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**LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PAID CASHEW WORK AND UNPAID DOMESTIC WORK: A STUDY AMONG WOMEN WORKING IN CASHEW PROCESSING IN KERALA, INDIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*By exploring the experiences of women cashew processing workers in Kerala, India, this study examines the interlinkages between paid cashew processing work and unpaid domestic work. Drawing on feminist qualitative research, it analyses how these two forms of work are intertwined through women's everyday lives and embodied experiences. Situating the study within broader feminist scholarship on gendered labour in Kerala, it argues that women experience paid and unpaid work as a continuum, interlinked through women's embodied labour. This continuum is shaped by caste, class and the nature of employment, temporary or permanent, government or private. The study further reflects on how survival becomes the core component of both forms of work and how women's meanings, values and emotions challenge the binary between productive and reproductive labour. By placing women's voices and embodied experiences at the centre of analysis, this study contributes to intersectional feminist understandings of work and labour embodiment within Kerala's gendered labour scholarship.*

**Keywords:** women's work, cashew work, unpaid work, caste, social security, survival, temporary work, India



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*“All women are usually workers, whether or not they are defined or recognised as such”  
(Ghosh, 2013)*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Cashew processing in Kerala is a labour-intensive and highly feminised industry with a long history of employing women from marginalised castes and classes. Although cashew cultivation is extensive in northern Kerala, processing is largely concentrated in South Kerala, particularly in the Kollam region (Many, 2019). The availability of cheap skilled labour, rail and port connectivity and the development of a small entrepreneurial class are cited as key reasons for this concentration (Chirayath, 1965, as cited in Kuzhiparambil, 2016).

The labour-intensive nature of cashew work, along with its gendered division of labour, is highlighted by KILE (2021), which notes that “while men in the industry are predominantly engaged in tasks like roasting, drying, supervision, loading and unloading, which are relatively less labour intensive and hence require a lesser number of workers, women are almost entirely handling the labour-intensive kernel-processing tasks such as peeling, shelling and grading”. Alongside this gendered division, Lindberg (2001) identifies the caste dimension of cashew work. In the 1930s, work was organised along intersecting caste and gender lines, with men from the ‘lowest’ castes concentrated in the most ‘unclean’ tasks, gender-mixed work limited to ‘lower’-caste sections and ‘higher’-caste sections remaining largely gender-segregated despite relative wage parity among ‘lower’-caste men and women.

More recently, the V. V. Giri National Labour Institute (2014) reports that women constitute 94% of the workforce in the cashew industry, with a large proportion belonging to socially and economically marginalised communities, 31% from Scheduled Castes (SCs) and 35% from Other Backward Communities (OBCs).

Against this background, this article examines how women cashew workers experience and define both their paid and unpaid work. Drawing on in-depth interviews and field observations, it explores how women relate their labour to emotions and embodied experiences, highlighting survival as the central thread shaping the continuum of their work.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Adopting a feminist approach, this study foregrounds the experiences and perceptions of women cashew workers and examines how they understand and navigate the continuum of paid cashew work and unpaid domestic labour. Nineteen in-depth semi structured interviews were conducted with women workers from two rural areas of Kollam district: twelve from government factories, six from private factories and one who had stopped working due to health concerns. Fifteen participants were permanent workers and four were temporary workers engaged in various sections such as shelling, cutting, peeling, grading and packing. Women working in packing centres were employed in small-scale factories.

Kollam district was selected due to its high concentration of cashew-processing units and the pronounced feminisation of the workforce. Participants belonged to diverse social, economic and religious backgrounds. All interviews were conducted in Malayalam and later transcribed and translated into English with care to retain meaning and nuance. Conducting interviews in Malayalam enabled participants to articulate their experiences and emotions more fully.

Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used. Interviews were conducted in spaces chosen by participants, including factories and homes. Retrospective data on home-based cashew work were collected from factory workers. In addition, non-participant observation was carried out in government factories and in the homes of private factory workers to understand work organisation, embodiment, routines and labour rhythms. The study is grounded in principles of ethics, reflexivity, positionality and care.

## **CONTEXT AND NUANCES OF CASHEW PROCESSING WORK**

Cashew processing is a labour-intensive industry in which women constitute the overwhelming majority of the workforce. KILE (2021) identifies a clear gender division of labour: men are primarily involved in roasting, drying, supervision and loading/unloading, while women are concentrated in shelling, peeling, grading and packing. Lindberg

(2004) notes that this division dates back to the 1950s, with men constituting about 5% of the workforce and performing roasting tasks, while women (95%) dominated shelling (40%) and peeling and grading (55%).

Cashew units include registered government factories, registered private factories and unregistered private units (Kuzhiparambil, 2016). Workers may be permanent or temporary; permanent workers have better access to social security, while temporary and home-based workers, mostly women, remain largely unrecognised. Processing involves roasting or steaming, shelling or cutting, drying, peeling, grading and packing (VVGnLI, 2014).

The industry expanded in the early twentieth century with export growth. Kollam emerged as a major centre due to cheap labour, infrastructure and trade linkages (Chirayath, 1965, as cited in Kuzhiparambil, 2016). The availability of cheap labour is consistently highlighted as central to this expansion (Harilal et al., 2006; Eapen et al., 2003). Raw nut shortages led to imports from African countries, while processed kernels serve both domestic and international markets (VVGnLI, 2014).

Pillai and Nair (1980) describe employment as seasonal and irregular, contributing to worker insecurity. Kanji (2004) highlights poor working conditions, inadequate ventilation, lack of protective gear and associated health issues among women workers.

Home-based work forms an invisibilised component of the global cashew network (Kuzhiparambil, 2016, as cited in Velayudhan, 2020), limiting women's ability to organise collectively and access social security. Even when men and women performed similar tasks, gender divisions were maintained to justify wage differences (Lindberg, 2004).

Caste continues to structure labour relations and allocation. Lindberg (2001) notes that 'lower' caste men historically performed the most 'unclean' tasks. Deepa (1994, as cited in Eapen et al., 2003) found that 75–100% of Scheduled Caste women were concentrated in shelling, the most hazardous task.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### *Locations of Work*

Women cashew workers perform multiple and shifting roles: government or private factory workers, permanent or temporary workers and factory-based or home-based workers. These identities are shaped by livelihood needs and work availability. Permanent status, especially in government factories, provides safety, state-backed protection and social security, making it highly valued despite lower wages.

The distinction between permanent and temporary workers is locally expressed as *cardukar* (card holders) and *thundukar* (paper record holders). The worker card signifies recognition and access to benefits. Temporary workers, mainly in private factories, lack formal records and are excluded from ESI, PF, paid leave, crèche facilities and union representation.

“Because we don't have any records, everything is written on a piece of paper (thundu)... There is no worker card [for us]... For us, there are no records at all... No other benefits”.

Temporary workers are the most vulnerable and are often preferred by owners due to lower costs and the absence of welfare obligations.

“Owner likes thundukar/temporary workers more because they work more and there is no issue of giving benefits and no records... They get profit out of thundukar”.

“If we (temporary workers) don't go to work tomorrow no one would ask about us”.

Gopal (1999), in a study of beedi industries in Tamil Nadu, identifies a similar hierarchy among passbook workers, joint workers and *chittai* workers. Passbook holders experience relatively greater security, while *chittai* workers remain highly vulnerable, similar to *thundu* workers in cashew processing.

## ***Intersections of Caste and Gender at Work***

Cashew work reproduces caste through labour organisation, embedding intersections of caste, class and gender (Lindberg, 2001). From the study it is evident that shelling and cutting, the most stigmatised and hazardous tasks, are largely performed by Dalit and marginalised caste and tribal women such as Pulaya, Kurava and Converted Dalit Christians. These sheds are often poorly lit, oil-stained and associated with notions of impurity. Peeling, grading and packing are considered ‘cleaner’ and are mainly done by Nair, Ezhava and Muslim women, especially in government factories. KILE (2021) identifies shelling as the most physically demanding task, involving prolonged sitting and exposure to corrosive cashew oil, disproportionately affecting Dalit women. Similarly, VVG NLI (2014) notes that around 60% of workers in shelling/cutting belonged to SC/ST households, compared to less than 20% in peeling, grading, or supervisory roles. Intergenerational continuity and transfer in shelling and cutting reflects restricted caste mobility. Although workplace discussions often emphasise class, caste and gender remain central to structuring labour hierarchies.

This finding echoes Lindberg’s(2001) historical analysis of caste based task segregation in the cashew industry and extends it into the contemporary period. What the study reveals is not merely the persistence of caste hierarchy but its reproduction through organisation of space, stigma and the body.

## ***Intergenerational Transfer of Cashew Work***

Most women reported that their mothers also worked in cashew processing, often in the same sections, indicating caste-based occupational continuity. Entry into cashew work is shaped by family history, poverty and limited educational mobility.

A Pulaya (SC) worker in the cutting section shared:

“Seeing my mother’s difficulty, I stopped my schooling and joined this work... Cashew work is difficult”.

Mobility between sections is rigid; workers usually remain in the same section throughout their employment. KILE (2021) observes the absence of a rotation system, with mostly illiterate and economically disadvantaged Dalit and Adivasi women concentrated in shelling for decades. Hnatkovska, Lahiri and Paul (2013), using NSS data (1983–2005), find that although occupational mobility has increased overall, SC/ST children remain significantly less likely to shift occupations compared to non-SC/ST groups. Thus, caste-based labour positioning is reinforced across generations.

## ***What the Workers Need***

Workers’ demands reflect fundamental survival concerns. Regular and sufficient work is urgent, as irregularity affects both income and access to ESI and PF. Women seek higher wages proportionate to the long and physically demanding hours of labour. Permanent status and accessible social security are essential given occupational risks.

Health problems are widespread, including allergies, respiratory issues and chronic back and knee pain resulting from prolonged sitting and exposure to cashew shell liquid.

“I had back pain because I used to sit for long hours... we used to go every day even if we were not well... It was very recently that I stopped doing that, especially after my uterus removal”.

Workers seek stable employment, fair wages and meaningful health protections.

## ***What Cashew Work Means for the Workers***

For women workers, cashew work is central to survival and everyday life rather than merely a source of income. Despite precarity, women continue due to limited livelihood options.

“In the initial times... I joined this work at the age of 17... now I know how to mingle with people and how to say our needs without hiding it”.

Permanent workers in government factories value ESI, PF, paid leave and educational support, particularly health benefits that proved crucial during COVID-19. However, irregular work often restricts consistent access to these protections. Temporary workers survive on low wages without social security, working as long as their bodies permit.

Beyond wages, the factory provides social connection and confidence.

“Before joining [this] work I used to stay within the home but after coming here I started talking to everyone. Earlier I didn't have any connection with the outer world”.

Women attach layered meanings to cashew work. Survival and joy coexist.

“For us...after doing all the work, we come to the factory...with happiness... This is like how we go to school”.

“It's for survival not because we like it... But when we come here...we become happy... till 5 pm we are happy saying jokes and all”.

Women consistently link paid factory work with unpaid domestic labour.

“Because it is for our house and also for our survival, we go to [cashew] work... cook rice and curry at home... gives happiness”.

As one worker explained regarding section choice:

“If some need comes... if children fall sick... we can leave work then and go... In peeling... we need to complete the work”.

Echoing Neetha (2010), paid and unpaid work are interlinked and essential for household survival. Invisible tasks within factories mirror unpaid domestic labour, reinforcing gendered devaluation. As Thapan (2009) observes, “a woman's embodiment is rarely experienced for pleasure or joy; the body is an instrument for survival”. Women's bodies ultimately connect factory and home, sustaining the continuum of paid and unpaid work.

## **CONCLUSION**

Work shapes the lived realities, relationships and survival of women. Conventional definitions that privilege paid labour invisibilise unpaid domestic work. This study demonstrates that paid cashew work and unpaid domestic labour exist as a continuum that is essential to sustaining life.

Women's entry into and experiences of cashew work are shaped by socio-economic and caste locations. The organisation of work, factory or home-based, permanent or temporary, structures wages, security, health, mobility and everyday realities. The section in which a woman works often remains fixed throughout her employment, reinforcing hierarchy.

Cashew work is organised along caste lines, producing differentiated and unequal experiences. Women from disadvantaged social locations face greater precarity, stigma and restricted mobility, reproducing inequalities across generations. Despite harsh and insecure conditions, survival needs compel women to remain in the industry.

Women attach diverse meanings to paid and unpaid work, valuing both in different ways. They experience them not as opposites but as interconnected realms that sustain family life. Ultimately, it is women's embodied labour that links

factory and home, creating the continuum of paid and unpaid work within intersecting structures of caste, class and gender.

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