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RESEARCH ARTICLE

WOMEN'S WORKFORCE ATTRITION IN WEST BENGAL'S INFORMAL SECTOR- AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This paper examines the factors driving high attrition among women workers in West Bengal's informal sector, focusing on economic, social, occupational, and institutional challenges that affect their continued employment. Using secondary data, government reports, and a comprehensive literature review, the study identifies several interconnected causes of women's withdrawal from informal work. These include low and irregular wages, job insecurity, insufficient social protection, unsafe working conditions, health issues, limited access to skill development, restricted career growth, gender-based discrimination, and the burden of household and caregiving duties. The study also highlights how social norms, limited financial independence, lack of childcare, and inadequate institutional support hinder women's ability to maintain long-term employment. The findings show that women's attrition in the informal sector is driven not only by individual choices but also by structural and institutional inequalities in the labour market. The study underscores the need for stronger labour protections, expanded social security, financial inclusion, accessible childcare, skill development, safer workplaces, and gender-sensitive employment policies. Greater institutional support and effective welfare programmes are crucial for improving job retention and creating sustainable employment for women. These findings are framed within the broader context of gender equality and women's empowerment, emphasizing the need to address both practical needs and strategic interests. The study concludes that coordinated, targeted policy interventions are essential to reduce attrition, strengthen women's labour market participation, and enhance their economic and social contributions to West Bengal's development.

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Introduction:-

Gender inequality continues to be a persistent social and economic challenge, reflected in the unequal distribution of work, opportunities, income, and responsibilities between men and women. Although significant progress has been made in women's social, economic, and political participation, traditional gender roles and structural barriers continue to restrict women's participation in secure and formal employment. This challenge becomes particularly

significant in the context of the informal sector, which provides employment to a large proportion of India's workforce and accommodates a substantial number of women.

In West Bengal, women participate in various informal occupations, including domestic work, agriculture, construction, street vending, home-based production, textile work, and other low-security activities. Despite their considerable contribution to household and regional economies, women employed in the informal sector often face low and irregular wages, absence of social security, limited legal protection, inadequate workplace facilities, and lack of employment stability. These vulnerabilities contribute to frequent movement between occupations and, in many cases, withdrawal from the workforce altogether. Such workforce attrition not only affects women's economic independence but also has wider implications for household welfare and regional economic development.

The changing nature of urbanisation, globalisation, and the expansion of the tertiary sector has further transformed women's employment patterns. While these developments have created new opportunities, they have not eliminated the structural constraints that influence women's decisions to enter, remain in, or leave employment. Therefore, examining the causes and patterns of women's attrition from the informal workforce in West Bengal is essential for understanding the relationship between gender inequality, employment vulnerability, and women's economic empowerment. This study seeks to analyse the major factors responsible for the attrition of women workers in the informal sector and to assess its broader socio-economic implications in West Bengal.

Objectives of the Study:-

1. To identify the primary factors influencing women working to leave the job in the informal sector.
2. To suggest effective policy and institutional measures to reduce women's workforce attrition and promote sustainable employment in the informal sector.

Research Methodology:-**Research Design:-**

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the factors influencing the attrition of women workers in the informal sector of West Bengal.

Nature of the Study:-

The study is quantitative and analytical, based entirely on secondary data. No primary surveys, interviews, or field investigations have been undertaken.

Sources of Data:-

Secondary data have been collected from reliable sources, including PLFS, NSSO, Census of India, MoSPI, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of West Bengal, ILO, World Bank, peer-reviewed journals, research papers, and official statistical databases. The analysis focuses primarily on female labour-force participation, informal employment, wages, occupational patterns, working conditions, and social-security coverage.

Study Area:-

The study focuses on West Bengal, India, covering women engaged in various informal occupations such as domestic work, agriculture, construction, home-based activities, street vending, handicrafts, and small-scale manufacturing.

Data Analysis:-

The available secondary data are systematically examined to identify employment patterns, socio-economic determinants, workplace challenges, and factors contributing to women's workforce attrition in the informal sector.

Literature Review:-

The informal sector, as defined by the 15th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) in 1993 under the International Labour Organization (ILO), comprises economic activities carried out through production units that are primarily owned and operated by households or household enterprises (Ghose and Halder 2025). Studies focusing on West Bengal similarly demonstrate that women engaged in domestic work, agriculture, construction, home-based production, and other informal occupations often experience considerable employment insecurity and inadequate access to labour welfare and social-security provisions. The literature further indicates that women's workforce participation cannot be examined solely from an economic perspective, as household and socio-cultural

conditions play an important role in shaping employment decisions. Marriage, childcare responsibilities, family obligations, household workload, and prevailing social norms frequently influence whether women enter, remain in, or discontinue paid employment (Ghose and Halder 2025).

Women's participation in paid employment plays an important role in improving their economic well-being, household bargaining power, and overall agency. Some researchers argue that paid employment can strengthen women's perceived contribution to household income and improve their bargaining position within the family. In contexts of economic vulnerability, women may therefore enter the workforce primarily as a response to financial hardship (IWWAGE 2025).

Women's participation in the labour market is influenced by a wide range of economic, social, cultural, and institutional factors. (IWWAGE 2025) emphasise that the nature and geographical distribution of economic growth and employment opportunities significantly affect women's access to paid work. These opportunities are further shaped by prevailing social norms concerning the type, location, and conditions of work considered appropriate for women. Similarly, (IWWAGE 2025) identifies several determinants of female workforce participation, including the level and pattern of economic development, infrastructure, government employment policies, availability of suitable occupations, family structure, cultural expectations, childcare facilities, property rights, age at marriage, educational attainment, migration patterns, and access to technology (IWWAGE 2025).

Globalisation and structural changes in the Indian economy have gradually expanded and diversified employment opportunities for women. Women are engaged across all three major sectors of the economy. In the primary sector, their participation is particularly visible in agriculture, forestry, fishing, mining, and related activities. In the secondary sector, women are employed in industries such as food processing, textiles, garments, wood products, paper, chemicals, and other manufacturing activities. The tertiary sector has also witnessed increasing participation of women, particularly in education, healthcare, social services, retail, hospitality, management, and public administration (Mondal and Chakraborty 2022).

However, the expansion of employment opportunities has not necessarily resulted in equal or secure participation. Women continue to be disproportionately represented in informal and unorganised employment, where jobs are often characterised by low wages, irregular working conditions, limited social protection, and inadequate employment security. Few studies also observed that women's workforce participation has generally increased over the decades, although the trend has been accompanied by fluctuations and interruptions. Few studies similarly highlight the concentration of women in the unorganised sector and the comparatively low participation of women in organised employment (Mondal and Chakraborty 2022).

According to (Bhattacharyya & Chaudhuri 2021), the persistence of gender inequality in education, limited access to professional and technical training, family responsibilities, and restrictive social norms continue to influence women's employment choices. Moreover, the increasing prevalence of part-time, temporary, and contractual employment demonstrates that informal forms of employment may exist even within otherwise organised economic activities (Roy and Das 2021).

According to (Choudhuri 2018), a substantial proportion of women workers are engaged in the informal sector, where employment is frequently characterised by casual, part-time, temporary, or seasonal arrangements. Informal workers, irrespective of gender, often experience inadequate wages, limited employment security, and poor working conditions. However, women tend to face greater vulnerability due to the intersection of social norms, cultural expectations, economic dependence, and gender-based discrimination (Roy and Das 2021).

Consequently, employers may perceive such workers as more dependent on their employment and therefore less likely to challenge unfair practices or demand improved working conditions. This situation contributes to the persistent gender-based inequalities and employment vulnerabilities experienced by women in the informal sector and may ultimately affect their ability to sustain long-term participation in the workforce (Mangal and Bhandari 2018). Thus, the increasing participation of women in the labour market presents a complex picture. While employment can enhance women's economic independence and bargaining power, their concentration in informal and insecure occupations continues to expose them to significant vulnerabilities. Understanding these conditions is therefore essential for analysing women's employment continuity, workforce attrition, and the broader challenge of gender inequality in India, particularly in states such as West Bengal (Dasgupta and Verick 2016). The literature characterizes women's participation in the informal sector as a multifaceted issue shaped by economic, social,

cultural, household, and institutional dynamics. While informal employment can provide women with income, economic independence, and increased bargaining power within the household, it is consistently associated with employment insecurity. Women engaged in domestic work, agriculture, construction, home-based activities, and other informal occupations frequently encounter low wages, irregular employment, limited social protection, poor working conditions, and insufficient employment security (Ghose and Haldar, 2025; Mondal and Chakraborty, 2022).

A significant finding across the study is that women's employment decisions cannot be explained by economic factors alone. Marriage, childcare, household responsibilities, family expectations, social norms, education, access to suitable employment, and availability of childcare facilities substantially influence women's ability to enter and remain in paid employment (Ghose and Haldar, 2025; IWWAGE, 2025). This indicates that workforce attrition may occur not only due to inadequate employment opportunities but also due to the social and familial constraints surrounding women's participation.

The extant literature highlights a persistent paradox within women's employment. Paid work can enhance women's economic well-being, household bargaining power, and personal agency; however, when employment is informal or insecure, these potential benefits are accompanied by significant vulnerabilities. Temporary, casual, part-time, and seasonal employment arrangements, together with inadequate wages and limited labour protection, often hinder women's ability to maintain sustained participation in the labour force (Roy and Das, 2021; Choudhuri, 2018). Furthermore, pervasive gender discrimination, insufficient access to technical training, and restrictive socio-cultural norms serve to perpetuate these structural disadvantages (Bhattacharyya and Chaudhuri, 2021).

The existing body of the survey further indicates that workplace conditions and power relations constitute significant, yet comparatively underexplored, aspects of women's sustained participation in the workforce. Mangal and Bhandari (2018) draw attention to the diminished bargaining power of women workers and their constrained capacity to contest inequitable employment practices. This vulnerability is exacerbated in contexts where formal contracts, grievance redressal mechanisms, or effective institutional protections are absent, thereby increasing women's susceptibility to exploitation and job insecurity.

In April 2026, during a field study, a sensitive story emerged that sheds light on a serious issue faced by some women workers. One woman courageously shared her experience of alleged sexual harassment at her workplace. She revealed that she was pressured into a physical relationship and warned that refusing could lead to her demotion. While this story is from one individual and not meant to represent all women workers, it highlights a troubling reality. It shows how power imbalances and fear of retaliation can affect women's ability to stay employed. Such experiences underline the urgent need for workplaces to prioritize dignity, safety, and effective grievance systems to protect their employees.

Ultimately, this account reminds us that addressing workplace harassment is not just about enforcing rules but about ensuring a safe and respectful environment where everyone can work without fear or intimidation. The Study shows that women's workforce participation has increased and diversified across various sectors, but higher participation does not necessarily mean secure, continuous, or decent employment. Existing studies have extensively explored female labour-force participation, informal employment, gender inequality, and employment vulnerability. However, there is comparatively limited focus on the specific reasons behind workforce attrition among women already engaged in informal employment, especially in West Bengal.

This study aims to fill that gap by examining how economic insecurity, household responsibilities, socio-cultural constraints, workplace conditions, gender discrimination, harassment, and limited social protection contribute to women's discontinuation from informal work. Therefore, the literature suggests that women's workforce attrition should not be viewed simply as an individual choice to leave employment, but as a complex result of structural, household, economic, and workplace factors. This understanding offers a solid basis for analyzing the challenges faced by women workers in West Bengal and identifying strategies to promote safer, more secure, and sustainable employment opportunities for women.

Major factors influencing women's informal employment:-

The primary factors influencing women to leave jobs in the informal sector of West Bengal can be understood through the following major areas:

1. **Low and Irregular Wages** – Many informal-sector jobs provide low, uncertain, or irregular income. When earnings are insufficient to meet household needs, women may leave employment or shift to other activities (Tanima C 2018).
2. **Job Insecurity** – Informal workers often lack permanent contracts, stable working hours, paid leave, and employment protection. This uncertainty makes long-term employment difficult.
3. **Poor Working Conditions** – Women may work in environments with inadequate sanitation, long working hours, insufficient rest facilities, and limited occupational safety (Tanima C 2018).
4. **Lack of Social Security** – Limited access to health insurance, maternity benefits, pensions, paid leave, and other social-security provisions can discourage women from continuing in informal employment.
5. **Family and Household Responsibilities** – Childcare, eldercare, household work, marriage, and family responsibilities can restrict women's ability to maintain regular employment, particularly when flexible work arrangements or childcare facilities are unavailable (Sudeshna R & Dipendra Nath D 2021).
6. **Workplace Safety and Harassment** – Concerns about unsafe workplaces, harassment, discrimination, and inadequate grievance mechanisms can influence women's decisions to leave employment (Sudeshna R & Dipendra Nath D 2021).
7. **Limited Career Growth** – Informal employment often provides few opportunities for promotion, skill development, training, or higher earnings. This can reduce women's motivation to remain in the same occupation (Manishree M & Chayon C 2022).
8. **Health Challenges** – Physically demanding work, occupational hazards, limited access to healthcare, and the difficulty of balancing work with personal health can contribute to employment discontinuation (Susmita B & Samhita C 2021).
9. **Gender Discrimination and Wage Gaps** – Women may receive lower wages than men for similar work or face unequal treatment and fewer opportunities, making employment less financially attractive (Susmita B & Samhita C 2021).
10. **Limited Access to Finance and Skills** – Lack of access to formal credit, digital financial services, vocational training, and market opportunities can restrict women's ability to improve their employment conditions or move into better-paying work.

Interpretation:-

Women's attrition from informal employment in West Bengal is therefore multidimensional. Women do not leave jobs only because of low wages; rather, economic insecurity, poor working conditions, inadequate social protection, family responsibilities, safety concerns, limited career opportunities, and gender-based disadvantages interact with one another. These challenges make it difficult for women to maintain continuous, secure employment.

These factors can be grouped into four broad categories:

Category	Major Factors
Economic	Low wages, irregular income, wage gaps, lack of financial security
Workplace	Unsafe conditions, long hours, job insecurity, lack of benefits
Social/Family	Childcare, household duties, marriage, family expectations
Institutional	Limited social security, skill development, financial inclusion, career growth

This framework will fit very well with your objective of identifying the primary determinants of women's workforce attrition in the informal sector of West Bengal.

Conceptual illustration based on the themes identified in the reviewed literature.



Image Source- (Bhattacharyya and Chaudhuri, 2021)

Findings from the Literature

Major factor	Influence on women's employment
- Economic factors - Social & cultural factors - Family responsibilities - Workplace conditions - Institutional factors	- Low wages, financial insecurity and limited employment opportunities influence entry and continuation in work. - Social norms, gender discrimination and expectations regarding women's roles restrict employment choices. - Marriage, childcare and household duties frequently interrupt women's employment. - Temporary work, irregular income, unsafe conditions and lack of job security can encourage withdrawal. - Limited social security, inadequate labour protection, childcare facilities and training opportunities affect employment continuity.

Employment–Vulnerability Relationship:-

Literature-based relationship between employment and vulnerability

Conceptual comparison derived from the reviewed literature.

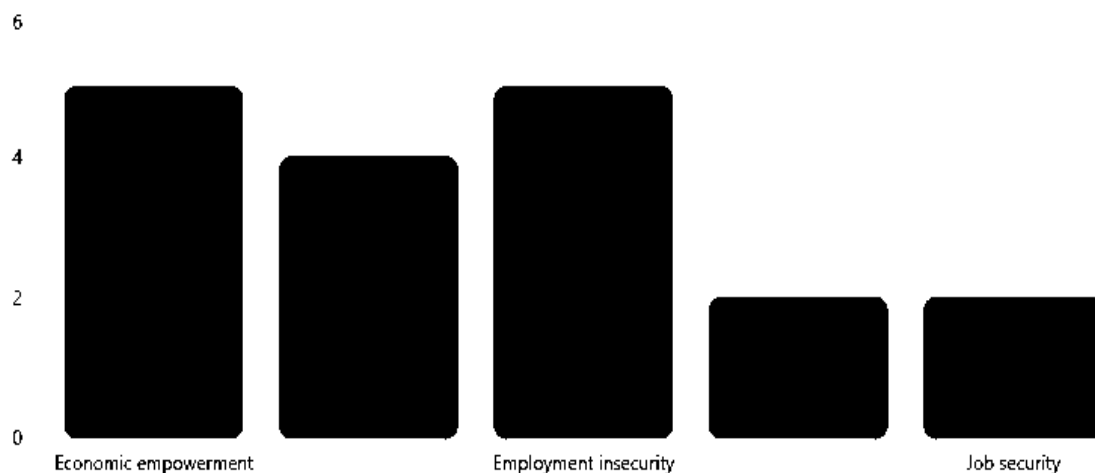


Image Source- (Bhattacharyya and Chaudhuri, 2021):-

The study presents a dual nature of women's informal employment. On one hand, employment provides income, economic independence and greater bargaining power within the household. On the other hand, the informal nature of employment exposes women to insecurity and limited protection. The most important insight is that women's participation does not necessarily mean sustainable employment. Women may enter the workforce because of economic necessity but later discontinue employment due to marriage, childcare, household responsibilities, low wages, poor working conditions, social restrictions, or lack of social-security benefits. Therefore, the literature provides a strong basis for studying women's workforce attrition in West Bengal. The major research gap is that previous studies have largely examined female labour-force participation and employment vulnerability, while relatively less attention has been given to why women leave informal employment and what factors determine employment continuity.

Findings:-

Between the year 2016 and 2026, West Bengal witnessed significant structural changes in its informal labour market, with women being particularly vulnerable to employment insecurity and workforce withdrawal. Available evidence indicates a substantial contraction of informal employment, alongside persistent challenges such as low wages, limited job security, and concentration of women in low-productivity occupations. Recent estimates also indicate a loss of approximately 3 million informal jobs, further intensifying employment vulnerability among women. (ILO 2017).

Major Phases of Employment Change:-

2016–2019: Pre-Pandemic Period – Female employment remained concentrated in low-paid and home-based activities such as beedi work, handloom, and subsistence agriculture, with limited growth in stable employment opportunities. **2020–2022:** Pandemic Period – The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted informal employment. The closure of small enterprises and restrictions on domestic and casual work resulted in substantial income losses and temporary or permanent withdrawal of many women workers (Pandey 2021). **2023–2026:** Structural Employment Contraction – The decline in informal employment became more structural, with estimates indicating the loss of around 3 million informal jobs in West Bengal. Women, being highly concentrated in vulnerable informal occupations, were disproportionately affected by this contraction (Pandey 2021).

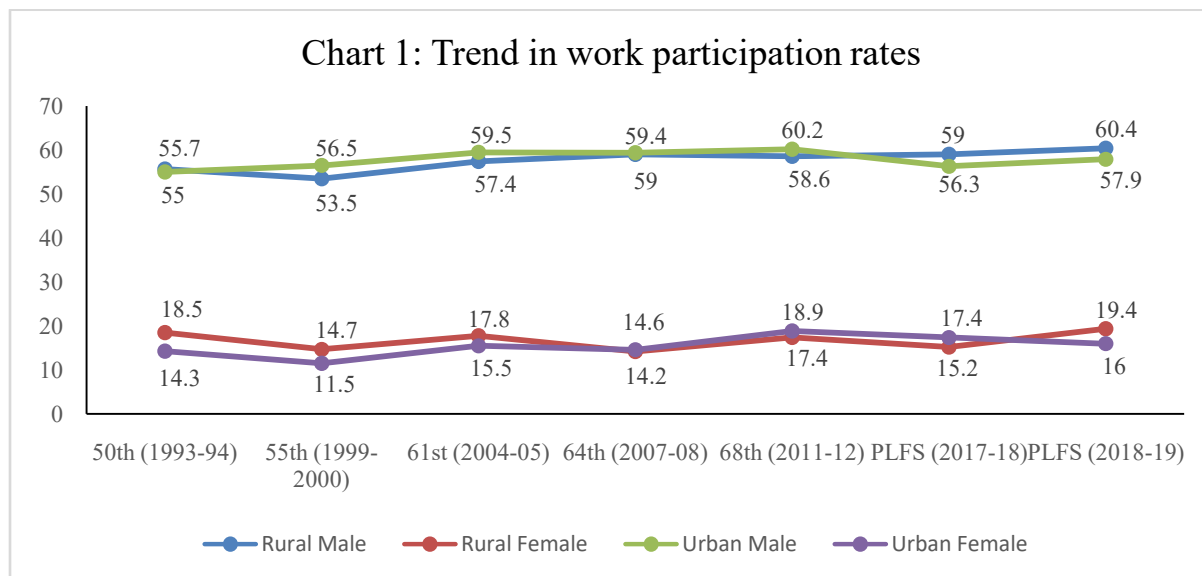
Women constitute a significant proportion of the agricultural workforce in West Bengal, particularly in paddy cultivation and the beedi industry. However, their contribution to agriculture is often undervalued or not recognised as formal employment. Many women perform labour-intensive activities such as weeding and transplanting, frequently as unpaid or family labour. This under-recognition contributes to the underreporting of women's economic participation. Consequently, the 2018–19 PLFS recorded West Bengal's female labour-force participation rate at 17.5% (Pandey 2021).

Workforce Participation of Female in West Bengal:-

Measurement distinction: The Female Workforce Participation Rate (FWPR) measures the proportion of employed women in relation to the total female population, whereas the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) includes both employed and unemployed women who are actively seeking or available for work (Pandey 2021).

- **Declining rural participation:** Since 2011–12, rural WPRs have generally shown a declining trend, while urban WPRs have remained relatively stagnant. This has contributed to a widening gender gap, particularly in rural areas (Pandey 2021).
- **Recent improvement:** The PLFS 2018–19 indicates an improvement in WPR for both men and women between 2017–18 and 2018–19, suggesting a positive movement in female workforce participation.
- **Urban female participation:** Urban women's WPR increased by approximately 2 percentage points during 2017–18 to 2018–19, representing the highest increase among the major demographic groups during this period (Pandey 2021).
- **Rural female participation:** Rural FWPR also recorded an improvement, increasing by approximately 0.8 percentage points during the same period.
- **Need for further analysis:** Although the recent increase in women's workforce participation is encouraging, it is too early to consider it a sustained long-term trend. Further research is necessary to identify the economic, social, demographic, and institutional factors responsible for this improvement (Pandey 2021).

- **Overall implication:** The emerging increase in female participation represents a positive development for women's economic empowerment; however, the persistent rural–urban and gender disparities indicate the need for greater employment opportunities, improved working conditions, and stronger social-security mechanisms for women.



Source: EUS 1993-94, 1999-2000, 2004-05, 2007-08, 2011-12, PLFS 2017-18, PLFS 2018-19, NSSO, MoSPI, GOI. The WPR figures are calculated for women and men of all age groups. (Pandey 2021)

Distribution of Women Workers by Employment Status in West Bengal:-

- Urban West Bengal: Most women are self-employed, with about 50% of women workers reporting themselves as self-employed.
- Around 42.5% are in regular wage or salaried jobs, and only about 5% work as casual wage labourers.
- Rural West Bengal: Self-employment is even more common, making up around 58.4% of women workers (Pandey 2021).
- This shows that many rural women rely heavily on self-employment for their income.
- Rise in self-employment: From 2004–05 to 2017–18, the share of self-employed women in rural areas was decreasing (Pandey 2021).
- But in 2018–19, this trend changed with a sharp increase of about 12.4 percentage points in one year. In urban areas, the share of self-employed women also went up by about 7 percentage points during the same time.
- Decline in casual employment: The number of women working in casual wage jobs dropped a lot between 2017–18 and 2018–19.

This is especially important for understanding job security and the reasons behind women leaving the workforce in the informal sector (Pandey 2021).

Policies and Institutional Interventions to Mitigate Women's Workforce Attrition in the Informal Sector:-

1. **Strengthen Social Security Coverage:** Expand the coverage of social security schemes, including health insurance, maternity benefits, pensions, accident insurance, and related welfare provisions, to encompass women employed in the informal sector. This would reduce economic vulnerability and provide a safety net for women workers.
2. **Provide Affordable Childcare Facilities:** Establish accessible childcare centres near workplaces and residential areas to help women balance employment and family responsibilities.
3. **Improve Wages and Ensure Equal Pay:** Strengthen implementation of minimum-wage provisions and promote equal pay for women to make informal employment more financially sustainable.
4. **Enhance Skill Development and Training:** Provide market-oriented vocational training, digital skills, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship programmes to improve women's earning capacity and employment opportunities.

5. Ensure Safe and Supportive Workplaces: Develop mechanisms to prevent harassment, discrimination, and unsafe working conditions, particularly for domestic, agricultural, construction, and home-based workers.
6. Improve Access to Formal Employment and Credit: Facilitate women's transition from informal to formal employment and provide easier access to institutional credit, self-help groups, and entrepreneurship support.
7. Strengthen Institutional Support and Worker Registration: Improve the registration and identification of informal women workers so they can access government schemes, legal protection, training, and social security benefits.
8. Promote Flexible and Local Employment Opportunities: Encourage home-based, part-time, and flexible employment options where appropriate, particularly for women facing childcare and household responsibilities.

Recommendation:-

A gender-responsive employment policy framework combining social security, childcare, fair wages, skill development, workplace safety, financial support, and institutional protection can significantly reduce women's workforce attrition and promote sustainable and secure employment in the informal sector.

Conclusion:-

The present study on "Attrition of Women Workforce in the Informal Sector in West Bengal: An Analytical Study" highlights that women's withdrawal from the labour market is not the result of a single factor but a consequence of the interplay of economic, social, occupational, and institutional vulnerabilities. Although women make a substantial contribution to agriculture, manufacturing, domestic work, home-based production, beedi work, and other informal activities, much of their contribution remains undervalued, underreported, and inadequately protected.

The analysis indicates that low and irregular wages, gender-based wage disparities, insecure employment, poor working conditions, limited social-security coverage, and restricted opportunities for occupational advancement are major economic and institutional challenges confronting women workers. Structural changes in the rural economy, including agricultural mechanisation and the contraction of traditional labour-intensive activities, have further reduced employment opportunities for women without always generating sufficient alternative sources of livelihood. The study also demonstrates that family responsibilities and prevailing social norms remain critical determinants of women's employment continuity. Many self-employed women remain within informal and low-productivity activities, where income insecurity, limited access to credit, inadequate social protection, and weak institutional support continue to exist.

Hence, the central conclusion of this study is that women's workforce attrition in West Bengal is fundamentally a problem of employment insecurity, gender inequality, and inadequate institutional support. Sustainable improvement in women's workforce participation cannot be achieved simply by increasing the number of women entering employment; it requires creating conditions under which women can enter, remain, progress, and earn with dignity and security. The transition from vulnerable informal employment to stable, productive, and socially protected work must therefore become a central component of inclusive economic development in West Bengal. Empowering women economically is not only essential for gender equality but also critical for strengthening household resilience, improving human development, and achieving sustainable regional economic growth.

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