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Caste-Based Differences in Rights Awareness, Vulnerability and Access to Support Services among Female Sex Workers

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Abstract

The study examines caste-based differences in awareness of rights, vulnerability and access to support services among 375 female sex workers in Chittoor District, Andhra Pradesh. Data were collected through personal interviews and analysed using descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA. The findings revealed significant caste-based differences in all four areas ($p < 0.001$). Forward Caste respondents had higher awareness of rights, access to support services and social work intervention, while Scheduled Tribe respondents recorded lower scores in these areas. Scheduled Caste respondents reported the highest level of vulnerability. These differences may be related to variations in education, economic conditions, social discrimination and access to information. The study recommends awareness programmes, better healthcare and legal support, livelihood opportunities and inclusive social work interventions to reduce vulnerability and improve access to services.

Keywords: *Female Sex Workers, Caste, Rights Awareness, Vulnerability, Support Services, Social Work.*

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Introduction

Caste and social category are important factors influencing the social, economic and living conditions of female sex workers. Women belonging to different caste groups may experience varying levels of social discrimination, economic inequality, stigma and exclusion. These inequalities can affect their awareness of legal rights, personal safety, dignity and access to essential support services. Female sex workers often face multiple forms of discrimination because of their occupation, gender and disadvantaged social position (WHO, 2022; UNAIDS, 2024). Ganju et al. (2016) observed that limited awareness of human rights, social stigma and discrimination create barriers for female sex workers in exercising their rights. Similarly, studies in India have highlighted that sex work-related stigma influences women's experiences in healthcare settings and their ability to access appropriate health services (Basu et al., 2019). Therefore, understanding caste-based differences is important for examining the unequal experiences and challenges faced by female sex workers.

From a social work perspective, caste-based differences need attention to promote social justice, equality, human rights and inclusive service delivery. The World Health Organization (2022) emphasized that structural barriers, discrimination and violence affect the accessibility and utilization of healthcare services among key populations. UNAIDS (2024) also highlighted the importance of protecting the rights of sex workers and addressing stigma, discrimination and violence. Ganju et al. (2016) further reported that community organizations play an important role in supporting female sex workers to understand and exercise their rights. In this context, the present study examines differences among Forward Caste, Backward Caste, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe respondents in terms of awareness of rights, vulnerability, access to support services and social work intervention. The analysis helps understand the variations across social categories and highlights the need for inclusive, community-based and need-oriented social work interventions.

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Review of Literature

Earlier studies have highlighted the influence of social, economic and institutional inequalities on the lives of female sex workers. Amnesty International (2016) reported that stigma, discrimination and social marginalisation expose sex workers to human rights violations and limit their access to protection and essential services. Beattie et al. (2010) identified violence and discrimination as major factors affecting the health and safety of female sex workers in South India. Similarly, Beattie et al. (2016) found that limited knowledge of specific human rights, social stigma and institutional barriers affected the ability of female sex workers to exercise their rights in Andhra Pradesh. Mahapatra et al. (2018) observed that financial insecurity, social discrimination, violence and inadequate social support contributed to multidimensional vulnerability among female sex workers in India. Further, Ganju et al. (2016) emphasised the importance of community mobilisation in improving rights awareness and access to support systems. These studies indicate that social inequalities may influence rights awareness, vulnerability and access to support services. However, limited attention has been given to comparing these dimensions across different caste categories. Therefore, the present study examines caste-based differences among female sex workers belonging to Forward Caste, Backward Caste, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe categories in relation to awareness of rights, vulnerability, and access to support services and social work intervention.

Objectives

1. To assess caste-based differences in awareness of rights among female sex workers.
2. To examine differences in vulnerability across caste categories.
3. To analyse caste-based differences in access to support services.
4. To examine differences in social work intervention needs among female sex workers.
5. To suggest appropriate social work interventions to address their needs.

Methodology

The present study adopted a quantitative approach with a descriptive cross-sectional design and was conducted in the combined Chittoor District of Andhra Pradesh, covering Madanapalle, Chittoor and Tirupati Revenue Divisions. The study population consisted of 15,743 female sex workers, from whom 375 respondents were selected using the Krejcie and Morgan method through multistage proportionate stratified random sampling. Primary data were collected from March to June 2026 through personal interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule among women aged 18 years and above engaged in consensual sex work. Caste was classified into Forward Caste, Backward Caste, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe. Awareness of rights, vulnerability, access to support services and social work intervention were measured using a five-point scale. The collected data were analysed using SPSS, with mean and standard deviation for descriptive analysis and one-way ANOVA to examine caste-based differences. Statistical significance was set at 5 per cent ($p < 0.05$). Informed consent, voluntary participation and confidentiality were kept throughout the study.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study on caste-based differences among female sex workers in Chittoor District, Andhra Pradesh. It examines differences in awareness of rights, vulnerability and access to support services across caste categories. The analysis is based on the responses of 375 female sex workers. Mean scores, standard deviations and ANOVA are used to examine variations among the groups. The findings are discussed in relation to the study objectives and their implications for social work practice

Awareness

Awareness of rights refers to the knowledge of female sex workers regarding their

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basic human rights, legal protections and entitlements to essential services. In the present study, it covers 12 aspects, including the right to life and personal safety, dignity and equal treatment, and protection from physical and sexual violence. It also includes awareness of access to healthcare, confidential health services, HIV/STI testing and treatment, police protection, legal assistance, and privacy and confidentiality. A five-point scale was used to measure the level of awareness: 1 = Not Aware, 2 = Slightly Aware, 3 = Moderately Aware, 4 = Very Aware and 5 = Completely Aware. Further, the study examines respondents' knowledge of government welfare and social-security schemes, appropriate channels for reporting violence, exploitation or abuse, and the availability of support from NGOs and social workers. These aspects are used to assess the level of rights awareness among female sex workers and examine variations across caste categories.

Table-1: Awareness of Rights among Female Sex Workers by Caste Category

Variables	Social Category (Caste)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	p.value	sig
Awareness of Rights	Forward Caste	114	30.28	11.32	11.230	0.000	**
	Backward Caste	78	24.94	10.17			
	Scheduled Caste	97	25.73	12.99			
	Scheduled Tribe	86	21.16	9.41			
	Total	375	25.90	11.61			

Table-1 shows differences in the level of awareness of rights among female sex workers across four caste categories. Forward Caste respondents recorded the highest mean score (30.28), followed by Scheduled Caste (25.73), Backward Caste (24.94) and Scheduled Tribe respondents (21.16). The overall mean score was 25.90, with a standard deviation of 11.61. The ANOVA result indicates a statistically significant difference among the caste categories ($F = 11.230$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that awareness of rights varies significantly across social categories, with Scheduled Tribe respondents recording the lowest mean score.

Forward Caste respondents recorded the highest awareness of rights, while Scheduled Tribe respondents recorded the lowest. Ganju et al. (2016) highlighted barriers to knowledge and exercise of human rights among female sex workers in Andhra Pradesh. Amnesty International (2016) and Platt et al. (2018) also emphasised the effects of stigma, discrimination and institutional barriers. These findings highlight the need for targeted rights-awareness programmes, legal literacy and community-based social work interventions, particularly for disadvantaged caste groups.

Vulnerability

Vulnerability refers to the risks, difficulties and challenges faced by female sex workers in their personal, health, economic, social and legal lives. In the present study, it is assessed through five dimensions covering 16 aspects: physical/sexual (4), health (3), economic (3), social (3) and legal/institutional vulnerability (3). Physical and sexual vulnerability includes safety concerns, violence and forced sexual activity, while health and economic vulnerability focus on healthcare barriers, financial difficulties and limited employment opportunities. Social vulnerability covers stigma, discrimination, lack of support and fear of rejection. Legal/institutional vulnerability examines fear of police, difficulties in obtaining legal assistance and mistreatment by authorities. The 16 statements are measured using a five point scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always. The findings help identify vulnerability-related concerns and the need for appropriate social work interventions.

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Table-2: Vulnerability among Female Sex Workers by Social Category

Variables	Social Category (Caste)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	p.value	sig
Vulnerability	Forward Caste	114	47.36	15.13	67.560	0.000	**
	Backward Caste	78	63.96	15.41			
	Scheduled Caste	97	70.76	8.63			
	Scheduled Tribe	86	68.50	12.93			
	Total	375	61.71	16.46			

Table-2 presents the differences in vulnerability among female sex workers across four social categories. Scheduled Caste respondents recorded the highest mean vulnerability score (70.76), followed by Scheduled Tribe (68.50), Backward Caste (63.96) and Forward Caste respondents (47.36). The overall mean score was 61.71, with a standard deviation of 16.46. The ANOVA result shows a statistically significant difference in vulnerability among the caste categories ($F = 67.560$, $p < 0.001$).

The findings show that Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe respondents reported higher vulnerability scores than Forward Caste respondents. This may be due to social discrimination, financial difficulties and limited support. Reed et al. (2010) also found that economic problems were linked to violence and sexual risks among female sex workers in Andhra Pradesh. Platt et al. (2018) highlighted the role of stigma, discrimination and unsafe working conditions in increasing vulnerability. Beattie et al. (2010) emphasised the importance of community-based programmes in reducing violence and improving safety. Therefore, special attention and social work support are needed to reduce vulnerability and improve the safety and social protection of disadvantaged groups.

Access to Support Services

Access to support services refers to the availability and use of essential health, counselling, legal, welfare and community-based services by female sex workers. In the present study, it is assessed through 12 aspects, including access to government health services, HIV/STI testing and treatment, counselling, NGO services, legal aid and government welfare schemes. It also examines awareness of available services, respectful treatment, non-discrimination, privacy, transportation facilities and knowledge of whom to contact for assistance. The 12 statements are measured using a three-point scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always. The responses help assess the level of access to support services and identify areas requiring improvement through social work interventions.

Table-3: Access to Support Services among Female Sex Workers by Social Category

Variables	Social Category (Caste)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	p.value	sig
Access to Support Services	Forward Caste	114	30.70	11.19	6.405	0.000	**
	Backward Caste	78	26.91	5.83			
	Scheduled Caste	97	30.07	11.50			
	Scheduled Tribe	86	25.51	7.22			
	Total	3	28	9.77			

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		75	.56				

Table-3 shows the differences in access to support services among female sex workers across four social categories. Forward Caste respondents recorded the highest mean score (30.70), followed by Scheduled Caste (30.07), Backward Caste (26.91) and Scheduled Tribe respondents (25.51). The overall mean score was 28.56, with a standard deviation of 9.77. The ANOVA result indicates a statistically significant difference among the caste categories ($F = 6.405$, $p < 0.001$). The variation in access to support services may be due to differences in awareness, financial conditions, social support, transportation and discrimination. Ganju et al. (2016) identified lack of awareness and social barriers as challenges in exercising rights among female sex workers in Andhra Pradesh. Similarly, Platt et al. (2018) reported that restrictive legal and institutional conditions create barriers to health and social services. These findings emphasise the need for NGOs, community-based organisations and social workers to improve service awareness, provide guidance and ensure equal access without discrimination, particularly for disadvantaged groups.

Social Work Intervention

Social work intervention refers to the support and services provided by social workers to improve the well-being and empowerment of female sex workers. In the present study, it is assessed through eight aspects, including awareness of rights, access to government welfare schemes, counselling and emotional support, legal assistance, skill development, peer support, community awareness to reduce stigma, and coordination between government agencies and NGOs. These aspects are measured using a five-point Likert scale, with the following response categories: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree and 5 = Strongly Agree. Higher scores indicate a greater level of agreement with the statements relating to social work intervention. The responses help identify the role of social work interventions in addressing the problems, reducing vulnerability and improving the quality of life of female sex workers.

Table-4: Social Work Intervention among Female Sex Workers by Social Category

Variables	Social Category (Caste)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	p.value	sig
Social Work Intervention	Forward Caste	114	33.45	2.92	18.666	0.000	**
	Backward Caste	78	28.67	7.91			
	Scheduled Caste	97	30.70	7.63			
	Scheduled Tribe	86	26.45	8.38			
	Total	375	30.14	7.30			

Table-4 presents the differences in social work intervention scores among female sex workers across four social categories. Forward Caste respondents recorded the highest mean score (33.45), followed by Scheduled Caste (30.70), Backward Caste (28.67) and Scheduled Tribe respondents (26.45). The overall mean score was 30.14, with a standard deviation of 7.30.The differences were statistically significant ($F = 18.666$, $p < 0.001$), indicating variations in social work intervention scores across caste groups.

The lower score among Scheduled Tribe respondents may be associated with limited awareness of social work services, fewer NGO linkages and difficulties in accessing institutional support. These findings highlight the need to strengthen community-based social work interventions, particularly for socially disadvantaged groups, through rights awareness, counselling, legal assistance and improved access to welfare services. Ganju et al. (2016) highlighted the importance of awareness and community support in helping female sex workers exercise their rights, while Jana et al. (2011) emphasised community mobilisation and collective empowerment in addressing their problems. These findings suggest the need for accessible, community-based social work interventions, with particular attention to groups facing greater barriers to support.

Summary

Caste is an important social factor that may influence the experiences of female sex workers, particularly their awareness of rights, vulnerability and access to support services. The

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present study examines caste-based differences in these areas from a social work perspective. It aims to assess differences in awareness of rights, vulnerability, access to support services and social work intervention among female sex workers.

The study adopted a quantitative approach with a descriptive cross-sectional design. It was conducted among 375 female sex workers in the combined Chittoor District of Andhra Pradesh. Respondents were selected through multistage proportionate stratified random sampling. Data were collected through personal interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule. Mean, standard deviation and one-way ANOVA were used for analysis.

The findings revealed that Forward Caste respondents recorded the highest awareness of rights (30.28), while Scheduled Tribe respondents recorded the lowest (21.16) ($F = 11.230$, $p < 0.001$). This may be due to differences in education, legal awareness and access to information. Scheduled Caste respondents reported the highest vulnerability (70.76), while Forward Caste respondents reported the lowest (47.36) ($F = 67.560$, $p < 0.001$). This may be associated with poverty, discrimination, stigma and limited social support. Regarding access to support services, Forward Caste respondents recorded the highest mean score (30.70), while Scheduled Tribe respondents recorded the lowest (25.51) ($F = 6.405$, $p < 0.001$). These differences may be related to service awareness, financial conditions and institutional access. Similarly, Forward Caste respondents recorded the highest social work intervention score (33.45), while Scheduled Tribe respondents recorded the lowest (26.45) ($F = 18.666$, $p < 0.001$). This may reflect differences in awareness and access to NGO and social work services.

Overall, the findings reveal significant caste-based differences across all four dimensions. They highlight the need for inclusive and caste-sensitive social work interventions to improve rights awareness, reduce vulnerability and ensure equal access to support services, particularly among socially disadvantaged groups.

Suggestions

- Awareness programmes should be organised for Scheduled Tribe and Backward Caste female sex workers to improve their knowledge of legal rights and available support services. Special attention should be given to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe women to address vulnerability, discrimination, violence and economic difficulties.
- Access to healthcare, counselling, legal aid and government welfare schemes should be strengthened through effective coordination between NGOs, social workers and government agencies. Skill development and livelihood programmes should also be provided to improve economic independence and reduce financial vulnerability.
- Finally, inclusive and caste-sensitive social work interventions should be developed to ensure equal access to services, dignity and protection for all female sex workers.

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