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Work Background Conditions and Economic Welfare of Women in Handicrafts: A Study of Less Developed Rural Areas

Mostafa Shamsoddini

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Faculty of Management, Economics and Accounting, University of Hormozgan, BandarAbbas, Iran

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Abstract

In order to improve the quality of women's personal, professional and family lives while addressing financial concerns, it is essential to consider the improvement of women's working conditions from multiple perspectives. In this regard, the research objective was to investigate the impact of working background conditions on the economic welfare of women employed in handicrafts in less developed rural areas. The statistical population includes all female workers in less developed rural areas of Iran in 2025 who are employed in handicrafts sector. The sampling method used was random cluster with a total of 380 samples selected according to Morgan's table. In order to collect the required data, a questionnaire prepared by the researcher was used, which included two sections to assess economic welfare and working background conditions. The results of the study systematically show that the dimensions of "unbiased behavior in work", "balance between work and life", and "social support" have the most significant impact on the economic welfare of women engaged in handicrafts. The findings of this study underscore the necessity of implementing targeted support policies to enhance equitable organizational practices, fortify work-life balance, and broaden social support networks as pivotal strategies for enhancing the economic welfare of rural women.

*Corresponding author

E-mail: m.shamsoddini@hormozgan.ac.ir

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Introduction

The goal of any society is to optimize social welfare, which is a function of per capita income, equitable income distribution, improvements in the quality of education, health, and social services, and the extent of social, economic, cultural, and political participation by men and women (Dorlach, 2021; Perera et al., 2022). This is a critical consideration in the planning process. From a macroeconomic perspective, employment is a critical factor with far-reaching implications (Peckham et al., 2019). It is a driver of income generation, production, and entrepreneurship, as well as a catalyst for the advancement of knowledge and technology. From a social perspective, employment provides individuals with a sense of dignity, social status, and self-confidence (Mao & Xue, 2022). Women's employment and related issues in the contemporary era is undoubtedly one of the most important issues that has emerged in the transition from traditional to modern society. Quality of life is an important social determinant of women's health, and women are also an important social group that affects quality of life (Lagadec et al., 2018). Women make up half of the human resources of a given society. Consequently, the status of women in that society is indicative of the progress of the society, and the progress of countries depends on the purposeful use of all human resources and talents, including women (Al-Asfour et al., 2017).

The diversity of Iran's ancient culture and civilization and the country's current potential can be transformed into valuable assets with proper planning and management (Mirfakhradini & Karoubi, 2023). Failure to utilize the potential of women in a variety of cultural, social, political, and economic fields makes the pursuit of development an impossibility. A review of available statistics reveals that Iranian women currently occupy a dual position and status. In terms of health and education indicators, Iranian women have a superior status compared to most countries in the region. However, in terms of their presence in the labor market and their share of income, their performance is significantly inferior to that of other developing countries.

Handicraft production, including Persian carpets, pottery, and embroidery, plays a vital role in the livelihoods of rural women in Iran, particularly in less developed regions. These artisans frequently depend on traditional skills that have been passed down through generations, resulting in the creation of products that are both culturally significant and economically valuable. Employment of rural women in handicrafts is important in several ways. On the one hand, these activities allow rural women to earn an independent income without having to leave their families and rural environment, which leads to their economic empowerment and contributes to improving the livelihoods of rural households. On the other hand, handicrafts are mainly based on indigenous and traditional skills that rural women have been familiar with in the past, and therefore do not require complex training or large investments. This characteristic makes handicrafts a suitable solution for creating sustainable employment in rural areas.

In addition, women's participation in this sector helps to preserve and revive traditional arts and cultural heritage. From a social perspective, employment in handicrafts can also increase the self-confidence of rural women and strengthen their role in family and social decision-making (Pratomo et al., 2024). Therefore, the development of this sector not only has a positive impact on the economy of rural households, but also contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in the area of gender equality and the reduction of inequalities.

A review of previous research shows that issues of equity and efficiency have played a pivotal role in the development of reformed welfare policies for different segments of society, especially women (Hartley & Lamarche, 2018; Malekzadeh, 2022; Shamsoddini, 2023). As evidenced by global employment trends, the participation rate of women in the labor force is lower than that of men. However, the gap between them has been narrowing. Nevertheless, the unemployment rate of women remains higher than that of men. In addition, women's wage levels tend to increase with the level of economic development of the country. In a context where social change is a significant phenomenon affecting all social groups, the formulation of dynamic and comprehensive plans is a crucial, specialized and complex undertaking. In order to achieve such a program, it is necessary to emphasize the role of women as economic and social activists, since the under-utilization of their potential in various fields leads to an unbalanced distribution of social resources. This inequality, which is pervasive in most societies, especially in developing countries, is a major challenge in the pursuit of sustainable development.

It is evident that handicrafts in rural Iran possess dual economic and cultural significance. This study posits that enhancing working conditions for women constitutes a pivotal conduit for achieving gender-inclusive development and cultural preservation. By systematically examining the influence of workplace equity, work-life balance, and social support on economic welfare, this research provides actionable insights for policymakers. As Iran navigates the tension between preserving cultural heritage and pursuing economic modernization, this study underscores an urgent opportunity to transform handicraft production from a subsistence activity into an engine of equitable development through targeted interventions in workplace conditions.

Literature Review

The village plays a crucial role in the social and demographic structure of society, as it is home to a significant number of people who contribute to the economy through their work. However, many developing countries face challenges related to the underdevelopment of their rural areas (Yar & Yasouri, 2024). This has led to a trend of people leaving their villages and moving to cities in search of better employment opportunities. The main reason for this migration is economic, particularly the lack

of access to employment in rural areas (Datta, 2012). Therefore, understanding the dynamics of village life and addressing the problems faced by rural communities is essential for overall development. The existence of regional inequalities, inequalities between cities and villages, and inequalities in the concentration of wealth and capital result in limited capital formation in rural areas. This ultimately leads to a lack of investment and resource mobilization in these areas, as well as a widening gap between rural and urban areas. This, in turn, contributes to the economic backwardness of rural areas and the low productivity of production factors. The role and position of villages in the processes of economic, social and political development at local, regional, national and international levels, and the consequences of the underdevelopment of rural areas, such as widespread poverty, increasing inequality, rapid population growth, unemployment, migration, urban marginalization, etc., have led to a focus on rural development and even its prioritization over urban development (Omidpour et al., 2020).

Handicrafts in developing countries are not only a cultural and artistic heritage, but also an important driver of economic and social development (Dalal et al., 2024). These industries contribute significantly to poverty reduction and household income by creating employment opportunities, especially for women and rural communities (Yadav et al., 2024). Since handicraft production usually requires low initial capital and limited equipment, it can be considered a sustainable solution for the economic empowerment of low-income groups. In addition, handicrafts play an important role in attracting tourists and developing the tourism industry by preserving local traditions and strengthening cultural identity. In many cases, handicraft exports also lead to foreign exchange earnings and the integration of local economies into global markets. Therefore, supporting this sector can lead to balanced and diversified growth in developing countries.

Rural women's employment in handicrafts and tourism faces many challenges. The main problems include limited access to markets, lack of adequate distribution networks, lack of working capital and lack of business development facilities (Tuyishime et al., 2015). Despite having traditional skills in handicraft production, many rural women are unable to sell their products at a reasonable price due to their unfamiliarity with modern marketing methods and limited access to digital technologies. In the tourism sector, the lack of necessary infrastructure, weakness in promoting and showcasing attractions, and cultural and social restrictions have reduced employment opportunities for women. In addition, the lack of specialized training and business advice, the absence of support organizations, and low wages are other obstacles facing rural women in these sectors. These challenges, along with the heavy responsibilities of household management and child care, have prevented many rural women from realizing the full potential of these sectors to improve their economic situation.

One of the most important indicators of a country's level of development is the status and influence of women in that society (Manandhar et al., 2018). If the foundations of the family, which serves as the

cornerstone of the social structure and system, are eroded due to frustration and A significant proportion of the active population experiencing depression will have a detrimental impact on the ability of motives and cultural patterns to maintain and standardize norms and institutions during the socialization process. This will ultimately lead to a crisis in the cohesion and survival of society. In advanced societies, in addition to their significant contributions to civil society, women also play an important role in the labor force, which can help mitigate the impact of economic crises on households (Hasunuma, 2019). The manifestations of gender inequality in labor markets vary depending on the level of economic development of countries (Dieterich et al., 2016). Studies have shown that boring jobs, work pressure and temporary contracts are associated with a higher probability of low economic welfare (Bambra et al., 2014).

The formal and informal social processes that facilitate the quality of employment serve to strengthen women's confidence in economic activity (Krigel & Benjamin, 2021). Lack of access to adequate employment opportunities can also affect the mental health of men and women in society (Polo-Muro, 2023). More generally, relative economic insecurity can hinder the rapid advancement of women's economic participation in societies (Kosec et al., 2021). Welfare policies affect both those who directly receive benefits and the broader population that may be connected to the welfare system (Hernæs, 2020). In many developing countries, including Iran, women's participation in the labor market has not increased in line with their educational attainment and skills. A variety of obstacles hinder women's economic activities outside the home. Despite Iranian women's desire to participate in economic and social activities, society has not fully benefited from their participation (Azizi & Moradi, 2022). The issue of employment, income, and other economic concerns has affected a wide range of individuals and groups. However, women's societies, particularly female heads of households and unmarried girls, have faced more significant challenges. In addition to economic concerns, a number of other issues have emerged in recent years, including marriage, divorce, the welfare of vulnerable women, an aging population, leisure activities, political engagement, the prevalence of physical and mental health problems, and the impact of cultural and social norms. These concerns have given rise to demands from women that underscore the need for strategic planning to address their needs.

Methodology

The objective of this research is to examine the impact of working background conditions on the economic welfare of women engaged in handicrafts in less developed rural areas. Consequently, the research design is practical in its purpose and quasi-experimental in its implementation. Both library-based data collection and fieldwork were used in this research. In the fieldwork section, a questionnaire designed by the researchers was used to collect information. In light of the research objectives, which

were to measure the impact of work conditions on economic welfare, a quantitative approach was deemed most appropriate. The Likert-scale questionnaire was employed to standardize data collection from a substantial, geographically dispersed sample, thereby ensuring statistical robustness. While qualitative methods (e.g., interviews) could potentially offer more profound insights, their practicality was constrained by the study's scope and emphasis on generalizable patterns. Furthermore, the utilization of quantitative data enables the formulation of direct comparisons with extant studies on rural women's labor, thereby enhancing the findings' relevance for policymakers.

The statistical population of this research is all female workers in less developed rural areas of Iran in 2025 who are engaged in handicraft sector. The sampling method used in this study was cluster sampling. In this method, a sample is drawn from groups or clusters of individuals rather than from individual units. Given the geographical dispersion of the statistical population, the cluster sampling method is more appropriate than the random sampling method. Consequently, the initial phase of the study entailed the identification of the six most impoverished provinces in the country as the primary clusters. Subsequent to this, a selection of five impoverished counties was made from each province. The final stage involved the random selection of two impoverished villages from each county. Finally, the population was stratified into segments of up to 10 individuals, who were then selected as the research sample in each village. In this study, a list of clusters was prepared and a research sample was selected from them using a random method, with a total of 380 samples selected according to Morgan's table.

To collect the necessary data, the researcher designed and administered a questionnaire to the subjects. This instrument consisted of two sections, the first of which was designed to assess economic welfare and the second of which was designed to ascertain working background conditions. The following three dimensions are considered in the assessment of economic welfare:

1- Provision of basic necessities: This dimension assesses women's capacity to provide the fundamental necessities of life, including food and clothing for themselves and their family members.

2- Feeling of relative deprivation: To measure this, we looked at how women compare to others, how facilities are distributed, and economic inequalities.

3- Suitability of living environment: It would be beneficial to consider the desirability of the living environment, the existence of suitable development opportunities, and the creation of desired changes in the living environment as potential indicators to measure the suitability of the living conditions.

In addition, five dimensions are considered with respect to women's work background conditions:

1- Impartial behaviour in employment: Impartial behaviour in employment can be defined as equality of employment opportunities, job security, type of jobs, and payment level for an equal amount

of work, as well as work without harassment and violence, having relative independence, and impartial handling of work-related complaints.

2- Work-life balance: The issue of work-life balance represents a significant challenge for the majority of working women.

3- Social support: The provision of fundamental assistance in addressing the financial implications of significant life events for women and their families is a fundamental aspect of employment. Social support benefits encompass a range of provisions, including medical care, sickness benefits, unemployment benefits, old-age benefits, occupational accident benefits, family benefits, maternity benefits, survivor benefits, and disability benefits.

4. Social discourse: The ability of women to express their opinions on work-related matters and participate in the formulation of working conditions is also a factor in the background conditions of employment.

5- Socio-economic context: This dimension defines the socio-economic context in which employment occurs. It can be argued that in order to achieve suitable work conditions, it is necessary to have a suitable socio-economic base in society.

The selection criteria for the research questionnaire were derived from the International Labor Organization's Decent Work Questionnaire (Deranty & MacMillan, 2012). While the relative importance of work dimensions and background conditions for women varies across countries and is subject to individual interpretation, the basic concept and framework remain consistent. In this study, an effort has been made to select questions that effectively assess the economic welfare and background conditions of women employed in rural handicrafts. The questionnaire is based on a 5-point Likert scale.

To determine the content validity of the questionnaire, the questions were refined to ensure clarity and precision. In addition, the relationship between the test and the measured trait was validated by five relevant professors. In addition, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient calculation method was used to assess the reliability of the questionnaire items. A total of 30 questionnaires were distributed to women employed in handicrafts in rural areas and collected upon completion. The analysis of the questionnaires yielded a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.71, which is considered an appropriate scale for the reliability of the questionnaire.

Results

Given this research population, it is imperative to ensure the reliability of the findings. To this end, a sample size of 380 women employed in handicrafts in rural areas was selected according to Morgan's table. Once the population and sample size had been determined, field data were collected by distributing

a questionnaire on the women's economic welfare and working background conditions. The demographic characteristics of the research sample are presented in Table (1).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics

Variable	Group	Number
Age	20-30	132
	31-40	108
	41-50	111
	>50	19
	Not specified	10
Education	Diploma and below	128
	Associate degree	44
	Bachelor	169
	Masters and above	35
	Not specified	4
Income	<200\$	110
	200\$-500\$	137
	>500\$	103
	Not specified	30
Work experience	<5	101
	5-10	150
	11-20	68
	>20	48
	Not specified	13
Number of dependents	On average	1.62

The variables were tested for normality using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Some dimensions have a significance coefficient greater than 0.05, so the null hypothesis that the variable of interest is normally distributed is rejected. The data are not normal, so LISREL cannot be used for structural equation modeling.

In the following section, composite reliability coefficients ($CR > 0.7$) and Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha > 0.7$) are used to assess the reliability of the research questionnaire. If these coefficients are found to be adequate, it can be concluded that the questionnaire is reliable. The Average Variance Extracted Index (AVE) is used to determine convergent validity. By utilizing this coefficient, questions with a factor

load of less than 0.5 are eliminated, ensuring that the value of the Average Variance Extracted Index is greater than 0.5 (Tubbs-Cooley et al., 2018). The results of this process are presented in Table (3).

Table 2. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for research questionnaire dimensions

Dimensions	Average	S. D	K-S	Number	Significant
Provision of basic necessities	3.74	0.244	1.006	380	0.262
Feeling of relative deprivation	2.74	0.710	1.580	380	0.015
Suitability of living environment	2.33	0.466	1/363	380	0.049
Impartial behaviour in employment	1.70	0.261	1.430	380	0.033
Work-life balance	2.22	0.385	1.822	380	0.003
Social support	1.41	0.440	0.940	380	0.334
Social discourse	1.73	0.383	1.060	380	0.209
Socio-economic context	1.95	0.619	1.753	380	0.004

Table 3. Cronbach's alpha, AVE and convergence for research questionnaire dimensions

Dimensions	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE	CR
Provision of basic necessities	0.750	0.590	0.781
Feeling of relative deprivation	0.674	0.511	0.712
Suitability of living environment	0.705	0.515	0.726
Impartial behaviour in employment	0.716	0.503	0.722
Work-life balance	0.677	0.506	0.707
Social support	0.720	0.562	0.725
Social discourse	0.693	0.517	0.720
Socio-economic context	0.711	0.504	0.718

Since the Cronbach's alpha coefficient exceeds 0.7 for most dimensions, the questionnaire and its subscales are considered reliable. In terms of convergent validity, a value greater than 0.5 indicates increased research validity. Since all the values (AVE) exceed 0.5, the validity of the factors is considered satisfactory. Conversely, if all the combined research reliability scores exceed 0.7, it can be concluded that the reliability of all dimensions of the questionnaire is adequate.

The results of Table 4 regarding the correlation of economic welfare with individual characteristics of the research sample indicate that there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between monthly income and the level of women's economic welfare, as well as between work experience and the level of economic welfare of women employed in rural handicrafts. In addition, a negative and significant relationship was observed between age and women's economic welfare. No significant

relationship was found between the variables of education level and number of dependents and the level of economic welfare of women engaged in handicrafts in less developed rural areas.

Table 4. The correlation test between women's economic welfare and individual characteristics of sample

Variables	Correlation Coefficient	Significant Level
Age	-0.135	0.015
Education	0.270	0.350
Income	0.082	0.022
Work experience	0.175	0.000
Number of dependents	0.048	0.0651

Following the statistical analysis of the research questionnaire, an attempt was made to estimate the free parameters from a set of observed data. Given the absence of a normal distribution in the data set, the least squares method of partial approximation was used to estimate the model. Figure (1-A) shows the research model in standard estimation mode, while Figure 1-b shows the research model in significance mode. From Figure (1-A), we can determine which dimension has the greatest influence on the economic welfare of women engaged in rural handicrafts and which has the least influence. Figure (1-B) shows the research model in the state of significance of coefficients (t-value). The coefficients of the research model show that all the relationships are significant.

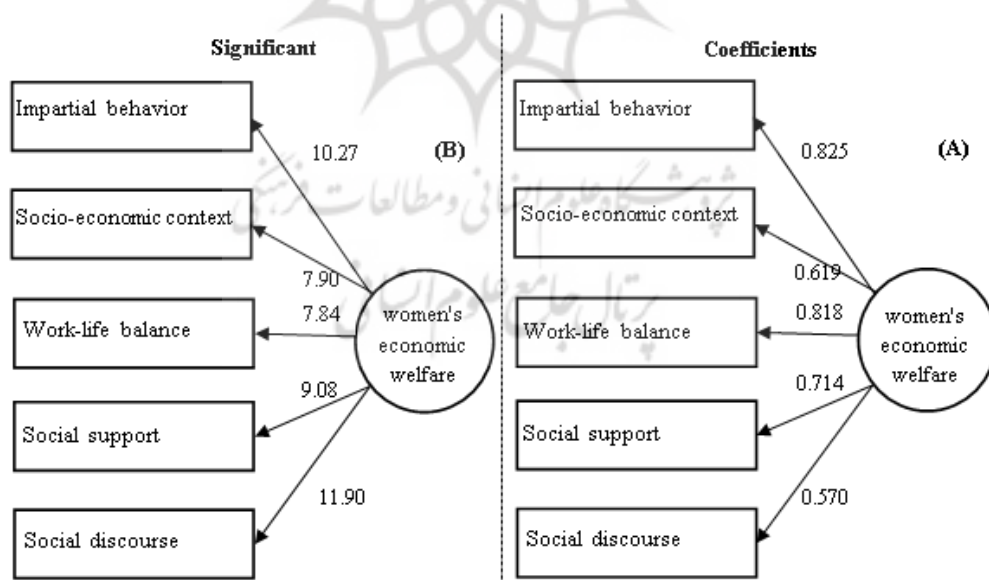


Figure 1. Significance, factor coefficients and model determination in standard estimation mode

The results show that all the coefficients of the model are acceptable and that the relationship between the components of the model is considered to be strong. In general, the dimensions of "Impartial behaviour in employment" and "Balance between work and life" have the greatest impact on the economic welfare of women engaged in handicrafts in less developed rural areas.

The goodness of fit (GOF) index is used to calculate the fit index of the model. A GOF value of 0.36 or greater indicates that the model is generally meaningful and acceptable (Chirico et al., 2017). The results of the calculations show that the value of GOF is 0.41, which supports the claim that the research model has a favorable fit. Finally, the goodness of fit of the model was developed using five indicators and the experimental data were analyzed. This resulted in a favorable fit between the structured model and the experimental data, and the model was found to be appropriate for explaining the impact of working background conditions on the economic welfare of women engaged in handicrafts in less developed rural areas. The results of these indicators are presented in Table (5).

Table 5. The indicators of model fit

Indicator	Value
χ^2	169.80
CFI	0.932
GFI	0.911
TLI	0.917
RMSE	0.011

Table 6. The value of R^2 and Q^2 for model endogenous variable

Endogenous Variable	$R^2 > 0.33$	$Q^2 > 0.35$
Women's economic welfare	0.670	0.525

As the results presented in Table (6) show, the value of R^2 for the endogenous variable serves to confirm the adequacy of the fit of the structural model. In addition, the Q^2 criterion assesses the predictive ability of the model. The value obtained for the endogenous variable demonstrates the robust ability of the model to explain the economic welfare of women engaged in handicrafts in less developed rural areas and, in general, the appropriate fit of the structural model. This further confirms the above findings.

Discussion and Conclusion

Women are an important social group that plays a dual role in society. In addition to their personal and family responsibilities, women actively contribute to the advancement of social and economic progress. Failure to utilize the potential power of women in various cultural, social, economic and political spheres precludes the possibility of social progress. An analysis of economic data relating to women in less

developed regions reveals a clear need for the implementation of more conducive employment and welfare policies for this demographic group.

The issue of women's employment is not the responsibility of a single agency. Since women make up half of the population, all executive agencies are to some extent concerned with women's issues and problems, and some of their activities are directed towards this area. Statistical data show an increase in the number of educated women in both urban and rural areas. However, these educational opportunities are not accompanied by skills training in key areas such as entrepreneurship, marketing and legal issues. As a result, the mere possession of a university education does not necessarily empower women in the area of employment. It appears that as women's desire for economic and social empowerment increases, improving the basic conditions of employment may provide women with a more direct route to suitable employment opportunities.

In order to determine the prevailing conditions of women employed in handicrafts in less developed rural areas, this study adopted a methodology that is in line with the general opinion and consensus previously expressed by researchers in this field. Five dimensions of working conditions were identified as key variables for measurement. Impartial behavior in employment can be expressed in terms of equality of employment opportunities, type of work, and level of remuneration for equal work. Resolution No. 111 of the International Labour Organization (1958) defines discrimination as any difference, exclusion or preference based on race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, nationality, descent or social origin which adversely affects the quality of employment opportunities or treatment in employment. The reconciliation of work and family life is a major public policy concern in many countries. This aspect is of particular importance for women, who bear the dual responsibility of caring for their families and maintaining their professional roles. Furthermore, the International Labour Organization, in its Resolution No. 156 (1981), emphasized that national policies should be designed to enable persons with family responsibilities who express the desire to enter or remain in the labour market to do so without being discriminated against. Another crucial dimension is that of social support. According to studies by the International Labour Organization, only 20 per cent of the world's workforce has access to social support, and the type and amount of social support available varies widely across countries. Another critical dimension is the extent to which women are empowered to express their views on work issues and to participate in shaping their working conditions. These perspectives may be articulated through their representatives or through direct engagement between women and their employers. In addition to the four dimensions discussed above, there are other dimensions that can be useful in analyzing employment conditions. This dimension specifies the socio-economic context in which women's employment takes place. It can be argued that in order to achieve decent working conditions, it is necessary to have a decent socio-economic base in society.

Despite the absence of analogous research in Iran, the findings of this study align with the results of studies Arabmzar et al. (2014), Fallah Jelodar et al. (2018) and Mahmoudi et al. (2021). It can be said that overcoming the deficiencies inherent in working conditions requires a considerable investment of effort. It is the responsibility of governments and their economic, political and social representatives to give priority to improving the basic conditions of women workers. Subsequently, employers and workers have a responsibility to improve these conditions. In addition, non-governmental organizations can play an important role in this regard. In order to achieve the recognition and identification of appropriate conditions for the economic welfare of women within countries, it is essential to have national determination, political will and the prioritization of strategies that are oriented towards the political, economic and social development of the country. In this regard, it is evident that a robust and efficient governance structure is a critical element for the tangible improvement of women's economic welfare.

It should be noted that the evolving landscape of work and the changing demographic composition of the workforce, particularly in terms of gender, has led to the emergence of a cultural and behavioral divide. This, in turn, has influenced the way in which laws are implemented and rights are developed in the workplace. Moreover, the benefits cannot be moderated to a reasonable extent. Conversely, the widening of this gap will make it increasingly difficult to address the issue of labor efficiency. In addition, labor relations between workers and employers have been adversely affected by extreme price fluctuations, low demand for labor, and high unemployment, especially among women. This has resulted in many women with higher education working in simple jobs, often with great dissatisfaction. In such circumstances, a reduction in the labor productivity of those who work under compulsion and without sufficient motivation is an inevitable consequence. The absence of comprehensive bilateral relations, coupled with a lack of interaction, mutual trust and reciprocity in the labor market, has led to the formulation of collective labor agreements and individual contracts that either do not address employment conditions or labor relations, or do so in a conditional and continuous manner. Such agreements have led to a decline in the quality of products or services provided by workers, while at the same time hindering the development of innovation and ingenuity among the labor force.

Declarations

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interest: None declared.

Ethics approval: Not applicable.

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