

Women and work in urban slums of India: spaces of systemic gendered deprivations

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Abstract

Despite being overworked, women are mostly designated non-workers. They struggle and fight long battles to take upon themselves double burdens of both household and employment. In this study, an attempt has been made to explore the status of women's work participation within the context of economic compulsion. The study is thus based in urban slums of India, which have been assumed to be preexisting spaces of poverty. This study intends to deconstruct the notion of feminization of poverty through a logical understanding of women's work participation in urban slums across 2613 cities and towns of India. Using equality coefficient, a correlation coefficient and a disparity index, the study goes on to find that the process of gendered deprivations is so majoritarian and widespread that it is almost systemic in nature. The social forces overpower the economic forces, such that economic compulsions do not obliterate these systemic gendered deprivations.

Keywords: *Women, Work, Urban, Slums, India*

Introduction

Michael Dennings (2016, p.273) in his widely read book, *Global Histories of Work* writes, 'Under capitalism, the only thing worse than being exploited is not being exploited. Since the beginnings of the wage-labour economy, wageless life has been a calamity for those dispossessed of land, tools and means of subsistence. Expelled from work, the wageless also became invisible'. Drawing an analogy from this, women within largely patriarchal spaces can be positioned the same. This is because, despite being overworked, they are mostly designated non-workers. In fact, they struggle and fight long battles to take upon themselves double burdens of both household and employment. But, what if employment is compulsive? What if there are economic constraints? Does that facilitate more and

more women to participate in the workforce? In this study, an attempt has been made to explore the above questions by analyzing the status of women's work participation in urban slums of India. Slums, in this context, have been assumed to be preexisting spaces of poverty. However, it is undoubted that slums are consequential to the process of urbanisation and migration and 'both the causes and consequences of urbanisation for women are, in fact, unique and deeply related to issues of gender' (Gomez et al, 2008). A study conducted in the slums of the National Capital of India reported that the quality of human capital embodied in working women from the urban slums of Delhi is rather unimpressive in terms of their skill-sets, their physical health and mental well being owing

to their dual burdens of household roles and compulsive economic engagements. Their insecurities are manifested in their extremely limited accumulations and overwhelming presence in the informal market (CARE India, 2017). In smaller towns, opportunities are scanty and the situation worse.

Materials and methods

This study intends to deconstruct the notion of feminization of poverty through a logical understanding of women's work participation in urban slums of India across 2613 cities and towns of the country. The trends thus reflect all men and women in all urban slums, as reported by the Census of India, 2011. The study attempts a comparative positioning of women as opposed to men under similar conditions of economic constraint. Beyond work, a discussion on the possible factors also forms an integral part of the study. The study makes a conscious attempt to identify those urban areas which are exceptions to the national trends. They provide more equal homes and opportunities to women, unlike the majority. The study goes on to find that social forces overpower economic forces; in the sense that economic compulsions do not obliterate systemic gendered deprivations.

Empirically, *equality coefficients* have been calculated by dividing the share of a particular group in a particular category by the share of the same group in the total population (which may alter as per the context). For example, equality coefficient or representation of working women in urban slums = share of working women in urban slums to the total working population in urban slums/share of women in urban slums to total population in urban slums. All values > 1 represent over-representation

of the concerned group in the concerned category and all values < 1 represent under-representation of the same. A value of 1 indicates equality. Sopher's disparity index [$\text{Log } x_1/x_2$] + [$\text{Log}(100-x_2) / (100-x_1)$] has been calculated to measure gendered gaps across categories of work assuming that more men (x_1) work as compared to women (x_2), i.e. $x_1 > x_2$ in urban slums. The merit of the disparity index in comparison to the equality coefficient lies in the fact that it reveals the extent of the gap over and above mere concentrations. In this case, values > 0 indicate dominance tilted towards men and values < 0 indicate otherwise. Zero indicates parity. Dot plots have been used to visually represent both methods. One dot is one urban centre.

Karl Pearson's correlation coefficient has been calculated to represent bi-variate relations between multiple factors and has been presented through a correlation matrix. The significance of the relations has been shown both at 99% (0.01 significance level) and 95% (0.05 significance level). All calculations and figures have been generated through IBM SPSS and Microsoft Excel.

Results and discussion

Slums as gendered spaces (with special reference to work)

Fig. 1 provides an overall impression of the gendered spaces that urban slums in India represent. Work participation explains the relative concentration of men and women with further clarity. Equality coefficients for scheduled caste (SC) and tribe (ST) men and women in urban slums have been calculated with respect to the total population of men and women in urban slums of the country.

Having historically experienced denials, the scheduled caste population constitutes 16.63% and the scheduled tribe 8.63% of the total population in India (Census of India, 2011). Their (for both men and women) concentration closest to the line of parity, relative to other parameters shown in Fig. 1, is indicative of the fact that most people living in urban slums principally belong to these two categories. Absence or limited access to both economic and social privileges tends to coincide thus. The gendered gap tends to widen as one looks at literacy first and then participation in the workforce. In both cases, however, men are on the upper side of the line of equality and women below the same. The incongruence between the literacy and the work participation trends reveal that women participate way less than their literacy rates enable them to, in comparison to the same education-occupation correlation in their male counterparts.

In a study based on 300 slum households of Kolkata, it was found that a woman's caste and education have no statistically significant relationship with her employment or income. She, as a household head contributes more significantly, which is seen to increase with a woman's increasing age and decrease with the household size. Contributions are also significant when she belongs to the BPL category. (Chaudhuri, 2018, 85). Therefore, one can assert the existence of systemic feminization of poverty. This is significant because it calls for strategic policies for urban slums in India which need to be as much gender-based as they are poverty-based.

At this stage, it must be recalled that each dot represents the gender equality prevalent in an urban centre and therefore, the concentration of dots closes to or farther

away from the line of equality (represented by 1) reveals the prevalence or repetition of gender-based equality or inequality respectively across geographical space.

Looking at the three different work participation-based categories (i.e. main, marginal and non-workers); one can observe an unchanging concentration of men close to the line of equality. The pattern concretizes as one moves from main workers (those occupied for more than 6 months in a year) to marginal workers (those occupied for less than 6 months in a year) to non-workers (defined by the Census of India, 2011 as those 'who did not work at all in any economically productive activity during the last one year preceding the date of enumeration...This category includes students, persons engaged in household duties, dependents, pensioners, beggars, etc.' (Census of India, 2011). The only times' women are seen to dominate the upper side of the line of equality are in the two latter categories of marginal and non-workers, both of which are indicative of disempowerment through either limited or non-participation in the workforce. The enormous nature of the gendered gaps in these two categories is evident from the vertical scale values of the same.

Categories of work

Gender-based disparities are more glaring among main workers as compared to marginal workers, as is observed by comparing Fig. 2 and Fig. 3. One observes a closer concentration of marginal workers along the line of parity (0 disparity) than main workers. Fig. 2 helps in deconstructing the category of main workers. It explains that within this larger category, men tend to dominate (indicated through positive values of disparity, since x_1 = men and x_2 = women

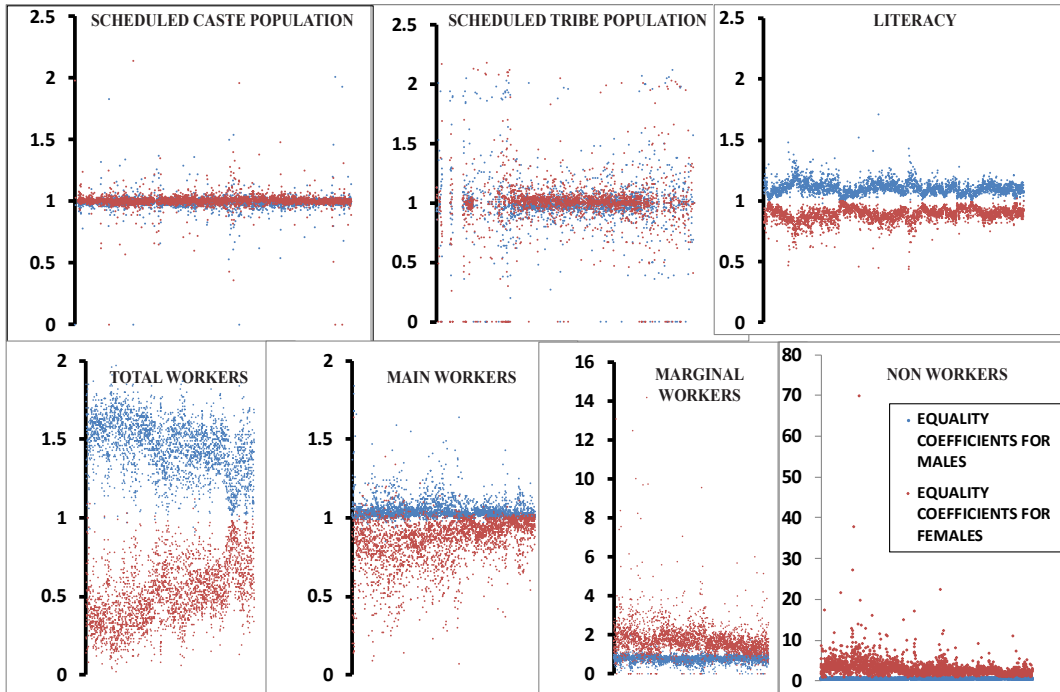


Fig. 1: Comparative representation of various census-based parameters in urban slums across 2613 cities and towns of India using Equality Co-efficient: A gendered perspective
 Source: Prepared by the author using data from the Census of India, 2011.

and the assumption was $x_1 > x_2$) in the category of cultivators, which implies a sense of ownership. A similar trend is observed in the category of other workers as well, which according to the Census principally includes ‘government servants, municipal employees, teachers, factory workers, plantation workers, those engaged in trade, commerce, business, transport, banking, mining, construction, political or social work, priests, entertainment artists, etc.’ (Census of India, 2011). Though still more concentrated on the positive side, the gender-based disparity among agricultural labourers is closer to the line of parity; so, does in the category of household industries, which is defined by the Census as ‘an industry conducted by one or more members of the household at home...and only within the

precincts of the house where the household lives in urban areas. The larger proportion of workers in the household industry consists of members of the household’ (Census of India, 2011). If there is any visible presence of women, it is principally in this category, as many urban centres reveal the dominance of women over men in this category, as is indicated by the negative values on the other side of the line of parity. This is true for agricultural labourers as well, but perceivably in fewer urban centres. Both these categories are indicative of poverty and compromised rights. Fig. 3 asserts the above findings. As one moves from 3-6 months to less than 3 months of being occupied in economically gainful activities, one observes many more cities and towns exhibiting gender parity,

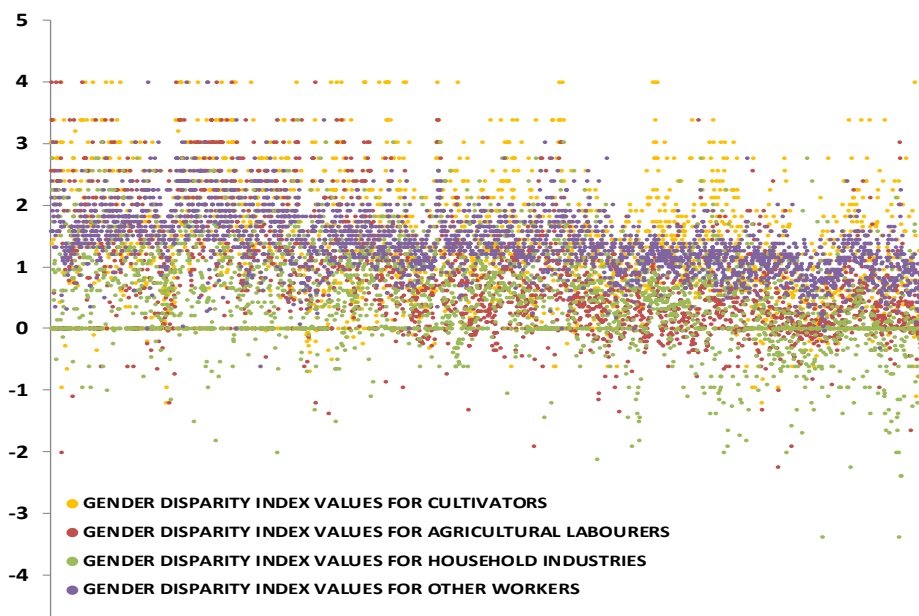


Fig. 2: Comparative representation of gender disparities in occupation in urban slums across 2613 cities and towns of India.

Source: Prepared by the author using data from the Census of India, 2011.

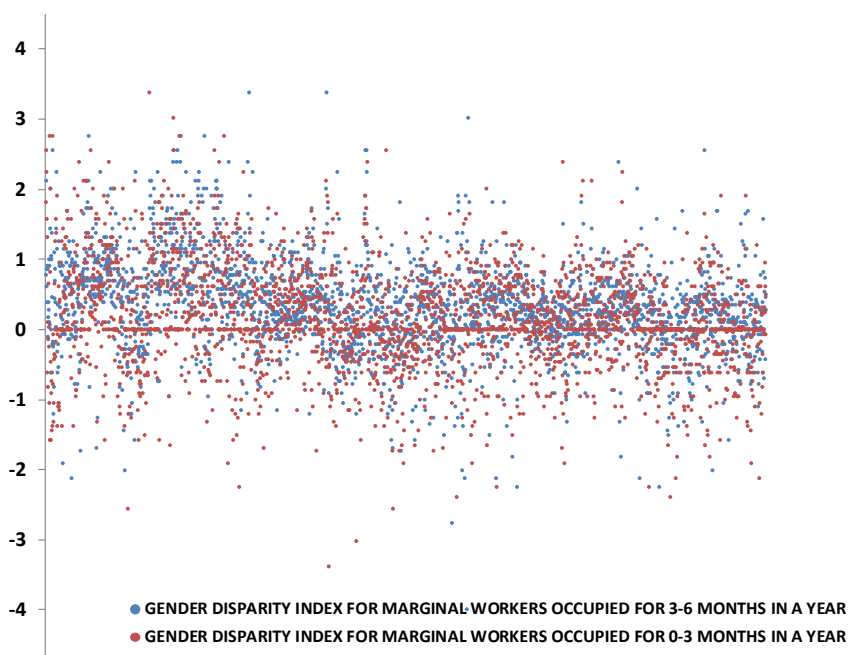


Fig. 3: Comparative Representation of Gender Disparities among Marginal Workers occupied for 0-3 months and 3-6 months of the year in urban slums of India across 2613 cities and towns.

Source: Prepared by the author using data from the Census of India, 2011.

indicated by a distinct line of red dots along 0 disparity.

The above findings can be corroborated through a Gujarat-based study that finds women coming from slums and ‘slum-like settlements’ of Bhuj generally engage in traditional occupations like ‘*bandhani*, embroidery, fall beading, etc’. Their presence in the formal sector, as even casual workers in the government sector, in the more emergent private sector, or even in the non-farm sector at large is rather limited. The study goes on to justify that women prefer the former in comparison to the latter owing to the flexibility of work hours which enables them to simultaneously cater to their household roles and the possibility of working from home enables them to avoid insecure work environments. However, the study also asserts how these preferences sufficiently limit women from expanding their ventures (De et al, 2019). The merit of this Census-based study in comparison to survey-based studies lies in the reality that it establishes the fact that what happens in one slum or slums of one city repeats in most slums across most cities of this country and thus re-confirms the notion of systemic deprivations for poor women in India. The survey-based studies however are the only ways to realize that the deprivation is so entrenched that it has almost been internalized by women themselves who thereafter express ‘preference’ to engage in traditional, home-based, unstable and low-paying occupations. This provides them the time to cater to their household chores as well.

These widespread normalized trends disempower women in multiple ways. The most significant impact is on women’s health which deteriorates owing to her double burdens of paid work and unpaid house-work.

Physical stress most obviously causes frequent illnesses along with compromised appetite, tiredness, loss of breath and so on (Kotwal et al, 2017, 93). Also, these extremely disempowering choices that women make situate them on the most vulnerable edges of the labour market. A study conducted as late as 2019 finds that women in India’s informal sector are likely to bear the burden of a job crisis. Under any kind of economic low, they are the first ones to be pushed out of the market. ‘According to the private Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), 90 percent of around 10 million jobs lost last year were held by women’ (Choudhury and Ulmer, 2019). Therefore, the reality anywhere is that non-slum women and slum men are better off than working women residing in slums. This is because, despite long hours of work in general and engagements in paid work, the latter remains poor (Azcona et al, 2020)

Explaining possible factors

In this study, an attempt has also been made to explore the possible factors that operate nationwide to make women the ‘working poor’ in India (Table 1). The share of total female workers shows a statistically significant positive correlation at 99% confidence level with sex ratio, the share of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe population and significant negative correlation at the same confidence level with household size, the share of non-SC/ST population and share of female literates. Let each one is discussed separately. As far as sex ratio is concerned, the positive correlation could simply mean that the presence of more women in urban slums possibly causes more women to participate in the workforce from a particular city or town. However, the sex ratio is an important gender-based parameter

Table 1: Correlation Matrix Explaining Possible Factors

	Share of total female workers	Sex ratio	Household size	Share of scheduled caste population	Share of scheduled tribe population	Share of non-SC/ST population	Share of total literates	Share of female literates
Share of total female workers	1							
Sex ratio	0.481**	1						
Household size	-0.424**	-0.431**	1					
Share of scheduled caste population	0.259**	0.137**	-0.204**	1				
Share of scheduled tribe population	0.183**	0.085**	-0.052**	-0.251**	1			
Share of non-SC/ST population	-0.356**	-0.181**	0.229**	x	x	1		
Share of total literates	-0.037	0.176**	-0.317**	-0.150**	0.044*	0.123**	1	
Share of female literates	-0.051**	0.216**	-0.337**	-0.162**	0.037	0.139**	0.978**	1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Pearson Correlation

Sig. (2-tailed)

N = 2613

x: irrelevant correlation

Source: Prepared by the author using data from the Census of India, 2011.

in itself. Therefore, higher sex ratios enabling more women to participate in the workforce is certainly a significant finding.

Female work participation shows a statistically significant and positive correlation with the share of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe population as well. Therefore, the inference is that, even if the coincidence of both economic and social deprivation marginalizes the SCs and STs in India (discussed earlier), they do not follow the otherwise majority trends of a negative correlation with female work participation as the relatively socio-economically privileged (non-SC/ST) groups do. It is also important to note the significantly negative correlation

that this group bears with sex ratio, unlike its counterparts. Female work participation in urban slums of India shows no significant correlation with literacy, however, it does show a significant negative correlation with the share of female literates. This literacy-work participation (or education-occupation) incongruence corroborates a previously stated finding from Fig. 1. As has been cited from survey-based studies carried out in different cities of India, household size expectedly bears a significant negative correlation with female work participation because a large household imposes more duties and greater care burden on women that most discriminately keeps them from participating

Table 2: Exceptions to systemic deprivations

City/Town	State	Share of Female Workers to Total Workers
Seer Hamdan	Jammu and Kashmir	0.52
P.Mettupalayam	Tamil Nadu	0.52
Rohru	Himachal Pradesh	0.51
Amila	Uttar Pradesh	0.51
Mathabhanga	West Bengal	0.51
Satana	Maharashtra	0.51
Yari Pora	Jammu and Kashmir	0.50
Pusaur	Chhattisgarh	0.50
Tasgaon	Maharashtra	0.50
Kilampadi	Tamil Nadu	0.50
Uppiliapuram	Tamil Nadu	0.50
Srimushnam	Tamil Nadu	0.50
Kayatharu	Tamil Nadu	0.50

Source: Prepared by the author using data from the Census of India, 2011.

in the workforce. The negative correlation between household size and sex ratio adds to this burden-based unemployment which seems to be experienced by non-SC/ST women unlike their counterparts in urban slums of India.

Having put forth the above patterns and reasons, it is also important to point out those places which are exceptions to systemic deprivations. However, only 13 cities/towns out of 2613 enumerated by the Census exhibit equal to slightly women dominant (little over 50%) workforces from the urban slums (Table 2). As many as 5 out of these 13 are in the state of Tamil Nadu, 2 in Maharashtra and 2 in Jammu and Kashmir. Expectedly, no big city features on the list. This small list of exceptions re-asserts the extensive nature of the issues discussed in the previous sections.

Conclusions

What is deeply disheartening in this entire unequal and disparate situation is the fact

that poor Indian women in urban slums undoubtedly work, but their work goes unnoticed and is undocumented. This is because of multiple reasons, beginning with problematic definitions of ‘work’ still used extensively, especially by the Census of India; the concentration of women in work that is unstable, seasonal and disguised; the gendered roles imposed on women that push them to voluntarily opt for such occupations or no occupation at all especially in large households with low sex ratio and so on. The process is majoritarian (more prevalent among the majority groups) and widespread and therefore systemic in nature. What confirms it is the fact that even literacy is not a saviour. The conclusion therefore is; the nation embraces an impression that women crowd the ‘non-worker’ category rather than the workforce; the truth is, they are indeed pushed to such margins of the workforce, both in terms of the nature and duration of paid work, despite the prevalence of economic

constraints, despite women's education, that their contributions are systemically denied, almost on purpose.

The issues raised in this study could possibly be justified better if age-segregated data for urban slums can be made available by the Census of India and if the non-worker's category can be deconstructed such that students can be separated from that category because one existing argument is that women are not in the workforce because they are studying and the other is its critique (Menon, 2019). Therefore, it shall be interesting to explore both sides in the context of urban slums in India. The merit of the study lies in its inclusion of the Census rather than a sample.

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