

# **Gender Dynamics in Urban Slums: A Case Study of Women's Work and Safety in Delhi**

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## **Abstract**

This paper conducts an analysis of gendered aspects of work and safety within slums of Delhi city paying attention to the field of unequal employment experiences of women in an informal labour market and the risk factors to their physical and psychological health. Drawing on qualitative research conducted in select slum settlements, the paper examines the socio-cultural and spatial constraints that shape women's employment opportunities, mobility, and daily experiences. The results show that women are involved in mostly low-paid, informal jobs which are insecure most of the time due to domestic duties and male-dominated culture. Safety emerges as a critical factor limiting women's access to public spaces and economic participation, with frequent incidents of harassment, inadequate infrastructure, and weak institutional support. The paper has made it clear that there are combinations of marginalization between gender, caste, class, and migration status that blight the women and limit their agency. It concludes with policy recommendations for enhancing women's safety, improving access to dignified work, and promoting inclusive urban development. This study forms part of the wider debate of gender issues, urban poverty and spatial justice in fast-urbanizing domains.

## **Introduction**

Popular urbanization in India has been the cause of the spread of informal settlements or slums, in the large cities such as Delhi. These overcrowded neighbourhoods usually do not have a field, no security, no access to a formal job which is disproportionately experienced by women due to their need to cope with both economic vulnerabilities and deeply rooted gender disparities. In this kind of situation, the overlaps with poverty, gender and urban informality define peculiar difficulties of women especially in their work and personal security.

While slums are often viewed as sites of economic struggle, they are also deeply gendered spaces where women's roles, mobility, and participation in public life are shaped by patriarchal norms and socio-spatial constraints. Women in such societies often do informal jobs, poorly paid, insecure, and unrecognized by the state, i.e. doing domestic chores, street sales, and home-based business. They further lose their working capabilities due to the unsafe public infrastructure, gender-based violence, and domestic chores which they are supposed to take as unpaid responsibilities.

## **Literature Review**

Urban slums are social territories of a complex nature where inequality, poverty, and informality all collide. In this environment, most of the accessibility to resources, mobility, and livelihood opportunities of people rest on gender. The following literature review focuses on three major aspects concerning the topic of the current study, which are the labour of women

in informal economies, the safety and gendered spatiality and the theme of intersectionality in urban slums.

The feminization of informal work in urban India has been discussed in a great volume of literature. As stated by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) along with International Labour Organization (ILO), more than 90 percent women in India work informally and the percentage is higher in the slums of urban locations. These are the type of jobs such as domestic work; waste picking, and home-based manufacturing, are poorly-paid, unregulated, and unprotected by social protection schemes (Chen, 2012; Neetha, 2008).

Research reports by Bhan and Shivanand (2013) point to the fact that such cities as Delhi have their share of slum-dwelling women, who have to experience the so-called double burdens of unpaid domestic labour and vulnerable wage employment. It is not only an economic imperative to determine their labour, but there are also traditional gender roles that leave care-giving and home duties to women and deny them the right to paid labour. Kabeer (2011) suggests that informal employment may limit people to some level of autonomy but can hardly create empowerment in the system due to compulsory weaknesses, unsafe working conditions, and mobility.

The relationship between gender and urban space is crucial to understanding women's safety. Scholars such as Phadke (2005) and Viswanath and Mehrotra (2007) have explored how women's movement in cities is often restricted by both real and perceived threats of violence. In the slum settings, this is compounded by congestion of housing, poor illumination, absence of sanitary amenities and inefficiency of policing. Such spatial and infrastructural shortages make up unsafe conditions, which keep women not going to workplaces, particularly in early mornings or at the end of the working day (Anand & Radhakrishnan, 2017).

Research by Jagori, a Delhi-based feminist organization, shows that fear of harassment is a major deterrent to women's participation in public life. Their safety inspections in the neighbourhoods of Delhi indicated the unfriendly surroundings limit the female participation in the economic activities and foster the reliance on their male family members (Jagori & UN Women, 2011).

Intersectional conceptualizations facilitate the unravelling of stratified disadvantages on women in the low-income neighbourhoods of the city. Indian researchers such as Roy (2014) and Deshpande (2011) have used the theory of intersectionality created by Crenshaw (1989) to examine how different factors interact as gender-based marginalization is exacerbated by caste, religion, and migration status. As an example, Dalit and Muslim women in the slums are most times subjected to underrepresentation in job markets, non-access to public schemes, and stereotyping by the authorities.

The migrant women in Delhi, who come mainly to rural areas, face a lot of vulnerable condition being in possession of little to no formal identity credentials, social networking, and proficiency with the language. These obstacles also limit their reach to form types of employment, residence and complaint procedure (Kundu, 2010). The fact that the urban poor have little say in the governance of their cities also implies that such problems as gender-based violence and economic inequality are more likely to be left off the urban policy agenda (Bhan, 2009).

## **Methodology**

This paper takes a qualitative case study design in investigating the overlaps between gender, work, and safety in urban slums of Delhi. The idea is to have a deep background of the way women are exposed to and make their way in the informal labour markets and safety issues in their daily life. Qualitative methods are especially used in examining lived realities of people that are usually missed in a quantitative survey.

## **Design of the Study**

The study is of interpretivist approach, which aims to uncover the process of constructing and negotiating gendered experiences within a defined space and the society in which this space is regarded. One of the research methods that can be used in the study of the selected slum communities in Delhi is a case study design as it provides a detailed, locally relevant analysis of the contextual understanding of the local realities to gain an insight into the wider urban processes.

## **Selection of sites**

Delhi was identified and three of its slum settlements utilized purposefully to capture the variants in the demographic content, the geographic locational difference, and access to infrastructure:

- Kathputli Colony (West Delhi) - with the migrant communities of artists and under the pressure of relocations.
- Seemapuri (East Delhi) a dense population settlement with large number of Muslims and Dalits.
- Sanjay Colony (an illegal colony that is semi-legalized in South Delhi) has better infrastructure, but also presence of NGOs.

The sites were selected in order to enable comparisons across caste, religion, and migration history and still have a few points of reference in the sense of a shared interest in informal urban settlements.

## **Lines of Sampling and Participants**

Participants were sampled purposively and through snowball sampling so that a diverse as well as contextually grounded sample is formed. In the three locations, 45 women of the age group of 18-55 were interviewed. These included:

- Casual labourers (e.g. domestic worker, street hawker, rag pickers, home-based workers)
- Women who want to work when idling in jobs
- Limited mobility household caregivers

Also, important sources like the local NGO workers, local community leaders and local municipal officials were also interviewed in order to get institutional and contextual reflections.

## **Methods of data collection**

The enumerated below were adopted as qualitative instruments in the research:

- Semi-structured interviews conducted with women addressing their work experience, safety experience and coping strategies.
- Focus group discussions (FGDs): A discussion will take place in every community to create a shared narrative and self-reflection of peers regarding common experiences.

Participant observation: Conducted when making visits to the communities to witness spaces, spatial patterns, and movements as well as dynamics within the neighbourhood.

Key informant interviews: Key informants (e.g. with NGO representatives (e.g., Jagori, Aajeevika Bureau), local police and urban planners at the ward level.

The interviewing and FGDs were conducted in the Hindi language, taped (with permission), and analysed.

### **Gendered Slum work**

Informal settlements in Delhi become the centres of a survival economy with women powering it, despite the fact that there is very little trace of the contribution and the hard work women actually do. This chapter will look at the gendered composition of work in urban slums, especially the kind of work that women do, socio-cultural handicaps that women experience as well as the way in which structural inequalities support gender differences in the informal labour market.

Jobs mostly taken by women in the sampled slum communities mostly come under the category of cheap, flexible and home based jobs which are part of the informal sector. These include:

- Middle-class labour of the home (cleaning, cooking, care giver)

Home-based production (garment sewing, incense stick rolling etc.)

- Recycling and Waste picking

### **Street peddling and petty trade**

These are jobs which are informal in nature and are not contractual and with no job and social security. Majority of the women are minimum wage earners who get paid by the day or by the piece. In the opinion of some interviewees, they lack formal validation, which makes their work invisible in statistics and policymaking, further institutionalizing indifference.

People say that I sit at home because I work at home and outside, and all around the day but when people are questioned about what I do they say that I may just be sitting at home.

Gender based norms in slum households encourage a strict division of house hold labour. Women are supposed to take care of housework first-cooking, child-rearing and taking care of the aged, and then look for paid jobs. Most of them stated that they had husband or in-laws opposing their efforts to provide their families as an external labourer.

My mother in law has been saying that it is a shame to work in the market as a woman. However, my husband does not earn that much money, we have no other choice.

When employed, women are generally relegated to do only the things that their gender should do like domestic work or work at home thus strengthening gender segregation in occupation.

Poor mobility is another common trend because it has adversely impacted the chances of women to access better-paying opportunities. Most of the women do not work or commute long distances to work because they fear being raped, harassed, and because they do not have a reliable means of transport. They consequently choose the jobs that enable them to stay or be around the settlement although the salary might be small.

This geographical constraint consolidates the economic dependence and restricts the upward moving. On the other hand, men residing in the same households tend to cover greater distance to work, work flexible hours, as well as, enjoy wider spectrum of employment opportunities.

Several women said they had been put under exploitive working circumstances. Wage inequality is also rife in the sector of domestic work where women of Dalit or Muslim origin receive lower wages than their counterparts. In addition, employers are usually not paying the salary or asking to work overtime without compensation, knowing that they have no legal contracts.

There is also middlemen who exploit home-based workers giving them arbitrary prices of the finished products and imposing fines on trivial flaws. There are however very little avenues of redress as women lack collective bargaining mechanisms or unions.

The common obstacle to economic mobility is associated with a deficiency of access to formal education, skill development and job training. Others did not find a way to finish school but instead had to leave at a tender age because of snatched marriage or gender norms. Consequently, they cannot get formal jobs or those with better remunerations in service or industries.

Although there are government-funded skill development programs (e.g., PMKVY), quite a few of them were not aware of them and, in any case, they face a bureaucratically inaccessible enrolment procedure. Migrant women were also left out through the language barrier, digital illiteracy, and the requirement of identity documents.

In spite of these limitations, the life situation of women in slums is rather impressive as they reveal high levels of resistance. Others create informal groupings to help each other spend time at work, also to share parenting duties or to use group travel to keep themselves safer. Other members of the household have to take more than one job to add to the family earnings at their own expense. Some of the NGOs operating in these fields provide skill training and microfinance programs, but they cover a small base.

**Safety and Mobility Regarding Matter** In the case of safety and mobility, the Governor states that there is no definite information regarding the existence of safety and mobility.

The issue of safety is everywhere among women in the urban slums and has a strong implication on the daily activities, movement as well as the economic opportunities that they gain. This part puts together the experience and negotiation of safety by women in the informal

settlements in Delhi and dwells on the following subjects: public space, infrastructure, violence, and gendered surveillance.

The women in the study reported that they were vastly harassed, intimidated and fearful in areas that include streets, markets, bus stops and even on the narrow streets in the slums. Verbal abuse cases, stalking, and groping cases were noted in all the three research sites. Such threats tend to be commonplace, and they happen in broad daylight and within purportedly familiar settings.

The main road does not even seem safe to walk to. We are followed by boys on bicycles; and comment followed. We pretend not to listen but we are afraid.” Shabnam, 21, Seemapuri

The fear of harassment influences the space and time of women and it is spread in several ways: women do not go out at night, they always travel in groups of persons or they change the path in which they should go to avoid specific places such as alleys or crossing in order to avoid harassment. This fear does not just translate to something physical but as a mental limitation on autonomy and agency.

A lack of infrastructures in the slums such as inadequate lighting, areas without toilets, and bad roads increase the risks. Streetlights are also not working in many locations, and therefore, it is very hazardous to move around at night. There is the major problem of public sanitation: the majority of women use shared or public toilets that are most of the time poorly lit, maintained and situated in remote areas, and this places them under risk of assault.

A worker bus, a shared taxi and a long journey on foot are the ways by which many working women go every day to their workplaces. However, even the realm of the public transport is a disputed territory. Women also complained of being harassed in buses (such as some touching you inappropriately, stalking you, or staring at you when you get off of the bus). Not many could afford their own vehicle and renting an auto or a rickshaw was not very feasible and even dangerous to travel on their own.

I will not accept a job that is farther away even though I get it. I do not want to take risks and travel by buses at the expense of my safety.”—Meena, 35, Sanjay Colony

That is why many women can accept paid less or erratic jobs, which are not farther than they can walk to, in fact, due to this fact, their economic freedom is restricted by safety.

Distrust and lack of access to law enforcement are characteristic in nature. A lot of women did not see any point in reporting a case of harassment or violence because they already had some negative experiences with police officers telling them that being outside was their fault or they needed to pay bribes.

The policemen want to know why we were alone. Then now we simply keep shut up--that is better than to be ashamed.”--Rita, 28, Seemapuri.

Non-existent practice of gender sensitive policing particularly in the slum locality creates a vacuum regarding the lack of institutional support to women. Most women did not know much about helplines or women protection cells and few had ever used them.



Interestingly not all constraints to mobility are caused or exerted by outside forces, some are imposed by the family member/ community under the pretexts of protection. Family members in most houses control how women dress, their time and even their life partners. Women are afraid of moral checking or reputational damage, and thus they are not allowed to attend any community activities, study, or even perform some kind of work.

Whatever happens outside, the entire blame falls on the girl and not on the man. That is why parents prevent us going out.”—Salma, 19, Sanjay Colony

These prohibitions, although in the guise of protection may, in fact, achieve the control of women through patriarchal dominance and further form another restraint of women in the sphere of politics in particular.

In spite of these problems, women are actively working on the strategies to deal with the safety. There are those who travel together or with a partner and some would avoid certain areas which are unsafe by sharing information about them, or they could organize their own routines to avoid harassment. Others can participate in local non-governmental organizations such as Jagori or Safetipin, obtaining safety training, whereas others can maintain an informal group to bring their issue forward through a community meeting or bargaining about lighting or police availability.

An example is in Seemapuri where a group of women approached the local councillor demanding streetlights and managed to have two lanes lit up although this increased safety to a slightly greater extent. Such instances of daily struggles show the agency and resilience within informal settlements.

### **Intersection and Power Structures**

Women's experiences of work and safety in Delhi's urban slums are not shaped by gender alone. They are a result of intersection of different social hierarchies, such as caste, religion, class, and migration status coupled with an unequitable power base in the household, community, and state. The section examines the way vulnerability, agency, and access to resources are formed at these intersections in the life of women who reside in the slums.

It is one of the key axes of social stratification in the Delhi slums and is associated with labor allocation, residential segregation and social capital. The study observed that the Dalit women were observed to be concentrated in stigmatizing and the most exploitative types of work including manual scavenging, waste picking and cleaning. Not only are such jobs low-paid but also are socially unacceptable and physically hazardous.

Nobody will allow us to do other work because we are Valmiki. This is our caste work, says Rekha, 32, Seemapuri, as she cleans socially.”

The Muslim women are no exception as they promote intensified marginalization. They said they encountered job discrimination and religious discrimination as well as increased policing or profiling by the authorities. Others were afraid of moving in majority Hindu regions by themselves because of communal conflicts.

They want to know our names and they say: You people always make trouble. They employ Hindu women first even when it comes to employment.”—Farzana, 45, Kathputli Colony

Therefore, gender is overlapped by caste and religion that determine not only the types of work, so the person might apply to, but also the sense of personal security in both the remote locations and within the streets and avenues.

Overall a substantial percentage of the women in the research were first-generation migrants of such states as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Mass movements have added weaknesses: the absence of identity papers, a language barrier, ignorance of urban structures, and lack of a support network. Migrant women were often locked out of welfare subsidized government schemes including subsidized food, health insurance or skill training, due to a lack of ration cards or because they had not been issued an Aadhaar card.

Here we do not get a ration. They tell us that we are not in the list of Delhi. Thus we make a living out of whatever little is earned.

Political participation is also restricted due to migrant status. Most of these women tend to be reluctant to visit the government offices or the police where they are afraid of either being harassed or being sent away.

The home is not always considered as a place of support and safety, and in most cases, when it happens to a girl or a woman in a slum, it is a place of manipulation and harassment. When it comes to women mobility, work and reproductive. Decisions by male member-husbands, fathers or brothers are often taken. Even domestic violence was reported by some women as a normal occurrence in their lives because they have no option to change.

When I go outside too often or speak with neighbours, he thinks that I am guilty. Then he whistles me. What is there to be done? There is no other place to go to.--Sarita, 37, Kathputli Colony

Furthermore, it was the women who bore disproportionate responsibility in the family, in terms of bringing up children, taking care of elderly family members, again restricting their chances to find or maintain jobs.

Solidarity and repression may exist within communities in the slums. Even in the three destinations, the unwritten rules dictated how women would act in the society: how they were dressed, how and when they went out, the people that they interacted with. When these norms were not followed, then gossips, social ostracism or even corporal punishment endorsed by the caste panchayats or the informal community elders was meted out.

When a girl is spotted talking to boys or it is noted that she is working late, members will talk bad about her. Her parents then prevent her going out.

This mass surveillance infringes the female freedom and supports patriarchal values in the form of a supposed community protection.

And yet, despite such levels of marginalization, women are not victimized victims. In the sites of their studies, women showed extreme strength in opposition to oppressive systems:



- Some formed informal women's groups to raise issues with local councillors or demand basic services.

Others could defy male dominance by participating in literacy or skill classes that were offered by NGOs secretly.

Some of them discussed with husbands and mothers-in-law in order to help them work providing some reasons which were based on the necessity to survive in a household.

My husband at first said no. However, I demonstrated to him how much I could make. He now assists the children also.”—Kamlesh, 33 at Sanjay Colony

## **Discussion**

The findings from this study reveal that women's work and safety in Delhi's urban slums are deeply intertwined issues, rooted in structural inequality, gendered spatial politics, and intersecting forms of marginalization. This part covers the wider theory and policy implications of the study with a relation made between the empirical results and more critical paradigms like spatial justice, the intersectionality and the informal urban economy.

The argument that women living in the slums become invisible in the policy of the city and in the general discourse is promoted in this research. Even though they keep households and cities afloat by providing domestic services, working out of homes or managing trash, their labour is hardly accounted or acknowledged. This invisibility reflects what feminist urban theorists have described as the "devaluation of reproductive and informal labour" (Federici, 2012; Neetha, 2008).

Further, the fact that women are found outside formal work places is not a choice that has to be met intrinsically, but the product of spatial, social and economic limitations. These dimensions of gendered work and access to labour of work are frequently not acknowledged in policies that emphasize building of infrastructure or rehabilitation of slums, and instead give weight to male breadwinners or people as heads of the family.

Among the greatest discoveries is that safety is no longer a matter of personal or criminal justice, but an economic problem. This hinders awareness of better paying jobs or any jobs considered to be stable to a great extent because they curtail the movement of women in space as a result of fear of violence, harassment and moral policing. This is in concurrence with the findings of other researchers on gendered geographies of fear in urban India which demonstrated how gendered geographies of fear limit women participation in the country (Phadke et al., 2011; Viswanath & Mehrotra, 2007).

The implications are mutual: lack of mobility will result in dependency in the economy, and this will subsequently decrease bargaining power both at the household and community level. This suggests that any intervention aimed at improving women's economic empowerment must also address safety, mobility infrastructure, and cultural norms simultaneously.

It is made very clear in the study that gender oppression is superimposed by caste, religion and migration status. The example of Dalit and Muslim women is of combination of gender based exclusion, occupation based segregation, police profiling and discrimination and service denial

on the basis of identity. Bureaucracy and documentation: There are far more migrant women than men whose situations are strongly affected by barriers because of bureaucracy issues and lack of documentation, which lead to their exploitation and abandonment by the state.

These overlapping disadvantages call back to the conception provided by Kimberlee Crenshaw (1989) who refers to such concept as intersectionality in that the inequality-based reflections (see: only gender) are incapable of reflecting all forms of marginalization. Intersectionality is not an academic construct in Delhi slums but it is lived reality that has created the conditions to determine who can work, who is secure and who is listened to.

Although much of the debate illuminated, the research also explains how women use self-power even in a limiting society. They bargain with patriarchal members of their families, organize themselves into groups, stand up to abusive employers, and change their schedules so as to keep their freedoms. These are personal resistances carried out daily and mostly undetected but are the most important types of political actions.

This is similar to what Partha Chatterjee (2004) terms as political society, given the fact that in this system of social control and politics, even those who are marginalized participate in political practice including access to the state and participation in the public life that is neither through formal rights solely but by negotiations, visibility and also through unofficial claims. Slum women are commonly found in this domain and have to demand the availability of streetlights or pressure groups are created, or informal negotiations are held on the provision of safe spaces.

There is not much of gender-neutral or gender blindness in structures of urban governance in Delhi, and institutions exist in few forms to even give a voice of poor women in the process of planning of the city. Both safety auditing and participatory budgeting programs are in existence of sorts, but seldom are in main policy.

## **Conclusion**

This paper aimed to explore the gendered relations of work and safety in the Delhi slums and specifically the experiences of the women who live there. By means of qualitative fieldwork in three slum settlements Kathputli Colony, Seemapuri, and Sanjay Colony, the research has identified how a combination of informal labour market, spatial insecurity and overlapping social inequalities influence the daily life of women in urban space.

Significant insights demonstrate that work of women is largely informal, low-paid and unrecognized and much depends on the patriarchal assumptions inside the house and in the society. At the same time, safety, the issue of being harassed or simply ignored and neglected as an infrastructural problem limits women a great deal when it comes to their freedom of movement and makes them dependent on men as far as the economy is concerned. These are compounded by the interaction of caste, religion, migration status, and the control of the household, which leaves most women in the perpetual negotiation between survival, independence, and safety.

However, women are also able to show their strength in such hardships. They push boundaries to exercise control, whether or not they know their collectives are informal, through individual

negotiations in the household, local activism. Such activities, which are frequently disregarded, constitute a significant segment of life in the city and should be further integrated into the study of the urban way of life and policy paradigms.

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