



Socio-Economic Conditions of Women in Slum Areas: A Study of Challenges and Pathways to Empowerment

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Abstract

Women residing in urban slums in India encounter multiple and overlapping disadvantages that arise from economic hardship, gender inequality, and limited access to basic services. Although urban poverty has been widely examined, the specific experiences of women within these settings require deeper attention. This paper explores the socio-economic conditions of women in slum areas of the District Barnala, Punjab. The findings indicate that women in slums experience multi-dimensional deprivation influenced by patriarchal norms and systemic barriers. The paper concludes by suggesting policy measures aimed at inclusive development and women's empowerment.

Keywords- Slum Women, Urban Poverty, Gender Inequality, Empowerment.

Introduction

The process of urbanization in India has led to the rapid growth of slum settlements, which are often marked by overcrowding, poor housing, and lack of essential amenities (Census of India, 2011). These conditions disproportionately affect women, who already face social and economic disadvantages. In such environments, gender inequality combines with poverty to create heightened vulnerability. Women often have limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, which restricts their overall development and well-being.

Review of Literature

Existing research highlights that poverty is not only an economic condition but also a social and gendered phenomenon. Sen (1999) emphasizes that development should be viewed as the expansion of individual capabilities and freedoms. Similarly, Kabeer (2015) discusses how structural inequalities limit women's access to resources and opportunities.

Reports by UN Women (2021) indicate that women in slum areas face additional challenges such as unpaid domestic responsibilities, restricted mobility, and exposure to violence. Agarwal (2018) further points out that women in urban slums experience inadequate access to education and healthcare, which reinforces their disadvantaged position.

Desai and Vanneman (2016) observe that women from economically weaker sections, especially in slum areas, have significantly lower access to formal employment and

social services. Despite these studies, there is still a need for integrated research that connects theoretical frameworks with empirical data and contemporary challenges such as digital inequality.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the socio-economic conditions of women in slum areas
- To analyze the extent of gender inequality
- To apply relevant theoretical perspectives
- To suggest policy recommendations for empowerment

Research Methodology

A survey was done with around sample size of 40 women in the slum area of district Barnala, Punjab respondents were selected through Random sampling and the respondents were evaluated on given below parameters.

Table -1

Education Level Distribution

Education Level	Frequency
Illiterate	10
Primary	12
Secondary	11
Higher	7

The data indicates that most women in the district have only basic education, while a considerable number remain illiterate. Limited access to education and early school dropout are common issues. This restricts their ability to access better employment opportunities and contributes to the continuation of poverty.

Table -2

Employment type Distribution

Employment Type	Frequency
Domestic Work	14
Street Vendor	10
Construction	9
Unemployed	7

The majority of women in the district are engaged in informal sector jobs such as domestic work and street vending. These occupations are typically low-paying and lack job security or social protection. This reflects the economic vulnerability of women in slum areas.

Table-3

Monthly Income Distribution

Monthly Income Distribution	Income Range (₹) Frequency
3000-5000	8
5001-7000	10
7001-9000	9
9001-11000	7
11001-12000	6

The income data shows that most women in the district fall within lower income brackets. Very few earn above 10,000 per month, indicating financial instability. This limits their access to essential services and better living conditions.

Challenges and Findings

1. Engagement in low-paid informal work

Women in slum areas are primarily involved in informal economic activities such as domestic labor, small-scale production, and street vending. These jobs offer irregular income and lack legal protection. With the advancement of technologies like artificial intelligence, traditional forms of work may face disruption. However, limited digital access prevents women from benefiting from new opportunities, thereby reinforcing economic inequality.

2. Prevalence of health-related challenges

Poor living conditions, lack of sanitation, and limited healthcare access contribute to widespread health issues among women. Long working hours in unsafe environments further affect their well-being. Although digital health solutions have the potential to improve access, low awareness and limited technological access reduce their effectiveness in such communities.

3. Low levels of education

Educational attainment among women in slums remains low due to financial constraints and social expectations. Many girls discontinue their education at an early stage. While digital learning platforms offer new possibilities, lack of infrastructure and digital literacy creates barriers to their use. This perpetuates the cycle of limited opportunities.

4. Gender-based discrimination

Social norms and patriarchal values restrict women's participation in decision-making and economic activities. They often receive fewer opportunities for skill development and employment. Even in emerging sectors, their representation remains low. Without inclusive approaches, technological progress may further widen gender disparities.

5. Social exclusion and limited access to services

Women in slum areas often face exclusion from formal systems such as banking, education, and welfare programs. Barriers such as lack of awareness, documentation, and digital access prevent them from benefiting from available services. This deepens their marginalization and limits their ability to improve their socio-economic status.

Suggestions

1. Improve education

Efforts should focus on increasing access to quality education, especially for girls. Digital learning tools and community-based education centers can help bridge the gap. Promoting digital literacy is essential for enabling women to benefit from modern educational resources.

2. Provide employment opportunities

Skill development programs focused on digital and vocational training can enhance employment prospects. Encouraging entrepreneurship and linking informal workers to formal markets can improve income stability and job security.

3. Strengthen healthcare systems

Improving healthcare infrastructure and awareness is necessary. Mobile health services and digital healthcare solutions can enhance accessibility. Training community health workers can further improve service delivery.

4. Promote safety and awareness

Awareness programs regarding rights, health, and safety should be strengthened. Technology-based safety tools and community engagement can contribute to a safer environment for women.

5. Support Self-Help Groups (SHGs)

SHGs can play a significant role in empowering women economically and socially. Providing digital training and financial support can enhance their effectiveness. These groups can also serve as platforms for knowledge sharing and collective action.

Conclusion

Women in slum areas face complex challenges arising from poverty, gender inequality, and social exclusion. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that includes education, employment, healthcare, and policy support. Inclusive strategies that incorporate technological advancements while ensuring accessibility can contribute to sustainable empowerment and equitable urban development.

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