



# Women's employment in India: A systematic review of opportunities and challenges

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## Abstract

Women's employment is widely acknowledged as a critical determinant of economic growth, poverty reduction and social empowerment. Despite constituting nearly half of India's population, women's participation in the workforce remains comparatively low, particularly in urban areas of northern states such as Uttar Pradesh. The present review paper examines the employment opportunities available to women and the key challenges constraining their participation in the labour market specially in Lucknow district. The study synthesizes existing literature on women's economic empowerment, skill development initiatives and the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in livelihood promotion. It highlights formal, informal and self-employment opportunities emerging through education, services, micro-enterprises and NGO-led training programmes. Simultaneously, it analyses barriers such as low educational attainment, patriarchal norms, safety concerns, limited mobility, wage disparities and lack of institutional support. The review indicates that NGOs play a crucial role in bridging the gap between women and employment by providing skill training, financial literacy, self-help groups and market linkages. However, structural and socio-cultural challenges continue to restrict sustainable employment outcomes. The paper concludes with policy suggestions aimed at strengthening institutional collaboration, enhancing skill-based training and promoting inclusive employment opportunities for women.

**Keywords:** Women employment, Empowerment, NGOs, Livelihood, Skill development, Lucknow

## 1. Introduction

Women's employment has emerged as a central theme in development discourse across the globe. Gainful employment not only enhances women's income but also improves their decision-making power, social status and overall quality of life. Economic participation enables women to contribute actively to household welfare and national productivity. Consequently, women's employment is now regarded as an essential component of inclusive and sustainable development (Kabeer, 2012)<sup>[9]</sup>. In the Indian context, however, women's labour force participation continues to remain comparatively low. Although women account for almost half of the country's population, their participation in paid employment is disproportionately limited. The Periodic Labour Force Survey reports that female labour force participation rates are significantly lower than those of males, particularly in urban regions (Government of India, 2023)<sup>[5]</sup>. Social norms, educational gaps, domestic responsibilities and safety concerns collectively restrict women's access to employment opportunities.

The situation is more challenging in northern states such as Uttar Pradesh, where patriarchal attitudes, low female literacy and limited skill training further constrain women's economic independence. Urban districts such as Lucknow present a paradox: while they offer expanding opportunities in education, healthcare, retail and services, many women remain excluded from these prospects due to socio-economic barriers.

At the same time, the presence of numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs), self-help groups (SHGs) and skill development initiatives has opened alternative pathways for women's employment and entrepreneurship.

Given this background, it becomes essential to examine both the opportunities and the constraints shaping women's employment at the district level. Understanding local dynamics helps in designing targeted interventions rather than relying solely on national-level generalizations. Therefore, the present review seeks to analyse existing research and evidence regarding women's employment opportunities, the challenges they encounter and the role of NGOs in promoting economic empowerment in Lucknow district. Women's employment and empowerment are closely interconnected concepts. Employment provides economic resources, while empowerment reflects the ability to exercise choice, control and agency in personal and social spheres. According to Sen (1999)<sup>[13]</sup>, development should be understood as the expansion of individual freedoms, including the freedom to participate in economic activities. Employment thus becomes a means of enhancing women's capabilities and autonomy.

Kabeer (1999)<sup>[8]</sup> defines women's empowerment as a process through which women gain access to resources, develop agency and achieve desired outcomes. Paid work increases women's bargaining power within households and improves their participation in decision-making. Similarly, Duflo (2012)

[3] argues that women's income contributes significantly to child welfare, education and health outcomes, thereby generating intergenerational benefits.

However, employment alone does not automatically guarantee empowerment. The nature and quality of work also matter. Informal, low-paid or exploitative jobs may not provide meaningful economic security. Hence, decent work conditions, skill development and sustainable income opportunities are crucial for achieving genuine empowerment (International Labour Organization, 2019) [7]. From this perspective, NGOs and community-based organizations become important intermediaries. They facilitate skill acquisition, provide credit support, promote collective enterprises and create market linkages that enhance the quality of women's employment. Thus, examining the role of such institutions is essential for understanding women's livelihood outcomes at the local level.

## 2. Review of literature

Globally, women's labour force participation has improved over the last few decades, yet gender disparities persist. Studies indicate that women are more likely to be engaged in informal and precarious employment with lower wages and limited social protection (ILO, 2019). Cultural norms, unpaid care work and occupational segregation continue to restrict women's economic advancement. Research by Goldin (2014) [4] shows that even when educational attainment increases, gender gaps in employment remain due to structural constraints and workplace discrimination. Therefore, policy interventions focusing on skill development, childcare support and safe working environments are necessary to ensure equitable participation.

In India, women's participation in the workforce presents a complex scenario. Despite improvements in education, female labour force participation has witnessed fluctuations. Mehrotra and Parida (2017) observe that declining participation rates are partly due to increased enrolment in education but also reflect limited availability of suitable jobs for women. Many women withdraw from work because available employment is either physically demanding, socially unacceptable or poorly paid.

Rangarajan, Kaul and Seema (2011) [12] highlight that most working women are concentrated in informal sectors such as agriculture, domestic work and home-based production. These sectors lack job security and social protection. Furthermore, household responsibilities disproportionately borne by women reduce their ability to engage in full-time employment.

Several scholars emphasize the contribution of NGOs in promoting women's livelihoods. NGOs often operate at the grassroots level and address local needs more effectively than formal institutions. They provide vocational training, organize self-help groups, facilitate microcredit and support entrepreneurship (Datta & Gailey, 2012) [2].

Gupta (2021) [6] found that NGOs in Uttarakhand enhanced women's income and confidence by offering skill-based training and market linkages. Similarly, Nandan and Kushwaha (2017) [11] reported that NGO-led skill development programmes significantly increased women's participation in

micro-enterprises and self-employment. Ahamad and Hemlata (2015) concluded that NGOs and SHGs are instrumental in improving women's socio-economic status through training, legal awareness and income-generating activities.

However, these studies also note challenges such as limited funding, inadequate market access and sustainability issues. Lucknow, the capital city of Uttar Pradesh, represents one of the fastest-growing urban centres in northern India. The district combines characteristics of both metropolitan and semi-urban economies, thereby offering diversified employment avenues in education, healthcare, retail, hospitality, handicrafts and small-scale enterprises. Rapid urbanization, expansion of service industries and the growth of private institutions have created new opportunities for women's participation in the workforce. However, urban development does not automatically translate into equitable employment for women. While opportunities exist, access remains uneven due to socio-cultural norms, educational disparities and mobility constraints. Thus, understanding sector-specific opportunities becomes essential. The formal sector in Lucknow provides employment in government offices, educational institutions, hospitals, banks, retail chains and corporate services. Women with higher educational qualifications increasingly participate as teachers, nurses, clerical staff, customer service executives and administrative professionals. Evidence suggests that education significantly enhances women's employability.

According to the Government of India (2023) [5], urban educated women demonstrate relatively higher workforce participation compared to those with low literacy levels. Formal employment offers better wages, job security and social protection benefits, thereby contributing positively to empowerment outcomes. Nevertheless, such opportunities are limited to a relatively small section of educated women. Many women from economically weaker backgrounds lack the qualifications required for formal sector employment, pushing them toward informal or self-employment alternatives. A substantial proportion of women in urban Uttar Pradesh engage in informal or home-based work. Activities include tailoring, embroidery, handicrafts, food processing, beauty services, domestic work and petty trade. These occupations require low capital investment and allow flexibility in managing household responsibilities.

Home-based work has been identified as particularly important for women who face restrictions on mobility or childcare responsibilities. Mehrotra and Parida (2017) [10] argue that informal employment acts as a coping mechanism for women in low-income households, enabling supplementary income generation even though wages remain low and irregular.

In Lucknow, traditional crafts such as chikankari embroidery, garment stitching and handicraft production offer livelihood opportunities to thousands of women. However, lack of market linkages and middlemen exploitation often reduce earnings, limiting the transformative impact of such work. Self-employment has emerged as a promising pathway for women's economic participation. Through small enterprises such as tailoring units, catering services, beauty parlours, handicraft

production and retail shops, women generate independent incomes and develop entrepreneurial skills. Self-help groups (SHGs) and microfinance initiatives have played a significant role in promoting such enterprises. Access to small loans, collective savings and peer support encourage women to start income-generating activities. Datta and Gailey (2012) [2] observe that collective enterprises enhance women's confidence and bargaining power while reducing financial vulnerability.

In the context of Lucknow, NGO-supported micro-enterprises—such as handicrafts, stitching centres and eco-friendly product manufacturing—have demonstrated measurable improvements in women's incomes. These initiatives also foster social solidarity and mutual learning among participants. Non-governmental organizations have become key stakeholders in addressing gaps left by formal labour markets. They function as intermediaries between marginalized women and employment opportunities by offering training, financial support and market access. Skill development constitutes the primary strategy adopted by NGOs to enhance employability. Training programmes typically include tailoring, embroidery, handicrafts, food processing, digital literacy and entrepreneurship skills.

Skill acquisition increases women's productivity and enables them to access better-paying opportunities. According to Gupta (2021) [6], women who received NGO-based training exhibited higher income levels and greater self-confidence compared to those without training. Similarly, Nandan and Kushwaha (2017) [11] found that skill development programmes significantly improved women's participation in micro-enterprises. In Lucknow, several NGOs run training centres that cater specifically to women from low-income households. These centres provide both technical skills and soft skills such as communication, financial literacy and business management. Beyond training, many NGOs facilitate direct employment through placement support and market linkages. They connect trained women with local industries, retailers or buyers, thereby ensuring income continuity. Placement support is particularly important because training without market access often fails to produce sustainable livelihoods. Studies indicate that linking production to markets enhances earnings and reduces dependence on middlemen (Datta & Gailey, 2012). For example, livelihood-focused organizations in Lucknow enable women artisans to produce handicrafts and eco-friendly products for urban markets. Such linkages increase income stability and expand economic networks. Entrepreneurship development is another significant intervention area. NGOs encourage women to establish small businesses by providing microcredit, group savings, skill development, mentorship and marketing assistance.

Entrepreneurship strengthens economic independence and decision-making capacity. Duflo (2012) [3] argues that when women control income, household welfare indicators such as children's education and nutrition improve substantially. Group-based enterprises also promote collective empowerment by fostering solidarity and shared responsibility. These arrangements reduce individual risks and enhance sustainability.

Employment interventions often generate benefits beyond income. Participation in training and group activities enhances self-esteem, social mobility and awareness of rights. Women gain confidence to interact with institutions, travel independently and participate in community decision-making. Kabeer (1999) [8] emphasizes that empowerment involves both material and psychological dimensions. Thus, NGO initiatives contribute not only to economic improvement but also to broader social transformation. Despite the presence of opportunities, multiple structural and socio-cultural barriers restrict women's workforce participation. Low levels of education and limited technical skills significantly reduce women's employability. Many women discontinue schooling due to early marriage or financial constraints, limiting access to formal jobs (Rangarajan *et al.*, 2011). Patriarchal norms often prioritize domestic roles over paid work. Household responsibilities such as childcare, cooking and elder care disproportionately fall on women, restricting their time and mobility.

Kabeer (2012) [9] notes that unpaid care work is a major invisible barrier to women's employment worldwide. Without supportive family structures, sustained employment becomes difficult. Concerns about personal safety, inadequate public transport and harassment in workplaces discourage women from commuting or working late hours. Safety concerns are particularly significant in urban settings.

These issues reduce women's access to better-paying jobs located far from residential areas. Women in informal sectors often face low wages, irregular payments and absence of social security. Informal employment lacks benefits such as maternity leave, health insurance or pension coverage (ILO, 2019). Such precarious conditions limit long-term economic stability and discourage sustained participation. Women entrepreneurs frequently struggle to access markets, raw materials and technology. Dependence on intermediaries reduces profit margins. Without institutional support, scaling up enterprises becomes challenging.

### 3. Objectives of the study

The present study aims to examine the status of women's employment opportunities and the challenges affecting their participation in the labour market in India. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- To examine the employment opportunities available for women across different sectors such as the government sector, private sector and informal sector.
- To identify the major challenges faced by working women, including gender discrimination, wage disparities, workplace safety concerns, family responsibilities and limited access to skill development opportunities.
- To review the role of government policies, programs and institutional initiatives aimed at promoting women's employment and economic empowerment.
- To suggest appropriate measures for improving women's employment opportunities and reducing barriers to their participation in the labour market in India.

#### 4. Methodology

The present study is based on a qualitative review of existing literature related to women's employment around the world. The research primarily relies on secondary data collected from various relevant published information and institutional sources such as academic journals, books, government reports, policy documents, research articles and reports published by national and international organizations. In this study, attention is given to studies examining women's labour force participation, informal employment, skill development programmes and the role of non-governmental organizations in livelihood promotion. Data and insights from government publications such as the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), reports of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, and reports from international organizations such as the International Labour Organization are also examined.

#### 5. Analysis from existing studies and empirical evidence

A synthesis of international, national, state and local studies reveals several consistent patterns regarding women's employment and empowerment. First, women's participation in workforce remains significantly lower than men's participation in workforce across both rural and urban areas. Despite improvements in educational attainment, employment gains have not kept pace due to structural and socio-cultural constraints (Mehrotra & Parida, 2017).

Secondly, women are disproportionately engaged in informal and low-paid occupations. As per The International Labour Organization (ILO) (2019) [7] reports explains that informal work lacks job security, social protection and fair wages and thereby limiting its potential to generate sustainable empowerment. Many women engage in home-based production or casual labour that supplements household income but does not ensure financial independence and stability.

Third, evidence highlights the positive role of skill development initiatives and NGO interventions. Studies demonstrate that women who participate in vocational training and self-help groups show improvements in income, confidence and decision-making capacity. Gupta (2021) [6], in his study had observed that training-based livelihood programmes enhances both earnings and self-esteem among rural women beneficiaries. Similarly, another study conducted by Nandan and Kushwaha (2017) [11] shows that micro-enterprise support increased women's economic autonomy and reduced dependence on male family members.

Fourth, local-level research indicates that collective approaches such as SHGs and cooperatives yield better outcomes than individual efforts. Group-based enterprises provide financial support, shared learning and social solidarity, which are crucial for sustaining livelihoods (Datta & Gailey, 2012) [2].

When these findings are contextualized within Lucknow, it becomes evident that the district presents both opportunities and challenges for women employment. While urban markets offer demand for services, handicrafts and small businesses,

women's access to these markets depends heavily on institutional facilitation. NGOs thus emerge as important catalysts that bridge the gap between skills and employment.

#### 6. Discussion

The review indicates that women's employment in India is shaped by the interaction of three major factors:

- Availability of opportunities,
- Access to skills, and
- Prevailing socio-cultural norms.

From the opportunity perspective available to women for employment are expansion of service industries, education centres, retail establishments, retail outlets and shopping malls along with micro-enterprises has also created diverse avenues for women's work. Informal and home-based occupations are also providing flexible options for those who are unable to join formal employment. Additionally, self-employment through small enterprises has become increasingly feasible due to microfinance and SHG support. However, access to these opportunities is uneven. Women from economically weaker sections often lack education, technical skills and exposure to markets. Consequently, they remain confined to low-paid work. This aligns with Sen's (1999) [13] capability approach, which argues that development outcomes depend not merely on resource availability but also on individuals' ability to utilize those resources effectively.

NGOs are also playing a significant role by enhancing capabilities through training, credit support and mentorship. Their localized presence allows them to identify specific needs and design targeted interventions. Skill training programmes, placement assistance and entrepreneurship development initiatives contribute directly to income generation. Moreover, participation in collective groups enhances women's bargaining power and social networks.

Nevertheless, the review also shows that NGO efforts alone cannot eliminate structural barriers. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, safety concerns and inadequate institutional support continue to restrict women's participation. Employment must therefore be complemented by broader social reforms, including gender sensitization, improved public transport and childcare facilities. Thus, women's empowerment should be viewed as a multidimensional process involving economic, social and institutional changes rather than merely job creation.

#### Policy implications and recommendations

Based on the reviewed evidence, several policy and programmatic measures can strengthen women's employment outcomes in Lucknow district.

- a) **Expansion of skill development centres:** it is one of the most significant requirement government agencies need to Establish localized vocational training centres focusing on market-relevant skills such as digital literacy, retail services, tailoring, handicrafts and food processing. As government has established Kushal Vikash Kendra at different locality which are equipped with machines and other skill enhancement tools.

- b) Safe transport and workplace environments:** Improved public transport, street lighting and grievance redressal mechanisms can enhance women's mobility and safety. As a major concern, pink buses, pink toilets and even residential hostels are now in government's plan to provide safety to women. Further, Community childcare centres enable mothers to participate in full-time employment.
- c) Financial inclusion and credit support:** one of the most important recommendations is easy access to microcredit, subsidies and start-up grants to promote women as entrepreneurs.
- d) Market linkages:** Connect women's products to urban and online markets to ensure sustainable income.
- e) Post-training placement support:** Facilitate internships and employment tie-ups with local industries.
- f) Digital and financial literacy:** Equip women with skills for e-commerce, online marketing and financial management.
- g) Cluster-based production models** Encourage collective enterprises to enhance productivity and bargaining power.
- h) Gender sensitization programmes:** Promote positive attitudes toward women's employment.
- i) Shared household responsibilities:** Reduce the burden of unpaid care work on women.
- j) Encouragement of education for girls:** Long-term improvements in employability depend on educational attainment.

## 7. Conclusion

Women's employment is a fundamental pathway to economic independence and social empowerment. The review of literature and available evidence suggests that despite expanding employment opportunities through formal, informal and self-employment sectors, significant challenges persist. Educational limitations, socio-cultural norms, safety concerns and labour market inequalities continue to restrict women's full participation. Ultimately, women's employment should not be viewed merely as an economic issue but as a broader developmental imperative. Creating enabling environments that combine skills, safety and social acceptance can transform women's livelihoods and contribute to inclusive growth.

## Declaration by authors

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### Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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