

## **Socio-Economic Dimensions of Working Women: A Study with Special References to Kanpur District**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present paper investigates the socio-economic scenario and challenges of working women in Kanpur district, a prominent industrial and educational hub of Uttar Pradesh. Based on primary and secondary data, it critically discusses their struggles with wage inequality, restricted career progression, and societal expectations. This research is conducted in a mixed-method approach, where 300 women were surveyed across different sectors of healthcare, education, manufacturing, retail, and other industries, while qualitative interviews were also carried out for enhanced depth. Results show that 75 % of women face wage disparities, 62 % find problems in safe mobility, and 58 % face socio-familial pressure that is forcing many to choose family responsibilities over professional ambitions. These implications represent a result of the interplay of socio-economic and cultural roles in shaping the women's world of work.

**Keywords:** Working women, socio-economic challenges, Kanpur district, wage disparity, gender equality, mobility, workplace inclusivity.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Kanpur district, known for its vibrant textile, leather, and educational sectors, serves as a microcosm of these challenges. Here, women's economic contributions are often overshadowed by socio-cultural constraints. The interplay of patriarchal norms, limited opportunities for skill development, and inadequate public infrastructure further exacerbates the situation. This study delves into the socio-economic realities of working women in Kanpur, analysing their challenges and contributions, and proposes actionable recommendations for fostering a more inclusive workforce. The participation of women in the workforce is an important indicator of the socio-economic progress of a country. India has made significant progress in education and employment for women over the decades, yet there remain entrenched gender inequalities, especially in states like Uttar Pradesh. The FLFPR for Uttar Pradesh, according to the latest Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS, 2021-22), is a mere 16.1% — one of the lowest in the country. Low participation rates, limited mobility, lack of workplace inclusivity and socioeconomic expectations such as wage disparity are systemic barriers to women fully engaging with their work environment.

Kanpur district, famous for its textile, leather and educational sectors, is an epitome of these challenges. In here, women's economic roles are masked by socio-cultural constraints. Compounding these challenges are patriarchal norms, which often mean that women have fewer skill development opportunities, combined with inadequate public infrastructure. The paper also explores the socio-economic conditions of working women in Kanpur, their pain points, and further suggests actions towards strengthening the workforce. The deep-rooted cultural norms in Kanpur significantly influence the employment landscape for women. Patriarchal notions continue to affect perspectives on female sexuality and marital status, more labourers were restricted to provisions of other household service. Such societal expectations are baked in deep, and they frequently deter women from entering the workforce, especially in roles that require unconventional hours or significant physical work [2]. What has emerged is the need for family support, as women with family encouragement are more willing to participate in and remain in the workforce. Exercise inclusivity in the workplace is an ongoing challenge. And if women do make it into the workforce, they are frequently faced with environments that are not designed for and do not respect their needs or rights. It makes the society figure too many issues which also include lack of maternity leave policies, no childcare, and obstacles due to harassment in the workplace leading to higher attrition rates in women employees [3]. Additionally, women's ability to access employment opportunities out of proximity from their homes is restricted due to limited mobility resulting from safety concerns and lack of dependable transport in Kanpur. Another roadblock is the wage gap. Like other women across India, women in Kanpur do not earn very much in comparison to men for the same work. Such disparity is not only demotivating, but also consolidates the notion of undervalued economic activity of women [4]. Moreover, the informal economy, which is relatively intensive in employment of women, often does not provide job security or benefits, making it less attractive for women to join the workforce. Solving these complex problems requires new policy approaches. We need to develop more women-inclusive policies that directly confront the challenges the government, NGOs and industry leaders. Such measures may include implementing safe forms of transportation, opening up vocational training centers that cater to women, stricter penalties for workplace harassment and equality in pay for equal work. Public campaigns aimed at changing cultural perceptions of women at work may also be important in changing societal attitudes [5]. To summarize, the low Female Labour Force Participation Rate in Kanpur is a manifestation of larger socio-economic challenges that need to be addressed in a targeted manner. With the right approach Kanpur can provide a model for many other regions facing similar issues meaning gender inclusivity for a better working environment. It is imperative that society takes measures to address inequality and the risks surrounding women, through policies that not only protect them but also educate them and create a safer environment that promotes equality and inclusivity, enabling women to compete equally in the economy with men.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Research has shed light on the global perception of this issue, and while this index has highlighted the issues of Kanpur, India, this knowledge can be applied to countries and regions all around the globe. Furthermore, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2022) ranks India 135th out of 146 countries regarding economic participation and opportunity for women [6], highlighting the systemic gender inequities that dominate the canvas of the Indian workforce. These gaps are not just figures but are deeply entrenched in a

complex interplay of socio-economic factors that hinder women's financial independence and engagement in the economy. Wage inequality is an age-old challenge that has long been acknowledged as an impediment to women's economic participation in India (Kabeer 1999; Deshpande and Kabeer 2019). The problem is especially acute in Kanpur, where the leather and textile industries are major employers. In these sectors, women often work without formal contracts and without the benefits and protections that would accompany formal employment. Such informal employment therefore earns lower wages than their male counterparts while exposing women to various proxies of workplace exploitation [7]. The inadequacy of safe and accessible transportation is another major obstacle to women joining the workforce. As stated in the Centre for Science and Environment (2020), only a quarter of working women in Uttar Pradesh feel safe using public transport. In Kanpur, which is both urban and peri-urban, such a fear of harassment and a lack of safer modes of transport limits women's access to potential workspaces [8], thus perpetuating a cycle of poverty. I mean, safe transportation is so important, it allows women to get to the workplace, so it needs to be solved with infrastructure upgrades for safety and regulation enforcement. As noted by the National Commission for Women (2018) joint family systems in the Indian context have used the metaphor for a more sinister structural arrangement. These systems often provide essential support, including childcare, which allows women to join the paid labor force. Yet, increasingly these systems reinforce gender norms by reinforcing the stereotype that women should always care for the home rather than prioritise expanding their career and professional development. This dual role can result in paradoxical support for women, and limitations to their advancement, and drives home the need for societal shifts in how women's roles are perceived and valued [9]. Education continues to be the most influential factor impacting women's employability. The stat of having formal employment allows more women to have skills that are required for them to enter into formal sectors of recruitment, while further building them up to ensure they are able to make higher wages and negotiate in the workplace. However, in Kanpur, educational attainment among women is highly skewed, affecting their career paths and largely restricting them to low-paid and insecure employment [10]. Such multifaceted challenges are best tackled with all-encompassing policies that focus on increasing women's access to education and formal employment sectors, and addressing cultural norms and infrastructural issues that deter women's economic participation. Programs like improvement of public transit security, enforcement of equal paying laws in the informal economy and access to educational courses that reflect market demand are key. Additionally, women's economic roles will require progressive momentum in reconstituted societal attitudes which support and sustain their participation in the work force.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- **Detailed Identification of Socio-economic Barriers:** Undertake a thorough investigation into the diverse socio-economic challenges faced by working women in the Kanpur district. This includes exploring issues such as wage disparities, employment discrimination, and societal norms that restrict women's access to certain job sectors or career advancements.
- **Comprehensive Analysis of Influential Factors on Employment:** Examine the extent to which education, mobility, and workplace policies influence women's employment in Kanpur. This involves assessing the quality and accessibility of educational opportunities for women, the availability and safety of transportation for commuting to work, and the inclusivity of workplace environments. The goal is to

understand how these factors either support or hinder the economic participation of women in the local labor market.

- **Formulation of Actionable Recommendations:** Propose a set of targeted recommendations designed to overcome identified barriers and improve the socio-economic status of women in Kanpur. This will include strategic interventions aimed at policy reform, educational enhancements, improved transportation systems, and workplace equality initiatives. The recommendations will focus on creating a supportive ecosystem that facilitates greater involvement of women in the workforce and promotes their long-term economic empowerment.

## Research Methodology

### Overview

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data. This approach allows for a robust analysis of the socio-economic barriers faced by women in the workforce in Kanpur district, the impact of various factors such as education, mobility, and workplace policies on their employment, and the development of actionable recommendations to enhance their socio-economic empowerment. The use of mixed methods facilitates a comprehensive understanding by combining the generalizability of quantitative data with the depth and context provided by qualitative insights.

### Data Collection

**Quantitative Data:** The quantitative component of this study involves the collection of primary data through structured surveys administered to a sample of 300 women working in various sectors within Kanpur. The survey includes questions designed to quantify the prevalence and impact of socio-economic barriers to employment, the accessibility and impact of educational opportunities, mobility constraints, and the inclusiveness of workplace policies.

**Qualitative Data:** Complementing the quantitative data, qualitative information is gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. These interactions aim to capture in-depth insights into the personal experiences, perceptions, and suggestions of the participants regarding the barriers they face and the support they require. This qualitative enquiry provides context to the numerical data, adding layers of understanding that are crucial for developing nuanced recommendations.

### Sampling Technique

The sample size of 300 women was determined based on the research objectives and the need for statistically significant results while ensuring manageability in data collection and analysis. Participants were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across various sectors critical to the regional economy. The sectors include:

- **Education (20%):** This sector was chosen due to the significant role of educational attainments in empowering women and shaping their career opportunities.
- **Healthcare (18%):** Selected because of the critical nature of this sector in providing employment opportunities for women and the unique challenges it presents.
- **Retail (15%):** Included as it represents one of the most accessible sectors for women but also one fraught with issues like wage disparity and part-time work.

- Manufacturing (25%): A vital sector in Kanpur, particularly in industries such as textiles and leather, where gender dynamics and employment conditions vary significantly.
- Others (22%): This category includes women from other sectors like IT, services, and informal employment, providing a broader perspective on the employment landscape.

#### Integration of Data

The integration of primary data with secondary data is a key feature of this methodology. Secondary data from existing research reports, government publications, and previous studies on similar topics provides a baseline against which to measure new findings and helps in validating the primary data collected through this study. Cross-verification between the primary and secondary data sources enhances the reliability and authenticity of the research conclusions.

#### Data Analysis

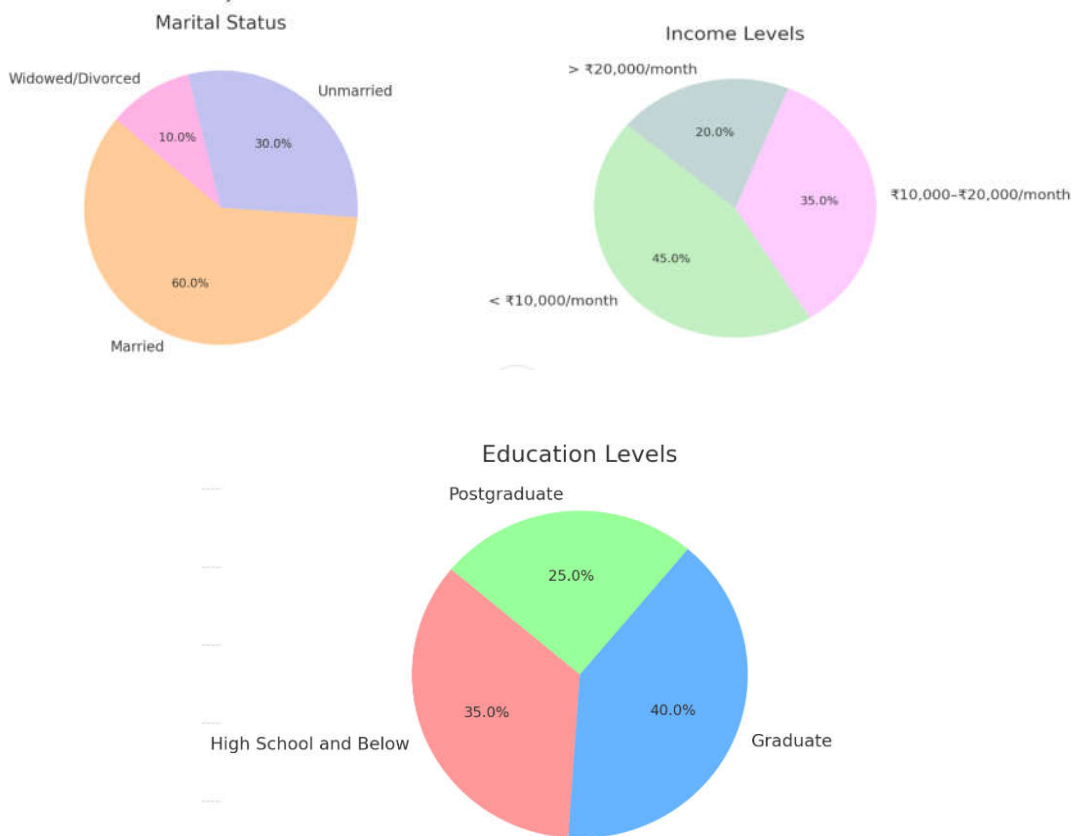
Quantitative data from the surveys will be analyzed using statistical software to identify patterns, trends, and correlations. Descriptive statistics will provide a basic understanding of the data distribution, while inferential statistics will be used to test hypotheses related to the impact of identified factors on women's employment.

Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups will be transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and narratives. Coding the data systematically allows for the aggregation of data points into meaningful clusters that relate to the research objectives.

#### Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are paramount in this study. All participants are provided with information about the study's purpose, their role in it, and the use of the data collected. Informed consent is obtained from all participants, ensuring that they understand their participation is voluntary and they can withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents are strictly maintained to protect their identity and personal information.

#### **Demographics:**



## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study's findings unveil the complex and multifaceted challenges faced by working women in the Kanpur district. Wage inequality emerged as a dominant issue, with 75% of respondents reporting significantly lower earnings than their male counterparts for performing similar roles or possessing equivalent qualifications. This disparity was pervasive across sectors. In the manufacturing sector, women employed in Kanpur's leather and textile industries earned an average monthly wage of ₹9,500, compared to ₹14,000 earned by men in similar roles, exposing deeply ingrained gender biases in wage structures. Even formal sectors like education and healthcare were not exempt, as female teachers and nurses reported slower increments and fewer promotional opportunities than their male peers. Beyond employer biases, the undervaluation of women's labour in society was starkly evident. Interviews revealed that many women hesitated to negotiate salaries due to fears of being labelled "demanding" or "difficult," aligning with documented gender dynamics in negotiation behaviours.

Table 1: Summary of Findings and Discussion on Women's Workforce Participation in Kanpur

Category	Findings	Percentage Affected	Discussion Points
Wage Inequality	Significant lower earnings compared to male counterparts across all sectors.	75%	Women face wage disparities even when performing similar roles or possessing equivalent qualifications, highlighting systemic gender biases in wage structures.

Mobility Challenges	Difficulties in commuting safely to workplaces, with concerns about harassment and high transportation costs.	62%	Safety concerns and high costs limit women's access to diverse employment opportunities, particularly affecting those in peri-urban areas.
Societal Pressures	Traditional gender roles and societal expectations limit professional aspirations.	58%	Cultural norms prioritize domestic responsibilities for women, with familial structures often discouraging full-time employment.
Educational Impact	Higher education correlates with better job opportunities and negotiating power.	-	Women with higher educational levels are more likely to secure formal employment, emphasizing the need for accessible, quality education.
Workplace Policies	Lack of gender-sensitive workplace policies.	25%	The absence of supportive measures like flexible working hours and maternity benefits disproportionately impacts women, especially in sectors like manufacturing and service.
Intersectional Issues	Higher exploitation in informal sectors among marginalized communities.	-	Women from lower-income households or marginalized communities face more severe exploitation and have restricted access to educational and skill development resources.

Mobility challenges were another significant barrier, with 62% of respondents facing difficulties in commuting to workplaces. Safety concerns were paramount, as women frequently reported incidents of harassment, including eve-teasing and verbal abuse, particularly during early morning or late evening travel. For those relying on private transport options like auto-rickshaws or cabs, high costs rendered daily commutes unsustainable. Women in peri-urban areas faced compounded challenges due to the limited availability of transport services, often forcing them to seek employment locally or withdraw from the workforce altogether. These mobility constraints not only restricted access to employment but also curtailed opportunities in sectors offering better pay and growth prospects.

Societal and familial pressures further impeded women's professional aspirations, with 58% of respondents citing these as significant obstacles. Traditional gender roles and expectations were at the core of these pressures. Married women, particularly those with children, struggled to balance professional and domestic responsibilities, often grappling with guilt and stress due to cultural norms prioritizing household duties. While joint family systems occasionally provided support, such as childcare, they often reinforced patriarchal attitudes. Many women reported being discouraged by in-laws or spouses from pursuing full-time employment, as it conflicted with their perceived domestic roles. Moreover, societal judgment extended to the type of work women pursued, with non-traditional roles like factory supervisors or sales representatives drawing criticism for deviating from conventional professions like teaching or nursing.

The study underscored the pivotal role of education in shaping women's employment outcomes. Higher education emerged as an enabler, with women holding graduate or postgraduate degrees more likely to secure formal sector jobs offering better pay, benefits, and career growth opportunities. For instance, women in education and healthcare sectors leveraged advanced degrees to negotiate higher salaries and greater job security. Conversely, women with lower educational attainment were largely confined to informal or low-paying jobs, such as

domestic work, factory labour, or retail positions, which often lacked basic benefits like paid leave, health insurance, or maternity support. These findings highlight the need for policies promoting access to affordable, quality education for women, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas of Kanpur.

A significant concern was the lack of gender-sensitive workplace policies, with only 25% of respondents reporting access to such measures. The absence of supportive practices, such as flexible working hours, maternity leave, and on-site childcare facilities, disproportionately impacted women in the workforce. Women in the manufacturing sector were particularly disadvantaged, as their workplaces rarely offered benefits beyond basic legal requirements, leaving many to rely on informal childcare arrangements like neighbours or elder siblings. Similarly, women in the service sector, such as retail or hospitality, faced rigid working hours that clashed with domestic responsibilities. In contrast, workplaces that implemented gender-sensitive policies, such as paid maternity leave and flexible hours, fostered greater job satisfaction and productivity among women. Respondents employed in larger organizations or schools with such measures expressed heightened loyalty and motivation toward their employers.

Finally, the study revealed that gender challenges intersected with caste and class, amplifying the disadvantages faced by women from marginalized communities or lower-income households. These women were more likely to be employed in low-paying, informal jobs and reported higher levels of workplace exploitation, including delayed payments and verbal abuse. Their access to resources like education and skill development programs was also significantly restricted, further entrenching their economic vulnerability.

In conclusion, the study highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to address the structural and systemic barriers faced by working women in Kanpur. From wage equity and safer transportation to gender-sensitive workplace policies and inclusive educational opportunities, these findings underscore the critical areas for reform to empower women and enhance their workforce participation.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study offers a comprehensive exploration of the socio-economic barriers that restrict women's workforce participation in Kanpur, highlighting the deep-rooted challenges they face. From wage inequality and mobility issues to societal expectations and inadequate gender-sensitive workplace policies, these factors create a significant hindrance to women's professional and personal growth. The study also emphasizes the compounding effects of caste, class, and gender, which place women from marginalized communities at an even greater disadvantage, often relegating them to informal, low-paying jobs with little to no protection or benefits.

Education emerges as a powerful tool for empowerment, as women with higher educational qualifications are better positioned to access well-paying jobs with growth opportunities. However, the lack of access to affordable, quality education and skill development programs, especially in rural and peri-urban areas, remains a critical issue that requires immediate redressal. Family and societal norms further compound these challenges, with traditional gender roles pressuring women to prioritize domestic responsibilities over professional aspirations and discouraging them from pursuing unconventional career paths.



Addressing these systemic issues demands a holistic and multi-faceted approach. Recommendations include implementing fair and transparent wage structures, improving access to safe and affordable transportation, and promoting workplace policies that support women, such as flexible working hours, maternity benefits, and childcare facilities. Furthermore, fostering a cultural shift to challenge patriarchal attitudes and empower women to step into leadership and non-traditional roles is equally essential.

Through coordinated efforts by policymakers, organizations, and local communities, these barriers can be dismantled, paving the way for women to contribute meaningfully to the economy. Empowering women in Kanpur's workforce is not merely a question of equity—it is a critical foundation for fostering inclusive and sustainable socio-economic progress in the region.

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