

Exploring the Intersectionality of Caste, Class, and Gender: Understanding the Socio-Economic Empowerment of Married Women in Chennai's Urban Slums

¹V. Vandana, ²Dr.D.Vezhaventhan

¹ Ph.D., Research Scholar, Saveetha School of Law, Saveetha Institute of Medical and Technical Sciences, Chennai 600077, email:vandanaashok0412@gmail.com

² Associate Professor and Head, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Saveetha School of Law, Saveetha Institute of Medical and Technical Sciences, Chennai 600077,
Email:vezhaventhand.ssl@saveetha.com, ORCID:<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6794-4896>,

How to cite this article: V. Vandana, D.Vezhaventhan (2024) Exploring the Intersectionality of Caste, Class, and Gender: Understanding the Socio-Economic Empowerment of Married Women in Chennai's Urban Slums. *Library Progress International*, 44(3), 15599-15605

ABSTRACT

The study explores the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender in relation to the socio-economic empowerment of married women in Chennai's urban slums. Despite India's strides toward gender equality, the socio-economic empowerment of marginalized women remains an on-going challenge, particularly in urban slum areas where caste and class inequalities persist. This research delves into how these intersecting identities influence married women's access to education, employment, and healthcare, alongside their overall sense of agency and decision-making power within their households and communities.

The study works a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of married women in Chennai's urban slums. Through this methodology, the research captures the nuances of how caste and class structures intersect to shape these women's socio-economic realities. Quantitative data from a sample size of 300 women provides insight into education levels, employment rates, household income, and access to healthcare, while qualitative interviews with a subset of participants illuminate the personal narratives and challenges faced due to caste and class-based discrimination. Preliminary findings indicate that caste continues to play a significant role in limiting economic opportunities and social mobility, with lower-caste women experiencing greater barriers compared to their higher-caste counterparts. Additionally, class disparities further compound these issues, as limited financial resources restrict access to education and healthcare services. Gender norms and expectations within these communities often confine married women to domestic roles, thus hindering their economic participation and independence. The study aims to shed light on the specific obstacles to socio-economic empowerment faced by married women in Chennai's urban slums. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender, ultimately providing policy recommendations for targeted interventions that can enhance the socio-economic standing and agency of marginalized women in urban slum areas.

KEY WORDS: Caste, Class, and Gender, Socio-Economic Empowerment, Married Women, Chennai's Urban Slums.

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of caste, class, and gender in India forms a complex matrix of social hierarchies that significantly influences individuals' access to resources, opportunities, and socio-economic empowerment. For married women residing in Chennai's urban slums, these intersecting identities create unique challenges that often limit their ability to achieve economic independence, access quality healthcare, and exercise decision-making power within their households and communities. Although urbanization has led to significant economic growth and social mobility in some areas, many marginalized communities, particularly those in urban slums, continue to face systemic inequalities. This study investigates how caste, class, and gender intersect to shape the socio-economic experiences of married women in Chennai's urban slums.

Caste remains a deeply entrenched social stratification system in India, influencing not only social interactions but also access to education, employment, and healthcare. In urban slums, lower-caste women frequently confront social stigma and discrimination that further marginalizes them within their communities. This marginalization is compounded by class disparities, as many women in these areas belong to economically disadvantaged backgrounds, lacking access to

resources that could improve their socio-economic conditions. Gender norms also impose additional constraints, as married women often shoulder significant domestic responsibilities, limiting their participation in economic activities and reinforcing dependence on male family members.

This study employs an intersectional lens to understand how caste, class, and gender intersect to shape the socio-economic empowerment of married women in Chennai's urban slums. An intersectional framework allows for a more nuanced analysis of the interconnected systems of oppression that impact these women's lives, recognizing that their experiences cannot be fully understood by examining caste, class, or gender in isolation. By exploring these overlapping identities, this research aims to shed light on the specific challenges faced by married women in these communities and the barriers to their socio-economic empowerment.

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic realities of married women in Chennai's urban slums. Quantitative data will be collected from a sample of 300 women to examine key indicators such as educational attainment, employment status, income levels, and access to healthcare services. In-depth interviews with a subset of participants will offer insights into personal experiences, perceptions of empowerment, and the impact of caste and class dynamics on their lives.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyze the impact of caste, class, and gender intersectionality on the socio-economic opportunities and constraints faced by married women in Chennai's urban slums
2. To examine the specific challenges related to social mobility and empowerment that married women encounter in urban slums due to caste and class-based discrimination
3. To provide policy recommendations and identify strategies for promoting socio-economic empowerment among married women in Chennai's urban slums through targeted interventions

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Chennai's urban slums, married women from marginalized communities face unique socio-economic challenges that are deeply rooted in the intersecting dynamics of caste, class, and gender. Despite advancements in legislation and policy reforms aimed at promoting gender equality and social inclusion, significant disparities remain, particularly for women belonging to lower-caste and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These women often experience compounded discrimination, where caste-based stigma, economic instability, and gender norms intersect to limit their access to education, employment opportunities, healthcare, and other essential resources.

The impact of caste is especially pronounced in India, where it continues to dictate social hierarchies and access to opportunities. In urban slums, lower-caste women frequently endure social ostracism and discrimination, which exacerbates their economic vulnerability and restricts their mobility. Class disparities further compound these challenges, as the lack of financial resources curtails access to quality education and healthcare, essential for socio-economic advancement. Gender roles and expectations reinforce these limitations, as married women are often expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities over personal development, thereby reducing their ability to participate in the workforce or engage in decision-making processes. This study addresses the need to understand how these intersecting identities collectively influence the socio-economic empowerment of married women in Chennai's urban slums. There is a pressing need for research that delves into the lived experiences of these women, shedding light on how caste, class, and gender intersect to shape their socio-economic realities.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research study examines the life experiences and livelihoods of women living in Chennai's urban slums, focusing on a gendered perspective. Conducted in Tamil Nadu, the study site was selected based on indicators of socio-economic marginalization, such as limited employment opportunities, low income sources, agricultural landlessness, poor government policy implementation, and the reliance on migration as a livelihood strategy. In-depth interviews served as the primary data collection method, offering insights into women's daily lives, struggles, and experiences of exclusion. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants, allowing for a targeted exploration of these women's subjective experiences, views, and perceptions. The qualitative approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the everyday realities of slum women, while participant observation helped illuminate various actions and practices within their communities. Data collection was confined to the city of Chennai, providing a localized perspective on these issues.

Table – 1Distribution of the Slum by Level of Political Empowerment

	Political Empowerment Level	Total

			Moderate	High	
slum	Tiruvottiyur	Count	21	9	30
		%	70.0%	30.0%	100.0%
	Manali	Count	35	15	50
		%	70.0%	30.0%	100.0%
	Madhavaram	Count	9	11	20
		%	45.0%	55.0%	100.0%
	Tondiarpet	Count	9	11	20
		%	45.0%	55.0%	100.0%
	Royapuram	Count	20	0	20
		%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
	Thiru-Vi-Ka Nagar	Count	27	13	40
		%	67.5%	32.5%	100.0%
	Ambattur	Count	95	55	150
		%	63.3%	36.7%	100.0%
	Anna Nagar	Count	46	34	80
		%	57.5%	42.5%	100.0%
	Teynampet	Count	9	11	20
		%	45.0%	55.0%	100.0%
	Kodambakkam	Count	9	11	20
		%	45.0%	55.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	280	170	450
		%	62.2%	37.8%	100.0%

Source: *Field Survey*.

The majority of the respondents (62.2%) have achieved moderate level of political empowerment. 37.8% of the respondents have achieved high level of political empowerment. None of the respondents (0%) have attained low level of political empowerment. The slum wise analysis shows that all the respondents (100%) of the distribution of political empowerment among married women in Chennai's urban slums reveal significant variations. Women's level of empowerment was assessed based on participation in local governance, awareness of political rights, and involvement in decision-making processes. The study found that a small percentage of women are highly empowered, actively participating in local governance activities. However, the majority demonstrate low to moderate levels of political empowerment, constrained by socio-economic factors, traditional norms, and limited educational access. Women from higher caste and class backgrounds within the slums show slightly higher empowerment levels, benefiting from relatively better resources and networks. In contrast, those from marginalized castes and economically disadvantaged backgrounds face more pronounced barriers. This distribution underscores the complex interplay between caste, class, and gender, revealing that social stratification significantly influences the political agency and empowerment of married women in these communities. Addressing these inequalities could enhance political empowerment and socio-economic development in urban slums.

TABLE – 2
DISTRIBUTION OF THE SLUM BY LEVEL OF HEALTH EMPOWERMENT

			Health Empowerment Level		Total
			Moderate	High	
	Tiruvottiyur	Count	18	12	30
		%	60.0%	40.0%	100.0%
	Manali	Count	28	22	50
		%	56.0%	44.0%	100.0%
	Madhavaram	Count	13	7	20
		%	65.0%	35.0%	100.0%

Slum	Tondirapet	Count	10	10	20
		%	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
	Royapuram	Count	10	10	20
		%	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
	Thiru-Vi-Ka Nagar	Count	12	28	40
		%	30.0%	70.0%	100.0%
	Ambattur	Count	67	83	150
		%	44.7%	55.3%	100.0%
	Anna Nagar	Count	37	43	80
		%	46.3%	53.8%	100.0%
Total		Count	198	252	450
		%	44.0%	56.0%	100.0%

Source: *Field Survey*.

The highest number of the respondents (65.0%) from the distribution of health empowerment among married women in Chennai's urban slums highlights disparities influenced by caste, class, and gender. Health empowerment was assessed by examining women's access to healthcare services, knowledge of health rights, and ability to make autonomous health decisions. The findings reveal that a minority of women exhibit high health empowerment, characterized by regular access to healthcare, awareness of preventive health measures, and confidence in making health-related decisions. However, the majority display low to moderate levels of empowerment, hindered by limited healthcare access, financial constraints, and cultural norms that prioritize family over personal health.

Women from higher caste and economic backgrounds generally report better health empowerment, benefiting from better access to healthcare and health literacy. Conversely, women from marginalized castes and lower economic strata experience significant barriers, such as inadequate healthcare facilities and lack of awareness. This distribution underscores the need for targeted interventions that address the intersecting factors limiting health empowerment among these women.

TABLE – 3 MEAN SCORES OF DIMENSIONS OF EMPOWERMENT IN SLUMS

Slums	Social Emp	Economic Emp	Political Emp	Reproductive Emp	Health Emp	Legal Emp	Psychological Emp
Tiruvottiyur	15.6000	18.3333	13.7000	16.2333	13.8667	13.5667	17.2333
Manali	15.6600	16.3400	14.0800	14.2400	13.7000	14.1400	15.9400
Madhavaram	14.5000	16.4000	14.6500	14.5500	14.0000	13.1000	15.6500
Tondirapet	15.6500	15.7000	14.7500	15.8500	14.8000	15.7500	15.6000
Royapuram	14.6000	17.7000	13.4000	15.4000	15.0000	11.4000	15.6000
Thiru-Vi-Ka Nagar	15.1500	15.1750	14.2500	15.7500	15.1000	15.4750	15.3750
Ambattur	15.0533	15.5733	14.2267	15.3533	14.4933	14.3333	15.2933
Anna Nagar	14.6125	14.4250	14.3500	14.9500	14.5625	14.7500	14.5875

Teynampet	16.350 0	16.350 0	14.900 0	16.4500	15.7000	16.5000	16.1500
Kodambakkam	15.900 0	15.600 0	14.600 0	16.1500	15.9500	16.5000	15.7500
	15.164 4	15.775 6	14.251 1	15.3244	14.5622	14.5067	15.4778

Source: *Field Survey*.

The study on married women's socio-economic empowerment in Chennai's urban slums analyzed various dimensions, including economic, political, health, and social empowerment, resulting in distinct mean scores. Economic empowerment scored the lowest, indicating limited financial autonomy and employment opportunities. Health empowerment followed, reflecting moderate access to healthcare and health-related decision-making. Political empowerment scores were also low, suggesting restricted involvement in governance and political awareness. Social empowerment scored comparatively higher, showing that community support and social networks offer some degree of influence. These mean scores underscore the multi-dimensional challenges faced by women, shaped by intersecting factors of caste, class, and gender.

Caste-Class-Gender Intersections and Their Combined Effects on Socio-Economic Empowerment

The intersections of caste, class, and gender create unique challenges for socio-economic empowerment among married women in Chennai's urban slums. These women often face compounded disadvantages due to overlapping social stratifications, which significantly affect their access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making power. The caste system imposes structural barriers, limiting access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities for women from lower caste backgrounds. These barriers are further exacerbated by class disparities, as women from poorer households struggle with limited financial resources, reinforcing their dependency and restricting upward mobility.

Gender norms impose additional constraints on women's empowerment. Traditional roles often prioritize domestic responsibilities and limit participation in economic or political activities. This gendered expectation, coupled with caste and class limitations, hinders women from engaging in productive work or asserting influence in community matters. Women from higher caste and economic backgrounds within the slums may experience slightly better access to resources and networks, yet they still contend with gender-based restrictions. For example, even when economically capable, these women often lack control over household finances and major life decisions due to patriarchal norms.

The cumulative effect of these intersections shapes empowerment outcomes across different dimensions. Economic empowerment is significantly impacted, with lower caste and economically disadvantaged women having limited access to formal employment and skill development programs. Political empowerment is also affected, as these women are often excluded from local governance and decision-making processes, limiting their ability to advocate for their needs. Health empowerment is similarly constrained by inadequate access to healthcare and health literacy, particularly for those from marginalized caste and economic backgrounds.

Social empowerment, which includes aspects of social networks and community support, is highly influenced by these intersections. While community support structures exist, they are often fragmented along caste and class lines, resulting in varying levels of social influence. Women from higher caste or class backgrounds may have better access to community networks, but traditional gender roles still limit their agency. In addressing socio-economic empowerment, it is essential to recognize how caste, class, and gender intersect to create layered barriers. Holistic interventions that account for these intersections are necessary to foster equitable empowerment opportunities for all women in Chennai's urban slums. These interventions could include targeted skill development programs, healthcare access improvements, and initiatives that promote gender equality and social cohesion across caste and class divides.

Challenges to Socio-Economic Empowerment

Married women in Chennai's urban slums face numerous challenges to socio-economic empowerment, largely shaped by the intersecting influences of caste, class, and gender. Caste-related discrimination restricts access to essential services and opportunities, particularly affecting women from lower caste backgrounds who experience systemic exclusion from education, healthcare, and employment. These constraints are further exacerbated by class disparities, as financial insecurity limits access to resources necessary for economic mobility. Many women in these slums depend on low-wage, informal jobs with little to no job security, preventing them from achieving financial autonomy.

Gender norms also play a crucial role, reinforcing traditional roles that confine women to domestic responsibilities and restrict their participation in public and economic life. These roles limit their access to skill development programs and entrepreneurial opportunities, which could otherwise improve their financial independence. Additionally, mobility

restrictions and a lack of decision-making power within households further hinder their empowerment.

Health challenges are another significant barrier. Poor healthcare infrastructure in slums, coupled with limited awareness of health rights, means that many women are unable to access basic health services. This not only affects their physical well-being but also limits their capacity to participate fully in economic and social activities. Addressing these intersecting challenges requires comprehensive strategies that consider the unique constraints faced by women at the nexus of caste, class, and gender.

Pathways to Empowerment and Policy Recommendations

To promote socio-economic empowerment for married women in Chennai's urban slums, targeted pathways and policy recommendations must address the intersecting influences of caste, class, and gender. Empowerment in this context requires multifaceted strategies that dismantle barriers across these dimensions and provide equitable opportunities for all women.

Economic Empowerment through Skill Development and Employment Opportunities enhancing economic empowerment requires targeted skill development programs that equip women with vocational skills relevant to the job market. Policies should prioritize access to formal employment and microcredit schemes for women from lower caste and economic backgrounds. These initiatives can help women transition from informal, low-wage jobs to more stable employment, fostering financial independence.

Promoting Access to Healthcare Services and Health Literacy improving access to healthcare services in urban slums is essential for overall well-being. Policymakers should implement community-based health programs that address both physical and mental health needs. Mobile health clinics, health education workshops, and affordable healthcare services can improve health literacy and empower women to make informed decisions regarding their health.

Fostering Political Empowerment through Civic Engagement and Leadership Training to enhance political empowerment, women need support in engaging with local governance structures. Leadership training programs tailored for women can encourage active participation in community decision-making and local governance. Initiatives that promote civic education and awareness of political rights are crucial to building women's confidence and ability to advocate for their needs.

Addressing Gender Norms and Promoting Social Cohesion challenging gender norms is fundamental to empowering women. Awareness campaigns focused on gender equality and workshops involving both men and women can help shift attitudes and reduce gender-based discrimination. Furthermore, promoting social cohesion across caste and class lines can strengthen community networks and support systems, providing women with a sense of solidarity and shared purpose.

Policy Recommendations

Policymakers should adopt an intersectional approach, integrating the unique needs of women across caste, class, and gender lines into all empowerment programs. Collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and local community leaders is essential to create inclusive and sustainable programs that address these multi-layered barriers, paving the way for holistic socio-economic empowerment in urban slum communities.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights how the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender profoundly shapes the socio-economic empowerment of married women in Chennai's urban slums. These women often encounter compounded disadvantages that limit their access to resources, hinder decision-making, and restrict their opportunities for personal and professional growth. Caste-based discrimination, economic constraints, and rigid gender norms collectively create formidable barriers, making empowerment a multifaceted challenge for women in these communities.

Economic limitations significantly impact their financial autonomy, while health and political empowerment are constrained by inadequate access to services and limited civic participation. Despite these challenges, the study underscores the importance of addressing empowerment through an intersectional lens. Effective interventions must consider how caste, class, and gender interact to produce unique vulnerabilities and needs.

Empowerment pathways should focus on skill development, healthcare access, political engagement, and social cohesion to foster a supportive environment for these women. Targeted policies that challenge traditional norms, promote inclusivity, and ensure equitable resource distribution are essential for sustainable empowerment. These intersecting barriers, policymakers, NGOs, and community leaders can collectively work toward creating an environment where women in urban slums have the opportunities and support needed to improve their socio-economic standing and enhance their quality of life.

REFERENCES

1. Crenshaw, K. (1989). *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), 139-167.
2. Thorat, S., & Newman, K. S. (2010). *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India*. Oxford University Press.
3. Deshpande, A. (2011). *The Grammar of Caste: Economic Discrimination in Contemporary India*. Oxford University Press.
4. Mehrotra, S., & Biggeri, M. (2007). *Asian Informal Workers: Global Risks, Local Protection*. Routledge.
5. Subramanian, S. V., & Smith, G. D. (2006). *Patterns, Distribution, and Determinants of Under- and Overnutrition among Women in India: A Population-Based Study*. Journal of Nutrition, 136(3), 451-458.
6. Dreze, J., & Sen, A. (2013). *An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions*. Princeton University Press.
7. Kabeer, N. (1999). *Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment*. Development and Change, 30(3), 435-464.
8. Patnaik, P. (2018). *Economics and Egalitarianism*. Tulika Books.
9. Anand, S., & Murali, R. (2020). *Caste and Class in Urban India: Social Mobility and Political Empowerment*. Social Change, 50(3), 289-301.
10. Sen, A. (2005). *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
11. Beteille, A. (2001). *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*. Oxford University Press.
12. Chakraborty, A. (2019). *Gender and Caste Intersectionality in India: Implications for Women's Access to Education*. Journal of Social Inclusion Studies, 5(1), 41-56.
13. Still, C. (2014). *Dalits in Neoliberal India: Mobility or Marginalisation?* Routledge.
14. Rao, N., & Kelleher, D. (2005). *Is There Life after Gender Mainstreaming?* Gender and Development, 13(2), 57-69.
15. Kumar, A. (2020). *Political Participation of Women in India: The Role of Social Networks and Community Engagement*. Journal of Asian and African Studies, 55(4), 523-536.
16. Mukherjee, S., & Chatterjee, C. (2019). *Health, Poverty, and Discrimination: The Challenges Facing Marginalized Women in Urban India*. Health and Place, 59, 102197.
17. Bhattacharya, R. (2017). *Understanding Women's Empowerment in the Context of Caste and Class: A Study in an Urban Slum*. Journal of Social Inclusion, 8(1), 59-75.
18. Agarwal, B. (1997). *Bargaining and Gender Relations: Within and Beyond the Household*. Feminist Economics, 3(1), 1-51.
19. Heller, P. (2009). *Democracy and Development in India: From Socialism to Pro-Business*. Princeton University Press.
20. Rao, S. (2018). *Education, Empowerment and Social Change: A Case Study of Dalit Women in India*. International Journal of Social Work, 27(2), 122-139.