
The Status Of Lower Middle -Class Women In India Post Their Employment

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How to cite this article: Shagun Arora, Ananya Jain (2024) The Status Of Lower Middle -Class Women In India Post Their Employment. *Library Progress International*, 44(3), 2803-2807.

Abstract

Work is a part of women's lives, irrespective of their social status. Today, women are making their presence felt by becoming financially independent. Educated working women act as agents of social change. This paper attempts to analyze women's participation in the labor force in India. The research is an exploratory study that examines the cognitive and behavioral perceptions of children, husbands, and in-laws of working women. It uses an extensive field survey of 30 families to explore the perceptions of husbands, children, and in-laws regarding the working women in their families. The study reveals that lower-class women contribute to the financial needs of the household. However, they are not empowered to make household decisions. The primary role of these women remains taking care of household chores and looking after children and elders. The study also documents that demographic variables like age, gender, and education do not significantly affect family members' perceptions of working women.

Key words: women employment, empowerment, perception towards working women

Introduction

Enhancing women's participation in the economy is a key driver of growth globally in the 21st century. Improved labor force participation is seen as a sign of women's elevated status in society. Despite economic pressures within families, shifting family dynamics, and expanded social roles, the pursuit of higher social status has pushed women into the workforce. Furthermore, with the advent of globalization, modernization, and digitization, the social and economic landscape for women in India has changed. Women now have greater job opportunities across various sectors.

Women play a multidimensional role within the family. The female participation rate in the labor force depends on the financial condition of the family. The need for women's participation in the labor force has increased due to changing family dynamics. Urbanization and modernization have encouraged Indian women across all classes to enter paid occupations. Although lower-middle-class women have long participated in economic activities outside the home, there has been a steady increase in salaried-class women in urban society. Economic growth in India has expanded opportunities for women. According to the Economic Census (2024), the average monthly income of lower-middle-class individuals is approximately Rs 33,000, while monthly expenses stand at Rs 19,000. In households with multiple earners, the primary wage earner contributes around 80% of the total expenditure, with women comprising a significant portion (42%) of this group. Women's income is considered primary in lower-middle-class households, thus necessitating their entry into the labor force. Additionally, women's participation in the workforce can be attributed to an educational gradient. The improved education system, increased social awareness, and rising cost of living have all acted as stimuli for the growing number of working women. Women not only share the financial responsibility of the household but also play a pivotal role in the development of society.

However, traditional gender roles have limited women's growth in the workplace. According to a report submitted by the Indian Ministry of Women and Child Development (2016), Indian women have traditionally been homemakers. The attitude of family members plays a very important role in determining the female participation rate. Cultural norms insist that a woman's first responsibility is toward her home, and therefore, the course of action a woman takes with respect to her work depends on the adjustments made between the workplace and home. Social norms emphasize a woman's commitment to the house, raising children, and caring for elders. The burden of family and childcare duties often limits women's access to quality education and employment outside conventional roles. Working women are expected to juggle multiple roles and be "superwomen" to prove themselves. Lack of spousal support in household chores and childcare, as well as the absence of necessary emotional support, deters women from participating in the labor force. Over the last half-century, distinct changes have occurred in the roles of both women and men within the household, leading to a shift in labor participation patterns in the workforce.

Over the years, the perception of families towards working women has changed. The change in family dynamics, with both parents working and the rise of single-parent households, has altered perceptions of women in the workplace and at home. Husbands are now more open to sharing household responsibilities, while in-laws provide a conducive environment for their daughters-in-law to work. Women have found ways to overcome the limitations imposed by social and cultural norms without directly challenging the social structure to which they belong. Consequently, this research paper attempts to understand society's perceptions and the roles of lower-middle-class women post-employment. The basic objective of this research is to understand and investigate the attitude of families toward working women.

The research paper employs a survey-based research design to explore family members' attitudes toward working women. Primary data were collected from the families of lower-middle-class women through a structured survey questionnaire using a purposive sampling technique. The sample includes 30 families from both rural and urban sectors in Jaipur. Questionnaires were designed for husbands, children, and in-laws to gather information on their perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and societal expectations regarding working women.

Literature review

Work and family are two of the most critical domains in an individual's life, and their intersection has been the subject of study for various researchers. Traditionally, researchers have focused on the role of Indian women in households. According to Bose and Das (2018) and Sudarshan and Bhattacharya (2009), household duties are typically prioritized in Indian households, and married women may face work restrictions. Sudarshan (2014) found that society expects women to take care of the household. Women who seek to participate in the labor force often face resistance from their families and peers. These societal expectations can lead women to internalize these norms and, therefore, choose not to work even in the absence of explicit restrictions. Rustagi (2010) presents evidence that these norms have remained relatively unchanged over the last twenty years.

Today, work is an integral part of women's lives, irrespective of their social and class locations. Women act as agents of social change, creating new social spaces for themselves through income-generating informal jobs. Goldin (1995) documented that among the lower-middle class, women's work is essential to meet basic needs. He hypothesized that, at the macroeconomic level, female participation in the labor market has a U-shaped relationship with economic development. According to this hypothesis, when an economy evolves from being agriculture-driven to being based on manufacturing and service sectors, female participation rates initially decline but later increase as economic development progresses. However, subsequent research has revealed limited empirical evidence to support the feminization of the U-hypothesis in India across different states (Gaddis & Klasen, 2014; Lahoti & Swaminathan, 2016). Rustagi (2010) noted that upper-caste households adhere more strongly to societal norms, suggesting that economic growth alone may not be sufficient to improve female participation in the workforce.

Researchers like Sorsa et al. (2015) found that gender norms in India prohibit women from engaging in economic pursuits. Additionally, infrastructure, labor laws, and societal perceptions obstruct women from participating in the workforce. While analyzing women's empowerment, researchers found that family attitudes toward working women are a critical factor in making labor force decisions. Singh and Meher (2024) explored labor force participation of both males and females across Indian states and the diversity in the range of female labor force participation rates (FLFPRs) across regions

of India to conduct an interstate and inter-regional analysis. The study examined the major reasons for low FLFPR in India. The researchers pointed out that the low female labor force participation rate was due to societal pressure to prioritize the household over work.

For a woman, family attitudes and perceptions about her work are very important when making work-related decisions. Goldberg et al. (2008) and Goldberg and Prause (2010) documented a positive perception of children toward their working mothers. The researchers found that mothers entering the workforce might also have a positive effect on children. The children considered their mothers as role models. The researchers also found that children valued the time they were able to spend with their mothers. Furthermore, Levine (1998) found that children's perceptions of time and family interaction depend on social norms. Ute (2006) documented the perception and attitude of children toward working mothers. The study found that although children were happy their mothers were working, they wanted them to spend more time with them. On certain occasions, mothers informed the researchers that working had a negative impact on their children because, after work, mothers were sometimes too tired to interact as much with their children as the children would have liked. Polatnick (2002) researched whether children wanted more time from working parents and found mixed results. The researcher also documented that children were adaptive and adjusted if their mothers spent less time with them, although they were reluctant to express their negative emotions about their parents. However, DeJong (2010) and Goldberg and Lucas-Thompson (2014) did not find empirical evidence of a negative impact of working mothers on children's development. According to them, children's academic and social development is negatively affected if the mother is working.

In the Indian context, a husband's attitude toward women's empowerment plays a major role in determining the activities and roles of women in the family and community. A favorable attitude from the husband helps women take steps toward empowerment. Some researchers have also examined the role of husbands in women participating in the workforce. Goldberg et al. (2012) documented that men who had seen their mothers work were more supportive of their wives becoming financially independent because their mothers were role models who uplifted society. Spitze and Waite (1981) examined the relationship between husbands' perceived attitudes toward their wives' working. The researchers found that some husbands were supportive of their wives working, as dual-earning families are able to provide more for their children. With increased financial opportunities come increases in healthcare, nutrition, and educational opportunities; however, some husbands felt threatened by their wives' achievements. Staines et al. (1986) documented that wives' employment had a non-spurious negative association with husbands' job and life satisfaction. Husbands of working wives felt less adequate as family breadwinners than did husbands of housewives, which appeared to account for their lower levels of job and life satisfaction.

Although women's empowerment and gender equality are key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the literature review reveals a dichotomy in family perceptions of working women. While families may feel proud of and benefit from having a working member in the household, they still expect women to manage household responsibilities. Some studies document positive support from families for working women, while others suggest the opposite. According to these studies, despite women's financial contributions, children, in-laws, and husbands often prefer that women stay at home. With this background, the study was designed to explore the attitudes of husbands, children, and in-laws toward middle-class Indian women.

Methodology

The research paper employs a survey-based research design to explore family members' attitudes toward working women and to provide insights into prevailing societal viewpoints on women's employment. The study uses the Jaipur region as a sample to represent the lower-middle class. The Jaipur region encompasses both urban and rural settings, offering an accurate representation of the population. Primary data were collected from families of lower-middle-class women through a structured survey questionnaire using a purposive sampling technique. The sample includes 30 families from both rural and urban areas. The survey, which included 30 husbands, 35 children, and 45 in-laws, was used to analyze family perceptions of working women. Three sets of questionnaires were designed for husbands, children, and in-laws to gather information on their perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and societal expectations regarding working women.

Result

Female employment is intrinsically linked to female empowerment. Women's participation in the workforce is not only essential for personal advancement but also for driving the economic performance of communities, nations, and the world. The lives of Indian women have substantially improved due to increased economic progress. However, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) and the National Statistical Office (NSO) have reported that the participation rate of women in the Indian labor force has remained below the global average of 47% for several years.

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Table 1: Labour Participation rate for people above the age of 15 years (%)

Years	Rural		Urban		Rural-Urban	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
2017-18	76.4	24.6	74.5	20.4	75.8	23.2
2021-22	78.2	36.6	74.7	23.8	77.2	32.8
Change	1.8%	12%	0.2%	3.4%	1.4%	9.5%

Source: NSO report (2023)

The female labor force participation rate depends on various structural and socioeconomic factors. Over the years, female participation in the labor force has increased, which is crucial for economic growth. According to the latest Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) Report for 2021-22, around 32.8% of females participated in the labor force in 2021-22. This marks a significant increase of 9.5 percentage points from 2017-18, when the female labor force participation rate (LFPR) was 23.3%. A significant portion of this increase has come from the rural sector rather than the urban sector, with participation rates increasing by 12.0 and 3.4 percentage points, respectively. In rural areas, the female LFPR was 36.6% in 2021-22 compared to 24.6% in 2017-18, showing an increase of 12.0 percentage points. Table 2 shows that female participation in urban areas was significantly lower than in rural areas, with the female LFPR at 23.8% in 2021-22 compared to 20.4% in 2017-18, reflecting an increase of just 3.4 percentage points.

The difference in the urban-rural rate of female participation is notable, given the disparity in higher education levels among women. According to the National Statistics Organization, over 60% of women in rural areas have only a primary education, while in urban areas, this figure is 30%. Despite their lower levels of education, women in the rural sector still participate in the workforce. In contrast, a U-shaped relationship between literacy and female participation rates is observed. Women who are less educated are more likely to participate in the labor force than highly educated women. Empirical evidence of this U-shaped relationship is primarily seen among urban women. It suggests that as household incomes rise, women may opt out of the workforce and into leisure. When household income is high, women are less likely to participate in the workforce, reflecting a patriarchal system that positions women as secondary breadwinners. Women may re-enter the workforce if the opportunity cost of leaving increases. This U-shaped relationship between education and work does not apply to men, whose participation in the workforce increases with education.

Findings and Discussion**Table 2: Demography of in laws based on age ,Education and employment N=45**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
Less than 50	15	0.33%
50 -60years	20	0.44%
Above 60 years	10	0.22%
Gender		
Male	20	0.44%
Female	35	0.77%
Education		
School	15	0.33%
College	20	0.44%
Post Graduate	1	0.02%
Illiterate	9	

Source field survey conducted by author

Table 3: Analysis of result of relationship and attachment of children/husband/In-laws

What kind of relation you have with your mother/wife/daughter in-law	Children		Husband		In-laws	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. I have good relation with my mother/wife/daughter in-law	4.02	0.78	3.58	0.65	3.04	0.42
2. My mother/wife/daughter contributes financially to the house	4.08	0.25	4.25	0.35	4.21	0.32
3. My mother/wife/daughter in-law have time for you	2.85	0.65	2.95	0.65	2.04	0.42
4. My mother/wife/daughter in-law is there for me when I need her.	3.95	0.65	3.58	0.65	3.04	0.42
5. My mother/wife/daughter stress at work does not affect you	3.45	0.42	4.02	0.45	3.75	0.42
6. I am proud of my mother/wife/daughter is working ?	4.25	0.65	4.02	0.35	3.65	0.44
7. I help your mother/wife/daughter in the kitchen	2.65	0.42	2.75	0.25	2.45	0.65
8. I do not always argue with her	2.08	0.5	2.65	0.45	3.54	0.43
9. In my opinion I share everything with her	4.56	0.46	3.58	0.32	2.08	0.65
10. I am happy the way things are there between us	3.56	0.45	2.5	0.35	3.08	0.45
Overall mean	3.545	0.46	3.38	0.45	2.9	0.34

Source Field survey conducted by author

Perception of in laws :

Women's decisions to participate in the labor force depend heavily on family values and perceptions. The family plays a crucial role in shaping the meaning of work and life for women. According to in-laws, women are expected to maintain a balance between their personal and professional lives. Despite their work commitments, women are also expected to address the needs and requirements of their family members. The survey results (Table 5) show that mothers-in-law over the age of 50 have higher expectations of their daughters-in-law. They believe that the role of women as caretakers is of utmost importance. The survey indicates that in-laws do not always fully support a working daughter-in-law. Women are expected to manage their work responsibilities while also taking care of household duties.

Furthermore, education does not significantly influence in-laws' perceptions of a working daughter-in-law. Although in-laws may prefer a working daughter-in-law, they still expect her to handle domestic chores. Table 2 shows that the in-laws who participated in the survey were not very supportive of their daughter-in-law working, with an overall mean score of 2.9 and a standard deviation of 0.34, indicating a preference against having a working daughter-in-law. Even though they agreed that a working daughter-in-law contributes financially to the household (Q2: mean = 4.21, SD = 0.32), they still expect her to work in the kitchen (Q7: mean = 2.45, SD = 0.65). The in-laws also believe that the daughter-in-law does not spend enough time with them (Q3: mean = 2.04, SD = 0.42), and they do not share everything with her (Q9: mean = 2.08, SD = 0.65). These results are similar to the findings of Krishnakumar (2020), who documented that the societal mindset regarding women prioritizing childcare and household activities remains unchanged. The in-laws believe that the well-being of the family is linked to a woman's involvement in taking care of the children, household activities, and maintaining good relationships with family members.

Perception of husbands:

Table 4: Demography of husbands based on age ,Education and employment N=30

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
Less than 40	10	0.33%
40-50 years	15	0.5%
50-60 years	5	1.667%
Education		
School	10	0.33%
College	12	0.4%
Post Graduate	5	0.16%
Illiterate	3	0.1%
Occupation		
Agriculture	6	0.2%
Non- agriculture	2	0.067%
In Manufacturing sector	9	0.3%
In service sector	5	0.16%
Business	4	0.13%
Unemployed	4	0.13%

Source: Authors calculation

The survey conducted in the research indicates that, despite middle-class women contributing to the financial needs of the household, they are not encouraged to participate in family decision-making. The men who participated in the survey were supportive of their working wives, as this relieved them of the sole responsibility of providing for the family economically (Q2: mean 4.25, standard deviation 0.35). However, the survey revealed that 60% of husbands felt insecure about their wives' success. Furthermore, men over the age of 40 were less able to accept women excelling in the workplace. These men, with traditional mindsets, believed that women should primarily serve as nurturers within the family. This attitude results in lower confidence and self-esteem among women, as they deprive themselves of opportunities to showcase their talents.

Additionally, the study revealed that a wife's employment has an adverse effect on her spouse's mental health, regardless of age, salary category, or educational level. Even men who were supportive of their working wives were less satisfied compared to men with non-working wives. The men who participated in the survey felt that while their wives were helping to meet the financial needs of their families, their family relationships sometimes suffered as a result of their employment. Husbands felt that their wives did not have enough time for them (Q3: mean 2.85, standard deviation 0.65). Although the husbands were proud of their wives working (Q6: mean 4.25, standard deviation 0.65), they did not help their wives in the kitchen (Q7: mean 2.65, standard deviation 0.42).

Table 5: Demography of in children based on age ,education and employment N=35

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Ages		
Less than 10	5	0.142%
10 -12years	16	0.457%
12-14 years	12	0.34%
14-16 years	2	0.05%
Gender		

Male	19	0.54%
Female	16	0.45%

Source: Authors calculation

Perception of children:

The research shows that 70% of children are very supportive of their mothers working. The study supports the idea that working mothers provide financial stability for their children and help them develop self-assurance, social awareness, and a sense of commitment (Q2: mean 4.08, standard deviation 0.25). In addition, working women serve as role models for their families and the community. These results are consistent with the research of Singh and Meher (2024), who reported that daughters raised by working mothers are more likely to be employed as adults and have higher incomes. Children of working mothers are not only more confident but also value the time they spend with their parents.

On the other hand, working mothers might have long-term effects on their children's development. According to the survey, 30% of children felt that their mothers had less time to spend with them (Q3: mean 2.85, standard deviation 0.65). The children believed that while mothers who work full-time do spend less time with them, they tend to trade quantity of time for better quality time. Additionally, the survey revealed that children over the age of 12 felt that their mothers' exposure to stress at work adversely affects their cognitive development and behavior (Q5: mean 3.45, standard deviation 0.42). In conclusion, it can be said that maternal employment seems to have a limited impact on children's behavior and academic achievement over the short term.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study reveals that women's participation in the labor force is multidimensional. A woman's decision to work is not solely an individual choice but is influenced by family attitudes and societal perceptions. According to the study, lower-middle-class women not only share the financial burden of the household but are also equally responsible for household chores. Societal pressure often burdens women with both personal and professional duties, leading to increased stress and anxiety. Therefore, maintaining a work-life balance is crucial for alleviating psychological problems. Additionally, time management skills can help women balance their work and personal lives. Lower-middle-class women prioritize job duties as they help them share the family's financial burden. However, these women adapt their work patterns to meet family and childcare demands, either by working from home or by choosing part-time entrepreneurial work to manage household chores.

The study identifies empowerment of women as a crucial step toward attaining sustainable development by various economic and social organizations and nations around the world. This research contributes to the existing literature by providing insights into society's attitudes toward working women. However, there are some potential limitations. The perceptions in Jaipur may not fully represent those of the broader Indian population. Additionally, the survey results may be biased as they are reported by the researcher. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into society's attitudes toward working women and contributes to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting the challenges faced by Indian women in the labor force. The findings of the research can guide the policymaker to make more concerted efforts to make policies which will encourage labour participation. Furthermore, all stakeholders need to make an effort to create an enabling environment that boosts female labor force participation, allowing women to contribute to the growth process.

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