

# We Know What is Good for Her: *Hunar*, and Respectable Work for Women

Sociological Bulletin  
73(2) 205–223, 2024  
© 2024 Indian Sociological Society  
Article reuse guidelines:  
[in.sagepub.com/journals-permissions-india](https://in.sagepub.com/journals-permissions-india)  
DOI: 10.1177/00380229241234083  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/sob](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/sob)



Rama Devi<sup>1,2</sup>  and Sawmya Ray<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

Education is often conflated with women's empowerment. Access to formal education is considered to possess the potential to usher in the elimination of the imposed dependence of women on men by enhancing their employability and easing their entry into the labour market. This article argues that establishing such simplistic interconnections evades hidden constraints of sociocultural conditions entwined with patriarchal ideologies that influence and even partially prohibit women's access to education vis-a-vis employment, resulting in their marginalisation in the labour market. Examining the nature of educational access and occupational aspirations, of urban women residing in a Delhi settlement, the article shows that patriarchal ideology impresses and controls the nature and outcome of the education they obtain. In the settlement, while most young girls are pursuing higher education, not everyone is expected to channelise their educational degrees to secure paid employment. Unlike men, women are not encouraged to engage in every form of work as the nature of female occupation is tied to notions of honour and disgrace of the family. Locally prevailing patriarchal norms dictate and define what constitutes respectable work for women. They are permitted to aspire and engage in reputable work.

## Keywords

Women, work, gender inequality, Delhi, *hunar*, respectable work

## Introduction

Education and wage employment is seen as crucial to women's empowerment and attaining gender equality. Education enhances women's income-generating

<sup>1</sup> Department of Humanities and Social Science, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, Assam, India

<sup>2</sup> Krea University, Sri City, Andhra Pradesh, India

<sup>3</sup> Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, Assam, India

## Corresponding author:

Rama Devi, Department of Humanities and Social Science, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, Assam 781039, India.

E-mail: [ramadevi2487@gmail.com](mailto:ramadevi2487@gmail.com)

capability and their overall life chances (Jayachandran, 2015). It is argued that women's ability to generate income, make economic contributions to the household, extend financial help to their kin members and network, enhances their status and decision-making power while helping them resist discrimination and violence (Kabeer, 2005). It is important therefore to understand the nature, and process of women's access to quality education and the outcome of educational accomplishment.

The article explores how prevailing gender norms shape the educational and occupational aspirations of Dalit and backwards-class women in the sociocultural milieu of a Delhi neighbourhood. Crucially, an oft-repeated sentence 'We know what is good for her' explicates the invisible yet powerful influence of underlying cultural values and beliefs on the nature of education and work they can possibly attain. Historically, the caste system in India proscribed educational access to Dalits who are placed at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Entry and access to formal education are conceived by Dalits as an instrument of emancipation, however, access and outcome of education differ for Dalit men and women (Devi & Ray, 2021, 2022; Gopal, 2012; Paik, 2009). Scholarship on Indian youths has brought focus on the experiences of educated male Dalit youths in formal educational settings, their political and occupational aspirations and how they negotiate with their status as educated unemployed (Jeffrey, 2008; Jeffrey et al., 2007; Kumar, 2016). However, a similar focus on educated Dalit women mainly on educational access and their occupational imageries is paid scant attention. This article addresses such gaps, elaborating on marginalised/Dalit-Backward Classes women's educational as well as occupational aspirations and trajectories. It discusses the ways in which Brahminical gendered notions of honour, shame and safety are deployed to regulate marginalised women's choices in the matters of education, occupation and marriage which in turn influence their life chances. At the same time, rather than submitting women also strategically negotiate with the familial and societal expectations to transcend the barriers erected by the cultural norms to accomplish their goals.

## **Women, Education and Work**

Gender theorists argue that gender relations, behaviour and interactions are governed by cultural rules as a result culture and cultural beliefs play a crucial role in framing social relations and in gendering society (Brewer & Lui, 1989; Eagly, 1987; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Ridgeway (1997, 2009) argues interactional processes interwoven in cultural rules enable the reproduction of gender stereotypes and pave the way to understanding persisting gender inequality in different social milieus. Thus, conservative gender practices (like veiling) are not essentially incompatible with the modern ethos, as 'more modern' and 'more religious' can co-exist simultaneously (Mahmood, 2011; Sabur, 2022). The opportunities promised by modern educational institutions and workplaces are not shielded from the cultural discourses on gender roles and relations. Rather than eliminating inequality ingrained in gender relations, these are the gendered sites where gender attributes are rehearsed and

patriarchal relations are reproduced. The gendered nature of education is evident in the academic segregation of men in putatively masculine disciplines of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and the underrepresentation of women in these disciplines (Acker, 1990; Bird & Rhoton, 2021; Britton, 2017; Patel & Parmentier, 2005; Williams & Ceci, 2012). Thébaud and Taylor (2022) show the 'spectre of motherhood' in STEM disciplines intervene and constrict academic and career choices for women. The circulation of narratives and discourse on motherhood in the academic workplace frames STEM disciplines as intensive requiring a long working hours. This reinforces the belief that female students/researchers cannot commit to the rigour demanded by the field owing to their domestic responsibilities, importantly, rigorous involvement in meeting motherhood duties. The early-career female researchers regularly encounter and experience cultural expectations of motherhood in the elite academic disciplines that discourage them to remain and pursue a career in the STEM fields. Additionally, scholarship underlines the pervasive presence of casual sexism and sexual harassment encountered regularly by female students in educational institutions (Moylan & Wood, 2016; Molyan et al., 2021; Mukherjee & Dasgupta 2022; Vandana 2020). Experience of sexual harassment is differential and varies on the axis of sexual orientation, class, caste, race, ethnicity and religion (Coulter & Rankin, 2017; Yee et al., 2015). It has been noted that female students, transgender, gender non-conforming, lesbian, gay and bisexual students are more likely to encounter sexual harassment than students conforming to socially legitimised heterosexual norms (Cantor et al., 2015; Hill & Silva, 2005). Capturing the experiences of Dalit female students, Vandana (2020) unpacks nuanced and distinct ways in which notions of feminine beauty, caste position and gender play out in educational institutions. Her study shows those female Dalit students who did not fall under the dominant notion of beauty tend to endure shame, public humiliation, reprimand, rejection and threats containing sexual undertones from male faculties. Thus, not matching the criteria of 'beauty' does not exempt Dalit female students from sexual harassment rather it exposes them to multitudes of vulnerabilities, exploitation and denial of opportunities. Paik (2009) shows acts of 'disciplining' and 'control' adopted both at home and in educational institutions make educational attainment challenging for Dalit women. She points methods of disciplining and regulating the mind and body of Dalit women are the modes that enable the reproduction of 'untouchability' in supposedly modern formal educational institutions.

Likewise, it would be naïve to assume that in the labour market distinctions of gender identity and relations are erased and it guarantees to liberate women from the patriarchal subservience. The devaluation of women's reproductive labour at home and productive labour in the informal economy has supported the capitalist economy and accumulation by making their contribution to the economy invisible (Mies, 2007, 1981). A marked shift in the discourse from 'nimble fingers' to 'nimble bodies' has been noted where according to the former women are naturally oriented to perform labour-intensive work rather than skilled work which justified their low wages in factories and industries (Islam, 2022). Mies (2007, p. 269) directs attention to the newer forms acquired by productive labour which she describes as the '*housewifisation of labour*' wherein informal underpaid

productive work in the new economy has moved within the domestic confines and is performed by women. Instead of alleviating, economic liberalisation has further intensified the feminisation of labour. Occupational segregation of women in exploitative, labour-intensive, underpaid work relying on feminine skills provides evidence of the gendered nature of the labour market where gender relations and hierarchy of class and caste are reproduced (Ray, 2016). Based on her fieldwork, Ray (2016) underscores the reproductive labour of nursing care workers, largely constituting women's workforce, in medical establishments of Kolkata underscores the tenacious link between caste, class and gender. She argues that the devaluation of nursing labour through stigmatising and categorising it as menial work justifies the lower wages. In the post-1990, India witnessed an expansion of the service sector excessively relying on affective and emotional labour to create a client base and generate profit. Women are increasingly visible in the sector wherein they adopt comportment and demeanours conforming to the demands of the sector (Mankekar & Gupta, 2016; Patel, 2010). Islam (2022) focusing on the young working women engaged in the service sector of Delhi refers to the malleability and negotiation of female bodies between home and workplace as 'plastic bodies'. While the moulding of female bodies in the sector has led to the construction of confident professional 'New Women' (Dhawan, 2010 c.f. Islam, 2022), at the same time they remain vulnerable to sexual harassment and are paid low salaries/wages. Pradhan et al. (2022) foreground the transformations wrought on by the globalisation in the HITEC city of Hyderabad resulting in the feminisation of labour which encourages the participation of women in the new economy, however, on the downside they are largely segregated in care and affective work which is categorised as feminised work. Despite the surge in demand for women in feminised labour does not catalyse improvement in the work conditions and wage raise. In the contemporary economy, women have become 'ideal neo-liberal labour—cheap and flexible and subservient' (ibid, p. 93). According to the International Labour Office report (2018) compared to men, a higher percentage of women are in informal employment in India. The nature and terms of absorption of women in the labour market show that their job promises little to no income security and leave them in a state of occupational precarity and impermanence. The report underlines that participation in informal employment is likely to reduce with the rise in educational levels.

Access to higher education and possession of higher degrees are expected to enhance employability by providing employable skills and diversifying employment opportunities for job aspirants (Srivastava & Srivastava, 2010). In India, the gender gap in school enrolment has narrowed and a larger percentage of women are accessing higher education. The All India Survey on Higher Education (Government of India, 2020) states that the gross enrolment ratio of women is 27.3%, which is higher than men standing at 26.9%. The report finds that of the total enrolment in 2019–2020, 49% are women. Despite the rise in female educational attainment, India has long been witnessing stagnation and even a decline in female labour force participation. In 1990, the female labour force participation rate was 30% which peaked at 32% in 2005. However, in the subsequent years, the rate has been consistently and even sharply declining which plummeted to 18.6% in 2020. Increased

attendance of women in educational institutions, rise in household income, lack of job opportunities and concerns about female safety are a few of the common reasons that are foregrounded to explain the puzzling condition of decline in levels of female participation in the labour market (Dasgupta & Verick, 2016; Fletcher et al. 2017; Steven, 2014). Further, the global gender gap report (2021) by the World Economic Forum states the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns have increased the global gender gap 'by a generation from 99.5 years to 135.6 years'. The gendered impact of the pandemic was markedly notable in the Indian labour market where, as compared to men, women were seven times more likely to have lost their job and eleven times more likely to have not returned to work (Abraham et al., 2022). By foregrounding the observations gathered during the fieldwork in 2022, the article foregrounds how or whether the pandemic affected and altered the personal and occupational pursuits of the participants. Nevertheless, primarily much of the article is based on the extensive fieldwork conducted during the period of 2016–2017.

Rather than the experiences at educational institutions and work conditions of women in paid employment, this article elucidates the cultural rules and domestic economic conditions that impinge on their access to higher education and participation in the labour market. Drawing on the experiences of educated employed and unemployed Dalit and backward classes women in a Delhi neighbourhood, it fleshes out the conditions under which they can study and frame their occupational decisions. Unlike for men, unconditional participation in paid employment is not a norm for women. Familial and cultural influence over the educational and occupational choices of women either constrains or makes their participation in paid employment conditional. However, poised between individual dreams and, familial expectations and demands, women strategically negotiate impositions that appear to emanate from patriarchal values. Crucially, paid employment is hierarchised for women based on respect and stigma attached to it which has an impact on shaping conditions that guide their decision to participate in the labour market. Despite the presence of employment opportunities in Delhi, women are selective and refrain from joining the work/sectors indiscriminately. By showing the hierarchical ranking of work for women is in tandem with patriarchal norms couched in the language of safety, honour, stigma and shame, the article argues mere educational degrees and employment opportunities are not enough to encourage women to join the labour market.

### *The Field and Research Methods*

The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a lower-middle-income Delhi Neighborhood, Ashanagar, between 2016 and 2017 which was also revisited for a brief duration in December 2018 and April 2022. Administratively, the neighbourhood is categorised as a resettlement colony which was established in 1976 during the national emergency to inhabit the people living across the city in squatter dwellings. The settlement is predominantly inhabited by Dalits. While many in the first generation of the residents were state employees who were positioned at lower ranks of various departments, the subsequent generation largely employed in the private sector precariat jobs, daily wage work or self-employed which do not guarantee stable tenure and income.

To meet the research aims, we approached young girls pursuing higher education, attending different organisations based in the locality to acquire skills (*Hunar*) and taking coaching for state jobs. Many of our participants were simultaneously pursuing education and acquiring skills or preparing for the state exams. The study deployed qualitative research methods of open-ended in-depth interviews, case studies, observation, group discussions and informal conversations with women and their family members to gather data. Broadly, we inquired about their educational, employment, and life aspirations, educational arc, family background, occupational goals and experiences if employed, how they spend their leisure hours, marriage and expectations from the spouse. The method of case studies allowed us to revisit our participants and capture the biographies of their everyday lives.

Initially, a male resident from the neighbourhood introduced us to the young girls enrolled in various graduate and post-graduate courses in colleges under/affiliated with the University of Delhi. Open-ended interviews were conducted with 23 college-going girls. Among these participants, a few were also regularly attending local NGOs and organisations offering diverse vocational/professional skills. Through the network of the participants, we accessed a total of five organisations where we held group discussions and informal conversations with the other girls learning skills. The average strength of girls participating in group discussions was seven. Also, we interacted with and interviewed the employees and instructors, mostly women, working in these organisations. The settlement is predominantly a Dalit neighbourhood, most of the participants are from Dalit and backward classes who are unmarried educated and primarily in their early 20s. In addition to meeting the participants in their homes and neighbourhood, locally present non-governmental organisations offering various employable skills to women were also accessed to conduct group discussions and informal conversations.

### *We Know What is Good for Her*

Regardless of gender, most youths in Ashanagar are predominantly concentrated in the 'soft', 'easy' and 'effeminate' disciplines of social sciences and commerce (Devi & Ray, 2022; Thomas, 1990). Although the gendered division of enrolment in these disciplines is not sharply marked, the salience of gender becomes apparent after class 12th when young boys and girls make overlapping decisions to pursue higher education in distance mode but for different reasons imbued with appropriate gender roles. The gender-based socialisation within the family and local prevailing gender norms unpack the dynamics which continue to exert influence on women's decision to pursue higher education and consequent employability. Most young men stress that mere possession of higher educational degrees does not promise employment and occupational stability. They prefer distance education because it allows them to engage in income-generating activities or learn employable skills on weekdays to strengthen their chances of securing gainful employment. The decision of male youths regarding the mode of education tends to have little to no family interference. In contrast, family and parents play a significant and authoritative role in determining academic and career pathways for women. As the remark from a mother suggests

We know what is good for her. We are her parents, not enemies. Whatever we think is for her advantage and well-being. She does not understand this today, but she will be grateful to us in the future. What is wrong in studying through correspondence? She can simultaneously study and learn domestic work, which is equally important for women to learn!

The remark came from the mother of a young girl, Anjana, during an informal conversation with her and her friends about their envisioned occupational future. The five young girls in this conversation were pursuing graduation and post-graduate courses from the distance learning mode in the city. All of them reside in the same lane and are friends familiar with the routine of each other's life and future dreams. They cited compulsions and intents of choosing distance education which included the responsibility to assist in domestic chores, low scores or to procure time to learn non-academic employable skills. Anjana wanted to pursue a career either in modelling or hotel management but received disapproval and vehement opposition to her professional aspirations from her parents. Her expressed professional interest in these fields stirred anxiety in her parents, who consider these professions to be undignified for a respectable woman to engage in. They sought to control Anjana by instituting tacit and overt mechanisms of vigilance to restrict her mobility and interaction with the world existing beyond the house to prevent external influence capable of fostering her choices. Against her will, despite the qualifying scores required to obtain admission to a regular college, they enrolled her in distance education where classes are held only on Sundays. They even decided on appropriate employment for her and promised to arrange one in an export-import firm where her father works. For the job, she ought to know the Spanish language as the firm requires language interpreters. At the time of this conversation, she had not yet begun to learn the language as promised by her parents. She helps her mother with household work and looks after her younger brother. Unable to resist, reluctantly she started attending the classes accompanied by her father to the college. Her parents keep strict vigilance on her movements outside the house, she is not allowed to step out of the house without permission or without being escorted by her parents. In caste Hindu society, female chastity is principally essential for marriage and reproduction of the family (Chakravarty, 2018). Unmonitored physical mobility and interactions with unrelated men pose a serious threat to the bodily integrity of women. It is commonplace in our field site for unmarried young women to be accompanied by family members, often male members, not only to the colleges but also to other places to guard them against the unknown and corrupt influence of the city. Regular education would have been an escape from the constant vigilantism curtails Anjana's agential power and freedom. However, her aspirations for venturing into a 'non-respectable' career such as modelling or hotel management, which for a woman did not seem to be safe and honourable in the views of her parents, led to further vigilantism and curtailment of her educational choices.

Thus, in our study, it is found that family members including parents, brothers and relatives overwhelmingly interfere and have a decisive say in the matters of discipline and mode young girls choose to pursue higher education. For young women, distance education often appears as a preferable option where classes are held only on weekends over the regular mode of education regardless of their competence and desire. In a regular mode of education, students commute to the

colleges/universities every day to attend the classes which are conducted throughout the weekdays. While youths in the locality tend to choose distance learning, it has distinctly gendered meaning and utility in reinforcing the gendered division of labour vis-a-vis patriarchal norm. Young men use the available weekday time to obtain wage employment and gain financial autonomy. The ability to earn a livelihood and provide financial support to the family trains them for the conventionally expected masculine role of a breadwinner. Whereas, female youths shoulder the responsibility of multiple domestic chores including caregiving along with their mothers. They expend time (in)voluntarily on learning, performing and internalising the norms of domestic compliance crucial to reproducing and raising a heterosexual family as a married woman. Urban location and its ethos have not succeeded in providing gender-sexual and bodily autonomy aspired by women.

### **Between Autonomy and Imposition**

Parental support, interest and encouragement are immensely important for women to strive towards achieving socio-economic and political aspirations. Like in the aforementioned case of Anjana, the aspirations of women may remain unmet and unaccomplished without sustained support and approval from the family. In the field, the extent of autonomy with which women could pursue their dreams and aspirations is contingent on the internal structure of the family, the nature of relationships shared among family members, collective beliefs and the community/ caste to which they belong to.

Pratima and Shruti are school friends, they completed graduation from the same college under Delhi University on a regular mode. After college, Pratima enrolled in a Master's programme in Political Science. She went on to complete her MPhil from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, where she is a doctoral candidate. Whereas, Shruti enrolled in Indraprastha University to obtain a teaching degree, Bachelor of Education (BEd). On completion of the course, she was hired as a teacher in one of the Delhi municipal schools on a contractual basis. Their ability to continue higher education from the reputed colleges/universities and concerted efforts towards attaining respectable employment demarcates them from those young women of the locality who are structurally denied similar opportunities. It also signals an apparent loosening of patriarchal control that enables female subordination and dependence on men by denying respectable economic opportunities and the development of capabilities important to live a dignified life. Deciphering this inconsistency in the otherwise established pattern of domesticating female bodies requires shifting attention to the importance a family gives to education, gender equity, a pattern of resource allocation, and the nature of the future they envision for the daughters. Shruti's mother says,

We do not discriminate between sons and daughters. We are spending on their education equally and encourage them to study. Every day after dinner, my husband and I ask them about their studies and give them a long lecture for nearly an hour about the importance of education.... We want our daughters to be settled in a good government job before their marriage. I tell them to work hard otherwise they will have to spend



their entire life feeding and raising the family as I do...Nowadays, in our caste (kurmi, OBCs) everyone wants an educated and earning girl to marry.... Even I want educated and employed wives for my sons.

Shruti has three younger siblings, one sister and two brothers. Her brothers are graduate students and the sister is taking coaching to prepare for state employment. Her parental claim of indiscriminate attitude manifests in the fair investment of financial resources in the education of their children regardless of gender. The lament and contempt in the remark towards only performing household chores underline that the parents do not desire the future of the daughters to be immersed in the mundane drudgery of domestic life. Through education and employable training and degrees, they are preparing the daughters to attain an economically independent future and break free from the life of imposed domestic labour. Changes in the way a community perceives and treats women are crucial to improve their status and ushering sweeping changes in gender relations. Shruti's parents stress that for the members of their caste group, education has become highly valuable and a source to gain social status. The collective strength of the community prompts social transformation by exerting pressure on its members to adopt the change. Shruti hails from the Kurmi caste (OBC), locally the community through caste associations and meetings has been emphasising educating and training the younger generation to obtain employment opportunities in the public sector and strengthen their socio-economic position in society. Women are not excluded from the pursuit, they are urged to participate and become partners in improving the social standing of the caste group. For the community, the educational and occupational achievements of women are increasingly becoming markers of superior social status and upward mobility. The case of Shruti shows that synchrony between the collective goal of a community and familial beliefs impacts women that might prove (dis)advantageous for their status and future. Shruti got married to a man from her caste who is supportive of her occupational aspirations. After two years into the marriage, she is still preparing for a state job.

The relational dynamics within the family are important to comprehend the way women negotiate, subvert and transcend patriarchal limits to win over independence. In a patriarchal society, authority to make decisions and control over family resources is mainly concentrated in the hands of male members (Ridgeway, 2009). The nature of the relationship women share with the patriarch of the house influences their ability to make strategic choices. Pratima lost her mother to a prolonged illness when she was studying in class 10th. She has an older married brother and two younger siblings; a sister and a brother. Before completing school education, her brothers dropped out of school. They are irregularly employed in the private sector and spend their leisure hours with peers in the locality. Pratima's father is a retired state employee and the expenses of the family are managed from his monthly pension. He has scant faith in the abilities of his sons to earn a steady income and share the responsibilities as men in the household. In contrast, the daughters, both Pratima and her younger sister have been successful in obtaining higher educational degrees from universities based in Delhi. He is proud and praises the educational triumph of the daughters which they accomplished while simultaneously doing a

plethora of domestic work and prudently managing the house and running errands. Strikingly, before making final decisions on important matters be it financial or familial, he consults and seeks advice from the daughters. It has been noted that women strategically perform gender roles and comply with gender rules to bargain with the structures of patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988). Through everyday demeanours and scrupulous behaviour, women prove their worthiness to be heard and freed from the restrictive grasp of patriarchal norms. The trust he has in their wisdom, maturity, and capacity to make sensible choices is a productive source to receive support or consent on the matters/choices to which he does not agree readily. Narrating her educational journey Pratima tells, 'My father agreed to my choice of taking admission in the regular mode because he knows that I will not betray the faith he has in me'. The notion of faith in this context connotes unuttered confidence and trust that women can be relied on to uphold the norms of sexual fidelity and guard their honour on moving beyond the safety of domestic boundaries without male protection. Women build trustworthiness within the family by diligently performing domestic responsibilities as well as through a mild form of social life and modest conduct in public spaces. Pratima does not socialise much in her locality and has very few female friends who are also pursuing higher education like her. Whenever Pratima steps out of the house, she sports attire (either a kurta and salwar/ jeans and kurta along with a dupatta) which marks her as a modest woman in public spaces. She even convinced her father to let her marry the man she loves and who does not belong to their caste. The idea of inter-caste love marriage was unacceptable to him, additionally, Pratima shared that her father was against the marriage because the boy belongs to an inferior caste (touchable) and does not have economic stability. Pratima's father is a retired state employee who owns two houses (three-storeyed) in the locality, her husband lives in a rented house with his parents in Ashanagar and has a meagre paying private job. The intersection of the low caste-class position of Pratima's partner rigidified her father's opposition to the marriage. Her father wanted her to marry a man from their caste who has a well-paid job and financial security. But Pratima expressed that she will not marry anybody other than the boy she chose. Further, she assured him that the economically precarious condition of her husband is temporary as after completing her PhD she would get a well-paid and respectable job. After over a year of persuasion, he finally relented to give consent to the marriage and she got married in November 2020 at a time when the country-wide lockdown norms were relaxed.

The attained freedom is negotiated not unfettered, it tends to be conditional, fragmentary and restrictive in scope. Behaving modestly and sincerely in domestic and public spheres women build their credibility vis-a-vis earn their freedom. Both Pratima and Shruti had the liberty to choose the form of education, strive for economic opportunities, unchaperoned mobility and select potential mates for the marital alliance. Nevertheless, they were constantly reminded of the time frame/ deadline to accomplish their educational/occupational goals before the marriage implying the power of conjugal homes to control their future. Due to the prevalence of a patrilocal form of marriage, where after the marriage the couples in our field site, as in most of India, reside with the husband's family or in the vicinity, freedom and autonomy are enjoyed by women in their natal homes is not abound, it is

circumvented by impending uncertainties awaiting at conjugal homes. Also, their families insisted they marry at an acceptable age at which finding a suitable groom is easy, as later the search becomes difficult and socially embarrassing on crossing the acceptable age limit. Even when allowed to select a spouse for themselves, they are strictly told transgression of the principle of caste endogamy is intolerable. Thus, consent to 'love marriage' is conditional, requiring, rather, expecting the girls to love a man from their caste, which was also the reason that Pratima had to convince her father about her choice of partner and wait for over a year to get consent from him for her marriage. Grover (2009) notes that the seeming existence of equality in the amorous relationship during the courtship period eventually transforms and power favourably shifts towards men in cases of love marriage often leaving women in a vulnerable position. The love marriages where women defy or arduously wait for familial approval of the alliance face the risk of losing the emotional and material support from the natal kin, unlike the women in an arranged marriage. The love marriage does not guarantee absolute freedom to women from the domestic restrictions at conjugal homes and unconditional spousal support to accomplish their professional goals. As in the case of Pratima, the combined impact of lockdown in 2020–2021, reconfiguration of domestic responsibilities at the conjugal home, and subsequent pregnancy has inordinately delayed her educational aspiration of timely completion of her doctoral thesis.

### ***Haath ka Hunar for Future Uncertainties***

There are several Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the locality claiming commitment to the goal of the welfare of socio-economically marginalised women. Administered by community leaders or associated with local politicians, these NGOs serve the task by attending to different aspects of women's lives. Disseminating awareness regarding the women education offering legal advice to victims of domestic violence, and providing training in vocational skills for free or at a nominal cost are some of the activities of these NGOs. These locally present NGOs and similar establishments are attended by the young girls in the hope of acquiring and honing employable skills which are swiftly accessible due to spatial proximity and affordability. Women attending these organisations range from school dropouts to those who are either pursuing or have completed higher education in distance learning. These women use available abundant time to spend in non-academic activities broadly related to earning income, assisting in domestic work, and learning employable skills. Sewing, beauty care, computer courses, front desk job training, teaching and preparing for state jobs are a few of the selected and feminised spheres where the female presence is perceptibly exclusive or predominant. The pursuit of each of these skills is imbued with different social meanings and guided by distinctive motivations.

In a group discussion consisting of fourteen unmarried and one married woman who are enrolled in learning sewing and beauty care courses from a local NGO one of the girls, Farzana, declares the intent and purpose of learning the skills for the future, 'education has its place, but if we acquire some *hunar* it will help us to

earn something in desperate times...who knows what awaits us in future after marriage.' *Hunar* is an Urdu word that connotes craft/skill. The statement illuminates, that education is important, but without *Hunar*/or specialised craft it alone is not enough to regain stability in times of distress. The girls present in the room accede and affirm the central motive of learning feminised *hunar* is to prepare themselves against the event of post-marital vulnerability that may arise due to spousal discords, financial instability, divorce/separation, widowhood and other advertent crisis. Also, women learn or are encouraged to learn these skills to enhance their marriage prospects because apart from education, knowledge of skills, like sewing or beauty courses, are important eligibility criteria for women to be selected as a spouse. Learning feminised skills is not essentially aimed at gaining employment or financial independence. These skills remain disused, as most of the participants did not continue their occupational career in the learned skills. Crucially, the acquisition of skills is rendered futile without resources and opportunities for uninterrupted practice to hone and improvise the learned craft. These skills are short-term courses spanning not more than three months, after which most women retreat to their homes and discontinue practising the learned skills. While only a few women can monetise the learned skills, several women who have attended these organisations are neither self-employed nor active in the labour market. Some of the participants even shifted to learning other employable skills like Nisha who after attending local skill institutes subsequently, in 2019 enrolled at ITI to pursue a two-year diploma course seriously and productively in Architecture. Due to the lockdown, she could complete the course in December 2021 instead of May 2021. Post-pandemic, in 2022, she joined a coaching institute to practice and learn computer-aided design software essential to profitably use the diploma in the labour market to claim a suitable job. In 2016, while pursuing graduation in distance mode Nisha completed a beauty and sewing course from an NGO, she remarked,

I learned the course because it is near my house and does not charge high fees... I thought it will give me a reason to step out and do some time pass. But these skills are not of much use because I did not practice, where do I practice? I don't have the money to buy cosmetics or clothes and without practice who will trust me with their face or clothes?

For young girls and women, local skill training organisations represent the space of respite from the monotony of life and enjoy leisure where they meet, interact and forge friendships with other women. Learning skills, thus, do not imply an inevitable possibility to achieve economic independence, rather it is premised on the uncertainty of future events that may precipitate conditions adverse to women and a desire to explore opportunities to build new relations. Acquiring gendered skills gets easy approval from natal families because it is also a method of securing financial future and autonomy for young women, though in a restricted manner as their chances of employability are subjected to various conditions. Participants say,

Our family encouraged us to learn stitching, sewing or beauty parlour but they do not want us to start working and earning income. Most of us are not expected to use these

skills for income generation. They send us here because they worry...tomorrow we will be married and what if economic or some other difficulties arise at conjugal home then at least we will not be dependent on others...using these skills we will be able to manage our own expense...also if the income of our husband is not enough to run the family then we can generate some "extra income" to meet small expenses like paying for tuition fee or buying ration...that too only if we have permission from husband and his family members...

Despite being encouraged by the families to learn skills (*hunar*), they are dissuaded to earn an income while at their natal home. Rather, it is stressed that families, both natal and conjugal, do not agree to send women—be it, daughters, or wives—outside the house to engage in paid employment. Natal families maintain that post-marriage the decision of their daughter's employment rests with the conjugal family, importantly on the groom. Only on the condition of obtaining consensus from the husband or his parents, women are expected to search and gain employment (Chanana, 1988). The gendered normative of man as the primary breadwinner reappears in the conversation where the financial contribution of women in the family is referred to as 'extra income'. The conversation signals men are expected to cover all or substantial domestic expenses, and the meagre income earned by women is the source of supplementary income that can only be spared to meet smaller expenditures. The second pressing concern for most girls is post-marital adjustments in conjugal homes, as it is not easy to resist the dictates of the new house members. Their choice to work after marriage, largely, is contingent on the permission of conjugal homes. These attained skills can be operated from home and may not draw much resistance against working outside, beyond domestic boundaries. Equipping girls with such skills is a way of securing financial independence. This can be read as a negotiation, though not a radical bargain, within the limits of what is possible in the patriarchal structure of the locality. The gendered nature of skills generally gets easy approval and encouragement from the families therefore it becomes a method of securing their financial future and limited autonomy.

### **Not Just Any Work, Respectable Work**

Seema works in a local NGO that offers legal aid and advice to women facing domestic violence, harassment, and marital discord. She listens to and records the problems brought by women and their family members to the NGO. Her office is sprawled in a single room which is partitioned by a curtain. In the partitioned room, one half of the room is used to provide legal help to women and in the other half, a woman runs a beauty parlour. In the small office space, Seema shares the work table with the owner of the NGO. Expressing dissatisfaction over the infrastructure at her workplace and the nature of the work, she says,

Is this work? We want to work but not just any work, respectable work. A respectable work is where you have your independent office, table, chair, air conditioner and people give you respect...a good job has a stable and adequate salary.

Similar remarks were often heard where young girls expressed their reluctance and dislike towards working in manufacturing industries or service sectors like

call centres present in the vicinity of the neighbourhood. Although, women are employed in the various sectors of the private and informal economy including manufacturing industries, the service sector, the development sector and as domestic help in nearby residential areas. Only a very small fraction of women are employed in state jobs including schools and departments of the Delhi government. However, women either aspiring or are already in the paid employment foreground that mere opportunities to work are not enough to motivate them to participate in the labour market, respect and honour attached to the work is an important criterion to make occupational choices and earn an income. The importance of honour and respect was mainly articulated by economically better-off families which can afford to have women out of the labour market. These families are in a position and willing to invest in quality education and occupational careers for women. Young unmarried women from economically better classes are also preparing for state jobs. Largely, public sector employment in banks or educational institutions or professionalised occupations (doctor/Chartered Accountant) are considered reputable and respectable jobs for women which also aligns with the superior status of their families. Obtaining aspired respectable jobs becomes difficult for women due to the increasing dearth of formal employment in the public sector and its resource-intensive nature. Both, formal state jobs and professionalised occupations, require economic resources to take coaching and prepare for the recruitment/entrance examinations and pursue professional education. Taking coaching or preparing for competitive exams seldom guarantees attainment of employment on the first attempt or ever at all. Apart from economic resources, a prolonged duration of time is required for pre-entrance preparations and repeated attempts to pass competitive exams to secure a job or to remain in professional education. The process of gaining a respectable job is cumbersome, uncertain, and unaffordable for many. Shekhar, an employee of Delhi municipality, has two daughters who are attending a coaching centre to prepare for banking services. About their preparations for the state job, he remarks,

Government job is good and safe for educated girls...private jobs are not safe for women I want my daughters to be economically independent and have respectable job. I have money to spend on coaching and higher education for my daughters, but not everyone has it...women from poor families work in the private sector...they are helpless.

Female participation in different sectors of the labour market is hierarchised as inferior or superior based on the nature of the work and workplace, work hours, stipulated wage/salary and, educational qualifications and skills required for the job. Respectable work is ranked superior as it requires higher and professionalised degrees, mental labour, fixed working hours, good working space and a regular salary. Additionally, the time of the work hours and clothes are important to ascertain and define the conditions of respectable work for women. One of the female participants working in a call centre shared that in the neighbourhood people despise and consider it inappropriate work for women. As she returns from work in the late evening and sports non-traditional clothing like jeans and shirts to the workplace, it draws suspicion from the neighbours that the nature of work performed by the

women in the sector is of immoral character. The kind of clothing women sport in modern workplaces is one of the ways to ascertain the respectability of the work. Broadly, jobs in the private sector, like in call centres or domestic help, with varying hours of work are disdained and suspiciously viewed by neighbours and relatives. Conditions and gradation of paid employment as respectable and menial for women simultaneously underline the patriarchal anxiety and relationship with the masculine identity. For women, respectable work is constructed and construed not merely based on income and nature of employment but also the ability of workplace conditions, like working hours, occupational designation or how they are addressed at the workplace (as Madam), to adhere and guard the patriarchal norms. Thus, workplace conditions ensuring the safety of female employees (like work hours are such that they can return home before dusk) and formalisation of occupational relations (where instead of by their name, women are referred to respectably as Madam) reduce the risks lurking at female chastity beyond the domestic confines. Further, the hierarchisation of paid employment for women is deeply tied to the masculine identity. It is believed that women exposed to 'patriarchal risk' engage in private-sector employment and casual labour (Cain et al., 1979). Women engaging in supposedly inferior forms, such as receptionists or domestic workers, of work, tend to come from impoverished families in which men are unemployed or earn a wage inadequate to meet the daily household needs. The class conditions and domestic hardships compel women to take up menial work which does not command respect in the locality. Female participation in paid employment to surmount socio-economic constraints is discerned as a disruption of masculine identity due to the failure of men to fulfil the primary role of breadwinner of the family and their financial dependence on women to meet domestic needs. Successful accomplishment of masculine identity is thus based on the ability to make an adequate financial contribution to the household which eliminates the conditions for women to step out and earn an income. Ashish owns a construction material shop in the locality and on being asked about the education level of women in his family, he says,

My wife and all my sisters-in-law are educated but they do not work outside. Domestic work and childcare are themselves overwhelming...we all (male members) are earning why should they work?

It is to be noted, in the pre-pandemic phase of the fieldwork, middle-class financially stable families, like that of Ashish's, often expressed vehement disapproval against the engagement of women in 'disreputable' menial jobs to earn income. Such strong objections are not absolute, they are conditionally alterable. During the pandemic, middle-class households deriving income from the private sector suffered either from job loss or erratic flow of income consequently deteriorating the financial equilibrium which also resulted in the dilution of rigid boundaries of the gendered division of labour. In 2022, some of the women joined the labour market and engaged in 'inferior' ranking works in manufacturing industries to stabilise and restore domestic financial conditions with familial approval. However, masculine pride is derived from the fact of financial non-dependence on women which does not threaten the gendered division of the labour in the household and keeps it intact. The familial

attitude towards the economic and occupational status of women is not homogeneous. It is held that higher educational degrees broaden occupational choices and opportunities and honourable status in society. Education is perceived as a promising tool to gain socio-economic upward mobility and status markers. Educated young girls receive financial and affective support from their family members to prepare and attain jobs guaranteeing economic autonomy and social respect. As has been argued, the status of women and the nature of the work they perform at the workplace is reflective of the effect it has on masculine identity, family reputation and patriarchal order. In the neighbourhood, girls are encouraged to secure jobs that are scant or resource-intensive mainly available in the public sector and prepare for professionalised courses which are considered to lead to superior and respectable jobs to engage in. Any educational and employment aspirations that do not fit standards of patriarchal respectability are discouraged and even denied.

## Conclusion

The marked upsurge in female enrolment in higher education indicates access to educational premises is no longer an exception for women. As a space to articulate, express, critically think, acquire new forms of knowledge, and challenge the existing knowledge paradigms, exposure to educational institutions holds immense emancipatory potential in more than one way. Equipping learners with employable skills is expected to bring economic independence and social dignity. However, the decline in female labour force participation shows that the conversion of educational attainments into economic autonomy is not guaranteed or inevitable, it is mediated by social structures, gender location and market conditions. Despite recording high economic growth, India's economy has not been successful in expanding formal employment opportunities for educated youths which proves markedly disadvantageous for women. Hierarchisation as *hunar*, work and respectable work for women highlights occupational choices that are not made arbitrarily and unconditionally by women. Patriarchal motives and familial socio-economic position have ramifications on female occupational choices and engagement in paid employment. While visible in skill training programmes and paid employment, respectable work/job inferred as formal and public sector employment is desired by women and their families. In contrast to, reluctance, resistance and contempt displayed for female participation in informal work or the private sector, respectable work is readily approved and desired by families. The predicament of achieving respectable work lies in the scarcity of formal state jobs. Additionally, these jobs are resource-intensive in terms of money and time which families are either unable or unwilling to spend on women. Economic constraints, belief in the gendered division of labour and compulsion of timely marriage act as a barrier to investing the resources required to realise the aspiration of respectable work. Further, the fusion of patriarchal norms of respect, honour, stigma and disgrace appear in the categorisation of paid employment as work and respectable work for women. Equating work opportunities to the patriarchal notion of respect and disrepute set out the conditions and circumstances for



women to partake in paid employment. It deters them from participating in paid employment independent of economic conditions and patriarchal impositions. Finally, unanticipated extraordinary and indefinite situations like the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns do inflict, even if fleetingly, disruptions and loosen rigid connections between women, work, and (dis)honour.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.


## Ethical Declaration

The research conforms to the ethical guidelines of the institution. The research procedure and methods deployed in the research was monitored and approved by the Department Postgraduate Programme Committee (DPPC). Informed oral consent was obtained from all the research participants.

## Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Rama Devi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4448-3238>

## References

- Abraham, R., Basole, A., & Kesar, S. (2022). Down and out? The gendered impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on India's labour market. *Economia Politica*, *39*, 101–128.
- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender & Society*, *4*(2), 139–158.
- Bird, S. R., & Rhoton, L. A. (2021). Seeing isn't always believing: Gender, academic STEM, and women scientists' perceptions of career opportunities. *Gender & Society*, *35*(3), 422–448.
- Brewer, M. B., & Lui, L. N. (1989). The primacy of age and sex in the structure of person categories. *Social Cognition*, *7*(3), 262.
- Britton, D. M. (2017). Beyond the chilly climate: The salience of gender in women's academic careers. *Gender & Society*, *31*(1), 5–27.
- Cain, M., Khanam, S. R., & Nahar, S. (1979). Class, patriarchy and women's work. *Population and Development Review*, *5*(3), 405–438.
- Cantor, D., Fisher, B., Chibnall, S. H., Townsend, R., Lee, H., Thomas, G., & Westat, Inc. (2015). *Report on the AAU campus climate survey on sexual assault and sexual misconduct*.

- Chanana, K. (ed.). (1988). *Socialisation, education, and women: Explorations in gender identity*. Stosius Incorporated/Advent Books Division.
- Chakravarty, U. (2018). *Gendering caste: Through a feminist lens*. Sage Publications.
- Coulter, R. W., & Rankin, S. R. (2020). College sexual assault and campus climate for sexual-and gender-minority undergraduate students. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 35(5–6), 1351–1366.
- Dasgupta, S., & Verick, S. S. (Eds.). (2016). *Transformation of women at work in Asia: An unfinished development agenda*. Sage Publications India.
- Devi, R., & Ray, S. (2021). Negotiating exclusion and precarity: Marginalised urban youth, education, and employment in Delhi. *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 64(4), 923–941.
- Devi, R., & Ray, S. (2022). Mahaul and Mazboori: educational aspirations and realities of Dalit youth in Delhi. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 1–20.
- Dhawan, N. B. (2010). The married 'new Indian woman': Hegemonic aspirations in new middle-class politics? *South African Review of Sociology*, 41(3), 45–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2010.516122>.
- Eagly, A. (1987). *Sex differences in social behaviour: A social-role interpretation*. Erlbaum.
- Fletcher, E., Pande, R., & Moore, C. M. T. (2017). *Women and work in India: Descriptive evidence and a review of potential policies* (Working Paper no RWP18-004). HKS. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3116310>
- Gopal, M. (2012). Caste, sexuality and labour: The troubled connection. *Current Sociology*, 60(2), 222–238.
- Government of India (2020). *All India survey on higher education*. Ministry of Education, Department of Higher Education, New Delhi.
- Grover, S. (2009). Lived experiences: Marriage, notions of love, and kinship support amongst poor women in Delhi. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 43(1), 1–33.
- Hill, C., & Silva, E. (2005). *Drawing the line: Sexual harassment on campus*. American Association of University Women Educational Foundation.
- International Labour Office (2018). *Women and Men in the informal economy: A statistical picture* (3rd ed.). International Labour Office.
- Islam, A (2022). Plastic bodies: Women workers and emerging body rules in service work in Urban India. *Gender & Society*, 36(3), 422–444.
- Jayachandran, S. (2015). The roots of gender inequality in developing countries. *Annual Review of Economics*, 7(1), 63–88.
- Jeffrey, C., Jeffrey P., & Jeffrey R. (2007). *Degrees without freedom: Education, masculinities and unemployment in North India*. Stanford University Press.
- Jeffrey, C. (2008). Generation nowhere': Rethinking Youth Through the Lens of Unemployed Young Men. *Progress in Human Geography*, 32(6), 739–758.
- Kabeer, N (2005). Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of third Millennium Development Goal. *Gender and Development*, 13(1), 13–24.
- Kabeer, N., Mahmud, S., & Tasneem, S. (2011). *Does paid work provide a pathway to women's empowerment? Empirical findings from Bangladesh* (Working Paper 375). Brighton: IDS.
- Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with patriarchy. *Gender & Society*, 2(3), 274–290.
- Kumar, S. (2016). The time of youth: Joblessness, politics and neo-religiosity in Uttar Pradesh. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 102–109.
- Mahmood, S. (2011). Politics of piety. In *Politics of piety*. Princeton University Press.
- Mankekar, P., & Gupta, A. (2016). Intimate encounters: Affective labor in call centers. *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, 24(1), 17–43.

- Mies, M. (2007). Patriarchy and accumulation on a world scale revisited. (Keynote lecture at the Green Economics Institute, Reading, 29 October 2005). *International Journal of Green Economics*, 1(3–4), 268–275.
- Mies, M. (1981). *The social origins of the sexual division of labour* (No. 85). Erasmus University Rotterdam.
- Moylan, C., A., & Wood, L. (2016). Sexual harassment in social work field placements: Prevalence and characteristics. *Affilia*, 31(4), 405–417.
- Moylan, C. A., Javorka, M., Maas, M. K., Meier, E., & McCauley, H. L. (2021). Campus sexual assault climate: Toward an expanded definition and improved assessment. *Psychology of violence*, 11(3), 296.
- Mukherjee, A., & Dasgupta, S. (2022). ‘He Says, She Says’: Sexism and sexual harassment in higher educational institutions of India. *Journal of Economic Issues*, 56(2), 408–415.
- Paik, S. (2009). Chhadi lage chham chham, vidya yeyi gham gham (the harder the stick beats, the faster the flow of knowledge) Dalit women’s struggle for education. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 16(2), 175–204.
- Patel, R. (2010). Working the night shift. In *Working the night shift*. Stanford University Press.
- Patel, R., & Parmentier, M. J. C. (2005). The persistence of gender roles in the information technology sector: A study of female engineers in India. *Information Technologies and International Development*, 2(3), 29.
- Pradhan, I., Mukherjee, A., & Rayaprol, A. (2022). Women and the changing nature of work in Hyderabad’s HITEC city. *Sociological Bulletin*, 71(1), 80–95.
- Ray, P. (2016). “Is this even work?”: Nursing care and stigmatized labour. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 51(47), 60–69.
- Ridgeway, C. L. (1997). Interaction and the conservation of gender inequality: Considering employment. *American Sociological Review*, 218–235.
- Ridgeway, C. L. (2009). Framed before we know it: How gender shapes social relations. *Gender & Society*, 23(2), 145–160.
- Sabur, M. A. (2022). Gender, veiling, and class: Symbolic boundaries and veiling in Bengali Muslim families. *Gender & Society*, 36(3), 397–421.
- Srivastava, N., & Srivastava, R. (2010). Women, work and employment outcomes in rural India. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 45(28), 49–63.
- Steven, K. (2014). *Why female labour force participation is declining so sharply in India*. (Research paper 10). International Labour office.
- Thébaud, S., & Taylor, C. J. (2021). The specter of motherhood: Culture and the production of gendered career aspirations in science and engineering. *Gender & Society*, 35(3), 395–421.
- Thomas, K. (1990): *Gender and subject in higher education*, Taylor and Francis Publishers.
- Vandana (2020). Dalit girls and sexual harassment in the university. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(1), 33–54.
- West, C., & Zimmermann, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & Society*, 1(2), 125–51.
- Williams, W. M., & Ceci, S. J. (2012). When scientists choose motherhood: a single factor goes a long way in explaining the dearth of women in math-intensive fields. How can we address it? *American Scientist*, 100(2), 138.
- World Economic Forum (2021). *Global gender gap report 2021*.
- Yee, M. W., Alagappar, P. N., & Ngeow, Y. M. (2015). Differences in the perception of sexual harassment by gender and ethnicity among selected Malaysian undergraduates. *Gender, Technology and Development*, 19(2), 204–230.