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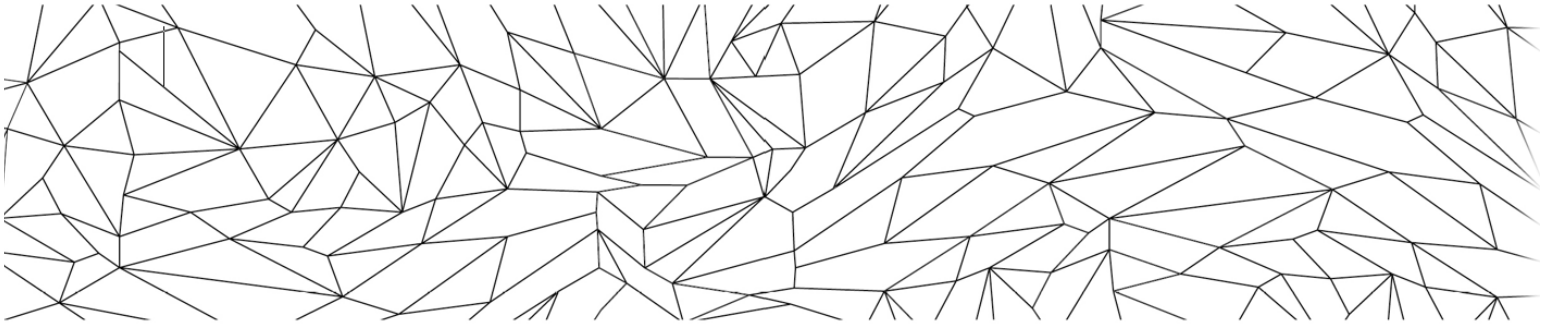

Blurred Boundaries: Social Reproduction in Indian Slums

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Section 1. Introduction

'काम से लौटकर स्त्रियाँ , काम पर लौटती हैं!'

'After leaving from work, women return to work' — an Indian saying that sharply captures the fluid nature of women's work (Asthana, 2024). It illustrates how work is distributed across overlapping spatial and temporal spheres, rather than neatly separated into home or workplace, day or night. The generational endurance of this phrase points to a structural invisibility: a persistent lack of recognition, both in language and in policy, for the labour — paid and unpaid — that sustains individuals, households, and entire communities.

This structural invisibility is best understood through the methodological and theoretical lens of Social Reproduction (SR). Social reproduction labour can take the form of child care, domestic work, community organizing, and can succinctly be described as the work that goes into reproducing the worker and all of society (Cantillon, Mackett and Stevano, 2023). For social reproduction scholars, the divide between production and reproduction is porous, blurred and fundamentally fictitious (Mezzadri, Newman & Stevano, 2022).Under the capitalist system, it must be viewed as a form of surplus-value extraction, often subsidising capital (Mezzadri, 2019). Within and without the social reproduction canon, increasing attention is being paid to the *majority world,* not just as a subject to be studied in isolation but as crucial to building theories of inclusion that allow for a more comprehensive politics (ibid.).

The need to rethink current narratives becomes especially urgent when thinking alongside urban poor communities in informal settlements, where the intersections of reproductive and productive work are most visible and most strained. Slums represent a spatial manifestation of

inequality (Mahabir et al., 2016). A slum, or *basti*[1], in the context of Indian cities, refers to a densely populated urban settlement characterised by informal housing and inadequate access to basic services such as clean water, sanitation, and waste management (UN Human Settlements Programme, 2003). Slums are often the material outcome of rural-to-urban migration and home to labour power that has not been absorbed into the formal labour sphere in the developmental process. Residents of slums are disproportionately from Dalit[2], Adivasi[3], and Muslim communities — social groups historically excluded from land ownership and formal employment (Deshpande, 2011).

In the absence of state-provided social care, and basic infrastructure such as sanitation, potable water, and secure housing, the burden of reproductive labour within the household increases (Fraser, 2016). However, in the context of slums, it is insufficient to analyse social reproduction solely at the level of the nuclear household (Katz, 2001). Many essential resources — such as toilets and water sources — are communal, and both productive and reproductive labour often unfold within shared spaces. As a result, the community becomes a central unit in the organisation of work. Additionally, informal networks of support among neighbours and kin play a critical role in sustaining daily life. Slum environments therefore are a crucial site for expanding the analysis of social reproduction beyond private nuclear households, making visible how labour is shaped by spatial inequality, infrastructural scarcity, and the pervasion of informality.

Even within the specificity of an urban Indian slum, experiences of life and labour cannot be homogenised (Harris, 2009). Compounding inequalities of gender, class and caste mark the negotiation of productive and reproductive labour time (Velaskar, 2016). In popular discourse,

[1] *Basti*, translated as slum, is the term residents themselves use, in contrast to the externally imposed label slum (Harris, 2009).
[2] Dalit refers to people from a marginalised caste background. Further discussed in section 2.
[3] Adivasi refers to indigenous people.

caste-based discrimination is often thought of as a purely rural phenomenon, necessitating more literature on discrimination in urban labour markets (Deshpande, 2011). While analysis of class, race, and gender based disparities is more implicit in some feminist-Marxist approaches, caste is an important axis that must be made explicit until it is embedded in SR frameworks.

It was through exploratory fieldwork in Mumbai that the urgency of this became clear. Semi-structured interviews with women in bastis revealed the need to interrogate the fluidity of productive and socially reproductive labour. These conversations organically gave rise to the core questions guiding this research:

What do the boundaries between productive and socially reproductive labour look like for women in urban Indian slums?

In what ways does this vary across intersecting inequalities of gender, caste and class?

How does this shape our current understanding of social reproduction frameworks?

This paper is organised into seven sections. Section one has introduced the research and its relevance. Section two situates the research question within broader literature, mapping its place in social reproduction debates and grounding the discussion in the Indian context. Section three outlines the mixed-methods approach, detailing the triangulation of national quantitative data, primary interviews, and secondary literature. Section four analyses quantitative data to provide a backdrop for the case studies, and support the ultimately discussion of fluidity. Section five presents descriptive life histories of three women, offering detailed portraits of their everyday negotiations between paid and unpaid labour. Section six provides a thematic analysis of these narratives, drawing connections across cases and engaging with existing scholarship to highlight key tensions and insights. Finally, section seven condenses the claims the paper advances: that the fluidity between production and reproduction is especially pronounced in

Indian slums; that this fluidity is structurally produced; and that its differentiation across social hierarchies is central to new methodologies and theories of social reproduction.

Section 2. Literature Review

Social Reproduction (SR) was first conceptualised by Engels narrowly as the labour needed to reproduce the worker (1884). Since then it has taken on a variety of meanings across a variety of disciplines, such as political economy and geography (Winders and Smith, 2018). The definition most helpful to my analysis is;

'Social reproduction is the fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life. It is also a set of structured practices that unfold in dialectical relation with production, with which it is mutually constitutive and in tension.' – Cindi Katz (2002, p.3)

This definition links the reproduction of human life with the reproduction of capitalist relations, emphasising their interdependence under capitalism. It also challenges traditional binaries — such as paid/unpaid and productive/reproductive work — by showing how these forms of labour are mutually constitutive and often overlap in practice. These relationships play out both in the routines of daily life and in long-term structured ways (Cantillon, Mackett and Stevano, 2023).

Throughout this paper I adopt Rao et al.'s framework (2023) of four conceptual dyads: waged productive labour, non-waged productive labour, waged reproductive labour and non-waged reproductive labour. Naming these four dyads makes them visible in a world of work definitions which otherwise platform waged productive work, and where feminist economics is sometimes thought of as limited to dealing with unpaid reproductive labour. Rao et al.'s framing was developed while studying time use in rural India. It gives language to study all four forms of labour simultaneously and systematically, necessary in marginalised Global South contexts

where the entanglement of all four is so evident. This is in line with the Marxist political economy ‘totalising’ view where the spheres of production and reproduction should be analysed simultaneously, and in relation to each other (Cousins et al., 2018).

To capture the various forms of reproductive and productive work that take place in the home, the household must be seen as a site of value generation (Cantillon, Mackett and Stevano, 2023). India’s social reproduction labour has been studied in the case of home-based work, which exemplifies the problem of neat distinctions between workplace and home, paid and unpaid, productive and reproductive. The seminal contribution by Maria Mies (1980) studied the framing of ‘non-working housewives’ in India as a purposeful ideology that allows women to be paid far below subsistence wages. Natascia Boeri (2016) follows in Mies’ footsteps (amongst many others; see Bose, 2007; Chen, 2014; Mezzadri and Fan, 2018) and studies home-based workers in Ahmedabad slums, dealing with questions of social reproduction and value-formation in contemporary India and how it challenges problematic binaries in conceptualisations of labour. This paper agrees that the boundaries between productive and reproductive work are challenged by home-based work, largely building on the insights from this body of literature. While home-based work exemplifies this collapse of categorisation, these tensions are pervasive for labour in the low-income urban Global South.

The blurred lines between production and reproduction in the home are stark across today's Global South, particularly because the boundaries of households are elusive. In her ethnographic critique, Deniz Kandiyoti (1999) challenges the conventional usage of the category ‘household’ in research. She argues that while the term is often treated as a fixed unit of residence, it fails to capture the fluid and context-specific arrangements that define the realities of domestic life. Household composition and budgeting practices shift in response to marriage, widowhood, and employment changes. She further observes that intra-household disparities —

in access to money, labour obligations, or decision-making — are deeply gendered and mediated by age and seniority. Kandiyoti calls for a flexible, context-sensitive approach, emphasising that capturing gendered vulnerabilities requires understanding how labour, care, and income are distributed within and across fluid, socially embedded household structures. While Kandiyoti's work focuses on the instability of the household category in rural contexts, her insights are equally applicable to urban settings such as slums, which similarly represent marginalised social formations in the Global South.

This paper can be seen as part of a larger project in re-centering the Global South in social reproduction approaches (SRAs), set out by Mezzadri et al. (2025) to go beyond using the Global South as a case study for existing Global North theorisations. This plurality is achieved by rooting analysis in the 'local,' namely through the axes of the *geographical*, the *historical*, and the *social*. The reflection of this can be seen in this work — the role of geography by placing analysis in India, and by looking specifically at the Indian city and how the urban context is different; the historical through considering whose stories get told, disrupting the privileging of the narratives of upper-caste women; and the social by acknowledging the slum as a specific setting that manifests socially and communally instead of a homogenised urban geography.

To challenge Global North epistemological privilege, we must acknowledge that theorists have been studying the Marxist-feminist conversation in India without positioning it as social reproduction literature (Cantillon et al., 2021). Insights from such work must be included. Hensman's work (2011) is a brilliant portrayal of how SR manifests differently in the South-Asian context, where society is deeply hierarchical and looks incisively at solutions available that wouldn't replace India's communalism with individualistic liberal society.

It is impossible to answer the first research sub-question without addressing the various inequalities embedded in this reality; namely gender[4], caste and class. Caste is best understood not merely as a social identity, but as a structural system of stratification that organises access to resources, networks, and opportunity (Deshpande, 2011). Caste in India consists of two overlapping systems; more well known is the *varna*, a hierarchical four-fold order with excluded groups, and *brahmins* at the top of the pyramid. A parallel yet different conception of caste is in *jatis.* These are the operative categories in contemporary life, encompassing over 3,000 hereditary, endogamous groups, that correspond with different occupations. While jatis align themselves with varna-based hierarchies, their status is fluid and often contested, with no fixed consensus on rank. My analysis discusses the jatis — such as mochi (cobbler), chambar (leather worker) — which are typically found at the bottom of or outside the varna system, i.e. marginalised caste or outside the caste hierarchy, referred to as Dalit (ibid.,).

Caste and class in India are inextricably linked, so research that incorporates Marxist class analysis is incomplete without considering the structural effects of caste-based inequalities. I draw on Anupama Rao's work on Dalit Marxism (2012) because it deals with the question of labour stigma, which is deeply gendered and lends itself to all decisions about labour. I also rely on Meena Gopal (2012) for her discussion of Dalit feminism and the relationship between caste, sexuality and labour. The question of a feminist-Marxist framework that sufficiently responds to and incorporates Dalit scholarship is an ambitious, challenging and necessary step that is beyond the scope of this paper and limited by my abilities and positioning as a savarna woman. However, while this paper is only able to slightly touch upon the layered effects of caste, it cannot be relegated to a separate sphere of analysis. If a real attempt is to be made to include

[4] This paper adopts a limited view of gender by not discussing transgender people, who are overrepresented in Indian slums (Sadiq and Bashir, 2022). Their experiences disrupt gender binaries and necessarily complicate the understanding of fluidity.

the Global South, analysis of caste must be embedded into our most fundamental understanding of gender and labour debates.

Another key distinction between Global North and Global South labour trajectories is the extent of informality. As Mezzadri (2019) describes, the majority of the labouring world is engaging in informal work, making it a key site of value generation. In South Asia, women are more likely to engage in informal labour, especially in its lower paid and most precarious forms (Vanek et al. 2014). Informal labour should not be seen as a transitional or residual *phase*, instead as a structural outcome of capitalist development itself (Bhattacharya and Kesar, 2020). Informality persists — and indeed expands — not in spite of growth but through it. Therefore, the binary of formal and informal labour must be interrogated to reveal the formation and extent of surplus extraction.

Section 3. Methods

The research design for this project was iterative, beginning with exploratory fieldwork (Busetto et al., 2020). In the summer of 2024, I received a grant to look at the 'work-lives' of women in Indian slums, to broadly answer why so much of the labour they engage in escapes formal national statistics (John, 2013). The interviews I conducted guided me to iterate my research question to look specifically at women's experiences of the boundaries between productive and socially reproductive labour. I have then adopted a mixed methods approach, triangulating secondary quantitative analysis, primary qualitative interviews and secondary literature. This question looks at overlap, interdependence, and fluidity of the categories of paid/unpaid, formal/informal, productive/ reproductive. Consequently it could not be answered by quantitative statistics alone — since much of the data manifests via categories (Cartwright and Igudia,

2023). The secondary literature used has been detailed in section 2, thus section 3 is split into a secondary quantitative component and a primary qualitative component.

1. Quantitative Component

The quantitative component of this research is primarily descriptive and serves to contextualise the qualitative case studies. By illustrating key patterns and characteristics in the work-lives of urban poor women in India, the data grounds the individual narratives in broader socio-economic realities, ensuring that the case studies are not read as isolated anecdotes and as embedded within wider trends. Two national datasets form the foundation of the quantitative analysis: the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS, 2023–2024) and the Time Use Survey (TUS, 2019 and 2024 preliminary reports).

The PLFS, as the main source for employment data, underpins much of the analysis of female labour force participation (FLPR) in India. What the PLFS gets right is it determines the employment status of a person based on the major activity during the reference period (7 days preceding the survey) instead of just on the day of the survey. In spaces where work is often informal and changes based on the day, the PLFS has done well to give a consistent, nationally robust picture (Srija and Singh, 2021).

However, several limitations constrain its utility for this research. Caste is reported only in broad administrative categories — Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), Other Backward Class (OBC) and Others (everyone else) — which obscures the complex stratifications within and across these groupings (Deshpande, 2011). For example, the caste *mochi*, sometimes considered a subcategory of the *chambhar*[5] caste, is classified as SC in Gujarat but as OBC in

[5]Jatis are not neatly bounded categories; they often intersect, overlap, and are sometimes understood as nested or hierarchical subsets. For instance, among communities associated with leather work, distinctions may be drawn between leather scavengers, leather workers such as Chambar, and groups like Mochi who specialise in making leather footwear.

Rajasthan, a nuance entirely absent from national labour data. The PLFS also employs a loose definition of formality by including workers who have access to at least one social security benefit. So regularly paid domestic workers (overwhelmingly women) are categorised as formal workers, despite having no work contracts, thus masking the extent of informality and inequality (Hirway, 2020).

The Time Use Survey (TUS) allows us to see unpaid productive and reproductive labour, which is an important first step in investigating the nature and boundaries of such labour. As such, the TUS has become a key tool in feminist economics and social reproduction scholarship (Stevano et al., 2021). The PLFS (2018–19) estimated India's female labour force participation rate at about 18.6%, in contrast, the TUS, 2019 shows that around 90–95% of women engage in some form of work when unpaid domestic and care activities are included, highlighting the large gap between women's economic participation as conventionally measured and their actual work burden. This disparity reflects methodological biases that discount women's unpaid labour (Raghu, 2021). However, the Indian TUS has also been critiqued as a missed opportunity, with a lack of context variables, such as questions of whom the work is performed for (Hirway, 2020). These shortcomings reinforce the need for qualitative methods that can trace the nuanced nature of labour time.

2. Qualitative Component

Qualitative data was collected through 15 semi-structured interviews conducted with women aged 18 to 70[6] across two adjoining slum areas of central Mumbai. The interviews explored work histories, spatial labour patterns, intra-household responsibilities, and broader care dynamics. The interview design drew inspiration from both time-diary methods (Rai and True, 2020) and life-history approaches, aiming to map work-life trajectories. The semi-structured

[6] National statistics are typically limited to 15-59 year olds as those of 'working age,' obscuring the reality that most poor people in India do not stop working at 59.

format allowed respondents to shape the direction of their narratives, giving priority to relatively unfiltered accounts of their labour experiences. In the analysis of the interviews, attention was paid to how respondents themselves construct and interpret their work lives. As Starr (2014) suggests, small-n qualitative work can be highly incisive when well-aligned with research aims. Three interviews were selected as detailed case studies. These were chosen for their narrative richness and were identified with thematic overlap yet contrasting castes, ages, and household structures (Malterud et al., 2016).

Figure 1. Informal settlements bordering Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport

Source: Google Earth, April 2025

The field site selection, central Mumbai, was intentional. As the historical centre of working-class and Ambedkarite politics (Sharma, 2012) and a key node of internal migration and urbanisation (Mitra, 2014), it offered a compelling setting for studying the organisation of labour. The slum settlement studied, located near Mumbai airport, is informally divided by dwellers into six areas.

This research focused on two: Sambhaji Nagar, named after a Maratha emperor, and Ambedkar Nagar, named after Dalit scholar and reformer Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

Interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and were conducted in situ to ensure participant comfort and minimise disruption to daily routines. Informed consent was prioritised at the outset of each session. A key informant who served as translator supported the interviews, translating between Marathi and Hindi where required. All interviews were audio recorded for accuracy and subsequently translated and transcribed into English to facilitate detailed analysis.

3. Positionality and feminist epistemology

As a savarna[7], upper-class, young woman, my positionality shaped the interview dynamic in complex ways. My gender and age created proximity, whereas my caste and class positioning introduced distance — particularly around education, where several respondents expressed discomfort or shame about their limited schooling, implicitly contrasted with my visibly educated background as a researcher. While Hindi-Marathi translation during interviews was smooth, translating into English posed challenges, as some terms lacked precise equivalents. Key terms have been retained in the original language to preserve cultural specificity. Notably, all 15 respondents scheduled interviews during paid work or leisure time, never 'domestic duties,' highlighting how unpaid reproductive labour remains the least negotiable aspect of women's time.

This methodological approach is grounded in feminist epistemology, which recognises subjectivity and human meaning-making as central to knowledge production (Harding, 1988; Haraway, 1988). In this research, social reproduction functions both as an analytic framework and a methodological lens. It is crucial to invert traditional analytical hierarchies and interrogate how social reproduction shapes production (Stevano, 2021). This was reflected in the interview

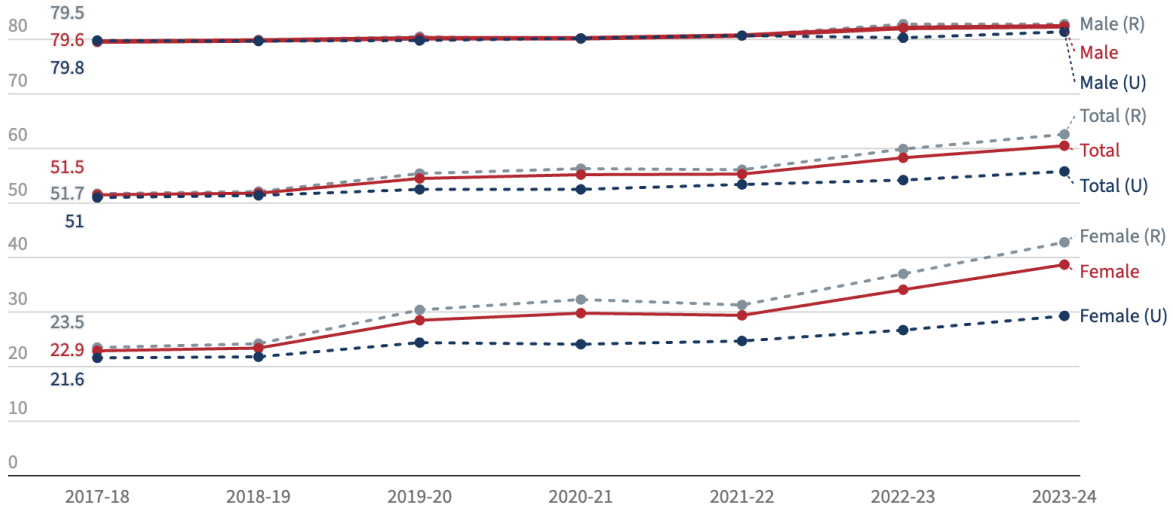
[7] The term *savarna* is used by Dalit activists to refer to individuals belonging to the four dominant varnas of the caste system, particularly those from privileged or upper-caste backgrounds.

design, by asking how domestic and care work influenced women's ability to take on paid work, rather than treating household responsibilities as residual. While interviews were conducted at the individual level, care was taken to account for intergenerational and atypical household forms, shared resources within the slum, and collective caregiving arrangements with neighbours and kin. This approach echoes Doss's (2021) critique of household-based models in economic analysis and underscores the need to recognise the community as a meaningful site of socio-economic life.

Section 5. Quantitative analysis for background

This section examines the key thematic factors that shape women's work-lives and reveal the structural tensions within them. As John (2013) argues, scholars and activists in India have long highlighted that women work — tirelessly, resourcefully, and in diverse ways — but are rendered invisible in state accounting systems. While official data often struggles to accurately represent women's labour, particularly when it does not conform to waged or formal models, it nonetheless offers important insights. Indeed, the exclusions within these datasets are not incidental and reflect the political choices embedded in survey design, demonstrating how data itself is shaped by dominant understandings of what counts as work.

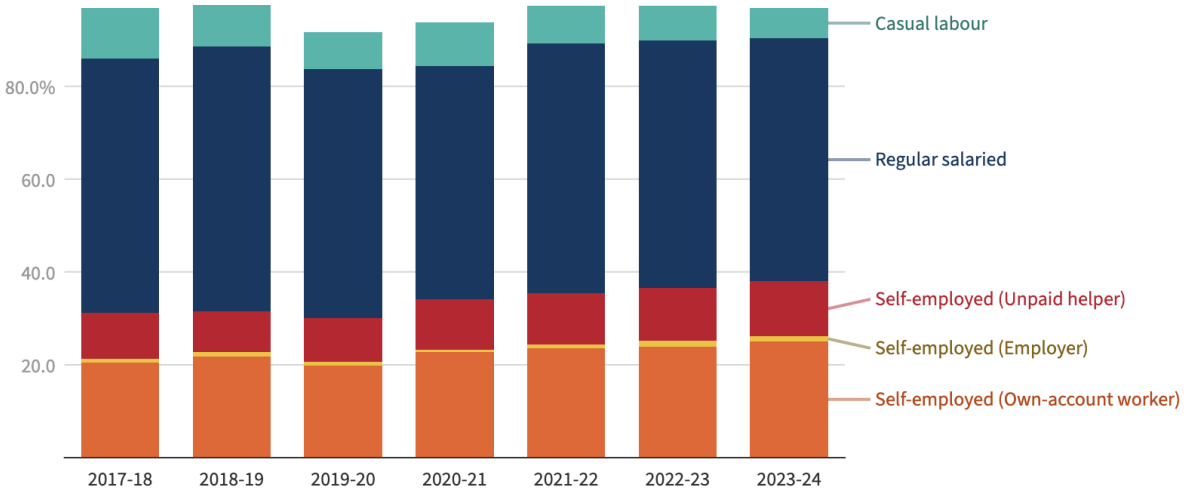
Figure 2. Labour force participation rates: 15-59 yrs, all India, Urban and Rural



Source: Deshpande, 2025, from Centre for Economic Data and Analysis

The female labour force participation rate (FLPR) in India is among the lowest in the world. As figure 2 illustrates, urban women have the lowest FLPR, but a steady rise can be observed, reaching ~29% in 2024.

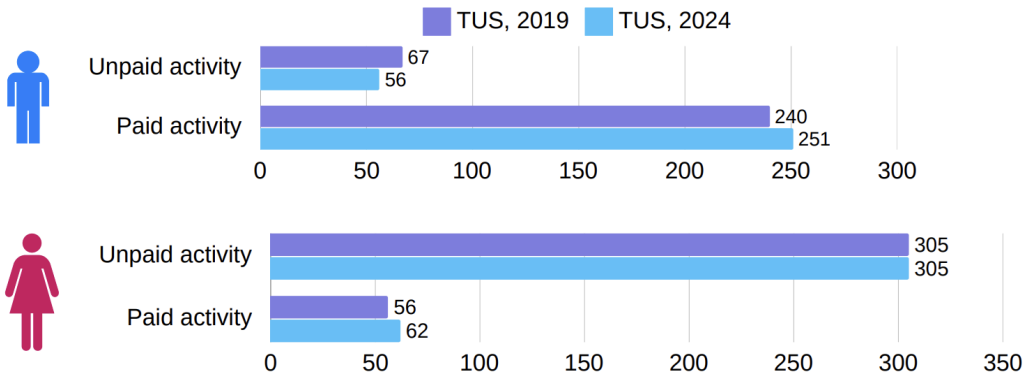
Figure 3.Workforce distribution: Women, Urban



Source: Deshpande, 2025, from Centre for Economic Data and Analysis

The next step is to examine where the observed increase in urban FLPR comes from. PLFS data (figure 3) reveals that the proportion of women engaged in regular salaried work has slightly declined, while ‘Self employed (own-account)’ has shown a steady rise — defined as employment where individuals operate on their own or with unpaid partners, without hiring others. Such work is typically characterised by low productivity and minimal earnings, often undertaken as a survival strategy rather than an indicator of economic empowerment. As Deshpande (2025) cautions, the rise in FLPR may therefore reflect economic distress rather than progress, and should not be read as an unambiguous sign of improvement in women's labour market outcomes. Data also attempts to capture home-based labour under the category of ‘Self-employed (unpaid helper).’ This often unpaid or minimally compensated work accounts for 13.8% of all urban women’s employment in India and typically involves contributions to family enterprises, sometimes categorised as ‘family help’ rather than independent economic activity (PLFS, 2023).

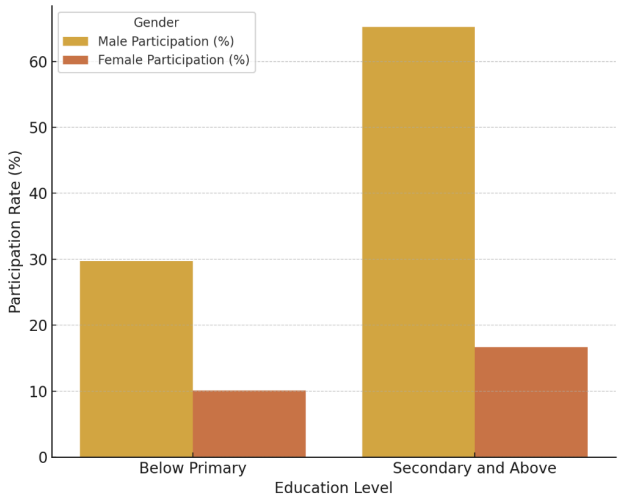
Figure 4. Average time spent (in minutes) in a day per person in paid and unpaid activities



Source: MoSPI, 2025

Globally, women spend more time than men on unpaid labour, but the disparity in India is particularly stark — women spend nearly five times as much time on unpaid work as men (figure 4). When men increased their time on paid work by 11 minutes, they reduced their unpaid labour by the same amount in a one-to-one substitution. In contrast, when women increased their time on paid work by 4 minutes, there was no corresponding decrease in unpaid work. This highlights a critical asymmetry: for women, reproductive responsibilities remain constant, regardless of shifts in paid employment, leading to a clear intensification of overall work.

Figure 5. Labour force participation by Education Level

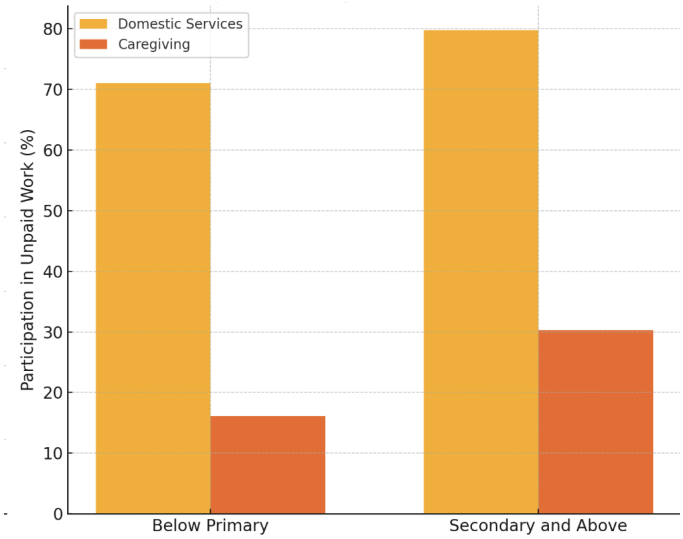


Source: Author's own calculations based on PLFS (2023-2024)

Further asymmetries are found in educational attainment as a pathway to enter the labourforce. As men attain higher levels of education, their labour force participation increases markedly — from 30% among those with below primary education to 65% among those with secondary education and above. For women, however, the rise is far more modest — from 10% to just 16.5% (figure 5). This divergence suggests that while education plays a role in shaping labour market outcomes, it is not a sufficient condition for women's entry into the workforce. Other factors — including social norms, expectations around domestic responsibilities, and constraints

on mobility — continue to significantly limit women's participation in paid work (Kabeer, 2024). The nature of the education must also be considered, with employment opportunities differing based on the language of instruction and public versus private schools, as evident in the case studies in section 5.

Figure 6. Women's unpaid work by education level



Source: Author's own calculations based on PLFS (2023-2024)

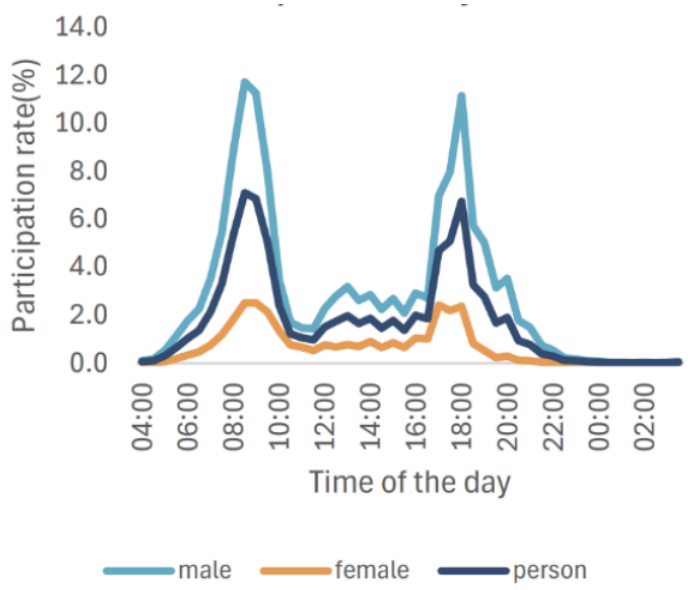
Even among educated women, unpaid reproductive labour remains central. With an increase in education level, time spent on domestic work increases from 71% to 80%, and caregiving from 16% to 30% as education levels rise (TUS, 2019). While this may seem counterintuitive, one possible explanation is the correlation with class: women from more privileged backgrounds are more likely to access higher education, but also less likely to participate in paid work, thereby continuing or even increasing their involvement in unpaid reproductive responsibilities. Rather than reducing reproductive responsibilities, education appears to intensify them — these duties are not replaced but added onto. This challenges the conventional assumption that access to formal employment through education enables women to exit the domain of unpaid care work. Instead, it highlights the layered and persistent nature of reproductive labour in women's lives.

Figure 7. Women migrants as proportion of population

Source: Indian Government website, based on census 2011

The tension between productive and reproductive labour is also affected by migratory patterns. According to the 2011 Census, approximately 38% of the Indian population were identified as migrants. Of these, around two-thirds were women, meaning 25% of the total population (figure 6). While marriage remains the primary reason for female migration, the data also reveals that over 100 million women reported migrating for reasons such as work, education, or business. Internal migration continues to dominate mobility patterns in India and holds particular relevance for understanding social reproduction patterns in spatiotemporally divided households (Shah and Leche, 2021). In Mumbai, for example, 53% of migrants originated from within Maharashtra itself (Census, 2011). In line with cultural practice, many pregnant women return to their mother's home in the village to give birth, highlighting how SR burdens shift due to proximity.

Figure 8. Percentage of people (15-59 yrs) commuting for work



Source: MoSPI, 2025

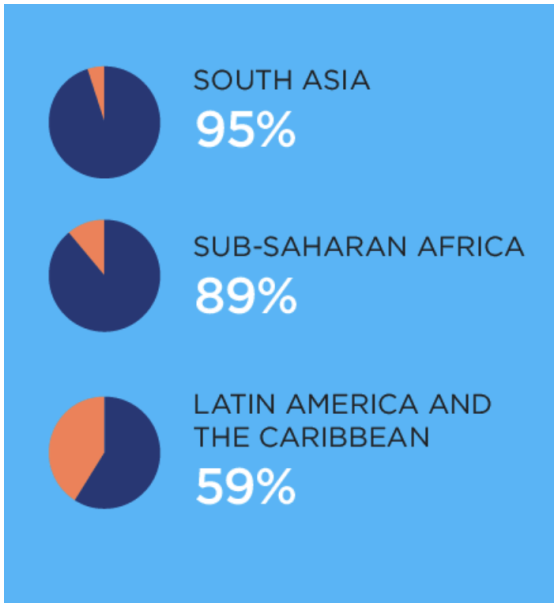
Shifting to look at daily mobility patterns, figure 8 illustrates that women commute significantly less than men, with flatter peaks in their daily commute. Rather than indicating reduced labour time, this trend reflects the spatial proximity of women's paid work to the home. For many urban poor women, employment is located within or near the domestic sphere — through home-based enterprises, community services, or informal slum economies. As a result, the spatial boundary between home and workplace collapses, further entangling productive and reproductive labour within the same temporal and physical space.

This collapse of spatial boundaries is also shaped by household structure and marital status, particularly among women who do not fall within the normative categories of 'married' or 'never married.'

The category of 'widowed/divorced/separated' individuals remained under emphasised, but contains stark gendered disparities. According to the TUS (2019), 11.6% of urban women fall

into this category, compared to just 2.5% of urban men. In low-income urban settings, these women are more likely to live in female-headed or multi-generational households, where they frequently assume central reproductive roles. Such arrangements disrupt conventional models of household labour, with older women often filling caregiving gaps left by absent spouses or working family members, thereby reinforcing their importance in sustaining the household's social reproduction.

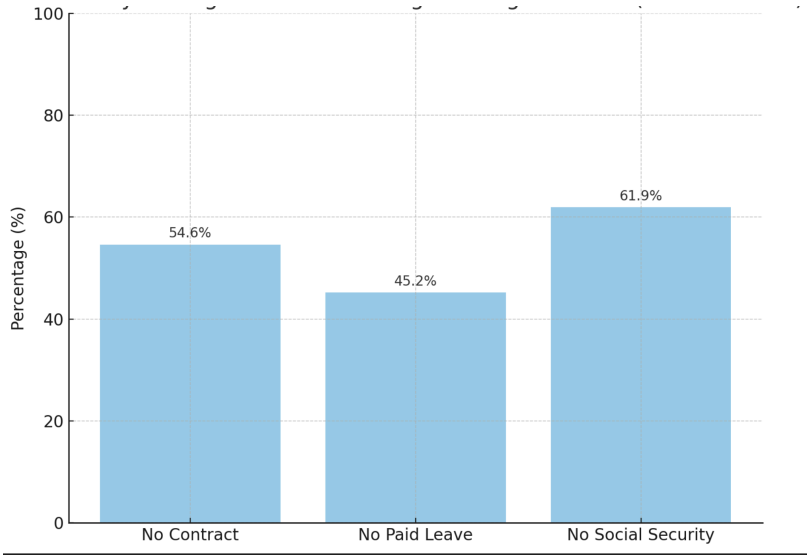
Figure 9. Women in informal employment as a percentage of total female employment



Source: UN Women, 2017

This layered burden is compounded by the nature of women's employment itself, which is overwhelmingly informal. 61% of labour globally occurs in the informal economy, where employment is often unregulated, unprotected, and unrecognised (ILO, 2018). Women are disproportionately represented in these precarious forms of work. In South Asia, an estimated 95% of women are informally employed (figure 9). However, even this figure may understate the extent of informality.

Figure 10. Insecurity among urban female regular wage workers



Source: Authors own calculations based on PLFS 2023-2024

Figure 10 highlights the blurred line between formal and informal employment: even within categories officially classified as “regular,” a substantial share of urban women experience insecure and unprotected conditions. Such overlapping vulnerabilities expose the fragility of “formality” for the urban poor and challenge conventional dichotomies in labour categorisation. Building on the quantitative patterns outlined here, section five turns to the stories behind the data. Through descriptive life histories of three women, it offers textured portraits of how productive and reproductive labour are negotiated on a daily basis and throughout their lives.

Section 5. Case Studies

Portrait 1. Jagubai

Jagubai is a 60-year-old Dalit woman from the Chambhar-Mochi caste. Widowed for several years, she lives with her two sons and their families in the same house she moved into after her child marriage at age twelve. She is widely recognised in her community for selling fish by the roadside every evening and describes, “I’m not dependent on anyone. I earn for myself.”

She migrated to Mumbai at the age of ten with her parents and six siblings, as her family left their village in search of work and food. The slum, then a much smaller and more fragile settlement, lacked even basic infrastructure. She recalls walking through open sewage to fetch water, often slipping and having to go back to collect it again. Her father became a tailor and her mother a domestic worker. At the age of ten, she too began working in other people's homes, sweeping floors and caring for children, earning £2 a month[8]. She never attended school. Her earnings, along with those of her three sisters, were taken to support the education of their brothers.

Throughout her life, she has done multiple forms of paid and unpaid work. As a young bride, she cooked for the household in the morning, worked full days as a domestic helper, and returned late in the evening to continue housework. When her first child was born, she was working on construction sites, carrying cement up multi-storey buildings. She tied the baby in a cloth hammock at home and would leave the door open and ask the woman who lived next door to keep watch. She would return home at midday to breastfeed. Later, she started selling fruits and vegetables, travelling to the city's outskirts to buy stock and then sell locally so she could remain close to her children.

Currently, she works as a fish vendor. Each afternoon, she travels to a wholesale market to procure fish and sets up her stall by the roadside in the evening, selling until nightfall. Whatever is left is stored on ice for the next day. She profits £50-60 a month and keeps it for her own expenses — particularly medicine, as due to her age she manages chronic illnesses. Her sons provide food but contribute nothing towards her healthcare. She says her daughter, who lives nearby with the family she has married into, is the only person who checks in on her well-being.

[8] equivalent to £15.20 today

Her husband was also from the Chambhar-Mochi caste, taking up the typical occupation as a cobbler. He spent his income on alcohol and routinely took her earnings as well. She speaks candidly about the years of physical and verbal abuse she endured. After returning from a full day of work, she would cook for the family and then be beaten. Eventually, he died in a road accident while inebriated.

She raised her three children — two sons and a daughter — while continuing to work full-time. Although free public schools were available, she could not afford the uniforms and books needed to send her children beyond the early primary years. Today, she lives with her sons who are married and have children of their own. While her daughters-in-law handle most of the cooking and cleaning, she is expected to cook when they are menstruating. She also supervises her grandchildren in the absence of her younger son who works out of town, including a young child with a spinal condition.

Portrait 2. Shilpa

Shilpa is 24 years old and has been married for six months. She lives in Ambedkar Nagar with her husband and his family. Her parents recently passed away, after which she moved into their house with her husband. While they both are formally employed and earn well, they have only recently been able to save money with the move, before which they were renting their room in the slum.

At 7 a.m., Shilpa wakes up and uses the communal bathroom. By 8:30, she has made breakfast, packed lunch for herself, her husband, mother-in-law, and brother-in-law, and left for work. She walks to the clinic where she works as a receptionist from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., returning home around 4:30. She does the laundry, fills drinking water — available only at 5 pm everyday — and cooks dinner. From 6 to 9 p.m., she tutors neighbourhood children at home. After class, she eats and goes to sleep by 11 p.m.

She holds a Bachelor's degree in Commerce, having studied at an English language women's college after attending a private school. Her story highlights the heterogeneity of experiences in the slums, subverting conventional images of informally employed, illiterate, home-bound women. She first began working after passing year 12, when she was 16 years old, as a computer teacher at an NGO. She has worked at the clinic for six years and has been tutoring students since finishing school. She earns between £120 and £130 per month from the clinic, paid directly into her bank account since it is a formal position. She also earns £85 to £95 in cash through tutoring classes. Her husband works in the loan department of a bank and earns £400 to £500 per month. She says he supports her financial independence and does not ask her to contribute to the household income. She keeps her clinic salary as savings and uses her tutoring income for 'personal' expenses, which usually end up being for the house. She uses her smartphone to search for jobs online with Urban Company[9].

Household chores are divided, primarily between the women in the house. She prepares meals and does the laundry. Her mother-in-law washes dishes and cleans the floors during the day. "Before getting married I could take standalone decisions," she says. "Now I have to put aside my ego and do things that may hurt but I must do to maintain relationships." Her words indicate how despite her formal work and a supportive husband, she operates within the constraints of social norms where she must prioritise familial cohesion and her social reproductive labour.

Portrait 3. Manju

Manju is thirty three years old. She lives in Ambedkar Nagar with her husband and three children, aged two, five, and sixteen. At seventeen, her parents arranged her marriage and so she migrated to Mumbai from her town in Dhulia, only a few hours from Mumbai. The family has lived in the same home for the past seventeen years.

[9] An Indian gig work platform that has gained popularity. There is a growing trend of people in the slums using the platforms to find work as delivery drivers, cleaners, or like in shilpa's case, tutors.

Before marriage, Manju worked on farms, since her family did not own their own land. In Mumbai, she started with small home-based tasks before training to work as a beautician. Her husband paid for her short course at a local centre. For the past six to seven years, she has been running a small beauty parlour from home. Her husband also cuts hair and runs his own salon on the pavement just outside the slum, serving male clients, while her set-up caters to women and operates from within their home. She and her husband are both from the *Nabi* caste, traditionally barbers.

Manju earns on a daily basis. On average, she makes £5 to £6 a day, with peaks of £10 to £15 during busier seasons (£180-450 per month). Some days she earns nothing. Sundays are the most reliable. She is paid in cash but keeps her earnings in her own bank account. She and her husband both contribute to household expenses, and she manages her share independently.

She wakes at 7 a.m., bathes, performs morning prayers, prepares lunch boxes, and hand washes the clothes. She drops her children to school and must be home when they return to give them snacks. Drinking water arrives in the evening, so she needs to be present to fill containers. Her husband returns home for meals. There is a constant negotiation between her productive and reproductive labour time. She states concisely, “I do my household chores, and whenever a customer comes in, I leave that to attend to them.” Her days often end at midnight.

Her children attend a private Marathi language school. Her eldest, 15, hopes to work in a bank. Manju says having children increased her workload significantly. The increasing heat has affected her business; customers now only come for waxing in the morning or evening; afternoons are quiet. She took extra precautions during the pandemic, reopening the parlour gradually and working carefully to protect her children at home.

If given the chance, Manju says she would continue doing what she does. She hopes to open her own large, professional beauty parlour one day.

Section 6. Analysis

The case studies provide a rich narrative that “puts flesh on the bone” of quantitative data (Sender et al., 2015). They are crucial in humanising the numbers, and revealing cross-cutting themes that point to where scholarship should be looking. This section is organised via themes of spatial organisation, paid work, migration, marriage, widowhood, and education. Each serves to highlight the elusive boundaries between public and private, paid and unpaid, productive and reproductive.

1. Spatial Organisation

Most houses in Indian slums have their doors open when residents are inside, to create ventilation and because many family members live next door or across. The methodological consideration of individual vs household vs community is laid bare as we are able to envision the community of the slum as resource-sharers, caregivers and consumers. As Hensman (2011) observes, the boundary between family and the outside world is far more porous in South Asia than in the West; extended kinship and neighbourhood networks often play crucial roles in everyday life.

Figure 11. Open doors while residents are home

Source: Photograph by author, Ambedkar Nagar 2024

The slum becomes not just a residential unit but a site of livelihood (Mahabir et al., 2016). People's working lives are not bounded by the home, nor are they integrated into the formal labour market; instead, they unfold within and through the social and spatial fabric of the slum. Their economic activities serve the slum — they don't sell or labour in distant formal markets. Even Shilpa, who has a more formal job, earns supplemental income by tutoring children from the slum. Manju's customers are all within walking distance, and Jagubai is known by everyone in the area for her fish stall. This shows the mutual dependency within the slum: their labour sustains not only their own households but also enables the reproduction of other families — Manju grooming other women, Shilpa helping educate their children, Jagubai feeding them.

Slum economies, far from being disorganised or incidental, have been well studied as dense, interlocking systems shaped by kinship, spatial proximity, and gendered roles (Rockefeller

foundation, 2013). In the urban slum I studied — centrally located within the city — residents are proximate to wider economic opportunities; however, women's labour remains largely home-bound or hyperlocal (ibid.,). This is not merely incidental but a strategic navigation of gendered constraints and familial obligations. These exchanges of care and service, though rarely paid at market rates, reflect an economy that is deeply interdependent and embedded in local social life.

Caste also plays a role in organising spatial distribution, with many slums following caste patterns, making it inseparable from how productive and reproductive labour unfold (DHNS, 2023). This is visible even in the spatial layout of the slum studied, which was divided into eight neighbourhoods, and I conducted interviews in two areas. Sambhaji Nagar and Ambedkar Nagar. Though both are informal settlements, Ambedkar Nagar — where most women in this study live — was visibly more deprived in terms of infrastructure and service access. These patterns reflect the tight correlation between caste and class in Indian cities, where historically marginalised castes remain disproportionately concentrated in informal housing and low-wage work (Deshpande, 2011).

2. Paid work

Of the fifteen interviews conducted, the majority of women had engaged in paid domestic or care work outside the slum, often referred to locally as *chutta kaam*, literally translating to 'not tied work,' meaning casual labour (Bag, 2020). Several factors contribute to the prevalence of this form of employment: it is low-skilled and requires no formal qualifications, has no age restrictions (with both children and elderly women being hired), and benefits from the central location of the airport slums. These settlements are often situated near middle and upper-class neighbourhoods, responding to demand for a readily accessible pool of domestic labour

(Bhattacharya, 2019). There is also a network effect, relying heavily on word-of-mouth hiring practices. Despite being external to the slum, it is also easier to organise such work around women's unpaid social reproductive responsibilities. Many domestic workers return home in the afternoon to collect water and receive children from school, before resuming evening shifts — highlighting the continuous negotiation between productive and reproductive labour. However, this form of labour blurs the boundaries between 'care' and 'work.' Employers often characterise domestic workers as 'like family,' a framing that obscures exploitative conditions and undermines demands for fair compensation and labour rights (Grover, Chambers and Jeffery, 2018).

Furthermore, caste plays a significant role in the domestic labour debate. Where upper caste women are withdrawn from paid labour to establish the power of caste status and to maintain the boundaries of compulsory heteronormativity, Dalit women are condemned to caste-defined domestic service in upper caste households. Meena Gopal (2012) and Rao (2012) argue that caste-based labour cannot be analysed through a gender or class lens alone. Unlike value-producing labour in Marxist terms, caste-structured labour is saturated with stigma, particularly when performed by women. This stigma cannot be abstracted from the body, which is simultaneously sexed and caste-marked. Reproductive work, when unpaid and done by privileged caste women, is treated as honourable; when paid and done by marginalised caste women, it is seen as polluting (Meena Gopal, 2012). This duality reveals the ideological scaffolding that underpins India's reproductive economy.

Perhaps most directly, caste also structures labour pathways through *jatis*. Manju and her husband are from a barber caste and continue this occupation — she runs a beauty parlour from her home, while he serves male clients outside. Jagubai's husband and son are cobblers, consistent with their caste-based occupational inheritance. These roles are not merely cultural residues; they are shaped by the market's ongoing caste segmentation, which restricts mobility

and reproduces class inequality (Thorat & Newman, 2010). Even when women select their own forms of paid labour, caste boundaries remain. Many women, including those in this study, cater to their own communities — running small-scale businesses that serve a familiar and caste-aligned clientele. Dr. Ambedkar himself recognised this tension, advocating that Dalits create enterprises within their own communities as a form of resistance against caste exclusion: “Run a business for your own community — who else could you work for?” (John, 2013). These occupational strategies are not simply choices, but shaped by a legacy of exclusion and the continuing constraints of caste-based markets.

The paid work these women engage in is typically conceptualised as providing a ‘secondary’ income. As evident through the case of atypical households like Jagubai’s, where she was widowed and the sole provider for many years before living in an intergenerational household, this assumption of ‘secondary’ is not always true (Balakrishnan, 2023). Even within more traditionally structured families, women’s income is not often framed as ‘for her own needs’ but tends to go directly into the reproduction of the household. Shilpa and Manju spoke kindly of their husbands as letting them keep the wages for ‘their own expenses’ when in reality they both spent on kids uniforms, groceries, and hygiene products. As such, the devaluation of women’s wages — stemming from the assumption that their income is supplementary — undermines their critical role in sustaining household life through social reproduction.

Likewise, the assumption that formal employment or access to education alleviates reproductive burdens does not hold in practice. As section 4 highlights, rather than reducing reproductive obligations, these pathways often result in their intensification. Shilpa’s case is instructive: though she completed a formal degree and initially held a salaried NGO position, marriage prompted her transition to a receptionist role that better accommodated her SR responsibilities, such as fetching water at fixed times. In this instance, formal employment was not an escape from domestic obligation, but a compromise shaped by it. Interviews from this study echo

Boeri's work which reveals how aspirations for daughters to enter the formal sector are widespread among working-class mothers (2016). However, these aspirations are sustained through a heightened burden of informal labour on the part of these mothers — undertaken to subsidise both education and care work.

3. Migration

While much of the SR literature has expanded to include care chains and migration from the Global South, it pays little attention to the role of internal migration in shaping reproductive labour (Shah and Lerche, 2020). While slowing down in recent years, India has long been characterised by rapid rural to urban migration which directly leads to the creation of these slums that this project explores. The case studies exemplify different forms of such migration. In Jagubai's case, her parents migrated from the village to Mumbai in search of food, reflecting what has been described as 'distress migration' — a move undertaken when survival with dignity is no longer possible in the place of origin (Mander and Sahgal, 2015).

Marriage migration is inextricably linked with labour migration in India (Deshingkar and Tripathi, 2022). Women who accompany their husbands to cities often enter informal work after resettlement, particularly in feminised sectors like home-based work or domestic work (Deshingkar and Tripathi, 2022). The shift into paid domestic work emerges as the most pronounced pattern among women migrating to urban areas, transcending boundaries of caste and community (Mazumdar et al., 2013). Manju's move to Mumbai occurred through marriage, the most common form of female migration in India. Over 20 million women in India migrate each year to join their husband's household (Fulford, 2013). This pattern of patrilocal migration is particularly significant in the lives of women: it involves a physical and emotional uprooting from familiar kin networks and a relocation into marital homes, where as daughter-in-laws they are at the bottom of the hierarchy (John, 2013). For Jagubai, who was widowed later in life, the

effects of this were particularly pronounced — she is now estranged from her natal family and their support, despite their improved circumstances. We also observe that her daughter is the only person in Jagubai's life who shows their care for her health, but they are separated by her participating in the same trend of patrilocality. As Dreze and Chen (1995) argue, patrilocality deepens women's isolation, especially in the face of marital breakdown or widowhood.

4. Marriage

As observed through the lens of migration, marriage profoundly shapes how women engage with both social reproduction and productive labour in Indian slums. Jagubai, married at age twelve, endured a violent, extractive relationship in which her labour — first in domestic work and later as a street vendor — was invisibilized and controlled. Her earnings were routinely taken by her husband, and she had little say in household decisions. Early and forced marriage, particularly among Dalit and low-income communities, continues to restrict women's autonomy, truncate education, and increase their vulnerability to violence (UNICEF, 2021).

By contrast, Shilpa's arranged marriage allowed her to retain control over her earnings and pursue both formal and informal work. Yet her agency was not absolute. She spoke of having to "put aside her ego" and be grateful for being permitted to work — suggesting that even relative freedom is conditioned by family expectations. Manju's experience lies somewhere in between. Though her marriage followed a traditional path, her husband sponsored her training and supported her running a home-based business. In all three cases, women's entry into paid work was negotiated within gendered family structures that continued to prioritise SR obligations.

These variations reflect what Kandiyoti (1999) theorises as 'patriarchal bargains,' women navigate existing power structures through accommodation rather than direct resistance, securing space for autonomy in exchange for compliance. Productive work is often allowed only

when it aligns with domestic roles or reinforces familial stability. Kabeer (2024) similarly argues that women's agency in such contexts is not absent but adaptive — shaped by the terms set by their households. Thus, SR responsibilities are not displaced by marriage but redistributed and intensified, with productive labour permitted only to the extent that it does not disrupt patriarchal expectations.

It is also important to resist binary framings of arranged versus love marriages. As Jeffrey et al. (2009) note, marriage outcomes in Indian slums are heterogeneous; support or exploitation can emerge regardless of how the union was formed. What remains consistent, however, is that the quality and structure of the marital relationship — often entered into with limited choice — fundamentally shapes women's ability to navigate the fluid boundaries between reproductive and productive work. Kandiyoti's writings (1999) and Kabeer's analysis of adaptive agency (2024) both illustrate how, in the South Asian context, the entanglement of marriage and labour takes a distinct form — where the boundaries between productive and reproductive work are more blurred because women's negotiations are continually shaped and reshaped within patriarchal family structures.

Caste also operates through the institution of marriage, particularly via endogamy — the practice of marrying within one's caste group — which remains a central mechanism for reproducing caste boundaries (Gopal, 2012). In the case studies, Manju's marriage adhered to these norms, while Shilpa and Jagubai's did not, underscoring the complexity of caste dynamics in urban slums. This highlights a major limitation in national data sets like the TUS, where caste is recorded only for the head of household and assumed to be uniform across all members. While such assumptions may better reflect rural households, urban slums — where inter-caste marriages are increasingly common due to spatial proximity and shared livelihoods — require more nuanced representation.

5. Widowhood

In analysing the fluid boundaries between social reproduction and production, it is essential to consider not only marriage but also its absence — through separation, divorce, or widowhood. While divorced or older women who were 'never-married' are less frequent in the Indian context, widowhood emerges as a significant and gendered category (illustrated in section 4), especially within urban slums. Women are more likely to be widowed because they marry at a younger age and due to men's greater exposure to occupational hazards, substance abuse, and their higher likelihood of remarriage (Carr and Bodnar-Deren, 2009).

Widowhood in South Asia has long carried stigma, shaped by patriarchal ideologies that equate a woman's worth with her marital and reproductive status where postmenopausal and widowed women are often seen as lacking femininity or social value. This is then mirrored by a lack of feminist research on their lives (Lamb, 1999). The historical context of sati[10] and the social regulation of widows has been explored by scholars like Ashis Nandy, who emphasises the deep cultural discomfort with women who outlive their husbands (Bonnett, 2012). Yet, widowhood is not always experienced as abjection. As Manor (2023) notes, widows are often characterised in policy and scholarship as either victims or unusually free, with widowhood sometimes enabling forms of independence unavailable within marriage — reflected in Jagubai's pride in her independence after years of subjugation.

In slums, female-headed households are common. These atypical family structures redistribute SR responsibilities in distinct ways. In some cases, widows live alone with children and shoulder all domestic and caregiving responsibilities. In others, like Jagubai's, intergenerational households emerge, with grandmothers taking on key roles in childcare and household maintenance. Widowed from a violent marriage, Jagubai expresses pride in her self-sufficiency,

[10] Sati is a Hindu funeral practice in which a widow, willingly or under pressure, immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Its legacy continues to shape attitudes toward widowhood in parts of South Asia.

managing her own earnings and continuing to contribute meaningfully to household survival. In Hinduism, menstruation is subject to Brahminical notions of impurity, similar to those attached to caste (Gopee, 2024). As a result, menstruating women are typically not allowed to enter the kitchen. Widows play a special role in social reproduction then, since they are typically postmenopausal.

In upper-caste communities, widowhood itself is often associated with ritual impurity and social exclusion. However, for Dalit women like Jagubai, widowhood may not entail the same level of ostracisation (Twamley and Sidharth, 2019). On the contrary, Jagubai maintained strong neighbourhood relationships and was widely respected, suggesting that caste can mediate the social experience of widowhood and shape how SR responsibilities are distributed within the community.

6. Education

Access to education, and by extension to information, plays a critical role in shaping the contours of both productive and social reproductive labour. Its most visible impact lies in determining access to ‘formal’ or ‘skilled’ work: Shilpa, with a Bachelor's degree, secures salaried employment as a receptionist, while Manju, trained in beauty work, runs a small parlour from her home. These outcomes align with established development discourses that posit education as a key route out of poverty and into formal labour markets (World Bank, 2018). Yet, such access remains deeply contingent on household dynamics, where the opportunity to study is often framed not as a right but as a concession granted by family members. This reflects what Kabeer (2024) terms “relational agency,” in which women’s access to resources is mediated through family structures and moral economies rather than through autonomous rights-based claims.

Education's transformative potential also varies by caste and class. Paik (2009) argues that for women from privileged caste backgrounds, education may enable limited participation in public life as long as it adheres to caste and class norms — particularly endogamy and respectability. Digital access is similarly uneven. While digital connectivity is often celebrated for expanding women's agency, this potential is shaped by structural constraints (Nguyen, Chib and Mahalingam, 2017). For Shilpa, the internet is a tool to search for supplementary income on gig work platforms. The search for paid labour bleeds into evenings and weekends, blurring the boundaries between productive and leisure time. Even tutoring gigs, when available, blur the line between formal and informal work, falling outside standard employment structures (Kassem, 2023).

Education also structures women's labour choices indirectly, through its relationship to the aspirations and routines of their children. Manju's workday is structured around school timings, while Jagubai expressed distress at being unable to educate her children due to the costs of uniforms and textbooks — despite public education being nominally free. The inadequacy of state provisioning increases women's reproductive burdens, forcing them to subsidise both the care and the educational future of their children through informal, low-paid, and time-flexible work. As Boeri (2016) notes, the drive to educate children is often framed as a pathway out of intergenerational poverty, yet it is built upon the ongoing and invisible SR labour of women.

Section 7. Discussion

This discussion shows that the boundaries between productive and socially reproductive labour are not simply blurred but structurally porous in Indian slums. Two core insights emerge: (1) the fluidity between production and reproduction is greater in urban Indian slums than assumed in Global North–centred SR scholarship; and (2) its degree varies systematically across caste,

class, and gender — and it is precisely these patterned variations that reveal the structural nature of the blurring. This section examines how porosity is reproduced through the themes analysed in Section 6. It then turns to the methodological challenges of studying such entanglement and reflects on what these findings mean for pluralising Social Reproduction Approaches (SRAs) by grounding them in a Global South perspective (Mezzadri et al., 2025).

For social reproduction scholars, the divide between production and reproduction is porous, blurred and fundamentally fictitious (Mezzadri, Newman & Stevano, 2022). What this text contributes, then, is that the degree of fluidity is greater in marginalised contexts, such as slums in India. This paper has, in line with emerging global south SR scholarship (see Stevano, 2021), illustrated how the categories of productive and reproductive are not mutually exclusive, but in fact overlapping and co-constitutive. The case studies make evident how productive and reproductive labour are closely intertwined in the organisation of daily life, with no clear boundary marking the start or end of the 'workday.' The life-histories approach highlights how this relationship shifts over the life course, as women's engagement with paid productive and reproductive work is consistently negotiated around their ongoing unpaid reproductive obligations. The tension between all four dyads of labour (Rao et al., 2023) is shaped, reshaped, and blurred based on caste, class and gender.

The framing of the nuclear household may appear self-evident in many Global North contexts, but in urban South Asia, the household is frequently embedded within wider community ties that shape everyday negotiations of labour. This is not to adopt a romanticised view of organic mutual aid, as some strands of feminist scholarship risk doing, but to highlight that decisions around productive and reproductive labour often unfold beyond the nuclear family unit. Nowhere is this entanglement more visible than in slum communities, which are not merely clusters of discrete households, but socio-spatial entities with distinct relational logics (Mahabir et al., 2016). Unlike gated communities in India with clear demarcations of private and public, slums

often lack strict geographical boundaries — socially and spatially — allowing for porous interactions. In these contexts, the family unit is rarely nuclear; households are often intergenerational, atypical, or centred around shared caste and religious affiliations. Caste, in particular, remains a powerful force of spatial organisation, often relegating marginalised caste residents to particular lanes or sections within a settlement.

Literature on home-based work (Boeri 2016; Mies, 1980) has powerfully shown how productive and reproductive boundaries are blurred when paid labour occurs within the domestic space. They also speak directly about how this spatial organisation of labour results in direct under-valuing, and reduces the wages paid for work within the home (Mies, 1980). Yet these insights must be extended beyond the physical home. In the case studies analysed here, women like Manju, Jagubai and Shilpa work not from within the household in a subcontracted global supply chain, but from within the community: tutoring local children, running parlours, or vending fish. As Stevano's work in Mozambique highlights, productive and reproductive labour in local labour markets unfolds differently from that which is part of the global economy (2021). These forms of labour are not part of the formal debates on 'home-based work,' yet they are structured by the same dynamics of gendered devaluation and spatial proximity. By focusing too narrowly on the monogamous nuclear household, current literature risks overlooking the broader social architecture of slums that structures labour relations. In this manner, the household becomes another categorisation with fluid boundaries; an overlapping unit of analysis, with complicated interpersonal and hierarchical relations.

Survey methodologies must evolve to reflect the complexities highlighted in this discussion. The permeability of categorisation is difficult to capture methodologically, particularly through quantitative data. Kandiyoti (1999) critiques the reliance on fixed, Western notions of the household in survey design. In the Indian context households are typically defined by a shared

kitchen (TUS, 2019). While this may serve large-scale data collection, it overlooks the nuanced sharing of resources across slums — contextual variables notably absent from most surveys. The methodological challenge is marked by the role of identity where many women who do engage in paid or unpaid labour continue to view themselves as non-workers, especially if the work is reproductive or informal (Sharma, Swaminathan and Lahoti, 2024). For example, when interviewing Shilpa she failed to mention tutoring as paid productive work she undertakes, and this information was only revealed through the course of the time-diary style interview. These findings reinforce that survey design is not neutral; rather, it is shaped by social norms and assumptions about what constitutes ‘real’ work.

The boundaries become harder to map when we consider how novel the TUS is and how sporadically data has been captured, but it provides a potential resource that can be fortified with background questions to paint a holistic image of work-lives (Hirway and Jose, 2011). The TUS captures ‘simultaneous activity’ but most resulting analysis continues to focus on the ‘primary’ activity of the woman. Evidently, these difficulties are exacerbated along lines of gender, caste, and class. Patrilocality and marriage migration trends make it harder to trace women’s life trajectories, and low literacy levels, often associated with structurally marginalised communities, limit participation in conventional surveys. Additionally, some information such as caste is often inferred solely from the head of household, obscuring intra-household and intergenerational dynamics; more granular data is urgently needed (TUS, 2019).

This epistemological challenge is deeply tied to the underrepresentation of marginalised voices in empirical research; studies often concentrate where data is easily obtainable and formally documented. Feminist research, however, demands methodological creativity and reflexivity — both in tool design and application. As Dottolo and Tillery (2019) argue, reflexivity must be understood not only as personal self-awareness but as a relational and ethical practice

embedded in the entire research process. It requires an ongoing engagement with one's positionality, and a commitment to generating knowledge that is situated, accountable, and context-sensitive. Accordingly, this research draws on primary time-diary tools and life-history interviews to access the layered, often invisible labour realities of urban poor women, conceiving mixed-methods analysis as one solution to limitations of national datasets. In terms of secondary literature there is a need to look to other disciplines and recognise the validity of non-academic texts as sources of economic information, such as Mary John's writing (2013) that draws from autobiographies that are some of the only sources of deeply textured information on this subject.

Mirroring what Cousins et al. (2018) write for marginalised people in South Africa: in the Indian context, like in other Global South settings, the difference in the experience of production and social reproduction is one of degree rather than kind. Much of the material discussed here is not entirely new; rather, it reinterprets familiar themes — such as caste-based discrimination, unpaid work, and informal labour — through the lens of social reproduction (ibid.,). Indeed, grounding social reproduction in a Global South context does more than add empirical variation — it forces a conceptual shift. As argued in the *Social Reproduction Approaches* (SRA) paper, feminist scholarship from the South is often treated as illustrative rather than theoretical (Mezzadri et al., 2025). Yet the cases discussed here, and in wider literature, challenge assumptions underpinning Global North SR theory.

Even within Global South focused approaches, formality of work is often treated as the escape from such precarity and overlapping labours. While formal employment may provide agency, it does not resolve the structural contradictions that underpin women's labour (Kabeer, 2024). As understood through quantitative analysis in section 4, formal labour often retains features of informality (PLFS, 2023). Hensman (2001) highlights how even formally employed women, such

as pharmaceutical workers in Bombay, struggle to participate in union activity due to domestic burdens and workplace discrimination — revealing that waged labour, although affording some individual bargaining power in the household — does not automatically translate into collective power.

Furthermore, informality is not a residual feature of a development as a transition narrative, but is instead a structurally enforced part of capitalist development for value extraction (Breman, 2013). Altogether, this reinforces the argument that formalisation alone cannot resolve the deep interdependence between productive and reproductive labour. If the formal jobs marginalised women aspire to for their children cannot offer 'escape.' the question becomes what can?

Taken together, this paper demonstrates that the boundaries between production and social reproduction are more porous in urban Indian slums than typically recognised — and that this porosity is patterned by caste, class, and gender in ways that reveal its structural foundations. These findings show that what appears as "blurring" is in fact a condition produced by broader capitalist and social hierarchies — echoing Katz's (2001) reminder that the local and global are mutually constituted. In this sense, the lived experiences of urban marginalised women do more than exemplify these dynamics; they *theorise* them, compelling Social Reproduction Approaches (SRAs) to become more fluid, historically situated, and grounded in Global South realities (Mezzadri et al., 2025). While SR work is essential to life-making and will not disappear, future scholarship must still ask how its demands might be prevented from saturating every corner of women's time, so that marginalised women too may access what should be a basic right: the privilege of boundaries — between labour and leisure, and between production and reproduction.

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