



**Motherhood and Economic Precarity: Household Survival, Social
Reproduction, and Intergenerational Educational Aspirations Among
Women Waste Pickers in Urban India**

Dr. Sabina Ashfaque Shaikh

Assistant Professor, Aditya Institute of Management studies and Research

Abstract

Women engaged in recyclable material collection constitute one of the most economically marginalized yet environmentally indispensable groups within India's expanding urban informal economy. Despite the substantial contribution to urban labor markets, where informality, gender inequality, biasness and economic vulnerability intersect. Although they play a major role in recycling systems, they are still excluded of formal labor protections and many other vulnerability and social security programs. This exclusion not only reinforces material insecurity always but also perpetuates institutional invisibility and lack of concern within municipal governance systems. This study investigates between motherhood interacts with financial instability to influence family strategies for survival and the educational goals passed down through generations. By situating motherhood at the analytical centre, the research illuminates the complex interplay between productive labor responsibilities and unpaid caregiving obligations within contexts of chronic economic insecurity. The study is based on primary survey data collected from 300 female waste pickers in urban India. Composite indices measuring Economic Precarity, Household Resilience, and Mobility Aspirations, were constructed using Likert-scale tools to capture multidimensional lived experiences.

Reliability analysis, correlation, and multiple regression modelling reveal that economic precarity significantly reduces the perception of upward mobility, however maternal education levels and household resilience mechanisms significantly strengthen educational aspirations. These finding empirically validate resilience as a moderating factor within conditions of structural disadvantage. The results indicate that motherhood operates at the same time as a place of structural weakness and as a source of transformative power.

The study recommends the policy interventions focused on institutional recognition systems and support educational programs across generations to disrupt patterns of inherited instability. Strengthening institutional inclusion and social security access may enable to social protection may contribute to more sustainable pathways for long-term mobility.

In urban India, the informal economy plays a important role in the lives of waste pickers, particularly women who balance motherhood with their work. These individuals often demonstrate resilience in the face of economic instability, yet their ability to achieve upward mobility across generations remains limited. Addressing these layered constraints requires an integrated policy and research approach that recognizes both structural barriers and individual agency.

Keywords: informal economy, women waste pickers, motherhood, resilience, economic precarity, intergenerational mobility, urban India, gender inequality.

1. Introduction

India's labor market is marked by a deeply characterised by structural informality, with over 80 percent of working women engaged in informal jobs (Periodic Labour Force Survey [PLFS], 202223). This structural dominance of informality reflects long-standing patterns of labor segmentation and uneven economic development across sectors. In India, informal employment refers to jobs that do not include official agreements, formal inconsistent pay, legal protections, or normally access to social security benefits like pensions, health coverage, or maternity support (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018). Such conditions can be seen are now expose workers to heightened economic vulnerability, income instability, and limited institutional recourse during periods of crisis. Women are disproportionately concentrated in this group because of gender-based divisions in the labor market, lower levels of education, and social and cultural norms that limit their movement and job options (Chen, 2012; Kabeer, 2016). These constraints reinforce gendered patterns of occupational segregation, thereby concentrating women in low-paid, insecure, and socially undervalued forms of work within the informal economy.

In this larger informal economy, waste collection is one of the most unstable and socially looked-down-upon jobs. This occupation exists at the intersection of economic vulnerability and social marginalization, reflecting broader hierarchies embedded within urban labor markets. Waste pickers, who are mostly women in many urban areas, collect, sort, and resell recyclable materials from streets, landfills, and public waste sites. Their labor forms an essential yet invisible link in the recycling value chain, connecting discarded materials to secondary production systems. Although they make a significant contribution to urban environmental sustainability and solid waste management systems (Medina, 2007; Dias, 2016), their work continues to be overlooked by institutions. Municipal systems frequently depend on the efforts of waste pickers to lessen the strain on landfills and lower recycling expenses, yet these workers seldom get official acknowledgment, safety measures, or inclusion within city governance structures (Samson, 2015). The absence of formal recognition not only heightens occupational risks but also perpetuates social stigma and economic insecurity within this already vulnerable population.

The instability of waste picking can be seen across various aspects. Economically, earnings are fluctuating and are based on changing scrap prices, seasonal differences, and the practices of middlemen. Socially, waste pickers face stigma that stems from caste hierarchies, ideas about occupational contamination, and their position on the margins of urban society (Gill, 2010). Legally, lacking official worker status restricts access to labor rights and social benefits. This multifaceted instability heightens vulnerabilities that are specific to gender. Women who sort through waste not only perform physically dangerous work but also take on an unfair share of unpaid care tasks at home, highlighting ongoing gender-based divisions in labor (Benería, 2003; Elson, 2017).

Within the context, motherhood becomes an important analytical perspective for examining strategies for economic survival and hopes for upward mobility across generations. By positioning motherhood at the center of inquiry, the study captures the intersection between

economic vulnerability and social responsibility within informal labor settings. Feminist political economy and social reproduction theory that highlights that women's economic choices are closely tied to their caregiving duties and reproductive work (Folbre, 2001). This perspective emphasizes that productive and reproductive roles are not separate spheres but deeply interconnected dimensions of women's lived experiences. For female waste pickers, earning an income is closely linked to caregiving responsibilities: children frequently join their mothers at work sites, are exposed to dangerous conditions, or face interruptions in their education. These overlapping responsibilities intensify time constraints and increase the emotional and physical burdens faced by women in precarious employment. At the same time, motherhood can serve as a source of motivation and strength, encouraging efforts to invest in children's education as a way to move beyond informal work (Moser, 1998). This dual role illustrates how motherhood simultaneously reflects structural constraint and aspirational agency within contexts of economic instability.

This study places women waste pickers at the crossroads of unstable informal work, gender-based caregiving duties, and strategies for moving up across generations. By situating this group within overlapping structures of labor precarity and social inequality, the research highlights the multidimensional nature of disadvantage in urban informal economies. By looking at how economic instability influences household resilience strategies and educational goals, the study adds to three connected areas of research: Informal work and gender-based vulnerability in urban economies. Feminist analysis of caregiving roles and reproductive tasks. Intergenerational mobility and educational choices in the context of poverty. Together, these strands of scholarship provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how structural constraints and individual agency interact within marginalized households. Grasping these dynamics is essential for creating policy interventions that go beyond just formalizing livelihoods and tackle the interconnected issues of job insecurity, social discrimination, and caregiving responsibilities. A narrow focus on labor formalization alone may overlook the broader social and familial dimensions shaping economic outcomes. Policies that combine social protection, recognition of occupations, support for child care, and access to education are essential to shift resilience based on survival into mobility opportunities that are structurally supported. Such integrated approaches can contribute to breaking cycles of inherited disadvantage and fostering more inclusive urban development pathways.

2. Literature Review Informal Economy and Gender

Informal Economy and Gender

Chen (2012) India's labor market is significantly characterized by a high level of informality, with women disproportionately concentrated due to deep-rooted structural inequalities. This structural concentration of women in informal employment reflects broader patterns of gendered economic marginalization within developing economies. Informal employment lacks written agreements, job stability, set pay rates, or access to social safety measures like health coverage, maternity leave, or retirement benefits. The absence of these protections increases economic uncertainty and transfers market risks directly onto workers. These circumstances leave workers facing unstable earnings, job instability, and increased susceptibility to economic

downturns. Structural factors such as gender-based division in the labor market, restricted educational opportunities, unequal access to resources, and cultural norms that limit women's independence hinder women's participation in formal jobs. These problem operate across both public and private spheres, reinforcing women's limited bargaining power in labor markets. As stated, informality is not just a temporary stage in economic development, but a fundamental part of labor markets in the Global South, where women are disproportionately found in the most unstable sectors. In a similar vein, Kabeer (2016) contends that gender norms and institutional biases perpetuate occupational hierarchies that limit women to low-paying and unstable jobs. As a result, women's main objective is on informal jobs strengthens patterns of poverty, restricts their financial independence, and reduces their ability to cope with economic difficulties within the household. Over time, this persistent precarity may also influence long-term household stability and intergenerational economic outcomes. Waste Picking and Urban Marginality

Dias (2016), Waste picking emphasizes one of the most unstable types of informal work and is closely linked to processes of urban marginalization. This occupation exists at the intersection of economic precarity, social exclusion, and spatial inequality within rapidly expanding cities. Waste pickers carry out significant environmental work by collecting recyclable materials, which helps reduce landfill waste, cut down on municipal waste management expenses, and support circular economies. Although they have made these contributions, they are still mostly excluded from formal recognition, labor security, and city integration programs. This institutional neglect reflects broader structural inequalities embedded in urban governance frameworks. Their work is marked by inconsistent income, exposure to hazardous conditions, exploitative middlemen systems, and severe social discrimination tied to caste and job-related hierarchies. These overlapping vulnerabilities intensify both economic insecurity and social stigma. As noted, waste pickers play a major role in urban recycling economies, yet they are seldom included in official solid waste management systems, leading to their lack of recognition within institutions. This exclusion strengthens their economic and social disadvantages and spatial isolation, frequently restricting them to informal neighborhoods with unstable housing rights and restricted access to public services. Over time, such layered marginalization reinforces cycles of poverty and limits opportunities for long-term socioeconomic mobility.

Social Reproduction and Motherhood

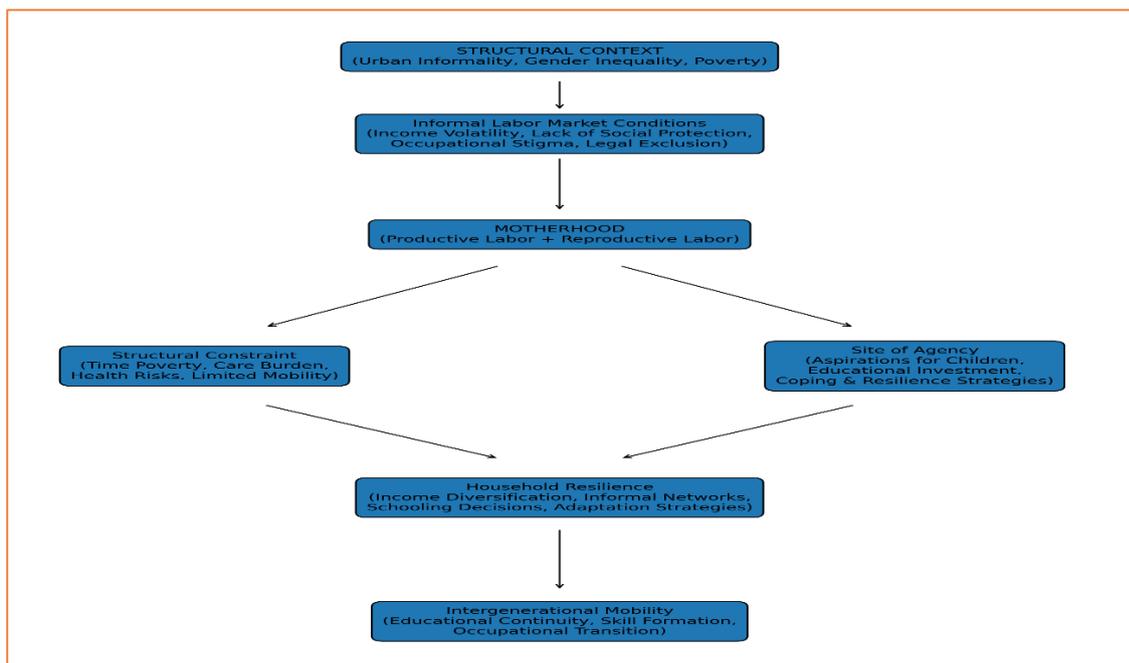
Social reproduction theory provides a critical lens for understanding how unpaid caregiving and domestic labor sustain broader economic systems. It emphasizes that economic production is dependent upon the daily and generational reproduction of labor control power, which is disproportionately performed by women within households. This perspective highlights the often-invisible foundation upon which formal and informal economies operate. As articulated by (2014, Fraser), capitalist economies rely on social reproductive labor while systematically undervaluing and externalizing its costs. Women engaged in informal employment face a “dual burden” of productive labor (income generation) and reproductive labor (childcare, eldercare, household management). This dual responsibility creates persistent time constraints and

emotional strain. In contexts of economic precarity, these responsibilities intensify, as limited access to childcare services, healthcare, and social protection increases the unpaid workload borne by women. For women waste pickers, caregiving responsibilities often intersect directly with livelihood practices, with children sometimes accompanying mothers to worksites. Motherhood thus becomes both a site of constraint—limiting time, mobility, and earning potential—and a source of aspiration, shaping decisions regarding household resource allocation and children’s educational investment. This dual character underscores the complex role of women in sustaining both household survival and future mobility prospects.

Intergenerational Mobility

Education is broadly acknowledged as a key means of moving up between generations, with the ability to disrupt patterns of poverty and inherited job roles. It is frequently viewed as the most viable pathway for achieving long-term socioeconomic mobility in disadvantaged communities. Nevertheless, in situations of long-term economic instability, the ability to support children's educational paths is often limited by the urgent need to survive. Immediate income needs may compete directly with investments in schooling. Financial instability, the opportunity costs associated with education, gender biases in investing in schooling, and inadequate public education systems can disrupt the continuity of education. These constraints often result in irregular attendance, early dropout, or reduced educational attainment. As shown by Blanden and Machin (2004), a parent's socioeconomic status continues to be closely linked to their children's educational achievements and future earnings, highlighting the ongoing passage of disadvantage across generations. This persistent intergenerational linkage underscores the structural barriers that limit mobility despite strong educational aspirations.

3. Theoretical Framework



This theoretical framework combines feminist political economy, social reproduction theory, and intergenerational mobility theory to analyze how instability in informal work affects

household outcomes. It draws on complementary theoretical traditions to explain both structural constraints and individual agency within marginalized labor contexts. It views motherhood as a mediating perspective, acting as a structural limitation due to caregiving responsibilities and financial instability, while also serving as a source of empowerment through educational goals and resilience strategies aimed at attaining social advancement. This integrated approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how economic precarity and caregiving intersect to shape long-term mobility trajectories across generations.

4. Research Objectives

1. To assess the level of economic precarity among women waste pickers in urban informal settlements.
2. To examine the resilience strategies adopted by households under conditions of economic instability.
3. To examine educational aspirations for children among women waste picker households.
4. To determine the socio-economic factors influencing perceptions of intergenerational mobility.

Research Hypotheses

H1: Economic precarity has a significant negative effect on household resilience among women waste picker households.

H2: Economic precarity has a significant negative effect on mobility aspirations.

H3: Household resilience has a significant positive effect on mobility aspirations.

H4: Household resilience mediates the relationship between economic precarity and mobility aspirations.

H5: Socio-demographic factors (education level, income, household size) significantly influence perceptions of intergenerational mobility.

6. Results

6.1 Reliability Analysis

Table 1
Reliability Statistics

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
Economic Precarity	0.812	7
Household Resilience	0.784	5
Mobility Aspiration	0.846	5

All scales demonstrate acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha > 0.70$).

6.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Economic Precarity	2.10	4.85	3.92	0.68
Household Resilience	1.90	4.60	3.18	0.71
Mobility Aspiration	2.80	5.00	4.34	0.56

Interpretation: Economic precarity is high (M = 3.92), while mobility aspirations are also strong (M = 4.34), indicating aspirational optimism despite financial hardship.

6.3 Correlation Analysis

Table 3
Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variables	Economic Precarity	Household Resilience	Mobility Aspiration
Economic Precarity	1	-0.31	-0.29
Household Resilience	-0.31	1	0.41
Mobility Aspiration	-0.29	0.41	1

Statistical Significance:

- Economic Precarity and Mobility Aspiration: $r = -0.29$, $p = 0.003$
- Household Resilience and Mobility Aspiration: $r = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$
- Economic Precarity and Household Resilience: $r = -0.31$, $p = 0.002$

Interpretation: Economic precarity negatively correlates with mobility aspirations, whereas household resilience positively correlates with mobility perceptions.

6.4 Multiple Regression Analysis

Dependent Variable: Mobility Aspiration

Table 4
Model Summary

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Standard Error
0.528	0.279	0.268	0.48

The model explains 27.9% of the variance in mobility aspirations.

Table 5
ANOVA

F	Significance
27.84	$p < 0.001$

The overall model is statistically significant.

Table 6
Regression Coefficients

Predictor	Unstandardized B	Standardized Beta	t	p-value
Economic Precarity	-0.182	-0.241	-2.32	0.021
Household Resilience	0.316	0.372	4.88	< 0.001
Maternal Education	0.254	0.312	2.91	0.004
Welfare Access	0.147	0.184	2.08	0.038

Interpretation:

Household resilience is the strongest positive predictor of mobility aspiration (Beta = 0.372, $p < 0.001$). Economic precarity negatively predicts aspiration (Beta = -0.241, $p = 0.021$). Maternal education significantly enhances mobility perception ($p = 0.004$).

7. Discussion

The results show that while economic precarity limits upward mobility optimism, maternal agency and resilience systems can limit vulnerability. Motherhood serves as a stabilizing, future-oriented context in precarious labor markets. These findings are in line with social reproduction theory, which posits that caring work undergirds not just households but also informal economic systems. Mothers choose education as a means of intergenerational transformation, in spite of structural marginalization. This demonstrates that even within structurally constrained environments, agency operates through long-term investments in children's educational attainment, reinforcing the dual role of motherhood as both adaptive and transformative within conditions of labor insecurity.

8. Policy Implications

Provision of occupational identity cards to ensure formal recognition and access to welfare advantage. Coverage under public health insurance schemes to minimize medical and financial vulnerability. Scholarships for children of waste pickers to promote educational continuity and mobility. Integration into municipal waste management systems to enhance job security and institutional inclusion. Community childcare support to reduce caregiving burdens and improve work stability.

Conclusion

Women waste pickers are the very embodiment of structural precarity and aspirational resilience. Their lived experiences reflect the intersection of economic insecurity, gendered labor segmentation, and social marginalization within urban informal economies. Motherhood heightens economic pressure but also spurs strategic investment in children's futures. This dual dynamic positions mothers as both vulnerable workers and forward-looking agents of change. This includes institutional recognition of informal labour and specific intergenerational policy interventions to break these cycles of inherited work. Such measures are essential to transform survival-based coping into sustainable pathways for long-term socioeconomic mobility.

References (APA 7)

- Blanden, J., & Machin, S. (2004). Educational inequality and the expansion of higher education. *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, 51(2), 230–249.
- Chen, M. A. (2012). The informal economy: Definitions, theories and policies. WIEGO Working Paper.
- Dias, S. (2016). Waste pickers and cities. *Environment and Urbanization*, 28(2), 375–390.
- Fraser, N. (2014). Behind Marx's hidden abode. *New Left Review*, 86, 55–72.
- Kabeer, N. (2016). Gender, labour markets and women's empowerment. Pathways Policy Paper.
- Periodic Labour Force Survey. (2022–23).ss Government of India.
- Dr.Sabina Ashfaque Shaikh, "Invisible Environmental Workers: Role Of Women Waste Pickers In Managing Urban Population Waste Burden (Mumbai, India)", *International Journal*



**International Journal of Advanced Research and
Multidisciplinary Trends (IJARMT)**
An International Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal
Impact Factor: 7.2 Website: <https://ijarnt.com> ISSN No.: 3048-9458

of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT), ISSN:2320-2882, Volume.14, Issue 2, pp.e407-e417,
February 2026, Available at :<http://www.ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT2602519.pdf>