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LABOUR PARTICIPATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN WORKERS IN THE INDIAN LEATHER INDUSTRY: REVIEW INSIGHTS

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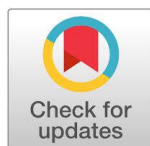
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Abstract: This review examines women's participation in India's leather and allied informal economy, with particular attention to socio-economic characteristics, motivations for work, workplace conditions, empowerment outcomes, and institutional support. The review synthesizes evidence from literature published between 1987 and 2024. An initial search identified 198 studies; backward and forward citation searching added 92 records, producing 290 candidate papers. After relevance and methodological screening, 50 studies formed the core evidence base. The literature shows a consistent pattern: women's participation is commonly driven by household economic necessity and limited livelihood alternatives, while low education, insecure work, wage inequality, occupational risks, weak social protection, and restrictive gender norms constrain their progress. Employment can improve household income, confidence, and participation in decisions, but income alone does not guarantee substantive empowerment. Collective organization, skill development, NGO support, and access to institutional services appear to strengthen women's agency. The review also identifies important evidence gaps, particularly the shortage of large-scale, district-specific, longitudinal, and statistically tested studies. Future empirical research should therefore move from simply documenting vulnerability towards testing the pathways through which employment can produce sustained socio-economic empowerment.

Keywords: women workers; leather industry; labour participation; informal economy; socio-economic empowerment; workplace challenges; institutional support

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1. Introduction

Women have long contributed to India's informal economy, yet their work is frequently less visible than their economic contribution. The leather and allied sectors illustrate this contradiction clearly. The industry provides livelihoods through factory work, subcontracting, home-based production, artisan activity, and other informal arrangements. Earlier research shows that women's roles have often been concentrated in low-paid, low-skilled, or home-based activities where employment rights and institutional visibility are limited. The expansion of global production networks has created opportunities, but it has also exposed women workers to precarious employment and unequal bargaining power.

The literature increasingly treats women's labour participation not merely as an employment issue but as a question of economic agency, dignity, social recognition, and empowerment. This distinction is important. A woman may earn an income and contribute substantially to her household while still having limited control over her earnings, weak decision-making power, restricted mobility, and inadequate access to social protection. Accordingly, the present review connects labour participation with the broader socio-economic conditions in which women work and live.

2. Review Purpose and Objectives

The review was undertaken to consolidate existing evidence and identify a practical agenda for future empirical research. It specifically aims to:

- assess the socio-economic and demographic profile of women workers in the leather and related informal sectors;
- identify the major workplace challenges and forms of gender-based disadvantage;
- examine the economic and social motivations behind women's participation;
- assess the influence of employment on household status, agency, and community standing; and
- review policy, organizational, collective, and skill-development interventions that may strengthen women's participation and empowerment.

3. Methodology of the Review

The review used a thematic and integrative approach to synthesize qualitative and quantitative evidence on women's labour in India's informal and leather-linked sectors. The source material covered the period 1987–2024 and included peer-reviewed articles, academic studies, theses, reports, and other scholarly works relevant to women's employment, informality, workplace conditions, empowerment, and policy support.

3.1 Literature Identification and Screening

An initial search produced 198 potentially relevant studies. Backward citation chaining and forward citation chaining were then used to identify additional work, adding 92 records and producing a pool of 290 candidate papers. The studies were screened for thematic relevance and methodological alignment. A total of 284 papers were retained after the broad relevance assessment, while 50 studies were classified as highly relevant and used as the core evidence base.

3.2 Analytical Framework

The synthesis was organized around five connected dimensions: (i) socio-economic profile, (ii) workplace challenges, (iii) motivations for participation, (iv) socio-economic impact and

empowerment, and (v) government, organizational, and collective support. This structure makes the review directly useful for designing a questionnaire-based empirical study, because each dimension can be translated into observable indicators.

4. Findings and Thematic Synthesis

4.1 Socio-Economic Profile of Women Workers

The reviewed evidence portrays many women workers as economically vulnerable, with low educational attainment, rural or poor urban backgrounds, and substantial household responsibilities. Several studies identify caste and socio-economic position as factors that compound gender disadvantage. Family responsibilities also shape the type of work women can accept, often making flexible, home-based, nearby, or informal employment more attractive than distant formal employment.

At the same time, the evidence should not be read as suggesting that all women workers share one experience. Differences by location, education, household resources, employment arrangement, and access to networks matter. This variation supports the need for district-level primary data rather than relying entirely on national or state-level generalizations.

4.2 Motivations for Labour Participation

Economic necessity is the strongest recurring explanation for women's participation. Household expenses, poverty, debt, and the need for an additional income frequently encourage women to enter informal or low-paid work. Limited alternative employment opportunities are another important factor. Cultural acceptance of particular forms of women's work and the possibility of combining paid work with domestic responsibilities also influence participation.

However, participation is not purely necessity-driven. Some studies point to skill acquisition, self-confidence, entrepreneurial aspirations, and the desire for greater independence. This distinction between survival-oriented participation and opportunity-oriented participation deserves greater attention in future empirical research.

4.3 Workplace Challenges

Workplace vulnerability is one of the most consistent findings across the literature. Reported problems include low wages, job insecurity, occupational hazards, inadequate protective measures, weak social security, limited maternity protection, and gender-based discrimination. Women working through fragmented supply chains may be especially difficult for labour regulation systems to reach. Weak representation and limited grievance mechanisms can further reduce workers' ability to raise concerns.

4.4 Socio-Economic Impact and Empowerment

The relationship between employment and empowerment is positive but uneven. Employment contributes to household income and can increase women's confidence and participation in family decisions. Yet the literature repeatedly cautions against equating employment with empowerment. Low earnings, continued domestic responsibilities, restricted mobility, social stigma, and patriarchal decision-making structures may prevent women from translating income into meaningful autonomy.

The strongest empowerment outcomes appear where employment is accompanied by supportive networks, self-help groups, collective organization, skill development, financial inclusion, or NGO assistance. These findings suggest that the quality and context of employment matter as much as employment itself.

4.5 Socio-Cultural Influences

Women's labour decisions are embedded in family and community relationships. Family support can make employment easier to sustain, while expectations that women should prioritize domestic responsibilities can restrict participation and career growth. Community perceptions also influence the acceptability of particular occupations. These socio-cultural influences are especially important in informal employment, where workplace and household boundaries are often closely connected.

4.6 Government and Institutional Support

The literature identifies welfare schemes, labour protections, skill development, maternity benefits, legal safeguards, collective organization, and NGO interventions as potentially important supports. Nevertheless, implementation is repeatedly identified as a weakness. Women may not know about available schemes, may face difficulties accessing them, or may work in employment arrangements that fall outside effective institutional coverage.

The evidence therefore points to an implementation gap rather than simply a policy gap. Future research should measure not only whether a scheme exists, but whether women know about it, can access it, use it, and perceive it as useful.

5. Critical Discussion

A major strength of the existing literature is its recognition that women's work cannot be understood through income alone. Studies increasingly connect labour participation with gender norms, care responsibilities, social identity, occupational risk, and institutional access. This broader perspective provides a more realistic understanding of empowerment.

However, the evidence base also has important weaknesses. Many studies are geographically narrow, use small samples, or rely heavily on descriptive and qualitative approaches. The reviewed literature contains relatively few studies that quantify the strength of relationships between participation, workplace conditions, socio-cultural influences, institutional support, and empowerment outcomes. Longitudinal evidence is particularly limited. As a result, claims about causality and sustained empowerment remain cautious.

6. Key Evidence Pattern

Dimension	Evidence Pattern	Implication
Socio-economic profile	Low education, economic vulnerability, household responsibilities	Profile respondents carefully at district level
Participation	Economic necessity and limited alternatives dominate	Measure both necessity and opportunity motives
Workplace	Low wages, insecurity, hazards and weak protection recur	Use clear, respondent-friendly workplace indicators
Empowerment	Income helps, but autonomy gains are uneven	Measure financial, household and social outcomes separately
Institutional support	Schemes exist but awareness/access are uneven	Measure awareness, access, use and satisfaction

7. Research Gap and Future Empirical Agenda

The review establishes a strong conceptual case for examining women's labour in the leather industry, but it also reveals a clear empirical gap. Much of the existing evidence describes vulnerability at a broad sectoral or regional level. Relatively little research brings together women's socio-economic profile, workplace experience, socio-cultural environment, and institutional support within a single measurable framework at the district level.

A district-specific study in a major leather-producing location can therefore make a practical contribution. Rather than asking only whether women participate in the industry, future research

should ask what enables participation, what constrains it, and whether participation produces measurable improvements in women's socio-economic position.

7.1 Proposed Empirical Framework

- Socio-economic profile: age, education, marital status, household income, dependents, travel distance and income source.
- Workplace factors: wages, working hours, job type, safety training, childcare, employer support, skill development, workplace satisfaction and grievance access.
- Socio-economic empowerment: control over income, household contribution, financial decision-making, social status, healthcare, children's education, community participation, confidence, savings and career aspirations.
- Socio-cultural factors: family attitude, community perception, influence of others, household decision-making, women's groups, expectations regarding domestic roles, peer influence, career opportunities, family relationships and confidence.
- Institutional support: welfare-scheme awareness, skill-program participation, childcare support, financial benefits, labour-union support, rights awareness, legal aid, government role, maternity benefits and overall institutional satisfaction.

7.2 Implications for Questionnaire-Based Research

The review provides a logical basis for a structured questionnaire using simple language and predominantly closed-ended response categories. This approach is particularly suitable where respondents have varied literacy levels. A pilot test should be used to identify ambiguous items, confirm reliability, and ensure that questions can be administered consistently through face-to-face fieldwork.

For the proposed empirical study, reliability testing such as Cronbach's alpha can be applied to multi-item constructs, while descriptive statistics can summarize respondent characteristics and perceptions. Chi-square tests can examine associations among categorical variables, while correlation and regression can be used to test relationships between workplace, socio-cultural and institutional factors and empowerment outcomes. Factor analysis may be considered where the sample size and measurement quality are adequate.

8. Practical and Policy Implications

- Strengthen implementation and awareness of labour welfare and social-protection measures for women workers.
- Expand accessible skill-development programmes linked to actual leather-sector employment opportunities.
- Improve workplace safety, grievance mechanisms, maternity protection and other basic employment safeguards.
- Support childcare and other care-related arrangements that reduce the conflict between paid work and domestic responsibilities.
- Strengthen women's collective voice through worker groups, self-help groups, unions and community organizations.
- Promote financial inclusion and practical mechanisms that increase women's control over the income they earn.
- Use district-level evidence to design interventions rather than assuming that a single national or state-level approach will fit every leather cluster.

9. Conclusion

The literature presents a clear but nuanced message: women's participation in India's leather and allied informal economy is economically important, yet participation takes place within conditions that can reproduce vulnerability. Economic necessity remains a powerful entry point into work,

while low wages, insecure employment, occupational risks, social norms and weak institutional access constrain the benefits women receive from employment.

Employment can nevertheless become a pathway to empowerment when it is supported by skills, collective organization, financial resources, social protection and changes in restrictive norms. The next step for scholarship is therefore not another broad description of women's vulnerability, but robust empirical testing of how these factors interact. A focused, questionnaire-based study of women workers in Ranipet District can respond directly to this gap by generating measurable, locally grounded evidence that can inform both academic understanding and practical interventions.

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