

GENDER-CASTE NEXUS IN WORK AND EMPOWERMENT: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF SCHEDULED CASTE WOMEN IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

Kumari Monika

Ph.D. Research Scholar (ICSSR Fellow),
Department of Sociology and Social Work, Himachal Pradesh University Summerhill (Shimla-05)

Niranjna Bhandari

Professor, Centre for Comparative Religion and Civilisation, Central University of Jammu

ABSTRACT

The interplay of gender and caste significantly shapes patterns of work participation and empowerment among Scheduled Caste women. The paper explores the interrelationship between caste and gender, along with regional disparities and structural barriers that restrict the economic progress and work participation of scheduled caste women. It examines how deep-rooted societal hierarchies and unequal power dynamics still restrict their access to decision-making, productive resources, participation in economic activities and employment. Descriptive statistical tools were employed to calculate work participation rates, gender-based disparities, and district-wise variations. Tables, percentages, and comparative analysis were used to interpret the data effectively. Using the intersectionality paradigm as a guide, the paper describes how caste and gender work together to produce a variety of layered kinds of economic difficulty. The paper concludes that district-level gender disparities are deeply shaped by regional inequalities and caste-based patriarchal structures. It further emphasizes that higher female participation in certain tribal areas often stems from economic necessity rather than genuine empowerment. It further argues that acknowledging and strengthening the economic role of SC women in Himachal Pradesh is essential for overall development. The findings are intended to inform policymakers who genuinely address the unique challenges of SC women, enabling them to assert economic agency and contribute meaningfully to local, regional and national economies.

Keywords: Caste Discrimination, Empowerment, Gender-Caste Nexus, SC Women, Social Exclusion, Sociology

INTRODUCTION

The quest for complete development remains unfinished without addressing the layered disadvantages faced by women belonging to historically marginalized communities. Despite frequent use of the word 'Empowerment' in global conversations, the lived reality remains deeply challenging for women who continue to be pushed to the margins of society. Although national or international development highlights the need to uplift the marginalized section, especially women from socially excluded communities. Efforts to reduce gender disparities and uplift economically disadvantaged social groups have been made by numerous organisations at the national and international levels. At the global level, framework such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 5, which focuses on achieving gender equality, and Goal 10, which aims to reduce inequality within and among countries (United Nations, 2015). At the national level, institutions such as the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and the National Commission for Scheduled Castes implement targeted schemes for the upliftment of Scheduled Caste women. Despite advancements worldwide, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2023) continues to highlight stark disparities in economic participation and opportunity, especially for women from marginalized racial, ethnic, or caste groups in the Global South. Larger sex disparities occur when gender meets other societal

systems, such as caste in South Asia or race in the West (World Economic Forum, 2023). And this is what really hurts: when there is one form of discrimination and when they co-exist with another, as it is the case with women and scheduled caste women.

With its diverse range of customs, cultures, and social systems, India offers a challenging environment for comprehending how caste and gender intertwine. India, a democratic republic recognized by the constitution, has advanced social justice and equity significantly since winning independence in 1947. However, deep-rooted social hierarchies, especially those based on caste and gender, continue to shape the lived experiences of millions of individuals, particularly those belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SCs). Scheduled Castes, historically subjected to systemic exclusion and socio-economic marginalization under the caste system, remain one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in Indian society. India's caste system and patriarchal social order operate as interconnected structures that reinforce social inequality. While caste determines social status and economic opportunity, patriarchy restricts women's autonomy and access to resources. Scheduled Caste women, positioned at the bottom of both hierarchies, thus face compounded marginalization disadvantaged both as women and as members of an oppressed caste. India's caste system and patriarchal social order operate as interconnected structures that reinforce social inequality. While caste determines social status and economic opportunity, patriarchy restricts women's autonomy and access to resources. Scheduled Caste women, positioned at the bottom of both hierarchies, thus face compounded marginalization disadvantaged both as women and as members of an oppressed caste. In both the above caste system and patriarchal structure, scheduled caste women face dual marginalization- both as women and as members of the oppressed class.

Why Himachal Pradesh? Himachal Pradesh predominantly rural and hilly state in northern India known for its progress in education, health, lifestyle, and women's development as compared to many other states; however, it reflects disparities when examined through the lens of gender and caste. Scheduled Castes constitute approximately 25 percent, one-fourth of the total population in Himachal Pradesh. Within this group, women represent 49.33 percent of the Scheduled Caste population (Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India, 2011). These women are largely concentrated in informal, unregulated, and low-paid sectors such as subsistence agriculture, domestic service, manual labour, construction work, and other forms of casual employment. Their participation in these sectors is often marked by job insecurity, lack of social protection, wage discrimination, and limited opportunities for skill development or upward mobility. Although there are several government programs aimed at uplifting their situation, they still have structural disadvantages that hinder them in terms of overall development and empowerment.

Based on the above discussion, it is evident that Scheduled Caste women continue to face discrimination in various aspects of life. This research paper attempts to analyze the opportunities and challenges that influence the economic activities and empowerment of SC women in Himachal Pradesh. It focuses on understanding how the combined impact of caste and gender affects their access to resources, participation in the labour world, and their capacity to exercise economic independence and decision-making power. Understanding scheduled caste women through different dynamics is important not only for inclusive development, but this also helps policymakers who work for the marginalized communities and their welfare.

The study draws on the concept of intersectionality, first introduced by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1989) to see how several types of discrimination, e.g., caste and gender, can combine to create a set of experiences of marginalization unlike any we have thus far experienced. The view can be used to explain why Scheduled Caste women experience a particular and harsher form of discrimination as compared to Scheduled Caste men and upper-caste women. Applying an intersectional lens is essential for analyzing the layered inequalities that restrict SC women's economic empowerment and for crafting more inclusive and effective policy responses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of literature is an essential part of the entire research process when you start the research process. Several studies have been conducted by various scholars on 'scheduled caste and economic development'. Some of the notable studies pertaining to the present study have been reviewed, which are as follows: -

(Sohail, 2014) in their study entitled "*Women Empowerment and Economic Development – An Exploratory Study in Pakistan,*" stated that women and men should work together for economic development.

(Nandrajog, 2017) In her paper entitled "Empowerment of Women and Development of Economy," she stated that government initiatives alone would not be sufficient, but society must take initiatives to provide a climate in which there is no gender discrimination, and women have full opportunities for self-decision making, which helps to achieve this goal.

(A. Suresh, 2018) In their study "An Economic Analysis of Empowerment of Scheduled Caste Women in Thoothukandi District of Tamil Nadu," they examined the economic empowerment and analyzed the quality of life of scheduled caste women after reservation. They found that the government has been providing many chances to advance the political, economic, and educational conditions of scheduled caste women. Further, they also stated that women from the deprived section must come on their own to grow and find their inner strength on their own, as it cannot be bestowed upon them by anyone else.

(Eswari, 2019) In her article "A Study on Role of Women in Economic Development in India," she emphasized women's economic empowerment, which may help them in the improvement of their social status in the family as well as society.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To analyze the intersectionality of caste and gender and how it influences economic opportunities and constraints faced by Scheduled Caste women.
2. To make practical policy suggestions and recommendations based on the target population's lived experiences to improve the economic engagement and empowerment of women from the Scheduled Castes

METHODOLOGY

The research design used in the study is both descriptive and analytical, focusing on secondary data to examine the gender-wise Work participation rate of the Scheduled caste in Himachal Pradesh. Work participation rates, gender-based inequities, and district-specific variances were calculated using descriptive statistical techniques. Effective data interpretation was achieved by the use of tables, percentages, and comparative analysis.

BRIEF INSIGHT INTO THE SCHEDULED CASTES IN INDIA

Scheduled caste people are one of the most disadvantaged groups, historically faced exclusion, Marginalization, and discrimination due to a rigid social hierarchical structure. Recognized by the Constitution of India, the term 'Scheduled Castes' refers to specific castes listed under the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, who are entitled to affirmative action policies and protective legislation aimed at redressing historical injustices (Government of India, 1950).

As we are aware, according to the 2011 census scheduled caste population comprises 16.6 percent of the total population. In which 18.5 percent of the total population of the scheduled caste lives in rural areas, whereas 12.6 percent lives in urban areas (Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India, 2011).

Despite constitutional safeguards and the implementation of numerous welfare schemes such as reservation in education, employment, and political representation Scheduled Castes continue to face systemic disadvantages in access to quality education, healthcare, land ownership, and sustainable livelihoods (Deshpande, 2011 Nambissan, 2009) Several studies indicate that caste-based discrimination persists in subtle and overt forms in both rural and urban contexts, impeding the social mobility of Dalits (Jodhka, 2010)

Besides, the situation with women who represent the Scheduled Castes is even more disadvantaged as they are discriminated against not only because of the caste but also due to gender reasons. Scholars such as (Rege, 1998) and (Guru, 1995) have emphasized the importance of analyzing Dalit women's experiences through an intersectional lens to understand the depth of marginalization fully. they endure. Their financial positions, which are mostly restricted to unregulated and low-paid work, overlap with a caste and gender-based exclusionary burden.

BRIEF INSIGHT INTO THE SCHEDULED CASTES OF HIMACHAL PRADESH

As per the 2011 census, 17,29,252 persons are scheduled caste, which constitutes 25.19 percent of the total population of the state. Himachal also has the 2nd highest proportion of SC's, followed by Punjab. As per the census record, 8,52,952 persons are scheduled caste women, which constitutes 49.33 percent of the total population of scheduled caste in Himachal Pradesh (Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India, 2011). This shows that almost half of the SC population in Himachal Pradesh belongs to the scheduled caste women. The scheduled caste in Himachal Pradesh is predominantly rural, as 93.4 percent of them reside in villages (Monika & Bhandari, 2025). In the present paper, an attempt has been made to find out how the caste and gender interconnect in work participation, economic growth and economic empowerment of scheduled caste women in Himachal Pradesh in general.

ROLE OF SCHEDULED CASTE WOMEN IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In the broader discourse on overall development, the contribution of marginalized people often remained unrecognized. Among these scheduled caste women roles also overlooked. Their contribution was also devalued by their family, community as well as their society. Even though they face systematic barriers, their participation in the overall development and economy, whether through agricultural labour, informal work, or small-scale entrepreneurship constitutes a significant but underappreciated force driving local and regional development (Deshpande, 2011).

In addition to the intersectional difficulties SC women face, the socioeconomic landscape of SC communities is characterized by a historical social exclusion, caste-based marginalization, and entrenched social hierarchies (Ambedkar, 1936) (Shah, Harsh, Thorat, Deshpande, & Baviskar, 2006). For SC women, these challenges are compounded by gender-based inequalities, placing them at a unique intersection of marginalization. Their access to education, land ownership, credit, and formal employment remains limited due to both structural and cultural constraints (Ghosh, 2014).

Acknowledging and appreciating SC women's economic achievements is key to inclusive and sustainable economic growth, in addition to being a question of fairness and social justice. Empowering marginalized women economically improves household welfare, advances gender equality, and contributes to wider development results, as feminist economists have maintained. (Sen, 2006) (Kabeer, 2005). Programs aimed at economic inclusion such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), and Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan (SCSP) have attempted to address these gaps, yet implementation challenges and social stigma often dilute their impact (Ministry of Rural Development, 2021).

The paper aims to study the various ways that SC women contribute to economic development, looking at the opportunities, they take advantage of as well as the challenges they encounter. Through

a sociological lens, it examines how the intersection of gender and caste shapes their labour participation and economic roles. The paper aims to highlight how the economic empowerment of SC women positioned at the nexus of caste and gender can act as a transformative force, fostering more inclusive development trajectories and reshaping socio-economic dynamics from the ground up.

Table 1

Gender wise Work Participation Rate of the Scheduled caste in Himachal Pradesh

Sr. No.	District	Work participation rate (percent)		
		Persons	Males	Females
1.	Chamba	55.97	60.09	51.8
2.	Kangra	44.67	54.8	34.54
3.	Una	40.94	53.5	28
4.	Hamirpur	53.02	56.7	49.46
5.	Shimla	52.16	59.24	44.68
6.	Solan	51.98	60.53	42.74
7.	Mandi	56.09	59.29	52.86
8.	Kinnaur	60.47	64.28	56.59
9.	Kullu	60.94	64.59	57.13
10.	Bilaspur	54.21	58.91	49.35
11.	Sirmour	55.81	52.16	49.02
12.	Lahaul & Spiti	59.15	62.91	55.13
		52.14	58.77	45.32

Source: Census of India, 2011

The table one reveals that the male work participation rate of the scheduled caste is higher than the female work participation rate by 13.45 percent. However, this male-female difference varies from one district to another among the scheduled caste population. The highest female work participation rate was observed in Kullu district 57.13 percent followed by Kinnaur (56.59%) and Lahaul & Spiti (55.13%). Whereas the lowest female work participation observed in Una district 28 percent, followed by Kangra (34.54%) and Solan (42.74%). Work participation difference among the scheduled caste population is recorded to be highest in Una District 25.50 percent, followed by Kangra 20.26 percent and Solan 17.78 percent. That is higher than the state difference. However, Mandi and Hamirpur districts have the lowest difference among male-female work participation rates, with 6.43 percent and 7.24 percent respectively.

Therefore, it is clear from the above discussion that the female work participation rate of the scheduled caste population is quite low among districts of Una, Kangra, and Solan in the state, whereas this disparity was relatively significant in the districts of Kullu, Kinnaur, and Lahaul & Spiti. There may be a number of reasons for the high participation rates among females in the scheduled caste community in the tribal districts. First off, the desire of the locals to rely on regional resources linked to primary economic activities like grazing, logging, and subsistence farming resulted in a higher work participation rate of female scheduled caste participation in the labour force in these tribal districts. The expanding tendency in cash crops in the agricultural sector, together with horticultural, cottage, and industrial activities, led to a relatively high rate of work participation among women in the scheduled caste population of the district of Kullu. Such occupations typically don't call for a formal education, and the family's financial situation may force both men and women to work to support their families.

These trends illustrate how the intersection of caste and gender shapes the labour experiences of SC women differently across districts, reflecting both structural inequalities and regional livelihood dynamics (Desai & Dubey, 2012; Government of India, 2011).

MAJOR CHALLENGES FACED BY SC WOMEN IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

Scheduled caste women are lower than women belonging to other castes, especially the upper caste. They are facing several challenges in society and the family. Due to education, modernization, industrialization, and globalization, the position of scheduled caste women has changed. However, they are still discriminated against in different spheres of life and forced to work as labourers, manual scavengers, or even as prostitutes. Scheduled caste women are not less capable, they can contribute the same as upper caste women and as men in economic development and overall development in society and the nation positively. There are some challenges faced by Scheduled Caste women in Himachal Pradesh that are listed below:

- 1. Multiple marginalization-** Scheduled caste women face intersectional discrimination; within the family, they face gender-based discrimination because Himachal is the state where the patriarchal system is prevalent. Authority transfer from father to son and most of the decisions are taken by the husband and power and resources are also controlled by the husband. They also face caste-based discrimination. Women often face discrimination in wages, promotion, and employment opportunities.
- 2. Limited access to education-** Scheduled caste girls often have lower level of education due to socio-economic constraints, which restrict their access to skilled jobs and other employment opportunities. Nambissan, in her study point out that the dropout rate has been increasing among Dalit girls due to exclusion and poor treatment in school (Nambissan, 2009). Additionally, Monika and Bhandari also highlight that in regions where both caste and gender discrimination are deep-rooted, SC women are less likely to complete their education, leading to diminished opportunities for social mobility and economic independence (Monika & Bhandari, 2025).
- 3. Social stigma-** The third dimension is social stigma. In general, when women work outside the home, they may face social stigma. Stigma is often more pronounced for Dalit women, who confront the intersecting burdens of caste and gender discrimination. As Still (2017) observes, societal expectations and patriarchal norms restrict mobility and visibility in the public sphere. That discourages women from working outside (Still, 2017).
- 4. Limited mobility-** societal norms and lack of basic amenities often limit Dalit women's mobility, making it difficult for them to access the market, job opportunities, training programs and other skills. Monika and Bhandari (2025) also underline that deep-rooted caste and gender hierarchies restrict SC women's participation in all spheres, thereby limiting their economic mobility and independence.
- 5. Unpaid care work-** women in Himachal Pradesh generally bear the burden of unpaid care work, such as household chores, childcare, etc., limiting their time and energy for engaging in income-generating activities. Marget Benston also states that "*the amount of unpaid labour performed by women is very large and profitable to those who own the means of production*". Feminist economist Benston highlights that women's unpaid contributions support not only their families but also the broader economy. Despite various government initiatives aimed at women's empowerment, the lack of support for redistributing or recognizing unpaid care work continues to hinder women's full participation in economic life.

These challenges require targeted interventions that address caste as well as gender-based inequalities, legal protection against violence and discrimination, targeted skill development program and training, and efforts to promote representation of scheduled caste women in decision making processes.

SUGGESTIONS

- The state machinery is expected to carry out some special monetary interventions comprising loan schemes, subsidies, and grants to ease the prevailing socio-economic inequalities experienced by the scheduled-caste women.
- To develop an environment of business generation among the scheduled caste women, there must be equal access to vital resources such as the credit facilities, raw materials and land, among others. These resources are the building blocks towards the establishment and growth of the business, but access to these building blocks is very acute.
- Policies aimed at strengthening the provision of healthcare services must be sought and such pursuance not only augers well with the promotion of the health of the populace but it also leads to the economic growth.
- The equal accessibility to good higher education is a precondition in the progress of the scheduled caste women. All these efforts must be geared toward enrollment, retention and successful completion of studies so as to offer these women the kind of competences that will empower them economically.
- Governmental structures ought to be involved in carrying out organized campaigns and sensitization programs aimed at ensuring economic inclusion and expansion among women of the scheduled castes. These practices are necessary to bring out deeply entrenched stereotypes, unfairness and discriminatory behaviours which hinder the economic opportunities of these women.

By focusing on above mentioned strategies and suggestion Himachal Pradesh can foster an economic empowerment and development of scheduled caste women, enabling them to realize their full potential and contribute positively to States's and the nation's economic development.

CONCLUSION

Based on the interpretation and analysis of the secondary data, it has been found that economic development and growth is directly linked with the empowerment of women, as this paper deal with the scheduled caste women's role in economic development found that the empowerment of scheduled caste women in Himachal Pradesh contributes significantly to the States's economic development by fostering inclusivity, promoting entrepreneurship and enhancing work force diversity within marginalized communities. Using the intersectionality framework, the study concludes that caste and gender operate simultaneously to generate layered forms of economic disadvantage. District-level data show significant gender differences in work participation, which are a reflection of regional socioeconomic trends as well as structural injustices rooted in caste-based hierarchies and patriarchal norms. Even if female participation is higher in some tribal regions, this is frequently the result of economic pressure rather than empowerment.

Empowering SC women requires more than policy it demands dismantling deep-rooted social barriers, investing in education and skill-building, and ensuring equal access to resources. Their meaningful inclusion in the economy is essential not only for equity but also for sustainable and inclusive development in the state. Further, it can be concluded that investing in their skills, education and entrepreneurship will help to cultivate a more inclusive and vibrant economy.

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