

Negotiating Survival: Gendered Precarity, Social Reproduction, And Power Within Constraint Among Women Rag Pickers in Urban India

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ABSTRACT: This article examines women rag pickers' labour in urban India through feminist political economy, embodiment, and social reproduction. Drawing on fieldwork from Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, it argues that women's agency in informal waste work operates through responsibility-laden survival rather than empowerment or accumulation. Widowed, separated, and deserted women—often sole household earners—experience intensified bodily depletion through long work hours, chronic illness, time poverty, and debt, yet simultaneously exercise everyday authority over income allocation, spatial mobility, market negotiations, and household governance. Conceptualised here as power within constraint, this relational agency sustains families and urban recycling systems while leaving structural inequalities intact. The article further offers a feminist critique of urban sustainability narratives, showing how cleanliness and recycling regimes depend on women's embodied labour while rendering them institutionally invisible. By foregrounding women rag pickers as economic managers rather than residual workers, the study reframes informal sanitation as a feminist political economy issue and calls for gender-just urban futures centred on labour dignity, bodily integrity, and social reproduction.

KEYWORDS: feminist political economy; embodiment; social reproduction; informal labour; gendered precarity; urban sustainability; power within constraint

INTRODUCTION

Feminist scholarship has long cautioned against equating women's labour participation with empowerment, particularly within informal economies structured by caste, gender, and unequal social reproduction. Yet urban waste work in India continues to be analysed primarily through frameworks of vulnerability, occupational health, or environmental management. Such approaches, while necessary, often under-theorise women's labour as a constitutive element of urban political economy and risk reproducing depoliticised narratives of resilience. This article intervenes in these debates by centring women rag pickers as economic actors whose embodied labour sustains both household survival and urban recycling systems under conditions of extreme precarity.

Drawing on feminist political economy, embodiment, and social reproduction theory (Elson 1998; Kabeer 1999; Federici 2012; Rai et al. 2014), I argue that women rag pickers exercise a form of relational agency shaped by responsibility rather than accumulation—what I conceptualise as power within constraint. Based on primary fieldwork conducted among women rag pickers in Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, the article demonstrates how occupational pain, time poverty, indebtedness, and infrastructural neglect coexist with women's everyday decision-making authority over income allocation, spatial mobility, market engagement, and household governance. Women's agency emerges not despite precarity, but through it, as they continuously negotiate bodily limits and social obligations to reproduce life under informal urban capitalism.

The article further advances a feminist critique of contemporary urban sustainability narratives. Cleanliness drives and waste-management reforms increasingly frame recycling as a technical or environmental achievement, obscuring the gendered labour that makes such outcomes possible. Women rag pickers remain invisible within Smart City frameworks and Swachh Bharat metrics, even as their informal work subsidises environmental sustainability at high bodily and social cost. By foregrounding embodiment and social reproduction, this study reframes informal waste labour as a feminist political economy issue rather than a marginal livelihood concern.

Empirically, the analysis draws on mixed-methods research conducted in 2023–24 with fifty-four women rag pickers, all from Scheduled Caste communities. The findings reveal stratified experiences of precarity shaped by marital status, housing insecurity, and access to urban infrastructure. Widowed, separated, and deserted women—often sole earners—experience intensified depletion through long work hours, chronic illness, and debt exposure, yet simultaneously gain expanded authority over household finances and survival strategies. Rather than reading this authority as empowerment, the article situates it within feminist critiques of burdened autonomy, where women's control over resources arises from necessity rather than choice.

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Women rag pickers perform physically demanding and hazardous labour under conditions of extreme precarity, marked by exposure to sharp objects, toxic waste, infections, and chronic health problems, alongside income insecurity and the near-absence of social protection (Uplap & Bhate, 2014; Wasnik et al., 2020). These risks are not gender-neutral. Women's concentration in the lowest rungs of waste work reflects gendered labour hierarchies within informality, where caste-based stigma, spatial exclusion, and patriarchal norms intersect to intensify vulnerability. Studies across Indian cities consistently document high levels of occupational illness, everyday harassment in public spaces, and barriers to accessing healthcare and welfare schemes, reinforcing women rag pickers' marginal position in urban labour markets and state welfare regimes (Wasnik et al., 2020). In Tamil Nadu, recent research from Chennai demonstrates how dump-yard labour further compounds women's health risks, while institutional mechanisms for worker safety and gender-responsive sanitation policy remain largely absent (Dhanasekar & Anitha, 2024).

By foregrounding women rag pickers as economic managers rather than residual labour, this article contributes to feminist debates on informal work, embodiment, and social reproduction. It challenges binaries of victimhood and empowerment, demonstrating how women convert occupational pain into everyday forms of power while remaining structurally excluded from labour protections and urban governance. In doing so, the article calls for a reorientation of urban policy away from output-driven sustainability toward labour justice, bodily dignity, and gender equity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Women rag pickers' agency is conceptualised not as liberal empowerment but as *power within constraint* (Kabeer 1999)—the capacity to define goals and act upon them under unequal conditions. For women rag pickers, agency operates through everyday decisions about work locations, hours, earnings negotiations, and household allocation. Chen's (2012, 2014) analysis of informal labour further informs this framework, showing how informal workers actively organise livelihoods through market relations, spatial strategies, and social networks rather than merely experiencing exclusion. Women rag pickers exemplify this form of economic citizenship, sustaining urban recycling systems while remaining institutionally invisible.

Feminist scholars caution against romanticising resilience (Rao 2017; Sanyal 2021). Accordingly, this paper adopts a *pain-to-power* lens that recognises women's profound bodily, emotional, and economic suffering while documenting their assertive economic practices and household authority. Power here is not institutional but relational, negotiated, and survival-oriented.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research on rag pickers has largely centred on occupational hazards, environmental exposure, child labour, and social marginalisation. Feminist scholarship further demonstrates how sanitation labour is deeply gendered and caste-marked, with women concentrated in the most hazardous and poorly paid segments. Yet much of this literature portrays women primarily as victims. Kabeer's (1999, 2012) conception of agency offers a corrective by foregrounding women's capacity for action within constraint. Early Indian scholarship framed waste picking as a survival strategy among poor, lower-caste women in urban contexts. Huysman's (1994) seminal study positioned women rag pickers as economic actors, documenting how waste work enabled daily income generation, limited autonomy, and household survival, while highlighting caste, migration, and gender as intersecting determinants of entry into waste labour.

Subsequent studies shifted attention to health risks. Research from Mumbai documented widespread injuries, respiratory illness, skin disease, gastrointestinal problems, and reproductive health concerns, intensified by long hours, double work burdens, nutritional deficits, and lack of protective equipment (Uplap and Bhate 2014). Wasnik et al. (2020) further showed that despite high morbidity, women's use of formal healthcare remained low due to poverty, time constraints, limited awareness, and discrimination, reinforcing vulnerability through exclusion from occupational protections and social security.

Harriss-White's (2023) feminist political economy analysis traces waste through local circuits to reveal how women's labour remains essential yet stigmatised and marginalised. Drawing on Deliege's paradox, she shows women's concentration in the most hazardous waste work, shaped by institutional arrangements, gendered property relations, and weakened bargaining power under privatisation.

Time-use scholarship has also been crucial. Neetha's work highlights how conventional labour statistics obscure unpaid care and domestic labour, while Indrani Mazumdar and Neetha (2011) demonstrate that failure to distinguish unpaid work masks women's economic contributions and helps explain declining female labour participation.

Recent Tamil Nadu-based studies document severe occupational risks among women working in Chennai dump yards, including musculoskeletal disorders, respiratory problems, and chronic illness, alongside near-total absence of safety measures and persistent policy neglect of gender-specific vulnerabilities (Dhanasekar and Anitha 2024). Overall, the literature reflects a shift from viewing women rag pickers solely as a survival population toward recognising them as gendered economic actors within informal urban systems, though region-specific evidence—particularly from Tamil Nadu—remains limited.

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RESEARCH GAP AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While existing studies have richly documented the vulnerabilities and health risks faced by women rag pickers, there is limited empirical analysis of their economic agency and household decision-making within informal waste economies. This study addresses this gap by examining how women exercise agency under conditions of precarity, caste-based stigma, and informality. Centring women's everyday economic practices, it analyses how occupational pain is actively negotiated and, at times, transformed into relational forms of power across both work and household spheres.

Research questions:

- What are the socio-economic conditions under which women rag pickers engage in informal waste work?
- How do women rag pickers exercise decision-making power in work-related and household contexts?
- Through what strategies is occupational pain negotiated and transformed into everyday forms of power?

Feminist Political Economy, Embodiment, and Social Reproduction: Reframing Informal Waste Labour

This study contributes to feminist theory by locating women rag pickers' labour at the intersection of embodiment, social reproduction, and urban political economy. Existing analyses of informal sanitation work in India largely frame women through lenses of vulnerability, health risk, or environmental service provision. While important, such approaches risk reproducing what feminist scholars have long critiqued as a depoliticised account of women's labour—one that documents suffering without theorising how that suffering is structurally produced or economically instrumentalised.

Drawing on feminist political economy, embodiment, and social reproduction theory (Elson 1998; Kabeer 1999; Federici 2012; Rai et al. 2014), alongside feminist time-use scholarship that foregrounds unpaid work and depletion (Hirway 2010, 2015), it is argued that women rag pickers exercise a form of relational agency shaped by responsibility rather than accumulation—what I conceptualise as power within constraint. Hirway's work demonstrates how women's unpaid labour systematically subsidises economic activity by absorbing infrastructural deficits and care responsibilities, producing chronic time poverty. This framework is crucial for understanding informal waste work, where women's paid rag picking is inseparable from unpaid domestic labour and bodily endurance. Women's agency thus emerges not through liberation from care, but through intensified responsibility for sustaining households under conditions of urban neglect. Women absorb the costs of inadequate housing, sanitation, healthcare, and childcare through their own bodies, time, and emotional labour. Their extended workdays—combining paid rag picking with unpaid domestic and care work—produce what Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas (2014) describe as depletion: the progressive erosion of physical, temporal, and affective resources necessary for everyday survival.

Embodiment is central to this political economy. Women rag pickers experience chronic pain, illness, fatigue, and menstrual insecurity not as episodic disruptions but as normalised conditions of work. The absence of protective equipment, toilets, and safe public infrastructure renders women's bodies sites of extraction, where urban sanitation and recycling economies externalise their operational costs. Occupational pain is thus not incidental; it is constitutive of informal waste labour. Feminist scholars have argued that women's bodies frequently function as shock absorbers for systemic failure (Federici 2012; Kabeer 1999). This study empirically demonstrates how urban sustainability regimes depend upon precisely such bodily absorption.

Yet women are not merely passive recipients of structural violence. Through everyday decisions about work locations, scrap selling, transport negotiation, debt management, and household budgeting, women exercise what Kabeer (1999) defines as relational agency—the capacity to act within deeply unequal constraints. However, this agency does not produce accumulation or exit from poverty. Instead, it operates through responsibility-laden survival strategies oriented toward feeding families, educating children, repaying debts, and maintaining social belonging. It is conceptual this as *power within constraint*: a form of embodied agency that sustains life without transforming the structures that produce precarity.

Social reproduction provides the connective tissue between women's labour in public waste spaces and their authority within households. Particularly in female-headed households shaped by widowhood, separation, or desertion, women emerge as primary economic managers. Control over daily earnings enables decision-making around food, healthcare, education, and social obligations. Feminist economists have long argued that such authority must not be romanticised, as it arises from necessity rather than choice (Agarwal 1997; Chant 2007). The convergence of earning and caregiving responsibilities produces what can be described as burdened autonomy: women gain decision-making power precisely because they are left to manage scarcity alone.

This analysis also advances a feminist critique of dominant urban sustainability narratives. Contemporary cleanliness and waste-management programmes portray recycling and sanitation as technical or environmental achievements, obscuring the gendered labour that makes them possible. Women rag pickers are rendered invisible within Smart City frameworks and Swachh Bharat metrics, even as their informal work subsidises urban environmental goals. Sustainability, in this context, is built on women's unpaid segregation labour, time poverty, bodily depletion, and informal debt. The city appears clean only because women's labour remains dirty, unrecognised, and expendable.

By foregrounding embodiment and social reproduction, this study reframes informal waste work as a feminist political economy issue rather than a marginal livelihood concern. Women rag pickers emerge not simply as vulnerable workers but as central actors

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in urban economies whose labour sustains both capitalist recycling chains and household survival. Their agency is real but constrained, powerful yet costly, indispensable yet systematically devalued. Recognising this paradox challenges celebratory accounts of informality and calls for a reorientation of urban policy away from output-driven sustainability toward labour justice, bodily dignity, and gender equity.

The sections that follow operationalise this framework through empirical analysis of women rag pickers' socio-economic conditions, spatial practices, market engagement, household governance, and embodied labour. Rather than treating these domains separately, the analysis reads them together as interconnected sites of social reproduction through which women negotiate precarity and enact power within constraint.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the socio-economic conditions and gendered work-related vulnerabilities of women rag pickers within the urban informal economy.
2. To analyse the everyday decision-making power of women rag pickers in relation to choice of work locations, market negotiations with scrap dealers, and the management of interactions in public and semi-public spaces.
3. To assess the role of women rag pickers as household economic managers, with particular attention to decisions regarding income allocation for food, education, healthcare, asset acquisition, debt repayment, and social obligations.
4. To conceptualise the transformation of occupational pain into everyday forms of power through a feminist political economy framework that foregrounds gender,

METHODOLOGY

This study draws on primary data collected during 2023–24 among women rag pickers in Tiruchirapalli city, Tamil Nadu. From a larger survey of sanitation workers, a purposive sub-sample of 54 women rag pickers—all belonging to Scheduled Caste communities—was selected for detailed analysis. Participants were primarily drawn from Dharanallur and Kalnaikan slums, with Dharanallur accounting for over 90 per cent of the sample. These settlements are characterised by congested living conditions, poor housing, and close proximity to scrap shops, markets, and transport nodes, shaping both livelihood strategies and everyday mobility. Dharanallur historically attracted rural migrants seeking wage labor, especially at the Gandhi Vegetable Market. Some households took up sanitation work, with women increasingly engaging in rag-picking. Over time, rag-pickers—mostly from the Scheduled Caste community and often related—became concentrated in this area.

Access to respondents was facilitated through local NGOs working with informal sanitation workers, which provided initial listings of rag pickers and supported community entry. Data were collected using a mixed-methods approach combining structured household surveys, time-use schedules, focus group discussions (FGDs), and in-depth interviews. The household survey captured socio-economic characteristics, work patterns, income, health conditions, indebtedness, and access to welfare schemes. Time-use schedules documented women's daily allocation of time across paid rag picking, unpaid domestic labour, and care work. FGDs and interviews explored work strategies, market negotiations, mobility practices, experiences of stigma and risk, and household decision-making. The data from FGDs, interviews, and surveys were triangulated using coding methods, with responses cross-checked across surveys and interviews against FGD findings to ensure consistency and reliability.

Field observations revealed that women typically work in groups and begin waste collection as early as 4 a.m., before municipal cleaning starts. They access collection sites identified through experience as high-yield areas and travel using buses, trains, or on foot. Women actively negotiate transport constraints—requesting less crowded buses from conductors and using general train compartments, often evading ticket checks or disembarking when inspectors approach—illustrating the precarious yet skilled navigation of urban space. Scrap is sold daily, after which women commonly repay informal loans or advances from scrap dealers or moneylenders, leaving only residual income for household expenses. Lunch is frequently sourced from roadside eateries due to time constraints. Rag picker-specific data were extracted from the larger sanitation worker dataset and organised into composite tables for focused analysis. Qualitative data were analysed thematically within a feminist political economy framework, foregrounding how gender, caste, spatial marginality, and informality shape labour experiences, market relations, and everyday agency.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Understanding the socio-economic profile of women rag pickers is critical to analysing how agency and power are exercised within conditions of precarity. Women's participation in rag picking is shaped not only by poverty, but by intersecting factors such as low educational attainment, disrupted marital relations, insecure housing, and limited access to basic urban services. These conditions reflect the gendered and caste-marked nature of urban informality, where women's labour is both indispensable and devalued. The indicators presented below provide the material context within which women rag pickers negotiate work, manage households, and transform occupational hardship into everyday forms of power

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Table 1: Socio Economic Profile of the Participants

Indicator	Rag Pickers Percentage /Value
Non-Literate	62.3
Literate	37.7
Widowed/Separated/Deserted	61.3
Currently Married	38.9
Living in Single-Room Houses	81.5
No Toilet Facility at Home	84.9
Access to Public Tap Only	84.9
Average Monthly Household Income	Rs. 15,457

The socio-economic profile of women rag pickers presented in Table 1 reveals deeply gendered vulnerabilities that are structurally produced rather than individually contingent. High levels of non-literacy (62.3 per cent) among respondents reflect long-standing gender bias in access to education, particularly for women located at the intersections of caste, poverty, and urban marginality. Limited formal education not only constrains access to secure employment but also restricts women's ability to navigate bureaucratic systems, claim welfare entitlements, or transition into alternative livelihoods. Literacy deprivation thus operates as a mechanism of labour segmentation, effectively locking women into the most precarious and stigmatised segments of informal work. The marital status profile further underscores the feminisation of responsibility under conditions of abandonment and loss. With 61.3 per cent of respondents being widowed, separated, or deserted, women rag pickers disproportionately assume the role of primary earners and household managers. This challenges dominant portrayals of women rag pickers as dependents or supplementary workers. Instead, the data reveal a pattern of gendered survival, where women enter hazardous waste work following the breakdown of patriarchal support structures that otherwise mediate women's access to livelihoods. Widowhood and separation often intensify social stigma and spatial exclusion, making waste picking one of the few accessible occupations due to its low entry barriers and absence of formal gatekeeping.

Housing and sanitation indicators expose the spatial dimensions of gendered deprivation in urban contexts. The fact that 81.5 per cent of respondents live in single-room dwellings and 84.9 per cent lack toilet facilities at home highlights the intersection of poverty, gender, and infrastructural neglect. For women, inadequate housing and sanitation extend beyond material deprivation to issues of dignity, safety, and bodily autonomy. The absence of household toilets disproportionately burdens women, increasing exposure to harassment, health risks, and time poverty, while reinforcing their marginalisation within the urban landscape. Women's mobility across neighbourhoods, markets, and dumping sites constitutes another axis of gendered labour extraction. While spatial mobility enables access to waste materials and better prices, it simultaneously externalises the costs of transport, physical exhaustion, and exposure to harassment onto women's bodies. From a feminist political economy and social reproduction perspective, this embodied labour erodes women's health and well-being, while urban recycling economies benefit from flexible, low-cost material flows without bearing the costs of sustaining the labouring body. This autonomy, however, must be understood not as labour freedom but as a survival-oriented form of agency shaped by the imperatives of social reproduction. Women independently determine work timings and locations in order to reconcile income generation with unpaid domestic labour, caregiving responsibilities, and bodily endurance. Such flexibility—often celebrated in narratives of informality—functions instead as a compensatory mechanism for the absence of public provisioning and labour protections, effectively subsidising both urban sanitation systems and capitalist recycling industries. The socio-economic indicators demonstrate that women rag pickers occupy a position of structural precarity produced through gendered exclusions across education, family, housing, sanitation, and labour markets. Yet these vulnerabilities coexist with women's centrality to household survival and urban waste economies.

Table 2: Spatial Autonomy and Work Decisions of Women Rag pickers (N = 54)

Work Characteristics	Percentage
Decide Work Location independently	100.0
Collect waste within local area	92.6
Collect from Streets	54.0
Collect from Market Shops	46.0
Work 6-7 Hours per day	67.9
Work More than 8 hours per day	22.6
Average Working Hours	6.4

Table 2 highlights the significant degree of spatial decision-making autonomy exercised by women rag pickers in Tiruchirappalli. All respondents (100 per cent) reported independently deciding their work locations, indicating that rag picking—despite its

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informal, precarious, and stigmatised nature—offers women a limited but meaningful form of control over the spatial organisation of their labour. This autonomy, however, must be understood not as occupational freedom, but as a gendered survival strategy shaped by the absence of formal employment options and labour regulation. A large majority of women (92.6 per cent) collect waste within their local areas, a finding that directly corresponds with time-use data showing women's need to coordinate paid waste work with unpaid domestic labour and caregiving responsibilities. Working close to home reduces travel time and allows women to manage household tasks such as cooking, childcare, water collection, and care for elderly family members alongside income generation. However, this spatial compression of work and home also intensifies women's overall workday, contributing to time poverty rather than alleviating it. A feminist political economy reading of the data therefore calls for a rethinking of women rag pickers not merely as welfare subjects, but as economic agents whose labour sustains urban sanitation systems at significant personal cost. Addressing these inequalities requires gender-responsive urban policies that recognise women rag pickers as workers entitled to dignity, safety, and social protection, rather than as marginal actors at the fringes of the city.

Street-based waste collection is universal (100 per cent), underscoring the centrality of public and semi-public spaces in women's labour processes. Nearly half of the respondents (46.0 per cent) also collect waste from markets and shops, indicating strategic efforts to access higher-value or more consistent recyclable materials. Time-use data reveal that women engaging in multiple collection sites often extend their workdays, while health data indicate higher incidence of musculoskeletal pain, fatigue, and minor injuries among women who cover wider spatial ranges and handle heavier waste loads. These patterns suggest that spatial diversification, while economically rational, carries embodied health costs.

Patterns of work intensity further reinforce this linkage. While most women (67.9 per cent) work between six and seven hours per day, nearly one-fourth (22.6 per cent) reported working more than eight hours daily. When combined with unpaid domestic and care work documented in time-use schedules, women's total work burden often exceeds conventional full-time labour norms. Health data show that women in the longer working-hour categories report higher prevalence of chronic back pain, joint problems, and general physical exhaustion, indicating a clear relationship between extended work hours, time poverty, and deteriorating health outcomes. The table demonstrates that women rag pickers exercise everyday forms of power in organising where and how they work, but that this autonomy is deeply intertwined with gendered time burdens and embodied health risks. From a feminist political economy perspective, women's spatial and temporal flexibility subsidises both household survival and urban waste recovery systems, while the cumulative costs of time depletion and bodily wear are internalised by women themselves. Linking spatial autonomy with time-use and health outcomes thus reveals how women's agency operates within—and is constrained by—the unequal organisation of social reproduction and informal labour.

Market Engagement, Scrap Selling, and Gendered Surplus Extraction

Linking the socio economic profile with market engagement reveal how women rag pickers' market engagement is deeply shaped by structural socio-economic vulnerabilities while simultaneously constituting a key site of agency and power.

Table 3: Market Engagement and Scrap-Selling Practices (N=54)

Indicator	Percentage
Sell Scrap Daily	85.2
Segregate Waste at Scrap Dealer shop	63.0
Segregate waste at Public Spaces	31.5
Receive Advance/Bonus from scrap dealers	80.1
Travel Using Multiple Transport Modes	78.1

Table 3 positions women rag pickers within informal scrap markets as gendered labour that sustains surplus extraction while remaining structurally devalued. The fact that 85.2 per cent sell scrap daily reflects not individual choice but the compulsions of social reproduction under precarity—low and volatile earnings, absence of savings, and immediate household needs. From a Marxist perspective, daily selling ensures continuous material flows to recycling industries, reducing circulation time while shifting risks of price fluctuation and income insecurity onto women workers. Waste segregation further intensifies surplus generation. Sixty-three per cent segregate waste at scrap shops and 31.5 per cent in public spaces, contributing unpaid or underpaid labour that enhances exchange value without corresponding remuneration. Gendered norms associating women with patience and dexterity naturalise their concentration in such labour-intensive tasks, enabling capital to appropriate additional surplus while rendering women's work invisible. Yet daily monetisation of labour also functions as a survival strategy: immediate cash flow allows women to smooth consumption and meet recurring household needs, underscoring the importance of liquidity in poor households (Elson, 1998; Kabeer, 1999).

Consistent with Chen (2012, 2014), women rag pickers are deeply embedded in urban markets through ongoing negotiations with scrap dealers, transport systems, and intermediaries. Decisions about selling points, segregation, and timing reflect experiential

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market knowledge exercised under asymmetric power relations. While women demonstrate economic competence, bargaining remains constrained by dealers' price-setting power and lack of institutional protection. Advances and informal bonuses—received by 80.1 per cent—tie women to specific buyers, functioning as mechanisms of labour discipline while also sustaining household reproduction in the absence of state welfare. Control over regular income reshapes household power relations, particularly for widowed, separated, and female-headed households, enabling women to prioritise food, healthcare, education, and debt repayment (Agarwal, 1997; Sen, 1990). However, this authority remains bounded. Women's negotiations with dealers secure marginal gains but occur within gendered and caste-stratified market hierarchies that exclude them from higher nodes of value realisation. These findings show that non-literacy, marital vulnerability, insecure housing, and inadequate sanitation compel dependence on informal waste work, where daily selling and segregation become necessary survival mechanisms. Women rag pickers thus emerge as central yet invisibilised contributors to urban recycling and household survival. Their agency operates within structural deprivation—producing relational power while simultaneously reproducing gendered exploitation—illustrating power within constraint rather than transformative empowerment.

Power within Constraint: Embodied Agency and Social Reproduction

Socio-economic, spatial, market, and household data show that women rag pickers' bodies and labour operate simultaneously as sites of vulnerability and agency. Structural disadvantages—low literacy, marital disruption, insecure housing, and inadequate sanitation—limit access to formal employment and compel reliance on informal waste work. Yet within these constraints, women exercise control over work locations, timing, mobility, and scrap-selling strategies, negotiating income generation alongside unpaid domestic and care responsibilities. These everyday decisions reveal how women manage bodily limits, health risks, and time poverty to sustain both households and urban recycling systems.

Viewed through feminist political economy and embodiment, women's labour absorbs structural inequalities while producing relational forms of power. Their bodies bear exhaustion, illness, stigma, and infrastructural deprivation, yet these embodied experiences generate practical knowledge, spatial skill, and economic competence. Decisions about when and where to work, how to navigate transport, negotiate prices, and allocate earnings constitute survival-oriented agency—what this study conceptualises as *power within constraint*.

Household decision-making is a key site of this relational power. Women are not only earners but primary financial managers, especially in female-headed households shaped by widowhood, separation, or desertion. Earnings are directed toward food, healthcare, education, debt, and social obligations, highlighting women's central role in social reproduction. Feminist political economy cautions against romanticising this authority: women's control over finances arises from structural compulsion, intensifying emotional, physical, and economic burdens while leaving exploitative labour relations intact.

Market participation further reflects this duality. Women mobilise experiential knowledge to negotiate with scrap dealers, manage informal credit, and maintain income flows. While this strengthens household bargaining power, it remains constrained by price-setting structures, gendered hierarchies, and lack of labour protections. Such negotiations secure marginal gains but rarely enable exit from precarity, reinforcing tactical agency that stabilises rather than transforms inequality.

These findings align with Kabeer's relational understanding of agency. Women rag pickers convert occupational pain into everyday power through decisions that sustain livelihoods and households under adversity. Their care-centred agency operates across public and private spheres yet remains bounded by intersecting inequalities of gender, caste, class, and informality. Informal labour thus exceeds binaries of victimhood or empowerment, revealing a terrain where vulnerability and power coexist.

This paradox carries policy implications. Urban sanitation frameworks prioritise infrastructure and privatisation while rendering women's labour invisible. A feminist political economy perspective calls for gender-responsive policies recognising women rag pickers as workers—through formal recognition, occupational safety, sanitation and childcare access, social security, and participation in waste governance. Interventions must address embodied and temporal inequalities, reducing time poverty and health risks while strengthening women's capacity to exercise agency without absorbing disproportionate costs. Overall, women rag pickers emerge as central yet invisibilised contributors to urban sanitation and social reproduction, transforming pain into relational power under persistent structural marginalisation.

From Pain to Power: Gendered Embodiment and Everyday Agency

Table 4: Occupational Pain and Coping Mechanisms (N=54)

Indicator	Percent
Do not Use PPE	71.7
Lack of Toilet access at Workplace	43.1
Use Open Space during Menstruation	13.6
Manage till return Home	13.6
Report Health Issues	96.2

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Table 4 exposes how occupational pain is structurally produced and unevenly borne by women rag pickers. The absence of PPE for 71.7 per cent of respondents reflects not individual negligence but institutional abandonment, through which municipalities and recycling markets externalise health and safety costs onto women's bodies. Similarly, the lack of workplace toilets for 43.1 per cent reveals gendered infrastructural neglect, transforming waste work into an embodied struggle shaped by menstruation, privacy, and dignity. That some women resort to open spaces or delay bodily needs underscores how agency is exercised under extreme constraint—through endurance, bodily regulation, and calculated risk.

With 96.2 per cent reporting health problems, illness emerges as normalised within informal labour regimes. Yet women actively manage this precarity by adjusting work intensity, timing, and mobility to sustain both income and bodily survival. From a feminist political economy perspective, power here does not arise from formal rights or protections but from everyday practices of care—for the self and for the household. Women convert occupational pain into relational agency through routine decisions that prioritise continuity of work, family survival, and personal dignity. This challenges dominant narratives that equate informality with passivity. Women rag pickers enact power through embodied knowledge and survival strategies, even as structural conditions remain unchanged.

Household Governance and Gendered Economic Power

Table 5: Household Economic Decision-Making by Women Ragpickers

Expenditure Category	Rag Pickers (%)
Spend on Children's Education	53.7
Annual Medical Expenses Below Rs. 5000	86.8
Monthly Food Expenses below Rs. 5000	66.7
Festival/Marriage Expenses Below Rs. 5000	91.7
Female Headed Households	High (qualitative)

Table 5 underscores women rag pickers' central role in household economic decision-making under severe material constraint. Feminist political economy emphasises that women's power lies not only in earning income but in controlling allocation and sustaining social reproduction (Folbre, 2001; Kabeer, 1999). Despite low and unstable earnings, women exercise decisive authority over everyday expenditures, demonstrating agency within structural inequality.

Over half of respondents (53.7 per cent) prioritise children's education, reflecting women's investment in intergenerational mobility and long-term household security (Elson, 1998; Federici, 2012). At the same time, low spending on food and healthcare reveals strategic rationing rather than absence of need. Women absorb economic shocks through deferred care, nutritional compromise, and self-denial to stabilise households—a gendered burden long highlighted by feminist scholars (Agarwal, 1997; Sen, 1990). Similarly, minimal expenditure on festivals and marriages illustrates how women negotiate dignity and social belonging within tight budgets, exemplifying what Kabeer (1999) terms agency through adaptation.

The prevalence of female-headed households further consolidates women's authority over household governance, as responsibilities for earning, budgeting, and caregiving converge following male withdrawal through migration, separation, or death (Chant, 2007). Women rag pickers thus emerge not as dependents but as economic managers whose everyday decisions redistribute risk and sustain family life. Their power lies not in surplus accumulation but in managing scarcity. A feminist political economy perspective reframes household poverty as the outcome of unequal urban labour systems that rely on women's unpaid and underpaid economic governance, revealing how women transform structural deprivation into everyday forms of authority while remaining excluded from formal recognition.

Gendered Time Use, Time Poverty, and the Erosion of Women's Own Space

The activity profile of women rag pickers reveals a deeply gendered pattern of time use, marked by long working hours, limited rest, and the near-erasure of personal time. On average, women spend 6.4 hours per day in paid rag-picking work, followed by 3.12 hours in unpaid domestic labour, leaving only 0.53 hours for personal care or leisure.

Table 6: Time Use Pattern of Women Rag Pickers (N = 23)

Activity	Average Hours per day
Rag Picking Work	6.40
Unpaid Domestic Work	3.12
Personal Care/Leisure	0.53
Total	10.05

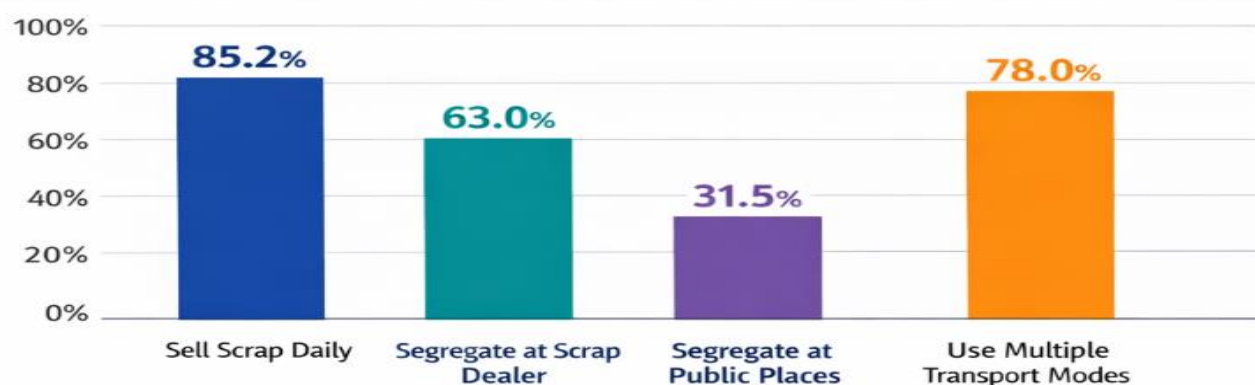
Negotiating Survival: Gendered Precarity, Social Reproduction, And Power Within Constraint Among Women Rag Pickers in Urban India

Time-use data reveal acute time poverty among women rag pickers, reflecting the double burden of paid waste work and unpaid domestic labour (Bardasi & Wodon, 2010; Hirway, 2010). While rag picking feeds urban recycling economies, women simultaneously perform essential but unvalued reproductive labour—cooking, cleaning, caregiving, water collection, and emotional care—without recognition or compensation (Folbre, 2001; Elson, 1998). The near parity between paid and unpaid work hours shows how women’s time is continuously mobilised for both market and household, leaving minimal scope for rest or self-directed activity.

Time Use of Women Rag Pickers (Daily Hours)



Market Engagement and Scrap Selling Practices



Yet time poverty also reveals relational agency. Women consciously redirect time away from leisure toward paid work and care to secure food, education, and social continuity. As feminist political economy emphasises, women’s agency often operates through responsibility-laden choices rather than freedom from obligation (Kabeer, 1999; Rai et al., 2014). This is not passive endurance but a costly strategy of care-centred survival. The extremely limited personal time (0.53 hours) signals a deeper gendered deprivation. Feminist scholars argue that leisure is a key indicator of autonomy and wellbeing (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000). Its erosion reflects systematic self-denial, as women prioritise family survival over bodily and emotional care, particularly in female-headed and economically stressed households (Hochschild, 1989; Kabeer, 1999). This deprivation is structurally produced: informal labour offers no fixed hours or social protection, while poverty intensifies unpaid work due to inadequate housing, water, and sanitation (Chen, 2012; Hirway & Jose, 2011). Women rag pickers’ lives cannot be reduced to binaries of victimhood or empowerment. Their power is forged within precarity—embodied, relational, and constrained. Gender-sensitive urban policies must therefore address unpaid care burdens alongside income generation; otherwise, interventions risk deepening women’s time poverty rather than alleviating it.

Household Dynamics and Informal Work

One of the Participants, a 35-year-old former rag picker, exemplifies the intersection of gender, age, and labor in shaping vulnerability and agency. Initially, she combined eight-hour rag picking with household management, while her husband, largely economically inactive, spent his limited earnings on personal consumption. Unusually, her husband assumed domestic responsibilities—caring for children, cooking, and managing chores—reflecting a rare gender role reversal; yet, he monetarily demanded compensation for these tasks, revealing persistent patriarchal expectations. Her youth exposed her to harassment in public labor spaces, highlighting age and gender as compounding vulnerabilities. Seeking safer and more stable work, she leveraged

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political networks and minimal bribes to secure contractual sanitation employment with a fixed monthly salary of Rs. 15,000. This transition afforded economic security, social recognition, and participation in worker meetings, though she noted the need to assertively claim statutory benefits. Her experience demonstrates that rag picking is particularly unsuitable for young women, underscores the conditionality of household gender role renegotiation, and illustrates how economic necessity, social networks, and political engagement intersect to shape women's labor trajectories and empowerment.

Structural Marginalisation, Informal Markets, and Power Within Constraint

Women rag pickers occupy the lowest rungs of urban labour hierarchies, shaped by intersecting inequalities of gender, caste, class, and informality. Their exclusion from formal employment, labour protections, and social security is not accidental but constitutive of urban capitalism, which relies on cheap, flexible, and disposable labour to sustain sanitation and recycling systems (Elson, 1998; Harriss-White, 2023). Women's concentration in the most stigmatised and hazardous waste work reflects the gendered allocation of "dirty" labour, rendering their contributions socially invisible while subsidising urban accumulation.

Within this context, women's earnings play a paradoxical role. Rag picking provides daily income that reduces dependence on male earners, enables household budgeting, and buffers minor crises. Yet this income secures survival rather than mobility. Feminist economists describe this as reproductive income within exploitative markets—supporting household continuity without enabling accumulation or long-term security. Women's engagement with informal scrap markets demonstrates constrained agency. Through price negotiations, dealer selection, and timing of sales, women deploy experiential market knowledge under asymmetric power relations. Rag picking thus operates as survival entrepreneurship: agency enacted through endurance and adaptation rather than ownership or upward mobility. This challenges celebratory narratives of informality that frame precarious self-employment as empowerment while obscuring its exploitative foundations.

Gendered vulnerability is intensified by women's disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care. Inadequate housing, water, sanitation, childcare, and healthcare expand domestic workloads and deepen bodily exhaustion. Feminist social reproduction theory highlights how women absorb systemic failures through their time, health, and emotional labour (Federici, 2012; Rai et al., 2014). Vulnerability here is cumulative—produced through the depletion of physical, temporal, and affective resources necessary for daily survival.

Marital disruption further reshapes this precarity–power nexus. Female-headed households often enhance women's control over income and decisions, yet simultaneously heighten exposure to debt, risk, and social scrutiny (Chant, 2007). This produces burdened autonomy, where authority is inseparable from intensified responsibility. Empowerment and marginalisation thus coexist, unsettling linear assumptions that autonomy necessarily reduces precarity. Crucially, structural marginalisation does not eliminate agency but reconfigures it. Women navigate exclusionary urban spaces through everyday negotiations with scrap dealers, creditors, municipal actors, and the public. Their agency is relational and responsibility-laden, embedded in care obligations and survival imperatives rather than formal rights or institutional recognition (Kabeer, 1999). This shifts analysis away from individualised resilience toward the gendered political economy of informality. Despite continuous income generation, women remain perennially indebted. Daily earnings meet subsistence needs, but healthcare, education, housing repairs, and social obligations routinely require borrowing from scrap dealers and informal lenders, reinforcing dependency. This reveals the limits of women's economic power: control over earnings sustains households but does not permit exit from poverty. Their power is reproductive rather than transformative.

Household Dynamics and Power

A participant, an 80-plus-year-old woman rag picker in Tiruchirapalli, exemplifies how gendered survival labour generates everyday power under structural constraint. Widowed early and having migrated to her current settlement seven years ago, she remains the sole breadwinner for a multigenerational household that includes her daughter, widowed daughter-in-law, and grandchildren. Despite chronic illness (diabetes and asthma), Mariammal continues to work three to four hours daily, collecting scrap from designated locations she has identified over time and selling it each evening. In the absence of pensions or retirement, bodily endurance becomes a condition of survival. Her earnings support daily household needs, children's education, festive expenses, and temple contributions. She has purchased a small house, rents out a portion for supplementary income, maintains modest savings, and borrows strategically during local festivals—demonstrating careful financial management rather than subsistence-level dependence. Through rag picking, she educated her children, arranged marriages, accumulated assets, and continues to support her grandchildren, illustrating women's central role in social reproduction across generations. She contrasts rag picking with wage labour such as construction work, emphasising its flexibility, autonomy, and relatively higher daily income. Her mobility relies on informal negotiations with bus conductors who allow large scrap bags for nominal luggage charges, highlighting how women navigate urban space through relational networks even amid stigma and suspicion. From a feminist political economy perspective, Her life reveals the paradox of empowerment under precarity. Her authority within both household and informal market relations emerges not from formal employment or institutional protection, but through embodied endurance, care labour, and continuous work. She transforms occupational pain—ageing, illness, stigma, and insecurity—into economic reliability and household survival. This is *power within constraint*: agency exercised through responsibility-laden choices that sustain families and urban recycling.

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systems while leaving structural inequalities intact. Her story challenges portrayals of informal women workers as passive victims, while also exposing the limits of individual resilience. Her continued labour into old age reflects institutional failure rather than personal choice, underscoring how urban economies depend on ageing women's invisible labour to reproduce both households and cities.

Household Labour and gender bargaining:

Another woman rag picker described a household marked by stark gendered labor inequalities and economic precarity. While her husband participates in formal employment, he does not contribute to domestic tasks. Basic household chores, such as fetching drinking water to the first floor—a physically demanding task—fall squarely on her shoulders. Occasionally, she requests her husband to fetch one or two pots of water daily; however, he conditions this assistance on monetary payment, typically Rs. 50, which is often spent on personal, non-essential consumption, including alcohol and tobacco. This illustrates the gendered devaluation of domestic labor: tasks performed by women are taken as duty and unpaid, whereas men's domestic contributions are monetized and often diverted to personal consumption. The situation reflects intersecting structural inequalities: class, caste, and residential space compound women's labor burdens. Living in informal settlements or congested housing in urban spaces, women bear both the physical and social costs of household maintenance while simultaneously engaging in precarious rag picking, which exposes them to environmental hazards, harassment, and exploitation. The labor of women is thus doubly marginalized—both in the household and in the public labor economy—yet they persist in performing these tasks out of responsibility for children, family survival, and household cohesion. This case highlights how patriarchal expectations intersect with class and spatial constraints to structure daily inequalities, reinforcing women's unpaid labor while constraining their access to economic autonomy and social mobility.

The findings show that women rag pickers are structurally marginalised yet economically indispensable; they convert occupational pain and stigma into household security; exercise decision-making authority in domestic and market spheres; and remain trapped in cycles of precarity and debt. This is power within constraint, not empowerment without pain. Women's agency operates through endurance, calculation, and care-centred survival, while the relations of exploitation remain intact. This study contributes to gender and informal labour debates by empirically documenting women rag pickers' everyday agency, reframing them as economic decision-makers rather than passive victims, and advancing a feminist political economy of sanitation that locates power in survival practices while exposing the structural limits that prevent such power from becoming transformative.

Toward Gender-Just Urban Sanitation: Policy Pathways

1. Formal Recognition as Workers, Not Beneficiaries

Urban sanitation policy must move beyond symbolic inclusion to legally recognise women rag pickers as workers within municipal waste systems. Gender-responsive implementation of the SWM Rules (2016) should guarantee registration, identity cards, and protection against displacement through privatisation. Recognition is essential for converting survival-based agency into enforceable labour rights.

2. Occupational Health as Labour Protection

Municipalities must ensure universal access to PPE, preventive healthcare, and basic health insurance for informal waste workers. Provision of workplace toilets, safe drinking water, and menstrual hygiene facilities is critical to addressing gendered bodily risks. These measures must be framed as labour entitlements rather than welfare.

3. Reducing Time Poverty through Public Care Infrastructure

Women's extreme time poverty requires investment in childcare, community kitchens, and accessible water and sanitation in low-income settlements. Without reducing unpaid care burdens, livelihood interventions risk intensifying women's labour extraction rather than improving wellbeing.

4. Disrupting Informal Debt Regimes

Access to low-interest institutional credit, emergency health funds, and debt relief mechanisms is essential to reduce dependence on scrap dealers and moneylenders. Financial inclusion must accommodate irregular earnings through flexible repayment structures.

5. Collective Voice in Urban Waste Governance

Women rag pickers must be represented in ward committees, sanitation planning bodies, and SBM–Urban monitoring frameworks. Supporting women-led collectives and cooperatives can enhance bargaining power, improve price negotiations, and shift agency from individual survival to collective influence.

6. Reframing Urban Sustainability Narratives

Urban cleanliness programmes must explicitly acknowledge that women's informal labour subsidises environmental sustainability at high bodily and social cost. Integrating feminist political economy perspectives would reorient policy from output-driven cleanliness metrics towards labour justice and gender equity.

CONCLUSION

Women rag pickers occupy a contradictory position of structural marginalization and everyday economic power, emerging as primary earners and household decision-makers despite low and unstable earnings, high health risks, inadequate sanitation, and persistent indebtedness. Their acute time poverty, reflected in the combination of long hours of paid rag picking and extensive unpaid care work, underscores the dual burden of productive and reproductive labor. Within these constraints, women exercise agency through market negotiations, strategic allocation of scarce resources, and careful debt management to sustain household survival, yet this agency remains largely reproductive, stabilizing families and subsidizing urban sanitation systems without enabling escape from poverty. The study contributes to feminist political economy by showing how women convert occupational pain, bodily exhaustion, and social stigma into economic reliability and care-centered survival, challenging victim-centric narratives while revealing the structural limits imposed by gendered informality and urban capitalism. Limitations include the study's focus on a single city and a relatively small sample, which may constrain generalizability. Future research could expand to comparative urban contexts, explore longitudinal dynamics of labor and household strategies, and assess policy interventions aimed at enhancing social protection, gender equity, and sustainable livelihoods in informal economies.

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