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Gendered Margins: Lived Experiences of Women in Institutional Housekeeping Roles in India

Sadaf[1], K. M. Ziyauddin[2]

Abstract

The present study aims to examine the lived experiences, challenges, and mobility of women employed as housekeeping workers in institutional settings. A large number of the women belong to low caste groups, thus indicating how caste reinforces occupational conditioning even in modern and educational institutions in India. It covers the obstacles, suggests adaptive strategies and ambitions that influence their work and personal experience. These women often face unstable working conditions, inadequate compensation, limited job security, and restricted opportunities for advancement. Societal expectations and gendered roles add to their misfortune. Qualitative methods of data collection and participatory methods are employed to record the narratives of structural inequalities experienced by the targeted respondents. The data reveals the presence of discrimination in the workplace, health risks, inadequate social protection, low wages, and the marginalisation of their labour within institutional hierarchies. The study highlights the need for policy reforms to incorporate inclusive frameworks that acknowledge the contributions of women in housekeeping roles. There is a need to contextualise their experiences within the larger discourse of labour rights and gender equity. The study aims to understand the gendered labour dynamics and inform practical initiatives for achieving equitable work conditions and dignified working environments. It also examines how institutions can bring inclusion as a mechanism by countering exclusionary processes within the institutional setup.

Keywords

Gender based exclusion, Aspirations, Lower Castes, Sanitation as occupation, Lived experiences, Structural inequalities, Lack of social protection

[1]Research Scholar, Dept. of Sociology, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad-500032 India
[2]Associate Professor, Dept. of Sociology, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad-500032 India
Email: [1]siddiquesadaf2@gmail.com, [2]ziyadse@gmail.com

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Introduction

Women's increasing participation in the workforce reflects a shift toward gender inclusivity; yet, their labour, particularly in low-paid, labour-intensive roles, remains undervalued and stigmatised (Bhongale & Bhattacharya, 2023). There are more than 5 million people in India working as sanitation workers, with 50 per cent of them employed in urban settings, including as manual scavengers who manually clean and carry human excreta every day (DAAA, 2022). The bulk of them belong to Hindu families coming from low caste born in the caste strata. Such women from marginalised caste and class backgrounds are disproportionately employed in sanitation and housekeeping roles, facing continuous systemic discrimination and exploitative conditions (PRIA, 2019). The existing presence of women from lower castes group does raise questions about urban mobility where discrimination has not declined, rather the evidence of rural discrimination engulfs the urban spaces and urban workplaces. Rural India is not only a site of caste-based atrocities, but new policies, new industry, new forms of capitalism and newer institutions have also adopted caste-based discrimination. Sukhadeo Thorat and Paul Attewel (2007) in their landmark field experiment study, «The Legacy of Social Exclusion: A Correspondence Study of Job Discrimination in India» properly addressed how new forms of capitalism adopted caste discrimination and it remains visible.

A large number of these women are employed in the unorganised sector, where they perform labour-intensive and low-paid tasks, often without job security or basic facilities (Ranjithkumar, 2024; Kumar& Arathi, 2024). Sanitation and housekeeping work includes toilet cleaning, waste management, domestic rubbish collection and disposal, road sweeping, gathering trash and disposal of these (UMC, 2023). While a large number of research studies focus on manual scavenging, sanitation works in the unorganised sector receive little attention. Consequently, there has been a lack of focus on the working and living conditions of sanitation workers employed in organised institutions, such as universities, hospitals, banks, and public sector offices. These are often supposed to provide safe and more dignified work environments, but this assumption remains untested and unexamined through empirical fieldwork. The women sanitation workers experience poor socio-economic conditions; their health, work-life balance, and safety need to be focused on by the government and non-government organisations. The present study addresses the gap, through an intersectional lens; it examines how gender, caste, and class shape their socio-economic condition, working experiences and institutional challenges focusing on the institutional sector: Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU), a central university in Hyderabad, India.

Literature Review

Women sanitation workers are one of the most vulnerable groups in India because they are hired as temporary and contract employees who receive no benefits (Kumar & Arathi, 2024). Surprisingly, the workforce employed in sanitation jobs across India does depend on women from lower Hindu caste families, making the lives of Dalits more vulnerable and increasing the level of suffering. Although the government report shows that the data of manual scavengers are almost zero, but when it comes to reality, we can see they still exist with different names, i.e., sanitation worker, cleaning worker, housekeeping worker, etc. The roles of housekeeping and sanitation workers in India are deeply rooted in caste-based discrimination, with Dalits and other marginalised communities excessively engaged in manual cleaning (Wilson, 2019; Shyamlal, 1981; Ziyauddin, 2022; Shahid, 2015). Women sanitation workers have to face social stigma, economic exploitation and health risks, these experiences being intersecting forms of oppression based on gender and caste (Kadlak et al., 2019). Other socio-economic factors heavily impact the familial and individual health of women employed in sanitation job, such that it does not matter even if they are working in modern institutions like an educational set-up. Health, well-being and illness does impact the entire family (Ziyauddin, 2025). A study by Borooah, Sabharwal, and Thorat in 2012 shows a higher impact on women who are engaged in caste-based hazardous occupations like sanitation, working without safety gears and health security, and how mortality among women from the Dalit community is higher than women from Hindu high castes. Further, on an average a Dalit woman lives 39.5 years of age as against upper caste women who live 54.1 years on an average.

Legislative efforts for marginalised women, such as the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act (2013), have aimed to eradicate manual scavenging. It has been implemented but remains weak; women are still engaged in manual cleaning (Gupta, 2016; Saldanha et al., 2022). Studies on sanitation work in urban settings, such as Mumbai, emphasise how neoliberal policies and contractual employment increased exploitation (Dubey & Murphy, 2021). Within organised and technologically advanced institutions, gendered labour hierarchies persist in subtler forms, where women disproportionately perform invisible and undervalued "institutional housekeeping" work that sustains organizational functioning. As highlighted by Bird et al. (2004), even data-driven and meritocratic institutions rely on women's unrecognised labour for coordination, monitoring, and reporting, while technological rationality privileges measurable outputs and efficiency, thereby obscuring gendered inequalities rather than abolish them. Despite expectations of better working conditions in institutional spaces such as universities, women housekeeping workers remain marginalised within organisational hierarchies. This

study seeks to address this gap by focusing on the lived experiences of housekeeping staff at MANUU.

Research Objectives

- To look over the socio-economic conditions of women sanitation workers at MANUU.
- To explore the institutional support and facilities available to these workers.
- To explore the challenges and difficulties they face in their roles.
- To assess whether these workers experience discrimination within the institutional setup.

Methodology

This study is qualitative research using both primary and secondary material, and the primary data was collected from the field, i.e., Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad. Hyderabad occupies an acclaim of having various premier educational institutions and organizations through which the questionnaire, interviews, case studies tools were used to collect data in this research process. In this research process magazine, articles and journals, reports and handbooks have been used as secondary sources to collect data. This study uses random sampling method in probability sampling, in which data has been collected by reaching the respondent randomly, which helps reduce bias and ensure diversity in responses. Random sampling is a subset of sampling techniques in which each sample has an equal chance of being selected.

There are a total of 80 women sanitation workers on the MANUU campus, out of which 50 per cent, i.e., 40 women, were selected for sampling. In this research, in-depth interviews (n=20) were conducted. Data were organised and presented in a tabular form for clarity. Data was collected in different departments, in hostels, in Osmania Central Park, in the admin building, in the Open Air Theatre, in the garden, etc., of the MANUU campus through observation and discussion. These workers do the work of cleaning in every building barring the boys' hostel. They clean the Civil Services Examinations Building, Directorate of Distance Education Centre for Distance and Online Education, CPDUMT, the library, the polytechnic, the guest house, the VC cottage, HRDC CSIT, etc. This research has been presented in a tabulated format.

Ethical Consideration

During the data collection from the respondent all efforts were made to comply with ethical principles and steps undertaken not to reduce the dignity and comfort of all respondents. The respondents were informed about the study, its academic purpose, and how the data would be used. All personal information shared by the respondent

has been kept confidential. Interviews and observations were conducted at times convenient for the respondents so as not to interfere with their work. The respondents were treated with respect during the research. Feelings and emotions, opinions and experiences of these workers were admitted and valued without any judgement. Prior to data collection, the purpose and objectives of the research were clearly explained to the respondents and, where applicable, to their supervisors. Data was collected only after obtaining their voluntary consent.

Theoretical Background

The study employed an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) to examine how women sanitation workers confront the intersecting oppressions of caste, class, and gender. Their experiences cannot be seen through a single lens but must be analysed through the interaction of multiple social hierarchies. Marx (1867) helps explain the Reserve Army of Labour, characterised by contractual, insecure employment and low pay, where women are seen as easily replaceable. Their economic status and marginalised caste push them into exploitative roles, reinforcing their vulnerability.

Silvia Federici (1975) argues that women's labour is underrated due to patriarchal norms; likewise, sanitation workers' cleaning work is considered a natural and normal duty rather than skilled labour. Furthermore, the field data and the manifestation of the context through Goffman's (1963) stigma theory reveal how these women are socially excluded due to their association with "impure" caste-based occupations. Their work is seen as filthy and dirty, reinforcing discrimination and seclusion. Together, these perspectives explain the structural and symbolic oppression faced by women sanitation workers.

In the context of bringing a larger social change among the life of workers involved into sanitation, a few policies are being brought in make their life world better. A sociological lens to these policies helps to showcase how policies could improve the overall living conditions of sanitation workers but it also raises questions to policymakers among civil society from the vantage point of dignity of labour, equality of life and employment opportunities and so on.

The explorations to such national level schemes are essentially needed here to examine the kind of intervention planned for the betterment of women sanitation workers and to sanitation workers countrywide.

Gender, Technology, and Institutional Labour Regimes

In discussions on gender and technology within institutional labour regimes, mechanised cleaning equipment is often presented as a marker of modernisation and efficiency in housekeeping work. However, field evidence from Central Universities such as Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU) reveals a significant

absence of such technological interventions in everyday cleaning practices. Despite the technological advancement, cleaning work continues to be carried out largely through manual labour, relying on traditional tools, chemical detergents, and prolonged physical effort.

This absence of mechanised cleaning technologies has distinctly gendered implications. Women workers, who constitute a substantial segment of the housekeeping workforce, are disproportionately exposed to harsh cleaning chemicals, contaminated surfaces, and repetitive manual tasks. Prolonged contact with chemical disinfectants without protective equipment frequently results in skin allergies, rashes, respiratory discomfort, and chronic health issues. The lack of mechanisation thus intensifies bodily strain rather than alleviating it, reinforcing the physical vulnerability of women workers within institutional spaces.

From a gendered labour perspective, the non-adoption of mechanised equipment is closely linked to the outsourced and contractual nature of housekeeping employment. Since workers are employed through private contractors, investments in technology, safety gear, or skill training remain minimal. Women workers have little to no say in decisions related to work processes or technological adoption, further marginalising them within the institutional hierarchy. Technology, in this context, is not merely absent but selectively withheld, reflecting cost-cutting priorities that override workers' health and dignity.

Moreover, the lack of mechanised cleaning equipment highlights the gap between institutional regulations and lived realities. While Central Universities are governed by labour laws and public accountability frameworks, outsourced women workers remain excluded from effective social security, health safeguards, and grievance redressal mechanisms. Viewing this through the lens of gender and technology reveals how institutional labour regimes reproduce inequality not only through technological surveillance where it exists, but also through technological neglect where it is most needed. The continued reliance on manual cleaning labour underscores how gendered bodies absorb the costs of institutional efficiency in the absence of inclusive and worker-centric technological interventions.

A new section titled "Gender, Technology, and Institutional Labour Regimes" has been added to address the theme of the special issue on Gender and Inclusion. This section critically examines the absence of mechanised cleaning technologies in Central Universities, with specific reference to MANUU, and analyses how manual cleaning practices disproportionately affect women housekeeping workers through increased health risks, job insecurity, and exclusion from decision-making processes.

Policies and Interventions

The policies also help to understand the living conditions of women workers in urban spaces, especially in institutional set ups. One does find that the does not have formal

written documents about the management of workers in the instruction as they are completely outsourced.

By going through the texts of the policies framed to improve working conditions and uplift the social security of a sanitation worker's life and life-world, the following points emerge in the present context. The implementation of prohibition acts by the government of India did generate significant civil society demand towards dignified and caste-free occupational activities. Safai Karamchari Andolan is an example that could highlight the plight of earlier manual scavengers to the policy makers, generated parliamentary debates and put social pressure on the judicial scrutiny connecting caste-based occupational association as against human rights.

The manual scavenging Act 2013 prohibits the employment of persons as manual scavengers and bans hazardous manual cleaning and also mandates protective gear and gives rehabilitation and beneficial financial assistance, and an alternative livelihood for those engaged in this practice. According to this, all sanitation workers should be provided PPE (gloves, masks, boots, etc.), as is mandatory for all solid waste handlers as per the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers & their Rehabilitation Act 2013.It is the duty of the employers, either ULBs or a private agency, to provide PPEs to sanitation workers.

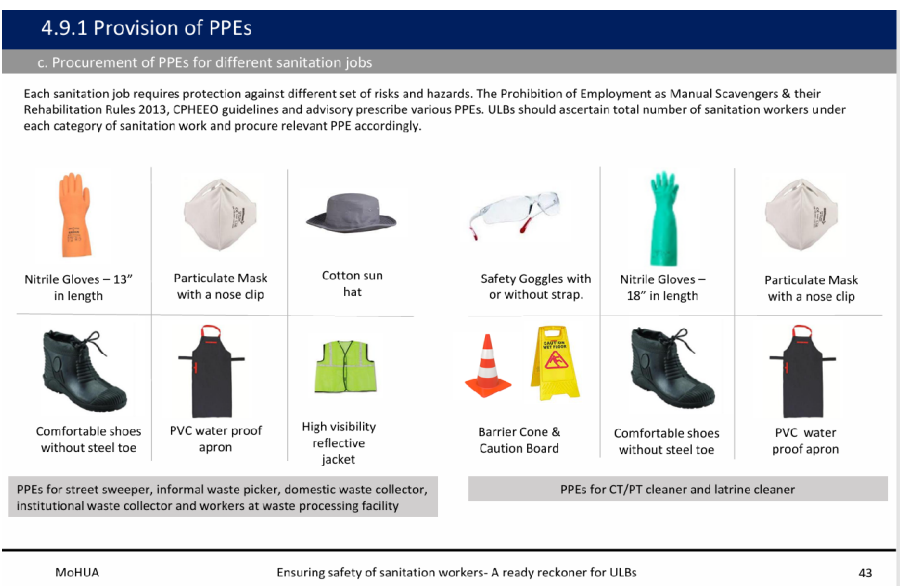


Fig. 1

Source: Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), 2020.

The Supreme Court order (2014) for ₹10 lakh compensation to be provided to the families of deceased manual scavengers since 1993 is a landmark ruling. The Swachh Bharat Mission 2.**0** guidelines focus on welfare and occupational safety of sanitation workers through access to PPE, while training and awareness points to a

continued attention to the policy-making processes though much had to be attended and implemented. The safety to the worker's life must be ensured as per the various provisions of the enacted law. In fact, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) issued a notification in 2019 that all cities must set up Emergency Response Sanitation Units (ERSUs) for quick response during dangerous cleaning operations, to promote mechanised cleaning. A micro scrutiny to the implementation of the policies narrates utter disregard to the spirit of the policies and parliamentary provisions that does not only show failure to the objectives, rather also how social concerns are ignorant and apathetic towards menial workers of India.

Grand Nomenclature: NAMASTE Scheme (2023–2026)

National Action for Mechanized Sanitation Ecosystem is a government initiative in India to ensure safety and dignity of sanitation workers, launched in 2023-24 with a plan to run from April 2025 to March 2026. The focus of this scheme is zero fatalities in sanitation work, only skilled/formalised work (no informal, unsafe jobs), no direct contact with faecal matter, Strengthen Sanitation Response Units (SRU), form SHGs of sanitation workers (called "Sanipreneurs"), provide PPE (mask, gloves shoes, glasses, etc.) safety devices, mechanised equipment and training. The NAMASTE scheme was introduced to extend financial & skill development support including loans/subsidies for mechanised equipment.

The provisioning of an impressive Provisions and Recommendations of NAMASTE Scheme moves to the health and safety of the workers. Apart from health insurance under AB-PMJAY extended to sanitation workers, manual scavengers and their family members also have safety devices worth ₹2 lakh. There are efforts built into this towards behavioural changes and IEC as awareness campaigns to engage only authorised workers and report unsafe practices taking place. Efforts are also being made to sensitize citizens and ensure recognition to effective individuals. The urban level bodies (ULBs) can motivate sanitation workers with awards, vouchers, Good Practice Days, and public recognition, providing incentives and acknowledgment whenever needed.

A good commendable initiative for sanitation and housekeeping workers are noted in a few states of the country. The government of Odisha launched Garima Scheme (Odisha, 2020) for comprehensive safety and dignity package for sanitation workers that includes health & life insurance, support for pucca housing. It also adds educational grants for children, and enhancing mobility through two wheeler support, special category of wages, reduced working hours, risk and hardship allowance, disability support, EPF & post-retirement benefit and making alternative livelihoods accessible. Appropriate PPEs and mechanised cleaning, standardised contracts for empowering sanitation workers & mandatory registration of private service providers are also listed in this. In Warangal district of Telangana, GWMC provides mandatory

licensing of desludgers plus PPE provision (reusable gloves, cloth mast stitched & uniforms). The Municipal Corporation of Indore (in Madhya Pradesh), launched the Swachh card in 2019 to reward workers performing best in certain parameters. The card can be redeemed monthly at malls, restaurants, movie halls, salons, medicine stores, and other shops. In Hyderabad, under the Swachh Bharat Mission, initiatives like national recognition (e.g. T. Venkaiah's award) and GHMC's monthly "Good Practice Day" honours sanitation workers and NGOs. These efforts enhances morale, improve public respect, and adds value to the dignity and visibility of sanitation workers. A standing success story of the DICCI, Telangana chapter helped 134 manual scavengers transition into entrepreneurs by providing support with loans, machinery, and tendering. This eliminated direct contact with faecal matter and secured them contracts with HMWSSB, creating a successful model of safe and dignified livelihood.

In short these efforts and policy framework are about ending unsafe manual scavenging, shifting to mechanised, skilled work, providing health and insurance, and financial support, also reducing stigma and increasing dignity, converting workers into "Sanipreneurs" (self-reliant entrepreneurs).

Findings

The findings are thematically organized to reflect the experiences and lived realities of the respondents, mainly focusing on their working conditions, interaction at workplace, health and treatment condition, and job security and if there are aspects of discrimination.

Socio-Economic Profile

The total number of housekeeping and sanitation women working in MANUU is 80, where a majority of women sanitation workers at MANUU are aged 31–40 (45%) or

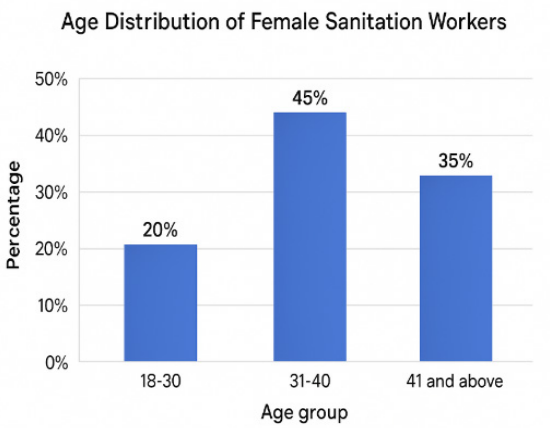


Fig. 2

Source: Field Work 2024

41 years and above (35%), with only 20% aged 18–30 years. Most of the women are married, i.e. 72.5% or widowed, i.e. 25%, reflecting their roles as primary earners for their families. Approximately 62.5% are from the local district, while 25% have migrated from other states, women who have toddlers leave their children behind. Housing data indicate a majority of workers, i.e. 70% live in a rented house, spending huge portions of their income (up to one-third) on fares and rents. Their family's occupations are also low-wage, with 45% engaged in labour work and 27.5% in sanitation-related jobs. Their household incomes are very low, with 50% earning between Rs. 15000-20,000/- monthly, aggravating their financial condition due to expenses like rent, utilities, and children's education.

In the above graph it shows that, 20 percent women aged 18 to 30 years, i.e. 8 in number are engaged in this work, while 18 women between 31 to 40 years, i.e. 45 percent and 14 women in the age group of 41 years and above or 35 percent serve as cleaning and sanitation worker. The total number of workers at MANUU are 120, out of which 80 are women workers of Maulana Azad National Urdu University, in which 40 workers have been engaged for this study. This shows that the largest number of workers here are young women who have gone out to work for their home and children. Thereafter, there are numerous old people who are widows and whose children are not helping.

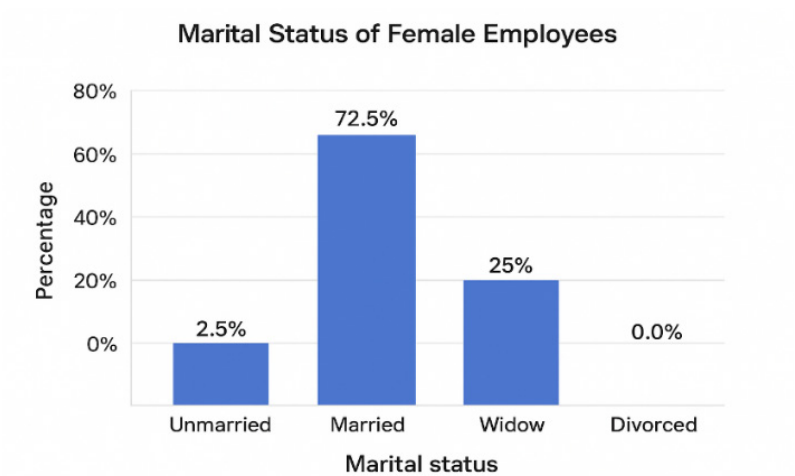


Fig. 3

Source: Field Work 2024

In the above graph, out of 80 women workers of Maulana Azad National Urdu University, 40 workers have been taken in which unmarried 2.5%, i.e. 1 woman. The proportion of married women is 29, i.e. 72.5% percent and among widow's 25 percent, i.e. 10 women are serving. This shows that most of the married women with

small children have left home to work and there are some widows who have no other livelihood to live on.

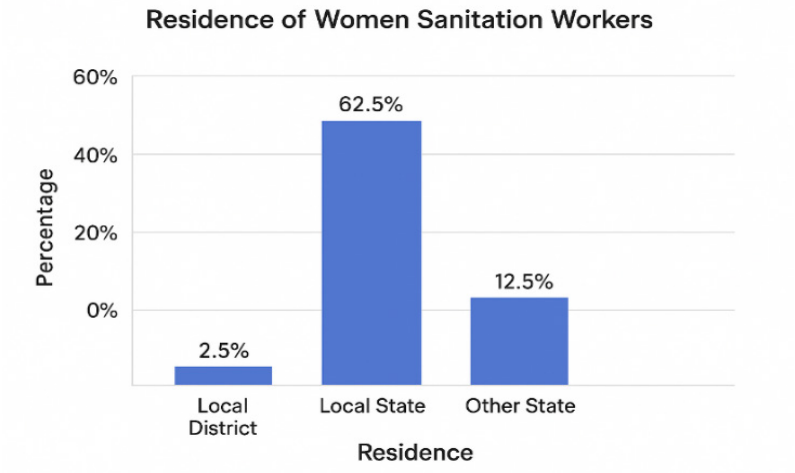


Fig. 4

Source: Field Work 2024

In the graph above, out of 80 women workers of Maulana Azad National Urdu University, 40 workers have been taken, in which 62.5% women i.e. 25 women are from the local district, 12.5% women i.e. 05 women are from the local state and 25% i.e. 10 women are from other states. This shows that women from the local district usually find work in their own district. But if facilities are not available everywhere, one has to migrate to other places. It is a very difficult task for a woman to leave her parents' home after getting married and then leave her house to earn a livelihood. She has to go to another place and leave behind young children.

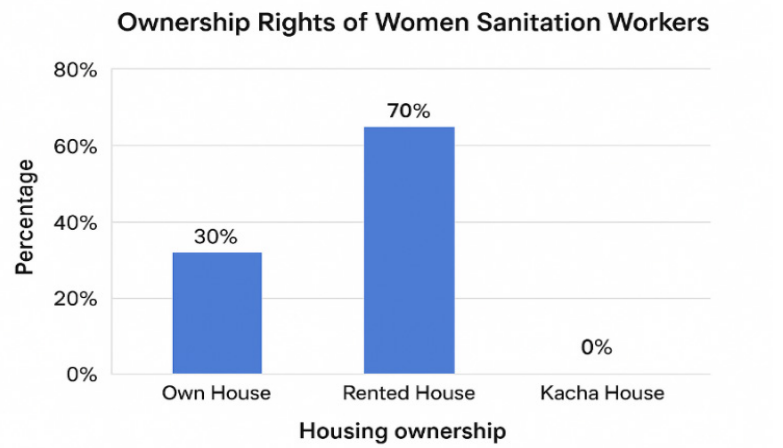


Fig. 5

Source: Field Work 2024

In the given graph, out of 80 female workers of Maulana Azad National Urdu University, 40 workers have been taken, in which 30 per cent of women i.e. 12 workers have their own house and 70 per cent i.e. 28 women are living in rented houses. This suggests that a large number of these workers are living in rented accommodation and spend one-third of their salary on rent.

Family Members' Occupation of Respondents

The data shows that 70% of the women's family occupations are low-wage and poor compensation occupations, with no government jobs. From the table below, it can be seen how cramped the home conditions of these sanitation workers are. Women's husbands are also involved in some menial work, whether they are working as labourers, doing other small jobs like selling vegetables, rikshaw pulling etc.

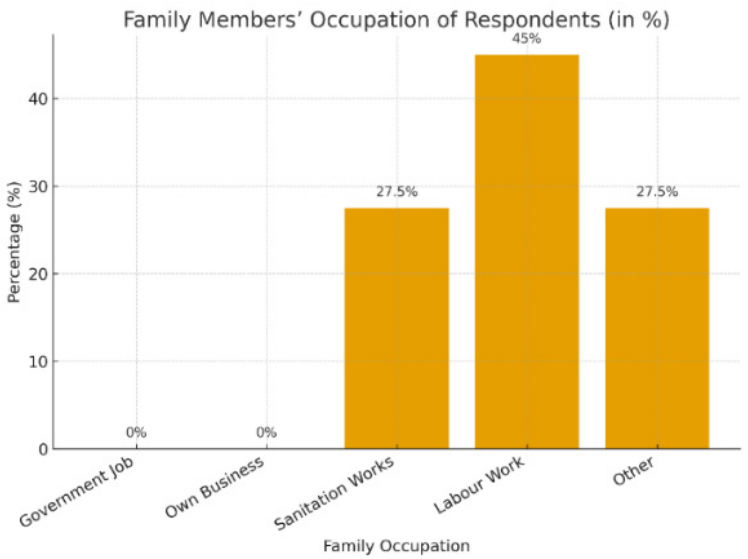


Fig. 6

Source: Field Work 2024

Income of Female Sanitation Workers

From the below graph, it is found that the household income of most of the women is less than Rs. 30,000. At the same time, they will have to spend on house rent, electricity, water, bus fare, children's school fees, food expenses and other needs with difficulty. They also tend to take loans due to expenses during festivals, medicines, etc., when sick. When I talked to some of the workers, I found that many workers are surrounded by lakhs of debts.

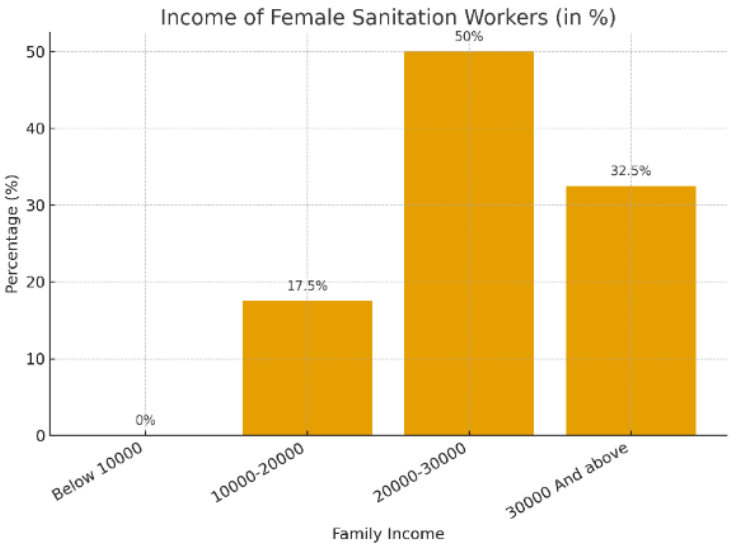


Fig. 7

Source: Field Work 2024

Working Conditions and Challenges

Women sanitation workers perform multiple tasks, including toilet cleaning (15%), room cleaning/mopping (45%), and waste collection (50%), road cleaning (15%), and weeding (7.5%). These overlapping responsibilities, often without additional compensation, increase their workload.

The indicates that these sanitation workers get only one day for leave in week, apart from which there is no leave on festivals although some additional workload does arrive every day which in turn causes anxiety and frustration.

Worker's Leisure at Institutional Spaces

What they do while free at the workplace was a general inquiry to every participant. The notion of leisure at work is something that could differ significantly at every institutional space and location. *Rest* is a common standardized word that stands out as a generalized concept to refer to an informal break, free after finishing the assigned tasked every day, and also to catch up with co-workers for few minutes and at times half an hour. It is a different fact that during the leisure time of women workers after finishing their work when the need some rest, there is no proper room or place where the can even sit comfortably. They are used to sitting in the veranda, on the stairs, under the stairs and spaces near the washroom. Most of the women get self-conscious every time a staff and or university professor passes through the stairs or there is movement in the walking gallery. This research comes out with a conceptual notion

to make understand that how women from low caste categories as a sanitation worker do spend their time whenever there is little time during the working hours. Therefore, *Free Space* is a space in almost all the academic and administrative building of the university where women workers sit during morning tiffin and lunch hours and also relax while chatting amongst them.



Fig. 8

Source: Field Work 2024

Functions of Women Sanitation Workers

From the below graph, it is seen that when a woman is involved in more than one work, in such a large organization, without having separate workers for each task, the same women workers are responsible for each work. That is, some tasks are shared, like sweeping, cleaning the toilets, etc., when it rains, they go for sweeping the streets, cleaning it when the overgrowth increases. They have to clean the cobwebs in a month, and have to do all this extra work for which there is no extra money.

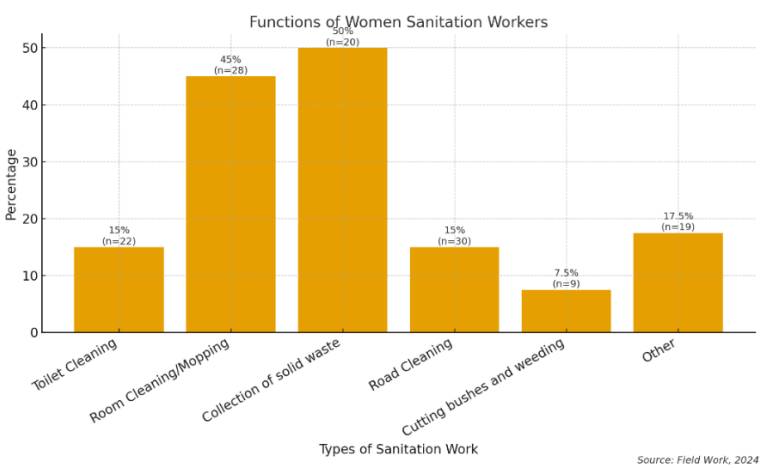


Fig. 9

Source: Field Work 2024

Facilities Available to Female Sanitation Workers and Access to Them

The study shows that more than ninety per cent of women cleaners indicated that they face problems with facilities like rest, changing of clothes, bathroom and washroom, dining space, clean drinking water, etc. In the hours between 7 am to 4 pm, any human being should get some time to breathe and recharge oneself, and for this at least one room is essential. If the women ever need to change clothes, there is no room available for that. There is a storeroom in only the girls' hostel for workers in which they can sit, rest, and eat. This facility is not available to the women working in other buildings. There are no toilets for them, and they hesitate as to enter the common washroom; to overcome this fear, it is important to clarify that the common washroom is for everyone, and they have as much right on it as the students. Some of the workers who work outside the buildings like on the university road and in the gardens do not have toilets. There is no place to eat, and no drinking water facility is provided. Apart from gardening workers, other workers are not allowed to sit in the park or even near the park, the reason is that university faculty, staff, pass by, and they don't feel comfortable sitting there.

The health care or attention to provide health is a buzz word to the workers life. Women often get sick at workplaces due to their weak body, a long day's work and at times dehydration due to lack of proper water and food. Even women workers feel unwell and fall sick, mostly they would report to the work except when serious health breakdowns.

In the below image, we see a women worker taking rest with high fever, but does not have the courage to request leave due to the pressure of salary deduction which is only source of her family to live.



Fig. 10

Source: Field Work 2024

Availability of Health and other Emergency Facilities

The graph below shows the health facilities available to women, in which about 82 per cent of women are not able to benefit from MANUU Health Centre. Some women have mentioned being able to get medicine on occasions, however, they don't get leave when pregnant or unwell. Infact, they face salary deductions when they take leave, which makes them suffer even more. When children are small, there is no crèche facility here, nor are they allowed to bring them. Among these 40 women, only one woman got help from her own PF money when her husband had an accident.

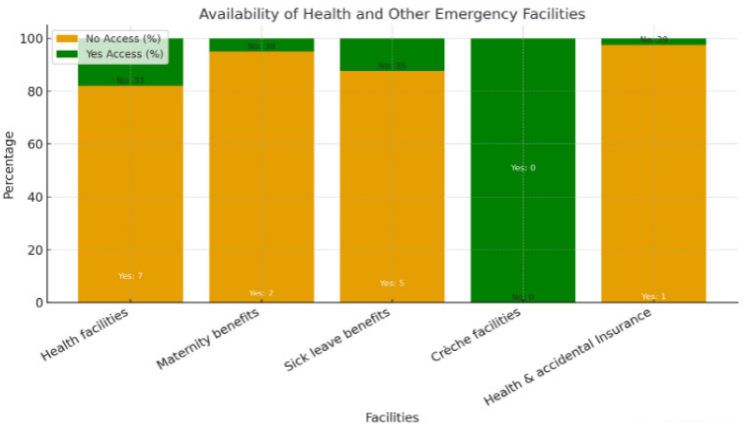


Fig. 11

Source: Field Work, 2024

Female Sanitation Workers Face Unfavourable Attitudes

The below graph shows that despite this being a central university with well-educated people, most working here have a bad attitude. It came across while researching that 80%

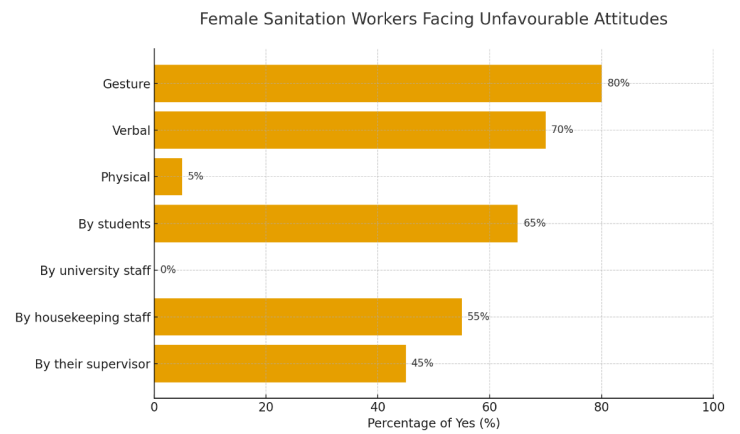


Fig. 12

Source: Field Work, 2024

of the 40 workers suffered gesture abuse, 70% verbal abuse, and 5% physical violence. The content shows that they are mostly used by students in their approach to workers a hint in the wrong, or bad manners with them, 62% of women are victims of their words. And not only by students but also by other working staff, they have a bad attitude towards these sanitation workers, and many workers are abused by their supervisor.

Frisking as Humiliation

Humiliation Happens when the Self-Respect of an Individual is Publicly or Individually not Provided

According to the Oxford dictionary, humiliation is the act of making someone feel ashamed and lose respect, or the feeling of being ashamed and losing respect. It can refer to the feeling itself or a specific act or event that causes this shame and loss of esteem. Sociologically, the feeling

According to Collins English Dictionary, the feeling of being ashamed or having lost the respect of others, or the act of causing someone to feel this way.

The closing hour of the workers is also a sociological phenomenon that provides a sense of ill-treatment as frisking creates a self-humiliation among the women because such frisking is unequal and not done to men workers.



Fig. 13

Source: Field Work 2024

The image shows women sanitation workers being subjected to frisking before leaving their workplace. Such practices often result in humiliation and a loss of dignity, reinforcing the unequal and discriminatory treatment faced by these workers.

Positive Effects of Working in an Educational Institution

From the below data it comes to known that most of the women working in the university experience some positive effects of working in the university. This research has shown us that all the women involved in housekeeping working here dream of giving their children higher education. Some of them who are young, are still passionate about studying.

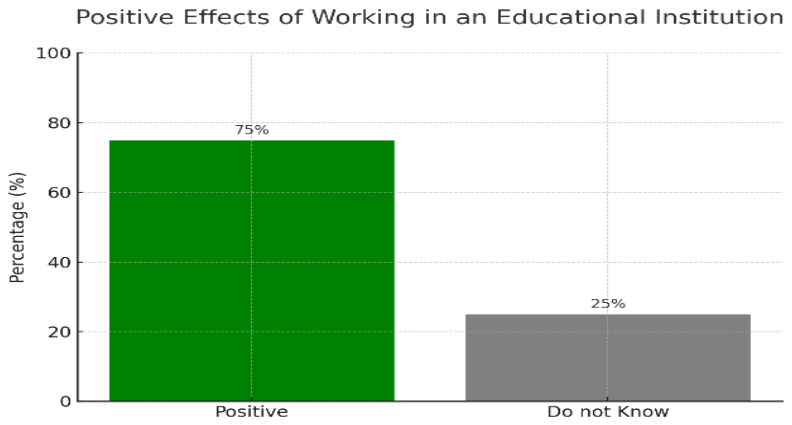


Fig. 14

Source: Field Work 2024

Key Challenges Include

- *Lack of Facilities:* Over 90% of women workers don't have rest areas, changing rooms, dining spaces, clean drinking water, and dedicated toilets. The workers working in hostels have access to a storeroom for rest, but cramped and poorly maintained.
- *Health Risks:* Use cleaning chemicals without adequate protective equipment (e.g., gloves, masks) leads to skin and respiratory issues. But there are very few workers who have PPE (gloves, masks) i.e. only 18% have access to the university's health centre, and 95% lack maternity benefits or sick leave.
- *Discrimination and Harassment:* 80% women workers report gesture-based abuse, 70% verbal abuse, primarily from students (62.5%) and by their supervisors (45%). These workers face routine frisking upon exiting the campus, it feels as humiliating and discriminatory.
- *Job Insecurity:* Total number of women workers reported contractual employment through private agencies results in low wages (Rs. 12,000–15,000 monthly), with deductions for provident funds and there no job security and health insurance.

Positive Impact

Despite these challenges faced by women sanitation workers, they still have some hopes and dreams. 75% of workers report positive effects working at educational institution, including aspirations for their children's education and, for younger workers, a personal interest in learning. This suggests social mobility and attitudinal change within an educational environment.

Case Studies

A 52-year-old woman from the Padma Shali caste which is a Hindu caste. This caste is located in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu and their traditional occupation is weaving. Her husband is a *mistri* (construction work) by occupation who builds houses. She is originally from Tandur, Vikarabad district, Telangana and spent her childhood in Karnataka, then married in Telangana. She is living in Lingampally, Hyderabad to work and live. She has a daughter and a son, both are married but she still has the debt of their marriage expenses. She is working to repay the debts incurred from her children's marriages and lives with her son and daughter-in-law in a rented house. Before her housekeeping job in MANUU, she was working in a canteen, where she was paid less but had food. They used to give her breakfast, lunch and a snacks in the evening. She is a toilet cleaner in girls hostel MANUU and earns Rs. 13,000/- monthly, out of which Rs. 8,000/- goes to rent and Rs. 2,000/- to transportation. Her schooling stopped after class 5, and because of an accident, she suffers from chronic pain and avoids heavy tasks. She doesn't have enough money to get proper treatment. Despite their essential contribution, healthcare access is negligible. She receives no proper medical care in MANUU, only basic medicines from the university health centre. When she asked for treatment she got the reply, "*Apka accident yha kaam krne se ya yaha kaam krte huye nhi hua hai to ye responsibility humari nhi hai.*" In brief, if you meet with an accident or injury elsewhere than the workplace, then the responsibility does not belong to the employers. She also faces discrimination from her supervisor, doesn't have a proper place to rest after finishing her work, and is resigned to sit at the verandas or stairs. It reflects the harsh realities of caste, economic pressure, lack of healthcare, and biased treatment at the workplace.

Anonymous 2 has been working at MANUU for eight years. During COVID-19, she was fired after students sympathized (with some money) with her struggles, and someone led to a complaint to the supervisor, she faced many difficulties. She was re-hired after the lockdown, and now earns Rs. 13,000/-. Her husband is bedridden because he got injured in an accident, when he fell from the fourth floor building 20 years ago and did not recover till today. At that time he was taken to Osmania Hospital, Hyderabad, but could not be properly treated and was supposed to be treated in another government hospital. However, due to not being able to get a card there, he was treated in a private hospital, which cost Rs. 12 lakhs, and he had to take a loan with 1 rupee interest and needs Rs. 6,000/- per month for medicines. She still has the burden of that loan of Rs. 12 lakh which was taken for her husband's treatment, with Rs. 6 lakh in interest still unpaid. She has three children, one son and two daughter, all are married. She has the responsibility of her widowed daughter and grandchildren. She needs more salary but whenever she asks her supervisor to raise her salary, she is

told to leave the job. With such a low salary and so many expenses, they have to face many problems. One day while cleaning she touched a chair to sweep. The chair was covered with clothes and mistakenly a girl started to shout, "*Aapne kaise mera kapda touch kiya apko wait karna hoga." (How did you dare to touch my clothes, you should wait.)* The cleaning worker and other workers face constant disrespect, especially from hostel students who insult or scold them, if they mistakenly touch student items while cleaning. Once she said, *"Humein hi har taraf se Sunna padta hai, humari koi nahi sunta.*" I have to hear peoples scolding and abuses and none bothers to hear me out'. This reflects the emotional exhaustion and invisibility they experience.

While conducting interviews I talked 40 women workers almost all of them were complaining of frisking, a woman worker in her late age 40, says, "We do work for the campus to make it neat and clean, and when we leave, it feels like we are being suspected of theft. Everyday guards instruct us to open our bags to check our belongings. We feel humiliated, disrespected, insulted. 'Why only us?'" this was the question from a sanitation worker.

Discussion

The findings of this research reveals that women workers at MANUU face systemic marginalization, encounter challenges documented in unorganized sectors (Ziyauddin, 2022; Shahid, 2015). The intersection of caste, class and gender indicates their vulnerability and the isolation of women, almost all of whom belong to lower castes (e.g. Scheduled Castes) and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The lack of facilities in the campus, such as rest areas, dining spaces, changing room, etc., reflects institutional neglect, while discriminatory practices like frisking and verbal abuse undermine their dignity. These conditions align with Dubey and Murphy's (2021) critique of contractual employment as a mechanism of oppression in urban settings. However, there are some positive aspirations of these workers, particularly for their children's education also for the young worker, suggest resilience and potential for social change, consistent with Saldanha et al.'s (2022) emphasis on community-driven empowerment. The study which focuses on an organized institution like MANUU highlights a paradox. Despite the educational environment as a central university which is considered with a better conditions, women workers face many issues. This emphasises the need for stronger institutional accountability and enforcement of labour rights, as current outsourcing to private agencies dilutes responsibility (Gupta, 2016).

Sanitation and housekeeping roles are taken as feminized, underrated and limited upward mobility, because they are considered as only the women's responsibility similar to domestic work which traditionally has been done by the women. Sanitation and housekeeping roles often received low wages compared to men, because cleaning is considered as low skilled. Contribution of cleaning and sanitation workers are crucial,

but they always remain unacknowledged and invisible. Sanitation and cleaning work if often performed by women and this gendered division of labours is also tied with caste hierarchies, because women from Dalit and other marginalized communities are disproportionately employed with cleaning and sanitation (Gosh & Banerjee, 2018). While educational institutions policies advocate for equality and inclusion, these workers remain excluded from opportunities for skill development, decision making process, social interactions, etc. (Raghavendra & Kumar, 2022).

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the lived realities of women sanitation workers at MANUU, revealing continuous structural inequalities rooted in gender, caste, and class. Despite their crucial and critical role in maintaining a clean and hygienic campus for the students and other, these women workers face lack of numerous facilities, health risks because of chemical usage, and discriminatory treatment from students and other staffs. Despite facing so many discrimination, these workers have positive aspirations also. This aspiration suggests potential for social mobility, but systemic reforms are urgently needed to address their challenges. The study contributes to the literature by highlighting the under-researched experiences of women in institutional housekeeping roles, calling for further investigation into organized sectors.

Recommendations

- *Institutional Facilities:* Maulana Azad National Urdu University should provide designated rest areas, changing rooms, toilets, and dining spaces especially to womensanitation workers.
- *Health and Safety:* It should be ensure access to PPE (e.g., gloves, masks, shoes) and health facilities, including sick leave and maternity benefits for female.
- *Anti-Discrimination Training:* Implement mandatory training for students and staff to address discriminatory attitudes and behaviours with the workers working in the university.
- *Policy Reforms:* Strengthen oversight of private housekeeping agencies to ensure fair wages, job security, and compliance with labour laws to fulfil their needs.
- *Crèche Facilities:* Establish crèche services to support workers with young children because they deprived from mother's affection and love.
- *Community Empowerment:* It should be ensure to engage workers in decision-making processes to address their needs and foster a supportive work environment.

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