

Excluded Lives: A Study on Slum Women's Socio-Economic Deprivation and Marginalization

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ABSTRACT

Gender is a powerful concept, influencing peoples' lives and molding their behaviors even before they know it. While the world today talks of sustainable development and equality, it is evident that the entire weight of societal expectations, compliance to traditional norms and compromises fall unequally on women. This study holds significance as it gives a peek into one of the dreaded facets of human existence, of poverty and its implications over women's lives and choices. The objectives of this study are to assess the educational level of slum women and the reasons for dropping out of education; to determine how many women work and lead single woman-led households; and to understand the factors for interstate and inter-slum migration by slum dwellers. The study was conducted in September 2022, and the primary data was collected through a field survey covering a total of 186 females of a slum area situated near Sector-38 in U.T. Chandigarh. A well-structured interview schedule was used to assess women and know about their educational, economic, and social life. The study reveals a state of concern as around 37.1% of the women surveyed were illiterate. The ones who could read and write dropped out of school early due to varied reasons like marriage and lack of financial resources. It was also observed that only 39.3% of women in the age group of 18 to 59 years perform some economic activity. The study unveils deeper societal stigma and ignorance, creating hurdles towards sustainable development and inclusivity.

Keywords: *Gender, Women, Poverty, Slum, Education.*

1. Introduction

1.1 Exploring Slums: Uncovering the Vitality of Infrastructure for Women's Empowerment

Urbanisation and population growth, particularly in developing countries such as India, are major concerns. Most Indian cities have experienced tremendous growth, especially in terms of population (Sajjad, 2014). Slums have become crucial components of cities in many low- and middle-income countries. Slums are unhealthy spaces with particularly high risks of infection and concussion, and children are highly susceptible, with the combination of malnutrition and reoccurring diarrhoea resulting in growth retardation and long-term impacts on intellectual growth (Ezeh et al., 2016). The urban environment is more complex than ever before. As a result, it should be acknowledged that the presence of slums around the world is not only a symbolic representation of poor urban planning, but also a sign that the slum is an important component of modern urbanisation (Bolay et al., 2006).

A slum is a densely populated area characterised by substandard housing construction, congestion, poor

sanitation, and a lack of clean water and other basic services. People's health is adversely affected by the slums' living circumstances. The spread of slums in urban areas and the myriad of health risks they provide is one of the biggest obstacles urban planners face around the world. But the rapid growth of slums has been a worldwide issue in major cities. Slums are areas of a city where living conditions are poor, and which defy all principles of good urban planning.

The term "slum" refers to a complex social phenomenon with widely varying definitions on a global and regional scale. A slum is a type of community characterised by a high concentration of people living in poverty, a miserable way of life, and a lack of access to essential amenities such as clean water, proper sanitation, reliable electricity, and transportation. The term "slum" has been altered by some entities to better suit their purposes.

The UN operational definition of a "slum" is "one or a set of persons living in the same house in an urban area who lack one or more facilities, i.e., secure tenure, durable housing, sufficient living space, access to better water and sanitation services" (Nitin et al., 2021).

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Now when we take the case of women, because of their lower socio-economic level, women and girls living in slums are more likely to be victims of sexual abuse. Biological factors also contribute to these women's and girls' increased need for personal space, security, and hygiene.

When living in the slums, women are more vulnerable to abuse. That's especially true for households in which the woman is the primary breadwinner. Especially in situations where women are expected to work outside the home and handle most household responsibilities alone. There has been a rise in sexually motivated crime in these areas, as opposed to monetary motives.

Women living in the slums face numerous hardships that significantly impact their daily lives. The majority of the cramped dwellings and structures in these areas are considered illegal settlements, resulting in a lack of crucial infrastructure amenities such as water, sanitation, and health facilities. Unfortunately, this absence of essential services disproportionately affects women, as they bear the brunt of informal caregiving responsibilities within their households.

Furthermore, women face additional vulnerabilities when commuting to and from work via public transportation. Their safety is at greater risk due to various factors. As these women increasingly participate in non-domestic roles, they find themselves exposed to a range of assaults simply because they are perceived as being disconnected from the formal support systems provided by institutions.

The issue of security becomes particularly critical for women, given the implicit insecurities pervasive in slum life. Basic survival becomes a paramount concern for them, and they not only lack information but also adequate preparation to address their fears in a suitable manner. This lack of knowledge and readiness exacerbates the challenges they face on a daily basis, further emphasizing the urgency of addressing these issues and providing support to empower women in slum communities.

2. Position of Women: Migration & Abuse

When we take into consideration the grand narrative of urban life, that of economic prosperity and a better life, what often gets shadowed are the millions of 'urban poor' or 'urban slum dwellers' with similar aspirations. A product of rapid migration, such phenomenal growth of slums in the past few years signals a similar crisis on the other part of the spectrum, that is, the rural areas. Majority of the slum dwellers, as noticed as a part of this study and otherwise, hail from rural backgrounds.

On further investigation, it becomes clear that the dream for better tomorrow drives people in rural settings to muster their lives into tiny bags and shift to cities. Once they reach such places, they set up make-shift housed and

slums with little to no amenities. Risking of personal hygiene and proneness to disease are the number one cause why the slum life becomes even more dangerous for certain groups, including women.

But lives in slum show another kind of bias as well. Most of the migrations from rural to urban areas are male-centric, that is, it is the male members of the family who are more likely to move out than the females. In case they do, the much wider social burden often follows them. In absence of the protection offered by family and brethren, a remarkable feature of rural lifestyles, women are often compelled to do jobs which might be unsafe or even worse, offensive.

To make both ends meet in such cities where cost of even the most basic amenities becomes an ache to the pocket, most of these women often need to work as hard at factories and other places, putting in equal effort, and remunerated with an unequal pay. This underlying wage gap further open another gruelling model which undermines women's contribution at work and at the same time, classifies them as secondary. In case of these women, who form a part of this study, and other similar women who have little or no education, the chances of violation become higher. Thus, women apparently face a dual stigma and get treated unequally both at workplaces and at homes.

When it comes to position of women inside their homes, there are a lot of incidents that go "unreported" and "unrecorded" owing to family honour and prestige. Women are often victims of domestic violence and all sorts of mental, physical, and psychological tortures. Other than this, women are very often at the receiving end of gruesome sexual offences both at the household as well as the workplace. This further jeopardises their right to a life of dignity and respects. Such internalisation of wrong doings has led to a sense of "normalisation" that women "will" face such issues and its "not a big concern", especially amongst the slum dwellers. This study provides an insight into the conditions of women and their present living scenarios, their vulnerabilities, and limitations.

For younger girls, poverty and abuse takes a toll over their mental and physical health, since childhood trauma can deeply alter a person's sense of perception into adulthood as well. No wonder why India happens to be hotspot of Anemia amongst young women. It becomes acute as we move lower on the age parameter. Pre-pubescent girls get little to no counselling on maintaining intimate/menstrual care, family planning, the importance of consent or use of contraceptives. This degrading situation sets off a spiral of other violations, making them easy targets of molestation, assault, rapes, and trafficking.

3. Objectives of the Study

- 1) To assess the educational level of slum women and the reasons for dropping out of education.

- 2) To determine how many women work and lead single woman-led households.
- 3) To understand the employment prevalence amongst the surveyed population.

4. Methodology

The study was conducted in **March 2023**, and the primary data was collected through a FIELD SURVEY covering a total of 186 females of a slum area situated near Sector-38 in U.T. Chandigarh. A well-structured interview schedule was used to assess women and know about their educational, economic, and social life.

5. Literature Review

(Mathias et al., 2018) A study evaluates a mental health intervention for disadvantaged young women in Indian slums. The 15-module curriculum shows improvements in anxiety, depression, and gender attitudes post-intervention, lasting for 8 months.

(Nagpal et al., 2019) Research examines toilet facilities in Lucknow slums, revealing that most residents use shared toilets while a small percentage have private facilities. BMI of female residents correlates with toilet usage and socioeconomic factors.

(Bag et al., 2017) The study assesses living standards in Indian slums using monetary and non-monetary approaches. Certain characteristics are associated differently with living standards, influencing policy design.

(Mallick et al., 2021) The nutritional status of children in West Bengal slums is investigated. Women’s autonomy, healthcare practices, and socioeconomic factors impact child nutrition.

(Bandyopadhyay and Sutirtha, 2020) Research explores the well-being of women in low-income urban households in India compared to men. Education and employment may reduce women’s well-being, indicating gender-specific correlations unaffected by omitted variable bias.

6. Data Interpretation & Results

After thorough examination of the questionnaire and evaluating the responses from the population, Data was compiled into tables and ultimately into graphs for easy comprehension. The following 8 graphs and tables provide insights to the research results.

Figure 1 shows us the number of women per household. Since the universe of this research is women living in slums, it was necessary to know how many of them were taken as a part of the study. It was revealed that 9 households had at least 1 woman in the house. On the other end, there were 54 households which had more than 5 women. The key observation here in respect to number of women shows that woman comprise as a substantial

part of the household. But this is far from being an encouraging fact. Having little autonomy over their bodies, women are compelled to have multiple children, or simply put, made to give birth until a male child is born. This not only increases the number of people to be fed in such dire situations, but also shows the inherent preference given to a male child in the society.

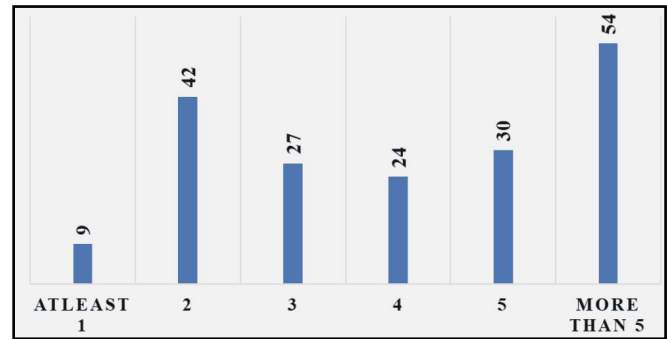


Fig. 1: Number of Women per Household
(Source: Authors’ Computation)

Table 1 presents the age composition of the research population. It can be noticed that the share of women lying in the category of “0-18 years” is 78, followed by 84 women in “18-65 years” category and 24 women in “above 65” category. The same is represented in the graphical format in figure 2.

The number of women in the working age group, that is, between 18 to 65 forms the majority of the population. Out of these 84 women who are well within the “working age”, it is a surprising fact that not even half of them are actually employed. Figure 3 shows that only 39% of such women are actually engaged in some kind of economic activity. Rest of the 61%, irrespective of their need to increase their financial stability do not find job owing to absence of skills, incentives and/or family support.

Figure 4 puts forth the level of education that was present in the surveyed population. It was shocking to note that 69 out of the 186 women surveyed were

Table 1: Age Profile of Women

Age Group	No. of Women
0-18	78
18-65	84
Above 65	24
Total	186

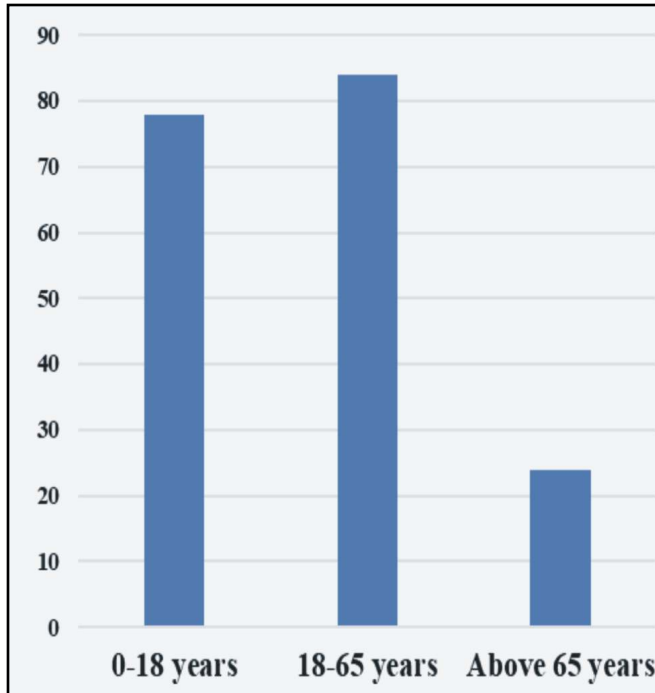


Fig. 2: Age Composition of the Surveyed Population
(Source: Authors' Computation)

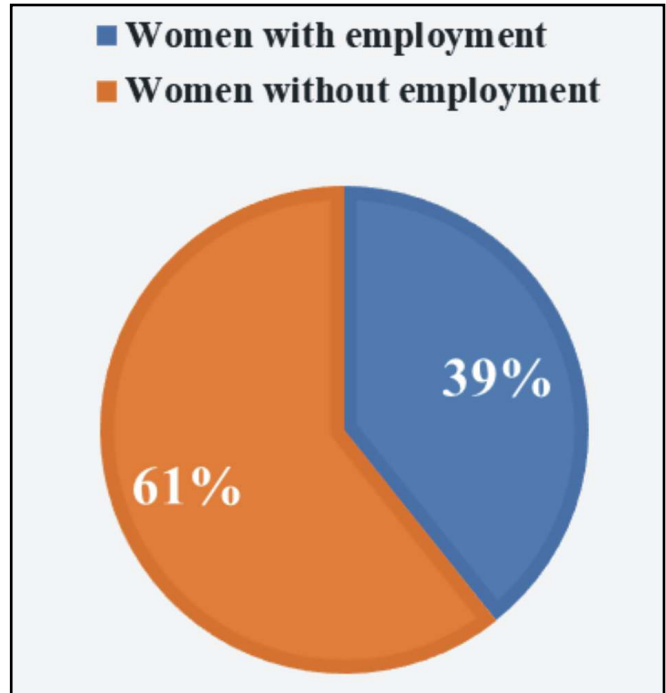


Fig. 3: Employment Trend Amongst the Studied Population
(Source: Authors' Computation)

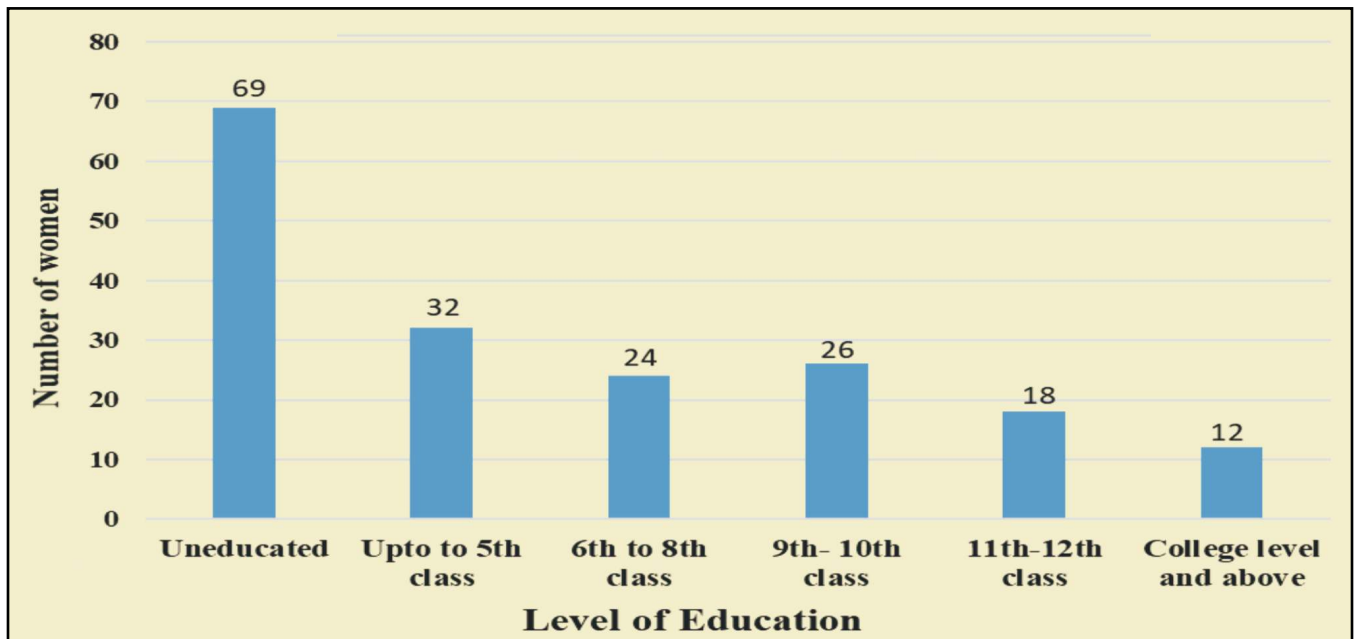


Fig. 4: Level of Education amongst the respondent population
(Source: Authors' Computation)

illiterate, totally unable to comprehend the alphabet in any language. It is 37.1% of the women. It brings before us the need to resolve some deeper issues of society when it comes to poverty and more specifically, feminization of poverty.

As we increase the education level, we notice that the number of women reduces significantly. College level

education and higher studies are a rare sight since only 12 women (around 6% only) could be found pursuing college education.

Women have been systematically induced to believe that education is something reserved for the menfolk. Duties of women are opined to be restrictive in nature, cleaning, cooking, and taking care of children. Education not only

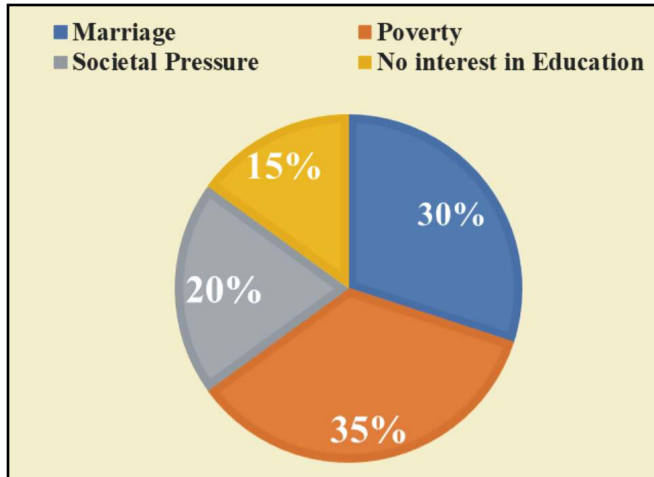


Fig. 5: Reasons for "Dropping-out" of Education
(Source: Authors' Computation)

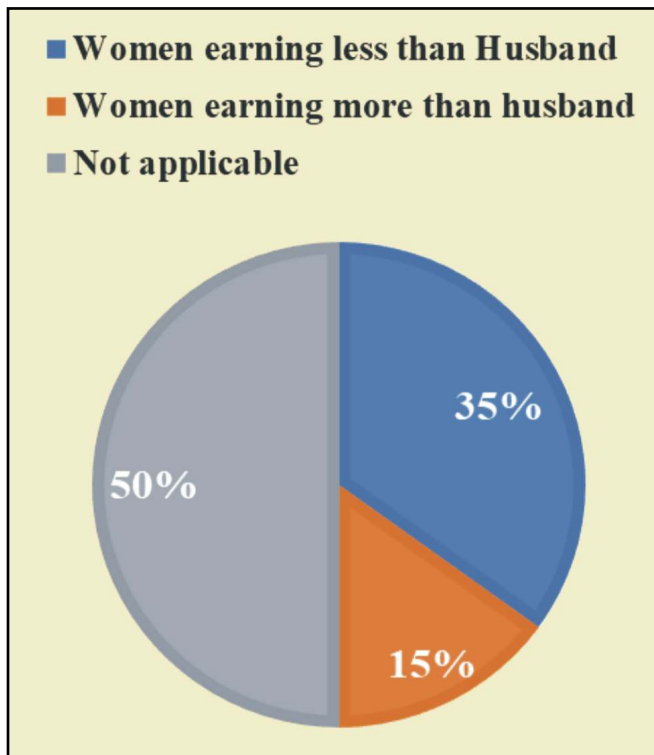


Fig. 6: Relative position of a woman's earning in a household
(Source: Authors' Computation)

help in uplifting people, but also provides them with an increased self-esteem, making them vigilant. In case of women living in such situations, it becomes a necessity.

Figure 5 presents the reason as to why women discontinue their education. The most broadly sighted reasons were taken as parameters which include marriage, poverty, societal pressure, and no interest in education. It can be seen that Poverty remains the single largest reason behind women dropping out of education, followed by marriage (around 30%), societal pressure (around 20%) and no

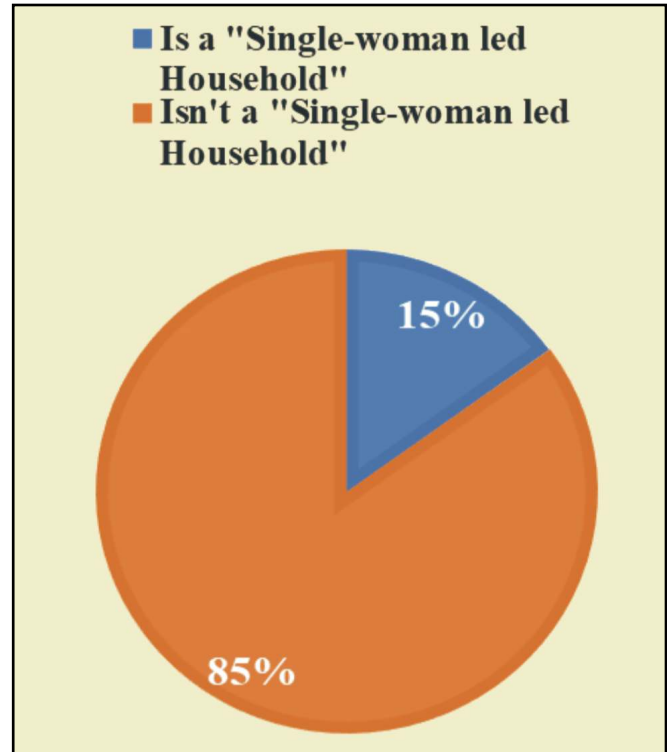


Fig. 7: Prevalence of Single Woman led households
(Source: Authors' Computation)

interest in studies (around 15%). Unable to make both ends meet, parents often prefer educating their sons more than their daughters. This stems out of the believe that women shall go to their husband's home after marriage, naming them as a "wasted expenditure". With poverty and marriage, it is the mindset of people that does not take women being independent positively. They are often ousted and face criticism. It is also observed that 15% of women did not have any interest in education. What this points to is not the inability of women to grasp ideas but lack of vocational subjects and skill development programmes which go beyond the traditional classroom subjects like mathematics and science etc.

Figure 6 shows the position of women when it comes to earning in comparison to their husbands. It shows that 35% of the women earn way less than what their husband's do. Around 15% of women earn more than their husbands. For 50% of the women, this parameter wasn't applicable since either they were unemployed or not eligible to work.

Figure 7 shows another interesting phenomenon. It represents the prevalence of single woman led households. Although the number of such households just made 15% of the surveyed population, single woman led households portray an altogether different scenario. A scenario in which a woman or a group of women earn more than their husbands. For 50% of the women, this parameter wasn't applicable since either they were

unemployed or not eligible to work together and spend together. A sense of economic independence is accompanied by added responsibilities. It was noticed that such women spent comparatively more on their children's or sibling's education as compared to other households. Additional societal stigma and prejudice against these women is also evident.

7. Discussion

Poverty has much wider connotations when it is studied in reference to gender. It is both the result of and the contributing factor of many imbalances prevalent in the society. While the paper specifically considers the plight of women who are surviving in conditions of abject helplessness. Education being an important factor of development seems compromised. Inability of women to take decisions concerning their life often lands them in situations like these where they are unable to fulfil their desires and aspiration. Constraints of money further aggravates the situation. As it comes out from this study, a prevalent wage gap and low employability of women in job market are reasons for the downgrade position of women. Another issue that creates hurdles in the path of holistic development of women is malnutrition and substance abuse.

8. Conclusion

Therefore, the study highlights the concerning prevalence of mass illiteracy among women, necessitating immediate attention. The existence of a so-called "egalitarian society" is rendered questionable when half of its members lack the ability to read or write. The persistently low employability of women is not due to a lack of motivation or skill, but rather a result of limited opportunities and societal constraints. Additionally, the study brings to light the alarming observation of a wage gap, where women are consistently paid less than men for performing the same work. These findings emphasize the urgency of addressing these issues and dismantling systemic barriers to ensure equal access to education, improve employment prospects, and rectify the unfair remuneration practices that perpetuate gender inequality.

9. Future Scope & Way Forward

1. **Formulation of Self-help groups for economic upliftment:** One of the key findings of the study is that a significant percentage of slum women surveyed were engaged in economic activities. However, to further enhance their economic status and empowerment, the formation of self-help groups can be a promising step. Self-help groups are collectives of individuals, typically from similar socio-economic backgrounds, who come together to pool resources, share knowledge, and support each other in various income-generating activities. These groups can provide women with access to financial services, skill-

building opportunities, and a platform for collective decision-making. By promoting the establishment of self-help groups, the study aims to empower slum women economically and foster their inclusion in the broader society.

2. **Promotion of Adult education programs:** The study reveals that a significant proportion of slum women surveyed were illiterate, and those who had some basic education often dropped out early due to various reasons such as marriage and financial constraints. To address this issue, a future scope would involve the promotion of adult education programs targeted specifically at slum women. These programs can provide functional literacy and numeracy skills, as well as empower women with knowledge about their rights, health, and financial management. Adult education programs can play a crucial role in breaking the cycle of illiteracy, enabling women to gain confidence, make informed decisions, and actively participate in societal development.
3. **Skill Development and widening avenues of professions considered "suitable" for women:** The study highlights the need to widen the avenues of professions considered "suitable" for women. Societal norms and stereotypes often restrict women's choices and limit their access to certain types of employment. To promote inclusivity and overcome these barriers, the future scope involves focusing on skill development programs that equip women with marketable skills in diverse fields. By offering vocational training, entrepreneurship development, and career counselling, women from slum areas can explore a wider range of job opportunities and break free from traditional gender roles. This approach seeks to challenge gender-based limitations and empower women to pursue professions that align with their interests and capabilities.
4. **Rehabilitation of people from slums, enabling them to live a dignified life:** The study sheds light on the marginalized living conditions of slum dwellers, particularly women. The future scope and way forward involve the rehabilitation of people from slums, aiming to provide them with improved living conditions and a dignified life. This can be achieved through various measures, including affordable housing initiatives, access to clean water and sanitation facilities, provision of healthcare services, and ensuring their inclusion in social welfare programs. By addressing the underlying socio-economic factors that contribute to slum existence, such as poverty and lack of opportunities, the aim is to uplift the living standards of slum women and their families, promoting their overall well-being and social integration.

5. **Digital Empowerment Initiatives:** To bridge the digital divide and empower slum women, innovative initiatives can be implemented to provide them with access to digital technologies and internet connectivity. This can include setting up community digital centers or mobile computer labs in slum areas, offering computer literacy and digital skills training programs tailored specifically for women. By equipping slum women with digital literacy and access to online resources, they can enhance their education, gain new skills, explore online job opportunities, and access various government services. Digital empowerment initiatives have the potential to open up new avenues for slum women, enabling them to participate more actively in the digital economy and society.
6. **Microfinance and Entrepreneurship Support:** Recognizing the financial challenges faced by slum women, innovative future scopes can focus on microfinance and entrepreneurship support programs. Microfinance institutions can be established or partnered with to provide small loans and financial services to slum women, enabling them to start or expand their micro-enterprises. Additionally, entrepreneurship support programs can be designed to provide training, mentorship, and access to networks for slum women interested in starting their own businesses. By fostering entrepreneurship and financial inclusion, slum women can generate income, build sustainable livelihoods, and contribute to the economic development of their communities.
7. **Advocacy and Policy Reform:** An innovative approach for the way forward involves advocacy and policy reform efforts to address the systemic issues contributing to the socio-economic deprivation and marginalization of slum women. This can include engaging with policymakers, community leaders, and relevant stakeholders to raise awareness about the challenges faced by slum women and advocate for policy changes. Efforts can focus on promoting gender-responsive policies, equitable allocation of resources, and addressing issues such as gender-based violence, access to quality education, healthcare, and social protection. By actively advocating for the rights and needs of slum women, the aim is to bring about systemic changes that promote inclusivity, social justice, and sustainable development.

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