Family and Beyond:

How Support Networks Shape Urban Women's Work Participation

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Abstract

The female labour force participation in India is notably low, particularly among urban households. This study explores the complex relationship between support networks and the labour force participation of urban women, with a focus on young mothers in Delhi-NCR, India. Drawing on data from 193 women and 30 in-depth interviews, this mixed-methods research investigates how multiple components of support affect women's engagement in the paid workforce. The results indicate that women with higher support density are nearly four times more likely to work, particularly those receiving childcare support. The intensity of support plays a crucial role: women receiving more intense housework support from domestic workers or high-intensity childcare support from their mothers-in-law are more likely to be employed. Women with strong support networks are able to manage demanding careers, while those lacking support struggle to engage in paid work. Support received is gendered, with women bearing the primary responsibility for childcare and household tasks, while men provide limited support, often when explicitly asked to. Gaps in system support, particularly reliable childcare options, remain a significant barrier. This study highlights the need for expanding affordable childcare options and encouraging a more balanced distribution of domestic responsibilities to support women's workforce participation.

1.1 Introduction

It takes a village to raise a child: women's labour force participation is not just a function of their personal choices or economic conditions but also the strength and quality of the support systems that surround them. Afridi et al. (2022) and Mussida & Patimo (2021) highlight that traditional family structures can sometimes reinforce these conservative norms, limiting women's labour market opportunities. India's traditional family structures are evolving. Puschmann & Solli (2014) and Klasen (2019) note that urbanisation and the rise of nuclear families have reduced reliance on kin for caregiving. This has led to a growing dependence on external support systems such as domestic workers and childcare services. However, the mere availability of these resources does not guarantee meaningful support. The quality of support matters, and as Chen & Ge (2018) and Arpino et al. (2014) emphasise, the involvement of family members, like mothers-in-law, can significantly impact labour force participation.

Support networks can be both enabling and constraining. When husbands and in-laws actively share caregiving, women have more freedom to engage in paid work. Conversely, households where caregiving duties fall entirely on women, or where family dynamics create stress, can significantly hinder women's work participation. Johnson et al. (1999) and Stoloff et al. (1999) underscore that a diverse and high-quality social network, beyond immediate family, plays a key role in women's labour market experiences.

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Countries that have successfully integrated women into the workforce have done so by building strong support structures. For instance, Thevenon (2013) demonstrates how expanded childcare services significantly improved labour force participation in OECD countries, particularly where policies supported working mothers. Yet in India, as Klasen (2019) points out, female labour force participation remains stubbornly low despite economic and educational gains.

The central question of this study is: *Do support networks affect women's participation in paid work?* We hypothesise that women with stronger support networks are more likely to engage in the workforce. However, previous research has largely equated support networks with family members or the size of the household, limiting the understanding of how these networks function. Additionally, even when support systems are available, their mere presence does not necessarily translate into actual support for women. It doesn't just take a village to raise a child—it takes a village to support a working mother. We argue that, *in the Indian context, both kin and non-kin support play an important role in women's participation in the labour force*. To better understand this dynamic, we break support into multiple components – density, source, type, and intensity – to analyse not just the availability but also the quality and effect of these networks on women's labour force participation.

This study investigates the multifaceted support structures that shape a young mother's reproductive and productive roles across the life course. We turn to everyday reproductive work, childcare and housework, and how household and community support affects women's ability to engage in paid work. This includes a detailed network analysis of support systems followed by a logistic regression model that identifies key predictors of women's employment status.

1.2 Data and Methodology

1.2.1 Study Area: Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR)

This study focuses on Delhi and the surrounding National Capital Region (NCR). Due to the close economic and social ties between Delhi and its neighbouring cities, the study includes the NCR along with Delhi as the study area. The NCR, as defined in the 2013 boundaries used by the Center for the Advanced Study of India (CASI), comprises the entire National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi as well as the urban populations of 18 adjoining districts from Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan, including cities such as Gurugram, Noida, Ghaziabad, and Faridabad (Chakravorty & Sircar, 2021). Though it is a rural-urban continuum, this study, like CASI, restricts its focus to urban areas as defined by the 2011 Census. The original purpose of developing NCR was to create a metropolitan cluster to relieve the demographic and infrastructural burden on Delhi and ensure balanced, planned development across the region. The residents of the NCR frequently commute to Delhi and share socio-economic characteristics, lifestyles, and access to services similar to those within the city. Thus, including NCR in the sampling frame allows for a more accurate and representative understanding of urban women's experiences in the capital region while maintaining the focus on urban realities.

Furthermore, Delhi-NCR offers a compelling urban context for the study of women's reproductive labour. Despite being a relatively well-developed region with high literacy, access

to digital infrastructure, and diverse employment opportunities, the urban female labour force participation rate and worker population ratio (WPR) remain significantly lower than the national average for women. While recent years have seen a gradual increase in WPR, the gap between urban and total female employment remains persistent. This paradox of urban advantage coexisting with restricted female employment makes Delhi-NCR an ideal case to explore how unpaid work, particularly the dual burden of housework and childcare, constrains young mothers' workforce participation and life satisfaction.

1.2.2 Sample Design and Framework

A mixed-method approach (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003) was followed, and both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from young mothers in Delhi aged 25-35 with at least one child aged 5 or below. Before the main survey, a qualitative and quantitative instrument pretest was conducted. The results from the pretest were used to develop quantitative and qualitative instruments further to explore the research problem in the study area.

Sampling

This study focuses on young mothers in the National Capital Region (NCR) aged 25-35 years. According to NFHS-5 (2019-21)(IIPS & ICF, 2021), the proportion of employed women aged 25-35 years with at least one living child aged 5 or below is 15.24%. This proportion is used to calculate the sample size for the study. Using Cochran's formula (1977),

$$n = \frac{\left(z^2_{1-\frac{\propto}{2}}\right) * \ p \ * \ (1-p)}{d^2}$$

Here, n = sample size

p = proportion of employed women aged 25-35 in Delhi with at least one living child aged 5 or below (15.24%)

d = level of error allowed in the study

At 5% level of significance, $z_{1-\frac{\propto}{2}}$ = 1.96. Allowing a 5% error in our study, the calculated sample size for our study is 199. However, after accounting for incomplete responses and interrupted interviews, the final effective sample consisted of 193 women. While Cochran's formula is traditionally used for estimating population proportions, in this study, it served as a methodological foundation to ensure that the sample size was sufficiently large and statistically robust for analysis rather than for prevalence estimation.

Sampling Framework

A two-stage random sampling design was used to ensure representativeness while focusing on middle-class urban households settings where both caregiving and paid employment frequently intersect.

Stage 1: Selection of Housing Societies

Sampling began with the construction of a district-level sampling frame using the *National Cooperative Database* maintained by the Ministry of Cooperation, Government of India. This database lists registered cooperative housing societies. Three housing societies were randomly selected from each district—nine districts of Delhi (as per the 2011 administrative division) and four districts of NCR (Ghaziabad, Noida, Faridabad, Gurugram). Where permission was denied by a Residents' Welfare Association (RWA), the society was replaced with another randomly selected one from the same district.

Stage 2: Selection of Households

After gaining access to each selected housing society, RWAs were requested to provide a list of households with at least one mother aged 25–35 and at least one child aged 5 or below. This list served as the sampling frame for the second stage. From each list, five households were selected randomly for interviews. Due to high non-response rates, eight households were initially selected to ensure that at least five interviews were successfully conducted per society.

The two-stage random sampling strategy was chosen over purposive sampling to minimize selection bias and enhance the representativeness of findings. The first stage ensured spatial and socio-economic diversity across districts, while the second stage allowed for randomness at the household level. Although access constraints required occasional substitution of housing societies, the systematic approach at both stages preserved the integrity of the sampling design.

While the NFHS-5 data informed the sample size estimation, it reflects the employment proportion for the general population. However, our study focuses on middle-class mothers residing in cooperative housing societies settings that may deviate substantially from the broader average. In our final sample, approximately 52% of the respondents were employed, a proportion significantly higher than the NFHS-5 benchmark. Our sampling deliberately focused on specific middle-class residential areas across NCR districts as well that may have distinct socio-economic characteristics and employment infrastructures compared to the broader Delhi region, leading to this difference. Furthermore, this discrepancy does not undermine the study but rather aligns with one of its key research objectives: to interrogate why some middle-class women work while others do not and what factors enable or constrain employment in this group.

The sample's composition reflects real-world heterogeneity in employment within this population and offers the analytical advantage of allowing subgroup comparison. While an ideal stratified sampling design would require separate sample sizes for employed and non-employed women, the resource-intensive nature of data collection made this infeasible. Nonetheless, having a near-balanced representation across employment categories enables robust comparative analysis even within a modest total sample.

1.2.3 Data Collection

The procedure used to gather data from survey respondents (young mothers) was a face-to-face interview conducted with the help of a questionnaire. The questionnaire included questions on the respondent's socio-demographic characteristics, natal family background, division of labour in the parental household, pregnancy and childbirth, current work status, workplace characteristics (for employed mothers), homemaker characteristics (for stay-at-home mothers), time use, household work and support systems, expectations, emotional support, marital attributes, and subjective life satisfaction. Data collection was conducted over a period of six months, from June to November 2023, across thirteen districts of Delhi-NCR, including all nine districts of Delhi and four districts of NCR—Ghaziabad, Gurugram, Faridabad, and Noida.

To complement the quantitative insights generated through survey data, thirty in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with a sub-sample of women drawn from the larger respondent pool. These interviews were designed to delve deeper into women's subjective experiences, especially in relation to their caregiving responsibilities and decisions around paid work. While the survey provided patterns and correlations, the IDIs allowed for an exploration of meaning-making, context, and nuance, capturing the "why" and "how" behind the "what."

The selection of these thirty women was purposive but grounded in variation. Participants were chosen to reflect diversity across key dimensions such as employment status (employed and non-employed), household type (nuclear or joint), presence or absence of domestic help, and levels of spousal or familial support in housework and childcare. Care was taken to ensure that voices from different districts and housing societies were represented.

Each interview was conducted in person, either at the respondent's home or in a nearby community space (park), depending on the participant's preference and privacy needs. Interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and were conducted in the language most comfortable for the respondent - Hindi, English, or a mix of both. A flexible interview guide was used, allowing women to narrate their life histories and reflect on key turning points such as marriage, childbirth, job loss or re-entry into the workforce. Probing questions focused on how women manage daily housework and childcare, how they divide their time, how decisions are made within the household, and how they feel about the responsibilities they carry. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and later transcribed and translated for thematic analysis.

Before administering the questionnaire and the interview schedule on the study population, pretesting was done in January 2023 on twenty young mothers (10 employed and 10 stay-at-home mothers) from Rohtak district, which is a part of NCR but was not included in the main survey.

This study collected data from 193 young mothers, each of whom reported on the individuals who supported them with housework and childcare. This resulted in 193 distinct ego-centric networks, each centred on a single respondent (ego) and mapping the types of support received from her family members, neighbours, domestic help, or community institutions (alters) (Moreno, 1934, 1946; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). While each ego network is unique, the alters identified across respondents often fell into common relational categories (e.g., husband, mother-in-law, neighbour). To identify overall patterns in the distribution of reproductive labour

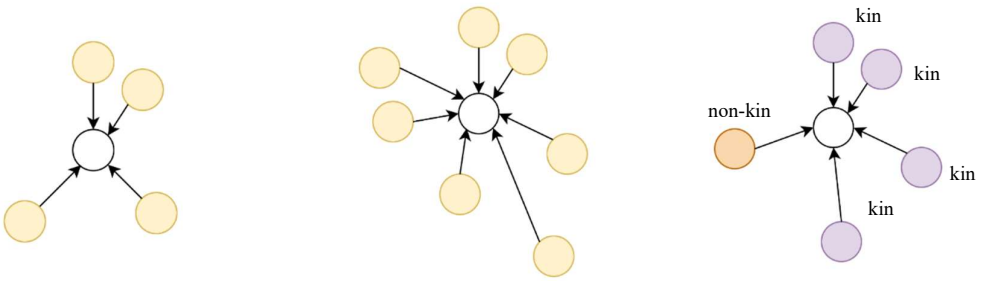
and to facilitate comparative analysis and modelling, we constructed a common ego network by aggregating these individual networks. This involved categorizing alters by role, calculating the proportion of respondents who received support from each role type, and measuring the average frequency and type of help reported. The resulting common ego network serves as a composite representation of the typical support structure surrounding a young mother in our study, allowing us to examine the general structure of care and labour sharing across the sample.

1.3 General Definitions

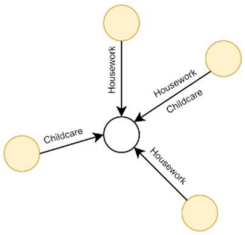
In this study, we divide support into the following categories – density, source, type and intensity. The density of support refers to the number of support networks available for assistance with childcare and domestic, as seen in Figures 1(a) and 1(b). Respondents with lower support density (Figure 1(a)) have up to four support systems: family members, community members, and online resources such as grocery delivery and online shopping. In the urban setting, outsourcing household tasks through digital platforms has become an increasingly important source of support for women. On the other hand, Figure 1(b) depicts a denser support network, where five or more support sources are available, providing a broader safety net.

The second component is the source of support (Figure 1(c)) from whom the respondent actually receives support, in contrast to the available support. These sources include kin – such as husbands, parents, parents-in-law, and other relatives *(purple)* – and non-kin/external support, including domestic workers, neighbours, and childcare institutions *(orange)*. In addition to these components, the study also considers whether the type of support received by the respondents (Figure 1(d)), such as support in household chores or childcare – affects a young mother's work participation. The final component, intensity of support, reflects how frequently and extensively the support is provided. Lower-intensity support involves help with one or two activities, such as laundry or cooking, and is represented by a thinner line in Figure 1(e). In contrast, higher-intensity support involves assistance with multiple activities – such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, and shopping – and is represented by a thicker line in the figure to indicate more frequent support.

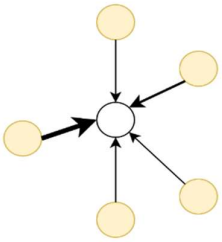
Figure 1: Support networks and components of support



(a) Lower support density (b) Higher support density (c) Source of support



(d) Type of support



(e) Intensity of support

1.4 Methods

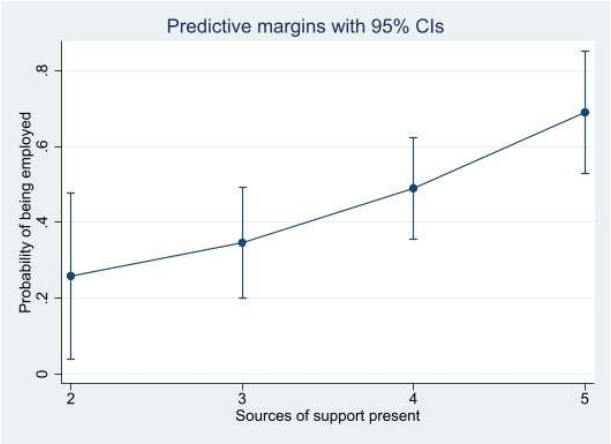
This chapter draws on both quantitative and qualitative data to examine the support systems available to young mothers. Descriptive statistics and bivariate analyses are used throughout to identify key patterns. In-depth interview (IDI) excerpts are included to supplement the quantitative findings.

The fourth section examines how support systems relate to mothers' employment through predictive margin plots that show the probability of employment based on various support factors. Additional margin analyses look specifically at how husbands' involvement in childcare and housework (categorised as never, low, medium, or high) affects the likelihood of mothers' employment. IDIs complement these statistical findings by providing personal accounts of how support networks either help or hinder workforce participation. We also use social network analysis and create network visualisations of mothers' support systems, including both family and community resources for childcare and housework. The thickness of ties and nodes in these visualisations represents how frequent and intense the support is, respectively. To assess how these support networks affect employment, we construct a multivariate binomial logistic regression model with employment status as the dependent variable (not employed=0, employed=1). The model includes socio-demographic factors such as the age of the respondent, number of children, family type, age at marriage, type of marriage, and educational background of the respondent, and measures of available support – density, type, source and intensity.

1.5 Results and Discussion

This section discusses how housework and childcare support from kin and non-kin sources affect the work status of young mothers. Figure 2 visualizes how the availability of support systems, both family and community, affects the employment probability of young mothers. Women with more support systems available have a higher probability of being employed. This suggests that shared responsibilities reduce the care burden on women, enabling them to pursue employment.

Figure 2: Change in the predicted probability of being employed, by presence of support systems



This figure demonstrates the critical role of both kin and non-kin (community) support networks in shaping women's employment decisions. In the absence of such support, reproductive labour becomes a significant barrier to participation in paid work. This figure aligns with the broader narrative that women's labour force participation is intricately tied to the availability of support networks (Bechara et al., 2015; Stoloff et al., 1999). Without such support, mothers face higher time poverty, making employment difficult to sustain (Bardasi & Wodon, 2010; Pepin et al., 2018; Zilanawala, 2013).

Figure 3a illustrates how husbands' involvement in childcare affects the employment probability of young mothers. When husbands are highly involved in daily childcare activities, the probability of the wife being employed increases significantly. Conversely, when men take on little to no childcare responsibilities, the probability falls sharply, as the burden of caregiving limits their ability to pursue paid work. This finding points to the need for equitable sharing of caregiving responsibilities.

Figure 3a: Change in the predicted probability of being employed based on husband's involvement in childcare; **Figure 3b**: Change in the predicted probability of being employed based on husband's involvement in housework

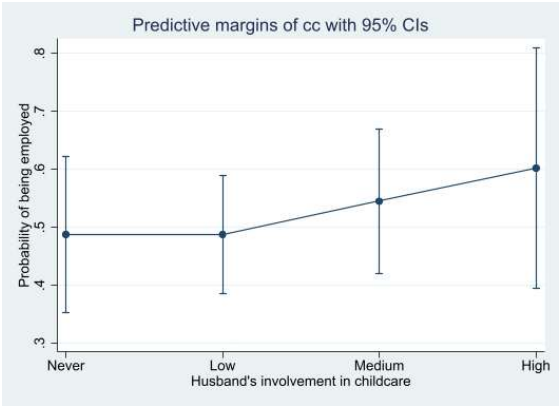


Figure 3 (a)

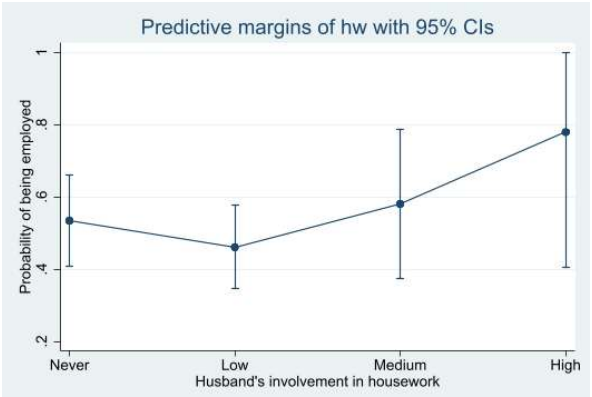


Figure 3 (b)

Figure 3b shows the impact of husbands' participation in housework on their wives' employment status. Higher involvement in housework by husbands leads to a greater likelihood of women being employed. Reducing the wife's household burden allows her to balance domestic and professional roles. When husbands perform only a minimal share of housework, the likelihood of women's employment decreases, reflecting the unequal distribution of unpaid labour in many households. This figure strengthens the argument that employment policies alone are insufficient without corresponding changes in domestic gender dynamics.

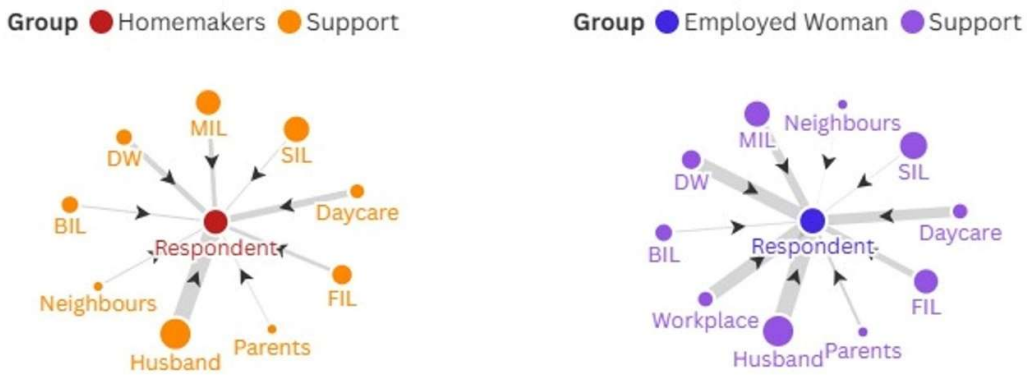
Male participation in housework and childcare does not merely redistribute domestic responsibilities—it actively enables women's entry into, and continuity within, the labour market. Empirical evidence from diverse contexts shows that when men engage more in routine childcare and domestic work, women's employment probabilities and working hours increase. Almeida et al. (1993) similarly found that as women's paid work hours increased, so did their husbands' participation in domestic duties, suggesting a reciprocal adjustment in roles. In fact, the father's involvement in childcare, particularly in the early postnatal period, has been found to influence the likelihood of mothers returning to work more strongly than occupational class or the father's own work hours (Norman, 2019).

Routine childcare, often regarded as the most time-consuming and gendered aspect of parenting, plays a particularly decisive role in shaping women's labour force outcomes (Gracia & Esping-Andersen, 2015). A more equal distribution of care and chores contributes not only to higher rates of female employment but also promotes a more sustainable gender balance in working hours (Samtleben & Müller, 2022). Beyond instrumental support, emotional and relational backing from male partners also shapes women's work decisions. Egalitarian divisions of labour increase women's likelihood of labour market re-entry (Bröckel, 2016), while emotional support from partners has been linked to improved maternal well-being during the transition back to work after maternity leave (Seiger & Weise, 2011).

Even in regions with historically high female labour participation, such as parts of Central and Eastern Europe, fathers' active engagement in domestic life continues to hold untapped potential for enhancing maternal employment (Fanelli & Profeta, 2021).

To gain deeper insight into the support systems available to young mothers, we constructed an aggregated ego network graph. Figure 4 represents the types and sources of support that homemakers (*left*) and employed women (*right*) receive from both family members and the broader community. The links from sources of support (alters) to the young mothers (ego) are depicted using directional ties, illustrating the flow of support. The thickness of these links represents the frequency with which each source provides assistance to the ego. Additionally, the size of each alter node reflects the intensity of support: larger nodes indicate that the source contributes across multiple domains, for instance, laundry, cleaning, childcare, and other household activities, signalling a broader and more sustained involvement.

Figure 4: Aggregated ego-centric social network support for housework and childcare received by employed women and homemakers from multiple social ties



Note: MIL = Mother-in-law, FIL = Father-in-law, SIL = Sister-in-law, BIL = Brother-in-law, DW = Domestic Worker

Employed women receive stronger childcare and housework support from their husbands, mothers-in-law, and community members, including domestic workers and workplace management, which helps them sustain their employment. On the other hand, homemakers rely less on external help, suggesting they bear the brunt of household and caregiving responsibilities on their own. The graph shows the husband as the most significant source of support. The findings highlight the importance of extended family and community networks in enabling women's employment. Aragao and Villanueva (2021) find that kin coresidence is positively associated with mothers' employment outcomes in Latin America, as living with a relative often increases the likelihood of receiving domestic support. This aligns with Sarkisian and Gerstel's (2004) broader findings on the role of extended families in providing unpaid care. Similarly, evidence from Kenya suggests that kin who reside within the household are more likely to assist working mothers compared to those living elsewhere (Clark et al., 2017). However, the reliance on in-laws (Figure 4) also reflects that gendered expectations persist, as these responsibilities are often placed on other women, such as mothers-in-law or sisters (Aragao & Villanueva, 2021; Luke et al., 2014; Saraff & Srivastava, 2010).

Even when support systems are available, their mere presence does not necessarily translate into actual support for women. To better understand this dynamic, we break support into multiple components – density, source, type, and intensity – to analyse not just the availability but also the quality and effect of these networks on women's labour force participation. Table 1 presents the results of multivariate binomial logistic regression that examines how socio-demographic factors and support systems influence the work status of young mothers.

Across Models 1, 2, and 3, the most consistent and striking finding is the role of community and kin-based support in enabling young mothers' employment. In Model 1, higher support density is associated with significantly greater odds of being employed (UOR = 5.05***), suggesting that simply having access to multiple sources of support makes a substantial difference. Community support for housework also stands out in Model 2 (UOR = 3.40***), indicating that non-family support can be just as—or even more—effective than familial help. Model 3 shows that the intensity of community support for housework (UOR = 4.45***) and

mother-in-law's support for childcare (UOR = 4.89***) both significantly improve the likelihood of employment, pointing to the importance of both who provides the support and how involved they are.

Model 4 integrates all the covariates into a comprehensive model that offers the most detailed understanding of what drives work participation among young mothers. Support density remains a significant factor, with women reporting higher support density having nearly four times the odds of participating in the labour force (AOR=3.89**). Receiving support for childcare continues to be pivotal (AOR=4.10*), further highlighting the importance of assistance in managing childcare responsibilities. The intensity of support also remains critical, with women receiving high-intensity housework support from domestic workers (AOR=7.28**) and high-intensity childcare support from mothers-in-law (AOR=6.02*) having a significantly greater likelihood of being employed. This table highlights the multi-layered barriers and enablers influencing women's work status. Age, family structure, and the number of children play crucial roles, but support systems act as decisive factors in determining whether women can work.

The logistic regression model demonstrates a strong fit with the data. The model's ability to discriminate between employed and homemaker statuses is confirmed by an AUC (area under the curve) of 0.8639, indicating excellent predictive power. The Likelihood Ratio Test (LR chi^2 = 81.44, $p < 0.01$) shows that the model significantly improves upon the null model. Additionally, likelihood ratio tests comparing the nested models reveal that the more complex model significantly enhances the fit, further supporting the relevance of the added predictors

Table 1: Odds ratio from multivariate binomial logistic regression assessing the effect of socio-demographic factors and support network factors on the work status of young mothers in Delhi-NCR, India

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	UOR	**CI**	**UOR**	**CI**	**UOR**	**CI**	**AOR**	**CI**
Support Density								
Lower support density®								
Higher support density	5.05***	[2.73,9.35]					3.89**	[1.19,12.75]
Source of Support								
Housework								
Not receiving support®								
Receiving support from community			3.40***	[1.70,6.84]			1.25	[0.43,3.57]
Receiving support from kin			1.28	[0.63,2.59]			1.12	[0.35,3.51]
Childcare								
Not receiving support®								
Receiving support			2.97*	[0.87,10.09]			4.10*	[0.78,21.42]
Intensity of support								
Housework - Husband								
Lower intensity®								
Higher intensity					0.57	[0.28,1.19]	0.57	[0.19,1.68]
Housework - Mother-in-law								
Lower intensity®								
Higher intensity					1.22	[0.40,3.72]	0.39	[0.08,1.86]
Housework - Female relatives								
Lower intensity®								
Higher intensity					0.58	[0.12,2.91]	0.33	[0.05,2.27]
Housework - Male relatives								
Lower intensity®								

Higher intensity	1.34	[0.42,4.26]	0.28	[0.06,1.37]
Housework - Community				
Lower intensity®				
Higher intensity	4.45***	[1.75,11.35]	7.28**	[1.54,34.36]
Childcare - Husband				
Lower intensity®				
Higher intensity	1.32	[0.66,2.64]	2.02	[0.71,5.74]
Childcare - Mother-in-law				
Lower intensity®				
Higher intensity	4.89***	[1.48,16.12]	6.02*	[0.93,38.90]
Childcare - Female relatives				
Lower intensity®				
Higher intensity	0.76	[0.03,18.77]	0.33	[0.01,7.93]

Model 4 is controlled for the age of the respondent, number of children, family type, age at marriage, type of marriage, and educational background of the respondent

Exponentiated coefficients; 95% confidence intervals in brackets

* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Dependent variable: Current work status of the respondent (0=homemaker/not employed; 1=employed)

While this is, to the best of our knowledge, the first study to examine the role of community and kin-based support in such depth using a multi-model approach, existing research does underscore the broader relevance of social support in shaping women's work outcomes. Prior studies have primarily focused on spousal, workplace, or organizational support in relation to work-family conflict. For instance, support from spouses and colleagues has been shown to significantly reduce family-to-work conflict, creating a more sustainable environment for working women (Bröckel, 2016; Daalen et al., 2006). Similarly, French et al. (2018) emphasize that organizational support, especially when it comes from multiple sources, is a key buffer against work-family strain. However, these studies often stop short of exploring non-institutional or community-based forms of assistance. As Prasad and Chattopadhyay (2023) highlight, states with stronger childcare infrastructure, such as functional crèches under the National Creche Scheme, also report higher levels of women's participation in paid work, pointing to the enabling role of accessible community support systems.

Other research has examined the role of personal networks and informal support systems in women's career pathways. Greer and Kirk (2022) highlight that personal connections and internal resources are instrumental in enabling successful career transitions for women. In the domain of self-employment, Allen (2000) found that social networks, especially their size and composition, are critical in shaping decisions to pursue entrepreneurial activity, though women often receive less influential support than men. These studies affirm that support networks are not peripheral but central to enabling women's economic participation. However, previous studies have seldom examined the differentiated effects of support by source, type, and intensity, gaps this study addresses directly.

To complement these findings, the following sections draw on in-depth interviews to examine how women navigate and make use of social networks in practice, offering a more nuanced understanding of the role of support systems in shaping labour force participation.

1.5.1 Positive Influence of Support Networks on Workforce Participation

A well-established support network plays a critical role in enabling women to engage in the workforce, particularly when it comes to managing childcare and household responsibilities. One 32-year-old employed woman with two young children described how her mother-in-law's involvement allowed her to sustain her career: *"My mother-in-law is a lifesaver. She takes care of the house, cooks breakfast, and waits for us to come home to cook dinner. She also manages the kids. Without her, I don't think I could have continued working."* This reliable household support enabled her to focus on her demanding job in the aviation industry without feeling overburdened by domestic responsibilities.

Similarly, a 30-year-old housewife with two children expressed her reliance on family care for her children: *"I feel that family can take the best care of the child because small children cannot explain what's happening with them. So I feel family is the best option for childcare."* In this case, family support not only gave her peace of mind but was also crucial for her to consider rejoining the workforce without the anxiety of leaving her children in external care. An employed woman described how her in-laws played a critical role in allowing her to work: *"I can continue my job because my father-in-law takes care of the children in my absence.*

Knowing they are safe and cared for gives me the peace of mind to focus on my work." In this case, her in-laws provided vital childcare support, enabling her work participation by taking over this responsibility during her working hours.

1.5.2 Barriers Created by Lack of Support Networks

The minimal involvement of support networks, particularly husbands, in household responsibilities emerged as a significant barrier to women's participation in the workforce. Many women revealed that their husbands only assist when explicitly asked, leaving women to shoulder most of the household and childcare duties. A 28-year-old housewife with one child shared her frustration about having to instruct her husband to help with chores: *"I absolutely have to tell my husband to do chores... but if I ask him to do something, it will definitely be done, and he gives 100% there. But why can't he just take the initiative without me asking every time?"* This limited spousal involvement creates an uneven distribution of labour, making it difficult for women to prioritise paid work. Another woman, a 30-year-old housewife of one child, described how her husband's lack of household participation constrained her ability to work full-time: *"Husband just comes home, eats and sleeps. He has no idea about housework unless I remind him. It's exhausting. I do most of the housework and take care of our child, which makes it hard to even think about a full-time job."* This imbalance places the bulk of responsibility on women, restricting their capacity to engage in paid labour.

On the other hand, a young housewife expressed that her husband is discouraged by his mother from participating in household chores, leaving her to manage everything alone. She laments, *"Even if he does try to help out, his mother quickly stops him and says he's not supposed to do household work."* This lack of spousal and in-law support traps her in her role as a housewife despite her strong desire to re-enter the workforce. Without adequate familial support, she faces insurmountable challenges in balancing her responsibilities.

1.5.3 Daycare and External Childcare: An Unreliable Alternative?

While external childcare facilities could provide a viable alternative to family support, the women's narratives reveal a deep scepticism about the quality and reliability of daycare services. These concerns are even more critical for those considering work participation.

A 29-year-old housewife with one young child shared her discomfort with external childcare: *"I don't trust daycares... I feel like they just placate the parents by showing their best behaviour when they visit, but the child doesn't get proper attention. I pulled my son out of daycare after a few days because I didn't like how they handled the kids."* This distrust left her with no choice but to depend on family for childcare, delaying her return to the workforce.

Similarly, a 31-year-old employed mother expressed reservations about using daycare services: *"I'm very apprehensive about leaving my baby in daycare. With all the stories you hear in the media, it's hard to feel safe. For now, I rely on my in-laws, but I don't feel comfortable with the idea of daycare at such a young age."* These concerns highlight the importance of reliable

family support when external childcare is not seen as a viable option, further emphasising the reliance on in-laws and extended family for employed women.

When asked to rate their trust in childcare systems, young mothers gave an average score of just 4 out of 10, with 62.04% expressing that they felt unsafe leaving their child there, and 7.41% citing unhygienic conditions as a major concern, alongside perceptions of staff neglect and general mistrust in childcare personnel. These responses underscore the systemic issues that continue to undermine confidence in formal childcare and push mothers toward family-based arrangements instead.

1.6 Conclusion

In this study, we hypothesise that women with more support systems available have shared domestic and caregiving responsibilities, which reduces the care burden on women, enabling them to pursue employment. We find that support density is a significant factor, with women with higher support density being almost four times more likely to participate in the labour force. Specifically, the support received for childcare is pivotal. The results are consistent with our research hypothesis, showing that employed mothers have better support systems in terms of both density and intensity. However, the findings also reflect that gendered expectations persist, as the support responsibilities are often placed on other women (such as mothers-in-law or sisters).

Moreover, community-based supports, such as domestic workers and access to childcare facilities, emerge as equally crucial factors in enabling women to sustain employment, further reinforcing the importance of collective support networks in reducing the unpaid care burden. However, concerns regarding the reliability and safety of external childcare remain a significant barrier. Many mothers expressed hesitation in leaving their children at daycare, citing issues such as safety and unhygienic conditions. This mistrust is reflected in the low average trust rating of just 4 out of 10 for available childcare services, suggesting that while access to external support is critical, its quality and perceived safety substantially influence women's ability to leverage these options.

To support women's labour force participation, policymakers must prioritise not only the availability but also the quality and transparency of childcare services. While childcare centres exist, many mothers express deep distrust of these facilities, often citing concerns over safety and supervision. Camera access, allowing real-time monitoring of their children, is essential for mothers to even consider using daycare services. Investing in childcare infrastructure that prioritises both safety and parental visibility can address these concerns, fostering trust and increasing the likelihood that mothers will utilise these services. Transparency and quality assurance mechanisms must be central to childcare policy design.

At the same time, the findings suggest that while external childcare is important, many working mothers in this study rely heavily on support from female family members and value this form of kin-based childcare. Thus, alongside service expansion, there is a pressing need for public education and media campaigns that highlight the developmental benefits for children of spending time with trained educators and peers. Normalising professional childcare, rather than

relying exclusively on kinship support, could help shift social perceptions and gradually expand mothers' trusted childcare options.

Promoting equitable distribution of housework and caregiving between spouses is critical at the household level. A modest increase in husbands' involvement in household chores has a significant impact, freeing women's time for employment and boosting marital satisfaction. Public awareness campaigns promoting shared domestic responsibilities can help dismantle traditional gender norms, enabling more balanced partnerships.

In conclusion, gender equality in labour markets requires multi-level interventions, combining family-friendly policies, robust childcare infrastructure, and social campaigns that challenge entrenched gender roles. By addressing these structural and cultural barriers, women can achieve both economic independence and enhanced marital satisfaction, creating a more inclusive and equitable society. Only through such comprehensive efforts can we bridge the gap in labour force participation and foster a supportive environment for women's full economic engagement.

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