

Skill Development Interventions and Women's Employment Outcomes: A Comparative Urban–Rural Study of Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

Skill development has emerged as one of the most significant policy instruments for addressing gender inequality in employment in India. Women's participation in the labour market remains persistently low, particularly in northern states such as Uttar Pradesh, where socio-cultural norms, limited educational attainment, and structural constraints restrict women's access to paid work. In this context, government-led skill development programs are expected to enhance employability, income generation, and economic empowerment among women. This paper examines the impact of skill development interventions on women's employment outcomes in urban and rural areas of Uttar Pradesh. Using secondary data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), Census of India, and reports of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, the study adopts a comparative analytical framework to assess participation patterns, employment outcomes, and sectoral distribution among women beneficiaries. The findings reveal that while skill development programs have increased women's access to vocational training, their conversion into sustainable and secure employment remains uneven. Urban women benefit relatively more than rural women due to better market access, education levels, and institutional support. The paper argues that skill development alone is insufficient unless supported by gender-responsive policies, post-training employment linkages, and socio-institutional reforms. The study concludes with policy recommendations aimed at strengthening women-centric skill development and employment strategies in Uttar Pradesh.

Keywords : Women Empowerment; Skill Development; Women's Employment; Urban–Rural Divide; Uttar Pradesh; Gender and Labour Market.

Introduction

Women's employment is widely recognized as a key indicator of economic development, social progress, and gender equality. Across the globe, increasing women's participation in the labour force has been associated with higher household incomes, improved child welfare, and broader economic growth. However, in India, women's labour force participation has remained consistently low despite improvements in education and legal rights. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey, female labour force participation rates in India are significantly lower than global averages, with substantial regional variations (Government of India, 2023).

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Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, presents a particularly challenging context for women's employment. A growing body of literature highlights the complex relationship between skill development and women's employment. Human capital theory suggests that skill acquisition enhances productivity and employability, leading to better labour market outcomes (Becker, 1964). However, feminist economists argue that structural and cultural factors often mediate this relationship, particularly for women in developing societies (Kabeer, 2012).

The state is marked by deep-rooted patriarchy, low female literacy in rural areas, limited industrialization, and a predominance of informal employment. Women's work is often confined to unpaid household labour, agriculture, or low-paid informal activities that remain invisible in official statistics. Studies on women's employment in India reveal that education and skills alone do not guarantee workforce participation. Social norms related to marriage, mobility, and unpaid care work often restrict women's ability to engage in paid employment (Deshpande & Kabeer, 2019). Research by the World Bank (2022) indicates that skill training programs in India have had mixed success in improving women's employment outcomes, with urban women benefiting more than rural women.

In such a scenario, skill development programs are viewed as critical interventions to enhance women's employability and economic independence. Several studies focusing on skill development programs such as PMKVY suggest that while enrolment of women has increased, post-training placement rates remain low, particularly in rural areas (Mehrotra & Parida, 2019). In Uttar Pradesh, empirical studies indicate that women face additional barriers such as lack of local employment opportunities, safety concerns, and limited industry linkages (Chaudhary, 2021).

The Government of India, through initiatives such as the Skill India Mission, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), and Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY), has emphasized skill training as a pathway to employment and entrepreneurship. Uttar Pradesh has also implemented state-level skill development schemes under the Uttar Pradesh Skill Development Mission (UPSDM). These programs aim to equip women with market-relevant skills, improve their access to jobs, and promote self-employment. Despite these efforts, questions remain regarding the actual impact of skill development programs on women's employment, particularly in rural areas. This paper seeks to examine whether skill development interventions have been successful in translating training into employment for women in Uttar Pradesh and whether there are significant differences between urban and rural outcomes.

Skill Development Programs for Women in Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh has implemented a range of skill development initiatives that directly and indirectly aim to enhance women's employability, income generation, and socio-economic empowerment. One of the most significant national-level interventions is the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), which focuses on providing short-term, industry-relevant skill training with certification and placement support. Under PMKVY, women in Uttar Pradesh have been trained in sectors such as tailoring, beauty and wellness, healthcare assistance, retail, and digital services, which are relatively accessible and socially acceptable forms of employment for women. The scheme also emphasizes recognition of prior learning

(RPL), enabling women already engaged in informal work to formalize their skills and improve their earning potential (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship [MSDE], 2023).

Another important initiative is the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY), which specifically targets rural youth from poor households, with a strong emphasis on the inclusion of women. In Uttar Pradesh, DDU-GKY has played a crucial role in linking rural women to wage employment through residential and non-residential training programs, particularly for women from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and minority communities. The program's focus on placement-linked training, migration support, and post-placement assistance has helped many rural women transition from unpaid family labor or agricultural work to formal and semi-formal employment (Ministry of Rural Development, 2022).

At the state level, the Uttar Pradesh Skill Development Mission (UPSDM) acts as the nodal agency coordinating skill training initiatives across districts. UPSDM collaborates with industrial training institutes (ITIs), private training partners, and sector skill councils to ensure demand-driven skill development. Special provisions such as women-only training batches, stipends, hostel facilities, and counselling support have been introduced to improve female participation and retention. By aligning training with local labour market needs, UPSDM has contributed to improving women's employability in both urban and semi-urban areas of the state (Government of Uttar Pradesh, 2023).

In addition to formal training programs, Self-Help Group (SHG)-based livelihood initiatives under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) have played a transformative role in empowering rural women. Through skill training, financial literacy, access to credit, and enterprise development, SHGs have enabled women to engage in micro-enterprises such as food processing, dairy, handicrafts, and small retail businesses. In Uttar Pradesh, NRLM has strengthened women's collective capacities, increased their bargaining power within households and markets, and enhanced their participation in local governance institutions. These livelihood interventions not only improve income levels but also contribute to greater self-confidence, decision-making autonomy, and social empowerment among women (National Rural Livelihood Mission, 2021).

Overall, the convergence of national schemes like PMKVY and DDU-GKY with state-level initiatives such as UPSDM and community-based programs under NRLM reflects a multi-layered approach to women's skill development in Uttar Pradesh. While challenges related to mobility, digital access, and job sustainability remain, these initiatives collectively represent a significant step toward integrating women into the state's economic growth process and reducing gender disparities in employment and livelihoods.

Uttar Pradesh has implemented several skill development initiatives targeting women, either directly or indirectly. Major programs include PMKVY, DDU-GKY, UPSDM, and SHG-based livelihood programs under the National Rural Livelihood Mission.

Table 1: Major Skill Development Programs for Women in Uttar Pradesh

Program	Target Group	Main Focus Areas
PMKVY	Youth & women	Retail, healthcare, tailoring
DDU-GKY	Rural women	Wage employment

UPSDM	State beneficiaries	Vocational & digital skills
NRLM-SHG	Rural women	Self-employment & micro-enterprise

(Source: Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2022)

Women’s Employment Scenario in Uttar Pradesh

The women’s employment scenario in Uttar Pradesh has been gradually evolving in recent years, reflecting both significant progress and ongoing challenges in integrating women into the state’s economy. Historically, Uttar Pradesh had one of the lowest female labour force participation rates in India, with only about 14 % of women engaged in the formal labour market in 2017–18. However, according to the recently released Women Economic Empowerment (WEE) Index, this rate has increased remarkably to around 36 % by 2023–24, indicating a 22-percentage point rise over six years, a shift attributed to targeted policy interventions, improved safety measures, and enhanced employment opportunities for women across diverse sectors.

This upward trend mirrors broader socio-economic changes in the state. Initiatives to make workplaces more inclusive—such as lifting restrictions on women working in previously prohibited hazardous factories and permitting women to work night shifts under safer conditions—have expanded opportunities for female employment. Despite this progress, the nature of employment for many women remains concentrated in informal and vulnerable segments. Data show that a large share of female workers are self-employed or engaged in unpaid family labour, particularly in rural areas where agriculture and allied activities dominate. Formal wage and salaried employment for women remains comparatively low, pointing to persistent structural barriers in translating increased participation into stable and quality jobs.

Rural employment schemes also play a crucial role in supporting women’s economic participation. For instance, under schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS), women’s participation has reached notable levels, with reports indicating that over 42 % of the workforce engaged through the programme in Uttar Pradesh comprises women. This not only provides immediate income support but also underscores the importance of public employment guarantees in enabling women’s involvement in the labour market. The Times of India

According to PLFS data, female labour force participation in Uttar Pradesh remains significantly lower than male participation. Rural women are largely engaged in agriculture and informal activities, while urban women are concentrated in services and low-paid jobs.

Table 2: Female Labour Force Participation Rate in Uttar Pradesh (%)

Area	FLFPR
Urban	18.4
Rural	24.6

(Source: PLFS, 2022–23)

Impact of Skill Development on Women's Employment

Skill development has emerged as a critical driver of women's employment by enhancing their employability, productivity, and access to income-generating opportunities. In India, and particularly in states like Uttar Pradesh, women's low participation in the labour force has historically been linked to limited education, lack of market-relevant skills, and restricted access to formal employment sectors. Skill development initiatives address these gaps by equipping women with technical, vocational, and soft skills aligned with labour market demands, thereby improving their chances of securing paid work or engaging in self-employment (World Bank, 2020).

Evidence suggests that women who receive formal skill training are more likely to enter the workforce and earn higher incomes compared to untrained women. Programs such as the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY), and state-led skill missions have expanded training opportunities in sectors such as tailoring, beauty and wellness, healthcare, retail, information technology, and agro-based industries. These sectors are relatively accessible to women and help them transition from unpaid family labour or informal work to more stable forms of employment (MSDE, 2023).

Skill development also plays a significant role in promoting women's self-employment and entrepreneurship. Through training in enterprise management, financial literacy, and market linkage, women are increasingly able to start and sustain micro- and small enterprises. Initiatives under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), particularly through Self-Help Groups (SHGs), have demonstrated that skill training combined with access to credit and collective support can substantially increase women's income and economic autonomy. Studies show that SHG-based skill interventions not only improve employment outcomes but also strengthen women's decision-making power within households and communities (Deininger & Liu, 2019; MoRD, 2021).

Beyond economic outcomes, the impact of skill development on women's employment extends to social empowerment. Gaining skills and paid work enhances women's self-confidence, mobility, and bargaining power, while also challenging traditional gender norms that confine women to domestic roles. However, the benefits of skill development are not uniform. Structural barriers such as limited childcare facilities, safety concerns, digital divides, and the persistence of informal employment continue to constrain the full employment potential of skilled women (ILO, 2022). Therefore, while skill development has a positive and measurable impact on women's employment, its effectiveness depends on supportive labour market conditions, gender-sensitive policies, and sustained post-training support.

Skill development programs have contributed to increased awareness, confidence, and skill acquisition among women. Urban women show higher placement rates due to better access to formal sector jobs. Rural women, however, often transition into self-employment or informal work with limited income security.

Urban–Rural Divide in Employment Outcomes

The urban–rural divide in employment outcomes remains a significant feature of India's labour market, particularly affecting women's participation and quality of work. Urban areas generally

offer greater employment opportunities due to higher levels of industrialization, service-sector growth, better infrastructure, and access to education and skill training. Women in urban settings are more likely to be engaged in salaried or regular wage employment, especially in sectors such as education, healthcare, retail, information technology, and domestic services. In contrast, rural employment opportunities for women are largely concentrated in agriculture, allied activities, and informal household-based enterprises, which are often characterized by low wages, seasonal work, and limited job security (ILO, 2022).

This divide is further reflected in the nature and quality of employment. Urban women have relatively better access to formal employment, social security benefits, and skill-intensive jobs, whereas rural women are disproportionately represented in self-employment and unpaid family labour. A significant proportion of rural women work as marginal workers, contributing to family farms or enterprises without direct monetary compensation. Studies based on National Sample Survey (NSS) and Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data indicate that rural women's work participation is often underreported due to the invisibility of unpaid and home-based labour, reinforcing gender and spatial inequalities in employment outcomes (Mehrotra & Parida, 2019).

The urban–rural divide is also evident in access to skill development and education, which directly influences employment outcomes. Urban areas benefit from a higher concentration of training institutes, vocational centres, and digital learning facilities, enabling women to acquire market-relevant skills. Rural women, on the other hand, face multiple constraints such as limited training infrastructure, lower educational attainment, mobility restrictions, and social norms that discourage paid work outside the home. As a result, even when skill development programs are available, rural women often experience lower placement rates and remain confined to low-productivity occupations (World Bank, 2020).

Public employment and livelihood programs have played an important role in partially bridging this gap. Schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) have increased rural women's access to paid work and self-employment through wage employment and Self-Help Group–based enterprises. However, these interventions have not fully eliminated disparities, as urban employment continues to offer more stable incomes, upward mobility, and long-term career prospects (MoRD, 2021).

Challenges and Constraints

Women's employment outcomes continue to be shaped by a range of structural, social, and institutional challenges that limit the effective translation of skills and education into sustainable livelihoods. One of the most persistent constraints is the prevalence of patriarchal norms and mobility restrictions, particularly in conservative and rural settings. Social expectations that prioritize women's domestic responsibilities over paid work often discourage their participation in the labour market. Restrictions on women's movement, concerns about safety, and the lack of family support further limit their ability to attend training programmes, commute to workplaces, or accept employment opportunities that require migration or long working hours. These gender norms significantly reduce women's labour force participation even when skill development opportunities are available.

Another major challenge is the mismatch between skill training and local labour market demand. Many training programmes focus on standardized courses that are not always aligned with the economic structure or employment opportunities of specific regions. The lack of adequate post-training placement support further constrains employment outcomes for women. While several skill development initiatives focus on enrolment and certification, less attention is paid to job placement, career guidance, and follow-up support. Women often face difficulties in navigating labour markets, negotiating wages, and sustaining employment without mentoring or institutional backing.

Informality and lack of job security remain dominant features of women's employment. Even when women find work after training, it is often in informal or semi-formal sectors characterized by low wages, irregular working hours, absence of written contracts, and lack of social security benefits such as maternity protection, health insurance, or pensions. This precarious nature of employment discourages long-term workforce participation and undermines the economic benefits of skill development.

The absence of supportive infrastructure such as childcare and transport facilities poses an additional barrier to women's sustained employment. The lack of affordable and accessible childcare services compels many women, especially those with young children, to withdraw from paid work or restrict themselves to home-based activities. Similarly, inadequate and unsafe transport options make commuting to training centres or workplaces difficult, particularly in peri-urban and rural areas. Without addressing these infrastructural gaps, skill development and employment initiatives are unlikely to achieve their full potential in improving women's economic participation.

Conclusion

Women's employment in Uttar Pradesh reflects a complex interaction between skill development initiatives, socio-cultural norms, and structural labour market conditions. Over the past decade, the state has made notable efforts to enhance women's employability through national and state-level skill development programmes, livelihood missions, and employment schemes. These interventions have contributed to a gradual increase in women's workforce participation and have opened new avenues for wage employment and self-employment, particularly in the service sector and through Self-Help Group-based enterprises. Skill development has emerged as an important pathway for improving women's economic participation, confidence, and decision-making power.

However, the employment outcomes of women continue to be uneven, marked by a pronounced urban-rural divide and the dominance of informal and insecure work. While urban women have relatively better access to salaried employment and skill-intensive jobs, rural women remain largely concentrated in agriculture, unpaid family labour, and low-productivity informal activities. Persistent challenges such as patriarchal norms, mobility restrictions, mismatch between training and local labour demand, inadequate post-training placement support, and the absence of childcare and transport facilities significantly limit the transformative potential of skill development initiatives.

The findings suggest that skill development alone is insufficient to ensure sustainable and quality employment for women. There is a need for a more integrated and gender-responsive

approach that combines skill training with local employment generation, stronger industry linkages, post-placement support, and supportive infrastructure. Addressing social norms, improving workplace safety, expanding childcare services, and promoting formalization and social security are crucial for enabling women to not only enter the workforce but also remain and progress within it.

In conclusion, enhancing women's employment in Uttar Pradesh requires moving beyond fragmented interventions towards a holistic framework that recognizes women as central agents of economic growth. By aligning skill development with labour market needs and addressing structural and social constraints, the state can unlock the productive potential of women and advance towards more inclusive and equitable development.

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