

Relational Selfhood and Agency: Rural Women's Experiences of Work and Family in Tamil Nadu

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HOW TO CITE:

Monika R P, Sriram G (2026),
Relational Selfhood and Agency:
Rural Women's Experiences of Work
and Family in Tamil Nadu
International Journal of Special
Education, 41(21s), 877 - 888

Rural women's economic participation in India functions simultaneously as an economic necessity and a site of contested identity formation, yet qualitative accounts of how these women reconcile relational and self-authored notions of selfhood remain limited. Drawing on forty in-depth, semi-structured interviews with informal-sector women across four blocks of Tiruvallur district, Tamil Nadu, this qualitative study examines how work and family jointly shape selfhood and everyday agency. Thematic analysis of the interview narratives generated three interlinked themes: the relational construction of selfhood through motherhood and provisioning, the practice of agency through control over earnings and low-visibility negotiation, and the dual role of family relationships as both constraint and enabler. Findings reveal that paid work did not displace relational identity but extended it, while simultaneously generating a parallel, self-authored identity marked by confidence, mobility, and public recognition. Agency proved domain-specific: women exercised deferred and negotiated decision-making around finances and mobility, but acted unilaterally on matters concerning children's welfare. Hardship, including illness, alcoholism, and widowhood, unexpectedly loosened male gatekeeping and enabled women's work, except where debt bondage entrenched dependency. Co-workers and self-help groups offered relational resources that compensated for constraints within the family. These findings extend feminist theorisations of relational autonomy and negotiated agency by showing that selfhood and agency are mutually constitutive, context-dependent processes embedded in the everyday negotiations of rural, informal work.

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Keywords: Women, Care work, informal work, Agency, gendered work, relational selfhood

INTRODUCTION

Women's economic participation is a defining feature of global change, yet remains deeply gendered in its execution, social valuation, and impact. According to ILO (2024), gender gaps persist globally, emphasizing the necessity of investigating how work interacts with women's

social positions. In India, where female labour engagement reflects economic necessity and restrictive normativity, work remains a central site for observing gendered power. This participation is more than a financial transaction; it is a social phenomenon defining women's visibility and domestic standing. Accordingly, the

study of women's labour must address the implications of work for their social identities and everyday lives.

Work serves as a primary pillar for the construction of selfhood and the assertion of identity. Scholarly accounts of gendered subjectivity suggest occupational roles provide the narrative resources individuals use to define themselves and claim social recognition (Acker, 1990; Bradley, 1999). While formal employment offers institutionalized categories like teacher or nurse, work functions as a source of status and contribution. For many women, engaging in paid labour transforms self-perception from passive dependents into active participants in household survival. However, this transformation is always mediated by prevailing gender norms that dictate the specific value assigned to their labour. Thus, work is not just an economic role but a foundational element of how women understand their value and personal worth.

This inquiry adopts relational selfhood as a primary analytical framework. Feminist scholarship has long challenged the ideal of the autonomous individual, arguing that subjectivities are embedded in social relationships, mutual obligations, and emotional ties (Gilligan, 1982; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). Relational selfhood posits that a woman's sense of "who she is" is constituted through her ongoing ties with spouses, children, extended kin, and the wider community. In rural contexts, self-understanding is often inseparable from these multifaceted familial roles and responsibilities. These relationships are the fabric of the self, meaning personal choices are weighed against collective responsibilities. By viewing the self as inherently relational, we can appreciate how women navigate the tensions between personal goals and social expectations.

Relational selfhood is agency, conceptualized here as a negotiated practice rather than absolute autonomy. Traditional paradigms often equate agency with unrestricted choice, but feminist theorists have redefined it as purposeful action exercised within the constraints of social

structures and norms (Kabeer, 1999; Mahmood, 2005). Agency involves everyday practices of bargaining, decision-making, and strategic accommodation that allow individuals to influence their lives. This perspective recognizes that women exercise agency through selective resistance, resource management, or the redefinition of tasks, even while complying with patriarchal norms. Agency is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic process of negotiation within the boundaries of what is socially permissible and acceptable. It reflects the capacity to influence circumstances even from a position of relative structural inequality.

The family serves as the primary site where relational selfhood and agency intersect. It is a source of identity, emotional attachment, and a domain of gendered obligation and authority. Because selfhood is constructed through these relationships, agency is also relational, shaped by the power dynamics, emotional needs, and economic requirements of the household. Family members can provide the support that enables a woman to work, yet they may also enforce domestic roles that limit her physical mobility and decision-making power. The intellectual heart of this study lies in examining how these same relationships simultaneously define, limit, and enable the choices available to women. Negotiation is the primary tool through which women balance these forces, making the family a dynamic arena of contestation, compromise, and mutual adjustment.

The informal economy offers a fertile empirical site for studying these conceptual relationships. Unlike the formal sector, where roles are institutionally defined, informal work is often insecure and interwoven with domestic life. For women in this sector, the boundaries between paid labour and unpaid household responsibilities are fluid and overlapping. They occupy multiple roles such as worker, mother, daughter-in-law, caregiver, without the benefit of a stable institutional identity. This lack of formal recognition creates a setting where work participation and family obligations are

inextricably linked. The analytical challenge is to understand how women construct a consistent sense of self when their labour is undervalued and their professional identity is considered secondary to domestic roles. Informal work provides a unique lens for observing how agency is practiced in mundane negotiations of everyday life.

The rural landscape of Tamil Nadu provides a distinct and relevant vantage point for this research. The state is characterized by relatively high levels of female labor participation alongside persistent patriarchal structures and kinship norms (Heyer, 2014; Kapadia, 1995). In district like Tiruvallur, the informal sector absorbs the vast majority of the rural female workforce, spanning from agricultural labour to small-scale manufacturing. While existing scholarship has highlighted the economic importance of women's earnings for household resilience, the internal subjectivities of these workers remain less understood. Examining women in rural Tamil Nadu allows for an exploration of how regional specificities of kinship, caste, and agrarian change influence the construction of selfhood. This context highlights the local, everyday realities of navigating work and family within the constraints of a rapidly changing regional economy.

Despite extensive literature on women's labour in India, a significant intellectual gap exists regarding the relational construction of selfhood. Research has traditionally focused on structural constraints or economic metrics of decision-making, often overlooking the internal processes of identity formation. Limited attention has been paid to how rural informal-sector women perceive the complex overlap between their various roles and how this perception shapes their agency. The relational dimensions of selfhood remain insufficiently examined in the context of these everyday negotiations and social interactions. There is a need to move beyond outward markers of bargaining power to understand how identity and action are co-constituted within the fabric of familial ties. This study addresses this gap by cantering

relational selfhood as a key analytical category in the study of rural women's lives and work in Tamil Nadu.

This research is guided by three concise questions mapping onto the study's primary objectives. First, how do rural informal-sector working women construct their sense of self through their ongoing relationships with family, work, and the wider community? Second, what everyday practices and forms of agency do women employ in making decisions and exercising choice across the domains of work and family life? Third, how do family relationships and gender norms simultaneously constrain and enable women's relational selfhood and their exercise of agency? The study aims to examine the intricate connections between relational selfhood, gendered expectations, and the negotiated practices of agency among rural women in Tiruvallur district. The final objective is to provide a holistic and grounded understanding of how identity and action are formed within the complex relational fabric of rural existence.

METHODS

1. Setting

The study was conducted in Tiruvallur district, located in north-eastern Tamil Nadu. The district is characterized by a rural economy where agriculture, brick-making, and various informal activities constitute the primary sources of livelihood. This setting is relevant because it reflects the broader socio-economic transitions occurring in rural Tamil Nadu, where traditional gender roles are being renegotiated amidst changing labour market opportunities and economic pressures. The research focused on four blocks within the district to capture a range of rural informal work environments and social contexts. Tiruvallur's proximity to industrial hubs introduces specific dynamics of labour mobility and access that shape the everyday experiences of rural women.

2. Study Population and Sampling

The study population comprised 40 rural women currently engaged in the informal sector. These participants were purposively selected from the

four blocks of Tiruvallur district to ensure that the data generated was directly relevant to the study's focus on work, family, and relational selfhood. Purposive sampling was appropriate for this qualitative inquiry as it allowed for the strategic selection of women whose lived experiences were central to the research questions. The participants represented a variety of informal economic activities, including agricultural labour, petty trade, and home-based production. Inclusion was based on their dual roles as informal workers and primary household caregivers, ensuring a focus on the overlap between work and family.

3. Data Collection Procedure

The primary method of data generation was in-depth, semi-structured interviews that allowed for a detailed exploration of the participants' lived experiences and meanings. The interviews focused on daily work routines, family relationships, household decision-making, and self-identity. This method provided the necessary flexibility to follow the participants' own narratives while ensuring that core conceptual themes were addressed consistently. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' explicit consent and were conducted in Tamil language. The conversational format encouraged women to reflect deeply on the nuances of their relational ties and the social significance they attached to their work. Interviews took place in private settings chosen by participants to ensure comfort and confidentiality.

4. Ethical Consideration

Ethical integrity was prioritized throughout the research process to protect the dignity and privacy of all participants. Informed consent was obtained prior to the start of each interview, with the study's purpose and the right to withdraw

clearly explained to each woman. To ensure complete confidentiality, all data were anonymized using participant codes, and all identifying details were removed during transcription. Audio recordings and written transcripts were stored securely to prevent unauthorized access. Given the sensitive nature of the topics, the researchers adopted an empathetic approach, prioritizing the well-being of the women throughout the fieldwork to ensure their respect.

5. Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, involving a systematic and recursive process to identify patterns of meaning across the interview narratives. The process began with the transcription of the audio recordings, followed by multiple readings to achieve familiarization with the data. Initial codes were generated to capture participants' specific ideas, which were then grouped into categories and refined into broader themes. The analysis was both thematically oriented and informed by the study's conceptual framework on relational selfhood and agency. The researchers remained attentive to themes emerging directly from the women's accounts while maintaining analytical rigor. The final stage involved synthesizing these themes into a coherent narrative addressing the core research questions and highlighting identity.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the forty in-depth interviews generated three broad themes corresponding to the study objectives: (a) the relational construction of selfhood, (b) the everyday practices of agency, and (c) the simultaneous constraint and enablement of selfhood and agency by family relationships and gender norms. Table 1 presents the themes and subthemes.

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes of Analysis.

Themes	Subthemes

1. Relational construction of selfhood	Identity anchored in motherhood and provisioning
	Work as a route to a second, self-authored identity
	Selfhood built through comparison with the pre-work self
2. Everyday practices of agency	Control over earnings as the foundation of agency
	Covert and deferred forms of decision-making
	Decisive, unilateral action on matters concerning children
3. Constraint and enablement by family and gender norms	The double burden as an unquestioned expectation
	Necessity and hardship as unlikely enablers of women's work
	The community of co-workers as a parallel support structure

Relational Construction of Selfhood

Identity Anchored in Motherhood and Provisioning

Women's first response to the question of who they are was rarely framed around their occupation; instead, most respondents anchored their sense of self in their relationships, particularly motherhood, even while working long hours outside the home. Earning was narrated not as a departure from this relational identity but as an extension of it. As one agricultural worker and mill worker put it:

"If someone asks who I am, I would first say I am Karthik and Priya's mother. Being a mother is the most important thing to me because everything I endure is for their future."

This pattern of subsuming the worker-self within the mother-self recurred with particular intensity among women in low-status occupations, where work offered little independent source of pride. A 55-year-old widow doing agricultural labour and grandchild care described herself in similarly protective terms:

"I work for my daughter and my grandchildren. Buying small things for the children makes me happy. Even after marriage of my daughter, I buy

her favourite sweets and small jewellery, as always, her mother."

For several respondents, particularly widows and women whose husbands were absent, unwell, or unreliable earners, this relational identity took the form of being the sole provider rather than simply a mother, collapsing the distinction between economic role and familial role. Selfhood, in these accounts, was less about individual achievement than about being indispensable to others. This pattern extended even to respondents who were not yet mothers themselves. A young, unmarried textile-mill worker framed her own identity around filial duty rather than occupation, describing herself first as "a dutiful daughter" whose earnings were securing her brother's diploma and her family's exit from debt, suggesting that the relational anchoring of selfhood observed among married and widowed respondents was not contingent on motherhood specifically, but on occupying a position of being needed within the family.

Work as a Route to a Second, Self-Authored Identity

Alongside this relational anchoring, a distinct and strong subtheme emerged: work generated a parallel identity that women described in

explicitly self-authored terms, often using the language of discovery. Respondents frequently reported realising capacities they had not previously known they possessed. A mill worker and agricultural labourer explained:

“Working outside has given me courage. I used to be afraid to speak to government officers or bank clerks. Now, because I manage my own wages and bank account, I feel bold. I discovered I am actually very good at managing money.”

This self-authored identity was most visible among women running small enterprises or occupying quasi-public roles, where the work itself required them to negotiate, bargain, or represent themselves publicly. A batter-shop owner noted that dealing with wholesale merchants who tried to shortchange her revealed a talent she had not known she had, while a Women Health Volunteer under the state’s community health scheme described a more institutionally recognised version of the same shift:

“Working has given me an identity beyond just being a wife. I have learned many things because of this job only. Now, I am telling people confidently about any illness or medicines and they also respect me as nurse.”

Several respondents named this second identity directly, referring to themselves by a work-based title rather than a kinship term, such as the street-food vendor known locally as “Bus Stand Idli Akka” or the tailoring worker as “Tailor Akka”. These self-given names suggest that occupational identity, once established, could come to rival and, in the naming practices of the community itself, sometimes outweigh purely relational identifiers.

Selfhood Built Through Comparison with the Pre-Work Self

A third recurring pattern was the construction of selfhood through an explicit before-and-after comparison, in which respondents measured their present confidence, mobility, and financial control against a remembered earlier self who had been dependent, fearful, or silent. A dry-fish vendor and SHG secretary widowed twelve years

offered one of the clearest articulations of this shift:

“Ten years ago, I was crying in a corner. Today, I am giving loans to others. A ‘good woman’ to me is someone who protects her family, not someone who sits quietly indoors.”

This temporal, comparative framing was echoed by a tailor-turned-shop-owner, who described moving from stitching quietly at home to running a rented shop on the main road, and by an agricultural labourer, who noted that she had once accepted whatever wage was handed to her but now demanded the going rate before entering the field. A rice-mill sorting worker framed the same shift around mobility rather than money:

“Five years ago, I was dependent and were feared to drive a two-wheeler. Now I have overcome that fear and I commute to a factory every day by two-wheeler.”

Notably, the comparison was rarely framed as a rejection of prior roles; rather, respondents redefined the meaning of being a “good wife” or “good woman” to accommodate their new capacities, expanding rather than discarding the relational vocabulary through which they understood themselves.

Everyday Practices of Agency

Control Over Earnings as the Foundation of Agency

The clearest and most consistently reported form of agency across the sample was control over one’s own earnings, even in the many cases where this control was partial or informally negotiated rather than complete. Respondents repeatedly linked the ability to make small, autonomous purchases to a broader sense of independence. A tailor working from home under her in-laws’ roof described this in modest but telling terms:

“Because I earn, I recently bought a second-hand smartphone for myself without asking my husband.”

For women in more exploitative or bonded arrangements, however, this foundation of agency was conspicuously absent, and its absence

was described with equal clarity. A woman working alongside her husband at a brick kiln, where wages were paid to the household as a lump-sum “advance” against debt, stated plainly:

“Earning money doesn’t mean cash in my hand ... I don’t decide how it is spent, except when I beg him for vegetables.”

The contrast between these two accounts illustrates that agency was not a simple function of working or earning per se, but of whether the wage relationship itself granted the woman custodianship of what she earned. Where wages were individualised and paid directly to women, as with agricultural work, or self-run enterprises, respondents described near-total control; where wages were pooled, advanced to husbands, or handed to fathers, that control was ceded structurally regardless of the woman’s own preference. This structural pattern was especially visible among unmarried women still living in their natal households. A young textile-mill worker described withdrawing her entire monthly salary and handing it directly to her father, who alone decided how it was spent, though she carved out a narrow zone of discretion within this arrangement:

“I can sometimes keep 500 rupees back to buy a dress or snacks without asking permission.”

Several respondents also described building individualised control over money outside the household economy altogether, through self-help group savings, chit funds, or post-office recurring deposits opened in their own names, which functioned as a private financial identity even when day-to-day household income remained shared or contested.

Covert and Deferred Forms of Decision-Making

Beyond direct control over money, respondents described a repertoire of everyday tactics for exercising agency without open confrontation, particularly on decisions that fell outside their usual discretion. Rather than arguing, many women reported timing their requests, marshalling evidence, or enlisting an intermediary to secure a preferred outcome. A handloom

worker described building a case with figures rather than words:

“I wait until he is sitting peacefully on the porch, and then I show him the notebook where I write our accounts. When he sees the numbers, he usually agrees with me.”

Other respondents described quieter, more strategic forms of the same manoeuvre. An agricultural worker admitted to enlisting her mother-in-law as an ally before approaching her husband, calling it “a trick I learned,” while a tailor and shop-owner proved the safety of a chit fund to her husband using another woman’s account records rather than through persuasion alone. A recurring and particularly striking variant were the decision to act first and manage the resulting disagreement afterward. A rice-mill worker summarised this logic starkly: “If you hold the money, you hold the final decision,” while an agricultural worker and mill worker, who decided to move her daughter to a better school over her husband’s objection that they could not afford it, recalled, “I showed him my savings and did it anyway.” These accounts suggest that, for many respondents, agency was less an act of open negotiation than a set of practised, low-visibility manoeuvres for arriving at a desired outcome while preserving domestic peace.

Decisive, Unilateral Action on Matters Concerning Children

Where negotiation and deferral characterised financial and mobility-related decisions, a markedly different, more assertive form of agency emerged specifically around children’s welfare and education, a domain in which several respondents described acting unilaterally and, at times, defiantly. An agricultural labourer with an alcoholic husband described enrolling her daughters in a government hostel over his explicit objection:

“I decided to put my girls in a government hostel so they get three meals a day, even though my husband opposed it, saying girls shouldn’t live outside. I didn’t care about his opinion.”

This willingness to override family opposition on children’s issues recurred across very different

occupational and marital contexts. A widowed grandmother supporting a deserted daughter reported throwing relatives out of her house for suggesting her grandchildren be institutionalised, and a rice-mill worker recounted physically taking her daughter to school each morning after in-laws attempted to withdraw her from education. Unlike the deferred or covert tactics used elsewhere, agency in this domain was typically enacted openly and immediately, suggesting that children's welfare functioned, across the sample, as a boundary condition beyond which negotiation gave way to unilateral assertion.

Constraint and Enablement by Family and Gender Norms

The Double Burden as an Unquestioned Expectation

Nearly every respondent, irrespective of occupation, income, or the degree of autonomy she otherwise exercised, described being expected to complete the full range of domestic labour in addition to paid work, with this expectation rarely questioned even by women who had otherwise renegotiated significant aspects of their family roles. A rice-mill worker undertaking eight-hour standing shifts described this starkly as a "double burden," while a batter-shop owner whose income paid the household rent in full reported that her in-laws nonetheless expected her to prepare elaborate meals for guests, since "they think the grinder does the work, not me." A brick-kiln worker offered perhaps the most extreme illustration, describing how she continued making bricks with a feverish child tied in a hammock beside her because neither her labour nor her caregiving could be paused. Where husbands did contribute to domestic tasks, respondents typically described this help as partial and occasional rather than shared: a batter-shop owner noted that her husband helped wash the grinder stones only on Sundays, and a tailor running her own shop said her husband would sometimes chop vegetables but that "the main duty is mine." This constraint operated less through explicit prohibition than through the sheer accumulation of unexamined expectation, limiting respondents' time, rest, and,

in several accounts, their ability to pursue further training or expand their work.

Necessity and Hardship as Unlikely Enablers of Women's Work

Set against these constraints, a counterintuitive pattern emerged in which the very hardships that constrained women's lives such as a husband's illness, alcoholism, irregular income, or death, were also what had originally pushed them into paid work and, subsequently, into the confidence and independence that followed from it. An agriculture worker observed this directly of her own household: "My husband's irregular income makes things difficult, but ironically, his lack of money is what forced him to let me work freely." A similar dynamic was described by a widowed fish vendor, for whom her husband's death, though devastating, removed the male gatekeeping that might otherwise have restricted her mobility and enterprise, and by a street-food vendor who began her cart business only after her husband sold her wedding chain for alcohol. These accounts complicate a straightforward narrative of family as either wholly constraining or wholly enabling; family crisis frequently functioned as the very mechanism through which structural constraint was, paradoxically, loosened. This loosening, however, was not universal. Where hardship took the specific form of debt bondage, as at the brick kiln, it appeared to have the opposite effect, deepening rather than relaxing the husband's control over both his wife's labour and her wages. The brick-kiln worker cited above continued to describe her husband, not herself, as the one who decided when to take a new advance from the owner or move to another kiln, indicating that the enabling effect of hardship documented elsewhere in the sample depended on the hardship disrupting, rather than reinforcing, existing lines of dependency.

The Community of Co-Workers as a Parallel Support Structure

The respondents consistently distinguished between the support available to them within the family and a separate, often more candid, form of

support drawn from co-workers, self-help group (SHG) members, or fellow labourers, which several described as compensating for what family relationships could not or would not provide. A brick-kiln worker explained that certain subjects were simply unspeakable at home:

“We cannot discuss our husband’s drinking with our families, but we share it openly here as we wash vessels under the common tap.”

Comparable accounts of peer solidarity appeared among agricultural labourers who share their family aspects together while resting at work, mill workers who used shared commuting time to “complain about our mothers-in-law”, and SHG members who described their group leaders and members as their primary source of both emotional and financial support. For unmarried factory workers still under parental authority, this peer network additionally functioned as a rehearsal space for imagined futures. Across the responses, this parallel community of co-working women emerged as a distinct relational resource, one that ran alongside, and at times substituted for, the support women could draw from within their families. The form this community took, however, varied with the structure of the work itself. Where employment was organised and public, as with SHG membership, chit funds, or the state health-volunteer scheme, peer support was relatively institutionalised, offering members access to pooled loans, collective bargaining against cheating merchants, and a recognised leadership structure. Where work was isolated and itinerant, as at the brick kiln or in home-based tailoring, the equivalent support was informal and localised, limited to the handful of women working the adjacent plot or living on the same street, yet respondents in these more isolated arrangements described it in no less essential terms, several stating plainly that without these fellow workers, the labour itself would be unbearable.

DISCUSSION

The study examined how rural informal-sector women in Tiruvallur district construct relational

selfhood and practise agency across the domains of work and family. The three themes that emerged map directly onto the study’s research questions, and together they answer the research problem by showing that selfhood is relationally anchored yet reworked through work, that agency is exercised through every day and often low-visibility negotiation, and that family relationships simultaneously constrain and enable both. Three interpretive threads deserve sustained discussion: the coexistence of relational and self-authored identities, the domain-specific character of agency, and the paradoxical enabling role of hardship. The discussion interprets these themes in relation to the study’s objectives and scholarship on women’s work in India.

The anchoring of selfhood in motherhood and provisioning strongly confirms the relational conception of the self advanced by feminist theory (Gilligan, 1982; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). The study extends this framework by showing that paid work did not displace the relational self but was narrated as an extension of it: earning was framed as care for children rather than as departure from maternal identity. This resonates with research on working-class mothers in India who construct socially valued identities through caregiving even while employed (Datta & Becker, 2025). The pattern was most intense among women in physically punishing or low-status occupations, suggesting that where work offers little recognition, relational identity remains the primary source of worth. This is consistent with Hill’s (2010) argument that identity and recognition are central to the well-being of informal women workers.

Alongside this relational anchoring, work generated a parallel, self-authored identity expressed in the language of discovery and in occupational naming such as “Tailor Akka.” This resonates with the self-authorization dimension of relational autonomy, the capacity to claim an identity for oneself rather than have it assigned (Mackenzie, 2021), and with Hill’s (2010) finding that worker identity and agency develop together. The before-and-after comparisons, in which

women measured present confidence and mobility against a dependent, fearful past self, indicate that work supplies a narrative resource for redefining the self. Further, respondents expanded rather than discarded the relational vocabulary, redefining what it meant to be a “good woman” to accommodate new capacities. This mirrors Kawarazuka et al.’s (2019) observation that women reinterpret gendered practices without directly challenging patriarchal structures, and it suggests a refinement of the patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988): women are renegotiating its terms through work rather than exiting it.

Control over earnings was the clearest foundation of agency, but the study refines resource-based accounts of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999) in an important way: agency depended not on earning per se but on whether the wage relationship granted women custodianship of what they earned. Where wages were individualized and paid directly, control was near-total; where they were pooled, advanced to husbands, or handed to fathers, control was ceded structurally regardless of preference. This qualifies the assumption that access to resources automatically translates into intra-household power (Kantor, 2003) and is consistent with experimental evidence that direct control over income raises women’s labour supply and liberalizes gender norms (Field et al., 2021), as well as with bargaining models in which income control is the channel through which autonomy operates (Heath & Tan, 2020). The use of

self-help group savings, chit funds, and post-office deposits as a private financial identity parallels the covert financial strategies documented in South Asian households (Gram et al., 2018).

The repertoire of covert and deferred decision-making, timing requests, marshalling evidence, enlisting intermediaries, and acting first while managing disagreement afterwards, exemplifies agency as purposeful action within constraint (Kabeer, 1999; Mahmood, 2005). These low-visibility manoeuvres are characteristic of bargaining with patriarchy, aimed at securing

outcomes while preserving domestic peace (Kandiyoti, 1988). The most striking finding, however, is the domain-specificity of agency: where negotiation and deferral characterized financial and mobility decisions, women acted openly and unilaterally on children’s welfare and education. Children’s welfare functioned as a boundary condition beyond which negotiation gave way to assertion. This suggests that agency is not a uniform capacity but is distributed unevenly across domains, a nuance that aggregate measures of empowerment may miss (Neetha, 2020).

The double burden of paid work and domestic labour was described as an unquestioned expectation even among women who had renegotiated other aspects of family life. This is consistent with Indian evidence that unpaid care work and time poverty constrain women’s employment and well-being (Tripathi et al., 2024) and with critiques of the persistence of gendered ideologies in the division of housework (Neetha, 2020). The finding that husbands’ help was partial and occasional, “the main duty is mine,” indicates that economic contribution does not by itself redistribute domestic labour. The brick-kiln worker making bricks with a feverish child beside her captures the simultaneity of productive and reproductive labour.

The most counterintuitive finding is that hardship, a husband’s illness, alcoholism, irregular income, or death, functioned as an unlikely enabler of women’s work and agency. This complicates the narrative of the family as wholly constraining and is consistent with accounts of Indian women’s labour force participation as driven by economic necessity rather than unconstrained choice (Costagliola, 2021). The apparent mechanism is that crisis disrupted male gatekeeping, loosening restrictions on mobility and enterprise. Yet the enabling effect was conditional: where hardship took the form of debt bondage, it deepened rather than relaxed male control. This conditional pattern is a novel contribution, specifying when hardship loosens constraint and when it entrenches dependency.

The community of co-workers, self-help group members, and fellow labourers constituted a parallel support structure that compensated for what families could not provide. This extends evidence that self-help group participation enhances women's empowerment and social networks (Swain & Wallentin, 2009) and supports Hill's (2010) argument that collective recognition is critical to worker identity and agency. The finding that peer support was institutionalized where work was organized and public, but informal and localized where work was isolated, suggests that the structure of informal work shapes the form of solidarity available to women.

These findings contribute to the research problem by showing that relational selfhood and agency are not opposed but mutually constitutive. The study refines its conceptual framework in three ways: selfhood is relationally anchored yet work generates a parallel self-authored identity; agency is domain-specific and practised through low-visibility negotiation; and the family operates as both constraint and, under specific conditions, enabler. These insights ground relational autonomy (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000) and negotiated agency (Kabeer, 1999; Mahmood, 2005) in the everyday practices of rural informal women workers.

CONCLUSION

Rural women's experiences in Tiruvallur demonstrate that work and family are not separate domains of identity and action but interconnected contexts through which selfhood and agency are negotiated. Women primarily understood themselves through motherhood, provisioning, and familial responsibility, while participation in informal work enabled a parallel,

self-authored identity associated with confidence, mobility, financial competence, and public recognition. Agency was expressed less through unrestricted autonomy than through control over earnings, strategic negotiation, deferred decisions, intermediary support, and, particularly in matters concerning children's welfare and education, unilateral action. These practices indicate that women's capacity to influence household outcomes varies across domains and depends on their control over resources and the relational conditions surrounding their choices.

Family relationships remained a source of both constraint and possibility. The persistence of unpaid domestic responsibilities alongside paid employment produced a double burden, while illness, irregular income, widowhood, or household crises could create opportunities for work by weakening established forms of male control. Such enabling effects were conditional, as debt-based labour arrangements could reinforce dependency and wage control. Co-workers, self-help groups, and peer networks provided additional relational resources for emotional support, financial strategies, and collective confidence. The findings position relational selfhood and agency as mutually constituted processes shaped by work, family, gender norms, and everyday negotiation.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding Statement

This paper is published as part of a research project sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR).

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