

WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION IN INDIA: WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?

Apoorva Ramachandra & Vajra Zayara

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ABSTRACT

Since the 2000s, there has been a notable increase in the number of women entering the global workforce; however, the overall percentage of women participating in the workforce has been declining, especially in regions like South Asia and the Middle East/North Africa. Despite positive trends in some parts of Asia, challenges such as lower pay and job insecurity persist for women compared to men. The COVID-19 pandemic has further widened the gender gap in workforce participation, reversing previous progress. In India, there has been a puzzling decline in female labour force participation rates (FLPR) despite factors like economic growth and higher education. This paper aims to analyse trends and disparities in FLFP in India between 2018-19 and 2022-23, as well as the factors influencing women's entry into the labour force.

The labour force participation rate (LFPR) measures the percentage of the population either working or actively seeking work. In 2022–23, men had an LFPR of 83.2%, while women had 39.8%, resulting in a 43.4% gap. Female LFPR saw remarkable growth from 24.5% in 2018–19 to 39.8% in 2022–23, with rural areas experiencing a 68% surge compared to the 39% increase in urban areas. However, most of the increase is in rural areas within the agriculture sector and is generally concentrated in some sectors. The irony is that the participation rate among female graduates is the lowest and simultaneously faces the highest unemployment rate (UR).

To ensure women enter and stay in the labour market, multifaceted strategies are required to address barriers faced by women that affect their demand and supply of labour. These include skill training and employment initiatives, enhancing safety at the workplace and improving safe mobility, recognising and redistributing the burden of unpaid work, and addressing social and cultural norms prevailing in India. By implementing these strategies, policymakers can create an environment conducive to women's meaningful participation in the workforce, fostering gender equality and economic empowerment.

Keywords: Women, Workforce, Unpaid work, Labour force participation rate, Gender Gap, U-Hypothesis

INTRODUCTION

Over the last twenty years (2000–2020), more than 307 million women have started working. However, the percentage of women globally who are part of the workforce has been dropping steadily (International Labour Organisation, 2024). According to Our World in Data, the global female workforce participation rate has gone down from 51.2% in 1990 to 46.2% in 2021. Although most regions have rates higher than this global average, South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa have much lower rates, sitting at only 22% and 18.4%, respectively (Ortiz-Ospina et al., 2024).

In contrast, the World Employment and Social Outlook report of 2024 highlighted a positive trend in the Arab states and many parts of Asia, where more women than expected joined the workforce. This increase in female participation is attributed to improved job opportunities for women. In South Asia, for example, the women's labour force participation rate (30.8%) was 45.9 percentage points lower than that of men (76.7%) in 2023, compared with a gap of 51.2 percentage points in 2010. However, the deviation from the trend of declining female participation rates implies that the rates fell slower than expected. However, this slow decline does not necessarily translate to favourable employment conditions because women's jobs typically pay less and are less secure than men's (Dasgupta and Verick, 2016).

Even with these improvements, there is still a big difference between the number of men and women working worldwide. The pandemic has made this gap even wider, undoing some progress made before 2020. By 2025, it is predicted that 25% more men than women will be in the workforce globally. In lower-middle-income countries, this difference is predicted to be even more noticeable, with a gap of 38% (ILO—World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2024, n.d.).

Globally, there is a trend of more men being part of the workforce than women. Looking at the ratio of women to men in workforce participation rates, in 2021, the average worldwide was 67.67%. In South Asia, it was 31.15%, and in India, it was 27.44%, lower than the global and South Asian averages (Ortiz-Ospina et al., 2024). Although there has been a slight narrowing of this gender gap due to more women enrolling in education globally (Verick, 2018), the decreasing rates of female workforce participation is a matter of concern among policymakers.

The case for Indian women has been extremely puzzling since studies indicate that factors such as rising growth, fertility decline, rising wages and education levels are conventionally tied to a larger female labour force participation rate (FLPR). In the case of India, none of these factors has directly contributed to a higher female LFPR (Rathore, 2023).

While the FLPR of most G20 countries has remained at the same level over the past two decades, India has experienced the opposite trend. In 2021, India had the lowest FLPR among all G20 nations, marking a steady decline since 2000. This decline in FLPR can be traced back even further in India's history. In 1955, the FLPR was 24.1%, which rose to 33% by 1972. However, since then, there has been a gradual and consistent decrease, reaching about 23% by 2017. Recently, there has been a reversal in this declining trend, with the FLPR improving to 33% in 2021. Further analysis of the data reveals that this increase in FLPR is mainly driven by location and industry-specific factors, such as the growing participation of women in agriculture within rural areas.

In this context, this paper seeks to address three key questions. Firstly, it will analyse the trends in female workforce participation rates from 2018–19 to 2022–23, considering factors such as education, income, sector, and employment status, using data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS). Secondly, it will investigate disparities in participation rates across rural/urban areas, religious groups, and castes, utilising the PLFS data. Finally, it will review existing literature to understand the factors influencing women's entry into the labour force, aiming to provide insights into addressing the challenges hindering women's workforce participation in India.

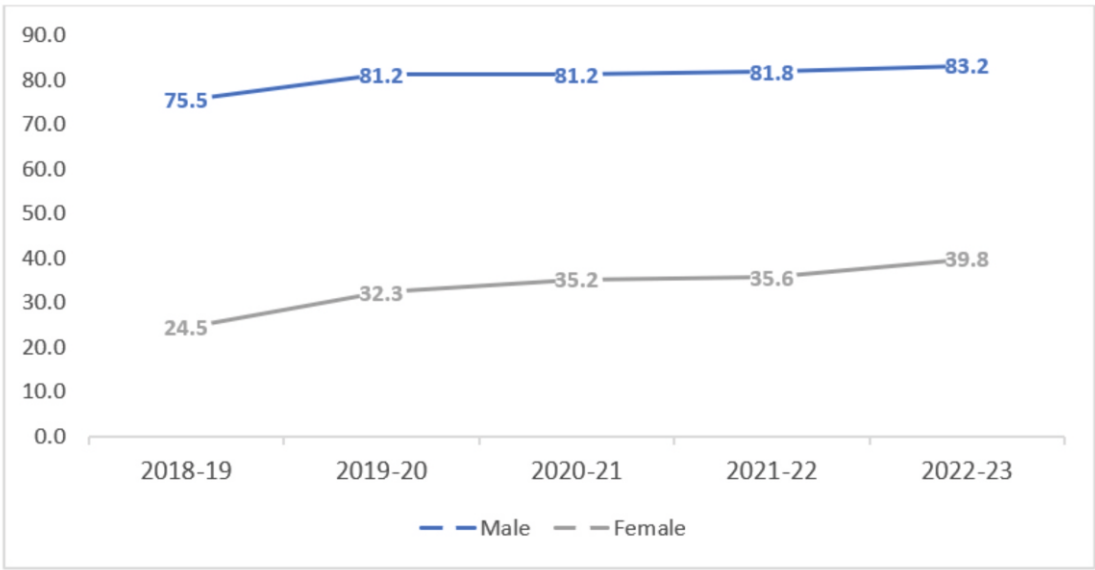
2. FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION IN INDIA

The labour force participation rate (LFPR) is defined as the percentage of the population in the labour force (i.e., working or seeking or available for work). LFPR is in usual status when the reference period is 365 days before the survey and in current weekly status when the reference period is 7 days before the survey date.

In the period of 2022–23, the LFPR as per usual status for men was 83.2%, while for women, it was 39.8%, resulting in a gap of 43.4%. Notably, the female labour force participation rate (FLPR) has seen a significant increase from 24.5% in 2018–19 to 39.8% in 2022–23, marking a remarkable 62% growth in participation (Figure 1).

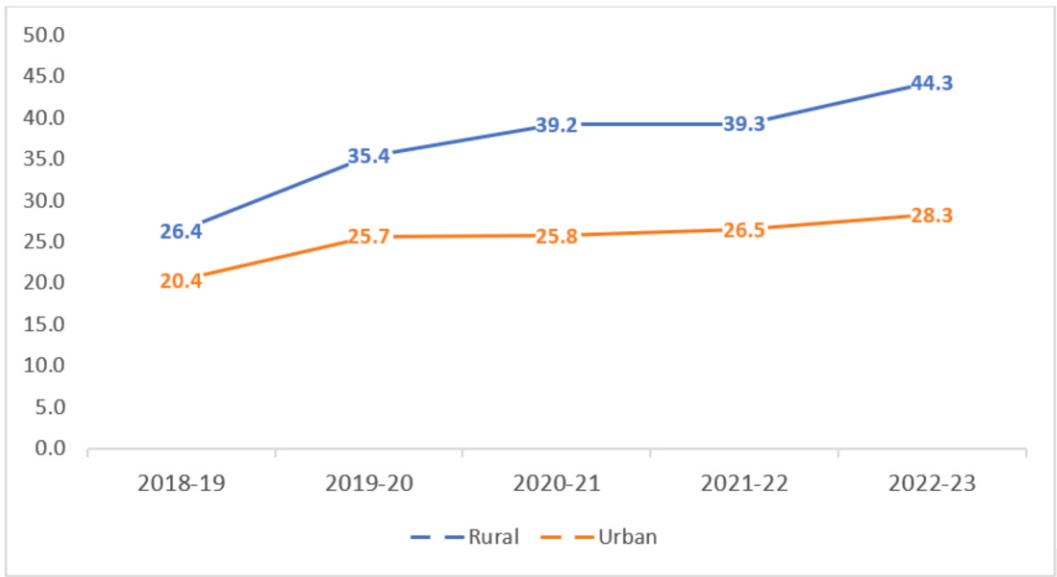
Breaking down the data by region (Figure 2), we observe that the increase in participation rates has been more pronounced in rural areas compared to urban areas. Specifically, in rural areas, the FLPR surged by 68% from 26.4% in 2018–19 to 44.3% in 2022–23. Conversely, in urban areas, the increase during the same period was 39%, rising from 20.4% in 2018–19 to 28.3% in 2022–23.

Figure 1: Labour force participation rate as per usual status (ps+ss) from 2018–19 to 2022–23 (in percent).



Source: Annual Report, PLFS 2018–19 to 2022–23

Figure 2: Female labour force participation from 2018–19 to 2022–23, as per usual status (ps+ss) (in percent).

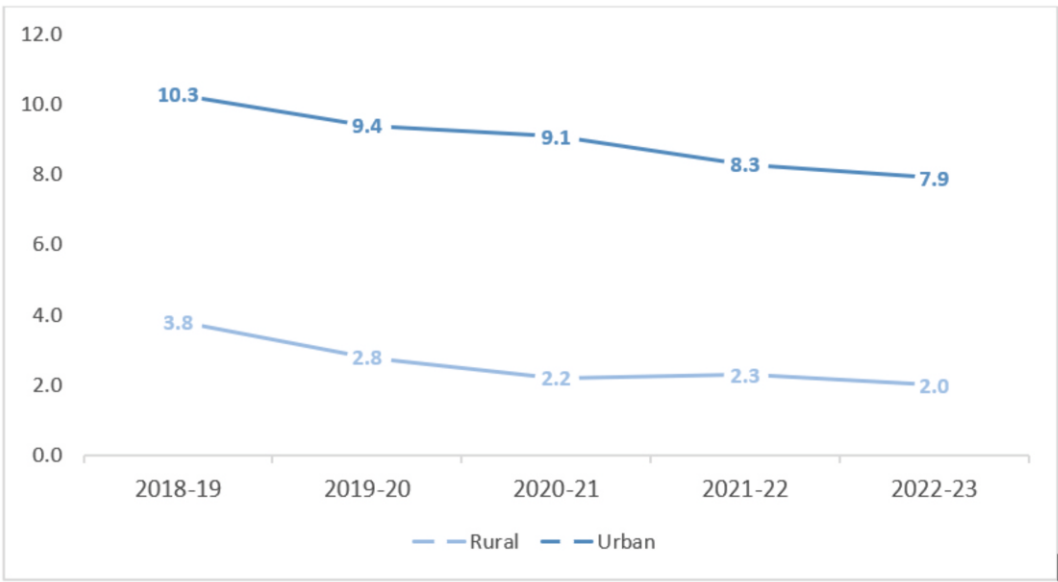


Source: Annual Report, PLFS 2018–19 to 2022–23

3. UNEMPLOYMENT RATE IN INDIA

The unemployment rate (UR) represents the proportion of unemployed individuals within the labour force. Notably, the female unemployment rate is significantly lower in rural areas than in urban areas during the period 2018–19 to 2022–23. Specifically, in 2022–23, the unemployment rate in rural areas stood at a mere 2%, while in urban areas, it was notably higher at 7.9%.

Figure 3: Female unemployment rate as per usual status (ps+ss) from 2018–19 to 2022–23 (in percent).



Source: Annual Report, PLFS 2018–19 to 2022–23

4.U-SHAPED HYPOTHESIS AND FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION

As per Claudia Goldin’s seminal hypothesis, the U-shaped theory offers an intriguing insight into the relationship between female labour force participation rates and economic development. According to this hypothesis, when a country is in its early stages of development and faces poverty, women are compelled to work, often in subsistence agriculture or home-based production. As the economy progresses, the focus shifts towards industrialisation, benefiting men more than women. However, as education levels improve, fertility rates decline, and societal norms evolve, women gain access to new opportunities in the service sector, which are often more accommodating to family needs.

These shifts can be understood through the neoclassical labour supply model at the household level. Initially, as a spouse's income increases, there is a negative impact on the supply of women's labour due to decreased necessity. However, as women's wages rise, the substitution effect comes into play, encouraging them to increase their labour participation.

Supporting this hypothesis, various studies indicate that both high-income and low-income countries tend to exhibit higher rates of participation in the women's labour force compared to middle-income countries. However, empirical evidence for the hypothesis relies on cross-country analyses, highlighting the observed correlation between economic growth and female labour force participation.

In fact, FLPR tends to be highest in some of the world's poorest and wealthiest countries, while it is lowest in nations with average national incomes. When plotted against GDP per capita, this relationship forms a U-shaped pattern, showcasing a complex interplay between economic development and women's participation in the workforce (Ortiz-Ospina et al., 2024).

However, many developing countries deviate from the strict adherence to the U-shaped theory of feminisation. For instance, studies conducted in India have questioned this pattern. Lahoti and Swaminathan (2016) examined the U-shaped relationship between development and women's labour force participation; they found no systematic U-shaped relationship between the level of domestic product and women's LFPR. India's steady economic growth is cited as a catalyst for better female labour force participation. However, the study finds that the composition of growth is more relevant for women than economic growth (Lahoti & Swaminathan, 2016).

In India, labour force participation rates among women have remained low and have only recently shown a slight rise (Rathore, 2024), certainly not corroborating the U-hypothesis. In addition, a recent study speculated that the feminisation of the U-shape holds only in countries whose ancestors used plough-based technologies in agriculture (Uberti & Douarin, 2023).

Attributing the evolution of female labour force participation in developing countries solely to changes in per capita GDP, as proposed by the U-shaped hypothesis, oversimplifies the complex interplay of various forces. The Feminisation U hypothesis, for instance, suggests that female labour force participation initially declines before rising during economic development. However, this theory does not fully capture India's relationship with the female workforce. While presented as a "stylised fact" of

development, empirical evidence supporting it across developing nations is inconsistent (Klasen, 2019). Scholars argue that models like the Feminisation U are inadequate in understanding the heterogeneous and complex developments in female labour force participation in India.

Many studies investigating the declining FLFPR focus on macroeconomic analysis, often overlooking crucial intra-household dynamics and cultural factors. Social norms within the household heavily influence a woman's decision to enter the labour force. However, existing literature tends to neglect the significant impact of gender roles favouring men's participation in work outside the home. By treating these factors merely as controls rather than explanatory variables, the decision-making process for women becomes obscured and mechanistic. Therefore, it is imperative to recognise labour force participation as a “gendered phenomenon” (Srikanth & Dey, 2023).

In essence, while the U-shaped hypothesis offers valuable insights into the relationship between economic development and women's labour force participation, it is essential to recognise the nuances and variations across different contexts and regions, as evidenced by the case of India and other developing nations.

5. ECONOMIC GAINS FROM WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE LABOUR FORCE

An IMF study titled 'Women, Work, and the Economy' suggests that achieving gender parity in labour force participation could result in a substantial increase in national income. For instance, in the United States, this could mean a 5% boost, while in Japan, it could be 9%, and in countries with the lowest female participation rates, it could be up to 15%.

As per an IMF study on 'Economic Gains from Gender Inclusion', closing gender gaps in the workforce promises substantial economic benefits through two key channels: Firstly, gender diversity brings fresh skills and perspectives, enriching productivity beyond the mere addition of workers. Evidence suggests a complementary relationship between male and female labour, often overlooked by traditional models. Bridging these gaps not only boosts women's earnings but also benefits men. Secondly, economic growth and development typically spur demand for services, a sector where gender equality in employment is more prevalent. However, barriers such as tax distortions and discrimination hinder female labour force participation, impeding sectoral reallocation

and dampening output and welfare. Removing these barriers could lead to significant welfare gains, especially in regions like India, Pakistan, and the Middle East and North Africa.

So, narrowing gender divides not only fosters economic growth but also promotes inclusivity and enhances overall welfare, with substantial benefits for both men and women.

6. EDUCATION

6.1 Trends in Education

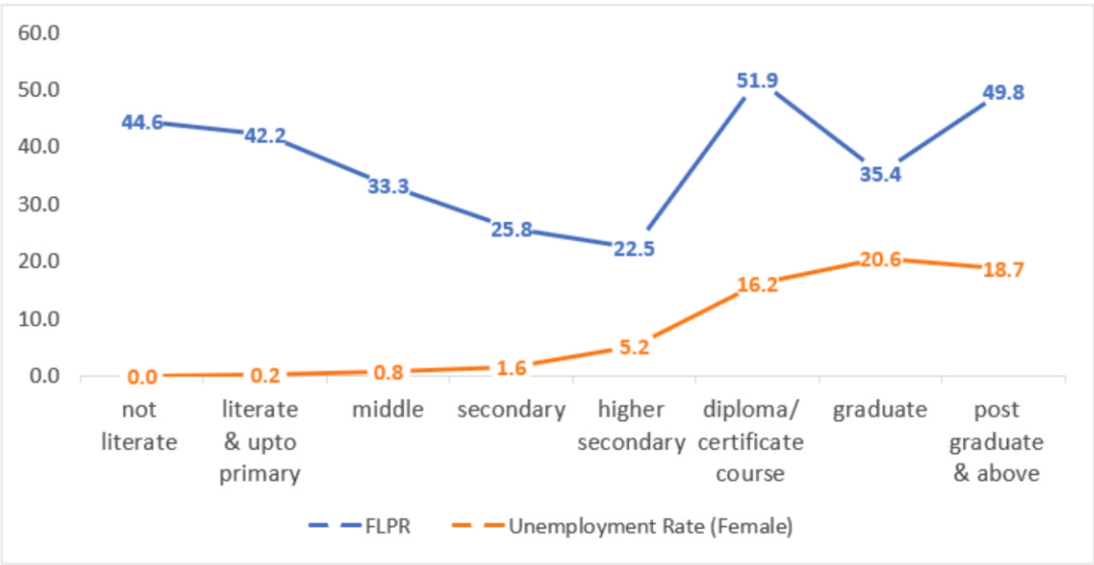
Education is often understood as a catalyst for higher female labour force participation, but in India, the trend indicates a lower level of participation. When comparing the participation rates of women and men across various levels of education, a gender gap emerges, with the widest disparity seen among graduates. Among those with a graduate degree, 85.2% of men are part of the labour force, while only 35.4% of women with the same level of education are participating, resulting in a gender gap of 49.8%.

An analysis of the FLPR and unemployment rates across different education levels in 2022–23 reveals intriguing trends (Figure 4). Initially, FLPR tends to decline as the level of education increases until the higher secondary level. However, there is a significant spike for diploma holders, followed by a subsequent dip for graduates. Interestingly, FLPR increases again for post-graduates.

On the other hand, examining the unemployment rate (UR) unveils a different pattern. UR remains very low at lower education levels and begins to rise from the secondary level onwards. It reaches its peak for graduates but slightly decreases for post-graduates.

The data suggests a concerning trend regarding graduates' participation in the workforce. Despite their higher education, they exhibit low participation rates and simultaneously face elevated unemployment rates.

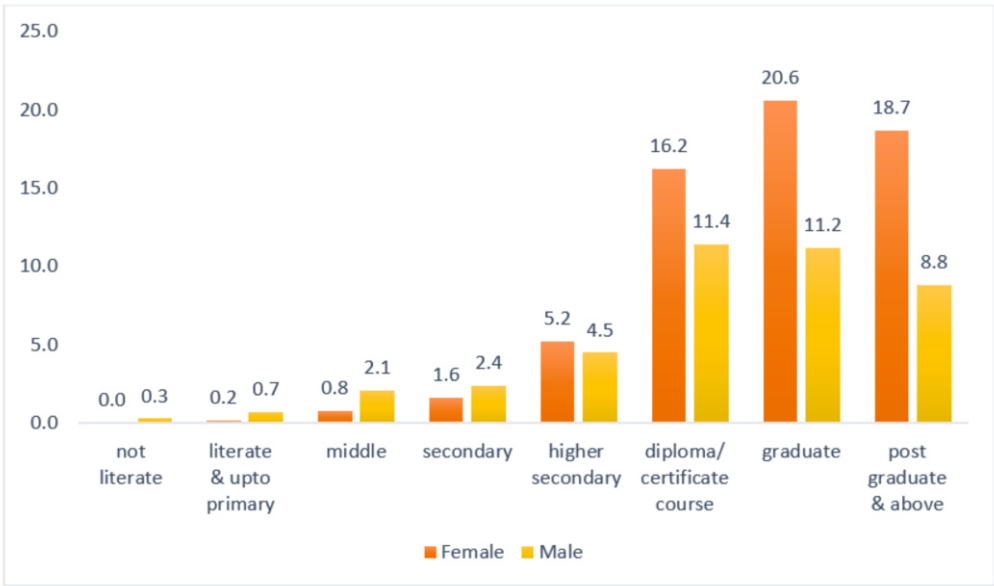
Figure 4: FLPR and female unemployment rate at different education levels in 2022–23 (in percent).



Source: Annual Report, PLFS 2018–19 to 2022–23

When comparing the unemployment rates (UR) of men and women at various education levels in 2022–23 (Figure 5), a distinct pattern emerges. Initially, at lower education levels, women have lower URs compared to men. However, this trend shifts from higher secondary education onwards, with the gap widening. For diploma/certificate holders, the difference in UR between women and men is 4.8%. Likewise, at the graduate and post-graduate levels, the gap stands at 9.8% and 9.9%, respectively.

Figure 5: Unemployment rate as per usual status (ps+ss) at different levels of education for persons 15 years & above (in percent)



Source: Annual Report, PLFS 2018–19 to 2022–23

6.2 Why does education not translate to higher participation?

The literature suggests a strong negative correlation between male education levels and female participation rates (Aggarwal, 2023). So, as men attain higher education, they tend to inhibit women in their households from joining the workforce directly or indirectly. Conversely, men with lower education levels are more likely to permit female family members to work due to economic constraints. Surprisingly, female education levels show no significant impact on the FLPR. Lahoti and Swaminathan (2016) found that completion of a college education for women hurt their labour force participation rate. In contrast, those who complete primary, secondary and middle schooling, along with any alternate specifications for education, including literacy rates, have no impact on the participation rate. Women with low levels of education are seen to work for household incomes, whereas those with high education are attracted towards labour with higher wages. Meanwhile, women in between these two groups are in a challenging position.

Moreover, consideration of one's status and the societal stigma associated with working women has also played a key role in keeping highly educated women from entering the workforce. (Afridi et al., 2018; Lahoti & Swaminathan, 2016). A study linking caste, wealth, and the human capital of rural women indicated that with affluence and education, women are delegated to allocate their time towards status production; the

South Asian preoccupation with “family honour” comes at the expense of a woman’s status. Status, in these cases, is a preoccupation with the “sexual purity” of a woman whose work outside the household would put her in proximity to non-related males. The trend is reinforced more strongly within the higher caste married women. Due to economic constraints, poorer and lower-caste households, although still believers of the status stigma paradigm, have to send their women to work.

Srikanth and Dey (2023) suggest that the fear of potential male backlash is one major reason that high levels of education still prevent LFP; highly educated women are likely not to surrender to the male patriarch, leading to increasing backlash and, subsequently, non-participation. The urban female literacy rate also highlights a negative effect on the female labour force participation rate. Highly educated urban women enter the workforce late for two identifiable reasons: urban household sizes and the nature of jobs created in an urbanised space (Lama, 2021).

Both data and literature emphasise that although education may empower women to work, it does not guarantee their participation in the labour force.

6.3 Vocational Training

In 2021–22, a higher percentage of males received both formal and non-formal vocational training. Looking at the fields in which women are getting trained (Table 2), the top five fields are IT/ITes (26.6%), textile/handloom (24.2%), healthcare & life sciences (8.9%), beauty & wellness (7%), and work related to childcare, and nutrition (3.4%). Apart from IT/ITes, all other fields of training are dominated by women.

Table 1: Percentage distribution of persons in the age group 15–59 years by status of vocational/technical training received in 2021–22

Category	Formal	Non-Formal	Did not receive any vocational training
Men	3.7	22.7	73.6
Women	3	9.3	87.7

Source: Annual Report, PLFS 2021–22

Table 2: Percentage distribution of persons aged 15–59 years who received formal vocational/technical training by field of training in 2021–22

Field of Training	Men	Women
Handicraft (04)	0.6	2.5
IT/ITeS (13)	30.1	26.6
Textiles/Handloom/Apparel (20)	1.1	24.2
Work related to childcare, nutrition, preschool, crèche	2	3.4
Beauty & Wellness (06)	0.3	7
Healthcare & Life Sciences	3.9	8.9

Source: Annual Report, PLFS 2021–22

6.4 Effect of Vocational Training

Bairagya et al. (2021) found a strong connection between education and women's workforce participation in India, with education showing a U-shaped relationship with participation. However, this changes for women with vocational training, who are more likely to join the workforce regardless of educational background. Interestingly, those with informal training have higher participation rates than those with formal training. For women without vocational training, the relationship between education and participation follows a traditional U-shaped curve. Analysing formal and informal vocational training's impact on female labour force participation, we found significant positive effects for both types, indicating a robust relationship. Notably, informal training has a higher impact than formal training, possibly because women with formal training seek regular employment. In contrast, those with informal training tend to be self-employed, as observed in the analysis.

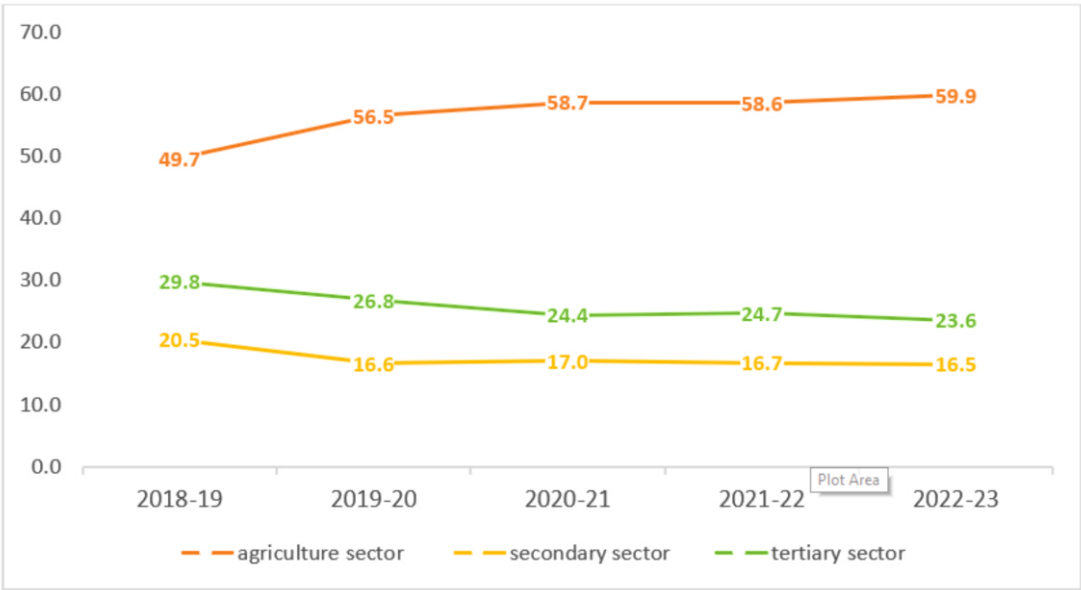
7. OCCUPATION SEGREGATION AND LACK OF DESIRABLE JOBS

7.1 Trends in women's workforce distribution by workforce and employment status

From 2018–19 to 2022–23, the Female Labour Participation Rate (FLPR) increased and was notably more pronounced in rural areas. Analysing where these women were employed in 2022–23, it is evident that the majority, 59.9%, work in the agriculture sector, followed by 23.6% in the secondary sector and 16.5% in the tertiary sector.

Examining the trend over this period, the proportion of females working in the agriculture sector has risen significantly, from 49.7% to 59.9%. Conversely, the share of females in the secondary and tertiary sectors has declined, from 29.8% to 23.6% and 20.5% to 16.5%, respectively.

Figure 6: Distribution of females working according to current weekly status by broad industry of work from 2018–19 to 2022–23 (in percent)

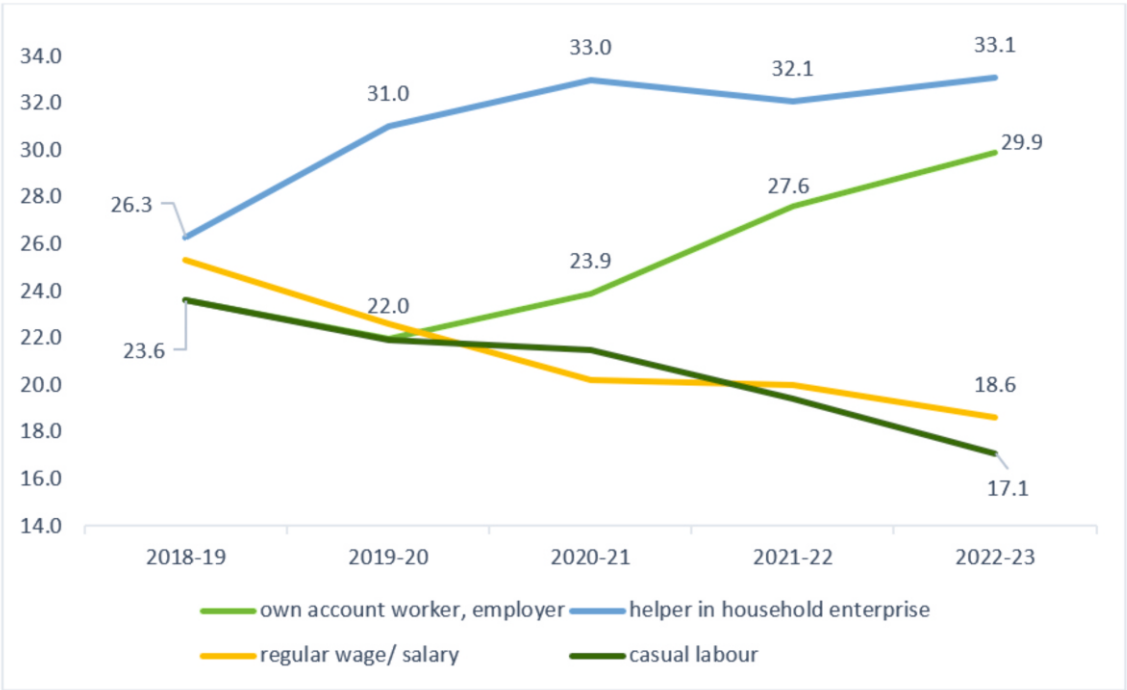


Source: Annual Report, PLFS 2018–19 to 2022–23

From 2018–19 to 2022–23, there has been a notable shift in women's employment status. The number of women classified as self-employed, including own-account workers, employers, and helpers in household enterprises, has increased. Conversely, participation in regular wage/salary jobs and casual labour has declined (Figure 7).

Specifically, the proportion of women working as own-account workers increased by 6.3%, while those employed as employers or helpers in household enterprises saw a rise of 6.8% over the same period. In contrast, the share of women in regular wage/salary jobs decreased by 6.7%, and participation in casual labour reduced by 6.5%.

Figure 7: Distribution of females by current weekly status by broad status in employment from 2018–19 to 2022–23 (in percent)



Source: Annual Report, RLFS 2018–19 to 2022–23

In 2021–22, the distribution of female workers (Table 3) in rural areas indicated a significant concentration of skilled agricultural, forestry, and fishery workers, accounting for 57.71% of the workforce. An additional 25.48% are engaged in elementary occupations, bringing the combined total to 83%. Within elementary occupations, 18% are agricultural, forestry, and fishery labourers, while 5.8% work in construction, mining, manufacturing, and transport. In contrast, urban females exhibit a more diversified occupational profile, though still in occupations considered for women. The largest proportion, at 22.07%, is in elementary occupations, followed by professionals at 18.15%, of which 10% work as teaching professionals, service and sales workers at 16.72%, and craft and related trades at 13.62%.

This data suggests a notable difference in occupational distribution between rural and urban female workers in India. Rural women are heavily concentrated in agricultural and elementary occupations, reflecting the predominant economic activities in rural areas. On the other hand, urban women have a broader range of occupations, indicating greater opportunities for employment diversification and potentially higher skill levels. Understanding these differences is crucial for designing targeted policies and interventions to address specific challenges faced by women in different geographic and occupational contexts. Efforts to promote gender equality and empower women in the workforce should consider the distinct needs and realities of both rural and urban settings.

Table 3: Percentage distribution of workers in usual status (ps+ss) by occupation group/sub-division/division as per National Classification of Occupation (NCO) 2015 all-India

NCO Code	Occupation	Urban Female (%)	Rural Female (%)
Division 1	Manager	9.96	2.49
Sub-division 11	Sub-Division Senior Executives and Legislators	5.66	1.37
Division 2	Professionals	18.15	2.85
Sub-division 23	Teaching Professionals	10.05	2.08
Division 5	Service and Sales Workers	16.72	4.20
Sub-division 51	Personal Service Workers	6.39	1.15
Sub-division 52	Sales Workers	8.86	2.47
Division 6	Skilled Agricultural, Forestry and Fishery Workers	7.61	57.51
Sub-division 61	Market-Oriented Skilled Agricultural Workers	7.34	53.8
Division 7	Craft and Related Trades Workers	13.62	5.39
Division 9	Elementary Occupations	22.07	25.48
Sub-division 92	Agricultural, Forestry and Fishery Labourers	3.96	18.17
Sub-division 91	Cleaners and Helpers	10.2	1.16
Sub-division 93	Labourers in Mining, Construction, Manufacturing and Transport	6.17	5.81

Source: Annual Report, PLFS 2021–22

7.2 Why are there limited opportunities for women?

One explanation for the limited job opportunities available to women is the disproportionate benefit that men receive from the rising demand for highly skilled workers. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in India, where men tend to possess higher levels of skill and education compared to women on average. Additionally, gender-based segregation in both occupations and sectors may confine women to specific job searches, aligning with prevailing social norms. If the sectors and occupations traditionally dominated by women experience minimal employment growth, it could further restrict job prospects for women, acting as a barrier to their workforce participation (Kapsos et al., 2014).

An analysis of male and female employment across various occupations from 1994 to 2010 indicated that the majority of female employment growth occurred in occupations that were not experiencing overall growth. Ten occupations, excluding those witnessing declines in employment contributed to approximately 90% of all employment growth (Kapsos et al., 2014).

The data illustrates significant gender-based occupational segregation in India. Less than 19% of the new job opportunities created in the country's ten fastest-growing occupations were occupied by women. Notably, the proportion of women increased in only three of these occupations during the mentioned period: other professionals, personal and protective services workers, and labourers in mining, construction, manufacturing, and transportation. Conversely, it declined in the remaining seven occupations. However, in occupations not among the fastest-growing, the share of women in total employment increased substantially in three areas: teaching professionals, life science and health associate professionals, and customer service clerks (Kapsos et al., 2014).

Women do not find desirable jobs in the urbanised job market since most of them are male-dominated. Employment is generated in bulk for men in the construction sector or platform economy jobs such as Uber drivers and Swiggy and Zomato delivery drivers. There exists a divergence between women's skills and the structure of the job market in India (Lama, 2021). At the bottom of the wage-distribution scale, gendered job segregation leads to wider gaps as jobs become exclusive to either men or women (Deshpande et al., 2018).

However, it is interesting to note that Lahoti and Swaminathan (2016) found a positive relationship between growth in the agricultural and construction sectors and women's economic activity. The data suggests that labour masculinisation is prevalent in all labour sectors except agriculture (Farnworth et al., 2023). Manufacturing employment is seen to have a negative effect on women's economic activity.

India's developmental trajectory saw a decline in agriculture, and that was not picked up by the manufacturing sector as is the case in other similar developing countries. Instead, the service industry experienced higher growth, picking up on the decline of the agricultural sector. Service industry jobs require skills that males predominate. This echoes the most prominent concern for the female workforce: economic growth is not translating into suitable employment growth for women, especially educated women. In contrast to South Asia, in East and South Asia, women's participation in the labour market in East and Southeast Asia has historically been higher due to the developmental transition from agriculture to export-oriented manufacturing. This pushed women into newly created jobs in these economies (Verick, 2018).

Women flock towards certain sectors due to occupational preferences such as lack of mobility and adequate skills or social acceptability. The service industry requires high-skilled labour, but growth in the manufacturing industry would have led to more unskilled labour jobs as well. Indian women are provided vocational and technical training primarily in textiles, garments, handlooms, and the apparel field, followed by IT-ITeS, health care and beauty services (McKinsey Global Institute, 2015). There is an evident need to expand the growth of these sectors, as well as the need for more women-oriented skill programmes in sectors such as leisure and hospitality (tourism services) and manufacturing other than garments to create a greater impact on women's employment.

Lahoti and Swaminathan also note that the Indian model of economic growth is both skill-intensive and capital-intensive, which leads to very little potential for employment generation. This explains the slow and persistent fall in women's economic activity during India's socioeconomic transformation.

7.3 Women in Agriculture

In a study undertaken among the wheat-growing communities in Madhya Pradesh, limited and highly contextual evidence suggests that women make farming decisions to varying degrees. However, rural advisory services and research institutes have not captured these decision-making processes on the ground. Although wheat is considered

a male-dominant labour crop, women are highly knowledgeable regarding its cultivation and farming. Despite their work in the fields as hired labour, women lack recognition as “farmers” due to male-dominated decision-making in wheat farming. At the same time, the study also highlighted the contradiction of women moving swiftly out of paid agricultural labour into unpaid work (Farnworth et al., 2023). Further, mechanisation and HYVs have limited women’s opportunities for paid labour in this sector. The rise of automation estimates a 28% loss of jobs for women who take part in agriculture and craft-related work (Farnworth et al., 2023; McKinsey Global Institute, 2015).

A study looking into women’s agricultural participation and land-holding households in rural India found that working in family farms means the loss of cash income, devaluation of labour, lack of visibility in official data, and increase in overall work burdens. It was also found that higher caste women in most areas are not allowed to work on others' farms, and their work on family farms is also limited. Additionally, a meagre increase in the income of the higher caste households causes women to withdraw from the labour force. It is mostly women from the SC and ST communities who comprise the agricultural wage labour force (Pattnaik & Lahiri-Dutt, 2023).

8. Social and Cultural Norms

8.1 Care Work

Table 4: Time Spent on Care Work by Men and Women in India (Time Use Survey, 2019)

Region	Time Spent on Care Work by Men	Time Spent on Care Work by Women	Gendered Burden (Women: Men)
Overall	40 minutes	335 minutes	8.4X
Rural	42 minutes	344 minutes	8.2X
Urban	33 minutes	317 minutes	9.6X

Source: Table taken from Nikore (2022).

Globally, women spend three times more hours on unpaid care work compared to men, while in India, this difference is even greater at eight times. A detailed analysis of data from the National Statistical Organisation's Time Use Survey in 2019, before the pandemic, reveals that women shoulder a disproportionate burden of unpaid work regardless of education, employment, or marital status. This gender gap in unpaid work

widens as women's educational qualifications increase. Even women with jobs end up doing about six times more unpaid care work than employed men, showcasing the unfair double burden they face. Surprisingly, the time women spend on unpaid work is not significantly linked to measures of women's empowerment like mobility or financial independence. Investing in the care economy is vital for boosting women's employment and preventing job downgrading among them (Nikore, 2022). Many women prioritise jobs that offer flexibility to balance their caregiving duties alongside paid work, reflecting societal expectations.

It must also be noted that women's economic activity does not always correspond with market forces since a significant number of women from lower to higher educational backgrounds, rural to urban, married and unmarried, are engaged with household income and work within the domestic sphere of care work. A study by Afridi et al. (2018) discussed this phenomenon among married women in rural India through a utility maximisation model, but it has been highlighted that such a neoclassical view on labour market decisions tends to overlook or underplay the gender roles thrust upon women (Srikanth & Dey, 2023). According to this model, all individuals are homo economicus, deemed to be welfare-maximising and infinitely rational. Such a framework assumes that women produce lower returns in activities outside the household relative to the activities within. Therefore, it models their non-participation as a "choice" in utility maximisation. However, Srikanth and Dey substantiate that labour market decisions are not an outcome of utility maximisation when the magnitude of the factors (gender roles, social institutions) that pull women towards their households are much larger than the forces that send them to work. It is imperative to quote here: "If women were utility-maximizing individuals, they would never succumb to their gender roles" (Srikanth & Dey, 2023).

8.2 Marriage and Children

It was recorded that the unemployment rate among rural females was lower than that of rural males, whereas the opposite holds in urban areas (Rathore, 2023). A study focused on urbanisation, and FLFPR indicated that as urban household size increases, more engagement from educated women in terms of household and care work is demanded. The "tragedy of the urban middle-class woman" or the "discouraged drop-out" hypothesis is routinely featured in the literature linking urbanisation and female labour force participation.

Women are encouraged to study to fit into the requirements of an "educated bride." However, after marriage, they are attacked by a stigmatised environment. Once they give birth to a child, educated women tend to be more productive in the home, contributing

their time and energy to their children's human capital (Afridi et al., 2018). This keeps them from entering the workforce. Childcare support and after-school childcare are important from the lens of women's economic participation and empowerment (Murthy, 2020) and require policy attention.

As per a time use data analysis by Nikore (2022), the data shows married women devote 8.6 times more time to unpaid work than married men. Unmarried women bear half the unpaid work burden of married women. Never-married women perform 4.2 times more unpaid care work than men. Among widowed, divorced, or separated, the gap is 2.3 times. Married women spend 52% of their time on unpaid care, while never-married women spend 12%. Married men allocate 6% of their time, and never-married men allocate 3%. The gender gap persists in rural and urban areas. The analysis showed that 97.2% of married women engage in domestic work, compared to 31.5% of married men and 45.9% of never-married women versus 16.6% of never-married men.

A study found that the only favourable marital status for working women is that of a divorcee or a separated woman; this points towards a lack of influence from male patriarchs and the need for financial security when single women are in charge of their families. It was also observed in households with a large number of women that some women could work due to the housework being divided amongst the other female members. (Lama, 2021 ; Srikanth & Dey, 2023)

Gautham (2022) compares married childless women to married women who recently became mothers for the first time and finds that the negative impact of children on paid work and participation is more pronounced among urban women than rural women. If urban mothers faced similar effects as rural mothers, urban maternal participation would be about 35% higher. This disparity is largely due to urban women's concentration in formal sector jobs, where motherhood disrupts work more significantly compared to informal sector employment or unpaid household production.

Additionally, urban mothers experience a 35% percent drop in employment compared to childless urban women, while rural mothers see a 9% percent decline. This difference cannot be attributed to household structure, availability of nonmaternal care, or resource constraints but rather to the inflexibility of formal sector jobs. The impact of motherhood is more pronounced in formal sector employment than in informal sector work or unpaid household production (Gautham, 2022).

Regarding childcare policies, while they might not boost overall rural maternal employment, they could help rural women transition to better jobs. Strengthening existing rural childcare policies would be essential for rural women to maintain formal sector jobs even with increased availability. However, childcare support could significantly boost urban maternal employment. For instance, having an adult or elderly woman in urban households increases maternal participation, indicating that childcare constraints are a significant barrier for urban women. Understanding the effects of urbanisation and modern sector employment on childcare responsibilities is crucial for creating suitable policies for women's employment in India (Gautham, 2022).

8.3 Mobility and Safety

Unlike men, women constantly consider safety strategies for travelling in public spaces regardless of the time of day. The absence of safe and fair public spaces and services directly hinders women's full participation in the economy.

In India, traditional gender roles often limit women's ability to participate fully in the labour force and influence their commuting patterns. According to Census 2011 data, 45% of women work from home due to household responsibilities. While walking remains a common mode of travel for both genders, women primarily rely on buses for commuting, while men often use bicycles or scooters (Rukmini S., 2019). A 2022 World Bank report highlights that women heavily rely on public transportation in Indian cities. About 84% of women's work trips are made using public, semi-public, or non-motorized transport. How men and women travel differs significantly. More women walk to work compared to men, with 45.4% of women opting for walking versus 27.4% of men. Additionally, women are more likely to use buses, considering affordability when choosing transportation. They often prefer slower modes of transport due to cost concerns. Safety issues also discourage women from going out, which limits their presence in public spaces (India—Toolkit for enabling gender-responsive urban mobility and public spaces, 2022). This gendered commuting gap, where women tend to travel shorter distances for work, reflects global trends.

In India, there are promising initiatives like free bus travel for women in Delhi, Hyderabad, and Bengaluru. However, with only 1 bus for every 10,000 people and around 90% of the population not owning any vehicle, accessibility remains a significant challenge. Despite these efforts, widespread issues such as overcrowding, unreliable schedules, and unpredictable waiting times continue to discourage many from using public transportation (Buses Are Vital for Women's Economic Success in India. Here's Why, 2024). As women manage household chores, childcare, and demanding jobs, their time

becomes incredibly valuable. However, unreliable public transport eats into this precious time, making it difficult to balance everything. Consequently, many women are compelled to seek employment near their homes, limiting their career advancement opportunities and professional aspirations.

Ensuring the safety of women in the workplace is especially important for a country like India, where many jobs are in the informal sector. About 95% of women work in these kinds of jobs (Marathe, 2020). A survey by Jagori and UN Women showed that women in informal jobs, like construction or domestic work, face the highest risk of physical harassment (40%). Factory workers (25%) and homemakers (20%) face comparatively less risk (Jagori and UN Women, 2011).

In 2013, India passed a law called the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, also known as the POSH Act. It covers all workplaces, including informal ones like domestic work. However, for most women in India, especially those in informal jobs, the law does not offer much real protection (Marathe, 2020). Human Rights Watch interviewed 85 women working in both formal and informal jobs, along with trade union officials, activists, and lawyers. They found that the government is not doing enough to enforce the law and protect women in informal jobs, like domestic workers. Even though more women are speaking out about harassment, many still face stigma and fear reporting it because they worry about retaliation or the long, often unsuccessful legal process (Marathe, 2020).

9. ECONOMIC FACTORS

9.1 Household Income and Participation Rate

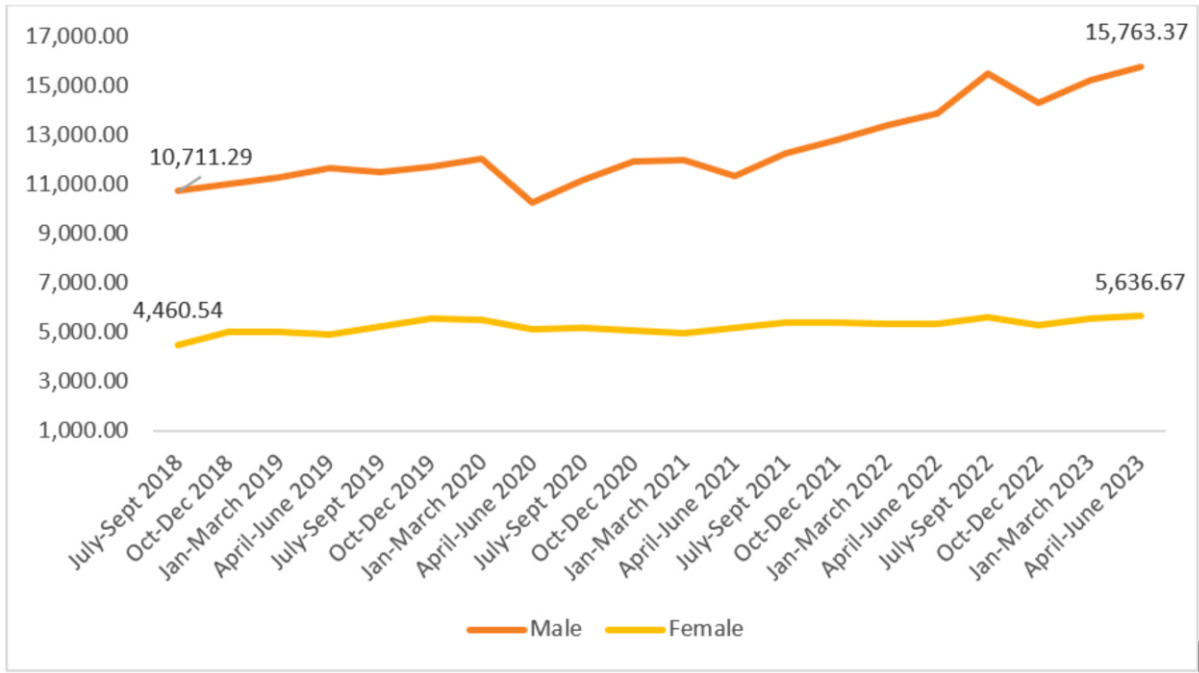
Poverty is a prominent feature of female interaction with the workforce. As women's education level goes from low to medium levels, they prefer to stop working for the sake of making ends meet since such work includes hard manual labour, often in agriculture or low-end services. Their commitment to the workforce is not secure or long-standing beyond financial concerns. Household income is thus a major factor, although its effect on female LFPR is seen to decline over time. Women work sporadically when it is economically necessary and leave when it is affordable. A supply and demand-oriented study found that the negative effect is above and over the effect of household income, indicating resistance from educated husbands towards working wives (Afridi et al., 2018; Pieters & Klasen, 2015). In a study of households in Kerala, it was observed that where the male heads were professionals or associate professionals, the women were more likely to

participate in the labour force. However, the influence of the household does not end with economic position; the intra-household power dynamics and membership of the household in various social institutions are important factors that keep women in their homes. Women’s LFP ties into their decision to conform to or deviate from the norms that lie within the household, primarily set by the patriarch (Srikanth & Dey, 2023).

9.2 Trends in Individual Income

Looking at the gross earnings over the past 30 days from self-employment (Figure 8), which is the employment status of 64.3% of female workers, during July 2022–June 2023, men earned an average of ₹9,681 more than women. The data shows that between 2018–23, the earnings gap has only widened. The absolute percentage increase in gross earnings in April–June 2023, compared to the same quarter in 2019, is 35% for men and 15% for women. Even for wage earnings from casual labour, the average difference in wages between men and women from April–June 2022 to the same quarter in 2023 was Rs.150. Similarly, for wage/salary of regular wage/salary employees, during the same period, men earned Rs.4,900 more on average.

Figure 8: Average gross earnings (Rs.) during the last 30 days from self-employment among self-employed persons in CWS from 2018–19 to 2022–23



Source: Annual Report, PLFS 2018–19 to 2022–23

9.3 Secondary Literature

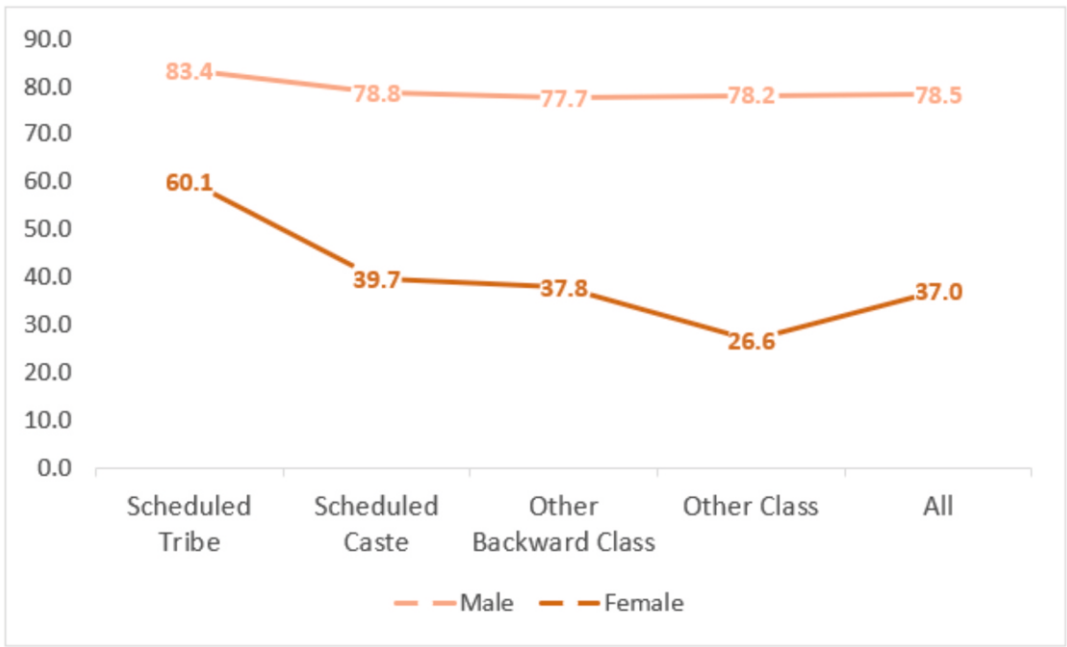
In contrast to the glass ceiling phenomenon that is observed in several developed countries, a study has assigned a “sticky floor” phenomenon to India after studying the gender wage gap (Deshpande et al., 2018). The “sticky floor” phenomenon refers to an employment pattern in which a section of female workers is delegated to the bottom rung of the job scale. Nurses, secretaries, and other clerical and service-sector jobs maintain this practice, which does not allow for advancement or higher pay. In contrast, the glass ceiling impacts educated women who are confronted with an artificial barrier that prevents their advancement in largely middle management jobs. The perceived discrimination, especially towards the lower end of the wage distribution, can be understood as a stimulus to growth in export-oriented economies. This challenges the very notion that inequality is inimical to growth as it fuels social conflict. When gender inequality is a socially accepted reality, the possibility of conflict breaking out due to discriminatory wage distribution is extremely low (Seguino, 2023).

10. SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

10.1 Trends in Women’s Employment by Caste

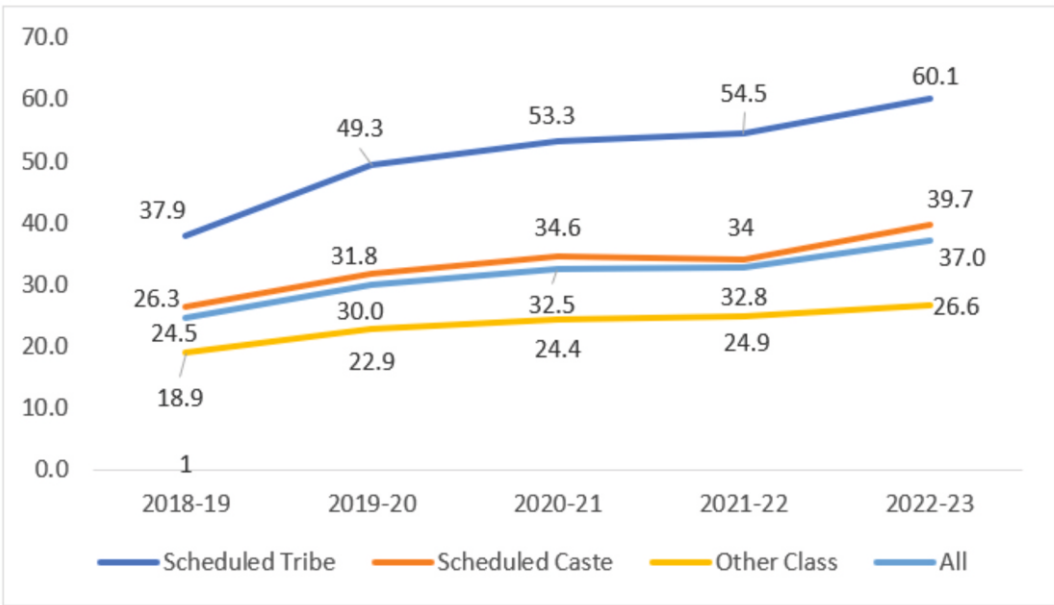
Looking at the participation rates of males and females in 2022–23 across different castes, male participation across all castes is similar, with scheduled tribes having the highest participation. In females, there are major differences across different castes. Female scheduled tribes have the highest participation at 60.1%, whereas other classes have 26.6%. Looking at the trend of female participation in different classes from 2018–19 to 2022–23, one can see that the participation rate has increased the highest among female scheduled tribes by 22.2%.

Figure 9: Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) for persons of 15 years and above for different castes in 2022–23



Source: Annual Report, PLFS 2022–23

Figure 10: Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) for persons of 15 years and above for different castes from 2018–19 to 2022–23



Source: Annual Report, PLFS 2022–23

Looking at the distribution of women by employment status in 2021–22 (Table 5), the majority of the women across all social groups in rural areas are unpaid family workers, working in household enterprises, or engaged in other types of work. In urban areas, the majority of women across all social groups are regular salaried/wage employees.

Table 5: Percentage distribution of female employment status by social group as per usual status (ps+ss) in 2021–22

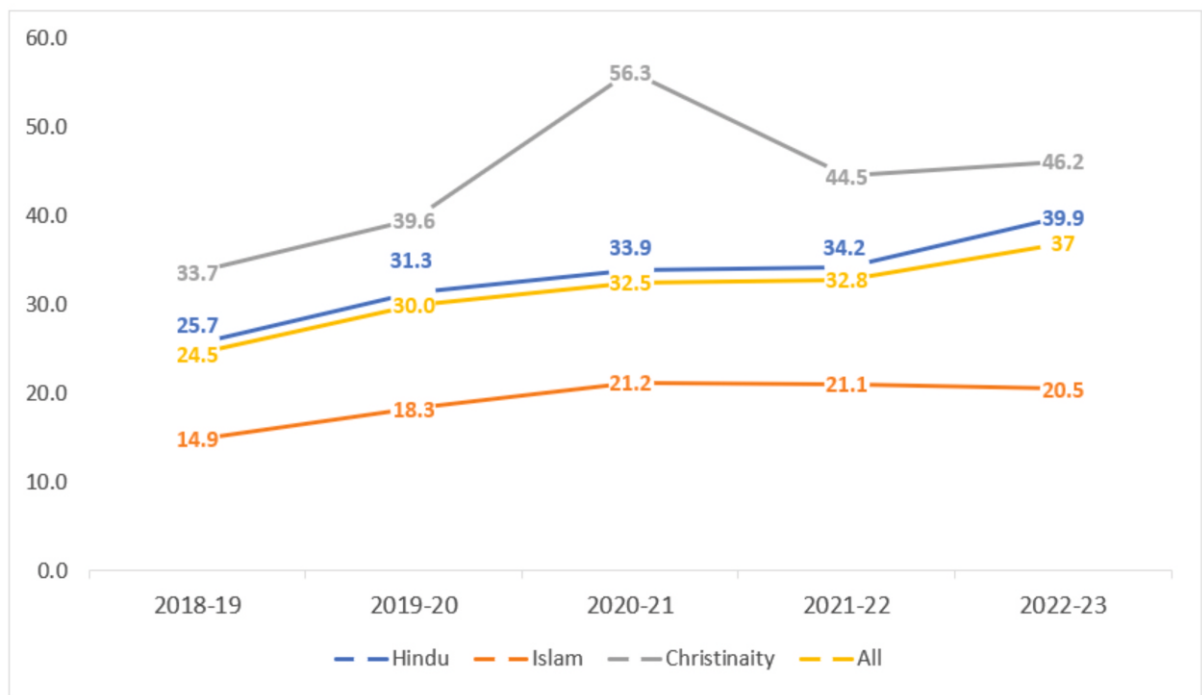
	Rural Female				Urban female			
Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) for persons of 15 years and above	Self Employed	Unpaid Family Worker worked in H.H. enterprise	Worked as a regular salaried/wage employee	In other types of work	Self Employed	Unpaid Family Worker worked in H.H. enterprise	Worked as a regular salaried/wage employee	In other types of work
Scheduled Tribe	9	29.8	2.9	13.7	8.3	4.5	16.8	5.3
Scheduled Caste	7.8	10.2	3.6	12.1	4.9	2.7	12.6	3.8
Other Backward Class	9.5	15.7	2.5	6.0	6.2	3.1	9.9	2.4
Other Class	9.2	11.0	3.1	2.8	5.5	2.1	11.1	0.6
All	9.0	15.2	2.9	7.5	5.9	2.8	11.0	2.0

Source: Annual Report, PLFS 2021–22

10.2 Trends in Women’s Employment by Religion

Examining participation rates by religion in 2022–23, Christians exhibit the highest rate at 46.2%, trailed by Hindus at 39.9% and Muslims at 20.5% (Figure 11). Notably, Hindus experienced the most substantial growth in participation, rising by 14.2% from 2018–19 to 2022–23, while Muslims saw a modest increase of only 5.6%.

Figure 11: Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) for persons of 15 years and above for different castes from 2018–19 to 2022–23



Source: Annual Report, PLFS 2018–19 to 2022–23

10.3 Interplay of caste and religion on women's participation

Considering the interplay of social institutions such as religion, caste/denomination/sect within religion, it is clear that the choice awarded to women to enter the labour force, in reality, is a collective choice that is often muddled by social norms. Gender and caste rules are closely linked and shape how society operates. The caste system determines both the social and sexual division of labour. So, the caste system is seen as a mechanism through which the control over the labour and sexuality of women can be maintained. The concepts of 'purity' and 'polluting' segregate women into groups and also regulate their mobility. So, the constraints on women's working and mobility are highest among upper-caste women. Even the data shows that women from other classes have the lowest participation (Figure 10) (Deshpande, 2021).

Women from lower caste households are more likely to participate in the labour force, but this trend was not seen in rural areas among the scheduled caste women (Sarkar et al., 2023). According to Eswaran et al. (2013), in rural areas of India, women might be hesitant to engage in market employment due to cultural stigma against married women working outside the home, driven by concerns about family status.

The rates of returns for educated SCs/STs are considerably lower than that of non-scheduled castes; it is speculated that this could be attributed to their ascribed low human capital endowments as well as marketplace discrimination in access to jobs, especially in the private sector. More proactive policy initiatives are required to combat this long-standing effect (S. Madheswaran & Attewell, 2009).

Srikanth and Dey suggest that FLFP is achieved through a “patriarchal bargain”, as evidenced by higher labour force participation in female-headed than in male-headed Hindu and Christian households in Kerala. The matter is reversed in Muslim households; male-headed Muslim households enable significantly greater women’s labour force participation than their female-headed counterparts. On the other hand, a study by the India Human Development Survey showed that Hindu women are more likely to be employed than Muslims but less likely than women of other religions (Sarkar et al., 2023).

According to Mehrotra and Parida (2017), women from Hindu or Muslim backgrounds are less likely to work in the job market compared to those from other religions, such as Christians or Sikhs. Additionally, the type of job a person has often depends on their social group in India. Neetha's (2014) study breaks down employment status by social groups, revealing that Muslims have the highest rate of self-employment, followed by upper-caste Hindus, possibly due to mobility limitations. On the other hand, casual wage work is most common among Scheduled Castes (SCs). Furthermore, women from the upper castes tend to dominate in modern industries, enjoying better job conditions and more stable employment.

Studies checking the intersection of the economy and caste found that those who owned village land had advantages in the wider economy. Caste networks play a crucial role in various sectors like cooperatives, sand-mining cartels, companies, and even the Church, influencing business, bureaucracy, and education. People leaving agriculture are often channelled into jobs based on caste, with Dalit women facing the most demeaning work, highlighting the heavy social burden they bear (MOSSE, 2019). It was also noted in the same study that gender inequality was reinforced by Dalit men who would delegate shameful tasks such as free labour and accepting handouts during life-crisis situations to Dalit women. Dalit women have to face the triple burden of patriarchy, caste and class.

The role of micro-financing self-help groups in increasing access to economic resources, community-level political empowerment, mobility, and reproductive health is an area worth exploring. A study looking into the SHGs in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, revealed that

following their membership in these groups, OBC and SC women had higher monthly earnings. Contrastingly, the study highlighted that despite having access to high-paying jobs in nursing and teaching, upper-caste women from Varanasi did not work (Kumari, 2017). Although Dalit women showcase a higher participation rate, the intersections of caste and gender restrict the job mobility of Dalit women greatly (MOSSE, 2019). While studying Hindu households in Kerala, it was observed that women who occupy the higher rung of the caste hierarchy typically participate less in the labour market. When they do engage, it is in “gainful employment”, upholding their status position. As we have seen, status production is a significant factor contributing to the declining FLFPR in India. Similarly, CSI and SC/ST Christians in Kerala are socioeconomically disadvantaged, like Hindu SCs and STs from the state (Srikanth & Dey, 2023).

Ultimately, the pull from these social institutions to resign to their respective religious, culturally dominant households is stronger than the gender-neutral push to join the labour market (Srikanth & Dey, 2023).

11. WAY FORWARD

The U-Hypothesis highlights that economic growth does not always lead to increased female participation in the labour market. Numerous factors hinder women from entering and remaining in the workforce, making it a complex issue to address. Understanding these constraints and their interactions is crucial for devising effective solutions. Simply achieving higher education levels does not guarantee increased female workforce participation. Even if women choose to enter the job market (demand for labour), they face challenges like job availability, bias in hiring, and job segregation. Moreover, deciding to work (supply of labour) involves considering household responsibilities, childcare, transportation affordability, workplace safety, and societal norms. Any solution must address both supply and demand factors simultaneously. This means addressing barriers on both sides simultaneously encouraging more women to enter the workforce while also ensuring that workplaces are inclusive and accommodating to their needs. Additionally, providing support for upskilling, childcare, safe transportation, and promoting gender equality in hiring practices are essential steps towards improving female participation in the labour market.

Skill Training and Employment: To address the issue of educated unemployment among women in India and promote their meaningful participation in the workforce, policymakers should prioritise initiatives aimed at skill training and employment. Firstly, efforts should be made to create an enabling environment for women in both formal and informal sectors, ensuring they receive appropriate employee benefits and work in safe

conditions. Additionally, policymakers must focus on diversifying job opportunities to effectively integrate educated women into the workforce, particularly in urban areas. To achieve this, thorough Skills Gap Analyses (SGAs) should be conducted across states to identify sectors in need of specific training centres based on job opportunities. These analyses should provide insights into employment needs and the hiring of skilled workers, taking into account gender disparities in occupational distribution. Gender-specific studies can further identify sectors with gender biases, allowing for targeted policymaking to address barriers to female employment (Ratho, 2020).

Furthermore, there is a need for gender-awareness training courses and strategies to retain trained women in the workforce. Publicising female role models and creating a healthy, safe, and hygienic work atmosphere can help dissolve taboos and insecurities associated with working women. Employers must also be encouraged to accept women in new roles and provide support for their post-training integration into the workforce. By incorporating these considerations into gender-responsive budgeting and policymaking processes, policymakers can foster greater female labour force participation in India, offering a more hopeful aspiration for women's economic empowerment and advancement. This approach aligns with the importance of training more women and ensuring their retention in the workforce, as highlighted by recent data and research (Ratho, 2020).

Safety at Workplace and Mobility: Through the paper, it has been identified that the unavailability of affordable and reliable transport coupled with household responsibilities compels women to work close to their homes. Hence, the need to understand and recognise time poverty among women is essential. So, investing in public transport by increasing the frequency, covering more areas, and ensuring affordability is necessary. Additionally, measures should be implemented to improve the safety and security of public transport, such as increasing surveillance, providing well-lit and secure waiting areas, and deploying female security personnel.

Furthermore, urgent action is needed to address sexual harassment in the workplace. The Indian government, in collaboration with state governments, civil society organisations, women's rights activists, trade unions, private sector entities, and national and state commissions for women, should raise awareness about existing laws and policies that address sexual harassment and ensure their effective implementation.

By addressing these dual challenges of poor public transport and workplace safety, policymakers can create an enabling environment for women to access learning and employment opportunities without fear or barriers.

Time spent on household responsibilities and childcare: To address the challenges faced by women balancing household and childcare responsibilities while entering the workforce, policy interventions are needed to create a supportive environment that enables women to engage in meaningful employment opportunities.

Firstly, there is a critical need to recognise and redistribute the burden of unpaid work, domestic chores, and care responsibilities, which are predominantly shouldered by women. This can be achieved through the provision of public services such as affordable and accessible childcare facilities, eldercare support, and other forms of social infrastructure that alleviate the caregiving burden on women. Additionally, improvements in childcare facilities are essential to enable women to participate in the workforce without compromising their caregiving responsibilities. This includes expanding the availability of affordable and high-quality childcare services, ensuring flexible working arrangements for parents, and promoting gender-sensitive workplace policies that accommodate the needs of working mothers.

Furthermore, institutional changes are necessary to address the systemic barriers perpetuating women's engagement in low-quality and informal employment sectors. This involves implementing policies that promote the formalisation of informal work, provide avenues for skill development and training, and ensure equal access to decent work opportunities regardless of gender.

12. Conclusion

The landscape of female labour force participation in India presents a complex puzzle, defying conventional expectations tied to economic growth, fertility decline, rising wages, and education levels. India's FLPR, among the lowest in G20 nations, witnessed a steady decline since 2000. Although there has been a recent rise in FLPR, especially in rural areas, challenges persist, necessitating comprehensive analysis and targeted interventions.

From 2018–19 to 2022–23, FLPR exhibited a notable increase, particularly pronounced in rural settings. However, occupational distribution analysis indicates a concentration of rural women in agriculture, highlighting the need for diversified job opportunities to foster economic empowerment.

Efforts to promote gender equality and empower women in the workforce must address multifaceted barriers, including skill training, employment diversification, workplace safety, and caregiving responsibilities. Policies aimed at providing gender-awareness training courses, ensuring workplace safety, improving public transport, and redistributing caregiving responsibilities are imperative. Gender-responsive budgeting and policymaking processes should prioritise these interventions to foster greater female labour force participation and economic empowerment.

Addressing educated unemployment among women requires targeted skill training initiatives and employment diversification efforts. Recognising the role of public transport accessibility and workplace safety in facilitating women's participation in the workforce is crucial. Moreover, acknowledging and redistributing the burden of unpaid work and caregiving responsibilities is essential to creating a supportive environment for women in the workforce.

In conclusion, the journey towards enhancing female labour force participation in India demands a holistic approach that addresses structural barriers and systemic inequalities. By implementing gender-sensitive policies, fostering inclusive workplaces, and providing support for skill development and caregiving responsibilities, policymakers can pave the way for meaningful economic empowerment and gender equality in the Indian workforce, as well as economic prosperity.

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