

# Gender Disparities in Labour Force Participation and Educational Attainment in India

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## ABSTRACT

India ranks high on global indices of gender inequality and the gender gap, with a significant disparity in labor force participation. Women are predominantly engaged in rural agricultural activities, reflecting the broader agrarian economy. Despite economic growth, urbanization, and industrial development, the transition of women into more productive sectors like manufacturing and services remains minimal. This study, using secondary data, highlights the persistent economic disempowerment of women in India despite various governmental and non-governmental efforts. The research suggests that enhanced access to education and employment opportunities is critical for women's empowerment. The paper concludes by recommending that policymakers invest in education, vocational training, and supportive legislation to facilitate women's integration into the workforce.

**Keywords:** Gender inequality, gender gap, labour force, women's economic empowerment

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## INTRODUCTION

Gender is a biological concept that determines what it means to be a man or a woman within a societal context. In many societies, gender structures can create institutional inequalities between men and women, often leaving women more vulnerable to and disproportionately affected by these disparities. One strategy to combat gender inequality is through the empowerment of women, a process that can challenge and transform these inequities. Empowerment involves uplifting women's spiritual, economic, political, and social status, particularly for those traditionally marginalized. It entails protecting them from all forms of discrimination and fostering a societal and political environment where women can live free from oppression, exploitation, fear, and discrimination.

### Women's Economic Empowerment

Women's economic empowerment has emerged as a central focus in development initiatives on a global scale. The positive outcomes of women's economic empowerment extend to both communities and nations. The enhancement of women's economic autonomy, enabling them to instigate economic transformations for themselves, is increasingly recognized as a pivotal element in attaining gender equality. Empowering women economically, a demographic representing half of the global workforce serves not only as a catalyst for economic advancement but also as a crucial aspect of promoting women's human rights. The allocation of resources by governments, businesses, and communities towards the empowerment of women, coupled with efforts to address existing disparities, plays a key role in reducing poverty in developing nations. Women's economic empowerment in India is influenced by various factors such as geographic location, education, age, and social status. Despite societal advancements, women often do not enjoy the same status as men. This paradoxical situation sometimes reveres women as goddesses while simultaneously subjecting them to inequality and discrimination.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Empowerment of women is commonly defined as the enhancement of the social and economic standing of women within both the family and society. The existing body of literature serves as the cornerstone upon which all subsequent research will be constructed. Examining previous literature provides valuable insights to guide new studies in the right direction. Numerous studies have delved into the topic of women's empowerment. Ghosh and Mukhopadhyay (1984) documented a significant decrease in the participation of women in the labour force, largely attributed to the dominant role of men in the workforce. Kabeer's study in 2001 suggested that initiatives promoting small business growth in Bangladesh led to an

increase in women's involvement in the labour force and improved social standing, despite significant cultural disparities. Chandershekhar and Ghosh (2007) observed a notable decrease in the informal employment of women and a rise in self-employment and regular employment opportunities in urban areas. Hoque and Itohara (2009) define empowerment as the enhancement of welfare benefits, equal access to resources such as educational opportunities, elimination of institutional gender discrimination, women's mobilization, and increased bargaining power within the household decision-making process. According to Young (2010), their study's results suggest an increase in public expenditure to alleviate the financial burden on women in terms of healthcare and education costs. Ranarajan et al. (2011) noted a downward trend in female labor force participation, which they attributed to the effects of education and income, leading to the conclusion that as household income levels rise, women are less inclined to engage in casual labor. Sanghi et al. (2015) observed a decrease in the participation rate of women in the labor force in rural regions, as evidenced through an analysis of data from multiple rounds of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO). This decline was attributed to a confluence of diverse factors operating in tandem.

**Objectives of the Study**

1. To analyse the gender disparities in the labour force participation rate in rural and urban areas.
2. To study the occupational distribution of female workforce and wage differentials
3. To analyse the gender gap in literacy and gross enrolment ratio in higher education
4. To offer useful suggestions in the light of findings

**Data Sources and Research Methodology**

The paper is descriptive and analytical. In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyse the gender gap in labour force participation in India and women's empowerment. The data used in this study is purely from secondary sources according to the need. The data is sourced from the Census Reports, Reports of Ministry of Human Resource Development, Govt. of India and the Employment and Unemployment Surveys (EUS) of the various NSSO rounds, which conduct periodic surveys to provide insights into various socio-economic parameters in India.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

**Male-Female Labour Force Participation Rates**

Table 1 compares labour force participation rates in rural and urban areas for both men and women over several years. The data shows that both men and women have higher participation rates in rural areas compared to urban areas. The labour force participation rate for men has remained relatively stable over the years in both rural (around 53-55 percent) and urban areas (around 50-55 percent). The participation rate for women shows a decline over time, particularly in rural areas, dropping from 32.3 percent in 1987-1988 to 24.8 percent in 2011-2012. In urban areas, women's participation fluctuates but remains significantly lower than that of men, with a slight overall decrease from 15.2 percent in 1987-1988 to 14.7 percent in 2011-2012. There is a pronounced gender gap in labour force participation. Men consistently have higher participation rates than women in both rural and urban areas. The difference between male and female participation rates in rural areas was about 21.6 percentage points in 1987-1988, increasing to approximately 29.5 percentage points by 2011-2012. The gap in urban areas is even wider, starting at 35.4 percentage points in 1987-1988 and slightly decreasing to 39.9 percentage points by 2011-2012.

**Table 1 Male – Female Labour Force Participation Rate of the age of 15 plus Years in Rural and Urban Areas**

NSSO Rounds	Rural		Urban	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1987-1988 (43 <sup>rd</sup> )	53.9	32.3	50.6	15.2
1993-1994 (50 <sup>th</sup> )	55.3	32.8	52.1	15.5
1999-2000 (55 <sup>th</sup> )	53.1	29.9	51.8	13.9
2004-2005 (61 <sup>st</sup> )	54.6	32.7	54.9	16.6
2009-2010 (66 <sup>th</sup> )	54.7	26.1	54.3	13.8
2011-2012 (68 <sup>th</sup> )	54.3	24.8	54.6	14.7

**Source:** NSSO EUS Rounds 1987-88, 1993-94, 1999-2000, 2004-05, 2009-10 and 2011-12

The table illustrates the persistent gender disparity in labour force participation across both rural and urban settings in India. While men's participation rates remain stable, women's participation rates show a concerning decline over time, particularly in rural areas. This suggests an urgent need for targeted measures to improve women's access to the labour market and to address the factors contributing to their lower participation rates.

**Sectoral Distribution of Female Workforce**

Table 2 shows the proportion of the female workforce employed in three sectors: Agriculture, Manufacturing, and Services across rural and urban areas for various years. The majority of women in rural areas are employed in agriculture, with the proportion decreasing from 84.7% in 1987-1988 to 74.9% in 2011-2012. Employment in the manufacturing sector among rural women shows slight fluctuations but an increase in the last recorded period, jumping from 7.5% in 2009-2010 to 16.7% in 2011-2012. The service sector saw a gradual increase in female employment, rising from 3.7% in 1987-1988 to 8.3% in 2011-2012. The service sector saw a gradual increase in female employment, rising from 3.7% in 1987-1988 to 8.3% in 2011-2012.

**Table-2: Proportion of Female Work Force in Different Sectors**

NSSO Rounds	Rural			Urban		
	Agriculture	Manufacturing	Service	Agriculture	Manufacturing	Service
1987-1988 (43 <sup>rd</sup> )	84.7	6.9	3.7	29.4	27.0	27.8
1993-1994 (50 <sup>th</sup> )	86.2	7.0	4.0	24.7	24.1	35.0
1999-2000 (55 <sup>th</sup> )	85.4	7.6	4.3	17.7	24.0	34.2
2004-2005 (61 <sup>st</sup> )	83.3	8.4	4.6	18.1	28.2	35.9
2009-2010 (66 <sup>th</sup> )	79.4	7.5	5.7	13.9	27.9	39.3
2011-2012 (68 <sup>th</sup> )	74.9	16.7	8.3	10.9	34.0	55.1

**Source:** NSSO EUS Rounds 1987-88, 1993-94, 1999-2000, 2004-05, 2009-10 and 2011-12

The table reveals that female employment in agriculture decreased significantly, from 29.4 percent in 1987-1988 to 10.9 percent in 2011-2012. The proportion of women in manufacturing remained relatively stable until 2009-2010 but rose to 34 percent in 2011-2012. Employment in the service sector saw a substantial increase, from 27.8 percent in 1987-1988 to 55.1 percent in 2011-2012. There is a noticeable shift in the employment of rural women from agriculture to manufacturing and services over time. In urban areas, women are moving away from agriculture towards manufacturing and, more notably, the service sector, which experiences a significant increase in female employment. The table reveals significant shifts in the sectoral distribution of the female workforce in India, with a notable decrease in agricultural employment and a corresponding increase in the service sector, especially in urban areas. This shift suggests economic diversification and the growing importance of non-agricultural sectors in providing employment opportunities for women. However, a significant disparity in employment patterns between rural and urban areas remains, indicating the need for targeted interventions to support women's employment across different sectors. The table highlights stark differences in sectoral employment between rural and urban women, with rural women more likely to be involved in agriculture, while urban women are increasingly represented in the service sector.

**Female Workforce by Nature of Employment**

Table 3 provides a comprehensive look at the activity status of the female workforce in rural and urban India, highlighting significant differences and trends over time. The table revealed a continuous increase in regular employment during the whole study period. Such a rise is a positive development since regular employment means better working conditions and higher earnings. The data about the self-employment of women in the workforce showed a more or less constant trend in all the rounds except a few. Whereas the proportion of casually employed women remains almost the same in rural areas, it shows a sharp decline for urban females. It shows the predominance of self-employment among rural women and a gradual increase in regular employment among urban women, indicating a heavy reliance on agricultural and informal sector jobs. The dominance of self-employment reflects the limited access to formal employment and may point to a need for enhanced economic opportunities and support for small businesses. The increase in regular employment indicates better access to formal job markets, but the high proportion of self-employment suggests a substantial informal sector presence. Both rural and urban areas see a gradual increase in regular employment for women, though it is more pronounced in urban areas. Rural women are more likely to be self-employed, often in agriculture, while urban women have better access to regular employment opportunities. There is a notable decrease in

**Table-3: Female Workforce by Activity Status\* in Rural and Urban Area (in per cent)**

NSSO Rounds	Rural Females			Urban Female		
	Regular Employment	Casual Employment	Self-Employment	Regular Employment	Casual Employment	Self-Employment
1987-1988 (43 <sup>rd</sup> )	3.7	35.5	60.8	27.5	25.4	47.1
1993-1994 (50 <sup>th</sup> )	2.7	38.7	58.6	28.4	25.8	45.8
1999-2000 (55 <sup>th</sup> )	3.1	39.6	57.3	33.3	21.4	45.3
2004-2005 (61 <sup>st</sup> )	3.7	32.6	63.7	35.6	16.7	47.7
2009-2010 (66 <sup>th</sup> )	4.4	39.9	55.7	39.3	19.6	41.1
2011-2012 (68 <sup>th</sup> )	5.5	35.1	59.3	42.8	14.3	42.8

**Source:** NSSO EUS Rounds 1987-88, 1993-94, 1999-2000, 2004-05, 2009-10 and 2011-12

\*Activity status: Principal status plus subsidiary status casual employment for urban women, suggesting improvements in job security and formal employment opportunities. A large proportion of women remain self-employed in both rural and urban areas, indicating ongoing reliance on informal and small-scale enterprises.

#### **Average Wage Paid to Employed Females**

Table 4 shows the mean wage of regularly employed males and females in rural and urban areas. It is clear from the table that there are absolute wage differentials between males and females both in the rural as well as in urban areas and also a widespread difference among females of both the regions and has widened more over time. In contrast to females, the wage disparities in the case of

**Table-4: Mean Wage of Males and Females Employed in Rural and Urban Areas (per day in Rs.)**

NSSO Rounds	Rural		Urban	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
1993-1994 (50 <sup>th</sup> )	58.48	34.89	78.12	62.31
1999-2000 (55 <sup>th</sup> )	127.32	114.01	169.71	140.26
2004-2005 (61 <sup>st</sup> )	144.93	85.53	203.28	153.19
2009-2010 (66 <sup>th</sup> )	249.15	155.87	377.16	308.79
2011-2012 (68 <sup>th</sup> )	322.28	201.56	469.87	366.15

**Source:** NSSO EUS Rounds 1993-94, 1999-2000, 2004-05, 2009-10 and 2011-12

males are less striking. Therefore, female workers are in a worse-off position in terms of wage earnings in comparison to male workers. In the case of female workers rural females are relatively in a worse-off position.

#### **Gender Gap in Literacy and Gross Enrolment Ratio in Higher Education**

Gender discrimination in education means women often end up in insecure, low-wage jobs, and constitute a small minority of those in senior positions. With the introduction of the new policies, there has been an improvement in the basic education level up to 14 years of age. A look at the mean years of education after 14 years shows an increasing trend since 1993-1994, though still low at around two years for rural females and three-plus years for urban females in the last two NSSO rounds as defined in table.5 The table highlights significant improvements in the educational enrolment and attainment of the female labor force aged 15-24 in both rural and urban areas over the years. However, it also underscores the persistent gap between rural and urban females, with rural areas lagging in both enrolment ratios and mean years of education. Continued focus on policies that enhance educational access and quality, particularly in rural areas, is crucial for fostering economic and social development and achieving gender equality in India.

**Table-5: Enrolment Ratio and Mean Years of Education of Female Labour Force of Age 15-24 Years**

NSSO Rounds	Enrolment Ratio		Mean Years of Education after 14 Years	
	Rural Females	Urban Females	Rural Females	Urban Females
1993-1994(50 <sup>th</sup> )	8.4	27.8	1.7	2.5
1999-2000(55 <sup>th</sup> )	11.3	29.9	1.8	2.7
2004-2005(61 <sup>st</sup> )	14.8	33.2	1.9	2.7
2009-2010(66 <sup>th</sup> )	15.2	34.5	2.1	3.2
2011-2012(68 <sup>th</sup> )	19.7	35.7	2.1	3.4

**Source:** NSSO EUS Rounds 1993-94, 1999-2000, 2004-05, 2009-10 and 2011-12

Policies aimed at increasing educational access and reducing gender disparity in education appear to have been effective, as indicated by the rising enrolment ratios and mean years of education. Higher educational attainment among young women can lead to better employment opportunities and economic empowerment, which is crucial for achieving gender equality.

Implementation of community-based programs to raise awareness about the importance of female education, indeed, the introduction of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the Right to Education in 2009 improved enrolment in basic education, but for better employability, the enhancement of skill through higher education is a prerequisite. Table 6 represents the male-female literacy

**Table-6 Gender Gap in Literacy Rate in India (1951-2011)**

Census Year	Person	Male	Female	The male-Female gap in Literacy Rate
1951	18.33	27.16	8.86	18.30
1961	28.30	40.40	15.35	25.05
1971	34.45	45.96	21.97	23.98
1981	43.57	56.38	29.76	26.62
1991	52.25	64.13	39.29	24.84
2001	64.83	75.26	53.67	21.59
2011	74.04	82.14	65.46	16.68

**Source:** [populationcommission.nic.in/content/993\\_1\\_LiteracyRate.aspx](http://populationcommission.nic.in/content/993_1_LiteracyRate.aspx)

gap in India and depicted an inverted U-type trend in the post-independence period, a positive development in the reduction of inequalities persist in the literacy level. As per the Census of 1951, the male-female gap in literacy rate was 18.3 which increased to 26.62 in the Census of 1981 highest in the post-independence period. The gender gap in literacy shows a sharp decline.

The literacy rate was very low in 1951, with a significant gender gap of 18.30 percentage points. The literacy rates increased from 1961 to 1981 for both males and females, but the gender gap widened from 18.30 to 26.62 percentage points by 1981. The literacy rates continued to rise, with the gender gap gradually decreasing from 24.84 in 1991 to 16.68 percentage points by 2011. There has been substantial progress in literacy rates for both genders over the 60 years, reflecting successful educational policies and programs. The narrowing of the gender gap indicates improved access to education for females, although disparities still exist.

Table 7 presents the total enrolment in higher education in millions, categorized by gender (men and women) for the years 2012-13, 2013-14, and 2014-15. The total enrolment in higher education increased slightly over the years, from 30.1 million in 2012-13 to 33.3 million in 2014-15. The total GER fluctuates slightly, with a decrease from 23.70 percent in 2012-13 to 16.23 percent in 2014-15. The table presents the gender gap in the gross enrolment ratio as well as in the enrolment in higher education in India. It is clear from the table that after a planned implementation of large numbers of the policies to reduce the gender gap the gross enrolment ratio there is a sharp decline to a significant level. Table 7 also clearly the fact that the gender gap in enrolment in higher education persists to a huge extent with a declining trend, which is a positive sign for the expected overall development of the females' in future through providing higher education.

**Table-7 Gender Gap in Terms of GER in Higher Education in India**

Years	Enrolment in Higher Education (Total in Million)					Gross Enrolment Ratio (Total)				
	Men	Women	Total	Gender Gap	Percent	Men	Women	Total	Gender Gap	Percent
2012-13	16.7	13.5	30.1	3.2	23.70	22.7	20.1	21.5	2.6	12.93
2013-14	17.5	14.8	32.3	2.7	18.24	23.9	22.0	23.0	1.9	8.63
2014-15	17.9	15.4	33.3	2.5	16.23	24.5	22.7	23.6	1.8	7.9

**Source:** Compiled from various Reports, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Govt. of India

The table provides insights into the gender gap in higher education enrolment in India, highlighting variations in enrolment rates between men and women over the years. While there has been a slight decrease in the gender gap, efforts are still needed to achieve greater gender equity in access to higher education. Addressing these disparities is crucial for fostering inclusive growth and development in the country.

### CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The female workers exhibit significantly lower participation rates in comparison to their counterparts; even though rural women represent a higher proportion in the workforce than urban women. A majority of rural women are informally employed and involved in low-wage agricultural activities. It can be inferred that the percentage of urban women involved in agriculture is rapidly decreasing, with many urban women seeking employment in the service industry. Conversely, a majority of rural women are primarily engaged in agriculture, where income-generating opportunities are limited.

The disparities in wages between rural and urban women are notably significant. The role of education is paramount in the holistic advancement of society. Despite efforts, disparities based on gender persist in literacy rates and enrollment in higher education. Although parents in both rural and urban areas of India are increasingly inclined to invest in the education of their daughters, the concept of women participating in the workforce remains a cultural challenge. A significant obstacle hindering women's participation in the labour market in India appears to be predominantly societal. The societal construct of 'family honor', deeply ingrained notions of gender roles, and apprehensions regarding the societal consequences of women's financial autonomy have further solidified patriarchal mindsets that inherently advocate for a woman's primary place within the household.

Investing in women's economic empowerment paves a direct route toward achieving gender equality, eliminating poverty, and fostering inclusive economic growth. The significant contributions made by women to economies, whether through business ventures, agricultural activities, entrepreneurship, paid employment, or unpaid domestic care work, must not be understated.

The labour market participation of Indian women is impeded by various obstacles, especially in sectors with high productivity, as a result of insufficient investments in education and time constraints stemming from caregiving responsibilities. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that female literacy rates and enrollment in education have shown an upward trend. For India to realize its ambition of becoming the world's third-largest economy by 2030, the country mustn't continue to exclude over 600 million women from equitable opportunities in the workforce. Higher educational levels are likely to enhance workforce participation rates and the quality of jobs available to women, contributing to broader economic growth. To further reduce the gender gap, policies need to specifically target female education, especially in rural areas and among disadvantaged communities. Continued investment in educational infrastructure and policies that support female education is crucial to achieving parity in literacy rates. Higher literacy rates for women have broad implications for their economic and social empowerment, leading to improved health, economic participation, and overall societal development. Efforts must continue to focus on eradicating the remaining literacy gap through more inclusive and accessible educational opportunities for women. Beyond mere enrolment and basic literacy, emphasis should be placed on the quality of education to ensure that females receive meaningful and empowering educational experiences.

**Note:** Literacy Rates for the Census years 1951, 1961 and 1971 relate to the population aged five years and above. The rates for the Census years 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011 relate to the population aged seven years and above. The 1981 Literacy Rates exclude Assam when the 1981 Census could not be conducted. The 1991 Census Literacy Rates excluded Jammu & Kashmir.

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