



Official Data and Women's Employment in India

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Recent data from official statistics show a steady rise in the number of working women as a proportion of all women in India's population. This is a reversal of the earlier trend, and is being heralded by a section of policy analysts and economists as an indicator of growing employment opportunities in India for working women. These statistics call for further investigation.

The Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS) (earlier referred to as the Employment and Unemployment Surveys) are nationally representative sample surveys conducted by the National Statistical Office. Women's work participation in rural India (the ratio of women workers to the population) is known to be lower than in most countries of the world, including developing countries. The female labour force participation rate (female workers plus female unemployed as a ratio of the female population) for ages 15+ was 35 per cent in India in 2023 (ILOSTAT). In the same year, the rate was 61 per cent in Thailand, 73 per cent in Bolivia, and 80 per cent in Nigeria. For the majority of countries in the International Labour Organization's database, female labour force rates were in the range of 57–63 per cent. As very few women in rural areas report themselves as unemployed, the difference between the size of the workforce and the size of the labour force is small.

A second observation is the recent *reversal* of the trend of decline in rural women's work participation. According to official data, work participation declined steadily between 1993–94 and 2017–18, and rose thereafter. For ages 15+, PLFS data show that 46.5 per cent of women in rural India were in the workforce in 2023–24, up from 23.7 in 2017–18, and 35.2 per cent in 2011–12. Not only is this a near-doubling of work participation over seven years but also a bigger change than experienced by any other group (rural men, urban women, and urban men).

According to PLFS data, of all women workers, the share of women in self-employment (notably in agriculture) rose sharply while the share of women employed as regular and casual workers declined. In 2011–12, 60 per cent of rural women workers were

classified as self-employed; the proportion rose to 73 per cent in 2023–24. The share of self-employed women in the agricultural sector rose from 48 to 62 per cent over the same period. On the other hand, the share of women casual workers declined from 36 to 16 per cent, and the share of regular workers rose from 5 to 10 per cent.

The recent rise in measured work participation may reflect growing distress, as the big increase is on account of the number of women engaged in self-employment in agriculture, particularly as unpaid family labour. It may also reflect the fact that as men shift out of agriculture and seek employment outside rural areas, women are taking their place at agricultural tasks. Indeed, these observations are not contradictory. Men *are* moving out of agriculture seeking more remunerative employment elsewhere, and women, physically constrained by the responsibilities of care work, are restricted to locally available work, whether unpaid or low paid.

Both these observations, however, may still not be capturing the reality on the ground.

Notwithstanding the observed rise in the proportion of women classified as workers, the underestimation of women workers in rural India remains a major shortcoming of official statistics. This is because the surveys *fail to capture the nature of women's work in a largely informal agrarian economy*. Women's work is often home- or farm-based, often unpaid, seasonal, intermittent (even over the course of a single day), and intermingled with care work.

The problems of capturing women's work in large-scale labour force surveys have been captured by detailed time-use studies at the village level conducted in varying rural settings across India over the last two decades. In 2017–18, the Foundation for Agrarian Studies (FAS) conducted a time-use survey in two villages of Karnataka, and collected information on all activities undertaken by a sample of rural women during 24 hours for seven continuous days in two seasons. In Siresandra village (Kolar district), the FAS studies found, first, that when employment was available, such as during the rice transplanting season, the large majority of women (and *all* women from peasant and worker households) were classified as workers (on the basis of major time spent during the reference week). Secondly, the studies found large seasonal variations in work participation: from 64 per cent in the lean season to 92 per cent in the peak harvest season. Thirdly, the studies found variations in hours of work and income generated for the same activity at different times of the year depending on a range of factors. In livestock rearing, for example, hours worked and income obtained depended on whether the milch cow was lactating and the quantity of milk produced.

This variability in rural women's work calendar across time of day, month, and season is difficult to capture in single-visit surveys, whether time-use surveys or labour force surveys. The methodology currently employed by the National Statistical Office does

not capture this variability, and this failure is likely to affect the identification of women workers.

Although official statistics show an upward trend in women's work participation rate in rural India – which government representatives are celebrating – it remains lower than in most developing and developed countries of the world. Researchers and policy makers need to focus on the constraints to women's work – such as the drudgery of care work and the lack of income-generating activities for rural women. Official statistics must improve to capture the reality of women's work. At the same time, strategies for ensuring steady and adequate incomes to women workers are of the utmost urgency.