

# Female Work Force in India: in the Face of Consistence Economic Growth and Structural Change



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## Abstract

India is experiencing a rapid growth of economy as well as structural change but work participation rate for females gradually declined. India is placed at 120<sup>th</sup> out of 131 countries in women's labour force participation. Several studies have shown *U-shaped* relationship between economic development and women's economic activity. Decline in labour force participation rate for females is more in rural areas. ILO traced on three factors - increasing educational enrolment, improvement in earnings of male workers that discourages women's economic participation and the lack of employment opportunities at certain levels of skills and qualifications discouraging women to seek work. Employment share of female labour force under different sectors of economy also changed over time. Female employment in agriculture sector in urban areas has decreased 18.5 percent and 9.8 percent in rural areas during 43<sup>rd</sup> to 66<sup>th</sup> round NSSO survey. But the problem is that, India's labour market is highly dualistic in nature, with a small minority of organised formal workers (about 7% of the total work force) and a vast majority in unorganised informal sector including those engaged in agriculture as low paying subsistence workers and very slow transformation in rural India. It is hopeful that, female employment in higher income service sectors is increasing slowly, bears a good sign for future. Only an effective and integrated policy is require to get a good momentum to accommodate a large demographic dividend.

This paper tries to focus on the changing pattern and nature of female work participation in India just preceding economic liberalization to post liberalization period. i.e, 1987-88 to 2011-12 using NSSO EUS data of different round and tries to draw out the reasons responsible for puzzling phenomenon. In the subsequent part of the writing sectoral engagement and the type of employment in rural-urban variation is tested

**Keywords:** Employment, Service, Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), Demographic Dividend, Structural Change, Rural, Urban.

## Introduction

India has experiences a rapid economic growth (about 7%) as well as structural change in the post liberalization era but the work participation rate among the females has decreased from 28.5% to 21.9% within the period 1987-88 to 2011-12 with a fluctuating trend (Employment and unemployment surveys (EUS of NSSO). According to the International Labour Organization's Global employment trends 2013 report, India is placed at 120<sup>th</sup> out of 131 countries in women's labour force participation. Several studies have shown *U-shaped* relationship between economic development and women's economic activity (Goldin, 1994; Tansel, 2002), hypothesizing that female labour force participation declines initially with economic development, plateaus and then rises again, a phenomenon reflective of structural shifts in the economy, changing influence of income and substitution effects, and an increase in education levels of women in the population (Goldin, 1994). But some scholars usually differs their opinion and do not interested to specify within some limited factors, establishing a straight-cut relationship of low female work participation rate for such a populace country where high social, economic and religious diversity is exist.

It is believed that, country's economic development crucially depends upon the participation rates of its women as they constitute around 50 percent of its human resources (NIPCCD, 2010). Not only that, women's participation in the workforce as compared to men is also an

important determinant of their social status (Mammen, 2000). Gender variation is driven by a wide variety of economic and social factors including economic growth, increasing educational attainment, falling fertility rates and social norms (Verick S, ILO, 2014). Women's participation in the labour market is influenced by social norms governing gender roles and responsibilities as much as it is by economic and structural factors (Lahoti R & Swaminathan H, 2013). Moreover, study of female work participation is an important issue because, India is enjoying 'demographic dividend' where the share of working aged people is particularly high, which can be generate more per capita growth through labour participation. Socially it is important because, employed women have a greater bargaining power with positive repercussions on their own wellbeing and that of their families (Rajendra G K, 2017).

### Aim of the Study

This paper tries to focus on the changing pattern and nature of female work participation in India just preceding economic liberalization to post liberalization period. i.e. 1987-88 to 2011-12 using NSSO EUS data of different round and tries to draw out the reasons responsible for puzzling phenomenon of persistent decline in female labour force participation rate in the face of consistent economic growth. In the subsequent part of the writing tested the sectoral engagement of female workers in economy and the status of their employment with rural-urban variation. The paper aims to mention with a conclusion mentioning policy issues and future prospect of female employment in modern India.

### Data Source and Definitions

The entire analysis of this paper is mainly based on the published data of Employment and Unemployment Surveys (EUS) from National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation, Government of India. NSS reports of the 43<sup>rd</sup> (1987-88), 50<sup>th</sup> (1993-94), 55<sup>th</sup> (1999-2000), 61<sup>st</sup> (2004-05), 66<sup>th</sup> (2009-10) and 68<sup>th</sup> (2011-12) rounds have been used in this connection. Workers are broadly categorised as follows;

1. Principal Status (P.S): The activity status on which a person spent relatively longer time during 365 days preceding the day of survey. This is comparable with 'main worker' in Census definition.
2. Subsidiary Status: 'Subsidiary Status' (SS) refers "if anybody is engaged in any activity for only a part of the year (similar to the concept of a 'Marginal Worker in Census)."

Three reference periods used in NSS surveys are (i) one year, (ii) one week and (iii) each day of the reference week. In the usual status approach, the activity status of a person is determined on the basis of the reference period of one year. If a person is working either under PS or SS, he/she is said to be counted under 'Usual Status or Usual Principal Subsidiary Status (i.e. both combined). This paper uses the employment estimates based on usual status (or usual principal subsidiary status, PS+SS).

### Review of Literature

Several important studies have been published based on the issue of female labour participation in Indian context but it is quite impossible to accommodate all literatures within this limited writing. I am trying to incorporate here only those relevant and significant studies.

Ghosh and Mukhopadhyay (1984) explained causes of reduction in number of female workers and their work participation rates. They also noticed the adverse sex-ratio of females in working fields and Inter-state variations in female employment. It is observed by them, northern States like Haryana, Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Punjab are characterised by low participation rates and southern states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala show higher participation rates.

Goldin Claudia (1994) in their working paper of NBER discussed in detail regarding the labor force participation rate of married women first declines and then rises as countries develop. Its U-shape is revealed both across the process of economic development and through the histories of currently advanced economies. The initial decline in the participation rate is due to the movement of production from the household, family farm, and small business to the wider market, and to a strong income effect. But the income effect weakens and the substitution effect strengthens at some point.

Unni and Rani (2000) have examined the issue of informalisation of employed women. Writers were focuses on the growing informalisation of labour force in India as well as South Asian countries. They argue that sub-contracting and loose contracts are primary reasons that are responsible for this trend.

Chandrashekhar and Ghosh (2007) have examined the female employment in urban India. They have observed that the quality of new jobs created for the urban females with a declining trend in casual employment of urban females and increase in the regular and self-employment.

International Institute for Labour Studies (2004) observed that, most women in India are engaged in part-time work and informal/unorganised sector, and which are obviously low quality of work.

Srivastava (2009) have studied the trends and patterns of women's employment in rural India and also examined the determinants of women employment. They have found that rural female employment is mostly found in unorganized agricultural sectors or in self employment basis. They have found a positive relationship of good jobs with educational attainment and try to identify the key deterrents of female work participation in rural and urban areas.

Lahoti and Swaminathan (2013) have established relationship between economic growth and women's economic activity in Indian contest and the studies suggest female labour force participation tends to decline initially with economic development, plateaus at a certain stage of development before rising again. This is argued to be mainly a result of structural shifts in the economy, changing influence of

income and substitution effects, and an increase in education levels of women in the population.

Mehrotra and Saha et al (2013) discussed about female labour participation in rural and urban India and the reality of such participation. The secondary (NSSO data) based study is tested in U.P and Gujarat state.

International labour Organisation (ILO) research paper (2014) discussed on recent female labour supply trends in India and potential measurement issues.

Sunita Sanghi, A Srijia, and Shirke Shrinivas Vijay (2015) analysed the trend and pattern of declining female work participation in India. They argued enrolment in education is one of the important cause of low work participation for female at present and with an increase in income levels of the households, a woman no longer prefers working as an unpaid worker or a helper or as a casual worker unless the work is remunerative (as in MGNREGA). However, such opportunities are limited in rural India and as a result women are not finding jobs matching their preference.

Sharma and Saha (2015) have emphasized on the all major aspects of female work participation using NSSO data. In their research paper, trend and pattern of female employment in India have been studied and regional/state level variation also tested. Some basic issue relating to female work participation is included like level of education, types of employment, sectoral distribution and wage differentials etc. In their study they have marked that the female workers have much lower participation rates than their male counterparts and hence comprise a marginalized section. The share of rural women in the workforce is much higher than those in urban. However, women in rural India are clearly in an inferior position in the labour market vis-à-vis their urban counterparts. This is evident from the fact the most of the rural women are casually employed and are engaged in low-paying agricultural work.

Ejaz Ghani, William Kerr, Stephen O'Connell (2017) has explained the gender differentials in work participation in India and suggest the way which can be done to promote shared prosperity.

### **Trend of Female Work Participation in Indian Labour Market**

Usually, economic growth goes hand to hand with emancipation of women. But data available with the NSSO shows otherwise for India. The persistent decline in female labour force participation rate (LFPR) in India in the face of consistent economic growth is a puzzling phenomenon (Lahoti R & Swaminathan H, 2013). LFPR in rural and urban India declined 7.5 percent and 0.5 percent respectively during the span of 43<sup>rd</sup> round survey (1987-88) to 68<sup>th</sup> round (2011-12) except 61<sup>th</sup> round (Table-1). Different scholars (Chandrashekhar and Ghosh, 2007; Srivastava & Srivastava, 2009) have argued that globalisation could be one of the important reason for this increase in female employment. Again decreasing female LFPR is observed due to global recession of 2008 which had a more adverse effect on urban

employment vis-à-vis rural employment (Sharma and Saha, 2015).

**Table-1**  
**Female Work Participation Rate Compared with Male Work Participation Rate in India.**  
**From 1987-88 to 2011-12.**

Round	Female Work Participation Rate		Male Work Participation Rate	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
43 <sup>rd</sup> (1987-88)	15.2	32.3	50.6	53.9
50 <sup>th</sup> (1993-94)	15.5	32.8	52.1	55.3
55 <sup>th</sup> (1999-00)	13.9	29.9	51.8	53.1
61 <sup>st</sup> (2004-05)	16.6	32.7	54.9	54.6
66 <sup>th</sup> (2009-10)	13.8	26.1	54.3	54.7
68 <sup>th</sup> (2011-12)	14.7	24.8	54.6	54.3

**Source:** NSSO, EUS report of 43, 50, 55, 61, 66, 68 round surveys.

**Note:** Figures are based on usual status approach and includes principal status and subsidiary status workers of all ages.

In India, there has been a consistent decline in female labour force participation rates both in rural and urban areas since the 1970s; 1999-2000 to 2004-05 being the only exception. Decline in labour force participation rate for females is more in rural areas and the declination rate for rural female labour force participation is much sharper in case of principal and subsidiary status taken together as compared to only principal status which reflects that, a larger share of decline in subsidiary status. The decline in subsidiary status employment is sometimes considered to be a positive development because people, especially females, resort to subsidiary employment as additional source of household income (Saha, P et al, 2013). The decade is a reflection of their declining numbers in agriculture, unorganised sector and those engaged as self-employed.

LFPR in India is combined with lots of social, economic and religious factors. Various studies have cited different reasons for the declining labour force participation of women (Rangarajan et al. 2012). But researchers are identified some firm factors like participation in education, social norms and household responsibilities which pull back or deter female participation in the labour market (Saha, P et al, 2013). On the other hand, non-availability of appropriate employment opportunities pushes females out of the labour market. ILO also traced on three factors - i) increasing educational enrolment ii) improvement in earnings of male workers that discourages women's economic participation and iii) the lack of employment opportunities at certain levels of skills and qualifications discouraging women to seek work.

Increasing participation in education to some extent has contributed to declining female workforce participation rate (Mazumdar and Neetha, 2011; Rangarajan et al., 2011). But some economists have argued that a larger proportion of females are opting out of labour force to attend to 'domestic duties only' –

a reflection of the greater pressure on females for household and caring responsibilities. Domestic duties and care work; ideology of the marital household and the environmental construct created in the household; and mobility and safety of women, govern their entry and withdrawal from the labour force (Sudarshan and Bhattacharya, 2009). However, level of education and corresponding labour force participation rate is displayed in table – 2. From this data set it is clear that, LFPR for females are more linked with low level of education probably due to lack 'good jobs' for educated females in Indian labour market. But it is hopeful that, employments in high

educated females are increasing in urban India since 2000. Female employment is flourished 27.3 percent in service sectors from 43<sup>rd</sup> round to 66<sup>th</sup> round survey in urban areas too, during 24 years; this growth is highest after 2000 definitely due to structural change. In certain sector like financial services, aviation sector Indian women lead the charge. Today, women head both the top public and private banks in India (Table-3). It was only at the highest education levels that the results show an evidence of pull factors drawing women into the labour force at attractive employment and pay conditions (Klasen and Pieters, 2012).

**Table-2**  
Level of Education of Female Work Force in India from 1988-89 to 2011-12

Rounds	Urban Females					Rural Females				
	43 <sup>rd</sup>	50 <sup>th</sup>	55 <sup>th</sup>	61 <sup>st</sup>	66 <sup>th</sup>	43 <sup>rd</sup>	50 <sup>th</sup>	55 <sup>th</sup>	61 <sup>st</sup>	66 <sup>th</sup>
Illiterates	29.2	30	27.1	30.4	23.1	52.6	54	51.3	55	43.2
Upto Primary	17.5	20.3	17.7	23.4	20.6	39.1	41.6	40.3	44.9	38.4
Middle	11.3	13.1	12.9	16.1	15.4	29	29	29	37.1	29.4
Secondary	15.1	13.4	12.4	12.3	9.7	26.1	25.8	25.7	30.5	22.2
Higher Secondary	NA	14.7	12.4	12.9	9.4	NA	23.4	20.6	25.2	18.3
Graduate & Above	31.5	30.1	27.3	29	25.9	35.1	36.6	31	34.5	29.7

**Source:** NSSO, EUS report of 43, 50, 55, 61, 66, 68 round surveys.

**Note:** 43<sup>rd</sup> round in 1987-88, 50<sup>th</sup> round in 1993-94, 55<sup>th</sup> round in 1999-2000, 61<sup>th</sup> round in 2004-05, and 68<sup>th</sup> round in 2011-12.

**Table-3**  
Female Employment in Different Sectors  
From 1998-99 to 2011-12.

Rounds	Urban Females			Rural Females		
	Agriculture	Manufacturing	Services	Agriculture	Manufacturing	Services
43 <sup>rd</sup> (1987-88)	29.4	27	27.8	84.7	6.9	3.7
50 <sup>th</sup> (1993-94)	24.7	24.1	35	86.2	7	4
55 <sup>th</sup> (1999-00)	17.7	24	34.2	85.4	7.6	4.3
61 <sup>st</sup> (2004-05)	18.1	28.2	35.9	83.3	8.4	4.6
66 <sup>th</sup> (2009-10)	13.9	27.9	39.3	79.4	7.5	5.7
68 <sup>th</sup> (2011-12)	10.9	44	55.1	74.9	16.7	8.3

**Source:** NSSO, EUS report of 43, 50, 55, 61, 66, 68 round surveys.

Social norms restrict women's availability and location of work leading to lower labour force participation (NCEUS, 2007). This may be reflected in the clear *U-shaped* relationship between women's education and labour force participation in India. Kingdon and Unni (2001). Social restrictions on the lifestyles of women tend to become more rigid as households move up in the caste hierarchy (Chen and Drèze, 1992), which would be reinforced by the negative income effect of rising incomes of family members particularly of husbands (Klasen and Pieters, 2012).

Participation of women in the labour force is more frequently led by economic compulsions rather than by choice. Females tend to cross their household boundary and enter into the labour force if there is a perceived fall in the reservation income of households (Unni 1989; Srivastava and Srivastava, 2010). Using NSS employment-unemployment data for 2004-05, Mukhopadhyay and Tendulkar (2006) were found a lower probability of the wife entering the labour force

(6% in rural and 4 per cent in urban areas) if their husbands had a regular or salaried employment.

India's labour market is highly dualistic in nature, with a small minority of organized formal workers (about 7% of the total work force) (Mehrotra et al., 2013) and a vast majority in unorganized informal sector including those engaged in agriculture as low paying subsistence workers. Female workers largely belong to the latter group which is more susceptible to economic shocks. The decline in female employment in the 2004-05 is a reflection of their declining numbers in agriculture, unorganized sector and those engaged as self-employed. (Saha, P et al, 2013).

However, with the help of econometric modeling Gaddis and Klasen (2012) have argued that, differential dynamics generated in different sectors like agriculture, manufacturing and services. Therefore, depending on the relative shifts in these sectors, countries might or might not end up tracing a U-shaped relationship between economic

development and female labour force participation (Saha, P et al, 2013).

### Females under Different Sectors of Economy and Their Types

Proportion of females in agricultural sectors gradually decreases over time which is more pronounced in urban areas (Table-3). Female employment in agriculture sector in urban areas has decreased 18.5 percent and 9.8 percent in rural areas during 43<sup>rd</sup> to 66<sup>th</sup> round survey (1997-98 to 2011-12). This sharp decline over this 24-year period is very much expected in the context of structural transformation following the economic reforms of 1991 (Sharma, A and Saha, S, 2015). Female employment in manufacturing also increases in a rapid rate especially in urban India probably due to export-oriented and liberalization policies. Post liberalization in India experienced quick expansion of service sectors in urban areas. Similarly share of female employment increased in this sector which was 27.8 percent in the period of 1988-89 and reached 55.1 percent in 2011-12 in urban areas. In

rural India where subsistence agrarian economy is dominating, the growth of service sector is obviously slow in nature.

There has been a continuous rise in the regular employment for females since the 43<sup>rd</sup> round. It has increased from 27.5 percent in the 43<sup>rd</sup> round to 42.8 percent in the 68<sup>th</sup> round (Table-4). This increase is positive development since regular employment means better working conditions and higher incomes (Sharma, A and Saha, A, 2015). Growth of regular employment for females in rural areas is very slow due to distressed agriculture and less diversification in economy. On the otherhand the decline in casual employment and increase in regular employment of urban females is a hopeful development. The quality of female jobs has improved somewhat in recent times as the share of female unpaid work declined in rural areas. In urban areas organised employment or salaried employment rose slightly in services and manufacturing sectors. However, most of the rise in these jobs was still in the informal sector without social benefits (Mesrotha et al. 2014).

**Table-4**  
**Status of Employment (P.S+S.S) of Rural and Urban Females in India**  
**From 1987-88 to 2011-12.**

Rounds	URBAN FEMALE			RURAL FEMALE		
	R.E	S.E	C.E	R.E	S.E	C.E
43rd	27.5	47.1	25.4	3.7	60.8	35.5
50th	28.4	45.8	25.8	2.7	58.6	38.7
55th	33.3	45.3	21.4	3.1	57.3	39.6
61st	35.6	47.7	16.7	3.7	63.7	32.6
66th	39.3	41.1	19.6	4.4	55.7	39.9
68th	42.8	42.8	14.3	5.6	59.3	35.1

**Source:** NSSO, EUS report, 43, 50, 55, 61, 66, 68 round surveys.

**Note:** PS: Principal Status, SS: Subsidiary Status, RE: Regular Employment, SE: Self-Employment and CE: Casual Employment.

### Conclusion

Females are almost half of the Indian population but participation in the job market is far below than males. After post liberalization (1991), India has experienced a rapid growth in economy and a rise in the share of the non-agricultural income and employment. In such a transition phase female participation in labour force, especially in countryside is declining. In this regard *U-shaped* relationship is observed with educational attainment. Though, the female participation in labour market is determined by some socio-economic dynamics in our country but we are hopeful for future for our potentiality and India, near to fertility transition, received a large demographic dividend which has already started. Indian economy and its structural change suffer with some typical problems. Policy maker should be careful to handling some issue regarding to female labour market like female working environment, wage and social security. Different skill development programme should be more proactive and absorb more females to fulfill the precondition of modern non-agricultural job market instead of in low-productivity agriculture, traditional small-scale manufacturing and unpaid household employment. Female employment

in higher income service sectors is increasing slowly, bears a good sign for future. Only an effective and integrated policy can be set get a good momentum.

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