The Participation Paradox:

WOMEN'S WORK AND TIME-USE IN INDIA
2017-18 TO 2025

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
BPO	Business Process Outsourcing
CWS	Current Weekly Status
DAY-NRLM	Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihoods Mission
EUS	Employment Unemployment Survey
FLFPR	Female Labour Force Participation Rate
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IT	Information Technology
LFPR	Labour Force Participation Rate
MGNREGS	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
NFHS	National Family Health Survey
NIC	National Industrial Classification
NSS	National Sample Survey
PLFS	Periodic Labour Force Survey
PLI	Production Linked Incentive
R&D	Research and Development
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TUS	Time Use Survey
USD	United States Dollar
WPR	Worker Population Ratio

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

India's aspiration to become a developed economy under the Viksit Bharat vision by 2047 can be accelerated by a substantial and sustained expansion of women's participation in the world of work. Although the economy crossed the USD 4 trillion mark in 2025 and remains among the fastest growing major economies globally, women contribute only around 18 per cent of GDP, and estimates suggest that India needs around 400 million women in the workforce to add close to USD 14 trillion to the economy by 2047. This amounts to doubling the female workforce from the current level. Realising the country's demographic dividend, therefore, is inseparable from closing the gender gap in the labour market.

This report collates a set of stylised facts on women's labour force and workforce participation in India and complements them with micro-evidence on how women allocate their time. Drawing on the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) and the Time-Use Survey (TUS) and comparing the earliest and latest comparable rounds (2017-18 and 2025), it examines participation rates, their composition across demographic groups and sectors, hours worked, earnings and the gender wage gap, the reasons women give for staying out of the labour force, and the daily allocation of time between paid and unpaid work.

Data and evidence analysed in the report suggests that while female workforce participation has risen sharply in India, the quality, productivity and intensity of women's work have not improved commensurately, and on several dimensions have even deteriorated. Structural transformation is visible for men but has largely bypassed the women in the country. India has expanded women's participation on the extensive margin, yet a lot needs to be delivered in terms of the compositional upgrading that would make that participation economically and personally meaningful for women. The report builds this argument using national datasets across several layers of evidence, summarised below, and it frames the report's core question - why economic growth has not translated into commensurate gains for women in the labour market. The answer lies in the depth of data.

While workforce participation has improved, it is not in line with the country's structural transformation journey. The female workforce in India has doubled between 2017-18 and 2025, from 104 to 201 million, with the worker population ratio rising from 22 to 38 per cent. This headline expansion, however, was overwhelmingly rural and was absorbed almost entirely by the agriculture sector. Moreover, the growth came through own-account and unpaid family work rather than regular salaried jobs, whose

share actually edged down. Data reveals that where women did enter manufacturing and services, they clustered in low-productivity, informal segments such as garments, textiles and domestic work. This sectoral movement runs counter to what the direction of structural transformation would predict.

The demographic details sharpen the paradox. The participation surge is concentrated among rural women in prime and mid-age brackets, while urban women moved only modestly, so that the rural-urban divide among women has widened even as the rural gender gap has narrowed. As observed globally, marriage often becomes a reason for women to exit the workforce, with nearly 87.6 per cent of married men participating in the workforce against just 37.3 per cent of married women in 2025. The married-women figure has risen sharply from 20.9 per cent in 2017-18, indicating some loosening of the 'marriage penalty'. Crucially, the gains have been concentrated among women at the lower end of the education distribution, consistent with an expansion into less-skilled, informal and largely rural work rather than a broad-based move into skilled or formal employment.

The intensity of work also reveals a similar trend. Average weekly hours fell for every group, but the decline was steepest for rural women. Rising participation alongside falling hours per worker implies an expansion of the workforce into increasingly marginal, low-intensity activity, the clearest sign that the quantity of female employment and its quality have moved in opposite directions. Interestingly, the manufacturing sub-sectors that should serve as a bridge from agriculture to higher-productivity work, notably textiles and apparel, show widening gender gaps in hours, deepening the internal segmentation.

Further, the analyses suggest that wages rose for both men and women, but increased faster for men, thereby widening the gender wage gap. Moreover, it widened most where it was already largest and where women are largely employed: that is, the rural labour market. Rural women now earn roughly 45 per cent of what rural men earn, down from about 53 per cent. The market is also sharply bifurcated as the sectors that employ the bulk of women (agriculture, textiles, apparel, retail, food services, domestic work) retain among the widest gaps in the economy, while the parity-wage, knowledge-intensive sectors (computer programming, scientific R&D, publishing, consultancy) employ only a small, if rising, share of women.

The time-use evidence supplies the mechanism behind the entire pattern. Women perform roughly three-and-a-half to four hours more unpaid work per day than men, a gap that did not narrow and, in the care dimension, actually widened, between 2019 and 2024, precisely the period of the participation surge. Entry into paid work reduces

women's unpaid burden only marginally; the margin of adjustment has fallen not on men or the household but on women's own self-care and self-development time, which has compressed measurably for working women even as it has held steady or risen for working men. This self-care compression is the clearest empirical signature of women's time poverty.

Read together, these layers of evidence indicate that India's structural transformation, as it has occurred so far, has not been gender inclusive. Most women remain in agriculture and largely in unpaid work; those who have entered the paid economy are concentrated in its low-productivity, informal and residual segments, while an unchanged division of household work continues to bind their time. India has succeeded in raising women's participation on the extensive margin, but much remains to be done to improve the quality, productivity, intensity and agency of that work. It is here that macroeconomic policy has a larger role to play. The next generation of labour market policy must move from maximising participation to enabling structural transformation for women in India by creating pathways into productive, formal, well-paid and future-oriented employment, while simultaneously recognising, reducing and redistributing the unpaid care burden that constrains women's economic agency.

The most immediate macro policy imperative is to recognise, reduce and redistribute the unpaid care and domestic work that the analysis identifies as the binding constraint on women's employment. This calls for a substantial expansion of affordable, good-quality childcare through greater investment in the care infrastructure and stronger enforcement of the crèche provisions of the Maternity Benefit Act and the Factories Act. Maternity leave should be complemented by paid paternity and shared parental leave, financed partly through social insurance rather than employer liability alone, so that the costs of caregiving neither fall disproportionately on women nor discourage their hiring. Beyond care services, piped water, clean cooking energy, reliable electricity, sanitation, efficient public transport and affordable eldercare should be treated as essential economic infrastructure, since each directly reduces the hours women spend in unpaid work. These investments are most effective when paired with re-entry support including return-ship programmes, refresher training and incentives for employers who hire women returning from career breaks and with flexible and hybrid working arrangements that carry no penalty for career progression, alongside sustained efforts to shift a greater share of domestic work towards men.

Second, policy must actively create pathways for women into higher-productivity manufacturing and modern services. This would entail breaking the occupational segregation that currently confines them to a narrow set of low-wage, informal activities. Industrial policy instruments such as production-linked incentive schemes,

industrial corridors, textile parks and electronics clusters should carry measurable targets for women's employment, skilling and leadership, and should prioritise factory-based, formal employment supported by safe transport, worker hostels and on-site childcare, so that manufacturing can finally serve as the bridge out of agriculture that it has not, so far, provided for women. In parallel, the knowledge-intensive and technology-enabled services in which women already command wage parity, such as computing, professional and scientific services, and other globally tradable services, should be opened up through investment in digital skills, connectivity and remote-work ecosystems that are particularly well suited to women constrained by mobility and care responsibilities.

Third, because the recent expansion in women's work has been overwhelmingly rural and concentrated in unpaid and low-productivity activity, deliberate attention must be paid to generating remunerative demand for rural women's labour. Place-based, cluster strategies that combine skilling, infrastructure, childcare, transport and employer partnerships, all designed around women's actual constraints of time, mobility and care, can create meaningful local employment. Public employment programmes such as MGNREGS, the rural livelihood missions, industrial policy and digital-economy initiatives should be better synchronised to move rural women from subsistence family work into paid, productive activity, with women-led farmer producer organisations, rural enterprises and digital platforms offering further routes into higher-value work. Since most women work in agriculture and in small, informal manufacturing units that cannot themselves provide childcare, safe transport or similar services, gender-responsive budgeting becomes the key instrument for financing this enabling infrastructure, raising women's hours in the near term while opening pathways into higher-productivity work.

Fourth, these demand-side measures must be underpinned by a stronger enabling environment. The education-to-employment pipeline needs to be strengthened so that India's rising female educational attainment translates into durable labour-market attachment: skilling should be aligned to industry demand and judged on placement and retention rather than training numbers alone, and supported by apprenticeships, career counselling and transition programmes for first-time workers. Women's access to finance and productive assets should be widened through collateral-free lending, dedicated credit lines and better-targeted delivery of existing schemes such as Mudra and Stand-Up India, together with reforms to land titling and joint-ownership norms that allow women to move from own-account subsistence activity into scaled, formal enterprise. Equally important is safety and legal protection. The new labour codes in

force from 2026 must be implemented effectively, social protection extended to women in gig and platform work, and public investment scaled up in safe last-mile transport, well-lit public spaces and working-women's hostels near employment hubs.

Finally, the evidence base itself should be deepened. The analysis in this report is possible only because of India's investment in large-scale survey infrastructure, and that infrastructure now needs to go further. Time-use surveys should be conducted regularly and integrated with the Periodic Labour Force Survey so that the interaction between paid and unpaid work can be tracked systematically, and labour statistics should routinely report indicators on maternal employment, career interruptions, occupational segregation and time poverty. Sustained investment in granular, sub-national data is equally important, since India's aggregate participation rate conceals wide variation across states and districts and, in effect, many distinct labour markets.

India's achievement in drawing tens of millions of additional women into the workforce is real and should not be understated. The task now is to ensure that this participation translates into better work, which is more productive, more secure, better paid and accompanied by genuine economic agency, rather than remaining concentrated in the low-productivity and unpaid margins of the economy. This requires acting on both sides of the constraint at once. On one hand opening opportunities for women to move up the productivity ladder, and on the other, easing the disproportionate burden of unpaid work that currently limits their ability to take those opportunities up. Pursued together and sustained over time, these measures would allow India's demographic dividend to be realised in full and place women's economic empowerment at the centre of the Viksit Bharat vision.



1. Introduction

Tanu M. Goyal, Shravani Prakash, Ketaki Gaikwad and Arjun Tandon[1]

Women's participation in the world of work is both an end in itself and a driver of development. That women's economic roles are central rather than peripheral to development was established by Boserup (1970), who showed that growth is not gender-neutral and can erode women's position even as economies expand. Sen (1999) reframed this in terms of agency, arguing that a woman's capacity to earn an independent income is not merely a route to development but constitutive of what development means. The relationship is bidirectional, as development expands women's opportunities, while their participation raises household investment in children's health and education, and strengthens their bargaining power at home, though neither outcome follows from growth automatically (Duflo, 2012).

The scale of women's under-participation and its cost are well documented. Globally, only about half of working-age women are in the labour force, against roughly 80 per cent of men.[2] The cost of leaving this potential untapped is large. It is estimated that closing gender gaps in employment could raise GDP per capita by around 20 per cent on average (World Bank Group, 2024; Pennings, 2022). Women's economic participation, therefore, is a question of economic performance as much as of equity. An important dimension of this under-participation is the disproportionate burden of domestic responsibilities and unpaid work.

A critical mechanism through which these inequalities are reproduced is the allocation of time. In 2018, about 606 million working-age women reported being unavailable for or not seeking employment because of unpaid care responsibilities, against only 41 million men.[3] Women perform 76.2% of all unpaid care work, which is nearly 3.2 times more than men and the total value of this work is estimated at close to nine per cent of global gross domestic product (GDP).[4] Women's disproportionate engagement in unpaid domestic and care work limits their ability to participate in paid work and to transition into sectors that require greater time commitment, regularity or mobility. Drawing on social reproduction theory (Bhattacharya, 2017), feminist economics (Elson, 1999; Folbre, 2006), and the marketisation models of Ngai and Pissarides (2007), what appears as a "withdrawal" from the labour market is often better understood as a reallocation of labour from market production to non-market household production, conditioned by the absence of marketised substitutes for domestic services. India's experience illustrates this sharply.

[1] Authors are grateful to Havishaye Puri, Mohd. Tahoor and Keshav Sachdeva for their assistance and support.

[2] World Bank (2022). Female Labor Force Participation. World Bank Gender Data Portal. https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/data-stories/flfp-data-story (last accessed August 25, 2026)

[3] ILO, 2018

[4] ILO, 2018

India's ambition to become a developed, high-income economy under its "Viksit Bharat" vision by 2047 cannot be realised without meaningfully expanding women's participation in the workforce. In 2025, India surpassed the USD 4 trillion GDP milestone, grew by 7.6% and, despite the current geo-political situation, it is projected to grow at 6.5% in both 2026 and 2027.[5] Despite these headline achievements, India's economic size still lags significantly, compared to some of the largest economies. More crucially, its per capita income remains lower than that of even many developing nations. One reason for this is that its female population contributes only 18 per cent to the GDP.[6] Therefore, unlocking India's next wave of growth will depend on closing the gender gap in the labour force. Estimates suggest that India requires an additional 400 million women in the workforce to contribute USD 14 trillion to the economy by 2047.[7] As the world's most populous nation, the vast untapped potential that India holds in its markets, its innovation capacity and its demographic dividend cannot be realised if its female population is left behind.

Against this backdrop, this report presents stylised facts on India's female labour force and workforce participation and micro-evidence on their time use. The report draws on the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) and the Time-Use Survey (TUS) to illustrate where women are currently employed in the country and how they use their time, which has a direct implication on their workforce participation. The analysis compares key indicators between 2017-18 and 2025, the earliest and latest available rounds of the PLFS, respectively. The 2025 estimates are based on the revised PLFS, which differs from earlier rounds in both its sampling strategy and reference period. Unlike the PLFS rounds from 2017-18 to 2023-24, which followed a July-June survey cycle, the revised PLFS reports estimates on a calendar-year basis. These methodological changes should be kept in mind when interpreting comparisons between the two years.

The remainder of the report is organised as follows. Section 2 situates the 2017-18 to 2025 period within India's longer labour market history. Section 3 and 4 examines women's workforce participation over this period, its aggregate movement, its composition by age, marital status and education, and its sectoral distribution. Section 5 turns to the intensity of women's work through hours worked, drawing out a quantity-quality distinction that participation data alone cannot reveal. Section 6 analyses earnings and the gender wage gap, both in the aggregate and across the sectors that account for the bulk of female employment as well as those where wages are at parity or favourable to women. Section 7 examines why women remain outside the labour force at the scale they do, drawing on PLFS data on reasons for non-participation and Section 8 dwells further on these reasons using the Time-Use Survey. Section 8 summarises the key findings, and Section 9 presents recommendations.

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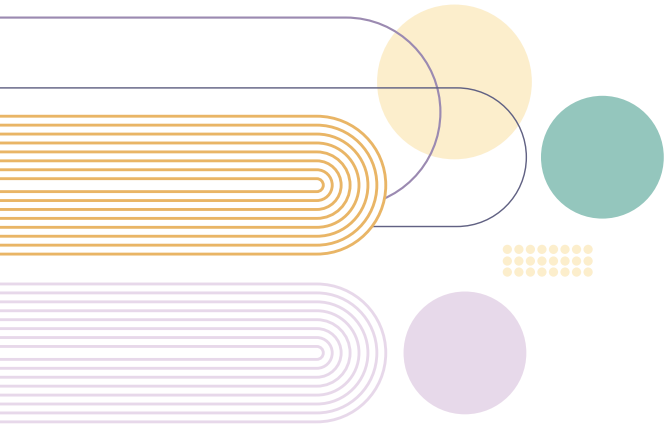
[5] IMF's World Economic Outlook Update for April 2026, accessible at https://www.imf.org/-/media/files/publications/weo/2026/april/english/text.pdf (last accessed August 25, 2026)

[6] National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) report, 2019-21, accessible at https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR375/FR375.pdf (last accessed August 25, 2026)

[7] The Nudge Institute; Bain Research, accessible at https://www.bain.com/insights/from-aspiration-to-action-building-indias-400-million-women-workforce/ (last accessed August 25, 2026)

2. India's Labour Market in Historical and Present Perspective

Historically, India's labour force participation rate (LFPR) has long exhibited a pronounced gender divide. In 1972-73, just under half of India's population aged five and above was in the labour force, with an overall participation rate of 49.1%, meaning roughly 240 of the 488 million people counted were either working or actively seeking work.[8] Participation was shaped overwhelmingly by gender. Men were far more likely to be economically active than women. About 64 per cent of men aged five years and above participated against only 33.2% of women, a gap of more than 30 percentage points. This divide held in both rural and urban areas but was sharpest in urban India, where the male LFPR of 59.7% compared to 16.5% for women. Compared to this, in rural areas, there was relatively higher female labour force participation, of about 37.4%. This, however, was mostly in the form of unpaid help on family farms and businesses and own-account farm work. In contrast, the LFPR for rural men was about 65 per cent. Across the board, participation was higher in rural areas (51.5%) than urban areas (39.9%), reflecting an economy still anchored in agriculture and family enterprise, where self-employment and helper roles, rather than regular wage jobs, absorbed most of the workforce (see Table 1).



[8] Employment-Unemployment Survey under the National Sample Survey 27th Round. The data pertains to October 1972-September 1973. Please note the population base here is age 5+, not the conventional 15+ working-age base.

Table 1: Distribution of Population by Employment Status, India (EUS 1972-73)

Particulars and Shares in %	Rural			Urban			Total		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Not working (not in labour force)	35.1	62.6	48.5	40.3	83.5	60.1	36.3	66.8	50.9
Working on own farm or non-farm business	24.2	5.1	14.9	16.2	3.5	10.4	22.5	4.8	14.0
Helpers in farm or non-farm business	11.8	18.1	14.9	4.0	3.9	4.0	10.1	15.3	12.6
Regular salary or wage workers	8.2	1.9	5.1	29.6	4.5	18.1	12.8	2.4	7.8
Working on own farm or non-farm business and also as casual wage workers	6.2	0.9	3.6	1.6	0.2	1.0	5.2	0.8	3.1
Working as casual wage workers	5.3	5.5	5.4	2.0	1.5	1.8	4.6	4.7	4.6
Casual wage workers intermittently seeking work	8.3	5.7	7.0	3.3	1.7	2.6	7.2	4.9	6.1
Not working but seeking work	0.8	0.2	0.5	2.9	1.1	2.1	1.3	0.4	0.8

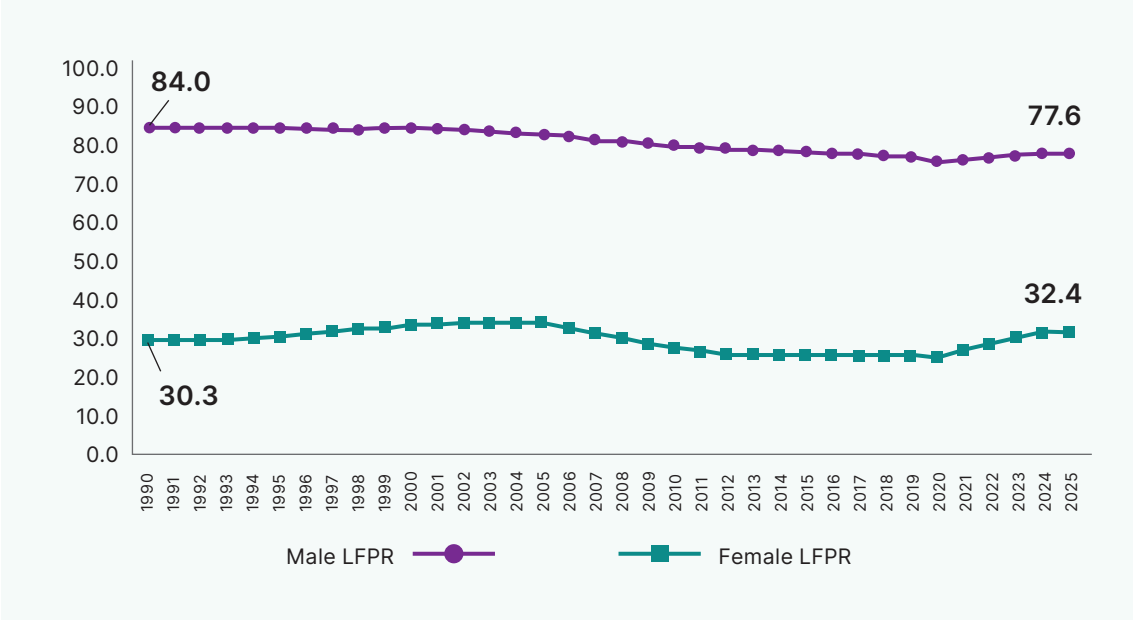
Source: Employment-Unemployment Survey under the National Sample Survey 27th Round. The data pertains to October 1972-September 1973.
Please note the population base here is age 5+, not the conventional 15+ working-age base.

Over the last three decades, a similar trajectory continues, raising fundamental questions about the distributional character of the country's growth. Male LFPR stood at around 84 per cent in 1990 and has since declined gradually to approximately 77.6% in 2025, largely reflecting increased participation in education and training among youth. Female LFPR, by contrast, stood at 30.3% in 1990 but rose consistently until 2005 reaching a peak in 2005 (see Figure 1). However, India's FLFPR fell sharply over the following one-and a half decades to a trough of around 25.1% in 2021, before recovering again to 32.4% in 2025 (World Development Indicators).[9] It was estimated

[9] The data in Figure 1 is based on the historical timeseries provided by the World Bank using ILO modelled estimates, which might differ from national estimates that are provided by the Government of India. In our case, the rest of the report uses the PLFS data, which differs in its trends slightly from the ILO estimates.

that 20 million women exited the workforce between 2004-05 and 2011-12, largely due to a withdrawal of rural females from the agricultural labour force. India's experience of a sustained decline in FLFPR during the period of its fastest aggregate GDP growth of over 8 per cent and rapid economic expansion was an analytical puzzle, as such a high and sustained rate of growth was expected to create new job opportunities and reduce poverty. The decline in FLFPR was largely attributed to supply factors such as educational attainment, socioeconomic status, increased household incomes, and insufficient job opportunities for women, stemming from factors such as social status and occupational segregation.[10]

Figure 1: Male and Female Labour Force Participation Rate (1990-2025)



Source: World Development Indicators, World Bank

[10] For details see World Bank Group (2017) and ILO (2014).
https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/559511491319990632/pdf/WPS8024.pdf (last accessed August 25, 2026)
https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@inst/documents/publication/wcms_250977.pdf (last accessed August 25, 2026)

3.
Women in the Workforce: Current Participation and its Composition

Since around 2015, India has increased its focus towards a "women-led development" agenda, under which a broad range of policy and institutional reforms were introduced to strengthen women's economic participation, spanning education equity, access to finance, skills, social protection, care and labour-market opportunities. Schemes like the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (2015) and Stand-Up India (2016) aimed to expand access to credit and entrepreneurship opportunities for women, while initiatives such as Skill India were targeted at improving women's access to market-relevant skills. To address women's disproportionate care responsibilities, the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017, increased paid maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks and introduced the mandatory provision of crèche facilities in workplaces. The subsequent labour code reforms of 2019-20 sought to strengthen gender equality in wages and recruitment, expand women's access to occupations and working hours subject to safety provisions, and extend social security coverage. Complementary programmes such as the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), the National Crèche Scheme/Palna and working women's hostels sought to ease financial, care and household constraints on women's participation in economic activity. Female bank account ownership surged to nearly 90 per cent, largely due to the government's financial inclusion drive under the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana. Taken together, educational parity and a decade of women-focused policies created conditions under which one would expect a marked and durable improvement in women's economic participation, an expectation the participation data of the following period allow us to test.

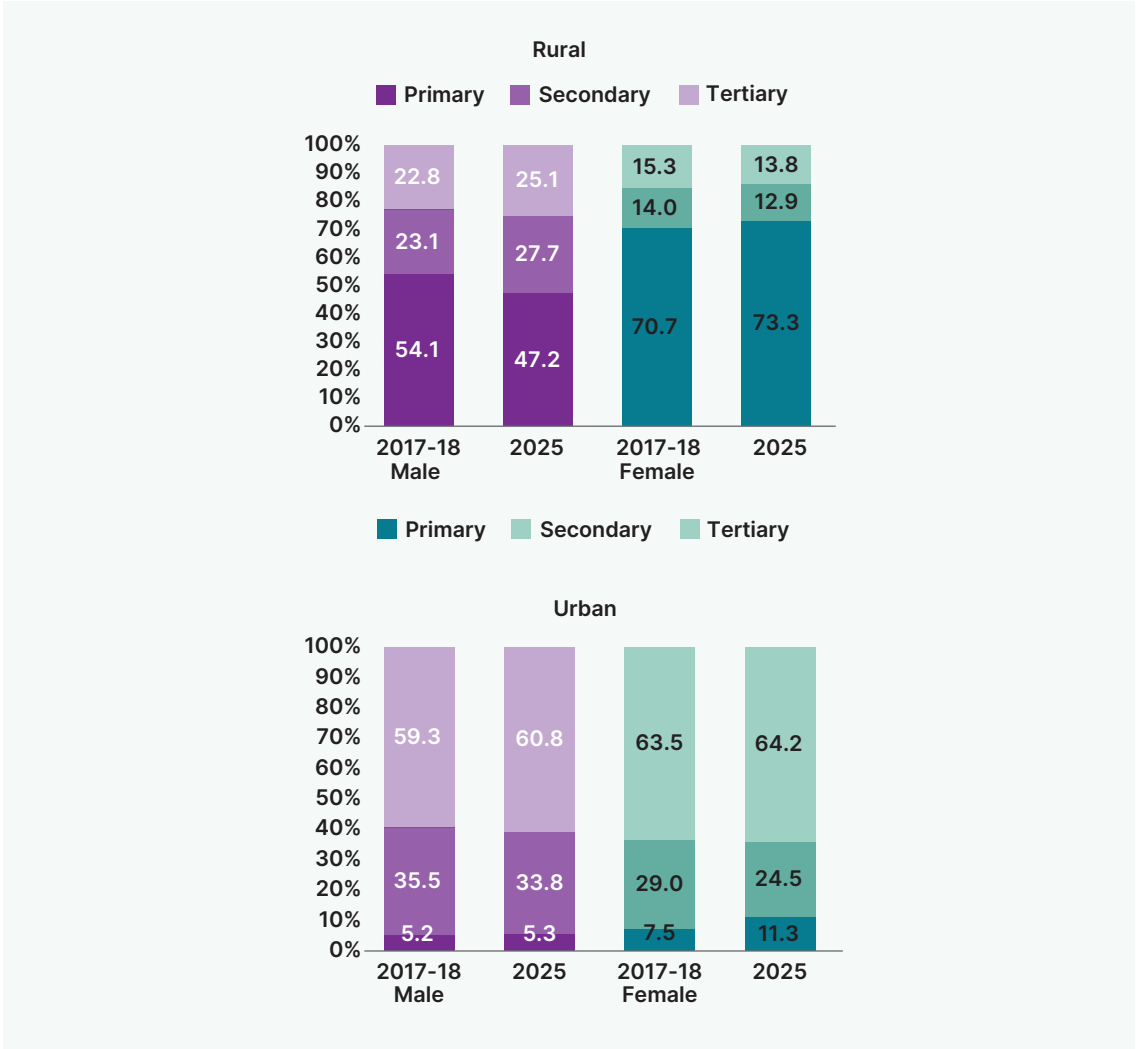
The period between 2017-18 and 2025 witnessed a marked expansion in workforce participation across India, though the nature of this expansion differed sharply across gender and geographies. Female workforce participation doubled during the period, rising from 104 million in 2017-18 to 201 million in 2025. In percentage terms, female worker population ratios (WPRs) rose from 22% in 2017-18 to 38% in 2025. This headline expansion, however, has to be read with caveats. While female WPR in rural areas rose sharply between 2017-18 and 2025 from 23.7% to 44.9 per cent, it only increased from 18.2% to 25.9% in urban areas.

Several theories have been advanced to explain this growth led by women's participation in the rural workforce. One strand sees it as distress-driven, with flat real wages, shorter working hours, and the growth of unpaid and subsidiary-status work, suggesting women have taken up low-productivity work to support household incomes rather than because better jobs opened up (Singh and Ankita, 2025; Thakur and Chaudhary, 2025; Ghatak et al., 2026; Baruah and Ankita, 2026; Motkuri, 2026). The other reads the same trends as

opportunity-led, crediting men leaving agriculture, the growth of labour-intensive allied activities, better rural infrastructure and digital access, and schemes such as DAY-NRLM and MGNREGS (Economic Survey, 2023-24; Sinha, 2025; Goldar and Aggarwal, 2026). Additionally, a deeper dive into micro level trends reveals a multitude of paradoxes within the growth in participation.

At the level of broad sectoral aggregates, the data reveal a structural divergence between male and female employment trajectories. In rural areas, men shifted away from the primary sector over this period, with their share in agricultural employment declining from 54.1% to 47.2%, while their shares in both secondary and tertiary activities rose correspondingly. However, women in rural areas moved in precisely the opposite direction, as their already high concentration in the primary sector intensified, rising from 70.7% to 73.3%, even as their shares in secondary and tertiary activities fell from 14 per cent to 12.9% and from 15.3% to 13.8% respectively (Figure 2). These trends are an indication that agriculture has become increasingly feminised over the years.

Figure 2: Sectoral Composition of Employment in Rural and Urban India by Gender



Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025

Urban areas exhibit similarly concerning dynamics. Men's sectoral distribution remained relatively constant, with slight indication of a slow but steady move from secondary employment towards tertiary activities. Women's employment in the secondary sector fell more significantly, but was only absorbed minimally by the tertiary sector. However, a troubling compositional shift was observed towards the primary sector, as the share of urban women employed in agriculture rose from 7.5% to 11.3%, indicating that the phenomenon of agricultural absorption has not been confined to rural areas.

The same story of expansion without upgrading emerges when employment is disaggregated by status. **The growth in women's participation has been concentrated in own-account and unpaid family work rather than in regular salaried employment, pointing to a rise in quantity without a matching gain in job quality.** In rural areas, women working as own-account workers rose from 13.9 million to 56.0 million between 2017-18 and 2025, doubling their share from 18.6 to 37.2%. Unpaid family work grew in absolute terms too, from 28.8 million to 49.3 million, but because own-account work expanded even faster, its share fell from 38.6 to 32.8%, a decline that reflects faster growth elsewhere rather than any real contraction. The same holds for casual wage labour, whose falling share (29.2 to 17.8%) likewise masks an absolute increase. Regular salaried employment, by contrast, expanded only modestly, from 7.9 million to 13.9 million, its share slipping from 10.5 to 9.3%. Urban women followed a similar pattern: own-account work grew from 6.9 million to 13.8 million (22.9 to 27.3%) and unpaid family work from 3.3 million to 6.0 million, while the share of regular salaried work edged down from 52.2 to 50.9%, indicating a relatively slower growth compared to the other employment categories (see Table 2). The additional women drawn into the workforce, therefore, have entered predominantly through self-employment and unpaid family labour, the most insecure and lowest-paid categories, rather than through formal, regular salaried jobs that would signal genuine improvement in the terms of women's work.

Table 2: Distribution of Employment in Rural and Urban India by Status Code, Gender (2017-18 Vs 2025)

Employment shares (in %)	Urban				Rural			
	2017-18		2025		2017-18		2025	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Own Account Worker	31.4	22.9	29.1	27.3	46.2	18.6	42.2	37.2
Self-employed Employer	3.6	0.8	6.8	1.3	1.9	0.5	4.1	0.7
Unpaid Family Worker	4.3	11.0	4.5	11.8	9.7	38.6	11.0	32.8
Regular Salaried Workers	45.7	52.2	46.5	50.9	14.0	10.5	17.0	9.3
Casual Wage Labour: Public Works	0.2	0.8	0.1	0.8	0.6	2.6	0.3	2.2
Casual Wage Labour: Other	14.9	12.3	13.0	7.9	27.6	29.2	25.3	17.8

Source: Authors' calculations using PLFS 2017-18 and PLFS 2025

Disaggregating to the industry level reveals the full extent of this compositional deterioration. In rural areas, the top ten industries captured in Table 3 account for more than 90 per cent of female employment, and the dominant feature is an overwhelming concentration in the agriculture sector, namely crop and animal production. The absolute numbers involved are striking: women engaged in this sector more than doubled in the period, rising from 54 million to over 100 million.[11] Therefore, the fact that the share of female employment remained broadly stable at around 72 to 73 per cent masks the reality that, in absolute terms, the growth in participation of the rural female workforce has been almost entirely absorbed by agriculture rather than distributed across more productive activities.

Table 3: Top 10 Industries employing rural women (2017-18 vs 2025).

Industry (Rural)	Examples	Activity Type	2017-18	2025
Crop and animal production, hunting and related service activities	Growing crops, fruits and vegetables; post-harvest crop activities; raising and breeding cattle	Agriculture	73.0%	72.2%
Retail trade	Sale of goods, food, beverages, etc through stores	Services	2.9%	3.8%
Education	-	Services	5.1%	3.2%
Construction of buildings	Construction of buildings: own account and contract basis; activities of repair and maintenance	Services	2.5%	3.1%
Manufacture of wearing apparel	Manufacture of all types of garments and clothing accessories	Manufacturing	2.1%	3.0%
Civil engineering	Construction of roads, railways and utility projects	Services	2.8%	1.8%
Manufacture of tobacco products	Manufacture of bidi, cigarette, zarda, paan masala and related products	Manufacturing	2.5%	1.7%
Manufacture of textiles	Spinning, weaving, finishing of textiles like carpets, rug, crochet, made-up textile except apparel	Manufacturing	1.4%	1.3%
Human health activities	Hospital, medical and dental, nursing services, etc.	Services	0.9%	1.0%
Food and beverage service activities	Restaurants and catering, etc.	Services	0.9%	0.8%

Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025

[11] These are census adjusted numbers

Beyond agriculture, the distribution of rural female employment across manufacturing and services reveals a pattern inconsistent with the sectoral upgrading that the structural transformation theory would predict. Manufacturing accounts for a modest share of rural female employment, and within it, the dominant activities are wearing apparel, tobacco products, and textiles – all labour-intensive, low-productivity activities with a large concentration of micro and small enterprises. Similarly, the share of women employed in retail trade (2.9% to 3.8%) and construction of buildings (2.5% to 3.1%) increased but these sectors are again characterised by the dominance of small and own account enterprises, a high degree of informality and limited productivity. Another concerning trend is the drop of about two percentage points in women's participation in education services, which is particularly significant given education's association with formal employment conditions and returns to human capital. Human health activities, another sector with relatively higher skill requirements, remained negligible and broadly unchanged at under one per cent. The net effect is that the non-agricultural employment of rural women has shifted not towards the higher-productivity end of the services or manufacturing spectrum, but towards its more informal and lower-productivity segments, a pattern that runs counter to the expectations of structural transformation.

Table 4: Top 10 Industries employing urban women (2017-18 Vs 2025)

Industry (Urban)[12]	Examples	Sector	2017-18	2025
Crop and animal production, hunting and related service activities	Growing crops, fruits and vegetables; post-harvest crop activities; raising and breeding cattle	Agriculture	8.9%	12.5%
Education	-	Services	15.1%	12.1%
Retail trade	Sale of goods, food, beverages, etc through stores	Services	8.8%	10.9%
Activities of households as employers of domestic personnel	Activities of private households as employers of domestic personnel such as maids, cooks, waiters etc.	Services	9.6%	9.5%
Manufacture of wearing apparel	Manufacture of all types of garments and clothing accessories	Manufacturing	7.9%	9.0%
Human health activities	Hospital, medical and dental, nursing services, etc.	Services	5.1%	5.0%
Other personal service activities	Washing, dry-cleaning, hair and beauty treatment, pet care activities, etc	Services	4.7%	4.2%
Manufacture of textiles	Spinning, weaving, finishing of textiles like carpets, rug, crochet, made-up textile except apparel	Manufacturing	5.5%	3.2%
Computer programming, consultancy and related activities	Web designing, software and hardware support activities, installing computer systems, etc	Services	1.4%	3.1%
Publishing activities	Books, periodicals and other publishing activities; software publishing	Services	2.5%	3.1%

Source: Author's calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025

[12] As per industrial classification under PLFS

Women's employment in urban areas exhibit greater heterogeneity, reflecting the diversity of the urban labour market. The industries in Table 4 collectively account for approximately three-quarters of urban female employment, and several trends are worth noting. The increase in agricultural employment from 2.6 million in 2017-18 to 6.3 million in 2025 is the most significant structural shift in urban female employment, making the agriculture sector the largest employer for women in urban areas also. The prominence of what is traditionally considered a rural activity within the urban industrial profile suggests that the sectoral distinctions assumed in conventional structural transformation theory, where agriculture is viewed as a predominantly rural activity and urban employment is expected to be concentrated in manufacturing and services, do not adequately capture the employment realities of women in India.

Urban women in manufacturing employment are again concentrated in labour-intensive sectors dominated by own-account or micro and small enterprises. In 2025, manufacturing of wearing apparel accounted for 9 per cent and textiles accounted for 3.2% of urban female employment, indicating that urban women remain concentrated at the lower-productivity end of the industrial spectrum. The directional shifts within manufacturing reinforce this characterisation as wearing apparel has gained share modestly from 7.9%, while textiles have contracted from 5.5%, leaving the sector more narrowly concentrated around a single labour-intensive activity. This mirrors the rural pattern, where wearing apparel is similarly the gaining manufacturing activity. This also suggests that the modest growth in female manufacturing employment is being absorbed almost entirely by garment production rather than by a broader diversification into higher-value manufacturing.

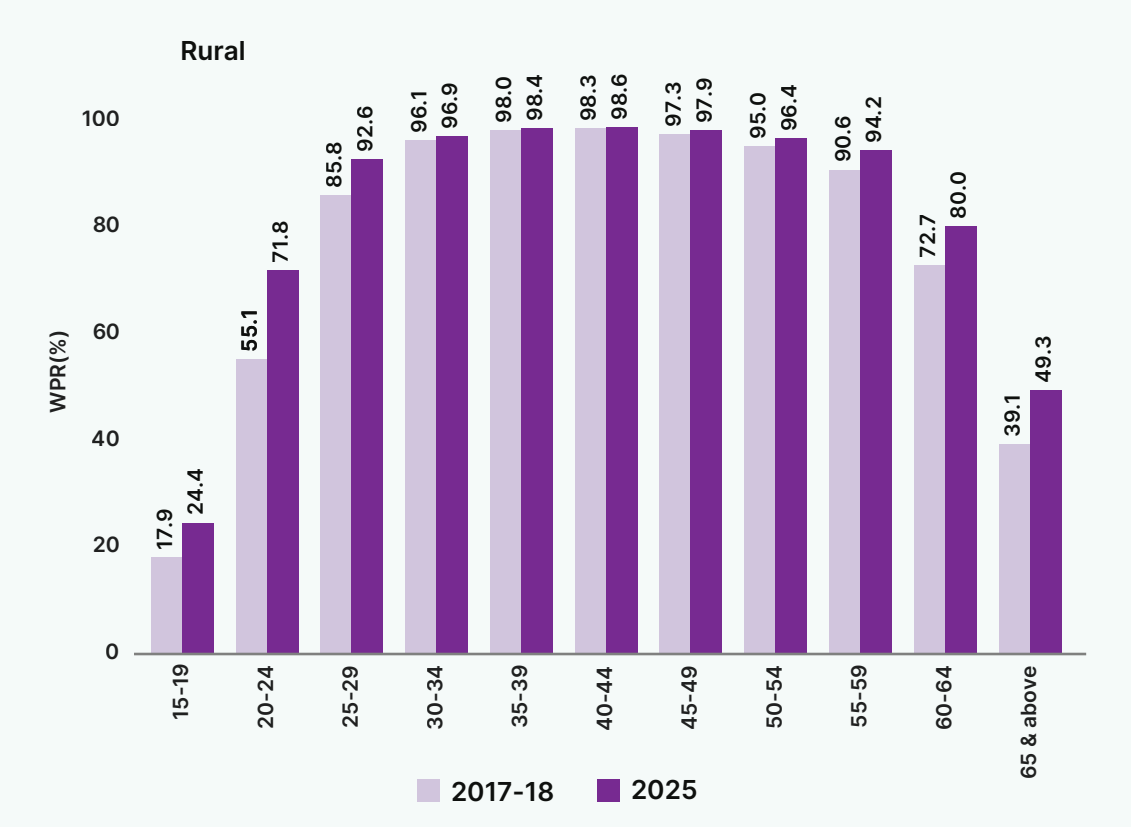
Service industries employed more than half the urban women in 2025 and the employment trends are more diversified than in the case of agriculture or manufacturing. Education is the single largest services employer of women at 12.1%. This is followed by retail trade and domestic work, which together absorb over a fifth of urban female employment. The prominence of domestic work and other personal services such as beauty treatment and dry-cleaning is structurally significant in urban areas as these are activities generally defined by informality, limited regulation and low returns to education or skill. Their centrality in the employment distribution points to the limits of urban services in offering productive employment for women. Human health, while meaningfully larger in urban than rural areas, remains modest given the sector's formal conditions and skill requirements. Computer programming stands apart as the one activity unambiguously located at the higher-productivity, skill-intensive end of the services spectrum. The directional movements qualify this snapshot in important ways. Education has contracted by 3 percentage points since 2017-18, a sharper fall than in rural areas, while human health has remained essentially flat and other personal services have marginally declined, together indicating stagnation in formal and semi-formal services for women. The sectors gaining ground are retail trade, computer programming and publishing; the gains in the latter two are notable as they represent movement into higher-productivity activities, but their shares remain too small to materially alter the composition of urban female services employment, which continues to be anchored by education, retail and domestic work.

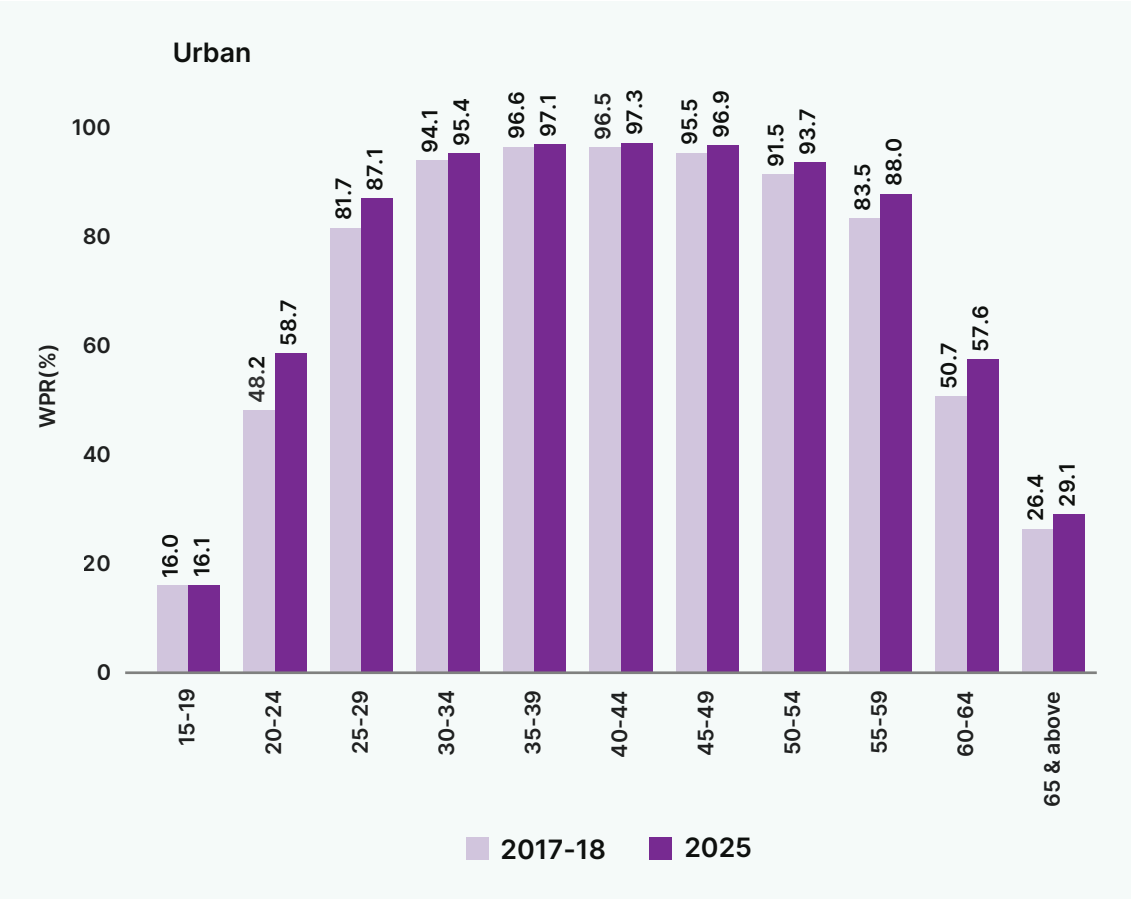
4.
Female Work Force Participation by Age, Marital Status, and Education

There is a large and systematic variation in employment trends across demographic subgroups. Understanding this variation is important both because it identifies supply-side constraints, if any, on women's participation and because it clarifies which groups of women are driving the observed aggregate trends.

Age. **In 2025, the age-wise distribution of workforce participation for men and women reveals that across all age groups, men have a higher participation rate, compared to women.** Male participation climbs steeply from the teens to a plateau of 96-99 per cent across the entire prime span (30-54), with rural and urban men tracking each other closely throughout. The rural-urban divide for men opens up only at the exit end, where rural men keep working into old age (80 per cent at 60-64, 49 per cent at 65+) while urban men retire (58 per cent and 29 per cent respectively), a difference plausibly rooted in higher dependence on the agriculture sector in the rural India and the lack of a fixed retirement age in the sector (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: Workforce Participation Rate for Men across Different Age Brackets





Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025

Compared to men, women's workforce participation never approaches this saturation, and its shape itself signals a different underlying logic. The level of workforce participation peaks later in age, at 45-49 years, where men's participation levels off, rather than in the twenties. This is consistent with the general narrative that women tend to exit the job market either after marriage or more often after childbirth, re-entering the workforce after childbearing. However, the general level of participation varies across urban and rural women. Rural women exceed urban women in every single age group, and the gender gap is consequently not a constant offset, but also a story of setting. That the urban gender gap is nearly double the rural one is the more analytically interesting finding and fits India's experience with economic structures. It suggests that it is the labour requirements of agriculture and household enterprises that pulls rural women into 'measured work', which may or may not be paid in nature. These opportunities are largely absent in urban settings, where women's relationship to paid work looks closer to exclusion.

Figure 4: Workforce Participation Rate for Women across Different Age Brackets



Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025

The direction of change between 2017-18 and 2025 deepens this asymmetry rather than resolves it. Male participation, already close to its structural ceiling in 2017-18, had little room to move, and the gains that did occur were concentrated at the edges of working life with more rural men entering the workforce between the ages of 15 to 29 (55 per cent to 72 per cent at 20 to25) and more rural men staying in it beyond the age of 60 (73 per cent to 80 per cent at 60-64), rather than any meaningful shift in the prime age plateau itself (See Figure 3).

Female participation shows real movement over the years, but of a very specific kind, where gains are large and concentrated overwhelmingly among rural women. In prime and mid-age brackets, the WPRs for rural women rose by over 30 per cent in some cases, effectively reconstituting the rural female employment curve into something resembling a genuine plateau closer to the male WPR. Urban women, by contrast, moved only modestly across the same ages, typically by 8 to 13 points (See Figure 4). This divergence is the crux of the underlying paradox – an aggregate rise in female WPR that, on inspection, reads as an almost entirely rural phenomenon. A surge of this scale concentrated in rural India, over a period in which urban, services-led growth has been the dominant engine of GDP growth, is difficult to read as women being pulled into work by improving opportunity; it is more consistent with rural female labour being drawn in by necessity, whether agricultural or household enterprise-linked. The corollary matters structurally too – because rural women's participation rose so sharply while urban women's barely moved, the rural-urban divide among women has widened even as the rural gender gap has narrowed, meaning the aggregate numbers conceal two quite different stories moving in opposite directions.

Marital Status. **Marriage functions as a significant constraint on women's labour market participation.** The 2025 data reveals a persistent gender divide across all marital status groups. Men have higher workforce participation than women, irrespective of marital status, but the gap is widest among those who are currently married. Over 87 per cent of married men participate in the workforce, compared with just 37.3% of married women – a gap of over 50 percentage points. Gender gaps are also evident among the divorced (84.2% for men versus 58.6% for women), the widowed (47.7% versus 30.3%), and the never-married (46.2% versus 15.8%). Marriage, therefore, appears to strengthen men's attachment to the labour market while coinciding with a sharp decline in women's economic participation. Marriage coincides with the strongest male participation but with comparatively weak female participation (See Figure 5).

Figure 5: Workforce Participation Rate by Marital Status and Gender



Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025

The direction of change since 2017-18, however, has been one of gradual convergence. WPR rose for every gender and marital status combination, but the gains were overwhelmingly female. The largest shift was among currently married women, whose WPR rose from 20.9% to 37.3% (+16.4 pp), while married men edged up only marginally from 85.7% to 87.6%. As a result, the gender gap among married individuals narrowed substantially from 64.8 to 50.3 percentage points. Similar, though smaller, gains were recorded among never-married women (9.3% to 15.8%) and widowed women (23% to 30.3%), while men's participation also increased across most marital groups from already high levels. Overall, the data point to a structural rise in female workforce participation. Marriage continues to depress women's workforce participation relative to men's, but it now exerts a markedly weaker drag than it did seven years earlier. This suggests that fewer women may be leaving the labour market after marriage and more are entering or remaining in paid work.

Education. **In 2025, the relationship between education and employment is distinctly U-shaped for both men and women, although men have higher participation rates at every education level.** Among men, participation peaks for those with the lowest level of education, which is primary education (85.1%), below-primary (82.6%) and those literate without formal schooling (81.4%). It is also high among the most qualified, including postgraduates (80.4%) and diploma-holders (79.2%). Participation is lowest at the secondary and higher-secondary levels, reflecting, in part, continued enrolment in education among younger cohorts. Participation among women is highest among below-primary (45.3%) and diploma-holders (42.4%), followed by the not-literate (39.8%) and postgraduates (39.3%), and lowest among those with higher-secondary (19.8%) and secondary (22%). Therefore, the gender gap persists across the educational spectrum, but is narrower among the more highly educated and wider at the primary and middle levels of schooling.



Figure 6: Male and Female Workforce Participation Rate by Education Level (2017-18 and 2025)



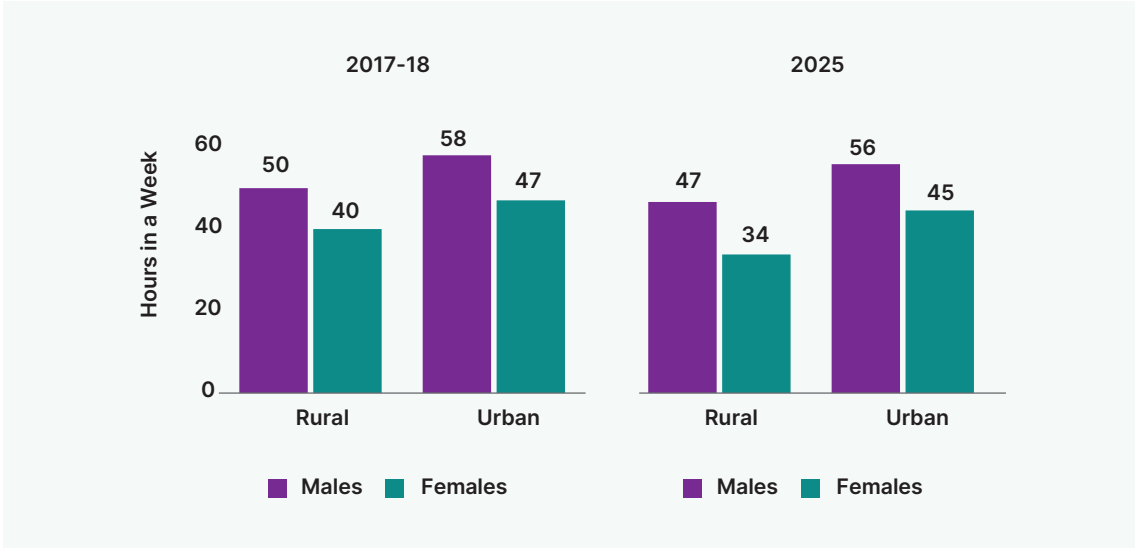
Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025

The direction of change in the educated workforce since 2017-18 reinforces the broader trend of gender convergence and is once again led by women. Female WPR rose at virtually every education level, with the largest gains concentrated among the least educated. Women with below primary education (+19.9pp), literate without formal schooling (+20.1pp), primary education (+18.1pp) and not-literate (+16.4pp) saw large increases in participation. In contrast, the gains were far more modest among graduates (+7.2pp) and postgraduates (+5.5pp). Men's changes were generally smaller and more evenly distributed, with the largest increases among diploma holders (+15.5 percentage points) and those with higher-secondary education (+10.1 percentage points). Overall, it is evident that the recent rise in women's workforce participation has been driven disproportionately by those with lower levels of education, suggesting that much of the increase has occurred in less skilled, predominantly rural and informal employment, rather than through a broad-based expansion of skilled or formal employment opportunities. This could be a reflection of rising rural/agricultural or distress-driven work.

5.
The Intensity of Female Work: Hours Worked

The aggregate working hours data establish consistent gender gap patterns across every dimension examined. On average, men work more hours per week than women, and urban workers, irrespective of gender, work more than their rural counterparts, reflecting the more structured nature of urban employment. However, the rural-urban divide is more pronounced among women than among men. In 2025, rural women worked about 13 hours less than rural men, compared with an urban gender gap of around 11 hours. In proportional terms, the rural gender gap is wider as women work about 27 per cent fewer hours than men, compared with about 20 per cent fewer in urban areas. Urban women also work nearly 11 more hours per week than rural women, compared to urban men who work 9 hours per week more than rural men. These trends suggest that women who do access urban employment tend to work more intensively, consistent with the earlier observed concentration of urban female workers in formal, scheduled employment rather than the part-time, seasonal or household-enterprise work that characterises much of rural female participation.

Figure 7: Average Working Hours for Men and Women in a Week



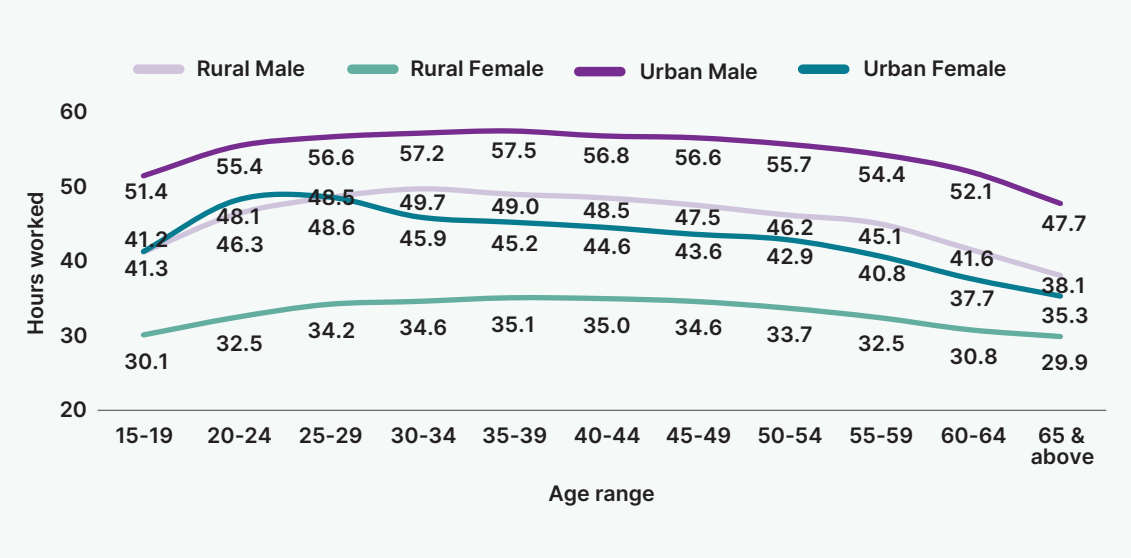
Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025.
Note: The average total hours worked in a week are calculated for activity 1 as per Current Weekly Status (CWS) in PLFS.

Over time, there has been a decline in average working hours, which has been the sharpest for women. Between 2017-18 and 2025, average weekly hours worked by the overall workforce fell. The decline was steepest for rural women whose working hours fell by a little over 6 hours, against a decline of 4 hours for rural men and roughly 2

hours for both male and female urban workers. Juxtaposing this decline in rural women's working hours with the sharp rise in their workforce participation between 2017-18 and 2025 indicates that much of the increase in participation has been accompanied by lower work intensity. Taken together, these two trends suggest that the rural female workforce participation surge has been driven largely by greater engagement in marginal and low-intensity activities and is most likely driven by necessity rather than improving opportunities. The hours worked data, therefore, is more granular and provide an important complement to participation rates, offering a more nuanced picture of the nature and quality of women's employment.

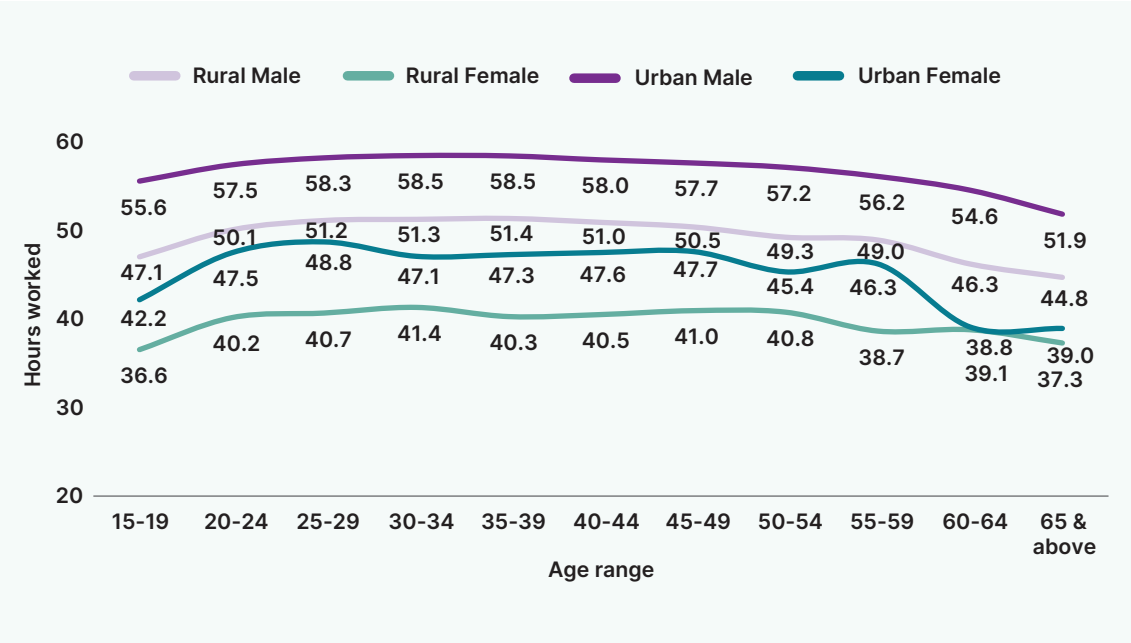
The age-wise distribution of working hours reveals the life-cycle mechanics behind the aggregate gender gaps across rural and urban areas. In rural India, women's weekly working hours in 2025 remain relatively low and broadly stable across most of their working lives, averaging around 30-35 hours per week through the prime working-age years, before declining after age 55. There is no pronounced peak and no life-cycle plateau. Compared to this, men's working hours predictably rise in their late twenties, peaking around the prime working age and declining after 55 years of age. In urban India, women's hours peak in the early twenties and decline through the thirties and forties before recovering modestly in later ages. This pattern is consistent with the life-cycle effects of marriage and childbearing, when many women reduce their working hours or exit the labour market, with limited re-entry thereafter. Rural women, by contrast, display a much flatter and consistently lower hours profile across age groups, suggesting that their employment is shaped less by career progression and more by the residual and supplementary nature of the work itself. The same broad pattern was evident in 2017-18, although women in both rural and urban areas worked longer hours across all age groups than they did in 2025.

Figure 8: Average Weekly Working Hours across Age Groups in 2025



Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025
Note: The average total hours worked in a week are calculated for activity 1 as per Current Weekly Status (CWS) in PLFS.

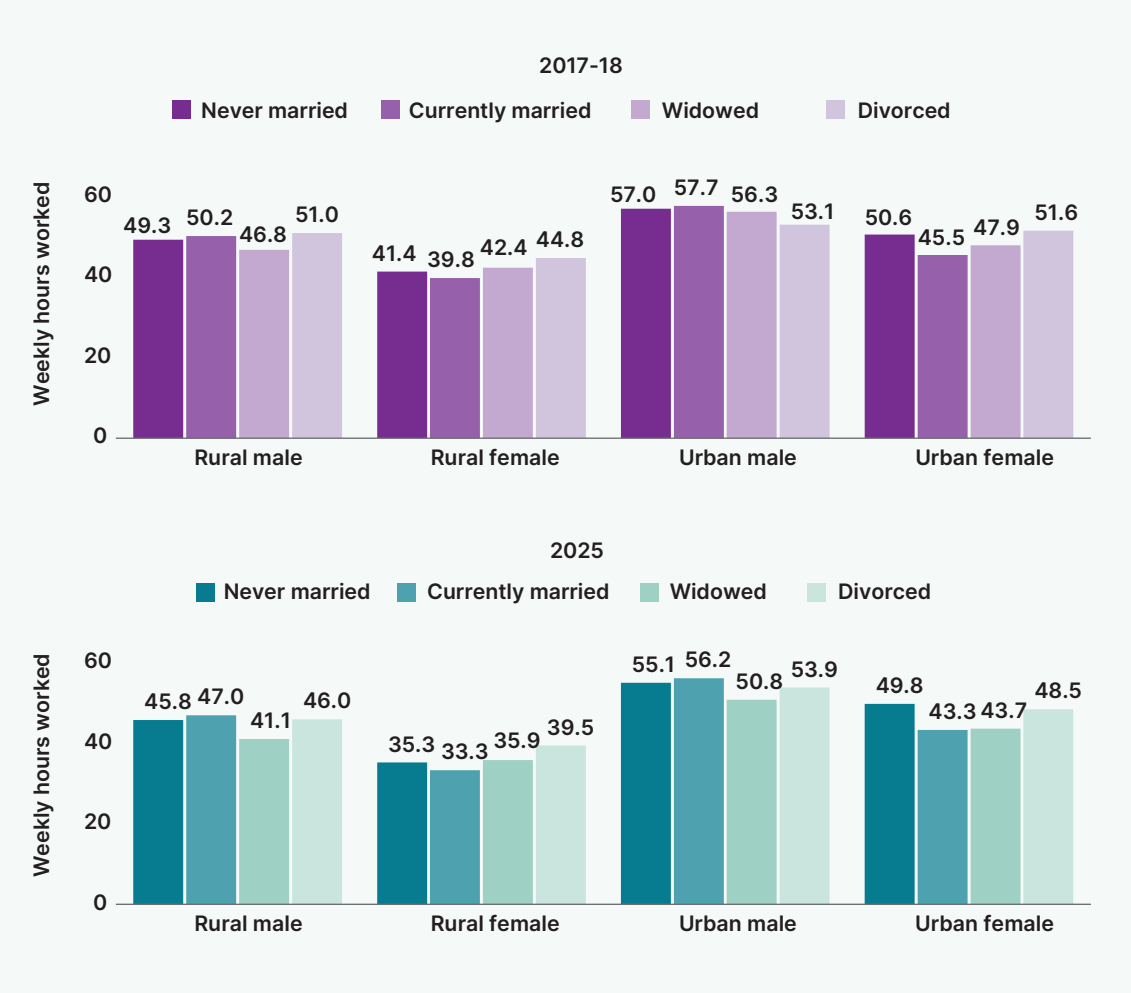
Figure 9: Average Weekly Working Hours across Age Groups in 2017-18



Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025
Note: The average total hours worked in a week are calculated for activity 1 as per Current Weekly Status (CWS) in PLFS.

A similar pattern is observed when working hours are examined by marital status. For men, marriage makes little difference to working hours, which remain clustered within a narrow band across marital groups in both rural and urban settings, with married men working the longest hours. For women, by contrast, marriage is associated with markedly lower work intensity. Currently married women work the fewest hours of any female group, in both rural and urban areas, consistent with the additional unpaid domestic and care burden associated with marriage. Divorced women generally work the longest hours, likely reflecting economic necessity, while never-married women also work relatively long hours, particularly in urban areas. In urban areas, never married women work substantially more hours than any other group, indicating the marriage and motherhood penalty women pay due to lack of enabling ecosystem. Urban widowed women work the fewest hours among unmarried women, their hours fell substantially between 2017-18 and 2025. Taken together, these patterns suggest that women's work intensity is shaped not only by labour market conditions but also by the gendered division of unpaid work within marriage.

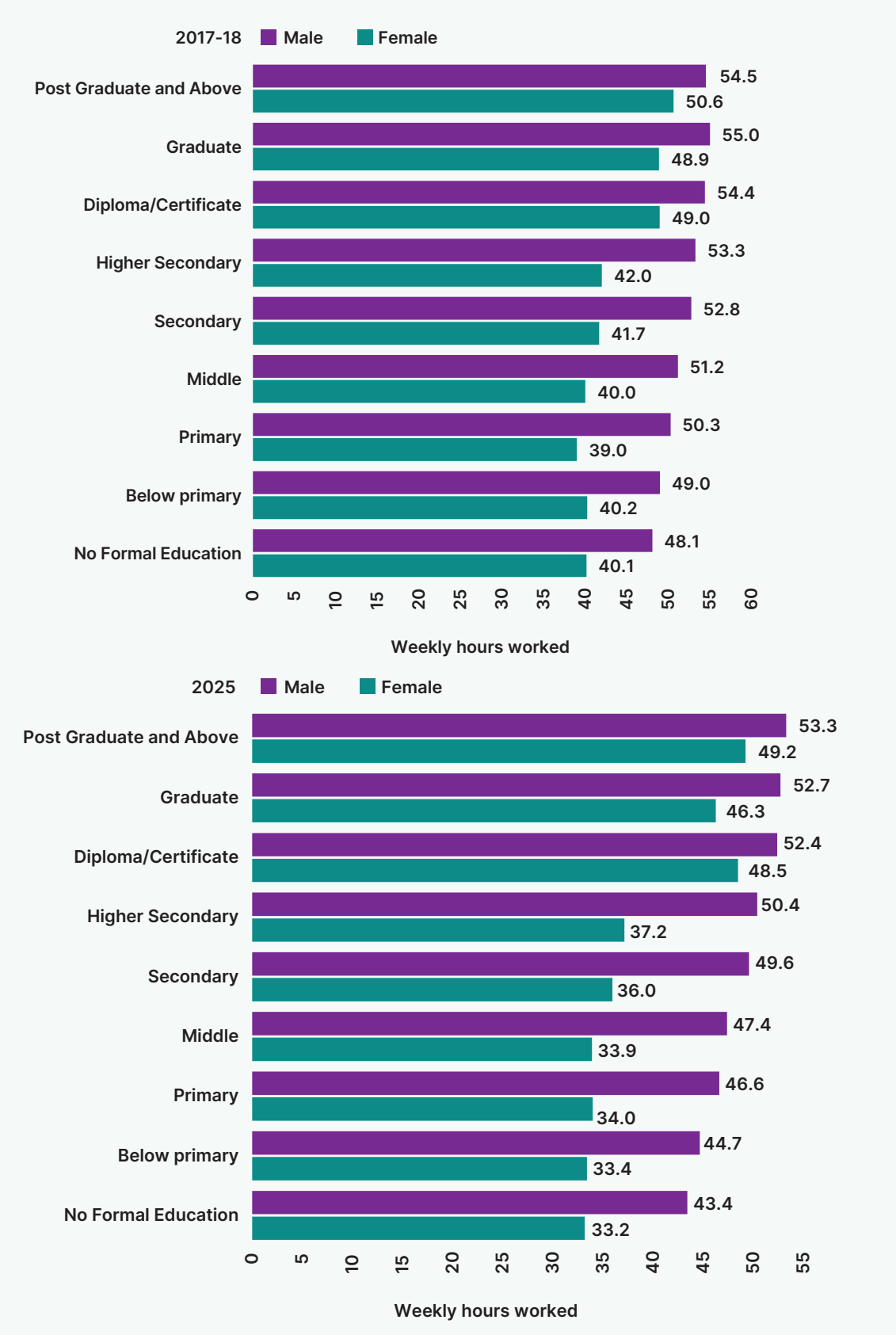
Figure10: Average Weekly Hours Worked by Marital Status for Men and Women in 2017-18 and 2025



Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025
Note: The average total hours worked in a week are calculated for activity 1 as per Current Weekly Status (CWS) in PLFS.

Education is the one dimension along which the gender gap in working hours narrows meaningfully, though only at the highest levels of educational attainment. For men, the higher their education level, the higher the average working hours. But for women, the pattern is variable. Women's working hours remain low and largely flat if they have no formal education up to the level of higher secondary education, but jump sharply at higher levels of education where they approach parity with men. This inflection is important as it again reflects that the gender gap in hours is not primarily a labour market problem, but a structural segmentation problem. Higher education enables women to access employment that is formal in nature, salaried and full-time, where working hours are institutionally determined and more standardised rather than constrained by the need to balance paid work with unpaid domestic responsibilities.

Figure 11: Average Weekly Hours Worked for Men and Women by Educational Qualification in 2017-18 and 2025



Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025
Note: The average total hours worked in a week are calculated for activity 1 as per Current Weekly Status (CWS) in PLFS.

Industry-level patterns reinforce the structural segmentation of women's employment. The top 10 industries that employ the largest numbers of women exhibit pronounced gender gaps in working hours, reflecting differences in the nature and quality of work (see Tables 5 & 6). Agriculture, the largest employer of rural women, records a relatively moderate gender gap of about 10 hours per week in 2025, in both rural and urban settings, largely because average working hours in agriculture are low for both men and women. The more instructive comparison is in manufacturing. Textiles and wearing apparel, the two major employers of women in both rural and urban India, show among the widest gender gaps at 20-21 hours per week in rural areas. This reflects the overwhelming concentration of women in piece-rate, home-based or casual segments of production, as opposed to men who hold more regularised and time-intensive factory positions. The hours gap is the clearest labour market signal of this segmentation. Tobacco manufacturing tells a similar story. Together, these industrial trends illustrate that women's presence in secondary-sector employment does not, by itself, indicate meaningful structural transformation. Instead, it reflects the absorption of female labour into the lowest-intensity, most informal niches of manufacturing.

Table 5: Weekly Hours Worked by Gender in the Top Ten Industries by Female Employment in Rural India

NIC Description	2017-18			2025		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Crop and animal production, hunting and related service activities	48	39	45	41	31	37
Manufacture of tobacco products	46	37	38	48	35	36
Manufacture of textiles	54	43	50	55	34	42
Manufacture of wearing apparel	55	36	48	53	32	40
Construction of buildings (residential and non-residential buildings)	47	43	47	45	40	44
Civil engineering	47	36	43	45	31	38
Retail trade	58	48	57	56	44	53
Food and beverage service activities	57	45	54	56	43	53
Education	51	47	49	50	44	47
Human health activities	56	52	54	56	52	54

Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025
Note: The average total hours worked in a week are calculated for activity 1 as per Current Weekly Status (CWS) in PLFS.

Table 6: Weekly Hours Worked by Gender in the Top Ten Industries by Female Employment in Urban India

NIC Description	2017-18			2025		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Crop and animal production, hunting and related service activities	47	37	44	41	31	36
Manufacture of textiles	64	42	58	61	40	54
Manufacture of wearing apparel	60	39	52	59	35	46
Retail trade	61	52	60	59	48	57
Food and beverage service activities	61	49	59	58	46	56
Computer programming, consultancy and related activities	58	58	58	59	58	58
Education	52	49	50	52	48	49
Human health activities	59	55	57	58	55	56
Personal service activities	57	44	51	57	42	49
Activities of households as employers of domestic personnel	62	42	47	61	41	46

Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025
Note: The average total hours worked in a week are calculated for activity 1 as per Current Weekly Status (CWS) in PLFS.

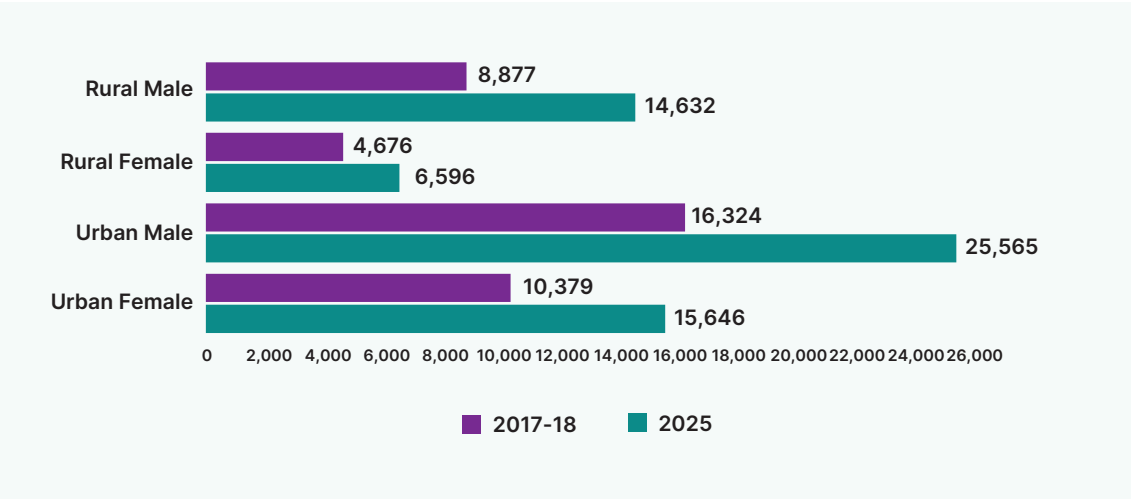
The tertiary sector presents a more varied picture. In 2025, the retail trade and food and beverage services show a moderate-to-high gender gap of 10-13 hours, consistent with women working shorter or split shifts relative to men who may hold more continuous shifts. Education and human health services, by contrast, show gaps of only 3-5 hours, confirming that proximity to formal employment norms substantially narrows the working hour differential. Computer programming and consultancy, which is largely an urban activity, shows near gender parity and signals that IT sector employment represents the sharpest break from the gendered patterns visible in rest of the economy. Domestic work, by contrast, illustrates the opposite. Women domestic workers record average working hours that are around 20 hours per week lower than men. This largely reflects the highly informal and fragmented nature of women's domestic work, which is often spread across multiple part-time jobs, whereas the relatively small number of men in the occupation are more likely to be engaged in longer-hour, full-time roles. Together, these sectors demonstrate that differences in working hours are shaped less by the industry itself than by the type and quality of jobs that women and men occupy within it.

Industry-level changes between 2017-18 and 2025 vary by sector, with the sharpest movements observed in agriculture and manufacturing of textiles, wearing apparel and tobacco. In agriculture, hours worked fell for both men and women in rural and urban areas, with the differential gap holding steady at around 10 hours. This is consistent with a sector absorbing more women workers at lower average hours, the distress-entry interpretation that the participation data already suggested. In manufacturing, specifically in the textiles, apparel, and tobacco sectors, the working hour gap widened between 2017-18 and 2025, with male hours declining modestly while female hours fell more steeply. In rural textiles, the gap moved from 11 to 21 hours; in wearing apparel from 19 to 21 hours. This is precisely the opposite of what structural transformation should look like for women, as industries that are supposed to serve as a bridge from agricultural to manufacturing employment are instead seeing women's working hours decline relative to men's, deepening rather than dissolving the informal segmentation within these sectors. If women were being incorporated into factory-based, regularised garment production as anticipated by developmental literature, their hours should be converging upward towards men's. The widening gap suggests instead that women's manufacturing employment is moving towards either informal settings or more piece-rate or own-account work. The tertiary sector offers a more differentiated picture. Education and health show largely stable, narrow gender gaps over the years. The IT sector continues to show full parity and is directionally stable.

6. Earnings and the Gender Wage Differential

While overall wages have gone up for both men and women, the increase has been larger for men. Wage data from PLFS 2017-18 and 2025 reveal that nominal earnings have risen for both men and women across rural and urban areas, but the pace and distribution of that growth have reinforced rather than narrowed existing hierarchies. Men's wages increased faster than women's in both rural and urban areas. Rural male wages rose by roughly 65 per cent against 41 per cent for rural women, while urban male wages rose by about 57 per cent against 51 per cent for urban women. The consequence is a gender wage gap that has widened over the period, and widened most sharply where it was already the largest (see Figure 12).

Figure 12: Average Monthly Wages across Gender for Rural and Urban Workforce (2017-18 and 2025)



Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025

The most acutely disadvantaged were women in the rural labour market. In 2017-18, rural women earned approximately 53 per cent of what rural men earned; by 2025, this ratio had deteriorated to around 45 per cent, implying that the average rural woman now earns less than half the average rural man's monthly wage. In absolute terms, the rural gender gap nearly doubled, from about ₹4,200 to over ₹8,000 per month. The urban gap, while smaller in relative terms, moved in the same direction. That the gap widened in both urban and rural areas during a phase of rising female workforce participation suggests that women's expanded presence in the labour market has been absorbed disproportionately into its lowest-paying segments, consistent with the sectoral concentration patterns discussed above. Rural women occupy the bottom

of the wage distribution on both margins. They earn the least, and their wages grew the slowest. Thus, increased labour force participation by women has not translated into convergence in earnings, indicating that women are entering employment on systematically inferior terms.

Table 7: Proportional Wages per hour for Men and Women in Rural and Urban India in Sectors with High Female Employment (2017-18 and 2025)

Rural India								
NIC Description	2017-18			2025			Wage Proportion (Male/ Female) (2017-18)	Wage Proportion (Male/ Female) (2025)
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total		
Crop and animal production, hunting and related service activities	38	24	36	73	42	62	1.6	1.7
Manufacture of tobacco products	23	12	13	47	23	24	1.9	2.1
Manufacture of textiles	36	22	32	62	35	47	1.6	1.8
Manufacture of wearing apparel	34	23	30	58	41	47	1.5	1.4
Construction of buildings (residential and non-residential buildings)	37	27	37	62	48	61	1.4	1.3
Civil engineering	32	21	28	76	44	59	1.5	1.7
Retail trade	38	23	36	63	43	60	1.7	1.5
Food and beverage service activities	39	23	37	64	50	62	1.7	1.3
Education	97	51	78	149	76	113	1.9	2.0
Human health activities	67	42	56	90	71	80	1.6	1.3
Overall	41	27	39	72	45	65	1.5	1.6

Urban India								
NIC Description/ Urban India	2017-18			2025			Wage Proportion (Male/ Female) (2017-18)	Wage Proportion (Male/ Female) (2025)
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total		
Crop and animal production, hunting and related service activities	51	26	46	94	46	76	2.0	2.0
Manufacture of textiles	45	21	39	75	37	64	2.1	2.0
Manufacture of wearing apparel	43	28	37	73	49	60	1.5	1.5
Retail trade	49	34	47	81	52	77	1.4	1.6
Food and beverage service activities	46	38	45	78	59	75	1.2	1.3
Computer programming, consultancy and related activities	132	107	127	219	186	210	1.2	1.2
Education	111	83	96	179	123	147	1.3	1.5
Human health activities	108	92	101	152	118	135	1.2	1.3
Personal service activities	45	29	38	70	59	64	1.6	1.2
Activities of households as employers of domestic personnel	37	25	28	56	40	45	1.5	1.4
Overall	65	51	62	106	81	100	1.3	1.3

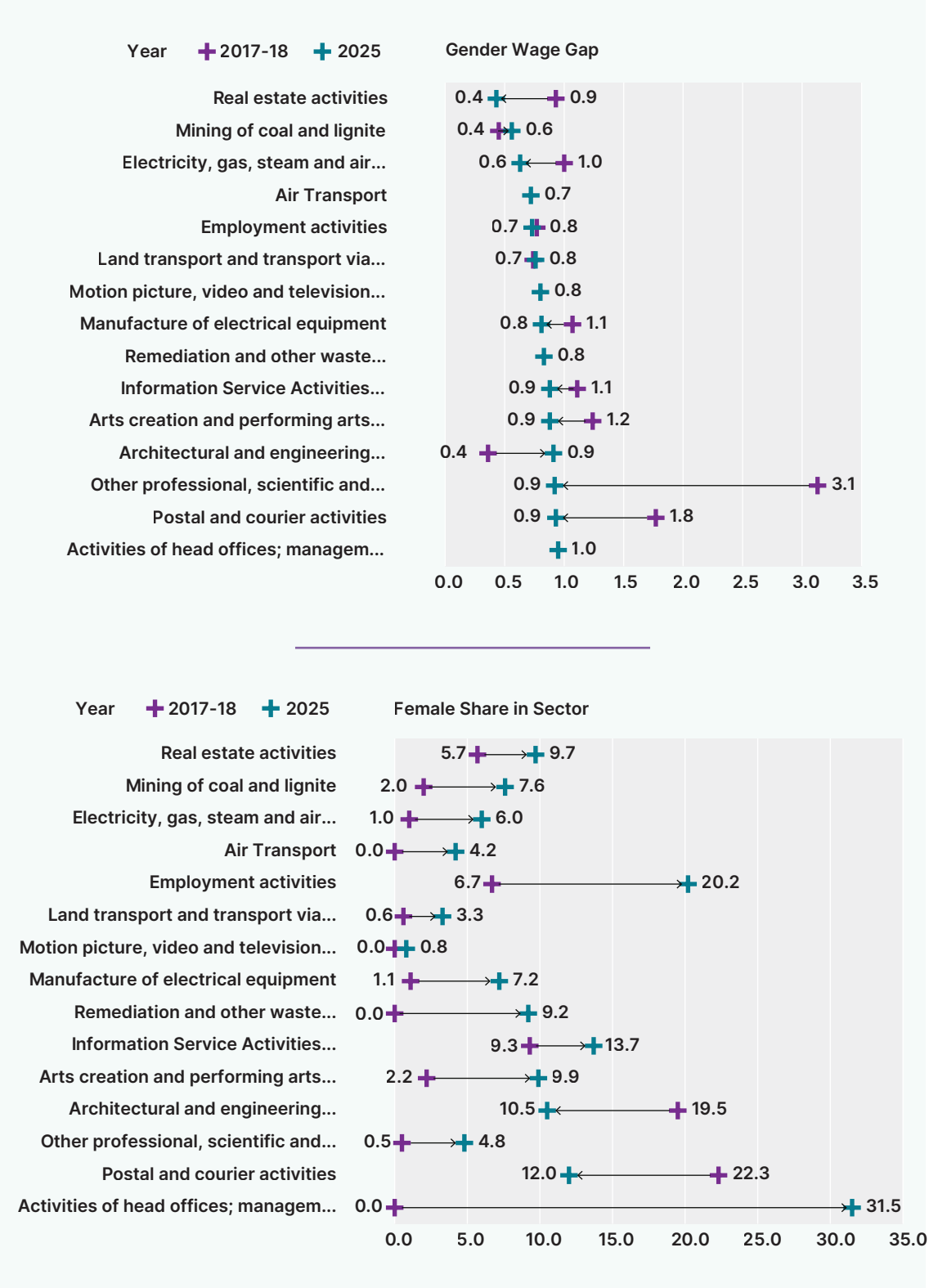
Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025. Wages per hour given above are for men and women in rural andurban areas.
Note: The sectoral wage proportion (male-to-female) provides a summary of the gender wage gap by sector. A ratio of 1.0 denotes parity; higher values indicate wider gaps. Read alongside the hours worked data for the same sectors, these ratios help disentangle whether gender differences within female-employing industries reflect fewer hours, lower rates of pay per hour, or both.

There is no observable structural pattern in the wage differential in rural India. In 2025, the widest gender wage differential among the top ten female-employing rural sectors were in tobacco manufacturing (2.1), education (2.0), textiles (1.8), and both crop production and civil engineering (1.7) (See Table 7). As these are the sectors where a majority of the women workforce is employed and they represent a spectrum of economic activities, the gender wage differential is a crucial reflection of the overall wage gap for women in the workforce. These are also the sectors where women enter in the early stages of structural transformation. The wide gap in rural education is more surprising, given that education is typically a formal, salaried sector where wage norms are institutionally set. The most plausible explanation is a wage premium commanded by men, or perhaps the type of position, including separating regular teachers from contract, para-teacher and Anganwadi-type positions, where women are disproportionately concentrated. Directionally, the picture between 2017-18 and 2025 is mixed but tilts toward divergence in the sectors most associated with structural transformation and the pattern parallels the hours worked findings closely. The manufacturing sector, central to the classical development ladder, show widening gender gaps in both hours and pay, while some industries in the tertiary sector show modest convergence, though from already narrow bases.

Urban sectoral wage gaps in 2025 display sharper polarisation than rural ones, with directional changes since 2017-18 that diverge from the rural pattern in several sectors. The widest gender wage gaps among the top ten female-employing urban sectors was in agriculture, textiles, retail trade, wearing apparel and education. Compared to this, wages were close to parity in computer programming, personal services, health, and food and beverage services. Directionally, urban patterns diverge from rural ones in several important respects. While some of the key services sectors saw a widening wage gap, including retail, education and human health services, others like textiles and domestic personnel services saw a declining wage gap (See Table 7).

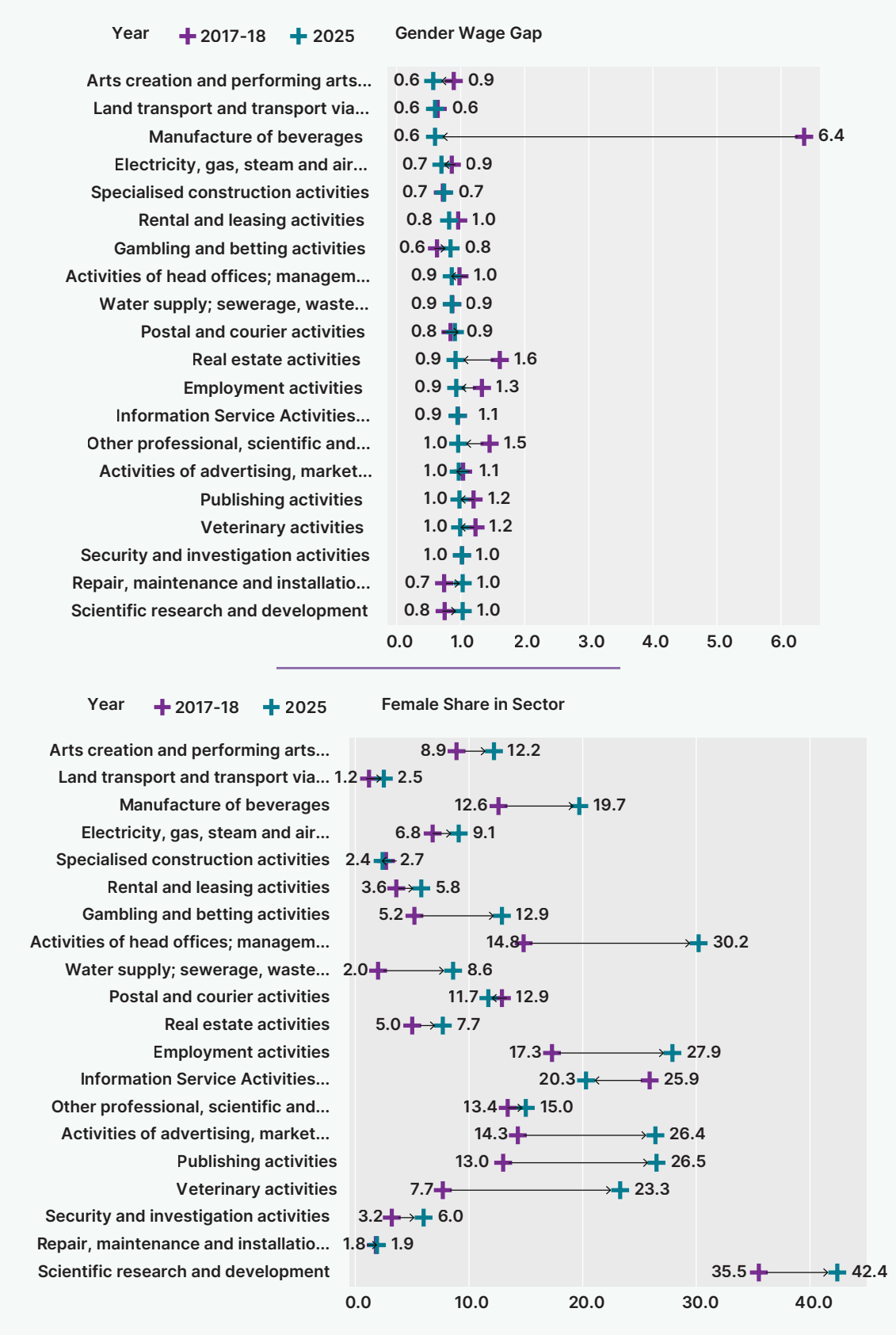
There are a few sectors in both rural and urban India where women earn on par with men or more than men. Around 15 rural sectors span a wage proportion ranging from 0.4 to 1.0, and include knowledge, technical and administrative activities that are often associated with high-skill and high productivity. These include sectors like head offices and management consultancy, information services, professional and scientific services, architectural and engineering, arts, and infrastructure and specialised industrial sectors such as electricity, coal mining, air transport and manufacture of electrical equipment (See Table 13). The composition is analytically distinct from sectors where women are currently employed in large numbers, mapping on to the higher-productivity, knowledge-intensive segments of the economy rather than agriculture and informal manufacturing and services.

Figure 13: Top Sectors with Favourable or Equal Wages and Share of Female in Total Workers in those Sectors in Rural India (2017-18 and 2025)



Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025
Note: The average total hours worked in a week are calculated for activity 1 as per Current Weekly Status (CWS) in PLFS. The gender wage gap is calculated using wage per hour (CWS)

Figure 14: Top Sectors with Favourable or Equal Wages and Share of Female in Total Workers in those Sectors in Urban India (2017-18 and 2025)



Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025
Note: The average total hours worked in a week are calculated for activity 1 as per Current Weekly Status (CWS) in PLFS. The gender wage gap is calculated using wage per hour (CWS)

Women's share of employment in these high-wage sectors remained low in 2025; however, it had increased compared to 2017-18. Very few occupations hired around or more than 15 per cent women, including head offices and management consultancy (31.5%), employment activities (20.2%), veterinary activities (14.4%), and information services (13.7%). In most of the remaining sectors, women account for less than 5-10 per cent of the workforce. Nonetheless, women's share has risen in most of these sectors between 2017-18 and 2025, and in several, the increase has been substantial.

The number of sectors with wage parity in urban areas is higher, dominated by professional, technical and knowledge-intensive activities. About 20 sectors in urban India have equal or favourable wages for women, including services like scientific research and development, publishing, advertising, veterinary services, head offices and management consultancy, information services, and other professional and scientific segments along with a few less conventional sectors where small workforces and specialised roles probably account for favourable wage ratios.

As in rural India, women's share of employment in these urban parity-wage sectors is modest across the board in 2025. The share is more than 20 per cent only in a few sectors like scientific research and development (42.4%), head offices and management consultancy (30.2%), employment activities (27.9%), publishing (26.5%), advertising and market research (26.4%), and veterinary activities (23.3%). Directionally however, the picture is more encouraging than in rural India. Women's share has risen in the majority of urban sectors and in several, the increases are substantial – veterinary activities, head offices and management consultancy, publishing, advertising, and employment activities, to name a few. Scientific R&D also gained ground, rising from an already comparatively high base of 35.5%. Yet, the decline in the share of women workforce in information services is particularly worth flagging, since it is one of the larger sectors on the list and one of the few knowledge-intensive segments where women have had an established historical presence (see Figures 13 and 14).

The female labour market shows a bit of contradiction in terms of wages. In the sectors that employ the bulk of women, wage gaps remain wide and, in the manufacturing sectors central to structural transformation, are widening. In the sectors where wages are on par or favourable, women's presence is thin in absolute terms, though gradually rising. The higher-productivity, knowledge-intensive segments of the Indian economy are absorbing women in growing but still modest numbers, and doing so unevenly across sectors. The scale is insufficient to shift the aggregate wage distribution for women. Structural transformation for women, in the specific sense of movement into higher-wage, higher-productivity sectors on comparable terms with men, is thus visible at the sectoral margins but has not yet reached a scale that would meaningfully alter the terms on which most Indian women engage with the labour market.

Read together, the sectoral wage gap data reinforce the structural transformation concern raised by the hours worked and participation analyses. In both rural and urban India, the sectors that classical development theory identifies as the pathway out of agriculture – textiles, apparel, tobacco – and, more broadly, manufacturing, exhibit

among the widest gender wage gaps in the economy and, in rural India, these gaps are widening rather than narrowing. Agriculture itself, which continues to absorb the majority of female workers, exhibits a rural wage gap of 1.7 and an urban gap of 2.0, with rural agriculture showing directional widening. Where gender gaps are narrow and stable – computer programming in urban India and, to a lesser extent, the formal tertiary segment such as urban health – women workers account for only a small proportion.

The parallel with the hours data is analytically important, since on both dimensions, women face the widest disadvantage in the sectors that employ them most, and the narrowest in credential-gated, formal segments that employ them the least. Structural transformation, in the specific sense of women's absorption into higher-productivity, better-remunerated manufacturing and services on comparable terms with men, is not yet visible in India. The manufacturing sectors that should be delivering this transition are instead deepening internal gender segmentation, primarily because of the dominance of smaller enterprises and lack of formal employment opportunities for women. The aggregate rise in female participation continues to be concentrated in agriculture and low-hour, low-wage segments where the gender penalty is the largest.

7.
Time as the Binding Constraint: Reasons for Non-Participation in the Labour Force

The patterns documented above describe a labour market in which women are not simply absent, but are concentrated in low-productivity agriculture and unpaid work, face a marriage penalty and confront persistent wage gaps. Understanding why women remain outside the labour force, or fail to transition into more productive employment, requires moving beyond participation rates to examine the reasons workers themselves give for non-participation.

The PLFS asks individuals outside the labour force to identify the primary reason for their non-participation. The responses reveal a striking asymmetry between men and women (Table 7). For men, the dominant reasons are the desire to continue studying (55.3% in 2025) and health or age-related factors (37.5%), which together account for over 90 per cent of male non-participation. These are structural or life-cycle reasons, largely unrelated to household organisation. For women, the picture is fundamentally different: 60 per cent cite childcare and personal household commitments as the primary reason for non-participation, a category that is reported by virtually no man (0.98%). Social reasons, which largely reflect restrictive norms around women's employment, account for a further 3.2% of female non-participation. Demand-side explanations including non-availability of work at a convenient location and lack of required training together account for only 1.5%.

Table 8: Distribution of Respondents by Reasons for not being in Labour Force (in %)

Reason	2025		2021-22	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Did not have the required training/qualification	1.2	0.8	1.9	0.9
Non-availability of work at a convenient location	0.2	0.7	0.3	0.8
Health/age related reason	37.5	14.1	33.0	12.0
Want to continue study	55.3	17.2	57.5	16.7
Social reasons	0.2	3.2	0.3	4.4
Financially well-off	0.8	0.8	0.6	0.9
Child care/personal commitments at home	1.0	60.0	1.3	59.0
Others	3.8	3.2	5.1	5.3

Source: PLFS 2021-22 and PLFS 2025

This distribution has been remarkably stable between 2021-22 and 2025, with the share citing childcare and household commitments rising slightly from 59 to 60 per cent. The evidence does not support a reading of female non-participation as primarily driven by skill deficits or insufficient job creation, the two explanations most commonly emphasised in policy literature (Deshpande and Singh, 2024). Women are out of the labour force because they are performing unpaid domestic and care work that is invisible to standard employment statistics but fully occupies their time. Micro-level evidence from West Bengal confirms this, showing that domestic chores are the principal constraint preventing women's participation in paid work, with many women officially classified as outside the labour force in fact engaged in unpaid productive activity (Deshpande and Kabeer, 2024).

Women's labour supply decisions are shaped jointly by household productivity constraints and social norms. Even where women possess education or employment potential, unpaid domestic work and caregiving continue to constrain their participation in market work (Afridi, Bishnu and Mahajan, 2024). Education raises not only women's market productivity but also their home productivity, making women with higher educational qualifications more efficient in household management and childcare. Where social norms prescribe minimum standards of home-produced goods and assign these responsibilities to women, households may rationally allocate educated women's time toward home production rather than market work – particularly at intermediate education levels, where household incomes make withdrawal feasible but market wages do not yet outweigh the value of home production. Raising women's education alone, without addressing domestic burdens and restrictive norms, therefore, is unlikely to substantially raise female employment. Understanding these constraints requires moving beyond participation data to the micro-level examination of how women actually allocate their time across the day, which is the subject of the next section.

8.
Insights from the India Time-use Survey

The Time-use Survey data for 2019 and 2024 make visible the dimension of gender inequality that the participation, hours and wage evidence can only imply. The data reflects that while men's time is concentrated in paid work across self-employment, regular wage employment and casual labour, women's time is concentrated in unpaid domestic and care activities. Among those who engaged in each category, in 2024, men spent around 444 minutes a day engaged in self-employment activities for the production of services, and those in regular wage employment for services around 452 minutes; the corresponding figures for women were 282 and 375 minutes. Within unpaid work, women spent approximately 320 minutes per day on production of services for own consumption including household maintenance, cooking, cleaning and related activities and 144 minutes on care for children, the elderly and other household members; the male equivalents were 97 and 81 minutes. Directionally, between 2019 and 2024, not much has changed. The period between the two survey rounds coincides with the sharp expansion in female workforce participation documented in the PLFS data, yet the time-use evidence records no corresponding reduction in the unpaid work women perform. Women's paid work has expanded without redistributing their unpaid work.

Table 9: Gender gap in minutes spent in a day on major activity (age 15-59)

Activity Title	Category	TUS 2019			TUS 2024		
		Rural Gender Gap	Urban Gender Gap	Total Gender Gap	Rural Gender Gap	Urban Gender Gap	Total Gender Gap
Self-Development/ Self Care/ Self Maintenance, etc.	Unpaid	80	7	57	89	27	70
Care for Children, Sick, Elderly, Differently-Abled Persons in Own Household	Unpaid	-56	-62	-58	-60	-71	-63
Production of Other Services for Own Consumption	Unpaid	-231	-222	-228	-225	-219	-223
Production of Goods for Own Consumption	Unpaid	82	78	85	28	20	30
Voluntary Work for Production of Goods in Households	Unpaid	-6	-17	-8	0	0	0
Voluntary Work for Production of Services in Households	Unpaid	-1	-3	-2	23	5	17

Activity Title	Category	TUS 2019			TUS 2024		
		Rural Gender Gap	Urban Gender Gap	Total Gender Gap	Rural Gender Gap	Urban Gender Gap	Total Gender Gap
Voluntary Work for Production of Goods in Market/Non-Market Units	Unpaid	-17	4	-12	52	51	52
Voluntary Work for Production of Services in Market/Non-Market Units	Unpaid	40	29	40	71	23	43
Unpaid Trainee Work for Production of Goods	Unpaid	37	85	47	0	0	0
Unpaid Trainee Work for Production of Services	Unpaid	107	-2	51	143	102	125
Other Unpaid Work for Production of Goods	Unpaid	-166	6	-156	0	0	0
Other Unpaid Work for Production of Services	Unpaid	-71	1	-52	0	0	0
Self-employment: For Production of Goods	Paid	84	134	91	89	133	93
Self-employment: For Production of Services	Paid	159	170	165	154	170	162
Regular Wage/Salary: For Production of Goods	Paid	83	84	87	68	59	68
Regular Wage/Salary: For Production of Services	Paid	74	76	71	100	66	77
Casual Labour: For Production of Goods	Paid	58	73	61	54	62	56
Casual Labour: For Production of Services	Paid	93	106	97	100	107	102

Source: Time Use Survey, 2019 and 2024.
Note: The gender gap is measured as male time – female time in minutes spent in a day on an average per participant in unpaid activities, paid activities and other activities. Please note that the TUS figures reported here are per participant (conditional on engaging in each activity) rather than per-capita, which is standard for the survey and it affects comparability across categories with different participation rates.

The gender gap makes the asymmetry sharper (See Table 9). In 2024, women spent approximately 223 minutes more per day than men on production of services for own consumption and 63 minutes more on care for household members – a combined excess of unpaid work of nearly five hours a day. In every paid work category, the gap ran in the opposite direction: men spent between 56 and 162 additional minutes per day in paid activity, with the widest gap in self-employment for services. In fact, the gender gap in care work widened marginally between 2019 and 2024, from 58 to 63 minutes, while the gap in domestic service production held essentially flat at around 223 minutes. In other words, over precisely the period during which female workforce participation rose sharply, the unpaid work gap did not narrow and, in the care dimension, it deepened.

Importantly, the gender gap in self-care time has widened. The gender gap in time spent on self-care and self-development activities that includes sleep and skill development, among others, was about 57 minutes in 2019; it increased to 70 minutes in 2024. A large proportion of the gap was driven by urban areas. As paid work and unpaid work have not been redistributed between the men and women, the visible margin of adjustment for women who have taken on additional paid work has been their own personal time. Self-care compression, alongside stable unpaid domestic work and rising paid participation, is the clearest empirical signature of time poverty for women, the point at which the constraint on women's time ceases to be theoretical and becomes measurable in reduced hours of rest and personal maintenance.

The time-use evidence establishes the constraint that the earlier sections of the analysis partially reveal. Structural transformation, understood conventionally, involves the reallocation of labour from low-productivity to higher-productivity activity. For women, however, this reallocation is contingent on reorganisation of household time in a way that entry into paid work is not simply layered onto an unchanged unpaid burden. Women's expanded engagement with the paid workforce has occurred without any redistribution of domestic and care responsibilities to men, and the margin of adjustment has fallen on women's own self-care and self-development.

The increased participation of women in the workforce has come at the cost of reorganisation of their own time rather than of the household. The earlier evidence in this report builds up to this point step by step. The participation data showed that women, particularly in rural India, entered the workforce in large numbers. The hours data showed that this entry was accompanied by fewer weekly hours per worker. The wage data showed that women remained concentrated in the sectors with the widest earnings gaps, with movement into parity-wage sectors real but limited in scale. The time-use data completes the picture and offers the explanation: the expansion in women's paid work has come not from any redistribution of unpaid work between men and women, but from women drawing further on their own time, meant for their self-care and self-development. **Structural transformation, in the specific sense of higher-productivity and better-paid employment expanding to include women on comparable terms with men cannot be completed while the unpaid economy remains as gender-asymmetric as it is.** Along with the reallocation of activities on the production side, it must also occur at the household level, with redistribution of unpaid work.

In fact, when one compares working women with the overall group, the situation is more concerning (see Table 10). For women, the effect of paid work is a redistribution of their own time, not of the household. In 2024, working women continue to spend around 4 hours a day on unpaid domestic services and nearly 2 hours on unpaid care work. This is true for both rural and urban women. While there is some reduction in the unpaid

burden when compared to the average for all individuals, it still remains substantially high, and one of the biggest burdens on women's time. Importantly, the comparison with working men makes the asymmetry stark. Working men, whether in rural or urban India, spend under three hours a day on unpaid domestic and care activities combined, and their unpaid workload barely differs from that of the average for all individuals.

Time devoted to self-care carries the sharpest signal. Working women record less self-care time than the female population as a whole, reporting around 18 minutes less per day in rural India and 31 minutes less in urban India. Compared to this, self-care time for working men is marginally higher than for the all-included male population in both settings, indicating that paid work for men does not compress time on rest or personal maintenance like it clearly does for women. Thus, time-use data shows that paid work operates on gendered time budgets in fundamentally different ways. For men, employment slots into an existing time structure without displacing personal time or requiring any redistribution of unpaid work. For women, it is absorbed by compressing self-care and by carrying an unpaid burden that reduces only marginally on entry into the workforce.

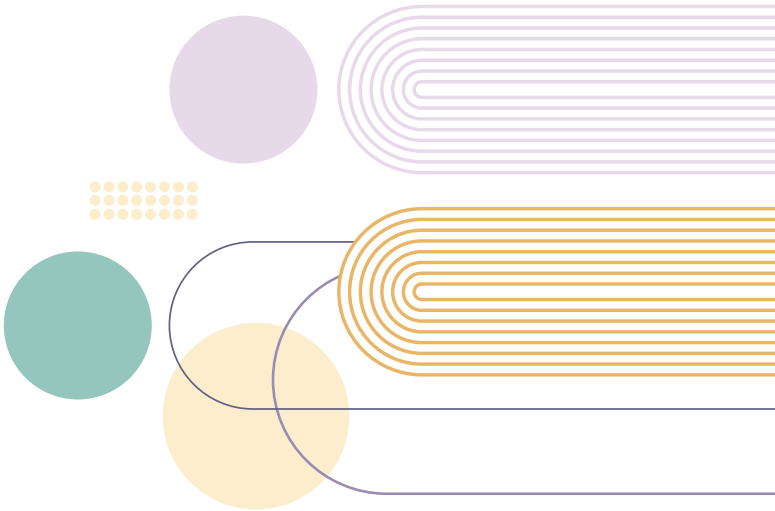


Table 10: Minutes spent in a day on an average per participant by their Principal Activity Status (All versus Working) in unpaid activities, paid activities and other activities as major activity (age 15-59)

Principal activity status	Activity	2019				2024			
		Rural Male	Rural Female	Urban Male	Urban Female	Rural Male	Rural Female	Urban Male	Urban Female
All included	Employment and related activities	471	344	549	410	479	342	543	415
All included	Production of goods for own final use	218	134	157	73	142	117	79	62
All included	Unpaid domestic services for household and family members**	103	341	100	332	90	327	89	322
All included	Unpaid caregiving services for household and family members**	81	139	79	147	78	143	74	150
All included	Unpaid volunteer, trainee and other unpaid work	102	108	112	105	144	104	145	112
All included	Learning	453	453	465	450	476	469	479	470
All included	Socializing and communication, community participation and religious practice	123	117	107	112	114	118	94	109
All included	Culture, leisure, mass media and sports practices	143	148	144	174	147	137	144	163
All included	Self-care and maintenance	735	714	707	716	706	694	690	698
Employed	Employment and related activities	475	386	554	441	472	366	540	425
Employed	Production of goods for own final use	222	155	163	76	151	130	85	62
Employed	Unpaid domestic services for household and family members**	102	265	100	232	93	254	92	227
Employed	Unpaid caregiving services for household and family members**	82	108	83	110	81	106	78	107
Employed	Unpaid volunteer, trainee and other unpaid work	105	122	112	137	151	128	130	121
Employed	Learning	192	164	164	183	192	153	155	161
Employed	Socializing and communication, community participation and religious practice	130	101	111	96	129	106	106	94
Employed	Culture, leisure, mass media and sports practices	134	117	135	124	142	109	143	123
Employed	Self-care and maintenance	733	684	704	672	710	676	694	667

Source: Time Use Survey, 2019 and 2024.
*Note: Conditional formatting is applied by each activity across all categories (rural/urban, male/female and 2019/2024), separately for each principal activity status. For activities marked ** (unpaid domestic services and unpaid caregiving services), the conditional formatting is reversed, as these activities represent the unpaid burden discussed in the text: higher values are red and lower values green, the opposite of all other activities. Colours are not comparable across rows.*[13]

[13] *Corrigendum: The colour grading of Table 10 in the first print edition of this report contained an error. The corrected table appears here, and this digital version should be treated as final. We regret the error.*

9. Key Findings and Recommendations

The empirical evidence in this report builds a picture of expanded female engagement with the paid economy but on structurally constrained terms. The overall growth masks deeper paradoxes that prevent real, sustained economic empowerment and agency for women, which become visible when granular micro-level data are unearthed.

First, there has been a surge in the female workforce participation but there is a deterioration compositionally, as the surge is overwhelmingly rural. Moreover, it is concentrated among women at the lower end of the education distribution and is largely in agriculture and household enterprise-linked activity. Urban female participation, by contrast, moved only modestly, meaning that the rural-urban divide among women has widened even as the rural gender gap has narrowed. The gap in rural areas has narrowed not through salaried work but through self-employment: women's fastest growth has come in own-account and unpaid family work, while their share in regular salaried jobs, the segment that would signal genuine upgrading, edged down. So, while overall India is experiencing services-led growth, female employment is overwhelmingly rural-agriculture based, making it more distress driven rather than opportunity led.

Second, the participation gain has been accompanied by a decline in the intensity of women's work. Weekly hours worked fell for every group between 2017-18 and 2025, but the decline was steepest for rural women. Rising participation and falling hours per worker together imply an expansion of the workforce into increasingly marginal, low-intensity activity, and means that the quantity of female employment and the quality of that employment have moved in opposite directions.

Third, the sectoral pattern of female employment is not consistent with structural transformation as classically understood. The manufacturing sub-sectors should function as a bridge from agriculture to higher-productivity employment. In India, sectors like textiles, wearing apparel and tobacco have witnessed widened gender gaps in hours worked between 2017-18 and 2025. Rather than absorbing women into factory-based, regularised production, these sectors are deepening internal gender segmentation, with women increasingly located in home-based, piece-rate and own-account niches. Structural transformation for women, in the sense of movement into higher-productivity employment on comparable terms with men, is not visible in the manufacturing data.

Fourth, the labour market for women is bifurcated on both hours and wages. The sectors

that employ the bulk of women, namely, agriculture, textiles, apparel, retail trade, food services and domestic work, retain among the widest gender gaps in the economy on both dimensions. The sectors where women earn on par with or more than men, such as computer programming, scientific R&D, publishing, advertising, management consultancy and veterinary services, employ only a small share of the female workforce. Women's participation in these parity-wage sectors is rising, but from low bases, and the aggregate scale remains insufficient to reshape the overall wage distribution.

Fifth, the time-use evidence completes the picture and supplies the mechanism. Women perform approximately three-and-a-half to four hours more unpaid work per day than men, and this gap has not narrowed between 2019 and 2024 despite the sharp expansion in female workforce participation. Entry into paid work reduces women's unpaid burden only marginally and leaves the gender gap within the working population essentially intact. The margin of adjustment has fallen on women's own self-care time, which has compressed measurably for working women even as it has held steady or risen for working men. Thus, the expansion in female paid participation has been financed not by any redistribution of unpaid work between men and women within the household, but by women drawing further on their own time.

Taken together, the findings suggest that India's structural transformation, as it has unfolded between 2017-18 and 2025, has not delivered for women in the sense developmental literature anticipates. The reallocation of labour from low to higher-productivity sectors has occurred largely for men. Women have expanded their engagement with the paid economy, but predominantly within the low-productivity, informal and residual segments of it, and against an unchanged distribution of household work that continues to bind their time.

India has succeeded in expanding women's labour force participation on the extensive margin, but has not yet improved the quality, productivity, intensity, or agency associated with that work. Therefore, the next generation of labour market policy reforms must shift from maximising participation to enabling structural transformation for women by creating pathways into productive, formal, well-paid and future-oriented employment, while simultaneously addressing the unpaid care burden that continues to constrain women's economic agency.

The following are some policy priorities that can be implemented:

- **Convert India's Human Capital Dividend into Women's Economic Participation:** Despite rising education levels and achieving gender parity, many women either never enter the labour market or exit at marriage and motherhood, representing a substantial loss of human capital. Policy should strengthen the education-to-employment pipeline through closer alignment between higher education and labour market demand, expanded apprenticeships and internships for women, stronger

university-industry partnerships, career counselling, placement support, and transition programmes for first-time female workers. Government skilling initiatives should prioritise placement and retention outcomes over training numbers alone, and programmes targeting young women should integrate employability, digital skills, financial literacy and entrepreneurship to build long-term labour market attachment.

II **Break Occupational Segregation and Enable Movement into High-Productivity Sectors:** While female labour force participation has expanded, women remain concentrated in a narrow set of occupations characterised by low productivity, low wages, informality and limited career progression. This occupational segregation is one of the principal barriers preventing employment growth from translating into structural transformation. Policy should explicitly target women's entry into higher-productivity occupations across manufacturing and modern services, through gender-responsive skilling aligned to industry demand, greater participation in STEM and technical fields, correction of gender stereotyping in vocational education, stronger employer diversity commitments, and more transparent recruitment and promotion practices. Public procurement and fiscal incentives can encourage firms to expand women's representation in non-traditional occupations and managerial roles.

III **Generate Demand for Rural Women's Labour through Place-Based Employment Strategies:** Moving rural women's employment from largely unpaid family work to remunerative opportunities requires attention to labour demand, not supply alone. Employment programmes should be designed around women's actual constraints, including time availability, mobility, digital access and care responsibilities. Cluster-based strategies that combine skilling, infrastructure, childcare, transport and employer partnerships can generate meaningful local employment. Public employment programmes, industrial policy, digital economy initiatives and entrepreneurship schemes should be better synchronised to support women's transition into remunerative work. Digital platforms, rural BPOs, AI-enabled local language mobile apps, women-led farmer producer organisations and export-oriented enterprises offer further opportunities for women to move into higher-value economic activity.

IV **Promote Women's Participation in High-Productivity Manufacturing:** Manufacturing has not functioned as the traditional bridge from agriculture to higher-productivity employment for women that it has historically played elsewhere. Instead, many labour-intensive sectors continue to rely on home-based, own-account and piece-rate work, with widening gender disparities in hours worked. Industrial policy should explicitly integrate gender objectives. Production-linked incentive (PLI) schemes, industrial corridors, textile parks, electronics clusters and export-oriented

manufacturing hubs should carry measurable targets for women's employment, leadership and skill development. Investment should prioritise factory-based formal employment, safe transport, worker hostels, on-site childcare and gender-sensitive workplace infrastructure, alongside targeted support for women-owned enterprises within manufacturing value chains and supplier development programmes.

V **Expand Women's Participation in High-Growth Services and Future-of-Work Sectors:** Several knowledge-intensive service sectors, where women experience wage parity or even a wage advantage, currently employ very few women. Policy should actively facilitate women's entry into technology-enabled and knowledge-intensive services by expanding access to digital skills, AI literacy, data analytics, cybersecurity, financial services, digital trade, and platform work. Investment in digital infrastructure, broadband connectivity, language technologies, remote work ecosystems and digital entrepreneurship would particularly benefit women constrained by mobility and care responsibilities. Greater participation in globally tradable services would give women access to higher-productivity employment while supporting India's services-led growth trajectory.

VI **Recognise, Reduce, and Redistribute the Care Burden Across Women's Life Cycle:** India loses a significant share of women from the workforce during marriage and childbearing years – a "motherhood penalty" that disproportionately affects educated women and represents a substantial erosion of human capital. Time-use evidence further shows that women's rising participation in paid work has not been accompanied by any meaningful redistribution of unpaid domestic and care work. Addressing this requires action on four fronts:

- Childcare infrastructure: Substantially expand affordable childcare through greater investment in the Palna Crèche Scheme, universal access to quality and affordable childcare services, and stronger enforcement of crèche provisions under the Maternity Benefit Act and the Factories Act
- Shared caregiving: Complement maternity leave with paid paternity and shared parental leave, financed partly through social insurance rather than employer liability alone, so that caregiving costs do not fall disproportionately on women or discourage their hiring
- Re-entry pathways: Support women's return to work after career breaks through tax incentives for employers hiring returnees, structured returnship programmes, refresher training and entrepreneurship support for mothers.
- Flexible work mandates: Make hybrid work, remote work and flexible hours accessible without penalising promotion or career progression
- Expand labour-saving infrastructure: Piped water, sanitation, clean cooking

energy, reliable electricity and efficient public transport alongside affordable eldercare and community care services must all be treated as essential economic infrastructure. Behaviour change campaigns encouraging greater male participation in domestic work should complement these investments.

VII **Mainstream Gender-Responsive Budgeting to Finance the Enabling Infrastructure for Women's Work:** The evidence in this report shows that women's employment remains overwhelmingly concentrated in agriculture in rural areas and, within manufacturing, in sub-sectors dominated by micro, small and medium enterprises and by informal, home-based and own-account arrangements. By their very structure, these are small establishments that cannot individually bear the fixed costs of the physical and social infrastructure including childcare, community kitchens, safe transport and sanitation that would allow women to raise their hours worked and deepen their engagement with the paid economy. Because such enabling services carry high fixed costs and generate benefits that extend well beyond any single firm, no individual informal or small-scale employer has the incentive to provide them and therefore their creation must instead be financed and coordinated through public expenditure. Macroeconomic policy, and gender-responsive budgeting in particular, is a central instrument in this regard. The Gender Budget should be used at both the central and state levels to expand and systematically track allocations towards the care and mobility infrastructure identified above, so that the recognise-reduce-redistribute agenda and the place-based and industrial strategies proposed elsewhere in this section are adequately resourced. Directing gender-budget allocations simultaneously towards care infrastructure and skilling as well as creating demand for women's work would address both issues by enabling women to increase their labour supply and hours worked, while opening pathways out of low-productivity work as they invest in upgrading their skills over time.

VIII **Strengthen Workplace Safety, Legal Protection and Safe Mobility** – Constraints on women's labour force participation are not only about skills or care work but also about safety and legal enforcement. It will be vital to ensure the effective implementation of India's new labour codes, which came into force in 2026 and legally prohibit workplace discrimination, guarantee equal pay for equal work, and allow women to work in all industries, including night shifts and hazardous operations. In addition, it is necessary to extend social protection and grievance mechanisms to women in gig and platform work. Public investment in safe last-mile transport, well-lit public spaces and working women's hostels near employment hubs should be scaled up as a precondition for participation, particularly in urban and industrial clusters.

IX **Expand Women's Access to Finance and Productive Assets:** Women's economic agency is also constrained by limited access to credit, formal banking and productive assets such as land and machinery. Policy should expand collateral-free lending and dedicated credit lines for women entrepreneurs and self-employed workers, strengthen last-mile delivery of existing schemes (such as Mudra and Stand-Up India) with better gender-disaggregated tracking of uptake and outcomes, and support women's asset ownership through land titling and joint ownership norms. This is necessary since access to finance and assets often determines whether women can move from own-account, subsistence activity into scaled, formal enterprise.

X **Strengthen Statistical Systems to Support Evidence-Based Policy:** India's statistical architecture needs further strengthening and gender-disaggregation. Time-use surveys should become a regular exercise and be systematically integrated with the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) to better understand the interaction between unpaid work and labour market outcomes. Labour statistics should routinely publish indicators on maternal employment, career interruptions, return-to-work rates, occupational segregation and time poverty. More extensive data collection on household access to labour-saving infrastructure would also allow policymakers to evaluate the effectiveness of investments aimed at reducing unpaid work.

As a next step, it would be important to delve deeper into the occupational segregation patterns across sectors and industries. It is also necessary to assess the baseline trends at the sub-national that is state and district levels. India's aggregate female labour force participation rate masks the fact that India is not a single labour market and that there are wide and persistent variations across states and districts.

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Appendix - Data and Methodology Note

Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)

This study uses unit-level data from the PLFS, conducted in India since April 2017 by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI). The survey covers the whole of India and, until recently, followed a reference period running from July to June each year; from 2025 it moved to a calendar-year basis. It is designed primarily to collect key labour market indicators, including each sampled individual's employment status and wages, alongside demographic characteristics such as sex, age, highest level of education, and marital status, and household characteristics such as monthly consumption expenditure, social group (caste), and religion.

The survey estimates employment using three approaches: the Usual Principal Status (UPS), the Usual Principal and Subsidiary Status (UPSS), and the Current Weekly Status (CWS). Under UPS, an individual is classified as employed if they were engaged in economic activity for the major part of the reference year. UPSS additionally counts those who worked in a subsidiary capacity for at least 30 days during the reference year. Under CWS, a person is recorded as employed if they engaged in any economic activity for at least one hour during the reference week (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2019). Employed individuals are then divided into three categories: self-employed, salaried employees, and casual labour. The PLFS also records the occupational and industrial distribution of workers, classifying each into an occupation using the three-digit National Classification of Occupations 2015 (NCO-2015) and into an industry using the five-digit National Industrial Classification 2008 (NIC-2008). While employment is estimated using all three approaches, wages and earnings are estimated only under CWS.

In our analysis, employment is estimated using the UPSS approach for individuals aged 15 years and above, while wages are estimated using the CWS approach for employed individuals. Table A1 presents the sample distribution for the two PLFS rounds used in the analysis. The 2025 round saw a substantial increase in sample size following revisions to the sampling design intended to improve the reliability of district-level estimates. Although the underlying definitions and measurement concepts

are unchanged across the two rounds, comparisons should be interpreted with these design changes in mind. In addition, because the PLFS sampling frame remains based on the 2011 Population Census, the absolute numbers derived from survey weights do not fully reflect India's current population. All population-level estimates are therefore adjusted using the projected population figures from the Report of the Technical Group on Population Projections (2020) to obtain estimates representative of the respective survey years.

Table A1: Sample Distribution, PLFS 2017–18 and 2025, by Gender and Sector

Year	Rural		Urban	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
2025	244,733	251,453	197,801	197,279
2017-18	94,181	90,754	73,439	72,246

To estimate hours worked and hourly wages, we adopt a multi-step aggregation and interpolation procedure. First, for weekly hours worked, we use the hours recorded for the first daily activity (defined in the PLFS as the activity with the longest duration of work that day), and assume that its NIC code corresponds to the final industry classification assigned under CWS. Second, we apply the same logic to casual-labour wages recorded on a daily basis, taking the wage of the first daily activity and mapping its NIC code to the CWS industry classification. Having estimated daily hours for all three worker categories and daily wages for casual labour, we aggregate these records into total weekly hours worked and weekly casual wages. To align these with the monthly earnings reported for regular salaried and self-employed workers, we convert monthly earnings to a weekly basis by dividing by 4.33, the average number of weeks in a month. Finally, we divide total weekly wages by total weekly hours worked for each category to derive a standardised hourly wage.

Time Use Survey (TUS)

This study also uses India's Time Use Survey (TUS), conducted by the NSSO, MoSPI, comparing the 2019 and 2024 rounds. The TUS records how individuals allocate time across a 24-hour reference day, with activities classified under the International Classification of Activities for Time-Use Statistics (ICATUS-2016). The estimates reported here are restricted to the population aged 15–59 on a normal day (excluding festival days and other atypical activity, per standard TUS convention), and measure minutes spent per day on each activity as the respondent's major activity, disaggregated

by sex and by rural/urban location. Table A2 presents the sample distribution for the two TUS rounds used in the analysis.

Table A2: Sample Distribution, Time Use Survey 2019 and 2024, by Gender and Sector

Year	Rural		Urban	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
2024	142,253	143,104	86,323	82,461
2019	138,350	134,777	89,371	84,622

We draw two sets of comparisons. Table 8 reports gender gaps, calculated as male minus female time in minutes per day, for unpaid activities (self-care, domestic and care work, and other unpaid production) and paid activities (self-employment, regular wage/salaried work, and casual labour). Table 9 compares time use across principal activity status: “Employed” refers to individuals classified as working under the usual principal activity status criterion, while “All included” refers to the full population aged 15–59 regardless of status (employed, unemployed, and not in the labour force combined). All figures are per-participant means, conditional on having engaged in the activity at all, rather than per-capita averages.