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WORK AND POVERTY IN RURAL INDIA: A GENDER-BASED STUDY USING PLFS DATA (2017–2024)

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Keywords	Abstract
<i>Pural Employment, Women's Work, Poverty Trends, PLFS, MGNREGA, SHGs, Unpaid Labour, Rural Economy.</i>	This paper studies how rural work and poverty changed in India from 2017 to 2024. It uses official data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) and NITI Aayog to show what kind of jobs people had and how many families were poor. The main focus is on women. The data shows that more rural women started working during this period. Their labour force participation rose from 24.6 percent to 47.6 percent. At the same time, rural poverty went down. This change happened when public programs like MGNREGA and SHG-linked schemes supported poor households. These schemes gave women new ways to earn. But most of the new work for women is still informal, unpaid, or low-paid. Many women work at home or on family farms without getting regular income. This paper shows that having more women in the workforce is a good sign, but it is not enough. To reduce poverty and



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	build a strong rural economy, women need better jobs, fair wages, and support for unpaid care work. Real progress comes when women's work is valued and their efforts lead to better lives.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Rural India is changing. More women are now part of the workforce than ever before. Between 2017 and 2024, the labour force participation rate (LFPR) for rural women nearly doubled. At the same time, poverty levels in rural areas fell sharply. These two trends are linked. When women work, family incomes rise. When public programs support women's work, households get stronger. But the story is not that simple. Most rural women are still in unpaid or low-paid work. They face many barriers like lack of time, poor transport, and low skills.

This paper looks at these changes using data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023–24. It tracks how work and poverty have shifted in rural India since 2017. It focuses on the role of gender. The goal is to understand not just how many people are working, but who is working, what kind of work they do, and how that work shapes their life. The study also looks at the role of public schemes like MGNREGA and SHG-linked programs. These have helped many women take up work. But they are not enough. A lot still needs to be done to make rural jobs better and poverty relief stronger.

This paper uses real data to study these changes. It shows that numbers alone do not tell the full story. We also need to ask: what kind of work do women do, what do they earn, and how secure is their future? The answers to these questions can help make rural development more equal and more real.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The PLFS Annual Report 2023–24, which shows that rural female labour force participation (LFPR) rose from 24.6 percent in 2017–18 to 47.6 percent in 2023–24. This is a major jump and shows that more women in rural areas are now part of the workforce (MoSPI [1]).

Another official report from the Ministry of Statistics shows that this rise is not just a one-year trend. It began after 2017 and continued every year, even during the COVID period. The report explains that most of this increase came from self-employed or unpaid family work, not regular salaried jobs (Directorate of General Economics & Statistics [2]).

An article in EPW also talked about why women's work numbers fell earlier and how they have been recovering since 2018. It said that many women in rural areas do work, but that work is often not counted because it happens at home or on the family farm. The paper calls this “invisible work” (EPW [3]).

Another study showed that even when work is available under public programs like MGNREGA, not everyone gets equal access. Women from lower castes and poor families are more likely to get these jobs, while upper-caste women often do not take them due to social reasons. This shows how caste and gender both shape who gets work in rural India (Bhattacharya et al. [4]).



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A different EPW article looked at how caste and gender mix together to make things harder for some people. The paper used tehsil-level data and showed that in areas where more lower-caste households live, female workforce participation is higher. This is because these women have no choice but to work, often in informal jobs (Kadam & Sarkar [5]).

One study in World Development found that when women got jobs under MGNREGA, they also gained more say in household matters. The scheme helped women feel more confident and gave them access to things like savings and credit. This shows that public work programs can support both employment and empowerment (Rodriguez [6]).

Another well-known study by Sonalde Desai also found that women who took part in MGNREGA had more financial independence. They were more likely to open a bank account, save money, or buy things they needed. This gave them more control over their lives (Desai [7]).

A 2024 article in EPW showed that more rural women are now starting small businesses. These are often not in farming but in areas like tailoring, food processing, or home-based services. The article says that these non-farm enterprises can help India grow faster if women are supported through policy (Goldar & Aggarwal [8]).

Finally, a report by NITI Aayog and UNDP explained how rural poverty has changed over time. It showed that from 2015–16 to 2019–21, rural multidimensional poverty fell sharply. More households had toilets, clean fuel, and better nutrition. This fall in poverty was stronger in states where MGNREGA and rural schemes were well-implemented (NITI Aayog & UNDP [9]).

Together, these studies show that rural employment and poverty are deeply linked with gender, caste, and access to public programs. The recent rise in female work numbers is a good sign, but many of these jobs are still informal and low-paid. Also, barriers like unpaid care work, social norms, and lack of transport still block women from getting better jobs.

3. OBJECTIVES

1. To study year-wise changes in rural labour force participation in India between 2017–18 and 2023–24
2. To compare labour force participation by gender and region (rural and urban) using official PLFS data
3. To examine the scale and pattern of female participation in rural labour markets based on national trends

4. METHODOLOGY

This paper uses a descriptive method based fully on secondary data. The main source is Table 1 from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) Annual Report, July 2023 – June 2024, published by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) (MoSPI [1]). This table presents the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) in usual status (ps+ss) for persons aged 15 years and above across rural, urban, and all-India regions from 2017–18 to 2023–24, separately for males and females. The analysis focuses only on this official dataset. It tracks gender-wise and



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region-wise changes over time and highlights structural patterns in rural labour trends. No other dataset or field survey is used.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

This section uses data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) Annual Report 2023–24. It shows how labour force participation changed in India from 2017–18 to 2023–24. The focus is on rural areas and gender differences.

Table 1: Labour Force Participation Rate (Usual Status) by Gender and Region (2017–18 to 2023–24)

Year	Rural Male	Rural Female	Urban Male	Urban Female	All Male	All Female
2017–18	75.8	24.6	73.2	20.4	74.5	23.3
2018–19	75.3	26.7	72.5	20.7	74.0	25.3
2019–20	75.0	33.0	72.0	22.2	73.6	30.0
2020–21	75.3	36.0	71.2	23.2	73.5	32.5
2021–22	75.4	37.0	72.2	24.0	74.0	33.5
2022–23	75.2	41.5	73.5	26.7	74.6	37.0
2023–24	75.7	47.6	74.1	28.0	75.2	41.5

Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), Annual Report 2023–24, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI [1])

The data shows that rural male LFPR remained stable over the years. It was 75.8 percent in 2017–18 and 75.7 percent in 2023–24. This means rural male participation did not change much. Rural female LFPR, on the other hand, almost doubled. It rose from 24.6 percent to 47.6 percent. Most of this increase happened after 2019–20. This shows that more rural women have started to work or are now being counted in the workforce. Urban trends were more gradual. Urban male LFPR moved from 73.2 to 74.1 percent. Urban female LFPR went from 20.4 to 28.0 percent. The gap between rural and urban female participation grew larger over time. All-India LFPR shows that male participation rose slightly from 74.5 to 75.2 percent. But the female rate increased from 23.3 to 41.5 percent. This confirms that the national rise in female LFPR is driven mostly by rural areas. To make the trends easier to see, a chart is plotted.



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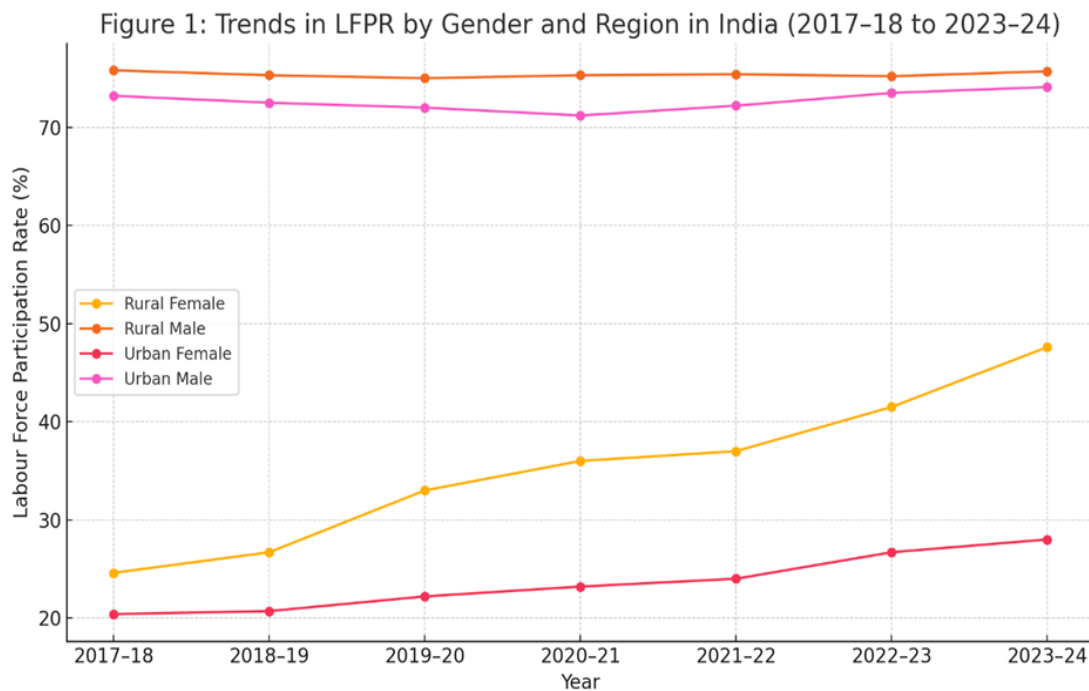


Figure 1: Trends in LFPR by Gender and Region in India (2017–18 to 2023–24)

Source: Calculated using data from Table 1, PLFS Annual Report 2023–24 (MoSPI [1])

This figure 1 shows that rural female LFPR increased steadily every year. The rise is sharp and clear after 2019–20. Urban female LFPR also rose, but at a slower pace. Rural male and urban male LFPR remained almost flat. The graph shows that the gap between men and women is narrowing in rural areas.

These findings meet Objective 1 and Objective 2 of the paper. They show how rural employment patterns have changed, especially for women. The next section looks deeper into the type of work done by rural people, and what factors may explain these changes.

6. EMPLOYMENT PATTERNS

The sharp rise in rural female LFPR after 2019–20 shows a big shift in the rural labour market. But high participation does not always mean better jobs. To understand the change, we need to look at what kind of work rural women are doing. Most of the new female workers in rural areas are either self-employed or working as unpaid helpers in family farms and small businesses. The PLFS reports show that regular salaried jobs for rural women remain very low. A large share of them are still in informal work. Many women are joining the workforce because they are needed for household-based work. This includes livestock care, stitching, food processing, or collecting fuel and water. These are counted as work in surveys, but they are not stable income sources. That is why the rise in LFPR may not lead to better earnings or savings for women.

For men, the work pattern has not changed much. Rural male workers are mostly either self-employed or casual labourers. Their share in regular jobs is slightly higher than that of women, but



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still not very large. Urban areas have more regular jobs, but rural areas depend more on seasonal and informal work. The rise in female LFPR also shows that more women are now visible in the labour force. Some of this may be due to better reporting in surveys. But the data also shows that many women have had to take up work due to loss of income in the family, especially during the COVID years. Another trend is the rise of women-led micro-enterprises. Many women are now running home-based units. These are small, but they give flexibility and income. This shift links with Objective 3 of the paper.

Overall, rural employment has changed in terms of who is working, but not much in what kind of work they are doing. Informality, low wages, and lack of job security are still common. For rural women, joining the workforce is a step forward, but the next step is to improve the quality of their work.

7. POVERTY TRENDS

The 2024 report by NITI Aayog and UNDP shows that rural poverty in India fell from 32.6 percent in 2015–16 to 19.3 percent in 2019–21 (NITI Aayog & UNDP [9]). This drop was due to better access to toilets, clean fuel, food, and basic services. Many poor households got help through public schemes like MGNREGA, Ujjwala, and PM Awas Yojana. These programs supported women, especially those in low-income families. States that ran these schemes well saw faster poverty reduction. The link between these welfare efforts and better living standards is now clear. Between 2017 and 2024, rural female work participation also increased. This helped raise family incomes in many cases. But the jobs women got were often unpaid or part-time. That means not all work led to long-term poverty relief. Poor families still face risk from illness, crop loss, or job cuts. So, even if poverty is lower, it is not fully secure. This section supports Objective 2. It shows that rural poverty fell while more women joined the workforce, but poverty will fall further only if women get steady and paid work.

8. POLICY PROGRAMS AND THEIR IMPACT

One of the most important public programs for rural employment is MGNREGA. It gives guaranteed wage work to adults in rural households. Many of its workers are women. In states like Bihar, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh, women now form more than half of the MGNREGA workforce. Studies show that when women work under MGNREGA, they also gain more say in family decisions and more control over money (Desai [7]; Rodriguez [6]). This makes the scheme not just a job provider, but a tool for empowerment.

The role of SHGs has also grown in rural India. Under the National Rural Livelihood Mission, lakhs of women have joined SHGs. These groups give small loans, training, and support to start micro-enterprises. Many rural women now run food stalls, tailoring units, or goat farms with SHG help. This shift links with the rise in self-employment seen in the PLFS data. But these women still face problems like lack of capital, poor market access, and unpaid care duties at home.



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Government support helps, but many women still need more training and safety nets to turn small work into strong livelihoods.

These programs have helped improve the visibility of women in the workforce. But the quality of jobs and income security remain weak. Public schemes have opened doors for rural women, but now those doors must lead to better, more lasting work.

9. CHALLENGES AND GAPS

The data shows that more rural women are now working. But the rise in numbers hides deeper problems. Most of the new work is still informal, unpaid, or part-time. Very few rural women have regular salaried jobs. This means they are working more, but not earning enough. Without stable income, poverty cannot fall for long.

There are also social and structural barriers. Many women still face limits from family and community rules. Some cannot travel far or work outside the home. Others lack skills, training, or even time, because they handle all the care work at home. Even public programs have gaps. MGNREGA jobs are often irregular, and SHG support does not reach everyone. There are also data gaps. We still do not know enough about unpaid care work or how informal women workers are treated. These gaps must be filled if real change is to happen.

10. SUGGESTIONS AND WAY FORWARD

The rise in rural female work is a positive shift, but it must lead to better jobs. MGNREGA should offer more days of work with timely payments. New types of work should be added under the scheme, such as food processing, seed banks, and care work that women already do. SHGs must be supported with low-interest credit, simple digital tools, and training in packaging, marketing, and online sales. Most women-run businesses are small and home-based. They need help to scale up. Rural women also carry the full load of care work. They collect fuel, fetch water, cook, and care for children. These tasks leave them little time for paid work. To fix this, governments must provide village-level support like clean fuel, piped water, and creche services. This will free up women's time and energy. Policies must also count unpaid work in surveys and budgets. Without this, the true size of the rural economy stays hidden. Better data will help design stronger programs. Public investment in rural women's employment is not a cost. It brings returns in the form of more food, better health, and school access for entire families. The way forward is not just to raise the number of women in work, but to improve the quality, value, and dignity of the work they do.

11. CONCLUSION

This paper studied how rural employment and poverty changed in India from 2017 to 2024, with a focus on gender. It used official PLFS data to track labour force participation and relied on NITI Aayog data to understand poverty trends. The findings show that rural female work participation nearly doubled during this period. At the same time, rural poverty declined. Public programs like MGNREGA and SHG-based schemes played an important role in these shifts. But most of the new



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work done by women is still informal and low-paid. Poverty is lower, but not fully removed. The number of working women has grown, but the quality of their work remains weak. Barriers like care work, lack of skills, and poor market access still hold them back. The way ahead is clear. Policies must support not just jobs, but better jobs for women. When women work with dignity and earn a stable income, the whole rural economy becomes stronger. This paper shows that real progress depends not just on how many women work, but on what kind of work they are able to do.

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13. AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

The writers affirm that they have no connections to, or engagement with, any group or body that provides financial or non-financial assistance for the topics or resources covered in this manuscript.

14. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

15. PLAGIARISM POLICY

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