



**Original Article**

**UNEQUAL WORK: EXPLAINING THE RECENT INCREASE IN FEMALE WORKERS IN RURAL INDIA**

**Dr. Arvind Kumar**

*Assistant Professor,*

*Faculty of Social Science, Magadh University, Bodh Gaya, Bihar*

**Manuscript ID:**

IJAAR-130407

**ISSN: 2347-7075**

**Impact Factor – 8.141**

**Volume - 13**

**Issue - 4**

**March – April 2026**

**Pp. 32 - 35**

**Submitted:** 14 Feb.2026

**Revised:** 27 Feb. 2026

**Accepted:** 2 Mar. 2026

**Published:** 10 Mar. 2026

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Dr. Arvind Kumar**

Quick Response Code:



Website: <https://ijaar.co.in/>



DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19166498

DOI Link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19166498>



Creative Commons



**Abstract:**

*There is an unusual change that is taking place in the rural labour market in India. After a decade long decline in the female workforce participation rate (WPR), it is suddenly rising. Especially after Covid-19 years. This blog note explores three interconnected features of women's work in rural India during 2017-2023. First, we explore the source of this increasing WPR by their activity statuses for rural India. Second, we then break down the activity statuses which shows an increase in women's participation by the social groups of households. Third, in the post Covid rounds (2020-21 onwards) PLFS asked a specific question to the individuals those who are outside the labour force: What is the reason behind their "non-participation" in labour market. We explore this aspect in the third subsection of the note.*

**Keywords:** *Economic and educational improvement, employment of Dalit and Adivas, large section of literature has dealt.*

**Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)**

*This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0), which permits others to remix, adapt, and build upon the work non-commercially, provided that appropriate credit is given and that any new creations are licensed under identical terms.*

**How to cite this article:**

*Dr. Arvind Kumar (2026). Unequal Work: Explaining The Recent Increase In Female Workers In Rural India. International Journal of Advance and Applied Research, 13(4), 32 – 35.*  
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19166498>

**Introduction:**

Over the period according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), the WPR for women has increased from 24.8 in 2017-18 to 42.7 percent in 2022-23 (table 1). The maximum increase

happened in the year 2019-20 by 7.2 percent and in the year 2022-23 by 5.1 percent. The question here is that from where this increase is emanating, it mitigate gender inequality or aggravate the challenges faced by women. (Beneria, L., & Sen, G.



(n.d.). Feminist Challenges To Development Economics.)

**Materials and Methods:**

The increase in the WPR (24.8% in 2017 to 42% in 2023) has happened due to a higher increase in the form of self-employment. Self-employment includes three specific activity codes: Own account workers (activity code 11), Employers (activity code 12), and Unpaid helpers in family enterprises (activity code 21). For women, this increase in self-employment has happened through the increase in the unpaid helpers in family enterprises (i.e. activity

status 21). These proportions rose from 9.6 per cent in 2017-18 to 17.7 percent in 2022-23 (See table 1). We have argued elsewhere (Agrawal et al. 2024) that this puzzling increase in self-employment is largely a sign of distress in the rural economy. We also observe that the increase in salaried workers was negligible. Casual workers increased from an 8% to 11% between this period. (Boserup, E. (2013). Urban Job Opportunities for Women. In E. a. Boserup, Woman’s role in economic development. Routledge).

**Table 1: Distribution of Working Age Women (15-65 years) in Rural India by Activity Status**  
in per cent, 2017-2023

Year	Within Workforce			Outside Workforce						
	Own Account Workers	Employers	Unpaid Workers in Family Enterprises	Salaried	Casual	WPR	Unemployed	Education	Engaged in Social Reproductive Labour	Others
2017-18	4.6	0.1	9.6	2.6	7.9	24.8	1.0	10.9	59.3	4.0
2018-19	5.6	0.1	10.0	3.0	7.8	26.5	1.0	11.1	57.0	4.4
2019-20	6.7	0.2	14.3	3.3	9.3	33.7	0.9	11.1	50.2	4.2
2020-21	8.0	0.1	16.1	3.5	9.8	37.5	0.8	11.6	46.4	3.6
2021-22	9.2	0.2	16.0	3.1	9.1	37.6	0.8	11.6	46.5	3.5
2022-23	10.4	0.2	17.7	3.0	11.4	42.7	0.8	10.5	42.8	3.2

Source: Authors’ Calculation from PLFS 2017-23

In rural India, 87% of unpaid household enterprise women workers are engaged in Agriculture and Allied Sector. Swaminathan et.al.

(2020) have argued in detail that the reality in rural India is the under-counting of such workers and it persists.



**Table 2: Distribution of Unpaid Helpers in Family Enterprises for Working Age Women in Rural India by Farm and Non-Farm Sector, in per cent, 2017-2023**

Year	Agriculture	Non Agriculture	Total
2017-18	92.20	7.80	100.00
2018-19	93.00	7.00	100.00
2019-20	94.30	5.70	100.00
2020-21	94.00	6.20	100.00
2021-22	93.40	6.60	100.00
2022-23	87.30	12.70	100.00

### Discussion:

A large section of literature has dealt this phenomenon of ‘unpaid workers’ in household enterprises are explained by the ‘status producing effect’ of caste. With economic and educational improvement, women from marginalised caste often withdraw from the ‘workforce’. What we observe here however does reveal two things. First, we resonate with the findings of Swaminathan et al. (2021), if there is lack of work in rural spaces, women are confined to work in their own farm. Second, in rural India, a Dalit or an Adivasi household is historically denied of the land rights and own meagre plots of land. So in these marginalised section if one observes an increasing number of women being engaged in ‘family enterprises’ that too within agriculture and allied sector: that means the lack of livelihood was so severe that marginalised women had to work wherever they could find work. Especially during the Covid time when the poorer sections were

burdened with lowered access to nutrition and were highly indebted to mitigate the crisis of income (Niyati and Vijayamba 2021). (Women and Work in Rural India. Edited by V. K. Ramachandran, Madhura Swaminathan, and Shruti Nagbhusan. Tulika Books. 2020.)

### Materials And Methods:

From 2017-18 to 2020-21, there was a consistent increase in the employment of Dalit and Adivasi (SC and ST) individuals, with the percentage rising from 36.5% to 38.8%. Meanwhile, the employment of Other Backward Classes (OBC) during this period also saw a gradual increase, starting at 43.8% in 2017-18 and reaching 45.7% in 2020-21. However, the percentage of individuals from the ‘Others’ category experienced a steady decline from 19.7% in 2017-18 to 14.6% in 2020-21.

**Table 3: Distribution of Unpaid Workers in Family Enterprises within Agriculture and Allied Sector for Working Age Women by Social Groups, Rural India, 2017-2023**

Year	Dalit and Adivasi (SC and ST)	Other Backward Classes	Others
2017-18	36.50	43.80	19.70
2018-19	37.70	44.60	17.70
2019-20	38.50	45.60	16.00
2020-21	38.80	45.70	15.50
2021-22	38.50	47.00	14.60
2022-23	36.00	48.00	15.90



Finally, we seek to look into the aspects of the double-burden that still continues for women in rural India. In 2022-23, roughly 43 per cent of women were engaged in what is termed as social reproductive labour (Persons engaged in Status code 92 and Status code 93, See table 1). Out of those 43

per cent women, 88.2% (of women aged 15 to 65) reported that they are not part of the labour force: primarily due to the responsibilities associated with “Child Care and Personal Commitments in Home Making.”

## Results:

**Table 4: Reason for being outside Labour force for Working Age Women who are engaged in 92-93 as Principal Activity**  
Rural India, 2022-23

Reason	Women %
Not Qualified	0.48
Non Availability of Work	0.53
Health and Age Related Reason	4.15
Wanted to Continue Study	0.15
Social Reasons	4.70
Financially Well-Off	1.70
Child Care and Personal Commitments in Home Making	83.19
Others	5.09

The table also outlines various other reasons contributing to women’s absence from the labour force, such as, with a minuscule 0.48 percent of women citing a lack of qualifications and 0.53 percent attributing it to the non-availability of suitable work. Moreover, health and age-related reasons account for 4.15 percent, while a mere 0.15 percent express a desire to continue their studies. Social reasons and financial well-being contribute to 4.7 percent and 1.7 percent, respectively. In conclusion, the intricate web of gender inequality is deeply rooted in societal norms and manifest in the labour force trends. While an increase in women’s labour force participation may seemingly reflect progress, a closer look reveals underlying disparities, particularly those marred with societal norms of gender and caste-based discrimination. Such realities must be dealt in detail before an uncritical celebration of the increased workforce participation for women. (Niyati, S., &

Vijayamba, R. (2021). Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on food security and indebtedness in rural India. *Review of Agrarian Studies*, 11(1), 107-123.)

## References:

1. Beneria, L., & Sen, G. (n.d.). *Feminist Challenges To Development Economics*.
2. Boserup, E. (2013). *Urban Job Opportunities for Women*. In E. a. Boserup, *Woman’s role in economic development*. Routledge.
3. Agrawal, N., Narayan, Samhitha., & Bhattacharya., Soham (2024): “New Working Poor: Features of Increased Female Workers in India”. *Economic and Political Weekly*.
4. *Women and Work in Rural India*. Edited by V. K. Ramachandran, Madhura Swaminathan, and Shruti Nagbhushan. Tulika Books. 2020.
5. Niyati, S., & Vijayamba, R. (2021). Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on food security and indebtedness in rural India. *Review of Agrarian Studies*, 11(1), 107-123.