

Economic Participation and Gender Disparities: Evidence from Labour Force Indicators Across Social Groups in India

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines gender disparities in economic participation across major social groups in India—ST, SC, OBC, and Others—using NSSO and PLFS data from 2004–05 to 2021–22. By analyzing Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), Work Participation Rate (WPR), and unemployment rates for men and women, the study highlights persistent gender gaps and widening inequalities among social groups. The results show that women consistently record lower participation and higher unemployment, with the gap most visible among OBC and Other social groups. Despite overall economic growth, improvements in female participation remain uneven and slow. The findings underline the need for targeted policies addressing intersectional disadvantages related to both gender and social identity.

KEYWORDS:

LFPR, WPR, Unemployment Rate, Economic Participation, Caste, Inequality.

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Introduction

Gender disparity in economic participation refers to the unequal involvement of men and women in labour market activities such as seeking work, engaging in paid employment, and contributing to productive economic activities. These differences are reflected in key indicators like the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), Work Participation Rate (WPR), and unemployment rate. In most developing countries, including India, women tend to participate less in the labour market compared to men, despite improvements in education, health, and overall human development.

Gender inequality in economic participation remains a critical barrier to inclusive growth in India. The intersection of gender with social stratifiers such as caste and tribe shapes access to education,

assets, and labour market opportunities. Existing literature documents that women's labour force participation in India is influenced by socio-cultural norms, educational attainment, urbanisation, and structural changes in the economy. Social groups—particularly Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled Castes (SC)—face additional constraints arising from historical marginalisation, limited access to resources, and discrimination. This study focuses on three core indicators: Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), Work Participation Rate (WPR), and Unemployment Rate, disaggregated by gender and social group, for the period 2004–2005 to 2021–2022. The primary aims to document temporal trends in female and male participation across social groups, to quantify gender gaps within each social group, and to discuss policy implications.

Objectives of the Study

The study guided by the following objectives

1. To study the trends in LFPR, WPR, and unemployment for men and women across SC, ST, OBC, and Other social groups in India.
2. To measure the gender gap in economic participation using the available time-series data.
3. To compare how women from different social groups participate in the labour market and identify which groups face the greatest disadvantage.
4. To suggest practical policy measures to reduce gender inequality in economic participation, especially for marginalised social groups.

Data and Methodology

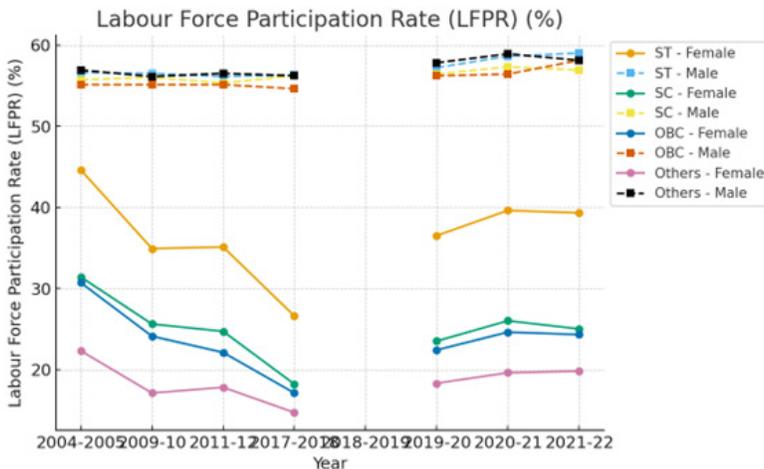
The analysis uses the tabulated dataset covering the years 2004–05, 2009–10, 2011–12, 2017–18, 2018–19, 2019–20, 2020–21, and 2021–22 for four social-group categories: ST, SC, OBC, and Others. Variables used include LFPR (female and male), WPR (female and male), and unemployment rate (female and male). The paper employs descriptive statistics (means, minima, maxima) and visual trend analysis. We compute gender gaps as the difference between male and female rates for LFPR and WPR (Male minus Female) and the difference between female and male unemployment (Female minus Male). Trends are visualised with line charts to compare trajectories across groups and genders. The analysis emphasises interpretive narrative grounded in observed patterns rather

than formal econometric causal estimation because the provided dataset is limited to aggregate rates across a small set of years.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of LFPR, WPR, and unemployment across social groups and gender reveals consistent and persistent disparities in India's labour market between 2004–05 and 2021–22. Across all years and social groups, women participate less in economic activities than men, and this gap continues despite overall economic growth.

Figure 1: LFPR trends by social group and gender (2004–2022)

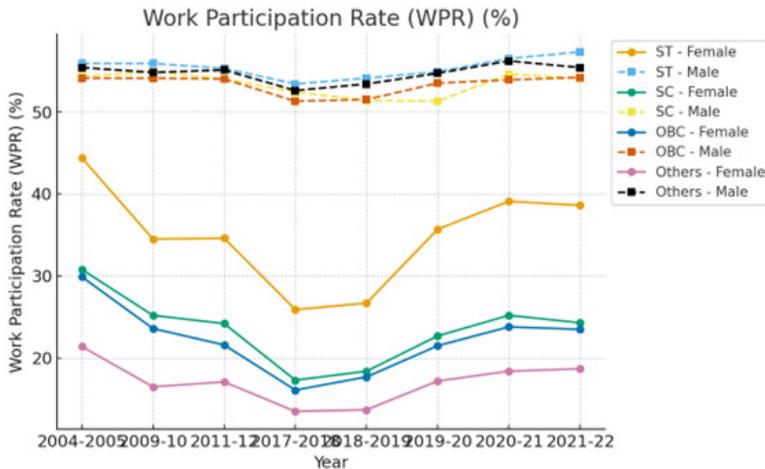


The LFPR charts show that:

- Female LFPR is consistently lower than male LFPR for all social groups.
- ST women record the highest LFPR among women, indicating relatively better engagement in economic work, possibly due to livelihood patterns based on agriculture and forest activities.
- Women from OBC and Other groups show the lowest LFPR, suggesting that social norms, education expectations, and lack of safe employment opportunities might restrict their participation more strongly.
- LFPR for women declined sharply between 2005 and 2018, especially among SC, OBC, and Others, and only showed recovery after 2019.

2. Trends in WPR (Work Participation Rate)

Figure 2: WPR trends by social group and gender (2004–2022)

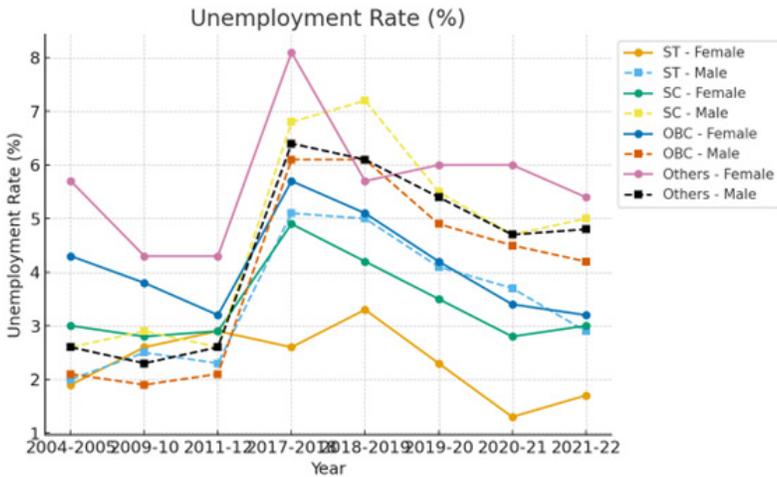


The WPR chart follows a similar pattern:

- Men consistently show higher WPR than women across all groups.
- Among women, ST women again show the highest WPR, while OBC and Other women show lower participation.
- The decline in WPR between 2004–2018 reflects shrinking opportunities for women and an increase in unpaid domestic responsibilities.
- After 2019, WPR improves slightly for all groups, likely due to economic recovery post-pandemic and rising informal sector activities.

3. Trends in Unemployment

Figure 3: Unemployment rate trends by social group and gender (2004–2022)



The unemployment charts highlight another important pattern:

- Women generally have higher unemployment than men, even though they participate less.
- The unemployment gap widens after 2018, especially among OBC and Other women.
- ST women have the lowest unemployment, reflecting their higher participation in casual and agriculture-based work, where work availability is less formal and more seasonal.
- Men in “Others” category show relatively high unemployment after 2017, indicating competition for formal-sector jobs.

4. Intersection of Caste and Gender

The charts clearly show that gender inequality becomes more severe when combined with caste disadvantage.

- ST women perform “better” only in terms of participation, not security or income.
- SC and OBC women show moderate participation but higher unemployment.
- Women in “Others” category experience the largest gender gap, showing how social norms may restrict their economic choices.

Overall, the charts illustrate deep inequalities shaped by both gender and social group identity, limiting India’s inclusive and sustainable development goals.

Suggestions / Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following policy interventions are recommended:

1. Promote Women's Employment Through Skill Development

Specialised skill training for women in SC, ST, and OBC groups can help them access better-paying jobs, especially in manufacturing, services, and digital sectors.

2. Expand Safe and Accessible Workspaces

Lack of safety and transport reduces women's mobility.

Providing secure workspaces, public transport, and safe commuting options can improve female labour participation.

3. Increase Access to Childcare and Support Services

Women often drop out of work due to household and childcare duties.

Setting up affordable childcare centres (crèches) can significantly improve women's continued workforce participation.

4. Encourage Formal and Flexible Work Opportunities

Flexible hours, work-from-home models, and part-time opportunities can help women balance work and domestic responsibilities.

5. Targeted Support for Marginalized Social Groups

ST and SC women need access to formal employment, financial literacy programmes, and entrepreneurship support. OBC and Other caste women require interventions to address social restrictions and skill mismatches.

6. Strengthen Employment Guarantee and Rural Livelihood Schemes

Programs like MGNREGA should be expanded to provide consistent and better-paying work opportunities for rural women.

7. Address Social Norms Through Awareness Campaigns

Long-term solutions require changing mindsets. Community-level programmes promoting shared domestic responsibilities and women's economic rights are essential.

8. Improve Data Collection and Monitoring

Better gender-disaggregated and caste-disaggregated labour statistics can guide effective policymaking.

Findings suggest that interventions to enhance female economic participation should be tailored to social group contexts. For ST and SC groups, measures that combine skill development, access to credits and assets, and social protection can reduce barriers. Vocational training

aligned to local labour demand, improved childcare provision, and strengthening of community-based employment schemes (with gender quotas) can promote inclusion.

For OBC and Others groups, enhancing formal sector opportunities and removing skill mismatches remain priorities. Across all groups, gender-sensitive labour policies and targeted affirmative actions are necessary to narrow the participation gap.

Conclusion

This paper documents persistent gender gaps in LFPR and WPR across India's social groups from 2004–05 to 2021–22. While male participation remains relatively stable, female participation experienced a downward trend until 2017–18 and a partial rebound thereafter. Unemployment patterns are heterogeneous across groups and over time. Policy measures must be context-specific, focusing on removing structural barriers that disproportionately affect women from marginalized social groups. Future research can extend this descriptive study by employing individual-level microdata to model causal factors behind the observed disparities.

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Conflict of interest:

The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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