Gender Disparities in Labour Force Participation in India: A Descriptive Rural–Urban Analysis

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Abstract

This studies explores the gender inequality in labour force participation in India with a particular emphasis on rural-urban variations since the year 2017- 2018 to 2022- 23. The study is descriptive in nature and uses secondary aggregate Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) statistics obtained from published Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) reports released by the National Statistical Office (NSO). Gender inequality is measured on three parameters, namely absolute gender gap, relative gender gap, and Gender Parity Index (GPI). The outcomes show that the female participation in labour force has improved significantly, especially in the rural regions, where the absolute gender gap reduced by 13.1 percentage points as compared to 5 percentage point in the urban regions. The Gender Parity Index in the rural areas improved by 0.32 to 0.52 demonstrating that gender disparities were narrowed significantly, whereas the urban GPI improved slightly by 0.27 to 0.34. In spite of these advancements, participation of male labour force still reigns in both rural and urban labour market. The results show that women are still disadvantaged and still experience structural and socio-economic limitations, particularly in the urban regions and that specific, gender-sensitive labour market policies are needed to ensure inclusive economic development in India.

Keywords: Labour Force Participation Rate, Gender Disparity, Gender Parity Index, Rural–Urban India

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1. Introduction

The concept of gender equality has been acknowledged as one of the key pillars of economic empowerment, social justice, and inclusive development in most countries. Women's labour force contribution has a significant influence on the welfare of a household, economic productivity and long-term economic development (Fluchtmann et al., 2024; Sorsa, 2015; Akhtar et al., 2023).Although major growth has been made in the field of education and health for female, gender gaps in labour force participation remain largely unchanged in many developing economies, especially in India (World Bank, 2012; Lahoti & Swaminathan, 2015). Many of these are potential indicators of the fact that women's human capital is underutilised and signs of structural, social and institutional obstacles to women's access to the labour market (ILO, 2019; World Bank, 2023).

The analysis is conducted based on the aggregate gender-wise Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) statistics reported in the annual PLFS reports generated by the National Statistical Office (NSO). Gender disparities in LFPR embrace variations in exposure to economic chances and engagement into productive pursuits. According to the World Bank estimates labour force participation of female workers in India was 31.2 per cent, in 2023, that of males was 76.8 per cent, and thus there was a large and enduring gender gap (World Development Indicators, 2023). These inequalities are quite significant relative to many other developing economies and this begs the question of whether India has inclusivity in its development process.

Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) evidence indicates that there has been some recovery in participation in the labour force by women in India since 2017 and especially since 2017-18. The male labour participation rate in rural regions rose to 80.2 per cent in 2022-23 after being at 76.4 per cent in 2017-18 and the female labour participation rate also rose from 24.6 per cent in 2017-18 to 41.5 per cent in 2022-23 (PLFS report, 2022-23). These gains though notwithstanding, the gender gap is still tremendous, which is an indication of slower convergence of male and female participation rates. Female labour force participation in cities grew slightly between 20.4 per cent in 2017-18 to 25.4 per cent in 2022-23, which was a steady increase as compared to men who remained at an average of about 74.5 per cent. The observed rural–urban differences reflect spatio-

temporal variations in the structural constraints influencing female labour force participation in India (Chatterjee & Sircar, 2021; Fernandez & Puri, 2023).

There is an increasing literature on gender differences in the labour force participation in India. According to Shiekh et al. (2019), there are notable disparities between the unemployment rates and male and female labour force participation, which points to unmitigated labour market inequalities. According to Srivastava et al. (2019), gender differences in labour force participation are high in India such that the rate of participation of females is significantly lower than that of males and global rates. These studies indicate that economic growth has not been adequate enough to curb the gender differences in participation in the labour market.

Research of recent years also points to high levels of regional differences in gender differences. According to Fernandez et al. (2024), there is a reduction in the gender disparities in participation in labour force in most industries in high-growth states (such as Tamil Nadu) and a constantly high gender disparity in states such as Uttar Pradesh. In their findings, they highlight the fact that lessening gender inequalities in labour force participation is crucial in order to experience sustainable and regionally equal growth.

In addition to quantified levels of participation, the economic role of women in India is usually undervalued since unpaid and informal employment is common. It is demonstrated by Srija and Vijay (2020) that only a third of the work performed by women is recorded in the traditional employment indicators, which is in contrast to a predecessor of three-quarters of the work of men. This underrepresentation does not only hide the true role that women play in the economy, but also the witnessed gender disparity in the labour market participation levels.

Even though the available literature gives significant information on the determinants and trends of female labour force participation, systematic rural-urban analyses based on the recent national-level data are still scarce. In addition, not many studies use multiple indicators to measure absolute and relative aspects of labour force participation inequality in gender. To fill these gaps, the current research paper analyses gender disparities in the labour force participation in India using a rural-urban analysis through PLFS data and various measures of gender gaps. In such a way, the research is useful in further developing the knowledge of spatial variations in women involvement in the labour

market, on the one hand, and providing policy-relevant knowledge towards facilitating equitable and inclusive development.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. The literature review is presented in Section 2. The data source and methodology are discussed in Section 3. The results and discussions are presented in Section 4, followed by the study conclusion in the last section.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Global Evidence on Gender Disparities in Labour Force Participation

Research from around the world has repeatedly identified the presence of gender gaps in labour force participation in economies. Righetto (2023) investigated into the importance of marital status in Italy and observed a great impact of family structures on women's labour market entry. Gevrek et al. (2022) also found that social norms, gender-role attitudes, fertility, religiosity and education inequality tend to support the male-dominated pattern of labour force participation in Turkey. It is observed that in the context of Iran, occupational segregation, gender discrimination, and restrictive social norms are among the most important factors that have caused gender inequality in contribution in the labour marketplace and restricted the process of achieving SDGs by female (Taheri et al. 2021). Taken together, these studies indicate that the gendered outcomes of the labour market remain to be influenced by socio-cultural and institutional dimensions in all countries.

Gender results are also influenced by trade, institutions and labour market structures. Yu et al. (2021) discover that the greater competition in imports in China exacerbates labour market participation difference, especially amongst women. Aldan (2021) demonstrates that despite the positive growth of female labour force participation in Turkey, it is still significantly connected with the existing gender wage disparities, partially because lower skilled women are entering the labour force. In the United States, Popov et al. (2019) present evidence that gender difference in labour force participation is greatly decreased under the influence of increased competition in credit market sectors.

2.2. Gender Disparities in Labour Force Participation in India

The gender disparities in the labour force participation in India have been very high in spite of the growing up of the economy and the increasing education levels of the females. Banerjee (2019) records the lack of change in the low level of female labour force participation in India and blames it on the social and cultural barriers. According to Kumari (2018), there is a U-shaped association between financial progress and the female labour force participation, which highlights the influence of education, the childcare accessibility, cultural norms, and the gender wages differences.

Recent researchers also touch upon structural barriers of women in India. Baral et al. (2022) demonstrate that the contribution of females in the labour force is still low as they are subjected to social norms that restrain them, lack of education, job flexibility, and discrimination at work. According to Singh et al. (2022), young females in India are much less probable than men to receive regular paid jobs and that marital status explains a significant fraction of gender wage gaps. Bishnu et al. (2024) believe that gender disparities in labour force participation are based on differences in the labour demand and the deterioration in female participation caused by the increasing male wages and household income impacts. India has also high indicators of labour force participation and unemployment with regard to the gender gap; the article Kasabe (2024) reports that gender inequality still persists between males and females.

There are sub-national pieces of evidence in India that show that gender disparities even in the areas that have seen economic growth still exist. According to Pandey (2022), a huge gender disparity in the labour participation in Bihar is reported despite economic development, and therefore the need to have women play a bigger role in the development process in order to achieve gender equality.

2.3. Household Dynamics, Gender Attitudes, and Mobility Constraints

Gender attitudes and the factors at the household level are important determinants of women's involvement in the labour market. As demonstrated by Preston (2023), gender role attitudes and education levels converged by a 6.5 percentage point between 2001-05 and 2015-19, and this led to gender differences in labour force participation converging.

Farré et al. (2022) show that commuting time impacts married women in disproportional ways, where every 10-minute increment in commuting time decreases women involvement by 4.4 per cent, and the effect of the same on men does not change significantly. Hu et al. (2023) discover that disruption of household arrangements have a negative impact on the labour force participation by females, especially married women, and that shows the unequal distribution of unpaid domestic labour. Molina et al. (2022) also demonstrate that increased female labour force reduces the gender differences in aspirations and achievement, which also impacts positively on the educational investments and future opportunities of the girls.

2.4. Research gap and Contribution of the study

This paper is mainly descriptive in nature and highlights the gender gap in the labour force participation across rural and urban areas in time through a set of gender gap indicators based on recent data from the PLFS.

Using the PLFS data from 2017-18 to 2022-23, the present study focuses on the gender disparity indicators: Absolute Gender Gap, Relative Gender Gap and Gender Parity Index, These indices, have been used in the past to analyze gender gaps in labour force participation, However, these have been specifically be used here to analyze the different rates of gender convergence in rural and urban labour markets. The results show that there is a gender convergence in rural India more than that in urban India over the study period in particular.

3. Data and Methodology

3.1. Data Source

This paper examines gender inequalities in the labour force participation in India and particularly the rural-urban inequality. The paper uses Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data which is an annual survey conducted by the National Statistical Office (NSO), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI). The PLFS is the most effective and consistent source of labour market data in India and is based on internationally accepted standards.

The study uses the information available from the published annual reports of PLFS gender-wise Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) data reported in the PLFS annual reports 2017-18 to 2022-23.

The Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) as per Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) is the proportion of persons in labour force (persons who are working or seeking/work available) to the people. The LFPR in the present study is the number of employed and unemployed persons who are seeking/available for work as a percentage of the population in the age group 15 years and above.

3.2. Analytical Framework

To examine gender disparities in labour force participation, the study employs three complementary indicators: Absolute Gender Gap (AGG)**,** Relative Gender Gap (RGG), and Gender Parity Index (GPI)**.** Together, these measures capture both absolute and proportional differences between male and female labour force participation rates.

Trend analysis and computation of gender disparity indicators are carried out using Microsoft Excel**,** which is used for data organization, graphical presentation, and calculation of the indices.

3.3. Measurement of Gender Disparity

3.3.1. Absolute Gender Gap (AGG)

The absolute gender gap measures the difference between male and female labour force participation rates in percentage points.

AGG (Rural) = Male LFPR (Rural) - Female LFPR (Rural) (1)

AGG (Urban) = Male LFPR (Urban) - Female LFPR (Urban) (2)

A higher value of AGG indicates a wider gender disparity in labour force participation.

3.3.2. Relative Gender Gap (RGG)

The relative gender gap expresses the absolute gender gap as a percentage of male labour force participation, thereby capturing the proportional extent of female disadvantage relative to the prevailing labour market norm.

$$\text{RGG (Rural)} = \frac{Absolute\ Gender\ Gap\ (Rural)}{Male\ LFPR(Rural)} \times 100 \quad (3)$$

$$\text{RGG (Urban)} = \frac{Absolute\ Gender\ Gap\ (Urban)}{Male\ LFPR\ (Urban)} \times 100 \quad (4)$$

The Relative Gender Gap (RGG) assumes the labour market participation of men as the reference point given that the participation rates of men are usually higher and more stable in the labour markets.[2] Given the patriarchal nature of Indian labour market, male participation is generally considered as the norm for the labour market, with female disadvantage measured against it in the field of labour market inequality literature. The RGG thus reflects the missing contribution of women's labour force participation, as a proportion of the male participation rate.

3.3.3. Gender Parity Index (GPI)

The Gender Parity Index measures the ratio of female to male labour force participation rates and provides an intuitive indicator of gender equality.

$$\text{GPI (Rural)} = \frac{Female\ LFPR\ (Rural)}{Male\ LFPR\ (Rural)} \quad (5)$$

$$\text{GPI (Urban)} = \frac{Female\ LFPR(Urban)}{Male\ LFPR\ (Urban)} \quad (6)$$

- **GPI = 1** indicates equality between male and female labour force participation
- **GPI < 1** indicates higher male participation

[2] Male labour force participation is chosen as the denominator because male participation is the prevailing labour market benchmark and the dominant labour force attachment that is used in labour economics literature (Mincer, 1962; Goldin, 1995; International Labour Organization, 2019). Hence, the Relative Gender Gap is the proportionate disadvantage of women's participation in the labour market based on the established gender labour market norm. While using the female LFPR as denominator may exaggerate proportional differences as participation rates among females are generally lower and less stable than for males across regions and over time.

- **GPI > 1** indicates higher female participation

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. Trends in Labour Force Participation Rates by Gender and Region

Table 1 shows the labour force participation rate (LFPR) of both men and women in rural and city India in the year 2017-18 and 2022-23. The findings indicate that there are rural-urban gender differences in the participation of both genders with time. Male participation in the labour force in rural regions also exhibits a slow growth with 76.4 per cent participation in 2017-18 and 80.2 per cent in 2022-23. The participation of female labour force in the rural regions shows a much steeper rise as it has increased by 24.6 per cent to 41.5 per cent in the same period. This significantly increased growth signifies that there has been a significant upsurge in labour market involvement among women in rural India.

Table 1: Labour force participation rates (in %)

Rural		
Year	**Male**	**Female**
2017-18	76.4	24.6
2018-19	76.4	26.4
2019-20	77.9	33
2020-21	78.1	36.5
2021-22	78.2	36.6
2022-23	80.2	41.5
Urban		
Year	**Male**	**Female**
2017-18	74.5	20.4
2018-19	73.7	20.4
2019-20	74.6	23.3
2020-21	74.6	23.2
2021-22	74.7	23.8
2022-23	74.5	25.4

Source: PLFS report (2022-23)

Conversely, the urban male labour force participation has been fairly constant with a slight fluctuation of 74.5 per cent in 2017-18 and 2022-23. The number of women participating in the labour force in urban areas grows by 20.4 per cent in 2017-18 to 25.4 per cent in 2022-23, but the growth rate is much slower than in rural areas. Regardless of the improvements in both areas, there is a large gap between the genders throughout the period.

4.2. Absolute Gender Gap in Labour Force Participation

Absolute gender gap (AGG), which is the disparity between male and female rates of labour force participation, gives an idea of the level of gender inequality. Table 2 show the trends in absolute gender gap in rural and urban areas. The absolute gender gap in rural regions decreases steadily between 51.8 percentage points in 2017-18 to 38.7 percentage points in 2022-23, or by 13.1 percentage points. This gradual drop indicates the accelerated increase in the female labour force participation compared to their male counterparts in the rural India.

Table 2: Absolute Gender Gap in Rural-Urban Labour Force Participation (in %)

	Absolute Gender Gap	
Year	Rural	Urban
2017-18	51.8	54.1
2018-19	50	53.3
2019-20	44.9	51.3
2020-21	41.6	51.4
2021-22	41.6	50.9
2022-23	38.7	49.1

Source: Authors' Calculation

The absolute gender gap in urban areas decreased by only 5 percentage points during the study period, going from 54.1 percentage points in 2017–18 to 49.1 percentage points in 2022–23.While there was a significant reduction in gender gap in rural labour markets, urban markets showed a significantly higher gap in participation in the labour market. The urban gender gap in the labour force participation rate was marginally unchanged at approximately 50 percentage points between 2019–20 and 2022–23, suggesting overall lack of enhancement in improving females' contribution in the labour force compared to

men. These results indicate that gender convergence was observed in rural labour markets, but not in urban labour markets.

4.3. Relative Gender Gap in Labour Force Participation

The relative gender gap (RGG) is used to present absolute differences in a percentage of the labour force participation of men to capture proportional differences. Table 3 show tendencies in the relative gender gap in rural and urban regions. In India, the gender gap in rural areas diminishes considerably, as the gap in 2017-18 was 67.8 per cent and in 2022-23 it is 48.3 per cent, a difference of 19.5 percentage points. This massive drop shows that the labour force participation rates by female have risen at a higher rate as compared to that of men in the rural areas.

The relative gender gap in urban areas also decreases but much more gradually, i.e., by 72.6 per cent in 2017-18, to 65.9 per cent in 2022-23, or by 6.7 percentage points. The urban relative gender gap is more constant and higher than the rural one throughout the study period, showing the presence of more and more aggressive obstacles to women participation in the labour force in urban areas. Such results imply that compared to the earlier days, gender gaps in labour force participation are bridging in both regions albeit at a slower rate in the rural areas than the urban areas.

Table 3: Relative Gender Gap in Rural-Urban Labour Force Participation (in %)

	Relative Gender Gap	
Year	**Rural**	**Urban**
2017-18	67.8	72.6
2018-19	65.4	72.3
2019-20	57.6	68.8
2020-21	53.3	68.9
2021-22	53.2	68.1
2022-23	48.3	65.9

Source: Authors' Calculation

4.4. Gender Parity Index in Labour Force Participation

Gender Parity Index (GPI) directly indicates gender equality, which is the ratio of woman to man labour force participation. Table 4 shows the tendency of the GPI of rural and urban regions. The GPI in the rural regions rises by 0.32 in 2017-18 up to 0.52 in 2022-23, indicating a significant change of female participation compared to that of males. This 0.20 point growth shows that there is some significant improvement in attaining gender equity in rural labour markets.

In cities, the GPI increases by 0.27 in 2017-18 to 0.34 in 2022-23; this is only 0.07 points of the growth. In as much as the positive growth is an indicator of some change, there is still a lot that urban regions can do to lessen the disparity between the rural and the urban regions in terms of gender equality. All in all, the GPI values are below unity in the two regions, which signifies further male dominance in the labour force participation. The rural areas however improve faster which points out inequality in the developmental stages of the regions.

Table 4: Gender Parity Index in Rural-Urban Labour Force Participation

	Gender Parity Index	
Year	**Rural**	**Urban**
2017-18	0.32	0.27
2018-19	0.35	0.28
2019-20	0.42	0.31
2020-21	0.47	0.31
2021-22	0.47	0.32
2022-23	0.52	0.34

Source: Authors' Calculation

4.5. Findings of the Study

These findings show that the gap in gender differences in labour force participation in India has been narrowed meaningfully between the start and end of the study period but in the rural regions it has been more effective and sustained than in urban regions. The absolute and relative gender gaps are decreased; the Gender Parity Index in both regions has got better. However, there are still relatively high gender inequalities in urban labour

markets, which may indicate the existence of more powerful structural, institutional, and socio-cultural divisions that hinder the women participation.

Such results support the idea that policy interventions in the region, especially the urban ones, should focus on mitigating the limitations of inflexible working schedules, safety issues, and inequalities in care loads to facilitate inclusive and gender-equitable labour market performance.

5. Conclusion

The analysis shows that there has been a noteworthy growth in the female labour force in India between 2017-18 and 2022-23, and rural regions have a higher rate of improvement compared to urban regions. The fact that gender gaps are narrowing (evidenced by the decreasing absolute and relative gender gaps and the increasing values of the Gender Parity Index) is a sign of slow progress in changing women's position in the labour force to be more inclusive. Nevertheless, the male involvement still prevails, especially in the city labour markets, where it has been slow to progress.

The results indicate that though the rural female involvement has been advantageous due to the economic need and informal sources of employment, urban female involvement still experiences some structural barriers which include lack of job flexibility, safety issues and non-payment of care. These limitations need to be remedied by developing specific policies including childcare, flexibility in employees work schedules, skill training and enhanced workplace safety in order to bring meaningful gender equality in the labour participation. In the future, the analysis can be expanded to state- or district-specific trends and sector-specific employment to offer more in-depth information regarding the regional disparities.

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