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A Gendered Analysis of the Labour Market in India with Special Reference to Assam

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Abstract

After witnessing a declining trend in female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) from 2004-05 to 2017-18 despite faster economic growth in India, it has improved significantly in the post pandemic period. Similar trend can be witnessed in Assam. Historically, Assam's FLFPR lagged far behind the national average and her Northeast neighbours'. However, in recent times, Assam recorded a very high FLFPR that effectively outpace the national average. Most expansion happens in rural Assam and it is driven by self-employment in agriculture sector. In this paper we study the reasons for such expansion and how it impacts on women's burden of care work. We mostly use existing empirical literature and Periodic Labour Force Survey and time use survey reports.

There is a huge debate on what explains recent increase in LFPR. Empirical evidence suggests that there has been a mix of factors that lead to the expansion of female LFPR. The dominant reason is distress driven particularly after the pandemic. To sustain the increasing cost of living even in rural areas, women are forced to join agriculture and other allied activity sector as self-employed or helper. Another reason for such expansion is the change in the methodology of measuring the labour force. The updated methodology captures women working in unpaid economic roles such as assisting on family farms or enterprises. To some extent, Government's targeted initiatives also initiate such expansion.

However, women disproportionately bear the burden of unpaid household chores and care work even after recent increase in female LFPR. As per Time Use Survey 2024 conducted by National Statistical Office reveals that women perform unpaid domestic and care work nearly for five

hours a day, almost eight times as much as men perform. This imbalance reflects the double burden borne by women due to patriarchal structure of the society. It has implication for their physical and mental health. This calls for the expansion of accessible and affordable care infrastructure particularly for children and old age people.

1. Introduction

Women's participation in labour force is an important indicator of her economic empowerment as it reflects her ability to contribute to the economy and attain financial independence. Hence, a gendered lens needs to be used while studying the trends and composition of labour market. A close observation of the labour market in India reveals a few paradoxes. After witnessing a declining trend in female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) from 2004-05 to 2017-18 despite faster economic growth, it has improved significantly from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 41.7% in 2023-24 for women aged 15 years and above. Interestingly, such expansion is more evident in rural areas and is largely driven by the expansion in own-account and unpaid work category of self-employment activities in agriculture and the unorganised sector. There has also been significant reduction in the share of women workers in regular salaried jobs in the organised sector and the industry and services sector over the last few years (Ara and Shrivastav, 2025).

However, there is wide inter-state variations in female labour force participation in India. UNFPA (2025) shows that Delhi and Lakshadweep record lowest FLFPR (below 30%). The FLFPR in Delhi and Lakshadweep are 18.5% and 17.1% respectively. FLFPR in Large states such as Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh ranges from 40% to 55% due to heterogeneity in economic structure, labour market opportunities, and social norms. In contrast, north-eastern and hilly states, such as Meghalaya, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland record female LFPR exceeding 60%. Similar trend is noted in Assam as well, although historically, it recorded some of the lowest FLFPR figures in India consistently lagging behind both the national average and its Northeast neighbours. Assam records 50% in 2024-25 outpacing the national average.

There is a huge debate on what explains recent increase in LFPR in India? Empirical evidence simultaneously validates parts of the **U-shaped curve (Tam, 2011)** theory at the educational extremes**,**

distress-driven and government initiative led expansion in rural areas. Researchers also claim that the recent increase in female LFPR is also because of methodological changes in how female labour force is calculated. U-shaped curve indicates that women with no or a lower education join agriculture or other informal sector due to push factors or in other words they are forced to join labour market due to economic necessity. As household income or education level improves, FLFPR starts declining and participation rises with the improvement in the level education. However, many studies argue that the recent increase in FLFPR is distress driven rather than due to pull factors (Deshpande, 2025). Government initiatives also has a role to play in the expansion of FLFPR.

However, there is also implication for the expansion of FLFPR on women's work burden. As women perform most of the household chores and care work, it is important to know whether their increase participation in economic activity reduce their burden of reproductive work.

In this backdrop, we would like to ask

1. Is the recent expansion of LFPR in Assam because of pull factors or distress driven?
2. What are the sectors which witness the expansion in LFPR in Assam and Why?
3. Does the expansion of LFPR reduce female's reproductive/care work?

To answer these questions, we used existing empirical literature, Periodic Labour Force Survey and Time Use Survey reports. We would start with the definition of female LFPR (section 2), followed by an empirical review of recent trends in India and Assam (section 3). In section 4, we would discuss the theories that explain the expansion. We would discuss the impact of the expansion of FLFPR on females' reproductive burden in section 6, followed by conclusion in section 7.

2. Definition of Female LFPR

In India Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) is measured as the percentage of women aged 15 and older who are either employed or actively seeking work, relative to the total female population in that age group (NSO, 2024). Ministry of Statistical and Programme Implementation conducts Periodic Labour Force Survey that collects data on India's labour market and estimates labour market indicators such as FLFPR, Worker population ratio (WPR), unemployment rate etc. The survey uses two reference periods to categorize women's economic activity-

Usual Status (PS+SS): This records a person's activity over a reference period of one year. It includes the *Principal Status* referring to the major time spent on an activity and *Subsidiary Economic Status* referring to any economic activity pursued for 30 days or more during the year.

Current Weekly Status (CWS): This captures a person's activity status during a reference period of the last 7 days. A person is considered employed if he/she worked for at least one hour on at least one day during those 7 days.

There has also been a methodological change in how labour force is calculated. Following updated guidelines from the International Labour Organisation (ILO), India's Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) records unpaid helpers in household enterprises as employed against earlier methods followed by National Sample Survey (NSS) (Waghmare, 2025, Verick, 2017).

3. Trends of FLFPR in India and Assam

Female labour force participation rates in India exhibits a puzzling trend. Verick (2014) presents the trends of female and male LFPR across rural and urban areas from 1993-94 to 2011-12 using various rounds of National Sample Survey data. Both in rural and urban areas, female participation rates declined, although there are considerable variations between urban and rural areas. There had also been a wide gender differences in participation.

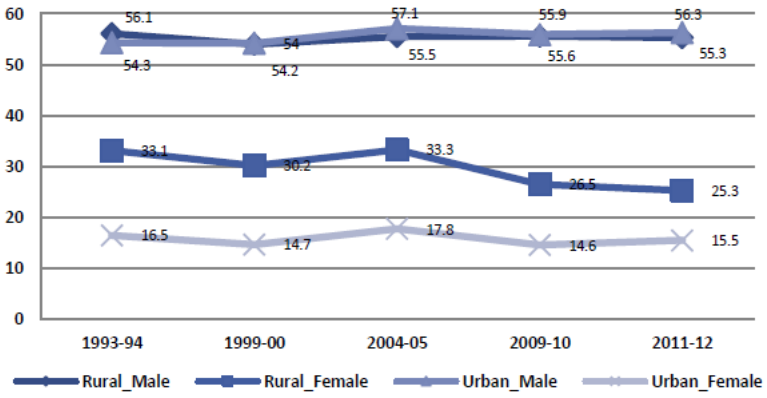

Fig1: Falling FLFPR (Usual Status) from 1993-94 to 2011-12
Source: National Sample Survey, Various Rounds (taken from Verick, 2014)

The picture has become reverse since 2017-18. The estimates published in UNFPA (2025) show that over the period of six years from 2017-18 to 2023-24, FLFPR has increased significantly from 23.3% in 2017–18 to 41.7% in 2023–24. There has been a sharp increase in FLFPR between 2021–22 and 2023–24, when female LFPR rose by 8.9 percentage points. The huge gap between male and female LFPR is very evident during this period.

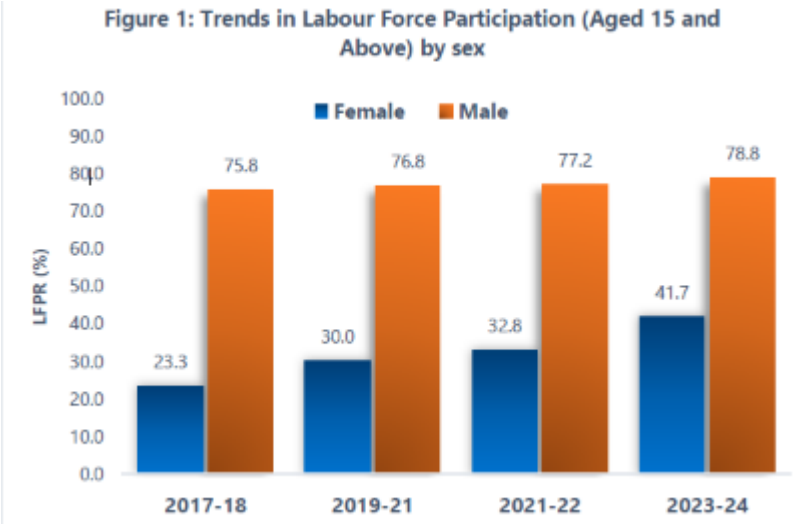

Fig2: Trends in LFPR
Source: PLF surveys (taken from UNFPA 2025)

Rural areas across all states witness significant increase in female LFPR. Assam is not an exception and recorded substantial increase in FLFPR in the post pandemic year (2021-22) (IWWAGE, 2025).

In rural areas of Assam, the increase in FLFPR is due to increase in self-employment. The share of self-employed women workers significantly increased from18.5 per cent in 2017-18 to 77.3 per cent in 2023-24. This increase is substantially higher than the national average. Consequently, there has been a decline in the proportions of casual and regularly salaried workers between 2017-18 and 2023-24. Urban areas of Assam also shows similar trend with share of women self-employed increasing from 32.3 per cent in 2017-18 to 48.9 per cent in 2023-24, and the proportion of women in regular salaried work declining from 62.8 per cent to 47.9 per cent during the same time period (IWWAGE, 2025). The majority of self-employed women in rural Assam are own-account workers, accounting for 63.7 per cent of the group. Similar composition is present in urban areas too. This is consistent with the national trend.

The sectoral distribution in rural Assam also mirrors the national trend ((IWWAGE, 2025). Most expansion in FLFPR happens in agriculture and allied activities with 79% of females employed in this sector followed by manufacturing of textiles and retail trade. Surprisingly in urban areas also, it is the agriculture and allied sector (18%) that absorbs most women followed by education (16%) and retail trade (11%).

4. What explains the expansion of Female LFPR

The recent substantial expansion of female LFPR can be attributed to rural economic distress, methodological changes in defining employed (Deshpande, 2025; IWWAGE, 2025) and also to some extent government initiative (Ravi and Kapoor, 2024). Many argue that the recent expansion of FLFPR is distress driven. Most females work as ‘helpers’ in agriculture activities and household enterprises. There has been no expansion in formal salaried jobs. The expansion became substantial after the COVID-19 pandemic. Pandemic caused job losses and reduced

income of the primary income earner, mostly men, which compelled women to join agriculture and household enterprises as helper.

There has also been a methodological change in how labour force is calculated. Following updated guidelines from the International Labour Organisation (ILO), India's Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) records unpaid helpers in household enterprises as employed against earlier methods followed by National Sample Survey (NSS). This methodological change results in a substantial increase in Employed (Waghmare, 2025, Verick, 2017).

5. Does the expansion of LFPR reduce female's reproductive/care work?

Women in India bear majority of the burden of household work and caregiving. The low female LFPR till 2011-12 can be attributed to this reason. However, what is the implication for the recent increase in female LFPR? National Statistical Office Time Use Survey 2024 data show that women work about five hours a day on unpaid domestic and care work. It is almost eight times as much as men. This does not merely reflect household inequality but shows the structural constraint on women's participation in paid work (Khan and Divakar, 2026).

6. Conclusion

Our study reflects that after persistently low female LFPR for decades, it suddenly started increasing particularly in rural areas of India. Assam also witnesses a similar trends. The expansion is mostly in the self-employed section of the labour force. Researchers have argued that there has been a mix of factors that lead to the expansion of female LFPR. The dominant reason is distress driven particularly after the pandemic. To sustain the increasing cost of living even in rural areas, women are forced to join agriculture and other allied activity sector as self-employed or helper. Another reason for such expansion is the change in the methodology of measuring the labour force. The methodology captures women working in unpaid economic roles such as assisting on family farms or enterprises as employed. To some extent, Government's targeted initiatives also initiate such expansion.

However, the expansion of female LFPR has not reduced the burden of reproductive and care work of females. With the expansion of economic activities performed by women, there has actually been double burden on women. This has implication for their mental and physical health. Therefore, steps needs to be taken for the expansion of accessible and affordable care infrastructure particularly for children. This also calls for the formalisation and professionalisation of care work, including fair wages, labour protections, and access to social security for care workers. Redistribution of care work within the household is equally important to promote more equitable sharing.

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