Macroeconomic Analysis and Skills Training (MAST) Workshop

The Participation Paradox: Women's Work and Time-Use in India, 2017–18 to 2025

Extensive and intensive margins of labour market engagement: evidence from PLFS and the Time-Use Survey

Tanu M. Goyal
Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations
Joint work with Shravani Prakash, Ketaki Gaikwad and Arjun Tandon

Jakarta, Indonesia · 29 October 2026



Female work force participation has increased, but there is significant untapped potential

- Between 2017–18 and 2025, the number of working women nearly doubled, from 104 million to 201 million.
- This increase was driven largely by agriculture, where women’s share of employment rose from 57% to 60%.
- The shift was concentrated in rural areas and was largely characterized by self-employment and unpaid family work.
- Female LFPR in 2025 stood at 40%, below the world average of 44% and far lower than male LFPR at 79%.
- Women contribute only about 18% of GDP in India
    - Bringing more women into good jobs could add more than 30% to GDP and is therefore central to India’s 2047 development vision.
- Women’s productive participation in the labour market is held back by constraints on both the demand and supply sides.
    - Granular surveys and micro-level data help identify where these constraints bind.

Broader Labour market trends

- **Incomplete transformation:** Agriculture’s share of workers fell from 70% (1980–81) to 42% (2022–23), but still employs 253 million.
- **Manufacturing stagnant:** Its share of the workforce has hovered around 10–11% for four decades.
- **Services led the shift:** Its share in total employment grew from 19% to 47%; industry and services together account for around 349 million non-farm jobs.
- **Job quality is weak:** Over half of workers are self-employed and a fifth are casual labourers; only about a quarter hold regular wage or salaried jobs.

Source: Goyal et al. (2026); PLFS 2017–18 and 2025. Shares are 2017–18 → 2025.

How this presentation is structured

Discusses two aspects:

1. First, to what extent do women participate in the labour market (the extensive margin)?
2. Second, how intensively do they engage once they are in it (the intensive margin)?

We answer these questions by combining two of India's large-scale surveys: the PLFS, which measures labour force participation, and the Time-Use Survey.

1

Participation
Extensive margin

Who is in the labour force, split by rural and urban areas and across the three major sectors (agriculture, industry and services).

2

Intensity of work
Intensive margin

Using the PLFS: the type of work women do (self-employed, regular salaried or casual), how many hours they work and what they earn.

3

Time use
Time-Use Survey

How much of women's time goes to unpaid care and domestic work; whether it keeps them out of paid work and eats into leisure and self-care.

4

Policy priorities
Implications

Bringing the findings together into a short set of policy priorities and recommendations.

Has the extensive-margin expansion been matched on the intensive margin?

The period between 2017-18 and 2025 witnessed a marked expansion in workforce participation across India, though the nature of this expansion differed sharply across gender and geographies.

Participation rates are binary. They record *whether* a woman works, **not how much, on what terms, or what that work displaces**.

Table 1. Analytical framework

Margin	Question	Indicators	Source
Extensive	Is she in work?	WPR; employment status; sector	PLFS
Intensive: market	How much, and on what terms?	Weekly hours; hourly wages	PLFS
Intensive: time	What does paid work displace?	Unpaid domestic and care work; self-care	TUS

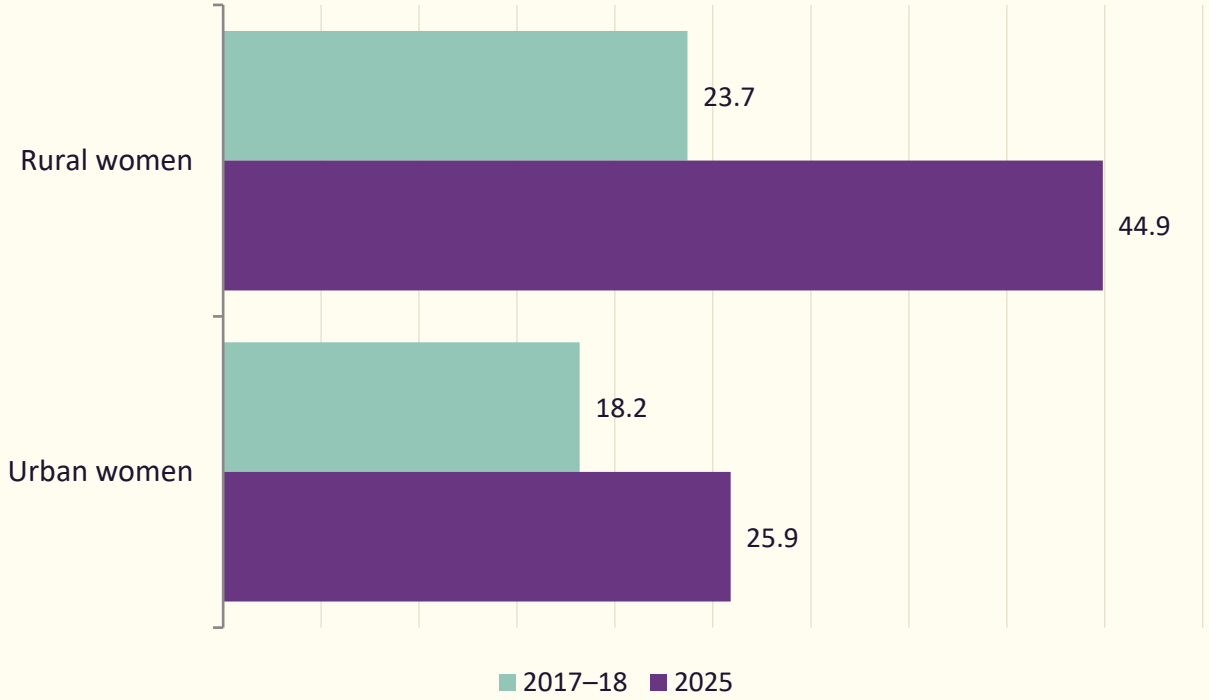
Does the expansion on the extensive margin carry through to hours, earnings and time allocation?

We examine that for India using micro data.

WPR: worker population ratio. PLFS: Periodic Labour Force Survey. TUS: Time-Use Survey (MoSPI).

The rise in women's work is concentrated in rural India

Figure 1. Female worker population ratio by sector of residence, %



- Since around 2015, India has increased its focus towards a "women-led development" agenda, under which a broad range of policy and institutional reforms were introduced
- The female workforce doubled between 2017–18 and 2025, from 104 to 201 million (PLFS): In % terms, female worker population ratios (WPRs) rose from 22% in 2017-18 to 38% in 2025.
- This headline expansion, however, has to be read with caveats.
  - While rural female WPR nearly doubled; urban female WPR rose by under 8 points.
- In rural areas men shifted away from the primary sector over this period and agriculture has become increasingly feminised
- In urban areas, men's sectoral distribution has remained constant, while women's employment in the secondary sector fell more significantly, but was only absorbed minimally by the tertiary sector, while urban women employed in agriculture rose from 7.5% to 11.3%

Source: Authors' calculations, PLFS 2017–18 and 2025.

Women's employment moved towards agriculture, against the transformation pattern

Table 2. Share of employment in the primary sector, %

Group	2017–18	2025	Change (pp)
Rural men	54.1	47.2	−6.9
Rural women	70.7	73.3	**+2.6**
Urban women	7.5	11.3	**+3.8**

- Rural men moved out of agriculture; rural women moved further in.
- Women in crop and animal production rose from 54 million to over 100 million.
- **Agriculture is now the largest single employer of urban women.**

Source: Authors' calculations, PLFS 2017–18 and 2025.

New entrants came through self-employment and from lower education levels

Table 3. Rural women by employment status, million (share, %)

Status	2017–18	2025
Own-account worker	13.9 (18.6)	**56.0 (37.2)**
Unpaid family worker	28.8 (38.6)	49.3 (32.8)
Regular salaried	7.9 (10.5)	13.9 (9.3)

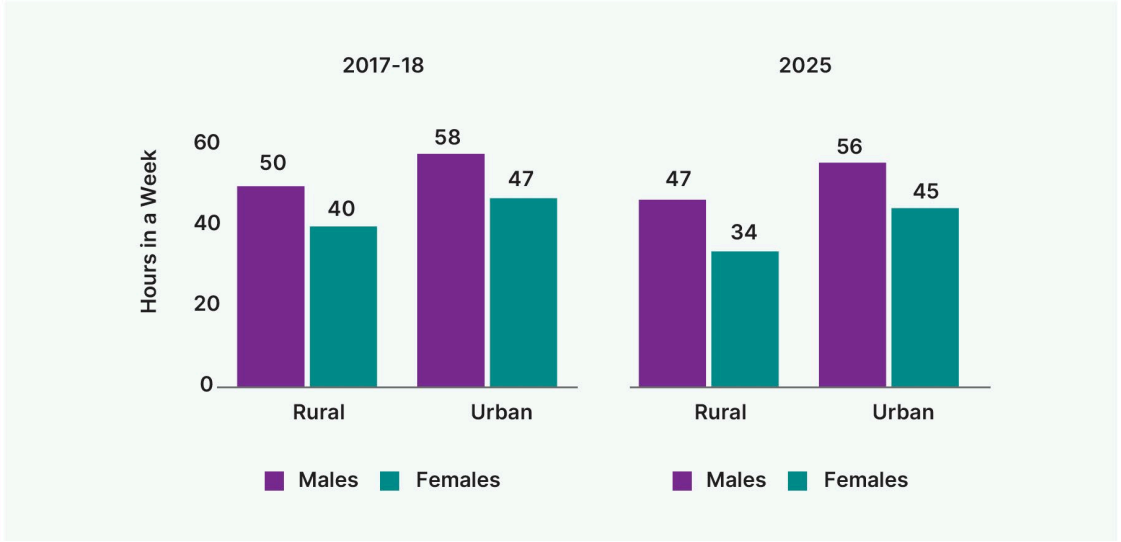
Table 4. Change in female WPR, pp

Group	Change
Below primary	**+19.9**
Literate, no schooling	**+20.1**
Graduate	+7.2
Postgraduate	+5.5

Source: Authors' calculations, PLFS 2017–18 and 2025. Married women's WPR rose from 20.9% to 37.3%.

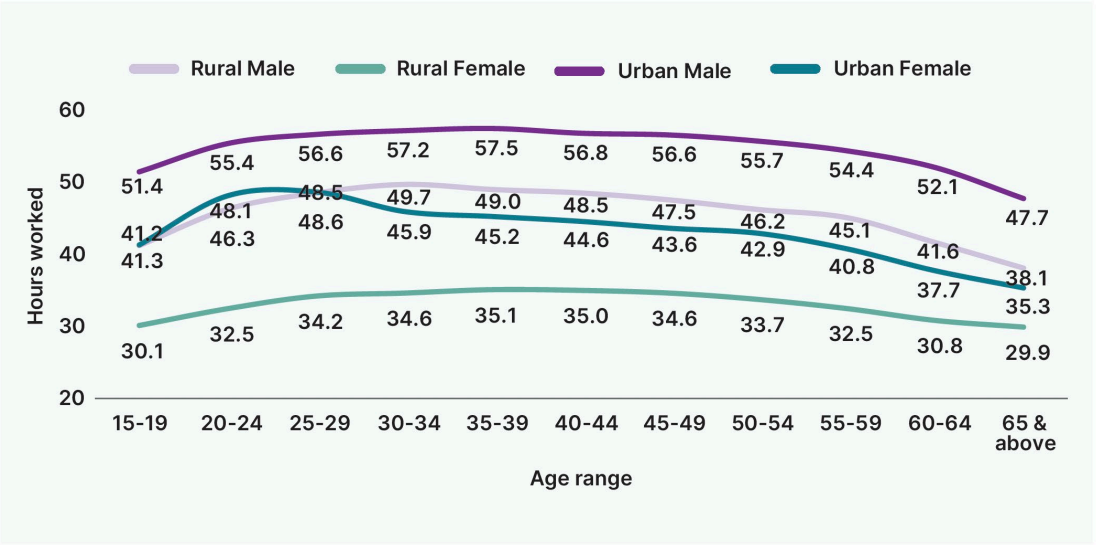
Participation rose while hours per worker fell, most steeply for rural women and for urban women at their prime age bracket

Figure 2. Average weekly hours, 2017–18 to 2025



Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025.
Note: The average total hours worked in a week are calculated for activity 1 as per Current Weekly Status (CWS) in PLFS.

Figure 3. Average Weekly Working Hours across Age Groups in 2025



Source: Authors' calculation using PLFS 2017-18 and 2025
Note: The average total hours worked in a week are calculated for activity 1 as per Current Weekly Status (CWS) in PLFS.

Manufacturing sector exhibits the larger gender gap in hours worked, while services reflect near parity

Between 2017-18 and 2025, it is observed that working-hour gaps vary by sector, with the sharpest movements in agriculture and in the manufacture of textiles, wearing apparel and tobacco.

Agriculture

During this period, in the agriculture sector, hours fell for both men and women in rural and urban areas, while the gap held steady at around 10 hours. This is consistent with the sector absorbing more women at lower average hours, reinforcing the distress-entry reading of the participation data.

Manufacturing

Manufacturing sector exhibits the largest and growing gender gap in hours worked.

- The gap widened in textiles, apparel and tobacco as women's hours fell more steeply than men's. In rural areas it grew from 11 to 21 hours in textiles and from 19 to 21 hours in apparel.
- This points to women moving into informal, piece-rate or own-account work rather than regularised factory jobs.

Services

In the services sectors, gaps in education and health remained narrow and largely stable, and IT continued to show full parity.

This points to the importance of creating more formal sector and high-skilled jobs for women.

The gender wage gap widened, most in the labour market where women are concentrated

Table 5. Average monthly wages

Indicator	Rural	Urban
Wage growth, men	+65%	+57%
Wage growth, women	+41%	+51%
Women’s wage / men’s, 2017–18	53%	—
Women’s wage / men’s, 2025	**45%**	—

Table 6. Male-to-female hourly wage ratio

Sector	2017–18	2025
Tobacco products, rural	1.9	**2.1**
Textiles, rural	1.6	**1.8**
Agriculture, rural	1.6	**1.7**
Agriculture, urban	2.0	2.0
Computer prog., urban	1.2	1.2

Source: Authors’ calculations, PLFS 2017–18 and 2025. Ratio of 1.0 denotes parity. The rural monthly gap rose from about ₹4,200 to over ₹8,000.

Care duties, not skills or jobs, keep women out

Table 7. Primary reason for not being in the labour force, %

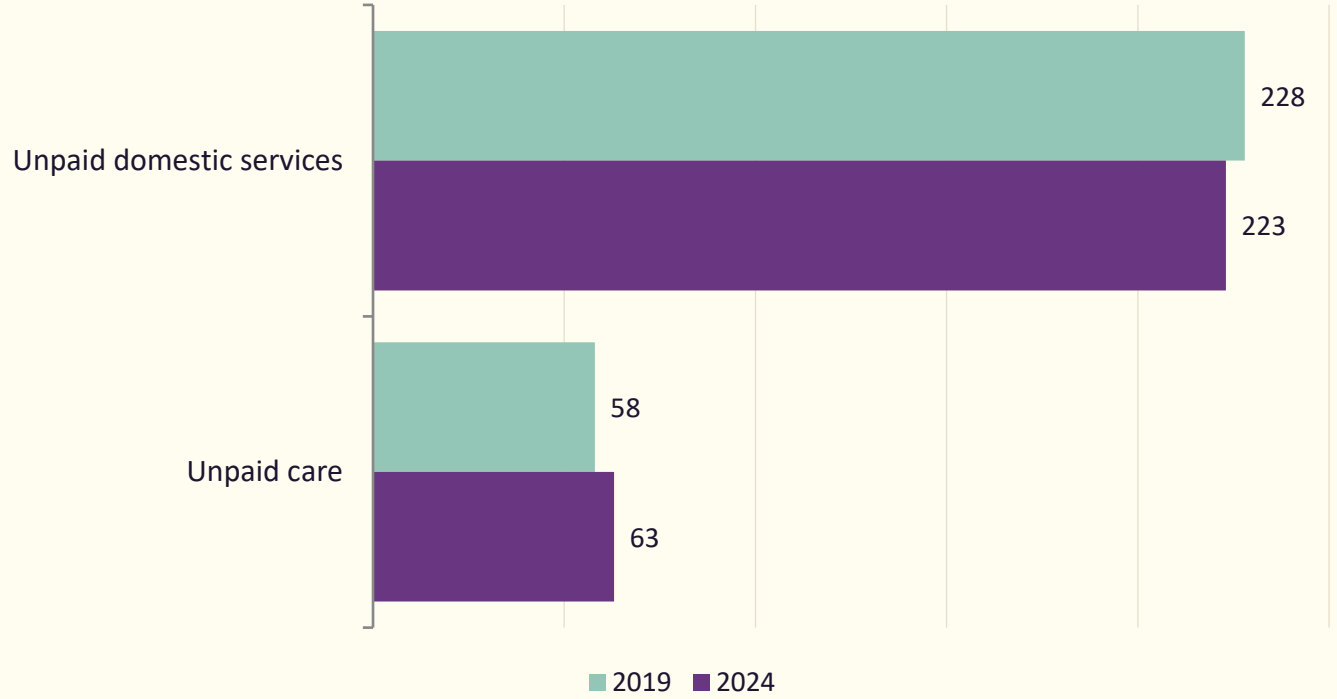
Reason	2025		2021-22	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Did not have the required training/qualification	1.2	0.8	1.9	0.9
Non-availability of work at a convenient location	0.2	0.7	0.3	0.8
Health/age related reason	37.5	14.1	33.0	12.0
Want to continue study	55.3	17.2	57.5	16.7
Social reasons	0.2	3.2	0.3	4.4
Financially well-off	0.8	0.8	0.6	0.9
Child care/personal commitments at home	1.0	60.0	1.3	59.0
Others	3.8	3.2	5.1	5.3

Source: PLFS 2021-22 and PLFS 2025

- Women's labour force participation is significantly affected by their domestic responsibility
- PLFS data reveals that supply side constraint over-power demand side issues when it comes to women's labourforce participation.
- PLFS identifies the constraint; it cannot measure how it binds.
- Time-use data further helps to understand the exact allocation of time between paid and unpaid work.

The unpaid work gap did not narrow over the period of the participation surge

Figure 4. Gender gap in unpaid work (men-women), minutes per day, ages 15–59



- Combined, women undertake about 286 more minutes of unpaid domestic and care work a day than men.
- In every paid category the gap reverses: men spend 56 to 162 more minutes a day.
- The care gap widened; the domestic services gap reduced marginally.

Source: Time-Use Survey 2019 and 2024; minutes per participant per day.

For employed women, paid work is absorbed by compressing self-care

Table 8. Minutes spent in a day on an average per participant by their Principal Activity Status (All versus Working) in unpaid activities, paid activities and other activities as major activity (age 15-59)

Principal activity status	Activity	2019				2024			
		Rural Male	Rural Female	Urban Male	Urban Female	Rural Male	Rural Female	Urban Male	Urban Female
All included	Employment and related activities	471	344	549	410	479	342	543	415
All included	Production of goods for own final use	218	134	157	73	142	117	79	62
All included	Unpaid domestic services for household and family members**	103	341	100	332	90	327	89	322
All included	Unpaid caregiving services for household and family members**	81	139	79	147	78	143	74	150
All included	Unpaid volunteer, trainee and other unpaid work	102	108	112	105	144	104	145	112
All included	Learning	453	453	465	450	476	469	479	470
All included	Socializing and communication, community participation and religious practice	123	117	107	112	114	118	94	109
All included	Culture, leisure, mass media and sports practices	143	148	144	174	147	137	144	163
All included	Self-care and maintenance	735	714	707	716	706	694	690	698
Employed	Employment and related activities	475	386	554	441	472	366	540	425
Employed	Production of goods for own final use	222	155	163	76	151	130	85	62
Employed	Unpaid domestic services for household and family members**	102	265	100	232	93	254	92	227
Employed	Unpaid caregiving services for household and family members**	82	108	83	110	81	106	78	107
Employed	Unpaid volunteer, trainee and other unpaid work	105	122	112	137	151	128	130	121
Employed	Learning	192	164	164	183	192	153	155	161
Employed	Socializing and communication, community participation and religious practice	130	101	111	96	129	106	106	94
Employed	Culture, leisure, mass media and sports practices	134	117	135	124	142	109	143	123
Employed	Self-care and maintenance	733	684	704	672	710	676	694	667

Source: Time Use Survey, 2019 and 2024.
*Note: Conditional formatting is applied by each activity across all categories (rural/urban, male/female and 2019/2024), separately for each principal activity status. For activities marked ** (unpaid domestic services and unpaid caregiving services), the conditional formatting is reversed, as these activities represent the unpaid burden discussed in the text: higher values are red and lower values green, the opposite of all other activities. Colours are not comparable across rows.*[13]

- **The unpaid burden falls on entry into work, but stays heavy.** Working women's combined unpaid domestic and care time is about 6 hours in rural areas and 5.6 hours in urban areas, against roughly 7.8 hours for all women. *That is still one of the largest demands on their day, irrespective of their employment status.*
- **Men's unpaid load barely changes.** Working men spend under 3 hours a day on unpaid domestic and care work combined, almost the same as all men.
- **Self-care carries the sharpest signal.** Working women get 18 minutes less self-care per day than all women in rural India and 31 minutes less in urban India. For working men, self-care time is slightly higher than for all men.
- **Employment works on gendered time budgets.** For men, paid work fits into an existing schedule. For women, it is absorbed by cutting self-care, leisure time and carrying a largely intact unpaid burden.

Easing the time constraint and opening productive pathways

1	**Recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid care**	• Affordable childcare; enforce crèche provisions of the Maternity Benefit and Factories Acts • Paid paternity and shared parental leave, financed partly through social insurance • Water, clean cooking fuel, transport and eldercare treated as economic infrastructure
2	**Pathways into higher-productivity manufacturing and services**	• Women's employment targets in PLI schemes, industrial corridors and textile parks • Formal factory jobs backed by safe transport, worker hostels and on-site childcare • Digital skills and remote work to open tradable services where women earn parity
3	**Remunerative demand for rural women's labour**	• Place-based clusters built around women's constraints of time, mobility and care • MGNREGS, livelihood missions and industrial policy aligned towards paid, productive work • Gender-responsive budgeting to finance care and transport small units cannot provide

Source: Goyal et al. (2026), Executive Summary.

Strengthening the enabling environment and the evidence base

4 A stronger enabling environment

- **Education to employment:** skilling judged on placement and retention; apprenticeships and first-job transition support
- **Finance and assets:** collateral-free credit, better-targeted Mudra and Stand-Up India, joint land titles
- **Safety and protection:** effective 2026 labour codes, social protection for gig work, safe last-mile transport

5 A deeper evidence base

- Regular time-use surveys integrated with PLFS, so paid and unpaid work are tracked together
- Routine indicators on maternal employment, career interruptions, segregation and time poverty
- Granular sub-national data: the aggregate rate conceals many distinct labour markets

Overall shift: from maximising participation to enabling structural transformation for women, acting on both sides of the constraint at once.

Thank you

India has expanded women's participation on the extensive margin; the intensive margin is where the next phase of policy must work.

Tanu M. Goyal · ICRIER

tgoyal@icrier.res.in

Full report: Goyal, T. M., Prakash, S., Gaikwad, K. and Tandon, A. (2026). *The Participation Paradox: Women's Work and Time-Use in India, 2017–18 to 2025*. ICRIER.



Two national surveys, compared across their earliest and latest rounds

Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)

- Rounds 2017–18 and 2025. Participation, status and industry (NIC); weekly hours and hourly wages for the principal activity under Current Weekly Status.
- The 2025 revised PLFS moves to a calendar-year cycle with a new sampling design; level comparisons with 2017–18 are indicative.

Time-Use Survey (TUS)

- Rounds 2019 and 2024; ages 15–59. Minutes per day on paid work, unpaid domestic services, unpaid care and self-care.
- Figures are per participant, conditional on engaging in the activity (the TUS standard), not per capita; this affects comparisons across activities with different participation rates.

The TUS rounds bracket the period of the PLFS participation surge, allowing paid and unpaid work to be read together.