



# Intersections of caste and gender: a systematic review of women's literacy and employment disparities in India

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## Abstract

Women's literacy and employment in India one of the major socio-economic challenges caste-based disparity that affecting. However significant progress has been made in improving educational access and increasing women's participation in the workforce, inequalities continue to persist across caste groups. Women who belong to socially disadvantaged communities face multiple forms of rejection due to the combined effects of caste and gender. These inequalities influence access to education, skill development, employment opportunities, income generation, and overall socio-economic advancement. This study examines the extent and pattern of caste-based disparities in women's literacy and employment with the objective of understanding how caste influences educational attainment and workforce participation among women. Secondary data sources such as census reports, government publications, labour force surveys, and published research studies are used to analyse trends and regional differences. Thus, women from historically marginalized caste groups generally experience lower literacy rates, reduced educational attainment and limited access to formal employment compared with women from socially advantaged groups. Findings revealed there are many factors that influence women literacy and employment such as early marriages, children's burdens, safety concerns and mobility especially in work place and transport.

**Keywords:** Caste-based disparity, Women literacy, Women employment, Gender inequality, Workforce participation, India

## Introduction

Women in scheduled castes and tribal groups women in these communities face a "double disadvantage" because caste or tribal marginalization interacts with patriarchal gender norms. These women have much lower access than men to literacy, schooling, and formal employment, while being concentrated in marginal forms of work. The socioeconomic development is associated with an overall improvement in the standard of living of scheduled group women relative to men (Dunn, 1993) [1]. Gender inequality remained visible as male literacy continued to be higher than female literacy Districts in the Upper Brahmaputra Valley generally showed higher literacy rates than those in the Lower Brahmaputra Valley. This research concluded that despite government initiatives for instance free education, scholarships, literacy improvement among SC communities has been improved.

Increasing literacy and educational attainment especially among women is essential for achieving socio-economic development and reducing inequalities among Scheduled Castes in Assam (Goswami Barooah 2014) [6]. The quality of living conditions among the Scheduled Caste population at the tehsil level in rural Haryana. The study was based on 14 indicators related to housing quality and household amenities, including housing condition, type of roof and floor, availability of electricity, drinking water, sanitation facilities, kitchen facilities, and cooking fuel.

The findings revealed significant spatial inequalities across rural Haryana. Tehsils such as Gurgaon, Kalka, Ambala, and

Panchkula recorded very high levels of quality of living space, whereas tehsils located in the Mewat region, particularly Punahana and surrounding areas, shows the poorest living conditions. Eastern and northeastern parts of Haryana generally displayed better living conditions than the western and southern regions due to higher literacy levels, better transportation networks, urban influence, and stronger socio-economic development.

Regional disparities continue to exist in the quality of life of SC in rural Haryana (Bhairagi and Chamar 2019) [10]. Socio-economic structure of the Chura community in Jhajjar district, Haryana, found that although the community has experienced improvements in education, occupational mobility, and living standards, significant socio-economic challenges persist. Most workers were engaged in primary-sector activities, indicating limited occupational diversification (Rekha 2021) [15].

Females lagged behind males at most levels of educational attainment, highlighting continuing educational disadvantages among Valmiki women. The authors concluded that despite improvements in literacy, substantial gender disparities remain in higher education, necessitating focused policy interventions to promote educational equality among marginalized caste communities (Rani & Chamar, 2025) [25]. Higher literacy levels of financial particularly improve financial well-being by enhancing financial security, stability, and decision-making capabilities. Although, caste-based discrimination negatively affects financial well-being and weakens the positive impact of financial literacy.

Although financial literacy empowers women economically. But still social inequalities and discrimination continue to prohibit their access to financial resources and opportunities (Harijan *et al.* (n.d.) 2025) [27]. women's labour force participation has declined significantly over the last two decades, especially in rural areas. This literature demonstrates that female labour force participation in India is shaped by a complex interaction of education, caste, economic opportunities, and social norms.

While higher education improves employment prospects, women's participation follows U-shaped pattern, Caste continues to influence labour market outcomes, with upper-caste women shows lower participation rates but greater access to high-quality occupations, whereas SC and ST women show higher participation but remain concentrated in less secure and lower-status jobs (Datta *et al.* 2020) [12]. women in India faces double burden of inequality because discrimination operates through both gender and caste hierarchy specially affecting SC and ST women.

Findings reveal that women's workforce participation decreased continuously over time. In 2017- 2018 workforce participation remained higher among ST and SC women than upper-caste women, but this shows that economic compulsion rather than equal opportunity. Rural women's participation also declined sharply across caste categories. (P. Singh & Pattanaik 2020) [13]. "Education paradox," where women with higher educational qualifications had lower labour force participation rates due to early marriage, childcare burdens, limited job availability, safety concern. Mostly women were engaged in unpaid family work, casual labour, or informal employment with limited access to social security, and paid leave (J. Singh, 2022) [17]. Literacy trends from the colonial period to the post-independence era and explored regional disparities in educational attainment across districts of Uttar Pradesh (Khatoon, n.d.) 2013 [4].

Education is one of the most powerful instruments for empowering women because it enhances their decision-making ability, economic independence, social status, political participation, and awareness of legal rights. According to the

2011 Census, female literacy stood at 65.46 percent compared to 82.14 percent for males, reflecting still educational inequality (Zafar, n.d.2016) [7].

Female literacy in Haryana increased substantially from 40.47 % in 1991 to 65.97 % in 2011, indicating significant educational progress among women. However, considerable regional disparities persisted across the state. Higher female literacy levels were observed in the lowest literacy rates were concentrated in the Mewat region. The study attributed these low literacy levels to socio-cultural conservatism, economic backwardness, and limited educational opportunities for women (Jangra & Kaushik, 2016) [8].

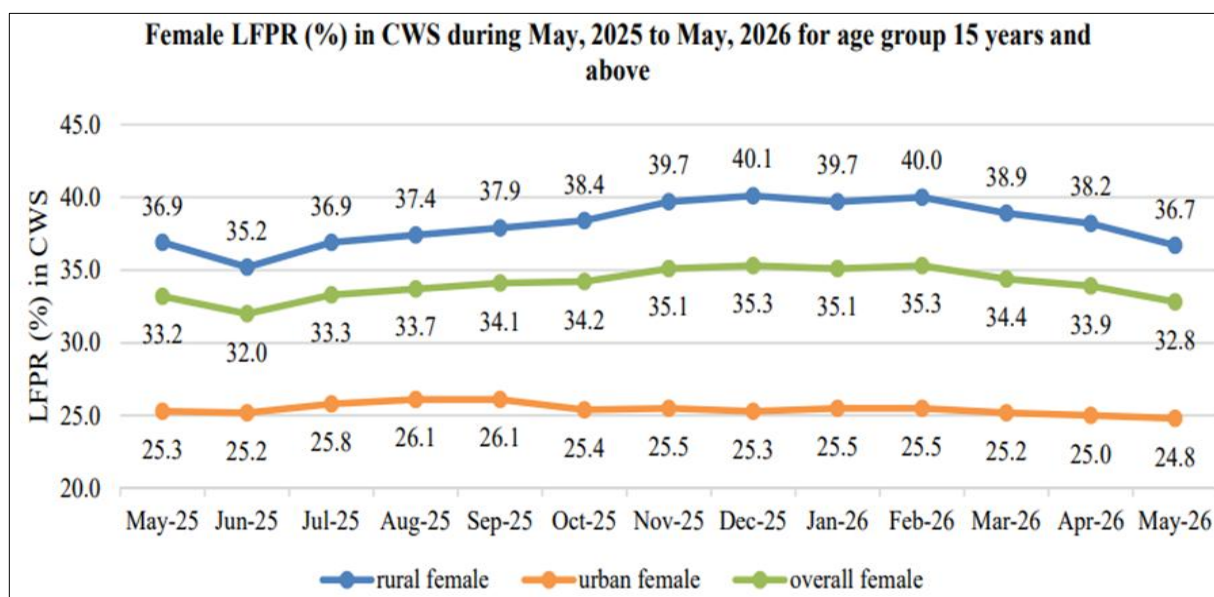
Women's workforce participation in several northeastern states is significantly higher than the national average, especially in Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Mizoram, owing to cultural acceptance of women's economic roles. Despite these achievements, women continue to face wage discrimination, limited political representation, restrictions on decision-making autonomy, and gender-based violence (Roy, 2025) [24].

**Objectives**

- To examine relationship between female literacy and employment across different caste groups.
- To investigate employment patterns and participation rates caste-wise disparities female work and education
- To investigate rural-urban variations in caste disparities in women's literacy and employment.

**Labour force participation of female**

In May,2026 Female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) for age 15 years and above stood at 32.8%. Female LFPR was recorded at 36.7% in rural areas whereas it remained almost at the same level at 24.8% in urban areas compared to the previous month. Compared to May, 2025, the overall female LFPR declined marginally by 0.4 percentage points, from 33.2% to 32.8% in May, 2026. Rural female LFPR remained broadly unchanged, whereas LFPR for urban female recorded a decline of 0.5 percentage points over the year (National Statistics Office [NSO], 2026).



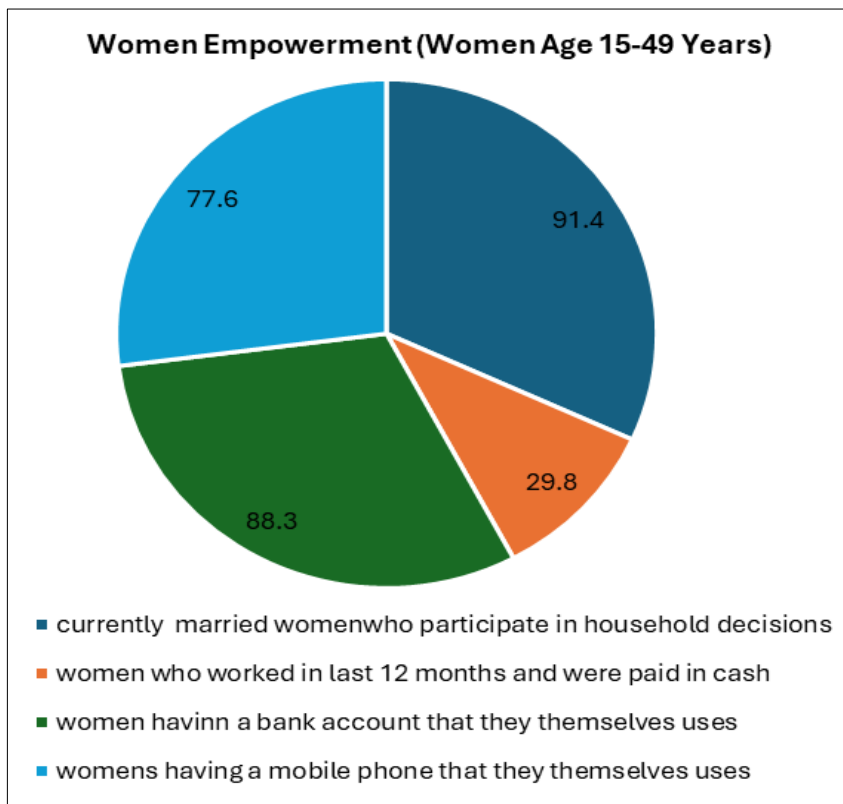
Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey 2025-2026 National Statistics Office Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (Government of India)

Fig 1

**Women empowerment**

Women empowerment means give social, economic, political powers to women make them powerful in all sphere of all life. In this report taken four indicators to show women’s empowerment. In India, there is a high participation rate in household decision making. Second indicator shows economic

participation in last 12 months. This remains a low area of empowerment. Third indicator is women who have saving account that is reflecting significant progress in financial independence. Fourth indicator related to digital literacy this is also show a noticeable gap in some regions (IIPS & MoHFW, 2026).



Source: NFHS -6 2025-26

Fig 2

**Girls’ enrolment in schools**

India has recorded a total enrolment of 121.59 million students. The number of girls (62.49 million) exceeds that of boys (59.10 million). Out of the total enrolment, 22.46 million students are enrolled in government schools. Girls (11.33 million) slightly outnumber boys (11.13 million) in government schools as well States with highest enrolment in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan.

In most states, girls’ enrolment is equal to or higher than boys’ enrolment. States such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Punjab, and Himachal Pradesh exhibit particularly strong female participation in education.

Southern states such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala maintain high enrolment levels. States such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Odisha show substantial enrolment in government school.

Gender differences in enrolment are relatively low, reflecting better educational inclusiveness. This suggests a narrowing of gender disparities in school enrolment the national level and across most states, girls’ enrolment is comparable to or higher than boys’ enrolment.

This reflects the positive impact of educational initiatives and policies aimed at improving girls’ access to education. The UDISE+ 2024–25 data reveal that gender disparities in school enrolment have considerably declined across India. Girls now constitute an equal or larger share of enrolment in many states. Large states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh account for the highest enrolments, while smaller Union Territories record the lowest. Government schools continue to play a vital role, particularly in northern and eastern India, in ensuring access to education for both boys and girls (Ministry of Education, 2025) [31].

Girls Enrollment	states
Andaman and Nicobar Isl.	23608
Andhra Pradesh	1937470
Arunachal Pradesh	91151
Assam	2551474
Bihar	8866715
Chandigarh	72072
Chhattisgarh	1979390
Dadra and Nagar Haveli a	47923
Delhi	1273321
Goa	19965
Gujarat	2671310
Haryana	1132867
Himachal Pradesh	402854
Jammu and Kashmir	702191
Jharkhand	2510855
Karnataka	2473394
Kerala	842506
Ladakh	14420
Lakshadweep	6117
Madhya Pradesh	4198303
Maharashtra	2584993
Manipur	104387
Meghalaya	205035
Mizoram	58010
Nagaland	72294
Odisha	2528361
Puducherry	40151
Punjab	1309280
Rajasthan	4140822
Sikkim	33716
Tamil Nadu	2326319
Telangana	1389272
Tripura	251791
Uttar Pradesh	7665745
Uttarakhand	415846
West Bengal	7544545

Source: UISDE 2024-25 report

Fig 3

**Implications**

- Vocational and skill-based training should be provided to women to enhance their employability.
- Women should be given autonomy, mobility, and decision-making power.
- Reduce discrimination against women and give them to equal opportunities.
- Government policies should focus on improving female literacy and workforce participation, especially in disadvantaged regions.

**Research gap**

All studies are based on primarily on secondary data sources. Primary data collected therefore, detailed field-level information could not be done. Female literacy and employment are unexplored those women who are educated but unemployment women. We need to investigate whether literacy improves women empowerment. Despite the implementation of policies and programmes women empowerment and women employment remain unequal among communities. Studies conducted so far have focused on SC and ST communities but not on OBC, therefore we can study specifically regarding OBC communities.

**Conclusion**

As we know that the educational status of women has improved significantly over the past few decades, their workforce participation rate (WPR) remains comparatively low. Women's participation in economic activities varies across regions and social groups. Several factors influence female workforce participation, including educational attainment, socio-cultural norms, religious beliefs, domestic responsibilities, and reproductive roles. These factors often restrict women's freedom. Women constitute nearly half of the population; however, their contribution to income generation and ownership of assets remains limited. Education plays a crucial role in women's empowerment and overall social development. States with higher female literacy rates generally exhibit better socio-economic conditions for women. The study explores variations across different social groups and identifies the structural and social factors responsible for unequal outcomes. This study concludes that reducing caste-based disparities in women's literacy and employment requires policy interferences focused on educational inclusion, skill betterment, equal opportunities should be given, and social empowerment. No doubt government policies doing better but still their regional disparities persist. Strengthening institutional support and promoting inclusive development can contribute to improving the socio-economic status of women among all caste groups. This study also highlights that improvements in literacy do not always translate into equal employment outcomes, reflecting persistent barriers within labour markets

In India women are worshipped as goddess. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said that “You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women”. Studies conducted in Haryana indicate considerable spatial variation in female literacy and employment. The eastern districts of the state show relatively higher female literacy rates, whereas districts such as Nuh, Hathin, and Punhana lag behind in educational development. There is a deep connection between cast and female work participation. Research also highlights significant caste-based disparities in employment patterns. Women belonging to higher castes are more likely to secure regular and better-quality jobs, while Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) women are often concentrated in low-paying and less secure occupations. Strong relationship between women's education, employment opportunities, and quality of life. Access to housing, sanitation, electricity, drinking water, and other basic amenities varies across regions and social groups, affecting women's overall well-being.

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