



# Unequal work: Gender, caste and the crisis of women's employment in Madhya Pradesh (1993–2017)

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## Abstract

This study examines the long-term trends and structural inequalities shaping women's employment in Madhya Pradesh from 1993 to 2017. Drawing on unit-level data from five rounds of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) and the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), the paper analyzes female labour force participation by age, caste, and education, alongside changes in employment type and access to job benefits. Despite improvements in literacy and economic development, female labour force participation in Madhya Pradesh declined from 55.8% in 1993 to 32.8% in 2017. Caste-based disparities remain entrenched, with SC/ST women more likely to engage in low-paid or unpaid work, while general category women face mobility and social constraints. The paradox of low participation among educated women highlights structural mismatches in the labour market. Additionally, most women remain in informal and insecure work, with limited access to contracts, social security, or paid leave. The paper concludes with policy recommendations aimed at improving the quality of women's work and enabling inclusive employment growth. Findings contribute to the broader discourse on gender, labour informality, and social exclusion in India.

**Keywords:** Women's labour participation, Gender gap, Social groups, Employment quality, Madhya Pradesh, Informal employment, Caste, Education

## Introduction

Madhya Pradesh, located in the heart of India, is a state marked by both economic diversity and deep-rooted social hierarchies. With a population exceeding 72 million as per the 2011 Census, it is one of India's most populous and socio-culturally heterogeneous states. The state's economy is primarily agrarian, with nearly 60% of its workforce engaged in agriculture and allied sectors. While recent years have witnessed some industrial growth and urban expansion, large sections of the population—especially women—remain concentrated in low-productivity, informal employment. The coexistence of economic stagnation in rural areas and nascent development in urban centres creates a complex backdrop for analysing gendered labour force patterns.

Women's labour force participation in Madhya Pradesh is not just an economic issue but a reflection of the state's intersecting socio-cultural dynamics. Despite growing female literacy and exposure to education, the state has witnessed a substantial decline in women's work participation over the past two decades. According to NSSO and PLFS data, the female labour force participation rate (LFPR) dropped sharply from over 55% in the early 1990s to less than 33% in 2017. This trend is emblematic of a broader national pattern, where India's female LFPR has fallen steadily despite economic growth, a paradox that has attracted significant scholarly and policy attention (Deshpande & Kabeer, 2019) [5].

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In Madhya Pradesh, the labour market outcomes of women are deeply shaped by their social identities, including caste, education level, marital status, and urban–rural location. Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) women, who traditionally engage in agricultural or wage-based manual labour, often participate in the workforce out of economic compulsion. However, their employment is largely informal, insecure, and poorly remunerated. In contrast, women from upper-caste or general categories may have better educational qualifications but face stricter social norms that restrict their mobility and discourage participation in low-status or informal work. This results in an intersectional disadvantage, where caste and gender together structure the degree and quality of labour market engagement.

Education, though widely seen as a pathway to empowerment, has not translated into proportional increases in women's employment in the state. Educated women—particularly those with secondary or higher qualifications—show among the lowest LFPRs, pointing to a mismatch between aspirations and the availability of dignified employment opportunities. This is further exacerbated by the absence of adequate job creation in sectors that are accessible and acceptable to women, such as healthcare, education, and services.

Moreover, traditional measures of employment, which focus solely on participation rates, fail to capture the quality of women's work. Many women remain engaged in unpaid family labour, casual wage work, or subsistence self-employment,

often without written contracts, job security, or access to social benefits. This underlines the need to assess not just how many women work, but in what capacity, under what conditions, and with what outcomes.

This paper, therefore, seeks to move beyond aggregate statistics and provide a disaggregated, longitudinal, and intersectional analysis of women's employment in Madhya Pradesh, highlighting how structural inequalities—rooted in caste, education, and gender—shape not only labour force participation but also the quality and dignity of work.

## Review of Literature

The trajectory of women's labour force participation in India has been the subject of extensive research, particularly in the wake of economic liberalization and rising educational attainment. Scholars have emphasized that labour participation cannot be viewed in isolation from social structures such as caste, education, and spatial divides. This review synthesizes key literature that traces historical patterns, identifies intersectional barriers, and examines regional dimensions—particularly in Madhya Pradesh, a state that exemplifies both economic stagnation and social stratification.

Deshpande and Kabeer (2019) <sup>[5]</sup> provided a macro-level examination of declining female labour force participation in India over the last three decades. Using NSSO data from 1983 to 2018, they argued that the decline in participation was particularly sharp among rural, younger, and more educated women. The study identified "withdrawal from distress employment" and "lack of suitable jobs for educated women" as central explanations. This national trend resonates with patterns observed in Madhya Pradesh, where withdrawal is not only economic but shaped by caste-based norms and limited job diversity.

Similarly, Chatterjee, Murgai, and Rama (2015) <sup>[2]</sup> analyzed data from the Employment-Unemployment Surveys and highlighted a paradox where increased schooling did not translate into higher labour force participation for women. Their findings showed a significant drop in rural female employment after 2004–05, despite improvements in educational attainment—a phenomenon echoed in the Madhya Pradesh data from this study.

Caste-based hierarchies deeply influence employment opportunities in India. Thorat and Newman (2007) <sup>[18]</sup>, in their landmark audit study on urban labour markets, found significant evidence of discrimination against Scheduled Castes and Muslims during job applications. While their study focused on urban India, the insights are relevant for Madhya Pradesh, where SC/ST women often face occupational segregation and exclusion from formal work.

Deshpande (2011) <sup>[4]</sup> used NSSO data to examine gender-caste interactions and showed that Dalit and Adivasi women had historically higher labour force participation rates due to their overrepresentation in low-paid and informal work. However, their participation did not translate into economic mobility or job quality. The study pointed out that these women were often concentrated in unpaid family labour and casual work with no social security—trends clearly evident in Madhya Pradesh's rural employment patterns.

Kannan and Raveendran (2012) <sup>[8]</sup> used NSS 61st and 66th rounds to highlight that among SC/ST women, participation rates remained high because of economic necessity, but with limited access to regular jobs or skill-based occupations. This trend challenges assumptions that participation equates empowerment and instead reveals a compulsion-led engagement with the labour market.

Several scholars have explored the so-called "education paradox" in female work participation. Kingdon and Unni (2001) <sup>[10]</sup>, using NSS 1993–94 data, found an inverted U-shaped relationship between education and work participation: illiterate and highly educated women were more likely to work, while those with secondary education dropped out. They argued that societal expectations, marriage norms, and lack of suitable job opportunities contribute to this U-curve—a phenomenon that persists in states like Madhya Pradesh.

Neetha (2014) <sup>[14]</sup> reinforced this point in her work on the feminization of the informal sector. She noted that although more women were gaining formal education, this did not necessarily lead to formal employment. Her analysis of NSS and other datasets revealed that educated women often opted out of the workforce due to lack of dignified job options, poor working conditions, or familial constraints. In Madhya Pradesh, this paradox is sharpened by the rural–urban divide and limited access to skill-based or service-sector jobs in non-metropolitan areas.

Agarwal and Sinha (2020) <sup>[1]</sup>, using PLFS 2017–18 data, further documented the low transition of educated rural women into the labour market. They found that access to employment was mediated by social group, with general category women dropping out due to social norms and OBC/SC women participating in informal work, albeit in precarious forms.

The spatial distribution of employment opportunities has long been a challenge in Indian labour markets. Himanshu (2011) <sup>[6]</sup> provided a comparative study of rural employment trends using NSSO data and argued that employment diversification outside agriculture was sluggish in central Indian states like Madhya Pradesh. He noted that while rural male employment saw some diversification into construction and transport, female employment remained stuck in agricultural labour and unpaid work.

Mukhopadhyay and Tendulkar (2006) <sup>[13]</sup> investigated employment quality in rural areas using a multidimensional deprivation index. They found that rural women in Madhya Pradesh had significantly lower access to job benefits, wage security, and upward mobility, even when employed. The study called for region-specific employment schemes with social protection for women workers.

Kapsos, Silberman, and Bourmpoula (2014) <sup>[9]</sup>, in their ILO report, analyzed labour market indicators across Indian states and found that Madhya Pradesh had one of the lowest female employment-to-population ratios, especially in urban areas. They emphasized that without investment in social infrastructure (such as transport and childcare), urban female employment would remain stagnant.

Numerous studies have pointed out that the problem is not only low participation but also poor employment quality. Mehrotra

*et al.* (2014) <sup>[12]</sup> examined the shift from informal to formal employment post-2005 and found that most of the new jobs created were of poor quality, without contracts or social protection. They argued that for women, particularly from marginalized castes, informalization was the norm rather than the exception.

Sudarshan and Bhattacharya (2009) <sup>[17]</sup> highlighted the invisibility of women's work in informal sectors. Drawing on NSS and primary survey data, they pointed out how home-based work, self-employment, and unpaid family labour were grossly undercounted, especially for rural women. In Madhya Pradesh, where unpaid labour dominates the occupational profile of women, this invisibility distorts both statistics and policy responses.

Mazumdar and Neetha (2011) <sup>[11]</sup> focused on the feminization of low-paid and insecure jobs in the urban informal sector. Their study used both NSS data and qualitative interviews to show that women—especially from OBC and SC backgrounds—were overrepresented in domestic work, vending, and construction, all lacking social benefits. The situation was exacerbated by the absence of skill upgrading or formal recognition of these occupations.

While national studies provide broad insights, only a few works focus specifically on Madhya Pradesh. Sharma and Saxena (2017) <sup>[15]</sup>, using NSS 68th round data, analyzed rural employment in the state and found that women's employment was highly seasonal and unpaid. They noted that even within MNREGA, women's participation was limited by patriarchal attitudes and lack of awareness.

Singh (2018) <sup>[16]</sup> conducted a district-level analysis of employment using PLFS 2017–18 and found large variations within Madhya Pradesh. The study showed that tribal-dominated districts had higher female participation, but in extremely low-paying or unpaid roles. Urban districts, on the other hand, showed a withdrawal of women from the labour market post-education, indicating aspirational mismatch and lack of dignified jobs.

Recent literature has moved towards identifying structural and normative constraints. Jain and Jayachandran (2020) <sup>[7]</sup>, using IHDS data, found that mobility restrictions, safety concerns, and gendered expectations around caregiving reduced the likelihood of women entering paid work, regardless of qualifications. This is highly relevant for Madhya Pradesh, where such norms are deeply embedded.

Chaudhary and Verick (2014) <sup>[3]</sup> examined the role of family dynamics in labour participation and found that household income, presence of children, and spousal characteristics influenced women's employment choices. They noted that in patriarchal northern states, including Madhya Pradesh, these factors had an outsized effect.

The literature collectively underscores that women's employment in India—and particularly in Madhya Pradesh—is shaped not only by economic cycles but by deep-seated social hierarchies and cultural norms. Caste, education, and geography interact in complex ways to restrict women's access to decent work. While some women are pushed into low-paid, informal jobs due to poverty, others are pulled out of the

workforce due to aspirations unmet by job quality. The decline in female labour force participation is not merely statistical—it is symptomatic of systemic exclusion and policy failure.

This paper contributes by building a longitudinal and intersectional understanding of these trends in Madhya Pradesh from 1993 to 2017, filling the gap in sub-national and caste-disaggregated employment studies.

## Research Gap

Despite a substantial body of literature on women's labour force participation in India, significant gaps remain—particularly in the context of Madhya Pradesh. Most existing studies have focused on national trends or individual determinants of employment, often neglecting regional disparities and caste-based labour segmentation. Moreover, while several works have addressed the decline in female LFPR post-liberalization, few have examined this phenomenon through a longitudinal lens specific to Madhya Pradesh across multiple NSSO rounds and the PLFS 2017–18.

Another critical gap is the insufficient disaggregation of data by social group and educational attainment. Studies rarely explore how Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and General category women experience employment differently over time. Similarly, the intersection of education and labour participation is underexplored, especially the paradox of falling LFPR among more educated women. Furthermore, there is limited empirical focus on the quality of employment—the type of work women engage in (e.g., unpaid, casual, regular, self-employed) and their access to social protection mechanisms.

This study addresses these lacunae by providing a caste-, education-, and age-specific analysis of women's employment trends in Madhya Pradesh over 25 years. It emphasizes not just participation, but the changing nature and quality of women's work in the state.

## Objectives of the Study

- To examine long-term trends in female labour force participation in Madhya Pradesh from 1993 to 2017, with a focus on gender gaps, rural–urban disparities, and age-specific patterns.
- To analyze caste- and education-based differentials in women's employment outcomes, including participation rates and occupational distribution across SC/ST, OBC, and General categories.
- To evaluate the changing nature and quality of women's work by assessing shifts in job types (unpaid, casual, regular, self-employed) and access to employment benefits such as contracts, paid leave, and social security, in order to identify key policy gaps.

## Data and Methodology

This study employs a quantitative, longitudinal approach based on secondary data to analyze trends and patterns in women's employment in Madhya Pradesh over a 25-year period. The analysis draws on unit-level data from five major rounds of nationally representative employment surveys conducted by

the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) and the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS). Specifically, the study uses data from the 50th round (1993–94), 55th round (1999–2000), 61st round (2004–05), 68th round (2011–12), and PLFS 2017–18. These datasets provide consistent and comparable information on key labour market indicators, enabling a rigorous analysis of long-term trends.

The NSSO employment-unemployment surveys (EUS) and PLFS collect comprehensive information on workforce status, education, industry, occupation, and social background of individuals. The focus of this study is on the working-age population, defined as individuals aged 15 to 64 years, consistent with international labour force definitions. Within this population, the analysis isolates the female sub-sample from Madhya Pradesh, using appropriate filtering variables such as state codes and gender identifiers.

A range of employment indicators is examined, including:

- Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR)
- Workforce Participation Rate (WPR)
- Unemployment Rate (UR)
- Employment type (unpaid family work, casual wage work, regular salaried work, and self-employment)
- Access to employment benefits such as written contracts, paid leave, and social security (for non-agricultural workers).

Data extraction and cleaning were conducted using statistical software, ensuring consistent variable naming across rounds and accurate filtering by state and gender. The estimates were weighted using appropriate sampling weights provided in the datasets to generate representative figures. Derived indicators were calculated using the usual status (principal + subsidiary) approach, which captures long-term engagement with economic activities and is more appropriate for analyzing women's work given their intermittent labour market participation.

The data was further disaggregated by social group (Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and General category), education level (illiterate, up to 10th standard, and 10th and above), and age group (15–29, 30–44, 45–64). This allowed the study to explore intersectional dimensions of women's labour participation—how caste, education, and age together shape women's employment outcomes.

The findings are presented using a combination of statistical tables and trend graphs, developed to show longitudinal changes in female LFPR, employment type composition, and access to job benefits across the five selected years. These visualizations help contextualize the patterns of withdrawal, informalization, and inequality that have characterized women's work in Madhya Pradesh.

Overall, the methodology allows for a systematic, disaggregated, and policy-relevant examination of women's employment trends, emphasizing both participation rates and the quality of work available to different social groups in Madhya Pradesh.

## Employment Patterns in Madhya Pradesh

### Gender Gap in LFPR (Male vs Female) Over Time

The labour force participation rate (LFPR) in Madhya Pradesh between 1993 and 2017 reveals a persistent and widening gender gap, despite broader changes in the economic landscape. Table 1 presents a clear trajectory of this divergence across five major survey years. While male LFPR has remained relatively stable—declining only modestly from 88.7% in 1993 to 82.3% in 2017—female LFPR has witnessed a steep and sustained fall, dropping from 55.8% to just 32.8% over the same period.

The gender gap, measured as the difference between male and female LFPRs, has widened significantly. In 1993, the gap stood at 32.9 percentage points, but by 2011, it had reached 51.1 points, indicating a sharp retreat of women from the labour force. Although there was a marginal improvement in female LFPR between 2011 and 2017 (from 31.7% to 32.8%), the overall gender disparity remained alarmingly high at 49.5 percentage points in 2017.

**Table 1:** Gender Gap in Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) among the Working-Age Population (15–64 years) in Madhya Pradesh

Year	Male LFPR (%)	Female LFPR (%)	Gap (Percentage Points)
1993	88.7	55.8	32.9
1999	86.3	52.8	33.4
2004	87.8	50.6	37.3
2011	82.8	31.7	51.1
2017	82.3	32.8	49.5

*Source:* Author's estimates based on unit-level data from NSSO (Rounds 50th, 55th, 61st, 68th) and PLFS 2017–18.

This divergence is particularly concerning when viewed in conjunction with improvements in women's education and health indicators over this period. The stagnation in male LFPR contrasts with the structural withdrawal of women, which may be attributed to a mix of socio-cultural norms, lack of suitable employment opportunities, and growing informalization of the labour market.

Urban-rural disaggregation (though not included in Table 1) from broader NSSO and PLFS datasets suggests that the decline is sharper in urban areas, especially among educated women, possibly reflecting aspirational mismatch and scarcity of formal jobs. In rural areas, the decline appears to be driven by shifts away from distress employment, mechanization of agriculture, and restricted mobility.

By 2017, the cumulative effect of these factors resulted in a near-halving of female LFPR from 1993 levels, despite only a marginal decline in male participation. This widening gap underscores a crisis of inclusion: while men continued to participate at near-saturation levels, women increasingly remained outside the labour market, invisible in both productive and statistical terms.

These trends necessitate a deeper inquiry into not just how many women are participating in the labour force, but under what conditions, in which sectors, and with what kind of



employment security—questions further explored in the following sections.

### Women LFPR by Social Group

An examination of female labour force participation across social groups in Madhya Pradesh between 1993 and 2017 reveals persistent caste-based disparities and a worrying decline in overall participation rates. Table 2 shows that SC/ST women consistently had the highest LFPR throughout the 25-year period, followed by OBC and General category women. However, all three groups experienced a notable decline, especially after 2004.

In 1993, LFPR among SC/ST women stood at a high 71.0%, significantly above the 45.1% recorded for General category women. The OBC category was not available in the 1993 data, but by 1999, their LFPR was 53.5%, situating them between SC/ST and General women. Despite the apparent advantage in participation among SC/ST women, it is important to note that this is often driven by economic necessity rather than improved access to dignified employment.

**Table 2:** Female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) by social group among the working-age population (15–64 years) in Madhya Pradesh

Year	SC/ST (%)	OBC (%)	General (%)
1993	71.0	NA	45.1
1999	67.6	53.5	23.4
2004	66.7	51.6	24.6
2011	41.2	31.5	15.2
2017	45.1	28.5	15.7

Source: Author's estimates based on unit-level data from NSSO (Rounds 50th, 55th, 61st, 68th) and PLFS 2017–18.

The most significant drop occurred between 2004 and 2011. SC/ST women's LFPR plummeted from 66.7% to 41.2%, while General category women saw a reduction from 24.6% to 15.2%. This sharp decline indicates a structural withdrawal of women from the labour market, likely influenced by a combination of mechanization in agriculture, reduction in casual rural employment, and limited expansion of formal job avenues. By 2017, participation slightly rebounded for SC/ST women to 45.1%, yet remained far below historical levels.

The emergence of caste-based disparities is especially visible post-2004. The gap between SC/ST and General category women widened, highlighting differential access to livelihood opportunities. General category women, despite better educational credentials, show consistently low LFPRs, suggesting stronger adherence to gender norms, more conservative household expectations, or selective withdrawal due to lack of "respectable" job options. OBC women reflect an intermediate trajectory, with participation falling from 53.5% in 1999 to 28.5% in 2017, closely tracking the downward trend in female employment nationally.

These findings echo broader national studies (e.g., Deshpande, 2011; Agarwal & Sinha, 2020)<sup>[4, 1]</sup>, which emphasize that while Dalit and Adivasi women often have higher labour participation, it is largely in informal, low-paid, and insecure

jobs. In contrast, General category women may face more social restrictions on mobility and market engagement, leading to their lower presence in the labour force.

Overall, caste not only influences whether women work, but also how and under what conditions they participate. The decline in LFPR across all groups—particularly the steep fall among SC/ST women—raises concerns about diminishing job opportunities even in traditionally active segments. The data underlines the need to address both caste-based and structural inequalities in employment generation and job quality in Madhya Pradesh.

### Women LFPR by Education Level

An intriguing and persistent paradox emerges when examining female labour force participation (LFPR) across different education levels in Madhya Pradesh between 1993 and 2017: higher educational attainment does not correlate with higher labour market engagement. Table 3 demonstrates that illiterate women consistently exhibited the highest LFPR, while women with education levels of 10th standard and above reported the lowest participation rates throughout the 25-year period.

In 1993, LFPR among illiterate women stood at 65.1%, nearly double that of women educated up to 10th standard (33.6%) and more than three times that of those with 10th and above education (21.3%). This pattern continued across the survey rounds, with only marginal variations. By 2017, although illiterate women's LFPR had declined to 48.7%, it still remained significantly higher than the 25.0% among those educated up to 10th and 18.1% among women with higher education.

This inverse relationship reflects a broader phenomenon noted in national-level studies (Kingdon & Unni, 2001; Deshpande & Kabeer, 2019)<sup>[10, 5]</sup>, often referred to as the "U-shaped curve" of female employment. Women with no formal education often engage in economic activities out of necessity, especially in agriculture and informal sectors. In contrast, women with moderate to high levels of education may withdraw from the labour force due to unavailability of suitable jobs, social norms restricting public work, or aspirational mismatches, particularly in urban areas.

**Table 3:** Female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) by education level among the working-age population (15–64 years) in Madhya Pradesh

Year	Illiterate LFPR (%)	Upto 10th LFPR (%)	10th and above LFPR (%)
1993	65.1	33.6	21.3
1999	64.3	36.6	16.6
2004	63.8	34.0	20.4
2011	45.6	24.6	14.0
2017	48.7	25.0	18.1

Source: Author's estimates based on unit-level data from NSSO (Rounds 50th, 55th, 61st, 68th) and PLFS 2017–18.

The sharpest decline occurred between 2004 and 2011 across all education groups. For example, illiterate women's LFPR dropped from 63.8% to 45.6%, while the more educated group declined from 20.4% to 14.0%. This fall corresponds to broader

trends in agricultural distress, mechanization, and the sluggish growth of the formal sector, which disproportionately affected women's employment prospects.

The consistent low LFPR among educated women underscores a failure of the education system to link learning with employability. Lack of job-oriented training, female-centric placement services, and safe, flexible work environments act as deterrents to labour market entry. Moreover, for middle- and upper-caste women, cultural expectations regarding domestic roles and marriage continue to influence participation decisions, especially when employment options do not match their skill or status expectations.

These trends challenge the notion that education alone is sufficient for improving women's economic agency. The evidence from Madhya Pradesh suggests that structural and normative barriers must be addressed alongside educational expansion. Without targeted interventions to create dignified, formal, and skill-aligned employment opportunities, rising literacy among women may paradoxically continue to coincide with declining labour force participation.

### Women LFPR by Age Group

An age-wise analysis of female labour force participation in Madhya Pradesh from 1993 to 2017 reveals a uniform decline across all age cohorts, with the most severe contraction among younger women (15–29 years). Table 4 illustrates this trend, pointing to both generational and structural shifts in women's work engagement over time.

In 1993, the LFPR for young women aged 15–29 was 51.5%, nearly comparable to the 64.1% participation of women in the 30–44 age group and 53.1% among those aged 45–64. Over the next two decades, all three groups experienced a decline, but the drop was most dramatic among the youngest cohort, whose LFPR fell to just 20.4% by 2017—a reduction of over 30 percentage points. This sharp decline suggests delayed or reduced workforce entry among young women, potentially linked to longer years in education, early marriage, and rising social conservatism, particularly in urban and upper-caste settings.

Historically, the 30–44 age group maintained the highest participation levels, underscoring the role of economic necessity, especially for women in poorer and rural households. However, their LFPR also dipped from 64.1% in 1993 to 43.4% in 2017, suggesting that even middle-aged women—typically more stable in their household responsibilities—are being pushed out of employment. This may be attributed to worsening employment conditions, displacement from traditional agricultural roles, and lack of appropriate jobs for women seeking re-entry into the workforce after a childcare break.

The LFPR for older women (45–64 years) declined more gradually, from 53.1% in 1993 to 38.9% in 2017, indicating some resilience among this group, possibly due to informal sector engagement or continued participation in subsistence work. Yet, even here, the participation trend shows vulnerability to shifting economic and policy contexts.

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**Table 4:** Female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) by Age Group among the Working-Age Population (15–64 years) in Madhya Pradesh

Year	15–29 (%)	30–44 (%)	45–64 (%)
1993	51.5	64.1	53.1
1999	44.8	64.0	51.9
2004	42.0	61.4	50.0
2011	25.3	38.2	32.7
2017	20.4	43.4	38.9

Source: Author's estimates based on unit-level data from NSSO (Rounds 50th, 55th, 61st, 68th) and PLFS 2017–18.

A range of factors may explain these declines:

- Early marriage and domestic responsibilities continue to limit young women's availability for paid work.
- Childcare burdens and absence of support systems disproportionately affect women in their 30s.
- Limited job availability, particularly in rural and semi-urban regions, hampers workforce entry and retention.
- Safety concerns and restricted mobility, especially in public transport and workplace environments, further discourage participation.

These age-wise dynamics point to the urgent need for targeted employment schemes tailored to life-cycle stages. For young women, policies should focus on education-to-work transition programs, apprenticeships, and skill-based placements. For middle-aged women, re-entry programs, childcare support, and flexible work arrangements could reduce barriers. For older women, enhancing the dignity and security of informal work through social protection can ensure continued economic inclusion.

In sum, the decline in LFPR across age groups in Madhya Pradesh reflects a structural and generational crisis in women's employment, demanding age-sensitive and life-course-aware policy responses.

### Composition of Women's Work: Unpaid, Casual, Regular, and Self-Employed

The composition of women's employment in Madhya Pradesh from 1993 to 2017 reveals a continued dominance of unpaid and casual work, with only marginal increases in regular and self-employment, underscoring the persistent informal and insecure nature of women's labour. Table 5 provides a detailed breakdown of job types, showing how the structure of women's work has evolved—albeit slowly—toward more market-linked roles.

In 1993, over 51.9% of female workers were engaged in unpaid work, largely as family helpers in agriculture or household enterprises. This reflects both economic necessity and the invisibilization of women's contributions to family-based production systems. By 2017, unpaid work remained high at 46.9%, suggesting limited structural transformation in women's work roles, particularly among marginalized groups and in rural areas.

Casual wage employment—typically low-paid and irregular—accounted for 37.4% of women's jobs in 1993 and peaked at 43.3% in 1999, indicating growing rural distress and lack of stable employment options. Although it declined to 31.3% by

2017, this reduction was not due to an improvement in job quality but likely the result of job losses and declining labour demand in manual work sectors.

**Table 5:** Distribution of women workers by job type in Madhya Pradesh

Year	Unpaid Work (%)	Casual Jobs (%)	Regular Jobs (%)	Self-Employed (%)
1993	51.9	37.4	3.4	6.9
1999	46.2	43.3	3.4	6.8
2004	50.1	35.8	6.7	7.1
2011	46.1	36.4	7.2	9.9
2017	46.9	31.3	10.4	9.2

Source: Author's estimates based on unit-level data from NSSO (Rounds 50th, 55th, 61st, 68th) and PLFS 2017–18.

Regular salaried jobs, which offer greater income stability and potential access to benefits, rose slowly from a negligible 3.4% in 1993 to 10.4% in 2017. Despite this growth, such employment remains limited and is mostly concentrated in urban areas and among better-educated women, often from upper castes. The low overall share highlights the barriers women face in accessing formal sector employment, including discrimination, lack of skills, and mobility constraints.

Self-employment, another category of market-linked work, grew modestly from 6.9% in 1993 to 9.2% in 2017. While often presented as a sign of entrepreneurial activity, women's self-employment in Madhya Pradesh is largely subsistence-based, lacking scale, credit access, or institutional support. Furthermore, this category tends to be dominated by upper-caste or general category women, who often engage in home-based or micro-enterprise work. In contrast, SC/ST women are disproportionately concentrated in unpaid or casual jobs, reflecting limited access to assets, networks, and education.

The persistence of unpaid and casual employment across two decades underscores the failure of economic growth to translate into quality jobs for women, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds. While there is a visible, though small, shift toward regular jobs and self-employment, the pace has been uneven and exclusionary, particularly along caste and educational lines.

To improve the composition of women's work, policies must focus on formalizing existing employment, supporting women-led enterprises, and expanding decent work opportunities—especially for SC/ST women trapped in low-value roles. Enhancing access to credit, training, and social security, along with reducing structural and social barriers, is essential to shift women's work from invisibility and precarity toward empowerment and productivity.

### Social Security and Safety Nets

Access to social protection mechanisms among non-agricultural female workers in Madhya Pradesh remains limited, reflecting the overwhelmingly informal and insecure nature of women's employment in the state. Table 6 highlights the proportions of women who report having access to social security benefits, written job contracts, and paid leave, and the

data underscores the slow and uneven progress toward formal work conditions.

In 2004, only 15.1% of non-agricultural female workers had access to any form of social security benefits such as pensions, provident funds, or health insurance. This figure rose modestly to 18.3% in 2011, and then more significantly to 25.4% in 2017, reflecting some policy and institutional efforts to extend benefits to informal workers. However, three-quarters of non-agricultural women still lack any form of social security, leaving them highly vulnerable to economic shocks, illness, or retirement without support.

Similarly, the share of women with a written job contract increased from 18.3% in 2004 to 32.9% in 2017. Although this represents measurable improvement, nearly two-thirds of women continue to work without formal contracts, which undermines job stability, enforceable rights, and access to benefits. The situation is more precarious in rural areas and among socially marginalized groups (SC/ST and OBC), where verbal agreements and informal hiring practices dominate.

**Table 6:** Access to social protection among non-agricultural female workers in Madhya Pradesh

Year	Social Security Benefits (%)	Written Job Contract (%)	Eligible for Paid Leave (%)
2004	15.1	18.3	25.2
2011	18.3	18.8	24.3
2017	25.4	32.9	30.6

Source: Author's estimates based on unit-level data from NSSO (Rounds 61st, 68th) and PLFS 2017–18.

Access to paid leave also followed a sluggish trajectory, rising from 25.2% in 2004 to 30.6% in 2017. This indicates that even among women engaged in non-agricultural sectors—presumably closer to formal employment—basic entitlements remain elusive. The lack of paid leave disproportionately affects working mothers and caregivers, reinforcing the cycle of job discontinuity and workforce dropout.

The persistently low levels of protection highlight that formalization of employment remains limited in scope and reach. Despite government initiatives aimed at expanding labour protections, the structural dominance of informal sector jobs—especially in retail, domestic work, construction, and home-based manufacturing—means that most women continue to work without contracts or legal safeguards.

These trends reinforce earlier findings on job composition: casual and unpaid work dominate the employment landscape for women, and even where women are engaged in self-employment or regular wage jobs, they often operate outside regulatory frameworks. Caste, education, and sectoral location further influence access—general category women in urban settings are more likely to access formal protections, while SC/ST women and rural workers are almost entirely excluded from such benefits.

To address this gap, there is an urgent need for universal and portable social security schemes, stronger labour inspection and enforcement, and targeted outreach to ensure inclusion of women in EPFO, ESIC, and maternity benefit schemes.

Extending benefits to informal workers, particularly through Self-Help Groups (SHGs), cooperatives, and gig platforms, may offer a pragmatic pathway to improving employment quality for women across Madhya Pradesh.

### Major Findings of the Study

This study presents a longitudinal analysis of women's labour force participation and employment quality in Madhya Pradesh from 1993 to 2017, using data from five rounds of NSSO and PLFS surveys. Several critical findings emerge:

First, there has been a sharp decline in female labour force participation rate (LFPR), from 55.8% in 1993 to 32.8% in 2017. This decline has widened the gender gap significantly, reaching nearly 50 percentage points by 2017. The fall is most severe among young women (15–29 years), indicating delayed entry or withdrawal from the labour market due to early marriage, education, or lack of suitable jobs.

Second, caste-based disparities are stark and persistent. SC/ST women consistently have higher LFPRs than OBC and General category women, but their participation has declined sharply post-2004. General category women exhibit the lowest LFPRs, reflecting stronger patriarchal norms and fewer incentives to engage in low-quality work.

Third, the analysis reveals an education paradox: women with higher educational attainment have the lowest LFPR, suggesting a disconnect between education and employability. Rising literacy has not translated into improved participation or job quality.

Fourth, the composition of women's work remains skewed toward unpaid and casual labour, with minimal gains in regular or self-employment. Most women remain in vulnerable employment, especially from marginalized groups.

Finally, access to job benefits remains limited. As of 2017, only 25% of non-agricultural female workers had any social security, and fewer than one-third had a written job contract or paid leave, underscoring the informality and precarity of women's work.

These findings highlight a deep structural crisis in women's employment, shaped by caste, education, and age, and call for urgent policy attention to both participation and employment quality.

### In Conclusion

The declining trajectory of women's labour force participation in Madhya Pradesh over the past two and a half decades signals a profound structural and social crisis. Despite improvements in literacy, public health, and access to education, the proportion of working-age women engaged in economic activity has sharply decreased—from 55.8% in 1993 to just 32.8% in 2017. This contraction is not a sign of improved economic well-being but rather a reflection of limited job opportunities, rigid social norms, and systemic exclusion from formal employment avenues.

The analysis reveals that labour market participation is deeply segmented by caste and education. SC/ST women, who historically had higher participation rates due to economic necessity, have also seen significant decline, particularly post-

2004. OBC and General category women, meanwhile, continue to have lower participation rates, often constrained by social expectations, lack of mobility, or absence of suitable employment. Most importantly, education has failed to function as a gateway to work—a paradox where women with 10th standard or higher qualifications are the least likely to participate in the workforce.

Even when women are employed, their work is often characterized by poor job quality: unpaid family work, casual wage labour, or precarious self-employment. Access to employment benefits remains limited, with the majority lacking written contracts, paid leave, or any form of social security. The intersection of gender with caste, education, and age exacerbates barriers to economic inclusion.

These patterns suggest that the challenge is not only one of participation rates, but also of employment quality, dignity, and security. Women's work in Madhya Pradesh remains largely invisible, informal, and undervalued.

In conclusion, addressing the crisis of women's employment in Madhya Pradesh requires multi-dimensional interventions that go beyond skill-building or education alone. It demands a restructuring of employment systems, investment in public infrastructure, and a normative shift in how women's work is recognized and supported. Only then can women be truly integrated into the labour market as equal and empowered contributors to the state's economic development.

### Suggestions and Policy Recommendations

To address the declining and unequal patterns of women's employment in Madhya Pradesh, a comprehensive and multidimensional approach is needed. First, it is essential to promote regular and dignified employment for women by incentivizing private sector hiring through tax benefits and ensuring strict enforcement of labour laws mandating written contracts, social security, and paid leave. Formalizing women's employment is not only a matter of economic necessity but also of social justice.

Equally important is the need for targeted skill development programs, especially for women from SC/ST and rural backgrounds. Education must be linked with employability through vocational training, digital literacy, and apprenticeship programs that prepare women for market-relevant roles. Merely acquiring schooling is not sufficient unless it leads to meaningful and secure employment opportunities.

Social protection must be expanded to cover women working in the informal sector. Access to maternity benefits, pensions, health insurance, and paid leave should be made universal and portable, particularly for those without stable jobs. Self-help groups, cooperatives, and local governance institutions can play a critical role in delivering these entitlements.

Women's entrepreneurship also deserves greater institutional support. Providing easy access to credit, business training, marketing platforms, and digital tools can encourage women to establish and scale up small enterprises. Investments in infrastructure—such as workspaces, transport, and internet access—are vital for enabling women's economic engagement, especially in rural and semi-urban areas.



Lastly, addressing social and structural barriers is crucial. Improving safety in public transport and workplaces, promoting flexible work options, and challenging patriarchal norms through public awareness campaigns can enhance women's mobility and autonomy. Special attention should be given to caste-responsive employment policies, ensuring that SC/ST and OBC women are explicitly included in job creation schemes. Only through such inclusive and integrated strategies can the structural crisis of women's employment in Madhya Pradesh be effectively reversed.

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