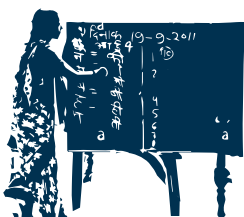
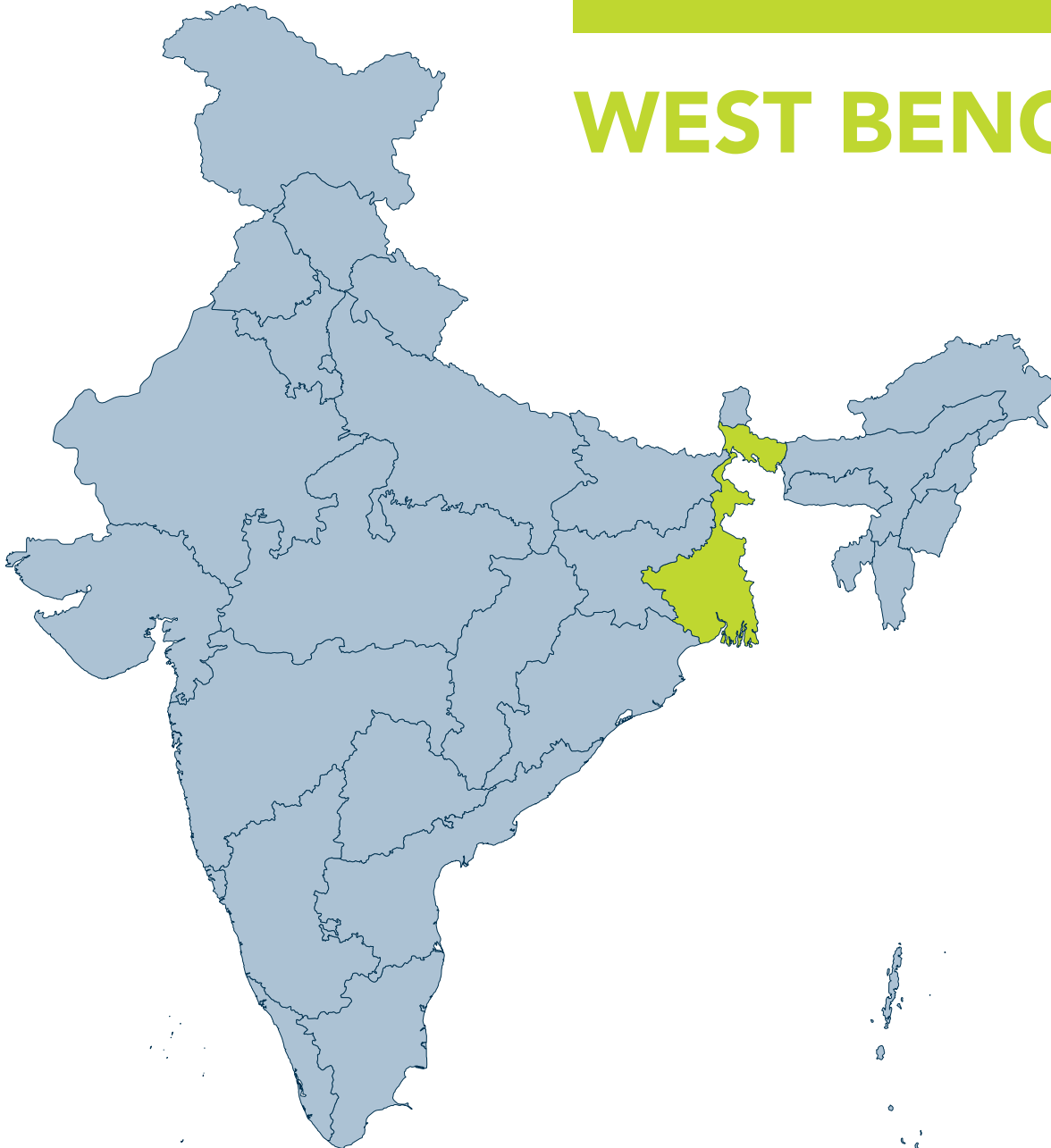


WOMEN'S WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION IN INDIA: **STATEWISE TRENDS**

WEST BENGAL



This series of state factsheets highlight important aspects of the status of women's employment in the states. The factsheets use secondary data provided by the National Sample Surveys' Periodic Labourforce Survey (PLFS), 2018-19. In certain parts of the factsheets, the data from employment – unemployment surveys (EUS) in some of the previous years, conducted by the same agency and data from other government sources have also been used to support specific facts.

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West Bengal

West Bengal (WB) is located on the eastern coast of the Indian peninsula, and is part of the fertile Indo-Gangetic Plain. It is the fourth most populous state in the country, with a population of about 99 million.¹ The state ranks eighth from the bottom in terms of Gross State Domestic Product per capita² among all states in India, with a fifth of its population lying below the poverty line.³ Approximately 68 percent of the population of WB resides in rural areas⁴ where agriculture predominates the economy, which makes the agricultural sector primary source of employment in the state.

There is a significant share of women engaged in agricultural activities. A large number of women find work in paddy fields and in the beedi industry, in particular. Despite this, women's work participation rates in WB have been historically low. One of the reasons for this is that women are primarily engaged in the agricultural sector – many of them in rice cultivation – and do not acknowledge their labour as 'work'. These women usually perform labour intensive activities such as weeding and transplanting, and are not paid for their work. Hence, there is gross underreporting of women's work in the state. Female labour force participation rates (FLFPRs) from the recent Periodic Labourforce Survey (PLFS) of 2018-19 reflects this: FLFPR for WB is 17.5 percent, which falls below the all India figure of 18.6 percent.

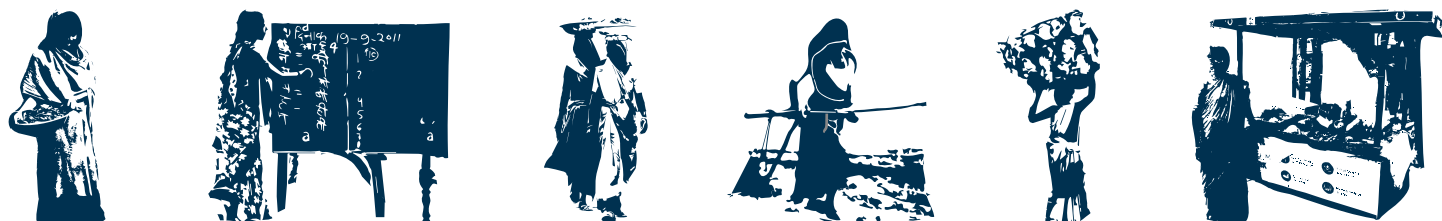
Gender inequality in the labour markets of the state is a pervasive problem, especially in rural areas. The gender gap in LFPRs in urban WB is 40.9 percentage points, which is comparable with the national figure. However, male-female disparity in rural LFPRs is as high as 46.7 percentage points – significantly greater than the gender gap of 35.4 percentage points observed for all of rural India.

WB's performance in terms of indicators on gender presents a mixed picture. Women in WB have the lowest mean age at marriage among all states in the country – mean age at marriage for women in the state is 21.2 years, while the national average is 22.2 years.⁵ Sex ratio stands at 941 males per 1000 males, one of the highest in the country.⁶ Maternal mortality ratio is 101, significantly lower than the national figure of 130.⁷ However, under-nutrition among women is high – 62.5 percent women in the age group 15-49 years are anaemic.⁸

Female labour force participation rate for West Bengal is

17.5%

which falls below the all India figure of 18.6%



¹ Source: Data from Unique Identification Authority of India, Government of India. Available at: <https://uidai.gov.in/images/state-wise-aadhaar-saturation.pdf>

² GSDP per capita figures for the year 2017-18

³ Source: Reserve Bank of India estimates in 2011-12, computed as per Tendulkar method on Mixed Reference Period (MRP). Available at: <https://www.rbi.org.in/scripts/PublicationsView.aspx?id=16603>

⁴ Source: Census 2011. Available at: https://censusindia.gov.in/2011census/censusinfodashboard/stock/profiles/en/IND019_West%20Bengal.pdf

⁵ Source: Women and Men in India 2018, 20th issue, Central Statistics Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation

⁶ Source: Table 16: Sex ratio at birth (female per 1000 male) by residence, India and bigger States/UTs, 2012-14 to 2016-18, Sample Registration System Statistical Report 2018

⁷ Source: Maternal Mortality Rate of Major States, Sample Registration System Statistical Report 2018. Note that Maternal Mortality Ratio is the number of maternal deaths per 100,000 live births.

⁸ Source: Women and Men in India 2018, 20th issue, Central Statistics Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation

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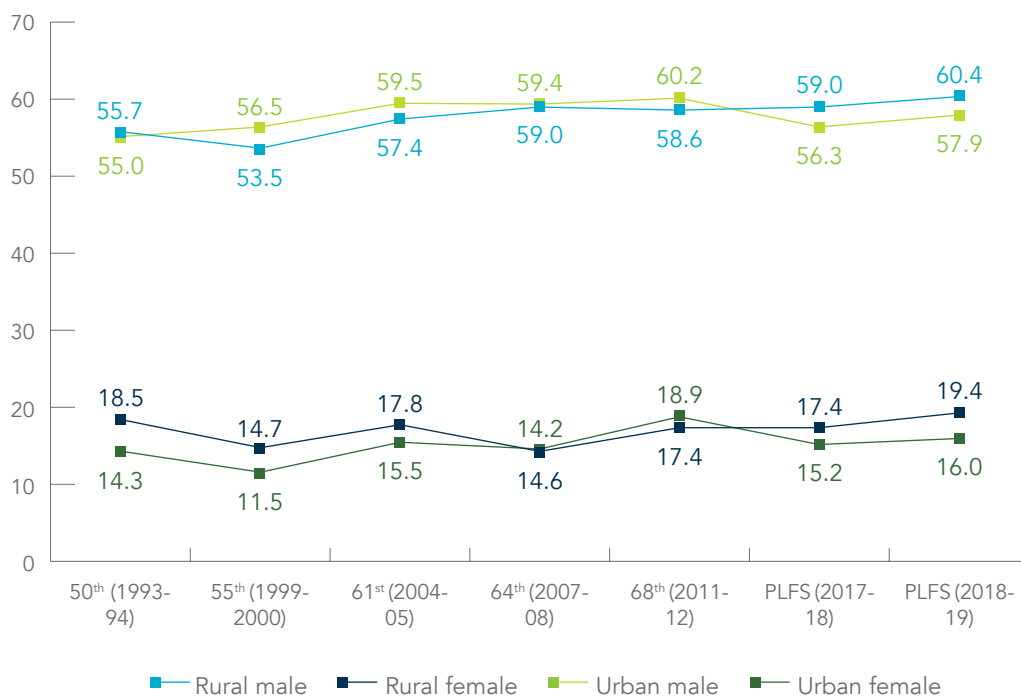


Trends in Female Workforce Participation Rates (FWPR) (Chart 1)

Female Workforce Participation Rate measures the ratio of employed females to total female population, unlike the FLFPR which also includes the unemployed in its measurement. Some interesting trends for WB are as follows:

- West Bengal shows vast differences between WPRs of men and women, particularly in rural areas. Additionally, the gender gap in rural areas has widened in recent years, especially since 2011-12.
- Since 2011-12, rural WPRs had been on the decline and urban WPRs had been stagnant. The recently released PLFS 2018-19 shows improvements in WPRs for both men and women between 2017-18 and 2018-19, however.
- Urban women's WPR rose by 2 percentage points within the span of a year – the highest rise among all cohorts in this period (Chart 1). Meanwhile, rural FWPR rose by 0.8 percentage points within the same period.
- The recent rise in WPRs for women across both rural and urban geographies is a welcome change but it is still too early to establish these improvements as stable trends. Improvements in FWPRs merit a deeper investigation, especially to understand the factors driving the rise.

Chart 1: Trends in work participation rates



Source: EUS 1993-94, 1999-00, 2004-05, 2007-08, 2011-12, PLFS 2017-18 and PLFS 2018-19, NSSO, MoSPI, GOI. The WPR figures are calculated for women and men of all age groups.

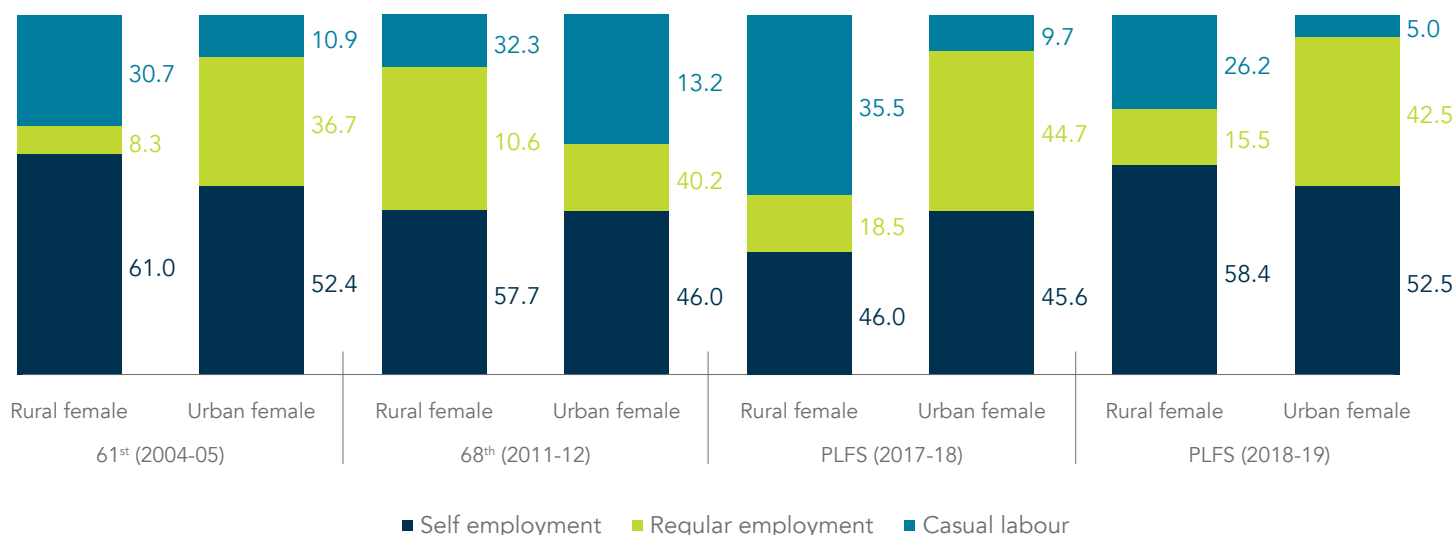
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Distribution of women workers by status of employment (Chart 2)

- In urban WB, one in every two women workers report themselves to be self-employed. 42.5 percent urban women workers are employed in regular wage work. Only 5 percent women work as casual wage workers.
- Self-employment is predominant in rural WB as well – 58.4 percent women workers report themselves to be self-employed.
- Self-employment in rural WB had been on the decline in the period between 2004-05 and 2017-18. 2018-19 witnessed a reversal of this trend with the share of self-employed women rising by a substantial 12.4 percentage points within a year.
- Urban areas saw a rise in self-employment as well, as the share of self-employed rose by 7 percentage points in the same period.
- On the contrary, the share of casual wage work among women fell sharply between 2017-18 and 2018-19, across all regions. In urban areas, the share of casual wage work dropped by approximately 5 percentage points.
- Meanwhile, rural areas, which experienced a rise in casual wage work among women in the long period between 2004-05 and 2017-18, observed a sharp decline in recent times – the share of casual women workers fell by 9.3 percentage points between 2017-18 and 2018-19.
- The share of regular wage work declined by 3 percentage points in rural areas and 2.2 percentage points in urban areas between 2017-18 and 2018-19, contrary to previous trends where regular wage work of women had been consistently growing, across the state. There is a need to investigate this further, especially to identify the sectors and occupations where women are gaining viz. self-employment, and reasons for decline in regular wage work.

Chart 2: Distribution of women workers by status of employment



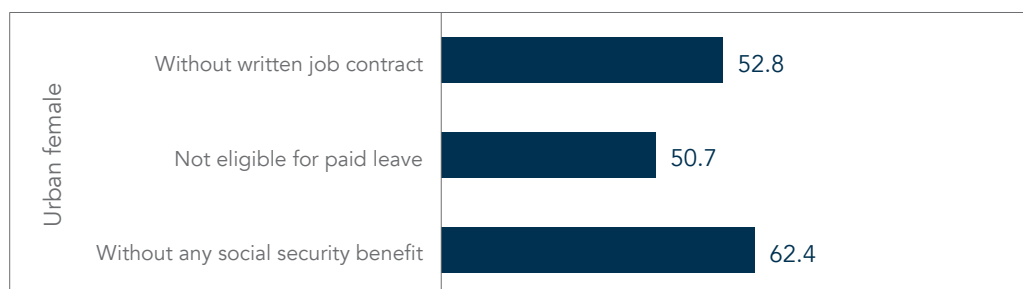
Source: EUS 2004-05, 2011-12 and PLFS 2017-18, 2018-19, NSSO, MoSPI, GOI



Condition of work in regular employment (Chart 3)

- The recent decline in regular wage work among urban women in WB raises concerns. Added to this is the high incidence of informality in regular wage employment. Nearly one in two women in regular employment in 2018-19 report that they are not eligible for paid leaves.
- Further, 58.2 percent women do not have a written job contract and a significant 62.4 percent of regular wage workers are without any social security benefits.

Chart 3: Share of regular women workers in urban areas without non-wage remunerations



Source: Annual Report, PLFS 2018-19

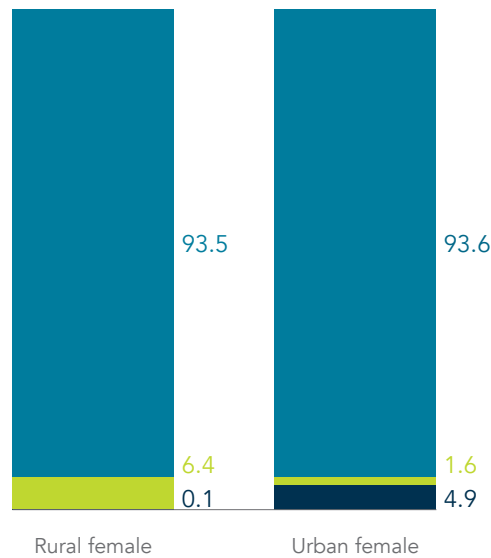
Women workers in casual employment (Chart 4)

- While casual wage work among women declined across the state, rural areas witnessed a sharper decline between 2017-18 and 2018-19.
- Despite the fact that the share of women employed on daily wage basis has declined across WB, 93.5 percent of rural women and 93.6 percent of urban women employed in casual wage work remain employed in non-public work.
- In rural WB, MGNREGA work accounts for only 6.4 percent of total employment in casual wage work for women. While this share is larger than that of many states, it is 2.3 percentage points lower than the national figure.
- The MGNREGA figures provided by the scheme website suggest that women person days out of total person days provided under MGNREGA in WB was a low 48.1 percent which was much lower than the national average of 54.2 percent in the year 2018-19 (Chart 5).

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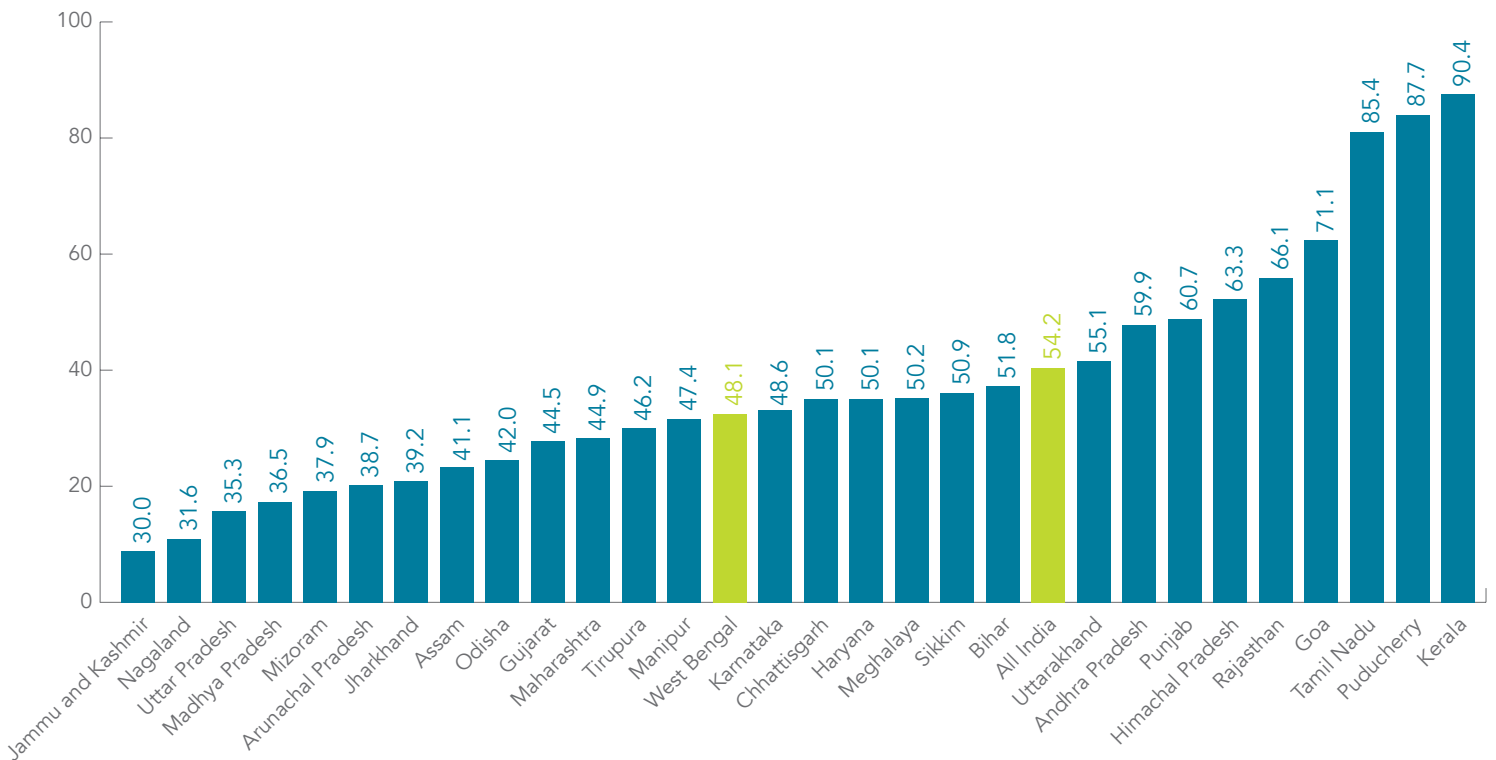
Chart 4: Women workers in casual employment



■ Casual labour in public work ■ MGNREGA ■ Other casual work

Source: Author's calculations based on unit level data from PLFS 2018-19

Chart 5: Women person-days out of total in MGNREGA, 2018-19 (%)



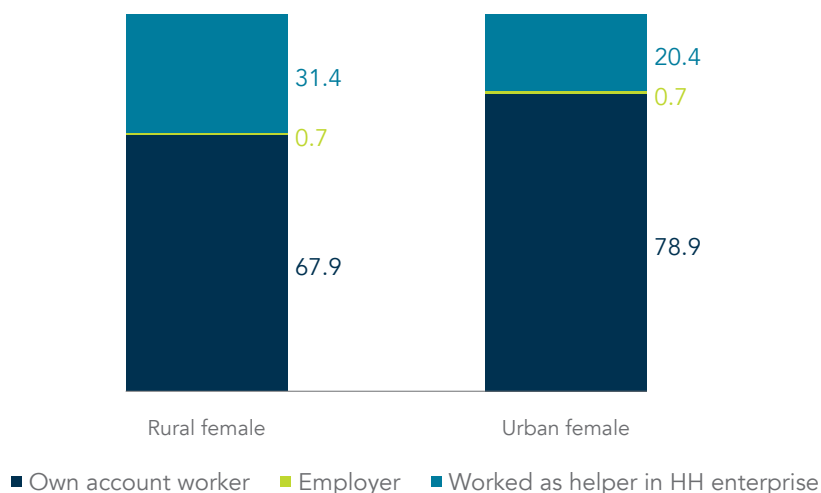
Source: MGNREGA Public Data Portal



Women workers in self-employment (Chart 6)

- A vast majority of self-employed women in WB work in own account enterprises, in both rural and urban areas. In rural WB, around 70 percent self-employed women are own account workers. This share is greater – about 79 percent – for urban areas.
- It must be noted that while a large number of women work in their own enterprises, most of these workers are home-based and the scale of their enterprises is typically small. This raises concerns for profitability within such enterprises as well as scope for expansion. This is particularly true for beedi workers, who roll beedis from their homes, and receive extremely low incomes from their work.
- In an IWWAGE study of informal women workers in WB,⁹ it was found that while beedi workers formed a majority share among the informal workers surveyed, they had the lowest incomes among all trades. Further, it was found that higher levels of collectivization were required for bargaining for higher piece rates, which is currently a major issue.
- Employers among self-employed women in both rural as well as urban areas form an insignificant share of 0.7 percent.
- Within self-employment, the share of women working as unpaid helpers in household enterprises is only 20.4 percent in urban WB. For rural parts of the state, this figure is higher – 31.4 percent, but remains lower than what is observed for most states.

Chart 6: Distribution of self-employed women workers



Source: Author's calculations based on unit level data from PLFS 2018-19

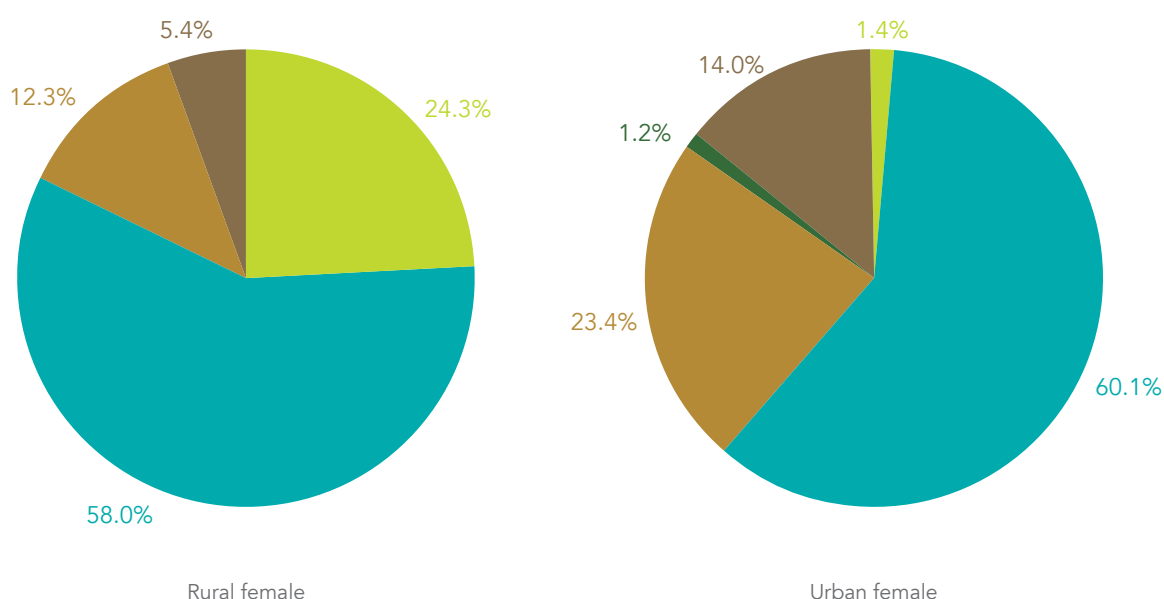
⁹ Strengthening Socio-Economic Rights of Women in the Informal Economy: The SEWA Approach in West Bengal and Jharkhand. Available at: <https://iwwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/SEWA-report.pdf>



Distribution of women workers in self-employment by broad industry division (Chart 7)

- The phenomenal rise in the share of self-employed women across WB in recent times merits further investigation. PLFS 2018-19 gives the distribution of self-employed women across broad industrial sectors.
- The figures show that manufacturing sector has the largest concentration of self-employed women in WB. 58 percent of rural women and 60.1 percent of rural women in self-employment are engaged in this sector.
- In rural areas, 24.3 percent women are employed in agriculture, 12.3 percent are in trade, hotels and restaurants and 5.4 percent are engaged in service activities, additionally.
- Given the significant share of self-employed women in agriculture, the state government runs several training programmes for women farmers under existing State Plan Schemes such as Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana, Farmers' Study Tour/ Training, Agricultural Training on Farm Women, Bringing Green Revolution to Eastern India, among others.¹¹ There are some provisions for beedi workers as well, namely, the West Bengal Beedi Workers' Scheme and the Beedi Worker's card which registers each worker and makes them eligible for several social protection schemes in the state.
- In urban WB, as mentioned earlier, a majority of self-employed women are concentrated in the manufacturing sector. 23.4 percent of self-employed women are additionally engaged in trade, hotels and restaurants and 14 percent are engaged in services.

Chart 7: Distribution of Women Workers in Self-employment by Broad Industry Division



■ Agriculture ■ Manufacturing ■ Trade, hotel and restaurant ■ Transport, storage and communications ■ Other services

Source: Author's calculations based on unit level data from PLFS 2018-19

¹⁰ Source: Economic Survey of West Bengal, 2017-18

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In conclusion, we see that despite small improvements in the workforce participation rate of women across the state in 2018-19, the gender gap in workforce participation in rural areas has widened over time. This suggests that rural women are increasingly weighed down by unpaid work, which is worrying.

Regular wage work and daily wage work has declined across both rural and urban geographies. The decline in regular wage work of women is a cause for concern, especially in urban areas.

The sharp rise in the share of self-employed women in recent times needs to be explored further. An overwhelming majority of self-employed women are employed as own account workers, most of them in manufacturing and agriculture. These women would benefit greatly from policies and interventions which can help diversify and expand the scale of their businesses, enhancing their incomes.

The factsheet is prepared by Nidhi Gyan Pandey, IWWAGE – Lead at KREA University. Copyright ©2021

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