



**Social Identities and Female Labour Force
Participation in India**
November 2021

Introduction

In 2017 the Asian Dalit Rights Foundation (ADRF) stated that 20 to 25 per cent of the world population, especially in South Asia, are subject to discrimination on the basis of 'caste' which is 'a fundamental determinant [of] social exclusion and development'. Caste is an inherited identity. In economic terms, castes were formed on the basis of different groups specialising in certain occupations but with time society has associated lower castes with long borne ideas of purity and impurity. Caste in the modern society falls under the contemporary class system, with corresponding hierarchical social standings. The long history of caste based discriminations in access to social and physical infrastructure has trapped several social groups, especially those burdened with the lowest forms of human labour like manual scavenging, disposing of human wastes and burning corpses, without the chance of any upward social mobility.

The 'grammar' of caste is complex, contributing to persisting socio-economic and human capital disparities in addition to subjective well-being, through difficulties in attainment of education, hiring bias and even violence (Deshpande, 2017). The female work force suffers not only from much discussed gender inequalities but also from an unrecognised caste bias that still exists in the labour market. But research on caste based

discrimination in the labour market, especially on the intersectionalities of caste and gender has been rare in case of India (Shah et al., 2018).

The post-independence Indian government was opposed to using caste as a parameter for measuring poverty and inequality, since 'both Gandhian utopianism and socialist universalism expected archaic caste to disappear with modernisation' (Mosse, 2018). Therefore, caste categorisation never became a part of national censuses (Dirks, 2001; Jaffrelot, 2006). Untouchability was recognised to be just a practice in the Hindu community, and was made illegal, but the Scheduled Caste (SC) communities who comprise 17 percent of the population (including Dalit or 'ex-untouchable'), still experience untouchability (Mosse, 2012). Caste remains a discounted parameter even with research and qualitative surveys pointing to it as an important determinant of social and economic status, poverty and discrimination in contemporary India.

This brief aims to collate evidence and compile data to affirm whether caste based discrimination in India exemplify the already disadvantageous status of women in the labour force. We look into trends of women's labour force participation, based on caste. The brief uses the administrative definitions of Scheduled Caste (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in India, provided by the major official datasets.



Photo credit: Young Indian Women, Sidhi India/Episcopal Relief/Adam Cohn/Flickr

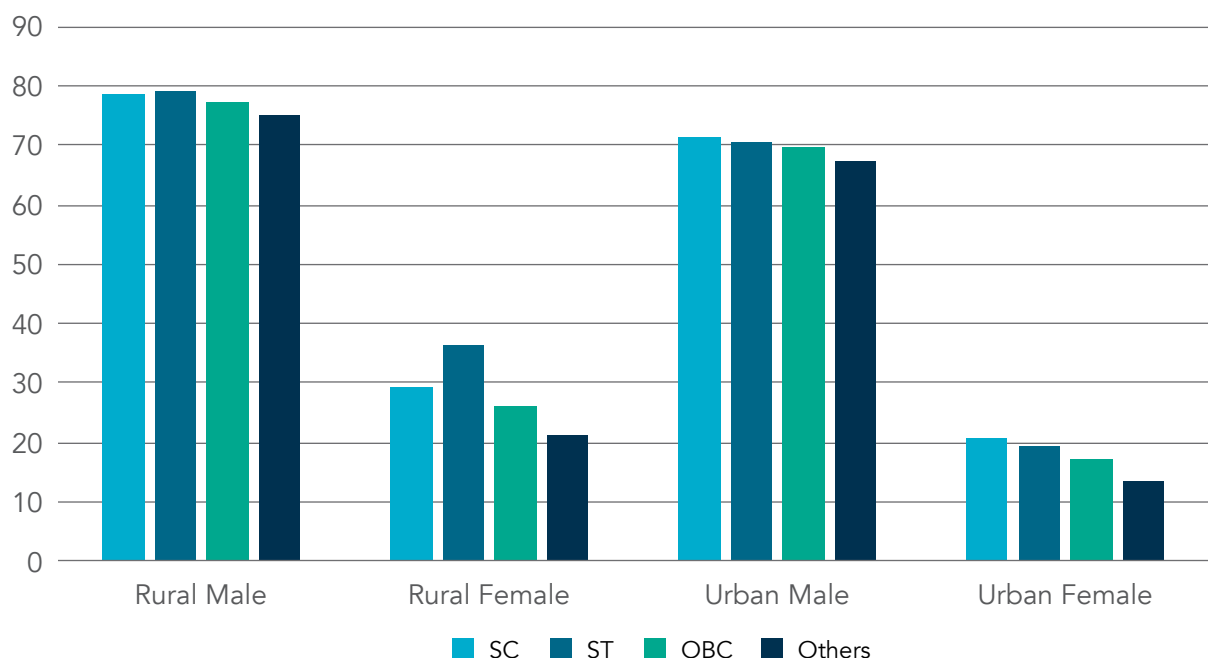
The divide in work force participation

Even though officially unacknowledged, caste remains a primary source and the most pervasive parameter of social stratification in India (Deshpande, 2011). Ironically in the face of veiled socioeconomic disaggregation of marginalised groups, their overall participation rates in the workforce are higher. However, this does not necessarily signify decent work. The workforce participation rate also shows a significant divide between the rural and urban female workforce in addition to that between men and women from the same social groups.

caste prejudice and believed 'polluting status' of the untouchables. Approximately 71 per cent of the SC farm wage workers reported a loss of an average of 43 work days due to discrimination in hiring. Among 389 non-farm wage labourers 52 per cent reported denial of work due to caste bias. In a similar urban labour market study, of the 314 regular salaried workers, 18 per cent SCs reported discrimination in selection, 22 per cent reported high caste employers preferring employees from their own caste and 23 per cent stated that high caste candidates with lesser qualification were selected.

The immorality of the labour market demands have trapped entire sections of the society

Labour Force Participation by Social Group and Gender



Source: Labour Bureau 2015

Dalits, people coming from the lowest castes in India and once considered 'untouchable', now come under the 'Scheduled Castes'. However, they still are subject to worse stigmatisation in hiring and access to human capital, and at workplaces. A survey conducted by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS), 1992 households in 80 villages across the states of Haryana, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh in 2013, showed that amongst 441 farm wage labourers 41 percent were denied work by the high caste employers due to

like the SCs into demeaning and dirty work for generations, associated with funerary work, flaying, leatherwork, and removers of the material residues of daily life. They themselves are treated as impure in a permanent way by society and excluded through residential segregation, from ownership of land, common water sources, even public spaces like classrooms or markets thereby pushing SCs away from caste conscious rural systems to autonomous, contract and daily wage jobs in urban areas (Mines, 2005; Mosse, 2012).

Quality and terms of employment

The families that migrate or reside in urban areas also have not escaped the limited growth in occupational hierarchy. SCs have had the highest unemployment rates in the post-liberalisation periods compared to other marginalised groups and upper castes along with young workers belonging to the SCs with similar levels of education which point to caste-based discrimination being a systemic problem. SCs have reportedly faced caste-based discrimination in hiring, leading to greater unemployment, 1.7 per cent more than the country average. In the urban areas, 26.9 per cent, 19.5 per cent and 37.8 per cent for SC, ST and OBC households, respectively were self-employed while 20.5 per cent, 18 per cent and 14.3 per cent reported casual labour as main source of their income.

Deshpande (2017) aggregated disparities in occupation, education and assets to construct the Caste Development Index, which showed that the degree of caste inequality remains unimproved or has worsened with the greater wealth or faster growth of different Indian states. Per-capita income and access to high-status occupations decrease as we go down the caste and class ladder and so do the return on education or capital assets, the proportion of people in poverty increasing through 'graded inequality' (Thorat, 2017). It comes as no surprise that now the majority of the country's capital wealth in form of land, buildings, finance etc. is largely in the hands of the 'upper' castes while the 'lowest' are still primarily casual and daily wage labourers in the informal and unorganised sectors with meagre earnings and lack of access to financial capital or assets. Therefore, a vicious circle subsists, obstructing access to physical and human capital amongst these social group which in turn is cited

Per Thousand Distribution of Households of Different Social Groups (Household Type)

	Regular Wage/Salaried	Self-Employed	Casual Labour	Others
Scheduled Caste (SC)	440	268	205	86
Scheduled Tribe (ST)	465	195	180	160
Other Backward Classes (OBC)	376	378	143	104
Others	445	369	59	126

Source: NSSO Data (2011-12)

The National Sample Survey (2011-12) showed that even among wage labourers, SCs had a much greater share of casual wage workers, which implies worse job security and lower earning. Amongst the overall casual labour population in the country 32 per cent were from the SCs, which was double their population share of 16 per cent. SCs are also employed for lesser number of days compared to upper castes which was attributed to differences in human capital endowment for one-third of the employment rate and two-thirds of it due to discrimination against SCs in the hiring process.

as a reason to avail any upward socio-economic mobility and vice-versa.

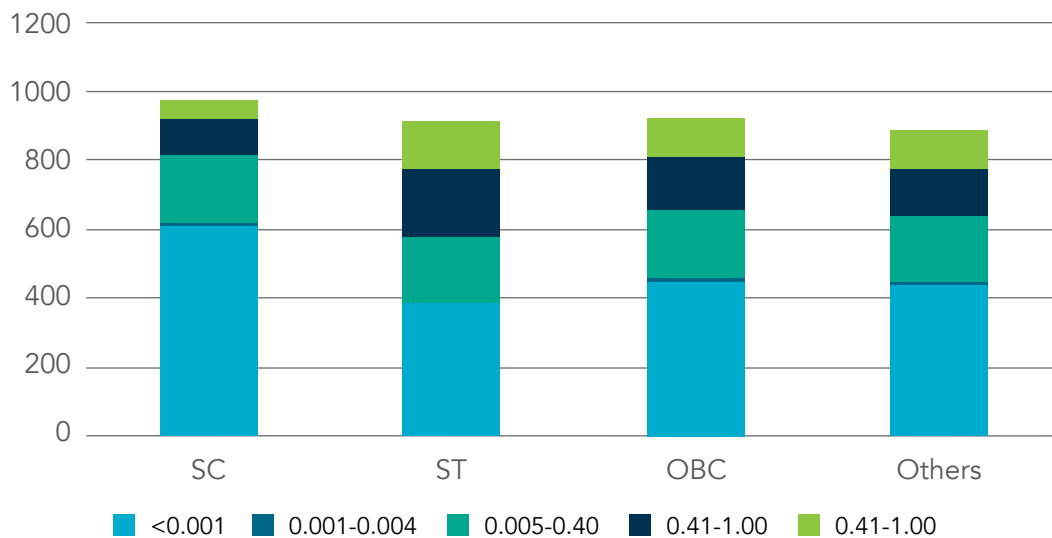
The labour market inequalities are exacerbated by the unequal access to resources by this cohort of the population. Some of these inequalities are evident in other parameters of the labour market. The other forms of inequalities in education and asset-holding have a direct bearing upon their labour market status. Their low asset ownership, in form of land etcetera, and low education rates stemming from ingrained social discrimination weigh against them in the labour market, making them almost completely dependent on wage labour.

Unequal asset holding

The employment and unemployment Schedule of the 68th round of the NSS (Agricultural Year (AY) 2010-11) showed that amongst the 47.4 per cent of the rural households who cultivated land less than 0.001 hectare in size, the SC, ST, OBC and others categories comprised of 61.2 per cent, 38.6 per cent, 44.8 per cent and 44.3 per cent respectively. The share of SC, ST and OBC households cultivating land greater than 4 hectares were very low at 0.6 per cent, 1.7 per cent and 2.7 per cent respectively.

Most households are either landless or own very small plots of land. This is evident from the chart above. The absence of land for large section of this population renders them as wage labour, working in others' fields. Also, the NSS report for 2011-12 showed that in rural areas, only 50 per cent of the SC households and 57.2 of the ST households and 34.2 per cent of the OBCs possessed MGNREGA job cards though in a positive light, the proportions were higher than the 38.4 per cent for rural households overall.

Size of Land Possessed by Social Groups



Source: NSSO 68th Round

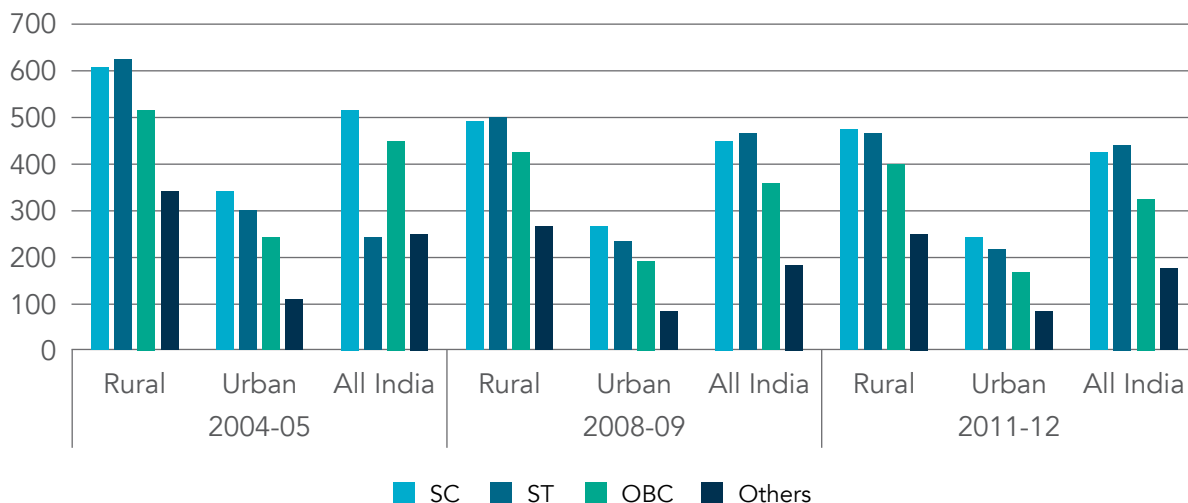


Educational disparities

Both the SC and Scheduled tribe (ST) communities in India show low and highly unequal educational attainment (Agrawal 2013).

Indian female workforce has been consistently decreasing on account of the combination of wage differentials between them and upper caste women, vulnerability and harassment at workplace and stigmatisation. It reveals that social hierarchy is a major decisive factor in case of wage and over

Proportion (per 1000) of Households with No Female Literate Member of Age 15 + Years



Source: NSS 61st (2004-05), 66th (2009-10) and 68th (2011-12) Rounds

Caste and gender: women's dual burden

Women belonging to such marginalised and minority groups face the duality of gender and caste based discrimination. A recent study (Singh et al, 2020) availed the NSS employment data from 1993–1994 to 2017–2018 to explain that the fraction of SC and tribal women in the

the long period of the study, wage discrimination between SC and upper-caste women has actively increased.

Most labourers from the 'lower castes' are part of the informal labour force. Working SC women are constrained at the lowest levels even in the informal labour market, lacking social mobility and social networks to move up and facing greater transaction costs to enter the formal

Wage Differentials: Caste, Gender, Employment



Source: PLFS Data 2018-19

Note: Monthly wage for casual labourers is equal to average daily wage over 4 weeks

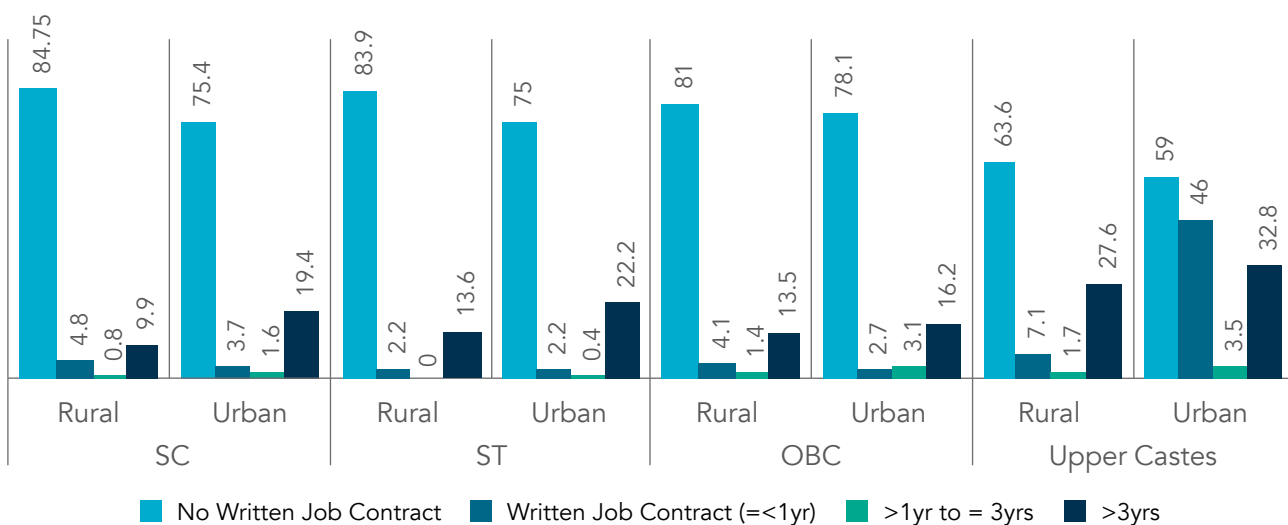
markets. They are therefore, most often trapped in the lowest paying jobs requiring hard physical labour. They are also likely to be in roles without written contracts, paid leaves and shorter periods of engagement.

Even within their own community the gender norms of subjugation of women continue. The intra-household power dynamic is even more skewed than that at the national level (Chakraborty, 2003) with SC women seen mostly constrained to the most wretched obligations and more

improve education and social awareness, and use these vocational skills for jobs. But here too the traditional gender division of labour, with women assuming labour-intensive tasks, often under male authority and supervision, continues to prevail. In addition, SC women who were employed and provided for their families, still were constrained by patriarchal norms of their communities and male authorities within the household.

With work environments in both private and public sector being somewhere between reluctant

Terms Of Employment for Female Workers (%)



vulnerable to caste humiliation (Mosse, 2012) and sexual violence (Irudayam, Mangubhai, & Lee, 2014) along with gender inequality (Still, 2017).

In the public sector, the majority of educated SC women were only able to access temporary and low paying work without social security or labour rights. Here, most were employed in typically female jobs, as teachers in government schools, but often below their acquired skill level. But in the post-liberalisation private sector however, there was an increase in employment for educated SC women. These were women, over 70 per cent of whom were between 20-30 years, and had accessed education through the reservation policies. They were mostly employed in the growing service sector and working for sub-contractors of larger companies (Singh, 2011).

However, with the smaller subcontracting firms, SC women only earned a near-minimum wage and mostly lacked job security and welfare benefits, without trade unions existing in these companies. The expanding NGO sector though proved to be an important source of employment for urban SC women, showing greater awareness of existing caste and gender discrimination (Kurian, 2014). Women here could access new information,

in employing lower caste women to being outright exploitative, entrepreneurship seems to be something where women can take control, irrespective of the communities they belong too. Both the central and state governments promoted independent businesses by the scheduled castes. The Delhi Scheduled Caste Finance Development Corporation runs several schemes to develop scheduled caste entrepreneurship. But SC women, especially those who sought to start businesses outside local communities, face problems in accessing supply for wholesalers from upper castes in addition to problems due to poor educational levels, lack of experience and in accessing credit or borrowing at affordable interest rates. For the majority of SC women such self-employment is more a distress-driven survival strategy to escape inadequately paid jobs and unemployment. They set up small-scale shops and undertake activities with low and uncertain incomes, involving a high degree of self-exploitation.

Policy structure and need for affirmative action

The Indian Constitution in its commitment to equality recognised historically disadvantaged

groups in a segregated society and provided special protection for Scheduled Castes and Tribes whose 'extreme backwardness' arose 'out of the traditional practice of untouchability', but there was no special recognition of societal bias and still existing untouchability (Dirks, 2001; Galanter, 1984). The much required affirmative action to not let discrimination on the basis of castes hamper overall productivity and optimum growth was, in the form of reservation in jobs and higher education.

The SC population has gained from the increase in state spending on public goods equalising access to school education, healthcare, housing, piped water and electricity (Munshi, 2016). Also the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) has been designed to self-target poorer SCs offering what is dignified as "government work" paid at the national minimum wage (Carswell & De Neve, 2014), in potentially increasing local wage rates and workers' bargaining power (Imbert & Papp, 2015).

The government's Mandal Commission extended benefits in form of fixed quotas or 'reservation' in public sector employment and higher education, formerly limited to the Scheduled Castes, to a more heterogeneous set of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) with a listing of 3,743 different jatis or castes, almost 52 per cent of the population. It recognises the idea that caste itself has been a criterion of socioeconomic backwardness and not just an effect of Hindu untouchability practices.

Despite various efforts by the government, such reservation policies in educational institutions and in government and public sector employment, educational and occupational progress amongst females from disadvantaged social groups such as the SCs and STs have not touched a larger share of this section of the population. Post-liberalisation policies in the last few decades have worsened existing inequalities though expected to welcome inspire a new age of market efficiency that would lead to a globally competitive economy with increased growth and employment. A study (Moose, 2018) however showed that by 2010 these opportunities were under threat as with cuts to government expenditure in line with the liberalisation policies, recruitment in the public sector became more irregular.

Among regular workers, Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) women are more likely to work in the public sector as a result of these affirmative action policies but though reservations have worked moderately in creating access to public employment, it has not translated in access to good-quality jobs for lower caste women. Deshpande (2017) showed that both caste and education were important parameters for women's

workforce participation but even access to higher education has not levelled the gap between social groups in terms of Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), pointing out that policies focused on increasing female employment need a more nuanced look into the interaction of education and intersectionalities to take into account the heterogeneous nature of the women workers.

In light of the quantitative evidence and qualitative research findings elaborated above, such affirmative action is necessary to allow better labour and capital mobility in the face of labour market restrictions. For that, research surveys aimed specifically at these marginalised cohorts need to be launched to stage a better foundation for policies that will free the female labour force of the country of implicit gender, caste and class bias.

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This brief has been authored by Rhitabrita Mukherjee, Senior Research Associate at IWWAGE.

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Block M 6, Second Floor, Kharera, Hauz Khas New Delhi, Delhi-110016

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