

INDIA

This factsheet highlights key aspects of women's employment at all India level, drawing on secondary data from the National Statistical Office's Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS). The analysis incorporates the latest calendar year-based PLFS data (January–December, 2025), along with the earlier calendar year data for 2022, 2023, and 2024 to capture recent trends in women's employment.

INDIA

Introduction¹

India's labour market continues to show a marked structural imbalance in female workforce participation, even amid sustained economic growth since liberalisation. Globally, female labour force participation rates have remained broadly stable at around 47–50% since the early 1990s, based on ILO modelled estimates. There is, however, significant regional variation. South Asia has consistently recorded among the lowest rates worldwide, hovering at around 30%. Within the region, countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka record participation rates considerably higher than India, which stood at approximately 28% on ILO modelled estimates in 2010 and has recorded a gradual recovery in the years since.² Although much of this increase is concentrated in rural areas and reflects distress-driven participation rather than structural transformation. Existing literature points to a combination of supply- and demand-side constraints shaping women's labour market outcomes. On the supply side, unpaid care responsibilities, restrictive social norms, safety concerns, and limited mobility continue to constrain participation, while on the demand side, inadequate job creation in women-intensive sectors and limited expansion of quality employment opportunities remain key challenges.³

In response to persistent gender gaps, policy efforts have increasingly targeted women's economic empowerment through initiatives such as the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), PM Vishwakarma Yojana, Stand-Up India, and self-help group (SHG)-based livelihood interventions. These schemes have aimed to strengthen women's access to credit, skills, entrepreneurial platforms and livelihoods, although concerns around informality and job quality continue to remain significant. Against this backdrop, this factsheet examines recent trends in women's labour market participation in India, focusing on sectoral distribution, employment status, occupational patterns, and the quality of employment.



Trends in Female Workforce and Labour Force Participation Rates

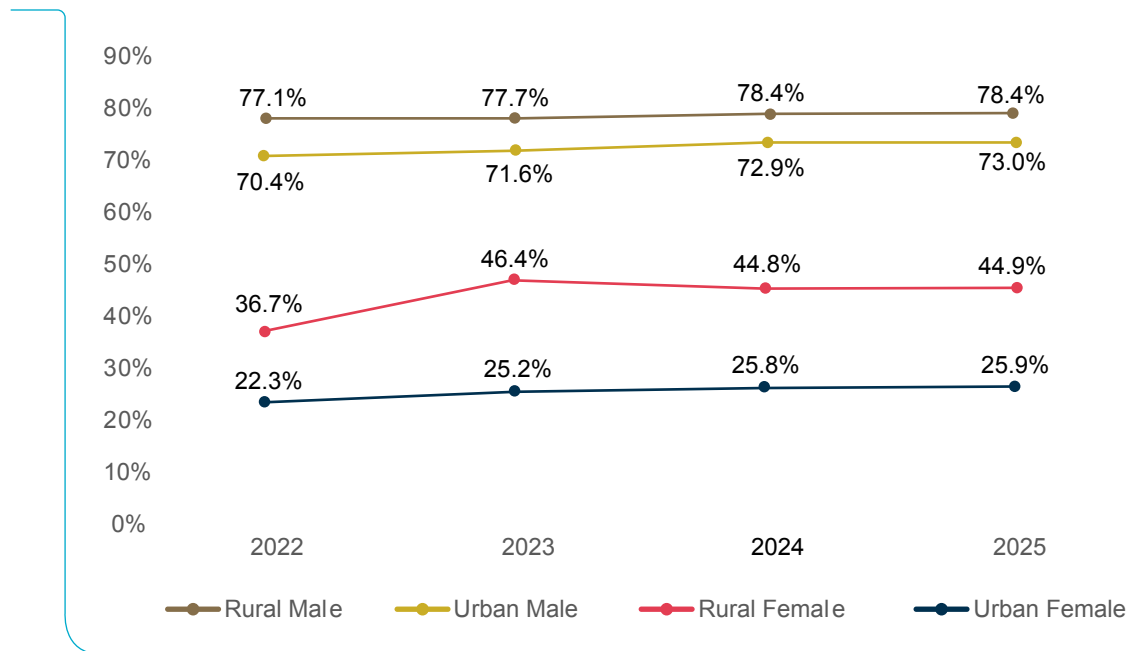
The Worker Population Ratio (WPR) shows a gradual increase from 2022 to 2025, with clear gender and rural-urban differences. Male WPR remains high and stable, with slight increases in both rural (77.1% to 78.4%) and urban areas (70.4% to 73.0%). Compared to 2022, female WPR rises sharply in 2023, especially in rural areas (36.7% to 46.4%), but then declines slightly and stabilizes around 45% by 2025. From 2022 to 2025, urban female WPR increases steadily but remains much lower (22.8% to 25.9%). Overall, women's participation has improved, particularly in rural areas, but significant gender gaps persist.

¹ From January 2025, the PLFS adopted a revised sampling design and methodology to improve the representativeness of labour market estimates. The analysis presented here uses calendar-year estimates, which remain broadly comparable across years, though caution may be warranted when comparing with estimates derived under the previous survey design.

² Female labor force participation rate. (2026b, January 28). Our World in Data: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/female-labor-force-participation-rates>

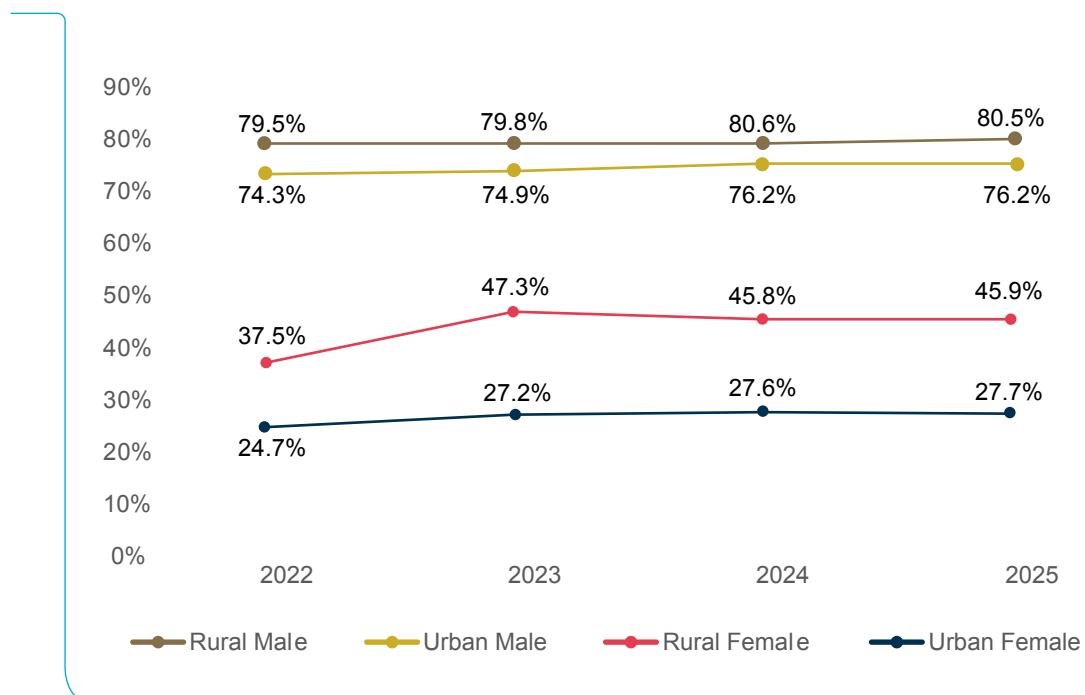
³ Ara, S., & Shrivastav, P. K. (2025). wl-6992-Decoding Rising Female Labour Force Participation in India: Evidence from PLFS Data. *Economic and Political Weekly/ Economic & Political Weekly*, 60(26–27). <https://doi.org/10.71279/epw.v60i26-27.39982>

Figure 1: Trends in WPR (15 Years and above)



- The Male and Female LFPR both show a modest increase from 2022 to 2025. Male LFPR remains high and stable, rising slightly in rural (79.5% to 80.5%) and urban areas (74.3% to 76.2%). Female LFPR sees a sharp rise between 2022 and 2023, especially in rural areas (37.5% to 47.3%), followed by a slight decline and stabilization through 2024-2025 at around 46%. Urban female LFPR increases gradually over the entire period (2022-2025) from 24.7% to 27.7% but remains much lower than rural levels.

Figure 2: Trends in LFPR (15 Years and above)

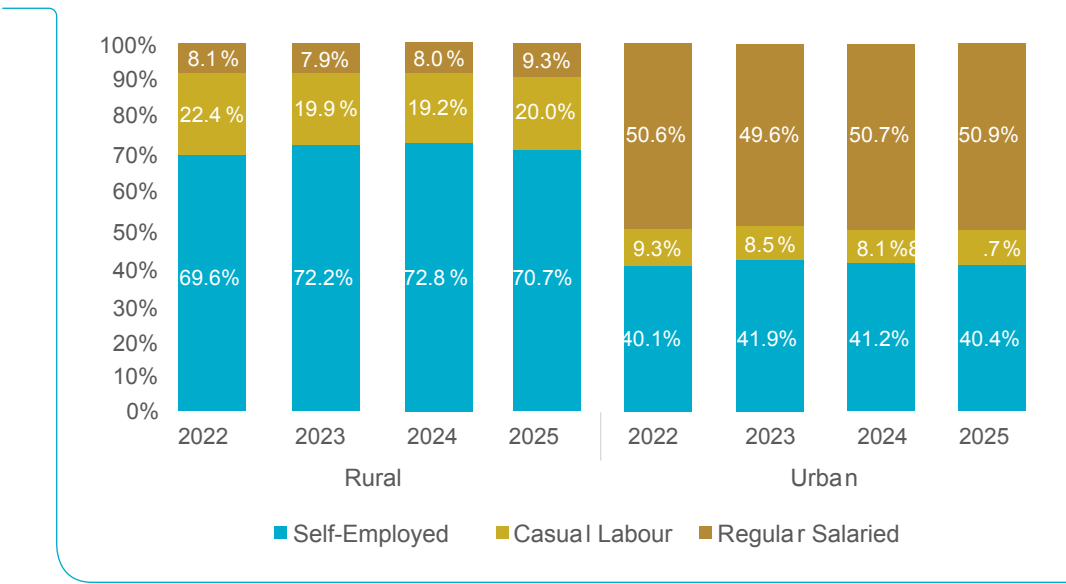


COMPOSITION OF FEMALE WORKFORCE

While overall participation has increased, the nature of women’s employment raises important concerns around quality and sustainability. The data consistently show that women’s work remains concentrated in informal and self-employed categories, with limited access to regular salaried work.

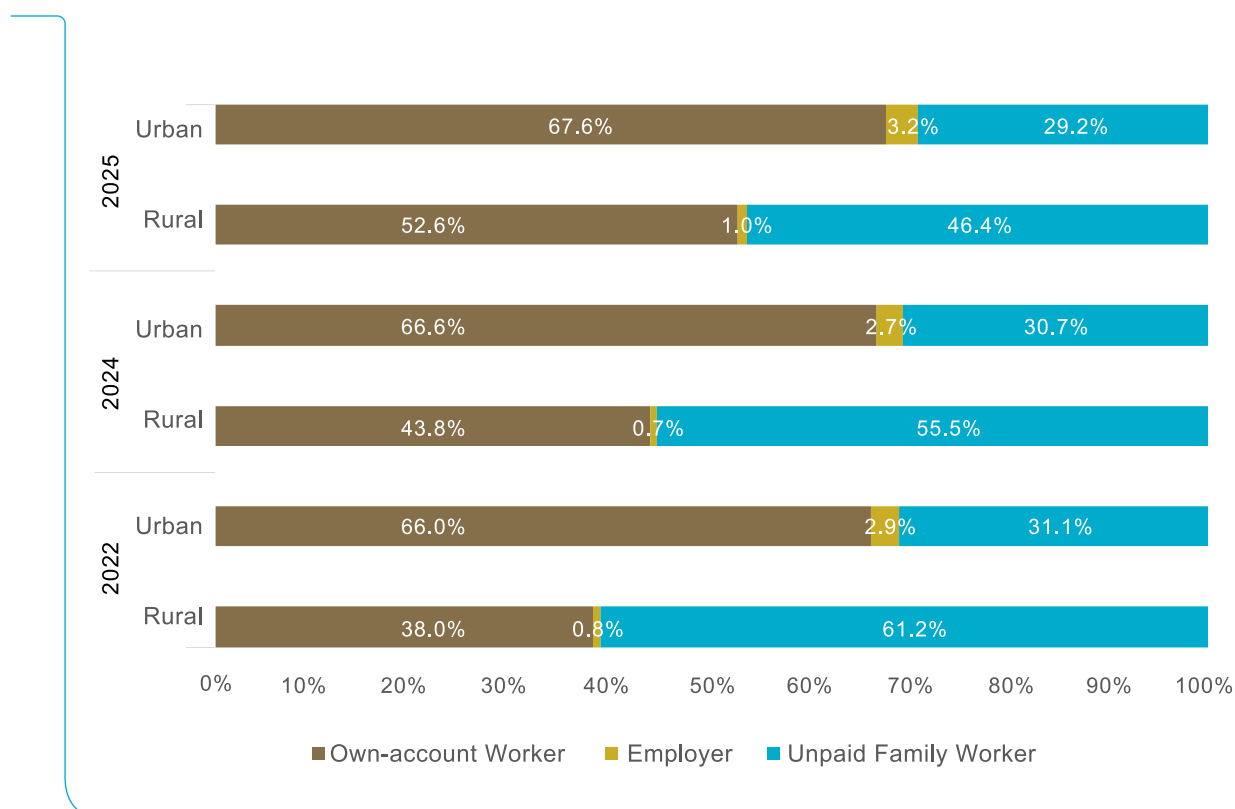
- Self-employment dominates the female workforce, particularly in rural areas, where it increases from 69.6% in 2022 to a peak of 72.8% in 2024 before declining slightly to 70.7% in 2025; in urban areas, it remains much lower and relatively stable around 40-42%.
- Casual labour forms the second-largest share for rural women, declining from 22.4% in 2022 to 19.2% in 2024, with a slight rise to 20.0% in 2025; in urban areas, it remains minimal, fluctuating between 8-9%.
- Regular salaried work constitutes a small share for rural women, though it rises modestly from 8.1% in 2022 to 9.3% in 2025; in contrast, it is the dominant category for urban women, remaining stable at around 50-51% throughout the period.

Figure 3: Type of employment



- Among self-employed women, own-account work shows a clear increase over time, especially in rural areas, rising from 38.0% in 2022 to 52.6% in 2025; in urban areas, it remains consistently high, increasing slightly from 66.0% to 67.6%.
- The share of women working as employers remains very low in both rural and urban areas, with only marginal fluctuations, around 0.7-1.0% in rural areas and 2.7-3.2% in urban areas.
- Unpaid family work declines notably, particularly in rural areas, falling from 61.2% in 2022 to 46.4% in 2025; in urban areas, it also decreases slightly from 31.1% to 29.2%, though it remains a smaller share compared to rural areas.

Figure 4: Distribution among self-employed women



DISTRIBUTION OF WOMEN WORKERS BY BROAD INDUSTRY DIVISIONS

- Between 2022 and 2025, the share of rural women in agriculture declined from 76.1% to 72.7%, indicating a shift away from farm work. At the same time, there are modest increases in key non-farm sectors such as retail trade (3.3% to 3.8%) and construction of buildings (2.3% to 3.1%), while education and wearing apparel manufacturing remained relatively stable. There was an emergence in tobacco and textile manufacturing by 2025, pointing towards limited but growing diversification into non-farm activities, despite agricultural dominance.

Table 1: Distribution of women workers by Broad Industry Divisions

NIC Sections	Rural		Urban	
	2022	2025	2022	2025
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	76.1%	72.7%	12.1%	12.7%
Retail trade, except of motor vehicles and motorcycles	3.3%	3.8%	9.9%	10.9%
Education	3.2%	3.2%	11.7%	12.1%
Construction of buildings	2.3%	3.1%	-	2.3%

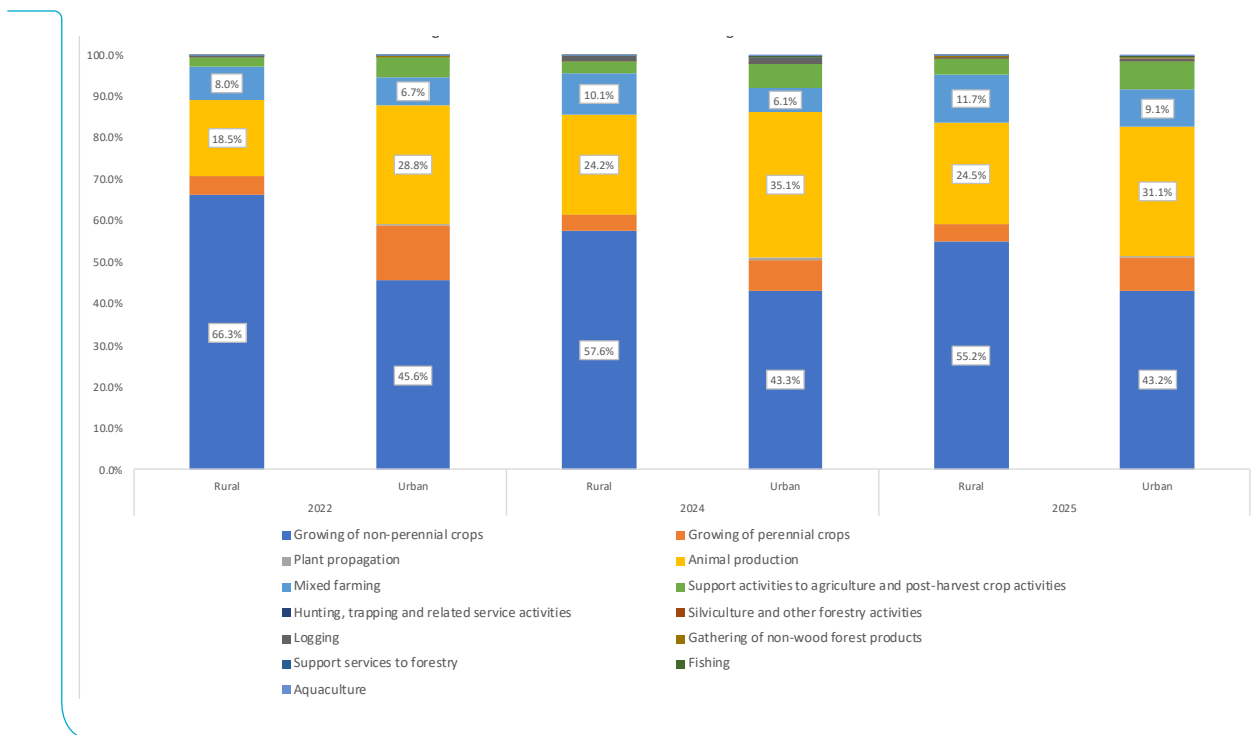
Manufacture of wearing apparel	3.0%	3.0%	9.4%	9.0%
Civil engineering	2.1%	1.8%	-	-
Manufacture of tobacco products	-	1.7%	-	1.8%
Manufacture of textiles	-	1.3%	4.5%	3.2%
Activities of households as employers of domestic personnel	-	-	10.5%	9.5%
Human health activities	-	-	5.5%	5.0%
Other personal service activities	-	-	3.7%	4.2%
Food and beverage service activities	-	-		3.1%
Computer programming, consultancy and related activities	-	-	3.3%	3.1%
Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	-	-	-	2.1%
Others	10.0%	9.4%	29.4%	20.9%

- Between 2022 and 2025, urban women's employment remained relatively diversified across education, retail, domestic work, manufacturing, and services. Education and retail trade remained broadly stable, increasing marginally from 11.7% to 12.1% and from 9.9% to 10.9%, respectively, while domestic work declined from 10.5% to 9.5%. At the same time, the share of women employed in agriculture, forestry, and fishing increased slightly from 12.1% to 12.7%, making it one of the largest employment sectors for urban women in 2025.
- Compared to rural areas, where women's work is overwhelmingly concentrated in agriculture, urban employment is far more diversified across services, retail, and manufacturing. However, the resurgence of agriculture in urban areas is unusual.

DISTRIBUTION OF WOMEN WORKERS WITHIN AGRICULTURE, FORESTRY AND FISHING

- In rural areas, women's work within agriculture remains heavily concentrated in growing of non-perennial crops, though its share declines from 66.3% in 2022 to 55.2% in 2025 which may reflect seasonal, irregular, and often low-productivity or unpaid forms of engagement rather than stable employment throughout year. At the same time, animal production increases from 18.5% to 24.5% and mixed farming also rises from 8.0% to 11.7% suggesting a shift toward diversified and relatively regular allied agricultural activities.
- In urban areas, the distribution is relatively more diversified, though non-perennial crops still account for the largest share despite a small decline from 45.6% to 43.2%. Animal production remains important and increases from 28.8% to 31.1%, while mixed farming rises from 6.7% to 9.1%. Support activities to agriculture also increase from 5.0% to 6.8%, while the share in perennial crops declines from 13.3% to 7.9%, indicating a gradual shift toward allied and support-based activities within urban agricultural work.

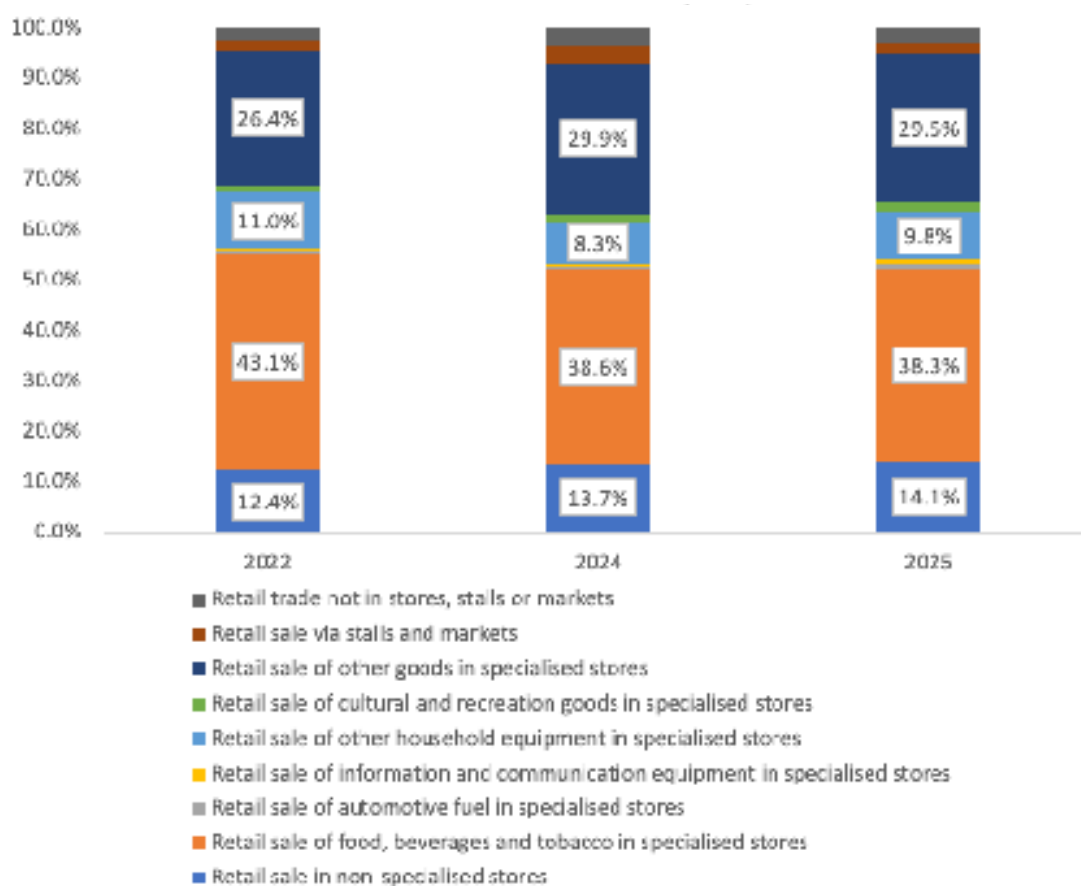
Figure 5: Distribution of women workers within Agriculture and allied activities



DISTRIBUTION OF WOMEN WORKERS WITHIN RETAIL TRADE (EXCEPT OF MOTOR VEHICLES AND MOTORCYCLES)

- In urban areas, where retail has a relatively strong presence for women, employment remains concentrated in food, beverages, and tobacco retail, though its share declines 43.1% in 2022 to 38.3% in 2025, indicating gradual diversification. At the same time, non-specialized stores increase (12.4% to 14.1%), and retail of other goods in specialized stores also rises (26.4% to 29.5%), suggesting a shift toward more varied retail activities.
- There is also a marginal shift within other segments like household equipment retail (11.0% to 9.8%) and small but rising participation in fuel and ICT-related retail, especially in urban areas. Overall, the trends indicate a slow movement away from traditional, necessity-based retail toward more diversified and possibly higher-value retail segments, though food-related retail still dominates.

Figure 6: Distribution of women workers within retail trade (except of motor vehicles and motorcycles)



DISTRIBUTION OF SELF-EMPLOYED WOMEN WORKERS BY BROAD INDUSTRY TYPES

- Between 2022 and 2025, the distribution of self-employed rural women remains heavily concentrated in agriculture and allied activities, with only slight changes (84.0% in 2022 to 82.2% in 2025). Non-farm sectors remain small in share and largely stable over time, with only marginal sector-specific movements. Retail trade shows a slight increase (4.4% to 4.6%), while manufacture of wearing apparel records a mild decline (4.0% to 3.9%). Tobacco manufacturing remains also remained largely unchanged, while textile manufacturing recorded a small increase from 1.3% to 1.6%. Overall, the structure remains largely unchanged, indicating limited diversification within women's self-employment.

Table 2: Distribution of Self-employed women by Broad Industry Types

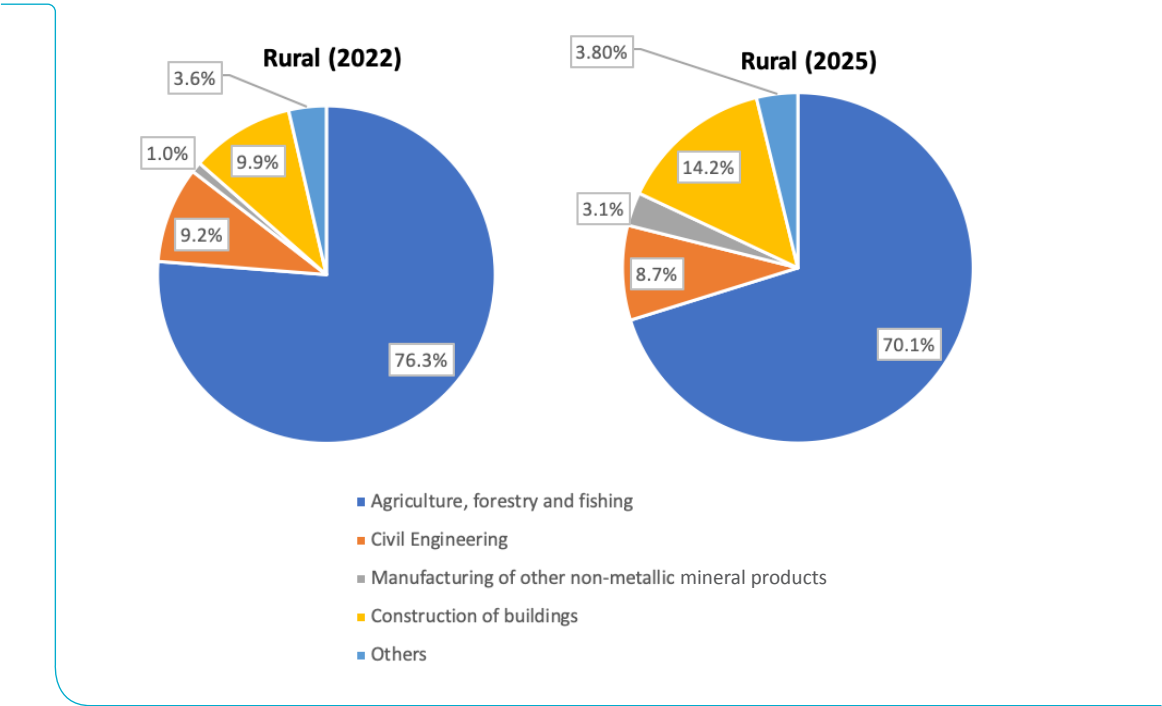
NIC (2-Digit)	Rural		Urban	
	2022	2025	2022	2025
Agriculture and allied	84.0%	82.2%	19.9%	21.8%
Retail trade, except of motor vehicles and motorcycles	4.4%	4.7%	17.7%	19.5%
Manufacture of wearing apparel	4.0%	3.9%	19.5%	18.8%
Manufacture of tobacco products	2.5%	2.4%	5.7%	3.9%
Manufacture of textiles	1.3%	1.6%	9.2%	5.6%
Other personal service activities	-	-	5.4%	5.3%
Education	-	-	4.4%	4.4%
Food and beverage service activities	-	-	4.3%	4.6%
Other manufacturing	-	-	2.3%	2.1%
Manufacture of food products	-	-	-	2.1%
Others	3.9%	5.2%	11.7%	11.9%

- Urban self-employed women in India remained concentrated in agriculture and allied activities, retail trade, and manufacture of wearing apparel between 2022 and 2025. The share of women in agriculture increased slightly from 19.9% to 21.8%, while retail trade also rose from 17.7% to 19.5%. In contrast, manufacture of wearing apparel declined marginally from 19.5% to 18.8%, alongside sharper declines in textiles (9.2% to 5.6%) and tobacco manufacturing (5.7% to 3.9%). Education (4.4%) and personal services (5.4% to 5.3%) remained broadly stable, indicating limited structural change in the sectoral composition of urban women's self-employment.

DISTRIBUTION OF CASUAL WOMEN WORKERS BY BROAD INDUSTRY TYPES

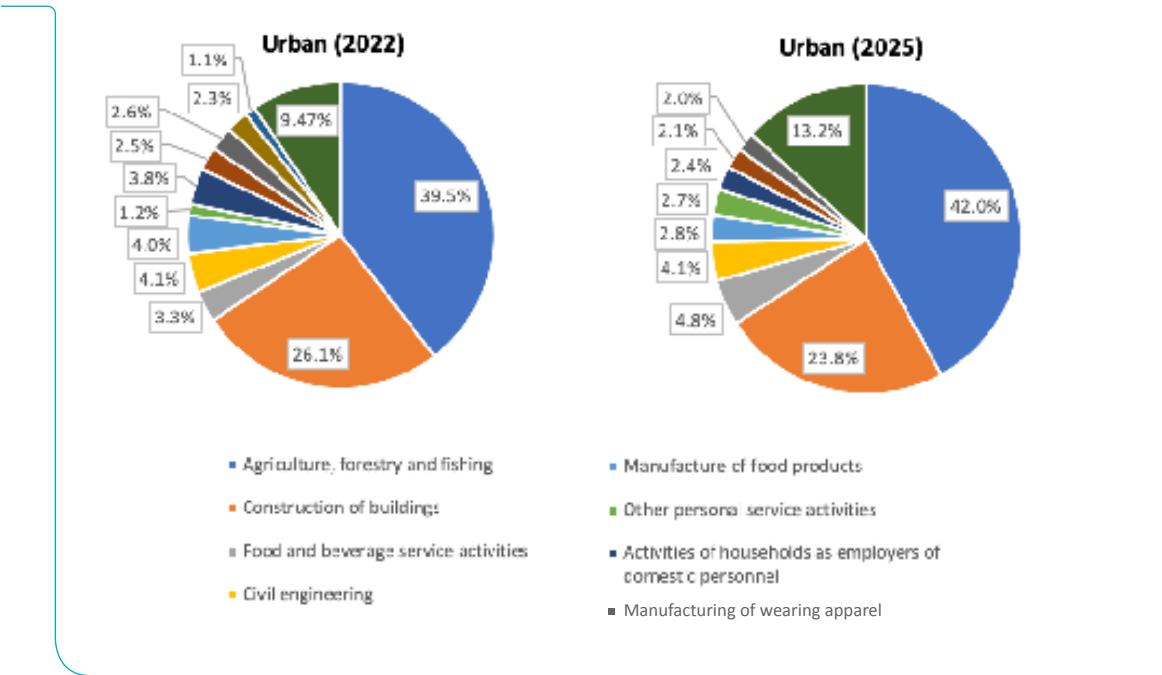
- Between 2022 and 2025, the distribution of casual employment among rural women in India shows a gradual decline in dependence on agriculture, forestry, and fishing, with the share falling from 76.3% to 70.1%. This decline is accompanied by a notable increase in construction of buildings from 9.9% to 14.2%, making construction an increasingly important source of casual employment for women. Civil engineering recorded a slight decline from 9.2% to 8.7%, while manufacturing of non-metallic mineral products increased from 1.0% to 3.1%, indicating limited but visible diversification towards non-farm and industrial activities.

Figure 7: Distribution of Casual Women Workers by Broad Industry Types



- Between 2022 and 2025, the sectoral distribution of casual urban women workers in India shows an increase in agriculture, forestry, and fishing from 39.5% to 42.0%, indicating a growing concentration in primary-sector informal work even within urban areas. Construction of buildings remained the second largest employer, though its share declined slightly from 26.1% to 23.8%. Food and beverage service activities increased modestly from 3.3% to 4.8%, while several manufacturing and domestic service activities recorded declines, including manufacture of food products (4.0% to 2.8%), textiles (2.5% to 2.1%), wearing apparel (2.6% to 2.0%), and domestic work (3.8% to 2.4%). Overall, the trends point towards continued concentration of casual urban women workers in agriculture and construction, alongside weakening participation in traditional urban informal industries.

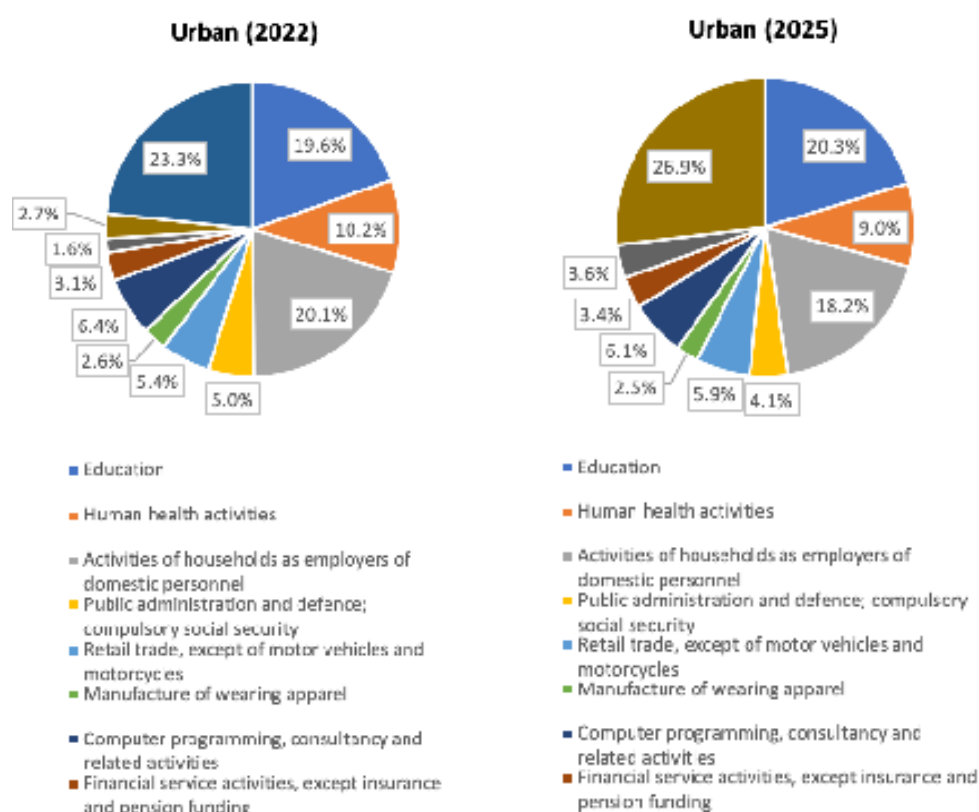
Figure 7: Distribution of Casual Women Workers by Broad Industry Types



DISTRIBUTION OF REGULAR SALARIED WOMEN WORKERS BY BROAD INDUSTRY TYPES⁴

- Between 2022 and 2025, regular salaried employment among urban women in India remained concentrated in a few key sectors, with education continuing as one of the largest employers, increasing marginally from 19.6% to 20.3%. Human health activities accounted for a significant share despite a slight decline from 10.2% to 9.0%, reflecting the continued importance of care-sector employment. In contrast, employment in domestic service households declined from 20.1% to 18.2%, indicating a gradual reduction in dependence on domestic work as a source of salaried employment for urban women.
- Public administration also declined modestly from 5.0% to 4.1%, while retail trade (5.4% to 5.9%) and financial services (3.1% to 3.4%) recorded small increases. Knowledge-intensive sectors such as computer programming remained relatively stable with a marginal decline from 6.4% to 6.1%, while apparel manufacturing also remained nearly unchanged. Overall, the structure of regular salaried employment among urban women remained broadly stable, with continued concentration in education, care work, domestic services, and retail activities.

Figure 8: Distribution of Regular Salaried Women Workers by Broad Industry Types

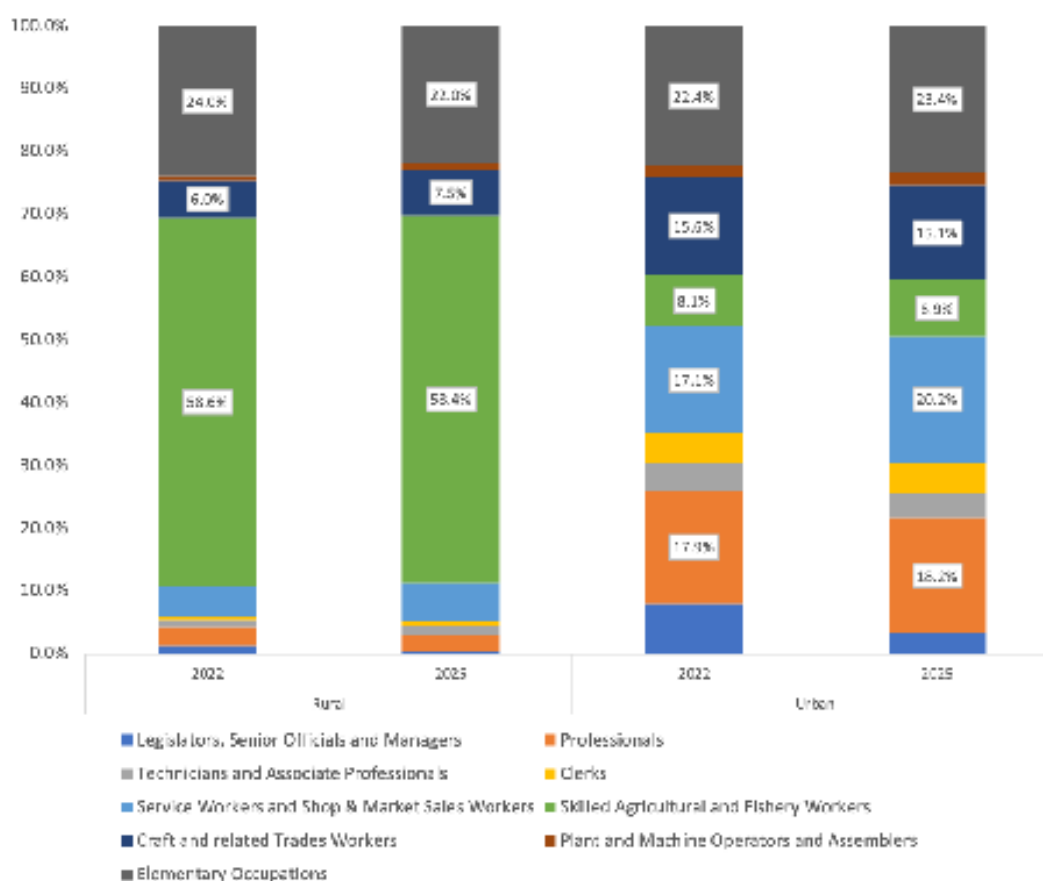


⁴ The sectoral disaggregation of regular salaried employment is presented for urban areas only. The share of regular salaried workers among rural women remains very small making industry-level disaggregation statistically unreliable and analytically less meaningful.

DISTRIBUTION OF WOMEN WORKERS BY OCCUPATION TYPES

- Between 2022 and 2025, the occupational structure of rural women shows slight diversification while remaining heavily concentrated in agriculture. The share of skilled agricultural and fishery workers remains largely unchanged (58.6% to 58.4%), while elementary occupations decline (24.0% to 22.0%).
- At the same time, there are modest increases in non-farm roles, particularly service workers (4.8% to 6.2%), craft workers (6.0% to 7.5%), and technicians (1.1% to 1.5%), indicating gradual movement toward diversified occupations. However, participation in higher-skilled roles like professionals slightly declines (2.9% to 2.6%), and managerial roles remain minimal, highlighting continued barriers to upward occupational mobility.

Figure 9: Occupational Classification of Women Workers

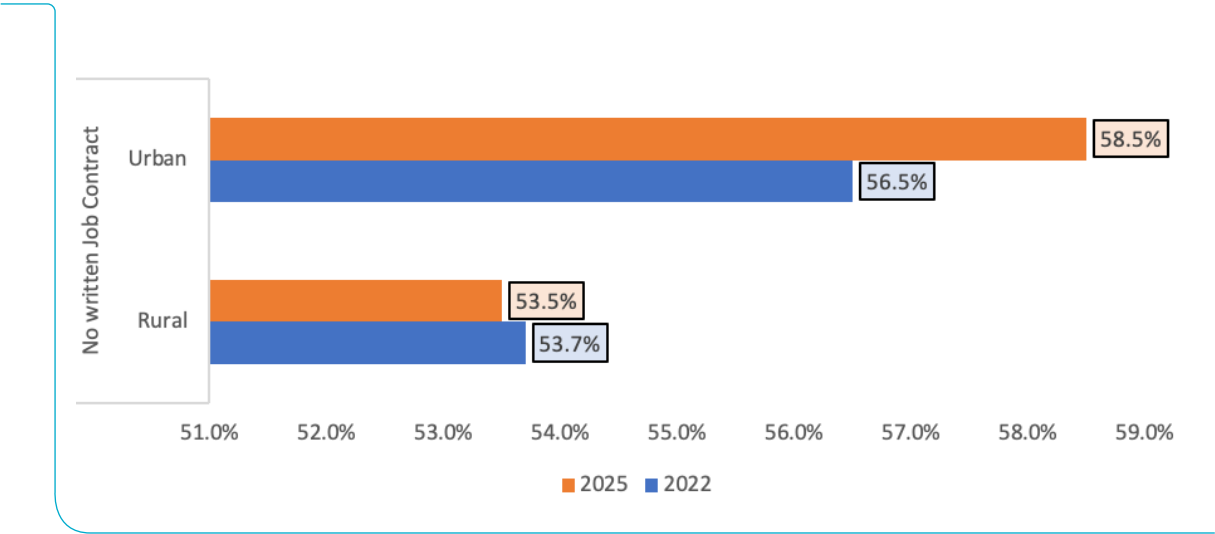


- Between 2022 and 2025, urban women’s occupational structure shows mixed shifts with continued diversification but some movement toward lower-skilled roles. Elementary occupations increase marginally (22.4% to 23.4%) and service workers see a notable rise (17.1% to 20.2%), indicating growing concentration in informal or lower-paid service roles.
- At the same time, professionals remain stable (17.9% to 18.2%), while craft workers decline slightly (15.6% to 15.1%) and managerial roles see a sharp drop (8.0% to 3.3%). Overall, while urban women remain more diversified than rural women, the trends suggest limited upward mobility and a possible shift toward more precarious employment.

CONDITION OF WORK IN REGULAR EMPLOYMENT

- Working conditions in regular employment remain largely informal, with limited improvement over time. Lack of a written job contract persists, with little change in rural areas (53.8% in 2022 to 53.5% in 2025) and an increase in urban areas (56.6% in 2022 to 58.6% in 2025). Overall, a significant proportion of women in regular employment continue to face insecure and informal working conditions.

Figure 10: Status of Job Contract



- Access to social security benefits among women in regular employment remains limited, with a majority still excluded. The share not eligible for any benefits remains high, though it declines slightly in rural areas (61.5% in 2022 to 57.4% in 2025) and stays broadly unchanged in urban areas (52.5% to 52.6%).
- Among those covered, the most comprehensive category access to PF/pension, gratuity, and health/maternity benefits shows modest presence, especially in urban areas (22.1% in 2022 to 18.6% in 2025, with fluctuations).
- Partial coverage (such as PF/pension with health benefits) also remains limited, while single-benefit access (only PF, gratuity, or health) constitutes small shares. Overall, the pattern indicates persistently low and fragmented social security coverage, with only marginal improvements over time.

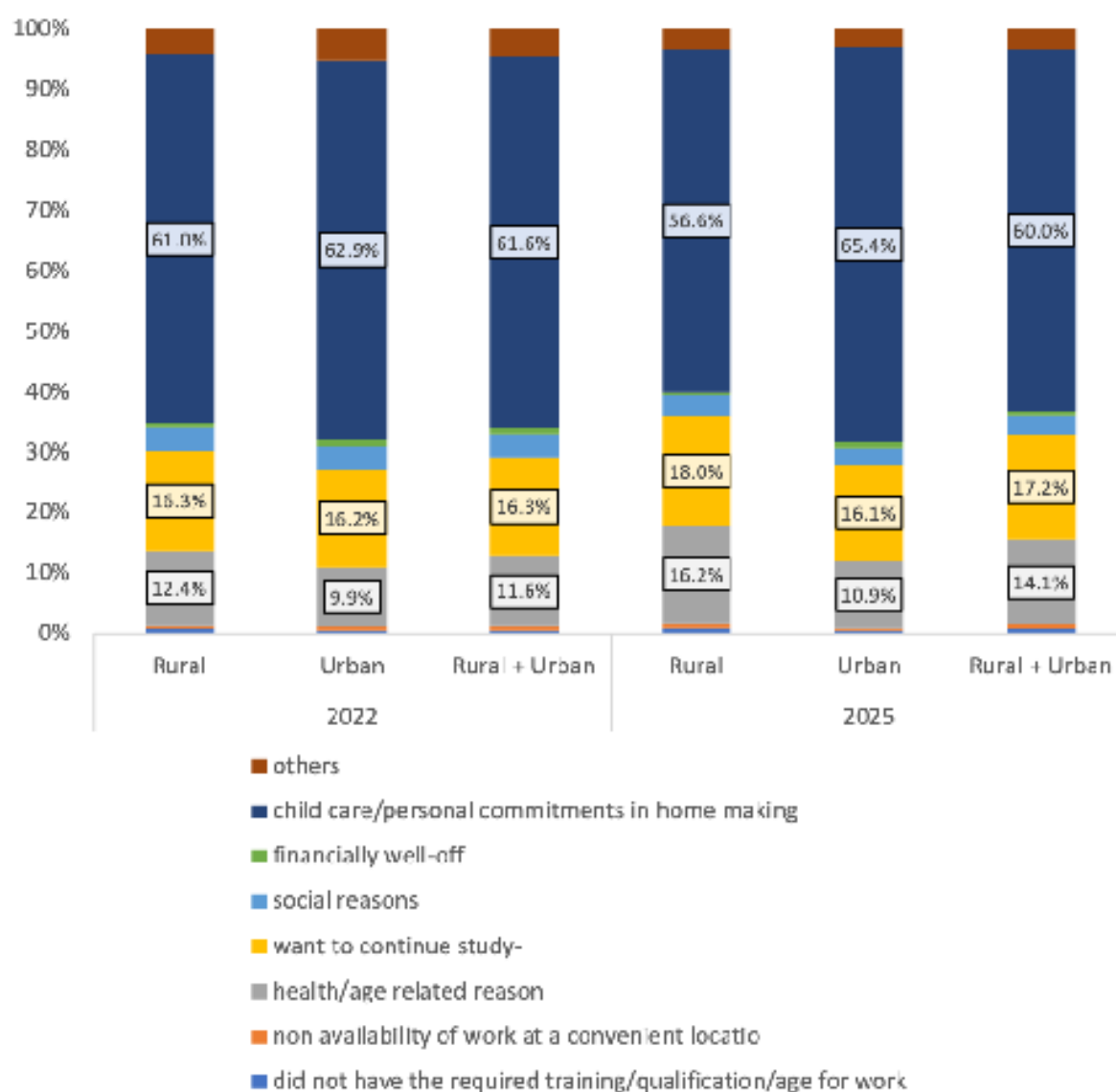
Table 3: Extent and Composition of Social Security Coverage among Women in Regular Employment (2022–2025)

Type of Social Security	2022		2024		2025	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
PF/pension only (GPF, CPF, PPF, pension, etc.)	7.3%	8.0%	5.0%	5.9%	6.9%	8.3%
Gratuity only	0.4%	0.1%	0.3%	0.0%	0.5%	0.2%
Health care / maternity benefits only	1.7%	0.8%	2.4%	0.7%	2.3%	1.0%
PF / pension and gratuity only	2.0%	4.0%	4.3%	3.2%	3.8%	3.7%
PF / pension and health care / maternity benefits only	10.2%	10.0%	9.5%	14.0%	10.1%	12.7%
Gratuity and health care / maternity benefits only	0.9%	1.1%	0.6%	0.7%	1.2%	0.6%
PF / pension, gratuity, and health care / maternity benefits	13.9%	22.1%	15.2%	19.0%	14.9%	18.6%
Not eligible for any of the above	61.5%	52.5%	60.5%	55.9%	57.4%	52.6%
Not known	2.1%	1.4%	2.0%	0.8%	3.0%	2.5%

REASON FOR NOT BEING IN THE LABOUR FORCE

- The primary reason for women being out of the labour force remains domestic responsibilities, with childcare and home-making accounting for the largest share, though it declines slightly overall (61.6% in 2022 to 60.0% in 2025), with a sharper drop in rural areas and an increase in urban areas (62.9% to 65.4%).
- Other reasons show modest changes: continuing education rises (16.3% to 17.2%), and health-related reasons increase notably (11.6% to 14.1%). In contrast, factors like lack of jobs, social reasons, and financial status remain minimal. Overall, unpaid care work continues to be the dominant constraint on women's labour force participation.

Figure 11: Reason for Not Being in The Labourforce



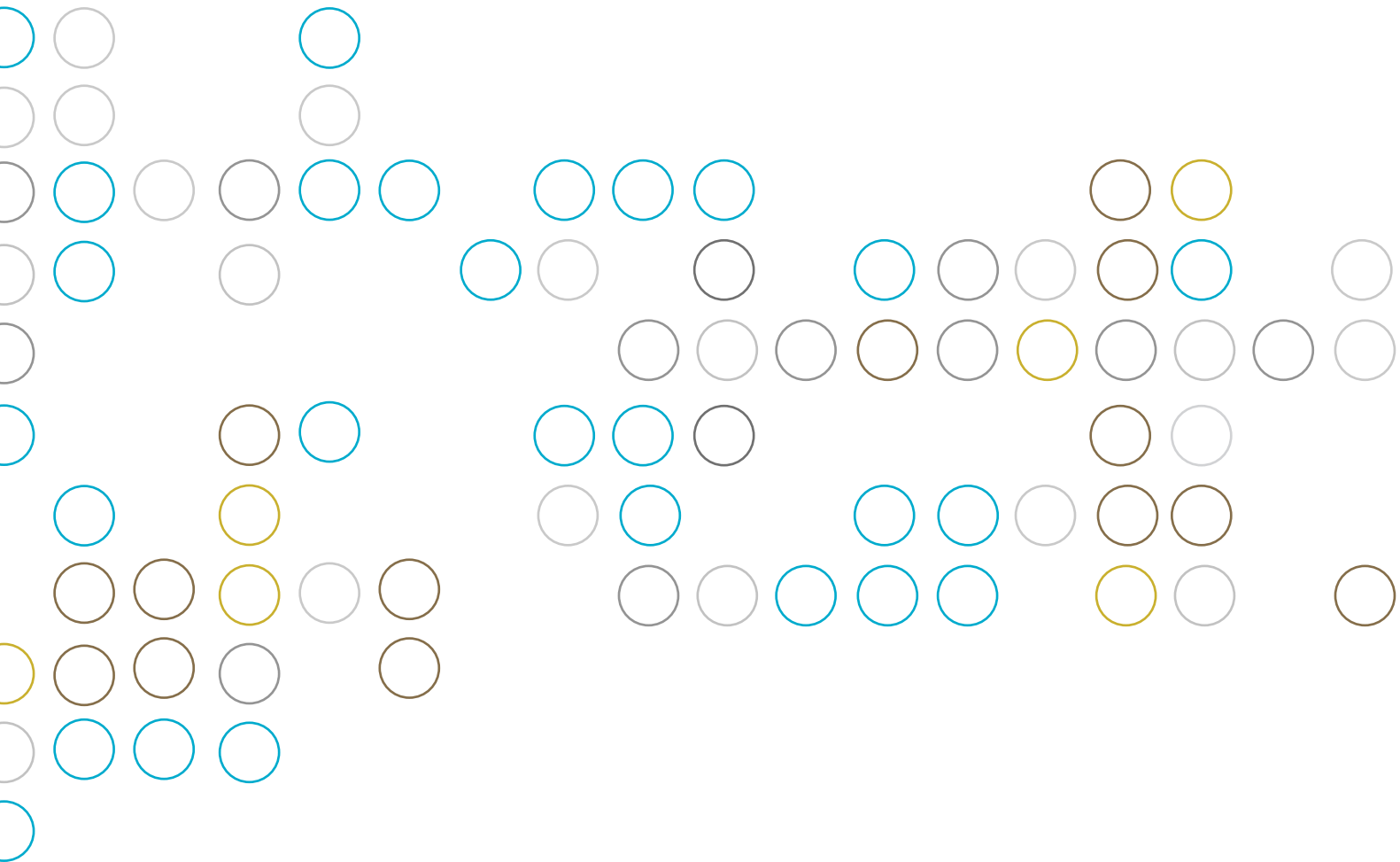
CONCLUSION

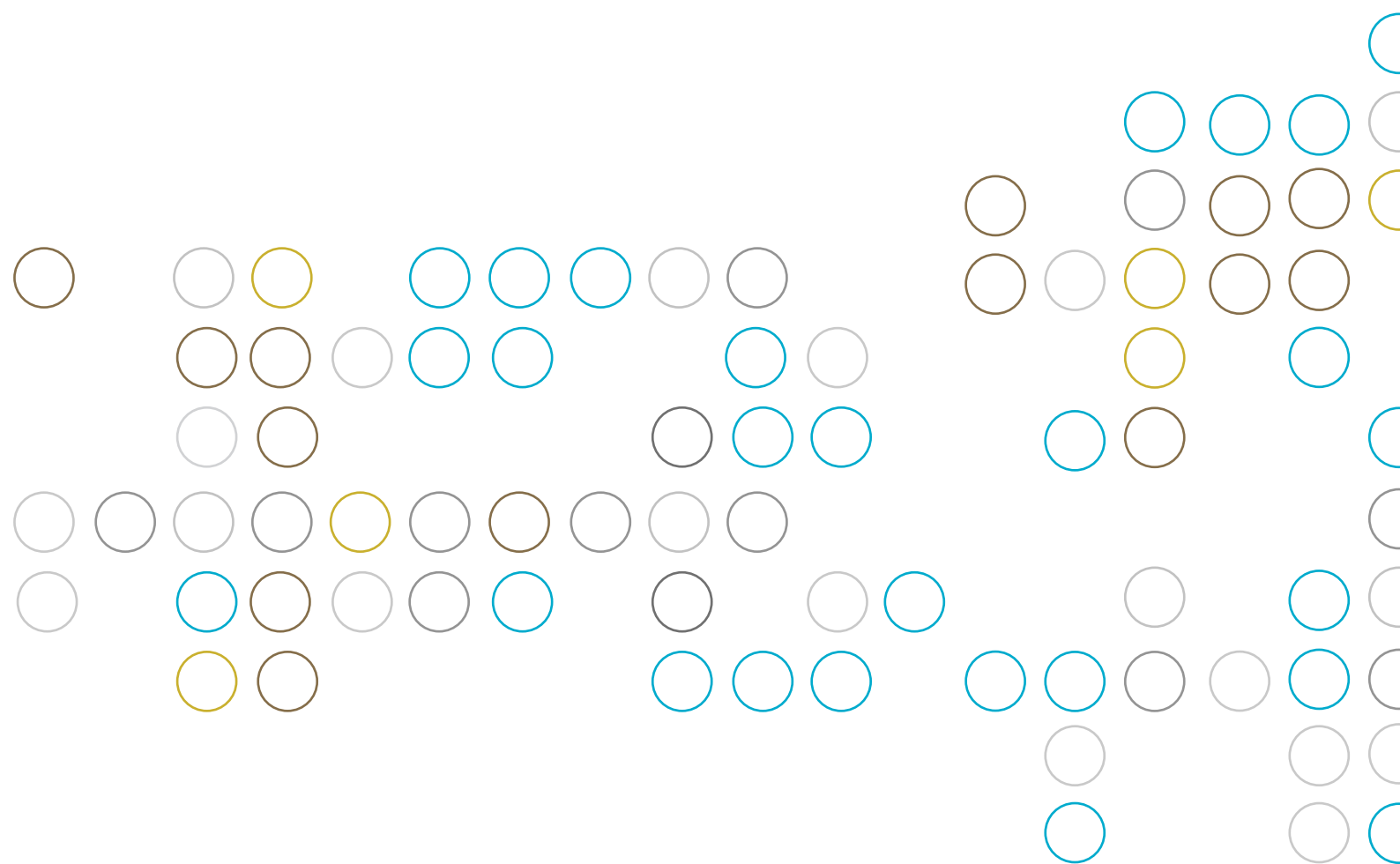
The evidence from PLFS calendar data highlights that while women's labour force participation in India has improved in recent years, the nature of this engagement remains constrained by structural inequalities. Women's employment continues to be heavily concentrated in agriculture, particularly in rural areas, with a large share engaged in non-perennial crop activities, reflecting seasonal, low-productivity, and often unpaid or informal work. Even within self-employment, which has driven much of the increase in participation, agriculture dominates, though there are early signs of diversification toward animal production and mixed farming, suggesting a gradual shift toward more regular forms of work.

Outside agriculture, women's employment is limited and fragmented across sectors. While urban areas show greater diversification into services, retail, and manufacturing, much of this work remains concentrated in low-value segments such as food retail, domestic work, and personal services. The rise in participation is also accompanied by a continued dominance of self-employment and casual work, with relatively low access to regular salaried employment, especially in rural areas.

Importantly, even within regular employment, informality persists, with a large proportion of women lacking written contracts and access to social security benefits. This indicates that entry into the workforce does not necessarily translate into secure or decent work. The occupational distribution further reinforces this, with many women clustered in elementary and low-skilled roles, and limited movement into higher-skilled or managerial positions.

Overall, the data suggest that the recent increase in women's participation is not yet indicative of structural transformation, but rather reflects distress-driven or necessity-led employment. Persistent constraints, ranging from unpaid care responsibilities to limited demand for female labour continue to shape both the quantity and quality of women's work. Moving forward, improving women's employment outcomes will require not just increasing participation, but enabling access to diverse, stable, and formal employment opportunities.







Institute for What Works to Advance Gender Equality

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