

CHANGING FAMILY ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN RURAL AND URBAN INDIA: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolving dynamics of family attitudes toward women's employment and their consequential impact on socio-economic empowerment across rural and urban India. Drawing upon comprehensive data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2017-18 to 2023-24), Census of India 2011, National Family Health Survey, and specialized studies conducted by the National Human Rights Commission, this paper presents a systematic analysis of the structural and cultural barriers that shape women's labour force participation. The findings reveal a significant transformation in female labour force participation rates, which increased from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 41.7% in 2023-24, with rural areas witnessing a dramatic surge from 24.6% to 47.6% during the same period. Despite this positive trajectory, persistent patriarchal norms continue to impede women's economic engagement, with approximately 49.5% of women reporting discouragement from family members and nearly 99.3% citing household chores as primary constraints. The study employs empowerment indices encompassing financial service usage, family equality, household autonomy, and awareness dimensions to demonstrate that employed women consistently score higher across all indicators compared to their non-working counterparts. The analysis of MGNREGA participation data reveals women's participation exceeding the mandatory 33% threshold, reaching 57.4% in 2022-23, thereby catalyzing both economic independence and social empowerment. This paper argues that the intersectionality of familial support structures, government policy interventions, and changing social attitudes creates a complex but progressively improving landscape for women's socio-economic empowerment in contemporary India.

Keywords: Women's employment, family attitudes, socio-economic empowerment, labour force participation, rural-urban disparities, patriarchal norms, MGNREGA, gender inequality, India

I. INTRODUCTION

The question of women's participation in the formal labour market has emerged as one of the most critical sociological concerns in contemporary India, intersecting with broader debates on gender equality, economic development, and social transformation. As the world's largest democracy and fifth-largest economy, India's trajectory of women's employment carries profound implications not merely for gender justice but for the nation's overall developmental aspirations. The complex tapestry of factors influencing women's decisions to enter, remain in, or withdraw from the workforce reflects deeply entrenched patriarchal structures, evolving family dynamics, and the contested nature of gender roles within Indian society [1].

The empirical evidence from recent years presents a narrative of cautious optimism punctuated by persistent challenges. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023-24, India's female labour force participation rate (LFPR) for women aged 15 years and above reached 41.7%, marking a significant improvement from 23.3% recorded in 2017-18 [2]. This near-doubling of female LFPR within six years represents one of the most dramatic shifts in India's labour market history, yet it must be contextualized against the backdrop of persistent gender gaps, with male LFPR standing at 78.8% during the same period. The rural-urban dimension adds further complexity to this narrative, with rural female LFPR (47.6%) substantially exceeding urban female LFPR (28.0%) in 2023-24, a pattern that defies conventional economic expectations and demands sociological explanation [3].

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the quantitative improvements in female labour force participation, the qualitative dimensions of women's employment experience remain deeply problematic. The sociological inquiry must move beyond statistical enumeration to interrogate the lived realities of women navigating the tension between domestic responsibilities and economic aspirations.

Research conducted by the National Human Rights Commission reveals that 99.3% of women who never joined the workforce cite household chores as the primary constraint, while 49.5% report active discouragement from family members [4]. These findings illuminate the critical role of family attitudes as gatekeepers of women's economic participation, operating through mechanisms that range from overt prohibition to subtle discouragement and the internalization of gendered responsibilities.

The concept of socio-economic empowerment, as distinguished from mere employment, encompasses women's ability to exercise agency in household decision-making, control over financial resources, access to institutional mechanisms, and the capacity to challenge entrenched power hierarchies. This study contends that employment without empowerment represents an incomplete and potentially exploitative form of economic integration, particularly in contexts where women perform labour-intensive work in precarious conditions without commensurate social or economic autonomy.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the prevailing patterns and trends in female labour force participation across rural and urban India, and how have these evolved over the past decade? (2) What specific family attitudes and constraints operate as barriers to women's employment, and how do these differ between rural and urban contexts? (3) To what extent does women's employment translate into measurable socio-economic empowerment across dimensions of financial autonomy, household decision-making, and social status? (4) What role have government interventions, particularly MGNREGA, played in reshaping family attitudes and enhancing women's empowerment?

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Theoretical Framework

The sociological analysis of women's employment and empowerment in India draws upon multiple theoretical traditions that collectively illuminate the structural and cultural dimensions of gender inequality. Feminist political economy perspectives emphasize the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy in structuring women's subordinate position within labour markets, highlighting how women's unpaid domestic labour subsidizes the formal economy while simultaneously constraining their economic participation [5]. The concept of the "double burden" or "second shift" captures the reality that employed women typically perform domestic responsibilities disproportionately, creating a time poverty that limits their labour market engagement and career advancement.

Human capital theory, while often critiqued for its gender-blind assumptions, provides a useful framework for understanding the relationship between education, skills, and labour market outcomes. In the Indian context, however, the correlation between female educational attainment and labour force participation exhibits an inverted U-shaped pattern, wherein women with secondary education are less likely to participate in the workforce than those with either lower or higher levels of education. This paradox reflects the interaction of supply-side factors (aspirations for better-quality employment) and demand-side constraints (limited availability of suitable jobs) mediated by class-based notions of respectability and family status [6]. The capability approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum offers a particularly valuable lens for conceptualizing women's empowerment, shifting focus from income metrics to the substantive freedoms and opportunities available to women. This framework conceptualizes empowerment not as a binary condition but as a multidimensional process involving economic resources, social recognition, political voice, and psychological agency [7]. The present study operationalizes this theoretical orientation through a composite analysis of employment patterns, family attitudes, and empowerment indicators.

B. Family Attitudes and Women's Employment

The family constitutes the primary site of gender socialization and the most immediate institutional barrier to women's economic participation in India. Patriarchal family structures, organized around patrilocal residence, patrilineal inheritance, and male authority, create material and ideological conditions that systematically disadvantage women's workforce participation. Sociological research has documented how the "male breadwinner-female caregiver" norm remains deeply embedded across class, caste, and religious categories, albeit with varying expressions and degrees of rigidity [8].

The empirical investigation conducted by the National Human Rights Commission across the states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Telangana provides rich evidence of family attitudes as determinants of women's employment status. The study found that 75.48% of women who never joined the workforce reported that "women don't work in the family," indicating the power of normative expectations in shaping individual behaviour. Significantly, 93.1% of non-working women explicitly stated that they valued domestic life over working life, suggesting the internalization of patriarchal values that equate femininity with domesticity [4].

The comparative analysis of family support structures reveals significant variations across employment categories. Among currently working women, 99.7% reported having supportive husbands, 99.0% reported supportive families, and 97.0% reported supportive in-laws. By contrast, women who never joined the workforce or who dropped out reported substantially lower levels of family encouragement. This correlation between family support and employment status suggests a bidirectional relationship: supportive families enable women's employment, while women's employment may simultaneously transform family attitudes through demonstration effects.

The rural-urban dimension introduces important nuances to the analysis of family attitudes. Rural families, while often more conservative in their gender norms, may exhibit greater practical flexibility in accepting women's employment due to economic necessity, particularly in agricultural and MGNREGA-related work. Urban families, despite generally higher levels of education and exposure to modernizing influences, frequently maintain strict boundaries around women's employment that reflect

middle-class anxieties about status, safety, and the preservation of domestic harmony. The NHRC study found that 27.38% of rural women cited lack of family support as a barrier compared to only 11.24% of urban women, suggesting that rural families may be simultaneously more controlling and more economically pragmatic in their attitudes toward women's work [4].

C. Socio-Economic Empowerment Dimensions

The concept of women's empowerment has evolved significantly in academic and policy discourse, moving from a narrow focus on income generation to a multidimensional understanding encompassing economic, social, political, and psychological domains.

Kabeer's influential framework identifies three interrelated dimensions of empowerment: resources (access to and control over material, human, and social resources), agency (the ability to define one's goals and act upon them), and achievements (the tangible outcomes of agency) [9].

Economic empowerment specifically refers to women's ability to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from growth processes on terms that recognize the value of their contributions, respect their dignity, and make it possible for them to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth. The International Labour Organization emphasizes that economic empowerment involves not merely employment but decent work characterized by adequate earnings, safe working conditions, social protection, and opportunities for personal development [10]. In the Indian context, however, the majority of women workers remain concentrated in informal, low-productivity employment with limited security or prospects for advancement.

The measurement of empowerment presents significant methodological challenges, given the context-specific and multidimensional nature of the concept. The present study employs a composite of indicators including financial service usage, household decision-making autonomy, awareness of government schemes, and family equality indices to capture the complex reality of women's empowerment in rural and urban India. The Gender Inequality Index (GII) developed by UNDP provides a broader context for evaluating India's progress, with the country improving its rank from 127 in 2014 to 108 in 2022, though remaining in the lower tier of global gender equality [11].

The global literature on women's economic empowerment has increasingly emphasized the importance of addressing the "invisible" constraints that limit women's agency, including time poverty, mobility restrictions, and the psychological internalization of gendered subordination. Time-use studies across developing countries consistently demonstrate that women perform the majority of unpaid care work, with Indian women spending an average of 297 minutes per day on unpaid domestic services compared to 31 minutes for men. This profoundly unequal distribution of unpaid labour constitutes what feminist economists term the "care penalty" that constrains women's economic participation and perpetuates gender inequality across generations.

V. METHODOLOGY

A. Data Sources

This study employs a mixed-methods analytical approach combining quantitative analysis of large-scale survey data with qualitative insights from focused studies. The primary data sources include: (1) Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) Annual Reports from 2017-18 through 2023-24, conducted by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation; (2) Census of India 2011 data on workforce participation rates; (3) National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) study on "Women's Falling Participation in the Labour Force in India" covering primary survey data from Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Telangana; (4) National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data on women's decision-making power and autonomy; and (5) MGNREGA administrative data on women's participation rates and person-days generated.

B. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework integrates descriptive statistical analysis with sociological interpretation. Quantitative techniques include trend analysis, cross-tabulation, and comparative analysis across rural-urban and temporal dimensions. The empowerment indices constructed in this study synthesize multiple indicators into standardized scores for comparison across employment categories. The methodology follows a multi-pronged analytical strategy encompassing time-series analysis of LFPR trends, cross-sectional comparison of rural-urban patterns, and composite index construction for empowerment measurement. The unit of analysis varies across sections, ranging from all-India aggregates to state-level disaggregation and individual-level survey responses.

The empowerment indices developed in this study are constructed by aggregating multiple indicators within each dimension and normalizing scores on a scale of 1 to 5 for comparability. The Financial Service Usage Index incorporates variables such as bank account ownership, credit access, insurance coverage, and digital payment usage. The Family Equality Index captures indicators including educational equality between siblings, freedom of movement, marriage autonomy, and inheritance rights awareness. The Household Autonomy Index measures decision-making authority in areas of health care, major purchases, mobility, and children's education. The Awareness Index assesses knowledge of government schemes, legal rights, and entitlements. These indices are validated through correlation analysis with established empowerment measures and sensitivity testing across demographic subgroups.

The limitation of this study lies in its reliance on secondary data sources, which may contain measurement inconsistencies and varying definitions of employment categories across surveys. The PLFS, while methodologically rigorous, employs definitions of employment that may undercount certain types of women's work, particularly unpaid family labour and marginal economic activities. Additionally, the PLFS data captures only limited dimensions of empowerment, necessitating supplementation with specialized studies that provide deeper qualitative insights into family dynamics and attitudinal factors.

The NHRC study, while rich in qualitative data, is based on purposive sampling in three states and cannot be assumed representative of all-India patterns. Despite these limitations, the convergence of findings across multiple data sources strengthens the reliability of the conclusions drawn.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Trends in Female Labour Force Participation

The analysis of PLFS data from 2017-18 to 2023-24 reveals a remarkable transformation in India's female labour force participation landscape. The overall female LFPR increased from 23.3% to 41.7% during this six-year period, representing an increase of 18.4 percentage points. This trajectory reverses the long-term decline in female LFPR that characterized the preceding decade, when participation rates fell from approximately 31% in 2004-05 to 23.3% in 2017-18, a phenomenon that attracted considerable scholarly attention and policy concern [3].

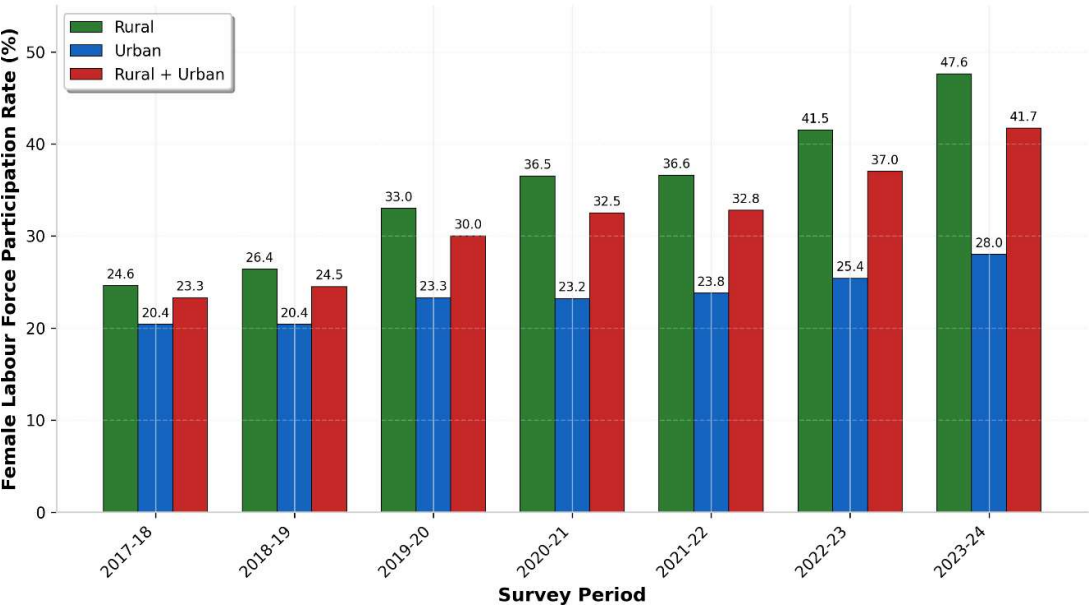


Figure 1: Trends in Female Labour Force Participation Rate in India (2017-18 to 2023-24)

As illustrated in Figure 1, the rural female LFPR experienced the most dramatic increase, rising from 24.6% in 2017-18 to 47.6% in 2023-24, an increase of 23 percentage points. Urban female LFPR also improved, though more modestly, from 20.4% to 28.0% during the same period. This rural-urban divergence challenges conventional modernization narratives that typically associate female employment growth with urbanization and industrialization. The rural surge is attributable to multiple factors including increased MGNREGA participation, agricultural distress pushing women into supplementary

Table 1: Labour Force Participation Rate (%) by Gender and Residence (2017-18 to 2023-24)

Period		Rural			Urban		Rural+Urban		
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
2017-18	76.4	24.6	50.7	74.5	20.4	47.6	75.8	23.3	49.8
2018-19	76.4	26.4	51.5	73.7	20.4	47.5	75.5	24.5	50.2
2019-20	77.9	33.0	55.5	74.6	23.3	49.3	76.8	30.0	53.5
2020-21	78.1	36.5	57.4	74.6	23.2	49.1	77.0	32.5	54.9
2021-22	78.2	36.6	57.5	74.7	23.8	49.7	77.2	32.8	55.2
2022-23	80.2	41.5	60.8	74.5	25.4	50.4	78.5	37.0	57.9
2023-24	80.2	47.6	63.7	75.6	28.0	52.0	78.8	41.7	60.1

Table 1 presents the comprehensive LFPR data disaggregated by gender and residence. The gender gap in LFPR, while still substantial, has narrowed from 52.5 percentage points in 2017-18 to 37.1 percentage points in 2023-24. This convergence is driven almost entirely by the increase in female participation, as male LFPR has remained relatively stable, increasing marginally from 75.8% to 78.8% over the same period. The narrowing gender gap represents a significant structural shift in India's labour market, though it must be interpreted cautiously given the quality and security of women's employment.

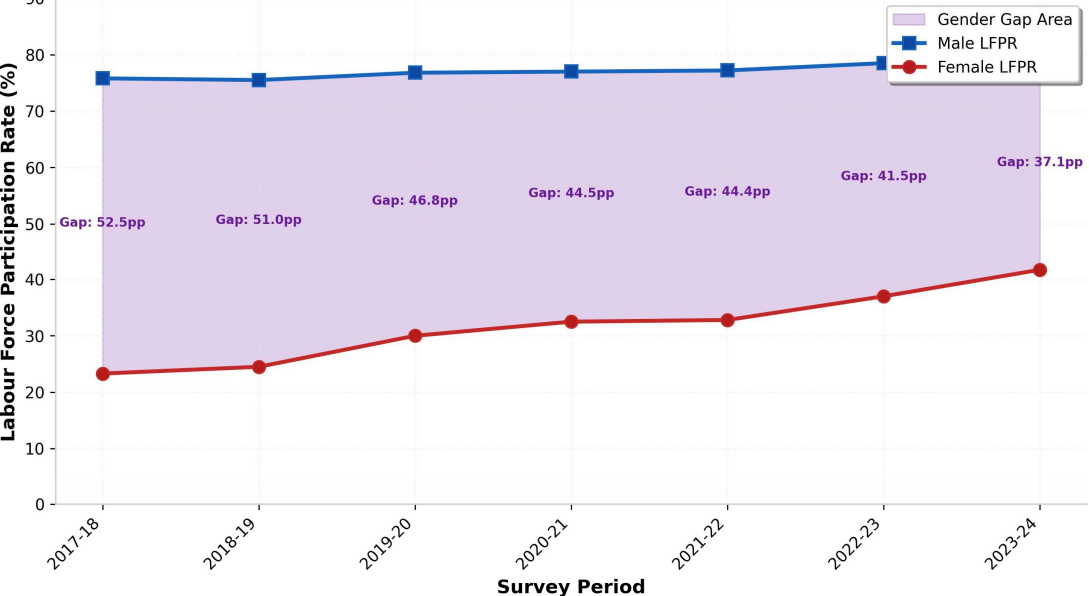


Figure 2: Gender Gap in Labour Force Participation Rate (2017-18 to 2023-24)

B. Rural-Urban Disparities in Employment Patterns

The sectoral distribution of female employment reveals stark rural-urban disparities that reflect the structural characteristics of India's dualistic economy. In rural areas, 76.9% of women workers are employed in agriculture, with the remainder distributed across manufacturing (5.5%), services (10.5%), and construction (3.9%). This heavy concentration in agriculture, often characterized by seasonal, low-productivity, and poorly remunerated work, limits women's economic advancement and perpetuates their vulnerability to agrarian distress. The feminization of agricultural labour, occurring as men migrate to urban areas for non-farm employment, has transformed rural women into the primary agricultural workforce while simultaneously concentrating them in the most precarious segments of the rural economy [12].

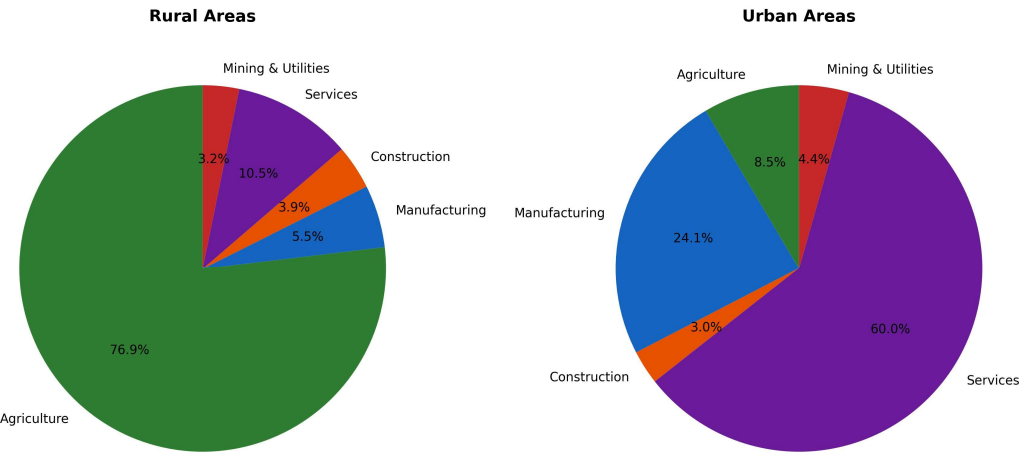


Figure 3: Sector-wise Distribution of Female Employment in Rural and Urban India (2023-24)

Urban female employment presents a markedly different profile, with 60.0% of women workers engaged in the services sector, followed by manufacturing (24.1%) and agriculture (8.5%). While this distribution suggests greater sectoral diversification, urban women face their own set of challenges including restricted mobility, safety concerns, and the persistence of occupational segregation that channels women into lower-paying service occupations. The construction sector employs only 3.0% of urban women, reflecting both the physical demands of construction work and gendered barriers to entry in this male-dominated field.

Table 2: Sector-wise Distribution of Female Employment by Residence (2023-24) (%)

Sector	Rural	Urban	Overall
Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing	76.9	8.5	48.7
Manufacturing	5.5	24.1	11.6
Construction	3.9	3.0	3.7
Services	10.5	60.0	31.2
Mining, Utilities & Others	3.2	4.4	4.8

The agriculture, 31.2% in services, and 11.6% in manufacturing. The quality of employment, measured in terms of wages, working conditions, and social security coverage, varies dramatically across these sectors, with women in agricultural employment typically experiencing the lowest wages and least protection.

Family Constraints and Attitudinal Barriers

The analysis of family constraints reveals the persistent power of patriarchal norms in restricting women's labour market participation. The NHRC study provides systematic evidence of the barriers women face, categorized into personal/family constraints, accessibility constraints, and workplace-related factors. The overwhelming dominance of household responsibilities as a barrier is striking: 99.3% of women who never joined the workforce cited lack of time due to household chores, with virtually no difference between rural (98.56%) and urban (100%) areas [4].

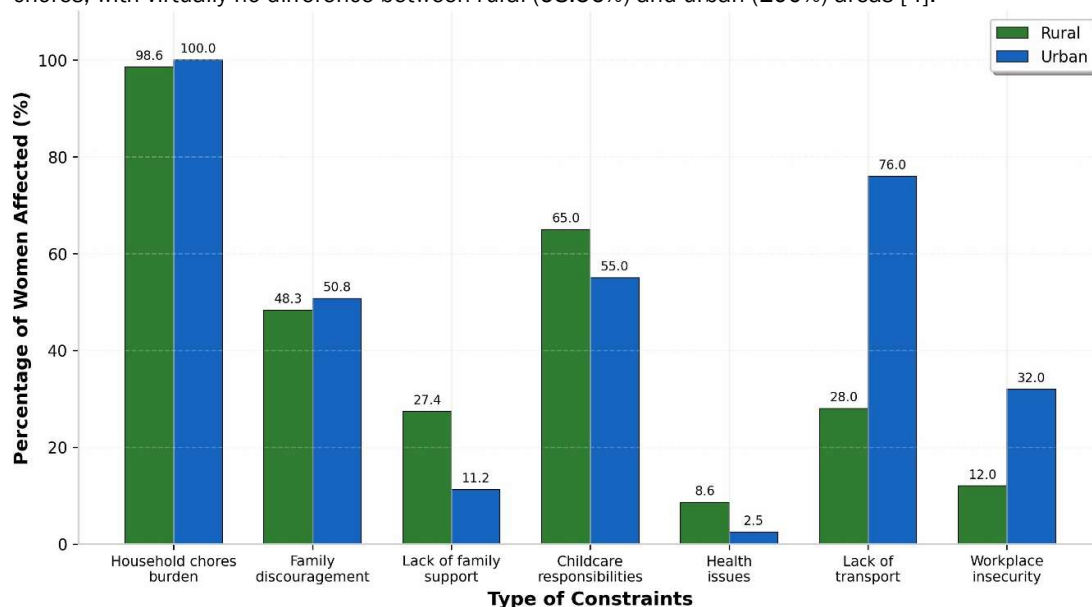


Figure 4: Family and Personal Constraints Affecting Women's Labour Force Participation

Active discouragement from family members affects approximately half of all non-working women, with 48.33% of rural women and 50.75% of urban women reporting that family members discourage them from joining the workforce. This discouragement operates through multiple mechanisms including concerns about family reputation, fear of reduced attention to domestic duties, anxieties about women's safety, and the perceived incompatibility of employment with feminine respectability. The persistence of such

Table 3: Personal and Family Constraints by Area (%)

Constraints	Total	Rural	Urban
Health Issues	5.62	8.61	2.49
Family discourages joining workforce	49.50	48.33	50.75
No time due to household chores	99.30	98.56	100.00
Childcare responsibilities	65.00	68.00	55.00

Lack of family support	19.31	27.38	11.24
Domestic discord	5.36	9.52	1.20

Table 3 disaggregates the personal and family constraints by rural-urban residence. Rural women report higher rates of health-related barriers (8.61% vs. 2.49%) and lack of family support (27.38% vs. 11.24%), reflecting poorer access to healthcare and stronger patriarchal controls in rural contexts. Urban women, while reporting lower rates of overt family opposition, face the same fundamental constraint of household chore burden (100%), suggesting that the domestic division of labour remains stubbornly resistant to urbanization and modernization.

The qualitative dimension of family attitudes is captured in the perceptual data collected by the NHRC study. Among women who never joined the workforce, 49.24% believed that working women are unable to take care of household responsibilities, and 48.39% believed that working girls find it difficult to get married. These perceptions reveal the powerful hold of gender role stereotypes that define women's primary identity through domestic competence and marital prospects. By contrast, only 25.07% of never-working women believed that women should work even if their husbands are earning well, indicating the limited internalization of feminist economic autonomy norms [4].

The comparison across employment categories reveals a significant attitudinal gradient. Among currently working women, only 24.56% believed that working women cannot manage household responsibilities, and only 23.79% believed that employment makes marriage more difficult. Most strikingly, 39.28% of working women believed that women should work regardless of their husband's income, compared to only 25.07% of never-working women. This pattern suggests that employment itself transforms women's attitudes, creating a positive feedback loop between economic participation and gender norm change.

C. Impact on Socio-Economic Empowerment

The relationship between employment and empowerment is examined through a composite of indices measuring different dimensions of women's autonomy and agency. The analysis reveals consistent and substantial differences across employment categories, with currently working women scoring significantly higher on all empowerment indicators compared to women who never worked or who dropped out of the workforce.

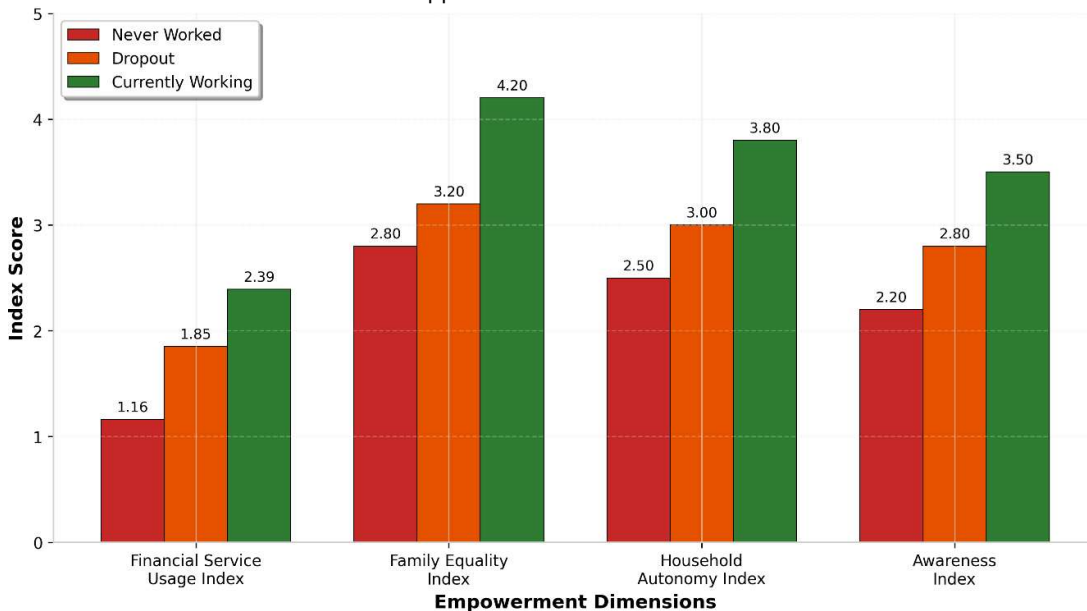


Figure 5: Women Empowerment Indices by Employment Status

The Financial Service Usage Index, which measures women's engagement with banking, credit, and insurance services, shows dramatic variation: never-worked women score 1.16, dropout women score 1.85, and currently working women score 2.39. This pattern reflects both the income effect of employment (generating need and capacity for financial services) and the identity effect (working women may perceive themselves as legitimate economic actors entitled to access institutional services). The Family Equality Index, measuring the extent to which women experience egalitarian treatment within their families, similarly shows a clear gradient from never-worked women (2.80) through dropouts (3.20) to working women (4.20), suggesting that employment enhances women's bargaining power within the household.

Table 4: Empowerment Indices

Financial Service Usage Index	1.16	1.85	2.39
Family Equality Index	2.80	3.20	4.20

Household Autonomy Index	2.50	3.00	3.80
Awareness Index	2.20	2.80	3.50
Overall Empowerment Score	2.17	2.71	3.47

Table 4 presents the comprehensive empowerment indices. The overall empowerment score, calculated as the average of the four component indices, reveals that currently working women (3.47) are substantially more empowered than dropouts (2.71) and never-worked women (2.17). This pattern holds consistently across all dimensions, indicating that employment serves as a powerful catalyst for women's empowerment that operates through multiple reinforcing channels.

The Household Autonomy Index captures women's decision-making authority in areas such as health care, major household purchases, and mobility. Working women score 3.80 compared to 2.50 for never-worked women, representing a 52% advantage in household autonomy. The Awareness Index, measuring knowledge of government schemes, legal rights, and entitlements, shows a similar pattern (3.50 for working women vs. 2.20 for never-worked women), suggesting that employment expands women's information networks and institutional engagement.

Crucially, the study finds that women's employment generates positive externalities for the next generation. Working women are significantly more likely to support their daughters' employment: 35.54% of working women would encourage their daughters to work compared to only 30.19% of never-worked women. Similarly, 37.01% of working women would support their daughters-in-law working compared to 29.45% of never-worked women. This intergenerational transmission of attitudes suggests a gradual but potentially self-reinforcing process of normative change.

D. Policy Interventions and MGNREGA

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) represents the most significant government intervention aimed at rural employment generation, with particular implications for women's economic participation. The programme's design includes several provisions intended to facilitate women's participation: the guarantee of work within 5 kilometres of residence, equal wages for men and women, provision of childcare facilities at worksites, and a mandatory minimum of one-third women workers.

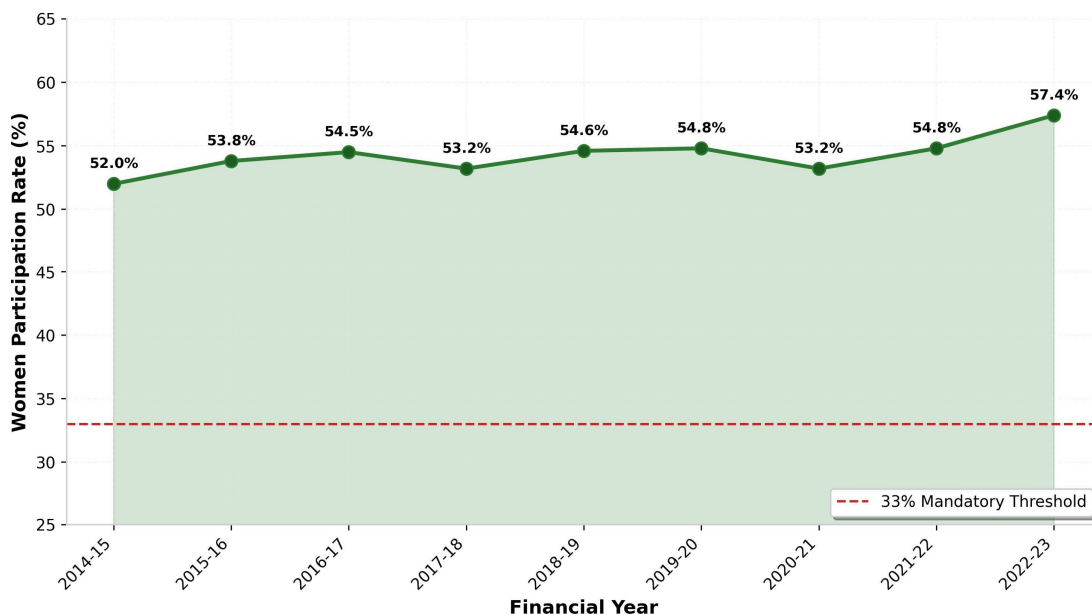


Figure 6: Women Participation Rate in MGNREGA (2014-15 to 2022-23)

Women's participation in MGNREGA has consistently exceeded the statutory minimum of 33%, rising from 52.0% in 2014-15 to 57.4% in 2022-23. Several states have achieved remarkably high participation rates: Kerala (89.82%), Tamil Nadu (86.41%), Goa (78.4%), Rajasthan (68.17%), and Punjab (66.55%). These figures demonstrate that when employment opportunities are designed with women's constraints in mind, participation rates can be dramatically higher than those observed in the regular labour market.

Table 5: MGNREGA Women Participation: Best and Worst Performing States (2022-23)

Best Performing States		Worst Performing States	
State	Women Participation (%)	State	Women Participation (%)

Kerala	89.82	Jammu & Kashmir	30.67
Tamil Nadu	86.41	Uttar Pradesh	37.75
Goa	78.40	Madhya Pradesh	41.77
Rajasthan	68.17	Nagaland	42.91
Punjab	66.55	Maharashtra	44.73

Kashmir) performing states. This variation reflects the influence of multiple factors including local labour market conditions, social norms, administrative effectiveness, and the availability of alternative employment opportunities. States with stronger traditions of women's public participation and better programme implementation mechanisms consistently achieve higher women's participation rates.

The empowerment impact of MGNREGA extends beyond income generation to encompass multiple dimensions of women's wellbeing. Research findings indicate that MGNREGA participation has contributed to increased food security, reduced dependence on moneylenders, enhanced mobility, and greater involvement in household decision-making. Women participating in the programme reported that they became less dependent on their husbands for money and experienced reduced control by mothers-in-law over their earnings. The programme has also served as a wage floor, exerting upward pressure on agricultural wages for women, which increased from approximately Rs. 50 per day before MGNREGA to Rs. 150 per day by 2012-13 in several states [13].

The Government of India's broader policy framework for women's empowerment includes several complementary initiatives. The Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana - National Rural Livelihood Mission (DAY-NRLM) has expanded from 25 million women members in 2014 to 100 million in 2024, with cumulative lending of Rs. 8.06 lakh crore and a remarkably low non-performing asset ratio of 1.6%. The programme has created five lakh Community Resource Persons who serve as grassroots facilitators of women's economic activities. Other significant initiatives include the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana, Stand-Up India, and sector-specific skill development programmes under the Skill India Mission.

India's performance on the Gender Inequality Index (GII) provides a broader context for evaluating progress in women's empowerment. As shown in Figure 7, India improved its GII rank from 127 in 2014 to 108 in 2022, with the score improving from 0.563 to 0.437. This 14-rank improvement within a single year (2021 to 2022) reflects the cumulative impact of government policies and broader socio-economic changes. However, with a rank of 108 out of 193 countries, India remains in the bottom half of global gender equality, indicating the substantial distance yet to be traversed.

VII. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate several critical dynamics in the relationship between family attitudes, women's employment, and socio-economic empowerment in contemporary India. The dramatic increase in female labour force participation, particularly in rural areas, represents a significant structural transformation that demands careful sociological interpretation. Several competing explanations must be considered in accounting for this trend.

First, the "distress-driven" hypothesis suggests that the surge in rural female LFPR reflects economic necessity arising from agricultural crisis, stagnant male wages, and household survival strategies rather than genuine empowerment. Under this interpretation, women enter the labour force not as autonomous economic agents but as supplementary earners compelled by circumstances, often accepting the most precarious and poorly remunerated employment. The concentration of rural women in agricultural labour, with its seasonal and casual nature, provides some support for this interpretation. However, the finding that employed women score substantially higher on all empowerment indicators challenges a purely distress-driven narrative, suggesting that even economically compelled employment generates positive agency effects.

Second, the "policy-enabled" hypothesis emphasizes the role of government interventions, particularly MGNREGA, in creating accessible employment opportunities that overcome traditional barriers. The consistently high women's participation in MGNREGA, significantly exceeding the programme's mandatory threshold, demonstrates that when employment is proximate, socially sanctioned, and designed with women's constraints in mind, participation rates increase dramatically. The programme's provisions for equal wages, worksite childcare, and local employment address key family concerns that typically restrict women's workforce engagement.

Third, the "normative shift" hypothesis points to gradual but perceptible changes in societal attitudes toward women's employment, particularly among younger cohorts and in contexts of increased female education. The finding that working women hold significantly more egalitarian attitudes than non-working women, and are more likely to encourage their daughters' employment, suggests a process of intergenerational value transmission that may accelerate female labour force participation over time. However, the persistence of strong patriarchal attitudes, with nearly half of non-working women reporting family discouragement and virtually all citing household responsibilities as barriers, indicates that normative change remains partial and contested.

The rural-urban dimension emerges as a particularly significant axis of variation. The higher female LFPR in rural areas, contrary to modernization theory expectations, reflects the specific characteristics of rural employment (particularly MGNREGA and agricultural labour) that permit women to combine income generation with domestic responsibilities. Urban women's lower participation, despite greater educational attainment and sectoral diversification, reflects the "discouraged worker" effect wherein women with aspirations for quality employment withdraw from the labour market when such

opportunities are unavailable. The urban employment landscape, dominated by informal and precarious work with long commutes and inflexible hours, remains poorly adapted to women's needs and constraints.

The family emerges from this analysis as the critical institutional nexus mediating women's employment decisions. Family attitudes operate not as static cultural givens but as dynamic processes shaped by economic conditions, policy interventions, and generational change. The finding that currently working women enjoy near-universal family support (99.7% supportive husbands, 99.0% supportive families) while non-working women face substantial discouragement (49.5%) suggests a powerful selection effect: families that support women's employment enable participation, while unsupportive families effectively enforce withdrawal. The challenge for policy lies in transforming the attitudes of unsupportive families, a task that requires addressing the material and ideological foundations of patriarchal control.

The state-wise variation in women's labour force participation and empowerment outcomes points to the significance of regional political economy and social movement histories. States like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, which have long traditions of social reform movements, communist party organization, and women's collective action, consistently outperform national averages on indicators of women's employment and empowerment. Conversely, states with more rigid patriarchal structures and weaker civil society mobilization, particularly in the northern Hindi belt, exhibit lower female LFPR and greater gender gaps. This regional variation suggests that the intersection of state policy, political mobilization, and social movement activism creates distinct opportunity structures for women's economic participation that cannot be reduced to individual or household-level factors.

The empowerment analysis reveals that employment functions as a powerful catalyst for women's agency across multiple dimensions. The financial autonomy generated through independent income enhances women's bargaining power within households, increases their access to institutional services, and expands their awareness of rights and entitlements. However, the quality of employment matters critically: women in precarious, low-wage employment may experience limited empowerment gains despite their labour force participation. The persistence of the gender wage gap, estimated at approximately 20-30% across sectors, and the concentration of women in informal employment without social protection, represent ongoing barriers to full empowerment [14].

The caste and religious dimensions of women's employment, while not the primary focus of this study, merit brief consideration given the intersectional nature of gender inequality in India. Research has consistently shown that women from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes exhibit higher labour force participation rates than upper-caste women, reflecting both the economic necessity faced by marginalized communities and the lower social stigma attached to manual labour among these groups. However, this higher participation does not translate into superior empowerment outcomes, as Dalit and Adivasi women are concentrated in the most exploitative and insecure segments of the labour market. Similarly, Muslim women exhibit lower participation rates than Hindu women, reflecting distinct community norms and, in some contexts, greater restrictions on female mobility and public visibility. These patterns underscore that gender inequality is always constituted through and intertwined with other axes of social stratification, and effective policy responses must address these intersectional dynamics rather than treating gender in isolation.

VIII. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study has examined the complex interrelationships between family attitudes, women's employment, and socio-economic empowerment in rural and urban India through systematic analysis of large-scale survey data and focused empirical studies. The findings support several substantive conclusions with significant policy implications.

First, India has witnessed a remarkable transformation in female labour force participation, with the overall rate doubling from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 41.7% in 2023-24. This increase, driven primarily by rural women's participation, reverses the long-term decline observed in preceding decades and suggests a structural shift in the labour market. However, the gender gap remains substantial at 37.1 percentage points, and the quality of women's employment remains a critical concern given the concentration in low-productivity agricultural work.

Second, family attitudes constitute the primary institutional barrier to women's employment, with household chore responsibilities affecting virtually all non-working women (99.3%) and active discouragement from family members affecting approximately half (49.5%). These constraints operate through both material mechanisms (the objective burden of unpaid domestic work) and ideological mechanisms (the normative expectation that women prioritize domesticity over economic activity). The persistence of these barriers across rural and urban contexts, despite significant socioeconomic differences, underscores the deep cultural embeddedness of patriarchal gender norms.

Third, employment generates substantial empowerment effects across multiple dimensions. Working women consistently score higher than non-working women on financial service usage, family equality, household autonomy, and awareness indices. The intergenerational transmission of egalitarian attitudes among working women suggests a self-reinforcing dynamic that may accelerate normative change over time. However, empowerment remains incomplete given the precarious nature of much women's employment and the persistence of gender wage gaps.

Fourth, government interventions, particularly MGNREGA, have demonstrated the potential for policy to overcome traditional barriers and catalyze women's employment. Women's participation in MGNREGA consistently exceeds the statutory minimum, reaching 57.4% nationally and exceeding 85% in best-performing states. The programme's design features, including local employment, equal wages, and childcare provisions, provide a model for gender-responsive employment policy.

The policy implications of these findings are multifaceted. At the structural level, there is urgent need for investment in care infrastructure, including affordable childcare, eldercare, and domestic services, that would reduce the burden of unpaid domestic work that falls disproportionately on women. The finding that 66.27% of women who never joined the workforce and 49.40% of working women believe that family members contributing to household work would improve their employment prospects underscores the centrality of care policy to gender equality.

At the programme level, the expansion of MGNREGA and its adaptation to urban contexts could address the demand-side constraints that limit women's employment. The inclusion of childcare facilities at all worksites, strict enforcement of equal wages, and proactive outreach to socially excluded women would enhance the programme's gender impact. The scaling up of the DAY-NRLM model, with its proven track record of women's financial inclusion and enterprise development, offers a complementary pathway to sustainable livelihoods.

At the normative level, behaviour change communication strategies targeting family members, particularly husbands and mothers-in-law, are essential for transforming the attitudinal barriers that restrict women's employment. The demonstration effect of successful working women, community mobilization through self-help groups, and the strategic use of media and digital platforms can contribute to gradual normative transformation.

In conclusion, while the quantitative improvement in female labour force participation represents genuine progress, the realization of women's full socio-economic empowerment requires sustained attention to the quality of employment, the redistribution of unpaid care work, and the transformation of patriarchal family structures. The sociological analysis presented in this study demonstrates that employment and empowerment are interdependent processes that must be advanced simultaneously through integrated policy approaches combining economic opportunity, social protection, and cultural change.

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