

Paradox of Progress: Why Educated Women in India Stay Out of the Workforce

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Abstract

Despite rising female education levels in India, women's labor force participation has declined over the past two decades. This paradox—where greater educational attainment does not translate into higher workforce entry—reveals deeper structural, social, and economic barriers. This paper examines the reasons behind this disjuncture by reviewing existing literature, analyzing secondary data, and exploring policy implications. It finds that women's workforce participation is shaped not only by economic conditions but also by entrenched social norms, mobility restrictions, skill mismatches, and inflexible labor markets. The study highlights significant rural-urban differences, showing that rural women's engagement is driven largely by distress-based employment, while urban women face higher opportunity costs and stronger cultural barriers despite better educational outcomes. The analysis demonstrates that education alone cannot guarantee economic empowerment unless complemented by supportive labor markets, safe mobility infrastructure, and redistribution of unpaid care work. The paper concludes by outlining policy interventions that can address the multidimensional constraints preventing educated women from entering the workforce.

Keywords: *women's labor force participation, education, India, gender norms, workforce barriers*

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1 Introduction

Women's education in India has expanded rapidly over the past two decades. Enrollment in secondary and higher education has increased, and young women now outperform men in several academic indicators. Yet women's labor force participation remains one of the lowest globally. This mismatch between education and employment raises important questions about India's development trajectory and the social structures that shape women's choices and constraints.

The paradox is particularly visible in urban India, where families increasingly invest in women's education but often do not expect or encourage them to work. In rural areas, participation patterns are different but equally complex, shaped by limited job opportunities, agricultural distress, and social expectations around marriage and domestic responsibilities.

This paper investigates the factors contributing to this paradox by examining existing literature, analyzing secondary datasets, and identifying key policy gaps. It argues that education by itself cannot dismantle the layered barriers women face in accessing paid work.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Social barriers to women's employment

A large body of work highlights how social norms shape educated women's labor market decisions in India. Scholars show that expectations around marriage, domestic roles, and family honor frequently discourage women from seeking or continuing employment, particularly in urban middle-class households (Sudarshan & Bhattacharya, 2009). These norms construct the ideal woman as a primary caregiver and homemaker, while paid work is seen as optional or even disruptive to family status. Even when women obtain higher education, their labor market choices are filtered through these expectations, leading many to withdraw from or never enter paid employment.

Safety considerations compound these pressures. Studies on crime and women's mobility find that perceptions of risk in public spaces, especially in large cities, strongly influence whether families permit women to travel for work or work late hours. Even modest increases in reported crime can trigger defensive responses such as restricting women's movements or preferring that they stay at home. For

educated women whose job opportunities are often located in urban business districts or require evening commutes, these constraints can severely limit feasible employment options and reinforce withdrawal from the labor force.

Unpaid care work is another central barrier that interacts with these norms. Time-use research shows that Indian women spend several times more hours than men on unpaid domestic work, including cooking, cleaning, and child and elder care (NCAER, 2022). This disproportionate care burden peaks at key life stages such as marriage, childbirth, and caring for aging parents. For women in regular salaried jobs, long and inflexible working hours become difficult to reconcile with these expectations, leading to career breaks or permanent exit from formal employment. Importantly, this constraint affects educated women as much as others; education may change employment aspirations, but it does not automatically reduce unpaid care responsibilities within households.

Taken together, this strand of literature suggests that rising education alone is insufficient to overcome deep-rooted gender norms and unequal divisions of labor. Instead, education can coexist with conservative expectations about women's roles, producing the very paradox in which highly qualified women remain outside paid work.

2.2 Economic and structural barriers

Economic and workplace structures also limit educated women's ability to enter and remain in paid work. Analyses of the Indian labor market stress that most formal sector jobs are highly inflexible, demanding continuous full-time, on-site presence with limited options for remote, part-time, or flexible schedules (Deshpande, 2020). Promotion tracks and performance evaluations are often tied to uninterrupted tenure and long working hours. For many women, especially those who shoulder primary responsibility for care work, such rigid arrangements make labor force participation extremely difficult, even when they possess the necessary qualifications.

A second set of studies points to persistent skill mismatches and the dominance of informality (International Labor Organization, 2021; India Skills Report, 2023). Educated women are frequently concentrated in disciplines such as arts, humanities, or teacher training, where formal job creation has been relatively

weak in recent years. At the same time, the bulk of employment opportunities in India lie in the informal sector, which typically offers low pay, little security, minimal social protection, and poor working conditions. This sector also often lacks formal contracts, maternity benefits, or safe and dignified workplaces. Faced with a choice between unemployment and insecure informal work, many qualified women either remain outside the labor force or withdraw after short spells of unsatisfactory employment.

Urban-rural contrasts emerge clearly within this economic context. Rural women, although less likely to have completed secondary or higher education, participate more in agricultural and casual labor, often driven by household survival needs rather than individual career preferences. Urban women, by contrast, are more closely linked to the formal and semi-formal sectors where entry barriers, skill mismatches, and rigid work cultures are more pronounced. The interaction of labor market structures with social norms helps explain why better education in urban areas does not automatically translate into higher workforce participation.

2.3 Policy measures and gaps

Several policy initiatives seek to promote women's education and employment, yet they only partially address the constraints facing educated women. The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 extended paid maternity leave in the formal sector from 12 to 26 weeks, signalling recognition of care-related constraints and aiming to support women's continued employment after childbirth. However, it covers only a small share of women workers, as the vast majority are employed in informal or non-contractual jobs where such protections do not apply. Some commentators also note that increased costs for employers may inadvertently discourage hiring of women into small and medium enterprises.

Skills and education policies have similar limitations. The Skill India Mission has expanded vocational and technical training opportunities, including for women, but existing evaluations suggest that many programmes focus on basic skills or traditional trades rather than aligning with the aspirations and qualifications of college-educated urban women. As a result, these schemes do little to resolve the mismatch between the fields in which women are trained and the sectors that are actually generating quality jobs.

Meanwhile, the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme has helped promote girls' education and address discriminatory practices such as sex-selective abortion, thereby improving educational access and outcomes. However, the scheme largely stops at schooling and does not directly connect educational gains to economic empowerment, labor market integration, or safe and supportive work environments. In practice, this means that policies successfully move more girls and young women into classrooms without ensuring pathways into dignified employment once their education is complete.

Overall, the literature indicates that social norms, unpaid care responsibilities, labor market structures, and partial policy responses all contribute to low female workforce participation, even among the educated. However, the specific predicament of educated urban women, at the intersection of rising schooling and stagnant or declining employment, remains relatively underexplored. This paper builds on existing work by focusing explicitly on that paradox and by using recent large-scale survey data to trace how the rural-urban divide interacts with education to shape women's labor market outcomes in India.

3 Data and Methodology

3.1 Data sources

This study uses secondary data from two major national surveys conducted by the Government of India. The first is the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), Rounds 3, 4, and 5, which provide information on women's educational attainment, household characteristics, and basic demographic indicators. These surveys allow tracking of changes in the share of women completing secondary and higher education over time, separately for rural and urban areas.

The second data source is the Periodic Labor Force Survey (PLFS), conducted annually since 2017-2018. The PLFS provides estimates of female labor market outcomes, such as Worker Population Ratio (WPR), Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR), and types of employment (self-employment, casual labor, regular wage or salaried work). By using multiple years of PLFS data, the study examines recent trends in women's workforce participation and compares rural and urban patterns.

3.2 Key variables

The analysis focuses on two main sets of variables. The first relates to education, measured by completed years of schooling and categorical levels such as “below primary,” “secondary,” and “higher secondary and above.” The second concerns labor market status, captured through indicators such as WPR and LFPR for women aged 15 years and above. These variables are disaggregated by place of residence (rural and urban) to highlight the contrast that is central to the paper.

Where available, the study also uses cross-tabulations of education level by labor market status. This illustrates how participation changes as women move from low to high education categories, helping to determine whether higher education consistently increases participation or if the relationship is more complex, particularly in urban areas.

3.3 Analytical approach

The study uses a descriptive and comparative approach. First, it presents simple trend tables and graphs that show how women’s educational attainment has changed across NFHS rounds for rural and urban India. These patterns help establish the scale of educational progress, especially among urban women.

Second, the study examines PLFS estimates of women’s WPR and LFPR over recent years. The analysis compares rural and urban female participation and then looks at participation by education level within each area. This step is important for identifying the ‘paradox of progress’: cases where better education does not correspond to higher workforce participation, particularly for urban women.

The approach is primarily quantitative and descriptive rather than econometric. The goal is not to identify precise causal effects but to systematically document patterns in the data and relate them to the social, economic, and policy factors discussed in the literature review. Where necessary, the paper references existing empirical studies that use more advanced statistical methods to support or contrast with the descriptive findings.

3.4 Scope and limitations

The analysis is restricted to working-age women as defined by the respective surveys and focuses on national-level trends with a rural-urban breakdown.

Because the study relies on secondary data, it is constrained by the definitions and classifications used in NFHS and PLFS. It cannot fully capture informal and unpaid forms of work that may be underreported, nor can it directly observe household negotiations, attitudes, or employer practices.

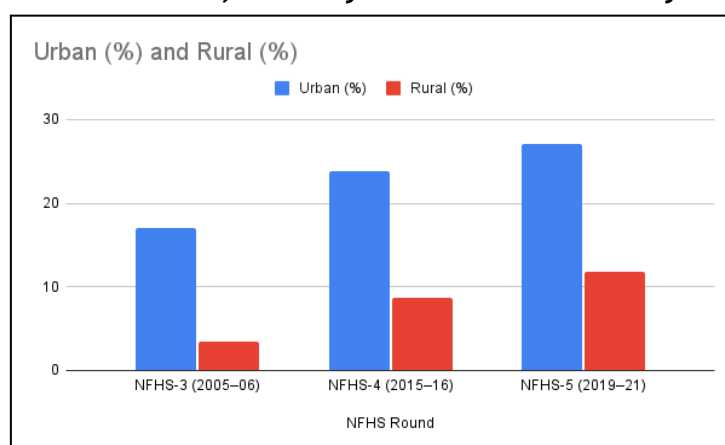
Despite these limitations, using large, nationally representative datasets provides a robust picture of broad trends in education and employment. This allows the paper to situate the experience of educated urban women within wider structural patterns and to connect quantitative evidence with the social and policy barriers identified in the literature.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 NFHS: Rising education, urban-rural gap

The NFHS data show a steady increase in the share of women who have completed 12 or more years of schooling in both rural and urban India. Urban women consistently have much higher attainment, rising from about 17% in NFHS 3 (2005-2006) to around 24% in NFHS 4 (2015-2016) and over 27% by NFHS 5 (2019-2021), while rural women increase more slowly from roughly three to four % to about 12% over the same period. This confirms that the expansion of secondary and higher education has been strongest in urban areas, creating a large pool of educated women (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, n.d.).

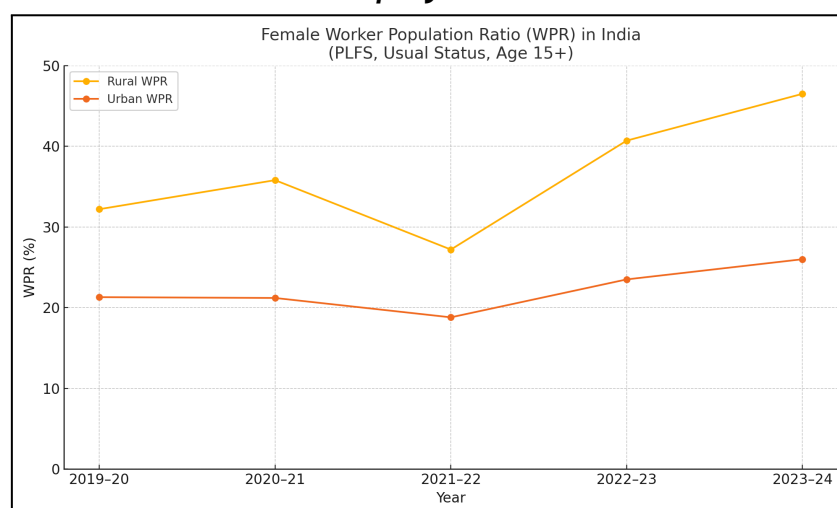
Figure 1: Share of women with 12 or more years of education, rural and urban India, NFHS-3 to NFHS-5. Source: Author's calculations based on NFHS-3, NFHS-4 and NFHS-5, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.



4.2 PLFS: Stagnant and diverging WPR

In contrast, PLFS trends for the female Worker Population Ratio (usual status, age 15+) reveal that workforce participation has not kept pace with these educational gains. Rural women's WPR remains substantially higher, fluctuating around the low 30s before rising sharply to about 41% in 2022-23 and nearly 47% in 2023-24, while urban women's WPR stays much lower, moving only between roughly 19% and 26% across the same years. This suggests that rural women, though less educated on average, are more likely to work, often in agriculture or informal activities driven by economic necessity, whereas many urban, better-educated women remain outside paid work (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2017-2024).

Figure 2. Female Worker Population Ratio (WPR), usual status, age 15+, rural and urban India, 2019-20 to 2023-24. Source: Author's calculations based on the Periodic Labor Force Survey, 2019-20 to 2023-24, Ministry of Labor and Employment.



4.3 Core empirical insight

Taken together, the NFHS and PLFS evidence shows a clear disconnect between rising female education and labor market outcomes, especially in urban India. Education levels for urban women have improved rapidly, but their WPR remains low and relatively stagnant, reinforcing the 'paradox of progress' that the rest of this paper investigates through social, economic, and policy explanations.

5 Policy Suggestions: Bridging the Gap

5.1 Expand safe and affordable mobility

Urban employment opportunities remain inaccessible for many women when commuting is perceived as unsafe or expensive. Public investment in well-lit, reliable, and affordable transport, along with last-mile connectivity such as feeder buses and shared services, can substantially improve women's access to workplaces and reduce workforce dropout. Dedicated women's coaches, panic buttons, CCTV coverage, and better policing around transit hubs can further lower safety concerns.

5.2 Promote flexible and remote work models

Policy incentives for employers to offer part-time, hybrid, and work-from-home arrangements can help women reconcile paid work with unpaid care responsibilities. Urban employment schemes and tax or social security benefits tied to flexible work options would encourage firms to design roles that are not based solely on long, continuous, on-site hours. Such models are particularly important for educated women returning to work after career breaks.

5.3 Strengthen career support in higher education

Universities and colleges can play a stronger role in linking female students to the labor market. Career counseling, mentorship programs, and gender-sensitive placement cells targeted at women, especially in non-STEM fields where campus recruitment is weaker, can expand access to diverse occupations. Exposure to role models, internships, and networking platforms can also counter family doubts about women's careers and demonstrate concrete pathways from degrees to jobs.

5.4 Rethinking Empowerment Beyond Education

Rural India is often portrayed as more regressive, yet research suggests that urban households, particularly among the middle and upper classes, can display more rigid and subtle forms of patriarchy. Educated women may be discouraged from working not because jobs are entirely absent, but because ideals of 'respectable' womanhood, household status, and fears of social judgment make paid work appear undesirable or unnecessary. Despite their qualifications, many

women confront invisible barriers within their own homes, including limited say in major decisions and strong expectations that they shoulder primary responsibility for caregiving.

For education to translate into real empowerment, change must occur not only in schools and workplaces but also in family and societal attitudes. Empowerment requires that women are recognized as economic contributors, decision makers, and leaders, rather than as students whose role ends at obtaining a degree. Without such a shift in mindset, rising educational attainment will continue to coexist with low workforce participation.

6 Conclusion: From Learning to Earning

Over the years, women's educational attainment in India has risen sharply, particularly in urban areas, yet this has not produced proportional gains in workforce participation. The evidence in this study shows that the gap is not primarily about a shortage of qualifications, but about the interaction of social norms, safety concerns, unpaid care burdens, labor market structures, and incomplete policy responses. Existing initiatives focus heavily on expanding education and on rural-focused schemes, while the distinct challenges facing educated urban women remain insufficiently addressed.

A deliberate shift in both policy design and social attitudes is necessary to ensure that education opens real economic opportunities. Policies that improve safety, flexibility, and career support must go hand in hand with efforts to redistribute unpaid care and challenge restrictive gender norms. Only then can education function as a genuine launchpad into paid work and economic agency, rather than a finish line that leaves many educated women outside the labor force.

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