

Gender Inequality in Employment: An Overview of Punjab

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Abstract

Gender inequality remains a social and economic challenge in modern society. Although Indian and Punjabi women have seen significant improvements in education, health, and social status compared to past decades, they still lack empowerment in employment. Despite many women qualifying academically, many are unemployed or work in low-skilled jobs. Issues such as equal pay for equal roles, limited promotion opportunities, workplace discrimination, and family responsibilities continue to block women's economic progress. This research paper analyses employment trends in Punjab related to gender disparities, explores their causes and social impacts, and suggests potential solutions.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Employment, Female Labour Force, Equal Pay, Punjab, Economic Growth.

Introduction

Gender inequality is a serious social, economic, and developmental issue in the developing economies. Women and men do not have equal rights and opportunities in terms of education, health, employment, income, property, social security, decision-making, and access to power. Despite this gender discrimination, women being able to demonstrate their competencies in all areas of human activity, including science, technology, education, sports, administration, industry, politics, and business, they are still not given equal work opportunities. According to the United Nations (2023), gender equality is the fifth sustainable development goal, which is impossible without empowering women and ensuring their rights.¹

According to the Ministry of Women and Child Development (2023), women are often unable to find appropriate jobs that match their qualifications, receive significantly lower pay than men,

¹ United Nations, The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023 (New York: United Nations, 2023).

are deprived of opportunities for promotion to managerial positions, and encounter gender discrimination at the workplace.² The reason behind the discrimination is societal norms, patriarchy, family roles, and safety concerns.

Employment is widely regarded as the most important determinant of an individual's economic empowerment, social identity, and standard of living. When a woman secures employment that matches her education and skills, it not only increases her income but also strengthens her family's economic stability. The OECD (2023) reports that employed women allocate more resources to their children's education, health, nutrition, and overall standard of living, thereby elevating human development for the next generation.

Conversely, the lack of equitable employment opportunities for women perpetuates economic dependency, which in turn constrains their decision-making autonomy, diminishes self-efficacy, and adversely affects their social positioning. Promoting women's active participation in employment constitutes a critical prerequisite for achieving sustainable economic development and advancing social equity.

Punjab, a highly developed agrarian state in India, has played a pivotal role in strengthening the national economy and ensuring food security since the Green Revolution. Over time, Punjab has witnessed expansion in its industries, service sector, education, healthcare, information technology, and small-scale enterprises. The role of women in all these sectors is steadily increasing. The Punjab Economic Survey (2023–24) highlights that rural women are actively engaged in agriculture, animal husbandry, dairying, vegetable cultivation, and household industries, while urban women participate as professionals in education, healthcare, banking, government, law, engineering, and entrepreneurship.³ Despite these advances, female labour force participation in Punjab remains disproportionately low compared to men, underscoring the persistence of gender disparities in employment opportunities even amidst improvements in women's education and qualifications.

Over the past few decades, Punjab has experienced a marked increase in female literacy and educational attainment. At present, girls are studying in schools, colleges, and universities, excelling in various fields such as medical, engineering, management, education, computer science, and more. However, despite the high levels of education, many women are unemployed or have to settle for low-paying jobs. According to the World Economic Forum (2024), the reasons for this include domestic duties, societal expectations, children, safety concerns, discrimination, and fewer job opportunities.⁴ This challenge extends beyond the individual level, constraining the nation's developmental potential, as a considerable proportion of highly educated women remain underutilised, thereby hindering productivity and slowing the pace of socio-economic progress in Punjab.

Social and cultural norms remain critical determinants of gender inequality in employment across Punjab. According to NITI Aayog (2023), while the status of women in Punjabi society has generally improved over time, the perception prevails that the breadwinner of the family

² Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, Annual Report 2022–23 (New Delhi: MWCD, 2023).

³ Government of Punjab, Punjab Economic Survey 2023–24 (Chandigarh: Economic Adviser to Government of Punjab, 2024).

⁴ World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2024 (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2024).

ought to be a man while a woman's role is restricted to managing the home and taking care of the children.⁵ Consequently, many educated girls are unable to secure jobs commensurate with their qualifications. Furthermore, post-marriage, women frequently face societal pressure to withdraw from the workforce or are denied opportunities to continue employment. Structural barriers, including inadequate infrastructure and safety concerns, further constrain women's access to work. These factors collectively result in the underutilization of women's potential, as cultural beliefs limit their ability to meet employer expectations, thereby hindering Punjab's overall socio-economic growth. Besides the social and cultural factors, women face challenges regarding equal pay and benefits. In many cases, especially in the private and informal employment sectors, women are often paid less than their male counterparts. Furthermore, women are underrepresented in leadership, managerial, and administrative positions. According to the World Bank (2023), women encounter career interruptions due to the lack of essential benefits such as parental leave, childcare support, safe and flexible working environments, and reasonable working hours. ⁶Consequently, women's morale is undermined, which constrains their overall potential and, in turn, hampers national development. Addressing this challenge requires the enforcement of equal pay for equal work and the systematic promotion of women into leadership and managerial positions, both of which can play a pivotal role in mitigating unemployment and fostering inclusive growth in Punjab.

Both the Government of Punjab and the Government of India have introduced a range of schemes and programs aimed at advancing women's economic empowerment, thereby contributing to the mitigation of unemployment challenges within the state. The Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (2023) report that various initiatives promote women's economic empowerment.⁷ Such incentives and programs include skill development, self-help groups (SHGs), women's entrepreneurship development schemes, Mudra Yojana, Startup India, Stand Up India, Punjab Skills Development Mission, and digital literacy programs, among others. The incentives have enabled women to gain access to various employment opportunities, starting with self-employment schemes and working in small-scale industries. Nevertheless, due to challenges related to awareness, economic constraints, and the lack of technical know-how, women are unable to benefit from most of the incentives provided. Therefore, apart from designing and providing potential incentives and policies, the government must ensure that there is proper sensitisation and that the policies address existing gaps and are effectively implemented at the grassroots level.

The impact of women's employment extends beyond their own income, affecting the family, society, and the country as a whole (Kaur, A. 2024). According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2023), women's economic independence is positively correlated with enhanced family welfare, improved educational and health outcomes for children, and greater female participation in household and community decision-making processes. ⁸

⁵ NITI Aayog, National Multidimensional Poverty Index: A Progress Review 2023 (New Delhi: Government of India, 2023).

⁶ World Bank, Women, Business and the Law 2023 (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023)

⁷ Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Government of India, Annual Report 2022–23 (New Delhi: MSDE, 2023).

⁸ Asian Development Bank, Asian Development Outlook 2023 (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2023).

This dynamic contributes to poverty reduction, enhances living standards and social status, and fosters overall development. The number of studies demonstrates that economies with a higher percentage of female labour force participation are positively associated with higher economic growth. Accordingly, for a developing state such as Punjab, addressing barriers to women's employment is imperative for sustaining economic advancement.

Despite the significant improvement in female education and literacy in India, women's participation in the labour force continues to remain comparatively low. Many educated women are unable to secure suitable employment due to social expectations, unpaid domestic responsibilities, and limited job opportunities. These challenges restrict women's economic independence and reduce their contribution to overall economic development. Desai and Joshi (2019) observed that the decline in female labour force participation is not primarily due to a lack of education but is strongly influenced by sociocultural norms, family responsibilities, and the shortage of appropriate employment opportunities.⁹ The study further emphasised that expanding flexible employment opportunities and promoting gender-sensitive labour market policies are essential for improving women's participation in the workforce.

Economic empowerment provides women with greater financial independence, confidence, and decision-making power within the household and society. Access to education, employment, financial resources, and institutional support enables women to improve their quality of life and contribute more effectively to economic development. Kabeer (2012) highlighted that employment is one of the most effective tools for reducing gender inequality because it strengthens women's control over resources and enhances their social and economic status.¹⁰ The study further emphasised that equal employment opportunities are essential for achieving inclusive development.

Women's participation in employment plays an important role in improving household income, reducing poverty, and promoting economic development. When women have equal access to employment opportunities, they become financially independent and contribute significantly to the welfare of their families and society. However, unequal wages, gender discrimination, and limited employment opportunities continue to restrict women's economic progress. Duflo (2012) stated that women's economic empowerment and economic development reinforce each other, and increasing women's participation in the labour market leads to inclusive and sustainable growth.¹¹

Despite notable improvements in female education in India, women's participation in the labour market continues to lag significantly behind that of men. Prevailing social norms, disproportionate household responsibilities, concerns regarding safety, and restricted employment opportunities collectively discourage many women from entering or sustaining engagement in the workforce. Chaudhary and Verick (2014) observed that these barriers significantly affect female labour force participation and recommended greater investment in

⁹ Desai, S., & Joshi, O. (2019). The paradox of declining female work participation in India. *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 62(1), 55–71.

¹⁰ Kabeer, N. (2012). Women's economic empowerment and inclusive growth: Labour markets and enterprise development. International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

¹¹ Duflo, E. (2012). Women's empowerment and economic development. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 50(4), 1051–1079. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.50.4.1051>◆

skill development, employment generation, and gender-sensitive labour market policies to improve women's economic participation.¹²

Over the last few decades, women have achieved remarkable progress in education and professional qualifications, yet equal participation in employment has not been fully realised. Many women continue to experience wage discrimination, limited promotion opportunities, and difficulties in balancing work and family responsibilities. Goldin (2014) argued that flexible working arrangements, equal pay, maternity benefits, and supportive workplace policies are necessary to reduce gender inequality and encourage greater female participation in the labour market.¹³

Despite increasing educational attainment among women, a considerable number of educated women remain outside the labour market. Cultural expectations, household responsibilities, and the shortage of suitable employment opportunities continue to limit women's workforce participation. Klasen and Pieters (2015) found that rising education alone cannot guarantee higher female employment unless sufficient quality jobs and supportive social conditions are available.¹⁴ The study emphasised the importance of expanding decent employment opportunities for women.

India has experienced rapid economic growth over the years; however, this growth has not resulted in a proportional increase in female employment. Many women continue to face barriers such as inadequate job opportunities, social restrictions, safety concerns, and a mismatch between education and available jobs. Mehrotra and Parida (2017) concluded that improving vocational training, strengthening labour market policies, and creating more employment opportunities are essential for increasing female labour force participation and promoting inclusive economic growth.¹⁵

Women's participation in the labour market contributes significantly to productivity, poverty reduction, and sustainable economic development. Countries with higher female labour force participation generally experience stronger economic performance and improved social outcomes. Verick (2018) emphasised that governments should promote equal employment opportunities by investing in education, childcare services, workplace safety, and equal pay policies so that women can participate fully in economic activities.¹⁶

Table 1.1 Employment Rate in Punjab

Years	Male Employment Rate	Female Employment Rate	Gender Gap
2000-2005	52.50%	23%	30%
2006-2011	52%	16%	37%
2012-2016	52%	14%	38%
2017-2021	51%	16%	35%

¹² Chaudhary, R., & Verick, S. (2014). Female labour force participation in India and beyond. International Labour Organization.

¹³ Goldin, C. (2014). A grand gender convergence: Its last chapter. American Economic Review, 104(4), 1091–1119. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.104.4.1091>◆

¹⁴ Klasen, S., & Pieters, J. (2015). What explains the stagnation of female labor force participation in urban India? The World Bank Economic Review, 29(3), 449–478. <https://doi.org/10.1093/wber/lhv003>◆

¹⁵ Mehrotra, S., & Parida, J. (2017). Why is the labour force participation of women declining in India? World Development, 98, 360–380. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2017.05.003>◆

¹⁶ Verick, S. (2018). Female labor force participation and development. IZA World of Labor. <https://doi.org/10.15185/izawol.87.v2>◆

2022-2024	53%	22%	30%
2025	54%	28%	29%

Source of Data: National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) Reports of 55th, 61st, 66th, and 68th Rounds (Years 2000 to 2016) and Annual Reports of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) issued by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) (Years 2017 to 2025), Government of India.

Table 1.1 presents the employment rates of men and women in Punjab over the period between 2000 and 2025. Between 2000 and 2025, Punjab’s employment trends reveal a persistent gender disparity despite some recent improvements. Male employment rates have remained relatively stable, fluctuating only slightly between 51% and 54%. In contrast, female employment rates have shown significant volatility, dropping from 23% in 2000–2005 to a low of 14% in 2012–2016, before gradually recovering to 28% in 2025. The gender employment gap accounted for 30% in 2000-2005, increased to 38% in 2012-2016, and further decreased to 29% in 2025. This decline and subsequent recovery highlight the structural and cultural barriers that disproportionately affect women’s participation in the workforce. The gender gap, which widened to 38% during 2012–2016, has narrowed to 29% by 2025, suggesting progress but still reflecting substantial inequality. Some of the leading factors associated with this growth include the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission, Skill India Mission, Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana, Stand Up India, Punjab Skill Development Mission, and the improvement in the educational and technical levels among women. Overall, while recent years indicate positive momentum in female labour force participation, the data underscores that sustained policy interventions and social change are essential to bridge the employment gap and unlock Punjab’s full economic potential.

In summary, the evidence indicates that while male and female employment rates in Punjab remain unequal, the gender gap has narrowed considerably over the years. This trend suggests that further progress is achievable if systemic barriers are addressed. Ensuring workplace safety for women, enforcing equal pay for equal work, expanding vocational skills training programs, and creating diverse job opportunities are critical measures that can accelerate this reduction. By implementing such strategies, Punjab can not only enhance women’s participation in the labour market but also strengthen its overall economic growth and social equity.

Table 1.2 Gendered Metrics of Employment and Unemployment in Urban and Rural Areas

Region	Economic Indicator	Male	Female	Gender Gap
Rural Punjab	Labour Force Participation	54.20%	23.50%	30.70%
Rural Punjab	Unemployment Rate	6.10%	11.40%	-5.30%
Urban Punjab	Labour Force Participation	57.80%	17.20%	40.60%
Urban Punjab	Unemployment Rate	5.50%	14.80%	-9.30%
Total Punjab	Youth Unemployment (15-29 years)	15.20%	24.60%	-9.40%

Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (Years 2017-2025), Labour Bureau (Years 2011-2016), Punjab Economic Survey, and Census of India (Year 2011), Government of India.

These indicators point to the fact that the economic participation of women is lower than that of men. For instance, considering the LFPR in Rural Punjab, females account for 23.5% while that of males is 54.2%. Therefore, the gap between the employment rates of males and females is 30.7%, which is a big difference to register. Hence, the statistics show that women's workforce participation is very low compared to that of men. Another indicator to support this fact is the unemployment rates; for example, in the rural areas, the percentage of unemployed males is 6.1% while that of the females is 11.4%. This implies that females face more challenges getting employed than males. Looking at the figures for Urban Punjab, one would reach the same conclusion. For instance, the LFPR for males is 57.8% while that of the females is 17.2%. From these statistics, one can conclude that there is a big gap between the employment rates of males and female by 40.6%. This gap is even bigger than that of the rural areas. Another indicator to support this fact is the unemployment rates; for example, in the urban areas, the percentage of unemployed males is 5.5% while that of the females is 14.8%. This implies that females face more challenges getting employed than males. However, looking at the unemployment rates for the youth and considering those aged between 15 and 29 years, one can easily believe that there is a big problem with unemployment for the young people in Punjab. For instance, the unemployment rate for young males is 15.2% while that of the young females is 24.6%. From these statistics, one can conclude that there is a gap between the unemployment rates of males and female by 9.4%. Therefore, based on the statistics, it is safe to assume that young educated females face more challenges getting employed than males. Some of the issues that lead to this gap include social expectations, domestic duties, lack of jobs in the local area, and a skills gap.

Key Challenge

- 1. Low Female Labour Force Participation:** Women's employment rates in Punjab remain significantly lower than those of men. Despite slight improvements, the gap remains wide, severely limiting women's economic independence and overall social status
- 2. Low Representation in the Organised Sector:** A majority of working women are employed in informal or casual labour roles. Unlike formal jobs, these positions lack job security, social benefits (such as healthcare or pensions), and clear career growth opportunities.
- 3. Limited Skills and Training Opportunities:** Women in rural and underdeveloped regions lack access to modern technical education, computer literacy, and skill development programs. Consequently, they are often confined to low-paying, ad-hoc, or seasonal jobs.
- 4. Sociocultural and Domestic Constraints:** Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, the heavy burden of unpaid domestic and care work, lack of safe transportation, unsafe work environments, and the absence of childcare/crèche facilities serve as major barriers to women entering and remaining in the workforce.

Suggestions and Policy Recommendations

To begin with, the issue of gender inequality in employment requires firm resolve to ensure equal pay for equal work and to guarantee safe, sound working conditions free from discrimination. Additionally, there is a need for skills training for women to acquire technical expertise in areas such as digital literacy and technical-vocational skills. There is a need for the activation of

female entrepreneurial skills in both urban and rural areas through access to institutional financing, credit facilities, and awareness of government-sponsored schemes. Furthermore, the provision of subsidised public transport, safe hostel accommodations, and crèches will facilitate high female workforce participation rates, generate quality employment opportunities, and lead to a highly competitive economy.

Conclusion

Despite notable advancements in literacy, education, and social awareness, gender inequality continues to constrain women's participation in Punjab's labour force. The analysis demonstrates that women remain disproportionately concentrated in informal and casual employment, with overall participation rates significantly lower than those of men. While incremental progress has been recorded, women's representation in decision-making roles, positions of authority, and wage levels remains markedly limited.

At both provincial and federal levels, governments have introduced policies, implemented programs, and fostered partnerships with the private sector to promote women's empowerment. Nevertheless, structural barriers persist. Sociocultural norms rooted in patriarchy, the burden of domestic responsibilities, concerns regarding personal safety, and institutional deficiencies collectively inhibit women's economic engagement, particularly in rural areas.

Addressing these challenges requires coordinated, multi-stakeholder interventions. Governments, private enterprises, academic institutions, civil society, and individuals must collaborate to generate quality employment opportunities, ensure equitable compensation, guarantee safe working environments, provide targeted skills training, and encourage female entrepreneurship. Equally critical is the promotion of sociocultural transformation through the dismantling of gender stereotypes. Such measures will not only advance women's economic empowerment but also contribute to increased Gross Domestic Product (GDP), enhanced household income, poverty reduction, and the achievement of sustainable development objectives.

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