

Sectoral Employment Dynamics in India: A Gender- and Region-Wise Analysis Across the Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sectors (2017-18 to 2023-24)

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ABSTRACT

India's economic growth has been accompanied by a shift of employment from agriculture towards the secondary and tertiary sectors, but the quality and benefits stemming from that shift remain unequally distributed. This study examines how sectoral employment trends connect to India's economic development by analysing this from the perspectives of gender and region, within the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors. Using PLFS data from 2017-18 to 2023-24, male-female and rural-urban gaps were collected for each sector and employment status, then modelled using linear time-trend regressions. The results show that self-employment rose across all three sectors, with women's participation increasing the fastest; for instance, women's self-employment in the secondary sector rose from 47.2% to 58.5% between 2017-18 and 2023-24. Regular wage/salaried gender gaps narrowed, most notably in services, where women's historically higher salaried share fell. Casual labour declined in agriculture and services, but still remained the leading form of employment in the secondary sector. This study concludes that turning this rising participation into better economic growth for India will require skill-development, stronger care infrastructure, and more labour protections.

Keywords: *Sectoral employment; structural transformation; gender gap; rural–urban disparity; PLFS; employment status; India; Labour economics*

INTRODUCTION

General Background

India's recent economic growth can be attributed to a gradual but clear structural shift of employment, away from low-productivity agriculture toward industries and services. Estimates from the World Bank (2024b) show that the percentage of the Indian GDP coming from services has had an increase from 35.4% to 49.9% over the last ~40 years (1984 to 2024). Meanwhile, microdata for 2011-12 to 2018-19 indicate agricultural employment fell from 47% to 41.1%, while services rose from 28.6% to 33.2%, with construction also growing (labour-wise), according to Basole (2022).

This re-allocation matters because output per worker in industry and modern services is significantly higher than in primary activities (which often see high underemployment). Therefore, shifting workers out of agriculture raises aggregate labour productivity and per-capita incomes (Alshehhi & Popp, 2017).

Oct 2026
Vol 12. No 5.

Employment composition, then, is a core indicator of India's stage of development and quality of growth. To analyse the same, this report will divide it between key National Industrial Classification industries.

India's National Industrial Classification (NIC) system groups economic activity (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2025) into broad industries: primary (agriculture, mining), secondary (manufacturing, construction), and tertiary (trade, education, finance). While the PLFS 2024 key indicators are organised by status rather than NIC codes (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2024), its employment measures by sector and gender can be implicitly translated into NIC groupings.

In 2024, 6.73% of urban workers worked in agriculture, while 59.84% of rural workers were occupied there. On the other hand, 0.49% of rural workers worked in Finance and Insurance activities, while 2.65% of urban workers were occupied in the same sector. Moreover, a mere 0.9% of rural workers were employed under a fixed wage contract in the agricultural sector, with a larger 16.8% under a casual, attendance-based agreement (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2024).

The secondary sector was the most reliant on casual work, with 44.4% of its workers in casual labour, against 30.2% self-employed and 25.4% in regular wage or salaried jobs. The tertiary sector was the most formalised of the three, where regular wage or salaried jobs made up the largest share at 51.0%, followed by 44.9% self-employed and only 4.1% in casual labour (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2024).

These patterns reflect both regional development and industrial diversification. More diversified, urbanised states show higher non-farm and services employment—such as how 69.3% of Maharashtra's output came from services in 2024 (World Bank, 2024a)—while rural states remain primary-sector heavy/ However, NIC industries are not the only key factors in determining employment composition (and its trends): one must segregate between gender and region, as well.

It is well known that, in developing countries, gender gaps are more prevalent. For example, as reported by the World Economic Forum (2025), southern Asia (including territories like Bangladesh, India, and Nepal) ranked 7th out of 8, while sub-Saharan Africa ranked 6th out of 8—both territories with lower levels of economic development than the higher-ranked North America and Europe (1st and 2nd, respectively).

In 2024, the Indian Worker Population Ratio in usual status (15 years+) was 57.7% overall (76.6% for men, 39.0% for women), with rural work still heavily concentrated in agriculture and urban work consisting mostly of services. Current weekly status data show women's labour force participation rate at 34.7%, versus 78.1% for men, and most highly educated female workers concentrated in professional and technical roles (45.7% of workers are women, but only 3% of them have an advanced degree), according to Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (2024). Differentiating between rural and urban

economies, the labour force participation rate of women in rural areas is a considerable 18.2% higher than that of urban areas, demonstrating low education (leading to low-skill employment).

These disparities are added on top of urban–rural divides, with rural employment still dominated by agriculture and informal work, and urban jobs more service-centric and formal. Studying gender-wise and region-wise patterns jointly is therefore essential to capture how sector, place, and gender intersect in shaping labour market outcomes. It is important, however, to substantiate these real-world trends in economic theory.

Firstly, sectoral employment shifts affect growth through their impact on average productivity. When workers move from low-productivity activities like subsistence agriculture—often plagued by underemployment, unemployment, low education, and continuations of the poverty cycle—into higher-productivity activities like manufacturing or modern services, aggregate output per worker rises, lifting state-level GDP (per Capita), as seen in a study conducted by Padhi & Sharma (2023). Other state-level analysis similarly finds that reallocating workers from primary to secondary activities supports both growth and productivity, while shifts toward low-productivity output can reduce them (Jain, 2021).

At the same time, different industries contribute unevenly. For example, organised manufacturing’s susceptibility to employment elasticity, output, wages, and capital varies across time, so the same unit of growth doesn’t always depict the same employment trend (Singh & Tare, 2025). Subsequently, high-end services such as finance and IT/technology also generate more value per added worker than low-end trade or informal construction, but their job creation depends on skills and formalisation (Pant et al., 2025). Therefore, even if worker involvement increases, low-output employment can cause overall productivity to stagnate. This uneven contribution makes industry-wise employment analysis essential for judging whether state-level structural change is genuinely growth-enhancing or merely absorbing labour at low productivity.

Literature Review

Sectoral employment patterns have been widely examined in the existing literature. This literature review attempts to use this wealth of work to set and justify the study, organising the relevant findings. In the same realm, a study conducted by Kumar & Chandra (2020)—which aimed to examine regional sectoral employment patterns across the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors—used data from 2004 to 2018 in two major Indian national surveys (the NSSO and PLFS) to compute dependency ratios across six state regions, as classified by the NIC-2008. It analysed links between dependency measures and household consumption using OLS, utilising labour, unemployment, household, age, employment status, and sectoral variables. The results revealed a declining dependence on agriculture-related fields, increased skill levels in agricultural roles, and higher movement into the tertiary (service) sector. Furthermore, female non-participation remained high due to factors such as education and domestic duties, consistent with long-run structural transformation theory. Variation in the states analysed reflected differences in urbanisation, education, and labour demand.

A different study by Sarkar & Torrejón Pérez (2025) aimed to map employment changes by industry, with the goal of identifying structural shifts across sectors and job levels. It used data drawn primarily from the PLFS and NSSO, differentiating by rural-urban composition, wage, task, and weights in employment shares. It analysed median wages, task intensity, location, and gender to do so. The decline in routine employment found suggested structural transformation and task re-distribution. Primary sectoral employment share dropped as tertiary employment rose, demonstrating a demand-side pull in urban economies for such services and a shift to more skilled jobs in rural areas.

Analysis conducted by Pant et al. (2025) aimed to assess movement towards service sectors by using NIC industry classifications across states. Using data from the PLFS and NSSO, as well as NIC service sub-sectors, the study focused on India, comparing states across the 2010s and 2020s by describing region-wise sectoral employment shares and services sub-sector profiles, and examining their relationships with urbanisation and output trends. The analysis used variables including state employment shares by NIC services subsectors (trade, transport, finance, public services, and IT-BPO), urbanisation, labour force participation rate (LFPR), worker participation rate (WPR), and output.

From a different lens, research conducted by Chand (2023) charted urban-rural differences in employment and industry participation across primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors. It used data over two separate time-periods: 2017-2018 and 2021-2022 from the PLFS, with PLFS indicators (LFPR, WPR, UR) to observe rural vs urban differences, gender gaps and measure changes in sectoral employment shares. It summarised the results using status categories, such as self-employed, regular, and casual, while emphasising location differences. Over the selected time period, rural areas saw rising female participation mainly through own-account and unpaid family work concentrated in agriculture, while urban employment remained partial towards the service-sector. Overall, unemployment fell, but the magnitudes differed: rural improvements were visible in lower-productivity, informal roles, whereas urban workers maintained steadier non-farm participation and relatively better job quality. These observations showed that rural employment stayed agriculture-heavy and informal, and urban jobs were more service-centric with stronger links to regular salaried positions. The increase in participation, especially for rural women, was driven more by distress and informal absorption than by high-quality job creation.

Similarly, a policy brief conducted by Fernandez et al. (2025), sponsored by the UNDP, showcased overall gender gaps at a state and sectoral level, and provided information on how narrowing the gender gap can boost economic growth. It did so by using PLFS indicators, such as but not limited to the LFPR (labour force participation rate), WPR (worker population ratio), and UR (unemployment rate) to calculate gender gaps. The differences were shown over time, across industries, and across states, differentiating between high and low growth rates as well. Employment categories between genders were also observed, using data and author-conducted calculations from the PLFS. The results indicated a rise in women's participation, mostly in agriculture, while urban gaps grew at a slower rate. Sectors with

high-growth still have large gender gaps, but variation between states is also present. The brief concluded with comments and suggestions on policies to help combat the gender gaps, supporting those on skills, care, and safety.

Subsequently, a study by Jain (2021) evaluates how India's sectoral composition in both income and employment changed from 1983-84 to 2019-20, and how these shifts relate to overall economic growth, productivity, and job creation. Taking secondary data for 16 large states, it used state income and per-capita income levels from the EPWRF, employment levels from ICSSR/NSSO surveys, and credit, capital, and population statistics from the RBI. To measure structural change, Jain applied two standardised metrics (the Norm of Absolute Values or NAV and the Modified Lilien Index) across three broad sectors and nine sub-sectors. All series were aligned to a common 2004/5 base year for consistency, a result of the differing sources. The results found that structural change in income hurts growth and productivity as economies shift toward lower-productivity services, while moving workers into secondary activities supports both growth and productivity. Despite this, both income-based and employment-based structural change are linked to weaker job growth, with the employment shift showing a stronger dampening effect. Moreover, demand and supply factors like human capital, technology, and private investment foster employment reallocation, but not income shifts.

Based on a different approach, Singh & Tare (2025) aimed to trace employment elasticity in India's organised manufacturing and evaluate how wages, fixed capital, and working capital influenced job creation across time. Using panel data for 21 major states from 1998 to 2023, it estimated employment responses to growth via a random effects model and assessed sub-periods to capture shifts around major reforms. Results show that Gross Value Added and working capital generally raised employment, with higher wages typically reducing jobs over 1998–2023 but turning positively proportional with employment in 2015–2023. Fixed capital supported jobs mainly in 1998–2008, suggesting later investments are slower or less labour-augmenting; output's job impact peaks in 2009–2014, while working capital's influence weakens after 2015. Policywise, adequate working capital and targeted capital formation can convert output growth into stronger job creation.

Particularly using NIC indicators, a study by Padhi & Sharma (2023) aimed to analyse the growth and employment levels of the Indian labour force by differentiating between different sectors. To do this, the World Bank's Shapley decomposition approach is applied to break down per capita income growth into contributions from employment shifts, productivity changes (output per worker), and population dynamics, both in aggregate and across sectors within India's labour market. The findings indicated that increases in output per worker and movement between sectors have been the primary drivers of gross value added. This points to structural transformation in the economy, characterised by a sharp decline (nearly by half) in agricultural wage growth and a steady migration toward non-farm activities.

In sum, the existing literature examines sectoral shifts, gender disparities, and regional patterns largely in isolation. Studies that track employment status, for example, rarely do so jointly by gender and

rural-urban location across the three main industries (primary, secondary, and tertiary). This study, therefore, addresses that gap by measuring, for each broad sector and employment status, how the gender gap (male/female) and regional gap (rural/urban) changed across the seven PLFS reports from 2017-18 to 2023-24, and finding whether the trends found are statistically significant. Doing so provides a consistent image of the current state of the Indian labour market, as well as where these disparities are widening or narrowing and a policy-relevant basis for identifying the statuses and sectors most in need of intervention.

METHODOLOGY

Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to examine how employment status in India has developed across gender and region between 2017-18 and 2023-24, within the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors, and to situate those trends within the wider literature on economic development. To do this, the study accepts three objectives:

- To analyse sectoral employment trends across primary, secondary, and tertiary industries to find shifts in employment status (self-employed, wage/salaried, casual);
- To measure gender-wise and rural–urban gaps in each employment status and test whether they show significant trends over time; and
- To frame these employment trends within the wider literature on structural transformation and economic development in India.

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are tested in this research.

H1: Gender Gap in Primary Sector Employment

The gender gap in primary sector employment exhibits a significant time trend.

- H1a: Self-employment
- H1b: Wage/Salaried employment
- H1c: Casual labour employment

H2: Regional Gap in Primary Sector Employment

The regional gap in primary sector employment exhibits a significant time trend.

- H2a: Self-employment
- H2b: Wage/Salaried employment
- H2c: Casual labour employment

H3: Gender Gap in Secondary Sector Employment

The gender gap in secondary sector employment exhibits a significant time trend.

- H3a: Self-employment
- H3b: Wage/Salaried employment
- H3c: Casual labour employment

H4: Regional Gap in Secondary Sector Employment

The regional gap in secondary sector employment exhibits a significant time trend.

- H4a: Self-employment
- H4b: Wage/Salaried employment
- H4c: Casual labour employment

H5: Gender Gap in Tertiary Sector Employment

The gender gap in tertiary sector employment exhibits a significant time trend.

- H5a: Self-employment
- H5b: Wage/Salaried employment
- H5c: Casual labour employment

H6: Regional Gap in Tertiary Sector Employment

The regional gap in tertiary sector employment exhibits a significant time trend.

- H6a: Self-employment
- H6b: Wage/Salaried employment
- H6c: Casual labour employment

Data Description

To validate these hypotheses, the study uses secondary quantitative data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), an annual record created by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, covering the time period 2017-18 to 2023-24. The variable is the percentage share of workers in each employment status (self-employed, regular wage/salaried, and casual labour), measured in percentage points (%) of the total workforce and divided down by sector, gender, and region. From these shares, two dependent variables are formed; the gender gap (male minus female share) and the regional gap (rural minus urban share), both in percentage points. Time (survey years 2017-18 to 2023-24) is the independent

variable. For analysis and observations, employment is first divided into three key sectors using NIC-2008 industry sections: the primary sector (mainly agriculture), the secondary sector (manufacturing and construction), the tertiary sector (information, communications, finance, insurance, and more). It is then divided into three employment status categories: self employed, regular wage/salaried, and casual labour. The dependent variable of this study is the gender gap and the regional gap for each status, which is then modelled and analysed using a linear time trend regression. Each regression is estimated on seven annual observations (survey years 2017-18 to 2023-24), giving five degrees of freedom for the reported t- and F-tests. Analyses were conducted using Numiqo and STATA.

All figure series are drawn from the PLFS Annual Reports 2017-18 to 2023-24 (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation), from the percentage distribution of workers in usual status (ps+ss) by status in employment and industry of work, divided by sector, gender, and region. The gender gap (male/female) and regional gap (rural/urban) plotted in each figure are derived by the author from these parts.

Data Analysis Method

Trend analysis is the analysis of how a variable changes over a period of time to identify consistent patterns of increase, decrease, or stability; it is done here to observe how gender and regional employment gaps have evolved across 2017-18 to 2023-24, and is conducted by plotting each sector's status shares as line graphs that make year-on-year direction and fluctuation visually clear. To formally test whether these observed movements are statistically meaningful rather than random fluctuation, regression analysis for trends is then applied, plotting each gender gap and regional gap against time to estimate the direction, magnitude, and significance of its change. Specifically, the study uses a linear time-trend regression of the form $\text{Gap} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Year}) + \varepsilon$, where the slope coefficient β_1 is the average annual change in the gap and its p-value indicates whether that trend is significant.

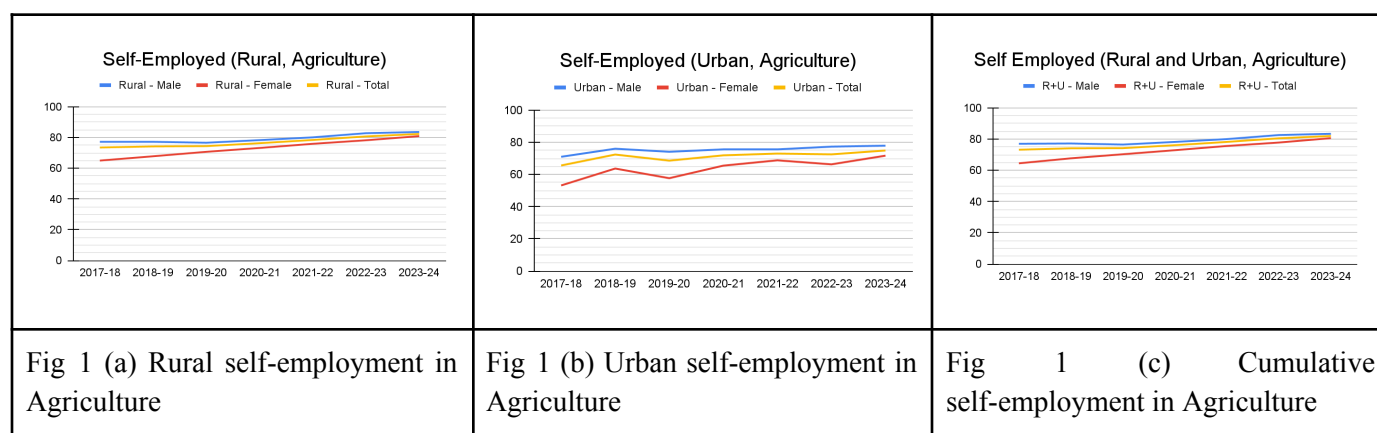
When reading the results below, there are a few limits that must be highlighted. Firstly, each trend is based on only seven annual data points, so the regression models describe the broad direction of each gap instead of a precise rate of change; with five wide residual degrees of freedom in the intervals around every slope, one unusual year can significantly impact the trends shown. Furthermore, eighteen gaps are examined, and at the ten per cent level around two would seem to be significant. This means that the weakest results (casual labour in the secondary sector and self-employment in the tertiary sector) are suggestive. Additionally, the time window examined spans the COVID-19 pandemic, so using a simple regression model on a sharp shock like the outbreak can cause a shift in the slope. This means that a longer time period of data would be needed to confirm the trends. Annual series like these also tend to be autocorrelated, which can make the standard errors seem smaller than they truly are.

RESULTS

Agriculture Sector

Trend Analysis: Self-Employed

Gap levels for the first and last year of each series are reported in Appendix A.



Source: author's calculations from PLFS 2017–18 to 2023–24 (see section 2.3).

With regard to figures 1 (a)-(c), India's self-employed labour force has seen a clear upward trend in the percentage of agriculture workers that are self-employed.

Increasing by an average of 1.47 percentage points per year, there was less movement in the cumulative rural percentages between the years 2017 to 2024 (as seen in figure 1 (a)), with the greatest increase between two years 2.1 percentage points between 2019 and 2021, a relatively large increase as compared to other years. Over the full period, the rural self-employment share rose from 73.5% in 2017-18 to 82.3% in 2023-24, a total increase of 8.8 percentage points that occurred at a faster rate in the later years (from 76.3% in 2020-21 to 82.3% by 2023-24).

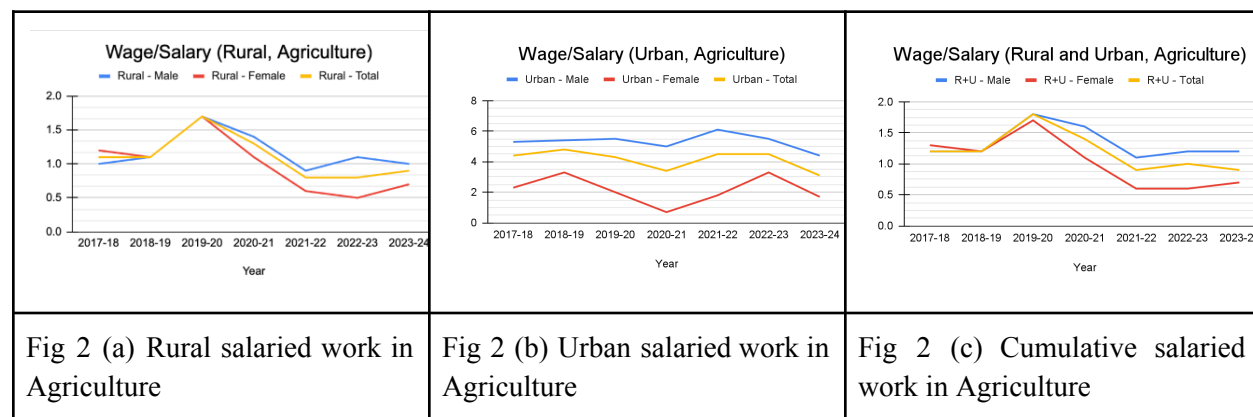
In urban areas, the cumulative self-employment percentages followed a more volatile path over the same period (as seen in figure 1 (b)), increasing by an average of roughly 1.55 percentage points per year but with more variation between individual years. The largest single-year increase was 6.8 percentage points between 2017-18 and 2018-19 (65.6% to 72.4%), immediately followed by a 3.8 percentage point decrease the next year (down to 68.6% in 2019-20), unlike the steadier trend seen in the rural diagram. Over the full period, the urban self-employment share rose from 65.6% in 2017-18 to 74.9% in 2023-24, a total increase of 9.3 percentage points.

Overall, in both regions (plotted in figure 1 (c)), the self-employment of females has also grown faster, increasing by ~9.7 percentage points more than that of males (in the 2017 to 2024 period). Male

self-employment in urban areas faced less volatile growth trends compared to females, with the two trends converging (most spread in 2017 and closest in 2024). It is also clearly visible that the impact of the rural workforce is much greater than that of the urban workforce when it comes to the rural and urban graph (figure 1(c)). This is why the maximum difference between a data point on the rural graph and the rural and urban graph (at the same time frame) is only 0.3 percentage points.

The sharper rise in rural self-employment could be attributed to the combined effects of weak non-farm job creation, stagnant real wages, and early pandemic disruption (which hit India in early 2020). This is because these drove distress-led job shifts, placing greater emphasis on family farming than contract/salaried work (ILO and Institute for Human Development, 2024). The faster growth of female self-employment in the agriculture sector reflects gendered distress adjustment, where worsening or unstable wage opportunities (especially in non-farm work) pushed households to rely more on women's labour in family farms and informal enterprises (Chakraborty, 2023). This also increased women's recorded self-employment more than men's, as PLFS also began classifying previously "invisible" female work as economic activity. As seen in a study conducted by Ara & Shrivastav (2025), women's participation has risen mainly through own-account/unpaid family agricultural work and distress-led adjustment when non-farm wage jobs were less reliable. The dominance of rural self-employment in the overall trend may be because of how most agricultural work (mainly farming and livestock) requires large swathes of open land, which are more available and cheaper in rural areas than urban areas (standard bid-rent theory (von Thünen, 1826)).

3.1.2. Trend Analysis: Wage/Salary



Gap levels for the first and last year of each series are reported in Appendix A.

Source: author's calculations from PLFS 2017–18 to 2023–24 (see section 2.3).

Note: the urban chart uses a 0–8 scale; rural and combined use 0–2.0.

Looking at figures 2 (a)–(c), the percentage of those involved in contractual, consistently salaried roles has been very low, although there has been some variation over the 2017 to 2024 period.

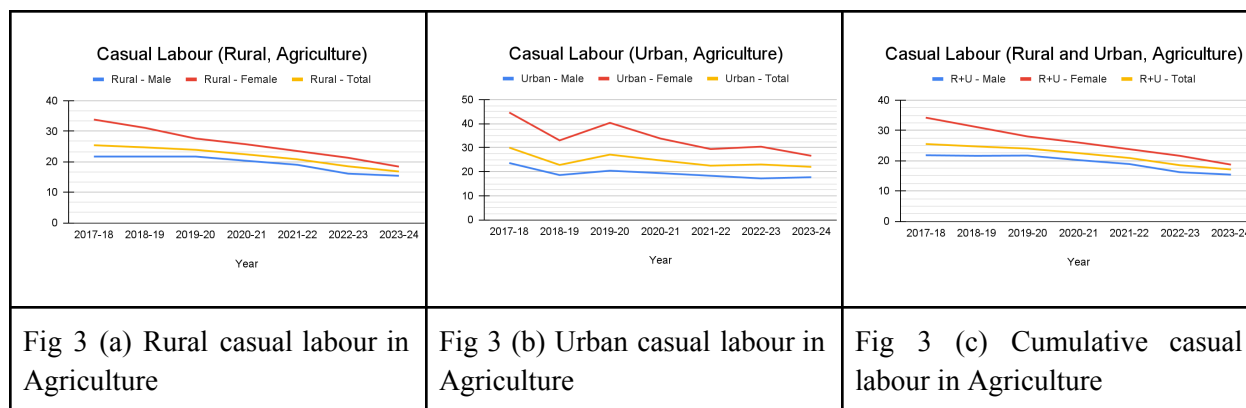
In the 2017 to 2019 period shown in figure 2 (a), rural agriculture experienced a relatively flat, plateaued state where the percentage of those under a wage contract in agriculture was unchanged. There were also no major shocks or reforms strong enough to shift the rural structure away from such casual and family-centric labour, which continued to dominate the less developed countryside. Rural male and female shares shifted very similarly and stayed low throughout, rising from 1.0% and 1.2% in 2017-18 to a peak of 1.7% in 2019-20, before then going back to 1.0% (male) and 0.7% (female) by 2023-24, resulting in little to no total change.

Urban salaried shares were well above rural ones but were far more volatile between years (demonstrated by the movement in figure 2 (b)). Urban males ranged between 4.4% and 6.1%, staying stable early on (5.3% in 2017-18, 5.4% in 2018-19, 5.5% in 2019-20) before decreasing to 5.0% in 2020-21. Urban females shifted more erratically, from 2.3% in 2017-18 down to just 0.7% in 2020-21—likely reflecting pandemic-era displacement from formal work—before rising finally to 1.7% by 2023-24. This left urban female salaried shares below their 2017-18 starting point despite the periodic shifts.

Urban salaried shares stayed consistently above rural ones at a range from –2.1 percentage points (2020-21) to –3.7 (in 2018-19, 2021-22, and 2022-23), with no clear trend toward convergence. However, because rural workers form the overwhelming majority of the agricultural workforce, the combined rural-and-urban line follows the rural trend almost exactly (seen in the similarity of the series of figure 2 (c) and figure 2 (a)), never differing by more than ~0.3 percentage points from the rural percentages.

These trends suggest that rural labour—which has a large majority influence on the cumulative data given how similar the rural graph and the rural and urban graph are—remained highly informal, with small farms and weak bargaining power giving employers little incentive to offer written, binding contracts. This occurred especially when the surplus of labour (India's population then was 1.35 billion, with 67% living in rural areas, according to World Bank (2022)) was great enough to offer a continuous supply of cheap, effective workers. This is further supported by a study by Chand (2023), which found that rural employment remains agriculture-heavy and informal, with low regular wage jobs and only small improvements over 2017-2022. The 2019-2020 period represents a marginal increase in formalisation driven by pre-COVID rural demand, public programmes, or institutional hiring, as well as better PLFS recording of regular wage work. However, the change is small, therefore signalling a small edge-shift rather than a broad improvement in job quality (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2019). A decline then came, falling from 1.8% to 0.9% (at its lowest in 2021-2022), then remaining stable until 2024. Such movements can be attributed to COVID-19, when firms and large farms chose to lay off formal salaried workers and households fell back to self-employment and casual work. After the shock, structural constraints and slow recovery meant agriculture went to an even more informal space, with little force pushing salaried jobs back up (Abraham & Basole, 2022).

3.1.3. Trend Analysis: Casual Labour



Gap levels for the first and last year of each series are reported in Appendix A.

Source: author's calculations from PLFS 2017–18 to 2023–24 (see section 2.3).

In rural areas, female casual labour fell from 33.8% in 2017-18, declining almost every year (31.1%, 27.6%, 25.7%, 23.5%, 21.3%, and finally 18.4%), as is mapped in figure 3 (a). Rural male casual labour declined more gently from 21.7% to 15.4% over the same period; this difference can be clearly seen in the steeper rural female series. This difference in steepness is clearly visible in the sharper slope of the rural female series (figure 3 (a)), which narrowed the rural gender gap in casual labour from 12.1% in 2017-18 to only 3.0% by 2023-24.

In the period of 2019 to 2020 (shown with the other periods in figure 3 (b)), there was a short spike in the percentage of urban casual labour in agriculture, which can be attributed to the initial shock brought about by COVID-19: the urban total jumped from 22.8% in 2018-19 back up to 27.1% in 2019-20 before resuming its decline. Urban female casual labour was the highest of any group throughout, standing at 44.6% in 2017-18, rising to 40.3% in 2019-20 after an initial decrease, and only falling to 26.6% by 2023-24, while urban males declined from 23.6% to 17.7%. Even after its long decline, the urban female share remained the largest casual-labour group in agriculture right through to 2023-24, where the difference between both genders was 8.9%.

Urban casual labour shares stayed above rural ones for most of the period (as observed in figure 3 (c)), with a regional gap that fluctuated between -1.7% and -5.2% , with the sole exception of 2018-19, when rural briefly overtook urban by 1.9 points as the urban total decreased to 22.8%. The regional gap widened toward the end of the period, reaching -5.2% in 2023-24 as rural casual labour fell faster than urban. Because rural workers dominate the agricultural workforce, however, the combined rural-and-urban line follows the rural trend closely, never differing by more than ~ 1 percentage point from the rural figure in any given year.

The consistent overall decline likely points to a structural reduction in agricultural casual labour (instead of a singular incidence), as households move away from insecure daily-wage work looking for more stability and better living standards (more common in self-employment or contractual work), especially in agriculture, with mainly low-skill jobs (Bhattacharya, 2025). As for the narrowing gender gap, this difference has fast lessened, suggesting that women are exiting the most unstable segment of agricultural labour more rapidly, often being absorbed into self-employment or unpaid family farming rather than into better formal jobs. An article by Ara & Shrivastav (2025) supports this, documenting falling female casual agricultural work and shifts into self-employment or unpaid family farming. Regarding the urban increase, this brief rise reflects distress-induced fallback employment, as migrant and urban workers who lost formal or regular non-farm jobs took up short-term, daily paid agricultural related work as a last resort, commonly seen in such cases with a temporary surge in low-quality, informal roles (Srivastava, 2020).

3.1.4. Regression Analysis: Agriculture

Table 1: Time Trend Regression Results for Gender and Regional Employment Gaps in the Agriculture

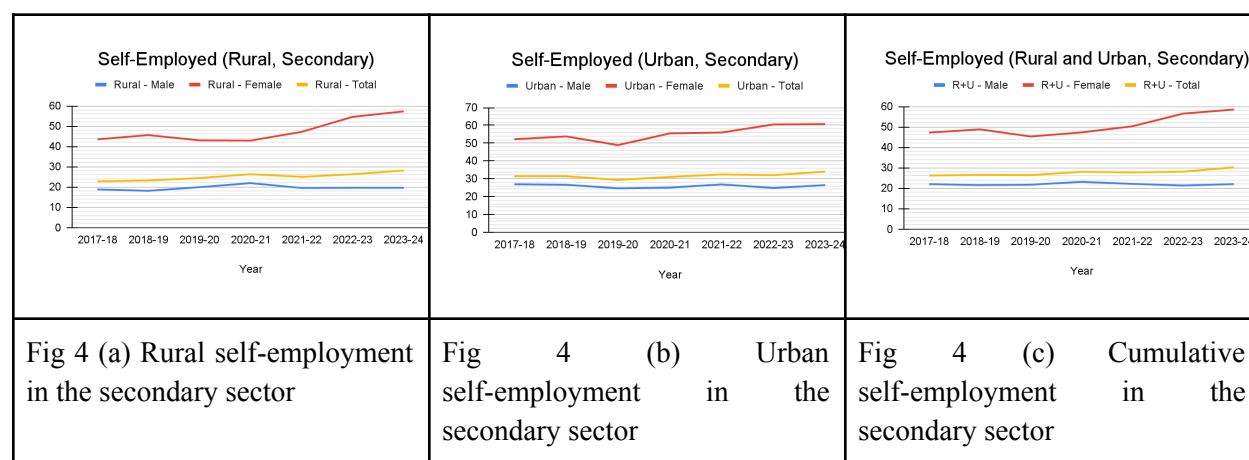
Sector Note: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

Gap	Hypotheses	Employment Type	Time Coefficient (B)	Std. Error	t-value	p-value (Coefficient)	R ²	F-statistic	Model p-value
Gender Gap	H1a	Self-Employed	-1.44	0.261	-5.52	0.003***	0.86	30.47	0.003***
	H1b	Wage/Salaried	0.12	0.025	4.87	0.005***	0.83	23.69	0.005***
	H1c	Casual Labour	-1.32	0.255	-5.17	0.004***	0.84	26.75	0.004***
Regional Gap	H2a	Self-Employed	0.39	0.438	0.89	0.413	0.14	0.80	0.412
	H2b	Wage/Salaried	0.08	0.148	0.54	0.614	0.05	0.29	0.613
	H2c	Casual Labour	-0.47	0.461	-1.02	0.355	0.17	1.04	0.355

In agriculture, the regression model results show clear but varying trends for gender and regional gaps across employment types. For self-employment, the gender gap is shrinking over time ($B = -1.44$, $p = 0.003$), meaning male and female self-employment shares are converging, while the regional rural-urban gap shows no statistically significant change ($B = 0.39$, $p = 0.413$). For regular wage/salary jobs, the gender gap is essentially flat and changes sign over the period (-0.1 points in 2017-18 to $+0.5$ in 2023-24), yet again the rural-urban gap is not statistically relevant ($B = 0.08$, $p = 0.614$). Finally, casual agricultural labour sees a converging gender gap ($B = -1.32$, $p = 0.004$), whereas the regional gap remains insignificant ($B = -0.47$, $p = 0.355$). Together, this suggests that over the examined time period of 2017-2024, most of the structural change observed within agriculture occurs between genders, instead of between rural and urban areas

3.2. Secondary Sector

3.2.1. Trend Analysis: Self-Employed



Gap levels for the first and last year of each series are reported in Appendix A.

Source: author's calculations from PLFS 2017–18 to 2023–24 (see section 2.3).

As can be observed in figure 4 (a), in rural areas, female self-employment in the secondary sector rose from 43.5% in 2017-18 to 57.3% by 2023-24 (a 13.8 percentage point increase) with most of that jump concentrated in the final two years (from 47.2% in 2021-22 to 54.6% in 2022-23 and then 57.3%). Rural males, by contrast, stayed even; the series was between 18.1% and 21.9%, and ended at 19.6% in 2023-24. This divergence raised the rural total from 22.8% to 28.1% and left a very wide rural gender gap, with women holding more than double the male self-employment share throughout

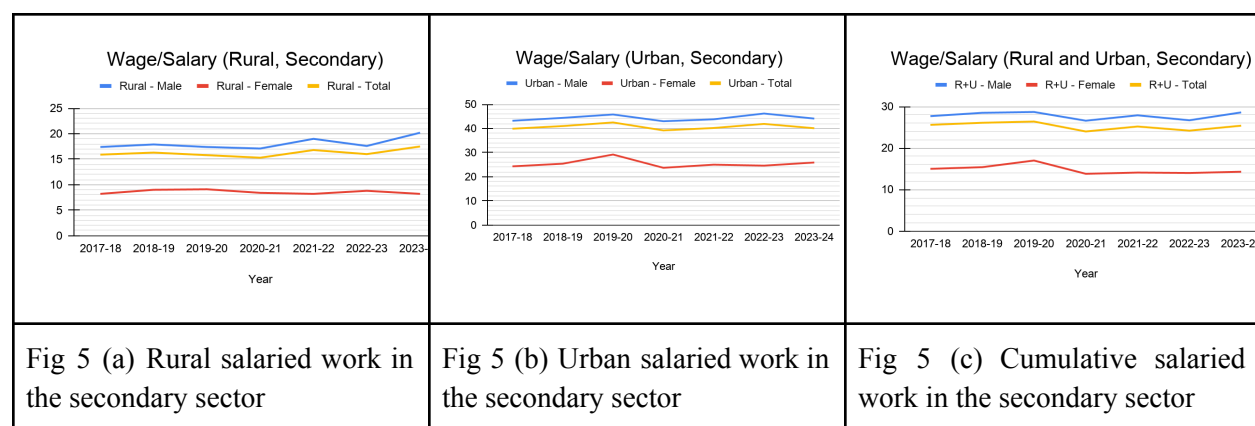
In urban areas, female self-employment also rose, moving from 52.2% in 2017-18 to 60.7% by 2023-24, while urban males were stable at 26.9% (falling slightly to 26.4%), visualised in figure 4 (b). Urban males

were stable throughout, moving only within a narrow 24.6% to 26.9% band and ending at 26.4%. As a result, the urban total rose only modestly from 31.4% to 34.0% across the period.

It is evident from the secondary sector self-employment figure 4 (c) that all three series—Total, males, and females—move in a similar upward direction between 2017 and 2024, with few sharp changes. For instance, in the combined rural and urban total, self-employment across all industries rose from 26.2% in 2017-2018 to 30.2% in 2023 to 2024. Over the same period, the male share is roughly stable (22% in 2017-2018 and 22% again in 2023-2024), while the female share increases sharply from 47.2% to 58.5%.

Within this broader pattern, the secondary sector graph shows a gentler, steadier increase for Total with both male and female lines trending upwards alongside the total, while the male line stays roughly flat. Because the male share holds at roughly 22% while the female share climbs from 47.2% to 58.5%, the upward movement in the total line is driven mainly by women. The much higher levels of female self employment (especially in rural areas, where female self employment is more prevalent) mean that rising female participation also contributes to the upward trend in the total series. Across 2017-2024, these patterns are therefore female-driven: women’s self-employment rises steeply while men’s holds roughly constant. They widen gender gaps within secondary activities (such as manufacturing, construction, and utilities supply) and reflect both distress exits from unstable jobs and a longer-term diversification into small manufacturing, repair, and construction jobs. This steady rise reflects a structural move toward own-account and family-based enterprises within the secondary sector, consistent with the modest increase in manufacturing’s employment share reported in the PLFS 2025 Annual Report and with the broader expansion of self-employment documented by Afridi (2025).

3.2.2. Trend Analysis: Wage/Salary



Gap levels for the first and last year of each series are reported in Appendix A.

Source: author’s calculations from PLFS 2017–18 to 2023–24 (see section 2.3).

The three graphs for wage and salaried employment in the secondary sector all show that regular, contractual work is heavily concentrated among urban men, with rural women occupying only a small share of these positions.

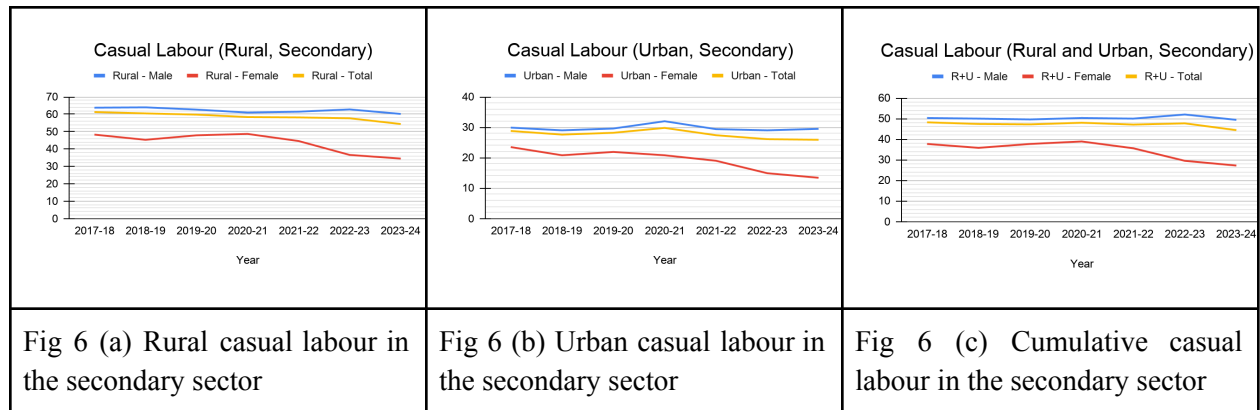
According to figure 5 (a), in rural areas, regular wage and salaried employment in the secondary sector stays low throughout the observed period, with both rural male and rural female lines far below urban trends, with rural men between only 17.1% to 20.2% and the rural total never more than 17.5%. Rural women are the most excluded group, with only a small minority in salaried roles (around 8.56% on average). These trends are further supported by research from Chand (2023), with rural women concentrated in informal roles and withdrawing from the mainstream workforce.

In urban areas, regular wage and salaried employment in the secondary sector is widespread, with the total urban share remaining high and fairly stable over 2017 to 2023 (an average of 40.7%), demonstrated by a coefficient of variation of only 0.0289 in figure 5 (b). Urban men dominate these roles however, with urban women participating at a much lower rate; the minimum variation between the two over the period examined was 16.6% in 2019-20, while the widest gap reached 21.6% in 2022-23 (46.2% male and 24.6% female). Women and male participation stayed steady at an average of 25.44% and 44.4% respectively, with little to no variation.

Across rural and urban areas combined (figure 5 (c)), the share of workers in regular wage and salaried roles in the secondary sector remained relatively stable between 2017-18 and 2022-23, shifting only slightly from 25.6% to 24.2%. There was a visible dip in 2020-21 however, when the overall percentage fell to around 24%—it has since been recovering marginally. Male and female trends both follow this flat pattern, with men consistently occupying a much larger share of salaried roles than women throughout this period.

Regular wage work in the secondary sector is clustered in urban or semi-urban industrial hubs, so due to proximity alone, urban workers (especially men) will find it much easier to access these jobs; globally, about 80% of economic output and most manufacturing activity is generated in urban areas (World Bank, 2026), and the cumulative graph's trends mirror that of urban's closely. These roles also include higher skills, education, and formal training, which is not only more common in urban areas but also in men (facing better schooling and less constraints from unpaid care work). Rural women, on the other hand, face multiple barriers: distance from industrial centres, lower educational attainment, social norms prioritising domestic and agricultural norms over formal factory and construction jobs, and employer biases towards men for physically intensive secondary-sector tasks (Afridi, 2015).

3.2.3. Trend Analysis: Casual Labour



Gap levels for the first and last year of each series are reported in Appendix A.

Source: author's calculations from PLFS 2017–18 to 2023–24 (see section 2.3).

Across all three graphs for casual employment in the secondary sector, casual labour is the largest employment status within secondary jobs; this is primarily driven by the construction sector, one of India's least-formalised industries, where daily and short-term hiring is the majority: nationally, nearly 90% of the workforce is informally employed, and construction absorbed much of the labour leaving agriculture (ILO and Institute for Human Development, 2024). The pattern is a clear upward or consistently high one, especially among rural men, and only modest declines in some urban and female trends.

Rural secondary employment is heavily composed of casual labour throughout the time period. The rural total share of casual workers is very high throughout, dropping only slightly from 61.3% in 2017–18 to 54.4% in 2023–24 (figure 6 (a)). Rural male casual employment stays above 60% for most of the period (63.8% in 2017–18, 60.2% in 2023–24), while rural female casual employment falls more, from 48.3% to 34.5%. This means that when rural workers move into the secondary sector, they are still much more likely to do so as casual labourers while women are gradually shifting away from the most unstable casual positions, often into self-employment or back into agriculture and unpaid family work.

In urban areas (figure 6 (b)), casual labour in the secondary sector is sizeable but relatively stable over time. Urban total casual employment is between 25.9% and 29.8% across 2017-18 to 2023-24, with urban males consistently around 29-32% and urban females much lower, declining from 23.5% to 13.4%. The urban graphs therefore show a secondary sector where roughly one in three urban workers are casually employed, with men making up the majority of that casual workforce and women increasingly under-represented in casual roles.

Looking at the combined rural+urban graph (figure 6 (c)), casual labour in the secondary sector consistently accounts for close to half of all secondary jobs. The overall line rises from 48.2% in 2017-18 to a peak of 48.2-48.0% around 2020–21, and only gradually decreases to 44.4% by 2023-24. Male casual employment remains higher than female casual employment throughout, seen in how total males stay around 49.4-52.0%, while total females fall more sharply from 37.7% in 2017-18 to 27.2% in 2023-24. This means that even with a slight recent decrease in the total, casual work remains the dominant employment status in the secondary sector overall, particularly for men.

Casual labour dominates secondary-sector employment because India’s non-farm economy leans heavily into construction and other low-skill, project-based work that hires workers on daily or very short-term basis instead of offering stable, long-term contracts. As surplus workers leave agriculture without education, training, or networks needed for regular manufacturing jobs, they are forced to work in these low-security roles (Wani, 2026). This is largely because neither manufacturing nor services generated adequate employment to absorb them, leaving construction as the primary job opportunity for displaced, unskilled rural labour, a sector whose seasonal nature and demand for abundant untrained workers make it easy to enter but offer little job security (Viswanathan, 2021).

3.2.4. Regression Analysis: Secondary Sector

Table 2: Time Trend Regression Results for Gender and Regional Employment Gaps in the Secondary Sector

Gap	Hypotheses	Employment Type	Time Coefficient (B)	Std. Error	t-value	p-value (Coefficient)	R ²	F-statistic	Model p-value
Gender Gap	H3a	Self-Employed	-1.94	0.647	-3.00	0.030**	0.64	9.01	0.030**
	H3b	Wage/Salaried	0.22	0.146	1.51	0.192	0.31	2.28	0.191
	H3c	Casual Labour	1.71	0.615	2.78	0.039**	0.61	7.74	0.039**
Regional Gap	H4a	Self-Employed	0.38	0.279	1.36	0.233	0.27	1.84	0.233
	H4b	Wage/Salaried	0.18	0.281	0.64	0.550	0.08	0.41	0.550

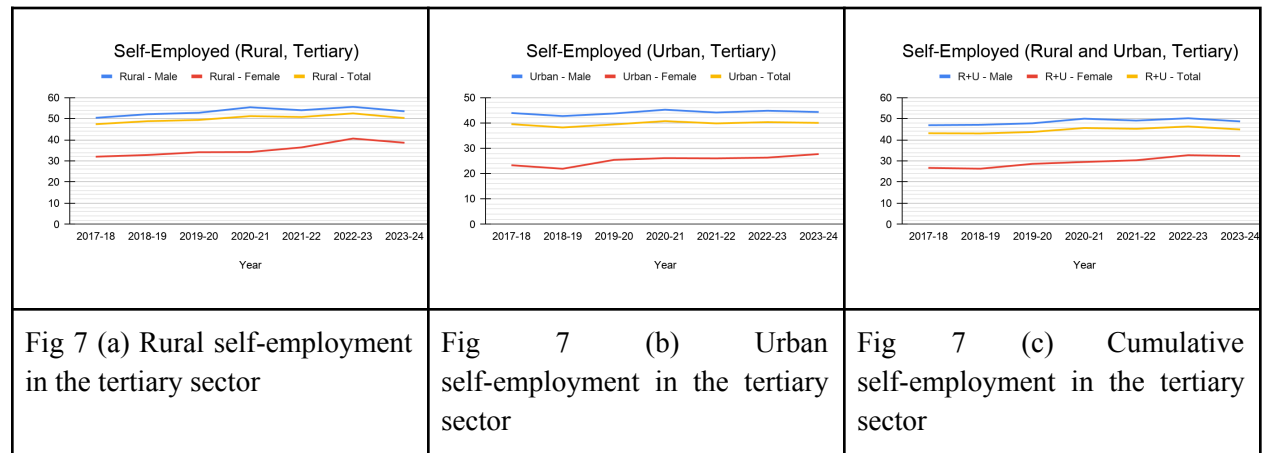
	H4c	Casual Labour	-0.55	0.268	-2.05	0.096*	0.46	4.18	0.096*
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Note: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

In the secondary sector, when applying the regression model, mixed but clear trends can be observed across the three employment types. In self-employment, the gender gap is widening ($B = -1.94$; from -25.2 points in 2017-18 to -36.5 in 2023-24), while the rural-urban gap is insignificant, suggesting similar or unrelated shifts for both regions ($B = 0.38$, $p = 0.233$). For regular wage/salaried work, neither the gender nor regional gaps change in a statistically significant way (for both genders and regions, B are small at 0.22 and 0.18 respectively, and $p > 0.1$ at 0.192 and 0.55 respectively), implying that the higher-quality jobs market is not becoming more or less unequal across gender or region. In contrast to this, for casual employment, the gender gap is widening with males consistently having a higher share ($B = 1.71$, $p = 0.039$), while the regional gap narrows ($B = -0.55$, $p = 0.096$). This points collectively to a secondary sector where the most unstable jobs are increasingly gender-unequal, while self-employment is becoming more gender-unequal; regional differences, however, are only relevant and decreasing in casual work.

3.3. Tertiary Sector

3.3.1. Trend Analysis: Self-Employed



Gap levels for the first and last year of each series are reported in Appendix A.

Source: author's calculations from PLFS 2017–18 to 2023–24 (see section 2.3).

It is evident from the tertiary sector employment data that all three trends (total, males, and females) show a general upward trend from 2017-18 to 2022-23, followed by a modest decrease in 2023-24. The

combined rural and urban total rose from 43.1% in 2017-18 to a maximum of 46.3% in 2022-23, before reducing slightly to 44.9% in 2023-24.

Rural self-employment rates are higher than urban across both genders throughout the period. Rural males were the most self-employed of any group, peaking at 55.6% in 2022-23 before settling at 53.5% in 2023-24, compared to 50.4% in 2017-18 (figure 7 (a)). Rural females saw a larger proportional increase: from 32.0% in 2017-18 to 38.6% in 2023-24, a rise of 6.6 percentage points. By 2023-24, rural females were approximately 10.9 percentage points more self-employed than their urban counterparts, a wider gap than for males, as shown in figure 7 (a). This increase can be attributed to a rise in the cultural acceptance of entrepreneurial females, along with movements such as SEWA which attempt to bring more females into the workforce.

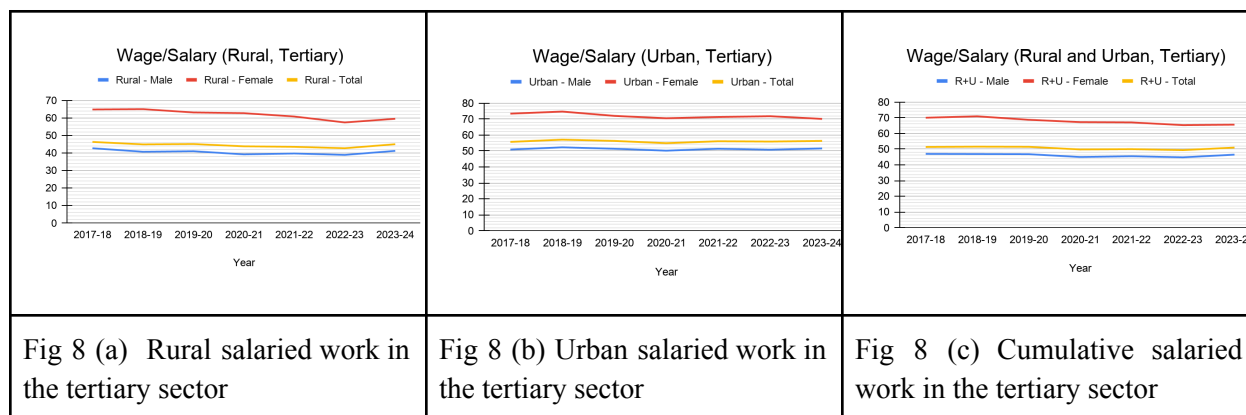
In urban areas, self-employment levels are lower and more stable than the overall combined figure, as can be seen in figure 7 (b). Urban males were between 42.7% and 45.2% across the period, ending at 44.3% in 2023-24 with little overall change. Urban females were consistently the least self-employed group across the entire sector, moving from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 27.7% in 2023-24 (figure 7 (b)). The low urban female self-employment rate likely reflects stronger urban demand for female labour in formal wage roles (particularly in education, health, and banking), which absorbs a significant portion of educated female workers into salaried positions.

The male and female trends move in the same broad direction but from different starting points. Male self-employment in the combined total began at 46.9% in 2017-18 and reached 48.7% by 2023-24, with most shifts in the 2019 to 2023 period. Female self-employment grew at a faster rate, with the combined total rising from 26.7% in 2017-18 to 32.3% in 2023-24, a gain of 5.6 percentage points. While males have consistently been more self-employed in the tertiary sector, the gap between them has lessened over the period as a result of faster female growth.

The high and rising self-employment in rural tertiary work reflects the concentration of local retail trade, food services, repair activity, and personal services in areas where formal firms are scarce (such as rural areas); a report by NITI Aayog's Pant et al. (2025) and Afridi (2025) furthered the idea that in many states, non-farm service work is dominated by small trade and self-employment. There, the main entry point into the workforce is self-employed or family-based enterprise rather than wage employment. The faster growth in female self-employment, especially in rural areas, is consistent with women entering low-barrier-to-entry service activities such as tailoring, home-cooking, and small trade. This also represents the trends seen in the primary and secondary sectors, where rising female participation has occurred largely in self-employment roles rather than in the salaried or contractual work that generally brings greater job security. This pattern is supported by Thakur & Chaudhary (2025), who find that the recent rise in women's workforce participation in India has been driven mainly by the self-employment category, particularly own-account and subsidiary work in petty trade, food processing, and household enterprises, rather than by growth in regular salaried employment. However, this could also be attributed

to a rise in innovation in India, with more females leaving the salaried workforce to enterprise independently.

3.3.2. Trend Analysis: Wage/Salary



Gap levels for the first and last year of each series are reported in Appendix A.

Source: author's calculations from PLFS 2017–18 to 2023–24 (see section 2.3).

The three graphs for wage and salaried employment in the tertiary sector reveal a clear gender reversal compared to the primary and secondary sectors; in services, females hold salaried positions at a higher rate than males throughout the observed period. Looking at the combined rural and urban total, wage and salaried employment remained broadly stable between 51.4% in 2017-18 and 51% in 2023-24, with a slight dip to 49.8% in 2020-21 that likely reflects COVID-19 disruptions to formal employment. However, this overall stability does not fully reflect the differing trends by gender.

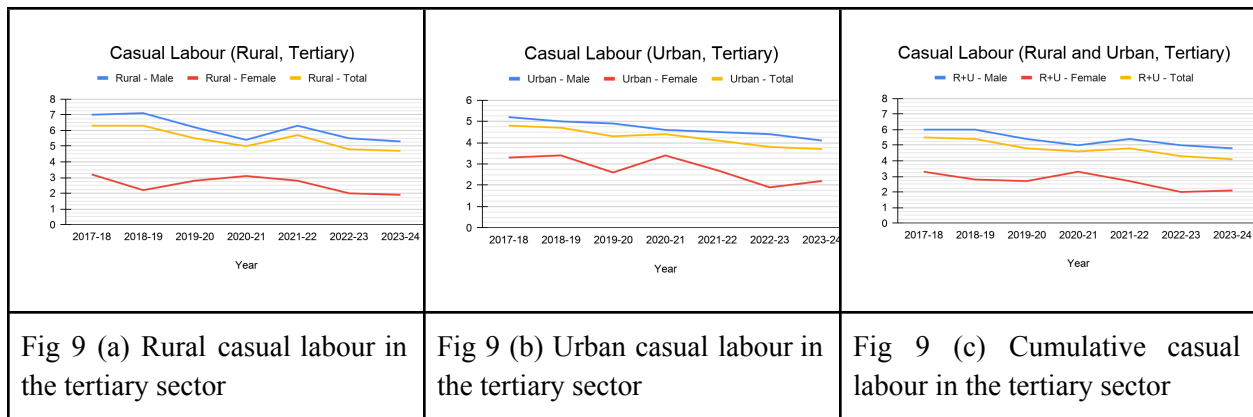
Rural salaried employment is lower than urban across both genders and shows more movement. Rural females had a share of 64.8% in 2017-18 that fell to 59.5% by 2023-24, a decline of 5.3 percentage points and one of the largest absolute falls among the groups observed over that period (figure 8 (a)). Rural males decreased only slightly from 42.7% to 41.2%, a smaller and less indicative change. The female decline corresponds to a rise in rural female self-employment, suggesting that women entering tertiary work increasingly prefer to go into self-employment instead of salaried work.

Urban areas show the highest salaried employment rates of any group, with the urban total moving from 55.7% in 2017-18 to 56.3% in 2023-24. Urban females consistently stay the most salaried groups in the entire tertiary sector (as is seen in figure 8 (b)), at 73.4% in 2017-18 and 70.1% in 2023-24, although their share has declined slightly over the period. Urban males, by contrast, stay at around 50.9% and 52.3%, below their female counterparts throughout.

Male salaried employment in the combined total stayed close to 47% throughout the period, with little movement. Female salaried employment is substantially higher (demonstrated by its higher series in figure 8 (c)), but has been declining: the combined female share fell from 70% in 2017-18 to 65.6% in 2023-24, a drop of 4.4 percentage points. Because the male and female trends roughly offset each other, the combined trend remains stable (with a coefficient of variation of only 0.018), but salaried work is becoming less common among female tertiary workers while self-employment rises.

The high female salaried share in tertiary services reflects the composition of women's formal employment in India, mainly teaching, nursing, and government administration roles, which are disproportionately held by women, carrying formal contracts and salaries. It also reflects the limited supply of formal rural service jobs for women relative to the rising demand for non-farm employment (secondary and tertiary sectors), pushing new workers into self-employed work rather than contractual wage employment. This pattern is consistent with analysis from Chand (2023), which finds that urban employment is more service-centric and regular-wage-heavy, while rural areas rely more on self-employment and informal work.

3.3.3. Trend Analysis: Casual Labour



Gap levels for the first and last year of each series are reported in Appendix A.

Source: author's calculations from PLFS 2017–18 to 2023–24 (see section 2.3).

Across all three graphs for casual employment in the tertiary sector, casual labour is the smallest employment status category; it is also the only category consistently declining across all groups throughout the period. Rural casual employment in the tertiary sector is consistently higher than urban for both genders, rural males were the highest casual employment group in the tertiary sector (shown in figure 9 (a)), at 7% in 2017-18 and 5.3% in 2023-24. Rural females fell from 3.2% in 2017-18 to 1.9% in 2023-24, approximately half of the male concentration.

In urban areas, casual employment in the tertiary sector is low but still present in both genders, as is visualised in figure 9 (b). Urban males were 5.2% in 2017-18, and 4.1% in 2023-24, while urban females decreased from 3.3% to 2.2% over the same period. The urban male and female casual percentages are relatively close compared to other sectors, suggesting that the type of casual service work available in large urban areas (such as domestic work, street vending, and transportation assistance) employs both genders at mostly comparable rates, unlike construction-driven secondary sector casual work, which is mostly male.

The combined rural and urban total fell from 5.5% in 2017-18 to 4.1% in 2023-24, with a steady downward trend (the trend line of which can be seen in figure 9 (c)). This is in contrast to the secondary sector, where casual labour has the largest share; this may be because, in services, the long-term nature of jobs require contractual labour and effort, instead of a day-by-day work.

Casual labour in the tertiary sector remains low because most service-sector activities require ongoing employment (such as for large projects), even in less formal jobs. In areas where casual service work is existent, it is primarily found around rural males who lack the education or networks required to work in the more stable and competitive service roles. The consistent decline across all groups represents a more relationship-focused tertiary sector, as mentioned by the June–September 2025 Quarterly Bulletin from PIB (2025). This is because services such as trade, transport, and personal care depend on repeat clients and trust built over time, which discourages the one-off, daily-hire arrangements that define casual work (ILO, 2016).

3.3.4. Regression Analysis: Tertiary Sector

Table 3: Time Trend Regression Results for Gender and Regional Employment Gaps in the Tertiary Sector

Gap	Hypotheses	Employment Type	Time Coefficient (B)	Std. Error	t-value	p-value (Coefficient)	R ²	F-statistic	Model p-value
Gender Gap	H5a	Self-Employed	-0.66	0.168	-3.93	0.011**	0.76	15.48	0.011**
	H5b	Wage/Salaried	0.68	0.132	5.14	0.004***	0.84	26.39	0.004** *
	H5c	Casual Labour	-0.01	0.067	-0.15	0.889	0.00	0.02	0.889

Regional Gap	H6a	Self-Employed	0.41	0.198	2.07	0.093*	0.46	4.29	0.093*
	H6b	Wage/Salaried	-0.33	0.216	-1.53	0.186	0.32	2.35	0.186
	H6c	Casual Labour	-0.08	0.067	-1.20	0.285	0.22	1.43	0.285

Note: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

Applying a simple regression model, in the tertiary sector, self-employment in services shows a narrowing gender gap over the period observed ($B = -0.66$, $p = 0.011$), but a widening regional gap at the 10% level ($B = 0.41$, $p = 0.093$), so women are increasing at a faster rate than men to converge while regional differences grow. For regular wage and salaried jobs, the gender gap is narrowing ($B = 0.68$; from -23.0 points in 2017-18 to -19.1 in 2023-24). Since women hold the larger salaried share throughout, this convergence reflects the erosion of women's advantage (their share falling from 70% to 65.6%) rather than men catching up. The regional gap does not change in any significant manner, however. Casual labour in services shows no statistically meaningful trend for either gender or region. Put together, tertiary sector employment is becoming more gender-equal in self-employment but converging in wage jobs (considered to be better quality).

1. DISCUSSION

This section compares agriculture, secondary, and tertiary sectors based on employment type and job quality. It does so by utilising two different differentiators: gender and region type.

Firstly, all three sectors showed rising self-employment, but for various reasons. For example, agriculture (indicative of India's primary sector) rose primarily due to distress-led movements from now-unstable non-farm wage work to an increased dependence on women for unpaid family work and low-wage, informal enterprise. The secondary sector's own-account work grew for different reasons, however; they can be attributed almost wholly to a growing group of small, informal, non-farm enterprises and distress or opportunity-driven expansion into more stable and well-paying construction and manufacturing jobs. Similarly, growth of self-employment in the tertiary sector has been concentrated in rural petty trade and services, where most new work is informal and family-based, while urban women are more likely to enter better-quality salaried roles in education, health, and finance.

Wage/salaried work, generally regarded as meeting the most aspects of the OECD (2024) as compared to self-employment and casual labour, is nearly absent in the agricultural sector, primarily because of how most production is organised around family farms and highly seasonal, weather-dependent tasks, so labour demand is irregular and often met by unpaid family members or short-term casual workers rather

than stable, formal jobs (Darpeix et al., 2013). Salaried regular secondary sector jobs are mainly concentrated in urban men on the other hand (approximately 44.4%, on average), because factories and construction sites cluster in cities, offering stable, formal income for those with basic technical or manual skills; since most urban men in India are only recently migrated from rural areas, they lack the more advanced education required for higher skill roles. The tertiary sector is the main source of wage/salaried work, especially among urban women (at around 74%); this, as also mentioned in work by Sundari (2020) and consistent with wider evidence on gendered job segregation, service-sector occupations may be relatively more compatible with women's educational profiles and unpaid care responsibilities, and are often constructed as more 'respectable' than manual work in agriculture or construction.

Casual labour acts as a widely available fallback option in times of economic shock, across sectors (Dasgupta & Kar, 2018). In agriculture, casual work has fallen as households move away from less reliable and sustainable daily-wage farm jobs toward self-employment or unpaid family roles. In the secondary sector, by contrast, casual labour remains dominant, especially in construction, which absorbs surplus rural men leaving agriculture while still providing higher paying work. Tertiary employment uses the least casual labour, and is steadily reducing it further, since many service activities rely on longer-term work rather than day to day hiring, as is seen in the secondary and primary sectors.

The gender and rural-urban patterns, although treated separately by the PLFS data analysed, must be considered as cross-dependent. In particular, women have been upgrading mainly within services, but they still hold a continued presence in low-paid informal roles in agriculture and secondary sectors; there has also been stronger rural female self-employment due to greater movement into unpaid family and farm labour work, as well as an increased small trade and services in rural economies. Clearly, rural trends remain tightly bound to primary-sector instability and informal absorption, while urban paths move into more service-centric, regular-wage opportunities; therefore, structural change in India is uneven and layered across sectors, regions, and genders in India.

2. CONCLUSION

This research report has examined how employment in India is distributed across the agriculture, secondary, and tertiary sectors in India, once separated by gender, employment status, and regional area. The aim of this study was to understand how these sectoral trends connected to the economic progress and development of India, as well as analysing where and why gaps in the labour market were found.

The study used India's Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data from 2017-18 to 2023-24, classifying employment into the primary, secondary, and tertiary group (similar to NIC groupings). For each sector and employment status, gender gaps and regional gaps were found and collected; these were then visualised and modelled using linear regressions, to observe whether each gap was significant, widening, or narrowing. Given the short seven-year window of PLFS data available, the analysis provided is descriptive of the trends instead of causal.

Across all three sectors, self-employment rose steadily, with female self-employment consistently growing faster than male, narrowing gender gaps in agriculture, the secondary sector, and tertiary services. Wage and salaried work showed the opposite trend in agriculture and services, where gender gaps narrowed (as women's larger share softened rather than through male gains). Casual labour decreased in agriculture, as well as in the tertiary sector, but remained the most popular employment status in the secondary sector; this is mostly driven by construction. Regional rural-urban gaps were insignificant in most cases, which indicates that the majority of structural change has occurred across genders instead of areas. Rural employment stayed mostly agricultural, while urban employment remained more tertiary sector centric.

Labour market change in India over 2017-2024 has been mostly uneven across sector, region, and gender, instead of a general shift towards higher quality employment. The increase in female self-employment (especially in rural agriculture) is likely largely caused by distress rather than independence, with women moving into unpaid family work and informal enterprise as non-farm wage opportunities decreased. Furthermore, the widening gender gap in casual work signal to women being pushed out of unstable jobs, aside from those now working in teaching, nursing, and administrative roles. Rural trends are mostly connected to those of the primary sector (agricultural) while urban patterns have more wage/salaried opportunities.

3. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Female self-employment in agriculture is rising but is likely mostly caused by distress rather than by better choices or openings; many women are forced into unpaid or low-wage family work rather than joining more productive businesses or salaried work. This must be changed through policy decisions. First, public employment and welfare programmes should focus on women and non-farm jobs, with the provision of on-site childcare so that female labour participation is not only stuck in low-productivity family farms. Second, both state and central governments must invest in basic care and transport infrastructure in rural and semi-urban areas, such as cheaper childcare and more accessible and predictable transit, because these would allow women to enter better quality and higher paying secondary and tertiary jobs (mainly found in urban areas). Third, the enforcement of labour laws in the secondary sector, especially in construction and small manufacturing, has to increase, with standard written contracts and social security registration ensured to be available to all workers. Over time, these policies would slowly help workers in casual secondary jobs move into more stable and rewarding wage work, while also narrowing the gender gap in the most unstable parts of the labour market.

4. LIMITATIONS

This study's success is quite limited by both the scope of PLFS data, as well as by the simplicity of the chosen analysis methods. Firstly, NIC industries are grouped only into broad, unspecific primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors, so important differences in-between sectors are sometimes not observable.

The study also does not test the relationship between composition of employment and economic growth directly; that relationship is discussed using the existing literature instead of estimated. For example, it is difficult to differentiate between high- and low-productivity services. In addition, the analysis uses simple linear time-trend regression models over a short window of time (from 2017 to 2024), as the PLFS was first launched in April 2017; this means that these models describe rough trends over time, but do not consider the effects of significant international, education, and policy changes. There also exists no clear and consistent framework for measuring job quality, so as the PLFS tables used do not provide consistent wage or earnings distributions for all statuses, especially for self-employed and casual labour, ranking which jobs are ‘good’ or ‘bad’ is imprecise. A fuller study, in comparison, would use richer, more detailed econometric models and data.

India’s recent employment trends are indicative of increasing labour participation without development in job quality. Turning this into more uniformly beneficial structural change will depend on converting this increased participation into better quality jobs through policy and stronger labour protections.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

All series are drawn from the PLFS Annual Reports 2017-18 to 2023-24 (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation), percentage distribution of workers in usual status (ps+ss) by status in employment and industry of work. Shares are in percentage points. Gender gap = male – female share; regional gap = rural – urban share. The Gender Gap and Regional Gap columns are the series derived in Tables 1–3.

A.1 Agriculture — Self-employed

Year	Rural - Male	Rural - Female	Rural - Total	Urban - Male	Urban - Female	Urban - Total	R+U - Male	R+U - Female	R+U - Total	Gender Gap	Regional Gap	Time
2017-18	77.2	65	73.5	71	53.2	65.6	77	64.5	73.2	12.5	7.9	1
2018-19	77.2	67.8	74.2	76	63.7	72.4	77.2	67.7	74.1	9.5	1.8	2
2019-20	76.6	70.7	74.4	74.1	57.7	68.6	76.5	70.3	74.2	6.2	5.8	3
2020-21	78.3	73.2	76.3	75.6	65.5	71.9	78.2	72.9	76.1	5.3	4.4	4
2021-22	80.1	75.9	78.4	75.6	68.8	73	80	75.6	78.2	4.4	5.4	5
2022-23	82.8	78.2	80.7	77.3	66.3	72.5	82.6	77.8	80.5	4.8	8.2	6
2023-24	83.6	80.9	82.3	77.9	71.7	74.9	83.4	80.6	82	2.8	7.4	7

A.2 Agriculture — Regular wage/salaried

Year	Rural - Male	Rural - Female	Rural - Total	Urban - Male	Urban - Female	Urban - Total	R+U - Male	R+U - Female	R+U - Total	Gender Gap	Regional Gap	Time
2017-18	1	1.2	1.1	5.3	2.3	4.4	1.2	1.3	1.2	-0.1	-3.3	1
2018-19	1.1	1.1	1.1	5.4	3.3	4.8	1.2	1.2	1.2	0	-3.7	2
2019-20	1.7	1.7	1.7	5.5	2	4.3	1.8	1.7	1.8	0.1	-2.6	3
2020-21	1.4	1.1	1.3	5	0.7	3.4	1.6	1.1	1.4	0.5	-2.1	4
2021-22	0.9	0.6	0.8	6.1	1.8	4.5	1.1	0.6	0.9	0.5	-3.7	5
2022-23	1.1	0.5	0.8	5.5	3.3	4.5	1.2	0.6	1	0.6	-3.7	6
2023-24	1	0.7	0.9	4.4	1.7	3.1	1.2	0.7	0.9	0.5	-2.2	7

A.3 Agriculture — Casual labour

Year	Rural - Male	Rural - Female	Rural - Total	Urban - Male	Urban - Female	Urban - Total	R+U - Male	R+U - Female	R+U - Total	Gender Gap	Regional Gap	Time
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Sectoral Employment Dynamics in India: A Gender- and Region-Wise Analysis Across the Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sectors (2017-18 to 2023-24)

2017-18	21.7	33.8	25.4	23.6	44.6	30	21.8	34.2	25.5	-12.4	-4.6	1
2018-19	21.7	31.1	24.7	18.6	33	22.8	21.6	31.1	24.7	-9.5	1.9	2
2019-20	21.7	27.6	23.9	20.4	40.3	27.1	21.7	28	24	-6.3	-3.2	3
2020-21	20.3	25.7	22.4	19.4	33.8	24.7	20.2	26	22.5	-5.8	-2.3	4
2021-22	19	23.5	20.8	18.3	29.4	22.5	18.9	23.8	20.9	-4.9	-1.7	5
2022-23	16.1	21.3	18.5	17.2	30.4	23	16.2	21.6	18.5	-5.4	-4.5	6
2023-24	15.4	18.4	16.8	17.7	26.6	22	15.4	18.7	17.1	-3.3	-5.2	7

A.4 Secondary sector — Self-employed

Year	Rural - Male	Rural - Female	Rural - Total	Urban - Male	Urban - Female	Urban - Total	R+U - Male	R+U - Female	R+U - Total	Gender Gap	Regional Gap	Time
2017-18	18.8	43.5	22.8	26.9	52.2	31.4	22	47.2	26.2	-25.2	-8.6	1
2018-19	18.1	45.6	23.2	26.6	53.8	31.4	21.5	48.8	26.5	-27.3	-8.2	2
2019-20	19.9	43	24.4	24.6	48.9	29.3	21.7	45.3	26.4	-23.6	-4.9	3
2020-21	21.9	42.9	26.3	25	55.5	31	23.1	47.3	28	-24.2	-4.7	4
2021-22	19.5	47.2	25	26.8	56	32.4	22.1	50.3	27.7	-28.2	-7.4	5
2022-23	19.6	54.6	26.3	24.8	60.5	32	21.3	56.5	28.1	-35.2	-5.7	6
2023-24	19.6	57.3	28.1	26.4	60.7	34	22	58.5	30.2	-36.5	-5.9	7

A.5 Secondary sector — Regular wage/salaried

Year	Rural - Male	Rural - Female	Rural - Total	Urban - Male	Urban - Female	Urban - Total	R+U - Male	R+U - Female	R+U - Total	Gender Gap	Regional Gap	Time
2017-18	17.4	8.2	15.9	43.2	24.3	39.9	27.7	15	25.6	12.7	-24	1
2018-19	17.9	9	16.3	44.4	25.4	41	28.5	15.4	26.1	13.1	-24.7	2
2019-20	17.4	9.1	15.8	45.8	29.2	42.5	28.7	17	26.4	11.7	-26.7	3
2020-21	17.1	8.4	15.3	43	23.7	39.2	26.6	13.8	24	12.8	-23.9	4
2021-22	19	8.2	16.8	43.8	25	40.2	27.9	14.1	25.2	13.8	-23.4	5
2022-23	17.6	8.8	16	46.2	24.6	41.9	26.7	14	24.2	12.7	-25.9	6
2023-24	20.2	8.2	17.5	44.1	25.9	40.1	28.6	14.3	25.4	14.3	-22.6	7

A.6 Secondary sector — Casual labour

Year	Rural - Male	Rural - Female	Rural - Total	Urban - Male	Urban - Female	Urban - Total	R+U - Male	R+U - Female	R+U - Total	Gender Gap	Regional Gap	Time
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Sectoral Employment Dynamics in India: A Gender- and Region-Wise Analysis Across the Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sectors (2017-18 to 2023-24)

2017-18	63.8	48.3	61.3	29.9	23.5	28.8	50.3	37.7	48.2	12.6	32.5	1
2018-19	64	45.3	60.5	29	20.8	27.6	50	35.8	47.4	14.2	32.9	2
2019-20	62.7	47.9	59.8	29.6	21.9	28.2	49.6	37.7	47.2	11.9	31.6	3
2020-21	61	48.7	58.4	32	20.8	29.8	50.3	38.9	48	11.4	28.6	4
2021-22	61.5	44.6	58.2	29.4	19	27.4	50	35.6	47.1	14.4	30.8	5
2022-23	62.8	36.6	57.7	29	14.9	26.1	52	29.5	47.7	22.5	31.6	6
2023-24	60.2	34.5	54.4	29.5	13.4	25.9	49.4	27.2	44.4	22.2	28.5	7

A.7 Tertiary sector — Self-employed

Year	Rural - Male	Rural - Female	Rural - Total	Urban - Male	Urban - Female	Urban - Total	R+U - Male	R+U - Female	R+U - Total	Gender Gap	Regional Gap	Time
2017-18	50.4	32	47.4	43.9	23.3	39.5	46.9	26.7	43.1	20.2	7.9	1
2018-19	52.1	32.8	48.8	42.7	21.9	38.2	47.1	26.3	43	20.8	10.6	2
2019-20	52.8	34.1	49.4	43.7	25.4	39.4	47.8	28.6	43.7	19.2	10	3
2020-21	55.4	34.2	51.2	45.2	26.1	40.7	50	29.5	45.6	20.5	10.5	4
2021-22	54	36.4	50.8	44.1	26	39.8	49.1	30.3	45.2	18.8	11	5
2022-23	55.6	40.6	52.5	44.8	26.3	40.3	50.2	32.7	46.3	17.5	12.2	6
2023-24	53.5	38.6	50.3	44.3	27.7	40	48.7	32.3	44.9	16.4	10.3	7

A.8 Tertiary sector — Regular wage/salaried

Year	Rural - Male	Rural - Female	Rural - Total	Urban - Male	Urban - Female	Urban - Total	R+U - Male	R+U - Female	R+U - Total	Gender Gap	Regional Gap	Time
2017-18	42.7	64.8	46.3	50.9	73.4	55.7	47	70	51.4	-23	-9.4	1
2018-19	40.7	65	44.9	52.3	74.7	57.1	46.9	70.9	51.6	-24	-12.2	2
2019-20	41	63.1	45.1	51.4	72	56.3	46.8	68.7	51.5	-21.9	-11.2	3
2020-21	39.2	62.7	43.8	50.2	70.5	54.9	45	67.2	49.8	-22.2	-11.1	4
2021-22	39.7	60.8	43.5	51.4	71.3	56.1	45.5	67	50	-21.5	-12.6	5
2022-23	38.9	57.4	42.7	50.8	71.8	55.9	44.8	65.3	49.4	-20.5	-13.2	6
2023-24	41.2	59.5	45	51.6	70.1	56.3	46.5	65.6	51	-19.1	-11.3	7

A.9 Tertiary sector — Casual labour

Year	Rural - Male	Rural - Female	Rural - Total	Urban - Male	Urban - Female	Urban - Total	R+U - Male	R+U - Female	R+U - Total	Gender Gap	Regional Gap	Time
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Sectoral Employment Dynamics in India: A Gender- and Region-Wise Analysis Across the Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sectors (2017-18 to 2023-24)

2017-18	7	3.2	6.3	5.2	3.3	4.8	6	3.3	5.5	2.7	1.5	1
2018-19	7.1	2.2	6.3	5	3.4	4.7	6	2.8	5.4	3.2	1.6	2
2019-20	6.2	2.8	5.5	4.9	2.6	4.3	5.4	2.7	4.8	2.7	1.2	3
2020-21	5.4	3.1	5	4.6	3.4	4.4	5	3.3	4.6	1.7	0.6	4
2021-22	6.3	2.8	5.7	4.5	2.7	4.1	5.4	2.7	4.8	2.7	1.6	5
2022-23	5.5	2	4.8	4.4	1.9	3.8	5	2	4.3	3	1	6
2023-24	5.3	1.9	4.7	4.1	2.2	3.7	4.8	2.1	4.1	2.7	1	7