

FRAGMENTATION AND INFORMALISATION IN INDIAN LABOUR MARKET: ANALYSIS USING PLFS DATA 2017 TO 2020

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ABSTRACT

Indian labour market is highly segmented in terms of gender, place of work, status of work and so on. Labour force participation and workforce participation are significantly low in India reflecting high dependency ratio. Surprisingly, female participation is alarmingly low in the Indian labour force. The disparity in earnings between regular wage or salaried employee and casual/self-employed is more prominent among women as compared to men. There is also a wide gap between earnings of male and female workers, in general. The share of employment in informal sector is increasing in India—a large part of the Indian workforce consists of self-employed and casual workers. Majority of the labour laws are designed to ensure employment benefits and social security of the workers engaged as regular wage and salaried workers in formal sector only. But a large part of the self-employed workers, casual workers as well as regular wage or salaried employees are hired informally in formal sector, who along with employees in informal sector remain outside of these labour laws. At the same time, these self-employed and casual workers are earning significantly lower as compared to the workers employed as regular workers in formal sector, thereby making them more

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vulnerable in an unusual pandemic-like situation. India needs to implement a unified labour code applicable to all workers irrespective of gender, place of work, status of work or size of the enterprise or at least reduce complexities in the labour laws to make them more inclusive so as to protect all workers equally from any adverse situation.

Key words: *Labour Market, Fragmentation, Informal, PLFS, India*

1. Introduction

Indian labour market is highly segmented where the divisions are distinguished by different characteristics. According to ILO¹, labour market segmentation arises from particularities of labour market institutions, like governing arrangements or lack of enforcement or type of workers. In India segmentation is quite prominent in the labour market; it is highly partitioned in terms of gender, place of work, status of work as well as socio-economic class. Historically, in India there is a clear preference of small enterprises especially for the production of wide array of consumer goods. It was expected that these enterprises will exploit possibilities of generating employment and rural industrialisation (Mehrotra, 2019). At the same time, medium and large enterprises are monitored and kept under more control in India. In one side, hardly any labour laws are applicable to small enterprises whereas in the other side, number of such laws to ensure quality of jobs increases with the size of the enterprises (ibid.). Majority of the labour- and industry-related laws are applicable to the workplaces with size above a threshold level in terms of employment. Factories in the manufacturing sector in India are defined on the basis of use of power and employment size. For example, factories registered under sections 2m(i) and 2m(ii) of the Factories Act, 1948 refer to factories with number of workers 10 or above, using power; and those with number of workers 20 or above, without using power. The definition, albeit some changes in recent years, remains same. The factory sector is also called formal or registered manufacturing sector, as registration is mandatory for manufacturing units which come under the class of factories. Remaining units fall into the category of informal or unregistered sector. These units in informal or unregistered sector remain outside of the government's tax and other regulations in most of the time. Therefore, there are clear disparity between the workers engaged in registered sector and those who are involved in unregistered or informal sector. Similarly, in services sector, formal sector consists of service providers which are registered under the Indian Company Act and remaining providers fall into the category of informal or unincorporated service providers. Formal sector comprises government sector,

1 <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/employment-security/labour-market-segmentation/lang-en/index.htm>

private corporate services sector, factory manufacturing sector, and educational (including medical and technical education) institutions receiving government (central or state) aid. Size-based regulations are applicable for enterprises above a threshold size of employment and in general these regulations increase and become stricter as the size of employment grows (Nagraj, 2018). These size-based regulations not only create disparity among workers in formal sector and those who are in informal sector but also deter enterprises from growing organically (Kruger, 2013; Nagraj, 2018). Formal or registered enterprises are gaining flexibility through casualisation of workforce. Labour laws ensuring quality of jobs are often found to be limited to 'on paper status' and the medium and large enterprises resort to hiring casual workers instead of regular wage or salaried employees. Most of the labour laws (including ILO's conventions) are designed to protect workers in formal or registered sector. In spite of that, casualisation and informalisation of the formal sector workforce are growing, thus depriving a large part of workers who are fortunate to get absorbed in formal sector, of most of the employment benefits and social security coverage.

The ongoing pandemic has exposed several cracks in the economic structure around the globe. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is not limited to mortality and morbidity due to infection. The pandemic has reduced economic activities across the world, slowed down the pace of growth, and interrupted production. Global Economic Prospects report (2022) predicts that world economy is about to enter a pronounced recession. Recovery of developing economies could be decelerated because of this slowdown of world economy along with rise of inflation, debt, income inequality and fresh upsurge of the ongoing pandemic. Indian economy was in a downward spiral when the pandemic hit the economy, with 2.8% growth in the fourth quarter of 2019-20. The GDP growth declined by 23.8% and 6.6% in the first two quarters of 2020-21. Despite the recovery of growth in the last two quarters of 2020-21, Indian economy witnessed a negative annual growth of GDP (-6.6%) in 2020-21. Though the economy witnessed a strong rebound in the first quarter, with a growth of GDP by 20.3%; the economy again slowed down in the second (8.5%) and third quarters (5.4%) of 2021-22. A business impact survey (FICCI-Dhruva, 2020) on 380 companies also emphasizes that pandemic has brought up uncertainty about the future for businesses, and enterprises are considering cost optimization through rationalization of manpower and salary, appraisals deferral, reduction in discretionary expenses, freezing of recruitments etc. We have already seen migrant labourers' plight to reach home by foot, travelling across hundreds of kilometres when some of them died even before reaching home. Anxiety level was mounting among the employees; formal workers were facing pay-cuts as well as delay in appraisals, whereas, informal workers fear loss of job. India needs a suitable employment policy to protect its labour market from any crisis situation like the -19 pandemic to maintain steadiness in domestic demand thereby creating macroeconomic stability.

With a fragmented labour market, it is of utmost importance to understand the structure of labour market, and to comprehend the loopholes in the policies. The labour market participation is different across gender and age. A major part of the workforce is self-employed and casual labourers. Even within regular wage employees, there exist informal labourers which makes the mapping more complicated. The labour market is also segmented through inequality in wage income. The objective of this paper is to examine the fragmentation in the Indian labour market, to highlight the glaring disparity among workers while formulating policy to protect Indian labour force from sudden shocks.

2. Database and Methodology

The major objective of this paper is to see the current situation of Indian labour market and disparities among workers across gender, sector and status of work. There is a vast body of literature that examine the disparity among workers from different socio-economic backgrounds. This paper keeps this (i.e., socio-economic background of workers) outside the domain of its analysis. This study uses data from Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), conducted by National Statistical Office (NSO) under Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), Government of India for the period 2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20. PLFS provides nationally representable annual data on Indian employment scenario. This annual survey is designed to replace the previous quinquennial Employment and Unemployment Survey (EUS). Also, there are changes in the sampling strategy and estimation in PLFS from EUS. Unlike EUS, for urban sector, PLFS is done on a rotational panel scheme. However, only for rural sector a cross-sectional survey is conducted. In the new survey strategy under PLFS, households under the rural frame are surveyed only once in the first quarter of the survey, whereas, in urban frame households are revisited in three consecutive quarters following the first visit in the first quarter. Thus, for urban areas all four quarters (First visit in quarter 1 and revisit of same households in quarter 2,3 and 4) have been considered to estimate statistics unlike its rural counterparts.

The purpose of this paper is to carry out an analysis of the situation of Indian labour force. This study uses labour force participation rate (LFPR), workforce participation rate (WPR), unemployment rate (UR) across sectors and genders following the definition given in the Annual Reports of PLFS (2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20). It is important to note that informal sector is defined as a sector which comprises all proprietary and partnership enterprises (as defined in the Annual Report of PLFS, 2017-18 to 2019-20).

This study also estimates the wage disparity among workers in India in Rural and Urban areas. Figures are estimated from unit level PLFS data for

2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20.² This study applies survey sampling weights to compute survey-design-based estimates. These year-wise survey-design-based estimates for employment/unemployment are adjusted with projected population to calculate population level estimates. Gender and sector-wise (rural and urban) projected population of the country for these three periods are taken from the Report of the Technical Group on population projection (based on Census 2011), published by the National Commission on Population, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India in November 2019.

3. Result Analysis

The estimated number of workers in India is 514 million as per PLFS, 2019-20. Despite the sudden occurrence of -19 pandemic, there is a 9% growth in number of workers during 2018-19 to 2019-20 (Table 1). Moreover, the number of unemployed persons in the labour force declines to 26 million during 2019-20 as compared to 29 million in 2017-18 and 30 million in 2018-19. This can be attributed to several reasons: first, the vast demographic dividend that India currently has, might act as a positive force in the growth in size of labour force. Second, PLFS 2019-20 captures only the early phase of the pandemic; the data from the subsequent rounds of PLFS can provide a clearer picture of the effect of the pandemic on Indian labour market. Third, the data are collected and estimated on the basis of the definition of labour force in the usual status (ps+ss). According to the definition used in PLFS data, the estimate of the labour force in the usual status (ps+ss) includes (a) the persons who either worked or were available for work for a relatively longer part of the 365 days³ preceding the date of survey and also (b) those persons from among the remaining population who had worked at least for 30 days during the reference period of 365 days preceding the date of survey. The definition of labour force is quite wide and thus the temporary discontinuation of work is unlikely to be captured under this definition.

Indian economy is characterized by low worker-population ratio, which stands only at 38.2% according to usual status (ps+ss) at all-India level (Figure 1). This indicates that the volume of economically dependent population is still quite huge in India. Majority of the workers are sole bread-earners for their families. However, labour force participation rate (LFPR) increased from 36.9% in 2017-18 and 37.5% in 2018-19 to 40.1% in 2019-20, according to usual status (ps+ss). Workforce participation rate (WPR) according to usual status (ps+ss) also increased from 34.7% and 35.3% in 2017-18 and 2018-19 to 38.2% in 2019-20.

2 PLFS 2019-20, PLFS is the latest nationally representable data on the Indian employment scenario during the pre-pandemic period.

3 https://www.mospi.gov.in/documents/213904/301563/Annual_Report_PLFS_2019_20m1627036454797.pdf/18afb74a-3980-ab83-0431-1e84321f75af

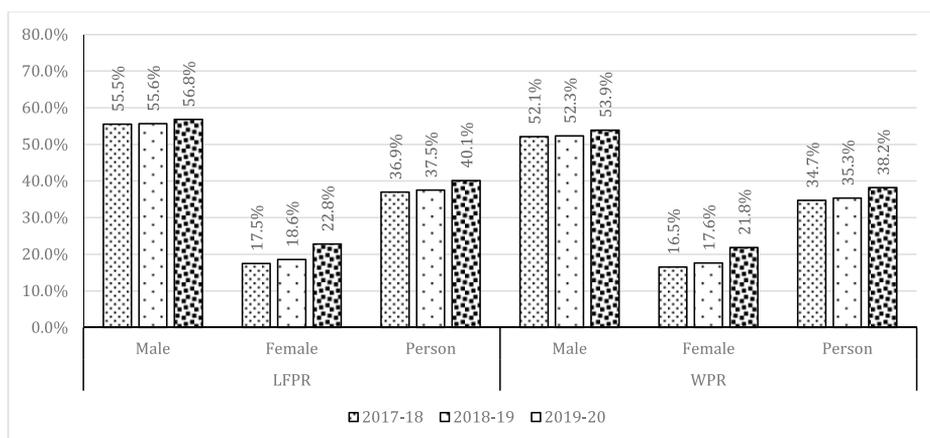
Table 1: Estimated number of Workers (Usual status) in India (figures are in Million)

	Male	Female	Person
2017-18			
Worker	353	106	457
Unemployed	23	6	30
Not in Labour force	301	529	832
2018-19			
Worker	358	114	471
Unemployed	23	6	29
Not in Labour force	304	528	833
2019-20			
Worker	373	143	514
Unemployed	20	6	26
Not in Labour force	299	506	807

Note: Figures are adjusted with projected population by sex (rural and urban separately) as on 1st March, 2018, 2019 and 2020

Source: PLFS, 2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20

Figure 1: Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR)

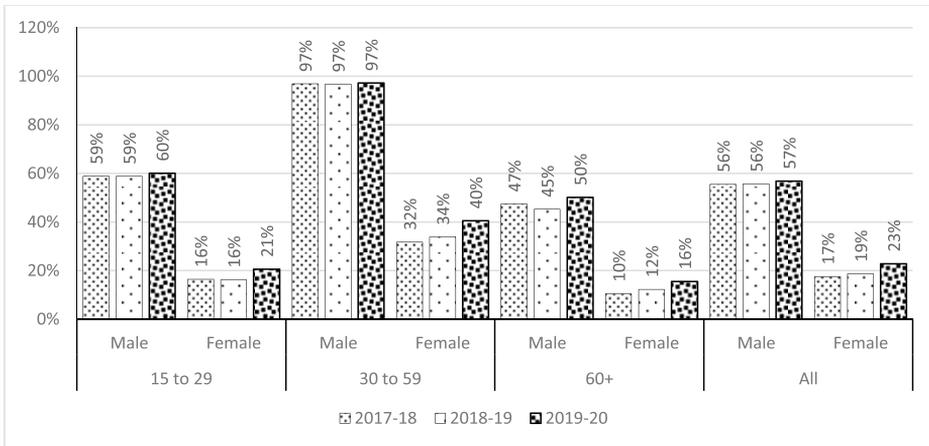


Source: PLFS, 2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20

Women's share in labour force and workforce is remarkably low in India -- female workers constitute less than 30% of the total workforce and labour force in India. In Indian workforce there are 39 female workers per hundred male workers (2019-20). The share of female in the total workforce increased from 23% in 2017-18 and 24% in 2018-19 to 28% in 2019-20. Figure 1 also shows that LFPR as well as WPR are significantly low among female population as compared to their male counterparts. In 2019-20, 57% of male population are

in labour force and 54% are in workforce in India. On the contrary, only 23% and 22% of Indian females are in the labour force and workforce respectively. However, there is a visible improvement in LFPR and WPR of women in 2019-20 as compared to previous two years. When there is only one percentage point increase in LFPR and WPR for men, for women, LFPR and WPR have raised by 6percentage points during 2017-18 to 2019-20.

Figure 2: Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) by age and gender (among age 15+)



Source: PLFS, 2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20

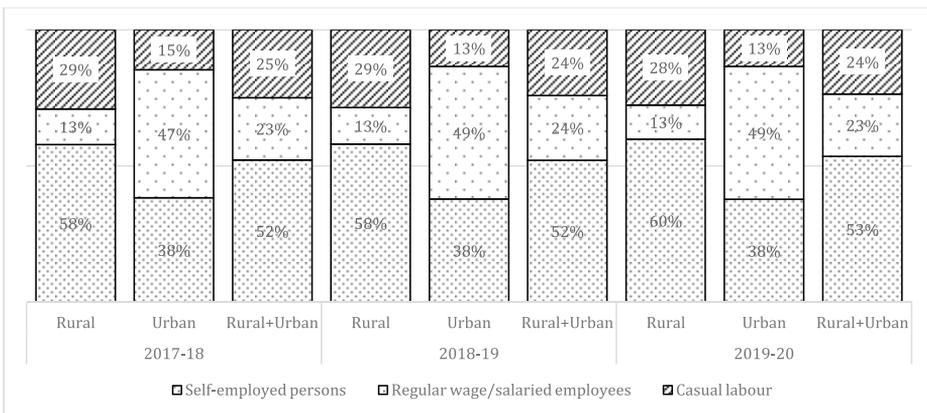
Further analysis of LFPR by age and gender for population group with age 15 and above (Figure 2) shows that for all the age groups, female LFPR is significantly less than that of male. In early age group (age 15-29) less than one-fourth of the females are in the labour force (either worker or aspire to work) whereas, more than half of the male population in the same age bracket are in the labour force. LFPR rises for women in the middle-age group, yet for male population in this age-group LFPR is even higher. The gap between male and female in terms of LFPR is highest in mid-age; it is less than 50% for female population in the age bracket 30 to 59, whereas, it is more than 95% for male population in the same age bracket in all the three years. Even in the older age (60+) LFPR of male population is higher than that of female population in India. In the second decade of 21st century, when women across the country is equally participating in the economic activities along with men, the obvious question that crops out is that, why Indian women are confining themselves only in household activities. India might need more gender-neutral employment policy as well as workplace.

Composition of Indian workforce in terms of status of worker shows that, significant portion of workers in India is either self-employed or casual workers (Figure 3). Among the rural workers, 60% are self-employed, 13% are regular

salaries or wage employees, while 28% are casual workers in 2019-20. In urban sector, 38% are self-employed, 49% are regular salaried or wage employees and 13% are casual workers. There is an increase in the share of self-employed in rural areas in 2019-20 as compared to previous two years. Similarly in urban areas, share of salaried or wage employees increased from 47% in 2017-18 to 49% in 2018-19 and 2019-20 (Figure 3). Figure 3 also shows that roughly one-fourth of Indian workers are engaged in the production activities as casual workers. Any odd economic situation (like outbreak of pandemic etc.) might cost casual workers losing their jobs and also they are hardly provided with any social security or employment benefits unlike other developed countries.

Agriculture and allied activities are largely informal in nature. 77% of workers in rural sector and 64% of workers in urban sector engaged in AGE⁴ and non-agricultural sector are in informal sector. Worker absorption in informal sector is increasing in India—share of informal sector in total employment increased at 69% in 2017-18 to 71% in 2019-20 (Figure 4). Table 2 depicts the condition of employment of this AGE⁴ and non-agricultural sector as reflected in different rounds of PLFS data. Result shows that even the section of workers who are blessed to have regular jobs in India, are also barely under any safety net. In AGE⁴ and non-agricultural sector, 68% of regular wage/ salaried employees do not have any written contract in rural sector, and in urban sector, the share is 67%. Moreover, 54% of regular wage/salaried employees are not eligible for any paid leave in rural areas and it is same for 51% of regular wage/salaried employees in urban sector. 59% of rural and 51% of urban regular wage/salaried employees do not receive any social security as per 2019-20 data (Table 2).

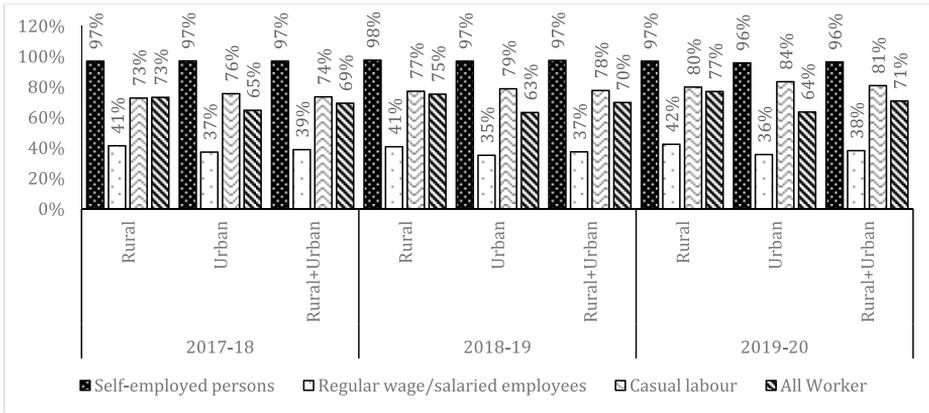
Figure 3: Composition of Indian workers by status



Source: PLFS, 2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20

4 Agricultural sector Excluding Growing of Crops, plant propagation, combined production of crops and animals without a specialized production of crops or animals

Figure 4: Share of informal sector in workforce engaged in AGEGC and Non-Agricultural Sector in Informal Sector



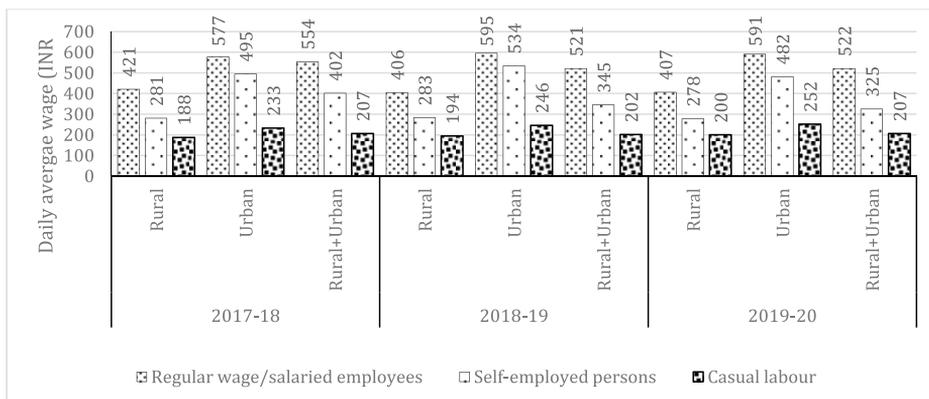
Source: PLFS, 2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20

Table 2: Status of employment condition in AGEGC and non-agricultural sector

Conditions	2017-18			2018-19			2019-20		
	Rural	Urban	All	Rural	Urban	All	Rural	Urban	All
With no written job contract	70%	73%	72%	68%	71%	70%	68%	67%	67%
Not eligible for paid leave	56%	53%	54%	57%	52%	54%	54%	51%	52%
Not eligible for any social security benefit	53%	48%	50%	56%	50%	53%	59%	51%	54%

Source: PLFS, 2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20

It is clear from Table 2 that there is not much improvement in the condition of workers in the last three years, and this true even for those who are blessed to have regular jobs in India. The labour market is fragmented in terms of wage disparity. Casual labourers are not only deprived of social security measures but also face wage discrimination. Figure 5 highlights the wage disparity across workers by status of work and place of work. It shows regular wage and salaried employees are earning significantly higher as compared to self-employed persons, both in rural and urban areas. Per-day earnings of casual workers are almost or less than half of the daily average earnings of regular and salaried employees in rural and urban areas. Result shows that average per-day income of casual workers is lower than that of self-employed persons as well as regular wage and salaried employees in India. Figure 5 also shows that average daily income in rural India is lower than that of urban India for casual workers, self-employed persons as well as regular wage and salaried employees.

Figure 5: Realaverage daily wage (2017-18 prices) by employment status

Note: Wages are normalised using CPI All India General Index (2012 base) for rural, urban and combined.

Source: PLFS, 2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20

Table 3: Realmonthly average wage/salary income by gender and employment status

	2017-18			2018-19			2019-20		
	Rural	Urban	All	Rural	Urban	All	Rural	Urban	All
1. Regular wage/ salaried employees									
Male	13541	18106	17394	13155	18696	16496	13053	18742	16560
Female	8933	14653	13893	8484	15064	12626	9345	14677	12801
All	12641	17324	16617	12172	17856	15634	12198	17721	15648
2. Self-employed persons									
Male	8945	16161	12954	9161	17612	11217	9045	15941	10626
Female	4107	6863	5850	4106	6848	4854	4400	6764	4988
All	8424	14837	12050	8505	16022	10361	8350	14448	9765
3. Casual workers									
Male	1455	1744	1586	1502	1834	1557	1569	1880	1613
Female	884	1007	922	912	1118	930	972	1198	986
All	1315	1633	1450	1360	1725	1416	1400	1763	1446

Note: Wages are normalised using CPI All India General Index (2012 base) for rural, urban and combined

Source: PLFS, 2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20

The wage gap is very much prominent across genders. Female workers, on an average, are found to be paid less than male workers if we analyse real monthly earnings of workers by gender and status of work (Table 3). On an average, female regular wage and salaried workers are earning 77% (72% in Rural and 78% in Urban) of their male counterparts. Female self-employed workers are earning on an average 47% (48% in Rural and 42% in Urban) of their male counterparts in the Indian workforce. Similarly, monthly wage of a

female casual worker is on an average 61% (62% in Rural and 64% in Urban) of a male casual worker. It also shows that not being the part of regular wage-salaried worker segment in India is a more expensive affair for female workers than male. Monthly earnings of self-employed males are roughly 64% of the monthly wage or salaries of regular male workers. On the contrary, monthly earnings of self-employed female workers is only 39% of their counterparts in Indian workforce engaged as regular wage and salaried employees. Similarly, male casual workers' per month wage is 42% of male regular wage and salaried employees. Whereas, female casual workers' monthly income is 33% of the monthly income of female regular wage and salaried employees.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The -19 pandemic has disrupted the livelihood of Indian citizens and a major challenge ahead to the government is to revive the economy. This article highlights that Indian labour market is highly fragmented, across gender, place of work, status of work, access to social security etc. There is a wide gap in wage across different segments of labour force. Majority of the workers in India are sole bread earners of their households, so, the welfare of the household is highly dependent on their earnings. Labour force participation and workforce participation is significantly low in India reflecting high dependency ratio. Surprisingly, female participation is alarmingly low in Indian labour force. Even in 21st century Indian women have not been participating in economic activities and they keep confining themselves into unpaid household work. This article also shows that in all age brackets women LFPRs are significantly lower than their male counterparts. It clearly suggests that Indian labour market or workplaces are not gender-neutral. World Bank study shows that female LFPR in India is even lower than Bangladesh, Nepal or Sri Lanka.⁵ According to ILO study, complex socio-economic and cultural factors interact with each other in the decision and choice of a woman joining labour force. Global evidence suggests that the determining factors can be educational attainment, fertility rates and age of marriage, urbanization, economic growth or cyclical effects.⁶ In Indian context, the issues suggested in literature include preference of flexibility and proximity of work due to socially determined role of women in household, travel time in urban areas (Chatterjee & Sircar, 2021), rising household incomes, sectoral structure of employment (Klasen & Pieters, 2015). This article finds that there is a glaring wage gap between men and women, which can be a plausible explanation behind the low workforce participation among women in India. Female regular wage and salaried employees, self-employed and casual workers earn only 77%, 47% and 61% of the earnings of their male counterparts in the workforce. However, further research is required to explore the curious case of low labour force participation among women in India.

5 <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/559511491319990632/pdf/WPS8024.pdf>

6 https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-new_delhi/documents/genericdocument/wcms_342357.pdf

In India, there is a huge gap in wage across regular wage/salary earning workers and casual workers. Global evidence shows that there is a wage differential among the temporary and permanent workers (Lass & Wooden, 2019 for Australia, Elia, 2010 for Italy). In India also, casual workers, on an average, earn less than the regular wage employees. The factors can be educational attainment or skill level, but to establish this, further research on this area is needed. Male self-employed and casual workers earn 64% and 42% of wage or salaries of regular male workers in India. On the contrary, female self-employed and casual workers earn only 39% and 33% of wage or salaries of regular female workers in India.

Though majority of the Indian labour laws are designed to ensure employment benefits and social security of the workers, these are mostly applicable to workers engaged as regular wage and salaried workers in formal sector only. Workers engaged in informal sector as well as self-employed and casual workers mostly remain outside of the shield of these labour laws. A large part of the Indian workforce consists of self-employed workers (53%) and casual workers (24%). Moreover, the share of employment in informal sector is increasing in India. Even majority of the regular wage or salaried employees in AEGEC non-agricultural sector neither have any written contract (67%), nor they are eligible for paid-leave (52%), nor for any social security benefits (54%). Indian labour market is not only witnessing expansion of informal sector in terms of creation of jobs or absorption of labour force but also informalisation and casualisation of workforce engaged in formal sector as regular wage or salaried employees. This large part of self-employed workers, casual workers as well as regular wage or salaried employees hired informally in the formal sector remain outside of the government policy net to protect workers. Moreover, these self-employed and casual workers are earning significantly lower as compared to the workers employed as regular workers in formal sector, thus making them more vulnerable in an unusual pandemic like situation such as faced during -19 outbreak. Providing more flexibility to employer in terms of increasing informalisation and casualisation of workforce is a global trend in the post-globalisation era (Srivastava, 2012), and developing countries like India are not any exception. But, pursuit of such policy of greater flexibility in the labour market in terms of casualisation and informalisation as well as implicit or hidden gender discrimination is resulting in a fall in quality of job and thereby welfare of the workers in the country. Growing incidence of precarious jobs in the country is not only depriving workers from quality of jobs (and life) but also increasingly exposing themselves to several forms of market failure (Sapkal and Chhetri, 2019). India should implement a unified labour code applicable to all workers irrespective of gender, place of work, status of work or size of the enterprise to protect them equally from any pandemic like situation in future and secure their livelihood. In other words, India needs a

‘one labour code for one country’ or at least reduce complexities in the labour laws to make them more inclusive to protect its labour force from catastrophic situation.

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