

## WAGE DISPARITIES AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

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### Abstract:

The present study analyses wage disparities between men and women engaged in agricultural activities in rural India. The analysis is based on secondary data covering trends from 2000-01 to 2023-24. The results indicate that while wages for both men and women have increased significantly over the study period, a persistent gender wage gap remains across all agricultural labour categories. Animal Husbandry Workers recorded the highest overall wage increase, with men's wages rising by 762.3 percent and women's by 779.2 percent. The growth trends were observed among Sowing, Harvesting, Picking, and Animal Husbandry Workers, with women's wage growth outpacing that of men. In non-field agricultural activities, wage growth has also been substantial, particularly for women. Horticulture workers saw the highest percentage increase in wages for women (91.8 percent), compared to men (71.3 percent). Packaging labourers, plant protection workers, and loggers/woodcutters also demonstrated similar patterns, with female wages increasing at a faster rate than male wages. While this trend suggests progress toward reducing the gender wage gap, men's wages remain higher overall. Despite this positive trend, men continue to earn more than women across all agricultural categories, underscoring the persistent wage disparity in the sector.

**Key Words:** Women Empowerment, Wage Equality, Agricultural Workforce, Wage Disparities, Wage Rates, Employment in Agriculture

### INTRODUCTION:

India has witnessed a notable increase in women's participation in the labour force over recent years. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) rose from 23.3 percent in 2017-18 to 41.7 percent in 2023-24. This upward trend is particularly significant in rural areas, where the FLFPR increased by 23 percentage points, reaching 47.6 percent in 2023-24 (PIB, 2024). Women play a pivotal role in India's agricultural sector, significantly contributing to its development and sustainability. As of 2022-23, the female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) in rural areas has risen to 41.5 percent, up from 24.6 percent in 2017-18. This increase is largely attributed to women's involvement in agriculture and self-employment activities (Rajora, 2024). Women are responsible for producing 60-80 percent of the country's food, underscoring their essential role in ensuring food security (Mittal, 2024). Despite their critical contributions, women in agricultural labour have historically been paid lower wages than their male counterparts. Wage disparities between men and women persist across various agricultural activities, raising concerns about gender-based economic inequality. While wage rates for both genders have increased over the years, the pace and extent of this growth vary, reflecting broader socio-economic and policy-driven changes. This study aims to analyse the trends in wage disparities and their implications for women's empowerment in rural India.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The present study examines trends in wage rates for men and women engaged in various agricultural activities in Rural India. Utilising secondary data from annual reports published by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Labour Bureau, Government of India, the analysis covers the

period from 2000-01 to 2023-24. Data collection and organization were conducted using MS Excel. The statistical tools were applied for analysis, including parametric and non-parametric methods such as the coefficient of variation, percentages, and growth rates. The findings are visually represented through line graphs, bar graphs, and other visualization techniques.

### RESULT AND DISCUSSION:

Wage disparities between men and women in the agricultural sector remain a persistent issue in rural India, despite significant economic and social development progress. Agriculture, being the primary livelihood for a majority of the rural population, employs a substantial number of women across various roles in on-field and non-field agricultural activity. The wage rates for both men and women engaged in various agricultural activities in India have significantly increased from 2000-01 to 2023-24. However, the gender wage gap persists across all categories. Ploughing/Tilling Workers experienced the highest wage increase among the different activities. For men, wages rose from ₹65.37 in 2000-01 to ₹418.25 in 2023-24, marking a 539.9 percent increase, while for women, wages increased from ₹40.13 to ₹302.32, reflecting a 653.7 percent rise. Despite this sharp increase, men's wages remain higher than women's. For Sowing Workers (including Planting/Transplanting/Weeding), men's wages increased from ₹58.65 to ₹386.24 (558.6 percent growth), and women's wages rose from ₹42.22 to ₹321.97 (662.7 percent growth). Similarly, harvesting /winnowing/threshing workers saw a 577.5 percent increase in men's wages (from ₹56.28 to ₹381.2) and a 595.2 percent increase in women's wages (from ₹45.87 to ₹318.86). In the case of Picking Workers (including Tea, Cotton, Tobacco, and Other Commercial Crops), men's wages increased by 623.1 percent (from ₹48.28 to ₹348.94), while women's wages grew by 675.5 percent (from ₹40.46 to ₹313.7). Animal Husbandry Workers had a wage rise of 762.3 percent for men (from ₹35.87 to ₹309.15) and 779.2 percent for women (from ₹27.9 to ₹245.34), showing the highest percentage increase among all activities. For general agricultural labourers (including Watering/Irrigation Workers, etc.), men's wages increased from ₹77.49 to ₹378.56 (388.5 percent growth), while women's wages rose from ₹42.21 to ₹301.28, showing a 613.9 percent increase. The wage rates for both genders have increased significantly over the years; women's wages have generally grown at a higher percentage than men's, indicating a narrowing gender wage gap. However, men continue to earn more than women across all agricultural activities, highlighting the persistence of wage disparities in the sector.

Table 1: Trends in Wage Rates by Gender for Agricultural Activities in India

Agricultural Activity (On-Field)	2000-01		2023-24		% Change	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
General Agricultural Labourers (Watering/Irrigation Workers, etc)	77.49	42.21	378.56	301.28	388.53	613.76
Ploughing/Tilling Workers	65.37	40.13	418.25	302.32	539.82	653.35
Sowing Workers (Planting/Transplanting /Weeding)	58.65	42.22	386.24	321.97	558.55	662.60
Harvesting /Winnowing /Threshing Workers	56.28	45.87	381.2	318.86	577.33	595.14
Picking Workers (including Tea, Cotton, Tobacco, and Other Commercial Crops)	48.28	40.46	348.94	313.7	622.74	675.33
Animal Husbandry Workers (Poultry Workers, Dairy Workers and Herdsman)	35.87	27.9	309.15	245.34	761.86	779.35
Agricultural Activity (Non-Field)	2013-14		2023-24		% Change	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women

Horticulture Workers (Nursery Growers)	223.17	154.02	382.08	295.37	71.21	91.77
Packaging Labourers	227.98	166.23	358.92	300.79	57.43	80.95
Plant Protection Workers (applying Pesticides, Treating Seeds, etc)	284.01	166.7	423.96	293.81	49.28	76.25
Loggers and Wood Cutters	304.72	154.84	471.59	285.04	54.76	84.09

Source: Wage Rates in Rural India: Ministry of Labour and Employment, Labour Bureau, Shimla

Women’s wages have grown at a faster rate than men’s across various agricultural labour categories, indicating progress toward wage parity. In horticulture, men’s wages increased by 71.3 percent, from ₹223.17 to ₹382.08, while women’s wages saw a 91.7 percent rise, from ₹154.02 to ₹295.37. Similarly, for packaging labourers, men’s wages grew by 57.4 percent, from ₹227.98 to ₹358.92, whereas women’s wages surged by 81 percent, from ₹166.23 to ₹300.79. A similar trend is observed among plant protection workers, where men’s wages rose by 49.3 percent (₹284.01 to ₹423.96), while women’s wages increased by 76.2 percent (₹166.7 to ₹293.81). Likewise, in logging and woodcutting, men’s wages saw a 54.8 percent rise (₹304.72 to ₹471.59), whereas women’s wages grew by 84.1 percent (₹154.84 to ₹285.04). Although men continue to earn higher wages overall, the faster wage growth for women has contributed to narrowing the wage gap. This trend may reflect greater recognition of women’s contributions in agricultural labour and the impact of policy measures promoting gender wage equality.

Wage Rates for Ploughing/Tilling Workers:

The wage rates for ploughing/tilling workers, both men and women, have shown a steady increase from 2000-01 to 2023-24, though not uniformly across the years. Men’s wages rose from ₹65.37 to ₹418.25, while women’s increased from ₹40.13 to ₹302.32, with compound growth rates of 8.40 percent and 9.18 percent, respectively. Despite women’s wages growing at a slightly higher rate, they remain significantly lower than men’s, highlighting persistent gender disparities. Wage fluctuations, measured by the coefficient of variation, were higher for women (68.63 percent) than men (60.06 percent), indicating greater volatility. Notable wage jumps around 2007-08, 2010-11, and 2013-14 may be linked to policy interventions like MGNREGA, inflation, and labour demand shifts. Post-2013-14, growth moderated but remained upward, even though economic disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic. The gender wage gap peaked in 2006 (48.20 percent) but declined to 25.90 percent by 2021, reflecting progress toward wage equality despite periodic fluctuations.

Figure 1: Gender-Wise Trends in Wage Rates for Ploughing/Tilling Workers in India



Sowing Worker’s Wage Rate (including Planting/Transplanting /Weeding):

The wage rates for sowing tasks, including planting, transplanting, and weeding, have steadily increased from 2000-01 to 2023-24 for both men and women. Men’s wages rose from ₹58.65 to ₹386.24 (558.5 percent increase), while women’s wages grew from ₹42.22 to ₹321.97 (662.8 percent increase), reflecting improvements in agricultural labour earnings driven by inflation, rising labour demand, and government policies, especially after 2006-07. However, the gender wage gap persisted, widening from ₹16.43 in 2000-01 to ₹64.27 in 2023-24. A sharp wage surge between 2009-10 and 2013-14 was likely influenced by rural employment schemes and inflation, while post-2014 growth slowed due to mechanization, crop price fluctuations, and agricultural distress. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, wages continued rising, likely due to labour shortages and government interventions.

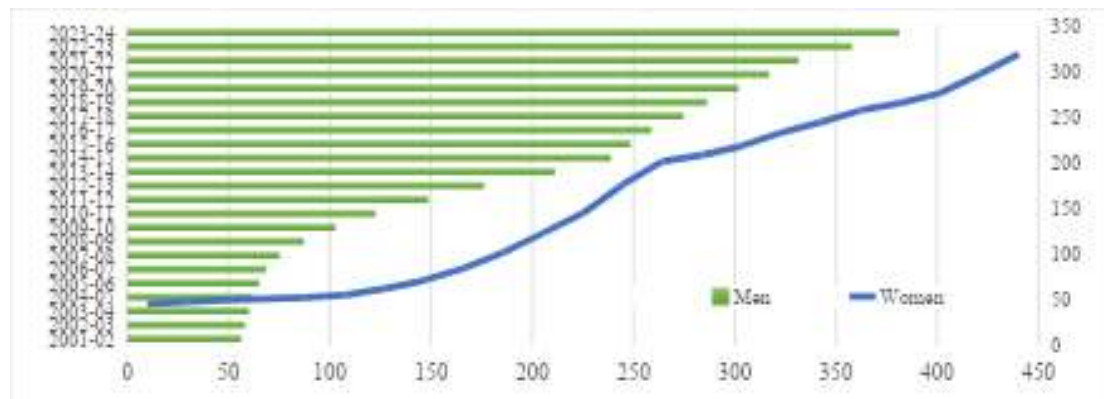
Figure 2: Trends in Wage Rates for Ploughing/Tilling Workers in India



Harvesting /Winnowing /Threshing Workers:

Wage rates for harvesting, winnowing, and threshing workers in rural India have steadily increased from 2001-02 to 2023-24, with men’s wages rising from ₹56.28 to ₹381.20 (577.4 percent) and women’s from ₹45.87 to ₹318.86 (595.3 percent). Despite this growth, the gender wage gap widened from ₹10.41 to ₹62.34, though women’s wages grew at a slightly higher rate, indicating gradual progress in reducing disparity. The sharpest wage hikes occurred between 2007-08 and 2013-14, likely due to inflation, labour shortages, and government employment schemes, while post-2014-15 growth slowed due to mechanization, fluctuating crop prices, and economic challenges. More recent increases after 2021-22 may be linked to labour shortages caused by migrant workers returning to rural areas and greater reliance on agricultural labour.

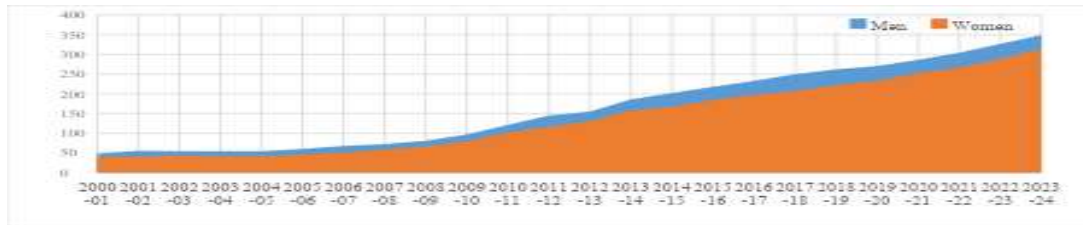
Figure 3: Growth in Wage Rates for Harvesting /Winnowing /Threshing Workers



Picking Workers (including Tea, Cotton, Tobacco and Other Commercial Crops):

Between 2000-01 and 2023-24, wages for agricultural pickers in commercial crops like tea, cotton, and tobacco saw a substantial rise, with men’s wages increasing from ₹48.28 to ₹348.94 (623 percent) and women’s from ₹40.46 to ₹313.70 (675 percent). While the wage gap widened in absolute terms (from ₹7.82 to ₹35.24), the percentage difference narrowed, indicating some progress toward pay equality. The sharpest increases occurred between 2009-10 and 2013-14, driven by inflation, rural wage policies, and growing labour demand. Post-2014-15, wage growth slowed due to mechanization and economic shifts, though the pandemic did not significantly hinder this trend. Despite improved earnings and economic upliftment, the persistent gender wage gap and the challenge of sustaining wage growth in an evolving agricultural landscape remain key concerns.

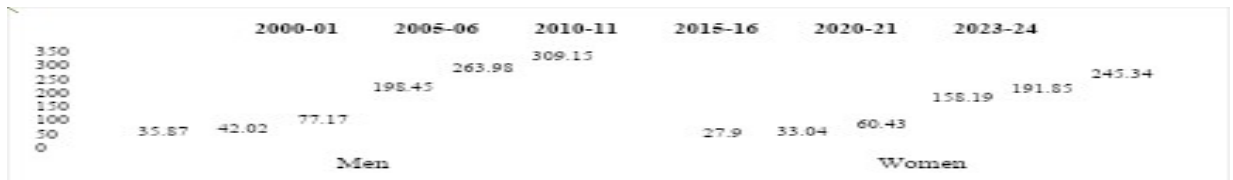
Figure 4: Trends in Wage Rates for Picking Workers



Animal Husbandry Workers (including Poultry Workers, Dairy Workers & Herdsman):

Animal husbandry workers care for livestock by feeding, breeding, and maintaining their health. Women play a crucial role in this field, especially in rural areas, by managing dairy farming, poultry, and small ruminant care. They contribute to tasks like milking, fodder collection, and disease management. Despite their significant involvement, their work is often undervalued and unrecognized. Empowering women through training and resources can enhance productivity and improve their livelihoods.

Figure 5: Wage Rates Scenario of Animal Husbandry Workers

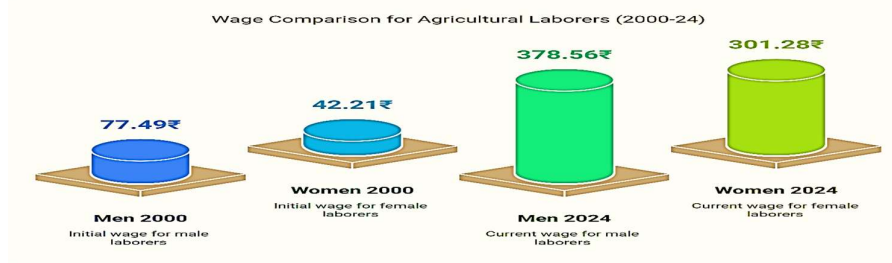


Wage rates for animal husbandry workers, including poultry and dairy workers, have shown a consistent upward trend from 2000-01 to 2023-24, with men’s wages rising from ₹35.87 to ₹309.15 (a 762.3 percent increase) and women’s from ₹27.90 to ₹245.34 (a 779.4 percent increase). This substantial growth reflects the sector’s rising importance in rural employment, driven by inflation, increased demand for livestock products, and government support. Despite higher wage growth for women, a persistent gender wage gap widened from ₹7.97 in 2000-01 to ₹63.81 in 2023-24. The most significant wage growth occurred post-2010, particularly after 2013-14, likely due to rural dairy and poultry initiatives. Even post-2020, wages continued to rise, underscoring the sector’s resilience. However, addressing gender disparities remains crucial for ensuring equitable pay in rural India’s animal husbandry sector.

General Agricultural Labourers (including Watering/Irrigation Workers, etc)

Wage rates for general agricultural labourers, including watering and irrigation workers, have steadily increased from 2000-01 to 2023-24 for both men and women, with men’s wages rising from ₹77.49 to ₹378.56 (388.5 percent) and women’s from ₹42.21 to ₹301.28 (613.8 percent). While women’s wages grew at a higher percentage, the gender wage gap persisted, widening from

₹35.28 to ₹77.28 in absolute terms, though percentage growth suggests progress toward wage equality. The sharpest increases occurred between 2009-10 and 2012-13, with slower growth after 2013-14, likely due to mechanization and economic factors. This wage rise signals improved rural earnings, but persistent disparities necessitate policy interventions for fair pay, with future trends hinging on policies, inflation, mechanization, and labour dynamics.



#### Wage Rates for Non-Field Agricultural Activities in India:

The wage trends among non-farm agricultural labour categories in India from 2013-14 to 2023-24 highlight wage growth and persistent gender disparities. Across all categories, horticulture workers, packaging labourers, plant protection workers, and loggers and woodcutters' wages have consistently increased, with the highest percentage growth observed among women, indicating some progress toward reducing the gender wage gap. Horticulture workers saw the most significant wage increase for women (91.8 percent), whereas men's wages grew at a slower pace (71.3 percent). Packaging labourers experienced a similar trend, with women's wages rising by 81 percent compared to men's 57.4 percent. Plant protection workers and loggers/woodcutters also exhibited substantial wage growth, particularly post-2020-21, likely due to labour shortages and rising demand. However, the gender wage gap remains persistent across all sectors, with men continuing to earn more than women despite higher growth rates for female wages. The wage disparity was most pronounced in plant protection work, where the gap increased from ₹117.31 in 2013-14 to ₹130.15 in 2023-24. In contrast, the smallest gap reduction was observed in packaging labourers. The post-pandemic period notably accelerated wage increases, reflecting economic shifts and labour market disruptions.

Table 2: Trends in Wage Rates by Gender for Non-Field Agricultural Activities

Year	Horticulture		Packaging		Plant Protection		Loggers & Wood Cutters	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
2013-14	223.17	154.02	227.98	166.23	284.01	166.7	304.72	154.84
2014-15	222.08	162.56	223.24	179.36	286.39	171.09	310.21	168.47
2015-16	239.47	178.37	235.71	185.88	289.62	190.37	323.85	166.8
2016-17	255.02	196.88	240.46	195.67	310.98	194.9	340.07	172.82
2017-18	267.49	208.86	241.02	199.47	317.92	200.99	351.66	193.17
2018-19	276.86	220.67	252.91	202.6	328.7	213.09	362.93	199.08
2019-20	288.72	234.69	268.04	225.82	347.23	225.19	378.29	196.2
2020-21	312.65	247.36	294.59	243.32	368.67	245.13	406.34	193.38
2021-22	334.55	257.34	311.47	262.05	387.04	254.57	426.65	227.57
2022-23	360.32	273.98	338.74	283.18	404.29	267.11	450.79	252.49
2023-24	382.08	295.37	358.92	300.79	423.96	293.81	471.59	285.04
C.G.R %	5.71	6.59	4.92	5.97	4.35	5.66	4.59	5.45
C.V. %	17.98	19.77	16.45	19.11	13.78	17.67	14.46	18.82

Source: Wage Rates in Rural India: Ministry of Labour and Employment, Labour Bureau, Shimla

**Conclusion:**

The study highlights significant wage growth for both men and women engaged in agricultural activities in rural India between 2000-01 and 2023-24, with women's wages rising at a higher percentage than men's, gradually narrowing the gender wage gap. However, men continue to earn higher wages across all labour categories, underscoring persistent disparities that require targeted interventions. Strengthening policy implementation, enforcing equal pay laws, and enhancing gender-inclusive employment schemes are crucial steps toward wage parity. Skill development programs, improved access to financial resources, and participation in agricultural cooperatives can further empower women economically. Raising awareness about labour rights, promoting leadership roles for women, and leveraging technology to connect them directly with markets will help ensure sustainable progress.

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