

MIDS WORKING PAPER

252

# WOMEN, WORK AND STATUS

LABOUR MARKET OUTCOMES  
IN TAMIL NADU

KALAIYARASAN A

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MIDS Working Paper #252  
August 2026

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MIDS Working Paper No. 252

*Women, Work and Status: Labour Market Outcomes in Tamil Nadu*

by Kalaiyaran A  
Associate Professor, MIDS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the seminar held at Madras Institute of Development Studies on 20 April 2023. Incisive comments by Professor Padmini Swaminathan, Professor S Anandhi, and others at the seminar were of great help in recasting the paper.

Published by  
Madras Institute of Development Studies  
79, Second Main Road, Gandhi Nagar  
Adyar, Chennai 600020 India  
Phone: 044 - 2441 1574/2589 | +91-9150944464  
Email: [pub@mids.ac.in](mailto:pub@mids.ac.in) | [www.mids.ac.in](http://www.mids.ac.in)

# WOMEN, WORK AND STATUS

## *Labour Market Outcomes in Tamil Nadu*

KALAIYARASAN A

### ABSTRACT

Women's participation in the economy offers a paradoxical picture in Tamil Nadu. Following an inclusive development trajectory, women indeed fare better compared with other states in basic economic indicators such as education and work participation and show equally better representation in modern sectors outside agriculture. Women's participation in the labour market in Tamil Nadu, despite having a low proportion and showing a decline in comparison to the state's past records, has been consistently higher than both the national average and that of other developed states. The probability of women working in different sectors and occupying positions across the skill spectrum is much higher in Tamil Nadu compared with any other state in the country. However, data suggest that these remarkable achievements in higher education and inclusion in the economy are accompanied by a higher wage gap, and occupational segregation at the workplace. Social norms<sup>1</sup> dictated by caste considerations still govern women's lives. While the state's interventions towards women's welfare—free transportation and reducing the burden of domestic chores—seek to strengthen supply-side constraints, the fall (until 2018) and the subsequent rise since then in female labour force participation in Tamil Nadu are driven mainly by the demand side, i.e. the lack of gainful employment in the fast-changing economy. Thus, the state needs to enhance its demand-side intervention by creating jobs in emerging sectors.

Drawing on three decades of survey datasets, including a recent time use survey and also from secondary literature, this paper

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<sup>1</sup> According to Jayachandran (2020), the social norms that influence women's work are (1) harassment and violence towards women in public spaces; (2) restrictions placed on women's social interactions and freedom of movement; (3) control over household finances; (4) intimate partner violence and the question of who should be the family breadwinner; and (5) the question of who bears responsibility for household chores and child care.

evaluates key labour market variables in Tamil Nadu: labour force participation, wages, earnings, and occupation. This paper is organised in the following order. The first section maps women's participation in the labour market. It also evaluates how women's decisions to work are influenced by a diverse range of economic and social factors, such as education, income, caste, location, and marital status. The second section examines how statistics from the time use survey make women's work more legible in the economy and in family. The third section assesses the condition of women at work and their sectoral participation compared with other developed states and the national average. It also critically evaluates the gender-earnings gap and its determinants. The fourth section evaluates how the state's welfare interventions enable women's participation in the economy.

## WOMEN IN LABOUR MARKET

Any discussion on women's participation in the economy has to take into account the level of participation in the economy and the rate of change over time. Economic theories suggest that, as the development process unfolds, female labour force participation follows a U-shaped curve – first it declines and then rises. The mechanisms hypothesised for the decline are the rising incompatibility of work and family duties as the workplace moves away from home, an income effect of the husband's earnings, and stigma against women working outside the home. The labour force participation rate (LFPR) increases while the stigma recedes. In addition, the potential for high earnings by women increases as their education improves further, as well as fertility declines, and better options to combine work and family duties (Gaddis & Klasen, 2014). Belying this logic, the persistently low female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) in India over the decades indicates a state of permanence or stagnancy in women's participation in labour force. Tamil Nadu is not an exception to this trend. However, while women's participation continues to be way lower than men's participation, it is better than that of other states. Thanks to state interventions and the century-old social mobilisation, women's participation in Tamil Nadu is higher than the national average and that of most of the states in India. As per the latest data from 2020–21, the LFPR is about 43% in Tamil Nadu compared with the

national average of 32.5%. Even in terms of the ratio of female participation to male participation, the state has been doing well (Figure 1). The gender ratio in LFPR is 0.55 in Tamil Nadu as against the national average of 0.42. Furthermore, in comparison with other developed states such as Gujarat and Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu fares better in women’s participation at the aggregate level (Table 1). Evidence suggests now that there is a strong positive relationship between the female labour participation rate and share of manufacturing in economy (Mehrotra & Parida, 2026). Besides, the structure of the workforce with a higher manufacturing proportion, supply-side welfare interventions by the state and early fall in fertility rates could be attributed to the higher women’s participation in the state.

FIGURE 1. FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE

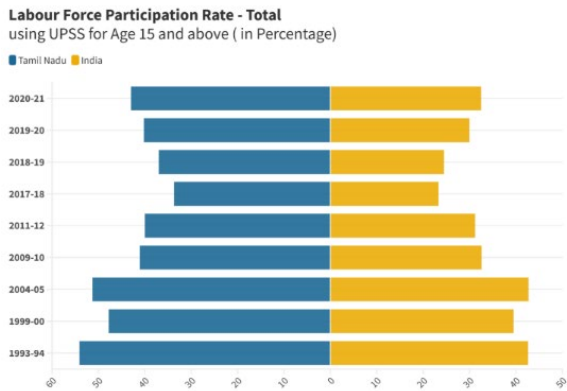


TABLE 1. STRUCTURE OF WORKFORCE (2020-21)

|                                         | TN    | Gujarat | Maharashtra | All India |
|-----------------------------------------|-------|---------|-------------|-----------|
| Self-employed: own account              | 19.8  | 27.3    | 16.3        | 21.6      |
| Self-employed: own account and employer | 1.4   | 0.5     | 0.9         | 0.5       |
| Unpaid family labour                    | 14.7  | 32.9    | 31.2        | 35.7      |
| Regular salaried                        | 27.2  | 19.1    | 20.4        | 18.7      |
| Casual labourer: public works           | 10.5  | 0.1     | 0.0         | 2.5       |
| Casual labourer: others                 | 26.5  | 19.9    | 31.2        | 21.0      |
| All                                     | 100.0 | 100.0   | 100.0       | 100.0     |

However, as in the rest of India, the FLFPR has been declining in Tamil Nadu gradually, which has become a cause of concern. As shown in Table A2 (in Appendices), the number of working women, similar to the rest of India, has been declining over time in Tamil Nadu as well. Women's participation has been declining in both rural and urban Tamil Nadu since the 1990s, only to show an increasing trend starting from 2018-19. For instance, women's participation has decreased from 54.1% in 1993-94 to 33.7% in 2017-18 and increased since then, reaching 43% in 2020-21. The corresponding national figures are 46.2% and 23.3% in 1993-94 and 2017-18, respectively, and it has increased to 32.5 in 2020-21. However, this increase cannot be considered significant as the increase in women's participation is attributable to a higher proportion of women working in unpaid jobs during the pandemic than in paid work, that too in the agriculture sector as against industries. We will further discuss this later.

About two-thirds of women of working age are outside the workforce (Table A1). This raises the following questions: Who are they? What are they doing? Tamil Nadu offers even more of a paradox: it has otherwise achieved remarkable gender parity in higher education and narrowed down its literacy gap, but such gains in education have not been fully translated into higher participation of women in the economy. While the state has been consistently above the national average by 10 percentage points in women's participation in workforce, it still follows the path of India's gendered pattern in workforce participation. In addition, most of the available statistics on India's FLFPR do not incorporate women's unpaid work. In many cases, women themselves do not realise that their labour should be classified as work. The Global Gender Gap Report reported that India has widened its gender gap and has been a country with the largest gender gap in the economy at 32.6% (WEF, 2021).

### *LFPR, WPR, and Unemployment Rate*

Three decades of historical trends suggest that the LFPR and WPR for women – two key labour market variables – go hand in hand without much variation. The difference – unemployment rate – has often been insignificant. For instance, the unemployment rate for women was 1.1% and continued to be so until 2011-12. It increased to 2.4% in 2017-18 and has been around 2% since then (Table A1). As Papola (2014) and Drèze (2023) reported, underemployment is a



major concern in developing countries. For the poor, it is wages or earnings that matter most as women would find a job for survival to eke out a living in any case.

Ashwini Deshpande (2023) suggested that the percentage of women who are actively seeking employment is lower than that of men. The declining rate of women's participation is observed from three accounts: (a) women do not want to work; (b) they are willing to work but not able to find work; and (c) they are forced to withdraw. Women's willingness to work and availability of work are two different factors: the former deals with the supply side, while the latter deals with the demand side of the labour market. Supply-side factors are largely shaped by education, income, infrastructure, social norms, etc. Sexual violence at the workplace adds up to the stigmatisation of working women (Jayachandran, 2021). If social norms are reproduced over time as newer generations conform to them, then a break from tradition, for whatever reason, may open up pathways of change. In addition to bearing and raising children, forced domestic chores eat up women's time. As feminists would argue, reproductive labour is not just an act of giving birth; it includes care work and a whole gamut of domestic chores that are neatly gender-divided. Hence, women are less attached to the labour market than they are to the family. Because of all these activities, women also undergo a higher number of transitions in and out of the labour force than men. Women generally have lower rates of unemployment, while men's unemployment is usually registered. For instance, in the past 30 years, women's unemployment rate in Tamil Nadu has never been higher than 2%. Low unemployment does not indicate improved well-being. Social norms dictate that men have to work out of compulsion, irrespective of the quality of work.

For the decadal fall in India since the 2000s, literature offers three sets of explanations for this gender-based discrepancy. First, young women withdraw from the workforce to opt for education, as evidenced by the increase in women's attendance in educational institutions. Kannan and Reveendren (2012) and Rangarajan et al. (2011) argued that about 44% of women who withdrew from the labour force during 2004-05 to 2009-10 chose to pursue

education.<sup>2</sup> Along with women's increasing attendance in educational institutions, an increase in income has also been seen as a cause for the decline, often referred to as the 'status effect'. The income effect derived from higher household earnings provides women with the choice of withdrawing from the labour force (Abraham, 2013; Himanshu, 2011; Thomas, 2012). This decline is also attributable to the increasing imbalance between work and family duties as the workplace moves away from home and the income effect of the husband's earnings facilitates such an exit. For instance, Dhanaraj and Mahambare (2019) showed that changes in family structure affect women's probabilities of entry into and exit from rural non-farming employment. Joint family setup is associated with a lower probability of women being involved in non-farming employment.

The second set of factors is on the demand side. Employment opportunities for women are declining in India (Ghosh, 2009; Patnaik, 2003). In rural areas, the decline in the number of jobs in the agriculture sector and inadequate alternative jobs are the causes for the decline in employment opportunities for women. Afridi et al. (2020) observed that mechanisation in the agriculture sector has disproportionately affected women's employment opportunities and contributed to a significant proportion of the decline in opportunities for women, while Chatterjee et al. (2018) argued that the decline in agricultural jobs without a commensurate increase in non-farming jobs has accounted for the huge decrease in FLFPR. In urban areas, fewer employment opportunities, coupled with stagnant middle-level employment generation, particularly in the manufacturing sector, have contributed to the decline.

The third set of factors is attributable to the prevailing social stigma against women working outside the home. According to this argument, women opt for domestic duties that are unpaid and unaccounted for. However, some scholars question such social norms and the evidence of women's desire to engage in activities that change their 'status' (Naidu, 2016). The need for caregiving

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<sup>2</sup> Some studies suggest that the increasing educational attendance among women in this age group is a highly significant factor in the decline of the FLFPR. Rangarajan et al. (2011) argued that about 44% of women, who withdrew from the labour force from 2004-05 to 2009-10, were those who chose to pursue education, while Kannan and Reveendren estimated that 27% of the drop may be attributed to additional enrolment in educational institutions.

and domestic duties imposed by social norms dictate women's participation in the labour market as they disproportionately engage in these activities. In this aspect, Tamil Nadu is no exception to the broader nationwide trend. Despite welfare measures such as mid-day meals and household goods supplied through the public distribution system (PDS), women in both rural and urban areas are not as mobile as men and are also not in a position to take up similar jobs to men because of the caregiving and domestic work such as household chores, and other sociocultural constraints (Deshpande & Kabeer, 2024). Evidence suggests that women do not seek employment if a job is not available in the vicinity to which they can commute. Given their domestic duties, if the nature of the job they would like to participate in is incompatible with their household commitment, women very often do not actively look for jobs even when they want/need to work.

Another notable aspect is that in Tamil Nadu, women's participation is equally shaped by caste boundaries. They restrict women's mobility in seeking jobs from their hometown, especially for young unmarried women. Advancement in status – as household becomes rich, women withdraw from work – has also been seen as a causal factor for the decline in FLFPR. While one cannot generalise this based on the data available, 'housewifization' (Heyer, 2015; Rao, 2015) has been reported in certain pockets of Tamil Nadu.

There is, of course, an increase in the enrolment of young women in educational institutions. The proportion of young women in higher education has increased from 4.5% in 1993–94 to 12% in 2018–19. However, the proportion of women involved in domestic duties—which was already high—has further increased from 35.6% to 42% for the same period. However, these figures are different from the national trend. The number of working women in Tamil Nadu is higher than in the rest of India: 33.7% as against the national average of 23.3% in 2018–19. In Tamil Nadu, women are well educated as the proportion of women's enrolment in higher education has been increasing in the state. The latest national family health survey (NFHS) data show that women's enrolment in higher education is 49.5% as against 50.5% for men. However, this achievement in education has not resulted in concomitant women's participation in the labour market. If we disaggregate women who reported working, there is a startling difference across states. As shown in Table 1, a high number of women report just doing unpaid

family labour. They are still accounted for in statistics, let alone those who report as doing domestic work and are still not counted.

About 14% of women report doing unpaid family labour in Tamil Nadu, as against 33% for Gujarat and 31% for Maharashtra, with the national average of 36%. In that sense, in Tamil Nadu, women's participation in regularised work that is better paid is far better compared with other states. About 27% of women are regular-salaried, as against 19% and 20% in Gujarat and Maharashtra, respectively, while the national average remains at 19%. However, what is remarkable is that Tamil Nadu still provides work to about 11% of women in casual jobs, which could also be due to the successful implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in the state.

### *Does Education Matter?*

While education certainly helps in getting jobs, it does not guarantee women's participation in the labour market. Both supply-side required skills and demand-side availability of opportunities play a role in ensuring women's participation. In other words, social norms, economic opportunities, demand and supply, and structural factors such as distance, infrastructure and transport all influence women's participation in the labour market.

Previous studies (Klasen & Pieters, 2012; Olsen & Mehta, 2006) have argued that there is a U-shaped relationship between female educational status and FLFPR. Both illiterate or poorly educated women and those with university degrees are more likely to work than women with intermediate levels of education. Three trends emerge here (Figure 2). Poor, uneducated women have a double burden: doing domestic duties at home and working for wages outside the home. Their participation, driven by economic necessity, is higher than that for all other income groups. While women with intermediate education generally settle down as homemakers, highly educated women (also a proxy for class) can afford to have someone employed for domestic help and thus can participate in the labour market (Naidu, 2016). Thus, both these categories of women show higher levels of FLFPR.

Evidence from Tamil Nadu suggests a rather V-shaped relationship between work and education for women, which has flattened over time. For instance, in 2020–21, illiterate women

showed an LFPR of 52%, while it was about 50% for women who have primary or middle education. The corresponding value for women with secondary and higher secondary education was 24% (Table 2). Women who were in the category of graduates and above had about 44% participation.

FIGURE 2. EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND WOMEN WORK PARTICIPATION

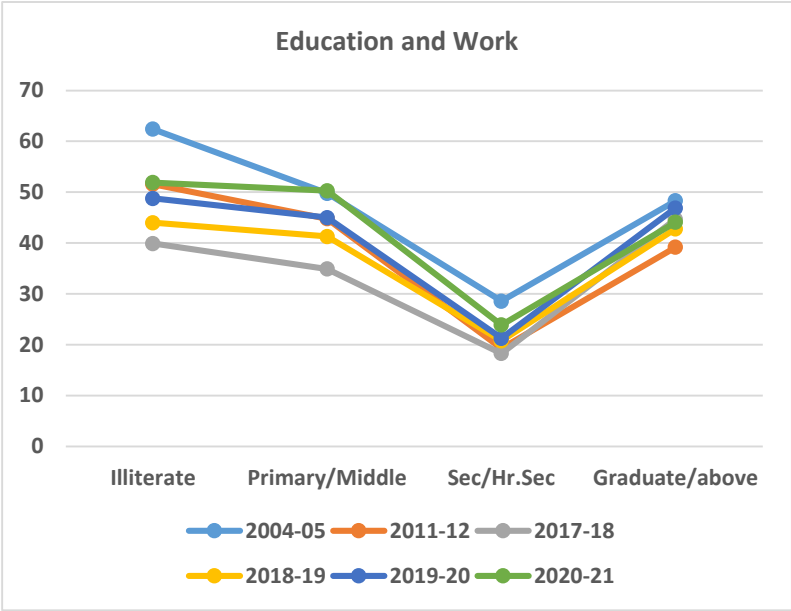


TABLE 2. WOMEN WORK PARTICIPATION RATE BY EDUCATION GROUP FOR TAMIL NADU

|                | 2004-05 | 2011-12 | 2017-18 | 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 |
|----------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Illiterate     | 62.4    | 51.6    | 39.9    | 44.0    | 48.8    | 51.9    |
| Primary/middle | 49.8    | 44.8    | 34.9    | 41.3    | 45.0    | 50.3    |
| Sec/Hr. Sec    | 28.6    | 19.3    | 18.3    | 20.8    | 21.3    | 23.9    |
| Graduate/above | 48.3    | 39.2    | 44.7    | 42.8    | 46.9    | 44.1    |

## *Does Income Matter?*

There is a thesis of income effect – as household income rises, women withdraw from the labour force and tend to focus on their domestic responsibilities (Das et al., 2015; Kapsos et al., 2014; Srivastava & Srivastava, 2010). Klasen and Pieters (2012) confirmed that this income effect accounts for a stagnant LFPR in urban India. Neff et al. (2012) and Mehrotra and Parida (2017) also showed that a substantial proportion of the decrease in LFPR can be attributable to the negative income impact. Using monthly per-capita expenditure (MPCE) as a proxy for income, the present study shows the relationship between income status and women's participation in the labour market. Poorer households show a higher participation of women. For instance, in 2018–19, 40% of women in the poorest quintile (Q1) participated in the labour market as against 31% in the richest quintile (Q5). Q2 and Q3 recorded 40% of women's participation, and the decline began with Q4, as women's participation reduced to 33% (Table A4). This is not surprising as economic necessity demands that poor women work more compared with their richer counterparts. In that sense, poor women are caught in the age-old vicious cycle of income poverty. They tend to work more and get paid less.

What is surprising, however, is the increase in women's participation among richer households during the pandemic. Between 2018–19 and 2020–21, particularly in the pandemic year, women's participation increased in richer quintiles, 11 percentage points in Q4 and 6 percentage points in Q5, as against 5 and 3 percentage points for poorer quintiles Q1 and Q2, respectively (Table A4).

This increase in participation is in stark contrast to the previous trend of decline in women's participation. The decline was much higher among lower-income classes. For instance, the rate of decline during 2004–05 to 2018–19 in Q1, Q2, and Q3 was 27, 21, and 14 percentage points, respectively, while the corresponding figures for Q4 and Q5 were 10 and -2 percentage points. It should be noted that women's participation from the richest quintiles was quite low, with a marginal increase. Notwithstanding the difference in the level of participation, the rate of change and this trend of decline and marginal increase of late are quite similar to the national trend. Therefore, the 'status production' thesis due to the increase in income seems to be overstretched.

For poorer quintiles, it could be simply the non-availability of gainful employment. About 60% of women were working in the agriculture sector in 2004–05, which reduced to 36% in 2018–19. It could be simply attributable to demand-side constraints, viz., that women's participation is falling due to the unavailability of steady remunerative employment.

Sirisha C. Naidu (2016) and Deshpande and Singh (2021) argued that the income effect thesis for the declining FLFPR underestimates the significance of women's labour both in the market and in the domestic sphere for household commitment. The decline is thus not due to the voluntary withdrawal of women from the labour market; rather, they are pushed out due to a lack of gainful employment, given the structural transformation of the economy. This narrative fits in the case of Tamil Nadu too. The state's interventions through its populist welfare—providing free transportation to women and reducing their burden of domestic chores via provisioning essential appliances such as mixer, grinder, and readymade provisions through its extended PDS network—would have certainly reduced supply constraints.

### *Does Marriage Make a Difference?*

Gendered social norms are attributable to women's withdrawal from work after marriage. Evidence of course suggests that marriage institutionalises gender inequality in the division of household labour (Srivastava, 2025). Women disproportionately bear the burden of unpaid domestic and care work, while men's daily routines change little after marriage. This unequal division of labour constrains women's participation in paid employment despite comparable educational attainment before marriage. While it does affect women's participation rate in the workforce, there are other factors such as earning level, opportunities, and the distance of work that contribute to women's participation in the labour force. In Tamil Nadu, a higher proportion of married women continue to work than in other developed states in India. Marriage does not necessarily make women withdraw from work, but long work hours at the workplace and long commutes do, along with unyielding domestic work burdens after marriage. Yet, in Tamil Nadu, about 39% of women who were married reported being working as against 34% in Maharashtra, 29% in Kerala, 26% in Gujarat, and just 22% across the country (Table 3). Furthermore, 33% of young women aged 18–35 reported working in Tamil Nadu as compared to 18% in

Kerala, 22% in Gujarat, and 28% in Maharashtra (Table 4). Married women tend to work more than unmarried women in all these states except Gujarat. In contrast, unmarried young women face a much higher unemployment rate. In Tamil Nadu, about 13% of young unmarried women reported as being unemployed but seeking jobs as compared to 17% in Kerala, which is the highest among comparable states, followed by 9% in Maharashtra, 4% in Gujarat, and 7% across India.

TABLE 3. MARRIED WOMEN WHO ARE WORKING (AGE 15 AND ABOVE), 2018-19

|             | Married | Unmarried |
|-------------|---------|-----------|
| Tamil Nadu  | 39.4    | 13.9      |
| Maharashtra | 33.8    | 15.1      |
| Kerala      | 29.1    | 12.7      |
| Gujarat     | 25.9    | 18.8      |
| All India   | 25.9    | 10.7      |

TABLE 4. YOUNG WOMEN (AGE 15–35)

|             | Working |           | Unemployed |           |
|-------------|---------|-----------|------------|-----------|
|             | Married | Unmarried | Married    | Unmarried |
| Tamil Nadu  | 32.9    | 19.4      | 3.2        | 13.1      |
| Maharashtra | 27.5    | 21.2      | 1.7        | 9.1       |
| Kerala      | 18.4    | 15.8      | 15.6       | 16.5      |
| Gujarat     | 21.6    | 27.5      | 3.2        | 3.8       |
| All India   | 22.0    | 14.8      | 1.2        | 7.1       |

This trend suggests that marriage penalty, i.e. women dropping out of the labour force once they are married, is exaggerated. While it requires a detailed study on its own, descriptive data points from the periodic labour force survey (PLFS) show married women tend work more than unmarried women. Marital-status-driven withdrawal of women’s workforce has thus to be seen in a context. Marital status alone does not influence the decision to work; it interacts with other economic statuses and opportunities available.



Women's workforce is much more diversified in Tamil Nadu. They are better represented in modern sectors such as manufacturing and services compared with many states in India. If we disaggregate occupation, about 36% of women reported as being self-employed in Tamil Nadu as against 61% in Gujarat, 48% in Maharashtra, and 58% across India. If we further disaggregate self-employed, about 18% reported doing unpaid family labour; though this is a significant number, it is lower than that of 33% in Gujarat and 31% in Maharashtra, with the national average being 36%.

Even among regular-salaried women,<sup>3</sup> the state does better. The proportion of regular-salaried women is about 27% in Tamil Nadu as against 19% and 20% in Gujarat and Maharashtra, respectively.

Another significant feature of women's workforce in the state is the nature of the public provision of work to women. About 11% of women working in the casual category reported working in public works. Such provision does not exist in states like Maharashtra and Gujarat, with the national average being 2.5%.

This achievement of women's entry into employment does not guarantee inclusion since they suffer from wage discrimination and often end up in low-productive jobs in informal sectors. However, a quantitative approach needs to be taken to understand the better employment rate of women. Mere expansion of schools, colleges, and teachers' training institutes alone accounts for persisting inequalities in opportunities that exist between women and men. Women's participation in education and work is shaped by their lives outside of the domestic sphere (Swaminathan, 1999).

### *Caste and Women's Work*

Since status and work are inversely correlated, one can presume that women from the lowest castes show much higher workforce participation rates than 'status-conscious' upper-caste women. For instance, Dalit women's participation in the labour market is about 50% as against 40% for their non-Dalit counterparts (Table A3). For Dalits and the poor, what matters is getting labour-decent wages.

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<sup>3</sup> Regular wage/salaried workers, notably, have been defined as those who receive 'salary or wages on a regular basis', but this category also 'includes those getting piece wage or salary and paid apprentices, both full-time and part-time' (emphasis added) (National Statistical Office, 2020).

Unemployment rates and work participation rates are irrelevant for the poor. If they are unable to find a good job, they will survive by doing odd work. Economic growth becomes meaningful only when the earnings and quality of jobs are taken into consideration. In that sense, Tamil Nadu is no different from the rest of the country. The gap in earnings between Dalit women and non-Dalits continues to be high. For instance, the average Dalit woman's earning in a regular-salaried job is Rs. 8,446 as against Rs. 13,905 for non-Dalits. Economic necessity makes them work even if the job is low-productive and less-remunerative.

### *Does Region Matter?*

There is a spatial dimension of women's participation. Poorer and economically backward districts show higher participation of women in the labour market. This could be simply attributable to the persistence of traditional agriculture and artisan jobs where women tend to concentrate. This trend is consistent with global experience. At low levels of economic development, women participate extensively in production, mostly in home-based farms and production. As economic transition takes place, jobs move from home to factories, and men get an initial advantage over women. While correlation is not causation, districts with a higher proportion of workforce involved in the agriculture sector show a higher percentage of women's participation in the workforce (Figure A3). For instance, in 2018-19, backward and agriculture-focussed districts—Ariyalur (62%), Nagapattinam (56%), Thiruvallur (53%), Pudukottai (52%), and Nilgiris (51%)—had a higher women's participation in the labour market than Chennai (24%), Kanyakumari (16%), Thiruvallur (29%), and Kanchipuram (32%). The story is not unambiguous. Some poorer districts showed lower participation. Krishnagiri and Theni, for instance, showed poor participation of women in the labour market, while relatively well-off districts such as Karur and Namakkal showed higher participation. These findings suggest that a rigorous econometric analysis is required to disentangle the effects of sub-regional backwardness in women's participation.

## TIME USE SURVEY: METHOD OF MAPPING WOMEN'S WORLD OF WORK

The increase in the proportion of women being reported as engaged in 'domestic duties' calls for further explanation. There is now considerable literature that critiques the inability of our data systems (based on the conventional definition of work) in capturing the 'work' done by women, which therefore results in such 'work' remaining unpaid and unaccounted for (Swaminathan, 2009). This observation calls for the inclusion of domestic and allied activities in LFPR calculations (Hirway, 2012; Mukherjee & Majumder, 2011). Some researchers also question the assumption of the so-called income effect, which argues that an increase in household incomes opens up 'choices' for women to decide between jobs and domestic work. This reasoning is rooted in the sexual division of labour, where women are placed in the domain of care while men are placed in the domain of work. Sirisha Naidu (2016) argues that 'differential valorisation of work in the workplace and the household reinforces the male breadwinner and female caregiver model, particularly when household reproduction is not guaranteed by the state' (Naidu, 2016, p. 106).

Feminists have been arguing for a re-evaluation of both the economic value of women's unpaid labour in the home and the worth of women's work in the economy (Swaminathan, 2009). The call for reworking the notions of what constitutes 'work' and 'who is a worker' needs to be taken into account while creating a more inclusive economy that pays enough attention to work that is unaccounted for. In particular, surveys such the national sample survey (NSS) do not capture economic participation adequately if women are engaged in irregular employment and occasional work in multiple occupations (Desai, 2017).

Through an in-depth analysis of the time use survey, the present study evaluates women's participation in paid and unpaid work and work conditions. While labour force surveys, i.e. National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) and employment-unemployment survey (EUS)/PLFS, cover all aspects of employment in the economy, they underestimate women's participation. By capturing both market-

related and non-market activities, time use surveys<sup>4</sup> provide full visibility to unpaid and care work. Their advantage lies in their ability to capture multiple and simultaneous activities in which women spend most of their time.

The survey considered in this study was conducted in 2019; all individuals aged above 6 years from the selected households were interviewed, amounting to a total of 23,011 individuals in Tamil Nadu and 4,47,250 across India. The recall period was 24 hours, from 4 a.m. the previous day to 4 a.m. on the survey day. For each activity, three indicators are estimated: (i) the percentage of participating individuals; (ii) the average time spent per activity for those engaged in the activity; and (iii) the average time spent per activity averaged over all individuals.<sup>5</sup>

This survey showed persistent and enormous gender disparities in how one spends time in everyday life. Following the trend in PLFS/NSSO surveys, women typically spend more time on unpaid care work than men. The percentage of women aged 15–59 years involved in paid work is 34%, which is just half that of men's figures (75%) pointing towards a significant gender gap in access to monetary income. The corresponding figures at the national level are 71% and 22% for men and women, respectively (Table 5).

However, a much bigger gap lies in the proportion of unpaid work of various kinds. About 90% of women are engaged in some kind of unpaid domestic services as against 24% among men. Similarly, 27% of women are engaged in caregiving for other family members compared with 14% among men. At the national level, about 92% of women are engaged in unpaid domestic services and

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<sup>4</sup> There are two methods—diary keeping and interview. In the diary method adopted in developed countries, participants are provided a diary in which one can note their activities, and the interview approach largely followed in developing economies is documented by survey officials. India follows the latter. A pilot time use survey was conducted through the State Directorate of Economics and Statistics in six states, viz., Kerala, Meghalaya, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, and Gujarat, for the first time in 1998–99.

<sup>5</sup> Per person: Average time spent in a day for any activity can be calculated by considering all the persons of a specific category. By this approach, the distribution of the total time of 1,440 minutes of a day per person belonging to that specific category in different activities can be derived, and the percentage proportion of the different activities in the total time of 1,440 minutes of a day can be calculated.

about 31% are involved in caregiving to their fellow family members.

TABLE 5. PERCENTAGE OF PERSONS PARTICIPATING IN A DAY IN ACTIVITIES OF MAJOR DIVISIONS (AGE 15–59, 2019)

|                                                                               | Tamil Nadu |        | All India |        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|--------|-----------|--------|
|                                                                               | Male       | Female | Male      | Female |
| Employment and related activities                                             | 75.2       | 34.4   | 70.7      | 21.7   |
| Production of goods for own use                                               | 5.6        | 17.8   | 15.3      | 21.8   |
| Unpaid domestic services for household members                                | 24.3       | 90.3   | 27        | 91.8   |
| Unpaid caregiving for household members                                       | 14         | 27.3   | 14.3      | 31.2   |
| Unpaid volunteer and trainee and other unpaid work                            | 1.7        | 2.9    | 2.8       | 2      |
| Learning                                                                      | 10.9       | 11.1   | 14.2      | 10.9   |
| Socializing and communication, community participation and religious practice | 71.1       | 71.3   | 74.7      | 75.3   |
| Culture, leisure, mass media sport practices                                  | 90.3       | 91.3   | 81.7      | 79.3   |
| Self-care and maintenance                                                     | 100        | 100    | 100       | 100    |

Such disparities become even more visible in the amount of time spent on each activity. For instance, on average, women aged 15–59 years spend 131 minutes per day—9.1% of their time—in paid work as compared to 372 minutes (26%) among men. If living standards are to be measured in welfare terms, then they should include the utility derived from direct time consumption (Acharya, 1982). Even on that account, women are deprived of their time. Of their total time spent per day, women spend 277 minutes (20%) on unpaid domestic work as against 33 minutes (only 2.3%) for men. The situation is not different even among youth. Young women spend 84 minutes (5.8%) of their time on paid activity, while young men spend 281 minutes, which is four times what women spend. Similarly, gender disparity persists among youth in sharing domestic duties. On average, young women spend 238 minutes (16.5%) of their time on unpaid domestic duty as compared to just 23 minutes for men. This is why, men also appear to have more time than women for self-care and maintenance, even though the time spent on other residual activities appears to be roughly the same (Table 6).

TABLE 6. MINUTES SPENT IN A DAY ON AN AVERAGE PER PARTICIPANT IN THE ACTIVITIES OF MAJOR DIVISIONS (AGE 15–59)

|                                                                               | Tamil Nadu |        | All India |        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|--------|-----------|--------|
|                                                                               | Male       | Female | Male      | Female |
| Employment and related activities                                             | 372        | 131    | 333       | 75     |
| Production of goods for own use                                               | 5          | 11     | 31        | 26     |
| Unpaid domestic services for household members                                | 20         | 231    | 28        | 290    |
| Unpaid caregiving for household members                                       | 11         | 41     | 12        | 45     |
| Unpaid volunteer and trainee and other unpaid work                            | 2          | 5      | 3         | 2      |
| Learning                                                                      | 51         | 51     | 60        | 45     |
| Socialising and communication, community participation and religious practice | 128        | 112    | 137       | 126    |
| Culture, leisure, mass media sport practices                                  | 144        | 159    | 125       | 127    |
| Self-care and maintenance                                                     | 708        | 701    | 711       | 704    |
| Total                                                                         | 1440       | 1440   | 1440      | 1440   |

Gendered social norms dictate unpaid care work as a female prerogative. Young women spend more than ten times as much as men on unpaid activities. Even in socialising, young women are deprived of their time. Feminists draw attention to the time spent in leisure activities to provide an assessment of women's well-being. They spend 107 minutes on socialising and community participation as against 131 minutes for men.

At the national level, women are deprived of their time compared with men, but they still spend more time on productive activities. The national average for women spending time on productive employment activities is 75 minutes as against 131 minutes in Tamil Nadu. Similarly, women in the state get more time to spend on learning, socialising, and cultural activities—127 minutes across India as against 159 minutes in Tamil Nadu. While the spent by women on productive employment activities is lower in the state compared with men, women are marginally better off compared with other states.

## WORLD OF WOMEN WORK

As stated earlier, in Tamil Nadu, women work in modern sectors and in a variety of occupations outside agriculture as compared to many other states in India. In this section, we will look at the nature of their work. In terms of occupations, women workers are distributed broadly: 30% in regular jobs, 34% in self-employed jobs, and 36% in casual jobs. The corresponding figures across India are 21%, 52%, and 27%, respectively. We focus on the first two—regular-salaried and self-employed jobs—while analysing earnings. Despite following the national trend of declining/stagnant women's participation in the labour market, not only is the overall FLFPR much higher in the state (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2017) but women engage in more productive sectors such as formal jobs in the factory sector, earn better, and are more urbanised. Women's participation in the service and manufacturing sector is 64% as against 44% in Gujarat, 35% in Maharashtra, and 43% across India. Even the proportion of women employed in the non-manufacturing sector<sup>6</sup> is about 18% (Figure 3). In Tamil Nadu, this sectoral shift of women away from agriculture is significant, given the larger national trend towards feminisation in the agriculture sector (Government of India, 2018; Figure 4).

Tamil Nadu constitutes about 28% of total regular-salaried women workers engaged in the manufacturing sector in India, which is higher compared to other industrialised states such as Maharashtra and Gujarat (13% and 11%, respectively) (Figure 4). This trend is further confirmed by the ASI, which collects data on factory workers in India. According to an estimate (Dhamija, 2023), of the 1.6 million women workers across India, 0.68 million (43%) were working in the factories of Tamil Nadu. About 40% of workers in factory sectors—mostly employed in apparel, textile, and leather industries—are women in Tamil Nadu, followed by 12% in Maharashtra and 7% in Gujarat (Figure 5). Even if we consider gender ratios, the proportion of regular-salaried women in the manufacturing sector is one of the highest in the country—28% as against the national average of 13%.

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<sup>6</sup> The non-manufacturing sector includes construction, mining and quarrying, electricity, gas, water supply, etc., but in employment growth, the construction sector contributes the maximum proportion (more than 95%).

FIGURE 3. WOMEN PARTICIPATION BY SECTORS (2018-19)

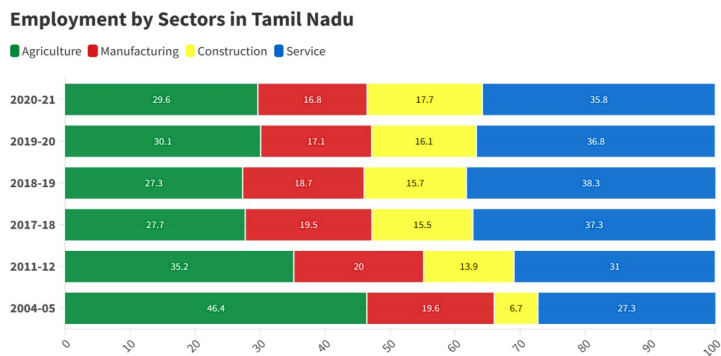


FIGURE 4. WOMEN IN REGULAR MANUFACTURING EMPLOYMENT (2018-19)

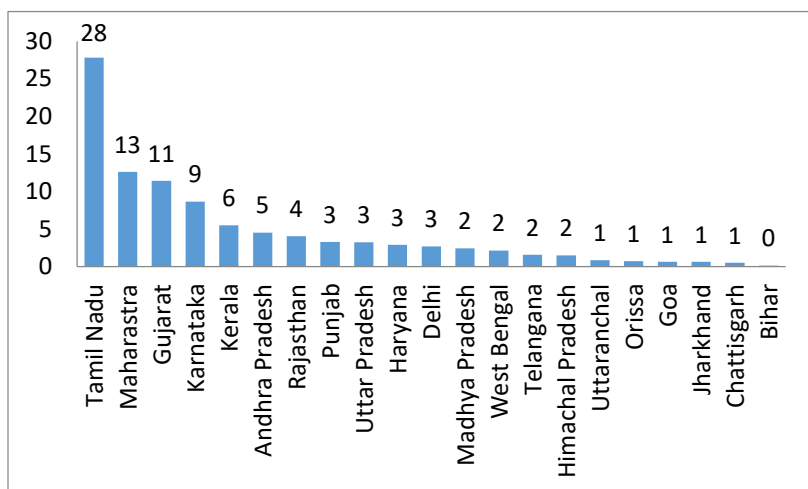




FIGURE 5. WOMEN IN REGULAR MANUFACTURING EMPLOYMENT (ASI-FACTORY SECTOR)

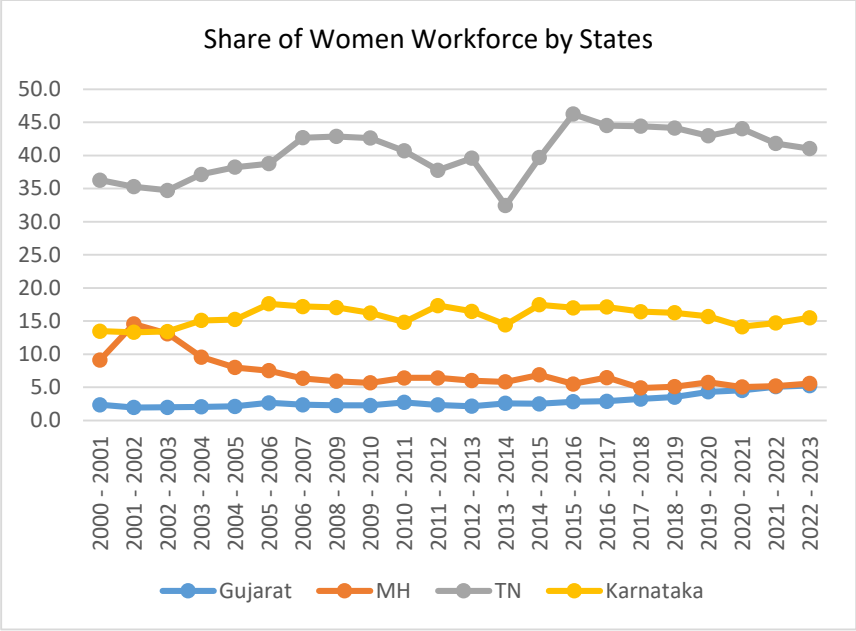
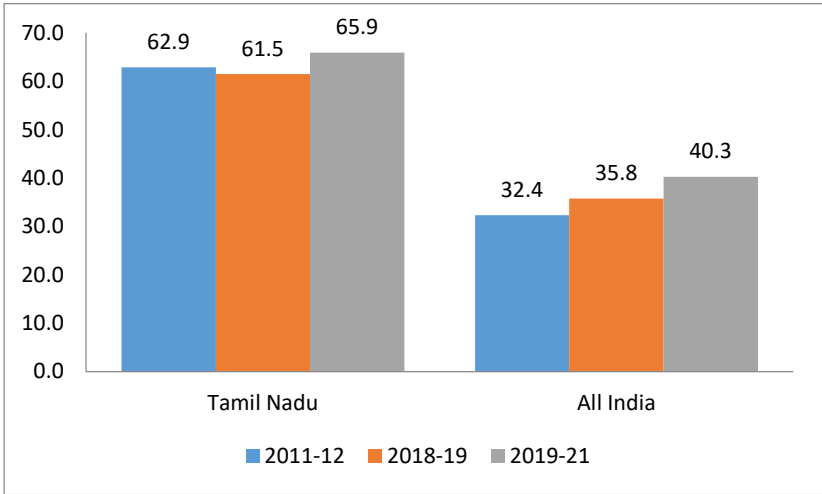


FIGURE 6. WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC SECTORS



Similarly, women in the government sector are equally well represented. About 66% of government employees in Tamil Nadu are women, as against the national average of 40% (Figure 6). This is a remarkable achievement, which is partly an outcome of state policies, such as introducing 30% quotas for women in government jobs by the then ruling party Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1989, which was again increased to 40% by the same party in 2021. This reservation has opened up opportunities—often contractual though—to women who are manning most of the governmental departments today.

In Tamil Nadu, even women who reported working as casual labourers are offered public works such MNREGA.<sup>7</sup> About 10.5% of women are working in MNREGA in the state as against the national average of 2.5%. Even in developed states such as Gujarat and Maharashtra, it is less than 1%. MNREGA has certainly improved women's participation in the economy and enhanced their bargaining power, apart from an increase in the reservation of labour in rural Tamil Nadu. MNREGA is generally evaluated based on the three stipulated dimensions in it: (a) at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment to each household requesting work in a rural area, (b) every worker being entitled to wages at the specified wage rate for every day's work based on the minimum wages set by the government, and (c) one-third of the beneficiaries of the programme to be women. A study by Princeton University (Bonner et al., 2012) showed that Tamil Nadu has topped all states in ensuring women's participation in the programme and does better on the other two dimensions as well. Though higher participation of women may well have to do with the possibility that male workers access higher-wage jobs in the rural economy and hence prefer not to seek MNREGA work, effective implementation has made it possible for women in rural Tamil Nadu to enhance their income. The higher level of women's participation in Tamil Nadu is also endorsed by other microlevel studies (Carswell & de Neve, 2014; Drèze & Oldiges, 2011).

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<sup>7</sup> MGNREGA is a rural job guarantee programme funded largely by the central government, through which rural households have the legal right to get up to 100 days of on-demand employment in public works every financial year.

FIGURE 7. REGULAR EMPLOYED EARNINGS

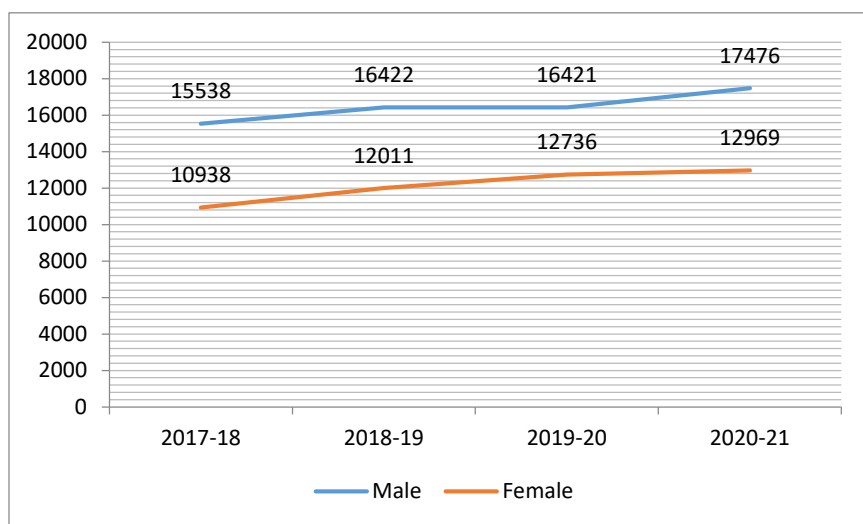


FIGURE 8. SELF-EMPLOYED EARNINGS

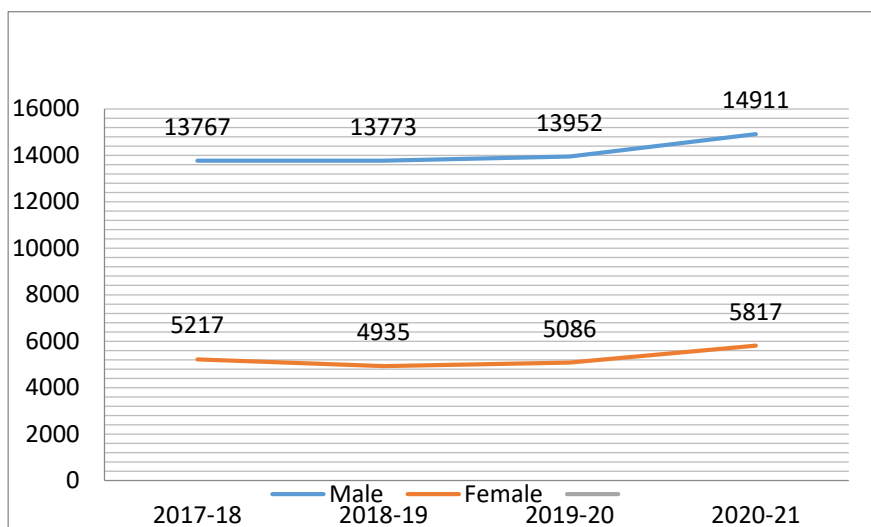


FIGURE 9. REGULAR WAGE DISTRIBUTION (TAMIL NADU)

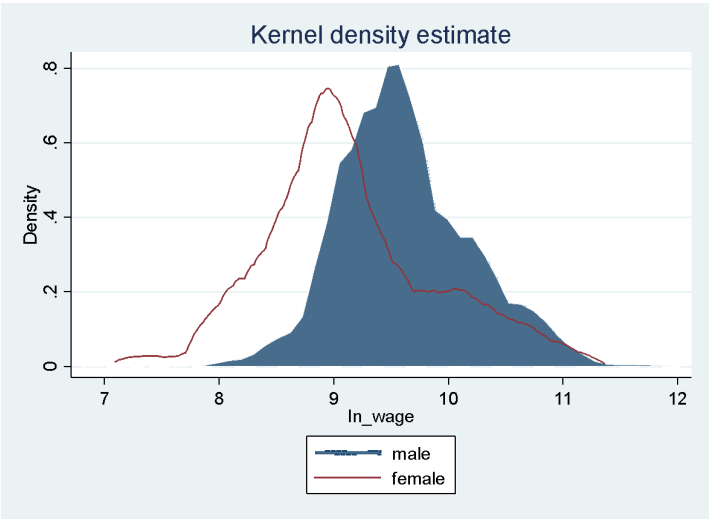
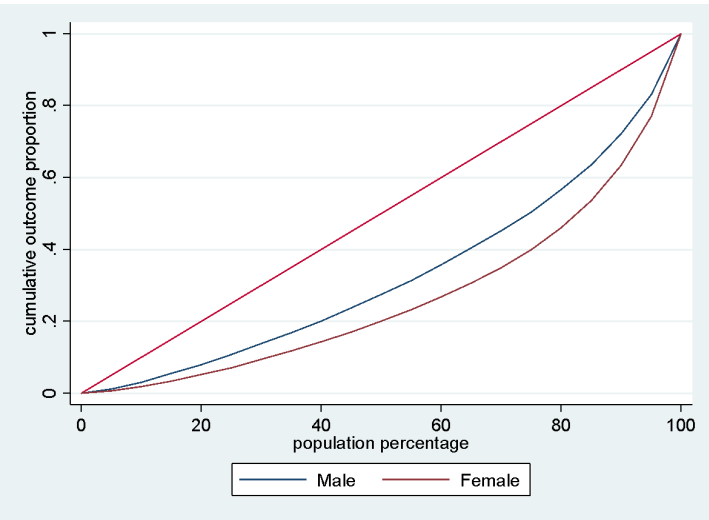


FIGURE 10. REGULAR WAGE DISTRIBUTION LORENZ CURVE (TAMIL NADU)



## *Earning Gap and Price of Being Women*

However, the increase in women's involvement in the economy does not translate into equal opportunities and earnings (Figures 9 and 10). Men and women do not start on an almost equal footing. Even if women manage to get into the job market, they suffer from occupational discrimination or wage discrimination while applying for identical jobs. The gender-earning gap (ratio of women's earnings to men's earnings) in Tamil Nadu is one of the highest in the country. For instance, monthly earnings for regular-salaried women in Tamil Nadu in 2020–21 was Rs. 12,969, as against Rs 17,476 for men (Figure 7). In other words, the average earning gap for regular-salaried women in Tamil Nadu is 0.74 as against 0.81 in Maharashtra, 0.85 in Gujarat, and 0.80 in Kerala, while the national average stands at 0.77. The trend is equally bad for self-employed women in Tamil Nadu: they earn as little as about 37% of what men earn. This ratio is better in states such as Maharashtra (0.51), Kerala (0.41), and Gujarat (0.38), with the national average being 0.44 (Figure 8).

### *Private versus Government*

The wage difference is much higher in the private sector than in the government sector. The average wage for women in the government sector in 2021 was Rs. 18,857 as against Rs. 27,886 for men. The earning gap across genders is 32%. The corresponding gender gap in the government sector in Maharashtra and Gujarat is 31% and 38%, respectively, with 30% being the national average (Table 7). As stated earlier, women's proportion in the government sector is the highest in the country. While a part of this gap can be accounted for by differences in education and work experience, the significant proportion is attributable to either occupational segregation—women concentrated in the lower end of the order—or purely discrimination in identical jobs.

In general, the average pay in the government sector is higher than that in the private sector. The average monthly income of women in the private sector is Rs. 10,324 as against Rs. 15,566 for men (Table 8). The earning gap in the private sector is 34%, which is much higher than that of the public sector. Within the private sector, the earning gap in manufacturing is 30%. On average, in manufacturing, women earn Rs. 9,205 as against Rs. 13,132 for men. The services sector is better in terms of both women's pay and their

earnings. Women earn Rs. 11,351 against Rs. 16,494 for men. However, their proportion is 25%. Manufacturing continues to be an important sector for women.

TABLE 7. WOMEN PAY ACROSS IN GOVERNMENT SECTOR ACROSS STATES (2018-19)

|           | Male<br>(Rs.) | Female<br>(Rs.) | Earning<br>Gap (%) | Share of Women in<br>Government Sectors |
|-----------|---------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| TN        | 27,886        | 18,857          | 32.4               | 61.5                                    |
| MH        | 28,421        | 19,470          | 31.5               | 24.9                                    |
| Gujarat   | 30,955        | 21,601          | 30.2               | 32.5                                    |
| Kerala    | 33,379        | 24,560          | 26.4               | 64.7                                    |
| All India | 30,968        | 18,899          | 39.0               | 42.6                                    |

TABLE 8. WOMEN PAY ACROSS SECTORS IN TAMIL NADU (2018-19)

|               | Male<br>(Rs.) | Female<br>(Rs.) | Earning<br>Gap (%) | Share of Women<br>Workforce (%) |
|---------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| Public        | 27,886        | 18,857          | 32.4               | 68.7                            |
| Private       | 15,566        | 10,324          | 33.7               | 30.4                            |
| Manufacturing | 13132         | 9,205           | 29.9               | 36.7                            |
| Service       | 16,494        | 11,351          | 31.2               | 25.2                            |

What explains this earning gap among both self-employed and regular-salaried women? It cannot be typically accounted for by 'human capital' differences as the literacy gap in the state is much lower than in many states. Women's enrolment in higher education is 51%—one of the highest in the country.

Women are constrained in numerous ways. Such constraints differ across castes and economic classes. For instance, for educated working women, primary caregiving is time-consuming, who can receive a sudden call from home anytime. To be more available to their families, they must be less available to their employers and clients. As a result, they tend to cut back hours or take jobs in areas of the nearest workplace that offer more flexibility, thus earning far less.

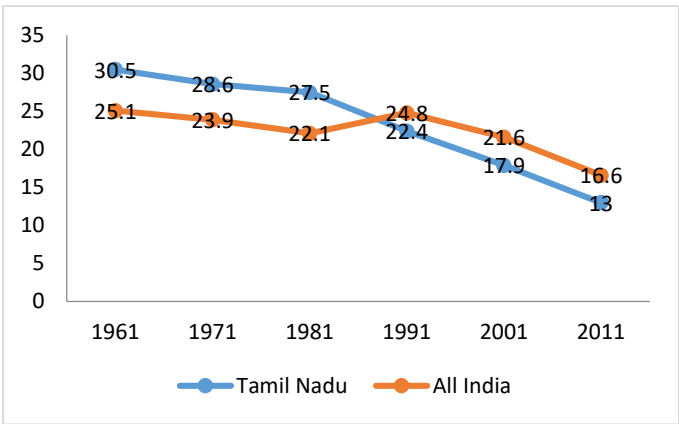
Regular-salaried jobs are not necessarily a secure form of employment given the trend of increasing contractualisation compounded by the absence of written contracts, weakened social security, and reduced collective bargaining. However, these jobs are still better than those in the rural farm sector or construction

sector, where the jobs are very precarious. High-end jobs require different sets of skills and opportunities. Although this diversification has still not kept pace with diversification in incomes, the state has seen a faster diversification of its workforce in the past three decades compared with the national trend. Importantly, this is true even in the case of the female labour force. Women’s participation in paid employment, as Arthur Lewis (1954) remarks, ‘... is one of the most notable features of economic development.’ Notwithstanding the possibility of such paid employment leading to a ‘double burden’ for women, entry into new spaces of participation and access to independent incomes may contribute to the undermining of gender hierarchies as well (Kabeer, 2012).

WELFARE AND WOMEN

Welfare has certainly empowered women in Tamil Nadu. Compared with other states, the probability of being healthy, getting educated, securing better jobs, achieving mobility, and having the ability to make key household decisions is higher for women in Tamil Nadu. State initiatives focussing on literacy, increasing the age of marriage, and reducing fertility have collectively contributed to women’s empowerment in multiple ways. Evidence suggests (Parthasarathi & Sinha, 2016) that these interventions have improved reproductive health outcomes.

FIGURE 11. GENDER GAP IN LITERACY



The state's ability to reduce the gender gap in literacy over time has been highly critical in this regard (Figure 11). Tamil Nadu had a gender gap higher than that at the national level until 1981. However, since 1981, the gender gap in literacy in Tamil Nadu has significantly improved (see Figure 8). Subsequently, a considerable decline in the total fertility rate (TFR) has been observed during this period, and one can argue that female literacy has a direct bearing on the TFR, which has shown a sharp decline from 3.9 in 1971 to 1.4 in 2023. The corresponding national averages have been 5.2 and 1.9 (Sample Registration System 2023). Similarly, Tamil Nadu has done extremely well in controlling mortality rates. Infant mortality ratio (IMR) has shown a drastic decline from 121 in 1972 to 12 in 2023, while the national average has declined from 139 to 25. The declining TFR has a close relationship also with the marrying age of women and their participation in the labour market. According to NFHS-4, the average age at the first marriage (the median age) among women in the 25–49 years age group in Tamil Nadu is 20.1, as against 19.7 in Gujarat and 19.9 in Maharashtra, with the corresponding national average being 18.6. The age at marriage determines the extent to which women are exposed to the risk of pregnancy and also influences fertility levels.

In the domain of work, some state interventions have improved women's working conditions over time. Tamil Nadu is a pioneer in establishing welfare boards for informal workers. Inspired by Kerala, the state has passed a bill that mandates shops and commercial establishments provide seating facilities for employees. This has turned beneficial to women as the majority of them work in textile showrooms and garment factories, who have been offered a much-needed reprieve given the long hours of work.

There is a slew of schemes initiated by the Dravidian parties that have attempted to specifically enhance women's work participation and mobility. For instance, the fare-free public transport (FFPT) scheme for women introduced by DMK in 2021 is an attempt to increase women's participation in workforce and to promote public transportation in the state. This scheme benefits women of all age groups using city and town buses. The study by the Citizen Consumer and Civic Action Group (CAG – 2023) has suggested that this scheme has an enormous impact on women's mobility. Of 3,000 women interviewed across six cities in the state, 88% reported as having benefited by the FFPT scheme as they more



often used the paid service earlier. A study by the Tamil Nadu State Planning Commission has also suggested a similar trend. Tamil Nadu has a long history of such interventions. For instance, in 2018, the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) government provided direct subsidies to buy two-wheelers through the Amma Two-Wheeler Scheme to working women whose annual income was below a certain level. DMK's scheme enabled women through mobility via public transport, and AIADMK's scheme of subsidising two-wheelers for working women enabled personal mobility. Although the full effect of these schemes is yet to be seen, the FFPT scheme will definitely encourage women's mobility. Women now do not have to rely on their family members to go to work or college. The government has also introduced monthly assistance of Rs. 1,000 for girls studying in classes 6 to 12 in government schools, which is paid directly into their bank accounts till the uninterrupted completion of their undergraduate degree. This is an attempt to further enhance women's enrolment in higher education, particularly those who come from marginalised communities and from government schools.

At the household level, welfare schemes such as giving free mixers and grinders to all ration card holders have certainly freed women from the drudgery of domestic duties—stone-grinding idli batter by hand—have helped them move out for work. For instance, about 40% of rural working-age women who are 15 years old or above are engaged in free collection of goods, preparing cow dung cakes, and fetching water from outside their houses in rural India. Therefore, one would expect that these welfare interventions have reduced the burden of domestic duties borne by women in the state, allowing them to participate in productive tasks outside home.

Tamil Nadu has also taken initiatives to protect the rights of the transgender community. The state constituted a welfare board, the first of its kind, in 2008 and enacted a law—Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019. It has also instituted an 'Award for the Third Gender' in 2020 to encourage the third-gender person who has done eminent work for their collective welfare. Appreciating the state's efforts in protecting transgender rights, the Naz Foundation—focussing on the transgender community—opened a centre in Chennai. These attempts have ushered in a degree of recognition for the transgender community in society while empowering them with economic opportunities.

## GENDERED SOCIAL NORMS: CASTE, WOMEN, AND CREDENTIAL CAPITAL

The increase in the participation of women in the economy has not translated into improved social recognition. In Nancy Fraser's terms,<sup>8</sup> women made a relative progress in income, employment status, and control over resources, but this has not been accompanied by improvement in social respect, status, and cultural valuation. Furthermore, women's mobility in Tamil Nadu is caste-bound. Women are still devalued in the cultural and social life of the state. 'Misrecognition'—patriarchal and caste norms governing choices—continues to remain. Recently, sexual differences that are common in the representation of women in cinema, through metaphors, have extended to all spheres of social life to signify gendered power equations in society. For instance, as Anandhi (2022) noted that 'women in Tamil Nadu are trapped in violent domesticity by being tolerant to domestic abuse and even give up their self for their family honour.'

Normalisation of violence against women and caste-bound mobility go hand in hand. One cannot transgress these norms. If they do, they will be silenced with violence. Often, this resistance at an individual level does not take a collective form, given the fragmentation based on castes/classes. Such resistance is localised. Similarly, worker identity is embedded in gendered social norms. Despite the sustained attack on patriarchal norms by feminist scholars and activists, social norms treat working women as inferior and morally suspect and tend to be corrupted. It is partly the outcome of the legacy of Dravidian parties, which have not given adequate attention to the gender question in their political culture.<sup>9</sup> They have consigned women to private life. Women suffered in both accounts—they were neither given equal importance in the public sphere nor made equal in private life.

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<sup>8</sup> Nancy Fraser (2008) argues that gender justice requires parity of participation—women must be able to participate as equals in social, economic, and political life. This requires three dimensions of justice: redistribution (equal access to resources and opportunities), recognition (equal social status and respect), and representation (equal political voice and participation).

<sup>9</sup> See <https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/women-dmk-aiadmk-tamil-nadu-election>

Such social norms are equally dictated by caste considerations. Women's aspirations, it is expected, should be aligned with caste aspirations, which restricts their mobility and thinking. Women's sense of freedom is limited, and only those decisions that enhance family status and caste standing in the social hierarchy are acceptable. This leads to the need for economic mobility for women within the caste order, which has been affected by the normalisation of violence against women at home and at factories. As NFHS 2019–20 had shown, domestic violence against women is 40%, which is much higher than Uttar Pradesh's 37% and the national average of 32%. The same survey showed that about 78% of women accept such violence as normal and about 56% of men justify it. Feminist scholars (Anandhi, 2022) argue that a kind of numbness prevails in the state in accepting such a scale of violence.

In this context, even the state's remarkable achievement in women's education needs to be scrutinised. Although its achievement of women's parity in higher education appears to be impressive, it is flawed in many ways. The increase in the gross enrolment ratio (GER) for girls is largely driven by the new political economy that began in the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> Getting girls educated, particularly through professional courses such as engineering, has come about to achieve 'professional hypergamy' rather than purely a hope for employment, monetary gain, or prestige (Carswell & De Neve, 2011). 'Patrilocality' used to be the norm that prioritises a son's education and career over a daughter's and men over women. While these norms are relaxed in securing girls' education, they are still followed in erecting new barriers and boundaries to prohibit caste transgression.

Nandia Hebbar (2024), for instance, in her fieldwork among women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) colleges, showed that gender difference is reinforced through language, rules, regulations, surveillance, and control. Many colleges in Tamil Nadu lack basic infrastructure, often in

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<sup>10</sup> While education was a priority for the Dravidian parties, it was not always for redistributive reasons. Educational institutions largely owned by intermediate castes worked as a channel for rent creation. These castes' political proximity helped them to secure licenses for running these institutions. As a result, private colleges mushroomed, resulting in increased enrolment. Tamil Nadu accounted for more than one-fifth of all educational loans availed in the country from public sector banks in 2013–14 as well as in 2015–16.

violation of AICTE norms. The syllabus and teaching methods are poor. Skills imparted are suboptimal. As a result, many girls who graduate are unemployable. Such poor skills equally contribute to the low participation of women in the labour market. In general, engineering graduates from Tamil Nadu fare poorly in indicators such as 'learning agility,' 'interpersonal skills,' 'adaptability,' and 'self-determination' (India Skills Report, 2018, p. 24).

Why are these girls then admitted to these colleges with huge tuition fees, often with borrowed loans in the first place? As Hebbar (2024) argues, it could be driven by the credential capital in the marriage market that enhances the family's social status. This indicates that education is not necessarily meant to empower girls by acquiring a sense of agency or autonomy. As stated earlier, caste consideration plays a role in this story. Certain castes, especially intermediate ones, find that education is the route to achieve upward mobility and enhance caste status. They have invested in education to build a chain of institutions and exploit the existing affirmative action policies in their interest (Upadhya, 2016; Vijayabaskar & Wyatt, 2013). Beyond enhancing family respectability, these castes view education as a means of preserving their social dominance and often resent the upward mobility of Dalits enabled by reservations (Chowdhry, 2009; Gorringer, 2012).

Hence, the process of getting girls educated clearly follows gendered patterns. The disciplines, tasks, streams, and spaces are neatly segregated along gender lines (Hebbar, 2024). Many of the private colleges run by intermediate caste groups deploy gender segregation in their college building construction itself, starting from its foundation to architectural design. Girls are provided with separate staircases and canteens and confined in gendered corridors. Such segregation is even followed in college buses.

In fact, girls receiving higher education suffer from both gender and caste norms. Caste men of their community and their patriarchal worldview decide how much and what kind of education needs to be imparted to their women. They are subjected to surveillance from family members to college authorities. This restricted mobility of women affects their employment prospects. Caste still dictates such a prohibition. If a woman transgresses caste norms and marries outside caste, such an act frequently results in violence, often depicted as 'aanava kolai' (honour killing), which

prevails in certain regions of the state and is often practised in specific castes (Damodaran & Gorringer, 2025; Rao, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

This paper maps women's position in the economy in Tamil Nadu by evaluating key labour market variables—LFPR, wages, earnings, and occupation. The invisible hand of the market is important, but its efficacy depends on the visible hand of the state, its regulatory structure, and interventions within which women are made to work. Women's decisions to work and their ability to do so are influenced by a wide range of economic and social factors. We find that women's education, age, income, caste, and location all matter in their ability to participate in the labour market. Equally important is the demand side of the labour market. At low levels of economic development, women participate in home-based farms and household production. As structural economic transformation unfolds, women are the primary victims of job losses. The rate at which jobs are dispossessed in traditional sectors—agriculture and artisan—has been higher than the rate of jobs created in modern sectors. The decline in women's participation is thus driven by demand factors such as a lack of gainful employment.

Women, however, are still better represented in modern sectors outside agriculture in Tamil Nadu compared with other states in India. Across India, one among three women working in factories is located in Tamil Nadu. Women are better represented in the government sector than men—two of three workers are women. The U-shaped relationship between women's work and education has flattened over time. However, poor women and Dalit women work more than others due to sheer necessity. In addition, gender norms that govern upper-caste women often do not govern poor and Dalits.

This increased participation is equally accompanied by gender inequalities in earnings. Despite state interventions and many victories on the long road to equality, the earning gap between men and women persists. The state's gender-earning gap is one of the highest in the country. The gap exists in both the public and private sectors. This gap is a sign of weak conditions of the informal labour market and poor efforts of the government to enhance skill levels and diversify sectoral participation.

State interventions through its populist welfare have certainly reduced supply constraints—freeing transportation and reducing the burden of domestic chores with the supply of food grains via the PDS. Welfare schemes such as providing free mixers and grinders to all ration card holders have certainly freed women from the drudgery of domestic duties, which helped them move out for work.

Caste norms equally dictate women's decision to work. Economic mobility of women is often seen as enhancing a family status than as autonomy and empowerment. Women's mobility seems to be thus caste-bound. Besides a few sporadic mobilisations around women's work, their collective mobilisation has been weak. Despite the intersection of work and gender, a worker's identity is still embedded within gender.

The domestic sphere is deeply gendered. Women typically spend disproportionately more time on unpaid care work than men. The roles and time spent on different activities are shaped by gendered norms. Some field-based studies suggest that violence at home and violence at the factory are normalised.

Freedom is relational. While the increased participation of women in the economy and their economic mobility offer them a degree of independence, it has also ushered in violence against women. Increased awareness and sense of rights allow women assertion. Such assertion questions patriarchy which often results in violence. As economists argue, it could be the 'backlash effect'—men who feel threatened by their female partners' greater economic power often resort to such violence. However, this hypothesis needs to be rigorously tested. Women's empowerment is thus a continuous variable (expressed as 'more or less'), not a dichotomous variable (expressed as 'yes or no'). Variations in the degree of women's participation in the economy and the resultant (un)freedom and violence that arise due to their increased participation should be clearly distinguished from those inequities that result from old-world patriarchy.

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## APPENDICES

TABLE A1: STRUCTURE OF WOMEN POPULATION IN TAMIL NADU (15 AND ABOVE)

|                         | 1993-94 | 2004-05 | 2011-12 | 2018-19 |
|-------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| In Work                 | 53.0    | 50.2    | 38.9    | 33.7    |
| Seeking Work            | 1.1     | 1.1     | 1.1     | 2.4     |
| Out of Work             | 45.9    | 48.7    | 60      | 63      |
| In Education            | 4.5     | 5.8     | 9.6     | 11.9    |
| Domestic Duty           | 35.6    | 36.9    | 44.5    | 42      |
| Pensioners and Rentiers | 0.7     | 1.9     | 3       | 6.6     |
| Others                  | 5.2     | 4.2     | 3       | 2.6     |
| All Women               | 100     | 100     | 100     | 100     |

TABLE A2: LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE USING UPSS FOR AGE 15 AND ABOVE, TAMIL NADU (IN PERCENTAGE)

| Year       | Rural | Urban | Total |
|------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Tamil Nadu |       |       |       |
| 1993-94    | 65.1  | 33.7  | 54.1  |
| 1999-00    | 57.4  | 30.3  | 47.8  |
| 2004-05    | 63.1  | 32.9  | 51.3  |
| 2009-10    | 53.0  | 25.9  | 41.1  |
| 2011-12    | 50.4  | 27.2  | 40.0  |
| 2017-18    | 39.0  | 27.6  | 33.7  |
| 2018-19    | 43.9  | 28.9  | 37.0  |
| 2019-20    | 47.6  | 32.1  | 40.2  |
| 2020-21    | 52.4  | 31.6  | 43.0  |
| India      |       |       |       |
| 1993-94    | 49.0  | 23.7  | 42.6  |
| 1999-00    | 46.0  | 21.0  | 39.5  |
| 2004-05    | 49.4  | 24.4  | 42.7  |
| 2009-10    | 37.8  | 19.4  | 32.6  |
| 2011-12    | 35.8  | 20.5  | 31.2  |
| 2017-18    | 24.6  | 20.4  | 23.3  |
| 2018-19    | 26.4  | 20.4  | 24.5  |

| Year    | Rural | Urban | Total |
|---------|-------|-------|-------|
| 2019-20 | 33.1  | 23.3  | 30.0  |
| 2020-21 | 36.3  | 23.1  | 32.5  |

TABLE: A3 FEMALE LFPR BY CASTE (AGE 15 AND ABOVE)

|         | LFPR (15 and above) for all | SCs  | Non-Dalits |
|---------|-----------------------------|------|------------|
| 1993-94 | 54.1                        | 69.3 | 49.8       |
| 2004-05 | 51.3                        | 60.5 | 48.5       |
| 2011-12 | 40.0                        | 47.8 | 37.8       |
| 2017-18 | 33.7                        | 41.6 | 31.1       |
| 2018-19 | 37.0                        | 46.8 | 34.1       |
| 2019-20 | 40.2                        | 46.1 | 38.1       |
| 2020-21 | 43.0                        | 50.7 | 40.2       |

TABLE A4: INCOME QUINTILE AND WOMEN WORK

|              | 2004-05 | 2011-12 | 2018-19 | 2020-21 |
|--------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Q1 (poorest) | 66.9    | 50.9    | 39.7    | 45.0    |
| Q2           | 62.0    | 42.3    | 41.1    | 44.4    |
| Q3           | 54.0    | 45.0    | 39.8    | 45.4    |
| Q4           | 43.0    | 36.0    | 32.7    | 43.7    |
| Q5 (Richest) | 29.4    | 27.6    | 31.3    | 36.6    |
| All          | 51.3    | 40.0    | 37.0    | 43.0    |
| All India    |         |         |         |         |
| Q1 (poorest) | 56.7    | 34.3    | 23.5    | 32.2    |
| Q2           | 49.2    | 32.8    | 23.8    | 33.7    |
| Q3           | 43.3    | 33.9    | 25.8    | 33.7    |
| Q4           | 36.3    | 31.8    | 25.6    | 33.2    |
| Q5 (Richest) | 28.7    | 24.7    | 23.8    | 30.1    |
| All          | 42.7    | 31.2    | 24.5    | 32.5    |

TABLE A5: STRUCTURE OF WORKFORCE (MILLIONS)

| Sector                                | 1993–<br>94 | 2004–<br>05 | 2011–<br>12 | 2018–<br>19 | 2019–<br>20 | 2020-21 |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---------|
| Agriculture                           | 15.1        | 14.9        | 11.4        | 8.5         | 10.1        | 10.5    |
| Manufacturing                         | 5.0         | 6.3         | 6.5         | 5.8         | 5.8         | 5.9     |
| Non-manufacturing                     | 1.3         | 2.2         | 4.5         | 4.9         | 5.4         | 6.3     |
| Services                              | 6.9         | 8.7         | 10.0        | 12.0        | 12.4        | 12.7    |
| Total workforce                       | 28.3        | 32.0        | 32.4        | 31.2        | 33.7        | 35.3    |
| Total labour force                    | 29.0        | 32.7        | 33.2        | 33.4        | 35.6        | 37.2    |
| Total population                      | 57.6        | 66.0        | 73.0        | 75.7        | 76.3        | 76.7    |
| LFPR male (15–59) %                   | 89.1        | 78.0        | 84.6        | 82.3        | 86.2        | 84.6    |
| LFPR female (15–59) %                 | 57.1        | 61.1        | 42.4        | 40.2        | 44.6        | 46.3    |
| Ratio of working population (15–59) % | 62.0        | 64.4        | 65.7        | 66.1        | 66.7        | 67.1    |

FIGURE A1: WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN LABOUR MARKET BY DISTRICTS

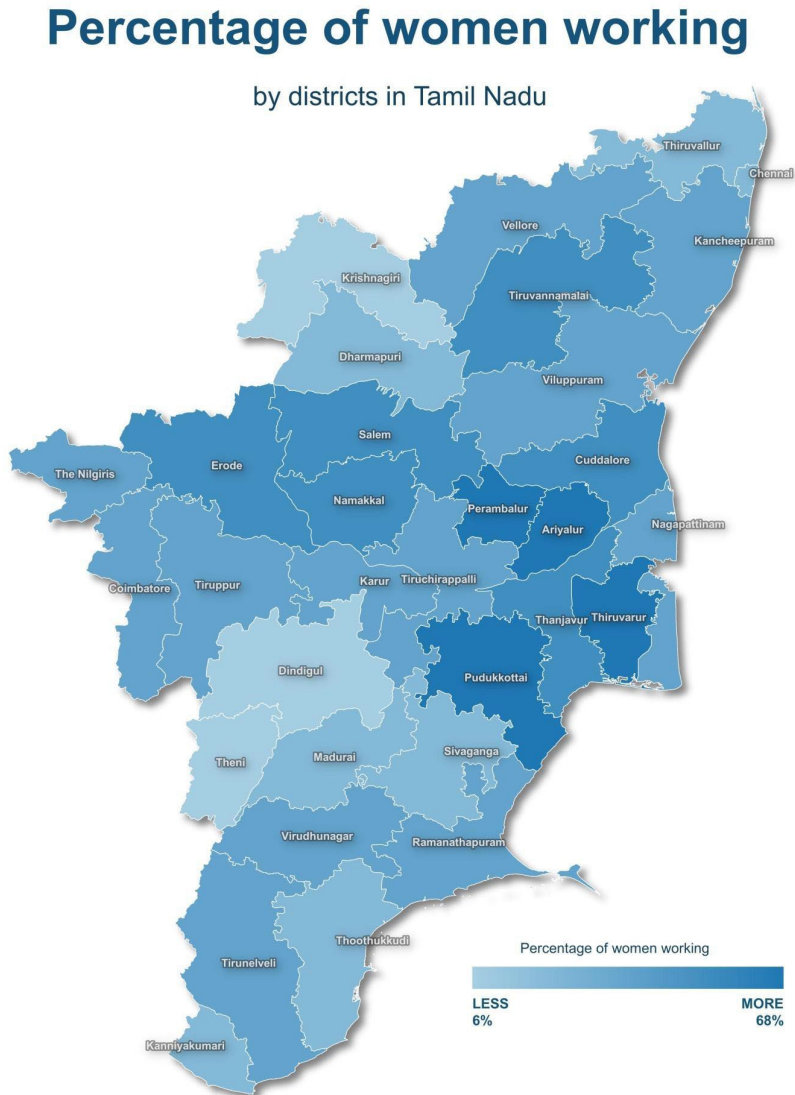


FIGURE A2: WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN MANUFACTURING BY DISTRICTS

# Percentage of women workers in manufacturing

by districts in Tamil Nadu

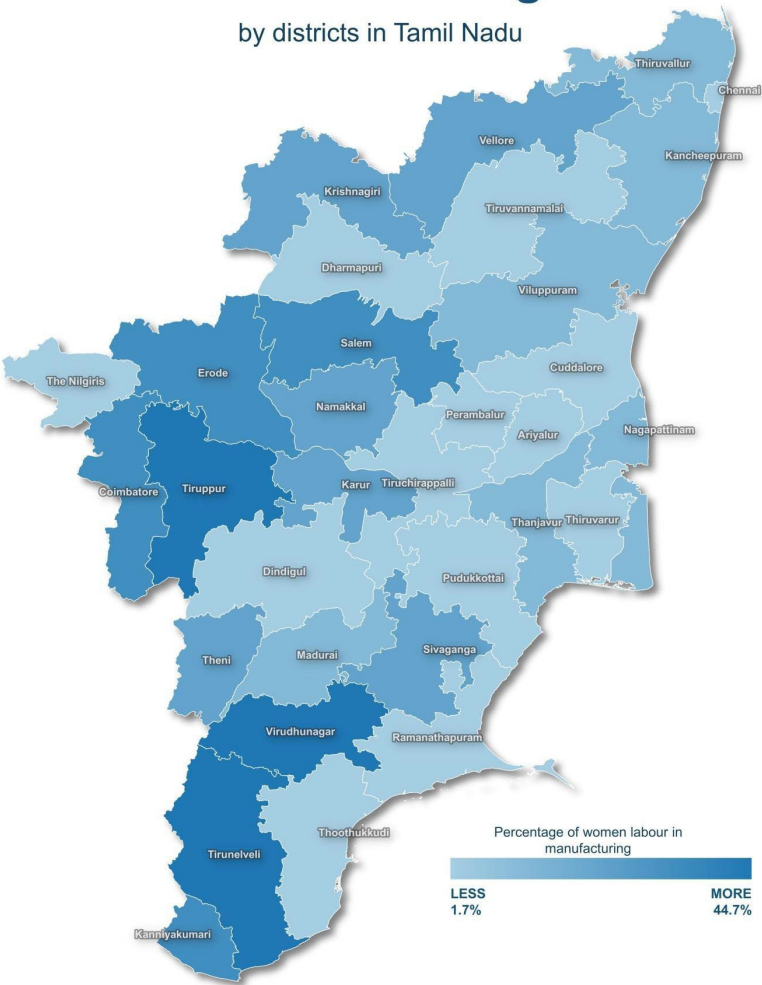
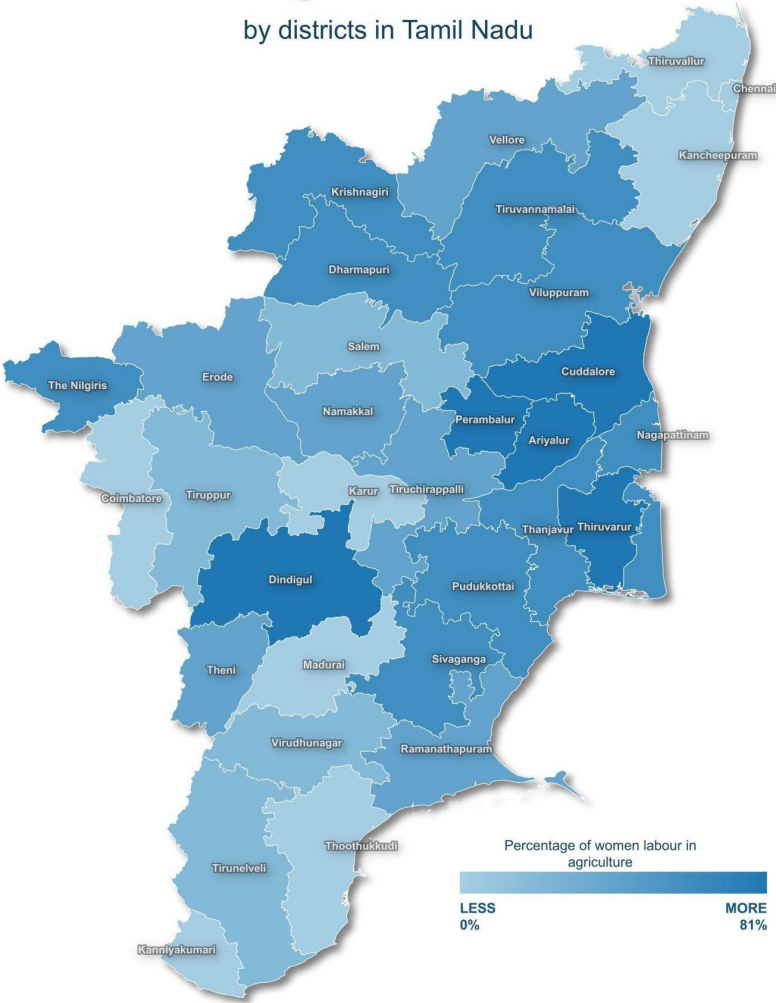


FIGURE A3: WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN AGRICULTURE BY DISTRICTS

# Percentage of women workers in agriculture

by districts in Tamil Nadu







Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS) was founded in 1971 by Malcolm S. Adiseshiah. It studies development problems of India, with a special focus on Tamilnadu. Since 1977, MIDS is a national institute funded jointly by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and the Government of Tamilnadu.