

# Crisis in Female Employment

## Analysis across Social Groups

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This paper, based on NSS employment and unemployment data for various rounds since 1999-2000, highlights the trends and patterns of inclusion and exclusion in female employment across social groups. It provides evidence of increasing social inequalities in female employment, alongside worsening gender-based segregations. It also shows how specific attention to social and cultural variables could overturn standard assumptions regarding women's employment, which indeed has relevance for more general discussions on employment in the country.

Participation of women in economic activity the world over has normally been positively related to the opening up of the economy, whether seen through the expansion of women-dominated sectors or through the cost-differential dimension. While some focus on the high-end sectors of information technology (IT) services, others stress on export manufacturing, both considered to favour the hiring of women and both linked to processes associated with globalisation. The characteristic features of the structure of the female workforce in India were often highlighted as an increasing feminisation of the urban workforce (on account of increased work participation for urban women); feminisation of agriculture (on account of an increased share of women workers in the primary sector); decrease in secondary-sector employment; and an increase in tertiary-sector employment.

Thus, it largely took the established understanding of expanding opportunities for women, which reached its peak with an unexpected jump in female work participation in the 61st round of NSS employment and unemployment data for the period 2004-05. Later rounds, however, showed a reversal with female participation rates falling drastically, especially in rural areas, indicating a crisis in women's employment. A pre-supposed homogeneity characterises discussions during this period, which may help in laying the broad employment patterns. Social group attribute is an important dimension, which could intersect with gender in the context of social and economic inequalities between various caste/religious groups. Thus, to understand the processes that have impacted the overall changes, or to analyse the impact of macro-level transformations on different categories of women with specific socio-economic characteristics, there is a need to unpack aggregate outcomes.

### Literature on Globalisation

Contradictory findings exist in the literature on various aspects of globalisation; similarly, diverse views exist on the actual impact of economic reforms on caste/religious groups, and its gender dimensions. At one end, some scholars have made a case for the positive impact of globalisation on women from the lower castes, drawing on the framework of the neutrality of markets. These scholars argue that changes in production relations and work organisations in the new economic era could help the less privileged women from lower castes, who have been marginalised or sidelined during the state-led welfare regime. This position also assumes that the internationalisation

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of capital will loosen the hitherto upper-caste monopolies amongst Hindus, thereby helping women from lower castes to reap the benefits of their labour (Omvedt 1997).

The marginalising aspect of globalisation, on the other hand, has been highlighted in another set of analysis. It is held that in the context of a social system where progressive state policies such as reservation have failed to address social exclusion, markets that operate within the given unequal social and economic structures are bound to widen inequalities instead of reducing them. Thus, women from lower castes and unprivileged religious groups, with low education and few skill endowments, would be further marginalised in the labour market in an open economy (Madheswaran and Attewell 2007; Thorat et al 2010). This would either push them out of the labour market or confine them to low-paid menial work.

Further, it is argued that one way to seek caste mobility is through redefining the role of women and controlling their mobility as part of the widely acknowledged “sanskritisation” process. This affects women’s participation in the labour market, or restricts their choice of occupations. Thus, caste divisions could affect both their participation in outside work and their concentration in particular occupations.

Explorations into the labour market outcomes of religious and caste groups have either analysed each social category separately/independently, or clubbed the caste groups into two segments – scheduled castes (sc)/scheduled tribes (st) and non-sc/st. Despite their relevance, such exercises hide important labour market trends and patterns, which are closely linked with distinct religious as well as caste groups. For example, the popular caste division of sc/st versus “others” fails to take into account the diversity of the category “others”, which comprises Other Backward Classes (obcs) and upper castes. Within these groups, Muslim and non-Muslim categories are also important distinctions that could provide much insight into the dynamics of the social structure and its impact on labour market outcomes. However, there has been no rigorous analysis of employment trends among Muslims prior to the setting up of the Sachar Committee.<sup>1</sup>

Against this backdrop, this paper explores the interface of religion and caste with the labour market outcomes of women through an analysis of the last five rounds of National Sample Survey (nss) unit-level data (1999-2000, 2004-05, 2007-08, 2009-10 and 2011-12).<sup>2</sup> It shows how specific attention to social and cultural variables overturns standard assumptions regarding women’s employment, and indeed, has relevance for more general discussions on employment in the country.

Ideally, it would have been better to separate all caste categories by religion. However, the sample size for some religious groups when subdivided across caste status offers very few entries, which would affect the results. Thus, one is limited by the sample size of the nss data in undertaking detailed disaggregate data analysis. Given this limitation, in the present analysis caste and religious groups are divided into five categories – st, sc, obc non-Muslims, Muslims and upper-caste non-Muslims.<sup>3</sup> The first two categories are considered without any reference to their religion, as this identity does not affect

their overall social status considerably.<sup>4</sup> Muslims are taken together regardless of whether they belong to obcs or upper castes, as the caste classification of the group varies between states. All non-Muslim obcs, irrespective of religious background, are clubbed together; similarly, all non-Muslim upper castes are taken as one category in the analysis. All analysis across social groups is based on usual principal and subsidiary status (upss) employment.

### Social Group Dimensions of Declining Female Workforce Participation

The most striking revelation of the recent rounds of National Sample Survey Office (nss) surveys is a significant fall in the female workforce participation rate (fwpr), or worker population ratio, between 2004-05 and 2011-12. Rural fwpr had dropped to 17.6% in usual principal status (ups) and 24.8% in upss employment. In urban areas, too, the fwpr fell substantially, from 13.5% in 2004-05 to below 12.5% in ups employment, and from close to 17% to about 15% in upss employment.

Table 1 confirms most of the existing understanding on caste/religious category-wise participation rates, with st

**Table 1: Workforce Participation across Social Groups, 1999-2000 to 2011-12 (UPSS)**

	1999-2000	2004-05	2007-08	2009-10	2011-12	Difference between 2011-12 and 1999-2000
<b>Rural</b>						
ST	43.8	46.4	39.7	35.8	36.6	-7.2
SC	32.5	33.3	30.7	26.8	26.2	-6.3
OBC non-Muslims	31.4	34.7	31.1	28.1	25.6	-5.8
Muslims	16.1	17.8	15.0	14.0	15.3	-0.8
Upper-caste non-Muslims	24.6	29.5	24.3	21.9	21.3	-3.3
Total	29.7	32.7	28.9	26.0	24.8	-4.9
<b>Urban</b>						
ST	20.4	24.5	20.4	20.2	19.6	-0.8
SC	18.5	20.0	16.7	17.7	17.3	-1.3
OBC non-Muslims	16.8	19.6	16.2	15.6	16.5	-0.3
Muslims	9.7	12.1	9.8	9.2	10.5	0.7
Upper-caste non-Muslims	11.2	14.0	11.9	11.7	13.4	2.2
Total	13.9	16.6	13.8	13.7	14.7	0.8
<b>Rural + urban</b>						
ST	41.2	44.4	38.0	34.5	34.8	-6.4
SC	29.9	30.8	27.9	25.0	24.2	-5.7
OBC non-Muslims	28.4	31.6	27.8	25.1	23.3	-5.1
Muslims	14.0	16.0	13.2	12.4	13.6	-0.4
Upper-caste non-Muslims	19.8	23.4	19.2	17.7	17.9	-1.9
Total	25.8	28.7	25.0	22.7	21.9	-3.8

Source: Unit-level data, various rounds, NSS.

women showing the highest rates compared to other groups. Muslims show the lowest participation rates followed by upper-caste non-Muslims, both in urban and rural areas, which again is a known pattern. sc women’s participation is normally understood to be higher than that of higher-caste women, which seems to have been the case in 1999-2000 too. The higher participation rates among sc women are attributed to poverty, and the relatively fewer restrictions on lower-caste women vis-à-vis the stigma associated with manual work, and on mobility (Das 2006).

Participation rates have declined across all caste/religious categories in line with the overall decline in the aggregate

participation rate of women after 2004-05. This uniform trend across social categories suggests that economic policies do have a generalised impact on women, irrespective of their social status, positioning economic issues in the forefront of women's employment. However, within this general trend for women as a specific category, there are differences across social groups in terms of its intensity. The highest decline in participation rates is for ST women, followed by SCs and OBCs. These differential rates of decline across social groups roughly match with the class division within these social groups, with a large section of SC and ST women belonging to poor households. This clearly supports the case for a class/caste analysis of women's economic status, against the usual pattern of one pitched against the other.

One of the disturbing insights that the disaggregate analysis provides is the steep decline in participation rate among STs and SCs (6.4% and -5.7%, respectively). This decline cannot be fully explained by an improvement in their economic profiles, which is the usual explanation offered for any drop in female participation rates. Studies during this period in fact indicate a strong relationship between low-caste status and poverty, suggesting the aggravation of an unequal social as well as an economic order (Deshpande 2001; Thorat 2010). The decline in

**Table 2: Male-Female Difference in Work Participation Rates – Rural + Urban (UPSS)**

Social Groups	1999-2000	2004-05	2007-08	2009-10	2011-12	Difference*
ST	13.8	11.5	18.2	20.9	20.6	6.79
SC	22.6	23.5	26.7	29.7	29.8	7.20
OBC non-Muslims	25.3	23.4	27.6	29.7	31.6	6.25
Muslims	34.4	34.6	38	39.2	37.5	3.14
Upper-caste non-Muslims	33.2	32.8	36.9	37.2	37.8	4.62
Total	27	26	30	31.8	32.5	5.48

\* Difference between 1999-2000 and 2011-12.

Source: Unit-level data, various rounds, NSS.

participation rate is largely on account of a steep drop in rural areas, which suggests declining opportunities in agriculture (Neetha 2013).

Tribal populations across the country are highly dependent on agriculture (their traditional source of livelihood), and women's contribution to subsistence agricultural production is known to be significant. The land alienation processes in tribal pockets, accompanied by the non-viability of subsistence agriculture, are factors that need attention in this context. The decline in opportunities for casual work in rural areas, along with alterations in crop patterns and technological changes in agricultural operations (worsened by the declining area under cultivation), seem to have contributed to a decline in the quantum of manual jobs, thereby leading to lower participation of SC women in agricultural employment. Further evidence on the marginalisation of SC and ST communities can be found in the trend in their share of the total workforce across the period. For both urban and rural areas, the shares of ST and SC women show the steepest declines, with the SC share declining at 5.2 percentage points in urban areas and the ST share in rural areas declining at 4.8 percentage points.

The disaggregate data also brings to the fore the need to separate OBC and upper-caste women in any analysis, with

both categories showing substantial differences in participation rates, especially changes over time. OBC women seem to have more in common with SC women than with those from the upper castes, with whom they are generally clubbed in other analyses. Muslim women not only show a very low participation rate, but also appear to have been marginalised further, with an overall decline in participation rates (Neetha 2013). The decline of household artisanal manufacturing, in which many women from this community were involved in a period of low alternative opportunities, may have been a critical factor in their growing marginalisation.

These trends suggest that a small decline in employment affects women from certain social backgrounds more specifically/directly. Further, data pertaining to 2004-05 – when participation rates peaked – shows that the highest increase was for the upper castes (3.6%). Thus, even in the context of an upward trend in participation rates, the benefits largely go to the privileged sections in society. The advantageous position that upper-caste women occupy in terms of education and accessibility to job markets places them in a better position during fluctuations in employment. They are the first to reap the benefits of any shifts, and the last to be affected during setbacks.

### Gender Gap in Workforce Participation Rates

Male-female differences in workforce participation rates across these categories are also revealing, as they expose the gendered variations across various social categories (Table 2). Thus, while caste is surely a determining factor in the understanding of women's work, gender seems the most critical issue, within which caste differences need to be located. The relevant inference for policy intervention in this context concerns the role of gender differentiation as the key determinant of employment absorption. Gender difference in workforce participation is the lowest for STs, followed by SCs, and is highest for Muslims and upper-caste categories. Here again, interestingly, the OBC category shows more similarity with SC women, than with upper castes or Muslims.

What is disturbing across all categories is the widening gender gap in the work participation rate. Further, as evident from male participation rates for 2011-12, the rates across social groups do not vary much (the only exception being the Muslims). But even for this social group, the difference is not as sharp as is the case with the female work participation rate. A comparison of the increase in gender differences in work participation overtime shows higher values for STs and SCs, followed by OBCs, compared to upper castes. For Muslims, while the increase is the lowest when taken across the period, given the poor work participation rate for women (13.6%), the difference is still alarming.

Thus, although the gender gap between participation rates has increased across all categories, the widening gap for lower social categories raises serious concerns. It seems that women from upper-caste categories are able to face the challenges better than lower-caste women, who are losing out majorly in the labour market. How much of this decline is due to the

tendency to restrict women's participation in outside employment following upper-caste norms is an issue that needs further analysis. The possibility of such a process is strongly related to the economic status of households. In other words, given worsening inequalities, one would expect an increase in male participation rates in the event of a decline in female participation rates, if such a process is at work. However, no such trend is visible from the data.

While the increased male-female differentials in work participation rates in sc and st categories have largely been on account of a sharp decline in female WPR, the difference for other categories has been more because of an increase in male participation rates. Thus, these two categories represent different processes at work, with different implications for policy. While one process would have led to an increased aggregate income of the household, the other would have worsened the already poor economic status of sc and st households. The resultant overall decline in the economic status of poor households from marginalised communities represents the continuation of structural inequalities and their strengthening with economic changes, raising serious concerns about women's status in these communities.

### Structural Shifts in the Nature of Employment

Increasing evidence suggests that sociocultural restrictions not only prevent women from participating in the labour market, but they also determine the nature of work that women undertake. An aspect normally missed out in discussions around female employment is the close relation between shifts in the nature of employment and social groups/locations. In view of this, an analysis of trends and patterns in the status of employment helps us to understand exclusion and marginalisation better.

A distinct feature of female employment at the aggregate level is the importance of self-employment. Not only does the self-employed category form the largest segment of the female workforce, but its share has also been closely associated with fluctuations in female workforce participation rates. The share of the self-employed increased in 2004-05 and declined in 2007-08, 2009-10 and 2011-12, in accordance with the shifts in WPR (Table 3). With regular employment accounting for a very small proportion of female workers, the opportunities for/availability of casual employment emerged as central to shifts in the nature of employment. The shift between casual and self-employment is evident in the employment data, and analysis of this trend suggests a compulsive and desperate move of poor households between these categories (Abraham 2009).

Given the different economic backgrounds of diverse social groups, these shifts at the aggregate level would have been an outcome of varied changes across these categories. Further, an understanding of the social composition of the self-employed category is especially important, as in discussions on the promotion of self-employment, marginalised and excluded groups also find extensive focus, along with women. The Sachar Committee's finding that a large proportion of Muslim women are

self-employed furthered discussions on the possibilities of promoting self-employment among women in this community. Although the share of self-employed among underprivileged social groups such as scs is lower (a reflection of a lack of assets), promotion of self-employment is often high on the agenda in all discussions on poverty, as well as on those concerning their economic and social empowerment.

**Table 3: Distribution of Female Workers from Various Social Groups across Status of Employment – Rural (UPSS)**

Period	Category	ST	SC	OBC Non-Muslims	Muslim	Upper-Caste Non-Muslims
1999-2000	Self-employed	53	37	60.6	70	74.9
	Regular workers	2.1	3	3	2.6	4.6
	Casual workers	44.9	60	36.4	27.4	20.6
	Total	100	100	100	100	100
2004-05	Self-employed	58.2	46.4	67	75.1	78.4
	Regular workers	2.4	3.6	3.6	2.8	5.7
	Casual workers	39.4	50	29.4	22.2	15.9
	Total	100	100	100	100	100
2007-08	Self-employed	53.6	38.7	62.5	68.3	76.7
	Regular workers	2.6	3.8	3.7	5.3	6.8
	Casual workers	43.9	57.5	33.8	26.4	16.5
	Total	100	100	100	100	100
2009-10	Self-employed	53.6	38.8	58.2	64.9	73.4
	Regular workers	2.5	4.9	3.9	3.8	7.2
	Casual workers	43.8	56.3	38	31.3	19.4
	Total	100	100	100	100	100
2011-12	Self-employed	57.2	44.3	61.4	68.2	72.9
	Regular workers	3.3	5.0	5.3	6.6	9.4
	Casual workers	39.5	50.6	33.4	25.2	17.8
	Total	100	100	100	100	100
Difference between 1999-2000 and 2011-12	Self-employed	4.2	7.3	0.8	-1.8	-2.0
	Regular workers	1.2	2.0	2.3	4.0	4.8
	Casual workers	-5.4	-9.4	-3.0	-2.2	-2.8

Source: Unit-level data, various rounds, NSS.

Thus, various governments have over the years initiated several measures, particularly for the sc and st groups, encouraging and supporting their direct participation in the private economy as entrepreneurs and capital holders. These policies mainly include a preference in the allocation of sites for business, the supply of capital, training in entrepreneurship skills, and incentives for market development.<sup>5</sup> While public policy continues to support entrepreneurship among the sc/st groups, there are also other initiatives to develop a positive policy on the development of an entrepreneurial culture, which can enable dalits to participate in the private sector and the informal economy (Thorat and Sadana 2009).

### Self-employment

Self-employment is more likely among those who own land, especially in rural areas. This is not a surprising pattern, since farming is the default occupation of those who own viable cultivable land or possess other investable assets. The share of self-employed among caste/religious groups does show considerable variation, with scs showing the lowest share. This, as discussed earlier, could largely be on account of a lack of assets – such as land and other productive resources, which are essential for being self-employed. Since different patterns are

visible in rural and urban areas even among the same social categories, reflecting different processes, the analysis is carried out separately for these locations.

Among the self-employed in rural areas, the highest proportion is among the non-Muslim upper castes, followed by Muslims. Among upper-caste non-Muslims, about 73% of those employed was into self-employment in 2011-12, while for Muslims, it was 68%. This concentration of Muslims in self-employment is well-acknowledged, with even the Sachar Committee supporting this finding. While self-employment has always been acknowledged as the primary status among upper-caste women, in the absence of any data on this category (excluding OBCs), the share of self-employed is often assumed to be less than that of Muslims. This assumption – of the highest share of self-employed among Muslims – leads to the conclusion that mobility restrictions are higher among Muslims, compared to upper-caste Hindus (given that the largest chunk of self-employed women are involved in family labour).

An overall decline in the share of self-employment during the period 1999-2000 to 2011-12 could be noted, not only for all women, but also for upper-caste non-Muslims and Muslims. However, for three other categories the shares show some increase, contrary to the overall picture. This trend is disturbing, as female self-employment in the current period is acknowledged to be crisis-driven and not an outcome of economic dynamism, where workers are engaged in continuous, intensive, less productive, and poorly remunerative work.

In analysing these trends in self-employment, there is a need to acknowledge sectoral concentration and differences among social groups. Thus, while agriculture is the most important sector of self-employment, for some social groups artisanal/handicraft production is equally, if not more, critical. Although a large number of women from these communities would contribute to household farm production, an important point that needs special attention is their role in traditional artisanal/handicraft manufacturing. With the opening up of the economy, coupled with changing consumer demands, many traditional industries have lost out in competition. The decline in the share of self-employment for Muslim women and some segments of OBCs could be an outcome of this imminent crisis in these sectors.

While men could move out of these crisis-ridden industries more easily, women are forced to continue, partly due to a lack of requisite skills for alternate work, and largely because of cultural restrictions. This is another issue that needs attention, apart from falling shares. The onus of running these household industries falls largely on women, with the returns coming nowhere close to their effort and time spent. Women in agriculture also face similar issues with agricultural income declining, resulting in an increase in the mass of poor, self-employed women. The absence of ownership of any productive assets and access to capital self-employment often coincides with engagement in petty production or retail vending, an issue that needs attention in the context of increased self-employment among marginalised communities.

### Casual and Regular Employment

Proportions in casual employment across social categories provide interesting insights into the distinct divisions that exist among women workers. The proportion of casual employment was the highest for SCs, which is the only social group with more than half of its women workers in casual employment. Apart from cultural differences, landlessness, lack of assets and human capital are factors that have a high presence in casual work, while social groups with better economic conditions show a different pattern. Thus, the proportion of casual workers is the lowest among upper-caste non-Muslims; however, it is significant across OBC categories and among Muslims. This favours the economic explanation over the cultural position.

With regard to regular employment – in rural areas, this accounts for only a small share of women across all social categories. However, closer examination shows upper-caste shares to be the highest, followed by Muslims. Since the NSS definition of regular work implies nothing other than regularity in employment, it is difficult to suggest implications without an examination of sectoral data.

The data also shows the inverse interconnectedness of self-employment and casual employment. A rise in the share of one definitely reduces the share of the other. Thus, the substitution is between casual wage employment and self-employment (this further points to the crisis-driven nature of female self-employment in general). Based on the earnings of the self-employed, it can be argued that this shift reflects a lack of opportunities for wage employment, forcing many to turn to self-employment as a livelihood option. It was also suggested that in the context of a lack of assets, such shifts to self-employment are likely to be a short-term phenomena and compulsion, rather than a permanent feature or one arising out of choice.

However, no such pattern is seen for upper-caste non-Muslims and Muslims. An increase in opportunities for casual wage employment is likely to benefit women from the lower social classes the most, given their poor asset status and human resource endowments (such as education and skill). But during a period of crisis of wage employment, while many from these communities may also move towards self-employment, the viability and sustainability of these enterprises become issues. The argument about a cultural premium among Muslims vis-à-vis self-employment and its preference over wage work is yet to be established through empirical studies. On the other hand, the growing demands for reservation in regular jobs do suggest an interest and anxiety among the community to access regular salaried jobs – although the gender dimension is not clear.

A distinct pattern is visible in urban areas, with self-employment accounting for the highest share of workers only among Muslims and non-Muslim OBCs (Table 4, p 55). Self-employment accounts for about 61% of Muslims, which is much higher than that of OBCs (45.5%), who also have a significant share of the self-employed. For the upper castes – unlike other social categories – the share of regular workers is clearly high,

with 54.5% of them being women. Although there has been an increase in the share of regular employment across all social categories (with scs and sts showing the largest increases), the fact that the share began with a smaller number leaves them with smaller proportions under regular work, compared to the upper castes.

Regular work, as defined by the NSSO, reflects only regularity in employment and does not touch upon better terms and conditions of work. This points to the need to look at changes in the proportions of regular employment for different social categories, as regular employment in different sectors indicate diverse terms and conditions of work. Thus, the high share of regular employment of upper castes towards the beginning of

**Table 4: Distribution of Female Workers from Various Social Groups across Status of Employment – Urban (UPSS)**

Period	Category	ST	SC	OBC Non-Muslims	Muslims	Upper-Caste Non-Muslims
1999-2000	Self-employed	31.9	38	49.1	67.2	39.5
	Regular workers	24.6	25.7	26.5	17.4	52.5
	Casual workers	43.5	36.3	24.3	15.4	7.9
	Total	100	100	100	100	100
2004-05	Self-employed	38.7	34.1	52.5	70.1	42.9
	Regular workers	26.9	38	28.9	18.7	49.7
	Casual workers	34.5	27.9	18.6	11.2	7.4
	Total	100	100	100	100	100
2007-08	Self-employed	31.6	30	46.6	64.2	37.3
	Regular workers	34.6	36.2	30.9	19.9	54.7
	Casual workers	33.8	33.7	22.5	15.9	7.9
	Total	100	100	100	100	100
2009-10	Self-employed	30.7	32.6	44.3	61	36.7
	Regular workers	33.9	35.9	32.3	21.4	57.5
	Casual workers	35.5	31.5	23.3	17.5	5.8
	Total	100	100	100	100	100
2011-12	Self-employed	34.9	31.9	45.5	61.3	39.4
	Regular workers	34.7	48.8	37.4	24.9	54.5
	Casual workers	30.4	19.4	17.1	13.7	6.1
	Total	100	100	100	100	100
Difference between 1999-2000 and 2011-12	Self-employed	3.0	-6.1	-3.6	-5.9	-0.1
	Regular workers	10.1	23.1	10.9	7.5	2.0
	Casual workers	-13.1	-16.9	-7.2	-1.7	-1.8

Source: Unit-level data, various rounds, NSS.

the structural economic changes may suggest their presence in formal employment. On the other hand, the increase in the share of regular employment post-liberalisation in all possible contexts does not refer to employment with formal conditions, but to the availability of employment without breaks. This issue is investigated further in the next section through a sectoral and occupational analysis.

### Widening Segregations through Markets

Self-employment is not a homogeneous category; unless one examines the various subcategories, it is impossible to analyse the implications of changes in self-employment. The disaggregation becomes all the more important in the context of various caste and religious categories, given the differential impact of economic changes on various social groups. Self-employed persons are further categorised into three groups:<sup>6</sup> own account workers, employers, and helpers in household

enterprises. The data shows that one of the most striking features of self-employment is the extremely high share of unpaid work done by women in both rural and urban areas (Neetha 2009). Trends in the unpaid work of women – apart from revealing some general household and social conditions – are also indicative of the related possibilities for economic independence or empowerment, or lack thereof (Mazumdar and Neetha 2011).

If unpaid work is removed from the category of self-employment, it appears that casual wage employment is the overwhelmingly predominant form of paid work among women, especially for the scs, sts, and even oBcs. While paid self-employment dominates among women from Muslim communities, regular wage work seems to be increasingly predominant among women from the upper castes. Given the advantageous position of women from the upper castes in terms of education and accessibility to job markets, such a trend may suggest the continuation and strengthening of structural inequalities in tandem with economic changes. These differential patterns clearly highlight the need to evolve differentiated policy formulations and interventions to address the issue of employment for different segments of the female population.

Differentiation within the status of self-employed reveals a bias typical in total female employment: the inclusion of unpaid work in any analysis and discussion on employment masks the actual patterns and issues that confront women workers, both at the overall and the disaggregate levels (Mazumdar and Neetha 2011). In this context, to understand women's employment alongside caste/religious intersections, there is a need to separate unpaid work from total employment.

This is not to suggest that women's contribution to unpaid work is not important. Women's unpaid work is central to agriculture and household industries, and their contribution to household livelihoods is fundamental. Production relations differ across paid and unpaid work, and hence the criteria for evaluating the quality of unpaid work, its social and legal status, and the identification of policy interventions require an approach different from that of wage employment. In paid employment – whether regular, casual or self-employed – the role of the market is central. Thus, the site of paid work is the most appropriate to engage with exclusionary labour market practices, given the existing social and gender constructs. Table 5 (p 56) shows the difference in participation rates for different social categories when unpaid work is removed from total employment.

Comparison between the two participation rates across social categories shows a narrowing down of differences across various social groups. sc and st women have the highest participation rates when unpaid work is excluded, although the rates are much below that of the usual wPR. The difference between paid work and unpaid work participation rates are highest for sts and scs, indicating that a considerable section of self-employed workers from these communities are unpaid workers who receive no financial returns for their work. Although the participation rates of Muslim women are the lowest among all social categories, the difference with other

social groups comes down distinctively when unpaid work is removed.

In rural areas, PWPR shows a decline for all social groups in accordance with the general trend, the only exception being Muslims (which is also negligible). However, the declines point to a hierarchy, with STs and SCs showing a distinct picture with huge declines in PWPR over the period (5.6 and 5.2 points, respectively). A reflection of the same process is noticeable in urban areas, where PWPR has shown a positive change for all social groups with the exception of ST and SC women, where it marks a decline. Thus, while the decline in the WPR of SC and ST women imply a loss of independent wage-earning paid

**Table 5: Paid and Usual Work Participation Rates across Social Groups, 1999-2000 to 2011-12 (UPSS)**

Sector/Social Group	Paid Work Participation Rates (PWPR)				Difference between 2011-12 and 1999-2000	Difference between PWPR and Workforce Participation Rate (WPR)			
	1999-2000	2004-05	2009-10	2011-12		1999-2000	2004-05	2009-10	2011-12
Rural									
ST	25.1	23.7	19.7	19.5	-5.6	-18.7	-22.8	-16.1	-17.1
SC	24.2	22.5	20.1	19.0	-5.2	-8.3	-10.8	-6.6	-7.2
OBC non-Muslims	16.9	16.7	16.2	14.1	-2.8	-14.5	-18	-12	-11.4
Muslims	10.2	9.5	8.7	10.3	0.1	-5.9	-8.3	-5.4	-5.0
Upper-caste non-Muslims	11.5	12.9	11.1	11.2	-0.3	-13.1	-16.5	-10.8	-10.1
All women workers	17.3	17.1	15.8	14.7	-2.6	-12.6	-15.6	-10.3	-10.1
Urban									
ST	17.4	19.2	17.8	16.5	-0.9	-3	-5.2	-2.4	-3.1
SC	15.3	17.3	15.9	15.0	-0.3	-3.2	-2.8	-1.9	-2.2
OBC non-Muslims	12.5	13.8	12.4	13.3	1.2	-4.3	-5.8	-3.2	-3.2
Muslims	7	7.6	6.6	7.8	0.8	-2.8	-4.6	-2.7	-2.7
Upper-caste non-Muslims	9.4	11.7	10.3	11.8	2.4	-1.9	-2.3	-1.4	-1.6
All women workers	11.0	12.7	11.5	12.2	1.2	-2.9	-3.9	-2.3	-2.5

Source: Unit-level data, NSS various rounds.

work, the decline for OBCs and upper castes are due to a decline in unpaid work. This suggests that declines in WPR that characterise all women during the period are substantively different for various social groups, with far-reaching implications for women's economic and social emancipation. Although the actual increase in PWPR remains small for all other categories, the hierarchy is striking, with upper castes showing the highest increase (more than double that of the OBCs, which follows the upper castes).

**Social Islands in the Making: Sectoral Dimensions**

Apart from restrictions on participating in the labour market, constraints exist on the sectors of employment that women can be associated with. Accordingly, women from certain caste groups may be concentrated in certain industrial sectors owing to cultural, economic, and other social factors. This is affected by the existing gender-based segmentation in the labour market, as well as the caste/religion-based stereotyping of employment in different sectors. The labour market outcome for women across various caste/religious categories will thus be determined by the interplay of gender and caste/religion-based segmentation of the labour market, and caste/religious prescriptions on women's work. Since employment availability and

the social (both gender and caste/religious) understanding of work are influenced by the location of employment, the analysis is carried out separately for rural and urban areas. Although in rural areas the traditional caste-based economic divisions are getting blurred, existing studies suggest a marked tendency for certain castes to cluster in particular occupations (Panini 1996).

The high concentration of women in agriculture (in rural areas) across all caste/religious groups (Table 6) is noted. The concentration is highest for STs and lowest for Muslims. Interestingly, SCs show a smaller share in agriculture, compared to OBCs and upper-caste women. The consistent decline

**Table 6: Distribution of Female Workers from Various Social Groups across Broad Industrial Divisions, 2011-12 (UPSS)**

	ST	SC	OBC Non-Muslims	Muslims	Upper-caste Non-Muslims	Total
Rural						
Primary	82.1	73.8	77.1	52.5	76.8	75.2
Secondary	13.3	18.8	14.6	38.0	10.0	16.5
Secondary, excluding construction	4.0	9.9	8.1	34.4	7.9	9.9
Construction	9.2	8.9	6.5	3.6	2.2	6.6
Tertiary	4.6	7.4	8.2	9.5	13.1	8.3
Urban						
Primary	24.1	11.4	15.8	8.1	4.9	11.2
Secondary	28.5	27.9	34.7	59.2	26.0	33.7
Secondary, excluding construction	16.5	22.6	30.2	56.9	23.9	29.7
Construction	12.0	5.3	4.5	2.4	2.1	4.0
Tertiary	47.5	60.7	49.5	32.6	69.1	55.1

Source: Unit-level data, NSS Employment and Unemployment Survey, 2011-12.

in the share of agriculture, generally an outcome of economic development, is seen across all social categories; the declines are more than the total average for all social groups except OBCs. The secondary sector (with the exception of construction) – largely manufacturing – accounts for a considerable proportion among Muslims. What needs to be noted is the increase in the proportion of Muslim women in manufacturing during the period, when the traditional handicrafts industry reported an enduring crisis. The movement of male members out of such industry could be a factor leading to an increase in the proportion of women.

Construction, which recently showed a positive shift in terms of female employment, is one sector where social segregations are clearly visible, with female employment in the industry largely limited to manual work. The proportion is highest for ST women and lowest for upper-caste non-Muslims. However, across the period, this is the only industry with a noteworthy increase in the proportion of women across all social categories in rural areas. The lack of any alternative employment for the poor across all caste categories seems to have resulted in the increased share of this sector. Whether this is indicative of a blurring of caste differentiation among the poor or an evolving renegotiation of tasks along caste divisions is something that needs further empirical probing. "Services" show a clear concentration, with a higher share, much above the average, going to upper-caste women. The social hierarchy is evident in the shares of various social groups, which need to be analysed across sub-sectoral shares (Tables 7, 8, p 57).

The urban distribution helps in the exposition of how social relations are transferred into, as well as affect, employment

outcomes in a system of production relations largely based on markets. Agriculture, even in urban areas, emerges as a key sector of employment for women, with peri-urban agricultural activities remaining important in the economy. Although the sector accounts for 11% of urban employment, its importance varies across social categories, with Muslims and upper castes showing smaller shares, and STs and OBCs showing higher proportions.

The secondary sector (largely manufacturing) is the most significant for Muslim women (57%), who account for about 23% of women workers in the sector. The concentration of Muslim women in manufacturing and its increase needs to be seen in the context of the ongoing crisis among tiny and cottage industries, especially handicrafts and artisanal production.

Construction in urban areas again shows a distinct pattern across social categories, with the proportion declining with an upward movement in social category. This suggests that given alternative employment possibility, there is an aversion to manual casual labour among socially privileged groups. The industry accounted for about 12% of ST women workers; the SC/ST population accounted for about 36% of female workers in the construction industry. Another 41% belonged to OBCs.

Services emerged as the single largest employer of women in urban areas (also with clear concentration across social

groups). The social composition of the sector is evident, with upper-caste women having larger shares (69.1%) in the sector, while Muslims have the lowest share (32.6%). About 61% of SC women are also concentrated in the service sector. Since the services sector comprises diverse industries with varying conditions of work, it is important to analyse the pattern across subcategories to capture the dynamics of social group divisions in this sector. The analysis is again limited to the 68th (2011-12) round of employment data, and is undertaken separately for rural and urban areas.

Disaggregation across broad divisions of the service sector provides interesting insights into the emerging enclaves of urban labour markets for women. Although prominent sectors across social groups match, their relative importance varies across social divisions, which again reinstate both a gendered and a social group-based division of employment. Here, again, education and trade are primary sectors for all social groups, although their relative importance varies. SC is the only social group for whom the category "Activities of households as employers" is primary, accounting for about 25% of all urban SC women workers.

Within education, however, primary education, including pre-primary education, accounts for the largest share of women from all caste/religious categories. But what needs to be noted

**Table 7: Patterns in Sub-sectoral Distribution of Women within the Tertiary Sector across Social Groups-Rural, 2011-12 (UPSS)**

Social Groups	Prominent Subcategories within the Tertiary Sector					
ST	Wholesale and retail trade (31.4)	Education (26.3)	Human health and social work activities (11.6)	Public administration and defence (8.7)	Activities of households as employers (7.3)	Others (14.6)
SC	Education (29.9)	Other services (20.7)	Wholesale and retail trade (19.9)	Activities of households as employers (10.7)	Human health and social work activities (7.0)	Others (18.8)
OBC non- Muslims	Wholesale and retail trade (32.6)	Education (28.7)	Other services (10.9)	Human health and social work activities (8.0)	Accommodation and food service activities (8.0)	Others (11.7)
Muslims	Wholesale and retail trade (40.3)	Education (25.4)	Human health and social work activities (8.7)	Activities of households as employers (8.2)	Accommodation and food service activities (8.0)	Others (9.4)
Upper-caste non-Muslims	Education (43.0)	Wholesale and retail trade (27.4)	Human health and social work activities (7.2)	Other services (5.6)	Activities of households as employers (5.3)	Others (11.6)
Total	Education (31.7)	Wholesale and retail trade (29.5)	Other services (10.7)	Human health and social work activities (8.0)	Activities of households as employers (6.2)	Others (13.9)

Figures in parentheses are shares for that subcategory to the total tertiary-sector employment for the relevant social group.

Source: Unit-level data, NSS Employment and Unemployment Survey, 2011-12.

**Table 8: Patterns in Sub-sectoral Distribution of Women within the Tertiary Sector across Social Groups-Urban, 2011-12 (UPSS)**

Social Groups	Prominent Subcategories within the Tertiary Sector						
ST	Wholesale and retail trade (21.6)	Education (19.4)	Human health and social work activities (15.6)	Other service activities (15.2)	Public admin and defence compulsory social security (10.2)	Activities of households as employers (8.9)	Others (9.2)
SC	Activities of households as employers (24.8)	Other service activities (17.7)	Wholesale and retail trade (17.0)	Education (13.7)	Public admin and defence compulsory social security (8.9)	Human health and social work activities (7.8)	Others (10.1)
OBC non- Muslims	Wholesale and retail trade (22.4)	Education (21.3)	Activities of households as employers (15.1)	Other service activities (11.9)	Human health and social work activities (6.7)	Accommodation and food service activities (6.7)	Others (15.8)
Muslims	Education (25.9)	Wholesale and retail trade (25.6)	Activities of households as employers (18.2)	Other service activities (10.1)	Human health and social work activities (7.4)	Accommodation and food service activities (4.7)	Others (8.1)
Upper-caste non-Muslims	Education (32.2)	Wholesale and retail trade (13.4)	Activities of households as employers (10.2)	Human health and social work activities (9.7)	Other service activities (6.9)	Financial, insurance and real estate activities (5.9)	Others (21.8)
Total	Education (24.2)	Wholesale and retail trade (18.2)	Activities of households as employers (15.1)	Other service activities (11.1)	Human health and social work activities (8.4)	Accommodation and food service activities (5.0)	Others (17.9)

Figures in parentheses are shares for that subcategory to the total tertiary-sector employment for the relevant social group.

Source: Unit-level data, NSS Employment and Unemployment Survey, 2011-12.



is their presence in other, advanced, sub-sectors of education. The share of sectors of higher education among upper-caste women was roughly 50%, while the negligible presence of sc/st women was noted, reaffirming the existing and dominant social understanding of the caste/religious dimensions of higher education. The proportions for Muslims were also much lower compared to those of obcs and upper castes.

Among these industrial divisions, private households with employed persons – the sector that showed a substantial increase in urban female employment – highlights not only the nature of employment generated during the high growth period, but also the emerging social identity of the sector. This increased presence of sc/st women in domestic work has been highlighted in many micro-level studies, and is an outcome of the social understanding of domestic work – such as sweeping, mopping, and other cleaning activities – as menial, with lower social status.

**Table 9: Distribution of Women across Social Groups by Type of Job Contract and Eligibility for Leave (UPSS)**

	ST	SC	OBC Excluding Muslims	Muslims	Upper Castes Excluding Muslims	All Women
<b>Rural</b>						
No written job contract	83.9	84.5	81.0	76.6	63.6	79.3
Written job contract: for one year or less	2.2	4.8	4.1	8.6	7.1	4.8
More than one year to three years	0.3	0.8	1.4	0.2	1.7	1.0
More than three years	13.6	9.9	13.5	14.6	27.6	14.8
Eligible for paid leave	16.3	18.7	25.0	23.4	43.5	24.9
Not eligible for paid leave	83.7	81.3	75.0	76.6	56.5	75.1
<b>Urban</b>						
No written job contract	75.0	75.4	78.1	80.1	59.0	71.1
Written job contract: for one year or less	2.2	3.7	2.7	2.2	4.6	3.5
More than one year to three years	0.4	1.6	3.1	1.2	3.5	2.7
More than three years	22.4	19.4	16.2	16.6	32.8	22.8
Eligible for paid leave	37.6	34.6	37.6	29.9	56.5	42.8
Not eligible for paid leave	62.4	65.4	62.4	70.1	43.5	57.2

Source: Unit-level data, NSS Employment and Unemployment Survey, 2011-12.

However, data also points to the changing social identity of this sector, with women from all social categories accounting for considerable shares. The share is high even for Muslim women (18.2%, much higher than the share of upper castes, which is 10.2%). The share of obcs is also high. Thus, it seems that the increasing demand for domestic work, coupled with the lack of alternate employment opportunities, drives many women – irrespective of their caste backgrounds – to take up such work. The specialisations and diversifications (cooking and caring for children and adults versus cleaning tasks) in this sector may also have contributed to its changing social profile, and needs further investigation.

The data also shows the extent of dispersion across social groups. Thus, while about 21% of upper-caste women are spread across various sub-sectors other than the listed five prominent sectors, Muslim women show the lowest dispersion, followed by sts and scs. More than caste/religion-based identity creation, economic prospects and the potential for social mobility are issues that need attention in this context.

Another aspect of employment, which provides insights into its nature and conditions, is distribution across type of

contracts. Table 9 is self-explanatory, and shows the skewed social group picture. Strikingly, a large number of women across all social groups possess no written contract. However, the proportion varies across social groups, with there being only about 64% of upper castes in this category, compared to 85% for scs in rural areas. Rural and urban areas show a similar picture, with a large proportion of women from the upper castes having more than three years of contract.

A similar, but sharper picture of upper-caste privileges is seen when the data is disaggregated across eligibility for paid leave. More than half of the women from upper castes were eligible for paid leave in both rural and urban areas, while Muslim women have the lowest proportion in urban areas, at 30%. These findings reiterate that pre-existing social hierarchies are maintained and reinforced (or at least reflected) in the labour market, although production organisation and employment relations have changed over time.

### Concluding Remarks

Caste differentiations are often expected to weaken and eventually disappear with economic development and urbanisation/modernisation. However, the foregoing analysis suggests that social and cultural inequalities continue to have a strong bearing on employment outcomes, even when the latter are determined by market forces. The market seems to operate within the existing structural inequalities of gender and caste/religion; and rather than altering these inequalities, it worsens and reinforces them. Both these result in layers of exclusion and exploitation, leading to status hierarchies based on male-female identities and other social divisions.

Thus, women from certain communities are losing out faster than others. The concentration of women from certain communities in specific sectors appears to be less a matter of choice and more an outcome of gender (intertwined with caste-based) stereotyping. On a more generic level, it is worth noting that notwithstanding all the hype about expanding opportunities for paid employment at the lowest rungs of service-sector jobs, there is a decline in the pwr for women from marginalised communities, even in urban areas. The domination of upper-caste women in the modern sectors of the economy and in occupations with better conditions of work signals a consolidation of caste-based advantages, even within a larger context of women's marginalisation.

The analysis also clearly suggests a deepening of gender-based inequality in employment. It is clear that gender is the primary axis of marginalisation and segmentation in employment, as evident from the uniform trend in women's employment across social groups (particularly marked by a crisis in female employment). The analysis also reveals a slight tendency for social group differentiation among women to level out over time. However, gender differentiation shows no sign of change, reinforcing the fact that gender remains the key challenge to female employment issues. Within the overall trend of gender differences, though, differentiation across social groups needs to be acknowledged.

Given this, the employment question of women deserves critical attention. A shortage of employment opportunities is a

decisive factor that could create and further segmentations in employment. Restrictions preventing socially privileged women from taking up wage work are clearly declining, particularly in urban areas, although this could be determined specifically by the nature and sector of employment. This means increased competition for certain categories of employment, and the educational and social disadvantage of marginalised communities means that they lose out in a major way.

The analysis has highlighted some broad patterns of social differentiation across women workers. However, it is problematic to assume that the nature and extent of marginalisation faced by all women in a given social group is identical, or even. Since sharp economic and social differentiations marked all social groups during the period under consideration, a nuanced understanding of the issue is warranted, possible only through intensive micro-level research.

## NOTES

- 1 Government of India (2006): the report of the committee was not only successful in raising the overall issues of the community, but has also provided substantial aid in initiating a discourse on women's economic status in the community.
- 2 Since census data does not record the caste identity of any respondent except that of SCs and STs, no further analysis is possible. The use of census data is also limited because of the non-publication of socio-economic data and working status by religion.
- 3 The five castes and religions followed in the analysis are derived by combining religion and caste status available in the household schedule of the NSS with the individual employment schedule, following NSS estimation procedures.
- 4 Although the NSS, since it follows the reporting method, allows for this disaggregation, too.
- 5 The National Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Finance and Development Corporation supports SC and ST groups in a number of ways when it comes to setting up enterprises and businesses. Similar corporations have also been set up in a number of states.
- 6 Own-account workers are the self-employed who operate their enterprises on their own account or with one or few partners, and run

their enterprises without hiring any labour. However, they may have unpaid helpers to assist them, mostly family members, who keep themselves engaged in their household enterprises as assistants working full or part-time, and do not receive any regular salary or wages in return for the work performed.

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