

Trends in Women's Employment in Punjab

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Abstract

In contemporary society, women's status has undergone significant transformation, driven by advancements in education, technological progress, government initiatives, empowerment programs, and evolving social norms. Consequently, women's participation in the labour market has expanded considerably, a trend particularly evident in Punjab. Historically confined to domestic roles, women are now emerging as vital contributors across diverse sectors, including education, healthcare, banking, administration, industry, agriculture, information technology, law enforcement, judiciary, and business enterprises. Employment has afforded women financial independence, enhanced self-confidence, and strengthened their social identity. Nevertheless, this increased participation has introduced new challenges, such as heightened stress, difficulties in balancing professional and domestic responsibilities, societal expectations, job insecurity, and elevated levels of anxiety. The purpose of this study is to examine the rising trend of women's

employment in Punjab, identify the key factors driving this shift, assess its implications for psychological well-being, and analyse the major challenges faced. Furthermore, the study seeks to propose policy measures and practical interventions to address these issues and promote sustainable women's empowerment.

Keywords: Women, Employment, Mental Health, Financial Independence, Stress, Punjab, Women Empowerment.

Introduction

Women play an important role in the development of any nation or society. In the 1990s the country experienced liberalisation, industrialisation, urbanisation and globalisation. From this perspective there was an effect on the working conditions and the jobs that were available to women. More jobs in cities for women, in both the private sectors have allowed them to work as independent workers or professionals. This has helped them to be part of the development of the country.

Though Punjab is predominantly an agricultural state, today it is witnessing tremendous development in education, health, banking, industry, information technology, trade and services. This development has led to increased participation of women in employment in different capacities. Previously engaged in domestic duties, allied activities to agriculture and looking after the family, women are now forging a niche for themselves as teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers, bank employees, administrative officers, policewomen, lawyers, professors, journalists, scientists, industrialists and experts in information technology. Not only this, but women in Punjab are also involved in economic activities through self-help groups, micro enterprises, small-scale business enterprises, online business activities and other digital platforms³.

Employment has provided women with financial independence, enhanced self-confidence, social recognition, and greater decision-making authority. A financially autonomous woman not only contributes to household income but also actively participates in critical family decisions, including those related to children's education, healthcare, and the family's long-term well-being. Beyond economic contributions, employment affords women a distinct social identity, self-esteem, and self-sufficiency, enabling them to engage more effectively in societal

development. In this context, women's labour is significant not merely as a means of achieving financial independence but also as a cornerstone for advancing social justice, promoting gender equality, and fostering sustainable development⁴.

While women's participation in employment represents a positive and progressive trend, it is accompanied by significant challenges. In contemporary society, working women are required to simultaneously pursue professional careers while managing domestic responsibilities and caregiving roles. This dual burden often results in considerable physical and psychological strain, as women must balance occupational demands with household obligations. Moreover, workplace-related issues—including interpersonal rivalry, extended working hours, job insecurity, limited opportunities for advancement, gender-based discrimination, and sexual harassment—further exacerbate stress and negatively affect women's mental health. Consequently, employment, despite its empowering potential, can also pose substantial risks to women's psychological well-being through multiple pathways.⁵

Mental health is an essential part of overall health and well-being. The World Health Organisation defined mental health as “a state of well-being in which an individual realises his or her own abilities, copes with the normal stresses of life, works productively and fruitfully, and contributes to the community.” Therefore, if an employed woman has poor mental health due to some stresses caused by employment, it will not only affect her performance at the job but also impact her family, child, career, and overall well-being. This is why the relationship between employment and mental health is of great importance.⁶ Alongside socio-economic changes in Punjab, significant transformations have occurred in the roles of women. Today's woman values both her career and her family. However, to maintain this balance, she faces a variety of social, economic, and psychological challenges. Consequently, it is the collective responsibility of the government, employers, family, and society to create a work environment wherein women can remain secure, respected, and mentally healthy to fully develop their potential.⁷

According to the World Mental Health Report published by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2022), mental health is a state of well-being in which one realises one's own potential, copes with the stresses of life, works productively, and contributes to the community, and it is not merely the absence of disease. The report notes that working women face greater risks of stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems due to their multiple roles.⁸

Similarly, the Women in Employment: Global Trends report published by the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2022) states that women’s labour force participation worldwide has increased, but gender pay gaps, discrimination, and work-life balance issues are persistent challenges. The report highlights the importance of fostering a supportive work environment for women’s mental health.

1.1 Total Female Employment Rate in Punjab

The female employment rate serves as a key indicator of women’s economic participation and empowerment in Punjab. Over the years, this rate has fluctuated, reflecting both progress and persistent challenges shaped by sociocultural norms, institutional barriers, and policy interventions. Tracking these trends provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of government initiatives, the role of the private sector, and the broader socio-economic transformation of the province. Ultimately, the employment rate highlights not only women’s contribution to the labour force but also their impact on household welfare and sustainable development.

Table 1.1: Total Female Employment Rate in Punjab (%)

Year	Total Female Employment Rate (%)
2000-2001	18.7%
2004-2005	21.3%
2009-2010	15.0%
2011-2012	13.9%
2014-2015	12.3%
2017-2018	11.7%
2018-2019	12.6%
2019-2020	14.8%
2020-2021	16.6%
2021-2022	17.2%
2022-2023	18.1%
2023-2024	18.4%
2024-2025	21.5%

2025-2026	23.5% to 24.1%
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Sources: Reports of the Central Statistical Organisation (CSO); Employment-related reports of the International Labour Organisation (ILO); Reports of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) on employment and labour force participation.

The data presented in Table 1.1 reflect the changing trends in female employment rates in Punjab over the past two decades. The data indicates that female workforce participation in Punjab reached its peak at 21.3% in 2004–05, largely due to the significant involvement of women in the agricultural and unorganised sectors. This reflects the reliance of rural economies on women’s labour, particularly in subsistence farming and informal work arrangements. In comparison, the rate stood at 18.7% in 2000–01, which also demonstrates a notable contribution of women to these sectors during that period.

Thereafter, a downward trend was witnessed in the rate from 15 % in 2009-10 to 11.7 % in 2017-18. The significant decline could be attributed to mechanisation of agriculture, fewer employment opportunities in rural areas, opting for higher education by many females, social constraints, and domestic responsibilities. Many women remained engaged in unpaid family help, resulting in their lower presence in the workforce.

On the other hand, since 2018-19, a positive change has been observed. As per PLFS, the female workforce participation rate in Punjab has risen from 12.6 % to 21.5 % in 2024-25. The main reason for this increase has been a rise in the female literacy rate along with the emergence of the digital economy, service sector, micro enterprises, self-employment, self-help groups, and government welfare schemes. Even in the post-COVID-19 situation, many women have chosen to set up work from home, online businesses, and allied enterprises.

It is estimated that the female workforce participation rate in Punjab will rise to 23.5-24.1 % in 2025-26. Thus, if adequate efforts are made to provide quality education to females, skill development training, create a safe working environment, ensure gender equitable pay, crèches at workplaces, and women-specific benefits, then the female workforce participation rate in Punjab can be increased.

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that the female employment participation rate in Punjab has witnessed a fluctuating pattern during the last two decades. While there was an initial rise followed by a steep fall, a positive change has been recorded in recent times. It must be

noted that social, economic, educational, and policy factors have a great role in determining the female workforce participation rate. Thus, to increase the rate, efforts must be made to provide quality opportunities in education, a safe working environment, social security, skill development, and mental health support to women.

1.2: Income Patterns of Working Women in Punjab

The income patterns of working women in Punjab serve as a crucial indicator of their economic empowerment and contribution to household and societal development. Over time, rising earnings across regular salaried jobs, self-employment, and daily wage labour reflect not only women's growing participation in diverse sectors but also the impact of education, skill development, and policy interventions. Tracking these income trends provides valuable insights into women's financial independence, their role in strengthening family welfare, and their broader influence on socio-economic progress.

Table 1.2: Income Patterns of Working Women in Punjab

Year	Regular Salaried Jobs (Per Month)	Self-Employment Income (Per Month)	Daily Wagers / Agricultural Labour (Per Day)
2000- 2001	₹2,500 – ₹4,500	₹800 – ₹1,500	40 – ₹60
2004-2005	₹4,000_₹6500	₹1500-₹2500	₹70-₹90
2009-2010	₹6000-₹9500	₹2000-₹3500	₹100-₹120
2011-2012	₹7000-₹11000	₹2500-₹4000	₹120-₹150
2014–2015	₹9500-₹14000	₹3200-₹5000	₹160-₹190
2017–2018	₹12000-₹18000	₹4000-₹6500	₹200-₹240
2019-2020	₹14000-₹21000	₹5000-₹8000	₹250-₹290
2021-2022	₹15000-₹24000	₹5500-₹9000	₹280-₹330
2023-2024	₹17,000 – ₹30,000	₹6,500 – ₹12,000	₹350 – ₹420
2024-2025	₹18,500 – ₹33,000	₹7,500 – ₹14,000	₹400 – ₹480
2026(proj)	₹19,000 – ₹35,000+	₹8,000 – ₹15,000	₹450 – ₹518

Sources: Annual reports of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS); Wage and employment reports of the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

The data in Table 1.2 highlight the evolving income trends of employed women in Punjab across different categories of work. Over the years, there has been a steady rise in earnings for women engaged in regular salaried jobs, self-employment, and daily wage or agricultural labour.

In 2000–2001, the average personal income for women in Punjab ranged between ₹2,500 and ₹4,500 per month, while family income from self-employment was estimated at ₹800–₹1,500 per month, and daily wages for agricultural labour stood at ₹40–₹60 per day. These figures clearly indicate that the majority of women were engaged in the agricultural sector and the unorganised workforce, where pay levels were relatively low. However, from 2004–2005 to 2017–2018, there was a notable rise in women’s earnings. This increase can be attributed to several factors, including the expansion of women’s education and qualifications, the growth of the service sector, and the rise of self-employment opportunities. Additionally, improvements in minimum wage rates and the availability of government jobs contributed significantly to higher income levels. Overall, this period reflects a transition in women’s economic participation, moving from low-paid agricultural work toward more diverse and better-paying employment opportunities.

Income for 2019 – 2020 to 2024 – 2025 is significantly higher. Monthly personal income accounted for Rs. 14,000 – 33,000, family income – Rs. 5,000 – 14,000, and daily wages – Rs. 250 – 480. The reason for this is a woman’s share in higher education, professional and IT qualifications, employment in the health, education, and banking sector, self-employment, and digitalisation.

According to the forecast for 2026, personal income is projected to be Rs. 19,000 – 35,000 or higher, family income – Rs. 8,000 – 15,000, and daily wages – Rs. 450 – 518. This means that the expansion of training, equal pay, and qualitative working conditions will allow women to further increase their incomes. It is evident that the rise in female employment has made a substantial contribution to Punjab’s economic growth through increased income levels among working women. The growing participation of women in the labour force has not only enabled them to enhance their personal living standards but has also strengthened the economic foundation of their families. By earning independently, women are able to influence household decisions related to children’s education, healthcare, and overall family welfare, thereby elevating their socio-economic status. Furthermore, women’s income has a multiplier effect, positively impacting nutrition, family well-being, and broader socio-economic development. In

this sense, the increasing trend of female employment is not only a driver of individual empowerment but also a catalyst for sustainable economic and social progress in Punjab.

Conclusion

The paper concluded that women's employment has emerged as a vital contributor to the socio-economic development of Punjab. Although female labour force participation experienced a decline during the first two decades of the twenty-first century due to factors such as mechanisation of agriculture, social norms, educational pursuits, and domestic responsibilities, recent years have witnessed a steady recovery. Expanding opportunities in the service sector, digital economy, self-employment, entrepreneurship, and supportive government initiatives have encouraged greater participation of women in the workforce.

The study further reveals a consistent improvement in the income levels of working women across regular salaried employment, self-employment, and daily wage occupations. Rising educational attainment, skill development, technological advancement, and increasing employment opportunities have enhanced women's financial independence and strengthened household welfare. Women's earnings have not only improved their standard of living but have also contributed significantly to children's education, healthcare, nutrition, and overall family well-being. However, economic empowerment alone does not guarantee overall well-being. Working women continue to face numerous challenges, including work-life imbalance, workplace stress, gender discrimination, job insecurity, and limited career advancement opportunities, all of which have important implications for their mental health. The increasing responsibilities associated with balancing professional and family roles make psychological well-being an essential component of sustainable women's empowerment.

Therefore, future policy interventions should focus not only on increasing female employment but also on creating safe, inclusive, and mentally healthy workplaces. Measures such as equal pay for equal work, flexible working arrangements, maternity and childcare support, effective implementation of workplace safety laws, mental health counselling services, skill enhancement programmes, and gender-sensitive organisational practices are essential. Such initiatives will strengthen women's economic participation while promoting their psychological well-being, thereby contributing to inclusive growth, gender equality, and the sustainable development of

Punjab.

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