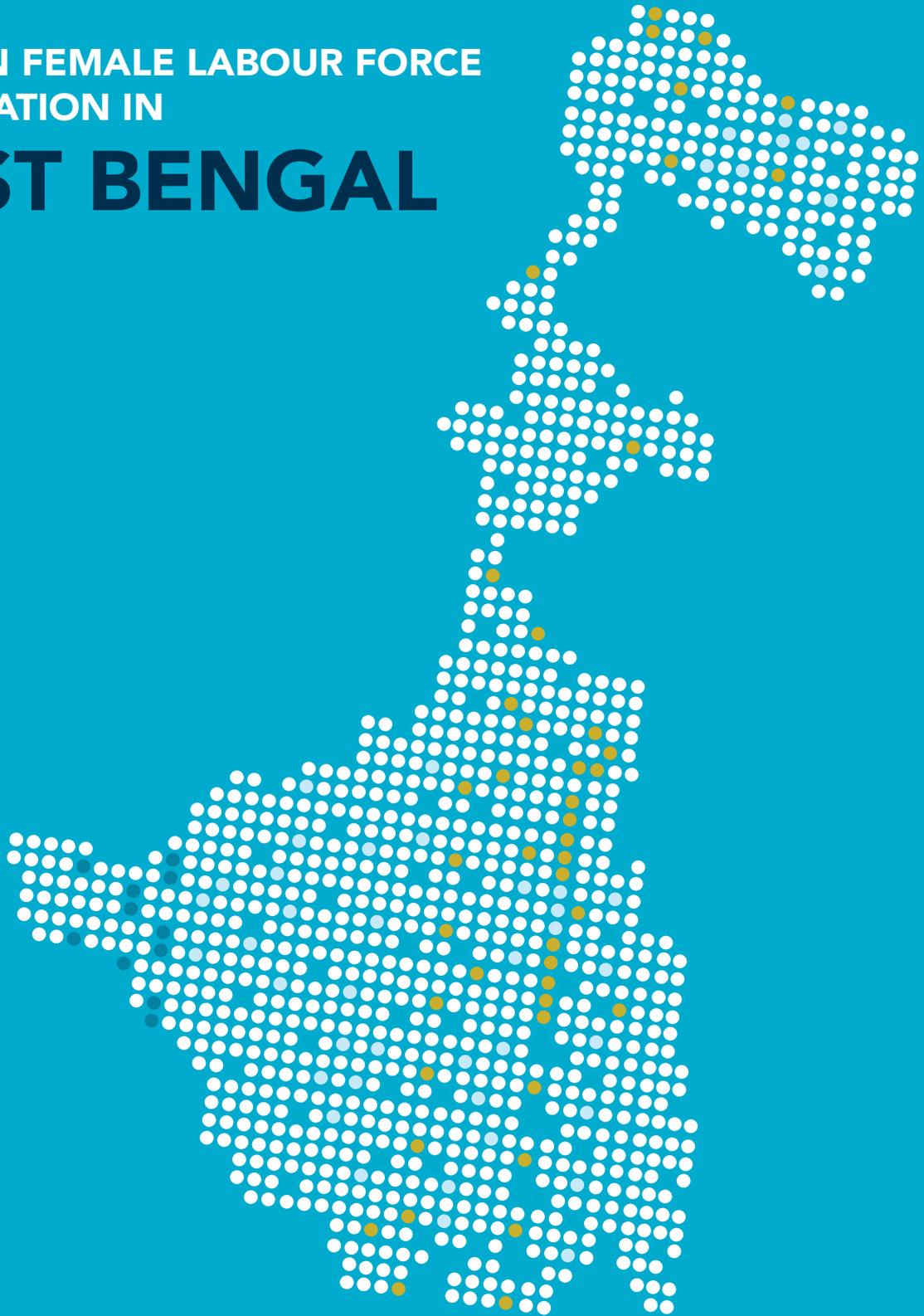


TREND IN FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION IN **WEST BENGAL**



This factsheet highlights important aspects of the status of women's employment in West Bengal. The factsheets use secondary data provided by the National Sample Surveys' Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), 2017-18 to 2023-24.





WEST BENGAL

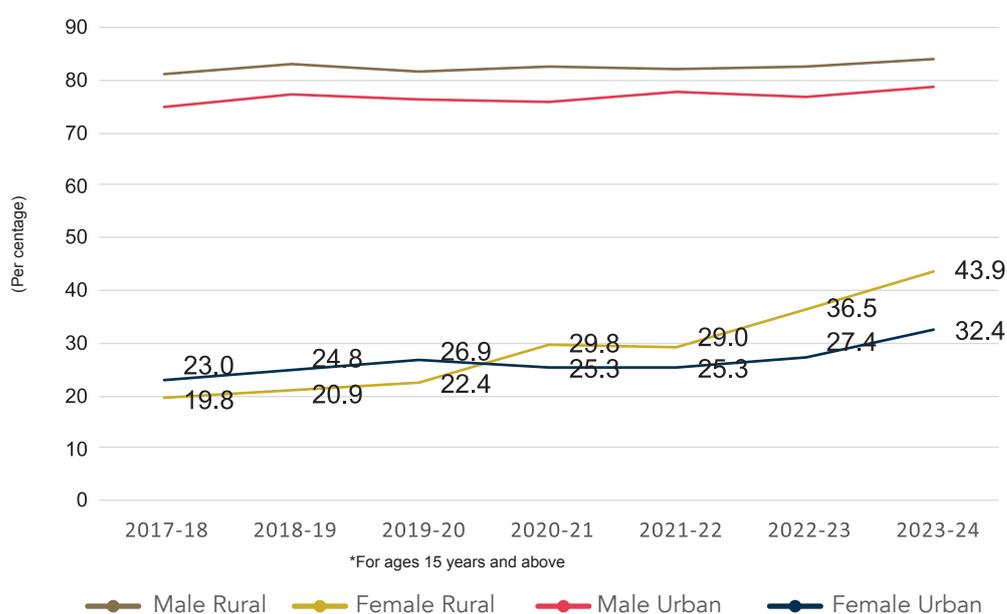
Introduction

West Bengal, one of India's populous and economically significant states, has experienced robust economic growth in recent years, yet continues to portray significant structural challenges that shape the landscape of women's work and gender equality. The state has historically been known for its rich agricultural base, cultural vibrancy and industrial legacy. The Gross State Domestic Product is projected to grow by 12 per cent in 2025-26¹, reaching Rs. 20.3 lakh crore, outpacing the national average. The manufacturing sector has played a crucial role in driving this shift, and the current growth is further propelled by substantial investments across various sectors.² Along with an increased investment in manufacturing and IT, there is great potential in the state's MSME sector that has shown to exceed its credit target in the fiscal year 2024-25. Despite these improvements, the per capita GSDP in 2023-24 stands at Rs 1,71,184, which is below the national average, indicating a gap in average income levels. Additionally, as per the latest data from NSO, West Bengal experiences a significant contraction in informal sector jobs, losing approximately 3 million such jobs in the last seven years. This shrinkage is concerning given dependence on informal employment for the majority of the workforce especially for women.³ West Bengal is also one of India's leading states in terms of inter-state outmigration, with implications for its labour market landscape. A large number of people- especially those with skills and education leave the state in hope for better working opportunities.⁴ The state has already been known for consistently lower rates of female labour force participation and over-representation of this workforce in low-paying informal jobs or in low-productivity sectors such as agriculture. The high rates of outmigration often add to the existing over-representation of women in low-productivity and low-paying sectors such as agriculture and domestic work. The persistent gender disparities highlight the urgent need for targeted policies and interventions to improve women's access to quality, secure and remunerative employment opportunities. This factsheet aims to explore various aspects of women's employment within the state.

Trends in Female Labour Force Participation Rates

- Since 2017-18, the rural female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) in West Bengal has shown a steady increase, rising from 19.8 per cent to 43.9 per cent by 2023-24, despite a temporary dip during the pandemic. Despite this steady increase, rural female labour force participation rate in West Bengal is still far lower than the national values (47.6 per cent). In contrast, the rural male LFPR has remained relatively stable, fluctuating slightly but overall increasing from 81.3 per cent in 2017-18 to 84.0 per cent in 2023-24.
- In urban regions, the female LFPR recorded an overall increase, rising from 23.0 per cent to 32.4 per cent in 2023-24. Meanwhile, the urban male LFPR showed minor fluctuations but ultimately increased from 75.1 per cent to 79.0 per cent over the same period. Overall, women's labour force participation rates are higher in urban geographies in West Bengal as compared to the national urban values (28.0 per cent).

Figure 1: Trend in LFPR from PLFS 2017-18 to 2023-24

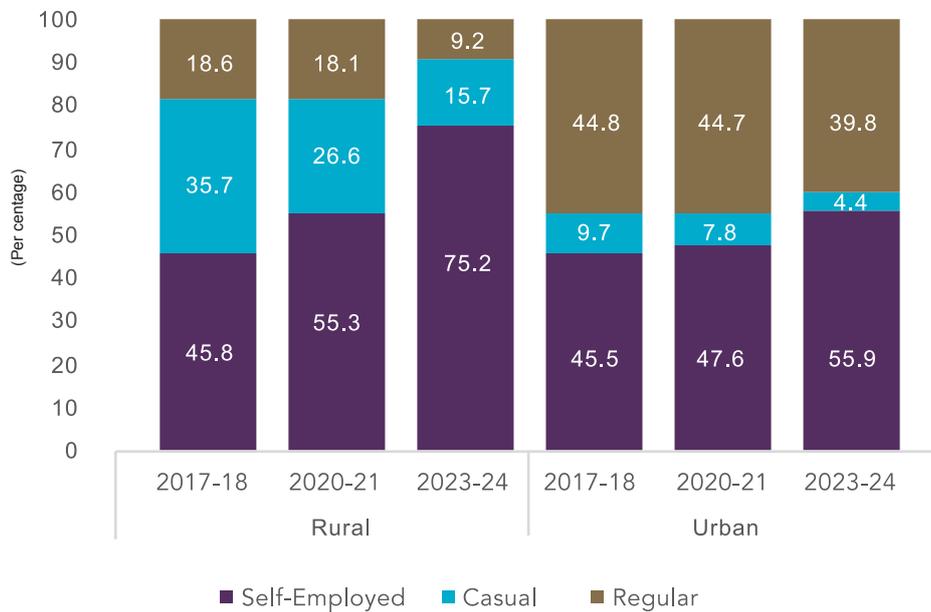




Distribution of Women Workers by Status of Employment

- In rural West Bengal, the share of self-employed women has grown substantially – rising from 45.8 per cent in 2017-18 to 75.2 per cent in 2023-24 mirroring national values. This increase in self-employment has been accompanied by a sharp decline in casual employment, which fell from 35.7 per cent to 15.7 per cent. Over the same time period, the proportion of women in regular salaried employment also declined steadily from 18.6 per cent to 9.2 per cent. This decline in both casual and regular salaried employment aligns with national trends, except these values are slightly more than the national rural values.
- Among urban women, self-employment increased from 45.5 per cent in 2017-18 to 55.9 per cent in 2023-24. Casual employment among urban women halved, decreasing from 9.7 per cent to 4.4 per cent during this period. Similarly, the share of women in regular salaried employment slightly declined from 44.8 per cent to 39.8 per cent, indicating a shift towards self-employment even in urban areas. The decrease in regular salaried jobs and casual employment, along with the rise in the share of self-employment in urban areas, aligns with the national trends. The higher share of self-employed women workforce can be attributed to multiple concerted efforts by the government. According to the latest Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises, West Bengal has the highest percentage of women-headed establishments in the country, standing at an impressive 36.4 per cent.⁵

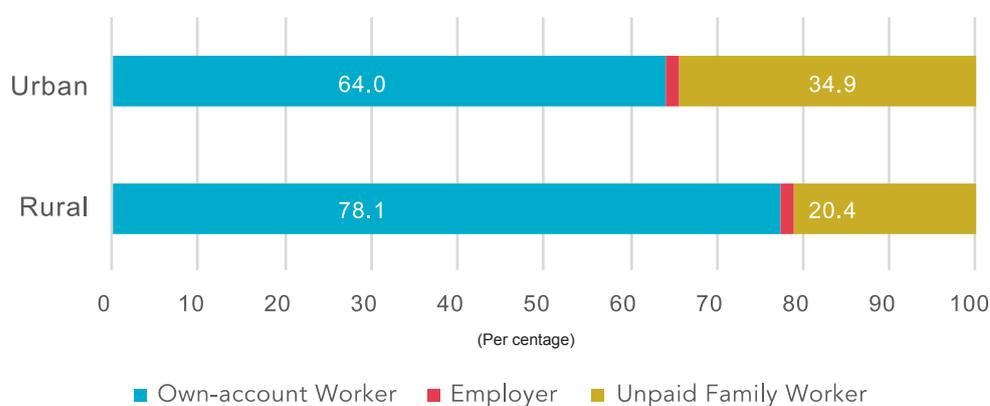
Figure 2: Women Workforce Distribution across Type of Employment



*For ages 15 years and above

- In rural West Bengal, 64.0 per cent of self-employed women are own-account workers, while a significant 34.9 per cent are engaged as unpaid family workers. Only 1.1 per cent operate as employers. Compared to national trends, the share of unpaid family helpers is much lower, indicating a shift for greater economic independence through roles that offer more control over their earnings. Higher values of own-account workers in rural geographies can potentially be the results of targeted policy efforts introduced by the state government to promote self-employment among women. These include schemes such as Swami Vivekananda Swanirbhar Karmasansthan Prakalpa, West Bengal Swarojgar Sahayak Prakalpa, and the West Bengal Women Development Undertaking, among others. These efforts have been specifically designed to provide market linkage to the Self-Help Group (SHG) members through credit linkages, interest subvention and accident coverage.⁶ Among urban self-employed women, 78.1 per cent are own-account workers, and 20.4 per cent are unpaid family workers. A very small proportion, 1.6 per cent, are employers.

Figure 3: Distribution of Self-Employed Women

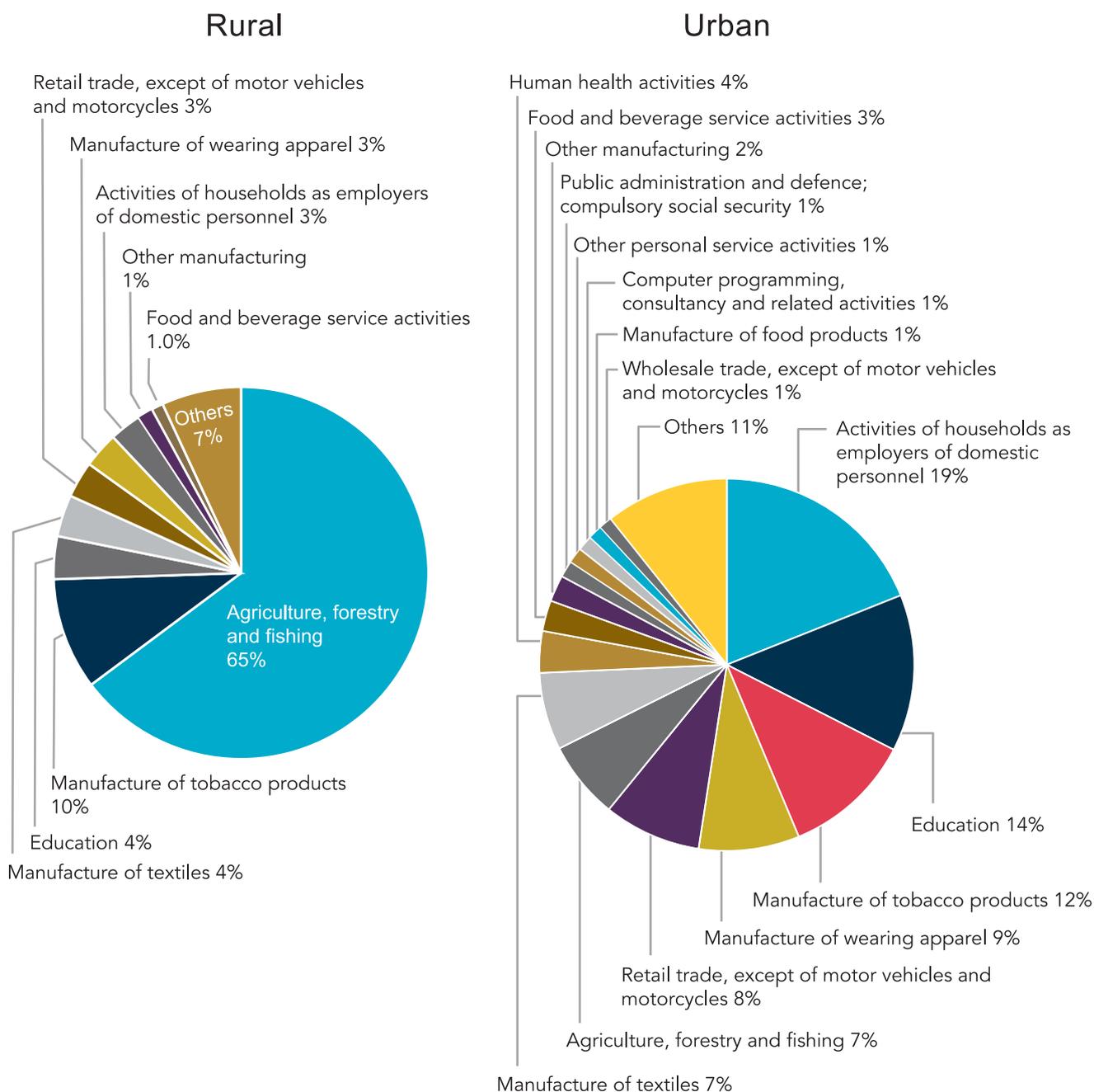


*For ages 15 years and above

Distribution of Women Workers by Broad Industry Divisions

- In rural West Bengal, a dominant 64.8 per cent of the female workforce is engaged in agriculture, forestry, and fishing. This is followed by the manufacture of tobacco products (9.7 per cent) and education (3.7 per cent). The share of women in agriculture remains considerably high, aligning closely with the national rural trends.
- In urban areas, the largest share of the female workforce is engaged in household activities as employers of domestic personnel (18.9 per cent), followed by education (13.6 per cent) and the manufacture of tobacco products (11.2 per cent). Agriculture, although significant in rural areas, accounts for only 6.8 per cent of urban female employment, reflecting a sectoral shift towards services and light manufacturing. This shift contrasts with national trends, where agriculture and education are the dominant divisions for employing women workers in urban geographies.
- Higher values of female workers engaged in household activities is rooted in a long-standing tradition of female domestic labour, specifically in West Bengal. Many women from rural districts migrate to urban centres such as Kolkata, with local 'centres' facilitating this migration by acting as employment hubs that connect rural women with urban households. With limited formal sector opportunities to women, domestic work remains a key source of income despite poor working conditions and low wages.^{7,8}

Figure 4: Distribution of Women Workforce by Broad Industry Divisions

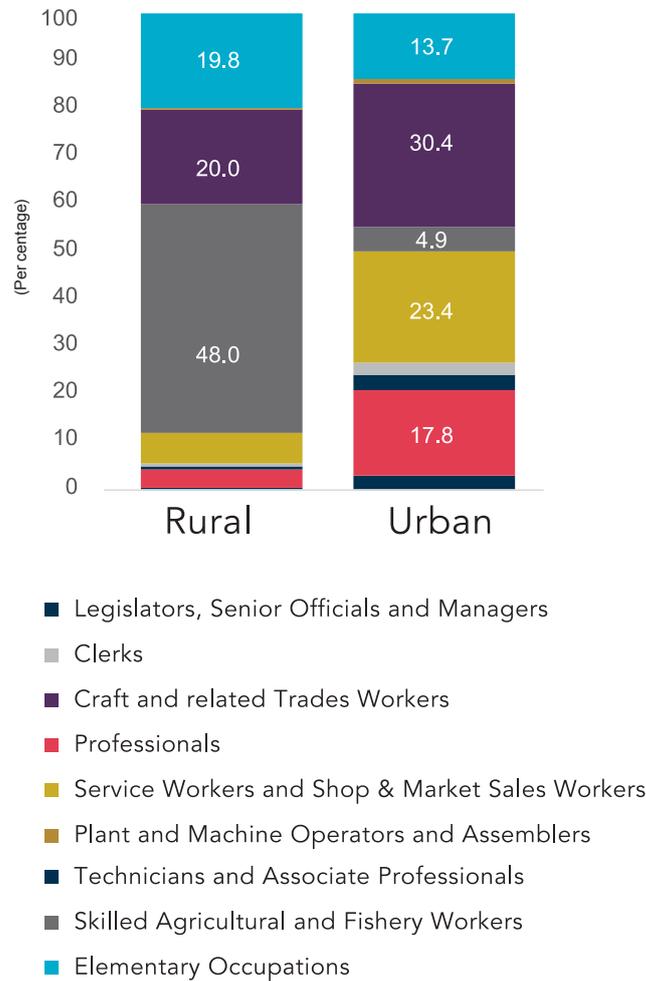


Distribution of Women Workers by Occupation Types

- In rural West Bengal, skilled agricultural and fishery work (48.0 per cent) remains the primary occupation for women, followed by craft and related trades work (20.0 per cent) and elementary occupations (19.8 per cent). Agricultural work continues to dominate,, alongside craft activities which engage a significant portion of women in rural areas.
- In urban West Bengal, craft and related trades workers (30.4 per cent) account for the largest share of the female workforce, followed by service workers and shop/market sales workers (23.4 per cent) and professionals (17.8 per cent). The occupational distribution in West Bengal differs significantly with the national trend, where elementary occupations, professionals and service workers form the dominant categories. Overall, the share of women engaged in craft and service work is considerably higher in the state, with a significant proportion also engaged in the service sector. Higher concentration of women in craft and related trade workers can be explained by the traditional home-based nature of many women's enterprises as well as the state government's attempt to promote rural craft sectors through initiatives like the Rural Craft Hub.⁹



Figure 5: Occupational Classification of Women Workers

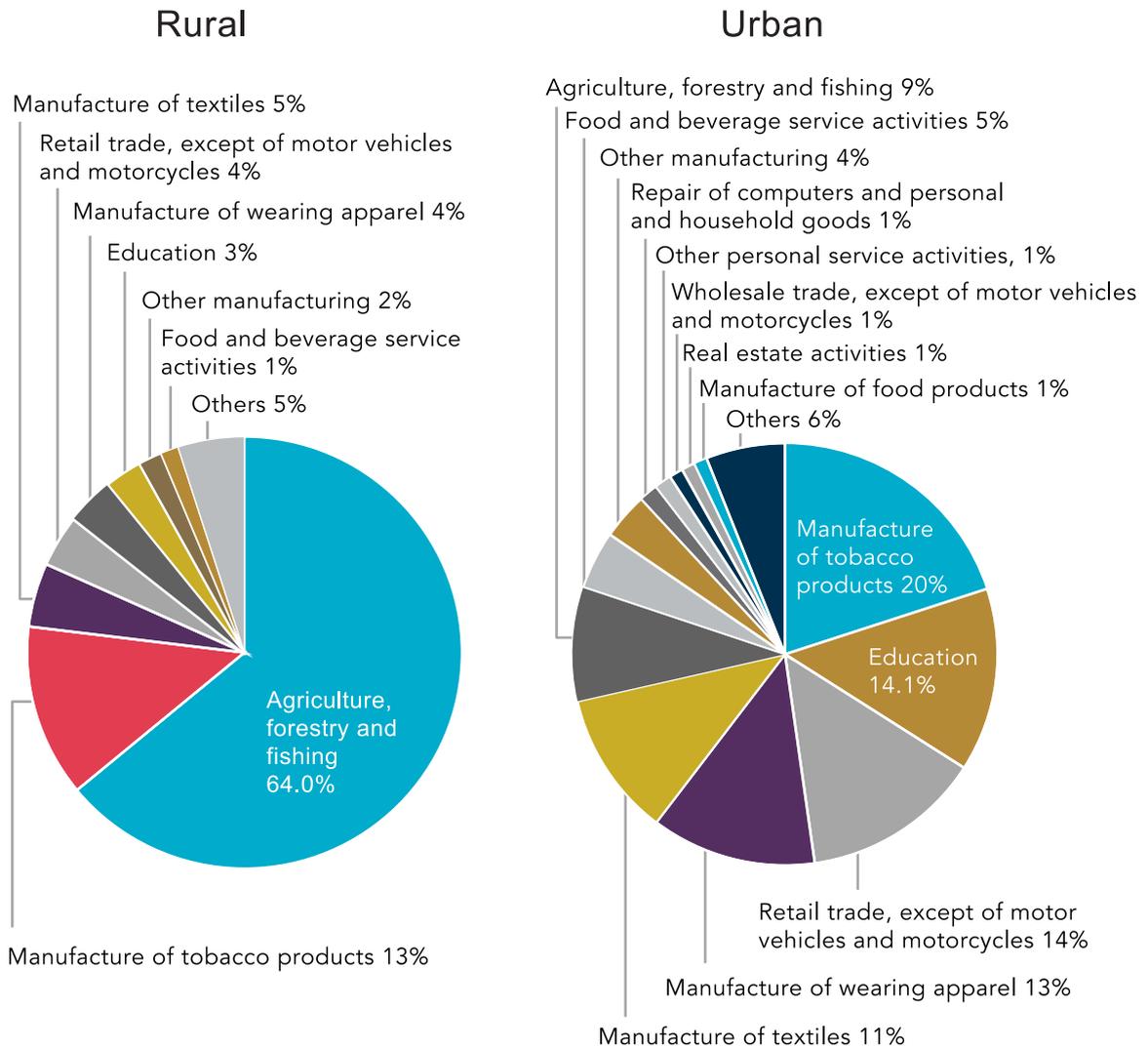


Distribution of Self-employed Women Workers by Broad Industry Types

- In rural West Bengal, among self-employed women 64.0 per cent are engaged in Agriculture, forestry and fishing activities. This is followed by manufacture of tobacco products (12.9 per cent) and manufacture of textiles (4.8 per cent).
- In urban West Bengal, self-employed women are primarily concentrated in manufacture of tobacco products (20.0 per cent), education (14.1 per cent), and retail trade (13.7 per cent). Engagement in agriculture among urban self-employed women is comparatively low (8.7 per cent).
- Higher shares of women engaged in the manufacture of tobacco products is rooted in the state's entrenched beedi industry, and the nature of this work being accessible to women and allowing them to combine income generation with household responsibilities.



Figure 6: Distribution of Self-employed Women Workforce by Broad Industry Types

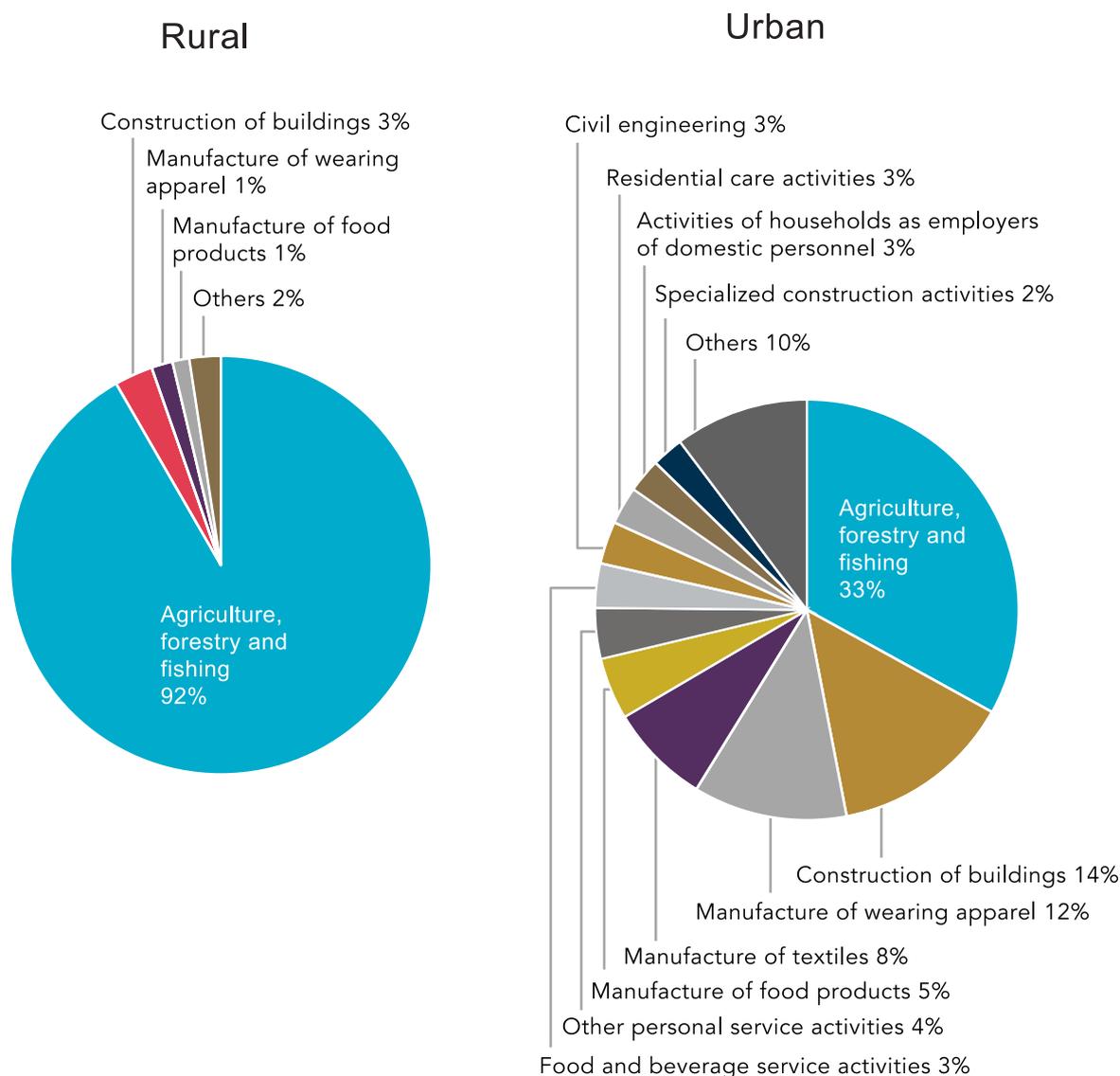


*For ages 15 years and above

Distribution of Casual Women Workers by Broad Industry Types

- In rural West Bengal, casual women workers are overwhelmingly concentrated in agriculture, forestry, and fishing, accounting for 91.7 per cent of employment. This is followed by construction of buildings (3 per cent), and manufacture of wearing apparel (1.6 per cent).
- In urban West Bengal, the distribution is more diversified. Agriculture, forestry, and fishing still employs a significant share (33.1 per cent), but other sectors show notable participation. This is followed by building construction (13.9 per cent), manufacture of wearing apparel (11.8 per cent) and manufacture of textiles (7.8 per cent).

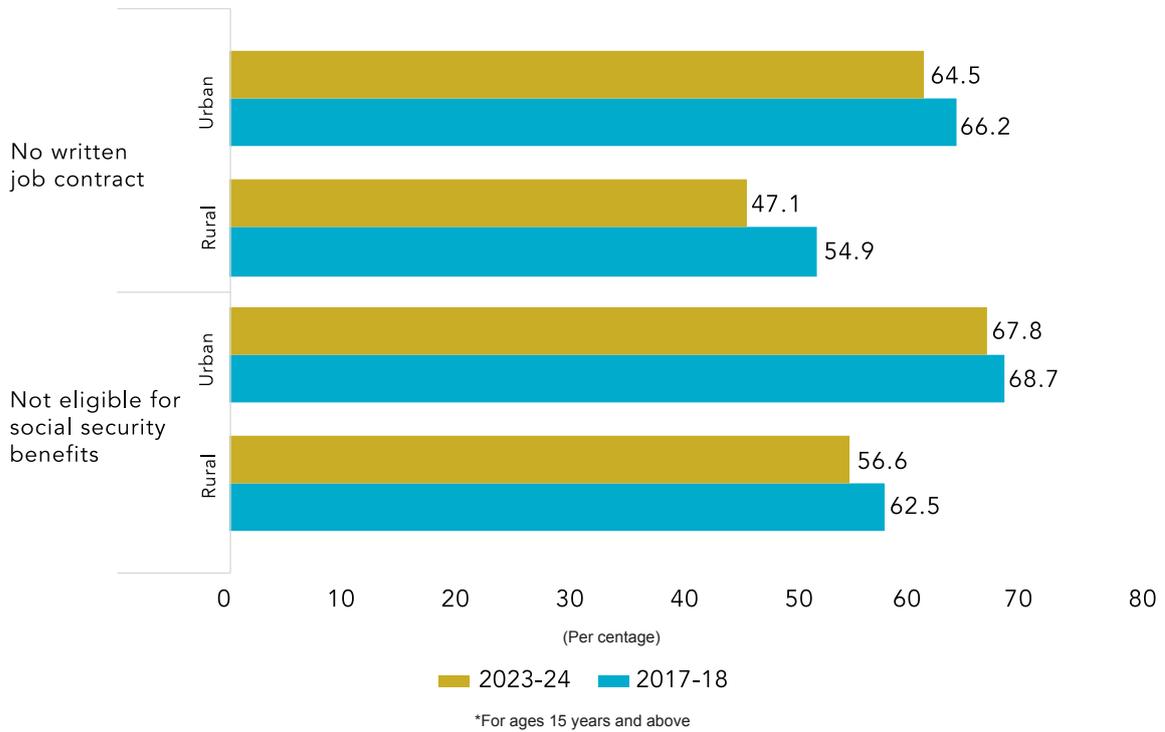
Figure 7: Distribution of Casual Women Workforce by Broad Industry Types



Condition of Work in Regular Employment

- Between 2017-18 and 2023-24, access to social and job security among regular salaried women has remained limited, especially in rural areas.
- The share of regular salaried women without access to social security benefits declined modestly in rural areas, from 62.5 per cent in 2017-18 to 56.6 per cent in 2023-24. In urban areas, the decline was marginal, from 68.7 per cent to 67.8 per cent. Despite these improvements, a significant proportion of women remain excluded from social protection, highlighting persisting vulnerabilities.
- In terms of written job contracts, there has been a slight improvement as the share of regular salaried women without a job contract declined from 54.9 per cent to 47.1 per cent in rural areas, and from 66.2 per cent to 64.5 per cent in urban areas between 2017-18 and 2023-24.

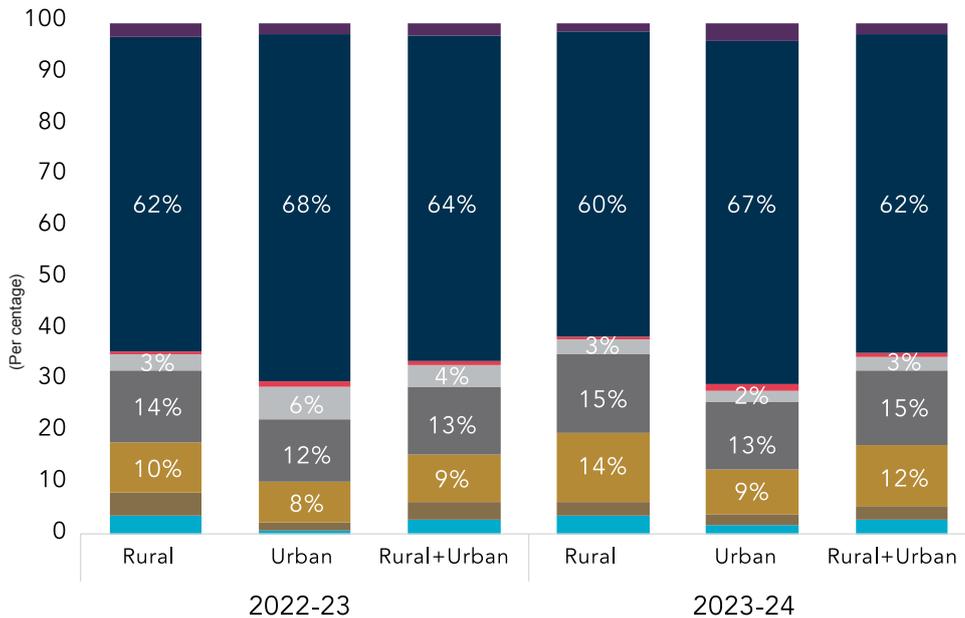
Figure 8: Presence of Social Security and Job Contracts - For Regular Salaried Women



Reason for Not Being in the Labour Force

- In rural areas of the state, 60 per cent of women cited childcare and domestic chores as the primary barrier to labour force participation in 2023-24.
- Similarly, in urban areas of the state, 67 per cent of women, cite household responsibilities as continuing to deter women's participation in the workforce.
- There is a very slight increase in the proportion of women who cite the desire to continue studying as a reason for not being in the labour force from 14 per cent to 15 per cent in rural areas and from 12 per cent to 13 per cent in urban areas. This indicates that there is a growing aspiration for higher education among women across both rural and urban geographies of West Bengal.
- Additionally, health and age-related reasons, particularly in rural areas, is cited by 14 per cent women as a barrier to participating in the workforce. These estimates have increased from 10 per cent within a year, and therefore point towards potential gaps in health support systems for working-age women.

Figure 9: Reason For Not Being in the Labour Force



*For ages 15 years and above

- Did not have the required training /qualification/age for work
- Health/age related reason
- Child care/personal commitments in home making
- Social reasons
- Non availability of work at a convenient locatio
- Want to continue study-
- Financially well-off
- Others

Conclusion

Despite the state’s robust economic growth and recent improvements in female labour force participation rates, most women continue to engage in low-productivity, informal and home-based work such as agriculture, tobacco manufacturing, and traditional crafts. The state has witnessed a steady rise in FLFPR, especially in rural areas, however it still continues to lag behind the national average. Alongside this rise, there is a sharper increase in self-employment across both rural and urban areas, with the decline of regular and casual work, raising questions about quality and security of employment. While the state boasts to have the highest number of women-headed unincorporated enterprises, research suggests that the predominance of self-employment in both farm and non-farm sectors is largely characterised by small-scale, petty production with meagre returns. For most women, self-employment is less a matter of entrepreneurial choice and more a reflection of necessity and the lack of viable alternatives in the formal labour market.¹⁰

The state reports to have slight improvements in terms of share of regular salaried women who have job contracts and access to social security. While this indicates some improvement, there is research that suggests a trend of “informalisation” even within the formal sector subjecting secure jobs to similar vulnerabilities such as informal work. This includes regular salaried employees but with limited to no access to formal contract, provident fund or any other forms of social security. While government initiatives aimed at improving both employment rates and entrepreneurial mindsets are appreciated, gender disparities and structural barriers continue to restrict access to quality, secure and remunerative employment. There needs to be an increased policy focus on skill development, formalisation of work, social protections and providing market linkages to ensure that the economic progress translates to a gender-inclusive growth.

Endnotes

- ¹ https://prsindia.org/files/budget/budget_state/west-bengal/2025/West_Bengal_Budget_Analysis_2025-26.pdf
- ² <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/west-bengals-2024-economy-story-of-growth-amid-challenges/articleshow/116672587.cms>
- ³ https://www.business-standard.com/economy/news/wb-lost-3-mn-jobs-in-informal-sector-maha-gained-2-4-mn-shows-nso-data-124070700509_1.html
- ⁴ <https://theprint.in/opinion/bengal-mustnt-gloat-over-eac-pm-migration-report-skilled-labour-still-moving-to-other-states/2429675/>
- ⁵ <https://knnindia.co.in/news/newsdetails/msme/west-bengal-leads-in-msme-manufacturing-women-led-enterprises-cm-mamata-banerjee>
- ⁶ https://finance.wb.gov.in/writereaddata/Economic_Review/Economic_Review23.pdf
- ⁷ <https://www.theindiaforum.in/book-reviews/why-there-are-fewer-and-fewer-women-work-bengal>
- ⁸ <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/the-rise-of-bengal-as-a-hub-for-female-domestic-labour-from-partition-to-the-present-9907150/>
- ⁹ https://wbmsme.gov.in/rural_craft_hab
- ¹⁰ <https://base.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/BASE-University-Working-Paper-Series-17-2023.pdf>



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