

## Status of Industrial Women Workers in Ludhiana District of Punjab

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### Abstract

*Over the past century, women's roles in industrial sectors have changed dramatically, supporting both social change and economic expansion. However, gender differences still exist in terms of pay, opportunity, and working conditions despite these developments. Thus, the present study has been planned to examine socio-economic aspects of women's empowerment through their participation in industry in Ludhiana district of Punjab. A sample of 120 women working in industry in rural areas of Ludhiana was taken into consideration. The study revealed that industry work led to increased work hours, savings, reduced debt, and improved decision-making. This positive change in industry work participation is reduced reliance on money lenders and economically self-sufficient. In contrast, women faced a double burden, long working hours and poor working conditions in the industry. There is a need to create a safe working environment and empower women workers via training, fair legislation and workplace reforms.*

**Key Words:** Industry, Rural women, Wages, Decision making

**JEL Classification:** J23, J24, L60, J16

### Introduction

In India, the term “Aadhi Abadi”, meaning “half the population,” is often used to refer to women. However, as per the Census, 2011, the sex ratio stands at 943 females for every 1,000 males, indicating that women not only make up less than half of the population. Even at the global level, the gender gap in labour force participation remains significantly understated. Female participation is just 50 per cent, compared to 80 per cent for men. The disparity is even more stark among women aged 25–54 with at least one child under six only 53.1 per cent are part of the workforce, in contrast to 95.7 per cent of men in the same category. Even, in India, although the overall labour force participation rate (LFPR) for people aged 15 and above has been rising since 2017–18, women's participation remains considerably lower than men's. The situation is particularly concerning in rural areas, where female LFPR fell from 26.5 per cent in 2009–10 to 25.3 per cent in 2011–12, and then dropped sharply to 18.2 per cent in 2017–18 (Jha, 2021). In urban areas, the figures improved slightly from 14.6 per cent in 2009–10 to 15.5 per cent in 2011–12, reaching 15.9 per cent in 2017–18 (Verick, 2014). This decline in rural female participation highlights deeper structural issues. Factors such as social norms, lower education levels, gender wage gaps, and workplace discrimination play a key role. A major

barrier is the patriarchal family structure, which often restricts women to domestic responsibilities and limits their access to employment opportunities (Dhanaraj and Mahambare, 2019). Even across societies, women's entry into the labour force has historically been controlled and constrained by the family structure. Social norms often restricted women from interacting with strangers or leaving the household, effectively excluding them from paid employment outside the home. In cases where women were permitted to work, their roles were typically seen as extensions of their domestic responsibilities, such as cooking, childcare, or cleaning rather than independent economic contributors. Women's participation in the workforce has long been entangled with household barriers and expectations. Particularly among upper and middle-class families, women were largely confined to caregiving roles, under the assumption that the family's financial stability made external employment unnecessary. During pre-industrial society, the gender-based division of labour was very rigid and women were confined to their household chores. Moreover, the patriarchal family structure demarked roles of family members such as the public sphere being confined to males and the private sphere being demarked to women (Debnath, 2015; Kaur, 2022).

Women's participation in the industry during World War II (1939-1945) remained the main cause of their emancipation and workforce participation because of the continuous demand for men in the military caused a drain

of men from the industry. As men went to fight in the war, there was a massive mobilization of women in the industrial jobs that were earlier considered men's work (Norberg and Johansson, 2021). Women used to work in the textile mills and garment factories in the initial stage as these jobs were low-paid with long working hours in harsh conditions. In the initial stage, "young girls" especially unmarried ones became part of the industrial setup. Later, married women without children and after that married women with children showed their presence in the industry. It was the first step towards women's mobilization which was most disruptive to their traditional family setup (Pierson, 1976). No doubt women got access to the job market but women's industrial participation remained confined to low-skilled and lower paid jobs. After World War II, women were largely pushed back into the domestic sphere, but this period also marked a shift in their roles within society and highlighted their potential in the workforce. The feminist movement gained momentum during this time, advocating for women's liberation, equal wages, and equal opportunities in industrial jobs. While women faced the challenge of a "double burden"—balancing household responsibilities with demanding work hours—their participation in the labor market brought about significant changes in their lives. This involvement not only increased their presence in the public sphere but also heightened their awareness of their economic, political, and social rights (Pierson, 1976).

Even, the Government of India has undertaken several initiatives to enhance women's participation in the labour force and improve the quality of their employment. Numerous protective provisions have been incorporated into labour laws to ensure equal opportunities and a safe, supportive work environment for women. For instance, the Code on Social Security, 2020 includes progressive measures such as extending paid maternity leave from 12 weeks to 26 weeks, mandating crèche facilities in establishments with 50 or more employees, and allowing women to work night shifts with appropriate safety measures (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2019). Additionally, the government has mandated that there should be no gender-based discrimination in establishments regarding wages for the same or similar work performed by employees of different genders. Similarly, recruitment practices must not discriminate on the basis of sex, except in cases where specific laws restrict the employment of women in certain roles. These efforts also support the principle of "equal pay for equal work", aiming to eliminate gender-based disparities in the workplace (Norberg and Johansson, 2021). Moreover, to enhance the employability of female workers, the Government is providing training to them through a network of Women's Industrial Training Institutes, National Vocational Training Institutes and Regional Vocational Training Institutes. Still, women are facing discrimination on various fronts in the industrial sectors such as occupational segregation and salary

discrimination (Lama and Majumder, 2018). Moreover, job opportunities for women are more likely available only in the agricultural sector, and the share in the service and industry sector is less than 20 per cent which also shows women's low work participation in present India (Rami, 2018). In the case of Punjab state, women's participation in industry and women's upliftment, such evidence is missing. Thus, the present study aims to comprehend the socioeconomic circumstances of Punjab's female industrial workers.

### Data Sources and Methodology

The present study is based on primary data with special reference to women's participation in industries to enhance women's empowerment. For the present study, two Industries namely (i) Sukartik Clothing Pvt. Ltd. (ii) Sodagar Woollen Mills Pvt Ltd, from the Ludhiana district was chosen purposively as it is the industrial hub of the state. From each selected industry, a list of women workers employed was procured and then 60 women in equal proportion were selected through random sampling. Thus, in total 120 respondents were taken for the present study. From each industry women workers (working in industries) were interviewed through a semi-structured interview schedule. Both open-ended and close-ended questions were asked from women to get in-depth knowledge of the stated problems. The study examined factors affecting women's participation in industry, changes in socio-economic status and constraints faced by them after joining industry. To depict the changes in women's decision-making after joining the industry mean score was calculated by giving weightage respectively self (3), with children (2), with husband (1) and only husband (0). The primary data collected from the respondents pertained to the year 2022-23.

### Results and Discussion

The study showed the demographic analysis of the industrial women workers from Ludhiana district of Punjab. The findings revealed that 55.83 per cent were within the age group of 18 to 25 years that represents more than half of the sample in this category. Only 20.83 per cent of respondents were aged 25 to 35 years, while 18.33 per cent were between 35 and 45 years. The results were in line with the findings of Rahman *et al*, 2010 who reported that majority of the workforce are young. The smallest proportion of the respondents i.e. 5 per cent were aged 45 years and above. The study revealed that younger women had more participation in industrial work than older women. In terms of education, more than half (67.50 %) of the respondents had completed matriculation, highlighting the prevalence of basic educational attainment among the women. Further 23.33 per cent of industrial women workers had completed senior secondary education and just 8.33 per cent of respondents were unable to read or write. Only one woman respondent had a graduate degree, indicating that higher education was

relatively very low among the respondents. This finding was in line with the findings of Akhter *et al*, 2022 that formal education was very low among industrial women workers.

In case of caste composition among the industrial women workers, it was found that 41.66 per cent of respondents belonged to the backward class, and more than half of the respondents i.e. 58.33 per cent belonged to the scheduled caste. In the study, the SC caste was dominant among the industrial women workers, and the general caste had no participation. The reason behind this was that due to socio-cultural norms in which higher caste women had low mobility in the households and male domination caused no participation in the industry. In terms of religious affiliation, the majority of the respondents belonged to the Hindu religion i.e. 58.33 per cent, while 41.66 per cent were Sikh. The reason behind the majority of the Hindu religion was that a major part of the industrial women workers were migrants. This finding was supported by the findings of Akhter *et al*, 2022 that women generally had marriage migration and stayed near to the industry in rural areas to fetch various jobs.

In the case of marital status, the study showed that a large proportion of respondents i.e. 87.50 per cent were married and only 4.17 per cent of respondents were unmarried, and 8.33 per cent were widows. The data showed that major industrial women workers were married because majority (58.3%) were migrant women who came with their husbands from UP, Bihar after marriage. It showed that after marriage migration, women started working in the industry for their survival. At the same time, only 41.6 per cent of women

were from Punjab.

The study revealed that more than half of the families were nuclear as compared to joint families i.e. 11.66 per cent. It means that the industrial job was impacting the traditional concept of joint households, either directly or indirectly. This finding line with Sikder *et al*, 2014 regarding the type of house, 89.16 per cent of the respondents were living in semi-pucca houses, 7.50 per cent of the respondents were living in pucca houses and only 3.00 per cent of the respondents were staying in kuccha houses. In the case of ownership of the households, the study found that 76.67 per cent of the industrial women workers were living in rented houses and only 23.33 per cent of respondents had their own house. In terms of the number of rooms, the majority, 69.17 per cent of the industrial women workers were living in houses with only one room, while 30.83 per cent of women workers were living in houses with two rooms. The reason behind small households as the majority of the respondents (76.67%) were living in rented households and also 58.33 per cent of the respondents were migrants. Access to washrooms showed a significant disparity, as 95.83 per cent of respondents had common washrooms, while only 4.17 per cent had access to an attached washroom (Table 2)

The finding of the study presented in Table 3 revealed that the factors responsible for joining the industry. Majority (87.5%) of the respondents had a lack of financial resources which remained a key reason for joining the industry. This indicated that financial constraints played a significant role in pushing individuals into employment within the

**Table 1: Distribution of respondents across demographic characteristics**

Demographic profile	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age (Years)	18-25	67	55.83
	25-35	25	20.83
	35-45	22	18.33
	45 and above	6	5.00
Education	Cannot read and write	10	8.33
	Matric	81	67.50
	Senior secondary	28	23.33
	Graduate	1	0.83
Caste	BC*	50	41.66
	SC#	70	58.33
Religion	Sikh	50	41.66
	Hindu	70	58.33
Marital status	Married	105	87.50
	Unmarried	5	4.17
	Widow	10	8.33

Note: \* Backward class: Kumar, Yadav, Tarkhan, Chimbe, Kashyap, Hajjam, Kumhars, Telli, Sinha.

#Scheduled caste: Rai Sikh, Harijan, Ramdasia, Mazhabis, Mistri, Ravidasia, Paswan, Mandal, Prasad, Bhangsi.

**Table 2: Distribution of respondents according to their household characteristics****(n=120)**

Particulars	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Family Type</b>		
Joint	14	11.66
Nuclear	106	88.33
<b>Type of house</b>		
<i>Pucca</i>	9	7.50
Semi - <i>pucca</i>	107	89.16
<i>Kuccha</i>	4	3.33
<b>Ownership of the house</b>		
Own	28	23.33
Rented	92	76.67
<b>Numbers of rooms</b>		
One	83	69.17
Two	37	30.83
<b>Access to washroom</b>		
Attached washroom	5	4.17
Common washroom	115	95.83

industry. Another major cause for the joining industry was indebtedness. Almost all the respondents i.e. 99.16 per cent agreed that indebtedness was also another major cause of joining the industry. Moreover, 96.66 per cent of respondents mentioned that lack of continuous work was also a factor contributing to their decision to join the industry, with only 3.33 per cent not acknowledging this as a factor. Only 4.16 per cent of respondents mentioned that unemployed husbands remained a factor in joining the industry. Thus, it was financial reasons that caused the respondents' participation in the industry because the majority of the respondents were migrants and stayed in rented apartments that needed to take care of their family needs.

Further, social factors responsible for joining the industry highlighted various underlying reasons related to respondents and family circumstances. Migration remained one of the factors for joining the industry i.e., 60.83 per cent of respondents. It is important to notice that in most of the cases, there was a combination of two or more factors that influenced respondents' participation in the industry, such as support to family and self-employed opportunities remained major concern. This finding was supported by the findings of Kirton, 2005.

The psychological factors revealed noteworthy patterns among the respondents. Mental pressure remained the major cause for joining the industry i.e., 75.83 per cent of respondents experienced it. Thus, lack of economic resources and indebtedness had increased mental pressures that led to their industrial work participation. Moreover, 65.00 per cent

of the respondents recognized industrial jobs were providing them self-employment opportunities and access to credit was reported in 73.33 per cent of respondents.

Table 4 showed that the decision-making process of respondents changed before and after joining the industry. For food, there was a major increase in self-decision-making, rising from 28.33 per cent to 86.67 per cent while decisions made only by the husband remained low. In clothing, self-decision increased from 15 per cent to 68.33 per cent with a decrease in decisions made solely by the husband. When it came to children's education, the husband made most of the decisions before joining the industry, but after joining, the decisions became more shared, with self-involvement increasing from 11.67 per cent to 30.83 per cent and health-related decisions also showed a shift towards more self-involvement after joining, with the self-decision rate rising from 25.83 per cent to 46.67 per cent. Regarding social gatherings, there was an increase in self-decision-making, rising from 30.83 per cent to 48.33 per cent. For spending on personal items, self-decision-making rose from 19.17 per cent to 70.83 per cent. Lastly, in purchasing assets, self-decision also showed significant changes, increasing from 10 per cent to 45 per cent while the husband's role decreased. These changes show a clear trend toward more self-involvement in decision-making after joining the industry (Kabeer, 1999) mentioned that control over resources (such as wages, money etc) made changes in women's lives as they were able to make their decisions independently. Economic independence made women independent in family decision-making, which

**Table 3: Factors impacting women's involvement in industry** (n=120)

Particulars	Yes	No
<b>Economic factor</b>		
Lack of financial resources	105 (87.5)	15 (12.5)
Indebtedness	119 (99.16)	1 (0.83)
Lack of continuous work	116 (96.66)	4 (3.33)
Unemployed husband	5 (4.16)	115 (95.83)
<b>Social factor</b>		
Migration	73 (60.83)	47 (39.16)
Support to family	120 (100)	-
Self-employed opportunities	120 (100)	-
Widowed	10 (8.33)	110 (91.66)
<b>Psychological factor</b>		
Mental pressure	91 (75.83)	29 (24.16)
Self-employed opportunities	78 (65)	42 (35.00)
Access to credit	80 (66.67)	40 (33.33)
Decision making	88 (73.33)	32 (26.66)

Note -Figures in the parentheses indicates per cent to total

**Table 4: Change in decision-making process of respondents before and after joining industry**

(n=120)

Particulars	Self		Only husband		With husband	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
Food	34 (28.33)	104 (86.67)	6 (5.0)	6 (5.0)	80 (66.66)	10 (8.33)
Clothing	18 (15.0)	82 (68.33)	63 (52.5)	15 (12.5)	39 (32.5)	23 (19.2)
Children education	14 (11.67)	37 (30.83)	87 (72.50)	69 (57.5)	19 (15.8)	14 (11.66)
Children health	31 (25.83)	56 (46.67)	49 (40.83)	40 (33.33)	40 (33.33)	29 (4.17)
Attending the social gathering	37 (30.83)	58 (48.33)	23 (19.17)	16 (13.33)	60 (50)	46 (38.33)
Expenditure on self	23 (19.17)	85 (70.83)	77 (64.17)	-	20 (16.67)	35 (29.17)
Purchasing of assets	12 (10.00)	54 (45.00)	23 (19.17)	8 (6.67)	85 (70.83)	58 (48.33)

Note: Figures in the parentheses indicates per cent to total



had a positive impact on their life. It was also a way towards women's empowerment.

Table 5 highlighted the different challenges faced by industrial women workers after joining the industry. Economically, most women faced wage disparity i.e. 91.66 per cent. Many women's were also facing a struggle with a lack of skills 95.83 per cent and poor working conditions with 94.16 per cent. Transportation was another major problem, as 87.5 per cent of women were lack of proper facilities to get to work. Most of the women were usually going by walk to industry instead of taking any public transport. On the social side, the biggest issue is dual responsibility, with 97.5 per cent of women were juggling both work and home duties. Moreover, 76.6 per cent also reported a lack of medical aid, and 80.83 per cent had no control over their earnings. Another social challenge was the lack of social security, mentioned by 77.5 per cent of women. Psychologically, many women experienced i.e. 88.33 per cent anxiety, low self-esteem 85 per cent and verbal abuse 90 per cent. Fear of maternity bias

was also significant, with 83.33 per cent expressing concerns about it might affect their career. These constraints reflected the tough conditions women were facing in industrial jobs. Islam, 2016 mentioned that industrial women workers often faced gender-based discrimination in their workplaces. This included unequal pay, lack of promotion opportunities, and exclusion from leadership roles.

### Conclusions and Policy Implications

The demographic analysis of industrial women workers reveals significant differences in caste, religion, and family size, which could inform targeted policy interventions and program improvements. The study indicates that industrial women workers are particularly from Scheduled Castes and Hindus, who have higher participation rates as compared to general castes and other religious groups. Family size and marital status show that the majority of the women were married and from nuclear families suggesting a greater economic dependency on the industry because most of them were migrant women. The study also revealed that

**Table 5: Constraints faced by industrial women workers after joining industry**

Particulars	(multiple response)	
	Yes	No
<b>Economic constraints</b>		
Wage disparity	110 (91.66)	10 (8.33)
Lack of transportation facility	105 (87.5)	15 (12.5)
Lack of skills	115 (95.83)	5 (4.16)
Poor working condition	113 (94.16)	7 (5.83)
<b>Social constraints</b>		
Dual responsibility	117 (97.50)	3 (2.50)
Lack of medical aid	92 (76.6)	28 (23.33)
No control over earnings	97 (80.83)	23 (19.16)
Lack of social security	93 (77.50)	27 (22.50)
<b>Psychological constraints</b>		
Anxiety /stress	106 (88.33)	14 (11.66)
Low self-esteem	102 (85)	18 (15)
Verbal abuse	96 (90)	24 (20)
Fear of maternity bias	100 (83.33)	20 (16.66)

*Note -Figures in the parentheses indicates per cent to total*

women were staying in rented apartments and facing economic challenges, including financial constraints and indebtedness; were the primary reasons for driving women to seek employment in industrial sectors. These challenges were exacerbated by low skill requirements and irregular work opportunities, which made industrial jobs more accessible but less stable. Social factors such as migration and familial responsibilities also played a vital role, while societal norms often imposed dual responsibilities of work and household duties on women. Psychological barriers, including anxiety, low self-esteem, and fear of maternity bias, further hindered women's ability to thrive in these environments. Additionally, poor workplace conditions, wage disparity, lack of transportation facilities, and insufficient social security measures emerged as critical constraints. The absence of maternity leave, inadequate medical aid, and lack of control over earnings compound these challenges, making it difficult for women to achieve work-life balance and financial autonomy.

To address these issues, comprehensive policy interventions are essential. Skill development and capacity-building programs tailored to industrial needs should be introduced, along with strict enforcement of equal pay for equal work to eliminate wage disparities. Workplace reforms, such as improved working conditions, childcare services, and transport facilities, are crucial for fostering a supportive environment. Strengthening social security frameworks by providing maternity benefits, medical aid, and insurance schemes will help women manage familial responsibilities while maintaining their professional roles. Psychological challenges can be mitigated through awareness programs to build confidence and by establishing counseling and grievance redressal systems. By implementing these measures, the empowerment of women in industrial sectors can be significantly improved, contributing to greater gender equity and sustainable economic growth.

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