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# Understanding Women's Workforce Participation in Assam: A Spatial and Socio-Economic Perspective

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**Abstract:** *Women are an important component of any society's human resource base and their meaningful participation in the workforce is closely linked to economic progress, household well-being and social change. In Assam, however, women's participation in economic activity has historically remained lower and more unequal than their demographic significance. While agriculture continues to provide livelihood opportunities for a large proportion of the rural population, changing economic conditions, limited agricultural returns, educational advances and expansion of non-farm activities are increasingly affecting women's labor market engagement. Women are increasingly participating in agriculture, wage employment, self-employment, household enterprises, handicrafts, weaving, petty trade, services and other non-farm activities. Nevertheless, their participation continues to be shaped by several socio-economic and institutional factors, including limited access to productive resources, employment opportunities, skills, finance, markets, technology and social support, along with the burden of unpaid domestic and care work. The study highlights the importance of education, skill development, financial inclusion, employment diversification, institutional support and improved access to markets in strengthening women's participation in the workforce.*

**Keywords:** *Women Workforce Participation, Female Employment, Labor Force, Assam, Sustainable Development.*

**Introduction:** The development of any economy depends not only on the size of its population but also on how effectively its human resources are utilized. The International Labour Organization (ILO)[1] defines the labour force participation rate (LFPR) as the share of the working-age population that is either employed or actively seeking work. The extent to which women participate in productive economic activities reflects not only the structure and opportunities of the labour market but also the broader social and economic conditions within which households and communities' function. Meaningful participation in paid employment, self-employment, family enterprises and other forms of economic activity can strengthen women's economic independence, improve household welfare, enhance their decision-making capacity[2] and contribute to the overall productivity of the economy. Consequently, female workforce participation has increasingly gained attention in discussions on inclusive growth, gender equality, poverty reduction and sustainable development.

Assam, one of the states of North-East India experienced male-oriented dominance in economic sector. For generations, agriculture has been deeply embedded in the economic and social life of rural Assam. Various

primary activities like paddy cultivation, tea cultivation, fishing, livestock rearing and other allied occupations have traditionally provided employment and supported household livelihoods. However, due to the fragmentation of landholdings, low income, recurring floods, environmental stress and growing climatic uncertainties, reliability of agriculture as the sole source of household income has increasingly come under pressure. Therefore, livelihood diversification has consequently become an important survival and adaptation strategy, with households increasingly combining agricultural activities with wage employment, petty trade, small-scale manufacturing, transport, construction, services, handloom and handicraft and various forms of self-employment. Therefore, livelihood diversification[3] has consequently become an important survival and adaptation strategy, with households increasingly combining agricultural activities with wage employment, petty trade, small-scale manufacturing, transport, construction, services, handloom and handicraft and various forms of self-employment. The expansion of these activities reflects more than a simple shift away from agriculture; it represents a wider transformation in the structure of livelihoods in both rural and urban areas. For women in particular, participation in non-farm activities can provide an opportunity to diversify household income, strengthen economic agency, develop skills, social and economic empowerment and gain greater engagement with local markets.

Despite this development, access to such opportunities is not evenly distributed. Women's participation is heavily shaped by access to education, skills, access to finance and markets, wage difference, household responsibilities, social norms, mobility, availability of infrastructure and the nature of local employment opportunities.[4] Therefore, an assessment of women's workforce participation needs to consider not only the level of participation but also its sectoral composition, employment status, spatial variation and the factors shaping women's engagement.

**Study Area:** Assam, widely regarded as the gateway to North-East India, occupies a strategically important position in the north-eastern part of the country. The state shares inter-state boundaries with seven neighboring states and international boundaries with Bhutan and Bangladesh. It has 2,276.3 km of inter-state boundaries and 529 km of international boundaries. Geographically, Assam extends from 24°08′ N to 28°02′ N latitudes and 89°42′ E to 96°00′ E longitudes, encompassing a diverse physical and socio-economic landscape.

According to the 2011 Census, Assam recorded a total population of 31,169,272, with a population density of approximately 398 persons per sq. km., slightly higher than the national average of 382 persons per sq. km. The state recorded an overall literacy rate of 72.19 per cent, although a considerable gender disparity remained evident. Male literacy stood at 77.85 per cent, compared with 66.27 per cent among females, highlighting the continuing gap in educational attainment between men and women.

The labour market of Assam also reflects significant challenges in the effective utilization of its human resources. The overall Work Participation Rate (WPR) was about 39.8 per cent according to Census 2011. Women constituted nearly 49 per cent of the state's total population, underscoring their substantial demographic presence and the importance of greater female participation in economic activities.

**Objectives:** The main objective of this study is to examine the nature and extent of women's participation in productive activities in rural and urban areas across the Assam and also identify the major types of income-generating activities and analyze socio-economic, demographic, institutional and local factors affecting women's participation underestimates the contribution of employment. The study further assesses the contribution of that employment to women's income generation, livelihood diversification and economic and socialempowerment. Moreover, identify the major constraints faced by women and recommend sustainable and appropriate policy measures to strengthen their participation and expand inclusive employment opportunities in Assam.

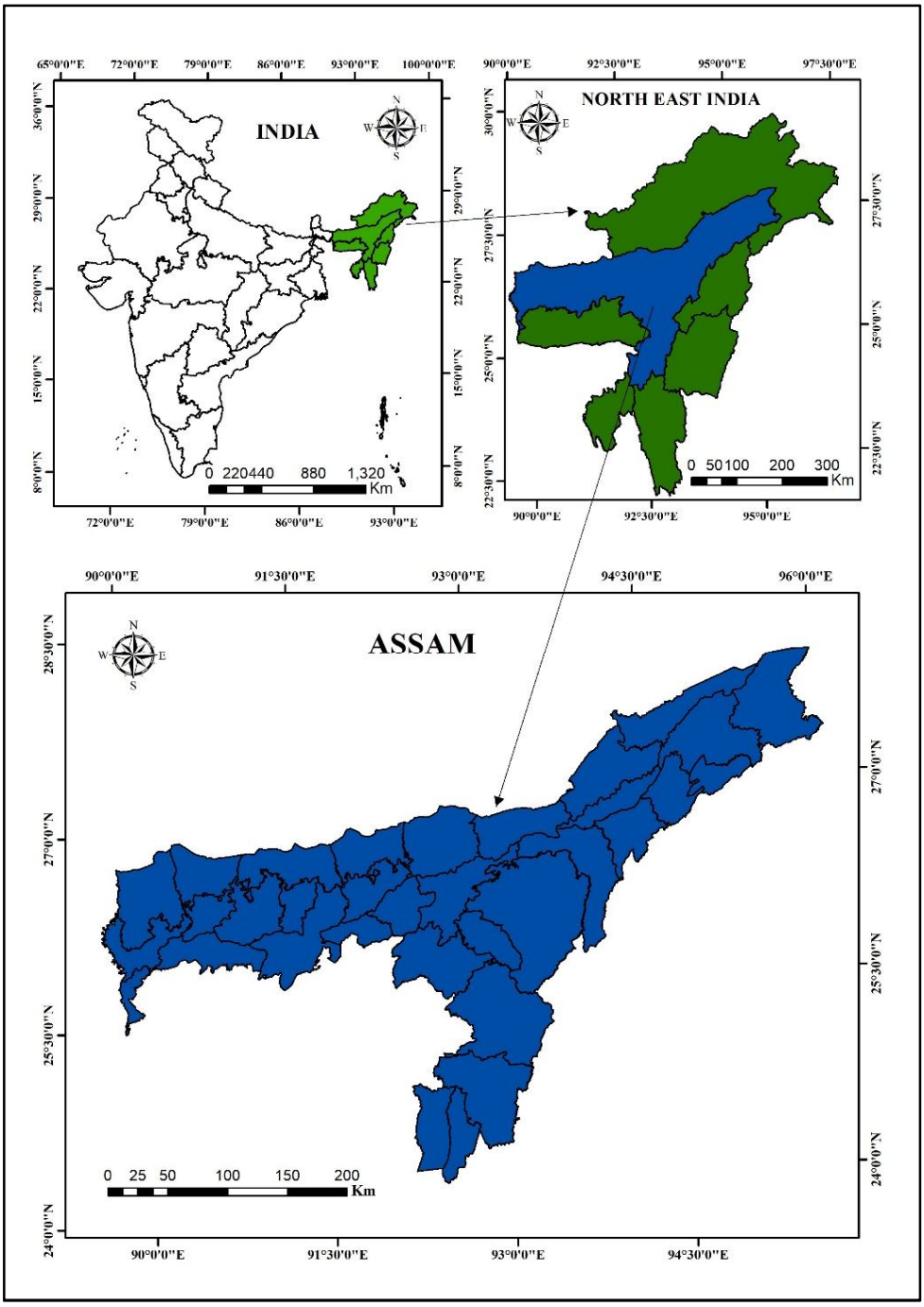



Figure 1: Location of the Study Area

**Data Base and Methods:** Thestudy is based on secondary data collected from authentic and reliable sources including Census of India, Periodic Labor Force Survey, National Sample Survey (NSS), Assam Statistical Handbook and other relevant government reports and publications.

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine women's participation in income generating activities in rural and urban areas across Assam. The analysis considers indicators such as women's workforce participation, nature of employment, occupational structure, rural-urban difference and types of productive activities. Various descriptive statistical techniques including percentages, proportions, means and comparative analysis are used to identify spatial patterns and occupational patterns. Moreover, tables and graphical representations have been used to clearly present the data and examine the factors affecting women's participation in non-farm sector.

**Results and Discussion:**

a. ***Gender Parity in Job Market:*** In the current era of science, technology, social, economic and political empowerment, women are lag behind men in terms of income and employment around the world. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022-23, in Assam, the female labour force participation rate (LFPR) is 20.3 % as compared to the male LFPR at 90 %[5]. The PLFS data also reveals that the employment rate in Assam from 2017-23 is significantly below the national average at all levels. However, this gap has gradually narrowed after 2020. Similarly, the LFPR of Assam at all levels was lowerthan the national average for female at all levels.But after 2020-22, the female participation rate of women started improving.

On the other hands, Assam has shown an outstanding performance in terms of male workforce participation where the male participation rate is significantly higher than the national average.

Table 1: Labor Force Participation Rate India and Assam, 2017-23

| Year | India | Assam |
|---|---|---|
| 2017-18 | 49.8 | 43.7 |
| 2018-19 | 50.2 | 46.5 |
| 2019-20 | 53.5 | 46.9 |
| 2020-21 | 54.9 | 52.7 |
| 2021-22 | 55.2 | 52.1 |
| 2022-23 | 57.9 | 55.4 |

*Source: Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam*

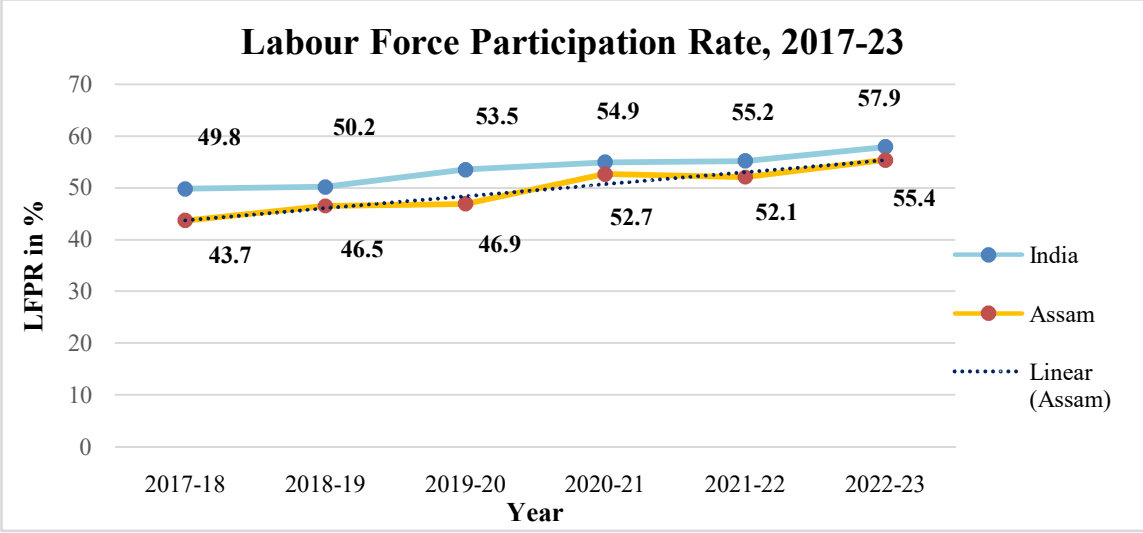



Figure 2: Labour Force Participation Rate of India and Assam, 2017-23

Table 2: Female Labor Force Participation Rate of India and Assam, 2017-23

| Year | India | Assam |
|---|---|---|

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 2017-18 | 22 | 11 |
| 2018-19 | 23.3 | 11.7 |
| 2019-20 | 30 | 16.4 |
| 2020-21 | 32.5 | 24.6 |
| 2021-22 | 31.7 | 26.8 |
| 2022-23 | 37 | 20.3 |

*Source: Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam*

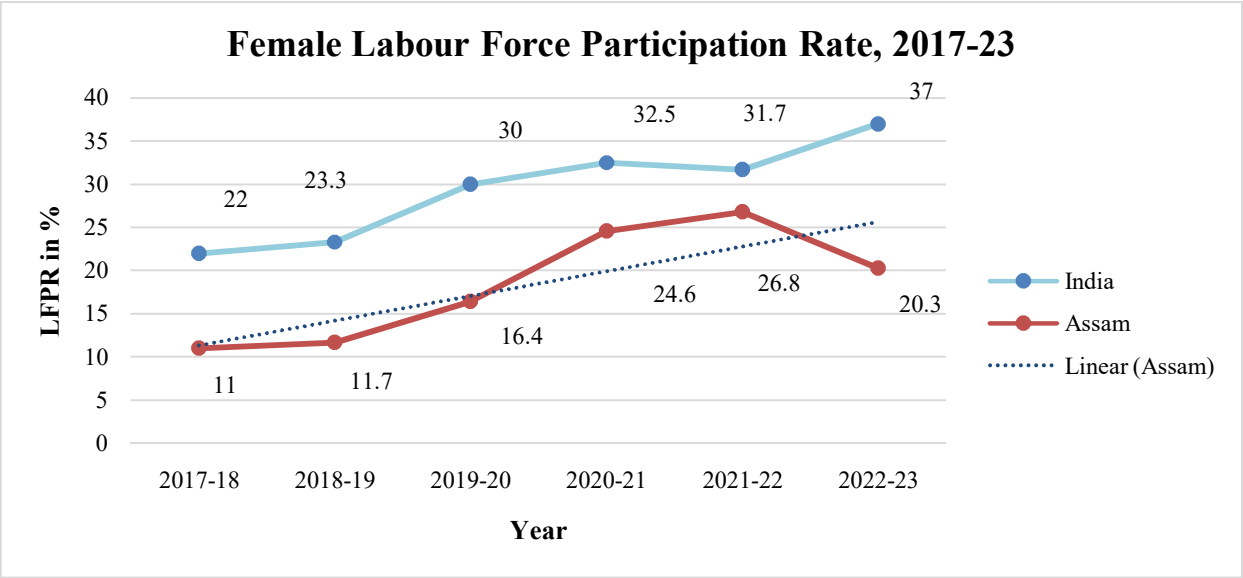



Figure 3: Female Labour Force Participation Rate of India and Assam, 2017-23

Table 3: Male Labor Force Participation Rate in India and Assam, 2017-23

| Year | India | Assam |
|---|---|---|
| 2017-18 | 71 | 74.2 |
| 2018-19 | 71.2 | 72.5 |
| 2019-20 | 76.8 | 77 |
| 2020-21 | 77 | 79.2 |
| 2021-22 | 73.8 | 76.8 |
| 2022-23 | 78.5 | 90.1 |

*Source: Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam*

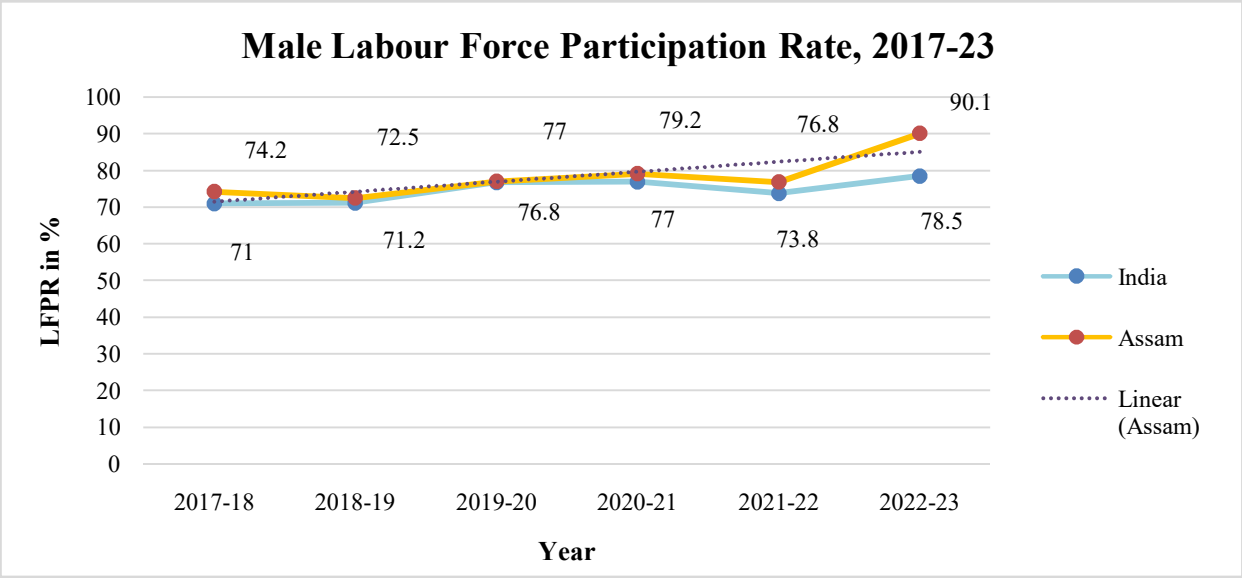



Figure 4: Trends in Male Labour Force Participation Rate of India and Assam, 2017-23

According to NCAER's estimation for 2023-24, LFPR in Assam is 50% considering its usual principal activity status (PAS)[6]. The female LFPR is only 28%, as against 73% percent for males in Assam[7].

Table 4: Labour Force Participation Rate in Assam (15 and above age), 2023-24

| | Rural (%) | Urban (%) | Total (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Female | 27.87 | 28.03 | 27.90 |
| Male | 72.01 | 76.98 | 72.75 |
| Both (Male & Female) | 49.90 | 50.56 | 50 |

Source: NCAER's survey 2023-24

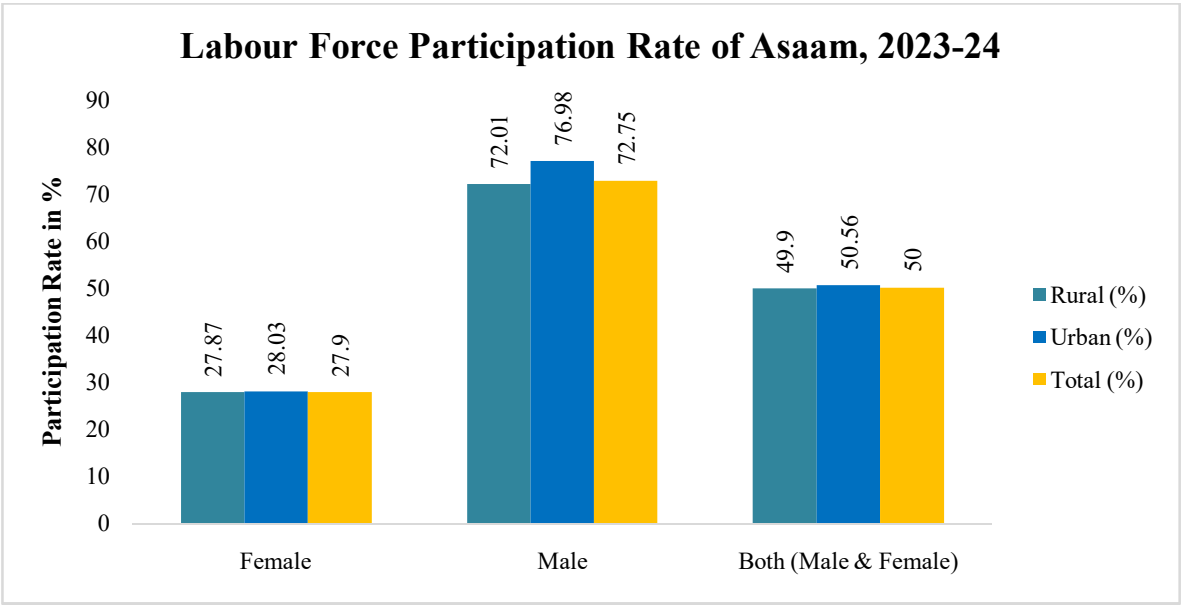



*Figure 5:Rate of Labour Participation in Assam, 2023-24*

b. ***Trends in Female Labour Force Participation Rates:*** According to PLFP report, Assam has witnessed a notable rise in female labor force participation among the population aged 15 years and above in the post COVID-19 pandemic period. The female participation rate increased substantially from around 29% (2021-22) to around 43 % in 2022-23, indicating a marked shift in women's engagement with the labor market.[8]

The urban FLFPR has also witnessed a rising trend, like other states of the country, rising from 15.4% to 31.5% between 2017-18 to 2023-24.[9]

Table 5: Rural and Urban Female Workforce Participation Rate of Assam 2017-24

| Year | Rural Female (%) | Urban Female(%) |
|---|---|---|
| 2017-18 | 12.4 | 15.4 |
| 2018-19 | 12.6 | 13.3 |
| 2019-20 | 16.2 | 18.5 |
| 2020-21 | 25.3 | 20 |
| 2021-22 | 29 | 22.5 |
| 2022-23 | 43.2 | 29 |
| 2023-24 | 52.8 | 31.5 |

*Source: PLFS Annual Report, 2017-24*

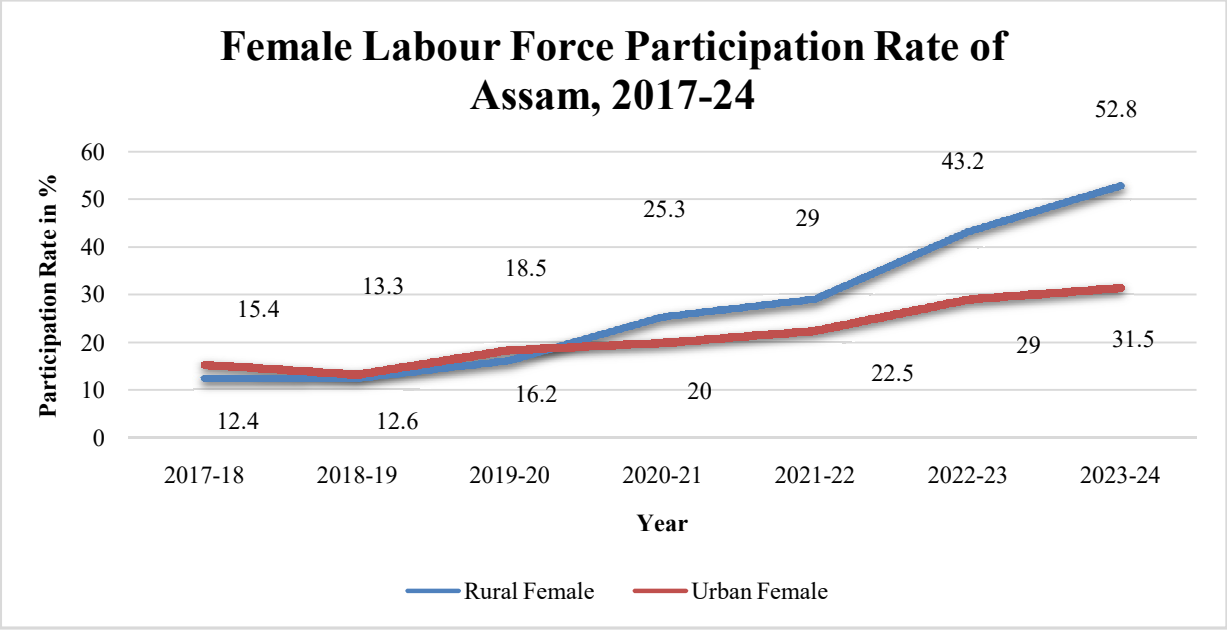



Figure 6: Trend in female labour force participation rate from 2017-18 to 2023-24

c. ***Nature of Employment Among Female Workforce:*** The employment structure of women in Assam has undergone noticeable changes across both rural and urban areas. In rural Assam, the share of women engaged in self-employed was relatively low at 18.5% in 2017-18 but increased substantially to 77.3% in 2023-24. This indicates a gradual shift towards self-employment and independent livelihood activities

among rural women. This surge significantly higher than the national trend, where these values improve but modestly over the same period[10]. At the same time, the proportion of women engaged as causal workers and regular salaried employees has shown decline between 2017-18 and 2023-24.

A similar transformation can also be observed in urban Assam. The proportion of self-employed increased from 32.3% in 2017-18 to 48.9% in 2023-24. As a result, the share of women in regular salaried employment declined from 62.8% to 47.9%. The proportion of casual workers also remained comparatively small and declined marginally over the period.

The increasing importance of self-employment in rural and urban areas reflects women's growing engagement in independent economic activities and may also indicates the diversification of employment opportunities beyond conventional salaried work.

Table 6: Nature of Female Labour Force Participation in Rural Assam, 2017-24

| Years | Self-Employed (%) | Casual Worker (%) | Regular Salaried (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2017-18 | 18.5 | 22.7 | 58.8 |
| 2020-21 | 65.2 | 7.5 | 27.3 |
| 2023-24 | 77.3 | 7.5 | 15.2 |

*Source: PLFS Annual Report, 2017-24*

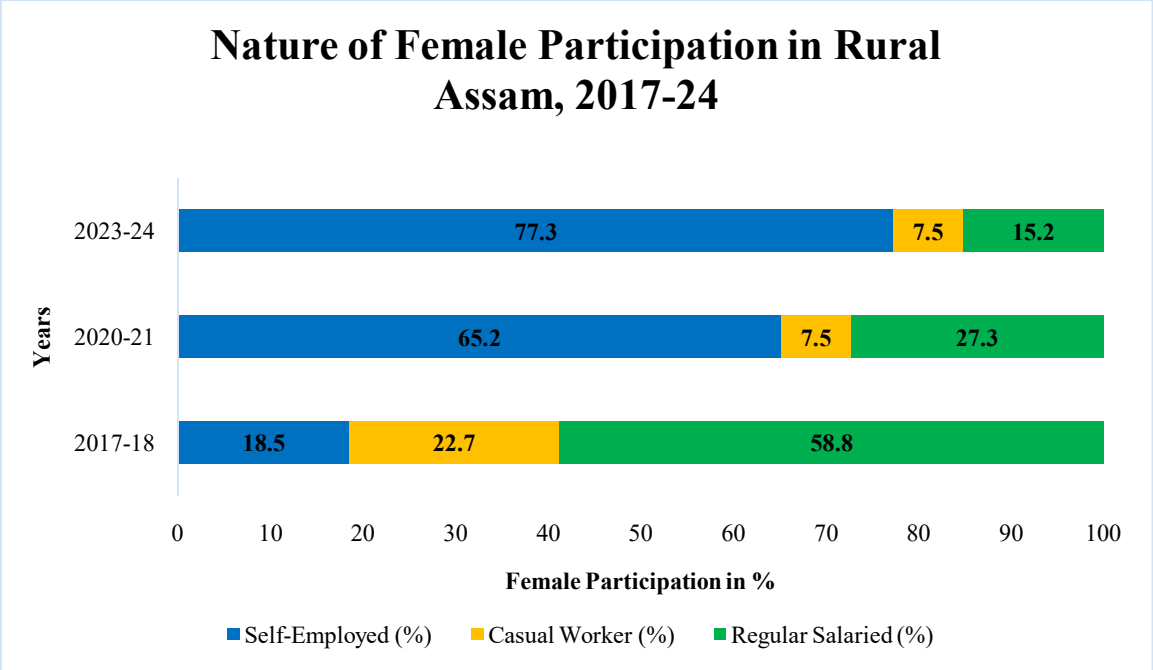



Figure 7: Nature of Female Participation in Rural Assam, 2017-24

| Years | Self-Employed (%) | Casual Worker (%) | Regular Salaried (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2017-18 | 32.3 | 4.9 | 62.8 |
| 2020-21 | 37.9 | 4.2 | 57.9 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2023-24 | 48.9 | 3.2 | 47.9 |

Table 7: Nature of Women Workforce Participation in Urban areas, 2017-24

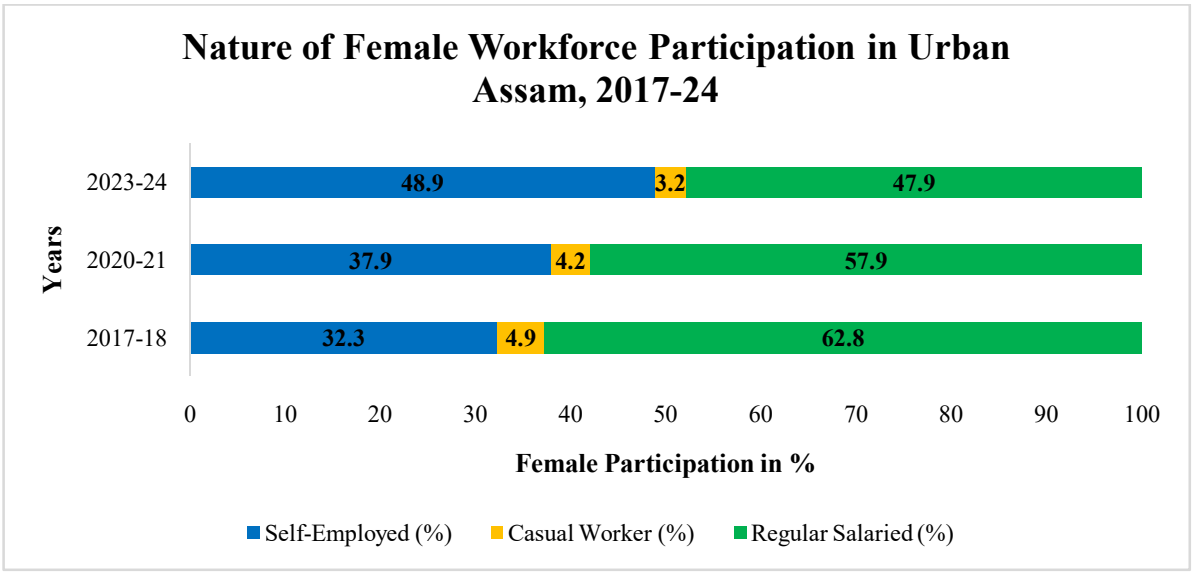



Figure 8: Nature of Female Participation in Urban Assam, 2017-24

d. ***Distribution of Women Worker in Different Activities:*** The sectoral composition of women's employment in Assam reveals a clear rural-urban divide. In rural areas, female (age 15 and above) employment remains highly concentrated in agriculture and allied activities, which account for about 79 percent of female employment. On the other hand, textile manufacturing forms the next major source of employment (6.5%), followed by retail at about 5.6%.

In urban areas, however, the employment structure is relatively more diverse, although agriculture and allied sectors account for the largest share of female employment (age 15 and above) at 18.3%. This is followed by 16 % and 11% of women in education and retail respectively.

This pattern broadly reflects the wider national trend, where women's employment continues to be strongly associated with agriculture in rural areas; while education, trade and other service-oriented activities assume greater significance in urban labor markets.

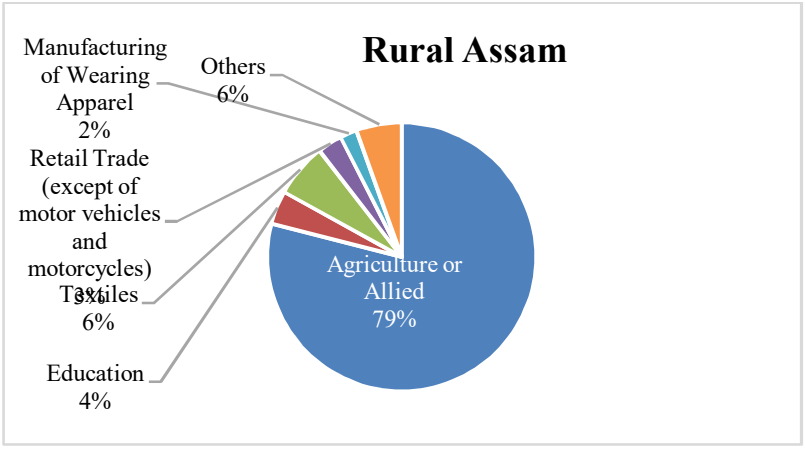



Figure 9: Distribution of Women Workforce in Rural Assam

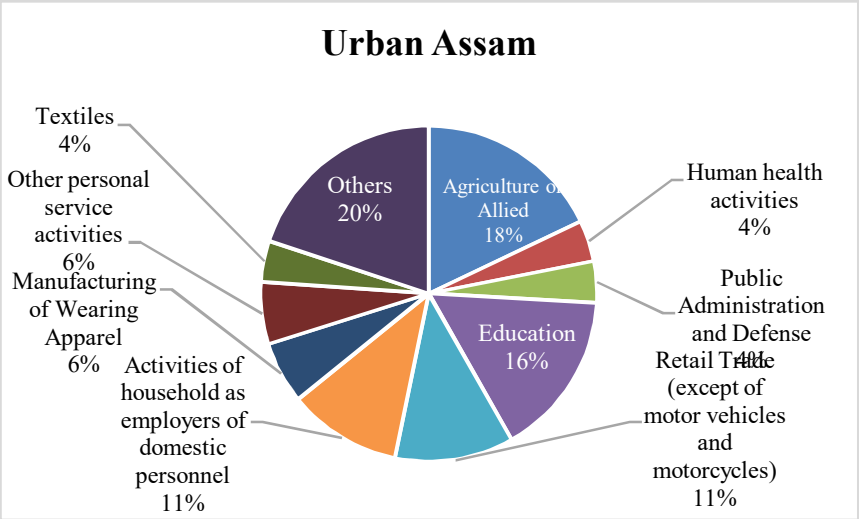



Figure 10: Distribution of Women Workforce in Urban Assam

e. ***Spatial Distribution:*** The spatial distribution of female labour force participation in Assam revealssubstantial inter-district variation in the participation of women aged 15 years and above in the labour market. According to NCAER's estimation from PLFS 2021-22, the highest level of female labour force participation is observed in Dima Hasao (97.55%), which stands out distinctly from the rest of the state. This is followed by Dibrugarh (65.13%), Udalguri (51.89%), Tinisukia (51.39%) and Darrang (51.13%)[11].

In contrast, several district like Chirang, Karimganj, Morigaon, Karbi Anglong, Hailaknadi, Cachar etc. districts record comparatively lower levels of female labour force participation.

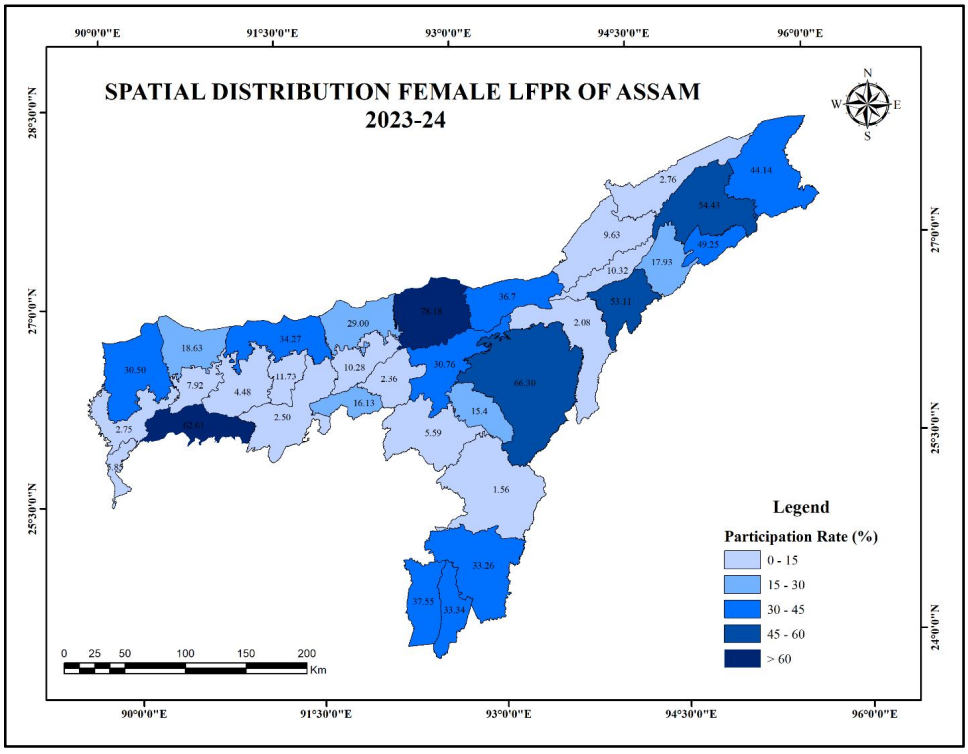



Figure 11: Female Labour Force Participation Rate (15 years and above)

f. ***Determinants of Female LFPR:*** Female labour force participation in Assam is shaped by a complex interaction of demographic, socio-economic, household and labour-market factors. Educational attainment, marital status, household structure, caregiving responsibilities, expected earnings, access to employment opportunities, skills, mobility, safety and prevailing gender norms influence women's decisions to enter and maintain in the labour market.In rural areas, agricultural employment, self-employment, household enterprises and SHGs provide important avenues for women's economic participation, whereas limited access to suitable non-farm employment and skill-matched opportunities may constrain participation. Similar to the national situation, the main reason for not being in the workforce is child care and domestic chores, which has slightly declined in the rural region of the state and slightly increased in urban region of the state within a year[12].

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that women's workforce participation in Assam is undergoing a gradual but uneven transformation. The increasing engagement of women in economic activities, particularly in rural areas and self-employment, indicates a significant shift in the livelihood structure of the state. However, this progress remains constrains by persistent gender disparities, rural-urban difference in employment opportunities and the continued influence of household, social and institutional factors. Thus, an increase in participation rates, by itself, does not necessarily signify a corresponding improvement in the quality, stability or economic returns of women's employment. The findings further suggest that the future of women's economic participation in Assam will depend not only on the creation of additional employment opportunities but also on their accessibility, productivity, security and compatibility with women's existing household responsibilities. Greater emphasis is thereforerequired on improving educational attainment, strengthening market-oriented skill development, expanding to formal finance, diversifying rural employment opportunities, improving market and digital connectivity and institutional mechanisms that support women's economic activities. In this regard, evidence-basedpolicy interventions by strengthening accessible, affordable and reliable childcare support and integrated and gender-responsive approach are essential to enhance women's workforce participation is required rather than relying solely on employment generation.

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