



# A Study on the Challenges Faced by Landless Women Agriculture Labourers in Tamilnadu

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## Abstract

*The Economic Survey 2024-25 reveals that the agriculture sector still remains the front-runner in fetching employment. In 2023, 45.8 per cent of employment was in the agriculture sector which has amplified to 46.1 per cent in the year 2023-24. Its share in employment was just 44.1 per cent in 2017-18. In other words, dependence on agriculture for employment has increased by two per cent in the last six years. The Economic Survey 2024-25 further reveals that the share of industry and services sector in employment has seen a decline, failing to fetch desired employment to the booming population as expected.*

*The survey document, quoting the report of the Periodic Labor Force Survey (PLFS) 2023-24, said that during the period between 2017-18 to 2023-24, women's participation in agriculture sector increased by about 7.5 per cent and men's participation decreased by about 4 per cent. The Economic Survey also says female agricultural employment has increased from 73.2 per cent in 2017-18 to 76.9 per cent in 2023-24 while male participation has declined from 55 per cent to 49.4 per cent.*

*Against this background recognising the importance of the primary sector how the fair sex fares in the agricultural sector as labourers, this study was conducted in Tamil Nadu. The rice bowl of Tamil Nadu is Thanjavur District, which is the main contributor to the agriculture of the state still, is taken as the representative sample district. Surveying 200 landless agricultural labourers randomly in this Thanjavur District in November 2025, this study was conducted. It elaborates the key challenges faced by them in their agricultural work.*

**Keywords:** Periodic Labor Force Survey (PLFS), landless agricultural labourers, women labourers, Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR).

India is an agrarian economy with about 54.6% of total workforce engaged in agricultural and allied sector activities as per Census 2011. As per the Annual Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) Report 2021-22, the estimated percentage distribution of workers at All-India level in usual status by broad industry division as per National Industrial Classification (NIC) 2008 shows that 38.1% men and 62.9% women are engaged in agriculture. Available data, and information on NITI Aayog also reveals

that, in India, agriculture employs about 80% of rural women. This indicates that a higher proportion of women are still involved in agricultural work compared to men.

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18. In other words, dependence on agriculture for employment has increased by two per cent in the last six years. The Economic Survey 2024-25 further reveals that the share of industry and services sector in employment has seen a decline, failing to fetch desired employment to the booming population as expected.

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### **Objectives**

The present study is made to analyse the various Challenges faced by the landless women agriculture labourers in Tamil Nadu. This study also called for a deeper examination of the structural barriers that restrict landless female agricultural labourer's access to credit, technology, and Government schemes.

### **Methodology**

The rice bowl of Tamil Nadu is Thanjavur District, which is the main contributor to the agriculture of the state still, is taken as the representative sample district. Interviewing two hundred landless agricultural labourers randomly in this Thanjavur District in November 2025, this study was conducted. It summarises the key challenges faced by them in their agricultural work. Secondary data was gathered from the Government published documents, reports and websites. The data were collected mainly from Agricultural Statistics at a glance -2024 Report published by Government of India, Ministry of Agriculture & Family welfare.

### **Significance of the Study**

Tamil Nadu has demonstrated a successful model of combining rapid economic growth with strong social development in recent years. Its status as 'India's most urbanized state' is a result of its focus on industrial growth and transportation, which has fostered urbanization and the growth of smaller towns. This commitment to expanding public services such as education, healthcare, social security, and public amenities has promoted Tamil Nadu to the third-highest human development index ranking among all Indian states in 2024. Tamil Nadu boasts a higher Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) than the national average, especially driven by manufacturing in the urban areas and agriculture in rural areas. In the context of transformation of economy to service centred and industry oriented, the agriculture itself losing its stature in the economy map of India, with no exception of the state of Tamil Nadu. While the male labour force is shifting its focus on the comparatively from this less profitable sector, the agriculture is now increasingly depending on the female labour force in rural India. Thus, the present study analysing the difficulties of female labourers in this sector, gain importance.

### **India's Position in World Agriculture**

In 2022, India maintained a leading position in global agriculture, ranking as the top producer of milk, pulses, and spices, and the second-largest producer of rice, wheat, sugarcane, fruits, and vegetables. The agricultural sector accounted for 18.8% of India's gross value added, with food grain production reaching a record 315.72 million tonnes in 2021-22. India ranks first in Arable land which refers to possession of 154.45 million hectares of soil in India is fertile, well drained and capable of being ploughed and cultivated to grow crops. From the below table it is also evident that India is holding 905.11 million rural population which is 26.49 percentage of global share making the country as a topper in the world.



### India's Position in World Agriculture in 2022

Particulars	India	World	% Share	India's Rank
A. Area (Million Hectares)				
Total Area	328.73	14085.41	2.33	Seventh
Land Area	297.32	13015	2.28	Seventh
Arable Land	154.45	1383.84	11.16	First
B. Population (Million)				
Total	1425.42	8021.41	17.77	Second
Rural	905.11	3416.80	26.49	First

Source: Agricultural Statistics at a Glance 2024-25

### Tamil Nadu's position in Indian Agriculture

The state of Tamil Nadu maintains a strong position in Indian agriculture, notably ranking second in the number of Agro and food processing units and contributing 8% to the national food processing output in 2022. The state achieved a record high

foodgrain production of 12.05 million tonnes in 2022. It also ranked first in the productivity of oilseeds, groundnut, and sugarcane. Regarding Production & Productivity, Tamil Nadu recorded 119.97 lakh tonnes of food grains in 2021-22. Tamil Nadu is a leader in specific crop productivity, ranking first in sugarcane, second in maize, and third in paddy.

### Share of Tamil Nadu in Indian Labour Force Participation

Workers are mainly classified in to main and marginal workers on the basis of their work. Those workers who work for the major part of the year that is six months or more are termed as Main Workers. Those who had worked for less than 6 months in a year were termed as Marginal Workers.

### Gender-wise Share of Tamil Nadu in Indian Labour Force Participation

Particulars	Gender	Work Participation Rate		Percentage of Main Workers		Percentage of Marginal Workers	
		TN	India	TN	India	TN	India
Rural	Male	60.0	53	85.2	78.5	14.8	21.5
	Female	41.2	30	75.7	55.6	24.3	44.4
	Total	50.7	41.8	81.3	70.5	18.7	29.5
Urban	Male	58.5	53.8	92.1	90.5	7.9	9.5
	Female	21.8	15.4	84.0	77	16.0	23.0
	Total	40.2	35.3	92.1	87.6	7.9	12.4
Total	Male	59.3	53.3	88.5	82.3	11.5	17.7
	Female	31.8	25.5	78.4	59.6	21.6	40.4
	Total	45.6	39.8	85.0	75.2	15.0	24.8

Source: Census of India, 2011

When we look into the distribution of the population in Tamil Nadu by workers and non-workers by the 2001 Census, it is clear that the work participation rates in Tamil Nadu for both men and women are above those for the country as a whole. An interesting aspect is obvious that while the percentage of Marginal Workers in Tamil Nadu is lower than the average for the country, the percentage of Main Workers in urban Tamil Nadu, however, is higher than that for the country for both

men and women. As per the 2001 Census, Tamil Nadu recorded, for the first time, a lower proportion of workers in agriculture as compared to the workers in other sectors. Workers in agriculture accounted for 49.55 per cent of the total workers in 2001. In rural areas, nearly 70 per cent of the total workers were in agriculture. Among males, it was around 65 per cent, whereas it was around 78 per cent among females.

Though the Work Participation Rate (WPR), which describes the percentage of workers to



population, steadily comes down as observed in the Census, 2011, due to the transformation of economy, the same is still higher in the relatively more developed State of Tamil Nadu as compared to the country figures across location and gender. The WPR is 60 % among male in rural Tamil Nadu, while the corresponding figure in all of India is lower, at 53 % in 2011. Among female in rural areas, the WPR is higher in Tamil Nadu at 41 % compared to 30% in India as per the Census 2011. In the urban areas too, the WPR for male and female are higher in Tamil Nadu compared to India as a whole.

There is sharp difference in work participation rate that prevails between males and females in Tamil Nadu as well as in India. Similarly, the work participation rate for female is far lower in the urban areas compared to rural areas in Tamil Nadu as well as in India. The latest Census available further reveals that the percentage of Main Workers is higher in Tamil Nadu compared to India, both among male and female and across the rural and urban areas in 2011. In other words, a larger proportion of workers in Tamil Nadu are able to find employment for more than six months in a year compared to their

counterparts in the country as a whole. This is not surprising given that Tamil Nadu is one of the most advanced states of India with regard to industry, agriculture, as also the service sector. Conversely, the incidence of marginal workers is lower in Tamil Nadu compared to India.

#### Composition of Female Workforce in Tamil Nadu

A person is considered working as cultivator if he or she is engaged either as employer, single worker or family worker in the cultivation of land owned or held from Government or from private person or institution for payment in money, or in kind or on the basis of sharing of crops. Cultivation also included supervision or direction of cultivation. On the other hand, a person who had given out his/her land to another person or persons for cultivation for money, kind or share of crop and who did not even supervise or direct the cultivation of land, was not treated as cultivator.

Similarly, a person who worked on another person's land for wages in money, kind or share of crop was regarded as an 'agricultural labourer'.

**Classification of Agricultural workers of Tamil Nadu 2011**

Total/Urban /Rural	Cultivators (Main and Marginal)	Agricultural Labour (Main and Marginal)	Male Cultivators (Main and Marginal)	Male Agricultural Labour (Main and Marginal)	Female Cultivators (Main and Marginal)	Female Agricultural Labour (Main and Marginal)
Rural	3885657	8408101	2476311	4162199	1409346	4245902
Urban	362800	1198446	256168	680508	106632	517938
Total	4248457	9608547	2732479	4842707	1515978	4763840

**Source:** office of the Registrar General of India

From the above table it is clear that both main and marginal female cultivators in rural areas of Tamil Nadu is 14.09 lakhs which is lower than that of main and marginal agricultural labourers of rural Tamil Nadu which is 42.46 lakhs. Likewise, the share of urban female cultivator is also less when compared to the share of urban female main and marginal labour.

#### Recent Trends in Female Labour Force Participation Rates in Tamil Nadu

Since 2017-18, there has been a rise in FLFPR [Female Labour Force Participation Rate] in both rural and urban regions. In rural areas, the rate increased from 39 percent to 54 percent between 2017-18 and 2023-24. However, the growth of urban Female Labour Force Participation Rate has been significantly lower, rising from 27.6 percent in 2017-



18 to 30.2 percent in 2023-24. The Female Labour Force Participation Rate of Tamil Nadu is much higher than the Indian Female Labour Force Participation Rate in both rural and urban regions over the period. The gap between male and female labour force participation rate is also lower in Tamil Nadu compared to all India gender gap in labour force participation rate. As there is high female force participation, the challenges faced by them are also high.

### **Summary of Challenges Faced**

Challenges faced by landless agricultural female labourers of the study sample are enumerated as grasped from the interviews.

Challenges due to Gender discrimination placed in first rank which is followed by the occupation related challenges. The challenges with high score are as follows.

The discrimination problem starts even with allotment of task, and aggravates at segregation of the agricultural tasks. In addition to that, low and unequal wages are widely seen in this study area. All the interviewed labourers with no exception acknowledge this gender biased discriminations which obviously reflect on the wages also.

Socio-cultural barriers and domestic burdens are more specific challenges faced by women agricultural labourers. Almost all the respondents are having the responsibility of taking care of young ones as well as the elderly dependents. In addition to that, this dual burden also lowers their access to Government sponsored free agricultural training and educational programmes.

As Landless agricultural women labourers do not have legal ownership on land, obviously, it is difficult for them to access credit, modern farming techniques and Government support. Being landless workers, there is not only nil ownership of land but also no possession of assets in any form are the other main challenge. As a result, almost all the respondents opine that they have very low access to Credit facilities, for which they mainly depend on the Self -Help Groups.

One-third of the respondents observed that there exists the Lack of safe occupational conditions and particularly the young female labourers are found facing more threats related to sexual harassment.

Around 28% of the respondents, particularly in the old age face physical health issues due to long working hours.

Around 12% of the respondents are found acknowledging the fact that they are having Mental health issues due to exploitation by landowners and contractors.

Other challenges documented are women labourers are having very limited access to agricultural inputs. Main reason for these challenges is due to the fact that almost all the agriculture equipments are not designed for female workers to handle.

### **Conclusion**

The challenges faced by the female labourers are multi faced varying with the various factors like education, societal status, caste, wealth possession, technology driven works, etc. The informal sector with no organisational set-up for their own remains voiceless. The increased mechanisation of the agricultural sector make the situation furthermore worse. Fortunately, the Government of Tamil Nadu is taking steps to ensure fair wages to them, encouraging them to become a member of the Agriculture Labourers Board, offering credit facilities through SHGs, offering scholarships to the children of the landless agriculture labourers as Uzhavar Paadhukapputh Thittam, etc. Very Recently, The Tamil Nadu Government also announced a monetary grant upto Rs. 5 Lakhs to SC/ST women to acquire their own agricultural land which is seen as a new dawn in the life of the landless agricultural labourers.

The key to achieving economic development lies in realising women's rights. Ensuring women's access to basic services, land control, property inheritance and financial inclusion is the way forward in achieving the lofty goals of SDG1 and the reduction in poverty. Empowering rural women especially landless agricultural women through



productive employment contributes to inclusive economic growth.

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