

# POLICY ANALYSIS SERIES





## **POLICY ANALYSIS #2**

# **WOMEN, LABOUR & SOCIAL SECURITY IN SIKKIM, INDIA**

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# Taking an in-depth look at policies affecting the eastern Himalaya



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### ***Contributions:***

MC and RS conceived the idea and the report framework; RS led the data collection, with assistance from TS; MC and RC co-led the data analysis; MC led the secondary research and manuscript writing with contributions from RS. Design and layout by MC. All authors contributed critically to the drafts and gave final approval for publication.

## Summary

Women are an important part of the workforce, globally and across all economic sectors. Yet, despite their continued participation in the labour market, they still face challenges- social, cultural, institutional- that affect their participation in the labour market, as well as their working lives.

This Policy Analysis focuses on the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022-2023\* to assess the status and characteristics of the female labour force in Sikkim, India. It highlights the different trends, and contradictions emergent within the female labour force, with a particular focus on women workers' access to social security benefits.

An assessment of the PLFS data raises many pertinent questions around youth employment, growth of the informal sector, rise of unpaid work, and low worker participation of urban women, amongst many others. While the Policy Analysis suggests ways forward for the Government and civil society, it is also functions as a starting point for a much-needed, exhaustive research on women and labour in Sikkim and the Eastern Himalaya.

\*PLFS 2023-2024 Report was released a few days prior to the launch of this report. A preliminary analysis of the 2023-2024 report indicates towards the continuation, and even acceleration of trends (viz. lower participation of urban women, increased employment in the tertiary sector, decrease in regular/salaried work) for women workers in Sikkim, as has been discussed in this report.

# Glossary

<b>PLFS</b>	<p>Periodic Labour Force Survey</p> <p>Annual survey which gives estimates of key employment and unemployment indicators.</p>
<b>LFPR</b>	<p>Labour Force Participation Rate</p> <p>Percentage of persons in the labour force (i.e. working or seeking or available for work) in the population and is often taken as an indication of the total labour supply.</p>
<b>UWSSA</b>	<p>Unorganised Workers Social Security Act</p> <p>Act passed by the Government of India in 2008 to provide for the social security and the welfare of workers in the unorganised sector.</p>
<b>Worker Population Ratio (WPR)</b>	<p>The percentage of employed persons in the population.</p>
<b>Unemployment Rate (UR)</b>	<p>The percentage of persons unemployed among the persons in the labour force.</p>
<b>Activity Status-Usual Status</b>	<p>The activity status of a person is determined on the basis of the activities pursued by the person during the specified reference period. When the activity status is determined on the basis of the reference period of last 365 days preceding the date of survey, it is known as the usual activity status of the person.</p>
<b>Activity Status-Current Weekly Status (CWS)</b>	<p>The activity status determined on the basis of a reference period of last 7 days preceding the date of survey.</p>
<b>MGNREGA</b>	<p>Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act</p> <p>This Act was passed by the Government of India in 2005 to provide a legal guarantee for 100 days of work to adult members of a rural household for employment in unskilled manual labour.</p>
<b>Female Labour</b>	<p>Females who were either 'working' (or employed) or 'seeking or available for work' (or unemployed)</p>

# Glossary

<b>Informal Labour</b>	Workers who are employed in informal enterprises or under unorganized working conditions.
<b>Regular/Wage Salaried Employment</b>	Persons who worked in others' farm or non-farm enterprises (both household and non-household) and, in return, received salary or wages on a regular basis (i.e. not on the basis of daily or periodic renewal of work contract). This category includes persons getting time wage as well as persons receiving piece wage or salary and paid apprentices, both full time and part-time.
<b>Casual Labour</b>	A person who was casually engaged in others' farm or non-farm enterprises (both household and non-household) and, in return, received wages according to the terms of the daily or periodic work contract, was considered as a casual labour.
<b>Self-Employed</b>	Persons who operated their own farm or non-farm enterprises or were engaged independently in a profession or trade on their own-account or with one or a few partners were deemed to be self-employed in household enterprises. They have autonomy and economic independence.
<b>Informal Sector Enterprises</b>	Unincorporated enterprises owned by households, (i.e., proprietary and partnership enterprises including the informal producers' cooperatives) are largely considered as informal sector enterprises. In PLFS, proprietary and partnership enterprises are considered as informal sector enterprises.
<b>Social Security Benefits</b>	The Code on Social Security, 2020 defines social security as ".. the measures of protection afforded to employees, unorganised workers, gig workers and platform workers to ensure access to health care and to provide income security, particularly in cases of old age, unemployment, sickness, invalidity, work injury, maternity or loss of a breadwinner by means of rights conferred on them and schemes framed.
<b>Own-account workers</b>	Self-employed persons who operated their enterprises on their own account or with one or a few partners and who, during the reference period, by and large, ran their enterprise without hiring any labour. They could, however, have had unpaid helpers to assist them in the activity of the enterprise.

# Introduction

Sikkim, one of the smallest states in India, consistently ranks high across numerous development and governance indicators (viz. literacy, rural development, sustainable development) amongst small states in India (Gollerkeri et al, 2022). Women in particular, are an important part of Sikkim's success story; visible in the public sphere and active contributors to the state's rapid economic growth.

However, while women in Sikkim continue to fare better in terms of access to education, health and employment opportunities in comparison to other Indian states, they face specific challenges and inhibitors. For women workers, their participation in the labour market, the types of work that are available or taken up by them, is driven by both economic as well as social conditions. Underemployment, insufficient workplace support, technological barriers, lack of entrepreneurial up-skilling opportunities, financial literacy, market inaccessibility, and social norms around work-life balance, affect their participation and output in the labour market.

In this edition of the Policy Analysis Series (PAS), we assess the status of the female labour force in Sikkim – their composition, trends, and existing social security policies supporting women workers in Sikkim.

Through this, we aim to present a holistic understanding of the current state of female workers in Sikkim and identify strategic areas for policy intervention and groundwork implementation needed to encourage, support and strengthen women workers.

Here, it is important to clarify that this report takes all working women in Sikkim, as reported in the PLFS into consideration, and not just Sikkimese\* women, who are eligible for government employment and social security benefits.

The data source for this report is the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) unless mentioned otherwise. The annual figures are drawn from the 2022-2023 report. For comparative figures, we have drawn from the reports of previous years between 2018 and 2022.

## Sikkim at a glance (Census 2011)

**Population:** 6,10, 577

Male: 3,23,070

Female: 2,87,507

Rural : 75 per cent

Urban: 25 per cent

Youth (15-29 years old): 1,98, 873

**Sex Ratio:** 890: 1000

**Literacy:** 81 per cent

Male: 87 per cent

Female: 76 per cent

**Major Industries:** Tourism, Pharmaceutical Manufacturing, Agriculture, Hydro-power

**LFPR:** 77 per cent (for 15-59 years, working age category).

Male LFPR: 83 per cent

Female LFPR: 70 per cent

**Unemployment Rate (2022-2023):** 2.2 per cent

\*While anyone can reside in Sikkim, not everyone can claim legal status or belonging as Sikkimese. The Sikkim Subject Regulation, 1961, outlines the criteria for recognition as Sikkim Subjects – basically organised around residence in the kingdom prior to 1961, documented through land ownership, tax receipts etc. An important point here is that the status of being Sikkimese is based on paternal descent. This has important ramifications for Sikkimese women married to non-Sikkimese men, and their children.



# Female Labour Force Participation in India

The Indian labour force can be disaggregated according to two parameters:

**(i) Sector of work**, based on the type of enterprise or production unit where the person is employed. This is further subdivided into formal, informal and the household sector.

**(ii) Type of employment**, defined in accordance to employment status and other job-related characteristics. Type of employment can be formal and informal (Bordoloi, et al., 2020:2).

In India, 58 per cent of men and women aged 15-59 years (i.e. the working age group) were a part of the workforce in 2022-23 (Chawla and Singh, 2024).

However, this growth is not uniform across the country or genders. Comparison across genders shows that the female LFPR in India has made a significant increase from 23 per cent in 2017-2018 to 37 per cent in 2023. On the other hand, male LFPR showed only a marginal increase, from 76 per cent to 79 per cent in the same period. Across the country, female LFPR is higher in rural areas than in urban areas.

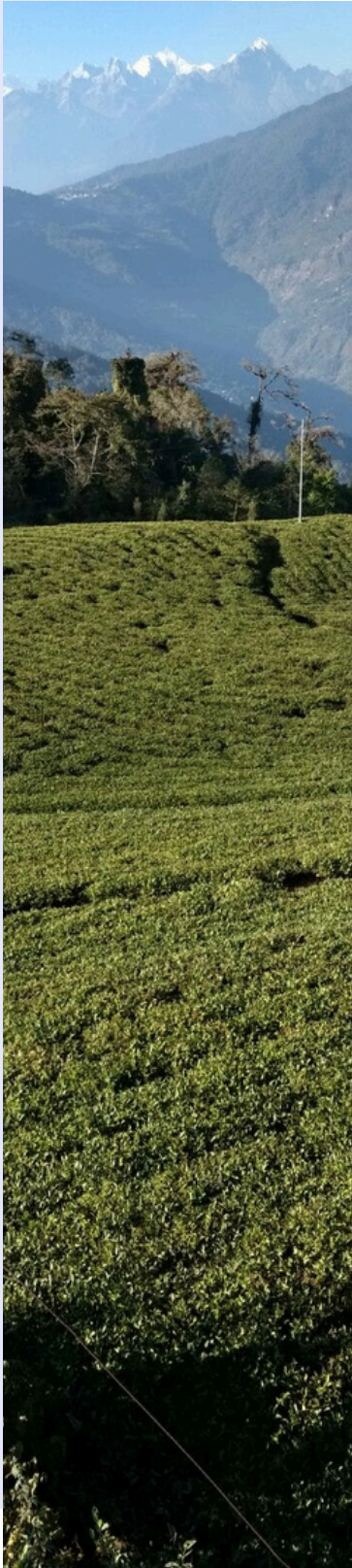
Sikkim recorded a higher female LFPR (70 per cent for 15-59 years age category) than the national average, a trend that was also visible across other Himalayan and north-eastern states\* (Bhushan, 2024). This indicates that in comparison to other parts of the country, more women are participating in the labour market in these regions.



\*The eight north-eastern states are Sikkim, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Tripura, Manipur, Mizoram and Assam.

# SIKKIMESE ECONOMY

“**Over 40 per cent of Sikkim’s youth are engaged in agriculture, with limited opportunities to transition to non-farm employment**”



Sikkim is one of the best performing small states in India ([Dutta, 2021](#)) with the highest per capita (Rs. 4,86,197) in the Northeast region, and only second to Goa, in all of India ([Government of Sikkim, Finance Department, 2021](#)). Amongst other development milestones, the poverty rate has reduced drastically over the last two decades, from 31 per cent to just under 4 per cent, the literacy rate currently stands at 81 per cent ([NITI Ayog, 2023](#)) and in 2019, the overall Human Development Index (0.717 points vs 0.645) was higher than the national average ([Singha and Nayak, 2021](#)), which is also the highest in the northeast region.

This economic transformation can be attributed to the growth and expansion of the secondary and tertiary sectors, which have been abetted by new economic and development policies like the North-East India Industrial and Investment Promotion Policy 2007, North East Special Infrastructure Development Scheme, Prime Minister’s Development Initiative for North-East Region, Sikkim Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises Policy 2022, and Sikkim Eco-Tourism Policy ([Singha and Singh, 2022](#)). These policies have been initiated by both the central and state governments for employment and income generation in the agriculture, manufacturing (pharmaceuticals, hydropower) and services (tourism, hospitality) sectors.

Although the manufacturing and services sectors are the highest contributors to the state economy (59 per cent and 31 per cent respectively) ([Damani, 2024](#)), an estimated 70 per cent of the total population still depends on agriculture and forestry for their livelihood ([NABARD, 2021](#)). Their increase in the share of the State Gross Domestic Product has not translated into adequate employment opportunities. The agricultural sector contributes only 10.12 per cent (2020-21) to the state’s economy (Damani, 2024), and yet, **over 40 per cent of Sikkim’s youth are engaged in agriculture, with limited opportunities to transition to non-farm employment** ([World Bank, 2023](#)).

This disconnect between the structure of growth and employment creation compounds challenges for workers who lack appropriate industry skill development training, awareness of sector-specific opportunities, and the capacity to migrate for education or employment ([Gupta et.al 2021](#)). The PLFS 2022-23 report also highlights that lack of participation in diploma and certificate courses, which further limits employment opportunities in diverse sectors.

As illustrated by the female LFPR in Sikkim, the combination of these circumstances corral workers, and especially women workers, to specific employment opportunities, which lead to very specific characteristics and conditions, as will be discussed in the following sections.



Photo Credit:  
Karchoong Diyali



Photo credit:  
Praveen Chettri

# Female Workforce in Sikkim

While women comprise 56 per cent of the total labour force, the LFPR shows stark divisions between rural and urban areas (Fig.1). Rural women have higher participation rates across all age groups, which is contrasted by the significantly lower participation rates of urban women. For both groups, their participation is lowest in the 15-29 years age group, which is generally when women marry and/or take on child-rearing duties (Singh, 2024). This trend is consistent with national trends of rural and urban women’s participation in the workforce (Fig.1).

In comparison to urban women, rural women are also more likely to rejoin the labour market as a result of greater access to flexible hours and the ability to work in close proximity to the home (Gautham, 2022). While flexibility, amongst other factors, contributes to higher LFPR for rural women (see Fernandez, 2023 for extended discussion), it could also act as a wage suppressant, with rural women having to trade lower wages for flexible working hours.

**“More rural women are working, than urban women”**

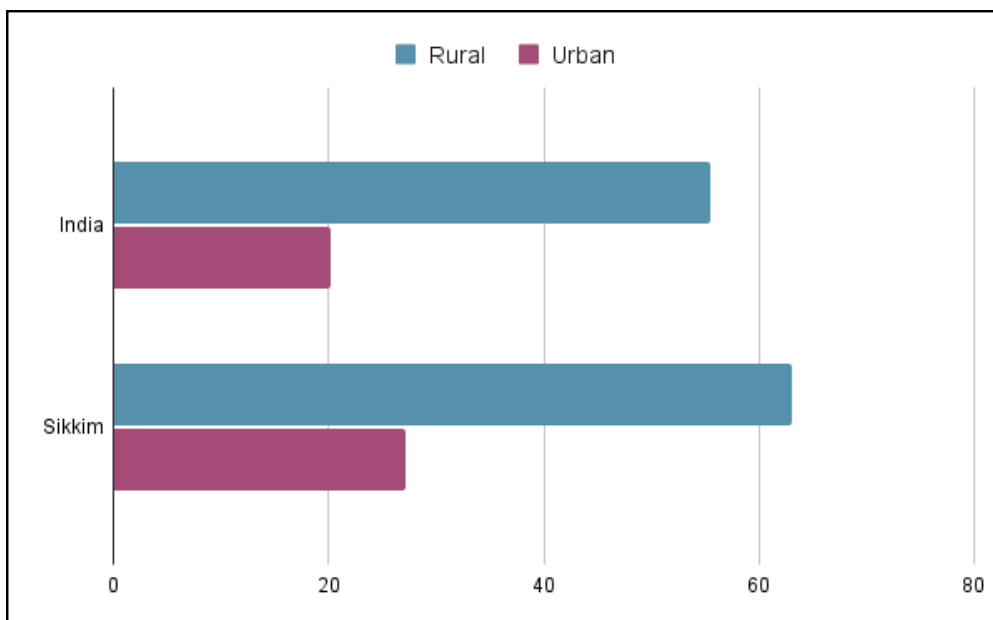


Fig.1 Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) for Urban and Rural Women (All Ages) in Sikkim and India  
Source: Author’s calculations based on Unit Level Data from PLFS 2022-2023

# Characteristics of the Female Labour Force in Sikkim

**1** More rural women are transitioning out of regular, salaried work

**2** Majority rural women are self-employed

**3** Higher employment in the agricultural sector

**4** More women are unemployed than men

**5** Urban women work primarily in the tertiary sector

**6** Growth in informal labour across sectors

**7** Limited access to Social Security benefits

# 1. More rural women transitioning out of regular, salaried work

A comparative analysis of the status of employment across two survey periods (2021-22 and 2022-23) highlights a decrease in regular, salaried work and as own account workers/employers, and an increase in other self-employment categories and helper in household enterprise\* (Fig. 2).

The drop in regular wage/salaried jobs was from 25 per cent to 18 per cent between the two survey periods, while employment as a helper in household enterprises increased from 35 to 46 per cent in the same period. ***This trend signals that more women are now “working” in unpaid roles*** (Chandrashekhara and Ghosh, 2024).

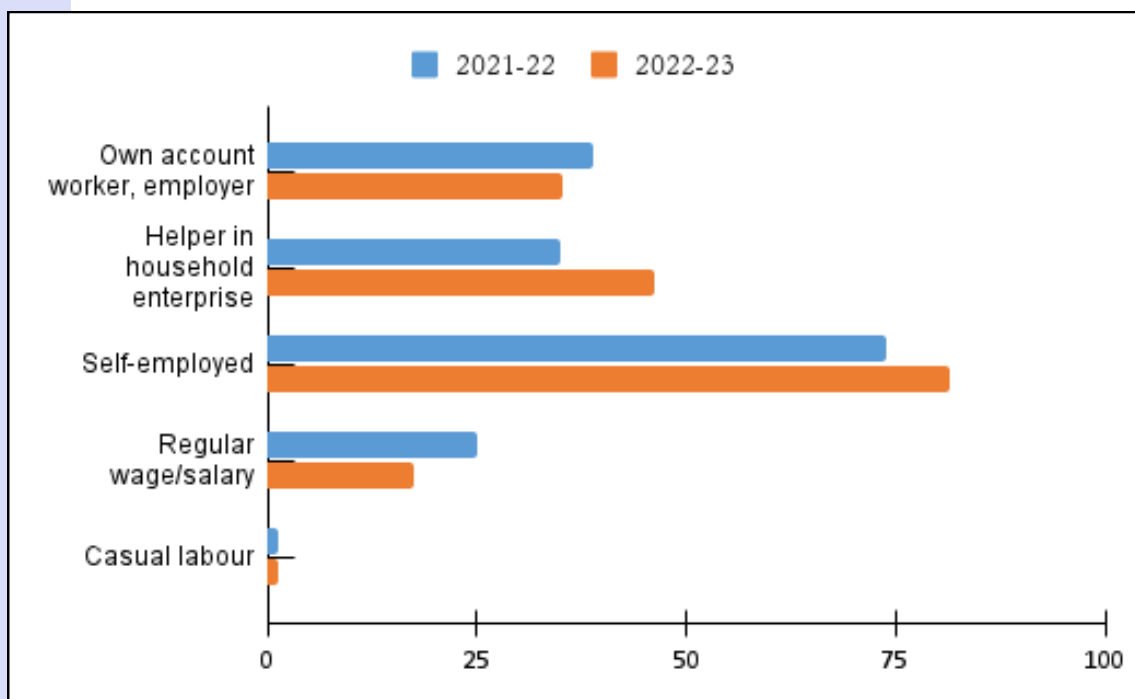


Fig. 2. Percentage distribution of rural women by status of employment across two survey periods (2021-22 and 2022-23)

Source: Author's calculations based on Unit Level Data from PLFS 2022-23 and 2021-22

\*Helpers in household enterprises are a category of self-employed persons mostly family members who keep themselves engaged in their household enterprises, working full or part time and do not receive any regular salary or wages in return for the work performed. They do not run the household enterprise on their own but assist the related person living in the same household in running the household enterprise. This specific category is still included in employment, on the grounds that it contributes to economic activity (Raveendran 2021).

## 2. Majority rural women are self-employed

Within the overall female working population, 77 per cent of rural women (aged 15 years and above) are engaged in the labour market, which is significantly higher compared with urban women's participation, which is only 34 per cent. However, this increase in rural female participation could also be a result of changes in how women's work was measured during past LFPR surveys ([Deshpande, 2023](#)).

Of these working rural women, **a staggering 81 per cent are self-employed** (Fig. 2) (compared to 54 per cent of self-employed rural men), working mainly in the tourism and agricultural sector as suppliers of fresh produce, small-scale vendors and entrepreneurs of local products.

This transition towards more self-employed roles could be attributed to a combination of limited regular/salaried employment opportunities and the success and popularity of Central and State Government schemes for eco-tourism, especially homestays, and the promotion of organic farming through access to low-interest loans, distribution of seeds, and farm animals.

Women's Self-Help Groups, which are supported by Central and [State government schemes](#), have also been instrumental in supporting home-based activities.

However, while self-employment might be one of the revenue streams for rural women, it which brings **challenges of temporary/seasonal employment, inconsistent payments, social and economic insecurity, and stagnant upward mobility**.



Photo credit:  
Praveen Chettri



### 3. Higher employment in the agricultural sector

Despite the declining returns in the agricultural sector akin to the rest of the country, an overwhelming percentage of rural women (74 per cent) participate in agriculture in comparison to rural men (37 per cent). Consequently, rural female participation in the secondary and tertiary sectors is significantly lower than rural men's (Fig. 3).

***Feminization of labour is also an indicator of women's social and economic roles.*** Given the overall distress in the agricultural sector, this can also be described as the 'feminisation of agrarian distress' (Pattanaik et al., 2017, Southard and Randell, 2022). The feminisation of agricultural labour can largely be attributed to male out-migration for non-farm work in other sectors (viz. manufacturing, construction), as well as economic distress that has prompted more women to enter the workforce to supplement family income.

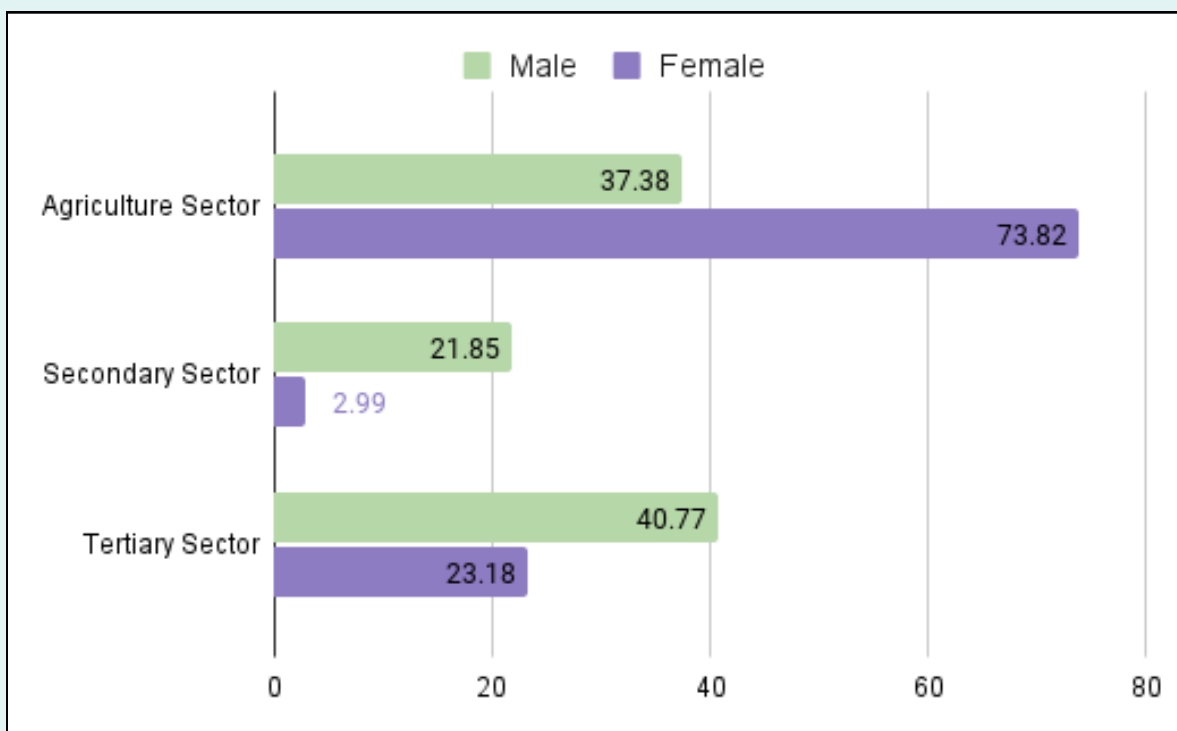


Fig. 3. Percentage distribution of rural women and men by status in the three economic sectors  
Source: Author's calculations based on Unit Level Data from PLFS 2022-2023

## 4. More women are unemployed than men

Women in both urban and rural areas face more unemployment in comparison to men. This is especially pertinent within the 15–29-year-old category.

# 16%

Rural women (15-29 years) are unemployed compared to 6.5 per cent rural men

# 10%

Urban women (15-29 years) are unemployed compared to 5.6 per cent urban men

## 5. Urban women work primarily in the tertiary sector

Despite higher educational attainments, better/more work opportunities and fewer social restrictions, urban women's (aged 15 and above) labour market participation remains low at only 34 per cent. However, unlike their rural counterparts who are mostly in self-employed roles, 68 per cent of urban working females are engaged in regular/salaried employment.

The transition to regular, salaried work is consistent with increased employment in the tertiary (service sector including trade, hospitality, retail, insurance, and tourism), which has generated the highest employment opportunities for urban females over the last five survey periods (Fig. 4).

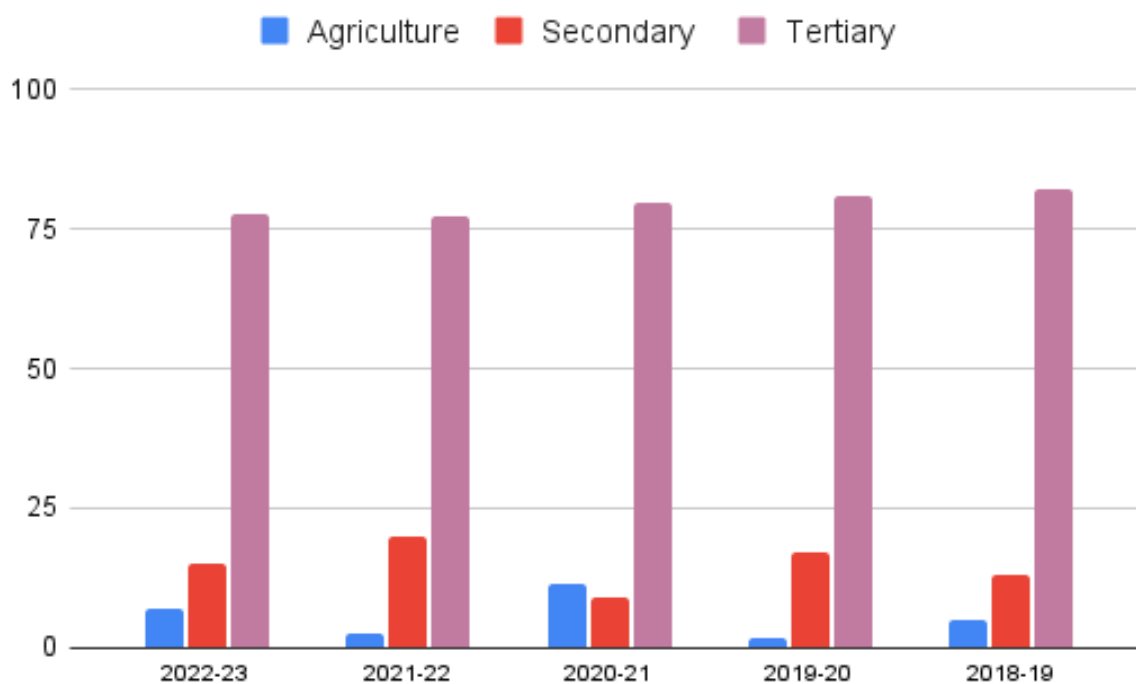


Fig. 4. Distribution of urban working women according to the sector across five survey periods  
Source: Author's calculations based on Unit Level Data from PLFS 2018- 2019 to 2022-2023

Of this, more than 75 per cent of regular/salaried jobs are in small and medium enterprises, including household proprietary and partnership establishments, public and private companies, and government employment. Further within that subsection, 61 per cent work in propriety and partnership enterprises, which are classified as informal sector enterprises by the [Central Statistical Organisation, Government of India](#).

Regular wage/ salaried employment in the informal sector does not translate to job security, health and income insurance, or up-skilling opportunities that can lead to financial security and better working conditions. Thus, the disproportionate participation of women in these sectors is also an indicator of the size and composition of informal labour in Sikkim (see Fig. 4).



Photo credit: Kunga Tashi Lepcha

Urban women also face the problem of educated unemployment ([Reimeingam, 2014](#)). This could be attributed to a combination of both social and economic factors that interact at the household and the macro-economic level. Major factors include lack of work suitable to educational attainment ([Chaudhary, 2021](#)), motherhood penalty ([Zumbyte and Bordia, 2017](#)), increased unpaid household and care work ([Lama, 2021](#)), and lack of growth in sectors dominated by women ([Roy and Mukhopadhyay, 2019](#)).

## 6. Growth in informal labour across sectors

Women in Sikkim have, and continue to work mostly in the informal sector (see Fig.3, Fig. 5). While informalisation was previously restricted to the agricultural sector, it is now widespread across all sectors. This has been exacerbated by almost chronic levels of informalisation even within the formal sector due to the growth of part-time, temporary, contract work, and non-union employment ([Chaudhary 2021](#)).

**Women typically take on roles that are more prone to informalisation** ([Kumari, 2023](#)).

For instance, while rural female labour is mostly concentrated in agriculture, urban women dominate in retail, hospitality, social work, health, and services. **Along with being prone to market volatility, these roles are also often considered an extension of women’s ‘natural’ roles within the household.** In comparison, most administrative, executive, and professional roles are predominantly taken on by men (Fig. 5).

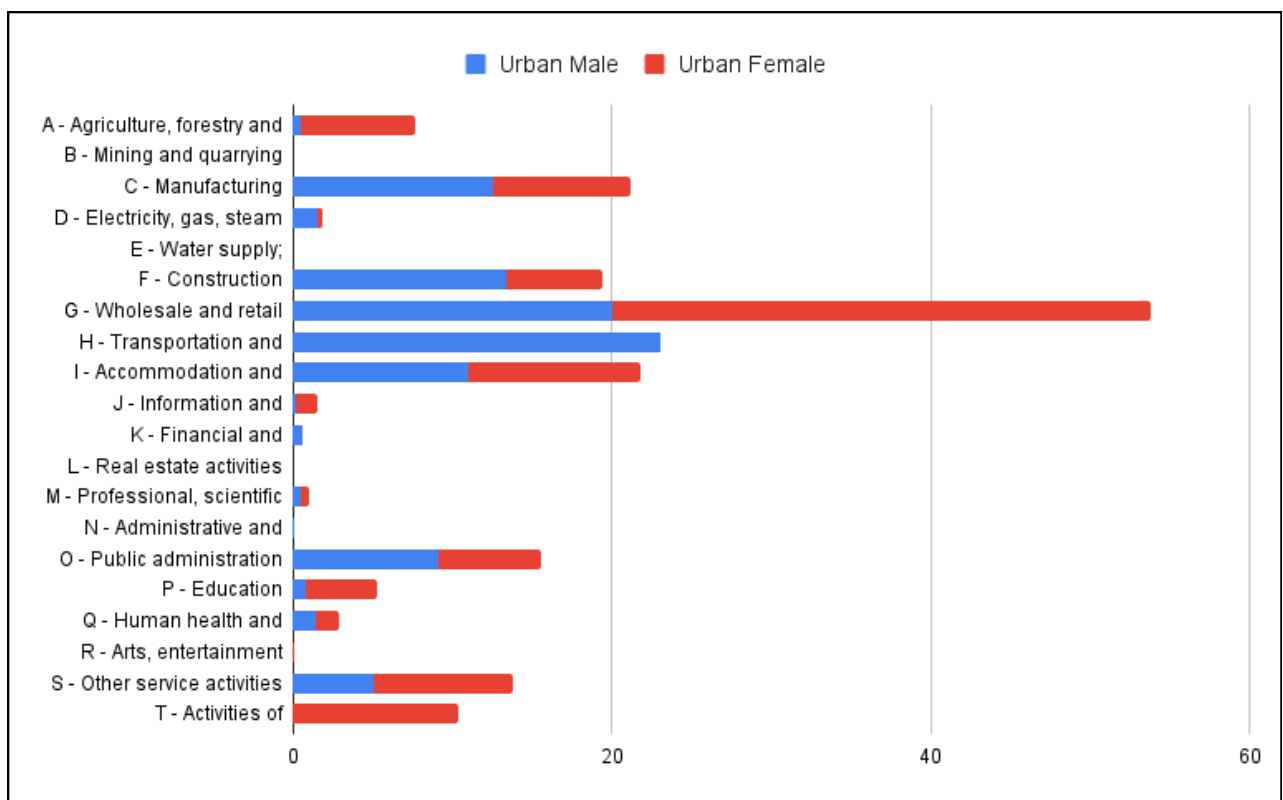


Fig. 5. Distribution of urban working men and women by industry  
 Source: Author’s calculations based on Unit Level Data from PLFS 2022-2023

Employment schemes like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) have been instrumental in contributing to the steady growth of casual, informal workers. 100-days works under the MGNREGA scheme has emerged as an important source of secondary employment and income for rural women, one which is not captured by the PLFS survey. This scheme employed more than 30,000 women in the 2024-2025 financial year itself, (MGNREGA, 2024) and continues to be the only source of employment, albeit temporary, for a growing number of rural women.

According to a World Bank, 2023 report, less than one-fifth of enterprises in Sikkim are women-led. Very few women take on formal, legal, registered entrepreneurial roles. Most of their businesses are in trade and services in low-return sub-sectors that remain at subsistence levels, and face challenges in ensuring sustainability, growth, formalization and employment generation (ibid). ***This means that women's entrepreneurial ventures remain small-scale and highly informal.***



Photo Credit:  
Karchoong Diyali

## 7. Limited Access to Social Security Benefits

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While women's LFPR growth in Sikkim is higher than other states in India, most of this growth is noticeable in the informal sector, where women are either self-employed workers or labourers in private enterprises. These jobs are characterised by a lack of formal working contracts, job security, social security benefits, vulnerability to market volatility, and lack of recourse to workplace security, prevention of discrimination and harassment, and unfair dismissal

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Working conditions of regular wage/salaried women in both rural and urban areas are rather dire as few workers enjoy basic work benefits (Fig.6). **Very few women workers have access to social security benefits, and urban workers experience higher levels of precarity than their rural counterparts.** However, worker precarity exists on a spectrum. While private enterprises like pharmaceutical companies and manufacturing units may provide some benefits (eg. medical compensation, creche services, working contracts, and overtime payment) (Chettri, 2023), women working for independent, small-scale enterprises often do not have any rights or employment security at the workplace (Chettri, 2022).

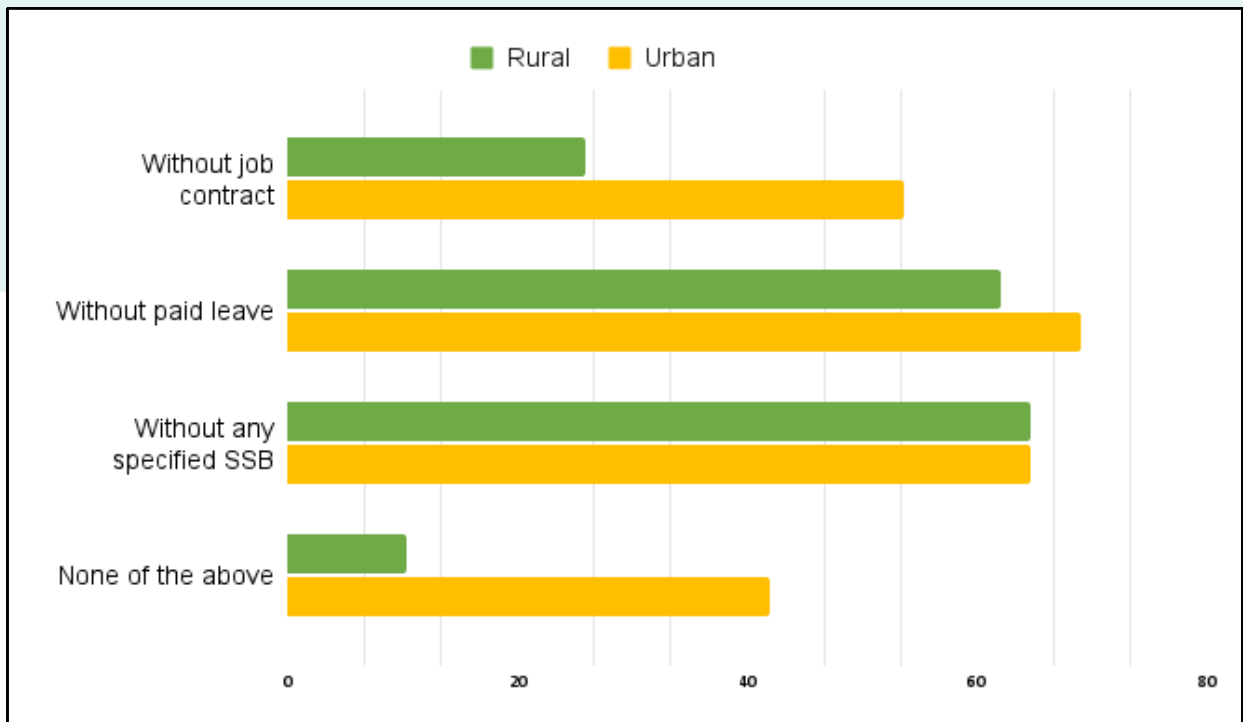


Fig. 6. Working conditions of regular wage/ salaried women: urban vs rural women  
 Source: Author’s calculations based on Unit Level Data from PLFS 2022-2023





# Social Security Policies for Working Women

Working women in Sikkim are overwhelmingly represented in agriculture and tertiary sectors, which are often not organised, regulated or monitored. Working in these sectors, women are faced with numerous challenges like work insecurity, lack of workers' benefits, and workplace security. It is therefore important to assess policies that are geared towards ensuring better livelihood outcomes for women workers.

Social security schemes in India are broadly divided into **Central Sector (CS)** schemes that are fully funded by the Government of India (GoI) and **Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSSs)**, for which the finances are contributed by both the GoI and state governments.

The GoI has initiated major labour law reforms in recent years. Following the recommendation of the 2nd National Commission of Labour, the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoL&E) all existing labour laws have been categorised into four 'Labour Codes'.

This codification is expected to rationalise and simplify current legislations across a variety of labour issues.

The four Labour Codes are: (a) The Code on Wages, 2019; (b) The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020; (c) The Code on Social Security, 2020; and (d) The Industrial Relations Code, 2020.

The Code on Social Security, 2020 aims to, “amend and consolidate the laws relating to social security with the goal to extend social security to all employees and workers either in the organised or unorganised or any other sectors and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto” (Government of India, Ministry of Law and Justice, 2020).

Prior to this codification, the Government of India had implemented the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act (UWSSA) in 2008 mandating state governments to provide social security benefits to workers of the unorganised sectors by formulating suitable welfare schemes. To enable this, the Government of India has introduced numerous schemes such as National Family Benefit Scheme, Handloom Weavers Comprehensive Welfare Scheme, Aam Admi Bima Yojana and Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana. These schemes have now been subsumed under the Code on Social Security, 2020.

The GoI has also introduced schemes for informal workers that are not covered by the Code on Social Security 2020; this includes Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana, Janani Suraksha Yojana Janshree Bima Yojana, Atal Pension Yojana, Janani Suraksha Yojana, and Deen Dayal Antyodaya Yojana.

While these policies are welcome, the Social Security Code, 2022 retains many of the problems that affected the efficacy of the UWSSA (see Bordoloi et al., 2022: 9-12 for further discussion). Additionally, the budgetary allocation for schemes exclusively meant for social security of the unorganised sector, declined in comparison to the 2023-2024 budget, thereby shrinking its reach and impact (CBGA, 2024).

## Social Security Policies in Sikkim

In addition to the abovementioned Central Government schemes, the State Government of Sikkim has initiated numerous worker benefit schemes (maternity and paternity leave, injury/death compensation, sickness benefit, pension, capacity-building, entrepreneur promotion etc.) under the Employees' State Insurance Scheme Building and Other Construction Workers Act 1996.

However, only State Government employees, factories or other establishments employing ten persons or more, and workers whose salaries do not exceed Rs.21,000 per month, and Rs. 25,000 per month in the case of differently abled, are eligible for these benefits (Labour Department, Government of Sikkim).

Under the Sikkim Labour (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Services) Act, 2021, it is legally mandatory for all workers, intermediaries for service-providers or sub-service providers, owners, employers and establishments, to register with the Registering Officer, Government of Sikkim. Registration of all workers is intended to, “effectively execute the plethora of existing welfare-schemes and to capacitate the State Government to frame rules, regulations, guidelines and programmes for improving the working and living conditions of labourers and also to protect them from exploitation by their employers.”

In 2022, the State Government revised the Minimum Wages Act with respect to daily-wage rates of unskilled, semi-skilled, skilled and highly-skilled categories of scheduled employment across both the formal and informal sector. The highest increment was noted in the unskilled (from Rs. 300 to Rs. 500) and semi-skilled categories (from Rs. 320- Rs. 520).

Additionally, State Government employees who hold Sikkim Subjects or Certificates of Identification, and have two or more children, receive advance and increments ([The Hindu, 2023](#)).

However, while these policies are welcome, there is a **glaring absence of social security benefits for women workers who are not Sikkimese, not registered with the Government, or both. This creates opportunities for discrimination and exploitation of a significant proportion of working women.**



Photo Credit:  
Roshan Rai

More than half of all women labour in Sikkim are informal labourers, working in agriculture as cultivators in homestead plots, graziers, home-based entrepreneurs, village-level public health workers, construction labourers in MGNREGA projects, in the retail and hospitality sector, and cleaners, and maids amongst many other roles. They are often self-employed, working individually, not unionised or registered with local authorities which would make them ineligible for social security benefits provided by the state. Thus, better social protection and employment generation measures, and effective policies and their implementation must be a priority for sustainable development and social equity for all.

“  
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Photo Credit:  
Karchoong Diyali

## Way Forward

- While more women might be participating in the labour market, it is imperative to assess the types of jobs that are becoming available, and what that might imply for the long-term socio-economic security of the workforce. *There is an urgent need for an in-depth state-wide assessment of the social and economic lives of the female workforce in Sikkim.*
- Rural women comprise a major proportion of the female LFPR, but are engaged in seasonal, erratic work and are often underpaid. Rural women should transition to better-paying roles that match their education and training profile. This could be achieved through *targeted training and up-skilling programmes, especially in the context of financial literacy and overcoming technological barriers and access to the market.*
- Men and women continue to take on gendered occupations; simultaneously men are over-represented in political, executive and administrative roles. This calls for an *assessment of the factors inhibiting female upward mobility and courses for rectification.*
- The disjoint between economic growth and unemployment needs to be corrected through *policies and active government interventions in the secondary and tertiary sectors.*
- Recognition and acknowledgement of labour informality has to be central to government legislation on labour, and concerted efforts must be made to *widen the social security net to all workers.* Policy can be supported by activism and awareness of labour issues, and rights as well as ease of access to support institutions like the police, legal administration and other labour redressal mechanisms.
- MGNREGA data is currently not counted in the current Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS). MGNREGA is an important source of self-employment for rural women and should be accounted for. Thus, *survey methods should integrate PLFS and MGNREGA data.*



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