Women's Labour Participation Rises, but the Question of Job Quality Remains



News reference: NSO's PLFS July-September 2026 quarterly bulletin; PIB release of 10 November 2026 and analysis of 11 November | Mains: GS-I society (women's empowerment); GS-III labour, employment, informal economy; Prelims: PLFS, LFPR/WPR/UR, NSO

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Why in the News

The National Statistical Office (NSO) has released the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) bulletin for July-September 2026. It shows a notable rise in women's labour force participation, but according to analysts this rise has occurred mainly in informal, low-productivity work such as self-employment and agriculture.

Key PLFS Figures (July-September 2026)

- Overall labour force participation rate (LFPR, 15+ years): up from 54.6% to 55.5% (compared with the previous quarter).
- Female LFPR: up from 33.2% to 34.7%.
- Female worker-population ratio (WPR): up from 31.3% to 32.8%.
- Overall unemployment rate (UR): down from 5.4% to 5.1%; rural UR down from 4.8% to 4.3%, while urban UR was nearly flat (6.7% to 6.8%).
- Rural self-employment: up from 61.4% to 62.7%.
- Share of rural workers in agriculture: up from 52.9% to 56.7% - a jump of 3.8 percentage points in one quarter.
- Total employed (15+): 57.9 crore on average, of whom 40.5 crore men and 17.4 crore women.

The Women-Specific Picture in Agriculture and Self-Employment

A Forbes India analysis of 11 November, citing PLFS data, said 59.8% of working women were in agriculture and 64.9% in self-employment. Among rural working women, the share of self-employment is stated as 72.8%. These have different denominators from the 62.7% self-employment or 56.7% agriculture figures for the whole rural workforce; do not mix them. The report also describes the role of unpaid family work. This brings out the need to test the quality of employment, but a separate official rate of "informal" work is not established by itself.

There Is Growth, but a Question on Quality

A recent World Bank report (October 2026) also acknowledged that much of the employment gain between 2017 and 2023 came from rural women entering paid work, raising the number of earners in families. But the report gave two warnings:

- Employment growth is concentrated in relatively low-productivity activities, and real incomes remained nearly flat.
- Youth unemployment rose from 14.6% to 15.9% between Q1 FY2026 and Q1 FY2027, and it is especially high among rural young women.

These figures raise the question of employment quality. The PIB press note cited does not give a direct rate of "informal employment". Treating agriculture or self-employment as insecure work by itself is also not right; regular income, social security and unpaid family work must be seen separately.

Why the Informal Sector Is Growing

- Agriculture and seasonal effect: a rise in the rural agriculture share in one quarter is a subject for examination, but it does not by itself lead to the conclusion that a long-term structural change has reversed because of seasonal variation.
- Differences within self-employment: running one's own enterprise and helping in a family enterprise without separate pay are different situations. They should not be treated as identical in employment analysis.
- The absence of social security: informal workers generally do not get protections like PF, pension and maternity benefits; mere registration should not be treated as proof of all benefits reaching automatically.

The Way Forward

- Expanding skill training and regular-wage jobs for women workers.
- Extending social security schemes to informal workers.
- Strengthening support structures such as childcare (creche) facilities and safe transport, so that women can choose better work.

Prelims Practice Question

Question 1: Consider the following statements:

1. Under the revamped PLFS (from January 2025), quarterly labour indicators are released for both rural and urban areas

2. The PLFS is conducted by the National Statistical Office (NSO), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) 1 only

(b) 2 only

(c) Both 1 and 2

(d) Neither 1 nor 2

Answer and Explanation

Answer: (c)

Statement 1 is correct: from January 2025 the revamped PLFS gives monthly and quarterly estimates for both rural and urban areas under the current weekly status (CWS); the April-June 2025 bulletin was the first of this series.

Statement 2 is correct: the PLFS is conducted by the NSO (MoSPI).

Mains Practice Question

"Women's labour force participation in India is rising, but the quality of employment remains a matter of concern." Review this statement in the light of recent PLFS data and suggest measures for improvement. (Answer in 250 words - 15 marks)

Answer Outline

Introduction: A rise in female LFPR and WPR, but participation and job quality are separate questions.

Main Body: The difference among agriculture, self-employment and unpaid family work; the right denominators; the limits of a seasonal quarterly change; regular income, social security, care and mobility.

Conclusion: Raising the quality of employment and women's choices alongside the count of jobs.

Syllabus mapping:General Studies Paper-I: society (women's empowerment); Paper-III: labour, employment, informal economyPrelims: PLFS, LFPR/WPR/UR, NSO

Sources

PIB press release - PLFS quarterly bulletin

The Hindu BusinessLine - Unemployment falls to 5.1% in July-September

Forbes India - Rural young women face rising joblessness

The Hindu - India made remarkable progress in reducing poverty: World Bank

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