

Under the Shadow of the Pandemic: Gender, Employment and Migration in 21st Century India

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A general starting point for a discussion on policy questions with respect to Gender and the Covid 19 Pandemic are issues that were raised quite early on, including

- a) Poorly understood differential impact of the disease on men and women - need for sex disaggregated data - limited as of now, and certainly not publicly available in relation to the vaccines, where as some have commented, the practice of “science by press release” is becoming entrenched.
- b) Domestic violence, increased care burdens, decreased access to necessary support services, interrupted access to sexual reproductive health, contraception, and nutrition services
- c) With the majority of health workers being women, issues of burnout with increased work hours and inadequate protections, although the fact that major contingents of women frontline health workers remain unrecognized as workers, and remain disentitled from minimum wages and other basic rights as workers hardly hit the headlines.
- d) Inequities in access to information and resources, including necessities such as soap, water, sanitation, and social safety nets
- e) Fear and stigma based discrimination and ethnic targeting
- f) Tendency to excessive use of emergency powers, where our history has something to tell us as well.

Historical parallels in India

- Rajnarayan Chandavarkar in his 'Plague panic and epidemic politics in India, 1896-1914'* describes the draconian plague measures of the colonial government – particularly in Bombay - the panic that gripped colonial policy and the common people. If the primary objective of policy measures was to identify and isolate the sick, remove them swiftly to hospital and segregate their contacts in 'health camps'.**
- Forms of resistance to the measures of the colonial state varied. The most common response to the frenzied plague measures, and indeed the scourge itself, was flight. From most large towns, a substantial proportion of the population simply ran away.
- (Does this sound familiar?)

*Ranger & Slack (eds) Epidemics and ideas: Essays on the historical perception of pestilence, 1992)

**Between 1896 and 1914, bubonic plague killed over 8 million people in India.

- The Plague led to the enactment of the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897, which was invoked to declare the lockdown. This was also one of the laws invoked for the nationwide lockdown in March.
- Resistance to the Plague regulations was widespread. Tilak was tried and convicted of sedition because he wrote against the colonial government's practices at the time, following the assassination of the Plague Commissioner in Pune.
- If the enormous exercise of force by the police in the present pandemic was and is indeed a matter of concern in evaluating current policy responses to the pandemic, it needs to be noted that under the shadow of the pandemic, three of the four labour codes were rushed through parliament in the teeth of opposition from all central trade unions, as well as the four farm laws, again without taking any account of opposition from farmers.
- Further, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, has set up a committee to suggest overarching changes and reforms to the Indian criminal justice system covering IPC, CrPc, and Indian Evidence Act. It has five members with no woman representative.

- Are these policy questions and historical experiences of relevance to women or are they gender concerns? I would argue that they are. Women's Studies scholar, Indu Agnihotri refers to the three Ds – Diversity, Development, Democracy as central to gender concerns.
- An oft repeated refrain with reference to the situations being thrown up by the Covid 19 pandemic – extraordinary as well as mundane – is that it has brought out the faultlines in society, particularly with reference to inequalities. The discourse on gender in relation the pandemic policies has typically followed along the framework set by the SDGs and international debates.
- Indeed, the issue of domestic violence was foregrounded by UN Women (The Shadow Pandemic) and NCW in India and discussions on services for survivors has been a matter of public discussion. Conditions of shelter homes, etc.
- But simultaneously extraordinary situation unfolded in the same period, as migrant workers – men, women, and children responded to the pandemic, lockdowns, and survival issues by fleeing to their home villages - traversing hundreds to thousands of miles against all odds, and in dangerous and pitiful conditions, many just walking all the way.
- Their desperate and dire conditions were brought to public view with a concentrated force that pitchforked the migrant labour question into national focus as never before. And yet, notwithstanding the visibility of \women among these migrants, the gender dimensions of the migrant question and the special conditions of women's labour migration, remained largely ignored or sidelined in the public policy debates and interventions that were pushed to centre stage by the pandemic.

Some questions from the ground

- In April, a 13 year old Adivasi girl, Jamlo Makdam died during her journey on foot to her village in Chhattisgarh from the chilli fields in Telangana.
- No discussion about the phenomenon of all female groups of women migrating for agricultural operations in various parts of the country that was typified by the group of women migrant agricultural labourers that Jamlo was a part of.
- The question is why such a group was recruited from a small Adivasi dominated village (Aaded), comprising barely 37 households with only 6 literates among a female population of 81 (Census 2011), and located in the interior of sparsely populated forest lands of district Bijapur.
- Why had the labour officer of Bijapur not used the Inter-state Migrant Workers' Act to regulate such migration?
- Why did he later register a case under the anti-trafficking Section 370 IPC against the woman 'agent' from Jamlo's village, who had reportedly been paid a paltry sum of Rs 10,000 to take the group of some 11 workers (including herself) to Telangana, and who was a part of the same group for the journey back on foot.
- Such questions and their wider structural and policy implications have remained outside the frame of public discourse, even as the strong reaction to the tragic death of this young girl led to some financial recompense to her family. Behind the hyper visibility of the incident and compensatory responses, many underlying policy issues and questions have been rendered invisible.

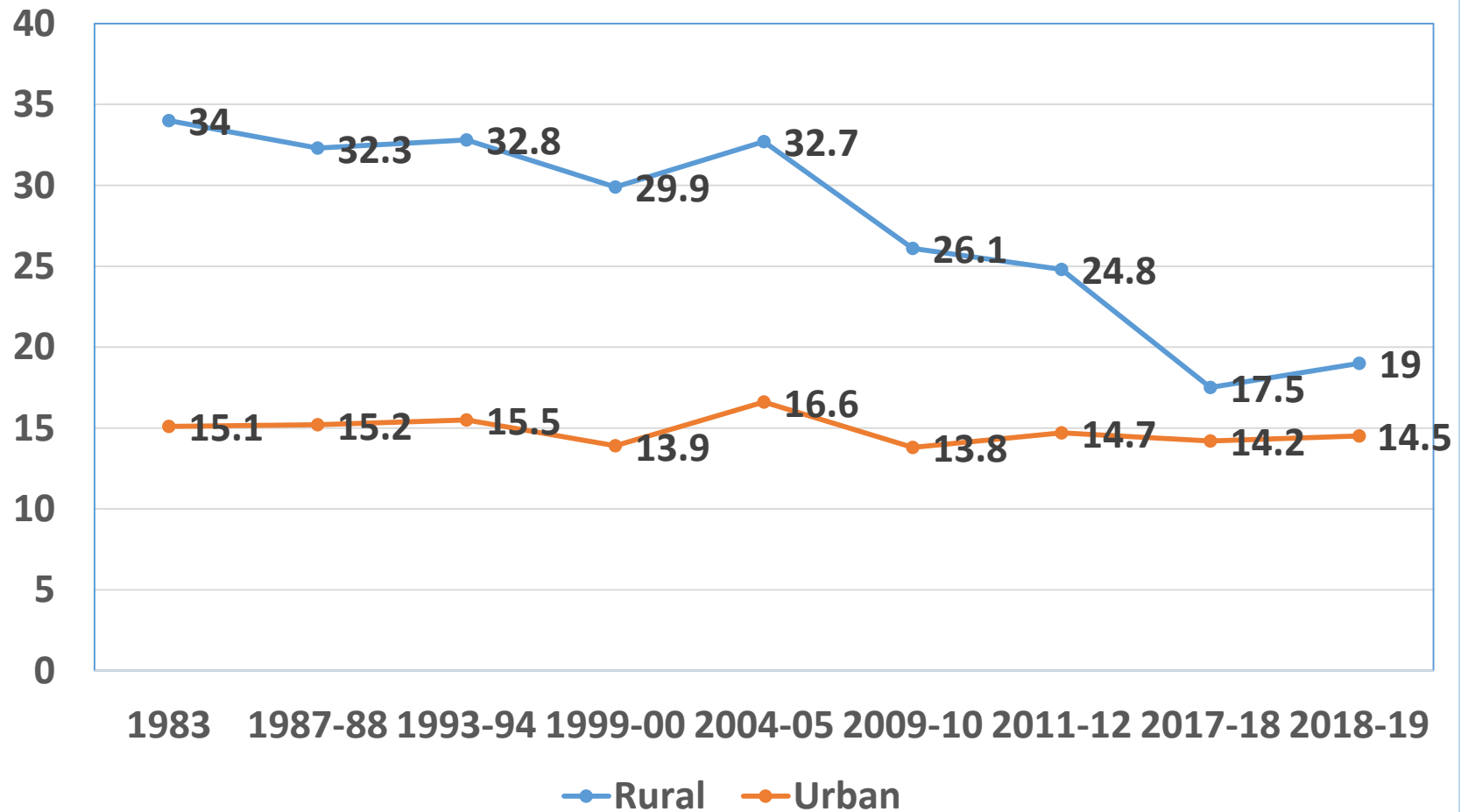
- In May, all watched 15 month old toddler (Rahmat) tried to wake his dead mother (35 year old Arveena Khatoon), who had been felled on a poorly fed and thirst ridden train journey back from her worksite in Ahmedabad to her native village in Katihar, Bihar. (Katihar is among the 20 most backward districts identified by the Niti Aayog in 2018, and one of the 11 of them with 'Muslim concentration')
- Legitimate questions were indeed raised regarding whether and how the conditions on the journey had led to Arveena's death. But there were many aspects to the backstory that remained buried underneath the terrible finality of her untimely death.
- Why or how had Arveena been married to a man in Bareilly (later divorced), more than a thousand miles from her home village and in a different cultural zone (the block of Azamnagar where her natal village is located has been reporting the 'sale' of young girls for marriage into distant parts of Uttar Pradesh over the past five years).
- How had Arveena (labelled mentally and physically sick in the police FIR thumb-printed by an unlettered brother in law), managed her work-life in Gujarat's highly developed construction industry with her small children in tow?
- Why is an increasingly corporatized construction industry allowed to persist with a casual workforce in an that allows for instant removal of workers without compensation?
- These questions that affect hundreds of thousands of women before, during, and after the pandemic remain relevant and unaddressed in any policy discussions. They are not settled by the monies provided by the government and other donors for Arveena's children's future after her death.

- For migrant textile and garment workers, who account for close to half of the female workforce in urban manufacturing, difficulties during the pandemic have been compounded by the suspension of labour laws and/or relaxation of legal provisions for decent work by several state governments in the shadow of the pandemic.
- Reports of employers openly announcing wage cuts, extension of the normal working day from 8 to 10 hours, cancellation of earned leave, no double wage for overtime, and threatening dismissal of those who do not accept the terms and conditions of this new normal, have come from the textile industry hub of Coimbatore.
- On one side thousands of garment workers are facing retrenchment in both Bangalore and Coimbatore. On the other, the largest garment factory in Kerala saw a mass exodus of some 600 homesick girls wanting to return to Jharkhand, followed by mass resignations by more than 150 girls from Odisha. Most had been placed by skill development agencies and many reportedly complained of not being able to return even once to their homes for over two years.
- It was migrant workers housed in hostels tied to their factories, that provided a captive workforce for garment and textile factories, when other workers were unable to come to work. The reactions of these young and mostly single women workers to the pandemic crisis has thus should cause us to raise questions regarding the model of government funded but privatised delivery of skill training - for placement in work and residence environments completely controlled by employers - in milieus that are alien and unconnected to their cultural roots, and where basic freedoms are therefore lacking.

Factoring in the gender and employment context

- Falling Female Work Participation Rates, and the gendered nature of the employment crisis when the pandemic hit
- Over the past two decades, the spectre of a highly gendered employment crisis has been haunting us with ever growing ferocity
- Falling employment rates among women has however failed to become a matter of policy debate
- Hyper visibility of women working in new forms and venues of employment seems to have invisibilised the far more widespread losses of women's jobs in other sectors across both rural and urban areas
- Visibilising and representing the interests of these large numbers of women losing employment needs to be centre staged in the public policy discourse

Female Work Participation Rates (WPR) 1983 -2017-18

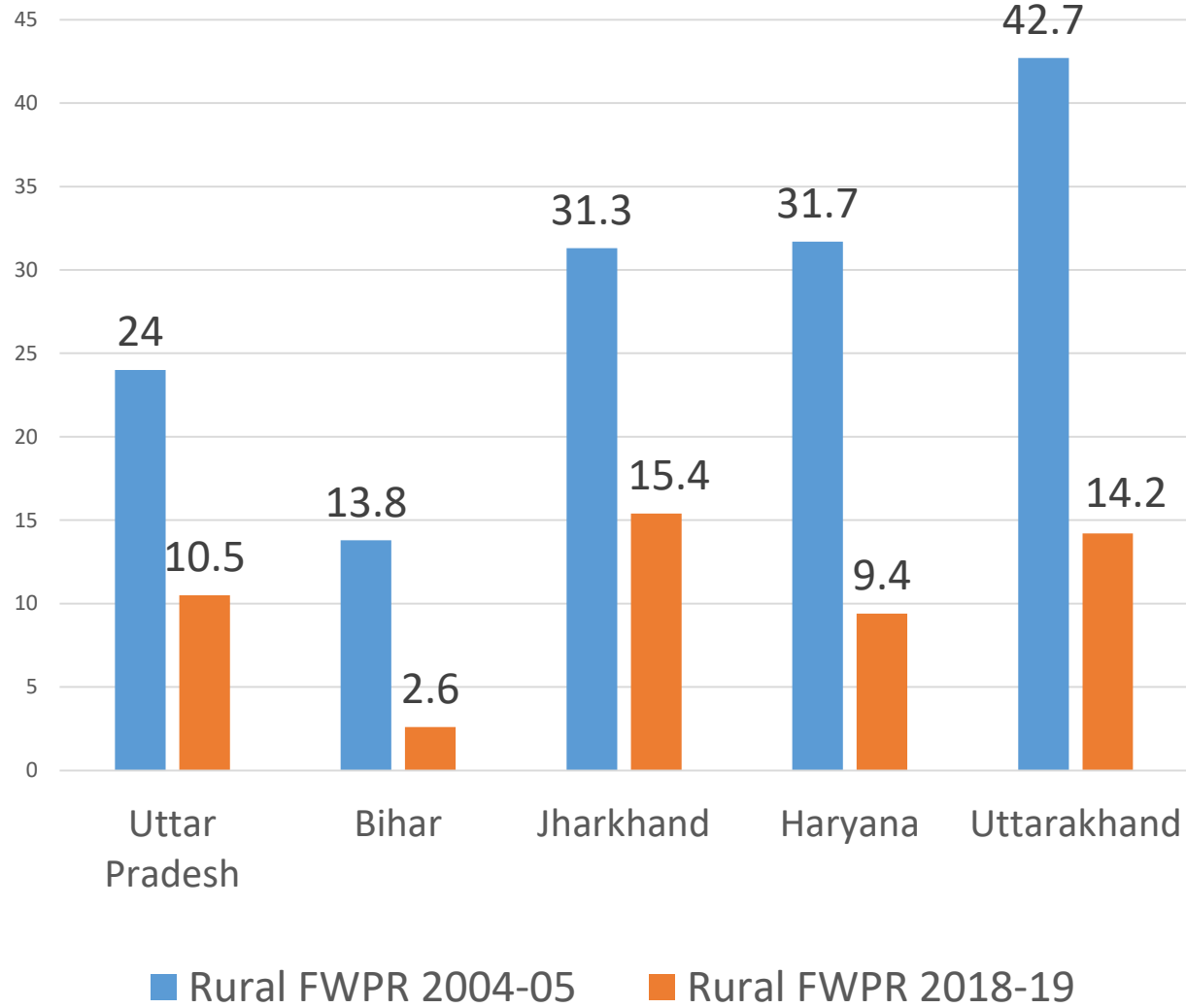


| State | Women's Work Participation Rates Rural | | | Women's Work Participation Rates Urban | | |
|---------------|---|---------|------------|---|---------|------------|
| | 2004-05 | 2018-19 | Difference | 2004-05 | 2018-19 | Difference |
| | | | | | | |
| Tamil Nadu | 46.1 | 33.2 | -12.9 | 24.1 | 21.6 | -2.5 |
| AP | 48.3 | 36.0 | -12.3 | 22.4 | 19.5 | -2.9 |
| Kerala | 25.6 | 21.1 | -4.5 | 20.0 | 19.7 | -0.3 |
| Maharashtra | 47.4 | 29.7 | -17.7 | 19.0 | 15.6 | -3.4 |
| Himachal | 50.6 | 46.9 | -3.7 | 24.1 | 21.9 | -2.2 |
| Bihar | 13.8 | 2.6 | -11.2 | 6.5 | 4.1 | -2.4 |
| Uttar Pradesh | 24.0 | 10.5 | -13.5 | 11.5 | 6.9 | -4.6 |
| West Bengal | 17.8 | 16.0 | -1.8 | 15.5 | 19.4 | +3.9 |
| India | 32.7 | 19.0 | -13.7 | 16.6 | 14.5 | -2.1 |

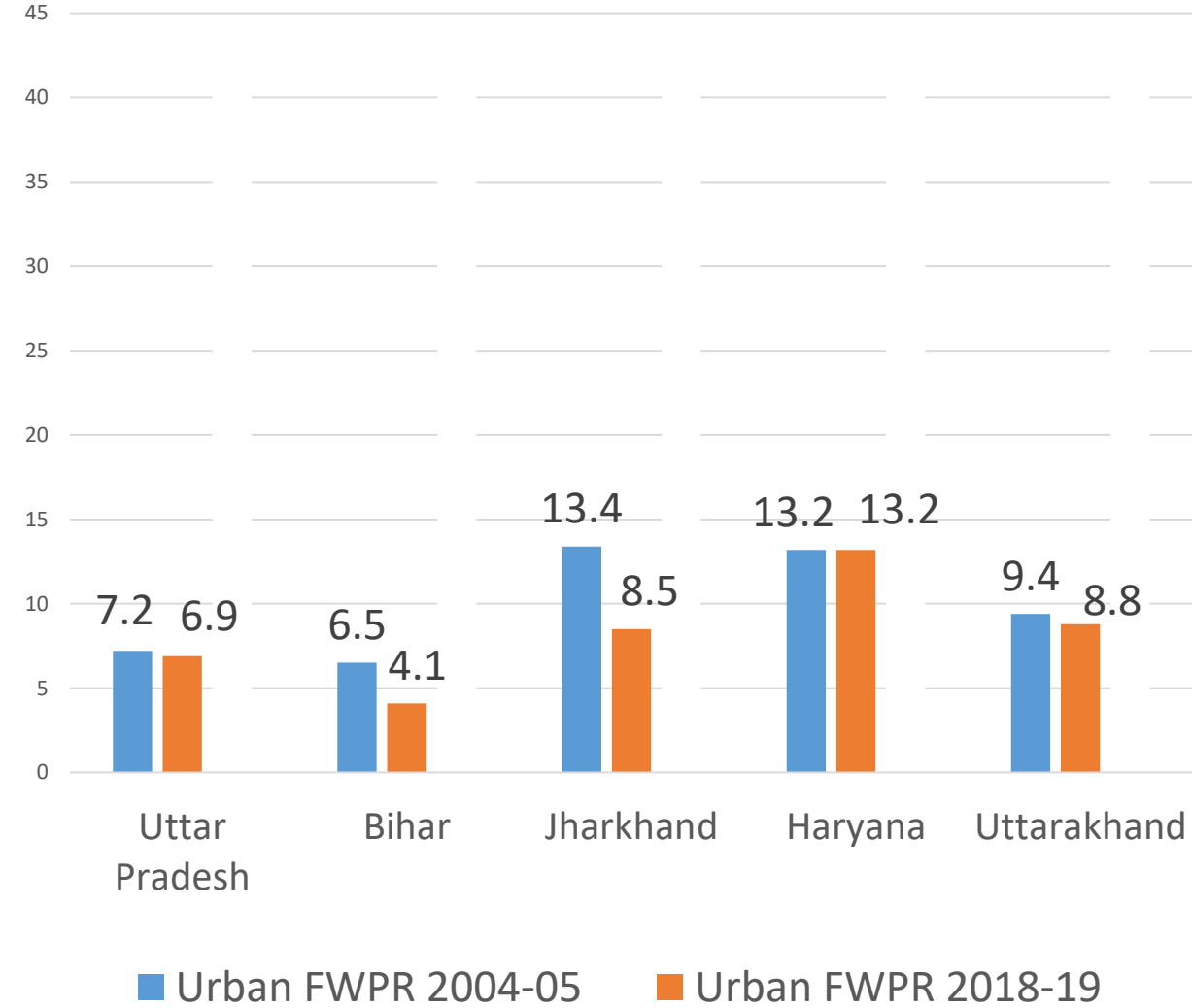
| Female Work Participation rate by Social Group Rural India | | | | Difference between 1999-00 and 2018-19 |
|---|---------|---------|----------------------------|--|
| | 1999-00 | 2011-12 | 2018-19 | |
| ST | 43.8 | 36.6 | 28.0 | -15.8 |
| SC | 32.5 | 26.2 | 18.9 | - 13.6 |
| OBC excluding Muslims | 31.4 | 25.6 | 18.9 (includes Muslims) | - 12.5 |
| Muslims | 16.1 | 15.3 | | |
| Upper castes excluding Muslims | 24.6 | 21.3 | 14.3 (includes Muslims) | - 10.3 |
| Total | 29.7 | 24.8 | 19.0 | -10.7 |

| Female Work Participation rate by Social Group | 1999-00 | 2011-12 | 2018-19 | Difference between 1999-00 and 2018-19 |
|--|---------|---------|--|--|
| | | | | Urban India |
| ST | 20.4 | 19.6 | 15.8 | - 4.6 |
| SC | 18.5 | 17.3 | 16.8 | -1.7 |
| OBC excluding Muslims | 16.8 | 16.5 | 15.0 (OBC including Muslims) | - 1.8 |
| Muslims | 9.7 | 10.5 | | |
| Upper castes excluding Muslims | 11.2 | 13.4 | 13.1 (Upper castes including Muslims) | + 1.9 |

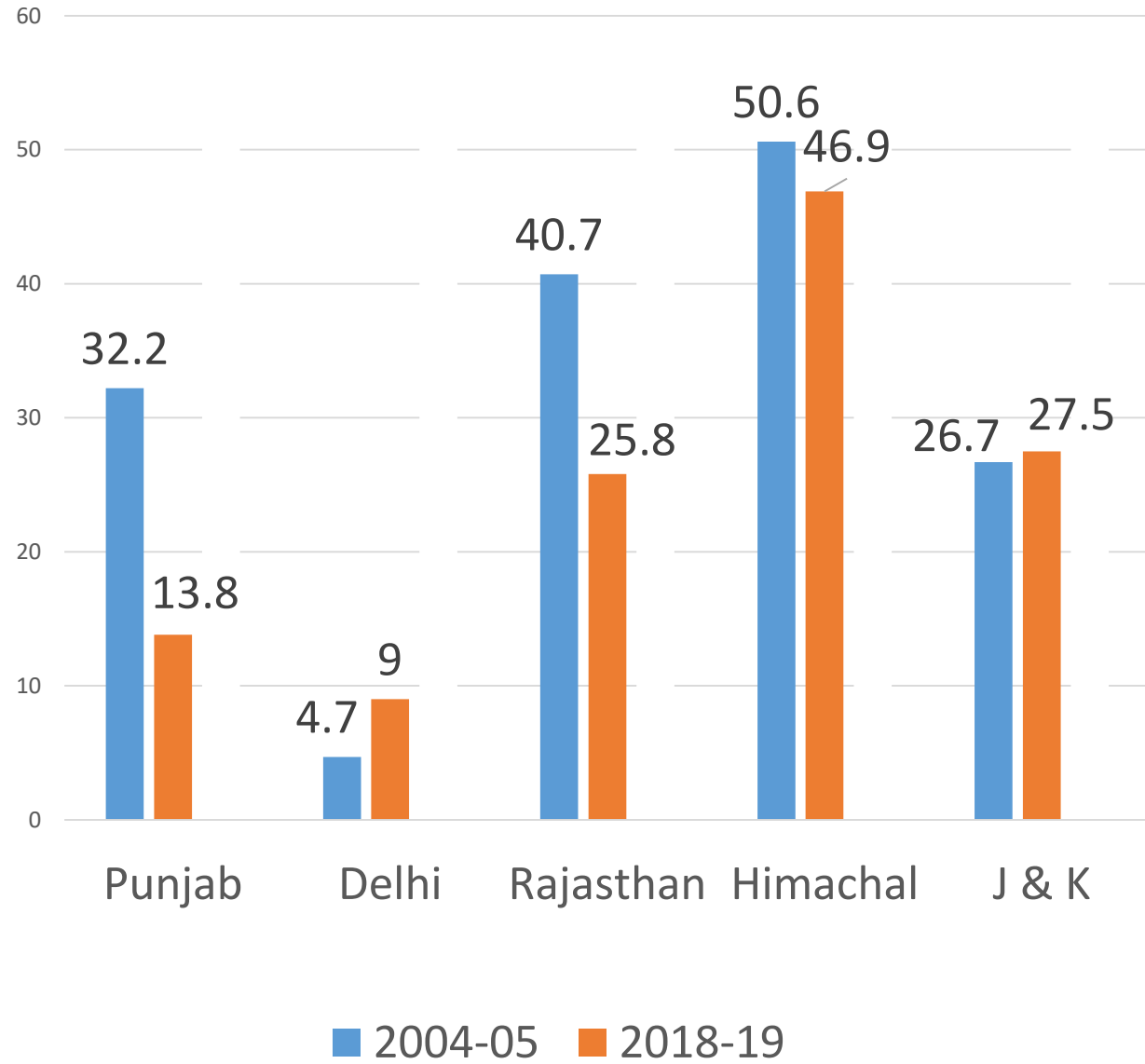
Rural Female Work Participation Rates 2004-05 and 2018-19



Urban Female Work Participation Rates 2004-05 and 2018-19



Rural Female Work Participation Rates 2004-05 and 2018-19



Urban Female Work Participation Rates 2004-05 and 2018-19

