

Post-MGNREGA Agricultural Wage Trends in Uttar Pradesh: Regional Disparities and Gender Gaps


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Agricultural wages are a key indicator of rural labour market conditions and livelihood security in India. Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, is particularly significant in this regard, with agricultural labourers constituting 27.11 per cent of total rural workers as per census, 2011. This paper analyses the dynamics of agricultural wages in Uttar Pradesh in the post-MGNREGA period against the backdrop of broader transformations in rural labour markets, including the expansion of non-farm employment, migration, and institutional wage interventions. This paper addresses four interrelated questions. First, it examines whether agricultural wages in Uttar Pradesh have followed the all-India trajectory of post-MGNREGA acceleration and subsequent slowdown after 2012-13. Second, it analyses regional disparities in wages within Uttar Pradesh, assessing whether wage growth has contributed to regional convergence or merely reinforced existing spatial hierarchies. Third, the paper investigates how gender mediates access to regional wage gains by examining male-female wage differentials across regions, and whether higher-wage regions exhibit greater gender equity or reproduce entrenched forms of gendered labour segmentation. Finally, it assesses the role of MGNREGA in shaping agricultural wages across regions and genders, focusing on its effectiveness as a statutory wage floor and a gender-neutral reservation wage. By situating wage outcomes at the intersection of market forces, social structures, and institutional interventions, the paper contributes to a more disaggregated understanding of agricultural wage determination in a large and internally diverse state.

Keywords: mgnrega, uttar pradesh, agricultural wages, gender equality

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1. Introduction

Economy of Uttar Pradesh is dominated by agricultural sector providing employment to about 51.5 percent of its working population in 2019 (*Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS, 2019-20; Gulati, 2022,*) which has increased to 55.94% in 2023-24 (PLFS, 2023-24). For a large segment of the rural workforce, particularly landless and marginal households, wage income constitutes the primary source of subsistence. Trends in agricultural wages therefore reflect not only the performance of the agrarian economy but also the broader dynamics of labour demand patterns and institutional intervention. Agricultural wages remain a central indicator of labour market conditions and livelihood security in rural Uttar Pradesh. In this context, Uttar Pradesh (UP) being India's most populous state, and having 27.11% of agricultural labourers as a proportion of total rural workers (Census, 2011) is critical to examine and understand the evolution of rural wages.

Over the last two decades, rural labour markets in India have undergone significant transformation. The expansion of non-farm employment, increasing rural-urban migration, and the introduction of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2005-06 have altered the institutional and economic environment in which agricultural wages are determined. At the national level, several studies document a sharp acceleration of agricultural wage growth in the immediate post-MGNREGA period, followed by a marked deceleration after 2012-13 (Himanshu, 2017; Himanshu & Kundu, 2016; Imbert & Papp, 2015). However, aggregate trends conceal substantial heterogeneity across states, regions, and social groups. Understanding how these processes unfold within a large and internally diverse state such as Uttar Pradesh is therefore essential.

Uttar Pradesh is characterised by pronounced regional disparities in agrarian structure, irrigation intensity, non-farm employment opportunities, and migration patterns. Western Uttar Pradesh is relatively commercialised and integrated with urban-industrial labour markets, particularly those linked to the National Capital Region. In contrast, Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bundelkhand remain labour-surplus regions marked by fragmented landholdings, low agricultural productivity, and high distress-driven migration.

These structural differences suggest that agricultural labour markets within the state are weakly integrated and regionally segmented, rather than forming a single unified market. Consequently, wage dynamics in Uttar Pradesh cannot be adequately understood through state-level averages alone. Regional analyses will give insights into the specificities.

Gender further complicates this picture. A substantial body of literature shows that women agricultural labourers face systematic wage discrimination, occupational segregation, and limited access to higher-paid tasks (Agarwal, 1997; Unni & Rani, 2008). Even during periods of rising wages, gender gaps tend to persist, reflecting entrenched social norms and unequal bargaining power. While MGNREGA has been widely acknowledged for expanding women's participation in paid work and establishing a statutory wage floor, evidence on its ability to reduce gender wage gaps in agricultural labour markets remains mixed (Drèze & Khera, 2017; Berg et al., 2018, p. 21).

This paper addresses four interrelated questions concerning the dynamics of agricultural wages in Uttar Pradesh in the post-MGNREGA period. **First**, it examines how agricultural wages in Uttar Pradesh have performed relative to all-India trends since 2004-05, asking whether the state has shared the national trajectory of wage acceleration followed by deceleration, or whether surplus labour conditions and limited non-farm absorption have produced a distinct wage path. **Second**, the paper analyses regional variation in agricultural wages within Uttar Pradesh, recognising that the state comprises multiple labour markets shaped by differences in agrarian structure, patterns of migration, and proximity to urban centres. This allows an assessment of whether wage growth has generated any tendency towards regional convergence or merely reinforced existing spatial hierarchies. **Third**, the paper investigates how gender mediates access to regional wage gains by examining male-female wage differentials across regions, and whether higher-wage regions exhibit greater gender equity or reproduce entrenched forms of gendered labour segmentation. **Finally**, the paper evaluates the role of MGNREGA in shaping agricultural wages across regions and genders, with particular attention to its function as a statutory wage floor and gender neutral reservation wage, and the extent to which its influence varies between labour-surplus and labour-tight regions.

Together, these questions situate agricultural wage determination in Uttar Pradesh within a layered structure of market forces, social norms, and institutional intervention.

2. Data and Methodology

This study uses government data to analyse trends, regional variation, and gender differentials in agricultural wages in Uttar Pradesh. The primary source is the official series *Agricultural Wages in India (AWI)* by Directorate of Economics and statistics, Ministry of Agriculture and farmers welfare, Government of India which provides district-wise and state-wise wage data since 1952. We have used State-level annual average daily wage rate data for male and female agricultural labourers to examine the long-term trends over the period 2004–05 to 2020–21, covering both early and late MGNREGA phases. For the Regional analyses district level data from the same source is compiled for the period 2016–17 to 2020–21. Districts are clustered into four broadly recognised economic regions, Western, Central (including Awadh), Eastern, and Bundelkhand (see **Appendix**) to capture spatial heterogeneity in agrarian wage structure, labour demand and effect of MGNREGA on farm wages. Regional wage estimates are constructed as simple averages of district-level wages, excluding missing and zero-valued observations. *AWI* data has certain limitations. District-wise data for Uttar Pradesh was reported only for 13 districts or less till about 2015–16, therefore could not be used for regional analyses. For 2016–17 data is reported from 55 districts, 2017–18 data is available for 67 districts, and the coverage increased to 72 districts in 2018–19 and 2019–20, 71 districts in 2020–21 out of a total of 75 districts at present which has been considered for regional analyses.

MGNREGA was launched in Uttar Pradesh in three phases starting from the 31 most backward districts in 2005, 17 in 2007 and the remaining districts in 2008. The analysis incorporates MGNREGA notified wage rates for Uttar Pradesh as a policy benchmark which is available from 2015–16 onwards from official MGNREGA website. Since MGNREGA wages are uniform across districts and genders within a given year, they provide a reference point for assessing whether public employment acts as a binding wage floor across regions and genders.

Occupation-wise wage data for major agricultural tasks are drawn from *Wage Rates in Rural India (WRR)* published by Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India. We have collected data for Uttar Pradesh for years between 1998–99 and 2023–24 to examine persistent task-based wage differentiation.

Nominal wages are deflated using the Consumer Price Index for Agricultural Labourers (CPI-AL, 2012=100) to obtain real wages. Data for CPI is collected from Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India for various years. The empirical analysis is descriptive and comparative relying on tabulations, growth rates, and figures. Sub-period compound annual growth rates are calculated for 2005–06 to 2010–11 and 2011–12 to 2020–21 to distinguish between early and post-expansion phases of MGNREGA. The objective is to identify structural and distributional patterns in agricultural wage formation across regions in Uttar Pradesh. Data is computed for the regions and analysed with the help of descriptive statistics.

Comparison of Wages in Uttar Pradesh with All India Wages of Agricultural Labour

Male agricultural wages increased steadily in both Uttar Pradesh (UP) and All-India over the period 2005–06 to 2020–21. However, wages in UP remained consistently below the national average throughout the period, indicating a persistent inter-state wage gap (Table 1, col. 4). In 2005–06, the average daily wage of male agricultural labourers was Rs.79.09 in Uttar Pradesh compared to Rs. 83.60 at the All-India level. By 2020–21, wages had risen to Rs. 283 in UP and Rs. 342 nationally. Thus, while nominal wages more than tripled in both cases, the absolute gap widened over time. Long-term Growth comparison shows that Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) for Uttar Pradesh was 8.87 per cent, whereas All-India CAGR was 9.85 per cent.

Table 1: Trends in Male Agricultural Wages: UP and All India

Years	Average Daily Wages of Agricultural Labour (Male) (Rs.)		UP wages as % of All India Wages
	Uttar Pradesh(UP)	All India	
2005-06	79.09	83.60	94.61
2006-07	61.90	94.33	65.62
2007-08	82.75	101.88	81.22
2008-09	92.74	117.15	79.16
2009-10	103.81	140.87	73.69
2010-11	124.46	147.91	84.15
2011-12	150.86	180.70	83.49
2012-13	179.72	213.71	84.10
2013-14	203.00	229.12	88.60
2014-15	226.00	268.00	84.33
2015-16	238.00	281.32	84.60
2016-17	233.00	279.00	83.51
2017-18	241.00	294.00	81.97
2018-19	260.00	306.00	84.97
2019-20	269.00	325.00	82.77
2020-21	283.00	342.00	82.75
CAGR	8.87	9.85	-

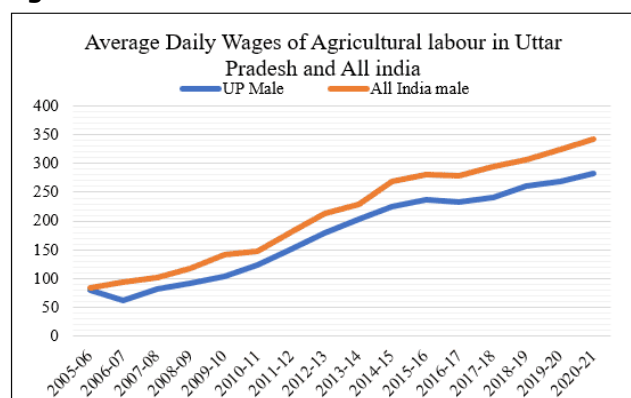
Source: AWI, DES, GOI.

Table 2: CAGR of Male Agricultural Wages (% per annum)

Period	CAGR of UP (%)	CAGR of All-India (%)
2005-06 to 2008-09	5.45	11.90
2009-10 to 2012-13	20.07	14.90
2012-13 to 2020-21	5.84	6.05

Source: Author

Figure 1



Source: Author

The higher CAGR at the national level indicates that male agricultural wages grew faster in some other states of India as compared to Uttar Pradesh. A study on Telangana and Maharashtra covering period 2001-2012 shows that farm wages increased sharply after the MGNREGA (Nagaraj et.al, 2016).

This suggests that wage dynamics in UP have been relatively sluggish compared to the broader national trend. The divergence in growth rates implies that Uttar Pradesh has not converged towards the national wage level, instead, the relative position of UP has weakened over time.

Analysing further, we can divide the whole period of growth into three distinct phases:

During the initial years of MGNREGA from 2005-06 to 2008-09, wage growth in Uttar Pradesh was uneven and slower compared to the national trend. Wages in UP increased from Rs. 79.09 to Rs. 92.74. All-India wages increased from Rs. 83.60 to Rs. 117.15. The national wage increase during this period was sharper, leading to a rapid widening of the wage gap between UP and All-India. This indicates weaker wage momentum in Uttar Pradesh during the mid-2000s.

Between 2009-10 and 2012-13, wage growth accelerated in both UP and All-India, but the acceleration was stronger in Uttar Pradesh. UP wages rose from Rs.103.81 to Rs.179.72. All-India wages rose from Rs.140.87 to Rs. 213.71. Although UP still lagged behind in absolute terms, the rate of increase was higher, resulting in a temporary narrowing of the relative growth gap. This period represents the fastest wage growth phase for Uttar Pradesh in the entire series. This phase also coincides with the operation of MGNREGA in all districts of Uttar Pradesh.

After 2013-14, wage growth moderated in both series, but the slowdown was more pronounced in Uttar Pradesh. Wages in UP increased from Rs. 203 to Rs. 283. All-India wages increased from Rs. 229.12 to Rs. 342. Both series show a deceleration, but the national series maintained a stronger upward momentum. As a result, the wage gap widened again in the later years, reinforcing the pattern of divergence (Figure 1).

Across the entire period, the ratio of UP wages to All-India wages declined modestly, indicating that Uttar Pradesh did not experience wage convergence. Mid-2000s, UP wages were about 94-95% of the national average. By 2020-21, UP wages fell to about 83% of the national average. This relative decline reflects structural disadvantages in wage growth rather than short-term fluctuations.

3. Agricultural Wages of Male, Female and MGNREGA - 2005-2021

Although agricultural wages for females have risen steadily since 2011-12 but gender inequality in wage outcomes persists. However, the impact of MGNREGA can be seen in the post-expansion phase after 2015-16 where the gap between male and female wages has narrowed (Table 3). Jose (2022) makes similar observation for many other states. In the context of Uttar Pradesh, the female agricultural labourers continue to earn systematically lower wages than their male counterparts (Figure 2), and no evidence of wage parity is observed in any year of the study period. The gender wage gap fluctuates but remains structurally embedded, reflecting deep-seated segmentation of tasks, customary norms of wage determination, and unequal bargaining power. While MGNREGA has provided a critical wage floor and employment security for women, it has not been able to equalise market wages or dismantle gendered hierarchies in rural labour markets. Rising wages, therefore, coexist with persistent gender inequality rather than signalling convergence. This result is consistent with other studies (Nagaraj et.al., 2016; Jose, 2022, p.147).

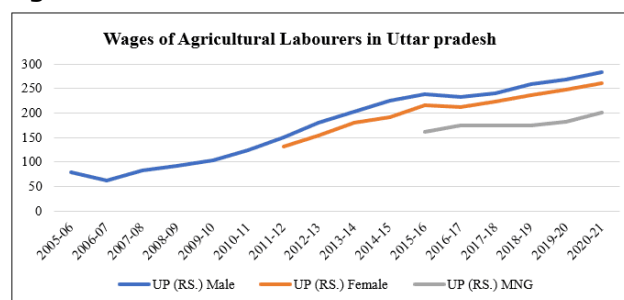
Occupation-wise wage data for agricultural labourers in Uttar Pradesh indicate a sustained increase in wages across all major agricultural tasks between 1998-99 and 2022-23 (Table 4). However, this growth has been generally accompanied by differentiation across agricultural occupations (Figure 3a-3d). Across all agricultural occupations such as ploughing, sowing, weeding, transplanting and harvesting male wages are higher than female wages throughout the period. The relative position of gender remains more or less unchanged over time, suggesting that wage increases have occurred within, rather than transformed, existing structures of labour segmentation. These patterns point to the resilience of gendered norms in wage determination, where rising labour demand and intensification have failed to dismantle entrenched gender hierarchies in rural labour markets.

Table 3: Average Daily Wages of Agricultural Labour in UP (Rs)

Years	Male	Female	MGNREGA (MNG)	Female as % of male wages
2005-06	79.09	NA	NA	NA
2006-07	61.90	NA	NA	NA
2007-08	82.75	NA	NA	NA
2008-09	92.74	NA	NA	NA
2009-10	103.81	NA	NA	NA
2010-11	124.46	NA	NA	NA
2011-12	150.86	131.13	NA	87
2012-13	179.72	154.23	NA	86
2013-14	203.00	180.00	NA	89
2014-15	226.00	191.00	NA	85
2015-16	238.00	216.00	161.00	90
2016-17	233.00	212.00	174.00	91
2017-18	241.00	224.00	175.00	93
2018-19	260.00	237.00	175.00	91
2019-20	269.00	248.00	182.00	92
2020-21	283.00	262.00	201.00	93

Source: AWI, DES, Various Years

Figure 2



Source: AWI, DES, Various Years

Table 4: Annual Average Daily Wage Rates for Agricultural Occupations in Rural India by Gender in Uttar Pradesh (Rs.)

Year	Ploughing		Sowing		Weeding		Transplanting		Harvesting	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1998-99	63	32	56	45	50	42	51	42	55	45
2001-02	68	39	61	43	52	43	54	46	56	46
2004-05	72	42	66	46	57	46	62	50	61	51
2007-08	89	49	77	56	69	57	73	60	73	61
2010-11	138	81	120	93	106	91	114	99	117	97
2013-14	222	131	192	150	173	151	179	159	193	160
2022-23	319	269	337	293	337	293	337	293	333	292

Source: WRI, Labour Bureau, GOI

Figure 3a

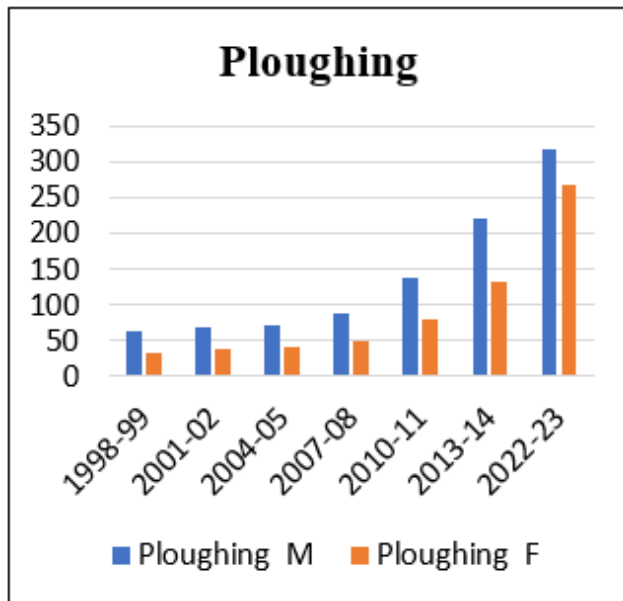
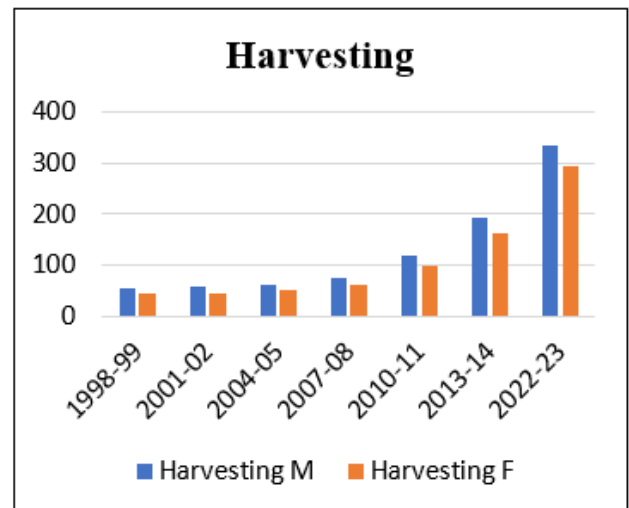


Figure 3d



Source: Author

Figure 3b

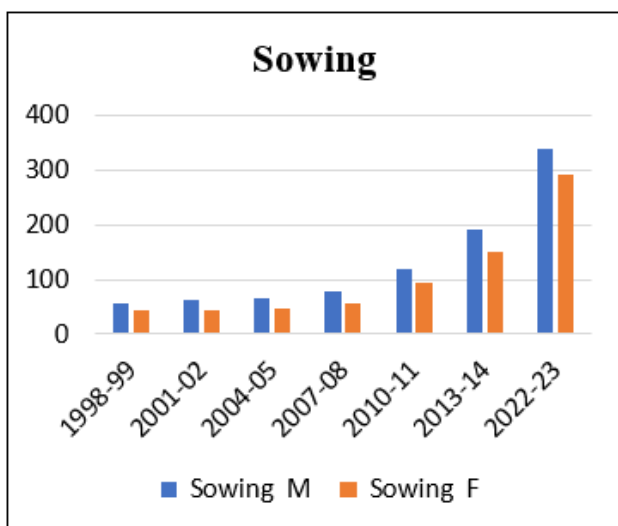
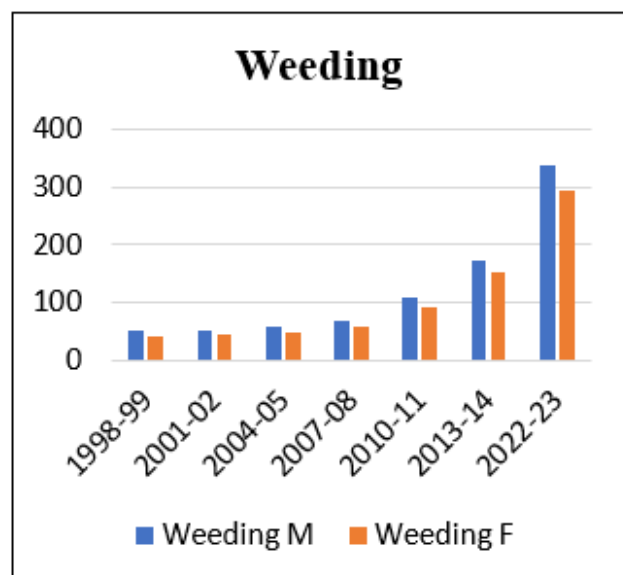


Figure 3c



4. Regional and Gender Differentials in Agricultural Wages in Uttar Pradesh (2016–2020)

For analytical clarity, districts are interpreted within broadly recognised sub-regions of Uttar Pradesh—Western, Central, Eastern, and Bundelkhand. Most of the area of the state are plains with fertile alluvial soils except the Bundelkhand region which is rocky, hilly and has semi-arid climate with poor quality soil (Gulati, 2022). The eastern region is flood prone whereas central and western regions have good irrigation system (Gulati, 2022). These regions differ sharply in agrarian structure, non-farm employment opportunities and proximity to urban centres. Rather than treating Uttar Pradesh as a single labour market, the analysis explicitly recognises its internally segmented nature, as emphasised in the literature on rural labour markets in India (Bardhan, 1984; Harriss-White, 2003). The regional comparison focuses on movement of agricultural wages, their growth and the gap between agricultural wages and the MGNREGA wage floor. Given the objective of identifying structural patterns of regional and gender inequality, the relevant data are analysed here at three levels: 1) Across regions, to assess spatial wage hierarchy, 2) Across gender, to identify gendered segmentation within regions and 3) Against MGNREGA wages, to evaluate the role of public employment as a wage floor.

Table 5: Regional Pattern of Nominal Agricultural Wages (Rs.)

year	Bundelkhand		Central		Eastern		Western		MGNREGA
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
2016	225.12	138.71	217.94	125.84	202.52	136.26	247.79	161.29	174.00
2017	218.16	156.75	219.64	157.56	215.29	160.04	261.35	180.51	175.00
2018	227.58	158.19	224.35	171.62	235.94	190.27	278.96	181.85	175.00
2019	232.29	155.11	240.23	187.00	257.88	201.81	289.36	185.18	182.00
2020	243.04	161.58	245.39	183.86	272.18	197.02	292.19	169.15	201.00
CAGR	1.93	3.89	3.01	9.94	7.67	9.66	4.21	1.20	3.67

Source: Author, Compiled from AWI

Table 6: Female wage as a % of Male Wage

year	Bundelkhand	Central	Eastern	Western
2016	61.62	57.74	67.28	65.09
2017	71.85	71.75	74.36	69.07
2018	69.53	76.52	80.65	65.19
2019	66.78	77.83	78.26	63.99
2020	66.49	74.95	72.37	57.89

Source: Author, Compiled from AWI

Figure 4a

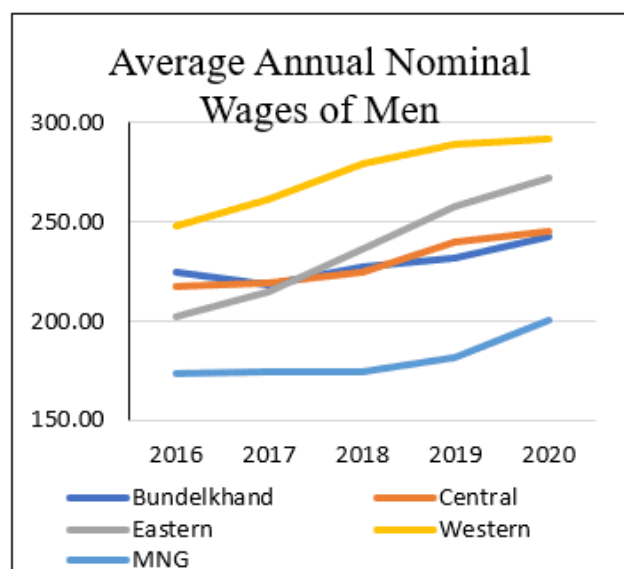
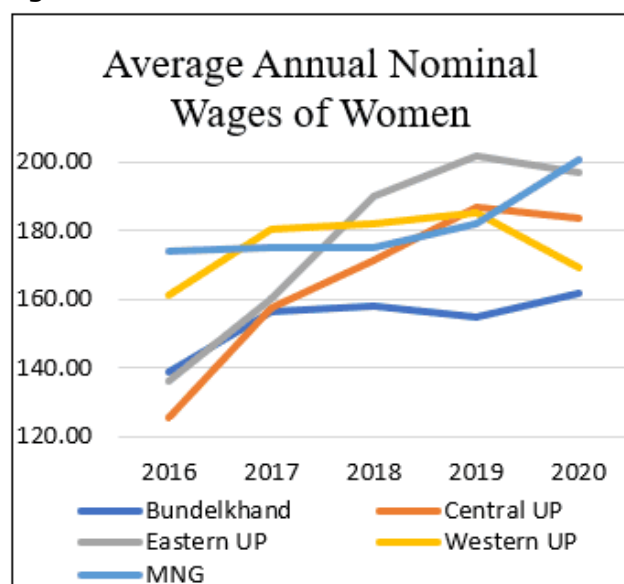


Figure 4b



Source: Author

The regional pattern of agricultural wages for males in Uttar Pradesh reveals persistent spatial inequality alongside gradual wage increase across all regions during 2016–2020 (Figure 4a). In Western Uttar Pradesh, men’s wages rose from ₹247.79 to ₹292.19, an increase of about 18%. Eastern Uttar Pradesh recorded a sharper rise, from ₹202.52 to ₹272.18, representing a growth of nearly 34%, suggesting partial regional convergence. Central Uttar Pradesh experienced a wage increase of about 13%, while Bundelkhand saw a relatively modest growth of around 8% over the period. The faster wage growth in Eastern Uttar Pradesh may be attributed to sustained out-migration, tightening rural labour markets, and the role of public employment programmes in strengthening workers’ bargaining power (Himanshu & Kundu, 2016).

Women’s agricultural wages, though substantially lower than men’s wages, exhibited faster growth in most regions (Figure 4b). In Eastern Uttar Pradesh, women’s wages increased from ₹136.26 to ₹197.02, registering a rise of nearly 45%. Central Uttar Pradesh also recorded a sharp increase of about 46%, while Bundelkhand and Western Uttar Pradesh experienced more moderate growth of 17% and 5%, respectively. The relatively rapid increase in women’s wages in poorer regions points towards the influence of MGNREGA in setting effective wage floors and limiting extreme gender-based wage suppression (Ravi & Engler, 2015; Dreze & Khera, 2017).

5. Absence of Regional Wage Convergence

Despite these gains, the gender wage gap remained substantial across all regions. In 2016, women’s wages constituted only about 65% of men’s wages in Western Uttar Pradesh (Table 6 & Figure 5d) and 62% and 67% in Bundelkhand and Eastern Uttar Pradesh respectively (Table 6, Figure 5b & 5c). By 2020, this ratio improved modestly in Eastern and Central Uttar Pradesh, where women’s wages reached approximately 72–75% of men’s wages (Figure 5a). In contrast, Western Uttar Pradesh continued to exhibit a wide gender wage gap, with women earning barely 58% of male wages in 2020.

This suggests that higher overall wage levels do not necessarily translate into improved gender equity, as gendered task segmentation and differential access to higher-paid operations persist (Unni & Rani, 2008; Rawal, 2006).

Overall, the evidence indicates that while agricultural wages in Uttar Pradesh have risen during the post-2016 period, regional and gender inequalities remain deeply entrenched. Wage determination continues to be shaped by region-specific agrarian structures (Gulati, 2022), labour mobility, and institutional interventions rather than uniform market forces alone. The findings underline the importance of viewing wage growth alongside distributional outcomes, particularly in terms of gender and regional equity.

Despite a general upward trend in wages over the period, there is little evidence of convergence between regions (Figure 4a & 4b). Wage growth in Western Uttar Pradesh does not narrow the gap with eastern Uttar Pradesh. This suggests that labour mobility, while significant, has not been sufficient to equalise wages across regions. This finding is consistent with evidence that migration from labour-surplus regions alleviates local pressure on wages without fully integrating labour markets (Himanshu et. al., 2013). Moreover, migration is selective, with young male workers more likely to migrate, reinforcing regional wage inequalities.

Figure 5a

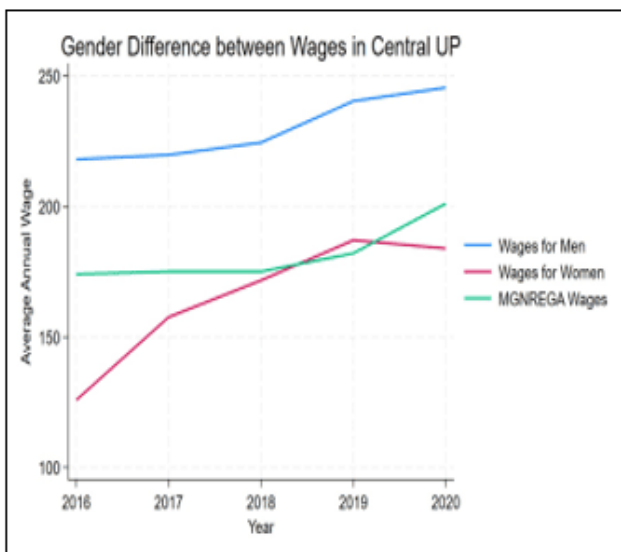


Figure 5b

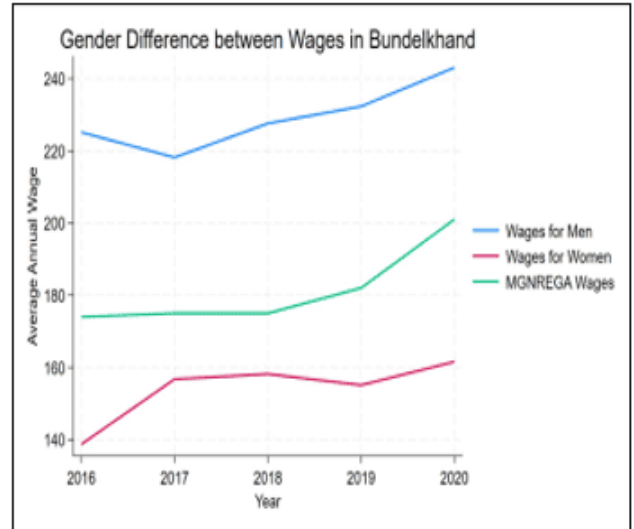


Figure 5c

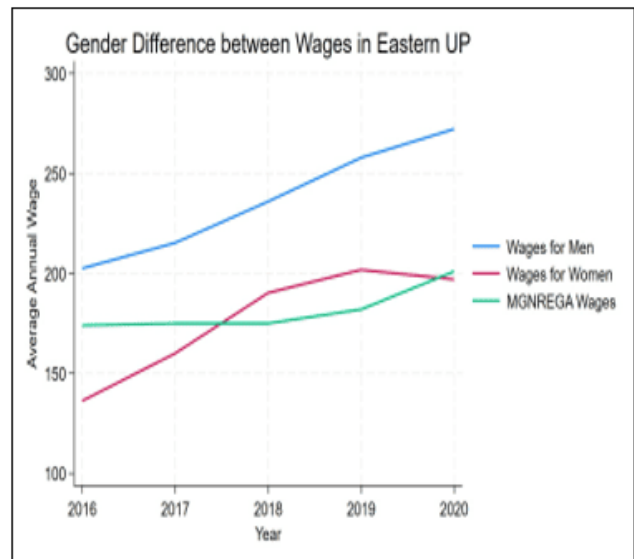
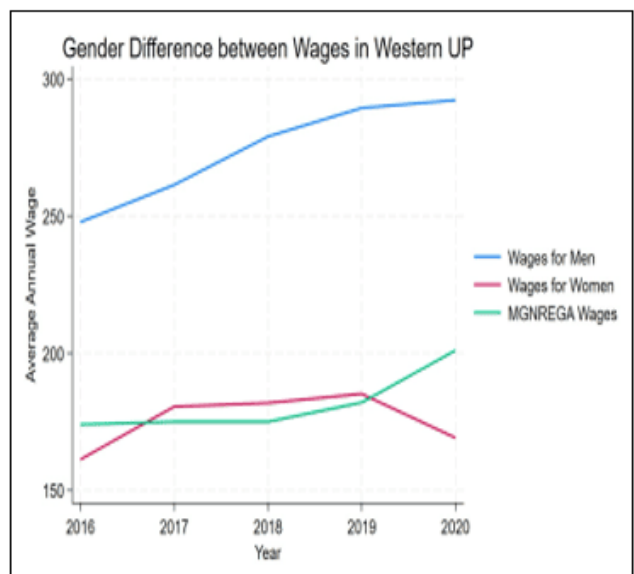


Figure 5d



Source: Author

MGNREGA and Regional Wage Floors

MGNREGA establishes a uniform statutory wage across districts within the state and also across gender (Figure 5a-5d). Its impact, however, varies by region. In western Uttar Pradesh, agricultural wages, particularly male wages remain substantially above the MGNREGA wage, limiting its influence on market wages. In contrast, in central and eastern Uttar Pradesh, where market wages are lower, MGNREGA operates as abinding wage floor. The literature suggests that public employment programmes can raise reservation wages and influence private wages under certain conditions (Dreze & Khera, 2017; Imbert & Papp, 2015). The district-level evidence indicates that such effects are strongest in labour-surplus regions, where MGNREGA provides a credible alternative to low-paid agricultural work. Berg’s (2018) district-wise study on 200 districts during 2000-2011 (where only seven districts of Uttar Pradesh are included) shows that MGNREGA had no statistically significant effect on agricultural wages.

MGNREGA and Female Reservation Wages

MGNREGA plays a particularly important role in shaping female agricultural wages. Female wages in many districts cluster close to the MGNREGA wage, especially in central and eastern Uttar Pradesh (Figure 5a-5d). This suggests that the programme acts as a reservation wage for women, strengthening their fallback option in local labour markets. Existing studies show higher female participation in MGNREGA and emphasise its role in improving women’s access to paid work (Dreze & Khera, 2017). However, evidence also indicates that while MGNREGA can raise equilibrium wages, it does not eliminate gender wage gaps in private employment (Imbert & Papp, 2015; Berg et. al., 2018). The findings from UP here, support this cautious interpretation.

Gendered Wage Rigidity

An important feature of the wage structure during 2016–2020 is the relative rigidity of female wages. Male wages exhibit greater regional variation and stronger responsiveness to labour market tightness, reflecting migration and non-farm employment opportunities. Female wages, by contrast, show less dispersion and remain closely tied to the statutory wage floor.

This rigidity indicates that policy intervention has stabilised women’s wages at the lower end of the distribution without enabling upward mobility within the agricultural labour market.

Intersecting Regional and Gender Inequalities

The combined regional and gender analysis reveals a stratified agricultural labour market. Regional labour demand determines wage ceilings, gender norms regulate access to these ceilings, and MGNREGA establishes a binding floor that is particularly relevant for women in labour-surplus regions. Rather than producing convergence, this structure results in persistent inequality alongside partial wage protection. MGNREGA prevents extreme wage suppression but does not alter the underlying regional and gendered segmentation of agricultural labour markets. This suggests that nominal wage growth failed to keep pace with inflation, especially post-2018.

6. Real Wages of Agricultural Labourers in Uttar Pradesh

Analysing growth of real wages region and gender-wise shows that for male labour after 2017-18, real wages declined after 2017-18 in all regions except eastern (Table 7, Figure 6a). For females real wages declined in all regions particularly after 2017-18 (Figure 6b). Western UP is especially noticeable in this respect. In spite of having a consistently higher wages for male as compare to other regions, female wages in western UP sharply decline after 2017, showing the largest gender gap. On the whole, we observe that nominal wages failed to keep pace with the inflation and the effect of inflation is sharper on the females.

Table 7: Average Real Wages of Agricultural Labourers in Uttar Pradesh (2012=100)

Year	Real wages of male (Rs. per day)				Real Wage Female (Rs. per day)			
	Bundelkhand	Central	Eastern	Western	Bundelkhand	Central	Eastern	Western
2016	171.72	166.24	154.48	189.01	105.8	95.99	103.94	123.03
2017	160.77	161.86	158.65	192.59	115.51	116.11	117.94	133.02
2018	160.49	158.22	166.39	196.73	111.56	121.03	134.18	128.24
2019	152.8	158.03	169.64	190.34	102.03	123.01	132.75	121.81
2020	153.31	154.79	171.69	184.31	101.92	115.98	124.28	106.7

Source: Calculated by Author

Figure 6a

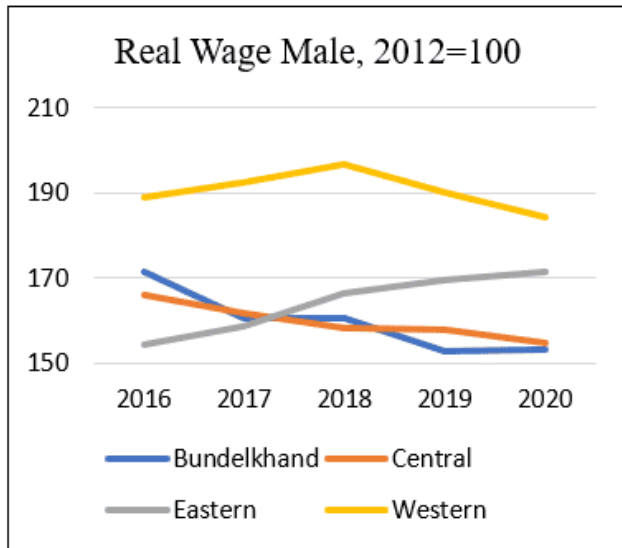
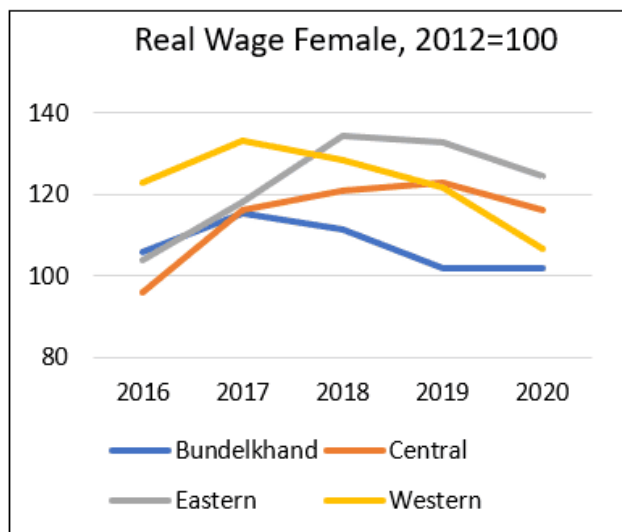


Figure 6b



Source: Author

7. Conclusion

This paper makes three distinct contributions to the literature on rural labour markets in India. First, it provides a district-level regional analysis of agricultural wages for Uttar Pradesh during 2016–2020. While existing studies document long-term trends in agricultural wages at the national or state level, district-level evidence remains limited. By using district-wise data, the paper highlights the persistence of spatial wage hierarchies within a single state, showing that wage differences across regions remain stable even during periods of overall wage growth. This reinforces the argument that rural labour markets in India are locally determined and weakly integrated (Foster & Rosenzweig, 2004; Himanshu et. al., 2013).

Second, the paper foregrounds gender as a structuring force in regional wage outcomes. Rather than treating gender wage gaps as a residual outcome, the analysis demonstrates that regional prosperity does not translate into gender wage convergence. Even in high-wage regions, female wages remain confined to a lower tier of the wage distribution. This finding supports political economy perspectives that emphasise the role of social norms and task segmentation in wage determination (Agarwal, 1997; Harriss-White, 2003).

Third, the paper situates MGNREGA within the regional and gendered wage structure rather than evaluating it in isolation. The findings suggest that MGNREGA functions primarily as a binding wage floor for women, especially in labour-surplus regions, while remaining largely irrelevant for male wages in high-demand regions. This nuanced role aligns with evidence that public employment programmes influence reservation wages without necessarily transforming private labour markets (Dreze & Khera 2017; Imbert & Papp, 2015; Berg et. al., 2018). By embedding MGNREGA within a layered wage hierarchy, where region determines wage ceilings, gender mediates access, and policy stabilises the floor, the paper advances a more integrated understanding of rural wage formation.

The analysis of agricultural wages in Uttar Pradesh during 2016–2020 highlights the durability of regional and gender inequalities. While wages have risen overall, the benefits of wage growth have been unevenly distributed. Regional hierarchies remain intact, and gender wage gaps persist across all regions. Public employment under MGNREGA has played a stabilising role, particularly for women, by setting a credible wage floor. However, without complementary interventions addressing gender norms, skill formation, and access to non-farm employment, agricultural labour markets are likely to remain segmented.

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Appendix

1. Western Region comprise of 26 districts. Agra, Aligarh, Amroha, Baghpat, Bareilly, Bijnor, Budaun, Bulandshahr, Etah, Firozabad, Gautam Buddha Nagar, Ghaziabad, Hapur, Hathras, Kasganj, Mainpuri, Mathura, Meerut, Moradabad, Muzaffarnagar, Pilibhit, Rampur, Saharanpur, Sambhal, Shahjahanpur, Shamli

2. Central Region comprise of 23 districts. Auraiya, Etawah, Farrukhabad, Fatehpur, Kannauj, Kanpur Dehat, Kanpur Nagar, Lucknow, Rae Bareli, Sitapur, Unnao, Ambedkar Nagar, Amethi, Ayodhya, Bahraich, Balrampur, Barabanki, Gonda, Hardoi, Lakhimpur Kheri, Pratapgarh, Shravasti, Sultanpur

3. Eastern Region comprise of 19 districts. Azamgarh, Ballia, Basti, Bhadohi (Sant Ravidas Nagar), Chandauli, Deoria, Ghazipur, Gorakhpur, Jaunpur, Kaushambi, Kushinagar, Maharajganj, Mau, Mirzapur, Prayagraj (Allahabad), Sant Kabir Nagar, Siddharthnagar, Sonbhadra, Varanasi

4. Bundelkhand Region comprise of 7 districts. Banda, Chitrakoot, Hamirpur, Jalaun, Jhansi, Lalitpur, Mahoba.

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