
WOMEN WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Women's workforce participation is a key element of a nation's economic development and social growth. In India, though remarkable progress has been made in terms of gender equality, women's workforce participation continues to be modest in comparison with international norms. This abstract analyses the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional determinants of women's workforce participation in India and discusses the implications of these determinants for Indian economic development. India's female workforce participation rate has improved slowly over the years but remains a cause for concern. India's female labor force participation rate is one of the lowest in the world, and in recent decades, it has also gone down in terms of percentage, as per different reports. There are various reasons for this gap. Conservative gender roles, deep-rooted cultural values, and restricted access to education and skill development opportunities are major barriers that prevent women from joining the labor force. Moreover, the absence of gender-friendly policies, including flexible working hours, maternity leave, and equal pay, also makes it difficult for women to join the labor force. The impact of patriarchal social systems and family structures also plays an important part in determining the participation of women in the workforce. In much of India, cultural expectations tend to limit women to domestic and caregiving work. Women are often required to prioritize household duties over career objectives, which prevents them from engaging in professional development and economic empowerment. In addition, rural women, a large segment of India's women population, experience other challenges, such as inferior infrastructure, limited mobility, and lack of resource access. Education and skill building are essential for improving women's labor force participation.

Introduction

Women's labor force participation is an important component of a country's development, affecting economic growth, social justice, and gender equality. In India, even after numerous policies to enhance gender balance, women's labor force participation is remarkably low in comparison to international standards. India has improved in the last few decades in many areas, including education, health, and political representation, but in the areas of employment and labor participation, women are still underrepresented. This trend is prevalent across many sectors, ranging from agriculture and informal work to corporate roles, undermining the overall economic potential of the country. Based on recent statistics, India's female labor force participation rate is much lower than most nations, even when income level, education level, and other determinants are controlled for. Based on data from the International Labour Organization (ILO), India's female labor force participation rate was about 22% in 2020, ranking among the lowest globally. This low rate of participation has been paired with a consistent drop in the percentage of women in the workforce over time, even as the economy expanded and other social indicators, such as literacy and life expectancy, have increased. This seeming contradiction of economic growth and stagnant or decreasing female labor force participation highlights critical questions about the obstacles to women entering and remaining in the workforce. A number of determinants are behind the low women's participation rate in India's labor market. Social and cultural norms, with deep roots in patriarchal patterns, tend to prescribe the positions women should hold in society and focus on family duties rather than career ambitions. In most areas of India, conventional gender norms continue to restrict women's participation in education, vocational training, and professional employment, perpetuating the notion that women's key responsibility is managing homes instead of formal work. These deeply ingrained values lead to a cultural context where women are supposed to sacrifice their individual interests for the family and society, which entails sacrificing career ambitions or not opting for full-time employment. Besides cultural and societal obstacles, economic considerations also have a significant role in limiting women's involvement in the labor market. Women are disproportionately overrepresented in low-paying and informal jobs, which feature substandard working conditions, job insecurity, and limited benefits like maternity leave and health cover. Additionally, credit, business opportunities, and mobility continue to be limited for most women, particularly those living in rural settings, who experience serious infrastructural, logistic, and societal barriers to jobs. In the cities, while education and jobs might be available for women in higher proportions compared to rural

communities, they experience workplace gender bias, pay gap, and a limited number of opportunities for job career growth. Policy interventions have been introduced to promote and enhance women's labor force participation. The Indian government has rolled out several schemes like the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao initiative, which works to enhance female education and literacy, and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which offers jobs to rural women. Moreover, attempts have been made to enhance women entrepreneurship and improve labor laws to provide gender equality in the workplace. Yet even with these efforts, female workforce participation remains persistently low, and more than ever there is a need for extensive reforms and a deeper cultural transformation. women's labour force participation in India is a problem that is closely embedded with social, economic, and cultural circumstances. Such obstacles need to be tackled through multidimensional measures, from policy changes and infrastructural advancements to societal consciousness and schooling. Increasing the labour force participation of women not only supports gender equity but also has the potential to unleash substantial economic development, enhance family well-being, and propel overall societal advancement.

Socio-economic Background

In urban areas approximately 22% of women participated in the labor force. And in Rural areas the LFPR for women was higher, reflecting increased engagement in economic activities. For the period July 2023-June 2024 Women are focusing on getting higher education before Starting a job About 38% of women are out of the work force because they are still studying. And around 43.% of women are not working because they are busy with childcare and household duties. Some religious or conservative communities have restrictions on women working outside the home. According to our society "Home and childcare taste sweeter to women while business and profession taste sweeter to men". India's rapid urbanization has led to significant economic growth, infrastructure development, and an expansion of industries. Rural employment opportunities, especially in agriculture, have been shrinking due to mechanization, climate change, and land fragmentation. Many rural women, who were previously engaged in agriculture or informal work, struggle to find stable employment in cities due to a lack of education, skills, and access to resources. Cultural and societal norms continue to restrict women's ability to work, especially in traditional households where their role is still primarily seen as homemakers. While there has been progress in recent years, the issue of women's workforce participation in India remains complex. The increasing participation of

women in India's workforce is driving economic growth by boosting productivity, fostering innovation and strengthening financial stability. As more women earn, families can invest in better education, healthcare, and opportunities leading to overall societal upliftment. A gender balanced workforce will help sustain productivity and address economic challenges. By encouraging women's participation across various industries India can secure its economic future and remain competitive globally women gain control over their earnings, leading to empowerment and self-reliance. Breaking Stereotypes like more women in leadership roles challenge traditional gender norms and inspire future generations. Many women face double burdens of managing both work and household responsibilities. Social expectations may discourage them from working, focusing instead on family or social responsibilities. In India fewer women have been working in paid jobs over the past 20 years. One major reason is that they spend a lot of time doing unpaid work at home Since these tasks are not considered part of the formal economy they are often overlooked in economic policies. This means that women's contributions at home are not counted as "real work" even though they are essential for families and society to function. As a result, women remain financially dependent and have fewer opportunities to join the workforce. Gaining financial independence empowers women, creating a positive chain reaction that benefits their families and communities. When women contribute economically, households can afford better education, improved healthcare, and greater opportunities. This empowerment fosters long-term social transformation. Women with financial stability are more likely to make decisions that secure a brighter future for their children, while communities thrive as women gain the resources and influence to drive lasting change.

Paid and unpaid work

Over the years more women in India have started participating in the workforce which is a positive trend for the economy. In rural areas LFPR. (Labour force Participation Rate) Increased from 50.7% in 2017-18 to 63.7% in 2023-24 while for urban areas it increased from 47.6% to 52.0%. LFPR for male in India increased from 75.8% in 2017-18 to 78.8% in 2023 - 24 and corresponding increase in LFPR for female was from 23.3% to 41.7% . Women in India experience both paid and unpaid work in the workplace Indian women spend 5-8 hours per day on unpaid works compared to men's 52 minutes. The Equal Remuneration Act 1976 aimed at ensuring equal pay for men and women for the same work or work of similar nature. However, despite these laws, many unorganized sectors still pay women less than men based on unfair

reasons. Because of fewer job opportunities women struggle to find paid work and often have to work for free or in low paying jobs. Women in India earn 20-30% less than men for the same work. Some states provide better job opportunities for women, while others still have high levels of unpaid work. Females spent an average of 306 minutes per day on unpaid domestic services in 2024, a slight decrease from 315 minutes in 2019. 40.3% of women are getting paid (aged 15 years and above). Women's higher participation in workplace where they are well paid Agriculture textiles health care education, IT and government services

Gender discrimination

Gender discrimination remains a significant obstacle for women often preventing them from pursuing careers of their choice. Discrimination against women often begins at home, influenced by illiteracy, patriarchal beliefs, cultural traditions, and deeply ingrained conservative mindset. Even though the government has implemented laws regulating night shifts and working hours for women to ensure their safety. A study found that Indian women face the worst gender bias compared to other countries. 85% of women in India said they lost a promotion, or job opportunities just because they are women. In India, 22% of working women feel that their companies favor men which is higher than the 16% average in other Asia Pacific countries. It is also due to wages and opportunities. Women are facing gender discrimination in every field, they feel biased. And sometimes this feeling makes them weak in their work duties. The primary causes of sex discrimination are rooted in cultural beliefs, while secondary causes related to organizational structures, policies and practices. Workplace discrimination is still a major barrier to gender equality. Gender bias to both societal beliefs about men and women and workplace policies that may unintentionally favor men.

In most parts of the world, including India, men are more commonly seen in jobs that are officially considered "economically productive," meaning they contribute to the economy in a direct and measurable way. However, women actually work longer hours overall because they also handle household responsibilities and other unpaid work.

Women's entrepreneurship

In today's world of globalisation, digital transformation and rapid growth in startups India is witnessing a rise in women entrepreneurs. Women now play a significant role in business and economic development while earlier times, when business mostly run by wealthy families or

high-income groups today's women entrepreneurs come from all background's regions and financial situations, they are setting up business in various fields like technology, manufacturing services, and retail. More women are starting businesses due to government support, digital platforms and changing mindsets. Women often face difficulty managing both business and household responsibilities. The impact of women entrepreneurs on the economy is substantial. 14% of total entrepreneurs in India are women. According to the Economic survey 2024-25, women now own approximately 22% of Micro, Small and Medium enterprises (MSMEs) in India. Government initiative supporting women businesses like

- Mudra Yojana - offers collateral free loans to women led businesses. Stand-up India scheme - Provides loans between 10 lakhs to 1 crore for women entrepreneurs.
- NITI Aayog - initiative provide mentorship and funding
- Self - Employed women's Association (SEWA) - Supports women in informal sectors with training and resources.

Women's entrepreneurship in India is growing. Digital platforms and better access to financial support have also played a big role in this progress.

Policies

The Maternity Benefit Act of 1961 in India continues to provide 26 weeks of paid maternity leave for women employees as established by the 2017 amendment. It supports working women during pregnancy, childbirth and early childcare. It acknowledges the physical and emotional challenges that come with motherhood and ensures that she have time to recover and care for their newborns. This leave is not only about physical rest, it is a special time for a mother to bond with her baby. It reflects an employer's commitment to supporting women during this crucial phase of their lives. This leave can be taken up to 8 weeks before the expected delivery date with the remaining period available post childbirth.

Sexual harassment at the work place is a serious issue that affects the safety, dignity, and well-being of women employees in India. It includes unwelcome acts like physical contact, sexually coloured remarks, showing pornography, demanding sexual favours and any other unwelcome sexual conduct. Lack of awareness about the law, especially in smaller workplaces and

informal sectors. Many cases go unreported due to stigma, job security fears, and social pressures. POSH Act is specifically designed to prevent and address sexual harassment of women at the workplace in India. POSH Act, the supreme court introduced Vishaka Guidelines which made it mandatory for workplaces to have complaint mechanisms. Several laws and policies promote gender equality and women's participation in the workforce. Many states and sectors provide horizontal reservation for women with existing SC/ST/OBC and general category quotas. Raising awareness among female employees about company policies related to sexual harassment and gender discrimination as well as encouraging them to report any such incidents without fear. This can be achieved by educating employees about security and safety measures, including guidelines.

The Indian government has launched several initiatives, such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Skill India and Digital India to promote women's education and employment.

Conclusion

The study highlights that women's participation in the workplace is limited. Societal norms and traditional mindsets contribute to this issue and additionally women often bear dual responsibilities, balancing work with household duties which affect their professional growth. To dissolve the taboos and insecurities associated with female, working it is necessary to create a healthy safe and hygienic work atmosphere. However, the situation is gradually improving various legal provisions, such as the Maternity Benefit Act of 1961 and the equal Remuneration Act of 1976 and restrictions on night shifts under the Factories Act, have been implemented to support women in the work place. Many educated women are part of the workforce and skill-training programs in cities are helping them find jobs. To further increase women's participation in the workforce, policymakers need to focus on creating more diverse job opportunities and at work place ensure that women feel secure and supported in their jobs. Women's participation in the workforce in India has been an area of increasing concern, as India struggles with social, economic, and cultural forces that affect gender equality in the labor market. Despite improvements over the years, women continue to encounter major impediments to full workforce participation, and their economic contribution remains disproportionately low relative to men. There has been a general rise in women's employment in the last few decades, mostly in urban centres. Education and employment prospects, together with policies from the government in favour of gender equality, have helped improve matters

to some extent. Programs such as the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) have helped offer windows for women's empowerment and economic engagement. Nevertheless, even with all these initiatives, India's female labor force participation rate (FLFPR) is still one of the lowest in the globe. As per different reports, India's FLFPR has declined in recent years, especially in rural regions, where women encounter more hindrances to work, such as inadequate infrastructure, cultural practices, and security issues. Social factors contribute importantly to the determination of women's labor force participation. Traditional gender roles, for example, the expectation that women will handle domestic duties and take care of children or elderly relatives, tend to restrict their capacity to participate in paid work. These social norms disproportionately burden women, constraining their mobility and career prospects. Also, discrimination during recruitment, differences in pay, and denial of access to positions of leadership are further hindrances to women's advancement in the workplace. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the plight of women in the workplace. Numerous women have been driven out of the labor market as a result of heightened caregiving duties, loss of jobs, and limited support systems. The pandemic underscored the importance of more inclusive policies and increased support for women in the workplace, including flexible working hours, improved maternity benefits, and access to childcare. In order to enhance women's labor force participation, it is essential to break down the structural and cultural obstacles that dissuade them from economic participation. Policymakers have to work towards creating an environment more favourable for women, ensuring equal opportunity, enhancing work-life balance, and eliminating harassment and discrimination. It is critical to inspire women to seek employment in various industries, such as technology, entrepreneurship, and leadership, in order to overcome obstacles and achieve a more inclusive and prosperous workforce in India. Full economic participation of women is not only an issue of gender equality but also the driving force of India's development and growth in the international economy.

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