

An Economic Appraisal Of Female Labour Force Participation In India

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Abstract

In addition to improving women's economic status, female labour force participation contributes to the general socioeconomic advancement of society. A high percentage of female engagement denotes gains in social and economic standing, promoting equal use of human potential for poverty alleviation and economic progress as well as empowerment.

Examining gender differences in India's labour force participation, this study highlights the significance of focused interventions for accomplishing the Sustainable Development Goals and economic growth. By examining patterns between 1990 and 2021, it reveals the complex interactions between historical, sociocultural, and economic elements. Disparities between urban and rural areas highlight the need for measures that challenge cultural norms and close socioeconomic divides.

This study identifies enduring difficulties that have their roots in cultural norms, differences in educational attainment, worries about job safety, and implementation gaps in policies. The economic ramifications underscore the need to address income inequality and the gender wage gap while highlighting the contributions made by women to GDP growth. In order to bring about transformative change, the study suggests a holistic approach that emphasises societal awareness, workplace regulations, education, and legal reforms. Working together is essential to building a vibrant, varied society that values and properly acknowledges the contributions of women.

Key words: *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR), Socio-economic status, Education, Informal, Agriculture, social norms, Discrimination, demographic dividend*

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I. Introduction

One of the main challenges to reaching the 2030 agenda's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is the eradication of gender-based discrimination in labour force participation. The United Nations highlights the vital role that women play in accomplishing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with special emphasis on Goal 5: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls." The achievement of gender equality as an aim and a remedy is demonstrated by this goal, also referred to as the stand-alone gender goal.

The 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) underlined the importance of women's economic involvement. The seminar emphasised how women's economic standing in society is inextricably linked to their empowerment. The ICPD noted that female labour force participation is a critical measure of women's empowerment and acknowledged the need of significant legal and legislative developments to protect women's rights worldwide.

Comprehending the determinants that impact women's choices to engage in or refrain from the workforce is crucial for policymakers seeking to promote robust economic growth. Women have a critical part in the labour force in India, an economy that is expanding quickly. Nonetheless, the gender makeup of the workforce in India has been gradually changing, and the female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) is declining, which is cause for concern. This percentage has been consistently below 35% for over 20 years, significantly lower than the average of 50% for developing nations.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) reports that the gender gap in employability in India is 50.9%, with only 19.2% of women and 70.1% of males in the labour force. India came up at position 135 out of 146 nations in the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report 2022, trailing below its smaller neighbours, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. It is one of five countries where gender inequality is more than five percent, along with China, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, and Qatar.

In India, women make up 48% of the population, yet they only contribute 18% of GDP growth, which is below average when compared to other countries. There is a considerable chance for equitable and sustainable growth if the gender gap in employment is closed, as doing so might increase India's GDP by 30%.

Over the years, the Indian government has worked to eliminate obstacles for women who work as labourers, bolster their ability to negotiate better pay and working conditions, enhance their skill set, and create more job options. Despite these initiatives, there are still large discrepancies, particularly between rural and urban areas, which emphasises the need for focused interventions to close these gaps.

The need to increase women's economic participation extends beyond poverty alleviation and economic growth to encompass general social development. Improving family health, lowering fertility rates, and improving child survival are only a few advantages of closing the gender gap in economic participation. Understanding and tackling the opportunities and obstacles in female labour force participation is critical for guiding India towards inclusive and sustainable development.

Rationale for the Study

The world has acknowledged India's economic strength, but a thorough analysis of the contribution made by women to this rise is essential. The goal of this research is to present a thorough examination of the underlying factors and economic consequences influencing women's participation in the labour force. Due to the complex nature of this issue, a detailed investigation is required to aid policymakers in promoting inclusive economic growth and to inform initiatives for fair development.

The World Bank, 2020 reports that the percentage of Indian women in the workforce has been falling, from 31.2% in 2005 to 20.3% in 2020. This trend raises serious questions about gender equality and economic progress. Comprehending the many obstacles encountered by women in the workforce, advancing policies that are sensitive to gender, and encouraging diversity in the workforce are the driving forces behind this research. In light of the approaching demographic imbalances, developing sustainable plans that guarantee a varied and well-balanced workforce requires a thorough understanding of the mechanisms behind this decline.

The study incorporates perspectives from the National Sample Survey Office's (NSSO) 2018 report on employment and unemployment (NSSO, 2018), the International Labour Organization's (ILO, 2018) study on gender and labour markets, and pertinent scholarly works examining the relationship between female education and career choices (Chakraborty et al., 2019). The NSSO's (2018) analysis of employment rates and the share of jobs in the informal sector provides important information about the challenges that women in the workforce encounter. Discriminatory practises affecting women's involvement in the workforce in India are shown by the ILO's research on gender and labour markets (ILO, 2018).

The study's objective goes beyond determining the underlying causes to include practical recommendations. This strategy is essential for providing guidance to companies, advocacy groups, and policymakers in their endeavours to halt the downward trend and promote a more diverse and equitable labour force in India. The study aims to minimise gender gaps, empower women, promote economic growth, alleviate poverty, and advance the social and economic progress of the nation by offering policy recommendations.

Objectives of the Study

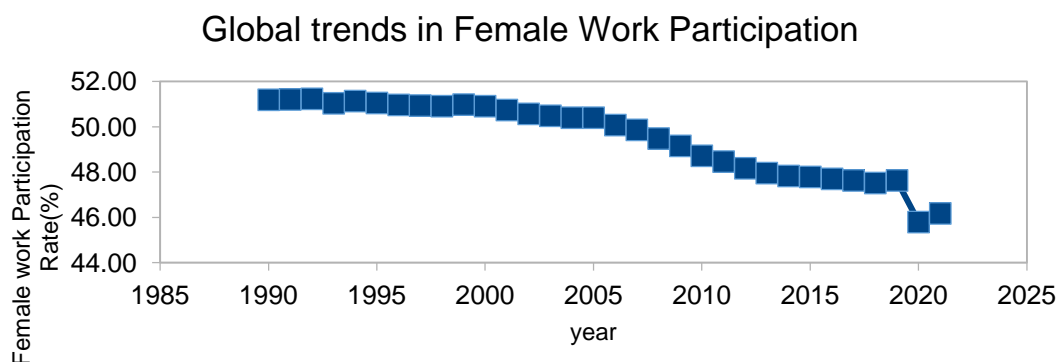
This research is guided by several key objectives:

- 1.To analyze the historical trends and patterns of female labour force participation in India.
- 2.To identify and evaluate the determinants influencing female participation in the labour market.
- 3.To assess the economic implications of varying levels of female labour force participation.
- 4.To examines the formidable challenges and barriers that impede women's full and equitable participation in the labour force.
- 5.To provide evidence-based policy recommendations aimed at fostering an inclusive and dynamic labour force.

Global Trends in Female Work Participation (1990-2021)

From 1990 to 2021, the global female work participation rate has undergone nuanced changes. It began fluctuating at 51.20% in 1990 and reached a low point of 45.80% in 2020 before slightly increasing to 46.18% in 2021. These numbers reflect the complex interactions between social, economic, and cultural elements influencing women's participation in the labour field around the world. The data offers insightful information about the changing dynamics of gender inclusion on a worldwide scale, portraying a nuanced story of both advancement and difficulties.

Fig. 1



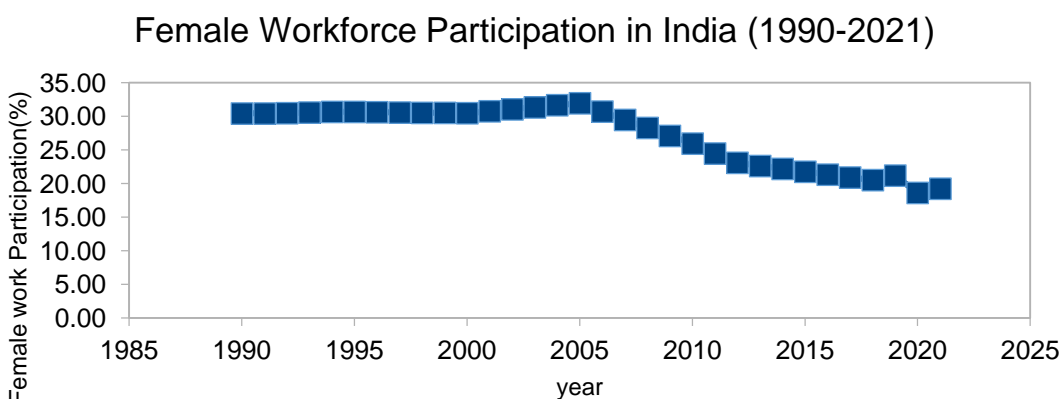
Source : ILO Statistics Database, ILOSTAT.

Comprehensive Analysis of Female Workforce Participation in India (1990-2021)

The trend of women's participation in the workforce in India from 1990 to 2021 has been marked by variations. Beginning in 1990 at 30.44%, the rate fluctuated little in the first several years, primarily staying close to 30%. The early 2000s saw a significant change, and the gradual increase peaked in 2005 at 31.96%.

The percentage of women in the workforce fell after this peak and reached 20.53% in 2018. The trend indicated a notable decline to 18.60% in 2020, despite a minor increase to 21.18% in 2019. 2020 saw a significant downturn, most likely brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a significant effect on a number of industries, including the labour market. A modest rebound occurred in 2021, when the rate increased to 19.23%. This complex path illustrates the unique impact of outside events, like the worldwide pandemic, on the participation of women in India's labour sector in addition to the pre-existing socioeconomic and cultural elements.

Fig 2.

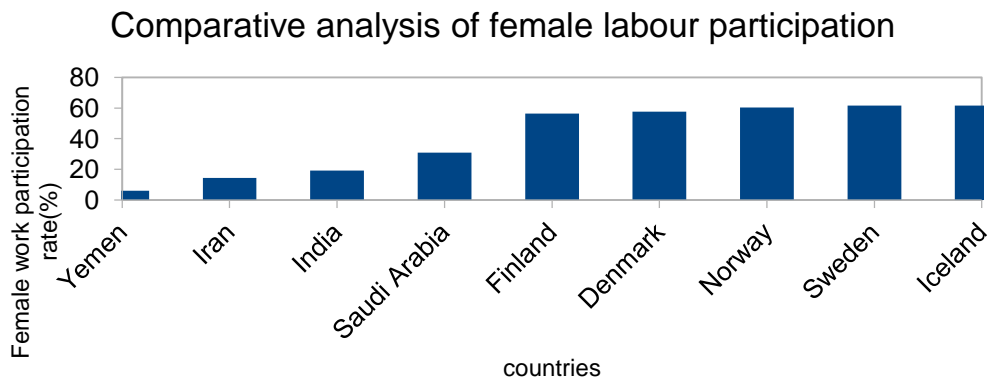


Source : ILO Statistics Database, ILOSTAT.

Global Perspectives: Unveiling Disparities in Female Work Participation and India's Unique Position

In 2021, a detailed analysis of the rates of female labour force participation in a number of selected countries showed notable differences, especially in relation to India. Noteworthy for their progressive policies and gender equality, the Nordic countries—Denmark (57.7%), Finland (46.5%), Iceland (61.7%), Norway (60.3%), and Sweden (61.6%)—exhibited significantly higher rates. On the other hand, countries facing difficulties with women's rights and labour force participation, such as Saudi Arabia (31%), had different results. Saudi Arabia made significant improvement throughout the years, as seen by the 15% female participation rate in 1990. This background offers a nuanced view of the development of Saudi Arabian women's employment engagement, adding to the larger story of worldwide differences in female labour participation. India's recorded rate of 19.2% underscored its unique position within this evolving global spectrum. This comparative analysis unveils the intricate dynamics of female workforce engagement, shedding light on both the strides made in progressive regions and the distinct challenges faced by India.

Fig. 3



Source : ILO Statistics Database, ILOSTAT.

Trends and Patterns of Female Labour Force Participation in India

Women's labour force participation rates (LFPR) in India have changed significantly throughout time. Although women have historically made up the majority of participants in the unorganised agriculture sector, new research (Chatterjee et al., 2020) shows that female LFPR is trending positively. This shows that more women are participating actively in the formal workforce. Women's labour force participation rates (LFPR) in India have changed significantly throughout time.

The historical evolution of female labour force participation in India reflects a complex interplay of cultural, societal, and economic factors that have shaped the trajectory of women's engagement in the workforce over time. Understanding this evolution is vital for devising policies that foster gender-inclusive economic growth and empower women in various socio-economic contexts.

Before Independence (Pre-1947):

Deeply rooted cultural standards that restricted women to home roles and restricted their access to formal education and employment were a defining feature of the pre-independence era. The socio-cultural factors influencing women's economic participation during this period (Sen, 2001). A pervasive patriarchal structure reinforced traditional gender roles, emphasizing women's primary responsibilities as homemakers. Limited educational opportunities for women were a consequence of societal expectations, perpetuating gender disparities in knowledge and skills. Women's economic engagement was primarily in agriculture and informal sectors, where they faced challenges such as unequal pay and lack of recognition.

After Independence (1950s-1960s):

Post-independence, societal expectations continued to prioritize women's roles in family and domestic duties over professional pursuits. Efforts towards societal progress faced resistance from deeply entrenched traditional norms, hindering women's acquisition of skills for meaningful participation in professional spheres. Studies by Desai and Kulkarni (2008) shed light on these challenges, emphasizing the intersection between societal expectations, educational limitations, and women's economic engagement. Despite incremental changes and the establishment of institutions focused on women's education, progress remained slow.

Before Economic Reforms (1970s-1980s):

Prior to the economic reforms of the 1990s, society continued to impose enduring norms that limited the participation of women in the labour force, notwithstanding gradual developments. Even if they happened gradually, educational improvements were crucial in raising the percentage of female literacy. Social conventions, however, continued to be a strong obstacle to women joining the formal workforce. Rao and Malhotra's (1998) research emphasised the necessity for focused interventions by highlighting the intricate relationship between deeply rooted cultural norms and educational gains.

Post Economic Reforms (1990s-2000s):

The economic liberalization of the 1990s marked a transformative period for India. Urban areas experienced a surge in women entering the formal workforce due to increased job opportunities in the expanding service and industrial sectors. However, rural areas continued to grapple with traditional norms. Studies, such as those by Bhat and Zavier (2003), provided insights into regional variations in female labour

force participation. The feminization of the urban workforce, increased work participation for urban women, and shifts in sectoral employment patterns characterized this transitional period.

Before COVID-19 (2010s-2019):

Despite strides made in the post-liberalization era, the decade from 2010 to 2019 witnessed a regression in female labour force participation. Cultural norms perpetuated traditional expectations, prioritizing women's domestic roles over professional pursuits. Inadequate support infrastructure, including a lack of affordable childcare facilities and limited flexible working arrangements, posed challenges for women seeking a balance. Gender wage gaps persisted, contributing to systemic challenges that hindered women's empowerment. Klasen and Pieters (2015) conducted research during this period, unraveling specific challenges faced by women in the contemporary workforce landscape.

Post COVID-19 (2020-present):

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented challenges to female labour force participation in India, disrupting economic activities and amplifying existing gender disparities. Research by Alon et al. (2020) shed light on the gendered impacts of the pandemic on labour market outcomes, emphasizing disproportionate effects on women. Job losses surged, particularly in sectors with a high concentration of female workers, exacerbating setbacks in female labour force participation. Increased caregiving responsibilities further affected women's ability to engage in the workforce, with the closure of schools compounding challenges. The digital divide widened disparities in remote work opportunities, emphasizing the importance of addressing digital inclusion in gender-inclusive policies.

Hence, from pre-independence constraints to post-economic reform opportunities and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the evolution of women's involvement in the workforce mirrors a dynamic journey. As India progresses on its path of economic and social development, confronting both historical and contemporary challenges becomes imperative to shape a labour market that genuinely empowers women.

Overview of Labour Force Participation Rates

Urban vs. Rural Disparities:

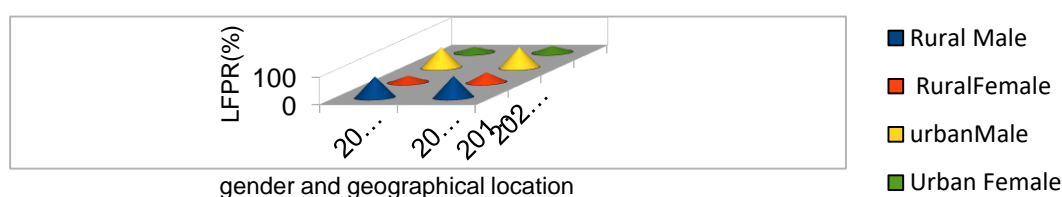
Notably, the urban-rural gap, including higher urban unemployment rates based on PLFS surveys, has been a focus of recent research (Biswas & Banu, 2023). This study provides a succinct analysis of women's economic empowerment, considering factors like literacy, education, marital status, and job profiles. Urban areas typically exhibit higher levels of female labour force participation, driven by improved access to educational institutions and a broader spectrum of employment opportunities (Klasen & Pieters, 2015). The urban setting facilitates greater exposure to diverse industries, allowing women to explore various career paths and foster professional growth. Access to educational resources and exposure to urban infrastructure contribute to a conducive environment for women's engagement in the formal workforce (Fabrizio et al., 2020).

Educational attainment emerges as a critical determinant of urban women's participation in the labour force (Kapsos, Silberman & Bourmpoula, 2014). While urban areas generally exhibit more progressive attitudes, certain cultural norms may still influence decisions around women's employment, particularly in specific industries or job roles. Addressing these cultural barriers remains crucial for fostering greater gender inclusivity in urban workplaces. It is critical to address socioeconomic disparities, advance education, and question cultural norms in order to establish a more equitable and inclusive labour market for women in both urban and rural environments (Rao & Malhotra, 1998).

Building a workforce where women, regardless of where they live, have equal chances for meaningful involvement and progress can be facilitated by recognising and resolving these inequities.

Fig . 4

LFPR for persons of age 15 years & above (%) by gender and geographical location (rural and urban)



Source: Annual PLFS Report, MoSPI

Figure 4 shows the LFPR in usual status (ps+ss) for persons of age 15 years & above (in %) segregated by gender and geographical location (rural and urban).

In 2017-18, a gender disparity in labour participation existed, with rural females (24.6%) lagging behind urban counterparts (20.4%). By 2021-22, a positive shift occurred as rural female labour participation increased to 36.6%, surpassing urban females at 23.8%. This reflects a substantial change driven by factors like increased awareness, educational opportunities, and evolving societal attitudes towards women's employment, influenced by cultural shifts.

Despite a higher share of rural women in the workforce, they often face inferior positions, engaging in low-paying agricultural work. Urban women, in contrast, are finding opportunities in the services sector, contributing to wage differentials.

As per PLFS 2021-22, a majority of rural females (20.6%) were engaged in the "Agriculture sector," with 14.2% working as helpers and only 6.4% as own account workers/employers. In urban areas, 3.4% of females were engaged in the "Services Sector" as self-employed. These employment patterns reflect not only economic but also cultural influences shaping the choices and opportunities available to women in different settings.

Educational Attainment and Employment

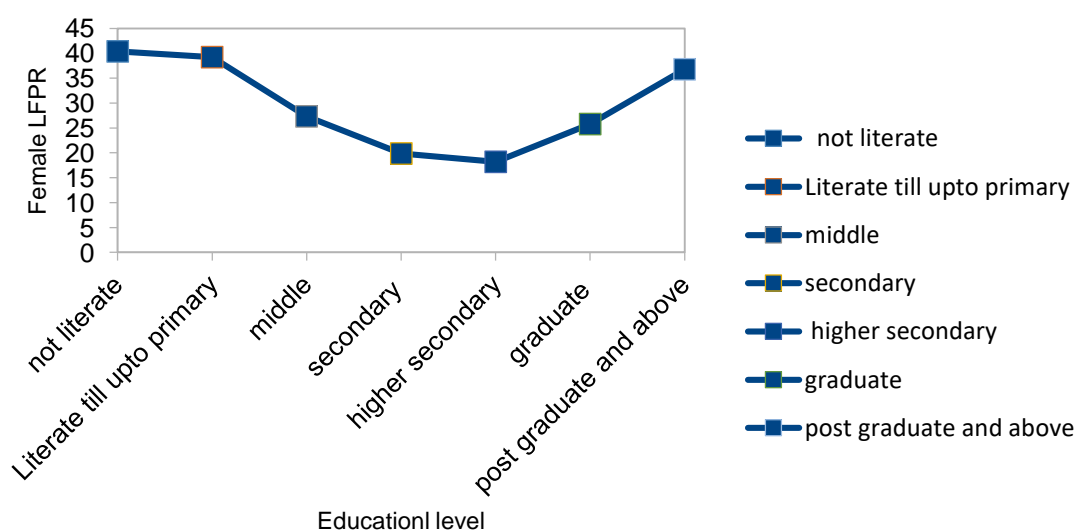
Educational attainment significantly shapes female labour force participation, with research consistently showing a positive correlation between higher education levels and increased engagement in formal employment (Chakraborty et al., 2017). This link is influenced by both income and substitution effects. The substitution effect suggests that educated women, commanding higher wages, may choose to substitute labour force participation for leisure or home work, while the income effect posits that higher education leads to higher incomes, potentially encouraging more leisure or home work.

Despite these positive associations, regional disparities in access to quality education add complexity to the relationship. Limited educational infrastructure and adherence to cultural norms in certain areas may act as barriers, impacting women's ability to attain higher education and participate in the labour force. The global understanding supports the positive association between education and labour force participation, emphasizing how higher education enhances employability and challenges traditional gender norms (World Bank, 2020).

Relationship between female LFPR and education level among persons of age 15 years and above during PLFS 2021-22 is shown in figure 5.

Fig .5

Relationship between female LFPR and education level



Source: Annual PLFS Report, MoSPI

The Female Work Participation Rate (FWPR) in India exhibits a distinct pattern tied to educational levels. The data highlights a notable FWPR of 40.4% among women categorized as not literate, indicating active workforce participation in this group. With increasing education, there is a consistent decline in FWPR, reaching its lowest at 18.2% among women with higher secondary education. A significant deviation from this trend is observed among women with post-graduate and above education, where the FWPR increases to 36.8%.

This unexpected rise at the highest educational levels challenges the otherwise inverse relationship observed in lower education categories, aligning with Andres et al. (2017), who note a U-shaped relationship between education and FWPR. Non-literate and primary-educated women exhibit the highest work participation, with a slight decline for those with middle and secondary education. The trend continues, showing a dip for higher secondary and graduate-level women but a noteworthy increase among postgraduate and above-educated women. This nuanced relationship suggests a positive impact on work participation at the highest educational levels, possibly influenced by the correlation between women's education and income. Regional disparities in educational opportunities introduce challenges, especially where limited infrastructure and cultural norms hinder women's access to quality education. To address these issues, implementing targeted policies focusing on improving educational infrastructure in underserved regions, challenging cultural norms, and promoting initiatives for girls to pursue higher education is crucial.

Sectoral Distribution of Female Workers

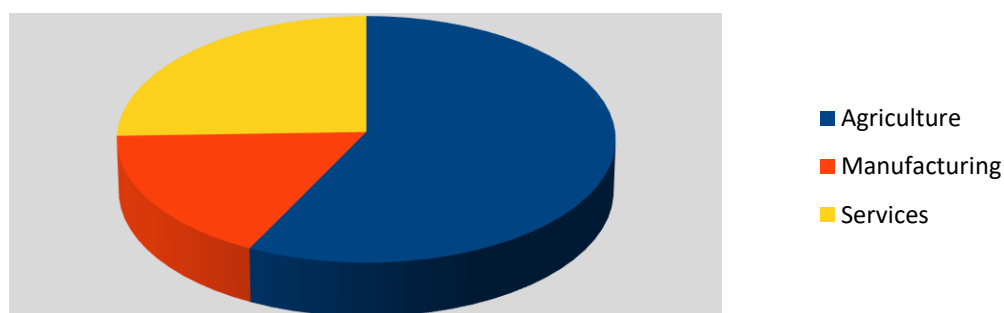
The sectoral distribution of female workers in India reflects a notable trend towards increased representation in service-oriented industries, as highlighted in studies. Additionally, improved working conditions and better opportunities for career advancement contribute to the rising female presence in formal employment within these sectors.

But a sizable fraction of female employees are still concentrated in the unorganised sector, which presents particular difficulties in terms of benefits access, social protection, and job security. The informal sector's lack of formal contracts and regulatory oversight leaves female workers vulnerable to exploitation and economic uncertainties.

The employment indicator categorizes jobs into Agriculture, Industry, and Services, providing a comprehensive view of changes in employment across these sectors. According to the 2021-22 Periodic Labour Force Survey, women significantly contribute to the agricultural workforce, boasting an impressive 57.3% female participation rate. In contrast, the manufacturing sector demonstrates progress in breaking down traditional gender barriers, with women contributing at a rate of 17.2%. The Services sector, a diverse realm encompassing various industries, witnesses women participating at a rate of 25.5%, emphasizing their integral role in propelling growth within service-oriented professions. While strides towards gender equality are evident, these statistics underscore the ongoing need to cultivate inclusive environments across all sectors, reflecting the current landscape and serving as a guiding compass for endeavors aiming to shape a more equitable future in workforce participation.

Fig. 6

Female Labor Force Participation Rate Across Key Sectors



Source: Annual PLFS Report, MoSPI

Women's active participation in agriculture, though marked by a high labour force engagement, faces challenges due to societal biases. Biases often overlook informal, unpaid, and home-based work, undermining the diverse contributions of women perceived primarily as homemakers. The flexible nature of their roles creates measurement difficulties in capturing the full extent of their involvement. Traditional expectations hinder policy formulation and resource allocation for empowering women in agriculture. Operating in informal settings exposes women to vulnerabilities, lacking social protection and adequate representation. Addressing these challenges is crucial for achieving equity and inclusivity in agriculture. The International Labour

Organization (ILO) stresses the necessity of policies addressing decent work deficits in the informal economy, advocating for social protection and equal opportunities for women (ILO, 2018).

Determinants of Female Labour Force Participation

Understanding the determinants influencing female participation in the labour market is pivotal for assessing economic implications. This exploration encompasses various factors, ranging from educational attainment and skill levels to socio-cultural norms, economic factors, and governmental policies.

➤ Educational Attainment and Skill Levels:

Educational attainment is a crucial determinant shaping female labour force participation, with higher education levels correlating to increased entry and sustainability in the workforce (Chakraborty et al., 2017). In India, the complex relationship between women's education and labour force participation exhibits a U-shaped pattern, influenced by income effects and intricate dynamics related to marriage and workforce engagement. Beyond formal education, skill development and vocational training play a vital role in enhancing a woman's ability to participate in the labour force, offering opportunities in specialized sectors (Chatterjee et al., 2018).

➤ Socio-cultural Factors:

Societal norms and cultural expectations significantly influence female labour force participation, with traditional gender roles in some communities discouraging women from seeking paid employment outside the home. Overcoming these cultural barriers necessitates a shift in societal perceptions, recognizing the value of women's contributions. Family expectations, including childcare and eldercare duties, also impact a woman's decision to participate in the labour force, emphasizing the need for supportive family structures and affordable childcare facilities.

➤ Economic Factors (Wages, Job Opportunities):

Wage disparities persist as a significant factor influencing female labour force participation, reflecting broader systemic inequalities within the labour market. Addressing wage disparities is crucial for achieving greater gender equality. Moreover, the availability of job opportunities, particularly in sectors traditionally employing women, profoundly impacts female labour force participation. Accessible job markets, coupled with inclusive policies, create an environment conducive to women's entry and advancement.

➤ Family and Household Dynamics:

The structure of a woman's household, including supportive partners or extended family members, significantly influences her decision to participate in the labour force. Flexible work arrangements and policies accommodating diverse family structures can facilitate increased female labour force participation. Economic necessity within households, such as financial need and dependency on a woman's income, also strongly determines her engagement in paid work.

➤ Government Policies and Initiatives:

Government policies and initiatives play a crucial role in shaping the landscape of female labour force participation. Measures like maternity leave provisions, anti-discrimination laws, and affirmative action policies positively impact women's access to and retention in the workforce. Skills development programs, including vocational training, educational subsidies, and entrepreneurship support, contribute to increased participation rates, aligning with the broader goal of enhancing women's skills and employability.

Economic Implications of female labour force participation

The economic implications of female labour force participation are multifaceted, shaping not only the workforce landscape but also influencing broader economic dimensions. As women increasingly contribute to the labour market, their impact resonates through various sectors, from GDP growth to poverty alleviation. Understanding these implications is crucial for fostering inclusive economic growth and harnessing the full potential of a diverse and empowered workforce.

➤ Contribution to GDP:

The active participation of women in the labour force plays a pivotal role in bolstering a nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Reducing India's dependency ratio will enable it to benefit from its demographic dividend, contribute to GDP growth, and raise per capita income if it aspires to become a \$5 trillion economy in the near future. However, reaching its full potential won't be achievable until women are fully integrated into the workforce.

➤ **Economic Growth:**

A higher proportion of women in the labour force acts as a catalyst for sustained economic growth. Beyond numerical representation, the inclusion of women fosters innovation, creativity, and a diversity of perspectives within the workforce. These factors are critical catalysts for economic dynamism and competitiveness at the national and international levels, highlighting the significance of labour force policies that are inclusive of both genders.

➤ **Income Disparities and Gender Wage Gap:**

Increased female labour force participation has the capacity to support economic expansion through workforce expansion. But entrenched income gaps persist because of things like uneven pay practises and occupational segregation, which keeps women's wages below those of males for work that is similar. In addition to empowering individual women by increasing their earning capacity, closing this gap is critical for attaining economic fairness because it boosts consumer spending and overall productivity. A more equal and dynamic economic environment is created when income disparities and the gender wage gap are reduced through increasing female participation.

➤ **Poverty Alleviation and Household Welfare:**

The economic empowerment of women through labour force participation directly influences poverty alleviation. Women's earnings make substantial contributions to household income, lifting families out of poverty. This empowerment results in enhanced household welfare, ensuring better access to fundamental components of a thriving society, including education, healthcare, and housing.

➤ **Long-term Economic Development Prospects:**

Women's active involvement in the labour force translates into enhanced human capital development, incorporating their participation in education, skill development, and professional growth. These aspects contribute to the formation of a more skilled and adaptable workforce, laying the foundation for long-term economic development(World Bank,2018). Sustainable economic growth necessitates unlocking the full potential of a nation's human resources, emphasizing equal opportunities for women in the labour market.

Challenges and Barriers

This analysis explores the many difficulties and impediments that prevent women from participating fully and fairly in the workforce. These hurdles, spanning cultural norms, educational disparities, workplace safety concerns, and policy gaps, collectively hinder women's ability to fully participate in the labour force. Understanding these multifaceted challenges is paramount for fostering an environment that champions gender equality, promoting a diverse and inclusive workforce.

➤ **Cultural and Social Norms: Traditional Gender Roles**

Deep-seated cultural norms perpetuate the idea that a woman's primary roles should center around caregiving and homemaking. These ingrained beliefs act as formidable barriers, impeding women's pursuit of paid employment and triggering societal resistance to their entry into specific industries or professions. Challenging these stereotypes and highlighting the value of women's contributions to the workforce is essential for dismantling these barriers.

➤ **Access to Education and Training**

Educational disparities persist in numerous regions, acting as a significant hurdle to women's entry into the labour force. Limited access to quality education poses a challenge that necessitates targeted interventions to enhance educational infrastructure and ensure equitable access to educational resources.

➤ **Work Environment and Safety**

Concerns over workplace safety, particularly in certain industries, serve as deterrents for women seeking employment. Addressing issues related to occupational health and safety is imperative for cultivating an inclusive work environment that prioritizes the well-being and security of all employees.

➤ **Harassment and Discrimination**

Discrimination and harassment play a part in creating hostile work settings that make women feel unsafe, uncomfortable, and on alert all the time. The impact on one's general well-being, work satisfaction, and mental health can be significant. An imperceptible obstacle known as the "glass ceiling" prevents women from rising to positions of high leadership.

- **Prejudice Based on Pregnancy:**
Women frequently encounter discrimination pertaining to pregnancy, maternity leave, or the possibility of becoming pregnant. This can involve discriminatory recruiting procedures, rejection of promotions, or unfavourable attitudes towards workers who are pregnant.
- **Policy Implementation Gaps**
Despite the existence of supportive policies, gaps in implementation can curtail their impact. Policies intended to increase women's involvement in the labour force are not as effective because of insufficient enforcement, a lack of knowledge, or administrative roadblocks.
- **Lack of Flexibility**
Policies related to work flexibility, including provisions for maternity leave and flexible work arrangements, may be inadequately designed, failing to meet the diverse needs of women in the workforce. Ensuring that policies are adaptable and responsive to different circumstances is vital for supporting women's participation in the labour force.

Policy Recommendations

- ✓ **Education and Skill Development Programs**
Efforts to enhance women's participation in the labour force must begin with prioritizing education. Additionally, implementing affirmative action policies becomes imperative, addressing systemic barriers and fostering an environment where women have equal opportunities to pursue education. Moreover, promoting vocational training and skill-building beyond formal education is essential. Expanding tailored vocational training programs equips women with the practical skills needed across diverse industries, fostering their employability. Recognizing the financial constraints that often limit educational opportunities for women, providing scholarships, grants, and financial aid programs is pivotal. This support, especially for marginalized and economically disadvantaged women, helps alleviate economic barriers associated with pursuing education.
- ✓ **Workplace Policies and Gender-sensitive Practices**
Creating an inclusive work environment is foundational to women's active participation in the labour force. Enforcing policies that champion gender equality within the workplace is paramount. The introduction of flexible work arrangements, including robust maternity and parental leave policies, supports work-life balance for women in the workforce. A safe and supportive work environment is crucial for professional growth. Strengthening workplace safety measures and protocols, especially in sectors prone to safety concerns, contributes significantly to fostering a secure and conducive work environment. Establishing mechanisms for reporting and addressing incidents of harassment and discrimination is equally important, ensuring the well-being of all employees. Moreover, encouraging women's leadership is a strategic initiative. Implementing mentorship programs facilitates career advancement, while promoting diversity and inclusion in decision-making roles breaks down existing barriers, fostering a more representative workplace.
- ✓ **Legal and Regulatory Reforms**
Legal and regulatory reforms play a pivotal role in dismantling gender-based disparities within the labour force. Ensuring the enforcement of these laws becomes a cornerstone for creating a more equitable work environment. Providing accessible legal mechanisms for seeking redress in cases of workplace discrimination and harassment is crucial, ensuring accountability for any violations. Comprehensive maternity and parental leave policies contribute significantly to supporting women in their professional endeavors. Advocating for these policies, which offer adequate time off with job security and benefits for new parents, is pivotal. Additionally, advocating for paternity leave policies promotes shared family responsibilities, fostering a more equitable division of caregiving duties. Recognizing the significant contribution of informal sector workers, extending legal protections and benefits to this sector, including access to social security and healthcare, is essential for addressing the unique challenges faced by women working in informal settings.
- ✓ **Social Awareness and Advocacy**
Challenging stereotypes and changing societal perceptions about women's roles in the workforce requires intentional efforts. Collaborating with media, educational institutions, and community organizations amplifies the impact of these awareness initiatives. Establishing ongoing platforms for dialogue and collaboration ensures a collective effort in addressing emerging challenges and opportunities in women's participation in the labour force. This collaborative approach strengthens advocacy endeavors, contributing to sustainable and positive changes in societal attitudes and workplace policies.

✓ Mitigating Pregnancy Discrimination:

To counter pregnancy discrimination, organizations should communicate clear policies on pregnancy, maternity leave, and accommodations, coupled with regular anti-discrimination training. Fostering a culture of diversity and inclusivity, celebrating various life stages, and implementing family-friendly policies like flexible work schedules are key. Legal compliance, support during maternity leave, addressing unconscious bias, and maintaining a confidential reporting system are essential measures.

II. Conclusion

Addressing gender disparities in India's labour force is crucial for achieving Sustainable Development Goals and unlocking economic potential. Despite government efforts, persistent inequalities, particularly in rural-urban contexts, underscore the need for targeted interventions. This study emphasizes understanding and overcoming the declining trend in female labour force participation, offering evidence-based policy recommendations.

The nuanced trajectory from 1990 to 2021 reveals a complex interplay of historical, socio-cultural, economic, and global factors, with fluctuations influenced by pre-existing norms and events like the COVID-19 pandemic. Urban-rural disparities further highlight challenges in diverse settings, necessitating policies that bridge socio-economic gaps, promote education, and challenge cultural norms for a more equitable labour market.

As India progresses, confronting historical and contemporary challenges is vital to empowering women economically. The multifaceted exploration reveals persistent challenges rooted in cultural norms, educational disparities, workplace safety concerns, and gaps in policy implementation. Overcoming these hurdles requires concerted efforts to challenge stereotypes, improve education and workplace safety, and design adaptable policies.

Addressing income disparities and the gender wage gap is crucial for achieving economic parity and societal well-being. Recognition of women's contributions in informal sectors, supported by gender-sensitive labour policies, is paramount. Dismantling traditional gender roles necessitates a holistic approach, addressing cultural norms, enhancing education, ensuring workplace safety, and promoting empowering policies.

Hence, achieving equity and inclusivity require collaborative efforts. The outlined policy recommendations form a comprehensive strategy emphasizing education, workplace policies, legal reforms, and social awareness. Prioritizing education and skill development, workplace inclusivity, legal reforms, and advocacy efforts can bring transformative change, fostering gender equality and empowering women economically.

The comprehensive examination of female labour force participation in India reveals crucial insights for achieving greater gender inclusivity in the workforce. Key findings stress the pivotal role of educational attainment and skill development as determinants for women's engagement in the labour force. To address this, policymakers must prioritize initiatives that enhance access to quality education and vocational training programs, especially targeting women in marginalized communities.

Socio-cultural norms and family dynamics emerge as influential factors shaping women's decisions regarding paid employment. Overcoming these cultural barriers is imperative for fostering inclusivity in the workforce, necessitating collaborative efforts from both policymakers and societal stakeholders.

Persistent challenges, such as the gender wage gap and disparities in job opportunities, underscore the need for proactive policies promoting gender equality within workplaces.

Legal and regulatory reforms are essential components of the strategy for a supportive work environment. Strengthening anti-discrimination laws, extending legal protections to informal sector workers, and enhancing maternity and parental leave policies are crucial steps.

The identified implications highlight the importance of collaborative efforts between policymakers, employers, and society. By prioritizing education, fostering inclusivity, and enacting legal reforms, India can pave the way for transformative change. To truly realise a future in which women's contributions are completely recognised and valued in every aspect of the labour force, sustained commitment from all stakeholders is necessary.

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