



Women's Labour Force Participation in India

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This discussion documents examines the causes behind India's decreasing rate of women's labour force participation (WLFPR). It draws important policy lessons from Bangladesh's recent success in encouraging women to readily participate in the labour force. It finally suggests policy measures that can be undertaken to gradually improve the state of India's WLFPR.

Executive Summary

Women's labour force participation in India has declined considerably in the last two decades. Some of the causes include occupational segregation, increase in women's participation in education, lack of access to technology, and automation of agricultural jobs – intertwining to become a complex problem.

This decline is detrimental to India's economic health as nearly half of the total labour force (constituting women) is either voluntarily dropping out or not able to work due to a lack of jobs in the country.

A policy revolution is needed which challenges the social, economic, and financial state of women – freeing them from the shackles of these issues. Inspiration in this document is drawn from Bangladesh, a neighbouring country that has succeeded in

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emancipating a considerable number of women from similar socioeconomic issues.

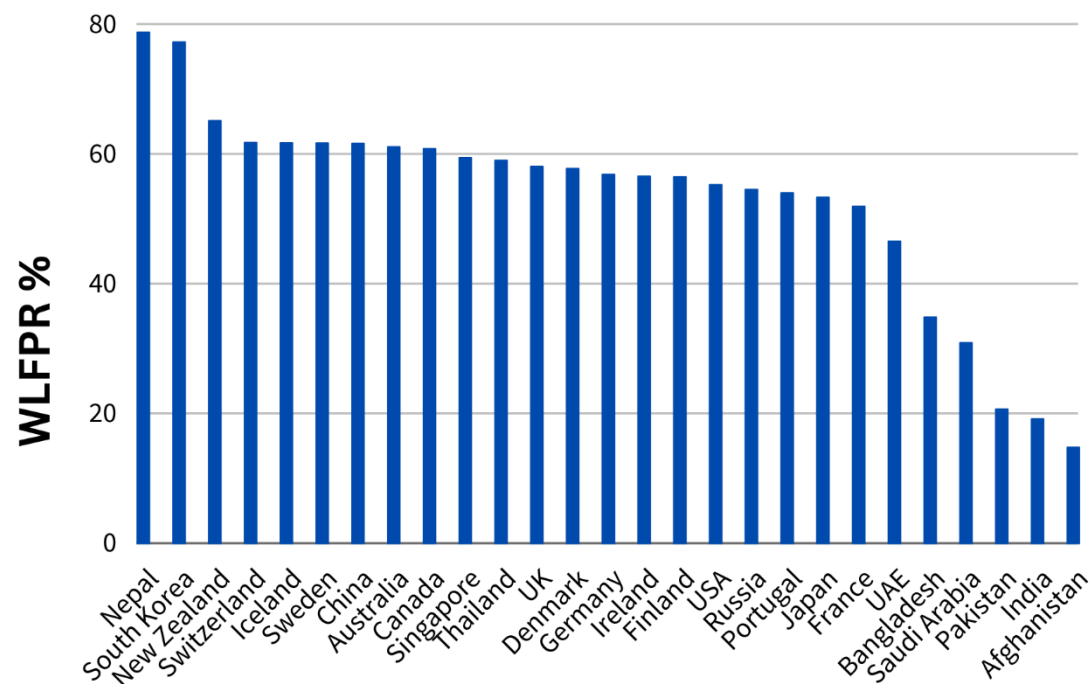
I. Introduction

India has one of the world's lowest women's labour force participation rates. Even before the pandemic, the country's women's labour force participation rate (LFPR) was only 18.6% as compared to 55.6% for men, according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (Jha, 2021). When the Union government-imposed lockdowns to tackle the spread of coronavirus, female LFPR suffered record collateral damage. During the April-June 2020 quarter, the female LFPR hit 15.5%, the lowest the country has recorded in a while (Kumar, 2021).

The labour force includes everyone who is employed and unemployed but looking for work.

It is important to look at these numbers in the context of how other countries are performing. Many of our neighbours are considerably ahead. According to data recorded in 2019 by the International Labour Organization (ILO), India ranked 171 out of 180 countries in terms of female LFPR. Pakistan and Bangladesh were ahead at ranks 166 and 154 respectively, while Nepal was at an awe-inspiring 3rd rank (Index Mundi). Even Saudi Arabia, which is acknowledged for its patriarchal and regressive traditions is ahead of India with a WLFPR of close to 30%.

India is ranked in the last 10 countries in the world. The top 10 countries have a WLFPR of 50%+.



Source: (Index Mundi)

Various issues contribute to these abysmally low numbers, including social backwardness, low-skilled jobs, bearing the brunt of household chores, and unpaid work. Oddly, these issues

occur against the backdrop of record growth in female education in India and a decline in fertility rates. Average (overall or female?) literacy in India has increased remarkably over the years with 84.8% in 2016, 85.3% in 2017 and 87% in 2018 (Indian Express, 2020). Additionally, the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21) reported that the average fertility rate in India has come down to 2.0 with 1.6 being the urban fertility rate and 2.1 in rural areas. This is a remarkable decline from 2.7 in 2005-2006 (Kaur, 2021).

This paradox exists primarily because India has witnessed jobless growth in the last two decades. There just have not been enough jobs for the female labour force to absorb. Additionally, India needs a social revolution, especially in the rural areas, to change the mindset of people (both men and women) towards female labour force participation.

This document looks at the causes of declining female labour force participation in India. We also trace the history of women

emancipation in India, the advantages that a high female labour force participation holds for a country, and recommendations on how India can create more jobs for women and encourage them to look for work.

2. Background

India's low female labour force participation rate is a unique and complex problem, one that is not expected from a country that has experienced rapid urbanisation and economic growth for the past three decades.

This is not new; this problem has been prevalent since the 17th century. When the country became a British colony, women had woeful social status. The Sati System, imposed widowhood even for child brides, female infanticide, dowry, etc, were some of the deplorable practices that were normal in those times. Kapur (2018) states that women were not allowed to participate in any activity beyond the four walls of the home and even then, key

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decisions were exclusively taken by the patriarch. Women's everyday duties were confined to child-bearing, household chores such as cleaning and cooking, and fetching water.

However, many social reformers stepped up in the 19th century to transform the condition of women and empower them to become equals in Indian society. It is safe to assume that even the British in India fought against many extremist ideologies to pass several laws that could potentially uplift women and improve their status in society. Landmark acts such as the Bengal Sati Regulation Act, 1829; Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act, 1856; Female Infanticide Prevention Act, 1870; Hindu Inheritance (Removal of Disabilities) Act, 1928; and Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 were passed by the British with the support of Indian reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy. These acts and efforts were vital in improving the social status of women.

While Indian women have been granted many rights including the right to vote, work, drive, among other freedoms, many women are socially confined by unspoken rules and duties including household chores, child-bearing, etc.

This was further improved when Mahatma Gandhi encouraged both men and women to step up and support him in the Indian

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Independence movement. Women held public meetings and rallies, participated in the Swadeshi movement, and rebelled against the British through words and arms. Many of these women belonged to particularly liberal families that spurred women's emancipation in India. In the backdrop of colonisation and the Independence movement, several women made history by being pioneers in particular fields. One of those was Savitribai Phule, who is regarded as India's first female educator, despite being illiterate before her marriage to Jyotirao Phule. She not only taught but also opened a school in Pune to facilitate the education of girls which could empower them to work later.

Once India attained Independence, many new legislations were passed to improve the lives of women, such as The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956; Special Marriage Act, 1954; and the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961. Moreover, educating and liberating women were considered a top priority. When the Constitution was framed, Article 14 deemed discrimination between a man and a woman illegal. Women-only educational

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institutes such as Kamla Nehru College and Lady Shri Ram College were opened to spur women's education, encouraging them to step out of their homes and study in a safe environment. This also inspired women to start putting their newly attained education to good use and they actively took up jobs as nurses, police officers, bankers, agents, lawyers, etc.

While this was predominantly happening in urban areas, women in rural India too gave tough competition to urban women in terms of workforce participation. Women have played, and continue to play, a significant role in the agriculture industry in India. They perform highly labour-intensive jobs such as weeding, picking, planting crops, managing poultry farms, feeding cattle, etc., even while bearing the brunt of household chores. Despite their efforts, men are still seen as decision-makers in this industry and the contribution of women contribution goes virtually unnoticed.

So, what exactly are the issues that have combined to become one complex problem that has severely cut down female labour force participation in the country?

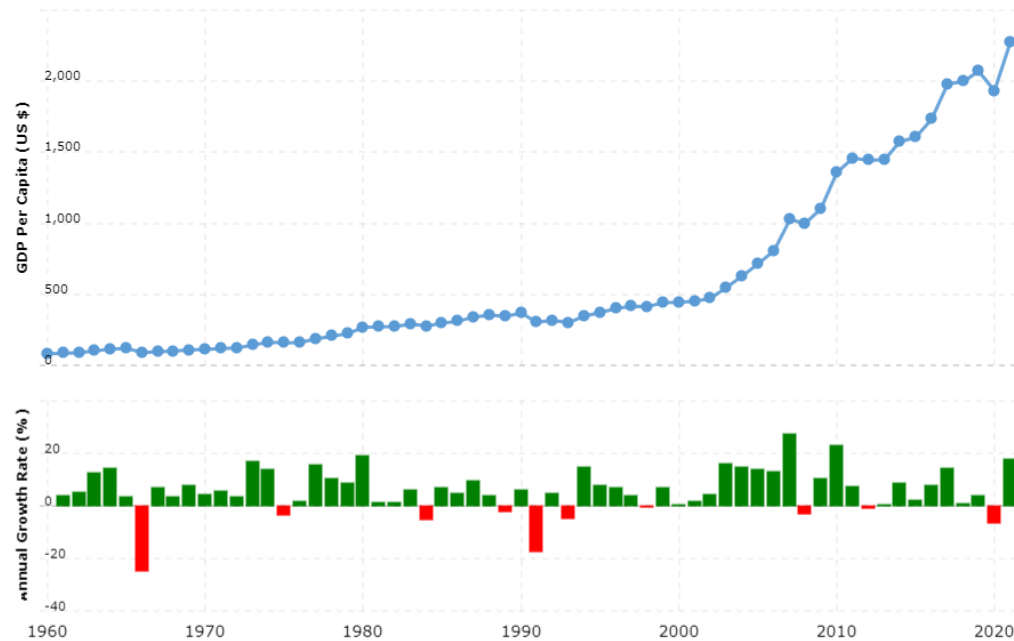
3. Causes

As mentioned above, there are many different causes for low and declining female labour force participation rate in India. It is important to note that much of this decline has happened in the last decade despite a remarkable growth in urbanisation and industrialisation in India. Here are some causes:

Increase in disposable income

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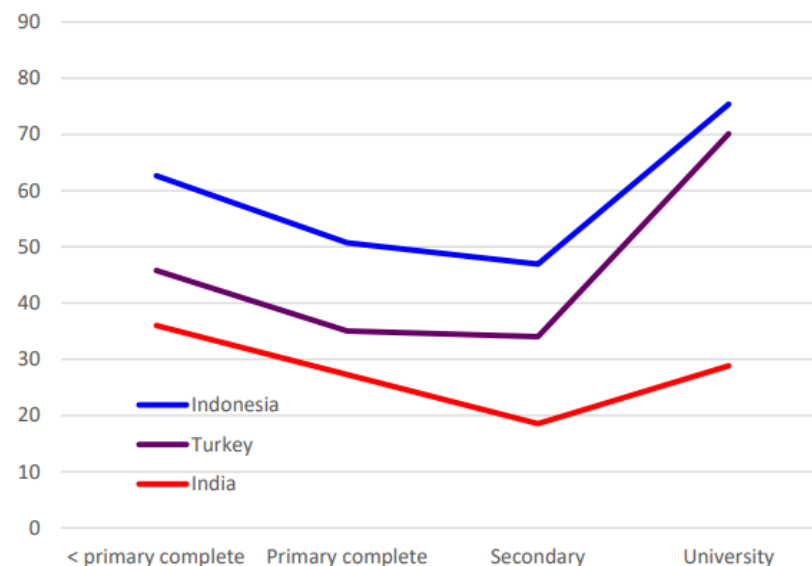
Despite economic hurdles, the amount of income people earn has only witnessed a steady rise in India. In 2020, the Ministry of Statistics stated that every Indian is earning six times more than what they were earning in 2014-2015 (Sharma, 2020). Data from World Bank shows that per capita income in India has risen from \$1574 in 2015 to \$2277 in 2022, an approximately 44% increase (Macrotrends).



Kapsos, Silberman, and Bourmpoula (2014) state that a rise in disposable income means that the standards of living go up and the necessity for a second income reduces. Now that we have established that a need for 'second income' reduced, the burden of abandoning careers has come down upon women as men are socially expected to work and earn for the household. Additionally, women now have both rights and facilities to get educated, which also contributes to low labour force participation. The U-shaped hypothesis on women's labour force participation explains this by empirically stating that although theoretically, women getting educated should lead to more jobs; it instead leads to the reverse until it starts to gradually recover. This entire journey is a U-shaped relationship between economic development and women's labour force participation rates (Chaudhary, Ruchika and Verick, 2014).

The idea behind mentioning the U-shaped hypothesis is to imply that India might be in the stagnant stage of the U-shape, when women are enrolling readily in educational facilities, curbing their participation in jobs as a result. If the U-shape hypothesis is true for India's current state of WLFPR, we can expect a considerable recovery.

Figure 1: Women's labor force participation by education, curvilinear relationships



Source: Authors' calculations from IPUMSI data.

Source: (Chatterjee and Vanneman, 2021)

Occupational Segregation

Agriculture has always been one of the main occupations in India, courtesy of the fertile land and helpful climate that the country possesses. However, since Independence and the liberalisation of the economy post-1991, service/industrial jobs

also exist besides agricultural jobs. Despite being relatively new, the services sector already contributes around 50-60% to the country's GDP (Economic Survey, 2021-2022). But the rising service/industrial jobs have not been able to absorb the female workforce as they have done for men.

In 1977-78, the proportion of rural women working in agriculture was 88.1% which came down to 71.7% in 2018-2019. However, in the same duration, the proportion of rural men working in agriculture reduced from 80.6% to 55% according to NSSO data (Nikore, 2021). This implies that while the men were able to boost their income through service and industrial jobs, women bore the brunt of low-paying, labour-intensive, almost invisible agricultural jobs. It is important to note that India lags behind its neighbours when it comes to large-scale manufacturing which tends to employ more women, such as in Bangladesh.

While the COVID-19 pandemic compelled many male migrant labourers to return to the rural areas to which they originally

belonged, it meant that they would have replaced the women who were doing these agricultural jobs in the first place through social coercion.

Agrawal (2016) states that occupational segregation is prevalent both in the urban and the rural sectors of India. However, there is greater segregation in the urban sectors and females are segregated from men in both the sectors which contributes to social inequity. Such practices lead to men holding positions wherein they not only earn more than women, they also get the opportunity to supervise them, thus asserting a professional power over the other sex (Reskin, B.F. and Bielby, D.D., 2005).

Increase in automation

We often hear about how automation is one of the key threats to human employment as machines, software, and robots have already begun to readily replace human workers. The missing element that does not get talked about is how women are replaced before men.

This has already happened in agricultural jobs in India on a large scale. Labour-intensive tasks that were previously done by both men and women were replaced by machinery. Tractors were brought in to replace tilling, canals with sprinklers were built for irrigation, harvester machines were brought in for harvesting, fertilisers and chemicals for weeding, etc. Agricultural factories also saw a rise in equipment that can replace labour-intensive jobs (Jhabvala and Sinha, 2002). All these types of machinery displaced women from their original jobs without any replacement and men took over the role of handling and operating these machines.

Technology is expanding at such a rapid scale that women are not able to catch up because of a lack of sufficient training and opportunities. This digital gender divide will become worse with women not having access to the Internet as much as men. The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019 pointed out that only 35% of active Internet users in India are women and they are 56% less likely to use the Internet than men (Global Girls Grow).

Gender-based social biases at work

A plethora of backward social biases surround employment opportunities for women and prevent them from taking up basic jobs in several industries, let alone taking up leadership positions.

1. **Night shifts:** Night shifts have seen a noticeable increase ever since automation and mechanisation crept into factories. These establishments can work round the clock

Although the intention behind night shifts is in women's favour, these laws tend to gradually establish biases against women.

and increase employment opportunities but women are conveniently left out under the garb of their own protection and safety. If not for the new labour codes, women were not allowed to work after 7 PM and before 5 AM. Under the new labour codes, women can work after 7 PM only if the establishment complies with a few rules and regulations including personal transport, creche on-premises, among others (Das Gupta, Moushumi, 2020). Why cash-strapped, COVID-induced lockdown suffered establishments will comply with this additional burden is an important question that remains to be answered.

2. **Hazardous Jobs:** In most establishments that require workers to perform tasks laced with hazards, women are prohibited by law. For example, Section 46(1)(b) of the Mines Act, 1952 prohibits women from working in mines, but men are allowed by law to perform the same tasks. In fact, the Factories Act 1948 has similar prohibitions for women. Women are not allowed to clean, lubricate or adjust any machinery that is in motion or poses a risk to women's health and safety (Seerwani, 2018). It is important

to note that these tasks are equally dangerous for men. However, instead of making these tasks safe for both men and women, one gender is conveniently left out while the other is exposed to occupational hazards.

3. **Heavy lifting:** In 22 states in India, women are prohibited from working in establishments where they will be required to lift weights above a certain threshold (Anand, Bomjan, Kaur 2022). While this may seem good for women's health and safety, these laws do not take into account women's willingness to work in arduous jobs. Moreover, machines are also not designed keeping women's body structure and strengths in mind. Most of these machines need a high upper body strength that men genetically possess, making them biological favourites to bag these jobs before women.

Gender-based social norms at home

Even if a woman decides to work and partakes in professional job opportunities as actively as men, she is still expected to do

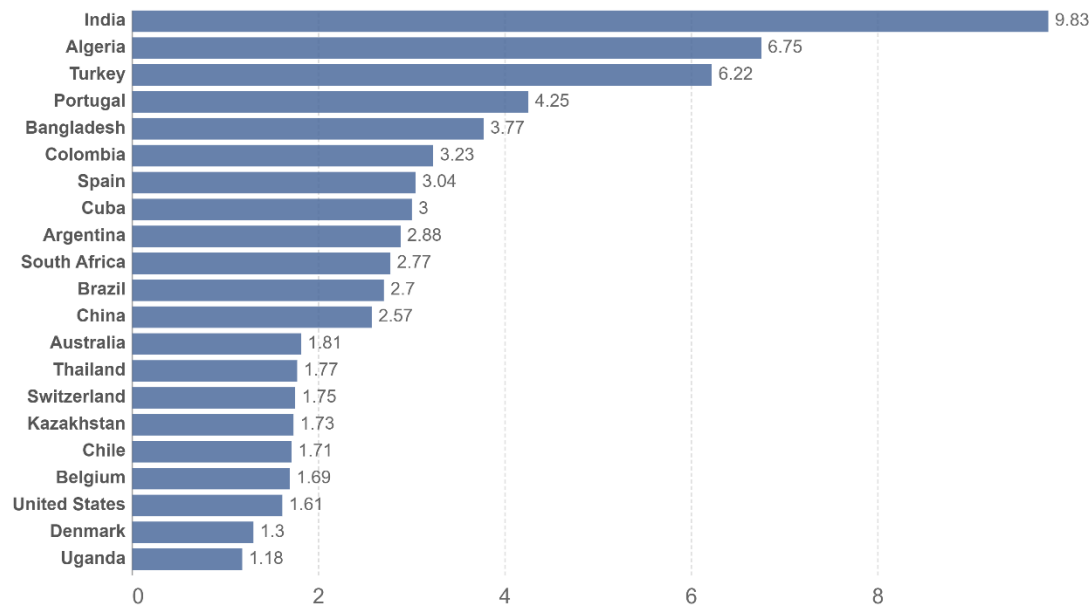
household chores that are almost always unpaid and bear the brunt of childcare. Many women give up jobs when there is a necessity to care for a child or an ill member of the family. This work is always unpaid and mostly falls on women's shoulders, thus preventing them from enjoying the same professional and personal liberty as men. Data from 2019 shows that only 27% of men performed unpaid household chores as opposed to 92% of women (Radhakrishnan, Singaravelu, 2020). Women, on average, spend nine hours per day doing household work as opposed to 6.8 hours by men (Agrawal, 2019).

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Female-to-male ratio of time devoted to unpaid care work, 2014



Female to male ratio of time devoted to unpaid care work. Unpaid care work refers to all unpaid services provided within a household for its members, including care of persons, housework and voluntary community work.



Source: OECD Gender, Institutions and Development Database (2014)

OurWorldInData.org/women-in-the-labor-force-determinants/ • CC BY

Most establishments do not encourage or prioritise the participation of women in the labour force by providing a safe working environment, creches to handle children, flexible work-from-home policy, paternity leave, etc. that can destigmatise the burden of household chores on women and encourage equality

between professional and personal tasks between men and women.

4. Advantages of WLFPR

Women's employment is underrated. It is not a coincidence that the world's most advanced countries have a comparably large female labour force and women occupy leadership positions as well. There are many advantages to an increase in female participation when it comes to jobs and overall benefit of the society. Here are the reasons why:

- **Diversity brings growth:** When women occupy key positions in an establishment, they bring an entirely new set of skills and experience, which further contribute to phenomenal growth. Research by McKinsey states that companies that have a more gender-inclusive environment on average experience a 21% gain in profitability than those

that do not (Berg & co., 2021).

- **Overall incomes increase:** When women who have never entered the workforce start taking up jobs, they bring competition for salaries into the market. This inadvertently increases everyone's incomes (Weinstein, 2018) .
- **Better talent pool:** Even companies benefit from women entering the workforce as it creates an incredible talent pool from which establishments can cherry-pick candidates according to their requirements.
- **More employment opportunities:** When women readily participate in jobs, they create additional jobs in the household economy (Kher, 2019). An example would be a working woman employing professional cleaners, nursemaids, and other similar professional workers to perform household duties, thus employing several people simultaneously with her own job.

- **Productivity boost:** Companies that can benefit from employees working in different shifts can experience a productivity boost with more women employees. Having women take up the day shifts, men can save on working overtime and can work night shifts. This can boost productivity in the labour force, eventually leading to profits.

5. Bangladesh's Model

Bangladesh's female labour force participation is quite ahead of India and the credit goes to the incredible economic resilience that the country has shown since a traumatic and debilitating war in 1971. Even countless famines were not able to act as deterrents to Bangladesh's growth especially when it comes to women's emancipation. In 2020, Bangladesh's WLFPR was 30.3% which

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was actually slightly reduced from its previous years due to COVID-19 (Trading Economics).

This success can be credited to civil support and government efforts to concentrate on female emancipation and growth since 1971. Nearly all the successive governments have tried to formulate gender-inclusive policies that have encouraged women to shed stereotypes and work alongside men to boost the country's economy. Since the late 1990s, these efforts have started paying off and Bangladesh has become a good example for its South-Asian counterparts to take lessons from. A great example of this is the ready-garment industry which is one of the leading industries contributing to Bangladesh's economy over the last decade (84% of all exports) (Billah and Manik, 2017). Some statistics show that this industry employs around 4 million workers, 70% of whom are women.

Bangladesh's social context

The majority of Bangladesh's population is Muslim and much like most South-Asian countries, it is a male-dominated society. Men conveniently dictate what women should or should not do and women are often confined within their homes. They also are required to adhere to the burqa system which poses a threat to women's liberation. Much like India, Bangladesh continues to have regressive traditions such as dowry, child marriage, illiteracy among women, etc., in the rural areas.

Schemes and efforts that have benefited Bangladesh's WLFPR

- **Government-NGO Partnerships:** The government of Bangladesh headed by PM Sheikh Hasina has recognised the multi-dimensional challenges that the women of this country face on a daily basis. This is why the government has made collaborative efforts with NGOs to extend micro-credit to women, improve health and nutrition in rural areas, and give stipends to girls for their personal growth. Various recommendations and efforts have been made to

include women's development as a key priority in all Five-year Action Plans, committees have been set up and rigorous efforts have been made to reduce violence, destitution, poor nutrition, sex trafficking among women and girls.

- **Vulnerable Group Development Programme:** The country recognises that all women cannot be treated equally as they all come from different economic backgrounds. This is why the country has specific programmes for poor and vulnerable women. Some of these include the Vulnerable Group Development Programme, the Allowances for Poor Lactating Mothers, the Vulnerable Group Feeding Programme, the Maternal Health Voucher Scheme, the Community Nutrition Programme, and the Allowances Programme for Widowed, Deserted and Destitute Women. These special programmes are great examples of intersectional feminism and how it can improve the condition of all women collectively.

- **Increase women in politics:** The last two Prime Ministers in Bangladesh have been women and they have managed the country for the last two decades. This has had a positive outcome on the number of women entering the labour force in the country. In fact, women are actively encouraged to join the political workspace in Bangladesh by reserving 50 seats for women out of 350 members in the parliament. Even the Speaker of Bangladesh is a woman and many similar high-ranking positions are held by women.

6. Recommendations

India needs a social, economic, and financial revolution when it comes to emancipating women from the shackles of societal norms, legal prohibitions, and encouraging them to step out and actively participate in the workforce. Here are some recommendations that can prove vital in liberating women and helping them to become employed:

Prioritise data collection

The government needs to collaborate with establishments to declare that there is a problem when it comes to recognising just how much women contribute to the care economy. Recognising that women are doing unpaid household duties, that even when they are working in offices or from home, they are expected to shoulder the burden of most of the chores can be pivotal in coming up with policies that can make women's lives easier. For example, introducing creches at work can provide confidence to women to step up and bring their children to offices while they work at the same time. Such policies can only exist when these

issues are nationally recognised and deemed as impediments to female labour force participation.

The government needs to step up and conduct surveys to collect data that can prove vital in understanding the true state of employment elasticity in the country with a special focus on female employment elasticity. Female employment needs to be undertaken as a priority when framing policies which can boost employment in the country.

Childcare facilities outside the home

Whose responsibility are children anyway? On one hand, it can be argued that children are only the parents' responsibility. On the other, we can say that the government should start investing in the welfare of children because eventually, they contribute to a country's economy.

Chevalier and Viitanen (2010) have conclusively proven that female labour force participation is negatively affected by young children. In India, childcare facilities that can encourage women to reserve time in their schedules to work do not exist and if they do exist, they are not implemented strictly. State policies that can ease the childcare burden are not active in India, unlike in France.

Fagnani (2011) states that France not only has a higher women's labour force participation, but women in France also participate more readily in childbearing owing to France's childcare-friendly policies. France has the second-highest fertility rate in all of Europe, just after Ireland. However, France's fertility rates are highly impacted by childcare facilities, wherein Irish fertility rates are heavily influenced by Irish families' beliefs in Catholicism (Connor, 2021). France provides a generous family allowance to take care of all children. Maternity leaves in France range from a minimum of 4 months to 12 months based on the number of children and other criteria. The country also offers

fathers paternity leave policies ranging from 27 days to 32. The Ministry of National Education runs 'écoles maternelles' or nursery schools for universal enrolment of children which frees up space in the mothers' schedules to get employed.

Invest in rural infrastructure

A significant portion of women's time in rural areas is spent on back-breaking, monotonous tasks that can easily be solved if there was better infrastructure in place. Women spend a lot of time travelling long distances for healthcare, fetching water, being dangerously close to biomass smoke, etc. This can be significantly reduced if there is governmental and private investment in improving roads, healthcare, sanitation facilities, water supply, etc., to conserve women's time in mindless tasks and allow them the opportunity to do more productive ones.

Flexible work policies

COVID-19 has proved that it is possible for companies to extend work-from-home policy because a lot of these jobs can be done easily from home. Allowing employees to work from home can help women by providing them more time for their children, saving on an unnecessary commute that is more often than not filled with safety issues, and keeping better health. Additionally, companies must also work towards provisioning overtime pay, limited and well-defined work hours, paternity leave, and avoid late-night get-togethers and meetings that can make women feel excluded from important company events. Such policies can encourage women to feel equal to their male counterparts and encourage more women to take up jobs.

Initiate programmes and open schools for female vocational training

Indian women severely lag when it comes to being skilful at work. Without proper access to the Internet, they are not able to keep up with their male counterparts and are only able to do low-

skilled jobs. Opening up institutes where women can take vocational training for upskilling can help them take up better jobs and improve diversity in the talent pool. This will eventually lead to more formal employment and a rise in female income, some things that India urgently needs to boost its economy.

Microfinancing women businesses

As pointed out above, women in Indian agriculture do most of the grunt work but the decision-making powers still lie with men. This can be changed if women are empowered financially and legally to start owning businesses of their own. This is where microfinancing can play a key role.

Microfinancing can help unprivileged women get easy access to credit, something they urgently need and not get entangled in formal documentation offered by banks and most NBFCs. The Union government in India has already made strides in this direction through the Mudra Yojana.

Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana provides loans of maximum 10 lakh rupees to non-corporate MSMEs.

However, there is urgent financial literacy required among rural women with respect to informal lending. This is where Self-help Groups (SHGs) can play a key role in educating these women and empowering them to take more loans for kickstarting their businesses bereft of any male intervention.

Improve access to technology

We stated previously that a lack of access to technology is holding girls and women back from employment. This can be changed through the collective efforts of the government through localised efforts. Here are some solutions that can prove effective in improving technical literacy among women:

- Invest in technology and telecom infrastructure in rural areas, so that women can have improved access to Wi-fi
- Set up self-help groups and training for parents and guardians to help them understand the importance of empowering women with technology. This can help destigmatise the rigidity that patriarchs practice against women and provide them more access to devices and technical innovations
- Community-led investments at local levels to increase the number of devices among underprivileged women
- Enabling rural and urban schools with technical infrastructure and introducing computers and internet-based projects as mandatory curriculum, so that parents are incentivised to invest in their child's education

Encourage large-scale manufacturing and upskill women

Around 60% of the Chinese women workforce (around 44% of the total workforce) are those who shift from rural to urban areas to work in factories (China Mike, 2020). As is popular and well-established, China has a robust manufacturing sector that employs more than 112 million people.

However, these numbers are completely different when it comes to India. It is estimated that women only constitute 12% of the total workforce in the Indian manufacturing sector with only 3% serving in core engineering (Panicker, 2020).

For women to participate more in the manufacturing workforce, we need to encourage the growth of the manufacturing sector in India in the first place. Despite the fact that India and China are neighbours with a similar geography and socio-economic history, the latter has made sizable progress in boosting economic growth through manufacturing. What India needs is a major overhaul in

infrastructure, better credit facilities, creating a smooth supply chain, and discouraging/disincentivising rent-seeking behaviour to boost manufacturing growth.

Large-scale manufacturers will also tend to employ more women to meet their labour and sales targets. But for that to happen, we also need to initiate upskilling programmes for women through which they can learn proper skills to work on par with men.

7. Conclusion

Improving women's labour force participation in India is not going to be an easy task. Even if some strides are made in this area, this will always be a work-in-progress. The government needs to look at the success models of its neighbouring countries which share the same demographics and social context to see how they are performing better than us. We need collective

efforts to encourage women to step up and join the labour force. But at the same time, we also need the government and establishments to create jobs that can absorb these new entrants at the same time.

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