
Female Labor Force Participation In India

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INTRODUCTION

India continues to struggle to provide its women with equal opportunity. In 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic, female labor force participation in India was 23.5%, according to ILO estimates.

The pandemic has made this situation worse. It has hit women disproportionately — because they work in sectors that have been the hardest hit; work more than men do in the informal economy; or because they are the primary caregivers at home.

As the recovery of the Indian economy requires a concerted effort of both government and citizenry, women can become a critical part of the economic recovery. Thus, there is a need to ameliorate long-standing issues that hamper female labor force participation in India.

Constraints In Female Labor Force Participation

- **Stereotyping In Society:** India's societal norms are such that women are expected to take the responsibility of family care and childcare. This stereotype is a critical barrier to women's labor force participation.
 - Due to this, women are in constant conflict over-allotment of time for work and life is a war of attrition for them.
- **Digital Divide:** In India in 2019, internet users were 67% male and 33% female, and this gap is even bigger in rural areas.
 - This divide can become a barrier for women to access critical education, health, and financial services, or to achieve success in activities or sectors that are becoming more digitized.
- **Technological Disruption:** Women hold most of the administrative and data-processing roles that artificial intelligence and other technologies threaten to usurp.
 - As routine jobs become automated, the pressure on women will intensify and they will experience higher unemployment rates.

- **Lack of Gender-Related Data:** Globally, major gaps in gendered data and the lack of trend data make it hard to monitor progress.
 - In India, too, significant gaps in data on the girl child prevent a systematic longitudinal assessment of the lives of girls.
- **Impact of Covid-19:** Owing to Covid-19, global female employment is 19% more at risk than male employment (ILO estimates).
 - For India, several estimates show that, compared to men, women were 9.5% less likely to be employed in August 2020 compared to August 2019.
 - In the **World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index** (which measures gaps that exist in the economic participation of women), India slipped to 112th place this year, simply because over 70 lakh Indian women have dropped out of work.

Way Forward

As a report by McKinsey Global Institute suggests that if women participated in the Indian economy at the level men do, annual GDP could be increased by 60% above its projected GDP by 2025. Given this, governments at all levels, civil society, and citizenry should take adequate measures to ensure gender equality.

- **Full-Time Child Care:** The Integrated Child Development Scheme provides some support, but it is not a full-time child care solution.
 - However, the “Sangini Centres” of Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) provide full-day child care for 0-5-year-olds, including nutrition, health, and child care.
 - Thus, similar centers should be significantly expanded.
- **Bridging Digital Divide:** To address this, partnerships between the public and private sectors will be most effective.
 - Actions will need to address affordability of phones and computers, female digital literacy and its social context, and inadequate technical content dedicated to women and girls.

- **Flexible Working:** The pandemic-induced remote working scenario has taught the corporate world that seamless work-life integration is possible not only for women but for male professionals as well.
 - Even as India Industries adds more diversity and inclusion initiatives such as increased maternity leave, mandatory paternity leave, the right to and choice of work for women depends greatly on organizations continuing the practice of flexible working.
- **Fiscal Incentives:** Women have a higher elasticity of labor supply than men (their labor supply is more responsive to their take-home wages) — lower income taxes for women can incentivize their participation.
- **Encouraging Women Entrepreneurship:** Creating job opportunities is the need of the hour. However, encouraging more women to become entrepreneurs will provide a long-term solution.
 - By creating jobs, fuelling innovation, and furthering investment in health and education, entrepreneurship among women could transform India's economy and society.
- **Prioritizing Gender Statistics:** A UN Women Initiative called “Making Every Woman and Girl Count” was launched in 2016 to help prioritize gender data, ensure regular production of quality and comparable gender statistics, and ensure that data are accessible and used to inform policy.
 - There is a need to incorporate such an initiative in India as well.

Conclusion

World Bank, noted that “no country can develop and achieve its full potential if half of its population is locked in non-remunerative, less productive and non-economic activities.”

Therefore, in a country where young women's education is now at par with men's, ignoring that half of the population isn't participating equally in the economy means we are missing out on innovation, entrepreneurship, and productivity gains.

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