

IMPACT OF GENDER NORMS ON THE FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Narendra Modi Government has set before the country of India the goal of attaining “developed country” status by 2047, the 100th year of Indian Independence. Indian policy makers believe that a prerequisite for achieving this target is an increased workforce participation by Indian females. Economists consider female workforce participation to be a prerequisite for increasing gender equity as well as a mechanism for improved access to health care, declining fertility rates, reduced poverty, and increased political and social participation of women. Over the last three decades as India’s gross domestic product (GDP) has grown, its female workforce participation has been declining. This research paper explores the causes of India’s falling Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR), focusing on gender norms and societal structures as the main factors which reduce both the supply and demand of female labour. With respect to supply, the challenge of balancing household duties and childcare with work is the central factor in limiting the presence of females in the workforce. On the other hand, the unconscious gender bias and a high wage gap mitigate the demand for female employees. The paper concludes with a discussion section, where remedial measures for improving female workforce participation in India are suggested.

Keywords: Female labour force, Wage gap, Gender inequality, Domestic labour, Gender norms, India

Introduction

India is home to 685 million women, of which 464 million are in the working age group of 15-64 years (World Bank Open Data, 2022). This sizable population can be a huge contributor to the country and its growth (Lawson, 2008); however, this does not seem to be the case. Despite a rapid rise in India’s gross domestic product (GDP), there has been a continuous decline in India’s female labour force participation over the past three decades.

As per the World Bank, in the past three decades, India has seen its GDP per capita increase from \$303.9 in 1991 to \$2,388 in 2021. Women in India have seen considerable structural improvements in their lives, such as decline in fertility rates and expansion of women's education. Fertility rates have declined steadily over the past several decades, from 4.0 in 1990 to 3.4 in 2000 and 2 in 2021 (World Development Indicators, 2021), for example. This decline would tend to be supportive of increased female participation in the labour market .

According to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme, "the Labour Force Participation Rate indicates the percentage of all people of working age who are employed or are seeking work. The rate excludes individuals who are neither working nor looking for work like students, pensioners, housewives, etc" (MOSPI, 2022).

Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) is defined as the percentage of persons in the labour force in the population.

$$LFPR = \frac{\text{No. of Employed Persons} + \text{No. of Unemployed Persons}}{\text{Total Population}} * 100$$

Source: mospi.gov.in

Female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) refers to women who are working or looking for a job. India's FLFPR has been steadily declining over the last three decades from 30.2% in 1990 to 17.5% in 2018 as per data by World Bank, Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), and Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) (Deora, 2023). This rate is amongst the lowest across developing nations (Council on Foreign Relations,2018).

It is critical to investigate this phenomenon as this drop can be a huge impediment to India realising its demographic dividend and attaining a developed nation's status (Council on Foreign Relations,2018). Female labour can be an important component of a country's development as is explained by Verick (2014): "Female labour supply is, both a driver and an outcome of development. As more women enter the labour force, economies can grow faster in response to higher labour inputs'. Specifically for India, it is estimated that per capita income could be 10 percent higher by 2020 and 20 percent higher by 2030 than in the baseline scenario if India's gender participation gap could be halved (Lawson, 2008). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) finds that India's GDP will increase by as much as 27 percent adding \$2.9 trillion if women participated in the economy at the same rate as men (Council on Foreign Relations, 2018).

Increasing women's employment is a critical factor in their progression towards economic independence and is also considered as an indicator of their overall status in society (Mammen &

Paxson, 2000). A decrease in the female labour force participation rate could also be indicative of a fall in the economic well-being of women, their economic status, and the status of females in the society; hence further investigation is needed.

It is also important to note that the problem with Indian FLFPR is not a lack of interest on the part of women. The 2011 National Sample Survey (NSS) shows that over a third of women engaged primarily in housework said that they would like a job. That number rises to close to half among the most educated women in rural India (Pande, 2018). It is also interesting to note that a significant proportion of women usually engaged in domestic duties reported their willingness to accept work if the work was made available at their household premises (Chaudhary & Verick, 2014).

Keeping the above scenario in mind, it is clear that increasing the female labour force is an important prerequisite not just for India gaining any advantage out of its demographic dividend but also for ensuring gender equality and improving the lives of half of its population (Council on Foreign Relations, 2018). The objective of the research paper is to understand and investigate causes of India's falling FLFPR with a special emphasis on societal norms and to then suggest remedial measures for improving female workforce participation.

Research Question: Are gender norms and societal structures in India the primary reason behind India's falling female workforce?

Methodology

The fall in Indian female labour force in the past three decades has been a worrying trend and hence has been a matter of study lately. This paper extensively looks at the current literature available including research papers, articles, and surveys. Apart from these, the paper also looks at expert's interviews and news reports. These sources show the causes of decline in the female labour force supply. The paper investigates these causes to answer the research question that is, "*Are gender norms and societal structures in India the primary reason behind India's falling female workforce?*" The investigation encompasses factors affecting both the demand and supply of female labour. The paper then attempts to establish certain concrete policy measures to help improve the female labour force participation.

The paper's methodology is two-fold. The first is the review of literature including research papers, articles, surveys, interviews, and news reports. The second is **solution- focussed**. The paper provides concrete policy measures that can be explored to help improve the female labour force participation.

Analysis

The relationship between female workforce participation and economic development has been widely studied and investigated. These studies suggest a U-shaped relationship between female labour force and economic development (Goldin, 1994). The studies suggest that female participation rates are highest when women are engaged in primarily agricultural activities. As the economy develops and undergoes structural changes there is a transition to more industrial jobs primarily for men. Commonly, women leave the workforce due to the increase in household incomes. With further economic development, fertility rates among women decline, education increases, and re-entry of women in the labour force are in response to the growing demand in the services sector. Claudia Goldin, economic historian and a professor at Harvard University, has established a U-shaped relationship between education levels and female workforce in the case of the United States of America. She states, "With greater education for women and a larger white-collar sector, the income effect falls because more families no longer face the stigma effect of manufacturing work" (Goldin, 1994).

India is an anomaly to the U-shaped hypothesis, demonstrating a stronger decline in women's LFPR as the economy continues to grow. India's GDP has risen from \$326.61 billion in 1990 to \$832.22 billion in 2005 and most recently to \$3,386.4 billion in 2022 (O'Neill, 2023). India's service sector has grown to 47.51% from 45% of India's GDP (O'Neill, 2023). Despite such a rapid rise in India's GDP and its service sector, there is a continuous decline in FLFPR and a lack of women's re-entry into the labour force. India's FLFPR has fallen from 32% in 2005 to 25% in 2021 (World Bank, 2023).

Because the U-shaped curve hypothesis does not hold true in India as seen through the previous paragraph, we can argue that India's FLFPR is not a function of economic development alone and that there are many other factors involved. "Female labour force participation in India and beyond", authors Sher Verick and Ruchika Chaudhary note, "Ultimately, women's employment is driven by a range of multifaceted factors, including education, fertility rates, social norms, and the nature of job creation"(Chaudhary & Verick, 2014).

Costagliola has made a similar and stronger argument. She states, "I argue that this failure to demonstrate a U-shaped relationship corresponds with initial conditions, that being social norms, which prevent women from actively engaging in the labour force" (Costagliola, 2021). The author proposes that "women's failure of re-entry into India's labour force is a direct result of patriarchal and traditional norms that prevent women from garnering gender equality." The article argues that falling FLFPR cannot be explained by income effect as India continues to be amongst the poorest countries in the world and women's inability to engage in the labour force results in food budget squeezes as other expenditures rise (Costagliola, 2021).

Along with this, the extent of secondary education or the literacy rate for women as compared to men cannot be pinned as a reason for this phenomena, as females are pursuing and completing an education at the same rate as males. The lack of job opportunities cannot explain the low female labour participation either considering India has a huge service sector, constituting 47.5% of its GDP, resulting in increased job opportunities for the females (O'Neill, 2023). The fact that not enough jobs have been created in the service sector points to an inherent gender bias in society. Costagliola (2021) asserts:

This notion exacerbates the understanding of the gendered nature of the division of labour, assuming that women cannot engage in the industrial economy, despite the fact that China's manufacturing sector employs a significant number of women. The expectation remains that women's duties lie in the household and that work-related activities must accommodate these duties.

She suggests here that the assumption that women quit the workforce as there is a transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy creates a gender bias in the division of labour in India. Additionally, we can gather that agriculture allows women to balance household duties with work while industrial work and the service sector does not. The author notes that gendered employment segregation is also fueled by traditional gender norms in India which impacts the creation of job opportunities for women. The lack of job opportunities, in turn, results in women being discouraged by their families to enter these sectors proliferating the notion of patriarchal and societal restrictions placed upon the will of women, especially women in poor socio-economic conditions, in the country.

This paper surveys the different literature and argues that gender norms and the patriarchal structure of Indian society are a pervasive factor impacting both the supply of women in the labour force, as well as the demand for women in the labour force.

Gender Norms and their Impacts on Female Labour Supply

A female's decision to join the labor force is impacted by (1) the load of household duties on her, (2) the responsibility of childcare, (3) the attitude of key decision-makers towards working women, (4) freedom of mobility, and (5) crimes against women. The paper establishes that all these factors are a result of the gender norms and the patriarchal societal structure in India and, therefore argues that gender norms influence the supply of the female labour force.

(1) Household duties:

The literature about India's female workforce points out that the problem of balancing household duties is one of the most dominant problems of Indian women (Mittal, 2023). Women in India

share an unreasonably large burden of household duties compared to the rest of the world (OECD, employment 2023). The disparity arises from patriarchal gender hierarchies that dictate that women should prioritize their domestic responsibilities over professional aspirations. A study by Chindarkar suggests that women in India spend an average of 7.2 hours on unpaid work, while men spend 2.8 hours (Express News Service, 2023). Chindarkar observes that since women are already stretched thin by balancing home and work life, they are less likely than men to join the labour force (Express News Service, 2023). This further perpetuates the social norms in society that continue to put the burden of household/domestic labour on women.

The article “Why are Indian women dropping out of the workforce at an alarming rate?” also confirms that work-life balance issues, gender norms, and socio-economic imbalances in India are leading to more women moving out of the workforce (Mittal, 2023).

We can conclude that gender norms have conditioned Indian households towards considering that household duties are a female-only domain. The lack of time Indian women have due to these responsibilities sets them at a considerable disadvantage even before they start working.

(2) Responsibility of Child Care and skewed gender norms at home:

Childcare is considered to be a women’s primary responsibility. A survey by the Foundation Strategy Group (FSG) reveals that 88% of women believe mothers could work outside the house, while 61% of key decision-makers don’t. (The key decision-maker is generally male—for 80% of married women, the husband is the key decision-maker, while for 54% of unmarried women, the father is the key decision-maker) (Goenka et al., 2023). The same survey also shows that women are unwilling to consider paid daycare because they believe childcare is primarily the mother’s responsibility (Goenka et al., 2023). This contradicts their belief that mothers should and can work outside the house. The survey finds that working mothers with children under 6 years rely on themselves or family to care for the child while they work. Additionally, a majority are unwilling to consider paid daycare in the future. In 75% of the cases where a mother wants to opt for paid daycare, the key decision-makers (usually fathers) would not give permission to do so. The survey also found that lack of affordability is not a key factor for not considering paid daycare (Goenka et al., 2023). The lack of interest in paid daycare leads to a higher strain on mothers to become the primary caregiver.

The division of childcare responsibilities between parents is greatly affected by gender norms in the home as is shown in the following study. The PEW Research Centre undertook a comprehensive survey on gender roles in Indian society. When surveyed on gender dynamics in the home, Indians, despite broadly aligning with global public opinion on equal rights for women, tend to be more conservative than people in most other countries surveyed when it

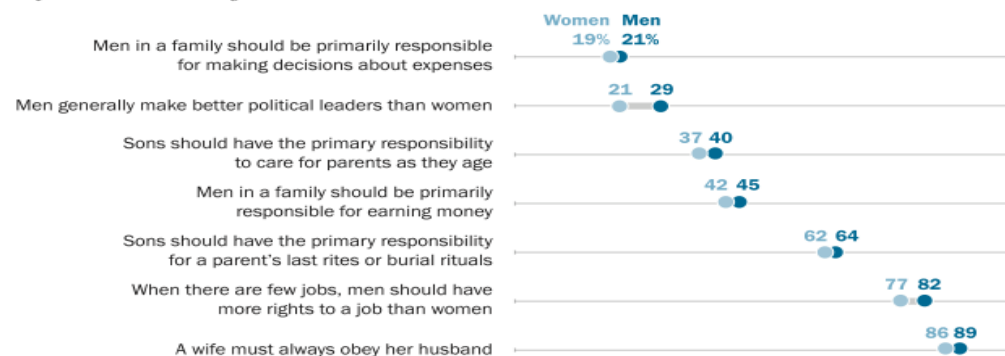
comes to gender dynamics in the home and in the economy (Pew Research Centre, 2022). As part of the Pew survey, respondents were asked “if a wife must always obey her husband.” 84% of women in the age group 18-34 and 87% of women of age 35+ responded that a wife must always obey her husband. Even amongst college-educated Indians, an overwhelming majority, about 80%, say that a wife must always obey her husband. When asked the question–“Which kind of marriage is more satisfying, one where the husband provides for the family and the wife takes care of the house and children, or one where the husband and wife both have jobs and together take care of the house and children?” Four-in-ten Indians prefer a traditional family dynamic, which is much higher when compared with a global median of 23% (Pew Research Centre, 2022). When asked about the statement, “When jobs are scarce, men should have more rights to a job than women,” a median of 17% of the global respondents (across 61 countries surveyed from 2013 to 2019) completely agreed with the statement. However, in India, the figure was roughly three times higher, at 55%.

Another concerning outcome of the survey was that there was a very small difference between men and women in India on gender attitudes (as shown in the image below). If this scenario is considered to be largely true for Indian society then one worrisome interpretation could be that Indian women accept their secondary status in society and do not wish to question it.

Through the aforementioned research it is evident that women bear a higher incidence of childcare duties in the home. This is due to a lack of access to and interest in paid daycare and through the proliferation of gender norms at home.

Small differences between men and women in India on gender attitudes

% of Indian adults who say ...



Note: Differences by gender are statistically significant. Muslims and Christians were asked about "burial rituals," all other respondents were asked about "last rites."

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 17, 2019-March 23, 2020, among adults in India. See Methodology for details.

"How Indians View Gender Roles in Families and Society"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: Pew Research Centre, “How Indians View Gender Roles in Families and Society”

An analysis of the above sources leads us to conclude that Indian men and even women prefer a traditional family dynamic in larger numbers than the global averages. This leads most families to consider childcare as a female-only job (Pew Research Centre, 2022).

(3) The attitude of key decision-makers towards working women:

Working women often find themselves lacking support, especially from key decision-makers. The FSG survey shows that 41% of key decision-makers in families with a working woman believe that women working outside the home care less about their families and homes (Goenka et al., 2023). A majority of the men in the household (usually key decision makers) would prefer if women worked from home or did a small business so that they could spend more time at home (Goenka et al., 2023).

We can conclude that if women in India have to work, they not only have to manage the dynamics at work and home but also deal with negative biases at home.

(4) 'Freedom of mobility' of women:

Denial of freedom to women is fundamental to maintaining the patriarchy in society. The FSG survey states, "Almost all women (84%) need to secure a family member's permission before deciding to work". The survey's findings further reveal that for 1 in 3 women (who are neither working nor seeking a job), the inability to secure permission, or the absence of a precedent in the community is one of the reasons for them not working (Goenka et al., 2023).

It is not just that women are burdened with household duties or are not allowed the freedom to work outside, but also that there are restrictions on their mobility. This is a very common phenomenon across the wide spectrum of Indian society. The 2011 Indian Human Development Survey shows that a very sizable fraction of Indian women say that they require permission from a family member even to go to the local market or health centre (Spend , 2017).

If women have to seek permission to move, then looking for a job is even more challenging and stacks the odds against them.

(5) Crimes against women:

Crimes against women is a strong deterrent to increasing FLFPR. The paper, "What is Keeping Women From Going to Work: Understanding Violence and Female Labour Supply" looks at the relationship between the two (Gupta, 2021). It presents a state-level analysis of how the lack of safety acts as a barrier to work for women and girls, and the extent to which crimes against women and girls can be associated with the sharp decline in female labour force participation rate. The paper concludes that on a national level, there is a low, albeit negative, correlation

between FLFPR and the crime against women and girls. A state-wide analysis of the data establishes that states with high FLFPR have a low rate of crime in comparison with other states.

An interesting aspect brought out by Gupta (2021) is that alcohol consumption by men and the level of male unemployment play a role in crimes against women. If unemployment increases for men, this could lead to an increase in violence against women, as there is backlash by men for women taking up jobs that could have employed men (Gupta, 2021).

The paper “Female Labour Force Participation and Crimes against Women: A Comparative Analysis” also concludes that a strong relationship between female labour force participation rate and the incidence of violence against women is observed in middle-income countries (Tanya, 2022).

Violence against women increases when men are threatened by women’s rising status and financial independence in order to confine women to their traditionally prescribed gender roles (Bhattacharya & Vora, 2023). The deterrent effect of crime is more in traditional societies, which attach higher values to the chastity of women (Chakraborty et al., 2018). Thus, research supports that crime against women is also an outcome of gender norms and that societal structure also has an impact on the relation between crime rate and women’s decision to take up employment.

Gender norms and their impact on the demand for female labour

After establishing that gender norms impact the supply of female labour force, we analyse the impact of gender norms on the demand for female labour by the enterprises. It is important to first understand a few aspects about job creation and employment levels in India. The first aspect to understand is that India’s development has not translated into corresponding employment generation, as it has been led by knowledge intensive service industry rather than labour intensive manufacturing. This phenomenon has often been referred to as ‘Jobless Growth” (Mehrotra, 2023). The second aspect to note is that rigid labour laws have led to a preference for automation in manufacturing in a country with labour surplus. Though the labour laws have been reformed recently, it needs to be seen how they will lead to more employment generation in general and women employment in particular. Employment in the manufacturing sector has fallen in the last five years from employing 51 million Indians in 2016-17 to 27.3 million in 2020-21 (Rathore, 2022) . This is directly linked with the availability of jobs for women, too. Even among women working in manufacturing, there is a sharp regional divide. Of the 1.6 million women workers across India, 680,000 (43 percent) were working in the factories of Tamil Nadu alone. In fact, 72 percent of all women working in industries were employed in the four southern states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala (Dhamija, 2023).

An analysis of the female employment in India reveals that gender norms limit the demand for female labour force in the enterprises. Gender norms lead to 1) biases towards female employment, 2) high wage gap and gender segregation, and 3) unfavourable hiring practices. 4) They are the reason for many challenges faced by female entrepreneurs. The paper analyses each of these below.

1) Biases towards women:

Many organisations feel there is no need to hire women when there are enough men available (Mittal, 2023). A survey by FSG reveals that there are five employer biases which restrict the employment of women (Goenka et al., 2023). These biases are described in the table below

Bias	
Motivation bias	The assumption on part of some employers is that a man will be the breadwinner in the family, and a woman need not earn.
Appropriateness bias	Some employers do not consider women for non-traditional job roles unless explicitly specified because they inherently believe the job to be unfit for women.
Performance bias	This highlights the belief that women are not as effective as men for the particular job role.
Affinity bias	This bias is evident when recruiters only reach out to men for candidate references and do not actively seek female candidate applications.
Safety bias	Companies feel that women need to be protected and, therefore, seek to ensure the safety of women by imposing restrictions on them.

Source: FSG Survey, (Growing Livelihood Opportunities for Women- GLOW), 2023

2) Presence of a high gender wage gap and gender segregation:

In Indian society, when women do go out to work, they are not given a fair wage (MOSPI, 2022). According to a recent survey by the National Statistical Office, there is a significant wage difference between men and women. The disparity is greater in urban areas than in rural areas. The national average wage received per day by casual workers for April to June 2022 was Rs. 393/day for rural male workers and Rs. 265/day for rural female workers. The corresponding figures for urban workers were Rs. 483/ day for males and Rs. 333/ day for females (MOSPI, 2022). States with the highest daily wage rates for rural males, namely Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh, also have the widest gender gap in wages, with female wages averaging less than 60% of male wages (MOSPI, 2022). Wage inequality between men and women for the same work is a global problem and the reason for these gaps lie in the inherent gender biases of the employers (Dwivedi, 2022). Moreover, women in India get clustered in low paying activities or to certain specific sectors especially in manufacturing. These being leather, apparel, and tobacco (Rampal, 2023).





3) Unfavourable hiring practices:

The FSG Survey points to many hiring practices which are unfavourable to women. Use of malecentric hiring messages and male friendly recruitment channels, excluding information valuable to women in recruitment messages, are some examples of unfavourable hiring practices (Goenka et al., 2023).

4) Problems faced by female entrepreneurs:

According to the FSG survey, in 2022, nearly 2 in 3 aspiring-to-work women prefer jobs over entrepreneurship (Goenka et al., 2023). Female entrepreneurs in India face substantial bias from their families and society. Still, there are about 15 million women-owned micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in India, over 70 percent of which are manufacturing enterprises (International Finance Corporation et al., 2022). The table below describes the different challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in India.

Challenges faced by women entrepreneurs

 SOCIAL BIASES AND CONDITIONING	 INABILITY TO ACCESS THE RIGHT KIND OF FINANCE	 LACK OF ACCESS TO NON-FINANCIAL SERVICES	 ACCOUNTING AND REGULATORY COMPLIANCE RELATED
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender bias in family and the business ecosystem • Limited opportunities to diversify sales channels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unsuitable credit products • Limited access to information about financial service providers • Discomfort with borrowing from formal sources • Insufficient support in accessing government schemes • Unconscious bias from credit providers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of advisory, child-care and networking support • Insufficient access to government-driven non-financial support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited exposure to accounting and regulatory best practices

Source: Opportunities and constraints of women owned very small enterprises in India, report by International Finance Corporation, 2022

Apart from facing different biases, these female-led enterprises also find it hard to raise capital from financial institutions and face a huge gendered credit gap (Garg, 2023). In India, women obtain credit equal to just 27% of the bank deposits they provide, compared to males who receive credit equal to 52% of their deposits (Garg, 2023). About 90 percent of women entrepreneurs in

India have not availed finance from formal financial institutions (International Finance Corporation et al., 2022). These enterprises are largely meeting their credit demands from microfinance institutions, which cannot lend more than INR 125,000 as per Reserve Bank of India guidelines. Government has launched many schemes to provides bigger loans to female entrepreneurs such as Mudra loans, Stree shakti yojana, Annapoorna scheme, DENA shakti scheme, Bhartiya Mahila business loan, Mahila Udyam Nidhi Yojna and Udyogini scheme. However, there is limited awareness about these schemes. Their benefits are limited due to inefficiencies in the scheme availing process and lack of information, guidance and documents needed to apply for a scheme (Microsave Consulting, 2022). Women-led MSME are not able to access debt capital from financial institutions because of unconscious gender bias, time poverty, among other areas (International Finance Corporation et al., 2022). Traditionally, women in India also face challenges regarding transfer of property titles, so they lag behind the males in furnishing collateral for their loan requirements (Garg, 2023).

Female labour in India and the problem of its measurement:

India's low female workforce scenario also entails a problem of measurement. A major chunk of women employed in family enterprises such as agriculture, livestock, fisheries, and kirana stores are not counted in the workforce while the men are. Also, Indian women are devoting a significant amount of time to domestic work. They are not being compensated for their labour, not being included in the labour force, and not formally contributing to the country's GDP. This does not show a true picture of the amount of work being done by the women in the country. A 2023 report by the State Bank of India suggests that unpaid women's total contribution to the economy is around INR 22.7 lakh crore—approximately 7.5 percent of India's GDP (State Bank Of India, 2023). In an interview with 'ThePRINT,' Deshpande of Ashoka University's Centre for Economic Data and Analysis (CEDA) claims that if household work is included in the labour force, then the figure would climb to 88%. She asserts that unpaid work is a huge freebie to the formally-employed workforce.

Policy makers are beginning to recognise this problem. For the first time, the National Economic survey of 2023 has recognised this predicament and revised estimates for FLFPR. However, even if the measurement methodology is fixed, most of India's female workforce would still be working informally as unpaid labour or earning minimal wages (Rampal N,2023).

Discussion

The constitution of India does not discriminate between men and women. As per the law, Indian women have similar economic rights to men. In fact, the Indian Government has undertaken many measures to bring women into the workforce such as improving credit availability for

women entrepreneurs, imparting skill training, and passing laws for the prevention of sexual harassment at the workplace. (Press Information Bureau, 2021). Considering the falling female workforce trends, these policies have had limited success because deep rooted gender norms and patriarchal societal structures are holding women back (Gupta, 2021). The Indian Government recognizes that in order to achieve the dream of India becoming a developed nation by 2047, it is imperative to get women into the workforce. For this, it needs to adopt a multi-pronged approach targeting three broad objectives:

Female employment generation: Generating sufficient avenues for female employment.

Changing social norms: Changing the mindset of people regarding female employment and creating a society conducive to female work.

Improving female well-being: Making sure that female employment translates into improving the lives of Indian women.

Female Employment Generation

Suggested measures	Ways to implement the measure
(1) Encourage labour intensive Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMES) / Female enterprises (in urban and rural areas)	Make financing schemes easily accessible - organise ‘Loan melas’ and workshops. Encourage and support financial institutions to launch special products targeted at MSME customers.
(2) Incentivise female employment by private enterprises	Reward employers who employ more than 50% women.
(3) Increase rural non-farm employment	Incentivise rural industrial development/
(4) Improve female employability	Improve digital literacy. Impart Job Specific skill training- Introduce schemes bringing vocational institutes and private enterprises together.
(5) Revisit Maternity Benefits (Amendment) Act 2017	Incorporate changes regarding paternity leave, work from home provisions for mothers as well as fathers.

(1) Encourage MSMES and female led enterprises:

For increasing female workforce participation, adequate job opportunities need to be created specifically for females. The government should encourage labour intensive industries and MSMES (Micro, Small, and Medium enterprises), especially female-led enterprises with a specific focus of employing more female workers. The challenges faced by these small enterprises, especially regarding securing credit, should be addressed. The government has launched many schemes targeting MSMES and female-led businesses. These financial schemes

should be made easily accessible both online and offline. Financial institutions and the government should organise loan fairs to spread awareness about these schemes. Lending institutions should develop lending schemes after understanding the needs of women-led enterprises. They should also provide support in completing the necessary documentation for availing these schemes, along with this, many female entrepreneurs find it difficult to provide collateral for loans because of difficulty in obtaining property titles (Jaswal, 2023). A favourable ecosystem regarding inheritance, asset ownership, and property transfer to women needs to be developed.

(2) Increase rural, non-farm employment:

Agriculture remains the main source of employment for rural women (Rampal N, 2023). Deshpande argues that in every nation, women were not historically in paid employment. Once women started to get into paid employment the norms began to change. She asserts, "The cycle needs to be broken at the point of provision of jobs. When women get out and start working in paid employment, norms will have to shift." She recommends increasing rural non-farm employment, "which is labour intensive, which is close to home, which women can access easily and it also pays more than the ... low paying, vulnerable, seasonal kind of agricultural employment" (Rampal N, 2023).

(3) Incentivise employers who employ female employees:

Provide incentives to enterprises with more than 50% female employees. For example, the government can offer to pay a certain part of the employer's contribution to the Public Provident Fund account if the enterprise employs more than 50% women.

(4) Improve the employability of women:

Along with generating enough employment, it is essential to impart necessary skill training for women so that they become strong contenders for job placements. It is also necessary to give them Internet and computer literacy to bridge the digital divide between men and women. The government has launched a 'National apprenticeship promotion scheme' in which it encourages apprenticeship opportunities and provides financial incentives to support employers and apprentices. Similar schemes should be devised for female employees and their training.

(5) Revisit Maternity Benefits (Amendments) Act 2017:

The act has provisioned for a paid maternity leave for 26 weeks to 12 weeks for first time and second time mothers respectively. This provision, though beneficial to women, can lead to bias towards hiring men (India Today, 2020). The act should provision for an equal paternity leave to

encourage equal sharing of the burden of childcare. It can provide for work from home for both parents.

Changing Social Norms

Suggested measures	Ways to implement the measure
(1) Start an aggressive, sustained campaign targeting all sections of the society	The campaign should target: Sharing the burden of household duties and childcare Improving the attitude towards working women Gender equality and respect for women
(2) Removing the biases in female hiring	Partner with industry organisations to conduct workshops targeting: recruiter biases in female hiring, benefits of hiring female employees
(3) Reducing gender wage gap	Make wages transparent, start industry specific dialogues about gender wage gap, sensitise employers about extra burden of childcare and household duties on women.

(1) Start a targeted campaign:

Employment generation and other economic policies need to be accompanied with a targeted campaign to break gender stereotypes and promote gender equality. Different campaigns must target:

- Sharing the household burden and childcare. A campaign encouraging members to share the household work burden is essential for women to come out of the trap of unbalanced household responsibilities. Such a campaign should not only target men but also women so that they are aware and feel that household work and childcare is a shared responsibility.
- Attitude towards working women: The attitude of the key decision makers and the society in general towards working women also needs to undergo a change through a sustained effort. Female employment needs to be looked at with pride rather than a compulsion forced upon by financial circumstances. Women achievers of the country need to be made part of this campaign.
- Gender equality and respect for women needs to be emphasised and lessons on these topics should be made a part of the school curriculum.

Such a campaign needs to be comprehensive and target all members of society. It needs to occur over a long period of time since these are age old norms and patriarchal structures are quite resistant to change. Government should involve different charitable organisations for this;

companies can also undertake such campaigns under their ‘Corporate Social Responsibility ’ initiatives.

(2) Removing the biases in female hiring:

Government should also partner with industry organisations to conduct workshops targeting recruiter biases in female hiring and spreading awareness about the benefits of hiring female employees.

(3) Reducing gender wage gap:

Industry organisations should also be engaged to discuss ways to reduce the gender wage gap in their specific industries. Policies need to be devised to sensitise organisations towards extra burden put on women because of childcare and household responsibilities. Wages need to be made more transparent.

Improving Female Well-being

A rise in female employment must also translate into improving the lives of Indian women. It is necessary that steps be taken to make the women of the country safe and economically independent.

Suggested measures	Ways to implement the measure
Safety of women (1)	Deterring crime against women: <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Create fear of law: sensitise the opposite gender about the consequences of crime against women● Make the redressal system female friendly● Safer public transportation systems and ensuring last mile connectivity
Financial independence (2)	Train women to open and operate their own accounts and manage their own finances

(1) Safety of women:

Violence against women is a significant deterrent to increasing female workforce participation. There are strong laws in place for ensuring the safety of women at all levels of society including at the workplace such as Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment (POSH Act) and Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO Act). These laws are unfortunately of little use if women are not aware of them or if they do not have access to redressal mechanisms. Timely delivery of justice is another issue. The ‘Impediments in Empowerment’ report by Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI, 2022) suggests, “To bring down

violence and crime rate, it is of utmost importance that the perpetrator is punished and timely. It is aptly said that justice delayed is justice denied.” The Supreme Court, as well as the government of India, have recognized the delay in justice in such cases (Gupta, 2021). In this context, it is imperative to create a fear of the law in the opposite sex. School and university curricula should include matters such as respect for women, legal rights of women and children. There should be public campaigns (including at schools) highlighting the consequences of sexual harassment and crime against women. A reliable and safe public transportation system with last mile connectivity is another prerequisite for increasing female labour participation. Women should be able to safely access employment avenues. The government can extend the reach of ‘women only’ buses along with feeder services.

(2) Make women financially independent:

A big incentive for women to join the workforce would be economic freedom. Women should be encouraged to open their own bank accounts and should be provided basic training to operate their own accounts and finances.

Conclusion

India wishes to reach the status of a developed country by 2047, as this will be their 100th year of independence. In order to achieve this, it is essential that Indians irrespective of gender contribute to the economy. Female labour force participation in India has seen a consistent decline since 2005 despite the rise in GDP of India. This paper investigates if gender norms and societal structures in India are the primary reason behind India’s falling female workforce. The investigation encompasses factors affecting both the demand and supply of female labour. It was found that India does not follow the conventional U-shaped relationship between female labour and economic development. The paper concludes that female labour in India is impacted largely by gender norms which affects both the demand and supply of female labour. A disproportionate burden of household duties and childcare, unfavourable attitudes towards working women, restrictions on women’s mobility, skewed gender roles in family, and a high incidence of crime against women and girls are the chief reasons for India’s falling workforce. Gender norms also negatively impact the demand for female labour. Gender segregation in industries, employer biases towards females, the gender wage gap, lack of awareness about benefits of employing females, and an unfavourable environment for female entrepreneurship are the key reasons resulting in low demand for female workers from the industry.

The paper recommends three key areas in order to raise the level of female employment in India. These are: (1) **female employment generation** to create sufficient avenues for female employment; (2) **changing social norms** to change the mindset of people regarding female

employment, and creating a society conducive to female work; and (3) **improving female well-being** by making sure that female employment translates into improving the lives of Indian women. The Indian constitution provides women an equal status as men; the legal framework of the country also provides multiple laws to uplift the status of women in the society, so the problem and the solution to India's low female workforce both lie in the society itself.

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