



Empowering Her Influence: Sparking Change in the Workforce Dynamics

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This paper explores the evolution of women's quest for equal rights and opportunities, this paper underscores persistent challenges in workforce participation. Women represent about 49.6% of the world's population. However, only 47% of females are engaged in the workforce. For men, the figure is 72%, which is 25% higher than that for women. In many underdeveloped countries the gap is more than 50% (International Labour Organization). In India, the female population is 48% but only 25% of them are engaged in work and it is among the lowest for emerging economies.

Despite progress in voting rights and education, gender discrimination remains a significant hurdle, especially in underdeveloped nations like India. The examination of COVID-19's impact on female job losses exposes a striking disparity, emphasizing the urgent need to address gender-based wage and opportunity discrimination contributing to the decline in female labour force participation rates in India. The discussion on urban-rural variations and the exclusion of women in household work highlights the untapped economic potential if unpaid labour were duly valued. The vulnerability of marginalized groups, such as sex workers during the pandemic, is revealed. The paper concludes by advocating the reduction of the gender gap in the workforce, stressing potential economic benefits. While acknowledging government initiatives, it underscores the imperative of effective implementation, safe working environments, and the promotion of female role models. Emphasizing the significance of a gendered budget and inclusive policymaking, the article envisions a more optimistic future for female labour force participation in India.

Keywords: Women's Quest, Workforce Participation, Gender Discrimination, COVID-19 Impact, Gender Gap Reduction, Inclusive Policymaking, Economic Disparity, Women's Empowerment

From the first feminist wave onward, women's conquest for equal rights and opportunities has evolved dramatically. From voting rights to equal opportunity at work, women have struggled for equality and against oppression for centuries. Even though many battles have been partly won - such as the right to vote and equal access to education, women are still lagging when it comes to their participation in the workforce. Women have come a long way.

Women represent about 49.6% of the world's population. However, only 47% of females are engaged in the workforce. For men, the number is 72% which is 25% more than for females. In many underdeveloped countries the gap is more than 50% (International Labour Organization). In India, the female population is 48% but only 25% of them are engaged in work and it is among the lowest for emerging economies.

According to the report by Oxfam, Even, if a Man and a woman start on the same level, the woman will be discriminated against in the economic sphere where she will lag in regular/salaried, casual, and self-employment. Amitabh Behar, CEO of Oxfam India said that "for every woman, 98% of discrimination faced is because of their

gender, and the rest 2% is because of their education and background.” Thus this shows that the low participation is mainly because of gender discrimination. During COVID-19, many women were laid off worldwide and in India. According to a recent report by the Center for Sustainable Employment at Azim Premji University in India, only 7% of men lost their jobs during the first lockdown in 2020, while 47% of women lost their jobs and did not return to work by the end of the year. Women performed even worse in the informal sector. Between March and April of the year, 2021, rural Indian women working informal jobs were responsible for 80% of job losses.

If we look for more trends, it suggests that female labour force participation rates in India have been perplexing. It was 34.1 per cent in 1999-00, 42.7 per cent in 2004-05, 27.2 per cent in 2011-12, and 25% in 2021-22(Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) annual report). This significant decline indicates the withdrawal of women from the workforce despite rapid economic growth is due to gender discrimination in wages and opportunities. Wages are lower for women 83 per cent because of discrimination and 17 per cent due to lack of education and work experience(according to the latest report by Oxfam).

However, there are considerable variations between urban and rural areas. A recent study by the Union Labour Ministry, states that the female labour force participation rate (in percentage) of rural women was 24.6% in 2018-19, it was 26.4% in 2019-20, it was 33% and in 2020-21 it was 36.5%, whereas the urban figure was 20.4% in 2017-18, 20.4% in 2018-19, 23.3% in 2019-20, and 23.2% in 2020-21. Rural women are less educated, unskilled, and low productive, whereas urban women are more educated, skilled, and productive and have a higher probability of getting employment. This is satiric to see that urban females account for a lesser share of the female workforce as compared to their rural areas. This is because:-

- Women in rural areas work in agriculture, which doesn't require a lot of training or expertise.
- Rural women work low-paying jobs just to make ends meet and support their families because of poverty.

In India, the decision to work by the female members rests on the family's decision rather than her individual decision. Although the literacy rate of females is improving it has to get much better before urban females account for a higher share of the total female workforce.

According to the India Exclusion Report, Women are among the most excluded groups in India. 43% of women are restricted to household work while others who are working in the formal or informal sector are exploited, discriminated against, and working on much lower wages

Generally, household work is not considered productive and is often neglected, leaving women at a severe disadvantage. Apart from cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children and elderly family members, Indian women also perform unpaid work in family businesses and low-paid labour in factories in the informal sector, where they are discriminated against and paid less than men.

Mckinsey's report says that women from historically marginalized groups are particularly vulnerable to exploitative labour arrangements because of their social status and poverty, requiring them to perform low-paying jobs. It also states that women in India perform almost ten times as much unpaid labour as men, which is much higher than the global average. As a result, they are unable to contribute to the economy and are excluded from the formal workforce. India's economy would grow by \$300 billion annually if that work were valued and compensated in the same way as paid work.

Among the most vulnerable are those girls who are forced into sex work before they reach puberty. Discrimination against sex workers and women in dangerous occupations like construction and mining is common. If lower-caste Dalit women attempt to stop cleaning faeces from open drains and dry toilets, they face threats of violence, eviction, and wage withholding threats.

A recent study on sex workers in India, by the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO), looked at 27,007 women who worked as sex workers in 28 states and Union Territories. The results showed that most girls in Delhi start working as sex workers when they are 14 years old, and most of them just survive the work. The top three cities in the country where women in the trade have no other source of income are West Bengal, Delhi, and Chandigarh. However, sex workers also worked in other fields in states like Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Manipur, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu.

Overnight, Covid-19 brought an end to the entire sex worker community. The most marginalised, deprived, and invisible population of our nation was also forgotten and left to fate during the pandemic, making them the most vulnerable working females.

Thus, for the betterment of females, it is important to narrow down the gender gap in the workforce. When more women join the workforce, everyone benefits. This will boost bigger growth as women will bring new skills to the workplace, and the productivity and growth gains from including women in the labour force (by reducing barriers to women's participation in the labour force). A recent study by the World Economic Forum states that GDP could rise by an average of 35% by closing the gender gap.

On this Independence Day, Our PM also said *“The more opportunities we give to women the more we will reap the benefits from their contribution. In the coming 25 years, I see a large contribution of the women of the country.”*

The Indian government has taken numerous steps to increase women's employment opportunities and workforce participation. The labour laws have included several safeguards to ensure that women workers have equal access to opportunities and a pleasant work environment. These include increasing paid maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks, making it mandatory for businesses with 50 or more employees to have a crèche, allowing women to work night shifts with adequate safety precautions, and other similar provisions.

Following the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976, which has been incorporated into the Code on Wages of 2019, there shall be no gender-based wage discrimination in an establishment or any unit thereof for employees performing the same or similar work for the same employer. In addition, unless the employment of women in such work is prohibited or restricted by or under any law for the time being in effect, no employer may discriminate based on sex when recruiting employees for the same job or work of a similar nature in terms of employment conditions. Through a network of Women Industrial Training institutes, National Vocational Training Institutes, and Regional Vocational Training Institutes, the government is providing training to female workers to improve their employability.

Therefore, for the government to put these policies into effect and increase the number of women employed, formal or informal, women must be provided with the appropriate benefits and a risk-free working environment. Policymakers must devise strategies to diversify jobs to guarantee that educated women make up a significant portion of the workforce and that skilling programs are successful in generating employment in urban areas. The stigmas and insecurities associated with women working would be greatly reduced by promoting female role models and creating a safe, clean, and healthy work environment. Female labor force participation in India could become a more optimistic goal if these issues were included in a gendered budget and policy-making process.