

## **A Comprehensive Analysis of Indian Women Labour Participation: Policy Recommendation for Growth and Inclusivity**

Dr. Maneesha Pandey,  
Associate Professor,  
Department of Political Science,  
Hindu College, University of Delhi, Delhi, India PIN: 110007  
Email: [pandeymaneesha@gmail.com](mailto:pandeymaneesha@gmail.com)

Received: February 11, 2022

Accepted: March 5, 2022

Online Published: March 24, 2022

### **Abstract**

In an economy that has faced unprecedented challenges due to the ongoing pandemic, the participation of women in the labour workforce has faced umpteen setbacks. The already declining trend in India's women workforce participation faced further downtrend as the boundaries between rural and urban, men and women; increased. In practice, the gender as well as rural-urban divide became more stark in both organized and unorganized sectors of employment that led to inequality in the labour market.

**Keywords:** women labour participation, pandemic, unorganized sector, organized sector, policy recommendations

**Contribution/Originality:** Not integrating the entire data of both organized and unorganized sectors in calculating the Indian women labour participation percentage resulted in important loss of granularity. This also misleads the statistics; a point this paper wishes to illustrate with the decline in female labour force participation.

### **Introduction**

In the growth of any nations' economy, women play a pivotal role in development, including higher contribution to children's education and health. A critical issue in developing countries is to empower women. The potential of women contributors to socio-economic growth and development has been accepted worldwide. It is a well-known fact and as stated in the World Development Reports on Gender and Jobs, women with paid and rewarding jobs are considered

not only as an integral part of any society, they also contribute in economic activities and decision-making at their household level. There is a need to recognize the significant role of women in the tremendous progress of the states' economy. Unfortunately, among the data available for 131 countries, India has one of the lowest female participation rates in the world and ranked at 120. Amongst the eight South Asian countries, it holds sixth position, just above Pakistan and Afghanistan (Chaudhary & Verick, 2014).

The Indian government has laid in a series of policies for the recognized women labour. But the lacuna in the policy is that the unregulated women sector who are the driving force behind the economy of the nation are not recognized. However, the Indian government has well-defined policies for recognized women labour (labour.gov.in). The constitution of India confers upon its citizens; both men and women, the fundamental right to ensure equality before the law and equal protection of law (Part III). Articles 14, 15, 15 (3), 16, 39 (a,b,c) and 42 enlisted in the constitution are specifically important. To name a few, Article 14 provides equality before law for women and special provisions in favour of women and children are stated clearly in Article 15 (3) (wcd.nic.in). On similar lines, men and women also enjoy the equal right to an adequate means of livelihood [Article 39 (a)] and Article 39 (d) bestows on its citizens' equal pay for both men and women for equal work. However, article 42 enables the state to provide security for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief (wcd.nic.in).

The Indian state has also incorporated certain policies and acts which are as follows:

1. Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006
2. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 (28 of 1961) (Amended in 1986)
3. The Dowry Prohibition Rules
4. Guidelines governing the Adoption of Children 2011
5. National Policy for the Empowerment of Women 2001

6. The Pre-Conception & Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act (Prohibition of Sex-section), 1994 and amendments
7. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005
8. Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986
9. Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012
10. The National Policy for Children, 2013
11. Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013
12. The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013
13. Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017
14. Compensation Scheme for Women Victims/Survivors of Sexual Assault/other Crimes - 2018

Government of India recent initiatives for social, economic and political growth are:

- To ensure the protection, survival and education of the girl child: Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)
- To empower rural women with opportunities for skill development and employment: Mahila Shakti Kendra (MSK).
- To ensure the safety and security for working women: Working Women Hostel (WWH).
- To empower girls in the age group 11-18 and to improve their social status through nutrition, life skills, home skills and vocational training: Scheme for Adolescent Girls.
- To facilitate a link between police and community in States/UTs for women in distress: Mahila Police Volunteers (MPV).
- To provide micro-credit at concessional terms to poor women for various livelihood and income generating activities: Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK).

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- To ensure that women take up gainful employment through providing a safe, secure and stimulating environment to the children: The National Crèche Scheme.
  - To provide maternity benefit to pregnant and lactating mothers: Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandna Yojna.
  - To provide housing under the name of the woman: Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana.
  - To enable a large number of Indian youth including women to take up industry-relevant skill training in securing a better livelihood: Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY).
  - To create opportunities for women in skill development, leading to market-based employment: Deen Dayal Upadhyay National Urban Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NULM).
  - To empower women and protect their health by providing LPG cylinders free of cost: Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana.
  - To economically empower the girls by opening their bank accounts: Sukanya Samridhi Yojna (SSY).
  - To impart skill development to women artisans engaged in coir Industry: Skill Upgradation & Mahila Coir Yojna (MSME programme).
  - To generate self-employment opportunities through establishment of micro-enterprises in the non-farm sector: Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP).
  - To promote female entrepreneurship, the Government has initiated Programmes like Stand-Up India and Mahila e-Haat (online marketing platform to support women entrepreneurs/SHGs/NGOs), Entrepreneurship and Skill Development Programme (ESSDP). Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY) provides access to institutional finance to micro/small businesses.

All the above policies constituted by the government of India are already in place and well-structured but despite this, the data on women labour participation in both organized and unorganized sectors are extremely skewed. It has been noted that the female labour force participation rate (LFPR) in India has declined for several decades. Overall women's participation in the labour workforce fell from 30.2% of the working-age population in 1990 to 15.8% in 2020, a dramatic downtrend (Figure 1). Participation of Indian women in the labour force has declined due to certain other reasons like "voluntary withdrawal from labour force". In recent years, the

focus of academia research is on the “income effect” that explains that mostly women opt out of jobs due to higher family income and they prefer household work; largely it can be argued as a ramification of strong patriarchal society. Also, the families have shrunk into nuclear setups and there is no institutional support for child care. Hence, supply-side factors emphasised in recent research work have corroborated with the above arguments that are causes for the recent decline in India's female LFPR. The central argument of this paper is to understand the extent and the nature of women's work and also their contribution to the nation’s GDP. In addition, women carry the multi-fold burden of their domestic responsibilities; yet are unable to meet their daily household expenses.

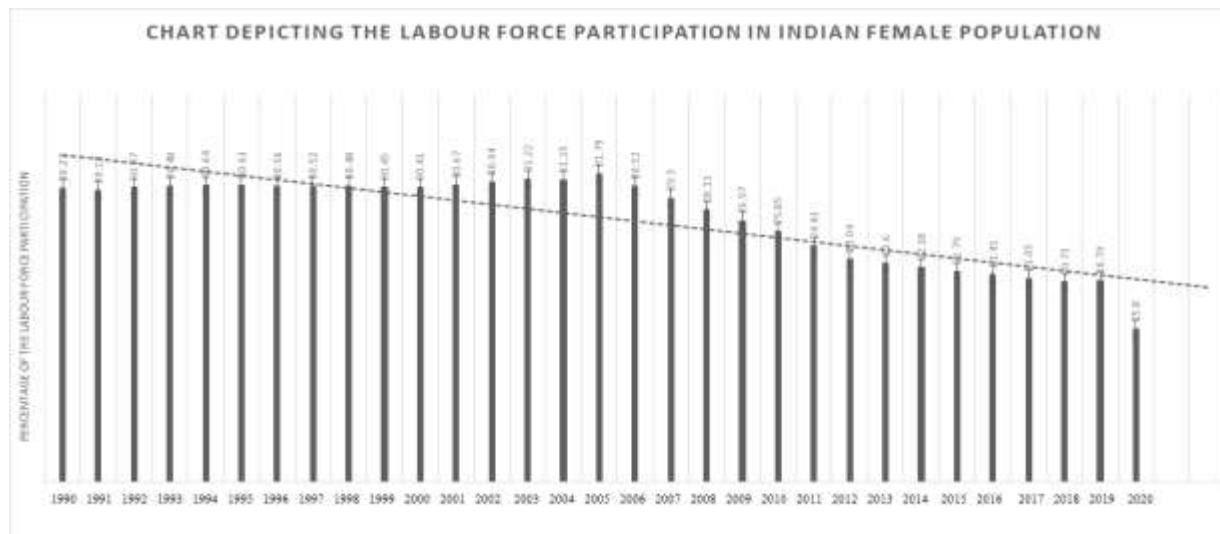


Figure 1: The chart depicting the linear downtrend of Indian women labour force participation of three decades.

Source: [https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/India/Female\\_labor\\_force\\_participation/](https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/India/Female_labor_force_participation/)

### **Declining trend in workforce participation of women in the organized sector**

The involvement of the women in the process of development and growth is highly complex and is indicated by the potential of their participation. The women labour force participation across the developing countries varies considerably more than men. Less than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of women in the working age participate in North Africa and South Asia and are around 2/3<sup>rd</sup> in East Asia and Sub-

Saharan Africa. In the developing countries the market gender gaps are more prominent; besides a wide range of social and economic factors such as economic growth, falling fertility rates etc.

In India, the female labour force participation has been inexplicable. In 1999-2000, the female participation rate which was 34.1% came down to 27.2% in 2011-2012. However, there are a number of variations in the urban and rural sectors. As per the National Sample Survey (NSS), the data for the past two decades' participation rate of urban women has shown a minimal increase i.e from 14.7% in 1999-2000 to 16.1% in 2018-2019 whereas; the rate of rural women's participation showed a downward trend from 30.2% in 1999-2000 to 19.7% in 2018-2019 (Figure 2).

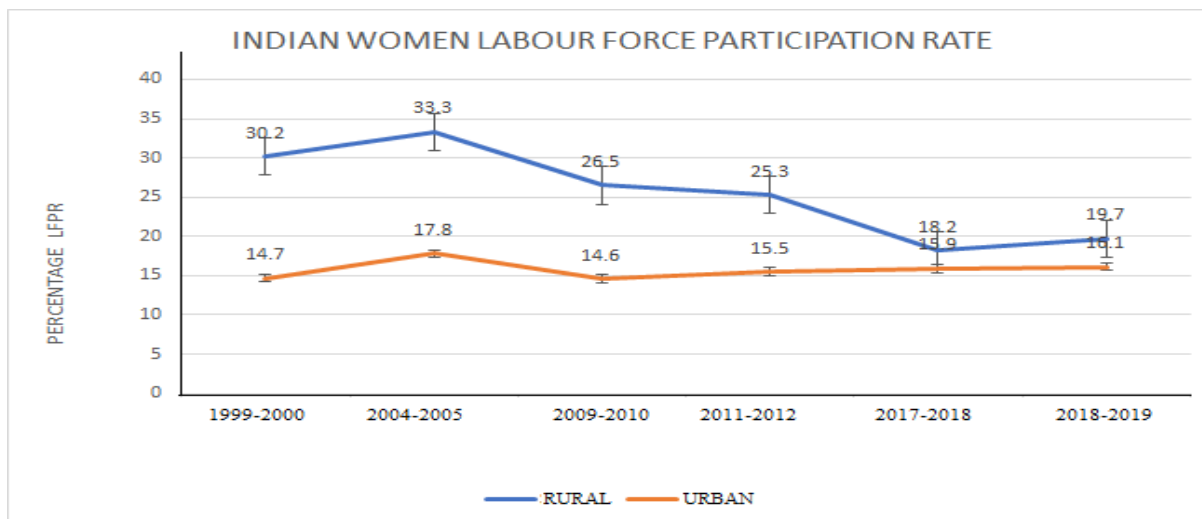


Figure 2: The chart showing the urban-rural gap of women labour force participation in India.

Source: Data from published reports of NSSO's employment-unemployment surveys (EUS) and Annual Reports of PLFS by Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI).

The study highlighted a continuous downswing trend in the participation rate of rural areas while it shows a steady increase in the urban sectors. Another observation from the data revealed that the number of working rural women is constantly declining. Also, as compared to the 1999-2000 survey, the rural women are more likely to be in the subsidiary or in the marginal employment, i.e., if at all they are working.

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### **Reasons for low participation of women force in organized sector**

It is often argued that the ability and the decision of women to participate in the labour force depends on a number of social and economic factors. The complexity of factors such as educational attainment, fertility rates and the age of marriage, economic growth and many more reveal the role of women at both household and macro level. And most importantly, India's urbanization trend is also to be kept in mind in order to understand the women workforce participation. According to Chatterjee and Sircar (2021), urbanization has led to less labour opportunities for women who are mostly engaged in agriculture. These women are usually unwilling to enter the labour market as most women's willingness to work encompasses societal expectations and domesticity. Nonetheless, most of the rural women engage in sporadic marginal jobs that are neither steady nor involve an employer. Thus assessing the workforce participation among these women becomes more challenging. This paper also aims to highlight this observed decline in female LFPR due to "measurement artefact" and should actually be termed as an "increase in unemployment". Another reason for worry is the non-availability of other employment opportunities, even if the number of farming jobs has been shrinking, especially in the rapidly-expanding areas which are an interface between neither truly rural nor fully urban (Chatterjee, Murgai and Rama 2015a, b). And when the pandemic struck, half the decline in female LFPR was not only due to changes in the composition of the available jobs but also the scarcity of jobs related to farming.

### **Impact of pandemic on women workforce**

The past year unleashed unprecedented challenges and overwhelmed everyone socially and economically. People from all walks of life were severely impacted by COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown but this impact has been unforgiving for women and girls. Women working in low-wage services in factories and industrial set-ups were indiscriminately laid off during the pandemic. Even the so-called Pink-jobs in the education and health sector also witnessed laying off of the women workforce. Women also bore the burden of caregiving to their families during the pandemic, so most did not bother to return back to work or search for new jobs. The disruptions to day-care centres, schools, and afterschool programs have been particularly

hard on working mothers as they couldn't focus on hours of work outside their home and leaving their jobs entirely in response. Centre for monitoring Indian economy (CMIE) and Centre for Economic data and Analysis (CEDA) showed 22.1% fewer employed women in 2021 than 2019; wherein 9.52 million women searched for jobs in 2019 which declined to 6.52 million in 2021. This steady waning of women's workforce is observed in both rural and urban sectors where a decline of 33.7% was observed among urban women seeking jobs and 23.5% less was seen in rural India from 2019 to 2021. The reasons for such urban-rural divide can be attributed to COVID-19 which has upended the labour market, with disastrous consequences for working women and their families. As the pandemic continues, women will endure an inconsistent share of its encumbrance. Though there has been a marginal recovery in the labour market after two years of the pandemic; with reappearance of any other variant, low-wage jobs will be the first to disappear. Moreover, women who were fortunate to keep their jobs, continue to balance competing priorities. Those who can work from home have to manage both with inaccessible childcare and must also care for, or help teach their children. Those who cannot afford telework and must show up physically to work, have the potential health risks of virus exposure to themselves and their families.

### **Declining trend in workforce participation of women in the unorganized sector**

The National Sample Survey data shows very low work participation by women in the unorganized sector despite the initiatives being undertaken by the government. The rate of female participation is only around 15% in the urban areas as per the 2011 census. Therefore, the women workers and their contribution remains invisible statistically. Despite women carrying multiple responsibilities of domestic duties and other chores, they are unable to meet their daily expenses. However, much of their work is undocumented and unregulated by data collection agencies which excludes them to get benefits of Sustainable Development Growth (SDG -8) for productive employment.

An attempt is made to investigate why women workforce participation is under-reported in the economic and non—economic output. It raises a pertinent question as to why the data is unable to apprehend the work of womenfolk and is unaccounted. The gap between the existing circumstances and the actual productive employment needs to be bridged so that women workforce



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can contribute for development. The ground reality and the official statistics have to correspond with each other regarding women's work. The estimate of poverty parameter has been critiqued umpteen number of times in India for not being able to provide a crisp analysis of the situation. The status of people in the poverty slab is unacceptably high, both in the urban and rural areas which leads to deprivations. While the majority of the poor population in India is concentrated in the rural areas, the proportion of the urban poor has increased rapidly. Inadequate access to housing and shelter, health and education, water, sanitation and social security are some of the acute problems that are faced by the urban poor. Apart from these deprivations, women's work burden aggravates due to gender disparities. As far as poverty in India is concerned, it is concentrated in some occupational groups and spatial locations. The intensity of poverty is clearly visible in the slums and in remote villages (Mehta & Shah, 2001; Bhide & Mehta, 2004).

### **Reasons for low participation of women force in unorganized sector**

There are a couple of reasons for low statistical invisibility of women participation. A strong male bias appears to be one of the primary causes of under reporting of women's work. The contribution of women in the family-based occupations such as agriculture, animal husbandry, weaving etc. is still unrecognized. The status of women further worsens as the women have a tendency to project themselves as "only housewives".

A survey conducted by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) observed that the census takers did not pose any question to the women and simply assumed that they did not work. Only 4 women out of 1000 households were asked any questions about their work status in the past one year (SARH and SCOPE 1996). The classification of women's work and their participation becomes all the more difficult due to their fragmentary participation. Their contribution is always at the less visible stage because they indulge in the processing and pre-marketing strategy. Another argument is that the women in Indian rural setup take part in a number of labour activities and classification of women's work becomes very challenging (Jain & Chand, 1982).

The 1988, Shramshakti Report observed that the personal contribution of women becomes undetectable since it merges with that of the family (Government of India. Shramshakti report (1988). This was restated in 1989 by Duvvury who observed that the majority of Indian rural women are involved in the manual labour in agriculture, cultivation and participate in the pre-and post-harvest activities at home. Yet, their contribution remains undocumented and unseen. The distinction between the economic and the non-economic activities is rarely clear since most of the women work in the non-market sector (Krishnaraj, 1990). In India and in most of the developing nations, women bracket themselves as “only housewives”, even if they are economically sound. The burden of “domestic responsibilities” of women underestimate the economically productive content of their work.

### **Impact of pandemic on informal women workforce**

Majority of India’s female workforce either work as daily-wage agricultural labourers or at construction sites or are self-employed in home-based production thus, mostly are involved in the informal sector. The emaciated economic conditions enforced by the pandemic lockdown further led to women losing their jobs in the informal sector. Women running roadside tea-stalls or selling goods at weekly markets almost lost their earnings. A complete halt of construction work and no access to markets to sell agricultural produce resulted in a sharp decline in their income (Institute of Social Studies Trust, 2020). There are others who worked as a large part of the labour force in industries like fashion, beauty, house-keepings and events, also faced severe layoffs. A survey across 12 states recorded that two-thirds lost their jobs, and those who could retain their jobs either received half the salary or no salary during the pandemic (Azim Premji University, 2020). Surprisingly, there is no difference among both rural and urban women when it comes to division of domestic work. It has been noted that within the age bracket of 15-59 years, 92% of women spend 5-6 hours daily doing domestic and caregiving unpaid work as opposed to 30-40 minutes of 29% of men indulging in household chores. In India, women's work preferences are largely influenced by the patriarchal biases and traditional gender roles that further extend socio-economic constraints on their ability to look out for opportunities of paid work. A global research has already stated that a two-hour unpaid labour undertaken by women leads to a decrease from 60% to 50%

participation rate in women's labour force (Ferrant et al., 2014). Therefore, government organizations, economists, grass root leaders and the policymakers, all are trying to gauge the extent of impact on women workforce during pandemic. Considering the effect of pandemic on the overall women labour participation; a bid to chart out a gender responsive recovery plan is laid taking in account women labour force in both formal and informal sector (iwwage.org).

### **Policy recommendations for inclusivity and economic growth**

As mentioned earlier that if working women are left unaccounted and undocumented, they will fail to avail the benefits of SDG-8 of productive employment. According to the 2011 census, the estimated worker population ratio (WPR) has improved over a period of time but microstudies have revealed that there remains a huge gap in WPRs estimated by the census and the NSS. Henceforth, it is strongly suggested that the census takers and the NSS should find out whether the women's contribution has been recorded along with the work of the male members. Women engaged in home-based work such as making golgappas, vadi, papad, dolls, torans and snacks for the male members to be sold in the market should be recorded as workers by the census and the NSS. If women working in the self-help groups (SHGs) are contributing to the family income, they should be made part of the appropriate census and also should be recorded in the NSS (Mehta & Pratap, 2020).

Globally, the gap between male and female labour force participation has reduced over the past years, but still gender-differences exist across nations. To close this gender gap, fiscal policy is a powerful tool. Yet, there is minimal knowhow on the route through which fiscal policy addresses gender inequality. For policymakers to design effective and sustainable gender-responsive fiscal policies, it is important to understand the long-term effects of fiscal policy on gender inequality, the transmission channels, and possible interactions with macroeconomic and social variables (Fruttero et al 2020). Indian states that adopted pro-female fiscal policies resulted in higher primary school enrolment and made more progress on gender equality than those that have not adopted such policies (Stotsky and Zaman 2016).

Other recommendations regarding policy decisions in developing and low-income countries should centre on female education and building infrastructure (including electricity, roads, water and sanitation) that reduces the time women spend on household and caregiving work (Jayachandran 2021). There is no doubt that education to women will provide greater opportunities to female labour force participation in low-income countries (Heath and Jayachandran 2016). Similarly, significant increase is seen on the entry into the labour market with substantial expansion and access to better infrastructure services. In rural India, better access to roads and more frequent bus service have raised female labour force participation (Lei, Desai, and Vanneman 2019). An improved access to water is also correlated with a less burden of unpaid nonmarket work, freeing up women's time to participate in income-generating activities (Koolwal and van de Walle 2013).

In low-income countries like India, the government should transfer cash to poor (low-skilled) women in the labour force so that it has an immediate positive impact on poverty and inequality. Though, it might not substantially increase worker productivity, but still help women to enter the labour market. Also, subsidizing child care and paid maternity leave may help in boosting female labour force participation.

## **Conclusion**

Female labour force participation rate is 23.41 % in India which is at a dismal 171<sup>th</sup> rank among 180 countries worldwide. This rank must not be compared internationally and should not be regarded as economic to determine women's activities; as India has diverse social, legal, cultural and demographic regions. Moreover, most rural women work on farms and family activities without pay, some work near their homes mixing both farm and household chores. However, the data available has not emphasized the participation of women involved in varied economic activities for their families' survival. Also, the data is unable to encapsulate the lack of work-life interface in women's lives. Hence, these should be treated as significant policy concerns by the government. By 2030, the SDGs should propose the achievement of full and productive employment, of both men and women, specially-abled persons and more importantly equal pay for work of equal value. Further, the areas of women's work should be identified for technological

enhancement and innovation, so that women earn better according to their skill, education and productivity; at par with men.

ILO has always promoted higher women labour participation as it is imperative for any nation's economic growth. It has been estimated that reducing the gender gap by 25% can uplift global GDP to 3.9 % by 2025 (ILO 2017). According to Cuberes and Teignier (2016), women's economic empowerment directly impacts not only labour force output but also higher domestic income. Gender parity and improved women workforce reduces income inequality and poverty by approximately 10 points as estimated by the current Gini coefficient (Gonzales et al., 2015). Thus, a robust boost in overall productivity can be achieved through greater participation of women in the labour force as it fosters new ideas of innovation, production and management.

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