



Female Labour Force Participation and Trends in India: An analysis of 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

Female labor force involvement drives growth, hence rates of participation show if a nation has the capacity to expand more quickly. The link between the presence of women in the labor force and more general development results is complicated, though. Rising female education levels and declining fertility have not led to increased employment rates for women. It is essential to understand the nature of the variables influencing women's employment in order to guide governmental approaches in resolving the problem. Despite India's strong economic growth and the demographic dividend's advantages, data from the National Statistics Office (NSO), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) show a fall in female labor force participation. In light of country's swift economic growth, it's challenging to explain this reduction in terms of economic factors. Female labor market participation may be being delayed due to age and cohort considerations, educational advantages, or advantages due to time and place.

Introduction:

In India, there is a direct link between female work and female empowerment. Over the years, there have been significant challenges with female employment and empowerment. The improvement in India's economy had a considerable impact on women's lives and, in turn, on the employment of women. Through its biannual labor force survey and national household survey, the National Statistics Office

(NSO), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), provides information on the employment position of women in India. Without a doubt, India's female labor force participation (FLFPR) rate has persistently declined below the global average of 47%, which reflects the proportion of women who are working or actively seeking employment. But the admirable reality is that over the years, women's emancipation has propelled female employment to new heights. Although it still falls short of the worldwide average, it has been getting better over time. According to most recent Periodic Labour Force Survey for 2021–22, India's FLFPR for the prime working age group (15 years and older) has significantly grown and is now 32.8%. India's female LFPR has been trending upward due to structural modifications in their lives, such as a drop in fertility rates and an increase in women's education. Number of women in labor force in India has increased to one third.

For a nation to thrive inclusively and sustainably, women must participate in labor force and access to quality jobs. Greater female employment is beneficial to the economy as a whole on a macro level. In India, the proportion of working women has been continuously increasing over time. Despite the fact that the proportion of women in the work force is lower than the global average, it is noticeably rising. On the other hand, it is impossible to ignore the different socio-economic elements that have an impact on women's labor force participation. There are still many barriers standing between women and the workforce, and they experience a disproportionate amount of challenges when it comes to access to employment, job choice, working conditions, job security, wage parity, discrimination, and balancing work and family obligations.

Demographic changes have a tremendous influence on the labor force participation rate, which has greatly affected India's economy recently. The most recent employment and unemployment data from the National data Office (NSO), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), show a worrying trend in the labor force participation rate (LFPR). Overall, the LFPR (usual status) dropped from 43% in 2012–13 to 40% in 2019–20, and decline maintained in 2018–19, among the labor force's female members. According to estimates, between 2015 and 2020, the participation rate of women decreased at an annual rate of 1.93 percent (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh, 2021). India now ranks tenth lowest among 130 nations in terms of female LFPR, and it is much lower than any of its South Asian neighbors, with the exception of Pakistan (Datta and Sharma, 2020). Yet, changing demographic dynamics (lower fertility and the demographic dividend benefits), as well as socioeconomic transitions such as rising education levels and economic structural changes in India, are expected to contribute to the creation of more favorable conditions for female labor force participation. Despite a GDP growth

rate of 8.6%, the economy's failure to integrate women into the labor force has been a concerning and surprising trend in recent years.

Female labor force participation is commonly cited as an important factor in economic success (Esteve-Volart, 2004; Klasen and Lamanna, 2009). As a result, increasing the number of women in the labor force is crucial for the country's future prosperity and shows that discrimination is dissipating and women are gaining power (Mammen and Paxson, 2000). Understanding the paradox of female LFPR decline in the current context—that is, with the country's current socioeconomic improvement—is critical.

Many experts have shed light on the causes of the dropping female LFPR since 2014–15 in the wake of the release of the NSO data for 2021 and 2022, which sparked a heated discussion. Numerous of these research noted that one of the potential causes of this reduction might be the undercounting of women in labor force, which is related to the use of subpar investigative techniques. Additionally, increasing female enrollment in schools and the slow rise of jobs all contribute to it.

Providing an Overview of Female Labor Force Participation

Multidimensional aggregation of structural and social components that makes up female labor force participation rate, the proportion of women who are employed has been rising over time. For the economy to flourish, female labor force participation must be encouraged and welcomed. In India, the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) has grown, according to the most recent Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) report for 2021–22. Although it is lower than the male LFPR, the female LFPR has been growing steadily over time, and currently, around one third of women are employed.

According to the most recent PLFS study, there was an increase of 9.5% points between 2017 and 2018, with just 23.3% of women of working age (15 and over) participating in the labor force in 2021–2022 as opposed to 32.8% in 2021–2022. The rural sector provided the biggest boost, increasing by 12.0 and 3.4 percentage points, respectively, compared to the urban sector. In rural regions, female LFPR climbed by 12.0% points from 24.6% in 2017–18 to 36.6% in 2021–22. This is an increase over the previous year. On the other hand, compared to rural regions, female engagement in urban areas was much lower. Urban regions had a female LFPR of 23.8% in 2021–22 compared to 20.4% in 2017–18, a gain of just 3.4% points. Figures 1, 2, and 3 from the Annual PLFS Report depict the Female Labour Force Participation Rate for age 15 and higher in 2021–2022.

In

Figure 1, 78.2% of men and 36.6% of women who are 15 years of age or older in rural regions are both was working. Female LFPR in 15- to 59-year-old age group in rural regions is 39.3%, compared to 82.1% for males. For those aged 15 and older, the overall LFPR in rural regions is 57.5%, and for people aged 15 to 59, it is 60.8%. Years.

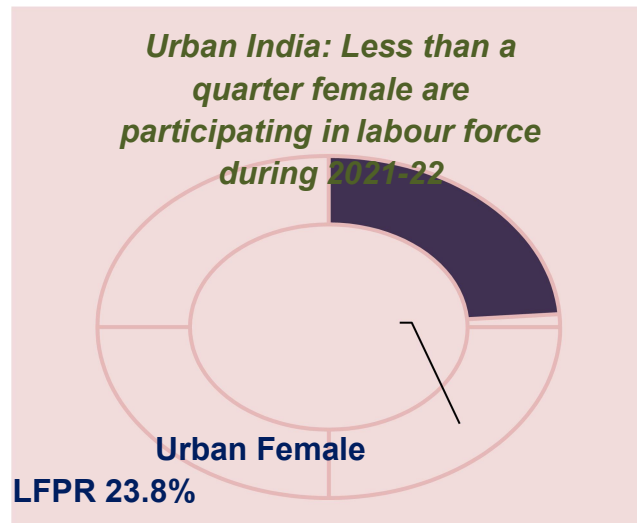
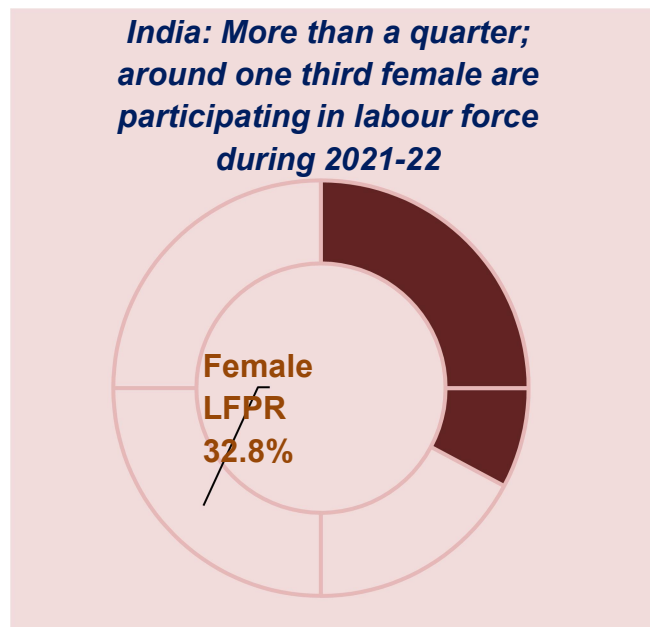


Figure 2. Source: Annual PLFS Report, MoSPI

Figure 2 shows that 74.7% of men and 23.8% of women over the age of 15 who live in urban areas are both working. In urban regions, there are 26.5% females and 81.2% men in age group of 15 to 59. In urban regions, the overall LFPR is 54.5% for those aged 15 and over and 49.7% for people aged 15 to over.

Figure 3.



(Source: Annual PLFS Report, MoSPI)

77.2% of men and 32.8% of women in India who are 15 years of age or older are in labor force, according to Figure 3. Male LFPR in the 15- to 59-year-old age group is 81.8%; female LFPR is 35.6%. The overall LFPR in India is 55.2% for those over the age of 15 and 58.9% for people between the ages of 15 and 59.

Table 1 displays the LFPR for people in their normal status who are 15 years of age and older, broken down by gender and place of residence.

Table 1: LFPR in usual status (ps+ss) for persons of age 15 years & above (in %)									
Years	Rural			Urban			Rural+Urban		
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
2017-18	76.4	24.6	50.7	74.5	20.4	47.6	75.8	23.3	49.8
2021-22	78.2	36.6	57.5	74.7	23.8	49.7	77.2	32.8	55.2
Change in 2021-22 over 2017-18 (% points)	1.8	12.0	6.8	0.2	3.4	2.1	1.4	9.5	5.4

Source: MoSPI

In comparison to 2017–18, female labor force participation rate (LFPR) grew by 9.5% points in 2021–22. This rising trend in female LFPR is the consequence of several confounding variables. Additionally, it is clear from the chart that the rise in female LFPR is the main factor contributing to India's total labor force participation rate's increase. Positive changes in the female labor market are largely attributable to the Government of India's efforts to increase employment and empower women through a variety of laws, policies, and programs. Though the female LFPR in India is lower than the male LFPR, it is encouraging to note that the female LFPR has already surpassed one-third of women and has increased throughout the years.

Table 2 also displays the LFPR for people in normal status aged 15 to 59 years, broken down by gender and geographic region (rural and urban).

Table 2: LFPR in usual status for persons of age 15-59 years (in %)									
Years	Rural			Urban			Rural+Urban		
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
2017-18	80.2	26.6	53.6	80.1	22.3	51.6	80.2	25.3	53.0
2021-22	82.1	39.3	60.8	81.2	26.5	54.5	81.8	35.6	58.9
Change in 2021-22 over 2017-18 (% points)	1.9	12.7	7.2	1.1	4.2	2.9	1.6	10.3	5.9

Source: MoSPI

According to the statistics in the table above, 35.6% of all females in the 15–59 age range participated in the labor force in 2021–2022 as opposed to 25.3% in 2017–2018, representing an overall rise of 10.3% points from 2017–18 to 2021–2022 in percentage of females in labor force. In rural regions, 39.3% of women in the 15–59 age range who were employed in 2021–22 represented an increase of 12.7% percentage points over the previous year. Female labor force participation in urban areas increased from 22.3 percent in 2017–18 to about 26.5% in 2021–22.

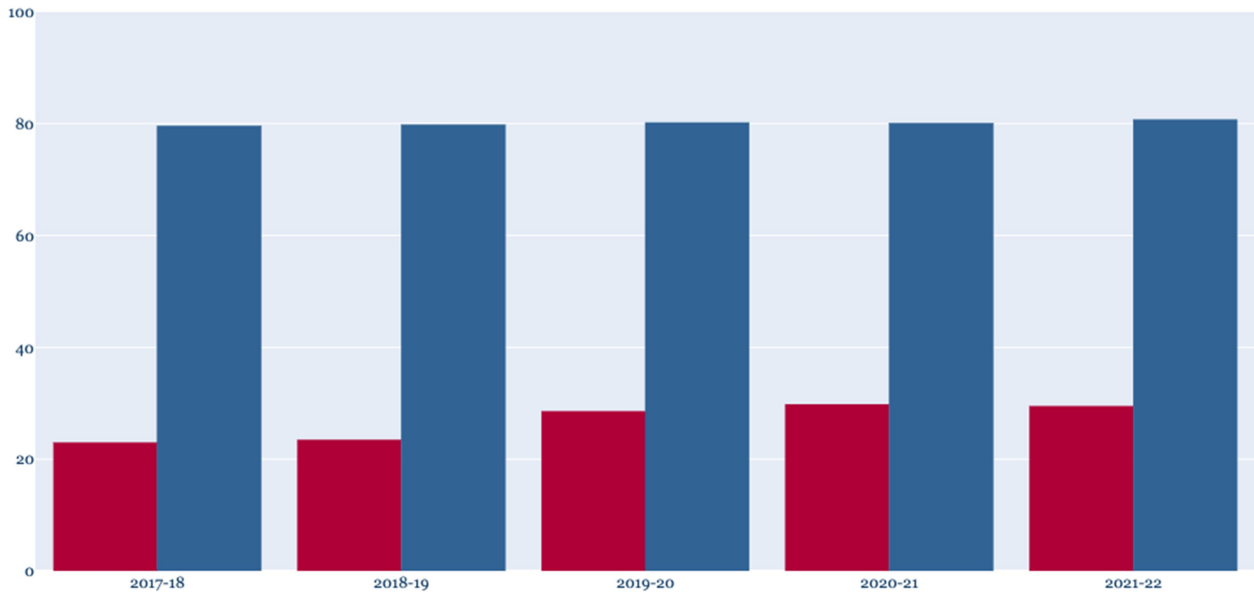
Trends in India's Labor Force Participation of Women: India's female labor force participation rate remains stagnant.

Analyzing the female LFPR's trends reveals the extent of the drop and sheds some light on the possible causes of variations in the participation rate. The participation rate changes from 1993 to 2022 are shown in Figure 4 based on data from the National Statistics Office (NSO) and the Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation (MoSPI). In India, the percentage of women who are in the labor force is shockingly low. Even after the reforms of 1990–1991, there was only a slight improvement. According to the graph below, India's female labor participation rate has consistently lagged behind the worldwide average for over three decades. In fact, it is lower than the rates in the majority of middle- and low-income nations. Additionally, it has shown a secular declining tendency since 2005. The entire LFPR fluctuates between 49% and 43% within the time period, showing a diminishing increase. With a participation percentage of 49%, the years 1993 and 2014–15 had the highest rates. The participation rate has decreased throughout the last seven years, falling from 49% in 2014–15 to 43.5% in 2019–20, with females experiencing the dip more noticeably. The breakdown of labor force participation by sex

shows that, with the exception of the year 2014–2015, the participation rate for men has been declining continuously through time while being stable for women.

Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS July 2021–June 2022) indicate that India's low female labor force participation rate (LFPR) appears to have plateaued in recent years. Women (aged 15–59) made up 29.4% of the work force in India in 2016, which is a decrease from 29.8% the year before. On the other hand, the LFPR for men went up, from 80.1% in 2020–21 to 80.7% in 2021–22. These numbers show labor force participation rate (L.F.P.R) depending on the current week's status. If a person is employed or actively looking for work, they are considered to be in labor force according to the current weekly

Figure 5: Labour force participation rate (All India, age 15-59) by current weekly status



Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey

status.

Women's LFPR did, however, see modest improvement in recent years. Women aged 15 to 59 made up 22.9% of the labor force in 2017–18. In 2018–19, this increased to 23.4%, and in 2019–20, it increased by over 5 percentage points. In order to stop the spread of the new virus, India was placed under a strict state of lockdown during the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic. It runs from July 2019 to June

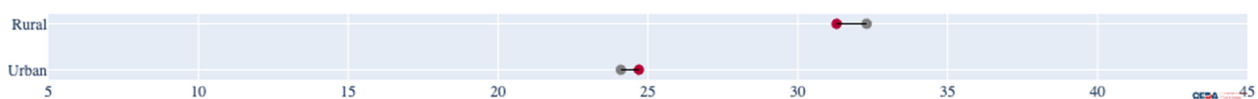
2020. Research shows that even in areas where women's labor force participation is low, it frequently rises during economic downturns, demonstrating its countercyclical tendency.

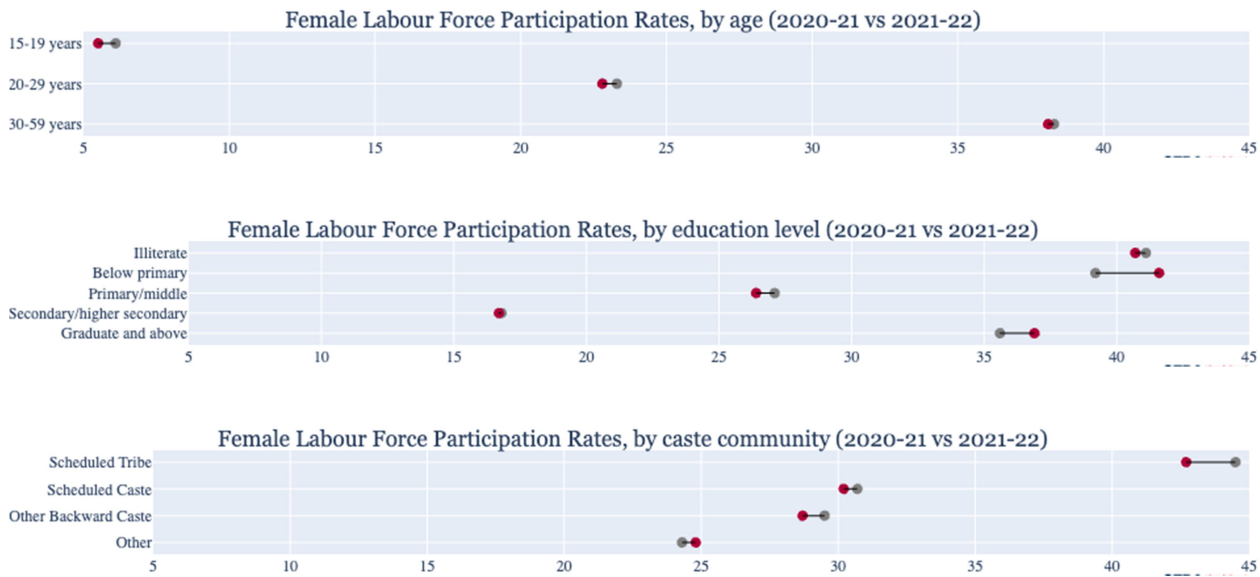
For instance, women's engagement in the labor force grew in India from 1999-2000 to 2004-2005 as a way to supplement declining wages brought on by the dire conditions in the agricultural sector (Abraham, 2009). In their study, Mehrotra & others (2014) discovered that rural women entering the economy as independent agricultural laborers was a significant contributor to this growth in employment. Women, on the other hand, left agriculture during high growth period from 2003-04 to 2011-12, but their total LFPR decreased during this time due to a lack of an increase in non-farm employment.

Chance of women seeking employment rose in households who faced large negative income shocks as a result of the pandemic-related lockdowns in India, according to research by Ishaan Bansal and Kanika Mahajan (2021). They discovered that although women's work increased, it was only temporary and that it then began to fall as households' financial situations improved, highlighting the fact that women's labor frequently serves as a safety net for lower-income households during times of economic uncertainty.

The trend toward improvement appears to have stopped in 2021–2022 after advancing for one additional year (Figure 5). Nevertheless, not all women have seen the same gains; in 2021–2022, the LFPR revealed minor reductions for rural women, women from Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste, and Other Backward Class communities, and women who were illiterate or had primary–middle level education. The L.F.P.R among urban women, women with graduate degrees, or women who were illiterate, on the other hand, saw a little improvement between 2020–21 and 2021–22. (Fig. 6)

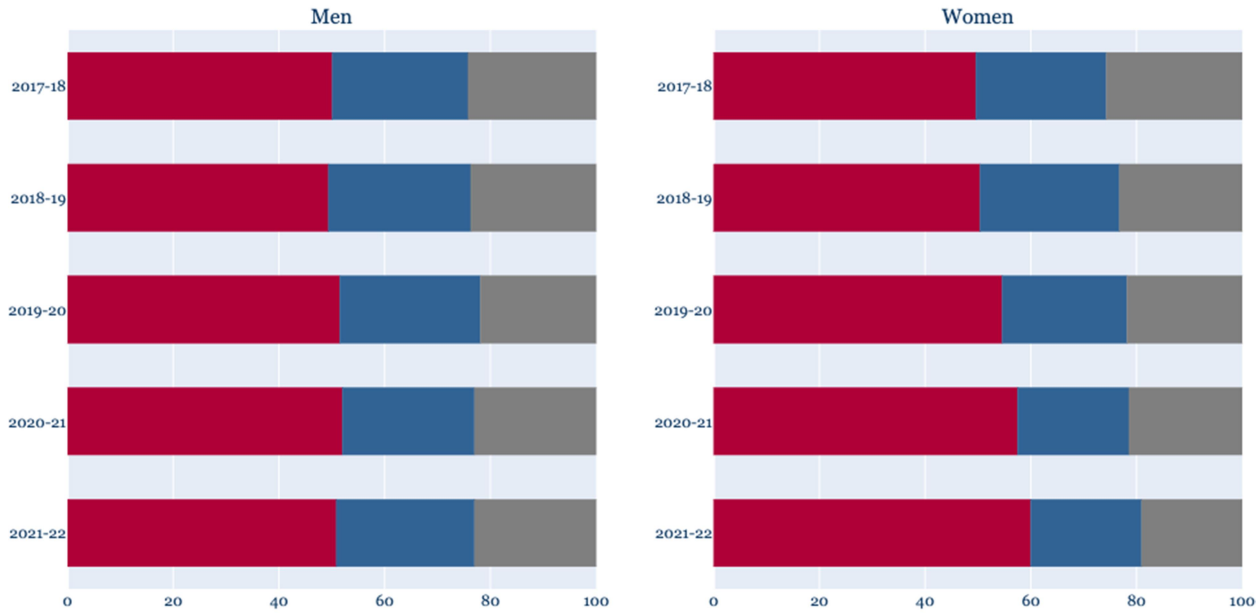
Figure 6: Female Labour Force Participation Rates, by sector (2020-21 vs 2021-22)





According to the PLFS statistics, 60% of women (aged 15 to 59) people had jobs in India in 2021–2022 were independent contractors. The similar percentage for males was 50.9% (Figure 7). There are many different types of people who work for themselves, including those who run businesses using hired labor and those who do not. It includes everyone who does not have a set job with a set pay. People may choose to work for themselves for a variety of reasons, including aspirational reasons or as a means of support if they are unable to secure wage-salaried employment.

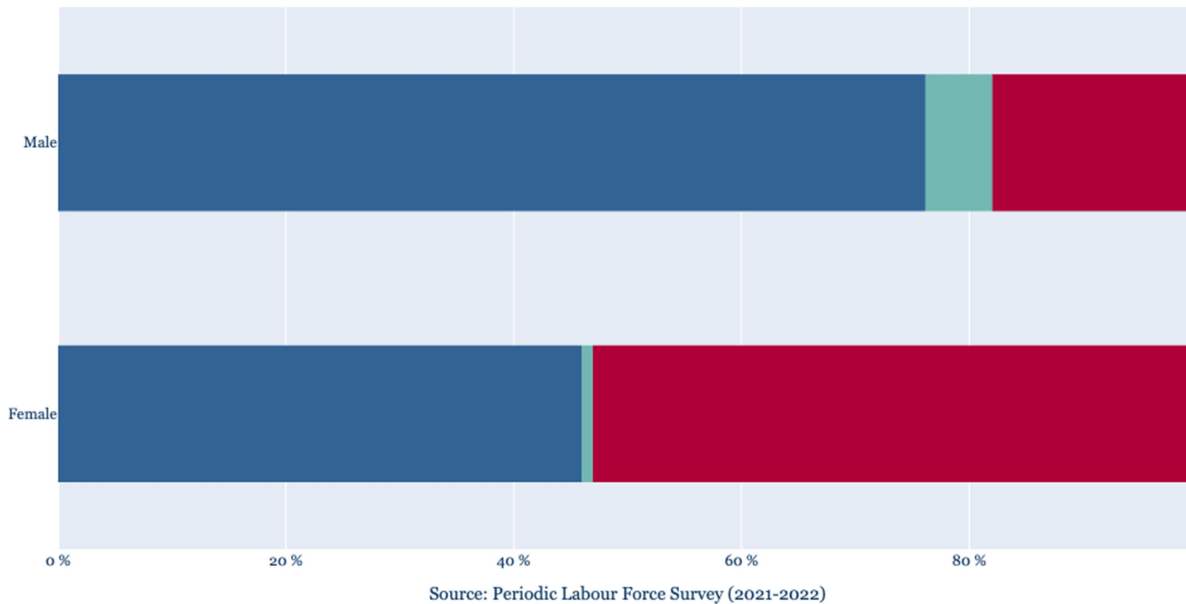
Figure 7: Workforce distribution (age 15-59)



Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (2023)

"Self-employed" people who work for compensation, work for free, or offer unpaid help. In 2021–2022, over half of women who were self-employed (53%) worked as "unpaid helpers" and 44.5% were "own account workers" (people who run their own businesses without using outside workers). Only 1% of independent contractors added staff to their companies. In comparison, in 2021–2022, only 17.9% of men (aged 15–59) who worked for themselves provided unpaid support. Instead, 74.3% were own account employees, 5.9% were employers. (Figure 8)

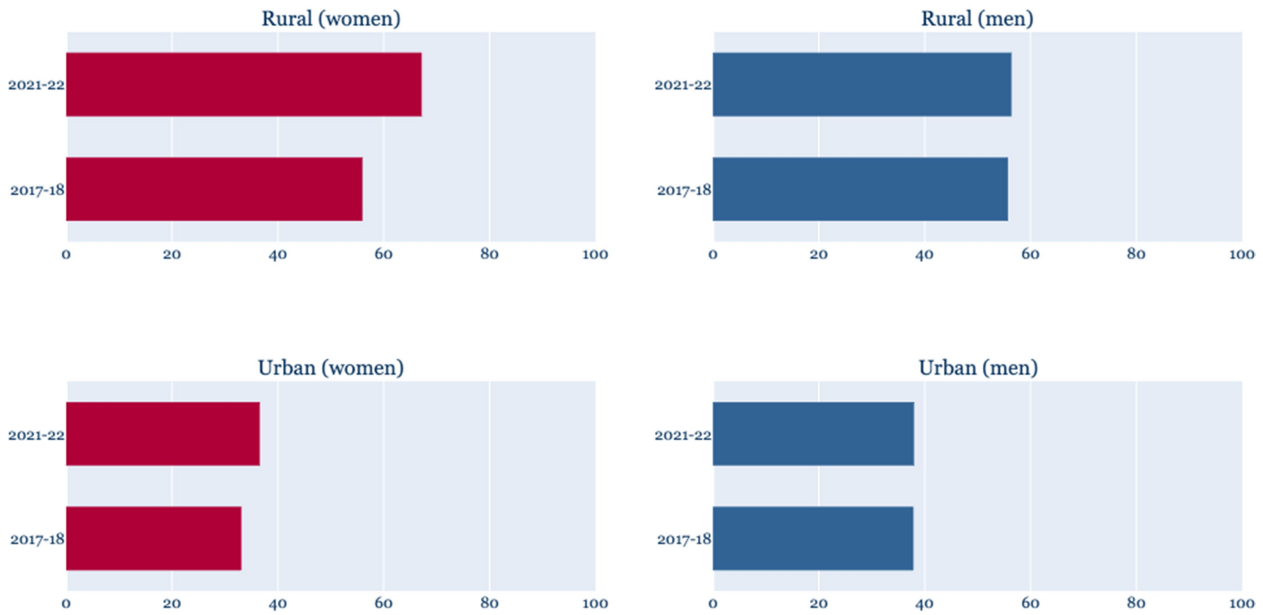
Figure 8: Distribution of self-employed workers (age 15-59), 2021-22



Because it doesn't result in independent income or improve women's engagement in public realm, working as a volunteer assistant in a family-owned business, particularly subpar kind of employment (Mehrotra, 2014). According to Deshpande (2021), a large portion of the job performed by these employees consists of "bottom-rung, survivalist livelihood activities."

In 2017-18, 48% of women (aged 15-59) claimed to be working independently, which is equal to males (48.9%), but has grown over the preceding four years. Male employees have not seen a comparable rise. Additionally, rural areas have played a significant role in the rise of women's self-employment (Figure 9).

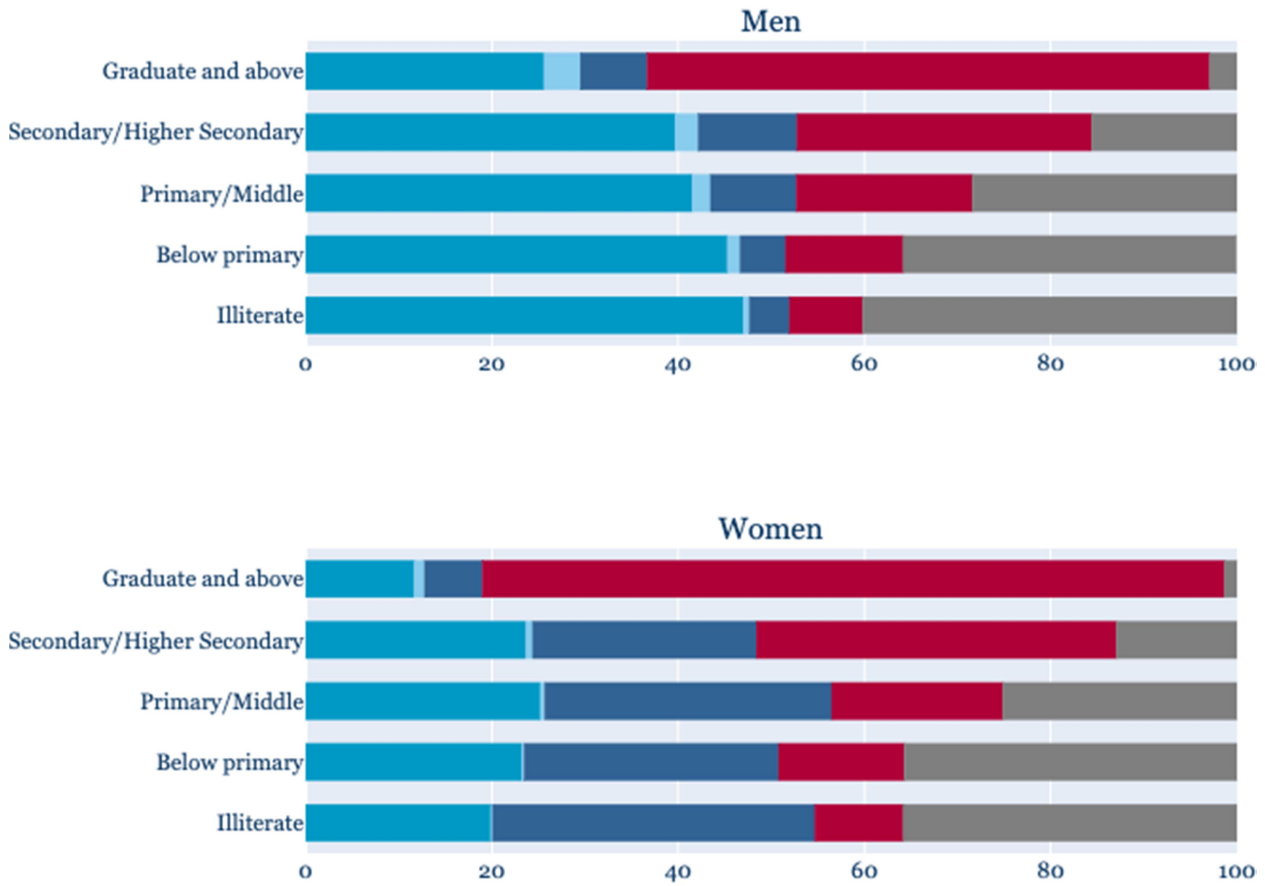
Figure 9: Proportion of workers who were self-employed (age 15-59), in 2017-18 and 2021-22



Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey

Among men and women of all age groups, women between the ages of 15 and 19 were the most likely to be self-employed and work as unpaid help. In fact, 50.8 percent of all women in this age group who worked in this capacity in 2021–22, up from 37.9% in 2017–18. The likelihood of men over 30 working as unpaid assistants was the lowest (4.4%).

Figure 10: Employment categories, by education and gender (2017-18)



Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (2018)

Part of Figure 10: Employment categories, by education and gender (2021-22)



Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (2021)

Figure 10 illustrates that proportion of women who work as unpaid assistance grown for all women, even those with higher levels of education. 6.2% of women (aged 15–59) with graduate degrees or above were employed as unpaid caregivers in 2017–18. This percentage rose to 11.2% by 2021–2022. In parallel, the proportion of people with this level of education who have paid positions fell from 79.7 to 72.1%.

Causes for Weak and Stagnating Female Labour Participation Rate in India

Many factors, including the older women's lack of technical skills, their home obligations, and the younger women's rising levels of education, Could play a role in a minimal and stagnant involvement of women in labor market. In addition, macroeconomic developments are anticipated to have a big impact

in this area. For instance, because a substantial proportion of women work in agriculture, the modernization of agriculture has a significant impact on the fall in the need for female labor. According to Bhutani (2004), women's means of subsistence are marginalized as a result of the automation of agriculture. A decline in rate of female labor force participation may also result from the slowdown in total job creation, or from economy's rise in joblessness. All of these factors have an impact on India's trends for female labor force participation.

India has recently benefited from economic and demographic circumstances that typically would cause female labor force participation rates to increase. Economic growth has been substantial, averaging 6-7% in the 1990s and 2000s, and female education has grown dramatically, albeit from a low base. Fertility has also greatly fallen. This is a significant problem for India's economic development since the country is now experiencing a "demographic dividend"—a period of exceptionally high rates of working-age population—which can boost per capita growth rates through impacts on labor force participation, saving, and investment.

However, this influence will be considerably smaller if women generally stay out of the workforce, and India may have labor shortages in important economic areas. There is also a ton of data that suggests employed women have more negotiating power, which has benefits for their personal well-being and the well-being of their families. It is obvious that labor supply concerns do contribute to the decline in female earnings. Married women with some education who have children find it challenging to find work, particularly if their partner is also educated and well-off. But labor demand is also significant. As non-agricultural occupations have not developed at the necessary rate, it appears that diminishing agricultural employment, particularly in rural regions, has left a gap in work alternatives for women.

Role of Government also shows a trend in increasing Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR)

To enhance women's employment prospects and labor force participation, the government has taken a variety of actions. Women's equal access to opportunities and a comfortable workplace are now protected by a number of safeguards in the labor laws. The 2020 Social Security Code has measures that extend paid maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks, mandate crèches in companies with 50 or more employees, permit women to work night shifts with the appropriate safety precautions, etc. According to the 2019 Pay Code, no employee may face gender-based discrimination at a location or a division of it while speaking about pay with another employee who does the same or similar work for the same

business. Aside from this, no employer is allowed to discriminate against a potential employee based on their gender when hiring them for the same job or one with similar requirements, unless doing so would violate a current law that forbids or restricts the employment of women in that field.

Through a network of Women Industrial Training Institutes, National Vocational Training Institutes, and Regional Vocational Training Institutes, the government provides training to female employees in order to improve their employability. Additionally, increasing employability while simultaneously producing employment is the government's primary goal. In order to boost employment across the country, the Indian government has launched a variety of projects.

Investments in capacity and infrastructure have a substantial multiplier effect on employment and economic development. The budget for 2023–24 predicted that capital investment spending would increase significantly for the third year in a row, by 33% to Rs 10 lakh crore, or 3.3% of GDP. Initiatives by the government to encourage growth are focused on this considerable rise in recent years. Indian government is supporting a number of initiatives to increase employment, including the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP), the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), the Pt. Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY), and the Deen Dayal Antodaya Yojana-National Urban Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NULM).

The government is implementing the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) initiatives, which have the potential to generate 60 lakh new employment, with an expenditure of Rs. 1.97 lakh crore during a 5-year period beginning in 2021–22.

In order to increase young employment, the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS) and Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) are also being implemented by the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE).

Conclusion:

The rate of women participating in the labor force in India is increasing. According to the most recent PLFS 2021–22, the female LFPR for age group of 15 years and above has significantly grown and is now 32.8% in India, up from 23.3% in the previous year. Additionally, the female LFPR for the age range of 15 to 59 years rose from 25.3% in 2017–18 to 35.6% in 2021–22. One of the key contributors

to this continuing advancement is the government's ongoing initiatives. Female involvement in the labor force and workforce is dramatically rising despite diverse socioeconomic conventions, which further encourages others to follow the road of success.

Government support for women's employment travels comes in the shape of policies, initiatives, programs, etc. Increased female labor force participation and a safe workplace are continuous goals of the many government programs and initiatives. Over time, more girls are enrolling in both higher education and schools. Female LFPR in India may be significantly influenced by structural changes to their life, such as a drop in childbearing rates and increased access to education for women. Policymakers must develop methods for job diversification since educated women make up a sizable portion of the labor force and because various skill-building programs and vocational trainings are successful in creating employment in metropolitan areas. The establishment of a healthy, secure, and sanitary workplace is vital to dispel the taboos and concerns related to female employment. These are a few of the concerns that have to be taken into account while creating policies that are specifically tailored to women's needs in India.

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