

SAHIT

WOMEN IN WORKFORCE

2024-25

57%
WOMEN

BELIEVE THAT GENDER
DIVERSITY POLICIES HAVE
HAD A POSITIVE IMPACT ON
THEIR CAREER GROWTH

27%
GDP POTENTIAL

*if India closes
the gender gap in
labour force
participation*

25% → 45.8%
Increase in male participation in
unpaid domestic work (2019-2024),
signalling shifting social norms



About SAHIT

The SAHIT platform is dedicated to advancing women's economic leadership and participation in India, aligned with the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047. Founded by Dr. Subi Chaturvedi, it serves as a collaborative ecosystem bringing together policymakers, industry leaders, researchers, and civil society to drive inclusive growth and systemic change.

SAHIT works to build evidence-based insights, foster dialogue, and enable actionable pathways for strengthening women's role across sectors of the economy.

About this Report

©SAHIT, 2024–25

Editor – Dr. Subi Chaturvedi

This report presents a comprehensive analysis of women's participation in the workforce in India, combining primary research, secondary data analysis, and sectoral insights from leading organizations working in the field of women's empowerment. The findings aim to inform policy, industry practices, and public discourse by grounding recommendations in both data and lived experiences.

This document may be quoted or cited with due acknowledgment to the source for academic, research, and media purposes. For permissions and further information, please contact: contact@sahit.in

Partners

Indian National Science Academy (INSA)

ASSOCHAM

About ASSOCHAM

The Associated Chambers of Commerce & Industry of India (ASSOCHAM) is the country's apex national chamber since 1920. It advocates actionable policy suggestions to strengthen the Indian economy by leveraging its extensive membership reach of over 450,000 companies, comprising of large corporates and SMEs. With over 70 Sector and State Councils, ASSOCHAM effectively represents diverse segments of Indian industry and focusses on aligning industry priorities with the nation's growth aspirations.

Research & Contributions

This report draws on contributions from leading organizations and experts working across policy, industry, and grassroots implementation in the domain of women's empowerment: IWWAGE, Nikore Associates, TQH Consulting, Pragma Development Advisors (PragmaDev), Sampark, FES, Just Jobs Network, IWWAGE, and UDAITI Foundation.

Acknowledgements

The SAHIT platform acknowledges the contributions of all partner organizations, researchers, and participants whose insights and experiences have informed this report. A special thank you to: Mitali Sharma, Brinda Juneja, Sonakshi Chaudhry, Aishwarya Bhuta, Anirudh Chakradhar, Prof. Smita Premchander, Gayatri Sharma, Renjini Rajagopalan, Prakriti Sharma and Pooja Sharma for their valuable contributions to the report.

Advancing Women's Economic Leadership for Viksit Bharat 2047

*Women are not just participants in
India's growth story—they are its architects.*



31.7%

Female Labour Force
Participation Rate

+14.2pts

Increase in Women's
Workforce

57%

Report Positive
Impact of D&I Policies

54%

Say Policies Aid
Retention



Download the
report here

SPECIAL MESSAGE



Prof. Ashutosh Sharma

Institute Chair Professor &
INAE Visvesvarya Chair Professor,
IIT Kanpur

Former Secretary, Department of
Science and Technology,
Government of India

Former President, Indian National
Science Academy (INSA)

I commend Dr. Subi Chaturvedi, a prominent and respected leader in science, technology, and inclusive innovation, for her vision in establishing SAHIT and leading this important initiative. She has been a role model for women and girls in science & tech, and a key enabler for bridging the digital divide in India.

The journey towards a Viksit Bharat 2047 is intrinsically linked with how effectively we harness the full potential of our human capital. Among the most critical dimensions of this is the participation and leadership of women in the workforce. Women's economic empowerment today is not only a matter of equity, but a strategic imperative for national growth, innovation, and global competitiveness.

It was with this conviction that the SAHIT platform was envisioned by Dr. Subi Chaturvedi during my tenure at the Indian National Science Academy (INSA). The idea was to build a collaborative, evidence-driven ecosystem that brings together academia, industry, and policymakers to advance women's participation in the economy. SAHIT represents a shift from intent to action, anchored in research, dialogue, and scalable solutions.

The SAHIT Women in the Workforce Report 2023–24 makes an important contribution in this direction. By combining empirical data with lived experiences, it offers a grounded and nuanced understanding of workplace realities, while also identifying pathways to accelerate inclusion and leadership.

The focus on women in the workforce, particularly in STEM fields, is especially significant. While India has made notable progress in expanding women's access to education, translating this into sustained workforce participation and leadership remains a key opportunity. Strengthening this pipeline is essential for building a future-ready, knowledge-driven economy.

I am confident that this report will serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, industry leaders, and researchers, and will contribute meaningfully to advancing women's economic participation in India.

FOUNDER'S MESSAGE



Dr. Subi Chaturvedi

Founder SAHIT

Sherpa, India-US CEO Forum
WG 7

Governing Board Member,
Indian National Science
Academy (INSA)

Co-Chair, US-India Task Force
on Artificial Intelligence (AI)
Co-Chair, Digital Economy,
USIBC

SAHIT

At its core, SAHIT is about shifting the narrative from participation to leadership. It brings together stakeholders across policy, industry, academia, and civil society to create a more cohesive, evidence-led approach to women's economic empowerment, one that is grounded in data, but driven by real-world impact.

Women are not just participants in India's growth story—they are its architects. As India moves toward Viksit Bharat 2047, the real question is not access, but advancement: are we enabling women to rise, lead, and shape the future of our economy?

SAHIT was founded to address a persistent gap—the “leaky pipeline” in women's careers. While more women are entering education and the workforce, far fewer reach leadership roles. This is not a question of capability, but of systems and support. SAHIT was envisioned as a platform to understand this gap and drive solutions that enable women to not just enter the workforce, but to stay, grow, and lead.

The SAHIT Women in the Workforce Report 2023–24 reflects this vision. It is not just a report, but a strategic effort to bridge insight and action. By integrating primary research, secondary data, and lived experiences, it offers a more complete understanding of workplace realities.

Importantly, this report goes beyond analysis to offer evidence-based, actionable recommendations grounded in both data and the voices of women. It seeks to address not just what the challenges are, but how they can be solved in meaningful and scalable ways.

As we look ahead, the goal is clear, to build workplaces where women are empowered to lead, innovate, and shape the future of work in India. SAHIT will continue to catalyse this shift.

This report is a step forward in that journey.

PARTNER MESSAGE



Col. Saurabh Sanyal (Retd.)

Secretary General
ASSOCHAM (Associated
Chambers of Commerce and
Industry of India)

Former CEO & Secretary
General of PHD Chamber of
Commerce

SAHIT

India's growth is resilient and gaining momentum as the country moves toward its vision of a Viksit Bharat. As we navigate this phase of economic expansion, it is increasingly evident that the next frontier of growth will be shaped by our ability to ensure broader and more inclusive participation in the workforce—particularly that of women.

The Second Edition of the SAHIT Women in Workforce Report reflects this priority. It brings together evidence-based insights, stakeholder perspectives, and sectoral experiences to present a comprehensive view of both progress achieved and challenges that remain. While there has been a gradual improvement in women's workforce participation and representation, structural barriers such as unpaid care responsibilities, skilling gaps, access constraints, and social norms continue to influence outcomes at scale.

At ASSOCHAM, we have consistently engaged with industry, government, and civil society to facilitate dialogue and drive actionable solutions. This report builds on that approach by focusing not only on identifying gaps, but also on showcasing replicable best practices and scalable models that can enable women to enter, sustain, and advance within the workforce.

From a policy and economic standpoint, enhancing women's participation is integral to achieving sustained and inclusive growth. It has a direct bearing on productivity, competitiveness, and the overall efficiency of labour markets. Strengthening this dimension will be critical as India seeks to consolidate its position in the global economy.

We believe this report will serve as a valuable reference for policymakers, industry leaders, and institutions, offering practical recommendations that can inform both policy design and implementation. It also reinforces the importance of collaborative action in building enabling ecosystems that support women across different stages of their professional journeys.

ASSOCHAM remains committed to advancing this agenda through continued engagement, knowledge partnerships, and advocacy. We hope that the insights presented in this report will contribute meaningfully to ongoing efforts towards building a more inclusive, equitable, and future-ready workforce.

Executive Summary

India stands at a pivotal moment in its development journey. As the country advances towards its vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, the role of women in shaping economic growth, innovation, and leadership has never been more critical. Over the past decade, India has made significant strides in expanding access to education, improving health outcomes, and strengthening policy frameworks that support women's empowerment. Female Labour Force Participation has shown an encouraging upward trend in recent years, reflecting rising aspirations and expanding opportunities.

Yet, this progress presents a nuanced paradox.

While more women are entering educational institutions and acquiring skills, their transition into sustained, quality employment and leadership roles remains uneven.

This report examines this gap not as a limitation, but as a strategic opportunity, to design systems that better align women's capabilities with the evolving demands of the economy.

Drawing on primary survey insights, secondary data, and sectoral analyses, the report highlights that enabling women's participation requires a holistic approach, one that goes beyond job creation to address the broader ecosystem of work.

Key Insights

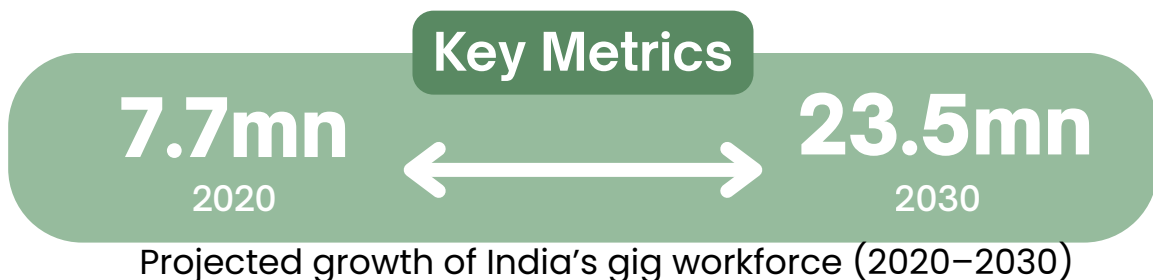
1. Rising Aspiration, Evolving Pathways

Women across India are increasingly aspirational, educated, and ready to participate in the workforce. However, their career journeys are shaped by a combination of access, awareness, and enabling conditions, including mobility, safety, and exposure to opportunities.

2. Policies Matter

When They Are Understood and Implemented

Survey findings indicate that organizations with gender diversity policies see positive impacts on career growth and retention.



Projected growth of India's gig workforce (2020–2030)

41.7%

India's Female Labour Force Participation Rate (2023–24), showing a strong upward trend

55%

Target FLFPR by 2050 identified as critical for sustained high GDP growth

<33%

of women are fully aware of inclusion policies in place for their benefit

3.2×

More time women spend on unpaid care work compared to men globally



Women in the Workforce

— India's Paradox and Potential —

Key Statistics | SAHIT Women in the Workforce Report 2023-24

41.7%



India's Female Labour Force Participation Rate (2023-24)

Rising, but not yet translating into leadership

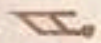
SAHIT, 2023-24

55%



Up to 27% GDP BOOST

From closing gender gaps in the labour force



SAHIT, 2023-24



55%



15-17% GDP

Value of India's care economy

SAHIT, 2023-24



<33%

Working women aware of

Working women aware of workplace gender policies



3.2x MORE

Time spent on unpaid work, women vs men globally

••••• The Paradox

••••• The Value

••••• The Path Forward

Entry into jobs up, leadership lagging behind

Gender parity could boost India's GDP by up to **27%**

Safe Public Transport & Mobility Policies
Comprehensive Care Work Programs

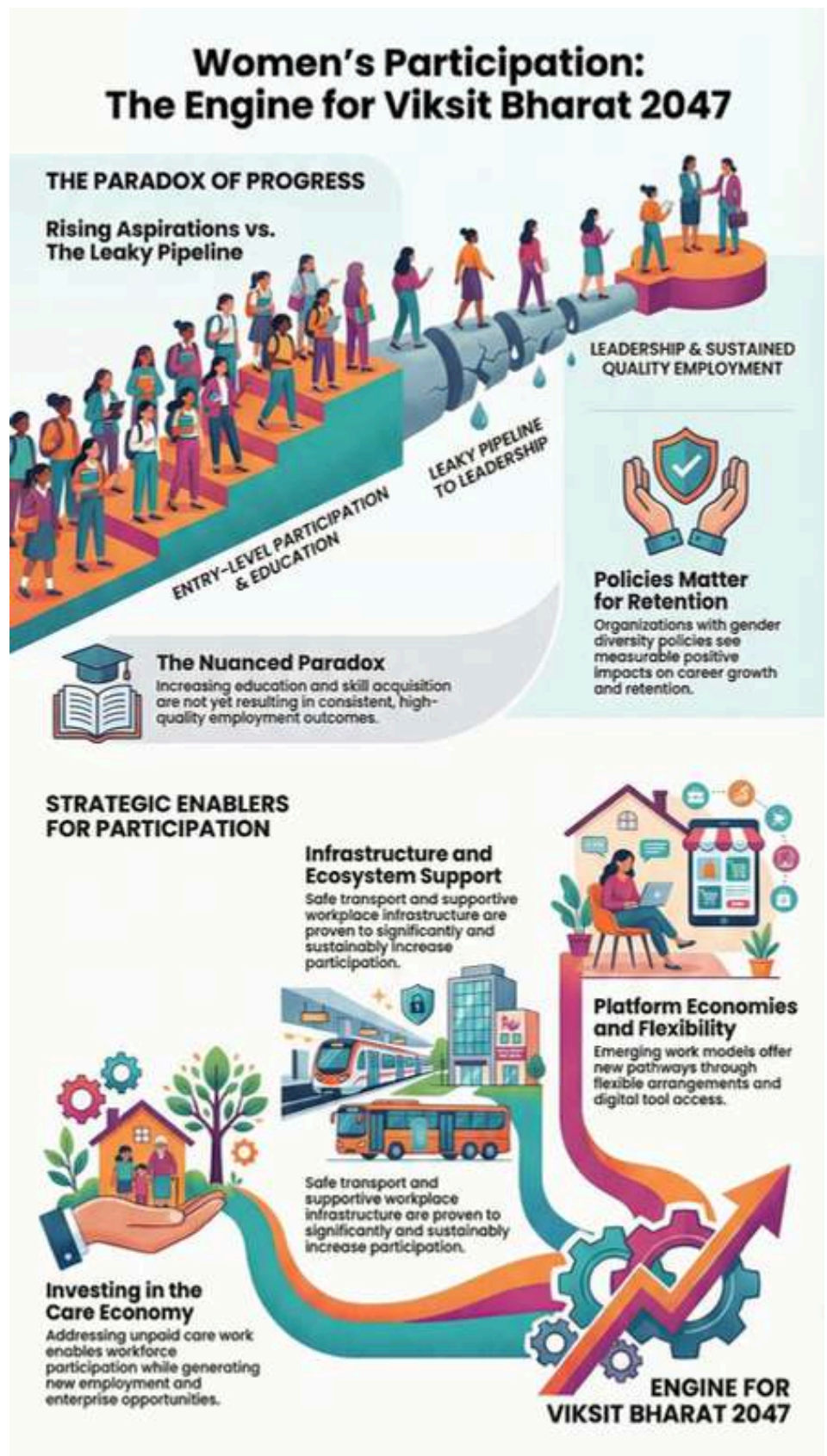
At the same time, there is an opportunity to strengthen awareness, communication, and implementation of these policies to maximize their effectiveness.

3. Care Economy as a Foundational Enabler

Unpaid care work continues to play a central role in shaping women's participation decisions. At the same time, the care economy presents a significant opportunity, as both an enabler of workforce participation and a generator of employment and enterprise.

4. Informal and Platform Economies: Expanding Access with New Considerations

Emerging work models, including platform-based employment, are opening new avenues for women's participation, particularly through flexible work arrangements.



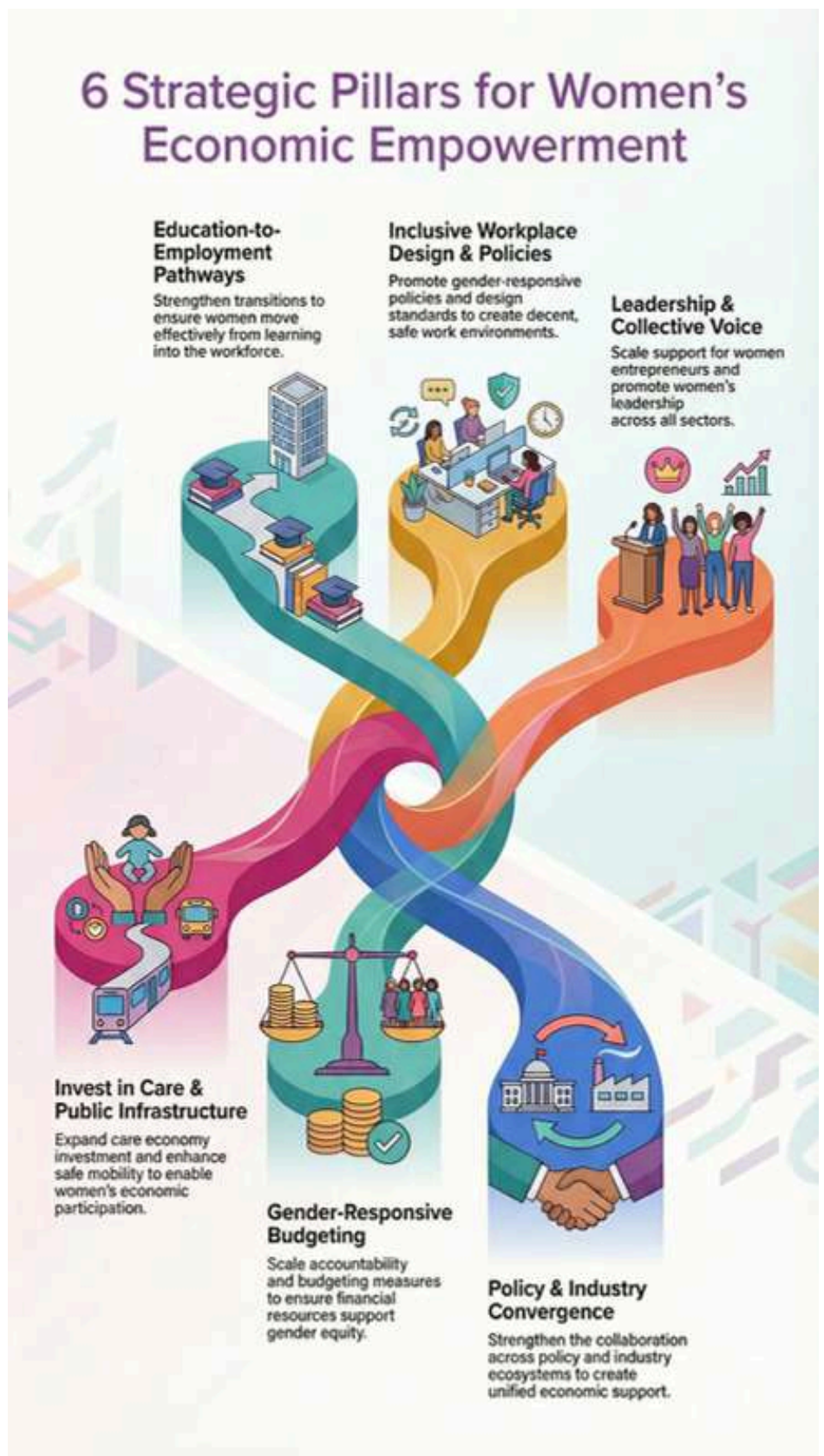
These pathways can be further strengthened through improved access to digital tools, social protection, and supportive infrastructure.

5. The “Leaky Pipeline” Remains a Critical Focus Area

While entry-level participation is improving, there is a visible drop-off as women progress through their careers. Addressing this requires sustained focus on retention, leadership pathways, and workplace environments that support long-term growth.

6. Infrastructure and Ecosystem Support Drive Participation

Evidence across sectors shows that when enabling conditions, such as safe transport, workplace infrastructure, and supportive policies, are in place, women’s participation increases significantly and sustainably.





Key Recommendations

To unlock this potential, the report outlines ten priority areas for action:

- Strengthen pathways from education to employment
- Expand investment in care economy infrastructure
- Enhance safe mobility and enabling public infrastructure
- Promote gender-responsive workplace policies
- Strengthen social protection and decent work standards
- Expand support for women entrepreneurs
- Scale gender-responsive budgeting and accountability
- Encourage gender-inclusive workplace design
- Promote collective voice and leadership among women
- Strengthen convergence across policy and industry ecosystems

TABLE OF



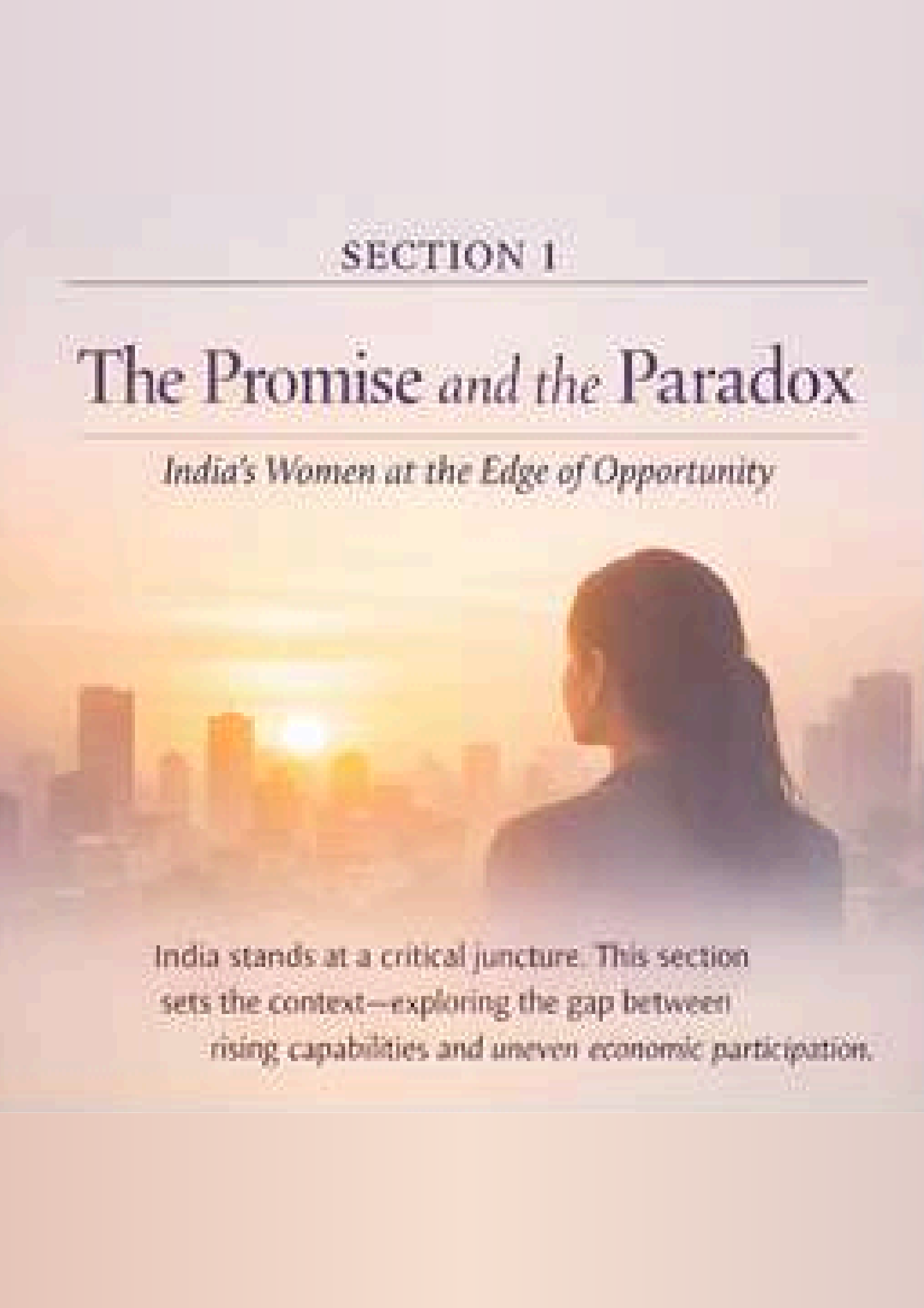
CONTENTS

Executive Summary	_____	07
Analysing trends in FLPR in India	_____	14
Evaluating the Impact of Gender Diversity Policies on Women's Career Progression in Corporate India	_____	22
Transformative Policies towards Empowering Working Women	_____	34
Strengthening Gender Responsive Budgeting for Enhancing Female Labour Force Participation	_____	38
Organising the Invisible: Exploring Methods to Visibilise and Organise Women Workers in the Informal Sector	_____	50
Beyond Unpaid Care: Transforming India's Care Economy for Gender-Inclusive Growth	_____	56
Decent Work Deficits: The Gendered Nature of ASHA's Work	_____	67
Women and the Platform Economy in India: Navigating Opportunities, Barriers, and Policy Pathways	_____	76
Unlocking India's Untapped Potential	_____	84
SAHIT Awardees	_____	94

SECTION 1

The Promise *and* the Paradox

India's Women at the Edge of Opportunity

A woman in silhouette is shown from the back, looking out over a city skyline at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow over the scene. The city buildings are silhouetted against the bright sky.

India stands at a critical juncture. This section sets the context—exploring the gap between rising capabilities and uneven economic participation.

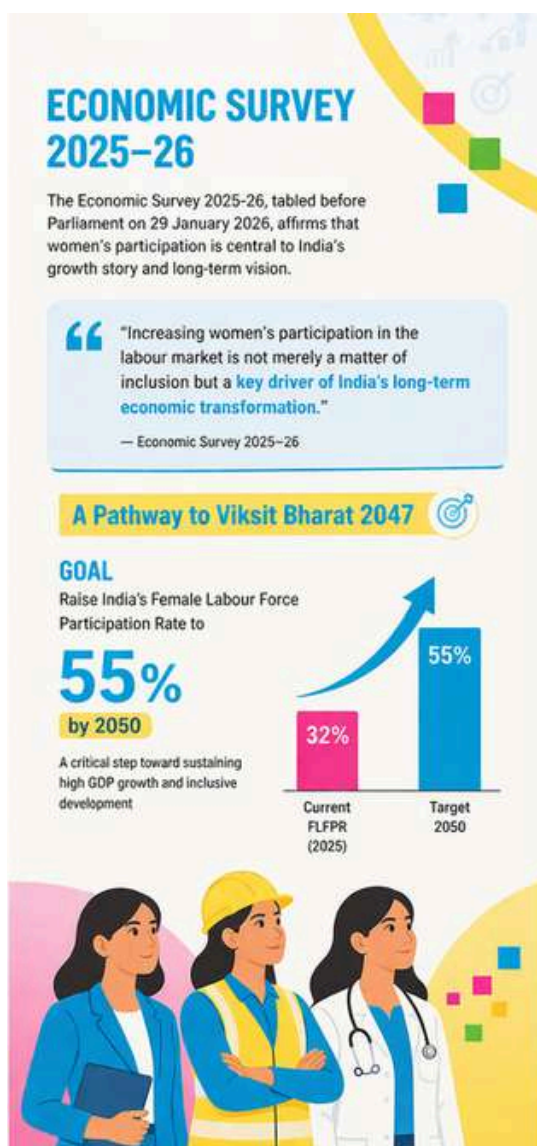
ANALYSING TRENDS IN FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION IN INDIA

“Across every field, women are shaping India's progress with determination, creativity and unmatched zeal. Their achievements inspire our nation and strengthen our collective resolve to build a Viksit Bharat”

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi, International Women’s Day, 2026

The Government of India’s Viksit Bharat 2047 framework articulates a long-term development objective of attaining fully-developed-nation status by the centenary of independence, with GDP projected in the range of USD 30-35 trillion. Within this framework, gender-inclusive growth has been identified as a structural precondition for sustained output expansion.

The Economic Survey 2025-26, tabled before Parliament on 29 January 2026, observed that increasing women’s participation in the labour market is ‘not merely a matter of inclusion but a key driver of India’s long-term economic transformation,’ explicitly situating higher female employment on the developmental pathway to Viksit Bharat by 2047. The Survey identifies a quantified intermediate objective: raising India’s Female Labour Force Participation Rate to approximately 55% by 2050 as a necessary condition for sustaining high annual GDP growth.

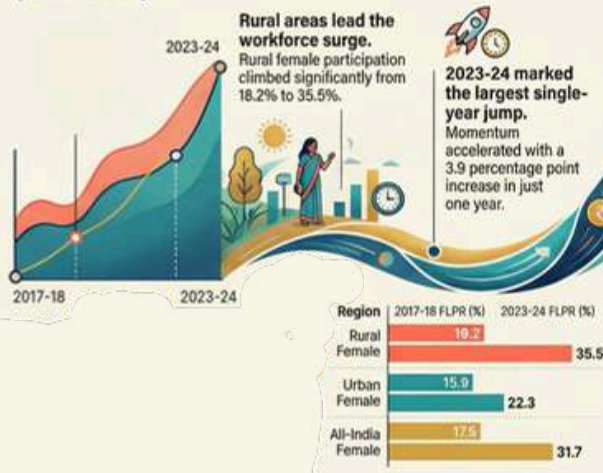


“The economic, political, and social participation of women is a central aspect of the process of development itself. The neglect of women’s agency is not only unjust but also deeply counterproductive.”

-Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (1999)

India's Workforce Transformation: The Surge in Female Labour Participation (2017-2024)

The Upward Trajectory (2017-2024)



Drivers of Participation



Trends in FLPR (2017-18 to 2023-24)

The rate of increase between 2019-20 and 2023-24 is particularly significant where the rural female LFPR increased by 10.8 percentage points in just four years, reflecting the dual impact of MGNREGS expansion, PM Ujjwala Yojana, and Self-Help Group (SHG) networks under the DAY-NRLM in enabling women to transition from domestic to economically active roles. The year-on-year improvement from 27.8% in 2022-23 to 31.7% in 2023-24 represents the single largest one-year jump between 2019-20 and 2023-24, underscoring an accelerating momentum.

Among the age cohort of 15-29 years, female LFPR stood at 25.0% in urban areas in 2023-24, up significantly from earlier years, reflecting improved educational transitions into the labour market for younger women—particularly those with secondary and higher-secondary qualifications. The PLFS 2023-24 records the overall national LFPR (all persons, usual status) at 45.1%, with the female component at 31.7%, up from 27.8% the previous year.

WPR Trend: 2017-18 to 2023-24

The WPR data underscores the magnitude of India's labour market transformation. Female WPR at the all-India level rose from 16.5% in 2017-18 to 30.7% in 2023-24, an increase of 14.2 percentage points across seven years.

The rural female WPR is especially significant, rising from 17.5% to 34.8% in 2023-24, reflecting the growing integration of rural women into agricultural and ancillary economic activities. The substantial single-year jump from 27.0% in 2022-23 to 30.7% in 2023-24 (rural+urban female, all ages) is the most dramatic annual increase in the series, indicating an accelerating structural shift.

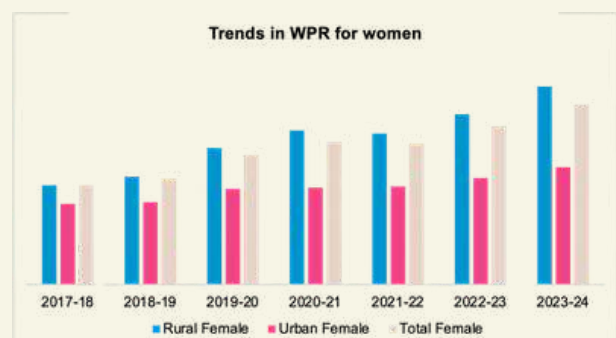


Figure: Trends in WPR for Women 2017 to 2024

The overall WPR for all persons in India stands at 43.7% in 2023-24, up from 41.1% in 2022-23. The rural WPR (56.3% for males and 34.8% for females) and urban WPR (56.4% for males and 20.7% for females) together paint a picture of an increasingly active workforce, with the female component contributing disproportionately to the aggregate growth. It is noteworthy that the unemployment rate for women in rural India declined to 2.1% in 2023-24 (from 1.8% in 2022-23), reflecting strong absorption into the rural workforce, while urban female unemployment at 7.1% reflects the greater competition and selectivity of urban labour markets; though this too shows improvement from the 7.5% recorded in 2022-23.

These gains align directly with the expansion of programmes like PM Vishwakarma (which formalises artisanal skills, with significant female beneficiaries), the Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP) under NITI Aayog, and the Lakhpati Didi initiative under DAY-NRLM, which has set targets to create 3 crore 'Lakhpati Didis'; women SHG members earning at least ₹1 lakh per annum through sustainable livelihood activities.

Unemployment Rate

The PLFS data from 2017-18 to 2023-24, showcases a positive trend marked by the visible decline of female unemployment rate. The decline in rural areas has been sharper than the urban areas, with the unemployment rate has declined by 1.7 percentage points, and currently stands at 2.1% in 2023-24.

The unemployment rate for urban females has also declined by 3.7 percentage points during the same period and has fallen to 7.1%. However, despite this decline these numbers have also show a persistent structural divide with urban female unemployment rate being substantially higher than rural female unemployment rate.

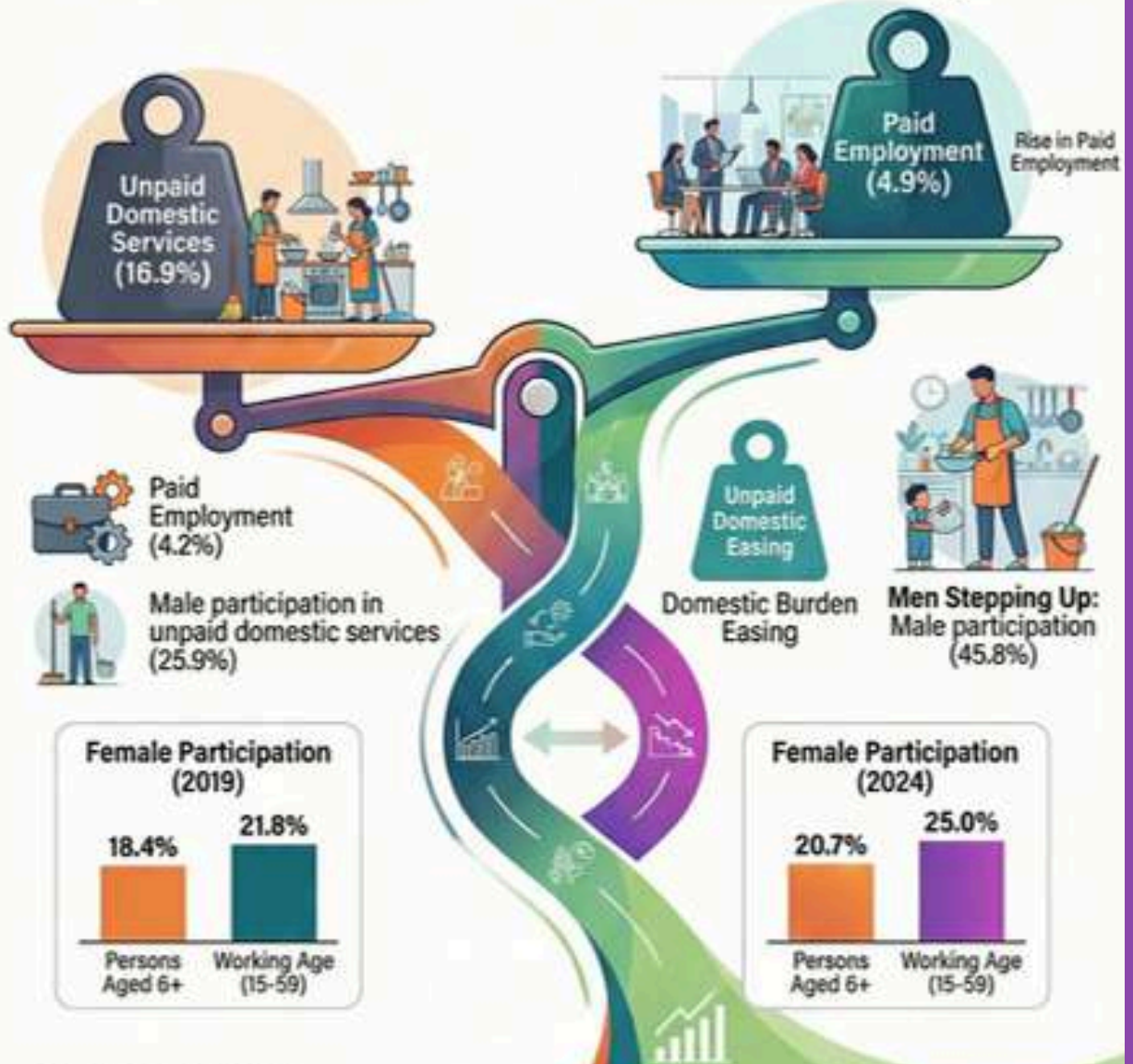


India's Time Revolution: The Rebalancing of Work and Life (2019-2024)

The 2024 Time Use Survey reveals a pivotal shift, highlighting a gradual rebalancing of the "time-poverty" barrier with increased female workforce participation and a significant rise in male contribution to domestic chores.

2019: Initial Allocation

2024: The Rebalancing Shift



Quality of Life & Personal Growth

Growing Prioritization of Learning
(5.8% to 6.5%)



The Leisure Boom
(Culture and Sports: 9.8% to 11.7%)



Persistent Time Poverty for Women



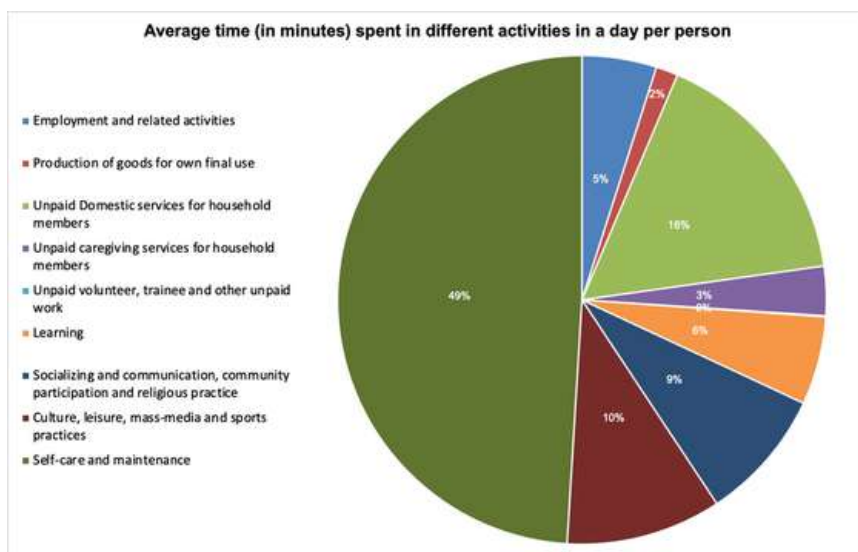
Time Use Survey 2024

The National Statistics Office (NSO) conducted India's first all-India Time Use Survey (TUS) from January to December 2019, and the second TUS DURING 2024. Both surveys collect detailed information on participation rates and time allocation (in minutes) across activities including paid employment, unpaid domestic services, unpaid caregiving, learning, and leisure for persons aged 6 years and above.

The comparison between TUS 2019 and TUS 2024 provides a rare temporal window into whether the structural improvements in female LFPR and WPR documented in the PLFS are accompanied by a rebalancing of unpaid care burdens, historically the most significant barrier to women's workforce participation in India.

The comparative analysis of the 2019 and 2024 Time Use Surveys reveals encouraging shifts in how females allocate their daily hours, pointing toward enhanced economic engagement and an improved quality of life.

Beyond economic metrics, the data reflects positive trends in human capital development and personal well-being.



Time invested in learning activities grew from 5.8% to 6.5%, underscoring a growing societal prioritization of education and skill acquisition. Furthermore, the most substantial growth occurred in culture, leisure, mass media, and sports, which jumped from 9.8% to 11.7%.

This expansion of leisure time is a vital indicator of progress, suggesting a move away from mere subsistence toward a more balanced lifestyle. Ultimately, these five-year trends illustrate a society steadily transitioning toward greater productivity and personal enrichment.

Government programmes have played a direct role in reshaping time use. The PM Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), having distributed over 10 crore LPG connections to women in BPL households, has

materially reduced the time burden of fuel collection—studies suggest a saving of approximately 45-60 minutes per household per day. The PM Awas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G) and Har Ghar Jal (Jal Jeevan Mission) have reduced women's commute burden for water collection, estimated to be substantial in water-stressed rural districts.

The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act 2017, which extended paid maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks for formal sector establishments, represents a landmark legislative intervention in redistributing the time and economic cost of care.

These policy-level changes are visible in the gradual, positive shifts in female time-use patterns between TUS 2019 and TUS 2024.

Women in Political and Administrative Leadership

The narrative of India's women in the workforce is incomplete without acknowledging the parallel gains in political representation and administrative leadership. These gains in governance are themselves enabling conditions for labour market improvements-women's representation in decision-making structures strengthens policy responsiveness to female workforce needs and sets visible examples of leadership.

Women in Parliament

The Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam provides for reservation of one-third of seats in the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, and the NCT of Delhi Legislative Assembly for women, representing the most significant legislative affirmation of female political representation in India's democratic history. Following the 2024 General Elections, 74 women were elected to the 18th Lok Sabha, constituting approximately 13.6% of total strength, with the trend line of women's parliamentary representation having increased from 49 seats (9.0%) in the 15th Lok Sabha (2009) to 78 seats (14.4%) in the 17th Lok Sabha (2019).

In the Rajya Sabha, 17% of seats were held by women as of 2025. At the panchayat level, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment's mandate of 33% reservation (extended to 50% in 21 states including Bihar, Uttarakhand, and Rajasthan) has



resulted in over 14.5 lakh elected women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions constituting approximately 46% of total elected PRIs representatives as per the Ministry of Panchayati Raj data.

Women in the Civil Services and Bureaucracy

In a historic step forward for women's leadership at the highest levels of state governance, both Odisha and West Bengal have announced their first-ever women Chief Secretaries. Along with this the representation of women has shown a consistent upward trend in the Indian Administrative Service and allied Central Services. The proportion of women qualifying the civil services exam increased from 24% in 2019 to 35% in 2023.

The increased presence of women in district-level administration (DMs and CDOs), state secretariats, and specialised technical cadres reinforces a broader trend of female empowerment within the machinery of governance.

Women in Corporate Leadership, Boardrooms, and Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship

India's corporate sector has also witnessed incremental but significant gains in female representation at leadership levels. The Companies Act, 2013 (Section 149(1)) mandated the appointment of at least one woman director on the board of every listed company and certain classes of public companies, a provision that has materially expanded the pipeline of female corporate leadership. Amid a growing emphasis on women in leadership, India has demonstrated steady progress in corporate boardroom diversity.

The share of female directors grew significantly from 6% in 2014 to 14% in 2019, ultimately reaching 17.6% across NIFTY-500 directorships in 2023 (Hunt Partners, 2025)

In the domain of entrepreneurship, the DPIIT's Startup India initiative recorded over 1.5 lakh DPIIT-recognised startups as

of early 2024, of which approximately 48% have at least one woman director. Women-led startups in sectors such as fintech, edtech, agritech, and healthcare have attracted growing venture capital attention. Over INR 3000 crore, has been invested in 149 women-led startups through Alternative Investment Funds, and over INR 200 crores have been approved as funding under Startup India Seed Fund Scheme for 1278 women-led startups.

The Udyam Registration Portal data indicates that approximately 20.5% of all MSMEs registered by mid-2024 are owned or co-owned by women, representing a significant entrepreneurial base of over 2 crore enterprises.

These figures reflect not merely the outcomes of targeted schemes but the compounding effect of rising female education, increased access to digital financial services through Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile (JAM trinity), and an evolving socio-cultural environment that increasingly supports female enterprise.

Conclusion: An Inflection Point for India's Women in the Workforce

The evidence highlighted across the preceding sections collectively establishes that India is at a defining inflection point in its female labour market trajectory.

The PLFS 2023-24 documents a Female LFPR of 31.7% and a Female WPR of 30.7%, both at historic highs in the PLFS series, sustained through seven years of consistent growth from the 2017-18 baseline. The Time Use Survey 2024 corroborates these gains by documenting a 3.2 percentage-point increase in female participation in paid activities (age 15-59) compared to TUS 2019, alongside early evidence of a redistribution of unpaid care burdens.

These labour market gains are neither accidental nor unidimensional. They are the product of a deliberate and multi-layered policy architecture encompassing livelihood missions (DAY-NRLM, MGNREGS), financial inclusion (PMJDY, PMMY, Mudra), infrastructure (PM Ujjwala, Jal Jeevan Mission, PMAY), skill development (PMKVY, Skill India), and legislative reform (Maternity Benefit Amendment Act, Companies Act, Nari

Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam) that has collectively lowered barriers to female economic participation across the income spectrum.

Simultaneously, the gains in political and corporate representation from the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam's transformative reservation mandate, to women constituting 46.5% of elected PRI representatives, to the growing presence of women on corporate boards and in India's startup ecosystem signal that the empowerment dynamic is systemic rather than sectoral.

India's women are not merely entering the workforce in greater numbers; they are doing so on increasingly favourable terms in formal employment, in higher-value sectors, in entrepreneurial roles, and in positions of public and corporate leadership. The challenge ahead lies in sustaining, deepening, and equitably distributing these gains, particularly toward the most marginalised women across caste, geography, and socioeconomic strata. The data is unambiguous: India's female labour

force revolution is underway, and the foundation laid over the past seven years positions the country well to meet its aspiration of a Viksit Bharat wherein women's economic agency is both instrument and embodiment of national progress.

References

Sen, A., 1990. Millions of women are missing. *New York Review of Books* (Dec. 20, 1990).

Drèze, J. and Sen, A., 2013. *An uncertain glory: India and its contradictions*. Princeton University Press.

Goldin, C., 1994. The U-shaped female labor force function in economic development and economic history.

Elborgh-Woytek, M.K., Newiak, M.M., Kochhar, M.K., Fabrizio, M.S., Kpodar, M.K., Wingender, M.P., Clements, M.B.J. and Schwartz, M.G., 2013. *Women, work, and the economy: Macroeconomic gains from gender equity*. International Monetary Fund.



FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

Evaluating the Impact of Gender Diversity Policies on Women's Career Progression in Corporate India

Dr. Subi Chaturvedi, PhD IIT Delhi



Abstract

This chapter explores the role and impact of gender diversity and inclusion (D&I) policies on the career advancement of women in corporate India. Drawing on primary research via a confidential survey of 150 women professionals in early and mid-career stages, the study examines to what extent organizational policies translate into meaningful workplace experiences.

The findings show that although the majority of organizations have developed gender diversity policies, there is still scope for increasing awareness and understanding of these frameworks among employees. Importantly, where such policies are effectively communicated and implemented, they positively influence career growth, confidence, and retention.

Key interventions such as flexible work arrangements, parental leave, and anti-harassment measures are widely recognized, while women's leadership development initiatives present an area for expansion.

The research highlights the need to move beyond policy adoption toward consistent implementation supported by strong communication, accountability, and feedback mechanisms. Insights from lived experiences further demonstrate that targeted interventions can have a transformative impact on women's professional journeys.

The study concludes that the effectiveness of gender inclusion lies not merely in policy presence but in its sustained integration into organizational culture and practice.

Introduction

India is at the crossroad of its mission to be a Viksit Bharat by 2047. At the heart of this vision lies the effective and long-term participation of women in the labor force, not only as contributors but also as leaders, decision-makers, and drivers of economic development.

Over the past decade, there has been a growing emphasis on gender diversity and inclusion (D&I) in corporate India. Organizations have implemented an array of policies including flexible work schedules, returnship initiatives, leadership programs, pay equity commitments, and anti-harassment frameworks. These developments signal a positive shift.

Nevertheless, the presence of policies does not guarantee equitable outcomes. The critical question remains: do these policies translate into actual career progression, agency, and opportunity for women?

This chapter aims to answer that question.

This study seeks to develop an evidence-based and action-oriented understanding of women's economic participation by examining how gender diversity policies are enacted in practice, and how they influence career trajectories, workplace culture, leadership access, and professional effectiveness.

Placing lived experience at the center, the study moves beyond quantitative indicators to explore workplace

dynamics such as informal norms, cultural biases, support systems, and structural constraints.

In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gender inclusion—one that evaluates success not only in policy design but in implementation, accountability, and everyday practice.

This approach enables a deeper examination of the gap between institutional intent and experiential reality within organizations.

Literature Review

The growing body of evidence on the involvement of women in the formal labor force notes its key importance in enhancing economic growth, organizational performance, and inclusive development.

According to the McKinsey Global Institute (2015), promoting gender equality has the potential to contribute considerably to the world GDP, and India is set to gain a lot as it has a demographic advantage. This is in accordance with the long-term development agenda of India in which enhancing the economic role of women is seen more as a primary pillar of sustainable and inclusive development.

Gender diversity and inclusion (D&I) policies have become significantly more popular at the organizational level. Studies conducted by McKinsey and Company and LeanIn.Org constantly conclude that more gendered companies, especially in

leadership positions, are more prone to become profitable, innovative, and quality-driven in their decision-making processes (McKinsey and Company and LeanIn.Org, 2023). The results have prompted Indian based companies to invest in formal interventions like leadership development initiatives, flexible working policies and mentoring networks to enable women professionals to experience more enabling environments.

Nevertheless, some key organizational dynamics that influence the way these policies become outcomes are also noted in the literature. A popular phenomenon is the leaky pipeline in which the proportion of women in the workforce reduces with each higher level of seniority.

Although the participation of entry-level has increased, there is still a chance to enhance retention, promotion opportunities, and women leadership in the company at higher ranks (McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org, 2023). This points out the importance of ensuring that it is not only the organizations that attract women talent, but that they also retain and develop them with specific support systems, sponsorship and inclusive leadership practices.

Research works by scholars also indicate that workplace culture and structural enablers are also significant in career trajectories. Inclusive workplaces, whose main features include equitable access to opportunities, accommodating management, and

appreciation of alternative career paths, have been reported to have a positive impact on the professional development and lifetime participation of women (Trinkenreich et al., 2022). Also, changing work patterns, such as hybrid and flexible working, are providing more and more possibilities of more effectively balancing professional and nonprofessional responsibilities, allowing a wider range of people to play a role at various life stages.

Research in the Indian context indicates that evolving socio-economic statuses, increased access to education and the increased opportunities in the formal sector are all leading to a progressive increase in women participation in the labor force. According to a study by Klasen and Pieters (2015), women have labour market results based on a set of economic benefits and social aspects, which imply the significance of combined policies aimed at supporting their outcomes via organizational innovation.

The existence of gender diversity policy(ies) in a workplace is one of the most important markers of progressive efforts made by an organization to create accepting, supportive, and conducive workspaces for women employees. In fact, studies have suggested that there's a resounding positive correlation between the existence of workplace gender diversity policies and the gains in reported employee well-being. In fact, a key study has

pointed out that the notification of gender diversity policies and their positive communication to the employees is an important tool to reduce employee attrition and improve retention. The same study highlights gender-inclusive practices that attempt to dismantle gender based barriers, cultivate equity, and create an environment where all employees feel valued and supported, "reinforces trust in organizational leadership, enhances psychological safety, and reduces voluntary turnover rates".

Generally, the literature is characterized by a positive trend, where institutions are increasingly committed and business are taking part in promoting gender inclusion. Simultaneously, it highlights an important opportunity: to enhance the efficacy of current efforts by filling the gaps in career development and leadership. Empowering this pipeline, between entry and leadership, will be central to the realization of the full potential of women in the workforce.

This supports the significance of basing research on lived experiences as it has been done in the current study to gain a better view of how policies are practiced and how they can be maximized even more to make a difference.

Overall, the literature indicates a positive institutional trajectory while emphasizing the need to strengthen the translation of policy into measurable outcomes.

Methodology

The study employed a structured anonymous survey to elicit the lived-experiences of women professionals in corporate India.

A total of about 250 respondents were targeted, and the questionnaire was sent and submitted online through Google forms. Random purposive sampling was employed to select women who were in the early and middle of their careers, and are currently employed in different sectors.

A total of 150 valid responses were recorded. The questionnaire instrument contained a combination of both quantitative and qualitative questions and employed various tools for collecting data including the likert scale and open and closed-ended questions.

The obtained data was analyzed in a structured format through SPSS which allowed both descriptive and inferential information to be obtained.

It enabled the detection of the major trends, associations, and patterns on which the documented evidence-based perspective on how the policies on D&I work could be transformed into real outcomes of women professionals.

appreciation of alternative career paths, have been reported to have a positive impact on the professional development and lifetime participation of women (Trinkenreich et al., 2022). Also, changing work patterns, such as hybrid and flexible working, are providing more and more possibilities of more effectively balancing professional and nonprofessional responsibilities, allowing a wider range of people to play a role at various life stages.

Research in the Indian context indicates that evolving socio-economic statuses, increased access to education and the increased opportunities in the formal sector are all leading to a progressive increase in women participation in the labor force. According to a study by Klases and Pieters (2015), women have labour market results based on a set of economic benefits and social aspects, which imply the significance of combined policies aimed at supporting their outcomes via organizational innovation.

The existence of gender diversity policy(ies) in a workplace is one of the most important markers of progressive efforts made by an organization to create accepting, supportive, and conducive workspaces for women employees. In fact, studies have suggested that there's a resounding positive correlation between the existence of workplace gender diversity policies and the gains in reported employee well-being. In fact, a key study has

pointed out that the notification of gender diversity policies and their positive communication to the employees is an important tool to reduce employee attrition and improve retention. The same study highlights gender-inclusive practices that attempt to dismantle gender based barriers, cultivate equity, and create an environment where all employees feel valued and supported, "reinforces trust in organizational leadership, enhances psychological safety, and reduces voluntary turnover rates".

Generally, the literature is characterized by a positive trend, where institutions are increasingly committed and business are taking part in promoting gender inclusion. Simultaneously, it highlights an important opportunity: to enhance the efficacy of current efforts by filling the gaps in career development and leadership. Empowering this pipeline, between entry and leadership, will be central to the realization of the full potential of women in the workforce.

This supports the significance of basing research on lived experiences as it has been done in the current study to gain a better view of how policies are practiced and how they can be maximized even more to make a difference.

Overall, the literature indicates a positive institutional trajectory while emphasizing the need to strengthen the translation of policy into measurable outcomes.

Methodology

The study employed a structured anonymous survey to elicit the lived-experiences of women professionals in corporate India. A total of about 250 respondents were targeted, and the questionnaire was sent and submitted online through Google forms. Random purposive sampling was employed to select women who were in the early and middle of their careers, and are currently employed in different sectors.

A total of 150 valid responses were recorded. The questionnaire instrument contained a combination of both quantitative and qualitative questions and employed various tools for collecting data including the likert scale and open and closed-ended questions. The obtained data was analyzed in a structured format through SPSS which allowed both descriptive and inferential information to be obtained.

It enabled the detection of the major trends, associations, and patterns on which the documented evidence-based perspective on how the policies on D&I work could be transformed into real outcomes of women professionals.

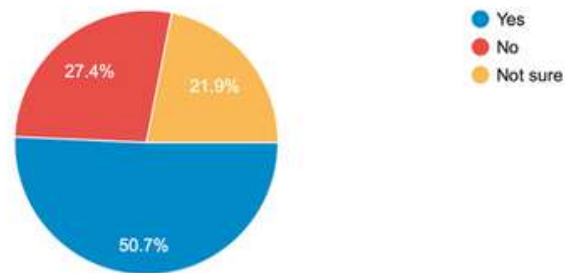
Findings

Policy Adoption and Awareness

A little over 50% of respondents reported that their organisations had gender diversity policies. However, less than one-third were aware of policy details, while a significant proportion remained uncertain about their existence.

As is evident in Fig 1, despite 50% of the women reporting that their workplace does possess a gender diversity policy, less than 1/3rd are aware of its contents. A slightly higher proportion record that they have no knowledge of the specifics of these policies at all.

Does your company have a stated gender diversity policy?



If yes, how familiar are you with the specifics of this policy?

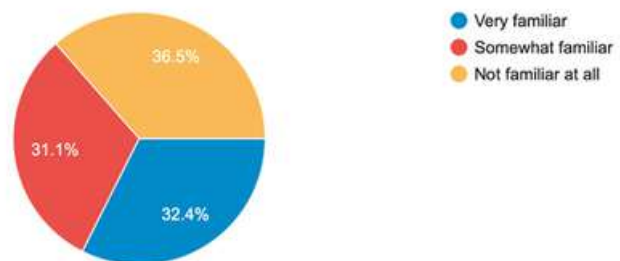


Fig 1: Comparison of Organizational Adoption of Gender Diversity Policies and Employee Awareness of Policy Provisions (top vs bottom)

Communication of Policies

For the various modes of communication employed to inform regarding gender inclusion policies, around 60% of the respondents reported that they were informed about these during an interactive program/event such as an

induction session or internal workshop, while passive means like email or handbooks were employed in 29% of the cases.

respondents reported a very positive impact of gender diversity policies on their career growth, while 33% experienced moderate benefits.

Impact on Career Growth

Close to 24% of

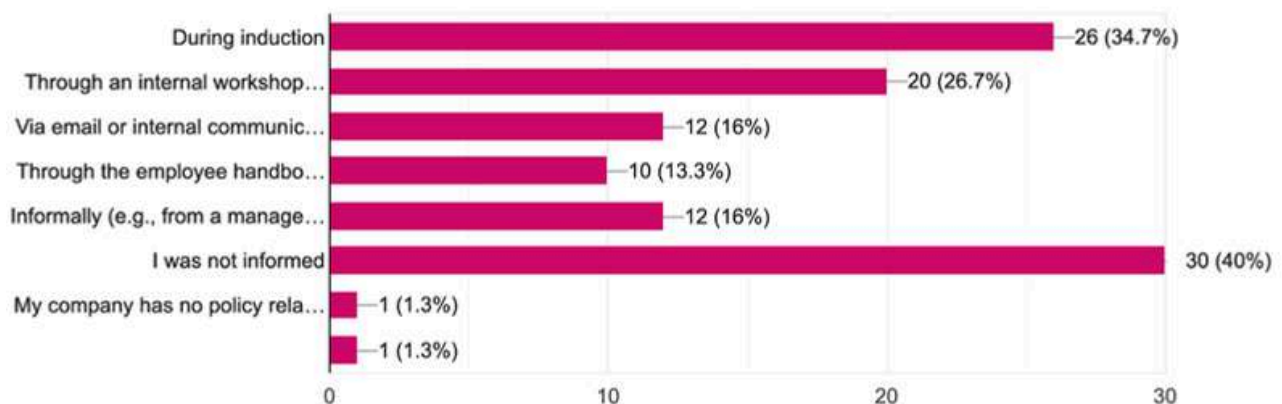


Fig 2: Modes of communicating gender diversity policies

Types of Policies Implemented

Flexible work arrangements (54%), parental leave (49%), and anti-harassment policies (38%) were most common. Leadership development initiatives and gender-sensitive evaluations were less prevalent.

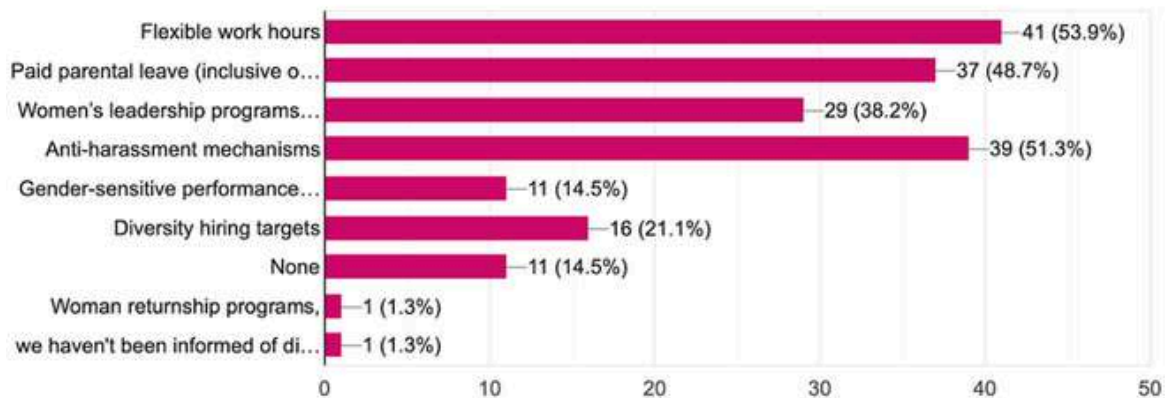


Fig. 3: Reported gender inclusive policies

Impact on Retention

Around 54% of respondents indicated that gender-inclusive policies significantly influenced their decision to remain in their organizations. Less than 5% believed that it wasn't important.

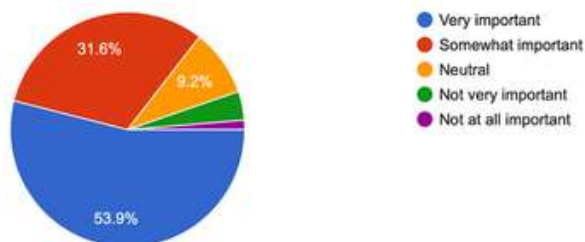


Fig. 4: Impact of gender inclusive policies on retention

Reporting and Redressal

Over 50% of respondents were not fully comfortable raising concerns. Only a minority reported satisfactory resolution, while others experienced weak follow-up or negative consequences.

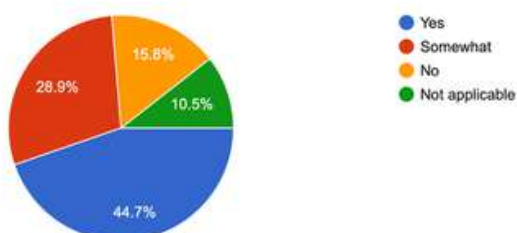


Fig. 5: Ease in reporting gender concerns at workplace

Discussion

The findings suggest that while gender diversity policies are increasingly adopted, their effectiveness is closely tied to awareness, communication, and implementation. Limited understanding of policies indicates a gap between institutional intent and employee experience.

At the same time, the positive impact on career growth demonstrates that well-implemented policies can significantly enhance confidence, aspiration, and participation. Gaps in leadership development initiatives highlight the persistence of structural barriers, particularly in advancing women to senior roles.

Implementation challenges and weak grievance mechanisms further underscore the need for stronger accountability systems.

Enhancing the Vigor and Presence of Gender Diversity Policies

Although more than half of the respondents reported that their organizations had gender diversity policies in place, they have poor understanding of the policy details, with less than a third aware of the specifics of the policies.

For instance, one respondent noted that while her organization had a formal gender policy, she only became aware of its provisions much later in her tenure through informal peer conversations rather than official channels

This is a great opportunity to organizations to improve internal communication and interaction. It is positive that most respondents got introduced to these policies via interactive methods like induction sessions and workshops. Enhanced policy visibility and employee alignment can be greatly achieved by further development of these structured touchpoints, such as continuous learning, refresher, and leadership communication.

Career Development as a Product of Formal Policies

The results clearly show that formal gender diversity policies do have a significant role to play in influencing career paths. Most participants said that such policies had a positive effect on their career development, which supports international findings on the importance of systematic inclusion systems. Not only do these policies offer institutional support, but it is also an indicator of organizational commitment, which can lead to increased confidence, aspiration, and long-term participation among women employees.

This is further reinforced by individual experiences shared by respondents. One professional highlighted that a formal policy mandating the consideration of at least one woman candidate for leadership roles encouraged her to apply for a team lead position, which she ultimately secured, marking a pivotal moment in her career and significantly boosting her confidence and visibility.

Increasing the Scope of Interventions

Companies have gone a long way in ensuring that they have put in place some of the essential gender-inclusive practices like flexible work schedules, sick leaves, and anti-harassment policies. Such interventions are responsive to changing needs in the workforce. A respondent shared that access to a leadership development program specifically designed to improve women's representation in management provided her with mentorship, exposure, and the confidence to transition into a leadership role

Meanwhile, the potential to extend the scope even further appears to be quite apparent specifically in respect to women leadership development and sponsorship schemes, which have yet to be widely embraced. These channels will be essential in enhancing the development of a strong leadership pipeline and longer-term representation at senior

levels.

The translation of Policy into Practice: Improving the effectiveness of implementation

Although the adoption of policy is on the rise, the results show that the effects of such initiatives are highly dependent on how they are implemented. It is worth noting that a large share of respondents pointed out that policies continue to change regarding uniform implementation.

This highlights the possibility of organizations institutionalizing such frameworks by ensuring accountability mechanisms are clear and regularly monitored and integrated into the main business processes.

Some respondents also indicated that while policies are formally in place, their visibility in day-to-day work environments can vary, suggesting an opportunity to further embed these initiatives into organizational culture and routine practices.

The transition between intent and implementation will be one of the keys to achieving the full value of gender inclusion initiatives.

Creating Trust by Responsive Workplace Ecosystems

The data captures a supportive environment in most areas, with many women free to raise gender-related concerns

pointing to increased openness and discussion in organizations.

Meanwhile, experiences in the realm of resolution and follow-up indicate that there is room to enhance redressal procedures to achieve uniformity and credibility.

Building open, responsive and communicative grievance channels can also build confidence and help to add to a more welcoming working atmosphere.

These findings reinforce the argument that policy effectiveness is contingent upon its integration into organizational culture rather than its formal existence alone.

Conclusion

The study highlights both progress and opportunity in advancing gender inclusion in corporate India. Organizations have made meaningful efforts in adopting gender diversity policies, and these initiatives have demonstrated tangible benefits in career progression, confidence, and retention.

However, the full potential of these policies remains unrealized due to gaps in awareness, implementation, and institutional support systems. Bridging these gaps will be essential in aligning policy intent with workplace reality. Notably, the first-hand experiences expressed by

the respondents indicate that even specific, well-planned interventions may bring forth significant opportunities and cause a genuine transformation.

With the future of Viksit Bharat 2047, there is a solid base to establish in India.

Organizations can be instrumental in creating inclusive, equitable, and future-ready workplaces by focusing on aligning the intent and practice of policy, as well as putting the voices and experiences of women at the heart of the policy.

References

Fine, C., Sojo, V. and Lawford-Smith, H. (2020). Why Does Workplace Gender Diversity matter? justice, Organizational benefits, and Policy. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 14(1), pp.36–72. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/sipr.12064>

Klasen, S. and Pieters, J. (2015). What explains the stagnation of female labor force participation in urban India?', *The World Bank Economic Review*, 29(3), pp. 449–478.

McKinsey Global Institute (2015). *The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in India*. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com>

McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org (2023). *Women in the Workplace 2023*. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com>

Mishra, K.K. (2025). Gender-Inclusive HR Policies and Their Influence on Talent Retention. *TPM – Testing, Psychometrics, Methodology in Applied Psychology*, [online] 32(S9 (2025): Posted 15 December), pp.2245–2254. Available at: <https://tpmap.org/submission/index.php/tpm/article/view/3685>.

Trinkenreich, B., Santos, G., Guizani, M. and Wiese, I. (2022). Women's career progression in the workplace: A systematic literature review, *IEEE Access*, 10, pp. 123–140.

Recommendations

6 Pillars for Sustaining Workplace Gender Diversity

A framework for institutionalizing inclusion through leadership development, accountability, and data-driven feedback loops.

Strategic Growth & Inclusive Culture



Institutionalize Leadership Pathways

Expand structured leadership programs, mentorship, and sponsorship networks to build a robust female talent pipeline.



Expand Inclusive Workplace Practices

Strengthen inclusion through returnship programs, career re-entry pathways, and customized life-stage support.



Continuous Policy Engagement

Move beyond one-time communication by using regular workshops, leadership-led conversations, and accessible policy dashboards.

Accountability & Feedback Systems



Embed Measurable Accountability

Integrate inclusion goals into leadership performance evaluations and track progress using internal metrics.



Strengthen Redressal & Trust

Build trust through accessible grievance channels, timely action, and transparent communication of outcomes.



Data-Driven Improvement

Utilize regular surveys and employee feedback loops to center lived experiences in decision-making.



The Gender Workforce Paradox From Potential to Participation

The pivot of our era is a choice between two distinct technological futures

UNEQUAL BY DEFAULT



Who will shape the future
of the AI economy?

AI is not just a technological shift-it is a civilizational transition affecting how economies function, how societies organize, and how power is distributed.
Market-driven exclusion and fragmentation.

INCLUSIVE BY DESIGN



AI is not just a technological shift-it is a civilizational transition affecting how economies function, how societies organize, and how power is distributed.
Human-centered, accessible ecosystems.

Technology can displace more
women than it empowers without
intentional intervention

THE OPPORTUNITY: High-Growth Sectors

AI creates vast new demands in data annotation, AI governance, product design, digital entrepreneurship, and cybersecurity.

THE RISK: Automation Vulnerability

Women are disproportionately represented in roles highly vulnerable to automation: administrative work, clerical jobs, and routine service roles.

THE MANDATE

Transitioning women from vulnerable to high-growth roles requires intentional, coordinated action across education systems, industry training, and government policy.

From Pipeline to Power

Rethinking Women's Place in India's Workforce

Bridging the Gap: India's Women in STEM Pipeline

43% Graduate

Engineering Lags Behind Life Sciences
Women make up only 28.7% of B.Tech engineering programs.

The Leaky Pipeline

but only
14-27%
Work

A significant number of female graduates do not transition into STEM careers.

The R&D Landscape

Government Leads in R&D Employment

Nearly half of women in STEM R&D work within government sectors.

Government
45.87%

27.62%

26.51% Participation in Private Industry

Private industry represents the smallest share of women in R&D roles

Industry
26.51%

Excluding women from technology development creates massive economic blind spots

1 Innovation Loss

Homogeneous teams consistently miss critical insights about real-world user needs

2 Market Blind Spots

Women influence a majority of global consumer decisions. Products designed without diverse perspectives miss highly profitable market segments.

3 Systemic Bias


AI learns from the assumptions embedded by creators. Absent diverse teams, bias is hardcoded into algorithms affecting millions globally.

**Gender inclusion is not diversity management.
It is technology governance.**

SECTION 2

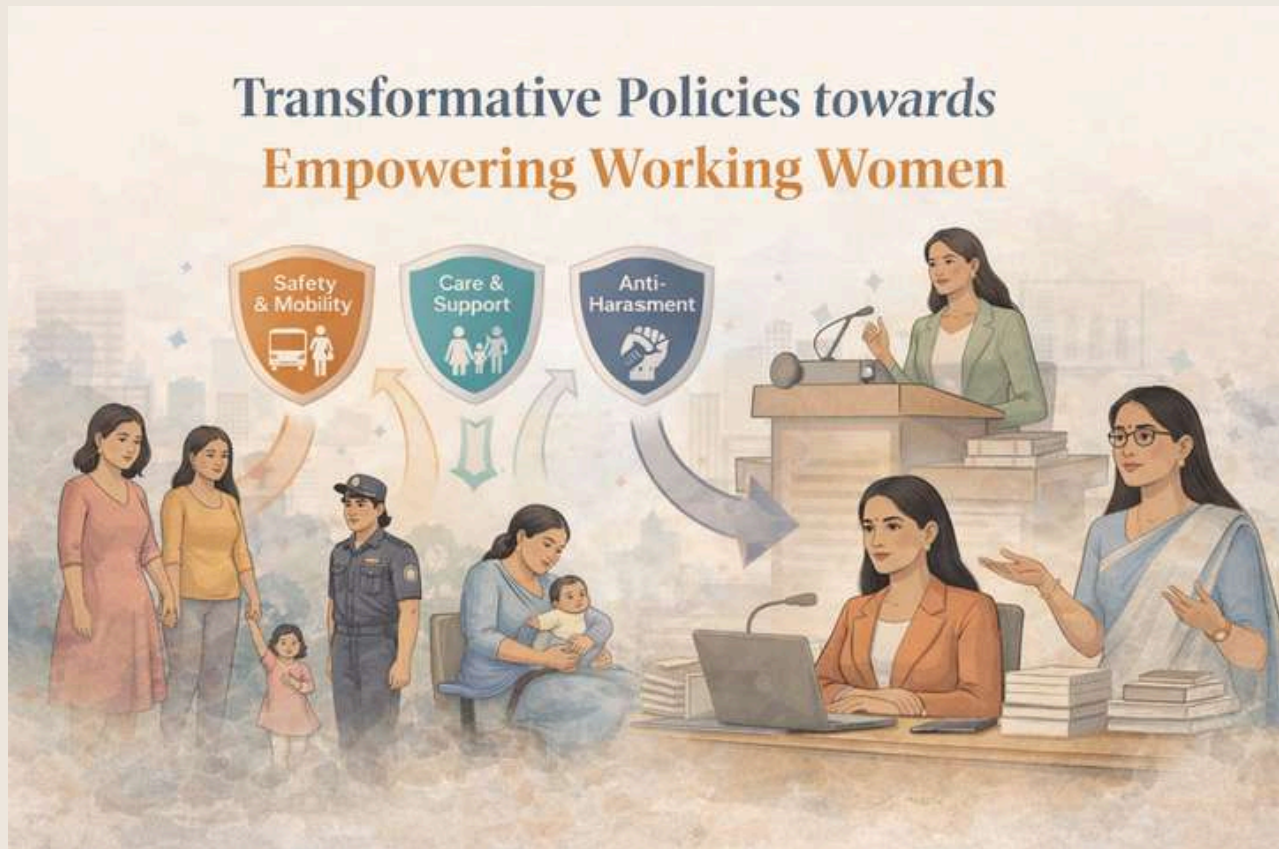
Bridging Intent and Impact

Understanding Structural Barriers to Women's Participation

This section examines the structural and systemic barriers that shape women's entry, retention, and progression in the workforce. 

TRANSFORMATIVE POLICIES TOWARDS EMPOWERING WORKING WOMEN

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES)



It is often assumed that economic or financial empowerment is the base for advancing women's rights, and other capabilities rest upon this base. In reality, working women can face more violence and discrimination both at home and in the workplace, than women who are not in paid employment. Studies show that working women are at higher risk of domestic violence at home, particularly when their husband is unemployed (Krishnan et al, 2009). Paid employment, on its own, is insufficient to empower women to make decisions, enter senior positions in the workplace, or take part in policy making processes.

The creation of jobs needs to be accompanied with support structures and workplace policies that truly empower women. The goal of our endeavors should be to generate women leaders who occupy senior positions in workplaces. Towards this, ensuring safety in public spaces and mobility, a comprehensive care work policy and a robust anti sexual harassment policy that also addresses gender-based discrimination is required. This paper will provide suggestions, for both the state and workplaces, that go beyond providing remuneration, towards generating women leaders.

Background

A higher number of women suffered from the fallout of the Covid 19 pandemic than men. One of the most damaging outcomes of the lockdown for women was the loss of employment and livelihood. In India, widespread job losses in formal sectors (close to 21 million salaried jobs) were lost as a result of the pandemic and the lockdown (see for example, LiveMint 2020). In April 2020 62% of the men who were employed in December continued to be employed; for women only 32% of those who were employed in December still had a job (LiveMint 2020). Women in urban India saw the deepest job losses.

Post Covid 19, in order to mitigate the economic losses suffered, government schemes promoting self-employment among rural women, have helped raise the female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) as per the Periodic Labour Force Survey. As per the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data, the rural FLFPR has

increased significantly by 23 percentage points between 2017-18 and 2023-24 (24.6% in 2017-18 and 47.6% in 2023-24). The Skill India Mission and loans for women through Stand Up India have been identified as initiatives that have improved female workers' employability. Yet, the PLFS data also notes that a notable 43.04% of women in India identify childcare and homemaking responsibilities as barriers to securing paid employment.

The PLFS data does not capture whether domestic violence at home, fear of violence in workplaces or while traveling to the workplace inhibits women from taking up paid employment. Anecdotal evidence does suggest that women are discouraged from taking up employment in areas considered as unsafe – for example, criminal law practice, politics, or jobs that require frequent travel or transfers (see for example IndiaSpend 2022). Further, mindsets that assume care work is inherently a woman's job and lack of policy level

interventions to reduce care responsibilities restrict women from taking up paid work. While the numbers of working women may have increased, there are very few women holding senior positions in almost all workplaces; women comprise only 5% of the top management in Indian Companies [IIM (A), 2022].

Safety in Public Spaces and Mobility

According to the ILO, lack of transport can reduce the probability of women working by 16.5% (ILO, 2017). Equally, women are less likely to participate in the workforce when the crime rate is perceived as high (Chakraborty et al, 2014). Increasing access to safe public transport is necessary in order to provide the freedom to work and to avoid women dropping out from the workforce.

In India, the latest surveys indicate that women feel unsafe while traveling alone at night (She Shakti Suraksha Survey, 2025)

Restriction on women working at night (for

example, in the Factories Act 1948) are gender sensitive, but not gender transformative, and do not address the root cause, that is, the perception of feeling unsafe at night. In 2024, following the rape and murder of a woman Doctor in the RG Kar hospital in Kolkata, the Supreme Court directed the government of West Bengal to amend a notification (Rattierer Saathi) that women can be restricted from working at night.

Rather than impose restrictions on women's work, efforts to increase the sense of safety, even when working late at night are required. Towards this, discussions with Panchayats on enabling women's mobility in rural areas, awareness generation through "reclaim the night" movements, and infrastructural changes (such as increasing street lighting, encouraging sustainable modes of transport) are more empowering for working women.

The Janki Devi Memorial College in Delhi has organized numerous sessions on bystander intervention.

These sessions enable students to be ready to engage as bystanders when witnessing cases of

sexual harassment in public places. The sessions encourage women students to assert their right to use public spaces, and to prepare in advance for the backlash that they are likely to face when asserting this right. Such programmes can be scaled up to instill greater confidence in young women to aspire for work that requires navigating public spaces.

Gender Based Discrimination – need to amend the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (or "POSH" Act) does not deal with gender discrimination at the workplace. Gender based discrimination can manifest itself in many ways in workplaces; for example, allocating less important work to women employees, asking women candidates at the time of the interview about their marriage plans, or assuming that women are unwilling to travel or work late. Cases of gender based discrimination that do not amount to sexual harassment at the workplace cannot be

dealt with by the Internal Committee.

For example, in a case that came up in a well known NGO, the respondent used a sexist term to address a woman supervisor when she admonished his work. As the act was not sexual, the Internal Committee could not take any disciplinary action against the respondent. This case highlights the need to widen the scope of the Act to include gender based discrimination and not to narrowly focus on sexual harassment.

The POSH Act has other limitations as well. The law requires that the Internal Committee be created with an external member. Normally, as the employer has a say in who is appointed as the external member, a person who is malleable can be appointed – without consideration of his / her competence in dealing with such cases. The employer shall act upon the final report of the Internal Committee (and is not bound to implement the recommendations of the IC); thereby making the operation of the law hierarchical (section 13 of the POSH Act).

Gender sensitization, which is an important means to counter both

sexism and sexual harassment at workplaces, is not mandatory under the law.

In the annual trainings, workplaces tend to prefer discussions on the Act rather than discussion on gender sensitization, which is considered unimportant by most HR professionals. Innovative awareness sessions that include gender sensitization can help workplaces develop policies that retain women workers.

A comprehensive policy to address care work Care work, which includes cooking, cleaning, taking care of children and the elderly, plays a large role in women dropping out from the workforce. Invariably, the burden of care work falls upon women who either assign the work to women care workers (domestic workers, nurses, nannies) or they take it upon themselves.

Investing in a care economy, that is, providing secure and decent work for care workers, is a win-win solution, which ensures that both decent jobs are created and women are freed from responsibilities that prevent them from seeking work.

State investment in care work is necessary for a comprehensive solution towards increasing the

FLFPR. Investing in a care economy can potentially create 300 million jobs by 2035 (UN Women, 2024).

Skilling opportunities in care work (both for men and women), creating infrastructure for laundry in India, old age homes, creche facilities in each locality, and improving the working conditions for ASHA and Anganwadi workers by classifying them as workers and not “volunteers” will ensure that more women can enter the workforce.

Importantly, extending protection to care workers from violence and sexual harassment (by ratifying ILO Convention 190), by creating awareness on who is the district officer, strengthening the capacity of the local committee to deal with such cases, as well as supporting unions for care workers will ensure that such workers feel

empowered in their work.

Conclusion

Economic independence allows women greater freedoms, the ability to make decisions, and to leave abusive relationships.

However, receiving financial remuneration on its own does not provide the capability necessary for living a life of value. Decisions by women over how to spend the money earned, whether to take a transfer for a better opportunity, or whether to continue working after having a child are often influenced by gender stereotypes and expectations.

In order to counter the structural barriers faced by women towards achieving success, supportive measures by both workplaces and the state can help bring about transformative change.

Recommendations:

1. Strengthen safe mobility and public infrastructure for women through improved transport systems, lighting, and community-led initiatives to enhance confidence and enable participation across diverse occupations
2. Expand the scope of workplace policies to address both sexual harassment and broader gender-based discrimination, including bias in hiring, task allocation, and career progression
3. Institutionalize mandatory gender sensitization and awareness programmes within organizations to foster inclusive workplace cultures and improve retention and leadership outcomes for women
4. Develop and scale comprehensive care economy policies, including childcare, eldercare, and support services, to reduce the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on women
5. Promote integrated support systems combining employment opportunities with social protections, safety measures, and leadership pathways to enable women not only to participate but to advance into decision-making roles

STRENGTHENING GENDER RESPONSIVE BUDGETING FOR ENHANCING FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION

Aishwarya Bhuta, The Quantum Hub (TQH)

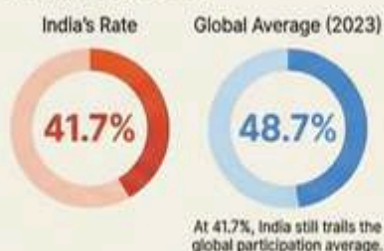
Transforming India's Economy: The Path to 70% Female Labour Force Participation

India sees rising female labour force participation but aims higher. Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) is the strategic tool to mainstream gender needs across all policies for the "Viksit Bharat" goal.

Rising from 23.3% to 41.7%



The Participation Gap



The "Viksit Bharat" 70% Target



Strategy: Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB)



Executive Summary

The female labour force participation rate in India has been showing an upward trend in recent years, and climbed to 41.7% in 2023-24 (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2024). However, it remains lower than the global average of 48.7% in 2023 [International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2024]. Meanwhile, the Finance Minister's speech presenting the Union Budget 2025-26 envisaged increasing women's economic participation to 70% to realise the goal of Viksit Bharat.

The budget can be an effective policy instrument for meeting this stated objective. The Union Ministry of Women and Child Development, as the nodal Ministry for gender responsive budgeting, has emphasised that gender budgeting does not imply preparing separate budgets for women and girls. Rather, it is a strategy aimed at transformative financing such that it leads to a positive impact in their lives. Thus, it is not only about initiating women-specific schemes and programmes, but also including women and girls in all policies and programmes run by the government.

by effectively identifying their gender-specific challenges and needs.

In June 2025, the Ministry of Women and Child Development launched a Gender Budgeting Knowledge Hub, a digital repository of resources on gender responsive budgeting processes for government ministries and departments as well as other stakeholders (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2025). This is a welcome initiative reflecting the Government of India's commitment as well as intent to mainstream gender responsive budgeting practices.

This chapter makes a case for deepening gender responsive budgeting to boost female labour force participation in India. Union Budget allocations

for key schemes and programmatic interventions impacting women's labour force participation in 2025-26 have been analysed and policy considerations offered for routing budgetary priorities towards enabling and enhancing women's labour force participation.

This chapter is based on secondary research. An examination of relevant budgetary documents released by the Union government, Annual Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) reports, and responses to parliamentary questions submitted by various Ministries/Departments have informed the analysis.

Female labour force participation in India

According to PLFS

estimates, female labour force participation rates rose significantly from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 41.7% in 2023-24 (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2019; 2024). This surge is driven largely by rural females in the self-employed category, indicating distress employment rather than gainful employment generation (Agrawal and Bhattacharya, 2024).

Despite the upward trend in female labour force participation between 2017-18 and 2023-24 (with the exception of the COVID-19-affected years), gender gaps in labour force participation persist. The gender gap was above 50% in both rural and urban areas in 2017-18.

The gender gap narrowed by 19.2 percentage points in rural areas, from 51.8% in 2017-18 to 32.6% in 2023-24. In comparison, it narrowed by only 6.5 percentage points in urban areas during the same period.

As of 2023-24, the gender gap in labour force participation was 47.6% in urban areas compared to 32.6% in rural areas.

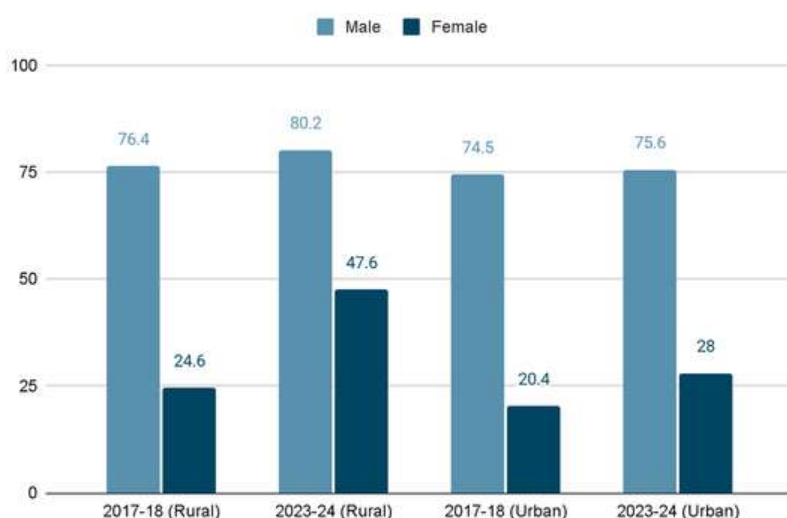


Figure 1. Labour force participation rates (in %) in India by gender and location (ages 15 and above)
Source: Adapted from Annual PLFS reports 2017-18 and 2023-24.



Figure 2. Percentage distribution of female workers by category of employment, 2017-18 and 2023-24
Source: Adapted from Annual PLFS reports 2017-18 and 2023-24.

The proportion of self-employed women workers saw an upsurge in rural as well urban areas between 2017-18 and 2023-24, with nearly three in every four women being self-employed in rural areas in 2023-24. A parallel development is a decline in the proportion of women in regular wage/salaried labour as well as casual labour during this period.

Deshpande (2023) posits that in an ideal scenario, if a declining proportion of women in casual labour is counter-balanced by an expansion in regular wage/salaried jobs, then it demonstrates improved job quality. However, as the expansion has been in self-employment rather than salaried jobs, this is more likely to be a symptom of disguised unemployment or under-employment. The Women and Work Report 2023 (Oberai et al., 2024) also notes that the increase in women’s self-employment rather than salaried jobs indicates the continuing crisis of limited opportunities in formal employment coupled with poor quality of jobs for rural women in particular.

In summation, women’s labour force participation remains significantly lower than that of their male counterparts, and women’s increasing participation in self-employment is indicative of an employment crisis. There is a need for greater budgetary attention towards narrowing gender gaps, and generating decent work and livelihood opportunities for women.

Union Budget 2025-26: Schemes for promoting women’s economic participation

Gender responsive budgeting entails incorporating a gender lens throughout the budget cycle of planning and formulation, enactment, execution, and audit. Chakraborty (2014) refers to gender responsive budgeting as a “fiscal innovation in that it translates gender commitments into fiscal commitments” (p. 1). Policies, schemes and programmatic interventions are not gender-neutral; access and participation vary by gender. This makes it crucial to integrate women’s needs and concerns in scheme design to achieve positive outcomes towards improving their economic participation in remunerative work.

Since its maiden publication in 2005-06, the Gender Budget Statement remains an important entry point and tool for implementing gender responsive budgeting in India. In line with the Government of India’s focus on women-led development in recent years, the gender budget received its highest-ever allocation at INR 4,49,028.68 crore, constituting a significant 8.86% of the Union Budget expenditure. Notably, the gender budget crossed 1% of the GDP for the second year in a row, nearly amounting to 1.38% of the GDP.

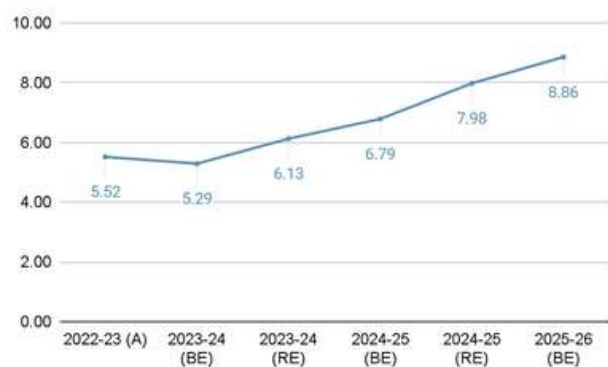


Figure 3. Gender budget as % of overall budget expenditure in recent years

Source: Compiled from Union budget documents, various years.

From the perspective of gender responsive budgeting, four pillars hold significance for enhancing women's economic participation - livelihoods and employment, entrepreneurship, skilling, and women's economic empowerment (WEE)-enabling infrastructure.

Allocations for key schemes under each pillar are discussed as follows:

(i) Livelihoods and employment

The National Rural Livelihood Mission - Aajeevika, aimed at supporting rural livelihoods, saw a notable increase in allocations of 26.3% in 2025-26 (BE) over the budget estimates of the previous year. However, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) saw stagnant total allocations at INR 86,000 crore in 2025-26.

In the case of the MGNREGS, the revised estimates tend to be higher given the demand-driven nature of the scheme. For instance, while the budget estimate for the scheme was INR 60,000 crore in 2023-24, the revised estimate was increased to INR 86,000 crore. To address this and prevent the need for supplementary allocations, the permissible expenditure under the scheme was capped at 60% for the first half of 2025-26 (Sharma, 2025).

This is questionable given the high dues from the previous FY to the tune of INR 21,000 crore. Further, there is a likelihood of delays in providing employment and disbursing wages to rural workers in the event that 60% of the allocation is used up by September 2025 (Tamang and Chakraborty, 2025).

It is worth noting that women's participation in the MGNREGS has constantly been above 50% since 2012-13 (Lok Sabha unstarred question, 2013) and reached 58.9% in 2023-24 (Ministry of Finance, 2024).

The proportion of the total MGNREGS allocation being reported in Part B of the Gender Budget Statement increased from 33.6% in 2024-25 to 46.5% in 2025-26. Given that the Gender Budget Statement reflects the proportion of the total scheme allocation earmarked for girls and women, it is promising that women's increasing participation in the MGNREGS reflects a corresponding increase in proportionate allocations in the Gender Budget Statement.

Within allied activities, while the National Livestock Mission saw overall allocations soar from INR 450 crore in 2024-25 (RE) to INR 800 crore in 2025-26 (BE), Part B of the Gender Budget Statement reflected a flat 30% of these allocations (INR 240 crore).

The Namu Drone Didi scheme is aimed at training SHG women in drone technology for agriculture. It saw a 50% decline in revised estimates for 2024-25 to INR 250 crore compared to the budget estimates for the same year, but received a shot in the arm in 2025-26 (BE) with INR 950.85 crore set aside for the scheme.

(ii) Entrepreneurship

The Economic Survey 2024-25 noted that among rural women, the share of own account workers/employers

surged from 19% in 2017-18 to 31.2% in 2023-24, highlighting a significant move toward independent work and entrepreneurship (Ministry of Finance, 2025). The Gender Budget Statement reflected an allocation of INR 862.5 crore for the Prime Minister Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP) which aims to assist entrepreneurs in setting up micro businesses in the non-farm sector.

This accounts for slightly less than 30% of the total allocation to PMEGP and should have been reported in Part C instead of Part B.

Table 2. Allocations for schemes benefiting rural industries

Scheme	2024-25 (BE) - overall allocation	2024-25 (RE) - overall allocation	2025-26 (BE) - overall allocation	2025-26 (BE) - Gender Budget Statement allocation	Proportion of overall allocation reported in the Gender Budget Statement in 2025-26 (BE)
PM Vishwakarma Yojna	4,824	4,000	5,100	1,530	30% (Part B)
Khadi Gramodyog Vikas Yojna	1,037.19	866.11	1,065.77	200.03	18.8% (reported in Part B instead of Part C)

Source: Compiled from Union Budget documents, 2025-26.

Announced in 2023-24, the PM Vishwakarma scheme aims at recognition, skill upgradation through training and better and advanced tools, credit support, digital empowerment, brand promotion and market linkages of artisans and craftspersons engaged in manual work (Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, 2023). Given that women comprised over 68% of the trainees under the scheme (Singh, 2024), a 30% allocation for the scheme reflected in the GBS may not be adequate.

Another scheme supporting traditional khadi artisans is the Khadi Gramodyog Vikas Yojna for promoting and sustaining the traditional khadi industry. Government data reveal that the participation of women artisans in the khadi sector is as high as 80% (Rajya Sabha unstarred question, 2024). Less than 20% of the overall scheme allocation reflecting in the Gender Budget Statement suggests the need for a rethink as highlighted above.

A new scheme for 500,000 first-time entrepreneurs, aimed at promoting women, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes entrepreneurs was announced in the 2025-26 budget speech. This scheme aims to provide term loans up to INR 2 crore during the next five years. No corresponding allocations could be found in budget documents, but the revised estimates of 2025-26 may provide clarity.

(iii) Skilling

The Economic Survey 2024-25 stressed the need for skilling the workforce to drive sectoral growth, requiring coordinated efforts from the government, private sector, and skills training institutions (Ministry of Finance, 2025). The Entrepreneurship cum Skill Development Programme was allocated INR 96 crore in 2025-26 (BE), of which 40% or INR 38.4 crore reflected in the Gender Budget Statement. The Skill India Programme comprising the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana 4.0 (PMKVY 4.0), Pradhan Mantri-National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (PM-NAPS), and Jan Shikshan Sansthan (JSS) schemes was allocated INR 625.59 crore or approximately 23.17% of its scheme allocation in Part B of the Gender Budget Statement. This was one of several examples of discrepancies wherein schemes which should now have been reported in Part C have been included in Part B instead.

INR 104.17 crore was allocated for the National Skills Training Institute (NSTI) in Part A of the Gender Budget Statement, almost 25% higher than 2024-25 (BE). Notably, 19 out of 33 functional NSTIs in 2024 were women-only institutions, 30% seats are reserved for women applicants in the other NSTIs, and women students are exempted from paying tuition and examination fees (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2024).

Courses offered go beyond gender stereotypes and impart skills to work as a computer operator and programming assistant, an electronics mechanic, and an architectural draftsman, among others.

An Artificial Intelligence Programming Assistant course was launched in eight NSTIs in 2024-25 (ibid.). While these are promising measures, the allocations may not suffice to support new-age education with state-of-the-art facilities for women students across all 33 NSTIs.

The New Internship Programme launched under the Ministry of Corporate Affairs in 2024-25 does not find a mention in the Gender Budget Statement despite its relevance for youth including young women students.

infrastructure including care infrastructure

The burden of unpaid care and domestic responsibilities remains a prime deterrent to women's economic participation. The Time Use Survey 2024 found that in the working age group (15-59 years), females spent an average of 305 minutes on unpaid domestic services for household members compared to only 86 minutes by their male counterparts (National Statistical Office, 2025).

Likewise, the duration for unpaid care work was nearly double at 137 minutes for females compared to 75 minutes for males (ages 6 years and above).

The aforementioned gendered differentials in unpaid work add to the significance of schemes such as Swachh Bharat Mission - Gramin (for construction of toilets in rural areas), Ujjwala Yojana (for clean cooking gas connections), and Jal Jeevan Mission (provision of tap drinking water connections).

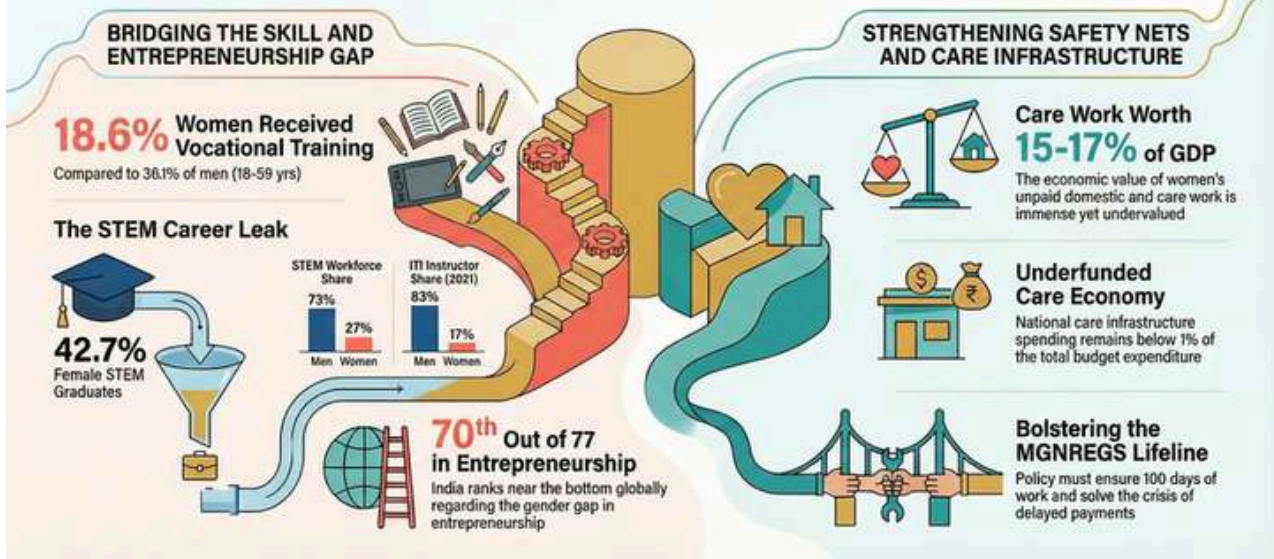
In addition to promoting women's safety and dignity, these schemes contribute towards freeing up women's time and energy for productive work. In line with this, the following allocations were reported in the Gender Budget Statement 2025-26:

- At INR 2,904.36 crore, nearly 40.38% of the Swachh Bharat Mission - Gramin's total outlay reflected in Part B of the GBS in FY26.
- About 30.56% of the Jal Jeevan Mission's total outlay was reported in Part B of the GBS, lower than 48% in the previous year.
- INR 9,100 crore was the overall allocation for the scheme for LPG connection to poor households. However, no fresh allocations were made in the Gender Budget Statement of 2025-26. This could be on account of the scheme meeting all its targets by July 8, 2024 (Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, 2024).
- Although the Palna scheme can similarly be understood to reduce women's unpaid care work through the provision of creches, specific allocations to the Palna/creche program can no longer be tracked because it has been subsumed under Samarthya. The Outcome Budget for 2025-26 set a conservative target of 3,000 functional Anganwadi-cum-creches, and enrolling 30,000 children therein. No other target outcomes have been mentioned.

(iv) WEE-enabling

Fiscal Pathways: Empowering India's Women Workforce

Gender-responsive budgeting is a strategic tool to accelerate women's economic empowerment by focusing on pillars like skilling, entrepreneurship, and care infrastructure to address systemic barriers.



Policy considerations

Gender responsive budgeting can be an effective strategy for accelerating women's economic empowerment by enabling their participation in the labour force. To this effect, policy considerations encompassing the four key pillars include:

(i) Resource adequacy for promoting livelihoods and employment generation

The MGNREGS remains a lifeline for the rural economy. A study by Dalberg (2022) in five states flagged gaps such as low levels of awareness, the need for handholding support for enrolment, supply of jobs failing to keep up with the demand, and gender-based discrimination at work affecting women workers' ability to participate in the MGNREGS. Over 8 crore people availed of work under the scheme in 2023-24 (Mukherjee, 2024). Therefore, adequate budgetary support towards ensuring availability of jobs, increasing the average number of workdays provided per household to 100 as mandated, as well as timely disbursement of funds to solve the crisis of delayed payments are imperative to bolster this scheme which acts as a cushion for lakhs of rural households.

(ii) Empowering women entrepreneurs with tailored support

India ranks 70th out of 77 countries in terms of the gender gap in entrepreneurship (World Bank Group, 2024). The study also noted that rural enterprises owned by women employ between 2.2-2.7 crore people. Yet, women entrepreneurs continue to grapple with barriers in access to formal credit and crucial business development services, market linkages, and technology. Women-led rural enterprises including SHG-run ones require tailored financial products; formal, fit-for-purpose and affordable capital; and support mechanisms including but not limited to bank and market linkages to grow and scale. Budgetary provisions should weave these considerations into relevant scheme allocations for incubation, business development support, credit and market linkages for women entrepreneurs. Besides, innovative means to tap into the expertise of the private sector and nudging their corporate social responsibility initiatives towards skilling and upskilling women entrepreneurs can also be envisaged.

(iii) From skill gaps to skill gains

Pre-existing inequalities resulting in lower levels of education and skills among women workers contribute to gender gaps in labour force participation. In 2022-23, 36.1% of men compared to only 18.6% of women aged 18-59 years had ever received vocational training, the gap widening over the years (Afridi, Gupta and Mahajan, 2024).

Notwithstanding a relatively high share of women STEM graduates (42.7% in 2018), women accounted for less than one-third (27%) of the STEM workforce in India (Kumar, 2024). Kumar further observes that STEM education fails to translate into STEM careers for many women graduates, besides their career exits likely to be sooner than that for their male counterparts. A study by IWWAGE, LEAD and TQH found that investments, mentorship, upskilling and reskilling opportunities can go a long way in retaining women STEM professionals (Oberai, Sinha and Rai, 2024).

India has 15,000 Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), of which nearly 17% or around 2,550 ITIs are only for women; yet, women formed less than 7% of skill training candidates and less than 17% of the instructors in ITIs in 2021 (NITI Aayog, 2023). Budgetary allocations to increase awareness regarding available free/low cost skill development courses, and for subsidised STEM education for girls and women can help narrow longstanding gender gaps in skilling. The PM Internship scheme is a welcome initiative but needs a wider scope including apprentice opportunities in STEM, a supply-demand match, and targeted enrolment campaigns for young women to amplify scheme visibility and uptake.

Sunrise sectors where demand for skilled labour is set to rise include healthcare, semiconductor manufacturing, green jobs focused on waste management, the agricultural sector embracing drone technology and robotics, and the care economy (“How India can bridge talent and skill gaps”, 2024). As technology is poised to be a gamechanger, skilling interventions should keep pace with the transformations in the digital age and the future of work, which will otherwise only deepen the gendered digital divide. Budgetary stimuli targeting skilling and job creation for women workers in these sectors can be crucial.

(iv) Investing in WEE-enabling and care infrastructure

The economic value of women’s unpaid domestic and care work in India ranges between 15-17% of GDP (Nikore et al., 2024). Saksham Anganwadi and POSHAN 2.0, Samarthya under Mission Shakti, Atal Vayo Abhyuday Yojana, and the National Social Assistance Program are the major Union government schemes for provision of care infrastructure and services. The cumulative allocations towards these schemes remains below 1% of the total budget expenditure (ibid.). Enhanced investments in the care economy can not only bridge gender gaps in female labour force participation, but also augment economic output and jobs in the care services sector.

The Economic Survey 2024-25 recommended strategic reforms to strengthen India’s care economy. These include (i) support for parental leave policies; (ii) subsidies for care services; (iii) public as well as private investments in building care infrastructure; (iv) skills training for

care workers; and (v) mechanisms for monitoring service quality and benchmarks (Ministry of Finance, 2025). Investments in various forms of infrastructure ranging from childcare centres and working women's hostels, to state-of-the-art public transport amenities facilitating affordable and safe mobility can be enablers for women's economic participation.

Conclusion

Making budgets count for women necessitates accounting for their differential needs and concerns in policy frameworks. This chapter attempted to shed light on the status of female labour force participation in India, emphasising the gender gaps in participation as well as the distress-driven shift towards self-employment particularly discernible in rural areas.

While the Union Budget 2025-26 is a step ahead in terms of record high allocations, there is scope for gender responsive budgeting efforts to be more strategically geared towards women's economic empowerment around the four key pillars highlighted - livelihood and employment, entrepreneurship, skilling, and the care economy. A larger number of interventions being reported in the Gender Budget Statement is indicative of an increasing number of Ministries and Departments attempting to incorporate a gender lens in their provisions. While this is promising, it may not be sufficient if gaps remain in estimating gender-specific usage and coverage of schemes and programmes.

For instance, this analysis showed that budgetary allocations reflected in the Gender Budget Statement often do not correspond to the proportion of women beneficiaries of those schemes. Plugging resource constraints and infusing adequate funds in schemes and programmes promoting women's livelihoods, entrepreneurship, skill development, the care economy, and WEE-enabling infrastructure are essential measures. The way forward should focus on strengthening gender responsive budgeting endeavours in this direction.

Acknowledgment

Editorial input by Sonakshi Chaudhry, The Quantum Hub, is duly acknowledged.

References

- Afridi, F., Gupta, T., and Mahajan, K. (2024, February 19). How skilling can bridge the gap between women & work. IndiaSpend. <https://www.indiaspend.com/gendercheck/how-skilling-can-bridge-the-gap-between-women-work-895618>
- Agrawal, N. and Bhattacharya, S. (2024, March 25). Unequal work: Explaining the recent increase in female workers in rural India. Foundation for Agrarian Studies. <https://fas.org.in/unequal-work/>
- Chakraborty, L. (2014). Gender-responsive budgeting as fiscal innovation: Evidence from India on "processes". Levy Economics Institute of Bard College, Working Paper no. 797. https://www.levyinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/wp_797.pdf
- Dalberg (2022). The state of rural employment: A look at MGNREGS across 5 states in India. https://media.licdn.com/dms/document/media/v2/D4D1FAQG41_EN84J1rA/feedshare-document-pdf-analyzed/feedshare-document-pdf-analyzed/0/1700555957841?e=1748476800&v=beta&t=nLBN9zcgqN1s-PXSFO0Jo72zjisdwErdr61IQVQp5l (Accessed: May 16, 2025).

- “How India can bridge talent and skill gaps in key emerging sectors” (2024, August 16). The Economic Times. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/how-india-can-bridge-talent-and-skill-gaps-in-key-emerging-sectors/articleshow/112570187.cms?from=mdr>
- International Labour Organisation (2024, October). Statistical Brief: The impact of care responsibilities on women’s labour force participation. [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/GEDI-STAT%20brief formatted 28.10.24 final.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/GEDI-STAT%20brief%20formatted%2028.10.24%20final.pdf)
- Kaushik, M. (2025, May 14). Internship target up nearly 6 times. Financial Express. <https://www.financialexpress.com/jobs-career/six-fold-jump-in-internship-scheme-target-for-fy26-3845034/#>
- Kumar, S. (2024). Women and STEM: The inexplicable gap between education and workforce participation. Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/women-and-stem-the-inexplicable-gap-between-education-and-workforce-participation>
- Lok Sabha Unstarred Question no. 4101 (2013, March 21). Women empowerment under MGNREGS. Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. <https://eparlib.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/638610/1/138428.pdf>
- Ministry of Finance, Government of India (2024, July 2022). 2.63 crore houses constructed for poor in last nine years in rural areas; women participation rate in MGNREGS increased from 54.8 per cent in 2019-20 to 58.9 per cent in 2023-24 [Press release]. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2034918>
- Ministry of Finance, Government of India (2025). Employment and skill development: Existential priorities. In Economic Survey 2024-25 (pp. 361-410). <https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/economicsurvey/doc/eschapter/echap12.pdf>
- Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, Government of India (2023, December 21). Rs.13,000 crore have been provided for the PM Vishwakarma Scheme from FY 2023-2024 to FY 2027-28 [Press release]. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseFramePage.aspx?PRID=1989108>
- Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (2024, July 31). 19 National Skill Training Institutes out of 33 are exclusively for women [Press release]. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2039516#>
- Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas (2024, August 08). LPG connections under PMUY [Press release]. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseFramePage.aspx?PRID=2043041#>
- Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India (2019). Annual Report, Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2017-18. https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Annual%20Report%2C%20PLFS%202017-18_31052019.pdf
- Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India (2024). Annual Report, Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2023-24. https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/AnnualReport_PLFS2023-24L2.pdf
- Ministry of Women and Child Development (2025, June 19). Ministry of Women and Child Development organises first of its kind National Consultation on Gender Budgeting [Press release]. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2137727#>
- Mukherjee, S. (2024, April 02). Over 80 million people worked under MGNREGA in FY24, shows data. Business Standard. https://www.business-standard.com/economy/news/over-80-million-people-worked-under-mgnrega-in-fy24-shows-data-124040101035_1.html
- National Statistical Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India (2025). Time Use in India, 2024. https://mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/TUS_Report_2024_28.03.2025F.pdf?download=1
- Nikore, M. et al. (2024). Formulating a strategy for India's care economy: Unlocking opportunities. Karmannya Counsel, Nikore Associates, CII Centre for Women Leadership, and Confederation of Indian Industry. <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2024/mar/doc202435319501.pdf>
- NITI Aayog (2023). Transforming Industrial Training Institutes. https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2023-02/ITI_Report_02022023.pdf
- Oberai, D. et al. (2024). Women and Work 2023. IWWAGE, Lead at KREA University, and The Quantum Hub. <https://thequantumhub.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/IWWAGE-Trends-Report-2023-Jul.pdf>

- Oberai, D., Sinha, S., and Rai, S. (2024). Women in STEM: Challenges and opportunities in India. IWWAGE, Lead at KREA University, and The Quantum Hub. <https://iwwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Women-in-STEM-Challenges-and-Opportunities-in-India-Report.pdf>
- Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question no. 110 (2024, November 25). Development of khadi clusters. Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, Government of India. https://sansad.in/getFile/annex/266/AU110_7vFdCl.pdf?source=pqars
- Sharma, H. (2025, June 10). In a first, Centre caps MGNREGS spend at 60% for first six months of FY 2025-26. The Indian Express. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/centre-caps-mgnregs-spend-first-six-months-fy-2025-26-10058179/>
- Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, Government of India (2023, December 21). Rs.13,000 crore have been provided for the PM Vishwakarma Scheme from FY 2023-2024 to FY 2027-28 [Press release]. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseFramePage.aspx?PRID=1989108>
- Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (2024, July 31). 19 National Skill Training Institutes out of 33 are exclusively for women [Press release]. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2039516#>
- Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas (2024, August 08). LPG connections under PMUY [Press release]. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseFramePage.aspx?PRID=2043041#>
- Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India (2019). Annual Report, Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2017-18. https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Annual%20Report%2C%20PLFS%202017-18_31052019.pdf
- Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India (2024). Annual Report, Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2023-24. https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/AnnualReport_PLFS2023-24L2.pdf
- Ministry of Women and Child Development (2025, June 19). Ministry of Women and Child Development organises first of its kind National Consultation on Gender Budgeting [Press release]. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2137727#>
- Mukherjee, S. (2024, April 02). Over 80 million people worked under MGNREGA in FY24, shows data. *Business Standard*. https://www.business-standard.com/economy/news/over-80-million-people-worked-under-mgnrega-in-fy24-shows-data-124040101035_1.html
- National Statistical Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India (2025). Time Use in India, 2024. https://mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/TUS_Report_2024_28.03.2025F.pdf?download=1



SECTION 3

The Invisible Economy

Recognising Informal and Unpaid Work



This section brings visibility to women's informal work and unpaid care, highlighting the need for systemic recognition and support.

ORGANISING THE INVISIBLE: EXPLORING METHODS TO VISIBILISE AND ORGANISE WOMEN WORKERS IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR

Anirudh Chakradhar, Mahika Yadav, Prameela V., Smita Premchander

Abstract

Informality is a persistent reality worldwide; the International Labour Organization (ILO 2018) estimates that 69.6% and 18.3% of the workforce in emerging and developed countries, respectively, are in informal employment. Despite India's rapid economic growth, over 90% of employment relationships are characterised by informality (Mehrotra 2019). This staggering size notwithstanding, informal workers are largely invisible to actors, systems, and policy. Without formal recognition of their employment, they operate in a state of precarity - left out of protective legal frameworks and exposed to deficits in decent work standards.

Examining gender dynamics reveals further complexities. Data from e-Shram suggests that nearly 50% of all informal workers are women (Haq 2021). Contrasting this with the overall female labour force participation rate of 33% (2024 World Bank statistics) indicates that women are far more likely to be in informal work. Women face added obstacles. To begin with, patriarchal norms and unpaid care responsibilities limit their work choices. Moreover, gender discrimination seems sharper in the informal labour market - women often receive less than half the male wage and tend to be clustered on the lower paying end of the occupational spectrum (ISST and IWWAGE 2021). This segregation is also prominent in the sectors women are engaged in. Women are concentrated in sectors like home-based or domestic work - fields with fragmented workforces, limited collective bargaining, and increased chances of exploitation, abuse, and discrimination (Shroff 2019). The following excerpt succinctly exposes the challenges of women in informal work:

“Who are the women working in informal work? They are mostly to be found in

casual, geographically dispersed, isolated, part-time, irregular, and often home-based, activities. They are located on the invisible margins of urban informal economies, or in remote rural areas. They are often self-employed. Many are in direct competition with each other - for work, for orders for their products, for space to sell their goods and services.

Many of these women are located at the intersections of different kinds of inequality: class, race, caste, occupation, and legal status, so building shared identity and interests represents an even greater challenge. Not surprisingly, there is little in their working conditions that lends itself to self-recognition of their status as workers, let alone social recognition.” (Kabeer, Milward and Sudarshan 2013).

Organising Domestic Workers

Though sizeable, domestic workers are an overlooked constituency. Government data suggests that there are about 5.23 million domestic workers in India, all informal - together forming about 1.1% of all informal employment. Most (3.8 million) are concentrated in urban areas. Owing to patriarchal norms and conceptions of work that are considered 'suitable' for women, this is a largely feminised sector; 3.2% and 9.4% of all informal women workers in India and urban areas, respectively, are engaged in domestic work (Raveendran and Vanek 2020).

Domestic work is typically excluded from labour law frameworks on occupational safety and health, and wages. Even where frameworks exist, implementation is lax. Resultantly, domestic workers have little job security, with scant regulation on working conditions, working hours, leaves, hiring and firing, and no safety nets to rely on (Mahanta and Gupta 2019). Further, domestic work is inextricably linked with caste and class dynamics; most domestic workers belong to poorer economic strata and marginalised castes. As they work within the 'private domain' of a household,

shielded from public view, these caste and power dynamics are laid bare, and workers are vulnerable to violence, abuse, sexual harassment, and discrimination (Gothoskar 2013). They also remain relatively isolated, lacking peers at the workplace, and therefore, opportunities to build solidarity and collective voice.

Stories of Success

Collectivising domestic workers could offer solutions to several of these challenges by visibilizing them and developing voice and influence. Several unions have tried to organise domestic workers with varying degrees of success. One extensively documented case with learnings for this process is that of the Karnataka Domestic Workers' Congress (KDWC), mobilised by the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) with support from an ILO pilot project.

For this project, between 2009-10, INTUC began by developing a constitution for the proposed KDWC through a wide consultative process. At this juncture, INTUC began taking several novel steps, recognising the unique context of organising domestic workers and responding to their specific needs. The first among these was the identification and training of a field cadre called the Karnataka Domestic Workers' Brigade. This Brigade – consisting of women from the identified communities with experience as social workers – was provided comprehensive training, and tasked with educating, supporting workers, and mobilising them to become members. This was crucial, as these women were able to build trust with the community, address concerns, and build credibility of the union among workers.

This Brigade engaged in an extensive word-of-mouth campaign. It informed domestic workers in identified communities and asked them to further spread news about public meetings. Finding an acceptable venue for these meetings was a challenge. It could not be done around workplaces, as this could result in consequences for the workers. There was also resistance from male members of the workers' households, who disapproved of these activities.

Timing was another issue; domestic workers worked from early morning till afternoon, before attending to their own household duties, and then returning to work in the evenings. Therefore, the Brigade was flexible

in its approach, consulting with workers and then agreeing to conducting these meetings in the late evenings for maximum attendance. The meetings were held in public places such as parks, temples, squares, etc. This increased attendance, but more crucially, strength in numbers at these public places allowed women to counter male resistance.

Initially, workers had a mixed response. The Brigade used several strategies to overcome this. At meetings, it educated workers about their rights and entitlements, and how a collective voice could strengthen demands to the government, citing the example of construction workers who had managed to bargain for the establishment of a construction workers' welfare board. It distributed information pamphlets in multiple local languages.

The Brigade made frequent visits and had repeated conversations to win the confidence of workers; their proximity to workers as community members was critical to achieving this. The Brigade used information about entitlements from government policies (such as pension, wages, food security, etc.) as an entry point. These provided an immediate value to the pressing everyday concerns of workers, giving them confidence that they were being heard, and demonstrated the potential of a collective agency led by workers.

The KDWC was registered as a union in 2009. Through these strategies, its membership grew to 2,500 within a year and over 7,000 by 2013 (Eluri and Singh 2013). The foundation for this was a locally led campaign that accounted for the context, built trust, and responded to the pressing needs of this specific target group of informal workers. Echoes of these strategies are seen in other examples too. In Kenya, the Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotel, Educational Institution, Hospital, and Allied Workers adopted a 'locally based, worker-led organizing strategy' (Duguid and Weber 2019). Members elected strong local domestic worker-leaders to an Organizing Committee (one for each city of operation). Further sub-committees were set up for every 100 households. These committees held weekly meetings (on Sundays for workers' convenience), educating workers about social issues, their rights, and workplace issues, and recruited them to the union. This model grew their base of domestic workers from 20 to 22,000 members in six years (IDWF and ILO 2017).

Organising Construction Workers

In contrast with the domestic work sector, construction work is a male-dominated industry and has sizeable formal employment. Still, it holds the largest share of those in informal employment, at nearly 52 million or 11.2% of all informal employment. While men account for the large proportion of these workers, about 5.1 million women are engaged as informal construction work, accounting for 4.9% of all women in informal employment (Raveendran and Vanek 2020). These workers, like other informal workers, are exposed to deficits in standards of decent work and legal protection. Moreover, as construction work tends to be hazardous, they face the double whammy of unsafe working conditions and limited social protection if they are injured. Migration brings in another layer of nuance. Migrant workers are very common in the construction industry, and due to a lack of social ties and sometimes an explicit effort by employers to seclude them, they fall outside the fold of unions and face additional risks at the workplace.

In construction too, men have monopolised higher-skilled, higher paid roles. Further, socio-cultural perception and gender norms limit women from performing 'men's work', locking them down to the bottom of the occupational spectrum (Kalpana 2019). While men are estimated to earn about Rs. 39.95 per hour on average, women only earn Rs. 26.15 (Raveendran and Vanek 2020).

Stories of Success

As with domestic workers, collectivising informal construction workers (especially women) can provide avenues to negotiate for formalisation, wages, and decent work. Sampark's experience of promoting a grassroots-level union of migrant construction labour in Bangalore offers several learnings in this regard.

Sampark has a long history of empowering women socially and economically in rural areas through collective SHG action. During this time, the organisation noticed substantial migration of the rural population to work in Bangalore's construction industry. Following this trail, Sampark's tryst with migrant construction workers began in 2013, most notably through the establishment of Workers' Resource Centres. These Centres supported migrant workers with access to essential services such as healthcare access, immunization, child education support, and assistance with obtaining government IDs and welfare benefits. Through further engagement, Sampark began engaging with deeper issues that informal migrant construction workers faced. Building on its experience, it began exploring models to collectivise these workers to build leadership, solidarity, and voice and influence. The *Karnataka Kattada Shramikara Sangha* (KKSS), which translates to the Karnataka Construction Workers' Union, emerged from this.

The idea of the Union itself was not imposed by Sampark, but rather, was selected by workers through a consultative process, over a three-year period. In this time, Sampark built trust with workers, educated them on their rights, and mooted the idea of collective action. Following deliberations on various models, the workers selected a union as the conduit for this collective action. Subsequently, KKSS was formally registered as a Trade Union in 2019, with 120 members.

This **bottom-up, worker-led approach** became a mainstay of KKSS, visible in all its organising strategies. Central to this is an extensive field cadre of "*Shramik Mithras*" or workers' friends. These are local community members from labour settlements, who are trained to conduct outreach, spread awareness, mobilise workers, and even facilitate access to services. As these *Shramik Mithras* are drawn from the settlements themselves, they understand the pulse of and are trusted by the community.

An orientation towards worker needs and access to rights and entitlements, is another pillar of KKSS' approach. Foundational to this was conducting health awareness camps in settlements, linking workers to public education and health facilities, supporting workers to procure government IDs and bank accounts, and registering them with the Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Boards for access to social protection and insurance schemes. As with the domestic workers example, these efforts provided immediate and tangible value to workers, motivating their membership and active

participation. KKSS uses digital tools like WhatsApp groups to stay connected and share information with members, particularly important as construction workers frequently change job sites.

Sampark makes concerted investments in developing leadership capacities of the union through exposure visits and enabling their participation in events and protests by other unions. Aside from this, Sampark organises regular training sessions for members on rights and entitlements, labour laws, digital rights, financial literacy, among others.

Through these strategies, KKSS had over 7,929 members by late 2024. Of these, nearly 37% (2,930) were women. This was possible through a focussed and intensive push towards inclusion of women. Unlike many unions which have a separate women's wing or division, KKSS mainstreamed women into the main leadership structure, to foster inclusion and build leadership capabilities of women. As a result, despite construction being a male-dominated industry, women (with wide acceptance) hold prominent leadership positions in the union. A notable example is Ms. Balamma, who was a president and has played vital roles in managing major union events and leading important negotiations. Gender sensitivity awareness and training is regularly provided to the union and in labour settlements. Moreover, the union leverages events such as International Women's Day to conduct focussed women's only events and training, to build their motivation, capacities, and voice.

Similar strategies were used by the Tamil Nadu Construction Workers Panchayat Union (KTPS). Additionally, KTPS organised skill training for women workers to help them move up the occupational spectrum. This hit a roadblock though, as contractors were not ready to hire even skilled women due to socio-cultural perceptions. KTPS went a step further, registering a cooperative to bypass contractors and directly place these skilled women with the principal employers! KTPS members also involved themselves in advocating for women's issues, such as safety, sanitation, streetlights, in local council meetings, to enable better participation of women in the workforce (Kalpana 2019).

Learnings and Models to Organise Informal Women Workers

All these examples present valuable lessons for unions and civil society organisations working to organise informal women workers. Some of these lessons, which can be applied with appropriate context-specificity, are discussed below.

New Unionism and Value Orientation: Researchers have observed that the strategies of organisations that cater to informal workers, particularly women, follow a philosophy of 'New Unionism'. This philosophy is captured in two characteristics, both of which can be observed in the cases cited in this article. The first refers to an orientation towards providing immediate and tangible value, through access to entitlements and development services for workers. This seems effective in mobilising workers by building trust and motivation for organisation, as informal workers lack these services in the prevailing situation. The second is an orientation towards negotiation with the State (Routh 2015, Kalpana 2019). This is particularly valuable in the case of home-based workers, domestic workers, self-employed, and other such categories that do not have traditional employers, as the State is the de-facto partner for social dialogue. This has value in other sectors too, as prioritises advocacy for establishment and implementation of social protection mechanisms and decent work regulation. Yet, a delicate balance must be drawn here; negotiation with the State is crucial, but where applicable, dialogue with employers is imperative to hold them accountable and ensure decent work standards at the workplace.

Field Cadres and Bottom-up Approaches: Organisation of field cadres is an established method employed by unions. In the case of informal workers though, field cadres drawn from the community assume special importance. Such a cadre allows for identification and outreach to informal workers, who otherwise remain invisible. Field cadres also enable effective trust-building with communities and ensure that their priorities are mainstreamed into union operations, creating an effective communication channel between the union and the ground. Ensuring adequate representation of women in these field cadres is imperative.

Context-specific, Responsive Approaches: Any strategies to organise informal workers must be shaped by a deep understanding of the context-specific nuances of the sector, to ensure effective outreach to and accessibility of workers (especially women). For example, the understanding of male resistance and sensitivity to work timings are key to facilitating active participation, without which any efforts will remain incomplete. Similarly, the context-specificity should extend to ensuring that engagement strategies and offerings of the union are responsive to the specific needs of women informal workers, as these may vary significantly with social dynamics, sector, and even, geography.

Building Leadership Capacities of Women: In addition to capacities of the union overall, investments must be made specifically to build leadership capacities of women and enable their participation in leadership roles within the union. Additionally, gender-sensitivity information must form a part of training and awareness offered to union members. These mechanisms will not only lead to greater membership of women but also ensure that women’s voice and issues are tabled and form a part of the union agenda.

All of these lessons together act on all three domains of change in the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Framework – Access to livelihood assets and services, building voice, influence, and agency, and challenging gender norms and rules of the game. Action on all these three domains is integral to effecting sustainable progress on gender equality (Premchander, Chowdhury and Pingali 2020). Organising workers and building a collective voice can make significant strides in visibilizing women in informal employment and create sustainable pathways towards decent work for all. It is certainly an uphill struggle, given the scale of informal employment and the rigid patriarchal norms that define women’s participation in the economy. Fortunately, these lessons offer a direction that can be adapted and applied on the way.

Recommendations

- Strengthen formal recognition of informal women workers through inclusion in labour frameworks, registries, and social protection systems to improve visibility and access to rights
- Promote and scale worker-led collectives, unions, cooperatives, and self-help groups that enable women to build collective voice, negotiate for better conditions, and access entitlements
- Invest in community-based outreach models using trained local field cadres to identify, mobilise, and support informal women workers through trust-based engagement
- Integrate access to services such as healthcare, financial inclusion, social security, and documentation as entry points for organising and sustaining worker participation
- Build leadership capacities among women workers through targeted training, representation in decision-making structures, and gender-sensitization initiatives to strengthen long-term agency and influence

EMPOWERING THE INVISIBLE: STRATEGIES FOR ORGANIZING INFORMAL WOMEN WORKERS



References

Carré, Françoise. 2013. Defining and Categorizing Organizations of Informal Workers in Developing and Developed Countries. WIEGO Organizing Brief No. 8, WIEGO.

Chen, Martha, Chris Bonner, and Françoise Carré. 2015. Organizing Informal Workers: Benefits, Challenges and Successes. Background Paper, New York: UNDP Human Development Report Office.

Chen, Martha, Renana Jhabvala, Ravi Kanbur, and Carol Richards. 2007. "Membership-based organizations of the poor: Concepts, experience and policy." In *Membership-Based Organizations of the Poor*, edited by Martha Chen, Renana Jhabvala, Ravi Kanbur and Carol Richards, 3-20. New York: Routledge.

Duguid, Fiona, and Nadya Weber. 2019. "Women Informal Workers and the Empowering Nature of Collectivizing and Collectives: An Evidence Synthesis (Draft)."

Eluri, Suneetha, and Alok Singh. 2013. Unionizing Domestic Workers: Case Study of the INTUC-Karnataka Domestic Workers Congress. Geneva: ILO.

Gothoskar, Sujata. 2013. "The Plight of Domestic Workers: Confluence of Gender, Class and Caste Hierarchies." *Economic and Political Weekly XLVIII* (22): 63-75.

Haq, Zia. 2021. "Women comprise nearly half of informal sector workers, data from new national portal shows." *Hindustan Times*, 22 October. Accessed June 25, 2025. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/women-comprise-nearly-half-of-informal-sector-workers-data-from-new-national-portal-shows-101634862406702.html>.

IDWF and ILO. 2017. Planning for Success: a Manual for domestic workers and their organizations. Jakarta: ILO.

ILO. 2018. Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture (Third Edition). Geneva: ILO.

ISST and IWWAGE. 2021. Women in the Indian Informal Economy. New Delhi: IWWAGE.
Kabeer, Naila, Kirsty Milward, and Ratna Sudarshan. 2013. "Organising women workers in the informal economy." *Gender & Development* 21 (2): 249-263.

Kalpna, K. 2019. "'Old' and 'New' Trade Union Activism: Organising Women Informal Workers in Tamil Nadu." *Economic and Political Weekly LIV* (50).

Mahanta, Upasana, and Indranath Gupta. 2019. "Introducing the Status of Domestic Workers in India." In *Recognition of the Rights of Domestic Workers in India: Challenges and the Way Forward*, edited by Upasana Mahanta and Indranath Gupta, 1-18. Singapore: Springer.

Mehrotra, Santosh. 2019. Informal Employment Trends in the Indian Economy: Persistent informality, but growing positive development. Geneva: ILO.

Premchander, Smita, Aindrila R Chowdhury, and Deepika Pingali. 2020. "Unequal Access: Women and their Livelihoods in 2020." In *State of India's Livelihoods Report 2020*, edited by Vijay Mahajan, 125-145. New Delhi: Access Development Services.

Premchander, Smita, Deepika Pingali, Anirudh Chakradhar, Saumya Premchander, Suki Iyer, Ruchika Khanna, and Shrutija Saxena. 2022. *Towards Strengthened Social Dialogue in India's Informal Economy*. New Delhi: ILO.

Raveendran, Govindan, and Joann Vanek. 2020. Informal Workers in India: A Statistical Profile. Statistical Brief No. 24, WIEGO.

Routh, Supriya. 2015. "Informal Workers' Aggregation in India: An Evolving Model of Collective Action." *Sociologie et sociétés* 47 (1): 177-199.

Shroff, Tvisha. 2019. "Globalization, Democracy and the Capabilities Approach to Labour Law: Making the Case for Domestic Workers in India." In *Recognition of the Rights of Domestic Workers in India: Challenges and the Way Forward*, edited by Upasana Mahanta and Indranath Gupta, 35-54. Springer.

Beyond Unpaid Care: Transforming India's Care Economy for Gender-Inclusive Growth

By ~ Brinda Juneja, Mitali Nikore

Introduction

India's care economy represents an untapped economic powerhouse with transformative potential for national development. Care work, both paid and unpaid, forms the invisible foundation upon which India's broader economic activities rest. It mainly consists of two overlapping activities: direct, personal, and relational care activities, such as feeding a baby; and indirect care activities, such as cooking and cleaning. Unpaid care and domestic work, such as nursing an ill partner or cooking for a family member, is care work provided without monetary compensation. Paid care work—such as domestic services provided by domestic workers, is performed by care workers in exchange for some form of remuneration.

Unpaid work is crucial for households and economies to function yet remains mostly invisible and unaccounted for in estimates of gross domestic product (GDP) and economic growth. The undervaluation and invisibility of care work, predominantly performed by women, has resulted in a market failure, where skilled and talented women are unable to realize their economic potential, leading to a misallocation of resources at the macroeconomic level. This market failure manifests as increased time poverty for women, inefficient allocation of women's talent, lack of well-paying jobs in the care sector, and motherhood penalties, ultimately lowering female labor force participation and constraining their economic development.

India's care economy represents an economic value of approximately 15-17% of GDP¹, yet remains largely unrecognized in formal economic measurements. Enhancing investments in the care economy has the potential to not only bridge gender gaps in women's labor force participation but also unlock a new economic segment for India's development. Evidence from the International Labour Organisation suggests that increasing investments in care services can generate significant employment opportunities, with direct public investment equivalent to 2% of GDP potentially creating 11 million jobs in India, nearly 70% of which would go to women².

¹ Nikore, M. (2024, March). *Formulating a strategy for India's care economy: Unlocking opportunities*. Nikore Associates, Karmannaya Counsel, & Confederation of Indian Industry, with support from the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

² Nikore, M. (2022). *Building India's economy on the backs of women's unpaid work: A gendered analysis of time-use data* (ORF Occasional Paper No. 372). Observer Research Foundation.
<https://www.orfonline.org/research/building-indias-economy-on-the-backs-of-womens-unpaid-work/>

Revitalizing the care economy is therefore critical to realize the vision of women-led development in Viksit Bharat 2047. As India enters an era of rapid growth in Amrit Kaal, there is a pressing need to prioritize investments from both public and private sectors in rebuilding the care economy, while creating new business opportunities in the care sector. Addressing gender gaps in unpaid care work through strategic investments not only enables greater women's workforce participation but also creates a more inclusive and sustainable economic model for India's development journey

The Invisible Backbone - Care Work and Economic Development

Care work forms the invisible backbone of our economy, yet remains systematically undervalued despite its crucial role in sustaining human life and societal functioning. Women shoulder a vastly disproportionate share of unpaid care responsibilities. According to the International Labour Organisation, globally, women spend 3.2 X more hours on unpaid care work than men—averaging 4 hours and 25 minutes daily compared to men's 1 hour and 23 minutes³. This pattern persists regardless of women's education levels or employment status.

The undervaluation of care work is reflected economically as well - the estimated monetary value of women's unpaid care work represents approximately 6.6 % of global GDP (roughly US\$8 trillion)⁴. Yet this immense economic contribution remains largely invisible in traditional economic measurements and policies.

The undervaluation and invisibility of care work creates a significant market failure with far-reaching economic consequences. When care work receives no monetary value, supply and demand dynamics become distorted. In the market of care work, women, the primary providers, deliver services without attaching any price, while households consume this labor without accounting for its cost or the provider's opportunity costs. Social norms that romanticize women as natural caregivers further entrench this market dysfunction, resulting in women bearing a disproportionate burden.

This market failure manifests in four critical economic inefficiencies:

- **Time poverty among women** - Women experience severe time constraints that limit their ability to pursue paid work, education, upskilling opportunities, or leisure, often resulting in compromised physical and mental health.
- **Constrained workforce participation** - Research from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development demonstrates that a two-hour increase in unpaid care responsibilities correlates with a 10-percentage point decrease in female labor force participation.⁵ This represents a substantial loss of skilled, talented workers who cannot find flexible arrangements compatible with their care obligations.
- **Motherhood penalties versus fatherhood premiums** - Mothers typically earn less than women without children (the "motherhood wage penalty"), while fathers often earn more than non-fathers (the "fatherhood wage premium"). This systematic economic disadvantage extends beyond immediate wages to career advancement and long-term financial security.

³ Ravi, S., & Biswas Kundal, A. (Eds.). (2023). *The ORF Gender Compendium: India's G20 Presidency and Women-Led Development*. Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/>

⁴ Ravi, S., & Biswas Kundal, A. (Eds.). (2023). *The ORF Gender Compendium: India's G20 Presidency and Women-Led Development*. Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/>

⁵ Nikore, M. (2022). *Building India's economy on the backs of women's unpaid work: A gendered analysis of time-use data* (ORF Occasional Paper No. 372). Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/building-indias-economy-on-the-backs-of-womens-unpaid-work/>

How undervaluing care work creates economic inefficiencies

1. Time Poverty Among Women

Women face severe time constraints that limit their ability to pursue:

- Paid work opportunities
- Education and skill development
- Rest and leisure
- Physical and mental wellbeing

2. Constrained Workforce Participation

OECD research shows:

+2 hours of unpaid care work
= -10% female labor force participation

This represents a substantial loss of skilled, talented workers from the economy

3. Motherhood Penalty vs Fatherhood Premium



4. Undervalued Formal Care Sector

Even when formalized, care occupations face systematic devaluation:

Lower wages compared to similar skill levels

Diminished social status and recognition

Limited career advancement opportunities

- **Undervalued formal care sector** - Even when care work is performed by paid service providers, it remains undervalued and underpaid. Care occupations like domestic services or childcare are viewed as extensions of unpaid responsibilities, resulting in lower social status and compensation.

India's demographic landscape presents both challenges and opportunities for the care economy.

By 2050, the proportion of elderly persons is expected to increase to 20.8% of the population (about 347 million people),⁶ while the number of children will remain substantial at around 300 million. This demographic transition necessitates strategic investments in healthcare, social support, and care infrastructure to address evolving needs while creating economic opportunities.

Strategic investment in the care economy represents a powerful economic opportunity. Increasing investments in care infrastructure and services could create up to 300 million jobs globally by 2035, with a significant proportion potentially filled by women. Each dollar invested in the care sector⁷ generates 2-3 X more employment than equivalent investment in physical infrastructure and construction.

⁶ Nikore, M. (2024, March). *Formulating a strategy for India's care economy: Unlocking opportunities*. Nikore Associates, Karmannaya Counsel, & Confederation of Indian Industry, with support from the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Public sector investment in care infrastructure can address multiple development goals

simultaneously. Building child and elderly care facilities in underserved communities helps meet growing care needs while creating employment. Formalizing care work structures with defined roles and fair compensation elevates the status of care workers and improves service quality. Providing training and upskilling opportunities for care workers creates career pathways in a growing sector. Finally, collecting gender-disaggregated data enables evidence-based policymaking for more effective interventions.

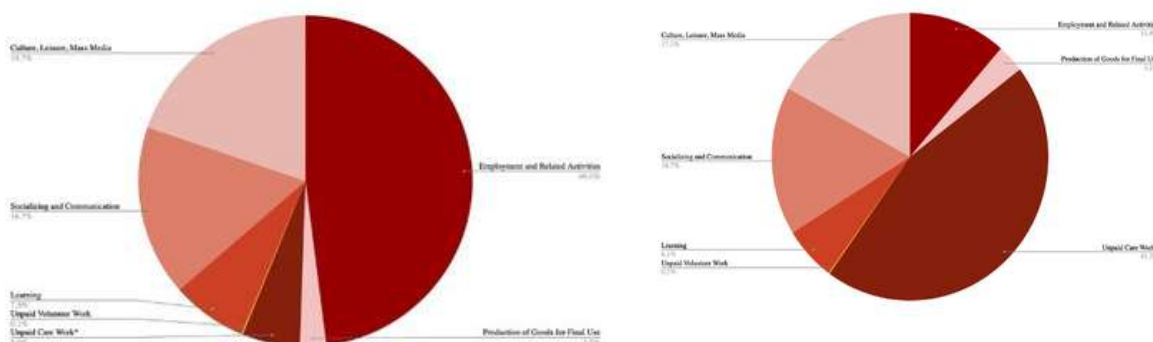
The private sector also plays a crucial role through workplace policies that support working

parents and caregivers. These include providing on-site childcare facilities, implementing flexible work arrangements, and offering care leave policies. Additionally, community-based organizations can deliver innovative, localized care solutions, particularly in informal sectors.

Time Use Survey Comparative Analysis: 2019 vs 2024

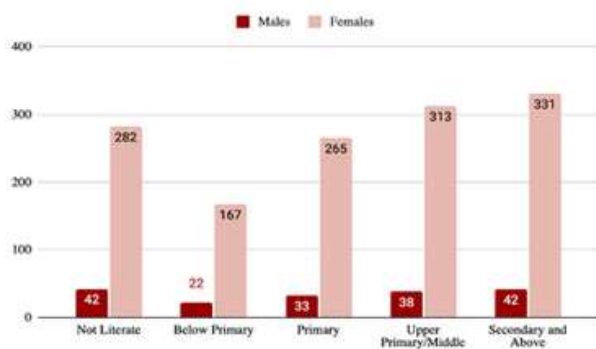
India continues to experience wide gender gaps in unpaid domestic and care work, with minimal improvement over time despite changing socioeconomic conditions. Comparative analysis of Time Use Surveys from 2019 and 2024 reveals that fundamental gender disparities in unpaid care responsibilities persist and have even intensified in certain demographic segments.

Figure: Time Distribution for Men and Women (as per TUS 2024)

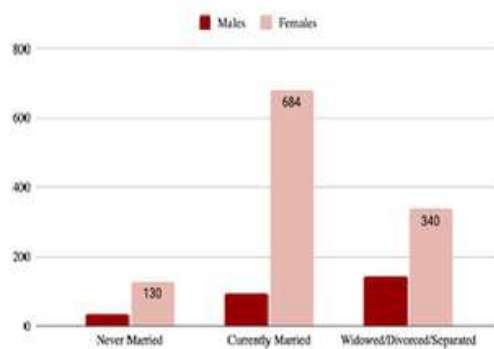


Avg Time Spent by Men

Avg Time Spent by Women

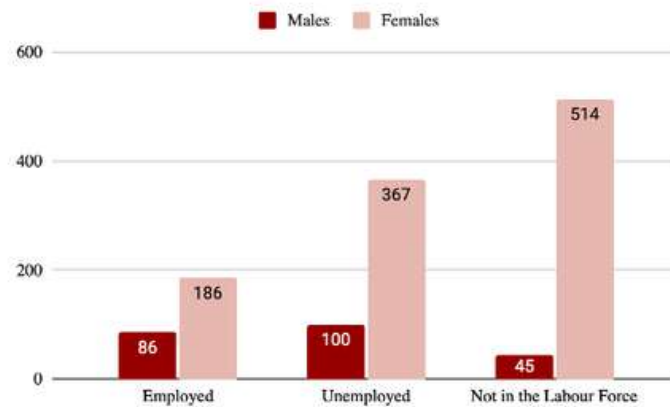


Time Spent on Unpaid Work by Educational Qualification in a day



Time Spent on Unpaid Work by Marital Status in a day

⁷ Ravi, S., & Biswas Kundal, A. (Eds.). (2023). *The ORF Gender Compendium: India's G20 Presidency and Women-Led Development*. Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/>



Time Spent on Unpaid Work by Employment status in a day

In the core working-age population (15-59 years), significant gender disparities in unpaid care work persist with minimal change over time. Women devoted 335 minutes (5.6 hours) daily to unpaid domestic and care responsibilities in 2019, with a slight increase to 341 minutes by 2024. In stark contrast, men's contributions remained remarkably low, edging up merely from 40 to 42 minutes during the same period. This entrenched imbalance means women continue to shoulder approximately 8.1 X more unpaid care work than men. Despite five years of broader socioeconomic advancement, these deeply rooted gender divisions in household labor have remained virtually unchanged, highlighting the resilience of traditional gender norms even amid other social transformations.

The rural-urban divide shows modest improvement by 2024, with the gender disparity in urban areas decreasing from 9.6 X in 2019 to 8.2 X in 2024, now matching the rural ratio. This positive shift stems from urban men increasing their unpaid care contributions more substantially (from 33 to 47 minutes) than rural men (from 34 to 40 minutes). Nevertheless, significant geographical disparities persist, and women across both rural and urban settings continue to have considerably less time available for employment, education, learning activities, and leisure compared to men.

Education does not appear to even out the distribution of care work between Indian males and females, with the disparity remaining high across all levels of education. By 2024, women with secondary education and above were performing 8.0 X more unpaid work than their male counterparts (331 vs. 42 minutes), compared to 8.2 X in 2019. Females with higher educational qualifications spend a marginally higher amount of time on unpaid care work, on average, than non-literate females. It is also notable that males with secondary education or higher spend less time on unpaid care work when compared to non-literate males.

Women in paid employment take on more unpaid care work than employed men, though this represents the area of greatest improvement. In 2019, employed women performed 5.9 X more unpaid care work than employed men. By 2024, this ratio decreased dramatically to 2.2 X, as employed men more than doubled their unpaid care contributions while employed women reduced theirs by 24%. Despite this progress, employed women still experience the double burden of balancing paid work and unpaid care responsibilities. Almost 93 % of working women in the 2019 TUS sample performed unpaid domestic services for household members, against only 31 % of working men.

The most surprising trend appears among married women, who experienced an extraordinary increase in unpaid care burdens, from 382 minutes in 2019 to 684 minutes in 2024. Though married men increased their contributions from 44 to 94 minutes, the absolute gap widened substantially. Similarly, women outside the labor force continue to shoulder overwhelming care responsibilities, undertaking 11.5 X more unpaid work than their male counterparts in 2019, with this burden intensifying by 2024.

These patterns suggest that while incremental progress is occurring in certain segments, particularly among the employed, broader structural factors continue to reinforce disproportionate unpaid care burdens on women across Indian society. Labor market participation appears to be a more powerful driver of equitable care distribution than education or marital status, highlighting the complex interplay between economic participation and gender norms in shaping domestic responsibilities.

Analysis of Care Economy Models in India

India's care economy stands at a critical juncture, with persistent gender gaps in unpaid care work creating significant economic inefficiencies while demographic shifts signal growing care needs in the coming decades. Several pioneering organizations have developed effective approaches to childcare provision that simultaneously support women's economic participation and create dignified employment opportunities. These models represent different points along the public-private spectrum, from community-funded cooperatives to CSR-supported initiatives, each with unique operational structures, risk distributions, and impact potential. By examining these successful models, we can identify replicable best practices and governance structures that could inform broader policy interventions in India's care sector.

Table: Analysis of Different Childcare Model in India

Models	About the model	Funding sources	Business risk	Target Beneficiaries	Scalability	Impact
Apnalaya's CCCs	Community-driven	Pure private/CSR	On care workers	Urban slum residents	Medium	Women's entrepreneurship
SEWA Sanginis	Cooperative	Community funding	On organization	Informal workers	High	Income doubling
Mobile Creches	Site-based	Diverse/hybrid	On organization	Construction workers	High	1M+ children
COWE's creches	Corporate partnership	Pure private/CSR	On organization	Industrial workers	Medium	Women's employment

Apnalaya operates 227 community-based childcare centers in Mumbai's informal settlements through a model that doubles as both childcare provision and livelihood generation. Established in 2014, each center cares for children (ages 5 months to 5 years) and operates from 10 AM to 5 PM. The business risk falls directly on the care workers who manage the entire creche independently without guaranteed income or fixed enrollment. This entrepreneurial approach creates ownership but introduces income volatility. The model demonstrates moderate scalability potential in urban settings. The model's impact extends beyond childcare, creating livelihood opportunities for 435 mothers across 46 self-help groups, with care workers earning approximately ₹5,417 monthly while mothers utilizing services earn about ₹7,800 monthly.



Visit to Apnalaya Creches in Mumbai

SEWA's Sangini Childcare Cooperative represents a community-driven model established in 1985. Operating 12 centers in Gujarat, each facility serves approximately 40 children (0-6 years) in mixed-age settings with three caretakers per center. The centers operate from 9 AM to 5 PM with structured programming including meals, exercise, and focused learning. Parent contributions (₹450-500 monthly) cover only a fraction of actual costs. Business risk is borne by the organization rather than individual care workers, who receive fixed salaries (₹7,000-12,000). With SEWA's extensive network of 2.9 million members across 18 states, this model demonstrates high scalability potential. Research indicates the model's impact includes doubling women's income through reliable childcare access, improved work focus, and reduced stress.



Visit to SEWA Sanganicentre, Ahmedabad

Mobile Creches pioneered a site-based approach transforming construction sites into temporary childcare centers since 1969. The organization employs three distinct partnership models: the Demonstration Model (50-70 children, direct management), the Tripartite Model (35-40 children, NGO partnerships), and the Employer Run Model (20-25 children, employer management). Centers operate 8 hours daily, 6 days weekly, focusing on health, nutrition, and age-appropriate learning. Business risk is primarily borne by the organization rather than individual workers. With operations spanning 18 states and 3,900+ centers established to date, Mobile Creches demonstrates exceptional scalability and has impacted over 1 million children. The model's adaptability allows it to function in various construction settings, including road projects, building sites, and brick kilns, showing strong potential for continued expansion.

The Confederation of Women Entrepreneurs (COWE), in partnership with SIDBI, operates the Aveksha initiative providing free daycare services for children of construction and industrial workers. Centers operate from 9 AM to 5 PM in purpose-built 800-1,000 sq. ft. container houses strategically located near work sites, featuring modern amenities including air conditioning, television, and CCTV surveillance. With operational costs of ₹1-1.3 lakhs monthly per center, the business risk falls on the organization rather than individual care workers who receive fixed compensation. While currently concentrated in Telangana with expansion plans for 20 additional centers, the model demonstrates moderate scalability potential contingent on securing NOCs from government authorities. Each center employs three women while enabling up to 30 mothers to pursue employment opportunities, effectively addressing both childcare needs and women's workforce participation.



Visit to Akshara Centre

A Strategic Framework to Transform India's Care Economy

The persistent and widening gender gaps in India's care economy demand immediate and comprehensive policy intervention. Despite five years of broader socioeconomic development between 2019 and 2024, women continue to shoulder approximately eight X more unpaid care work than men, with married women and those outside the labor force bearing an even heavier burden. This entrenched imbalance not only constrains women's economic opportunities but also represents a significant market failure that undermines India's growth potential. With the economic value of women's unpaid care work estimated at 15-17% of GDP, and demographic projections indicating a substantial increase in care needs due to an aging population, India must adopt a strategic approach to transform its care economy. The following five-pillar framework offers actionable recommendations that can simultaneously address gender disparities, create employment opportunities, and establish care as a recognized economic sector essential for sustainable development.

Pillar 1: Equitable Leave Policies

A comprehensive strategy for India's care economy begins with equitable leave policies that enable both women and men to balance paid work with caregiving responsibilities. Current policies place a disproportionate burden on women, constraining their economic participation and reinforcing traditional gender roles. Government subsidies for registered MSMEs and start-ups could help these businesses bear the cost of mandated six-month maternity leave, preventing discrimination against women in hiring while ensuring maternal and infant wellbeing. This mirrors successful practices in countries like Japan, France, and Canada, where governments share maternity leave costs with employers. Moving beyond gendered policies, India should consider mandating a balanced combination of maternity, paternity, and gender-neutral parental leaves. Market-based instruments such as parental leave insurance products could provide financial security during leave periods, with individuals and employers co-paying monthly premiums. Beyond parental leave, employers should implement flexible work arrangements and gender-neutral care leave policies for ongoing caregiving responsibilities, monitored by a joint government-industry task force.

Pillar 2: Strategic Subsidies for Care Services

The second pillar focuses on well-designed subsidies to stimulate both the supply of and demand for quality care services. Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have proven effective vehicles for women's entrepreneurship and community service delivery. Financial incentives under the Palna scheme or a new centrally sponsored scheme could support SHGs and Community-Based Organizations in establishing childcare facilities in underserved areas. Similar incentives for elderly and long-term care services would help build capacity in this underdeveloped sector, supporting diverse models including home-based care and multigenerational activity centers. Additionally, tax rebates for women-led MSMEs and cooperatives providing care services would expand the supply of care services while creating business opportunities for women entrepreneurs.

Pillar 3: Investments in Care Infrastructure

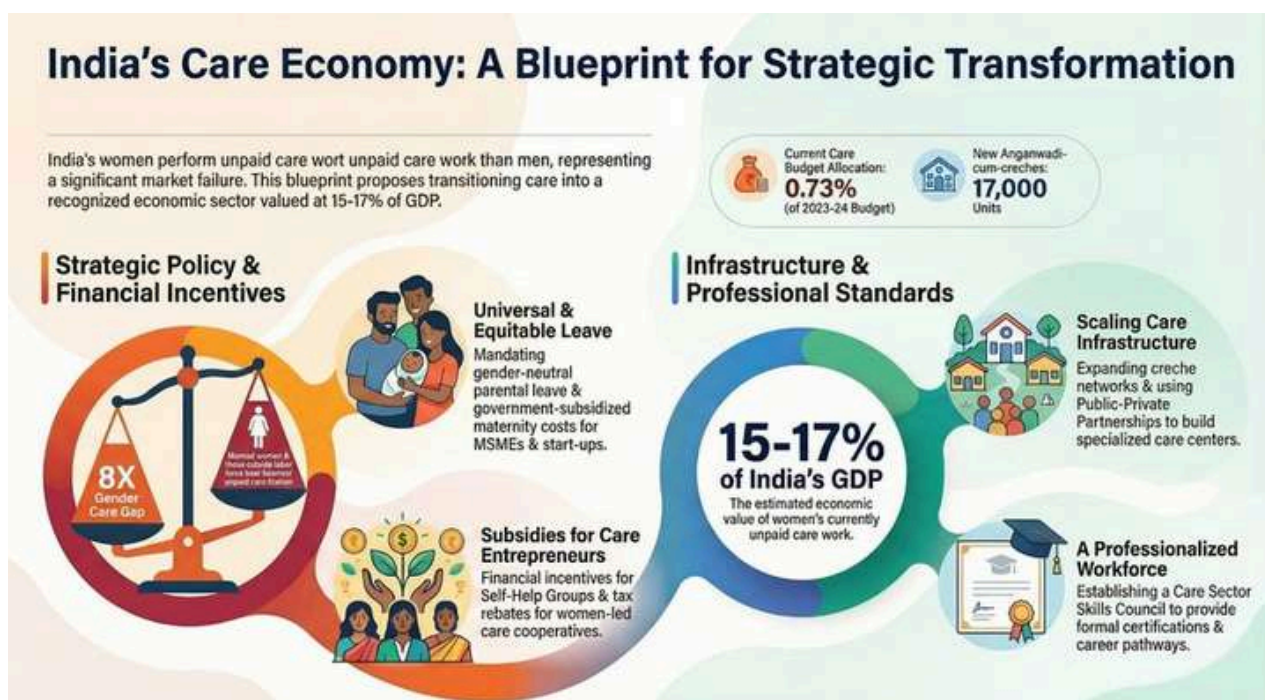
Investment in robust care infrastructure constitutes the third pillar. Current public investments remain inadequate, with budget allocations for major care-related schemes at approximately 0.73% of the 2023-24 budget. While the government's plan to establish 17,000 new Anganwadi-cum-creches under the Palna scheme is promising, targets should be expanded with commensurate funding increases. Beyond Anganwadis, India needs a centrally sponsored scheme supporting multipurpose care facilities addressing specialized needs, including care for differently-abled children, elderly care facilities, and long-term care centers. Public-Private Partnership frameworks could mobilize private capital while maintaining quality standards and affordability, potentially leveraging NGOs and SHGs for operational expertise.

Pillar 4: Professional Development of Care Workers

The fourth pillar addresses the critical need for a professional, skilled care workforce. India faces a growing supply-demand gap for trained care workers, with many existing workers lacking formal recognition and career advancement opportunities. The National Skill Development Council should conduct a comprehensive skill gap study and develop detailed job roles, seniority levels, and specializations across the care spectrum. Corresponding certification systems would create clear career pathways and elevate the status of care work as a valued profession. Incentives for private training institutes would rapidly scale up capacity, while international collaborations could facilitate global employment opportunities for Indian care workers, particularly in aging societies facing worker shortages.

Pillar 5: Quality Assurance Mechanisms

The final pillar establishes institutional mechanisms for quality assurance, currently lacking in India's care sector. The Ministry of Women and Child Development should establish minimum service standards and infrastructure benchmarks adaptable to local contexts while maintaining core quality requirements. More frequent time-use surveys and specialized studies would enable better tracking of gender gaps and workforce trends, with clear institutional responsibility for data collection. A dedicated Care Sector Skills Council would coordinate workforce development, setting standards for qualifications, wages, and performance across the sector



Conclusion

Transforming India's care economy requires concerted action across multiple dimensions to address persistent gender disparities while creating economic opportunities. The five-pillar framework—equitable leave policies, strategic subsidies, infrastructure investments, care worker professionalization, and quality assurance mechanisms, provides a comprehensive roadmap for this transformation. Successful models like Mobile Creches, SEWA's Sanginis, Apnalaya's CCCs, and COWE's Aveksha centers demonstrate viable approaches that can be scaled with appropriate policy support. By recognizing care work as a vital economic sector and addressing the market failure it represents, India can simultaneously enhance women's workforce participation, create quality employment, and build resilient care infrastructure essential for sustainable and inclusive development.

Acknowledgments

This paper has been authored by Brinda Juneja, Research Manager at Nikore Associates, serving as the lead author, with significant contributions from Mitali Nikore, Founder of Nikore Associates, as co-author. Research assistance was ably provided by Chestta Kathuria, Research Associate at Nikore Associates.

SECTION 4

At the Frontlines

Women Sustaining India's Essential Systems

*This section focuses on frontline women workers,
revealing broader systemic realities
through lived experiences.*

DECENT WORK DEFICITS: THE GENDERED NATURE OF ASHA'S WORK

Kajol Tanaya Behera, Smita Premchander, Anirudh Chakradhar

Abstract

This article uses a gender analysis framework to highlight how ASHA workers find themselves in an important but invisible, disadvantaged position in the employment hierarchy in the health sector in India. To meet the goals of maternal and child health and community medicine, the Indian government introduced ASHA workers as a cadre of community health workers in 2005. ASHA workers have proven their worth in terms of improved access for women to health services and lowered child and maternal mortality. They were at the forefront of delivering health services during COVID-19, at risk of their own physical and mental health, and even abuse.

However, their productive, reproductive, and community role is not recognized as work, and are characterized by serious Decent Work deficits. ASHA workers have been agitating and voicing their demands to the state and central governments. Given that India has a shortage of health workers of all types, ASHA workers are needed in greater numbers. The government needs to attend to the demands of ASHA workers for employment, fair wages, and working conditions, including leave, social protection, and structural positioning where their voices can be heard.

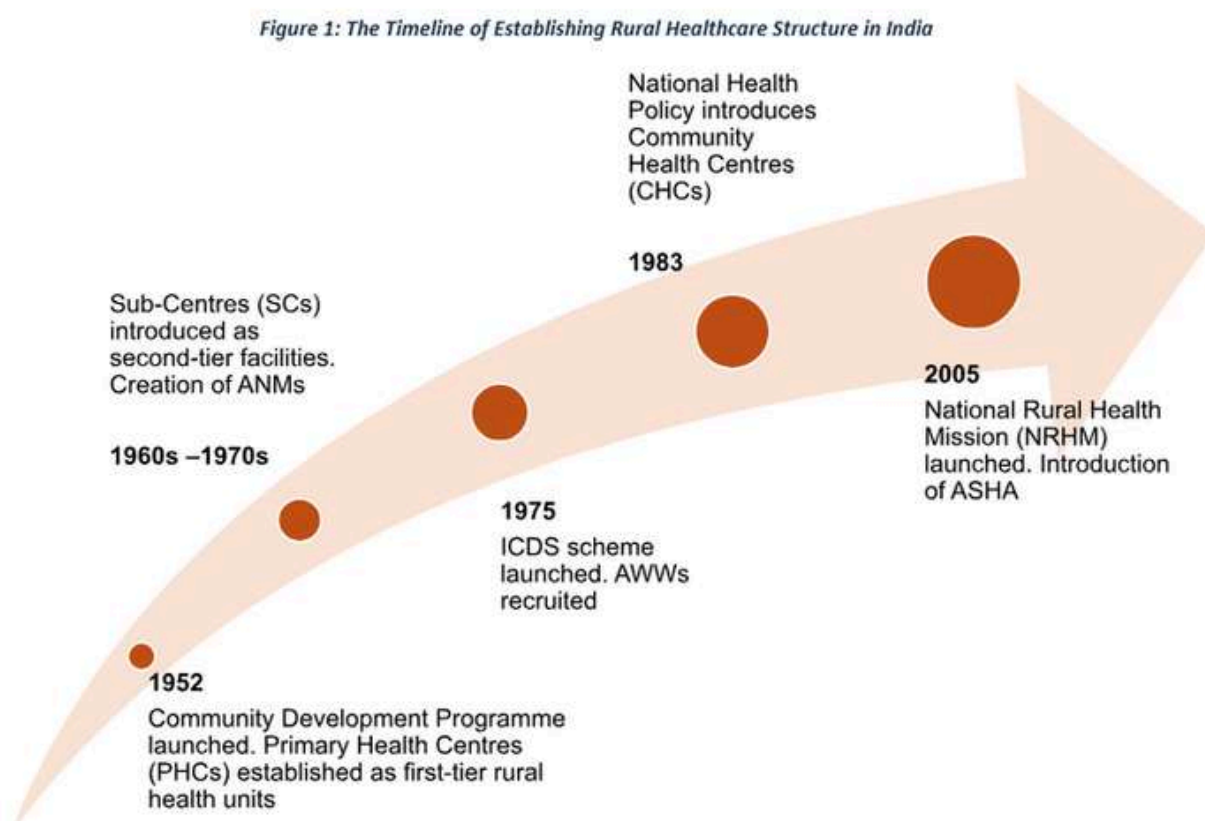


Introduction

In the 1940s, pre-independent India, diseases like malaria, cholera, and tuberculosis were widespread. The Bengal Famine of 1943 killed millions. Most of the population, residing in rural areas, had little access to healthcare. This period was also marked by global shifts toward welfare-oriented healthcare, which led Indian leaders to advocate for systemic changes in the national health system. In response, the British Indian government formed the Health Survey and Development Committee, chaired by Sir Joseph Bhore, in 1946.

The Bhore Committee recommended a three-tiered health system, which the Indian government operationalized after Independence, comprising Sub-Centres, Primary Health Centres (PHCs), and Community Health Centres (CHCs). Introduced in 1952, this model aimed to decentralize healthcare and improve rural access.

A detailed diagram illustrating the establishment timeline of the community healthcare worker profiles, along with the three-tier medical infrastructure, is depicted in Figure 1.



By the 1960s, Sub-centres were staffed by Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs) to provide maternal and child health services. In 1975, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme introduced Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) to deliver nutrition, preschool education, and basic healthcare to children under six. In 1983, Community Health Centres were created to serve as referral facilities. However, rural health challenges persisted, leading to the launch of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) in 2005.

The Contributions of ASHA Workers

A key innovation of the NRHM was the creation of the Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) profile. ASHA, derived from the Hindi word for “Hope”, is a female community member trained to serve as a link worker, social mobilizer, and health educator. The idea was inspired by Chhattisgarh’s Mitandin Programme, where local women known as “Mitainins” became trusted health workers.

ASHAs are women aged 25 to 45 years who could be married, widowed, or divorced, and preferably have completed at least 8th-grade education. They were primarily tasked with maternal and childcare. They identify pregnant women, register them for schemes like Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY), and ensure hospital deliveries. ASHAs educate the mothers, help them choose the hospital, and even take them to the hospital. ASHAs teach breastfeeding and arrange postnatal visits during the first week. They are also trained to give basic medical care using their kits, teach people how to prevent diseases, counsel families on family planning and safe abortion and encourage birth spacing. ASHAs are also tasked with conducting health surveys and helping communities plan and use local health services.

The work of ASHA has made a real difference in improving maternal and child health.

According to Institute for Human Development (IHD), between 2005-2011, About 90% of pregnant women use ASHA services, 17% more women are making their first antenatal care visit during pregnancy, 5% more women completing four or more check-ups, 26% more births attended by skilled professionals, and 28% more deliveries take place in health facilities. Reported by the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 5, between 2019 and 2020, the percentage of women who contacted an ASHA doubled from 11 percent to 23 percent.

Women are now more likely to meet an ASHA than any other community health worker. While less than half of women (43 percent) had their first postnatal check-up with a doctor, 12 percent had the checkup with an ASHA. The result of the grassroots health support was that the maternal mortality ratio dropped from 384 in 2000 to 103 in 2020. The infant mortality rate fell from 37 per 1,000 live births in 2015 to 30 in 2019.

During the COVID-19 crisis, community health workers, including ASHAs, rose to the challenge. Around 3.5 million women, including 1 million ASHAs, formed the frontline response in rural and semi-urban India (Pal, Saha, Bhatia, & Biswal, 2020). ASHA workers carried out contact tracing and spread awareness about the virus in their communities. They provided door-to-door care for COVID-19 patients and kept maternal and child health services running during lockdowns. With little training and support, they became the first and often the only point of care for millions (Das & Das, 2021). In 2022, the WHO honoured India's ASHA workers with the Director-General's Global Health Leaders Award for their ground-level impact on COVID-19 management.

Visible, Impactful, Yet Neglected- The Gendered Nature of ASHA Work

The genesis of the community-health volunteer status for ASHA lies in policymakers' belief that women could better connect with other women on sensitive reproductive health issues and would be less likely to leave the role for private medical practice or corruption (Ved et al., 2019).

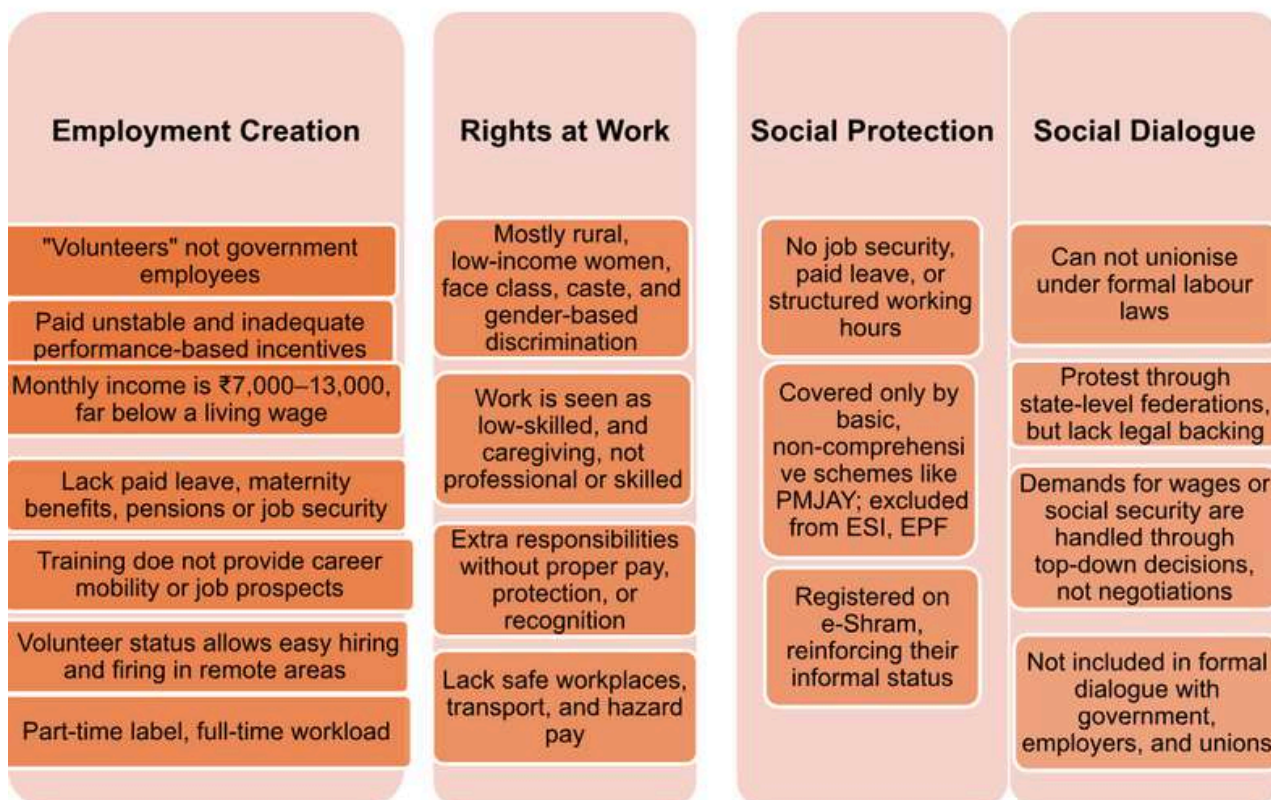
Ironically, this choice reinforces gender stereotypes by keeping women in unpaid or underpaid caregiving roles.

To understand the complex and gendered nature of ASHA work, two key frameworks can be applied: Caroline Moser's Triple Roles Framework and the International Labour Organization's Decent Work Agenda.

Moser's framework highlights the struggles that ASHAs face in their reproductive role, productive role and community role due to the nature of their work. The ILO's Decent Work pillars: employment creation, rights at work, social protection, and social dialogue, help further examine how ASHAs experience challenges in their productive role.

Productive Role: Unlike doctors and nurses, ASHAs suffer under broader professional and social biases that frame their work as emotional, low-skilled, and feminine. The productive work of ASHAs falls short in all four pillars of the International Labour Organization’s (ILO’s) Decent Work. This is depicted in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: ASHA Workers: Deficit in Decent Work



These points to serious Decent Work deficits, largely arising from not recognizing them as workers, and not extending basic rights and protections that are available to all workers. Despite acting as a critical foundation for a government programme, their work is considered voluntary in nature and deserving of only honorariums and incentives. This puts them in a rather strange position of being informal workers that are well-entrenched within government structures and a formal sector (Premchander, et. Al., 2023)

A Long-Standing Battle Demanding Decent Work

For nearly two decades, ASHA workers have been agitating for recognition, fair remuneration, and socio-legal status. Their demands have largely been met, or rather dismissed, with incremental concessions instead of enabling a systemic change. Their struggle highlights that as long as care work remains gendered and rooted in the undervaluation of women’s unpaid reproductive and community labor, ASHAs will continue to be seen as an extension of domestic work rather than health professionals. Consequently, their training will remain inadequate, the profession will remain informal, and compensation will be nominal. Gender bias in healthcare systems that prioritize male-dominated roles and ignore the economic contribution of frontline women workers will deepen.

The 2025 protest by ASHA workers in Kerala, which continues beyond 65 days, highlights this neglect. Despite their critical role during the 2018 floods and the COVID-19 pandemic, their pay remains performance-based and insufficient, around ₹7,000/month. Recognizing ASHAs' labour as formal productive work requires a radical shift that assigns economic value to all three of women's roles: productive, reproductive, and community based.

Community Role: ASHA workers are vulnerable to verbal abuse, harassment, and even physical violence, particularly when dealing with challenging situations or resistant community members. Families and communities sometimes discriminated against them because they moved from house to house. Their struggles are shaped by their gender, caste, and religion (Shrivastava et al.,2023). ASHAs from lower castes reported discrimination when serving higher-caste villages. Such issues often go unreported in public discussions. During the pandemic, many were wrongly blamed for spreading the virus. An Oxfam survey found that 33% of ASHAs faced violence or discrimination while working during COVID-19. Moreover, they are often excluded from local decision-making. In Shahapur, a region marked by poverty and poor infrastructure, ASHAs reported mixed community perceptions.

While their work was generally acknowledged, their volunteer status was undervalued (Bhatia, 2014). Many community members, especially in households reliant on daily wages, could not relate to unpaid or low-paid labor. ASHAs faced mistrust, with some villagers assuming they received regular salaries like ANMs or MPWs. Even local health committees and elected leaders lacked clarity about ASHA remuneration.

Reproductive Role: ASHAs navigate a constant tension between their professional and personal lives. As wives and daughters-in-law, they are still expected to cook, clean, and care for family members after long hours in the field. ASHAs also experience feelings of guilt for putting less time into family and childcare. They also experience disrespect by the elderly for a poorly incentivized job (Shrivastava et al.,2023).

Many ASHAs face resistance at home, as their families see little financial return for the time and effort they invest (Bhatia, 2014). This is made worse by the need for ASHAs to pay for travel and supplies upfront with expected delays in reimbursement. ASHAs are pressured by in-laws, mocked by husbands, or denied basic expenses (Bhatia, 2014).

Decent Work for ASHAs: The Call of Future Health Care in India

In a country like India, where 6.1 doctors and 10.6 nurses or midwives cater to 10,000 people, as opposed to 44.5 healthcare workers recommended by WHO, and fewer than two nurses assisting per doctor as opposed to three nurses (Karan et al., 2021), ASHAs have already expanded their role beyond maternal and child health in multiple states. In Rajasthan, they conduct door-to-door tuberculosis screenings, showing how they adapt to disease-specific programs. In Chhattisgarh, ASHAs act not only as healthcare providers but also as health rights advocates, addressing nutrition and sanitation. In Kerala, they have expanded their work to include mental health support and elderly care. Maharashtra's ASHAs contribute to tuberculosis, leprosy, and non-communicable disease control, while Delhi's ASHAs are preparing to expand into palliative care and mental health.

The gap for healthcare assistance in India is expected to widen as the population ages. By 2050, one in five Indians will be over 60, and chronic illnesses like diabetes and hypertension will become more common. At the same time, medical and treatment costs have more than doubled in five years, and annual medical inflation has reached nearly 14 percent, far outpacing general inflation (The Week, 2025). Public healthcare remains underfunded, and fewer than 15 percent of formal

workers have employer-sponsored insurance. In this context, ASHAs will continue to serve beyond their initial profile to reduce the burden on formal healthcare.

To equip ASHAs in helping the government meet these healthcare challenges, their needs must be addressed first. These include both practical needs, which improve their conditions of work, and strategic needs, which improve the position they and their work have been assigned in the health work hierarchy.

Practical Needs of ASHA Workers

ASHAs need to be formally recognized as essential contributors to the public health system. They require fair and regular wages that move beyond the current task-based incentives. Decent working conditions, including fixed hours, adequate rest, manageable workloads and access to protective gear, especially during public health crises, are mandatory. They need to be safeguarded against workplace harassment or exploitation. Mobility support is another critical area. Transport allowances or logistical assistance are essential for those covering remote or difficult terrain. Immediate access to basic social protection like health insurance, pension schemes, and welfare benefits is also key.

ASHAs must be included in local health planning and decision-making processes, giving them a voice through proper social dialogue mechanisms.

Strategic Needs for Long-Term Transformation
At a deeper level, ASHA workers need their roles to be formalized with structured salaries, job security, and complete recognition as skilled public health professionals. They should receive all employment entitlements, such as paid leave, maternity leave, sick leave, and compensation for overtime work. Workplaces must be made gender-sensitive and safe, not just physically but also in terms of respect and recognition.

The status of women's livelihoods is influenced by their access to education, vocational skills, employment options, and the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Premchander, Roy Chowdhury, and Pingali, 2020). ASHAs must be provided with clear career pathways and recognized skill-training, where they could grow, take on leadership roles, and specialize. Public awareness about the value of ASHA work is also crucial to reduce stigma and build long-term community support.

A positive case example in this direction can be taken from Pakistan. The efforts of the All-Pakistan Lady Health Workers Association led to the formalization of over

100,000 community health workers. Though challenges like delayed payments persist, formalization has substantially improved their financial security and societal status (Mumtaz et al., 2003).

Women health workers, many of whom are the primary earners in their families, have reported better access to education for their children, improved healthcare within their households, and greater economic stability.

Policy recommendations in India have consistently supported formalization of contract workers. The 45th and 46th Indian Labour Conference (ILC) deliberated on the need to extend social security benefits such as Employees' State Insurance (ESI) and Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) to scheme-based workers, including ASHAs and Anganwadi workers. In 2020, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Labour strongly recommended the formalization of these workers, advocating for structured wages rather than ad hoc honoraria and incentives, and rejecting their classification as honorary or voluntary workers.

The fiscal commitment required to formalize these roles is significant but must be viewed as a long-term investment in public health, social welfare, and gender equity. We contend that if perspectives of work are gendered, women's work will continue to be perceived as an extension of their care role in the household. A reversal would call for a recognition of the importance of community-level health care as work, with a fair economic value placed on it, resulting in fair wages, working conditions, social protection, and voice and representation. ASHA workers have proven that they deserve it; the Indian healthcare system needs community health workers, and it is time that we grant their demands and their rights to Decent Work.

Recommendations

1. Recognize ASHA workers as formal employees within the public health system with structured salaries, job security, and clear employment status, moving beyond incentive-based compensation models
2. Ensure comprehensive social protection including health insurance, pensions, paid leave, and maternity benefits to strengthen financial security and long-term wellbeing of ASHA workers
3. Improve working conditions through defined work hours, manageable workloads, mobility support, and access to safety mechanisms, including protection from workplace harassment and violence
4. Establish clear career progression pathways with structured training, certification, and opportunities for specialization and leadership within the healthcare system
5. Strengthen institutional voice and representation by integrating ASHA workers into local health governance and decision-making processes through formal platforms for social dialogue

References

- Bhatia, Kavita. (2014). Performance-based incentives of the ASHA scheme stakeholders' perspectives. *Economic and political weekly*. 145-151.
- Chakradhar, A., & Madhav, S. (2023, January 19). ASHAs: Informal workers in the formal sector. *India Development Review*. <https://idronline.org/article/rights/ashas-informal-workers-in-the-formal-sector/>
- Das, S., & Das, S. (2021). Intimate labor at biomedical frontlines: Situated knowledges of female community health workers in the management of COVID-19 in India. *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, 7(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v7i1.34781>
- International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. (2021). National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019–21: India: Volume I. Mumbai: IIPS. Retrieved from <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR375/FR375.pdf>
- Institute for Human Development. (2005 & 2012). India Human Development Survey (2004–05 and 2011–12) [Data set]. National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) and University of Maryland.
- Jammu Kashmir Policy Institute. (2024, March 22). The silent backbone of healthcare: The vital role and struggles of ASHA workers. Jammu Kashmir Policy Institute. <https://www.jkpi.org/the-silent-backbone-of-healthcare-the-vital-role-and-struggles-of-asha-workers/>
- Karan, A., Negandhi, H., Hussain, S., Zapata, T., Mairembam, D., De Graeve, H., Buchan, J., & Zodpey, S. (2021). Size, composition and distribution of health workforce in India: Why, and where to invest? *Human Resources for Health*, 19(1), 39. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12960-021-00575-2>

- Kurapati, Jyothi; Anitha, C T. Community Health Workers' Challenges during COVID-19: An Intersectionality Study. *Indian Journal of Community Medicine* 50(3): p 520-524, May–Jun 2025. | DOI: 10.4103/ijcm.ijcm_53_23
- Menon S, Bisht R, Nair B. ASHA Workers During COVID-19 in India: At the Intersection of Gender and Work. *Journal of Health Management*. 2025;27(1):78-85. doi:10.1177/09720634241307290
- Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. (2011). Guidelines for community processes: ASHA programme. National Health Mission, Government of India. <https://nhm.gov.in/images/pdf/communitisation/task-group-reports/guidelines-on-asha.pdf>
- Moser, C. O. N. (1993). *Gender planning and development: Theory, practice and training*. Routledge.
- Mumtaz, Z., Salway, S., Waseem, M., & Umer, N. (2003). Gender-based barriers to primary health care provision in Pakistan: The experience of female providers. *Health Policy and Planning*, 18(3), 261–269. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapol/czg032>
- Pal, S., Saha, D., Bhatia, S., & Biswal, C. (2020). Understanding the perspective of frontline health workers in Bundelkhand region to improve COVID-19 containment efforts. *SRIJAN*. <https://srijanindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Understanding-the-perspective-of-Frontline-Health-workers-in-Bundelkhand-region-to-improve-COVID19-Containment-Efforts.pdf>
- Premchander, S., Pingali, D., Chakradhar, A., Premchander, S., Iyer, S., Khanna, R. and Shrutija, S. (2023). *Towards Strengthened Social Dialogue in India's Informal Economy*. Research Report (Forthcoming). ILO: New Delhi.
- Premchander, S., Roy Chowdhury, A., & Pingali, D. (2020). Unequal access: Women and their livelihoods in 2020. In *State of India's Livelihoods Report 2020* (p. 125). Access Development Services. https://www.aiacaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Soil_Report-2021.pdf
- Shrivastava R, Sharma L, Jolly M, Ahuja R, Sharma R, Naslund JA, Agrawal J, Shidhaye R, Mehrotra S, Hollon SD, Patel V, Tugnawat D, Kumar A, Bhan A, Bondre AP. "We are everyone's ASHAs but who's there for us?" a qualitative exploration of perceptions of work stress and coping among rural frontline workers in Madhya Pradesh, India.
- Singh, V. (2023). ASHA workers in India: A quest for socio legal identity. *Society and Culture Development in India*, 3(2), 301–307. <https://doi.org/10.47509/SCDI.2023.v03i02.10>
- The Week. (2025, June 22). Medical inflation in India is outpacing general inflation by a considerable margin. *The Week*. <https://www.theweek.in/news/health/2025/06/22/medical-inflation-in-india-is-outpacing-general-inflation-by-a-considerable-margin.html>
- Ved, R., Scott, K., Gupta, G. et al. How are gender inequalities facing India's one million ASHAs being addressed? Policy origins and adaptations for the world's largest all-female community health worker programme. *Human Resources for Health* 17, 3 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12960-018-0338-0>

SECTION 5

New Frontiers of Work

Women in Emerging and Digital Economies



This section explores women's opportunities in digital platforms and emerging sectors.

WOMEN AND THE PLATFORM ECONOMY IN INDIA: NAVIGATING OPPORTUNITIES, BARRIERS, AND POLICY PATHWAYS

Written by Prakriti Sharma and reviewed by Aditi Vyas and Bidisha Mondal

Introduction

India's platform economy stands as an expansive and rapidly evolving labour market segment, offering new economic avenues for millions, particularly women. Yet, data reveal a complex picture wherein opportunities coexist with systemic, gendered, and intersectional barriers. This chapter draws upon the latest government data, scholarly research and reports to present a data-intensive, rigorous account of women's platform work in India.

The country's gig and platform workforce numbered an estimated 7.7 million in 2020-21, with projections forecast escalating to 23.5 million by 2029-30. According to NITI Aayog (2022), women constitute approximately 28% of this workforce, although this figure varies significantly depending on sector, geography, and data source (NITI Aayog, 2022). These growth figures are important for national strategies such as Viksit Bharat which emphasize inclusive economic development and digital empowerment. Simultaneously, India's Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR), has recently been steadily increasing, reflecting a gradual shift in women's economic engagement in the country. The intersection of expanding platform work and rising FLFPR presents an opportunity to harness flexible, technology-mediated employment as a pathway for women's greater participation in India's formal and informal labour markets. This evolving landscape underlines the critical policy and programmatic focus on leveraging platform economies aligned with broader social and economic targets under schemes promoting digital inclusion and women's empowerment.

To understand the skill levels that exist in the platform economy: 47% of jobs as medium-skilled, with the remaining nearly equally split between low- and high-skilled roles. Apart from skill type, the work also differs as per occupational type, pay structure, and working conditions. It ranges from historically feminized, care-

oriented, and domestic services conducted largely through digital platforms, such as cleaning, beauty services, and eldercare, to traditionally masculinized sectors, including ride-hailing, logistics, and delivery services (Pathak, Uprety, & Maharjan, 2025; Fairwork, 2024; Nair, 2022; NITI Aayog, 2022).

Several key types of platform work can be identified:

- On-demand home and personal services: Platforms connect workers with consumers seeking beauty treatments, cleaning, plumbing, appliance repair, and other household services.
- Ride-hailing and delivery services: Companies such offer flexible gig opportunities primarily in transportation and food/parcel delivery, shaping a huge segment of urban platform work.

Care and domestic work platforms: These focus on eldercare, childcare, nursing, and domestic help. Digitalisation within care and domestic work platforms remains limited when compared to other segments of the platform economy.

In many cases, the digital interface is designed primarily for customers, with minimal features or support structures for workers. Even if often digitally mediated, work conditions frequently mirror informal and unprotected forms of employment (Mondal, Sharma, Chowdhury, & S, 2025).

Gender dimensions intersect strongly with the typology of platform work. Women disproportionately dominate the caregiving, domestic help, and beauty services sectors, often viewed as extensions of unpaid care labour and historically feminized jobs. Conversely, men dominate platform-mediated ride-hailing, delivery, and technical gigs, where higher earnings and greater autonomy are typical. This gendered occupational segregation replicates broader labour market inequalities and frames the scope of women's economic empowerment potential within platform work (Pathak, Uprety, & Maharjan, 2025; Fairwork, 2024).

At the same time, unique advantages attract women to platform jobs: non-linear, flexible hours enable them to balance care responsibilities with paid work: a key factor given the high unpaid care burden borne by women in India. Yet, it is important to highlight that flexibility alone does not resolve underlying inequities without concomitant improvements in social protection, infrastructure, and algorithmic fairness, it remains a central feature offering glimmers of enhanced agency and economic opportunity for women navigating India's platform economy (Mondal, Sharma, Chowdhury, & S, 2025; Ghosh, Zaidi, & Ramachandran, 2022).

The evolving scope of platform work in India demands detailed exploration of gendered barriers and enablers to participation and advancement. Against this backdrop, this chapter synthesizes the broad landscape of platform work types and women's participation therein, elucidating trends with rich empirical data and policy insights. It situates platform work as both a continuation of historic labour market patterns and a site of emerging possibilities for transforming women's economic inclusion.

Barriers to Women's Participation in India's Platform Economy

Despite platform economy's rapid growth, persistent barriers substantially limit women's equitable participation. Notably, these barriers exist on two levels: first, women face significant challenges in entering the platform work sector itself due to structural and societal obstacles; and second, the work environment within

platform economies generates additional hurdles that compound precarity and exclusion. These are further exacerbated due to gendered constraints such as care responsibilities, safety concerns, and exclusion from collective.

- Structural Barriers to enter the Platform Economy: Digital Access, Literacy, Socioeconomic Constraints, and Norms

Structural barriers, ranging from uneven digital connectivity to restrictive gender norms, intersect with economic marginalization to determine who can participate, under what conditions, and with what outcomes. These constraints continue to limit not only women's entry into the platform economy but also the nature of work they are channelled into and the stability of their earnings.

Digital access disparities remain a core hurdle. Studies indicate that a higher percentage of women lack independent smartphone ownership or digital literacy, severely restricting their ability to engage with app-based work platforms (Mondal, Sharma, Chowdhury, & S, 2025; NITI Aayog, 2022). Moreover, limited access to bank accounts or digital payment literacy compounds financial exclusion, affecting women's capacity to receive payments, save, and invest in work-related assets (Tiwari, 2025).

Socioeconomic status further constrains participation, as many women in the platform economy come from low-income backgrounds with limited education, leading to reduced awareness of platform work opportunities (Mondal, Sharma, Chowdhury, & S, 2025). Social and cultural norms around gender roles also restrict women's mobility and acceptable work types, effectively channelling them into traditionally feminized but lower-paid sectors such as domestic work and caregiving (Pathak, Uprety, & Maharjan, 2025; Ghosh, Zaidi, & Ramachandran, 2022).

A critical barrier to occupational diversification in platform work is also the lack of technical skills and targeted upskilling opportunities for women, especially in non-traditional sectors of work like driving (Mondal, Sharma, Chowdhury, & S, 2025).

NGOs and civil society organizations often play a pivotal role in bridging this gap by organizing digital literacy and vocational training programs tailored for women workers, thereby enabling some to diversify into less traditional and better-paying platform jobs (ibid). These initiatives remain isolated and insufficient in scale but exemplify effective pathways to overcome technical skill deficits and promote broader inclusion.

- Sectoral Challenges: Income Insecurity, Lack of Social Protection, and Algorithmic Control

Within the work itself, the platform economy generates distinct and pervasive challenges for women. To begin with, income volatility emerges as a critical issue: studies demonstrate irregular and unpredictable earnings are endemic, requiring workers, primarily women in this context, to extend working hours to attain minimal remuneration thresholds (Ghosh, Ramachandran, & Zaidi, 2022). This financial precarity is further exacerbated by women's overrepresentation in lower-paid, feminized sectors such as caregiving and beauty services, where opportunities for surge earnings or high-status gigs are structurally limited (Bansal & De, 2024; Minh, 2025), perpetuating systemic economic disparities.

In addition to income instability, gender pay gaps persist. The ISST study (2022) quantify that female delivery workers earn approximately 10% less than their male counterparts, a figure worsened by women's caregiving duties and restricted mobility which limit their ability to access surge pricing and incentive-driven earnings.

Platform algorithmic controls impose mandatory login hours, task quotas, and penalty mechanisms that constrain genuine worker autonomy and disproportionately burden women who must negotiate domestic and caregiving demands simultaneously (Anwar, Pal, & Hui, 2021; Ghosh, Zaidi, & Ramachandran, 2022).

Women's inability to freely accept or refuse tasks without adverse consequences limits their capacity to optimize work schedules and earnings, resulting in extended working hours that

compound time poverty (Mondal, Sharma, Chowdhury, & S, 2025).

Women's inability to freely accept or refuse tasks without adverse consequences limits their capacity to optimize work schedules and earnings, resulting in extended working hours that compound time poverty (Mondal, Sharma, Chowdhury, & S, 2025). Moreover, safety concerns and social norms circumscribe the operating hours and mobility of women workers, further restricting actual flexibility (ibid). Thus, while flexibility serves as a vital demand-side enabler, its real-world application on platform work frequently falls short, requiring complementary policy and platform design reforms to realize its full potential for women's economic empowerment.

These systemic issues are compounded by gender-specific constraints. The substantial unpaid care burden borne by women in India severely limits their time available for income-generating activities, including platform work (Mondal, Sharma, Chowdhury, & S, 2025).

At the same time, algorithmic management practices also tend to constrain worker autonomy by enforcing mandatory task acceptance, penalizing refusals, and using opaque evaluation systems that may embed and reinforce gender biases (Bansal & De, 2024; Ghosh, Zaidi, & Ramachandran, 2022). As a result, women often face systematic assignment to lower-paid, gender-stereotyped tasks, reducing opportunities for advancement (Ghosh, Zaidi, & Ramachandran, 2022).

This care labour reproduces conditions of time poverty, reducing capacity for sustained or intensive participation. Additionally, safety concerns, including risks of harassment or violence in public and private spaces, restrict women's mobility and access to platforms offering night or travel-intensive shifts, exacerbating occupational segmentation into safer but lower-paid and often less visible roles (Mondal, Sharma, Chowdhury, & S, 2025).

Platforms' grievance and safety redress mechanisms remain inadequate or underutilized, perpetuating vulnerability.

Furthermore, despite legislative recognition of gig and platform workers under India's Code on Social Security (2020), coverage of maternity benefits, health insurance, paid leave, and accident support remains negligible among women platform workers (Fairwork, 2024; Pathak, Uprety, & Maharjan, 2025). In practice, there remain several constraints that temper immediate widespread access to these social protections among women platform workers.

Awareness of eligibility and benefit schemes is relatively low within the worker population, compounded by logistical hurdles such as documentation requirements, online registration complexities, and fragmented implementation across states (Fairwork, 2024; Mondal, Sharma, Chowdhury, & S, 2025). Consequently, many women platform workers to health and livelihood risks without adequate institutional support.

While some sectors, especially ride-hailing and delivery, have piloted insurance and health schemes, coverage remains inconsistent, and claim processing is often slow or unclear, reducing the practical effectiveness of these safety nets for most female workers (Fairwork, 2024; Pathak, Uprety, & Maharjan, 2025).

These hurdles are exacerbated due to inadequate public infrastructure that acts as a barrier to women's meaningful participation in India's platform economy. Platform workers predominantly operate in urban public spaces and private households without designated workplaces, relying heavily on access to basic amenities to perform their jobs effectively and safely.

However, studies reveal systemic inadequacies in urban infrastructure, with a pervasive lack of accessible, safe public toilets, resting spots, charging stations, and drinking water facilities, which disproportionately impact female gig workers (Fairwork, 2024; Mondal, Sharma, Chowdhury, & S, 2025). This infrastructural exclusion poses challenges to women's health and dignity and may limit their earning potential and sustained engagement in platform work, highlighting an important area for targeted policy attention and improvement.

Lastly, women's limited involvement in labour collectives or unions curtails effective advocacy for better pay, safer working conditions, or non-discrimination policies. Barriers to collectivization include time poverty, restrictions on public engagement due to social norms, being isolated at work (with streets/ households as workplaces) and platforms' classifications of workers as independent contractors, which structurally impede collective bargaining (Bansal & De, 2024; Mondal, Sharma, Chowdhury, & S, 2025).

Importantly, the very nature of platform work compounds isolation; women often work physically alone, dispersed across streets, or clients' homes rather than in centralized workplaces, which severely limits opportunities for peer interaction, solidarity building, and information sharing (Mondal, Sharma, Chowdhury, & S, 2025). In the absence of robust collective voice, women remain largely reliant on platform goodwill or on regulatory protections that are yet to be fully realized.

Centring Gender-Sensitive Regulation in India's Evolving Labour Markets

The declining viability of traditional rural livelihoods, especially agriculture, continues to push labour towards urban centres and digital gig platforms, providing a steady supply of workers willing to engage in low-barrier, flexible jobs facilitated by accessible smartphones and affordable internet connectivity (Ghosh, Ramachandran, & Zaidi, 2022).

At the same time, the proliferation of venture capital and startup ecosystems further supports the rapid expansion of platform firms across India's urban and peri-urban landscapes, generating millions of jobs; for instance, NITI Aayog reports that key aggregators of ride-hailing services have collectively created between one and 2.2 million jobs since 2014, while Fairwork India estimates over 3 million platform workers across popular service sectors (NITI Aayog, 2022; Pathak, Uprety, & Maharjan, 2025; Fairwork, 2024). Importantly, platform work is deeply integrated with India's informal economy, acting as a digital extension and formalization attempt of existing informal labour, leveraging digitization and increasing gadget penetration (Ghosh, Ramachandran, & Zaidi, 2022).

Given this rapid expansion, the absence of systematically collected Labour Force Survey (LFS) data on platform workers presents a major evidence gap, underscoring the urgent need to incorporate gig and platform labour into national employment statistics to guide policy and regulatory design.

Given their centrality and growth trajectory, Indian labour legislation has taken pivotal steps toward recognizing and regulating platform and gig workers. Historically, Indian labour law categorized workers into government employees, Public Sector Undertakings staff, and private sector employees, categories that fail to do not accommodate gig or platform labour due to its atypical contractual forms (Ghosh, Ramachandran, & Zaidi, 2022). Recognizing this gap, the Union Labour Ministry's consolidation of 44 laws into four comprehensive Labour Codes covering wages, industrial relations, social security, and occupational safety: represents an ambitious reform effort intended to streamline, modernize, and extend labour protections (ibid).

However, it is important to note that the Code on Wages does not currently extend to gig and platform workers, even though it adopts an expanded definition of "employee." This stems from the ongoing definitional and implementation challenges. For instance, many gig workers operate across multiple platforms, making the identification of a single "employer" complex; additionally, conventional minimum-wage frameworks, typically structured around piece-rate or hourly work, do not easily align with task-based gig (Ghosh, Ramachandran, & Zaidi, 2022; Mondal, Sharma, Chowdhury, & S, 2025)).

As a result, gig workers remain outside the purview of key labour protections such as minimum wage safeguards, equal pay mandates, Provident Fund contributions, Employees' State Insurance, and gratuity provisions (ibid).

Conversely, the Code on Social Security, 2020, marks a historic legal recognition by explicitly acknowledging gig and platform workers as a distinct occupational category alongside unorganized sector workers.

It provides mechanisms for social security schemes and creates a National Social Security Board for gig and platform workers, envisaging welfare funds financed through 1-2% of platform aggregators' annual turnover or 5% of workers' wages contributed by platforms. Registration mechanisms leveraging Aadhaar-linked Unique Registration Numbers further aim to facilitate service delivery.

Despite these advances, complexities remain, such as overlapping definitions of "gig worker," "platform worker," and "unorganized worker," which risk regulatory gaps and confusion about benefit eligibility (Mondal, Sharma, Chowdhury, & S, 2025). Additionally, regulatory fragmentation persists due to the multiplicity of government entities involved without clear accountability, raising concerns over the enforcement of workers' rights (Mondal, Sharma, Chowdhury, & S, 2025).

For example, grievance redressal systems, where present, place ultimate authority with companies rather than independent bodies, undermining worker protection, particularly for vulnerable women exposed to cyber harassment or stalking.

Specific regulatory measures exist, including the Motor Vehicle Guidelines (2020) capping commissions, limiting surge pricing, imposing maximum daily work hours, mandating insurance coverage, and requiring drivers to retain a significant share of fares. However, enforcement and coverage vary (Ghosh, Ramachandran, & Zaidi, 2022). Sector-specific regulations addressing e-commerce food safety and transport aggregators reinforce some oversight but remain partial (ibid).

Gender-related gaps within the legislative framework remain especially pronounced. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013, currently does not extend mandatory coverage to women gig workers classified as independent contractors or freelancers (Ghosh, Ramachandran, & Zaidi, 2022). Studies reveal that most platform companies lack functional Internal Committees to address harassment for non-employee women workers, restricting legal recourse and safety.

Additionally, domestic workers, many of whom engage through platform intermediaries, are often excluded from social security schemes, creating ambiguity between labour identities and further marginalizing care-oriented female labour (Ghosh, Zaidi, & Ramachandran, 2022). Therefore, gender-specific protections require explicit inclusion of women gig workers under sexual harassment laws and mandatory company policies to protect workers both from clients and platform mechanisms (Mondal, Sharma, Chowdhury, & S, 2025).

Therefore, complementary infrastructure investments, such as adequate public toilets, lighting, and crèche facilities, are vital to enhancing women's safety and enabling longer work hours, thus supporting earning capacity.

Furthermore, flexible work arrangements must account for gendered care responsibilities, avoiding one-size-fits-all policies. Incentivizing "shorter but more profitable" work hours and enforcing zero-tolerance policies towards harassment can create safer, more appealing working conditions for women. Moreover, transparency through mandated publication of gender-disaggregated data supports accountability, guiding informed interventions. Strengthening women-centric union representation and leadership ensures their issues do not remain marginalized in collective bargaining processes.

Looking forward, platform work promises significant potential for increasing women's labour force participation due to its flexibility and scalability. Surveys demonstrate a majority of women value flexible timing as the most attractive feature of gig work (Mondal, Sharma, Chowdhury, & S, 2025).

Yet, concerns over accessibility to benefits, fragmented regulatory enforcement, and potential cost externalization to workers highlight persistent implementation challenges. International precedents, including the UK's three-tier worker classification and California's AB-5 law, offer models to recalibrate worker protections amid platform work's fluid employment relationships, balancing flexibility with rights.

In conclusion, realizing the transformative promise of platform work for women in India hinges on comprehensive, gender-sensitive regulatory frameworks that reconcile innovation with robust legal protections, expanded social security, enhanced platform accountability, and inclusive governance. Integrating systematic LFS data on platform workers, coupled with learnings from emerging policies and global practice, will be essential to foster equitable, dignified labour futures.

Recommendations

1. *Expand Digital Inclusion and Financial Access for Women*

Strengthen access to smartphones, digital literacy, and financial tools (banking, digital payments) through targeted skilling and subsidy programmes, enabling more women to enter and effectively participate in platform work.

2. *Enable Women's Entry into High-Growth, Non-Traditional Sectors*

Design targeted skilling and transition programmes (e.g., driving, logistics, technical roles) to support women in diversifying beyond traditionally feminized, lower-paying platform roles.

3. *Strengthen Social Protection Mechanisms for Platform Workers*

Accelerate implementation of social security provisions under existing frameworks to ensure health insurance, maternity benefits, income protection, and accident coverage are accessible, simple to enroll in, and widely adopted by women workers.

4. *Promote Gender-Sensitive Platform Design and Work Conditions*

Encourage platforms to adopt transparent, fair, and flexible algorithmic systems, including:

- Greater control over task acceptance
- Safer working hours and geographies
- Clear grievance redressal mechanisms

This will help translate flexibility into meaningful economic empowerment.

5. *Invest in Enabling Infrastructure and Collective Voice Mechanisms*

Develop gender-responsive public infrastructure (safe transport, toilets, rest spaces, crèches) and support women-led collectives and representation platforms to strengthen voice, safety, and long-term participation in the platform economy.

References

- Anwar, I. A., Pal, J., & Hui, J. (2021). Watched, but Moving. *Proc. ACM Hum. Comput. Interact.*
- Bansal, T., & De, S. (2024). Gender and the Gig Economy: An Analysis of Women Workers across Gig Platforms. *Ijrasnet Journal For Research in Applied Science and Engineering Technology.*
- Fairwork. (2024). Fairwork India Ratings 2024: Labour Standards in the Platform Economy. Bangalore, India; Oxford, United Kingdom. Retrieved from https://fair.work/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2024/10/Fairwork_India_Report_2024.pdf
- Ghosh, A., Ramachandran, R., & Zaidi, M. (2022). "Women Workers in the Gig Economy in India": An Exploratory Study. *ISST.*
- Ghosh, A., Zaidi, M., & Ramachandran, R. (2022). Locating women workers in the platform economy in India – old wine in a new bottle? *Gender and Development.* Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/366111168_Locating_women_workers_in_the_platform_economy_in_India_-_old_wine_in_a_new_bottle
- Minh, L. V. (2025). Gender, Work, and Digital Labor Platforms in Asia: A Systematic Review. *International Journal of Social Science and Applied Technology.*
- Mondal, B., Sharma, P., Chowdury, A., & S, A. (2025). *The Changing World of Women's Work: Navigating the Possibilities and Precarities of Platform Work.* IWWAGE.
- Nair, G. (2022). 'New' terrains of precarity – gig work in India. *Contemporary South Asia.* Retrieved from ISB.
- NITI Aayog. (2022). India's Booming Gig and Platform Economy. Retrieved from https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2023-06/Policy_Brief_India's_Booming_Gig_and_Platform_Economy_27062022.pdf
- Pathak, C. P., Uprety, L., & Maharjan, N. (2025, July 11). Gig Work, Big Gaps: Women in India's Gig Economy. *global-is-asian.* Retrieved from <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/gia/article/gig-work--big-gaps--women-in-india-s-gig-economy>
- Tiwari, A. S. (2025). Implications of the Rise of Platform Economy on The Gendered Labour Parity in India. *International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research.* Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/394589925_Implications_of_the_Rise_of_Platform_Economy_on_The_Gendered_Labour_Parity_in_India

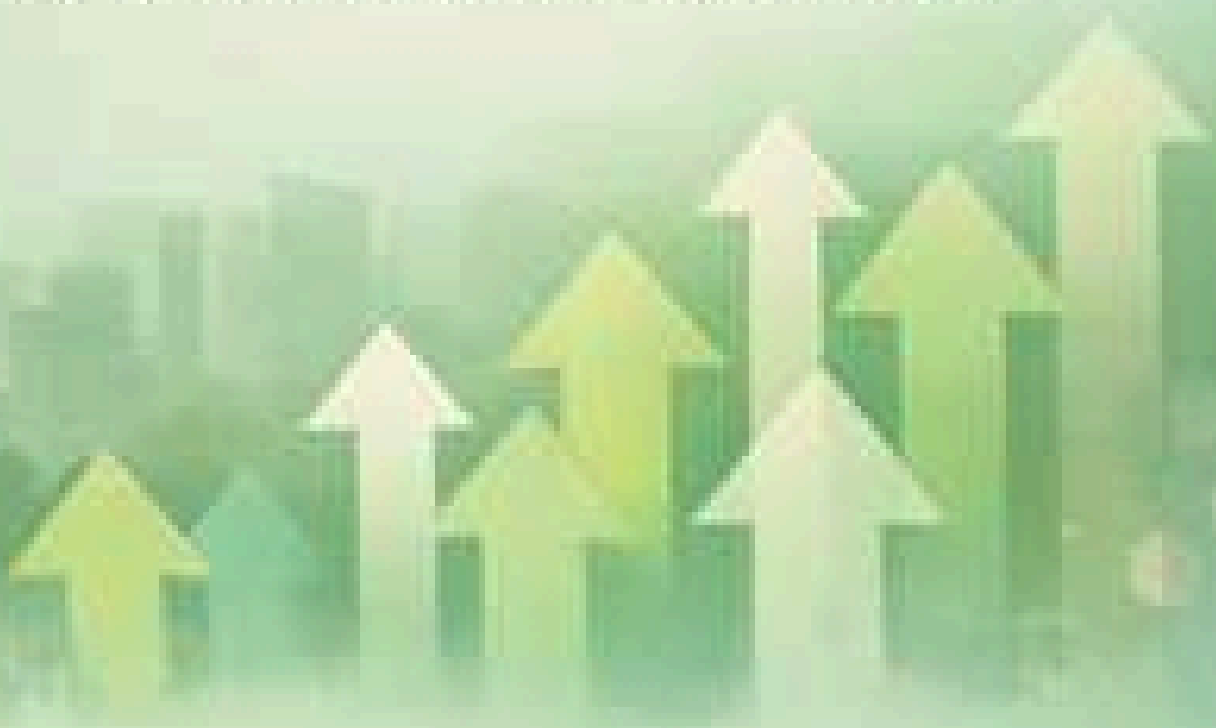
The chapter is written by Prakriti Sharma and reviewed by Aditi Vyas and Bidisha Mondal.

This chapter draws from IWWAGE's previous and ongoing work on the platform economy, built by Bidisha Mondal, Prakriti Sharma, Anjali S, Aneek Chowdhury and Vidhi Singh, under the guidance of Sona Mitra. Post [India's Emerging Gig Economy: The Future of Work for Women Workers](#) (2020), IWWAGE conducted a flagship study [The Changing World of Women's Work](#) (2025) to help understand the shifted dynamics of platform work. Together, with our ongoing collaboration with the International Labour Organization to examine grievance-handling and dispute-resolution mechanisms for platform workers in India, these studies provide a rich evidence base on women's experiences, sectoral dynamics, and regulatory gaps within digitally mediated work.

SECTION 6

What Works

Lessons from Practice and Emerging Models



This section showcases effective approaches that enhance women's workforce participation.

WOMEN AT WORK

Unlocking India's Untapped Potential

Pooja Sharma Goyal and J Priyadarshini



The Paradox of Progress: Rising Education, Stagnant Participation

A few months ago, during a visit to a government training centre in Uttar Pradesh, I met a young woman who reminded me of many others we've met across the country. She had completed a diploma in electronics, was supporting her two younger siblings, and was confident, articulate and eager to work. When asked what she wanted next, her answer was simple: "A job that lets me use what I've learnt."

But as we spoke longer, a more familiar picture emerged. She had never met a recruiter from a manufacturing company. She didn't know what roles existed outside her district. There was no safe way to travel to the nearest industrial cluster. And while her family supported her studying, they weren't sure about her taking up work that required early or late shifts.

Her story mirrors what we hear repeatedly from young women on the brink of entering the workforce, from employers trying to bring more women onto their shop floors, and from parents who want their daughters to work but worry about safety, mobility, and childcare. These aren't abstract barriers; they define the daily calculus of whether a woman can step into paid work.

And yet, when these building blocks are put in place—safe transport, reliable accommodation, supportive infrastructure—we see demand and aspiration rise almost immediately.

Whether it is electronics manufacturing in Karnataka or auto manufacturing in Maharashtra, companies report the same pattern: when safety and mobility are assured, more women apply, families offer support, and participation climbs.

At another convening a few weeks later, we met a group of women running Shakti Rasoi, a small canteen inside a government office.

One of them, Kamini, spoke about how, as a homemaker, her views, especially on money, were rarely counted. But after she and a few neighbours began a small tiffin service and were later selected to run the Rasoi, everything shifted.

Earning even a modest, steady income changed how her family listened, how decisions were made, and how she saw herself.

“People take you seriously when you bring something home,” she said, capturing in one line what economic participation unlocks for so many women.

Stories like hers sit alongside a broader national picture, one where rising aspiration is moving faster than the structures that connect women to work.

And that's where India's paradox becomes clear. On paper, the country has made tremendous strides.

Maternal health indicators have improved, and girls now constitute nearly half of all enrolments in higher education.

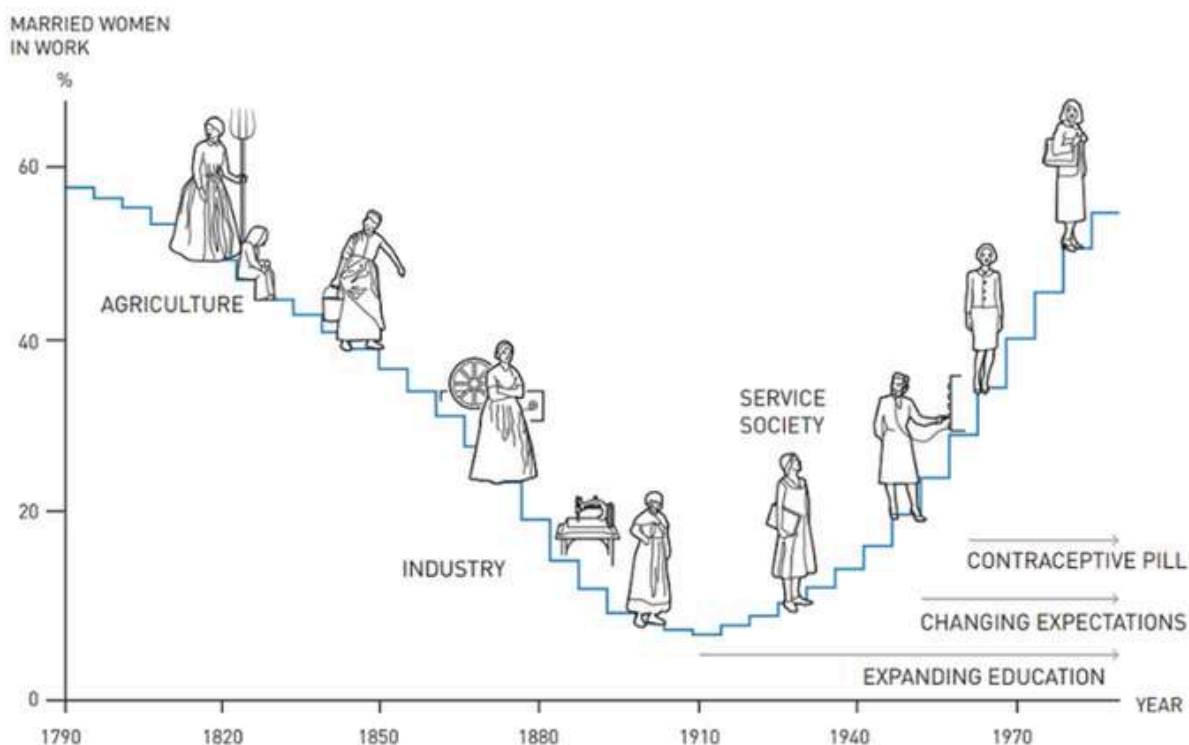
Yet this progress has not translated into workforce participation in the way it should have.

Overall FLFPR has risen from 27% in 2022 to 41.3% in 2024, but this uptick is driven largely by self-employment and subsistence work.

Participation in the formal economy where quality jobs, stability, and mobility are built has stayed frozen at 18% for five years.



Claudia Goldin’s seminal research on the U-shaped curve of women’s labour force participation helps explain this contradiction. As countries transition from agrarian to industrial and then service-led economies, women’s participation first falls and only rises again when job structures, family norms, and public infrastructure adapt to women’s realities. India is at the cusp of economic growth, where participation outcomes are still catching up with education and employability gains. Women are educated, employable, and aspirational but the system around them has not yet evolved to match their transition from informal to formal work.



Source: Nobel Prize Website

The Economic Cost of Exclusion

This mismatch carries a significant economic cost, one that is visible in numbers but felt even more sharply in lived experience. Nearly 196 million employable women remain outside the workforce, a population the size of Brazil sitting just beyond the edge of India’s growth story. Much of their time is absorbed by unpaid care responsibilities whose economic value, though absent from GDP, is estimated at nearly a third of India’s output.

And for companies, the opportunity loss is equally striking: in sectors where women are employed at scale logistics, warehousing, electronics, firms consistently report higher attendance, better output quality and measurable productivity gains. The potential is evident, but these outcomes remain uneven across sectors and regions.

Every conversation we had in factories, ITIs, village clusters, or district offices carried the same thread.

Women were not short of aspiration or ability. What they lacked were the conditions that make aspiration possible to act on: a safe way to travel, a predictable shift, a crèche nearby, a workplace that didn't see them as an exception.

And a system that didn't leave the burden of "figuring it out" solely to them or their families. This chapter unpacks that system. It proceeds in four parts:

- Mapping the current landscape: where women work, where they don't, and why the formal economy continues to remain out of reach for so many.
- Understanding the drivers of choice: how safety and mobility constraints, household norms, and the design of work itself shape women's participation decisions.
- Identifying pockets of change: examples across states and industries that have begun to shift women's workforce participation on the ground.
- Charting the path forward: what it will take to move from scattered successes to a system that consistently

enables women to work and allows India to fully realise its demographic and economic potential

India's Female Workforce Landscape: A Data Snapshot

We turn to the numbers that sit beneath those stories. Numbers that explain why so many women, even when ready to work, find themselves circling the labour market rather than entering it.

Across districts, one pattern becomes clear: aggregate figures hide more than they reveal. On the surface, India's female labour force participation appears to be rising; beneath it lies a churn of short-lived jobs, thin opportunities, and a steady push into informal work that offers little stability.

Women are overwhelmingly willing to take up paid work if it is available locally and if getting to work doesn't become a daily negotiation. Yet the jobs that offer stability and long-term growth continue to shut them out. The formal sector - India's most organised and better-paying part of the economy has hardly moved, with women's participation locked at around 18% for half a decade.

Women's participation locked at around 18% for half a decade.

In the blue- and grey-collar space, which fuels manufacturing and logistics, only about one in five workers is a woman. Even among those who do join, more than half expect to leave within the year.

The instability is not a reflection of ability, but of life transitions that workplaces barely acknowledge. Women between 27 and 32 told us the same thing repeatedly: "If something opened closer to home, I would go back."

Sector by sector, these patterns become starker. In IT and services, representation has improved, helped by flexible roles and hybrid work arrangements. But in manufacturing and construction, legal restrictions and outdated compliance frameworks still keep women out of night shifts and "hazardous" roles, shrinking the universe of jobs before they even begin to apply.

Pharmaceuticals tell a more subtle story: women are present, but primarily in contractual or temporary roles, with pay gaps that widen sharply at senior levels.

In logistics, the industry many thought would be the breakthrough, women remain just 7% of the workforce in formal companies. And yet,

where women are hired, companies quietly report something important: they stay. They show up. They improve productivity. Operational cost savings rise, sometimes by double digits. The problem is not performance; it's entry.

The gig economy was meant to change this dynamic. Digital platforms promised flexibility and local work, something many women said they wanted. But the reality has been far more constrained. The algorithms that govern gig work reward long hours and continuous availability something women with caregiving duties simply cannot offer.

Wage gaps persist, and the tools needed to succeed: a vehicle, a smartphone with reliable data, a driving licence remain out of reach for many. Even among women who are digitally literate, only about half use mobile internet in their daily lives. Flexibility, without support, has turned out to be a fragile promise.

Across these sectors, a set of deeper contradictions keeps reappearing. Highly educated women, for example, often leave faster when their expectations for growth are not met. Ambition is not the problem; pathways are. Women enter the workforce hoping for careers, not just jobs, but only a small fraction access skill-building or advancement programmes that could help them grow. The system does not show them what the next step looks like.

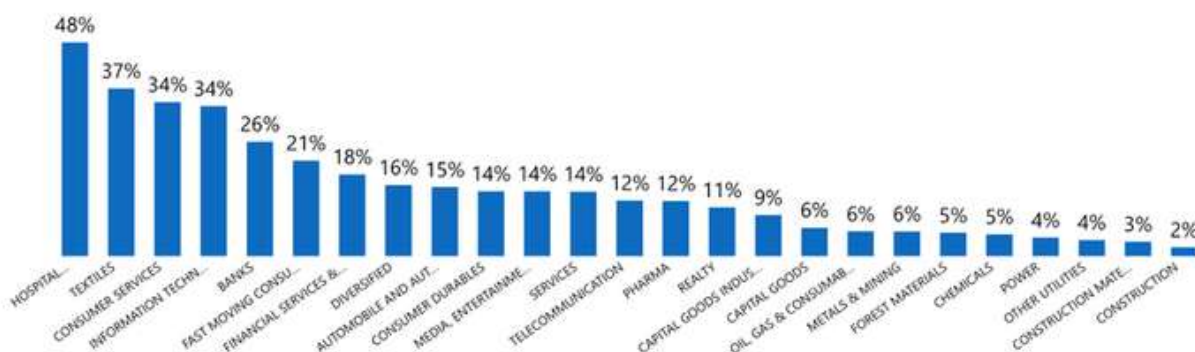
The biggest contradiction, however, is invisible in most economic statistics: the weight of unpaid care. Indian women spend hours each day on caregiving and unpaid domestic work, far more than men. This burden shapes every career decision whether she can take a job with erratic hours, whether she can travel, whether she can stay late to meet a deadline. Globally, one in four women leave work within a year of becoming mothers; India

follows the same pattern. Domestic responsibilities are not just a background condition, they are a structural barrier.

Financial precarity adds another layer. Even when women find work, the numbers rarely add up. In blue- and grey-collar roles, women earn a fraction of what men do, and most are unable to save meaningfully. Rising living costs in urban centres mean that a job that does not pay well enough to cover commute, meals, and basic expenses becomes not just unattractive but unsustainable. Many women who left these roles told us the same thing: "If the pay was better, I'd go back." Better pay, in other words, is not a perk; it is the only way to make work possible.

Taken together, these patterns reveal an economy where women are constantly negotiating their way in and out of work not because they lack aspiration or skill, but because the system has not been designed with

Women Representation in FY 2024-25



their realities in mind. The data shows movement, but the movement is fragile. Participation is rising, but the rise is uneven and unstable. The landscape is shifting, but not yet transforming.

The Everyday Hurdles Women Navigate

Over the past decade, India's public systems have steadily expanded their efforts to support women's entry into the workforce. Training programmes, employment exchanges, job portals, and welfare schemes now reach millions of women each year.

Yet, for many women standing at the edge of the labour market, the journey from education to employment still feels less like a clear pathway and more like a series of disconnected steps.

A young woman may be trained by one department, certified by another, and then left to search for jobs that don't quite align with her skills. Employment exchanges, originally envisioned as bridges between people and work, now function largely as registration points. In some states, fewer than 10% of women who register receive a job lead. Similarly, skill-training programmes spread across ministries have built scale, but often struggle to stay closely aligned with evolving market demand.

As a result, many women continue to be trained in low-growth trades such as tailoring or beauty services, even as sectors like electronics, logistics, and manufacturing actively seek female workers.

At the same time, departments focused on women's development have prioritised safety, welfare, and entitlements critical for participation. Foundations for Counselling services, helplines, and protection mechanisms play an essential role in enabling women's agency.

What is now emerging, however, is the need to more tightly connect these efforts to employment outcomes so that safety and welfare systems also become springboards to economic mobility. Labour departments, too, are strengthening job portals and employer outreach, but last-mile engagement, especially for women who need additional support to transition into work, remains uneven. The pieces are in place; the opportunity lies in helping them work together more seamlessly.

But the system doesn't just fragment institutions; it fragments women's journeys. On the supply side, every step is shaped by constraints that the system barely acknowledges.

Mobility is limited not only by safety concerns but by deeply gendered expectations around household work that swallow up large parts of a woman's day. Even when women complete formal education, families often hesitate to let them travel long distances, work late shifts, or accept jobs without guaranteed social protection.

The lack of reliable transport, safe accommodation near industrial hubs, and predictable work hours quietly narrows the universe of jobs they can consider. Many simply give up before they begin, not for lack of aspiration, but because the infrastructure around work was never designed with them in mind.

On the demand side, the barriers are just as structural. Employers frequently assume women will be less reliable, more costly to accommodate, or unable to take on physically demanding roles, assumptions that persist despite evidence to the contrary. In sectors like logistics and warehousing, women have been shown to reduce absenteeism and improve quality metrics, yet companies hesitate to hire them at scale. Factory floors and office environments remain largely male by design: inadequate toilets, lack of safe commute options, and rigid HR policies signal to women

What emerges is not a story of women failing to participate, but of an ecosystem failing to absorb them. A system where opportunities, services, and institutions function in parallel but never align; where women's education soars but leads to jobs only by accident, not design; where the burden of navigating all these gaps falls entirely on the individual. Understanding this broken architecture and the interplay between supply and demand-side barriers is essential before we begin to rebuild a system that actually works for women.

Where Inclusion is Making a Difference
If the earlier sections reveal how the system breaks down, this one shows where it breaks open. Across factories, logistics hubs, pharma sales teams, and corporate offices, Udaiti's field research has found a simple truth: when inclusion works, it is never by accident. It happens because someone, an HR head, a plant manager, a CEO decides that women's participation is a business priority, and then redesigns the system around that belief.

The strongest companies begin by examining the everyday mechanics of work. They rewrite job descriptions that once assumed a male worker. They run interviews with mixed panels so the signal to

women is clear: you belong. At Delhivery, this meant rethinking recruitment entirely, removing physical requirements that automation had already made redundant, opening doors to women in roles that had long been labelled "men's work."

In many of their hubs, the impact was visible almost instantly: higher attendance, better quality control, and smoother shift operations. Leaders we spoke to described it plainly "when women join, discipline improves." What looks like diversity rhetoric on paper becomes operational efficiency in practice.

Retention, too, is strongest where flexibility is treated as a design principle, not a favour. Companies that offer staggered shifts, part-time options, and freer start times see women stay through life events that traditionally force career breaks. Hindustan Unilever's Career by Choice program reframed maternity not as a disruption but a transition.

Zomato's period leave policy normalised monthly health needs that workplaces typically ignore. In each case, the message is the same: women shouldn't have to contort their lives to fit work; work must adapt to real lives.

Advancement follows a different logic. Hiring

women and helping them stay is only part of the equation; moving them forward requires visibility, sponsorship, and structured pathways that don't leave growth to chance. Companies that have made progress here treat leadership pipelines as infrastructure, not aspiration. Mentoring and sponsorship programmes help women navigate inflection points where many otherwise stall. When responding directly to the "broken rung" in middle management, the results are tangible. For instance, our case studies on tech companies show that Returnship initiatives show that when women are supported to re-enter with skilling and mentorship, they stay longer and progress faster than those hired through conventional routes.

Yet the levers of change look different from one sector to another. Logistics offers one kind of opportunity; pharma another; manufacturing a third. In logistics, the transformation begins with infrastructure. Women's participation rises sharply when companies provide clean washrooms, safe transport, and female HR executives on every shift small signals that a workplace was designed with women in mind.

When these basics fall into place, women outperform expectations: better

attendance, fewer errors, and in some cases, cost savings of up to 12% in last-mile operations.

Mahindra Logistics and Delhivery have demonstrated how women forklift operators, packers, and delivery associates can improve both productivity and workplace culture. Pharma, by contrast, struggles with the lifecycle cliff. Women enter the workforce in strong numbers but drop off at middle management, often during the years of marriage and motherhood.

The companies that have slowed this drop-off Abbott, Pfizer, Dr. Reddy's have done so by addressing two persistent anxieties: mobility and safety. Return-to-work programs help women re-enter after maternity; Cipla's Neev program enables women to train in manufacturing roles while earning; Dr. Reddy's offers care kits to medical representatives and has publicly committed to a senior leadership target of 35% women by 2030. These efforts signal institutional intention not just individual goodwill.

In blue- and grey-collar roles, the most decisive factor is proximity. Women repeatedly told us that they would return to work if jobs were simply closer to home; 20% of women

who had dropped out said this directly.

Flexi-staffing companies like Qness bridge this gap by formalising employment offering contracts, benefits, and a buffer between women and informal, unpredictable employers.

Where industrial clusters offer safe, affordable accommodation, such as Tamil Nadu's Thozhi Hostels, women's participation rises sharply. The principle is clear: don't move the woman; move the opportunity closer to her.

Skilling, too, works only when tied to mobility and advancement. Functional training operating machinery, digital inventory systems, quality control has yielded strong returns: 65% of women who undertook such training saw salary hikes of ₹4,000 or more when they switched jobs. But skilling alone is never enough. It must be paired with guidance, exposure, and pathways, a lesson reinforced by Udaiti's leadership programs. When women understand not just how to do their current job but how to grow into the next one, their participation becomes durable rather than fragile.



Across industries and roles, Udaiti's research shows a pattern: inclusion succeeds when employers redesign workplaces, when ecosystems smooth the path to opportunity, and when women see realistic, attainable routes for advancement.

None of this is experimental. It is replicable, scalable, and grounded in evidence from the field. The challenge now is to take what works in pockets and make it the norm across India's workforce.

Making Work Work for Women

India is at a moment where many pieces are already coming together. Strong digital systems, progressive policies, expanding industries, and millions of women whose aspirations are rising faster than ever. Everywhere we go, we see women ready to learn, ready to work, and ready to grow into roles that match their abilities and ambitions.

The question now is simple: can we design cities, jobs, policies, and support systems that make working a practical choice for women instead of a daily negotiation?

When mobility, care, safety, and skilling come together, participation rises almost immediately. We've seen this across states and sectors.

Udaiti's approach is about bringing these pieces into one frame connecting evidence with action, and helping create ecosystems where women don't have to fight the system to work.

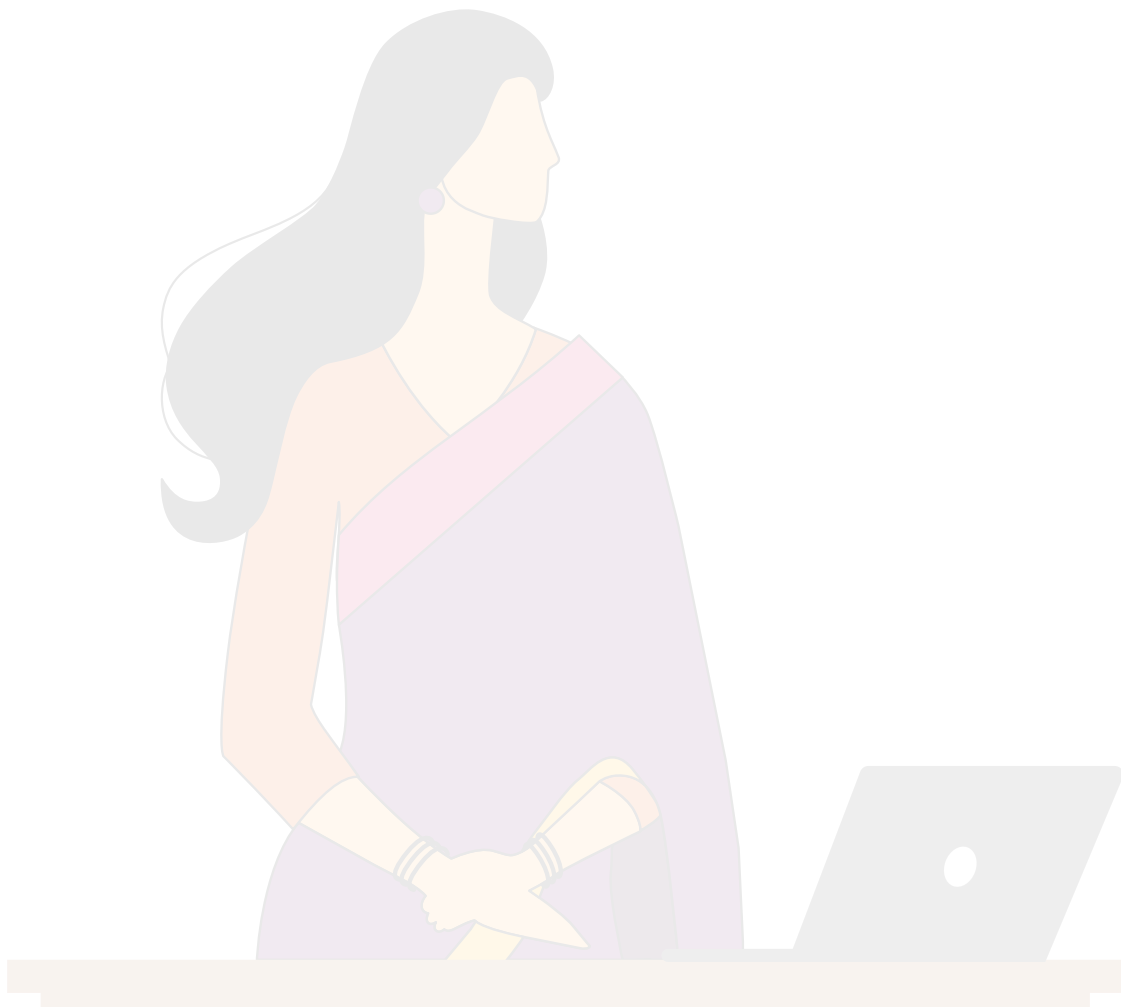
If India is serious about becoming a developed nation by 2047, enabling women to participate fully isn't a side priority. It's the path forward.

Recommendations

- Strengthen local job ecosystems by aligning skilling programmes with industry demand and creating employment opportunities closer to women's homes to improve workforce entry and retention
- Invest in safe and reliable mobility solutions including transport, accommodation, and last-mile connectivity to enable women to access a wider range of employment opportunities
- Promote workplace design and policies that support retention and advancement, including flexible work arrangements, career progression pathways, and returnship programmes
- Expand access to affordable and accessible care infrastructure such as childcare and eldercare services to reduce the burden of unpaid work and enable sustained workforce participation
- Enhance coordination across skilling, employment, and welfare systems to create seamless pathways from education to employment, ensuring women can transition effectively into the workforce

References

1. National Statistical Office (NSO). (2024). Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), Annual Report 2023–24. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India.
2. Women's Formal Employment Tracker. 2025. The Udaiti Foundation
3. Goldin, C. (1994). The U-Shaped Female Labor Force Function in Economic Development and Economic History (NBER Working Paper No. 4707). National Bureau of Economic Research.
4. The Udaiti Foundation (2025). State of women in the blue- and grey-collar workforce in India. Udaiti Foundation.
5. The Udaiti Foundation & Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). (2025). SheMoves Logistics – Driving Diversity & Inclusion in Logistics.
6. The Udaiti Foundation (2025). *State of women in the blue- and grey-collar workforce in India*. Udaiti Foundation.
7. *ibid*.



2024-25

**...SAHIT
AWARDS**

**Celebrating
women
icons,
achievers and
changemakers**



Winners

SAHIT ICON



Dr. Parvinder Maini

Scientific Secretary, Office of
PSA

Science Policy and National Innovation Leadership

Dr. Parvinder Maini serves as Scientific Secretary at the Office of the Principal Scientific Advisor to the Government of India, driving expansion of the national R&D ecosystem, shaping science, technology and innovation policy, establishing regulatory frameworks, and enabling collaboration across industry, academia, and government to deliver citizen-centric outcomes.

Under her leadership, the PSA office has operationalized key national initiatives including the One Health Mission for pandemic preparedness, Livelihood Mission, National Research Foundation, City S&T Clusters, National Deep Tech Policy, and zero-emission trucking. Her mandate also includes strategic engagement with international agencies to develop frameworks addressing global S&T policy challenges.

Dr. Maini holds a doctorate in Meteorology and Oceanography and brings over 33 years of multidisciplinary experience. She is an IMS Fellow (2023), Vice President of the Federation of Indian Geosciences Associations, and Executive Committee member of the Indian Geophysical Union, with research spanning monsoons, forecasting, and climate services.

SAHIT ICON

Technology Policy and Digital Transformation

Debjani Ghosh is a Distinguished Fellow at the NITI Aayog and Chief Architect of the NITI Frontier Tech Hub, India's pioneering government initiative on frontier technologies. In this role, she shapes national strategy on emerging tech such as AI, quantum, and deep tech, fostering innovation ecosystems and collaborations across government, industry, and academia.

Before joining NITI Aayog, Debjani served as President of NASSCOM, where she championed digital transformation, deep tech growth, and India's global innovation leadership. Her 28+-year technology career includes senior roles at Intel and broad engagement in driving technology-led economic and societal impact. She emphasizes responsible, inclusive innovation, and human-centric technology deployment. Recognized globally for her leadership in tech and policy, she continues to advocate for India's strategic role in the global technology landscape while advancing digital talent, trust, and equitable growth.



Ms. Debjani Ghosh

Distinguished Fellow, NITI Aayog, and Chief Architect - NITI Frontier Tech Hub

SAHIT ICON

Innovation and Entrepreneurial Leadership



Ms. Kiran Mazumdar Shaw

Executive Chairperson and
Founder of Biocon Limited

Kiran MazumdarShaw is a pioneering Indian entrepreneur, healthcare visionary, and the founder and Executive Chairperson of Biocon Limited. Starting in a garage in 1978, she transformed Biocon from an industrial enzymes company into a fully integrated, global biopharmaceutical enterprise. Driven by a philosophy of compassionate capitalism, she has been pivotal in redefining the biotechnology landscape, ensuring affordable access to life-saving medicines globally. Her outstanding contributions to science and healthcare have earned her immense global recognition. She is the recipient of two of India's highest civilian honors: the Padma Shri and the Padma Bhushan. Additionally, she has been named the EY World Entrepreneur of the Year, awarded the Othmer Gold Medal, and consistently ranked among Forbes' Most Powerful Women. As a passionate philanthropist and the first Indian female business leader to sign the Giving Pledge, Mazumdar Shaw continuously drives equitable healthcare worldwide

SAHIT ICON

Artificial Intelligence and National Digital Innovation Leadership



Ms. Kavita Bhatia

Chief Operating Officer,
IndiaAI Mission

Ms. Kavita Bhatia, Scientist 'G' in the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), Government of India, and Chief Operating Officer of the IndiaAI Independent Business Division, has been central to advancing India's AI and digital public infrastructure agenda. She plays a key role in operationalising the IndiaAI Mission, including scaling national AI compute capacity, enabling innovation ecosystems, and driving initiatives under AI, Human-Centred Computing, and the Digital India Bhashini programme. She has contributed to shaping India's global AI engagement, including leadership in GPAI-related initiatives and the IndiaAI Impact Summit.

Her contributions also include foundational work in Aadhaar and digital payments, strengthening inclusive digital access at scale. She also led the Mobile Seva initiative, which received the United Nations Public Service Award. With over two decades of experience, her work reflects a strong focus on leveraging AI and digital technologies for inclusive, secure and scalable public service delivery.

Vartika Shukla

Former Chairman & Managing Director of Engineers India Limited (EIL)



Energy Leadership and Industrial Innovation

Vartika Shukla, a Chemical Engineering graduate from IIT Kanpur and IIM Lucknow alumna, led Engineers India Ltd. as CMD. With over 32 years' experience, she drove major oil, gas, and petrochemical projects, advanced R&D and engineering, and championed biofuels, digitalization, and policy development in India's energy and industrial sectors.

Academic Leadership and Technical Education

Tripta Thakur is Vice Chancellor of Uttarakhand Technical University. An expert in power systems and renewable energy, she has led research, policy, and academic initiatives. Her work advances sustainable energy, smart grids, and technical education, contributing significantly to India's clean energy transition and innovation ecosystem.

Dr Tripta Thakur

Vice Chancellor, VMSB
Uttarakhand Technical University



Dr Vinita Sahay

Director IIM-Bodh Gaya



Management Education and Institutional Leadership

Vinita Sahay is Director of Indian Institute of Management Bodh Gaya. A professor of marketing and international business, she has advanced management education, research, and global collaborations. Her leadership focuses on academic excellence, innovation, and industry engagement, shaping future leaders and strengthening India's management education ecosystem.

Research, Innovation and Scientific Advancement

Jyoti Sharma is a senior official at the Department of Science and Technology. She contributes to science policy, research funding, and innovation programs. Her work supports scientific advancement, technology development, and capacity building, strengthening India's research ecosystem and promoting collaboration across academia, industry, and government sectors.

Dr Jyoti Sharma

Head, Research Development and Innovation Cell, DST



Dr Ekta Kapoor

Head, FFT, Department of Science and Technology, GOI



Science, Technology and Innovation Policy

Ekta Kapoor is a scientist at the Department of Science and Technology. She contributes to policy, research programs, and innovation initiatives. Her work focuses on advancing scientific research, fostering collaboration, and supporting technology development, strengthening India's science ecosystem and promoting inclusive, sustainable growth through innovation.

Climate Innovation and Sustainable Technologies

Dr. Anita Gupta, a visionary leader and dedicated public servant, holds a doctorate in engineering from IIT Delhi. She possesses over 30 years of rich experience in managing Government of India-led programs, while serving as Adviser and Head of Climate, Energy and Sustainable Technologies (CEST) and Innovation and Entrepreneurship at the Department of Science and Technology, Ministry of Science & Technology, Government of India.

Dr Anita Gupta

Head of Scientific Divisions, Climate, Energy and Sustainable Technology (CEST) Division, DST



Dr. Anupama Singh

Joint Director (Education) &
Dean, ICAR-IARI



Agricultural Education and Research Leadership

Anupama Singh is a researcher at ICAR-Indian Agricultural Research Institute. She specializes in agricultural science and crop improvement, leading research projects that enhance productivity and sustainability. Her work advances innovative farming practices, strengthens India's agri-research ecosystem, and contributes to food security and rural development initiatives nationwide.

Scientific Leadership and Research Ecosystem Development

Dr Geetha Vani Rayasam, Director, CSIR-NIScPR (8th September 2025) is a highly experienced and accomplished scientist with vast experience in academia, industry, Government of India and abroad. Dr Rayasam is a PhD in Biochemistry from IISc Bengaluru and has post-doctoral experience in IGBMC, France and at the National Institute of Health, USA. She has worked in Industries such as Ranbaxy (Daiichi-Sankyo) and SMART ANALYST as a senior scientist in the areas of new drug discovery and development.

Dr. Geetha Vani Rayasam

Outstanding Scientist & Head,
CSIR-HRDG



Dr. Nisha Mendiratta

Executive Director, IUSSTF, DST



International Science Collaboration and Innovation

Dr Nisha Mendiratta is Advisor and Head of Women in Science and Engineering and Climate Change Programme at Department of Science and Technology. She has worked in NRSA, Hyderabad, IIRS, Dehradun and NCMRWF, Noida. She has led a major programme at NRDMS, a division of DST. She is recipient of the meritorious PG fellowships of IARI. She is serving as an Expert Member of a number of national/ International level committees on climate change and related issues. Dr Nisha has published many research papers and articles and co-authored a number of departmental technical documents.

Sustainability and Climate Leadership

Vaishali Nigam Sinha serves as a Chair, ReNew Foundation and Chief Sustainability and CSR Officer on the Board of ReNew. She started her career on Wall Street as an investment banker and has worked in London, New York and Mumbai as a banker for over 15 years. Vaishali is also the Founder and CEO of iCharity, a non-profit online platform which brings together those who want to give and those who are committed to working in the social sector. Currently, she is the co-chair, CII Task Force on Arts, Heritage & Culture. She is also the co-chair, Regional Committee on CSR & Gender Equality at CII Northern region.

Vaishali Nigam Sinha

Co-Founder and Chairperson
Sustainability, ReNew



Dr Rashmi Sharma

Head, NCSTC Division & SHRI Cell, DST



Science, Technology and Innovation Policy

Dr. Rashmi Sharma leads Science Communication and the Science and Heritage Research Initiative at the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India. With a PhD from the University of Tsukuba, she successfully bridges science and society by empowering young researchers to tackle socially relevant challenges. An INSA Women Associate, her impactful leadership has revitalized key national programs and earned her numerous honors, including the Women Scientist Empowerment Award.

Entrepreneurship and Wellness Innovation

Dr. Ananya Awasthi is the Founder-Director of Anuvaad Solutions, an all-women team that works closely with the Ministry of Women and Child Development in advancing India's Poshan agenda through scientific and technical support. Her work focuses on translating scientific evidence to inform the national nutrition program, promoting mother and child nutrition, strengthening the Anganwadi system, training and capacity building of Anganwadi workers and behavior change communication for promoting healthy dietary practices in citizens.

Dr. Ananya Awasthi

Founder-Director, Anuvaad Solutions



Dr. (Mrs.) Uma Kumar

**Professor & Founder Head,
Department of Rheumatology,
AIIMS**



Medical Sciences and Public Health

Dr. Uma Kumar is a distinguished medical professional, researcher, and the Professor and Founder Head of the Department of Rheumatology at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi. A visionary in her field, she established the super-specialty department at AIIMS in 2015 and pioneered the innovative 'Rheumatology Day Care' concept in India to provide advanced, accessible patient care. Recognized globally, she has been highlighted as an eminent Indian woman scientist by UNESCO and awarded the Fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh.

Academic Leadership and Inclusive Education

Prof Bineesha Payattati, Professor of Practice, is an Environmental Field Scientist with over 30 years of experience in the sustainability sector, and has successfully implemented over 280 projects and programmes, mainly in the waste management sector. Currently serving as the Executive Director of the International Institute of Waste Management (IIWM) has been contributing to the academic arena as a Mentor in the innovation hub of several Universities and IITs in India. Her efforts in this sector are bridging the gap between Industry, Govt bodies (AICTE, NAAC & NIRF) and Academia.

Prof. Bineesha P

**Executive Director
International Institute of Waste
Management (IIWM)**





Aditi Chauhan

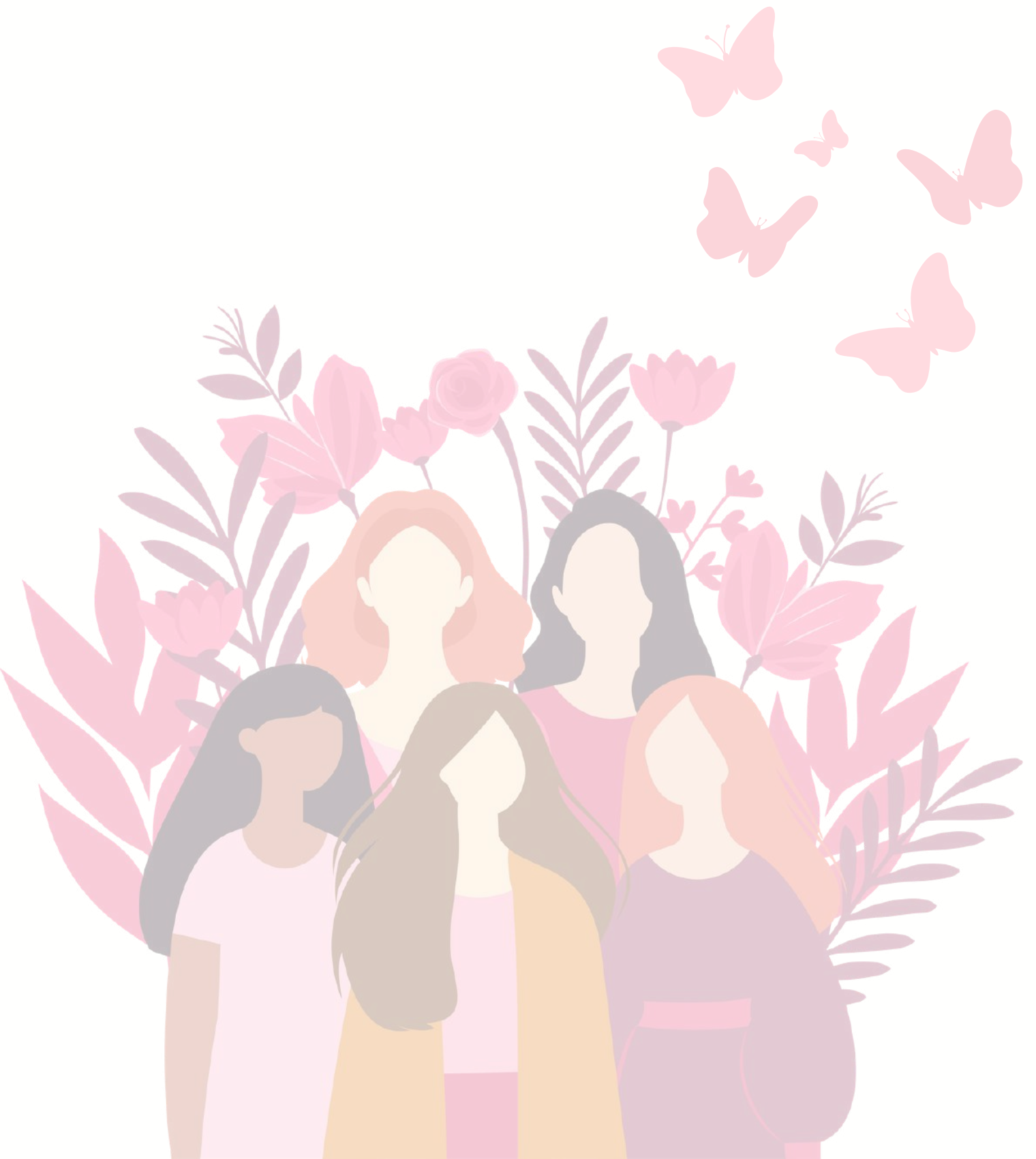
Former Indian Football Team
Captain

Sports Leadership and Women's Empowerment

Aditi Chauhan is a trailblazer in Indian football and a symbol of resilience, leadership, and purpose-driven impact. As the former captain and goalkeeper of the Indian women's national football team, she has represented the country with distinction on global platforms, breaking barriers for women in sports.

Beyond her achievements on the field, Aditi has dedicated herself to nurturing the next generation through grassroots initiatives that empower young girls to pursue football and build confidence, discipline, and leadership. Her work is not just about sport, it is about creating pathways, challenging stereotypes, and enabling opportunity. Aditi Chauhan continues to inspire as a leader who is shaping a more inclusive and empowered sporting ecosystem in India.

SAHIT



SAHIT



Get in touch

contact@sahit.in
subi.chaturvedi@sahit.in

