



Trends and Determinants of Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) in India: A Post-2020 Analysis

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Abstract

This research paper critically examines the trends and determinants of the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) in India with a focus on the post-2020 period. Employing a qualitative approach, the study synthesizes secondary literature, policy documents, and regional case studies to explore the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors influencing FLFPR. The findings highlight that despite modest gains, women's workforce participation remains constrained by entrenched patriarchal norms, caregiving responsibilities, inadequate childcare, limited formal job opportunities, and significant regional disparities. The prevalence of informal and self-employed roles, policy implementation challenges, and the ongoing impact of COVID-19 further restrict meaningful and secure employment for women. The study emphasizes that addressing these persistent structural barriers through integrated policy measures and social reforms is crucial for achieving equitable and inclusive economic growth in India.

Keywords: Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR), Socio-cultural norms, Informal sector employment, Policy implementation, Regional disparities

Introduction

Female labour force participation in India remains a critical, yet complex, facet of the country's socio-economic development. Despite decades of growth and multiple policy efforts aimed at enhancing women's economic engagement, their participation rate continues to lag significantly behind men and comparable developing economies. Understanding the nuanced factors behind these trends is essential for crafting effective interventions. Since 2020, India's labour landscape has been shaped by pandemic disruptions, new labour codes, and intensified government focus on gender inclusion. This paper undertakes a qualitative examination of

India's FLFPR by synthesizing broad secondary literature—including policy documents, academic reviews, and regional case studies—from this period. The goal is to uncover the layered social norms, institutional factors, and policy impacts that influence women's employment and participation.

Objectives

The research objectives of this study are,

1. To qualitatively analyze the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional determinants influencing the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) in India since 2020.



2. To examine the impact of government policies and labour market dynamics on the nature and quality of women's workforce participation, with a focus on regional disparities and informal sector involvement.

Statement of the Problem

Despite economic growth and various policy initiatives in India since 2020, the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) has remained relatively low and uneven across different regions and socio-economic groups. Women's workforce participation continues to be constrained by complex socio-cultural norms, economic conditions, and institutional barriers that limit their access to secure and dignified employment. Moreover, government policies intended to encourage female labour participation face implementation challenges, particularly in addressing the vast informal sector where most women are employed. This study aims to qualitatively analyze the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional determinants shaping FLFPR, while also examining how labour market dynamics and policy interventions impact both the quantity and quality of women's workforce engagement. By focusing on regional disparities and informal sector involvement, the research seeks to understand the persistent gaps between policy objectives and actual outcomes, highlighting the structural barriers that prevent meaningful and equitable participation of women in India's labour force.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach centered on exploring the determinants and dynamics shaping Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) in India post-2020. Policy Documents and Government Reports were perused to understand the role and status of policy frameworks affecting women's labour participation, official reports and labour codes from Ministries and Economic Advisory bodies were reviewed. Supplementary qualitative data was drawn from recent news features and region-specific case studies highlighting women's lived experiences and regional variations in work participation.

Thakur & Chaudhary (2025), This study critically analyzes the recent rise in FLFPR in India, emphasizing the importance of distinguishing genuine employment growth from survey classification changes such as increased self-employment. It provides important insights into interpreting FLFPR trends, focusing on socio-cultural and institutional determinants affecting women's labour participation.

Dev & Sahay (2025) examined the care work penalty limiting women's workforce engagement, this paper highlights socio-cultural barriers and the lack of flexible employment opportunities. It sheds light on how unpaid domestic burdens interact with labour market conditions to shape FLFPR patterns qualitatively.

Mehrotra & Parida (2025), focused on the nature and quality of women's labour market participation, revealing that much of the FLFPR increase is due to shifts from unpaid family roles to precarious self-employment rather than formal job growth. It discusses informal sector dynamics and policy implications relevant to your research.

Kumar & Saini (2022) created a mixed-methods exploration of regional disparities, this paper connects education, culture, and local livelihood opportunities to women's participation rates. It aligns directly with examining regional variation and the role of systemic determinants.

Analytical Framework

- For **Objective 1**, thematic content analysis was applied to identify and interpret prevailing socio-cultural norms, economic conditions, and institutional barriers impacting women's labour participation.
- For **Objective 2**, policy contextualization and qualitative assessment of labour market conditions—including informal sector prevalence and job quality—were conducted, with attention to regional diversity.

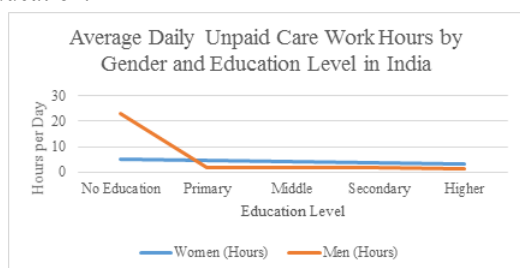


Determinants Influencing FLFPR

Socio-Cultural Norms

Patriarchal family structures and deeply entrenched gender roles continue to shape and limit women's public and economic lives in India. The expectation for women to be primary caregivers means that regardless of their education, a large share of their daily time is consumed by unpaid care work. This persistent gender gap starts early and endures through all education levels, making paid work difficult to pursue or sustain—especially around marriage and childbirth.

The following line chart visualizes how women, regardless of education, devote much more time to unpaid care work than men. The difference is particularly pronounced for women with less education.

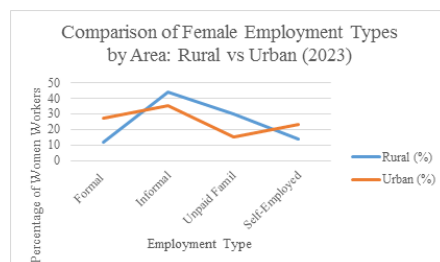


Source: National Statistical Office (NSO), Time Use in India 2019 Report; Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022-2023.

Economic Necessity vs. Opportunity

In rural India, women tend to join the workforce out of survival necessity, not choice. This means more rural women accept informal, low-paid, or unpaid family work. In contrast, urban women, though often better educated and with more formal job opportunities, still confront significant barriers: workplace safety, discrimination, and restrictive gender norms, resulting in large informal or self-employed participation even among the educated.

The next chart compares employment type prevalence for rural and urban women, making clear the rural dominance of informal and unpaid work and the relatively higher—but still limited—urban formal participation.



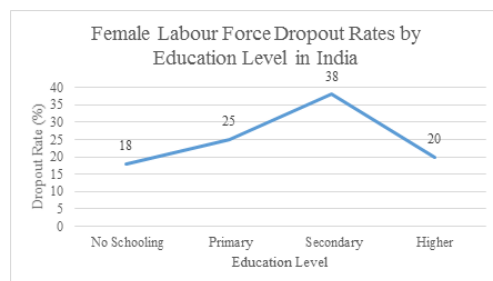
Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) Annual Report 2022-2023 (MOSPI).

Institutional Barriers

Lack of formal childcare, inflexible employers, and sporadic enforcement of labour protections directly shape women's employment continuity. Women with children, especially in nuclear or low-income households, often find no safe, affordable childcare nearby, while part-time and flexible work opportunities in India's formal sector are rare. These obstacles, compounded by mobility-related safety concerns, force many women into sporadic or home-based work—further entrenching their economic insecurity and workplace invisibility.

Education Paradox

India's FLFPR displays a “U-shaped curve” by education: Women with no schooling or higher education are likelier to be working, albeit often in very different roles. The highest dropout from the workforce occurs among those with only secondary education—a stage coinciding with marriage and heightened community scrutiny. Women in this cohort often leave the workforce due to household or marital pressures, and limited access to flexible or dignified jobs matching their qualifications.



Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) Annual Report 2022-2023 (MOSPI).



Findings and Results

1. Determinants Influencing FLFPR

- **Socio-Cultural Norms:** Patriarchal expectations and gendered caregiving roles severely restrict women's workforce engagement. Marriage and childbirth often lead to exit from formal or skilled employment. Women devote over twice the time men do to unpaid care work, which leads to early withdrawal especially among moderately educated women.
- **Economic Necessity vs. Opportunity:** Rural women's participation primarily arises from livelihood needs, engaging in informal agriculture or unpaid family work, whereas urban women face barriers tied to safety, gender discrimination, and limited job access despite better education.
- **Institutional Barriers:** Inadequate childcare, inflexible work arrangements, and scant enforcement of labour protections disproportionately hinder women's employment continuity. Limited mobility and safety concerns are pervasive.
- **Education Paradox:** Participation shows a U-shaped pattern where the least and most educated women participate more; middle-educated women drop out due to social constraints.

2. Policy and Labour Market Impact

- **Policy Initiatives:** Programs such as PMKVY, extended maternity leave, and crèche mandates help improve participation, but uneven implementation and inadequate outreach limit impact, especially in rural areas.
- **Informal Sector:** Over 80% of female workers remain in informal or self-employed roles, often with low pay and no social security, reducing economic resilience even as FLFPR rises.
- **Regional Disparities:** States such as Himachal Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh show better outcomes due to progressive gender norms and local women-focused schemes, while Uttar

Pradesh, Punjab, and Delhi report low and slow improvements.

- **Pandemic Impact:** COVID-19 intensified unpaid work and forced informal employment uptake, particularly affecting urban women's workforce reentry.

Interpretation and Discussion

Female participation in India's workforce is constrained by overlapping social, economic, and institutional factors. Education alone does not guarantee employment due to social norms and market mismatches. Informal sector predominance leaves most women vulnerable to low wages and poor protections. Policy interventions offer promise but require better enforcement and tailored regional applications. Qualitative insights reveal women's lived experiences, highlighting the need for integrated social and economic reforms.

Conclusion

While India's FLFPR has modestly improved since 2020, persistent structural and cultural barriers limit women's effective economic participation. Future progress depends on sustained efforts to shift social norms, strengthen policy implementation, expand social protections, and provide flexible, quality employment opportunities, especially targeting the informal sector and regional disparities. These steps are fundamental for equitable and inclusive growth in India.

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