



Women's Participation in the Labour Force: An Analysis of the Current Trends in the Indian Economy

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Abstract

The labour force participation rate (LFPR) among women is an important measure of economic development and gender equity. In India, female labour force participation has historically remained low compared to global averages, despite rapid economic growth. This research article examines the trends, determinants, and implications of women's labour force participation in India. It explores the structural, cultural, and policy-related factors influencing participation, and highlights the relationship between female LFPR and women's empowerment. Using data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) and relevant secondary sources, the article presents a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities for improving gender parity in the Indian labour market.

Keywords: women, labour force participation, Indian economy, worker population ratio

Introduction

India's demographic dividend and its aspirations for sustained growth in manufacturing and services make women's economic participation a critical priority. In many countries, higher female educational attainment, declining fertility, and urbanisation have contributed to rising female labour force participation. India's trajectory, however, has been complex. Despite notable improvements in human capital and living standards, India's female labour force participation rate remains among the lowest in the world. Scholars and policymakers debate the reasons for this pattern, attributing it variously to a paucity of suitable jobs, social and cultural norms that restrict women's participation in

the labour market, and statistical measurement issues that undercount informal or home-based work.

Labour force participation is a key indicator of a country's social and economic development. It reflects not only the availability of employment but also the inclusiveness of growth, especially in terms of gender equality. In India, the paradox of rising female education levels and declining Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) has attracted significant scholarly and policy attention. According to the PLFS 2022–23, India's FLFPR improved to 37%, compared to 28% in 2019–20, yet the gap between male (76%) and female (37%) participation remains stark (MOSPI, 2023).



Research Problem

Despite India's rapid economic growth and structural transformation, women's participation in the labour force has remained persistently low compared to both global standards and the male workforce within the country. Recent data reveal some recovery in female labour force participation, yet significant gender disparities persist in both employment levels and the quality of work opportunities available. The underlying causes of women's low participation are multidimensional, involving socio-cultural norms, educational attainments, lack of suitable employment opportunities, and structural barriers in the labour market. Moreover, the wide gap between male and female worker population ratios underscores entrenched gender inequalities in access to productive and remunerative employment. This situation not only hampers India's overall economic potential but also restricts progress toward gender equality and inclusive development. Therefore, the research problem lies in critically examining the current trends in women's labour force participation, identifying the major causes of their low representation, and comparing gender disparities in worker population ratios in order to understand the structural and socio-economic barriers that continue to limit women's participation in India's labour market.

Objectives

- To understand the current trends in women's participation in the labour force in the Indian economy
- To examine the causes of low labour force participation rate among women in India.
- To compare the worker population ratio for males and females in the Indian context.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine women's labour force participation in India. The methodology integrates both secondary data analysis and comparative evaluation, enabling a comprehensive understanding of patterns, determinants, and gender disparities.

The analysis is based primarily on secondary data collected from credible and nationally representative datasets. The key source of data is the Periodic Labour Force Survey published annually by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), Government of India. Additional statistical inputs are drawn from the National Sample Survey, International Labour Organization reports, World Bank databases, and relevant policy documents. Scholarly articles, research reports, and government publications are also reviewed to provide a contextual understanding.

Results and Discussion

Current Trends in Women's Participation in the Labour Force

Women's participation in the labour force is widely recognized as a fundamental driver of women's empowerment. When women engage in paid economic activities, they gain not only financial independence but also greater decision-making power within households and communities. Labour force participation provides women with access to income, skills, and networks that enhance their bargaining power, reduce dependency, and enable them to challenge entrenched gender roles. The table 1 show age group wise labour force participation rate from 2017-18 to 2023-24 in the Indian economy.

Table 1 Age Group Wise Labour Force Participation Rate (in percent) in usual status 2023-24 (PLFS)

Age Group	Rural			Urban			Total		
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
15-29	65.1	30.8	48.1	59.9	23.8	42.6	63.5	28.8	46.5
15+	80.2	47.6	63.7	75.6	28.0	52.0	78.8	41.7	60.1
All ages	57.9	35.5	46.8	59.0	22.3	41.0	58.2	31.7	45.1



2022-23 (PLFS)

Age Group	Rural			Urban			Total		
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
15-29	65.5	25.8	45.9	58.4	20.8	40.7	63.5	24.5	44.5
15+	80.2	41.5	60.8	74.5	25.4	50.4	78.5	37.0	57.9
All ages	55.5	30.5	43.4	58.3	20.2	39.8	56.2	27.8	42.4

2021-22 (PLFS)

Age Group	Rural			Urban			Total		
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
15-29	62.1	22.3	42.6	58.9	20.2	40.6	61.2	21.7	42.0
15+	78.2	36.6	57.5	74.7	23.8	49.7	77.2	32.8	55.2
All ages	56.9	27.2	42.2	58.3	18.8	39.0	57.3	24.8	41.3

2020-21 (PLFS)

Age Group	Rural			Urban			Total		
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
15-29	60.6	22.0	42.0	59.0	19.0	39.9	60.1	21.1	41.4
15+	78.1	36.5	57.4	74.6	23.2	49.1	77.0	32.5	54.9
All ages	57.1	27.7	42.7	58.4	18.6	38.9	57.5	25.1	41.6

2019-20 (PLFS)

Age Group	Rural			Urban			Total		
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
15-29	60.8	20.7	41.3	58.3	20.3	40.0	60.0	20.6	40.9
15+	77.9	33.0	55.5	74.6	23.3	49.3	76.8	30.0	53.5
All ages	56.3	24.7	40.8	57.8	18.5	38.6	56.8	22.8	40.1

2018-19 (PLFS)

Age Group	Rural			Urban			Total		
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
15-29	58.8	15.8	37.8	58.6	17.1	38.7	58.8	16.2	38.1
15+	76.4	26.4	51.5	73.7	20.4	47.5	75.5	24.5	50.2
All ages	55.1	19.7	37.7	56.7	16.1	36.9	55.6	18.6	37.5

2017-18 (PLFS)

Age Group	Rural			Urban			Total		
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
15-29	58.9	15.9	38.1	58.5	17.5	38.5	58.8	16.4	38.2
15+	76.4	24.6	50.7	74.5	20.4	47.6	75.8	23.3	49.8
All ages	54.9	18.2	37.0	57.0	15.9	36.8	55.5	17.5	36.9

Source: Report Women and Men in India 2024 Selected Indicators and Data
(Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India)



The analysis of age-group-wise LFPRs from the PLFS between 2017–18 and 2023–24 indicates persistent gender disparities, even though with gradual improvement in female participation. Male LFPR has remained consistently high, averaging around 75–80% for the population aged 15 years and above, with only minor fluctuations over the years. In contrast, female LFPR has exhibited a steady upward trend, rising from 18.2% in 2017–18 to 31.7 % in 2023–24. This increase, particularly notable after 2020–21, may be attributed to structural shifts in the economy following the COVID-19 pandemic, which compelled greater female involvement in both agricultural and informal sector employment.

The rural–urban divide in female LFPR remains stark. Rural women reported higher participation rates (35.5% in 2023–24) compared to their urban counterparts (22.3%), underscoring the greater reliance on women’s labour in agricultural and allied activities. Conversely, urban women face multiple constraints, including limited availability of flexible employment, the double burden of unpaid domestic responsibilities, and safety-related concerns, which collectively restrict their economic participation.

Age-group analysis reveals that women aged 15–29 years consistently record lower participation compared to the 15+ category, despite modest improvements. For instance, LFPR among young women rose from 15.9% in 2017–18 to 28.8% in 2023–24. This suggests that higher enrolment in education, prevailing social norms, and care responsibilities continue to limit younger women’s engagement in the labour force.

Overall, the gender gap in LFPR, though still wide, has shown signs of narrowing, as women’s participation increased more sharply than men’s over the study period. This gradual convergence signals incremental progress towards gender inclusivity in India’s labour market, though substantial challenges persist in achieving parity.

Low Labour Force Participation Rate Among Women in India – Reasons

The labour force participation rate of women in India has remained one of the lowest among emerging

economies, despite rapid economic growth, demographic advantage, and notable strides in education and health indicators. Several interrelated factors contribute to India’s low female LFPR. The problem of low female labour force participation in India cannot be viewed merely as an economic issue but as a complex interplay of cultural, social, and structural barriers. Addressing these challenges requires not only policy reforms in employment and education but also broader transformations in gender norms, workplace equality, and societal perceptions of women’s economic roles. The table 2 points out various reasons for why women not participating in labour force.

Table 2 Women not in Labour Force - Reasons

Reasons	Percentage
Child care/Personal commitments in home making	44.5
Want to continue study	33.6
Health/age related reason	9.3
Others	4.7
Social reason	3,4
Did not have required training/qualification/age for work	3.2
Financially well-off	0.7
Non-availability of work at a convenient location	0.6

Source: Employment Statistics in Focus April 2023
(Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India)

The data on reasons for women remaining outside the labour force highlights that domestic responsibilities continue to be the single most dominant barrier to female labour market participation in India. As per the findings, 44.5% of women reported child care and personal commitments in homemaking as their primary reason for not working. This underscores the deeply embedded social expectation that women should bear the primary responsibility for household duties, which limits their ability to engage in paid employment.



The second most common reason, reported by 33.6% of women, was the desire to continue education. This reflects both a positive trend of greater female enrolment in higher education and, at the same time, a delay in their entry into the labour market. However, without adequate opportunities for transition from education to work, this can lead to a mismatch between skills acquired and employment prospects.

Health and age-related issues were cited by 9.3% of women, showing that physical constraints, especially among older women, act as another barrier. A smaller share 4.7%, mentioned "others," which likely covers diverse personal or situational factors.

Social barriers remain evident as well, a 3.4% of women attributed their non-participation to societal norms and restrictions, reinforcing the idea that restrictive gender norms continue to shape women's economic roles. In addition, 3.2% of women cited the lack of required training, qualification, or appropriate age for work, suggesting gaps in skill development and employability that prevent them from entering the labour market.

Economic factors appear to play a relatively minor role, as only 0.7% of women reported being financially well-off as a reason for not seeking work, and 0.6% reported the non-availability of work at a convenient location. This suggests that the issue is less about the absence of jobs and more about structural, social, and cultural barriers that keep women outside the labour force.

Overall, the analysis highlights that women's exclusion from the labour market in India is driven more by domestic responsibilities, educational transitions, and social constraints rather than by economic self-sufficiency or lack of job opportunities. This points to the need for gender-sensitive labour policies, such as affordable childcare, flexible work arrangements, and skill enhancement programs, alongside broader efforts to challenge and reshape restrictive gender norms.

The factors explaining women's low participation in the labour force in India are not isolated but interconnected structural barriers that

reinforce each other. Women's disproportionate responsibility for household management creates a "time poverty" that restricts them from entering the labour market. Gender-biased social norms deepen this problem. Patriarchal expectations assign women the role of caregivers and discourage their engagement in paid employment. Rising household income produces an interesting paradox. While higher income levels are generally associated with improved well-being, in India they often act as a disincentive for women to work. This reflects what economists call the "income effect," where rising earnings of male members reduce the financial need for women's participation.

Wage and salary disparities further exacerbate the problem. When women perceive that the returns to their work are significantly lower than those of men—owing to wage gaps, occupational segregation, or lack of career mobility—there is less incentive to participate. This perpetuates a vicious cycle: fewer women in the workforce leads to continued undervaluation of women's labour, which in turn reinforces wage disparities.

A careful examination of these factors reveals that India's low female labour force participation is not simply an outcome of individual choice, but the result of structural inequalities, socio-cultural expectations, and labour market distortions. Any effective solution requires a multi-dimensional approach—including redistribution of care work, reform of wage structures, expansion of safe and flexible job opportunities, and most importantly, challenging entrenched social norms.

Worker Population Ratio for Males and Females

The Worker Population Ratio (WPR) is an important tool for assessing how effectively a country is utilizing its population in productive employment. It shows the proportion of people, within the total population, who are actually engaged in economic activities like producing goods and providing services. A higher WPR reflects a greater share of the population contributing to the economy, while a lower WPR suggests that many individuals are either unemployed, engaged in unpaid domestic work, or



outside the labour force altogether. Thus, WPR not only measures the level of employment but also provides a deeper understanding of the structure of

the workforce, gender disparities, and the balance between rural and urban employment.

Table 3 Worker Population Ratio (WPR) in usual status (ps+ss) for persons of age 15 years and above (All India)

Year	Rural			Urban			Total		
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
2023-24	78.1	46.5	62.1	72.3	26.0	49.4	76.3	40.3	58.2
2022-23	78.0	40.7	59.4	71.0	23.5	47.7	76.0	35.9	56.0
2021-22	75.3	35.8	55.6	70.4	21.9	46.6	73.8	31.7	52.9
2020-21	75.1	35.8	55.5	70.0	21.2	45.8	73.5	31.4	52.6
2019-20	74.4	32.2	53.3	69.9	21.3	45.8	73.0	28.7	50.9
2018-19	72.2	25.5	48.9	68.6	18.4	45.8	71.0	23.3	47.3
2017-18	72.0	23.7	48.1	69.3	18.2	43.9	71.2	22.0	46.8

Source: Report Women and Men in India 2024 Selected Indicators and Data
(Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India)

The WPR for persons aged 15 years and above has shown a consistent improvement over the years. At the all-India level, WPR increased from 46.8% in 2017–18 to 58.2% in 2023–24, highlighting a rising engagement of the working-age population in productive employment.

In terms of the rural–urban divide, rural areas consistently record higher WPR compared to urban areas. In 2023–24, rural India reported a WPR of 62.1%, whereas urban India recorded only 49.4%. This suggests that rural workers, particularly women, are more likely to participate in economic activities, often due to agricultural and informal sector employment.

When comparing gender participation, males continue to dominate the labour force. In rural areas, male WPR remained stable above 72%, reaching 78.1% in 2023–24, while female WPR rose sharply from 23.7% in 2017–18 to 46.5% in 2023–24. Similarly, in urban areas, male WPR was 72.3% in 2023–24, compared to a much lower female WPR of 26.0%. This reflects a persistent gender gap in labour force participation, though rural women's participation has improved significantly in recent years.

The data also reveals a gradual closing of the gap between men and women in rural areas, whereas in urban areas, women's participation has remained relatively stagnant with only marginal improvement. This indicates that while rural women are increasingly entering the workforce, urban women face structural challenges such as skill requirements, mobility issues, and social constraints.

Interpretation and Discussion

The analysis of Worker Population Ratio (WPR) and Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) reveals important insights into gender disparities in India's labour market. While recent PLFS data indicate a rise in female participation from 28% in 2019–20 to 37% in 2022–23, the gap between men (76%) and women (37%) remains wide. This reflects both progress and persistent inequality.

An introspection of the data highlights that while India has made modest progress in improving female labour force participation, deep-rooted cultural norms, structural constraints, and economic inequalities continue to hold women back. Meaningful empowerment will require both policy reforms (childcare, wage parity, flexible work arrangements) and social transformation



(redistribution of care work, challenging gender stereotypes).

Conclusion

The analysis of women's labour force participation in India reveals a paradox of progress. On the one hand, recent data from the PLFS (2022–23) indicate an encouraging rise in female labour force participation, from 28% in 2019–20 to 37%. On the other hand, the persistent gender gap—male participation standing at 76%—underscores the structural and social barriers that continue to constrain women's economic engagement (MoSPI, 2023). Factors such as the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, entrenched gender-biased social norms, wage disparities, inadequate childcare support, and limited access to safe and flexible employment opportunities remain key obstacles. Women's empowerment and labour force participation are deeply interlinked. Participation in paid work enhances women's economic independence, decision-making power, and social status, which in turn contributes to broader goals of gender equality and inclusive growth. Yet, empowerment also requires dismantling systemic barriers that prevent women from realising their full potential in the labour market. This includes addressing the undervaluation of unpaid care work, ensuring equal pay for equal work, creating skill development opportunities, and promoting gender-sensitive workplace policies. Ultimately, raising women's labour force participation is not merely an economic imperative but a social and developmental necessity. A more gender-inclusive labour market would not only contribute to India's growth trajectory but also advance its commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals. Only then can India harness the full potential of its demographic

dividend and move towards a more equitable and sustainable future.

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