

Female Labour Force Participation in India: Studying the Effectiveness of Policy Measures on Longevity of Women in the Workforce

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ABSTRACT

In India, female labour force participation has remained consistently low, with many women leaving the workforce after brief periods of time, despite numerous government measures to increase and incentivise women's employment. Despite the introduction of measures like paid maternity leave, skill development programs, and workplace safety laws, it is still unknown as to how effective these policies have been in improving the longevity of women's participation in the workforce. Evidence assessing the impact of these variables on the lifespan of women's participation across various socioeconomic groups is lacking, including accounting for factors such as the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and the continued undervaluing of women's unpaid care labour in India, as well as other cultural factors. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the degree to which the policy frameworks in place encourage women to stay in the workforce, and propose recommendations on the role of law and regulation in increasing female labour force participation.

Introduction

Why are women in India leaving the labour force just as they become increasingly educated, skilled, and economically necessary? Despite decades of policy reform aimed at promoting female labour force participation (FLFP), India's numbers are still among the lowest in the world. Only 19% of working-age women were in the labour force in 2021, down from 32% in 2005, despite the fact that the economy developed and women's educational attainment improved (Frayer and Kumar, 2023). In this author's opinion, the dichotomy is striking: while the Indian government has implemented paid maternity leave, workplace safety rules, and skill development programs, these initiatives have not resulted in sustained workforce involvement of women from all socioeconomic classes.

The issue is not purpose, but rather impact and retention. Policies like the Maternity Benefit

(Amendment) Act of 2017 and skill development programs like the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) attempt to make it easier for women to enter the workforce and enhance their working circumstances (Kumar, 2023). However, these policies are not resulting in long-term employment or economic stability. According to Ellina Samantroy, while recent Periodic Labour Force Survey data show a rise in FLFP from 22% to 35.9% between 2017 and 2023, this increase is mostly driven by self-employment and unpaid family work, rather than substantial integration into the formal sector (Samantroy, 2024). The true problem is to ensure that women not only enter the workforce, but also stay, grow, and succeed there.

Compounding this are outdated legal frameworks that, under the guise of protection, continue to restrict women's access to opportunities. According to Abhishek Singh, over 150 labour rules in Indian states regulate where, when, and how women can work, prohibiting females from doing night shifts in industries such as manufacturing and hospitality (Singh,2024) . These legal obstacles based on paternalistic notions, impede women's access to high-growth, high-paying jobs and contradict the larger policy goal of gender-inclusive development. Singh emphasises that unless these rules are changed, regulatory frameworks would continue to impede women's involvement in India's formal employment market.

This study examines whether India's current policy and legal frameworks genuinely support long-term female labour force participation and explores what changes are needed to make workforce inclusion sustainable and equitable. First, the paper examines whether India's current legal frameworks and policy measures effectively ensure the long-term participation of women in the labour force, beyond temporary gains.

Then, it analyses how protective labour laws and well-intentioned but flawed policies often constrain women's economic opportunities, and how deep-rooted social and cultural norms continue to shape women's employment decisions in ways that policies fail to account for.

Finally, the paper proposes policy recommendations that include reforming restrictive labour laws, investing in gender-responsive infrastructure and caregiving support, and designing policies that acknowledge the social realities influencing women's workforce participation.

Literature Review

This literature review looks at the institutional, legal, and social elements that influence female labour force participation (FLFP) in India, especially as education levels rise and the economy grows. Although numerous regulatory reforms have attempted to improve women's workforce integration, real participation remains low and sometimes informal. The review looks at government publications, peer-reviewed research, and policy studies published between 2015 and 2025 to identify prevailing explanations, contestations, and gaps in existing scholarship.

Recent periodic labour force survey (PLFS) data suggest that India's FLFP will rise from 22% in 2017-18 to 35.9% in 2022-23 (Samantroy, 2024). However, Samantroy warns that this apparent increase conceals a trend towards unpaid family work and self-employment over formal sector inclusion. Her analysis demonstrates that, while involvement is increasing numerically, the quality and stability of women's employment remain low. Similarly, using data from PLFS, CPHS, EPFO, and MSME, suggest that the recent increase in participation, particularly among rural women, is driven by hardship and informal work, with no significant gains in incomes or job security (Deshpande, 2025). This discrepancy points to a methodological challenge in interpreting labour force statistics. While official surveys may record engagement, they do not always reflect empowerment, wages, or continuity. These studies underscore the importance of distinguishing between entry into the labour force and retention in meaningful employment, framing a critical gap in the evaluation of policy success.

Similarly, Sunaina Kumar investigates the changing dynamics of female labour force participation (FLFP) in India, revealing a demographic transition in which younger, more educated women enter the workforce and older, less educated women leave. This trend, while hopeful, highlights the limitations of present policy approaches, which largely ease entry but fail to ensure long-term retention. Kumar points out that despite initiatives like paid maternity leave and skill development programs, barriers such as occupational segregation, lack of supportive infrastructure, and the systemic undervaluing of unpaid care work continue to hinder women's sustained employment. Her analysis underscores the need for integrated, inclusive policies that not only address economic access but also the social and cultural constraints shaping women's labour decisions—making it highly relevant to evaluating the effectiveness of India's existing legal frameworks in improving the longevity of FLFP (Kumar, 2023)

Another impediment to long-term FLFP in India are its work rules. Singh (2024) finds approximately 150 legislation that restrict women's capacity to work in specific sectors, particularly at night or in dangerous occupations. Though presented as protective, these regulatory limits frequently exclude women from higher-paying and developing occupational industries, such as manufacturing or hospitality. Based on Prosperiti's 2022 legal study, Singh observes that only a few states have eased these prohibitions, indicating a slow pace of development (Singh, 2024). The literature constantly criticises these regulations for enforcing obsolete gender stereotypes in the name of safety. However, one significant limitation of present research is the lack of empirical evaluation of alternate safeguards—such as workplace safety audits, secure transportation, or flexible work options—that could allow women to access these positions without legal repercussions.

The longevity of women's participation is also shaped by deeper structural and social norms. According to Chatterjee, Desai, and Vanneman, women's labour market outcomes are influenced

by both supply-side restrictions (such as schooling, household duties, and mobility) and demand-side shortcomings (such as a scarcity of employment in sectors that welcome female workers) (Chatterjee, Desai, and Vanneman, 2018). While policies have aimed to bring women into the workforce, their design and implementation have largely failed to ensure that women stay. Legal restrictions, social norms, and the continued neglect of unpaid care work often override these efforts, leading to short and fragile work tenures. This dual-frame analysis is foundational in understanding not only *why* women exit the workforce, but *how* their labour is undervalued in both public and private domains. However, the study does not address whether these patterns are shifting among younger, urban populations—leaving room for further age- and location-specific analysis.

Across the literature, three themes emerge: (1) structural and cultural barriers limit the sustainability of women's employment; (2) legal frameworks, while protective in theory, frequently act as barriers in practice; and (3) unpaid work remains an invisible but significant deterrent to women's participation in the formal economy.

This review reveals that while the question of *why* women exit the workforce has been widely studied, the question of *how* to ensure that they stay—particularly in good jobs—requires further empirical investigation. It also highlights the need for intersectional research that differentiates by caste, class, location, and age group. The next section of this paper therefore builds upon these findings to examine whether India's current legal and policy architecture truly supports long-term, equitable female labour-force participation—and what changes are needed to make that vision a reality.

Discussion

This study set out to assess whether India's existing policy measures and legal frameworks are effective in ensuring the longevity of female labour force participation (FLFP), not just its temporary increase. A critical analysis of the data reveals two major findings: first, that many laws and policies which claim to promote women's labour force participation paradoxically limit their opportunities; and second, that these policies fail to account for deeply embedded social and cultural factors that ultimately shape women's decisions to stay in or leave the workforce (Mehrotra and Parida, 2017). Together, these findings challenge the effectiveness of India's policy approach and highlight the urgent need for reform rooted in both structural and cultural understanding.

The first major theme that emerges is how certain protective labour laws actually constrain women's economic agency. Over 150 laws restrict women's employment in sectors like mining, petroleum, night shifts, and establishments serving alcohol (Singh, 2024). These restrictions are

often framed as safety measures to prevent harassment or moral degradation, but their net effect is to exclude women from high-paying and growth-oriented sectors (Singh, 2024). For example, women are barred from working night shifts in many industrial jobs, severely limiting their options in sectors such as manufacturing, logistics, or security services. Rather than addressing workplace harassment through accountability or structural reform, the law restricts women's mobility, thereby reinforcing gendered assumptions that women are inherently vulnerable and need to be protected, even at the cost of their autonomy.

This is not merely a legal issue—it results in material consequences for women's economic futures. As the OECD notes, restrictive laws across states and sectors lead to reduced female employment in formal, well-compensated work (Sorsa, 2015). Moreover, such legal exclusion discourages employers from hiring women in the first place, creating a chilling effect on female employment and reinforcing stereotypes about the “liability” of hiring women. Even laws like extended maternity leave—while progressive in intent—can disincentivize employers from hiring or retaining women of childbearing age, especially in the absence of shared parental leave or government-supported caregiving infrastructure. In short, many well-intentioned policies result in structural exclusion, contributing to the very marginalisation they seek to prevent.

The second central finding is that most policies fail to consider the social and cultural norms that influence women's participation in the workforce. Labour market data alone cannot capture the complexity of decisions that women make about employment—decisions often rooted in family expectations, community surveillance, or internalized gender roles. In many middle-income households, rising affluence combined with conservative values encourages women to stay at home to focus on domestic duties (Chatterjee, 2019) In these cases, women voluntarily exit the workforce even when jobs are available, often under subtle social pressures rather than legal barriers.

A prime example of this disconnect is the burden of unpaid care work, which remains nearly invisible in most policy frameworks. Indian women spend an average of 352 minutes per day on unpaid domestic work, compared to just 185 minutes on paid work (Chakraborty, 2021). This “double burden” is not simply a time-management issue—it reflects the cultural expectation that women must prioritize caregiving, regardless of their educational background or career ambitions. As Frayer and Kumar show through personal narratives, even well-educated urban women like Aditi Dhulap often drop out of the workforce not because of lack of opportunity, but because of caregiving demands that policies fail to accommodate (Frayer & Kumar, 2023).

Adding on, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic offers a striking example of this failure. As highlighted by the EPW article, women experienced disproportionately greater job losses and a slower rate of re-entry into the workforce compared to men, revealing deeply entrenched gender

biases and the fragility of women's employment. This aligns with the study's conclusion that while programs like maternity benefits or skill development schemes exist, they do not address the systemic and cultural vulnerabilities that force women out of work during disruptions. The pandemic has made visible the invisibility of unpaid care labour and the inadequacy of current labour protections to account for it. Thus, the study underscores the need to reassess the policy framework not just through an economic lens, but also a gender-sensitive and crisis-responsive approach that prioritises long-term retention and equity in the labour force (Nikore, 2022)

Importantly, current laws and labour policies rarely acknowledge or address this reality. Policies assume a gender-neutral or even male-default model of the worker, ignoring the disproportionate share of household labour carried by women. While schemes like maternity leave or crèches exist on paper, they are rarely implemented in informal sectors or small enterprises where most Indian women are employed. Moreover, policies do not sufficiently incentivize male participation in caregiving, nor do they invest in public infrastructure—like affordable childcare, eldercare, or safe public transport—that would make it feasible for women to remain in the workforce long-term.

What becomes clear is that laws and regulations designed without considering the cultural ecosystem in which women live are bound to fail. They may produce temporary or cosmetic improvements in participation rates but will not foster long-term retention or career growth. Scholars such as Samantroy argue that tackling women's labour issues requires not only legal reform but also investment in gender-responsive infrastructure, social protection, and behavioural change campaigns (Samantroy, 2024). Similarly, the surge in female participation in recent years—particularly in rural areas—may not indicate empowerment, but rather distress-driven or informal employment taken up out of necessity rather than opportunity (Deshpande, 2025).

Ultimately, this discussion reveals that the longevity of women's workforce participation cannot be legislated into existence through top-down reforms alone. Laws must be rewritten not just to remove restrictions but to address the real-world conditions that push women out of employment—be they legal, cultural, or domestic.

Conclusion

This paper set out to critically evaluate whether India's current legal and policy interventions genuinely support the long-term engagement of women in the workforce or merely produce temporary statistical gains. Through a layered examination of labour laws, policy frameworks, and socio-cultural dynamics, the paper concludes that while India has made notable strides in recognizing the importance of female labour force participation (FLFP), its approach remains

fundamentally flawed in both design and execution.

Protective laws, rather than empowering women, often limit their access to meaningful employment opportunities under the guise of safety and morality. Policies tend to focus on entry into the labour market without addressing the deeper structural and cultural forces that compel women to exit it. These include unpaid care responsibilities, rigid gender norms, and lack of enabling infrastructure. Moreover, the assumption of a gender-neutral workforce ignores the lived realities of Indian women, particularly those in informal sectors and marginalized communities. Future research must delve deeper into regional, class-based, and caste-based variations in these social norms. A more intersectional, grassroots approach to data collection and policy-making is needed to create frameworks that enable Indian women not only to enter, but to remain and thrive in the workforce.

Ultimately, women's sustained participation in the labour force is not only a question of employment policy but of social justice, economic growth, and democratic inclusion. For India to harness the full potential of its demographic dividend and move toward equitable development, it must center women not just in policy rhetoric, but in every stage of law-making, institutional reform, and cultural transformation. Only then can FLFP shift from a statistic to a sustained and empowering reality.

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