



Reaping the Potential of the Female Workforce

This editorial is based on [“International Women’s Day - Reaping the Potential of the Female Workforce”](#) which was published in The Hindu on 08/03/2022. It talks about the challenges to harnessing the potential of the female workforce in India.

For Prelims: India’s Female Labour Force Participation, Women in Informal Economy, ILO, MGNREGA, Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017, Gig Economy.

For Mains: Contribution of women in India’s economy, Gig Economy as a way forward for working women, Challenges to increasing female LFPR, Women and Informal Sector.

The theme for **International Women’s Day 2022** (March 8) is **‘gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow’**. However, employment is one of the sectors where gender inequality can be witnessed at its peak.

[India’s female labour force participation \(FLFP\) rate](#) is the lowest among the **BRICS countries** and is also **lower than some of its neighbours in South Asia** such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

To address this problem, what we need are **concerted efforts and targeted strategies along with a change in attitudes**, for women to take advantage of these new labour market opportunities.

Access to higher education, skill training and digital technology are the three great enablers in helping India reap the potential of its female labour force.

What is the Scenario of Women’s Workforce Participation?

- In some places, the presence of women is appreciable, for instance, female participation in projects under the [Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme](#) is about **50%**.
- India also boasts of the **highest share of female airline pilots at 15%** while the world average is barely 5%.
- Also, not too long ago, half of India’s **banking assets were under institutions headed by women**.
- Despite this, the participation of women in the workforce in India has still remained low. India’s **female LFPR is now among the world’s lowest at around 20%**, on par with countries like Saudi Arabia.
 - As per a report by the [International Labour Organisation](#), **India ranks 121 out of 131 countries** on female LFPR.

What about the Women in Informal Sector?

- According to a 2018 study by the ILO, **more than 95% of India's working women are informal workers** who work in labour-intensive, low-paying, highly precarious jobs/conditions, and with no social protection.
- The [Maternity Benefit \(Amendment\) Act, 2017](#) more than doubled the duration of paid maternity leave for women employees to 26 weeks, proposing an option to work from home after this period, on mutual agreement with the employer, and made crèche facilities mandatory for establishments employing 50 or more women.
 - However, **these benefits are mostly enjoyed by formal sector women workers**, constituting less than 5% of the women workforce.
- The **lack of affordable and quality childcare services** and maternity benefits increase the burden on informal women workers, aggravating gender and class inequalities.

What is the Share of Women in Different Sectors?

- According to **United Nations Women (UN Women)** estimates, women make up a significant proportion of all healthcare workers and more than 80% of nurses and midwives.
- Women also form a significant proportion of the workforce in the education sector in India, especially in primary education and early childhood care.
- The care service sector, which includes health, education, and other personal care services, is more labour-intensive than sectors such as manufacturing, construction or other service sectors where the employment potential gets affected due to factors such as the introduction of tools, technology and increased mechanisation.

What About the Gig Economy and Women's Access to Digital Resources?

- The [Gig Economy](#) has demonstrated resilience even during the pandemic, with platform workers playing an indispensable role in urban India.
 - Studies indicate that **women appreciate the income-generating potential of the gig economy**.
 - The ILO Global Survey (2021) noted that working from home or job flexibility are particularly important for women.
- Digital platforms that allow remote work are, in principle, accessible to men and women in any location. However, **access to the Internet and smartphones can be a restricting factor**.
- Data suggest that in India, **women's access to the Internet** and to smartphones is **much lower than that of men**.
- According to the GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report, **only 25% of women owned smartphones compared to 41% of men** in India in 2020.
 - Closing this gap can be significant in boosting women's employment in the gig and platform sector.

What Can Be Done to Increase FLFP?

- **Providing Skill Training:** Skill training of women in **job roles aligned to the gig, platform and care sectors** as well as other emerging sectors such as those **covered under the Production-Linked Incentive Scheme** needs to be encouraged.
 - **Online skill training** can also be beneficial to women who face constraints in physical mobility due to social norms, domestic responsibilities or concerns over safety.
 - We need **training programmes with well-defined outcomes for women's digital access** and to mentor them to take up employment opportunities in emerging sectors.
- **More Investments:** Greater investment in **better health and care facilities** would not only improve the well-being of India's people and hence their economic productivity, but will also lead to more employment opportunities for women.
 - The ILO Report on Care work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work: Key findings in Asia and the Pacific (2018) indicated that increasing investment in the care economy has the **potential to generate a total of 69 million jobs in India by 2030**.
 - **Enabling women to acquire both physical assets** (through credit facilities, revolving funds, etc.) and employable skills is crucial for them to take up employment opportunities

in new and emerging sectors.

- **Providing Child Care Services:** This initiative will significantly **support women in managing their care responsibilities**, enabling them to devote sufficient time to paid employment.
 - Investments to set up child care services through **collaborative models in office complexes** and with industry associations in industrial corridors are also important.
 - The **National Creche Scheme** which lays out specific provisions for working women has suffered diminished government funding. **Revitalising the provisions of the scheme** and adding a **network of public and workplace crèches can be hugely beneficial**.
 - Public crèches **can be operated at worksite clusters** such as near industrial areas, markets, dense low-income residential areas, and labour nakas.

Drishti Mains Question

“Increasing Female LFPR in India is crucial not just to achieve economic growth but also to promote inclusive growth and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals”. Comment.

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