



Empowering Women for Sustainable Economic Growth

This editorial is based on “[Labour force participation of teen girls and elderly women in rural India is increasing](#)” which was published in The Hindu Business Line on 19/01/2025. The article brings into picture the significant rise in women's labor force participation, particularly in rural areas, but highlights that economic necessity, especially for teenage girls and elderly women, overshadows true empowerment, revealing deep structural barriers to gender equality.

For Prelims: [Periodic Labour Force Survey\(2023-24\)](#), [Ujjwala Yojana](#), [Har Ghar Jal](#), [MGNREGA](#), [National Rural Livelihood Mission](#), [Beti Bachao Beti Padhao](#), [Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan](#), [PM Jan Dhan Yojana](#), [Stand-Up India Scheme](#), [Women Reservation Act, 2023](#), [Skill India Mission](#), [Digital Saksharta Abhiyan](#), [National Rural Livelihoods Mission](#), [Global Gender Gap Report 2023](#).

For Mains: Key Drivers of India's Improved Female Labour Force Participation, Structural Challenges in India's Female Labour Force Participation.

According to recent [Periodic Labour Force Survey data \(2023-24\)](#), women's labor force participation has shown significant growth, particularly in rural areas where **it nearly doubled from 18.2% to 35.5% over 6 years**. However, deeper analysis reveals concerning patterns - **there's a sharp rise in participation among teenage girls (15-19) and elderly women (60+)**, often **driven by economic necessity rather than empowerment**. While the increasing participation marks progress, significant structural barriers remain to be addressed before we can achieve a truly **gender-sensitive economy** that offers **equal opportunities and choices to all workers**.

What are the Factors Driving India's Improved Female Labour Force Participation?

- **Reduced Household Drudgery through Welfare Schemes:** Government schemes like [Ujjwala Yojana](#) (free LPG connections) and [Har Ghar Jal](#) (tap water to households) have eased women's domestic burdens, creating more time for economic activities.
 - With less time spent on firewood collection or fetching water, women, especially in rural areas, have moved into agriculture and allied activities.
 - The number of total refills taken by Ujjwala Yojana beneficiaries has risen from 159.9 million in 2018-19 to **344.8 million in 2022-23**, and household tap water connections under **Jal Jeevan Mission** reached **78% of rural homes** as of **October 2024**, directly reducing drudgery for women.
- **Increased Employment under Government Schemes:** Women have benefited from wage employment schemes like [MGNREGA](#), which provide local opportunities with equal wages for men and women.

- In 2021-22, women constituted **54.54% of the MGNREGA workforce**, according to the Ministry of Rural Development.
- Similarly, initiatives like [National Rural Livelihood Mission \(NRLM\)](#) have empowered over **9.89 crore women as of 2023** through self-help groups (SHGs), helping them engage in micro-enterprises and financial activities.
- **Declining Fertility Rates and Smaller Families:** India's declining [fertility rate](#), now at **2.0 (NFHS-5, 2021)**, has reduced the burden of child-rearing on women, allowing them more time to participate in paid work.
 - Smaller family sizes, especially in urban areas, have enabled women to enter the workforce and focus on career development.
 - This demographic shift is evident in the **rising FLFP in younger age groups (20-35 years)** in urban areas, as per **PLFS 2023-24**.
- **Improved Literacy and Education Levels:** Women's literacy and access to education have steadily improved, enhancing their employability and participation in the workforce.
 - Schemes like [Beti Bachao Beti Padhao](#) and [Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan](#) have helped boost female literacy, now at **77%**.
 - Additionally, programs like [Skill India Mission](#) and [Digital Saksharta Abhiyan](#) are equipping women with vocational and digital skills, enabling participation in emerging fields like e-commerce and gig work.
- **Shift Towards Self-Employment and Entrepreneurship:** Women are increasingly entering self-employment and entrepreneurship, aided by financial inclusion initiatives like [PM Jan Dhan Yojana \(PMJDY\)](#) and [Stand-Up India Scheme](#).
 - **55% of Jan Dhan account holders are women**, providing them with formal banking access and enabling credit linkages.
 - As of March 2023, loans amounting to ₹40,710 crore were sanctioned under the **Stand-Up India scheme**, with **80% allocated to women entrepreneurs**, fostering economic independence.
- **Technology and Digitization as Enablers:** The rapid expansion of internet access and digital platforms has created new opportunities for women to participate in gig and remote work.
 - Platforms like **Amazon Saheli** and **Mahila E-Haat** are enabling women to sell products and services from home.
 - With rural India accounting for **53% of internet consumption**, more women are leveraging digital tools to join the workforce, **reducing the constraints of mobility**.
- **Supportive Legal Frameworks:** Progressive legal measures like [Maternity Benefit \(Amendment\) Act, 2017](#), which provides 26 weeks of paid maternity leave, and [POSH Act, 2013](#), have created a more supportive environment for women to remain in the workforce.
 - Recent steps like the passage of the [Women Reservation Act, 2023](#) indicate a **political commitment to improving women's representation and opportunities**, creating a ripple effect on workforce participation.
- **Rising Role of Self-Help Groups:** Self-help groups under [Ministry of Rural Development's Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission \(DAY-NRLM\)](#) and other state-level programs have empowered women through credit access, skill development, and collective bargaining.
 - Till February 2024, [Self-Help Groups \(SHGs\)](#) had mobilized over **₹1.7 lakh crore** in loans for women-led enterprises.
 - States like **Tamil Nadu and Kerala**, where SHGs are particularly active, have seen a direct correlation with higher FLFP compared to the national average.

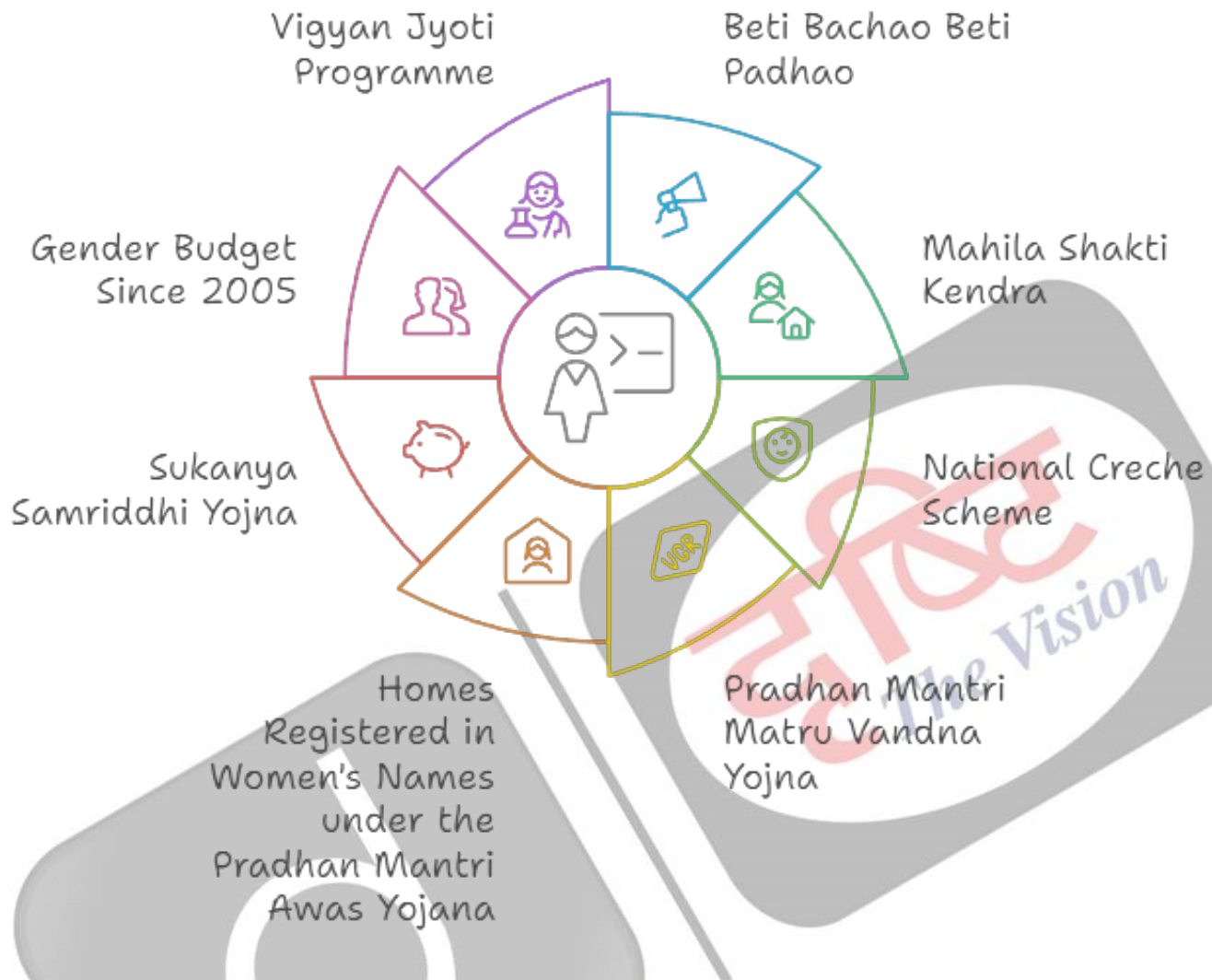
What are the Structural Challenges in India's Female Labour Force Participation?

- **Gendered Social Norms and Cultural Constraints:** Despite economic development, traditional social norms discourage women from participating in paid work, confining them to domestic roles.
 - The stigma of women working outside the home, especially in rural areas, limits their access to opportunities.
 - Moreover, **societal expectations for women to prioritize caregiving over careers** reduce workforce inclusion.
 - According to the [Global Gender Gap Report 2023](#), India ranks 127th out of 146 in economic participation, highlighting deeply entrenched gender biases.

- **Inadequate Access to Quality Education and Skill Training:** Many women lack access to higher education and vocational training, creating a **skills mismatch in emerging job markets**.
 - **Female literacy and enrollment in STEM fields remain low**, limiting employability in high-growth sectors like IT and manufacturing.
 - In 2022-23, **only 18.6% of women aged 18-59 received vocational training**, with just **7% of skill trainees** being women in 2021, despite **17% of ITIs being women-only**.
 - This under-preparedness leaves women confined to informal and low-paying sectors, perpetuating economic dependency.
- **Unpaid Care Work Burden:** The disproportionate burden of unpaid care work—**childcare, eldercare, and household chores**—leaves women with little time for paid work.
 - Welfare measures like **Ujjwala Yojana** and **Har Ghar Jal** have reduced household chores but have not fully translated into workforce inclusion.
 - According to NFHS (2019-21) data, **approximately 85% of women aged 15-59 engage in unpaid domestic work**, with minimal variation between urban and rural areas.
 - This inequality limits women's ability to access full-time employment.
- **Structural Informality and Gender Wage Gap:** A significant share of women in India's workforce are in informal jobs, such as **agriculture and garment manufacturing**, which are low-paying and lack social security.
 - This structural informality results in precarious employment and a persistent gender wage gap.
 - According to the [World Inequality Report 2022](#) estimates, men earn **82%** of the labour income in India, whereas women earn **18%**.
 - Additionally, over **90% of women workers** are in the informal sector, as per the **Economic Survey 2023**, making decent work conditions inaccessible.
- **Weak Implementation of Gender-Sensitive Workplace Policies:** Poor enforcement of **maternity benefits, flexible work policies, and crèche facilities** discourages women from continuing in the workforce.
 - Private sector compliance with **The Maternity Benefit Act, 2017**, remains low, especially in smaller enterprises.
 - According to a report by OP Jindal Global University, **93.5% of women workers in the country cannot access maternity benefits**.
 - This lack of structural support for working mothers forces many women to drop out of the workforce post-childbirth.
 - Despite laws like **POSH Act, 2013**, enforcement remains weak in informal and small enterprises.
- **Persisting Security Concerns:** The [National Crime Records Bureau \(2022\)](#) revealed a **12.9% rise in crime against women between 2018 and 2022**, leading many families to discourage women from traveling for work.
 - However, **more than half of the women who died by suicide in the 2020-2022** were housewives, a 2022 report by **National Crime Records Bureau**.
 - Furthermore, **lack of safety infrastructure in cities** limits women's mobility and reduces their access to employment opportunities.
- **Economic Necessity Driving Constrained Choices:** The recent surge in rural women's LFPR, especially in agriculture, highlights participation driven by necessity rather than agency.
 - **Women are often forced to step in as primary earners** due to male out-migration or the absence of earning members in small households (**feminisation of agriculture**).
 - The **PLFS (2023-24)** shows elderly rural women and teenage girls entering the workforce, **often reflecting economic vulnerability rather than empowerment**. This indicates that many women remain trapped in low-value, survival-driven jobs.
- **Limited Representation in Leadership Roles:** Women continue to face significant barriers in breaking the **"glass ceiling" and reaching leadership positions in both public and private sectors**.
 - As of April 2024, there are 77 women lawmakers in India, making up **14.7% of the total seats**. The **Women's Reservation Act, 2023** will come into effect after 2029.
 - A 2024 report on **'Women in Leadership in Corporate India,'** revealed that women held **only 18.3% of senior leadership roles (managerial levels and above)**.
 - This lack of representation limits women's role in decision-making and perpetuates gender

stereotypes.

Empowering Women in India



What Strategies Can Address Structural Issues and Promote Effective Economic Empowerment of Women?

- **Strengthen Skill Development with a Focus on Emerging Sectors:** Launch tailored skill development programs for women in high-growth sectors like **IT, renewable energy, and healthcare**, alongside traditional sectors like **textiles and handicrafts**.
 - Programs under **Skill India Mission** and **Digital India** can integrate gender-specific initiatives like digital literacy for rural women or advanced STEM training for urban women.
 - Ensuring convergence with initiatives like **Stand-Up India** will provide financial and entrepreneurial support, encouraging women to become job creators.
- **Expand Access to Affordable Childcare and Crèche Facilities:** Introduce a nationwide **Childcare Support Mission** to scale up implementation of crèche facilities under the **National Creche Scheme** in both urban and rural areas.
 - Link this with workplace policies under the **Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017**, mandating affordable daycare centers for all enterprises, including informal setups.
 - This would enable women, **especially in the 25-40 age group**, to re-enter the workforce without the burden of caregiving.
- **Enhance Women's Access to Formal Credit:** Expand the outreach of **PM Jan Dhan**

Yojana and ensure seamless access to affordable credit under [Mudra Yojana](#) for women-led businesses.

- Combine this with financial literacy programs under **National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)** to empower self-help groups (SHGs) with entrepreneurial skills.
- Support **women entrepreneurs by simplifying loan procedures**, offering mentorship programs, and setting up gender-sensitive financial support desks at banks.
- **Promote Gender-Responsive Infrastructure Development:** Invest in gender-sensitive public infrastructure like safe and **affordable transport, separate sanitation facilities, and well-lit roads**, especially in rural and urban peripheries.
 - Expand urban safety initiatives like **Safe City Projects** to enhance women's mobility and reduce workplace barriers.
 - Partner with state governments to implement such infrastructure under the **Smart Cities Mission** for better inclusivity and accessibility.
- **Strengthen Workplace Policies for Gender Equality:** Mandate gender-sensitive workplace policies, including flexible working hours, paid maternity leave, and anti-harassment measures under the **POSH Act, 2013**.
 - **Promote hybrid work opportunities and remote jobs**, particularly for women in urban areas, to retain them in the workforce post-childbirth.
 - Incentivize companies to conduct gender audits and improve workplace diversity under corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives.
- **Promote Representation in Leadership and Decision-Making Roles:** Introduce capacity-building programs for women under [Mission Shakti](#) to prepare them for leadership roles in politics, governance, and corporate sectors.
 - Encourage private companies to adopt diversity benchmarks and ensure at least **30% representation of women in leadership** positions.
- **Focus on Digital Inclusion to Leverage Technology:** Bridge the gender digital divide by expanding the **Digital Saksharta Abhiyan** and providing women with subsidized smartphones and internet connections in rural areas.
 - Promote **gig economy opportunities, e-commerce platform** work avenues for women through digital literacy training.
 - Initiatives like **Mahila E-Haat** and **Amazon Saheli** should be scaled up to **connect women entrepreneurs with larger markets** and provide them with marketing, logistics, and financial support.
- **Develop Gender-Responsive Social Protection Frameworks:** Design social protection programs that prioritize the needs of working women, including universal healthcare, old-age pensions, and unemployment benefits.
 - Strengthen insurance schemes like [PM Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana \(PMJJBY\)](#) and [PM Shram Yogi Maandhan Yojana](#) to ensure income security for informal women workers.
 - Introduce **conditional cash transfers linked to women's workforce participation** to incentivize their economic activity.
- **Address Region-Specific Barriers with Targeted Interventions:** Design state-specific strategies to address regional challenges, such as **low FLFP in northern states (e.g., Haryana and Uttar Pradesh)** versus relatively **higher participation in southern states (e.g., Kerala and Tamil Nadu)**.
 - States with low FLFP can launch targeted campaigns for gender sensitization, vocational training, and transport access.
 - Collaborative efforts between states and central programs like **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao** can help bridge regional disparities.
- **Recognise Women's Role in the Care Economy:** Recognize the care economy as a key sector for employment and invest in training women as caregivers, nurses, and childcare workers.
 - Initiatives under [Ayushman Bharat](#) can expand opportunities for women in healthcare and allied services.
 - Create public-private partnerships to set up **affordable elder care and childcare centers, where trained women can take up employment**, while enabling other women to join the workforce.

Conclusion

The **rise in women's labor force participation in rural India highlights both progress and**

persistent challenges. Economic necessity, particularly among teenage girls and elderly women, reveals **deep structural barriers to empowerment.** To achieve genuine gender equality, reforms in education, skills, and work conditions are crucial. **Aligning with SDGs 5 (Gender Equality) and 8 (Decent Work),** policies must focus on breaking systemic barriers. Empowering women fully will unlock India's economic potential, fostering a more inclusive and sustainable future.

Drishti Mains Question:

The labor force participation of women in India has shown significant growth in recent years, yet structural barriers and socio-economic challenges persist. Analyze the factors contributing to this trend and suggest measures to ensure sustainable and effective economic empowerment of women.

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. Which of the following gives 'Global Gender Gap Index' ranking to the countries of the world? (2017)

- (a) World Economic Forum
- (b) UN Human Rights Council
- (c) UN Women
- (d) World Health Organization

Ans: (a)

Mains

Q.1 "Empowering women is the key to control population growth". Discuss. (2019)

Q.2 Discuss the positive and negative effects of globalization on women in India? (2015)

Q.3 Male membership needs to be encouraged in order to make women's organizations free from gender bias. Comment. (2013)

Q.4 Distinguish between 'care economy' and 'monetized economy'. How can the care economy be brought into a monetized economy through women empowerment? (2023)