

Policy Brief

INDIA'S BIG GENDER CHALLENGE: COVID-19's devastating impact on rural female labour force participation



“No country can ever truly flourish if it stifles the potential of its women and deprives itself of the contributions of half of its citizens.”

Michelle Obama

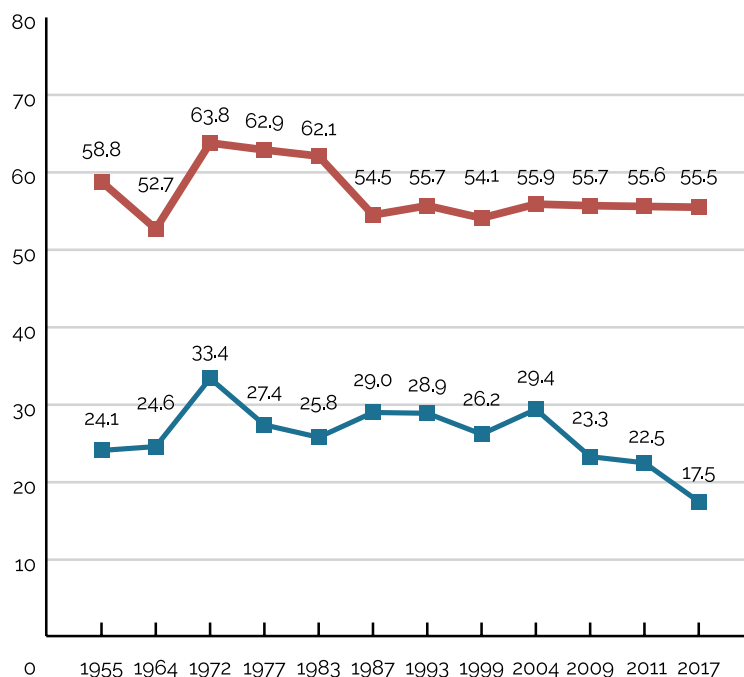
- Implementation of women focused job guarantee schemes in urban and rural India
- Mass awareness campaigns around social and cultural norms by the government
- Address the political economy of care work, a crucial factor impacting labour participation
- Increased representation of women in the Parliament and state legislature
- Investing in safe and last mile public transport system across the country

While India has made commendable strides on women's issues and rights (such as access to education, autonomy, access to healthcare, etc.) over the past few decades, one key area where there has been a consistent decline is their participation in the labour force. A recent report in April 2022 found that India's female employment rate plummeted to just 9% due to the COVID 19 pandemic losses, which is the same as Yemen, a conflict affected country. However, the roots of India's dismal female labour force go back to pre-COVID times as India's FLFPR was on the decline even before the pandemic.

In this policy brief, we will explore the reasons behind India's declining FLFPR pre and post COVID as well as suggest a few recommendations which can help stem the decline. Our main suggestions include launching a women-oriented employment guarantee scheme, mass awareness and culture campaigns on gender equity, improving the public transport system, and addressing the political economy of care work for women.

FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION IN INDIA

When it comes to FLFPR, India's case has always puzzled researchers and social scientists alike. Over the years, numerous research studies and empirical analyses have found a few common issues that are thought to be behind this puzzling decline.



LFPR - all ages

Source: www.lse.ac.uk

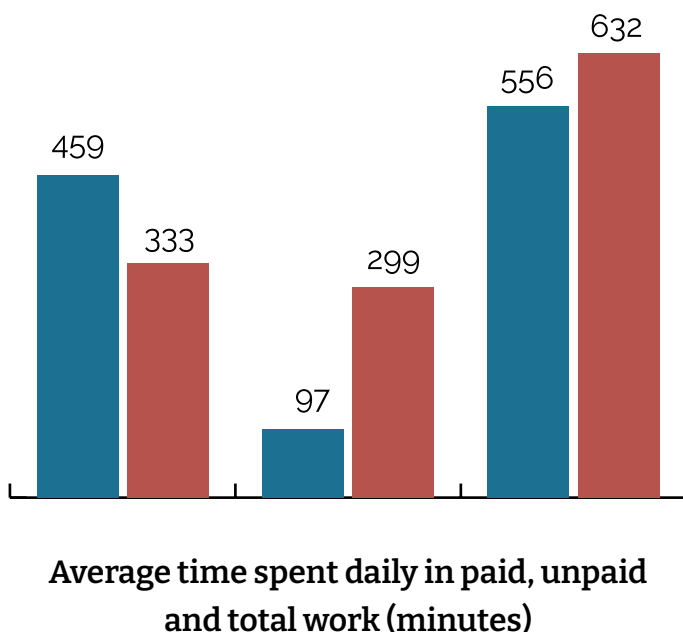
The first issue that has been inferred as one of the key reasons impacting women's abilities to take up paid work is the burden of unpaid care work. In as recent as 2018, women in urban areas spent about 5.2 hours daily on unpaid care work (rural women 4.85 hours) as compared to just 29 minutes by men in urban areas and 32 minutes in rural areas. This huge gender gap itself demonstrates the burden which women have to face thereby affecting their ability to take up decent paid work. Research suggests that women often prefer paid work closer to home as compared to jobs farther to home as it allows them to balance their unpaid care work responsibilities alongside the paid work. Another recent study, which was the first ever time use survey by the government, found that while men only do 97 minutes of unpaid care work, the corresponding figure for women was 299 minutes.

The second reason which has been found to impact low female participation rate in India is the effect of marriages. Given the strong gendered dynamics around marriage norms and practices, where a woman is expected to move to her husband's home and prioritise taking care of the household, many women are compelled to leave their jobs or take up a more 'flexible' job which is in line with their household care duties. Research suggests that the decline in India's FLFPR has been concentrated among rural married women. The enormity of this reality can be inferred by the fact that around 97% of Indians migrating for marriage are women according to the Census 2011. While the event of marriage itself may not be sufficient to reduce the FLFPR, it is the social and cultural norms regarding the role of wives in a new household that affects their chances and ability to continue their jobs or take up equivalent paid work.

Another significant reason the job opportunities available for women are girls are often less productive with no social protection, less pay, and more vulnerability. Within the rural parts of India, where 60% of the women are engaged in agriculture, data and opinion point out that there is a dearth of non-farm jobs for the women. Whereas in the urban areas, with teaching profession being an exception, women labour is concentrated around sales, house cleaning and domestic work. Additionally, since fast growing sectors like service and manufacturing demand technically skilled labour, men tend to have better tertiary and vocational training compared to women. Automation too within agriculture, forestry and other allied activities, is estimated to push 12 million women out of the labour force by the year 2030.

IMPACT OF COVID 19 AND POST COVID 19 EFFECTS

COVID-19 in India has had a disproportionate impact on the female labour force participation rates right from the pandemic's outset. Initially, with the first lockdown announced by the Indian Government in 2020, more women were pushed out of the labour force, accounting to 47% compared to 7% men who lost their jobs. The second and more recent wave of COVID-19 specifically turned brutal for the rural women. While rural women made up 11% job losses in April 2020, they accounted for an alarming 80% of job losses in April 2021. With the return of migrants, loss of



Source: National Statistical Office; The Diplomat

employment, closed markets & schools, and the need to care for the sick & old, COVID-19 led to an increase in the unpaid care burden for women and girls. Within the rural areas, surveys revealed that during the pandemic out of 10 hours of active time in a day, women spent around 90% of their time in managing unpaid care work.

Agriculture remains the primary source of livelihood in rural areas. Women, though lacking land rights, end up being the prime contributors to agricultural productivity. For instance, 73% of rural women workers are farmers, but only 13% of them have any form of land holdings. Initially, women reported that due to closure of the markets, they were unable to sell their produce, or get a fair price. Though this impact was temporary, reverse migration especially of the male members has seemed to have left a more permanent impact on the women previously engaged in agriculture. Two separate surveys with women in rural areas have revealed that women who were previously engaged in farm activities, have been replaced by the returnee male migrants. Additionally, there have been instances where the male migrants have taken up the high paying jobs in agriculture and farm sector, leaving women with low paying and labour-intensive roles.

MGNREGA on the other hand remains a lifeline for rural India especially women. Despite COVID, women continue to hold 52% of the MGNREGA work as of April 2021 as per Ru-

ral Development Ministry, but it is worth noting that the participation declined to a five-year low. Additionally, between April to May 2021, the demand for NREGA increased by 3% whereas the job availability dipped by 21%. In this light, a survey by Nikore Associates with 50 women community organisations shares that in times of job scarcity in rural India, women often forfeit their own employment making way for their male relatives.

Along with agriculture, non-farm livelihoods which mainly engage women from SHGs have also been impacted by the pandemic. Firstly, it has been reported via various consultations with SHGs that some women had to leave the collectives due to increased household responsibilities. Secondly, even though during the first wave, the SHGs ran community kitchens and provided cooked meals to feed the poor including migrants, they were provided with food supplies and fuel, but not paid for their time and work, as shared by Jagruti Mahila Sangh, a cluster-level federation of 360 self-help groups in Dumarkudar village of Jharkhand's Bokaro district. During the first wave, the SHG members engaged in making masks and sanitizers that provided them some relief from the crises, but with the second wave, since the supply for such items increased, leaving SHGs with no demand for their work, and hence, out of work.

SRIJAN'S WORK

Our organisation's existing work in rural

India indicates that with two successive waves of COVID and work drying up in urban regions, many male workers have permanently moved back to villages. Thus, with this significant reverse migration, there is a need to empirically assess its impact on women's labour market opportunities and on rural FLFPR. To understand these issues in further depth, SRIJAN is currently conducting an empirical study across three districts in three states: Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan (one each). We aim to study the immediate impact as

well as medium and long-term ripple effects on women's labour market opportunities. There have been a few studies in India (Behera, Mishra & Behera, 2018 Dandekar & Ghai, 2020, which focus on the impact of reverse migration on villages in general; we feel there is a strong need to identify and study its impact on rural women, especially after the permanent reverse migration post the second COVID wave. During our work on livelihood programs and initiatives in the field, we understood the significance of the pandemic's impact

Policy Recommendations

Implementation of women focused job guarantee schemes in urban India: Given the abysmally low labour force participation in India it is important to introduce public works programs on a national level which specifically focuses on hiring women in urban areas, where FLFPR is worse than rural areas. Programs such as NREGA have had a mostly positive impact on women and thus, similar programs in urban areas will definitely help women access paid work and help augment the FLFPR in urban areas.

Mass Awareness campaigns around social and cultural norms by the government: As discussed earlier in this brief, often young women are not allowed to access paid work due to social, cultural norms which prohibit/restrict their paid work opportunities. Therefore, it is necessary that a mass awareness campaign is launched by the government which addresses this issue. It could be similar to the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan or the Beti Padhao Beti

Bachao Abhiyan, which have had some positive effects on their respective issues.

Address the political economy of care work: The burden of unpaid care work on women in India is immense as compared to men. Thus, for any program or initiative on improving FLFPR in India, it must address the challenge of unpaid care work.

Increased representation of women in Parliament and state legislature: Research suggests that women's issues and needs are given priority when women are elected as Parliamentarians and members of legislative assemblies in the state. Thus, to address this very woman specific issue of their declining FLFPR, it is important that more women are elected to the legislatures.

Investing in a safe and last mile public transport system across the country: Some studies have also found that due to many workplaces being located far away combined with a lack of safe and accessible public transport, many young women drop out of the workforce, especially in urban areas. Thus, a highly recommended policy suggestion is to invest in building

Further readings:

Guha, D. & Bharti, A. (2020), 'Making a Gender Responsive Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme', IWWAGE, Available at: <https://iwwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Making-a-Gender-Responsive-Urban-Employment-Guarantee-Scheme.pdf>

Sili L. (2021), 'How can India help women to stay in the workforce?', LSE Impact Blog, 22 March, Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/2021/03/22/how-can-india-help-women-to-stay-in-the-workforce/#comments>

Afridi, F., Dinkelman, T. & Mahajan, K. (2018). 'Why are

fewer married women joining the work force in rural India? A decomposition analysis over two decades'. J Popul Econ 31, pp. 783–818 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00148-017-0671-y>

Mehrotra, S. & Parida, J.K. (2017), 'Why is the Labour Force Participation of Women Declining in India?' World Development, Volume 98, pp. 360-380, ISSN 0305-750X, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.world-dev.2017.05.003> Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X17301663>

IndiaSpend & Nikore Associates (2021), 'Stories Of The Lockdown', [Podcast], Available at: <https://stories-of-the-lockdown.simplecast.com/>

Bibliography

All India Disaster Mitigation Institute (2021), 'Agriculture, Gender and COVID-19: Impact and Recovery', Issue No. 195, Southasiadisasters.net, India. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/india/agriculture-gender-and-covid-19-impact-and-recovery-southasiadisastersnet-issue-no-195>

Bhardwaj N. (2022). 'Women and Work in India: Trends and Analysis', India Briefing, 18 April. Available at: <https://www.india-briefing.com/news/women-and-work-in-india-trends-and-analysis-24758.html/>

Chopra D., Sengupta S., Pillai N., Dand S. & Jain D. (2015). 'Placing Women's Unpaid Work in Development Policy', Gender and Economic Policy Discussion Forum. Forum XVII. Briefing Note 17, 10 August. Available at: https://in.boell.org/sites/default/files/uploads/2013/10/briefing_paper_17.pdf

Gupta S. (2021). 'Destructive second wave: The impact on women and the rural economy in India', Observer Research Foundation, 27 July. Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/destructive-second-wave/>

Impact and Policy Research Institute (2020). 'Gendered impacts of COVID-19', India Water Portal, 20 September. Available at: <https://www.indiawaterportal.org/articles/differential-impact-covid-19-rural-women>

Raman S. (2019). '73.2% Of Rural Women Workers Are Farmers, But Own 12.8% Land Holdings', IndiaSpend, 9 September. Available at: <https://www.indiaspend.com/73-2-of-rural-women-workers-are-farmers-but-own-12-8-land-holdings/>

Raman S. (2021) 'Rural Women's Collectives Struggle To Survive Even As They Help Manage Covid Fall-out', IndiaSpend, 30 July. Available at: <https://www.indiaspend.com/womenwork/rural-women-collectives-struggle-to-survive-manage-covid-fall-out-764367>

Nikore M., Jha S, Mundhra P. (2021). 'Why rural women are bearing the weight of India's second Covid wave', Indian Express, 2 June. Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/covid-19-rural-india-women-7341294/>

Panwar B. (2022). 'Why they opt out of job market?', Daily Pioneer, 10 May. Available at: <https://www.daily-pioneer.com/2022/columnists/why-they-opt-out-of-job-market-.html>

Salcedo-La, Viña C., Singh R. & Elwell, N. (2020). 'Rural Women Must Be at the Heart of COVID-19 Response and Recovery', WRI India, 22 September. Available at: <https://wri-india.org/blog/rural-women-must-be-heart-covid-19-response-and-recovery>

South China Morning Post (2021). 'India lays out controversial bill to raise women's marriage age', 22 December. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/south-asia/article/3160615/india-lays-out-controversial-bill-raise-womens-marriage-age>

UN Women (2021). 'Your questions answered: Women and COVID-19 in India', 27 July. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2021/7/faq-women-and-covid-19-in-india>