

From Constraints to Opportunities: Rural Women in India's Labour Force

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Abstract

The participation of women in the labour force is a critical indicator of social progress and economic development. In India, rural female labour force participation rate (RFLFPR) has witnessed a remarkable rise, nearly doubling from 18.2 percent in 2017 to 35.5 percent in 2023, according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS). Despite this progress, rural women continue to face multiple barriers such as socio-cultural norms, limited access to education and technical skills, household responsibilities, and lack of social protection. Factors such as age, marital status, caste, income level, and male migration also significantly influence their participation. The persistence of unpaid care work, safety concerns, and the digital divide further restrict women's access to productive employment. However, government initiatives like MGNREGA, NRLM, Skill India, Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana, Maternity Benefit Act, and Namo Drone Didi provide important opportunities to enhance women's empowerment and expand livelihood options. Addressing structural challenges and creating enabling conditions for women's economic engagement is essential for sustainable development. This paper highlights the drivers, challenges, and opportunities associated with RFLFPR, emphasizing the need for policy interventions and institutional support to harness the full potential of women's contribution to rural economies.

Key words: - Gender equality, labour force participation, women empowerment

Introduction: Labour force in other words Economically active population is nothing but the total number of employed and unemployed population in the country. Unemployed here refers to the people who are Involuntarily unemployed and also those who are searching for the jobs.

Labour force participation rate is the ratio of total labour force in the country to the working age population in the country. In India working age is the age between 15 to 64. To the developing country as like India, Labour force participation rate should increase to meet the growing demands of the

country which directly contributes to the economic development.

In this paper we will concentrate on the factors influencing Rural female labour force participation rate(RFLFPR) , their challenges and opportunities. In India, RFLFPR has increased from 18.2% in 2017 to 35.5 % in 2023 (PLFS,2023) where it is clearly indicating that RFLFPR is almost doubled in 7 years whereas Urban female labour force participation rate(UFLFPR) has increased from 15.9 % to 22.3% over the same period. These figures highlight that RFLFPR has not only grown at a faster pace

but also shows greater potential for further expansion compared to UFLFPR..

Factors Influencing Rflfpr :-

RFLFPR is influenced by many factors which we can divide them as a broad factors like Demographic , Socio Cultural, Education and skill levels, Economic and Livelihood conditions, Infrastructure and access , Institutional and policy factors. Some of the factors are:-

1) Age :- It is one of the important factor influencing labour force participation , usually female LFPR follows a bell shaped curve , rising between ages between ages 20-30, peaking between 30-40 and then declines sharply.

2) Marital Status:- Marital status strongly influences RFLFPR. Married women often dominate agricultural and household-based work, unmarried women tend to enter wage employment when possible, and widowed/divorced women participate out of necessity.

3) Caste and Religion :- Many of the castes don't allow women to work outside which limits them to participate in labour force but in contrary many of the caste women participate more due to economic compulsion and fewer social restriction.

4)Social Status :- In some areas, women working outside is seen as a sign of low standing therefore discouraging the participation.

5)Lack of technical skills :- Many of the jobs demand the high technical skills ,lack of these required skills in the Rural female make them to restrict their participation in the labour force.

6)Household Income level :- RFLFPR is higher among women from low-income households due to economic necessity, while it tends to decline in middle- and high-

income groups where social norms and reduced financial pressure discourage participation.

7)Male migration :- This may have both positive and negative effect on RFLFPR , It increases women's participation by pushing them into agricultural and household economic roles in the absence of men. whereas in contrary many women may withdraw from the workforce due to steady remittance income and may concentrate on unpaid domestic work.

8) Access to land and credit :- Women with land or Self-help group based loans are more likely to participate in farm or allied activities compared to the women who lack them.

9) Government Schemes :- Many government initiatives like MGNREGA, NRLM, Skill India etc encourages them and push the women to enter into the labour force.

Reasons For Low Participation Of Women in Labour Force: -

1) Safety Concerns :- Main reason for the low participation of women in labour force, Safety is the important concern for the women which directly limits women to work outside.

Eg :- the number of workplace sexual harassment cases reported by the National Crime Record Bureau increased from 402 in 2018 to 422 in 2022.

2) The Double Burden :- According to the Economic Survey 2024, women's unpaid care and domestic work contributes as much as 3.1 percent of India's GDP, compared to only 0.4 percent from men. This disproportionate responsibility for household and unpaid duties limits women's time, mobility, and opportunities to engage in paid employment, thereby reducing their effective participation in the labour force.

- 3) **Education:-** Recent Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data shows that 37.94 percent of women stay out of the workforce to continue their education. While education is essential, prolonged withdrawal from the labour market delays women's entry into productive employment. This also risks a situation where higher educational attainment does not necessarily convert into actual participation, leading to underutilization of their potential in the economy.
- 4) **Digital divide:-** The National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–2021) found that only 33 percent of women in India have never used the internet. This limited access to digital tools and online platforms restricts women's opportunities for skill development, information access, and participation in modern forms of employment.
- 5) **Social Protection:-** The eShram database (March 2022) shows that women account for 52.7 percent of the 287 million registered unorganized workers, surpassing men in this sector. This highlights women's heavy concentration in informal and insecure jobs, often lacking adequate wages, social security, and legal protections. Without stronger safety nets, their vulnerability in the labour market continues to discourage stable and long-term participation.

Steps Taken By Government to Enhance LFPR :-

The government plays a vital role in bringing women into the labour force. Schemes that support women's participation in the workforce help enhance the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) and significantly empower women. Initiatives of the government not only create employment opportunities but also provide financial independence and skill development. Strengthening the implementation and

outreach of such programs can ensure sustained and inclusive growth of female labour participation, particularly in rural areas.

- 1) **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme :-** These scheme was launched in 2015 which aims to improve female child survival, safety, and education, addressing the declining sex ratio and raising awareness.
- 2) **National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 :-** Prioritizes gender equity in education, with focus on equitable access to quality education, especially for disadvantaged groups.
- 3) **Working Women Hostel:-** Provides safe accommodation with daycare facilities in urban, semi-urban, and rural areas for working women. This initiative helps women balance work and family responsibilities while ensuring their safety and security. By reducing concerns related to housing and childcare, it encourages more women to join and remain in the labour force.
- 4) **Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY):-** Launched in 2015, it provides loans to micro and small enterprises, including those owned by women. By offering financial support without the need for collateral, the scheme empowers women to start or expand their businesses. This enhances self-employment opportunities and promotes women's entrepreneurship, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas.
- 5) **Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017:-** Includes paid maternity leave of 26 weeks, crèche facilities in larger establishments, and provisions for night shifts with safety measures. This ensures job security for women during and after childbirth while supporting their health and childcare needs. By protecting women's rights at the workplace, the Act

encourages higher retention of female employees and creates a more inclusive work environment.

- 6) **The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013:-** This legislation is a landmark step in India aimed at safeguarding women from sexual harassment and ensuring a safe and equitable workplace. It provides a clear definition of sexual harassment and requires the formation of Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) as well as Local Complaints Committees (LCCs) to handle complaints. The law is applicable across all workplaces—organized and unorganized—and extends protection to every woman, irrespective of her employment status.
- 7) **NAMO Drone Didi :-** Namu Drone Didi is a central sector initiative designed to empower women-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs) through the use of drone technology in agriculture. Under this scheme, around 15,000 selected SHGs will be equipped with drones during 2024–25 and 2025–26 to offer rental-based agricultural services to farmers. The program is expected to enable each SHG to earn an additional income of at least ₹1 lakh annually, thereby supporting women's economic empowerment and promoting sustainable rural livelihoods.
- 8) **The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976:-** The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 was introduced in India with the objective of eliminating gender-based disparities in the workplace. The law mandated that men and women performing the same or similar types of work must receive equal wages. It also prohibited employers from discriminating on the basis of gender in matters such as recruitment, promotions, transfers, or training opportunities,

thereby promoting fairness and equality in employment practices.

Conclusion : Rural female labour force participation in India has shown an encouraging upward trend in recent years, yet it remains constrained by deep-rooted structural, social, and economic barriers. Women continue to bear the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, safety concerns, and cultural restrictions, which limit their ability to engage fully in the workforce. At the same time, disparities in education, access to technology, land ownership, and financial resources restrict their entry into skilled and better-paying employment opportunities. While economic necessity pushes women from low-income households into the labour market, their participation is often limited to low-paid and insecure work, highlighting the need for stronger institutional and policy support. Government interventions have played a significant role in creating opportunities for rural women, ranging from wage employment under MGNREGA to entrepreneurial support through PMMY, and more recent initiatives like Namu Drone Didi. Legal frameworks such as the Equal Remuneration Act and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act provide an enabling environment for gender equality. However, the challenge lies in ensuring effective implementation and equitable access to these benefits across all regions and communities. Strengthening skill development, expanding digital literacy, improving social protection, and addressing safety concerns are crucial steps to sustain and accelerate progress. Empowering rural women to participate in the labour force not only enhances their agency and economic independence but also contributes significantly to national growth, food security, and inclusive development. Thus, a holistic and sustained effort is required to unlock the full potential of rural women in India's workforce.

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