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WOMEN'S LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION

Addressing the Unpaid Care Work Barrier

1. Latest Developments

Achieving the goal of Viksit Bharat by 2047 requires India to raise its economic growth rate closer to 8% and expand women's participation in the workforce.

According to the World Bank, increasing the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) to 50% from 34.6% in September 2026 could significantly accelerate India's progress towards becoming a high-income economy.

However, inadequate data on unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities makes it difficult to understand why women remain outside paid employment.

2. Understanding the Gender Gap in Workforce Participation

Women's participation in paid employment is influenced by several factors, including unpaid domestic work, childcare, eldercare, mobility restrictions and workplace accessibility.

However, experts caution against assuming a direct relationship between care responsibilities and women's withdrawal from the workforce without adequate empirical evidence.

The government is therefore attempting to improve its statistical framework to understand the relationship between unpaid care work and women's employment decisions.

The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) has proposed changes to two major surveys following suggestions from academics, government ministries and economic advisers.

3. Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)

The proposed changes aim to capture the nature and extent of unpaid household work.

Key Additions

- Identify whether household-produced goods and services, such as cooking, feeding children and caring for elderly people, are meant for self-consumption or commercial purposes.
- Ask whether individuals actively sought paid employment during the previous 30 days.
- Identify whether individuals currently wish to undertake paid work.
- Record the principal reasons for not seeking employment, including family and household responsibilities.

Existing Data Gap

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The PLFS already asks individuals outside the workforce why they are not seeking employment. However, its existing categories, such as childcare and personal commitments in homemaking, are considered too generic.

- In 2025, 44.4% of women cited childcare or personal commitments in homemaking as their primary reason for not seeking employment.
- The existing framework does not distinguish between women who undertake unpaid work by choice and those who do so because of social expectations or a perceived sense of duty.

4. Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises (ASUSE)

MoSPI also proposes collecting information from female business owners on barriers affecting women's entrepreneurial participation, particularly:

- Limited time available for entrepreneurial activities.
- Restrictions on women's mobility outside their homes.
- Household responsibilities and caregiving obligations.

These additions could help identify gender-specific barriers to women's participation in the informal and entrepreneurial sectors.

5. Unpaid Care Work – The Gendered Burden

The government's Time Use Surveys (2019 and 2024) highlight the unequal distribution of unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities.

- Working-age men (15–59 years) spent 62 minutes a day on various unpaid activities in 2024, down from 74 minutes in 2019.
- Women in the same age bracket saw their time spent on unpaid activities rise slightly from 364 minutes per day in 2019 to 366 minutes in 2024.

Key Observations

- Women spend nearly six times as much time as men on unpaid activities.
- While men's unpaid work declined between 2019 and 2024, women's contribution remained almost unchanged.
- Despite this persistent disparity, female LFPR increased from approximately 26.5% to 43.6% during the same period.

These contrasting trends demonstrate the need to examine how women balance paid employment with unpaid responsibilities rather than assuming that unpaid care work automatically prevents labour-market participation.

6. Importance of Improved Data Collection

The proposed survey changes could strengthen evidence-based policymaking in several ways:

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- Better measurement: Establish the magnitude and distribution of unpaid domestic and care work.
- Regional analysis: Identify differences between rural and urban areas and across States.
- Demographic insights: Examine variations among younger and older women.
- Employment preferences: Understand whether women outside the workforce actually wish to undertake paid employment.
- Policy targeting: Distinguish between lack of employment opportunities, social restrictions and caregiving responsibilities.

However, the reliability of findings will depend on respondents providing accurate information. MoSPI officials believe that people generally report their work accurately, although expectations of government benefits may sometimes influence responses.

7. Addressing Structural Barriers – Lessons from Tamil Nadu

Unpaid care responsibilities are only one part of the problem. Women's employment also depends on suitable wages, workplace proximity, safe transportation and appropriate living arrangements.

Tamil Nadu employs four out of every ten directly employed female factory workers in India. The State has adopted elements of the Chinese manufacturing model by providing dormitories for women workers near factories or within industrial campuses.

Significance of the Model

- Reduces commuting distances and mobility-related constraints.
- Provides safer and more accessible accommodation.
- Facilitates the employment of migrant women workers.
- Supports manufacturing growth amid demographic ageing in several southern States.

However, re-entering the workforce requires multiple conditions to come together, including adequate remuneration, accessible workplaces, safe transportation, and childcare and eldercare support.

8. Way Forward

- Strengthen care infrastructure: Expand affordable crèches, childcare centres and accessible eldercare facilities.
- Recognise unpaid work: Improve measurement and recognition of women's unpaid domestic and caregiving contributions.
- Promote shared responsibilities: Encourage equitable distribution of household and caregiving duties between men and women.
- Improve workplace accessibility: Provide safe transport, affordable accommodation and gender-sensitive workplace facilities.

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- Support women entrepreneurs: Improve access to credit, skills, markets and flexible working arrangements.
- Adopt evidence-based policymaking: Use disaggregated PLFS and ASUSE data to develop region-specific interventions.
- Generate decent employment: Expand formal, secure and adequately remunerated employment opportunities for women.

9. Conclusion

Achieving Viksit Bharat by 2047 requires moving beyond merely increasing women's labour force participation figures towards addressing the structural barriers that restrict their economic choices.

Better data on unpaid care work can transform women's economic participation into a major driver of India's inclusive and sustainable growth.

Source: The Indian Express (IE)

