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ARTICLE



BARRIERS FOR WOMEN'S WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION



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As India celebrates the 79th Independence Day this week, it is also a moment to reflect on the country's journey towards inclusive growth. Over the years, women's participation in the workforce has evolved. However, data shows that their participation varies across regions (such as rural and urban), types of work (such as blue- and grey-collar jobs and gig-based employment), etc.

Women's Participation in the Workforce

Women's participation in the workforce varies globally but generally remains lower than men's, with persistent gender gaps and significant social, economic, and cultural influences.

Key points regarding women's workforce participation:

- Globally, about 47% of women of working age participated in the labor market in 2020, compared to 74% of men. This gender gap has remained relatively constant over the past 25 years.
- The global female labor force participation rate hovers just over 50%, while it is about 80% for men. Women are less likely to work in formal employment and often face inferior income opportunities.
- Female participation follows a U-shaped pattern related to economic development: it is higher in the poorest economies mostly due to agricultural work, drops in middle-income economies, and rises again in high-income economies with more service sector jobs and higher education for women.
- Women tend to be overrepresented in vulnerable employment in low-income economies, while in higher-income countries they have better access to stable, paid jobs.
- In India, female labor force participation rate has been increasing, reaching around 37% in 2022-23, but remains significantly lower than men. Barriers include social norms, caregiving responsibilities, lack of childcare support, education levels, and access to vocational training.
- Women's increased workforce participation is linked with higher productivity, innovation, financial stability, and economic development.

- Despite progress, women still earn less and have fewer opportunities for career advancement, with many factors such as health, family duties, social norms, and education influencing their participation.

Overall, while women's workforce participation has seen improvements globally and in countries like India, substantial gender gaps and challenges remain due to economic, social, and cultural factors. Enhanced education, vocational training, childcare support, and efforts to change social norms are critical to increasing women's full economic participation.

Women in different colour jobs

Women in the workforce are often classified by the "color" of the jobs they typically hold, a convention that groups jobs based on historical and social roles:

- **Pink-collar jobs:** These are positions traditionally held by women. Common pink-collar jobs include nursing, teaching, administrative and clerical work, customer service, and other roles in personal care and service industries. Historically, these jobs are often associated with lower wages and limited advancement opportunities compared to other sectors. Examples include nurses, teachers, secretaries, waitresses, and hairstylists. Pink-collar jobs reflect areas where women's labor has been concentrated and are still prevalent in many economies today, though some professions like nursing and teaching are increasingly considered white-collar in certain countries.
- **Blue-collar jobs:** These involve manual labor and working-class occupations, often in sectors like manufacturing, construction, maintenance, and other physically demanding roles. Women in blue-collar jobs face different challenges, including health-related issues due to the physical nature of the work and working in historically male-dominated environments.
- **White-collar jobs:** These are professional, managerial, or administrative positions usually performed in office settings. Women in white-collar jobs tend to occupy roles in education, healthcare management, human resources, marketing, finance, and other professional services.

There is also increased awareness of how women of different races and ethnicities face distinct barriers and disparities in these job categories due to intersecting factors of gender and race.

The classification by collar color highlights traditional gender divisions and roles in the labor market and is useful for discussing women's representation, challenges, and employment trends across sectors.

In summary, women are largely found in pink-collar jobs, which focus on service and care roles, while also participating in blue-collar manual work and white-collar professional careers to varying degrees. This classification underscores ongoing social and economic dynamics related to gendered labor markets.

BARRIERS FOR WOMEN'S WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION

Barriers to women's workforce participation are multifaceted and vary across regions and contexts. Key barriers frequently documented in recent research and reports include the following:

1.Unpaid Care and Domestic Work Burden

Women disproportionately bear the burden of unpaid care work such as child-rearing, elder care, and household chores. This reduces their available time and energy for paid employment and career advancement. For example, in India, women spend more than twice as much time on unpaid care work compared to men, severely limiting their labor force participation opportunities.

2.Lack of Formal and Flexible Work Options

The absence of formal part-time or flexible work arrangements restricts women, especially those balancing domestic responsibilities. In many developing countries, including India, part-time work is not well-regulated or widely accepted, pushing women into informal, insecure jobs without social protection.

3.Patriarchal Social Norms and Gender Roles

Deep-rooted societal expectations often prioritize women's roles as caregivers and homemakers over their economic participation. Traditional gender norms limit women's access to education, skills training, and employment, discouraging them from joining or remaining in the workforce.

4.Gender Wage Gap and Employment Quality

Women frequently face significant wage disparities compared to men, even for similar work, reducing the financial incentive to work and undermining job retention. Moreover, many women are employed in low-wage, informal, or precarious jobs lacking social security and opportunities for advancement.

5.Safety and Mobility Concerns

Safety issues related to commuting and workplace environments, inadequate infrastructure (like safe transport and sanitation), and concerns about harassment restrict women's ability to access and sustain employment, particularly in male-dominated or blue- and grey-collar jobs.

6. Workplace Culture and Structural Barriers

Workplace environments that are male-dominated, lack supportive policies (e.g., maternity benefits, childcare facilities), and have inflexible schedules contribute to high attrition rates among women. Discrimination during hiring and promotion, as well as limited training and digital skills, further limit women's prospects.

7. Legal and Institutional Constraints

In many regions, discriminatory laws, weak enforcement of labor protections, and the absence of formal childcare services constrain women's workforce participation and retention.

8. Intersectional Factors

Additional barriers arise from intersecting social identities such as caste, religion, rural or urban status, and education level, which influence differential labor force participation rates and the types of jobs women are able to access.

These barriers collectively contribute to low female labor force participation rates globally and in specific contexts such as India and Egypt. Addressing them requires integrated policy efforts including improving access to affordable childcare, promoting flexible work options, enhancing women's safety and mobility, enforcing equal pay, challenging social norms, and investing in education and skills development for women.

Thus, the context of barriers to women's workforce participation is complex and rooted in social, economic, cultural, and structural factors that must be addressed holistically for meaningful progress.

Gender as a general barrier

Gender acts as a fundamental barrier to women's workforce participation through a combination of structural, social, cultural, and perceptual factors. These include:

- **Deep-rooted Gender Norms and Stereotypes:** Societal expectations often dictate that women are primary caregivers and homemakers, leading to beliefs that they should prioritize family over work. This perception discourages employers from hiring women due to concerns about maternity benefits and productivity. Women are also stereotyped as less capable of performing physically demanding or technical jobs, which limits their employment in many sectors.
- **Workplace Structural Barriers:** Women face rigid and inflexible work schedules that clash with caregiving duties. Wage inequality persists, with women often earning significantly less than men for similar roles. Further, inadequate workplace infrastructure—like poor safety measures, lack of childcare facilities, and insufficient

transport—discourages women's sustained participation especially in blue- and grey-collar jobs.

- **Cultural and Social Barriers:** Patriarchal norms restrict women's freedom of movement and participation in the formal workforce. In many societies, cultural mindsets limit women's access to economic opportunities and perpetuate unpaid care work burdens. Discriminatory laws and policies in some contexts also reinforce these barriers.
- **Mobility and Safety Concerns:** Women's access to jobs is often constrained by unsafe or unavailable transportation, particularly for night shifts or platform/gig economy roles that require mobility. This "transport inequality" severely limits their job options and economic independence.
- **Workplace Culture and Gig Economy Biases:** Male-dominated work environments can be unwelcoming to women, leading to low morale and high attrition. In the gig economy, women are frequently pushed into lower-paid and more socially acceptable roles, reinforcing existing gender disparities rather than leveling the playing field.
- **Intersectional Factors:** Women from marginalized groups face compounded barriers due to caste, religion, or socio-economic status, often being confined to informal, low-paid, or precarious jobs.

Addressing gender as a barrier requires comprehensive policy interventions that focus on creating flexible work options, improving safety and infrastructure, promoting equal pay, dismantling stereotypes, and enhancing women's autonomy and mobility to unlock their full economic potential.

Overall, gender is a primary obstacle to women's workforce participation, influencing not only the availability of jobs but also the quality and sustainability of employment for women across diverse contexts. This reflects a global and cross-sectoral challenge that demands social, cultural, legal, and economic reforms.

Possible Solutions to Overcome Challenges

Promote Shared Domestic Responsibilities and Provide Childcare Support:

- Encourage equitable sharing of household and caregiving duties through awareness campaigns.
- Create accessible and affordable childcare centers and parental leave policies, including paternity leave to support shared parenting.

Shift Social Norms and Empower Women:

- Design community and family engagement programs that challenge restrictive gender norms.
- Support women's autonomy and decision-making through education and empowerment initiatives.

Enhance Education and Skill Development:

- Invest in accessible education and vocational training tailored for women, especially in rural areas.
- Implement flexible learning and upskilling programs that consider women's time constraints.

Ensure Safe, Inclusive, and Equitable Workplaces:

- Enforce anti-discrimination and harassment laws rigorously with effective grievance redressal systems.
- Promote equal pay transparency and career development opportunities for women.

Improve Infrastructure and Flexibility at Work:

- Provide safe transportation, women-friendly workplace facilities, and on-site childcare.
- Encourage flexible work hours and remote work options to accommodate caregiving responsibilities.

Strengthen Legal Frameworks and Their Implementation:

- Develop comprehensive labor laws supporting women's rights and monitor their enforcement.
- Include childcare costs and maternity benefits in employment policies.

Increase Access to Finance and Entrepreneurship Support:

- Expand financial inclusion programs like collateral-free loans and business training for women entrepreneurs.
- Promote self-help groups and entrepreneurship schemes at both central and state levels.

Engage Multiple Stakeholders:

- Include partners, families, communities, employers, and policymakers in efforts to foster positive attitudes toward women's employment.

- Encourage companies to adopt gender-inclusive policies and invest in women's advancement programs.

These solutions combined address the interconnected barriers women face, fostering an environment where women can participate fully and equally in the workforce, contributing to economic growth and social equity. Governments, corporations, and society at large play critical roles in implementing these strategies effectively. Empowering women economically leads to broader societal benefits including poverty reduction and increased human capital