



## Bringing women into the workforce

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**(Mains GS 1:Role of women and women’s organization, population and associated issues, poverty and developmental issues, urbanization, their problems and their remedies.)**

### **Context:**

- There are many reasons to cheer for all those committed to gender equality in 75 years of independence.
- Women empowerment at every sphere of life is reflected through their participation in education, employment, sex ratio etc.

### **Improved gender equality:**

- Women have made rapid strides in access to education, even at the secondary and tertiary level.
- Large scale public investment is being made in improving sex ratios at birth, reducing maternal and infant mortality, improving access to sanitation, menstrual health services as well as family planning methods.
- Most importantly, successive governments have put in place policies and programmes to address gender bias.

### **Women’s exclusion from the labour force:**

- The recent release of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2019-20 clearly establishes women’s exclusion from the labour force.
- Crucially, the latest PLFS covers the period of July 2019 to June 2020, including the Covid-19 induced national lockdown in March to June 2020.

- A review of the PLFS 2019-20 and the earlier surveys highlights the glacial pace of improvement in women's labour force participation and employment, and signs of Covid-linked distress.

### **Gap increasing:**

- The gap between the male and female labour force participation continues to exceed 45 percentage points.
- The Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) for working ages (15 years and above) declined from 47 per cent in 1987-88, hitting its nadir at 23 per cent in 2017-18.
- FLFPR has now recovered marginally to 30 per cent in 2019-20.
- In comparison, men had an LFPR of 92 per cent and 77 per cent in 1987-88 and 2019-20 respectively — more than double the FLFPR.

### **Rural female workforce participation:**

- Even as the proportion of rural women at work increased, they remained predominantly employed in agriculture as wage labourers.
- Between 1987-88 to 2018-19, the rural female workforce participation rate (FWPR) fell from 53 per cent to 25 per cent.
- This decline was driven by gendered occupational segregation and continued gender gaps in skilling, which create barriers to women's employment in the manufacturing sector.
- However, between 2018-19 to 2019-20, the rural FWPR increased from 25 per cent to 32 per cent, the proportion of women employed in agriculture rose from 72 per cent to 76 per cent, and the share of rural women working as unpaid helpers in household enterprises rose from 38 per cent to 42 per cent.
- These rapid changes which occurred just in the last one year clearly reflect the distress caused by Covid-19 for rural women.

### **Women to work:**

- The urban women's employment grew only marginally, and in sectors with greater exposure to the risks posed by Covid-19.
- The urban FWPR declined from 25 per cent in 1987-88 to 18 per cent in 2018-19, largely driven by rapid increases in urban household incomes and continued pressure of unpaid work and social norms, with families not requiring "secondary income earners", that is, women to work.
- Between 2018-19 to 2019-20, urban FWPR rose from 18 per cent to 21 per cent.
- However, this increase in FWPR was driven by increasing participation of women in the trade, hospitality, hotels, and restaurants sector (from 14 per cent to 22 per cent), and in construction, even as the proportion of women employed in manufacturing, professional, social and government services declined.

- Moreover, the casualisation of the urban women's labour increased, clearly indicating that even though more urban women were at work, their employment is riskier and working conditions more precarious post Covid-19.

#### **Increase in FWPRs seen extremes:**

- The greatest increases in FWPRs were seen at the extremes, either amongst women with the lowest or highest levels of education.
- In rural areas, FWPR amongst non-literate women grew by 9 percentage points, and amongst those with upto primary education by 7 percentage points, whereas graduates saw the lowest increase of 3 percentage points between 2018-19 to 2019-20.
- On the other hand, in urban areas, increases amongst non-literate women, those with upto primary education, and graduates were equivalent of 3 percentage points.

#### **Gender wage gap:**

- The gender wage gaps have narrowed very slowly, except for casual rural workers.
- Overall, the female wage increased from 71 per cent to 75 per cent of the male wage over the last decade, between 2009-10 to 2019-20, with nearly half the increase coming in the last year.
- However, for casual rural workers, the female wage fell from 68 per cent to 64 per cent of the male wage in the last decade.

#### **Women are last to be rehired:**

- Despite gains in the past two years, the FLFPR in 2019-20 continues to be lower than in 2009-10.
- Data from women's community-based organisations, self-help groups and corporates revealed that women's employment was at far greater risk post Covid-19, with women often being the first to be let go and the last to be rehired.
- Women remain concentrated in high-contact sectors (for example textiles) still at risk due to Covid-19 as well as in low-growth, low-productivity sectors (for example agriculture).
- Moreover, 76 per cent of women and 81 per cent of men in India believe that when jobs are scarce, men have more right to a job, amongst the highest globally (Pew Research Centre, 2020).

#### **Need for robust policies:**

- In order to break these structural barriers, and boost the FLFPR, there is a need for robust medium-term policies which simultaneously stimulate demand for female employees and workers and increase the supply of female workers.
- For the demand-side policies, state governments can establish gender-based employment targets for urban public works, while private firms can expand efforts by increasing diversity targets across job roles and seniority levels.

- Governments can also consider offering wage subsidies, especially to micro, small and medium enterprises for hiring women, as well as provide financial support to cover costs of maternity leave and creche facilities.
- Governments can also consider increasing targets for procurement from women-led enterprises.
- Increasing public investment in the care sector can redistribute the burden of unpaid work and also increase demand for care workers - jobs which can be taken up women.

### **Supply-side policies:**

- Among the supply-side policies, governments can consider incentive-based, course-wise gender-based targets for skill training under Skill India mission.
- Government also needs to develop gender-sensitive infrastructure at skill training institutions through steps like mandating separate washrooms, balanced gender ratio of trainers and strict security to bridge gender skill gaps.
- Firms can offer gender-neutral care work leave, implement stringent policies against sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination and design flexible, hybrid work policies to enable work from home for women, increasing retention rates for women employees.

### **Conclusion:**

- Even as women in countries across South Asia and the World face an unprecedented risk to their human rights, India has remained deeply committed to the goal of gender equality.
- As it emerges as a strong regional and global power, India must set an example, and embark on a path of sustainable, gender-inclusive economic growth post-Covid.
- Achieving this vision necessitates that India's women take leadership in rebuilding the economy, foreign policy, polity, and in creating a society that values the voice of its women.