

# Unequal Participation, Unequal Gains: A Gendered Political Economy of Women's Economic Participation in India

Manimekalai. N

Director

Centre for Women's Development Studies New Delhi

## Abstract

Despite sustained economic growth and rising female educational attainment, India continues to record one of the lowest female labour force participation rates (FLFPR) in the world. This paradox has generated extensive debate in policy and academic circles, often explained through supply-side arguments centred on women's preferences or household income effects. Drawing on secondary data from official sources, policy documents, and feminist economic literature, this paper advances a policy-facing gendered political economy analysis of women's economic participation in India. It argues that women's labour outcomes are shaped less by individual choice and more by structural constraints embedded in labour markets, unpaid care regimes, social norms, and policy design. The paper situates women's work within intersections of gender, caste, and class, highlights the centrality of unpaid care work, and critically reviews recent policy approaches to women's employment. It concludes by outlining concrete policy directions for recognising, redistributing, and supporting women's work as a foundation for equitable and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Women's work, labour force participation, unpaid care work, gender inequality, labour policy, India.

## Introduction

Women's economic participation is widely recognised as central to inclusive growth, poverty reduction, and gender equality. Yet India presents a persistent and troubling anomaly. At a time when women's educational attainment has improved and the economy has diversified beyond agriculture, female labour force participation has stagnated or declined, remaining far below global and regional averages. This trend has attracted growing attention in policy debates, particularly in the context of India's demographic dividend and aspirations for high-growth development. Mainstream explanations often attribute low female participation to rising household incomes, education-induced withdrawal, or women's domestic responsibilities framed as individual choices. Such interpretations, however, obscure the structural and institutional factors that shape women's access to paid work. Feminist scholarship has consistently shown that women's labour outcomes are embedded within gendered divisions of labour, caste hierarchies, informality, and the unequal distribution of unpaid care work. This paper adopts a policy-facing feminist political economy approach to examine women's economic participation in India. It moves beyond participation rates to analyse the quality, conditions, and recognition of women's work. The paper seeks to contribute to ongoing debates in *Economic & Political Weekly* by foregrounding care, informality, and social norms as central policy concerns rather than residual issues.

## Review of Related Studies and Research Gap

A substantial body of literature has examined women's labour force participation in India, particularly its decline since the mid-2000s. Early macro-level explanations linked women's withdrawal from paid work to rising household incomes and education, suggesting an income effect that reduced women's need to engage in wage labour. However, this argument has been widely critiqued. Mehrotra and Parida (2017), using NSS data, demonstrate that the decline in female labour force participation coincided with a slowdown in employment generation, especially in rural areas, indicating demand-side constraints rather than voluntary withdrawal.

Subsequent studies have foregrounded structural features of India's labour market. Kannan and Raveendran (2019) show that employment growth in the post-reform period has been characterised by informality and casualisation, disproportionately affecting women. Using PLFS data, Sudarshan and Bhattacharya (2018) document persistent gender gaps in employment quality, wages, and access to social security, arguing that women's labour market disadvantages are embedded within segmented labour markets rather than individual characteristics.

Feminist economists have emphasised the centrality of unpaid care and domestic work in shaping women's economic participation. Hirway (2015) argues that the systematic exclusion of unpaid work from national accounting frameworks leads to distorted policy priorities and underinvestment in care infrastructure. Drawing on time-use data, Abraham and Hirway (2019) demonstrate that women's disproportionate care burden results in severe time poverty, limiting their ability to access regular and secure employment. These studies highlight that women's labour supply decisions cannot be understood independently of care regimes and social provisioning.

Caste and social location further mediate women's work experiences. Agarwal (1997) underscores how intra-household bargaining power, shaped by gender and asset ownership, influences women's access to economic resources. Neetha (2014), in her study of women domestic workers, illustrates how migration, informality, and social networks shape women's entry into precarious urban employment, particularly among lower-caste and migrant women.

Recent policy-oriented research has critically assessed government interventions aimed at enhancing women's employment. While programmes such as skill development initiatives, self-help groups, and microcredit schemes have expanded women's participation in economic activities, scholars caution against their limitations. Deshpande (2022) argues that the policy emphasis on entrepreneurship often shifts risk onto women while leaving structural labour market constraints unaddressed. Similarly, Kabeer (2016) warns that instrumental approaches to women's employment, focused narrowly on growth outcomes, risk undermining women's agency and rights.

**Research Gap:** Taken together, these studies provide important insights into the gendered nature of work in India. However, the literature remains fragmented across labour market analysis, care studies, and policy evaluation. There is limited work that integrates these strands into a single, policy-facing feminist political economy framework. In particular, insufficient attention has been paid to how unpaid care regimes, informality, social norms, and contemporary employment policies interact to shape women's economic participation. This paper addresses this gap by offering an integrated analysis that links empirical trends with feminist theory and policy critique. This paper makes three interrelated contributions to existing debates on women's work and economic participation in India. First, it advances an integrated, policy-facing feminist political economy framework that brings together labour market analysis, unpaid care work, and social norms—domains that are often examined in isolation. By doing so, the paper reframes low female labour force participation not as a problem of women's preferences or employability, but as an outcome of structural constraints embedded in labour demand, care regimes, and policy design.

Second, the paper contributes empirically by synthesising evidence from the Periodic Labour Force Survey and the Time Use Survey to highlight the simultaneity of informality, poor job quality, and time poverty in shaping women's labour outcomes. Rather than treating recent increases in participation rates as unambiguous progress, the analysis demonstrates how such trends are closely tied to self-employment, unpaid family labour, and insecure forms of work, thereby cautioning against overly optimistic policy interpretations.

Third, the study contributes to policy debates by critically evaluating contemporary employment and empowerment initiatives through a gender lens. It shows that prevailing policy approaches—centred on skills, entrepreneurship, and microcredit—tend to individualise responsibility and risk, while underinvesting in care infrastructure and decent job creation. By foregrounding care as economic infrastructure and women as rights-bearing workers, the paper offers a reorientation of policy priorities relevant for debates on inclusive growth, labour reform, and gender justice in India.

## Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, secondary-data-based analytical methodology grounded in feminist political economy. Rather than undertaking primary fieldwork, the study synthesises multiple data sources to examine women's economic participation in India from a policy-facing gender perspective. The methodological approach is appropriate given the paper's objective of reinterpreting existing empirical trends and policy frameworks rather than estimating causal effects. The analysis draws primarily on nationally representative secondary data and policy documents. Employment trends and labour market characteristics are examined using data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), Government of India, for selected years between

2011–12 and 2022–23. These data are used to analyse female labour force participation rates, employment status, sectoral distribution, and the prevalence of informality. To capture the gendered distribution of unpaid care and domestic work, the paper draws on the Time Use Survey (TUS) 2019. In addition, the study reviews relevant policy documents, programme guidelines, and official reports related to women's employment and care provisioning, including those pertaining to skill development initiatives, the National Rural Livelihoods Mission, microcredit schemes, childcare services under the Integrated Child Development Services, and emerging urban employment initiatives. Peer-reviewed academic literature, particularly from *Economic & Political Weekly* and feminist economics journals, forms an important complementary source.

## Limitations

The study is subject to the limitations inherent in secondary data analysis. PLFS and TUS data do not fully capture the complexity of women's informal and unpaid work, and changes in survey design over time complicate trend comparisons. Moreover, the absence of primary qualitative data limits the ability to capture lived experiences and regional specificities. These limitations notwithstanding, the methodology is well suited to the paper's aim of offering a synthetic, policy-relevant feminist critique of women's economic participation in India.

The analysis is interpretive and descriptive rather than econometric. Survey data are used to identify broad patterns and structural features—such as trends in participation rates, employment status, and time use—rather than to establish causal relationships. Tables derived from PLFS and TUS are employed to illustrate key arguments on informality, job quality, and time poverty. Particular attention is paid to how survey categories may undercount or misclassify women's work, especially unpaid family labour and home-based production. Policy initiatives are analysed through a critical gender lens that assesses not only programme intent but also underlying assumptions about women's work, care responsibilities, and labour markets. The paper examines whether policies address demand-side employment creation, care infrastructure, and labour protections, or whether they primarily rely on supply-side interventions that individualise responsibility.

The data analysis in this study is designed to support a descriptive and interpretive examination of women's economic participation rather than causal inference. Statistical analysis is therefore used selectively to summarise patterns, identify disparities, and contextualise policy debates. Unit-level data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) were utilised to examine female labour force participation rates, employment status (regular wage/salaried, casual labour, self-employment, and unpaid family work), and rural–urban differences. Key variables analysed include work participation status, usual principal and subsidiary activity, sector of employment, and nature of employment. Data from the Time Use Survey (TUS) 2019 were used to analyse average time spent on unpaid care and domestic work by gender and location. The analysis relies primarily on descriptive statistical techniques. These include computation of percentages, averages, and cross-tabulations to compare women's and men's labour market outcomes across rural and urban contexts. Trend analysis across survey rounds is used to highlight broad changes over time, with careful attention to breaks arising from changes in survey methodology.

Findings from the statistical analysis are presented through summary tables aligned with PLFS and TUS formats, facilitating transparency and comparability. Tables are used to illustrate trends in participation rates, employment status, and time use, and are interpreted in conjunction with qualitative insights from the literature. Statistical results are not presented as standalone findings but are embedded within a broader gendered political economy analysis. Given the known undercounting of women's work in labour force surveys, particularly unpaid family labour and home-based activities, the analysis treats official estimates as conservative indicators. Changes in female labour force participation rates are interpreted cautiously, with attention to the quality and security of employment rather than numerical increases alone.

## A Gendered Political Economy of Work

Conventional labour economics defines work narrowly as paid employment captured through labour force surveys. Feminist economics challenges this definition by emphasising the continuum between paid and unpaid work and by recognising care labour as a foundational component of the economy. Women's economic participation must therefore be understood as encompassing formal and informal employment, self-employment, family labour, and unpaid domestic and care work. This paper draws on a gendered political economy framework characterised by four core insights. First, the sexual division of labour assigns women

primary responsibility for unpaid care work, constraining their time, mobility, and employment choices. Second, labour markets are segmented along gender and caste lines, producing occupational segregation and wage disparities. Third, social norms surrounding respectability, marriage, and motherhood shape women's labour supply and demand. Finally, state policies and institutions play a decisive role in either mitigating or reinforcing these inequalities through labour regulation, social protection, and care provisioning.

## Trends in Female Labour Force Participation

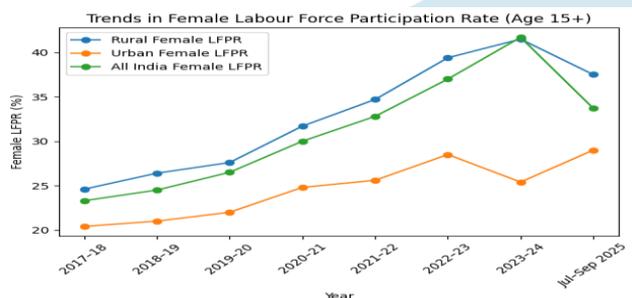


Figure 1 Female Labour Force Participation Rates in India by Sector and Location (Rural/Urban), Selected Years

**Female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR, age 15+) for Rural, Urban, and All-India across PLFS years, including the Quarterly CWS (Jul–Sep 2025).**

**Structural Inequalities Highlighted by the Data** The overall low female LFPR (23.3% in 2017–18 rising to ~37% in 2022–23) reflects systemic barriers that prevent women from participating fully in the labour market. Women face gendered constraints such as unpaid care work, household responsibilities, mobility restrictions, and cultural norms limiting their employment opportunities. Even with economic growth, structural patriarchy keeps female labour participation significantly lower than men's (~75–80% for men). Rural vs urban disparities show that participation is higher in rural areas. Rural participation is concentrated in informal, low-paid, and unrecognized work, often in agriculture or family enterprises, which is precarious and undervalued. Urban women's lower participation (~28% in 2022–23) may reflect social norms, safety concerns, and lack of family-friendly employment policies, despite more formal job opportunities.

**Informalization and Gendered Precarity** The PLFS data does not disaggregate quality of employment. Feminist analysis points out: High rural female participation masks informality: (i) Many women are engaged in unpaid family work, casual labour, or piece-rate agricultural tasks. (ii) Limited social protection for women in these sectors reinforces gendered economic vulnerability. (iii) Participation increase does not necessarily translate into empowerment or agency if women lack decision-making power over income and working conditions.

**Intersectionality: Caste, Class, and Region** Aggregate LFPR hides intersectional inequalities: (i) Lower-caste, tribal, and marginalized women are disproportionately represented in low-wage informal work. (ii) Women from wealthier urban families may opt out of labour markets due to societal expectations or unpaid domestic roles, reducing urban LFPR.

**Regional disparities persist:** Northern and western states have lower female LFPR than southern and eastern states, reflecting cultural, educational, and infrastructural differences.

**Temporal Trends and Social Change** Rising LFPR from ~23% to ~37% over 5–6 years is positive, but a feminist critique questions what kind of employment drives this growth: Much of the increase is likely in informal, low-skill, or low-paid sectors rather than formal, autonomous, or managerial roles. Policy interventions (like rural employment schemes, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, or skill development programs) have helped, but deep gender norms remain barriers.

**Urban Female Labour Force Participation: A Critical Concern** Urban women's LFPR remains low despite higher education levels. This reflects structural patriarchy, where household responsibilities disproportionately fall on women. Women may face inadequate maternity benefits, unsafe commuting, harassment, and lack of childcare, limiting employment. Feminist policy perspective: Without transforming workplace norms and state support, increasing education alone does not translate to labour market equality.

Policy should focus on quality, autonomy, social protection, and sectoral equity.

- Recognition and formalization of informal work, including wages, social security, and labour rights.
- Childcare, transport, and safety interventions for urban and semi-urban women.
- Targeted skill development for rural and marginalized women to move from subsistence work to better-paying sectors.
- Gender-sensitive labour statistics: Disaggregate by occupation, caste, class, and paid vs unpaid work to guide effective policy.

Feminist Critique on Rising rural LFPR reflects women's economic necessity; largely informal and undervalued work. Low urban LFPR Shows persistent patriarchal constraints, safety concerns, and care burdens. Overall LFPR growth Not necessarily empowerment; quality, autonomy, and recognition matter. Lack of sectoral disaggregation Hides inequalities by class, caste, and employment type. Policy lens Must move beyond increasing numbers to structural reforms and social protections. The data shows a numerical improvement in female LFPR, but a feminist critique reveals that mere participation is insufficient. The persistent gendered division of labour, social norms, and informalization limit real empowerment. Policies must address structural inequalities, intersectional vulnerabilities, and quality of employment, not just participation rates. India's female labour force participation rate remains among the lowest in the G20. Data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey indicate that women's participation declined steadily from the mid-2000s and has recovered only modestly in recent years. This aggregate trend conceals significant rural-urban and social group variations.

In rural areas, women's participation has fallen sharply due to agrarian distress, declining viability of smallholder agriculture, and mechanisation, which has displaced women from traditional farm tasks. In urban areas, employment growth has not translated into commensurate opportunities for women, reflecting skill mismatches, safety concerns, and employer discrimination. Participation rates are particularly low among married women, women with young children, and women from socially marginalised communities. Importantly, survey-based measures undercount women's work, especially unpaid family labour and home-based production. As a result, official statistics systematically underestimate women's economic contributions, reinforcing their policy invisibility.

## Employment Structure, Informality, and Job Quality

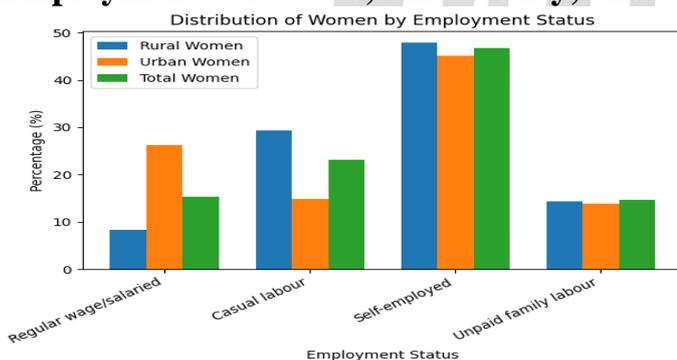


Figure 2 Distribution of Women Workers by Employment Status (Regular, Casual, Self-employed, Unpaid Family Labour)

Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (various years).

Women workers in India are overwhelmingly concentrated in informal employment. They are more likely than men to be self-employed, engaged as unpaid family workers, or employed in casual and home-based work arrangements. Even within the organised sector, women are clustered in a narrow range of feminised occupations such as teaching, nursing, domestic work, and clerical services. Job quality remains a critical concern. Women's employment is characterised by low wages, limited social security, irregular hours, and poor working conditions. Gender wage gaps persist across sectors and employment categories, reflecting both occupational segregation and discrimination. The policy emphasis on women's entrepreneurship and self-help groups, while valuable in some contexts, has often reinforced precarious self-employment rather than generating pathways to decent work.

## Unpaid Care Work and Time Poverty

Table 1: Average Time Spent on Unpaid Care and Domestic Work by Gender (Hours per Day)

Gender	Rural (Hours/Day)	Urban (Hours/Day)	Total (Hours/Day)
Women	5.6	5.3	5.5
Men	1.4	1.6	1.5

Source: Time Use Survey, Government of India.

A defining constraint on women's economic participation is the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work. Time-use surveys consistently show that women spend several times more hours than men on cooking, cleaning, childcare, and eldercare. This unpaid labour subsidises the market economy while remaining unrecognised in national accounts. The absence of affordable childcare, eldercare services, and basic infrastructure such as water, sanitation, and transport intensifies women's time poverty. Consequently, many women opt for flexible but low-paid informal work or withdraw from the labour force altogether. From a policy perspective, ignoring unpaid care work leads to flawed diagnoses and ineffective interventions.

### Social Norms, Mobility, and Safety

Beyond economic factors, social norms play a decisive role in shaping women's labour outcomes. Norms around female respectability, household status, and caregiving responsibilities restrict women's mobility and occupational choices. Concerns about workplace safety and commuting further limit women's participation, particularly in urban and industrial employment. These constraints intersect with caste, class, and religion, producing differentiated experiences of exclusion. Women from Dalit, Adivasi, and minority communities often face compounded barriers in accessing secure and dignified employment.

### Policy Approaches and Their Limits

Women's Employment Policies in India: Initiatives and Persistent Gaps

**MGNREGA Initiative:** Provides a legal guarantee of wage employment and has increased women's participation in rural public works, with provisions for equal wages and worksite facilities. **Persistent Gaps:** Employment remains seasonal and low-paid, with delayed wage payments and limited asset creation. The scheme inadequately addresses women's care responsibilities and excludes urban poor women and informal workers.

**National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) Initiative:** Promotes women's collective participation through microfinance, entrepreneurship, and livelihood diversification, particularly among rural and marginalised communities. **Persistent Gaps:** Livelihood activities are often confined to low-return, home-based work, reinforcing gendered occupational segregation and increasing unpaid labour burdens without ensuring sustainable income or market access.

**Skill Development Programmes (PMKVY and related schemes) Initiative:** Aims to enhance women's employability through vocational training and certification. **Persistent Gaps:** Training is frequently misaligned with local labour markets and social norms, resulting in low placement rates and continued concentration of women in precarious, informal employment.

**Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 Initiative:** Extends paid maternity leave and recognises reproductive labour as a workplace concern. **Persistent Gaps:** Coverage is largely limited to formal-sector workers, excluding the vast majority of women employed in informal, contractual, and self-employed work.

**Labour Codes and Women's Workforce Participation Initiative:** Seek to simplify labour regulations and formally enable women's employment across sectors and working hours. **Persistent Gaps:** Dilution of labour protections, weak enforcement mechanisms, and lack of gender-sensitive safeguards risk exacerbating precarity for women workers, particularly those from lower castes and migrant backgrounds.

**Skill India and PMKVY:** Skill development programmes have increasingly targeted women through short-term vocational training. However, placement outcomes for women remain weak, and training is often concentrated in traditionally feminised, low-paying sectors such as tailoring, beauty services, and care work.

Limited attention to local labour demand, workplace safety, and post-training employment support constrains their impact.

**Self-Help Groups and NRLM:** The expansion of women's self-help groups under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission has enhanced financial inclusion and collective capacity. Yet SHG-linked livelihoods are largely confined to low-return activities and rely heavily on women's unpaid labour. The emphasis on micro-enterprises often substitutes for, rather than complements, the creation of stable wage employment.

**MUDRA and Women's Entrepreneurship:** Credit schemes such as MUDRA have improved women's access to formal finance. Nonetheless, most women borrowers operate survival-oriented micro-enterprises with limited scalability. Debt-based entrepreneurship, in the absence of market access and social protection, can increase economic vulnerability rather than empowerment.

**ICDS and Childcare Provision:** The Integrated Child Development Services scheme remains the primary public childcare intervention. While critical for maternal and child health, ICDS coverage and quality vary widely, and services are poorly aligned with the needs of working women, particularly in urban areas. Anganwadi workers themselves face precarious employment conditions.

**Urban Employment Initiatives:** Unlike rural employment guarantees, urban employment programmes remain limited and fragmented. The absence of a gender-sensitive urban employment framework disproportionately affects women migrants and informal workers, reinforcing labour market exclusion. Together, these initiatives reflect a policy preference for supply-side interventions that individualise women's employment challenges, while insufficiently addressing structural constraints related to care, job quality, and labour demand.

### **Rethinking Women's Work**

The persistent gap between women's education and employment outcomes underscores the limitations of human capital-centred explanations. Women's labour force withdrawal should be understood as a rational response to insecure, low-quality jobs combined with high unpaid care burdens and restrictive social norms. A feminist political economy perspective shifts attention from women's supposed lack of aspiration to the conditions under which work is offered and valued. Recognising women as workers rather than as auxiliary earners or entrepreneurs is essential for meaningful policy reform.

### **Recommendations, and Future Research-Feminist Critique of Existing Approaches**

From a feminist political economy perspective, prevailing analyses and policy responses to women's economic participation in India remain limited in three key ways.

(i) dominant frameworks privilege labour force participation as an outcome in itself, rather than interrogating the conditions, quality, and social valuation of work. This focus obscures the ways in which women's labour is systematically channelled into informal, insecure, and poorly paid activities that coexist with heavy unpaid care responsibilities.

(ii), policy narratives frequently individualise women's employment outcomes by emphasising skills, entrepreneurship, and self-reliance. Such approaches shift responsibility and risk onto women while leaving intact the gendered organisation of labour markets and households. Feminist scholarship cautions that empowerment framed primarily through market participation, without addressing power relations, care burdens, and labour demand, risks reproducing inequality rather than transforming it.

(iii), the persistent separation between economic policy and social reproduction reflects a deeper devaluation of care work. Unpaid care labour—performed predominantly by women—continues to subsidise both the market and the state, yet remains marginal to macroeconomic planning. A feminist critique thus calls for recognising care not as a residual social issue but as a central economic concern.

(iv), Addressing women's economic participation requires a shift from narrow, supply-side interventions to a comprehensive, care-sensitive employment strategy. First, substantial public investment in care infrastructure—including childcare, eldercare, health services, water, sanitation, and transport—is essential to reduce women's time poverty and enable access to regular employment. Care provisioning should be treated as economic infrastructure rather than welfare expenditure.

(v) employment policies must prioritise the creation of decent and secure jobs for women, particularly in urban areas where labour force participation remains low. This includes gender-sensitive urban employment

programmes, strengthened labour regulation in informal sectors, and enforcement of minimum wages and social security for women workers.

(vi), skill development and entrepreneurship initiatives should be embedded within broader labour market strategies that address demand, market access, and working conditions. Without such integration, these programmes risk reinforcing precarious self-employment and debt-led livelihoods.

(vii), improvements in labour statistics and data systems are critical. Better measurement of women's work—especially unpaid and home-based activities—is necessary for informed policy design and accountability.

Future research should extend beyond aggregate participation rates to examine the long-term trajectories of women's employment across the life course, particularly in relation to marriage, motherhood, and ageing. There is also a need for more regionally disaggregated and intersectional studies that capture the differentiated experiences of women across caste, class, religion, and migration status. Qualitative research that foregrounds women's lived experiences of work, care, and mobility can complement survey-based analyses and deepen understanding of how policies are negotiated on the ground. Finally, comparative research on care regimes and employment strategies across states and Global South contexts would be valuable for identifying alternative policy pathways for gender-just development. In summary, while the upward trend in female LFPR is encouraging, true gender equality in the workforce requires more than numbers. Policies must focus on formalizing informal work, ensuring social protections, improving workplace safety, providing childcare support, and creating quality employment opportunities. Only by addressing these structural barriers can have increased participation translate into genuine empowerment, economic independence, and social recognition for women across India.

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