

Where are the Women in India's Labor Force?

Female workforce participation in the country has been declining since the 1990s, and fell to a record low of 15.5% last year. So, as the Indian economy has grown, why has it shut out its women?

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GIFT STORY FOR FREE



Female health workers in India prepare to begin immunization efforts to protect citizens from imported cases of polio (AJ Williams/CDC/Wikimedia Commons)

It's 9:30 p.m. and 27-year-old Pinki Kumari has just put her two young children to sleep and found a moment for herself for the first time in the day. Kumari wakes up at 4:30 a.m. every day to cook, clean, fill water, and prepare her children before heading to work as the sole beautician at the village's neighborhood salon in the outskirts of Ranchi, Jharkhand in eastern India. When she returns in the evening, more household responsibilities await.

"My husband has constantly asked me not to, but I've always wanted to work," she said. "Work feels good." Married young and unable to complete her graduation, Kumari used to work in the informal sector, providing basic tailoring and beauty services from a rented shop near her home for many years for nominal wages. But, with the salon opportunity, this is the first time Kumari has worked as a full-time employee, with a dependable salary. During the pandemic, her husband lost work, but her income of ₹7,000 (\$94) per month helped keep them afloat. Now, the salon is shutting down and Kumari has to commute to the city if she wants to keep working — but neither will her husband allow the commute nor is she willing to do it. "My trouble will only increase if I go there. And I am not scared of trouble, but I have to think of my children as well," Kumari said. If she's gone for long, "who'll look after them?"

Kumari's experience offers a glimpse into the precarious work lives of women in India, which, according to World Bank [data](#), had a female labor force participation rate of 21% in 2019, the ninth lowest in the world. The rate [fell](#) to a record low of 15.5% in the April-June 2020 quarter, exacerbated by job losses and increased care burden during the coronavirus pandemic. But data shows that Indian women have been drastically exiting the workforce for a while now — a declining trend since the early 1990s, despite [steady economic growth](#), [increased female literacy rates](#), and a [sharp decline in fertility rates](#) within the same period. So, as India has kept progressing, why has it shut out its women?

The initial decline in labor force participation in the 1990s was not a cause for worry, Rosa Abraham, senior research fellow at Azim Premji University, told me. That period saw women from rural households withdrawing from low-

paid, labor-intensive agricultural work because of a growing economy and an accompanying rise in household income. The cause for worry, instead, is how much female labor force participation has declined since then, she said. “It means that while women have been able to withdraw from ‘bad’ jobs, there has been no concurrent increase in good jobs in the economy for them.”

Even as men have been able to find work in non-agriculture sectors and migrate outside their villages for work, that has not been the case for women. [Two-thirds](#) of India’s female workforce is still employed in agriculture as their primary activity, despite India’s GDP shifting toward manufacturing and services. Women also face [restrictions on their mobility](#) — [only 41% of Indian women](#) ages 15 to 49 say they are allowed to go alone to the market, to the health center, and outside the community. Even if they can travel alone, experts say the lack of safe transportation and childcare services harms their ability to work.

In spite of higher levels of education, women often do not find work for the skills they have. Much of women’s employment in India is concentrated in low-skilled or semi-skilled jobs, with men primarily taking white-collar urban jobs. “Young men with Class 10 or 12 education find jobs as mechanics, drivers, sales representatives, postmen, and appliance repairmen. Few of these opportunities are available to women,” Oxfam’s 2019 [Mind the Gap](#) report said.

After Dipti Dhawal Saroj, 28, earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Hindi in 2014, she found no work prospects around Bansiya village, her home in Jharkhand. Like Kumar, only after receiving vocational training from the non-profit Pratham Institute, did a job opportunity as a nursing aide present itself in 2018, in full-time patient care in New Delhi. Saroj was both excited and terrified by the prospect of moving to a big city. While she chose to work as a full-time home nurse to save herself the hassle and unsafety of travel, it has meant being on duty 24/7 with no paid leave or friends. Most of her friends have moved back to Jharkhand. Her salary of ₹15,000 (\$200) per month is substantial for her family. But Saroj’s parents are looking for prospective grooms back home. Whether she continues working at all, then, she said, “will depend on

the household situation after marriage, and the husband. I do worry about it sometimes.”

Ensuring that women have work opportunities is a significant challenge for developing nations, as demonstrated by India’s neighbors Nepal — which has a female labor force participation of 82% — and Bangladesh, at 36%.

Rohini Pande, professor of economics at Yale University, explains that Nepal’s high participation rate can be attributed to the country’s non-industrial economy, since most women work in agriculture, the country’s largest sector. “The risk is that Nepal could well follow India’s path if it doesn’t put in place policies to help women shift from agriculture into manufacturing and services” as the country develops, she said.

However, Bangladesh has indeed fared better. The country has seen significant GDP growth and increased GDP per capita, the latter even surpassing India’s during the coronavirus pandemic. “The case of Bangladesh is interesting because it saw a large increase in the low-skilled manufacturing sector, especially in the garment industry, which attracts a lot of women,” Pande pointed out. “In contrast, India’s growth has been much more service-driven — think, technology, call centers, and hospitality. In many countries, the service sector actually favors women — this is not the case in India.”

India has long been facing a job crisis — there aren’t enough jobs for its burgeoning population. “Every month, the working age increases by 1.3 million people, and India must create 8.1 million jobs a year to maintain its employment rate,” a 2018 World Bank report noted, “which has been declining based on employment data analyzed from 2005 to 2015, largely due to women leaving the job market.” India’s unemployment rate, at 7.1%, is higher than that of Bangladesh (5.3%), Nepal (4.4%), and Pakistan (4.7%). Women also fared worse on that indicator: in the three months that ended in September 2020, female unemployment in India was at 15.8% vs. 12.6% for male workers.

A [recent economic study](#) found that, against the backdrop of India's jobs crisis, the few available jobs more often than not went to men, who also displaced female workers. The falling labor force rates, the study says, "is likely to be a consequence of low and declining demand for female labor, rather than supply-side constraints keeping women indoors." Even in high-skilled jobs like engineering, one [online survey](#) found that unemployment among women was five times that of men, and 45% of women said they had to compete with other female colleagues to get hired for the one "women's spot."

"When few jobs are available, employers tend to have the preconception that men should be first in the queue for those jobs because they will need to play the role of breadwinner for the household," Pande said, "and that women might be a risky hire because they will leave the job if family duties call, or if they become pregnant."

Paromita Sen, a research manager at SEWA Bharat, has seen that often when men and women get the same kind of skill training, the men get hired and the women don't. For instance, after SEWA [conducted specialized skill training](#) for local, unemployed youth in Andhra Pradesh to help them find jobs in a solar park in the region, the company hired only four out of 86 women compared to 66 out of 97 men.

Women's burden of unpaid work severely restricts the time they can spend on paid work, added Sona Mitra, principal economist at the Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE). Indian women on average spent [297](#) minutes per day on unpaid care work, while at 39 minutes per day, men in India performed among the lowest share of unpaid care work among all regions in the world. This lopsidedness means that women may look for opportunities with flexible timings and locations (work from home or close to home), and the ability to use some hours of the day for personal needs. "These kinds of opportunities are rare," she said. But during the coronavirus pandemic, despite a few [scattered](#) reports, most women were unable to gain from the flexibility of working from home. Instead, the added

burden of unpaid care work meant that many women temporarily withdrew from work, Mitra said.

This fragility of women's work in India came to the forefront during the pandemic. A [working paper](#) by Azim Premji University found that compared to men, women were seven times more likely to lose jobs during the national lockdown; having lost their jobs, women were 11 times more likely not to return to the workforce. Higher education and marriage made women less likely to return to work, but had the opposite effect on men.

In the last two years, hundreds of millions of Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), Anganwadi workers, and women's self-help groups (SHGs) [were critical](#) to [COVID management](#). Still, government employers continue to underpay them and see their work as voluntary. Vidya Kamble, an ASHA worker in the Sangli district of Maharashtra, earned only about ₹2,000 a month even as she carried out day-long, door-to-door surveys and health checkups in her village. Rima Devi, an SHG leader in the Ramgarh district of Jharkhand, ran a community kitchen for months and manufactured thousands of masks (at ₹3 per mask) along with other members in her village, but the government didn't fairly compensate her.

The view that women should take on unpaid labor has persisted long before the pandemic. The 2019 Oxfam Mind the Gap [report](#) highlighted that of the 60 million jobs created between 2000 and 2005, 14.6 million jobs were unpaid female family workers in the agricultural sector: "This is because most of the paid jobs went to men and the unpaid jobs were left for women to take up."

"It's a continuation of a patriarchal system where when women are engaged in some kind of work, it is always undervalued," said Abraham. "The value of public services, the value of education and health, and the care economy, it is time for us to open our eyes and see that these are important sectors of the economy, and even from a very crude way of measuring contribution, which is the GDP, they still have immense contribution to the economy."

Here lies the more fundamental problem in India, experts say, that many overlook — women are working, but their work is often invisible and uncounted. Almost 94% of women are employed in the informal or unorganized sector, which also does not offer them decent wages or social security, making them more vulnerable to exploitation and economic shocks. Women are actively contributing to family enterprises, farm labor, street vending, kirana shops, and so on, but not being counted as workers. “When you can’t acknowledge someone as a worker, you then can’t make sure that their work is protected, that they are protected, that there are schemes to support them,” said Sen of SEWA Bharat.

Recognizing women’s work and formulating policies to support them is the very basis of changing the system. For instance, the Kerala government announced a Smart Kitchen program that will offer loans to purchase equipment that can lighten women’s load. Increased public expenditure in creches or child care centers can generate employment for some women, while enabling others to go to work, Abraham noted.

“A lot of what the government should be doing is just increasing work opportunities and, importantly, increasing flexible work opportunities that match women’s employment needs,” Pande said. “A critical component of helping women enter the workforce would be to make part-time jobs have the same formal-sector recognition as full-time jobs do.”

Gender equality and more equal participation in the workforce are vital for maintaining a growing economy. There are also societal benefits, such as increased innovation and sustainability. In 2012, the World Bank reported that women in the workforce contributed to a 30% reduction in extreme poverty in Latin America and the Caribbean between 2000-2010.

As for Pinki Kumari, the last year has shown her that she’s skilled enough to be self-employed again, but this time, she’s determined to replace the neighborhood salon that is shutting down with one of her own. She hasn’t

found any government programs to support this venture, but has secured a loan from her self-help group. At the time of publishing, she was keen on opening in a few weeks, so she wouldn't lose momentum.

"If a woman finds some support," Kumari said, "she can do anything that's in her heart."

Sarita Santoshini is an independent journalist based in India reporting on gender, social justice, and global health and development.

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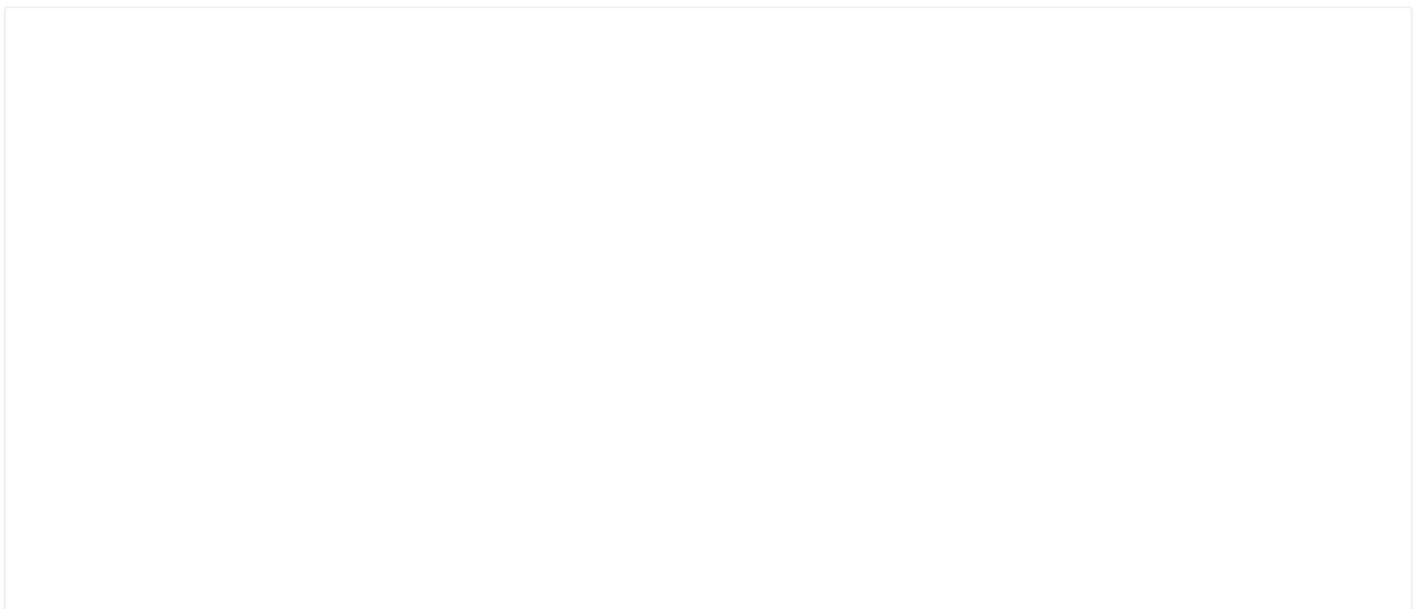


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