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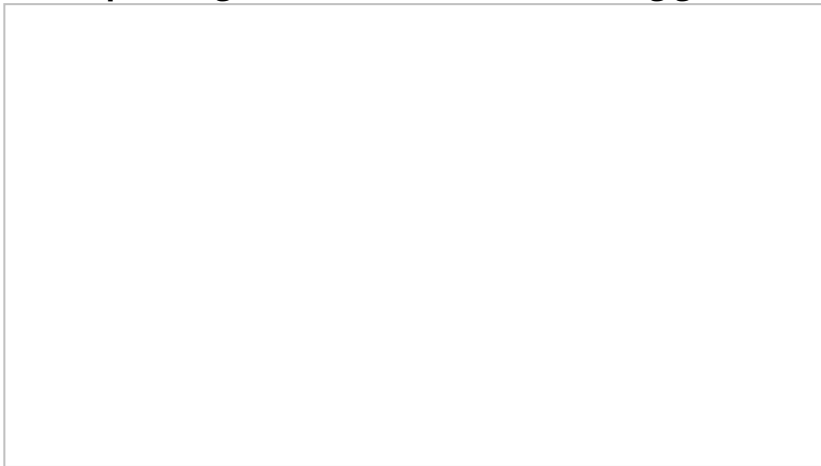
## How to Boost Women's Workforce Participation

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(The editorial is based on the article "How to Boost Women's Workforce Participation" which appeared in Businessline for 27th January 2019. In this editorial, we'll discuss the gaps in female work participation in India and see some best practices on how women across the world are being incentivized for work.)

**There has been much clamour over the fall in Female Labour Force Participation Rates (FLPRs) in recent years.**

- **The data from the Labour Bureau indicate that the FLPR for ages 15 and above has declined from 30% in 2011-12 to 27.4% in 2015-16.**
- Additionally, estimates suggest that not only has there been a fall in FLPR, but the size of the total female labour force has also shrunk from 136.25 million in 2013-14 to about 124.38 million in 2015-16, a drop of 11.86 million in two years.
- **If the ILO projections are any indication, the FLPR is slated to fall to 24% by 2030 which will certainly detract India from achieving SDG 5 (sustainable development goal number 5) — eliminating gender inequalities by 2030.**



In recent years, **government policies** were aimed at addressing the falling FLPR have mainly focussed on launching employment programmes with special provisions to incentivize female employment such as:

- MGNREGA; Micro Units Development and Refinance Agency (MUDRA);
- **Launching special skill training programmes; and heavy investment in programmes that support the education of the girl child.**
- Working Women Hostels for ensuring safe accommodation for working women away from their place of residence.
- Support to Training and Employment Program for Women (STEP) to ensure sustainable employment and income generation for marginalized and asset-less rural and urban poor women across the country.
- Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) to provide microfinance services to bring about the socio-economic upliftment of poor women.
- National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW) to strengthen the overall processes that promote all-round Development of Women
- Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017

The Skills Report, a joint initiative of Wheebox, a Talent Assessment Company, PeopleStrong, an HR Tech Company and Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) said that the employable population has touched 47 percent this time. **The increase in employability touching 47% is a good sign for the market. But we have a long way to go an entire ecosystem should focus on bridging the employability gaps.**

- Not much attention has been given to address the underlying social norms that compel women to be primary caregivers and disproportionately place the burden of care responsibilities on women.
  - **According to the NSSO**, the proportion of women engaged primarily in domestic duties has only increased between 2004-05 and 2011-12 from 35.3% to 42.2% in rural areas and from 45.6% to 48% in urban areas.
- There are two important considerations that warrant the attention of policymakers.
  - The amendment to Maternity Benefit Act has inserted an additional section that provides for the crèche facility in every establishment having 50 or more workers. The threshold for applicability of the provision related to is high and should be reduced.
  - **The law perpetuates gender stereotypes to the extent that it recognizes that child care is just the mother's responsibility by not giving male employees an equal benefit to visiting their child during the day. All of these limitations must be looked into.**
- With respect to the unorganized sector, there is a need to ensure the implementation of the National Creche Scheme that targets the provision of child-care facilities to unorganized sector women workers.
- **A recent report suggests that reductions in the Centre's contribution from 90 percent to 60 percent in 2017** have resulted in delayed and non-existent payments from the States prompting many crèches to shut down across the country.

## Way Forward

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- One thrust area in which government support can have direct implications for reducing the time burden on women is child-care support.
- **Child-care subsidies free up mothers' time to enter the labour force and have had significant implications in impacting female employment.**
- A study has found that implementation of free child-care services in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, almost doubled the employment rate of mothers (who were not working prior to receiving this benefit) from 9 percent to 17 percent.
- Additionally, child-care subsidies can also have positive spillover effects on the education of young girls for they no longer have to be left behind to take care of their younger siblings.
- Further, in the backdrop of the gradual breakdown of traditional family arrangements of child care, a community-based approach to the provision of child-care services can be looked into.
  - The Second National Commission on Labour, 2002 cited the 'praveshdwar home-based childcare programme' of the Government of Nepal as an excellent example of community-based child care which catered to the children aged 0-3 years and was run by mothers themselves.
  - Mothers often formed groups of six and took turns to look after children at their homes.
- **The government can also work towards making reflective programmes on gender equality in secondary education compulsory that challenge the traditional dynamics that dictate the duties of the woman to be a 'caregiver' and man to be a 'breadwinner'.**
- Care responsibilities are often a barrier for women in realizing their workforce participation aspirations; therefore, programmes to boost female employment without any arrangement for reducing the care responsibilities of women will only increase their burden.
- **Social norms are alterable, and broader economic trends and government policies are what really matter. Initiatives such as Skill India, Make in India, and new gender-based quotas — from corporate boards to the police force — can spur a positive change.**
- The state governments should also make policies for the participation of rural women in permanent salaried jobs.

Today, Indian women are poised to take part in a rapidly expanding economy. The government's strategy to address the time burden barrier to female participation will certainly be a proactive stance.

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