

# Women in the Workforce: An Analysis of Trends and Challenges

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**ABSTRACT:** *The participation women in workforce have changed significantly. They have increasingly stepped outside of their traditional roles and into diversified roles across many industries. However, difficulties with work-life balance and gender pay gap continue to be problems. Organizations now embrace various viewpoints, which led to measures that help women in advance their careers. The paper examines the complex relationship between women and work, examining the challenges, advancements, and injustices that have characterized it. The paper includes a thorough analysis of secondary sources. In order to create a comprehensive picture of women and work, a wide range of scholarly publications, reports, and studies compiled and examined.*

**Key Words:** *Women, work, workforce Participation.*

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Date of Submission: 05-08-2023

Date of Acceptance: 19-08-2023

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## I. INTRODUCTION

As social norms, economic situations, and governmental initiatives alter over time, women's participation in the labour market has changed significantly. In the past, women's chances for employment and career progression were frequently constrained to domestic tasks due to established gender norms. However, the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a notable transformation, as women increasingly entered the workforce in pursuit of greater independence and economic empowerment. The 1960s and 1970s women's liberation movement was essential in questioning traditional gender roles and promoting women's rights in the workplace. As a result of this movement, laws and company rules have been modified in order to combat gender-based discrimination and assist women's desires for careers. Anti-discrimination regulations like the Civil Rights Act in the US were introduced, which was a big step in the right direction for women seeking equal work prospects. On the other hand, capitalist development has led to women playing a significant role in paid labor, yet their participation remains ideologically defined as "male"(Milkman, 2016).This imbalance results from the continued necessity for the family, particularly the unpaid work of women, and the inclusion of human activity in the manufacture of commodities. Although industrial capitalism replaced the family as the fundamental unit of social production, the family is still an important institution for economic organisation. Women are in charge of carrying out a variety of personal duties in the house, including cooking food, housecleaning, and essential medical care. The family is an important component of our economic system, and this is the material basis of the cultural definition of women as primarily wives and mothers(Milkman,2016).But as the economy expands, more women join the paid labour market, expanding chances for compensation. This undermines the socially imposed gender-based division of labour, which places the burden of unpaid labour on women to support those around them. Studies from the early 1980s, like Narayan's (1982, as cited in Rajadhyakha and Smita,2018), confirmed that Indian women maintained to apply not to make compromises with the burden of their domestic duty. Women prioritised their family responsibilities over their careers. Through a study of role interventions of married working women, Hemlatha and Suryanarayan, came to the conclusion that the age and socioeconomic status of working women and their husbands, the age and number of children, the type of family, the nature of work, and the timing of work all had a significant impact on the problems that women faced. The husbands' assistance and comprehension were crucial in reducing the issues faced by working women (Hemlatha and Suryanarayan 1983, cited in Rajadhyakha and Smita, 2018).

The decade of the mid 1970's to mid 1980's saw a number of development state national and international level pertaining to women's rights that culminated in the establishment of women's studies centres in Indian universities (RajadhyakhaandSmita,2018).These organizations provided support for studies on women and the workplace, especially for those from rural and poor sections of Indian society. For instance, the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (Towards Equality, Government of India, 1974) emphasised the alarming and deteriorating state of women's conditions in India.By summarising data on unbalanced child and adult sex ratios, which were witness to the substantial disparities in mortality rates between men and

women, the report formally documented the subordination of women. Events like the International Women's Year in 1975, the International Women's Decade in the 1970s, and the enactment of the Equal Remuneration Act in 1976, which gave men and women who did the same and similar work the right to receive equal wages, all played concurrent roles in advancing a gendered viewpoint on social reality. The mid 1980s to mid 1990s saw the inclusion of samples of men and examination of gender differences in work and family research studies (Rajadhyakha and Smita,2018).In India, this was the decade when working couples were studied. By stressing the lack of visibility of women's economic participation in national revenue finance, women studies throughout the 1980s also brought up the problematic issue of the technique of analysing labour and non-work in India (Krishnaraj, 1983, as cited in Rajadhyakha and Smita,2018 ).On another hand, India's 1991 liberalisation initiative has had an impact on women and work research since the mid-1990s. Women's studies continued to conduct research that was motivated by a belief system that emphasised patriarchal norms and the structural barriers to women's place in the nation, including increased poverty, restrictive home life, rising fundamentalism, and the politicisation of religion (Desai, 1994, as cited in Rajadhyakha and Smita,2018). It expanded its scope to look at how globalisation affected the engagement of women in the workforce (Sonpar and Kapur, 2001).

## II. DISCUSSION

The historical evolution of women's participation in the workforce is a testament to the transformative societal changes that have unfolded over time. From being relegated to domestic roles and denied access to formal employment, women have embarked on a remarkable journey towards inclusion in diverse industries. This shift was catalyzed by pivotal moments such as the suffrage movement, which granted women the right to vote and paved the way for broader societal recognition of their capabilities. The impact of World Wars I and II further accelerated change, as women assumed roles traditionally reserved for men, challenging deeply entrenched gender norms. Despite progress, the issue of gender-based wage disparities continues to cast a shadow over women's professional lives. Research consistently highlights the existence of a gender pay gap, where women, on average, earn less than their male counterparts. This gap is a multifaceted outcome of a complex interplay between various factors. Occupational segregation, driven by stereotypes and societal expectations, channels women into certain industries or roles, often those that are undervalued and underpaid. Discriminatory practices, both overt and subtle, persist in compensation structures, perpetuating economic inequalities. For women pursuing jobs, finding the delicate balance between work and family obligations continues to be difficult. Making strategic decisions is necessary due to the responsibilities of care giving and professional objectives. Workplace rules are very important in determining this equilibrium. Policies on maternity leave, the availability of flexible work schedules, and access to reasonably priced childcare facilities all have a substantial impact on a woman's capacity to balance managing her family and her career. This problem is made worse by the general societal narrative that surrounds women's obligations as primary cares which frequently causes women's career paths to be disrupted .

Karl Marx and Freidrich Engels, prominent critics of capitalism, believed that capitalism creates separate spheres of equality. They felt that as more women entered the job, the patriarchal family would disintegrate and that capitalism would create an equal playing field for men and women who were exploited as workers. However, they failed to recognize that paid labor markets are institutions that bear gender and that employment can emancipate women from male oppression only within sex-based hierarchical work organizations. The connection between capitalism and gender subjugation is not a straight line and relies on a number of different tendencies. Women entering the paid labour force have the potential to exacerbate already-existing structures of gender subordination, disintegrate them, or reconstruct them. Unpaid domestic work only makes matters worse. These trends show that, rather than being the final goal, entering the paid workforce serves as a way of emancipating women workers from patriarchal oppression and financial slavery, which are prevalent in male-dominated capitalism today. Kabeer et al. (2013) suggests that-

*Women often view their work as a looser concept of family survival or livelihood, with no clear distinction between market and domestic activities or roles. They often subscribe to broad social perceptions of their work as lacking value. Organisations use various narratives to build a sense of shared identity among members, which forms the basis of claims making. Women may be slow to step into a work-based identity due to their upbringing primarily focused on domestic responsibilities. Raising the status of women in the workplace can help reduce stigma and promote a more inclusive work environment. Raising the status of or reducing stigma around work is crucial for organizations to build a shared and valued identity. For waste pickers, sex workers, and domestic workers, the issue of treating them as human beings with human rights is more urgent than addressing workers' rights. Domestic workers' social exclusion stems from the general invisibility and low value attached to domestic work. Women who see work as a natural part of their identity often view it as a temporary phase, not a primary identity. Relations of servitude in former feudal societies and racialized*

*internalized norms of inequality also shape women workers' perceptions of their lives, jobs, and destinies*(P-252).

One of the key reasons women have had such poor representation in traditional trade unions and why new types of women's organising have developed is that gender inequities divide workers. These disparities still exist and have an impact on how men and women interact while discussing the problems of female employees. For example, any support for women's activism tends to diminish when women seem to threaten men's interests within or outside the family since males have a vested interest in keeping certain perks linked with gender inequality (kabeer et al.,2013).

Women's ability to succeed professionally continues to be hampered by gender-based harassment and discrimination. The 'MeToo' movement's emergence has been a turning point, highlighting how widespread workplace misconduct is. The movement has made organisations and governments reconsider current practises and policies by highlighting the urgent need for systemic change. Initiatives to increase awareness, put strict anti-harassment policies in place, and cultivate a climate of respect and openness have gained popularity, but it will take time and effort to get rid of such deeply ingrained behaviours. Studies of women's labour typically concentrate on specific elements rather than the total. The 'care economy' and the contribution of women to unpaid care work in families and communities are further areas of concern. With a few notable exceptions, the literature has a tendency to minimise the significance of women's unpaid employment, particularly in developing nations. However, over the past three decades, there has been a significant increase in women's employment in both developed and developing countries, known as the feminization of the labor force (Chen et al., 2005).The informalization of the labour force, also known as the increase in informal and non-standard work with significant insecurity, is a result of this trend. This has given rise to the notion that these trends are connected. However, there is continuous discussion concerning the mechanisms underlying this phenomenon, including whether women are assuming roles previously held by men or transforming some forms of labour into settings typically connected to women. According to feminist scholars, feminization and informalization co-occur because of changes in social reproduction, and both men and women are impacted by informalization.Related findings include the fact that women, particularly in emerging nations, bear a larger burden of poverty than do men, a phenomenon known as the "feminization of poverty"(Chen et al.,2005).Researchers and activists asked for a gender perspective in every aspect of poverty research during the UN Decade for Women (1975–1985) in order to draw awareness to the socially and economically disadvantageous situation of women, particularly women who headed households.

A single easy way to evaluate the relationship between gender and poverty is to compare the levels of poverty in female- and male-headed households (Kabeer 1996; Burn 2004). This is because the household, not the individual, serves as the basic unit of poverty analysis. The notion that social and economic disparities experienced by women are always related to homes headed by women has recently become called into doubt (Chant ,2003).However, because it expresses a widely witnessed reality, the notion of the feminization of poverty has been a potent advocacy tool for women's rights activists( Chen et al.,2005).Gender inequality and ongoing poverty are impacted by the location of the working poor, particularly women, in the global labour market. Planning for development must take into account the experiences of the unemployed, particularly women, who participate in the informal sector, as well as how gender interacts with other factors that contribute to discrimination at work. In order to take into account the reality of informal job markets, mainstream economists along with others who provide advice to lawmakers need to reconsider their assumptions regarding the way employment markets are constituted and behave. Poor women's empowerment relies on their control over income within the household and their role in budget allocation. Their bargaining power depends on their earnings and bargaining power outside the household. However, their capacity to work outside the home is influenced by gender roles and domestic dynamics. Women are more likely than men to be own-account operators, industrial outworkers, unpaid contributing family members, informal entrepreneurs, export-oriented light manufacturing, street trade, and selling perishable goods ( Chen et al., 2005).Due to this, women who work in the informal economy experience a huge gender pay gap that is perhaps wider than the one experienced by women in the official economy. Women tend to work in lower-paying jobs more frequently, and even when performing equivalent sorts of informal employment, their earnings can vary. This is partially caused by the different amounts of time that men and women can devote to paid job. Studies that take into account hours worked, days worked, education, and experience also reveal that women typically earn less than males in the same line of work. This is frequently because women are thought of as being less skilled or able to rely on a male breadwinner (Kantor and Nair, 2005).Due to their gender, women suffer limitations in paid work, such as limited access to property, increased social needs for their hours, and limited freedom of movement. Gender assessment must be combined with additional factors and sources of disadvantage in order to completely comprehend the relationship between women's employment and poverty. Most poverty-stricken women are impoverished and disadvantaged owing to class, religion, race, ethnicity, geography, and other factors in

addition to gender norms and interactions. Impoverished people majority are found in rural areas and by religious, racial, or ethnic minorities; gender also plays a role in their inferiority.

Additionally, the world was introduced to a fascinating phenomenon that eminent economist Amartya Sen had come to notice in 1990: the one hundred million women who were just 'missing'. He said in a piece for *The New York Times* that "These numbers tell us, quietly, an awful tale about inequalities and mistreatment leading to the increased mortality of women." He pointed out that a wide range of social, cultural, and economic variables, such as limited access to economic rights (such as property rights), education, nutrition, and health, were aggravating this issue. Three decades later, the UNFPA's State of the World Population Report 2020 estimates that of the 142.6 million missing women worldwide, 45.8 million are believed to be from India. The Global Gender Gap Report 2020 has ranked India among the five worst countries in the 'Economic Participation and Opportunity' index. This gendered sensitivity has been made even more acute by the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 outbreak has significantly increased the amount of unpaid care and domestic labour that falls on women. Women in the Asia-Pacific region devote an average of 4.1 times more time than males to unpaid care giving and household duties, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO). The shutdown of schools, daycare centres, and nursing homes during the COVID-19 era is also likely to have added to this number. Additionally, any additional family care duties are frequently given to women in regions with overburdened medical facilities

The economy however is now becoming more capital, technology, knowledge and skill-driven and less labor-intensive. The boundaries between private and public places are weakened by the transition from industries to home offices. This can result in a mixture of personal and professional boundaries, putting men and women in close competition. Women can compete on an equal basis because skills, rather than physical strength, become more vital for work. However, discrimination against working women begins during the hiring process because Indian males are not yet willing to acknowledge women's skills in many fields, with the exception of teaching, nursing, and clerical labour. This undervalues women's abilities and makes them choose, despite their qualifications, less difficult employment. Women need to be proficient at balancing their various responsibilities in both their personal and professional lives. Women are more likely than men to be unemployed or working temporary jobs since they do not have access to social security and medical benefits. This causes various health issues including work-related disorders like psychological strain. Headaches, back discomfort, circulation issues, exhaustion, and physical and mental illnesses are common among women who work. Additionally, they encounter difficulties with childcare. Particularly in superior professions where qualifications are comparable and men are chosen, women's effectiveness is sometimes questioned. The ability of women to supervise male colleagues, make independent judgments, and manage tasks successfully is questioned by supervisors. Despite the fact that women have demonstrated their efficiency, authorities are hesitant to promote them and even when they are, there remains the accusation that they were given the job simply because they were female. Working women encounter difficulties while having a family since they frequently worry about losing their jobs. According to *The Guardian* reports<sup>1</sup> -50,000 women lose their careers each year as a result of pregnancy or childbirth. Sexual harassment, racist comments, personal conflicts, competitiveness, and unsupportive bosses are all examples of workplace discrimination. Male coworkers frequently disregard the opinions, recommendations, opposition, and accounts of women. However, The Vishaka guideline from 1997 and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressed) Act, 2013, are two examples of legal measures in India that protect women from workplace sexual harassment. However, because of the poor redressed pathways, women frequently feel alone and are hesitant to report mistreatment. Women are less likely to speak out about harassment because of their financial vulnerability, job insecurity, stereotypes, social isolation, and family norms. Furthermore, The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Goldman Sachs have conducted recent research that suggests gender equality in employment participation rates would significantly boost GDP growth. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) adds that if women had entered the labour force at the same rate as males, India would have grown 27% wealthier. Female labor force participation should not be seen as a complete solution, but rather a focal point for examining social conditions and background. The importance of women's work should be highlighted, along with the conditions that make it possible. Beyond rates of participation in an economy characterised by capital exploitation and patriarchal oppression, the actual issue facing women workers is structural. In addition to resolving employment requirements for women, international organisations and authorities should concentrate on creating higher standards jobs outside of slavery. Instead of just raising female labour force participation rates, the objective is to offer women chances for respectable jobs that will enable them to become economically independent.

The digital era has recently brought up new chances and obstacles for women to participate in the workforce. Women are now able to mix their professions with other duties because to the growth of remote work and the service sector. It has, however, also drawn attention to the digital gap, which can adversely impact women in underdeveloped nations or those with little access to or knowledge of technology. By closing this gap, we can ensure that women are able to take full advantage of the opportunities presented by the digital economy.



The COVID-19 outbreak served as yet another reminder of how crucial it is for women to work. Women had crucial roles on the initial stages of the pandemic response, especially those working in industries like healthcare, commerce, and education. However, the crisis also negatively impacted women, who were burdened with additional care giving duties as a result of school closings and overburdened healthcare infrastructure. In order to meet these demands, many women were compelled to abandon the industry or cut back on their hours, which exacerbated already-existing gender gaps.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

The journey of women in the workforce is one of advancement, difficulties, and constant development. Even though there have been considerable advancements in gender equality, there is still work to be done to remove prejudices and obstacles that prevent women from fully participating. It is vital to keep in mind that women's empowerment is not merely an issue of social justice as we negotiate the complexity of the modern world, but also an agent of economic expansion, breakthroughs, and social prosperity. We can open the door to a future in which women's contributions are fully acknowledged and respected across all fields of the workforce by building a friendly diverse atmosphere. In order to remove obstacles and advance gender equality in the workplace, policy initiatives have become essential tools. Globally, governments and institutions have implemented policies to overcome gender inequality. The goal of gender-inclusive laws is to end discriminatory behaviour and level up the playing field. Governments, corporations, and civil society must work together to develop complete solutions to deal with these issues. A more equal workplace can be achieved through passing laws that uphold parental leave, prohibit workplace harassment, and enforce pay parity. Programmes for mentoring and financing can be implemented by businesses to support the advancement of women leaders and offer chances for professional growth. Investment in educational and training initiatives that support female career aspirations in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) professions can also assist in closing the gender gap in fields where women have historically been under represented. Additionally, societal views and cultural norms have a significant impact on employment options and choices available to women. To create an atmosphere where women may follow any career they desire without fear of judgment or prejudice, it is imperative to challenge deeply ingrained stereotypes about gender roles. Reframing attitudes and encouraging young girls to dream big can be accomplished through educational initiatives and media portrayals that highlight women in a variety of positions and professions.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/women-in-leadership/2013/nov/20/fifty-thousand-women-lose-jobs-maturity>.( accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> August, 2023)