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Female Labour Force Participation — Why India Still Lags in Leadership

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WHY IN NEWS

A new analysis highlights that while India's **female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR)** improved from **33.9% (2022) to 40% (2025)**, it remains significantly below the **global average of 49%** and lags peers like Brazil (53%) and Vietnam (69%). The gap is even more pronounced in **leadership positions** — corporate boardrooms, academic faculty, and high-level management — where women remain structurally underrepresented despite legal mandates and policy interventions.

UNDERSTANDING LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION

Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) measures the percentage of the working-age population (15–64 years) that is either employed or actively seeking employment. It is distinct from the **employment rate** (which measures only those with jobs) — LFPR includes both the employed and the unemployed who are looking for work.

India's LFPR Trajectory

YEAR	FEMALE LFPR	MALE LFPR	GENDER GAP
2019	~21%	~76%	~55 pp
2022	33.9%	~77%	~43 pp
2025	40%	~78%	~38 pp
Global avg	49%	75%	~26 pp
Brazil	53%	—	—
Vietnam	69%	—	—

The improvement from 21% to 40% in six years is significant — but a large part of this rise is driven by **rural self-employment and agricultural participation**, not formal wage employment. This distinction matters: rural LFPR rise reflects economic necessity more than empowerment.

THE LEADERSHIP GAP — A DIFFERENT STORY

Even as overall participation rises, women's presence in **decision-making positions** tells a different story.

Academia

INSTITUTION CATEGORY	FEMALE FACULTY % (2011-12)	FEMALE FACULTY % (2021-22)
National average	25.9%	29.5%
IITs (national avg)	~12%	~14%
IIT-Jodhpur (highest)	—	22%
IIM-B, IIM-A	~18-20%	~20-22%

Progress is slow. At the current trajectory, gender parity in IIT faculty would take decades.

Corporate Boardrooms

- **77% of leading firms** have only 1–2 female directors
- Women hold **13 per 100** high-level manager positions relative to men in similar positions
- **Critical mass theory** (Rosabeth Moss Kanter): minimum **30% women** on a board is required for women to function as genuine influencers rather than token members
- India's **Companies Act, 2013 (Section 149)**: mandates at least one woman director for listed companies and large public companies — but the law sets a floor of one, far below the critical mass threshold

Corporate India vs. Global Benchmarks

METRIC	INDIA	GLOBAL AVERAGE
Female board representation	~17%	~28%
Female CEOs in top 100 firms	~5%	~8%
Female high-level managers per 100 male equivalents	13	~40 (developed economies)

SUPPLY-SIDE VS. DEMAND-SIDE EXPLANATIONS

Economists debate two frameworks:

Supply-Side (Barriers to Women Entering Work)

- **Safety and mobility constraints:** women face higher safety risks during commuting and at workplaces
- **Care burden:** India's **unpaid care economy** (childcare, elder care, household work) falls disproportionately on women; men average 35 minutes/day on unpaid care; women average 4-5 hours
- **Social norms:** stigma against women working outside home, especially in certain communities
- **Education-employment gap:** even as female education levels rise (gender parity in higher education enrolment achieved), the translation into workforce participation lags

Demand-Side (Structural Barriers in the Labour Market)

- **Wage discrimination:** India's gender pay gap is approximately **20-25%** (women earn significantly less than men for similar work)
- **Occupational segregation:** women concentrated in low-wage, informal sectors
- **Glass ceiling:** formal and informal barriers to promotion into leadership positions
- **Lack of affordable childcare:** India's **National Creche Scheme** covers a fraction of actual demand

POLICY INTERVENTIONS

What Exists

POLICY	PROVISION
Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017	26 weeks paid maternity leave (up from 12 weeks)
Companies Act, 2013 (S.149)	Minimum 1 woman director on listed companies
National Creche Scheme	Subsidised childcare for working women below poverty line
Beti Bachao Beti Padhao	Education and awareness — but limited labour market impact
MUDRA Scheme	Micro-credit — majority of beneficiaries are women
PM Vishwakarma	Skill development — partial coverage of women artisans

What Is Missing

- **Mandatory gender pay audits** (UK has these for large firms; India doesn't)

- **Equal care burden policy:** paternity leave equivalent to maternity leave to redistribute care work
- **Affordable childcare at scale:** subsidised crèches/daycare near industrial clusters
- **Board diversity quotas:** Norway-style 40% board quota for listed companies
- **Data disaggregation:** India’s labour statistics need better sectoral breakdown of female employment quality, not just quantity

THE ECONOMIC IMPERATIVE

World Bank estimate: India needs approximately **8% annual GDP growth** to achieve developed-economy status by 2047 (Viksit Bharat goal). Achieving this requires India’s **total factor productivity** to rise — which, in a labour-constrained economy, means **bringing more women into productive, formal employment**.

McKinsey Global Institute estimated that closing India’s gender gap in work could add **\$700 billion to GDP** by 2025 (the gap remained; the potential is even larger now).

NITI Aayog has flagged female LFPR as a key indicator for Viksit Bharat. The 2026 Economic Survey notes that the quality of female employment — not just the quantity — needs to improve, with a shift from unpaid agricultural work to formal wage employment.

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS1 — Society	Women’s role in society, gender inequality, unpaid care economy
GS2 — Governance	Companies Act, Maternity Benefit Act, policy gaps
GS3 — Economy	LFPR, labour productivity, Viksit Bharat, GDP growth
Essay	Women empowerment vs. structural barriers; care economy
Mains Keywords	LFPR, gender pay gap, glass ceiling, critical mass theory, care economy, Companies Act S.149, Maternity Benefit Act

FACTS CORNER

- **India’s female LFPR (2025):** 40% (global average: 49%)
- **Brazil LFPR:** 53%; **Vietnam LFPR:** 69%

- **Gender pay gap in India:** ~20-25% (women earn less for similar work)
- **IIT female faculty:** ~14% nationally; IIT-Jodhpur highest at ~22%
- **Companies Act 2013, S.149:** Mandates minimum 1 woman director on listed/large public companies
- **Critical mass threshold:** 30% women on board required for genuine influence (Kanter's theory)
- **Maternity leave (India):** 26 weeks paid (post-2017 amendment) — one of the longest globally
- **Male unpaid care work (India):** ~35 minutes/day vs. women's 4-5 hours/day
- **MUDRA women borrowers:** Over 68% of MUDRA loan accounts held by women
- **Viksit Bharat target:** 8% annual growth required — female LFPR improvement is a key enabler

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