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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Where the Jobs Are: What Million-Plus Cities Tell Us About Urban Work

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

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Where the Jobs Are: What Million-Plus Cities Tell Us About Urban Work

 **Business Standard**

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GS3
GS1

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THE LIFT LINE

For the first time, official data profile employment across India's 46 largest cities, and the picture is striking: the million-plus cities are jobs engines, with higher participation, lower unemployment and better wages than urban India as a whole. Yet the same data carry a warning. Women remain shut out of these engines by childcare and household duties, and the outcomes vary sharply from city to city. Agglomeration is working; the question is whether policy will harness it or waste it.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Urbanisation, the labour market and women's economic participation are core to the economy syllabus, and the geography of jobs links directly to settlement patterns. Fresh PLFS numbers give you current, citable data to replace stale figures in both Prelims and Mains.

GS Paper 3: Growth, development and employment; inclusive growth; the labour market; issues related to the demographic (<https://ujyari.com/vocab/demographic/>) profile.

GS Paper 1: Urbanisation, their problems and remedies; distribution of population; role of women.

Prelims angle: Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS); Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR); Worker Population Ratio (WPR); Unemployment Rate; the shift of PLFS to monthly bulletins; million-plus cities defined as those with over ten lakh population; agglomeration economies.

Mains angle: How cities can be leveraged as engines of inclusive employment, especially for women, and why unpaid care work is an economic and not merely a social issue.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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The Periodic Labour Force Survey, run by the National Statistical Office, is India's principal source of employment data. It has recently moved to more frequent, monthly reporting, improving the timeliness of labour-market signals. Drawing on PLFS 2024-25, the NSO (<https://ujjyari.com/terms/nso-mospi-statistical-architecture/>)'s "Labour Market Dynamics in Million-Plus Cities" study offers the first comprehensive statistical profile of work across the 46 cities with populations above ten lakh.

The headline is that these cities outperform urban India overall. They show higher labour force participation, lower unemployment and better earnings, reflecting agglomeration economies: the productivity gains that come from concentrating firms, workers, skills and services in dense urban clusters. Sectors such as information technology, finance, healthcare, education, retail, hospitality and professional services cluster in these cities and pull in workers.

The gender story is two-sided. Female labour force participation in million-plus cities has risen from 19.8 per cent in 2017-18 to 27.2 per cent in 2025, and the female worker population ratio has climbed too, a genuine improvement. Yet roughly 69 per cent of women in these top cities remain outside the labour force, kept out chiefly by childcare and household responsibilities. The disparity across cities is also wide, so aggregate gains hide very different local realities.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The central argument is that India's biggest cities are proven jobs engines whose potential is capped by two constraints: the unpaid-care burden that suppresses women's participation, and the wide inter-city disparity that means a national average conceals both leaders and laggards.

Agglomeration Works, but Is Underused

The data confirm that density delivers: concentration of firms and skills raises participation, lowers joblessness and lifts wages. But India's urbanisation policy has often treated cities as problems to be managed rather than as engines to be powered, underinvesting in the infrastructure, services and land-use flexibility that agglomeration needs.

The Care Penalty on Women

Rising female LFPR is welcome, but with about 69 per cent of urban women still outside the workforce because of childcare and household duties, the binding constraint is the unpaid-care economy. Without affordable childcare, safe transport and supportive workplaces, higher demand for female labour cannot translate into higher supply.

Disparity Across Cities

A single national average masks wide variation. Some cities generate far better outcomes than others, which means one-size-fits-all policy will fail. City-specific diagnosis and place-based policy are needed.

INDICATOR	MILLION-PLUS CITIES	WHAT IT SIGNALS
LFPR	Higher than urban average	Agglomeration pulls people into the labour force
Unemployment	Lower than urban average	Denser job markets match workers to jobs
Wages	Better than urban average	Productivity gains from clustering
Female LFPR	27.2% (2025) vs 19.8% (2017-18)	Rising, but off a low base
Women outside labour force	About 69% in top cities	Care burden is the binding constraint

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Read the data through three lenses. First, the agglomeration lens: cities are not just where people live but where productivity is manufactured, so urban policy is economic policy. Second, the care-economy lens: unpaid work done overwhelmingly by women is invisible in GDP but decisive for participation, which reframes childcare and eldercare from welfare spending into labour-supply infrastructure. Third, the disaggregation lens: averages mislead, and the useful policy signal lives in the spread between cities, so a good analyst asks which cities are pulling ahead and why. Put together, these lenses turn a survey release into an argument: to grow inclusively, India must invest in its cities as engines and in the care economy as the enabler that lets half the population reach those engines.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

PLFS profiles India's 46 million-plus cities -> they show higher LFPR, lower unemployment, better wages than urban India -> agglomeration economies are working -> but about 69% of urban women stay out of the labour force due to care and household duties -> female LFPR rises from 19.8% to 27.2% yet remains low -> outcomes vary widely across cities -> policy response: power cities as engines, build the care economy, and use city-specific, place-based interventions -> agglomeration becomes inclusive.

WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Treat cities as engines, not burdens.** Invest in urban infrastructure, services, public transport and flexible land use so agglomeration economies can be fully realised.

- 2 **Build the care economy.** Expand affordable, quality childcare and eldercare, and support workplace flexibility, so that rising demand for women workers meets rising supply.
- 3 **Make cities safe and accessible for women.** Safe, reliable public transport and safe public spaces are direct enablers of female participation.
- 4 **Go place-based.** Use city-level PLFS disaggregation to design interventions suited to each city's labour market rather than a national blanket approach.
- 5 **Formalise and upskill urban work.** Extend social security and skilling to the services and gig sectors that dominate big-city employment.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC regularly examines urbanisation, employment and women's work (2023: "Empowering women is the key to control population growth. Discuss"; 2017: "Women's movement in India has not addressed the issues of women of lower social strata"; and recurring questions on [jobless growth](https://ujiyari.com/terms/jobless-growth/) (https://ujiyari.com/terms/jobless-growth/) and the informal economy). This editorial provides current, disaggregated PLFS data to anchor those answers.

Practice question: "India's million-plus cities are jobs engines, but their potential is capped by the unpaid-care burden on women." Examine, with reference to recent PLFS data, how urban and care-economy policy can make city growth more inclusive. (15 marks, 250 words)

Sources: *Business Standard* (<https://www.business-standard.com/opinion>)

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[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)[Read Full Article on Ujiyari →](#)<https://ujiyari.com/editorials/2026/07/bs-million-plus-cities-plfs-urban-jobs-2026/>

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