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Counting Her In: Female Work Participation as India's Growth Multiplier

 THE HINDU

25 July 2026

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THE LIFT LINE

A nation cannot walk to prosperity on one leg. India's female labour force participation has risen fast on paper, yet the deeper question is not how many women are counted as working, but **how many are earning, secure and free to choose that work.**

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Female work participation sits at the intersection of society and the economy, which makes it a rare theme that pays off in **two GS papers at once**. It links the sociology of gender roles to the hard arithmetic of growth, savings and **demographic dividend**. Examiners increasingly frame it not as a welfare question but as a **macroeconomic constraint**: if half the working-age population is under-employed, the economy is running below capacity.

GS Paper 1: Role of women, social empowerment, and the changing structure of the Indian family and rural society. **GS Paper 3:** Employment, growth, inclusive development, and the mobilisation of human resources.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: the **Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)** is conducted by the **National Sample Survey Office** under the **Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI)**; female **LFPR** rose from **23.3 per cent in 2017-18** to **41.7 per cent in 2023-24**; rural female LFPR reached **47.6 per cent** against urban **28.0 per cent**; the **Worker Population Ratio (WPR)** measures the share actually employed, not merely seeking work; **LFPR** counts the employed plus those seeking work.

For **Mains**, the argument to carry is that the recent rise is real but **quality-thin**, driven heavily by rural self-employment and unpaid family labour, and that converting participation into **decent, remunerated work** is the true reform frontier for Viksit Bharat 2047.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

For two decades India presented a puzzle. Incomes rose, girls' schooling improved, fertility fell, yet **fewer** women appeared in the workforce. Female LFPR slid through the 2000s, bottoming near 23 per cent, even as comparable economies pulled women in. Economists called it the **great Indian paradox**.

The last five PLFS rounds have reversed the fall. Female LFPR climbed from 23.3 per cent in 2017-18 to **41.7 per cent in 2023-24**, and the calendar-year PLFS for 2025 places it around **40 per cent** with a female WPR near **38.8 per cent**. The turnaround is one of the most significant social-statistical shifts of the decade. The debate now is over **what kind of work** these numbers capture.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The rise is real, but its composition is fragile

Most of the jump came from **rural women** and from **self-employment**, including a large share classified as **unpaid helpers in household enterprises**. Rural female LFPR (47.6 per cent) nearly doubled in six years; urban female LFPR (28.0 per cent) rose far less than rural. A woman recorded as a “worker” tending the family farm or shop is genuinely contributing, but she may earn no independent wage and hold no bargaining power. This is why analysts warn against reading the headline as unqualified good news: participation has widened faster than **paid, secure** work has.

The U-shaped hypothesis and the education gap

The classic **U-shaped hypothesis** predicts that female participation falls as household incomes rise (women withdraw from distress labour), then rises again as education and white-collar opportunities expand. India may be at the turning point of that curve. Yet a stubborn signal remains: only a small fraction of employed women aged over 25 hold advanced degrees, and **urban female unemployment stays elevated** at around 8 per cent, meaning educated women who want jobs cannot find them.

INDICATOR	2017-18	2023-24	NOTE
Female LFPR (all-India)	23.3%	41.7%	Sharp rise
Rural female LFPR	24.6%	47.6%	Drove the increase
Urban female LFPR	20.4%	28.0%	Rose, but far less than rural
Female WPR (2025)	-	~38.8%	Employed share
Male LFPR (2023-24)	-	78.8%	Persistent gap

The growth dividend on the table

The economic prize is large. When women earn independently, household **savings, nutrition and children's schooling** improve, and consumption deepens. International estimates have long held that closing India's gender employment gap could add several percentage points to GDP over time. For a country targeting **developed-nation status by 2047**, leaving that dividend unclaimed is not a social oversight but a growth failure.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Read the numbers through three filters. **First, quantity versus quality:** always ask whether a rise in participation is paid and secure or unpaid and **precarious**. **Second, supply versus demand:** women's willingness to work (supply) has grown, but the shortfall of safe, accessible, appropriately skilled jobs (demand) is now the binding constraint. **Third, the enabling environment:** participation is shaped less by ambition than by **safety, mobility, childcare and social norms**. A woman may want a job the market offers, yet an unsafe commute or an unshared care burden can veto it. The policy target must therefore be the **enabling ecosystem**, not the headcount alone.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Girls' education + falling fertility -> larger pool of work-ready women -> but blocked by unsafe mobility, care burden, thin job demand -> outcome splits: rural unpaid self-employment (counted) vs urban paid jobs (scarce) -> policy on safety, care economy, skilling + demand creation -> women in decent paid work -> higher savings, consumption and GDP -> Viksit Bharat 2047

WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Build the care economy as infrastructure.** Public and workplace **childcare and eldercare** free women's time. Recognising care as economic infrastructure, and investing in creches and **anganwadi-linked support**, directly raises participation.
- 2 **Make mobility and workplaces safe.** Safe public transport, well-lit last-mile connectivity, and enforced workplace-harassment protections address the single largest silent barrier to urban participation.
- 3 **Skill for demand, not for certificates.** Align skilling and apprenticeship, including under **PMKVY and self-help-group federations**, to sectors that are actually hiring women, from care and health to electronics assembly and services.

- 4 **Leverage what works and pay for it.** MGNREGA already draws crores of rural women into wage work with guaranteed parity; **SHG-based livelihoods** under DAY-NRLM build savings and enterprise. Deepen these into ladders toward **formal, better-paid** employment rather than terminal safety nets.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has repeatedly probed this terrain: “Women’s movement in India has not addressed the issues of women of lower social strata” and questions on how globalisation and the **demographic** dividend intersect with women’s work. The theme also connects to Mains GS3 employment and jobless-growth debates.

Practice question: “India’s rising female labour force participation masks a crisis in the quality of women’s work.” Critically examine, and suggest measures to convert participation into decent employment. **(15 marks, 250 words)**

Sources: PLFS Annual Report 2023-24, PIB, PLFS Annual Report 2025, PIB, Trend in Female LFPR, IWWAGE

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