PR04 / Barriers and Enablers Shaping Women's Participation in the Workforce

Topic : Practice

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Women's participation in India's economy continues to be shaped by structural constraints, social norms, institutional arrangements, and labour-market dynamics. According to the most recent data from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), the female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) among individuals aged 15 and above stood at around 34% in September 2025, the highest observed in recent years, yet still modest compared to total labour participation.

At the same time, the majority of women workers are employed in informal work arrangements like including self-employment, casual labour, own-account work and unpaid family work, which tend to lack job security, formal contracts, social protection or regular wages. Self-employment among women reportedly rose sharply to 67.4% in 2023–24. Despite considerable policy focus on skilling, welfare, entrepreneurship support and financial inclusion, these structural conditions continue to curtail meaningful economic engagement for many women.

This panel investigates how empowerment efforts intersect with everyday realities on the ground. It aligns with the 2026 IPPN theme — Public Policy Praxis in the Global South: Building Coherence and Capacity for Future Challenges — by examining how policy frameworks intended to expand women's economic participation translate (or fail to translate) into actual livelihoods. Rather than viewing economic participation as a binary of employed/unemployed, we emphasise the spectrum of labour: from unpaid or home-based work, to gig- or platform-based informal labour, to self-employment or entrepreneurship.

We ask: what enables some women to navigate institutional constraints while many remain excluded? Case-based field evidence shows that gender norms, unpaid care responsibilities, limited access to capital and social security, and fragmented service delivery shape outcomes. At the same time, pockets of promise emerge: women's entrepreneurship in the informal/unincorporated sector is growing, he share of women as proprietors of informal-sector establishments reportedly rose to about 27.2% in 2023–24. This points to shifts in agency and institutional openings.

By bringing together empirical, ethnographic, and practice-oriented studies, this panel seeks to deepen understanding of the obstacles women face and the enablers — institutional, social, and economic — that allow meaningful participation in the economy. We aim to highlight how policy design and implementation might better recognise unpaid, precarious, and informal labour; address gendered risks; and build coherent, gender-sensitive institutions that support sustainable livelihoods.

Research Questions
What structural, social, institutional and economic barriers shape women's participation in livelihood activities across formal, informal, rural, and urban contexts in India?
Which enabling conditions — such as policy innovations, collective action, digital platforms, entrepreneurship support, or community networks — most effectively improve women's access to sustainable, dignified livelihoods?
How can policy design and implementation processes better recognise unpaid labour, gendered risks, and intersectional inequalities that influence women's economic engagement?

CALL FOR PAPERS

Women's economic participation in India continues to be shaped by deep structural, social, and institutional constraints, even as recent labour statistics point to gradual improvements. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) , the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) for women aged 15 and above has increased in recent years, driven largely by a rise in self-employment and other informal work arrangements (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2024). Yet most women remain concentrated in low-paying, insecure, or unpaid forms of labour, reflecting entrenched gender norms, unequal care responsibilities, and persistent barriers to resources such as credit, skills, and social protection (Deshpande, 2020; Kapsos et al., 2020).

This panel invites empirical case studies, ethnographic analyses, comparative assessments, and

methodological reflections that interrogate these dynamics across rural and urban contexts. We welcome contributions examining barriers to labour force participation; the role of social norms and unpaid care work; women's engagement in gig and platform-based work; the impacts of digital inclusion initiatives; access to welfare schemes and financial services; and institutional reforms designed to strengthen gender-responsive policy implementation. Studies exploring women's entrepreneurship, collective organising, and informal-sector innovation are particularly encouraged, given evidence that women-owned enterprises in the unincorporated sector are increasing and shaping new livelihood trajectories (International Labour Organization, 2023).

At the same time, digital platforms, self-help collectives, and community-based organisations are emerging as important enablers of women's agency, mobility, and economic autonomy. However, these opportunities coexist with new vulnerabilities, including algorithmic precarity, unpredictable earnings, and gaps in social security coverage (Chaudhary, 2022). Methodological reflections that examine how to study such hybrid and evolving labour forms will add significant value to the conversation.

These are the potential panelists:

Gayathri Vasudevan: CEO, Sambhav
Dr. Bindu Ananth Chairperson, Dvara Health Finance
Dr. Pavithra Suryanarayana, Associate Professor, Government Department at the LSE
Through interdisciplinary perspectives, this panel aims to deepen understanding of the constraints limiting women's livelihoods and the institutional, social, and economic enablers that support meaningful participation. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on building coherent, context-responsive, and gender-sensitive public policy in the Global South.