NR25 / The Invisible Architecture of Inequality: Care, Gender Norms, and Women’s Work

Topic : Research

Chair : Bidisha Banerji (Vedica for Women)

Second Chair : Pallavi Maitra (ADVOCATE)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Research Objectives

To examine how unpaid care work and household responsibilities constrain women’s labour market entry, retention, and mobility.

To analyse the role of gender norms, stereotypes, and motherhood-related biases in shaping women’s workplace outcomes.

To assess legal and institutional gaps in protecting women workers, especially mothers and caregivers.

To identify policy options—such as childcare systems, flexible work arrangements, and gender-inclusive labour regulation—that can reduce barriers.

To integrate economic, behavioural, and legal perspectives in understanding the gendered care-work nexus.

Research Questions

How does unpaid care work shape women’s decisions regarding labour force entry and continued employment in India?

What forms of explicit and implicit workplace bias—including the motherhood penalty—affect women’s professional trajectories?

How do gender norms influence employment preferences, employer expectations, and household bargaining?

Where do India’s legal frameworks on maternity, discrimination, and workplace safety fall short in supporting women’s sustained participation?

Which policy instruments hold the most promise for reducing care burdens and shifting social norms?

Despite rising education levels and demographic opportunities, India continues to face persistently low and uneven female labour force participation (Klasen & Pieters 2015; Chatterjee et al. 2018). Recent analyses show that while participation numbers have risen post-pandemic, much of women’s work remains unpaid, informal, or precarious, revealing the deep structural constraints that continue to shape women’s economic lives (PLFS 2025; ILO 2024). In particular, women’s disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, combined with entrenched gender norms, plays a defining role in limiting their ability to engage in paid work (Folbre 2012; Hirway 2020; India Time Use Survey 2024). Retention of the educated urban professional woman is a challenge due to multiple factors that affect the number of women in Senior and Top Management/Leadership positions across all areas, including the Judiciary, Academics, Medicine, Corporations, etc. For example, over the past 75 years, since India’s independence, only 11 women have served as judges.

Newer studies underscore that more than half of working-age Indian women remain outside the labour force, primarily due to care responsibilities and the absence of supportive care infrastructure, such as affordable childcare and eldercare services (ILO 2024; Indian Express 2024). Time-use data from 2024 reaffirm that women continue to perform the vast majority of unpaid domestic and caregiving work, constraining their time and mobility for paid employment. These constraints intersect with explicit and implicit biases, including the well-documented motherhood penalty—a systematic decline in earnings, career progression, and workplace valuations following childbirth (Budig & England 2001; Bertrand et al. 2023). Famously, Indra Nooyi, the former PESICO CEO, mentioned that the career clock and the biological clock are in direct conflict. There is also a dearth of role models of successful women around in the family, and the stereotypes that exist in a patriarchal society make it even more challenging for a woman.

Recent global evidence (World Inequality Report 2025) further shows that, even when unpaid labour is included, women globally work more hours but continue to earn significantly less, mirroring the Indian context, where structural and normative barriers remain formidable. From a legal-policy perspective, the panel offers insights into rights-based protections, maternity entitlements, workplace discrimination laws, and the enforcement gaps that impede women’s ability to remain in employment. Recent legal-policy discussions (ILO–NCAER Roundtable 2025) emphasize the need for gender-inclusive workplace frameworks, especially within emerging sectors such as the platform economy, where women's participation is rising but remains vulnerable. Affirmative Actions that exist are still very rudimentary, such as the

Maternity Benefit Act, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace, the Equal Remuneration Act, the Code on Social Security and Occupational Safety, and the Health and Working Conditions Code.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Despite rising education levels and demographic opportunities, India continues to face persistently low and uneven female labour force participation (Klasen & Pieters 2015; Chatterjee et al. 2018). Recent analyses show that while participation numbers have risen post-pandemic, much of women's work remains unpaid, informal, or precarious, revealing the deep structural constraints that continue to shape women's economic lives (PLFS 2025; ILO 2024). In particular, women's disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, combined with entrenched gender norms, plays a defining role in limiting their ability to engage in paid work (Folbre 2012; Hirway 2020; India Time Use Survey 2024).

Newer studies underscore that more than half of working-age Indian women remain outside the labour force, primarily due to care responsibilities and the absence of supportive care infrastructure, such as affordable childcare and eldercare services (ILO 2024; Indian Express 2024). Time-use data from 2024 reaffirm that women continue to perform the vast majority of unpaid domestic and caregiving work, constraining their time and mobility for paid employment. These constraints intersect with explicit and implicit biases, including the well-documented motherhood penalty—a systematic decline in earnings, career progression, and workplace valuations following childbirth (Budig & England 2001; Bertrand et al. 2023).

Recent global evidence (World Inequality Report 2025) further shows that, even when unpaid labour is included, women globally work more hours but continue to earn significantly less, mirroring the Indian context, where structural and normative barriers remain formidable. From a legal-policy perspective, the panel offers insights into rights-based protections, maternity entitlements, workplace discrimination laws, and the enforcement gaps that impede women's ability to remain in employment. Recent legal-policy discussions (ILO–NCAER Roundtable 2025) emphasize the need for gender-inclusive workplace frameworks, especially within emerging sectors such as the platform economy, where women's participation is rising but remains vulnerable.

This interdisciplinary panel brings together economic, legal, and behavioural research to analyze how the care economy, social norms, and structural biases continue to shape women's work. It also aims to identify innovative policy pathways—such as investments in childcare, social protection design, labour law reform, workplace flexibility, and norm-change strategies—to enable a more gender-equitable labour market in India.

Indicative Papers

The Motherhood Penalty in India: Evidence from Labour Market Transitions

Unpaid Care Work, Gender Norms, and Invisible Labour: Revisiting Measurement Frameworks

Social Norms and Occupational Sorting: Behavioural Insights from India

Legal Rights, Care Responsibilities, and Women's Work: An Institutional Review

Gendered Biases in Hiring and Workplace Practices: New Evidence from India