

Women and Work in India: Challenges, Opportunities and Perspectives for Policy

Vibhuti Patel¹

Abstract

This book review examines Women and Work in India: Challenges, Opportunities and Perspectives for Policy, an edited volume that provides a comprehensive analysis of the structural, social, and economic barriers shaping women's labour force participation in India. Covering themes such as unpaid care work, employment trends, time-use surveys, platform work, caste and gender inequalities, and social protection, the volume integrates empirical evidence with policy-oriented analysis. The review highlights the book's contribution to gender economics by exposing the invisibility of women's work while proposing inclusive, evidence-based policy frameworks to enhance employment opportunities, labour rights, social protection, and gender-responsive development in India.

Keywords: Women's Labour Force Participation, Gender Economics, Unpaid Care Work, Social Protection, Labour Market

This edited volume by renowned economists encompasses across 24 chapters, well researched and analytically robust inquiry blended with extensive primary and secondary empirical datasets to deconstruct the structural, cultural, and methodological barriers that persistently keeps Indian women's labour force participation rate abysmally low. The chapters address important concerns regarding changing contours of paid and unpaid work of women's work, drawing on the latest data and information on gender based division of labour, unpaid domestic and care work and recommend evidence-based policies and grounded strategies to improve remunerative employment opportunities, humane work condition, digitisation and platform based work, labour standards and legal

¹ Distinguished Visiting Professor, Impact and Policy Research Institute (IMPRI)

safeguards. In terms of theoretical perspective, this scholarly anthology deconstructs core concepts of gender economics such as invisible work, care economy, gender norms in the current macro, meso and micro economic contexts of rural and urban India. Most important contribution of the book is a fine balance of diagnostic metrics with practical policy frameworks on 4 thematic areas- limitations of existing official measurement of women's work in capturing women's unpaid family labour and care work; trends and changing patterns in women's employment from 1983 to 2025 and the paradox of improved educational status of women not improving job opportunities; insights from time-use studies in diverse geographies and critical assessment of the gig/platform economy and the formal childcare sector.

In Part I, Chapter 1: Understanding Women's Work in India: Introduction to the Volume by Alakh N. Sharma, Vandana Upadhyay, and Aasha Kapur Mehta provide framework and set the tone of the volume.

Part II: Measuring Women's Work has 3 chapters. The 2nd chapter by G.C. Manna bring the fore conceptual and operational biases in the data sets provided by National Sample Survey Organisation, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India with regards to measurement issues in estimating work participation of women and in valuing their unpaid domestic work and care-giving services. Chapter 3 authored by Aasha Kapur Mehta and Sanjay Pratap provides eagle's eye view of meta data of census reports and several NSSO Rounds over last 5 decades on work participation of women, identify reasons for underestimation of women's contribution to the economy by conducting field based surveys of multiple activities done by women in the urban, rural and tribal areas and show the pathway to rectifying the invisibility of women's work so that "the disproportionate burden borne by women with regard to cooking, cleaning and caring for children, the elderly, and the ill also needs to be acknowledged, visibilised, reduced and redistributed both within and outside the home." (p. 53). Chapter 4 by Balwant Singh Mehta is based on a Public Perception Survey in the context of The National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi and show that both supply and demand side factors such as gender norms, unpaid family work of domestic and care duties, income and education effects, limited suitable job options,

mobility challenges, unsafe and unfriendly work environments are responsible factors; and recommends more gender responsive, data-informed, and women-centric interventions.

Part III: Time Use Studies and Special Geographies deals with technical aspects of measurement of women's work and show the alternative to overcome the "invisibility" of women's economic contribution to non-market care work and market economy. Chapter 5, coauthored by N. Neetha and Indrani Mazumdar is based on field based Time Use Survey (TUS) within a Labour Force Survey (LFS) survey on Women's Work in Haryana and based on its conceptual and methodological learnings point out 'the limitations of the sectoral/occupational data in periodic labour force participation rate and flag the need for generating additional data to understand gendered concentrations in various occupational classes.' (p. 95). Chapter 6: Gender and Work in Mountain Economies: Results from a Time Use Survey from Across Twelve Himalayan States by Vandana Upadhyay and Kanchan Devi provide valuable insights on women- specific arduous activities of food gathering and food production, seasonal income-generating activities, asset holding patterns, non-timber forest produce collection, and agricultural operations at the household level in the context of ecological degradation and capitalist transitions that disproportionately increase the physical workload and time poverty of women in the mountainous terrain. Chapter 7 authored by Deepak K. Mishra and Sweta Tripathy also profiles an illuminating scenario of interplay of capitalist transition and gendered labour in the hill economics of North East India. Chapter 8 contributed by Indira Hirway comprehensively analyses shortfalls in the Time Use Surveys (TUS) in terms of accurately capturing women's work and stresses upon the making TUS full-proof as the TUS data are "important inputs in designing macroeconomic policies and macroeconomic modelling, and thereby support integration of gender in the mainstream economy to promote inclusive development" (p. 175).

Part IV: Trends and Patterns in Employment and Work has 3 chapters.

Chapter 9 Alakh N. Sharma and Balwant Singh Mehta captures Trend and Pattern of Women's Work in India for the period of 1983 to 2024 and highlight that 'Educated

young women continue to face high unemployment because of skill mismatch and limited availability of quality and aspirational jobs.’(179) revealed in gender gaps in NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) statistics. Chapter 10 by Bidisha Mondal, Sona Mitra, Prakriti Sharma, and Aneek Chowdhury gives nuanced analysis of demand side opportunities of Women’s Self-Employment in India. Chapter 11 by Bishwanath Goldar and Suresh Chand Aggarwal shows that ways of increasing Workforce Participation of women in India by employment generation in Non-Agricultural Activities.

Part V: Caste and Religion bring out many uncomfortable truths of ground research conducted with intersectional perspective that includes multiple marginalities and vulnerabilities of based on caste, class and religion in chapter 12 titled, ‘Gender Discrimination in Employment in Indian Labour Market: Decomposition by Castes and Religion’ by Panchanan Das as well as in chapter 13 by Nisha Srivastava and Rahul Ranjan on continuity and change in caste-based differences in women’s employment.

Part VI: Motherhood, Care Penalties and Gender Responsive Care, discusses the current discourses among gender economists, legal luminaries and policy makers nationally and globally in chapter 14 by Anupama Uppal and Amandeep Kaur which contextualises gender discrimination in wages and employment in India at the backdrop of overarching Care Penalty and Chapter 15 by Sreerupa, Jahnvi Andharia, and Tanisha Dasgupta that envisions Gender Responsive Models for Balancing Universal and Contextual Childcare Needs Beyond “One-Size Fits All”.

Part VII: Women Workers in the Platform Economy and Global Value Chains expose the deplorable realities of digital platform work (gig work) which is glorified as a flexible solution for home-bound women. Chapter 16 by Anwesha Ghosh highlights a lack of social protection, work place safety, social security, women’s vulnerability to monopsonistic market structures, and profound atomisation of Women Platform Workers in India and recommends concrete Policy Strategies for their recognition as ‘employees’ and legislative provision for collective bargaining. Chapter 17 by Dev Nathan, S. Rahul, Shikha Silliman Bhattacharjee, and Govind

Kelkar deconstructs monopsony capitalism in the global supply chain that thrives on gender inequality and precarity of labour.

Part VIII: Education and Employment highlights the gender differentials in returns to education, burgeoning informal sector that thrives on cheap labour of women. Chapter 18 by Jeemol Unni and Ravikiran Naik gender differences in returns to education mismatch in the urban labour market in India both in formal and informal sectors. Chapter 19 by Ravi Srivastav presents a gendered temporal analysis of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) among youth (aged 15 to 29 years) in India and suggests that India needs gender sensitive policies to reduce the unpaid work and care burden of unpaid work, improve the safety of women in work- places and safe mobility from home to educational institutions and work, creches and supportive ecosystem. Chapter 20 by Jajati Keshari Parida and Akankshya Satapathy discuss the U shape hypothesis in the Indian Context and show the relationship of low work participation of women due to and economic growth penalty in India.

Part IX: Policy Perspectives is dedicated to the policy measures needed to enhance women's workforce participation in all sectors of the economy, specific intervention strategies for rural, peri urban and metropolitan contexts and role of the state in generation of public employment and ensuring dignity, safety and social protection for the scheme workers (such as anganwadi workers and ASHAs). Chapter 21 by Dipa Sinha critically reflects on women's work and the critical role of the state for ensuring decent public employment in India. In chapter 22, Ellina Samantroy delineates gender responsive policy perspective and way forward for ensuring social protection for women workers in India. In chapter 23, K. P. Kannan and G. Raveendran share an inspiring story of the impact of Kerala's Kudumbashree System in addressing Poverty and promoting women's collective agency and enhancing capability for dignity and improved quality of life. Chapter 24 by Aasha Kapur Mehta, Alakh N. Sharma, and Vandana Upadhyay carve out a pathway to address multi-pronged challenges faced by women in the social constructed labour market by creating and institutionalising an architecture of universal access to robust social protection based on the foundation of gender justice

This volume is a valuable resource for researchers, students and teachers of women's studies/gender studies, policy makers and gender-trainers, civil society organisations, development practitioners and scholars of labour economics, employment research, and development studies.

Reference

Alakh N. Sharma, Aasha Kapur Mehta, and Vandana Upadhyay (ed.s) (2026) Women and Work in India: Challenges, Opportunities and Perspectives for Policy, Singapore: Springer Nature, 2026.
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