

FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION IN INDIA: TRENDS, PATTERNS AND REGIONAL DISPARITIES DURING 2017–18 TO 2023–24

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ABSTRACT

Female labour force participation (FLFP) is a key indicator of economic development, gender equality, and inclusive growth. Despite notable improvements in female education and health, India has historically recorded relatively low female labour force participation compared with many developing economies. However, recent evidence from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) indicates a substantial increase in female labour force participation after 2017–18, warranting renewed academic attention. This study examines the trends, patterns, and regional disparities in female labour force participation in India during the period 2017–18 to 2023–24. The study is based on secondary data obtained from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), Census of India, National Family Health Survey (NFHS), Economic Survey, and the Reserve Bank of India. Descriptive statistical techniques, including trend and comparative analyses, have been employed to examine changes in labour force participation across rural and urban areas and among selected states. The findings indicate a significant increase in female labour force participation during the study period, although considerable rural–urban and interstate disparities continue to exist. Rural women continue to exhibit higher participation rates than urban women, while substantial differences persist across states due to variations in economic opportunities, educational attainment, labour market conditions, and socio-cultural factors. The study highlights the importance of employment generation, skill development, entrepreneurship promotion, social protection, and gender-responsive labour market policies in enhancing women's economic participation. The findings contribute to the understanding of recent labour market dynamics and provide policy insights for promoting inclusive and sustainable economic development in India.

KEYWORDS: Female Labour Force Participation, PLFS, Rural–Urban Disparities, Employment, India, Economic Development

1. INTRODUCTION

Female labour force participation (FLFP) is widely recognized as an important indicator of economic development, gender equality, and inclusive growth. Women's participation in productive economic activities contributes to household income, poverty reduction, human capital development, and overall economic progress. Accordingly, increasing female labour force participation has become a major policy priority under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2024) and the World Bank (2024) also emphasize that greater participation of women in the labour market is essential for achieving sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

India presents a unique case in the global discourse on female labour force participation. Despite sustained economic growth, improvements in female education, declining fertility, and better health outcomes, women's participation in the labour force remained relatively low for several decades. This phenomenon, often referred to as the "Indian puzzle," has attracted considerable academic attention (Klasen & Pieters, 2015; Lahoti & Swaminathan, 2016). Although women have traditionally contributed to agriculture, livestock rearing, household enterprises, and informal economic activities, much of their work has remained unpaid or inadequately captured in official labour statistics (Himanshu, 2011). Between 2004–05 and 2017–18, India experienced a significant decline in female labour force participation. Previous studies attribute this decline to a combination of factors, including rising household income, increasing educational enrolment among young women, restrictive gender norms, unpaid domestic responsibilities, and limited access to suitable employment opportunities (Das & Desai, 2003; Klasen & Pieters, 2015; Chatterjee, Desai, & Vanneman, 2018). However, recent evidence indicates a reversal of this trend. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey, the female labour force participation rate

among women aged 15 years and above increased from 23.3 per cent in 2017–18 to 41.7 per cent in 2023–24 (MoSPI, 2024).

Despite this improvement, female labour force participation continues to exhibit considerable regional disparities across states and between rural and urban areas. Variations in economic structure, educational attainment, employment opportunities, and socio-cultural norms have resulted in substantial differences in women's participation in the labour market. Understanding these disparities is important for designing effective policies that promote women's economic empowerment and inclusive development.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Female labour force participation (FLFP) has been widely recognised as an important indicator of gender equality and social transformation. Theoretical and empirical studies have examined the factors influencing women's participation in the labour market, highlighting the roles of human capital, structural transformation, labour market opportunities, and socio-cultural norms. Boserup (1970) was among the first scholars to emphasise women's significant contribution to economic development, particularly in agriculture and rural production, while arguing that development policies often underestimate women's productive roles. Becker's (1964) Human Capital Theory further explains that investments in education, skills, and training enhance labour productivity and improve employment opportunities. However, Goldin (1995), through the U-shaped hypothesis of female labour force participation, argued that women's participation tends to decline during the early stages of economic development owing to structural transformation and rising household incomes, but subsequently increases with improvements in education, declining fertility, and the expansion of employment opportunities in the modern economy.

Empirical studies have produced mixed evidence regarding the relationship between economic growth and female labour force participation. Mammen and Paxson (2000) found cross-country evidence supporting the U-shaped relationship between economic development and women's labour force participation, suggesting that structural transformation, educational attainment, and changing social norms collectively influence women's employment decisions. In the Indian context, Klasen and Pieters (2015) observed that despite rapid economic growth and improvements in female education, labour force participation among urban women declined because of increasing educational enrolment, rising household incomes, and limited availability of suitable employment opportunities. Similarly, Lahoti and Swaminathan (2016) reported that female labour force participation declined during the period 1983–2012 despite improvements in women's educational attainment, indicating that economic growth alone does not necessarily translate into higher female employment.

Labour market conditions also play a crucial role in determining women's workforce participation. Kannan and Raveendran (2012) argued that employment generation in India has not kept pace with economic growth, thereby restricting employment opportunities for women, particularly in the organised sector. At the same time, educational advancement has not consistently resulted in higher labour force participation because many women continue to face barriers such as occupational segregation, unpaid care responsibilities, workplace safety concerns, and limited access to suitable employment. Field et al. (2021) demonstrated that strengthening women's financial autonomy and decision-making power positively influences labour supply and contributes to changing gender norms, suggesting that women's economic empowerment depends not only on education but also on access to financial resources, supportive institutions, and favourable labour market conditions.

Several studies have also highlighted considerable rural–urban and regional disparities in female labour force participation. Rural women generally exhibit higher participation rates because of their involvement in agriculture, livestock rearing, and family-based enterprises, whereas urban women often encounter greater constraints arising from childcare responsibilities, occupational segregation, and inadequate employment opportunities. Regional variations further indicate that differences in economic development, industrialisation, labour demand, educational attainment, and socio-cultural practices significantly influence women's participation across states, thereby underscoring the importance of context-specific policy interventions.

The introduction of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) has significantly improved the availability of reliable labour market data in India and has revealed a notable increase in female labour force participation after 2017–18. Recent PLFS reports indicate that this improvement has been driven largely by increased participation in self-employment, agriculture and allied activities, and informal employment. Government initiatives such as the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), Skill India Mission, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and financial inclusion programmes have also contributed to expanding livelihood opportunities for women. Nevertheless,

concerns regarding employment quality, wage inequality, occupational segregation, informality, and unpaid care work continue to limit women's full integration into productive and decent employment.

Overall, the existing literature suggests that female labour force participation is influenced by a complex interaction of economic, educational, institutional, demographic, and socio-cultural factors. While earlier studies primarily focused on the declining trend in female labour force participation before the introduction of the PLFS, relatively few have comprehensively examined the recent increase using the latest official data while simultaneously analysing rural–urban differences and interstate disparities. This gap provides the rationale for the present study, which examines the trends, patterns, and regional disparities in female labour force participation in India during the period 2017–18 to 2023–24 using recent PLFS data.

3. RESEARCH GAP

Although female labour force participation (FLFP) in India has been extensively studied, several important research gaps remain. Earlier studies have primarily focused on explaining the declining trend in female labour force participation during the pre-PLFS period using data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO). While these studies provide valuable insights into the influence of education, household income, social norms, and labour market conditions, they do not adequately capture the recent changes observed after the introduction of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS).

Recent PLFS reports indicate a marked improvement in female labour force participation since 2017–18. However, empirical studies analysing this upward trend remain limited. Existing research has largely examined individual determinants of women's labour force participation in isolation, with relatively few studies providing an integrated analysis of temporal trends, rural–urban differentials, and interstate disparities using the latest official data.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to bridge these gaps by analysing the trends and patterns of female labour force participation in India during 2017–18 to 2023–24 using the latest PLFS data. It provides a comprehensive assessment of rural–urban differences, interstate and regional disparities, and the policy implications of recent changes in women's labour market participation. By integrating these dimensions within a single analytical framework, the study contributes to the growing literature on women's employment and offers evidence-based recommendations for promoting inclusive and sustainable economic development.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study aims to examine the trends, patterns, and regional disparities in female labour force participation in India during the period 2017–18 to 2023–24. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. To examine the trends and patterns of female labour force participation in India during 2017–18 to 2023–24.
2. To analyse rural–urban differentials in female labour force participation and identify the factors contributing to these disparities.
3. To examine interstate and regional variations in female labour force participation across India.
4. To suggest policy measures for enhancing women's labour force participation and promoting inclusive and sustainable economic development.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is descriptive and analytical in nature and is based exclusively on secondary data to examine the trends and regional disparities in female labour force participation (FLFP) in India during 2017–18 to 2023–24. Data have been collected from authentic sources, including the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) published by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), the Census of India, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), the Economic Survey, and the Handbook of Statistics on the Indian Economy published by the Reserve Bank of India. The study uses the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) as the principal indicator and employs descriptive statistical techniques, including percentage, trend, and comparative analyses, supported by tables and figures. The findings are interpreted in the context of socio-economic and regional variations.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Trends in Female Labour Force Participation in India (2017–18 to 2023–24)

Figure 1 reveals a remarkable increase in female labour force participation in India during the study period. The FLFPR rose from 23.3 per cent in 2017–18 to 41.7 per cent in 2023–24, representing an increase of 18.4

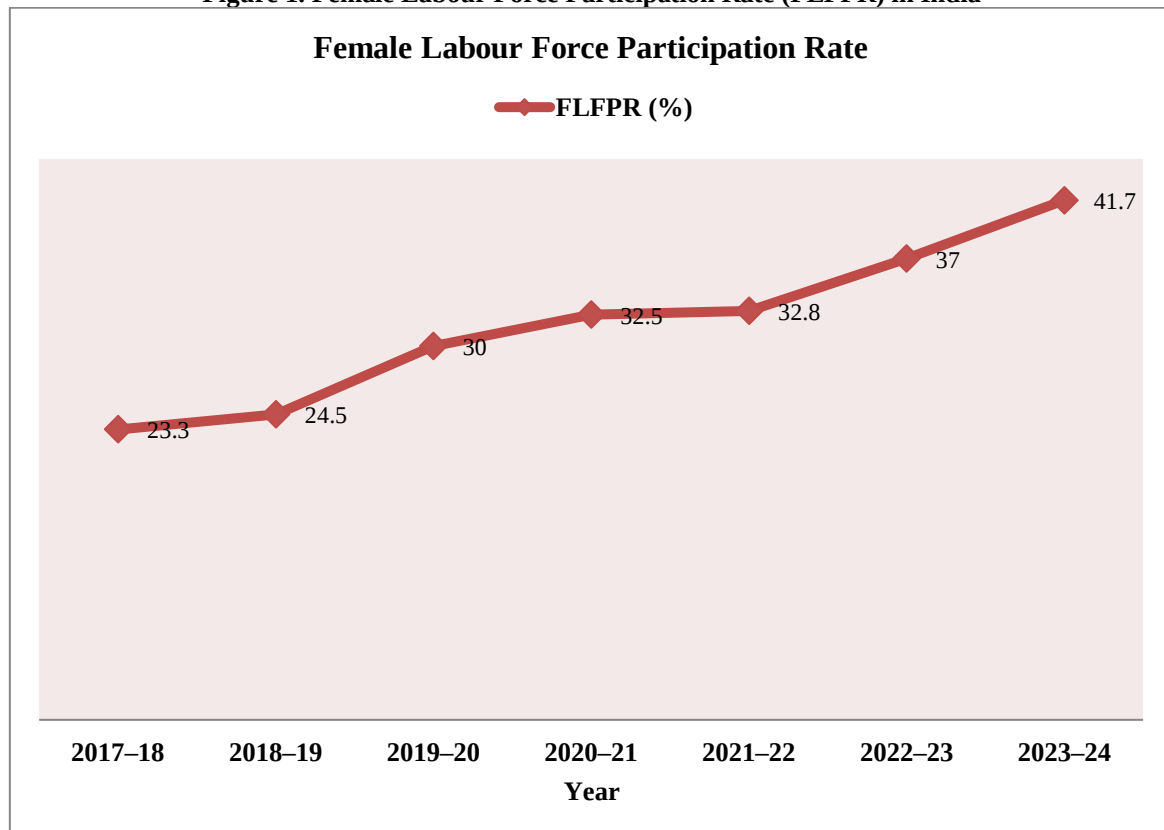
percentage points over seven years. The upward trend became particularly pronounced after 2019–20, indicating an expansion in women's participation in economic activities.

Several factors may have contributed to this improvement. The expansion of self-employment, greater participation in agriculture and allied activities, growth of women-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs), implementation of the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), and increased access to financial inclusion initiatives have created additional livelihood opportunities for women. The post-pandemic recovery of economic activities may also have encouraged higher labour market participation among women.

Despite this positive trend, the increase in FLFPR should be interpreted with caution. A considerable proportion of the additional employment is concentrated in self-employment and informal work, where wages, productivity, and social security remain relatively low. Therefore, higher participation does not necessarily imply an improvement in employment quality.

The findings support the observations of Klasen and Pieters (2015), Lahoti and Swaminathan (2016), and more recent PLFS-based studies, which suggest that labour market conditions, government livelihood programmes, and structural changes in the economy have significantly influenced women's employment patterns in India.

Figure 1. Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) in India



Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), MoSPI (Various Annual Reports)

6.2 Rural–Urban Differences in Female Labour Force Participation

Table 1 indicates a persistent rural–urban disparity in female labour force participation in India during 2017–18 to 2023–24. In 2017–18, the rural FLFPR was 24.6 per cent, only 4.2 percentage points higher than the urban FLFPR of 20.4 per cent. While both rural and urban participation increased over time, the pace of growth was considerably faster in rural areas. Rural FLFPR increased to 26.4 per cent in 2018–19, followed by a sharp rise to 33.0 per cent in 2019–20, 36.5 per cent in 2020–21, 36.6 per cent in 2021–22, 41.5 per cent in 2022–23, and 47.6 per cent in 2023–24. In contrast, urban FLFPR remained almost stagnant at 20.4 per cent during 2017–18 and 2018–19, before increasing gradually to 23.3 per cent in 2019–20, 23.2 per cent in 2020–21, 23.8 per cent in 2021–22, 25.4 per cent in 2022–23, and 28.0 per cent in 2023–24.

Consequently, the rural–urban gap widened substantially from 4.2 percentage points in 2017–18 to 19.6 percentage points in 2023–24, reflecting a much stronger improvement in rural women's labour force participation. Overall, rural FLFPR increased by 23.0 percentage points, whereas urban FLFPR rose by only 7.6 percentage points during the study period.

The comparatively higher participation of rural women can be attributed to their greater involvement in agriculture, allied activities, livestock rearing, forestry and family-based enterprises, where employment is predominantly self-employed or unpaid family work. The rapid increase in rural FLFPR after 2019–20 suggests that post-pandemic livelihood adjustments and greater reliance on household enterprises and self-employment significantly contributed to women's economic participation. Moreover, the flexibility of rural work enables women to combine productive activities with domestic responsibilities (Lahoti & Swaminathan, 2016).

By contrast, the relatively slow increase in urban FLFPR reflects persistent structural barriers, including limited availability of suitable employment, occupational segregation, skill mismatches, childcare responsibilities, workplace safety concerns and inadequate work–life balance. Although urban women generally attain higher levels of education, the expansion of quality employment opportunities has not kept pace with the increasing supply of educated female workers. Klasen and Pieters (2015) argue that both supply-side factors, such as rising education and household income, and demand-side constraints, particularly insufficient growth of female-intensive employment, contribute to low urban female labour force participation. Similarly, Mehrotra and Parida (2017) emphasize that the predominance of informal employment and inadequate creation of quality jobs continue to limit women's labour market participation in India.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the recent increase in India's FLFPR has been driven primarily by rural employment expansion. While this represents a positive development, sustained improvement in women's economic empowerment requires the creation of secure, productive and remunerative employment opportunities, particularly in urban areas, to reduce the persistent rural–urban disparity.

Table 1: Rural–Urban Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) in India, 2017–18 to 2023–24 (Usual Status, 15+ years)

Year	Rural (%)	Urban (%)	Rural–Urban Gap (Percentage Points)
2017–18	24.6	20.4	4.2
2018–19	26.4	20.4	6.0
2019–20	33.0	23.3	9.7
2020–21	36.5	23.2	13.3
2021–22	36.6	23.8	12.8
2022–23	41.5	25.4	16.1
2023–24	47.6	28.0	19.6

Source: Compiled from Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) Annual Reports, 2017–18 to 2023–24.

6.3 Interstate and Regional Disparities

Table 3 reveals substantial regional disparities in female labour force participation across India during 2023–24. The Central region records the highest average FLFPR (53.9 per cent), largely driven by the exceptionally high participation rates in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. Women's greater involvement in agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, and self-employment contributes significantly to the region's strong labour force participation.

The North-Eastern Region ranks second with an average FLFPR of 50.0 per cent. States such as Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Meghalaya exhibit relatively high female participation owing to women's active role in agriculture, family enterprises, local trade, and comparatively favourable socio-cultural norms regarding women's economic activities.

The Southern region records an average FLFPR of 42.9 per cent. While Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh display relatively high participation due to diversified manufacturing and service-sector employment, Kerala continues to report comparatively lower participation despite high female educational attainment, reflecting persistent labour market and social constraints.

The Western region shows a moderate average of 41.3 per cent. States such as Rajasthan and Gujarat contribute positively through agricultural and self-employment opportunities, whereas Maharashtra, despite its industrial development, records comparatively lower female participation in several urban areas.

The Northern Region registers an average FLFPR of 40.6 per cent. Although Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand exhibit high participation due to women's involvement in agriculture and allied activities, the overall regional average is reduced by relatively low female labour force participation in states such as Punjab, Haryana, and the National Capital Territory of Delhi, where prevailing social norms and lower workforce engagement among women continue to limit participation.

Among all regions, the Eastern region records the lowest average female LFPR (37.1 per cent). This is primarily attributable to the very low participation rate in Bihar, which offsets the relatively better performance of Jharkhand and Odisha. The region continues to face challenges related to limited non-farm employment opportunities, lower industrialisation, and socio-cultural barriers affecting women's participation in paid work.

Overall, the findings indicate that female labour force participation varies considerably across regions because of differences in economic structure, agricultural dependence, educational attainment, industrial development, employment opportunities, and prevailing gender norms. These regional disparities highlight the need for state-specific and region-specific policy interventions aimed at expanding decent employment opportunities, promoting skill development, strengthening rural non-farm activities, and addressing socio-cultural barriers that restrict women's participation in the labour market.

Table 2: Zone-wise Average Female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) (Usual Status, Age 15+), 2023–24

Zone	Representative States	Average Female LFPR (%)
North	Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Delhi, Jammu & Kashmir	40.6
South	Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Telangana	42.9
East	Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal	37.1
West	Goa, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan	41.3
Central	Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh	53.9
North-East	Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura	50.0

Source: Compiled and calculated by the author from PLFS Annual Report 2023–24, MoSPI.

Note: Zone-wise averages are calculated from state-level female LFPR (Usual Status, Age 15 years and above).

7. DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the present study indicate that female labour force participation in India has improved significantly during the period 2017–18 to 2023–24, marking a reversal of the declining trend observed during the earlier NSSO rounds. This upward trend reflects greater engagement of women in economic activities and signals positive changes in the labour market. However, the increase in participation should be interpreted with caution, as it is accompanied by considerable regional, sectoral, and structural disparities. Women's participation in the labour force continues to be shaped by a combination of economic opportunities, educational attainment, social norms, household responsibilities, and institutional factors. Moreover, despite the recent improvement in female labour force participation, a substantial gender gap persists, with women's participation remaining considerably lower than that of men. This highlights the continuing challenges of achieving gender equality in the labour market and underscores the need for policies that address both participation and the quality of employment. Thus, while the rise in the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) represents an encouraging development, it does not necessarily imply improvements in decent work, economic empowerment, or gender equality.

A major finding of the study is the persistent rural–urban disparity in female labour force participation. Rural women continue to record substantially higher participation rates than urban women, largely due to their involvement in agriculture, allied activities, and household-based enterprises. In contrast, urban women often encounter barriers such as limited availability of suitable employment, occupational segregation, unpaid care responsibilities, safety concerns, and difficulties in balancing work and family commitments. The study also identifies significant interstate and regional variations in female labour force participation. States in the North-Eastern, Central, and Southern regions generally perform better than several northern and eastern states, reflecting

differences in economic structure, livelihood opportunities, educational attainment, social development, and prevailing gender norms. These findings demonstrate that national averages conceal considerable regional heterogeneity and underscore the need for context-specific policy responses.

The analysis further reveals that agriculture continues to be the largest source of employment for women despite the structural transformation of the Indian economy. A substantial proportion of women remain concentrated in informal and low-paid occupations characterised by limited job security and inadequate social protection. Consequently, higher labour force participation does not necessarily translate into better employment conditions or greater economic empowerment. Moreover, although female educational attainment has improved considerably over time, education alone has not ensured higher labour force participation, indicating that socio-cultural constraints, unequal distribution of unpaid care work, mobility restrictions, and workplace discrimination continue to influence women's employment decisions. Reducing these structural barriers is essential for narrowing the gender gap in employment and ensuring that women benefit equally from economic growth.

These findings have important policy implications for promoting inclusive and sustainable economic development. Expanding employment opportunities in labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, garments, food processing, healthcare, tourism, education, and other manufacturing and service industries can create greater demand for female workers. At the same time, strengthening women-focused skill development programmes, vocational education, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship initiatives can improve employability and facilitate women's entry into emerging sectors of the economy. Enhancing access to institutional credit, financial services, and business support through Self-Help Groups (SHGs), the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), and other entrepreneurship promotion programmes can further strengthen women's economic participation.

Given the significant rural–urban and interstate disparities identified in the study, policy interventions should be designed according to local socio-economic conditions rather than adopting a uniform approach. Improving workplace safety, expanding affordable childcare and crèche facilities, strengthening public transport, and promoting gender-sensitive infrastructure can reduce the barriers associated with unpaid care responsibilities and mobility constraints. Furthermore, policies should encourage the formalisation of women's employment through improved social security coverage, equal remuneration, better working conditions, and stronger labour market protections. Since agriculture continues to employ a large proportion of women, efforts to modernise agriculture, diversify rural livelihoods, and expand rural non-farm employment are equally important for improving women's income and productivity. Expanding digital infrastructure and promoting women's participation in the digital economy can also create new employment opportunities, particularly for educated and young women.

Overall, enhancing female labour force participation is fundamental to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Reducing the persistent gender gap in labour market participation requires a multidimensional policy approach that combines employment generation, skill development, entrepreneurship promotion, financial inclusion, social protection, childcare support, workplace safety, and gender-responsive labour market institutions. Such an integrated strategy would not only improve women's economic empowerment and the quality of employment but also contribute to inclusive economic growth, poverty reduction, reduced inequalities, and the effective utilisation of India's demographic dividend.

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