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Measures in improving the female labour force participation

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Why is in news? The Department of Economic Affairs ‘**Indian Economy — A Review**’ (2024), has highlighted the **rising female labour force participation rate (FLFPR)** in the last six years, **especially in rural India**.

The report reads: “While urban FLFPR has also been rising, the rural FLFPR has seen a sharp growth. The rise in rural female FLFPR has been **accompanied by a rise in the share of self-employment and agriculture** among working women, points which deserve greater scrutiny.”

The rise in the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) in rural India, particularly over the last six years, can be **attributed to strategic interventions** like the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana National Rural Livelihood Mission (DAY-NRLM) and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS).

These programs, focusing on skilling support, credit access, and diversified livelihoods for women, have significantly contributed to the economic empowerment of women in rural areas.

About FLFPR:

Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) is a **ratio of the number of women who are part of the labour force to the number of women in the working age (greater than 15 years of age)**.

A woman is considered to be a part of the labour force if she/he is **either employed or actively looking for work**.

Highlights of the report:

The FLFPR in rural areas increased **from 24.6% (2017-18) to 41.5% (2022-23)**.

DAY-NRLM, with over 90 lakh **Women’s Self-Help Groups (SHGs)**, has played a crucial role in transforming the lives of over 9.96 crore women.

MGNREGS, providing **260 crore person-days of work annually**, has emphasized individual beneficiary schemes, raising incomes for women.

Initiatives like **MKSP and SVEP under DAY-NRLM** have empowered women in agriculture and entrepreneurship, respectively.

Social capital of women’s collectives, supported by elected Panchayat leaders, has been instrumental in the success of these programs.

Challenges:

Despite progress, there’s a **need for a more comprehensive understanding** of the factors contributing to the increased FLFPR.

Kamaraj IAS Academy

Plot A P.127, AF block, 6 th street, 11th Main Rd, Shanthi Colony, Anna Nagar, Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600040

Phone: **044 4353 9988 / 98403 94477 / Whatsapp : 09710729833**

High informalisation characterized by the **absence of formal contracts or social security**, prevents women from participating actively in the labour market.

In India, the **scarcity of alternative employment options** in manufacturing, suppresses their labour force participation. For instance, the automotive industry, employs predominantly male workers, excluding a large proportion of potential female employees.

India experiences one of the most pronounced **gender disparities in wages**, as highlighted in the Economic Survey of 2018. Eg. **Low wages under MGNREGS** pose a challenge, with men often opting for higher-paying jobs in the market.

Societal norms **dictate specific job roles** known as ‘Pink Jobs’ for women, confining them to sectors like nursing, teaching, and gynaecology. This limitation **hinders women’s participation in male-dominated fields** such as engineering and defence, where they face both overt and subtle barriers.

Traditional expectations regarding women’s roles in unpaid care, childcare, and household tasks significantly restrict their participation in the formal workforce.

The **rise in household incomes** provides women with the financial flexibility to **choose not to engage in formal employment**, focusing instead on domestic duties or personal interests. **National Sample Survey Office (NSSO)** suggests that higher family incomes correlate with lower female workforce participation rates.

The prevalent **issues of violence against women and workplace harassment**, particularly in night-time roles, act as significant deterrents, limiting women’s participation in the labour force.

Despite higher educational attainments among women, there’s a **lack of suitable job opportunities**.

Certain **state laws restrict women from working** in specific hazardous sectors, impacting their employment options. For instance, laws in some states prohibit women from working in **mines or certain factory roles**, limiting their employment choices in these sectors.

The **low representation of women in India’s political landscape**, with only 14.4% of seats in the Lok Sabha occupied by women, reflects a gender gap in policy-making.

Significance of enhancing FLFP:

Economic Boost: According to the IMF, gender parity in the workforce can improve India’s GDP by 27%.

Tackling poverty: It helps to tackle the phenomenon of feminisation of poverty, which is a result of highly informalised work performed by women.

Improvement in Social Indicators: Encouraging more women to enter the formal workforce will improve indicators like Infant Mortality Rate (IMR), Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR).

Self Confidence and Dignity: Financial independence enables women to play a greater role in decision-making like family planning.

Global Commitments: Improving FLFPR is related to achievements of SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities).

Government Initiatives for Female Labour Force:

Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017: Enhanced paid maternity leave to 26 weeks. There is an option for remote work post-leave on mutual agreement. Mandatory crèche facilities for establishments with 50+ female

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employees.

Anganwadi Centers (Integrated Child Development Services – ICDS): Offers nutritional support, safe environments, and early childhood education, aiding women in rejoining the workforce post-childbirth.

National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013: Provides affordable food and grants cash transfers of at least INR 6,000 to pregnant and lactating mothers, reducing the necessity for early work return.

Stand Up India Scheme: Facilitates bank loans ranging from INR 10 lakh to 1 crore for new enterprises in various sectors, specifically targeting SC/ST/Women entrepreneurs.

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013: A legal framework to protect women from sexual harassment at work, promoting a safer and more equitable working environment.

Way Forward:

Ensure equal pay for work of equal value through legal protection, wage transparency, and gender-neutral job evaluation.

Address occupational segregation by challenging preconceived notions about work.

Implement gender-responsive policies to safeguard Indian women's employment.

Empowering Indian Women through **training, and development opportunities**

Promoting flexible working arrangements is a need of the hour as hybrid work allows women to be more efficient and productive, and to increase their visibility with senior leadership.

Encourage Indian women to **enter traditionally male occupations** by which women receive better pay