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From Transport To Childcare, Wages To Skilling: How Public Policy Can Boost Indian Women's Workforce Participation

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India is currently at a pivotal moment in its economic and demographic trajectory. In 2025, India is estimated to overtake China as home to the largest working-age (15-64 years) population in the world (Deshpande and Chawla, 2023)¹. However, it is yet to tap into the full potential of this ‘demographic dividend’. A large share of its prime working-age population remains out of the labour force. As of 2023-24, nearly two-thirds (64.4 per cent) of India’s women (aged 15 years or more) were not part of its labour force—i.e. they were neither working nor looking for work, data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) shows. Among men of the same age group, the corresponding share was 22.5 per centⁱ.

The picture remains sobering even among those with high levels of education. In 2023-24, among women (aged 15 years+) who had a postgraduate or higher degree, only half (51.1 per cent) were part of the labour force (among men, this share was 89.4 per cent)ⁱⁱ. Among women of the working-age group (i.e. 15-59 years) who had received formal vocational or technical training, again, only 58.1 per cent were part of the labour force (either employed or unemployed) and 41.9 per cent were not looking for workⁱⁱⁱ.

Among the women who were in the labour force and employed, over two-thirds were self-employed, not necessarily as entrepreneurs and employers but primarily as own-account workers or unpaid helpers. Self-employment was high for men too, but women were more likely to be engaged in this form of employment. Only a small share of those in employment were in regular wage employment or running firms where they employed others. Agriculture and the primary sector remained the predominant employers of India’s workforce, especially the female workforce.

A consequence of these skewed and gendered labour market patterns has meant that the Indian economy is unable to benefit from the potential of some of its most qualified and productive workers.

While gender gaps in the workforce are common around the globe, India’s case remains conspicuous given the quantum and persistence of these gaps. With a female-to-male labour

i LFPR estimates are by current weekly status and sourced from the eSankhyiki portal of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI).

ii LFPR estimates are by usual status for persons of age 15 and above.

iii LFPR estimates are by usual status for persons of age 15 and above

force participation rate (LFPR) ratio of 42.6 per cent in 2024, [as per the World Bank's data based on modelled estimates from the International Labour Organization \(ILO\)](#), India trailed the global average of 69.6 per cent by a significant distance. This ratio was similar at the turn of the millennium (40.8 per cent), and it worsened in subsequent years, before recovering.

Economists have often explained women's labour force participation as having a U-shaped relationship with economic development (see [Jayachandran, 2020²](#) and [Goldin, 1994³](#) as examples, though there are some disagreements as well). Female LFPR tends to be higher at low levels of income but declines as incomes rise, and rises again at higher levels of income. This is true both at the household level and at the level of the larger economy.

In India, however, the impressive economic growth of recent decades hasn't translated into increased economic participation or opportunities for women. In fact, female labour force participation [witnessed a drop before recovering](#) in recent years. Research has pointed to various reasons behind this—from [the lack of non-farming employment opportunities, decline in manufacturing employment⁴](#) and [occupational segregation leading to lack of adequate opportunities⁵](#), to the relative [increase in wages of men](#) leading to women reducing their labour supply to supplement household incomes (the [counter-cyclical nature⁶](#) of women's labour force participation). Even the recent increase in female labour force participation has been [driven largely by an increase in self-employment⁷](#), primarily in rural areas, and not by regular wage or salaried employment.

Beyond adversely impacting India's ranking on various global indices, these skewed labour trends have serious consequences—they hold India back from tapping into its full economic potential, prevent firms and companies from benefiting from our entire talent pool, limit women's lives and freedoms, and adversely affect not only the overall public culture but also the socio-economic outcomes of both women and households.

WHAT CAN PUBLIC POLICY DO?

Several industries and occupations have kept women out or on the margins for decades, if not longer. When women's presence remains scarce in any arena, it becomes a barrier in itself, discouraging others from entering since women are more likely to join spaces where other women are already present. Public policy can create the conditions to break the status quo,

enabling a critical mass of women to enter and participate in activities from which they have been traditionally excluded on an equal footing.

There are multiple ways to do this: First, public policy must ensure women do not face any legal barriers to accessing work opportunities. Second, policies could make it mandatory for employers to ensure a minimum representation of women and/or implement specific policies that are targeted at women, such as mandatory paid maternity leave, providing transportation to female employees, etc. While designed with the intent to promote women's workforce participation, these can also sometimes lead to resistance from firms or create negative incentives for them to hire women (with female employees seen as having higher costs), leading to fewer women getting hired (for instance, see [Beneerjee, Biswas, and Mazumder, 2024](#)⁸ and [Gupta, 2024](#)⁹, who look at the unintended consequences of maternity leave in India, or [Bhalotra et al. \[forthcoming\]](#)¹⁰ on the unintended impact of legislating to handle workplace sexual harassment). Third, instead of the former approach that places the onus of addressing supply-side constraints on firms, public policy can help create the enabling conditions and infrastructure that make it easier for women to access economic opportunities. [Kowalewska \(2020\)](#)¹¹ finds evidence that public policies can enable a critical mass of women even without placing hard mandatory requirements on business, but rather, by adopting a 'soft' voluntary regulations approach. However, the success of this approach depends on the broader public provision for women-friendly policies.

THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS IDENTIFY SOME POLICY MEASURES THAT CAN HELP INDIA CLOSE THE GENDER GAPS IN ITS LABOUR MARKETS:

REMOVE LEGAL RESTRICTIONS:

Even though India's Constitution envisages equality of opportunity for all, various laws restrict women's full and equal access to employment opportunities. In 2022, there were more than 50 acts and 150 rules in India preventing women from accessing employment opportunities, as per [Anand and Kaur \(2022\)](#)¹² in their report, 'State of Discrimination'. These laws impose limitations and restrictions on employers hiring women, and often pertain to either working at night or in work that is seen as hazardous, arduous or morally inappropriate. In subsequent editions, the State of Discrimination report found that while some states have eased some restrictions, many of these continue to persist. [The most recent edition](#) finds that the 10 most populous states in the country prohibit women from working in 217 different factory jobs¹³.

The Union Government's [Economic Survey 2024-25](#) also recognises this barrier, noting that 'labour laws intended to protect the rights of women workers have, more often than not, discouraged hiring by creating systemic barriers to their entry into the workforce'. Removing these restrictions is a necessary first step to dismantling demand-side barriers that keep women out of the workforce. While workers deserve protection from exploitation, the role of public policy is to facilitate enabling conditions that ensure safe and humane workspaces for all, and not discrimination rooted in paternalism, which prevents one half of the population from accessing work opportunities on an equal footing.

FACILITATE ACCOMMODATION CLOSE TO THE WORKPLACE:

While India has recorded staggering economic growth in recent decades, it has not translated into the availability of high-quality employment opportunities for everyone. Some of this has been attributed to India's shift from the primary to the tertiary sector, without the middle transition. Manufacturing also has the ability to create large numbers of jobs for women. Women comprised over a third of India's manufacturing workforce in 2023-24, and their share within the workforce has seen an increase in recent years, as Nileena Suresh's [analysis¹⁴ of PLFS data](#) shows. However, they are more likely to be working in informal manufacturing rather than in organised manufacturing, where they comprise just over a fifth of all directly employed workers—a [share that has remained largely stable over time \(Dhamija, 2023\)¹⁵](#).

Setting up large factories and industrial clusters—ones that can generate significant employment—requires large tracts of land, which is often available on the outskirts of cities and at a distance from residential areas. For women, this distance can become a barrier to accessing these newly created job opportunities. Providing accommodation to workers close to the workplace can not only help dismantle that barrier for women but also help factories and enterprises attract a larger pool of workers in general, making them more competitive. China pioneered this model of the '[dormitory labour regime](#)', allowing its factories to tap into labour (though it also meant a lowering of freedoms for the workers)¹⁶. Several East Asian economies followed in its footsteps (see [Sheng and Shrestha, 1998¹⁷](#); [Nguyen et al., 2016¹⁸](#); [Ramadhani and Manaf, 2020¹⁹](#)).

In an [advisory](#) issued to employers with the intent of boosting women's participation in the workforce, the Ministry of Labour and Employment recommends that every large and micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) employer should 'collaborate to build or facilitate common working facilities and/or dormitories/working women hostels'. This would help reduce

travel times for the employees and enable employers to include more women in their workforce. The guidelines also recommend attaching childcare and senior care facilities to these hostels.

In its 2024 report '[SAFE Accommodation](#)—Worker Housing for Manufacturing Growth', NITI Aayog highlights the importance of investing in such residential facilities. It notes:

“A key challenge in this growth trajectory is ensuring the availability of a sufficient workforce in a single, centralised location. Given the population density and scale of operations, manufacturing relies heavily on migrant workers. This situation presents a complex dilemma where the development of factories hinges on the availability of accommodation, yet the demand for housing relies on the existence of factories. Inadequate accommodation near industrial hubs contributes to high attrition rates, low productivity, and workforce instability. Moreover, this prevents workers, particularly women, from migrating in search of better employment opportunities, thereby impacting the manufacturing sector’s competitiveness and undermining the sector’s growth potential.”²⁰

The report also identifies potential regulatory reform to pave the way for more working housing that could help expand the worker supply for India’s factories.

In 2024, the state of Tamil Nadu joined hands with manufacturing firm Foxconn to build a residential complex catering to over 18,000 women workers in the company’s factories in Sriperumbudur. This [was the first residential complex](#) of this scale built by a state government for a private manufacturer. The company followed it up with [dormitory facilities for its factory workers in Chennai](#) later that year. Women comprise the bulk of the company’s employees in India.

While women-only residential facilities can enable women to enter and remain in the workforce, they may also come with limitations in some cases. One, firms are likely to invest in these only when they largely depend on women workers. Where the share of women is low, companies might not find it cost-efficient to invest in such facilities, and consequently, women’s participation may continue to remain low. Second, such facilities might work better for younger women, particularly those who are not married or don’t have children. Women with partners and/or children may want to live with their families rather than on their own.

Building residential facilities that cater to all workers and/or allow families to move in together might be a way to avoid these limitations. These will allow firms to attract more women across

the age spectrum and build a bigger pool of workers in general. Allowing families to live together while accessing employment will incentivise workers to remain in the workforce longer, as such arrangements allow workers to better manage their professional and personal lives together. Building such residential facilities also creates backward and forward linkages, boosting local economies and widening the geographic spread of economic development beyond a handful of cities.

Hostels for working women

In addition to investing in accommodation facilities close to upcoming and existing manufacturing units, building working women's hostels can be an important way to support women in accessing employment opportunities that are located at a distance from their homes. Working women's hostels have existed in India for decades. [Satyogi \(2023\)](#)²¹ traces their origins to 1972-73—as women sought work in Indian cities, the challenge of safe accommodation and security emerged, and in response, such hostels were developed by voluntary organisations with funding aid from the government. In subsequent years, public policy evolved to increase their budgetary allocations and expand their coverage.

Currently, the government runs the Sakhi Niwas scheme. Whereas earlier the scheme was run as a grant-in-aid initiative where funds were released to states and union territories (UTs) for the construction of new hostels or expansion of existing ones, in its current form, the scheme is being run as a demand-driven, centrally sponsored scheme. Now, states and UTs assess their requirements and submit their proposals, and once approved, the funds are released.

There were 523 functional Sakhi Niwas hostels spread across the country at the end of 2024, and 5.29 lakh women had benefited from these between April 2014 and December 2024, as per the Women and Child Development (WCD) Ministry's [website](#). However, not all states have such facilities; Bihar, Goa, Ladakh, Punjab, Tripura, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal do not have any hostels as per the WCD Ministry data. Increasing the availability of such hostels can help more women access work and educational opportunities. The Union Government allocated [INR 5,000 crores](#) to the scheme for the construction of hostels in FY 2025.

While government-run hostels are affordable, they can suffer from long construction [delays](#), limited services, and poor management or quality. Private accommodation with better facilities may be unaffordable for many. The state of Tamil Nadu runs its hostels—the ‘Thozhi’ hostels—via an innovative [public-private financing model](#) that can address both these challenges. The state provides the land and partial grants, and the Tamil Nadu Shelter Fund co-finances the construction of these hostels. The fund conducts an open bidding process where private operators can bid to operate these hostels. The result has been hostels that are safe but also have modern infrastructure with quality services, allowing women to choose rooms based on their budgets. The hostels also have creches and facilities for those with disabilities ([World Bank, 2024²²](#)).

INCREASE THE AVAILABILITY OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT:

Residential facilities close to the workplace are one way to make jobs more accessible to workers, especially women. Reliable, safe, and affordable transport is another. Men and women commute differently, and this has implications for their ability to participate in economic life. [As per Census 2011](#), nearly half (45.2 per cent) of working women did not travel to work; among those who did, walking was the most common mode of travel. Buses were the next most used mode of transport. Among men, nearly three-quarters of the workers did travel, and while walking was the most common mode for men too, they were less likely than women to be doing so. The next most common modes were bicycles and two-wheelers, and buses were the fourth most common mode. Women were also more likely to be travelling shorter distances. It is in this context that the availability of affordable, regular and safe public transport assumes salience for women.

In recent years, several states have made bus travel free for women. Field reports (see examples [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#))²³ suggest that these are helping women, especially those from low-income households, in various ways—from better access to markets for small business owners to improved savings for daily-wage earners and greater independence for women. Women’s use of buses has increased substantially across states where such schemes have been introduced. However, to ensure that their full benefits are harnessed, there is a need to increase investment in public transport. In several cities, there is a lack of sufficient number of public buses and trains, leading to overcapacity that not only creates safety hazards for all but also leads to a [bias](#) and [backlash against women riders](#)²⁴. Increasing the availability and frequency of buses is essential to ensure the success of these initiatives. To specifically support working women, the government could consider hub-and-spoke models that cater to their needs. Round-the-clock

availability of good public transport that is equipped to ensure the safety of women can help women access jobs that may be located at a distance or where work shifts spill over to very late or early hours. In the absence of such public facilities, the onus lies either on women themselves or on individual firms to arrange for safe transportation, and not all organisations have the required resources or commitment to do so. As a consequence, women end up missing out on potential employment opportunities.

INVEST IN CHILDCARE INFRASTRUCTURE AND POLICIES:

Given that women tend to shoulder a disproportionate share of childcare-related work, the availability of quality and affordable childcare services has been recognised as a critical factor in influencing women's ability to participate in labour markets around the world (see, for example, [Kowalewska, 2020²⁵](#); [Clark et al., 2019²⁶](#); [Chaturvedi, 2019²⁷](#); [Anukriti et al., 2023²⁸](#)). Recognising its importance, India has taken essential steps to make such services available to working parents, especially working mothers.

In 2017, India [amended](#) the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, directing all establishments with 50 or more employees to arrange a creche facility at their office premises. The act also directs employers to ensure women can visit these facilities up to four times a day.

Additionally, India has been running the National Creche Scheme to provide daycare facilities to children aged six months to six years (beyond six years, the Right to Education Act makes school education a right for children aged 6-14 years). The creche scheme was launched to support women's labour force participation, and the WCD Ministry [guidelines](#) envisage creches to be located near homes or the place of work of mothers (ideally at a walkable distance of 0.5-1 km). The creches are being run at Anganwadi centres, and along with providing a safe space to host children while parents are away, they are also expected to provide nutritional and learning services for the young children.

For the majority of India's women who work either in informal employment or are self-employed, these creches can provide the necessary support as they manage the dual demands of their employment and their role as parents. However, despite existing for some years now, the creche scheme is yet to translate into the availability of services for India's women. For instance, there were 11,395 [approved](#) Anganwadi-cum-creches as of 28 February 2025, but only 1,761 (~15 per cent) were operational, [WCD Ministry data shows](#). In several states, not a single creche was operational.

In addition to the creches supported by the WCD Ministry, Karnataka's Koosina Mane creches provide another childcare model, specifically for women workers in rural areas. In 2023, the state government announced that it was setting up Koosina Mane (or children homes/creches) in 4,000 gram panchayats that would cater to women working under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). In addition to supporting mothers, the creches were envisaged to create new job opportunities for women. While creches are usually run by the WCD Ministry, the Koosina Mane creches are run by the [Department of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj](#).

While some companies do support their employees with childcare leave and support either out of compliance or voluntarily, relying on firms to provide such support comes with limitations. First, while creches can cater to male and female employees who are parents alike, firms may see the costs of complying with such mandates and providing such facilities as additional costs of hiring women, jeopardising women's employment. Second, and more importantly, even when firms make such infrastructure available to their employees, the large majority of women end up not benefiting because they are working in the informal sector, as casual labourers or in smaller firms. Investing in more public infrastructure of care can provide essential support to all workers, especially women who continue to shoulder the bulk of caregiving responsibilities across the country. Public provision of such infrastructure and services also reduces the compliance costs on individual firms and reduces the costs of hiring women.

GUARANTEE A MINIMUM LIVING WAGE AND EQUAL WAGES TO ALL WORKERS:

Equal pay for equal work is envisaged in the Indian Constitution as one of the Directive Principles of State Policy. In 1976, India passed the [Equal Remuneration Act](#), which specified that it was the duty of the employer to pay equal remuneration to men and women workers for the same work or for work of similar nature. Since 1948, India has also had a law that envisages paying workers a minimum wage. In practice, however, women's earnings tend to be lower than those of men across employment categories, and their average earnings remain meagre, far below the minimum wage.

In the April to June 2024 quarter, women in regular wage and salaried employment earned INR 17,034 on average, as compared to INR 22,375 for men²⁹, data from the PLFS 2023-24 shows. Those working as casual labourers earned INR 306 per day (compared to INR 459 for men), while self-employed women earned only INR 5,803 on average each month compared to INR 16,723 for

men. These numbers must be read keeping in mind that women are most likely to be self-employed, an employment category that has been on the rise in recent years, indicating the overall low earnings of women workers in India. India ranks among the bottom 10 countries on the indicator ‘Wage equality for equal work’ in the World Economic Forum’s [Global Gender Gap Index](#) for 2025.

Several research studies have noted the persistence of wage gaps. Using data from the Employment and Unemployment Surveys (EUS) of 1999-2000 and 2009-10, [Deshpande, Goel, and Khanna \(2018\)](#)³⁰ found that women in regular wage and salaried jobs earned less than men, and much of the wage gap was discriminatory. Further, they found that while the wage-earning characteristics of women had improved relative to men in the period, the discriminatory component of the wage gap had increased as well. They also note that gender wage gaps were higher among low-wage workers compared to high-wage ones, and that this ‘sticky’ floor had become stickier for women over this period. [Duraismy and Duraismy \(2016\)](#)³¹ had similar findings—that women at the bottom of the distribution faced higher wage discrimination and that it had increased over the years (1983-2012).

When women’s earnings are lower, they have fewer incentives to continue working and their labour force participation remains precarious. While the law envisions wage parity, ensuring there is no wage discrimination in practice is essential. One nudge for this could be increased transparency—in some countries, for instance, companies are required to disclose their gender wage gaps. This simple requirement can bring in some accountability and create incentives for firms to ensure they pay their workers equally, regardless of gender.

Additionally, while the law provides for minimum wages, ensuring a minimum living wage for all can enable better living conditions for all workers, as well as help women who tend to be overcrowded in low-paying roles and industries. The ILO [defines](#)³² a [living wage](#) as ‘the wage level that is necessary to afford a decent standard of living for workers and their families, taking into account the country’s circumstances and calculated for the work performed during the normal hours of work’. Essentially, a [living wage](#) allows a worker to meet their basic needs and live with dignity. Ensuring workers are paid a living wage and not just a minimum wage can help narrow the gender wage gap, especially for those at the lower end of the wage-earning spectrum ([Chen and Xu, 2024](#)³³; [Majchrowska and Strawiński, 2018](#)³⁴; [Kahn, 2015](#)³⁵). The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) argues that industries often keep wages low to cut costs and stay competitive, and many of these industries, such as textiles, tend to employ women in large numbers³⁶. Moving to a living wage paradigm can help. Evidence also indicates that

organisations that pay workers living wages see higher retention and longer employee association.

ENSURE SAFE WORKPLACES:

Safety at the workplace should be non-negotiable, but for women, bullying, harassment, and sexual violence are common experiences at their workplaces. Such violence is a serious violation of their dignity and fundamental rights, and a very real barrier to their ability to participate in the workforce.

In 2013, India passed the landmark Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act—commonly referred to as the POSH Act—to address this. The act defines what constitutes sexual harassment at the workplace and includes unwelcome acts or behaviour that could be either direct or implied in this definition. It also has a wide definition of the workplace and covers workers in the unorganised sector, domestic workers, and any place visited by an employee in relation to their work.

While the enactment of the law has been a significant step towards creating safe workplaces, its implementation leaves much to be desired. Another major lacuna has been [the gap in using data](#) to improve the implementation of the act³⁷. Even though the act makes it mandatory for employers to report data on cases reported and resolved, this data has not been used to understand the landscape of violence and its redressal. It would be very useful to use learnings from this data to understand compliance, identify firms that are not following the law in its full spirit, and influence safety policies going forward. It should also be supplemented with employer-employee surveys to complement and supplement the learnings. As noted in [a previous analysis \(Chawla, 2024\)](#)³⁸, ‘if the day-to-day experience of women at workplaces has the shadow of sexual harassment looming large, it is a continuous emotional and psychological burden that takes a severe toll on the well-being of women, and significantly diminishes their ability to work productively’.

ENSURE ADEQUATE SANITATION FACILITIES:

A [news report in June 2025](#) highlighted the case of women workers at a construction site in the National Capital Region who were removed from their jobs because they wanted to use the toilet³⁹. The report pointed to the lack of toilet facilities on such sites, creating serious issues of health and dignity for women, and how they cope with the same. This was not the first time [such a gap](#) had been highlighted in the press⁴⁰. While policy initiatives such as the Swachh Bharat

Mission have led to increased and improved sanitation facilities at the household level (which can improve [the labour supply of women](#)⁴¹), access to toilets at the workplace remains a serious and common barrier for women, especially those working in informal and precarious forms of employment.

Various government laws mandate the provision of toilets for workers, and yet, numerous field reports and lived experiences of women paint a different picture. The lack of toilets poses [health risks](#)⁴² for women, leading to [discomfort](#)⁴³, [infections](#)⁴⁴ and [health concerns](#)⁴⁵, and safety risks as they are forced to defecate in the open. As a consequence, it negatively impacts their [economic productivity](#) and they are pushed to miss work days or work fewer hours⁴⁶. Ensuring all women workers have access to clean and functional toilets is a simple intervention that can improve their workplace experience and productivity significantly. In their research using data from the 73rd round of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), [Posti, Khare, and Kumar \(2023\)](#)⁴⁷ found that access to toilets had a positive impact on the share of female workers in an informal firm.

Along with ensuring that individual firms are complying with the law, making available clean and functional public toilets in markets, public spaces, and places that are easy for workers to access can help. It also reduces compliance costs on individual employers and firms, especially small ones that lack adequate resources and infrastructure. More importantly, these create services for floating worker cohorts that don't have fixed workspaces but that have to move between locations constantly, such as street vendors, gig economy workers, drivers, delivery agents, etc.

INVEST IN MODERN AND JOB-RELEVANT SKILLS TRAINING:

Women tend to be over-represented in certain sectors and roles, and many of these tend to pay lower wages (see [Suresh, 2025](#)⁴⁸; [Das et al., 2023](#)⁴⁹; [Dhamija, 2023](#)⁵⁰; [Mondal et al., 2018](#)⁵¹). Because of this gendered traditional presence, younger women and men often end up aspiring for similar jobs and work as their senior peers, perpetuating the cycle and solidifying occupational segregation. Breaking the cycle at the level of skilling and vocational training can be disruptive, building a bigger supply pool of female candidates for traditionally male-dominated roles. However, women are less likely to receive any form of formal or informal training as compared to men, and even when they do, they are more likely to get trained in traditionally female-dominated sectors.

Sample this: only 24.5 per cent of women in the working age group (15-59 years) had received any form of vocational training (formal or informal), as per PLFS 2023-24, in comparison with 44.9 per cent of men. This share was only 18.9 per cent among younger women (aged 15-29 years), while 33 per cent of younger men had received such training. The most common field of vocational technical training was Information Technology and Information Technology Enabled Services (IT-ITES). Among men who had received any form of vocational or technical training, 37 per cent had received training in IT-ITES, and among women, the corresponding share was 28.4 per cent. After IT-ITES, for women, the next most common fields were textiles and handlooms, apparel (27.6 per cent), beauty and wellness (7.2 per cent), healthcare and life sciences (5.9 per cent), and office and business-related work (5.5 per cent). For men, the next four most common fields were electrical, power, and electronics (13.5 per cent), office and business-related work (6.5 per cent), healthcare and life sciences (4.4 per cent), and mechanical engineering (capital goods, strategic manufacturing) (4.3 per cent). (*Note: these shares exclude the 'Other' field*).

The need to invest in skilling women in non-traditional and modern vocations is particularly important given the ongoing tectonic shifts in the world of work. With digital technologies, robotics, and artificial intelligence disrupting long-established roles and creating new ones, the current moment presents an opportunity to accelerate the process of correcting the gender skew in several industries. Training women in these new-age skills and technologies can open up several new avenues for them—from logistics and manufacturing to green energy, the gig economy, robotics, and more. But getting younger women to be interested in these opportunities—traditionally held by men—will not be easy. On one hand, there is a need to ensure a steady pool of women who are enrolling for and participating in such upskilling programmes. On the other hand, it is important to reach out to young women along with their families and communities, and spread awareness about the possibilities.

Under its Skill India Mission, the Indian government runs several initiatives to train young people in various vocational and industrial skills, such as the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), Jan Shikshsan Sansthan (JSS), National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS), and Craftsmen Training Scheme (CTS), delivered through various Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) spread across the country.

As of 30 June 2024, India had 15,034 ITIs spread across various states. Over 300 of these were exclusively for women. The share of skill training institutions exclusively for women was better among India's National Skill Training Institutes (NSTIs). Of the 33 institutions, over half (19)

were exclusively for women. However, women remained a minority among those enrolled in the ITIs. In the academic session 2022, women comprised only 14.1 per cent of those enrolled in ITIs, while men made up the other 85.9 per cent of students, an analysis of data from the Ministry of Skill Development And Entrepreneurship's NCVT-MIS-ITI Dashboard shows (while 46 per cent of the total available seats remained vacant). Further, the top three trades in which students were enrolled remained different for male and female students: electrician, fitter, welder for men, and computer operator and programming assistant, electrician and sewing technology for women.

In comparison, women comprised 80.4 per cent of the beneficiaries trained under the JSS scheme between FY 2021-22 and 2023-24. However, they were mostly trained in beauty or apparel-related skills. In a response⁵² to a question in Parliament, the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship [observed](#):

'JSS scheme is offering courses which may be preferred by women such as Beauty Care Assistant, Assistant Hand Embroider (Phulkari / Chickankari / Kashmiri / Zari Zardozi / Kantha), Beauty Care Assistant, Assistant Dress Maker, etc. These courses are having [the] highest enrolment of women beneficiaries.'

Similarly, the government runs several vocational training centres exclusively for women, but the courses they offer largely fit traditional occupational stereotypes, mostly related to beauty, tailoring, secretarial roles, etc.

Barriers that prevent women from accessing economic opportunities, such as distance and lack of safe transportation and accommodation, also limit their access to these opportunities ([NITI Aayog, 2023](#)⁵³). Additionally, there are financial constraints, lack of awareness, a tedious admission process that requires access to digital devices and services, as well as a lack of gender-sensitive cultures and infrastructure at the ITIs that prevent women from enrolling in these courses ([Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2020](#)⁵⁴). The predominance of limited vocations and technical skills is another barrier preventing women from accessing skills that would enable them to access good-quality and better-paying jobs. Addressing these barriers and enabling women's access to skilling opportunities, especially ones that can help them access better jobs, should be a priority for public policy.

Traditional economics attributes low labour force participation to supply-side and demand-side factors. The supply side includes factors that impact women's ability to 'supply' their labour or be available for work, such as health, educational attainment, skilling, domestic responsibilities, etc. On the other hand, demand-side factors are linked to the 'demand' for women's labour—the availability of jobs, safe workplaces, remuneration, etc.

India has made remarkable progress on women's education enrolment and attainment and on fertility and health outcomes (the supply-side factors). These have been accompanied by impressive economic growth and development in recent decades. Yet, these gains have not translated into women's economic participation to their full potential. There is not only a quantitative gender gap in our labour markets, but women are also far less likely to be in regular-wage employment, and their average earnings remain lower than those of men across employment types. This is despite the fact that the gap in educational attainment has virtually closed, and girls and young women consistently have better educational outcomes than men. Yet, women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic and caregiving work that consumes the bulk of their time. On average, an Indian woman spent 236 minutes each day on unpaid domestic work for the household in 2024, while an Indian man spent only 24 minutes. These are some of the [widest gender gaps](#) in the world⁵⁵.

While governments should not dictate how a household is run, public policy can help build and nurture the right infrastructure and services to alleviate this disproportionate burden on women. India has enacted several landmark policies in this direction—from mid-day meals to Anganwadi centres, and maternity and childcare leave. But beyond these supply-side factors, demand-side barriers remain very real roadblocks to women's economic participation. These barriers prevent women from altogether entering or thriving in the workforce.

Beyond outright legal barriers, organisations and firms tend to keep women out in myriad ways—from gendered hiring ads and biased recruitment processes to unsupportive work cultures, limited opportunities for growth, wage gaps, and lack of safety. While some of these are rooted in an explicit bias against women (such as assumptions that women won't be able to do some work or are likely to drop out), others may be due to unintended or covert biases (for example, research evidence has shown that simple design choices regarding how job ads are worded or how recruitment processes are structured may have implicit gender biases). In addition, other barriers may arise due to increased compliance costs when hiring women. The very laws that are brought in to support women in the workplace end up jeopardising their prospects.

From helping ease supply-side constraints to dismantling these demand-side barriers, there is a lot that public policy can do. Not only will these help women access more opportunities, they will also make our labour force more competitive, productive, and allow us to unleash the full promise and potential of our young and ambitious population.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Remove legal restrictions:** Eliminate laws and policies that restrict women from certain jobs. Focus instead on creating safe, accessible and non-discriminatory workplaces for everyone.
- **Invest in modern and job-relevant skills training:** Instead of training women in a limited set of vocations, skilling programs for women should include modern, job-relevant skills, including in traditionally male-dominated fields. This creates a larger pool of qualified female candidates for diverse roles and sectors.
- **Provide accommodation near manufacturing units:** Build or facilitate residential complexes and dormitories near factories and industrial clusters. This removes a major barrier for women living far away, attracts more workers, and helps all workers better manage their professional and personal lives.
- **Invest in hostels for working women:** Increase the availability of safe, affordable public hostels. Explore innovative public-private partnerships, like Tamil Nadu's "Thozhi" program, to expand options.
- **Increase the availability of public transportation:** Invest in more frequent, safe, and available public transport. Implement hub-and-spoke models and round-the-clock services to support working women with varied work shifts.
- **Expand childcare infrastructure:** Increase the number of operational public creches in both urban and rural areas. Instead of putting the onus on individual employers, investing in public childcare infrastructure is crucial, especially for women who work in the informal sector, in smaller firms or in casual labour.
- **Substantially increase the availability of clean and functional toilets:** Along with ensuring that individual enterprises provide sanitation facilities for their workers, it is imperative to provide clean and functional public toilets in public spaces. These create services for workers who don't have fixed workspaces such as street vendors, gig economy workers, drivers etc.
- **Ensure equal pay and a living wage:** While laws for equal pay exist, wide gender wage gaps persists. Public policy should enforce wage parity - making it mandatory to disclose gender wage gaps can be one way. Further, shifting the focus from a minimum wage to a minimum living wage can help since women tend to be overrepresented in low-paying roles.
- **Enhance workplace safety:** Safe and harassment-free workplaces are a fundamental requirement for women's sustained participation in the workforce. There is a need to

ensure that the Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (POSH) Act is being implemented in letter and spirit. Using compliance data to understand and improve the law's working is essential.

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