

strongly prevalent in the society. In this narrow-minded society, the mere birth of a girl child was considered inauspicious. The 19th and 20th centuries saw significant feminist movements for women's rights, and in the West, feminist thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir, Germaine Greer, Kate Millet and Virginia Woolf waged ideological struggles for women's liberation. Simone de Boulogne once said, "One is not born a woman, but one is made a woman." She elaborates it further saying, "Woman is not woman merely by birth, but she turns a woman. No biological, psychological or economical destiny happens to be the lone creator of the fate of a woman. An entire civilisation creates such a peculiar creature."

Women in Patriarchal Society

The relationship between men and women is one of the two cornerstones of society. Only in a balance and equality between these two foundations can a healthy, democratic, and exploitation-free society be envisioned. However, for centuries, the situation has been the opposite. There is neither a proper balance in society nor women's freedom. Women have been subjugated. Since men have always feared women's independent power, they have primarily targeted their freedom. In this context, Rajendra Yadav's following comment is crucial: "In fact, through all this literary and culturally dignified jargon, man has the one thing about woman that has been killed, crushed, or tamed is her freedom. Man has always feared woman's independent power and has deliberately made it the focus of his attacks. In her integrity and completeness, woman is formidable and invincible. There she is a power that is free and unrestrained, wild and capricious—that is why man has broken her. Only by breaking can one be weakened and tamed. Man has constantly and in every way tried to make her dependent and passive, which is why Beauvais says, "Woman is not born, she is made."

Indian Women's Liberation Movement

In India, the women's issue first began to be discussed in the early 19th century when Raja Ram Mohan Roy, in Bengal, spoke out against the practice of Sati and advocated for women's rights to education and property. He opposed the practice of purdah and child marriage and supported widow remarriage. This wave of new consciousness in India had a widespread impact on women's society. A revolutionary shift in the women's liberation movement in India occurred when many women, including Savitribai Phule, Ma Sarada Devi, Pandita Ramabai, Fatima Sheikh, Anandibai Joshi, Ramabai Ranade, Sister Nivedita, Francina Sorabji,

Tarabai Shinde, Annie Jagannathan, Rukhmabai, Begum Rukeya Sakhawat Hussain, Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, Swarn Kumari Devi, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, and Manorama Gupta, became part of it. These women creatively opposed social evils and irrelevant traditions and customs. This consciousness of women's liberation and resistance, which arose in the background of the Renaissance, has been flowing uninterruptedly in contemporary society today, passing through many powerful writers, politicians, social reformers, thinkers and intellectuals.

Legal and Social Changes after Independence

After independence, the social status of women in India underwent a healthier and more meaningful transformation. Along with significant constitutional protections, numerous progressive laws were enacted to protect women's interests, and numerous development policies and programmes were adopted to initiate and sustain efforts to uplift women in society and bring them to parity with men in all spheres of life. Since independence, the status of Indian women has seen significant improvements in education, employment, and legal rights, with them serving in roles ranging from the President to fighter pilots. However, they still face serious challenges, in some form or another, such as patriarchal mindsets, domestic violence, harassment, rape, gender discrimination, exploitation, torture, gender pay disparity, and the rural-urban divide.

To address this inequality, exploitation of women, and gender-based discrimination, and to promote women's safety, security, and empowerment, the Government of India and state governments are implementing a comprehensive Mission *Shakti* campaign. Under the *Sambal* and *Samarthya* sub-plans, it aims to empower women, provide legal assistance, and ensure access to benefits from various government schemes.

Government Schemes for Women's Empowerment

To empower women and ensure their equal participation in the workforce, the Government of India is implementing significant schemes and policies, including Mission *Shakti Yojana*, *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*, *Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana*, *Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana*, *Sukanya Samridhi Yojana*, *Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana*, *Lakhpati Didi Yojana*, *Namo Drone Didi Yojana*, *Mahila e-Haat*, *SwadharGreh Yojana*, *Mission Indradhanush*, *Trade Scheme*, *Women's Helpline*, *STEP initiative*, *Mahila Samman Savings Certificate*, and *Mahila Shakti Kendra*. The Government of India is playing a significant



role in promoting women's participation in the workforce through the establishment of committees and commissions, such as NITI Aayog (Women's Action Framework 2047), Parliamentary Committee on Women's Empowerment (2024), Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Ministry of Labour and Employment (2025 Draft Policy), BRICS Forum on Women's Development (2025), Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, and the 16th Finance Commission.

Additionally, recent efforts to increase women's participation in the workforce have focused primarily on implementing incentives and employment programmes for women, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme, and Mudra. The government has made efforts to provide safe workplaces and specialised skill training programmes for women. The Maternity Benefit Act of 2017 increased paid maternity leave from 12 weeks to 26 weeks and includes provisions that make it easier for women to work.

Female Workforce Participation: Trends and Statistics

As a result of these historic and innovative schemes, policies, committees, commissions, and campaigns initiated by the Government of India focused on

women's empowerment, India has achieved a major milestone in women's economic participation, with the female labour force participation rate increasing from 23.3 per cent in 2017-18 to approximately 41.7 per cent in 2023-24. This remarkable increase has also given India a distinct identity globally, as World Bank data confirms that India has recorded the highest increase in women's labour force participation among all BRICS countries over the past decade. According to the Ministry of Labour and Employment, India's female labour force participation rate (LFPR) is expected to nearly double from 23.3 per cent in 2017-18 to 41.7 per cent in 2023-24, reflecting the transformative inclusion of women in the workforce. According to the World Bank (2025), India has recorded the most significant growth among BRICS countries, with a 23 per cent increase over the last decade. According to the State of Working India Report 2023, the composition of the female workforce in India is changing; more young and highly educated women are now entering the labour market.

By 2030, India is projected to have the world's largest working-age population, reaching nearly 70 per cent. India is poised to become a major contributor to global economic growth and is targeting a GDP growth rate of 8 per cent over the next five years. Women are expected to account for more than half of new entrants

into the workforce by 2030, as highlighted in the report "India's Breakout Moment." According to the latest Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) report 2023, the labour force participation rate for women aged 15 and above increased from 23.3 per cent in 2017-18 to 32.8 per cent in 2021-22, representing a growth of 9.5 per cent. This increase was more pronounced in rural areas, where it increased by 12 percentage points, while in urban areas it increased by 3.4 percentage points. Specifically, the LFPR (labour force participation rate) for women in rural areas increased from 24.6 per cent in 2017-18 to 36.6 per cent in 2021-22, representing a growth of 12.0 percentage points.

Challenges and Obstacles

Female labour force participation in India has seen significant growth in recent years, although it remains low compared to the global average. The female labour force participation rate declined from 31.2 per cent in 2011-12 to 23.3 per cent in 2017-18, reflecting women's exclusion from the labour market. However, this figure has also seen rapid change, with the female labour force participation rate expected to increase to 41.7 per cent in 2023-24. Despite numerous initiatives, awareness programmes, and reforms, challenges remain. According to a report by the Azad Foundation, the female workforce in India fell to 18 per cent in 2019 from 37 per cent in 2006. India ranks 135th out of 146 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index 2022. According to market researchers, only 6 per cent of India's largest 160 companies have women in board positions.

Currently, many traditional values, inhumane constraints, and familial, social, political, economic, and religious norms prevent women from working outside. The various obstacles that still stand in the way of increasing women's participation in the workforce in India are patriarchal social system, discrimination against women in government and non-government offices, physical and mental harassment of women, lack of self-reliance and independence, undervaluation of women's labour, gender pay gap and prevalence of gender stereotypes, socio-cultural biases, irregularities in maternity leave regulations, rural-urban divide, occupational segregation, lack of infrastructure for child care leave regulations, societal indifference towards women, exclusion from technical and STEM education, lack of sense of identity, existence and rights, lack of freedom to make decisions, dual mentality in families towards women, domestic violence/domestic

abuse, lack of awareness of schemes, rules and laws related to women's empowerment, lack of family encouragement for women to enter the workforce, increasing impact of mechanisation, shrinking agriculture and underdeveloped manufacturing sector, limited safe transportation facilities and unfriendly work environment.

POSH Act 2013 and She-Box Portal

Sexual harassment of women at the workplace not only violates their fundamental rights but also poses a serious challenge to their participation in India's labour force. It not only hinders economic progress but also creates an environment of fear and insecurity in the workplace. In this context, a safe and dignified work environment for women is crucial.

To ensure this, the Government of India enacted the POSH Act 2013 (POSH Act - Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act). Its objective is to prevent, prohibit, and provide justice to women against sexual harassment. The Ministry of Women and Child Development has launched an online portal called the Sexual Harassment Electronic Box (She-Box) for women employees working in public and private enterprises. This portal is for filing complaints related to sexual harassment and violence against women.

Role of Women in Developed India

However, in the future, women's participation in the workforce can only be ensured by removing these barriers from Indian society. The division between women's domestic work and their work life must be stopped, and all women's work, both formal and informal, must be valued. Focusing on women's work options, while taking into account cultural context and autonomy, is essential. Promoting and supporting higher women's labour force participation is not only a matter of gender equality but also a key driver of social progress and development. Utilising women's full potential in the workforce will propel the entire country forward through socio-economic growth, poverty reduction, improved human capital, and greater inclusiveness and equity. As India progresses towards a *Viksit Bharat@2047*, ensuring 50 per cent female workforce participation will be crucial. In the future, empowered, educated, and employed women will not only form the foundation of inclusive growth but also shape a more equitable and globally competitive India. □