



Impact of Social Norms on Women's Economic Empowerment in India

Research Brief

November 2025

ABOUT IWWAGE

The Institute for What Works to Advance Gender Equality (IWWAGE) was established in 2018 with an aim to build and deepen evidence around the low participation of women in the economy to find solutions to support the development of gender inclusive policies and programmes.

IWWAGE is an initiative of LEAD at Krea University, an action-oriented research centre housed at the Institute for Financial Management and Research (IFMR), a not-for-profit society which is also the Sponsoring Body of Krea University.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Bordoloi, M., Awasthi, S., Roy, S. (2025). Impact of Social Norms on Women's Economic Empowerment in India. IWWAGE (LEAD at Krea University), November 2025.

DESIGN

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We express our gratitude to Ms. Sharon Buteau (Executive Director), LEAD at Krea University; and Ms. Radha Chellappa (Executive Director), IWWAGE for their constant support and encouragement.

We are extremely grateful to Dr. Sona Mitra (Advisor), IWWAGE; and Ms. Aditi Vyas (Associate Director - Research & Policy), IWWAGE, for their valuable feedback and unwavering support during the development of this research brief.

We extend our sincere appreciation to Dr. Neetu John (Principal - Gender Research & Programs) at Fraym, for her insightful comments that have both informed and shaped our work.

We are deeply thankful of Dr. Sharon Barnhardt (Director), Centre for Social and Behaviour Change at Ashoka University; Ms. Sushmita Mukherjee (Independent Consultant and Expert in Gender & Social Norms, Behavioural Science, Research & Evaluation); and Mr. Shekhar Menon (Senior Program Officer - Behavioural Insights), Gates Foundation for their valuable feedback.

The team would also like to extend special thanks to the editorial and design team – Ms. Rachita Malik (Head - Communication and External Engagement), IWWAGE; and Mr. Sakthivel Arumugam (Manager - Creative Design, Learning & Communications), LEAD at Krea University.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) encompasses women's access to economic opportunities, control over economic resources, access to decent and non-discriminatory work conditions and the autonomy to make economic choices. It is both a process and an outcome that enhances individual agency and contributes to inclusive economic growth. In many developing countries including India, WEE is not only impacted by structural barriers such as inadequate care infrastructure, issues related to last-mile connectivity, poor gender-sensitive workplace infrastructure, and limited access to skills, but also by deeply entrenched social norms around gender that define 'appropriate' roles for women in societies. These gender norms, operating through families, communities, and institutions, reinforce patriarchal hierarchies, which systematically limit WEE. This research brief unpacks the interplay between informal and formal structures of implementation of gender norms across three distinct pathways of WEE: a) Access to economic opportunities, b) Choice of occupations, and c) Workplace experiences. Drawing on social norms theory and feminist economics literature, the brief presents existing evidence through a synthesis of scholarship, secondary data, and programmatic insights from India and globally.

In India, socio-cultural norms around marriage, motherhood, care responsibilities, and mobility reflect how patriarchal norms undermine women's autonomy and curtail their access to economic opportunities. Latest evidence highlights that majority of Indian women who are not in labour force, cited childcare and personal commitments as the principal factors. Similarly, less than half of the married women in India reported having freedom of mobility on their own. While gender parity in educational enrolment has been achieved to a great extent, household investments in girls' higher education, especially in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields, are undermined by prevailing beliefs in women's secondary earner status. Limited ownership of property and assets, further constrains WEE. Social norms also shape the nature of work considered 'suitable' for women, reinforcing occupational segregation and gender wage gaps. Gender-based segregation of occupations are often influenced by employers' perceptions regarding women's productivity primarily because of care responsibilities, leading to discriminatory hiring practices. Gendered workplace practices, shaped by patriarchal expectations, also limit women's career progression and leadership roles. Women's overrepresentation in informal sector in India, is symptomatic of gendered constraints in the labour market. Limited upward mobility, discrimination, and under-provisioning of care infrastructure at workplaces, also contribute to early attrition and lower effective retirement ages for women.

Progress in WEE in India requires deliberate, long-term, and holistic efforts that go beyond expanding economic opportunities to actively confront and transform restrictive social norms that act as invisible barriers. Given the complex nature of marginalization based on caste, class, and regional disparities, an intersectional approach is essential that simultaneously addresses structural barriers and the underlying normative frameworks that perpetuate gender inequalities.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| Acknowledgement | 02 |
| Executive Summary | 03 |
| A. Background | 06 |
| A1. Objectives | 07 |
| A2. Conceptual Framework | 07 |
| A3. Methodology and Approach | 08 |
| B. Pathways to WEE and Impact of Social Norms | 09 |
| B1. Access to Economic Opportunities | 09 |
| B2. Occupational Choices and Nature of Work | 09 |
| B3. Workplace Experiences: Earnings, Upward Mobility, and Job Retention | 15 |
| C. Flagship Union Government Programmes and Their Role in Shifting Social Norms | 18 |
| D. Insights with Policy Implications | 20 |
| References | 23 |



Background

Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) refers to women's ability to access economic opportunities across diverse occupations and sectors with decent work conditions, alongside better access to resources, assets, and social protection, that leads to improved agency to make economic choices. From a macro-economic perspective, WEE refers to creating an enabling environment for labour markets to work for women and empowering women to compete in markets (World Bank, 2006). It is a process that not only leads to upliftment of women's lives through engagement in gainful employment, but also contributes to the betterment of communities and society as a whole. WEE can be seen as a process as well as an outcome of improved access to economic resources and ability to make economic decisions about their own lives. WEE is deeply influenced by multiple structural and systemic factors. Structural issues such as inadequate child care infrastructure, lack of access to market-relevant skills, poor transportation facilities with last mile connectivity, and women's safety concerns at public places, have an adverse impact on WEE in India. At the same time, systemic barriers such as deep-rooted social norms around gender, operated through families, communities, and social institutions - have an overarching impact on WEE. Gender norms, a subset of social norms, are informal but deeply entrenched beliefs about gender roles and power relations that regulate behaviour in specific contexts (UNICEF, 2020). These unwritten rules based on patriarchal beliefs, influence appropriate conduct and define acceptable roles and behaviour for men and women, as well as shape institutions, policies, markets, and resource allocation within societies (Boudet et al., 2023). Gender norms can create powerful constraints in WEE by determining the nature work perceived

to be suitable for women, influencing employers' practices, reinforcing occupational segregation, restricting mobility and agency, and shaping aspirations (Jayachandran, 2021).

In the Global South, societal expectations from women around prioritisation of domestic work, restrictions on mobility, and male approval for financial decisions, tend to limit women's financial autonomy (Chandramohan, et al., 2023; Bussolo, et al., 2023). Even with higher education, women encounter limited avenues for employment and constrained agency, reflecting persistent normative barriers (Marcus, 2021). Across Asia, unequal care responsibilities remain a major structural barrier, tethering women to home and limiting access to formal and high-skilled jobs (ADBI & SEWA Bharat, 2023). In South Asia, entrenched socio-cultural norms continue to dictate women's work, with domestic responsibilities being a key driver of women's low labour force participation rate (LFPR) (ILO & ADB, 2023).

Norms are neither static nor uniform across different socio-cultural contexts. The rural-urban divide deepens gender-based inequalities in economic empowerment created by gender norms, with rural areas experiencing a "more restrictive code of conduct" (Tolciu & Zierahn, 2012; Chandramohan et al., 2023). Moreover, evidence from South Asia shows 'marriage penalty' associated with WEE, with marriage reducing the likelihood of economic engagement even before child bearing. While women's education reduces this penalty by expanding opportunities, husbands' education has not shown any significant effect (Bussolo et al., 2023). However, even in these socio-cultural contexts, women try to navigate ways to engage in economic activities while conforming to accepted social narratives.

Evidence from rural Bangladesh shows that while patriarchal and religious practices restrict women's employment, yet they try to invoke cultural and religious narratives to justify their economic engagement. Higher education and employment sometimes result in recognition of their contribution to household income, enhancing decision-making power (Rietveld et al., 2023). Another study indicated how Pakistani women entrepreneurs strategically used religious justifications to legitimise their business activities, thereby negotiating gender roles within households and society (Roomi et al., 2018).

Women's economic engagement cannot be understood as an individual rational choice made in isolation; it is deeply embedded within wider social and cultural environments in which they are situated. Further, women's educational attainment, household wealth, social group, and rural-urban dynamics influence how social norms impact WEE. Across Asia, these interlocking dynamics converge to create a dual bind: women remain constrained by the unequal burden of unpaid care work, while simultaneously facing social barriers for economic empowerment. On one hand, social norms directly impose pervasive, often invisible, constraints on women's choices regarding work, and control access to earnings. However, norms do not always operate in isolation. They often indirectly interact with structural factors such as creation of decent job opportunities in the economy, care infrastructure, safe transportation facilities, and institutional support, to influence the process of WEE. Policy interventions to create jobs and address infrastructure constraints, not only provide access to employment opportunities, but also gradually shift norms by normalizing women's economic participation (Deshpande, 2024). Therefore, while it is crucial to have deliberate interventions to transform the social norms that sustain gender inequality, efforts at removing structural barriers can also address discriminatory gender norms to enable WEE.

A1. Objectives

This research brief seeks to explore how social norms around gender, impact the process of women's economic empowerment in India across three broad pathways:

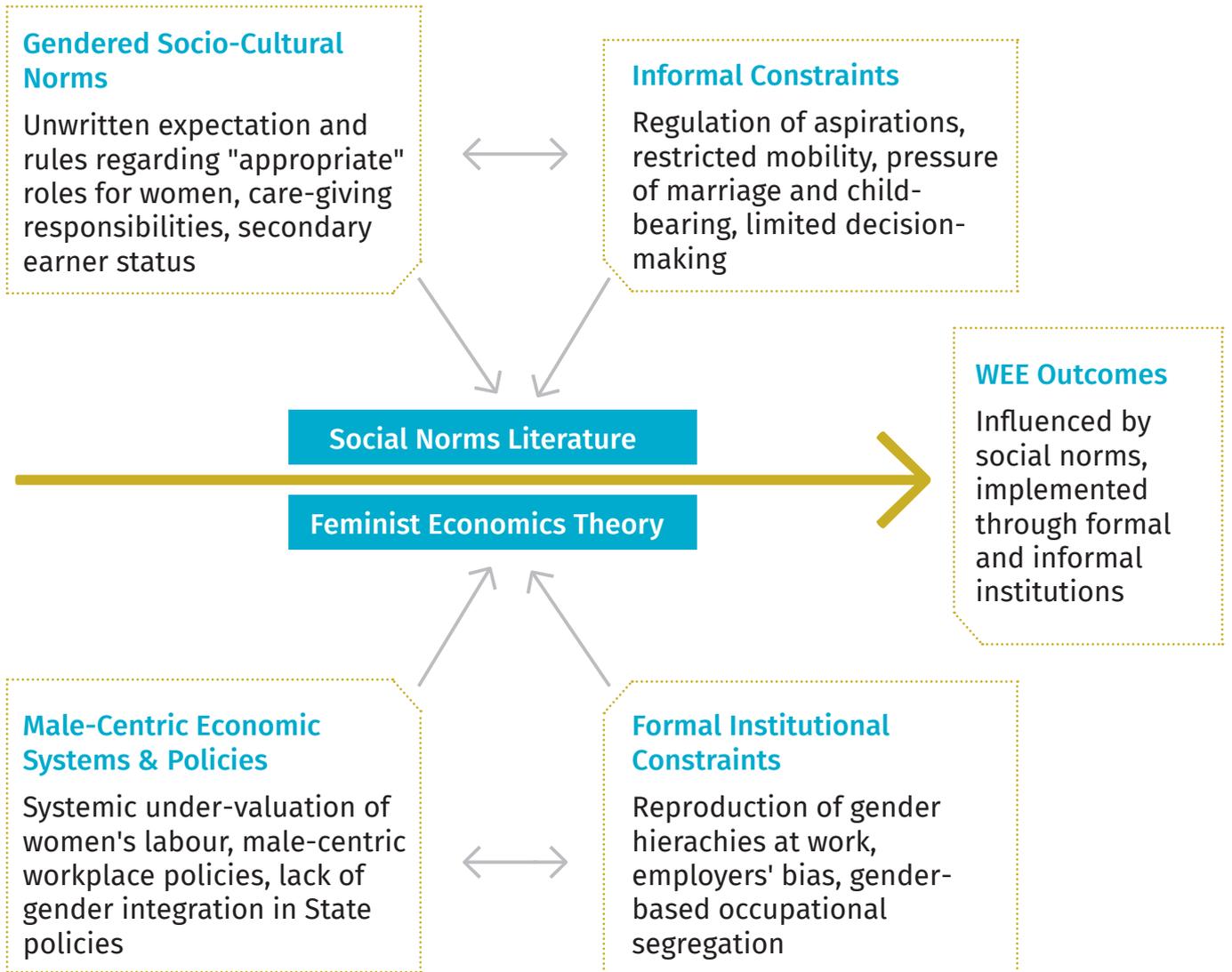
- Access to economic opportunities,
- Occupational choices,
- Career progression and workplace experiences.

Additionally, the brief aims to present key insights to inform policy and programmatic interventions that can help address the challenges caused by social norms in advancing WEE.

A2. Conceptual Framework

This brief draws on two schools of thought - the social norms literature and feminist economics theorisation- to analyse how WEE is shaped by social norms. Social norms theory is built on a wide body of scholarship that examines how unwritten yet powerful expectations regarding "appropriate" roles for women, influence individual and collective behaviour within families, communities, and institutions (Bicchieri, 2005; Johnson, 2012; Mackie et al., 2014). Such norms often impose domestic and caregiving responsibilities on women, limiting their mobility and narrowing labour market participation (Jayachandran, 2021). Within this framework, the focus is on how informal institutions regulate opportunities and aspirations, thereby influencing pathways to women's economic engagement. On the other hand, feminist economics is a school of thought and political action that interrogates the structural and institutional dimensions of gendered inequalities (Agarwal, 1997; Agenjo-Calderón & Gálvez-Muñoz, 2019). It critiques the undervaluation of women's unpaid labour and highlights how economic systems and policies are historically built on male-centric assumptions (Folbre, 1995; Nelson & Stephens, 2013). This perspective highlights how formal institutions, State policies, and development programs reproduce gender hierarchies by systematically devaluing women's contributions both inside and outside households. Taken together, these two perspectives provide a multi-layered framework and allow us to capture the interaction between social norms and economic institutions, offering a more comprehensive understanding of WEE (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: Influence of Social Norms and WEE



A3. Methodology and Approach

This research brief adopts a desk-based analytical approach, synthesising existing scholarship, secondary data, and programmatic insights from India and globally. The approach is conceptual and evidence-driven, rather than

empirical. It aims at distilling insights from diverse sources into a coherent conceptual framework discussed in the previous section. It recognises the limitations of desk-based synthesis and the absence of new field-based evidence. However, it leverages existing research and data to generate actionable insights for researchers, policymakers and practitioners.

B

Pathways to WEE and Impact of Social Norms

In India complex gender norms surrounding care responsibilities, asset ownership, mobility, jobs perceived to be suitable for women, upward mobility at workplaces, and agency to take decisions about their own lives, significantly impact women's aspirations to be economically independent, access to paid work, nature of occupations they engage in, and their upward mobility at work.

B1. Access to Economic Opportunities

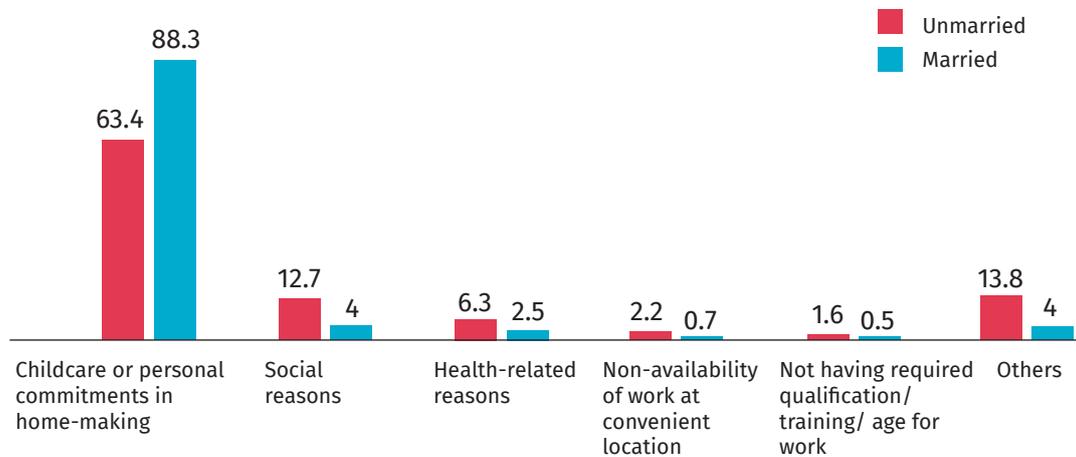
Women's ability to access employment opportunities is significantly influenced by socio-cultural norms around their care-giving role, freedom of movement, households' attitude towards investment in women's education, autonomy over reproductive health choices, and intra-household autonomy.

Women's Perceived Role as Care-Givers

LFPR among Indian women aged 15 to 59 years was 45.2 per cent during 2023-24, as compared to 83.5 per cent among men, as per the estimates from Periodic Labour force Survey (PLFS). Excluding 12 percent women who were engaged in studies, a significantly large proportion (40.7 percent), stayed away from labour market and was primarily engaged in domestic duties with or without other household consumption activities such as free collection of vegetables, firewood, and cattle feed, sewing, tailoring, weaving etc. When these women were enquired about the possible reasons for not joining the labour force, majority (85 per cent) cited child-care responsibilities and personal commitments in homemaking, as the key reasons. Additionally,

5 per cent of women reported other social reasons. These patterns exemplify the 'care penalty' - where women's primary role in social reproduction limits their participation in the formal economy (Folbre et al., 2021). The disproportionate share of domestic work and care responsibilities is also highlighted by India's latest Time Use Survey (TUS, 2024). The average time spent on unpaid domestic work by Indian women was 289 minutes daily, as compared to 88 minutes spent by men during 2024. Similarly, average daily time devoted to unpaid caregiving by women was 137 minutes, as opposed to only 75 minutes by men. These findings imply how gender norms manifest in practice - the subjective norms around gender roles often create social pressure that influences women's behavioural choices, making them feel obligated to prioritise care work regardless of their career aspirations. The theory of planned behaviour developed by Ajzen (1991) further elucidates how attitudes toward caregiving (often positive for women due to socialisation), subjective norms (societal expectations), and perceived behavioural control (limited agency due to structural constraints) converge to shape women's intentions and subsequent engagement in unpaid care work (Amar et al., 2024). As argued by Folbre (2018), unpaid care work represents a form of "caring labour" that has been historically undervalued because it has been provided by women at low or no cost, perpetuating gender-based economic inequalities. Feminist scholarship has highlighted that while macroeconomic production relies on women's unpaid labor, it often undervalues such labour (Braunstein, 2021). They fundamentally challenged conventional economic paradigms by explicitly valuing unpaid care work that has been systematically rendered invisible in traditional economic analysis (Waring, 1988;

Figure 2: Percentage Distribution of Women (15 to 59 years) Engaged in Domestic Duties across Reasons for Not Joining Labour Force, by Marital Status, All India, 2023-24 (%)



Source: Estimated from PLFS, 2023-24 unit-level data.

Marriage often imposes additional care responsibilities on Indian women. A look at the reasons cited for abstaining from labour force separately by married and unmarried women in India during 2023-24, indicates how social expectations to fulfil household care needs, increase substantially after marriage (Figure 2). For the unmarried women, along with care work, other social reasons and non-availability of work in convenient locations also become crucial barriers. A survey conducted by the Institute for What Works to Advance Gender Equality (IWWAGE), covering around 5,000 women across five states in India in 2021-22, also found high prevalence of gender norms dissuading women from stepping out to work (IWWAGE, 2022). Married women and those with childcare responsibilities were observed to be much less likely to participate in the labour force, in comparison to those unmarried and without children. Additionally, higher spousal income led to a lower likelihood of women's labour force participation, indicating the presence of an negative income effect. Majumdar (2024) also notes how the 'male breadwinner' norm affects married women's labour market inclusion and earning potential.

Gendered Attitudes towards Education & Skilling

Access to education and training to develop skills demanded by emerging labour market, is crucial for women's labour market participation. However, systematic devaluation of women's economic contributions in patriarchal societies also shapes educational investments. Norms around women's restricted mobility and unpaid care burden, negatively impact access to education and skill development. While India's gender gap in enrolment rates has shrunk drastically over the last decade to reach gender parity in enrollment both school education and higher education, there is still a considerable gender gap in household expenditure on education, pointing towards persistent gender-based discrimination. The widening gender gap in household expenditure with increasing levels of education, to the disadvantage of girls, is largely influenced by perceived returns on investment in girls' education (Bordoloi & Roy, 2025). This demonstrates that human capital investment decisions are not made in isolation but are deeply embedded within patriarchal economic structures that undervalue women's

potential economic contributions, thereby reproducing their economic dependence and reinforcing gendered divisions of labour that benefit patriarchal capitalism (Urban & Pürckhauer, 2016). It creates a self-reinforcing cycle where women's perceived lower economic value justifies reduced investment in their human capital, which in turn produces the very economic outcomes used to rationalise the initial underinvestment (Polachek, 2004). It is often perceived that benefits of such investment will accrue to the daughter's marital household rather than her natal family (Jensen, 2010). This represents a fundamental market failure where the social costs of maintaining patriarchal gender norms exceed the economic benefits, yet these norms persist because they serve the interests of male-dominated institutional structures (Ferrant & Kolev, 2016; Guiso & Zaccaria, 2023).

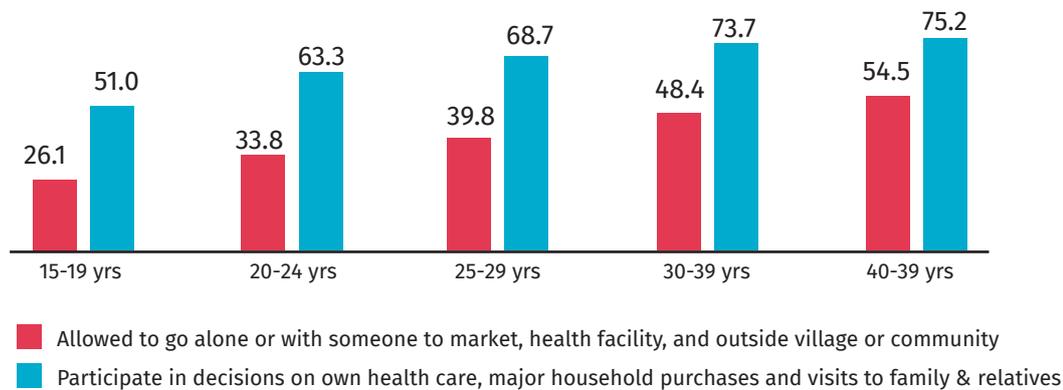
Gendered investment in education is also reflected in the nature of subjects chosen for higher education by (for) women as opposed to men. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), 2019-20, the proportion of females enrolled in arts/humanities/social sciences was much more than that of males (49 per cent of females versus 39 per cent of males). On the contrary, concentration of males was much higher than females in courses related to engineering or technology (16 per cent of males versus 7 per cent of females). Evidence suggests that stereotyping Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields operates through social norms that associate technical competence with masculinity, creating psychological barriers for women entering these fields (Mabica et al., 2025). However, considering fast-changing labour market dynamics, especially due to automation and Artificial Intelligence (AI), relevant skill development has become essential. Research demonstrates that gender stereotypes about STEM ability begin to emerge as early as three to four years of age and persist through childhood and adolescence, with children internalising beliefs that boys are "naturally" better at technical subjects (McGuire et al., 2020; King et al., 2021).

Restricted Mobility and Lack of Agency

Restricted mobility limits access to employment, educational institutions, and financial services that are necessary for economic independence (Mehta & Sai, 2021). Additionally, confined mobility perpetuates the disproportionate burden of domestic duties and unpaid care work on women, narrowing their pathways into formal, high-skilled employment (UNDP, 2024). Feminist economists argue that this spatial confinement functions as a form of economic control, where women's economic opportunities are systematically constrained by their assigned role as primary caregivers (Kabeer, 2020). Similarly, lack of women's agency to make economic choices or non-participation in intra-household decisions, also impede the empowerment process. A considerable share of women in India still face these restrictions, primarily operated through societal pressure of so-called 'acceptable' behaviour for women.

In order to capture women's freedom of mobility in India, the latest round of National Family Health Survey (NFHS) captured information regarding whether women were allowed to go alone to three places: market, health facilities, and places outside the village or community. Nationally, only 42 per cent of women in India were allowed to go alone to all three places during 2019-21 (NFHS round 5) (Figure 3). Similarly, NFHS-5 attempted to capture the extent to which Indian women participated in household decisions regarding own health care, major household purchases, and visits to family or relatives. At the national level, 71 per cent of married women aged 15-49 years, participated in all three decisions alone or jointly with their husbands. On the other extreme, 11 per cent women did not participate in any of the three decisions. However, such restrictive norms seem to become less stringent as women become older, and in urban areas than in rural.

Figure 3: Percentage Women (15 to 49 Years) with Freedom of Movement and Participation in Household Decisions by Age-Groups, All India, 2019-21 (%)



Source: National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-20, India Report, Volume-I, International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF.

Another practice that serves as a mechanism of spatial control over women's mobility is the veiling practice in some parts of the country, especially in rural areas. This practice is a visible marker of adherence to patriarchal norms with considerable regional variation (Roy et al., 2024). For instance, veiling practices are least common in South India, and most prevalent in central and northern regions, more so among Muslims and Hindu upper castes. Another set of barriers for WEE is created by prevalence of sexual harassment and abuse during commuting or at work. Mobility restrictions imposed upon women by families are influenced by prevalence of such crimes. This represents a systematic externalisation of the social costs of maintaining patriarchal gender relations onto women themselves, who must bear the economic burden of restricted mobility and employment opportunities. Differences in the prevalence of public harassment across societies are influenced by how acceptable such behaviour is socially, with greater tolerance leading to higher barriers for women's labour force participation (Jayachandran, 2021).

In patriarchal societies women are traditionally expected to obey their husbands or the male head-of-households and ask for their permission in making important decisions (Palriwala & Neetha, 2011; Das & Žumbytė, 2019). Such expectations tend to limit their agency, including the decision to engage in economic activities. Even when women are engaged in paid work,

they do not always have the agency to decide on how to spend their earnings. During 2019-21, 17 per cent of Indian men reported that husbands should have a greater say regarding decisions on spending money earned by wives, while 66 per cent of men believed that both husbands and wives should have an equal say, according to NFHS-5. Patriarchal norms sometimes become so ingrained in women's world-views that they tend to internalise them, which has a direct bearing on women's aspirations and creates obstacles in their own economic empowerment. A section of women, especially in rural and peri-urban areas of India, still believes that they at best can be secondary earners and it is alright to be criticised if they are unable to undertake their 'supposed' primary responsibilities as caregivers. An extreme example of this is the fact that 45 per cent of women and 44 per cent men in India during 2019-21, believed that a husband is justified in beating his wife in certain circumstances, such as going out without informing, neglecting house work or children, arguing, not cooking properly, showing disrespect to in-laws, refusing to have sex etc.

Low Asset Ownership

While better employment opportunities are important, independent land rights or property ownership, contribute significantly in improving women's economic and social status (Agarwal, 1994). Limited access to assets and resources, often acts as a barrier for women willing to

explore entrepreneurship opportunities as a source of employment. Availing formal credit is particularly challenging for women because of lack of collateral due to limited access to assets and property. Women's access to formal credit also increases women's bargaining power and control over resources. Access to formal finance can contribute positively to women's empowerment, as well as to overall economic growth of the country (IWWAGE et al., 2021).

There is considerable gender-gap in property ownership across South Asia, primarily due to patriarchal social norms. Evidence from rural Bangladesh shows that patriarchal norms limit women's land or property ownership and their ability to exercise control, which in turn reduces their economic well-being (Sultana et al., 2024). In India also, data from NFHS-5 highlights significant gender disparities in property ownership. During 2019-2021, only 13 percent women aged 15-49 years owned a house independently, while 29 per cent owned one jointly. Land ownership is even lower among women, with only 8.3 per cent owning land alone and 23.4 per cent jointly. In comparison, 62.5 per cent men owned a house and 43.9 percent owned land (UNFPA, 2023). Despite legal reforms, women's ownership of land rights remains limited across most states in India due to a combination of social norms and administrative hurdles. Even when women are landowners, they typically hold smaller, lower-quality plots and rarely have sole titles (Jain et al., 2023).

Limited Bodily Autonomy and Reproductive Health Choices

Women's empowerment is closely related to autonomy over their bodies in terms of ability to make reproductive health choices, and access to reproductive health services. Without reproductive rights, social and economic rights have limited power to advance women's well-being (Freedman & Isaacs, 1993). Bodily autonomy can be simplified as women's ability to make decisions regarding when to have a child, number of children, and spacing between children. An empowered woman should be able to negotiate for safer sex and use of

contraception. Despite improved status of women in certain societies, patriarchal norms can significantly influence fertility behaviour and contraceptive usage (Belanger, 2002).

In India, societal expectation for young women to conform to reproductive norms—like early marriage and immediate childbearing—continues to persist, especially in rural and peri-urban areas. Such norms reinforce power relations in a way that hampers women's reproductive agency. Findings from NFHS-5 indicate that total unmet need for family planning among married women (15-49 years) in India during 2019-21, was 9.4 percent, which refers to women who were not using contraception but wished to postpone childbirth or stop childbearing altogether. Contraceptive usage is often driven by power dynamics within the household. Women's intra-household agency has been found as an enabling factor of contraceptive usage (Yaya et al., 2018). Lack of contraception usage has several negative consequences- unintended pregnancies, increased fertility, and maternal and child health risks. When women have better control over their fertility, through access to contraceptives, knowledge on methods of family planning, young women can pursue education for a longer period, acquire more skills and eventually enter the labour market.

B2. Occupational Choices and Nature of Work

Social norms contribute significantly to gender-based occupational segregation in the labour market, which not only limits economic opportunities for women, but also creates gender wage gaps and restricts women's upward mobility. Occupational segregation is influenced by "subjective norms" - the perceived social pressure about acceptable behaviour and occupational choices for women versus men. Social norms theory illuminates how shared cultural expectations about gender-appropriate work reinforce occupational segregation through mechanisms of social approval and sanctions. Anker (1997) explains how gender stereotypes attribute five "positive" characteristics to women - caring nature, skill in household management, greater manual dexterity, greater honesty, and attractive physical appearance -

that are used to justify channeling women into specific occupations.

During the pre-COVID period between 2011-12 and 2019-20, India experienced a rise in gender-based occupational segregation measured in terms of the Duncan Dissimilarity Index. While segregation in the urban labour market has been greater than in rural areas, there has been a steep rise in rural segregation levels (Bordoloi, 2024). Moreover, the rise in occupational segregation occurred alongside a gradual increase in women's workforce participation since 2017-18. This indicates that even though work opportunities are created for women, the jobs are available more in occupations where female concentration has been traditionally high. This paradox exemplifies how patriarchal capitalism creates employment opportunities for women while simultaneously confining them to devalued sectors, thus maintaining gender-based economic hierarchy. Another study found that about 22 to 30 per cent of gender-based occupational segregation was attributed to unexplained factors, interpreted as discrimination. Therefore, a significant part of segregation cannot be explained by human capital differences or individual preferences, but rather reflect structural discrimination within patriarchal economic systems (Das et al., 2023). Feminist economics highlights that while there are substantial economic costs associated with occupational segregation, these patterns persist because they serve the interests of male-dominated institutional structures (Khan et al., 2023). The patriarchal economic structures often channel women's labour into lower-paid, lower-prestige "feminine" occupations. Till the latter half of the 20th century, most women across the globe remained concentrated in a limited number of pink-collar jobs, such as secretaries, nurses, teachers, and child care workers. Reasons included women's priority for family commitments and care responsibilities, desire to avoid the rat race, the traditionally male-dominated jobs often making women feel unwelcome, and the societal perception of masculinity associated with some blue-collar jobs (Folbre, 2001).

During 2023-24, some of the occupational groups in India with relatively higher concentration of women included agricultural workers including

those engaged in animal farming, agricultural labourers, teaching professionals, health associates, personal care & service workers, and those engaged in elementary occupations in sales and services. Similarly, education, human health & social work, and private households are three sectors where concentration of women workers has been considerably higher than men. This reflects what feminist economists identify as the extension of women's unpaid care responsibilities into the paid labour market, where women are concentrated in jobs requiring nurturing, care, and interpersonal skills. On the contrary, occupations with relatively higher concentration of men in India included 'Plant and Machine Operators, Assemblers, Metal, Machinery, Craft & Other Trades Workers', 'Legislators, Senior Officials, Managers', and 'Sales Workers', among others.

Employers' Bias Contributing to Occupational Segregation

Women's employment is also affected by how employers perceive appropriate job roles and responsibilities for them. Employers, being part of the larger society, are also influenced by traditional gender norms. Employers often assume that women's productivity is impacted by care responsibilities, thereby limiting their economic opportunities (Boudet et al., 2023). Gendered perceptions of employers can lead to discriminatory hiring practices, which represents a manifestation of patriarchal capitalism where statistical discrimination is used to justify the undervaluation of women's labour (Stöcker & Zintl, 2024). Women are expected to take up occupations that allow them to prioritise care needs of households. Feminist economists argue that such expectations undervalue women's productive capacity, where their economic opportunities are constrained by the unpaid care penalty that makes employers view them as less committed workers (Tunçsiper, 2024). Deshpande & Singh (2021) highlighted the influence of social norms in India in shaping employers' perceptions of female workers, creating obstacles in participation in paid work.

A study by IWWAGE across Karnataka and Jharkhand, based on a primary survey of 1,238 small enterprises in 2022, observed that

female entrepreneurs were more likely to hire women as compared to their male counterparts (IWWAGE & DSEU, 2022). Across enterprises, the major sources of hiring employees were informal, including word of mouth from friends and relatives, referral by employees, etc. As most enterprise owners were male, women were less likely to be hired unless specifically sought. This illustrates how social networks reproduce segregation through "gendered social capital," where informal hiring practices systematically exclude women. Female entrepreneurs, often home-based, restricted their search to immediate networks, limiting awareness of other job opportunities, confining them to informal, small, and low-growth units. The study also found that entrepreneurs prioritised years of experience, specific skills, and long working hours when hiring, creating challenges for women due to high care burden. Another study in India found that for jobs advertised in online job portals where employers preferred women workers, consistently offered lower wages than those where men are preferred, again reinforcing patriarchal capitalism (Chaturvedi et al., 2022). A study by (Afridi et al., 2023) found that employed women were 14.5 per cent less likely to receive interest from male suitors relative to those not working. Again, women in traditionally 'masculine' occupations face an additional 3.2 per cent disadvantage relative to women in 'feminine' roles. Social norms theory explains how this reflects social expectations about appropriate gender roles, where women's employment in male-dominated occupations is perceived as threatening traditional patriarchal arrangements. In India, this effect is especially pronounced among men of higher castes belonging to northern regions where the prevalence of gender norms is stronger. This exemplifies what feminist economists term the "double burden", where women face economic penalties both in the labour market and in the marriage market (Mukherjee & Sarkhel, 2025).

B3. Workplace Experiences: Earnings, Upward Mobility, and Job Retention

As argued by Kabeer (2019), more than access to employment, women's empowerment depends on the nature of work, access to income, and the way employment impacts their unpaid work. However, gender-based discriminatory practices at workplaces, along with patriarchal institutional structures often create roadblocks in women's economic progress.

Gender-Based Wage Differences

In India, gender gap in wages persists across most occupations and industries even when men and women perform similar tasks, and have similar skills. Wage gap is more pronounced in regular employment than in casual work, and greater in urban areas than in rural areas. Additionally, women face wage discrimination based on age (Kothe & Gupta, 2024). In the rural non-farm labour market, the perceived difference in human capabilities between women and men drives the wage difference, apart from social stigma governing the hiring process. Research indicates that while the wage difference can be partly attributed to endowment components (education, age, etc.), the employers' perceptions of women's productivity, shaped by deep-seated gender norms, remain key impediments to equal pay and retention (Pattayat et al., 2023).

Limited Upward Mobility

Feminist economists highlight how normative expectations create a 'motherhood penalty', resulting in women with young children to remain under-represented in leadership roles in organisations. The associated obstacles are mostly framed as personal choices rather than systemic issues. Societal norms are often internalised by women that accord primacy to motherhood at the expense of their careers. This results in an identity dilemma as women

grapple with meeting unrealistic standards of both being ideal mothers and successful professionals. Mothers frequently turn down promotions due to the dual burden of family and leadership duties. They also experience less control over their careers, stress, guilt, job insecurity, and reduced satisfaction. The concept of 'internalisation of subjugation' explains how a section of women in these settings adopt masculine behavioural norms to gain legitimacy, and yet face systemic glass ceilings (Torres et al., 2024). For instance, women's career progression in academia can be restrained by factors such as male-dominated workplaces and gendered institutional practices. Research from Malaysia and Bangladesh identified barriers to women's leadership, such as negative colleague perceptions, managerial bias, lack of support, and complex promotion processes. Additionally, sexual harassment was highlighted as a significant barrier to career advancement (Islam et al., 2023).

Statistics revealed that even though women constitute 48 per cent of university students in India, only 33 per cent enter the workforce at the entry level and a mere 24 per cent rise to managerial roles, as reported by (McKinsey and Co, 2025). This disparity is most acute at career initiation, where an average age-gap of seven years between entry-level women (39 years) and men (32 years) indicates delayed workforce entry and slower career progression for women. Such delays can be attributed to care responsibilities and the lack of institutional support for balancing work and family obligations. This further elucidates how gendered expectations shape these outcomes. Subjective norms that valorise masculine traits such as assertiveness and long working hours permeate workplace cultures, making promotions contingent on behaviour culturally coded as masculine. A study based in India finds that only one in nine women are promoted annually, as opposed to one in six men, with successful promotions linked to exhibiting masculine traits and discouraged women who negotiate for advancement - behaviour that violate prevailing norms of femininity (AON, 2024). The under-representation of women in leadership is partly linked to lower female willingness to enter competitive environments. Experimental

evidence from Northeast India shows that men generally compete twice as often as women, but this gender gap narrows or reverses in societies with gender-balanced norms. Among the patriarchal Karbi tribe, men were observed to compete almost twice as often as women, but the gap shrinks to just 18 per cent among the Dimasa tribe, and actually reverses among the matrilineal Khasi population, where women compete 13 per cent more than men (Klonner et al., 2020).

Challenges in Long-Term Sustenance and Re-Entry into Job Market

According to data released by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the average effective retirement age in India shows a notable gender gap with the retirement age for men at 70 years on average, was significantly higher than that for women at about 62 years in the year 2018. The gap in retirement age is largely driven by caregiving responsibilities that disproportionately fall on women. The traditional expectation that women assume caregiving roles alongside paid work, leads to physical and emotional burnout, pushing many to retire earlier or leave employment prematurely. Deshpande & Singh (2021) argues that while motherhood is associated with low LFPR among women in India, there is no significant drop of working women from the labour force around childbirth. A considerable decline in women's LFPR is attributed to demand-side constraints: lack of steady, gainful employment for women, industry-wide employment shifts, and the displacement of women by male workers, especially during economic shocks. This highlights the crucial role of quality job creation, which stabilizes the frequent transitions of exits and re-entries that characterise Indian women's labour market engagement. These demand-side failures reflect a market that undervalues sectors employing women and fails to internalise the social costs of care, resulting in unstable employment pathways (Folbre, 1995; Nelson & Stephens, 2013).

Despite India's Maternity Benefit Act, 2017, over 90 per cent of women remained excluded due to their engagement in informal work. Even in formal-urban settings where the Act mandates creche facilities in establishments with more than 50 employees, the enforcement has been inconsistent, with a survey depicting only 48 per cent of IT firms being compliant (Marathe, 2024). From a feminist economics standpoint, this represents a gap in public provisioning of care services, externalising the care costs onto women and compelling workforce exits due to inadequate childcare support. Social norms that view childcare as a private family responsibility, further delay State action and reinforce employer non-compliance. A recent study by IWWAGE (2024) found that there has been a steady decline in Union Budget allocations for schemes related to early childhood development that created challenges in ensuring effective functioning of crèches.

In the recent times, traditional gender norms in India have become less stringent in urban areas than in rural, contributed by reduced structural barriers, prevalence of nuclear families, better access to education, information and resources. In parts of urban India, a delicate balance between familial obligations and professional aspirations can be observed, especially among college-educated, married, and middle-class women. A recent study revealed that while marriage and care responsibilities constrain women's career trajectories, some parents and in-laws encourage women to pursue paid work, indicating an interplay between societal expectations and shifting social norms (Khullar & Sudarshan, 2025). Women who are located within this context, display moments of both conformity and agency. For instance, a section of women seeks out work opportunities that allow some flexibility while balancing family care responsibilities. This reflects how empowerment is realised less through outright rejection of norms but more subtly through negotiations within the social fabric. Another study conducted by IWWAGE in partnership with ZOOM, that explored the preferences of women in non-metropolitan regions, found that in a sample of 400 women, 71 percent preferred hybrid working models when given the option (IWWAGE & Zoom, 2023). While older women

(33 to 55 years) were more likely to choose hybrid models due to difficulties in balancing domestic and professional responsibilities, a considerable proportion of junior-level workers without caregiving responsibilities at home, preferred in-person roles.

IWWAGE plays a crucial role as a learning and technical partner to Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana - National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM) programme implemented by Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), Government of India, by supporting gender mainstreaming across different verticals of the mission. It has been observed that although beliefs and practices around gender roles vary across and within states, there are signs of incremental shifts in gender norms in rural India. A study based in rural India (IWWAGE, 2024) found that a considerable share of women believed that both men and women should be allowed to work outside their homes. A significant share of women reported that their husbands support their participation in livelihood-generating initiatives through membership in Self-Help Groups (SHGs), by encouraging them to attend meetings and events. However, women's mobility remains limited as many women still require permission from a male or senior family member to go out of house, and unpaid care work continues to be seen as a woman's duty. Another study by IWWAGE (2025) found that while a proportion of rural men in India support women's participation in community-level entrepreneurial activities by sharing household duties, a large section still resent women's participation in SHGs.



Flagship Union Government Programmes and Their Role in Shifting Social Norms

Several Union Government programmes and schemes, while primarily designed to enhance women's economic participation and welfare, contribute directly or indirectly to shifting restrictive social norms. These interventions aim at enabling women to access public spaces, claim entitlements, and take on roles that contest entrenched gender expectations. Few such flagship schemes are discussed below. The present list is not exhaustive but indicative.

Economic Participation and Decision Making

The SHG eco-system under DAY-NRLM empowers women to collectively save, borrow, and manage credit, thereby enhancing financial control and decision-making (Ramesh, 2024). The very act of SHG members meeting regularly, managing finances, and engaging in community decision-making, directly challenges norms that confine women to the private sphere and exclude them from leadership roles and financial autonomy. 'Nayi Chetna', a nation-wide community-led campaign under DAY-NRLM, is undertaken to create awareness, mobilise masses, generate gender-sensitization and set institutions into action against gender-based violence and discrimination. It includes awareness-building regarding (a) prevention of child marriages through dialogue with parents, adolescents; (b) gender-based violence; (c) benefits of retention of girls in schools; (d) need for asset creation in women's names, among the key interventions. In 2024, 227 new Gender Resource Centres

(GRCs) across 13 States have been inaugurated (Ministry of Rural Development, 2024).

Skilling and Training

The components under the central sector scheme of 'Skill India Programme' such as Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), the Pradhan Mantri National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (PM-NAPS), and the Jan Shikshan Sansthan (JSS) Scheme, and the Craftsmen Training Scheme (CTS), have trained over 35 lakh women (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2025). These schemes open access to new trades for women and reduce occupational segregation. For adolescent girls, the NAVYA (Nurturing Aspirations through Vocational Training for Young Adolescent Girls) programme has shifted aspirations away from early marriage toward employability. These initiatives collectively challenge norms that confine women to the household by enabling them to gain diverse skills to participate in economic activities.

The Department of Science & Technology (DST) started two initiatives - Vigyan Jyoti and Engage with Science - to increase STEM opportunities for girl students. These interventions aim to strengthen STEM education for girls through scholarships, mentoring by women tech experts, and an interactive digital platform for students and teachers. The goal is to boost girls' representation in engineering and technology and build a strong STEM ecosystem (Ministry of Science and Technology, 2020)

Visibility & Mobility

Government schemes such as Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and the Working Women Hostel Scheme support women's presence in public spaces and facilitate access to economic opportunities. Women's participation in MGNREGS reached 58 per cent in 2024-25 from 48 percent in 2013-14, challenging perceptions that daily-wage labour is men's domain (PIB, 2025). Similarly, the Working Women Hostel scheme enables women to live independently for work or study, confronting norms that tie women's safety and respectability to the family home and male guardianship. Together, these interventions expand the social acceptability of women's mobility and visibility in economic life.

Leadership & Authority

Legal frameworks such as the POSH Act (2013) and the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 signal institutional acceptance of women in workplaces and actively contest patriarchal assumptions about women's suitability for leadership or professional spaces. Alongside this policy shift, the SHG movement positions women as community leaders, while the Mahila Police Volunteer (MPV) scheme inserts women into visible authority roles in local governance and law enforcement. The linkage between women's participation in paid work and women's participation in politics rests on the idea that as more women occupy key decision-making positions and take part in formal democratic processes, they will advance perspectives that support women's role in the economy and prioritise issues of care and social protection.

Asset Ownership & Value of Girls

Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) that mandates women's names on property titles, disrupts the patriarchal tradition where houses and properties were predominantly owned by men. Similarly, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) campaign aims to elevate the social worth of girls and reduce gender bias in household investments in education. Another scheme

known as Stand-Up India, supports women in setting up greenfield enterprises in sectors such as manufacturing, services, allied-agriculture activities or trading. Such initiatives further challenges stereotypes about women's roles in business and asset creation.

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Insights with Policy Implications

Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) in India is constrained not only by structural barriers in access to skills, workplaces, and resources, but also by deeply embedded social norms that shape what is considered as appropriate work for women, how their time is valued, and agency to take decisions that are crucial for their economic empowerment. These norms, rooted in expectations of women as primary caregivers, along with limited freedom of mobility outside home, and narrow definitions of suitable occupations, continue to restrict women's economic choices even when enabling policies and schemes exist. Evidence suggests that family commitments and unpaid care work, are some of the key reasons for majority of Indian women to stay away from the labour market. Additionally, there is a strong prevalence of 'marriage penalty', that imposes additional societal pressure on women to prioritise family commitments post marriage, challenging their participation in paid work. Women's 'secondary earner' status in families also influences gendered investment by households in their education and skill development, which eventually leads to low employability in labour market. India's official labour surveys indicate that gender-based occupational segregation has risen during the last decade and a half, with women clustering around care sector occupations such as teaching professions, health care services, personal care services, and in elementary occupations including domestic

work in private households. Social norms also shape employers' perceptions regarding women's employability and job considered 'suitable' for women, which is reflected in the gendered recruitment practices that lead to gender wage gaps and restricted upward mobility for women at workplaces.

Addressing the challenges created by regressive social norms is crucial to enhance WEE. This requires moving beyond programmatic delivery to actively challenge and transform the normative foundations of inequality. Women's participation in economic life improves not only when opportunities for training and employment are available, but when care work is redistributed, mobility is enabled, occupational stereotypes are broken, and workplaces affirm inclusion. In this regard, norm shift should not be viewed as a parallel agenda but a core driver of WEE. As gender norms are culturally ingrained in people's behaviour and perceptions, challenging these norms and thereby bringing in behavioural changes, would require sustained long-term effort. The labour market challenges in India are further intensified for rural women, lower-caste women, and those from ethnic minorities, who face the intersection of patriarchal gender norms, caste-based discrimination, and inadequate social protections, all of which converge to heighten labour market instability, early exits, and economic vulnerability (Srivastava, 2019)

(Sengupta & Panchanan, 2014). This compounded marginalisation underscores the urgent need for intersectional policy interventions that address not only gender-based discrimination, but also caste, class, and geographic disparities to create truly inclusive and sustainable pathways for WEE. Based on these insights the following section discusses a way forward that can feed into future policy directions and provide pathways for shifting mindsets, practices, and institutions in ways that ensure WEE.

Care Economy & Redistribution of Unpaid Work: Considering 'care penalty' being the biggest factor constraining women's labour force participation, it is important to allocate greater investment by both government and private sector in quality and affordable childcare and eldercare services in the form of crèches, care cooperatives, community day-care centres. At the same time, it is important to strengthen compliance with the Maternity Benefit Act, 2017 in terms of employer-provided childcare by all eligible organisations. In parallel, it is crucial to launch long-term behaviour-change campaigns through multiple media channels with men and boys to normalise shared caregiving responsibilities. Media and communication policies should establish guidelines for gender-sensitive advertising to challenge stereotypical portrayals of women's roles. Additionally, integration of gender equality modules in school education curriculum, can address norm formation at early stages.

Education, Skilling & Sectoral Entry: Considering gendered investment by households on education and preference for non-technical courses among women in higher education, it is important to incentivise girls' entry into STEM, digital, and other emerging fields through scholarships, mentorship, and gender-sensitive pedagogy. Integrating gender-responsive skilling into Skill India programme, expanding NAVYA nationally, introducing flexible/remote skilling modules might be more impactful. To

accelerate change in restrictive gender and social norms, both government (Union and state governments) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) should jointly identify, support, and amplify local role models who challenge gender stereotypes. These could include women in non-traditional livelihoods, men sharing unpaid care work, youth advocating gender equality, or community elders endorsing progressive practices.

Mobility, Agency & Safety: Restricted mobility of women and lack of agency to participate in intra-household decisions or to make economic choices, impeded women's economic participation in multiple ways. Investing more in safe public transport infrastructure (CCTV, lighting, grievance redress systems), expansion of hostel infrastructure for working women and students with integrated skill centres and employment linkages can be crucial enablers. Similarly, embedding agency-building modules (financial literacy, negotiation, digital skills) into SHGs and skilling programs, and ensuring intersectional targeting (rural, Dalit, Adivasi, minority women) can be helpful. Engaging husbands and male family members through structured programs can address these constraints at their source. SHG members can also facilitate rural women in accessing information regarding available employment opportunities and existing government programmes on skill development, entrepreneurship, credit access etc.

Workplace Inclusion, Retention & Leadership: Employed women often face gender discrimination at workplaces in terms of gender wage gaps, 'motherhood penalty', glass ceilings, and restricted upward mobility. In order to address these issues, it is important to enforce equal pay and anti-discriminatory policies with transparent employer reporting. Strengthening anti-harassment mechanisms such as compliance audits of POSH Act might also be useful.

Tackling Occupational Segregation & Employer

Bias: Employed women in India are majorly concentrated in agriculture, and various care sector occupations, reflecting the extension of unpaid domestic work into paid labour. Occupational segregation is also influenced by employers' perceptions about women's commitment in professional spaces considering the care burden. In order to address these issues, it is important to incentivise women's entry into non-traditional trades (STEM apprenticeships, Stand-Up India for high-growth sectors). At the same time, it is essential to promote female entrepreneurship in emerging sectors, with targeted credit and market linkages. Gender-sensitisation for employers is crucial in this respect. Strengthening of equitable recruitment practices and fostering inclusive workplace policies can create pathways for more women to join and thrive in the workforce.

India's current policy landscape for WEE provides a foundation for addressing some of the constraints faced by women due to the social norms, as identified in the research brief. However, transformative change requires moving beyond economic programs to challenge the deeply entrenched beliefs about gender roles that shape women's economic choices. The success of the interventions depends on sustained political commitment, adequate resource allocation, and coordinated efforts by government, private sector, CSOs and communities.



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