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WOMEN IN LABOUR FORCE: UNDERSTANDING BARRIERS TO FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO AGRA CITY

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Abstract

Female labor force participation serves as a fundamental indicator for examining women's empowerment and economic development trajectories. Their entry into the workforce creates substantial economic benefits through increased household income and enhanced decision-making autonomy. This economic empowerment generates positive spillover effects yet women encounter numerous barriers in workforce participation. The objective of this study was to identify the barriers preventing women from participating in the labor force within Agra city. The study is based on primary data gathered from female respondents in Agra City. The findings reveal lack of support from families and society, Pregnancy and childbirth and eldercare responsibilities as primary obstacles in hindering women's participation in labour force. The paper also offers policy recommendations to support women in securing employment opportunities.

KEYWORDS: Female labour force participation, Women Empowerment, Gender and employment

1. INTRODUCTION

Female labor force participation serves as a fundamental indicator for examining women's empowerment and economic development trajectories. The integration of women into workforce generates a ripple effect that benefits families and communities, driving meaningful social transformation. Their entry into the workforce creates substantial economic benefits through increased household income and enhanced decision-making autonomy. Financial independence enables women to make strategic investments in human capital development, particularly in education and healthcare for their families. This economic empowerment generates positive spillover effects, as financially autonomous women are better positioned to influence long-term household welfare decisions and contribute to community development initiatives.

The macroeconomic implications of increased female labor force participation are equally significant. Enhanced productivity, innovation, and economic diversification result from women's contributions to various sectors. Countries with higher female workforce participation rates typically demonstrate greater economic resilience and competitiveness in global markets.

Globally, women constitute nearly half of the human capital, yet their participation in economic activities remains disproportionately low. In India, women account for approximately 48.5% of the total population, but their engagement in the labour market is significantly below that of men. Despite recent improvements, the female labour force participation rate remains around 30.7%, which is considerably lower than the global average.

Female employment in India is closely linked to women's empowerment, but it is shaped by an intricate web of socio-cultural, economic, and political factors. These influences have contributed to a persistently low Female Labour Force Participation rate, even in the face of rapid economic expansion.

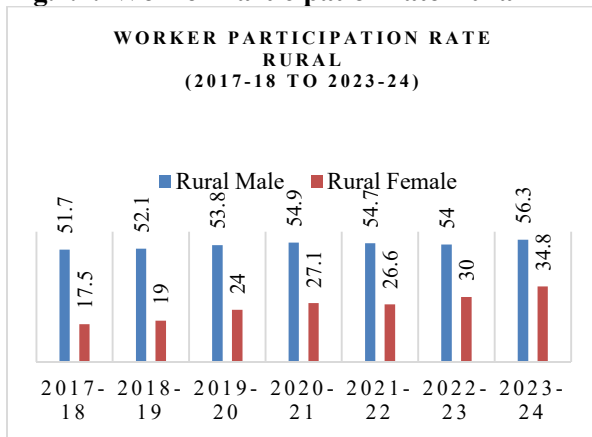
The decision and ability of women to participate in the labour market is determined by a complex interplay of factors operating at both household and macroeconomic levels. A substantial barrier remains the disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic and care work borne by women. According to UN Women, 16.4 billion hours are spent globally on unpaid care work each day the equivalent of two billion people working an eight-hour day without remuneration. The estimated value of this work is equivalent to 9% of global GDP, or approximately USD 11 trillion (UN Women, Whose Time to Care, 2020). Additionally, despite increasing participation, women in the labour market continue to face structural disadvantages. On average, women earn 23% less than men globally and spend nearly three times as many hours on unpaid domestic



responsibilities (UN, 2020). International Labour Organization (ILO, 2018) also underscores that unpaid care work is the primary barrier preventing women from entering, remaining, and advancing in the labour force. Globally, women perform 76.2% of total hours of unpaid care work more than three times that of men. In countries like India men's contribution is especially low: Indian men spend an average of only 31 minutes daily on unpaid care tasks, accounting for just 7.9% of their total working time.

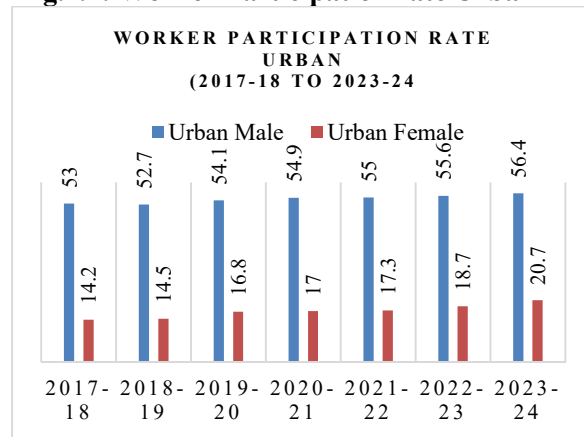
Gender-based violence, workplace discrimination, and unequal access to leadership positions are other such factors that constitute significant barriers to women's economic participation. These challenges were further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disproportionately affected women through increased domestic violence, expanded care responsibilities due to school closures, and heightened health risks, given that 70% of global health and social workers are women. (UN, 2020)

Fig.1.1: Worker Participation rate Rural



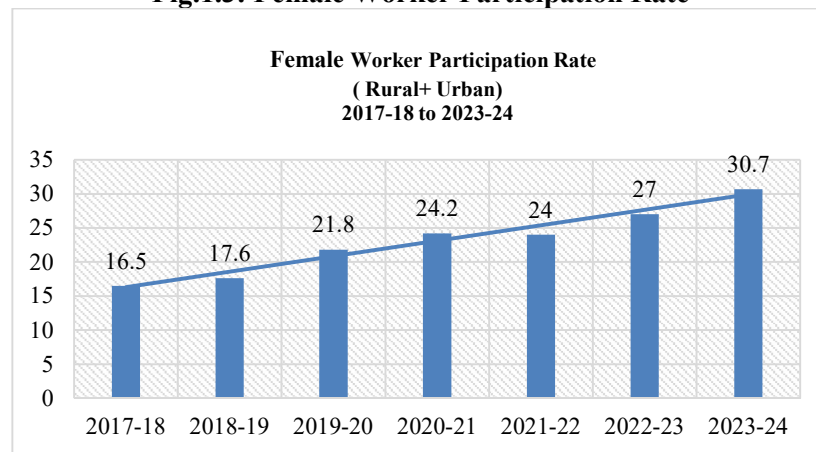
Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (2023-24)

Fig.1.2: Worker Participation rate Urban



Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (2023-24)

Fig.1.3: Female Worker Participation Rate



Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (2023-24)

According to figure 1.1, 1.2 & 1.3, the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023–24, while female worker participation has increased in both rural and urban areas, the disparity between the two remains stark. In rural areas, the Worker Participation Rate (WPR) for women nearly doubled, raising from 17.5% in 2017–18 to 34.8% in 2023–24 an increase of 17.3 percentage points. In contrast, urban female WPR grew more modestly, from 14.2% to 20.7% over the same period an increase of only 6.5 percentage points.

Several factors contribute to this urban-rural difference in female labour force participation, including differences in the nature of available employment, higher opportunity costs for urban women, and greater social expectations around formal



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work and household responsibilities in urban settings. While rural women are more likely to engage in agricultural and informal sector work, urban women face limited access to flexible work arrangements, safety concerns, and a greater mismatch between their education and available job opportunities.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- **Kousar et al (2019)** investigated the social, cultural, and institutional barriers influencing female labour force participation in Lahore, Pakistan. Their findings reveal that cultural constraints were reported more frequently than other barriers as discouraging factors for women entering the workforce. Key obstacles identified included male dominance and entrenched gender stereotypes, which significantly hinder women's participation in the formal labour market.
- **Nikore (2021)** conducted a comprehensive analysis of time-series data spanning nearly seven decades (1950–2018) to trace the trajectory of women's economic contributions in India. The study found that women's work has remained largely informal, invisible, and labour-intensive throughout this period. Despite notable improvements in educational attainment, increasing household incomes, economic liberalization, and growing integration with global value chains, female labour force participation in India has steadily declined and continues to remain significantly lower than that of men. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these trends, triggering widespread job losses among women particularly those engaged in the informal sector and stalling the recovery of women-led microenterprises.
- **Tsani et al (2013)** examined the relationship between female labour force participation and economic growth in South Mediterranean countries. The econometric analysis provided empirical support for the widely discussed U-shaped relationship between economic development and FLFP, wherein participation initially declines and then rises with economic progress. The study highlighted that region-specific socio-economic characteristic contribute to persistently low FLFP rates in the South Mediterranean context. Using the simulation model, the authors found that low female participation had only marginal effects on macroeconomic indicators under current conditions. However, the removal of barriers to women's labour force entry and a subsequent rise in participation could yield substantial economic benefits.
- **Albotmeh and Irsheid (2013)** explored the nature of Palestinian women's labour market participation and entrepreneurship. Key findings highlighted that women's participation, particularly as entrepreneurs, remains low in comparison to regional and global standards. However, there has been a slight increase in women's labour market participation over the past 17 years, contrasting with stagnant or declining trends among men. Palestinian women continue to face high levels of horizontal occupational segregation. They are disproportionately concentrated in agriculture and service sectors while remaining nearly absent from construction and transportation. Political constraints and limited labour demand for women were identified as central barriers to women's economic inclusion
- **Thévenon (2013)** examined the influence of key labour market trends and policy interventions on the growth of female labour force participation across OECD countries. The study observed a significant rise in women's participation in the labour force during this period, largely driven by structural changes in the economy. The transition from industrial to service-oriented employment created expanded opportunities for women, while the growth of public sector jobs offered greater employment security an important factor for women, particularly when planning to start families. Government policies aimed at improving work-life balance have also played a pivotal role in supporting women's increased labour market engagement.

3. NEED OF THE STUDY

The need for studying barriers to female labour force participation in Agra City emerges from several critical gaps and pressing socio-economic concerns:

1. Agra City economy, which primarily relies on tourism and handicrafts, confronts significant challenges in realizing sustainable growth. Recognizing the barriers to women's participation in the workforce is crucial, as research consistently demonstrates that increased female labor force engagement significantly contributes to GDP growth. With women making up nearly half of Agra's population, their underutilization represents a substantial untapped economic resource that could propel local development.
2. Agra presents a distinct case study as a tier-2 city characterized by unique urban-rural dynamics. Its close proximity to rural areas leads to intricate migration patterns and diverse socio-cultural norms that significantly impact women's



participation in the workforce. Analyzing these dynamics provides valuable insights into how urbanization differentially affects employment opportunities and constraints for women across various neighborhoods and socio-economic segments.

3. Agra's prominence as a major tourist destination presents considerable opportunities for women's engagement in tourism-related services, hospitality, and cultural sectors. However, various barriers may hinder women's access to these opportunities. Recognizing these challenges is essential for formulating targeted policies that can leverage this potential while ensuring the safety and dignity of women in tourism-related employment.

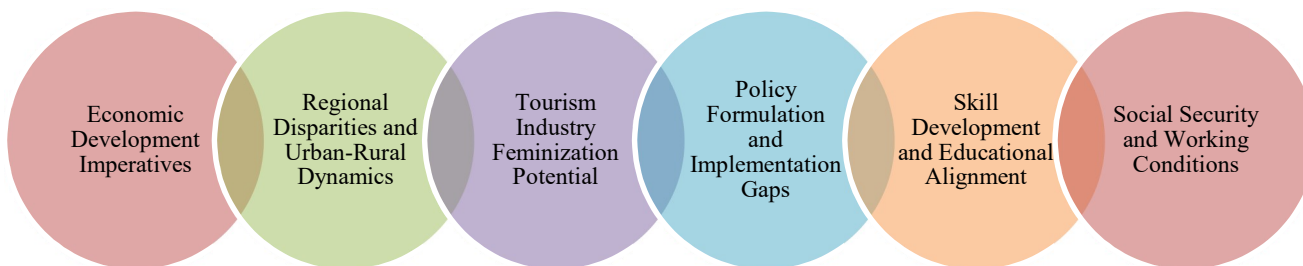
4. Current national and state-level policies regarding women's employment may not sufficiently address the unique challenges faced by women in cities such as Agra. It is essential to conduct research to pinpoint implementation gaps and develop context-specific interventions that can effectively enhance women's labor force participation while accommodating local cultural sensitivities and infrastructural limitations.

5. Agra's traditional industries, including leather goods, handicrafts, and marble work, demand particular skill sets. By understanding existing barriers, we can pinpoint mismatches between women's educational backgrounds and the available job opportunities. This insight can inform the creation of targeted skill development programs that align with both local economic needs and the capabilities of women.

6. The informal nature of a significant portion of employment in Agra raises important concerns regarding working conditions, social security, and workplace safety for women. It is essential to conduct research to better understand these challenges and to develop frameworks that ensure women's economic participation does not come at the expense of their safety, health, or family responsibilities.

This study aims to fill a critical knowledge gap in the dynamics of the gendered labor market within mid-tier Indian cities, offering insights that can guide the formulation of more effective and inclusive economic development strategies for Agra and similar urban centers.

Fig.1.4: Need of the Study



Source: Self Structured

4. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- This study aims to identify the social, cultural, and economic barriers limiting women's participation in the workforce.
- To suggest future action plans and policy for increasing female labour force participation.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is conducted on 63 respondents through an online survey with help of Google Forms, for the analysis of changing structure of female labour force participation in Agra City. A Primary Survey has been conducted through a self-structured questionnaire in digital form and online discussion from different experts through Google meetings. This study adopts a descriptive research design to examine the barriers affecting women's participation in the workforce.

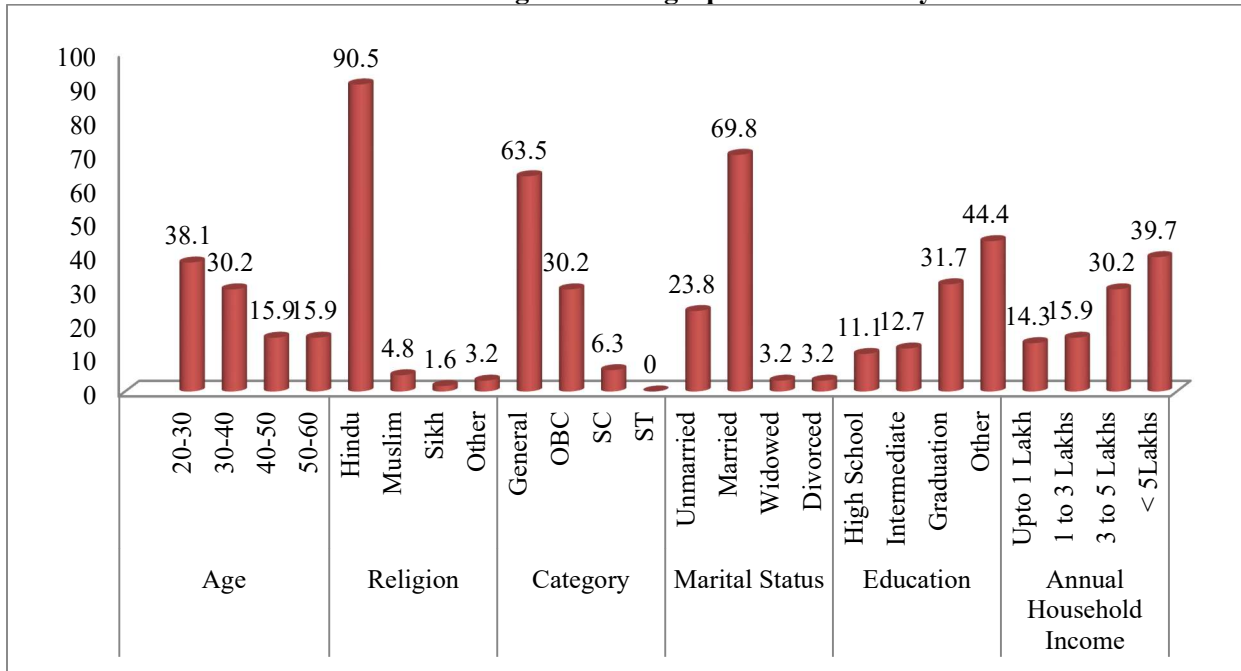
DATA COLLECTION

The data was collected through a structured questionnaire targeting 63 female respondents selected using random sampling from Agra city. In addition to primary data, the study also utilizes secondary sources, including government reports, published research studies, news articles, and relevant publications to support and contextualize the findings.



DATA ANALYSIS

Fig.1.5: Demographic Profile Analysis



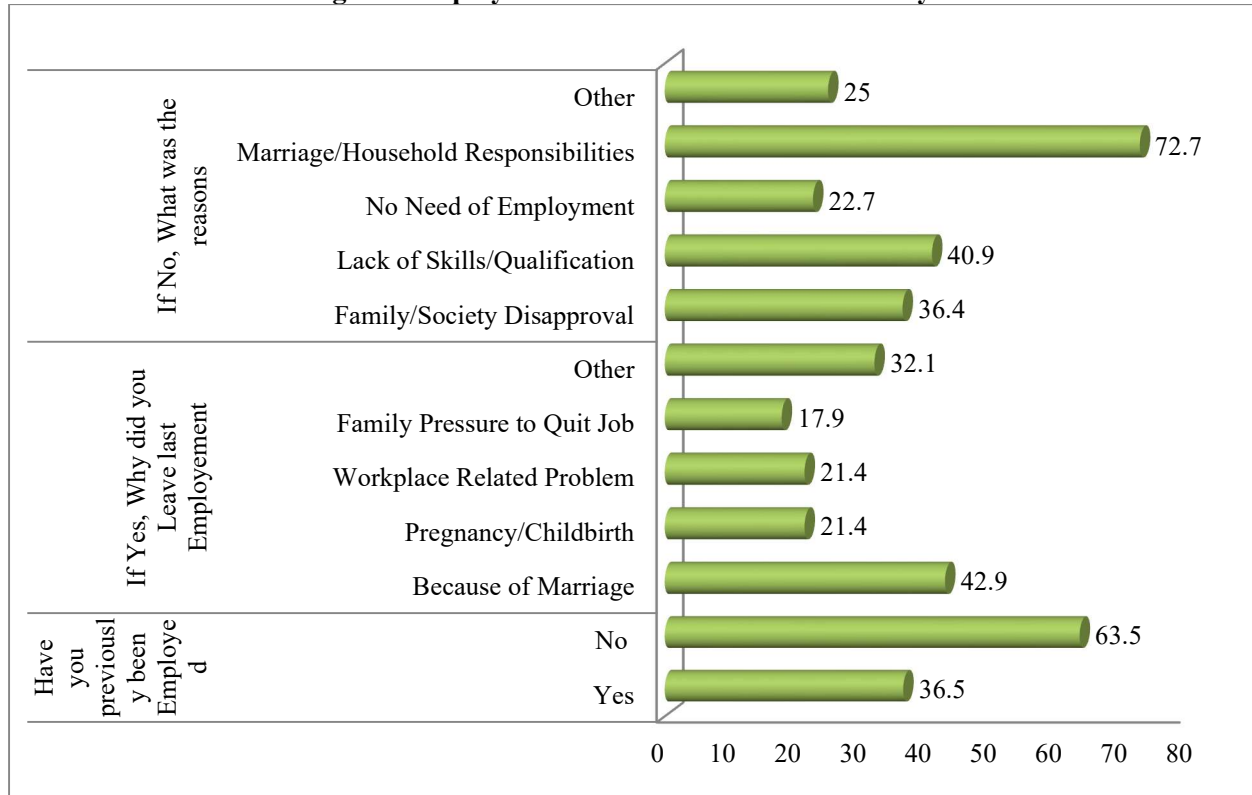
Source: Researcher Finding

Figure 1.5 shows that, the study sample displays distinct demographic characteristics across several dimensions. The age distribution indicates a predominantly middle-aged population, with the largest group in the 40-50 age group (90.5%), followed by the 30-40 age group (38.1%). Younger individuals, aged 20-30 and below 20, show minimal participation, accounting for 30.2% and 15.9% respectively. Older age groups (50-60) and above 60 represent smaller portions of the sample. The religious composition is heavily skewed toward Hindu participants (90%), while Muslim representation stands at 4.8%. Participation from Sikhs is minimal at 1.6%, and other religious communities account for 3.2%. This distribution may reflect the geographic or cultural context of the study area. Occupational categories show diversity, with individuals from the General category comprising 63.5% of the total respondent. This is followed by Other Backward Classes (OBC) at 30.2%, while Scheduled Castes (SC) represent 6.3% and Scheduled Tribes (ST) show no participation (0%). In terms of marital status, the respondents are predominantly married (69.8%) and unmarried (23.8%) . There is minimal representation from widowed (3.2%) and divorced (3.2%) categories. Educational attainment reveals moderate literacy levels, with the most common qualification being intermediate education (31.7%), followed by graduation (44.4%). High school education accounts for 11.1%, while post-graduation represents 14.3%, with higher education categories showing declining participation. Income distribution demonstrates economic diversity, with the highest representation in the annual household income of 3-5 lakhs (39.7%), 1-3 lakhs (30.2%), below 1 lakh (15.9%) of the respondents, while higher income above 5 lakhs (14.3%).

This demographic profile suggests a sample that is predominantly middle-aged, Hindu, married, with moderate educational levels and middle-income backgrounds. These factors should be considered when interpreting the study's findings and their generalizability.



Fig.1.6: Employment Patterns and Barriers Analysis



Source: Researcher Findings

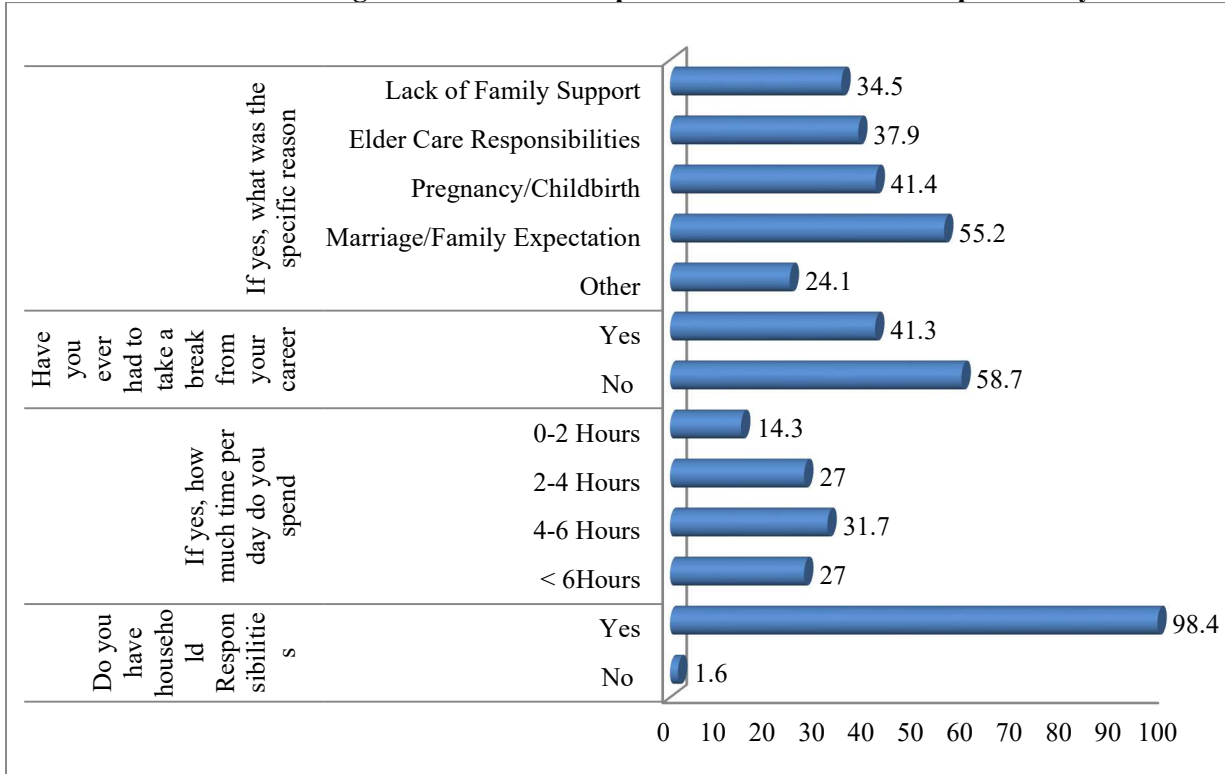
The figure 1.6 shows that majority of respondents (63.5%) have never held a job, while 36.5% respondents having prior employment experience. The marriage appears to be the leading reason for leaving the job (42.9%), indicating that significant life transitions can impact employment continuity. Other notable reasons include workplace-related issues (21.4%) and pregnancy or childbirth (21.4%), which share equal proportions. Additionally, family pressure to resign affects 17.9% of respondents, while miscellaneous factors account for 32.1%.

The survey reveals that marriage and household responsibilities represent the most significant obstacle to employment (72.7%), far exceeding other factors. This suggests that traditional gender roles and domestic expectations create considerable barriers in female workforce participation. Furthermore, a lack of skills or qualifications is identified as another major barrier (40.9%), underscoring the importance of education and training initiatives. Family or societal disapproval affects 36.4% of respondents, pointing to social and cultural constraints on employment. Interestingly, only 22.7% respondents expressed they do not need employment, while 25% cited other unspecified reasons.

Overall, These findings indicate that social and cultural factors play a crucial role in determining women's workforce participation, with marital status and family obligations serving as the main drivers of both women leaving their jobs and facing obstacles when trying to enter employment. The data highlights a pressing need for policies aimed at addressing work-life balance, skill development, and the evolution of social attitudes toward employment, particularly for married individuals and those with family commitments.



Fig.1.7: Household Responsibilities and Career Impact Analysis



Source: Researcher Findings

The figure 1.7 reveals that marriage and family expectations are the most significant factors, affecting 55.2% of respondents. This reinforces traditional gender roles that prioritize domestic responsibilities over professional pursuits. Pregnancy and childbirth accounts for 41.4% of career disruptions, highlighting both biological and social challenges faced during reproductive years. Additionally, elder care responsibilities impact 37.9% of respondents, pointing to the burden of intergenerational caregiving and lack of family support affects 34.5% of respondents, while other miscellaneous factors (24.1%).

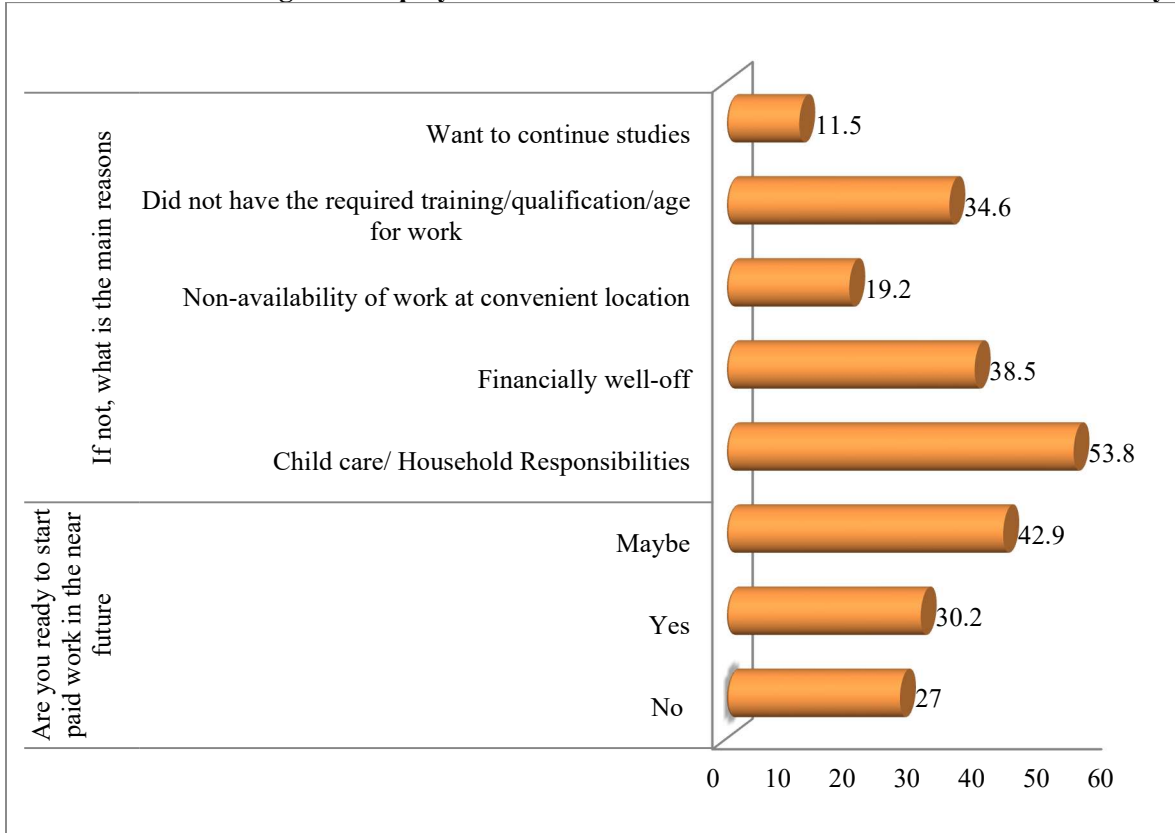
Career sacrifices for family show that a substantial 41.3% of respondents report having made career sacrifices to prioritize family needs. In contrast, 58.7% indicate that they have not made such sacrifices. This suggests that family responsibilities significantly impact career decisions, though experiences vary among participants.

Daily time allocation for household tasks reveals significant variation in the domestic workload. The majority of respondents (31.7%), comprising dedicates 4-6 hours daily to household responsibilities, while 27% spend 2-4 hours, another 27% spend less than six hours on such tasks and only 14.3% respondents spending 0-2 hours on domestic duties.

Ownership of household responsibilities indicates that an overwhelming 98.4% of respondents acknowledge having household obligations; with only 1.6% respondents do not have any responsibilities. This near-universal expectation of managing domestic tasks highlights that household management is an unavoidable aspect of life for the study population. Overall, the findings indicate that household responsibilities create significant barriers to career development and continuity, with most respondents facing time constraints and role conflicts that necessitate career compromises. The data suggests a need for support systems and policy interventions to address the unequal distribution of domestic labor and provide mechanisms for balancing family and professional responsibilities.



Fig.1.8: Employment Discontinuation and Future Work Intentions Analysis



Source: Researcher Findings

The figure 1.8 shows that main reason for leaving job childcare and household responsibilities, which affects 53.8% of respondents. This shows how much domestic duties influence career choices, matching traditional views where family comes first. Financial stability is the second major reason, affecting 38.5% of people. It indicates that some left their jobs because they didn't need to work for money anymore.

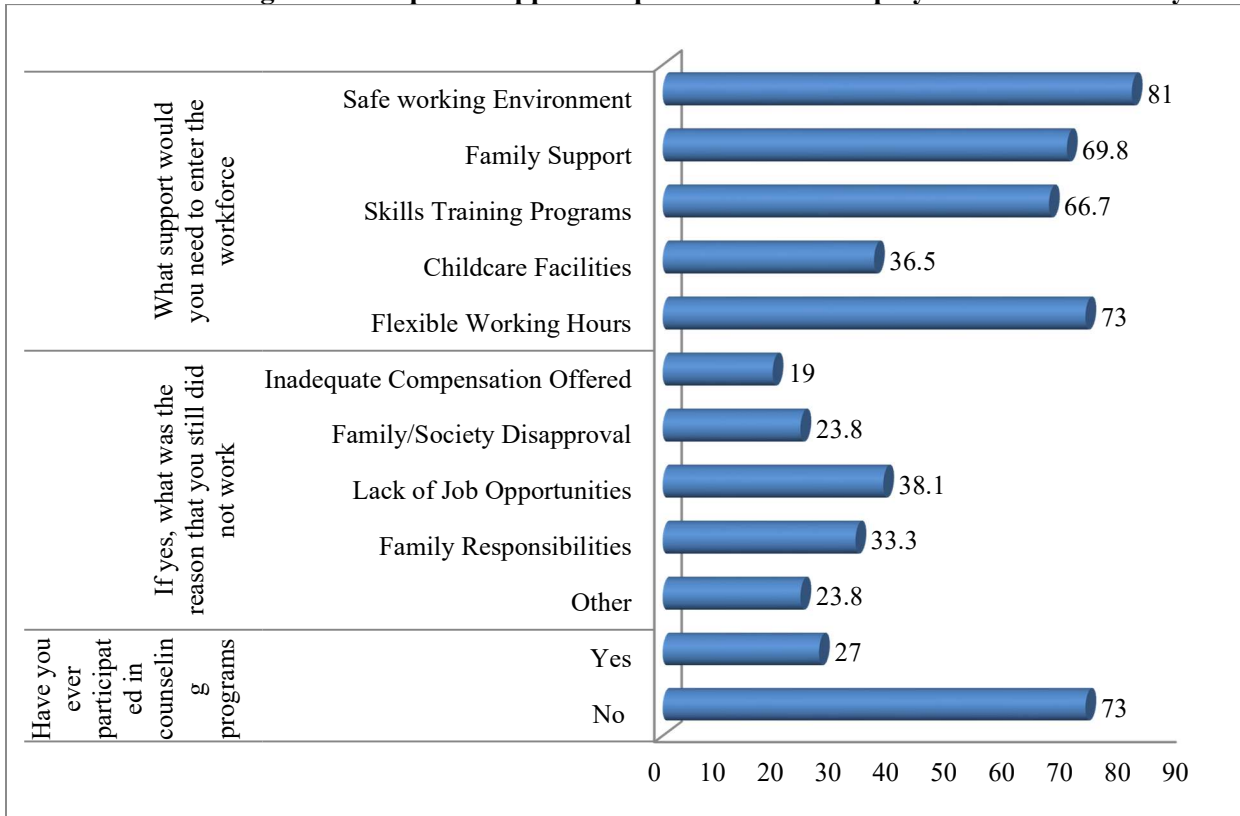
About 34.6% stopped working due to lacking the necessary training, qualifications, or age for available positions, pointing to mismatches between skills and jobs. Geographical issues, such as not having worked nearby, affect 19.2% of participants. Only 11.5% wanted to pursue further education, showing that this is not a major factor in leaving jobs.

When it comes to future work intentions, many respondents felt uncertain. The largest group (42.9%) chose "maybe," suggesting they might work again depending on factors like family situation or job availability. Thirty percent are ready to work soon, while 27% are not prepared to start working.

These results indicate that, although some people show interest in working again, they face challenges that affect their readiness. Factors like family obligations, required skills, and job availability play significant roles. The uncertainty about future work suggests a need for flexible job options and support policies to help overcome these barriers.



Fig.1.9: Workplace Support Requirements and Employment Barriers Analysis



Source: Researcher Findings

The figure 1.9 shows that, most important need for entering the workforce is a safe working environment, with 81% of respondents highlighting safety concerns. This indicates that worries about harassment, discrimination, or physical harm are major barriers to finding work. Family support is the second most important factor, cited by 69.8% of respondents, showing that having help at home is crucial for getting jobs. The majority of respondents (66.7%) say that skills training programs are essential, pointing to gaps in skills and the need for training initiatives. Flexible work hours are needed by 73% of respondents, highlighting that strict schedules can conflict with their personal responsibilities. Childcare facilities are necessary for 36.5% of respondents, suggesting that while childcare support is important, not everyone needs it, possibly due to different family situations.

The biggest barrier to finding a job is the lack of job opportunities, reported by 38.1% of respondents. This shows there aren't enough suitable jobs available. Family responsibilities affect 33.3%, reinforcing how domestic duties can impact job decisions. Family or societal disapproval influences 23.8% of respondents, indicating ongoing social and cultural challenges to working.

About 19% of respondents mention inadequate pay as a barrier, suggesting that some job options may not offer enough financial reward. Other barriers make up 23.8% of responses, and the relatively low concern about pay shows that while important, it isn't the main issue. The majority of respondents (73%) have not participated in counseling programs, while only 27% have received such services. This gap shows that many people lack access to or knowledge of career guidance that could help them enter the workforce.

Overall, these findings suggest that successful integration into the workforce requires a multi-faceted approach. It should address safety, family support, skills development, and flexible work options. The data indicate that current employment barriers are mainly structural, such as a lack of job opportunities, and social, such as family responsibilities and disapproval, rather than just financial. Therefore, it is important to create policies that tackle both systemic and cultural barriers to employment.



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FINDINGS

- The majority of respondents were adults, aged 40-50 years.
- Religious composition is heavily skewed toward Hindu participants, with minimal diversity from other communities.
- The respondents are predominantly married (69.8%), with the General category representation at 63.5%
- The majority of respondents have never been previously employed, indicating limited formal workforce participation.
- Most of the respondents leave their jobs due to Pregnancy/childbirth and workplace-related problems.
- Marriage and household responsibilities constitute the most significant barrier to employment.
- Lack of skills or qualifications represents a major obstacle.
- Family or societal disapproval affects 36.4% of potential workers.
- Marriage and family expectations are the primary cause of career disruption (55.2%)
- Pregnancy and childbirth account for 41.4% of career interruptions.
- Elder care responsibilities affect 37.9% of respondents.
- Only 30.2% are definitely ready to start working, while 27% are not ready.
- Childcare and household responsibilities remain the primary reasons for employment discontinuation.
- Financial stability accounts for 38.5% of work discontinuation decisions.
- Safe working environment, family support, flexible working hours, and skills training programs are the most critical needs for workforce entry.

SUGGESTION

- Implement mandatory flexible working hours, part-time options, job-sharing, and remote work policies with tax incentives for employers.
- Establish government-subsidized childcare centers, mandate workplace crèches for organizations with 30+ employees, and create mobile childcare services.
- Launch targeted vocational training programs aligned with market demands, establish community-based skill development centers, and create digital literacy initiatives.
- Implement stringent safety regulations, establish anonymous harassment reporting mechanisms, and create women-only transport facilities.
- Launch campaigns promoting women's economic participation, conduct family counseling on work-life balance, and organize dialogues with religious and social leaders.
- Educate families about shared household responsibilities, create incentive schemes for supportive families, and promote male participation in domestic duties.
- Strengthen anti-discrimination laws, create fast-track courts for workplace harassment cases, and establish legal aid services.
- Provide tax rebates for women returning to workforce, create low-interest loans for skill development, and establish pension contributions for career break periods.
- Invest in digital infrastructure, provide subsidized internet access, and create co-working spaces with childcare facilities.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed numerous barriers faced by women in labor force participation with marriage, family responsibilities, and pregnancy/childbirth serving as the primary obstacles to employment. The findings demonstrate that 69.8% of respondents are married, with household duties and lack of family support creating substantial employment challenges. Despite these barriers, there is potential for increased participation, as evidenced by 30.2% of respondents expressing readiness to work given appropriate support systems. Women's empowerment through enhanced workforce participation



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can significantly boost national economic growth and contribute positively to overall economic development. To realize this potential, comprehensive policy interventions including flexible work arrangements, childcare support, skill development programs, and family sensitization initiatives are essential. Priority should be given to providing women with educational programs and skill development activities while ensuring equal employment opportunities and compensation to enhance their prospects of accessing sustainable employment opportunities.

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