

Awareness, Access, Mobility- Major barriers for rural female labor force participation

Overview

India's female labor force participation rate has been ranked at **140 out of 156 countries** in 2021 as per the Global Gender Gap report 2021 (WEF). While everyone acknowledges the need to close the gender gap in workforce participation, little effort is directed toward understanding what influences women's participation in economic activities. In our study conducted in **136 villages across 5 districts** with **3320 women, 57% of the cohort is engaged in informal labor, while 66% of them aspire to be self-employed if given the opportunity.** Through this study, we have attempted to deepen our understanding of what influences women's employment choices through a quantitative survey and focus group discussion. Is it **lack of awareness, access to employment pathways, mobility, societal norms, family constraints, education, or pre-conditioned behaviors that affect their choices? Do they have a choice at all?** Identifying these factors can help design support systems to increase their participation in economic activities.

Methodology

Focus group discussions were conducted with 4 cohorts of women from WIWA project locations across Hyderabad, Lucknow, Ahmednagar, Bhopal & Dhamtari. These women were grouped based on their employment status- **Labor/Informal Work, Salaried Job, SHG, Unemployed.** Discussions were held over a virtual call on zoom. Each cohort had 10-12 participants.

In addition to basic demographic details, the following questions were asked in each FGD.

1. Why and how did you choose your current employment activity?
2. What challenges are you currently facing in your employment activity?
3. What are your future aspirations?
4. If given the opportunity of becoming a Sarpanch Of your village, what initiatives would you like to take for women in your village?

Participant Profile

The following table illustrates the education, nature of work and income of the participants



Salaried	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Grade 10- 9 women• Grade 12- 2 women• Masters Degree- 1 woman	<p>These women are engaged in the following job roles in their village:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Govt. school warden-INR 3,000 pm, INR 10,000 pm.2. Govt. school teacher-INR 5,000 pm3. Anganwadi worker- INR 6,000 pm.4. College teacher-INR 10,000 pm.5. Panchayat Operator-INR 5,000 pm.
Labor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Grade 7- 2 women• Grade 10- 8 women• Grade 12- 2 women	<p>These women are engaged in informal labor in agriculture & construction activities in their village. Wages per day are within the range of INR 200-350.</p>
Self-Help Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Grade 10- 2 women• Grade 12- 8 women• Graduate- 2 women	<p>These women are part of self-help groups in their village & engage in production of products like washing powder, hand-made bags and clothes based on orders received in their groups. Their earning ranges from INR 5,000-INR 7,000 per month subject to orders.</p>
Unemployed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Grade 7- 2 women• Grade 10- 8 women• Graduate 12- 2 women	<p>These women are not engaged in any income earning activity.</p>

Key Take-Aways

Difference in aspirations of 'married' and 'unmarried' women

Marriage adds additional responsibilities to a woman's life and her decision-making is highly influenced by husband/family. While there is an aspiration to engage in livelihood activities, they are bound by 'location' and 'time'. The married cohort prefers locally available employment opportunities, even better if they can work from home and are willing to spare 4-5 hours for the same whether it be training or job. The unmarried cohort is more likely and open to training and work opportunities outside of their village/district.

This indicates that there could be merit in designing different interventions for both these cohorts

'Mobility' is a major challenge for most women

Given household chores and child-care responsibilities, traveling for employment/training is very difficult. Most women in the discussion requested a 'transport facility' which is safe & reliable for commuting for training/work.

Provision of safe & reliable transportation facilities should be a major consideration while designing training programs & offering employment opportunities

Local/home-based employment opportunities are the most preferred

Job roles available within the village such as Anganwadi worker, and administrative roles in the Panchayat office are the most ideal and aspired for by women. But at the same time, Generating more such locally available jobs can be a game changer in motivating women to enter the workforce. Online tutor based education roles, village level sales roles, delivery of healthcare services could be some potential opportunities. Tailoring training & employment option was the most preferred within this group. Most women shared that it is convenient for them to engage in tailoring and earn some income from it. While some are already selling clothes stitched at home, others aspire to get trained and start earning from this activity.

Generating village-level job opportunities/home-based micro-enterprise options for women can motivate them to enter the workforce

Need for change in perception & behavior of husband/family/society

Most married women prefer working from home due to household and familial duties and can take out 4-5 hours in a day. This indicates that after marriage, the burden of unpaid work falls disproportionately on women who are expected to take on most of the household and familial responsibilities (HH chores, childcare, and taking care of elderly family members). It is imperative that a mindset shift happens in society so that domestic responsibilities are divided between the spouses/partners equally.

Lack of awareness about possible income-earning opportunities

All the 46 women aspire to take up income earning opportunities but are unaware of the What, How and Where? "We don't know how we can get skill-training, certification and where we can apply for jobs and if there are any opportunities to work from home", shares Geeta, one of the participants. Information asymmetry is a major obstacle for these women who want to participate in some form of income generation. There isn't a platform/information hub at the local community level where they can be informed and get guidance to fructify their aspirations.

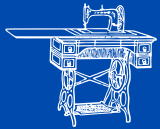
Health, Mobility, Income opportunities, Behavioral Nudges- top priority initiatives chosen by women if made Sarpanch

All of the groups were asked a similar question: 'If you were given the opportunity to become the Sarpanch of your village, what initiatives would you take to improve the lives of women in your village?' The responses can be broadly grouped into four categories: improving women's health, increasing mobility, providing income opportunities, and changing societal attitudes towards women. This indicates that there is aspiration to participate in income-generating activities and an understanding of challenges faced by women at the community level. A platform to spread awareness, provide access & empower them to take leadership in their communities can bring waves of change.

Recommendations



Set-up local/community level information hubs where women can search for & get guidance for possible pathways of income generation- jobs, entrepreneurship, gig opportunities.



Conduct SMO training and offer equipment support for home-based tailoring income earning opportunities as it was the most voted/preferred skill-training demanded by women.



Design interventions that use behavioral nudges to change the perceptions and mindsets of the community and male counterparts

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