



RETHINKING THE WAYS OF MEASURING WOMEN'S WORK IN INDIA

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Acknowledgements

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CONTENTS

1	Executive Summary	06
2	What Does Measuring Women's Work Yield?	07
3	The Importance of Labour Statistics	08
4	The Measurement of Labour and Production	08
5	What Characterises Women's Labour in India?	10
6	A Gendered Critique of the Production Boundary	12
7	Unrealised Potential: Implications of Invisibilising Women's Labour	14
8	Redefining Women's Work with a Nuanced Approach	15
9	References	17

Executive Summary

The labour market statistics that measure women's labour are a critical foundation for effective policy design and ecosystem interventions to advance women's economic empowerment. As per current measurements, India's female labour force participation rate stands at approximately 30%. However, the methodologies that lead to this figure are underpinned by a range of assumptions and principles that lead to gendered consequences. This perspective unpacks how labour and economic activity is measured for the purposes of national accounts, and offers a gendered critique of the existing statistical methodologies.

The measurement of labour and economic activity is guided by the United Nations System of National Accounts (UN-SNA), which pivots around the production of goods and services. Activities such as cleaning, cooking, childcare and elder care are outside the UN-SNA production boundary, which has the effect of obscuring the contributions of women to the economy, and the range of social factors that directly impact the manner in which women work.

Economic growth, education, fertility rates, and social and cultural context influence women's participation in the labour force. Where women participate in paid employment, they navigate paid work alongside their indispensable role in the household. They also undertake several expenditure-saving activities in the household and contribute to family enterprises and subsistence activities, which are not considered in national accounts.

Existing methodologies of measuring women's work have three key shortcomings – the exclusion of women's economic contributions; an overreliance on market definitions of productivity that obscures the social value generated through women's work; and neglect of the social norms that dictate the manner in which women work and navigate household patriarchy along with labour. Consequently, the skewed representation of women's work and a lack of holistic understanding of factors that determine it have far-reaching implications, limiting the effectiveness of policy design, and limiting the effectiveness of ecosystem action and interventions targeted at women workers.

It is imperative to build an alternative narrative for women's work that recognises the indispensable role women play in building economic, social and human value. The key pillars of such an approach should recognise the full spectrum of socioeconomic value that women's work creates, and appreciate the interconnection of factors that govern the working ways of women.

What Does Measuring Women's Work Yield?

Women's participation in the labour force is a key indicator of a country's development, progress and gender equality. Trends in the domain of women and their participation in the labour force are highly sensitive to external social and economic conditions. These reflect a country's approach towards tackling the inequalities that affect women, in aspects such as education, fertility rates, equitable fiscal policies, and social norms, among others. Women's participation in the labour force is also an important accelerant of economic growth. For these reasons, female labour force participation remains a closely tracked and relied upon figure, both domestically and internationally. It informs policy interventions such as labour market regulation, design of welfare schemes, improvements to education and skilling facilities, as well as addressing deep-rooted cultural norms. It is also a guiding tool for the activities of foundations, multilateral agencies and non-governmental organisations working to improve women's economic empowerment and financial autonomy.

In recent years however, alarms have been sounded regarding the declining female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) in India, which now stands at approximately 30% - a far cry from the average of 53% for countries in the Asia Pacific region (MoSPI 2022; OECD 2022). This consistently declining figure has also raised questions on the manner in which FLFPR is calculated, and whether it is representative of women and their ways of working in India. Considering the central role of this statistic in guiding development initiatives on women, economy and labour, it is crucial to unpack the narrative and methodologies that produce this figure.

This perspective forms the first part of SKI's work on understanding and representing the reality of women's work and labour in India.

Table 1: Understanding women & their ways of working: Perspectives on women's work

Part 1: Existing methodologies of measuring women's labour	Part 2: A new framework to understanding and measure women's labour & its value
<p>Overview of existing statistical methodologies used to measure economic activity & labour, and the gendered implications of these methods that do not accurately reflect the economic and social contribution of women's labour, and the factors that determine the ways in which women work.</p>	<p>An alternative framework to view women's labour, which captures the following perspectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The value of women's work • The factors that determine the ways in which women undertake labour • Levers that can contribute to strengthening women's economic empowerment and agency.

The Importance of Labour Statistics

Labour statistics can be defined as a body of official statistics that deal with work, productive activities, workers, the characteristics of the labour market and its operation (ILO 2017). These statistics provide a window into the labour market, at the micro and macroeconomic levels, covering both labour market demand and supply issues. These are also vital indicators that help a country monitor its progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goal 8 – ensuring decent and productive employment for all (IAEG-SDGs 2017).

Female labour force participation, and the measurement of women's labour, is an integral component of labour market statistics. It covers the contributions of women to the labour market and economy. Incorporating a gender-sensitive approach towards the collection of labour statistics is imperative to ensure that women's contributions are accurately represented in national accounts, and that their specific constraints and opportunities are understood. This includes valuing women's unpaid as well as paid labour. The mainstreaming of gender-sensitive approaches is especially crucial considering that certain key indicators related to labour are currently not gender-disaggregated. Examples include access to social security, migration, workforce in the manufacturing sector, and asset ownership. Moreover, such an approach can unearth gender-specific issues in labour and economics shaped by the local realities of women negotiating with the forces of patriarchy and markets, thereby allowing targeted interventions by stakeholders such as policymakers and civil society.

The Measurement of Labour and Production

The United Nations System of National Accounts (UN-SNA) is the internationally agreed set of principles and recommendations on how economic activity, and consequently, labour, should be measured and compiled (United Nation Statistics Division [UNSD] n.d.). Internationally comparable, consistent and coherent national accounts are building blocks of macroeconomic statistics, including labour statistics, and form the basis for economic analysis and policy design (UNSD n.d.).

United Nations System of National Accounts

The UN-SNA measures activities that take place in an economy. Consequently, at the heart of the SNA is the production of goods and services. Labour and labour force participation are intrinsically tied to activities that contribute towards the production of goods and services.

The UN-SNA defines production as "a physical process, carried out under the responsibility, control and management of an institutional unit, in which labour and assets are used to transform inputs of goods and services into outputs of other goods and services" (European Communities, IMF, OECD, UN & World Bank 2009). In this regard, the UN-SNA uses the concept of a production boundary, which defines what activities are considered to be

production. Critically, this boundary also defines which activities are considered labour – a narrower category than work – for the purposes of national accounts.

Under the UN-SNA's production boundary, the following activities are included:

- The production of all individual or collective goods or services that are supplied to units other than their producers, or intended to be so supplied, including the production of goods or services used up in the process of producing such goods or services;
- The own-account production of all goods that are retained by their producers for their own final consumption or gross capital formation;
- The own-account production of housing services by owner-occupiers and of domestic and personal services produced by employing paid domestic staff.

To understand the shortcomings of the SNA's definition of production, it is valuable to identify the range of activities that are excluded, such as:

- The cleaning, decoration and maintenance of the dwelling occupied by the household, including small repairs of a kind usually carried out by tenants as well as owners;
- The cleaning, servicing and repair of household durables or other goods, including vehicles used for household purposes;
- The preparation and serving of meals;
- The care, training and instruction of children;
- The care of sick, infirm or old people;
- The transportation of members of the household or their goods (European Communities, IMF, OECD, UN & World Bank 2009).

Despite adopting seemingly neutral boundary conditions, the production boundary in fact has the effect of obscuring both the contributions of women to the economy, and the social and economic reality which directly affects the manner in which they work.

Indian System of National Accounts

For the most part, the Indian statistical system has strived to follow the standards of the SNA, recognising the needs for accuracy and comparability of national accounts, and in this regard, mirrors almost exactly the production boundary of the SNA (PIB 2019). As per the most recent data from the International Monetary Fund, the Indian national accounting system covers the entire economy and all activities within the production boundary. The only exception to the coverage is the production of goods (other than those in agriculture, forestry and fishing) within the households for their own final consumption (IMF 2023). While the UN-SNA considers the product of all goods for household consumption within the production boundary, the ISNA only considers the production of primary goods. Nevertheless, the production boundary followed in India is closely aligned with the UN-SNA, and therefore poses similar concerns with respect to the exclusion of activities that have a highly gendered lens. Thus, the boundaries set by the SNA and ISNA together combine

to produce the bedrock for statistics on labour and production for India. This is especially significant as a range of international organisations like the World Bank and ILO, rely on data produced through the use of these methods such as the PLFS (ILO 2023).

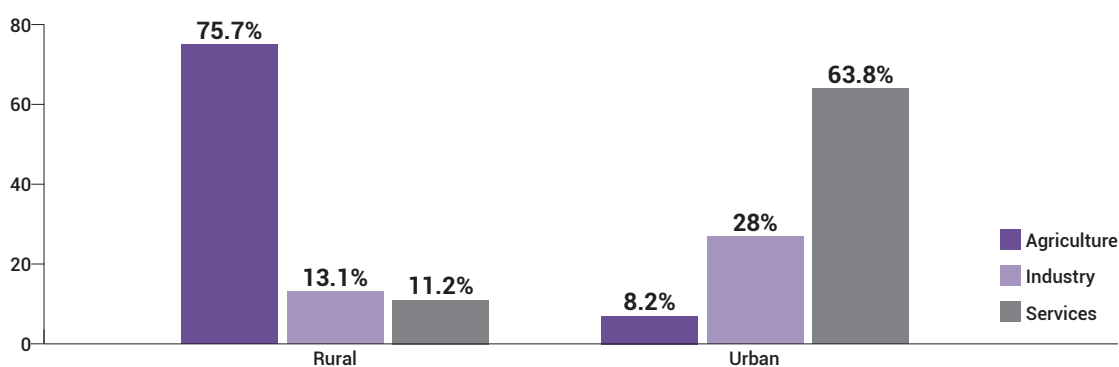
What Characterises Women's Labour in India?

A complex network of factors, including economic growth, education, fertility rates, and most crucially, social and cultural contexts, is responsible for driving or inhibiting women's participation in the labour force (Chaudhary et al. 2014). Where women are able to participate in paid employment, they navigate paid work alongside their indispensable role in the household. In several cases, the boundary between their paid work and unpaid work is blurred.

Sectoral participation and nature of work

In terms of sectoral composition, Indian women follow the overarching pattern of relying on the agrarian economy. Notwithstanding rapid urbanisation in India, over two-thirds of the population still rely on the agrarian economy for their livelihoods (Houngbo 2020). Consequently, agriculture continues to be the sector in which a majority of women are engaged, with 60% of those in the agricultural labour force (Chand et al. 2022). Certain other sectors have also absorbed a significant number of women workers, such as construction, manufacturing, hospitality, retail, and apparel (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI] 2022). *Figures 1 and 2* illustrate the composition of women workers across different sectors.

Figure 1: Percent distribution of Female workers over Industry types



Source: Niti Aayog 2022, Sanyukta 2022

86.1 MILLION
 women worked in the agriculture sector which is 60% of total women labour force.

17%
 of FLF (23.9 mn) is employed in the industry sector, which includes construction.

33.7 MILLION
 in the service sector, out of which 12.3 mn and 21.4 mn are from rural and urban households respectively.

Figure 2: Percentage distribution of workers by broad industry (PLFS 2020-21)

Agriculture, construction, hospitality, retail, and apparel witness a major share of women workers, leading to 'feminisation' of these industries.

Sectors	Rural Female	Urban Female
Agriculture	75.4%	10.4%
Mining & Quarrying	0.1%	0.1%
Manufacturing	7.4%	23.0%
Electricity, water, etc.	0.1%	0.6%
Construction	5.9%	4.4%
Trade, Hotels & Restaurant	3.5%	16.2%
Transport, Storage & Communications	0.3%	3.7%
Other Services	7.5%	41.6%

Source: Sanyukta 2022

However, regardless of the sector in which they work, women's labour in India has historically been characterised by high levels of informality, precarity and decent work deficits. 81.8% of women's employment in India is concentrated in the informal sector (ILO 2018). This means that an overwhelming majority of women workers are beyond the pale of legislatively protected workplace rights. Instead, these workers are overrepresented in historically precarious and low-paying jobs, such as street vending, waste picking, home-based work, construction labourers, domestic work, head-loaders and other short-term contracts resulting in intermittent work carried out on an irregular basis. Women's participation in the labour force also exhibits a high degree of volatility, with frequent transitions, and periodic entrances and exits. This type of labour is unregulated and unorganised, resulting in lack of social security and poor working conditions. It is also largely invisible in official statistics, as a significant proportion of the informal economy slips through the cracks in survey design, which does not fully account for the intermittent, sporadic and irregular nature of labour in the informal sector (Chakraborty 2021; FES 2018).

Composition of women's work in India

Women's work is a composite whole of several moving parts, that are sensitive to a range of external factors, such as deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, constraints on education and mobility, the absence of an enabling policy ecosystem as well as the lack of availability of decent jobs commensurate with their qualifications.

Additionally, the primary arbiter of women's work in India has been the non-negotiability of their domestic responsibilities, such as household chores, child rearing, and caring for the elderly. These social norms continue to be a dominant force in determining women's work even in an increasingly globalised Indian society and economy. The boundary between women's paid work and unpaid work is often extremely porous and unclear, and women's demand for paid work often directly correlates to its compatibility with household work.

Thus, it is not only gender that informs the preferences and structures of women's work, but larger societal, cultural and economic constraints, all of which feed into decisions about women and their work.

A statistical approach that privileges the lived experiences of women workers and surfaces their most pressing challenges is key towards enabling collaborative ecosystem action towards addressing women's issues in the labour market. However, this is inhibited by preconceived notions and presumption that underlie statistical data collection on labour.

A Gendered Critique of the Production Boundary

The rules that determine what counts as economic activity within the production boundary and consequently made visible in national accounts, is itself a value judgement that reflects patriarchal notions of what constitutes productive activity. This criticism offers a challenge to traditional methods that define economic reality, that is, in terms of what economic data is made visible to stakeholders and what is kept in the dark (Saunders et al. 2016).

Separating labour from work

Women perform a range of paid and unpaid tasks that are indispensable for the household and the larger economic and social well-being of a country (Nikore 2022). However, only a small percentage of their work is counted as "labour", and is consequently reflected in statistics and data. Labour is a subset of work measured in purely economic terms and only

Figure 3: Activities within the SNA production boundary

Intended destination of production	For own final use		For use by others								
	Own use production work		Employment (work for pay or for profit)			Unpaid trainee work	Other work activities	Volunteer work			
Forms of work										In market and non-market units	In households producing
								Goods	Services		
	Of Services		Of goods	Employment and related activities			Unpaid volunteer, trainee and other unpaid work				
Activity*	Unpaid caregiving services for household and family members	Unpaid domestic services for household and family members	Production of goods for own final use	Employment in corporations, government and non-profit institutions	Employment in household enterprises to produce goods	Employment in households and household enterprises to provide services	Unpaid trainee work and related activities	Other unpaid work activities	Unpaid direct volunteering for other households**	Unpaid community and organisation-based volunteering**	
Type of work	Unpaid work (unpaid care work, domestic work and production of goods for own final use)						Unpaid work (community, volunteer, trainee work)				
Relation to the SNA				Activities within the SNA production boundary							
				Activities outside the SNA production boundary but within the General production boundary							

*Activity based on the International Classification of Activities for Time Use Statistics 2016

**Depending on the activities and beneficiaries, unpaid volunteer work could be considered either within the SNA production boundary or within the general production boundary. All volunteer work for producing goods (including community-organized major construction, inter alia, of roads, dams, wells etc.) is classified as within the SNA production boundary. Unpaid volunteering work to produce services for the market is also accounted in within the SNA production boundary. On the other hand, unpaid volunteer services to other households, to the community (except organized major construction as noted above), to neighbourhood associations, and to other informal associations are activities within the general production boundary but outside the SNA production boundary.

Source: UNSD 2017

constitutes work that goes towards the production of goods and services. As previously stated, women's work is a composite mix of a range of activities, some of which may fit the definition of labour and some of which may not. But the production boundary slices their work into two binary categories, thus consigning a large proportion of their work to invisibility, as demonstrated by *Figure 3*.

The limitations of existing methodologies for measuring labour from a gendered perspective can be studied from the following key lenses: i) exclusion of women's economic contribution; ii) overreliance on market definitions of productivity; and iii) neglect of governing social norms.

Exclusion of women's economic contribution

As the above image illustrates, unpaid caregiving services and unpaid domestic services fall outside the scope of the SNA production boundary when these services are produced and consumed within the same household. Even while excluding these activities from the production boundary, the SNA itself acknowledges that a significant amount of labour is devoted to the above activities, and this is a crucial and integral contribution to the economy and welfare (European Communities, IMF, OECD, UN & World Bank 2009).

However, the missing link in the SNA's analysis is that the labour that goes into these excluded activities is not gender-neutral. Rather, it is women who shoulder these activities to a disproportionate degree. In India, it is estimated that women spend nearly 10 times as much time as men on performing domestic and household tasks (UN Women 2021). Additionally, women undertake an array of expenditure saving activities at the household level, such as gathering firewood, fetching water, tending to the garden, milking family cows, and so on, which are not accounted for in national accounts. In particular, the arbitrary production boundary makes a large part of women's labour invisible in official statistics, and consequently, devalues their economic contribution. It is estimated that women's contribution to the economy through their unpaid labour is a staggering 7.5% of the GDP (SBI 2023).

Market definitions of productivity

Another shortcoming of the SNA's principles is its binary approach towards production/non-production, which also informs the binary notions of either being in the workforce or out of it. Falling on either side of the binary determines whether a particular activity is reflected in national accounts, and also whether a person is counted as being part of the workforce. This does not map neatly on to the realities of women's work, especially in a Global South context. A majority of South Asian women fall in between the extremes of women who clearly work outside the home for pay and women who exclusively perform unpaid services for the household (Deshpande 2019). Moreover, an overreliance on market definitions of what counts as production measures value in purely economic terms further ignores the social value generated through women's work. Even though the generation of this social good cannot be clearly quantified in economic terms, it remains fundamental to a country's economic growth and well-being. Domestic work and caregiving for family members, for instance, are critical pillars of household well-being and welfare.

Neglect of governing social norms

As previously stated, women's work in India is dominated by high informality and precarity, and is also a product of governing social norms that privilege their position in the home. However, their participation in precarious forms of work is frequently undertaken as a consequence of household economic distress, meaning that it is often seasonal, sporadic and irregular. Additionally, women are also involved in family businesses, undertaking unpaid activities that are nevertheless expenditure-saving and economically valuable. As these activities are undertaken within the boundaries of the home, it is rarely counted as labour, and these women are not recognised as workers (FES 2018). Women navigate work by simultaneously occupying the roles of a social and economic actor, and generating a combination of social and economic value through their activities.

In conclusion, women are constantly working, but their labour is not counted due to flaws in statistical principles and approaches. Their contribution to the economy as well as the social value of their labour is invisible – yet indispensable.

Unrealised Potential: Implications of Invisibilising Women's Labour

Prevalent methods of counting work and productivity disadvantage women by invisibilising their contributions. This has a range of material consequences. It impacts the interventions of key stakeholders working to advance women's economic empowerment.

Limiting the effectiveness of policy design

At the outset, the invisibility of women's work in economic data interrupts a crucial pipeline of data towards policy formulation. It is hard to form policies for the unknown. Putting women's work outside the production boundary also puts it outside the purview of economic policy (SBI 2023). This has a twofold consequence – firstly, it inhibits the formulation of targeted and evidence-based policies to address the labour market challenges faced by women, and secondly, it does not allow for the forecasting of cascading consequences of policy announcements on vulnerable women workers. It has been estimated that if women's work were duly enumerated in national accounts and labour market statistics, women's workforce participation rate would rise to 46.2 % (Sanyal et al. 2023) – a staggering increase from the current figure of approximately 30%.

Additionally, the invisibility goes beyond undercounting in economic terms, and also obscures the reality of women's preferences and capacities within a given set of circumstances (Nagpal et al. 2023). Distinguishing work from labour – and making both visible in data – is critical to inform policy design, as policies only address market operations, and not how social factors operate to govern women's work. Without acknowledging why women work the way they do, and the factors that inform their decisions, policies cannot appropriately target the right levers towards increasing women's

agency and participation in paid and dignified work. For instance, without clear information on the value of unpaid care that women provide, developing policies to build a robust care infrastructure for the country will be inherently compromised. Another example is how education policy itself is limited, without building school-to-work pipelines based on the recognition of working women's lived realities, such as reproductive choices.

Limiting the effectiveness of ecosystem action and interventions

The lack of representation in official statistics inhibits the work of development agencies and stakeholders, such as multilateral organisations, foundations and civil society. These actors rely upon statistics on women's work and their labour force participation collected at the national level to design and implement their interventions to support women's economic empowerment. The flawed assumptions that underlie these statistics are also reflected in these development initiatives, thus hampering their impact.

Ineffective engagement strategies that do not acknowledge how women balance social norms with economic duress are unlikely to materially improve women's labour force participation. Rather, the need of the hour is a strategy that embeds the role of social and cultural norms, and the composite ways in which women undertake work and labour.

The data deficit that plagues our perspectives on women's labour has far-reaching consequences for the work and impact of development actors. Addressing the data deficit will help provide the ecosystem with a composite view of a woman's life, which is closely entangled with her work and labour. This is critical information not only for creating the right types of jobs for women from a macroeconomic perspective, but also for better informing the design of interventions of foundations, philanthropic organisations and civil society. The role of the ecosystem can be more community-centric and responsive if their interventions are armed with knowledge about the reality of social structures within which women operate, instead of merely disrupting and severing them. Taken together, improvements in data can vastly strengthen the role of actors working to advance women's economic positions.

Redefining Women's Work with a Nuanced Approach

In order to address the gender gap in the labour market, the ecosystem must first aim to close the data deficits that invisibilise women's labour. Additionally, there is a need to better understand how women's employment is a product of their sociocultural context, thus informing their decision-making around work and labour. By mainstreaming women's economic contribution and improving ecosystem understanding of the holistic range of factors that affect women's work, interventions targeted at women workers can be far more impactful. There is increasing recognition among key actors, such as the government, for the need to reform how labour market statistics are measured from

MEASURING WOMEN'S WORK IN INDIA

a gender perspective. Most recently, the Economic Survey 2022-23 made note of the issues with the measurement of female labour force participation in India (Ministry of Finance 2023). Time-use surveys have also been introduced as a solution to this issue. These surveys aim to capture how time is spent, rather than only measuring labour, which thus provides a more holistic picture of the range of economically and socially valuable activities that are undertaken during the course of a day.

There is a need to steer away from mere quantification, and recognise that value is generated by labour that goes beyond market definitions of production. Women are at the centre of community and care networks, whose value cannot be measured in monetary terms.

Building an alternative narrative for women's work, that recognises the indispensable role women play in building economic, social and human value, is thus an urgent imperative for the development ecosystem. The key pillars of such an approach should encompass a recognition of the full spectrum of socioeconomic value that women's work creates, and a nuanced appreciation of the holistic interconnection of factors that govern the working ways of women. Developing a framework through which women's labour can be measured and viewed will form a critical pillar of Sattva's work on women at work. We believe that creating a pipeline from this framework to ecosystem interventions can thus have significant value for India's working women.

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