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How Love Marriages can boost India's Economic Growth

DEC 20, 2024



Exclusive- By Bibhudatta Pradhan

India's female labour force participation rate has remained persistently low, despite rising economic growth, fertility decline, rising wages and education levels.

According to the latest Periodic Labour Force Survey, only 41.7% of women aged 15 years and above participated in the workforce in 2023-2024, significantly lower than the male participation rate of 78.8%. In urban areas, the female labour force participation rate was just 25.5% in 2023-2024, while in rural areas it was higher at 41.5%. This disparity highlights women's challenges in accessing employment opportunities, especially in urban settings. However, there is some progress. The female labour force participation rate has steadily increased from 23.3% in 2017-2018 to 41.7% in 2023-2024, though it still lags behind the world [average](#) of 48.7%. Economists attribute this rise largely to the growing number of women entering self-employment.

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Many women are contributing to their family farms or running small home-based businesses, such as shops or artisan services. Various government initiatives by the central and state governments have also played a role in boosting women's participation in the labour force. Schemes like Mudra loans, the Drone Didi initiative, free bicycles for girls, and marriage grants for the underprivileged have helped empower women economically and socially. Additionally, activists have been actively campaigning for wage equality and advocating for the creation of jobs tailored to women's needs, further supporting their inclusion in the workforce.



These combined efforts are gradually paving the way for greater opportunities and economic independence for women across India. Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain, and the overall improvement in female workforce participation has been modest.

Bridging the gender gap in labour force participation is crucial for India to achieve its ambitious goal of becoming a \$5 trillion economy within the next three years. One significant factor contributing to gender inequality in the labour market is the decline in women's workforce participation after marriage. While men often enjoy a "marriage premium" that boosts their employability, women face a "marriage penalty," according to a recent World Bank [report](#). The report states that in India, post-marriage female employment rates drop by 12.1 percentage points, even in the absence of children. This decline underscores the societal pressures and expectations placed on women post-marriage, particularly in traditional Indian arranged marriages.

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In arranged marriages, families typically dictate women's roles, prioritizing household responsibilities over career aspirations. Studies reveal that women in such marriages are more likely to conform to these expectations, often becoming full-time homemakers and thereby limiting their participation in the labour force. In contrast, love marriages often enable couples to negotiate their roles more equitably, based on mutual understanding and shared aspirations rather than familial dictates.

"Parent-arranged marriage reduces post-marriage labour market autonomy for job-oriented women.," states a research paper titled "Made in Heaven, Matched by Parents": Does Arranged Marriage Restrict Labour Market Autonomy and Participation of Women? "We measure causal effects using a marriage tradition instrument and discover that self-choice marriages have a 30 percentage point higher likelihood of labour market autonomy than arranged marriages." "Our findings have direct policy implications," the paper highlights. "To achieve women's empowerment, the de-stigmatization of labour market work must be accompanied by the cultural de-legitimization of parent-arranged marriages." Love marriages in India are growing slowly, especially in rural areas where caste, religion, family reputation and traditional norms dominate.

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They currently [make up](#) just 3% of all marriages, compared with 93% being arranged marriages and another 2% categorized as love-cum-arranged marriages. Therefore, alongside other initiatives, promoting love marriages can play a significant role in enhancing women's workforce participation and driving economic growth.

(Bibhudatta Pradhan is a senior journalist based in New Delhi.)





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