

Shattering the Glass Barrier

Transcending systemic barriers to ensure more women at the helm

The underrepresentation of women in executive roles and labor unions remains a persistent issue worldwide, and India is no exception. Despite significant progress in education, workforce participation, and gender equality legislation, women still face considerable barriers when it comes to accessing leadership positions. This underrepresentation shortchanges not only women but also the entire workforce, as it limits the potential of nearly 50% of the population. These challenges are particularly evident in corporate sectors and labor unions, where societal expectations around caregiving responsibilities disproportionately impact women. While strides have been made, much work remains to be done to foster a truly equitable and inclusive workforce that empowers women to step into leadership roles.

Underrepresentation of Women in Executive Roles

In India, the underrepresentation of women in high-ranking executive positions remains stark. According to the *World Economic Forum's* Global Gender Gap Report (2020), India ranks 149th out of 153 countries in terms of female participation in the workforce. While women make up around 40% of India's workforce, they hold only 15% of senior leadership roles. Gender disparities in leadership persist, primarily due to a combination of gender biases, a lack of mentorship opportunities, and limited access to decision-making networks.

A similar pattern can be observed in labor unions. Women in India face significant barriers to joining and leading labor unions. Women workers in informal sectors such as domestic work, textiles, and agriculture often lack the organizational support needed to secure membership or take on leadership roles within unions. According to the *Indian Ministry of Labour and Employment*, women made up only 30% of the total union membership in India in 2020, and even fewer held leadership positions. This indicates a deep-rooted issue within the labor movement, where the voices of women workers are often marginalized due to lack of representation.

Cultural and structural biases within labor unions often favor male leadership, with women being sidelined or excluded from higher levels of decision-making. Women in unions often face resistance from male counterparts who question their capabilities or leadership potential, further entrenching the gender inequality that exists within the labor movement.

Disparities in the Formal Workforce

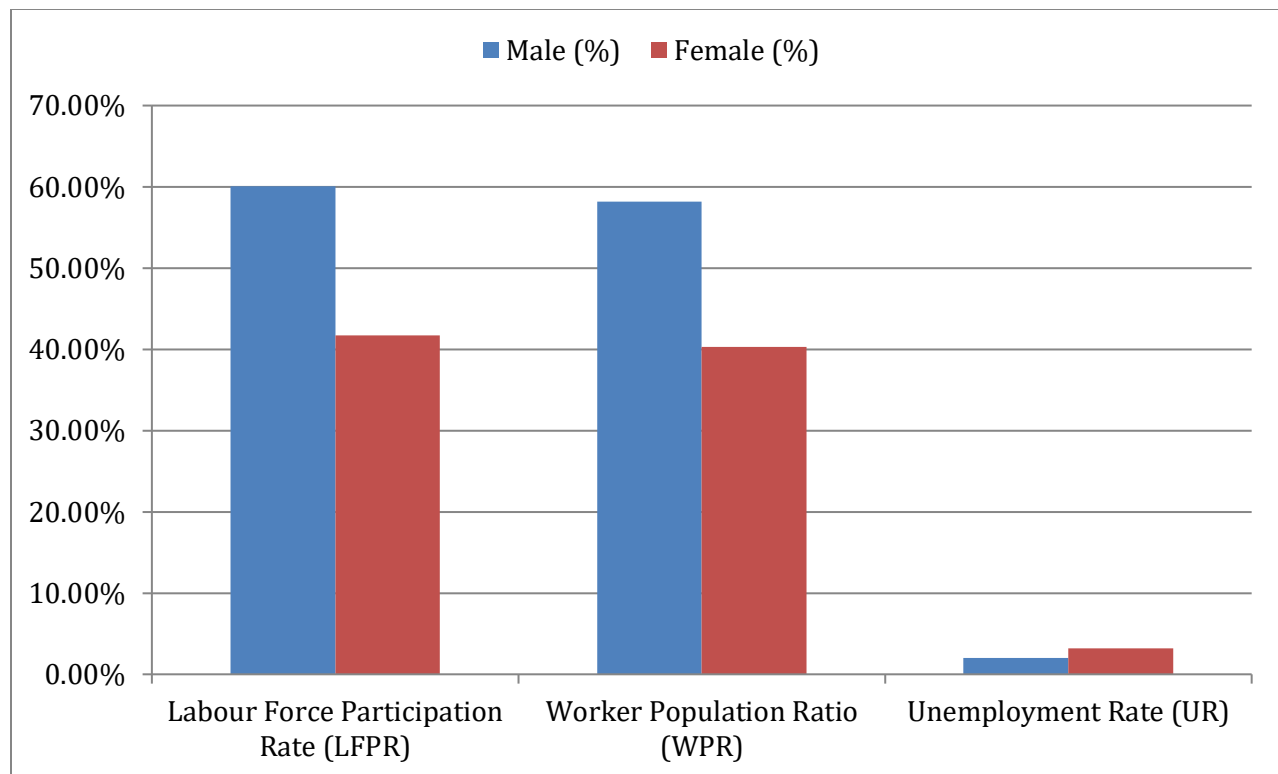
Despite various diversity hiring initiatives, India's formal workforce continues to exhibit a notable gender gap. According to the latest Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) for 2023-24, the participation of women in the workforce has improved significantly. The female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) increased to 41.7%, up from 23.3% in 2017-18. Meanwhile, the male LFPR stands at 60.1%. This improvement highlights a positive trend, yet women's participation still trails behind that of men.

The Worker Population Ratio (WPR) for women also rose considerably, reaching 40.3% in 2023-24 compared to 22% in 2017-18. For men, the WPR is 58.2%. Furthermore, the unemployment rate (UR) for women has declined to 3.2% from 5.6% in 2017-18, while the male unemployment rate dropped to 2% from 6% over the same period.

Key Indicator	Male (%)	Female (%)
Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR)	60.10%	41.70%
Worker Population Ratio (WPR)	58.20%	40.30%
Unemployment Rate (UR)	2.00%	3.20%

While these improvements are encouraging, gender disparities persist, particularly in formal sector employment and leadership roles. Women remain underrepresented in salaried jobs, with a decline in their share from 21% in 2017-18 to 15.9% in 2023-24. Conversely, self-employment among women has surged to 67.4%, reflecting an increasing reliance on informal economic activities.

These trends suggest that while educational attainment and workforce participation among women are rising, systemic barriers continue to limit their access to formal employment and leadership positions. Effective diversity initiatives, combined with structural reforms, remain crucial to closing the gender gap in India's workforce.



The Glass Ceiling: Barriers to Women's Career Advancement

A significant obstacle women face in their careers is the "glass ceiling," an invisible barrier that prevents women from advancing to the highest levels of leadership within organizations. The glass ceiling exists in both corporate and union environments, albeit in different forms. In corporate settings, this ceiling manifests as gender-based discrimination, limited access to networking opportunities, and the lack of sponsorship that often propels male counterparts into senior roles. Women are frequently passed over for leadership roles in favor of less-qualified male colleagues, or they are pigeonholed into lower-paying, administrative, or people-oriented roles that prevent them from advancing into key decision-making positions.

In labor unions, the glass ceiling is evident in the lack of women in leadership positions, despite women constituting a significant portion of the union membership. Cultural and structural biases within labor unions often favor male leadership, with women being sidelined or excluded from higher levels of decision-making. This reflects a systemic issue where women's voices are minimized or ignored, even though they are the backbone of the labor force in many sectors, particularly in informal or service-oriented industries.

Leaving Women Behind - The Second Shift

One of the primary barriers preventing women from advancing in their careers and securing executive roles is the challenge of balancing leadership responsibilities with caregiving duties. In her landmark book *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (1989), Arlie Russell Hochschild explores how women, even those in dual-income households, often find themselves taking on the majority of housework and caregiving after returning from their formal jobs. In India, the societal expectation that women should be the primary caregivers in the family places a disproportionate burden on them. This "second shift" can limit women's ability to take on leadership positions.

Corporate structures often fail to accommodate these caregiving needs, resulting in a situation where women face burnout and stress trying to manage both aspects of their lives. Consequently, women are often forced to opt for roles with less responsibility or scale back their careers, stunting their professional growth.

Diversity Hiring: A Box-Checking Exercise

In recent years, many organizations in India, as well as globally, have adopted diversity and inclusion (D&I) policies aimed at improving gender parity in the workplace. While these policies are an important step toward achieving greater representation, they often fail to address the root causes of gender inequality in leadership roles. One of the major criticisms of such diversity initiatives is that they often turn into "check-box exercises," where organizations hire women to meet diversity quotas or enhance their public image, rather than genuinely promoting women into leadership roles based on their merit or abilities.

These initiatives often result in tokenism, where women are given roles or positions without the genuine power or decision-making authority to influence outcomes. Furthermore, the inclusion of women in leadership teams in many organizations often does not lead to substantial changes in organizational culture or policy, which can be detrimental to the broader goal of gender equality. Instead of creating meaningful change, diversity hiring sometimes becomes a superficial exercise in which organizations focus on numerical targets rather than on dismantling the systemic barriers that hinder women's advancement.

In some cases, women are appointed to high-profile roles but are not supported by structures that enable them to succeed. They face challenges such as unequal pay, lack of mentorship, and hostile work environments, which prevent them from achieving true leadership. This creates a situation where diversity hiring appears to be a symbolic

gesture, rather than a genuine attempt to address the deep-seated issues of gender inequality.

Policy Solutions: Flexible Work Arrangements and Paid Parental Leave

To address these barriers, India needs to implement more comprehensive policies that facilitate work-life balance, promote gender equity, and encourage women's participation in leadership roles. The following policy solutions are crucial:

1. **Flexible Work Arrangements:** Flexible working policies, such as remote work, flexible hours, and job-sharing, would help women balance professional responsibilities with caregiving duties. While some sectors, particularly in IT and the service industry, have adopted flexible work models, they are not yet prevalent across all industries. Enabling women to access these work arrangements can provide them with the opportunity to take on leadership roles without sacrificing their personal responsibilities.
2. **Paid Parental Leave:** Expanding paid parental leave to include both mothers and fathers is essential. The introduction of the *Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act* in 2017, which increased maternity leave to 26 weeks, was a positive step, but the policy fails to address the caregiving responsibilities of fathers. Introducing shared parental leave would enable both parents to equally share caregiving duties and support women in taking on leadership positions without the added burden of being the sole caregiver.
3. **Support for Career Growth:** To break the glass ceiling, organizations should adopt policies that actively support the career growth of women. These include mentorship programs, leadership training opportunities, and clear career progression pathways for women. Moreover, removing bias from performance reviews and promotions will ensure that women have equal opportunities to ascend to top leadership roles.
4. **Promoting Genuine Diversity:** Diversity hiring should not be about meeting quotas but should instead focus on fostering genuine inclusion. This means ensuring that women in leadership positions have access to decision-making power and are supported in their roles through mentorship, equal pay, and resources. Organizations should also address unconscious biases in hiring and promotion processes to ensure that qualified women are not overlooked for leadership roles.

Success Stories of Women Leaders

Despite the many challenges women have faced in historically male-dominated fields, several women have emerged as powerful and highly successful leaders. These women have risen to positions of great influence and authority in spite of the factors that traditionally limit women's career growth. They were able to successfully navigate familial responsibilities and societal biases to emerge as powerful testaments to resilience, determination, and the breaking of barriers. They have not only excelled in leadership but also paved the way for future generations of women by advocating labor reforms, pushing for gender equality, and leading with a vision that transcends traditional expectations. From heads of state to corporate titans, these women have proven time and again that when given the opportunity, women can achieve extraordinary things and redefine what true leadership looks like. Their achievements are a reminder that removing gender bias and ensuring equal opportunities can unlock incredible potential in women.

Corporate Sector

In the corporate sector, women such as Indra Nooyi, former CEO of PepsiCo, and Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, founder of Biocon, have proven that women can break barriers and lead successful careers in male-dominated industries. Other notable figures include Falguni Nayar, founder of Nykaa, Roshni Nadar Malhotra and Arundhati Bhattacharya who have risen to remarkable positions of power and influence. Roshni Nadar Malhotra, as the chairwoman of HCL Technologies, is not only India's wealthiest woman but also ranks as the 60th most powerful woman globally. She is a strong advocate for diversity and gender representation in the workplace and is deeply involved in philanthropic efforts through the Shiv Nadar Foundation and The Habitats Trust. Similarly, Arundhati Bhattacharya, the former chairperson of the State Bank of India, now leads Salesforce India as its Chairperson and CEO. Her significant contributions to the banking sector were recognized in 2025 when she was awarded the Padma Shri, India's fourth-highest civilian honor. While all these women have made remarkable strides in their respective fields, it is important to acknowledge that there are only 14% women in senior leadership roles in India.

The inspirational stories of these women and their achievements are often supported by a combination of factors, including strong familial support systems, access to mentorship, and opportunities that remain limited for many women due to deep-rooted gender biases. Despite their incredible success, these women still had to navigate societal norms and systemic barriers that many other women in India continue to face. Their stories highlight the need for greater support, equal access to opportunities, and a more inclusive environment for women across all sectors.

Government Entities

In India, women leaders made significant strides in politics, breaking barriers and asserting their influence at the highest levels. Leaders such as Indira Gandhi, who served as the first and only female Prime Minister of India, set a powerful precedent for women in political leadership. Her tenure marked a transformative era in the country's political landscape. In recent years, women like Mamata Banerjee, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, the late Mrs. Sushma Swaraj, former External Affairs Minister, and Nirmala Sitharaman, the current Finance Minister, have continued to build on this legacy. Mamata Banerjee, known for her strong leadership and ability to challenge the status quo, has become a key figure in shaping state and national politics. Sushma Swaraj's diplomatic acumen and advocacy for the welfare of Indian citizens abroad earned her widespread respect both domestically and internationally. Meanwhile, Nirmala Sitharaman's leadership as Finance Minister has been a game-changer, as she navigates India through complex economic challenges and continues to push for reforms that enhance economic growth and stability.

Despite these successes, women's representation in Indian politics remains relatively low. As of 2025, women make up just around 14% of the total seats in the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of Parliament. While the participation of women in political roles has grown over the years, it still lags behind that of men, reflecting the need for greater gender equality in political representation. These leaders, however, continue to break new ground, inspiring more women to engage in the political process and contribute to shaping India's future.

Labor Unions

The role of women in labor unions is crucial for achieving more equitable and effective regulatory outcomes for women workers. Historically, women in India have faced significant barriers in terms of equal pay, workplace safety, and maternity rights. However, when women are actively involved in labor unions, they can voice these issues more effectively and advocate for policy changes that directly benefit them. Additionally, having more women in leadership roles within labor unions helps to challenge deeply ingrained gender biases and fosters an inclusive environment where women's needs and perspectives are better understood. In sectors like agriculture, textiles, and domestic work—where women are disproportionately represented—union leadership by women can make a significant difference in negotiating for better wages, job security, and social protections. Women's active participation helps amplify issues that directly affect them, pushing for changes that would improve workplace conditions for all workers.

In India, strengthening women's representation in labor unions can drive meaningful regulatory reforms and create safer, fairer workplaces. The inclusion of women in union leadership is essential to building a more just and equal society, where the voices of women workers are heard, valued, and acted upon.

An example of this grassroots empowerment can be seen in the work of Masanagari Narsamma and Alcole Narsamma, founders of Sangham Radio, India's first all-female community radio station, established in 2008 in Telangana. The station has been a platform for rural women to discuss a wide range of issues—from farming techniques to women's rights and health awareness. Through their efforts, they have not only educated rural communities but also fostered a movement that underlines the transformative power of community-driven media. Their work exemplifies the broader impact that women's leadership can have on social and regulatory outcomes, especially when it comes to addressing issues that disproportionately affect women workers.

The underrepresentation of women in executive roles and labor unions in India is driven by a combination of cultural, societal, and institutional factors. While some policy solutions have been put in place, such as paid parental leave and flexible work arrangements, there is still much more that needs to be done. Diversity hiring has often been reduced to a check-box exercise, and the glass ceiling remains a significant barrier for women in many industries. However, the success stories of women leaders advocating for labor reforms and leading by example show that change is possible. Moving forward, India must continue to evolve its policies to promote genuine diversity, dismantle the glass ceiling, and create an equitable work environment where women have the opportunity to thrive and lead.