



Barriers for Women in Public Employment

Introduction

Despite high economic growth and improved health and economic outcomes since the 1990s, female labour force participation (FLFP) has stagnated or declined in India, falling to 17.5 per cent in 2017–18 according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS). Even before the impact of Covid-19, barriers to entering the labour force for women were high, and over 80 per cent of all female workers were either self-employed or working as casual workers—less than 20 per cent were regular salaried workers.

For working women, the public sector is the largest provider of formal or regular salaried jobs in the Indian economy: 22.6 per cent of female non-agricultural workers are employed by the government, with 27 per cent in government employment in rural areas. Outside of regular salaried jobs, women also perform many other vital, yet under-recognised, roles in the public sector. These include, for example, frontline delivery workers such as Anganwadi workers under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and bank sakhis under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM). However, although the supply of educated young women who are ready to work has increased over the past decade, notable institutional and structural barriers combined with overall reductions in public employment are limiting opportunities for working women.

Given stagnating FLFP according to official data, the severe impacts of Covid-19 on unemployment, and the necessity to boost economic growth and recovery, removing barriers to women's opportunities in public employment is more important than ever. Improving women's public employment prospects has the potential to not only create needed jobs, but deliver indirect benefits such as improved public service delivery, greater social protection for women, and boosts to consumption from increased household incomes.



Image credit:
Public Services International, flickr

¹ Data sourced from National Sample Survey (NSS) and PLFS 2017–18, taken directly from Sinha et al. (2020), 'Generating Female Employment through Public Employment: Scoping Paper', <https://iwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Generating-Female-Employment-A-Scoping-Paper.pdf>.

Where Women Work: A Data Perspective¹

Labour force participation			
17.5% female labour force participation	Of women in the labour force: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 51.9% are self-employed • 21% are regular salaried workers • 27% are casual workers 		
Women in the public sector			
22.6% of non-ag. female workers work in government	In rural areas, 27% of women work in the government	Comparatively, only 11.3% of male non-ag. workers work in government	But still, nearly 70% of all government workers are male
63.7% of female government workers are regular salaried	In contrast, 81.7% of male government workers are regular salaried, with the disparity largely coming from rural areas. In rural areas, only 48.4% of female government workers are regular salaried.		
Women government workers are concentrated in a number of sectors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 46% work in education, largely as teachers; • 23.9% work in either public administration, health or social work activities; • 13.6% work in civil engineering, predominantly as casual workers in public works 			
Perks and Benefits:	<i>Without written contract</i>	<i>Without paid leave provisions</i>	<i>Without social security benefits</i>
All female government workers	44.5%	40%	60%
Regular salaried female government workers	39%	26.4%	31%
Rural female government workers	47.1%	32.4%	76%

Nearly one in four working women are employed by the government. Despite the fact that only 11.3 per cent of working men are employed by the government, women still only make up roughly 30 per cent of all government workers due to their low labour force participation compared to men. While the benefits and protections government workers receive are greater than the general population, male government workers still fare better. For example, 81.7 per cent of male government workers are regular salaried compared to 63.7 per cent of female government workers.

Nevertheless, employment in the government provides greater security and benefits for women than other employment. Two-thirds of female

government employees are regular salaried workers compared to 21 per cent of all women workers. Forty per cent of female government employees have access to social security benefits, which, while low, is still more than the 33 per cent for all women workers. For women in regular salaried government employment, 69 per cent have access to social security benefits.

The security associated with government employment is one of many reasons why women view public sector opportunities as aspirational. However, the data and underlying gender disparities highlight key issues that need to be addressed to create greater opportunities for women.

Disparities in Public Employment

Low turnout and performance in civil service examinations

The Indian Civil Services serve as the backbone of public administration. Yet, three out of every four candidates who were recommended in the 2017 Indian Civil Service exams were men. Of the 4.5 lakh individuals who appeared for the exams, only 1.25 lakh were women. While the number of individuals who have applied over the past five years has almost doubled, the rates of women appearing, qualifying and eventually getting recommended has changed little. For those who appear at the exam, only 1.3 per cent of female candidates qualify compared to 3.5 per cent of male candidates.

Among both general candidates and reservations for economically weaker sections, namely Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC), gender disparities arise at similar levels. Three out of four SC, ST or OBC candidates appearing for exams are male, and for those who appear, only 1 per cent of female candidates qualify compared to

almost 3 per cent of male candidates. Only 20 per cent of those receiving recommendations in the final round were women.

These disparities highlight that women both apply and appear in lower numbers, and are less likely to qualify in the exams for both the general population and economically weaker sections. Forthcoming research on the characteristics of civil service applicants is also yielding insight to the lack of diversity among female candidates. There are virtually no female applicants from rural areas or those with parents below Class-10 education, and many women come from families in which parents are current government service employees.

These outcomes directly reflect the educational disparities which exist between men and women that lead to lower female participation and performance in civil service exams. The social barriers to rural women, in particular, to delay marriage, further their education and attend the numerous training and coaching institutions that exist across the country, play a leading role in their negligible presence in the civil services. The barriers to enrolment in coaching and the extent to which these centres serve the needs of female candidates are areas requiring further research.

Candidates for the 2017 Civil Services Examination (Preliminary and Main)						
	Preliminary			Main		
	Applied	Appeared	Qualified	Appeared	Interviewed	Recommended
Female	2,90,101	1,25,895	1,667	1,641	467	254
<i>SC/ST/OBC</i>	1,51,404	67,262	684	670	208	107
Male	6,57,627	3,30,730	11,699	11,419	2,097	802
<i>SC/ST/OBC</i>	4,09,549	2,00,702	5,879	5,708	1,180	425
Total	9,47,728	4,56,625	13,366	13,060	2,564	1,056

Source: Annual Report 2018–19, Union Public Service Commission.

Honorary and volunteer activities for women in public service delivery

Outside of civil services, many public programmes and schemes that disproportionately employ women often do not recognise them as employees, despite the crucial link they serve between the government and local communities. Many frontline service delivery workers including Anganwadi workers and helpers, Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), mid-day meal workers, and bank sakhis are referred to as honorary workers and volunteers, are paid an honorarium, or are remunerated based on (minimal) incentive-based structures.

For many of these positions, remuneration varies across states, and payments are not infrequently delayed. For example, mid-day meal workers receive ₹7,000 a month in Kerala, but only ₹1,250 a month in Bihar. ASHAs have no monthly salary and are paid on task-based incentives for community health services such as immunisations and antenatal care. A significant portion of some teachers also face this challenge. Of the 11 lakh teachers across India in 2016–17, 14 per cent were estimated to be contract workers, 60 per cent of whom were women². These contract teachers earn a fraction of salaried teachers, varying across states from ₹4,800 in Rajasthan to ₹31,000 in Punjab.

Formalising employment for Anganwadi workers, helpers and ASHAs alone would provide recognised government employment for the more than 3 million women who currently serve in those positions. Recognition of contract teachers as regular salaried workers will bring greater job security to millions of educators, and can be used to fill the numerous vacancies that exist across the education department. In addition to the higher salaries and access to government pensions and other benefits they would receive, the increase in dignity and motivation would greatly improve public service provisioning for the essential services frontline workers provide.

Vacancies in administrative postings

Filling current government vacancies remains one of the largest avenues for increasing women's opportunities in the public sector. Vacancy rates sit at roughly 7 per cent for Anganwadi workers and helpers and 22 per cent for the overall police force. There are 2.13 lakh vacancies in secondary and higher secondary education, 52,000 for ASHAs and 28,000 for Auxiliary Nurse Midwives

(ANMs). For departments that set a minimum target of female employment, such as 33 per cent for the police force, the targets are not often met. Currently only 8.7 per cent of the police force are women.

Addressing these administrative vacancies should be a sensible first step to improving women's government employment. Hiring under the Indian Railways has established some promising practices by selecting a number of openings specifically for women, and waiving application fees on employment examinations to encourage more female candidates to apply. Evaluating and expanding such gender-sensitive recruitment practices can further increase regular salaried employment and support efficient public service provisioning mentioned above.

There also exist large disparities in public employment per population compared to other countries. For OECD countries, public sector employment averages 20 per cent of total employment. While 22.5 per cent of female workers work in the public sector, the share is only 11.3 per cent for men who make up the majority of India's labour force. For the police force, the UN recommends a force of 222 per 100,000, while India has only 138. Increasing these numbers to internationally recognised numbers for public servants per population will provide even more employment. In addition, following widespread recommendations for India to increase its social sector spending, including increasing health spending from 1 per cent to 3 per cent of GDP and education spending from 4 per cent to 6 per cent of GDP, will also create further government employment opportunities for women as India's social sector infrastructure expands.

Lack of basic services

Provision of social services has an enormous impact on women's time and ability to work. Given that the majority of household work and domestic care fall to women, their ability to seek public employment is limited by their daily responsibilities at home. For example, without adequate healthcare facilities, women face a greater burden of caring for sick family members. Without access to nurseries and childcare facilities, women with children below school age have limited access to childcare in order to work.

According to the 2019 Time Use in India survey³, men spend 20.2 per cent of their daily time on employment and goods production compared

² State of Working India, 2019

³ Time Use in India, 2019, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.

to 5.8 per cent of women's daily time. This gap in income-related activities roughly correlates to women's daily time spent on unpaid care and domestic work, which accounted for 19.6 per cent of women's daily time compared to 2.7 per cent for men. Investment in expanding basic services has the potential to significantly decrease the domestic burdens women face and enhance their ability to join the labour force. Greater investment in the National Creche Scheme provides one opportunity, which has seen declining investment from the central government since 2017, dwindling the number of operating creches and leaving those behind to operate largely with NGO support⁴.

In addition to higher labour force participation, increasing public investment in social services will also create more jobs for women in the public sector. Evidence from other countries has shown that investments in social and care services create jobs that disproportionately employ women. One study from South Africa found that targeting these burdens through an investment of ZAR 13.3 billion (USD \$873 million) into health and childcare services would generate 772,000 jobs, with 60 per cent going to women, and a 1.8 per cent increase in the national growth rate⁵. Investment in social services also has indirect benefits over the long term: having a healthier, more educated population enables more women to take on economically productive and higher-paying jobs. While data for India is sparse, global evidence shows that investments in basic services can create jobs for women, including public sector employment, and increase their labour force participation.

Absence of women in leadership

Despite the number of programmes and schemes that explicitly employ and benefit women, gender imbalances remain high in leadership positions across departments. For example, of all women in the police force, 71.8 per cent are Constables, 17.6 per cent are Head Constables, while less than 3 per cent serve as Inspectors or higher leadership positions. In part, frequent transfers and limited promotional opportunities from lower level positions likely lessen the prospect of women taking up these positions. In healthcare, although women are higher represented as nurses and frontline workers, men occupy a significantly larger share of medical practitioner positions

including doctors, dentists and pharmacists.

Prioritisation of women workers in government should not only focus on lower cadres of government workers on the frontlines and in public service delivery. Attention should also be given to balance out women's representation in leadership positions across schemes and departments.

Covid-19 and Women Government Workers

By nature of the roles they perform, women are disproportionately involved in frontline service activities, especially so in the global response to Covid-19. In India, ASHAs and Anganwadi workers, roles exclusively performed by women, have directly led pandemic response efforts including door-to-door campaigns, contact tracing of positive patients, conducting community health assessments, and delivering food rations, in addition to their usual responsibilities⁶.

Concerningly, the employment barriers and insecurities female government workers faced before the pandemic have only been exacerbated during pandemic response. Renumeration has dwindled, particularly for ASHAs who previously were compensated on tasks performed, such as immunisations, which were halted at the beginning of the lockdown in March 2020. While additional compensation has been provided to some workers, these are often one-time payments and not all have received them. Frontline health workers have also reported shortages in personal protective equipment (PPE), so much so that many have had to purchase their own sanitisers and masks in order to safely perform their job functions. Some have also faced hostility from the very communities they are attempting to serve, either due to fears that frontline workers will themselves further spread the virus or fears of potential quarantines in government facilities.

These realities underscore the necessity of addressing these barriers for female workers. Addressing them will help guarantee the right to safe working conditions, adequate compensation, and deserved social protections that will benefit women workers and the economy at large.

⁴ 'Why the Number of Creches has Dropped Sharply Since 2017', Times of India, 31 January 2019.

⁵ Antonopoulos, R. and K. Kim (2011). 'Public Job-Creation Programs: The Economic Benefits of Investing in Social Care Case Studies in South Africa and the United States' Annandale-on-Hudson: Levy Economics Institute of Bard College.

⁶ 'Frontline Women Health and Nutrition Workers at the Forefront of the Covid-19 Response', IWWAGE, September 2020.

Way Forward

Increase investments in women's education: Addressing educational disparities as well as social barriers to higher education and employment is essential to increase the pool of qualified female candidates. Detrimental social norms that pressure women to marry early or prevent them from travelling between cities to colleges or coaching centres for fear or safety concerns, for example, need to be addressed. At a policy level, this includes both improving the gender gap in learning outcomes and literacy as well as addressing the social norms that lead to these disparities.

Increase investments in basic social and childcare services: For frontline workers, this entails ensuring that workers have access to sufficient PPE and materials to safely and effectively do their jobs. It also includes broader strengthening of the health and education systems to ease the burden of unpaid care and domestic work which falls disproportionately on women. Revamping the National Creche Scheme provides one opportunity for improvement at scale.

Formalise honorary workers to ensure access to permanent salaries and social protections: Formalising positions such as Anganwadi workers and bank sakhis will cement their inclusion in the government workforce and provide greater security through regular salaries, pensions, and other government benefits not currently available to them.

Create an upward trajectory for informal employment: While formalisation of the many honorary positions will require long-term strategies, a shorter-term supplement could include creating pathways to formalisation for women workers. This includes having more well-defined promotional structures that offer professional growth opportunities, in particular to frontline workers.

Prioritise female leadership: The process of improving gender parity in public employment is one that must happen vertically and horizontally through all government entities. Too often are women hired in lower level positions while senior leadership remains heavily male dominated. It

is essential to bring gender parity to leadership positions to ensure gender-balanced debate and collaboration on policy issues that address the issue of gender.

Fill administrative vacancies: Filling current vacancies remains one of the quickest ways to increase the numbers and share of women in government. When filling these vacancies, gender-sensitive recruitment practices should be considered to allow more women to apply, and promotional opportunities for existing female employees should be encouraged.

Invest in research on the gendered dynamics of employment in India: Further research into both the barriers to women's employment as well as effective strategies to increase their successful participation are needed. Some initial areas of exploration may include: (i) the barriers to female enrolment in training and coaching centers, and the effectiveness of those centers in catering to female students; and (ii) evaluations of existing gender-sensitive recruitment practices, such as those used by the Indian Railways.

This analysis has been authored by Steven Walker, is a policy consultant and researcher focused on cross-sectoral issues in international development. Valuable feedback and inputs were provided by Sarojini Ganju Thakur.

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