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Evolutionary Pathways to Female Labor Force Participation in India and the United States

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Abstract

This paper analyzes India's chronic low Female Labor Force Participation Rate (FLFPR), indicative of poor institutional responsiveness, deleterious norms, and scarce labor demand puts the economy in a self-reinforcing trap of very underutilized human capital. Unlike the sharply different path of the United States, where policy, legal reforms, and social movements produced sustained female labor force integration. Through an evolutionary comparative paradigm, of variation selection and retention, paper follows the way the U.S. transformed social movements and legislative punctuations into long-lasting institutional retention, whereas India's incremental advances are precarious and uneven. The paper argues that India cannot replicate U.S. reforms verbatim but recommends pursuing an adaptive policy transfer through contextual learning and institution building. This strategy can break the equilibrium of low participation, which would lead to inclusive growth and transform gender parity as a welfare objective into an economic productive strategy.

Keywords: Female Labor Force, Evolutionary Policy, Adaptive Transfer, India, United States.

Introduction

India's present FLFPR stands at 41.7% for ages 15+ in usual status, India aspires to achieve 70% female labor force participation by 2047. In comparison with the male labor force percentage of 78.8% for ages 15+ in usual status (PLFS, 2024), India has near about a 40% shortfall of LFPR of males compared to females, while the disparity is near about 25% globally (Priya, 2024). This extreme disparity reveals an immense under deployment of 50% of the human capital and economic productivity constraints of the nation.

Aside from equity, the gap will have a developmental impact, when even half the population, being educated as well, is out of the formal job it tends to impede the composite output, productivity, and innovation potential and fiscal potential would be adversely affected. Paid work for women increases household earnings, lessens inequality (particularly where women's income is consumed differently), and enhances intergenerational human capital development (Verick, 2014).

International estimates of macroeconomic statistics indicate that narrowing the gender gap in employment and quality of jobs would add significantly to GDP for nations. India's GDP may rise by 27 per cent, as per IMF Chief Christine Lagarde (Economic Times, 2018) if the gap in workforce along gender lines is eliminated. These numbers aren't hypothetical; they are based on a rational input-output principle whereby greater labour inputs translate into changed mix of sectors and productivity gains.

Reduced participation contracts the formal tax base, lowering social protection and public investment funds. With a population that is ageing in the medium term, inaction to mobilize labor from women diminishes the ability of the economy to offset demographic pressures (Halim et al., 2023).

Global Context - India, the United States, and the World

For a better global context, at the higher end, the sub-Saharan African economies record female participation rates above 80%, e.g., Madagascar at 82.6%, which are driven largely by subsistence agriculture and informal markets, and at the other extreme, there are conflicts affected, and deeply conservative societies such as Afghanistan and Yemen, which register a participation as low as 5-10% (The World Bank, 2024). Between these extremes, India exhibits moderate but stagnating participation, while the United States shows a historically higher and more stable trajectory.
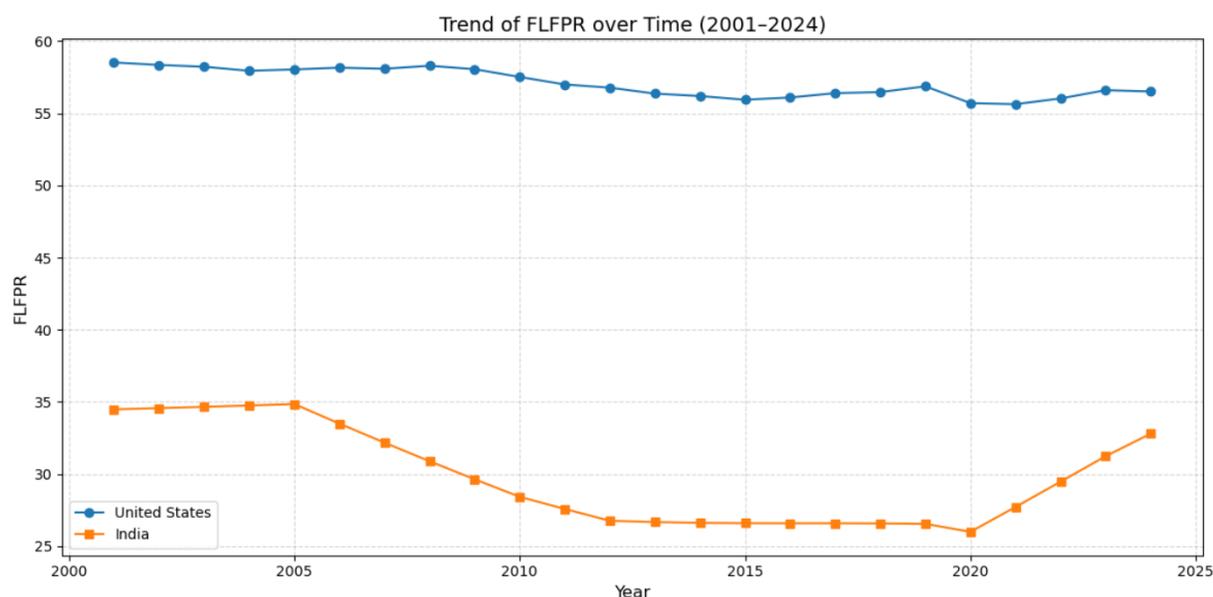

Figure 1 Trends of FLFPR in Countries. Source: World Bank Data, Made by Author

Long time series data show India's FLFPR fell from mid-30s (early-2000s) into the mid-20s by the late-2010s, before rebounding into the low-30s by 2021-24. The USA, by contrast, experienced a raise in the FLFPR during WWII, where millions of US women did enter industrial jobs. The participation dropped in the 1950s, as after the war, many men returned home. From the 1960s onwards, the FLFPR rose dramatically; peaked around 60% in 1999, and slipped to 57% approximately by 2018 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). Today, US women make up

approximately half of the workforce, and also continue to outnumber men in higher education attainment.

Problem statement/Research question

Problem Statement: India's chronically low FLFPR signifies an unproductive equilibrium propelled by interacting supply-side, demand-side, and institutional constraints, with quantifiable losses to GDP, fiscal resources, and household well-being.

Research Question: What policy evolutionary mechanisms account for the divergence in female labor force participation between India and the United States, and how can India borrow winning institutional strategies to shatter its low-participation equilibrium?

Why India and the US?

The U.S. is an instance where institutions are pro-participatory in character. The two nations vary on colonial heritage, administrative capacity, labor market organization, social norms regarding gender, and welfare state in the form of the state. These variations serve as a natural experiment in a case study where, if one version of a policy works in the U.S. but does not work in India, then comparing the two is likely to shed light on whether the failure is a result of a deeper cultural factor or institutional limitations. The objective of this comparison is not policy transplantation but learning in context and determining which versions of U.S. reforms can successfully fit into India's institutional environment

Methodology - Comparative Evolution Framework and Case Study

Women's labor participation is a result of interacting institutional, cultural, and economic factors that shift in incremental ways. The Evolutionary Theory in Comparative Policy Analysis proposed by Professor Adrian Kay, of the Crawford School of Public Policy (Kay, 2020), simulates

this dynamic by considering policies and institutions to develop by variation, selection and retention, and incrementally change as per the situated environment.

This framework suits Indias's case most as FLFPR patterns are path-dependent and thus influenced by habits, norms and institutional mechanisms which are opposed to drastic changes. A core idea of the evolutionary framework states that institutions do not evolve simply by the design or deliberate rational choices of the actors; instead, they evolve through habits that are ingrained into society with shared dispositions. Some habits are so rigid and are backed by power and coercion that they tend to resist change. Institutions might persist not because they are efficient but because powerful actors tend to enforce the reproduction of old habits in society (Kay, 2020).

Evolution can be viewed through three lenses: as a *process* (gradual or punctuated change though "windows of opportunity"), as a *theory* (variation–selection–retention mechanisms), and as a *metaphor* (adaptive systems shaped by feedback). The following section applies these three lenses to trace how the U.S. and India diverged in institutional evolution around female labor participation (Kay, 2020).

Analysis

Applying the framework reveals distinct patterns in both countries.

I. Evolution as a Process:

India's women's labor participation exhibits slow change with feeble punctuations, defying demand constraints, cultural factors, and COVID-19 shocks, leading to minimal institutional support. The liberalization reforms of the early 1990s operated as such a punctuation by opening markets in services, telecom, and retail, and reducing regulatory constraints, creating new demand-side opportunities in urban centers for women (Deshpande, 2025). Later, the COVID-19 pandemic

can also be constituted as another shock where large-scale exits of women from employment, both formal and informal, exposed heightened vulnerabilities in the informal sector (Sumalatha et al., 2021).

The U.S. had evolutionary decline, recovery, and significant punctuations such as WWII and civil rights, feminist movements, legal reforms, demographic changes such as fertility decline and changing family size, and sectoral changes as the rise of services and higher education for women (Yellen, 2020). The cumulative changes pushed the USA across critical thresholds of legal support, normative change, and demand for female labor, enabling stronger retentions facilitated by institutional support, punctuations that open windows for larger change.

II. Evolution as a Theory:

A. Variation or Initial Conditions (Initial Conditions)

India's early decades post-independence had high female labor participation. However, over time, variation emerged in urban versus rural education levels, castes, and states. Variations also stem from heterogeneity across Indian states. Some states with more industrialization, better infrastructure, and progressive norms, such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, have higher FLFPR, while others lag. Education has sharpened among women, generating a variation in supply-side readiness, but the demand-opportunity gap persists (Chatterjee et al., 2018).
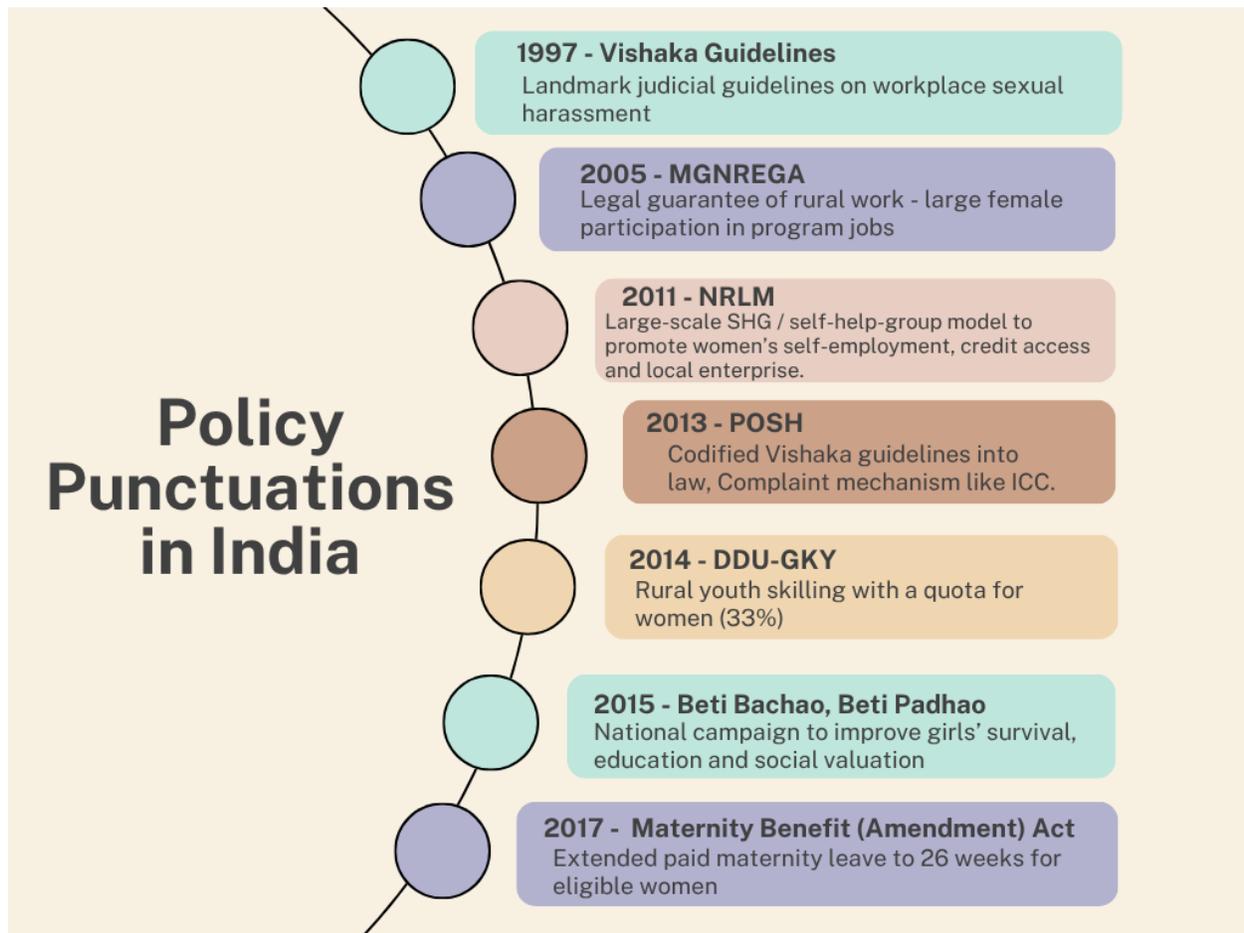
Figure 2 Polices Timeline for India

While in the US, variation emerged historically from following how traditional economies grew from the agricultural sector to the industrial, and then the services. Early industrialization, when women's participation fell, was a time when there were far fewer low-paid jobs acceptable to highly educated women, but it rose again once white-collar and service sector jobs became more accessible (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020).

B. Selection Pressures

Cultural stigmas and gender norms tend to limit female work outside the home. This works as a selection pressure that tends to filter out certain job opportunities that require long travel and

safe commutes or late hours. Many jobs available to women are informal, low-paying, and insecure, where they are less likely to be acceptable for long-term career trajectories (Mehrotra, 2019). Institutional deficiencies act as negative selection pressure. The demand for female incentive occupations is limited. Heavy industry or male-dominated job sectors impose high barriers. Nearly 80% of women in India are in informal jobs without access to any security benefits, pensions, or workplace safety mechanisms. This tends to discourage the labor force's entry into highly paid sectors and constrain productivity growth for the overall economy (Raveendran & Vanek, 2020).

U.S. selection pressure includes the landmark Equal Pay Act of 1964, the Civil Rights Act (1964), complemented by Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), makes jobs more accessible for women.
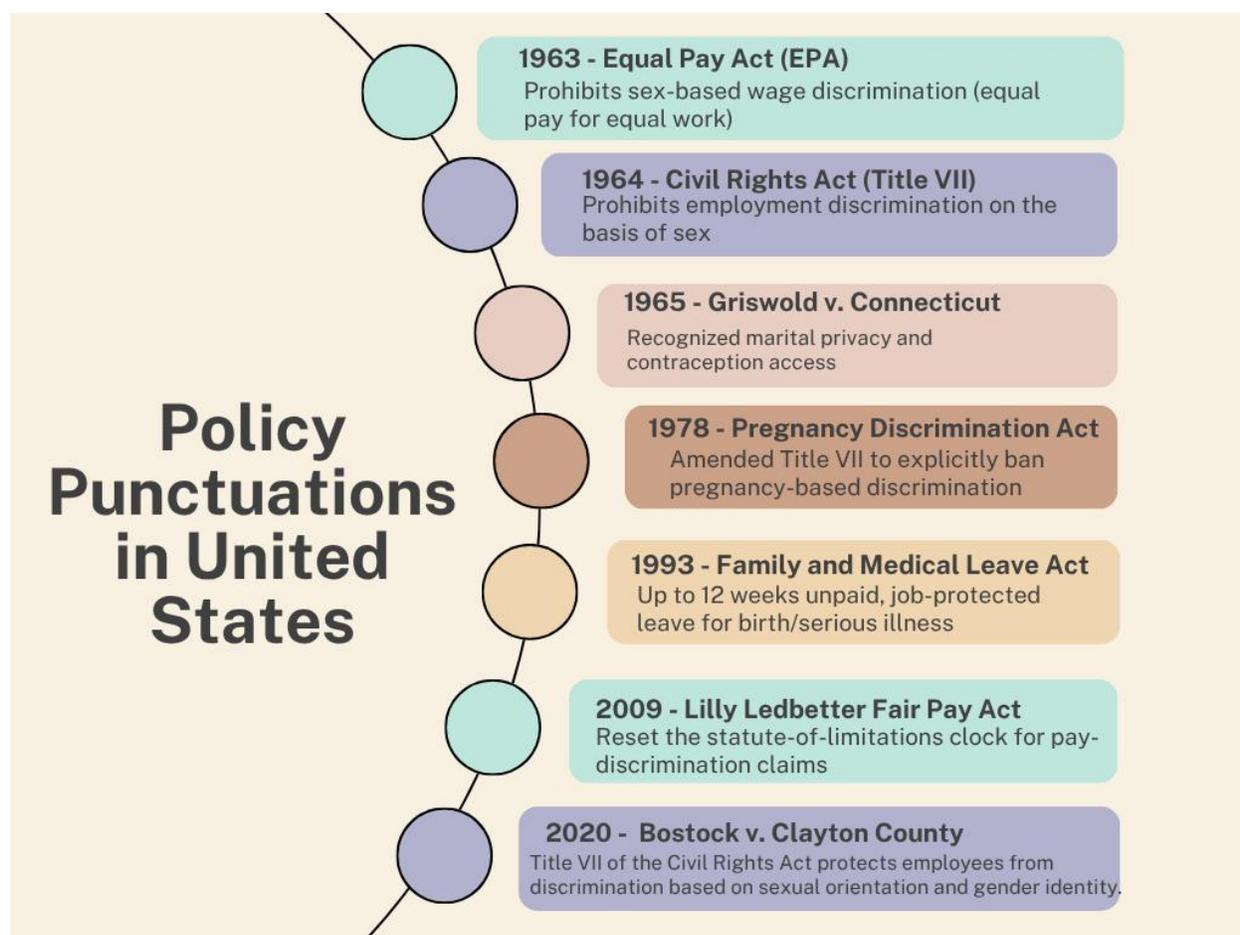
Figure 3 Polices Timeline for USA

The feminist movement, changes in household norms, and increased female education gave a cultural shift that made women's work outside the home more acceptable. Technological changes and contraceptive availability enable women to plan childbearing, invest in education and careers, changing the cost of returns to work versus home-shaped participation (Yellen, 2020).

C. Retention and Path Dependence

Once women work in informal sectors, their return to the formal sector is often blocked due to skill mismatch, lack of mobility, and constraints. This reinforces lower FPR in formal, secure employment for women. Early marriage and gendered caregiving expectations persist over

generations (Sharma, 2024). Retention is weak due to early marriage, limited childcare, and poor enforcement of legal protections. These norms reproduce socially and culturally, making change weak and slow, lowering institutional inertia as well.

Vocational or technical education connects with local labor demand. There is better retention where such prospects are available. Many educated women remain unemployed or underemployed. Schemes like Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) and Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP) provide vocational training and microloans, often with a quota or special slots for women (Kumar, 2025). While educational attainment among women has risen sharply in recent years, a large number remain underemployed or clustered in low-productivity sectors due to weak links between education and the vocational skills needed for acquiring a job in the market (Chatterjee et al., 2018). Government initiatives such as MNREGA, Maternity Benefit Scheme, etc., remain poorly coordinated (EPW, 2024). These mechanisms tend to produce a low participation equilibrium, where the supply-side barriers, the demand-side failures, and institutional weakness reinforce each other.

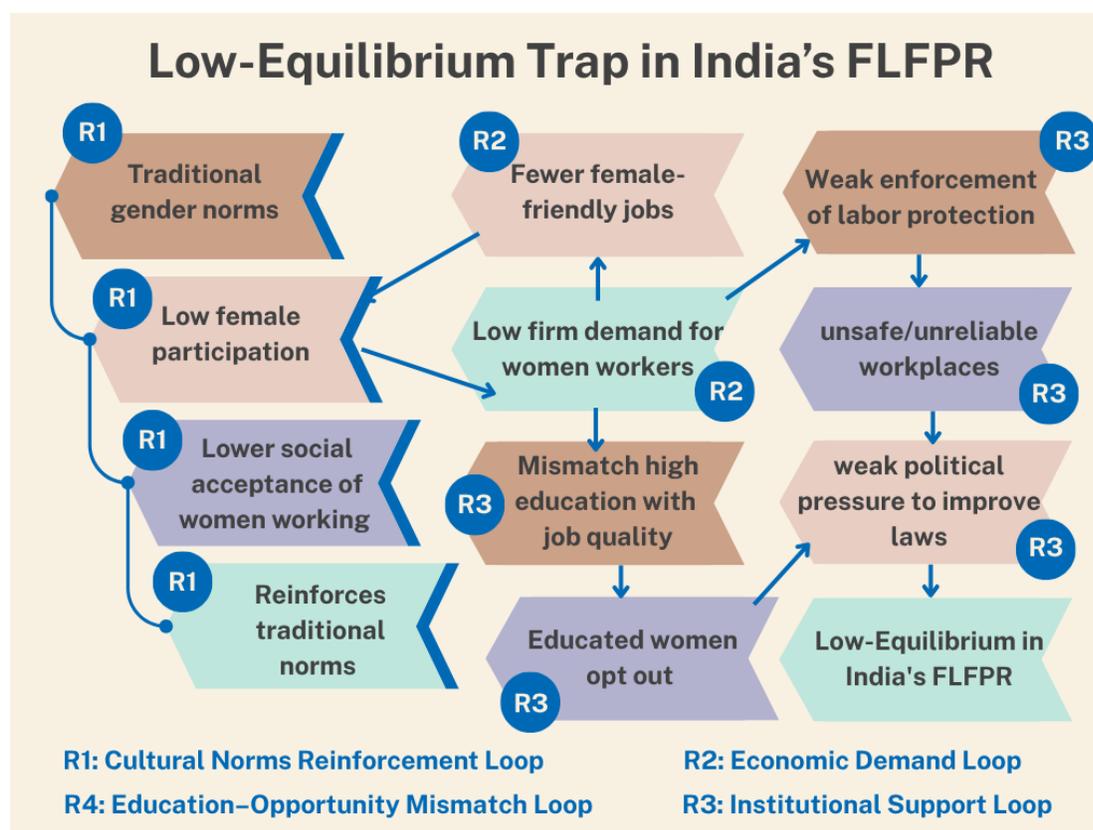The dynamic can be understood through four integrated feedback loops.

Figure 3 Low Equilibrium Trap Loops

R1: Cultural Norms Reinforcement Loop - Fewer working women reduce visibility, normalizing restrictive norms. R2: Economic Demand Loop - Limited female labor supply discourages firms from designing inclusive jobs, perpetuating low demand. R3: Institutional Inertia Loop - Weak enforcement and limited representation reduce pressure to reform workplace protections. R4: Education–Opportunity Mismatch Loop - Educated women reject low-quality jobs, which policymakers misread as voluntary non-participation. These feedback loops among norms, demands, and institutes tend to create a self-sustaining low participation equilibrium.

In the U.S., legal protection and a welfare state are well-functioning, where once laws, policies, and norms are established, they tend to stay. E.g., protection from maternity, minimum wage, etc. (Bailey et al., 2021). These provide retention for women's longer-term labor force engagement. Over the decades, the expectations of working women became normalized, especially

among more educated, younger women (Bureau, 2011). Public schools, child care availability, and flexible work arrangements in some sectors gave stronger institutional support (Ho et al., 2024). For many women, staying in the labor force created incentives to overcome initial barriers. This retention reinforced more demand for female labor and supportive institutional changes, reinforcing positive feedback loops.
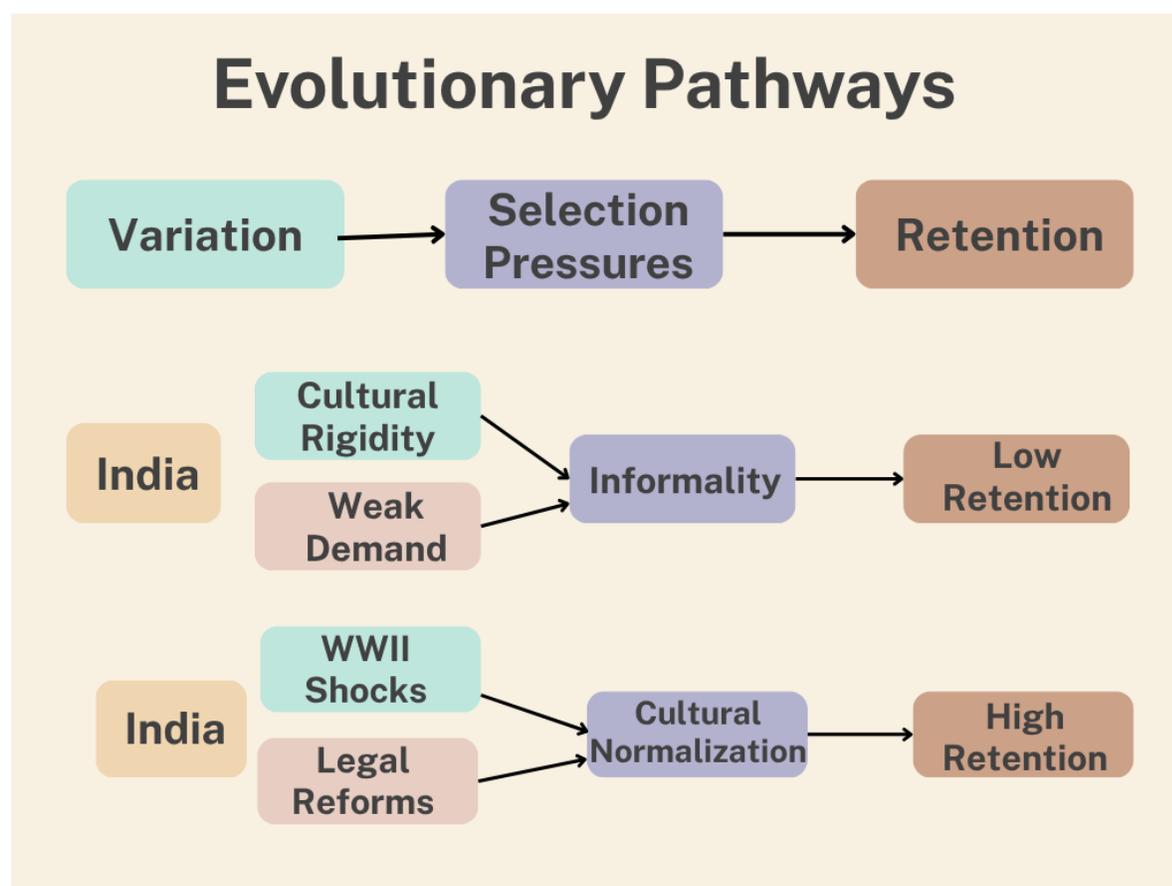

Figure 4 Evolutionary path ways - Variation, Selection, Retention for India and USA

III. Evolution as a Metaphor: Conceptualizing Policy Dynamics

In India, supply-side constraints, including the rising household income effect and educational effect, contribute to the U-shaped female participation curve. With higher incomes,

traditional families do not tend to send the women of the household out for work, as basic survival is ensured. At the same time, higher education means longer female schooling years that tend to initially reduce women's participation (Goldin, 1994). Traditionally, women disproportionately shoulder the unpaid care responsibilities of the household. The absence of affordable child care as well as elder care reduces the available hours for paid work, which adds to the interrupted career trajectories and high exit rates. (Mehrotra, 2019). There are persistent social attitudes that frame women's work as secondary or optional, reinforcing the institutional inertia for higher reforms for women's betterment.

The US followed an "Adaptive learning" approach, which means the evolution of female labor force participation reflects how policy, culture, and demographics interact in a complex environment.
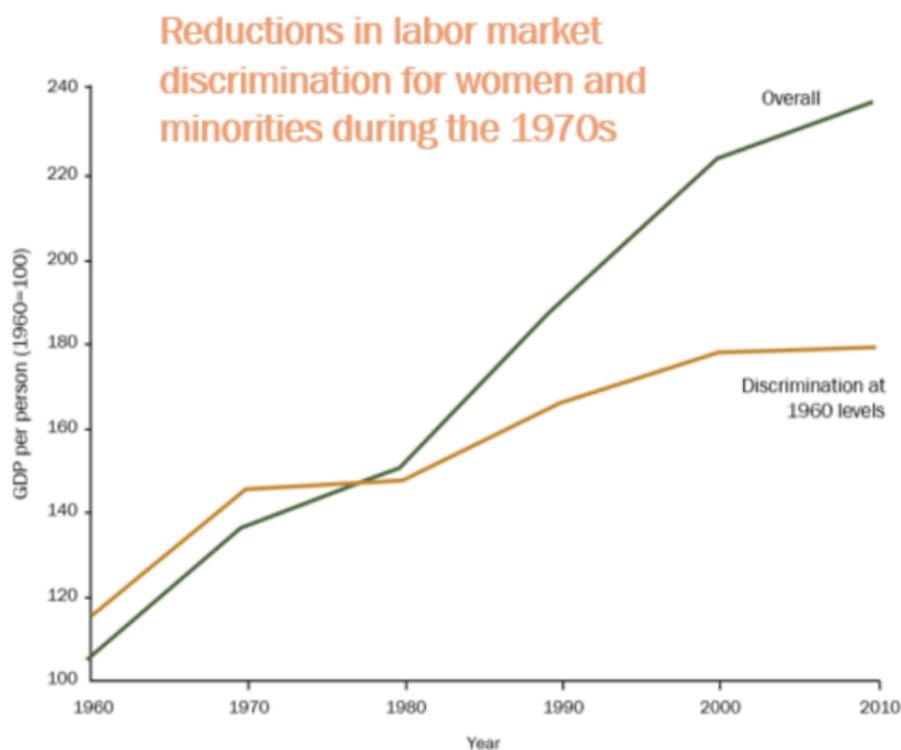

Figure 5 Two pathways of United States of GDP per-person, Source: World Bank, 2025

The above graph shows that if the U.S followed discrimination levels which were prevailing in the 1960's against its women then its GDP per person would be half of what it is currently. This proves that going away from discriminatory laws have perfectly added to their productivity overtime and the country is reaping huge dividends to anti-discrimination laws. Contraceptives enabled women to delay childbirth. Investing in education and careers during the early years accounted for a non-trivial share of the women's rise in the labor force between 70s and 90s (Clark, 2019). Feminist mobilization and changing norms about marriage and gender roles collectively reorganized labor markets to accommodate women.

Discussion

Above stated comparative evolutionary analysis between the two countries showcases that India's low FLFPR is not a residual or a random outcome of the societal environment but rather a self-reinforcing institutional equilibrium state. The four integrated feedback loops explain why incremental policy and gradualism have not produced higher productivity, supply-side improvements have been necessary such as education and skill schemes, but are inefficient because they fail to shift the selection pressures or secure retention mechanisms. The U.S. case clarifies a part out of this, the punctuated policy shocks and institutional retention via enforcement, labor market institutions, public services, convert the temporary shifts of those policy shocks into durable long-term equilibrium.

Three key implications flow from this above analysis. First, that the policy may shift from isolated supply or welfare programs to a huge systematic framework-based shift, which simultaneously alters demand, reduces mobility or care constraints, and strengthens enforcement of non-discriminatory laws via multi-pronged interventions which break multiple loops at once. Second, incentives must be designed as selection pressures for firms, states, as well as investors

and financiers, which reward verifiable changes in women's employment levels and intensifies retention rather than compliance with paperwork for bureaucratic purposes. Third, there needs to be a mechanism for adaptive governance where rigorous monitoring and evaluation with pre-specified indicators is essential to convert policy pilots into institutionalized policy within the structures of the economy without incurring huge wasteful fiscal commitments.

India's chronically low FLFPR does not only represent economic inefficiency but also institutional policy equilibrium, which has been sustained through feedback loops of norms, market failures, and administrative red-tapes. The comparative analysis reveals that U.S. did not simply legislated equality into its institutions, but it also evolved into it over time, sustained it as well. There were repeated policy punctuations, interacted with social movements within communities, and also industrial transformations to create strong institutional retention, whereas India's gradual incremental and welfare-oriented approach through created a policy variation but did not lead to selection or retention. What was needed was a huge behavioral change, which was not achieved via these policies due to implementation gaps in them leading to limited demand for female employment, diluting their potential impact.

It is argued that female participation is primarily limited by social norms and voluntary choices, but norms are not static. They respond to incentives, visibility, and current institutional conditions. Evidences from U.S. showcases that feminist movement alone were insufficient without making concrete legislative actions to admit them to institutions and market adaptation. Reforms created safer workplaces and economic restructuring also created white-collar opportunities. Similarly, in India, where firms and governments have improved female-friendly conditions, such as Tamil Nadu's electronic clusters (ETB Sivapriyan, 2024) offering women's hostel and safe transport, FLFPR has measurably increased. Therefore, we argue that norms follow

a structure and not vice-versa. Behavioral constraints are endogenous to institution design and need to be taken into account.

India's welfare-led approach through National Job Guarantee Schemes and Social Protection is appropriate for a developing country, but this argument can understate the role of demand-side policy and industrial incentives. While MNREGA did improve female participation temporarily, it did not translate into opportunities for women into higher productivity or formal sectors. The evidence from World Bank (2020) shows that countries which tend to target industrial employment programs, such as Bangladesh and Vietnam, achieve structural shifts faster than the who solely rely on welfare transfers.

India has numerous policies which promote female employment, but there is an implementation failure. Thus, it is assumed that creating new policies might only duplicate efforts. The problem is not too many policies, but very little policy evolution. Most schemes tend to lack adaptive feedback and coordination. Evolutionary governance requires feedback loops where some initiatives are rigorously evaluated, institutionalized, and failures are redesigned upon, rather than following short-term electoral and opposition-led policies. There needs to be constant monitoring and evaluation.

Thus, we recommend market enabled, but government-led policy, which would help come out of the loops.

Recommendations

A centrally-coordinated (Ministry of Labor & Employment lead, Ministry of Finance co-lead) National Gender Employment Mission (NGEM) that issues time-bound fiscal incentives (tax credits, social security subsidies) to firms that create verifiable "female-friendly jobs" and meet retention targets for women hires. This will lead to initial habit creation by the employers to hire

female workers via incentives. It also increases firm demand creates selection pressures for firms to redesign jobs and workplace norms.

Public-private arrangements for safe women's hostels, dedicated buses, and large-mile transport connectivity to the industrial estates can be co-sponsored by industrial clusters and state governments, to directly address the safety and commute barriers which feed into the cultural constraints and low participation of women. Increasing the physical visibility and safety of women workers not only expands supply into jobs but also alters social expectations by normalizing women's presence in industrial spaces. The government can also co-fund employer childcare centers or offer vouchers for private community creches tied to female-led employment sectors. Minimum standards should be set by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, where it becomes easier for women to return to work within 6 months of childbirth, and this increases retention of women once they start working after child-birth.

A Returnship Program that connect women who left workforce post-childbirth, care-responsibilities, marriage, etc. by the Ministry of Skill Development in partnership with industry chambers should be established. It would integrate 6-12 weeks of on-the-Job training, mentoring and certification. Concurrently, apprenticeships can be provided to fresh graduates. This removes the education opportunity bottleneck, and facilitates re-entry into formal sector there by avoiding aspirational frustration of highly educated women who are currently employed in jobs of lesser skills. The employers which will retain conversion rates can then also receive scaled incentives and this can be standardized progressively at the national level.

With all this, there should be increased enforcement of legislative regulations like POSH enforcement, to impose enforcement of workplace safety. Emphasis should be also laid in cutting down complaint settlement time, this will turn legal safeguards from symbolic rules into

enforceable limits. This would change employer behavior and enhance the perceived safety which would be an underlying determinant for household choices on women employment opportunities. A strict enforcement of laws turns laws into retention.

To provide sustained market pull, central and state procurement systems might offer procurement preferences to suppliers which meet female employment and retention criteria. Procurement preferences would create a long-term credible demand anchor for certified firms making investment in female recruitment and retention commercially rational than just a show-off and facade. When combined with NGEM incentives, procurement policy would become a persistent selection pressure which would raise firm-level incentives to hire and retain women.

Dedicated credit lines (SIDBI / NABARD) and seed funds for women-led firms and for firms creating women-focused manufacturing/service units, can be given. Lower collateral requirements and interest subvention if retention targets are met will be provided in the future. This would stimulate female entrepreneurship and job creation with retention conditions.

Lastly, data being the cornerstone, the MoSPI and the NGEM Secretariat would need to release a public FLFPR dashboard and an adaptive governance journal to track the follow-through on the policies, release disaggregate data by state, sector, district, and execute pre-specified rules guided by autonomous evaluations. Transparent data would enhance political and social visibility, compelling policy makers to choose effective variants and enable institutionalization of what works to hold on over the long term.

Conclusion

India's challenge is not one of policy lack, but one of systematic institution design. It is necessary to develop its own ability to learn over time by experimenting with policies, responding to needs through institutions, and reinforcing success. An approach to inclusive growth would need

to go far beyond welfare-led redistribution to institutionalized productive expansion, where women's economic engagement is not treated as a secondary equity dimension, but as a conscious lever of national competitiveness.

This demographic dividend will only benefit development dividends of its labor institutions to join with women-oriented economic players. Feedback is necessary for evolution. To experiment what is successful, choose what is correct, and preserve what works. Finally, the shift to an inclusive growth balance will induce a deeper transformation in India's state reform policy, increasing nation's production frontiers and redefine the concept of economic reform.

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