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Holding Up Half the Sky on India's Farms

Context

- The celebration of **International Women's Day** on March 8 highlights the achievements and struggles of women across sectors.
- In the same spirit, the **Food and Agriculture Organization** declared the **International Year of the Woman Farmer**, drawing attention to the vital yet often unrecognized role of women in agriculture.
- In India, women form a backbone, pillar, and essential workforce of the agricultural economy, contributing significantly to **crop cultivation, livestock rearing, and agricultural labour**.
- Despite this central role, women farmers remain **undercounted, underpaid**, and economically marginalized.

The Challenge of Counting Women Workers

- Accurate measurement of women's participation in agriculture remains difficult due to the **informal nature** of rural economies.

- Much of women's labour is **home-based, seasonal, intermittent**, and closely linked with **care work**, making it difficult for surveys to capture their actual contribution.
- Many women perform multiple tasks such as **childcare, animal care**, and **farm work** within a single day, which often leads to their labour being unreported.
- Nevertheless, available data indicates a rise in rural women's workforce participation. Among rural women aged 15 and above, participation increased from 35% in 2011–12 to 46.5% in 2023–24.

The Scale of Women's Participation in Agriculture

• Crop Production

- Women play a critical role in **crop production**. Field studies conducted by the **Foundation for Agrarian Studies** show that women contribute a substantial share of labour in farming activities.
- In several villages across Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh, women accounted for about **one-third of family labour** in crop cultivation.
- When both family and hired labour are combined, women's contribution becomes even more prominent.
- In some villages, women represented **more than half of the total agricultural labour**, reaching up to **61%** in certain regions.
- These patterns illustrate the dependence of farming systems on women's labour and their active involvement in sowing, transplanting, weeding, and other farm operations.

• Livestock Rearing

- The **livestock sector** is one of the fastest-growing segments of agriculture and relies heavily on women's labour.
- Activities such as **feeding animals, collecting fodder, cleaning sheds**, and **milking** are largely performed by women within rural households.
- Households that own **milch cattle** almost always involve women in daily livestock care.
- With nearly **40 million rural households** owning milch animals, millions of women spend several hours each day performing livestock-related tasks.
- Despite their continuous labour, women rarely receive direct **financial recognition** or **economic compensation** for these contributions.

• Agricultural Wage Labour

- Women also participate as casual wage labourers in agricultural operations.
- However, **mechanisation** and changes in agricultural practices have reduced the overall demand for manual labour, particularly affecting women workers.
- The share of women in casual agricultural labour varies across regions but remains substantial in many villages.
- Women workers often come from **manual labour households** or **small peasant families**, where agricultural wage work is essential for **household survival** and **livelihood security**.

Persistent Challenges Faced by Women Workers

• Inequality in Wages and Earnings

- Despite their extensive participation, women agricultural workers receive low wages, limited earnings, and face a significant gender wage gap.
- In many rural regions, women earn **less than ₹300 per day** for agricultural work.
- In some areas, women's wages are less than half of men's wages, demonstrating strong wage inequality.
- National statistics reveal a similar pattern: the average daily wage for women in agricultural tasks such as sowing and weeding is approximately ₹384, with variations across states.
- Even where wages are higher, inflation-adjusted earnings have shown little improvement over the past decade.
- **Structural Inequality and Lack of Asset Ownership**
 - A major structural barrier is the limited ownership of productive assets, especially agricultural land.
 - Although women constitute nearly half of the agricultural workforce, only about **10% of rural women own land**.
 - Without land ownership, women face restrictions in accessing institutional credit, government schemes, agricultural subsidies, and decision-making power within farming households.
 - This lack of ownership reinforces patterns of economic dependency and gender inequality.

Conclusion

- Women sustain India's agricultural economy through their extensive involvement in **crop farming, livestock management, and rural labour markets**.
- Their work supports food production, household livelihoods, and the broader rural economy. Yet their contributions remain largely invisible, undervalued, and poorly compensated.
- Addressing these inequalities requires improved **data collection**, recognition of women as **farmers and workers**, expansion of **fair wages**, and greater access to **land ownership and economic rights**.
- Strengthening these measures is essential for achieving **inclusive rural development**, ensuring **gender equity**, and acknowledging the vital role women play in sustaining India's agricultural system.

Holding Up Half the Sky on India's Farms FAQs

Q1. Why is women's agricultural work often undercounted in India?

Ans. Women's agricultural work is often undercounted because it is informal, home-based, seasonal, and frequently combined with childcare and other domestic responsibilities.

Q2. What proportion of rural women participated in the workforce in 2023-24?

Ans. About 46.5% of rural women aged 15 years and above participated in the workforce in 2023-24.

Q3. Which agricultural sector relies heavily on women's labour besides crop cultivation?

Ans. The livestock sector relies heavily on women's labour for tasks such as feeding animals, collecting fodder, and milking cattle.

Q4. How do women's agricultural wages compare to men's wages?

Ans. Women's agricultural wages are generally much lower than men's wages and can be less than half of what

male workers earn.

Q5. Why is land ownership important for women farmers?

Ans. Land ownership is important for women farmers because it provides access to credit, government schemes, and greater economic and decision-making power.

Source: **The Hindu**

From Women's Development to Women-Led Growth

Context

- India's development narrative is shifting from **women's development to women-led development**, where women are seen not merely as beneficiaries of welfare schemes but as active leaders shaping the nation's progress.
- Women's empowerment, or Nari Shakti, is increasingly driving India's growth, particularly in knowledge-based sectors such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), which are crucial for achieving the vision of a Viksit Bharat.
- This article highlights India's transition from women's development to women-led development, focusing on the growing participation of women in education, STEM fields, research, and innovation as key drivers of the Viksit Bharat 2047 vision.

Strengthening Girls' Education in STEM

- India has strengthened the foundation for women in science through greater access to education and improved school participation.
- The **Gender Parity Index** has reached **0** at foundational, preparatory and middle levels, and **1.1** at the secondary level, indicating equal or higher participation of girls compared to boys.
- Declining dropout rates show better student retention.
- Initiatives such as early skill development programmes and Atal Tinkering Labs provide practical exposure to technology and innovation, encouraging girls to pursue STEM fields from an early stage.

Rising Female Participation in Higher Education

- India's higher education sector has expanded significantly, with institutions increasing from 51,534 to over 60,000 and enrolment rising from 3.42 crore to 4.46 crore since 2014-15.
- Women have played a key role in this growth, with female enrolment increasing from 1.57 crore to 2.18 crore and the **Female Gross Enrolment Ratio** rising from 22.9 to 30.2, indicating steady progress in women's access to higher education.

Growing Participation of Women in STEM

- Women's participation in STEM education in India has increased significantly, accounting for **43% of total enrolment** in higher education, one of the highest shares globally.

- However, women represent **6%** of the national R&D workforce, highlighting the need to strengthen the transition from education to research careers.
- Policy initiatives such as supernumerary seats for women in IITs and NITs have improved their representation from below 10% a decade ago to over 20% in recent years.

Rising Participation of Women in Research

- Women's involvement in academic research in India has increased significantly.
- Postgraduate enrolment rose from 19.8 lakh in 2014–15 to 32 lakh in 2022–23, while doctoral enrolment increased from about 47,000 to over 1.12 lakh, reflecting a growth of more than 135%.
- **Increasing Representation in STEM Research**
 - Women accounted for over 53% of STEM fellows under the UGC NET–Junior Research Fellowship in 2024–25, with 7,293 of the 13,727 recipients pursuing doctoral research.
 - This indicates growing female participation in advanced research fields.
- **Women in the National R&D Ecosystem**
 - Within India's research and development ecosystem, about 45.87% of women researchers work in government institutions, 27.62% in higher education, and 26.51% in industry, showing their expanding presence across sectors.

Policy Support and Fellowships

- Government initiatives have strengthened women's participation in research.
- The **Prime Minister's Research Fellowship** has supported over 3,500 scholars, including 35% women, and aims to fund 10,000 fellowships in the next five years.
- The **Anusandhan National Research Foundation** further supports the expansion of India's research ecosystem.
- Government initiatives, including the Union Budget 2026 proposal to **establish safe and affordable hostels** for girls pursuing STEM education, aim to encourage more women to build careers in science.
- As emerging fields such as artificial intelligence, quantum technology, and data science grow, women's participation will be crucial for strengthening India's innovation ecosystem.

Women at the Core of the Viksit Bharat Vision

- As India moves towards becoming a **Viksit Bharat by 2047**, women are expected to play a leading role in this transformation.
- With increasing participation across sectors and emerging technologies, Nari Shakti will drive India's knowledge economy and development journey.

From Women's Development to Women-Led Growth FAQs

Q1. What does the shift from women's development to women-led development signify?

Ans. The shift signifies recognising women not merely as beneficiaries of welfare schemes but as active leaders driving economic growth, innovation, and social transformation in India's development journey.

Q2. How has India improved girls' participation in education and STEM?

Ans. India has achieved near gender parity in school enrolment, reduced dropout rates, and introduced initiatives like Atal Tinkering Labs and skill programmes to encourage girls' interest in STEM fields.

Q3. What trends show rising female participation in higher education in India?

Ans. Female enrolment in higher education increased from 1.57 crore to 2.18 crore, while the Female Gross Enrolment Ratio rose from 22.9 to 30.2 since 2014–15.

Q4. How are women contributing to research and innovation in India?

Ans. Women's postgraduate and doctoral enrolment has grown significantly, with more women receiving STEM fellowships and increasing participation in government institutions, academia, and industry research sectors.

Q5. Why is women's participation important for achieving the Viksit Bharat vision?

Ans. Greater participation of women in education, science, and emerging technologies will strengthen innovation, productivity, and knowledge-based growth, making them central to India's Viksit Bharat 2047 vision.

Source: IE

GDP Growth vs Employment Reality - Re-centering India's Economic Policy on Jobs

Context

- The release of a new GDP series with revised growth estimates has renewed debate about the state of the Indian economy.
- While the revised figures reinforce the narrative of India as the "fastest-growing major economy," economists argue that excessive emphasis on GDP growth masks a critical issue — persistently **high unemployment**, especially among youth.

New GDP Series and the "Double-Deflation" Method

- **Key methodological change:**
 - The latest GDP estimates adopt the double-deflation method for calculating Gross Value Added (**GVA**).
 - This method separately deflates output and input prices, giving a more accurate measure of real production.
- **Revisions in growth estimates:**
 - The 2024–25 growth rate is revised upwards slightly, reinforcing growth optimism, while the 2023–24 growth rate is significantly revised downward.
 - Despite revisions, India continues to be portrayed as the **fastest-growing** major economy globally.
- **Critical observation:**

- While methodological improvements are welcome, the policy discourse remains disproportionately focused on production (GDP) rather than employment generation.

Unemployment - The Understated Indicator

- **Rising unemployment trends:**

- Data from surveys such as the Periodic Labour Force Survey (**PLFS**) indicate that unemployment remains higher than historical benchmarks.
- For example, unemployment Rate (Current Weekly Status) in 2011-12 was 3.7%, while it stands at an average of **2%** (in the 10 months before Jan 2026).
- 2011-12 serves as a reasonable benchmark since the effects of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the Mukherjee Stimulus had largely subsided.
- Since then, unemployment has remained consistently higher, though it has moderated slightly in recent years.

- **Youth unemployment:**

- The situation is more severe for young people (**15-29** years). For example, the youth unemployment rate (Usual Status) in 2011-12 was 7.7%, while it reached 10.2% 2023-24.
- This indicates that economic growth has not translated proportionately into job creation, pointing to the phenomenon of “**jobless growth.**”

Inflation Trends - Policy or Agricultural Luck?

- **Official narrative:** The Economic Survey claims that government policies have pushed the growth frontier, and tamed and anchored inflation.
- **Alternative explanation:** Evidence suggests that the decline in inflation may not primarily be due to monetary policy.
- **Role of agriculture:**
 - **Food prices**, a major component of inflation, largely determine the inflation trajectory.
 - The agricultural growth in 2024-25 was 4.2%, an unusually strong performance.
 - Higher agricultural output reduces food price inflation, thereby lowering overall inflation.
- **Key issue:** It remains unclear whether the current low inflation is the result of policy intervention, or favourable agricultural conditions (benign monsoon, natural factors).

Selective Presentation of Economic Indicators

- A key criticism concerns the asymmetry in official communication. **For example**,
 - The Economic Survey presents detailed inflation data from 2011 onwards, highlighting its decline.
 - However, unemployment data for the same period is not similarly emphasised.
- If comparable unemployment data were presented, it would reveal that unemployment today remains **higher** than historic levels, contradicting the optimistic narrative of economic performance.

Methodological Puzzle in Unemployment Data

- An unusual pattern emerges from PLFS data. During 2020-21 (COVID-19 pandemic), though the GDP contracted by ~7%, unemployment declined.
- **Global comparison:** In countries like the United States, unemployment surged during the pandemic despite a smaller GDP contraction.
- **Implication:** This anomaly suggests a need for greater methodological scrutiny and clarification from the National Statistical Office (NSO) to enhance credibility of unemployment data.

Key Challenges and Way Forward

- **Overemphasis on GDP growth:** As the primary economic indicator.
 - **Reorient economic policy towards employment:** Shift focus from growth-centric policy to employment-intensive growth.
- **Persistent unemployment:** Particularly among youth.
 - **Promote labour-intensive sectors:** Such as manufacturing (especially MSMEs), construction, agro-processing, and labour-intensive exports such as textiles and footwear.
- **Jobless growth:** Where production increases without proportional employment generation.
 - **Strengthen agricultural productivity:** Sustained agricultural growth helps control food inflation and supports rural employment.
- **Selective economic narrative:** Highlighting favourable indicators while downplaying others.
 - **Balanced economic monitoring:** Economic assessment should give equal importance to GDP growth, inflation, and employment.
- **Data credibility concerns:** Due to unexplained statistical patterns.
 - **Improve labour market data:** Greater transparency in PLFS methodology. Clarification of anomalies such as declining unemployment during economic contraction.

Conclusion

- India's strong GDP growth narrative does not fully capture the realities of the labour market.
- While methodological improvements in GDP estimation strengthen economic statistics, **persistent unemployment** — particularly among youth — remains a critical concern.
- A sustainable economic strategy must therefore move beyond celebrating growth figures and prioritise employment generation, data transparency, and balanced policy evaluation.
- Only then can India's growth translate into broad-based economic **well-being** and **inclusive development**.

GDP Growth vs Employment Reality FAQs

Q1. Why has the adoption of the “double-deflation” method in GDP estimation been considered significant?

Ans. It improves the accuracy of real GDP estimates by separately deflating output and input prices while measuring GVA.

Q2. Why is GDP growth alone considered an inadequate indicator of economic performance in India?

Ans. Because strong GDP growth has not translated into sufficient employment generation, leading to concerns of jobless growth.

Q3. What trend does recent labour market data reveal about unemployment in India since 2011-12?

Ans. Unemployment rates have remained consistently higher than the 2011-12 benchmark despite recent economic growth.

Q4. How does agricultural performance influence inflation trends in India?

Ans. Higher agricultural growth reduces food price, which significantly lowers overall inflation due to food's large weight in the CPI basket.

Q5. Why has the decline in India's unemployment rate during the COVID-19 pandemic raised methodological concerns?

Ans. Because unemployment fell even when GDP contracted sharply, contradicting global trends.

Source: IE

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/daily-editorial-analysis-12-march-2026/>

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