



A HISTORICAL EXAMINATION OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE AMONG WOMEN IN INDIA: THE IMPACT OF LABOUR REFORMS AND SOCIAL POLICIES SINCE INDEPENDENCE

Adarsh Thakur ¹  & Pallavi Pandey ²

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

¹ Ph.D. Scholar, School of Social Sciences, Devi Ahilya

Vishwavidyalaya, Indore, MP, India;

² Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Sociology, Mata Jijabai Govt Girls PG College, Indore, MP, India

Corresponding Author:

Adarsh Thakur

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260404007>

Abstract

Rising engagement of women in the workforce have heavily impacted policy and academic discourses in areas relating to work life balance. In the aftermath of India's independence, Government of India initiated several labour reforms and social policies designed to enhance women's working conditions, facilitate gender equality, as well as enable better work life balance. This research offers a historico-sociological analysis of work life balance amongst women in India between 1947 and 2025. Relying on secondary data, sources such as government reports, labour legislation, policy documents and scholastic literature, the study investigates the interdependence between labour reforms, social policy and women's endeavors in managing occupational and familial obligations. The study asserts that while policy interventions and labour reforms have improved women's access to jobs and workplace protections considerably, structural disadvantages stemming from patriarchy, the sexual division of labor and entrenched socio-cultural perceptions has yet kept the accomplishment of substantial work-life balance at bay. Finally, the study traces the paradigm shift from welfare-based policies to empowerment-oriented policy framework and recommends the necessity of inclusive and gendered reform agenda.

Keywords: *Work-life balance, working-women, labour reforms, social policy, gender*

Introduction

The discourse of work-life balance is of topical interest in contemporary societies, as they go through rapid demographic transitions, the processes of globalisation and changing socio-cultural landscapes (International Labour Organization, 2023). In India, with increasing access for women to education, employment, entrepreneurship and public spheres, gender roles are undergoing significant changes leading to crucial debates on work-life balance. Work-life balance can be defined as an individual's capacity to juggle occupational duties successfully while achieving satisfaction in personal and family life. This issue is all the more important for women as they often carry additional unpaid domestic responsibilities on their shoulders over and above that of occupational demands (Hochschild, 1989).

However, a social understanding of work-life balance in the Global South and particularly in India cannot disregard its Eurocentric framing which continues to dominate organisational psychology. Generally framed in Western discourse as an individual challenge of managing time between career employment and life in the nuclear family, work-life balance is a vastly complicated concept in the Indian social context where large joint family structures, massive informal sector, deep-seated caste and class stratifications, and the enduring impact of collectivist social ethos persist (Desai & Krishnaraj, 1987). Work-life balance for the Indian woman is less a personal negotiation with employer or an individual fight for 'flexibility', and more a protracted bargaining process between her, her extended kin network, her community's moral codes, and structural constraints on patriarchal systems of male dominance and female subordination (Walby, 1990).

A central paradox in the economic development of India in the decades following Independence has been the decline in the female labour-force participation rate (FLFPR) despite robust growth of the Gross Domestic Product. Economists refer to this phenomenon as a 'U-shaped curve,' which essentially implies that in times of increasing household incomes, there is a reduction in female workforce engagement in paid labour force (Klasen & Pieters, 2015). The 'exit from the labour force' among women cannot be wholly attributed to the notion of having achieved work-life balance in an egalitarian setting; it largely represents the

operation of an 'income effect' and the sociological 'process of Sanskritisation' whereby the exclusion of women from visible economic activity signals an 'upward mobility and cultural pretension among lower-order and intermediate castes' and 'rich landowners'. (Srinivas, 1956, p. 78) Thus, for a large number of Indian women, the only means to overcome work-life conflict under conditions of patriarchy is complete exit from formal labour force.

Since Independence, state policies and legislation have addressed issues concerning women's work, employment opportunities and gender equality. These policy and legal interventions include maternity benefit laws, equal remuneration acts, workplace safety measures, child care facilities and laws pertaining to prevention of sexual harassment at workplaces (Government of India, 2013, 2017). However, the continuing patriarchal norms of society and culture, disparity in domestic division of labour, spatial and temporal restrictions on women's mobility, discrimination in employment opportunities and occupational segregation continue to pose profound challenges for women in their quest to strike a work-life balance. Moreover, many of these legal and policy provisions are confined to the organized sector, leaving most Indian women working in agriculture, domestic service, informal manufacturing and trades out of their purview (Ghosh, 2009).

In this paper, an attempt has been made to critically review the labour policy, legislative framework and the social welfare provisions initiated with respect to women workers in India from 1947-2025. An attempt has been made to study the extent to which these interventions have shaped the experience of work-life balance among women and the role of social factors which continue to impinge upon the life chances of working women and their familial sphere. A critical analysis of legislative actions, policy choices and social changes occurring in the last eight decades question as to whether state-initiated reforms have effectively ruptured patriarchal constraints on gendered divisions.

Sociology and the Work-Life Balance Discourse

Work-Life Balance is not an individual or a 'lifestyle management' choice; it is an indicator of a social system where work and family structures influence our lives in ways we have not fully come to understand through an individual or organisational perspective. It is a process in which time, labor and the care function are unequally and unequally divided within a society, by such social institutions as the state, family and work organisation and mediated by various cultural beliefs and practices. Thus, a sociological interpretation would engage in an understanding of such concepts as social reproduction, patriarchy, caste system and class struggle to explicate the gender disparities on work-life balance in India.

The Data of Indian Population Census across various years on Women work participation shows significant transformations. While Census 1951 and 1961 show participation mostly in agricultural sector and household-based activities of informal sector in rural areas and informal manufacturing and services in urban areas respectively, 1971 census indicate increased rural non-agricultural workforce participation by women. The 1981 census registers increasing workforce engagement in manufacturing. By the turn of the millennium, the increased level of education among women in 2001 and by 2011 the work participation rate of women in India had stood at approximately 25.5 per cent. The 2011 census also suggests a 'downward trend in Female Work Force Participation' in India, indicating that despite advancements in education, access for women to formal employment remained limited due to structural barriers. (Census of India 2011: Social Groups and Main workers). A United Nations Decade for Women Reports (1975-1985), also provided extensive accounts on global gender-disparity in distribution of 'paid and unpaid' work with women, sharing an unequal burden of both. Moreover, global report on this issues show that women account for disproportionate share of unpaid domestic and care work in the household and unpaid productive work in own enterprise or household farm (ILO 2018; UN Women 2022). According to the latest Time Use Survey of India, Indian women spend approximately 290 minutes a day on unpaid household and care services, a staggering nine times more than the time devoted by men (around 30 minutes a day) for similar activities. This is one of the highest differentials in the world (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MOSPI], 2019). The large gap in unpaid domestic and care activities determines the space and the time left for women to be engaged in paid labor.

Functionalists suggest that in traditional societies, roles were split into expressive and instrumental roles whereby men occupied the instrumental role, which primarily involved participating in paid labor force in the public domain while women occupied the expressive role which primarily focused on managing the household, rendering care, nurturing and performing household chores in the private sphere (Parsons & Bales, 1955). But when societies became industrial and women entered into the world of paid labor market, and did not receive mandate to adjust the balance of home-based work and office-based tasks, such system inherently caused tension, chaos, instability. As per the arguments, feminist theorists argue that work life imbalance and greater work life stress experienced by women is the consequence of structured power imbalance inherent in a patriarchy where the dominance of the male gender dictates social order in both family and workplace, as well as society at large (Walby, 1990). From marxist and socialist feminist perspective (Bhattacharya 2017), this is explicable via Social Reproduction theory, wherein capitalism relies on women's unpaid domestic labor to reproduce its labor supply, but not as part of its 'circuits of production'. The Indian capitalist project has therefore been sub sized by externalizing cost of care work onto women in their household and personal lives.

The theory of the 'second shift,' elaborated by Arlie Hochschild (1989) is key here, where a woman works a full day's labor in the home and workplace, only to come home to do another 'shift' of unpaid labor-cooking, cleaning, and childcare-creating 'time poverty.' While this double burden leads to diminished health outcomes and psychological stresses for women, the concept of the 'Motherhood Penalty' for women and 'Fatherhood Bonus' for men is also significant, as becoming a mother often leads to the loss of opportunities and career progress for women, whereas fatherhood is viewed as increasing desirability in the job market

for men (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007). Walby (1990) demonstrates that Patriarchy operates as a form of control through several dimensions: Household work, State action and legislation, Occupational labor and Cultural forms and practices that results in an unequal apportionment of life opportunities and of economic opportunity on men vs. Women.

Indian Women's Work: History Of Labour Laws And Social Policies

A. Early Post-Independence Years (1947-1975)

Following the adoption of the Indian constitution in 1950, the bedrock of equality, non-discrimination and social justice were established with provisions for equality of law, prohibition of discrimination on sex in terms of public employment in Articles 14, 15, and 16 respectively and equal pay for equal work in Article 39. The Indian state also stipulated to ensure humane conditions of work and maternity relief in its working places in Article 42 (Government of India, 1950). The legal principles enshrined in the above stated Articles of the Indian Constitution were progressive and progressive for their era-at par with, and perhaps even more advanced than many of the contemporary Western democracies in the field of statutory gender equality. Nevertheless, during this initial period of post-independence era, women labour policy was predominantly protective, not an empowerment one, formulated within the policy framework of Nehruvian socialist approach.

Inspired by Victorian notion of female delicacy the laws that evolved around women's work concentrated on the protection aspect of the female workers, such as working conditions, work hours and safety measures (Factories Act, 1948). Most importantly, no female employee is allowed to work on night shifts and it is illegal to employ her for the jobs classified as hazardous (Government of India, 1948). But these provisions restricted female labour market mobility significantly as it pushed many of them towards the informal, unregulated sector and also reduced their opportunities of formal sector engagement. During these years of transition for Indian policy makers and for gender equality women's workforce participation rates were very high in agricultural and informal sector. And it was not on the radar of most of the policy maker that the women would want a balance between their work and personal life, as women were already stereotyped as wives, mothers, homemakers.

B. Women's Movement and Equality Based Reforms (1975-1990)

The mid of seventies witnessed dramatic shift of policy focus. International Women's Year 1975 proclaimed by the United Nation (UN) ignited public awareness towards the issue of women empowerment and the decade was marked by concerted civil society activism, making gender equality as important policy agendas and objectives of policy formulations. Equal Remuneration Act in 1976 established legally the principle of equal remuneration for men and women, non-discrimination between men and women at the time of recruitment, promotions, and transfer etc (Government of India, 1976). 1974 marked publication of landmark report "Towards Equality" by CSWI which highlighted deteriorating conditions of female employment, growing gender differentials and total failure of economic policies to address this crisis, necessitating the shift of paradigm from "welfare" to "developmental" approach towards women. Furthermore, the organized movements of the 1970s helped in highlighting the critical issues concerning women in the informal sectors in India.

Report of the Shramshakti (National Commission on Self Employed women and women in Informal sector, 1988) drawn attention towards deplorable working and living conditions of women working in unorganized sector including total lack of basic labour rights, social and health security and adequate pay for their work. Still, the dream of balancing work and personal life could not achieve concrete shape. Due to rapid growth in the education and increase number of women in some professional careers that requires them to take up paid jobs alongside paid household work, increased dual burden on the female employees.

C. Liberalisation And Economic Transformation (1991-2010)

Post 1991 economic liberalisation of India changed the dynamics of Indian economy and job market significantly (Government of India, 1991). Opening up of the economy resulted in the rapid growth of the service, information technology (IT), and business process outsourcing (BPO) sector which had immense capacity of absorbing educated women.

Influx of women into the professional careers helped them increase their financial independence, mobility, and agency in significant way. But in this new system of globalized capitalist system of work, women entrepreneurs and employee faced new challenge of work-life balance on a very personal, social and psychological level, due to long working hours, night shifts etc to keep globally competitive (Ghosh, 2009). The Factories Act was even amended to allow women employees to work at night shifts to facilitate greater ease of global integration in the IT sector which signals to transition from "protectionism" to "facilitation." The process of urbanization also resulted in the disintegration of traditional joint family system leading to a shortage in availability of unpaid labour within families for care of elderly and child, that paved way for a demand for migrant and marginalized women for performing domestic work by urban and peri urban middle and upper-class families, which scholars termed as 'global care chain' operating domestically (Hochschild, 2000).

D. Contemporary Period (2010 TO DATE)

A period of legal consolidations and rise of digital economy have characteristically marked the most recent few years. With the enforcement of The sexual harassment of women at workplace (Prevention, prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, it aimed to protect working women from sexual harassment by putting more emphasis on building a secure work environment, mandating establishment of internal complaints committee in offices and defining the term 'workplace' in a much wider sense (Government of India, 2013).

This was followed by the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 which provided maternity benefits in the forms of paid maternity leaves from 12 weeks to 26 weeks with the provision of crèche for women workers employed in the enterprises having 50 or more employees, making India one of the progressive countries in world on paper with respect to provisions of maternity support for working women (Government of India, 2017). Moreover, in an effort towards legislative reform, the government also consolidated 29 labour laws into 4 broad labour codes (Ministry of labour and employment, 2020). Among them, Code on industrial relation (CIR), 2020 has tried to address the issues pertaining to fixed term employment, gig workers, and platform workers etc., whereas the Social security Code of 2020 covers issues related to social security and welfare for gig and platform workers and others to promote the formalisation of the labour market through comprehensive social safety nets.

From a sociological perspective, algorithmic management used to govern these digital workers, especially women have proven to enforce labour precarity for gig workers who often enter in the gig economy for flexibility but are forced by algorithmic demands to work exhaustingly with little regard for human well-being (Leong, 2018). The COVID 19 pandemic profoundly disrupted this landscape by mandating widespread use of Digital technologies and remote work opportunities, hence enabling widespread adoption of Work From home (WFH) among a huge section of corporate women. Though it provided greater flexibility to manage personal and professional life, at the same time it blurred boundary lines and often resulted in increase in unpaid care work especially for women (ILO, 2020, UN Women, 2020). Even in 2025, many women working from home continue to bear dual responsibilities of household work management along with corporate professional tasks, leading to sustained work-life conflict and burnout in this period.

Impact of Labour Reforms and Social Policies on Work-Life Balance

From the above historical and socio-cultural perspectives on women work and Labour laws in India it becomes evident that though legislations and social policies have made huge stride towards empowering women workers, yet their actual impact has been varied and quite complex. In the formal sector, reforms have led to progressive changes for working women with provisions for maternity support to alleviate stress related to childbirth. Legal frameworks now guarantee economic justice and support better workplace environment promoting both participation and security in labour force participation. However, a crucial analysis of labour reforms reveals their shortcomings.

The legal provision for a paid 26-week maternity leave on the other hand had an adverse effect for hiring women by smaller firms and some enterprises which see this provision as adding up financial burden and thus make them less likely to hire women of childbearing age, impacting their employability. The foremost failure of Indian labour policy to provide any sense of balance for working women has been its inadequate concern and scope in protecting vast millions of informal women workers. For majority of the working women in India, the laws regarding formal employment have hardly any relevance. Working without basic job security, adequate wage, and paid leave they largely are invisible in Indian policy discourse.

The discourse of Indian labour policy always construes care as an exclusively "women's issue". Policies generally focus on supporting women to 'accommodate' their family obligations instead of challenging power relations in households through redistribution of duties. India, till date does not have a legislatively supported and uniformly implemented paid paternity leave for the organized sector. In the name of extended paid maternity leave and nearly no paid leave for fathers, the Indian state further reinforces patriarchy at an individual level to uphold the 'natural' notion that childcare is the duty of women, thus making the domestic division of labour a structurally ingrained, culturally accepted norm (Hochschild, 1989).

Conclusion

The journey of Indian labour reform and social policy between 1947 and 2025 outlines a slow, messy migration from more paternalistic, welfare-based models to more empowering ones. Significant gains are inarguably undeniable from the post-independence era to the present; however, such advances cannot, and should not, mask the inherent constraints that bind them. With constitutional protections, progressively drafted labour law, enhanced maternity benefits and modern workplace health and safety regulations, the Indian state has actively widened the social, and particularly the working public sphere, to accommodate the presence of women in it.

With spaces and avenues of women's agency created, opportunities in life and work can be broadened in more balanced and equitable ways especially if this access benefits women within the protected, organised sectors of employment, though less is to be said of women working in informal sector or gig economy. This narrative, however, remains one of limited potential. Patriarchal mindsets coupled with deeply entrenched gender divisions within homes as well as unequal structures of society greatly truncate state measures intended to facilitate work-life balance; this has clearly and consistently been found to be beyond workplace strategies as only the transformative redesign of domestic, community, social, corporate and other societal structures will facilitate true balance (Walby, 1990) since no amount of changes to workplace could even compensate, let alone overcome the problem of "the second shift". Moving Forward The challenges presented over the past eight decades necessitate comprehensive solutions with a policy as well as a socio-cultural dimension. State policy of the future must work relentlessly to address and re-balance private household tasks and duties which requires provision of guaranteed paid leave for fathers for caring of their children.

Moreover, the state must recognise childcare provision not as welfare measure but as crucial public service delivery, the state has now and should do more, on enacting effective and relevant policy measures. Importantly, the state will need to engage in significant innovative legislative interventions so as to expand social security access to informal economy workers and gig

workers who are predominantly women. Only through an intersectional strategy tackling inequity both within the corporate public and private social spaces can truly effective and equitable work–life balance be attained for all Indian women.

Acknowledgment: No

Author's Contribution: Adarsh Thakur: Literature Review, Data Collection, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing; Pallavi Pandey: Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

Funding: No

Declaration: The authors have given consent for the publication.

Competing Interest: No

References

1. Bhattacharya, T. (Ed.). (2017). *Social reproduction theory: Remapping class, recentring oppression*. Pluto Press.
2. Committee on the Status of Women in India [CSWI]. (1974). *Towards equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India*. Government of India.
3. Correll, S. J., Benard, S., & Paik, I. (2007). *Getting a job: Is there a motherhood penalty?* American Journal of Sociology, 112(5), 1297–1339.
4. Desai, N., & Krishnaraj, M. (1987). *Women and society in India*. Ajanta Publications.
5. Ghosh, J. (2009). *Never done and poorly paid: Women's work in globalising India*. Women Unlimited.
6. Government of India. (1948). *Factories Act*.
7. Government of India. (1950). *Constitution of India*.
8. Government of India. (1976). *Equal Remuneration Act*.
9. Government of India. (1991). *Economic survey 1990–91*.
10. Government of India. (2013). *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act*.
11. Government of India. (2017). *Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act*.
12. Hochschild, A. R. (1989). *The second shift: Working parents and the revolution at home*. Viking.
13. Hochschild, A. R. (2000). Global care chains and emotional surplus value. In W. Hutton & A. Giddens (Eds.), *On the edge: Living with global capitalism* (pp. 130–146). Jonathan Cape.
14. International Labour Organization [ILO]. (2018). *Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work*. ILO.
15. International Labour Organization [ILO]. (2020). *COVID-19 and the world of work*. ILO.
16. International Labour Organization [ILO]. (2021). *World employment and social outlook 2021*. ILO.
17. International Labour Organization [ILO]. (2023). *World employment and social outlook 2023*. ILO.
18. Klasen, S., & Pieters, J. (2015). *What explains the stagnation of female labor force participation in urban India?* The World Bank Economic Review, 29(3), 449–478.
19. Ministry of Labour and Employment. (2020). *The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code*. Government of India.
20. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MOSPI]. (2019). *Time use survey*. Government of India.
21. National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector. (1988). *Shramshakti: Report of the National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector*. Government of India.
22. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner. (1951, 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001, 2011). *Census of India*. Government of India.
23. Parsons, T., & Bales, R. F. (1955). *Family, socialization and interaction process*. Free Press.
24. Srinivas, M. N. (1956). *A note on Sanskritization and Westernization*. The Far Eastern Quarterly, 15(4), 481–496.
25. UN Women. (2020). *From insight to action: Gender equality in the wake of COVID-19*. UN Women.
26. UN Women. (2022). *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The gender snapshot 2022*. UN Women.
27. Walby, S. (1990). *Theorizing patriarchy*. Basil Blackwell.
28. World Economic Forum. (2024). *Global gender gap report 2024*. World Economic Forum.

Publisher's Note

The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

©The Author(s) 2026. Open Access.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>