Declining Women Workforce Participation

Why in news?

The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data for 2017-18 and the December quarter was released recently by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI).

How is women labour force participation in India?

- As per 61st round of the NSSO survey (2004-2005), 48.5% rural women (above 15 years) were employed either as their major activity or as their subsidiary activity.
- But this number dropped to 23.7% in the recently released report of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS).
- In other words, in rural India, nearly half the women who were in the workforce in 2004-05 had dropped out in 2017-18.

Is this a new change?

- The drop in work participation by rural women is not sudden.
- The latest data from the PLFS simply continue a trend that was well in place by 2011-12.
- Worker to population ratio (WPR) for rural women aged 15 and above had dropped from 48.5% in 2004-05 to 35.2% in 2011-12 itself.
- In contrast, the WPR for urban women aged 15 and above declined only mildly from 22.7% in 2004-5 to 19.5% in 2011-12, and to 18.2% in 2017-18.

What does the sectional data suggest?

- It is to be noted that the drop is not located primarily among the privileged sections of the rural population.
- More importantly, most of the decline in the WPR has taken place among women with low levels of education.
- For illiterate women, the WPR fell from 55% to around 29% while that for women with secondary education fell from 30.5% to 15.6%.
- In all, the broad-based decline has higher concentration among the least educated and the poorest.

- So clearly, the drop is not a result of a choice made due to rising incomes of the households.
- In other words, it is not a choice by the richer households that women's time could be better spent caring for home and children.
- It is neither a trend among women with higher education.
- So, it is largely a result of the fact that women are unable to find work in a crowded labour market.
- This reflects the conditions of disguised unemployment, which is a cause of concern for the nation as a whole.

Which components have recorded decline?

- The decline in work on family farms and allied activities contributed the most (14.8 percentage points).
- This is followed by casual wage labour (8.9 percentage points).
- Next came the work on family enterprises in other industries (2.4 percentage points).
- These were counter-balanced by a 0.7 percentage point increase in regular salaried work.
- There was also a 0.5 percentage point increase in engagement in public works programmes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).
- In all, most of the decline (23.1 percentage points out of 24.8) came from reduced participation in agriculture and allied activities.
- Men's participation in agriculture has also declined.
- Among men aged 15 and above, 56.1% participated in agriculture in 2004-5. In contrast, only 39.6% did so in 2017-18.

What are the causes?

- **Mechanisation and land fragmentation** have reduced agricultural work opportunities for both men and women.
- While men were able to pick up work in other industries, women reduced their participation in other industries as well as agriculture.
- A man with class 10 education can be a postal carrier, a truck driver or a mechanic.
- Such other **work opportunities**, except for work in public works programmes, are not easily open to women.
- This challenge is particularly severe for rural women with moderate levels of education.
- Hence, education is associated with a lower WPR for women, in the rural context.
- Evidently, in 2016-17, around 29% illiterate women were employed,

compared to only 16% women with at least secondary education.

- The method of **categorisation of workers** in the NSSO survey and PLFS also contributes to the inflated numbers.
- [It counts as primary activity in which respondents spent a majority of their prior year.
- Subsidiary activity is in which individuals spent at least 30 days.]
- If individuals are defined as working by either primary or subsidiary criteria, they are counted among workers.
- Increasingly, as demand for agricultural work declines and women engage in diverse activities, their work tends to become fragmented.
- So there could be tremendous undercount of women's work under the standard labour force questions, particularly in rural areas.
- A woman who spends 15 days on her own field, 10 days as a construction labourer and 15 days in MGNREGA work should be counted as a worker using the subsidiary status criteria.

What are the possible ways out?

- The recent establishment of the Cabinet Committee on Employment and Skill Development is a welcome move.
- The committee is expected to take the issue of declining female employment.
- Development of transportation infrastructure could go a long way in bringing in rural women into non-agricultural work.
- If the cabinet committee formulates appropriate policies, the potential gender dividend could be far greater than the much celebrated demographic dividend.

Source: The Hindu

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Quick Fact

Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)

- PLFS is a recent initiative aimed at generating estimates of various labour force indicators.
- It measures employment every 3 months in urban areas and once a year in both rural and urban areas.
- The quarterly survey only captures data classed as current weekly status (CWS), while the annual survey measures both the usual status and CWS.
- The National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) under the Ministry of Statistics

and Programme Implementation conducts the survey.

