Kerala's Right to Disconnect Bill

Mains: *GS II – Government policies and Interventions*

Why in News?

Recently, Kerala has introduced the Right to Disconnect Bill, 2025, aiming to protect private-sector employees from being forced to answer work calls, emails, or messages after office hours.

What is the Right to Disconnect Bill of Kerala?

- **About the Bill** – The Kerala Government's proposed Right to Disconnect Bill, 2025 seeks to protect private sector employees from excessive work-related digital communication beyond official working hours.
- **Important provisions** – The bill grants employees the right to disengage from calls, emails, messages, and virtual meetings after work hours, without fear of disciplinary action.
- **Significance** – If enacted, Kerala would become the first Indian state to legislate such a right.
- **International examples** – Countries such as France, Spain, Italy, Germany, and Belgium have introduced similar measures.
- Evidence from France's experiments with shorter workweeks indicates improvements in mental health, productivity, and job satisfaction, suggesting that regulated working hours can benefit both workers and employers.
- **Indian context** – In India, where long workdays and constant digital availability are often normalized, the Right to Disconnect could serve as an important corrective, particularly for women navigating paid work alongside unpaid care responsibilities.
- **Similar policy** – Karnataka's paid menstrual leave legislation are among the most progressive state-level initiatives aimed at addressing the everyday pressures faced by workers, particularly women.
- **Other measures** – Alongside such reforms, the expansion of digital technologies, remote work, and flexible employment arrangements has created new opportunities for women's participation in the workforce.
- **Continuing concerns** – However, despite these changes, women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic and care work and this raises a crucial policy question.

What are the impacts of various reforms?

- **Impact of new Labour Codes** – Parallel to state-level reforms, the four new labour

codes introduced by the Ministry of Labour and Employment *aim to improve women's participation in the workforce*.

- These reforms permit women to work at night across sectors (with consent and safety measures) and promise equal access to higher-paying jobs.
- Such measures are significant in a country with one of the lowest Female Labour Force Participation Rates (FLFPR) globally.
- Since 2004–05, India's FLFPR declined steadily, reflecting deep-rooted structural and social constraints.
- **Education and the U-Shaped Hypothesis –** Economists often explain trends in women's workforce participation using the U-shaped relationship between education and employment.
- Women with very low education levels tend to work out of economic necessity, while those with higher education access better-paying jobs and professional opportunities.
- Women with intermediate education, however, are more likely to withdraw from the workforce due to social norms, marriage, or caregiving responsibilities.
- Additionally, India's pattern of economic growth has been skewed towards sectors that traditionally employ fewer women, limiting job opportunities outside agriculture.
- Recent data shows a modest rise in FLFPR, largely driven by self-employment among rural women, particularly in agriculture—highlighting the lack of quality non-farm jobs for women.
- **Effect of digitalisation** – Between 2015 and 2022, India witnessed a sharp increase in internet access and digital penetration, coinciding with a gradual rise in FLFPR.
- Several studies point to a positive relationship between digitalisation and women's employment, particularly for salaried and self-employed women.
- Digital technologies enhance women's access to job information, increase autonomy, and enable flexible work arrangements such as work-from-home (WFH).
- **Limitations** – However, these benefits are not evenly distributed.
- Women who lack digital literacy, autonomy, or household support often fail to benefit fully from ICT-led opportunities.
- **Gig Economy** – The gig economy, often promoted as flexible and empowering, has attracted increasing numbers of women across the Global South.
- For women with lower education levels, gig work can provide income opportunities while allowing them to manage domestic responsibilities.
- **Digital entrepreneurship and e-commerce** – They have opened new avenues.
- India has approximately 7,000 women-led start-ups, accounting for around 7.5 per cent of all start-ups, and women make up nearly 14 per cent of entrepreneurs.
- Digital platforms allow women to access markets, build networks, and bypass traditional barriers such as mobility constraints.
- However, most women entrepreneurs remain concentrated in micro-enterprises within the informal sector, facing limited access to credit, technology, and social security.

What are the important issues women facing?

- **The "Double Burden" of Labour** – The Covid-19 pandemic normalised remote work, especially in the formal sector.
- While the work from home (WFH) increased women's labour force participation, it also blurred the boundary between paid work and domestic labour.

- Historically, Indian women have worked from home as unpaid family labour or as home-based piece-rate workers in industries such as garments and bidi rolling.
- Contemporary corporate WFH arrangements, however, largely involve middle-class women who are expected to perform professional duties alongside domestic work—often without a corresponding redistribution of household responsibilities.
- Studies consistently show that WFH women experience a "double burden", juggling paid employment and unpaid care work, particularly childcare.
- Flexible jobs may increase women's participation, but they do not automatically reduce unpaid labour.
- **Corporate Work Culture and Burnout** – India's corporate sector reports some of the highest burnout levels globally.
- Long workdays, constant digital surveillance, and expectations of round-the-clock availability have intensified since the pandemic.
- Employees working with multinational firms often operate across time zones, leading to disrupted sleep cycles and poor work–life balance.
- For women, these pressures are compounded by entrenched gender norms assigning primary responsibility for household and care work to them.

What lies ahead?

- **Need for Structural Support** – Economist Claudia Goldin highlights that when women combine paid work with caregiving under WFH arrangements, frequent interruptions reduce productive work time.
- The care economy and the market economy are deeply interlinked, and women's participation in paid employment reshapes household care dynamics.
- In this context, the Right to Disconnect Bill can be a meaningful intervention for formal sector workers.
- However, its effectiveness depends on complementary structural policies, including:
    - Affordable and accessible childcare and crèches
    - Paid parental leave for both parents
    - Social security for informal and gig workers
- Without such support, flexible work arrangements risk reinforcing, rather than reducing, gendered inequalities.
- Flexible work arrangements and digital technologies have expanded opportunities for women, but they are not a panacea.
- In the absence of structural care support and equitable household labour distribution, flexibility often translates into intensified workloads for women.
- Progressive legislation like the Right to Disconnect must therefore be embedded within a broader framework of gender-sensitive labour and social policies to genuinely ease women's work burdens.

Reference

[The Indian Express| Reducing the Burden on Women]



SHANKAR
IAS PARLIAMENT
Information is Empowering