

Transformation of Women Workforce in Self - Help Organizations from Part Time and Casual to Full Time for Boosting Circular Economy - An Opinion Based Study on Specific Self - help Groups of Kolkata

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Abstract: *India is in an alarming state when it comes to the participation of the female section of the society in active workforce. If this continues then a bleak future is imminent. However, some people have developed, or are trying to develop awareness, and are actively working on this. Some corporates are also encouraging this by collaborating with them, by helping them or by buying from them. Although the numbers are lesser if only the corporates are considered but the numbers are more if the many self - help organizations across India that are providing some sort of support, livelihood are taken into account. Thus, they help in empowering the womenfolk who in most cases belong to the underprivileged section of the society. The problem is that majority are part - time workers, and hence their percentage is not reflected in the female workforce participation data. The aim of the present study is to identify the factors that prevent the working mothers from working full time, and to analyze how they can be accommodated into the larger or full - time workforce which would get reflected in the female labour participation rate (FLPR). Also, this study intends to find out that working mothers' involvement can be considered as a good contributor to circular economy through sustainable development. The research is qualitative in nature and has been carried through interviews and surveys. Feedbacks have been taken from self - help organizations based in Kolkata and upon which recommendations have been made to bring both environmental sustainability and increased working mothers' participation on the same platform.*

Keywords: circular economy, environmental sustainability, female labour force, self - help organizations, working mothers

1. Introduction

Indian economy can boost its growth through inspiring significant economic participation by women. But, unfortunately even after urbanization India failed to motivate women to participate in workforce. Jobs in rural areas have declined and most of the female workers from the said area were unable to adopt the changes and were not working in urban areas. As a result, the gap became more significant between organized and unorganized workers. It is really a great challenge for India to develop comprehensive and feasible ways to increase women workforce when half of the entire population is not fully participating in the economy. If about 50 percent women participate in workforce, India's economic growth can increase by 1.5 percent to 9 percent per year. Various projects have been formulated by the World Bank which confirms larger economic participation by women. During past 15 years they invested over \$3 billion to give assistance to state governments for upgradation of rural women under poverty through self - help organizations. Almost 45 million women got assistance from such projects. Even some of them have become prosperous entrepreneurs by having better access to finance and higher incomes that have been beneficial for their families and communities. As per Economic Survey Report (2022 - 2023) published by Minister of Finance and Corporate Affairs, it was stated that over 28.5 crore

unorganized workers already were registered on E - Shram portal as of 31st December, 2022 according to Ministry of Labour and Employment. The main aim of developing such a portal is to create a National database of unorganized workers and keep a track of it. However, these projects alone cannot support women to become self - dependent and grow in their life. Although even when they are involved in work, they have the tendency of leaving jobs frequently due to various family constraints. Keeping this in mind, the present study is based on interviews and surveys that have been conducted at specific centres that provides an umbrella to woman - majority self - help groups. The Kolkata - based self - help organizations such as the Zero Waste Shop under Newtown Kolkata Development Authority (NKDA) and the South Asian Forum for Environment (SAFE) are exemplary platforms for circular economy. They produce and sell environmentally sustainable and recycled products. This is a new and emerging concept that combines sustainability and recycling with rural development and women empowerment. This collaborative venture is something healthy and much - needed for both the well - being of the planet and for providing stability to developing economies like India. The present study is based on the 300 primary data collected from Kolkata - based self - help organizations with an objective of establishing a reconciliation between mother nature and women labour force. With heavily depleting natural environment on the one hand, and with negligible

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record of female workforce participation, the study strives to find a way to balance both for sustainable development.

2. Review of Literature

A primary data of 300 samples have been considered for this study, and it has been done on certain self - help organizations based in Kolkata. For this purpose, some articles, journals, reports and registered websites have been reviewed to fulfill our objectives.

Shekhawat Singh. R and Dr. Singh. K (2023) both have described that the Indian government is focusing on women empowerment through schemes under the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan like Beti Bachao - Beti padhao, Bank Sakhi, Kanya Sumangala Yojana, Sukanya Samradhi Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, Mudra Yojana and Ujjwala Scheme. The 20 trillion stimulus package announced by the Prime Minister in 2020 would be spent on cottage industry and micro, small and medium enterprises. In the research paper, it has also been found that for making Indian women self - reliant, schemes including the Ek stall Ek Mahila ke Naam, Samarth Training Abhiyan, Kabad Se Jugad, Sewing and knitting training centres, and Atmanirbhar Bharat Rojgar Yojana, are resulting in transformation of livelihoods, and in turn, empowering women. They have highlighted some very important aspects regarding the concept of self - help groups, which are a boon to poor women, and what the Indian government is doing to support women involved in such groups. Here, it has been mentioned how when women form these groups, they become eligible to get small loans from banks, and even the government provides subsidy to them. In addition, they have also specified that the Prime Minister transfers 1000 Crores to self - help organizations benefitting around 16 lakh women members. Also, both of them have pointed out that self - help organizations have found great success in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. **Deininger. F and Gren. A (2022)** have expressed their concern about the fact that women are *'underrepresented, underpaid, undervalued, and sometimes completely invisible in the labour market.'* The situation has worsened even more after the pandemic. The underrepresentation issue is a matter of concern even in high potential climate friendly sectors, and the fact that green jobs tend to avoid or exclude women. According to them, gender diverse companies are performing better when it comes to sustainability. In this article they have also emphasized on the importance of upskilling and reskilling women for better outcome. The positive initiatives such as the International Finance Corporation (IFC) 's 'Powered by Women' and the World Bank's RENEW MENA, and the benchmarks created by Equal Aqua (EA), which have impacted the situation, and hold the promise to alter the scenario further. It is also evident from here that the World Bank is well - aware of the fact that the increase in women's workforce participation and the low - carbon transition are inextricably linked. **Estrada. C and Schuber. C (2022)** both have specified about the role of MSMEs and sustainability for achieving SDGs. They also refer to the evolution of female - majority MSMEs, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) project to promote women entrepreneurs, and the World Bank Enterprise survey's data. **The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)**

(2022) in the article has tried to explain that how financial institutions are being instrumental in creating a net - zero carbon future financing female - led businesses by investing in female - led businesses and hence potentially promoting better planetary health. **The United Nations Report (2022)** also focused on greater female participation and gender - responsive approaches for tackling the climate crisis. **Magana Ramos. S and Bendig. H (2022)** have summarized the increasing global role of women in environmental action. **Khan. S (2022)** has highlighted the instrumental role of women in circular economy in recent times. **Linnenkoper. K (2021)** has shared the fact that the global recycling industry is welcoming women. **Bhattacharya. A (2020)** has opined that work from home (WFH) is a good way to boost women's participation in workforce. **Sharma Seth. Y (2021)** has found that Maharashtra has topped the list of states with a maximum number of beneficiaries under the Atmanirbhar Bharat Rozgar Yojana scheme approved by the Ministry of Finance for providing special assistance to states for capital expenditure. Maharashtra is followed by Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh. **Noronha. G (2020)** has given some important details regarding the Indian states that have availed the same scheme. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh (in descending order) were leading in terms of highest amount received under the first installment of the scheme. **Singh. S (2020)** has stressed on how the Federation of Indian Chambers and Industry (FICCI)'s women's wing's priorities include sustainable livelihoods and economic empowerment of rural women for an Atmanirbhar Bharat or self - dependent India. **Balch. O (2015)** has projected another dimension which includes the issues and hurdles in path of women when it comes to sustainability - based roles that account for low realization of the potential that the female workforce possesses when it comes to such roles. **Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Report (2008)** published for United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) has pointed out that the economic, social and environmental contributions of women are not fully realized in workforce as they are marginalized worldwide. The report has also explored the various aspects of sustainable development with a gender perspective, and documents how female contributions could be better realized through it. According to the report, *'In failing to make the best use of their female populations, most countries are underinvesting in the human capital needed to assure sustainability.'*

3. Research Gap

The literatures referred to have claimed that private, government and global bodies are focusing on greater female workforce participation and taking initiatives to increase it. In recent years even the number of women entrepreneurs have grown as a result of it. But still, when it comes to woman workforce participation's numbers or records, a lack is found - either in representation or in genuine participation. This means, there is a definite gap in planning and execution, and the implementation of the initiatives is remaining incomplete.

4. Objectives and Research Methodology of the Study

In the present study, after identifying the gap in this research, certain objectives have been framed and they are as follows:

- 1) To understand how much percentage of the women workforce is full time or part time in specific self - help organizations in Kolkata.
- 2) To analyse the barriers which prevent the women workforce from working full time.
- 3) To try to bring them to be self - dependence through involvement in sustainable development.

This research study is descriptive in nature and primary data has been collected from 300 respondents who are working women from different self - help organizations situated in certain areas of Kolkata. Direct interviews and surveys were conducted to record their responses regarding their cause of involvement in this specific kind of work and also their awareness level regarding environmental sustainability and circular economy. In this study the data has been analyzed with the help of simple charts including percentage.

5. Results and Discussions

In the present study, 300 responses were collected from different self - help group organizations located in certain areas of Kolkata. Such collected responses are analyzed with the help of simple charts including percentage. Firstly, initiative has been taken to find out the percentage of male and female work participation rate in circular economy through sustainable development which has been shown with the help of Table 1 mentioned below.

Table 1: Percentage of Gender participation

Male Work Participation	Female Work Participation
10%	90%

Out of total 300 respondents, it was observed that 90% comprised of female participants and only 10% comprised of male participants. According to the survey, the cultural background of the workers and the natural gender - based personality profiles were responsible for such low male workforce participation. This cultural phenomenon is also not uncommon in western nations.

Secondly, the percentage of women work participation based on their age has been shown with the help of Table 2 mentioned below.

Table 2: Age Range

18 - 24 years	25 - 35 years	36 - 40 years	40 - 45 years
20%	35%	35%	10%

Out of total 300 respondents, it was observed that 35 % belong to age ranges from 25 - 35 years and also 36 - 40 years, but 20 % belong to age ranges from 18 - 24 years, and 10 % belong to age ranges from 40 - 45 years. It was found from the surveys that accelerated process of ageing in hardworking people is responsible for only 10% of the workers being in between the age of 40 - 45, and no workers above the age of 45. Poverty is a common factor in all the

forementioned age groups.

Thirdly, the percentage of women work participation based on their educational level was shown with the help of Table 3 mentioned below.

Table 3: Level of Education

10 th standard	Primary qualified (5 th standard)	Graduate
90%	8%	2%

Out of total 300 respondents, it was observed that 90% of the working women are qualified up to 10th standard, 8 % are qualified up to primary level, i. e., the 5th standard, and only 2% of working women are qualified as graduates. The reason behind this was of course that people with higher qualifications generally either opt for full - time jobs or for jobs with better salary. As majority of this workforce does not even possess basic formal education, they are not aware about their rights, and how to protect those rights. This is why they are unaware of new opportunities upgrade themselves and their children.

Fourthly, the percentage of women work participation based on their marital status was shown with the help of Table 4 mentioned below.

Table 4: Marital status

Single mother	Widow	Married
5%	10%	85%

Out of total 300 respondents, it was observed that 85% of working women are married and having husband and children, 10% are widows and 5% of working women are single mothers. So, it was observed that married women get involved to support their families, and the others have almost no other option but to become self - dependent as they are the sole earning members of their families.

Fifthly, the percentage of women work participation based on their nature of work was shown with the help of Table 5 mentioned below.

Table 5: Nature of Work

Part time	Casual	Full time
95%	5%	0%

Out of total 300 respondents, it was observed that 95 % of working women are engaged as part - time workers, and only 5% are engaged as casual workers, and none of the respondents, i. e., working women work as full - time workers. Hence, it was seen that they are willing to work full - time, but they are not accommodated as full - time worker as work opportunities are not available to them across the year. So, they are compelled to work on a part - time or on a casual basis only.

Sixthly, the percentage of women work participation based on their nature of work was shown with the help of Table 6 mentioned below.

Table 6: Nature of Industry

Recycling	Sustainable handicrafts
70%	30%

Out of total 300 respondents, it was observed that 70% of working women are engaged in recycling industry, and 30% are engaged in the sustainable handicrafts industry. From the collected data, it was identified that major percentage of the female workforce is involved in the recycling industry, rather than the sustainable handicrafts industry. Surprisingly, it was also found that the majority are not at all aware of the ethical and environmental implications of the significance of the work that they are doing. For them it is a way to earn their livelihood.

6. Conclusion

Based on personal interviews and surveys conducted at specific self - help organizations' units, it can be inferred that apart from less male participation, a good percentage of female workforce can be considered as a good contributor to eco - conscious cultural practices. Though they are not personally aware of that, but the ones under whose leadership they are working are fully aware of the eco - conscious side of their business. Also, a considerable number of women work from home, as many do not need a factory or office space to prepare the handicrafts and recycled craftworks.

Despite low male workforce participation, a good percentage of female workforce participation has been identified. Even it was observed from the survey that many eco - conscious people and certain corporates who are environment - friendly (for instance, Decathlon and Ambuja Neotia), are promoting these products by buying from them or inviting them for workshops and display, so that more people are aware of these specific self - help organizations, and also become environment - conscious at the same time. However, it is also clear from the interviews that cost remains an issue with what they produce. If the cost keeps remaining more than mass produced mainstream industrial products, then the self - help groups would not be able to become dominant players in the market. The involvement of more women would lead to more production, and this would reduce the cost of individual products for sure.

Although for the present study self - help organizations operating in Kolkata, the capital city of West Bengal, have been considered, the registration data of West Bengal is not very encouraging. Also, if we take into account the Atmanirbhar Bharat Rozgar Yojana, then the data for West Bengal is not inspiring either. This state of affairs needs to change for good.

7. Recommendations

After considering the literature reviewed and analyzing the findings recorded, certain recommendations have been suggested. The following recommendations would help the cause of both environmental sustainability and women workforce participation at the same time.

- **Government's major initiative:** The 'E shram' portal and card is a welcome initiative of the Indian government. Although it is showing encouraging signs, but it has not reached all, especially the female workforce participants. If they do not register for it, they are left untracked, and thus do not find proper

representation. The representation data is directly proportional to the registration data. If they get registered, then only they would also get the benefits of certain government schemes and of other initiatives. Not only this, the registered data would also help to detect the percentage of workforce not involved on a full - time basis, and also would be reflected in the percentage of workforce on the national database. The state governments, the NGOs and the self - help organizations should take initiatives to raise awareness about the above - mentioned portal among the poor and the rural masses in order to make them an integral part of the workforce.

- **Encouraging female entrepreneurs:** As mentioned before, the women empowering government schemes such as the Mudra Yojana under Atmanirbhar Bharat, and the government support for self - help groups, have collectively helped women in India to open their own businesses (self - help organizations), and recruit many women under them. This is a good progress, but registration should also be a priority everywhere. The increasing number of women entrepreneurs would definitely inspire confidence in other women to become entrepreneurs themselves, or to be a part of the workforce nonetheless. Moreover, women entrepreneurs can generally understand other women better, and encourage them to find their rightful place in the workforce. As a result, the Indian economy would also get additional boost.
- **Greater involvement of corporates:** As already mentioned earlier that some corporates have shown interest in supporting self - help organizations. However, if majority of the corporates of all sectors start showing interest, then the working women could be encouraged, and through this, they would hopefully get work all the year round.
- **Awareness of ethical value:** People should be aware of the ethical value of the products created and sold by the self - help groups. The more they are aware of it, the more they would buy such products, in turn giving impetus to the workforce and the industry.
- **Awareness about environmental value:** The women workforce, if made aware of the environmental value of the kind of work they are doing, would lead to increased female workforce participation.

If all this becomes a reality, then there is hope for the following:

- **Increased women workforce participation:** If the above suggestions are well - implemented in India, then there is a possibility of a considerable increase in women workforce participation rate in a short span of time.
- **Recognition and pay:** Working women involved would get proper recognition and deserved pay for their unique creations.
- **Preservation of traditional artwork:** The self - help groups are not just saving the environment, but they are also saving traditional artworks through handicrafts. So, when it is done on a larger scale, it would increase the chances of the artworks' survival. This in turn, would not only be good for the planet, but the future generations could also experience and conserve its

cultural value.

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