International Journal of Social Research and Development
www.socialsciencejournal.net
Online ISSN: 2664-8709
Received: 12-07-2026, Accepted: 11-08-2026, Published: 26-08-2026
Volume 8, Issue 3, 2026, Page No. 88-96

From gendered economy to gender-just economy: Rethinking economic justice through labour, care and public policy in India

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Abstract
Economic justice cannot be separated from gender justice because the economy itself is structured through gendered relations of production, reproduction, property, labour, care and access to resources. Conventional approaches to economic development have historically privileged paid market activity while treating unpaid domestic and care work as private, non-economic and largely invisible. It is a framework that obscures the social labour through which economies are reproduced and simultaneously naturalises women's disproportionate responsibility for that labour. This article examines the relationship between gender and economic justice and argues that achieving gender justice requires not simply incorporating women into existing economic institutions but transforming the institutions, norms and policies that produce gendered economic disadvantage. Relying primarily upon secondary data and selected policy and programme cases from India, the article analyses female labour-force participation, the gender division of unpaid care work, occupational segregation, wage inequality, social protection, women's collective economic participation and gender-responsive budgeting. The analysis demonstrates that while India has experienced a discernible rise in women's labour-force participation, this increase has occurred alongside persistent inequalities in the quality, remuneration and security of women's work. Recent Time Use Survey evidence reveals that women shoulder approximately 84 per cent of unpaid care time in India, with the imputed economic value of women's unpaid domestic and care work estimated at 15–17 per cent of GDP, figures comparable to, and even exceeding, key sectors like manufacturing or trade. A 2025 National Statistics Office survey across 46 Indian cities found that 69 per cent of women outside the labour force cited childcare and household responsibilities as the primary reason, compared with only 1 per cent of men. The Economic Survey identifies unpaid care responsibilities as a significant structural constraint on women's economic participation. At the policy level, initiatives such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihood Mission, self-help groups and gender-responsive budgeting offer important mechanisms for strengthening women's economic agency. However, their transformative potential depends upon redistribution of care, control over assets and income, decent employment and institutional accountability. The article develops a relational conception of gender-economic justice in which recognition, redistribution, representation and rights are treated as mutually constitutive dimensions of justice. It concludes that the objective should move beyond making women economically productive towards constructing an economy that is itself gender-just.

Keywords: Gender justice, economic justice, feminist economics, unpaid care work, women's labour, gender-responsive budgeting, social reproduction, India, economic empowerment, gender inequality

Introduction

The relationship between gender and the economy has traditionally been approached through questions of women's participation in employment, wage discrimination, poverty, access to property and financial resources, and representation in economic decision-making. These remain fundamental questions. Yet a deeper problem lies beneath them: the economy is not a gender-neutral sphere into which women enter as autonomous economic actors. Economic institutions are themselves constituted through gender relations. The organisation of paid employment, household production, care, property ownership, labour markets, social protection and public expenditure reflects and reproduces historically established relations between women and men [8].

This observation requires a reconsideration of what is meant by economic justice. If economic justice is understood merely as equality of income, employment or market opportunity, a substantial dimension of economic inequality remains invisible. A woman who performs several hours of unpaid cooking, cleaning, child care, elder care, water collection and household management every day may be classified as economically inactive despite performing socially necessary labour. Conversely, a man employed in the formal economy may be understood as economically productive even though his ability to participate in paid work depends partly upon unpaid labour performed within the household. Thus, the boundary between the economic and the non-economic is itself socially constructed [32].

Feminist economists have challenged precisely this boundary. The distinction between productive and reproductive labour has been central to feminist political economy because capitalist economies depend upon social reproduction while frequently externalising its costs to households, communities and, disproportionately, women [8, 12]. Sen's capability approach similarly demonstrates that equality cannot be assessed solely through commodities or income because individuals possess unequal capabilities to convert resources into substantive freedoms [14, 24]. Nussbaum's capability framework further emphasises bodily integrity, practical reason, affiliation and control over one's material environment as essential dimensions of a dignified life [13, 23].

The Indian context makes this problem particularly significant. India has witnessed considerable improvements in women's education, health, political participation and access to formal financial institutions. Female labour-force participation has also increased in recent years, reaching an estimated 30.7 per cent in 2025, with PLFS 2023–24 showing a rise to 41.7 per cent from 37 per cent, though much of this increase reflects rural unpaid family work or low-productivity self-employment [13, 19]. Yet participation alone does not establish economic justice. Women remain disproportionately concentrated in unpaid work, informal employment, low-paid occupations and work compatible with domestic responsibilities [3]. The 2019 Time Use Survey demonstrated the enormous gender gap in unpaid domestic and caregiving work, while the Economic Survey 2024–25 continued to identify household and childcare responsibilities as major barriers to women's participation in paid employment [5, 6].

The International Labour Organization estimates that 708 million women worldwide were outside the labour force in 2023 because of unpaid care responsibilities. Globally, women continue to undertake a disproportionate share of unpaid care work and face persistent earnings and social-protection disadvantages [9, 10, 26]. The World Bank similarly identifies the care economy as both an obstacle to women's economic participation and an important potential source of employment and economic growth [17].

The central argument of this article is therefore that gender justice and economic justice are not two separate objectives. Gender inequality is produced through economic institutions, while economic inequality is simultaneously gendered. Consequently, an economy cannot be considered economically just if it systematically depends upon the under-recognised, under-remunerated or unpaid labour of women. Equally, gender justice cannot be achieved only through formal equality before law or increased representation if women continue to lack substantive control over income, property, time, employment and economic decision-making.

The article advances a related proposition: the objective of policy should not simply be to integrate women into a pre-existing economy, but to transform the economy so that its institutions of production and social reproduction become gender-just.

The discussion proceeds through five interconnected questions. First, how should the relationship between gender and economic justice be conceptualised? Second, in what ways does the organisation of paid and unpaid labour reproduce gender inequality? Third, what does Indian evidence reveal about women's economic position? Fourth, what can be learned from major policy interventions such as MGNREGA, self-help groups and gender-responsive budgeting? Finally, what would a gender-just economy require beyond conventional measures of women's economic empowerment?

Gender, Economy and the Problem of Justice

The intersection of gender and economy reveals structural inequalities that directly challenge contemporary notions of social justice. Historically, economic systems have disproportionately undervalued women's labour, creating a wealth gap that is not merely a financial issue, but a serious moral failure. Addressing this disparity requires a complete re-evaluation of how society measures merit, work, and institutional fairness.

1. Beyond the idea of a gender-neutral economy

Mainstream economic reasoning has often represented individuals as autonomous agents who enter markets to exchange labour, goods and services. Such abstraction can be analytically useful, but it obscures the social institutions within which economic agency is produced. Individuals enter markets with unequal access to education, property, mobility, social networks, time and decision-making power. These inequalities are strongly structured by gender, class, caste, ethnicity, marital status and location.

The household is especially important. Conventional economic analysis historically treated the household largely as a unit of consumption, while feminist economics demonstrated that it is also a site of production, allocation, bargaining and power [2, 8]. Household decisions concerning who works for wages, who performs domestic labour, whose career takes priority, who controls income and who receives education are not simply individual choices. They are embedded in social norms and unequal bargaining power.

Amartya Sen's analysis of gender inequality is important in this regard because it rejects an exclusively resource-based conception of justice. Equality of resources does not automatically produce equality of freedom. What matters is people's substantive capability to live lives they have reason to value [14, 25]. Gender norms may therefore restrict women's capabilities even where formal rights and nominal access to resources are equal.

Nancy Fraser's distinction among redistribution, recognition and representation provides another useful framework. Redistribution addresses economic inequalities; recognition concerns status hierarchies and cultural devaluation; representation concerns participation in decision-making and political voice [4, 20]. Gender-economic justice requires all three. Redistribution without recognition may leave women's care labour devalued. Recognition without redistribution may celebrate women's contribution without changing material inequalities. Representation without either may increase participation in decision-making while leaving underlying economic structures intact [21, 22].

2. Social reproduction and the hidden foundation of the economy

The concept of social reproduction provides a particularly productive bridge between gender and economic justice. Social reproduction encompasses the activities necessary for maintaining human beings and reproducing labour power, including childrearing, cooking, cleaning, caring for dependent persons, maintaining households and sustaining communities [8, 12].

Much of this labour is unpaid. Yet unpaid does not mean economically irrelevant. A factory worker can report for work because someone has prepared food, cared for children, cleaned the household and maintained the conditions necessary for everyday life. These activities contribute indirectly but fundamentally to the functioning of the formal economy. Feminist political economy therefore challenges the artificial separation between "productive" economic activity and "reproductive" domestic activity [8, 12].

This is particularly important for understanding women's labour. If economic productivity is measured exclusively through market transactions, a substantial proportion of women's socially necessary labour disappears statistically and politically. The resulting invisibility can then become a justification for further exclusion from economic resources.

UN Women argues that unpaid care work should be understood through the principle of recognising, reducing and redistributing care responsibilities. Such an approach moves beyond simply valuing women's contribution symbolically towards restructuring the organisation of care itself [15, 16, 28].

The issue can therefore be represented as follows:

Gender norms → unequal care responsibilities → unequal time availability → unequal labour-market participation → unequal income and social protection → unequal bargaining power → reproduction of gender norms.

This is a circular process rather than a linear one. Economic inequality reinforces the household dependence that sustains gender inequality, while gender norms simultaneously reproduce economic inequality.

The Gendered Organisation of Labour in India: Evidence and Patterns

Evaluating the evidence and patterns of India's labour market exposes a rigid, gendered division of work that resists rapid economic modernization. Despite legislative mandates and economic growth, entrenched occupational segregation continues to relegate female workers to the periphery of the formal economy.

1. Women's labour-force participation: Participation is not the same as justice

India's recent labour-market trends require careful interpretation. Official data indicate that women's labour-force participation has increased, particularly in rural areas. This is a significant development and should not be understated. However, the meaning of increased participation depends upon the type of employment women enter, the remuneration they receive, the degree of autonomy they possess and the extent to which paid work is combined with unpaid domestic responsibilities.

The latest available PLFS evidence shows continuing substantial gender differences in labour-force participation. According to PLFS data, female labour-force participation in urban India under the current weekly status increased only marginally from 25.5 per cent in 2023 to 25.8 per cent in 2024, while the national labour-market indicators continued to exhibit considerable gender disparities [12]. The urban female labour force participation rate stagnates at a dismal 25 per cent, trailing far behind the 38.2 per cent seen in rural areas [14]. World Bank data similarly show that India's female-to-male labour-force participation ratio remains substantially below parity [18].

Table 1: Female Labour Force Participation in India: Selected Indicators

Indicator	Value	Year/Source
National LFPR (women, 2025 estimate)	30.7%	ILO/Goldman Sachs analysis [1]
Rural female LFPR (PLFS 2023-24)	41.7%	MoSPI/PLFS [13]
Urban female LFPR (PLFS 2023-24)	25.8%	MoSPI/PLFS [13]
Urban female LFPR (current weekly status, 2024)	25.8%	MoSPI PLFS 2024 [12]
Women in salaried employment (million-plus cities)	65%	NSO city survey 2025 [3]
Salaried women monthly earnings (million-plus cities)	₹23,700	NSO city survey 2025 [3]
Salaried men monthly earnings (million-plus cities)	₹30,700	NSO city survey 2025 [3]
Gender wage gap (salaried, million-plus cities)	23%	NSO city survey 2025 [3]

Source: Compiled from PLFS, NSO city survey, and ILO data

The question, therefore, is not simply whether women are entering the labour market. It is what kind of labour market they are entering and under what conditions.

Rural women's employment may frequently be characterised by informality, agricultural labour, self-employment, unpaid assistance in family enterprises and other forms of work offering flexibility but limited security. The Economic Survey 2024–25 reports that among married women surveyed in relatively less financially privileged rural households, household and childcare responsibilities were cited as significant barriers to paid work. It also observes that unpaid agricultural assistance remains an important component of women's labour [6].

This suggests that increased female labour-force participation should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of the disappearance of gender inequality. In some circumstances, it may represent economic necessity rather than enhanced autonomy. Women's employment can coexist with a "double burden": participation in paid work without a corresponding redistribution of domestic responsibilities.

2. The unpaid care economy: Time Poverty and Economic Invisibility

The strongest evidence for the gendered character of India's economy comes from time-use data.

India's Time Use Survey 2019 demonstrated substantial gender differences in unpaid domestic and caregiving activities. Women aged 15 to 59 devote 305 minutes daily to unpaid domestic chores, in comparison to men's 88 minutes [8]. The Economic Survey 2023–24 reports that working-age women spend approximately 5.6 hours per day on unpaid work compared with about 30 minutes for men. Even women engaged in paid employment spend substantially more time on unpaid care work than men in paid employment [5].

More recent data from the 2024 Time Use Survey paints an even starker picture: women still supply far greater hours of unpaid work and only modest gains in paid working time, from 56 minutes in 2019 to 62 minutes in 2024. In contrast, men devoted close to four times as much time as women on paid activities (251 minutes vs. 62 minutes in 2024), clearly showing the time trade-off that women endure through their caregiving duties [8].

Table 2: Gender Distribution of Time Use in India

Activity Category	Women (minutes/day)	Men (minutes/day)	Gender Gap
Unpaid domestic work (2019 TUS, age 15-59)	305	88	217 min
Unpaid care work (Economic Survey 2023-24)	336	30	306 min
Paid activities (2024 TUS)	62	251	189 min
Unpaid care time share	84%	16%	—
Unpaid domestic work (2024 TUS)	299	98	201 min

Source: Time Use Survey 2019, 2024; Economic Survey 2023-24; Hindustan Times analysis [5, 8]

The significance of this disparity extends beyond the household.

Time is an economic resource. A person who spends several hours each day on unpaid care has less discretionary time available for paid employment, education, political participation, rest, entrepreneurship and skill development. The gender distribution of time therefore influences the distribution of economic opportunity.

The issue can be conceptualised as time poverty. Income poverty is normally measured through insufficient monetary resources. Time poverty refers to insufficient discretionary time because of excessive unpaid work or competing responsibilities. Women can therefore experience both income poverty and time poverty, with each reinforcing the other.

A 2025 National Statistics Office survey covering labour market indicators across 46 Indian cities with populations exceeding one million found that 69 per cent of women who were outside the labour force cited childcare and household chores as the primary reason. By comparison, only 1 per cent of men reported the same reason for not participating in the labour market [3]. The burden of unpaid care work varied significantly across cities: Howrah recorded the highest share at 83 per cent, followed by Surat (81 per cent), Pimpri Chinchwad and Bhopal (78 per cent each), while Coimbatore recorded the lowest at 38 per cent [3].

The Indian case illustrates why conventional labour-force statistics can be misleading if detached from time-use evidence. A woman may be classified as outside the labour force while performing substantial economically necessary work within the household. The problem is not simply statistical undercounting. It is a problem of social valuation.

The imputed economic value of women's unpaid domestic and care work in India stands between 15 per cent and 17 per cent of GDP, figures comparable to, and even exceeding, key sectors like manufacturing or trade [8]. Yet public spending on care infrastructure in India scrapes below 1 per cent of GDP [8].

3. The motherhood penalty and occupational segregation

The gendered distribution of care becomes especially visible around marriage and motherhood.

The transition to motherhood can interrupt women's employment, reduce working hours, constrain occupational choices and affect earnings over the life course. The Economic Survey identifies the "motherhood penalty" as a significant source of professional inequality, with women tending to move towards occupations and employment arrangements compatible with childcare responsibilities [5].

This is not simply an individual decision. It reflects the interaction between workplace organisation and household gender norms.

When workplaces assume a worker without substantial care responsibilities, while households assume that women will absorb care responsibilities, women encounter a structural disadvantage. Flexible employment can partially mitigate this problem, but flexibility without adequate pay, social protection and career progression may relocate the costs of care onto women.

Occupational segregation remains a central component of economic inequality. Women account for 94.2 per cent of nursing and midwifery associate professionals and 85 per cent of childcare and personal care workers, while representing only 6.1 per cent of engineering professionals [13]. This segregation reflects multiple forces: education pipelines, social norms and caregiving expectations that steer women toward roles seen as 'family compatible', narrowing opportunities and shaping earnings and mobility.

The gender pay gap is not adequately explained by direct discrimination alone. In a study of over 150,000 Indian job advertisements, approximately 8 per cent explicitly stated a gender preference in job descriptions. Some job portals allow employers to specify gender preferences in job ads. In a review of 34 major job portals in India, nearly 40 per cent allow employers to specify gender preferences. Explicit preferences and gendered wording, such as emphasis on inflexible hours or frequent travel, shape who applies and at what wage, accounting for nearly 17 per cent of the gender wage gap at the application stage [13].

From Economic Empowerment to Economic Agency

The language of "women's economic empowerment" has become central to contemporary development policy. It is an important development because it recognises women's economic agency. Nevertheless, empowerment should not be reduced to employment, entrepreneurship or access to credit.

Economic agency includes at least four dimensions:

1. **Access:** access to employment, credit, land, property, education, technology and markets.
2. **Control:** control over income, assets, time and economic decisions.
3. **Voice:** participation in household, community, institutional and policy decisions.
4. **Security:** protection against economic shocks, exploitation, violence and loss of livelihood.

A woman may receive a microcredit loan but lack control over how the money is used. She may own a bank account but have little authority over household expenditure. She may participate in paid work while continuing to perform almost all domestic labour. She may become an entrepreneur while operating within an insecure informal market.

Research on financial diaries conducted in Tamil Nadu demonstrates that financial work, contracting credits, managing and repaying debts, planning, making donations and lending money, constitutes an extension of domestic work largely undertaken by women.

This financial work involves routine, time-consuming tasks and skills, yet remains largely unrecognised as economic activity [7].

Thus, access alone is insufficient.

Economic justice requires the movement from access to substantive agency.

Sen's capability approach is useful here because it directs attention towards the actual freedom people possess to convert resources into valued ways of living [14]. From this perspective, economic empowerment should be assessed through capabilities rather than through nominal programme participation alone.

Policy and Institutional Responses in India

An analytical review of India's legislative and institutional frameworks reveals a persistent gap between progressive policy formulation and its effective implementation on the ground.

1. MGNREGA and women's economic agency

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme represents an important example of a public programme with significant implications for gender and economic justice.

MGNREGA provides a statutory framework for rural employment and has incorporated provisions relevant to women's participation, including equal wage provisions and institutional measures intended to facilitate women's access to employment. According to ministry data, more than half of MGNREGA beneficiaries are women, with over 6.7 crore workers from about 5 crore families provided employment under the scheme [15].

Its significance extends beyond income. Independent access to paid employment can strengthen women's bargaining position within households. The receipt of wages in women's own hands can enhance control over resources and reduce complete economic dependence.

However, MGNREGA should not be romanticised. Women's participation is affected by local labour markets, care responsibilities, mobility, implementation quality and the availability of work near households. Moreover, public employment cannot substitute for a comprehensive care infrastructure.

The programme demonstrates an important principle: public employment policy can function as gender policy when it is designed around women's actual constraints.

2. Self-help groups and collective economic agency

The expansion of women's self-help groups, particularly through the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihood Mission (DAY-NRLM), represents another significant development.

As of January 2025, about 10.05 crore women households have been mobilised into 90.90 lakh Self Help Groups (SHGs) under DAY-NRLM [5]. The mission seeks to bring at least one-woman member from each rural poor household into the fold of SHGs and support them to take up economic activities. Over 1.15 crore women SHG members have become 'Lakhpati Didis' with annual household income of over ₹1 lakh [15].

Self-help groups can provide women with access to savings, credit, financial literacy, collective organisation and livelihood opportunities. More importantly, collective organisation can alter the social basis of economic agency. A woman who individually possesses limited bargaining power may acquire greater institutional voice through collective action.

An impact evaluation study of DAY-NRLM conducted during 2019-20 by the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation with support from the World Bank showed an increase in income of women enrolled with SHGs by 19 per cent over the base amount, a decline in share of informal loans by 20 per cent, and an increase in savings by 28 per cent [15, 27].

Yet microfinance and collective entrepreneurship must not be treated as universal solutions. Credit can facilitate economic agency, but it can also generate indebtedness if livelihood opportunities and market conditions are inadequate. Similarly, entrepreneurship programmes can shift responsibility for structural unemployment onto individual women.

The transformative question is therefore not just whether women become entrepreneurs, but whether they gain sustainable control over productive resources and markets.

3. Gender-responsive budgeting

Gender-responsive budgeting is one of the most important institutional mechanisms through which economic policy can be connected with gender justice.

The underlying principle is straightforward: public expenditure is not gender-neutral. Infrastructure, transport, water, sanitation, employment, health, education, energy and social protection can have different consequences for women and men. Gender-responsive budgeting therefore seeks to examine how public resources affect different genders and to allocate resources accordingly [16].

India's Gender Budget Statement has expanded significantly in recent years. For 2026–27, the Union Government reported an allocation of approximately ₹5.01 lakh crore in gender-budget allocations, equivalent to 9.37 per cent of the total Union Budget, up from 8.86 per cent in 2025–26. This marks an 11.36 per cent increase over the GBS allocation of ₹4.49 lakh crore in FY 2025–26 [9, 33]. The 2026–27 Gender Budget Statement includes allocations from 53 ministries/departments and five Union Territories.

The scale is significant, but expenditure volume alone cannot establish gender justice.

Gender budgeting should be assessed through at least four criteria:

First, allocation: How much is allocated?

Second, incidence: Who actually benefits?

Third, implementation: Are allocated resources spent effectively?

Fourth, transformation: Do expenditures change the structural conditions producing gender inequality?

This distinction is crucial because a programme can be categorised within a gender budget without necessarily transforming the gender relations that generate inequality.

Despite progress at the Union and state levels, gender-responsive budgeting remains largely absent at the city level. Major spending that matters most for women's lived experiences in cities, including transport, sanitation, lighting, markets, footpaths and other everyday urban services, often escapes meaningful gender analysis. As of

2025–26, while 49 Union ministries and departments report gender budget allocations and 14 state governments have adopted GRB frameworks, only a few municipalities such as Mumbai and Pune have implemented gender-sensitive budgeting among India's 266 municipal corporations and 2,018 municipalities [4, 14].

4. The care economy as public economic infrastructure

Perhaps the most important policy frontier is the care economy.

Care is often treated as a private family responsibility. Yet this assumption produces substantial economic costs. When families cannot access affordable childcare, eldercare or disability care, women frequently compensate through unpaid labour.

Investment in care can therefore have a double dividend.

First, it creates employment in childcare, eldercare, health and related sectors.

Second, it releases women's time for education, paid employment, entrepreneurship and political participation.

The World Bank estimates that investment in care services could generate substantial employment globally while simultaneously supporting women's economic participation [17]. The ILO similarly argues that the care economy must be understood as an economic sector rather than purely a welfare concern [10].

For India, this means that childcare centres, anganwadi services, eldercare, disability care, maternity support, paid parental leave, safe public transport, water infrastructure and sanitation should not be treated as isolated welfare measures. They constitute economic infrastructure for gender equality.

The Union Budget 2026–27 recognises this principle through the proposal to train 1.5 lakh multi-skilled caregivers across geriatric, child and allied care services, which will enhance service delivery while creating new avenues of dignified employment, particularly for women [9, 34].

From Recognition to Redistribution: The Four Dimensions of Gender-Economic Justice

The preceding analysis suggests a four-dimensional framework.

1. Recognition

Women's unpaid domestic and care labour must be recognised as economically and socially necessary work.

Recognition does not necessarily mean converting every household activity into a wage. It means incorporating unpaid work into economic analysis, time-use measurement and policy design.

The 2019 and 2024 Time Use Surveys represent important steps because they make visible activities that conventional labour statistics often marginalise [11, 8]. Recent scholarship on unconditional cash transfers to women in India similarly theorises these transfers as providing economic recognition of women's unpaid domestic and care work [2].

2. Redistribution

Recognition without redistribution can become symbolic.

The distribution of income, property, employment, time and care responsibilities must change. Redistribution therefore includes:

- Redistribution of unpaid care between women and men;
- Redistribution of resources through public expenditure;
- Redistribution of productive assets;
- Redistribution of economic opportunities across regions and social groups;
- Redistribution of risks through social protection.

The goal is not simply to help women adapt to existing inequality but to alter the distribution of economic resources and responsibilities [31].

3. Representation

Economic decisions are made within households, firms, markets, cooperatives, financial institutions, trade unions and governments.

Women require meaningful representation within these institutions.

Representation matters because those who participate in decision-making are more likely to influence the allocation of resources and the design of institutions.

The Constitution (74th Amendment) Act, 1992, reserves 33 per cent of seats in urban local bodies for women, while at least 20 states have increased this reservation to 50 per cent. The Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, provides for the reservation of approximately one-third of directly elected seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for women [1]. Yet numerical representation has not consistently translated into a coordinated political voice on economic issues [1].

Gender justice therefore requires women's participation not only as beneficiaries of development programmes but also as economic decision-makers.

4. Rights

Finally, economic justice must be grounded in rights.

Women's economic security should not depend exclusively on welfare schemes or household benevolence. Rights concerning equal remuneration, property, inheritance, maternity, social protection, safe working conditions and freedom from discrimination provide a stronger institutional basis for economic citizenship.

This fourfold framework can be expressed as:

Recognition + Redistribution + Representation + Rights = Gender-Economic Justice

The four dimensions are mutually reinforcing. Recognition makes hidden labour visible; redistribution changes material inequalities; representation changes decision-making power; and rights institutionalise gains.

The Economy Must Also Become Gender-Just

The phrase "women's economic empowerment" contains a subtle limitation. It can imply that women are the problem to be empowered, while the economy itself remains unquestioned.

A more transformative perspective asks a different question: What would an economy look like if it were designed around gender justice from the beginning?

Such an economy would differ from the conventional model in several respects.

First, it would recognise care as a fundamental economic activity.

Second, it would treat time as a resource relevant to economic justice.

Third, it would value employment quality rather than employment participation alone.
Fourth, it would recognise social reproduction as a collective responsibility rather than an essentially private female responsibility.
Fifth, it would connect economic policy with social policy rather than treating them as separate domains.
Sixth, it would evaluate economic growth partly according to its distributive and social consequences.
This last point is particularly important. GDP growth does not automatically imply gender justice. An economy may grow while women continue to experience unequal wages, insecure employment, unpaid care burdens and limited property ownership.

The question therefore shifts from
How can women participate more effectively in the economy?
To:
How can the economy be reorganised so that participation, remuneration, care and decision-making are gender-equitable?
This is a conceptual shift from women's adaptation to the economy towards transformation of the economy.
IMF research estimates that closing the gender gap in labour force participation could raise India's GDP by up to 27 per cent [13]. A 2018 McKinsey Global Institute study estimated that faster progress towards gender equality could have raised India's annual GDP in 2025 by US$770 billion relative to a business-as-usual trajectory [1, 35]. Yet the case for transformation rests not only on economic efficiency but on principles of justice.

Selected Indian Cases: What Can Be Learned?
Three broad policy experiences illustrate the distinction.

Case 1: Public employment
MGNREGA demonstrates that public employment can create income opportunities while strengthening women's bargaining power. Its limitation is that employment provision alone cannot eliminate care constraints.

Lesson: employment policy must be connected with care infrastructure.

Case 2: Women's collectives
DAY-NRLM and self-help groups demonstrate the importance of collective economic agency. Access to credit, savings, skills and collective organisation can enhance women's capabilities. In rural Madhya Pradesh, women SHG members have emerged as Community Resource Persons, Krishi Sahyogis (Agriculture Facilitators), and Gender Master Trainers, reshaping everyday power relations in agriculture and the household [10].

Lesson: financial inclusion becomes transformative when accompanied by collective voice, market access and control over resources.

Case 3: Gender-responsive budgeting
India's expanding Gender Budget demonstrates growing institutional recognition that public finance has gendered consequences. Yet the increase in allocations should be accompanied by stronger outcome measurement and gender-disaggregated monitoring.

Lesson: gender budgeting should move from expenditure classification towards transformative fiscal governance [30].
Taken together, these cases suggest that gender-economic justice requires simultaneous intervention at the levels of labour, household, community and state.

Towards a Gender-Just Economic Policy Framework
A comprehensive policy framework for India should incorporate the following principles.

1. Make care a public economic priority
Affordable and accessible childcare, eldercare and disability care should be treated as economic infrastructure. India's 2024 Time Use Survey shows women still spend 305 minutes daily on unpaid domestic chores compared with men's 88 minutes [8]. Without care infrastructure, this gap will persist.

2. Recognise time poverty
Time-use indicators should be incorporated into development planning alongside income and employment indicators.

3. Improve the quality of women's employment
Policy should focus on wages, social protection, occupational safety, maternity protection, career progression and formalisation rather than simply increasing participation rates. In million-plus cities, women in salaried employment earn an average monthly income of ₹23,700 compared with ₹30,700 for men, which is a wage gap of nearly 23 per cent [3].

4. Strengthen women's control over assets
Land, housing, inheritance, productive assets, credit and digital financial resources are central to long-term economic agency. Under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin, all new houses built over the last two years have been sanctioned in the name of women beneficiaries or in joint ownership, with around 74 per cent of sanctioned houses owned by women solely or jointly [15].

5. Reorganise care within households
Public policy should encourage men's participation in caregiving rather than simply enabling women to combine paid employment with unchanged domestic responsibilities. Only 1 per cent of men outside the labour force cite childcare and household responsibilities as the primary reason, compared with 69 per cent of women [3].

6. Strengthen gender-responsive budgeting
Gender budgeting should include outcome indicators, beneficiary incidence analysis and independent evaluation rather than functioning primarily as an accounting classification. Cities need to institutionalise ex-ante gender budgeting by integrating women's priorities into budgets before they are approved [14].

7. Incorporate intersectionality
Gender programmes should account for differences based on class, caste, rurality, disability, age, marital status and other dimensions of social inequality.

8. Strengthen women's collective voice

Self-help groups, worker organisations, cooperatives, unions and community institutions can provide forms of collective bargaining power that individualised empowerment programmes cannot generate.

9. Revalue care occupations

Care workers, domestic workers, anganwadi workers, health workers and other predominantly female workers should receive adequate remuneration, social protection and occupational recognition.

10. Develop gender-sensitive economic indicators

Economic evaluation should incorporate:

- Female labour-force participation;
- Employment quality;
- Gender pay gaps;
- Ownership of assets;
- Control over income;
- Unpaid care hours;
- Time poverty;
- Social-protection coverage;
- Access to childcare;
- Women's participation in economic decision-making.

Such indicators would provide a more substantive measure of economic justice than GDP growth or employment rates alone.

Conclusion

Gender justice and economic justice are inseparable because gender relations are embedded within the organisation of economic life. The economy is not simply a neutral arena in which pre-existing gender inequalities are expressed. It actively reproduces those inequalities through the distribution of paid and unpaid labour, access to assets, occupational structures, wages, social protection and decision-making power.

India's recent experience demonstrates both progress and limitations. Women's labour-force participation has increased, women's collectives have expanded, financial inclusion has improved, and gender-responsive budgeting has acquired substantial institutional visibility. Yet these developments coexist with a persistent gendered division of unpaid care work, occupational segregation, informal employment, unequal economic security and unequal control over time and resources.

The evidence on unpaid care is especially decisive. With women shouldering 84 per cent of unpaid care time in India, valued at 15–17 per cent of GDP while public spending on care infrastructure scrapes below 1 per cent, the economy's dependence on unrecognised female labour is unmistakable. If women continue to perform a disproportionate share of the labour necessary to reproduce households and communities, their apparent economic "inactivity" cannot be interpreted simply as individual choice. It reflects the organisation of social reproduction. Similarly, if women enter paid employment without redistribution of unpaid work, labour-market participation may produce a double burden rather than genuine empowerment.

Economic justice must therefore move beyond income and employment towards a broader concern with capabilities, time, care, assets, rights and voice.

The article's central proposition can consequently be stated in simple terms:

An economy is not gender-just simply because women are allowed to enter it. It becomes gender-just when the organisation of production, reproduction, distribution and decision-making no longer systematically places women at an economic disadvantage.

This requires a movement from a model of "empowering women within the economy" to one of "transforming the economy through gender justice."

The future of gender-economic policy in India should consequently be organised around four principles: recognise unpaid work, redistribute care and resources, represent women in economic decision-making, and secure economic rights. Such a framework would bring feminist economics, social policy and economic development into a common analytical space.

Gender justice is therefore not an additional objective to be attached to economic development after the fact. It is a criterion by which economic development itself should be evaluated.

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