Women at Work: South Asia Case Compendium on Workforce Participation

Lessons from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka

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Executive Summary

Women's workforce participation in South Asia remains among the lowest globally, averaging just 24%. This compendium explores six successful interventions from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka that have expanded economic opportunities for women while challenging entrenched gender norms.

The case studies span diverse sectors—from garment manufacturing and dairy cooperatives to digital platforms and informal labor unions. Each model demonstrates how integrated approaches combining skills development, collective organization, market access, and social support can catalyze both economic empowerment and social transformation.

Key insights include:

- Collective action (e.g., SEWA, Kudumbashree) enhances bargaining power and sustainability.
- Skills + market linkages ensure that training translates into income.
- Norm change and agency are mutually reinforcing—economic participation fosters confidence and shifts perceptions.
- Integrated support systems (e.g., childcare, financial services) are essential for sustained engagement.
- Quality of employment matters—safe, dignified work must accompany scale.
- Contextual adaptation is critical—models must align with local norms and policy environments.

By learning from these interventions, stakeholders can design scalable, holistic programs that not only increase women's labor force participation but also promote inclusive growth and gender equity across South Asia.

Introduction

Women's workforce participation in South Asia has seen uneven progress over the past decades. While pockets of success have emerged, the region continues to grapple with deeply entrenched gender norms, limited access to formal employment, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work. According to the World Bank (2022), female labor force participation in South Asia averages around 24%, among the lowest globally, with significant variation across countries and sectors.

This persistent gap is not merely a labor market issue—it reflects broader structural inequalities. Scholars such as Naila Kabeer (1999) have emphasized that economic empowerment is not just about income generation, but about expanding women's choices, agency, and voice. Similarly, Amartya Sen's capabilities approach underscores the importance of enabling individuals—especially women—to lead lives they value, through access to education, health, and meaningful work.

Recent literature also highlights the economic cost of gender inequality. A McKinsey Global Institute report (2015) estimated that advancing gender parity in India alone could add $770 billion to its GDP by 2025. Yet, barriers such as informal employment, lack of childcare, mobility restrictions, and digital exclusion continue to limit women's participation in paid work.

Across India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, however, innovative models have emerged that challenge these constraints. From garment factories and dairy cooperatives to IT platforms and community enterprises, women are increasingly stepping into paid and entrepreneurial roles. These interventions demonstrate that when women gain access to skills, income, and leadership opportunities, they not only transform their own lives but also contribute to household resilience and national growth.

This compendium showcases six successful models of women's workforce participation, highlighting interventions that combine skills development, collective action, market linkages, and norm change. By analyzing these cases, we explore the intersection of economic empowerment, social transformation, and policy innovation—offering replicable insights for practitioners, policymakers, and donors seeking to design holistic and scalable programs.
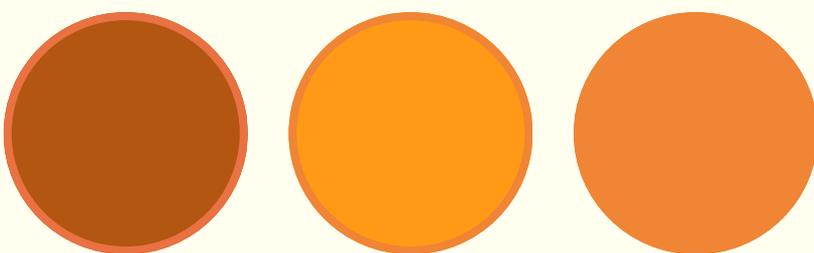
Methodology

This compendium employs a qualitative case study approach to examine successful models of women's workforce participation across South Asia. Six interventions from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka were selected based on their scale, innovation, and documented impact on women's economic empowerment.

Selection Criteria:

- Geographic diversity across South Asia
- Sectoral representation (e.g., agriculture, manufacturing, digital economy)
- Evidence of measurable outcomes (e.g., income generation, agency, norm change)
- Availability of credible documentation and third-party evaluations

Data Sources:

- Secondary literature including academic publications, policy reports, and organizational case studies available online
- Government and multilateral agency datasets (e.g., World Bank, ILO, NSSO)
- Program documentation from implementing organizations (e.g., SEWA, Kudumbashree, Amul)

Methodology ....

Analytical Framework:

The analysis draws on Amartya Sen's capabilities approach and Naila Kabeer's empowerment framework to assess how each model expands women's choices, agency, and economic resilience. Cross-case synthesis identifies common success factors and challenges, with attention to contextual adaptation and policy implications.

Limitations:

- Reliance on secondary data may limit real-time insights
- Outcomes are context-specific and may not be universally replicable
- Normative shifts are difficult to quantify and require longitudinal tracking

Case Study 1: Bangladesh Garment Sector - Scaling Women's Workforce Participation

Context

Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) industry has grown into the country's largest export sector, employing over 4 million workers. Around 60–65% of them are women, mostly from rural or low-income backgrounds. The industry has been a critical pathway for women's entry into paid work at scale in South Asia.

Intervention/Model

The rapid expansion of RMG factories in the 1980s and 1990s coincided with targeted investments in:

- Rural-to-urban female migration support: Recruiters and social networks enabled women to migrate for jobs.
- Factory employment systems: Although often exploitative, they created structured entry points for first-generation women workers.
- Policy incentives: Export-oriented policies encouraged garment factories to grow, indirectly creating large numbers of jobs for women.

Outcomes

- Increased labor force participation: Women's participation in paid work in Bangladesh rose from less than 8% in the early 1980s to over 36% by 2020 across all sectors however, much of it linked to RMG.
- Household bargaining power: Evidence shows female garment workers contribute substantially to family income, delay child marriage, and invest in siblings'/children's education.
- Norm shifts: The idea of rural women migrating for paid work became socially normalized over time, even in conservative regions.

- Export-led growth: The sector now contributes over 80% of Bangladesh's total exports, demonstrating women's contribution to macroeconomic transformation.

Challenges

- Precarious working conditions: Low wages, long hours, poor safety (e.g., Rana Plaza collapse, 2013).
- Limited upward mobility: Few women advance to supervisory or managerial positions.
- Double burden: Women workers remain responsible for care work at home, leading to "time poverty."
- Vulnerability in crises: COVID-19 showed how quickly female garment workers could be laid off, without social safety nets.

Key Lessons for South Asia

1. Scale is possible: Large-scale female employment can emerge when industrial policy, labor demand, and women's readiness intersect.
2. Norm change is gradual but achievable: The mass entry of women into factories slowly shifted perceptions of women as earners.
3. Quality matters as much as quantity: Simply creating jobs is insufficient; safety, wages, and upward mobility must be built in.
4. Complementary investments needed: Access to childcare, housing, transport, and social protection are critical to sustain women's participation.

Case Study 2: India – SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association)

Context

India's informal sector employs over 90% of women workers, many without social protection or formal recognition. Women in this sector—street vendors, home-based workers, domestic workers—face economic vulnerability, low wages, and minimal bargaining power. SEWA, founded in 1972 in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, emerged to organise and empower these women to achieve economic security, self-reliance, and social dignity. Its success is deeply rooted in Gujarat's socio-political landscape, where a tradition of grassroots activism, responsive governance, and inclusive development created fertile ground for SEWA's growth.

Intervention/Model

SEWA's model combines collective organisation, capacity building, and access to markets and services:

- Unionisation: Women workers are organised into local unions to represent their rights and negotiate with employers and authorities.
- Financial inclusion: Microfinance and cooperative banking services are provided to enable savings, loans, and entrepreneurship.
- Skills training: SEWA runs vocational and enterprise development programmes in textiles, handicrafts, and service sectors.
- Market linkages: Women are connected to local, national, and international markets through cooperative structures and e-commerce platforms.
- Social security: Health, childcare, insurance, and pension schemes are extended through partnerships with government and NGOs.

Outcomes
- Economic empowerment: Thousands of women have moved from precarious, low-income work to stable, income-generating activities or microenterprises.
- Agency and bargaining power: Women report greater decision-making in households and communities.
- Collective voice: SEWA's members have successfully advocated for policies such as recognition of home-based workers and social protection schemes.
- Scalability and replication: SEWA's model has inspired similar unions and cooperatives across India and South Asia.

Challenges
- Sustainability of income: Many women still face low wages and market fluctuations in informal sectors.
- Normative barriers: Women continue to carry the bulk of unpaid care work, limiting time for economic activity.
- Training reach: Skills programmes need continuous updating to meet changing market demands.
- Policy dependence: Access to social protection often relies on government schemes that are inconsistent across regions.

Key Lessons for South Asia
1. Collective organisation works: Empowering informal workers through unions or cooperatives builds bargaining power and social security.
2. Integrated support is essential: Financial services, skills training, market access, and social protection together create sustainable livelihoods.
3. Agency drives impact: Economic empowerment increases women's decision-making and community influence.
4. Replicability is possible but context matters: Local norms, market conditions, and policy frameworks must guide adaptation.

Case Study 3: India – Kudumbashree Mission (Kerala)

Context

Kerala's Kudumbashree Mission, launched in 1998, is one of the world's largest women-led community-based poverty eradication programs. It organizes women into Neighborhood Groups (NHGs) and links them to microenterprises, financial services, and social development programs.

Intervention/Model

- Self-Help Groups (SHGs): Women form NHGs at the local level to manage savings and loans.
- Microenterprise support: Skill training and seed capital are provided for ventures in food processing, handicrafts, agriculture, and services.
- Capacity building: Leadership, financial literacy, and entrepreneurial skills are cultivated.
- Convergence with government programs: Health, sanitation, and social welfare schemes are integrated into SHG activities.

Outcomes

- Economic empowerment: Women-led microenterprises generate sustainable income.
- Social influence: Participants gain confidence, mobility, and community voice.
- Poverty reduction: Household incomes improve and financial resilience increases.
- Replicability: Model has inspired community-based women's programs across India.

Challenges
- Access to high-value markets remains limited for some enterprises.
- Normative restrictions on mobility persist in conservative communities.
- Ongoing mentorship and capacity building are needed to sustain success.

Key Lessons
1. Community-based collective action amplifies women's economic and social impact.
2. Linking microfinance, training, and enterprise creates sustainable livelihoods.
3. Integration with government programs increases reach and social outcomes.

Case Study 4: India – Women's Dairy Cooperatives (Amul/Banas Model)

Context

Women's dairy cooperatives in Gujarat, led by Amul and Banas Dairy, have transformed rural livelihoods. They organize women smallholders into cooperatives to produce and market milk and dairy products.

Intervention/Model

- Cooperative structure: Women own shares and participate in governance.
- Training & skill development: Milk production, hygiene, bookkeeping, and marketing skills.
- Market linkages: Access to local and national milk markets through cooperative networks.
- Financial inclusion: Micro-loans and savings programs to support household and enterprise needs.

Outcomes

- Income generation: Women earn steady income, improving household financial security.
- Agency & empowerment: Participation in cooperatives strengthens decision-making and leadership skills.
- Community impact: Better nutrition and education outcomes in households.
- Scale: Thousands of women participate across Gujarat, replicable in other Indian states.

Challenges

- Seasonal price fluctuations affect income stability.
- Care work responsibilities continue to limit time for cooperative activities.
- Expansion to high-value products requires additional training and infrastructure.

Key Lessons

1. Ownership and governance increase women's agency and sustainability.
2. Market linkages are crucial for enterprise viability.
3. Cooperative models can be scaled while retaining social impact.

Case Study 5: Nepal – Community-Based Cooperatives

Context

In rural Nepal, women face limited employment opportunities and restrictive social norms. Community-based cooperatives (agriculture, handicrafts, and savings-lending) have emerged as pathways to income, skills, and empowerment.

Intervention/Model

- SHG/Cooperative formation: Women form local groups for savings, credit, and collective enterprise.
- Skills training: Agriculture techniques, handicrafts, digital literacy.
- Market facilitation: Local and regional markets accessed through cooperatives.
- Capacity building: Leadership, negotiation, and financial literacy training.

Outcomes

- Increased household income and economic resilience.
- Enhanced social agency, including participation in local decision-making bodies.
- Norms gradually shift: women taking economic roles gain recognition in families and communities.

Challenges

- Geographic isolation limits market access.
- Limited digital infrastructure restricts scale-up.
- Cultural resistance in some regions slows norm change.

Key Lessons

1. Cooperatives provide collective strength and risk sharing.
2. Skills + market access is a powerful combination for sustainable livelihoods.
3. Incremental norm change is possible when economic participation becomes visible.

Case Study 6: Sri Lanka – Women in IT/BPO and Digital Platforms

Context

Sri Lanka's IT/BPO sector has grown rapidly, offering employment opportunities to educated women in urban and semi-urban areas. Digital freelance and platform-based work also allows women to participate in the economy from home. Recent government initiatives, including the Digital Sri Lanka 2030 strategy, aim to bridge infrastructure gaps and promote inclusive digital growth, making these opportunities more accessible to women across regions.

Intervention/Model

- Training & upskilling: ICT, English, and professional skills development programs are offered through public-private partnerships and government schemes.
- Flexible employment: Work-from-home and part-time roles accommodate care responsibilities and mobility constraints.
- Digital platforms: Freelance portals for translation, content creation, and data services provide income-generating opportunities.
- Support networks: Women-focused professional networks offer mentorship, peer support, and career guidance.

Outcomes

- Workforce participation: Increased entry of women into IT/BPO and digital sectors, especially in urban and semi-urban areas.
- Economic independence: Women contribute significantly to household income and financial decision-making.
- Agency: Decision-making, mobility, and confidence improve through digital engagement.
- Skill transfer: Digital skills provide pathways to higher-paying roles and entrepreneurial ventures.

Challenges

·Gender stereotypes in management: Women face barriers to leadership and career progression in tech environments.

·Access to reliable internet and technology: Infrastructure gaps persist in rural areas, though government programs are working to close them.

·Care responsibilities: Unpaid domestic work continues to restrict women's time and career growth.

Key Lessons

1. Flexible and digital work options can overcome traditional mobility barriers.
2. Skills development and mentorship are critical for sustained economic empowerment.
3. Government investment in infrastructure and digital literacy enhances scalability and inclusion.
4. Online platforms enable scalable, replicable models across South Asia.

Cross-Cutting Insights

Analyzing these six models reveals several common success factors and challenges across South Asia:

1. Collective Action Amplifies Impact

- Unions, cooperatives, and SHGs strengthen women's bargaining power, access to markets, and social networks.
- Examples: SEWA, Kudumbashree, and dairy cooperatives show that shared governance and decision-making increase sustainability and agency.

2. Skills + Market Linkages = Sustainable Livelihoods

- Technical, digital, and vocational training paired with access to buyers or platforms ensures that skills translate into income.
- Examples: Sri Lanka IT/BPO women leverage digital skills; Nepal cooperatives combine handicraft skills with local markets.

3. Agency and Norm Change Are Mutually Reinforcing

- Economic participation alone is insufficient; programs that consciously address gender norms see deeper, lasting outcomes.
- Examples: Bangladesh garment sector normalized female migration; Kudumbashree women gained confidence and community voice.

4. Integrated Support Systems Matter

- Women need childcare, transport, financial services, and social protection to maintain participation.
- Examples: SEWA's health and insurance programs; Amul/Banas cooperatives provide financial literacy and credit support.

5. Quality and Safety Cannot Be Ignored

- Employment scale must be paired with decent working conditions, fair wages, and opportunities for growth.
- Examples: Garment sector challenges highlight risks of precarious employment; IT/BPO sectors show benefits of flexible work arrangements.

6. Contextual Adaptation is Key

- Each model reflects local norms, economic structures, and policy environments. Replication requires tailoring interventions to specific community and market realities.

Conclusion

- The six cases illustrate that women's workforce participation is a catalyst for both economic growth and social transformation. Across South Asia, interventions that combine skills, collective organisation, market access, and supportive policies enable women to overcome structural barriers, challenge restrictive norms, and gain economic independence.

- These stories demonstrate that workforce participation is not merely about employment — it's about agency, confidence, and sustainable development. When women earn, decide, and lead, families thrive, communities prosper, and national economies grow.

Way Forward

- Scale Proven Models – Adapt successful interventions like SEWA, Kudumbashree, and cooperative models in other regions while tailoring to local norms and markets.

- Invest in Skills & Market Access – Ensure workforce readiness programs include vocational, digital, and financial literacy skills, alongside linkages to viable markets.

- Address Care & Normative Barriers – Combine economic interventions with strategies to reduce unpaid care work and shift gender norms in households and communities.

- Strengthen Data & Measurement – Track women's participation, income, agency, and norm change outcomes to inform policy and program improvements.

- Promote Policy Convergence – Align government, NGO, and private sector initiatives to create enabling environments for women's sustained workforce engagement.

- By learning from these cases, stakeholders can design holistic, scalable, and sustainable programs that enhance both women's agency and regional economic growth.

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