

MAKING WORK WORK FOR WOMEN

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GPS



EVENT SUMMARY

Hosted by the 21st Century India Center at UC San Diego's School of Global Policy and Strategy and the Good Business Lab, the "Making Work Work for Women" event gathered experts to address India's low female workforce participation. This event provided a platform to explore the barriers limiting women's employment and reimagine job opportunities that better support their needs. Through presentations, panel discussions, and ideation sessions, participants shared emerging insights, identified funding interests, and discussed ways to foster effective partnerships. Together, they aimed to pave the way toward a more inclusive labor market for women in India.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM MAKING WORK WORK FOR WOMEN

Need to address structural barriers to women's employment

Experts emphasized the need to address structural barriers, such as safety concerns, mobility issues, and biases, that limit women's access to jobs. Solutions like coordinating travel, providing safe transportation, and promoting transparency in job postings can enhance women's workforce participation.

Flexible work arrangements are key

Research highlighted the importance of flexible work arrangements, such as home-based work initiatives, to increase women's labor force participation, and to align jobs with household dynamics and safety considerations. Flexible work arrangements can help women balance work with household responsibilities, improve productivity, and reduce reliance on informal loans.

Workplace amenities matter

Supportive workplace amenities, such as mobile communication tools, grievance mechanisms, and flexible salary advances, can improve women's job satisfaction, financial resilience, and productivity. Research emphasized that women value these amenities highly, yet they remain scarce in job descriptions and workplace policies, perpetuating wage disparities, monopsony power, and limited job mobility.

Participatory Research and Action-Oriented Solutions

The panel discussions emphasized the need for participatory research that involves diverse communities and interdisciplinary fields to address labor market gaps. Action-oriented research that bridges theory with real-world needs is essential for driving scalable, impactful change for workers and businesses.

Navigation of On-Ground Realities

Co-design approaches, cultural sensitivity, and addressing broader systemic dynamics when implementing solutions is very important. Researchers must also make research actionable and compelling for businesses and stakeholders to drive meaningful change.



SUMMARIES OF PRESENTATIONS

Session 1: Gender, Recruitment, and Discrimination

In this session, presenters discussed how safety concerns, information gaps, and biases limit women's access to jobs. Rolly Kapoor's study found that coordinating travel for women in urban India increased their job search activity, emphasizing the role of safe mobility. Virginia Minni showed that labor force participation rates shape gender composition within firms, with highly skilled women overrepresented in countries with low female participation. Andelyn Russell highlighted how a lack of amenities on job posts affects whether women apply to jobs, while Colin Sullivan's research on paternalistic discrimination demonstrated that safety assurances can increase female hiring. Together, these insights underscore the importance of addressing mobility, transparency, and safety to enhance women's workforce participation.

Context Setting and Topic Overview

Speaker: Madhukari Mishra, University of California, San Diego

Madhukari Mishra discussed the recent rise in female labor force participation (FLFP) in India, which increased from 23.3% in 2017-2018 to 41.7% in 2023-2024, particularly in rural areas where many women are self-employed in the farm sector. Participation trends appear consistent across regional lines, with the Northeastern states showing especially high FLFP rates. However, participation rates remain limited in urban areas with stagnation in non-farm self-employment and casual labor roles. Misra highlighted that these issues may stem from structural limitations on the demand side or potential misalignments in labor market accounting. Overall, while FLFP has grown, significant challenges remain in broadening employment options for women beyond the rural and agricultural sectors.

Together in Search: Experimental Evidence from Coordinating Travel Among Women Job-Seekers in Urban India

Speaker: Rolly Kapoor, University of California, Santa Cruz

Rolly Kapoor, studied how safety concerns and social norms limit women's physical mobility and therefore their job search efforts in urban India. The research found that when women were matched with others from their neighborhoods and allowed to coordinate travel to job interviews, interview attendance increased by 76-80% and overall job search activities grew. This suggests that expanding women's social networks and facilitating group travel can enhance their access to employment opportunities and job search participation.

Gender Gaps across the Spectrum of Development: Local Talent and Firm Productivity

Speaker: Virginia Minni, University of Chicago Booth School of Business

Virginia Minni's research investigates the impact of gender gaps in labor force participation (LFPR) on firm productivity, particularly in multinational firms across various countries. The study reveals that the gender composition within firms mirrors the country's LFPR, in that firms hire fewer women in countries with low LFPR. In countries with low LFPR, women who do participate are generally more skilled, and are over-represented in the highest rungs of a firm's hierarchy. Gender equality policies may not work as intended if the different distributions of productivity across genders due to positive selection are not considered.

Information Frictions in Job Descriptions

Speaker: Andelyn Russell, Wharton Applied Economics, University of Pennsylvania

Andelyn Russell's research examines the role of missing amenities in job descriptions and their impact on women's job applications in India. Many job descriptions for entry-level white-collar positions in India are sparse, lacking important amenities which are crucial to jobseekers. The study shows that job seekers are more likely to apply to jobs with a fixed work schedule and transportation support, but companies that do offer these amenities do not include the information in their job descriptions. These amenities may be missing from job posts because recruiters assume that jobseekers can infer valued amenities from other job post features, even though applicants value them highly and are more likely to apply to jobs with this information on the post.



Paternalistic Discrimination

Speaker: Colin Sullivan, University of Pittsburgh

Colin Sullivan's research focuses on paternalistic discrimination: the preferential hiring of men to protect women from jobs considered dangerous or harmful. The study conducted in Dhaka, Bangladesh, compares employer hiring decisions for male and female applicants for a night shift job, where transportation was provided at the end of the shift. Results show that when employers were aware that women had a safe way to get home, hiring rates for women increased significantly, suggesting that perceived safety concerns influence hiring decisions. The experiment emphasizes that understanding the barriers to employment, such as paternalistic discrimination, can help shape policy particularly that policies that aim to improve worker safety can dually increase female labor supply and demand.



Session 2: Flexible Work Arrangements

This session focused on how flexible work arrangements impact female labor force participation in India. Lisa Ho's research showed that home-based, flexible jobs in West Bengal are highly effective at drawing women who were out of the labor force into paid work, and that these at-home jobs can act as a stepping stone to less flexible, outside-the-home work. Suhani Jalota found that work-from-home digital jobs in urban India address safety and household constraints, though traditional domestic expectations still limit married women's participation. Anant Nyshadham's study in rural Rajasthan demonstrated that flexible, home-based work boosts job acceptance and productivity, as women balance work with childcare. Lastly, Rashi Sabherwal emphasized that when it comes to jobs for women in low income informal settlements in Jaipur, both men and women value wages and low job-related risk as compared to job flexibility and identity of co-workers. Together, these findings highlight the importance of wages, flexibility, safety, and alignment with household dynamics in promoting women's employment.

Bringing Work Home: Flexible Arrangements as Gateway Jobs for Women in West Bengal

Speaker: Lisa Ho, Yale Economic Growth Center and Macmillan Center

Lisa Ho's research examines the impact of flexible, home-based work arrangements on increasing labor force participation among women in West Bengal. The study shows that these digital gig jobs allow women to balance work with household responsibilities. While the work tends to be slower and of lower quality from home, the flexibility offered acts as a gateway to outside-the-home jobs for women initially out of the labor force. There is evidence that this effect operates through a change in attitudes: job flexibility makes a large difference in the labor supply of women who held traditional pre-intervention attitudes, and the work experience then shapes the gender attitudes of these women and their children to become more supportive of women working for pay.

What Works for Her? How Work-from-Home Digital Jobs Affect Female Labor Force Participation in Urban India

Speaker: Suhani Jalota, Hoover Institution at Stanford University

Suhani Jalota's study explores how work-from-home digital jobs can increase female labor force participation (FLFP) in urban India. By offering flexible, remote work that addresses safety concerns, childcare responsibilities, and housework, the study shows that these jobs

significantly increase women's job uptake. The research also highlights that while higher wages improve job retention, work-from-home opportunities are particularly effective for women who face constraints on leaving the house. A parallel experiment reveals that husbands were more responsive to wages and indifferent to job locations for themselves but over half were opposed to their wives working from home. The findings suggest that though digital gig work can increase women's labor force participation, domesticity constraints may keep married women out of the labor force in India.

Enabling Access to Flexible Jobs by Connecting Rural Indian Women to Global Supply Chains

Speaker: Anant Nyshadham, Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan

Anant Nyshadham's research examines whether offering flexible, home-based work opportunities can increase women's labor force participation in rural India, specifically in the context of the handicraft industry. The study, conducted in Neemrana district in Rajasthan, finds that women working from home are 17% more likely to accept job offers and produce 81-83% more output than those working outside the home. Women in the work-from-home group also report 64% more hours worked than work-from-work women, with the additional time mostly coming from reduced leisure and multitasking with childcare. The results suggest that flexible work arrangements can be highly effective in increasing women's labor force participation, especially when jobs can be done at home, leading to improved productivity and a more sustainable work-life balance.

Women, Work and Wellbeing: Evidence from Urban India

Speaker: Rashi Sabherwal, University of Pennsylvania

Rashi Sabherwal and co-authors explore the significant gap between the low actual participation of women in the labor force in India (24-42%) and stated aspirations for work (91%). The research focuses on the preferences of women in Jaipur, India, and highlights the importance of wages as well as non-wage amenities such as low salary and tenure risk and proximity to home for women's job preferences. They show preliminary evidence that men may be more sensitive to job related risk and social disapproval. The findings suggest that while high-wage jobs are more attractive to women, the risks and informal nature of jobs remain significant deterrents.



Session 3: Amenities and The Workplace Environment

This session explored how workplace amenities and structures can enhance women's job satisfaction, financial resilience, and productivity. Teresa Molina presented a study showing that a mobile communication tool for workers to report grievances, when paired with an incentive program for HR workers responsible for responding to these grievances, led to increased productivity. Garima Sharma's research highlighted that women face wage disparities due to monopsony power and limited job mobility, as they prioritize employers offering amenities like safety and maternity leave. Smit Gade's study demonstrated that flexible salary advances improved financial stability for low-income women, reducing reliance on informal loans. Together, these findings emphasize the role of supportive workplace amenities in improving women's work outcomes.

Call and Response: The Business Impacts of Systems to Improve Worker Voice

Speaker: Teresa Molina, University of Hawai'i at Manoa

This study examines the impact of a tool enabling workers to directly and anonymously communicate with HR through a mobile phone based technology. After about six months, the tool led to reduced turnover and absenteeism and increased salary. When paired with an incentive program aimed at improving HR workers' responsiveness to these grievances, the tool also led to increased productivity, likely due to the increased reporting of grievances related to work culture and factory amenities.

Monopsony and Gender

Speaker: Garima Sharma, Northwestern University

This study explores gender based wage disparities in Brazil that women face due to monopsony power, and limited job mobility. It suggests that women tend to prefer certain employers due to factors like safety, commuting frictions, and maternity leave but have fewer good employers that provide amenities such as maternity leave, and flexibility, which limits their job mobility compared to men. Firms have more monopsony power over women than men because men switch industries much more than women, and women work in fewer industries suggesting that they disproportionately work in certain industries because of the limited availability of industries offering valuable job amenities. Gender amenities not wage gaps drive women to work in the textile industry.

Impacts of a Flexible Salary Advance Product on Women's Financial and Workplace Outcomes

Speaker: Smit Gade, Good Business Lab

The study examines the impact of a flexible salary advance (FSA) product on women's financial resilience, particularly addressing the liquidity constraints faced by low-income workers. Oftentimes, low wage workers are very sensitive to even small changes in budget and face high financial stress. By enabling workers to access up to 50% of their earned wages through a digital platform, the product helped women reduce borrowing from informal sources and decrease financial stress. Results show that women in the treatment group were less likely to reduce their usual monthly expenditures due to shortage of funds compared to the control group but there were no significant reductions in monthly savings by the treatment group. The findings highlight the importance of amenities, including access to earned wages.



SUMMARIES OF PANEL DISCUSSIONS



Unlocking Potential for Women in the Gig Economy

Moderator: Anant Nyshadham, Associate Professor, Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan

Panelists:

- Todd Greene, Vice President and Executive Director of WorkRise, Urban Institute
- Shelly Steward, Chief Research Officer, The Workers Lab
- Karthik Murali, Head of Safety Net Programs, Aikido Labs

The panel highlighted the transformative role of participatory research in reshaping labor markets and how traditional data often excludes younger, racially diverse groups, but inclusive efforts like Workers Lab are addressing this gap. A key message was the need for research to be action-oriented, thus bridging theory with real-world needs. They questioned whether there is truly an evidence gap or if existing research is simply inaccessible and encouraged engaging diverse communities and interdisciplinary fields, such as sociology and social work, to enhance the scope and utility of research and promote actionable outcomes.

Panelists further critiqued oversimplified debates, like wage versus flexibility, and stressed understanding platform workers' health and financial stress. Another critical issue discussed was the uncertainty around gig workers' earnings, which limits their ability to access government-sponsored benefits. Initiatives like WorkRise's Worker Schedule Control program at Ikea, explores the impact of flexible scheduling on economic security and mobility, and show some potential to address this gap. Lastly, national policy reforms, such as improving worker classification standards; collaboration between diverse institutions; and interdisciplinary fields were emphasized to create scalable, impactful change for workers and businesses alike.

Implementation Lessons: How to navigate on-ground realities within firms

Moderator: Lisa Patel, Assistant Director, 21st Century India Center

Good Business Lab Panelists:

- Arvind Patil, Associate Director, Design
- Varun Jaggannath, Associate Director, Field
- Mansi Kabra, Associate Director, Communications

The panel discussion delved into insights from Good Business Lab's on-ground work, spotlighting the transformative impact of prioritizing worker wellbeing. It explored co-design approaches like the Double Diamond framework, emphasizing the integration of anecdotal and data-driven insights to craft solutions rooted in cultural, social, and structural realities. The conversation also addressed the challenges of field research, particularly in factories, highlighting strategies such as gender-sensitive methods and grievance tools to empower women workers while addressing broader systemic dynamics.

A key focus was on translating research into actionable strategies, advocating for ROI-focused narratives, impact-driven stories, and operational insights to engage businesses and stakeholders. The discussion emphasized the importance of making research actionable, highlighting that evidence alone isn't always sufficient for adoption. Researchers must examine "what's the evidence that evidence matters" to understand how findings can be made compelling for not just businesses but stakeholders that influence their decisions like funders and civil society organizations.

The panel argued for balancing self-driven research inquiries with an understanding of the pressing challenges that businesses are already grappling with. By applying a research lens to questions firms find critical, researchers can produce insights that resonate with decision-makers, ensuring research addresses real-world needs and drives meaningful change.



Ideation Session: Anecdotes to insights - Inspiration from the field

Led by: **Arvind Patil, Associate Director, Design, Good Business Lab**

The interactive workshop invited research and development practitioners to explore how personal stories, field observations, and lived experiences can shape impactful research agendas. Using group activities and human-centered design frameworks, participants collaborated to identify research gaps, generate actionable ideas, and address systemic and individual challenges.

Discussions focused on the disconnect between research and real-world issues, the absence of collaborative frameworks for setting priorities, and missed opportunities to address emerging trends. Participants worked together to uncover research opportunities, develop empathetic research designs, and craft actionable, story-driven research questions for future exploration.

21st Century India Center

The 21st Century India Center at the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy seeks to serve as a world-class hub for public engagement, current challenges and opportunities on the most important issues facing India today. The 21st Century India Center is dedicated to making a profound difference in the lives of others through research and community partnerships designed to create actionable solutions to global challenges now and for future generations. Learn more at india.ucsd.edu.

Good Business Lab

Good Business Lab is a global NGO that uses rigorous research and human-centered design to identify and proliferate worker-wellbeing programs across the Global South. GBL's team of over 100 researchers, strategists, designers, developers, and implementers has worked across industries, building evidence that investing in worker wellbeing is a strategic imperative. Learn more at goodbusinesslab.org.

#1: Empathy Mapping

Team: Date:

The aim of this exercise is to collaboratively explore how personal stories, field observations, and lived experiences can inform and shape impactful research agendas. Each participant will take 2 minutes to share a story or observation from their fieldwork, highlighting an unmet need, challenge, or opportunity they've encountered.

WHAT THEY SAY (quotes from the story)

WHAT THEY THINK (assumptions, thoughts)

WHAT THEY FEEL (emotions tied to the situation)

WHAT THEY DO (actions or responses)

#2: Insight Synthesis

Team: Date:

Based on the stories shared during the empathy mapping exercise, identify and group similar experiences or anecdotes. Each group will then analyze the empathy maps to uncover key insights or potential areas for further research.

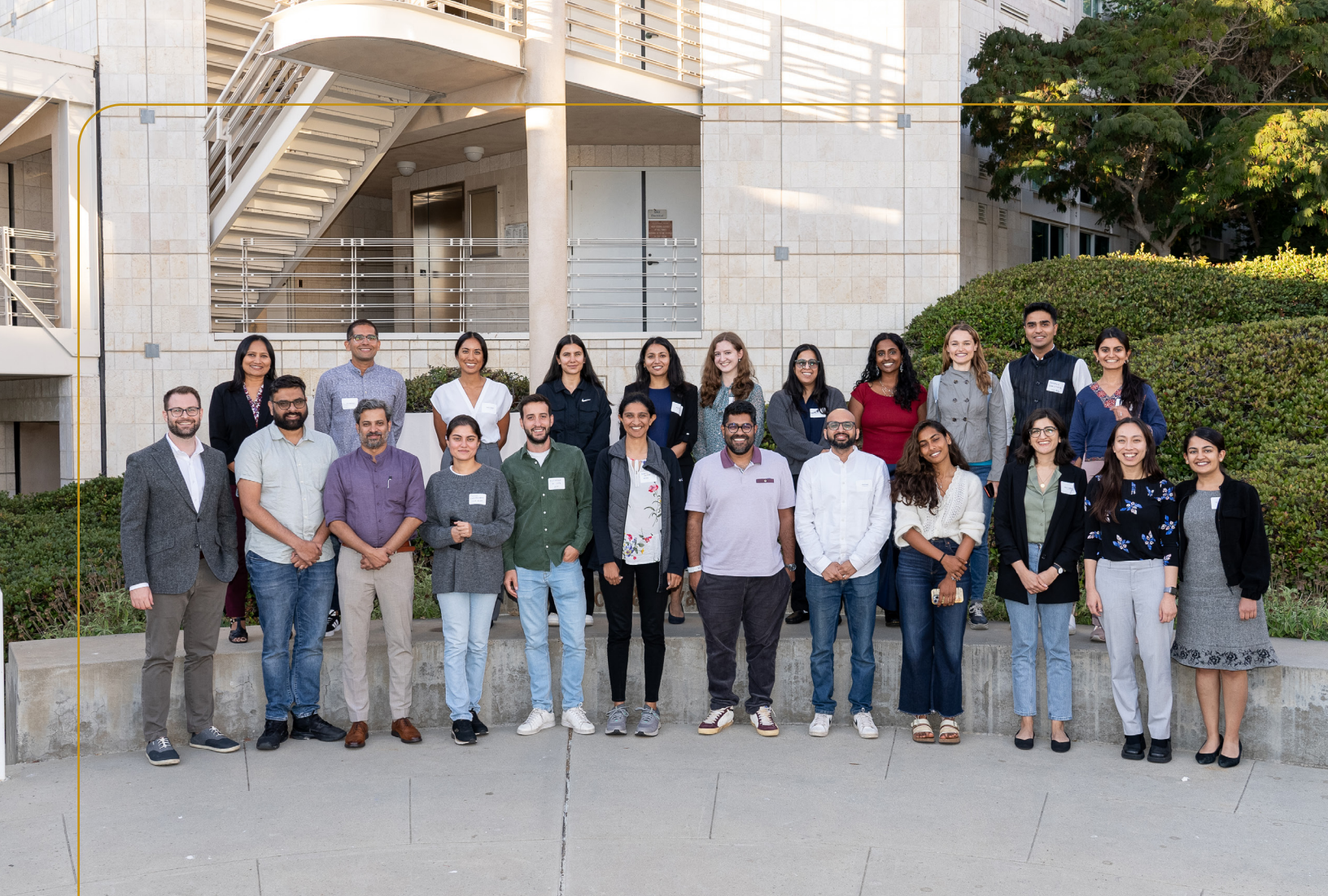
Example: Several researchers have come across rural farmers' difficulty in adopting new agricultural technologies. Although the specific regions may differ, a common theme emerges: farmers' hesitation to adopt these new tools stems from a lack of training and resources.

Key Insights

There is a strong sense of mistrust and fear of failure when it comes to adopting new agricultural technologies. Farmers are concerned that trying new tools or technologies due to previous experiences of poor outcomes.

Potential Areas For Research

Investigate the factors that influence farmers' decision-making processes regarding the adoption of new technologies. Explore ways to build trust and reduce perceived risks, address barriers and knowledge gaps, and provide targeted training and support.



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