

One-Day National Seminar on *Women, Labour and Empowerment in the Context of Globalization* Organised by the Women's Studies Centre, Vidya Bhavana, Visva-Bharati

Date: 24th February 2025 | **Venue:** Vidya Bhavana Conference Hall, Santiniketan

In the age of unprecedented global connectivity, economic restructuring, and digital innovation, the condition of women's labour has emerged as a central concern for policymakers, academics, and grassroots movements alike. The One-Day National Seminar on "Women, Labour and Empowerment in the Context of Globalisation" hosted by the Women's Studies Centre at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, on February 24, 2025, brought together a diverse and dynamic group of thinkers and practitioners. It served as a reflective space to examine the lived experiences of working women in India and beyond, and to engage critically with the paradoxes of empowerment in a neoliberal world.

Globalisation and the Changing Nature of Work

Globalisation is often presented as a tide that lifts all boats, but as multiple speakers at the seminar emphasized, its benefits are deeply uneven, particularly when viewed through the lens of gender. One of the key objectives of the seminar was to interrogate the very notion of "empowerment" that accompanies development and modernisation narratives. In reality, while opportunities have expanded for some women, particularly in urban centres and emerging sectors, many others continue to face exclusion, marginalisation, and exploitation.

Inaugural Session

The seminar commenced with the **Vedic Hymn** as the **Opening Song**, followed by the **Lighting of the Lamp**, symbolizing the start of an academic journey toward enlightenment and awareness.

Key dignitaries in the inaugural session included:

- **Chief Patron:** Prof. Narayan Chandra Mandal, Vice-Chancellor (Offg.), Visva-Bharati
- **Chief Guest:** Prof. Jane Alam, Vice-Chancellor, Murshidabad University
- **Guest of Honour:** Prof. Anjan Chakrabarti, Director, UGC Malviya Mission Teacher Training Centre, North Bengal University
- **Special Guest:** Prof. Nursadh Ali, Principal, Bolpur College
- **Welcome Address:** Prof. Sirajul Islam, Principal, Vidya Bhavana
- **Concept Note Presentation:** Dr. Tanusree Paul, Assistant Professor, Women's Studies Centre
- **Vote of Thanks:** Dr. Jyoti Ratan Ghosh, Vice-Principal, Vidya Bhavana

Highlights:

Dr. Tanusree Paul's **concept note** outlined the rationale of the seminar, touching on the intersections of women's work, globalisation, and empowerment.

The inaugural session was marked by a powerful convergence of academic and administrative voices. Prof. Narayan Chandra Mandal, Vice-Chancellor (Offg.), Visva-Bharati, was the Chief Patron, while Prof. Jane Alam (Vice-Chancellor, Murshidabad University) and Prof. Anjan Chakrabarti (Director, UGC Malviya Mission TTC) offered deep insights into the macro-political and educational frameworks needed to support women's economic participation. The presence of community-engaged educators such as Prof. Nursadh Ali (Bolpur College) and Prof. Sirajul Islam (Dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Visva-Bharati) rooted the event in local realities, reaffirming Santiniketan's commitment to socially relevant education.

Plenary Sessions: Key Presentations and Insights

The plenary session consisted of lectures by five main eminent Professors and Media Personalities.

Women's Employment and the Macroeconomy: An Examination of Recent Trends– Prof. Surajit Majumdar, Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Prof. Majumdar's presentations reflected the complex dynamics of the interplay between work and employment in India with a particular focus on female labour force participation in India. One of the key observations found from the lecture was a significant decline in women's workforce participation rate. He highlighted the nature of self-employment among women, which is often not a result of entrepreneurial aspirations but rather a reflection of economic distress. Many women engage in self-employment due to the lack of stable employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas. Additionally, the rise of the informal sector and contract-based work has further exacerbated job insecurity, making it difficult for women to find sustainable employment. The increasing burden of care work at home, coupled with the lack of supportive institutional mechanisms like childcare facilities and maternity benefits, further contributes to women's economic marginalisation. In conclusion, the lecture provided a critical perspective on the challenges faced by female workers in India.

Prof. Majumdar emphasized the need for policy interventions that focus on skill development, better labour protections, and gender-inclusive employment policies to address the declining trends in female workforce participation. His analysis underscored the importance of rethinking employment strategies to ensure economic empowerment and greater work opportunities for women in India.

Flying High: Navigating Challenges and Opportunities for Women in India's Civil Aviation Industry - Prof. Kaushiki Dasgupta, Vidyasagar University

Prof. Kaushiki Dasgupta focused on the aviation sector, tracing the journey of Indian women pilots while exposing the gendered barriers that persist in this high-tech, high-risk profession. Despite policy reforms, women in aviation continue to encounter bias, workplace insecurity, and an under representation in leadership roles. The session called for a rethinking of inclusivity that extends beyond access to address representation, safety, and equity.

Prof. Dasgupta highlighted policy measures that can facilitate greater female participation. Airlines and regulatory bodies have introduced policies to encourage gender diversity, including scholarships and mentorship programs for women in aviation.

Prof. Dasgupta concluded by emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to gender inclusivity in aviation. She called for greater advocacy, stronger legal frameworks, and more supportive workplace policies to ensure a level playing field for women in this high-potential sector. The discussion sparked engaging dialogue among participants, with many sharing personal experiences and suggestions for fostering gender equity in aviation.

Work, Employment, and Female Labour in India - Dr. Subhanil Chowdhury, St. Xavier's University, Kolkata

The session focused on the structural transformation of the Indian economy, emphasizing employment patterns and female labor participation. Dr. Subhanil Chowdhury provided a critical analysis of economic transitions, gendered employment trends, and income disparities.

The presentation began with a theoretical overview of economic transformation, referencing the Lewis Model of transition from a traditional to a modern economy and Marx's theory of capitalist production. However, India's transformation remains distinct due to the continued dominance of agriculture. High reliance on non-wage work and petty production. Female earnings remain significantly lower than male earnings, indicating persistent wage gaps and economic vulnerability.

The session highlighted critical issues in India's employment structure, particularly for women. While female participation is rising, structural constraints such as low job creation, wage gaps, and the dominance of informal work limit economic empowerment. The need for policy interventions to address gender disparities and promote inclusive growth was emphasized.

How to Understand Women's Household Labour?- Prof. Debarshi Das, IIT-Guwahati

The presentation by Debarshi Das focused on the decline in women's labour force participation in India over recent decades. It aimed to provide a theoretical understanding of this trend using a Marxist framework, particularly about unpaid household labour.

The speaker highlighted the falling rates of women's participation in formal and informal employment sectors. He linked this decline to structural factors, emphasizing the relationship between paid and unpaid labour.

Prof. Debarshi Das provided a thought-provoking analysis of women's labour, emphasizing the need to recognize unpaid household work as a crucial economic factor. His Marxist perspective offered valuable insights into the structural reasons behind declining female workforce participation. The session highlighted the importance of policy interventions to bridge the gap between unpaid and paid labour.

Rise in India's Female Labour Force Participation Rate: Myth or Reality? - Mr. Devadeep Purohit, The Telegraph, Kolkata

Mr. Devadeep Purohit's presentation explored the reported rise in India's Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR), questioning whether this increase reflects real change or is due to altered measurement methods. He highlighted key concerns, including persistent gender norms, economic distress driving women into work, and government efforts promoting self-employment.

Despite the rise, 60% of working-age women remain outside the labour force. Discussions focused on barriers such as wage gaps, care giving burdens, and workplace conditions. While

some experts see policy-driven progress, others fear the trend may reverse with economic stability. The session emphasized the need for deeper research and policy measures to ensure sustained female workforce participation.

Technical Sessions: Case Studies and Field Research

The technical session comprised of all 42 papers presented on a wide range of topics by various scholars, practitioners and students. The sessions were divided under major sub themes -a. Women and Labour Market Outcomes in a globalizing world, b. Women's Labour Right and Social Protection, c. Employment, Social outcomes of women's employment. There were four main technical sessions that took place.

These sessions acted as a bridge between theoretical frameworks and lived realities, offering a nuanced understanding of how empowerment manifests in contexts shaped by tradition, technology, and transformation. The research presented was as diverse in method as it was in scope—ranging from ethnographic fieldwork and interviews to case studies and mixed-method analyses.

One of the most illuminating presentations came from Madhureema Bhowmick, who explored the transformative potential of the *Sabala Mela*—a state-sponsored fair in rural Bengal that provides women artisans with a platform to showcase and sell their traditional crafts. Far from being merely a commercial outlet, the *Sabala Mela* emerged in her study as a space of cultural affirmation and resistance. Women involved in kantha stitching, Pattachitra painting, and handmade jewellery were not only generating income but also preserving their heritage and forming networks of solidarity. Through the act of creation and commerce, these women were actively challenging the marginalisation often imposed on them by caste, class, and gender norms. The fair thus became both a symbol and instrument of feminist empowerment—a place where economic autonomy intersected with cultural agency.

From artisanal markets to online platforms, the theme of digital empowerment was further developed in Apratim Bhattacharya's presentation, which investigated the role of e-commerce in the handicraft sector of West Bengal. His research identified a major paradox: while online platforms like Amazon Karigar and Flipkart Samarth have dramatically expanded market access, most rural women artisans remain excluded from these opportunities due to a persistent digital divide. With only 38% of rural craftswomen able to effectively use digital tools, the promise of global markets often slips through their fingers. Bhattacharya's study highlighted the urgent need for interventions in digital literacy, mobile infrastructure, and financial education to ensure that the benefits of digital transformation are equitably shared.

A similar concern about digital disparities was raised by Dr. Sudeshna Dutta, whose work focused on women entrepreneurs participating in India's Common Service Centre (CSC) Scheme. Though designed to bring digital services to rural areas, CSCs often reflect and reproduce gendered inequalities. Many women running these centres do so with support—or in the shadow—of their male family members. Interviews revealed that women often avoid participating in digital meetings, delegating these tasks to their husbands. Network instability and security concerns further hindered their ability to engage fully. Dr. Dutta argued that while CSCs hold significant potential for empowering rural women, they must be redesigned with

gender-sensitive training, stronger institutional support, and a greater focus on women's autonomy in the digital economy.

From digital workspaces to the rapidly expanding gig economy, the session by Debanjan Chakraborty and Anushka Bag offered a critical analysis of platforms like Uber, Swiggy, and Zomato. These digital labour platforms have been heralded as flexible and inclusive employment avenues, particularly for women. However, the researchers showed how beneath the veneer of freedom lies a stark reality of precarity. Women workers in the gig economy face algorithmic control, lack of social security, low and inconsistent wages, and safety concerns—factors that compound traditional gender roles rather than dismantle them. The presentation concluded with a warning: unless accompanied by systemic labour protections, the gigeconomy risks becoming a high-tech mirage of empowerment that deepens gendered labour inequalities.

Beyond the economic and technological, the seminar also engaged with ecological and health-related dimensions of women's labour. A compelling case study from South 24 Parganas, presented during the session, explored the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on the health of women in the pisciculture sector. Repeated cyclonic storms, rising salinity, and deteriorating water quality have had devastating effects—not only on local livelihoods but also on women's reproductive and menstrual health. These challenges are compounded by the near-total absence of accessible, gender-sensitive healthcare infrastructure. The study brought to light the often-overlooked ways in which environmental injustice intersects with gender and class, calling for the integration of health rights into climate resilience strategies.

The role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in empowering women also featured prominently in the technical sessions. A field study from Poshla village revealed that while SHGs have successfully increased access to loans and community support, financial independence remains an elusive goal. Most women continue to prioritise household expenditures and children's education over personal financial growth. The findings suggest that empowerment is a process, not a product—a journey shaped by social conditioning, familial roles, and local economies. For SHGs to become true agents of change, they must move beyond microcredit to offer skill development, leadership training, and political awareness.

Finally, the session led by Arpita Hazra examined the complex consequences of male out-migration in the Purba Bardhaman district. As men migrate to cities for work, women are increasingly taking on roles traditionally denied to them—managing finances, leading households, and participating in local decision-making. While this shift has undeniably expanded women's spheres of influence, it also imposes a double burden of economic responsibility and domestic care. Hazra's research showed that empowerment is not without cost, and that the social recognition of women's labour continues to lag behind their actual contributions. Her conclusion called for community-based support systems and gender-sensitive rural development policies to ensure that women's expanding roles are met with corresponding rights and resources.

Several papers interrogated the role of law in shaping women's labour experiences. Discussions included the efficacy of Anti-Human Trafficking Units, the under utilisation of legal protections for acid attack survivors, and the role of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) in promoting inclusiveworkspaces.Despitetheexistenceofnumerouslawsandschemes—fromthe

Maternity Benefit Act to the UJJAWALA scheme—implementation remains weak, and awareness among beneficiaries is alarmingly low.

Speakers noted that legislative frameworks must be supported by cultural shifts within institutions such as schools, universities, and workplaces. The presentation by Dr. Sharmila Yadav on gender-based violence in educational institutions exposed the deep-rooted fear and stigma that prevent young women from reporting harassment, even in spaces that claim to promote gender equality.

Conclusion: Toward a Gender-Just Future

The seminar did more than register problems—it offered pathways toward transformation. It advocated for a model of empowerment rooted in dignity, autonomy, and collective well-being rather than individual economic gain alone. Participants called for a redefinition of labour to include unpaid care work, for policy reform to be driven by women's lived experiences, and for educational institutions to lead in generating knowledge that challenges inequality rather than reproducing it.

Ultimately, the seminar reinforced that globalisation is not a singular process with uniform outcomes—it is shaped by national policies, cultural values, and everyday practices. Women are not passive recipients of globalisation's effects but active agents navigating, resisting, and reshaping its terms. By foregrounding their voices and insights, the seminar fulfilled its promise to not just understand the world differently but to change it.

The seminar ended with a vote of thanks provided by Dr. Jyoti Ratan Ghosh, Vice Principal, Vidya Bhavana, Visva-Bharati.

Some Pictorial Representations from the Seminar are provided below



Figure 1: Dignitaries Lightning the Lamp



Figure 2: Prof. Narayan Chandra Mondal, Vice-Chancellor (Offg.) Visva-Bharati, delivering his Presidential Address



Figure 3: Adhyakhya, Vidya Bhavana, Visva-Bharati delivering his speech



Figure 4: Chief Guest of Inaugural Session, Prof. Jane Alam, Vice-Chancellor, Murshidabad University



Figure 5: Special Guest of Inaugural Session



Figure 6: Keynote Speaker Prof. Anjan Chakraborty, Director, MMTTC, University of North Bengal



Figure-7: Dr. Tanusree Paul, Assistant Professor, Women's Studies Centre, Vidya Bhavana, Visva-Bharati



Figure 8: Technical Session, Participants Delivering their Presentation.



Figure-9: During Opening Song



Figure 10: Dr. Subhanil Chowdhury, Associate Prof., Dept. of Economics, St. Xavier's University



Figure 11: Talks during Plenary Session



Figure 12: Technical Session, Participant presenting her Paper