



“Tax Incentives, Gender Targets, Skill Programs Will Boost Women Workforce”

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“Stronger Labour Inspections Needed to Prevent Exploitation and Trafficking”

Intro: What if tackling climate change, trafficking and gender inequality demanded a single, integrated approach? In this thought-provoking conversation, **Dr. Chetana Naskar (Climate & Gender Expert, Researcher)** unveils sharp insights on women’s workforce participation, corporate accountability, child protection, climate shocks and migration risks. Speaking exclusively to **Mahima Sharma** of **Indiastat**, Dr Naskar argues that policies, businesses and communities must act together. Bridging silos with measurable reforms is the need of the hour. Her perspective leaves us asking: are we ready to confront today’s crises with solutions bold enough for tomorrow? Take a read at **Socio-economic Voices** this week.

MS: With India’s gender gap and workplace inequalities, what fiscal or regulatory steps should governments take to boost women’s workforce participation, and how can the private sector be incentivised and held accountable?

Dr. Naskar: You know, India’s recent Global Gender Gap Report shows we’re still lagging behind in women’s workforce participation. Only about 25-27% of women are formally employed, which is very low compared to men. So, the question is, what can governments and companies do to change that in the years to come?

Well, first, the **central and state governments** can introduce targeted **fiscal incentives**. For instance, they could give tax breaks to companies that hire and retain women or provide subsidies for workplace childcare. **Kerala** already has some schemes supporting women in small businesses and self-employment. Extending such schemes nationally could make a big difference. States like **Gujarat and Maharashtra** could set up more **safe transport facilities**, so women can commute to work safely and without worry.

Then, there are **regulatory measures**. The government can make it mandatory for companies above a certain size to have **gender diversity targets** and report women’s participation annually. Penalties for non-compliance, coupled with recognition for companies doing well, can motivate firms.

Now, on the **private sector side**, incentives can go beyond compliance. Companies could get **public recognition, awards or tax benefits** if they achieve measurable improvements in hiring, promotions and leadership roles for women. At the same time, there should be **accountability**, like publishing gender pay gaps and workforce composition every year. Think of states like Karnataka, where startups are now reporting gender ratios-this kind of transparency builds trust and pressure for real action.

Finally, a collaborative approach helps. Governments can partner with private firms for skill-building programs, especially in tech and manufacturing, areas where women’s participation is still low. The key is **short-term action but measurable results**, so that within 12 months, we start seeing women moving into formal jobs and leadership roles in a visible way.

MS: Bihar and other states report frequent trafficking rescues. What reforms in labour inspections, inter-state coordination, and corporate due diligence can cut supply-chain risks? How should mandatory ESG reporting help?

Dr. Naskar: Let me remind you here that - human trafficking is a severe issue, ranking as **the third most organised crime globally**. In India, it’s a billion-dollar industry, with Bihar being a significant source state. Factors like poverty, illiteracy and unsafe migration routes contribute to this crisis.

Now let me come down to the **‘Legal Framework and Challenges’ that India faces:**

India has strong laws like the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976. Also, the Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Act. However, **implementation gaps persist** due to inadequate inspector-to-factory

ratios and tax compliance measures, such as auto-renewal of licenses without proper checks.

Need for Systemic Reforms

- Labour Inspections by updating outdated laws and increasing surprise inspections in high-risk sectors.
- Capacity Building by regular training for labour officers on legal mandates and amendments.
- Inter-State Coordination towards the strengthening collaboration between source and destination states for timely rescue and rehabilitation.
- Corporate Accountability by implementing comprehensive corporate due diligence laws to ensure ethical supply chains.
- Enhancing ESG Reporting - India's ESG reporting is mandated by SEBI's Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR) framework. But, it currently applies only to the top 1,000 listed companies. Expanding this to include small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is crucial. The focus should be on social indicators like gender, wages and workplace safety. Third-party audits by trusted agencies can ensure transparency and accountability.

While India has made strides in addressing human trafficking and bonded labour. But deep and significant challenges still remain. Continuous efforts and reforms are necessary to protect vulnerable populations and uphold human rights.

MS: Most rescues still involve child labour. What policy reforms and business practices should close enforcement gaps? How should high-risk sector companies show compliance?

Dr. Naskar: India has strong child protection laws and schemes like the Child Labour Act, Juvenile Justice Act, POCSO, Right to Education, Mission Vatsalya and POSHAN 2.0. The challenge lies not in policy gaps but in weak implementation and monitoring. Benefits often fail to reach the most vulnerable children. Having said that, we have glaring figures:

- Most rescues in 2024–25 were of children trapped in work. **Nearly 90% of rescued kids were found in child labour.**
- Over 50,000 children were freed across India last year in 2024 alone. This shows the scale of the problem.
- Some states - Telangana, Bihar, Rajasthan - reported the most rescues. That tells us where action must be strongest.

What is needed is a stronger structural and institutional mechanism from Panchayati Raj Institutions up to district and state levels. Local governance must ensure proper delivery of schemes. Public awareness, along with regular training and capacity building of officials, is crucial. **Effective implementation, not new policies, will close child protection enforcement gaps.**

Now, what can change? **First, policy. We need more local labour officers on the ground.** They must have money and transport, so they can check hidden workshops. Their reports should be public, so people see progress. Every rescue must connect the child to school and the family to cash help, otherwise the child may fall back into the same exploitative situation. Courts also need to move faster on cases and ensure timely conviction along with severe punishment. This will make the traffickers and exploiters fear the law.

Second, business practices. Companies, especially in risky sectors like textiles, mining and construction, must map their supply chains. They should publish every year how they keep child labour out. Not just words, but proof - supplier lists, audit reports, training records, even complaints and how they were fixed. High-risk sectors should face independent checks by outside experts.

Government contracts and licences can be linked to this compliance. If a company fails, it should lose public contracts. If it passes, it earns trust. Big firms can also support worker helplines and community programmes in villages where children are often pulled into work.

My message is simple: rescue is not enough. Children must stay free and safe. Preventive measures should go hand in hand with the rescue and rehabilitation processes. You know the proverb - "it takes a village to raise a child" - which underlines the 5 protective rings of responsibility in the protection and overall well being of a child. They are family, community, institutions, state and international laws. This mechanism should be strengthened and followed. For that, the state, business and community have to act together. If the rules are clear and followed, rescues will go down, schools will fill up and families will earn with dignity. That is the path to closing the gap and it is the responsibility of the state.

MS: Banking and registration drives have increased women's economic participation, but gaps remain. What policy and corporate actions—finance, procurement, training—can scale sustainable women entrepreneurship?

Dr. Naskar: It's great that banking and registration drives have finally brought more women into the financial system. In states like Rajasthan and Bihar, for example, schemes like Jan Dhan Yojana have helped millions of women open bank accounts. But just having an account isn't enough. Many women still struggle to turn that access into real business opportunities.

So, what can actually help them move from financial inclusion to real, sustainable entrepreneurship?

First, policy and corporate initiatives need to work hand in hand. Policies could focus on easy credit access with low-interest loans specifically for women entrepreneurs. Maharashtra's Mahila Coir Yojana and Tamil Nadu's Kudumbashree are good examples—they provide not just loans but also mentorship, helping women start small businesses.

On the corporate side, companies can step in through procurement programs. Consider big firms reserving a percentage of their supply chain for women-led businesses. This creates a guaranteed market and builds confidence. At the same time, training is essential. Financial literacy alone isn't enough. Women need skill-building workshops—how to run accounts, market their products or even use digital tools. Karnataka has some state-run training programs that have helped women scale micro-enterprises in textiles and handicrafts.

Another idea is hybrid initiatives. Policymakers can offer grants for women to attend certified training programs and corporations can sponsor mentorship networks. Think of it as giving them money, skills and connections all at once. Over time, this builds real agency.

We need to combine policies that **lower credit barriers, corporate programs that create market opportunities and targeted training for skills and business management.** Women can move from just being "financially included" to becoming powerful entrepreneurs. It's not about giving handouts—it's about creating systems that make them independent, confident and successful.

MS: Climate shocks displace rural families and increase trafficking risks, as seen this year. What early-warning and social-protection measures should states include? Should public-private partnerships be involved, and how?

Dr. Naskar: See, climate change is no longer distant. Extreme weather events are increasing in intensity, frequency and impact. In 2024, global average temperatures reached record highs. India experienced the highest number of extreme events that year. From January to September, 255 out of 274 days or 93%, saw extreme weather. **The human toll was severe: 3,238 lives lost, 9,400 livestock dead, 3.2 million hectares of crops damaged and 2.3 lakh houses destroyed.** Approximately 5.4 million people were displaced across 27 states and UTs, with Assam alone accounting for half.

2025 Gave Some Early Indicators - The crisis continues in 2025. Between March and April, 160 people died due to lightning, a 184% increase over last year. In the first six months, 1.6 million people were displaced. Northern states, including Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir and Delhi NCR, experienced severe floods. These events highlight the urgency of implementing climate laws at international, national and state levels, though enforcement remains challenging.

So what's the need-of-the-hour then? I am sharing few urgent steps required:

1. Strengthening Risk Management

To protect vulnerable populations, digitalised and localised risk management is crucial. Mapping high-risk zones and identifying vulnerable communities—women, children and differently-abled—is the first step. Early Warning Systems (EWS) must be community-managed. Local volunteers and frontline workers should be trained to monitor, communicate and respond effectively. Messages and dissemination methods must suit local contexts, using radios, phones and other accessible tools.

2. Preparedness and Awareness

- Regular mock drills and disaster preparedness exercises enhance community readiness. Awareness campaigns should reach schools, ASHA and Anganwadi workers, Self-Help Groups, Circle Officers and Child Protection Officers.
- Monitoring displacement camps is essential to track entries, exits and prevent suspicious activities.
- Families and frontline workers must know helpline numbers for reporting concerns promptly.
- EWS design must be gender-sensitive, addressing unique needs of women, children and disabled populations.

3. Targeted Post-Disaster Action

- Rehabilitation should be swift and holistic. Linking schemes like MGNREGA, PM Awas Yojna, PDS and POSHAN ensures livelihoods, housing and nutrition support.
- Distress migration and trafficking risks must be addressed through targeted interventions rather than “one-size-fits-all” approaches. Climate events worsen social inequalities, making focused action critical.

4. Strengthen Public-Private Partnerships

NGOs, CBOs and media must collaborate with government agencies for awareness drives. **Tech companies** can provide real-time tracking and robust EWS. **Private IT firms** should create user-friendly portals for communities to access benefits and report issues. **Corporates and individuals** can fund relief and logistics, as seen in Punjab’s flood recovery efforts.

5. Capacity Building and Livelihoods

- Training local actors, such as bus drivers, taxi operators, youth and RPF personnel.
- This also further helps identify trafficking risks.
- NGOs can link populations to skill development and employment programs.
- Corporates can support recruitment and training, reducing desperation-driven migration from disaster-prone regions.

MS: When public and private climate adaptation funds are allocated, what policy safeguards and KPI requirements should ensure funds are gender responsive — i.e., that adaptation investments also advance women’s economic security rather than entrenching gendered vulnerabilities?

Dr. Naskar: In my experience and opinion, the first step is **policy safeguards**. For instance, governments can require that any funded project include a **gender impact assessment** before approval. This is like checking whether women will benefit from a new irrigation system or if they will just bear extra work. Some Indian states, like **Rajasthan and Odisha**, have started asking local climate projects to show how women farmers and fisherwomen are included in planning and decision-making.

That makes sense. So then you will ask me, ‘**What about KPI requirements?**’

These are measurable indicators to track progress. A simple but effective one is tracking the **percentage of women directly benefiting from a project**, whether through access to resources, training, or income opportunities. For example, if a state funds climate-resilient agriculture, a KPI could be the number of women trained in new farming methods or receiving microloans to adapt crops.

Another safeguard is requiring that **project leadership include women**. Research shows when women are in management or oversight roles, projects tend to distribute benefits more fairly. Plus, **community consultations** should be mandatory, with quotas to ensure women’s voices are heard.

Also, linking funds to **economic outcomes** helps. If adaptation projects—like flood-resilient infrastructure or water harvesting—include small business support or access to finance for women, it improves economic security. Some Southeast Asian countries, like **Bangladesh**, tie climate adaptation funds to women-led cooperatives, ensuring the money supports livelihoods, not just infrastructure.

In short, gender-responsive climate finance needs clear rules: **gender impact assessments, women-focused KPIs, inclusive leadership and economic opportunity components**. Without these, adaptation investments might unintentionally reinforce existing gender inequalities.

MS: Agricultural and informal value chains are climate-sensitive and often use child labour. Which regulatory or buyer-led interventions would you prioritise to protect children while preserving smallholder livelihoods under climate stress?

Dr. Naskar: One major challenge in addressing child labour is that agriculture and informal value chains fall outside formal labour laws like the Factories Act or BOWC. Children are pushed into informal, labour-intensive, age-inappropriate work. They often face long hours and unsafe conditions. However, child protection laws such as the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, Bonded Labour Act, and Trafficking in Persons Laws still apply. Strong regulatory mechanisms are needed to ensure compliance and protect children in these sectors.

Protective Measures - Hotspots and high-risk areas must be mapped first. Frequent raids and rescue operations should be carried out. **District and block administrations must work with trusted CSOs/NGOs to act on tip-offs**. Rescuing children should be timely, well-planned and strictly legal. Offenders must face penalties under existing laws.

Preventive Actions - Collaboration with CSOs, private and philanthropic groups is essential. Vulnerable children should access social security schemes like **Mission Vatsalya, RTE, Mission POSHAN, skill development and vocational training**. Families also need targeted support, since child well-being depends on overall family welfare.

Holistic Rehabilitation - Rescued children need sustainable rehabilitation. This includes **linking them to government schemes, enrolling them in schools and providing cash benefits**. The goal is complete reintegration and protection from further exploitation.

Community Vigilance - Strengthening local community monitoring is essential. Village-level **child protection committees, SHGs, adolescent clubs and youth groups** should actively prevent and report child labour incidents. Community involvement creates constant vigilance.

Buyer-Led Interventions - In India, ethical production practices are still emerging. Companies can still make a difference. **Responsible sourcing, zero-tolerance child labour policies, child labour-free declarations and premium pricing for compliant products** encourage change. These practices can gradually shift production norms.

MS: As climate-driven seasonal and permanent migration increases, which geospatial and labour-market tools can map emerging migration corridors, prevent trafficking? How should national policies integrate these measures effectively?

Dr. Naskar: Using GIS and Remote Sensing to Map the new and emerging migration corridors. See, the nuances that are involved in human trafficking are ever evolving. **Emergence of new patterns of trafficking, techniques of trafficking, forms and purpose of trafficking – it is an ever-evolving industry using newer means and routes for trafficking.**

Therefore, the government has to **stay very alert and constantly improve and upgrade** its ways of identifying and monitoring high-risk climate vulnerable districts with emerging out-migration and migration corridors.

Then, train and sensitise relevant stakeholders, be it border officials, Police, AHTUs, CSOs/NGOs, RPFs, GRPFs, transport associations, front-line workers, community led institutions and community at large who have emerged as being involved in aspirational or displacement led trafficking.

The government should **judiciously use the e-Shram Portal** that intends to capture the migrant workers data of the informal sector as well. This would be a game changer in tracking the mobility pattern and understanding the migration corridors and the source and destination domains of the migrant population. Overlaying the data with other socio-economic indicators, will highlight the at-risk population.

Distress and unsafe migration due to climate change and its precipitating impact on human trafficking is a very critical issue that we are facing, but it is not receiving the required attention and traction. Currently, both the issues are looked at separately. But I think both the climate policies India has and is amending and various acts and laws that are there including NHRC, should **integrate the aspect of human trafficking in their adaptation, mitigation strategies, disaster preparedness**. I believe concerted and coordinated effort from the ministry of labour, home affairs and women and child development will incur much successful results in preempting trafficking. We need to move from reactive to preventive mechanisms.

MS: How can regulations ensure corporates to include social-risk assessments—gender, child protection, trafficking—within climate-resilient supply chains? What incentives or penalties would ensure compliance?

Dr. Naskar: See the problem is we think of every issue in silo and try to curve out solutions in silos. Climate resilience is not just about reducing greenhouse gas emission. Because climate change is not a distant future that with controlling GHG emission we will be able to avoid the crisis. Climate change is the very reality now. It is happening now which has both environmental and social implications. **Any regulatory framework has to be holistic in nature, for example ESG – it is Environmental, Social and Governance.**

India already has a social regulatory framework for businesses. It checks how companies handle **gender equality, pay fairness, workplace environment, and unethical practices**. Companies are scored or ranked on these points.

Many investors now look at **ESG scores** before investing. Businesses want a clean image. India also has **CSR rules**, requiring firms to invest a part of their profit in public welfare. Laws like **POSH** protect women at work, while **POCSO** and the **JJ Act** protect children from abuse.

The **SEBI ESG framework** includes social risk assessment, but most focus mainly on the environment. Social and governance risks must also get equal attention.

The government can encourage good practices by giving **priority for green funds, loan concessions, tax rebates, and performance awards** to companies that follow social safeguards. This improves their reputation, credibility, and trust with investors and consumers.

Penalties for breaking rules include **lower ESG scores**, stricter government or bank checks before loans, and fines under existing **labour laws**. Strong enforcement creates accountability and protects society.

About Dr. Chetana Naskar

Dr. Chetana Naskar currently serves as the Lead Coordinator for She Changes Climate - India Network. She works in advocating for women's leadership in climate decision-making, ensuring that the urgency of addressing climate change is met through an inclusion and diversity principle. She is also an Independent Consultant with the VV Giri National Labour Institute (VVGNI), Ministry of Labour and Employment, Gov. Here she works on projects evaluating and assessing the impact of various government schemes and policies. An executive fellow at the Digital Economist, Chetana has earned her PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University, specialising in gender and intersectional issues. She also has various publications to her credit, including government reports, newspaper publications and articles.

About the Interviewer

Mahima Sharma is an Independent Journalist based in Delhi NCR. She has been in the field of TV, Print & Online Journalism since 2005 and previously an additional three years in allied media. In her span of work she has been associated with CNN-News18, ANI - Asian News International (A collaboration with Reuters), Voice of India, Hindustan Times and various other top media brands of their times. In recent times, she has diversified her work as a Digital Media Marketing Consultant & Content Strategist as well. Starting March 2021, she is also a pan-India Entrepreneurship Education Mentor at Women Will - An Entrepreneurship Program by Google in Collaboration with SHEROES. Mahima can be reached at media@indiastat.com

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