

## India's missing half

Reams have been written about India's demographic dividend — how being a nation of young people puts us at a great economic advantage over other ageing countries. In theory, this is true. Yet, the reason why we cannot fully reap the benefits of this dividend is less talked about, perhaps because it is an inconvenient truth. India's woeful gender gap in the workplace makes us much poorer as a nation, economically and socially.

About 48.5 per cent of Indians are women, that's nearly half of our population. The World Bank says that the share of Indian women above the age of 15 employed in our workforce is only 25 per cent. It was 34 per cent in 1991 and has been sliding steadily since. In China, the number is 60 per cent. According to the ILO, India ranks 121 out of 131 countries in Female Labour Force Participation (FLFP), one of the worst in the world. Any talk of a demographic dividend is meaningless when one half of the population is just not participating in the economy. The reasons are many.

First, India is a deeply feudal, parochial and sexist society. Deep down, most Indians subscribe to the stereotype that a man's place is in the workplace, the woman's at home. For many Indian men, it is a matter of shame to see women in their families go out to work. Other than the perceived stigma of not being able to provide for their womenfolk, there may even be a subliminal fear that financially independent women could challenge their assumed superiority and dominance in the household. Women have internalised this. More girls may be going to school, yet this ethos is so ingrained that education may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for taking up employment, at least durably. Even in urban and educated households, it is documented that women's participation in the workspace actually goes down with improvement in family incomes. As families earn more, they feel it is no longer necessary for the woman to work, the man's income is enough.

These sub-optimal employment trends underscore the unequal status Indian women are accorded in households, particularly in rural and semi-urban India. The National Family and Health Survey reveals that more than half of Indian women do not even enjoy free mobility; they are not allowed to move out of their house unaccompanied by a male member. If you cannot leave the house, how do you work?

Infrastructure, or the lack of it, does not help. Even for women who are allowed to work, travelling to the workplace is a challenge. In many parts of India, there is either no public transport or the quality of it is so forbidding to women that going to work is not a feasible option. As agricultural prospects fade further, a large part of rural India keeps migrating to urban centres in search of work. This again puts women at a disadvantage; most often it is men who travel out with women left behind to tend to children and the elderly.

Women with children face tremendous discouragement within their family setups to go out to work and even if they can stand up against it to venture out, the absence of any childcare support infrastructure renders it impossible for mothers to continue full-time work. Then there is the problem of working late, which inevitably invites amoral aspersions on the women involved and is thus largely discouraged in most families. Safety in the workspace is another huge issue. Women are routinely subject to harassment of every kind imaginable and, over time, it wears down their resolve to keep going.

These may seem like soft issues, but only to men who have never had to negotiate working life through such travails. In reality, these can be crippling.

What is noteworthy is that our neighbours, other than Pakistan, seem to be doing much better on

this front. The FLFP for Bangladesh is 57 per cent and Sri Lanka 35 per cent. Other than social factors, one reason could be the assimilation of women into the vibrant exporting sectors of these countries. The textile industry, in both these countries, employs millions of women. India has a strong IT sector, which employs many educated women but lacks a large enough manufacturing export sector which can employ less skilled women, who are much larger in number. This may be the most significant economic reason for India's woeful female labour participation. In the West, much of the recent discourse has revolved around a gender pay gap — women getting paid far less than men for similar job profiles. In our country, while pay gaps do exist, the real challenge is to get more women gainfully employed.

It won't be easy. Decades of conditioning is not easy to undo, particularly in a society as conservative and regressive as ours. Job creation, regardless of gender, has come to a standstill over the last four years. Where a man can't find a decent job, what hope does a woman have, against all the odds? Yet, we have to start somewhere.

Such a low female labour participation comes at a huge cost, even to our GDP, which we set the biggest store by. The social consequences of a larger assimilation of women into our workspace could be staggering. It has the potential to rid our country of the many shameful aspects of our tattered social fabric. We need women, not just in our boardrooms but on our shop floors, in our factories and on our workstations. India needs its own MeToo moment, of a different kind.

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