

MIND THE GAP: ON GENDER GAP

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues relating to Growth & Development - Demographic Economics & Various Indexes

Assessing women's access to equal opportunity and resources against the access that men have would be a scientific way of evaluating a nation's commitment to the advancement of its citizens. But going by the [World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index 2020](#), released last week, questions can easily be raised about whether this government is doing the right thing by the country's women. India has dropped four points from 2018, to take the [112th rank on the Index](#). The Index measures the extent of gender-based gaps on four key parameters — economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. Notably, it measures gender-based gaps in access to resources and opportunities in countries, rather than the actual levels of the available resources and opportunities. Despite a small score improvement, India has lost four positions as some countries ranked lower than India have shown better improvement. The country has reportedly closed two thirds of its overall gender gap, with a score of 66.8%, but the report notes with concern that the condition of women in large fringes of Indian society is 'precarious'. Of significant concern is the economic gender gap, with a score of 35.4%, at the 149th place, among 153 countries, and down seven places since the previous edition, indicating only a third of the gap has been bridged. The participation of women in the labour force is also among the lowest in the world, and the female estimated earned income is only one-fifth of male income. An alarming statistic is India's position (150th rank) on the very bottom of the Health and Survival subindex, determined largely by the skewed sex ratio at birth, violence, forced marriage and discrimination in access to health. It is on the educational attainment (112th rank) and political empowerment (18th rank) fronts that the relative good news is buried.

There is no question that the Gender Gap Index presents India with an opportunity to make the necessary amends forthwith. Doing what the government is currently doing is clearly not going to be sufficient; it needs to engage intimately with all aspects indicated by the Index to improve the score, and set targets to reduce the gender gap in the foreseeable future. It will have to drastically scale up efforts it has introduced to encourage women's participation, and increase opportunities for them. To do so it also needs to make sure there is actual implementation at the ground level. While a good score on any global index is a target worth pursuing, what is being questioned here is basic — is the state reneging on its commitment to half its population? A commitment to ameliorate the conditions for women is a non-negotiable duty of any state.

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