

A Lose-Lose Proposition

Indian women's labour force participation, at just 27 per cent, is ranked 170 out of the world's 188 economies. Not only is Indian women's labour-force participation among the lowest in the world, research suggests it may be declining. This is despite rising education levels and declining fertility. There are many reasons why this matters: For one, women cannot contribute to India's economic growth if they are not fully participating in the workforce. Also, working women tend to have greater bargaining power in their households, which could translate to better outcomes both for their children and themselves.

Explanations for low women's participation in the labour force have proliferated. Research mentions social norms in passing, but this explanation merits deeper consideration. What exactly is the problem with a woman working outside the home? For women in exploitative jobs, poor working conditions are clearly problematic. But more generally, the widespread belief that women should not work outside the home is based on a conservative view that elevates a man's status if the women in his household are "able" to stay at home.

Social Attitudes Research India (SARI) is a survey that tracks social attitudes in India, including beliefs about women and work. We asked adult men and women between the ages of 18 and 65 in Delhi, Mumbai (only men), Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan whether they believe that a married woman, whose husband earns a good living, should or should not work outside the home. More than 40 per cent of respondents in every location report that women should not work outside the home. This is in stark contrast to the US, where the General Social Survey data shows that the percentage of adults who believe women should not work outside the home was below 40 per cent at least as early as 1972.

Men are more likely to hold this view in each place (47 per cent in Delhi, 48 per cent in Mumbai, 57 per cent in UP, and 48 per cent in Rajasthan), but this attitude is commonly held by women too (34 per cent in Delhi, 48 per cent in UP, and 45 per cent in Rajasthan). And although it is commonly assumed that education will break down conservative social attitudes, over one quarter of respondents with greater than a 10th standard education in Delhi and Mumbai believe that women should not work outside the home. These attitudes of patriarchy have been internalised even by women and the most educated.

At the same time, it is not the case that women are not interested in working: According to India's 2011 National Sample Survey, over one-third of women primarily engaged in household work expressed the desire to have a job. There may be many reasons why women who would like to work might not; the SARI survey suggests that disapproval of women working outside of the home is likely an important one.

Evidence suggests that women with access to networks outside the home can gain a civic and political consciousness, which can benefit their communities and society. But traditional attitudes related to women's work mean that these human development considerations and women's own preferences tend to be disregarded. Until women and women's work are valued at par with men and men's work, it is likely that many capable women will be left out of contributing to India's development.

What can be done to counter these conservative attitudes? At the very least, the government must loudly and persistently condemn the visible and invisible ways in which patriarchal attitudes disempower women.

Further, aggressive implementation of policies that will encourage women's work is critical. For example, macroeconomic evidence from OECD countries suggests that childcare subsidies can

stimulate female labour participation by raising the returns of work outside the home. But while crèches and daycare facilities in India are mandated as per policy, they are often non-functional or do not exist near the women who need them. There is also evidence that paid parental leave and job guarantees have a positive effect on female workforce participation. Although India's new maternity leave policy is quite generous by international standards, it does not cover the vast majority of working women engaged in the informal sector, and its costs are to be borne wholly by employers, potentially hurting the demand for female labour.

In addition, lessons from developed countries may not apply in the deeply patriarchal Indian context. Thus more data on women's time use and perceived costs and benefits of being in the workforce is needed to make women's contribution visible, learn about the constraints they face, and determine which policies are likely to expand work opportunities.

Each one of us must engage in reflection and dialogue to recognise and counter gender inequality. By not addressing the attitudes that confine women's choices and public presence, we are telling the next generation of girls and women that their preferences and aspirations do not matter, or matter only as far as they conform to what is most important for the men in their families. It is a costly mistake to so vastly limit India's potential.

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