

EQUALITY BEYOND GDP

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Women - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

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The writer is a senior research scholar at Department of Social Work, Delhi University

Last month, Niti Aayog released a report on state-level progress across various indicators under the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The comprehensive index score on gender equality (Goal 5) revealed that all Indian states, except Kerala and Sikkim, fall in the red zone, signifying low performance.

Despite such worrisome findings in its own report, Niti Aayog's almost simultaneously released 'Strategy for New India @75' document falls short of engaging gender equality in a meaningful way. This important, over 200-page document includes only a short, four-page section on gender which discusses just one theme: The need to enhance female labour force participation, while neglecting a whole gamut of other issues.

Crimes against women are discussed merely as a barrier to women's mobility, one that hampers their supply in the labour market. This, despite the NCRB data recording an 83 per cent increase in crimes against women between 2007 and 2016, and the Thomson Reuters Foundation's global poll in 2018 naming India as the most dangerous country for women. Likewise, the chapter on school education does not go beyond suggestions to offer counselling and support to girls who are victims of gender-based violence.

In its single-minded focus on improving GDP-driven growth statistics, the strategy document aims to achieve a female labour force participation of at least 30 per cent by 2022. Between 2005-06 and 2015-16, the female labour force participation rate (LFPR) in India declined from 36 per cent to 23.7 per cent. This decline is much steeper in rural areas, from 49.7 per cent to 26.7 per cent. Clearly, India is not following a historical trajectory similar to other countries where female labour participation rates have increased with improvements in education levels and GDP.

The strategy document does not recognise that female labour force participation rate in India is, in fact, lower among urban, educated women. According to recent research by Public Affairs Centre (PAC), a major metropolis like Delhi has only 196 female workers per 1,000 workers, and Mumbai has only 188. In contrast, a state like Nagaland, which has historically been matrilineal, has more than 500 women workers per 1,000 in most districts. The strategy document skips discussing any number beyond the national averages, and offers no analysis of social barriers on women, particularly married, in entering or staying put in the labour force.

Although it mentions in passing the unpaid work done by women in the household, it demonstrates no understanding of how it constrains women and how public policy can play a role in addressing it. It is further unclear if the reference to unpaid work undertaken by women was to point at the conceptual difference between work and employment, as considered in GDP calculation, or at the need to make household chores more participative. The result is that nearly all the recommendations revolve around addressing workplace-related barriers, while being oblivious to social barriers. Although women do need crèches and flexible work hours, the enabling force driving women towards economically active choices will be a renegotiation of

gender roles within families. Without this, most women will only juggle jobs and not enjoy fulfilling careers.

Thus, the 'Strategy for New India @75' takes a limited utilitarian approach to gender, where inclusion of women in the labour force is perceived from the vantage point of economy and growth statistics, and not of women realising their full potential or exercising their agency. It is evident when the document mentions that if more women were to be employed in the formal sector, the GDP would increase by 1.4 per cent. There is absence of any discussion on over-representation of economically active women in the informal sector, which leaves them poor and vulnerable, deprived of many work benefits.

Any policy seeking to enhance female labour work force participation is appallingly deficient if it fails to include perspectives on areas like paternity leave and mainstreaming of gender education in schools. There is also a stark absence of any reference to the gender-wage gap, despite a government report in 2018 finding a 30 per cent wage gap even for men and women with the same qualifications. Further, although the need to improve women's asset ownership is identified, the strategy document limits itself to access to common property resources and joint registration of property with spouse. The core issue of equal inheritance rights is conspicuous by its absence.

This policy document offered a crucial opportunity for an informed discourse around gender equality in its totality. However, it seems to have short-changed issues of gender rights and justice, and opted for a GDP-centric approach focusing only on capitalisable gender dividend. Incentivising companies to employ women and promoting safe work spaces are necessary but not sufficient. The foremost frontier which Indian women need to conquer remains firmly within our families.

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