

# A STRANGE PARADOX FOR INDIAN WOMEN

Relevant for: Indian Society | Topic: Role of Women and Women's Organization

Abigail Adams, wife of the second President of the U.S. and mother of the sixth President, wrote to her husband, "If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion." As last year's #MeToo movement and Sabarimala protests showed, perhaps Indian women are echoing her and are ready to foment a rebellion.

What fuels these movements? Could it be that the very success of India's economic transformation brings with it a stark realisation that it has not paid particular care and attention to women? The most promising sign of the improving conditions of Indian women lies in declining inequality in education. In all villages and towns, mornings and afternoons are brightened by the smiling faces of girls and young women, dressed in their uniforms, walking to school. Almost all girls go to primary school and, according to the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) of 2011-12, 70% of girls aged 15 to 18 are still studying, only five percentage points less than boys. They frequently outperform boys. In 2018, in the Class XII CBSE examination, 88.31% girls passed, compared to 78.99% boys. However, in spite of rising education and rising aspirations, labour markets and social norms constrain women, almost as if they are all dressed up for a party with nowhere to go.

## Surveying India's unemployment numbers

Data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) and the IHDS show that education and employment have a U-shaped relationship. Illiterate women are most likely to participate in the workforce. Work participation drops sharply for women with primary and secondary education and rises only with college education. Research by Esha Chatterjee and colleagues in a paper published in the journal *Demographic Research*, using data from the IHDS, further documents that this relationship holds even after we take into account income of other members of the household, social background and place of residence.

Employment opportunities that are open to their mothers, including farm labour and non-farm manual work in construction, hold little appeal to secondary school graduates who have invested their hopes in education. However, white-collar jobs are either not available or demand long hours and offer little job security in this time of a gig economy. NSSO data for 25- to 59-year-old workers in 2011-12 show that among farmers, farm labourers and service workers, nearly one-third are women, while the proportion of women among professionals, managers and clerical workers is only about 15%.

## A place for the woman

Young men with Class 10 or 12 education find jobs as mechanics, drivers, sales representatives, postmen and appliance repairmen. Few of these opportunities are available to women. Whether employers choose not to hire women in these positions or working conditions make for an inhospitable environment for young women is not clear. Educated women's main employment options lie in qualifying as a nurse or a teacher or looking for office jobs.

If barriers to work participation are not enough, young women's lives are also circumscribed by social norms that shape their family situation. Marriage remains the only acceptable fate for young women in India. Whereas a third of Japanese women and 11% of Sri Lankan women aged 30-34 are single, less than 3% of Indian women are single at that age. Moreover, women's education does not seem to carry the same value in the 'marriage market' as caste, the family's

economic status and horoscope. Research from other countries shows that educated women marry similarly educated men. But in India, women frequently marry men with lower education than themselves. Zhiyong Lin and his colleagues at the University of Maryland find that whereas less than 5% women married men whose education was lower than themselves in the 1970s, the proportion has grown to nearly 20% recently.

### The missing women

If rising education for women does not offer increasing income-earning opportunities or better marriage prospects, does it at least give women greater autonomy in other areas of their lives? Based on recent National Family Health Survey data, there seems to be little evidence that a moderate level of education offers women a greater say in household decisions or freedom of movement outside the home. College graduates fare slightly better, but even for them, the difference is relatively small. For instance, 48% of women with no schooling do not go to a health centre alone; the proportion for college graduates is only slightly lower at 45%. This is a strange paradox. Parents make tremendous sacrifices to educate their daughters, and young women joyously work hard at school in search of a better life, only to have their aspirations frustrated by economic and social barriers that restrict their opportunities. Is it surprising that periodically their frustration takes the shape of a social movement? What is surprising is that their demands are not more strident, and that no political party has chosen to espouse their cause.

If women were a caste, their cause would be championed by political parties now trying to mobilise caste-based vote banks. We would see proposals for women's quota in government jobs and higher education. If women were an economic class, we would see subsidies and a variety of other economic incentives showered on them. However, our political process sees women as an extension of the men in their households and assumes that no special effort is needed to win their hearts and minds.

### Also read

Still in the shadows: do Indian women have basic health rights?

Sociologist Raka Ray has presented a sophisticated analysis of the relationship between political parties and women's movements. She has argued that in the 1980s and 1990s, the CPI(M) in West Bengal had an ambivalent relationship with its women's wing, and domestic violence was seen as a function of class oppression, with frustrated, unemployed men beating up their wives. In more recent history, the discourse regarding marriage, divorce and inheritance has been co-opted by communal politics.

As we head into an election season, perhaps it would be wise for political parties to remember that women form half the voting population. The American experience is salutary in this regard. The 2018 House of Representatives elections in the U.S. that brought victory to the Democrats were shaped by the Democrats winning women's votes by an overwhelming margin. According to the PEW Research Centre, Democrats won 59% of women's vote as opposed to 40% for Republicans; among men, they won 51% versus the 47% won by Republicans. Let us hope that some political party will figure out that women are not simply extensions of their husbands and fathers and campaign on a platform that focuses on creating economic and social opportunities for women.

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