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Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues Related to Poverty, Inclusion, Employment & Sustainable Development

Three times as many males as females are employed in the 15-49 age group in India, a stubborn gender gap that has remained virtually the same over the last five years, the latest edition of the National Family Health Survey Report shows.

Around 75% of boys and men in the age group of 15-49 are currently employed, said the fifth edition of the NFHS (for 2019-21), released by the ministry of health and family welfare.

"About 25% of women in the age group of 15-49 are currently employed, compared with 75% of men aged 15-49. Employment is higher among less educated people. About 89% among men and 34% among women are employed with less than 5 years of schooling. There are approximately 87% men and 34% women who are employed with no schooling," noted the report.

Referring to the previous NFHS-4 (for 2015-16), the report said, "24% of women were currently employed in 2015-16, compared with 25% in 2019-21. Among men, the proportion who are currently employed has not changed in the same period."

The survey—an important indicator of social trends—defines currently employed as those who were employed in the seven days before the survey. This includes respondents who did not work in the past seven days but are regularly employed, and were absent from work for leave, illness, vacation or any other reason.

India has been seeing a consistent decline in female labour force participation for years, and the survey raises important questions about whether India's growth is inclusive enough, pointing to the need for urgent action, said Poonam Muttreja, executive director at the non-profit Population Foundation of India.

"We need a holistic approach to make women active participants in economic growth, and empower them. Investment in girls' education and skill development is essential. Unpaid household work, such as caregiving, is considered solely a woman's domain. We need to work on changing mindsets and social norms," she said.

"Additionally, providing housing to single working women and safer public transport could also play a role in increasing women's participation in the economy."

Around 70% of females and 19% of males reported that they were not employed in the 12 months preceding the survey. A lower percentage of women than men are currently employed in every state.

Bihar (14%), Uttar Pradesh (17%), and Assam (18%) have the lowest percentage of women in work. More than a third of women were currently employed in a handful of states: Karnataka (35%), Andhra Pradesh (37%), Telangana (39%), Manipur (40%), and Meghalaya (42%).

Those women who are employed are mostly working as farm or production workers.

Ironically, women and men with 10-11 years of schooling, never married women and men, women and men with no children, and women and men belonging to the highest wealth quintile

are less likely to be employed than others.

The NFHS is a large-scale, multi-round survey conducted in a representative sample of households throughout India. Dr Mansukh Mandaviya, Union health minister, released the report on Thursday in Vadodara, Gujarat.

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