

## The missing women

The World Economic Forum's just-released report — the Global Gender Gap Index, 2017 — shows that India's poor showing on gender equity has hit rock-bottom. It has been ranked 108 out of 144 countries, a fall of 21 places from last year's 87 — and its lowest since the index was developed in 2006. It would be safe to say that, at this rate, it would take centuries to close the wide gap between Indian men and women. The report flags two indicators as being particularly guilty. The first is "health and survival", where India is in the bottom four, largely as a result of its losing battle against a falling sex ratio at birth and the lack of access to healthcare. The second is "economic participation and opportunities for women". Despite gains in education, women's work participation rate stands at an abysmal 27 per cent. According to a World Bank report, about 19.6 million women have dropped out of the workforce between 2004-05 and 2011-12. Even when women earn, says the WEF report, they are paid 60 per cent less than men for similar work done. Most of the work they do is unpaid labour — at home, in the fields and in childcare. Thus, on every point in the spectrum of human development, from sheer survival and basic health to the opportunities available to realise one's human potential, Indian women are precariously placed. The data needs to be parsed to see if the precipitous fall this year is a result of the larger crisis in agriculture, or the blow to women's finances from demonetisation. But the report raises serious questions about why two decades of economic progress have not led to commensurate strides in women's lives. It certainly ought to send the central and state governments back to the drawing boards to re-assess ongoing schemes, and to reinvest more heavily in the nutrition and health of women. Economists are agreed that for a society to be gender-just, there is no substitute for a greater participation of women in the workforce — and more women in leadership roles. Bangladesh, at the 47th spot, is an example of how political empowerment — 20 per cent of its legislators in parliament are women, 45 per cent of women are in the workforce — has levelled the field considerably for its women. In contrast, only 12 per cent of legislators in India are women. The time for change is now, and it ought to start at the top — with the political class.

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