

# FALLEN THROUGH THE CRACKS

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

Representational image. | Photo Credit: [V. Ganesan](#)

The year 2020 marks the anniversary of two major events concerning the status of women. First, it is nearly fifty years since the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) submitted the report 'Towards Equality' to the United Nations (UN), which focused on women-sensitive policymaking in India, providing a fresh perspective on gender equality. Second, it is the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, a benchmark for analysing the condition of women and State-led empowerment. Noting these jubilees, this article reviews the position of women's work in India, the effects of the ongoing pandemic, and the new Indian labour codes in relation to women's labour.

India's female employment trends do not resonate with its high economic growth, low fertility, and rise in female schooling. Between 2004 and 2018 — unlike the shrinking gender gap in educational attainment — the gender gap in workforce participation yawned, demonstrating one of the lowest labour participation rates for women, which have been consistently declining since 1950.

The recently released Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), 2018-19 indicates a dramatic fall in absolute employment for men, and more so women, who faced a decline in labour participation rates (from 2011 to 2019) in rural areas from 35.8% to 26.4%, and stagnation in urban areas at around 20.4%. Furthermore, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report ranks India at 149 among 153 countries in terms of women's economic participation and opportunity. The gender wage gap is the highest in Asia, with women 34% below men (for equal qualification and work), according to a 2019 Oxfam report. This stifles women's labour force participation, despite the guarantees of India's Equal Remuneration Act, 1976. Women also disproportionately populate India's informal economy, and are concentrated in low-paid, highly precarious jobs.

Research analyst Shiney Chakraborty's estimates show that agriculture employs nearly 60% of women, who form the bulk of landless labourers in an almost completely informal sector, with no credit access, subsidies, little equipment, and abysmal asset ownership. According to *IndiaSpend*, only about 13% of women tillers owned their land in 2019. Manufacturing employs (almost completely informally) only around 14% of the female labour force. The service sector sees women disproportionately involved in care-work. According to the National Sample Survey (NSS) 2005, over 60% of the 4.75 million domestic workers are women.

In the context of the ongoing pandemic, in India, the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) showed that 39% of women lost their jobs in April and May compared to 29% of men, corroborating the UN's fears of COVID-19's compounding impact on already low-paid and insecurely-employed poor women. Unsurprisingly, India's strikingly unequal gender division of household work has also worsened during the pandemic. Women spend (an unpaid) three times (as per NSS) or even six times (as per OECD) more time than men in household work. According to the World Health Organization, 70% of the world's healthcare and social workers are women. In India, women are indispensable as frontline ASHA workers, but they are underpaid and overworked.

India recently passed three labour codes, on occupational safety, health and working conditions, on industrial relations, and on social security. The laws are expected to transform labour

relations, but they only end up 'easing business'. The codes acknowledge neither the gender wage gap nor non-payment of wages and bonuses, and ignore informal (mostly women) workers in terms of social security, insurance, provident fund, maternity benefits, or gratuity. Though 'allowing' women to work night shifts, there is little focus on accountability and responsibility; even protection from sexual harassment at workplace is missing. Maternity benefits remain unchanged from the 2017 amendment, with an insensitively formulated adoption leave policy that grants leave to women who adopt infants under the age of three months, ignoring that most children are much older at the time of adoption, and offering little incentive to adopt long-awaiting older children.

The recent labour codes disregard women's work conditions. This is, bluntly, women-insensitive labour policy-making, and, all in the middle of a crushing pandemic. Gender cannot be wished away, since every policy and code affects a giant proportion of India's workforce — both paid and unpaid, acknowledged and unacknowledged.

*Neethi P. is with the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, Bangalore and teaches on Labour Informality and Women's work*

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