

An unrealised gender dividend

Women today are not held back by social constraints, access to education or mobility, but by lack of employment opportunities



SONALDE DESAI

AS ECONOMISTS STRUGGLE to explain the stagnation in women's participation in wage work in India, conservative social norms have emerged as a handy target to explain why rising economic prosperity has not translated into greater employment for women. However, this assumption of social stagnation has little basis in reality. The India Human Development Survey (IHDS), organised by the University of Maryland and the National Council of Applied Economic Research, has tracked changes in the lives of Indian households between 2004 and 2024. This survey of over 42,000 households documents steady changes in Indian women's lives and highlights the aspirational transformation that young Indian women in the 2020s are living through compared to their sisters who came of age in the first decade of the century.

The second wave of IHDS was conducted in 2011-12, and the third wave covering the period 2022-24 was recently completed. Here, I focus on interviews with approximately 18,000 married and unmarried women, aged 20-29, in each wave. Ten years is a relatively short time, but this decade was pivotal for changing the course of how young Indian women live their lives.

Over this decade, Indian parents have increased their investments in developing their daughters' capabilities. Parental aspiration for their children — both sons and daughters — has grown rapidly, resulting in a massive increase in education. Today, the gender gap in education has virtually disappeared, and girls seem poised to outdistance boys. In 2011-12, IHDS found that 27 per cent of 20-29 year-old women had completed class 12 and only 12 per cent had a college degree. In 2022-24, more than 50 per cent had completed class 12 and 26 per cent had a college degree. More importantly, there was no difference between the proportion of young men and young women with a college degree. This increase in girls' education was accompanied by delayed marriage. In 2011-12, 76 per cent of the women in their 20s were married, by 2022-24 the proportion had dropped to 66 per cent.

This expansion of girlhood allowed women to expand control over their own lives. Marriage remains a family affair, but whereas only 42 per cent of young women in 2012 had any input in selecting their partners, by 2022, 52 per cent did. Premarital contact between spouses has historically been low, but is increasing sharply. In 2011, 30 per cent of women met their husbands before marriage, and 27 per cent connected via phone, WhatsApp, or email. By 2022, this proportion was 42 per cent and 54 per cent, respectively. Many of these changes reflect how women view their lives and families. While 23 per cent of young women in 2012 thought having more sons than daughters was essential, the proportion had fallen to 12 per cent by 2022.

Young women also began to expand their connection with the world around them. The proportion of women who felt comfortable travelling a short distance alone by bus or



CR Sasikumar

train grew from 42 per cent to 54 per cent, and membership in Self Help Groups increased from 10 per cent to 18 per cent for women in their 20s. Even political engagement has increased slightly; in 2012, 6 per cent attended a political meeting of a gram sabha or ward committee; by 2022, this proportion was 8 per cent.

These are not revolutionary changes; women continue to negotiate their lives within various constraints. But the sum total of these changes reflects the ongoing transformation in the social and normative climate in which Indian women live their lives.

However, the one area where a transformation has not even begun relates to economic opportunities. Women continue to contribute to the economy by working on family farms, and the Periodic Labour Force Survey has documented a substantial increase in this work. However, participation by women in wage labour has stagnated. The IHDS shows that the proportion of 20-29 year old women in wage labour was 18 per cent in 2012, falling to 14 per cent in 2022. Some of it may be due to increased college enrollment, but even for women in their 30s, participation in wage labour stagnated.

The new economic orthodoxy tells us that women's low levels of employment are because of restrictive social norms that look

The one area where a transformation has not even begun relates to economic opportunities. Women continue to contribute to the economy by working on family farms, and the Periodic Labour Force Survey has documented a substantial increase in this work. However, participation by women in wage labour has stagnated. Some of it may be due to increased college enrollment, but even for women in their 30s, participation in wage labour stagnated.

down on families where women work. However, among married women in our sample who were not employed, 73 per cent in 2011 said they would be happy to work if they could find suitable jobs; this proportion had grown to 80 per cent in 2022. Moreover, 72 per cent said their families would allow them to work if they could find a suitable job. These do not simply reflect wishful thinking. When MGNREGA started paying women the same amount as men, women jumped in with both feet to seek out even manual work. Today, more women work under MGNREGA than men. Improvements in transportation systems have also contributed to increased non-farm work by women.

Of the four key areas that define women's empowerment, personal efficacy, power in intra-household negotiations, societal engagement, and access to income-generating activities, we see improvements in the first three domains. In contrast, the fourth — access to employment — has stagnated. It is time to invite India's daughters to partake in the fruits of economic development; they have clearly shown that they are ready and willing to help harvest the gender dividend.

The writer is Professor and Centre Director, NCAER Data Innovation Centre and Professor Emerita, University of Maryland. Views are personal.

