



School to Work: A Tale of Missing Females in the Indian Labour Market

Dr. Debasis Barik

Senior Fellow, National Council of Applied Economic Research

India has made remarkable strides in expanding access to education for girls over the past few decades. Enrolment rates for girls in primary and secondary schools have risen significantly, and gender gaps in literacy have narrowed. Girls have surpassed boys even in gross enrolment in higher education. However, this educational success has not translated into a proportional increase in female labour force participation.

Despite robust economic growth and declining fertility, women's participation in wage work in India has not increased over the last two decades. The latest Economic Survey (2024-25) report even marked a significant dip in wage employment among women since 2017, both in rural and urban areas. According to the World Bank, working women in India dropped from 24 percent to 18 percent between 2010 and 2020. This anomaly points to systemic barriers that prevent educated women from translating their qualifications into employment opportunities.

Conservative social norms are the most commonly blamed reason for this disconnect. However, recent evidence refutes this claim. Using the latest wave of the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) data, Sonalde Desai claimed that parental aspiration and investment in girl

children have gone up over the last decade, leading to parity on enrolment in higher education and delayed marriage among girls (The Indian Express, 13 November, 2024). Young Indian women have shown considerable improvement in the first three among the four key domains of women's empowerment, i.e., personal efficacy, power in intra-household negotiations, and societal engagements, and access to income-generating activities over the last decade. They have shown their readiness to engage in income-generating activities, but a lack of suitable employment opportunities is acting as a hindrance to their success.

A job-relevant skill gap has stood out as one of the major roadblocks on the way to women's employment. Today, more women enrolled in higher education are studying arts, humanities, and social sciences, which have limited scope in providing employment. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22, in both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, a smaller number of females were enrolled in engineering and STEM courses compared to males. Despite a high enrolment rate, the choice of stream acts as a deterrent to women's employment.

In addition to this, vocational training plays a role in enhancing the employability of women. The current policy offers women limited

vocational training opportunities like apparel, tailoring, beauty and wellness, healthcare, and retail, which align with their traditional roles. However, well-paying jobs in a modern world require skills like English proficiency, digital literacy, IT and computer skills that schools often fail to provide.

Even with all these shortcomings, we need to acknowledge that we are unable to produce adequate jobs that attract young women to work and grow. Workplace discrimination based on gender makes the workplace toxic for women to work and thrive. Safety and security often pose a threat to their mobility for work. Offering on-the-job training, flexible work hours, or work-from-home options, and childcare facilities in the workplace have the potential to raise the labour force participation among Indian women.

The economic costs of low female labour force participation are profound. India is missing out on the demographic dividend that an educated female workforce could offer. In a period of low fertility, providing opportunities to Indian mothers with smaller family sizes to join the workforce would boost the economy. Moreover, the underutilization of half the population limits innovation, productivity, and inclusive growth.' ⁿⁿ