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Work force participation of women in India: A factor that needs reform

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Abstract

Earlier, women who were given due respect in the epics, generally depicted as a good wife or a good mother. Gradually things changed and the social reformers got admiration as great women. Later the warrior women came into picture and created history. And things changed to many women becoming politicians, astronauts, actress, scientists, doctors and what not. Even after all this, women's participation in workforce is negligible if compared to their male counterparts. There are many factors which lead to women leaving their jobs. Sometimes they leave because they can't adjust their timings with their profession, sometimes it's the culture that depicts a good woman sacrificing her professional life for her family, at times they face discrimination in the workplace and leave, and some leave because of harassment at the workplace. These reasons are still present in the world but due to the introduction of many acts and laws in favour of the women, their participation ratio has increased considerably. Gradually, women participation rate in the workforce is heading towards the pinnacle as education and globalization has changed the mindset of the society. Women intellect is now recognized and the importance of their participation in the workforce is also accepted as the need of the hour to become competitive in the global village.

Keywords: Workforce participation, profession, discrimination, education, globalization

Introduction

The idea of perfect womanhood is perfect independence. There is no hope of rise for that family or country where there is no estimation of women, where they live in sadness." Swami Vivekananda.

The above quoted lines, famously uttered by a 19th century Indian monk way before India woke up to its present status of being an independent and recognized nation-state, addresses an insight which informs the development discourse all over the world today.

India is a country rich in its cultural heritage. Here, women are worshipped as Goddesses. Since time immemorial, women have paid their due contribution in varied literature. We have heard of the contribution of women in wars, battles, court related matters and education also. We have the example of Rani Laxmi bai of Jhansi; who fought against the British, Savitribai Phule; the pioneer of India's feminist movement, Chand Bibi and many more. Many reformists in the later period emerged to rule out many prevailing atrocities in the society like Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar who worked towards widow re-marriage from 1854 onwards, the first school for girls named, "Bhide Wada" which opened in the year 1848, Lord William Bentinck who abolished child marriage and many such advancements.

India being an agricultural land, have many women who participated in farming on their own land or worked in others in their fields. Gradually, after the advent of education, they started working in various other fields and moved to other cities, states and countries also. This was the result of prevalence of education and the masses becoming literate. It led to change of mindset which made them think that education and professionalism of a girl child is also immensely important. Now, women are working in all fields. They are respected and solicited in various profession but due to cultural hinderances like marriage, childbirth, mindset of some particular people towards working women, night shifts, family responsibilities etc., they are either not preferred in a job or they have to leave their jobs.

Thus, the workforce consisting women is still not equal to men. India's 21% female LFPR (Labour Force Participation Ratio) is not even half the global average 47% ^[1]. The female labour participation rate in India had fallen to 20.3% in 2019 from more than 26% in 2005,

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according to World Bank estimates, compared with 30.5% in neighboring Bangladesh and 33.7% in Sri Lanka ^[2].

Literature review

One of the reasons for women leaving their jobs is expecting a multi tasker out of them. Men and women both face stress in the workplace. But the stress is more to women in comparison to because they have to play many roles in the home and workplace as well that results in conflict between their roles as a person and as a worker ^[3]. There are gaps in remuneration based on genders and it stretches somewhere between 8% to 48% ^[4]. So, the workforce participation of women, even if starts enthusiastically, faces hitches because of many factors from their end and because of these personal factors, they face discrimination in remuneration also. Unequal pay is not only demoralising for women but it is an issue which impacts the economy and thus, should be dealt with severity. Inequality between gender pay and their resultant participation in the labour force is a big moral issue but it is an economic challenge as well which has to be dealt with on a critical basis ^[5]. A report suggests that the employers prefer appointing and promoting male employees over female employees because of the career break they face due to their family and biological responsibilities. Their payments are also kept relatively lower because of these reasons ^[6]. Factors prevailing in one's country also pose various restrictions on women who want to work. In India Scheduled Caste and Scheduled tribes and Muslims are those who are abstained mostly from working in any sector ^[7]. Females do not have equal employment opportunities if compared to their male counterparts. In many industries and occupations women are not preferred and even not given employments though the positive side of it is there was a growth in their employment by 8.7 million between 1994 and 2010 ^[8]. Many women from the rural and urban areas both, are indulged in unpaid activities like childcare, household chores and elderly care. It can be taken care of if the local government bodies open other options like elderly care centres, child care centres, preschools and so on ^[9]. Women contribution to GDP in India is only 17%. Almost 20 million females left being a part of the workforce between 2005-2017 ^[10].

Indian culture and women workers' importance in jobs

In our society we have an inclination towards statements like "Home and childcare taste sweeter to women while business and profession taste sweeter to men." The Indian culture hinges woman's stature on the role of bearing and rearing of children and attending to household chores. The fact that "woman working for payment outside her home has been undervalued and less respected and a woman working for her family's farm is more socially acceptable than a woman working in the same field as a paid or waged labourer. It clearly highlights the irony on the fate of the women entrapped because of some orthodox cultural norms. Fast forward to 2021, 75 years since independence – the situation stands such that reports indicate a dwindling tendency in participation rates of women in the formal labour-force participation rates declined from 34.1 per cent in 1999-00 to 27.2 per cent in 2011-12, and wide gender differences in participation rate also persists ^[11]. Patriarchy has had an upper hand in general in most traditional norms across the country. This form of

discrimination has over time acquired the status of a norm, permeating the overall cultural attitude towards determining claims of women at multiple levels.

Due to a disproportionate workload in terms of care giving duties at home, women most often have less time for other activities such as paid work and education. In a sample of 62 countries, it is interesting to note that on an average 4.5 hours a day were devoted by men to social life and leisure while for women, the number of hours was reduced to 3.9 in India.

This difference is indoctrinated in the minds of large section of society. The poor participation of women in the country's workforce could perhaps be explained by socio-cultural attitudes that prevail among families that are not given to modern ways of thought. The more subtle expression of patriarchy is through symbolism i.e., giving messages of the inferiority of women through legends that highlight the self-sacrificing, pure image of women. It is also expressed through the ritual practices which day in and day out emphasize the role of women as faithful wives and devout mothers. The traditional norms restrict women from having aspirations beyond marriage. This is the huge cultural indoctrination which worsens the gender skew of our workforce largely.

Thus, we see that throughout the country, there are strong social and cultural norms that perpetuate power imbalances between men and women. A study conducted over the South Asian population concluded that gender inequalities are deep rooted in the culture but it is also prevailing in the policies and institutional framework which altogether hampers the female employment ratio ^[12].

The society is hostile towards women who break the ice and reframe their priorities on their own.

Educated married women in urban areas have been found to be so socially conditioned to give weightage to their care giving duties at home that there are also astonishing instances of women willingly leaving their jobs to cater to "socially implied primary duties and roles" of housekeeping and child bearing. The reason lies here also in the culturally levied disproportionate pressure to sustain the marriage on the shoulders of women driving them to often compromise with their work life aspirations.

Jobs for educated women and uneducated ones

Women's participation in workforce is also due to the difference in education system. An educated women can't accept any job that comes her way and the same way an uneducated woman also can't take up a job present in the market. The male literacy rate is 84.7% and that for females is 70.3%, showing a gap of around 14 percentage between the sexes at the national level. The gap is more in the rural areas. These educated women have to choose employment on the basis of educational qualifications. They can be an educator, doctor, an inspector etc. while an uneducated women can get a job as per her skill acquired and polished since long like handicrafts, tailoring etc. Being literate infuses confidence and a woman looks for the job according to her comfort level and potential. She cannot take up any job that comes her way. Girls at different education level have different job choices and women with skills but uneducated have to take up jobs according to their potential only. These things limit the participation of women in jobs because not all are learned and not all are skillful. They need to update themselves according to the changing

scenario but it is not always possible due to family responsibilities and other societal hurdles.

Unequal pays for equal work

The Indian Government is concerned about the welfare of its citizen and for that many statutory laws are made by the government. Though, the implementation of the same is done from the government's end but still there is much negligence in the follow up of the same. Indian government has made the Equal Remuneration Act 1976 to eradicate any possibility of discrimination in getting wages according to gender, race, community etc. but there are uncountable unorganized sectors which still have discrimination on the basis of certain unestablished criteria. In many countries and in India also women face inequality in payment of wages^[13]. The inequality in the gender pay gap, is 25% higher in the health workforce than in any other sector. Women in the health workforce around the world earn 28% less than men, and 34% less in India, whereas global estimates show that women across sectors are paid about 22% less than men (ILO, 2018a, 2018b)^[14]. Women participation in the workforce gets affected by the absence of employment opportunities for them and many a times they have to offer their services for free^[15].

According to the Gender Gap Index in 2020, India has slipped to the 112th position from the previous 108th in 2018. According to this report, it will take India close to 100 years to fill the gap in various sects. It stands 149th in economic participation and opportunities, and 117th in wage equality for same kind of work^[16].

Women considered a liability

Women since ages immemorial have been regarded as "inferior sex" due to social, economic and mental constructs. When we think of uniform clad soldiers, CEOs, engineers, scientists etc., we are more likely to imagine men compared to women. Women have been treated as damsel in distress and her education fees as burden. Boys are treated as investment and girls as liability. Global economy could be earning more than \$160.2 trillion if women were paid for household work and equal pay was provided. Women are seen as "paraya dhan" since parents have to pay dowry at many places and after getting married economically supports in-laws. This rises cases of gender bias including lower female education rate, lower number of women in workforce and also unequal pay for equal work. Menstruation & pregnancy leaves have raised question at her performance and capabilities which make women feel like a liability. Sexual harassment and casual sexism at workplace have become a new grim reality. There is a popular perception that lower literacy is proportional to women being considered as liabilities. But reports have suggested distorted sex ratios can be observed even in metropolises. Freeing the potential of women is the fastest multiplier that we can have in terms of national growth. It is an accelerator in eradicating poverty. But considering half the population i.e., women as liability, smash that opportunity.

Lack of entrepreneurship spirit and reach to government schemes

Maintain a work-life balance hasn't come easy. Saying goodbye to my son when he says 'Mamma don't leave me...' still breaks my heart. – Aditi Jussawalla.

Women entrepreneurs is an emerging phenomenon. In the olden times, women were educationist, social reformers, field workers but not entrepreneurs. The phenomenon is taking pace now but even then, we still have less women in business. This could be because of the long-rooted phenomenon in the minds of people which coaxes the society to think that women can't do business.

Government has launched the 'Annapurna Scheme' for women in food and catering industry, 'MUDRA Scheme' for business loans, 'Dena Shakti' scheme for women in agriculture, retail, manufacturing and small enterprises etc. The aid is a positive step towards development of women entrepreneurs but it is beyond the reach of many women who have productive ideas but lack of access to these schemes or they are unaware of the means due to lack of support from any knowledgeable individual.

Reasons for low participation of women worker in the work force:

Unhealthy competition at workplace

An unhealthy competition focuses on result by however means it is achieved. Here, the employer is also involved as he wants the target to be achieved and the means to achieve it, whether positive or negative is of least importance. It leads the employees to follow a course of action which could be unhealthy. This is faced by women also at workplace. If a woman faces this type of competition in continuation, she either quits the job or remains restless. Such unhealthy competitions also lead to lowering of interest towards work in women.

Male dominancy/ Male chauvinism

Male chauvinism is the likeliness for men to feel that they are superior and their stature lies above women and that they should be the dominant and principal sex because of their "so-called superiorly bestowed mental and physical abilities". Male chauvinists tend to attempt to assert their superiority in any situation where they interact with women. When the defiling concept of "male chauvinism" enters into the workplace, woman rather than catering to a job market, become subjugated to the clutches of a chauvinistic market. The male chauvinist refuses to acknowledge the rights of women to become equal to men and feels as though they are the lesser sex and dismisses the viewpoints of woman worker starkly without giving them due consideration. Often their ideas will lead them to dominate on women by force and hurl their aggressive viewpoint to supersede the opinion of woman leading them to suppress them ultimately. They tend to berate them for having their own opinions and will correct them for not following them. Because this male dominance at workplace, many women who have a flair to excel abstain from being a part of the workforce. Either they quit the jobs or work without offending anyone to keep their mental peace intact.

Gender discrimination

Gender discrimination is the biggest hurdle in the life of a woman who cannot take up a job of her choice. Even the government has made laws to curb nightshifts for women and suitable working hours for women which is a relief for them but not for the employer. Gender discrimination starts from one's house due to illiteracy, patriarchal mindset, cultural values, ingrained norms and deep-rooted orthodox thought process. It happens at workplace also coz women

are provided certain rights in the form of Maternity Act, Factories Act etc. the employer who is bound by the statutory rights follows the laws but most of the unorganized sectors where the government control is not direct, try to flout the rules by giving lesser pay to women or by discriminating against them which leads to their turnover in the long run.

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment includes, unwelcomed sexual advances, unsolicited sexual remarks, requests for sexual favours, suggesting pornography without consent and other verbal or physical harassment of a physical nature in the workplace or learning environment according to Equal Environment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).

Studies shows that 1 out of 3 working women are subjected to sexual harassment. In year 2007, U.S. EEOC registered 12,510 new charges of sexual harassment against women. It sometimes includes 'quid-pro-quo' demand which means man at higher position asking for sexual favours in return of promotion or foreign assignment. If women take a firm stand against sexual advances it can lead to a "hostile work environment" or interrupt an employee's success. "MeToo" movement against sexual assault at workplace is one such example. 'MeToo' a viral hashtag leading the trend in October 2017 threw light upon widespread prevalence of sexual assault in workplace. It popularized soon after sexual misconduct allegations against Harvey Weinstein. American activist Tarana Burke has been first reported to use this term as early in 2006 but phrase 'MeToo' was popularized by American actress Alyssa Milano on twitter in 2017 that "gave people a sense of magnitude of the problem." But we have limited number of women taking a stand against a wrong done. They keep mum due to social boundations or prefer to leave jobs instead of fighting with the prevalent system. In 1997, Supreme court laid guidelines in Vishakha vs State of Rajasthan case that any such act should result in criminal remedies under Indian penal code or civil remedies. It also demanded establishment of complaint committees known as Grievance redressal committees to be headed by women with at least 50% of female members and should have third party engagement like NGOs. In 2013, Indian government came up with Sexual harassment at workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act and POSHCO Act. HR professionals should ensure that companies should define unacceptable behaviours in code of conduct handbook and official policies, ensure harassment prevention training, outline reporting procedures and investigate claims.

Lack of flexi hours and social responsibilities

Flexi hours help anyone to go ahead with the work given without compromising on her personal life. A woman, when gets into family responsibility needs some time to adjust in the new environment and she has to leave job if the new family members or the employer are not ready to adjust with her. If at that crucial time, she will be given an opportunity to work from home, flexi hours or week to work, she would be able to continue her profession and there would be no break in her career. There are many such examples where a woman had to leave her flourishing career because she was expected to look after her family and give up her job and not her husband. According to Momspresso, 48% women leave their jobs midway due to family responsibilities, 45% leave because of challenges during the infancy of a child, 35%

leave for maternity break and do not return after childbirth and 16% have to take leave because they are expected to take care of the elders at home. There are many females who contribute towards the economy but since they are not in the formal sector, their work is not counted in the official records. Other than that, many of the works which women do is taking care of the family, raising children, cooking meals for the household and even helping hands in the businesses without getting paid^[17].

Suitable jobs for women workers

There are rigid norms in the society, though the norms are reforming but they still need a lot of improvement. There are some jobs which are not considered appropriate for the fair sex. This does not implement on all, but many parents want their girl child to work in a place where she doesn't have to encounter many males, she has a safe environment, she has the time for her family, she comes back by afternoon or does it part-time. Only 19.9% of the total labor force in India are women according to World Bank Group, "Labor Force, Female (% of Total Labor Force) – India," The World Bank Databank (2020). Analysis of NSSO data (1970 – 2018) shows that women have largely been undertaking labor-intensive, home-based, and informal work, concentrated in low-productivity sectors^[18].

Women's participation in work force- What can be done?

We have come a long way since the Vedic era. Women were always given a respectful position in India. They are worshipped in the form of goddesses. But their contribution in work outside the confines of her house was never a welcomed move. We have to change our mindset towards the long prevailing norms about women. Women have the potential to stand tall in all walks of life and that can be decided only if given an opportunity to her. Many women in India have proved that they can excel in any field; they can be a scientist like Dr. Aditi Pant, they can be an educationist like Savitri Bai Phule, they can be a reformist like Mother Teresa, they can be an author like Sudha Murthy, they can be an entrepreneur like Kiran Majumdar Shaw.

Resolution of any kind of discrimination starts from the family. Women should be given equal opportunities of education by the orthodox families, so that they can prove their mettle. Instead of saving money for their marriage, families should save money for their education. They should be made fearless in taking up tasks, and they should be taught to stand for themselves and take risks instead of making them timid. They should be taught to polish their personalities so as to win against adverse conditions and not limit themselves to the confines of their homes. They should be made independent and feel proud of their earnings instead of taking refuge in the arms of their fathers or husbands. Access of government aids should be made available through service centers and it should be an easy task to approach. Government officials should be appointed to visit the remote places and ignorant women to draw out budding entrepreneurs from their shells. The maternity benefit act 1961, the equal remuneration act 1976 etc. should be implemented on all organizations irrespective of their sector.

To increase woman labour force and change societal arena, general awareness should be generated among the conservatives. Also, Women education should be promoted

through campaigns and programs. Some studies suggest that the training and development of women should not be confined to giving only the technological and managerial know-how rather it should inculcate the basic literacy, numerical ability, social knowledge, political viewpoints, gender awareness and learning beneficial life-skills^[19].

The atmosphere of workplace and the surrounding should be cooperative with understanding and adjustable feature as when women are emotionally connected to a place through their sense of safety, their work power crosses their maximum level. For women it should be a willful decision to work extra hours, without pressuring under tag of productivity loss.

Provisions for vocational and technical knowledge will also catalyze the impact as belief in one's ability affects approach towards an opportunity. With this post covid pandemic impact where jobs are straining to earn revenue there should be a mutual collaboration and everyone - male and female should have equal contribution. This can be ensured by crafting framework of policies to unleash the full potential of women. A literate woman is more likely to enter the labour force in comparison to an illiterate woman. Some household see women education as an investment and some as an expenditure^[20]. If all household start seeing women education as investment, things will become more beneficial for women.

The best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women. The moves like to raise the age after which women can legally marry from 18 to 21 which can spur greater female work participation through extended education and a mutual contribution in child-rearing. The families which consider education as an important, want their girl children to study as much as possible. Sometimes due to continuing education, young women cannot become a part of the workforce^[21].

It should be brought more and more into the picture of the expanse of India to make the nation touch the sky-rocketing pillars of success.

Conclusion

In the light of the above study, it can be concluded that women's participation in the workforce is deficient due to many factors. A single factor cannot be pointed out for the same. Women face discrimination in the workplace as the employers already know about the biological obstacles faced by the women and which could hamper her regularity and consistency at the workplace. Studies have shown that women have dual responsibilities in the society and that forbids the continuation of their professional career. The traditional mindset of parents and the society pushes them to early marriage and settling down for them mostly means getting married and have progeny.

Not everything is threatening as the government has made many laws and acts to make women continue their work without any obstacle. There are acts like Maternity benefit act, 1961, Equal Remuneration act 1976 and Factories Act which puts a bar on employers from employing women at night shifts. Thus, workforce participation of women is gradually taking a great shift towards betterment. Education has also played a significant role in making society aware of the importance of education and professionalism of women. Now getting married or raise children is not the only consideration for women rather they are taught to be independent and educated. Self-dependent women, who

have carved a niche for themselves in their profession, get immense respect by the society.

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