

Working Women in India: A Study of Select Aspects

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Abstract

As per the traditional mindset of our society; decision-making, authority, commanding respect from others, are amongst the issues which don't consist of women in themselves. But it is fortunate to mention that patriarchal boundaries are diminishing constantly. Increasing diversity or feminization has become the symbolic feature of Indian workforce in the global arena. With the total of 481.7 million, workforce of India (being the second largest in the world) consists of 149.9 million (31.1 percent) women. India's economic growth is remarkable in its reach and impressive for pulling millions out of poverty, but women are still missing at virtually every level of professional life. Growth has not any meaning and relevance without women inclusion. Women are India's half demographic dividend, if they are given the community support and ample opportunities. With other facts and findings, based on secondary data, the research paper encloses the crucial objective to highlight the present status of working women in India with reference to select aspects of demography, politics and economy. This paper is an attempt to explore the relevance of women workforce for the economic upliftment of the country.

KEYWORDS: Gender issues, Legal protection, Women empowerment, Women workforce.

Introduction

Gender discourse and involvement in economic activities is not a new topic to be discussed but due to its growing importance worldwide gradually, it is the ever explorable one. Active participation of women and their status in every sphere is now a matter of concern for every country and community who is on the way of inclusive and sustainable growth. Policymakers and thinkers consider women empowerment as a key to the real development. 'By force' factors (poverty, rising familial requirements, death or inability of father / brother / husband) behind the involvement of women in vocational activities may share a major proportion, but 'by choice' factors are also there, representing their zeal to attain self-satisfaction and self-dependent position. Role conversion of women from "homemaker" to "breadwinner" is today's prevailing trend.

In Indian context, the picture seems to be contradictory. As per the traditional mindset of society, woman is considered as "homemaker". However, the modern viewpoint treats her as "homemaker" on societal front and "breadwinner" on economic front. But it is fortunate to mention that patriarchal boundaries are getting demolished constantly with the passage of time. Women are emerging in the form of new entrants and vibrant leaders in the country. Therefore, it becomes interesting and relevant as well to highlight the issue of "Working Women in India".

Objectives

This research paper is an attempt to explore the importance of women workforce for the upliftment of the country as a whole. To highlight the present status

of working women in India with reference to demographic, political and economic aspects; is the crucial objective of this study. Extensive review of the relevant literature has been performed to attain the objective and to arrive at the conclusion. Various books, journals, articles, media reports and websites are the sources considered for this paper.

Demographic Aspect

This portion of the study encloses the demographic characteristics of India. Without analyzing the population composition, one cannot identify the actual status of women on various parameters. Proportion of women in different geographical and economic divisions is quite important to fulfill the objective of this attempt. The latest 15th census of India conducted in 2011 along with that of 2001 have been investigated to come up with meaningful results.

First of all, the proportion of women in total population is 48.46 percent and sex-ratio shows the hike of 10 points in 2011 from 2001, i.e., 943 and 933 respectively. In rural areas the sex-ratio has increased from 946 to 949. The corresponding improve in urban areas has been of 29 points from 900 to 929. Kerala has recorded the highest sex-ratio in respect of total population (1084), rural population (1078) and urban population (1091). The lowest sex-ratio in rural areas has been recorded in Chandigarh (690). The corresponding value in urban areas has been reported in Daman & Diu (551). Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra; these seven states and one Union Territory Lakshadweep, show fall in the sex-ratio in rural areas.

Literacy among women is another important factor to be considered here. For this purpose, Effective Literacy Rate ($\frac{\text{No. of Literate persons aged 7 and above} \times 100}{\text{Total Population aged 7 and above}}$) has been used. The ELR in India works out to 73 percent (Rural-67.8 percent; Urban-84.1percent). There has been an increase of 8.2 percentage points in the ELR (9.1 percentage points in rural areas and 4.2 percentage points in urban areas) during the last decade. Female Literacy Rate works out to 64.6 percent (Rural-57.9 percent; Urban-79.1percent) which was 53.7 percent in 2001. The highest female literacy rate in rural areas is reported in Kerala (90.8 percent), while the lowest is depicted in Rajasthan (45.8 percent). In urban areas, the lowest female literacy rate is returned in Jammu & Kashmir (69.0 percent) and the highest in Mizoram (97.3 percent). The female literacy rate gets amplified significantly by 10.9 percentage points during 2001-2011.

After identifying the trends of quality and quantity of “*Aadhi Aabadi*”, it is worth to talk about workforce composition. As per census 2011, the total number of workers (who have worked for at least one day during the reference year) in India, is 481.7 million. Of this, 331.9 million workers are males (68.9 percent) and 149.9 million (31.1 percent) are females. However, out of total workforce 34.94 percent represents rural female workers and 21.0 percent depicts the proportion of urban female workers. It is also important to note that the percentage of main workers among the female workers is 59.6 percent. Work Participation Rate (WPR) for the country works out to 39.8 percent. This is marginally higher than the corresponding WPR of 39.1 percent in census 2001. But the marginal reduction of WPR among women (from 25.6 percent in 2001 to 25.5 percent in 2011) should be treated as the primary indicator by the policymakers. State wise data here present a very strange fact that Himachal Pradesh (44.8 percent) ranks first in WPR for women workers, while the lowest female WPR has been reported from NCT of Delhi (10.6 percent). About

two of every three women are engaged in agrarian activities either as a cultivator or as an agricultural labourer. Remaining working women belong to household industries and other workers categories. All these figures can be summarized as, despite having the world's second largest workforce, the participation of women in economic activities is still disappointingly low. Significant hikes in sex-ratio and effective literacy rate represent the efforts of government and concerned authorities but the current plans need to be reviewed and seriously implemented in the light of desired outcomes in this regard.

Political Aspect

Political engagement of women does not limit to only participation in elections and allied activities, rather it comprises freedom of movement, freedom from the risk of violence, decision-making over family formation and having a voice in society and influencing policy. Women's meaningful participation in politics affects both the range of policy issues that are considered and the types of solutions that are proposed. Within politics women can play various roles, such as, voters, political party members, candidates and office bearers, and members of the civil society. Research conducted by International Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) in 2002 shows that many countries have seen a gradual shrinking of the disparities in voting participation between women and men in the post-World War II era, and in some countries, like Norway, women are out pacing their male counterparts in the voting booth. At the end of 2012, the global average of women in parliament stood at 20.3 percent, up from 19.5 percent in 2011. Percentage of women in parliaments (2012) region wise across the globe is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

As per the Election Commission of India, there were 54 percent male voters and 46 percent female voters in General Elections held in 2014 for the 16th Lok Sabha. Just about 12 percent women candidates contested in these elections. Out of 543 total members in this lower house, there are just 61 women seating MPs representing the portion with 11.23 percent. However, in 2009 this number was 59. This figure highlights the gap between Indian and global averages as shown in Table 1 earlier. On the contrary, research conducted earlier state that women leaders can lead the society in a much better way. According to the IPU survey (2008), female parliamentarians tend to prioritize social issues such as, childcare, equal pay, parental leave and pensions; physical concerns like reproductive rights, physical safety and gender based violence; and development matters consisting poverty alleviation and service delivery. In India, research conducted by Beaman, L. et al. (2007) showed that West Bengal villages with greater representation of women in local councils witnessed an investment in drinking water facilities double that of villages with low levels of elected women, with roads that were almost twice as likely to be in good condition. The study also revealed that the presence of a woman as council leader reduces the gender gap in school attendance by 13 percentage points. Although our constitution (as per 73rd amendment passed in 1992) provides reservation of one-third share to women at local level in villages and urban areas, yet there is an urgent need of many efforts to include women in politics and policy-making so that our country can successfully address the issues related to security, jobs, human rights, physical well-being and human development.

Economic Aspect

Report of International Labor Organisation (ILO) states that proportion of women in total workforce of India is just 23 percent which is far that of China (75.2 percent), South Asia (36.0 percent), East Asia (67.0 percent) and the global average (53 percent). Current status of working women in India depicts, 96.0 percent of female workforce is engaged in unorganised sector. A survey of 131 countries regarding female labour force participation ranks India at 120th position. Report of United Nations Gender Inequality Index (GII, 2014), has ranked India a depressing 134th out of 187 nations behind countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq, based on factors like labor force participation. Other facts in this regard show that only 14 percent are female executives among the total senior management position holders in Indian corporate sector. In Technology and Engineering stream ratio between boys and girls is 7:3. Share of women justice seated in High Courts of India is just 8.5 percent. Indian women's ranking on economic empowerment parameters is 0.3 in which 1.0 would mean equality with their male counterparts. Before reaching the middle of careers, the dropout rate of Indian women is 48 percent. India's economic growth is remarkable in its reach and impressive for pulling millions out of poverty, but women are still missing at virtually every level of professional life. Despite this, hurdles have failed to stop Indian women's talent. Global arena is illuminating with some Indian female luminaries. Version of 500 most powerful women of International magazine Forbes (2015), also consists of six personalities from Indian perspective.

Table 2 about here

Framework to safeguard and promote Working Women

This portion of the study includes two categories mentioned hereunder:

- i. **Legal framework safeguarding the working women in India:** Here comes various laws and legislations in the picture which are framed to provide safety to women at their workplace.
 - a. There are some constitutional provisions under different articles of 14, 15, 15 (3), 16, 39 (a), 39 (b), 39 (c) and 42.
 - b. Legal provisions have immense relevance in this regard:
 - The Employees State Insurance Act, 1948.
 - Various sections of Indian Penal Code, 1960 viz., 326 (A & B), 354, 376, etc.
 - The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 (Amended in 1995).
 - The Contract Labour (Regulation & Abolition) Act, 1976.
 - The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976.
 - The Factories (Amendment) Act, 1986.
 - Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013.
- ii. **Government Initiatives in this way:** Establishment of 'National Commission of Women' in January, 1992 is the first milestone on the way to ensure women empowerment. Government of India also approved her affirmation to Conservation on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 1993 which was the global effort backed by UNO to make sure gender equality in all respect. National Policy for the Empowerment of Women also has been formed in 2001 and National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW) has been launched on 08th March, 2010. Besides this,

annual allotment of funds through the Union Budget to various schemes is another initiative taken by our governments since independence. Union Budget for the financial year 2015-16 consists of following schemes and programmes:

- a. Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (*SABLA*) is under implementation since 2010-11. It is a comprehensive scheme that has been formulated to address the multi-dimensional problems of adolescent girls (11-18 years). The allocation of *SABLA* for the year 2015-16 is Rs.10 crore under Central Plan. Funding to States / UTs shall be via *Nirbhaya Fund*, for which an allocation of Rs.680 crore has been made by Ministry of Finance.
- b. Under the reconstruction Schemes, there is a new scheme namely National Mission for Empowerment of Women including *Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojna* (IGMSY). The scheme has two components viz., IGMSY and ‘Umbrella Scheme’ for protection and development of women. The allocation for IGMSY for the year 2015-16 is Rs.438 crore.
- c. Other important women empowerment schemes of the Ministry of Women and Child Development include Support to Training and Employment Programme (STEP); Micro-Credit Scheme of *Rashtriya Mahila Kosh* (RMK), Hostels for Working Women etc. The Ministry is implementing “*Ujjwala*” scheme, which provides support for rescue, rehabilitation, reintegration and repatriation of victims of trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation.

Need and Suggestions for the Upliftment of Women Workers

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) released a report on 08th March, 2014 (International Women’s Day) titled, “Power, Voice and Rights: A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific” and identified that one of the factor behind slow growth of this region is Women’s slow progress. Main points of conclusion of this report were:

- Owning assets like land and home empowers women and reduces risk of violence.
- Gender equality is a right which promotes good economics and democracy.

The report also has projected that India’s annual GDP growth rate could jump 4 percent if more women joined the workforce as well as it can make Indians 5 percent richer.

Following suggestions can be helpful for the empowerment of women workers:

- Banks and other financial service providers need now to extend credit beyond micro credit level. ‘*Bhartiya Mahila Bank*’ (BMB) can play a pivotal role to enhance women entrepreneurship nationwide.
- Private sector must be given more incentives to hire women at senior and junior level as well.
- Government must create better training programmes for women in non-traditional fields. After all, jobs like car repairing, plumbing, carpentry and computer maintenance pay more than data entry or sewing jobs.
- There must be better institutional support to ensure the “Work-Life Balance” of women employees. Flexitime, job sharing, tele-commuting, career breaks,

on-site child care centre (crèche), special leave; are some of the modern techniques which can be judiciously applied to make a proper fit between work life and home life of women staff.

- Own community steps by forming collectives, networks and Self Help Groups (SHGs) like the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), they can create their voice for communal bargaining rights as well as co-operative credit and savings systems.

Conclusion

No doubt, growth has not meaning and relevance without women inclusion. Women are India's half demographic dividend, if they are given the community support and ample opportunities. They cannot only become financially independent, but could also work as the engine of the country's prosperity.

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Table 1: Percentage of Women in Parliaments by Region

| Regions | Total (Percentage) | Single / Lower House (Percentage) | Upper House / Senate (Percentage) |
|---|--------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Americas | 24.1 | 23.9 | 25.0 |
| Asia | 17.9 | 18.4 | 14.1 |
| Europe (excluding Nordic countries because of zero percent women) | 23.2 | 21.9 | 21.5 |
| Middle East | 13.2 | 15.7 | 6.8 |
| Pacific | 15.3 | 12.7 | 36.0 |
| Sub-Saharan Africa | 20.4 | 20.9 | 17.5 |

*Source: The World Bank's World Development Report (WDR2012).

Table 2: List of Indian Women included in Forbes 2015

| Name of the Personality | Rank | Introduction, specialties and expertise |
|-------------------------|------|---|
| Indira Nooyi | 15th | Chairperson and CEO of Pepsico, whose net revenue makes it the second largest food & beverage firm in the world. Her recognition includes 2 reputed degrees, 6 honorary doctorates, the Bernard Medal of Honour and the Padma Bhushan. |
| Arundhati Bhattacharya | 30th | Chief Managing Director of SBI. First woman to be the chairperson of SBI in 2013. |
| Chanda Kochar | 35th | CEO and MD of ICICI Bank, the second largest banking system and the largest bank in the country. This year, she has also been listed in the TIME magazine's list of 100 most influential people in the world. |
| Padmasree Warrior | 84th | Chief Technology and Strategy Officer at Cisco Systems, an American MNC that manufactures and sells networking equipments. |
| Kiran Mazumdar Shaw | 85th | Founder and Chairperson of Biocon Ltd. and also the Chairperson of IIM-Bangalore. Biocon Ltd. is India's largest publicly treated bio - pharmaceutical company, which valued its revenue at \$460 billion last year and distributes its products in 85 countries worldwide. She has also received Padma Bhushan and Padma Shri. |

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| Shobhana Bhartia | 93rd | Chairperson of 'Hindustan Times' media, Endeavour India and the Pro – Chancellor of the famous Birla Institute of Technology, Pilani. She has also been awarded with Padma Shri. |
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*Source: Forbes Magazine, 2015.