

BRIDGING THE GENDER EQUITY GAP: THE WAY FORWARD

Gender inequality continues to remain a major barrier to human development. Women and girls are continued to be discriminated against in provision of basic facilities like health, nutrition, education, etc. This discrimination manifests later by way of their lesser involvement in economic activities, labour force participation as well as in political representation. This has serious negative consequences not only for the development of the capabilities of women, but also for the progress and development of the world as a whole.

The World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Report 2021 has highlighted the need for urgent action in this regard. India's overall ranking has slipped to 140th position from the 112th position in 2020 in the Global Gender Gap Index. This index benchmarked 156 countries using tools for cross country comparison and provides a numerical grading for the gender gap between men and women in four key areas. This index can help countries identify the weak spots and then prioritize the policies for course correction that will most effectively close the gender gaps in the identified areas.

The report used fourteen variables to create the index and thirteen out of these are from publicly available "hard data" indicators from organizations such as International Labour Organisation (ILO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Health Organisation (WHO). The report examines the following four overall areas of inequalities between men and women globally.

1. Economic participation and opportunity outcomes on salaries, participation levels and access to high-skilled employment;
2. Educational attainment outcomes on access to basic and higher level education
3. Political empowerment outcomes on representation in decision-making structures
4. Health and survival outcomes on life expectancy and sex ratio etc.

In the case of India, most of the decline occurred on the political empowerment subindex, where India regressed 13.5 percentage points, with a significant decline in the number of women Ministers from 23.1 per cent in 2019 to 9.1 per cent in 2021. Though this is an area of concern, it has also been seen that the report is based on data regarding political representation of women in the legislatures only. The percentage of women among the elected representatives at the Gram Panchayat level (decentralized government at the village level) has seen an increasing trend. Although the Constitution provides for "not less than one third" reservation for women in Panchayats, it is seen that 21 Indian states have provided for 50 per cent representation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. As on date, out of about 31 lakh elected representatives of Panchayats, 14.5 lakh are women. This translates into 46% of elected representatives in decentralized governance of the country being women. This is a large number, though this has not been incorporated in the WEF report.



¹ Global Gender Gap Report 2021, World Economic Forum

² Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Govt of India, Annual Report 2020 - 2021

Notwithstanding the above, economic participation of women in the society has declined. Improvement in this key sector is urgently required and this would have a significant influence on the other areas as well. As per the WEF report, decline took place in the economic participation and opportunity subindex and India's gender gap on this dimension has widened by 3 per cent this year, leading to a 32.6 per cent gap closed till date.

The indicators used in the report for economic participation and opportunity are labour force participation, wage equality for similar work, estimated earned income, women as senior officials, managers, professional and technical workers.

According to the report, among the main drivers of this decline is a decrease in women's labour force participation rate, which fell from 24.8 per cent to 22.3 per cent. In addition, the share of women in professional and technical roles also declined to 29.2 per cent. The share of women in senior and managerial positions also remains low. Only 14.6 per cent of the senior positions are held by women and there are only 8.9 per cent firms with female top managers. Further, the estimated earned income of women in India is only one-fifth of men's, which puts the country among the bottom 10 countries on this indicator.

However in terms of literacy, 96.2 per cent of the educational attainment subindex gender gap has been closed, with parity achieved in primary, secondary and tertiary education. Though gender gaps still persist in terms of overall literacy, almost one third (34.2 %) of women are illiterate as compared to 17.6 per cent of men, there is a definite improvement and the gap is narrowing. Unfortunately, the closing of gender gap in terms of literacy is not being reflected in women's economic participation and provision of economic opportunity. On the contrary the participation of women in labour force has gone down.

The reasons for this decrease in economic participation need to be analyzed and action taken to rectify this. It is quite obvious that reducing the size of the population/ pool to draw people from, for paid economic activity can only have an adverse effect on the economic growth of the country. According to an article analyzing the reasons for this downfall, in the *Financial Express*, it was stated that unpaid care work continues to be a woman's responsibility, with women spending on an average five hours per day on domestic work, as against 30 minutes for men (NSSO, 2019). Women face inordinate mobility restrictions such that only 54 percent can even go to a nearby market alone (NFHS, 2015-16). Women regularly sacrifice wages, career progression, and education opportunities to meet family responsibilities. In addition there are safety considerations, and other restrictions.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also affected women more, resulting in massive job losses for them, especially informal workers, and slower recovery of their microbusinesses. It has also increased their domestic work, deepened gender digital divides, disrupted girls' schooling and placed millions of female health workers at risk.

It further suggests that to chart a gender-sensitive socio-economic recovery, post-COVID-19, the government, the private sector, media, and the social sector need to work together to improve working conditions, reduce wage gaps, increase opportunities for women across sectors, and change mindsets. State governments may establish gender-based employment targets for urban public works. Central or state governments can consider introducing wage subsidies to incentivise hiring women in micro, small and medium enterprises. Governments could introduce mandatory or incentives-based gender targets in skill training institutions. Corporates should track the proportion of women at different levels of seniority across job roles. Firms and NGOs should come together to invest in bridging the digital gender divide as well.

According to a Mc Kinsey report, during Covid, despite the added stress and exhaustion, women were rising to the moment as stronger leaders and taking on the extra work that came with this. Women compared to men at the same level, are doing more to support their teams and advance diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

Increasing the number of women in the work force not only has a positive impact on women empowerment but also on the overall development of society and nation. The value addition that women provide in the work force is very substantial. Several empirical studies have gone to show the positive impact, that higher number of women have, on the work place. A Mc Kinsey Report has brought to the fore, that greater gender diversity on the senior executive team corresponded to the higher performance uplift in their data set. For every 10% increase in gender diversity, earnings before interest and taxes rose by 3.5%. Women leaders have a key measurable impact on an organization's bottom line. Women leaders provide a different set of skills, imaginative perspectives, and, importantly, structural and cultural differences that drive effective solutions. A more creative standpoint followed, which was seen to unplug the finer details that could go unnoticed otherwise. The 'centre for creative leadership' research has also shown that more women in workforce resulted in more job satisfaction, lesser burnout, more meaningful work and more organizational dedication not only among women but also among male employees.

³ Unseen reasons for fall in women's participation in labour force in India: *Financial Express*, online, 2nd March 2021.

⁴ Mc Kinsey Report: Women in the Workplace, September 2021.

A United Nations report 'The Time is Now' addresses the gender dimension of corruption and stresses the need to act immediately. This 2020 study underlines the importance of understanding how national, cultural and social norms interact and shape corrupt practices. It emphasizes that gender equality policies can have a positive effect in preventing and countering corruption and also vice versa. The linkage between gender empowerment and lower level of corruption has also been established through various researches/ hard data.

Another research has shown that countries with a greater proportion of women among top decision makers in legislatures have lower levels of income inequality. A greater share of women cabinet ministers resulted in greater levels of confidence in the national governments. It re-established the findings that when women hold more executive leadership positions and their companies are more profitable. Companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams are 21% more likely to outperform the national average. Increasing access to resources and women's leadership in agriculture could increase agricultural yield by 20-30%. When more women leaders hold cabinet positions, there is a trend towards increased spending on health services. Their decision-making over land and household income improves access to education and healthcare for their families.

Taking cue from the above, at the national level, there is an urgent need to mainstream gender equality in all economic policies at all levels of decision-making. Inadequate representation of women in political, technical, labour force as well as leadership roles is definitely an area of concern. Not only do we need to continue to work on improving the literacy ratio but also to bring about real empowerment through economic participation. Also the fact that girls and women are doing well academically, and the gender gap in education is being reduced, needs to be translated into increased participation of women in the work force and their contribution in economic activities.

The Covid pandemic has further hampered the progress towards gender parity and has amplified the gender gap despite the fact that a large number of women were at the forefront of the fight against Covid as essential workers in health as well as family care. The lockdown and the consequent digitalization/ online nature of work has adversely affected the informal sectors like textiles, handicrafts, and other small scale industries where women participation played an important role. There is an immediate need to revive such industries. The Government, Public Sector Undertakings and other organisations need to take affirmative action to increase the hiring /recruitment of women in the workforce, ensure that equal wages are paid to men and women. They need to create environments that are conducive to working of women, like day care system for children, rest rooms and other basic facilities for women.

Awareness generation for sharing of household burden and parental responsibilities equitably also need to be done. The gender stereotyping in childcare and household chores is to be reduced. All stakeholders should deepen their understanding of the entire gamut of issues which impact participation of the women in economic force and start making systemic changes. More researches could be commissioned to delve deeper into the causes of these gender gaps so that the lacunae can be plugged. At the societal level improving the status of women in society especially focusing on rural areas, remote areas and the economically challenged groups could be undertaken.

Structured skill development of women could be undertaken in identified areas which are likely to take off in future. Areas like cloud computing, data analysis, documentation, supply chain management and other IT based activities which are likely to be the major job providers in near future should be identified and focused on for vocational education and training. If required, re-skilling and re-training need to be done. During pandemic, women emerged as caregivers for the sick and were at the forefront of the medical field, whether it was doctors, nurses and other caregivers. Training / skill development for professional caregivers may also have a huge job potential in the near future.

Organisations could also support women through flexible working hours, support system, etc. Areas of concern like safe transportation to and from the work place especially in rural/ remote areas has to be taken care of, as top priority. Public transport systems need to be strengthened. Growing use of technology especially the 'push button technology' where running of machine and equipment can be done using minimum force/ strength, can go a long way in increasing the participation of women in fields which were earlier considered male dominated like factory workers, drivers and other equipment operators where heavy machinery is used. Organisations whether public or private sector could also think in terms of making it mandatory for



⁵ The Time is now: Addressing the gender dimensions of corruption, UNODC

a certain percentage (around say 20% to begin with) of women workers in each of their labour based contracts where contractual workers are employed in PSUs, etc.

At the managerial level also, despite the fact that criteria like competence, merit are used for recruitment and promotions, due to societal mores, traditional factors, women are traditionally under-represented and do not get their due. This needs to be rectified not only by increasing intake of women but also ensuring that they are not discriminated against in promotions and other career advancement. A lot of good work has been done recently towards women empowerment across sectors. However, the pace has to be picked up.

It is observed that when Panchayati Raj Institutions initially introduced reservation for women, there were several misgivings of real political empowerment being passed on to women as the system of 'Sarpanch patis' was seen in many states where, though the woman was the Sarpanch of the village: however the effective power was wielded by her husband giving the name Sarpanch pati. However, it is seen now, after several years, there is steady improvement and now more and more women sarpanches are wielding actual power. This goes on to show that once a system is put in place, there may be initial resistance to change but over time these affirmative actions do bring in fruitful results and a real change in the society.

The Ministry of Home Affairs' advisory relating to 30% reservation of women in police force is a very innovative step and several CPMS, BSF, CRPF, ITBP and other battalions where women are being recruited are benefitting from this. In Indian Army also lot of stress is being laid, even by the judiciary to induct more women and bring in a conducive environment for their working.

Recently several women have started working as Chairpersons in many male dominated public sector organizations like SAIL, EIL, SCI and ONGC. Even in judiciary, more women judges are appointed in the High Courts and Supreme Court.

Based on the findings of a committee constituted for women being empowerment, NTPC Limited, one of the public sector undertakings in the power sector, has in 2021 has taken several measures to try and bridge the gender gap. A batch of 50 engineers, exclusively women, was recruited in 2021. This is particularly heartening as in engineering field, there are usually very few women in such organisations. Also several changes were made in the general recruitment and promotion processes rendering them objective so that biases that may creep against women at the time of recruitment and promotions are minimized. Regarding more women in labour force, efforts are being made at various field units. In one of the company (NTPC), in Jharkhand, female operators for operating 100 tonne dumpers /dump trucks are being deployed. To increase participation of women MSE vendors, a special Vendor Development programme was organized by NTPC in association with MSME Development Institute in January 2022.

It is time to bring in more and more of these practices across sectors and across states through a concerted campaign wherein women in large numbers are allowed to enter the workforce and work effectively and contribute towards economic development, progress of the nation and the world at large. ■

Author



Dr Praveen Kumari Singh
(The author is Additional Secretary, CVC)



Trishaljit Sethi
(The author is Director General (Training), Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Govt. of India)