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Contemporary Issues Relating To Indian Women

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The editorial is based on the article "A strange paradox for Indian women" which appeared in The Hindu on 7th March 2019. The article analyses contemporary issues faced by Indian women like barriers to work participation and lack of political representation.

Inequality in education has been declining for Indian women. According to the Human Development Survey (IHDS) of 2011-12, 70% of girls aged 15 to 18 are still studying, only five percentage points less than boys. Also, they frequently outperform boys. In 2018, in the Class XII CBSE examination, 88.31% of girls passed, compared to 78.99% boys.

However, in spite of rising education and rising aspirations, participation of women in labour markets has not increased accordingly. Along with this, constraints from social norms like 'marriages' have not loosened their grip thereby affecting the true potential of women in the country as a human resource.

Barriers to work participation

- Data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) and the IHDS show that education and employment have a U-shaped relationship (a rise and subsequent decline in employment with the rise in education levels).
- **Illiterate women are most likely to participate in the workforce.**
- **Work participation drops sharply for women with primary and secondary education and rises only with the college level education.**
- Factors like income of other members of the household, social background and place of residence also add to the lack of women's participation in the workforce. Non-availability of white collar jobs, disproportionate long hours and lesser job security narrow down the job opportunities for educated women in India.
- NSSO data for 25-to-59-year-old workers in 2011-12 show that among farmers, farm labourers and service workers, nearly one-third are women, while the proportion of women among professionals, managers and clerical workers is only about 15%.

- **While men with lesser levels of educational qualifications (Class 10 or 12 education) can find jobs as mechanics, drivers, sales representatives, postmen and appliance repairmen, few of these opportunities are available to women.**

Both social prejudices and working conditions which are mostly centred around the male workforce contribute to the inhospitable environment for women, who often find it difficult to adjust to male-centric working conditions.

- Educated women's main employment options lie in qualifying as a nurse or a teacher or looking for office jobs.

Unavailability of better marriage prospects

"The value of women's education is overshadowed by factors like caste, the family's economic status, and horoscope".

- **While educated women marry similarly educated men around the world, women in India frequently marry men with lower education than themselves.**
Also, whereas less than 5% of women married men whose education was lower than themselves in the 1970s, the proportion has grown to nearly 20% recently.
- **The recent National Family Health Survey data reflect that the increasing levels of education have not offered a greater say in household decisions or freedom of movement outside the home to women.**
- In perspective, a third of Japanese women and 11% of Sri Lankan women aged 30-34 are single, less than 3% of Indian women are single at that age.

As witnessed above, rising education for women does not offer increasing income-earning opportunities or better marriage prospects, neither does it give them greater autonomy in other areas of their lives. Social barriers and prejudices have curbed the benefits from the rising education levels of women in the country. Their contribution to the economy specifically, or the society as free and liberated members in general, have further been worsened by lack of political representation.

Lack of political representation

"If women were a caste, their cause would be championed by political parties now trying to mobilize caste-based vote banks. We would see proposals for women's quota in government jobs and higher education. If women were an economic class, we would see subsidies and a variety of other economic incentives showered on them."

Women in India have been seen as an extension of the men in their households and there has been a lack of political will to work on the issues related to marriage, divorce and inheritance or women economic opportunities.

Way Forward

- **An integrated approach is needed along with women-centric policy making where women are not treated as passive beneficiaries but are seen as potential contributors to society.**
 - The political landscape and structures should facilitate women's participation as both voters and representatives.
Along with legislative cushions like the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, Maternity Benefit Act, social sensitization towards the issues of women is important.
 - Measures for increasing education levels should be balanced with the creation of jobs, the development of responsible and sensitive workplaces, along with a positive change in the stereotypical gender roles.
 - India has shown a dedicated will to bring changes by pledging to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals which include ideals of gender justice and women empowerment.
 - Only with constructive planning and comprehensive changes at various levels of society can the new emerging "women" be able to realize her complete potential in India.
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