

Let's bring women back into workforce

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The Female Labour Force Participation (FLFP) rate in India has fallen from 36% in 2005-06 to 24% in 2015-16, according to the most recent Economic Survey of India. In 2013, within South Asia, India had the lowest rate of female employment after Pakistan and among G-20 countries, only Saudi Arabia fared worse than India. A staggering 19.6 million women quit jobs between 2004-05 and 2011-12.

What really holds back women from entering work and staying put?

Gender wage gap: Female workers are highly disadvantaged in the labour market. They are in large part low-skilled informal workers, engaged in low-productivity, low-paying work. To add to the woes, most women earn far less than men in India for the same work -- the gender gap in wages is worse than in South Africa, Brazil and Chile.

MNREGA: In an ironic twist, with rising family incomes and guaranteed subsistence income under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), many families have reduced their expectations of women supplementing the family income.

Social factors: Indian society has always placed the responsibility of being a breadwinner on the man. Many sections of society and many families value the role of a woman as a parent, caregiver and a homemaker and many women are coaxed or coerced to drop out of the workforce the moment they are on the family way, maternity benefits notwithstanding. For many women, decisions related to their careers are taken by the larger family, especially the men of the family. This, and other social factors, contribute to fewer women entering work, as well as a large number of them exiting work places.

Maternity Benefits Act: The recent amendment to the Maternity Benefit Act rightly increased the mandatory maternity leave from 12 weeks to 26 weeks. The Act has also enjoined organisations employing more than 50 people to provide for a neighbourhood crèche. In a perverse outcome, these amendments seem to have increased costs and started to become a deterrent for many smaller organisations to hire women. A survey by the leading employment services company TeamLease of 350 start-ups and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) found that at least 26% said they prefer hiring a male candidate, given the cost of the six-month maternity leave benefit.

The Second Dip: It is well known that Marriage-Maternity-Mobility (the 3Ms) derail careers of many women. The few who have a support system at home and the determination to plough through face the second dip when they are in their 40s. When they have been in executive jobs for long and the next peak is in sight but out of reach, there is hardly any motivation to push further. Women then prefer to look for lighter and more flexible career options. While for some, it is the growing children and for several it is their health, many are forced to take on the roles of care-givers to aging parents and in-laws, thus resulting in women withdrawing from the workforce.

Disabling conditions: For the few women who have succeeded in building corporate careers, a seat in the boardroom is still a hard-fought battle. Most organisations, while paying lip-service to diversity, have really not created enabling conditions to consistently develop women leaders. Even today, in many organisations, women are not part of the inner circle dominated by men. The 'old boy's networks' remain tightly wound around late-evening parties, weekend travel and attending conferences, which women need to excuse themselves from because they have commitments at home. Women lose the opportunity to network, be known and grow.

What can we do?

Several progressive organisations have programmes (such as the Tata SCIP programme) today encouraging women to restart their careers. Then, of course, there are support systems in most enlightened organisations, like on campus crèche facilities, equal and encouraging paternity leave policies, women's networks, etc.

While the social factors that impact a woman's career are beyond an organisation's reach, we can definitely increase the conversations around safe places to work, for everyone. Empowered internal complaints committees for prevention of sexual harassment are key.

We can ensure that our leadership teams have a stronger representation of women, thereby ensuring a larger sensitivity to the demands of women.

In our experience, while the percentage of women working for us hasn't dramatically gone up, we have seen more women staying longer in the organisation. They want to work longer and marry later. And it is heartening that this is happening in rural India, where we work. We have supported women in trying family situations, easing their return after childbirth with flexible hours and appropriate work-from-home options. We have seen women use these opportunities judiciously and almost always live up to the faith reposed in them by the organisation.

More women at work will undoubtedly make organisations richer. Let us do everything possible.

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