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Women in the Urban and Rural Workforce in India with Focus on the Pandemic

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Abstract

India is a diverse nation with 28 states and 8 union territories, catering to the needs of various communities, religions, and cultures. However, when it comes to the treatment of women in society, there is always the issue of discrimination and disparity. In the workforce, the COVID-19 pandemic has also had a large impact. The paper makes an extensive study of women in rural and urban workforces of India, through case studies, to discuss the ground reality of Indian women in the national workforce. The paper looks at the journey of Indian women from being confined by the limitations of domestic duties, to their advent in contributing to a significant age of the national workforce. It aims to throw light on the barriers holding women back from achieving their true potential in the national workforce, and on the role played by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic, Indian women, workforce, socio-economic position, mental health, rural India, urban India.*

1.0 Introduction

India has been described by many to be the land of intense diversity with an emphasis on its cultural diversity. Despite such societal contrast, it is a country that prides itself on its solidarity. Modern Indian society is an amalgamation of all the various contemporary influences, its long history of colonization and various influxes of diverse cultures from all around the world.

Indian women have also had very deep-rooted roles which speak stories of their own. There are various traditions and societal norms which have evolved over time to create an image of the 'ideal Indian woman' who is well versed with the ways of the household, managing her family, while also excelling in the academic and professional aspects of her life (Indian Womanhood: Some Psychological Concepts, 2015). To some, these attributes may seem normal while in reality, they put an overbearing pressure on Indian women to balance all aspects of their lives and excel everywhere. At the same time, it is commonly observed that men are not directly pressured to maintain the domestic aspects of their life. The professional aspects of a modern Indian woman's life are not considered valid by the community surrounding her which subscribes to the traditional roles assigned to women in the past

(Schalkwyk, 2000). Thus, the current status of ‘modern Indian women’ is a paradox. They are on the pinnacle of success but still suffer from violence and overwhelming expectations from their family and their community (Legal Service India, n.d.).

India's women employment situation is problematic and a serious matter of concern as their participation in the workforce has been declining over the past decade even when the GDP is increasing. As per the data presented by the World Bank, it is said that only 20.3% of girls and women from the age of 15 and onwards participate in the labour force, with women accounting for only 19.9% of the total labour force.(Women in the Workforce: India (Quick Take), 2020)

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, created unique obstacles for women in the Indian workforce, with the employment rates taking a nosedive due to the lockdown. According to the International Labour Organisation, it is noted that many women lost their jobs during this period, especially in the informal sectors of the economy when in most cases, these jobs were the main sources of income for the families (*Women Work More, But Are Still Paid Less*, 1995). With these details as a background, this paper intends to analyze the roles of women, their participation in the workforce in urban and rural environments and how the challenges that are faced by them have increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.0 An Overview of Women in the Workforce

2.1 History - Indian women's Journey into the National Workforce

Historically, women have played a significant role in shaping the dynamics of our society. There has been a marked difference in the way women and men are treated in every society. In the Indian subcontinent, the role and position of women can be understood by looking at different time periods (Dalvi, n.d.).

In the Vedic period, it is said that women were greatly acknowledged, as their participation in society and in the day-to-day rituals was necessary. The position of a wife was honoured, and without her, the husband could not perform any religious ceremony. During this period, women had opportunities to develop within the domestic sphere. A woman was the creator, protector and educator of her family and children. While women were not secluded from

domestic and social affairs, they were dependent on their male counterparts throughout their lives. Yet, the Vedic period is said to be the golden period for women when they were valued in their contributions and had the freedom to engage in religious and social activities (Dalvi, n.d.).

In the ancient Indus Valley Civilization, women were worshipped as Prakriti, the mother, and enjoyed an honourable position in society. Even though patriarchy was prevalent, and male members dominated the society, women enjoyed various positions of importance and demanded respect and reverence. However, as time passed, the status of women underwent changes in all aspects of life. There was a gradual degeneration in the status of women in India after the Later Vedic age (Srivastava, 2018).

During the Medieval period, the practices of the purdah system, sati and dowry came into existence and were glorified. These practices were accompanied by the notion that women solely belonged to the four walls of their homes (Dalvi, n.d.). Following this, in the colonial period, during the rule of the East India company, social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Pandita Ramabai and Jyotiba Phule took the responsibility of fighting the social evils prevalent at that time and improving the status of women (Kapur, 2019).

Post-independence, India witnessed the formulation of various programs and schemes that had the objective of transforming the lives of women. Women were encouraged to acquire education. The beginning of the women's movement got underway by understanding and addressing the obstacles faced by women which included the issues related to property rights, violence, legal status, rights of minority women and political participation. Indian women today have won a number of battles against an oppressive system of life and are committed to raising questions that will make their lives more emancipating (Kapur, 2019). One example here is their role in the labour force of the country.

2.2 Socio-Economic Position of Women in India

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the convention on eliminating all forms of discrimination against women in 1979. This had a profound impact on women's

capability to conduct their autonomous lives in society (Singh, 2013). In India, it is acknowledged that socio-cultural factors and patriarchy in the home and work environments pose significant challenges for women entering into the workforce (Women in The Workforce: India (Quick Take), 2021). In a 2019 Oxfam India report titled ‘Mind The Gap – State of Employment in India’ that analyses the state of employment in India, from the lens of gender, it is explained that scarcity in quality jobs and the increasing wage disparity are key markers of gender inequality in the Indian workforce. Indian women spend 16 billion hours a day doing unpaid care work (The Times of India, 2019).

On the other hand, according to an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report on “Balancing paid work, unpaid work and leisure” in 2015, Indian women were ranked at number 2, after Mexico, as being burdened with most unpaid work. The average Indian woman spends 243 minutes, a little over four hours, on household chores, which is almost ten times the 25 minutes the average man does (Jha, 2020). As homemakers, women are thus forced to stay at home and do the work that gives them no economic value. A report states that if this unpaid work was taken into account, Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP) would jump to 81% in India (Online, 2020b). The status of women in India as ‘employed’, adds to this story of discrimination: In 2019 the FLFP was at 20.9%, a 10% drop from the 30% occupied in the 1990s (Statista, 2021a)

National agencies of data collection further prove the fact that women’s contribution as workers in our country is severely undervalued. There are various hurdles women have to overcome to find the place they deserve in work environments. At the same time, it is noted in several instances that the safety and autonomy of working women are hindered. Additionally, their efforts are also undervalued in a work environment. Indian working women are also subjected to pressure from their families, in which case married women have to adhere to the limitations laid by both their parents and their in-laws. These situations, thus, create problems that are unique to women in contemporary India (Working Women: Key Facts and Trends in Female Labor Force Participation, 2017).

2.2.1 Socio-Economic Position of Working Women in Urban India

The number of women working in the urban areas of India is less than the number of women working in the rural areas of the country. The urban female labour participation rate in India fell to its lowest in November 2020 at 6.9% (Sharma, 2020). This decline could be because of the greater skill and specialization required to work in urban environments. It can also be attributed to the better financial situations of urban women that pacifies any need to work in economically uplifting roles. Additionally, the influence of cultural and social norms coerce women to stay at home and take care of their families. Girls who take part in the labour force often face unequal pay, gender bias, security, bodily and intellectual harassment, loss of their own circle of relatives support, inadequate maternity leave, etc., that act as main challenges for them to work (Verma & Mulani, 2018).

2.2.2 Socio-Economic Position of Working Women in Rural India

The position of working women in rural India has increased considerably within the past decade. First, the agricultural economy has been largely stagnant over the years and employment opportunities have not grown. This in turn created job losses in the past decade. As a result, the Women's Labor Force Participation Rate in rural India fell drastically, from 49.4% in 2004–05 to 24.6% in 2017–18.(Krishnan, 2020)

On the “availability” end, rural women's primary duties are alleged to be within the household. They are expected to support their family's economic status along with adhering to their domestic responsibilities, and thus, can enter the labour force only as subsidiary workers. This situation keeps many rural women employed only within the ‘subsidiary status’(SRIVASTAVA, N. & SRIVASTAVA, R. 2010).

2.3 The Concept of ‘Glass Ceiling’

Glass ceiling is a metaphor and refers to an invisible barrier that prevents someone from achieving their career goals in workplaces (Kagan, n.d.). This metaphor is generally associated with women working in any organization and the invisible hurdles they face in their efforts to progress in their careers. At the root of the glass ceiling are gender-based barriers and these gender-based barriers stem from the stereotyped preferences and

leadership styles. Adding onto these styles are forces like socio-cultural norms, relevant laws and policies and the fact that organizations still hold women back in both developing and developed countries. (Yadav & Khanna, 2014) Glass ceilings are present all over the world, but the degree of intensity varies. The data below - based on research by Scoopwhoop published on their Instagram handle - details how skewed the participation of Indian women is in the workforce:

- Only 10% of the women are startup founders in India.
- Indian women's contribution to the GDP is one of the lowest in the world at only 17%.
- Only 25% of women are formally involved in India's labour market.
- There are top 250 companies in India and only 6 out of these have women as CEOs. 3 out of these 6 women are either the founders or belong to the family of promoters.
- As of the 17th Lok Sabha, India has only 78 women Members of Parliament in a house of 543. This accounts for a 12% representation, while the global average is 22% (Dantewadia, 2019).

2.4 Case Studies of Women Breaking the Glass Ceiling

2.4.1 Urban India

In the year 2012, Ms Falguni Nayar gave up her lucrative career as an investment banker to satisfy her entrepreneurial wish and founded Nykaa, a platform for beauty, wellness and fashion products. She defied all social norms that judged women and proved everyone wrong who said that 50 years of age is too late to start something new (Maiti, n.d.). According to Falguni Nayar, she was fortunate to belong to a family who supported her in all her endeavours. Today Nykaa, is one of the biggest online portals for the wellness of women and promotes the idea of beauty in diversity and caters to each and every brand in beauty and fashion (Maiti, n.d.). This success story shows that liberation from cultural and social norms and the ability to overcome the same with the help of education and family in urban areas help women in surmounting the “glass ceiling”.

2.4.2 Rural India

Kalpana Saroj was a Dalit woman. She lived in a small village in Maharashtra known as Roperkheda. At the age of 12, she was forced into marriage. After many struggles, she broke free from her marriage at the age of 16. After she broke her marriage, society disregarded and isolated her. However, this did not stop her from building her future ahead. She moved to Mumbai with her uncle, who helped her and taught her the operation of Industrial Sewing machines. Following this, she took a loan from the government to start her tailoring business and soon opened up her own furniture shop and gradually paid back her loans. She then set up an NGO, to provide financial assistance to those who belonged to the underprivileged section. In 2006, she was approached by the workers of Kamani Tubes for her help as the company was having a hard time staying afloat in the market. She not only revived the company but also took the company to new heights and brought worldwide fame to it (Verma, 2017). In 2013, she was honoured with the “Padma Shri” award for “Trade and Industry”. With utmost dedication and consistent hard work, she built a ₹2000 crore empire and continues to serve as an inspiration to not just Dalit women, but every Indian woman (Desk, 2020).

3.0 The COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impact on Working Women in India

On 11th March 2020, COVID-19 was declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), as a result of over 11,800 cases of coronavirus in over 110 countries and territories around the world. The Director of WHO warned that the outbreak of coronavirus would not just be a public health crisis, but it would be a crisis that would touch and impact every sphere of our life. This warning turned out to be true throughout 2020, following into 2021 (Ducharme, 2020). The sudden escalation of COVID-19 and the lockdown imposed on people made the situation of the Indian working women very critical. On the 24th of March 2020, India declared its first nationwide lockdown, which put a halt to most economic activities (Hebbar, 2020). Eventually, there was a gradual shift in the employment sector and employees were encouraged to work from home.

The implementation of work from home was seen as a relaxed approach at the beginning by some. But as time progressed, this style of work rested as a burden on the shoulders of working women. Now, the employed women, while performing their official duties, were simultaneously taking care of their homes, children, and elders (Livemint, 2020). In line with the UN Women's report, 'Insights to Action', 'women are losing their livelihood faster because they are more exposed to hard-hit economic sectors', and in addition to this, the communities who are victims of institutionalized poverty are at a continued risk (Livemint, 2021).

According to new research 2021 in Livemint, Shareshtha Sachdeva, a single mother, had her life turned upside down due to the pandemic, as she was asked to leave her seven-year-long job. In such a situation, it is explained that for her, dealing with finances was like a nightmare. Ruchee Anand, director of Talent and Learning Solutions (India), claims that India has a gender gap wider than the rest of the Asia-Pacific (APAC) region. About 63% of women and 69% of working mothers in India claim to have faced discrimination because of their household responsibilities (Livemint, 2021). Additionally, LinkedIn, in accordance with a report on "Opportunity Index 2021", found that 89% of women are of the opinion that COVID-19 has affected them and has widened the prevailing gender gaps at work. It would, therefore, be right to say that the pandemic has impacted working women and working mothers disproportionately (Livemint, 2021).

4.0 The Pandemic and the Challenges Faced by Women in the Labour Workforce

Due to the contagious nature of coronavirus, many countries introduced lockdowns to prevent the COVID-19 infection from spreading. As a result, many sectors came to a halt, hindering the economic condition of the nation and even across the world. Working from home for women became even more challenging during the lockdown. Balancing paperwork & household work all at once became much more difficult for working women (Kaur & Sharma, 2020).

4.1 Urban Women and the Pandemic

4.1.1 Socio-Economic Position of Urban Women During the Pandemic

During the pandemic, urban India had witnessed a detrimental impact on women's economic and social welfare and conditions, with the added burden of double shifts and long working hours from home. It has also been observed that women are increasingly missing from the formal sector in the Indian economy. It was also noted that higher education or experience did not protect the women from losing their jobs and that the exit rate was at its highest with respect to the salaried women at 56% (ILO, 2018). Furthermore, it has been seen that women who were still employed during the pandemic had to change their attitudes, priorities, savings, and investments in order to safeguard their future (Bateman & Ross, 2021b).

4.1.2 Urban Women and Job Losses

The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) data, which is mostly the strongest indicator of job losses, shows that the employment rate for urban women has been steadily declining. 7.5% of women in urban areas were employed prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. In April, the number fell to 5%, and it has barely recovered since then. The employment rate was 5.4% in February 2021, according to the data (Gera, 2021).

The lockdown has had an impact on women's employment, reversing previous increases. 'Down and Out?' is the title of a working paper from Azim Premji University, according to the paper, 'the gendered impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on India's labour market,' is that women in India are 7 times more likely to lose their jobs during the national lockdown and 11 times more likely to not return to work after losing their jobs (Gera, 2021).

4.1.3 Urban Women and Mental Health

According to a survey conducted by SEWA's Cooperative Federation, household monthly income plummeted by as much as 65% in the first three months of the pandemic during the lockdown (M. Chatterjee, 2021). Another study of Indian urban youth on their experiences with lockdown showed a majority of respondents across all age groups emphasising that their mental health was harmed by the lockdown in April 2020.

Approximately 42% of female respondents between the ages of 18 and 25 said their well-being was severely impacted at the time (Statista, 2021). Among the women in the urban workforce, female informal labourers, who are among the country's most exploited and vulnerable employees, had to endure severe hardships that could have unavoidably affected their mental health and general well-being (M. Chatterjee, 2021).

The significant rise in care work has been one of the rising concerns for women throughout this pandemic. While women have traditionally juggled employment outside and inside the house, the pandemic put a greater strain on them. Before the pandemic, working women were able to get some help from the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) and government-run crèches. They frequently left their young children at ICDS anganwadis or crèches, where the children would receive at least one meal each day, pre-school stimulation and education, as well as health care. Children of all ages have been staying at home since the outbreak of the COVID-19 infection. Since the initial lockdown, ICDS child care centres and crèches have been closed, and most states have (as of June 2021) yet to reopen. There were complaints of parents not being able to give enough or no meals in a study of children conducted by SEWA (M. Chatterjee, 2021). While urban women are bearing the brunt of this change on the domestic end; due to the fall in employment rate, they are also trapped in a helpless state.

4.1.4 Case Study: Women in the IT Sector

Even though the economic aspects of the pandemic hit both men and women, a report by the Cybersecurity firm Kaspersky, states that statistics show that women in the IT sector were being disproportionately hindered by the home lives in which they operate during the pandemic. The report elaborates that a majority of the women employed in the IT sector have faced hurdles to growth in their careers. According to the report, 76% of Indian women in the IT sector are of the opinion that the pandemic is to be held responsible for the delay in their career growth. The report identifies that some of the main reasons around this fall is due to day-to-day functions such as homeschooling and cleaning. Other issues included adapting to working hours around family life (Bureau, 2021)

With the setup of work from home, women have had long exhausting working hours as they managed everything on their own with little or no help from their male counterparts. Ranging from cleaning the house, dressing up their children homeschooling them and then completing their tasks assigned, the days in the pandemic were challenging for the Indian women in the IT sector (B. 2020, December 20).

4.2 Rural Women and the Pandemic

4.2.1 Socio-Economic Positions of Rural Women During the Pandemic

India is largely an agrarian economy. Therefore agriculture is the backbone of the economy and the main source of livelihood and employment to the women in rural India. India was among the worst affected due to the pandemic in terms of women labourers. During the initial three month lockdown, and in the months that followed, 19% of the women remained employed, while 47% were rendered unemployed due to the pandemic (Bateman & Ross, 2021b). These women could not return to work even by the end of 2020. Thus, women labourers, rather than leaving agriculture and looking for better opportunities in India, were completely pushed out of the workforce (Bateman & Ross, 2021b).

4.2.2 Rural Women and Job Losses

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, around 25% of rural women worked, compared to 18% of metropolitan women. These rural women have borne the brunt of the COVID-19 and lockdown - losing jobs, earnings, and being forced into hazardous labour circumstances while ferrying water and firewood, cooking, and caring for sick family members. Between March and April 2020, the first month of the nationwide lockdown, 15.4 million women lost their employment, with 12 million of them being rural women. Rural women's employment returned to pre-Covid levels by July 2020, despite the sharp initial drop.

In April 2021, the second wave slammed rural India with surprising intensity, wiping out 5.7 million rural women's employment. In April 2021, rural women accounted for over 80% of employment losses, compared to only 11% in April 2020. In May 2021, over 2.8 million rural women (11% of the rural female workforce) returned to work, despite the fact

that 8.6 million rural males lost their jobs (3.5% of the rural male workforce) (NIKORE et al., 2021).

4.2.3 Rural Women and Mental Health

The vulnerability of the rural Indian women increased by the social pressures faced by. It is said that the risk factors that are specific to the female gender, such as gender discrimination and the related factors such as vulnerability to poverty, malnutrition, violence, and an undervalued social position, contribute to Indian women's psychological state. The degree of exposure to such factors and the severity of psychological problems in women are said to be related. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is even more relevant to note that severe life events, including loss, humiliation and entrapment can lead to depression and other mental health issues in women (Women and Mental Health in India: An Overview, 2015). Assessing the effects of work on rural women's mental health is an aspect that needs to be addressed. However, there is a severe lack of information in general, on the state of mental health of rural women in India. The mental turmoil that rural Indian women would have to endure during the pandemic due to excess workload, scarce job opportunities, loss of loved ones and overall uncertainty of their financial situations need to be documented and addressed in India. (Women and Mental Health in India: An Overview, 2015b)

4.2.4 Case Study: Women in the Agriculture Sector

At a time when the pandemic impacted the economic landscape, how we work, where we work from, and indeed, who works, are important factors to consider. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, rural women in the workforce were disproportionately responsible for domestic chores and caretaking duties, while also having to take part in farm work within a very limited time, as compared to men. With the pandemic, they still bear the brunt of additional domestic responsibilities including the duties of taking care of out-of-school children, elders, or sick relatives (Panicker, 2021).

Making the situation dire is the fact that women in the agriculture sector have very limited access to savings and credit when compared to their male counterparts. With fewer savings to draw upon, women within the agriculture sector are unable to bear income losses from the

effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and are likely to struggle to meet basic challenges like buying the seeds and fertilizers needed for the subsequent planting seasons (Panicker, 2021).

5.0 Post Pandemic Situation for Indian Women in the Workforce

The pandemic created unique situations for everyone to live in and new obstacles for women to work in. The economic crisis perpetuated job loss all across the country with a number of diverse problems for people to face such as lack of resources to treat COVID-19 patients. The uncertain nature of the pandemic also made it difficult for families to manage their finances without jobs (Bateman & Ross, 2021). Given the ephemeral nature of the pandemic's impact and the amount of time it will persist, as well as the ecosystem's fledgling awareness of how successful or efficient the response has been, it is critical to consider COVID-19's long-term impact on women in India. According to some assessments, the long-term impact might be large enough to reverse decades of progress for women's empowerment throughout the world, partly because, in the hurry to handle the growing public health catastrophe, most countries have neglected to prepare their responses with gender in mind (Women in India: COVID-19 Impact, Response and Policy Environment, 2021b).

This lack of responsibility from the official's side has given insight into the ineptitude of the government on working during emergency situations, moreover, it has shed light on the absence of attention being paid towards work conditions of women in both formal and informal sectors of employment (Women in India: COVID-19 Impact, Response and Policy Environment, 2021).

An article on Livemint claims that the labour market has been badly disrupted by the economic lockdown and school closures, with women bearing the brunt of the load (Kaul, 2021). When the spring lockdowns were imposed, Indian men stepped in to share home duties, according to a new study by economist Ashwini Deshpande (Rajagopalan, 2020). However, by August, men's time spent on housekeeping had decreased, despite the fact that it was still greater than pre-pandemic levels (Rajagopalan, 2020). And, in comparison to their less-educated colleagues, highly educated men spend less time on household duties. The

depressingly low participation rates of women in the workforce are unlikely to improve very soon. For many Indian women, the broader economic downturn, school and childcare closures, and the need to catch up on schooling will impede the process of re-entering the workforce. Household earnings will fall, making women more financially reliant on their families or the government, which is already struggling to provide a sufficient safety net (Rajagopalan, 2020).

6.0 Recommendations

- There needs to be a change in the way women's contribution in the employment sector is perceived. The government needs to enforce plans that promote young women to work and educate themselves during unprecedented times as well and not give up on their jobs during unprecedented times.
- There need to be provisions that prevent employers from enforcing gender bias preventing women from getting back on their feet and working.
- There needs to be more promotion of progressive ideas that discourage women from giving up their careers despite their financial situations. More promotions of STEM education and careers needs to be done to push women into jobs that are developing and are going to be more prevalent in the future to increase the overall involvement of women in the workforce.
- The perils of the pandemic inflicted upon women due to the lockdown need to be addressed and there should be more support for women in both urban and rural sections of the Indian society trying to join the labour force after the pandemic.
- The severity of women's mental health is a matter that needs to be discussed and prioritized as a major issue and needs to be addressed. Proper endorsement and promotion of mental health issues among people can elevate the involvement of women in plans provided to assess mental health.

7.0 Conclusion

Ironically, it is observed that in the Vedic period women were treated with much more respect and love than they are today. When we progressed as a nation, we started to sideline

women and began treating them as mere subordinates. From the intensive research, it has been realised that there is not enough data to understand the living conditions of women living in rural India. However, women everywhere, from every background are striving hard to shatter the glass ceiling, defy social norms and build something for themselves. Therefore, we as a society need to appreciate how hard women try to strike a balance between their work life and the duties of their household. Even if they are not working, they are an intrinsic part of our society who need to be acknowledged at every step.

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