

Female workers: How can India protect them?

By Gajal Gupta on 01 June 2021

A group of experts discuss what needs to be done to improve the health, safety and employment rights of women workers in India.

Although India has become the world's fifth largest economy, the workforce participation rate of women in the country has sharply declined. Women make up 48 per cent of the Indian population but have not benefitted as equally as men from India's rapid economic growth.

A 2017 report from the World Bank found that less than a quarter of women have joined the labour force in India and only a fifth are directly employed. India has one of the lowest rates of female labour force participation globally, with only parts of the Arab world having a lower rate.

The labour force participation of women in India actually fell from 36.7 per cent in 2005 to 26 per cent in 2018, according to a report from the international consultancy Deloitte, Empowering girls and women in India for the Fourth Industrial Revolution <https://bit.ly/2QWOVUQ>

The Covid-19 pandemic has worsened the situation around the participation of women in the Indian workforce due to the economic damage arising from lockdowns and other restrictions on businesses and people.

Safety Management asked three experts how the gender gap in India's workforce can be ended and how to improve the health, safety and employment rights of female workers in India.

We interviewed:

- **Shikha Gautam**, Research director, Dattopant Thengadi Foundation, a research organisation of Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), India's largest trade union
- **Nirupama Subramanian**, Co-founder and managing partner, GLOW – Growing Leadership of Women, an organisation that aims to enhance inclusion and empower women to create a more just and equitable world
- **Aparna Mathur**, Co-founder, GLOW.

What is the current situation around the female workforce in India?

Shikha: Female labour force participation is important for the balanced growth of the economy. However, looking at the labour force participation rate in India; we can see the signs of imbalance as the female participation is considerably low.

Nonetheless, this is a phenomenon that is dominant across the world, as International Labour Organization (ILO) data from 2018 suggests that the global labour force participation rate for women is 26.5 per cent below that of men. Also, the compliance with ILO regulations on matters of labour welfare – such as a minimum wage and fair working conditions – around the world is not satisfactory. The same goes with female workforce participation and the working conditions of women. At the same time, the ready-made ILO regulations with a ‘one size fits all’ concept cannot be suitable for all workers around the world, and a tailor-made understanding needs to be employed.



Shikha Gautam,
Research director, Dattopant Thengadi Foundation, a research organisation of Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS),
India's largest trade union

How is the health and safety of female workers put at risk and in what particular industries?

Shikha: There is no way to define the categories of risk and risk-free zones because there are different kinds of risks in both the organised and unorganised sectors.

For instance, if we consider the unorganised sectors, unskilled or semi-skilled women are primarily employed in the construction and mining industries, which are considered high-risk sectors. In these sectors, women are employed without proper safety measures, considering the high risk of life-changing accidents, health hazards and in some cases loss of life altogether.

In the organised sectors, the risks are often related to different forms of harassment (mental, sexual or both). However, it is important to understand that women working in the unorganised sectors are also not immune to those risks.

Along with these problems, a lack of a women-friendly work environment features - such as proper sanitation, hygiene and toilets - adds to the health risks faced by women at work. New technological interventions to provide comfort in the workplace are also putting women's safety at risk. It is an area that needs further investigation. Cybercrime in this regard is one such aspect that puts the safety of women workers at risk.

Aparna: I would say heavy engineering, mining, construction and liquor companies are the most male-dominated industries. The infrastructure is poor and physical safety is always suspect.

In India, particularly in the north, the safety of women in relation to travel, site work and late hours will always be a concern. Managers have no option but to take extra effort in ensuring the safety of their women employees.

I worked in a male-dominated company 22 years ago. I was always worried about entering the closed cabins of my prospective male clients. On several occasions, I had to request my male colleagues to escort me. Thankfully, POSH (the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act of 2013, the #MeToo campaign and landmark verdicts such as the MJ Akbar and Priya Ramani case are a step in ensuring the physical and psychological safety of women.



Aparna Mathur,
Co-founder, GLOW – Growing Leadership of Women, an organisation that aims to enhance inclusion and empower women to create a more just and equitable world

What type of risks are women exposed to at work in India?

Nirupama: Apart from inherent job-related risks that impact both genders, women employees in blue-collar and white-collar jobs are exposed to certain two categories of risks – physical and psychological.

Women are exposed to physical risks like molestation while commuting to work and sexual harassment at work as well. The lack of adequate infrastructure for women, like clean and accessible washrooms and access to feminine hygiene products at the workplace, also exposes them to physical and psychological risks.

In many workplaces, women face psychological risks ranging from verbal abuse by senior men to seemingly innocuous ‘mansplaining’ and stereotyping. Many women in my workshops report structural exclusion from certain events that enable after-hours networking. Many functions, like sales and manufacturing, have fewer women employees due to inherent biases and working conditions. Being the only woman in the room or the only woman in the office also makes women feel vulnerable and exposed.



Nirupama

Subramanian, Co-founder and managing partner, GLOW – Growing Leadership of Women, an organisation that aims to enhance inclusion and empower women to create a more just and equitable world

How, why and where do women miss out on employment and social security protections?

Shikha: The overall participation of women in employment is somewhere around 19 per cent compared to 76 per cent of male participation.

A considerable proportion of women, who are capable and willing to work, are out of employment. Those who are working have to face social hurdles that keep challenging their professional and economic activities. The employment structure in India and in most parts of the world is not structured according to the biological and social needs of women. Hence, in the unorganised sectors, women's concerns (maternity and safety being the common concerns), are not considered, and they are rather preferred to be out of the workforce than facilitate them with enough economic and social support despite the prevailing legal provisions.

Recently, the organised sectors have started providing social security in different forms to women workers regarding their safety, security, hygiene and maternity benefits, along with other benefits. But even now, the women employed in the unorganised sector are either unaware or denied these provisions.

Do women on low incomes have extra childcare and domestic duties – for example, having to do housework after finishing their day job?

Shikha: This phenomenon cannot be seen just in the case of women as it can apply to all genders. Also, there could be different social, economic and personal dimensions that lead to situations like managing both household and economic participation together. Also, it is not just specifically related to low income groups. In the present circumstances, women carry the burden of most unpaid care work, but the contribution of men shouldn't be totally ignored.

Has the situation improved for working women?

Shikha: With different provisions in the new labour code, which focus on creating a balance between the male-female workforce, different provisions for women have been introduced. One example is maternity benefit 2017 (amended), which extended the maternity benefits from a 12-week period to 26 weeks. Along with that, the 'same pay for same work' provision in the Code on Wages will provide gender parity in the workforce.

Also, the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code mandates decent working conditions, sanitation and hygiene, which will improve the scenario for everyone irrespective of their gender. However, the degree of implementation depends on the willpower of different states and sub-ordinate bodies/appropriate governments.

What impact has Covid-19 had on the mental wellbeing of women in India ?

Nirupama: Most women have borne the responsibility of childcare and the care of the elderly during Covid-19. More women have lost jobs during the pandemic, and this has eroded their net worth and self-worth. Women are not venturing out to look for new jobs during this time since the domestic load has increased, which keeps them inside the house doing unpaid work. Age-old gender biases are further perpetuated by deeming the man's job the more important one and reinforcing the woman's place in the house, especially during dangerous times.

Are Indian businesses doing enough to protect the health, safety and mental wellbeing of female workers?

Nirupama: Most organisations these days do take care of physical risks. International businesses that have outsourced their work processes to India –known as BPOs – which have night shifts and later working hours, provide transportation for women employees. One organisation has a rule that a female employee cannot be the last person to be dropped off to work.

Many manufacturing organisations provide transportation to factories at remote locations for all employees. Companies do provide creches and feeding rooms at the workplace, which provides peace of mind and psychological safety for women employees.

The POSH Act mandates the formation of an Internal Complaints Committee to handle cases of sexual harassment and most organisations have provision for the same. However, many aspects of psychological safety still need to be addressed. Many cases of harassment are not reported, and apart from a few large companies, few organisations focus on intentionally building an inclusive culture where everyone feels safe.

More needs to be done in the area of gender sensitisation, increasing awareness of biases, providing equal access to opportunities and educating the workforce on emotional and mental wellbeing and safety.

What else should the government and businesses be doing to protect the health, safety, employment and social security rights of female workers?

Shikha: More often than not, the governments and the employers and even trade unions are more focused on policy-making, whereas the larger issues arise because of improper implementation, or lack of implementation, of the existing laws. The present legislative framework needs to be implemented properly because any extension to the laws without properly implementing the existing rules will not measure the pros and cons of the already framed laws, and any further extension will be shallow and vague.

What do you think about gender inequality at work in India, in the organised and unorganised sectors?

Aparna: Gender inequality is quite pervasive in organisations, societies and families. Gender inequality exists in the form of lost opportunities, mansplaining, molestation, power games, misogynistic comments etc.

Equality is very subjective, and its understanding is based on the individual's context. Societal and parental conditioning contributes to the framing of this lens. We see things the way we want to, and hence a singular universal definition of gender equality is difficult to arrive at.

For example, men will justify not providing a challenging opportunity for a woman as a way of protecting her. "She will not be able to cope with the pressures. Her home front is tough too," they might say.

This can be viewed as care and concern for the other. Also, there is a tacit expectation that a woman will care for her husband's stakeholders – including parents, extended family, friends – like her own, especially in India. There is no expectation on the man to do the same for the woman's side of the family.

Some of these biases and stereotypes are also perpetuated by women. So, inequality exists in every space. Thankfully, with awareness of diversity and inclusion now starting to improve, we are learning to call out gross inequalities and take one step forward in bringing a balance to this.

What steps need to be made to improve gender equality, by employers and in the government rules and regulations?

Aparna: Diversity and inclusion is now a big agenda for most organisations, though I feel the momentum on this is slow. We have too much ground to cover and organisations need to accelerate the process. Thankfully, there is enough incentive for them to do so, as the business case is very clear. Sometimes, the tokenism of a few encouraging speeches and lunches for women are seen as efforts at inclusion and promoting gender equality. Mindsets need to shift to genuine inclusion. This is a slow burn process and organisations need to understand that it requires time and attention.

The government needs to embark on including mindset shifts as part of their policy decisions and welfare schemes. Without shifting the patriarchal mindset, equality in action (to an extent greater than what it is today), will be elusive.

Digital technology needs to be leveraged to cover masses, especially those in decision-making roles – for example, Panchayats, municipal corporations and politicians.

In a society where power games based on masculine hegemony is still rife, it will take tremendous effort and money to alleviate its impact. Very few people understand the impact of diversity and inclusion in its full potential and education about that is paramount today.