Where are women in India’s workforce? Slipping female LFPR is worrying trend

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There is a need to tackle barriers at home and workplace

Economic empowerment is key to gender justice, and therefore the International Women’s Day—observed on March 8—is a good occasion to take a look at the challenges women in the country face in this regard. India’s workforce has been contending with a worrying retreat of women’s participation. The female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) in the country has fallen from 30.27% in 1990 to 20.8% in 2019, as per data from the World Bank.

What’s worse, the decline was steepest in the years of high growth—2003-04 to 2010-11—indicating that the fruits of growth didn’t flow equally to men and women in terms of empowerment. The pandemic has likely aggravated this—the loss of jobs in the informal sector is likely to have pushed many women out of work. The formal sector hasn’t done well either, with women’s share in new payroll additions, which had been trending downwards for a long time, falling to below 20% in August 2020.

This seems in line with the International Labour Organization’s (ILO’s) warning that the pandemic is going to exacerbate employment inequalities. The biggest worry is the slide in women’s labour force participation in rural areas, where households’ (and consequently, women’s) economic vulnerability is likely to be higher even as urban FLPR has stagnated at a lower rate for many years now.

One of the reasons, as a 2014 ILO paper points out, could be growing enrollment of women in higher education, which would translate into a lesser number of women in the early years (15-29 years) of the age cohort considered for FLFPR seeking employment or being employed. Indeed, as per multi-year All India Survey of Higher Education findings, the share of women in higher education enrolment has risen from 44% in 2011-12 to 49% in 2018-19; in 2018-19, the female gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education was even marginally higher than that of males.

But, the fact that such a large chunk of women are still missing from the workforce–even in the higher age brackets–should give policymakers reason for concern; more so, with the likelihood that a lot of women with higher education are not choosing to seek employment or face barriers at home and the workplace that force them to remain outside remunerated employment. Meanwhile, unpaid housework seems to be entirely the women’s burden—irrespective of a woman’s employment outside the home—which means women’s potential is getting eroded by underutilisation.

On International Women’s Day, there is reason to celebrate how women have managed to challenge the old structures—the number of women in corporate leadership today will certainly seem a quantum leap from the past decades. At the same time, there are many sobering realities to contend with: no matter how many women we see in boardrooms today, we still don’t have enough. In the larger picture, even that seems a concern that may only come to later; the need is to take down the barriers that are keeping women out of employment–from care and housework roles to poor support at the workplace.