



A strange paradox for Indian women

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Better education is not leading to better job opportunities, marriage prospects or freedom of movement

- As last year's #MeToo movement and Sabarimala protests showed, perhaps Indian women are ready to foment a rebellion.

Education and employment

- What fuels these movements could it be that the very success of India's economic transformation brings with it a stark realisation that it has not paid particular care and attention to women.
- The most promising sign of the improving conditions of Indian women lies in declining inequality in education.
- Data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) and the IHDS show that education and employment have a U-shaped relationship.
- 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 college education.
- Employment opportunities that are open to their mothers, including farm labour and non-farm manual work in construction, hold little appeal to secondary school graduates who have invested their hopes in education.
- However, white-collar jobs are either not available or demand long hours and offer little job security in this time of a gig economy.
- 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%.
- Educated women's main employment options lie in qualifying as a nurse or a teacher or looking for office jobs.

The importance of marriage

- If barriers to work participation are not enough, young women's lives

are also circumscribed by social norms that shape their family situation.

- Marriage remains the only acceptable fate for young women in India.
- Based on recent National Family Health Survey data, there seems to be little evidence that a moderate level of education offers women a greater say in household decisions or freedom of movement outside the home.

Women's vote

- If women were a caste, their cause would be championed by political parties now trying to mobilise caste-based vote banks.
- However, our political process sees women as an extension of the men in their households and assumes that no special effort is needed to win their hearts and minds.
- As we head into an election season, perhaps it would be wise for political parties to remember that women form half the voting population.

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