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Role of Women in India's Socio-economic Transformation

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This editorial is based on the article '[The Gender Ladder to Socio-economic Transformation](#)' which appeared in "The Hindu" on 3rd May, 2019. The article describes the current status of women in India's socio-economic transformation and what can be done to improve this status.

For the past few decades and especially in the last few years, Indian women have taken a great stride in all fields of activity. Yet, a lot remains to be achieved. For example, we have to understand if women in India are truly free and if their voices are truly being heard.

What Made the News?

An unprecedented focus on women's employment in this year's elections is what made the news.

The major national parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress, have reached out to women, and their respective manifestos talk of measures to create more livelihood opportunities in rural and urban areas, which include incentives to businesses for employing more women.

The Short Gist

Data from recent surveys show some disturbing trends in female labour participation. Some of these are listed below.

Trends in Workforce Participation

- **Currently, the participation of women in the workforce in India is one of the lowest globally.**

- The female labour force participation rate (LFPR) in India fell from 31.2% in 2011 - 2012 to 23.3% in 2017- 2018.
 - **This decline has been sharper in rural areas**, where the female LFPR fell by more than 11 percentage points in 2017 -2018.
 - This fall in workforce participation can be attributed to a complex set of factors including:
 - low social acceptability of women working outside the household;
 - lack of access to safe and secure workspaces;
 - widespread prevalence of poor and unequal wages;
 - a dearth of decent and suitable jobs;

Most women in India are engaged in subsistence level work in agriculture in rural areas, and in low paying jobs such as domestic service and petty home based manufacturing in urban areas.

Relation Between Education and Work

- **A recent study observed a strong negative relationship between a woman's education level** and her participation in agricultural and non - agricultural wage work and in family farms.
 - Essentially, women with moderately high levels of education do not want to do manual labour outside the household which would be perceived to be below their educational qualifications.
 - The study also showed **a preference among women for salaried jobs as their educational attainment increases**; but such jobs remain extremely limited for women.
- It is estimated that among people (25 to 59 years) working as farmers, farm labourers and service workers, nearly a third are women, while the proportion of women among professionals, managers and clerical workers is only about 15% (NSSO, 2011 - 2012).

Opinions from the Editorial

We have to note that it is not the case that women are simply retreating from the world of work. On the contrary, surveys have found that women devote a substantial amount of their time to work which is not considered as work, but an extension of their duties, and is largely unpaid (viz. the care sector).

The incidence and drudgery (**hard monotonous routine work*) of this unpaid labour is growing. Also, the burden of these activities falls disproportionately on women, especially in the absence of adequately available or accessible public services.

Burden of Unpaid Work

- This includes unpaid care work such as childcare, elderly care, and household work such as collecting water.
- It also encompasses significant chunks of women's contribution to agriculture, animal husbandry, and non- timber forest produce on which most of the household production and consumption is based.

Needs and Requirements of Migrant Women Workers

Women have also expressed the need for policies which ensure safe and dignified working and living conditions for migrant workers.

- For example, in cities, governments must set up migration facilitation and crisis centres (temporary shelter facility, helpline, legal aid, and medical and counselling facilities).
- They must also allocate social **housing spaces for women workers**, which include rental housing and hostels.
- They must ensure **spaces for women shopkeepers** and hawkers in all markets and vending zones.

On the question of work, women's demands include gender responsive public services such as free and accessible public toilets, household water connections, safe and secure public transport, and adequate lighting and CCTV cameras to prevent violence against women in public spaces and to increase their mobility.

Furthermore, they want **fair and decent living wages** and appropriate **social security** including **maternity benefit**, sickness benefit, provident fund and **pension**.

Women Require Recognition as Farmers

- Women have strongly articulated the need to enumerate and remunerate the unpaid and underpaid work they undertake in sectors such as agriculture and fisheries.
- **Their fundamental demand is that women must be recognised as farmers in accordance with the National Policy for Farmers; this should include cultivators, agricultural labourers, pastoralists, livestock rearers, forest workers, fish-workers, and salt pan workers.**
- Thereafter, their equal rights and entitlements over land and access to inputs, credit, markets, and extension services must be ensured.

To Conclude

Any government which is serious about ensuring women's economic empowerment and equal access to livelihoods must address the numerous challenges that exist along this highly gendered continuum of unpaid, underpaid and paid work.

- A two-pronged approach must entail facilitating women's access to decent work by providing public services, eliminating discrimination in hiring, ensuring equal and decent wages, and improving women's security in public spaces.
- Government's must also recognise, reduce, redistribute, and remunerate women's unpaid work.

Women also reiterate the need to recognise and redistribute their unpaid work in the household.

- For this, the government must collect sex-disaggregated household level data with suitable parameters.
- Unless policymakers correctly assess and address the structural issues which keep women from entering and staying in the workforce, promising more jobs — while a welcome step — is unlikely to lead to the socioeconomic transformation India needs.

What Makes this Topic Important for UPSC?

"Is the National Commission for Women able to strategize and tackle the problems that women face at both public and private spheres? Give reasons in support of your answer."
[GS II 2017]

The above question is a good example of the depth required on women's issues. This depth has to be built gradually and holistically. Today's editorial, for example, covers one aspect of women's issues particularly well – 'women in the workforce'. To increase the depth on this topic further reading can be done by **searching our website**.

Drishti Input:

Addressing structural issues which keep women away from the workforce is a must if we are to achieve the socioeconomic transformation that India needs. Discuss. [250 Words]