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The Big Picture- Women in the Workforce

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The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2020 ranked India at 149th position out of 153 countries on **Economic participation and opportunity**. According to the WEF report, raising women's participation in the labour force can increase India's GDP significantly. A working woman creates a lot more employment in the economy thus providing a source of livelihood for others.

The declining women's labour force participation, gender pay-gap, high rates of informal work with lack of social security are seen as impediments to the goal of gender equality and the empowerment of women in India.

Factors for Low Workforce Participation of Women

There are multiple factors responsible for low women participation in the workforce ranging from patriarchy and stereotypes in society to lack of enabling and safe environment for working women.

- According to the **All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) report 2018-19**, the gender gap in the country narrowed as compared to the previous year, i.e. 2017-18.
The girl students have outnumbered men in eight disciplines. However, these women are either marrying early or not looking for jobs.
- Shrinking Agriculture Sector:
 - Labour force participation data by NSSO shows a decline in the number of women in the workforce is accounted for mainly by rural women.
 - The shrinking of the agriculture sector is the reason for the pulldown in the figures in India.
 - Also, the manufacturing sector is not so robust to absorb job losses from the agriculture sector.
- Infrastructure Issues:
Smart cities, safer commuting options, a workforce and work setting plan which enables women to also raise families, are the primary drivers of the way women respond to working options in urban spaces.
- Stereotypical Gender Roles:
 - Jobs with undefined nature of work such as factory jobs are thought to be male-dominated and women are discouraged to go in that turf.
 - Women are expected to play the set gender roles specifically that of parenting after a certain age.

Steps Taken By the Government

Several steps have been taken by the government to ensure that women are empowered across the country. Many laws and policies have been formulated in recent years to encourage women's participation in the workforce. Some of those are:

- **The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017**
 - The amendment provides for 26 weeks of paid maternity instead of 12 weeks.
 - The Bill introduces a provision wherein an employer may permit a woman to work from home after the period of paid leave.
 - The Bill introduces a provision that requires every establishment with 50 or more employees to provide crèche facilities within a prescribed distance.
 - The Bill has faced criticism for excluding paternity leave. There are also apprehensions that the act will disincentivise the corporates from hiring women.

- The labour ministry issued an advisory to the state pertaining to the safety of women under the Factories Act 1948, which clearly stated that the organisation will have to provide safe commuting facilities for women working at late hours.
 - **Pickup and drop facilities for women working late** will help create a strong infrastructure to create an enabling environment for working women.
- **Sexual Harassment Electronic-Box (SHe-box)**
 - The Ministry of Women and Child Development (WCD) has launched an online platform to enable women employees working in both the public and private organisations to file complaints related to sexual harassment at the workplace.
 - It has been launched to ensure the effective implementation of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013.
 - Once a complaint is submitted to the portal, it will be directly sent to the Internal Complaints Committee of the concerned Ministry or department.

Way Forward

Over the last few years, more women have taken up science, technology, engineering, and mathematic (STEM) courses and are aspiring to enter the workforce. However, dropout rates among women are also high particularly around marriage maternity and motherhood as far as employment is concerned. There are options like working from home yet a lot more needs to be done.

- There is a need for **timely auditing of laws** to ensure better implementation of legislation.
- **Better transport infrastructure** added with childcare facilities at or near workplaces will help women realise their full potential.
- Ultimately, the goal is not merely to increase female labour force participation, but to provide opportunities for decent work that will, in turn, contribute to the economic empowerment of women.
 - Getting women into the workforce is not enough, it should be accompanied by their ascent to the leadership positions.
 - It will help create a women-centric environment within the organisation.

There is no, one size fits all strategy as women in rural and urban areas have very different issues therefore there needs to be separate policies for different regions. If women's workforce participation in India is realised to its full potential and given India's demographic dividend, it can easily achieve the target of \$5trillion economy.