

WORKING WOMEN IN 2016: THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

The possibilities of women entering the work force in ever greater numbers is a future that is of interest not just to policy makers but also to CEOs, HR heads and to marketers. Working women represent a source of talent in resource scarce times and a source of greater discretionary spending power, both personal and for the family. Thus developing an informed view of the future of working women in India is a worthwhile exercise for a wide set of players on the national scene.

Currently, there are two kinds of broad perspectives of the future being offered for consideration, what one may call the utopian view and the dystopian view. Media which is championing the world view of a bright new India is the major proponent of the utopian view ... highlighting stories of the savvy and confident young Indian woman, a new generation of women who are bravely forging new trails and asserting their identity. If you believed this view, then you would bet that 50% of working age women entering the work force by 2016 is a certainty.

The women's activist groups on the other hand present the doom and gloom view. While they concede the gains of the past 50 years, they point to the still tenuous position of women in Indian society and the lack of respect, autonomy and independent decision making that is the truth for the vast majority of urban and rural women. The alarming rise of female foeticide in the past decade across all sections of society is but a testimony to the reality that women are second class citizens in modern India. If you believed this view, then you would believe that even over the next decade only a very small proportion of women would enter the work force.

Is there any other way of approaching the question of working women in the future, of anticipating what is the shape of things to come? What are the possible and probable futures? Given the reality of many Indias, I will confine my discussion to urban women, considering the top 8 metros and the other 25 million plus big towns – these places should (hopefully) represent the most socially progressive environment for women.

Let's start with some key current facts. Studying IRS data, if we look at the class structure of households in the top 8 cities, we find the professional class (SEC A) to be 15%, the trader and grey collar class (SEC B&C) to be 42% and the worker class (SEC D/E) to be another 43%. Only 22% of all homemakers work outside the home. If we match education levels and the nature of work to class, we find that while education improves as we move up the class levels, the % of working women actually declines (23% among worker class, 14% among trader class and 12% among the professional class). This suggests that economic pressure is the main reason why women go out to work full time today.

Another source of data at an All India level is the government's NSSO survey estimates. The labour force participation rate jumped in 2006 – the urban rate was 16.6%, the highest in 25 years. The trend from the 1970s to 2000 of female LFPR is one of marginal decline rather than increase. A linear extrapolation would make for a very conservative estimate indeed, confirming the views of the dystopians and the cautious optimists.

However, thinking about the future is interesting because the past is not a good predictor, especially considering the extent of social change that India is going through now. What would point us towards alternate futures is a consideration of the driving forces shaping our tomorrows.

Driving forces for change or enabling forces include a wide gamut of demographic, economic, technological, socio-cultural and attitudinal trends. The explosive growth of organized retail in the next decade with its requirement for sales girls and customer service executives, coupled with the projected growth of the ITES and IT industries will throw open jobs like never before, especially for women from the trading class. In this case, it may be fair to say that supply will create its own demand. The spread of cheap PCs, broadband connections and internet access would make it possible for many more mothers to work from home. The trend of rising aspirations for lifestyle

upgradation coupled with rising costs could give rise to a situation wherein dual incomes are a must. There is also a rising interest in entrepreneurship as revealed by the recent TIE study in six cities, with about 25% of women in the trading class expressing a keen desire to set up and run their own businesses.

Attitudinal driving forces include women's desire to earn money of their own so as to have greater respect and negotiating power in the family, accompanied by an equally strong desire to step out into the wider world. During this decade, today's teens will also become adults. These are girls in metro and urban homes who have been treated equal to boys while growing up, have been taught by their mothers to be assertive and who have grown up in a time of choice and comfort with shopping. There is a very visible attitudinal trend amongst them, to enjoy a phase of being single and working, in order to enjoy freedom, independence and spending power before they marry and settle down into family life.

Opposed to these are a significant set of driving forces which are the disablers or the forces for stability, which would push for the system to stay at its current equilibrium. Foremost amongst these is the implicit goal of the social system as a whole, which is the social advancement of the family unit. Most reasonably educated women have worked out that their maximum contribution to the family's progress lies in being professional home managers and mothers. It is their performance as family managers and mothers which gets them the most respect in the extended family circle. Women themselves don't wish to give up the family leadership role to concentrate on careers. And juggling it all is far too hard for the majority. Looking ahead at the world of work, it promises to be a 24x7x365 high pressure world – whether for professionals, traders or businessmen. Finally, women will still need to negotiate with their families to work and without their support would hesitate to take bold decisions to enter the work place.

The interaction of these opposing forces of change and stability suggest several possibilities as the shape of things to come. The first is the emergence, by the end of the decade, of a definite single working phase in young women's lives before they settle down into marriage and family. Young women from both the professional and trading classes would subscribe to this worldview and the explosive growth of the service sector would make this possible. The second is the growth of part-time working and working from home, something that allows women to monetize their talents while still prioritizing their family. Finally, the only force that would get families and women themselves out into full time working is the pressure for dual income due to rising costs.