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Assessment of policy spaces for women-lead empowerment – a synthesis of learned experiences from the W20 event at MAHE

A Policy Brief

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Harini Santhanam | Prashant K. Choudhary | Kalpana R. | Shreya C. Bhat | Anusree R. | Sruthi Kumar

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For any enquiries and/or clarifications write to:

The Head of the Department,

Department of Public Policy,

Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE), Bengaluru campus

Email: dpp.maheblr@manipal.edu

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Assessment of policy spaces for women-lead empowerment – a synthesis of learned experiences from the W20 event at MAHE

Harini Santhanam, Prashant Kumar Choudhary, Kalpana R., Shreya C. Bhat, Anusree R., Sruthi Kumar

Department of Public Policy, Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE), Bengaluru campus, Yelahanka, Bangalore – 560064

Communicating author: harini.santhanam@manipal.edu

Introduction

The shift in the paradigm of Women empowerment to Women-led empowerment was the highlight of the recently concluded W20 Conclave at Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE) Bengaluru. The faculty of the Department of Public Policy, MAHE Bengaluru, as well as selected students admitted to the Master’s Programme in Public Policy (MA Public Policy, Batch 2023-2025) participated in the proceedings of Day 1 of the W20 Conclave, MAHE Bengaluru on 26th May 2023. Listening to the experts speak, the students and the team identified the following areas for policy interventions to improve the gender equality in 4 interventional areas:

1. Providing better opportunities for higher education
2. Creating networks for skill training
3. Enhancing employability and
4. Enhancing leadership

Following this, a short survey was conducted to obtain innovative ideas across the above domains.

The questions put forth as part of the survey are provided in the table below:

Table: Key questions on policy interventions for improving gender equity as part of W20 deliberations and expected levels of their societal impacts in terms of policymaking

Q.No.	Question regarding active policy interventional spaces	Expected levels of impacts for different types of policy interventions		
		<i>New policy introduction</i>	<i>Policy Improvement space</i>	<i>Normative space for existing policies</i>
1.	From your participation, indicate the most important change we need to bring to Women Higher Education in India?	High	High	Moderate
2.	In your opinion, what professional skills do women need to have to be a successful person?	Moderate	High	High
3.	In your opinion, in which sector is women's highest employability? Give one alternate sector where it needs to improve.	High	High	High
4.	In your opinion, what should a woman change in herself to be recognized as a true professional?	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
5.	Given an opportunity, what can we recommend to the government to facilitate better educational attainment opportunities for women?	High	High	High
6.	In your view, write the biggest hurdle for women to excel in career and one pathway to overcome the same?	High	High	High

Higher education for women

According to the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) Report for the year 2020-21 the Gross enrolment ratio of female students at Higher educational institutes stands at 27.3% as against 26.9% of male enrolment. The present contribution of women to the GDP is only 18%. The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) of women students at Higher Education Institutions (HEI) stands at 27.3 per cent against 26.9 per cent of men enrollment in India. There is also an increase in the Gender Parity Index (GPI) during the last five years, from 0.94 in 2016-17 to 1.05 in 2020-21. However, there is a significant gap between women enrollment in professional programs compared to other academic streams (AISHE, 2023). The World Economic Forum in its Global Gender Gap Report 2021 ranked India at 140 out of 156 countries with a score of 0.625 (out of 1). Though Indian women represent 48 per cent of the population, their contribution to the GDP stands at 17 per cent of GDP compared to 40 per cent in China. According to estimates, if equal opportunities were made available to women, India could add 770 billion USD to its GDP by 2025. Studies have shown that there is a significant correlation between educational attainment and economic empowerment of women, which is also an indicator of women's health and wellbeing in general. This calls for an enhanced role for HEIs in addressing the gaps that exist and bring in systemic changes to have more women in workforce as partners in the growth process.

Key points of reference with respect to the survey and brainstorming sessions are presented as follows. In terms of the most important changes needed to be brought to Women Higher Education in India, the respondents identified the following interventions as most promising for Questions 1 & 5 (Table 1):

1. Incorporating fee concessions as part of state higher education policies for women undertaking higher education to reduce the drop-out percentage and to increase women enrolment in higher education.
2. Providing a comprehensive educational plan to develop and utilise indigenously produced digital universities model for increasing access to education for rural women in two phases:
 1. For imparting formal education: primary, secondary, tertiary education, as well as
 2. For imparting skill education to those outside the formal education pathway.

3. It is necessary to break the gender stereotype where some courses in India are considered appropriate for women and others for men. For example, enrolment of women in STEM fields such as IT and engineering is significantly lower as compared to their male counterparts. This can be tackled by providing matching incentives to HEIs that enrol qualified students to professional courses where inequalities are quite evident.
4. It was necessary to design and adopt a policy “educational justice” as a supportive policy for improving the chances of higher education for women. Hence, the denial of opportunities must be penalised in the like the dowry act and domestic violence act, with laws to support married women's education so that their husbands don't act against their wish to study.

Policy interventions such as the following will be critical to provide more opportunities for lifelong learning for women, mirroring closely Delor’s declaration of the 'Four Pillars of Education', i.e., “to know, to do, to be, and to live together”:

1. To focus on GPI along with GER (making GPI as a key indicator while assessing the status of women within a country)
2. To promote professional education among young women (special schemes, scholarships, part fee waivers)
3. To provide preferential placement options to begin early work-life after higher education.

Skill training and development among women

Responses in terms of the key spaces of interventions identified in terms of the skill development initiatives questioned are discussed below. In India, the Skills Sector Councils determine the National Occupation Standards (NOS) to define the job roles over different sectors. However, as per the National Skills Framework, the concept of Recognition of Prior Learning on the other hand, is not well constrained to recognize and certify the learning levels of a person from unorganized sector, outside the normal learning path. This factor hinders the women educational attainment to a large extent. This factor is even more pertinent to the migrants who are forced to compromise any form of education or skill training, including being financially literate, to fit into low-skilled jobs for daily livelihoods. The following policy spaces exist providing scope to evolve strong frameworks for skill development:

1. To develop (country-specific or context-specific) framework for skill development programs specifically designed for women.
2. To encourage public-private partnership in skilling women in all domains
3. To invest in developing micro credentials that can help women in equipping themselves for the world of work.
4. To create more opportunities within the gig-economy which suits women as they continue to manage their care work.

Financial inclusion

It has been estimated that there exists ~230 million women entrepreneurs and over 100 million agrarian workers. Women in India also are viewed as leaders of “a silent revolution” the trend that indicates that the voting patterns of women lean towards anti-incumbency. Such voting choices also reflects on the independence of the contemporary women to select the representation of leaders paying attention to skill development and job creation with potential to achieve financial independence for better livelihoods. However, such independence will need to be supported with financial literacy for realizing the best-use scenarios.

Financial literacy is important as cashflow management, insurance of commodities produced, claims all need to her to actively engage with financial institutions. Therefore, it is very important that financial literacy is made a part of education since school days. Factors such as ownership of assets and properties indicate the levels of financial inclusivity. Global leadership is essential to identify the interventional areas and to support and create an ecosystem for women pertaining to the following points:

1. Financial literacy programs to be introduced in the school curriculum.
2. Financial education made a compulsory part of higher education curriculum.
3. Hands-on training provided to women students in higher education with internships and capstone projects.

Care work responsibilities

Work participation rates of the developing countries are close to 69% for women (as against 81% for men); in India, these are further skewed: work participation is 79% for the men and 27% women. Recent data of World Bank suggests that the labor force participation rate in females is about 22% compared to the males (71.8%). Studies over the decade have shown that low work participation for women in general cannot be attributed to the reasons for their unemployment but are rather direct measures of two factors: 1. the non-availability of appropriate opportunities for the women workforce and 2. the extent of unpaid work for the hardworking population exposed to drudgery. For example, data on the work participation rates for women in urban and rural India are surprisingly 13% and 25-26%. These trends reflect the lack of appropriate employment opportunities for women that also guarantee livelihoods and safety of the work environment especially in the urban centers.

Converting this intangible contribution of the care work force to tangible one will be crucial to elevate the position of a woman within the society. Here shared responsibilities become important i.e., care work is shared by both men and women equally in the households. It is on the pretext of need for this care work that she is restrained from contributing tangibly to the economy. Therefore, the policy interventions required to strengthen a positive care work recognition system must:

1. To ensure the care work becomes a shared responsibility in families that calls for social change through development engineering.
2. Create infrastructure within the societies to support women are reduced with the share of care work (facilities for children and elderly day care homes)
3. Media plan (social media awareness campaigns) for making care work equitable.

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