

# ISAS Brief

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## The Status of Women in India: Widening Gender Gap

*India ranked a low 108<sup>th</sup> position out of 144 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2017 published recently by the World Economic Forum, slipping 21 places in its overall ranking from the 87<sup>th</sup> position in 2016. India's decline in the ranking can be primarily attributed to a widening of its gender gaps in political empowerment, literacy rate and life expectancy. India's gender gap is further accentuated by the low participation of the women in the economy and low wages for those who have the employment opportunity. It is crucial to understand the constraints faced by the women in order to devise the appropriate policies to address this complex problem.*

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### Introduction

The Global Gender Gap Report, first introduced by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2006 as a framework to capture the magnitude of gender-based disparities and monitor their progress over time, recently came out with its 2017 Report. It benchmarked 144 countries on their progress towards gender parity on a scale from 0 (imparity) to 1 (parity) across four fundamental sub-indexes – Economic Participation and Opportunity; Educational Attainment;

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Health and Survival; and Political Empowerment. All four of these sub-indexes have 14 different indicators that compose them. This year, the WEF also introduced a deeper analysis of the gender gaps across the industries and the role of gender-based occupational and skills imbalances.<sup>2</sup>

India ranked a low 108<sup>th</sup> place out of 144 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2017, slipping 21 places in its overall ranking from 87<sup>th</sup> position in 2016, and down 10 places from 2006. Despite closing 67 per cent of its gender gap, India is still behind many of its international peers such as China which is ranked 100 this year, and its South Asian neighbours, Bangladesh (47) and the Maldives (106), which hold the top-ranks in the region, having closed just under 72 per cent and 67 per cent of their overall gender gap respectively.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1: A Closer Look at India's Score Card**

Global Gender Gap key indicators	2016		2017	
	Rank	Score	Rank	Score
<b>Global Gender Gap Index</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>0.683</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>0.669</b>
<b>Economic Participation and Opportunity</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>0.408</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>0.376</b>
Labour force participation	135	0.344	136	0.347
Wage equality for similar work (survey)	103	0.573	80	0.620
Estimated earned income (US\$, PPP)	137	0.232	137	0.232
Legislators, senior officials, and managers	-	-	114	0.148
Professional and technical workers	-	-	118	0.338
<b>Educational Attainment</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>0.950</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>0.952</b>
Literacy rate	124	0.778	118	0.752
Enrolment in primary education	1	1.000	1	1.000
Enrolment in secondary education	1	1.000	1	1.000
Enrolment in tertiary education	99	0.936	95	0.990
<b>Health and Survival</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>0.942</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>0.942</b>
Sex ratio at birth	142	0.893	141	0.904
Healthy life expectancy	71	1.054	117	1.028
<b>Political Empowerment</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>0.433</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>0.407</b>
Women in parliament	112	0.136	118	0.134
Women in ministerial positions	50	0.286	76	0.227
Years with female head of state (last 50)	2	0.723	3	0.697

Source: *Global Gender Gap Reports (2016 & 2017)*, World Economic Forum.

Note: In 2016 and 2017, 144 countries were covered; Score: 0.00 = imparity; 1.00 = parity.

<sup>2</sup> Global Gender Gap Report 2017. *World Economic Forum*, 2 November 2017. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2017> Accessed on 3 November 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

## Political Empowerment

India's decline in the global ranking can be primarily attributed to a widening of its gender gaps in political empowerment, literacy rate and life expectancy. Though India is still within the top 20 countries in the Political Empowerment pillar this year, the widening of the gender gap is seen across all indicators comprising the sub-index – participation of the women in parliament and in ministerial positions as well as years with female head of state in the last 50 years.<sup>4</sup> The abysmal representation of the women in parliament and ministerial positions shows that the progress in gender equality remains slow in all structures of power and types of decision-making in India.<sup>5</sup> The Women's Reservation Bill, which called for reserving 33 per cent of the seats in the Lok Sabha (Lower House) and the State Legislative Assemblies for women, continues to languish in the Lok Sabha for the past 21 years.<sup>6</sup> Equal participation is not only a prerequisite for democracy, but also an inevitable condition for harmonious human existence as it would have a bearing on the policies and the structure of the institutions.<sup>7</sup> Such participation will lead to the collective power of both genders, creating a society where human beings flourish regardless of their gender identity. It will also help terminate relations of exploitation and subordination.

## Economic Opportunity and Participation

With a ranking of 139 out of a total of 144 countries in the Economic Opportunity and Participation sub-index, achieving gender equality in the workforce is one of India's greatest challenges. This gap is reinforced by India's twin troubles: the low participation of the women in the economy (136<sup>th</sup> rank) and low wages for those who have the employment opportunity (137<sup>th</sup> rank). The women's share among legislators, senior officials and managers as well as professional and technical workers is minimal today. Women comprise only over

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "Pakistan, Afghanistan fare better than India on women's representation in parliament", Doel Sengupta. *The New Indian Express*, 16 March 2017. <http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2017/mar/16/pakistan-afghanistan-fare-better-than-india-on-womens-representation-in-parliament-1581960.html> Accessed on 8 November 2017.

<sup>6</sup> "Twenty Years Too Long: Women's Reservation Bill Continues to Languish in Lok Sabha", Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty. *The Wire*, 16 September 2016. <https://thewire.in/66260/womens-reservation-bill-in-lok-sabha/> Accessed on 5 November 2017.

<sup>7</sup> "Why Aren't We Dealing With the Lack of Women in Indian Politics?", Haris Jamil & Anmolam, *The Wire*, 2 August 2017. <https://thewire.in/163311/politics-womens-representation/> Accessed on 5 November 2017.

one third of the labour force and a female employee in India is estimated to earn less than a quarter of the annual income earned by a male employee. While the WEF report points to a decrease in gender gap in wages for similar work, a woman is still paid only about 60 per cent of what her male counterpart receives for similar work.<sup>8</sup> The percentage of unemployed youth and adults is also higher among the women as compared to the men. While 8.1 per cent of the men are involved in high-skilled work, only 1.8 per cent of the women are involved in the same type of work. However, roughly the same proportion of men and women are employed in the informal sector. The women's share of daily unpaid work, including household chores and childcare, is 65.6 per cent while it is only 11.7 per cent for the men. The women are also less financially independent than men in India – while 62.5 per cent of Indian men hold some kind of account in a financial institution, the figure is just 42.6 per cent for the women. In terms of economic leadership, women fare poorly as well, with a gender gap as wide as 95 per cent. This data points to the wide gender gap in labour force participation in the formal sector, particularly, and the consequently lower labour rights protection for female workers.

India's low, stagnating female labour-force participation has important implications for the economic development of the country which is currently experiencing a "demographic dividend". If the women are included in the labour force, India will enjoy an even greater dividend from a larger working population. Furthermore, employed women have a greater bargaining power with positive repercussions on their own well-being and that of their families.<sup>9</sup> As Klaus Schwab, Founder and Executive Chairman, WEF, said, "Competitiveness on a national and on a business level will be decided more than ever before by the innovative capacity of a country or a company. Those will succeed best who understand to integrate women as an important force into their talent pool."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Global Gender Gap Report 2017, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> "Low, stagnating female labour-force participation in India", Stephan Klasen, *Livemint*, 21 March 2017. <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/vgO1ynMV6UMDnF6kW5Z3VJ/Low-stagnating-female-labourforce-participation-in-India.html> Accessed on 7 November 2017.

<sup>10</sup> "Moving Backwards: Ten Years of Progress on Global Gender Parity Stalls in 2017", Oliver Cann, *World Economic Forum*, 2 November 2017. <https://www.weforum.org/press/2017/11/ten-years-of-progress-on-global-gender-parity-stalls-in-2017/> Accessed on 4 November 2017.

## Health and Survival

India's performance in the Health and Survival category has been particularly dismal. It has remained the world's least-improved country in this measure over the past decade, ranking the fourth-lowest in the world.<sup>11</sup> The low ranking is mainly due to India's poor sex ratio of just 943 females to 1,000 males.<sup>12</sup> India's rank of 141 for sex ratio at birth points to the continued strong preference for sons.<sup>13</sup> In terms of healthy life expectancy, India's score and ranking, in particular, have fallen substantially from the previous year.

## Educational Attainment

While India has succeeded in fully closing its primary and secondary education enrolment gender gaps for the second year running and, for the first time, has almost achieved parity in its tertiary education enrolment gender gap, the overall ranking for Educational Attainment is still low at 112 because of the continued disparity in literacy rates across the men and the women in the country. A deeper analysis of the report also shows that the primary, secondary and tertiary education attainment rates for the men are higher than that for the women across all age groups covered in the report. The gender gap in the skill set is evident from the different degree types attained by the men and the women – there is a stronger tendency for the women to gravitate towards the social sciences, journalism, education, and health and welfare while there is a higher proportion of the men obtaining degrees in business, administration and law, information and communication technologies, manufacturing and construction. The patriarchal nature of the Indian society views the women as homemakers and men as breadwinners, leading to a differential treatment of the sons and the daughters by the parents and a resultant gender gap in the access to education. The report also states that 73.9 per cent of the women are married by the age of 25 as compared to only 34.7 per cent of the men.<sup>14</sup> The Indian government has implemented several programmes to reduce the education gap between the two groups. However, social norms do not allow the women to make the most of these programmes.

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<sup>11</sup> "India slips 21 slots on WEF Gender Gap index 2017", *The Hindu*, 2 November 2016. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-slips-21-slots-occupy-108th-rank-on-wef-gender-gap-index-2017/article19966894.ece> Accessed on: 3 November 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Census of India, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Global Gender Gap Report 2017, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

On a positive note, Indian States such as Kerala and the seven sister States in the Northeast have managed to make commendable progress in reducing the gender gap across several crucial indicators. However, while there are relatively high female workforce participation rates in the hill States of Northeast India, the rates are extremely low in States and Union Territories such as the National Capital Territory of Delhi, Chandigarh, Bihar and Punjab. The great variation across the country in this rate is an unsettling aspect of the country's development trajectory and points to the fact that no link can be established between income and/or literacy with female workforce participation rate.<sup>15</sup>

## **Conclusion**

While one has been witnessing greater rhetoric on the gender gap issue from all quarters in India in recent decades, the ground reality, however, calls for more decisive interventions from the political elites. The downward slide in the WEF's gender gap index reinforces the existence of the deeply-entrenched prejudices and the gender-biases in the Indian society weighed heavily against the women. India still faces substantial gender gaps in the most fundamental areas of life – in the access to and control of resources, in economic opportunities, and in power and political voice – making gender equality a core development issue in its own right.

In order to promote gender equality, there is a need to foster economic development which will, in turn, ensure greater incentives for more equal resources and participation, reform institutions, as well as to take active measures to redress persistent disparities in command over resources and political representation. If the new development-centric political discourses do not include a genuine concern to bridge the gender gap, not only would India be denying itself of the full benefits of its demographic advantages, manifested both in numbers and the age-groups, the development it achieves would also be, at best, lopsided.

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<sup>15</sup> *Changing Status of Women In North-eastern States: Felicitation Volume in honour of Prof. C. Lalkima.* Mittal Publications, 2009. pp. 75.