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A Growth Story That Needs Women at Work

Context

- India aims to become a **Viksit Bharat** by **2047**, but achieving this goal requires sustained **8-9% GDP growth**, productive employment, and inclusive development.
- Rising youth unemployment, slowing structural transformation, increasing **income inequality**, and low **Female Work Participation Rate (WPR)** have weakened the economy.
- While external shocks such as the **West Asia conflict** have exposed these vulnerabilities, domestic policy shocks since 2016 have already slowed job creation and reduced private investment.
- Unlocking women's employment is essential for restoring growth.

India's Employment Challenge

- India's recent growth has been largely jobless, with employment failing to keep pace with the expanding workforce.
- Economic disruptions caused by demonetisation, a poorly implemented GST, the NBFC crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic reversed structural transformation by increasing dependence on agriculture and reducing

manufacturing employment.

- The resulting rise in inequality weakened **aggregate demand**, lowered private investment, and slowed non-farm job creation, limiting India's long-term growth potential.

Women's Employment: A Powerful Growth Multiplier

- Expanding women's participation in the workforce is one of the strongest drivers of economic growth.
- A **10-percentage-point** increase in female WPR could raise GDP growth by nearly **2 percentage points**.
- Greater female employment:
 - Expands the **labour supply** and productive capacity.
 - Raises household incomes, consumption, and savings.
 - Improves **nutrition**, education, and healthcare, strengthening **human capital**.
 - Promotes **productivity**, innovation, and competitiveness through gender-diverse workplaces.
- Women's employment is therefore both an economic necessity and a tool for inclusive development.

Why India's Female Work Participation Remains Low

- India's female WPR remains below **30%**, among the lowest globally.
- During the 1980s and early 1990s, women's participation was high because of agricultural employment.
- However, mechanisation, declining demand for manual labour, and rising education reduced female participation between 2004 and 2018, reflecting the first phase of the **U-shaped labour participation hypothesis**.

The Illusion of Rising Female Employment after COVID-19

- The rise in female WPR after **2020** largely reflected economic distress rather than quality employment.
- Pandemic-induced reverse migration and shrinking urban jobs forced many women into **Unpaid Family Labour (UFL)**, subsistence farming, animal husbandry, and poultry.
- This **distress-driven feminisation of agriculture** increased labour participation but not productive or secure employment.

Manufacturing: The Missing Link

- India's growth has been concentrated in capital-intensive sectors such as finance, IT, and organised manufacturing, which generate limited employment.
- Labour-intensive industries like **textiles**, garments, footwear, food processing, and MSMEs experienced declining employment between **2013 and 2019**.
- Despite **Make in India** and the **Production-Linked Incentive (PLI)** scheme, women's manufacturing employment in 2019 remained below its 2004 level, recovering only by 2022. Expanding labour-intensive manufacturing is therefore critical for employment generation.

Regional Divide: Lessons from Tamil Nadu

- A sharp **North-South divide** characterises female employment.

- **Tamil Nadu**, with only **5-6%** of India's population, employs over **40%** of the country's women factory workers due to its strong textile, electronics, footwear, and automobile industries, combined with better female literacy, transport, hostels, and social acceptance of women workers.
- In contrast, many northern states suffer from weak public education, poor healthcare, high malnutrition, low female mobility, and limited industrialisation.
- **Bihar**, for instance, has a female WPR of only **15%**.

The Crisis of Educated Young Women

- Although secondary education has achieved near gender parity, employment opportunities have not kept pace.
- The number of women aged 15–29 years who are **NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training)** has risen from below 70 million before 2004 to over 100 million by 2018.
- Rising unemployment among educated women represents a major loss of India's demographic dividend.

Way Forward

- India should promote **labour-intensive manufacturing**, strengthen **MSMEs**, improve public education and healthcare, enhance women's safety, transport, childcare, and hostel facilities, expand skill development, and encourage women's entrepreneurship.
- Replicating the **Tamil Nadu model** in northern states through industrial clusters and gender-friendly infrastructure can substantially increase female employment and accelerate inclusive growth.

Conclusion

- India cannot achieve **Viksit Bharat** by excluding half of its population from productive employment.
- Higher **female labour force participation**, stronger manufacturing, investment in **human capital**, and greater **gender equality** are essential for generating employment, boosting productivity, and sustaining long-term economic growth.
- Women's employment is not merely a social objective but the missing engine of India's development.

A Growth Story That Needs Women at Work FAQs

Q1. Why is increasing women's work participation important for India's growth?

Ans. Increasing women's work participation expands the labour force, boosts productivity, raises household incomes, and can significantly accelerate India's GDP growth.

Q2. Why did female work participation rise after 2020?

Ans. Female work participation increased mainly because many women entered unpaid agricultural and family work due to economic distress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Q3. How has manufacturing affected women's employment in India?

Ans. The decline of labour-intensive manufacturing sectors has reduced employment opportunities for women despite industrial initiatives.

Q4. Why is Tamil Nadu considered a model for female employment?

Ans. Tamil Nadu has created large-scale employment for women through strong manufacturing industries, better education, and supportive infrastructure.

Q5. What is the biggest obstacle to achieving Viksit Bharat by 2047?

Ans. Excluding a large proportion of women from productive employment is one of the biggest obstacles to achieving the goal of Viksit Bharat by 2047.

Source: **The Hindu**

India's Foreign Policy Must Look Seaward

Context

- India has become the **second-largest supplier of seafarers globally**, with over 3.2 lakh personnel serving international shipping.
- They play **a crucial role in global trade**, energy security, and the Blue Economy, yet operate in a complex system involving multiple jurisdictions, flags of convenience, and diverse stakeholders.
- Recent conflicts in West Asia, the Red Sea, and the Black Sea have exposed **the vulnerability of Indian seafarers** and underscored the need for stronger protection.

India's Growing Maritime Workforce

- Indian seafarers work across international waters without permanently residing abroad.
- A single voyage may involve an Indian crew member employed by a foreign company, sailing on a vessel registered in another country and carrying cargo owned elsewhere.
- This **fragmented structure creates uncertainty** regarding responsibility during emergencies, often delaying rescue, legal assistance, and repatriation.

Challenges Faced by Indian Seafarers

- **Complex Jurisdictional Responsibility**
 - The multinational nature of shipping often blurs accountability among ship-owners, Flag States, insurers, and port authorities.
 - During crises such as attacks, detention, or abandonment, Indian diplomatic missions frequently struggle to identify the responsible authority, delaying assistance.
- **Rising Security Threats**

- Commercial ships increasingly operate through conflict-prone waters.
- Missile attacks, drones, piracy, hostage-taking, and sea mines in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, West Africa, and West Asia have endangered civilian crews.
- Indian seafarers have become unintended victims of geopolitical conflicts despite having no role in them.

• **Crew Abandonment**

- India records one of the highest numbers of abandoned seafarers worldwide.
- Many face unpaid wages, inadequate food and medical care, confiscated documents, and delayed repatriation.
- Weak enforcement of the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) by some flag States further worsens their plight.

• **Information and Communication Gaps**

- Although ship-tracking technology reveals a vessel's location, it rarely provides information about the crew's safety.
- Families often remain unaware whether their loved ones are injured, detained, or stranded, causing severe anxiety.

• **Limited Consular Preparedness**

- India's diplomatic missions are organised geographically rather than around mobile maritime workers.
- The absence of specialised maritime officers, coordination with ports, hospitals, insurers, and legal experts often slows emergency response.

Government Initiatives

- The Seafarer First initiative marks an important **step toward proactive protection** by introducing a tracking dashboard, monitoring of high-risk regions, and liaison officers for affected families.
- The Directorate General of Shipping has also restricted **deployment on vessels associated with crew abandonment** and advised against deployment through conflict-prone routes such as the Strait of Hormuz.

Existing Gaps

- India still **lacks a permanent Maritime Consular Protocol** defining responsibilities during emergencies.
- Existing bilateral maritime agreements primarily facilitate employment and recognition of certificates but provide limited provisions for legal assistance, consular access, emergency evacuation, or compensation.
- Additionally, **many seafarers receive insufficient information** regarding vessel ownership, insurance status, sanctions, or previous abandonment records before signing contracts.

Way Forward

- India should establish a **dedicated maritime consular network** with trained officers in major shipping hubs.
- The **Seafarer Dashboard** should remain operational for all designated high-risk maritime regions.
- A comprehensive Maritime Consular Protocol should define procedures for distress response, rescue, legal aid, and repatriation.
- Recruitment agencies must ensure **transparency by disclosing vessel ownership**, insurance coverage, sanctions, and previous abandonment history before employment.
- Seafarers should have the **right to refuse deployment into officially designated conflict zones** without facing penalties.
- At the international level, **India should collaborate with the Philippines, Indonesia, the International Maritime Organisation (IMO)**, and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to establish common standards on crew welfare, detention, abandonment, and repatriation.
- **Stronger enforcement of the Maritime Labour Convention** and protection of commercial shipping from attacks are essential to safeguarding civilian seafarers.

Conclusion

- India's maritime ambitions **extend beyond ports, shipping corridors, and** naval capability.
- They depend equally on protecting the citizens who sustain global maritime commerce.
- **Ensuring proactive governance**, international cooperation, transparent recruitment, robust consular support, and effective legal safeguards **will strengthen India's maritime leadership** while fulfilling its responsibility towards every Indian seafarer, regardless of the flag under which they serve.

India's Foreign Policy Must Look Seaward FAQs

Q1. Why are Indian seafarers particularly vulnerable during international conflicts?

Ans. Indian seafarers often work across multiple jurisdictions, making responsibility for their safety, rescue, and repatriation difficult to determine during crises.

Q2. What is the purpose of the Seafarer First initiative?

Ans. The Seafarer First initiative aims to monitor Indian seafarers in high-risk regions through a tracking dashboard and provide liaison officers for affected families.

Q3. What are the major challenges faced by Indian seafarers?

Ans. Indian seafarers face challenges such as jurisdictional ambiguity, security threats, crew abandonment, communication gaps, and limited consular support.

Q4. Why is a Maritime Consular Protocol necessary for India?

Ans. A Maritime Consular Protocol is necessary to establish clear procedures for rescue, legal assistance, emergency response, and repatriation of Indian seafarers.

Q5. How can India strengthen the protection of its seafarers?

Ans. India can strengthen seafarer protection by improving recruitment transparency, enhancing consular support, enforcing international maritime laws, and promoting global cooperation through the IMO and ILO.

Source: **The Hindu**

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