Where have all the working women gone?

The number of women in the workforce has seen a worrying drop in the last decade. Women are leaving paid jobs at all levels of education, age and income. This despite more girls and women now passing out of schools and colleges.

Amulya Gopalakrishnan looks at the causes and highlights solutions needed to bring gainful work to women

It’s the big whodunnit of our times — what is causing Indian women to withdraw from paid work? Over the last decade, an already low female labour force participation rate continued to fall steadily. India is an embarrassing standout for its income level, where it is barely ahead of Pakistan and some Arab nations.

The latest periodic labour force survey of 2017-18 shows that only about 23% of working-age women are employed, down from 31% in 2011-12 and 43% in 2004-05.

Studies show that women are dropping out at all levels of education, age and income, but it is working-age rural women who have retreated dramatically — from 49% in 2004-05 to 36% in 2011-12 and now 25% in 2017-18.

“Of course, I liked my job, and I want to work outside,” says 22-year-old Manaswini Dutta, from a handloomweaving family in Odisha’s Maniabandha village. She got a customer service job in Bhubaneswar, earning Rs 8,500 a month, until an illness forced her to return home. She laughs and crinkles her nose at the idea of a weaving job, which her parents and grandparents do.

Apart from the labour of running the home, her mother and grandmother also handle the yarn and dyeing, before the men take over at the loom.

Some of the low levels of women’s work participation can be explained by systematic underestimating. A majority of women work in a grey zone: not in paid labour outside the home, but yet contributing to the family livelihood. She might be doing piece-rate work at home, or putting in irregular stints at a construction site — but neither she nor her family would identify this as proper work to surveyors.

Economists Ashwini Deshpande and Naila Kabeer, who conducted a household survey in seven West Bengal districts in 2017, found that the women’s labour participation rate for the state, pegged at 16% by NSSO, climbed to 52% in those seven districts with a more nuanced questionnaire.
But given that the same blunt survey has been used for all these years, what explains the clear slide of the last decade and half? The first and biggest reason: education. School enrolment increased across caste and gender in the last 10-15 years, drawing in girls who might have been child labourers, and keeping them in school, explains economist Santosh Mehrotra. Schemes like bicycles for teenaged girls and scholarships also encouraged schooling, leading to “a revolution of rising aspirations”, he says.

When Naandi Foundation surveyed over 70,000 teenaged girls across India last year, it found that three out of four did not want to get married till 21, and seven out of 10 want a graduate degree. They do not want to work in fields or do the manual work their mothers did, but their aspirations have run smack into the forbidding walls of the job market.

“I studied till Class 10, did well without any tuition, but needed Rs 4,000 to go to college in Baramba, apart from all the other expenses,” says 19-year-old Rinku Sahu of Maniabandha. Her family focused its resources on her brother instead, and is trying to arrange a suitable match for her.

Mehrotra outlines many more reasons, like greater mechanisation in agriculture, which displaces some of the winnowing and threshing work that women do. “Between 2004-5 and 2011-12, real wages rose because of nonagricultural jobs growing and overall peak investment, and many women stayed back in the household because they could,” he says.

Now, he says, “open unemployment is at a 45-year high of 6.1%, and even their brothers are not finding jobs. A lot of women are simply disheartened and not even looking for jobs. Construction work has fallen, and manufacturing jobs — especially labour-intensive ones like textiles, where women work — have fallen between 2012 and 2018, he says.

“We must not hold women responsible for dropping out of the labour market — where are the opportunities for them?” says Deshpande. Women’s jobs are seen as more dispensable, and are lower-paid. In urban areas, domestic work is the one area that has grown, and education and retail also employ many women. Among urban working women, the share of regular, salaried jobs has increased from 35.6% in 2004 to 52.1% in 2017. But in the 15-29 age group, nearly 27% of urban women are unemployed and seeking work.

“Less educated rural women who have lost farm jobs have few options apart from MGNREGA and self employment as small vendors, making beedis, or doing zarizardosi work. The best thing for them is to boost self-help groups, for which funding has been increasing,” says Mehrotra. Deshpande said in China, the non-farm rural economy has grown rapidly, and India needs a similar focus. “The only dignified jobs for rural women are as Asha or Anganwadi workers,” she says.

While there is no all-encompassing solution to boost women’s work participation, Mehrotra and many experts feel that scaling up paid care-work would be a hugely worthwhile intervention. Asha, Anganwadi and midday meal workers make up nearly a crore of women, who bear heavy
responsibilities for the community’s nutrition and health, early childhood and maternal care but are not recognised as fixed workers. “The government of India spends barely 1.2% of the GDP on health, roughly 3% on education. These are labour-intensive sectors that employ women. Simply investing in human capital will create jobs, especially for women,” says Mehrotra.

Expanding this network of community frontline workers, and strengthening health and education and social services would not only directly employ women, it would shift the burden from the bulk of women who work at home without pay, and undergird the paid work of others. It is an investment in future citizens, and what’s more, these are jobs that are unlikely to be rendered obsolete by technological change.

“Childcare is not the primary hurdle for women in India as it is in the West, it’s also domestic chores and eldercare,” says Deshpande, but increasing public spending on this traditionally unpaid “women’s work” is clearly a way forward.

But women need a fair shot at all kinds of employment. Prioritising sectors where women are employed and making room in others is essential. Mehrotra suggests creating more accommodation for working women in semi-urban areas, improving transportation, starting skilling centres near manufacturing clusters, encouraging entrepreneurship, and so on.

If Indian women had the same work participation rates as men, Oxfam estimates the GDP would rise by 43%. Their low presence in the workforce is proof of persisting inequality, and the loss is collective.