Women's Employment Post-Pandemic - WFH

What is the issue?

- Women' employment has fallen during the pandemic. Also, the quality of that employment has declined.
- In this context, here is an argument why not all women may benefit from the work from home (WFH) option being demanded by various quarters post the pandemic.

How is post-pandemic women workforce participation?

- Even before the pandemic, women's participation in the workforce has always been low compared to the men's.
- Only 9% of all women of working age were employed compared to 67% of men of working age.
- Now, the pandemic has hit women harder than men.
- Though only 11% of the workforce in 2019-20, they suffered 13% of the job losses in April 2020.
- To note, most women lost more of the top end jobs in the organised sector.
- They had to make up by taking jobs in the informal and gig economy.
- Urban, educated women's employment declined more than that of rural women.
- The rural women continued to find work in the fields and on MGNREGA.
- But there too, women's participation has decreased, not only due to Covid-19, but also due to other economic and social factors.
- The boom in college and school going girls, especially in urban areas, has not been translated into a demographic dividend for the economy.

Has it improved after the lifting of the lockdown?

- The job market has recovered somewhat in January 2021 with women's employment increasing by 11.9 million.
- But the new employment is mostly in the lower end construction and agriculture sectors.
- Women's employment in the better paid manufacturing and service industries has not recovered to previous levels.
- The most-expected urban version of the MGNREGA which could have provided jobs for low income women was not included in the recent Budget.

Why is WFH option being demanded?

- The pandemic has necessitated the trend of working from home (WFH).
- This has offered some hope for women's employment.
- The reasons are saving of costs on office space, commuting costs, costs of meeting and so on.
- It is argued that WFH is likely to increase women's participation.
- This is because it can allow more women to combine their domestic duties with office work more seamlessly.
- This can also help overcome the cultural concerns of women's safety at the workplace and en route.
- Even before the lockdown, companies were outsourcing parts of the production to women who worked from home.
- E.g. Titan was outsourcing the production of watch parts, such as straps or dials to women or women's groups.

What are the shortcomings with this?

- Working from home might not be the best way to empower women.
- In any case it applies only to urban women in the organised sector.
    - Neither agricultural work where women are employed to work in the fields, nor MGNREGA work can be done from home.
    - The same applies to the work of Anganwadi or ASHA workers whose main responsibility is interaction with their charges.
    - Nor will WFH positively affect women employed in the unorganised sector, working from home on craft production, handlooms, or selling vegetables etc. and the like.
- Though WFH or outsourcing may enable women to increase their income it will not empower them.
- Outsourced work can be exploitative since women cannot unionise or even resort to collective action.
- Being confined to the home and juggling domestic chores and paid work throughout the day is neither stimulating nor empowering for women.
- It only imposes a double burden.

What is a better way forward?

- Women need to leave the confines of their home.
- They must meet other work related people for their own mental and physical well being.
- Careers too are advanced through the networks formed during the work.
- Professional women at the higher end who prefer WFH may be able to periodically go to their workplaces or keep in touch with colleagues online.

- But this is not the case for lower end workers.
- For them, a model such as the Lijjat Papad cooperative is better.
- There, the women come together at a central place to collect raw materials and deliver the finished product. The actual production is done at home.
- It is a model which also allows for introduction of PPF (Public Provident Fund), health checks, or group insurance benefits.
- In all, WFH may certainly increase women's participation in the organised urban labour force.
- However, it may not be the case with all women, especially in the unorganised sector or lower end works.
- The end of the pandemic could thus see a mix of WFH and regular working.

Source: Business Line

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