

Gender in Skill Development Policy in India from 2014 to 2020: Enrolment Parity, Employment Deficit and the Limits of Mainstreaming

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the gender dimension of Indian skill development policy between 2014 and 2020. It assesses that this period achieved something worthwhile and yet also something disappointing. Few large public training systems in developing countries have achieved the near parity of enrolments for women under flagship short-term skilling programs over this brief period. The labor force participation of women also fell during the same period and the quality of training did not result in better placement. The four areas of failure in the paper are: the limited occupational menu, the lack of care and mobility support, the fact that the metric is one of placement and not certifying qualifications and the fact that the demand side is not growing in the sectors which absorb women. The paper argues that this disjunction is because the policy approach treated gender as a target for inclusion in training, rather than as a structural feature of the labour market.

Keywords: gender, skill development, Skill India Mission, PMKVY, female labour force participation, occupational segregation, India

1. Introduction

In November 2014, a dedicated Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship was established, indicating that vocational training would no longer be viewed as an extension of education or labour administration but rather as a separate branch of economic policy. Based on the National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship of 2015 and the Skill India Mission, the Indian government constructed the biggest publicly funded short-term training system in its history over the course of the next six years. That policy was designed with gender in mind from the start. The policy identified women as a specific focus of both its skilling and entrepreneurship components, and one of its stated goals was to increase women's participation in the workforce through appropriate skilling and gender mainstreaming of training (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2015). This research tackles the contradiction of women's ongoing exodus from the workforce over those same years. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey, the female labour force participation rate for individuals aged fifteen and older was 23.3% in 2017–18, compared to approximately 31% in the 2011–12 Employment and Unemployment Survey (Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, 2019). A employment market that was taking in proportionately fewer women coexisted with a strategy that was successful in training huge numbers of women. Knowing why is this paper's analytical challenge.

2. The Policy Framework after 2014

2.1 Institutional Architecture

Given the prominence of these four instruments during the period, it is noteworthy that equity for disadvantaged social and geographical sections was one of the guiding principles of the National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2015 that replaced the National Policy on Skill Development, 2009. The equipment for the training centers was provided under the National Skill Development Mission, which was launched in July 2015. The flagship short-term skill development program under NSDC was the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), which was implemented in two phases, the first phase 2015-16 and a much larger second phase 2016-20. The 2016 National Apprenticeship Promotion scheme, Sector Skill Councils and National Skills Qualifications Framework also helped to develop these standards and industry interaction.

This was released as a fifth gender-specific instrument. Skill training for marginalized communities was one of the three areas of impact of the Skill Acquisition and Knowledge Awareness for Livelihood Promotion (SANKALP) project, which was approved in October 2017 and launched in January 2018. An amount of Rs 4,455 crore was approved that included a World Bank loan of Rs 3,300 crore. Inclusion became not just a declarative promise, but an object of design and monitoring supported by a conditional package of funds.

2.2 Gender Provisions in the Flagship Schemes

The first mechanism was quantitative reservation. The placement linked rural skilling program of Ministry of Rural Development, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana made a provision of at least 33% women in the trainings. However, women have been more than half of trainees in recent years (Ministry of Rural Development, 2021). Secondly, providing transport allowance, setting PMK's in every district to avoid long travel time, and providing residential training with secured hostel facilities under the rural scheme have contributed to women's participation. Third was sectoral targeting, with most women enrolled in Sector Skill Councils (SSCs) in retail, healthcare, beauty and wellness, fashion and handicrafts sectors.

Non ministry of skills programs have similar objectives, but are directed toward gender more explicitly. The Mahila Shakti Kendra scheme sought to bring together skills and other entitlements at block-level, while the Ministry of Women and Child Development's Support to Training and Employment Program for Women continued as a training and employment program for women in unorganized sector (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2017). The Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana focuses on credit-linked enterprise, and with its female clientele, the skilling program for entrepreneurs was mainly compared to this.

3. Evidence on Participation and Outcomes, 2015 to 2020

When judged only by the number of people enlisted, the record is good. The share of women in the total enrolments into the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, has been cited to be, in earlier phases, 40-50 per cent, and in a few cases, closer to 50 per cent. Most of those trained and placed in the program's rural skilling scheme were women. In contrast to the small share of women placed in traditional and formal apprenticeship programs and Industrial Training Institutes, this was a substantial increase in the overall level of placements, within only a few years in the program.

Their record is poor and is poor for both genders on the one metric of greatest relevance for livelihoods: placement. Of the just under 19.85 lakh students trained under the first phase of flagship program, only 2.62 lakh or a little more than thirteen percent have been placed. As of June 2019, 12.60 lakh, or one in four of the 52.12 lakh applicants who concluded the training were placed in phase 2. The conversion from certificate to work has been consistently lower for women, who are half the trained and less than half the placed among the applicants. Thus the gender issue at the time is not access to training, but the gap between completing training and finding work.

A third explanation is occupational concentration. There are occupations, like sewing machine operator, hand embroidery, beauty treatment, sales assistance, and basic health care supporting jobs on the lowest floors, that are less formalized and lack a strong promotion ladder; these jobs are more likely to be concentrated among women. The scale of this skill training in these sectors has reproduced and to some extent institutionally embedded the prevailing sexual division of labour. The National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme did not provide any gender-segregated and gender-sensitive infrastructure for women and did not create any women-friendly work zones. Women's entry into engineering trades in ITIs remained low throughout, and its architecture was inadequate to reshape women's place in such trades.

4. The Paradox of Rising Training and Falling Participation

Although the decline in female labor participation is not a consequence of the training programs, it is nevertheless an issue contextual to them. An explanation for training's inability to halt or reverse this decline is provided in one of the studies of the period. Klasen and Pieters (2015) provide a thorough account of the stagnation of female labor force participation in urban India as a result of supply-side and demand-side reasons. On the supply side demand, an increase in household income and in husbands' educational attainment would reduce the number of married women in the labor force. On the demand side, the low growth of sectors attracted by female labor has decreased the participation rate in response to the changes of the employment structure. Mehrotra and Parida (2017) conducted a similar analysis using national data and reaching the same conclusion: declining participation in agriculture and rise of participation in education and income effects in households were not

accompanied by gender-responsive non-farm job creation in the countryside that was strong enough to offset declining rural participation.

Chatterjee, Desai and Vanneman (2018) refocused the puzzle as the Indian paradox: women's education had been rising, but employment declining. They reasoned that if years of education do not result in employment, it is more difficult to conclude that a certificate gained after a few hundred hours of education is important to break gender barriers in employment, unless the multiplier effect was truly a skills-related barrier. For the policy conclusion, a training program only increases employment when the initial binding constraint is lack of marketable skills. Where normative restrictions on acceptable types of labor, lack of safe transport, unpaid caregiving responsibilities, or absence of available jobs are binding, there is no reason to expect any effects from a training certification.

5. Four Limitations of the Policy Design

Gender was included as a participation goal rather than an analytical lens, and while women were present in programme documents, they did not account for why women who complete the training do not take up jobs. Programmatic limitations to availability of gender disaggregated data on outcome rather than intake have been repeatedly raised in Parliament (Lok Sabha, 2019). Moreover, in the absence of sex-disaggregated outcome data, the system increased its measurements.

Secondly, within the training market, there were perverse incentives, and disincentives for women. Training partners were reimbursed based on the number of certified candidates. In the Sharada Prasad Committee report based on an evaluation of Sector Skill Councils (SSCs) in 2016 and 2017, it was concluded that there is weak linkage between assessment, demand in the labour market and placement (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2017). In throughput-type systems, the courses that are easiest to deliver have the least (labour market) value, and are favored by women.

Thirdly, most of the complementing circumstances that have an influence on the effects of women's work are not within the scope of the skilling ministry and cannot be taken for granted. One precondition for the skilled woman accepting a job is, for example, day-care, accommodation for overseas trainees, safe and low-cost transport and occupational safety regulations. There was some provision for these in fragmented forms, of residential training in one scheme and creches in the other, but not a joined up training and creche package.

Fourth, the demand side was assumed. The skilling effort was based on a presumed demographic dividend requiring trained workers. The need for a balance of demand and supply was captured in the National Policy 2015 as well. As construction was a more strong employer of men than women, due to the slower growth of the manufacturing sector, the increased supply of qualified women into firms not hiring them explains the rise in certification without placements. This is the dominant experience of the interwar period and

consistent with the general principle in the development literature that any type of infrastructure (physical or human) relaxes only one constraint at a time.

6. Conclusion

Women have made some notable advances in the vocational training system that was implemented in India between 2014 and 2020. There is near gender parity in the flagship program enrollment, while women are actually over-represented in the rural program. Access to training is a first order result and, in terms of the time frame, it is insufficient. Gender issues pertaining to skills development policy were discussed in the first stage and these remained unresolved at the end.

The three implications are that rather than look simply to enrollment and certification, we should measure sex-disaggregated employment and wages over time, for it is the only way to know if training has an effect. Any extension into nontraditional jobs must include placement, and workplace rights and protections, and course portfolios must be deliberately expanded beyond feminized jobs. The acquisition of skills, transportation of self, care and safety must be provisioned alongside one another, as they constitute working conditions of women's labor rather than simply an extension to training program provision. Thus, as long as the policy sees gender only as a constraint on enrolment, rather than as an appropriate specification of the labour market, the trained female labour force will never equal the working one.

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