

## **Women's Work is not Valued Properly\***

### **Interview with Jayati Ghosh by Sudipta Datta**

In her 2022 book, *The Making of a Catastrophe (Aleph)*, on the disastrous economic fallout of COVID-19, Indian development economist Jayati Ghosh writes that job losses and food insecurity were significantly higher for women. As in many other countries, she pointed out that the lockdown in India was also associated with significant increases in complaints of domestic violence on women. She also noted that women's labour market participation, which had been falling from already low levels since 1993, experienced further sharp declines.

In an interview with *The Hindu*, Ghosh talks about gender blindness of official policies, inequalities in society, the state of women empowerment and why women face multiple disadvantages in India. Edited excerpts:

**The world is clearly not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030. The pandemic has perhaps made it an even more difficult target to achieve. Where does India stand on this?**

India is among the worst countries in the world for women, by almost any indicator, and things have actually deteriorated since the SDGs (sustainable development goals) were adopted. India is among one of the few countries that did not even achieve the MDGs (millennium development goals) for maternal health, and since then the pandemic has dramatically worsened the situation because of the lockdown, the closure/reduction of health facilities (including reproductive services) and the reduction of household incomes especially among the bottom half of the population, that also affected nutrition of women and girl children disproportionately.

**According to the fifth round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) Report, 23.3% women got married before attaining the legal age of 18 years. Considering India's population, the percentage is staggering. How can child marriage be prevented and reduced?**

The best way to raise the age of marriage is to ensure education through all levels of schooling for girls, and then provide access to paid work. Laws that punish the poor for having been married off in childhood (as the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act is now being implemented in Assam) don't help – they make things worse.

Recently, President Droupadi Murmu rued the low workforce participation of women, saying that to achieve the goal of India becoming a \$5 trillion economy, a more active role of women would be helpful in achieving the goal. What is your view on this, why is women participation low in India and what are the factors responsible for it?

Low workforce participation rates of women (more correctly, low employment participation rates—since most women work in India but don't get paid for it) are terrible not only because of the loss of potential GDP. In fact, I would argue that this is the more trivial outcome, and reflects the obsession with monetary GDP which is not a good indicator of human progress. Low employment participation tends to be an indicator of the overall status of women in society, and also contributes to that low

status. It also means that women's work is not valued properly even when they do enter the paid workforce, so that in India we have one of the largest gender wage gaps in the world. There are many factors responsible for this. First is the persistent and pervasive gendered division of labour that makes women and girls responsible for all "household duties" including care of the young, the old, the sick, the differently abled; cooking and cleaning; fetching water and fuelwood where required; other tasks that contribute to the consumption of the household, like kitchen gardening, poultry raising, weaving and tailoring, etc. These are often so onerous and time consuming that it is not possible for women to make themselves available for paid work. Second, the overall low employment generation in the country has effectively meant that women have been pushed out of the workforce. It is well known that women tend to get rationed out of good jobs and when all jobs are scarce, they get rationed out of any job. We saw this happen during the pandemic, across the world and especially in India where work participation rates for women sank even further, from already very low levels. Third, there are social and cultural norms that restrict women's mobility (in addition to forcing them to do unpaid work at home) such as requiring permission from male household members, constraints on time outside and places that can be visited, types of work that women can engage in, and so on. Fourth, there are serious concerns about safety, to and from and at the workplace, as well as the absence of basic amenities (like public toilets, proper street lighting and even women-friendly street policing) that would enable women to engage in outside employment.

**How can women and girls be put at the centre of economies if women are the backbone of recovery, why aren't they being given more?**

Ultimately economics is about power, and therefore politics. It is presented as this "technocratic" discipline, but that is a smokescreen for hiding the real power imbalances at play. Too much of economic policy is explicitly and implicitly directed to favour those who are financially and politically powerful—and this is then presented as a requirement of some supposed iron laws of economics. This is how most mainstream economics (and economic policy making) simply ignores the unpaid labour of women—because it can get away with doing so. We will not see a change until there is really widespread and sharp popular mobilisation against this.

**Do you think the government needs to do more for the informal sector, which is the sector where women opt for jobs the most, and what can it do?**

The micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) employ the bulk of the Indian workforce, as well as most women who do paid work. Yet they have faced the brunt of the economic policies of the government. There are only a few haphazard, poorly designed and underfunded schemes for such enterprises, and no concerted action to ensure that they are viable and able to expand over time, and in economically just and environmentally sustainable ways. A comprehensive strategy for MSMEs and especially micro enterprises - is therefore essential if India is to progress.

**You have said before that the government has to step in to create demand why is it important to put more money into the hands of the poor, particularly women?**

One of the striking features of the past decade is that, while the private corporate sector has been the major beneficiary of government economic policies (from subsidies to tax cuts to deregulation of various markets and of the exploitation of

nature) private investment rates in India have been coming down. This is mainly because of the decline and then stagnation of mass consumption demand. The K-shaped recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that the top 10% of the population is doing well, and that is already a large market (around 130 million people). But as long as the material conditions of the vast bulk of the population do not improve, mass consumption demand cannot rise, and therefore private investment also will continue to falter.

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