

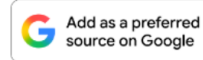
When employment is not empowerment

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Many women in India are underemployed, technically working but without the dignity, scope, or opportunities their education deserves

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AAYUSHI DUBEY



Low representation at workplaces and domestic pressures compels women to settle for less. | Photo Credit: Getty Images

India celebrates rising female literacy and record numbers of women entering higher education. Yet, many women, mostly in small towns, are employed in jobs that do not give full play to their potential, while some others do not work at all. The paradox is striking: the country produces educated women, but fails to use their potential.

So a large number of women are underemployed — technically working, but without the dignity, scope, or opportunities their education deserves. Its roots lie in the motherhood penalty, career breaks, topographical limitations, and most persistent, societal expectations. It is not only an economic problem but a woman-specific one too. At its core, underemployment reflects how traditional gender roles still dictate a countless number of women's lives.

Recent Periodic Labour Force Survey data show that women's employment rate grew from 22% in 2017-18 to 40.3% in 2023-24. Yet, employment statistics are misleading: they measure quantity and not quality. A Ph.D. holder working as a clerk or an MBA graduate tutoring a few middle-school children both count as "employed". However, these numbers conceal underemployment. The consequences of underemployment are vast, from psychological to economical. India invests in education but is not able to give jobs to women on the basis of their potential and qualifications. McKinsey estimates that India could add \$770 billion to its GDP by closing gender employment gaps. These gaps can be closed by ensuring that more women join the workforce and those already working are fully and fairly employed.

My research, "Impact of underemployment on women's mental well-being", presented at the 29th international and 60th national conference of the Indian Academy of Applied Psychology, shows that two-thirds of underemployed women experience lower well-being than unemployed women. Sufficiently employed women report good well-being consistently. This shows how the quality of a job can make a huge difference when it comes to mental health and well-being. Underemployment leads to lower self-esteem,


chronic stress, and identity loss. In corporate India, women are three times more likely to reach out for mental health support than men, a testament to the psychological toll underemployment has on them. Many women I interviewed reported feeling undervalued, underappreciated and even inferior to their male colleagues. A woman researcher aged 33 said, “I strongly feel that I am underpaid compared with my male colleagues, despite having the same qualifications and responsibilities. I find it difficult to access opportunities, which creates an unfair gap in earnings. The situation becomes even more discouraging because there are only four women out of 29 faculty members, making our representation and visibility very limited.”


Low representation at workplaces and domestic pressures compels women to settle for less. But why should they? The Time Use Survey, 2024 from the Union Ministry of Statistics shows that women in the 15-59 age group spend approximately four hours and 50 minutes a day on unpaid domestic work — three hours more than men, who average about 88 minutes. Even if women just get a little support from their male counterparts, it would go a long way in getting many women out of underemployment.


As a young woman, I looked up to many women in my locality. I live on an educational campus, and many female spouses here are highly educated, but are employed in jobs that underutilise them. I saw the toll it took on them. For some, the toll was very visible, but for others it was invisible but always present. This is the reality of underemployment, and the only way we can get rid of it is if we come together as a society. First, the mindset needs to change. Men should participate in household duties and women should get a chance to get back into the workforce after maternity leaves. Women deserve fair promotions, equitable pay and supportive policies. Addressing underemployment is not only a matter of justice for women; it is essential to unlocking India’s full potential as a society and economy.

aayushidubey@gmail.com

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