



We need women in the manufacturing sector

If ever there was a time to rethink the role of women in the workforce, it is now. While there are several efforts being made to facilitate the growth of women entrepreneurs, encourage more women to enter the health care sector and even IT sector, perhaps an area which has been neglected and sorely needs attention is manufacturing and heavy industries. According to studies, women barely constitute 12% in the manufacturing sector, just 3% in core engineering. This is in contrast to the IT sector which attracts much greater women's participation, thanks to a variety of reasons.

The IT sector offers jobs with relatively high remuneration and perks, it is knowledge-based and so more gender-neutral, the work flow is flexible and the work is not considered physically strenuous. The number of women in the IT sector had been increasing incrementally till Covid-19 struck after which we don't have any authentic information.

Many IT companies saw diversity and inclusion as desirable and believed that these principles enhanced productivity. Companies such as Wipro and Infosys have built in equal opportunities and facilitate talent growth among women employees. These have proved beneficial to the business.

But we need to look beyond just these avenues as we head towards an economic situation where generating employment across sectors will make all the difference. There are several reasons why women are under-represented in the manufacturing and heavy industries sector. The obvious ones are that these are perceived to require hard manual labour, not a correct assumption always; that the hours are long and are not as lucrative as other professions.

Another more compelling reason is that women are not encouraged to acquire the

skills to go into this sector.

This is where the fillip that the New Education Policy plans to give to vocational training could help. In countries such as Germany, vocational education is seen as attractive and a route to employment, whereas, in India, it is looked down upon, something that a person who could not get into a conventional degree course would opt for.

The government must make more women aware of job opportunities in this sector and emphasise that most companies engaged in manufacturing and heavy industries, by and large, do not compromise on the safety and health of their employees.

Women bring collaboration, innovation and creative thinking to the workplace. Employers must at least now take note of global practices where principles such as parental leave and flexible hours are incorporated into workplace functioning. The idea should be to make maximum use of the human resources that we have and make a shift to more gender inclusion across fields. Where women have been given the opportunity and conducive conditions, they have excelled.

I was pleasantly surprised recently to read a while ago that the mining giant, Vedanta's central control room at its aluminium plant in Lanjigarh is operated entirely by a team of women. They focus on operations and optimising resources, not easy work in a business seen largely as a man's profession. I am sure that there are many more such examples.

We need to showcase these and highlight the experiences of women in these fields. The way India and its women will move into a post-Covid-19 world will be key to social and economic empowerment.

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The views expressed are personal