

Towards a Framework for Forging Links: Exploring the Connections between Women's Education, Empowerment and Employment

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Abstract

It is a common belief that there are substantial returns on education, both direct and indirect and gainful employment is regarded as one of the expected outcomes of education. However, existing analyses of the employment–unemployment trends in India indicate an inverse relationship between women's education and employment. Within such a context this article seeks to raise the question of whether the education system can address the problem of educated women withdrawing from the labour force even as attempts are made to transform other structural factors that impinge on the situation. Feminist concerns about empowerment frame this discussion on education and employment.

Keywords

Empowerment, labour force participation, vocational education, unemployment

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Introduction

Over a period of time and across sections of people consensus has built up in India, as in many parts of the world, that education of girls is important. The idea is so well entrenched in the present that it has acquired the status of common sense. Pockets of resistance to the education of girls persist even today but by and large the concept of girls' education has gained widespread, if not universal, acceptance. Linked to this acceptance is the common belief that there are substantial returns on education, both direct and indirect. Given such an approach gainful employment is regarded as one of the expected outcomes of education. However, analyses of the employment–unemployment trends in India of the past few decades have indicated an inverse relationship between women's education and employment. These findings in turn have led to much debate and discussion about the explanations provided for the defeminisation of the educated labour force. Within the context of these discussions, this article raises the question of whether the *education system* in India can address the problem of women (who have been educated within this system) withdrawing from the labour force. The article argues that such a question has to be addressed even as attempts are made to transform structural factors that impinge on the situation of employment and unemployment in the country. Furthermore, by introducing the feminist concern about empowerment into the discussion on education and employment, the article seeks to develop a framework that can simultaneously hold together concerns about education, empowerment and employment.

Policy makers and economists, in particular, have drawn attention to the puzzling phenomenon of the decline in labour force participation of women in India even as, or as some have argued *because* their presence in education is increasing. Such a phenomenon is at odds with the projections made by the human capital approach that posits an increase in women's labour force participation as a result of education. This trend is also unlike the one observed in other countries, where a direct relationship has emerged between women's education and employment. Maitreyi Bordia Das and Sonalde Desai for instance point this out,

Globally and in most individual countries, both female education and female employment have increased over the last several decades Studies in [the] 1960s when female employment began to rise in the United States as well as more recent studies show that women with higher education are more likely to be employed than women with lower education

Although the strength of the relationship between education and employment varies across countries, approaching insignificance in some cases ... *South Asia is unique in recording a strong negative relationship between women's education and labor force participation.* (Bordia Das and Desai, 2003, p. 1, emphasis mine)

Most studies dealing with the decline of women's participation in the labour force have restricted themselves to treating education as one of the parameters in their examination of the data and have gone on to focus more on influences external to the education system when analysing the causes. Education is factored into the discussion primarily in terms of levels or grades and its certifying or credentialing function. There has been no systematic analysis of the content of education or the nature and role of education that might be impacting the adverse connections observed between women's education and employment. Consequently, solutions to the problem of declining participation of women in the labour force are sought outside of the education system. While such considerations are critical, this paper seeks to emphasise the point that the education system too needs to take cognisance of the problematic trend of educated women being unemployed, and work towards ways of responding to it. The article begins by asking *whether* in the first place it is within the scope of the education system to address the issue of employment.

As a counter to the proposed objective of examining the role of education in ensuring employment, it may well be asserted that the goal of education is not to *guarantee* employment. Classical liberal thinking on education in fact delinks education from employment, believing that education is an end in itself. More recent approaches to education that foreground the critical and functional dimensions of education, such as the capability approach proposed by Amartya Sen, also recognise this dimension of education. As Rosie Vaughan points out, 'it is important to distinguish between education as a functioning in itself and education as a facilitator of other functionings' (Vaughan, 2007, p. 109). However, the disturbing trend of disproportionately large numbers of educated women remaining outside the labour force needs to be understood and addressed. For the low-income groups in particular, huge opportunity costs are involved when they decide to educate their girls. The expectation of future employment is an important factor in their decision to opt for education in spite of the odds being stacked against them. It is therefore necessary to reflect on the nature of the disjuncture that exists between the projections and expectations regarding girls' education and the steady

decline in women's labour force participation rates (LFPR) over the decades beginning from the 1970s onwards.¹

In order to grasp the full significance of the present discussions on the link between women's education and employment it is important too to recall that the history of mass education of women in India is only about a century old. It has been marked by severe opposition at times and crippling apathy at others. Nonetheless, a striking feature within this chequered history of women's education in India is that a case had to be made out for justifying women's education at every critical juncture. The justifications, moreover, were different at different points in time since they were responses developed within varying contexts. Tracking this trajectory of women's education will help us appreciate the distance travelled to arrive at the present time when the question of the relationship between women's education and employment is being posed.

The question of women's education came to be framed *as an issue* for the first time during the British colonial rule in India during the 19th century, an issue that was deliberated and debated publicly among both the Hindu and Muslim communities. The significance of the subject of women's education being raised during this period has been remarked upon and analysed by many (Chakravarti, 1998; Forbes, 1998; John, 2012; Kishwar, 2007; Minault, 1998; Sarkar and Sarkar, 2007; Swaminathan, 1999).² During the reform period women's education became a lens, through which the many changes in the organisation of the private and public lives of Indians under colonial rule were explained and made meaningful in discussions that took place in the public domain. In the nationalist period that followed in the early part of the 20th century, women's education was sought to be 'modernised' in ways that would involve women in nation-building efforts.³

In the post-Independence period, women's education came to be regarded as a matter that required special attention (of the state mainly and other organisations concerned with the status of different groups of people) only after the Committee on the Status of Women in India submitted in 1974 its report titled *Towards Equality*. The report pointed to the low literacy levels of women as also the fact that the number of women in white-collar jobs was far below that of men. A significant consequence of the report was the impact it had on the National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986, which emphasised the objective of ensuring women's equality through education.

The education of girls received a fillip in the 1990s, coinciding partly with the NPE-Programme of Action (1992) as also the introduction of the District Primary Education Programme with support from the World

Bank. These interventions were largely influenced by the human capital approach to education. Within this framework, education of girls and women was regarded as important for a range of reasons. Among these are: (i) greater income gains for the individual and economic growth for the country; (ii) lowered fertility rates and improved maternal and child health; (iii) and higher educational attainments of the next generation (Herz and Sperling, 2004). The significant interventions made in education in the new millennium too draw on a similar rationale. The Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA), the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and schemes like the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) and National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) have focused on the education of girls by drawing on a developmental logic that posits a close connection between education and higher standards of living through better livelihood and employment opportunities. Going forward from this brief history of women's education in India, we now turn to issues that emerge when examining the link between education and employment.

The article is organised as follows: The following section reviews recent literature on 'missing women in the labour force' and focuses in particular on explanations for the reduced LFPR of educated women across varied educational levels and social groups. The third section is an overview of the different measures recommended or adopted by the educational system as its response to mitigating the problem of the educated unemployed. The fourth section engages with the gendered dimension of the existing disconnect between education and employment. It also argues for the need to bring in the feminist notion of empowerment as a necessary bridge between education and employment. Furthermore it pulls together the strands from the earlier sections in order to indicate the possible ways forward vis-à-vis the problem of educated females missing from the Indian labour force.

Education and Trends in Female Labour Force Participation

In summing up its findings, the Report on Employment and Unemployment Survey 2011–2012 draws attention to the stark difference that exists between the labour force participation rates (LFPR) of women and men. The reports points out that 'female LFPR is significantly lower as compared to male LFPR under the usual principal status approach. At All India level, female LFPR is estimated to be 25.4 per cent as

compared to 77.4 per cent in male category' (Government of India, 2012, p. ii). The report goes on to indicate that the 'female WPR [Worker Population Ratio] is estimated to be 23.6 per cent at All India level under the UPS [Usual Principal Status] approach as compared to the male WPR of 75.1 per cent' (Government of India, 2012, p. iv).⁴ These statistics clearly reveal two things: (i) the number of women *seeking employment* is in itself very low; it is disproportionately lower when compared to men and (ii) the number of women *employed* is also much lower than men (see Tables 1 and 2).

Before returning to consider current levels of educated women's labour force participation, it is worth noting that concerns were expressed as far back as the 1970s about the connection between education and employment. Drawing upon *Towards Equality*, Karuna Ahmad referred to the close link that was posited between education and employment and pointed out that '[p]ublic debate on the question of equality between the sexes usually tends to centre around the questions of education and employment for women' (Ahmad, 1979, p. 1435). Interestingly, her review of the different studies that were taken up in the 1970s, and also of data from the 1960s, reveals that the declining trend in educated women's employment has been a rather consistent feature of the Indian economy.

Table 1. Gender-wise Break-up of Labour Force (in millions)

NSS	Rural		Urban		Male	Female	Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female			
1999–2000	201.98	106.75	78.87	19.25	280.85	126.00	406.85
2004–05	222.91	126.49	94.24	26.50	317.15	152.99	470.14
2009–10	236.09	106.41	103.13	24.25	339.22	130.66	469.88

Source: Rangarajan et al. (2011).

Table 2. Gender-wise Break-up of Work Force (in millions)

NSS Round	Rural		Urban		Male	Female	Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female			
1999–2000	198.61	105.69	75.38	18.20	273.99	123.89	397.88
2004–05	219.30	124.21	90.77	24.72	310.06	148.93	458.99
2009–10	232.27	104.80	100.17	22.92	332.44	127.72	460.17

Source: Rangarajan et al. (2011).

For instance, the representation of women even in the so-called female dominated professions such as teaching, nursing and medicine registered a decline. For example, the proportion of women teachers declined from 26.1 percent in 1965–66 to 18.2 percent in 1970–71. The number of women in administrative, executive and managerial jobs also registered a downward trend. For instance, the Committee on the Status of Women reports that the proportion of such women to total workers decreased from 3.3 percent in 1960 to 2.5 percent in 1968. The decline in administrative services has been most substantial—from 10,351 in 1963 to 6,237 in 1966. There has been a decrease in the number of engineers too; e.g., the number of women engineers, which was 514 in 1963–64, rose to 1,140 in 1969–70 and then came down to 994 in 1971–72. (Ahmad, 1979, p. 1435)

The focus of Ahmad's reflections is primarily on women in white-collar jobs. Ahmad cites the explanation provided by some of the studies for the high rate of unemployment among educated women, also termed 'voluntary unemployment': '(a) domestic responsibilities, and (b) preference for not seeking employment when it is not necessary' (Ahmad, 1979, p. 339). Ahmad concludes her review article by making a strong case for more contextual studies that take into consideration structural as well as social and cultural aspects that are responsible for the decline in the employment of women.

Subsequent to the publication of *Towards Equality* (Government of India, 1974), feminist interest in understanding and measuring women's work and women's participation in the labour force generally deepened further. The publication of *Shram Shakti* (Government of India, 1988), the report of the National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, too is an important milestone in this regard. Feminist scholarship sought to explain the steadily decreasing female labour participation rates even as critiques of the existing processes of enumeration were mounted and alternative methods of measurement suggested.⁵ From this rich literature on the subject of women and work my engagement here is restricted to studies, admittedly few, that have examined the link between education and employment. After the earlier sets of studies in the 1970s that focused directly on the employment of educated women, attention to the *qualitative nature* of the link between women's education and employment from a feminist perspective is emerging once again in the present time.⁶

Following the publication of the results of the 66th National Sample Survey Organisation's (NSSO) quinquennial round of the employment–non-employment survey for the period 2004–2005 to 2009–2010 and the annual reports of the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government

Table 3. Level of Education Attainment and LFPR of Women Excluding Those Undergoing Education

	1983	1987–88	1993–94	1999–2000	2004–05	2009–10
Rural						
Not literate	44.8	46.5	43.1	28.7	30.8	25.8
Literate but less than primary	44.7	35.6	44.0	28.6	33.2	30.0
Primary	43.0	45.3	41.9	30.8	33.2	30.6
Middle	37.5	41.8	36.2	25.5	32.2	28.7
Secondary	50.2	53.8	40.3	26.2	32.0	24.9
Graduate and above	56.7	63.0	61.2	46.2	41.9	32.4
Total	44.6	45.7	42.8	28.6	31.7	27.2
Urban						
Not literate	29.3	28.7	28.1	15.6	17.4	13.8
Literate but less than primary	29.3	27.4	28.5	15.0	19.2	16.6
Primary	26.0	26.9	27.1	14.4	19.6	17.6
Middle	22.4	25.1	23.8	13.5	15.3	16.0
Secondary	42.8	40.6	34.6	16.8	15.1	12.5
Graduate and above	61.1	61.6	57.2	33.7	32.3	26.0
Total	30.9	31.4	30.6	16.8	19.8	17.3

Source: Abraham (2013).

of India, discussions have focused on how to explain the ‘missing female labour force’ with increased attention given to education as a critical factor in the analyses (Abraham, 2013; Kannan and Raveendran, 2012; Rangarajan, Kaul and Seema, 2011) (see Table 3). I focus on these recent studies while also referring to a few studies that appeared in the earlier part of this century and which drew attention to the negative relationship between women’s education and employment.⁷

A distinctive aspect of the present discussion on the missing labour force is the status given to education as an explanatory factor. While the LFPR have on the whole declined, there is greater concern about the sharp decline in the female LFPR. Some analysts have explained this decline by pointing out that larger numbers of women are joining educational institutions rather than the labour force (Mehrotra, Parida, Sinha and Gandhi, 2014; Rangarajan et al., 2011). For instance, Mehrotra argues that

[t]here are important reasons for the decline in female LFPRs between 2004–05 and 2009–10. First is education. There had been a significant increase in enrolment, higher for girls both in the age-group below 15 years, as well as 15–19 years. There was a similar increase from 20 to 24 year children: from 14.9% for boys and 7.6% for girls in 2004–05 to 22.5% and 12.8% in 2009–10 (Planning Commission 2013). [figures] reinforces the argument showing the increasing number of women attending educational institutions and therefore out of the labour force. (Mehrotra et al., 2014, p. 53)⁸

However, others have countered this argument (Abraham, 2013; Chowdhury, 2011). Chowdhury directly challenges the conclusion that improved participation in education is leading to the decline in women's participation in the labour force:

... it is ... doubtful as to whether an increase in women attending educational institutes can be put forward as an explanation for a fall in the female LFPR. This is because unlike for men, it is seen that the LFPR for women has decreased for all ages above the age of 15. In the case of men, there has been a decline in the LFPR mainly for the age groups 15–19 and 20–24 because of an emphasis on education. For the other age groups, LFPR has remained more or less constant, with marginal changes. Thus a decline in the LFPR for urban males can be explained mainly by an increase in the proportion of men in the 15–19 and 20–24 age groups undergoing education. This cannot be said for women, where the LFPR for every age group has declined. (Chowdhury, 2011, p. 24)

Abraham (2013) provides an extended analysis of the nature of the link between the higher presence of women in education and the seemingly concomitant decline in their labour force participation. He points out:

Education is widely regarded as one of the key tools of empowerment of women that enhances their agency and autonomy. The change in preference among the female children and young adult females towards education should essentially prepare females for entry into the labour market equipped with more years of education and skills than preceding generations. (Abraham, 2013, p. 105)

Given that the ground realities belie such expectations, Abraham draws on earlier literature and feminist analyses⁹ on the subject to succinctly sum up the three arguments available to explain the decline in female LFPR in spite of the growth of female education: First, women return

after an education to attend to the demands of domesticity, using their education for status reproduction and the reinforcement of patriarchal norms. This tendency can also be traced to the 'income effect' explaining why women with higher education stay out of the labour force if there is another earning member in the family. Second, women face 'discouraged worker effect' in different ways through occupational segregation, wage and other forms of discrimination, stigma etc. Third, gendered patterns of investment in the education of girls are such that women are mostly provided education in streams that have lower labour market demand.

Along with these analyses that have emphasised the cultural dimension of the problem, there are other studies that have highlighted structural aspects of the Indian economy. Das and Desai (2003) attribute the lower presence of educated women in the labour force to the lack of suitable employment opportunities. Several of the other studies cited earlier too have made this point. Bridging the binary set up between cultural factors on the one hand and structural factors on the other, Das points out in her report 'Poverty and Exclusion in India' that '[N]ot only is it difficult to separate cultural factors from economic opportunities, but, often, the cultural affects the structural, and vice versa' (Das, 2011, p. 151). Das (2011) also draws attention to the fact that there is a great heterogeneity in female labour force participation by region, caste and tribe. Her study arrives at a conclusion that confirms the U pattern, that is, the poorest women (from the lower castes) and well-off women (from the upper castes) are the ones who are in the labour force. This is borne out by data emerging from the employment-unemployment survey for 2011-2012 as well, according to which, 'Results by gender indicate that in case of female category, the unemployment rate is highest in general category (129 persons out of 1000 persons). In the other three social groups [Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes], the female unemployment rate is less than the national average of 69 persons out of 1000 persons' (Government of India, 2012, p. 48).

Notwithstanding the significant variations that exist across different social groups, all the existing studies do acknowledge that education did not particularly encourage the likelihood of women participating in the labour force. Before assessing the implications of such a trend for women (and not for the economy or economic growth), we turn to the education system to understand how it has responded to the issue of unemployment.

Responses from the Education System to the Issue of Unemployment

Even three years after graduation, over 60 percent of all graduates remained unemployed. Although a significant proportion of apprentices find employment, close to two-thirds are not employed in the trade for which they were trained—a third of these had been trained in obsolete trades. There appear to be three reasons for this: (a) limited growth and labor demand in the manufacturing sector, (b) mismatch between the skills attained and those actually in demand, and (c) mismatch between the skills taught and the graduates' own labor market objectives. (World Bank, 2008, p. iii)

The problem of the educated unemployed in India has a rather protracted and fractious history. It in fact existed and demanded attention even during the colonial period. Lord Macaulay, for instance, gestured towards the inability of the educated to find gainful employment when he referred in his Minute of 1835 to the petitions submitted by students of Sanskrit college beseeching the Governor-General for jobs. His disparaging remarks about this particular set of the unemployed were made to augment his case for introducing English education, which according to him had greater demand and relevance. Among other things, the utilitarian or the instrumental slant given to education by Macaulay's Minute came in for a great deal of criticism during his time as well as later. It is important to recall these aspects of our educational history since we often tend to forget that discussions on education during the colonial and the nationalist periods have shaped policies on education vis-à-vis the question of employment in critical ways.

In his introduction to the compilation of the many documents of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that elaborated on the concept of nationalist education, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya draws attention to the fact that the demand for scientific and technical education emerged during the 19th century as a result of the requirements of businessmen in particular. However, this demand was re-articulated by the nationalists in terms that laid the foundation not only for a separation of the practical and theoretical dimensions of education but for the establishment of a hierarchy between them as well, with theoretical education being accorded greater value.

It is interesting to observe that in the beginning the demand for some types of technical education arises from practical business sense, without any nationalist rhetoric.... When the intellectuals and political leaders took over from the businessmen and industrialists and began demanding government aid

for high technical education a shift of focus might have taken place. B.R. Tomlinson observes that the nationalists 'preferred the theoretical over the practical, the written over the oral' and thus the problem of practical education for skill creation at the factory-level remained unresolved (Tomlinson, 1998). (Bhattacharya, 2003, pp. xx–xxi)¹⁰

In the later part of the nationalist phase, Gandhi sought to provide a corrective to this privileging of mental faculties by providing an outline for *Nai Talim* or a new approach to basic education, which emphasised the pedagogic value of manual work (Gandhi, 1953). However, by the time Indian independence was achieved and the recommendations of the Kothari Commission adopted, the core values of *Nai Talim* were effectively dropped.¹¹ Reports of later committees and commissions though have commented at some length on the need for vocational education but the split in opinion on the role of education, which is to an extent mirrored in the split between general (or academic) education and vocational education, persists and is manifested in different ways.¹² Of the positions that accept that an economic aim is a legitimate part of education, two approaches have been adopted in the main to forge links between education and employment: (i) teaching the value of work and (ii) strengthening the vocational education stream.

The importance of developing a school curriculum around work in the Indian context was first emphasised, as mentioned earlier, by Gandhi. A renewed focus on this aspect at the national level is witnessed nearly five decades after independence in the form of a national focus group position paper on work that was developed as part of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) exercise of 2005. The main argument extended by the position paper is that work needs to be included in the Indian education system as a way of countering the hegemony of the existing knowledge base of the elite sections of our society.

The exclusionary character of the education system in India is to a great extent founded on the artificially instituted dichotomy between work and knowledge (also reflected in the widening gap between school and society). Those who work with their hands and produce wealth are denied access to formal education while those who have access to formal education not only denigrate productive manual work but also lack the necessary skills for the same. The socio-economic, religio-cultural, gender and disability-related dimensions of this dichotomy have serious implications for education in India. Over a period of time and through systematic practice, such a notion of education has come to be embedded in the knowledge system, representing the dominant classes/ castes/cultures/languages, with patriarchy in each of these categories

playing a decisive role. The education system has tended to 'certify' this form of knowledge as being the only 'valid' form. In the process, the knowledge inherent among the vast productive forces along with the related values and skills has been excluded from the school curriculum. (NCERT, 2007, p. iii)

The position paper on work makes a clear distinction between the 'work-centred' education that it is advocating, on the one hand, and vocational education, on the other. It makes a strong case for introducing for children up to the age of 14 years a work-centred education, which would serve as the bedrock on which *vocationalised education* could be built up after the child completes secondary and higher secondary education. The document in fact argues that such an approach would help break the dichotomy between the academic stream and the vocational stream.

In spite of the persuasive arguments put forward by the position paper on work, its recommendations have not been adopted on the ground. Interestingly, even the position paper on the Aims of Education (NCERT, 2006b) developed as part of the same NCF 2005 exercise does not include work or vocation or employment as part of the nine points that it elucidates as forming the broad aims of education. The only time the paper indirectly refers to employment is when it attributes a negative value to it:

... education has come to be perceived more and more as a *means* of ensuring the future 'well-being' of students (i.e., their place in society and their economic status which guarantees this place)—this has led to a neglect of children's *present* abilities and difficulties, which could deprive them of a quality of life much richer in content than that the education system prepares them for ... (NCERT, 2006b, p. 1)

Thus the predominant response that the education system has historically evolved for tackling the problem of unemployment has been in terms of separating the academic from the vocational stream and subsequently attempting to strengthen vocational education. Vocational education is directly aimed at creating employment opportunities by providing need-based programmes. Recommendations regarding vocational education have been included in almost all the major policy documents on education in India beginning from the time of the Educational Despatch (or the Wood's Despatch) of 1854 right up to the present time when significant funds were allocated for it in the 11th and 12th Plans. The setting up of the National Skill Development Agency and the efforts at meeting the 12th Plan target of skilling 500 million people by 2022 has provided a fillip to the efforts to link education with employment in a more direct

manner. Vocational education derives its importance from the observed phenomenon that the formal sector does not have the capacity to absorb people and that over 90 per cent of labour force participation is in the informal sector. Secondary and vocational education is targeted primarily at this group of people.

While vocational education is proposed as a possible solution to the problem of unemployment, it is not without its shortcomings. A World Bank study on skill development and training for the period between 1983–1984 and 1998–1999 pointed out that in comparison with the demand for workers with secondary education, the demand for workers with technical/vocational skills has in fact declined (World Bank, 2008, pp. 4–5). A range of reasons, including lack of convergence between the various agencies involved, inadequate linkages with industries, antiquated curricula, lack of teachers and lack of adequate equivalence for employment, have been cited as the reasons for the failure of vocational education in India (Swaminathan, 2008; World Bank, 2008). Swaminathan (2008), however, draws attention to another serious lapse that may well be at the heart of the problem we are facing today in relation to unemployment:

Much more significant, however, in our opinion, is the need to capture *the kind of discourse* that preceded these arrangements in these countries [with successful school-to-work transition systems], in the first place, and the changing nature of the discourse over time. It is our contention, that a large part of the explanation for the poor record in vocational training and the almost complete lack of interface between even this miniscule vocational education and employment in India has a lot to do with the absence of any worthwhile discourse on this subject in post-independent India, and the consequent inability to set up appropriate institutions and systems to forge such an interface. (Swaminathan, 2008b, p. 846, emphasis mine)

Women's Education, Empowerment and Employment

The discussion in the previous section clearly indicates the need for greater and more innovative thinking on the part of the education system so that it can effectively respond to the problem of unemployment. It is argued here that along with this discussion it is as important, if not more important, to examine the *gender dimension* of the problem of the educated unemployed. As we have seen in the section on education and

trends in female labour force participation, the reasons why women do not participate in the labour force overlap at times with those for men but are also distinctive in terms of what has been explained as the 'income effect' and the 'discouraged worker effect'. Bias in terms of investments in the education of girls is yet another reason for their lowered participation in the labour force.

Before seeking to *engender* the discourse on education and employment, we also need to ask: why is women's employment a desired goal? Or, in other words, is there a link between women's employment and empowerment? The question comes up because the human capital approach that was globally predominant from the 1970s onwards, along with the incipient women's movement in India, seemed to suggest that a woman's employment or economic empowerment would lead to her being empowered in all aspects of her life. Belying this expectation, however, there was a gradual realisation among feminist activists and scholars that there is no linear or one to one connection between employment and empowerment. Even in the article by Karuna Ahmad (1979) referred to earlier, she questions the assumption implicit in positing educational and employment opportunities as being fundamental to women's empowerment. This scepticism expressed in the 1970s has gained further ground through extended exploration and studies on women's lives leading to the conclusion for instance that

Women's entry to paid employment is not necessarily an indicator of well-being and may even indicate pauperization, impoverishment and greater levels of vulnerability for many of those doing so. In addition, without supportive social institutions that loosen women's bonds to care and domestic responsibilities, their entry to paid employment exacts a heavy price through the double burden of work inside and outside the home. (Mazumdar and Neetha, 2011, p. 125)

Coming to the issue from another and thought-provoking angle, Mary John (2013) has problematised conventional Marxist and feminist understanding that labour represents value by bringing into the discussion the fact of stigma attached to certain kinds of labour, especially those performed by lower caste women. The question she poses is 'How ... do we square a labour theory of value with a stigma theory of labour, the very negation of value, whose fullest contradiction is embodied by Dalit women?' (John, 2013, p. 185). The question needs deeper reflection and engagement than is possible here. However, a claim may be made that education is perhaps that instrument which can play a critical role even

in undermining stigma. The efforts to introduce the value of work into the school curriculum could expand to take these considerations on board as well. One of the problems though with work-centred education as it is presently conceptualised is that it does not provide a *critique* of the reproduction of labour roles according to caste and gender.

Some early feminist critiques of textbooks however did attempt to alter the stereotypical representations of women and men in textbooks in order to make available different role models for students. Textbook revisions then sought to include stories and pictures of women in different professions. Interestingly though, these new representations were exclusively of women in white-collared jobs (such as pilots or astronauts or scientists etc.). The point about ‘dignity’ of all labour was erased in these efforts to demonstrate that women were as capable as men in certain valued professions. Though not explicitly stated, empowerment, it seemed, was possible for women only by being employed in certain professions. The NCF’s position paper of the national focus group on gender issues in education (NCERT, 2006a) too has critiqued these revisions.

Initiatives to remove sexist bias in textbooks undertaken in the last decade or so played [sic] yet again by their limited understanding of gender and equality. One strategy was to attempt quantitative equality by increasing visual representation of girls and women. Another was to facilitate ‘role reversals’, in order to depict equality among sexes. ‘If men can do it, so can women’—this mode was used to justify changes in content Textbook writers made visible the achievements of women without any thought to how the very concept of writing accounts of great men’s lives needed rethinking. (NCERT, 2006a, p. 19)

The position paper on gender issues in education, like the position paper on aims of education, does not directly reflect on the kind of education that will enable girls to make an effective transition to work as part of their life cycle. The paper, however, does provide an important foundation from which further thinking on the employment question is possible through the emphasis it places on ensuring women’s empowerment through education. The position paper elaborates upon what empowerment in education implies:

- (i) promoting self-recognition, *a positive self-image and self-actualisation*;
- (ii) stimulating *critical thinking*;
- (iii) deepening *understanding of the gendered structures of power, including gender*;
- (iv) enabling *access to resources*, specially to an expanding framework of information and knowledge;
- (v) developing the ability to analyse the options available, and to facilitate the

possibility of *making informed choices*; (vi) reinforcing the *agency of girls to challenge gendered structures of power and take control of their lives*. (NCERT, 2006a, p. 26, emphasis in original)

Another instance where the link between women's education and empowerment was built in a robust manner was in the Mahila Samakhya programme, which was introduced in 1987 subsequent to the introduction of the National Policy on Education in 1986. The programme was a unique one that sought to empower adult women through education. It is worth noting though that the conceptual framework of Mahila Samakhya required a *separation* of education from literacy.¹³ The distinction between literacy and education is brought out clearly by Jain and Rajagopal (2012) and is cited at some length here in order to draw attention to the specific meaning attached to education in the programme as distinct from how it is generally understood:

Educational discourse in MS [Mahila Samakhya] has contained an ongoing tension between two different, though not mutually exclusive, interpretations of the term 'education'—a narrower, more defined usage, and a broader, undefined but highly valued interpretation. In the first sense, and popularly held view, education is understood as gaining literacy skills, formal schooling and acquiring certification through the mainstream delivery system.... The broader, value loaded interpretation of education links it to accessing 'knowledge' in a basic sense; sifting what is worth knowing, rediscovering and absorbing new learning to inform action. It has an undefined character but it stands close to wisdom, which promotes 'justice' and 'equality'. (Jain and Rajagopal, 2012, p. 174)

The Mahila Samakhya programme focused on the latter meaning of education, equating it with empowerment to such an extent that the former meaning was neglected in most cases.

Krishna Kumar and Latika Gupta (2008) provide a conception of empowerment that contrasts rather sharply with that embraced by Mahila Samakhya. Through a study that focuses on the kind of education provided in Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV), they contend that empowerment of girls who join the KGBVs cannot be restricted to making them aware of discriminatory practices and exploitation alone. They emphatically argue that it is important for pedagogic practices within these KGBV schools to have academic rigour that can enable substantial learning of all school subjects. They point out that such education is the only catalyst that can break the cycle of oppression (Kumar and Gupta, 2008, p. 23).

The inference that Kumar and Gupta arrive at is very critical in a context where some large-scale studies too support the argument that it is not specific skills that ensure employment but broad and generic capabilities.¹⁴ For girls and women too it would seem that a composite of rigorous skill (including life skills) and knowledge training along with provision of career counselling would go a long way in ensuring their participation in the labour force in ways that empower them. These are preliminary thoughts in relation to ‘engendering’ the discourse on linking education and employment for girls and women in particular. There is need for in-depth studies that can provide further understanding of the context of the decisions that men and women make in relation to employment as also their expectations from the educational system itself to enable them to make the transition to work. Having historically tracked and gathered together the issues that have a salience for the problem of women’s unemployment, the point being underscored here is that the education system needs to think through and respond to the contemporary problem of women withdrawing from the labour force in spite of being educationally qualified.

Conclusion

The article began with a set of related questions: Is it possible for the education system to take cognisance of the problem that education seems to function as a disincentive for women to participate in the labour force? If so, what needs to, and can be, changed in the present system of education so that the positive outcomes expected from education, including gainful employment, have a higher likelihood of succeeding for girls and women? The second section discussed the issue of women missing from the labour force. The third section dealt with the response of the education system to the problem of unemployment in general. In the fourth section, an overview of the feminist responses to education and empowerment were discussed before arriving at the conclusion that the process of bringing attention to the issue of the educated unemployed woman would involve discussion of the connections between women’s education, empowerment and employment rather than of approaches that address them separately or in combinations that often exclude one of the three dimensions. The article moreover contends that the response to the problem of the educated unemployed would have to go beyond resorting to mere skill training on the one hand or exclusively emphasising empowerment. A combination of these approaches would have to be

considered along with other aspects that would emerge from future studies.

Notes

1. Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) is defined as the number of persons in the labour force (those seeking work) per 1000 persons. This includes the number of employed and unemployed persons. Therefore

$$\text{LFPR} = \frac{\text{No. of employed} + \text{No. of unemployed persons}}{\text{Total population}} \times 1000$$

The Worker Population Ratio (WPR), on the other hand, is the number of persons employed per 1000 persons

$$\text{WPR} = \frac{\text{No. of employed persons}}{\text{Total population}} \times 1000$$

The “labour force” is the total of which the “workforce” is a part, any changes in the former are bound to have an impact on the latter’ (Rangarajan et al., 2011, p. 68).

2. Scholarship on the subject of women’s education during the reform period has focused on only certain regions of British India such as the United Provinces and the Provinces of Bengal, Bombay, Madras and Punjab. Developments with regard to women’s education in other parts, for instance, the North-East, are not available.
3. For an elaboration of this argument, see documents included in Bhattacharya, Bara, Yagati and Sankhdher (2001) and Bhattacharya (2003).
4. See note 1 for an understanding of LFPR and WPR. Usual principal status (UPS) refers to the activity in which a person spends relatively the major part of time during the reference period under consideration.
5. The essays included in the anthologies edited by K. Saradmoni (1985) and Padmini Swaminathan (2012) provide an understanding of the nature of debates and discussions around the issues of women and work.
6. The kind of in-depth sociological studies recommended for instance by Karuna Ahmad (1979) that could take into consideration the social, cultural and subjective aspects of the educated woman’s life, along with the objective conditions, were not pursued though a great deal of research was carried out in relation to women and work from the 1980s onwards. If we were to speculate on the reasons for the absence of such studies, we would have to consider two aspects in the main. One, the separation of studies on education from those on work; while the former were concerned with discrimination regarding provisioning and attainments as far as girls’ education was concerned, the latter was focused on issues of unenumerated female work including within the informal sector where a large number of women had either only a few years of education or were illiterate. Two, the Mahila

Samakhya programme introduced in 1985, which is referred to in the latter part of the article, seemed to have been entrusted with the task of addressing together the issues of education and livelihood. More work, however, will have to be done to substantiate the propositions put forward here. It may be mentioned here that a couple of research studies focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of workforce participation/withdrawal of educated middle-class women have been initiated recently at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Hyderabad.

7. In contrast to the sociological studies referred to in note 6 above, these studies have engaged with official and macro data sets of NSSO, the Census, etc. to analyse the connections (or the lack thereof) between education and employment.
8. Also see Table 2.
9. In particular, see Jeffery and Jeffery (1994), Kodoth and Eapen (2005) and Swaminathan (2012).
10. Evidently class and caste interests would have played a significant role in these discussions and formulations. They need to be examined and analysed in greater detail than is possible within the scope of this article. I mention this important dimension of the issue here and will be taking it up in a forthcoming publication on the subject of the fee reimbursement scheme introduced in the state of united Andhra Pradesh.
11. For an elaboration of this argument, see Kumar (1998).
12. I use 'general education' here to refer to a position that believes that the aims of education are intrinsic to education itself and not necessarily beyond. 'Vocational education' on the other hand gestures towards a position that believes education should lead to employment.
13. The many insightful essays in Vimala Ramachandran and Kameshwari Jandhyala's edited volume *Cartographies of Empowerment: The Mahila Samakhya Story* (2012) reflect on different aspects of the programme including the implications of distinguishing between education and literacy. In particular, see essays by Ramachandran, Sharada Jain and Shobhita Rajagopal and Dipta Bhog and Malini Ghose in this volume.
14. World Bank (2008) and Swaminathan (2008) refer to such studies.

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