

## TELLING NUMBERS

63 million 'missing' women: we need a pink revolution

**L**OOK CAREFULLY AT ALL THE HEADLINES, screaming or otherwise, that are popping up these days about corruption. How many of them feature women? Study after study has found over the years that more members of the 'fairer sex' in parliament and in the top echelons of business coincide with lower levels of corruption.

The numbers are stark. In 2015 the McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) created a Female Empowerment Index (Femdex) for India. On a scale of 0.00 to 1.00, five states – Mizoram, Meghalaya, Kerala, Goa and Sikkim – had a Femdex of 0.67; they accounted for just four per cent of India's working-age female population. The bottom five states – Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Assam and Uttar Pradesh – had a Femdex of 0.46 and accounted for 32 per cent of the female workforce.

The MGI calculated that if India brought 68 million more women into the workforce by 2025, our gross domestic product would be higher by an annual \$2.9 trillion with greater gender parity. Imagine that. The study said in order to get there, the female labour force participation rate would have to rise from 31 to 41 per cent. The *Economic Survey* for 2017-18 quoted IMF chief Christine Lagarde as saying at Davos that raising women's participation in the workforce to men's would boost India's economy by 27 per cent.

The MGI also estimated that we would have to add 115 million non-farm jobs in the decade to 2022 (when our leaders have promised a New India) in order to guarantee minimum acceptable living standards for all citizens. This looks like a bridge too far to cross. The journey is tougher because the greater mass of women working in India's rural economy are in low-productivity jobs. It is not much better at the leadership level – only 7 per cent of tertiary-educated women work as senior officials, compared with 14 per cent among men.

Based on the Demographic and Health Surveys and the National Family Health Survey 2015-16, the *Economic Survey* said women's situation in India

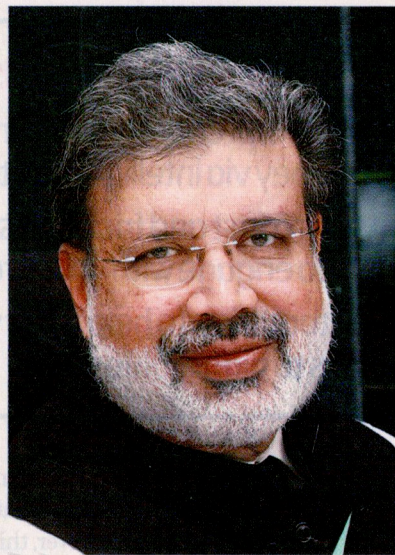
has improved on 14 out of 17 indicators. But progress is a relative term: women's employment has in fact declined; some 47 per cent of women do not use contraception, and of those that do, less than one-third use female-controlled reversible contraception.

Concomitantly, son-preference in India continues to be rampant, said the Survey, "giving rise to sex selective abortion and differential survival" leading to skewed sex ratios at birth. It calculated that there are 63 million "missing" women.

The Survey also found strong "son meta-preference", which means having children until the desired number of sons are born. It estimated that as a result, there are 21 million "unwanted" girls in India. "In some sense, once born, the lives of women are improving but society still appears to want fewer of them to be born," it said, calling for "collective self-reflection".

This Survey, the fourth authored by Chief Economic Adviser Arvind Subramanian, had a pink cover. "The colour of this year's survey cover was chosen as a symbol of support for the growing movement to end violence against women, which spans continents," it said. I recommend the gender chapter in particular. If you are too busy, at least study Table 1 on page 106, which puts ritual obeisance to *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* in perspective. **BW**

*The author is former Editor, Reuters Asia, Editor-in-Chief of The Hindustan Times and Editor of Business Today*



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