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Demographic transition and change in women's lives

Published On: 12-07-2023

Why in News:

The passage of World Population Day (July 11) is also a time to look at how India's demographic journey has changed the lives of its citizens, particularly its women.

Overview of India's Demographic Transition

India's population grew from about 340 million at Independence to 1.4 billion.

This growth was fuelled by the gift of life that receding starvation, improved public health, and medical miracles brought to India. In 1941, male life expectancy was about 56 years; only 50% of boys survived to age 28.

Today, life expectancy for men is 69 years, and nearly 50% live to see the ripe old age of 75. This rapid decline in mortality took parents by surprise, who no longer needed to have four children to ensure that at least two would survive, causing population growth until fertility decline caught up with the mortality decline, and the Total Fertility Rate fell from 5.7 in 1950 to 2.1 in 2019.

These statistics mask the tectonic shift in the lives of people as they learn to adjust to a longer lifespan and fewer children. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the lives of Indian women.

Women's childhood, adulthood, and old age have been transformed over the course of demographic transition, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively.

Change for Indian women

As families began having fewer children, ensuring at least one son became more difficult. With four children, the chance of not having a son was barely 6%, but with two children, it grew to 25%.

Social norms and patrilocal kinship patterns combined with lack of financial security reinforce a preference for sons. The India Human Development Survey (IHDS) found that 85% of women respondents expected to rely on their sons for old age support, while only 11% expected support from their daughters.

Hence, parents who want to ensure that they have at least one son among their one or two child family, resorted to sex-selective abortion, and, in some cases, the neglect of sick daughters.

Consequently, the number of girls per 100 boys, ages under five dropped from 96 to 91 between 1950 and 2019.

With a fertility decline, active mothering occupies a smaller proportion of women's lives, creating space for education and employment.

Good data on this only goes back 30 years, based on the National Family Health Survey, finds that the number of years women spend caring for children under five declined from 14 years in 1992-93 to eight in 2018-20; the years spent caring for children ages six to 15 dropped from 20 to 14 years. These changes are only partly accompanied by changes in the life course of women.

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While women's educational attainment increased, with over 70% of girls enrolling in secondary education, early marriage and childbearing remain the predominant forces defining women's lives.

The average age at first birth has hardly budged about 20 for women born in the 1940s and still remains well below 22 years for those born in the 1980s.

Early motherhood, perhaps, explains why lower fertility does not translate into higher labour force participation for women. Women need to establish secure connections to the labour market and gain work experience if they are to get skilled jobs.

By the time peak childcare demands end, they have missed the window for occupations that require specific skills; only unskilled work is open to them.

Demographic shifts also affect women's lives at older ages. With rising life expectancy, the proportion of the female population aged 65 and above increased from 5% to 11% between 1950 and 2022, and is projected to reach 21% by 2050.

While the proportion of older men will also increase, aging for women has unique implications. Women generally marry men who are older and are more likely to outlive their husbands.

The 2011 Census shows that while only 18% of men above age 65 are widowed, about 55% of the women are widowed.

For widowed women, the lack of access to savings and property results in dependence on children, mainly sons, bringing the vicious cycle of son preference to full circle

Harnessing gender dividend

Changing patriarchal norms may take a long time. Meanwhile, enhancing women's access to employment and assets will reduce their reliance on sons and could break the vicious cycle of gendered disadvantage, stretching from childhood to old age.

However, unlike East Asian nations where demographic transformation has led to delayed and often foregone marriage and childbearing, early marriage and childbearing remain central to Indian women's lives. Hence, any efforts at improving women's labour force participation must be accompanied by access to safe and affordable childcare.

A World Bank evaluation based on a randomised controlled trial in Madhya Pradesh found that the expansion of Anganwadis to include a crèche led to an increase in the work participation of mothers.

Arguably, the most striking example of the importance of childcare is documented in a study based in urban China by Du and Dong; it found that as state support for childcare declined, employment rates for mothers fell from 88% to 66%.

The Way Ahead

One relatively low-hanging fruit would be to make staffing crèche an acceptable form of work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS).

At present, NREGS is being used to build physical infrastructure but there is no reason it cannot be used to develop social infrastructure where NREGS workers can help staff crèches.

The burgeoning self-help group movement can be harnessed to set up neighbourhood child-care centres in urban and rural areas.

Obtaining the much hoped for demographic dividend cannot be done without fully harnessing the gender dividend. Improving access to childcare is an important component of achieving this.