

## Women in the Indian Working Force: Trends and Differentials

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*During the three decades and a half since professor D.R. Gadgil had examined at length varied evidences relating to the participation by Indian women in economic activities, or women in India's working force, based on 1961 Census data, the level of participation in the working force by Indian women has continued to be a vexed issue. Based on the outcome of the recurrent debates on the subject, this paper reviews the extensive evidence that has become available on the subject during the last several decades. In most discussions relating to helping the Indian women to achieve equality with men, considerable emphasis is laid on enabling them to gain independence from their spouses, sons and siblings or parents by providing opportunities for participation in income-earning activities. An improvement in the working conditions and wages and salaries of women workers is also a high priority concern. The review of the necessary data and evidence is attempted in this paper with a view to obtain a proper perspective on these issues.*

### 1 The Context

India is one of the few countries of the world with an excess of males or a deficit of women in its population.<sup>1</sup> This anomaly in the sex ratio of the population has been the theme of recurrent debate and discussion in the country at least since the beginning of the Census counts in late 1860s. Yet, the quantum of analytical research on the subject is grossly inadequate. The growing interest in raising the status of Indian women and in encouraging gender equality should facilitate more extensive research on the subject.

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While undertaking this review, I have no illusion that our data base on this (or any other) theme is perfect or flawless. There are no perfect statistics anywhere, but

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<sup>1</sup> Presently Director, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi and formerly Director, Gujarat Institute of Development Research, Ahmedabad. The Paper presents an extensively revised version of the Kunda Datar Memorial Lecture delivered at the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune during January 1994. Several comments of late Professor V.M. Dandekar and other friends after the lecture have stimulated some further work. Some friends at the Gujarat Institute of Development Research have contributed a great deal to the preparation and revision of the contents of the lectures. They include Paul Jacob, Anil Gumber, Jignasu Yagnik, Bharat Adhyaru, Upendra Upadhyay and Arti Dave. Girija, Sheela and Vasanthi have ably handled the word processing work. While placing on record my deep appreciation of the varied help of these colleagues, I assume the full responsibility for all errors of facts or interpretations.

<sup>2</sup> According to the recent population Censuses of India, the number of males per 1,000 females in the country has ranged between 1,063 (in 1961) and 1,079 (in 1991). The underlying factors have been discussed at length in: Visaria, Pravin, *The Sex Ratio of the Population of India*, Census Monograph No. 10, Office of the Registrar General, New Delhi, 1971.