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## Young women hold the key to skilling India

One of the ways to narrow the gender gap in India's workforce is focusing on the country's 253 million youth

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Shagun Sabarwal



An Indian labourer works on a salt pan in the outskirts of Nagaur district, Rajasthan, March 7. International Monetary Fund chief, Christine Lagarde said raising women's participation in the workforce to the level of men could boost the Indian economy by 27%. (AFP)

At the World Economic Forum, the International Monetary Fund chief, Christine Lagarde, said that raising women's participation in the workforce to the level of men could boost the Indian economy by 27%. She emphasised the urgent need for reforms focusing on inclusion of women in the economy. The IMF chief's comments should not come as a surprise to anyone given that the rate of female labour force participation in India is only 27% compared to 79% for males, and is lower than

in all G20 countries (with the exception of Saudi Arabia). Even worse is the trend observed in the National Sample Survey data which shows a drop in female labour force participation rates from 1993-94 to 2011-12, across all educational categories.

One of the ways to narrow this rather alarming gender gap in India's workforce is to begin by focusing on the substantially large youth population. With nearly a fifth of the country's population adolescents in the age group of 10-19, India has about 253 million young people. Is India giving the right opportunities to its future generations, especially its large young female population early enough? By making education a top national priority, India has managed to get most girls to school — the latest Annual Status Education Report shows that by age 14, most rural youth were enrolled in schools. However, being in school has not guaranteed equal learning and acquisition of skills for both boys and girls. Girls are worse off. The ASER survey, covering around 30,000 youth from 26 rural districts across 24 states, also finds that less than 30% of girls aged 14-18 in rural India are able to calculate simple percentages, compared to nearly 50% of boys in the same age group. This is a cause for concern since these girls will lack some foundational skills needed to succeed on the job and they might become unemployed or get stuck in low-wage, unstable, informal sector jobs.

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The government of India has focused significant attention to capitalise on the country's potential demographic dividend. The ambitious skilling initiative — Skill India — launched in 2015, aims at providing training to 400 million people by 2020. However, a one-size-fits-all approach will not work to correct the wide gender imbalance that exists. Dedicated efforts to draw young women into the labour force and equipping them with the right skills outside the formal education system early on, might be the necessary first step.

For designing effective policies and vocational training programmes that prepare young girls' transition to work, governments can look at scientific evidence. Randomised evaluations, conducted by researchers affiliated with the Abdul Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) contain important policy lessons. For example, evidence shows that programmes that reduce information asymmetries among young women have significant potential of succeeding. A randomised evaluation in Kenya found that providing simple, actionable information to girls on the relatively higher returns to vocational training in male-dominated courses (such as construction or mechanics) as compared to female-dominated courses, (beauty and tailoring) increased girls' enrolment in trade school courses that prepared them for typically male-dominated trades. Another example regarding the power of

information comes from a randomised evaluation conducted in rural Indian districts near Delhi. This evaluation found that providing information to females aged 15-21 years, about business process outsourcing (BPO) jobs, and on how to access these opportunities, increased their rate of employment outside their home town.

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Research also suggests that travel restrictions on young women, which are particularly severe in South Asia, can hinder the completion of training programmes. An evaluation of a six-month women's training programme in Delhi slums found that a ten-minute increase in the time taken to reach the centre was associated with a 14 percentage point reduction in likelihood of programme completion. An ongoing evaluation of a government vocational training programme in Pakistan showed that take-up and drop-out were highly related to travel distance to the training. This programme is providing single-gender transport to the training programmes to ensure young women attend and complete the training.

Though limited, evidence exists to show that simple solutions targeted specifically at overcoming barriers faced by young girls, can spur them on the path towards learning. As India builds an institutional architecture to implement skilling, it must correct this glaring gender imbalance by designing policies that overcome the vulnerabilities and challenges faced by young Indian girls. This is imperative for realising the promise India, as a country of young, holds.

*Shagun Sabarwal is associate director of policy and training, J-PAL South Asia*

*The views expressed are personal*

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