Policy Report

SOCIAL NORMS

&

PUBLIC POLICY

The Economics Society, SRCC

REVIEWS

Public policies impact stakeholders across businesses, governments and civil society. Designing effective policies therefore requires an insightful understanding of the needs and the dynamics of each of these stakeholders. Policy makers often grapple with the tendency to design policies based on frameworks and opinions without substantiating it with evidence-based decision making. At the core of the success of every public policy, whether it is in education, agriculture, health or women welfare, is an understanding of the social norms that influence the acceptability and success of these policies.

In a country where the scale of these challenges is as huge and complex as ours, the state machinery and its public policies play a critical role. Providing access to better public services to the masses cannot happen through islands of excellence of a few successful projects or programmes. The deep-rooted development challenges we face require long-term, large-scale and multi-government public policy programmes. Population-scale public policies are the only way of creating and sustaining the momentum needed to bring about transformative change.

This report is an excellent step in that direction of analysing a few of the most important and potentially impactful public policy programmes. It provides an evidence-based and objective assessment of the impact of the chosen policies. It also provides a constructive criticism of its flaws with suggestions on ways to improve them, based on social norms which form the very fabric of our diverse and vibrant society. It is an excellent repository of these programmes and a starting point to those seeking a comprehensive and balanced insight into some of our most important public policies.

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At the outset, I would like to congratulate the team members of The Economics Society, SRCC for documenting a well-articulated policy report. The policy report has rightly touched upon several factors influencing the progress of our nation.

It has been 74 years since we emerged free from the shackles of 100 years of colonial rule. The colonial rule not only deprived citizens of their fundamental rights but disintegrated the strong ethical values of our society. The "divide and rule" policy segregated our nation into a society based on the caste system and religion. We cannot ignore the fact that even before the colonial rule certain evils already existed in our society. The stereotype related to religion, sex, and caste are so deeply ingrained in our society that it might take several years to overcome the remnants of the effect. The constitution of our country was drafted to overcome the subjugations enforced upon certain sections of the society, for their upliftment and empowerment. The policies made under the guidance of our constitution have improved the situation to some extent. It's time to revisit the policies, do a gap analysis and evaluate the observations. An evidence-based approach to work upon the age-old policies would give a new lease of life to them. It is pertinent to mention that our society is extremely diverse and "one size fits all" does not imply for the country.

The formulation of policies needs to be given adequate flexibility during implementation. The policies should be formulated with the expert advice of homegrown experts. A blind emulation of the West might not produce envisioned results. Further, only the formulation of laws and policies is not enough, they have to be effectively implemented. The commitment of political leadership towards a cause has been documented to be a sustainable tool, before behavioral change sets in the society. A rise in sex ratio in the worst affected districts of Haryana is an example of this situation.

On an optimistic note, the government has started realizing the flaws in the pre-existing policies and has started taking effective measures to improve them. Expert advice is sought while formulating the new policies. The PC-PNDT Act and Universal Health Coverage through Ayushman Bharat indicate towards our progress for a New India. The change is certainly there, though it might take a couple of years to bring about a sustainable change. To conclude, we need to understand that we do not live in a utopian world and gaps in a pre-existing policy shall continue to emerge. The policy makers need to keep identifying them and address them by re-evaluating the policies.

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INTRODUCTION

"People are going to behave however the social norms permit, and beyond that."

- Max Cannon.

Social norms refer to the informal rules that govern behaviour in groups and societies. They encompass collective attitudes, behavioural patterns as well as individuals' perceptions about others' behaviours and attitudes. The contentment with following the customary practices and ideals of their reference group or the fear of social ostracism due to non-compliance prevents individuals from questioning or altering them.

Social Norms can be broadly categorised into:

- descriptive norms (beliefs about what others do)
- injunctive norms (beliefs about what others approve and disapprove).

While descriptive norms are followed by people unquestioningly, stemming from their belief that these practices are justified since a majority of members from their community follow them, injunctive norms are diligently followed by people for fear of stigmatisation.

Policies are sets of rules that are used to guide the present and future behaviour of a group of people. However, while trying to alter group behaviour for the betterment of society, policymakers often ignore the various social norms that govern different groups or communities. Hence, economic incentives and law enforcement are often overpowered by these unwritten rules of social conduct (and reluctance of people to deviate from the norm). It becomes important to target not just the undesirable activities of people but also the social norms governing these activities.

For instance, girls are considered to be inefficient in STEM subjects by many. This perception might seem insignificant at an individual level. However, this unfounded attitude of communities goes on to impede women's growth prospects in both their personal and professional lives in profound ways. Government policies to reduce disparities in the workforce are all rendered ineffective because of this underlying social norm.

The government may enforce strict punishments for gender-based discrimination in workplaces, but unless this baseless perception of women is questioned (and changed), they wouldn't be able to enter the workforce in the first place, due to discouraging attitudes of their parents and teachers.

There are innumerable economic and social issues with such norms as their root cause ensuring the continuity of their existence. Aware of this fact, Prof. Richard Thaler, the 2017 winner of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics, has been urging behavioural economists 'to shift attention from economic choices like retirement plans to social norms affecting policies.'

In the recent past, policy analysts have been trying to modify the *choice architecture*. However, the power of harnessing *defaults* (the social norms) and prompting people to be receptive has not been very successful. This traditional system has to be accompanied by a rigorous cost-benefit assessment of the impact of different behavioural nudges at individual and group levels. Problems need to be analysed from all perspectives- economic, social, personal, institutional and international. Further, this dynamic approach needs to be accompanied by rigorous field-experiments and surveys to ascertain the social network as well as the mechanism through which such social norms are enforced upon a group.

In this Policy Brief, we try to identify social norms and analyse their impact on government policies. For convenience, the brief is divided into four sections:
- Education
- Agriculture
- Healthcare
- Women Welfare.

Under each of these sections, we explore social norms that are rendering policy responses ineffective. We also suggest modifications to existing policies as well as some new policy interventions that might solve the problems at hand by taking cognisance of the existing social norms.

EDUCATION

Education forms the backbone of any country's present and future. The social norms governing education are different in different parts of India depending on whether it is rural or urban. Identifying social norms in education, hence becomes a two-pronged approach. While social norms don't have a huge impact on urban India (given a better level of education and opportunity), rural India faces challenges in the form of lopsided sex-ratio, reluctance to educate the girl child, caste and wealth-based discrimination in institutions, to name a few. Higher education in the country has also been plagued by bureaucracy and red-tapism. While these may not seem like social norms, the fact remains that there is a reluctance to change such happenings due to fear of superiors and as a corollary, in a way, social ostracism. People are likely to indulge in these practices as they believe that others are following them too and hence, this self-fulfilling prophecy hampers the efficacy of our education policies.

A social norms approach in policy-formulation can not only help get rid of the various hurdles in the implementation of education policies and ensure that desired outcomes are achieved, but also confirm that our future generations are not plagued with restrictive social norms, by bringing about a behavioural change. According to Berkowitz, "interventions to correct misconceptions, by revealing the actual, healthier norm, will have a useful effect on most individuals, who will either reduce their participation in possibly problematic behaviour or be encouraged to engage in protective, healthy behaviours." Such social norm interventions have been successful in reducing college students' affinity towards drinking and smoking. Indian students, particularly those belonging to economically disadvantaged families, are known to indulge in drinking, smoking and illegal drug use, primarily because of their belief that a lot of their peers are also doing the same. Interventions that reveal not just the harmful effects of such activities, but also point towards the healthy habits being followed by most of their peers can help solve this problem.

Rigid social hierarchies, based on caste and gender, have persisted in India since the colonial era. In a bid to overcome the problems, directly or indirectly, the Government has undertaken quite a few policies under its belt.

Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao

The scheme, launched in 2015, aimed to target both an on-ground change as well as a behavioural change. As per UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report, "gender inequalities, sustained in part by discriminatory norms, undermine children's access to education and their learning experiences." To improve the declining sex-ratio in a majority of States in the country due to greater preference for a male child, the Government wanted to show that women should be celebrated and not resigned to mere household chores, in line with the adage that 'educating a woman is equal to educating a generation'. While the policy was moderately successful in increasing the sex-ratio, the problems and fallacies were much more than what met the eye.

The Economic Survey of 2017-18 revealed that a majority of Indian couples still preferred a boy and would continue to have children, for want of a boy child. This leaves around 21 million undesired girls in India. These unwanted girls form the maximum proportion of children not attending higher secondary school. Parents view their girl child as a 'future home-maker' in their husband's house and feel that an education above primary level might increase the burden of dowry (an illegal but still widely prevalent practice) they might have to pay.

The States which were worst hit, like Haryana, failed to register an improvement in sex-ratio, rather saw a fall. This can be attributed to a dissonance between the target and the methodologies adopted. For a policy that heavily relies on people-to-people interaction, there was a dearth of female workers on this scheme. Moreover, the positions had a high turnover, which deterred the formation of a proper bond between the residents of an area and the workers. Another possible hit to the system was the removal of the 'no-detention' policy, which meant that students could be asked to repeat grades. However, this can undermine the fact that people in rural areas do not have access to tuitions and have other familial duties that an urban kid does not usually face. Secondly, in the scenario of a child, especially a girl child failing a grade, the parents might find it better to send the kid to work to earn an extra buck rather than fail classes. Additionally, one of the biggest concerns due to which an adolescent girl drops out of school in rural India is the lack of access to proper sanitary products and menstrual hygiene. This is one of the many concerns that could have been adequately addressed under the scheme.
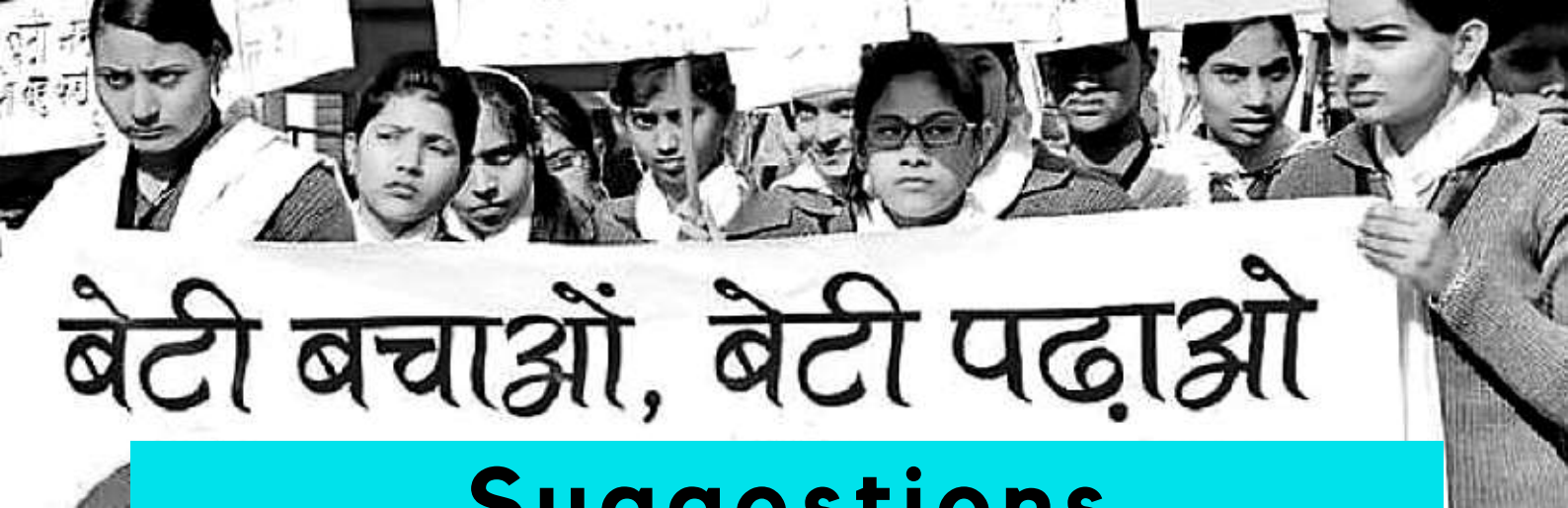
Suggestions

To make this moderately successful scheme a fully successful one, the scheme needs a better understanding of the ground realities instead of hoping for a trickle-down effect. The best way to approach this is to have more female workers who can induce the girl child and especially, the parents to send the child to school. The problem of a high turnover also needs to be addressed. Additionally, collaborating with local NGOs and other organisations should not go amiss, given they would know the people and the area better. All these would help build trust among the people and help, as a collective unit, to dismantle regressive thoughts of not giving due importance to the girl child. The campaign of #SelfieWithDaughter, which aimed to bypass failure bias and showcase the achievements, was a good start but more work, including more of personalised communication techniques, are required in the field to bring about a behavioural change.

The advertising campaigns failed to efficiently target specific States where child sex ratios were more abysmal than others. A more targeted and personalised approach is required for such States so as to personally connect with the people of these States, keeping their social norms, cultural beliefs and traditions in mind. Modern technology can be used to keep a track of dropout rates of girls after completion of primary education in different regions and targeted interventions are required to encourage girls to continue further studies.

As the old saying goes, 'when you educate a man, you educate a man, but when you educate a woman, you educate a generation'. Thus, this initiative should not be marketed as a campaign to uplift the status of women but as a means to uplift our society.

Efforts must be made to ensure a gender- neutral school management and environment by sensitizing the teachers and other school staff in this regard. A course content with a specific focus on making students, both girls and boys, believe in gender equality must be introduced. Due attention needs to be paid on the coursework and training as well, so that the end result of a girl child rising through the ranks becomes a motivating story for people still reluctant to send their children to school.

Mid-Day Meals

With the aim of helping the socially and economically disadvantaged children from malnourishment, the Government introduced the scheme of Mid-day meals in 2013. An indirect outcome expected from the introduction of this scheme was the formation of congenial bonds among all students. All students, irrespective of their caste, creed, colour or religion, were expected to sit and eat together.

However, the regular practice of caste-based discrimination by school administration, teachers and even the cooks hampers the ability of the scheme to break caste barriers and foster a feeling of brotherhood among all students. A surprise inspection conducted in Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe dominated areas of Rajasthan revealed that the children from Valmiki community were made to sit separately from their other classmates and the helpers even refused to wash their plates (Pallikonda M and Judith A, 2017). Not only the helpers, but also the teachers were found to observe caste and gender-based discrimination. Another study conducted by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) revealed that Dalit students were being offered less quantity of food as compared to the 'upper class children'. Approximately 20% of those surveyed were disinterested in going to school because of such rampant discrimination.

Instances of teachers and workers asking Dalit students to get their utensils from home, refraining them from touching the utensils of 'upper class children' and serving them food from a distance, so as to avoid touching them have been brought to light. Parents of 'upper class students' as well as the school administration prefer having the food cooked by a non-Dalit. A Scheduled Caste woman is rarely employed by the Self Help Groups who prepare the food. As per a study conducted by Samaj Pragati Sansthan (SSP), only 5 out of 92 cooks in seven districts of Madhya Pradesh were found to be Dalits. Such social divisions ingrained deeply within the minds of the workers and administrators render this well-intended policy inefficient.

The location of the school has also been found to have an adverse impact on school attendance/dropout rates (and thereby, their participation in the Mid-Day Meal Scheme) among children belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes; this is due to the discrimination faced by them while passing 'upper-caste' localities.

Suggestions

Such problems require not just legal but also social solutions. Education needs to serve as a means to bring about a positive norm change, instead of perpetuating them further. Efforts should be made to sensitise all those involved in the implementation of such policies regarding the importance of non-discriminatory education. Workshops and proper training should be provided to workers at all ranks, to ensure that the policy achieves its stated objectives through proper implementation. Teachers and other school staff must be employed not just on the basis of their educational qualifications but through a rigorous selection process aimed at gauging their views regarding the caste structure, gender bias etc.

Efforts should be made to change the attitude of the 'upper-caste' parents as well, since it is them who insist on having their child be seated separately from other 'lower-caste' children. Children must begin learning the values of universal brotherhood and equality from home. Parent counselling sessions as well as intensive outreach campaigns must be organised by the Government. The role of Non-Profit Organisations and Civil Society becomes paramount since these organisations tend to have a personal connect with the residents of the areas they operate in. (Behavioural change requires increased face-to-face interaction and information dissemination).

It is important for all stakeholders (school administration, community leaders, civil society, district administration) to work in tandem for this scheme to benefit all sections of the society equally. Strict enforcement of this scheme can help ensure equal access to all children, irrespective of their caste, creed, gender or religion. Official inspections of schools to check for discriminatory behaviour must be conducted on a regular basis.

The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 needs to be modified so that the different forms of untouchability and other discriminatory practices being experienced under this scheme are considered punishable offences. More schools need to be set up in Dalit dominated regions or neutral locality regions and administrators must employee Dalit cooks as well.

Skill India

Skill India was launched in 2015 in pursuance of the Government's goal of making India the "Skill Capital of the World", alleviating poverty and uplifting the marginalised communities. While it has achieved a lot, many issues still remain unanswered, particularly those pertaining to mismatches, both in skills imparted and the treatment of marginalised classes.

Various on-ground surveys and reports show that women in many places, rural and urban alike, face the barrier of societal norms that disallow them to go and work. Familial and societal pressures exist even in urban households where the families are strictly against the idea of women leaving the house and going out for work. Northern States usually show this distressing trend where a man considers it 'shameful' if the women in his house go out and work. Women's employment takes a hit when employers have a mandate against employing women because of the additional costs involved (For example, the costs incurred on safety mechanisms and infrastructure). This percolates down to the skill programme wherein the people are reluctant to send women and girls to diverse skill-training programmes. This means that women are compelled to resign to traditionally women-centric programmes like stitching and beauty (and not technical programmes, involving the use of complex machinery). These ideas limit women's participation to a certain sectors, which is detrimental and gives rise to the idea of what women can and cannot do.

As per a finding by Observer Research Foundation, while women's participation in the workforce has increased slightly from 15.5% in 2011-12 to 15.9% in 2017-18, paid employment has not significantly helped improve their economic lives, since a large number of women are being assigned to a relatively smaller number of "female occupations", bringing down the wages.

Apart from gender issues, caste is also a major problem that plagues the policy's final implementation. Many people reportedly leave the jobs offered to them post skill-training because of discrimination and denial of basic amenities. Lastly, the skill-training programmes are not diverse and there exists a big mismatch between industry demand and the actual vocational training imparted.

Suggestions

From a top-down level, more diverse skill-training programmes covering a plethora of skills should be conducted by the Government to ensure that every person has access to a larger stream to choose from. A more diverse range of courses is needed, so as to increase gender diversity in all occupations. Stringent rules must be enforced upon the trainers to ensure that the participation of males and females is equal in all courses and that courses are not segregated between men and women on the basis of their baseless perceptions of the two sexes (while males are encouraged to take up technical courses, females are confined to 'women-centric' industries such as bangle-making and stitching).

Diverse employment options can also be beneficial in starting less recognised industries and might be a good way to break down the barriers regarding gender stereotypes which limit women to a few select fields. The Government needs to take cognizance of the emerging gender-neutral employment choices such as freelancing and lay special emphasis upon developing the required skills among rural women. This opening up of new opportunities might serve as a stepping stone for women to suit some of their work-needs, which are agreeable by their families as well (for example, working from home, or returning on time). Success through these means might ensure that the women, now earning for their families, end up having more freedom, bringing about a general change in the mindsets of people.

Employers should also come under the scanner for failure to comply with safety standards for women as well as reluctance to incorporate infrastructure which would adequately encourage support for women employees. Their gender diversity should be disclosed so that it can be noticed if a gender bias exists. Feedback mechanisms and competent committees should be set up to look into the problem of people leaving jobs due to caste-based discrimination. Moreover, in order to reduce employers' aversion to hire women, stemming from their belief that hiring women requires the organisation to incur additional costs, employment benefits, social safety nets and safety precautions should be made mandatory by law, regardless of whether the employee is a male or female.

National Education Policy

The National Education Policy (NEP) has a long history going back to 1968 and has, in the past, repeatedly been touted by many international academicians as the 'same points in a different package', every time it has undergone a change.

However, the latest policy, released on 29th July, 2020, has been hailed by the Government as a total overhaul in the mechanics of education in the country. The policy rightly takes into account social norms and other factors that prevent many from accessing quality education.

The past policies aimed to substitute education for "skills" in the hope of transforming India into the "Skill Capital of the World" and hereby, failed to acknowledge the importance of studies. The skills imparted usually fetched jobs in the lower hierarchy of work, thus eliminating any chances of an underprivileged individual moving up the pecking order. The National Education Policy of 2020 takes a more holistic and multidisciplinary approach. It aims at providing contemporary skills to all students to make them better equipped to face the workforce competition as well as seeks to foster creativity, critical thinking, conceptual understanding and quality academic research.

The age-old bias against children of certain communities has either kept them out of the educational system or affected their academic performance. According to a report by Oxfam , "75% of the more than six million children out of school in India are either Dalits (32.4%), Muslims (25.7%) or Adivasis (16.6%)." The policy lays down the Government's aim to allow equitable access to high-quality education for all learners, regardless of social or economic backgrounds, by 2040. It takes into account the marginalisation/underrepresentation of certain students based on their gender-identities, socio-cultural identities, geographical identities, disabilities and socio-economic conditions. The scope of school education has been broadened to facilitate multiple pathways to learning involving both formal and non-formal education modes, to enable all to pursue education. Besides this, the policy suggests a list of incentives such as targeted scholarships, conditional cash transfers to incentivize parents to send their children to school, providing bicycles for transport, establishing appropriate infrastructure etc. to encourage the participation of marginalised sections.

The said document is appreciated for addressing the concerns of disparity between the male and the female enrollment and dropout rates. It succeeds to address concerns due to which girls in rural areas find themselves dropping out of schools by rightly proposing to identify social mores and gender stereotypes that prevent girls from accessing education. Provision of sanitation and toilets and the proposal to institue a 'Gender Inclusion Fund' to support and scale effective community-based interventions that address local context-specific barriers to female and transgender children's access to and participation in education are likely going to have a positive impact.

Students will be sensitized through this new school culture, brought in by teachers, trained social workers and counsellors as well as through corresponding changes to bring in an inclusive school curriculum that shall go on to rid our future generations from bias and discriminatory attitudes.

True transformation is possible only when policy-makers delve deep into the root causes of the issues that have long plagued our educational institutes and tackle their sources. A change in the culture of institutions, regulators and governments has become imminent. The teacher recruitment process laid down in the NEP 2020, including classroom demonstrations/ interviews, is a step in the right direction towards gauging passion and motivation of teachers and reducing social bias at work.

However, the exact methodology to be adopted to achieve the objectives is still ambiguous and a lot depends upon its efficient implementation. A major drawback of a suggestion by this Central policy is its emphasis on the 'three-language principle' and native language is a medium of instruction which might lead to State-wise divides or allow students to graduate from school without having learnt the universal language, English. This will inhibit the ability of non-English speakers to compete in the workforce. Moreover, many classrooms in India have students from various backgrounds. For instance, a classroom in Kolkata may comprise Hindi-speaking and Bengali-speaking students. The idea of using native language as a medium of instruction becomes flawed, with regards to implementation, in such a situation. Also, while our native language is developed majorly at home, the globally-dominant language, English, is not going to be developed in a majority of homes but many would be required to converse in English during work. While this is just a suggestion, government schools who are likely to follow it would not be able to attain outcomes at par with private schools.

AGRICULTURE

The agricultural sector holds immense potential to drive a nation's economy forward as well as help a lot of people to escape the grip of poverty. However, various social norms have hampered the productivity of Indian farmers by making them adhere to inefficient, conventional means of farming.

The social norms governing behaviour and activities of Indian farmers are usually descriptive in nature, that is, most farmers tend to abide by these unwritten practices on the sole pretext that all other farmers in their region are also following them. Hence, they continue to follow these practices, equating general acceptance of such practices to social approval and tend to become rigid in their observance, not questioning their validity or efficacy.

A few social norms take the form of injunctive norms as well, in the sense that, since they stem from systemic inequalities in our social system, people tend to rigidly follow them for fear of social ostracism.

Any policy aimed at altering existing agricultural practices can prove to be more effective if they also consider the social norms governing farmers' behaviour, how they operate and what factors keeps them in place. Interventions that strategically build upon this increased understanding of the farming community can effectively bring about the desired change. All agriculture-related decisions made by farmers are not guided by their rational considerations of costs and benefits or productivity gains and hence, socio-cultural barriers must also be acknowledged while formulating policies.

For instance, the age-old belief among Indian farmers that agriculture is a 'gift of God' renders them at the mercy of Monsoons instead of offering them an opportunity to innovate. Close cooperation among farmers, the agro-industry and technological research institutes can help solve this problem. In India, instead of fostering cooperation and collaboration by increased farmer participation, farmers are treated as 'opressed classes' who are generally poverty-stricken. This perception greatly inhibits farmers' potential to develop innovative and more efficient techniques of farming. Israel's agricultural model can help us better understand the importance of nurturing congenial relationships between different stakeholders in the industry.

Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana

It has been scientifically proven that climate change and land degradation practices can severely hamper the yield and quality of food crops. The Economic Survey of 2017-18 explicitly warned that "Climate change could reduce annual agricultural incomes in the range of 15% to 18% on average, and up to 20% to 25% for unirrigated areas".This has put the onus of ensuring sustainable agricultural practices on the government. However, strict measures to curb environment-degrading practices have proved ineffective over the past years, primarily because of the existence of contradictory social norms. This puts added pressure upon the government to bring about a behavioural change to improve outcomes.

Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana aims at promoting certified organic farming under the National Mission on Sustainable Agriculture. However, just as it has been observed in the case of Nigerian farmers and their disinterest in adopting Agri-Environmental Schemes (AES) due to strong cultural resistance by the farming community, a similar situation is being experienced in India today. The farmers were not driven by economic incentives offered by the Nigerian government but by the practices followed by those around them (*Coent et al, 2018*). "Roadside farming", that is, "how farmers' decisions are impacted by their observance of each other's practices by the side of the road is often mentioned as a determinant of behavior." (*Burton, 2004*).

Farmers's decisions are also driven by their desire to conform to generally-followed practices in their community. The only way to make them change their practices is to make them realise how their peers are also doing the same and how society hails those practices as just and beneficial for all.

While the government policies are directed towards the right direction of promoting sustainable practices, they often disregard social norms and hence, face complexities in implementation and are unable to produce their desired outcomes. Similar is the case for other schemes like the Soil Health Card Scheme as well government's effort to develop new technologies for improving agricultural processes (the adoption of these technologies remains low for the same reason).

Suggestions

The Indian government needs to increase the economic incentives offered at the initial stage aggressively so as to make economic incentives of adopting sustainable practices stronger than the prevailing social norms. With time, as more and more people switch over to sustainable practices/more efficient modern technology and methods, these incentives can be lowered since, by that time, the social norms would have shifted in favour of sustainable practices; as farmers would see more and more people adopting these new practices, they'd feel compelled to adopt them too.

There is a belief among a large number of consumers that small and marginal farmers cannot provide them with good quality organic food, since organic food is expensive and customers are unable to verify the authenticity of the produce. While the present scheme does provide proper certification to the farmers, there is no traceability record that can help assure consumers.

Moreover, proper communication and awareness campaigns need to be taken up by the government. To bring about a change in social norms, governments at all level need to be apprised of the urgent need to adopt climate- friendly practices, particularly the *Sarpanchs* at *Gram Panchayats*. Allocations from MGNREGA can be directed towards environmental-friendly activities like soil and water management, plantation and Agro-forestry, etc.

Efforts must be made to encourage more face-to-face knowledge sharing between farmers and officials; emphasis should be on making the farmers realize the changing trends in agricultural practices and how more and more farmers have begun adopting such sustainable and more efficient practices. This should be an intensive awareness generating campaign, spanning all members and acquaintances of the farming community since it must be noted that social factors affecting farmers' decisions are not just limited to the society-level but can also be as proximal as a farmers' child viewing a certain practice with disdain.

Gender-Neutral Policies

Sustainable rural growth and poverty alleviation are not possible without an inclusive approach by policymakers. Although agricultural practices and policies intend to enhance the overall agricultural productivity, pronounced gender disparities prevent them from achieving these motives because of the ingrained gender bias in our society. The agricultural sector has long been in distress, with farmer protests and suicides on the rise. Increased participation of the female farm labourers, women farmers and farmers' widows in these protests has been observed over the past few years, bringing to the forefront, the issue of structural inequities in our agricultural sector and its consequent toll upon the females.

Women's role in agricultural practices has been traditionally defined as that of a "helper"; women are often referred to as "farmers' wives" instead of "farmers." This greatly influences their ability to access land rights, necessary inputs, financial credit, pension and other social benefits, irrigation sources, technology, advisory services and training, etc.

As per a finding by Oxfam (2018), around 85% of rural Indian women are involved in agriculture, but only about 13% own the land on which they work. Moreover, as per the India Human Development Survey (IHDS, 2018), 83% of agricultural land in the country is inherited by male members of the family and less than 2% by females, stemming from societal perceptions of women as inferior to men, the burden of unpaid household work upon women, patrilocal post-marital residence and opposition to mobility from their husbands. Widows are also left struggling for ownership of their deceased husbands' land and houses.

Despite laws encouraging and protecting female ownership, women are often forced to relinquish their rights, either forcefully (by their spouses or other family members) or willingly (because of their lack of awareness and illiteracy). This translates to lower entitlements to females for want of ownership and subsequent loss of their economic potential. Moreover, the distribution of crops and farm activities between males and females further proves the existence of gender bias. While most men are involved in commercial farming, most women are involved in subsistence farming. Further, women often perform non-mechanised tasks at farms such as winnowing, sowing and harvesting whereas men perform all the technical work. Women's role in agriculture is often considered as an extension of their household responsibilities and is hence, often underpaid and unacknowledged.

Suggestions

Hence, all government schemes aimed at boosting agricultural production must take cognisance of the inherent gender bias and modify existing policies such as Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY, an insurance scheme), Pradhan Mantri Kisan Maandhan yojana (a pension scheme) and Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana (PKVY, to promote organic farming in groups or clusters) to make them more inclusive.

Emphasis should be on ensuring that entitlements to women under these schemes are not in name only, but are also effective in uplifting the conditions of women farmers.

As per a finding by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO, 2011), empowering women through land and ownership rights has the potential of raising total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5- 4% and can reduce hunger across the world by 12-17%. Hence, the onus lies on the governments to ensure uniform and equal inheritance and succession laws. The focus of all policies aimed at increasing agricultural productivity must also be on reducing gender inequalities and fostering growth that is more inclusive in nature.

'Collective approaches' focusing on integrated community-based programmes, that facilitate the formation of a group for landless women (Agarwal,2020) as well as measures to mobilise credit and promote female- friendly financing institutions (FAO,2010), are required on an urgent basis. For instance, the 'collective approach' can be integrated in the Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana allocating clusters to a group of widows of male farmers to empower them.

Moreover, policies must be designed to increase awareness among women about their own rights. Education curriculum must be better designed so as to encourage girls to take up more technical courses relevant to agriculture. Efforts must also be made to include women in social sector schemes relating to insurance, health, pension, etc.

HEALTH

Individuals try to abide by the social norms of the group they associate themselves with on the basis of factors like income, education, place of residence (the rural-urban divide), etc. Fear of social ostracism makes us hold beliefs that the society, or a group as a whole, perceives (which can be inaccurate and/or misleading). Hence, their role in our health-related decisions is quite significant.

Past attempts at delivering proper healthcare to all Indians and policy interventions to improve its quality haven't been very successful. This is largely because of the failure of these policies to recognize the role of social norms existing in various Indian communities. There are a variety of social norms at play that determine the health-related behaviour of the masses. These are important deterrents that render healthcare policies largely ineffective. Although, due to the long- drawn efforts of the State as well as various activist groups and other non-governmental organizations, these practices have reduced, yet discrimination on the basis of caste (mostly in rural areas), and lately on the basis of class, exists to the detriment of public health policy. It is largely due to this, that many of those belonging to the lower strata still have limited access to formal healthcare. Even today, they are rendered discriminatory treatment and, therefore, they refrain from resorting to modern healthcare facilities.

The Government's *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan,* a community- led sanitation programme, is often cited as a successful example of a wide-scale behavioural change, brought about by challenging the age-old practice of open defecation. It did so through a social norms approach, wherein it relied heavily on face-to-face interaction of local residents with the *swachhagrahis (*who leveraged their social ties with the villagers) and widespread dissemination of information through social media. Villagers were willing to change their practices as they observed more and more people following hygienic sanitation practices.

Healthcare Policies

The world's largest publicly-funded health insurance policy, Ayushman Bharat has benefited a huge section of the society. However, it fails to take into account certain moral, ethical, and psycho-social issues. Despite its mass coverage, the policy doesn't consider people's ideologies and social perceptions regarding health. Various other State health insurance schemes also face the same concern.

Sometimes, the patient's health-seeking behaviour leads to delays in obtaining medical help for reasons that have more to do with culture, social practice and religious beliefs than scientific evidence. A social norm, majorly prevalent in the rural areas, is the preference for local 'traditional' interventionists, including natural healers, hermits, 'daimas' or midwives, over doctors and nurses. While a few of them might be undertaking genuine practice, many of them, especially the so-called practitioners of 'black magic', are imposters who mislead people into superstitious practices. This adversely impacts the health of those who fall prey to such practices.

Due to these reasons, people, particularly those residing in rural areas, avoid resorting to modern forms of healthcare in times of medical emergencies. These interventionists, being mostly local residents, are often in personal contact with the people. Thus, local people tend to 'trust' these interventionists more than doctors and modern health practitioners, whom they view as 'outsiders'. For instance, in many Indian villages even today, people have huge trust in 'daimas' or midwives and prefer to get the deliveries of 'newborns' done by them. This might be, in effect, due to the lack of proper medical facilities in villages; however, at the same time, this might also be a cause behind villagers' aversion to go to modern hospitals and clinics.

On the other hand, those people who do opt for western forms of medicine are often looked down upon or discriminated against by the healthcare personnel in hospitals. It turns out to be a struggle for these socially and/or economically backward classes, to even avail of a bed for their sick family members. Most of the time, these people lose their lives before being granted a bed by these hospitals. Moreover, without a proper acknowledgement receipt by hospitals, these workers can't avail themselves of insurance claims, which further dissuades them from opting for these schemes in the first place.

To sum it up, discrimination on the basis of caste in every institution, ranging from hospitals and insurance companies to banks, makes people reluctant to opt for State or Central Health Insurance Schemes. Further, rural households do not have much of a tendency to invest in their health. Investment for the marriage of their girls, for example, far outweighs the savings of rural communities for any unforeseen health emergency.

In primary health clinics and state-run community hospitals, an average consultation with the doctor lasts just around a few minutes, which makes it hard to take account of underlying socio-economic and psycho-social factors. The short consultation time makes it difficult for doctors to investigate adverse factors impacting patients' physical and mental well-being. For instance, consider a woman suffering from anxiety attacks and shortness of breath. A doctor can prescribe the appropriate medicines to cure her physical symptoms after an interaction with her for a few minutes. However, the brief consultation would not be enough for the doctor to decipher the root cause of such behavior, which might be, for instance, due to forced marriage. Without due attention, the causes will never be exposed and the woman's family might never know the mental toll of conventional practices upon young girls, never quite giving a powerful incentive to re-evaluate their existing beliefs.

Another disparity exists in the form of the rural-urban divide. A greater concern for the government has been to first satisfy the needs of the urban elite. This is mostly because of the assumption that the natural environment and physically strenuous rural occupations pursued by rural households serve as a shield from a lot of ailments. It is little wonder that while the more affluent sections of the rural society have gained upward mobility and have managed to come closer to affording the modern amenities offered in the cities, including expensive curative facilities; however, largely speaking, the colonial paradigm of rural-urban dichotomy in the provision of health services has continued till this day. There is a huge mismatch in the budget allocations for rural and urban healthcare in most States. The rural health budget is not allocated in proportion to the size of the rural population, which is much more than the urban population. As per a paper by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, India "will have only 7 doctors per 10000 population by 2030". A survey by the Organisation of Pharmaceutical Producers (OPPI) in India and KPMG found that 80% of the doctors in India function in urban areas.

Suggestions

A better developed primary healthcare system can reduce local 'traditional' interventions and associated social beliefs. Presently, there is a dearth of qualified doctors and staff in rural hospitals, which further reduces the trust of villagers in modern health treatment and other facilities. Doctors and staff are also known to show caste-based discriminatory behaviour. Regular and proper monitoring of staff behaviour becomes an absolute necessity.

Efforts should also be directed towards reducing the workload of doctors by increasing capacity so that a doctor can spend more time with each of her/his patients. This may also help spark better health awareness among people through regular screening as well as help nurture trust between the doctors and patients.

Lower-caste individuals are largely ignored by empanelled private hospitals by citing reasons such as inappropriate documentation. For structural and qualitative improvements, incentivising such hospitals to provide good treatment in terms of both behaviour and procedure is of paramount importance. The government can specify costs of disease treatments after adjusting for inflation rates so as to attract private players. State participation should be increased since the National Health Scheme only deals with 1,394 diseases. This calls for more customised policy responses by States, to take into account the existing social norms of that State. Policymakers can aim at utilising the power of social norms in their own favour, as seen in the success of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan that made the observance of hygienic practices a commonality.

The major drawback of the Ayushman Bharat Scheme is that it relies extensively on the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) of 2011 to identify beneficiaries. This outdated dataset does not consider the changing dynamics of individuals' social and economic status or the many developments that have taken place since 2011. It under-counts some of the poorest sections of people and at times, overestimates the deprivation of some. There is an urgent need to collect revised data more efficiently because in India, caste-based discrimination is not just driven by the individual's community but also by his/her income level.

WOMEN WELFARE

Ingrained systemic bias against females has profound implications in their personal as well as professional lives. Baseless perceptions about women's ideal role in society impinge upon women's self-respect and freedom.

Policies to uplift the status of women prove ineffective, primarily because they simply focus on changing the rules and not the behaviour of people. For the rules to be effective, people's attitudes and behaviours need to be modified and for that to be achieved, policies need to take into account the existing social norms and the factors that hold them in place. There's an urgent need to shift the inequitable gender norms in favour of achieving gender equality. A lot of progress has been made in this sphere by feminists, women rights' activists and women's health practioners but there is still a long way to go in becoming a gender-equal society.

Inheritance laws

Much like all the other setups of law, Inheritance law has also evolved over a period of time from within as well as with a close-knit nexus of the folkways, customs, social norms and institutions. Before having the legal fabrications in position, the Inheritance laws were defined mostly by customary laws of precincts. In matters of succession also, there were myriad schools of thought. One such example on how social norms can affect welfare can be seen with the help of the concept of "Streedhana", an ancient Hindu law which meant that a woman was entitled to all the gifts that she received at the time of her marriage. However, it was only this "dhana" that was considered to be a widow's absolute property and she was entitled to the other inherited properties only as a life-estate (with very limited powers of alienation), if at all. This provision was later changed in the Hindu Succession Act of 1956. However, this example explicates the need of evolving laws and policies. This is essentially due to the character of social norms and cultures that always remains in a constant state of flux.

Inheritance

Inheritance can be a source of security and freedom for Indian women, improving their status in their households, the society as well as in the workforce. Property rights to the Indian women are highly divided and doled out. Every religious community has its own set of laws and they continue to be governed by them in several personal matters, property rights being one of them. Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists are governed by a whole together different set of laws while Muslims and Christians believe in different laws based on the Sharia and Gospel respectively. Moreover, tribal women continue to be governed by the norms of their respective tribes. To complicate it further, under the Indian Constitution, both the Central and the State governments are competent to enact laws on matters of succession and hence, the States can (as some have) enact their own variations of property laws within each personal law.

Ergo, there is no uniformity in the inheritance laws of India. There is no single body/set of laws that can ensure the guarantee of equality and justice, two of the most sacrosanct values of The Indian Constitution. For by and large, with a few exceptions, the Indian courts have refused to test the personal laws on the touchstone of Constitution to strike down those that are clearly unconstitutional, and have left it to the wisdom of the legislature to choose the time to frame the Uniform Civil Code as per the mandate of a Directive Principle in Article 44 of the Constitution.

The social norms coloured by religion, largely patriarchal, often are the biggest hindrance in the way of just Inheritance laws. Women's dependency on their male counterparts, primarily in rural areas, makes such arrangements virtually defunct. The men of the households fear losing their property after the woman gets married and hence, refrain from passing on the property to females. Women who do inherit property, do not always get physical possessions. Many times the possession of land deeds remains with the brothers or the husband of the women, failing the entire system which aims at providing them with their fair share. Women often give up these rights in favour of 'maintaining familial harmony' as well. This practice, know as 'Haq tyag', is often followed in many northern and western States.

Panchayats

The Indian government took a colossal step in 1993 by bestowing the 73rd constitutional amendment bill, which *inter alia* encouraged the participation of women in rural district-based units, i.e., the Panchayats. It intended to bring about an absolute transformation in these local institutions operating at the provincial level, both in terms of management and gender-equity. Politics, in general, has been largely considered an arena for men. The societal norms and the dual responsibility of women have proved to be significant obstacles responsible for their lack of participation in the field. The participation of women in gram meetings is limited and infrequent because of male domination in the meetings. Thus, the 73rd amendment tried to resolve the matter by reserving 33% of seats for women.

The policy, theoretically, has made it more natural for women to engage in these fields but outrightly neglected the role of social norms in action at the village level. It guarantees that the positions are reserved at the village level but ignores the crucial role of the interplay of social norms and prejudices against women in rural regions. Most of the seats that are presently reserved for women were earlier in the hands of men. These men try to fix this up in favour of one of their women relatives. As per a survey, about 41.7% of the female pradhans and 41.8% of the female ward members drew their motivation for contesting the panchayat election from their spouse. Community groups like Mahila Mandals and Self-Help Groups motivated 23.3% of women to take a plunge and political parties come a poor third, motivating only 6.9% of the women representatives and that too only in the states of West Bengal, Sikkim, Tripura, and Kerala.

At the rural level, women lack knowledge and information concerning the system. Most of them are oblivious to the complexities of the system. They are also burdened by the 'dual responsibility' they face. Thus, most of them do not attend the gram meetings. This eventually results in a lack of initiative and leadership skills required to handle the seat. Moreover, while the motive of the legal arrangement in place was to encourage women to participate in politics, what it actually did, in reality, was that it made 33% a 'boundary number'. Women in villages seldom contest from unreserved seats. Hence, if we consider 33% of women contesting from reserved seats, out of which most of them contest on behalf of their husbands/relatives, then effectively we have a very low proportion of women that are willingly competing in the elections.

Suggestions

Inheritance Laws:

Implementation of a Uniform Civil Code that can bring about uniformity in the legal structure pertaining to Inheritance rights is extremely necessary. As already pointed out, the property rights are severely differentiated on the basis of religion which makes the entire structure complex. Hence, having a uniform structure would simplify the system.

Literacy is another area where the government needs to work; informing women about their rights is a significant task at hand. Moreover, financial literacy must be imparted to rural women so as to help them better manage their financial assets (presently, wealth is majorly managed by male members of rural households).

Panchayats:

Making participation of some proportion of women in villages mandatory can effectively make them acclimatize to workings of the system, make them aware of the problems, render them the confidence to discuss on public platforms, and make them more literate. Another recommendation could be to ensure the real implementation of the arrangement. This can be done by ensuring that the reserved seats are only contested by women members who are not in immediate relations with the family that held the seat previously. This can ensure more accountability in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Women who have made it solely through family associations are not effective in advancing themselves and drawing about significant innovation.

Moreover, improving literacy rates should always be the focal point of the government which can provide relevant information and knowledge.

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