



The consensus: Indian working woman has arrived

What Women Feel

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There are two dominant images of the modern Indian woman. The first image is that of the meek sati-Savitri victim who is yet to see the light of modern values. She may have donned modern clothes and started living yet she remains her conservative self, steeped in values of a male-dominated society. The other is that of the irrepressible rebel, who cannot be contained or tamed. Radicals and feminists often draw upon this imagery of the hidden modernity of Indian women. The tyranny of these two images often prevents us from listening to the modern Indian woman.

The findings of The Indian Express-CNN-IBN-CSDS survey of Indian women invite us to question both these. Sure, the survey has over-sampled urban women (56 per cent as compared to the national average of 28 per cent) but it is not easy to fit in some of the findings with the sati-Savitri image. Both urban and rural women reject some of the male-centric notions of gender roles:

Indian Express-CNN IBN Survey

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- There is an overwhelming support cutting across rural-urban and religious divide that parental property should be shared equally among daughters and sons. This sentiment is strongest among graduate, single women living in metropolitan areas. Younger rural women clearly favour this.
- There is a near consensus among women that their role should not be restricted to staying at home and looking after the family, as 77 of the urban and 69 of the rural support the proposition that there is nothing wrong in women working. It is not just that practically every young graduate woman favours this idea. A majority of old and young women too endorse the idea of working women.
- Again, cutting across the rural-urban and class divide, our respondents reject the belief that too much education is bad for women. Even the uneducated do not favour this proposition.
- If you thought all these opinions are about politically correct subjects, consider this: when asked to react to the proposition that there is nothing wrong for women to have sexual desires, the verdict is an abashed 3:1 in favour. The support is higher among the young metropolitan women, but no section displays a dominance of Victorian prudishness.

An incipient sexual revolution? The beginning of a much delayed transition from a 'traditional' and 'conservative' to a 'modern' outlook? The findings of the survey do not support this reading either. A rejection of male-centric values that fall within their experience does not lead to a rejection of the male-female stereotypes:

- The stereotype that men are generally more intelligent than women is accepted by a large number of our respondents. Those who accept it are more likely to be rural and less educated than those who reject it. Of course, the well-educated reject this, but this rejection does not vary across various classes as in the case of rejection of gender roles.
- Women are of course happy to embrace the more convenient stereotypes that they are more sensitive than men. Men tend to be disloyal. The image of a sensitive woman is prevalent across all sections of women and is strong.

young single women. The stereotype that men cannot be trusted as they are generally disloyal is also strong women; married women tend to be a shade more generous.

- Though majority of them disagree with the idea of only men taking important family decisions, two out of five are fine with the idea.

Nor does the rejection of gender roles lead the Indian women to question institutions such as marriage, family and community.

- If men and women are incompatible, should they seek divorce or continue to be together? This question drew a verdict with more women favouring retention of marriage. No doubt the proportion of those who favour divorce is much higher than it would have been in the past, but there is generally an unwillingness to do anything that would shake the institution of marriage.

- The idea of a live-in relationship outside marriage finds little support. The highest endorsement comes from women, one-sixth of whom support the idea.

- The idea of pre-marital sex too finds few takers, though the urban educated women are a little more open. It may be tempting to think of these attitudes as contradictory and to portray the modern Indian women as contradictory in personality. Or perhaps, like their male counterparts, the modern Indian woman is trying to forge her own path.