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**DAILY EDITORIAL
ANALYSIS**

TOPIC

**GENDER, CAREGIVING & LAW IN
INDIAN RESEARCH FUNDING**

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GENDER, CAREGIVING & LAW IN INDIAN RESEARCH FUNDING

Context

- As India seeks to emerge as a global scientific power through achievements in space missions, pharmaceuticals, and innovation, concerns remain regarding the structural barriers faced by women researchers, particularly during mid-career stages.

About Women in Academia and Their Role

- According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22, India had nearly 16 lakh faculty members, and 57% were male and 43% female.
 - ♦ Women remain significantly underrepresented in STEM institutions, senior faculty positions, and research leadership roles.
 - ♦ Female enrolment in higher education has risen steadily, with the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for women marginally exceeding that of men in recent years.
- However, representation declines sharply in senior academic and STEM leadership positions.
- Reports by the Department of Science and Technology (DST) and Science and Engineering Research Board (SERB) indicate lower application and success rates for women in research grants and fellowships.
 - ♦ Women researchers often face interruptions during the postdoctoral and early faculty stages due to childbirth and caregiving responsibilities.

Constitutional Basis for Gender-Sensitive Policies

- Article 15(3): It empowers the State to make special provisions for women and children, thereby constitutionally validating affirmative action policies.
- Article 16: It guarantees equality of opportunity in public employment while allowing corrective measures for historically disadvantaged groups.
- Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP): Articles such as Article 39(a) advocate equal right to livelihood and fair opportunities for all citizens.
- Article 51A(e): It imposes a fundamental duty on citizens to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.
 - ♦ Institutional systems that systematically disadvantage women researchers violate the spirit of this constitutional principle.

Legislative Gaps Affecting Women Researchers

- Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017: It extended paid maternity leave from 12 weeks to 26 weeks for eligible women employees and mandated crèche facilities in establishments with 50 or more employees.
 - ♦ However, many women researchers work through fellowships, contractual appointments, and project-based positions which often remain outside the effective coverage of the Act.
- Absence of Statutory Paternity Leave: India lacks a comprehensive statutory framework on paternity leave.
 - ♦ Central government employees receive only 15 days leave under administrative rules, and many research scholars are excluded even from this provision, reinforcing the assumption that caregiving is primarily a woman's responsibility.
- Lack of Reintegration Support: A major weakness in current policy is the absence of structured support after maternity leave. Women returning to research often face disrupted experiments, delayed publications, broken collaborations, and missed grant deadlines.
 - ♦ Most institutions expect immediate restoration of productivity despite these disruptions.

Other Gaps Affecting Women Researchers

- Career Breaks and Age Constraints: Women commonly face research interruptions during childbirth and childcare years.
 - ♦ Since academic progression depends heavily on publication timelines, grant eligibility, and international collaboration, such breaks disproportionately affect women.
 - ♦ Although agencies like SERB provide age relaxation for women applicants, this addresses only eligibility criteria and not the broader structural barriers.

- Lack of Re-entry Support: Women returning after maternity leave often face disrupted laboratory work, broken collaborations, reduced publication output and difficulty in securing grants.
 - ◆ There is limited institutional support for reintegration into active research.
- Unequal Domestic Responsibilities: Women in dual-career academic households continue to perform a larger share of domestic and caregiving work.
 - ◆ It reduces research productivity, conference participation, networking opportunities, and international academic visibility.
- Inadequate Institutional Infrastructure: Many universities and laboratories lack functional crèche facilities, flexible work arrangements, caregiver-friendly policies, mental health and counselling support.
 - ◆ As a result, women researchers often struggle to balance academic and personal responsibilities.
- Limited Recognition of Other Caregivers: Current policies focus largely on women-specific age relaxation but often ignore single fathers, caregivers of elderly parents, and researchers with dependent family responsibilities.
 - ◆ A broader caregiving-sensitive framework is still missing.
- Exclusion of Other Caregivers: Current policies overlook single fathers, researchers caring for elderly parents, and persons with dependent family responsibilities.

Efforts and Initiatives to Fill the Gaps

- Judicial: In *Vijay Lakshmi vs Punjab University* (2003), the Supreme Court distinguished between formal equality (same treatment), and substantive equality (equitable outcomes).
 - ◆ The Court upheld preferential provisions for women where they address genuine structural disadvantages.
- Government Initiatives:
 - ◆ Women Scientist Scheme of DST: It provides opportunities for women scientists who had career breaks to return to research.
 - ◆ SERB-POWER Scheme: It aims to reduce gender disparity in science and engineering research through dedicated funding and fellowships for women researchers.
 - ◆ Gender Advancement for Transforming Institutions (GATI) Programme: It promotes gender equity in STEM institutions through institutional reforms.
 - ◆ National Education Policy (NEP) 2020: It emphasises institutional flexibility, faculty welfare, inclusive education, and gender inclusion funds.
 - However, many provisions remain non-binding and require effective implementation.

Way Forward: Towards Layered Support Systems

- Measures Needed: Funding agencies such as SERB and UGC should consider:
 - ◆ Re-entry Fellowships: Dedicated fellowships for women returning after career breaks.
 - ◆ No-Cost Grant Extensions: Automatic extensions for researchers with documented caregiving responsibilities.
 - ◆ Flexible Evaluation Systems: Assessment based on 'academic age' rather than chronological age.
 - ◆ Childcare Support: Funding for childcare during conferences, field visits, and research travel.
 - ◆ Gender-Neutral Caregiving Provisions: Additional support for researchers with significant caregiving responsibilities irrespective of gender.

Daily Mains Practice Question

[Q] Critically examine the need for women-specific support measures in India's research ecosystem. Discuss the gaps in current policies and suggest reforms for a more inclusive and equitable academic environment.

Source: IE

