

# Business Standard

## Number of women in blue-collar jobs increasing across manufacturing sector

*As companies move to be more gender inclusive*

Ishita Ayan Dutt | Shine Jacob | Sohini Das | Kolkata\Chennai\Mumbai



“Lady candidates need not apply.” So read the postscript in a job notice from Telco (now Tata Motors) on a notice board in the corridors of the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore (now Bengaluru), in 1974. Irked, Sudha Murty, who was then pursuing her masters in computer science at the institute, wrote a postcard to JRD Tata, expressing her surprise at this gender discrimination, especially since the Tata Group were pioneers on many fronts. Shortly, Murty became the first woman on the firm’s shop floor.

About five decades on, 13 per cent of the workforce and 23 per cent of the hires on the shop floors of Tata Motors are women. And the auto major has just set a goal to increase the share of women on its shop floor to 25 per cent in the future.

Tata Motors is not the only company looking to step up gender inclusivity in the manufacturing space. Across industries, there is a growing effort to bring in gender diversity.

Deloitte's Blue Collar Workforce Trends Report 2023 shows that the current female blue collar workforce participation is at 8 per cent (1 in 12), a rise from <2 per cent a couple of decades earlier. The life sciences, automotive, and engineering design are sectors that are leading in gender diversity ratio on account of their high degree of automation, skilled talent requirement and premium pay. The study covers 104 organisations and more than 300 manufacturing units.

### **A shift in mindset**

Soni Singh, 38, now area manager, engineering plant electrics — Tata Steel, Jamshedpur, was among the 12 women recruited from a batch of 120 in 2001. It was the first batch of trade apprentices at Tata Steel that included women. In the past couple of years, however, the percentage of women at the company's intake-level has gone up to 45-50 per cent.

Singh has been placed in different sections — from the sinter plant to the central maintenance team and the blast furnace. "Now, I am working in a designing role where plants are getting designed for production."

The environment in a steel plant is harsh, with exposure to extreme heat and dust. But the women employees here are steely too. Of Tata Steel India's 36,000 employees, women on the shop floor comprise 7.5 per cent (till September 2023) of the workforce.

The company is now planning a 'pink' coke oven battery unit at Jamshedpur, to be operated entirely by women by the end of next year.

At JSW Steel facilities, some of the production lines are managed by women. A coil-to-plate and sheet processing line at Vijayanagar in Karnataka is completely run by women. Two steel coating lines and a new cold rolling mill at Vasind in Maharashtra are also largely operated by women.

Currently, close to 6 per cent of JSW Steel's total workforce are women and the company is looking to take the number to 15 per cent by 2030.

Others are not far behind. ArcelorMittal Nippon Steel India (AM/NS India) has doubled the percentage of women on the shop floor in the last four years. But Ashutosh Telang, chief human resources officer, AM/NS India, feels that there is a lot more to be done.

The \$2 billion auto components maker, Anand Group, currently has 1,700 women on the shop floor, constituting 20 per cent of its workforce. It plans to increase the number to 30 per cent by 2025. In some of its units, the representation of women is as high as 70–100 per cent.

The country's largest commercial vehicle major, Ashok Leyland, has implemented an "all-women production line" at its Hosur facility in Tamil Nadu. And Ola Electric's Future Factory has a 100 per cent female workforce in Tamil Nadu.

Instances of higher representation of women on the shop floor are common in the southern states. The ecosystem of Apple Inc, including its vendors, Foxconn, Pegatron, and Wistron, and component manufacturers like Salcomp, Avery and Jabil, is now the largest single-brand employer of women in India. A large chunk of these women employees are in Tamil Nadu in the units of Foxconn and Pegatron.

Similarly, in ITC's integrated consumer goods manufacturing and logistics facilities (ICMLs), which include units in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana, women constitute between 50 per cent and 75 per cent of the total workforce.

According to Aditya Narayan Mishra, managing director and CEO of CIEL HR, a study conducted by his company across 131 firms in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu indicates a 26 per cent increase in female employees on the shop floor in 2023 over 2022. "The female-to-male ratio in this function stands at 4:10 in 2023, up from 1:10 in 2022," says Mishra.

In the male-dominated rail sector, Wabtec Corporation (formerly GE Transportation) recently introduced a dedicated Pink Line on its shop floor. "We are pursuing a target of above 20 per cent women on our shop floors, in white-collar functions and in engineering teams," says Sujatha Narayan, senior vice-president and India region head, Wabtec Corporation.

### **Why the push for women**

There are multiple reasons for companies to push the pedal on improving gender diversity. As Jaya Singh Panda, chief learning & development and chief diversity officer, Tata Steel, points out, "If you don't increase women participation in the workplace across industries then a large talent pool is out of the system, apart from the fact that economic growth gets impacted."

Adds Jagdish Kumar, group president and chief financial officer, Anand Group: "There are several advantages of recruiting women – first being less attrition."

Ashok Leyland's Raja Radhakrishnan, president and head of human resources, feels more women on the shop floor not only creates inclusiveness but also a positive and productive work environment.


For AM/NS India's Telang, employing more women taps into the potential of a workforce segment with unique strengths and perspectives, and this is needed to meet its goal of 40 million tonne per annum by 2035.

And ITC's Amitav Mukherji, head, corporate human resources, is betting big on employing women, enthused by their regularity, dexterity and discipline.

Diversity is also an important component of ESG (environment, social, governance) reporting. The Securities and Exchange Board of India's new ESG framework becomes applicable for top 150 companies from this fiscal.

## GENDER DIVERSITY

- ▶ **Of Tata Steel's 36,000 employees**, women on the shop floor comprise 7.5% of its workforce
- ▶ **Close to 6% of JSW Steel's workforce are women.** Firm looks to take the number to 15% by 2030
- ▶ **ArcelorMittal Nippon Steel India has doubled the percentage of women on the shop floor in the past four years**
- ▶ **20% of Anand Group's workforce** are women on the shop floor; Firm plans to increase the number to 30% by 2025
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## The barriers

For women on the shop floor the journey has often not been easy. Vaishnavi Sudhakar Wakale, 22, who works at Tata Motors' trim, chassis, and final (TCF)- 2 plant in Pune, says that the idea of stepping out to work was inconceivable for women in her village. "Now my parents are proud of what I have achieved, and assembling cars gives me a sense of empowerment," Wakale says.

Successfully doing what was traditionally considered a man's job has given them a unique sense of empowerment, says Sitaram Kandi, vice-president, human resources, passenger vehicles and electric vehicles, Tata Motors. "They are now our



strongest advocates, encouraging other women in their network to join the shop floor.”

Wakale’s tribe is certainly increasing, albeit at a slow pace. “In the blue-collar environment, there is a stigma attached to working, and hence the representation of women is lower,” Neelesh Gupta, director, Deloitte India, points out.

Though Deloitte’s study states that one in 12 blue-collar workforce in India is female, “traditional industries, such as chemicals, cement, and EPC/infra, which have less automation, operate in remote locations, and emphasise more on physical labour, have a lower ratio (1:15) in the manufacturing sector,” Gupta adds.

The representation of women in the white-collar workforce is, of course, much higher — 14 to 16 per cent in manufacturing compared to 8 per cent for blue-collar jobs. The difference is probably on account of the fact that these jobs need less manual work, pay a premium and have better flexibility as compared to blue-collar jobs, explains Gupta.

But whether blue collar or white collar, there is also the overarching issue of gender pay gap. India Inc’s journey towards gender justice needs to address all factors to improve women’s participation in the workforce.

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