

What are men and women good at? The answer may surprise you

[Devina Mehra](#) | 15 January 2026



Work that is considered as 'women's work' within the household, such as cooking, becomes something she is considered incapable of doing when it pays well.

SUMMARY

Women do a great many things better—but this is acknowledged only so long as the work is unpaid. Once skill turns into income, power or prestige, women are edged out and men step in. From kitchens to coding, the pattern raises questions of social equity and economic growth.

Quick, tell me which gender has more natural affinity and skill in the following fields? Make-up. Sewing. Cooking. You are likely to tell me that while it is not as if men can't be trained in them, women are naturally better in each of these fields.

But now comes the kicker. In the Indian film industry until a few years ago, women were not allowed to work as makeup artists, as per the bylaws of The Cine Costume, Makeup Artists and Hair Dressers Association. They could only be hair-dressers. Yes, women were not allowed to do make-up once it became a paying profession.

A woman who recently graduated in hotel management told me that the hardest department to break into in a hotel is the kitchen. Deliberately, the atmosphere is made such that it discourages and even drives away women. To give only one example, abusive language is often used.

Silai-kadai (sewing-knitting) are considered feminine hobbies, but how many women tailor masters do you know? In a city that is a major garment export hub, there is not a single one in any manufacturing unit.

Immediately, the pattern becomes clear. When a skill is unpaid and unvalued, it is a woman's domain, but if the market is willing to pay a price for it, women are systematically discriminated against and kept out of that domain. The very thing that was women's work within the household becomes something she is incapable of doing when it pays well.

You have men, sometimes even at high places, questioning whether women have the same aptitude and skills in maths and technology as men. But there was a time when nearly all the computer programming and war-time code breaking was done by women.

Ada Lovelace is regarded as the first computer programmer, having published an algorithm intended to be executed by the first modern computer. By the 1940s, almost all software programmers were women. One report said, "Programming requires lots of patience, persistence and a capacity for detail and those are traits that many girls have."

The programmers of the Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer (ENIAC), the first programmable general-purpose electronic digital computer, were six female mathematicians: Marlyn Meltzer, Betty Holberton, Kathleen Antonelli, Ruth Teitelbaum, Jean Bartik and Frances Spence. Nevertheless, the women who worked on ENIAC were warned that they would not be promoted to professional ranks, which were only for men. Designing the hardware was "men's work" and programming the software was "women's work."

Even till the 1960s, there were a significant proportion of women software programmers. But guess what happened as software was seen as more important and better paying than hardware—the field was overrun with men, and women were characterized as being incapable of mastering technology.

From high-tech professions in the West to the most down-to-earth in the East. Do you know that the bulk of the labour on Indian farms is provided by women? But they do not own the land they work on, do not do the monetary transactions of selling crops, and our mental image of the typical Indian farmer is usually not a woman.

That is the case in many areas. The hard work is done by the women, but the person out in the market is a man. A large share of construction labourers are women, but the masons and contractors are almost all men.

These narratives are everywhere: teachers will say that girls are more mature than boys at the same age. At home, school-age girls are given responsibilities that range from household chores to looking after younger siblings.

Married women are asked to regulate their husbands' emotional states. Overall, at home, women are supposed to have the superpower of multi-tasking, managing emotions and maturity. But guess which gender is seen to be a better manager when it is a paid position?

On the other hand, given any family responsibility, men tend to forget everything from their children's schedules to their own medical appointments. A man told to cut potatoes will likely just cut them and leave them on the cutting board, not cleaning or putting away the knife and board because, hey, they were not instructed to.

That is like lowly employees saying they needed more specific instructions, revealing an inability to think for themselves. But then, that treatment is reserved only for unpaid labour. At the job, they are supposed to be able to think of everything and execute it better than women.

See the pattern? The work is classified as easy, unimportant and feminine when it is unpaid or pays little. As soon as it begins to bring in money, power or prestige, it becomes a male domain. Once you see the pattern, you can't unsee it.

What is this discussion doing in a finance column for *Mint*? That would be a valid question if it wasn't for the fact that women are half the world's population and should be 50% of the economy. Even for those who have zero interest in social equity, it is a reminder that no country has moved up the income ladder without a very substantial participation of women in the paid workforce.

Thus, even from a purely economic point of view, this is not something that can be ignored.

The author is chairperson, managing director and founder of First Global and author of 'Money, Myths and Mantras: The Ultimate Investment Guide'. Her X handle is @devinamehra