

Conflicting roles and gendered perceptions: Factors affecting female labour force participation in India

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Abstract

Despite liberalization of the economy and technological advancement, India is lagging far behind other countries in terms of the Female Labour Force Participation Rate. The opening up of the economy has attracted huge foreign investment and created number of new types of jobs. In recent decades, India has enjoyed economic and demographic conditions that ordinarily would lead to rising female labour-force participation rates. Yet National Sample Survey (NSS) data for India show that labour force participation rates of women aged 25-54 (including primary and subsidiary status) have fallen substantially. The present paper tries to explore the social and cultural reasons behind this phenomenon.

Keywords: female labour force participation, gender, patriarchy, social and cultural determinants

1. Introduction

Trade liberalization and rapid changes in technology has led to shift of production base for skilled and unskilled-labour from industrialized to developing countries. Embracing the foreign investment, India liberalized its economy in 1990s paving the way for huge investment in the private sector. The importance of this sector in the economy of the country can be visualized from the fact that it contributes to the major portion of national income and employment. Taking advantage of the educated youth and the strides in Information Technology India has emerged as one of the favorite destinations for outsourcing services. India's underutilized human capital was successfully churned into exporting houses. In recent decades, India has enjoyed economic and demographic conditions that ordinarily would lead to rising female labour-force participation rates. Yet National Sample Survey (NSS) data for India show that labour force participation rates of women aged 25-54 (including primary and subsidiary status) have fallen substantially. The present paper tries to explore the social and cultural reasons behind this phenomenon. The paper is divided in to two sections. Section one discuss the trends in Female Labour Force Participation Rates (FLFPR) across the world with a focus on India. The second section explains the social and cultural determinants of career of women that leads to their low participation in the labour market.

2. Female work-Participation in India

An overwhelmingly large percentage of workers (about 92 per cent) are engaged in informal employment and a large majority of them have low earnings with limited or no social protection (Das Sonali, *et al.* 2015) ^[1]. This is true for a substantial proportion of workers in the organized sector as

well. Over half the workers are self-employed, largely with a poor asset-base, and around 30 per cent are casual labourers seeking employment on a daily basis. About 18 per cent of those employed are regular workers, and amongst them less than 8 per cent have regular, full-time employment with social protection (Sharma. N. Alakh, 2014) ^[5]. Large share of both women and men working in the informal sector is another striking feature of Indian labour market.

Female labour force participation is a driver of growth and therefore, participation rates indicate the potential for a country to grow more rapidly. However, the relationship between women's engagement in the labour market and broader development outcomes is complex. The participation of women in the labour force varies considerably across developing countries and emerging economies, far more than in the case of men. Labour force participation is usually regarded as an issue of labour supply, reflecting the decision to participate in paid labour market activities as opposed to remaining inactive (for example, domestic duties, education, etc.) (Chaudhary and Verick 2014, p.2) ^[2]. The participation of women in the labour force varies considerably across developing countries and emerging economies, far more than in the case of men (figure 1). The gender disparity is highest in South Asian countries, notably Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, and lowest in Nepal (the exception for South Asia) and South-East Asia (Cambodia and Myanmar). In the latter set of countries, there is virtually no gender gap, reflecting that women and men participating equally in the labour force, at least in numerical terms. However, the quality of employment and opportunities for better jobs continue to be unequally distributed between men and women, even in countries where there is close to parity in the labour force participation rate.

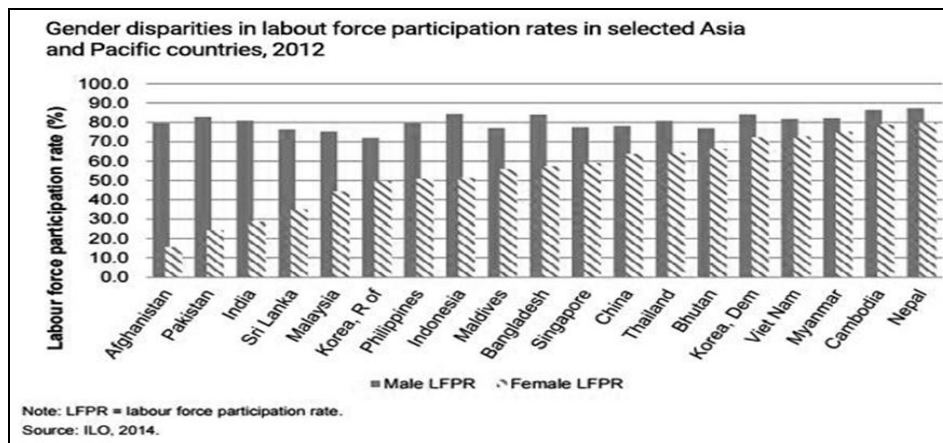


Fig 1

Usually, empowerment of women is an important indicator of economic growth. But data available with the International Labour Organization (ILO) shows a puzzling picture for India. Between 2004 to 2011, when the Indian economy grew at a healthy average of about 7%, there was a decline in female participation in the country’s labour force from over 35% to 25% (ILO, 2014). The prospect of employment is contradicting with the increased access to education for women in India. The enrolment of girls in higher education increased from 39% to 46% from 2007 to 2014, but female participation in India’s labour force declined to a low of 27% in 2014 from 34% in 1999, according to a 2015 study by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). More young women are enrolled in higher education than ever before – and apparently more successful in clearing 10th-standard board exams than young men. Almost 12 million women are enrolled in undergraduate courses, but few continue to professional courses; 600,000 women were enrolled for diploma courses in 2013, the latest year for which data are available. Even fewer women sign on for PhDs; only 40% of PhD candidates are female. This is quite baffling in a country with a huge demographic dividend of the working population Prachi Salve

According to the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) EUS, the rural female LFPR (RFLFPR) has been almost half of the rural male LFPR, while in the urban areas, the FLFPR is even less than half of the male LFPR (Table 1). While the FLFPR marginally revived in urban areas in 2011–2012, in the rural areas, the declining trend continues except for the year 2004–2005.

Table 1: Labour Participation Rate per 1000 of age-15-plus years as per Usual Status

NSSO Rounds	Rural		Urban	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1993-1994	876	491	801	238
1999-2000	845	364	782	180
2004-2005	864	497	796	246
2009-2010	825	378	762	194
2011-2012	813	358	764	205

Source: NSSO EUS rounds:1993-1994,1999-2000,2004-2005,2009-2010 and 2011-2012

India’s FLP is lagging behind the global average of 50 percent and East Asia average of around 63 percent. It is also

noteworthy that India’s Gender gap in participation (between males and females) is the one of the widest among G-20 economies at 50 percent (Rajadhyaksha 2015) [4]. Beyond economic reasons, social and cultural factors play a major cause of low FLP of women in India. Women’s employment is perceived as secondary or additional income and they are forced to give priority to the family responsibilities over their career. The next section looks in to the social and cultural determinants of women’s employment in India.

3. Social and cultural Determinants of Female employment

In India, owing to its complex sociocultural norms, understanding women’s work is a complex task ((Beneria, 1982). Women’s labour is perceived as lower in status compared to the men’s labour. The low Labour force participation of women in India is consequent to caste, religion, marital status, and other sociocultural norms. Though women have more opportunities in the workplace than ever before, they still lag behind men in terms of wages and access to high-status positions and occupations. Over the last decade or so, India has made considerable progress in increasing access to education for girls as increasing numbers of women of working age are enrolling in secondary schools. Nonetheless, the nature of economic growth in the country has meant that jobs were not created in large numbers in sectors that could readily absorb women, especially for those in rural areas. Despite inadequate job creation, household incomes did rise, which potentially reduced women’s participation, especially in subsidiary activities (“income effect”) due to change in preferences. Finally, though most women in India work and contribute to the economy in one form or another, much of their work is not documented or accounted for in official statistics, and thus women’s work tends to be under-reported. Mounting evidence suggests much of this inequality is rooted in the family. In some communities, notably upper caste Hindus and Muslims, there may be a stigma attached to women working outside the home - especially if it involves work considered 'menial' - which increases family and societal pressures to drop out if the men in the household are earning enough to foot the bills (Subramanya 2013) [8]. The unequal division of labor within the family combined with a workplace structure that ignores or devalues the family responsibilities of workers constrains the options available to working women. Work and family

responsibility may impact more on mental health on women as compared to men. There are a number of times contradictory demands made by the worlds of work and family life lead to dissatisfactions that have an impact on the various spheres of a women's life.

In India, the strong patriarchal structure of the society, poses a major constraint to women's employment choice. Married women find it more difficult to enter in to the job market (Panda, 1999) ^[13]. The decision to work outside the home is usually a household decision and women's household workload, asymmetric information and safety concerns are key factors influencing their participation in the labour market (Sudarshan and Bhattacharya, 2009) ^[14]. The role of family and kinship structures in determining women's work-life choices is important. Social factors play a very significant role in repressing women's labour force participation in India. These include the restrictions imposed on women's movements outside the household as discouraged by the husband and in-laws. However, it is striking that the proportion of females attending to domestic duties is relatively high in urban areas and among the better educated – the very segments of the female population that are likely to face less social constraints on labour participation. In 2009–10, among urban females with graduate degrees, those who were reported to be attending to domestic duties were close to 60 per cent, which was almost twice the corresponding proportion for rural females with primary or middle-school education (Thomas, 2012) ^[15].

Most of the Indian men are not ready to accept that women are capable enough to work side by side with men in all the sectors, other than in a few limited ones like teaching, nursing and in clerical sectors. Their capabilities are generally underestimated as a result of which Indian women have a tendency to opt for less demanding jobs even if they are highly qualified. Women actually have less flexible work schedules than men do. Because traditionally female and part-time jobs are also typically low-paid and low-status jobs, women are less likely than men to be able to decide when to take a day off work or to alter the hours they work (McCrane 2002) ^[11]. It is a fact that women have to face problems just by virtue of their being women. And if they are working the problems are multiplied manifold. Working women are those who are in paid employment. Social attitude to the role of women lags much behind the law. This attitude which considers women fit for certain jobs and not for other jobs influences those who are involved in the recruitment of female employees.

Gender Discrimination at work place also plays a major role for women staying away from labour market. Despite an array of legal protection provisions, Indian women employees face multiple levels of discrimination and subjects to mental and sexual harassment at their work place. The laxity in enforcing the rules against discrimination and harassment make the career difficult for the female employees. Discriminations coupled with pressure from the family leads to women stepping back from the labour market.

4. Conclusion

Despite liberalization of the economy and technological advancement, India is lagging far behind other countries in terms of the Female Labour Force Participation Rate. The opening up of the economy has attracted huge foreign

investment and created number of new types of jobs; women could not be benefited out of this growth in the economy. Prevalence of a strong patriarchal society and influence of family has a decisive role in the career choice of women. This has resulted in huge gap in labour force participation of women and men. This is an important issue for India's economic development as India is now in the phase of "demographic dividend", where the share of working-age people is particularly high, which can propel per capita growth rates through labour force participation, savings, and investment effects. But if women largely stay out of the labour force, this effect will be much weaker and India could run up labour shortages in key sectors of the economy.

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