

Trend and Pattern of Female Labourforce Participation in India

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ABSTRACT

India has already started realizing its demographic dividend and female population which account for nearly 50 per cent of the population is an asset to be utilized carefully if we have to reap this window of opportunity. Declining fertility rate and child dependency ratio are factors which can facilitate female workers to come out. In short, a bubbling rural economy is the need of the hour to create jobs and absorb the bulging economically active female labourforce in economic activities.

Key Words : Female population, Female labourforce, Cooking, Child care

INTRODUCTION

The role of women in overall development of humankind is well acknowledged, particularly in the upbringing of their families. However, most of their work particularly of home care such as cooking, fetching water, child care, washing clothes and many related chores, is generally regarded as unproductive through a narrow lens of defining work (Sharma, 1985). This has been also contested by several scholars in the past (Sen, 2010; Ghosh, 2017). It is also argued that official statistics such as Population Census and NSSO do not capture the work of women due to their restricted definition of work, which excludes care work at home. A general characteristic of low women work participation in Indian labour market is now being increasingly contested by some scholars working on time-use survey data by National Sample Survey Organisation. In fact, their analyses have shown a higher participation of women in the work in the framework of SNA and non-SNA activities (Hirway, 2014; Ghosh, 2017), though this does not detract from the point that women's participation in activities *outside* the home remains low. Without going into debate of what is work and what is non-work, particularly in the case of women, we would confine ourselves to the general

definition of a work and worker, as is being followed by National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) in its quinquennial surveys on Employment and Unemployment. NSSO defines 'work' as "engagement of a person in any gainful economic activity during a reference period". Accordingly a person is enumerated as worker when she or he is engaged in a gainful economic activity (either for market or self-consumption) for a given period of time. Three reference periods are used by NSSO to ascertain the activity of a person, *i.e.* Usual Status (US) with a reference period one year preceding of the date of survey, Current Weekly status (CWS) with reference period last one week preceding the date of survey, and Current Daily Status (CDS) with daily activity status of a person during all the seven days in a week preceding the date of survey. The recent Periodical Labour Force Survey (PLFS) by NSSO now excludes the CDS as a reference period.

Is decline in female participation in work a negative feature for women's equality and empowerment? Can women's work be viewed as empowering since this entails the double burden given their existing domestic responsibilities? Papola and Sharma (1999) argue how the concepts and categories used in statistics and policies do not always capture the nature and extent of women's

work. They question the expression of employment through a single dimensional measure such as person hours, or some time measure without the corresponding information on qualitative characteristics of work such as earnings, productivity, regularity, security and stability and physical conditions of work, especially since women are largely engaged in informal sector activities which scores very low in terms of these characteristics. Thus given the survival and necessity based participation of women in agriculture and informal employment without social protection and minimal workers rights, "...it becomes a matter of personal judgement whether to regard a quantitative increase in female work participation as such as a positive development". The twin objectives of gender equality and empowerment which are incontestably accepted as desirable in the new millennium call for a deeper exploration in the current context, with substantial changes in the status of women with regard to the levels of education, fertility rates, aspirations and nature of work participation. It is pertinent to reflect on whether the decline noted in the female work participation rates is a positive or negative development? It is also argued that low participation of women results in lower national income. According to one estimate, the GDP of India would increase by 43 per cent if women had the same WPRs as of men (Oxfam, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

The present study attempts to examine the trends of female labourforce participation in India since 2004–2005 onwards. The paper also examines the trend of WPR by different characteristics such as age-group, income group, level of education, socio-religious belonging and regions, and tries to capture different aspects of work participation rate among rural women. This study uses NSSO unit level data on employment and unemployment for the years 2004–2005 and 2011–2012, and periodic labour force survey (PLFS) by National Statistical Office for the year 2017–2018.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Trends of female labourforce participation in India:

As mentioned earlier, we have considered here the population group of age 15 years and above to analyse the LFPRs, as some of persons attaining this age tend to join work due to a variety of factors. A broad declining trend in labour force participation has been the feature,

particularly in case of female population in India. The female LFPR almost reached to half in 2017-18 as compared to that in 1983 (Table 1). The decline in female LFPR accelerated in early 1990s and reached to a lowest 23.3 per cent in 2017-18. There are several explanations for such rapid decline, which are explained in the next section. However, before this it would be interesting to examine the trends in LFPRs at more disaggregated level, such as rural and urban areas, by social groups and across states.

Table 1 : Trends in LFPRs in India (Age 15+)

Year	Male	Female	Person
1983	87.0	44.6	66.1
1993-94	85.6	42.7	64.6
1999-2000	83.6	38.9	61.6
2004-05	84.0	42.7	63.7
2009-10	80.6	32.6	57.1
2011-12	79.8	31.2	55.9
2017-18	75.8	23.3	49.8

Source: NSSO Thick Rounds on Employment and Unemployment and Periodic Labour Force Survey 2017-18

Female LFPRs is generally higher in rural areas as compared to urban areas in the country. There has been a rapid decline in female LFPRs over the years—over half of rural women constituted female labour force in 1983, which declined to one-fourth by 2017-18. The decline in female LFPR in rural areas was faster since 2004-05. In urban areas, nearly one-fourth of women population constituted labour force in 1983, which almost hovered around this ratio till 2004-05, and declined by about four percentage points between 2004-05 and 2011-12. The female LFPRs remained at about 20 per cent during 2011-12 and 2017-18 in urban areas. In other words, most of the decline in female LFPRs in India is originating in rural areas of the country. Unlike the female, almost three-fourths of male population is in labour force in the age-group 15 years and above. This is true both in rural and urban areas. The male LFPRs also tended to decline over the years, but more so after 2004-05. However, the rate of such decline has been much slow as compared to their female counterparts both in rural and urban areas. The male LFPRs between 2011-12 and 2017-18 declined by about five percentage points in rural areas and about two percentage points in urban areas, respectively.

The declining trend in female LFPRs has been across all-age-groups. The decline in female LFPRs

Table 2: Age-wise female LFPRs

Year	15-29			30-59			60+		
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
2011-12	59.8	22.8	41.9	97.4	39.4	68.6	57.0	17.4	37.0
2017-18	58.8	16.4	38.3	96.8	31.7	64.0	47.4	10.4	29.1

Source: PLFS, 2017

among youth in the age-group 15-29 years can be largely attributed to their rising participation in education. But the decline of about eight percentage points in their LFPRs in the age-group 30-59 years and 60+ years between 2011-12 and 2017-18 (Table 2) is rather perplexing. Equally intriguing is the fact that while about 60 per cent male youth are in labour force, with a marginal decline of one percentage point during 2011-12/2017-18, the female LFPRs should not have declined so rapidly in the age-group 15-29 years. This certainly shows the rising aspirations and preferences for better employment among female youth population, the absence of which forces them to prefer stay outside participating in the labour market. A notable decline of about ten percentage points is observed in male population age 60+ years and about seven percentage that in case of women in this age-group. Such fast decline in the old-age population is again indication of declining prospects of employment in the labour market for old-age population who are largely less educated and have poor set of skills, that have become redundant with the faster pace of technological changes and resultant rapid automation across all sectors of the economy including in small and informal enterprises (UNCTAD, 2019).

Female LFPRs vary substantially across their social groups. For example, the female LFPR among ST women is almost double than those belonging to other social groups. This is largely associated with their women's large participation in agriculture and wage work. Next to STs, nearly one-fourth of SC women are in labour force. In case of males, the LFPRs are highest among STs, followed by SCs, OBCs and lowest among others. However, the variations in male LFPRs across

Table 3: LFPRs among population belonging to different Social Groups, 2017-18

Social group	Male	Female	Person
ST	79.7	36.6	58.4
SC	77.3	25.1	51.7
OBC	75.7	22.8	49.4
Others	73.7	18.7	46.5
Total	75.8	23.3	49.8

Source: PLFS, 2017

different social groups are not sizeable, implying the predominance of males in labour market (Table 3).

Whether education has any relationship with the LFPRs in general and that in case females in particular is presented in Table 4. Generally, LFPRs should increase with the improvement in the educational levels of population. Such pattern, however, is a mixed one. Among females, the relationship is roughly of a 'U' shaped, *i.e.* LFPRs being comparatively higher among better educated (diploma and graduate degree holders) and illiterates and primary level schooling. A comparatively lower female LFPRs for those with middle, secondary and senior secondary education, is partly due to the fact of their higher transition to tertiary level education in recent years. This is reflected in a sizeable decline in female LFPRs at middle education from 28.1 per cent in 2011-12 to 17.6 per cent in 2017-18. Interestingly, there has been a highest 11.1 percentage points decline in the LFPR of illiterate females between 2011-12/2017-18, closely followed by those with middle level of education. Contrary to this, the LFPR almost remained same at 33 per cent in case of females with graduate level education. In other words, a large number of females with lower levels of education have withdrawn themselves from the labour force, particularly in the rural areas of the country.

Table 4: LFPR by education level of population (15+): 2017-18

Educational level	Male	Female	Person
Illiterate	79.8	27.8	45.9
Upto primary	86.6	25.1	56.1
Middle	78.0	17.6	51.5
Secondary	65.1	14.6	44.2
Sr. secondary	58.9	13.5	39.9
Diploma	80.1	44.9	70.3
Graduate and above	81.8	33.4	61.8
Total	75.8	23.3	49.8

Source: PLFS, 2017

Regional pattern in female LFPRs:

A huge variations in female LFPRs can be seen across different states in India—ranging from a highest (almost 50%) in Himachal Pradesh and Chhattisgarh to

lowest 4.1 per cent in Bihar. The female LFPRs less than the national average at least in 11 out of 23 states is presented in following Table 5. Low female LFPRs can be seen in poorer states like Uttar Pradesh, Assam and Jharkhand, female LFPRs as well as those witnessed in relatively richer states of Haryana, Gujarat, Delhi, Punjab and Uttarakhand. In the relatively richer states such as Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, female LFPRs are fairly above 30 per cent. In other words, there appears no correlation between the income levels of states and their LFPRs. In fact, female LFPRs have been traditionally much lower in urban areas and higher in rural areas, particularly in hilly areas, among tribal and SC population. Such variations in male LFPRs across states are comparatively less stark—ranging between a highest 80 per cent in Assam and Madhya Pradesh to lowest 69 per cent in Bihar and Uttarakhand. There is also no significant correlation between male and female LFPRs across the states. For example, Assam with 80 per cent of male LFPR had as low as 12.7 per cent female LFPR; Bihar with 69 per cent male LFPRs as compared to a lowest female LFPR of 4.1 per cent in India. Similarly, there is no correlation between the per capita income levels and female LFPRs. Such mixed pattern with huge variations in female LFPRs across various states of India is a mixed results of several factors, which need deeper analysis.

Reasons for declining female LFPRs :

In brief, the decline in LFPRs among women have been steeper in rural areas, particularly among those with lower level of education and among those belonging to SC/ST social groups. Thus, the overall decline in the LFPRs of women in India can be explained to some extent by the rising enrolment/retention in the spheres of secondary and tertiary education. The percentage of youth female population as students increased significantly from about 11 per cent in 2004-05 to about 27 per cent in 2011-12. In case of youth males, the ratio increased from 20.6 per cent to 34.5 per cent during the period 2004-05 to 2011-12 (Mamgain and Tiwari, 2016). Also, an improvement in household income along with lack of remunerative employment opportunities is leading to lowering female LFPR (Neff *et al.*, 2012; Rangarajan *et al.*, 2011). An interplay of various socio-cultural, economic and religious factors also resulted in their overall low participation in the labour market, particularly in rural areas of the country (Verick and Choudhary, 2016). The

Table 5: State-wise LFPRs by Gender, 2017-18

State	Male	Female	Total
Andhra	79.1	42.5	59.9
Assam	80.3	12.7	47.5
Bihar	68.6	4.1	38.2
Chhattisgarh	79.2	49.3	64.5
Delhi	75.2	14.3	47.1
Gujarat	77.8	19.9	49.8
Haryana	74.3	14.3	45.5
Himachal Pradesh	75.8	49.6	62.4
Jammu & Kashmir	75.9	30.2	53.9
Jharkhand	73.9	15.4	45.1
Karnataka	77.8	26.1	51.6
Kerala	70.2	26.5	46.5
Madhya Pradesh	80	31.7	56.7
Maharashtra	74.9	30.8	53.1
North-east states	72.5	26.3	49.9
Odisha	78.6	19.5	48.3
Punjab	74.9	15.6	46.5
Rajasthan	73.4	27	50.7
Tamil Nadu	77.7	33.7	55.1
Telangana	74.9	32.6	53.9
Uttar Pradesh	75.1	13.5	44.6
Uttarakhand	69.8	18.1	43.9
West Bengal	79.3	20.8	50.1
Total	75.8	23.3	49.8

Source: PLFS, 2017

non-recording of women's work in recent years has also been cited as yet another reason for low LFPR among women (Hirway, 2014). Neff *et al.* (2012) argue that while education can be an explanatory factor in rural areas for decline in women's workforce participation rates (WPRs), it does not hold true for urban areas. Rather, they found a significant evidence of a decline in women WPR due to improvement in household incomes, suggesting reduction in distress-induced WPRs.

Conclusion and policy implications:

The participation of women in labour force (LFPRs) tended to decelerate at a faster pace particularly since 2004-05 onwards in rural areas of the country. This decline has been among youth females as well as among women in the age-group 30-59 years. One of the major reasons for the decline in female LFPRs among youth has been their increasing participation in education. However, the explanations for the declining female LFPRs in the age-group 30-59 years are partly located in rapid

farm mechanisation and decreasing demand for female labour in various agricultural operations over the years coupled with non-availability of work in rural areas for those who are educated and find difficult to migrate out for work. This has compelled many of them to withdraw from active participation in labour market. The recent faster deceleration in employment opportunities, particularly in non-farm sector both in rural and urban areas such as in construction, textiles, automobiles, etc., has adversely affected the employment prospects of women in rural areas. In urban areas, employment opportunities for women though increased, as evidenced in a marginal increase in their work participation rates, the quality of employment to them is a major concern. More so, due to limitations of defining work, a large chunk of women's work remains outside the purview of work as defined in NSSO surveys, which has been questioned by several scholars as well.

Being aware fully about such limitations of defining work, we have estimated predicted probabilities of women's joining labour force with the help of supply side variables. We find that the probability of women joining labour force is significantly less than their men counterparts after controlling age, education, caste, place of residence and income levels of households. These results also indicate a number of other factors such as social customs which discourage women to participate actively in labour market, gender-based discrimination in employment and wages, and disproportionately larger engagement of women in care economy.

The government should come forward to support paid care activities in health, education, and other social services which can promote women employment in coming years in a big way. These activities are unlikely to be affected by automation and thus have potential for employment generation. Related policy issue is to create affordable accommodation for working women, particularly in semi-urban towns as well as other cities. This would help their mobility and increased participation in work. Creation of skill training centres near to manufacturing clusters for women, improving transportation facilities and encouraging entrepreneurship would be another measures to promote women employment.

Another major challenge is to improve the educational development of youths, particularly women. As has been seen earlier, education significantly enhances the probability of getting better jobs. Therefore, efforts

need to be made to ensure the higher transition of youths to vocational and technical education, and also to higher education. An alarming aspect of the educational development of youths including women is the increasing deficit of quality education and skill training. A visible gender and caste-based segregation and discrimination in educational development do hamper their prospects of employment women and SCs and STs. It is in this context, public educational institutions, at both the school and higher levels, need to be strengthened and made accountable for their quality and relevance. Private educational and training institutions, on the other hand, need to be monitored closely for the quality of teaching they offer, and their fee structures. The current measures of skill development under the National Skill Development Mission need not only to be pegged up in a big way in order to address the skill shortages being faced by the Indian industry, but also be assessed in terms of their coverage and utility in getting employment in labour market. The preliminary results of Prime Minister's Skill Development Programme are again signalling their inadequacy in getting access to jobs.

Last but not least, women's work need to be measured through improvement in definitions of work and using time use criteria as is done in Time Use Surveys. Capturing work –its extent, its nature, its remuneration (or lack of it) and the terms under which it occurs – is absolutely essential not just for those involved in policy making for development and equity, but also for all those concerned with understanding the nature of Indian economy and society (Ghose, 2016).

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