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Women and Work: A Gendered Analysis of Unpaid Labour and Low FLFPR in India

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Abstract

The most recent Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data released by the National Statistical Office of India for 2021-22, shows that the labour force participation rate for women stands at less than 25%, which is even lower than what it used to be 30 years ago. The counter-intuitive phenomenon of women working less, even amid increasing secondary education rates for women and the overall economic development of the country, is puzzling. This paper argues that unpaid domestic and care services breed gender inequality which spills into labour outcomes for women. To support the hypothesis, data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank is descriptively analysed along with the Time Use Survey conducted in Indian households in 2019. The Time Use survey found that women spend a disproportionate amount of time engaged in unpaid labour in the household, performing activities such as cooking, cleaning, and childhood and elderly care; while men spend less than half the time doing the same. This results in a marked time of poverty. Domestic and care work received by families through women's unpaid labour subsidizes the cost of the same for the household, and yet it robs them of financial independence. The paper also reconciles falling participation rates with economic development and discusses possible explanations. Showing that social norms are a major hindrance to women's employment, the concluding section of the paper calls for a gender equitable redistribution of care and household work; and public investment in the care economy, to improve labour force participation rates for women in India.

Keywords: *labour force, female labour force participation rate, unpaid labour, care economy, time use*

1.0 Introduction

Indian women's relationship with the labour force has always been capricious. The most recent PLFS data released by the National Statistical Office of India for 2021-22, shows that the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) stands at less than 25%, whereas the same proportion for their male counterparts is close to 60% (National Sample Survey Office, 2022). While this signifies a small improvement in FLFPR over the last five years, the rate is much lower than what it used to be 30 years ago. The trend of a falling FLFPR can be seen starting 2004-05 onwards through previous rounds of the National Sample Survey as well, as Figure 1 shows. Moreover, while LFPR for men in both urban and rural areas have remained similar, there has always been a substantial gap in FLFPR – urban FLFPR has consistently stayed much below the

rural FLFPR.

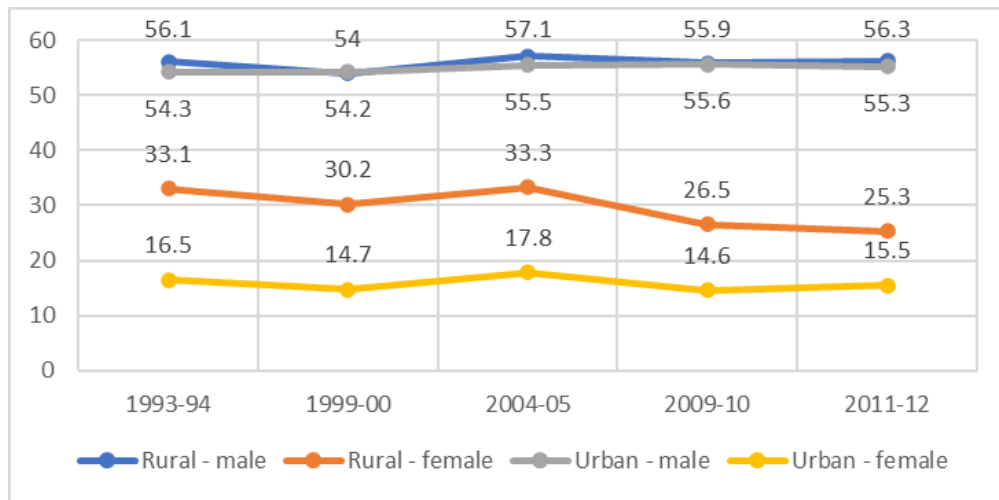


Figure 1.0 Labour Force participation rates, 1993-2012.

Source: National Sample Surveys

There are some counter-intuitive phenomena going on. The Indian economy has seen fairly stable growth pre-COVID. Since the early 1990s, when liberalisation reforms began, growth rates have been higher and more stable (World Bank, 2018). PLFS data from COVID years shows that FLFPR survived COVID as well- Figure 2 shows no major falls in rural or urban categories during the pandemic. Labour force participation rates for men have hovered around 60% throughout this whole time, but women have seen a falling LFPR despite increasing economic growth. Why then, has economic growth not translated into women’s sustained inclusion in the labour force?

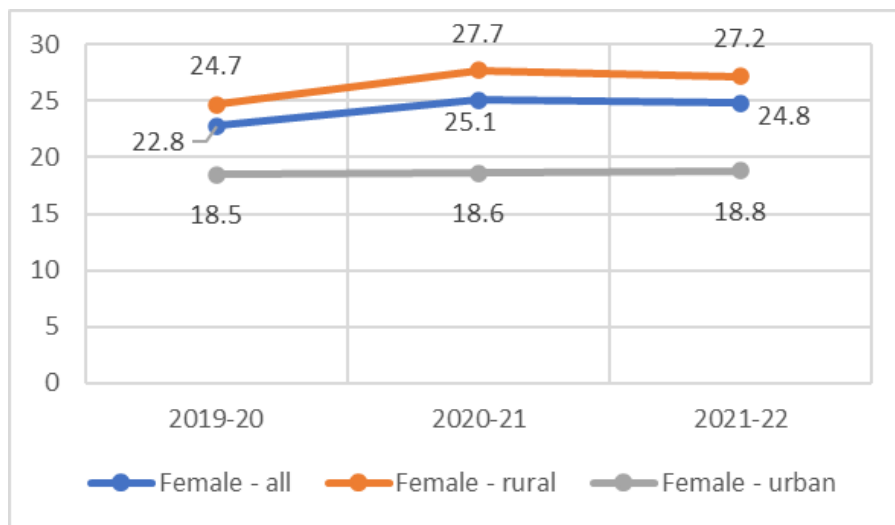


Figure 2.0 Female Labour Force Participation Rates, 2019-22.

Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2021-22

Educational attainment outcomes for Indian women have also improved over the years. Theoretically, education should increase the productivity of human capital, and lead to a positive relationship with employment. Female secondary enrolment has been rising steadily in India—from around 35% in 1993 to more than doubling at 77% in 1991 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023). Additionally, fertility rates have declined steadily in the past few decades, which would tend to be supportive of increased female participation in the labour market (Kapsos, Silberman, & Bourmpouloa, 2014). Why is it that employment outcomes have not followed suit?

Women working less, even amid increasing education rates for women and the overall economic development of the country, is puzzling. This paper argues that gender gaps in labour outcomes stem from inequality in unpaid care work, which affects women's labour force participation. This factor is underscored by all other arguments explaining the relationship between women and work in South Asia, particularly India. This unequal relationship also breeds in women's decisions and choices when they do look for work, which is evident in the feminization and informalization of certain kinds of work. Before delving into unpaid labour, the paper discusses the supposed paradox between economic growth and FLFPR.

2.0 Why has Economic Growth not Translated into a Higher FLFPR in India?

Economic growth in the last few decades in India has largely been attributed to post-liberalisation reforms in the 1990s. While these had thrust India's growth trajectory upwards, most of the development was concentrated in the service sector. India, like most developing countries, employed most of its people in agriculture, and not all of them could be absorbed by the new, booming service sector. World Bank data shows that of all employed women, almost three-fourths were engaged in agriculture in 1991. The figure kept falling, first gradually and then sharply, and stood at a little over 50% in 2019 (International Labour Organization, 2023).

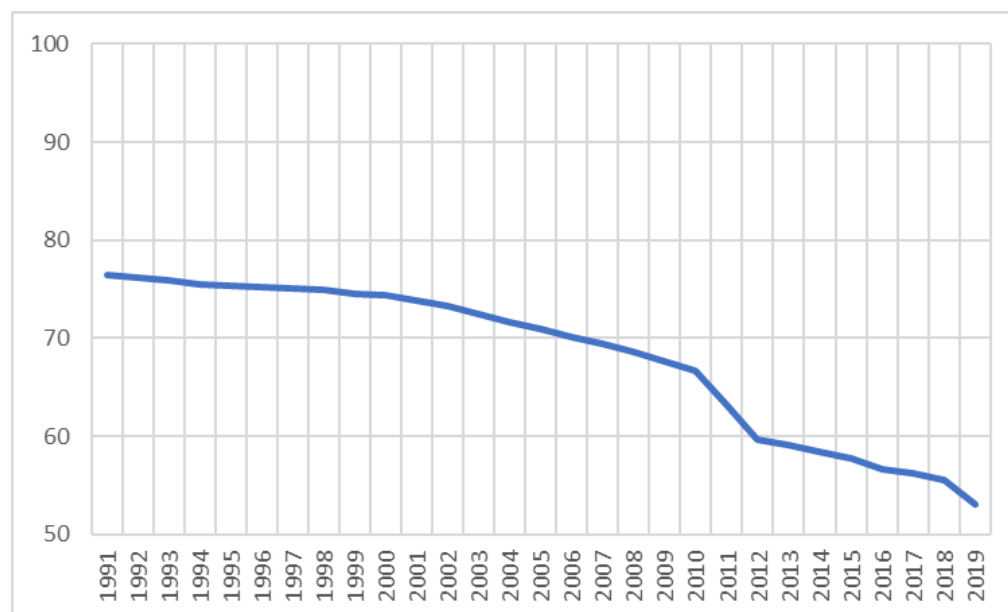


Figure 3.0 Female Employment in Agriculture, as % of Female Employment, 1991-2019.

Source: World Bank Data

The agriculture sector is notorious for disguised unemployment. The liberalization period was also characterized by mechanization in the agriculture sector, and manual labour was replaced with machines to increase efficiency. Studies show that this has played a negative role towards FLFPR in India (Singh & Garces-Ozanne, 2017). According to the demand side analysis, the declining need for manual labour and the lower share of agriculture in the GDP reduced employment opportunities for women. A study using data from 1999-2011 in India found that a one percentage point increase in mechanization decreased female labour used per hectare by 0.7%. Men's labour also fell by 0.1% per hectare, but insignificantly. The study attributes a 22% overall reduction in women's labour use in agriculture to an observed 32 percentage point increase in mechanization (Afridi, Bishnu, & Mahajan, 2021).

Another consequence of increased economic growth was increased household income and consumption. There may be a simple income effect at play here – now that men can make the equivalent amount of money in the household as they were earlier with women's additional work, there is simply no need for women to continue participating in work outside the household. Their labour is implicitly bought by the household. Women in wealthier households generally tend to have lower participation rates than women in poorer households. An ILO report estimates that this explains about 2 percentage points worth of fall in FLFPR in India in the

2000-2010 period (Kapsos, Silberman, & Bourmpouloa, 2014).

In the context of Indian social norms, these cases are a testament to the notion that men are supposed to be the primary breadwinners in the household. Women may step in from time to time to participate in work outside the household, but their primary contribution is expected to be inside the household, performing unpaid duties. As soon as the financial need ceases, women return to this primary task, exiting the labour force.

Rapid urbanization, which was expected to bring in better opportunities for women's employment, has also failed to do so. Most jobs generated by urbanisation have been historically male-dominated, concentrated in the areas of construction and platform economy roles. Low and stagnant urban FLFPR reflects gender barriers that exist in urban spaces – lack of safe modes of public transport and gender-responsive workplaces. This is a sign that “the sluggishness of social change can offset the opportunities for productive employment” (Lama, 2021).

Some economists point out that an increase in women's enrolment in higher studies is also a potential cause behind their withdrawal from the labour force. Now that social attitudes have improved slightly, and education has become more accessible, women may be substituting paid work with additional years of education. However, PLFS data shows low FLFPR for all age groups, way past the typical age of completing higher education.

The U-shaped curve for FLFPR, as theorised by Goldin, is often invoked in India's case. It states that in its initial stages, economic development leads to a fall in FLFPR, but after hitting a threshold, as female education improves and the value of their time in the market increases, FLFPR rises again, proportional to the level of economic development (Goldin, 1995). However, several empirical studies have shown that this hypothesis does not hold true for India, at least yet (Chaudhary & Verick, 2014). It is thus evident that social norms, particularly the expectations from women in the household, are holding them back from participating actively in the economy and robbing them of economic empowerment and financial independence.

3.0 Missing Link – Unpaid Labour and Time Poverty

OECD data shows that around the world, women spend two to ten times more time on unpaid care work than men (Ferrant, Pesando, & Nowacka, 2014). Data from the Time Use Survey released by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India,

2019 also shows massive inequalities in the ways in which men and women devote their time doing unpaid work.

Description of unpaid caregiving services	Male	Female
Childcare and instruction	74	134
Care for dependent adults	104	89
Help to non-dependent adult household members	85	76
Travelling and accompanying goods or persons related to unpaid caregiving services for household members	74	71
Other activities related to unpaid caregiving services for household members	82	75
All care activities	76	134

Figure 4.0 Average time (in minutes) spent in a day per participant in unpaid caregiving services for household members (rural+urban).

Source: Time Use in India- 2019

Description of unpaid domestic service activities	Male	Female
Food and meals management and preparation	94	204
Cleaning and maintaining of own dwelling and surroundings	53	72
Do-it-yourself decoration, <u>maintenance</u> and repair	75	76
Care and maintenance of textiles and footwear	41	64
Household management for own final use	55	67
Pet care	97	88
Shopping for own household members	61	62
Travelling, moving, <u>transporting</u> or accompanying goods or persons related to unpaid domestic services for household members	64	59
Other unpaid domestic services for household members	71	90
All unpaid domestic services for household members	97	299

Figure 5.0 Average time (in minutes) spent in a day per participant in unpaid domestic services for household members (rural+urban)

Indian women, on average, spent 134 minutes a day performing unpaid caregiving services for the household, whereas men spent 76 minutes for the same. Additionally, women spent around 300 minutes a day in unpaid domestic services. This figure was 97 minutes for men – less than a third of the women’s share. The difference is most stark in cooking-related activities, followed by cleaning-related activities. It is important to note that these figures are ‘per participant’, i.e., calculated only for those who reported participating in the activities related to these categories in the first place. Women were 3 times more likely to have participated in unpaid domestic services, and 2 times more likely to have participated in caregiving services (National Statistical Office, 2020).

This trend is not unique to India, but India certainly ranks higher than average in this disparity. In an analysis by ILO, India ranks third in the share of women in total unpaid care work among middle-income countries, trailing only behind Cambodia and Pakistan (Charmes, 2019). It is reasonable to assume that with women bearing the brunt of executing domestic and care-related tasks, it leaves them with little time to take up employment outside the household. The high burden of shouldering unpaid work and the lack of time to take up paid work keep women in poverty, both in monetary and multidimensional terms.

An extrapolation of World Bank and OECD data provides support to this hypothesis- the amount of time devoted to unpaid care work is negatively correlated with female labour force participation. The OECD report states: “In countries where women spend an average of five hours on unpaid care activities, 50% of women in the working age population are active, i.e. employed or looking for a job. However, in countries where women spend three hours on unpaid care work, 60% of women are active in the labour force. A decrease in women’s unpaid care work is related to a ten-percentage point increase in women’s labour force participation rate (for a given level of GDP per capita, fertility rate, female unemployment rate, female education, urbanisation rate and maternity leave)” (Ferrant, Pesando, & Nowacka, 2014).

Other than keeping women out of employment, gender disparity in unpaid work has other, not-so-overt economic implications as well. Women performing domestic and care work leads to the subsidization of its cost for the family which receives it – the household benefits from the

service, and yet, the worker, i.e., the woman, is robbed of an opportunity of financial independence. If a woman's cooking, cleaning, caregiving, and other invisible services are enabling other members of the family to participate visibly in the economy, her work is an implicit input needed by the other members to continue functioning as an active member in the economy.

Its economic value is typically not recognised – neither by the family nor by the policymakers in the country. In this manner, inequality breeds more inequality, within and outside the household. A recent report estimated that the total contribution of unpaid women to the Indian economy is around 22.7 trillion Indian Rupees, which is almost 7.5% of India's GDP (State Bank of India, 2023). By making this contribution invisible, not only is women's work undervalued, but the country's overall economic growth is also slowed down. This gender gap is as inefficient as it is unfair. Educated or skilled women having to engage in 'low-productivity' tasks is equivalent to misallocation and under-utilization of resources. An economy stands to benefit greatly if unpaid work is reduced and redistributed.

4.0 Policy Recommendations

Investing in public infrastructure towards direct and indirect care work can be a useful way to formalise and universalise care, while also providing women more flexibility and greater opportunity to join the labour force. Because of the gendered nature of this work, this would create more jobs, especially for women, and help bring them under the ambit of formal work and benefits. This could solve the high degree of informality and risk associated with domestic and unpaid labour.

Some possible ways to make public investments in the care economy can be through providing care infrastructure, care-related social protection, and state-sponsored care services for children, elderly and sick people (Chopra & Krishnan, 2022). To reduce time poverty among women, expanding infrastructure such as the availability of piped water, clean cooking fuel, hygienic sanitation facilities and subsidies on kitchen and home appliances can play an important role. Conditional and unconditional cash transfers can provide social insurance to primary caregivers in families. State-funded universal childcare and healthcare systems, such as nurseries, pre-schools and care homes will also create opportunities for decent work while reducing the burden of unpaid labour. The ILO recommends a comprehensive care policy package, that comprises time, income security, services, and rights. This includes policies for care leave,

breastfeeding breaks, the right to safe and healthy workplaces, nursing facilities, and long-term care cash benefits (Addati, Cattaneo, & Pozzan, 2022).

Making education and skill training programs more relevant and accessible, providing resources to women-led businesses, provision of safe public transport and other multi-dimensional policies will help encourage women to remain in the labour force.

Investing in care also means promoting flexible leaves, family-friendly working arrangements, and schemes such as parental leaves. Promoting gender-neutral parental leaves, and a compulsory component of parental leave for the male parent, can also be an effective strategy to redistribute the responsibility of care. The Finnish model of a ‘family leave’ can be explored, wherein both parents have a compulsory portion of the collective leave and can choose to transfer some days to the other parent. This can be kept flexible to suit the primary caregiver’s needs.

Public investment should be accompanied by educational campaigns pushing towards gender equality and equitable redistribution of household and unpaid work. An ILO review of several studies around the world found that investing in the care economy led not only to jobs and income generation but also their distribution by gender (UN Women and International Labour Organization, 2021).

5.0 Conclusion

The concluding section of the paper calls for a gender-equitable redistribution of care and household work, not just through large public investments in the care economy, but also through targeted gender sensitisation campaigns and educational programs. Social norms and the burden of unpaid domestic and care work are major reasons keeping women out of the labour force and economically disempowered.

Improving labour market outcomes for women should not just be about getting them into the labour force, but also about providing opportunities for economic empowerment. A gender-specific issue such as this, calls for policies that are actively gender-responsive. Redistributing unpaid work is not just a question of economic efficiency, but also one of fairness.

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