

THINKING SEEDS

Women and Work in Urban India: An Anomaly

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Summary: *This article aims to resolve the incongruity pertaining to low female work force participation rate in urban areas despite decline in fertility rates, education gaps and greater educational attainment among the urban women. It presents a series of demand and supply side factors, which have systematically resulted in this anomaly and which have set the Indian development experience apart from that of other developing nations.*

The sky is not my limit...I am."

T.F. Hodge

India has grown at an unprecedented rate in the past few years with growth rate surpassing 9% per annum between the time period 2005-08. Concomitantly, there has also been a sizeable decline in fertility rates, gender education gap and improvement in female education levels, which should ordinarily have led to higher female labour force participation. This is because traditionally, industrialization, modernization and development have been associated with rising share of women in labour force as can be observed through the development experience of the now developed nations of USA, UK and France.

It is indeed puzzling, that against this opportune and conducive background, India has experienced stagnation in the female work force participation rate in urban area, which has been reported to languish at 18% since the 1980s (NSS). Not only is the proportion of India's total female population that is economically active among the lowest in the world, but urban areas do even worse. Few states with the notable exception of Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia perform worse in terms of female work force participation rates. Thus, it is required that the anomaly of India's unique trajectory is highlighted and its deviation from the standard experience be explained.

Stephan Klasen and Janneke Pieters in their paper

'What explains the stagnation of female labor force participation in urban India (2013)?' empirically present the case for the existence of a U shaped curve with respect to female workforce participation rate and educational attainment. It has been observed that at very low educational level (to the point of illiteracy), the female work force participation rate is high which plummets into a downward trajectory with improvements in educational attainment and rise again at higher educational level. Thus, a woman with medium or intermediate educational qualification is less likely to work than a woman with advance or very poor level of educational attainment.

There exists a series of supply and demand side factors that have quantitatively played a significant role in accounting for the seemingly paradoxical phenomenon of low female labour participation rate in urban India. On the demand front, we have the nature and the size of the market. In the past decade, growth in urban India has been fuelled through the expansion of the building and construction sector, which are not really considered suitable avenues for employment of women. Additionally, there is also the classic case of crowding out effect at work in the urban areas. With an increase in the educational qualification of women, there has been a cumulative explosion of high skilled labor force. However, the increase in the white-collar jobs which are the only jobs likely to pull in highly qualified women have not been able to keep in pace with the increase in supply of high skilled female labor force. According to an NSS survey, the share of white-collar services in urban employment has fallen from 19% in 1987 to 17% in 2009, while the proportion of graduates in the working age population have increased precipitously from 11% to 21% reflecting the improvement in the educational levels in the country. Consequently, there has been a crowding out of female labor participation because of oversupply of educated workers relative to the growth in jobs considered appropriate by educated women.

Moving onto the supply side factors, cultural norms and stigmas attached to women working outside and participating in economic activities is still cogent and sees no sign of enfeebling in the near future. This also plays a crucial role in arresting women labor force participation in India.

According to Preet Rustagi, joint director of Institute for Human Development in Delhi, "To a certain extent, men control women's lives. And women have internalized this as the norm. In such situations, the little work they do is the result of compulsion, such as when the household income is not enough, rather than choice." The presence of parents in law in the household or existence of a large joint family places the burden of nurture and care on the women such that an inclination on her part to work is simply not enough. Women in India are constrained and their emancipation is arrested due to the existence of social and culture stereotypes that endorse patriarchy and chauvinism. Thus, despite growth and development of the country, the Indian urban women remain subservient to the cultural and patriarchal norms. The persistence of stigmas against blue-collar menial work for women has led to a lower level of participation rates among women with medium educational attainment.

Empirically, it has also been established that the existence of income effect such that that rising education and incomes of husbands serve to drastically lower female labor force participation rate, is also a dominant supply side factor influencing participation rate of women. Thus, the assignment of gender roles is internalized in our society such that the man continues to remain the provider and women the nurturer. It is not the existence of the phenomenon but the comfortable acceptance in our society that is perturbing, so much so, that not only men but also women accept it as a way of life. There is little or no protest and surprisingly very little is been done about it. Gender stereotypes and assignment of roles places the entire burden of household chores on the women. There arises the question of valuation of work done by women in the household which because it is done out of love, care and affection has no way to be valued and accounted for.

Thus, the role of education (particularly medium or intermediate) in improving women's participation rate has declined. There has been evidence suggesting that part of the expansion of education in India has been to

improve marriage prospects of women, rather than their employment prospects. (Stephan Klasen and Janneke Pieters).

The fact that, now, education (medium and intermediate) does not have a substantial positive impact on influencing the female labor force participation rate is distressing. The inertia of low female labour force participation rate needs to be overcome. Unless this is done, India is unlikely to reap the benefits associated with realization of demographic dividend. This is precisely what the East Asian countries have done for it is estimated that nearly one third of the economic miracle of the East Asian countries can be attributed to the demographic dividend (Bloom and Williamson, 1998). Melanne Verveer, the head of the U.S. State Department's Office of Global Women's Issues, calls women the 'lowest hanging fruit' in order to achieve economic growth. Laxmi Puri, the assistant secretary general of U.N. Women, noted in 2011 that India's growth rate could jump by 4.2% if women were given more opportunities to participate in the economic life of the country. It is also fairly apparent that rise in women employment and income will be associated with amelioration of the status of women and development of a more egalitarian order. Thus, the call for greater female labor participation is uncontestedly justified.

Therefore, it is required that the government create employment opportunities sensitive to the needs of women and promote economic activity that would attract greater female participation. There is also need to make the workspace safe and create greater awareness and sensitization regarding gender issues. Today, the Indian women are all poised to take part in the rapidly expanding economy. What is required is that the barriers to female participation in the economy be removed and the government re-orient its growth strategy in favor of women.

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