Choice, Constraints, Cultural Norms: Understanding Factors Underlying Women’s Labour Force Participation

Ashwini Deshpande and Naila Kabeer

Presentation to the FESDIG group, New Delhi

February 20, 2019
Gender differences in labour force participation (LFP) in India.

Female LFP persistently low and declining: India has among the lowest female LFPRs anywhere in the developing world: share of women that are working or seeking work as a % of women of working age population (16-60).

2011-12 NSS: India: 25% and West Bengal: 17% (global average 50%; East Asia 63%)

Low levels: partly because women’s work undervalued: both by the household and by the women themselves.

Partly due to restricted definition of economic activity.

This paper seeks to a) contribute to better measurement of women’s economic activity by suggesting a few small changes in the existing NSS questionnaire; b) understand factors that aid or impeded women’s participation in the LF; c) quantify the (unmet) demand for work.
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Recent international spotlight on low and declining female LFPRs in India: IMF, Economist, NYT

“Patriarchal social mores supersede economic opportunity in a way more associated with Middle Eastern countries ... enduring stigma of women being seen as “having to toil.”
It's Complicated

- Large body of literature, spanning at least 4 decades, analysing female LFPRs: both levels and trends over time.
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- How important are cultural norms, typically seen as social conservatism (taboos on mobility; having to cover face; Islam)?
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How important are cultural norms, typically seen as social conservativism (taboos on mobility; having to cover face; Islam)?

“Who Pays for the Kids”: is it the burden of childcare? Or the marriage penalty?
Understanding Participation, not Decline

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Murshidabad (highest proportion of Muslims); Howrah, North 24 Paraganas and South 24 Paraganas (in the top eight for Muslim share, as well as for per capita income); Bankura (one of the bottom three in per capita income); Purulia (one of the bottom three for income, as well as the one of the bottom two for Muslim share); Kolkata (richest district, fully urban).
Survey Areas
Final sample: 3701 women and 1817 men (men were roughly half by design)
Data and Sample

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Roughly 9% from Bankura, 16% from Howrah, 16.7% from Kolkata, 15% from Murshidabad, 25% North 24-Parganas, 9.7% from Purulia & 7.5% from South 24-Parganas.
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We classify women as “working” if they answered “yes” to this question.
To those who answered “no”: a series of questions about different kinds of work they consider a part of their domestic duties, but are actually economic activities.

- Working on kitchen gardens/orchards
- Rearing poultry
- Husking paddy
- Making jaggery
- Weaving baskets/mats
- Making cowdung cakes for fuel
- Tailoring/weaving
- Tutoring
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Measuring Labour Force Participation Rates

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For each activity, a set of two questions: 1 whether they were involved in that activity; 2 if they did the activity not just for their home use, but for economic help or support in family’s income generating work.
We classified those who answered “yes” to 2 as “economically active” (EA).
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We checked whether households possessed land, livestock. Working age women from these households, who answered “no” to the first question, are also counted as EA.
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$EA + Working = \text{Extended Definition of LFPR}$
Extended Definition of LFPR

- Count both “working” and “EA”: 52%
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- Our extended definition is not based on adding reproductive or care work to economic work, but is derived from including activities that fall within the conventional boundary, but women discount their contribution to these activities as part of routine housework, and are most likely unpaid.
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Note that the boundary between “OLF” and “EA, but involuntarily unemployed” is fuzzy.
Female LFPR Estimates

Survey: total for 7 districts (2017)
NSS EUS (2011-12): total for all state.
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Working</th>
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LFPR by Education

Ashwini Deshpande and Naila Kabeer
Choice or Constraints: FLFP
Multinomial logit estimation of probability of being in one of the labour force categories, i.e. “working” and “economically active”, relative to “OLF”.

Estimating Probability of LF Categories

- Multinomial logit estimation of probability of being in one of the labour force categories, i.e. “working” and “economically active”, relative to “OLF”.
- Standard explanatory variables: age, age squared, rural/urban residence, educational categories, caste, marital status, and household size.
- One set of ‘new’ covariates captures the effect of domestic constraints, measured by three variables: if the respondent is primarily responsible for child care; for elderly care; and the number of domestic chores: cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, hh maintenance, collecting water.
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Predicted Probability: Economically Active

Average Marginal Effects with 95% CIs

Effects with Respect to:
- hhsize
- eldercare
- childcare
- dom_tasks
- coverhead
- sep/divorced
- widow
- never married
- General
- Brahmin
- OBC
- ST
- postsec
- secondary
- primary
- Urban
- agesq
- age

Effects on Pr(Lf=Econ_Active)
Domestic Chores Matter More

- Western focus: burden of childcare key impediment in LFP.

South Asia: childcare is not a critical factor. More important is the burden of domestic chores (cooking, fetching water, gathering firewood and washing clothes) and eldercare, which is heavy and most often not shared.

Chopra, D. (2017): India, Nepal, Rwanda, Tanzania Study

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Who takes the main responsibility for domestic chores: cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, hh maintenance, collecting water

<table>
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<th></th>
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<td>(96.90)</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
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<td></td>
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*t statistics in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
“Despite your domestic preoccupations, would you accept work if made available at your house”
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73.5% say “yes”.

Demand for full-time work, whether regular or occasional.

Work categories: formal/semi-formal wage work; informal wage work; self employment outside; self-employment home; unpaid/expenditure saving

Perceptions about work: formal work is most desired and gives most satisfaction (work in progress)

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Choice or Constraints: FLFP
Demand for Work

▶ “Despite your domestic preoccupations, would you accept work if made available at your house”
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- agesq
- age

Effects on Pr(Work Demand)

Ashwini Deshpande and Naila Kabeer | Choice or Constraints: FLFP
Discussion: Female LFPRS: is the decline real?

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Some important work questions the "decline":

- Desai (2017); Chatterjee et al (2015): proportion of economically active women not declined, but the number of days they work has.
- Massive decline in agricultural jobs, not accompanied by an increase in manufacturing jobs, and/or wage employment. Movement out of agri into informal and casual jobs, where the work is sporadic, and often less than 30 days at a stretch. Modern sector opportunities mostly accruing to men.

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