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.”
Paper based on primary survey in West Bengal

Joint with Naila Kabeer.
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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.
Measuring Labour Force Participation Rates

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Specifically: working on kitchen gardens/orchards, rearing poultry, husking paddy, making jaggery, weaving baskets/mats, making cowdung cakes for fuel, tailoring/weaving and tutoring.
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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.
Extended Definition of LFPR: Expenditure Saving Activities

- We classified those who answered “yes” to 2 as economically active in expenditure saving activities (ES).
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Out of LF

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Note that the boundary between “OLF” and “ES” is fuzzy.
Estimating Probability of LF Categories

- Multinomial logit estimation of probability of being in one of the labour force categories, i.e. “working” and “ES”, 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.

- The second includes the effect of cultural norms: “veiling”, = 1 if the woman covers her face sometimes or always. Standard errors are clustered at the village level.
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Ashwini Deshpande, Ashoka University

The Visible and Invisible Barriers to Indian Women Working
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Domestic Chores Matter More

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

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

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International attention on visible markers (burqa) or religion (Islam). But the real “cultural” norm that needs to change: sharing of domestic chores.
Do Domestic Chores Explain International Variation in FLFP?

Female-to-male ratio of time devoted to unpaid care work, 2014

Female to male ratio of time devoted to unpaid care work. Unpaid care work refers to all unpaid services provided within a household for its members, including care of persons, housework and voluntary community work.

Source: OECD Gender, Institutions and Development Database (2014)
The Demand-Side Story and the Grey Zone

- Focus on LFP misses a crucial dimension of women’s work in SA.

- Two ends of the spectrum are more easily identified: clearly in the LF or clearly out of it.
- Most women are in between, in the grey zone: unpaid economic work; or workers who work occasionally because regular work is not available.
- Education level of women rising over the last two decades: lack of suitable work.
- Stigma? Fear of sexual violence? If yes, why is the decline greater for rural women, for lower-caste women?
- Internal migration: women brave massive odds, take huge risks to migrate for work.
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Expenditure saving work.

Unpaid work should not be seen as care work.

Def of cultural norms to be re-articulated: unequal sharing of domestic, unpaid care work, from its current focus on religious differences, especially the spotlight on Islam or veiling as a constraint to labour force participation.
Concluding Comments

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