

FROM DOMESTIC ROLES TO ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE: ANALYSING FEMALE'S EVOLVING INVOLVEMENT IN THE LABOURFORCE

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Introduction

Gender and labour studies have consistently highlighted the systemic undervaluation and secondary status attributed to women's work compared to men's. This disparity is ingrained from childhood through societal norms and collective consciousness, where boys are typically socialised with toys such as cars and bikes and girls with dolls and kitchen sets. This early socialisation channels men into professions like mechanics, driving, and engineering, while women are predominantly represented in the fashion industry, education, nursing and domestic work. These gendered divisions of labour have been further entrenched by the essentialisation of gender-specific activities, with household duties being designated as women's responsibilities and men being tasked with earning and managing household expenditures. This division has historically compelled men to pursue education and acquire skills and training necessary for employment, whereas women have been confined to the domestic sphere mainly due to the societal stigma surrounding female employment outside the house, which has further reinforced their relegation to unpaid domestic labour, resulting in less involvement of women in the labour market.

The concealment of female labour constitutes a characteristic manifestation of the gender based labour distribution across numerous societies, further perpetuated by the ethnocentric presumptions inherent in the perspectives of researchers, policymakers and decision-makers. When work is understood and normalised as 'paid work outside the home', then the worth of women's subsistence and domestic services obviously becomes overlooked and undervalued. This undervaluation occurs because women are traditionally associated with domestic tasks and caregiving responsibilities for children and the elderly. The literature is replete with narratives that illustrate rural women who identify themselves as "housewives," even though they engage in work outside the home, such as agricultural labour, small-scale market production, industrial workers, and petty commodity production (Swaminathan, 2004) since working outside the home is relegated to women in rural societies. However, things are changing with the support of education, skill development

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and equal pay for the same work irrespective of gender.

In the context of rural society, older women always exhibit a heightened alignment with patriarchal norms and their pivotal role in the community's socialisation process, particularly in shaping the upbringing of the younger female generation. The societal adherence to patriarchal norms directs women towards engaging in occupations marked by subordination, often diverging from mainstream roles or those oriented towards decision-making. Societal restrictions represent a significant factor contributing to the limited engagement of rural females in the labour market. In summation, this article explores the nature of female engagement in the labour force, examining the factors that have contributed to changes in their working conditions and the barriers that continue hindering their participation. An analytical descriptive method has been employed to synthesise existing literature on women and labour. This study aims to offer a thorough understanding of the current challenges and progress in female engagement in the labour force in India.

Trends and Challenges in Female Labour Force Participation in India

The most recent findings from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), disseminated by the Labour Bureau, reveal a notable increase in the rate of women's labour force engagement from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 37% in 2022-23. In rural India, it has been observed that the number of women farm labourers has increased. This is mainly due to the mechanisation in agriculture, which has pushed men to find work in the non-agricultural sector. It also changed agricultural production from subsistence to commercial crops like millet cultivation to horticulture and plantation, which demanded women's participation. Further, the National Sample Survey (NSS 68th round) sheds light on several other factors pertinent to female engagement in the labour force. These factors assume significance in comprehending the challenges associated with elevated female labour force participation and offer potential policy solutions. Notably, the NSS data states that a substantial proportion of women who were currently inactive in the labour force but expressed a willingness to work predominantly reside in rural areas. Furthermore, these women tend to possess higher educational qualifications but are engaged in household activities. The difficulties women face in securing jobs suited to their preferences are noteworthy. Additionally, women with vocational training exhibit a higher likelihood of workforce engagement, irrespective of their educational levels. Wage disparities are more pronounced in fields characterised by a greater female representation. Sectors such as education and domestic or home services, spanning rural and urban areas, demonstrate a relatively high representation of women (Fletcher et al. 2017). The researcher also confirms previous studies propositions that women with limited socio-economic resources and status were more likely to engage in

the labour force compared to women from wealthy families. Paradoxically, women workers started experiencing a notable increase in wages, suggesting a reduction in gender wage disparity for the same work.

The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) provides frequent updates on labour force data. The most recent survey indicates that a substantial portion of workers are predominantly employed in the manufacturing, retail trade, and education sectors within the non-agricultural domain. This pattern is noticed consistently in both rural and urban areas. Specifically, within non-farm activities, the manufacturing sector employs the largest number of workers, totaling 30.36 million, which represents 28% of the total non-agricultural workforce. This is followed by the retail trade sector with 27.19 million workers (25.08%) and the education sector with 10.60 million workers (9.77%). Together, these three sectors account for approximately 63% of total employment in the non-farm sector. A similar pattern of employment distribution is seen in rural areas, where the manufacturing, retail trade, and education sectors employ 29.13%, 23.92%, and 14.14% of workers, respectively. In urban regions, the manufacturing sector employs 27.15% of the workforce, followed by the retail trade sector at 25.98%, and the education sector at 6.45% (PLFS 2023).

Men and individuals from the upper echelons of society predominantly dominate the labour market. These groups possess the necessary skills, training, and social networks to capitalise on available job opportunities. Conversely, women often face substantial social constraints due to societal norms and household responsibilities. These constraints essentialise female interests, values, and careers based on rigid gender norms, significantly limiting their career choices and opportunities. This disparity highlights the ongoing challenges in achieving gender equality in the labour market and underscores the necessity for targeted interventions to address these inequities.

Factors influencing Women's Labour Force Engagement

Numerous factors contribute to the low engagement of females in the labour force, encompassing marriage migration, childbirth, social restrictions, increased household income, and a lack of skills, education, and training. These factors collectively diminish female competitiveness in the labour market. Macro studies of labour force engagement reveal that females experience a notable decline in labour participation in the 30-34 and 35-39 age cohorts, primarily due to domestic responsibilities and other forms of unpaid labour. In contrast, men experience a decline in labour force participation during their schooling years (15-19 and 20-24), which allows them to acquire the necessary skills for the global labour market. National data indicate that men's work participation increases significantly after the age of 35 (Sharmistha and Kavita, 2014). Adult women often withdraw from jobs

due to social restrictions, marriage migration, and childbirth.

Empirical data from countries such as Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Peru indicate that the rate of labour engagement for divorced or separated females is five times higher than that of married women. Additionally, single women's work participation is four times higher than that of married counterparts, indicating that economic necessity drives divorced or separated women to re-enter the workforce (Klasen and Pieters, 2015). A similar trend is evident in India, where the participation of working women is closely tied to their socio-economic background. Divorced or separated women from impoverished backgrounds find it challenging to withdraw from work, especially with the added pressure of supporting children.

Furthermore, women from Dalit castes and tribes exhibit the highest labour force participation rates, reflecting their socio-economic impoverishment and the fewer social taboos they face compared to other communities regarding working outside the home. Conversely, Muslim women in rural areas have significantly lower participation rates due to religious norms that restrict their mobility and entry into the labour market (Sharmistha and Kavita, 2014; Srivastava and Srivastava, 2010).

Higher education is generally associated with increased work participation. In India, this relationship manifests differently between men and women. For men, higher education correlates positively with labour force participation due to societal expectations and better access to employment opportunities. However, for women, a lack of skills, training, and societal norms pushes them away from market competition. In contemporary times, education alone is insufficient to secure jobs. Individuals also require certificate courses, training, and special skills, along with a good educational background to capitalize on labour market opportunities. In rural Indian society, if a husband has a good income that covers household expenses and holds property in the village, their women are frequently dissuaded from engaging in wage work. Instead, they are encouraged to contribute by caring for children and the elderly and handling daily household tasks. This trend intensifies as household income increases, with societal expectations pressing women to leave the labour force and concentrate on domestic responsibilities or home-based enterprises.

In East Asian countries like Korea and Japan, female work participation follows an M-shaped curve, with women exiting the workforce during childbearing years and re-entering as their children grow (Kawata and Naganuma, 2010). In India, female labour force participation declines among women in their mid-twenties, especially in urban areas, due to marriage migration, household responsibilities, and childbearing (Sharmistha and Kavita, 2014). The likelihood of married women re-entering the workforce is low due to increased

social responsibilities within the family. Studies indicate that young, unmarried women with good educational backgrounds are more likely to obtain factory employment. In contrast, married women with children have limited job opportunities that accommodate their domestic workloads. A study in Ambattur found that women enter the labour market at a young age (under 18) but often leave before age 30 due to family pressures (Swaminathan, 2012). These women generally possess fewer skills and less work experience than men, as patriarchal norms force them to withdraw from work after marriage and during childbearing.

In rural India, women predominantly work in agriculture; however, their lack of access to land, markets, decision-making roles, and productive resources undermines their ability to secure credit. Recently, there has been a rise in women's involvement in the manufacturing sector in both rural and urban regions. In the service sector, women are concentrated in government jobs, particularly in health and education, with significant representation as elementary school teachers but limited presence in higher education positions. This underscores persistent gender stereotypes and discrimination within the labour market.

Navigating Gender Norms: The Role of Employment in Enhancing Women's Socio-Economic Position

The association between employment and women's increased societal and financial independence is intricate and multi-dimensional. This analysis incorporates case studies from diverse global contexts to shed light on this connection. Research on women's employment suggests that married women frequently perceive working outside the home as a means to attain economic and social freedom. Employment empowers women within their families, enhances their respect at home, and amplifies their influence in decision-making processes. Additionally, employment offers women financial stability and economic independence, reducing their reliance on male family members for financial support (Moore 1988).

In Hong Kong, wage employment has relatively improved the status of working daughters, giving them a voice in family affairs, particularly in relation to their younger siblings. However, their opinions were often disregarded if they conflicted with their parents' wishes. Despite this, working women reported a higher degree of self-determination, and many of their marriages were not arranged but initiated through peer-group activities (Salaff, 1976). In rural India, societal constructions of gender roles and women's responsibilities within the household restrict their access to certain types of jobs. However, urban women enjoy relative freedom in choosing their careers and life partners. This is mainly because of the progressive urban mindsets that combine diverse socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural factors. These differences are influenced by the environment in which they

live and the opportunities and challenges they face. Women's employment and income can alter their position within the family, influencing household decision-making, domestic labour sharing, and resource distribution. Although women may not always control their earnings, their household bargaining power increases when compared with homemakers. Thus, employment raises women's negotiation power and enhances the perceived fairness of their rights.

The overall status of women within the family remains distinct from that of men in patriarchal societies. Sons are often given preferential treatment due to cultural and religious emphases on patrilineal continuity and ancestral traditions. According to oral tradition, sons receive the primary benefits of the family, while daughters are socialised to pay respect to elders, manage household chores, and embody traditional feminine traits. Despite the Hindu Succession Amendment of 2005, which aimed to grant equal ancestral property rights to daughters, Indian women still need to fight for their ancestral property rights in social contexts and courts. The amendment has had a limited effect on females land ownership in India. Most women who own agricultural land in rural India are widows living with their adult sons (Agarwal, 1994). This study suggests that land ownership, in addition to employment, is crucial for enhancing women's status in India.

In patriarchal societies, the family plays a vital role in instilling social norms. The concept of family honour or prestige is especially significant among upper-caste, dominant castes, and elite classes. This honour is closely tied to the modest and chaste behaviour of the family's female members. Consequently, men assume full responsibility for their female relatives' moral and economic welfare, restricting women's mobility to protect their chastity. The societal expectation that women act as custodians and caretakers of family members has been deeply internalised in Indian society. This ethos suppresses women who wish to pursue paid employment. These norms have remained largely unchanged over the past two decades, particularly among affluent and elite households in rural India (Rustagi 2010). The researcher observed that it is the elderly women who are more patriarchal in rural societies who try to continue the legacy of the patriarch through the process of socialisation and essentialising gender roles, rights, and responsibilities.

While women do have certain privileges within kinship structures, but the organisation of lineage, inheritance, and marriage in patriarchal societies often undermines their rights to access land and control assets. Limited access to the labour market due to low skills, training, and educational attainment further restricts women's employment opportunities. Hence, the traditional gender norms and practices must change on par with the changing socio-economic conditions, and the traditional structure of inheritance, marriage, and lineage

regimes needs to loosen according to the changing circumstances. The researcher contends the association between a country's global position and women's labour force engagement. On the one hand, media experts started highlighting India's improving economic situation in the global market after Modi became the Prime Minister of India. On the other hand, a recent PLFS survey indicates a rise in female labour involvement compared to previous years. These propositions support the argument that there is a significant association between female involvement in the labour market and broader development outcomes in the country. In this context, female employment may be influenced by necessity, or it may result from rising educational levels, evolving societal norms, and the availability of employment opportunities. This situation can be analysed from two perspectives.

First hand, it can be argued that the increased engagement of females in the labour market is often noticed in the course of economic downturns, primarily as a response to reducing family earnings on the account of joblessness (the so-called "added worker effect") (Abraham 2009, Attanasio et al. 2005, Bhalotra & Umana-Aponte 2010). Generally, when females do participate in the workforce, they are frequently employed in underpaid and low-productivity positions (ILO 2011). Consequently, the extensive entrance of females into the labour market is not always seen as a desirable outcome, as it may be driven by economic distress rather than increased access to quality jobs. It is widely acknowledged that female workers in emerging economies are often neglected, devalued and downplayed in national data stating female are frequently engaged in domestic and unpaid activities, such as homemaking and caregiving, which provide benefits to household level (Beneria 1982, Boserup 1970, Donahoe 1999).

Conclusion

This study has explored the intricate association between employment and enhanced societal and financial independence for females, drawing from case studies across various global contexts. It is evident that female engagement in the labour market is influenced by many factors, including socioeconomic status, cultural norms, and the evolving economic landscape. In the Indian context, the persistent undervaluation of female work and their relegation to domestic roles continue to constrain their engagement in the labour market. The deeply ingrained societal norms that dictate gender roles from an early age lead to a gendered division of labour, where men are directed towards more lucrative professions while women are confined to less valued domestic and care work. This segregation is further reinforced by the traditional caste and patriarchal structures prevalent in rural communities.

The review of the literature highlights a significant trend of increased labour force

participation among women from the Dalit community, suggesting that socioeconomic necessity can drive women into the workforce despite societal constraints. However, the family, as a primary social institution, remains a critical barrier to women's mobility, particularly in patriarchal rural societies where older women perpetuate traditional norms through socialisation. The national data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) indicates a substantial increase in women's labour force engagement over the past few years, with notable engagement in agriculture, manufacturing, and education sectors. This trend is partly attributed to economic necessity and the changing nature of agricultural production, which demands more female participation. Additionally, women with vocational training and higher educational qualifications are more likely to engage in the workforce, highlighting the importance of skill development and education in enhancing women's labour market participation. Despite these advancements, significant challenges remain. Societal and familial expectations continue to restrict women's employment opportunities, particularly for married women and those with children. The societal pressure to adhere to traditional gender roles often forces females to exit from the labour force, especially when household incomes rise.

The study also draws parallels with other global contexts, such as East Asian countries, where female labour force participation follows an M-shaped curve, influenced by childbearing and re-entry into the workforce as children grow older. In India, similar patterns are observed, with female labour force participation declining in the mid-twenties due to marriage and increase in domestic responsibilities. The analysis underscores the need for targeted policy interventions to address these challenges. Enhancing women's access to education, vocational training, and skill development is crucial for increasing their competitiveness in the labour market. Additionally, policies that support work-life balance, such as childcare services and flexible working arrangements, can help mitigate the effect of domestic responsibilities on females' employment.

The study concludes that while there have been notable advancements in women's labour market participation, achieving gender equality requires a multifaceted approach that addresses both structural barriers and societal norms. Empowering women through education, economic opportunities, and supportive policies is essential for enhancing their societal and financial autonomy, ultimately contributing to broader development outcomes. The ongoing challenges and advancements in women's labour market participation reflect a complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and policy factors. Continued efforts to address these issues are vital for promoting gender equality and leveraging the full potential of females in the workforce.

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