(In)Visibility, Care and Cultural Barriers: The Size and Shape of Women’s Work in India

Ashwini Deshpande, Ashoka University and Naila Kabeer, LSE

August 30, 2019
Labour Force Participation

- 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.”
Large body of literature, spanning at least 4 decades, analysing female LFPRs: both levels and trends over time.
It’s Complicated

- Large body of literature, spanning at least 4 decades, analysing female LFPRs: both levels and trends over time.
- Measurement issues are critical: insights from this literature have (partly) influenced how NSS measures women’s work, but scope for improvement remains.
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“Who Pays for the Kids”: is it the burden of childcare? Or the marriage penalty?
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Districts chosen on the basis of per capita income and share of Muslims, capturing both ends of the distribution for these two criteria.
Understanding Participation, not Decline

- Data collected from 7 districts in West Bengal between July and September 2017.
- Why West Bengal? Eventual aim: comparison with Bangladesh, but this is a stand-alone study.
- Districts chosen on the basis of per capita income and share of Muslims, capturing both ends of the distribution for these two criteria.
- 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

[Map of West Bengal showing survey areas in red]

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Women’s Work in India
Final sample: 3701 women and 1817 men (men were roughly half by design)
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Close to 57% rural & 43% urban. By design, our sample has a greater proportion of urban women, compared, for instance with the 2011-12 NSS EUS, which is 27 percent urban.
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Close to 57% rural & 43% urban. By design, our sample has a greater proportion of urban women, compared, for instance with the 2011-12 NSS EUS, which is 27 percent urban.

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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Our first question: say “yes” if they were involved in any economic activity currently, i.e. in the last 12 months, either earning an income or doing work that they thought saves household money.
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No restriction on the number of days, or whether the work was paid or unpaid.

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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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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- We checked whether households possessed land or livestock. Working age women from these households, who answered “no” to the first question, are also counted as ES.
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\[ ES + Working = \text{Extended Definition of LFPR} \]
Extended Definition of LFPR

Count both “working” and “ES”: 52%
Extended Definition of LFPR

- Count both “working” and “ES”: 52%
- 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.
All other women are in the OLF category.
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63% of these women do at least one of these activities for “home use”; 15% do three.
Out of LF

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- These activities are “expenditure saving”, but based on women’s self-reported description of their work, we count them as out of the labour force.
- Note that the boundary between “OLF” and “ES” is fuzzy.
Principal Activity Status of Women, WBLFS, 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of women 16-60 yrs</th>
<th>Howrah</th>
<th>Murshidabad</th>
<th>Kolkata</th>
<th>North 24</th>
<th>Bankura</th>
<th>Purulia</th>
<th>South 24</th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
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<tr>
<td>Conventional</td>
<td>28.31</td>
<td>30.78</td>
<td>37.74</td>
<td>22.92</td>
<td>33.04</td>
<td>21.47</td>
<td>19.2</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>76</td>
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<td>16.23</td>
<td>17.08</td>
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<td>29.38</td>
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<td>158</td>
<td>92</td>
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<td>860</td>
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<td>OLF</td>
<td>47.24</td>
<td>37.89</td>
<td>46.03</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>39.58</td>
<td>49.15</td>
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<td>282</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>133</td>
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<td>100</td>
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<td>N</td>
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<td>567</td>
<td>925</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>276</td>
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UPAS of Women, NSS 68th Round, Unemployment-Unemployment Survey, 2011-12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of women 16-60 yrs</th>
<th>West Bengal</th>
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<tr>
<td>Invol Unemp</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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<td>Domestic</td>
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<td>OLF</td>
<td>8.94</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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</table>
### Descriptive Statistics for Women by LFPR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Conventional Mean</th>
<th>Expenditure Saving Mean</th>
<th>OLF Mean</th>
<th>ALL Mean</th>
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<tr>
<td>age</td>
<td>35.29</td>
<td>34.27</td>
<td>35.89</td>
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<td>ST</td>
<td>0.06</td>
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<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.49</td>
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<tr>
<td>hindu</td>
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<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.67</td>
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<td>muslim</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
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<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.57</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.43</td>
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<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.24</td>
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<td>0.21</td>
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<td>0.45</td>
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<td>19.20</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>860</td>
<td>1740</td>
<td>3604</td>
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</table>
LFPR by Education

LF Categories by Educational Attainment

- Illiterate
- Primary
- Secondary
- Postsecondary

- Mean of flfpr_conv
- Mean of flfpr_es
- Mean of olf

Ashwini Deshpande, Ashoka University and Naila Kabeer, LSE
Women’s Work in India
LFPR by MPCE and Prod Assets

LF categories by Quartiles of Prod Asset Index

- mean of flfpr_conv
- mean of flfpr_es
- mean of olf

Ashwini Deshpande, Ashoka University and Naila Kabeer, LSE
Women’s Work in India
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, home 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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Estimating Probability of LF Categories

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Domestic Chores Matter More

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

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

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Women’s Work in India
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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
Who takes the main responsibility for domestic chores: cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, hh maintenance, collecting water

<table>
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<tr>
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<td>N_labsaving</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(96.90)</td>
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</table>

*t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
Demand for Work

“Despite your domestic preoccupations, would you accept work if made available at your house”
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73.5% say “yes”.

Demand for 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)
Demand for Work

- “Despite your domestic preoccupations, would you accept work if made available at your house”
- 73.5% say “yes”.
- Regular full-time (18.66); regular part-time (7.76); occasional full-time (67.8); occasional part-time (5.78)
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73.5% say “yes”.

Regular full-time (18.66); regular part-time (7.76); occasional full-time (67.8); occasional part-time (5.78)

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)
Demand for Work

Ashwini Deshpande, Ashoka University and Naila Kabeer, LSE

Women’s Work in India
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There is a demand for work, especially if it is compatible with domestic chores.

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

Source: OECD Gender, Institutions and Development Database (2014)
Even with better estimation, majority of women get classified as “not working”.
Concluding Comments

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- Even with better estimation, majority of women get classified as “not working”.
- But these women are not necessarily OLF.
- What do women do when they are “not working”? Expenditure saving work.
- Unpaid work should not be seen as care work.
- Def of cultural norms to be rearticulated: 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.