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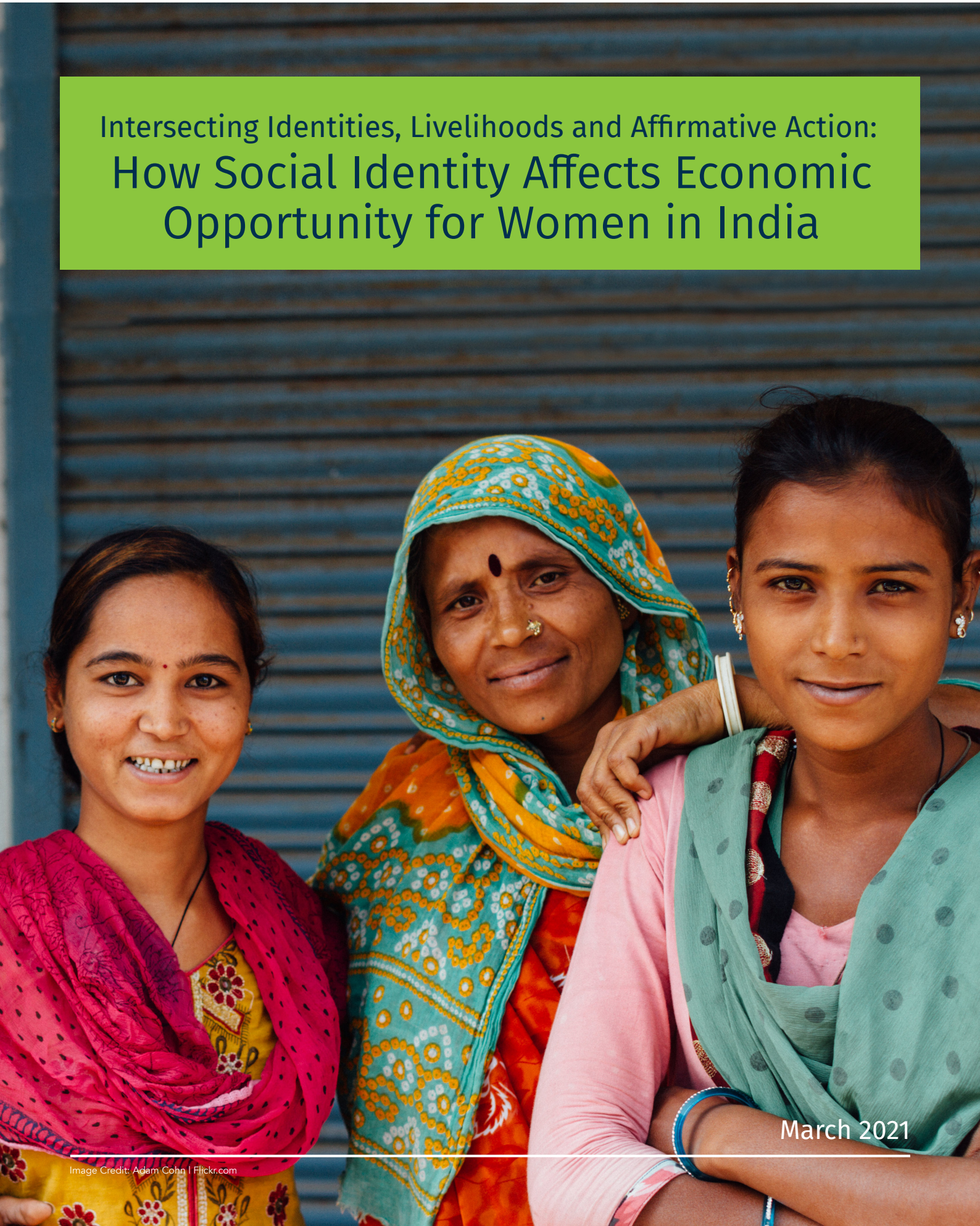
Intersecting Identities, Livelihoods and Affirmative Action:

How Social Identity Affects Economic Opportunity for Women in India



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ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

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ABOUT IWWAGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a landscape assessment of the current state of gender inequality in the economic sphere in India, which is a key facet of overall inequality. The assessment comprises the latest empirical evidence based both on demographic survey data, as well as key results from cutting-edge scholarly literature. Male–female gaps are significant in many dimensions, but the contours of these gaps are shaped by the overlap of gender with other social identities, such as caste, religion or tribal identities. Thus, women from stigmatised and marginalised groups are disadvantaged along two dimensions and have to battle the double stigma of this intersectionality. This paper outlines the trends in overall gender gaps in the areas of labour force participation, self-employment and education over the last couple of decades, but highlights the role of intersectionality that goes into producing structures of advantage and disadvantage. The paper discusses policies such as the National Rural Livelihood Mission designed to encourage self-employment, which have had several other positive impacts, such as increase in empowerment and autonomy, but their record in terms of enhancing livelihoods is mixed at best. Evidence shows that policies such as employment guarantee schemes or transport infrastructure could end up having positive gendered effects, despite their gender-blind design. The paper argues that in order to tackle inequality fundamentally, we need to mainstream evidence-based research on intersectionality, which should be the basic lens informing policy.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Motivation

This paper presents a landscape assessment of the current state of gender inequality in the economic sphere in India, which is a key facet of overall inequality. The assessment comprises the latest empirical evidence based both on demographic survey data, as well as key results from cutting-edge scholarly literature. Economic inequalities between men and women are inextricably linked to social and demographic inequalities, reflected in an adverse sex ratio, discrimination towards the girl child in health, nutrition and education, and sexual violence, both inside the home and outside it. This paper focuses on the economic dimension, while recognising the crucial interconnections that present the full picture of contemporary gender inequality in India. We need to be cognisant of these interconnections, not only to fully grasp the extent and multifaceted nature of gender inequalities, but also to recognise the deep, and sometimes invisible, interconnections between policies. This is especially crucial when policies targeted towards one specific objective (say, the imbalance in the sex ratio) could have unintended consequences for other dimensions of gender inequalities (for instance, gender gaps in education).[1]

[1] Sharma and Rastogi (2020) show that as a standalone measure, a ban on fetal sex determination could actually worsen the problem of gender discrimination rather than mitigate it.

While there is a large body of literature and evidence on each of these aspects, which this paper summarises briefly, the role of intersectionality in defining gender inequalities is discussed less often. Male–female gaps are significant in many dimensions, but the contours of these gaps are shaped by the overlap of gender with other social identities such as caste, religion or tribal identities. Thus, women from stigmatised and marginalised groups are disadvantaged along two dimensions and have to battle the double stigma of this intersectionality. This paper outlines the trends in overall gender gaps in the areas of labour force participation, self-employment and education over the last couple of decades, but highlights the role of intersectionality that goes into producing structures of advantage and disadvantage.

The discussion of inequalities, especially if we recognise intersectionality appropriately, begs the question of the apposite policy framework. The paper ends with a discussion of the current policy framework, and how it needs to change to address multiple disadvantages produced by intersectional inequalities.

The paper should be read as a wide-angle, panoramic view of the landscape of inequalities between men and women, overall, as well as along the axes of social group identities, and not as an original research paper that dives deep into one specific problem. The focus is on summarising the state of knowledge on the economic dimensions of male–female inequality based on large-scale empirical evidence. This can be combined with specific nuances from the multitude of ethnographic accounts and empirical research that zooms in on one precise aspect of the larger matrix of inequalities.

1.2 Summary of Main Conclusions

The male–female gaps in labour force participation rates (LFPR) in India are strong and persistent, as female labour force participation (FLFP) continues to decline from its already low level. The decline is driven by rural women, especially Adivasi women. There are several explanations advanced for the low level as well as the decline. Part of the problem is the inability of the statistical system to correctly count women's economic work. Women are involved in economic work in far greater numbers than labour force statistics are able to capture. Additionally, the registered decline has been in paid employment, and not in women's reproductive labour.

There is a large body of academic research that views the decline in recorded FLFP as a decision taken by women to drop out of paid work. The attention of this body of work is on identifying the supply side constraints that prevent women from entering paid employment or prompt their exit. The focus in this body of literature is on conservative cultural norms, the stigma of working outside the home, or the deterrent effect of sexual violence. However, evidence that these factors are responsible for the decline in female labour force participation is not convincing. There is indeed a supply side constraint that women have to battle; the real cultural norm that prevents women from participating in paid work is the belief that they are primarily responsible for domestic chores and care work. Evidence from India's first Time Use Survey (TUS) (2019) reveals substantial gender disparities in time spent on domestic duties.

However, there are important demand side reasons for the decline in FLFPR. This is the problem of the low demand for female labour, especially commensurate with women's increasing educational attainment.

The other important dimension characterising gender gaps in the labour market relates to wage gaps and employer discrimination. Over the decade which saw a fall in women's labour force participation rate, women's educational attainment increased sharply. Thus, in 2010, if women were 'paid like men', the average wages of women would be higher than those of men. The fact that men earn higher wages/salaries after accounting for wage earning characteristics reveals substantial wage discrimination.

The intersection between gender and social identities such as caste and tribe indicate that Dalit women, disadvantaged on account of caste, poverty and patriarchy, are the worst-off in terms of material indicators, as well as on autonomy and mobility indicators.

Gender gaps in self-employment are even larger than those in wage employment. Policies such as the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) designed to encourage self-employment have had several other positive impacts, such as increase in empowerment and autonomy, but their record in terms of enhancing livelihoods is mixed at best.

Other policies such as employment guarantee schemes or transport infrastructure could end up having positive gendered effects, despite their gender-blind design. Electoral quotas also have positive effects, both along gender and caste dimensions. Job quotas for women are applicable to government jobs, which are shrinking. Additionally, they need several other complementary provisions to be effective.

This paper is organised into seven sections. Section 2 presents the numbers on gender gaps in the labour market, focusing on both labour force participation as well as wage gaps, followed by major explanations for the trends. Section 3 discusses key dimensions of gender–caste intersectionality in the labour market and educational attainment. Section 4 discusses female self-employment and women in business, with a brief overview of self-help groups (SHGs). Section 5 examines the issue of women's economic empowerment through the lens of intersectionality. Section 6 presents a brief discussion of the policy issues, including a discussion of policy trade-offs. Section 7 offers some other important facets of gender inequality and concluding comments.

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2 Gender Gaps in the Labour Market

Since 1991, the Indian economy has witnessed significant structural transformation. This has been accompanied by high growth rates in national income, with fluctuation, till roughly 2014–15. The fertility rate in India declined to 2.2 births in 2019. International experience would indicate that a combination of high economic growth and low fertility is the right precondition for greater participation of women in paid economic activities. Yet, while gaps between men and women in educational attainment have narrowed considerably over time, gaps in labour force participation have widened. Female labour force participation rate, always low in India, has declined precipitously over the decade. This section presents a landscape assessment of the state of knowledge and empirical evidence on gender gaps in labour markets: labour force participation, work participation, unemployment and wage gaps.

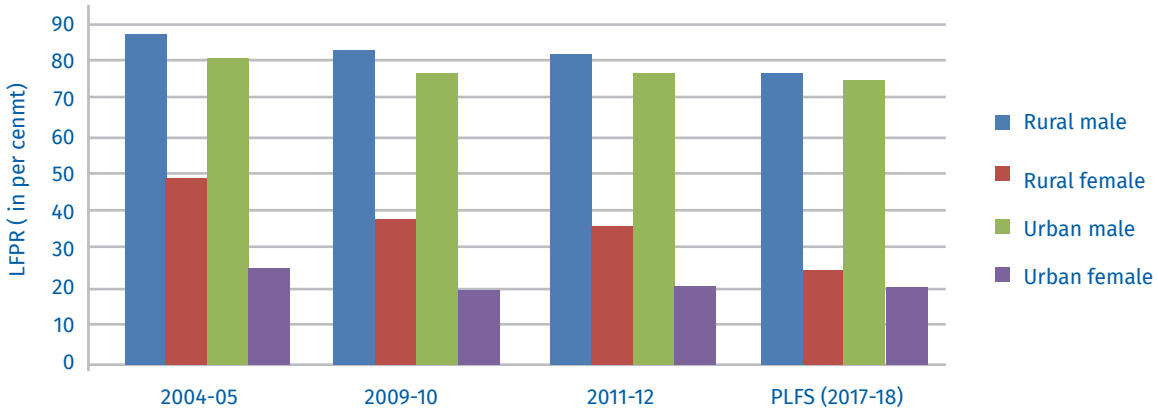
2.1 Labour Force Participation and Unemployment Rates

2.1(A) Trends

India has among the lowest LFPRs[2] in the world, well below the global average of 50 per cent, and East Asian average of 63 per cent. Appendix A explains the definitions used by the National Sample Survey (NSS) to calculate LFPRs. Figure 1, from the Periodic Labour Force Survey Report (PLFS) for 2017–18, shows the LFPRs for men and women (15 years and above) between 2004–5 and 2017–18, separately for rural and urban areas.

Figure 1 reveals that first, male LFPRs for all the years are significantly higher than female, and the gap between the two has been increasing over the years. Second, there is no significant difference between rural and urban LFPRs for men; however, for women, rural LFPRs have been higher than urban for all years.

Figure 1: LFPR in usual status.



Source: PLFS 2017–18, p. 54

Third, while male LFPRs have also declined slightly over the period by nearly 10 percentage points for rural men (from nearly 87 to 76.4 per cent) and urban men (80 to 74.5 per cent), female LFPRs have registered a sharp decline, especially in rural areas. Rural female LFPRs declined by 25 percentage points (from roughly 50 to 25 per cent), whereas urban female LFPRs continued their historically low levels, and declined slightly (from roughly 22 to 20 per cent).

Since 2017, the NSS has been releasing quarterly estimates of key labour force indicators. However, comparison should be made with caution, as these are current weekly status (CWS) figures, whereas Figure 1 is based on usual status estimates. The latest figures on LFPRs are those contained in the NSS Quarterly Bulletin for April to June 2019.[3] These show that LFPRs during April–June 2019 were 73.3 and 19 per cent for men and women, respectively, the same level as in April–June 2018.

[2] See Appendix A for definitions
[3] http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Quarterly_Bulletin_PLFS_April_June_2019_M_0.pdf.

Unemployment

Due to the presence of disguised unemployment or underemployment in India (i.e. workers with very low productivity engaged in menial, survivalist activities), open unemployment historically has not been very high. There is an additional reason for women's open unemployment rates to be low. As we note below, open unemployment rates for women will give the lower bound of the unutilised portion, as there are several women who have an unmet demand for work (i.e. they would like paid work), but do not actively go out looking for work. This is due to demands of domestic work and the knowledge that paid work that it is compatible with domestic chores would not be available close to home. Thus, they would not be classified as unemployed, but in the NSS they are declared as mainly engaged in domestic work because of the non-availability of work. Such women declare themselves to be 'not working' but not unemployed. NSS code 92 refers to those who attended domestic duties only, and code 93 to those who attended domestic duties, but also engaged in free collection of goods. Until 2011–12, the NSS Employment–Unemployment Surveys (EUS) allowed us to probe the details of women's work because there was an entire section in the survey devoted to understanding the specific activities women were engaged in, whether strictly for household use or not. This detailed probe, through Block 7 of the EUS, revealed that women were engaged in unpaid economic activities, but were not classified as workers. The PLFS has dropped Block 7. Thus, it does not allow us to probe the nature of work for those individuals who declare their work status as code 92 or 93.

In 2017–18, 3.8 per cent of rural women were unemployed according to usual status, compared to 5.8 per cent of rural men. CWS unemployment rates for rural women were 7.7 per cent (a historical high) compared to 8.8 per cent for rural men. For urban areas, in 2017–18, as they have been in most years, unemployment rates for women were higher than those for urban men (10.8 and 7.1 per cent, respectively, according to usual status, and 12.8 and 8.8 per cent, respectively, according to CWS).[4] The April–June 2019 figures for unemployment based on CWS reveal no significant change in unemployment. The only other time when unemployment rates for urban women according to usual status were in double digits was 1977–78 (when urban female unemployment rate was 12.4 per cent, compared to 5.4 per cent for urban men).

A defining feature of contemporary open unemployment is that it characterises 'educated' people more than the uneducated. Here 'educated' is defined as individuals with secondary level and higher education. As Table 1 shows, the unemployment rate for rural educated males rose to 10.5 per cent in 2017–18, from 3.6 in 2011–12. For rural women, it rose from 9.7 to 17.3 per cent over the same period. For urban women, the rise is even larger—it almost doubled from 10.3 to 19.8 per cent. Thus, of the educated urban women who are in the labour force, one in five was looking for a job in 2017–18. This is a telling statistic emphasising the demand side constraints to women's labour force participation.

[4] Statement 30, p. 82, PLFS 2017–18.

Table 1:
Unemployment rates by educational attainment (%) according to usual status (ps+ss), 15 years and above, 2004–5 to 2017–18, all-India

	2004-15	2009-10	2011-12	PLFS	2004-05	2009-10	2011-12	PLFS
	Rural Male			Rural Female				
Not literate	0.3	0.3	0.5	1.7	0.2	0.0	0.2	0.1
Lit & upto primary	1.0	1	1	3.1	1.0	0.5	0.3	0.6
Middle	1.6	1.8	1.8	5.7	3.4	2.3	2.5	3.7
Sec & above	4.4	3.5	3.6	10.5	15.2	1.8	9.7	1.3
ALL	1.6	1.6	1.7	5.7	1.8	1.6	0.6	3.8
	Urban Male			Urban Male				
Not literate	1	1	0.7	2.1	0.3	0.9	0.4	0.8
Lit & upto primary	2.1	1.6	1.9	3.6	2.9	0.5	1.3	1.3
Middle	4.2	2.6	2.2	6.0	8.0	3.7	3	5.1
Sec & above	5.1	3.6	4.0	9.2	15.6	12.2	10.3	19.8
ALL	3.7	2.8	3.0	6.9	6.9	5.7	5.3	10.8

Source: Statement 32, PLFS, 2017-18, p. 84.

2.1(B) Explanations

The literature on Indian LFPRs focuses on two distinct but related issues: one, the persistently low level, and two, the decline over the last decade. Several studies have explored either one or both of these dimensions (Neff et al., 2012; Das et al., 2015; Chatterjee et al. 2015; Afridi et al., 2017; Klasen and Pieters, 2015; Siddiqui et al., 2017; Sarkar et al., 2019; and Afridi et al., 2020, among others).

There are several alternative explanations for low female LFPRs in India. At the macroeconomic level, it has been suggested that female LFPRs have a U-shaped relationship with economic growth (Goldin, 1995). Whether India is on the declining part of the U-curve, only time can tell. However, it is important to note that the evidence for the U-shaped relationship is widely debated, and, in fact, individual countries display a great deal of heterogeneity in the relationship between economic growth and LFPRs (see Chaudhary and Verick, 2014 for an extensive list of references on this debate).

We can broadly group the literature on both the low levels and the recent decline of female LFPR into the following rough thematic groups, while noting that several works address more than one theme.

2.1.1 Measurement

If women's participation in economic work is measured through a dichotomous indicator (in the labour force, or out of it), we tend to miss a crucial dimension about women's work in specific regional contexts such as South Asia. To understand this better, we need to appreciate what I have elsewhere called the 'Grey Zone', which defines the unpaid, invisible and fractured nature of women's work (Deshpande, 2019).

At the two ends of the spectrum are women who clearly work outside the home for pay, and those who are clearly not in the labour force (i.e. are in the working age group, but are neither working nor looking for work) out of choice, and are exclusively involved in care activities, such as cooking, cleaning, routine household chores, caring for children and the elderly.

However, the majority of women in South Asia are in between these two extremes. These are women whose involvement in economic work (activities that are within the standard boundaries of the System of National Accounts [SNA], i.e. counted as economic activities when national income or GDP is measured) lies in a grey zone. These are women who might work in the house or outside, and whose work might be paid or unpaid, and whose work might be continuous throughout the year, or seasonal, and it might be full time or part time. A woman might be involved in the family business, or the main activity that provides the livelihood for the family. For example, she could be involved in livestock rearing or farming or helping with the kirana shop, or involved in artisanal activity such as making baskets, or weaving or making pots. If these are family activities, then her contribution to economic work (over and above her 'care' work) would not be paid. In such a case, it is highly likely that she would not be seen as a worker, neither by her family, nor by herself.

These women are also very likely to fall through the cracks of the statistical system.

Several of these women are home-based workers, seen not only in India, but in large parts of the developing world. For decades, such women have remained underpaid, invisible, but often vital parts of domestic or global supply chains. They are contracted by firms (multinational or domestic) or sub-contracted on a piece rate basis. In the garment industry, they are the among the lowest category of workers, stitching sleeves, sewing buttons, trimming threads, embroidering. Other examples of home-based work include food processing, rolling agarbatti, bidi-making, assembling sticker bindi sheets, weaving, etc. It is estimated that their number is over 38 million.

A short summary of this is: women are 'working' but are not being counted as such. Their participation in economic work is invisible. Mehta and Pratap, (2017) demonstrate how counting women's work correctly can make their work visible and enable their contribution to national income to be counted correctly. Mondal et al. (2018) show that a large part of the so-called decline in women's work participation is not an actual decline, but a shift from paid to unpaid work.

Overcoming Measurement Bias in Official Statistics

Neff et al. (2012) demonstrate how estimates of female LFPR become higher using NSS data, if we include unpaid economic activities. Deshpande and Kabeer (2019), through a large primary survey conducted in West Bengal, show how even small changes to the NSS questionnaire can make big differences to the estimates of labour force participation by better capturing the unpaid economic work women routinely do on family farms, businesses or enterprises.

The National Data Innovation Centre (NDIC)

conclusively demonstrates the importance of correct measurement. Their study (Deshmukh et al., 2019) shows how work participation rates are sensitive to survey design. They argue that standard labour force status questions, where respondents are asked to identify primary and secondary activities of women, resulted in women being listed as 'homemakers'. However, when respondents were asked about who participated in wage work, non-wage subsistence work and family business, the same women were more likely to be included as workers. They point out that this omission is particularly large for work on family farms and in caring for livestock; i.e. about 96 per cent of women's omitted activities are in these two areas. Thus, they make a case for counting work, not workers.

2.1.2 Women's Work through Time Use Surveys

The focus in western literature has been on women's unpaid non-market work—domestic chores, care and reproductive work. The sexual division of such work, which disproportionately falls on women everywhere, is a key feature of gender inequality globally.

However, in developing countries including India, there is another crucial dimension to women's unpaid work: unpaid economic work, the kind of work that would get counted as 'work' if it were done by a man. This includes work on farms and fisheries, on livestock and orchards, in family enterprises engaged in artisanal production (handloom, handicraft), family-run stores in retail, family-owned workshops (woodwork, metal work) and so on. Thus, women in developing countries are engaged in unpaid work that would conventionally fall within the boundaries of the SNA, i.e. activities that get counted in the measurement of a country's national income or GDP.

Pioneering Indian feminist scholars were concerned that labour force statistics that formed the basis of GDP estimation by measuring 'workers'—for instance those collected by the NSS or national Census in India—were unable to capture women's economic contributions because a large part of women's economic work (distinct from domestic chores) was unpaid and unvalued.

What happens if women's work is not counted adequately?

As Devaki Jain has noted, this failure to measure women's economic contribution reduces them to 'virtual non-entities in economic transactions, such as property ownership or offering bank loans as collateral' (Jain, 1996, p.WS 47).

These words are as valid today as when they were written. Women become invisible as workers, and are seen primarily as engaged in domestic work, even when their economic contribution is critical to the success of their family enterprises. In other words, often men and women do very similar work, but men get counted as 'workers' and women do not.

Jain reminds us that 'if women's unpaid work were properly valued, it is quite possible that women would emerge in most societies as the main breadwinners—or at least equal breadwinners—since they put in more hours of work than men...' (Jain, 1996, p. WS 47).

The First Official TUS: 1998 Pilot

Advocacy by leading scholars to count women's work adequately led to the Indian Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) conducting a pilot TUS in 1998–99 across six states in India: Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Odisha, Tamil Nadu and Meghalaya. This was based on a survey of 18,591 households. The main objectives of this pilot were to quantify the contribution of women in the 'national economy' and to assess 'gender discrimination in household activities'.

The report found that out of 168 hours (24*7) in a week, men spent 42 hours in SNA activities, whereas women spent 19 hours. However, in what the report described as extended SNA', which includes unpaid economic activities, men spent 3.6 hours compared to women who spent 34.6 hours.

Combining time spent on SNA with that on extended SNA, the report found that rural men were spending 46.05 hours on 'work', compared to rural women who were spending 56.48 hours. Corresponding figures for urban men and urban women were 44.5 and 45.6 hours, respectively.

The major headline finding from the pilot was that the share of women's work to total work (male + female) was 55 per cent, far higher than figures from official statistics would reveal. Further, including extended SNA activities, women's participation in economic work was higher than men's. If these activities had been counted correctly, there would still have been a gap in labour force participation between men and women, except in the opposite direction.

The First National TUS, 2019

The pilot highlighted the need for an all-India survey, but it took two decades before it saw the light of day. This national level survey interviewed 1,38,799 households and covered the entire country except Andaman & Nicobar Islands. In contrast to international surveys, the Indian TUS relies on the interview method, where information on all members of the household 6 years and older was collected from a single respondent, as we noted at the beginning of this piece.

Unlike in international TUS, the reporting of time spent on various activities was not done separately by each person in the household, but often by a central respondent for all members of the household. When the respondent was giving details about their own time use, it would be 'self-reporting'. In the 2019 TUS, 56 per cent of rural males self-reported (49.5 per cent urban), and 65.8 per cent rural women self-reported (62.5 per cent urban). This is an important disclaimer to be noted when we analyse figures from TUS. It is entirely possible that male respondents overstated their own contribution to domestic chores and understated their wives' contribution to economically productive work.

The broad buckets were participation and time spent on paid activities, unpaid caregiving activities, unpaid volunteer work, unpaid domestic service producing activities, learning, socialising, leisure and self-care activities.

The presentation of data in this report is in a format different from the pilot. It uses three categories to refer to SNA, non-SNA, Other activities (instead of clearly identifying extended SNA, as the pilot did). It finds that in employment related activities (for all individuals 6 years and above), rural men spent 434 minutes/day, which amounts to 50.63 hours/week. Rural women spent 317 minutes/day, or 36.98 hours/week. The corresponding figures for urban men and urban women were 514 minutes/day (59.96 hours/week); and 375 minutes/day (43.75 hours/week).

Thus, focusing only on SNA activities (paid economic activities), the 2019 TUS confirms the findings from employment or labour force statistics. The report shows that share of time spent in SNA activities is greater for men than women, and the gaps are larger in urban compared to rural areas. This is in accordance with the gaps in LFPRs.

However, if we examine the percentage share of total time in a typical day by age group, gender and rural/urban residence, we find that women spend a far greater proportion of their time in non-SNA production compared to men, regardless of age group and rural/urban residence. Non-SNA production activities are unpaid and they include unpaid domestic services for household members, unpaid caregiving services for household members, unpaid volunteering for household and community.

Male–Female Difference: 'Unpaid Domestic Service'

The 2019 TUS reports numbers from the self-reported distribution of total time in a day across broad categories for men and women separately. We have noted the male–female difference in SNA work. A major difference between men and women is in terms of time spent on 'unpaid domestic service'. What does this category include? It includes 'food and meal management and preparation', 'cleaning and maintenance of own dwelling and surrounding', 'DIY maintenance, repair, decoration', 'care and maintenance of textiles and footwear', 'household management for own final use (e.g. paying bills)', 'pet care', and 'other unpaid domestic services'.

These are fancier labels to describe routine and humdrum cooking and cleaning chores. In 2019, Indian women spent ten times more time on these activities compared to men.

This highlights the structural issue of sexual division of domestic work, which is among the most unequal in South Asia, especially in India and Pakistan, compared to the global average. The results of the TUS 2019 show that there is no evidence of movement towards the more equal sharing norms that are seen internationally.

Image Credit: Paula Rey | Flickr.com

2.1.3 Demand Side or Supply Side?

The focus on a binary indicator such as labour force participation reduces the issue of women's involvement to a labour supply one. If women's involvement is seen only as a supply side story, then the attention, quite naturally, would be on factors that inhibit women's ability or inclination to go out of the house and work. Thus, the spotlight turns to constraints such as the stigma attached to working outside the home—which may or may not be internalised by women—or a rise in religious conservatism, or a resurgence of a patriarchal mindset which asserts the supremacy of the male breadwinner model, where the man earns and the woman cooks, cleans and cares for the household.

Supply side explanations also highlight that poverty appears to be a major factor in women's economic activity (e.g. Olsen and Mehta, 2006). As household per capita income rises, an 'income' effect appears to come into play, leading women to withdraw from the labour force so that participation rates decline with rising income (Kapsos et al., 2014; Srivastava and Srivastava, 2010). Examining data from five large sample rounds of the NSS EUS (1993–94, 1999–2000, 2004–5, 2009–10 and 2011–12), Das et al. (2015) confirm that income has a dampening effect on FLFPRs, in contrast to men, whose LFPRs are not significantly related to household spending. But they find that the negative income effect is non-linear and decreases as income increases. This non-linear relationship between income and participation is driven by urban women. As women's education has increased, it may have altered their preferences and especially their reservation wage. This is likely to be higher for urban women; highly educated urban women will work when available work is commensurate with their qualifications. Therefore, these supply-side explanations only partly explain the decline in FLFPRs.

One characteristic that sets women's economic work apart from men's is that due to reasons of marriage, childbirth and child care, women might enter and exit the labour force at several points in their lives. Good quality longitudinal data would throw light on factors determining entry and exit into the labour force. Using data from two rounds of the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) panel for 2005 and 2012, which is the only nationally representative panel data, Sahoo et al. (2019) examine factors that govern the entry of women into the labour force, and exit from it.

However, there are demand side explanations, which draw our attention to the lack of demand for labour in the occupations and activities in which women are concentrated. There is important work which shows that what we note as a decline (which is equated to withdrawal of women from the labour force in a supply side mindset) is actually a manifestation of the changing nature of work availability, especially for rural and less educated women. This body of work questions the 'decline' narrative (Desai [2017]; Desai et al. [2018]; Chatterjee et al. [2015]). This work shows that the proportion of economically active women has not declined, but the number of days they work has, which shows up as a decline in LFPRs. In India over the last three decades, there has been a massive decline in agricultural jobs, and this has not necessarily been accompanied by an increase in manufacturing jobs, and/or other non-agricultural wage employment. There has been movement out of agriculture into informal and casual jobs, where the work is sporadic, and often less than 30 days at a stretch. The new modern sector opportunities, especially in high value-added service sectors, mostly accruing to men.

Lahoti and Swaminathan (2016) demonstrate that economic development in India has not been led by labour-intensive manufacturing, which has resulted in producing growth with low employment intensity, disadvantaging women more than men. Chatterjee et al. (2015) show that sectors that tend to hire female workers have expanded the least during the last decades. Gupta (2017) investigates the effect of trade liberalisation in India (post-1991) on women's employment and finds that establishments

exposed to larger tariff reductions reduced their share of female workers. This evidence would confirm the questioning of the decline narrative.

Since the decline in LFPRs has been driven by rural women, the latest evidence from Afridi et al. (2020) offers valuable insights. They show that mechanisation has led to significantly greater decline in women's than men's labour in Indian farms. They find that reduced demand for labour in weeding, a task requiring precision and one that was more often undertaken by women, explains a large part of a decline in women's labour. The study shows that when specialisation of work is sex-specific, technological change can have gendered impacts.[5]

2.1.4 Cultural Norms, Social Barriers, Stigma and Sexual Violence

In the literature on female LFPRs in India, a great deal of the focus is on the decline. However, an equally (if not more) important issue is the persistently low level of women's LFPR in India, lower than our other South Asian neighbours, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. In joint work with Naila Kabeer, I explore factors that shape the low level (Deshpande and Kabeer, 2019). Our results are based on a large primary household survey in seven districts in West Bengal. We collect data on all the indicators included in the official surveys, and on additional variables that are usually not included in surveys.

Since we wanted to focus on which specific internal constraints inhibit women from working, we asked specific questions about if they were primarily responsible for child care, for elderly care, for standard domestic chores (cooking, washing clothes etc.), and if they covered their heads/faces always, sometimes, or never. The latter is taken as a proxy for cultural conservatism; indeed, internationally, women covering their faces in public spaces is often attacked as an oppressive practice. Of course, the context in the West is different in that covering heads/faces is associated with being Muslim. In India, the practice is followed by both Hindus and Muslims, and in recognition of that, we label it more broadly as "veiling", and not as wearing a burqa or hijab.

As noted above, we implemented simple changes to the official survey questionnaires in order to get better estimates of women's work that lies in the grey zone. Accordingly, our estimates are higher than official estimates, but even with improved measurement, a little over half (52 percent) get counted as "working". Which means that participation in work is low, even after work in the grey zone is included.

The critical role of domestic chores

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[5] While studies can be divided into those focusing on supply side versus demand side explanations, there are several studies combining demand and supply side explanations, such as Klasen and Pieters (2012); Neff et al. (2012), and so on.

Since we wanted to focus on which specific internal constraints inhibit women from working, we asked specific questions about what their primary responsibilities were: child care, elderly care, standard domestic chores (cooking, washing clothes, etc.), and if they covered their heads/faces always, sometimes, or never. The latter is taken as a proxy for cultural conservatism; indeed, internationally, women covering their faces in public spaces is often attacked as an oppressive practice. Of course, the context in the West is different in that covering heads/faces is associated with being Muslim. In India, the practice is followed by both Hindus and Muslims, in recognition of which we label it more broadly as 'veiling' and not as wearing a burqa or hijab.

As noted above, we implemented simple changes to the official survey questionnaires in order to get better estimates of women's work that lies in the grey zone. Accordingly, our estimates are higher than official estimates, but even with improved measurement, a little over half (52 per cent) get counted as 'working'. This means that participation in work is low, even after work in the grey zone is included.

Is there an unmet demand for work?

Do women really want to participate in paid work, or have they internalised the male breadwinner model, which relegates them to care of the home and family? What about the 'income effect', according to which women work only if necessary for economic reasons, and withdraw from work as soon as they don't need to? What about the marriage penalty, i.e. women drop out of the labour force once they are married? Thus, women's work might be a sign of economic compulsions of trying to make two ends meet, rather than an expression of their desire for economic independence.

We explore the evidence for this in our survey. Married women are less likely to be working than unmarried women, but marriage in India is near universal, and asking women to choose either marriage or paid work is not a fair or realistic choice. We asked women who were currently not working if they would accept paid work if it were made available at or near their homes: 73.5 per cent said 'yes'. When questioned further, 18.7 per cent expressed a preference for regular full time; 7.8 per cent for regular part time; 67.8 per cent for occasional full time; and 5.78 per cent for occasional part time. It would appear that there was indeed a major unmet demand for paid work, whether regular or occasional, full time or part time, as long as the work in question was compatible with their domestic responsibilities. Based on this, we suggest that being out of the labour force is less a matter of choice for large numbers of women, and more a reflection of the demands of unpaid domestic responsibilities.

Role of stigma or fear of sexual violence

There is a belief that women's work outside the home is stigmatised by family and society, and this sigma could be a factor underlying low LFPRs. However, we should note that urban LFPRs have always been lower than rural. If stigma is the main reason underlying this gap, then it follows that urban women have faced greater stigma than rural. But the entire decline in LFPRs is due to rural women. Does this mean that stigma, which might be greater in urban areas, has remained roughly constant, but has increased in rural areas? This does not appear plausible. Finally, the stigma of working outside the home as a mark of low status is typically characteristic

of upper caste women, as discussed in Section 3; Dalit and Adivasi women have always worked outside the home in far greater proportions. But as we noted above, the largest decline in LFPR has been for rural Scheduled Tribe women.

The only set of explanations that fit all these facts is the following: (non)availability of work which is compatible with domestic responsibility, i.e. either at or near the home or easy to get to.

What about fear of sexual violence? Recent studies[6] find that perceptions of violence deter women from working outside the home—that either women are less likely to work in regions with greater violence against women, or that increased reports of sexual violence reduce the probability of urban women working outside the home. Borker (2018) finds that fear of sexual violence influences college choice by women in Delhi; compared to men, they are more likely to choose a lower quality college if the route of travel is safer, as well as spend an amount as high as double the average college tuition to travel on a safer route. This evidence is entirely plausible: women are less likely to go to regions with high rates of public crimes against women. Yet, these results do not shed light on the persistence of low average labour force participation of Indian women. Also, the sexual violence and stigma narrative does not account for the decline which is driven by a decline in the LFPRs of rural women, and especially of rural Adivasi women.

Internal migration

Contrary to the stigma/fear of violence narrative, based on the Census figures for 2011, we see that nearly 70 per cent of internal migrants in India were women. This is not to suggest that there are no risks of violence or concerns about safety of women as they migrate. Exploitative, unsafe, informal working conditions with poor pay continue to characterise a large number of women migrants, who are vulnerable to sexual violence. Yet, women are taking huge risks and are migrating in growing proportions.

Marriage induced migration continues to be the single largest cause of women's internal migration, but its importance has declined over the last three decades. Between 2001 and 2011, the proportion of women migrating for work increased by 101 per cent, which was more than double the rate for men (48.7 per cent).[7] Women who cited 'business' as a reason for migration increased by 153 per cent during 2001–11, more than four times the rate for men. Even women who migrated for marriage ended up looking for work and/or working. Thus, migration for marriage does not preclude women's participation in work; again, it all boils down to availability of suitable work.

Is the decline in FLFPR across the board?

The continuous focus on the decline in FLFPRs masks the fact that employment for some categories of women has increased over time. Most of this increase has been in jobs that are low paid, with long hours of work, no social protection, and/or hazardous. Mondal et al. (2018) record an increase in SHG-related work, classified as self-employment. They show an increase in employment in traditionally female dominated activities in health and education. The increase in numbers of women health professionals was driven by traditional occupations, such as nurses and midwives. In urban areas, they reveal gains in employment in white collar jobs within a small section of highly educated urban women, notwithstanding the overall picture of occupational segregation by gender.

[6] http://ftp.iza.org/dp11874.pdf and https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X17303534
[7] https://archive.indiaspend.com/cover-story/women-migrate-for-work-at-double-the-rate-that-men-do-93512

Employer attitudes

The discussion on social norms or cultural barriers is concentrated on cultural attitudes that prevent women from accessing paid jobs. Das et al. (2019) investigate if there are cultural factors that bias employers against hiring women. Based on a unique survey of over 600 firms in three large cities of Madhya Pradesh, they find that the likelihood of the firm having at least one-woman employee is strongly influenced by firm characteristics such as location and size, after controlling for which employer attitudes are not a significant determinant of whether or not the firm hires a woman. The implication of their findings is that culture might be slow to change, but policies aimed at increasing female employment need not wait for cultural change.

2.2 Gender Wage Gaps: Labour Market Discrimination

The discussion on gender bias by employers leads us to a discussion of labour market discrimination which would result in wage gaps. Indeed, in addition to clear and persistent differences in LFPRs, data reveal sharp gender wage gaps, the latter consistent with international experience. Mahajan and Ramaswami (2017) investigate the apparent paradox that gender wage gaps in agricultural wages are higher in south India, a region with more favourable indicators for women, compared to north India. They examine whether this could be due to Esther Boserup's proposition that higher gender gaps in the south are due to higher female LFPRs in that region (Boserup, 1970). They find that differences in female labour supply are able to explain about 55 per cent of the gender wage gap between the northern and southern states of India.

Formal sector, urban labour markets, presumably more meritocratic, are not immune to gender wage differences either. Varkkey and Korde (2013) document gender pay gaps using paycheck data between 2006 and 2013 for 21,552 respondents, of which 84 per cent were males. This data is based on a voluntary internet survey conducted among formal sector workers, and hence, the sample is not representative. They find that the pay gap increased with skill level and position in the occupational hierarchy.[8]

Deshpande et al. (2018) analyse the issue of gender parity in wages by focusing on the evolution of male–female wage gaps for an emerging economy, India, and decompose the gaps to understand patterns of gender-based labour market discrimination. The paper uses EUS data from two large NSS rounds: the 55th round in 1999–2000 and the 66th round in 2009-10 to explore gender wage gaps among Regular Wage/Salaried (RWS) workers, not only at the mean, but along the entire distribution to see 'what happens where', i.e. assess where in the wage distribution are gaps higher.

The gaps are decomposed into an 'explained component' (due to gender differences in wage earning characteristics), and the 'unexplained component' (due to gender differences in the labour market returns characteristics). The latter is treated as a proxy for labour market discrimination. The paper performs the standard mean decomposition[9] and quantile decomposition,[10] evaluates changes in each of these over the 10-year time period between the two NSS rounds.

The main findings are as follows: in a four-way division of workers into Self-Employed, RWS workers, Casual Labour and Unemployed, in 2009–10, the sharpest gap was in the proportion of male and female workers in RWS work. The

[8] These findings are at variance with our findings of a sticky floor. This is perhaps because their sample is not representative and is restricted to internet users. Also, their educational categories are not comparable to ours.
[9] Using the Blinder–Oaxaca method.
[10] Using Melly's refinement of the Machado–Mata decomposition method.

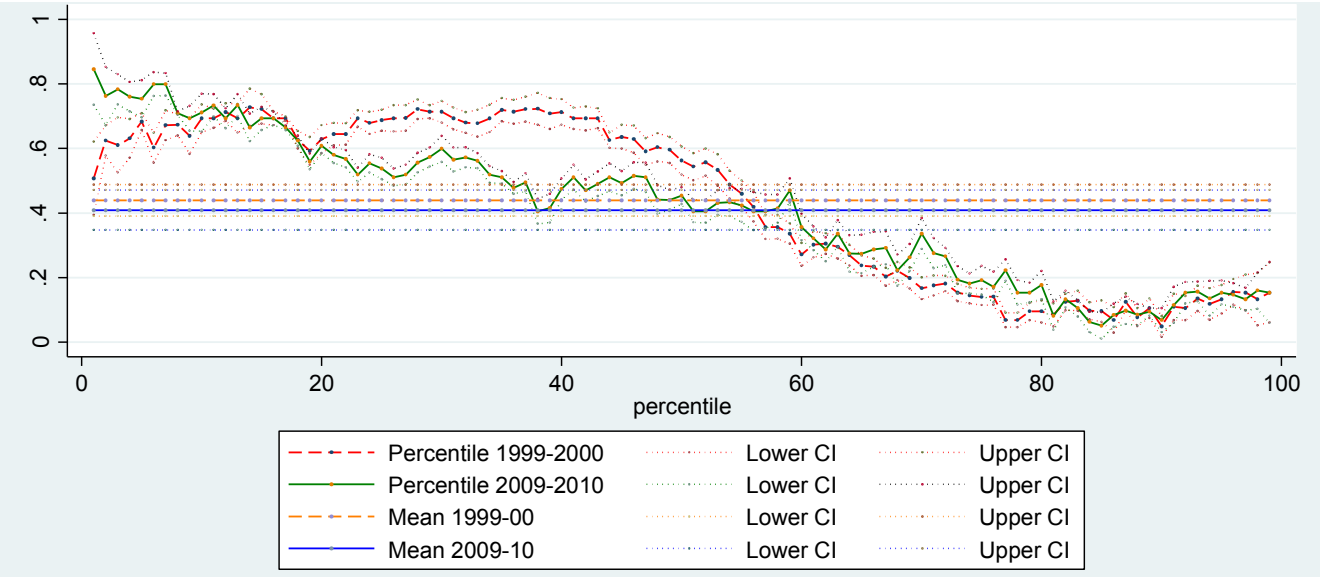
average (raw/unconditional) wage gap for RWS workers, expressed as a percentage of female average wages, declined from 30 per cent to 26 per cent over this decade. At the same time, educational attainment of women increased over the decade, and a greater proportion of women are in professional occupations than men, which could explain some of the decline in average wage gap. Both in 1999–2000 and in 2009–10, average female wages were less than male within the same education level, occupation and industry, and type of work, i.e. public versus private sector, permanent or temporary, union member or not.

The decomposition exercise indicates that the bulk of the wage gap is unexplained, i.e. possibly discriminatory. While average characteristics for women in RWS have improved over the decade, the discriminatory component of the wage gap has also increased. In 2009–10, if women were paid like men, they would earn more than men on account of their characteristics.

Moving beyond average wages, for both years, male wages are higher than female wages across the entire wage distribution. For both years, the gender wage gap decreases as we move from lower to higher deciles. In 2009–10, the highest gap across deciles is at the 1st decile (103 per cent), and it declines steadily thereafter to reach approximately 7 per cent at the 9th decile. Thus, for both years, we see the existence of the 'sticky floor', in that wage gaps are higher at lower ends of the distribution and steadily decline over the distribution. We can see this pattern clearly in Figure 2.

Gender log wage gaps across percentiles and at the mean

Figure 2:
Gender log wage gaps across percentiles and at the mean with 95% CI, 1999-2000 and 2009-2010.



Source: Deshpande, Goel and Khanna (2018), p. 336

Based on decompositions, the paper also shows that RWS women at the lower end of the distribution face higher discriminatory gaps in wages.

An analysis of the gender pay gap captures one crucial dimension of discrimination. Das et al. (2019) document literature showing discriminatory attitudes towards women that affect women's labour supply as well as demand. They cite studies that show how women are less likely to be hired in jobs which require technical skills as they are perceived to be inferior in these skills relative to men. Ironically, the biggest constraint for women to access paid employment opportunities, i.e. societal expectations about their primary role as being responsible for reproductive labour, which includes domestic work and care duties, becomes a key factor based on which employers discriminate against them. Women are seen as having low attachment to labour markets, and are routinely assigned to 'female' occupations that require caregiving or domestic skills.

2.3 Wage Gaps: Glass Ceilings Versus Sticky Floor

In contrast to Western developed economies, gender wage gaps in India (similar to China and several other countries) exhibit a sticky floor, and not a glass ceiling, i.e. these are higher at the bottom of the wage distribution than at the top.

One explanation for the sticky floor might be the statistical discrimination by employers. As noted above, in India, social norms place the burden of household responsibilities disproportionately on women. Because of this, men are perceived to be more stable in jobs vis-à-vis women. Given the higher probability of dropping out of the labour market, employers discriminate against women when they enter the labour market because they expect future career interruptions. As women move up the occupation structure and gain job experience, employers become aware of their reliability and therefore discriminate less. Men usually have more work experience or tenure than women on average. Women who have high levels of education and are at the top end of the distribution might be perceived to have high levels of commitment, and due to their past investments in education are thought to be stable employees.

At the higher end of the wage distribution the nature of jobs is very different from those at the bottom. The women working in these jobs are more likely to be the urban educated elite working in managerial or other professional positions. These high wage earning women are more likely to be aware of their rights and might be in a better position to take action against perceived discrimination. Employers would be aware of these possibilities themselves, and hence, may not be able to discriminate a great deal between similarly qualified men and women. Second, the payment mechanism in these jobs would be far more structured and rigidly defined. Whether in the public sector or the private sector, most high paying jobs will have written contracts with predefined clauses for basic increases in salaries, year on year.

Contrast this to a situation where an employer is paying a regular wage to a woman with no education working in an elementary occupation, which is a typical example of a worker at the bottom of the wage distribution in the Indian context. It is easier for the employer to discriminate in this case, as these jobs are in the informal sector and outside the jurisdiction

of labour laws. Women at the bottom have less bargaining power compared to men due to family commitments or social custom, and are more likely to be subject to the firms' market power. Thus, a sticky floor could arise because anti-discriminatory policies are more effective at the top of the distribution.

Article 39 of the Indian Constitution envisaged equal pay for equal work for both men and women. To this end, legislations such as the Equal Remunerations Act (1976) were enacted after the equal remuneration ordinance was introduced in the year 1975. Absence of strong minimum wage legislations means that wage gaps can be larger at the bottom of the distribution.

Job segregation is also a known contributor to wider gaps at the bottom as men and women only enter into exclusively 'male' and 'female' jobs. Low skilled jobs for women may pay less than other jobs that require intense physical labour, which men typically do. Our model specifications control for broad industry and occupation groups; however, within certain low paying broad industrial categories, men and women could be doing different kinds of jobs and that could be picked up as the discrimination component.

Image Credit: SWEA

Image Credit: ILO Asia-Pacific | Fli

3 Intersecting Identities

The analysis of male–female inequalities is incomplete unless we extend it to understanding intersecting and overlapping identities. This section focuses on the intersection of gender (defined as sex, because gender disaggregated data are only available for men and women, not for any other gender identity) and social groups defined by administrative categories of Scheduled Castes (SC), or Dalits; Scheduled Tribes (ST) or Adivasis; and Other Backward Classes (OBC), which are a group of intermediate castes and communities; and the residual category of 'Others', a rough proxy for castes conventionally placed at the top of the caste hierarchy. Based on this social and conventional understanding of the relative ranking between groups, I have used the term 'upper caste' to describe their position as a shorthand description of the group; the terms 'upper' or 'lower' should be not be interpreted as an endorsement of caste hierarchy by the author.

3.1 Intersectionality and Intersectional Invisibility

Why should we focus on intersectionality? Overlapping social identities can either multiply privilege or disadvantage, or pull in opposing directions—an individual could be privileged in terms of one identity (say, race or caste), but disadvantaged in terms of another (say, gender). This produces a whole matrix of hierarchies, not necessarily linear, and makes assessments of inequality enormously challenging. The evidence presented in this section aims to establish the case for why we need an evidence-based approach to engage with, and disentangle, these complicated strands which define the fault lines of inequality.

Before turning to the evidence on India, a brief glimpse into the history of intersectionality would be useful. American scholar Kimberle Crenshaw's (1989) paper put intersectionality, as a critical concept of analysis, on the map of academic discourse. She drew attention to the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of analysis. As a result, studies on race discrimination focused on sex or class privileged Blacks, and those on sex discrimination focussed on race or class privileged women. Thus, within each type of discrimination (race or gender), the focus is on the most privileged and this results in marginalising the multiply burdened. This is best expressed in her famous statement: 'All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, and Some of Us are Brave', the latter being a less than oblique reference to Black women who tend to be ignored by both the race- and gender-based narratives.

There is an additional challenge for individuals with multiple subordinate identities, which can be understood through the concept of 'intersectional invisibility'. It has been argued that possessing multiple subordinate group identities renders a person 'invisible' relative to those with a single subordinate group identity (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008). We should note that in the literature on intersectionality, the assessment of who is worse-off— those with multiple or single identities—is contested. One side of the debate advocates a 'double jeopardy' model, which suggests that disadvantage accrues with each of a person's subordinate group identities. In this view, 'if the most violent punishments of men consisted of flogging and mutilation, women were flogged and mutilated, as well as raped.' The other side of the debate argues that persons with a single subordinate group identity are relatively more disadvantaged than those with multiple identities.

The concept of intersectional invisibility draws attention to the distinctive forms of oppression experienced by those with intersecting subordinate identities. The argument is that androcentrism (the tendency to define the standard person as male), ethnocentrism (the tendency to define the standard person as a member of the dominant group, e.g. White Americans in the US or upper caste Hindus in India) and heterocentrism (tendency to define the standard person as heterosexual) causes a tendency to perceive people who have intersecting identities as non-prototypical members of their constituent identity groups and therefore rendered invisible. Thus, Black women in the US, who do not fit the prototypes of their respective subordinate groups will experience 'intersectional invisibility'.

In the context of caste and gender in India, this would translate to the intersectional invisibility of specific issues that affect Dalit women: the triple burden of patriarchy, caste and class.

Before we turn to the empirical evidence on dimensions of intersectionality in India, it is worth outlining how the caste–gender overlap impacts women's work.

3.2 Women and the Caste Hierarchy

In India, the majority religion, Hinduism, is not monotheistic. Despite substantial regional and caste-specific variations in its practice, the predominant version of Hinduism is Brahmanical Hinduism. Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are closely interconnected, as they are the organising principle of the Brahmanical social order. Yet, neither caste scholars nor feminist scholars pay adequate attention to just how inextricable the two dimensions of hierarchy are.

The caste system not only determines the social division of labour, but its sexual division as well. For instance, in agriculture, women can engage in water regulation, transplanting and weeding, but not in ploughing. Maintaining the purity of the caste system is possible only by controlling the sexuality of women. Thus, endogamy (a crucial feature of the caste system) should be seen as a mechanism of recruiting and retaining control over the labour and sexuality of women; the concepts of 'purity' and 'pollution' segregate groups and also regulate the mobility of women.

Safeguarding caste hierarchy implies that women are seen literally as the gateway through which the purity of the caste hierarchy is maintained. 'The subordination of women was crucial to the development of caste hierarchy, the women being subject to increasing constraints the higher the caste in the hierarchy' (Liddle and Joshi, 1986: 50). Historian Uma Chakravarti (1993) has persuasively demonstrated how 'women's sexual subordination was institutionalized in the Brahmanical law codes and enforced by the powers of the state' (p. 580).

While caste endogamy is the norm, all inter-caste marriages are not regarded as equally undesirable. Anuloma unions (women marrying up) are not as abhorred as pratiloma (men marrying up) unions, which continue to be punished severely, most often by death ('honour killings'). In this understanding, one of the biggest transgressions is the horror of hypogamy, i.e. the lower caste male has to be prevented from sexual access to women from higher castes.

Thus, historically, the higher the caste ranked in hierarchy, the greater was the immurement of women. The constraints on women's public visibility and mobility have been the highest among upper castes. Is there a trade-off, as suggested in the literature, between better material conditions of women (higher caste) and greater autonomy, freedom via fewer (or no) taboos on public visibility that has historically characterised the lives of lower caste women? We will examine this in greater detail in Section 5. 2.

3.3 Intersectionality: Gender and Social Groups (LFPRs)

This is reflected in the differential LFPRs of women, such that upper caste women have historically had lower labour force participation compared to Dalit and Adivasi women, because working for wages has been seen as a marker of low status. This is compounded by the fact that the taboos on public visibility are greater for upper caste women compared to lower caste women.

Indeed, this expression of the intersection between gender and social groups remains persistent in 2017–18, as upper caste women have the lowest LFPRs compared to all other social groups (15 [14.2] in rural [urban] India, compared to 27.6 [18.4], 18 [19.2] and 17.4 [16.1] per cent for ST, SC and OBC, respectively).

Table 2 shows the worker population ratio (WPR) for men and women within the broad caste groups for 2017–18.

Table 2:
Worker Population Ratio (WPR) (in percentage) according to usual status (ps+ss) for different social groups during NSS 61st (2004–5), 66th (2009–10), 68th (2011–12) rounds and PLFS (2017–18)

NSS rounds	ST	SC	OBC	Others	ALL-India
Rural Male					
PLFS (2017-18)	53.8	52.3	50.5	52.2	51.7
68th (2011-12)	55.7	53.9	1	55.2	54.3
66th (2009-10)	55.9	54.8	1.8	55.2	54.7
61st (2004-05)	56.2	54.5	3.6	55.7	54.6
Rural female					
PLFS(2017-18)	27.0	17.4	16.8	14.1	17.5
68th (2009-12)	36.4	26.2	23.9	20.1	24.8
66th (2009-10)	35.9	26.9	26.7	19.9	26.1
61st (2004-05)	46.4	33.3	26.2	26.2	32.7
Urban male					
PLFS(2017-18)	49.9	52.5	53.2	53.1	53.0
68th (2009-12)	52	54.5	54.6	54.9	54.6
66th (2009-10)	51	55.0	54.3	54.2	54.3
61st (2004-05)	52.3	53.7	55.4	55.0	54.9
Urban female					
PLFS(2017-18)	17	17.2	14.3	12.6	14.2
68th (2009-12)	19.2	17.2	15.1	12.9	14.7
66th (2009-10)	20.3	17.8	14.5	11.3	13.8
61st (2004-05)	24.5	20.0	18.5	11.4	16.6

Source: PLFS 2017-18, page 93

We can see that the caste gaps in WPRs for men are minuscule. Gaps in social groups in LFPRs are mainly due to the gaps in female LFPRs. Examining the decline in terms of the gender–social group overlap, we find that both in rural and urban areas, LFPRs of ST or Adivasi women have declined the most, followed by rural Dalit women. Between 2004–5 and 2017–18, the decline in ST female LFPRs has been 19.4 percentage points in rural areas and 7.5 percentage points in urban areas. The corresponding decline for SC women has been 16 and 3, for OBC women 16 and 4, and for upper caste women 12 and 1 percentage points, for rural and urban areas, respectively.

Given that the largest decline has been for rural ST women, the narrative of Indian women dropping out of the labour force due to conservative social norms or fear of sexual incidence violence seems very weak, as already noted in Section 2. There is no evidence of greater violence over the last 15 years, targeted specifically against tribal women, relative to Dalit women, which would account for the greater decline among Adivasis compared to Dalit women. Also, the argument about sexual violence is that a generalised rise in violence acts as a deterrent to women participating in economic work; the violence need not be directed towards one community. But if it is a rise in generalised violence towards

women, we should not expect to see sharp differences between social groups.

Also, given that STs are among the poorest communities in India, the idea that the income effect underlies the decline in women's LFPRs appears to be weak. This suggests that the reasons are more complex and point more decisively in the direction of labour market discrimination and the demand side story, which would be a combination of fewer jobs, skill mismatch, and employers' unwillingness to hire women from marginalised and stigmatised communities.

An interesting feature of social group differences in female LFPRs is that differences in unemployment rates do not mirror those in WPR. In other words, just as the decline in WPR between 2004–5 and 2017–18 has been the largest for ST women, followed by SC women, the rise in unemployment rates is not the highest for ST women. In fact, the highest level of unemployment according to usual status in each NSS round is registered by upper caste (UC) women, and the rise in unemployment for upper caste women is at least as large as that for SC–ST women, if not larger (Table 3). This would be an artefact of educational differences, since a rise in unemployment is driven by a rise in the educated unemployed.

Table 3:
Unemployment rate (UR) according to usual status (ps+ss) for different social groups during NSS 61st (2004–5), 66th (2009–10), 68th (2011–12) rounds and PLFS (2017–18)

NSS rounds	ST	SC	OBC	Others	ALL-India
Rural Male					
PLFS (2017-18)	49.	6.4	5.7	6.1	5.8
68th (2011-12)	1.3	2.0	1.7	1.8	1.7
66th (2009-10)	1.7	1.7	1.4	2.0	1.6
61st (2004-05)	1.1	1.7	1.5	2.0	1.6
Rural female					
PLFS(2017-18)	2.2	3.2	3.8	5.9	3.8
68th (2009-12)	1.1	1.4	1.7	2.4	1.7
66th (2009-10)	0.9	1.5	1.4	2.5	1.6
61st (2004-05)	0.4	1.4	1.9	2.9	1.8
Urban male					
PLFS(2017-18)	7.0	8.2	6.9	6.8	7.1
68th (2009-12)	3.4	3.2	2.5	3.4	3.0
66th (2009-10)	4.4	3.1	2.8	2.7	2.8
61st (2004-05)	2.9	5.5	3.3	3.7	3.8
Urban female					
PLFS(2017-18)	7.6	10.5	10.9	11.2	10.8
68th (2009-12)	4.8	4.5	4.7	6.3	5.2
66th (2009-10)	4.3	4.2	6.2	6.2	5.7
61st (2004-05)	3.4	4.6	6.7	8.5	6.9

Source: PLFS, 2017-18, page 94.

3.4 Intersectionality: Gender and Social Groups (Education)

This leads us to examine the nature of intersectionality between gender and social groups in the field of education. Before moving to this discussion, we should note that there is a large literature on gender gaps in education, which examines the role of son preference and gender discrimination within the household in shaping gender gaps. Going into the details of that literature would be outside the scope of this paper, but one conclusion from it is that the quantity gaps between girls and boys have been more or less eliminated, especially up to the secondary level. Due to government campaigns for compulsory and universal education, the proportion of children completing schooling at least till Class 8 has been increasing, and the male–female as well as social group gaps in secondary school attainment have been declining over the last three decades (Deshpande and Gupta, 2020).

Table 4 presents the mean years of formal education based on unit level data from PLFS across gender and social groups.

Table 4:
Mean years of formal education, all India

NSS rounds	ST	SC	OBC	Others	Total
Men	5.46	6.03	6.86	8.20	7.03
N	42176	55440	138895	122875	359386
Women	4.13	4.60	5.50	7.10	5.75
N	40678	52809	134668	118254	346409
Total	4.81	5.33	6.19	7.66	6.40
N	82854	108249	273563	241129	705795

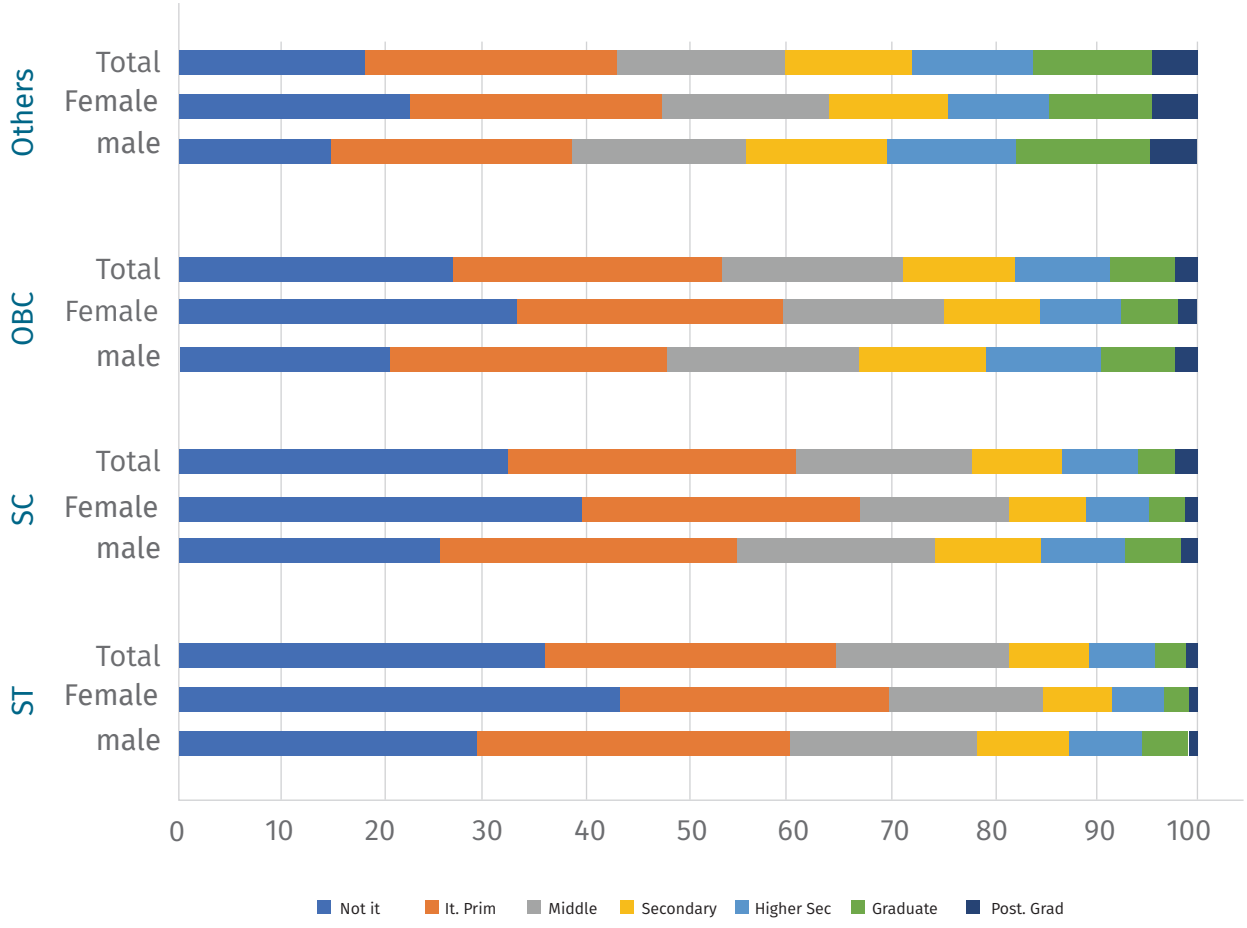
Source: author's calculation from unit-level data, PLFS 2017-18

We see that within each social group, women have lower average years of education compared to men. However, ST and SC women have the lowest average years of education across all sex–caste categories, and between the two, ST (Adivasi) women are the most disadvantaged in terms of education.

Going beyond the average years of education, Figure 3 shows the distribution of sex and caste across levels of educational attainment. Others (a rough proxy for upper castes) have the highest proportion of graduates and above, roughly about 16 per cent, with about 17 per cent men and 14 per cent women in this category of highly educated individuals. The corresponding proportions for ST are 4, 5 and 3, respectively; and for SC are 6, 7 and 5, respectively. Within each caste category there are gender differences at lower levels of education, but the gender differences narrow at the top end.

Figure 3:
Author's calculations based on unit-level data, PLFS 2017-18

Education attainment by sex and caste categories, India, 2017-18



The disparities seen in educational attainment are not because of lack of enrolment at the starting level of education. Table 5 shows the gross enrolment rate (GER) in 2015–16 at different levels of education. The GER is the total enrolment at a specific level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the eligible official school-age population corresponding to the same level of education in a given school year. Here school-age population simply refers to the population in the age group which officially corresponds to the relevant level of education.

Table 5:
Gross Enrolment Rate (GER): 2015-16

	ALL			SC			ST		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Primary(I-V)	97.9	100.7	99.2	109.5	112.4	110.9	107.8	105.7	106.7
Upper primary(VI-VIII)	88.7	97.6	92.8	97.8	107.4	102.4	95.4	98.2	96.7
Elementary(I-VIII)	94.5	99.6	96.9	105.8	110.8	107.9	103.4	103.1	103.3
Secondary(IX-X)	79.2	81	80	83.9	86.9	73.7	73.7	73.7	74.5
Sen Sec(XI-XII)	56	56.4	56.2	55.8	58	85.3	43.8	43.8	43.1
Higher Ed	25.4	23.5	24.5	19	19	19.9	15.6	15.6	14.2

Source: Ministry of Human Resources and Development (MoHRD, 2018: 11).

Table 5 shows that GERs for females are higher than for males within every caste group up to the secondary level. From senior secondary onwards, gaps start to appear in male– female GERs, and these gaps are higher among ST and SC communities. This suggests that staying enrolled in higher educational institutions is more challenging for girls from marginalised communities, possibly due to material disadvantage coupled with discrimination due to their stigmatised identities.

Based on the GERs, the Ministry of Human Resources and Development has calculated a Gender Parity Index (GPI) which is simply the ratio of female students to male students at each level of education. This is a good indicator because it is easy to understand: a value of one would mean perfect gender parity, a value of less than one would indicate that women are under-represented. Table 6 shows the GPI for 2015–16.

Table 6:
Gender Parity Index (GPI): 2015-16

	ALL	SC	ST
Primary(I-V)	1.03	1.03	0.98
Upper primary(VI-VIII)	1.10	1.10	1.03
Elementary(I-VIII)	1.02	1.05	1.00
Secondary(IX-X)	1.10	1.04	1.02
Sen Sec(XI-XII)	1.01	1.04	0.97
Higher Ed	0.92	0.91	0.83

Source, MoHRD (2018: 12).

Table 6 reiterates the point made in Table 5. Gender gaps start to appear from the post-secondary higher education level; however, for STs, we see gender gaps at the senior secondary level. The average annual drop-out rates in school education also do not reveal gender gaps within caste groups until the secondary level; however, the drop-out rates for SC and ST children are higher than the average for all.[11] This is not a function of school performance: the pass percentage for SC women in the Class XII final board examinations was 48.6 per cent, compared to 46.1 for SC men, 45.7 for ST women, and 46.4 for ST men, respectively. This is comparable to a pass percentage of 48.4 for all women and 43.1 for all men (MoHRD, 2018: 14).

A survey of the intersection of social group and gender in the field of education establishes the point made in Section 3.2, which is that while the decline in LFPRs is the highest among ST women, the rates of unemployment among these women are not the highest because the rise in unemployment is being driven by a rise in educated unemployment. This also suggests that the so-called drop in LFPR among ST women is highly likely to be a combination of demand side and measurement issues (more women in the grey zone) than a reflection of women dropping out of the labour force.

[11] The drop-out rates are available from the author upon request.

Image Credit: Hand in Hand International | Flickr.com

4 Female Self-employment and Women in Business

While women's participation in the labour force is subject to measurement errors and demand side constraints, what does the picture of women in self-employment and in business reveal? This is a pertinent question, also because India has a large programme for boosting rural livelihoods specifically targeted towards women via the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), in addition to several state-specific schemes.

Before we discuss gender gaps in self-employment, we should note that the Indian business sector is characterised by the problem of the 'missing middle'. The overwhelming majority of businesses are very small, micro enterprises, most in the informal sector. Within the micro enterprises, the single largest category is that of 'own account' workers, i.e. owner- operated enterprises, or one-person enterprises. These are bottom-of-the-rung, survivalist livelihood activities. A small minority of the self-employed could be called entrepreneurs, with medium sized enterprises mostly absent. Women tend to work on family-owned businesses, as we noted in Section 2. Thus, while in India self-employment cannot be equated with entrepreneurship, female entrepreneurs do exist.

The first point we need to note is that the gender gaps in entrepreneurship are larger than those in labour force participation. The actual numbers vary by source. Khera (2018:3), based on the World Bank Enterprise Survey, suggests that women entrepreneurs comprise about 10 per cent of the total number of entrepreneurs in India, and they are highly skewed towards smaller sized firms (98 per cent of women-owned businesses are micro enterprises and 90 per cent of these are in the informal sector). Korreck (2019) cites data from the Sixth Economic Census (January 2013–April 2014), which shows that out of 58.5 million businesses counted, 8.05 million were owned by women, which indicates that 13.76 per cent of entrepreneurs were women.

Korreck (2019) investigates the causes of low female entrepreneurship in India by interviewing women and men in business. She found that younger women did not see their gender as being a constraint to entrepreneurship, whereas older women did. Her own interviews found the presence of a subtle or unconscious gender bias ('business is not a woman's world'), which makes it harder for women to break through. This is also reflected in the way families react: women are expected to predominantly take care of the home and children. This suggests that the burden of being primarily responsible for domestic work (discussed in Section 2.1.5) is as valid a constraint for businesswomen as it is for wage workers.

A very critical barrier to women's business leadership is the masculine corporate culture and exclusively male networks. Korreck's male respondents described the 'Indian startup ecosystem ...[as] .. a "bro culture" of "alpha males", where empathy is lacking and talking about emotional challenges is perceived as a weakness' (2019: 5). Sexual harassment is another important factor that acts as a deterrent to women entering spaces that are dominated by men.

While Korreck's is a qualitative account, there are empirical studies of the factors that shape female entrepreneurship in India. Ghani et al. (2012) use detailed micro data on unorganised enterprises to analyse spatial determinants of female entrepreneurship in India in the manufacturing and services sector. They find that adequate infrastructure and education levels are associated with higher female entry. However, the presence of female entrepreneurs is a strong determinant of subsequent entry, i.e. higher female ownership among incumbent businesses within a district–industry pair is associated with higher female entry.

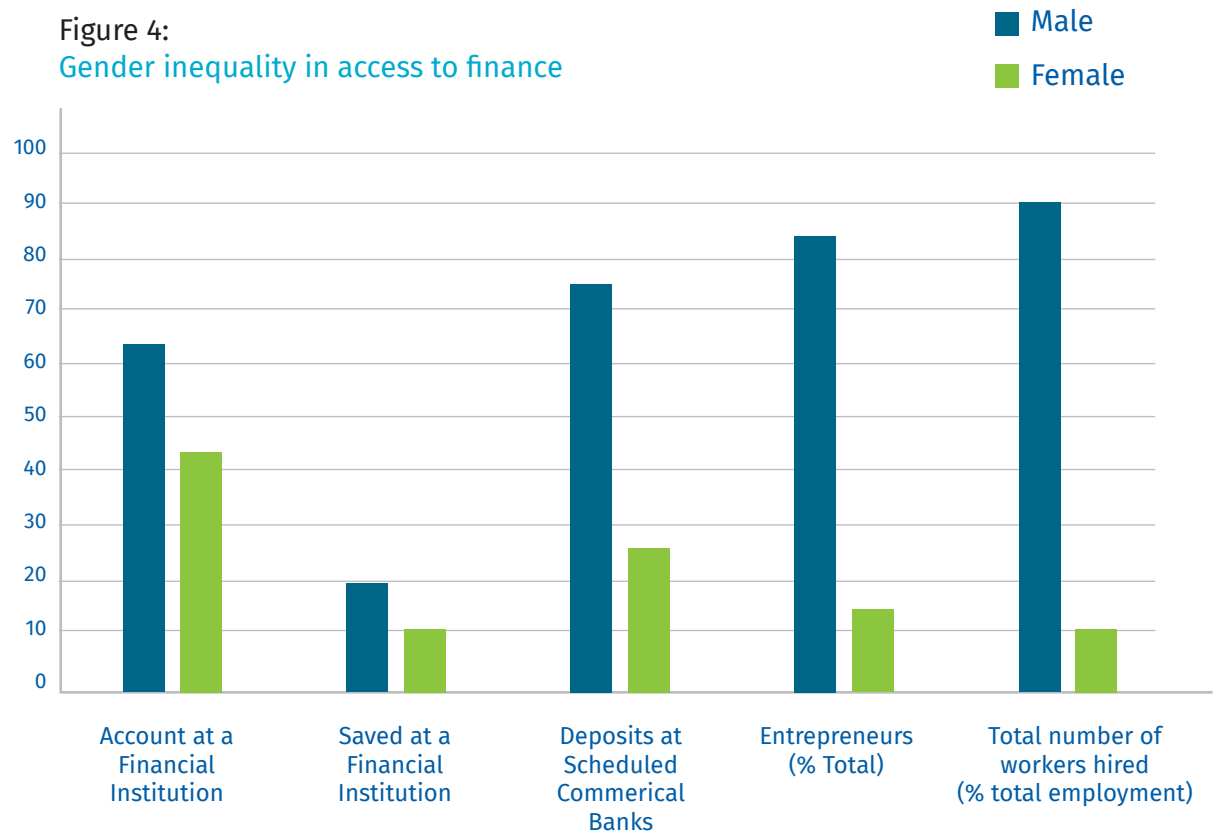
My joint work with Smriti Sharma (Deshpande and Sharma, 2013) uses data from two censuses of registered Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) manufacturing firms. This sector is very important as it contributes about 26 per cent of GDP and roughly 48 per cent of all exports. We find that while social group disparities in ownership marginally increased between 2001–2 and 2006–7, gender disparities have marginally decreased. The share of SC, ST, OBC and female ownership is higher in rural compared to urban areas. Based on descriptive evidence as well as rigorous growth regressions, we find that SC–ST enterprises are more survivalist than entrepreneurial. Consistent with the evidence on LFPRs, we find that female ownership is much higher among SC–ST firms than among upper caste firms. In contrast to other literature on female small business ownership, we find that female-owned and female-managed firms grow faster than their male counterparts, after controlling for other factors.

Seventy-nine per cent of women entrepreneurs were self-financed, suggesting that an

immediate policy measure to increase female entrepreneurship would be to increase access to institutional sources of finance (MSME, 2016–17: 86–87). Khera (2018) points out that there are a number of constraints specific to women entrepreneurs' ability to access finance. Restricted access to inheritance and land ownership turns women towards informal sources of finance as they rarely own property that could be offered as collateral to access institutional sources of finance. Banks also regard women as high-risk and avoid lending to them.

Figure 4 illustrates the large gender gaps in access to finance, which is one of the main reasons underlying large gender gaps in entrepreneurs and size of establishment (as measured by total number of workers hired), seen in the last two bars of Figure 4.

Figure 4:
Gender inequality in access to finance



Source, Khera (2018), p.3

Source: World Bank, Sixth Economic Census (2014)

Wage work and entrepreneurship are often posed as alternative choices, especially for members of disadvantaged groups and groups discriminated against. The implicit assumption is that obstacles to labour market participation might not be present in the arena of entrepreneurship. This is not a valid assumption at all, and disadvantaged minorities face hurdles and structural barriers in both spheres. Khera's analysis (2018) shows that the gains from closing the entrepreneurship gap are not independent of the conditions in other spheres, for instance, labour market. Thus, we should think of female entrepreneurship as complementary to women's labour market outcomes, and not as an alternative.

4.1 Women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs)

India has a long tradition of organising women in SHGs. The focus here is to target rural women, mostly poor. The current government umbrella programme for promoting rural livelihoods through self-employment in India, underway since 2011, is the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY–NRLM) under the aegis of the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD). DAY-NRLM aims at creating efficient and effective institutional platforms of the rural poor, enabling them to increase household income through sustainable livelihood enhancements and improved access to financial services. The programme envisages that through SHGs and their federations, the poor would be facilitated to get increased access to rights, entitlements and public services, diversified risk and better social indicators of empowerment.

Do these programmes work as intended? International literature shows mixed effects of SHGs on livelihoods (Banerjee et al., 2015; Brody et al., 2015; Morduch, 1999; Goetz and Gupta, 1996; Datta, 2015), with some studies finding stronger livelihood impacts than others. Thus, existing evidence indicates that the first order impact is not necessarily significant, but what is assumed to be the second order impact (namely, increase in empowerment) is most often realised, and might be the stronger effect.

My joint work with Shantanu Khanna (Deshpande and Khanna, 2019), based on a large primary survey in Maharashtra, confirms this. We show that regardless of whether the presumed first order effect of the programme—enhancing livelihoods—materialised, the main impact of SHGs on the ground was the creation or enhancement of social capital, which has the potential to strengthen the process of women's empowerment. We highlight how this creation/enhancement of social capital and increased empowerment was realised through the establishment of networks of weak economic ties. This result is more in line with the vision of early feminist inspired approaches to mobilising poor women into SHGs, which imagined that group solidarity through SHGs would help instil in women an awareness of their rights and the confidence to tackle opposition within their families and community.

We also find that SHG membership translates into greater personal efficacy and stronger propensity to collective action, for these women, compared to women higher in the caste hierarchy. This indicates that being a part of a savings group imparts greater agency to those whose voices are either less heard or actively silenced. In the context of the tenaciousness of caste hierarchies, this is a very important outcome of the programme, even if it was not originally intended as a major outcome.

Research on the impact of SHGs reveals that in some cases, encouraging wage earners to turn to self-employment (Garikipati, 2012) or to increase female labour force participation (Pandey et al., 2019) can have other positive effects in terms

of empowerment of member women (Deininger and Liu, 2013). However, most of the evidence for India suggests that SHGs do little to increase asset formation (Datta, 2015; Ostrom, 1994), or lead to higher wage premiums (Joshi and Desai, 2013). Repeated exposure to public spaces and increased participation has also resulted in more mobility without dependency on male family members.

Despite these shortcomings, the impact of SHGs in terms of several indicators of women's empowerment, such as increasing women's access to credit, capital, loans, household decision making, literacy and a support group, has been significant. In the long run, they could, and have been known to, play a vital role in mobilising women for participation in the labour force, as well as in the daily affairs of their communities to air and address their grievances (Brody et al., 2015). The expansion of the scope of SHGs into human development indicators such as in health, nutrition, enterprise training, political participation and education explains the popularity of SHG programmes despite not yielding as many tangible financial returns.

Image Credit: Tricycle | Flickr.com

5 The Vanishing Trade-Off? Women's Empowerment through the Lens of Intersectionality

Women's economic empowerment (WEE) can be described as 'the transformative process by which women and girls go from having limited power, voice, and choice at home and in the economy to having the skills, resources, and opportunities needed to access and compete equitably in markets and the agency to control and benefit from economic gains.'[12]

[12] https://ww2.gatesfoundation.orag/equal-is-greater/

A big component of opportunity is the possibility of paid employment. Does participation in paid work always make women more empowered? This is not a straightforward question, i.e. the answer is complicated. Most studies show a positive effect of women's paid work on her individual empowerment or on family outcomes. For instance, Afridi et al. (2016) show a direct positive effect on women's empowerment and an indirect effect on children's welfare. However, as has been noted, women need decent work opportunities as a precondition to increasing income and assets.[13]

Examining the question of women's empowerment through the lens of intersectionality reveals complex nuances.

Caste–Gender Overlap and Empowerment

Decision making and mobility indicators are seen as vital components of empowerment. While taboos on women increase with a rise in caste hierarchy, Dalit castes have historically been relatively more egalitarian towards women.[14] A lower caste woman is trapped in the cesspool of relative poverty, deprivation and sexual abuse with comparatively fewer restrictions on her public visibility. Among the upper castes, poverty level varies across the spectrum of castes (although, upper castes as a group are economically better off than the lowest castes). However, the lives of the women are shrouded in a mass of taboos. Does this enable a judgement about which section of women is better off or more empowered?

A unilateral answer to this is problematic, since there is a trade-off between material well-being, and autonomy and mobility. In reality, for Dalit women, this trade-off is more illusory than real. The fewer restrictions on working outside their homes could be more due to compelling poverty and less due to a radical belief in the fundamental right of women to work.

In two separate papers (Deshpande, 2002, 2007), I suggest that the distinction between the two caste rungs, based on the public visibility of women, is increasingly redundant. While the actual upward mobility of Dalits has been negligible, there has been a tendency to emulate traditions of the so-called upper castes, perhaps as part of the oft- discussed phenomenon of Sanskritisation.[15] Since 'constraints on women are an essential part of a rise in caste hierarchy (Liddle and Joshi, 1986: 59) (the rise could be real or presumed), it has meant the spread of practices that undervalue the role of women in the family and in the workplace (such as disinheritance from land, exclusion from the productive economy, removal from public life and seclusion inside the home) to castes that were known for their relative egalitarianism. This has been seen to be responsible for the spread, among other things, of the now ubiquitous practice of dowry.

Also, since women are seen as 'custodians of purity of the house and its members' (Srinivas, 1976: 229), this may imply tremendous pressure on them to conform to antiquated and conservative traditions that could, in reality, work against their desires. This spread of the undervaluation of women could well have altered the egalitarian nature of marital relationships among the lower castes. An observation that was valid 30 years ago now needs to be re-examined: 'among the less Sanskritised "low" castes, conjugal relations appear to be more perceptibly egalitarian than among the Sankritized high castes, and this is true of all the regions, including the Hindi-speaking areas'.[16]

[13] https://ww2.gatesfoundation.org/equal-is-greater/element/decent-work-opportunities/

[14] It is important to reiterate that Hinduism is not a monolithic religion, and religious practices and worship of deities vary with region and jati. However, certain common features mark the religious practices of the 'twice born' castes, and certainly constraints on women and a derogatory and discriminatory attitude towards Dalits is inherent in the upper caste religious code.

[15] This term is owed to Srinivas (1962), who believed that 'Sanskritisation is both a part of the process of social mobility as well as the idiom in which mobility expresses itself ... can also occur independently of the acquisition of political and economic power' (p. 9). This is how he describes the process: 'A low caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritising its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins, and the adoption of the Brahminic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, although theoretically forbidden' (p. 42).

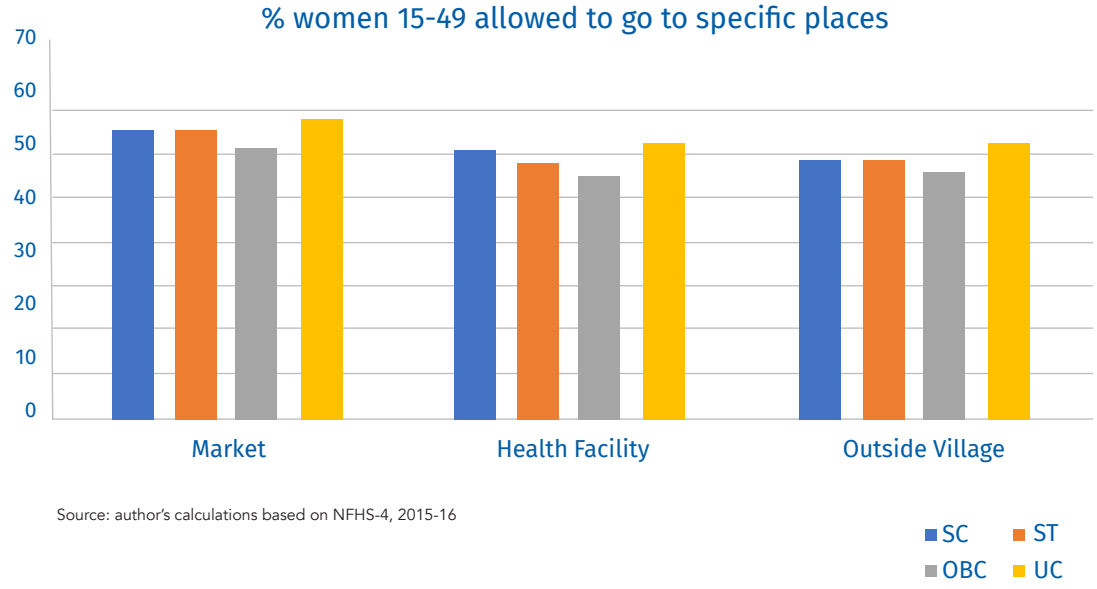
[16] Srinivas (1976: 231).

We can see this through a quick comparison of women across major social groups based on data from the National Family and Health Survey (NFHS) of 1998–99 which reveals that a greater proportion of upper caste women were involved in decisions about health care and purchasing jewelry compared to Dalit, tribal and OBC women. A greater proportion also had better material outcomes, such access to money, exposure to mass media (TV, radio, cinema/theatre), food intake (consuming milk or curd; pulses or beans; fruit; and green leafy vegetables at least once a week).

This picture of the non-existent trade-off appears to continue. In 2015–16, data from NFHS-4 reveals the following caste-wise differences in selected autonomy indicators. The percentages of women involved in the following decisions (either wife or husband and wife jointly) were as follows: How should women's cash earnings be used? 87 UC; 82 Dalit; 80 OBC); Own health care (77 UC; 75 Dalit; 72 OBC); Women's visits to family or relatives (77 UC; 75 Dalit; 73 OBC); Major household purchases (75 UC; 74 Dalit; 72 OBC). In terms of financial autonomy, NFHS-4 had questions related to women's access to money and credit: women with money deciding its use themselves (48 UC; 41 Dalit; 39 OBC), and women with bank accounts that they use themselves: similar distribution across caste groups.

Figure 5 shows selected mobility indicators for women across social groups. Greater proportions of UC women are allowed to go to the market, health facility and outside the village compared to other social groups.

Figure 5:
Women's mobility indicators



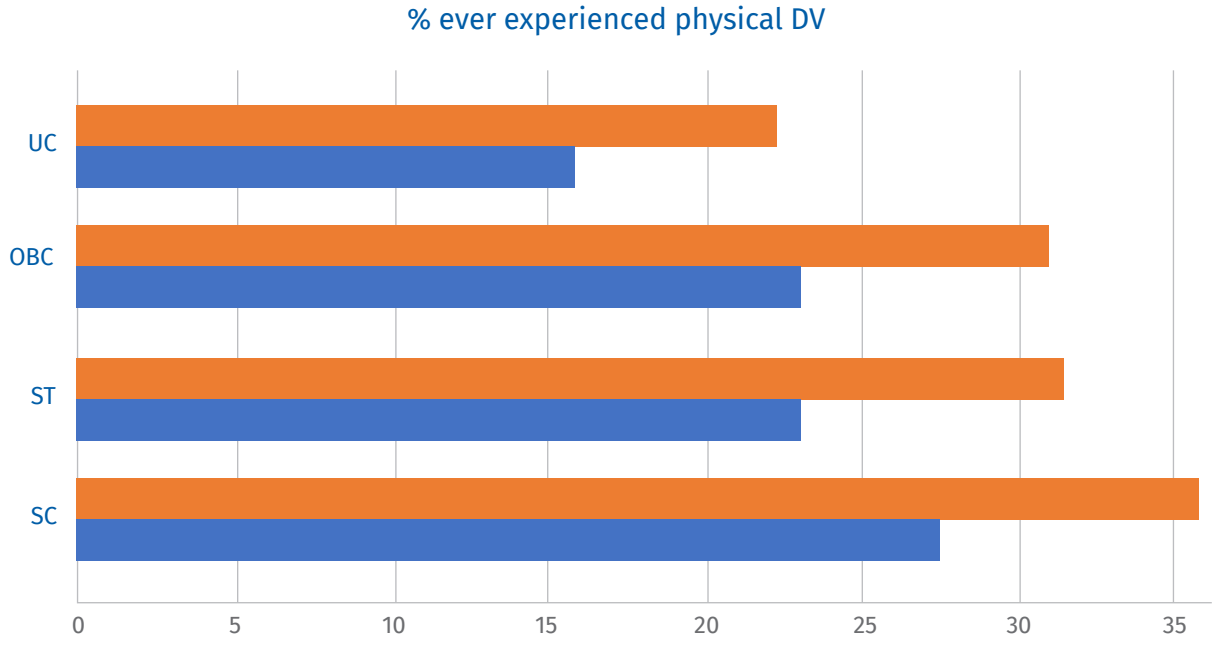
Source: author's calculations based on NFHS-4, 2015-16

Violence against Dalit women: Outside the home and inside

While the taboo on the public mobility of upper caste women has declined to the point that they report the highest percentages on a range of mobility indicators, Dalit women are subject to horrific violence by upper caste men to establish their caste supremacy: to remind Dalits of their 'rightful place'. There are virtually daily instances of sexual assault, rape, being paraded naked, forced prostitution and abuse towards Dalit women. Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) for 2007–17 shows that crimes against Dalits increased by 66 per cent; rapes of Dalit women doubled. Six Dalit women are raped every day. These are reported crimes and are likely to be underestimates. There is reason to believe that crimes against Dalits are often not reported for fear of retribution, or are not registered. If they are, they are often covered up as police colludes with the perpetrators who are from dominant castes.

While Dalit women are subject to horrific caste violence outside the home, inside the home, they are not immune from the patriarchal oppression and violence that characterise women from other groups. Figure 6 shows the percentage of women who ever experienced domestic violence in 1998–99 and 2015–16. Since these are self-reported figures, whether the higher proportions for Dalit women reflect an actual increase in domestic violence or whether they are more open to reporting it is a moot point. If it is the latter, it reveals greater agency on the part of Dalit women compared to women from other social groups.

Figure 6:
Percentage ever experienced physical domestic violence



Source: Author's calculations based on NFHS-4, 2015–16.

The net upshot of this discussion is that the trade-off between material prosperity and greater autonomy and mobility seems to have vanished. Subject as they are to prejudice, deprivation, discrimination and oppression, Dalit women appear to bear the triple burden of caste oppression, patriarchy and poverty, and are therefore the worst off.

Image Credit: Thessaly La Force | Flickr.com

Image Credit: Meena Kadri | Flickr.com

6 Policies: Affirmative Action and Beyond

The landscape of male–female disparities as well as intersectionality between gender and social identity reveals that with the exception of school education, the gaps between men and women, as well as within the different social groups within women, are either static or increasing.

This leads to the question of the appropriate policy responses towards redressing these inequalities. There are broadly two types of policies: one, policies that are not specifically targeted towards women, but have a favourable gendered impact; and second, affirmative action and other policies specifically targeted towards women. One of the most widespread policies of the latter type is the NRLM, aimed to encourage self-employment among women, which is briefly discussed in Section 4.

The most studied policy of the former type is that of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). Sahoo et al. (2019) find that NREGS is favourable to women's labour force participation, i.e. women are significantly less likely to exit from the labour force in districts with higher implementation of NREGS, as measured by the average labour expenditure. In NREGS, one-third women are targeted beneficiaries, and there is explicitly no gender discrimination as men and women are paid equal wages.

Das et al. (2015) explore the association between several policies and labour force participation. They find that men and women who hold an NREGS card are more likely to be in the labour force, and this probability is higher for women than men. They find that states with higher social sector spending (expenditure on social sectors as a percentage of the net State Domestic Product [NSDP]) have higher FLFP. A 1 percentage point rise in total social spending (controlling for other factors) leads to a 1.5 percentage point rise in FLFP. Specifically, an increase in education expenditure of 1 per cent of NSDP increases FLFP by 2 per cent, controlling for other factors. They also find that poor infrastructure (measured by total surfaced road lengths and transmission and distribution (T&D) losses of state power utilities) has a dampening effect on FLFP.

Lei et al. (2019) examine how village transportation infrastructure affects women's and men's agricultural and non-agricultural employment. Their results show that access by paved or unpaved roads and frequent bus services increase the odds of non-agricultural employment among men and women. The effect of road access on non-farm employment (relative to not working) is stronger among women than among men. This effect is further differentiated by community. They find that improved transportation infrastructure has a stronger positive effect on women's non-farm employment in communities with more egalitarian gender norms.

These studies suggest that increasing women's participation in the economy should not be seen only as a 'gender' issue. Several other gender-blind policies, such as infrastructure development, can have gender-specific (positive) impacts, reinforcing the point that women's empowerment should not be compartmentalised but mainstreamed and integrated into the entire policy framework.

6.1 Policy Trade-Offs

The complexities of policy interconnections was highlighted in Section 1. It is important to recognize that policies targeted to address one dimension of gender inequality could end up having unintended adverse impacts on other dimensions, two examples of which are discussed below.

Equalising inheritance

An important component of women's economic empowerment is asset ownership. In large parts of the world, daughters' inheritance rights are weaker compared to sons. As Agarwal (1997) highlights, property, land in particular, is a crucial determinant of the economic and social status of women. Women in developing countries have unequal inheritance rights, and this is an important reason underlying their continued dependence on men. There are a number of studies that document the impact of equalisation of inheritance rights on various aspects of women's empowerment (summarised in Bhalotra et al., 2017). In India, inheritance rights for women were equalised with the rights of men by five states between 1976 and 1994,

and finally for all states in 2005. Evidence for India also suggests positive effects of equalising inheritance rights, e.g. granting inheritance rights to women increases girls' schooling (Deininger and Liu, 2013; Roy, 2015).

However, the road to women's empowerment and equality is rocky; policies such as granting inheritance rights, which are important in themselves and are to be supported, can initially cause a perverse effect of the kind Bhalotra et al. (2017) establish. They find that female foeticide increased in response to inheritance reform. They find a significant decrease of 3.8-4.3 percentage points, which is outside the normal biological range, in the probability that a girl is born post-inheritance reform, post-ultrasound in households where the first-born child is a girl, rather than a boy. This is 61–69 per cent of the potential female births that did not occur due to ultrasound use between 1995 and 2005. This finding is indicative of the fact that awarding inheritance rights to women makes parents more averse to having a daughter.

Their results point to the slow changes in son preference, efforts to tackle which lead to another policy conundrum. In India, fertility has declined faster than son preference, and this has resulted in the 'intensification effect', or the increased elimination of girl children at lower order births (Das Gupta and Bhat, 1997), as parents aim to achieve their desired sex composition of children within a smaller family size. Kaur et al. (2016: 9) report studies showing a sharp decline in the girl-to-boy sex ratio for second order births when the first born was a girl, which indicates sex selective abortion at the second birth order. John (2018) documents how son preference (and daughter aversion) pose a challenge, where a small family of one boy and one girl is the norm. She argues that this seemingly egalitarian practice hides more muted forms of son preference, as families are averse to having both girls if they want two children and are likely to sex-select.

The policy of cracking down on prenatal sex determination seems to be a good response to tackle sex-selective abortions. However, Sharma and Rastogi (2020) find that while the passing of legislation to prohibit sex-selective abortions in India in the period between 1989 and 2003 did lead to an increase in female births, it also led to a widening of the gender gap in education between boys and girls: a direct outcome of explicit household discrimination against unwanted daughters.

This discussion indicates that (a) gender awareness must inform all policies, and (b) both intended and unintended (positive as well as negative) consequences of policies need to be reckoned with when we think of optimal policy designs.

6.1 Political Representation and Intersectionality

The normal process of economic development, on its own, may not increase women's participation in the political sphere. The continued low presence of women in the political spheres of the industrialised developed countries is testimony to that. India's actual record is impressive compared to most developed countries: a woman prime minister for 19 years, several women chief ministers, ministers of state and other important political functionaries at both the central and state government levels. However, perhaps more than in several parts of the world, women in India are under-represented in key decision-making bodies, a feature that prompted the introduction of affirmative action (reservations) in the electoral sphere.

India has caste and tribe quotas at all levels of elections, and a 33 per cent quota for women only at the level of local bodies. There

has been a long-standing demand for 33 per cent reservation for women at higher levels, which has led to debates within the women's movement about whether there should be caste quotas within the quota for women.

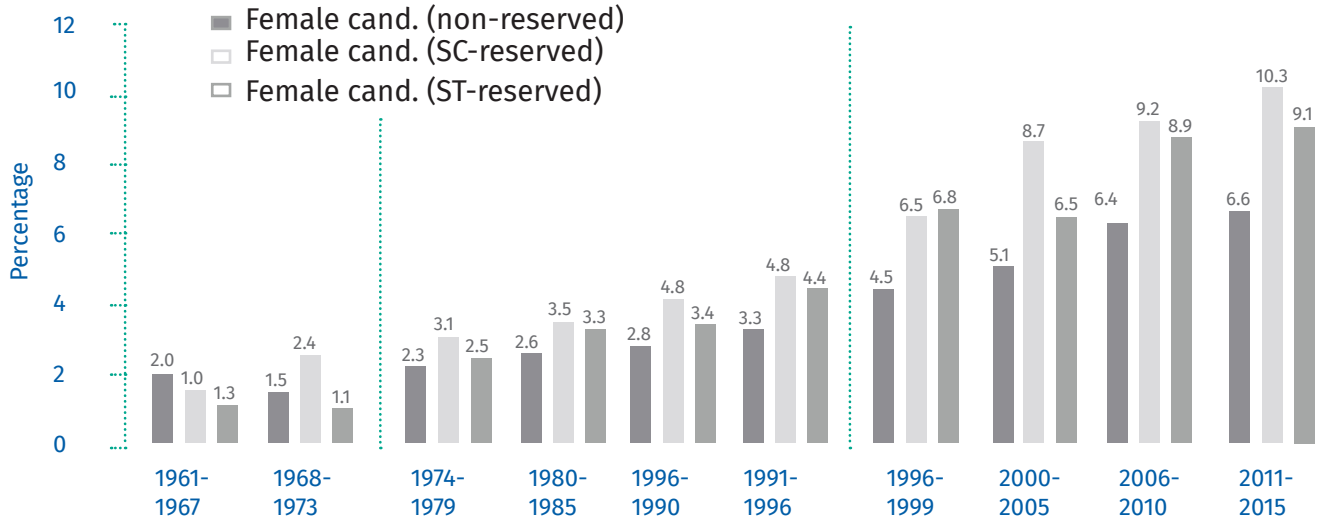
There is a large body of literature on the impact of women's quotas in local bodies on the nature of decision making and the nature/direction of public goods provisions (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Clots-Figueras, 2011), as well as on other outcomes, such as improved attitudes toward women leaders (Beaman et al., 2009), more education for girls, either by raising girls' own aspirations and/or their own aspirations for them (Beaman et al., 2012), or violence against women (Iyer et al., 2012).

However, even though the debate around caste quotas within women' quotas is not settled, the two types of reservations—those for women and those for social groups—have had an impact on each other. Thus, empirically, we see that reservations for women have had a caste impact and quotas for social groups have had a gendered dimension.

Cassan and Vandewalle (2017) revisit the literature on women's reservations in local bodies, and empirically show that reservation not only impacts policy implementation along the gender dimension (the main result of the literature), but it also has impacts on the distribution of benefits along the caste dimension: specifically, it leads to lower political participation by upper caste women.

There is no reservation for women in assembly elections. What has been the trend in terms of female candidates? Jensenius (2016) has compiled a complete data set of the more than 4,500,000 candidates running in state assembly elections, and more than 77,000 candidates running for parliamentary elections during 1961–2015. Women were nominated at somewhat lower rates to seats reserved for SCs and STs than to other seats in the early 1960s, at similar rates in the 1970s and 1980s, and at considerably higher rates in the 1990s and 2000s.

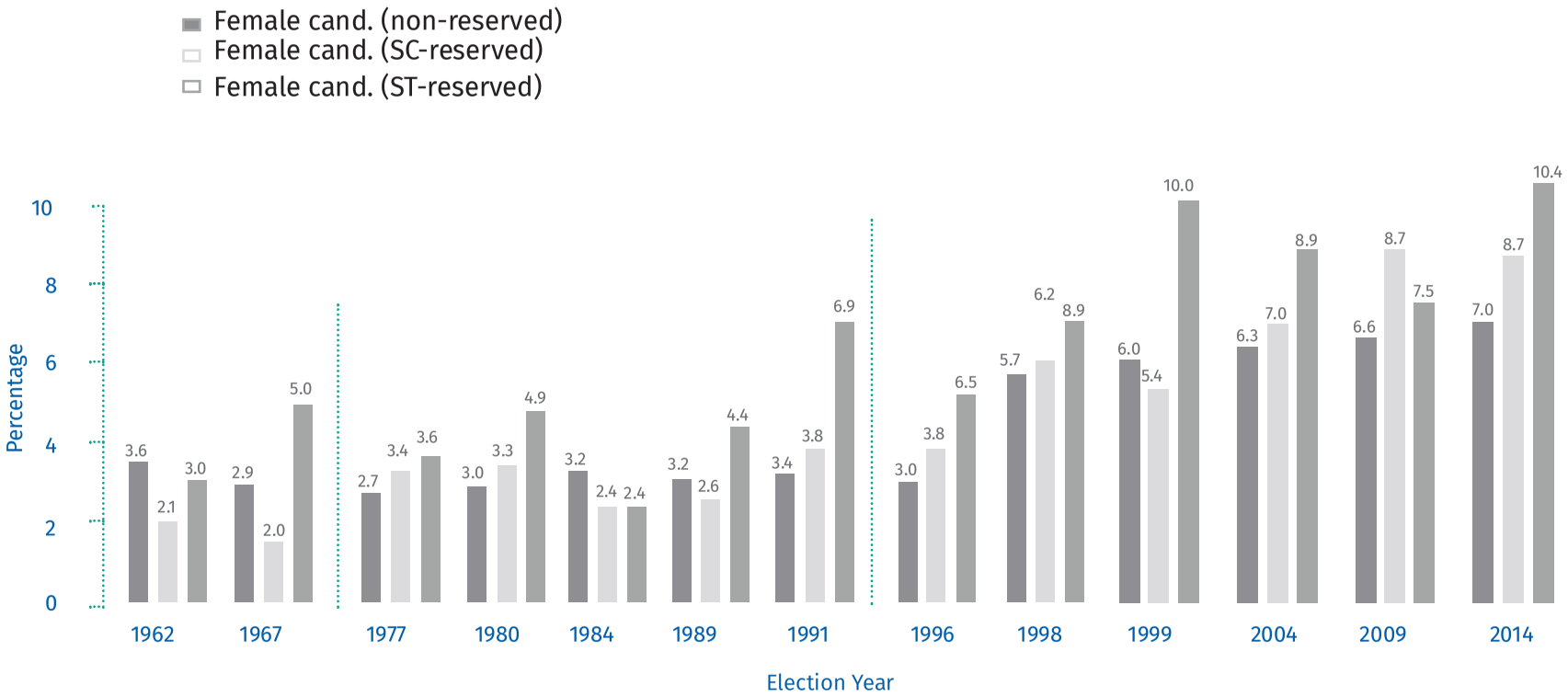
Figure 7:
Percentage of female candidates in non-reserved, Scheduled Caste (SC) reserved and Scheduled Tribe (ST) reserved state assembly constituencies, 1961–2015.



Source: Jensenius (2016: 453).

Figure 8:
Percentage of female candidates in non-reserved, Scheduled Caste (SC) reserved and Scheduled Tribe (ST) reserved parliamentary constituencies, 1962–2014.

Figures 7 and 8 show the percentage of female candidates in non-reserved, Scheduled Caste (SC) reserved and Scheduled Tribe (ST) reserved assembly (1961–2015) and parliamentary constituencies (1962–2014), respectively.



Source: Jensenius (2016), p. 453

We see that much of the increase in the nomination of female candidates in India in recent years has occurred in reserved constituencies. Political parties have been resisting changes in existing power hierarchies; however, as the pressure on parties to nominate more women has intensified, they have responded by nominating female candidates at the cost of their least powerful male politicians—SC and ST men. Jensenius (2016) argues that as reserved constituencies tend to be less competitive, the increase in women in these constituencies are evidence that quotas for lower castes have created a political space that is more accessible to women.

6.2 Job Quotas

India has in place a policy of affirmative action for SCs and STs, and more recently for OBCs in public sector jobs and higher educational institutions. These quotas are vertical reservations. Several states in India have implemented job reservations for women in public sector jobs. These are known as 'horizontal reservations' as they cross-cut all the categories designated for vertical reservations, i.e. for each of the social group categories, there would be some seats reserved for women. In terms of implementation, this implies that the process of formation of a roster whereby positions get assigned to groups (SC, SC–woman, OBC, OBC–woman, and so on) is enormously complicated and can be effective only in large organisations. This is the micro issue of implementation. The larger macro issue with job quotas is similar to that of caste quotas: since these are applicable to government jobs, their efficacy in terms of their ability to provide employment reduces as the number of government jobs shrink.

Table 7 shows the distribution of major Indian states by whether they have job reservations for women and the date from which reservations have been implemented.

Table 7:
Reservation for women in government jobs, Indian states

State	Policy	Year implemented	Percentage reserved		
Andhra Pradesh	yes	17.04.2018	33.33%		
Assam	Yes	13.05.2005	30%(rescently upgraded to 50%)		
Bihar	yes	28.12.2016	35%		
Chattisgarh	yes	03.02.1997	30%		
Gujrat	Yes	1997 & 2014	33%		
Haryana	yes	20.07.2006	33%		
Jharkhand	Yes	21.10.2014	50% for primary teachers		
Karnataka	yes	1978,1996 & 15.10	33%		
Madhya Pradesh	Yes	03.02.1997 & 28.1(	33%		
Maharashtra	Yes	25.05.2011	30%		
Meghalaya	Yes	27.04.2018	10% in police		
Odisha	Yes	23.12.1992	32.32%		
Punjab	Yes	18.03.2017	33%		
Rajasthan	Yes	07.06.99	30%		
Sikkim	yes	21.06.2018	30%		
Tamilnadu	Yes	28.3.1989	30%		
Telangana	Yes	28.05.2016	33.33%		
Uttarakhand	Yes	18.07.2001 & 24.07	30%		
Tripura	Yes	20.05.2018	10% in police		
Arunachal Pradesh	No	N/A	N/A		
Goa	No	N/A	N/A		
Himachal Pradesh	No	N/A	N/A		
Jammu & Kashmir	No	N/A	N/A		
Kerala	No	N/A	N/A		
Manipur	No	N/A	N/A		
Mizoram	No	N/A	N/A		
Nagaland	No	N/A	N/A		
Uttar Pradesh	No	N/A	N/A		
West Bengal	No	N/A	N/A		

Source: compiled by author from various sources

Table 7 shows that a number of states do not yet implement job quotas. Additionally, even for states that do implement quotas for women, various parliamentary committees have raised urgent issues related to provision of jobs for women. The Parliamentary Committee on the Empowerment of Women in its 2014 report decried the poor quality of facilities for working women, which included the absence of basic facilities at the workplace such as toilets. It pointed out that reservations for women are not sufficient. Employers, both in the public and private sectors, will have to provide conditions at the workplace that do not dehumanise women and do not add to their stress. In addition to toilets, other provisions such as creches and maternity benefits should be seen as minimum entitlements.

In addition to specific job quotas, there are some jobs exclusively held by women, such as frontline health workers: Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA), Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) workers and Auxiliary Nurse and Midwives (ANMs). These jobs are the backbone of India's public health system as these women are often the first port of call for several people, especially in rural India. Yet, these workers are poorly remunerated, not paid their meagre honorariums on time, and work under extremely hazardous and precarious conditions, as the experience of Covid-19 transmission has shown.

Image Credit: Emre Azizlerli | Flickr.com

7 Discussion and Concluding Comments

Persistently low rates of FLFP remain a challenge in India. A part of the issue, easier to fix, is mis-measurement. But even correcting for that, women's involvement in paid work remains low. The larger issue, harder to fix, is how to get more women into paid work. Sonalde Desai, in an opinion piece has argued that women not joining or dropping out of the workforce is nothing short of a national tragedy.[17] She points out that while India's demographic dividend is much celebrated, it is the squandering of the gender dividend that we need to be concerned about. The Economist calculated that if India were to 'rebalance its workforce' (i.e. correct the gender imbalance), India would be 27 per cent richer.[18] argues that.

Increased participation of women in paid work has several larger ramifications. In South Korea and Bangladesh, a rise in FLFP contributed substantially to a lowering of son preference. In India too, stereotypes about girls and boys are changing: qualitative studies reveal that girls are seen as caring and more likely to provide old age support, and boys are seen as selfish and uncaring. There has also been an improvement in the sex ratio at birth (which continues to be masculine, but less so). Total fertility rate is now at replacement level; family sizes have fallen.

Women are being educated, rapidly, and they want to work. But suitable opportunities are insufficient (the demand side), and the notion of suitability rests on compatibility with their 'primary' responsibility of domestic chores. This is the real cultural norm (and not religion or veiling) that constrains women's labour supply.

[17] https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/squandering-the-gender-dividend/article27819805.ece
[18] https://www.economist.com/leaders/2018/07/05/why-india-needs-women-to-work

7.1 Son Preference and Gender Discrimination Inside the Household

India is an ideal setting to examine these issues, as the prevalence of son preference is most obviously manifested in the skewed sex ratio at birth. The Indian economy has undergone extensive structural transformation over the last three decades, as manifested in greater urbanisation, migration, greater diversity in sources of livelihoods, and a movement away from traditional farming occupations. This process has been accompanied by various government schemes aimed at enhancing the value of a daughter through subsidies and other monetary incentives, along with changes in inheritance laws. Additionally, vigorous media campaigns emphasising that daughters are just as capable as sons are actively promoted by the government.

Other countries with strong son preference, specifically China and North Korea, have managed to achieve an improvement in child sex ratio through targeted, explicit state-sponsored interventions towards gender equality. Such interventions might not be easily replicable in democracies.

The South Korean story is similar to India in that they have also seen extensive structural change since 1991. As the pre-industrial social organisation in South Korea disintegrated with rapid urbanisation, increasing female education and participation in the labour force, the relationship between parents and their children changed in certain key dimensions. One, daughters were economically as capable of providing parental support as were sons; and two, whether old age care would be provided by the son or the daughter depended more on who lived closer to the parents. Both these factors helped undercut the material basis for son preference (Chung and Das Gupta, 2007).

In India, we do not see similar processes unfolding. We see clear evidence of increased gender bias in quality of schooling which is driven by families with meta son preference. Prima facie, this suggests that the combination of factors such as patrilocality and near universality of marriage continue to sustain the notion that girls are paraya dhan, literally another's property. Families might perceive that they will not benefit from investment in their daughters' education, as they will move away to their marital homes, a phenomenon described as ‘watering a neighbour's garden’. Adding to this is the deep-rooted and persistent pressure of generating a dowry, which further reinforces the belief that investing in higher quality education for girls is a waste of precious resources.

Also, the total fertility rate (TFR) is rapidly declining in India, from 3.16 to 2.66 between 2001 and 2011, based on national Census figures. The sample registration system data (SRS) for 2016 shows a TFR of 2.3 (with 1.8 in urban areas). There has been some change in strong son preference attitudes in India, as can be seen in the improvement in the sex ratio at birth (SRB) from a peak of 113.6 in 2004 to 110 in 2012. This is still above the natural average of 105 but is an improvement to be noted.

The change in son preference is slow and uneven but is perceptible. Qualitative studies reveal the beginnings of a new gender stereotype: caring daughter and unreliable sons, especially after their marriage. The normal route of women being valued through their economic contribution to

the family is not on the cards for India, as there is a decline in the already low female LFPRs.

Growth, development and structural shifts in India have not acted as natural antidotes to gender discrimination. Sex selection as well as educational investments in children appear to be part of family strategies to achieve upward mobility (Basu and Desai, 2016; Kaur et al., 2016; Kaur and Vasudev, 2019). Meta son preference (the desire to have at least one son) could be an element of an upward mobility strategy of the new elite: aim at small families and focus on children's success and aspire for at least one (successful) son.

7.2 Urgent Need to Recognise Intersectionality

In conclusion, we see that gender equality in various economic dimensions and women's economic empowerment remains a significant challenge in India. It is clear that economic growth, whether high or low, is not the main factor in shifting the needle on gender equality. Evidence for India shows that a variety of policies impact gender equality; therefore, gender needs to be mainstreamed into the entire policymaking apparatus, and not be compartmentalised into a secondary priority.

However, much of existing research focuses on identity silos. As we noted in Section 3, this privileges dominant groups within single identities. The intersection of caste and gender reveals that Dalit women bear the triple burden of caste, gender and class. Field et al. (2010) implemented a business training intervention through SEWA Bank and found that upper caste women responded very positively, indicating that the training helped them overcome knowledge deficits caused by social restrictions/norms. This experiment suggests that modernisation and structural change could benefit Dalit women, unless discrimination and/or Sanskritisation edge them away from economic activity.

To tackle inequality fundamentally, we need to mainstream evidence-based research on intersectionality which could inform policy.

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APPENDIX A

The report of the Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2017–18, conducted by the National Sample Survey, outlines the architecture of key labour force indicators succinctly in a table:

4. Unemployment Rate (UR): UR is defined as the percentage of persons employed among the persons in the labour force

2.37.1 The architeture of key labour force indcations are given below in tabular form:

Activity Profile		Key Indicators
Activity status(code)	Category of persons	
11,12, 21, 31, 41, 42, 51, 61, 62, 71, 72	Workers	1. Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR): no of employed persons + no of unemployed persons ----------*100 Total population 2. Workers Population Ration (WPR): no.of employed persons ----------*100 Total populations 3. Proportions Unemplyoed (PU): no.of unemployed ----------*100 no.of umemployed persons ----------*100 no.of employed persons + no.of unemployed persons
81, 82	Unemployed	
91, 92 93, 94 95, 97 98, 99	not in labour Force	

Note: Activity status codes, 42, 61, 62, 71,72, 82, and 98 are used only in the current status and the remaining activity status codes are used in both usual status and in current status.

Definitions of labour force and LFPRs based on NSS.

Labour force, or the economically active population, refers to the population which supplies or seeks to supply labour for production and, therefore, includes both 'employed' and 'unemployed' persons.

The NSS estimates of labour force have been based on the following approaches:

- according to the usual status (principal status + subsidiary status), i.e. by considering usual principal and subsidiary activity together;
- according to the current weekly status (CWS)

The labour force according to the usual status (ps+ss) is obtained by considering the usual principal status and the subsidiary status together. The estimate of the labour force in the usual status (ps+ss) includes (a) the persons who either worked or were available for work for a relatively larger part of the 365 days preceding the date of survey, and (b) those persons from among the remaining population who had worked for at least 30 days during the reference period of 365 days preceding the date of survey.

The labour force in CWS gives the average picture of labour force participation in a short period of one week during the survey period. The estimate of labour force according to the CWS approach gives the number of persons who worked for at least one hour or was seeking/ available for work for at least one hour on any day during the seven days preceding the date of survey.

APPENDIX B

Capturing Women's Unpaid Economic Work in Household Surveys

Deshpande and Kabeer (2019) paid particular attention in the questionnaire to questions relating to women's work. The problem of measuring women's work in the Indian context has both practical and conceptual dimensions. On the practical side, there is the problem of under-reporting. Both interviewers and respondents in large-scale surveys tend to discount many aspects of women's work. In particular, they tend to view work that is unpaid and carried out within the domestic domain as an extension of housework (Jain, 1996; Deshpande, 2002, 2017; Chaudhary and Verick, 2014). In view of this, it is especially important to emphasise training of field workers and enumerators in order to sensitise them to these multiple issues related to measurement of women's work.

However, the problem is not simply one of under-reporting; it also relates to the definition of labour force activity used in official statistics. The NSS obtains the work status from Block 5 of the Employment–Unemployment Survey (EUS) in which work details of each individual household member are listed. The head of the household typically answers this, which makes it a highly likely source of under-reporting. Block 5.1 of the NSS EUS is essentially a household roster, where the respondent (typically the head of the household) is asked to provide details about the 'usual principal activity status' of each member of the household. This is the activity status of the person in the 365 days preceding the survey based on the 'majority time criterion', i.e. the activity on which the person spent a 'relatively long time'. However, before this question is asked, the NSS surveyors make a dichotomous classification between 'those in the labor force' (working or not working) and those not in the labour force. The latter are classified as out of the labour force, and all follow up questions about the usual principal activity status are asked only to those who are classified as 'in the labor force' (p. A-6, NSS, 2011–12). Thus, if women are more likely to be classified as out of the labour force because their work is either home-based or unpaid or both, then no follow up questions about the nature of their involvement in productive work will be sought.

Deshpande and Kabeer decided to use the NSS definition, but to extend it to capture the ILO definition and to include additional questions in order to ensure more accurate estimates of women's labour force activities. They also asked the questions of the woman herself, rather than the head of household or any other male respondent, and finally, given the interrupted and seasonal nature of women's work, they did not restrict the number of days they were involved in an activity for it to count as labour force participation. For these reasons, their survey is an improvement over the standard questions in household surveys.

The first question was a dichotomous one, which asked women whether they had engaged in any economic activity in the past 12 months, either earning an income or doing work that had saved household money. While the latter category falls into expenditure-saving activity of the kind that is within the SNA boundary, it is excluded from NSS questionnaires. Those who answered 'yes' to this question were classified as economically active by conventional criteria.

Second, to those who answered 'no' to this question, they asked a series of questions about different kinds of work that are likely to be considered part of their domestic duties, but which fall within the SNA production boundary. These questions are analogous to the NSS EUS Block 7 questions that are administered to all those who have been classified as 'attended to domestic duties' or 'attended domestic duties

and engaged in free collection of goods for household use' (NSS codes 92 and 93), which are made up almost exclusively of women.

Specifically, they asked about the following activities: working on kitchen gardens/orchards; rearing poultry; free collection of fish, small game, wild fruit, vegetables for household consumption; husking paddy; preparing jaggery (gur); preservation of meat or fish; weaving baskets/mats; making cowdung cakes for fuel; tailoring/weaving; and tutoring of own or other children free of charge.

The NSS questions ask women to answer 'yes' or 'no' to each of these questions. Again, Deshpande and Kabeer tweaked this format slightly. They asked about each activity separately in a set of two questions: first, whether they were involved in that activity, and second, if they did the activity just for own use/consumption or to support the family's income generating work.

Those who answered 'yes' to the second question, i.e. those who did these activities as income support, were classified as economically active. If women had answered 'no' to the first question, as well as to the series of follow-up questions, but their households possessed agricultural land or livestock, these were classified as 'economically active' because of the evidence that women who belong to such households contribute to household economic activity as a part of their domestic duties. Several women reported doing multiple activities; we count all women who do at least one activity in this definition (i.e. additional activities are not double counted).

These women were classified as economically active according to expenditure saving criteria. It is worth noting that this extended definition does not include care work and domestic chores, but only those unpaid activities that fall within the conventional boundary, frequently treated by women themselves as part of their routine domestic duties.

Finally, all remaining women, those who were not classified as economically active by either conventional or expenditure saving criteria, were classified as out of the labour force (OLF). These are women who do at least one of the activities counted in the extended definition of production for home use. Given that these are expenditure saving economic activities, the demarcation between doing them exclusively for home use versus for economic help is fuzzy. Thus, the line dividing women who are included in the expanded definition of economic activity, and those classified as unpaid/OLF, is blurred. All women do at least one economic activity, either for home use or as unpaid labour in household economic activities.

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