THE INDIA FORUM
A JOURNAL-MAGAZINE ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

September 23, 2024

How Marriage and Motherhood Skew the Labour Market

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Life events like marriage and motherhood, which are near-universal among Indian women, have been found to play a significant role in womenâ??s decision to join or leave the workforce. So too sexual harassment at the work place, and now climate change.

The low labour force participation of Indian women has generated much discussion in academic and policy circles in the context of increasing the current low levels of employment. Suggested policy interventions range from improving minimum wage rates and social security benefits to providing childcare support at the gram panchayat level â?? burdens reflecting demand and supply constraints and the complex factors underlying them (Seth and Chakravarthy 2023; Jose 2020). Indeed, the stylised U-shaped feminisation hypothesis that relates womenâ??s employment to the structural development of the economy encompasses supply and demand factors (Goldin 1994).

In the early stages of economic growth, women drop out of the labour force due to a contraction in agriculture and the lack of suitable jobs in manufacturing. There is also an income effect that keeps women out of employment. As the service sector expands and womenâ??s education improves, the rising opportunity cost of their time draws them back into the labour force. This relationship is, however, not entirely borne out in the Indian context, where other factors come into play (Lahoti and Swaminathan 2016; Klasen and Pieters 2015).

This short piece highlights critical channels for womenâ??s labour supply and is not meant to be a thorough review of all the factors affecting womenâ??s labour force participation. I discuss lifecycle events, marriage, and motherhood, which are universal to most Indian women. Two other factors â?? sexual harassment at work and in public spaces and the emerging challenge of climate change â?? are also discussed briefly.

Motherhood and marriage

Gender norms around childcare are particularly sticky and have a significant bearing on womenâ??s ability to take up and retain employment. 'Motherhood penalty' refers to the negative impact of having a child on womenâ??s labour market outcomes, both in terms of participation and earnings. Kleven et al. (2019), using Danish administrative data from 1980 to 2013, provide evidence on the impacts of children on womenâ??s labour force participation, hours of work, wage rates, and choice of occupation. The study finds that child penalties persist over the long run and contribute to a gender gap in earnings of almost 20%, even in a country that was ranked second in the European Union in terms of gender equality indicators in 2022.

Several factors mediate the effects of motherhood, making any generalisations across countries fraught. Countries with low levels of economic development and large informal economies do not exert the same penalty on mothers with young children. Informal sector employment (particularly in agriculture, where a large proportion of women are employed) is flexible, with the location often close to the home or even home-based, allowing women to continue their employment without no breaks or minimal ones even after childbirth. Using data from Karnataka and Rajasthan, Lahoti et al. (2023) found no impact on womenâ??s labour force participation after the first childbirth.

This apparent flexibility that allows women to continue without a break even after childbirth hides the precarity of employment in the low-wage informal sector, which offers no benefits and does not have any contracts, either verbal or written. The penalty here is not in terms of the inability to continue employment but the inability to take time off for recovery and to breastfeed and bond with the child.

Unsurprisingly, the motherhood penalty for women in the formal sector could mimic the effects found in the more advanced economies of the global South. In Chile, with the birth of the first child, womenâ??s formal employment declines, while there is an increase in informal employment (Bernielle et al. 2021). The authors note that the informal sector is attractive to new mothers due to the flexible nature of jobs that allows them to continue working while handling childcare responsibilities. The weak benefits in the formal sector further drive this movement.

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Though well-meaning, the Maternity Benefit Act (1961), amended in 2017, is a poorly crafted policy that applies only to the formal sector. Even if this Act were fully implemented and supported women (which it fails to do), it would still impact only a tiny proportion of women in Indiaâ??s workforce.

A vital feature of the 2017 amendment enhanced maternity leave for women in the formal sector to 26 weeks from 12. The onus of financing this benefit is the employerâ??s, with no contribution from the government. This policy, coupled with the lack of paternity leave, makes women expensive to hire and retain. And, predictably, the market moved to substitute women with men (Gupta 2023). Another negative aspect of the scheme is the signal that fathers need not worry about childcare. A mandated paternity leave would not have disincentivised womenâ??s employment and could have opened conversations about the role of fathers in childcare.

Post-pandemic, flexible work arrangements have gained more traction and could potentially offer a solution to attracting women to the labour market. Using a variety of flexible work arrangements, Ho et al. (2022) find that in West Bengal women are most receptive to employment opportunities that allow them to work from home, which enables them to attend to their childcare responsibilities. Two other results from the study are noteworthy. Flexibility has a cost in terms of performance, primarily due to interruptions in workflow. On the other hand, an encouraging result is that such work arrangements promote a virtuous cycle of employment, including a movement towards less flexible future job opportunities and a positive shift in gender attitudes towards womenâ??s employment.

The authors raise the concern of ghettoisation of women in flexible, low-paying jobs if such an arrangement becomes more permanent. In the entirely different context of the US economy, women pay the price for flexibility in highly paid occupations such as MBAs and lawyers due to a non-linear relationship between hours worked and earnings per hour (Goldin 2014).

Extending this research to explore the implications of flexibility on menâ??s performance would be insightful. If workflow interruptions are a driver of reduced employee performance, it is fair to conjecture that men are less likely to face this issue, which is driven by gendered expectations around primary responsibility for childcare or household duties.

> One study found that that men prefer spouses who are not employed or are in relatively feminine occupations. Women in non-traditional occupations who want to continue working are least attractive as potential spouses.

Unlike motherhood, there is scarce literature on the impact of marriage on womenâ??s labour force participation. In a patriarchal society with strict honour codes surrounding the purity of women, it is a reasonable expectation that young women are not allowed to work pre-marriage. Families may worry about unmarried daughters mixing with strangers and breaking social norms that may hurt their prospects in the marriage market. Transgression of social norms typically has adverse cascading effects on the entire family and provides additional fodder for policing womenâ??s movements.

A recent study provides indirect evidence on how norms may interact with marriage and labour markets. Afridi et al. (2023) elicit menâ??s preferences on spousal employment by conducting an experiment using an online matrimonial platform. The experiment consists of varying womenâ??s employment status, occupation, and preference for continuing employment after marriage while keeping other attributes constant. The results are sobering.

Broadly, the study finds that men prefer spouses who are not employed or are in relatively feminine occupations. Women in non-traditional occupations who want to continue working are least attractive as potential spouses. The study was conducted in Bengaluru and Delhi, and in keeping with expectations, the results are mainly driven by â??upperâ?• caste men from Delhi. Lahoti et al. (2023) found the opposite in their study of largely rural women in Rajasthan and Karnataka, where paid work for women registers a sharp increase upon marriage, with the effect particularly pronounced amongst those from poorer households.

Sexual harassment and violence

With the rape and murder of a resident doctor at R.G. Kar government college in Kolkata, the issues of sexual harassment and violence against women are prominent in the media. The Kolkata incident shines a spotlight on safety at the workplace, without the traditional patriarchal deflections that question womenâ??s choices, including their clothes, morality, and mobility.

In addition to being a violation of a fundamental human right to live without fear and violence, the spectre of sexual harassment has a dampening effect on womenâ??s employment activity (Chakravorty et al. 2018; Siddiqui 2022). Media reported sexual violence against women reduces younger womenâ??s labour supply. The effect is short-lived but significant, nevertheless. The fear of sexual harassment not only affects working-age women, but also their educational choices. Borker (2018) finds that young women are willing to compromise on the quality of their college if it is on a safer travel route. These sub-optimal education choices are of concern as they restrict women from achieving their full potential.

Sexual harassment of women at the workplace cuts across spatial and occupational boundaries to include females of all hues: domestic workers, wage labourers, nurses, doctors, IT workers, and so on (Chaudhuri 2008; PRIA Gender Team 2020; Social and Rural Research Institute 2012). Many women cannot exit the labour market due to financial precarity. Still, those who can afford to do so often drop out, either voluntarily or under pressure from their families who fear for their safety.

There is mixed evidence on the relationship between intimate partner violence and employment. Womenâ??s economic autonomy can prevent violence or invite a backlash due to the transgression of gender norms. Intimate partner violence impacts womenâ??s labour supply in several dimensionsâ??fear of violence can be a deterrent to seeking employment, and the experience of physical violence can lead to interruptions in work. At the same time, psychological stress due to violence (anxiety, depression, low self-esteem) can have long-term consequences on womenâ??s overall well-being, including economic well-being.

Climate change

Any discussion of development is incomplete if we do not account for the multi-headed hydra of climate change that is at our doorstep. The ramifications of climate change for human and planetary well-being run deep, but there is much to be understood and learnt. What we do know is that inequalities of all kinds have a mutually reinforcing relation with climate change. Inequalities exacerbate adverse impacts and are also amplified by the shocks of climate change.

> A shock due to droughts affects womenâ??s employment more than men as women are less able to diversify from agriculture to non-farm activities.

Recent evidence suggests that gender inequalities are interlocked in a vicious cycle with climate change, which has implications for health, employment, and income (Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center 2023). Globally, womenâ??s employment and earnings are affected negatively by climate change largely due to their inability to take advantage of non-agricultural opportunities, partly because of low skills, restricted mobility to migrate, and increased domestic duties (Fruttero et al. 2023). This is also borne out in India where a shock due to droughts affects womenâ??s employment more than men as women are less able to diversify from agriculture to non-farm activities (Afridi et al 2022).

With heat waves being experienced globally, there is an urgency to act. A new International Labour Organization (ILO) report estimates that 70% of the working population (2.41 billion) is exposed to excessive heat (Flouris et al. 2024). As a silent killer, heat waves are profoundly devastating for vulnerable and marginalised populations, where women are overrepresented. Gendered responsibilities and systemic disadvantages render women more vulnerable to heat waves than men, with gender gaps in access to cooling devices and other physical and financial assets.

There is increased demand for care work due to illness and school closures that reduce womenâ??s paid work options. In rural areas, scarcity of water and firewood forces women to walk long distances in the heat to cater for household requirements. Exposure to extreme heat during pregnancy negatively impacts maternal health and the labour supply later in life, which increases their probability of working in the unskilled sector (Gao et al. 2023).

Discussion

An underlying thread that ties the disparate factors affecting womenâ??s employment together is patriarchal gendered norms and expectations. While norms are not static, they are sticky and not easily amenable to change.

Womenâ??s responsibilities as primary caregivers and the gendered division of labour at home force them to either exit the labour force or search for jobs that are compatible with their domestic responsibilities. The market solves this problem by offering flexible hours or part-time employment, but a cost is extracted in terms of low wage rates and possible loss of benefits. The bigger issue is that the

solution accommodates gender norms rather than challenging them.

Womenâ??s role as secondary income earners is reinforced; there is little incentive for men to share household responsibilities with women. The status quo cannot change unless there are policy initiatives that encourage men to engage in care giving (mandated paternity leave, provision of flexible hours to men and women, for example), or interventions that promote equitable gender attitudes in school children (Dhar et al. 2022) or engage the community in changing norms to prevent a backlash (Andrew et al. 2022).

Violence against women, within the household and in society, is often a response to the non-fulfilment of gendered responsibilities or transgressions of accepted social boundaries. Factors that threaten menâ??s identity as breadwinners or protectors (unemployment status or economic insecurity) are predictors of violence against women. Even when gender identity threats do not result in violence, women may tone down their ambitions or appear less successful to ensure stability in household relationships.

> Putting aside the meagre earnings and the conditions of work, engaging in an economic activity provides an opportunity for women to leave the confines of their homes.

There is also evidence that an increase in annual temperature can increase intimate partner violence (Zhu et al. 2023), although the effects of other climate shocks on violence are mixed (Fruttero et al. 2023). The climate change crisis highlights the role of gender and other structural inequalities in disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations, creating barriers to new employment opportunities, and broadly preventing a just transition that is inclusive and equitable. On the flip side, it presents an opportunity to address entrenched gender norms and ensure women are represented in decision-making and leadership roles.

An overarching goal of womenâ??s labour force participation is greater agency and enhanced well-being across multiple dimensions. Being engaged in an economic activity can be a whole new experience and open unexplored vistas. Of course, one can debate if the work is decent and fulfilling. For most women in the Indian context, it is unlikely to be so. However, putting aside the meagre earnings and the conditions of work, engaging in an economic activity provides an opportunity for women to leave the confines of their homes. Depending on the circumstances, this could be usefulâ??help them gain confidence by navigating public transport, meeting co-workers, building social capital, and in some instances even a respite from violence.

On the other hand, the earnings contribution is relevant for bolstering household income and enhancing voice and agency within and outside the household. There is sufficient evidence that suggests that the identity of the income earner is paramount in household decisions for outcomes that are of value to women themselves. A long-term implication of womenâ??s employment is the change in intergenerational attitudes it can foster, presumably by providing non-traditional role models for boys and girls (Deshpande and Kabeer 2024; Ho et al. 2023).

It is useful to widen the gaze when discussing womenâ??s employment. Several intersecting identities (caste, religion, region,) in addition to class, shape womenâ??s choices and opportunities. Crucially, gender norms, expectations, and responsibilities also vary by class and other identities. Interventions aimed at moving social norms to reduce gender equality, while emphasising current constraints, must start with children and challenge the biases and stereotypes they are exposed to in their daily lives. It is a long-term engagement, but sowing the seeds of change early can move the needle on regressive societal attitudes and aspire for gender equality in all spheres.

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