

Of Inequalities and Hopes: The Gendered Connotations of the Economic Liberalization of India

Ritwika Patgiri

Department of Economics

South Asian University

Abstract

Globalization and liberalization have indeed led to incredible changes in the socio-economic front of India. Started in 1991, India has often been termed as a highly globalized economy, but the effects of this liberalization are different for different groups. With a story of a historic inequality against women, it is interesting to understand if the liberalization has worsened or made the conditions of women better. Dr. Amartya Sen has defined gender inequality as “not one homogenous phenomenon, but a collection of disparate and interlinked problems.” This inequality could be in terms of a low female-male sex ratio, access to education and health, mortality rates, female labour force participation rate or inequality of ownership of assets. What I am interested and seek to understand in this paper is the phenomenal low female labour force participation rate in India, which has been continuously declining since the liberalization process. Nobel Laureate Dr. Sen was the first one to coin the term “missing women” to refer to the low sex-ratio or the women-men ratio, especially in South Asia which can be as low as 0.94 or even lower. The sex ratio in India has improved over time, along with educational enrolment rates, however, what remains striking is the continuous decline in female labour force participation rate (LFPR). There is a new form of “missing women” in the Indian labour force despite a growing economy and infrastructure development, showing a biased form of post-liberalization development.

My attempt in this paper would be to understand the reasons behind this continued trend of falling female LFPR, a trend of inequality in the already prevalent gender related inequalities relating to access in health care as well as education. The LFPR in India was 35% in 1990 and 27% in 2018, a stark fall despite an expanding market economy which has refuelled the emergence of traditional gender stereotypes with widening gender pay gaps. While access to education and health has improved over time, the fall in female LFPR could accrue to faulty

infrastructure and skewed-gender-biased policies. There has been an expansion of transportation and communication infrastructure in the country, but fewer and fewer women have taken up these opportunities to access employment. Economists cite the feminisation U hypothesis as a possible reason behind this, with education and female workforce participation rates having a U-shaped relationship. What I try to understand in this paper is the reason beyond this, an inequality deep rooted in migratory trends as well as infrastructure bias.

Introduction

The story of Indian liberalization starts in 1991 when India carried out a dramatic series of economic reforms to cope better with the world. Markets were opened up, financial as well as structural reforms were carried out, and the Indian growth story thus officially begun. If we look at the statistics for India ever since the reforms in terms of growth rates, sex ratios, access to primary education, female enrolment rates, access to health, maternal mortality rates and infant mortality rates, we get an idea of how India has fared in the gender dimensions post the economic reforms bestowed with high rates of growth. The sex ratio was 927 women per 1000 males in 1991, which has improved to 943 women per 1000 males- a meagre improvement but an increase nevertheless. In rural areas, this has increased from 938 to 949 and 893 to 929 in urban areas from 1991 to 2001 respectively. In terms of literacy rates, the female literacy rate is 65.46% in 2011 compared to 82.14% for males- a stark contrast. In 1991, this was 39.3 and 64.1 for males and females respectively – a long road covered in terms of female literacy rates. The female enrolment rate has increased rapidly since 1990 but this increased female enrolment is compromised by persistently high drop-out rates and poor attendance of girls with respect to boys (NUEPA, 2008).

Marked by a high growth rate and a reducing female fertility rate together with a rise in women's access to education, one would expect India's female workers to be participating in the labour market more and more. India has grown at an unparalleled rate in the past two decades with growth rates surpassing 9 percent per annum between 2004-05 and 2007-08 and averaging about 7 percent per annum between 2012-13 and 2016-17 (Surbhi Ghai, 2018). But a contradictory process has taken place with the female labour force participation rate reducing since 1991. There is a new form of "missing women" in the Indian labour force, with India

ranking 121st out of 131 countries in terms of female LFPR. This is a new form of “inequality” where despite a rise in overall dimensions of female welfare, women workers are somehow discouraged to join the labour force. Dr. Amartya Sen has defined gender inequality as “not one homogenous phenomenon, but a collection of disparate and interlinked problems.” The contradictory fall in female LFPR despite a rise in overall growth can be understood in terms of numerous economic as well as socio-cultural factors.

Economists agree that a period of high growth concomitantly leads to two stylized paths – a shift of employment from agriculture to manufacturing and finally to services, and second, a rural to urban migration. What is different in the Indian experience is how there is a direct shift from the agriculture sector to services, skipping the industrial period and defying the growth trajectory of all other developed countries. The stagnation of the manufacturing sector leading to low employment in industry has made females even more “invisible” in this sphere. According to a study by the Consulate General of Sweden in India, women in India are underrepresented in the manufacturing sector, with participation ranging between 3% (core engineering sectors) to 12% (emerging sectors like computer engineering). The second process, rural to urban migration, is said to have played a bigger role in the fall in female LFPR. Former female rural agricultural workers find it more difficult to find employment in the urban spaces with manufacturing sector playing its role and rendering them more “invisible”.

Before proceeding further, let us understand the trends of this female LFPR both internationally and domestically.

Female Labour Force Participation Rate Trends

There is no historical evidence that the female labour force participation rate is directly correlated with high growth rates or that it decreases with increases in female education, declines in fertility rates and increases in access to better health facilities. According to World Bank data, it is only the high income countries that show a rise in female LFPR while middle and low income countries do not follow a similar trajectory.

For the non-high income countries, there is indeed a fall in female LFPR with this fall being greater in the middle income countries than the low income countries. One possible explanation is when income is lower, the participation of women in the labour market becomes more

important to generate more income for the household. As income increases, the opportunity cost of women participating in the labour market increases with women finding it more feasible to remain at home. This goes directly in line with the population theory of demographic transition, which states that as a country grows, the population initially declines, then increases and decreases.

For low income countries, this fall is not very significant, implying although societal norms are prevalent, the households require more members to earn since there are more mouths to feed. The fall is the greatest for the Upper Middle Income and Middle Income countries, which show that as household incomes rise, the woman mostly gives up her work and taking in the position of the “caregiver” as society desires her to function.

India, a developing country which falls in the middle income group, has one of the lowest female labour force participation rates – typically measured as the share of women that are employed or seeking work as a share of the working-age female population – among emerging markets and developing countries (Sonali Das, Sonali Jain Chandra, Kalpana Kachhar, Naresh Kumar, 2015). A female LFPR of 33 percent implies that only 125 million of the roughly 380 million working-age Indian females are seeking work or are currently employed. If we look at the trend of how this has changed over the years by looking at the data for various income category countries, the trend is somewhat different for each group. For high income countries, there has been an increase in the female LFPR from 1990 to 2018, though it is still lower than the male LFPR. The story is different for the other groups: there is a decline in each of them. Based on global evidence, some of the factors for this include educational attainment, fertility rates and the age of marriage, economic growth and cyclical effects, and migration leading to urbanization. In addition to these issues, social norms determining the role of women in the public domain continue to affect outcomes (Sher Verick, ILO).

India has a female LFPR which is slightly better than that of the Arab world, where religious norms expect women to not only not work outside but also be satisfied with that. India has a better female LFPR in South Asia only if compared against Pakistan, and countries like Bangladesh and Nepal are far ahead in this race. The longer-term trends of South Asia suggest that women have increased their participation in a country like Bangladesh, which is due to the

growth of the readymade garment sector and an increase in rural female employment, mainly on account of the spread of micro-credit and micro-finance. Apart from Nepal, where the participation rate for women reached 79.4 per cent in 2010-11 and the Maldives where it was 54 per cent in 2009-10, Bangladesh now has the highest rate in the region. The rate has also increased in Pakistan, albeit from a very low starting point, and is particularly low in urban areas, while participation has remained relatively stable in Sri Lanka, even though the latter has witnessed robust economic growth and strong improvements in social indicators in recent years.

Among the different regions of the world, the female LFPR has seen a rise in some regions and a fall in some other regions. For the world on average, the rate has actually declined from 1990 to 2018, though it has seen a slight increase in Sub Saharan Africa, and a decent rise in the OECD countries, the European Union and the Latin American countries. The fall in South Asia despite a rise in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Afghanistan can be largely attributed to the large-scale decline in the Indian scenario. There is also a fall in the female LFPR in China which drives the fall in East Asia, but this fall in female LFPR of China is less than the fall in Indian female LFPR.

If we look at the different South Asian countries, we see that all the countries except India and Sri Lanka have seen a rise. The fall in Sri Lanka can be largely attributed to the skewed nature of the labour market for the lower-skilled workers, making women the vulnerable section yet again.

The total labour force participation rate as of 2018 is 61.8%, which is 1.4% less than the previous decade. However, the decline in women's participation rate has been slower than that of men (ILO, 2018). On average around the world, women remain much less likely to participate in the labour market than men.

Literature Review

There has been a great deal of work done in calculating the trend of female labour force participation rate across the world, understanding the various hypotheses and the effect of education on the female employment rate. Trends of female LFPRs reflect different patterns across the life cycle, resulting from changes in education participation among youth and older workers' retirement choices. Not only are women less likely than men to participate in the

labour force, but those who do are also less likely to find employment. They are also likelier to be paid less as compared to their male counterparts (ILO, 2018).

The idea of economic development and women's participation in it has its roots in Ester Boserup's pioneering work of 1970 where she describes how industrialization and subsequently, modernization alters women's role in both the domestic as well as the public sphere. Gender is a basic factor in division of labour (Sen & Beneria, 1981). She also argues how there is a "dubious generalization" that claims men to be food providers while historically, women in Africa have been always involved in subsistence farming leading to "female marginalization". This "female marginalization" leads to women's exclusion from capitalist employment (Scott, 1986). Claudia Goldin in 1995 explored the U-shaped relationship between married female labour supply and the level of economic development across cross sectional countries. Initially, when the income level is low and the agricultural sector like poultry, dairy, rice, and cotton dominates the economy, women's participation in the labour force is high – be it paid or unpaid. As the economy grows and income rises with expansion of technology and market, women's labour force participation falls, retreating to household chores, leading to an "immiseration" of women with no change in the hours of work. The possible reasons could be income effect, fall in demand for workers in agriculture which implies a greater fall in women agriculture workers and lack of demand for women workers in manufacturing sector due to social customs. As female education improves, the women move back into the paid workforce resulting in a U shaped relationship between income and female labour force participation rate. This process suggests that at low levels of development or the falling part of the U, the income effect dominates a small substitution effect, while as incomes increase or in the raising portion of the U, the substitution effect comes to dominate. Evidence from the US shows that as the country develops, women get "white collar" jobs like clerical work which is socially approved.

Women's labour supply is marked by two factors: the opportunity cost of her time which is the wage rate, and the "unearned" income which could be earnings of her husband, the peace that she finds of not being exploited at the labour market or the household harmony that she maintains by now going out to work as expected by social norms. If the unearned income which is her husband's income or the household income goes up, there will be a lesser incentive for the woman to work outside, reducing female participation in the labour force (Kristin Mammen,

Christina Paxon, 2000). There could be legal as well as social barriers to women's labour making decisions. Preferences are also marked by the nature of the work, as women tend to prefer "white collar jobs" compared to "blue collar jobs" because of assembly line work (King, 1983), long working hours with the spread of industrialization, bad health standards and large gendered pay differences (Mammen, Paxon, 2000).

Economic growth and women's participation go hand in hand. It has been highlighted in various studies how lower LFPR pulls down economic growth, and that empowering women has significant economic benefits in addition to promoting gender equality (World Bank, 2012). David Cuberes and Marc Teigner in their remarkable 2014 paper illustrate the negative impact on resource allocation, aggregate productivity and income per capita. The model quantifies the costs of gender inequality in the labour market and the effects of existing gender gaps in both developing and developed countries. They simulate an occupational choice model with heterogeneous agents that impose several frictions on female economic participation and their wages and shows that gender gaps in entrepreneurship and in labour force participation significantly reduce per capita income. For India, they find that gender gaps lower overall per worker incomes by about 26 percent.

Similarly, women's participation in the labour force is likely to positively affect the economic growth of a nation (Esteve-Volart, 2004). It is said that women's employment may be driven by necessity and household poverty but also be the result of increasing educational attainment, changing societal norms and available employment opportunities. In terms of the first perspective, an increased participation of women is often observed during times of economic crisis, mainly in response to declining household income on account of unemployment in the household leading to the so-called "added worker effect" (Bhalotra and Umana-Aponte, 2010). In general, when women do work, they tend to be engaged in low-paid and low productivity jobs (ILO, 2011). Thus, the widespread entry of women into the labour market is not always the desired situation, as it may be distress-driven and does not reflect increased access to decent jobs. Another key issue in this arena is measurement. It is widely recognized that women's work in the developing world is overlooked, undervalued and underreported because women are often home-based and contributing to non-market activities, such as care-giving, which have economic benefits for households (Beneria, 1982; Boserup, 1970; Donahoe, 1999).

The Cause of Concern: Before and After Liberalization

Female labour force participation rates are indeed falling in all parts of the world, and not just India. Why is this then, a matter of concern for India's story? The fertility rate in India is falling rapidly, nearing the replacement rate. There is indeed an indirect relationship between lower fertility rate and higher female LFPR, but this has not been the case for India. If we look at the data since the male LFPR has also fallen along with the total LFPR. The data reveal a close to 22% fall in the female LFPR compared to a 7% fall in the male LFPR. The fall in total LFPR is close to 10%, which is mostly due to the fall in female LFPR.

The first problem that arises from this World Bank data which is taken from National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) database is that it renders workers engaged in activities like "attending domestic duties and engaged in (a) free collection of goods such as vegetables, roots, firewood, cattle feed, etc. and (b) sewing, tailoring, weaving, etc" as non-workers. The Indian System of National Accounts considers this number to be too small to have any serious implication, but a time use survey data by Anders, Dasgupta, Joseph, Abraham, and Correia shows this to be substantial. There is also a doubt on the credibility of the NSSO data and the survey might actually underestimate the work participation of women. In fact, according to the McKinsey Global Institute's "The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in India" carried out with data from 2005 to 2015 states that women in India perform 9.8 times the amount of unpaid care work than men. If this was taken into account, India's output would increase by \$0.8 trillion.

To understand the reasons behind these contradictory result, let us first look at the rural-urban and formal-informal employment dynamics of India.

Rural and Urban, Formal and Informal

As an economy shifts from an agricultural economy to an industrial one, there is a decline in female LFPR due to a shift from family-based production to large-scale production in industrial units (Sunita Sanghi, A Srija and SS Vijay, 2015). Women face the greatest burden in a manufacturing economy, with long labour hours, a greater focus on energy-based work and a larger pay gap. According to 2011 Census of India, close to 70% of the women in India live in

rural areas. There is a massive loss of job of women in the manufacturing sector. This could be due to a decrease in demand for products of the traditional sector. The labour force participation of women in rural areas is much higher than women in urban areas. Over time, the gap between urban and rural areas has narrowed moderately, with most of the convergence being driven by the fall in participation rates in rural areas. As a result, taken together, female labour force participation rates nationwide have fallen since the mid-2000s. (Sonali Das, Sonali Jain Chandra, Kalpana Kachhar, Naresh Kumar, 2015).

If we look at agriculture, there has been a recent trend of feminization of agriculture. The pie chart below tells us the percentage of women engaged in different rural activities reflecting some 26% women workers being actively engaged in agriculture.

For India, the participation rate of rural women decreased from 26.5 per cent in 2009-10 to 25.3 per cent in 2011-12 (usual status definition), while the rate for urban women increased from 14.6 per cent to 15.5 per cent over the same period. The latest data from 2011-12 also reveals that fewer women in rural areas are working; however, if they are working, they are more likely to be in the subsidiary or more marginal employment in comparison to 2009-10.

Female workers are often overrepresented in the informal sector. There is a gender wage gap in both the formal and informal sectors, with male workers earning a higher wage on average in both sectors. The World Bank estimates that 90% of the women working in the informal sector are not included in the official statistics. Women's work is often undocumented and considered as disguised wage work, unskilled, low paying and does not end up providing benefits to the workers. In India, almost 94% of total women workers are engaged in the informal sector, of which about 20% work in the urban areas. Nearly 50 per cent of these women workers are the sole supporters of their families. Another startling fact is that out of all women workers a mere 7.5% are availing the membership of authentic registered trade unions.

The informal sector is hard to define, and the definitions overlap in developed and developing cases. Construction labour, domestic workers, garment workers, vendors, and sales girls can roughly be identified as informal sector jobs for women in India, with many other disparities existing. Another problem that arises is the lack of data in terms of employment in the informal sector; the Census data only gives us a rough estimate and there is indeed no authentic data on women working in the informal sector. Most of the women working in this sector work here

because there is no other option. Informal female workers have to work some 7-8 hours, bring up the children and then work outside, at a wage lower than their male counterparts, for another 5-6 hours. These workers have very few options in terms of gainful employment. The women workers engaged in informal sector are poor, perhaps the poorest of the poor, uneducated and weak. Various studies by Papola (1982, 92) clearly and emphatically show another amazing fact that the urban labour market discriminates against women much more than the rural labour market. This discrimination results in decline in the participation of women in economic activities.

What could be the possible reasons for this fall in the female LFPR in India then?

It is often claimed that India has been adhering to this U-shaped hypothesis which is leading to this drastic decrease in female LFPR. This can, however, be discarded in the Indian context with empirical evidence (Bhall & Kaur, 2011, Rao et al, 2010). Education and female employment are correlated, but the nature and dynamic of this correlation are different. Income and female employment are also correlated, with both labour and leisure trading off and income and substitution effects playing off together. Economists claim that as income rises, female labour force participation rates first decline and eventually increase owing to a large income effect- change in hours of work of an individual with respect to change in family income, which dominates a small substitution effect- change in hours of work with respect to change in own labour wages. But there exists a range of recent studies that have failed to find a significant relationship between economic growth and LFPR in India (Gaddis and Klasen, 2012).

Possible Theories: “Missing Women” in the Indian Labour Force?

There is evidence of U shaped hypothesis in Pakistan with an increase in education and dynamics of economic activity increases the female LFPR (Mujahid, 2013) but not quite so when it comes to India. Lahoti and Swaminathan in 2013 use a panel data analysis from 1983 to 2010 to explore the relationship between economic growth and female LFPR and instead find an inverted U relationship between the two with growth in agriculture and manufacturing sectors have found to have attracted more women workers. These studies reinforce the idea that the relationship between economic growth and LFPR is complex and is mediated by large number of socioeconomic and cultural factors. Thus, the optimism that the Indian FLPR has

reached the bottom of the U-shaped curve and will soon turn around the corner and start rising might be misplaced or unwarranted. Over the last decade or so, India has made considerable progress in increasing access to education for girls as increasing numbers of women of working age are enrolling in secondary schools. Nonetheless, the nature of economic growth in the country has meant that jobs were not created in large numbers in sectors that could readily absorb women, especially for those in rural areas. Despite inadequate job creation, household incomes did rise, which potentially reduced women's participation, especially in subsidiary activities ("income effect") due to changes in preferences. Finally, though most women in India work and contribute to the economy in one form or another, much of their work is not documented or accounted for in official statistics, and thus women's work tends to be under-reported. In India, a substantially high proportion of females report their activity status as attending to domestic duties. In 2011-12, 35.3 per cent of all rural females and 46.1 per cent of all urban females in India were attending to domestic duties, whereas these rates were 29 per cent and 42 per cent respectively in 1993-94. Therefore, mis-measurement may not only affect the level but also the trend in the participation rate.

The other reason put forward is migration and trends in the rural-urban movement, which not only changes the structural formation of the economy but also the demographic one. The case of Turkey becomes important here where the women's LFPR in urban areas has been diminishing drastically since 1950 owing almost entirely to ongoing migration from rural to urban areas, dropping from 36.1 per cent in 1989 to 23.3 per cent in 2005. The rural women who have settled in urban areas are now left without jobs (Kemal and Naci, 2009). The rural women who were unpaid agricultural workers become "invisible" in the urban space. Urban society changes the dynamics; a woman can no longer be immersed in disguised agricultural work, she has to go out and work. This creates social and cultural dynamics different from rural areas, as women need transportation and infrastructure like legal frameworks or even a level of safety in public spaces that will encourage her to work out. The low participation of married women in urban employment can also be explained as women being thought of as the caregivers of the family and even working women have the dual responsibility of taking care of the home and working outside. Other kinds of infrastructure also matter, like the presence and affordability of child care services. Statistics show that women's participation rates are almost 60% in the EU-15

countries, which have highly developed child care systems while it is around 20% in Turkey. There is a link between child care facilities and women's labour force participation. Of course, this is very meagre when it comes to India, as child care facilities are not a cultural norm anyway.

Rural urban migration in India is definitely a predominant phenomenon in India, like all other developing countries, where the service sector in the urban areas is "pulling" the agrarian rural population. This is creating a different kind of bias: the women are becoming "invisible" in the urban space with high demand for skilled jobs and the women being clearly being left behind. It is more difficult for rural female migrants to get jobs in larger cities and towns, which demand better skills, longer work schedules and wider gender pay gaps. The women are already at a disadvantage due to lack of skills, lack of jobs in the manufacturing sector – which is already stagnant and creating lesser and lesser jobs, so women are finding themselves at a further disadvantage. There is a different cycle at work, as women are less skilled when it comes to industrial or manufacturing work because skill training among women is not as high as among men, hence the demand for highly skilled workers puts them in another kind of disadvantage, borne out of cultural norms.

The participation of a few numbers of females in the labour force of India reflects a strangely familiar concept of "missing women". The term was initially used by Dr. Amartya Sen to refer to the low female-male sex ratio in South East Asia, especially in India and China. The sex ratio, though not at par with the developed countries, has relatively improved since the liberalization of the Indian economy. The lowest performing states like Haryana have received a range of incentives to encourage births of girls and hence improve the female-male sex ratio. There are incentives to reduce the female fertility rate as well, which have had a direct effect on the female-male sex ratio. Yet somehow, low fertility rates have led to a worsening of the female-male sex ratio in recent years.

This brings me to my argument that a better fertility rate does not have to necessarily lead to an increase in female LFPR: the fertility rate has led to a worsening of sex ratios due to various socio-cultural norms and these very socio-cultural norms have indeed led to a fall in the LFPR. Female mobility to a large extent is dependent on family norms (which are governed by societal norms) which are in turn shaped by the infrastructure of public spaces. Infrastructure of

transport and communication plays the biggest role in this. If we look at a city like Delhi, the female LFPR increased from 2004 to 2011, while it dropped at the India-wide level, however the level itself in Delhi was significantly lower. The building of the Metro was a huge step in this, the Delhi Metro offered many women the hope to reach their workplaces in time. However, transportation costs and incidents of sexual harassment in the city are also important determinants in this regard. Women often end up becoming discouraged workers.

There is no denying that female mobility and work participation rates depend largely on how safe the public spaces are, how confident women feel in going out to work. The transportation and communication infrastructure hence is an important determinant of the female work force participation rate, especially in urban areas. High costs of transportation are as much responsible for lower mobility among women as are social evils like harassment and molestation. For most women, covering long distances between work and home becomes as much an economic issue as a social one. There are issues of safety, issues of coming home late which will be frowned upon by the husband and other family members, but also, it might seem futile to women to cover such long distances spending money on transportation, coming home late, cooking dinner and get tired in addition to the chances of getting harassed on the way. The money may not seem to balance that, and women lose out in accessing “gainful employment”. Staying at home, caring for the family and maintaining harmony in the family becomes the main goal, or rather, the safer goal. In economic terms, the opportunity cost of going to work seems lower in such cases. Attitudes at home remain the biggest reason for the lower female labour force participation rate. For the woman, it is always “safer” at home, or so she is convinced. The outside world, the male-dominated public spaces, is the unsafe world that she believes she needs protection from. It is not like transportation and communication infrastructure has not developed in India; there is great progress been made, but the visibility of men and the subsequent “invisibility” of women in urban spaces with long working hours have made women more “discouraged” as workers.

Conclusion

The Indian economy is said to be going through the U hypothesis with the assumption that India is in the falling part of the curve, and the LFPR is expected to rise in the coming years.

But this may not be the case, and the lack of empirical evidence in this regard is striking. If it is true that the women are getting educated, this is a welcoming change – there is indeed evidence of a rise in female enrolment rates as well as rise in the number of women pursuing higher studies in the country. But this may not lead to anything substantial if social norms and infrastructure bias continue to override everything else. The recent fall in rural female participation rate accrues to large-scale migration, but a continuous fall in urban areas cannot just be attributed to migration, it has other underlying socio-economic factors, with women being more “invisible” in the urban spaces in absence of a proper legal framework and longer work schedules.

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