

What reports on Indian women's falling participation in labour force don't tell you

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According to the [World Bank report](#) released in June 2022, Indian women's labour force participation – proportion of the population over the age of 15 that is economically active – has been steadily declining since 2005 and is at a low of 19 percent in 2021. Recent articles draw on this data to claim the continuities of patriarchal oppression and structural barriers to women's economic participation in India. Most of these articles fail to acknowledge that this measure does not capture women's participation in the informal economy. In developing economies such as India, women are concentrated in the informal sector and demonstrate a preference for home-based work opportunities that allow them to balance their domestic duties with income-generating activities.

In addition, these articles draw a simplistic and instrumental link between women's labour force participation and measures of societal development. But looking at the developed world, we know that women's higher labour force participation coincides with a reduction in society's fertility rate and a rise in the cost of caregiving. How do we reconcile these outcomes with the idea that women's higher labour force participation is necessarily conducive to development objectives? It is important to move beyond reductionist explanations and probe how women's employment operates in specific contexts. This calls for a more comprehensive understanding of women's decision-making and navigation around employment.

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Women navigating formal employment

Standard economic theory predicts that as household income increases, women withdraw from devalued labour because their income is no longer required to run the household. As household income rises and educational attainment improves, women re-enter the workforce. But for moderately educated women from upwardly mobile families, there is often a mismatch between available jobs and their skills and ambitions. As their families are in the process of claiming middle-class status, young women are often averse to taking up low-paid jobs in the formal economy. If they are unable to secure high-status white-collar jobs, they prefer home-based work such as tailoring or running tuitions for young children. Thus, women's employment preferences are often intertwined with family-centred projects of class and social mobility.

In a [recent study](#), FSG interviewed 6,600 women of working age from low-income communities across 16 cities in India. It found that women's ability to work outside the home is defined by the views of their family members who prefer women working from home or engaging in a small business to allocate more time to household responsibilities. But 59 percent of women prefer jobs in the formal sector over entrepreneurship. Less than 1 percent of working mothers with children under 12 years old have used paid childcare services. 89 percent are unwilling to use paid childcare services. Affordability isn't a key factor in not considering paid daycare. It's because mothers do not trust daycare services as they do not provide 'family-like' care.

These findings suggest that Indian women's employment-related decisions are shaped by considerations of providing caregiving to their children and balancing their preferences with familial expectations.

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Need a cultural perspective on gender

Ethnographic studies and development practitioners have consistently pointed out the importance of family and community identity in defining the preferences and choices of young women. But popular discussions on gender equality in India remain limited by the tendency to compartmentalise women's lives into work (defined formally and by the market) and life (defined by areas other than working for the market such as care work and fulfilling basic household needs). From this distinction springs the truism that women's work is an important metric of gender equality, as earnings from the market give them greater power in household decision-making.

However, women, especially in low-income communities in India, have a composite view of their lives (jobs, enterprises, care work, upholding traditions, and community connections) and navigate through these with their household and extended family. The non-compartmentalisation emerges from a culturally embedded and empirically grounded perspective that does not view culture as a limitation, but as a resource and enabler that provides a comprehensive valuation for all kinds of work that women do (informal and formal).

This translates into everyday negotiations that have less to do with upturning the current social structure and more with negotiating for increased autonomy within the cultural context. For instance, if women's employment preferences are not predicated on renegotiating childcare duties with their husbands but rather a desire to perform their role as a more hands-on mother while holding formal employment, then the solution cannot be policies that speak to men taking on more work in the household. Rather, policy solutions must derive from the negotiations women are interested in undertaking with their employers around home-based work or flexible working hours. It is important to perceive women's employment goals as reflective of preferences defined not only by their gender but also by their social and cultural context.

Relatedly, the conversation about the linkages between gender equality and women's employment will also shift. Once everyday navigations become a measure to build on, gender equality becomes less defined by the disaggregation of the roles of men and women to demonstrate women's exploitation. Rather, it is more about women's evolving negotiation capacity and choices and how they are driven by the aspirations and influences of a globalised world. Nurture (of children, family, parents, and community) is a necessary aspect of a society's stability, mental well-being, and sustainability. The breakdown of the family structure and caregiving systems in developed economies offers an important lesson. If Indian women want to participate in the formal labour force while retaining their family structure, this preference should be accommodated in institutional and interpersonal responses.

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