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Sirisha C Naidu, *Wright State University*



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Domestic Labour and Female Labour Force Participation

Adding a Piece to the Puzzle

SIRISHA C NAIDU

The declining female labour force participation in India alongside high economic growth is puzzling. Increasing educational enrolment, and higher household incomes have been offered as hypotheses to explain the decline in women's participation in work. Increasing participation in domestic activities has been considered "status production," and as evidence that economic growth has been beneficial. However, these explanations do not fully account for why women from households with lower incomes and fewer assets are leaving the labour market. National Sample Survey Office data on "domestic activities" reveals that a significant proportion of women are working to ensure the daily survival of households. It is argued that the shift of women's labour to domestic activities may in fact be a strategy to cope with the immiserating tendencies of the Indian economy.

Declining female labour force participation in India has been the cause of much consternation and debate in the last decade. Data from the quinquennial National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) surveys on employment and unemployment reveal two interesting aspects.

First, the female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) in urban and rural areas has been declining since 1987–88 barring an anomaly in 2004–05. This decline has been hypothesised as evidence of rising attendance in educational institutions (for example in Rangarajan et al 2011), or increasing household incomes, that is, an "income effect," which allows working women the choice of withdrawing from the labour force (for example in Abraham 2009; Himanshu 2011; Thomas 2012). A less optimistic view is that the data indicate declining employment opportunities for female workers in India (Ghosh 2009; Patnaik 2003).

Second, women's participation in domestic activities has been subject to an upward trend since 1987–88. Some researchers have taken this as further evidence of the income effect at play suggesting that participation in unpaid and unaccounted work is evidence of women's desire to engage in "status" producing activities (Abraham 2009; Himanshu 2011; Srivastava and Srivastava 2010). Others have critiqued NSSO's definition of work which excludes domestic activities and have argued that the conventional definition of labour force is subject to undercounting (for example in Hirway 2012; Kapsos et al 2014; Mazumdar and Agnihotri 2011; Sen and Sen 1985).

This paper analyses these two aspects of the data on Indian women's activity rates, declining labour force participation and increasing participation in domestic activities. I briefly review the dominant explanations offered for declining FLFPR which has been at the centre of the debate. I further focus attention on women's rising participation in domestic activities, an issue that has received insufficient consideration in the literature. I investigate whether the label of "status production" is justified and discuss potential reasons underlying women's shift from the labour market to domestic production.

The paper adopts a framework that views the household as an institution that supports the global capitalist system and considers domestic activities, including subsistence production and housework, as structural features of capitalist accumulation (Wallerstein and Smith 1992). Work, whether in the wage or household economy, constitutes a survival strategy for the working classes. Therefore, my argument is that

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Sirisha C Naidu (sirisha.naidu@wright.edu) is at the Department of Economics, Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio, US.

neither activity—labour force participation or domestic activities—can be understood independently of each other. I contend that participation in the labour force or in domestic activities is necessarily shaped by constraints of household survival and that the exigencies of reproduction drive women's work commitments in the labour market and the domestic sphere. In other words, I propose that an additional aspect should be considered in the debate on FLFPR and women's activity rates; that women's withdrawal from the labour market and their increased participation in the domestic economy may signify a crisis of reproduction, and an attempt to boost household consumption for an immiserated population. Then the paper briefly examines some features of the labour market for women in India. Subsequently, the importance of domestic work to the everyday survival of the working classes is highlighted. The penultimate section explores the relationship between women's labour market participation in conjunction with participation in domestic activities. The paper concludes with a discussion.

Labour Market and Wage Economy

Labour force participation is defined as the proportion of the population that is economically active. The NSSO includes self-employed and unpaid family workers, regular wage and salaried employees, casual workers and the unemployed in its definition of labour force participation rate and presents data for the whole population as well as by sex. Table 1, which presents data on female usual activity status, indicates that

Table 1: Female Usual Activity Status Distribution (for All Ages)

Activity Status (Principal Status or PS)	1983	1987–88	1993–94	1999–2000	2004–05	2009–10	2011–12
Rural							
Self-employed and unpaid family work (1)	21	22	18.5	11.4	13.6	10.2	9.4
Regular wage work (2)	1.6	2.1	1.3	0.9	1.2	1.1	1.3
Casual wage work (3)	18	17	17	11	9	9	6.8
All domestic (4)	29.8	27.3	34.4	36.3	35.5	39.9	42.2
Domestic duties only (4a)	15.9	15.1	15.7	20.3	17.5	22	18.5
Domestic duties and allied activities (4b)	13.9	12.2	18.7	16	18	17.9	23.7
Unemployed (5)	0.6	1.4	0.5	0	0.8	0.5	0.5
Education (6)	7.6	7.2	11.7	18.4	21.3	23.8	25.1
Others (7)	21.4	23.1	16.2	22.4	18.4	15.6	14.7
LFPR (1+2+3+5)	41.2	42.5	37.3	23.3	24.6	20.8	18
LFPR + All domestic	71	69.8	71.7	59.6	60.1	60.7	60.2
Urban							
Self-employed and unpaid family work (1)	8.3	8.5	7.9	4.5	5.4	4.2	4.6
Regular wage work (2)	8.4	9	7.8	4.6	5.7	5.3	6.1
Casual wage work (3)	7	6	6	3	2	2.4	1.8
All domestic (4)	38.5	38.1	40.2	45.4	45.7	48.2	48
Domestic duties only (4a)	30.8	29.5	30.5	38.4	35	39.9	36.4
Domestic duties and allied activities (4b)	7.7	8.6	9.7	7	10.7	8.3	11.6
Unemployed (5)	1.5	1.9	1.8	0.9	1.4	0.9	0.9
Education (6)	18.2	18.4	21.8	25	25.1	25.6	26
Others (7)	18.1	17.9	14.1	16.9	14.5	13.4	12.6
LFPR (1+2+3+5)	25.2	25.4	23.5	13	14.5	12.8	13.4
LFPR + All domestic	63.7	63.5	63.7	58.4	60.2	61	61.4

Source: Abraham (2013); Author's calculations.

during the period 1987–88 to 2011–12, FLFPR declined from 42.5% to 18% for rural women and from 25.4% to 13.4% for urban women. This resulted from a decline in women's participation in self-employment and unpaid family work, and casual wage work. In 1983, nearly 40% of rural women and 15% of urban women were involved in these two activities. In 2011–12, the proportion of women engaged in this work declined to 16% and 6% in rural and urban areas respectively. I review the three proffered explanations for the decline in FLFPR: the effect of a positive income effect, higher enrolment in educational endeavours, and a decline in employment opportunities.

First, declining FLFPR in India has been viewed in the context of the U-hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, at low levels of development when agriculture is the dominant economic sector, demand for women's labour in agriculture is high. At the same time, high levels of poverty compel women to supply their labour in the market. As the economy grows and develops its non-agrarian sectors, the importance of the agrarian economy diminishes and the demand for women's labour declines. A corresponding rise in household incomes induces women to reduce labour supply, that is, the income effect. As the economy continues to grow, women gain higher education and skills, and they enter the labour force again. Consequently FLFPR increases. In short, the U-hypothesis claims that FLFPR is high for economies at low and high levels of economic development, whereas middle-development economies suffer from low FLFPR. Applying this hypothesis to the Indian case, Abraham (2013) argues that India, being a middle-development country, is on the downward portion of the U-shape such that higher economic growth and development is likely to lead to lower FLFPR. He infers that women's withdrawal from the labour market must be a result of the income effect.

The income effect explanation suggests that a rise in male wages should adequately compensate for the loss in income resulting from women's withdrawal from the labour market. While evaluation of income is beyond the scope of this paper, I attempt to draw inferences using wage data provided by the NSSO. Tables 2 and 3 (p 103) provide NSSO data on nominal and real wages for male and female workers in regular and casual employment. Between 1993 and 2011–12, nominal wages for casual male workers increased by ₹126 and ₹150 in rural and urban areas respectively between 1993 and 2011–12, and for regular male workers by ₹264 and ₹391 in rural and urban areas respectively. These increases in male wages are certainly greater than female wages in 2011–12. However, attention to data on real wages yields the following. The increase in wages for casual male workers was ₹22 and ₹20 in rural and urban areas respectively, and ₹39 and ₹58 for regular male wage labour in rural and urban areas respectively, which is lower than total real wages for female casual and regular workers in 2011–12. While I acknowledge that wage data may not provide the complete income effect story, nonetheless, it is useful to note that the loss in household real income due to withdrawal of female labour may not be adequately compensated by the increase in real wages for male workers.

Table 2: Average Daily Wage Earnings of Casual Wage Labour of Age 15–59 Years

NSSO Round	Nominal Wages (₹)			Real Wages (₹)		
	Male	Female	Increase in Male Wages	Male	Female	Increase in Male Wages
Rural						
2011–12	149.32	103.28	126.14	45.31	31.34	22.13
1993–94	23.18	15.33		23.18	15.33	
Urban						
2011–12	182.04	110.62	149.66	52.58	31.95	20.2
1993–94	32.38	18.49		32.38	18.49	

Rural real wages are calculated using the consumer price index for agricultural labourers (1986–87) and urban real wages are calculated using consumer price index for urban non-manual employees (1984–85).

Source: NSSO (2014a); Author's calculations.

Table 3: Average Daily Wage Earnings of Regular Wage Labour of Age 15–59 Years

NSSO Round	Nominal Wages (₹)			Real Wages (₹)		
	Male	Female	Increase in Male Wages	Male	Female	Increase in Male Wages
Rural						
2011–12	322.28	201.56	263.8	97.8	61.163	39.32
1993–94	58.48	34.89		58.48	34.89	
Urban						
2011–12	469.87	366.15	391.75	135.71	105.75	57.59
1993–94	78.12	62.31		78.12	62.31	

See note for Table 2.

Source: NSSO (2014a); Author's calculations.

Deepening the Puzzle

Moreover, research not only questions the robustness of u-hypothesis across countries (for example, Gaddis and Klasen 2014; Kabeer and Natali 2013), but Lahoti and Swaminathan (2013) in an India-specific study that utilises state-level panel data from 1983–2010 find no significant relationship between economic development of states and their labour force participation rates. Instead, their research suggests that the participation rate is affected by the composition of growth and compels us to seek explanations beyond the income effect of the u-hypothesis.

Tables 2 and 3 further indicate a gender wage gap, that is, the return to work rate for women workers are lower than male workers in regular and casual wage work and in rural and urban areas. NSSO (2014a) also reports that average wages for women workers are below those for male workers at each level of education and in each industry. Das (2006) estimates that discrimination accounts for 73% of the gender wage gap in the informal sector. This differential valorisation of labour efforts maintains a labour hierarchy in the workplace. Whether employers adopt a conscious attempt to create and maintain these divisions is unclear, nevertheless, they benefit from maintaining unequal access of jobs and returns to female labour. The gender wage gap may at least partially explain why women with secondary education and college degrees constituted a significant proportion of those who withdrew from the labour market (Thomas 2010).

A second explanation for the declining FLFPR in India suggests that higher educational enrolment by women has reduced current labour supply but is expected to generate better employment and economic opportunities in the future (for example, Rangarajan et al 2011). Among other factors, the u-hypothesis attributes low FLFPR in middle development

countries to low skill and educational attainment. It is presumed that increased educational attainment will automatically increase FLFPR. Table 1 indeed indicates a higher proportion of women engaged in educational attainment over the decades. However, studies suggest that educational enrolment accounts only for a fraction of the decline in FLFPR. Kannan and Raveendran (2012) estimate that higher educational enrolment accounted only for 27% of the total 38.5 million women who did not enter the labour force between 2004–05 and 2009–10, and these women were mostly under the age of 25 years. Kapsos et al (2014), on the other hand, estimate that educational attainment accounted for only about 7% of the decline in the FLFPR between 2000 and 2010.

Furthermore, NSSO data shows a decline in FLFPR at all levels of education between 1983 and 2009–10 despite improved educational outcomes (Abraham 2013). Further investigation of NSSO data by Thomas (2010) indicates that between 1999–2000 and 2004–05 53% of urban women and 41% of rural women with graduate degrees had withdrawn from the labour market into domestic duties. On the whole, 80%–90% of women with undergraduate and graduate degrees attended to domestic duties (Thomas 2010). Thus, contrary to the prediction of the u-hypothesis educational attainment does not appear to have the expected positive association with labour market participation. Instead, it further deepens the puzzle of women's increasing participation in domestic duties in spite of high economic growth rate and high educational attainment.

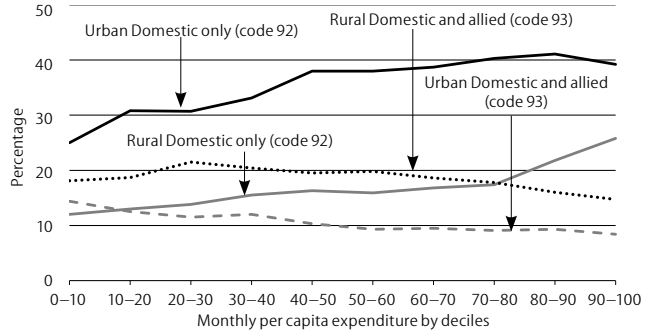
The third explanation advanced for women's declining engagement with the labour market in India rejects the u-hypothesis and instead blames the economy for not creating adequate employment. It is beyond doubt that the decline in women's employment was mainly driven by the decreasing ability of the agricultural sector to absorb labour, which previously employed nearly 68% of all female workers (Mazumdar and Agnihotri 2011). This is reflected in the significant decline in women's participation in self-employed and unpaid work and casual wage work in rural areas as Table 1 indicates; these activities have been primarily agriculture-based. While this seemingly supports the u-hypothesis, agriculture is not the only sector that shed female labour from its payrolls. In the period 2004–05 to 2009–10, female workers lost 21.5 million jobs in the agricultural sector and 3.1 million jobs in the manufacturing sector (Mazumdar and Agnihotri 2011). The number of jobs for urban women in secondary and tertiary sectors increased by 3.8 million between 2004–05 to 2011–12, but this was inadequate compared to an increase in the potential female labour force by 21.5 million during the same period (Thomas 2014). Additionally, in the period 1999–2000 to 2009–10, the proportion of home-based work as a proportion of female urban employment declined from 22% to 9% (Chen and Ravindran 2011). While the decline in demand for female labour in agriculture is expected given the decline in agriculture's contribution to gross domestic product (GDP), employment opportunities have not expanded, at least not sufficiently, to absorb women workers.

In addition to insufficient employment creation, there are concerns about the quality of employment that is being generated. For instance, in their analysis of the urban informal sector, which employs more than 80% of urban workers, Chen and Ravindran (2011) note that the combined proportion of the least desired informal sector occupations—home-based work, domestic work, street vending, and waste picking—increased from 19% to 33% of total urban employment, and from 24% to 41% of total urban informal employment in the period 1999–2000 to 2009–10. The share of women workers in these occupational categories declined from 35% to 24% in this period, while the share of these occupational categories in total male urban employment by 20 percentage points to 35% (Chen and Ravindran 2011).

We can infer the following. First, male workers have replaced female workers in undesirable informal sector occupations that were previously the bastion of female workers (Chen and Ravindran 2011). Second, the decline in women's share in undesirable work may be welcome if more desirable formal sector secure jobs were forthcoming. However, NSSO data presented in Table 1 shows a 2.8 percentage points decrease in casual wage work but only a 0.7 percentage point increase in regular work during this period. Colatei and Harris-White (2004) observe that female workers in rural areas are able to gain employment in the agricultural sector only when male workers were employed in better remunerated non-farm sector (also Mencher 1988). The converse appears to be true in the urban informal sector, that is, the defeminisation of the certain sectors may be a result of an employment squeeze that compels male workers to take on less desirable jobs and displace women workers of their tenacious foothold in the labour market. These data speak to the scarcity of sufficient high quality jobs that have direct and indirect effects on women's participation in the labour market.

Low quality employment is integral to the global phenomena of informalisation and casualisation of work. NCEUS (2009) estimates that 90% of the total Indian workforce consists of informal workers. Informal employment, characterised by low wages, lack of job security or social security, low bargaining power, and higher incidence of sexual harassment for female workers (NCEUS 2009) remains the primary option for an overwhelming proportion of women who choose or are forced to remain in the labour market. In addition, insufficient job creation in the Indian economy forces male workers to compete for jobs and occupation with lower returns that were the refuge of female workers, thus threatening potential “de-feminisation” (also Kannan and Raveendran 2012). Studies further suggest that the desirability of female workers with a large female workforce declines as industries upgrade or mature and need skilled workers, and as regulations and labour organising improves the bargaining position of female workers (Ghosh 2009; UNDESA 1999 cited in Razavi 2009). Existing gender inequities may facilitate de-feminisation, but it is likely predicated on immiserating economic conditions in which even male workers do not have access to better jobs and wages. In short, demand for labour, particularly, female labour, is

Figure 1: Distribution of Women in Domestic Duties by MPCE Deciles for 2011–12



Source: NSSO (2014a).

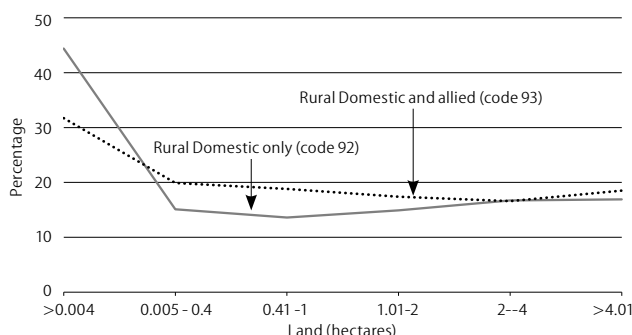
limited and may have contributed to women's forced withdrawal from the labour market.

Domestic Economies

Table 1, which presents data on female usual activity status from 1983 to 2011–12, depicts an upward trend in the proportion of women who reported domestic duties as their principal status; from 29.8% and 38.5% in 1983 to 42.2% and 48% in 2011–12 for rural and urban women respectively. Advocates of the income effect hypothesis suggest that activities categorised as domestic duties are “status producing” for the household and that they result from higher household incomes (Abraham 2009; Himanshu 2011; Srivastava and Srivastava 2010). Kannan and Raveendran (2012) object to this characterisation and observe that 61% of 28.16 million women missing from the Indian labour force in 2010 were from the poorest households. In response, Rangarajan et al (2014) argue that even the relatively poor could experience the income effect, thus withdrawing female labour from the market. Therefore, in this section I investigate whether the association of domestic duties with status production and a positive income effect is justified.

First, it is important to note that the NSSO categorises “domestic duties” into “domestic activities only” (NSSO activity code 92) and “domestic and allied activities” (NSSO activity code 93). Free collection of goods (vegetables, roots, firewood, cattle feed, etc), sewing and tailoring, weaving, processing food for household consumption, etc, are included in the category domestic and allied activities. While NSSO documentation does not describe the category “domestic duties only,” following Mukherjee (2011) I assume that these activities include “care of family members, meal preparation, washing dishes and clothes, cleaning the house, and homestead maintenance.”

Second, I explore whether characterising the broad category domestic duties (NSSO activity codes 92 and 93) as status production is justified. Figure 1 suggests a positive association between monthly per capita consumption expenditure (MPCE) and proportion of rural and urban women engaged in domestic activities only. Yet, the association between MPCE and proportion of urban women engaged in domestic and allied activities is negative. The proportion of rural women engaged in domestic and allied activities, on the other hand, increases in the first three MPCE deciles and thereafter gradually declines.

Figure 2: Distribution of Rural Women in Domestic Duties by Land Cultivated for 2011–12

Source: NSSO (2014a).

However, in the rural Indian context, income may not be the only variable associated with socio-economic status, so I also present the relationship between land cultivated and “domestic only” and domestic and allied activities in rural India in Figure 2. There appears to be a U-shaped relationship between domestic activities only (status code 92) and land, but a negative relationship between domestic and allied activities (status code 93) and land. Nevertheless, the proportion of women engaged in both sets of activities is the highest for households cultivating less than 0.004 hectares of land, which constitutes 48% of all rural households (NSSO 2014a). On comparing the distribution of land cultivating and landowning households, I find that households cultivating less than 0.004 hectares of land are also likely to own less than 0.41 hectares of land (less than 1 acre) (NSSO 2014a), or what Basole and Basu (2011) refer to as “effectively landless” households. Hence the highest participation in domestic activities only, and in domestic and allied activities are effectively landless households with possibly lower access to well-paying and secure non-farm work. Figures 1 and 2 suggest that participation in domestic activities only (status code 92) is positively correlated with MPCE for urban and rural women, but not positively correlated with land for rural women. On the other hand, participation in domestic and allied activities (status code 93) is not positively correlated with land for rural women or MPCE for rural and urban women.

Investigating women’s participation in individual activities listed by NSSO under domestic and allied activities is also

Table 4: Participation of Women (15–59 Years) Usually Engaged in Domestic Duties (Including Subsidiary Status) in 2011–12

Specified Activities	Rural (%)	Urban (%)
Maintenance of kitchen garden (1)	24.1	9.6
Work in household poultry, etc (2)	38	14
Domestic agricultural activities (1 or 2)	47.3	20
Free collection of fish, etc (3)	22.4	5.2
Free collection of firewood, cattle fodder, etc (4)	57.8	17
Free collection of goods (3 or 4)	59.8	18.4
Food processing (own produce) (5)	11.1	2.7
Food processing (acquired) (6)	6	5.1
Preparing cow dung cakes (7)	56.3	20.9
Sewing tailoring, etc (8)	29.3	39.5
Free tutoring of own and other’s children (9)	5.4	12.9
Fetching water from outside house (10)	40.4	18.7
Fetching water from outside village (11)	1	-
Any of above items (1–11)	89.5	67.9

Source: NSSO (2014b).

revealing (Table 4). Greater than 40% rural working-age women engaged in domestic and allied activities were involved in free collection of goods, domestic agricultural activities, preparing cow dung cakes and fetching water from outside their houses. In urban areas, the proportion of women who participated in free collection of goods, preparing cow dung cakes, and sewing and tailoring was 30% or higher. Based on past research it would be safe to suggest that the poorest households depend the most on free collection of goods, preparing cow dung cakes (for example in Beck and Ghosh 2000; Jodha 1986),¹ and fetching water. Except for free tutoring of children, which experiences low participation by rural and urban women, all activities are directly related to production of goods for household consumption. The argument that these activities are status producing is unconvincing given that they can be easily substituted by market goods in households with high income and/or access to necessary infrastructure.

Further, women’s desire and “choice” to engage in domestic activities can be inferred from NSSO data. In 2011–12, of the women who “chose” domestic duties (status codes 92 and 93) as their primary activity status only, 15.8% and 14.2% of rural and urban women respectively cited religious and social reasons, whereas 60.1% and 64.1% of rural and urban women respectively reported that they took on domestic duties because no other family member was available to take up this work (NSSO 2014b). Of the women above 15 years of age who listed domestic duties as their principal status, 41.7% and 49.1% in rural and urban areas respectively were willing to work in the labour market. Of these, only approximately 5% in both urban and rural areas were looking for occasional work, and the remaining desired regular work (though a significant proportion wanted regular part-time work) (NSSO 2014b). If the data reflect ground realities, they suggest both a lack of choice in activities undertaken and a desire to participate in the labour market. In addition, these data underlie the importance of domestic activities to both rural and urban households and hints at the potential economic compulsions to undertake these activities that have historically been within the domain of the domestic sphere.

Wage, Domestic Economies, and Reproduction

Reproduction comprises the explicit costs of providing for socially determined essential commodities, participating in the labour market (that is, education and training), and the intangible costs of caregiving that may not fully be quantified. In capitalist economies, wages constitute a primary form of meeting minimum consumption needs. Yet, the processing of wages into goods and services occurs outside the capitalist markets and within the domestic sphere (Dickinson and Russell 1985). Further, in the absence of sufficient wages to sustain reproduction, brought upon by inadequate absorption of labour, insufficient capital investment in employment generating sectors, or weak bargaining position of workers, the working classes may be forced to shift some or all their labour to production for consumption, or what Meillassoux (1977 cited in Cockcroft 1983) referred to as “domestic economies.”

Despite high economic growth for more than a decade, FLFPR in India is declining. FLFPR in 2011–12 was 0.22 and 0.5 times the FLFPR in 1983 for rural and urban areas respectively. Whereas participation in domestic activities only in 2011–12 was 1.12 times the rate of participation in 1983 for both rural and urban women, participation in domestic and allied activities was 1.7 times and 1.5 times the rate of participation in 1983 (Table 1). In other words, we are witnessing a shift of women's labour to domestic economies. In their state-level analysis of FLFPR in the 1970s, Sen and Sen (1985) suggested that women living in states with low FLFPR compensated for the lack of wage work with increased participation in domestic and other allied activities which the NSSO does not treat as "work." It appears that a similar process continues to operate in the Indian economy.

Significance of Domestic Sphere

The significance of the domestic sphere or domestic economies for reproduction of working-class households cannot be undermined. Yet, effort expended by labour within the domestic sphere remains outside commodity relations, and in India as in many other countries, is unaccounted in official statistics, and hence becomes "invisible." Following the feminist critique of the conventional definition of work that excludes domestic and unpaid work, Hirway (2012), Mukherjee (2011), Sen and Sen (1985) and others have argued for the inclusion of domestic and allied activities in FLFPR calculations. The last row in Table 1 sums up the percentage of women in the conventionally defined labour force and percentage engaged in domestic activities. In doing so, the expanded participation rate does not vary significantly since 1983, and has stagnated at around 60% in the last three NSSO rounds, despite significant changes in FLFPR. However, even if adopted officially, the expanded definition of FLFPR does not address why women's participation in domestic and allied activities has increased significantly since the 1980s. This increased participation in invisible work has tremendous implications for gender equity.

As the previous section indicates, women's increased participation in back-breaking and laborious domestic and allied activities is not positively correlated with MPCI nor land. Further, the labour market seems unable to provide adequate secure employment. Thus, it is very likely that women's increased participation in domestic and allied activities in the last three decades may be a result of inadequate well-paying employment, or adequate real household income, or both. Studies that attribute increased participation in domestic activities to women's proclivities towards status production (even if it is attributed to gendered social norms) or to a positive income effect (for example in Abraham 2013; Rangarajan et al 2014) fail to fully appreciate the characteristics of the labour market as well as the significance of women's labour whether in the market or the domestic sphere for household reproduction. Women's participation in the domestic economy and reproduction results from a sexual division of labour that is a socio-economic not biological imperative, which means that the burden of care and daily reproduction is passed on to

women. The differential valorisation of work in the workplace and the household reinforces the male breadwinner and female caregiver model, particularly when household reproduction is not guaranteed by the state.

To the extent that the Indian state has undertaken welfare measures to provide "substitute wages" and subsidise consumption of essential goods they have aided domestic economies in keeping immiseration at bay and possibly reducing the burden of women responsible for reproduction of the household. However, the degree of intervention has been woefully insufficient. Research on declining calorie consumption especially for those in the lower end of the wage and asset spectrum (for example, see Patnaik 2007), and the possibility of a "budget squeeze" due to the loss of public goods and limited social security (Basu and Basole 2013; Naidu and Ossome forthcoming) suggests a "crisis of consumption" that Palriwala and Neetha (2009) attribute to inadequate labour commodification and "familialism," which relies on family and community and particularly women's role in reproducing the household. Rather than being the cause of the consumption crisis, women's de-valorised, invisible work may be an outcome, or in other words, a recourse to survival under neo-liberalism in which neither state nor the capitalist market economy are willing to commit resources to reproduction (also see Braedley 2006). In lieu of adequate wage employment, wages and the failure of the Indian state to provide a broad safety net for the working class, women's increased participation in domestic duties indicates that the household sphere, and particularly women, are shouldering an increasingly higher proportion of the burden of reproduction as Meillasoux (1977, cited in Cockcroft 1983) anticipated. Women's increased participation in domestic and allied activities may thus be a coping strategy to deal with the "crisis of reproduction" (Naidu and Ossome forthcoming).

Abraham (2013), in resorting to the U-shaped explanation, while recognising the importance of reproductive work, suggests that the opportunity costs of reproduction that prevents women from participation in the labour force is temporary and one that will ease once economic growth is sufficiently high. However, despite increasing economic growth, we have yet to witness a decline in women's role in reproductive activities. While it is unclear how further growth will impact women's involvement in such activities, NSSO data definitely indicates that high participation in domestic activities coexists with high economic growth. Such a situation is beneficial to capitalist firms. The intensification of domestic economies provides a subsidy to maintain labour needed in capitalist production, and thus allows for conditions of inadequate employment and wages to coexist with high economic growth and profits. As Picchio (1992: 97) notes, "[t]he more labour is embodied in its reproduction the less it costs the employer," thus suppressing the costs of labour and retaining the economy's global competitiveness. In other words, the growth path is contingent on women's high engagement with uncompensated labour expended in reproductive activities, or in other words, in women's high engagement with domestic economies.

The position that views domestic activities merely as status production runs the risk of ignoring the immiseration faced by working-class households in India, as well as the associated gendered burden of such immiseration. Depending on the economic conditions of the household, state intervention, access to means of production for domestic economies, and gender relations, effort in household production and reproduction may continue beyond the point when marginal product equals zero, and may undermine the physical and psychological well-being of the female workers (for example, in Floro 1995). This further perpetuates the vicious cycle of immiseration of the worker and the household.

Conclusions

This paper investigates the implications of the trend in women's activity rates in the labour force and domestic activities. Contrary to arguments of a positive income effect and status production that are predicated on the u-hypothesis, the robustness of which has been questioned in recent research (for instance in Gaddis and Klasen 2014; Kabeer and Natali 2013; Lahoti and Swaminathan 2013), this paper argues for a more nuanced analysis in which work constitutes a survival strategy for the working classes in the lower end of the income and asset spectrum.

nsso data suggests that women's participation in domestic duties is not always associated with higher incomes and higher land and hence cannot be convincingly deemed as status production. Domestic duties themselves can be categorised into domestic activities only, and domestic and allied activities. Perusal of the latter category suggest that it consists mainly of production activities that do not enter the market calculus but are important for household consumption. In the context of a

rise in insecure employment, rising gender wage gap and shrinking employment opportunities, women's shift from the labour market to labour intensive domestic and allied activities offers further evidence against the straightforward applicability of the u-hypothesis to the Indian case.

The puzzle of increasing participation in domestic economies at the expense of participation in the labour market cannot merely be understood as acontextual patriarchy that compels women to confine themselves to the household sphere, nor can it merely be characterised as the result of a growing economy that frees women from drudgery. Instead, women's participation in various work activities may be better understood as the interplay of political, social and economic institutions under contemporary and contextual capitalist practices that influence access to means of production (that is, wage work), determine value of labour power, shape the family-household (Fine 1992) and determine access of the working classes to public goods and welfare. In other words, women's switch of principal activity status from the labour market to domestic activities needs to be understood in the context of inadequate well-paying employment for the working classes and the existence of a potential crisis of reproduction. There is no guarantee that further economic growth will automatically increase Indian FLFPR or decrease women's participation in domestic activities unless structural conditions of the labour market and the burden of reproducing households are adequately addressed. While this paper presents a preliminary analysis in this paper, future research could uncover further complexities of domestic economies, particularly the differences between domestic activities only, and domestic and allied activities, and elucidate their interrelationship with the labour market in the context of household reproduction of the working classes.

NOTE

- 1 Research also suggests a non-linear relationship between income, wealth and reliance on extraction of "free" goods for household consumption (for example in Naidu 2011; Narain et al 2008).

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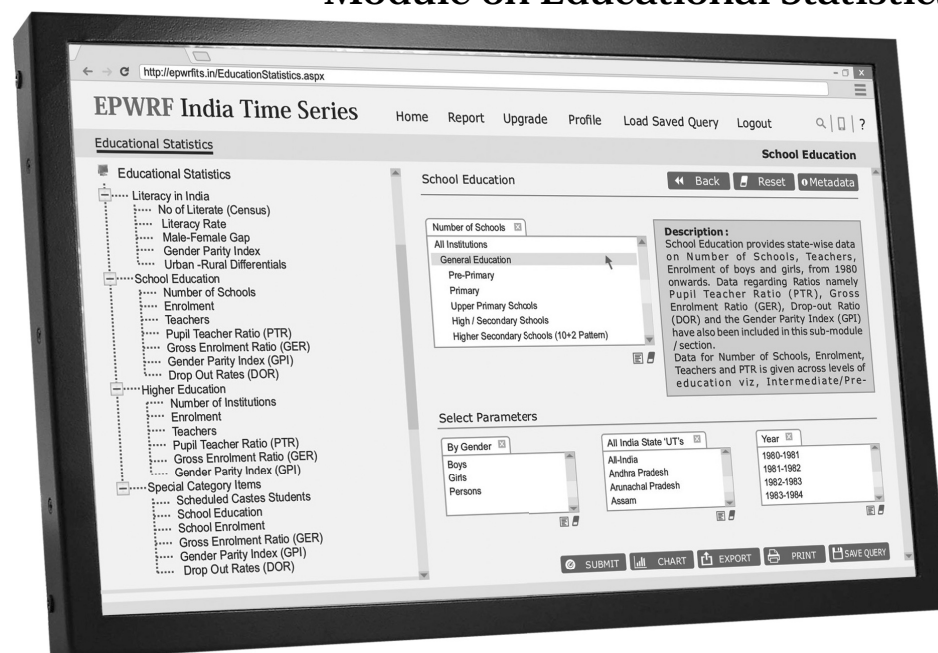
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