

## Empowering Women

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Several studies have found that a higher participation in the labour force does not necessarily improve women's status, rather, under circumstances, increased participation in labour force disempowers women and widens the gender gap.

There have been many studies on the issue of women's participation in the labour force. A large number of studies are aimed at finding the correlation between the women's participation in labour force and possible change in women's socioeconomic status. Since the 1980s, labour force participation growth has been substantially higher for women than for men for every region of the world. A UN study claims that the increasing participation of women in paid work has been driving employment trends and the gender gaps in labour force participation rates have been shrinking. Although this has been the general perception that increased participation in labour force empowers the women, but this view has been debated.

Normally, it is expected that women's labour force participation will encourage more, NOT less, education for girls. Nevertheless, the general pattern reviewed across India provides a cautionary message and reminds people once again of the multidimensionality of gender stratification. Understanding the multi-dimensionality of gender stratification also helps one think about other gendered consequences of women's labour force participation. A multitude of conditions may limit the liberating impacts of work outside the household and, even in the best of circumstances, outside work usually implies a dual burden for wives and mothers.

While the frequency of women's work may increase girls' economic value, which has positive benefits for their survival, girls' economic value may also increase their parents' incentives to keep them out of school to maximize their immediate economic returns. A lower literacy rate, in the long run, contributes to disempowerment.

Studies have also found that increased participation of women in the labour force does not necessarily reduce the gender gap. It can, instead, increase the gender gap. An interesting study on Indian women illustrates circumstances when higher rates of women's labour force participation contribute to less rather than more gender equality: more women's labour force participation may lead to girls being withdrawn from school and put to work; the frequency of girls' work may restrict their schooling, which widens the gender gap in basic education. Contrary to expectations from either human capital or gender empowerment perspectives, analyses across 409 Indian districts show that girls have relatively lower literacy compared to boys in areas where more women are in the labour force.

An important missing point is that the study does not focus on the kind of employment the womenfolk participate in. If the employment avenues are based on formal knowledge and skills, then the literacy rate might have positive relationship with women's participation rates in the labour force. The findings of this study disprove one usual assumption that working empowers people. This result that a mere participation in the labour force does not empower women, rather it can lead to disempowerment, under certain conditions, will be true for man as well. If a worker is not compensated enough, then such work perpetuates poverty, illiteracy, and ill health.

Although the aforesaid observation does a considerable job of analyzing the relationship between women's participation in the labour force and their literacy rates. Owing to a number of changes in the overall scenario of Indian economy as well as in the Indian society, there might be noticeable changes in the pattern of women's participation in the labour force and their literacy rates.

The above study is based, largely, on the 2001 Census data. The socioeconomic condition has changed significantly in these 10 years.

The overall literacy rate in India has improved from 65% to 74% and women's literacy rate has improved as well from 53.67% in 2001 to 65.46% in 2011. The gender gap between educational achievements has also reduced.

As more formally educated girls are entering the job market, the findings may or may not hold anymore. For instance, a good proportion of Call Centre workers are female and they are educated. It may change the result that labour participation rate for women has a negative correlation with their literacy rates.

Although some of the indicators of gender empowerment are encouraging but, there are other indicators such as child sex ratio, which show that the gender gap is increasing.

This implies that the changes are not unidirectional, and hence, nothing can be said for sure without making a proper investigation of the present scenario. Therefore, there needs to be more studies based on the new data and further analysis in this regard may yield different results. To conclude the relationship between increased labour force participation and empowerment are not as obvious as someone may think. □