

# Declining Female Labour Force Participation and Crisis of Social Reproduction

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Sharp fall in Labour Force Participation Rates (LFPR) showing a rise in discouraged or disheartened workers in India is essentially a manifestation of a protracted agrarian crisis together with declining growth of non-farm employment for both skilled and unskilled workers since 2012. The decline in LFPR according to the National Statistical Office<sup>1</sup> was particularly severe in the case of rural female of age group 15-29 recording a steep fall of 15.7 percentage points by usual principal and subsidiary status (UPSS) during the period 2005-12 which shows a slightly less decline of 13.6 percentage points if we broaden the age group to 15 and above. For the rural females and for the two age groups mentioned, LFPR declined further by 11.2 percentage points during the period 2012-18. Notably LFPR remained strikingly stable for urban male of age group 15 and above. Generally labour force participation for females is much higher in the case of low income households compared to higher income groups, but since the fall in LFPR has been much sharper in the case of low income households, the usual gap between low and high income households in terms of labour force participation also declined during this period.

Commentators following this drastic fall in female LFPR have come out with some tentative and interrelated hypotheses. These include, among others, the assertion that (i) young girls are opting for education rather than joining the labour force; (ii) women opt out of work once household income increases during high growth periods; (iii) there are definitional and execution issues in capturing women's work during surveys; and, (iv) it is simply the decline in job opportunities for women. ILO did a comprehensive study<sup>2</sup> validating the interplay of all these factors,

while recognising the crucial fact that 62 per cent of the decline in female LFPR can be explained by the fact of diminished employment opportunities and 38 per cent of the fall can be on account of other factors such as increase in household consumption or higher participation in educational institutions. Explanations suggesting rise in household income as the most important determinant of decline in female LFPR become increasingly unsustainable when we see a decline in real wages of regular rural and urban workers in India during the period 2012-18.

This article suggests that the fall in female LFPR is structural and manifests a crisis arising out of the conflict between regime of accumulation and that of social reproduction. The distribution of waged and unwaged work at the level of household is not merely an optimisation problem with given options of income and constraints at the individual level. It is a result of a larger process manifesting a crisis of social reproduction that the current neoliberal regime of capital accumulation inflicts through diminishing employment opportunities on the one hand and privatising social and community provisions on the other.

## **Social Reproduction: Waged and Unwaged Work**

Female participation in the labour market and the distribution of waged and unwaged work within the household is directly linked to the dynamics of production and social reproduction. At one level it depends on the nature of the labour market, availability of waged work and the provisions of physical reproduction on a daily basis, while at a systemic level it is the result of inclusion and exclusion dynamics of women labour depending on the needs of capital

accumulation. The myopia of choice theoretic approach fails to see the gendered nature of exclusion of women labour and tends to resolve it within the confines of household decisions.

Capitalism as a system exists when owners of means of production and subsistence come in contact with sellers of labour power, the workers. Despite workers being at loggerheads with the capitalists given their conflicting interests, capital requires workers for production and therefore there has to be a process of producing and supplying labour so that the system keeps going. For economics in general and political economy in particular the supply of labour is conceived as a natural process of wear and tear and finally death of current labour, which has to be generationally reproduced by supply of fresh labour. But labour as human beings and labour as possessors of a commodity labour power are two different aspects altogether. The dynamics of population defines the growth of new people but labour power is a social construct as selling labour is not something intrinsic to human nature rather it is the only fall back option for those forcefully alienated from the means of production. Therefore, production of labour power is neither a result of a natural process nor is it produced in a capitalist way involving inputs and hired labour. Labour power is produced in a non-capitalist site within the realm of kinship based family. Had it been produced as any other commodity in capitalism it would have destroyed the material basis and claimed that household is the site of free autonomous individuals who are responsible for their own failure. More importantly, the production of labour power as a process of physical procreation, as well as physical sustenance and rearing, involves critical contribution of unwaged labour structurally assigned to domestic labour of women.

The division of labour within the household and the distribution of waged and unwaged work are often optically collated to the biological division between men and women in the process of procreation. In fact, the supply of wage labour involves domestic labour that produces use values not meant for sale and hence often not considered to be meaningful work. But this very important process of reproducing and replenishing labourers has to be under control of capital and therefore capitalism facilitates patriarchal control over women, their bodies as well as on their choice of work. Therefore, the gendered structure of control over women's work is not only a continuity of transhistoric patriarchy but in the particular context of capitalism such domination is integral to the capital-labour relationship that is to be reproduced. In this

process family is often reified as the only site of production and source of labour power that helps justifying male domination within the household as a necessary prerequisite for capitalist accumulation. There is a process of physical reproduction which involves individual production and consumption of use values within the household but social reproduction entails a larger process of reproducing the totality of labour, maintaining non-labouring population and ensures generational replacement.<sup>3</sup>

The unwaged work performed by domestic female labour actually transfers unwaged work from the realm of private to the realm of public. It reduces the cost of producing able-bodied human beings and hence adds to the surplus of the capitalist employer. Therefore, the balance of waged and unwaged work is of immense importance and is articulated through the dynamics of production and social reproduction. What is even more important is the fact that the relevance of unwaged work is only appreciated when it contributes to the production of labour power and therefore surplus. Otherwise unwaged work has no meaning vis-à-vis capitalism. In other words, the use of domestic labour within the family, undergoing processes of oppression and alienation, can have some importance only when this contribution can be passed on to the capitalist through wage employment. This also determines the calculus of two-earner families in replacing unwaged work by waged services, the cost involved in employing someone as domestic help with respect to income earned through paid employment.

### **Accumulation and Crisis of Social Reproduction**

The structural subordination of affective and material unpaid domestic work often termed as 'reproductive' work by 'productive' waged work defines the distribution of household labour and related inclusion and exclusion of women from economic activities for the society as a whole. But this process has been linked with the particularities of regimes of accumulation. Regime of accumulation is relatively a less abstract concept than principles of accumulation.<sup>4</sup> It defines the forms of social transformation in the realm of production and consumption that helps in increasing relative surplus value with unchanged norms of deriving absolute surplus value. It actually articulates a balance between production and consumption through appropriate institutions and social norms. In other words, a particular regime of accumulation conditions the social reproduction process according to its needs but at the same time gives rise to

contradictions that demand further resolutions.

In the nineteenth century, liberal competitive capitalism was based on industrial exploitation of labour on the one hand and colonial expropriation on the other hand. It primarily depended on increasing use of cheap labour including women and children and the inhuman nature of exploitation became a real threat to the process of social reproduction. It drew attention of novelists and social commentators at that point of time which surfaced as a critique of industry-based modernity. The middle class and the elite also felt the tension of eroding working-class family structure and certain protective legislations were put in place to control the use of women and child labour. The response was basically to control unbridled exploitation driven by profit motive of individual capitalist and impose norms that ensure continued supply of labour serving the long-term interest of the capitalist class as a whole. It drove back women from economic activities confining them once again in domestic work and was culturally exalted by the Victorian model of 'separating' family space from work place.<sup>5</sup> The exclusion of women from waged work became the norm to stabilize social reproduction. But this did not last long as the wages were low and the imposed separation became unsustainable beyond a point.

In the twentieth century after the Great Depression we see a change in the regime of accumulation with the rise of Fordism and Keynesian welfare state as a response to the crisis of social reproduction. It was partial internalisation of social reproduction by the state where the concept of 'family wage' emerged as an acknowledgement of public responsibility of generational reproduction. In this process the regime of accumulation could establish a balance between production and consumption by way of linking mass production with familial consumerism. But it also led to exclusion of women from active labour force and the 'male worker' emerged as the imagery of working class in state protected regimes.

In the current phase the regime of accumulation is market based, social welfare provisions are severely cut down, unionised workers are being replaced by informal and precarious labour in the name of labour market flexibility and the family wage is simply out of the agenda. The decline in the share of working class in value added has been the reality across the globe and capital takes advantage of labour arbitrage in making huge profits. The resultant decline in demand in advanced economies is taken care of partially by debt financed consumption roping

in working class in the labyrinth of financial gains. The scope of displacing the demand problem is less in developing countries where the permeation of financialisation is far less compared to advanced countries because of low per capita income.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, financialisation results in a disconnect between profit, productive investment and employment. The shrinkage of manufacturing employment particularly in labour intensive sectors such as food processing, garments and leather disproportionately reduces the scope of female employment. For the upper middle class two earner families, working women can substitute their unpaid domestic work by low paid mostly migrant domestic help and thus pass on the crisis of social reproduction to working class and poorer families. In the case of poorer families however this transference is not an option. Employment opportunities have shrunk, wages have fallen below the socially necessary costs of reproduction, and commodification of health, education, child care, food and energy because of privatisation, have left no other option to fall back upon but to stretch the unwaged activities to make both ends meet. The exclusion of women from the labour force therefore expresses a deep crisis of social reproduction caused by a regime of accumulation that depends on income deflation or under-reproduction of labour and nature.

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### **Notes and References**

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4. Michael Aglietta 2000. *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The US Experience*, London: New Left Books
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