

Care to work?

Undercounting women's work is representative of a deeper misunderstanding

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RECENT National Sample Survey (NSS) data released by the government recognises "distinct gender differentials" in the Indian workforce — stark in urban areas where 54 per cent of every 1000 males report working, while only 14 per cent women work.

Academics and activists often cite cultural norms which view women as home-makers and men as breadwinners at the root of such a male-female gap. Hence, our culture mandates that women stay at home and take care of their families, while men find employment and contribute to the economic sustenance of the household. But is 'culture' a policy scapegoat?

A survey commissioned by the International Labour Organisation and conducted by the

Institute of Social Studies Trust unpacks the ways in which socially constructed barriers manifest in women's work and life-choices — that is, decisions about

how much time women choose to spend working outside the home vis-à-vis the time spent at home taking care of family.

The conventional statistical lens can underestimate women's work. The ISST study reports 21 per cent female workforce participation, which is much higher than the NSS female worker population ratio (7.5 per cent) for urban Delhi. Such magnification can be attributed to the smaller scale and focus of the study which allowed intensive probing. The variation also highlights difficulties in disentangling women's economic role from their domestic duties. Several women were engaged in paid informal work which was part-time or home-based like providing tuitions, tailoring garments or domestic work. Such employment patterns are often not reported or perceived as "work" by enumerators or women themselves. Further, women assisting their family members in clinics, shops and enterprises did not immediately report themselves as workers. Close

to 56 per cent of the women surveyed, when explicitly asked by ISST investigators, stated they helped their family members with businesses and jobs.

Beyond the tricky, technical dimensions of statistical reportage, the study finds that women make career choices bearing the consistent load of household work. Within the group of respondents who withdrew from employment, excessive household workload was cited as the dominant reason. The amount and nature of household work is related to marital status. Thus, 43 per cent of the single women in the city are working compared to 19 per cent of married women who are reported as workers.

A long and heavy workload resulting from combining paid work and household care work like cooking, caring for the elderly and childcare was cited by most working and non-working women as the major reason to avoid entry into employment. Data on the daily routines of women surveyed suggests a nor-



mal working day of 11-15 hours for women in the workforce, where they are unable to considerably renegotiate the amount of time required for household tasks.

Working women rely on support from their spouses and other family members. Those from middle class and richer households hire nannies, full time maids or part time domestic help. Thus, the decision to work is primarily related to the informal

arrangements available to assist female domestic workload associated with marriage and family. Fears regarding safety and mobility were the second most prominent problem associated with joining the workforce. Family structures, public space and the job market penalize women for prioritizing caring for their families while making public and market spaces more easily available to men.

In a policy climate where much

discussion has been focused on affirmative action and demand oriented policies such as reservations, the study ascribes significance to supply-side solutions. Unless women feel safe and confident about managing household tasks and care for their children and the elderly, increased female work participation would create greater stress for working women. Investment in infrastructure like safe public can enable women to access more distant

jobs and distances. Further, policy stimulus to institutionalise care-related support while allowing for flexible hours for women workers can harness their participation. Childcare or elderly care debates in urban India have been close to non-existent with the dominant view being that providing quality care for the household is a primarily private, familial and female task. More workplace reform and public involvement in care provision is needed along with a stronger sense of collective responsibility.

'Care work' needs to be recognised as an active ingredient in national economic growth. It is not necessary for all women to find paid jobs. Urban women may seek work or choose not to join the workforce. However, the Delhi survey affirms that women are making such choices within a predetermined patriarchal context, where women are cast as the sole providers of household care and their responsibilities as daughters, housewives, mothers and sisters remain invisible and undervalued. While women's choice not to work is rendered acceptable, can women choose not to care?

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