

What Exactly is Work?*

Jayati Ghosh

For a while now, there has been much focus and concern about the decline in women's workforce participation in India. The large sample surveys of the [National Sample Survey Organisation](#) on employment and unemployment suggest that between 2004-05 and 2011-12, women's recorded work participation declined from 33.3 per cent to 25.3 per cent in rural areas and 16.6 per cent to 14.7 per cent in urban areas. This is not just very low by the standards of other countries (both developed and developing) but makes India quite unique in that women's work participation appears to have fallen even as national income was rising rapidly.

All sorts of explanations have been offered for this observed trend. One partial explanation is that more young women (in the 15-24 age group) are engaged in education, which is a good thing. But this does not explain the total decline. Another powerful explanation is that rising real wages have allowed women in poor households to avoid or reduce involvement in very physically arduous and demanding work with relatively low wages and turn instead to more focus on "domestic duties". Implicit in this discussion is a notion of a household-level backward bending supply curve, which allows women especially in poorer families to choose not to "work" when their economic conditions allow it.

But much of this discussion probably misses the basic point: that a lot of work done by women is simply not captured by the data. So this decline may only reflect a further decline in the status of women in which more of the work they perform for their families and society is simply not recognised, much less rewarded.

Most standard dictionaries define work as "any activity involving mental or physical effort done in order to achieve a result". Economic activities are typically defined in a more restrictive way, as actions that involve the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services at all levels within a society, which of course begs the further question of what constitutes "goods and services". Pared down to its essence, it can be noted that any activity that can potentially be delegated is economic activity, which leaves only personal consumption and leisure as non-economic activities and requires a broadening of the common perception of what such activity is.

For example, the activities associated with motherhood are typically seen as "non-economic". Yet breastfeeding can be outsourced through the hiring of a wet nurse, which then makes it an economic activity, with the wet nurse engaged in paid work. An even more extreme but recently proliferating example is that of surrogate motherhood, in which a woman is paid to be impregnated, carry a child in her womb and go through child birth, making all these explicitly paid economic activities which in turn also contribute to national income to the extent of the remuneration received. Yet a woman who does this for her "own" child rather than someone else's, and without any monetary reward, is classified as "not in the labour force".

Fortunately, we finally have a new and more realistic international standard for the definition of work. According to the [19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians](#) in November 2013 (ratified by the ILO in March 2014), "Work

comprises any activity performed by persons of any sex and age to produce goods or to provide services for use by others or for own use.” The inclusion of the last phrase “for use by others or for own use” provides the crucial difference, as it includes the production of goods and services performed in the home for other household members and for personal use.

Several aspects of this definition are worth noting. First of all, work is defined irrespective of its formal or informal character or the legality of the activity. It excludes activities that do not involve producing goods or services (e.g. begging and stealing), self-care (e.g. personal grooming and hygiene) and activities that cannot be performed by another person on one’s own behalf (e.g. sleeping, learning and activities for own recreation). The significance of this definition is that it maintains that work can be performed in any kind of economic unit. Employment – defined as “work for pay or profit” therefore becomes a subset of work.

This new and enlarged concept of work should dramatically change the way in which work is both recognised and measured in India as well. Since the Chief Statistician of India was in fact the Chairperson of that path-breaking conference, it is to be hoped that the way the Indian data are presented is also changed accordingly.

However, at present in India, the NSS includes a broad category that it calls “neither working nor available for work (or not in labour force)”, which includes the following codes:

- 91 attended educational institutions
- 92 attended to domestic duties only
- 93 attended to domestic duties and was also engaged in free collection of goods (vegetables, roots, firewood, cattle feed, etc.), sewing, tailoring, weaving, etc. for household use
- 94 rentiers, pensioners, remittance recipients, etc.
- 95 not able to work owing to disability
- 97 others (including beggars, prostitutes, etc.)
- 98 did not work owing to sickness (for casual workers only)
- 99 children of age 0-4 years

Lumping these disparate groups together and classifying them all as “not working and not in the labour force” is deeply problematic for several reasons. It is very evident that Codes 92 and 93 do involve the production of goods and services that are potentially marketable and are therefore economic in nature, and would be classified as work in the new ICLS definition. Code 97 presents a different kind of anomaly: marketed activities that are not considered as work presumably for some moral reasons, though this is not stated explicitly (and also it is not clarified why, for example, smuggling should be acceptable if begging is not). The matter is further complicated by the fact that the NSSO also includes some unpaid work in its definition of work, by including “unpaid helpers in household enterprises” among those defined as working.

Suppose we include Codes 92, 93 and 97 in the definition of work? It turns out that this dramatically changes the picture with respect to trends in work participation in the recent past. To begin with, many more women are involved in working, in both paid and unpaid activities, to the extent that many more women work than men in India. Using this more inclusive definition of work, the overall work participation rate for all women in India has been consistently higher than for men. In 2011-12, the total female work participation rate (even after declining over the decade) was as high as 86.2 per cent, compared to 79.8 per cent for men. This is a very different picture from the conventional one that sees most women in India as “not working”.

Another startling feature that comes out is the gender gap in unpaid work. While it is only to be expected that the proportion of men who are involved in domestic work (Codes 92 and 93) would be lower than women, the difference is enormous. Less than one per cent of men in both urban and rural areas have been involved in this as their usual principal activity, but for women the proportion has been in excess of 60 per cent! Not only is the female rate substantially higher than the male rate, but the gap between them has increased over this period from 5.6 percentage points to 6.4 percentage points. Unpaid work should not be casually dismissed: they encompass activities that are absolutely essential for society, which simply must be undertaken for households and societies to continue at all.

Significantly, once such work is factored in, there is less evidence of significant decline in female work participation in recent times, certainly when compared to men. Indeed, the decline in male work participation then appears to be stronger than that for women – and both can be explained dominantly by the increasing involvement in education.

Overall what the Indian data therefore indicate is not that less Indian women are working – rather, there has been a shift for women, across both rural and urban locations, from remunerated and/or recognised work to unpaid and largely unrecognised domestic duties. This shift from paid to unpaid work should not be lightly dismissed. It is in fact further indication of the low and declining status of women in Indian society, and reflects a process of relative disempowerment. It should therefore be taken seriously not just by policymakers but by all those who want a just and equitable society.

*** This article was originally published in the Frontline, Print edition: October 31, 2014.**