

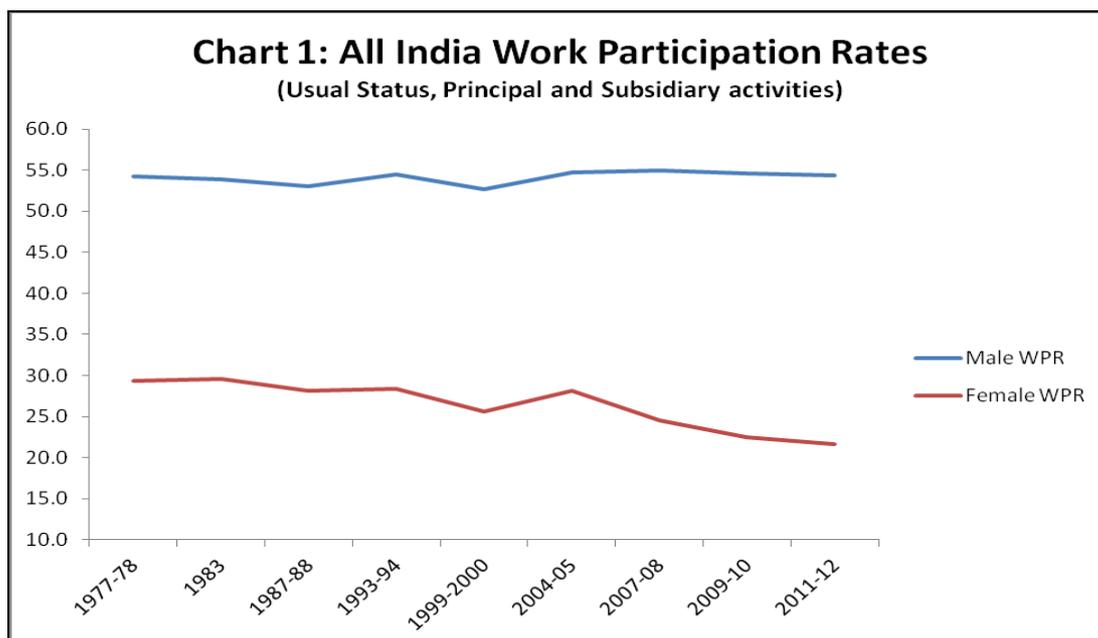
# Where have All the Women Workers Gone?

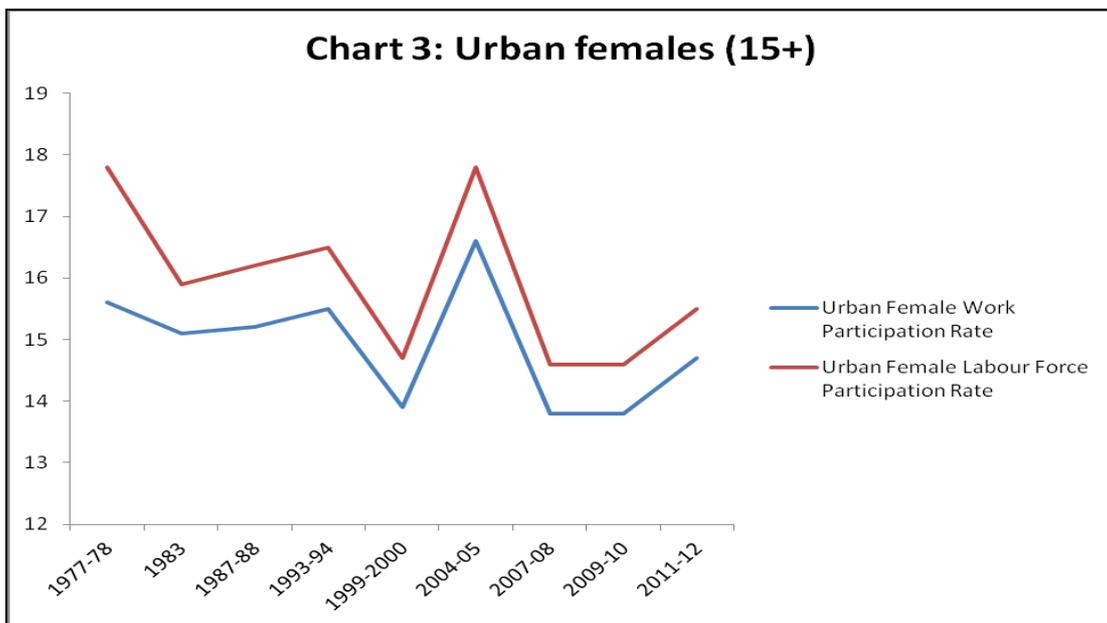
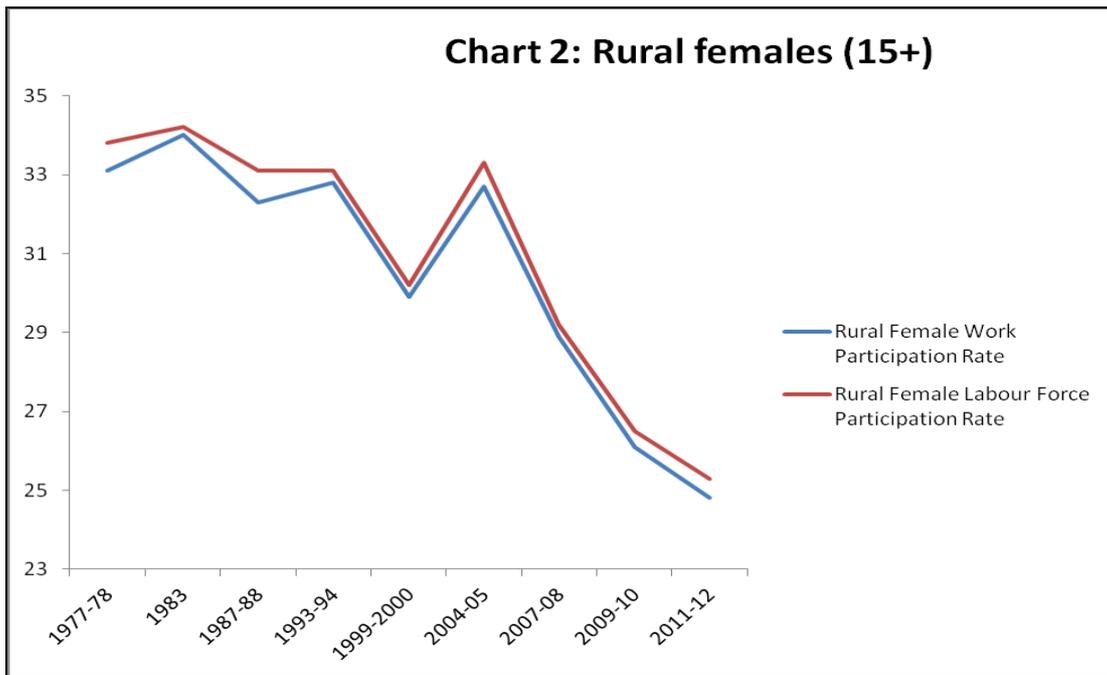
C.P. Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh

Among developing countries, it is possible that the recent Indian experience has displayed a unique trajectory with respect to women's work. The story of industrialisation and development is most commonly also a story of increasing women's work force participation: not only because more and more women are drawn into paid employment, but because the burden of unpaid labour performed within households tends to get reduced and transformed into remunerated activities with rising per capita incomes. Of course there are questions about the nature, quality and remuneration of women's work, as well as the double burden of paid and unpaid labour. But it is also the case that recognising women's work is often an essential part of recognising the contribution of women to the economy and society, and is associated with greater autonomy and agency of women – so it is a useful indicator of women's status in society as well.

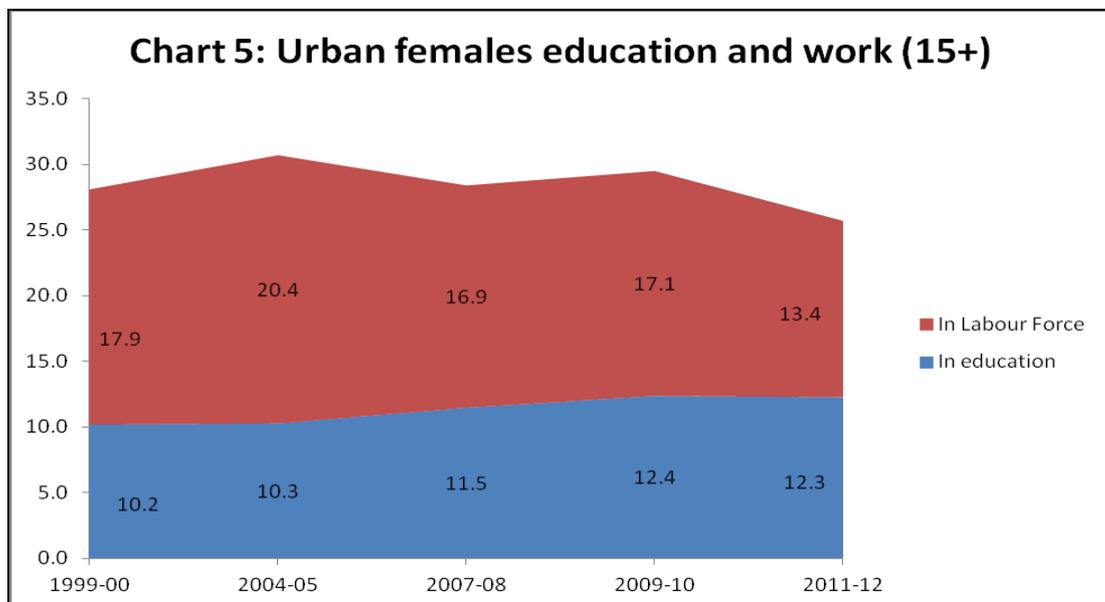
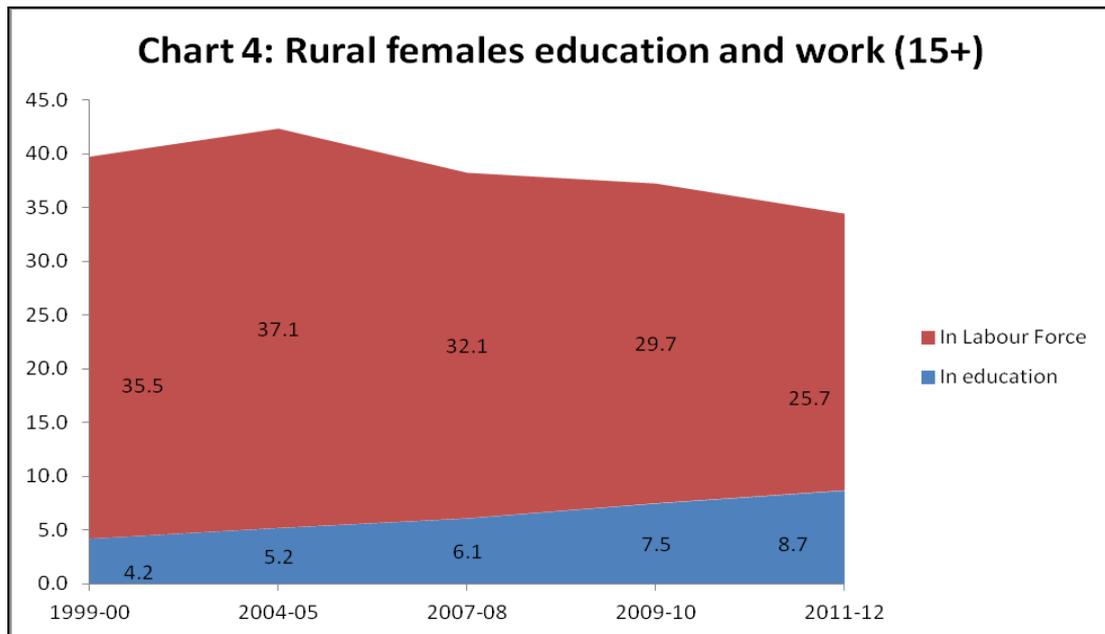
If this is the case then there is much to be concerned about women's employment patterns in India. Female [work participation rates](#) (WPRs) in India have historically been significantly lower than male rates. What is more surprising is that despite three decades of relatively rapid GDP growth, these rates have not increased, but have actually fallen in recent times. Chart 1 indicates that the gap between male and female WPRs (for the 15+ age group) has grown as male rates have remained stable and female rates have declined below their already very low levels.

The decline is particularly sharp for rural women, as shown in Chart 2. The sharp decline in 2009-10 was dismissed as a statistical aberration when it first emerged in the NSS large survey, but the subsequent large [survey in 2011-12](#) has revealed a further decline, implying that there is a real tendency at work that has to be understood and explained. In urban areas (Chart 3) women work participation rates have been very volatile (possibly reflecting the vagaries of the sample survey) but nonetheless over a mildly declining trend.





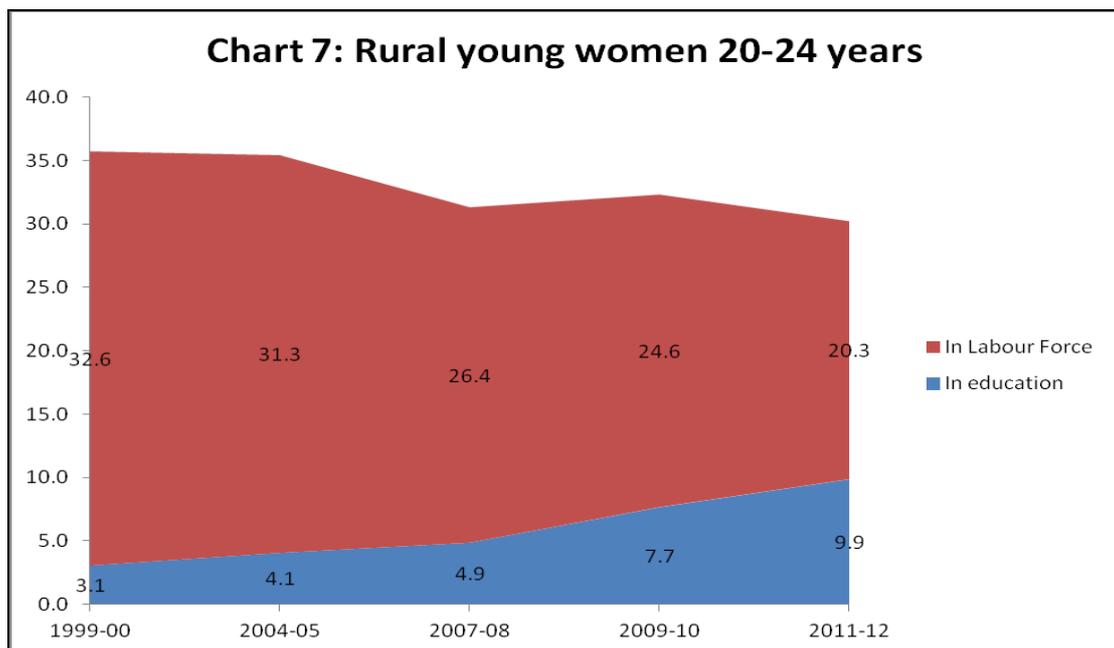
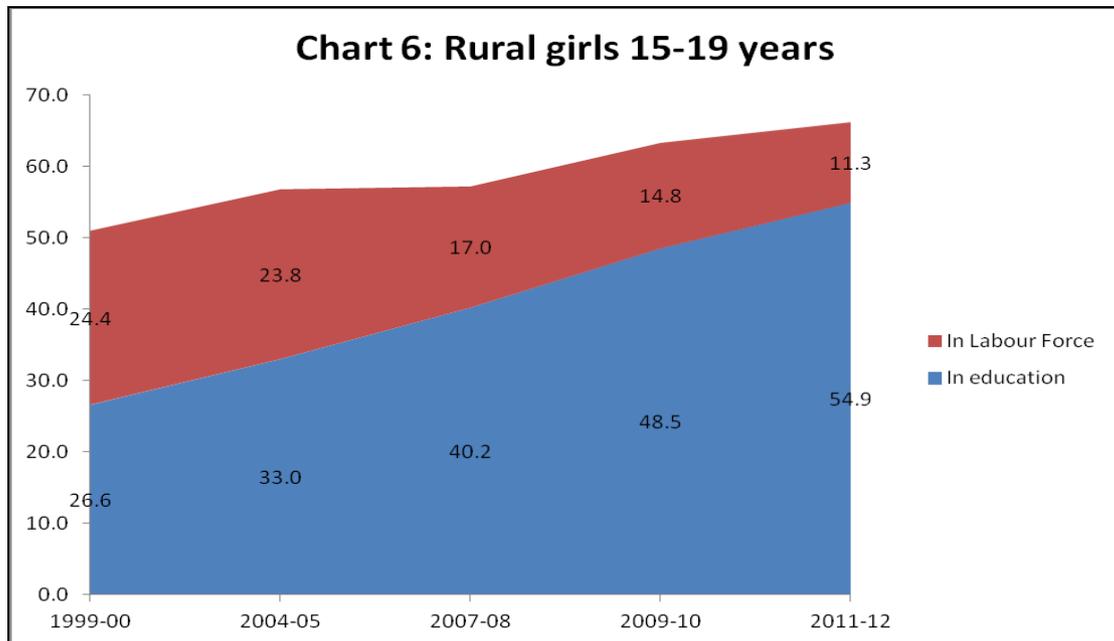
It is widely believed that the decline in work participation rates is because of increasing participation in education, which is to be welcomed. It is certainly true that female participation in education has increased in both rural and urban areas, and especially so since 2007. However, as Charts 4 and 5 indicate, this still does not explain fully the total decline in female labour force participation, which has been significantly greater in rural India and somewhat more in urban India.



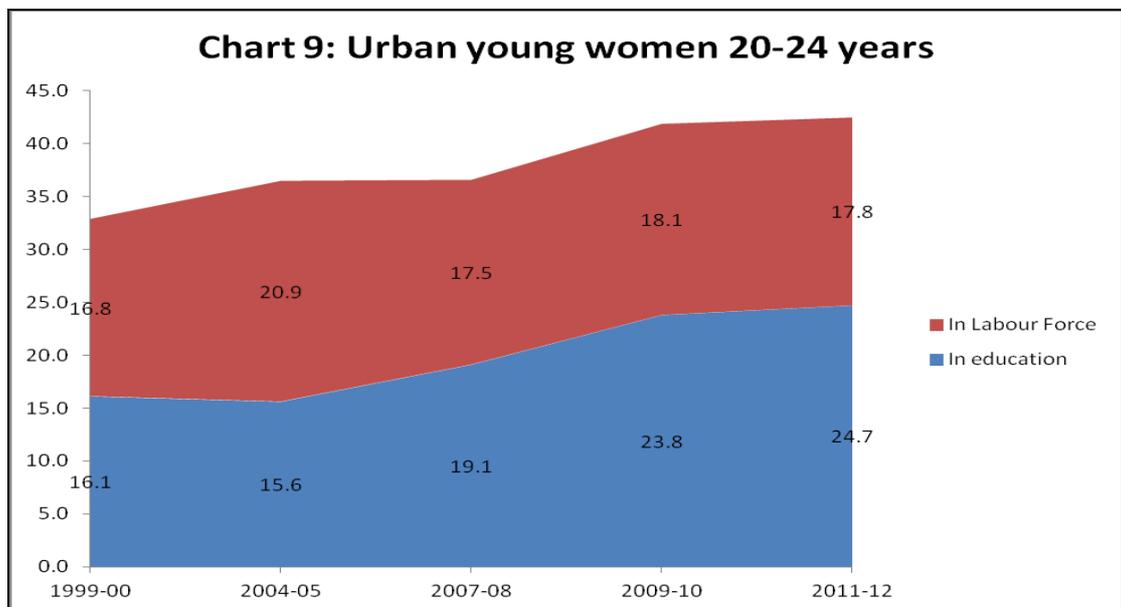
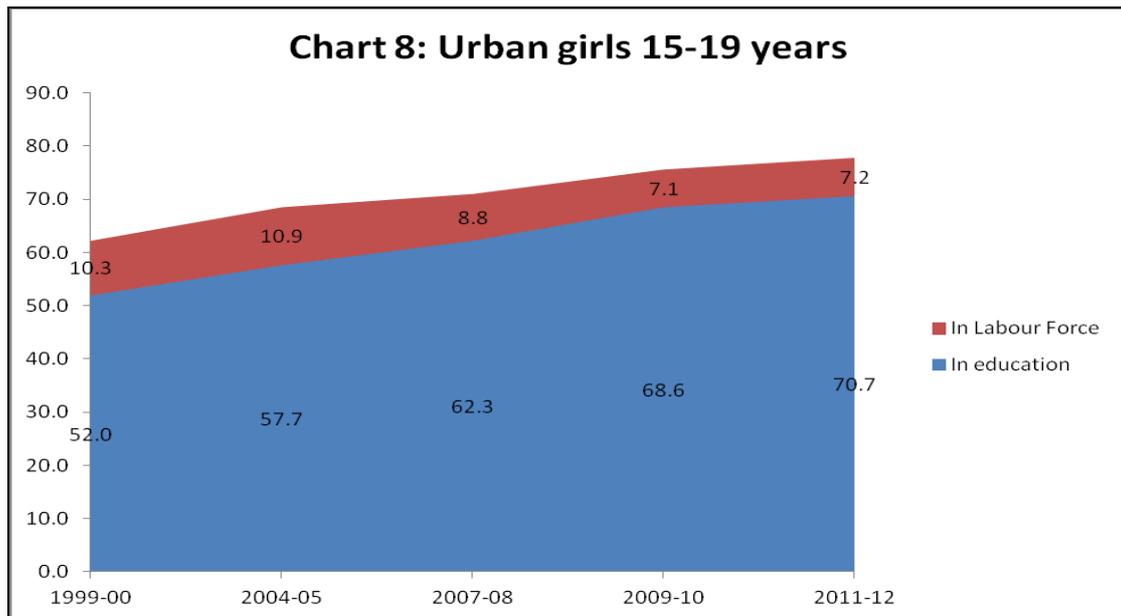
Incidentally, it is worth noting that labour force participation rates (which include workers and those openly unemployed, that is searching but not finding jobs) closely track the work participation rates, to the point that open unemployment rates of women have been falling because of declining labour force participation. It may be that the “discouraged worker” effect is particularly strong for women, or it may reflect other social causes that inhibit recognised work.

It is worth examining the situation of young women in particular, because that can be both an important indicator of the status of women and their activities, as well as a pointer to the future. Chart 6 shows that for rural girls in the age group 15-19 years, education is indeed the dominant reason for the apparent withdrawal from the labour force, and this can only be a good thing (whatever concerns we may have about the quality of education and the subsequent employability). But Chart 7 points to an extremely disturbing tendency – in the age group 20-24 years, increasing involvement in education does not compensate for the general decline in work participation. It may

well be that young women are permitted to participate in education up to a point, but as they enter “marriageable” age, they withdraw (or are made to withdraw) from the labour force.



A similar tendency does appear to be operating for young women in urban India, although here the proportion that continues on to tertiary education is higher than in rural areas. Even so, it does not necessarily translate into recognised employment – which is obviously a concern.



So what exactly is going on? What explains this extraordinary deterioration in one of the more obvious indicators of the economic empowerment of women in India?

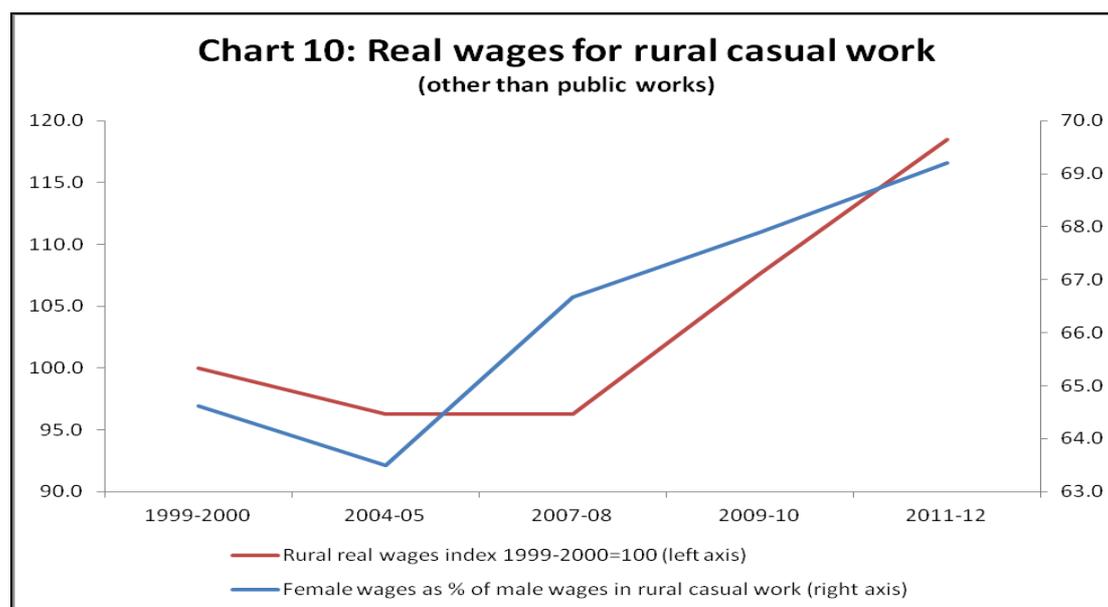
Much of the decline in work participation has been among self-employed workers, including (but not only) those involved in agriculture. The growing mechanisation of agriculture has played a role in reducing demand for women's work. In addition, the change in ecology has led to a decline in many rural activities earlier performed by women, such as the collection of minor forest produce, while other changes (such as the growing difficulties of collecting fuel wood and water) have increased the time that has to be devoted to unpaid labour.

Indeed, the time that has to be allocated to unpaid labour – in the form of not just various economic but unrecognised activities like provisioning essential items for household consumption but also the care economy generally – is likely to be an

important reason for the withdrawal of women from the labour force. It is clear that in addition to broader socio-economic processes, state action has a critical role to play in changing this.

Social perceptions about women and their capacities are also important factors. It is ironic but true that as some activities become less arduous and physically taxing (in agriculture and construction for example, where machines take over some of the more difficult tasks) women are replaced by male workers. But there is really no physical reason why women should be less able than men to drive tractors and harvester-threshers or operate construction machines. Rather, it reflects the persistence of what should be archaic attitudes towards women and the work they are fit to perform.

These point to why women workers could be withdrawn from the labour force as household incomes increase even in relatively poor families. Chart 10 shows that in rural India real wages for casual work have increased significantly in the recent periods. This in turn can be the result of many factors, in which the role of the [MNREGA](#) in stabilising the rural wage floor and providing a better bargaining situation for rural workers are probably also worth noting. However, one unfortunate consequence of this could well be that less women are available for outside household work – in a peculiar form of backward bending labour supply curve for households that is the outcome of patriarchy!



Of course, India is a country of vast dimensions and enormous variation, so it is probably wrong to analyse trends from an All India perspective when there are likely to be significant differences across states. Indeed, Table 1 indicates how significant these are, with female WPRs varying from a low of 5.3 per cent in rural Bihar to a high of 52.4 per cent in rural Himachal Pradesh. (The data in this table refer to the entire population rather than the 15+ age group, so the rates, including for All India, are lower than in the earlier charts.)

**Table 1: Female work participation rates by state**

(Usual Status, Principal plus subsidiary activities)

State	Rural		Urban	
	2004-05	2011-12	2004-05	2011-12
Andhra Pradesh	48.3	44.5	22.4	17
Arunachal Pradesh	41	27.8	14.8	12.7
Assam	20.9	12.2	10.9	9
Bihar	13.8	5.3	6.5	4.5
Chhattisgarh	45.4	41.5	18.1	24
Delhi	4.7	14.6	8.8	10.4
Goa	18.8	21	18.8	15.7
Gujarat	42.7	27.8	15.1	13.3
Haryana	31.7	16.2	13.2	9.7
Himachal Pradesh	50.6	52.4	24.1	21.2
Jammu & Kashmir	26.7	25.5	11.2	11.7
Jharkhand	31.3	19.8	13.4	6.6
Karnataka	45.9	28.7	18.1	16.3
Kerala	25.6	22.1	20	19.1
Madhya Pradesh	36.6	23.9	15.4	11.5
Maharashtra	47.4	38.8	19	16.6
Manipur	35.1	26.2	22.1	18.2
Meghalaya	47.8	39.1	30.3	20.2
Mizoram	44.1	39.4	28.1	24.9
Nagaland	50.4	31.2	25.7	14.4
Orissa	32.2	24.6	14.8	15.5
Punjab	32.2	23.4	13.3	13.6
Rajasthan	40.7	34.7	18.2	14.1
Sikkim	31.8	48.7	16.8	27.3
Tamil Nadu	46.1	37.8	24.1	20.1
Tripura	8.5	22.8	10	11.3
Uttaranchal	42.7	30.8	12.7	8.6
Uttar Pradesh	24	17.7	11.7	10.2
West Bengal	17.8	18.9	15.5	17.4
<b>All India</b>	<b>32.7</b>	<b>24.8</b>	<b>16.6</b>	<b>14.7</b>

However, what is striking in Table 1 is not just the variation across states but also how widespread has been the decline in women's work force participation. The northeastern states of Tripura and Sikkim are the only ones that shows a substantial improvement in women's work participation in both rural and urban areas from 2004-05 to 2011-12. There were minor increases in West Bengal and rural Himachal Pradesh. Everywhere else, the same depressing tendency that marks the All India pattern is evident, even in states that earlier showed much higher proportions of female workers.

Obviously the weight of patriarchy rests heavy not just on Indian society but also on the Indian economy, involving a huge waste of human potential that the society can ill afford.

**\* This article was originally published in The Business Line on November 11, 2013.**