

## **Are Women Really Working Less in India?\***

**C.P. Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh**

There has been much discussion on the evidence from recent NSS large sample surveys on employment, of the significant decline in women's workforce participation rates. Various explanations have been offered for this, including rising real wages that 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 this entire discussion misses a basic point – that participation in such activities is also work, and that it is economic activity that is necessary for society. In essence, any activity that can potentially be delegated is economic activity, which leaves only personal consumption and leisure as non-economic activities.

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". Indeed, the very notion of "maternity leave" from paid work suggests that the mother is in effect on some sort of holiday, rather than actively engaged in the work of producing a child.

While the NSSO, like many other similar surveys, falls into the trap of considering such activity as non-work, it does collect data on these and other activities, which allows us to examine the trends in such unpaid domestic work compared to recognised work. Code 92 describes those who attended to domestic duties only, while Code 93 covers those who attended to domestic duties and also engaged in free collection of goods (vegetables, roots, firewood, cattle feed, etc.), sewing, tailoring, weaving, etc. for household use. It is obvious that these all directly contribute to household consumption and are therefore economic activities. More to the point, they are also essential, in that households (and society) cannot continue to exist if they are not performed.

There is another peculiar category, Code 97 "others" – which covers marketed activities that are not considered as work (like begging, prostitution, etc.) presumably for some moral reasons, though this is not stated explicitly.

Once such work is factored in, and other paid but unrecognised work (the category "others") is also included, then there is less evidence of significant decline in female work participation in recent times. Indeed, the decline in male work participation then appears to be stronger than that for women – and both declines can then be explained dominantly by increasing involvement in education.

Charts 1 and 2 provide evidence of this for rural and urban females (age 15 years and above) respectively. Once all the different forms of work – both paid/recognised and unpaid/unrecognised – are taken into account, then aggregate work participation declined by only 6.1 percentage points in rural areas and 3.8 percentage points in urban areas – and this decline can be mostly explained by increased involvement in education.

But arguably the more interesting point that emerges from both these charts is just how many women are involved in working, in both paid and unpaid activities. Indeed, judged by this more expansive definition of work, many more women work than men in India – the work participation rate for all women in India has been consistently higher than for men. In 2011-12, across both rural and urban areas, 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”.

Chart 1

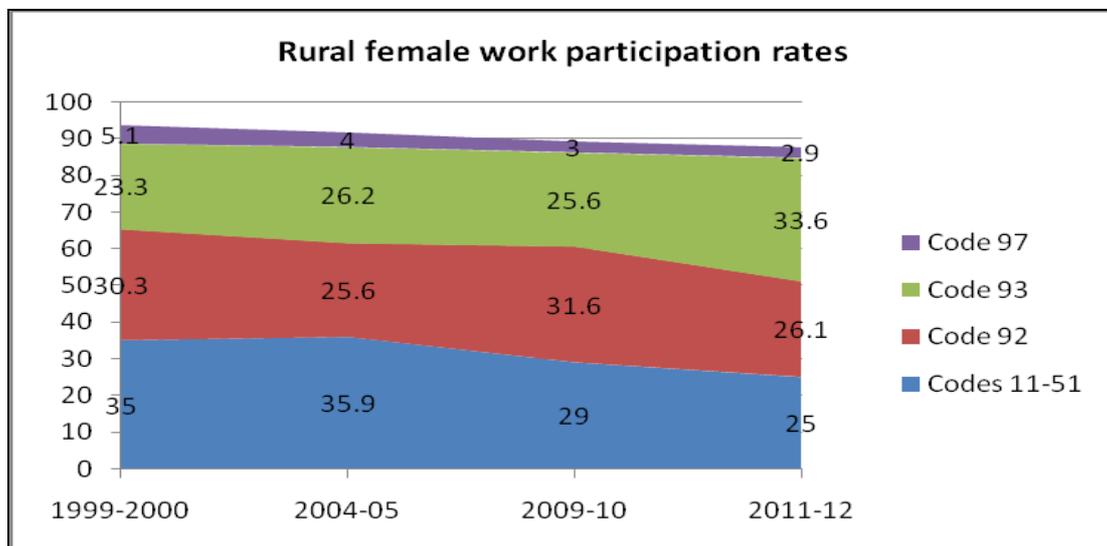


Chart 2

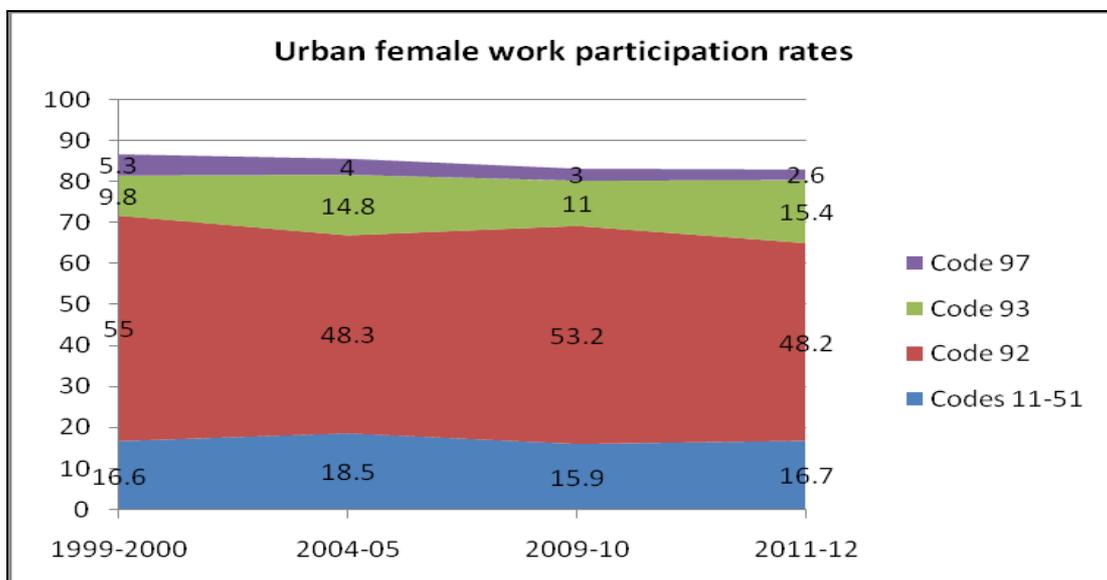


Chart 3

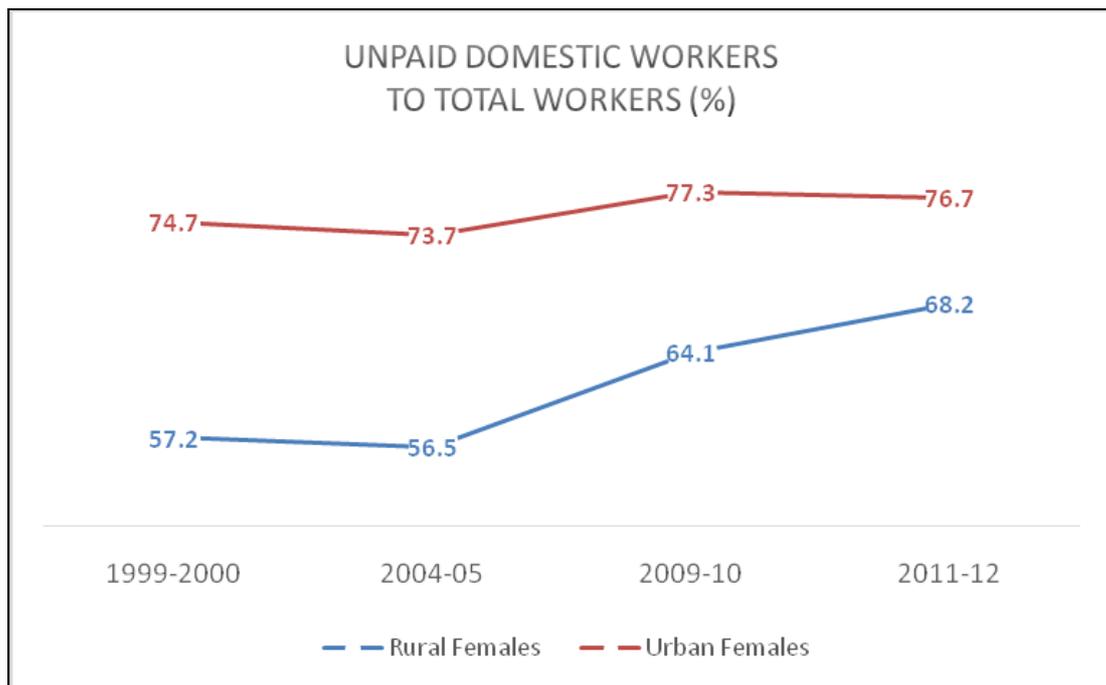


Chart 3 identifies the important underlying trend in this – that the proportion of women engaged in unpaid/unrecognised work in India as actually been increasing over the past decade. The increase has been particularly strong in urban areas. It should be noted that even this understates full extent of unpaid work by women, since large numbers of them are involved as “unpaid helpers in family enterprise” which is in fact recognised by the NSSO as “work” and is included in Codes 11-51. If these were to be included, the share of unpaid workers among women workers would be even higher.

There may be objections to this way of interpreting work, because it involves going beyond, and possibly even contradicting, the “conventional” treatment of work in national income accounting as well as in employment and labour force surveys. However, convention is not a good or sufficient justification for any practice, and an argument for preserving the existing definitions (which are riddled with conceptual contradictions) must be made on analytical grounds. Further, since the unpaid work covered in Codes 92 and 93 directly and indirectly contributes to output and therefore enables the labour productivity that is captured using the restrictive notion of work, not including such workers in total workers provides a wrong impression of the true labour productivity in society.

Most of all, undervaluing women’s work also undervalues women in society, so there are important reasons for domestic work at least to be recognised as socially necessary and important activity in our labour force surveys.

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