

# **Female Labour Participation in Rural and Urban India: Does Housewives' Work Count?**

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## **Abstract**

Labour force participation in India responds to economic, social, cultural and demographic mechanisms. Employment, unemployment, and unpaid labour were all measured in the 1999/2000 Indian National Sample Survey. Men's official labour-force participation stood at 85% and women's at 35%. The overall rate of labour force participation among women had fallen since 1989. Furthermore, measurement issues create doubt about the real rates of change of women's self-employment. Women's domestic and farming work can sometimes arguably be classified as self-employment. However many women instead report themselves as housewives. The statistics reveal a U curve of female employment by education levels. A detailed measurement of both domestic work and other unpaid work is provided. Women in the Muslim cultural group do more extra-domestic work (and are more likely to be 'inactive') than women in other cultural groups. Economic poverty causes employment to be more likely. We provide a number of reasons which help explain both the work patterns and the housewifisation pattern. These include both subjective factors as well as economic and demographic factors.

Note: all tables and graphs referred in this article can be found in the appendix 1.

## **Introduction**

In India, as elsewhere, people face a conflict over time spent on housework and childcare versus time spent on paid work. Ironically, if people are paid market rates for childcare and cooking work, rather high valuations are put on these supposedly 'domestic' tasks. Some estimates of the national income have been made

which adjust for the unpaid unmarketised domestic work in the USA (\*Ref Femecon). These show large increases in the Gross Domestic Product. However, since the work is actually not monetised, people in general don't normatively accord 'domestic work' the values imputed in such studies. Instead, they devalue this work and many people consider it to be women's work. In India, across a variety of regional and cultural divisions, domestic work and childcare are widely considered to be women's work. It is often implicitly seen as undignified for a man to actually get involved in the dirty work of child cleaning, the messy work of dishwashing, or the time consuming women's jobs of cooking curries or sweeping the floors. Cleaning toilets is universally women's work and the conditions in which some dalit people (ie those who were previously called harijans, untouchables or sweepers) work as toilet attenders are unbelievably unsanitary and unpleasant.

The unpleasant aspects of domestic work were analyzed by Thorstein Veblen who is better known for his theory of the leisure class. Veblen argued that the dominant people in the leisure class would visibly display time-wasting behaviours (e.g. sports or watching artistic performances) whilst they depend on the devoted or enslaved work of others who would do all the essential services such as cooking, cleaning, and clearing away. Veblen argued that by showing themselves to be cleaner than the working classes, both feudal and capitalist ruling classes displayed their prowess and status. Their physical prowess during military times was augmented by their considerable personal autonomy and control over other people's bodily movements even in peacetime. Veblen is famous for the theory of conspicuous consumption in which even the middle classes were found to emulate the lazy and excessively luxurious behaviours of the rich. (His data were from 1910-1925 USA.) Why do middle classes do this? In part, it is because emulating the behaviours demonstrates one's identification with the higher class. This identification can have subtle cheering effects on someone who is actually oppressed within a hierarchy but prefers to imagine that they are not too far down that hierarchy.

This paper examines women's work in India and how huge swathes of women are devoted only to unremunerated work. By contrast, being unemployed is rather rare among men. For women, the

orthodox indicators of unemployment do not really apply. Instead it is non-employment time that we need to focus upon. In India the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) has repeatedly given measures of women's time spent on a variety of activities which broadly one can call the informal sector. These measures are, however, provided *if and only* if the woman first declares that she has no paid work, is not unemployed per se, and is doing domestic work only. She cannot declare herself self-employed either (although many Indian women do) so the category of 'housewives' is an appropriate label for this residual group of **non-employed** women who were asked the questions about unremunerated work. We provide details of this survey and a summary of the findings in this paper. We conclude with a normative discussion of the situation.

The more women's time is allocated to paid employment, the less of their time is available for the unpaid work. Most western feminists would argue that the unpaid work done by women tends to get too little attention, and that its social and economic valuation is unreasonably low. Yet they do not go so far as to hope for an increase in the time spent on domestic work. The main issue, they would argue, is the rewards and conditions of the work, both domestic and paid work. Women should be autonomous (Jejeebhoy and Sathar, 2001), they should be paid appropriate rates for paid work and they should not be oppressed or coerced in their economic decisions. Ironically, however, most housewives will quickly argue that they 'chose' to be housewives and 'not to work'. This reaction (which we have had in field research in rural Andhra Pradesh in 1985-8 and in 1995-6 as well as in 2005-6) reflects a revaluation in which the woman positively values her role in the family and prefers not to engage in some other set of more public roles.

As indicated by these field data, there is a delicately balanced set of normative principles lying behind all the decisions people make about labouring. Even when we (as researchers) describe labouring, we unintentionally invoke or hint at some of these norms. In this paper we tread a fine line between positive and normative description. In a sense we integrate positive description with normative analysis (see also Olsen, 2005). We take 'labouring' and 'working' to mean the same thing, whilst 'employment' refers to

the narrower subset of paid work (including piecework, hourly paid, casual and salaried work).

The International Labour Office (ILO) defines unemployment in a rather open way, requiring that the person be seeking work and also be available for work during the two weeks preceding the interview. For women who are doing child care, it is hard to claim that they are really seeking work even if the woman would, in some hypothetical sense, perhaps be willing to be employed if she could. In the villages where Olsen did fieldwork in 1995-6, groups of very poor women had created a village level crèche and this had enabled a number of the women to do more paid work. This showed that they had been unemployed previously, due to child care duties. However in ILO terms, they couldn't have claimed to be unemployed because the child care work kept them from actually seeking work. Andhra Pradesh where the fieldwork occurred has one of the highest female labour force participation rates of all the large Indian states. Details are given in a separate paper (Olsen and Mehta, 2005, forthcoming 2006) available from the authors.

The ILO's definition of labour-market inactivity has been changing over time since 1970 and it now tends to include less of the family helpers as 'inactive'. The unpaid family helper nowadays tends to be classified as a contributing family worker (though without pay) (ilo.laborsta.org, Variables and Definitions section). In this way there is a drift toward higher *recorded* labour-force participation of women and children even though this does not necessarily correspond to a real change or increase in their working hours.

Most importantly, the frame of reference of this paper considers labour relations – including employment, class and gender relations – to lie behind all outcomes that are measured for groups of individuals in India's large-scale national surveys. We step back from making judgements about which forms of labouring are desirable or otherwise (see Olsen and Mehta, 2005, for some rational judgements). We describe the tendencies that are currently causing people to do paid work in the Indian economy and, in particular, we examine the tendency to be labour-market 'inactive' in detail.

Both men's and women's labour force involvements are explored here with a view to a balanced, nuanced and in-depth analysis of

the differences that emerge between groups of people. These differences have several meanings. Firstly, they imply that causal tendencies are operating concurrently on fairly big homogeneous groups of people. Shared features of the groups include economic poverty, cultural background, health, and demographic conditions. Secondly, homogenous groups may imply that a majority of people of one type make a similar explicit choice, e.g. one group avoids paid work and tends to do domestic work. This interpretation of domestic work sounds rather innocuous and structuralist. But the career break often has negative effects on a person's lifetime chances in the labour market. Constraints and constraining social norms can lead to such "choices" actually being sub-optimal or disempowering for the individual (Folbre, 1994). Fraser (1994) argues that women are exploited through the capitalist system in particular. They do socially necessary labour which was normally not allowed for even in Marxist theorisations of the reserve army of labour (Folbre, 1982; see also Custers, 2000). Thirdly, the differences between groups suggest that policy made with one image of 'women's needs' may go wrong if applied to all women. Extending a gender analysis to allow for *men's needs* suggests further nuances: For instance, in India, are employers expecting to pay a breadwinner's wage to each man? Do employed women therefore get a lower wage than men for subjective reasons? One paper cannot answer all these questions but we do succeed in describing the overall situation in terms of employment outcomes in some detail.

Work in India is predominantly conducted outside of paid formal employment contracts. There is a huge formal sector in urban areas, but both rural and urban India also have large numbers of people doing farming, trading and other work in informal enterprises. Instead a range of remuneration arrangements for farmers, traders, other proprietors and their families, non-family helpers, and piece-rate workers cause low employment participation rates. Among women there was a long-term downward trend in the labour-force participation rates 1901-1971 (Sharma, 1985: 64, citing Mies, 1980: 6). This long-term trend reflected the growth of the distinct role of the housewife over the period 1901-1971 and was unfortunately associated with a rising male sex ratio in the population as a whole (*ibid*: 63). This appearance of lower women's participation was further exaggerated by some changes in

the recording of employment in the 1971 Census. The Census of that year was hard to compare with previous years.

Since 1971 there has been a stabilisation of women's employment. The ILO database [www.laborsta.org](http://www.laborsta.org) shows no rise in women's economic activity rates for India 1972-2002.<sup>1</sup> These data show 31% of women working in 1970, 31% in 1980, 27% in 1990, and 30% for India in 2000. In other words there is no substantial change, according to this source.

The measures of work participation obtained by the National Council for Agro-Economic Research (NCAER) in their survey in 1997 showed labour force participation rates of 52% among men and 26% among women (Shariff, 1999: 66). Their calculations used both usual and subsidiary status. The usual status refers to someone having six months per year or more of paid work or self-employment. For those who do not have that regularity of work, the presence of any paid work can then be considered to give a 'subsidiary' status of participating. Mainly women were brought into the records via this subsidiary working status. At the all-India level it raised women's labour force participation from 18 to 26% (*ibid.*). The NCAER figures closely mimic the Indian Census figures for 1991 (presented in parallel by Shariff, *ibid.*). The Census showed 27% of women and 53% of men were in the labour force using the combination of usual and subsidiary status. (If you leave out subsidiary status, the women's participation rate goes down by about 5 percentage points.) NCAER labels these figures clearly as 'work participation rates' indicating that inactivity, domestic work, and extra domestic work don't count as work (Shariff, 1999: 66). Furthermore state differences in work participation rates are given (*ibid.*, p. 66) using NCAER data. The change in female work participation rates due to including subsidiary status has different effects for different states. For those with low participation rates under the heading of 'usual' status (for women), there is a huge difference. Adding subsidiary workers in some cases doubles the work participation rate, e.g. from 9 to 29% in the Punjab, and a similarly large jump occurs in Uttar Pradesh (Shariff, 1999: 67).

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<sup>1</sup> The ILO presents for each five-year period its 'Projections and Estimates of female economic activity rate', also found in the UN Common Data Base as variable code 4270, dated on 5-year period centres. See [ilo.laborsta.org](http://ilo.laborsta.org)

The gender differential in participation persists over time, but whether it is narrowing or not is an open question.

This paper is mainly cross-sectional. There is a strong tendency to be employed among all degree level graduates, including Muslim women. A U-curve of employment probabilities exists over education levels. This U curve is stronger among Muslim women than among other women due to a range of factors. These factors include the expectation (among certain families) that being seen in public could damage a woman's role as protector of the honour of her family; a sense that a woman's education is a way to gain social status and not just future wages; and a sense among household members that they can afford to enable one woman to stay at home most of the time – especially if the household is urban and middle-income.

Among rural households, it is widely believed that it is prestigious for a Hindu woman to cook and serve food to her family and any guests that may come (Dube, 1988). In rural areas for these women to do domestic work only and nothing else is relatively rare. Instead, doing a range of paid and unpaid work, including some tasks that we call 'extra-domestic work', is more common. The tendency of naming a woman *as being overall a housewife* is very popular. A high status is generally associated with the role of housewife in parts of the country that have implicit cultural values associated with Sanskritisation, Brahmanical gender norms, and/or the habit of observing *purdah* (Chakravarti, 1993; George, 2002; Poitevin and Rairkar, 1993). Because of the popularity of calling a woman a housewife, we have avoided using the 'principal status' of the person over a whole year and instead have focused upon each person's work during a one-week recall period. We use last week's work status as the main indicator of a person's employment status. Otherwise women's work would be understated as people try to exaggerate the presence of a housewife in each household.<sup>2</sup> The causal mechanisms behind the 'housewifery' pattern are explained and explored in the interpretive sections that complete the paper.

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<sup>2</sup> The 'principal' status is a generalisation derived in the field by NSS staff with respondents. It is not the same as the 'usual' status but is closely allied to it. NSS documents the subjective judgments that should be made in deriving the 'principal' status and derives the decision from the overview of the past year's work (via unrecorded recall).

We begin with a brief review of literature, then introduce the large-scale data set (NSS 55<sup>th</sup> round) used in the paper, and finally present the results. The interpretation that takes up the last section follows a retroductive logic: what social and cultural mechanisms must or may be operating to create the overall patterns that were observed in the data?

## **Review of Literature on Women's Labour Force Participation in India**

The relevant literature includes economic theory, institutionalist revisions, gender and development theory, and some additional themes from demography and geography. In the literature on labour-force participation, standard sources begin with the supply of labour (Ellis, 1993) and quickly move on to mention human-capital aspects of labour supply (Mathur, 1994). According to this view, 34% of adult Indians participated in the labour market in 1991, and this figure comprised 16% among women and 51% among men (Mathur, 470). More up-to-date figures show a small decline in both women's and men's labour-force participation between 1993/4 and 1999 (Srivastava, 2003: 130-131). 30% of the women in rural areas were working, as recorded in the National Sample Survey of India using a combination of principal and subsidiary employment status, compared with 53% of men (all ages being considered, *ibid.*). Only 14% of urban women were working, by this measure (*ibid.*, 131). Detailed differences in the recall method of record-keeping imply that the two sources are not directly comparable. Mathur used the Indian Census 1991 data. Srivastava used the NSS. *Sarvekshana* (the Bulletin of the National Sample Survey Organisation, 2001: 6; Jacob, 2001) shows a declining female labour force participation rate when comparing 1993/4 and 1999/00 using NSS. Jacob studied four different measures. The weekly and daily status measures of employment status showed the same overall trend. Specifically, over this period using NSS data the rural percentage in the labour force fell by 10% among women and by 4% among men. The urban percentage in the labour force fell 11% among women and there was no change among men. (*ibid.*, p. 55).



Basing his statistical analysis upon district-level Census data for 1991, Mathur used averages at the district level to model the 'response' of employment to education levels. A U curve can be seen using Mathur's data, among women (*ibid.*: 495-497) since participation first falls between the illiterate group and the next group. Participation rises rapidly after that. Apart from updating the definitive study by Mathur, the present work admits more possibilities into the 'participation' category. Mathur allowed all main farmers, casual labour and employers to be grouped into the active group, following the Indian Census categories, but we add to this various home workers and family labour. In this way we obtain a variant on the labour-force participation rate that is consistent with current ILO definitions.

The human capital theory primarily predicts that wages reflect the rewards earned by human capital in productive enterprises. It has three parts however. First there is the potential worker's subjective reckoning of what they would earn if they worked for pay; secondly there is the act of gaining more education or training (which occurs both at schools and in firms); and third there is the reward firms give to productivity. This complex of factors has been unpicked carefully by other authors, who note that each stage faces certain problems. Basically the theory only relates crudely and roughly to reality. Firstly, it is not a *person* who reckons on earnings that they could make, it is a complex and yet cooperative household which can have one or several bargaining and decision-making processes going on (Agarwal, 1997). Secondly, investments in education and training are not merely individual rational choices but are also socially embedded decisions. Fevre has stressed the *habitus* component in which status gains, family enculturation, emulation of role models, and avoidance of stress all play a part (using Welsh data, Fevre 1999). Thirdly, the rewards firms give to education have been shown to differ substantially across countries, regions, sectors, and by sex of worker (Kingdon, 1999 in Papola, ed., 1999). Deshpande and Deshpande argue that the gender pay gap observed in urban India occurs because

gender-based discrimination is universal and enduring. .  
. That women are overcrowded in low-paid, dead-end,  
insecure and in short, "bad" jobs is easily verified . . .  
(1993: 223).

Kingdon (1999) insists on detailed evidence for such claims since the situation varies from place to place and from job to job.

These vagaries of human capital theory leave it wounded but not dead. The theory helps to show that there is an opportunity cost of avoiding labour-force participation. If the individual's returns to working are low, their opportunity cost of not working will be low too. They will then tend toward being labour-market inactive. If they have a degree, the opportunity cost is high since their workplace productivity is likely to be reckoned (by employers) to be high. From human capital theory, one would expect an upward tendency in the labour force participation rate as we move across education levels.

Human capital theory is part of a wide-ranging neoclassical theory of labour supply and demand. Neoclassical theorists argue that supply and demand cause the wage to reward workers according to marginal productivity (as argued by Skoufias, 1992, for instance). Huge gender pay gaps exist (Deshpande and Deshpande, 1998). These ranged in 1994 from 43% among illiterate and lower primary workers (ie women earning just 57% as much as men, per day) to 23% among graduates, averaging at 20% overall (all figures are for urban India; the source cited is an NSS report dated 1997.) A neoclassical economist would tend to argue that only market imperfections such as stereotypes, rigid segmentation by gender, and cultural taboos on one sex doing certain operations can be introduced as explanatory factors. To a neoclassical economist, these factors are givens; they act as preferences of individuals; they are not part of the scope of economic science; and they cannot be treated in economic models.

The approach taken here is that the human capital claims can be augmented with a rich array of other claims arising in disciplines close to economics. The neoclassical approach is not necessarily the one that must lead the analysis. Statistical analysis was followed by retrodution – asking why these results came out – and then has been iterated with further statistical and qualitative analysis. The qualitative analysis uses both secondary reports and primary research.

The reason for jettisoning the neoclassical framework as a whole, whilst retaining some of its human capital claims, is that in rural

and less-developed country contexts it has become abundantly clear that an individualistic framework is inadequate (Folbre, 1986; Kabeer, 1994). Among economists, the “new home economics” evolved to handle this problem. For a review of NHE see Ellis (1993). It was applied to Indian labour markets by Skoufias (1993).

According to NHE, the result of the utility-maximizing decision at household level is thought to be an optimal distribution of the workers’ efforts toward paid and unpaid work, and leisure. Detailed research by Skoufias has uncovered patterns in India which are consistent with this theory. Skoufias’ detailed study of seasonal movements in wages and work-time (spent working on farms, either paid or unpaid) concluded that women’s labour time is seasonally spread quite differently from men’s in India. This generalisation is also supported by older data, but in recent years women have taken on much more of the agricultural work than in the past. Certain tasks are taboo for women in most of rural India, notably plowing the land, but in general a feminisation of agricultural labour has occurred whilst men have tended to take most of the new non-agricultural jobs in rural areas (DaCorta and Venkateswarlu, 1999; Harriss-White, 2003).

Avoiding the whole neoclassical theoretical edifice, we can use political-economy institutionalism as hinted at by Ott (1997) and as spelt out in detail by Toye (2003), Hodgson (2004), and Harriss-White (2003). Veblen is one of the famous originators of today’s institutionalism, and several associations promote this as a new way to do pluralist economics.<sup>3</sup> Institutionalism refers to an assumption that social norms are in a state of flux as they interact with rules and with personal interpretations that either reproduce those rules or change them. Institutions are never simply given. In the case of India’s labour markets, for instance, there are institutionalised norms about the terms of employment. These help to define what people expect from “piecework” “group contracts” “daily casual labour” (also called *coolie* labour), “exchange labour” and salaried work. Since norms are ever-changing, they are always potentially renegotiable and institutions are also differentiated even within one community (e.g. as we see with marriage and cohabitation occurring side by side in the West).

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<sup>3</sup> The European Association for Evolutionary Political Economy; the International Network for Economic Method; the Association for Heterodox Economics; and the IDEA network for development economists are four of these associations. Each has a website and publications.

Institutionalists empirically studying the Indian labour market fall into three main types. First there are the women-in-development specialists, who focus on gender differentiation. Second there are studies of discrimination against women and its causes. Thirdly there are those who have examined the formation of labour gangs, neighbourhood work groups, trade unions, bonded labour relationships, migrant labour and different types of work contracts. All these three groups are pluralist; it is primarily economists who isolate their arguments away from the details of competing theories (Olsen, 2006).

Specific authors working in the above areas include the following. Firstly those who describe women's movement into active and visible self-employment (e.g. Bhowmik and Jhabvala, 1996) indicate that it is perceived as highly desirable among these women for them to validate their work by calling it micro-enterprise or a business. The economic activity of women as a special group is the focus of Gautum and Tripathi (2001) in their description of women managing goats. Gulati (1995) notes that women's economic and commercial activity in India is restricted by ongoing expectations that they will still also meet a wide range of family expectations. These difficulties, which women face in different ways, vary depending on whether they live as a daughter in the natal home, or as a wife in the marital home, or (rarely) independently (see Chatterjee, 1993; Gibbons-Trikha, 2003). Whilst there is some state variation, notably in the far north and east of India where non-Hindu tribes are more predominant, there is considerable bias against women which links up labour-force inactivity with poor health and low education (Dunn, 1993; Swaminathan, 2002; Jejeebhoy and Sathar, 2001). Narasimhan (1999) goes onward to argue in favour of women organising themselves separately from men in order to resist patriarchy.

Deshpande and Deshpande argue that human capital theory explains why the gender pay gap observed in urban India is a vicious circle:

‘Asked why women invest less in their education and training, [economists] turn to the sexual division of labour which ascribes to women the role of housekeeper and to men that of the breadwinner. The sexual division

of labour weakens women's commitment to the labour market but it maximizes the welfare of the household. With their weak commitment, they choose, quite rationally, not to accumulate as much human capital as men do.' (1993: 223).

However, Deshpande and Deshpande's own data show that urban women working in the service industries earn as much or more than men of the same educational level if that level is secondary school, and that the gender pay gap falls as education rises (1993). Therefore the bald statements that are sometimes made, as illustrated above, need perhaps to be carefully reconsidered in the light of detailed evidence. Our further research will take up the wage-rate question in detail but so far we are just looking at work participation rates.

Kapadia looked closely at rural labouring and finds that women as well as men often form labour gangs in order to increase their bargaining power *vis a vis* the employers of casual labour (Kapadia 1996, 1997, 1999). Interviews in 1995 by Davuluri Venkateswarlu also show that women join contracting groups to do casual labour, preferring that to domestic labour and unpaid labour (verbatim transcripts provided to the authors). DaCorta and Venkateswarlu (1999) argue that the feminisation of the rural agricultural labour force is not necessarily good for women but it is a strong trend. The variety of labouring contracts has been described in detail by Breman (2003) with respect to migrant labour and by Rogaly (1997) with respect to field labouring in north India. The bargaining power of the worker is influenced by a whole range of factors which critically affect the wage struck each day. Rogaly is one of the few researchers to have explored this phenomenon although Agarwal (1997) has theorised it with regard to women's work choices. A bargaining approach to the evolution of the gender pay gap might be a rich way of challenging neoclassical theory with a substantive alternative.

Thus a rich arena of social relations linked with power-rich hierarchies has been explored by these pluralist, multi-disciplinary authors studying the work economy. All of these institutionalists have paid due attention to unpaid work. Few of them have offered any large-scale statistical evidence. Many insitutionalist studies rest upon a locally based case-study dataset because that is how

the terms and conditions of specific labouring contracts are best examined. This paper tries to fill the gap whilst being sensitive to the claims made by the women-in-development school (known as WID; see Kabeer, 1994) in particular.

Authors from another theoretical orientation, the “gender and development” school (known as GAD), have argued that households have cultures (Hart, 1986b), households engage in social class relations (Kalpagam, 1994), and households experience both bargaining and cooperation among their members (Agarwal, 1997; Sen, 1990). The gender and development school differs from the women-in-development school in that class and gender are seen as interacting. Women are not simply seen as a homogenous group. GAD and WID are sometimes posed as opposites, but GAD builds upon the insights of WID (Kabeer, 1994; Kalpagam, 1994). See Olsen and Mehta (2005) for a GAD analysis of the right to work in India.

The use of statistical evidence to back up these theories has been prominent in the work of Dreze and Sen (\*), Swaminathan (2002), Agarwal (1994), and Srivastava (2003). These authors attribute the terrible overall outcomes experienced by Indian women due to patriarchal and exploitative capitalist culture. Other than those mentioned here, however, most feminists in India have tended to avoid statistics. In the interests of bridging the chasm between neoclassical economists and some feminists, our methodological pluralist research aims to mediate between schools of thought such as NHE vs. GAD.

When labour-force involvement is classified into employment, self-employment, unpaid family labour, inactivity, and other, we effectively study the labour-force involvement in a reductionist way at the ‘individual’ unit of analysis. A Marxist view on this augments both GAD and NHE by studying inter-household farm exploitation (e.g. Athreya *et al.*, 1991; Singh, 1995; Olsen and Mehta, 2005). Byres and other Marxists have argued that resources owned at household level under the current legal system must be taken into account. In this paper we have allowed for the social class system which is an open system of inter-household employment relationships. In regressions we use land owned (and its square), indicators based on employment, and indicators of

tenancy and poverty. Self-employment itself is a class outcome (at person-level) which acts as a dependent variable.

Our pluralist approach also included three further hypotheses arising from demographers, the anthropological study of dowry, in which boys' families receive and girls' families give large amounts in cash and in kind (Heyer, 1992), and studies of girls' lower education rates (Swaminathan, 2002). A separate paper uses regression to draw out the U curve of housewifisation while controlling for all these important factors. Variables which were controlled for included the number of children in the household, the age of the respondent, allowing curvature and dummies for India's states to have state-wise differentiation in labour markets for a variety of agro-climatic and historical/institutional reasons. The cross-tabulations and Figures in this paper arise from gross averages but they are consistent with the regression equations (Olsen and Mehta, 2006).

It would be ideal to allow for minor work-relevant health differences among the population too. In the UK where 20% of the adult population has a disability of some kind affecting their ability to work, labour-force participation studies routinely control for ill health. However in India's National Sample Survey 55<sup>th</sup> round there is no indicator of temporary or mild disability. Instead there is a mutually exclusive status known as 'unable to work due to disability'. Such people are simply grouped here into the inactive category. There was no question on 'long-term limiting illness' as found in Western surveys.

Caste differences and the various religious groupings were found to have significant association with work outcomes in India. Important aspects of caste are experienced at the 'upper' end of the spectrum in the differences between Brahman and other 'forward' castes such as the Merchants and the Reddy farming castes (Sharma, 1985: 57; 59; 72, referring to northern Uttar Pradesh). The upper castes are highly differentiated over space, and no records are kept of the specific castes in NSS of the detailed caste name of households.

Analysis of caste in the detailed sense in which it is lived therefore has to occur within a more detailed, triangulated study. Table 1 shows the evidence for main caste groups that is available from

NSS 55<sup>th</sup> round. For details of one fieldwork site in Andhra Pradesh in 1986-7 and 1995 see Olsen (1996) and the ESRC Data Set Study Number 3927 (see [www.data-archive.ac.uk](http://www.data-archive.ac.uk)) respectively. There it was found that the labour relations of merchant castes were particularly strongly gendered, since their womenfolk rarely if ever worked for anyone else. Brahmin women, too, rarely worked for pay at all and were rarely seen in the fields. However among the middle and lower castes, and among Muslim people who were 15% of the local population, work for pay was common for both men and women. The detailed study of caste allows occupational patterns to emerge as linked to small scale caste groups, such as Kshatriya (often landlords) and Chetties (merchants) as well as Kummaaris (potters, who are often small farmers as well as potters), Aacharyas (goldsmiths, who again are often doing farming with the menfolk also doing paid employment in banks as valuers), and so on. For a brief review of gendered aspects of caste and labouring see Raghuram (2001).

## **Data and Methodology**

In our analysis, labour-force involvements are classified as follows (see also Appendix): Employed; self-employed, which includes own-account workers and unpaid family labour; unemployed; and inactive. The last category covers 'attending to domestic duties' as well as student, retired, ill and other. Table 1 shows the percentages of the Indian working-age population falling into these categories in 1994. We used ages 16-65 although, in addition, many Indian children also work. For those adults who do domestic work, two collapsed categories are shown here ('inactive' and 'doing extra-domestic work'). Details of the recording of extra-domestic work are in Appendix 1, and the results are summarised in Tables 3 and 4. In the NSS in 1994, a few men aged 16-65 were doing domestic work (about 1% -- but many more if the over-65s were included). However in 1999 no men were recorded as such. This step backward in the social construction of housewifery (as female-only) and is unnecessary since many men are labour-market inactive and some of them do informal-sector work. It would be ideal to return to a more sex-blind recording of the employment statuses.

Traditionally gender theorists have stressed that work in the informal sector should probably appear as 'self-employed', which is



possible if the household's respondent argues that that is the best way of categorising a person. For many women, and a few men, 'attending to domestic duties' was the main employment status, but there was nevertheless performance of a wide range of up to 12 activities which would, by many people, be considered to be productive and 'in' the labour market. These are not remunerated activities, but they contribute to the household's livelihood. In the questionnaire, the wording specifies that the person 'attended domestic duties and also engaged in free collection of goods, sewing, tailoring, weaving, etc. for household use.' The activities that are considered here as 'extra-domestic' are:

- husking paddy;
- grinding grain;
- preparing sugar for home use;
- preserving meat or fish;

- collecting firewood or dung;
- making cow-dung cakes for the fire;

- kitchen garden or orchard maintenance;
- work in poultry/dairy;
- fish, small game, fruits or vegetable gathering;
- making baskets or mats;
- sewing, tailoring, weaving;
- tutoring of own or others' children free of charge.

These activities were grouped under the headings 'food preparation work', 'fuel and fire work', and 'informal sector unpaid work', respectively, in Table 5. Jacob (2001: 7) shows that 26% of the urban female domestic workers did 'sewing, tailoring, etc.' (vs. 22% of rural female domestic workers). 13% of urban female domestic workers did 'tutoring of own children' (vs. 5% for rural female domestic workers), and 9% of the urban and 36% of the rural female domestic workers worked in a kitchen garden, did poultry work, or similar. Overall, urban women were more likely to be working purely as housewives than were rural women. This pattern may support Mies's claim that modernisation would imply a growing housewifisation (Mies, 1998, original 1989).

Further details about the survey form the rest of this section.

## *General Introduction to NSS 55th Round*

The National Sample Survey is an integrated survey on household consumer expenditure, employment, unemployment and informal non-agricultural work. It covers both individuals' work (including both paid and unpaid work) and household principal occupation. Detailed indicators of people's personal principal and subsidiary occupation, hours worked, and earnings are provided. At the household level, income estimates are not provided. Instead, the wealth/poverty spectrum is measured using household-level per-capita expenditure. This indicator is not very sophisticated but it does allow the relative spending of households (adjusted for their gross size) to be taken into consideration.

### *Sampling*

The NSS has used a sampling scheme that rotates on the calendar months for its Central samples. Thus all quarters of one calendar year are represented in all regions. The survey period of the 55<sup>th</sup> Round is 1<sup>st</sup> July, 1999 to 30<sup>th</sup> June, 2000. A sample of 10,400 first-stage units (*fsu*'s) (rural and urban combined) were surveyed at all-India level.

In addition to these main 10,400 *fsus*, which are known as the Central sample, there are state samples with additional *fsu*'s. All the States/ Union Territories except for Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Lakshadweep participated in the 55<sup>th</sup> round at least on an equal matching basis compared to the size of the central sample. The state samples did not have the rotating timing found in the central sample. The rotation is useful because it means that when a one-week recall period is used, at least half the overall sample are spread out over the entire year. In this paper, both the central sample and state samples have been used together to maximise the sample size.

360,000 people aged 16-65, and 592,000 aged 0 to 99 years were in the survey. The average household size was 5.8 and there were on average 2 children under the age of 16.

## **Results: Indian Women's Labour Force Participation**

In Tables 1 and 2 the overall level of labour-force participation is seen to be 85% among men and 35% among women using the one-week recall method. In the *National Human Development Report 2001*, published by the Planning Commission in 2002, the same NSS data are used to report the labour-force participation rates as they were recorded at three time-points: 1989, 1994, and 1999/2000. The rates shown there for 1999/2000 are very similar to our estimates: 84% among men and 39% among women (Planning Commission, 2001: 155). Here the combination "usual principal and subsidiary status or seeking or available for work" was used. Thus, whether one uses one-week recall or the usual-and-subsidary combination, the results are nearly the same.

Going back in time, this *Report* shows both participation rates declining (*ibid.*), with men's rates falling from 87% in 1983 to 84% in 1999/2000 (a small decline). Women's rates fell from 44% in 1983 to 39% in 1999/2000 – a larger decline on a smaller base. The meanings of this decline are multiple depending on one's policy perspective. Some of the important meanings of withdrawing women from employment are positively valued by many Indian residents quite apart from the commercial effects.

In Table 2 it can be seen that self-employment is a more important category of work among men than among women. However, as stressed in the *National Human Development Report*, the rates of participation differ depending on which social category the person is in. In the rest of our discussion we will focus on some of the diversity within India's overall averages (see also Olsen and Mehta, 2005).

As shown in Table 4, women's employment rates fall as caste status rises. It is also notable that rural and urban employment rates are very different. In both places however women do plenty of self-employment. In rural areas this is mostly agricultural whereas

in urban areas it is mainly informal-sector and small-scale manufacturing.

The U curve of employment *per se* is shown in Figure 1. A logistic regression of employment *per se* also showed that the tendency to have a job (including casual work) first falls with education moving from illiteracy toward middle levels, and then rises (results available from the authors). In other words both net and gross patterns showed a U curve. The rapid decline in rates of inactivity among both Hindu and Muslim women as they reach graduate status can be seen in Figure 1. Both Hindu and Muslim women tend to have a typical inverted U of labour-force participation over age-groups (Figure 2). Hindu and Muslim women's rates of labour-force participation are different across a wide spectrum of education levels excepting among graduates. We can test for the differences for other major religions, as done also in the *National Human Development Report*, but we would do this only in the context of detailed evidence about each religious grouping. Since we know most about Hindu and Muslim cultural groupings, we have only described these two in Figure 3.

The education effects found in the regression indicated only weak support for the human capital theory of labour supply. The rise in labour supply only applied when we compared highly educated women to those in the middle levels of education. Below that there is an apparent perversity. Women of low education levels are more likely to work than those of middle levels. The causal mechanism behind this is a nexus of household-level poverty. We allowed for this in the regression by using a dummy variable for being in a poor household. Poor women are most likely to take casual paid work. Many Indians perceive poor women's employment as being a response to their household income crisis. It is seen as necessary drudgery for them from which housewives have been relieved.

The regression equation allowed for much more than education. Institutional factors were present and statistically significant. The different states' cultural, regulatory and historical backgrounds were allowed for by using state dummies, many of which were highly significant.

## **Poverty and Labour Market Outcomes**

Household level economic poverty was measured by the NSS by getting item-wise recall of monthly expenditure and then adjusting this for the household size, giving a per capita indicator. Those people living in households with less than half of the median monthly expenditure were deemed to be poor for the purposes of the simple regressions here. Such an analysis omits intra-household differentials in the control over expenditure, non-economic aspects of poverty, and differentials in the cost of different types of people (children, adults, elderly). Because they use a recall method, the accuracy of the figures for household economic poverty are further cast into doubt. This paper uses the indicator of household economic poverty in a rough and ready fashion because of these caveats.

Poverty (in this sense) is far more prevalent among the rural scheduled castes and scheduled tribes than in other parts of the population. In this way and others, these regression results suffer from endogeneity. The same causal mechanisms that are represented by one variable are also to some extent embedded in other variables. Economic poverty, for instance, is measured directly but then is also proxied by some other variables. Landholding is represented both by the owned holding and the operational landholding (proxied through a dummy for being a tenant). These endogeneities are not too problematic if we take the regression for what it is: a description of the outcomes of a complex array of causal mechanisms which work both actually and counterfactually. They operate not only in their own right, but also only in contexts in which they are able to have effects. We cannot expect regression to simply separate all the causal mechanisms since the operationalisation of social causes is fraught with overlaps between context and specific causes.

We find that people whose work as tenant farmers are less likely to be employed and more likely to be self-employed themselves.

We also find that poor households have a reduced tendency to have a woman working purely within the home (as a domestic worker or housewife), because the women in these households tend to go out for employment. Many of these poor women have a double burden of domestic and paid work or even a triple burden of domestic, farming and paid work.

A third warranted argument is much more controversial. Those households which pull themselves out of poverty are more likely to withdraw the woman (or to have her choose to withdraw herself) from the labour market. Women's withdrawal from employment can be an elegant yet silent testimony to the couple's economic success.

Village level fieldwork in Andhra Pradesh helped Olsen to learn that having a woman kept in private is a prestigious and high-status form of invisibility. Many housewives are discouraged from riding bikes even though most learn to ride during their childhood. In a sense most Indian women observe a form of purdah. These patterns cut across castes and religious groupings. The irony of the high-status women often being made invisible via social norms only increases the social distance between them and the poor or low-status women. The norms for different groups of women are quite different and so what a woman 'chooses' is couched in her specific context, her economic / political / caste / religion / lineage and locality as well as her marital status and whether she has borne children. Because of this differentiation it is dangerous to generalise.

## **Interpretation of Cultural Factors**

Qualitative research helps in exploring the meanings people attach to women doing domestic work. Across India there is a broad cultural tendency to 'Hinduisation', such that even among India's muslims and other minorities some cultural patterns mimic those of the dominant Hindu groups (Bujra, 1992; check date of ref.). These include dowry, patrilocality, and arranged marriages for instance. Agarwal's review of inheritance by widows goes so far as to ignore all minority ST and Muslim groups (1998), using only Hinduism-based examples and sources, which is perhaps unfortunate, but does reflect the widespread understanding that the gender order is of a nearly nation-wide nature and is not simply or solely embedded in religious groupings and civil law.

Agarwal's work crosses over between WID, GAD, institutionalism and cultural studies, because she has studied both the dynamics of household bargaining (1997) and the roles of religious difference and state-wise policy differentiation across the four countries of South Asia (1994).

The delicate interplay of culture and local social norms leads to about five aspects of housewifery roles which are often perceived (not by all, but predominantly in most places) to be positively valued. These include (1) 'Sanskritisation' a process of displaying upward mobility by invoking and demonstrating honourable roles for women, e.g. as the provider of refreshments at functions, the calm manager of the household, and the beautiful object of admiration (Chakravarty, 1993; Dube, 1988). (2) Even women who have professional occupations can successfully continue with their housewifery roles by employing other women to do much of the nitty gritty daily work so there is no problem with the double burden (e.g. Raghuram, 2001). (3) Women can take care of these matters without involving their employed menfolk. Men's long working hours support the full domestic responsibilities falling upon mothers' and wives' shoulders at home. The exclusion of men from the role of housewife, and from all records of extra-domestic work in NSS 55<sup>th</sup> round, demonstrates a growing patriarchal role demarcation in India. It is widely seen as more dignified for men to be uninvolved with domestic matters. (4) Women who do farming work can be seen as the helpmeet and unpaid worker of the male household head. This sexist and androcentric approach to farming households is a patriarchal value implicitly held very widely in society (for comparative evidence in which French farm accountants are considered as 'just wives', see Delphy and Leonard, 1992). Finally, (5) many people prefer women to act submissive and deferential toward elders and toward men. Acting deferential is considered to be appropriate and to keep the women in safe relationship networks which protect the women in a patronising way. These women insist that they have a large and valued 'private life' (e.g. women observing purdah who sit with other such women in a household courtyard chatting). However they are effectively then barred from engaging in public life.

To the extent that people hold these values they will intersubjectively create spaces in which middle-income women act as housewives.

The opponents of patriarchy are many and diverse, and their voice has been loudest among the academic authors already cited. They argue that deferential and excessively private roles are bad for women. By listing them, we enable readers to consider the pros

and cons of the U curve situation rather systematically. (1) Dependency of most wives on a male breadwinner and his family's property. (2) Low bargaining power of women so that they cannot easily exit, or threaten to exit, a marital home even if there is alcoholism, an affair, or domestic violence (Agarwal, 1997). (3) The woman who has neither job nor self-employment can, at times, be isolated and lose confidence (Srivastava, 2003; Jejeebhoy and Sathar, 2001). (4) Poor educational outcomes of girls (Swaminathan, 2002). (5) Women fall behind in their knowledge of their own profession or occupation. (6) Ultimately in this context women are often seen in a diminutive, degraded, and denigrated light. Their work is seen as 'helping' work even if it would be classified as 'employment' or 'self-employment' if done by a man. (7) Women who are not in relationships are seen as exceptional, threatening, odd and often mentally unstable (documented by Gibbons-Thrika, 2003). (8) Sexual harassment of working women goes hand in hand with the patronisation of non-working women. (9) The earnings of girls and women may be seen as 'pin money', as temporary, as nonessential.

## **Conclusion**

The paper has described a complex situation in which a U curve of women's employment by education levels is caused by a mixture of economic and cultural factors. The whole paper is suffused with interdisciplinary pluralism so that these factors can be taken into account in a balanced way. So-called 'inactive' people can be divided into the inactive *per se* versus those who were recorded as doing some extradomestic work. The ILO definition of unemployment is not sufficiently detailed to help us clarify the nature of the borderline between employment and non-employment. This borderline seems to be permeable and socially constructed.

The U curve was explored in some detail using statistical evidence. The paper ended with a list of the felt advantages and disadvantages of women working as housewives – the typical scenario at the bottom of the U among middle-educated women. The standard norms for housewives are adapted for poor women, who often have a double or triple burden of work, and for rich women who can employ others to assist them whilst still being the manager of a household. Great heterogeneity among women is therefore noted. One hopes that a diversification of values



(especially about men and women doing domestic work) and a serious ethical discussion of the morality of patriarchy can be based on this kind of overview study. We cited many authors who have engaged in this serious discussion but we also note that the situation appears to be getting worse instead of better in India since its economic liberalisation around 1991.

## Appendix 1

Table 1: Means of Important Variables by Gender, India 1999 ( as %), Ages 16-65

Mean	Men	Women	All
Employed or Casual	39	15	27
Self-Employed*	43	19	31
Inactive (Narrow sense)	15	26	20
Inactive (ILO sense)	15	65	39
Extra-Domestic Work	0	39	19
Unemployed (in the ILO sense)	3.4	1.1	2.3
Percent in Labour Force	85	35	60
Married	70	77	74

Age	34 years	34 years	34 years
Female	0	100	49
Education "Illiterate"	Base	Case:	
Education: Below Primary	11.4	9	10
Primary	12	10	11
Middle	17	11	14
Secondary	14	8	11
Higher Sec'y	7	4	6
Degree	7	4	5
Muslim	5.5	5.5	5.5
Hindu	91.5	91.5	91.5
Scheduled Tribe	8.6	8.8	8.6
Scheduled Caste	19.3	18.9	19.1
Household Poor	16.9	18.3	17.6
Tenant	9.6	9.1	9.4
Land Owned	.79 hectares	.79 hectares	.79 hectares
Number of Babies	.22	.23	.22
Number of Children	2.1	2.1	2.0
Household Size	5.9	5.9	5.9

Source: NSS 55<sup>th</sup> Round, Employment and Unemployment Data, Ages 16-59. All of the all-India estimates are obtained using grossing weights. All other estimates in this paper are obtained using sampling weights at the person level. Note: \*Self-employed' includes contributing family worker and own-account worker.

Table 2: India's Labour Force Participation Rates (Based on NSS), 1999

	Women	Men
% who were employed	15%	39%
% who were self-employed*	19%	43%
% of women who were reported as ILO	1.1%	3.4%

unemployed		
Total Labour Force Participation Rate	35%	85%

Source: NSS 55<sup>th</sup> Round, Employment and Unemployment Data, Ages 16-65.

Note: \*Self-employed' includes contributing family worker and own-account worker.

Table 3: Women's Extradomestic Work by Rural and Urban Location, India 1999

<i>The Location of the Woman</i>	Percent of Women Who Did Extradomestic Work	Percent of Women Who Did Informal Sector Work, Specifically	Percent of Women Inactive (ie Not Doing Extradomestic Work Nor Paid Work)	Percent of Women ILO Inactive, ie doing domestic and/or extradomestic work
Rural	42%	33%	19%	61%
Urban	27%	26%	44%	71%
All	39%	31%	26%	65%

Source: NSS 55<sup>th</sup> Round, Employment and Unemployment Data, Ages 16-65.

Table 4: Women's Labour Force Participation by Caste Group, India 1999

<i>Mode of Renumeration</i>	Scheduled Tribes	Scheduled Castes	Other "Backward" Castes	Other Castes and Groups Not Named Already
Inactive (Narrow sense)	17%	20%	24%	32%
Employed	25%	24%	14%	8%
Self-Employed*	31%	16%	22%	16%
Extra-Domestic Work	26%	39%	39%	43%
Unemployed	0.9%	1.1%	1.1%	1.2%
All Women	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: NSS 55<sup>th</sup> Round, Employment and Unemployment Data, Ages 16-65.

Note: \*Self-employed' includes contributing family worker and own-account worker.

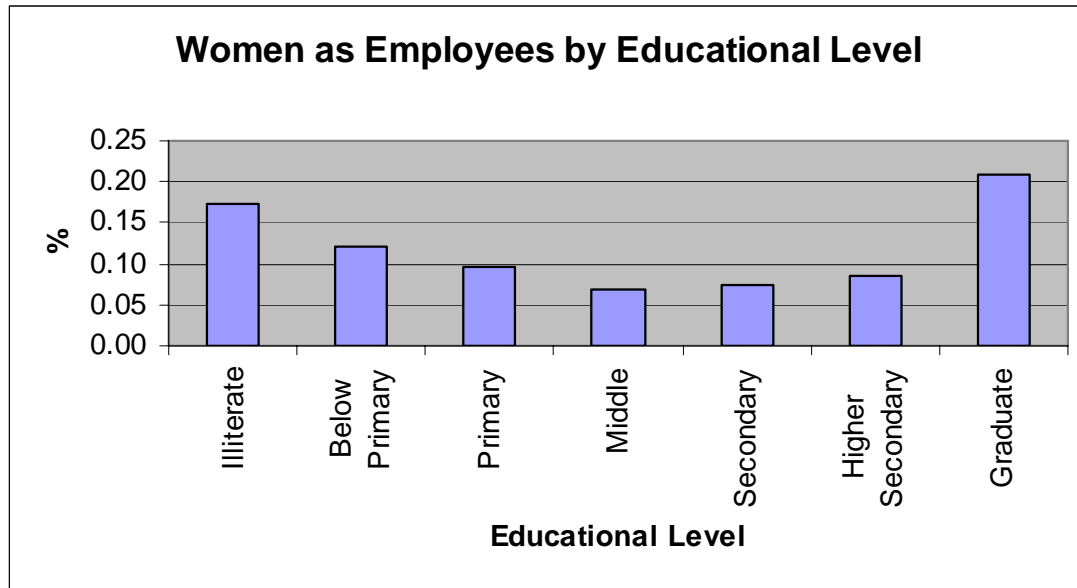
Table 5: Extradomestic Work, Rural and Urban Women, India 1999

	Percent of Women Engaged in Extradomestic Work*			
	India	All	Rural	Urban
Collected firewood and fuel e.g. dung	Employee	5%	5%	1%
	Other	30%	38%	6%
	All	26%	33%	6%
Did food preparation work for storage or consumption	Employee	1%	1%	0%
	Other	5%	7%	1%
	All	5%	6%	1%
Did informal sector work without remuneration	Employee	3%	4%	1%
	Other	34%	37%	28%
	All	30%	25%	32%
Numbers@	Total Overall	186127	113177	72948

Source: NSS 55<sup>th</sup> Round, Employment and Unemployment Data, Ages 16-65.

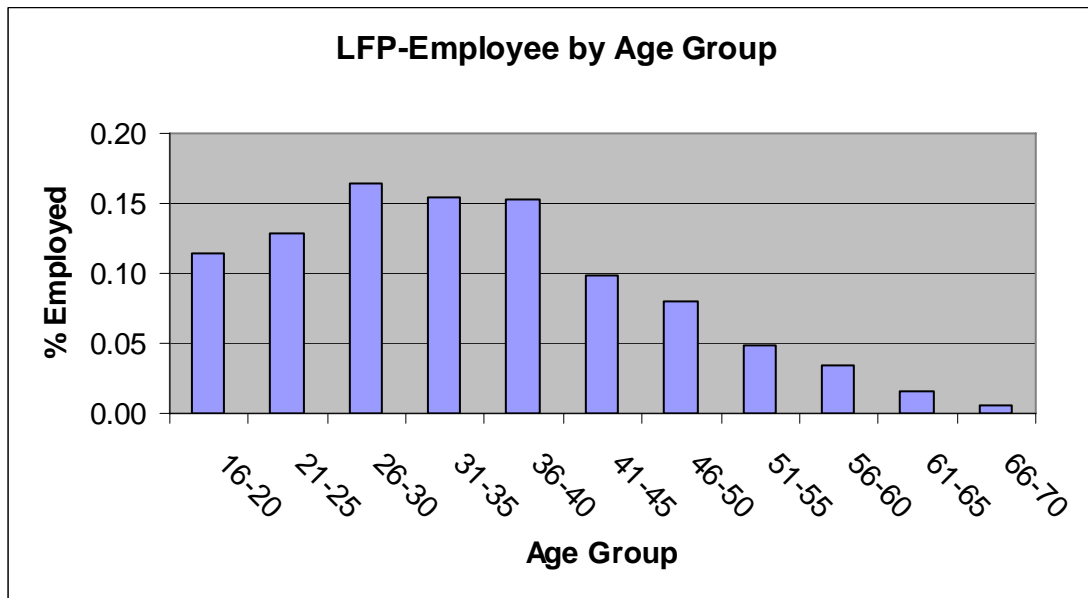
Notes: \* men were not recorded as doing extradomestic work because, by definition, in 1999 they were never classified as housewives. @All of the all-India estimates are obtained using grossing weights. All other estimates in this paper are obtained using sampling weights at the person level.

Figure 1: The U curve of Women's Employment, India 1999



Source: NSS 55<sup>th</sup> Round, Employment and Unemployment Data, Ages 16-65. This figure omits women's self-employment.

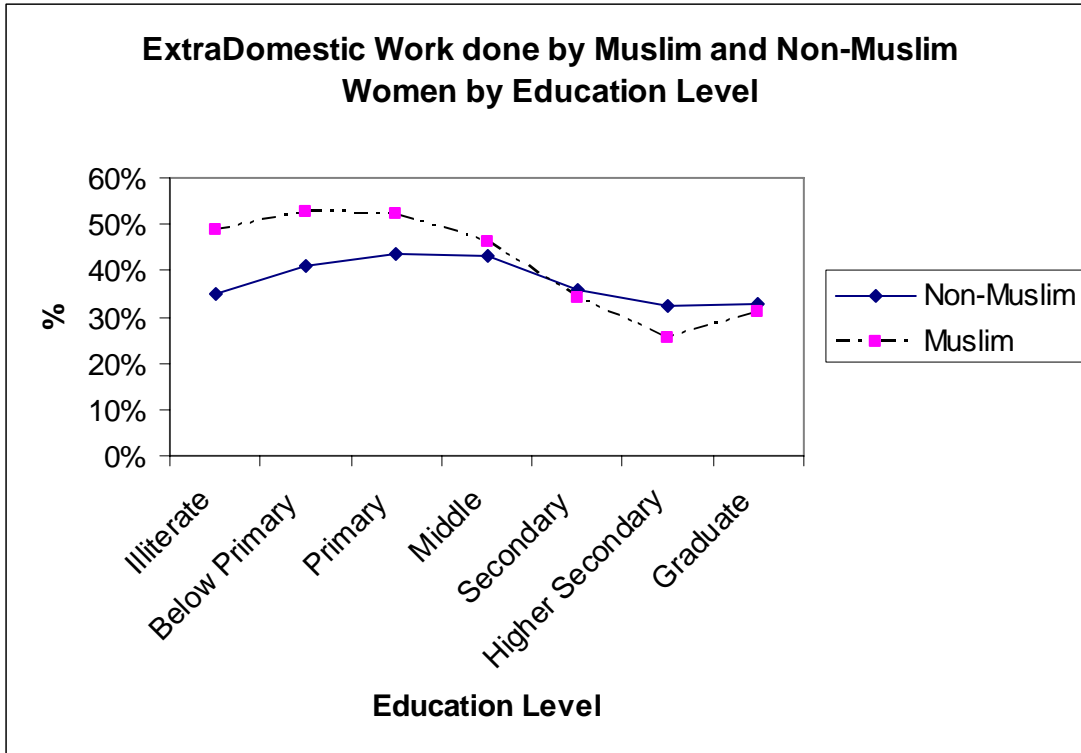
Figure 2: Age and Employment Participation Among Women, India 1999



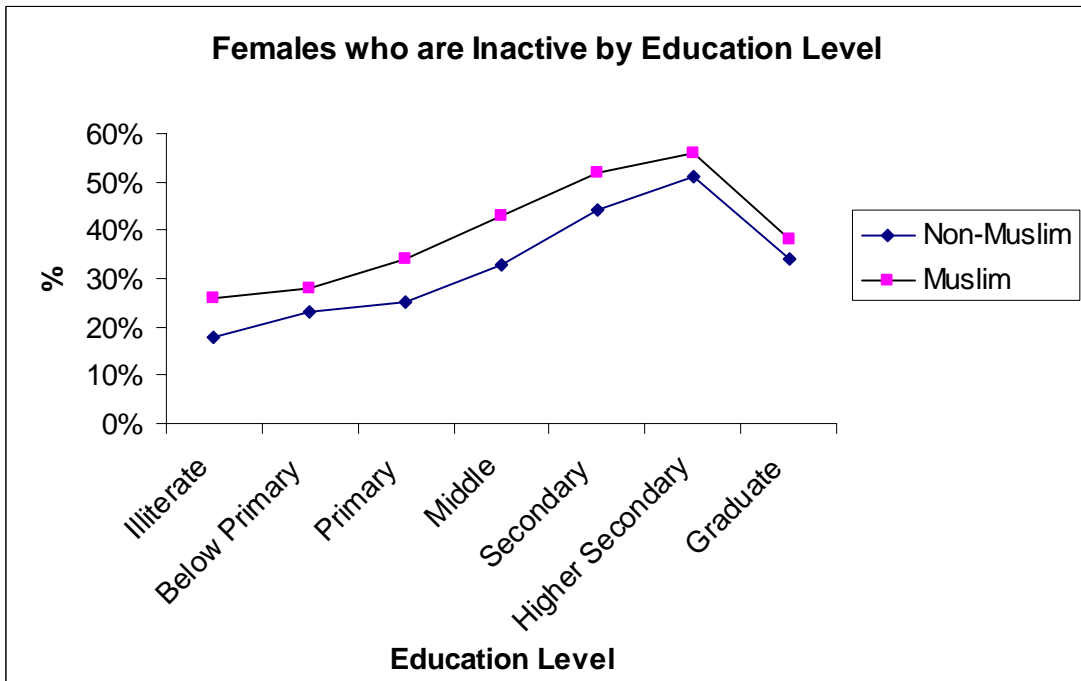
Source: NSS 55<sup>th</sup> Round, Employment and Unemployment Data. This figure omits women's self-employment.

Figure 3: Women Doing Extradomestic Work vs. Being Inactive, India 1999

Panel 3A) Doing Extradomestic Work



Panel 3B) Inactive (In the Narrow Sense)



Source: NSS 55<sup>th</sup> Round, Employment and Unemployment Data, Ages 16-65.

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## Appendix 2: Description of selected variables

### Labour force involvement:

Every household member's employment status was examined us a one-week recall period of 14 half-days. Every half-day was examined, and firstly if there were any half-days (or more) with a regular salaried/waged employment then this job was recorded as a characteristic of the whole household as well as for that person. Then using the same one week recall data, doing casual labour was examined the same way. The one-week recall dataset included up to four different activities for each half-day period. These 'activities' did not include any of the extra-domestic work listed later in this appendix. Instead, standard employment statuses were recorded here, as shown in the table below.

### Classification of Individuals Into Labour Force Involvements

	Mutually Exclusive Personal Employment Statuses
worked in hh. enterprise (self-employed) as own account worker, or employer	Self-Employed
worked as helper in hh. enterprises (unpaid family worker)	own-account worker
worked as regular salaried/wage employee, or did casual paid labour	had paid work
did not work but was seeking and/or available for work	Unemployed
studying; domestic duties only	Inactive
domestic duties and was also engaged in free collection of goods (vegetables, roots, firewood, cattle-feed etc.) sewing, tailing, weaving etc. for household use	extra-domestic work
Other: e.g. begging.	Inactive

### **The Measurement of Extra-Domestic Labour:**

Many women had as their recorded main employment status “attended domestic duties and are also engaged in free collection of goods, sewing, tailoring, weaving, etc. for household use”. Of these, those who had no other work in the recall week are here labelled the extra-domestic workers. The extra-domestic work activities recorded in the survey were asked about in the following way (NSS Round 55 questionnaire, page 15): ‘Along with your domestic duties did you more or less regularly carry out during the last 365 days:

1. maintenance of kitchen gardens, orchards, etc? (yes/no)
2. work in household poultry, dairy, etc? “
3. free collection of fish, small game, wild fruits, vegetables, etc. for household consumption?
4. free collection of firewood, cow-dung, cattle feed, etc, for household consumption?
5. husking of paddy for household consumption?
6. grinding of foodgrains for household consumption?
7. preparation of gur for household consumption?
8. preservation of meat and fish for household consumption?
9. making baskets and mats for household use?
10. preparation of cow-dung cake for use as fuel in the household?
11. sewing, tailoring, weaving, etc., for household use?
12. tutoring of own children or others’ children free of charge? ’

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