

# Through the Magnifying Glass: Women's Work and Labour Force Participation in Urban Delhi

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A study conducted in urban Delhi through a household survey between September and November 2006 estimates a greater female workforce participation rate than recorded in the National Sample Survey. It indicates undercounting and reflects the informality that surrounds women's work. This paper seeks to explore the nature of women's workforce participation and attempts to identify key factors influencing women's decision to work, the type of work they do, the constraints they face, and the perceived benefits and costs of engaging in paid work outside the home. In doing so, issues surrounding the methodology and underestimation of women's work within the urban context are also tackled. The study also suggests the need to understand the familial and household context within which labour market decisions are made. The role of family and kinship structures to determine women's work-life choices emerge as an important area for further study.

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Measuring women's paid workforce participation is complicated for reasons of both perception and method, as was demonstrated in the seminal time-use study of women's work conducted in the early 1980s by Devaki Jain and Malini Chand (Jain 1985). It is further complicated by the overwhelming predominance of informal over formal workforce participation by women in south Asia (ILO 2002). This paper seeks to throw some light on the nature of women's workforce participation in urban Delhi, and to identify what appear to be the key factors influencing women's decision to work, the type of work they do, the constraints they face, and the perceived benefits and costs of engaging in paid work outside the home.

In his essay on "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question", Partha Chatterjee suggested that a spiritual and material dichotomy had become the basis for new norms and the determination of gender roles: "The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality" (Chatterjee 1989: 243). It continues to be true that Indian women play a critical role in religious rituals, maintaining kinship ties, and celebrating festivals, apart from their reproductive roles and responsibilities. An implicit social contract continues to influence the allocation of household roles and responsibilities. According to Banerjee (1998), women can be seen as a "flexible resource" of the household, the implication being, not that they are confined to private spaces or to any rigid roles, but rather that they lack the autonomy to take decisions about work.

Our survey of women in Delhi in 2006 confirms that the decision to work outside home is usually a household decision, i.e., a large majority of working women did not work prior to marriage and a majority of unmarried working women stop working after marriage or after delivery of a child. What seems to emerge as a general finding is that the strongest influence on whether or not women work after marriage is not the individual attributes of the women, but the external environment and ideology of the marital household.

## 1 Background: Female Labour Force Participation

Data from the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) suggests a decline in the overall female participation rates between 1983 and 2000 and a substantial decline in female subsidiary labour supply. Analysts have attributed the low levels of workforce participation and decline to a mix of positive factors such as increased participation in education; cultural-aspirational

sanctions, whereby increased prosperity and household income lead to withdrawal of female workers; and labour market disparities resulting in wage discrimination and barriers to entry into preferred jobs (Sundaram and Tendulkar 2004; Das 2006).

In both rural and urban India, on an average, workforce participation rates (WFPRS) of women from poor households are higher than those from households above the poverty line. Such data has led to the presence of what was referred to as compelling need-based participation (Sundaram and Tendulkar 2004) of women in the workforce, where it is poverty status that, *ceteris paribus*, drives women to greater workforce participation. In fact, this analysis further says that greater female WFPR from a particular household increases the probability of the household being below the poverty line. Hence, poverty assumes an important role in analysing women's WFPRS.

Recent data shows that the national urban female WFPR increased to an all-time high of 16% in 2004, as a result of increased subsidiary status participation – an increase of 19% (NSSO 2005).

Data on labour force participation rate (LFPR) in Delhi suggests that the state mirrors the national labour force gap. Comparing NSSO data from 1993-94 to 2005-06, we see that the proportion of female workers per 1,000 persons has continued to decrease. The urban female LFPR for the usual status has dropped from 102 per thousand women in 1993-94 to 78 in 2005-06 as per the NSS 62nd round. Male labour force participation has increased steadily from 1993-94 to 2004-05. However, the recent 62nd round of NSS data shows a sharp decline to 506 men participating in the labour force per thousand men in urban Delhi.

This data gives rise to a number of questions. For example, is there an underestimation of women's work in large-scale national surveys because of the nature of the participation, such as their concentration in informal or home-based activity? Data reviewing the demand for women in the labour market has highlighted the growth in opportunities in smaller, informal trades and services (GOI 2002a). Evidence from a large number of micro studies further suggests that women workers continue to be partly netted in by labour force surveys because of the nature of the work that they perform, which is often home-based, subcontracted, or through sources of self-employment. Women's work is also embedded in domestic activity, which creates perceptions that these activities are not to be reported as "work". Case studies confirm the presence of urban informal employment, which is insecure, home-based, and contractual (ISST-HNSA 2006).

In addition, there are likely impacts of supply-side constraints, including women's reproductive roles, cultural sanctions, patriarchal hierarchies and aspiration-related issues. It would be imperative to see if such demographic variables relating to household size and sex ratios play any role in determining female workforce participation. The roles played by the child-dependency ratio and the child-woman ratio need to be explored in the urban context, with the average household size being smaller and family structures changing towards becoming more nuclear. The average household size in Delhi has shrunk from 4.4 in 1999-2000 to 4.1 in 2004. The child-woman ratio in poor households is higher (relative to those in non-poor households) by about 28 percentage points. Any exploration of women's work

has to factor in the time spent on care work and the interaction between productive and reproductive responsibilities.

Other population characteristics such as age and education structures also play a significant role. A large section of the labour force in the informal economy is possibly migrant in nature (GOI 2002b) and may be undercounted. Migration and women's work choices may be linked, as many sources of employment such as domestic work are based purely on a migrant stream of workers (Pathare 2000).

Another diagnosis offered for weak female workforce participation is the absence of preferred job opportunities due to gender biases (Das 2006), suggesting that poor returns from the labour market, in combination with the availability of another stable income stream through marital partners or other family members, causes women to avoid participating in the labour market.

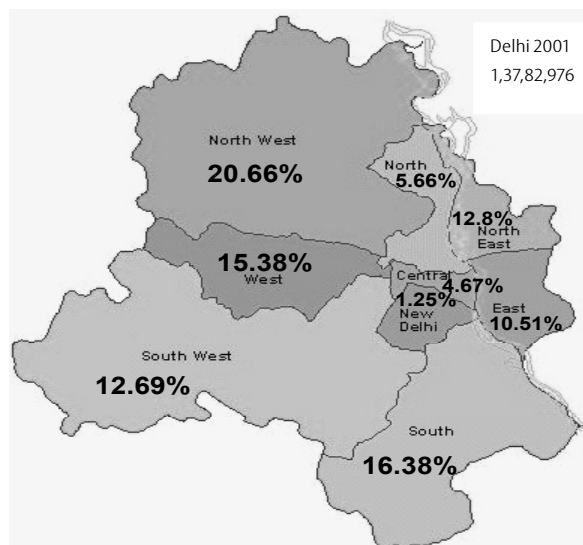
On the demand side, increase in women's workforce participation is linked to expansion of opportunities. Over time, the behaviour of women's workforce participation is expected to reflect the impact of industrial growth: Goldin's analysis for the United States (US) suggested a long-run U-shaped pattern of female workforce participation over time. The thrust was on urbanisation. The idea being, with accompanied demographic transition, women's participation in the labour force, which is high in rural areas, would dip initially during the transition and eventually rise in the complete urbanised context (Goldin 1990).

Close to 94% of Delhi's population resides in urban areas. The rural population as a percentage share of the total population has been decreasing for the past decades. Thus, the city serves as an excellent case study to probe the effects of urbanisation, if any, on workforce participation. It is the intention of this paper to attempt, through a field survey, to throw light on the level and nature of workforce participation of women in urban Delhi, and the likely role of the variables mentioned above in the observed outcomes.

## 2 Context: The City of Delhi

Delhi is a highly urbanised city, with a population distributed across different zones as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Population Distribution of Delhi



While a majority of Delhi's population resides in established colonies and regularised localities, slum and *jhuggi-jhonpri* (JJ, or impermanent huts) clusters account for 33.8% of the city's population. The distribution of population across different types of settlements is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Population by Settlement Type – Delhi 2000**

Sl No	Type of Settlement	Estimated Population in 2000 (in Lakh)	Total Estimated Population (%)
1	JJ clusters	20.72	14.80
2	Slum designated areas	26.64	19.10
3	Unauthorised colonies	7.40	5.30
4	JJ resettlement colonies	17.76	12.70
5	Rural villages	7.40	5.30
6	Regularised–unauthorised colonies	17.76	12.70
7	Urban villages	8.88	6.40
8	Planned colonies	33.08	23.70
	Total	139.64	100.00

1 lakh = 0.1 million.

Source: *Delhi Economic Survey 2005*.

The average level of income in Delhi is higher than in the rest of the country. As per government estimates, the annual per capita income in Delhi is Rs 53,976 in 2006. Per capita income in Delhi has been on a consistent rise and far higher than the national per capita income. Income in Delhi is ascertained to be 2.5 times that of the Indian average per capita income (Delhi HDR 2006).

As a result of high and rising levels of income, the poverty levels in Delhi are estimated as being below all-India numbers. The population below poverty line (BPL) has been decreasing consistently in Delhi. In monetary terms, the monthly per capita poverty line was demarcated at Rs 454.11 for urban areas in 1999–2000.<sup>1</sup> As of 2000, close to 8% of Delhi's population lived BPL. Data available from the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) shows the income distribution of Delhi's population and is depicted in Figure 2.

Thus, Delhi is witnessing increasing population, rising incomes, and rapid urbanisation. It is against this backdrop that this study is placed.

### 3 Sample and Methodology

A household survey was carried out in Delhi during a three-month period between September and November 2006. The sample canvassed is a subset of a larger sample surveyed by the NCAER in 2005. A multistage stratified sampling scheme was adopted at the NCAER to generate representative samples. Sample districts, villages, and households form the first, second, and third stages, respectively, for the selection of the rural sample, while cities/towns, urban blocks and households are the three stages of selection for the urban sample. The sample size and its distribution were determined on the basis of the accuracy required and the resources available. Approximately, a sample of 63,000 households out of the preliminary listed sample of 4,40,000 households was spread over 1,976 villages (250 districts) and 2,255 urban wards (342 towns), covering 64 NSSO regions in 24 states and

union territories. To increase accuracy and ensure adequate item response, the survey was conducted through face-to-face interviews of heads of households and members of households, using a questionnaire based approach. Non-response was reduced by conducting focus group discussions, proper training of interviewers and supervision. Proper measures (such as good survey design, well-designed survey instruments, reliable sample frame, proper implementation of fieldwork, robust data cleaning and analysis) were undertaken to minimise sampling and non-sampling errors.

Though the sample did not include slum households, in terms of income distribution, it is representative of the city of Delhi. A predominant section of the sample is drawn from the growing lower middle class of Delhi. Around 5% of the sample consists of households that are BPL.

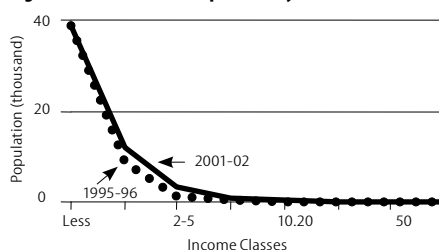
The sampling methodology used implies that the survey results represent close to 15 million persons living in Delhi. The current population of Delhi is estimated to be close to 15.3 million people.<sup>2</sup> As per the 2001 data, 45% of Delhi's urban population is female. The sample canvassed by the ISSR includes 48% female and 52% male share of the population. It draws from the entire geographical expanse of Delhi from the north-most location in Narela to the extreme south in Mahipalpur and Mehram Nagar. While concentrated in planned colonies and regularised areas, a few JJ resettlement colonies near Bawana have also been included.

A few areas in south and south-west Delhi could not be covered in the ISSR survey due to the restrictions imposed by residents for entry into colonies and apartment complex areas around the time period of the study. Investigators reported immense difficulty in tracing female respondents and canvassing questionnaires due to safety concerns women in Delhi face and urban work-life patterns. In certain settlement colonies, families had migrated due to the insecurity surrounding tenure and possibility of demolition. Other such areas reported problems in household identification as the pattern of addresses had undergone changes. Thus, from the target 600 households, 447 were canvassed across the 58 blocks listed for the sample.

Questionnaires were canvassed to female respondents from varying backgrounds to get an improved understanding of women's decision to join the workforce. Students from Delhi University and volunteers from the ISSR community centre were trained for the purpose of the survey. Various concepts surrounding the informal economy and difficulties in measuring women's work were elaborated upon and, while the definition of work and activity status remain similar to the NSS design and usual status definition, more significance was placed on probing and acquiring a sharper insight into household work-life arrangements. Field investigators were asked to additionally note some comments based on respondents' reactions to questions and field observations during interviews.

Data has been obtained through the survey conducted by the ISSR on a number of variables, including income and poverty

**Figure 2: Distribution of Population by Income in Delhi**



Source: NCAER (2002).

status, migration status, education status, age, fertility and household size, and aspirations and cultural perceptions. The influence of each of these on women's decisions regarding work is discussed in the following sections.

#### 4 Key Findings: Women's Workforce Participation Rates

As per primary activity status, the survey reports 21% female workforce participation. Female labour force participation is registered at 24%. The corresponding estimates for men are 84% and 87%. These numbers are considerably higher than the NSSO estimates for Delhi. The main reason for the difference might be the extensive probing, use of female investigators, and the inclusion of all paid economic activities as "work".<sup>3</sup> Another key cause could be the inclusion and extensive focus on home-based, piece rate work and discussions with investigators on the varied forms of work in which women participate.

During the survey, investigators reported a few cases in which immense probing was required to discover the nature of women's work and earning status. The problems surrounding the perception of work appeared significant in areas, where women did not consider their unpaid assistance in family run shops or businesses as work. In a few particular cases, women did not want to divulge the working details of other female members in the family, suggesting tensions regarding female activity status. Around 15% of the respondents had withdrawn from the labour force.

#### 4.1 Age

As per the survey, women in the age group of 21-34 years report close to 34% labour force participation rates, which slide to 17% in the 35-49 years' age group. Increasing reproductive workload could be a reason for lower participation in later years; alternatively, this may also indicate a higher propensity to work amongst the younger generation.

A comparison with the latest NSSO data for the urban female population in Delhi suggests a similar picture, with the greatest chunk of women who join the workforce being from the post-marital age group. However, the NSS data highlights women in the 35-49 years' age group as reporting the highest working population ratio in urban Delhi. This share has increased dramatically between 1993-94 and 2004-05. While 18.4% of women between the ages of 35 and 49 years were working in 1993-94, this share increased to 48% in 2004-05.

#### 4.2 Marital Status

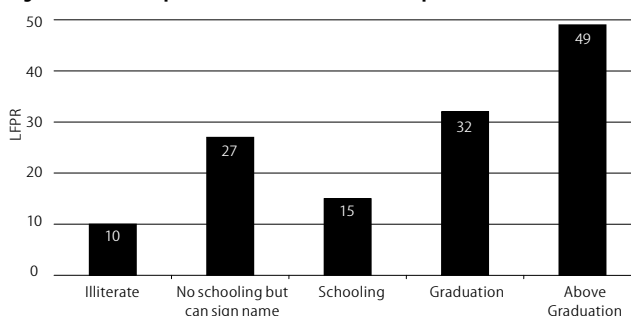
Marital status has a strong connection with LFPR. The survey shows that unmarried women in the 18-60 years' age group report 43% labour force participation rates. This is much higher than the national average, the Delhi average, and the urban area average. While it is difficult to assume that these women will stop working or withdraw from the workforce after marriage, the current segment of married non-working women report marginal

work histories, with only 15% reporting having engaged in work earlier. Figure 3 shows the difference in the LFPRs of married and unmarried women.

#### 4.3 Education

Education emerges as a significant variable influencing women's labour force participation. As per the survey results, women's decision to work is mediated by the level at which their labour choice operates. Women with no schooling report higher labour force participation than women who have completed schooling. Graduate women show 5% higher labour force participation than the non-schooled group, among which the labour force participation rate is estimated to be close to 32%. Close to half the women who are educated above graduation do join the workforce. This section reports a 49% labour force participation rate (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Education Specific Female Labour Force Participation



#### 4.4 Income

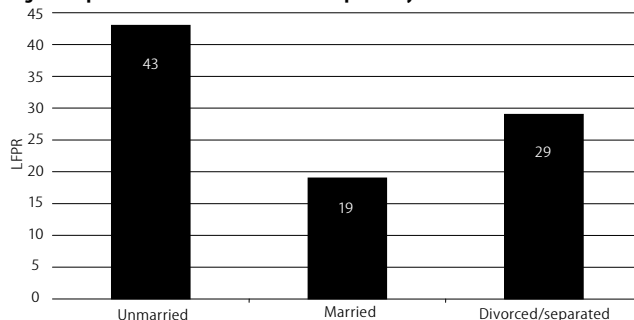
From the survey data, the effect of household income on women's workforce participation is not as clear as that of education. The highest participation levels are seen among the BPL households and the highest earning households, followed by the middle income range (annual household incomes of Rs 3.30-3.85 lakh), which reported 42% working women.

There is a strong relationship between income level and the education expenditure that a household can incur and this could explain the relatively higher LFPR among the upper income classes.

Data on poverty status was also available and it is interesting to note that the LFPR for men and women is significantly higher for BPL families than the average calculated for Delhi. As per the survey, around 50% of women from these families are part of the workforce. This is a different picture to the one presented by the NSS, according to which

the female urban workforce participation is the highest in the upper most monthly per capita expenditure (MPCE) class as per the 61st and 62nd round (NSS 2006), and the weakest amongst the lowest MPCE category. This difference from NSS findings can be attributed to training investigators to probe for informal forms of work, taken up by women from poor households.

Figure 3: Specific Female Labour Force Participation by Marital Status



Labour force participation remains the same, with none registered as unemployed. The LFPR for men from BPL families is 92%, with 61% of 18-60 year olds being engaged in regular or salaried work. While male WFPRs are roughly similar across income ranges, female WFPRs are seen to marginally change within middle income ranges and to increase dramatically in poor households.

## 5 Activity Status and Informality

Overall, as per activity status descriptions received through the survey, a far greater number of male members of households are engaged in paid work, while a majority 51% of the women in the sample describe themselves as housewives. Table 2 summarises the findings of the survey relating to the activity status of men and women.

**Table 2: Activity Status of Sample (%)**

Activity Status	Men	Women
Self-employed	28	4
Salaried	31	14
Home-based workers	2	2
Casual labour	2	1
Unpaid family labour	0	1
Unemployed	3	2
Housewife/stay at home male	1	51
Student	25	22
Retired	6	1
Others	2	2
Total	100	100

implies a regular job with monthly payments and some degree of assurance regarding the continuation of work (for example, working as a shop assistant on a regular basis). Of the women who are working, only 28% said they were entitled to provident fund cover and 38% had access to paid leave. The implication is that even when they are reported as “salaried”, most women form part of the informal workforce without access to any assured social security. This is an elaboration of the results from the 2005 Delhi Economic Census, which throws light on the degree of informality in Delhi and its employment and entrepreneurial landscape. The data suggests that only 2.5% of enterprises in urban Delhi employ 10 or more workers.<sup>4</sup>

## 6 Contrasting Working and Non-Working Women

A glance at the work and life histories gathered through the survey data can enable us to further comprehend the context within which work-life choices are made by women in Delhi. The predominant role played by care work, safety concerns and the environmental construct created by the household emerges from a comparison between working and non-working women, which is given below.

In terms of demography, there are more similarities than contrasts between working and non-working women. This is true of household size – five for both groups, and marital status – 18% of working and 13% of non-working group were unmarried. The average age of working women in the sample is 36, while the average age of non-working women is 39. The average age of non-working women, although marginally higher, does not

The activity status reported is similar to the NSS data, which also highlights domestic duties as the most significant activity for women in urban Delhi, with 56.8% women reporting this category. It should be noted that “salaried” does not imply working in formal or organised enterprises; rather, it

suggest a generational shift in terms of working patterns. However, age-specific workforce participation rates show that women from younger post-marital age groups<sup>5</sup> possess a greater proclivity to join the workforce than their older counterparts.

Investigators also found greater willingness among younger female respondents to discuss working patterns and aspirations. To quote one non-working respondent who has a 22-year old daughter: “These days, girls work and we do not interfere. Times have changed and they had to. As long as she is happy and well.”

The distribution of working and non-working women across various educational categories suggests that differences in working decisions and labour market gains become significant only for those who have pursued education above graduation. While 17% of the working women in the sample report possessing education above graduation, majority of working women (41%) have completed schooling. Majority share of non-working women also report completing schooling, while only 6% of this group reports studying above graduation. This finding strengthens the argument for greater stress on female access to higher education for genuine labour market returns to accrue within an urban context.

An important finding while exploring linkages between education and entry into the labour force is the amelioration of anxiety and insecurity in dealing with the world of work and the “outside” associated with lower levels of education. The following quote makes it clear: “Women who study more have seen the world. What have we seen – our home, parents, and school? Those women are better able to deal with working. I shall be unable to do so.”

While similar proportions of women who are working and non-working are married and the average household size is the same, the role of the marital household is significant in terms of domestic democracy and household care arrangements. The next section elaborates on the roles played by reproductive workload and marriage.

## 7 Marriage and Reproductive Work Burden

“When you marry, you can do anything your husband permits.”<sup>6</sup>

A large section of women in both the working and non-working groups are married – 82% of working women and 87% of non-working women. Around 47% of all respondents stated that they had quit work after marriage and childbirth.

Contrary to perception, marital status does not impose a direct bar on women’s access to a working life. Rather, marital status and its associated reproductive roles mediate this access and the nature of work-life arrangements. Only 31% of the working respondents had worked prior to marriage. This means that for a good 69% of working women, the decision to work follows, and does not precede, marriage. Around 60% of the working respondents had worked prior to childbirth, implying that as much as 40% of working women decide to work only after getting married and having a child.

In the non-working respondent pool, 16% had worked before marriage, and 11% had worked prior to childbirth. From the segment that said they had worked prior to childbirth, 60% stopped working after the birth of their child. Similarly, amongst the

non-working respondents who worked prior to marriage, 57% stopped work after marriage. These numbers suggest the role played by the childcare workload in determining the nature of the female labour market supply.

Around 53% of the working respondents felt that working women should stop working when their children are young. This section supported the idea of women rejoining the workforce after their children reached a certain age. Some 54% of the working respondent pool also felt that working interfered with duties such as childcare.

Amidst the non-working women, only 20% seek employment once again. The key decision to quit work appears to be voluntary, based on the current familial context. Some 68.5% of our respondents who left working said they themselves took the decision to not work any more. Around 12% of the respondents said their spouse had asked them to stop working. Most accounts of withdrawal stress the role played by household work. A common response in the survey was “household work became too much” when investigators tried to explore the reasons for withdrawal.

Within the 15% section of respondents who withdrew from the workforce, household workload is cited as the key reason by as many as 30%. Household workload is related to marital status. The average hours of work for working and non-working women suggest the sheer difficulties they face in joining the labour force. Table 3 shows the average hours of work for working and non-working women.

**Table 3: Average Hours of Work**

Working women
Average hours spent on reproductive work/household duties: Five hours
Average hours spent on paid work: Six hours
Average hours spent on unpaid economic work: Four hours (40% of total working respondents said they spent time on unpaid economic work).
Non-working women
Average hours spent on reproductive work/household duties: Seven hours.

Table 3 suggests a normal working day of 11-15 hours for women in the workforce. Such long hours of work and the reflected domestic responsibilities shouldered by women are a crucial variable influencing work-life choices. Thus, the higher workforce participation rate amongst unmarried women is indicative of women’s reproductive work and its significance in determining female labour supply.

Within the realm of reproductive work, it is interesting to note that both reproductive and market-oriented work form part of the domestic workload that women manage.

The concept of unpaid economic work needs an elaboration at this point. This is defined as any engagement with an economic activity for which no payment is received. A significant section of women who cited being engaged in unpaid economic work were those who helped other family members in family-run enterprises such as grocery shops or communication centres.

Some 56% of our survey respondents stated that they helped their household members in economic activities. These ranged from cleaning the shop space to dealing with customers during the other member’s absence. Kamini Devi, a housewife, said cleaning her husband’s electronics shop was part and parcel of her domestic duties. In reply to the investigators’ queries about

her working patterns and engagement in unpaid economic work, she highlighted the significance of perceptions surrounding household roles in deciphering “work”:

You asked me what I did and I said I am a housewife. What work do I do other than taking care of the family? Now you ask me what work I do in a day and I tell you that I clean his shop... does that make much difference... I am at home and that’s all I do.

Amongst non-working respondents, the fact that children and housework need more time was cited by a majority of 34% as the key reason for stopping work. This was followed by illness, which was reported by 13% of the section. Two causes tied as the third-most cited for leaving work: migration and low earnings. It is interesting to note that within the group of women who withdrew from the workforce, none worked as casual labourers. The major sector from which withdrawal was observed is the regular salaried workforce. A further break-up of respondents who have withdrawn from the workforce will provide more insights.

## 8 Perspectives and Patterns in Work

Care, ideology of the marital household and concerns regarding safety govern women’s entry and exit from the labour force. Around 68% of non-working women had to consult with somebody in their family before starting to work. Hence, they also cite familial objections as the key obstacle in joining the workforce. For working and non-working women, one of the key hurdles cited in joining the workforce is the pre-existing workload relating to household chores. In Delhi, with its high reporting of crime against women, it is not surprising to find that mobility and safety concerns are the second-most frequently cited hurdle for working women.

As per usual status, close to 15% of the respondents reported withdrawal from the labour force. This percentage is higher for married women. Some 23% of this section withdrew from self-employment. One recurring instance of this was of women who conducted tuitions from their natal home deciding to stop after marriage. Other instances were of women who traded in goods such as clothing items, who felt no need to continue with the task of running a business. One of our respondents in such a situation said: “The business was doing well and I managed on my own. It was small and had a few loyal customers, but once I moved, it was too difficult to continue with such work.” Around 47% of such withdrawals took place from regular salaried work. A further 22% withdrew from home-based, piece rate work.

Changing work-life patterns amongst the working section of the respondent pool were registered and explored during the survey. Labour market mobility was a key feature cited by the 59 women amongst the respondents, who said that they had changed their working pattern in terms of occupation or place of work.

Amongst the respondent pool, close to 51% of the working women interviewed said they had changed their work pattern in terms of their activity status or place of work in the past. It is interesting to note that the primary push for such change appears to be the perceived “better opportunity” in the new workplace or status. During the survey, 24% cite this as the key cause for change.

The accounts of some women stress the deconstruction of this term, not merely defining “better opportunity” in terms of income

and monetary benefit, but also in terms of flexibility to deal with household work and reproductive responsibilities. Approximately 22% of this sample suggests that the nature of earnings, either in pure unit value and/or the frequency of payment, caused them to look for other forms of work. Finally, 17% said that household work and childcare caused them to adjust their work patterns to suit their domestic duties. Infrastructure, combined with such housework, can be seen as a key reason for 14% of the women citing “distance from residence to place of work” as a reason to change their work pattern.

Amongst the 115 working respondents interviewed, 22% stated that they are the primary earners for their households. In many cases, employment problems associated with the male members of the family or retirement have created this situation. For the majority 78% respondents who were working, the income earned from their work was additional to a primary source of income. Only 10 women amongst the respondent pool reported increase in household tensions after they started working. However, once asked about other known families, close to half the respondents said they had heard of conflict in other families due to women working.

Worrisome signs were reported by several female investigators during the survey. One investigator witnessed wife-beating and another observed visible signs of physical abuse. The former case was that of a working woman and her unemployed husband. Issues relating to masculinity and women’s work, though complex, have an integral role to play in the reporting and repercussions of women’s work.

In terms of perception, neglecting children and conflict over domestic chores emerged as the two most negative aspects attributed to joining the workforce by both working and non-working women. Economic security and greater experience and knowledge alongside strengthened personality were cited as the three most positive attributes of working by both working and non-working women.

## 9 Concluding Comments

The survey of women’s work in Delhi throws light on several issues relating to work and well-being concerns. As far as methodology is concerned, the fact that participation rates as recorded in this survey are substantially higher than those recorded by the NSSO, suggests that undercounting and perception bias can be overcome through intensive probing as was done here.

A majority of working women are part of regular salaried workers and thus their contributions are visible and perceived as contributions. Most women who work value this contribution to the household. Twenty-three per cent said the household could not survive without their income and another 42% said it would manage with some difficulty. This is an interesting pattern to follow in a context where women have historically not been viewed as economic actors within a household.

On the supply side, reproductive work and domestic roles prove to be significant variables in influencing female labour force participation. Working women spend five hours on an average per day on housework/childcare in addition to six hours on paid work; where unpaid work is also being done, this adds on another

four hours. Women who are not working spend an average of seven hours in housework and care work. The time spent on care work is high, and working women are not able to reduce their home responsibilities very much. Maintaining work-life balance is a key issue in understanding the well-being implications of women’s work. Long hours and the resultant strain cause deeper psychosocial tensions for women, which is an important dimension to explore further in terms of the repercussions of workforce participation.

In our sample, the age-specific labour force participation between 25 and 38 years is higher than at all other ages. This could be a cohort effect, indicating an upward shift in the LFPR. The LFPR for married women – 19% – is substantially below that of unmarried women at 43%. At the same time, 69% of working women did not work prior to marriage, so implicitly, the consent and encouragement of the spouse appears to be critical in the decision to work. Further, the WFPR for those with no schooling, but who could sign their name, was much higher than for the illiterate. However, the LFPR falls with some schooling, presumably reflecting a “sanskritisation” effect. With education above graduation, there is a substantial increase.

The relation of income with LFPR is not clear. A tendency towards an initial fall in WFPR and then increase is just discernible. The highest LFPR for women is for those from households below the poverty line and highest earning households, followed by those in the income range of Rs 3.30-3.85 lakh per annum. This could possibly reflect the impact of both higher levels of education, higher aspirations, and the ability to make arrangements for housework/childcare in the mother’s absence.

A key finding is that most working women do not have access to paid leave or provident fund. This reflects the informal structures within which women work.

Looking at the perceptions as well as the data, it appears that women’s work contributes to economic security, a stronger personality, and experience and knowledge. Very few women reported increased tensions within the household as a result of their working outside, although a much larger number stated that they were aware of such effects. But a high workload is experienced and this is a negative aspect. Apart from family objections and lack of information, mobility and safety concerns were cited by both working and non-working women as a barrier.

The fact that working and non-working women alike felt that children get neglected is more complex, suggesting the absence of acceptable alternatives for childcare. Another clear way of improving the well-being of working women does emerge: safety in movement around the city and access to safe transport. Thus, the key factors that may push up women’s workforce participation rates appear to be higher education, reduction in time spent on housework (domestic technology, water and electricity, childcare arrangements), and safety in public spaces (transport, lighting).

In an increasingly urbanising context where cash incomes are paramount, women’s work may become an integral component of future household livelihood strategies. Further, the changing tone and tenor of youthful aspirations may create a greater willingness and desire on the part of the younger female generation to join the workforce. The survey stresses that issues relating to

household care arrangements and public space, which are primarily dealing with the external environment beyond the work space and labour market, emerge as key variables in unravelling the complicated texture of Delhi's female labour force.

Women's role within the household in the context of rapid urbanisation is changing. The study imposes the need to understand this changing context within which labour market decisions

are made and explore the dominant role of family and kinship structures to determine women's work-life choices. While kinship studies were once described as a "nasty medicine: to be taken and endured in the hope that it will do some good" (Uberoi 1993: 1), to understand the nature and nurture of the female labour force will require labour market analysis to infuse such sociological narratives.

## NOTES

- 1 <http://delhiplanning.nic.in/Economic%20Survey/ES%202005-06/Chpt/21.pdf>
- 2 Chapter 3: Demographic profile (PDF). *Economic Survey of Delhi, 2005-2006*, pp 17-31. Planning Department, Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi. Retrieved on 21 December 2006.
- 3 Differences in WPR between national and micro surveys are common. For example, women's WPR in Punjab has been variously estimated at 4.4% (1991 Census) and 28.8% (NCAER 1993). While NSS data on work participation is regarded as much more accurate than the census, intensive probing as done here would no doubt increase the positive responses.
- 4 Calculated from data in Table S-17(A), Row 23 on page S-63, Report on the Fifth Economic Census of Delhi, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Delhi, available at <http://des.delhigovt.nic.in/ecensus/es2005.pdf>
- 5 As per Census 2001 data, the average female age at marriage for Delhi is 19.2, which is higher than the all India average of 18.3 years.
- 6 Quote from Manju Kapur's novel, *Home*, 2006, Random House, p 267

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