

Role of Family and Society in Women's Economic Empowerment

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Abstract : Economic liberalization of economy, initiated in early 1990s, within India has opened new opportunities to aspiring Indian population. Inclusiveness and fairness of distribution of these opportunities have been a major topic of discussion and available evidence suggests that there has been an increase in inequality after liberalization.

In this paper, we first establish current economic status of women by analyzing employment opportunities available to them by reviewing relevant literature. Labor force participation as well as wages for men are double than labor force participation and wages for women. A large section of female labor force is in un-organized sectors such as agriculture. Within organized sector, we are far behind in having women in leadership or entrepreneurial roles.

The objective of this paper is developing a better understanding of the social factors contributing toward economic inequality of women. One of the major factors identified is the gender role assigned to women in Indian society. Gender role for a woman in Indian family is that of a daughter, a wife or a mother; always in relation to a man and without any independent existence.

Finally, policy initiatives are reviewed in terms of their efficacy in correcting gender role assigned to women.

This research paper is based on secondary research data.

Keywords: Women empowerment, Economic development, Gender inequality, Gender role

Introduction

John Money coined the term gender role in 1955 to indicate a set of societal norms dictating what types of behaviors are generally considered acceptable, appropriate or desirable for a person based on their actual or perceived sex.¹

Talcott Parsons gave a model of what these behaviors were for men and women in 1955 in education, profession, decision making, housework and child care in American families. His finding was that education, profession and decision making domains were primarily available to men and housework and child care domains were considered exclusive responsibility for women.²

Gender role for women in India is not much different than women in any part of the world. They are expected to manage household chores, look after children and family members and leave it to the men to run the world.

In this paper, we first establish that there is a significant difference in economic well-being between men and women. Then we will review existing research and available data to find reasons for why these differences exist.

Economic Status of Women in Contemporary India

In this section, basic statistics are presented to establish current economic status of women in comparison to men.

Work Participation

Women work participation - typically measured as the percentage of females that are employed out of all employable female population - is less than half of work participation for men.

There is major difference in female work participation in urban and rural India implying that women tend to participate more in manual work like agriculture (Chart 1 in appendix).

Female work participation is also the lowest in India within BRIC countries (Chart 2 in appendix).

Wages

At All-India level, wages per day worked for employed women worker was reported at INR 145.63 whereas it is almost double for their men counterpart (INR 288.14) for the year 2009-10 (Chart 3 in appendix).

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Women in Leadership Position

India ranks lower within BRIC countries with regard to number of firms headed by women executives (Chart 4 in appendix).

Social Factors Contributing Toward Economic Inequality

From the analysis of charts in the section above, it is quite clear that the primary problem area for women is a dismal rate of work participation, especially in public or organized sector.

Das, S. and others (2015) have tried to model work participation with regard to literacy rate and familial responsibilities in case a woman is married or has children. As is expected, work participation for women increases when they are educated and decreases when they are married or have children.³

Literacy Rate in India

Primary and secondary school enrolment and attendance rates are lower for girls than for boys (47% and 53% respectively)⁴ indicating some son preference in regard to access to education. The lack of provision for facilities for girls, such as toilets, reinforces this issue.⁵

There is a considerable gap of 17% in literacy rate between men and women (Chart 5 in appendix).

It is more likely that even within literate females, level of higher education is not as good as males (Chart 6 in appendix).

According to United Nations data from 2006, 27.6% of girls between 15 and 19 years of age are married, divorced or widowed.⁶ This will also be a major constraint in women getting opportunities at higher education.

Attitude Toward Women in Workforce

Most of the time the decision of whether a woman works or not is taken by the family. Klasen and Pieter's (2012) find that for urban Indian women, participation in the workforce at lower education levels is dictated by economic necessity.⁷

Mammen and Paxson (2000) suggest that rising household incomes could lead to a withdrawal of women from the labor market.⁸

Social Institutions

Gonzalez, Jain-Chandra, Kochhar and Newiak (2015) find that the presence of gender-based legal restrictions, in particular, restrictions on women's rights to inheritance and property as well as legal impediments to undertaking economic activities (such as opening a bank account or freely pursuing a profession) are strongly associated with larger gender gaps in labor force participation.⁹

Furthermore, social institutions with more gender equality have been associated with better development outcomes and higher living standards. Indeed, the OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) scores countries on 14 indicators, grouped into five sub-indexes - discriminatory family code, restricted physical integrity, bias toward sons, restricted resources and assets, and restricted civil liberties—using different dimensions of social institutions related to gender inequality.¹⁰ India ranks relatively low on the OECD SIGI index.¹¹

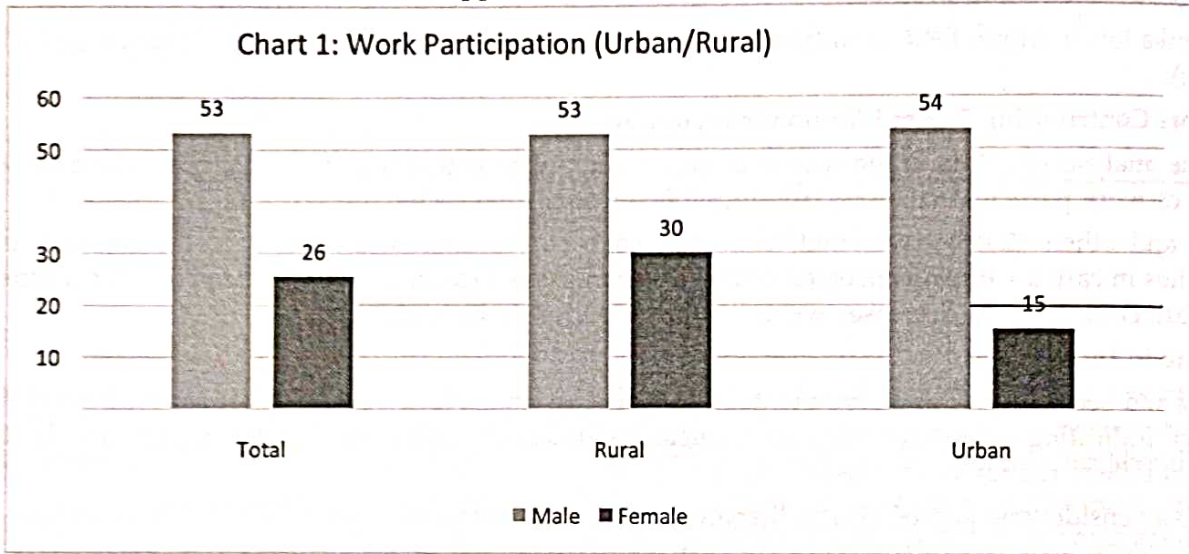
Policy Review

India has policies to safeguard women's interest, but implementation has always been a problem. For example, the Hindu Succession Act of 2005 granted Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Jain women (who make up the vast majority of women in India) co-equal inheritance rights to ancestral and jointly owned property, and the same rights as sons, whether they are married or not, to reside in or seek partition of the family dwelling house. In practice, a number of obstacles prevent women from accessing land and non-land assets, including discriminatory inheritance customary practices, limited legal literacy, discriminatory attitudes towards women's ownership and control of land in the family and community and discrimination in the allocation of land through state transfer programs.

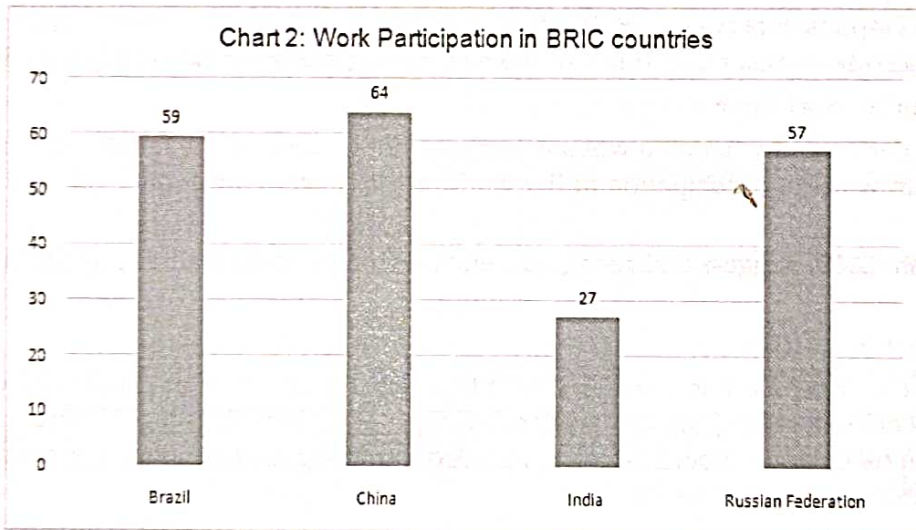
Conclusion

It is clear from the sections above that majority of important decisions in woman's life—concerning her education, profession, inheritance—are taken by family members. Even when there are policies giving rights to women, they are rarely exercised and much depends on the good-will of the family.

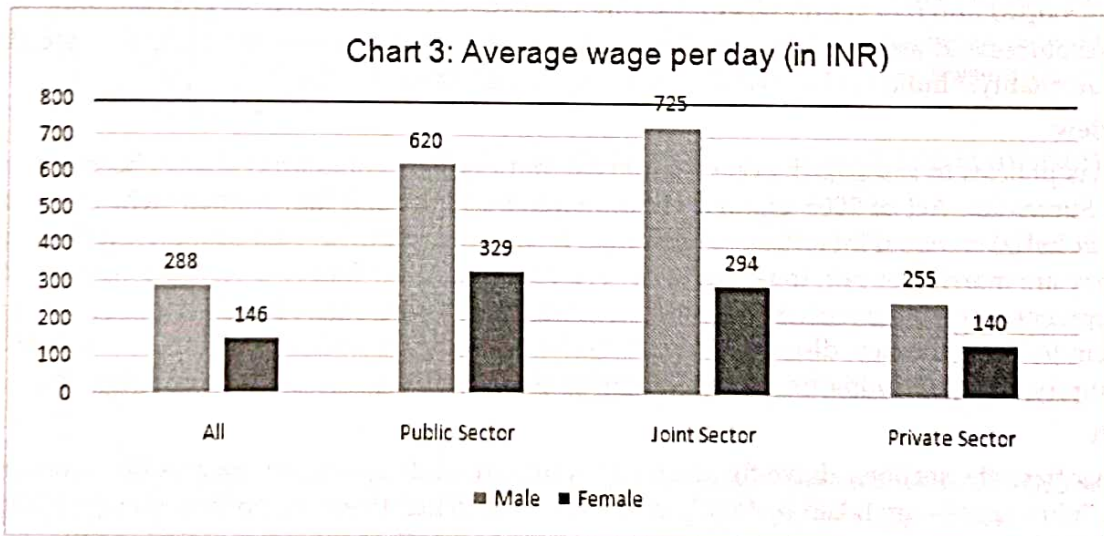
Appendix: List of Charts



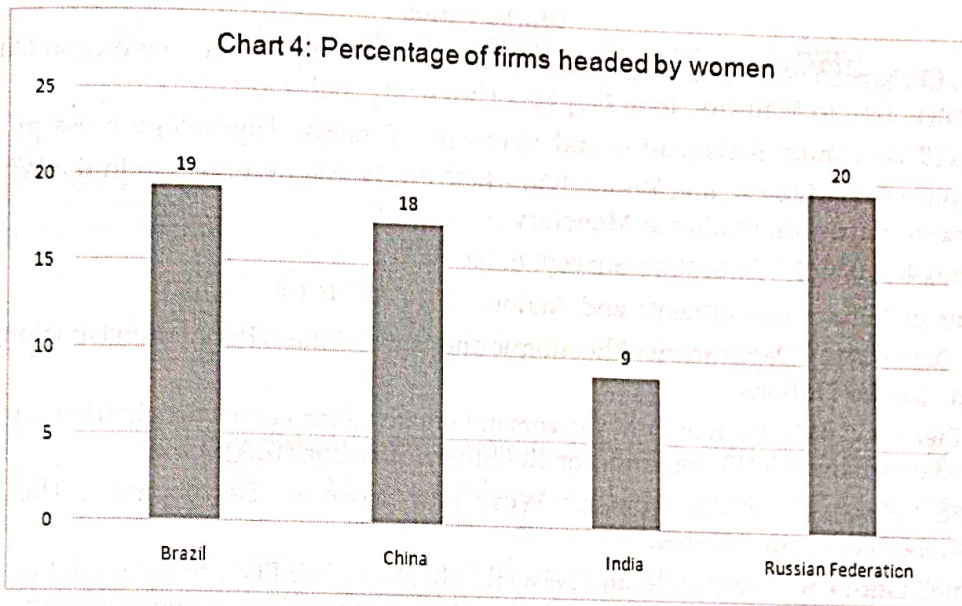
Source: Office of the Registrar General, India (Year-2011) [10]



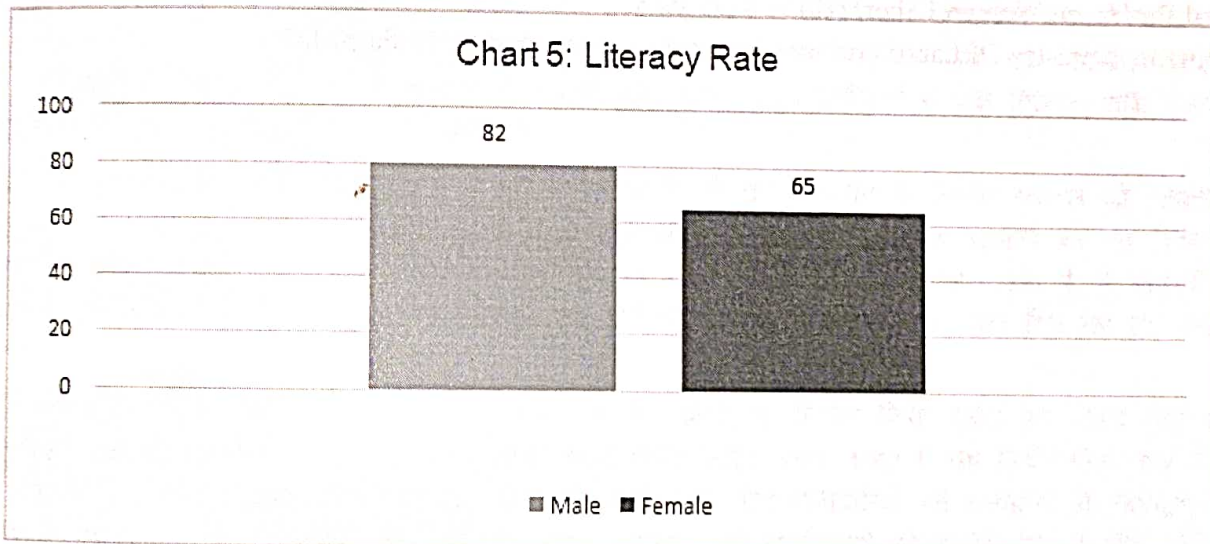
Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2013



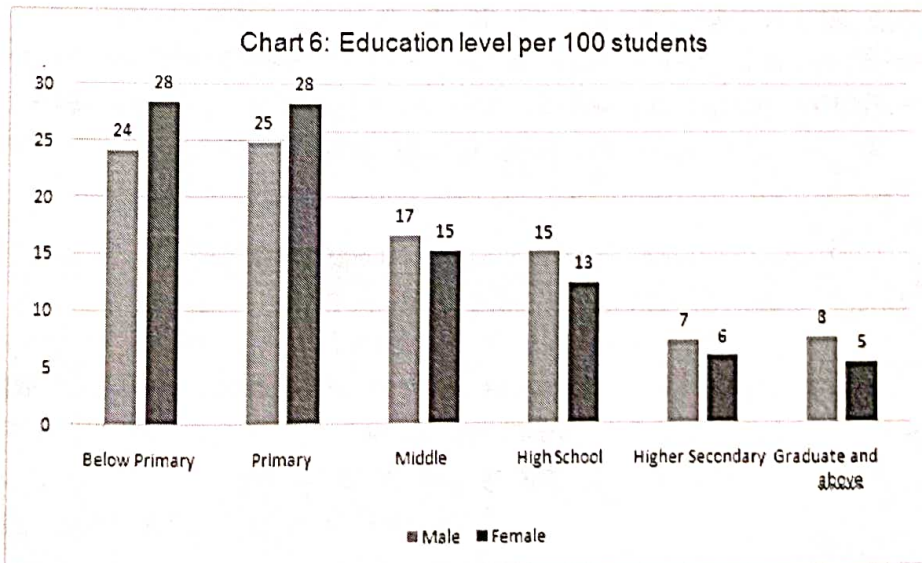
Source: Labour Bureau, 2009-2010[10]



Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2009-2015



Source: India Census, 2011



Source: Census of India, 2001

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