

It Takes a Village: Childcare and Women's Paid Employment in India

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Higher rural than urban maternal employment in India can be explained by the greater flexibility of rural employment in terms of both work time and work space, allowing for greater compatibility between women's reproductive and productive lives.

In both rural and urban India, mothers do about four times as much childcare as their spouses, and well over ten times as much other domestic work. However, maternal employment is considerably higher in rural India: about 32 percent of rural mothers are employed, compared to only 17 percent of urban women. Scaled by levels of participations among otherwise similar childless married women, this translates to 35 percent lower participation for urban women, compared to 6 percent for rural women.

Despite empirical evidence that motherhood effects on employment differ systematically across developed and developing countries, recent work on workplace flexibility for mothers in developing countries is scarce. Workplace flexibility in turn has implications for the extent of compatibility between women's employment and childcare, a central theme in the "gender equity" literature concerned with variations in fertility in post-industrial countries.

In an influential paper written at the height of the international population control movement, Jaffe and Azumi (1960) argued that moving women workers from informal 'cottage' industries into jobs in the formal sector would increase the incompatibility between their reproductive and productive roles and hasten a decline in fertility rates. However, beyond a point, the response to such role incompatibility might well be a withdrawal from the labor force rather than a continuing decline in fertility. Later sociological research on "maternal role incompatibility" framed the conflict between women's employment and childrearing as central to understanding variations in employment-fertility relationships (Stycos and Weller 1967). In particular, it was argued that rural work was more compatible with childcare. In the absence of reliable time use data, these claims remained speculative and difficult to substantiate.

Differences in rural and urban work environments and in their compatibility with both active and supervisory childcare need to focus on both temporal as well as spatial compatibility. Using India's first nationally representative time use survey (the ITUS), which surveyed all persons aged 6 or above in 138,799 households (447,250 individuals) in 2019 (MOSPI 2019), Gautham (2023) examined underlying differences in the costs of children to understand the interplay between women's productive and reproductive lives.

This analysis found that formal sector wage employment is associated with a high degree of temporal inflexibility: the incidence of part-time employment is low, and average hours worked are high. These constraints are relaxed for informal self-employment, and to an even greater extent for own-use production.

Rural women are also much more likely than urban women to engage in informal self-employment or own use production activities which are typically home-based (or located in the worker's own unit). On the other hand, urban women are more likely to be in formal or informal sector wage employment where workplaces are employer-owned and located outside the home, limiting the possibility of simultaneously supervising or being "on-call" for children.

To more fully describe the the employment effects of motherhood, this analysis compared married childless women with married mothers with just one child. Controlling for a rich set of individual and household characteristics, motherhood decreases work participation by 35 percent for urban women, but only 9 percent for rural women.

Controlling for household composition does not eliminate rural-urban differences in employment effects. Interestingly, the presence of adult or elderly women substantially increases employment for urban—but not rural—women, suggesting that constraints on participation introduced by the lack of substitutes for maternal childcare are binding for urban mothers. Higher household expenditure is associated with lower female participation, but does not affect the rural-urban difference in the estimated employment effect of motherhood, ruling against the possibility that rural mothers are more likely to be employed simply because they are poorer and are less able to give up paid work.

Nearly half of the urban-rural difference in the effects of motherhood on paid work time and participation can be explained by differences in just the broad type of work: because motherhood has smaller impacts on production for own use relative to, say, formal sector employment, and because urban women are much more likely to be in formal jobs, motherhood has a greater disruptive effect on urban women's paid work. A key methodological implication of this study is to demonstrate that childcare constraints go well beyond measured time spent on active childcare: time diary surveys typically focus on activities rather than constraints on responsibilities; care, in particular, often involves joint production or "multi-tasking" and entails responsibilities such as being "on-call" or supervising a child (Folbre 2021). Given the magnitude of difference in the employment effects of motherhood, differences in active childcare time between rural and urban women are disproportionately small. Supervisory childcare deserves greater attention in both survey design and sociological research. The joint production of childcare, unpaid work, and paid work is key to understanding patterns of maternal employment in India.

Existing family policy in India is haphazard and fragmented. On the one hand, India's Maternity Benefit Act mandates 26 weeks of paid maternity leave and the Factories Act (1948) instructs employers to provide crèches at establishments where more than 50 women are employed; however, these laws apply to only formal sector workers, leaving the majority of women workers uncovered. Rural women have greater access to publicly provided childcare, mainly through anganwadis (childcare centers) and free crèche facilities when employed at NREGA worksite (India's primary public workfare program). However, anganwadis provide only 3 hours of daycare (timings that are not generally consistent with employment needs), while crèches at NREGA worksites have, for the most part, failed to materialize. Substantive problems with implementation aside, the lack of coherence in India's family policy has been subject to extensive criticism. The present analysis demonstrates that recognizing the relationship between different forms of production and childcare is crucial to designing effective policy in both rural and urban settings.

In urban settings, subsidized or free public childcare may have large positive effects on overall maternal employment. For instance, the presence of an adult or elderly woman in urban households raises urban maternal work participation by 7–8 percentage points, which suggests that childcare constraints are binding for urban women. On the other hand, while childcare policies are unlikely to raise overall rural maternal employment, they may be necessary to enable rural women to transition to better forms of employment.

Existing debates on the falling rate of rural female labor force participation have focused primarily on gender norms as they intersect with rising household incomes and the limited availability of "good" jobs for rural women. However, even with an expansion of formal sector job availability, existing rural childcare policies would need to be strengthened for rural women to be attracted to such jobs. This is in addition to the myriad other benefits of childcare support that are not directly related to rural women's employment, including potential reductions in rural women's time poverty, as well as possible improvements in child outcomes.

References

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