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The Productivity Debate and Women’s Work: Careers or Family Care?

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Educated women leaving the workforce hurts India’s growth. But child & family care options are lacking in the work structures we now have. We need “bridge” jobs, like part-time work, to help these women re-enter the workforce while balancing family needs, even with the trend of intensive parenting.

A debate on productivity at work and/or the number of hours people should put in at the workplace was sparked a short while ago by Founder and Chairman Emeritus of Infosys N.R. Narayana Murthy who spoke in a somewhat unreflective manner about the virtues of a 70-hour work week, especially for the youth. But maybe we ought to thank him for having said this at a time when we can compare and juxtapose his recommendations with what American economic historian Claudia Goldin said about an allied concern—“Children take time. Careers take time” (2021: 9).

Post-World War II Germany and Japan are cited by Murthy as exemplars of achieving economic development, but in these instances women were barely recognised as workers at the time. This view also ignores the reality of the gender gap in India’s work participation rate (WPR), which is wider than in most other countries. This is reflected by the Global Gender Gap Report 2023, which ranked India 26th in educational attainment but 142 out of 146 countries in terms of economic participation and opportunity. In talking about productivity and economic growth today, therefore, it becomes essential to speak of men and women and not the amalgamated concepts of “youth” or “labour”.

Whither Women’s Work?

Women’s work in India often remains invisible and unpaid for or women are relegated to the category of the unemployed. Surely, the focus on productivity should not only be about the number of hours spent at work, but also about the need to achieve optimal and gainful employment outcomes for both men and women. This, however, will hardly be possible if we do not address the expansion of work opportunities, recognise the value of the work involved in child or family care and home management, and find enabling mechanisms for women in particular, that too across the class spectrum.

Questions have been raised about how educated persons, especially women, do not always move into employment that matches their training (see, for example, Neetha 2024). While the value of education extends well beyond a narrow understanding of “usefulness”, equally, work that is done with motivations other than earning money — such as voluntary and care work — needs to be valued rather than ignored.

However, in assessing whether or not education and employment for women tend to be well matched, the data in India is quite revealing. The labour force participation rate of women who were “graduates and above” stood at just 24.8 (compared to almost 80% for men who had received higher education) and represented only 10% of women’s employment in 2018-19 (Neetha 2024).

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The exodus of women from the workforce, too, represents a similar concern. In an ongoing study, based on interviews with middle-class, married, college-educated women in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR), we note how the male breadwinner-female homemaker model is easily adopted by them, as they choose to opt out of jobs and careers to take care of their children and families. This model has been ideologically acceptable in the past, for upwardly mobile persons in rural and urban contexts for whom it signifies improved socio-economic status, often termed as the Sanskritisation effect (Srinivas 1977; Shah 2005).

However, aspirations are changing in all contexts. Our educated middle-class respondents saw careers and employment to be important life objectives. So they hoped in time to return to work, something in which their spouses and families largely supported them. At a national level, there are clear signs and exhortations about how we need to ensure not just women’s inclusion in education, but also in gainful jobs or careers. But so far this is something that does not seem to be at the heart of the debate regarding work productivity.

Workspace Innovation

Our next concern is about what may be conceivable frameworks for ensuring work productivity, ideally, among all workers, women and men? India is probably some light years away from looking at gender equal opportunities at work, despite achieving gender parity in higher education. Some attempts have been made, however, that seek to support those who would otherwise fall off the employment grid, in particular, women.

One example of such an experiment for women in regular formal work comes from the banking sector. Former head of State Bank of India [Arundhati Bhattacharya recently mentioned the “leaky pipeline” phenomenon](#), referring to women who tend to give up work at three points in their careers — their childbearing years, when their children are about to appear for school-leaving examinations, or when their elderly family members need care. By introducing a two-year sabbatical to enable women to deal with these difficult stages, the bank was able to save 673 careers during her tenure. This is a feasible option for other organisations to emulate.

An example of workspace innovation that addresses informal workers, discussed below, also contains elements that can offer guidelines for others. This is an experiment undertaken by Rangstru in Bikaner via its village-level work centres. It has helped to create an enabling work environment for women who are not able to leave home for day-long employment at distant locations and therefore tried to get by with whatever work was feasible in and around their homes. By encouraging them to undertake home-based embroidery work, a traditional craft they were familiar with, their livelihood options have been expanded.

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The village centres, introduced by Rangstru, are a further innovation. They give women the advantages of working from home by providing them with a dedicated workspace nearby that enables them to make trips home as and when needed. This ensures, among other things, safe and clean storage of products and the avoidance of child labour.

Rangstru is a social enterprise, which was first set up as a producer company. It then evolved into a private limited company, and in 2006 became a public limited company. The organisation has sought to provide work to as many people as possible, mainly employing local artisans skilled in embroidery, weaving, and allied work. Absorbing many of the risks associated with production such as an intermittent absence of orders and work, power cuts, periods of slowdown or delays in shipments and procurement of raw material, Rangstru has enabled women of poor communities to become economically independent and be part of a corporate structure that creates products for both Indian and global brands.

The workspace innovation of the village craft centres has enabled compliance with the code of conduct of buyers such as ensuring no child labour is engaged. This is a requirement of most brands but difficult to implement when women work at home. At the same time, these centres are located close to their homes, and because women are free to take breaks, they retain most of the advantages of work from home. All of this has also been seen to enhance productivity and employment. While such practices may not be easily replicable in every context, there are demonstrable lessons to be drawn from this model, especially on its intent and purpose (Home Net South Asia 2021).

Valuing Familial Care

The care function of families is actually a misnomer because familial care-giving is largely assumed (and presumed) to be something that women provide, mainly as mothers and wives. As we see in our study of middle-class women, the primary reason why our respondents gave up full-time work was because they needed to care for children, spouses, or other family members at different life stages.

The inevitable adoption of the breadwinner-homemaker model by these women reflected their lived reality within the wider context of acceptable norms and ideologies on feminine care-giving on the one hand, and employment that offers high rewards but costs more in terms of time on the other. Just as what Goldin calls “greedy work” demands ever-increasing effort and time, the commitments of parenting and familial caring continue, and may become more intense as both children and other adult family members grow older.

As another recent debate on work from home (WFH) and work near home (WNH) continues to unfold in post-Covid-19 urban India, we see educated women grappling with issues that are not so different from what their poorer counterparts in rural and urban India

face — the need to simultaneously juggle care for their families with paid work. Why is it that women who are in a position to hire domestic help continue to feel that child care and care of other family members is solely their responsibility and should not or cannot be contracted out?

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A key to understanding this is to be found in a recent study by Sugandha Nagpal and Vanita Viswanath (2023) who discuss how women's choice of work is influenced by family and community identity. These authors refer to a survey by the Facilitation Services Group (FSG) of 6,600 women of working age from low-income communities across 16 cities in India and note the unwillingness of 89% of the respondents to use paid childcare services. This is not because of affordability but because they do not provide “family like” care. The study found that women have a composite view of their life and have a clear preference for participating in the formal labour force while supporting their family units. This important insight applies to women and families in virtually all income groups.

Our respondents, college-educated middle-class women in Delhi and the National Capital Region, opted out of jobs and careers, yet many were engaged in part-time, intermittent, or voluntary work, while they hoped to re-enter full-time work later. They did not, however, have the option of regular part-time work, with benefits, as this is not an employment trajectory that has developed so far in India. In the US, Europe, and Japan, the data suggests that a large proportion of working women continue to be in part-time work, and this certainly eased the entry of women into the labour force in the post-World War II period.

Full-time work that rewards long hours cannot be an option for both spouses in a dual career family with children, unless all child care is outsourced to someone, which few people would want. It may even have detrimental societal outcomes. While the phenomenon of educated women opting out of the labour force is seen as undesirable from a growth point of view, little effort has so far gone into developing work structures that recognise the reality of familial concerns about care-giving in India.

One of the findings of our study is that in our sample of middle-class women living in and around Delhi, all with degrees, there was a clear preference for sharing child care with others in the family, wherever possible, rather than finding alternatives such as crèches or after-school services. None of our respondents gave any indication that they would have liked to find full-time child care facilities so that they could continue working. Moreover, in many cases the decision to quit their jobs and careers came when the children were older and were seen to need more supervision, not care.

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We see this mainly as a comment on the quality of services that are available. It also partly reflects the weakness of schools that lack the ability and resources to be able to offer counselling or take note of the issues that children may face. Most of our respondents emphasised the need to provide academic support to their children, in the way of after-school tutoring, counselling, and arranging for tuitions and extra-curricular activities. So, more than physical care, women were helping children to cope with emotional, academic, and other problems—that is, helping them acquire skills and knowledge well beyond what schools provide. All of these imply that time must be necessarily spent with children. At the same time, all the women believed that one must keep working at something.

As one of our interviewees put it, “Of course, money is a factor because I believe a woman should always be financially independent. Also, I think one should always be engaged in something because when children eventually grow up, you do have a lot of time. If you are not engaged with something somewhere, it often leads to depression and other things.” We argue that opening up what might be described as “transitional” opportunities — for example, regular part-time work — might induce or enable some of these women to seek gainful employment despite the value being increasingly placed on intensive parenting.

Towards a Different Reality

Indian women in the last 50 years or more have attained higher educational qualifications in considerable numbers, leading to changes in how they view themselves and what they aspire for. However, on the surface, it still seems as if a majority are simply falling into very traditional routines.

Our respondents did visualise and hope for a different reality in the future, something that became quite apparent in conversations about their daughters, for whom they had distinct career aspirations. By emphasising that they would like their daughters to work and have careers these women were pointing out that their choice of staying at home was not a comment on the value of a career, but they hoped that perhaps their daughters would be able to choose differently.

Clearly, the present situation is not one where family care and gendered roles alone are keeping women at home — there is also the absence of flexible, part-time or suitable opportunities that allow a better balance of time and gender roles. Women seeking to re-join the work force, say, after a child or family care break may be better served by newer structures — corporate, state or others—that can enable them to add to the much sought after productivity that Murthy talks about. That too in flexible work spaces and possibly in a “non-greedy” work week that may not comprise 70 hours, but in ways that Goldin, for one, would view as an opportunity that need not be lost. Experimenting with innovative and flexible work arrangements that combine gainful work with time for care-giving may be what needs to be focused on in a range of organisations and social contexts.

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