

BRIDWELL INSTITUTE WORKING PAPER SERIES



## **Economic Liberalization and Its Impact on Women in the Indian Workforce**

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# Economic Liberalization and Its Impact on Women in the Indian Workforce

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November 2023<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper investigates the paradoxical relationship between economic liberalization and female labor force participation (FLPR) in India. Despite significant advancements in economic freedom and GDP per capita since the 1991 reforms, these have not translated into increased FLPR in India. This is contrary to trends observed in other economies where liberalization typically leads to economic growth and higher FLPR. But India's FLPR is declining. The paper delves into various factors that could explain this anomaly, including socio-economic indicators, demand and supply-side factors, and sectoral shifts in the economy. It evaluates theories such as the feminization-U hypothesis, honor-income trade-off, and the impact of education on women's labor participation. Additionally, the paper examines the lack of high-status jobs, migration patterns, and wage gaps across industries. Ultimately, it posits that India's unique trajectory of jobless economic growth could be a critical factor behind the declining FLPR, highlighting the need for further research to understand and address this issue. This paper contributes to the broader discourse on women's economic empowerment and labor participation in the context of economic policies of liberalization, deregulation, and development.

**JEL Codes:** J16, J21, P27

**Keywords:** Economic Liberalization, Female Labor Force Participation, India, Economic Growth, Economic Freedom, Gender Economics.

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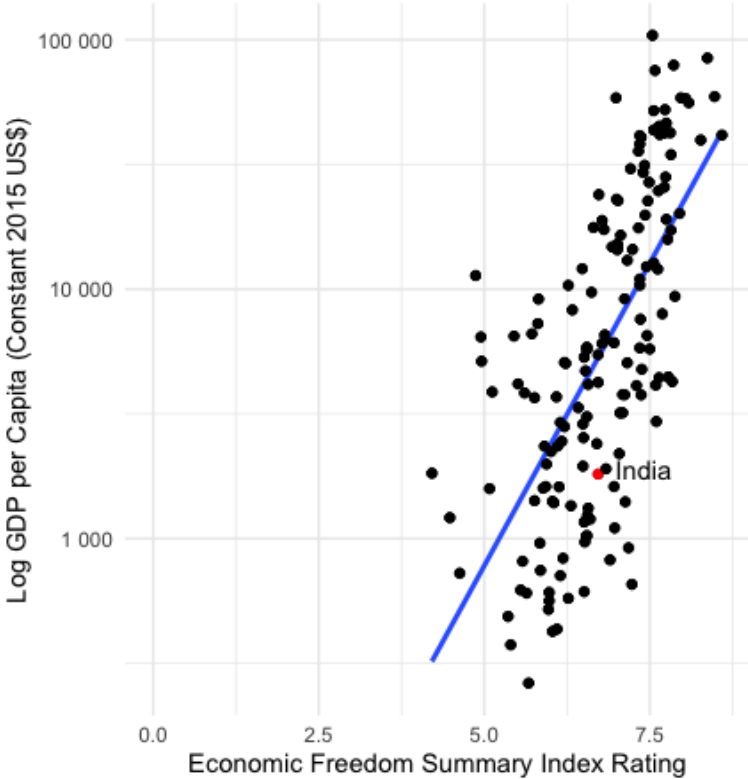
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<sup>2</sup> We thank participants of the Economic Freedom and Women Colloquium at the Bridwell Institute of Economic Freedom, Southern Methodist University, held in July 2023, for comments and feedback. We are grateful to Anooosheh Zahra Mirkhushal and Jayat Joshi for research assistance. Any errors in this paper are our own.

# 1. Introduction

Development indicators typically improve with economic growth—the tide that lifts all boats. There is a strong positive relationship between per capita GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and economic freedom (see figure 1),<sup>3</sup> where economic freedom encompasses free markets, free trade, property rights, and limited government (Hayek 1944; Friedman 1962; Buchanan 1987; De Soto 2003; Gwartney et al. 2022; among others). And countries that have greater economic freedom tend to have higher standards of living (Islam 1996; Easton and Walker 1997; De Haan and Sturm 2000; Carlsson and Lundstrom 2002; Berggren 2003; Faria and Montesinos, 2009; Rode and Coll 2012; Hall and Lawson 2014; Hussain and Haque, 2016). Greater economic freedom also includes increased social and political freedoms (Hall and Lawson 2014), greater human capital development (Hall and Lawson 2014; Feldmann 2021; and Dillis forthcoming), and more entrepreneurship (Gwartney, Lawson, and Block 1996; Bjornskov and Foss 2008; Nystrom 2008; Bradley and Klein 2016; Dutta and Sobel 2021).

**Figure 1: GDP per capita and economic freedom, 2020, world**



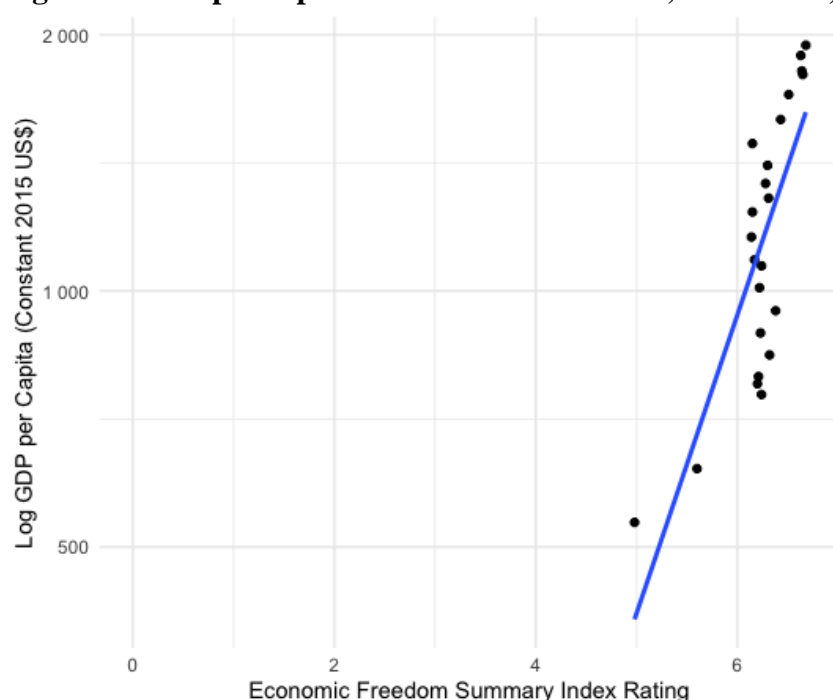
*Source:* Authors’ calculations. Log GDP per capita (constant 2015 \$US) for 2020 is from World Bank Indicators from World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files; the Economic Freedom Summary Index is from the Fraser Institute<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> The causality is difficult to determine, however.  
<sup>4</sup> The Fraser Institute’s Economic Freedom Index is divided into five areas: 1) Size of Government, assessing reliance on individual choices versus government decisions; 2) Legal System and Property Rights, evaluating

*Notes:* The figure presents a scatter plot of GDP per capita and economic freedom for all countries in the Economic Freedom Index along with the line of best fit and the 95 percent confidence interval for a cross section of countries.

India follows the pattern (figure 2). Its path to sustained economic growth from the late eighties until 2020, roughly coincided with the period following its reforms by stealth in the eighties and the big burst of economic freedom with the economic reforms of 1991.<sup>5</sup> Pattanaik and Nayak (2014) find a positive relationship between economic freedom and GDP per capita over time in India, and Debroy, Bhandari, and Aiyar (2011) find that Indian states with greater economic freedom generally show improved performance in various economic indicators.

**Figure 2: GDP per capita and economic freedom, 1990–2020, India**



*Source:* Authors’ calculations. GDP per capita (constant 2015 \$US) is from World Bank Indicators from World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files, and the Economic Freedom Summary Index is from the Fraser Institute.

Indicators that help measure and track the position of women in society also improve with rising incomes. Globally, the condition of women, historically at a disadvantage, tends to improve more than men in the course of development (Duflo 2012).<sup>6</sup> Increases in GDP per capita lead to improvements in health and sanitation and a decline in fertility rates, greater access to

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property ownership security and judicial independence; 3) Sound Money, focusing on currency stability; 4) Freedom to Trade Internationally, analyzing citizens’ ability to trade with foreigners; and 5) Regulation, measuring the impact of bureaucratic constraints on trade and transactions.

<sup>5</sup> We use “liberalization” and “economic reforms” interchangeably to refer to increases in economic freedom.

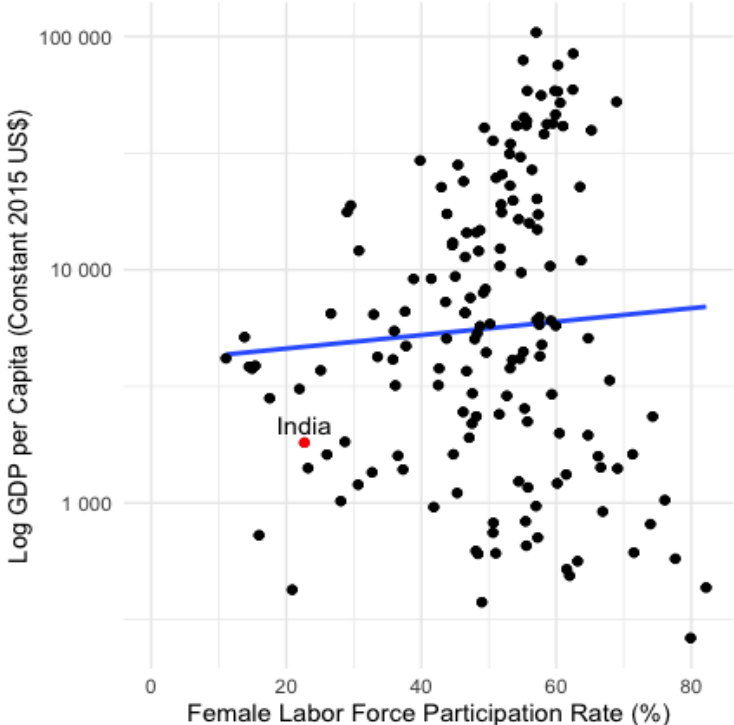
<sup>6</sup> Economic development alone might not eliminate the imbalance between the sexes. For instance, this imbalance manifests itself in the persisting gender wage gap, even in rich and industrialized nations.

education and employment for women, investments in technology and infrastructure that reduce time spent on domestic duties and childcare, and structural change in the economy—all empowering women and improving maternal and child health outcomes (Goldin and Katz 2002; Greenwood, Seshadri, and Yorukoglu 2005; Goldin 2006; Field and Ambrus 2008; Miller 2010; Dinkelman 2011; and Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer 2015). Improvements in living conditions have gone hand in hand with more women joining the workforce. Women’s participation in the labor market drives and reflects economic growth. As women enter the workforce, they contribute to economic expansion. This, in turn, enhances their skills and reduces societal barriers related to work, leading to even more women participating in the workforce.

Such trends are clear in countries like South Korea, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and China (Bloom et al. 2007; Bloom and Finlay 2009). These countries experienced economic reforms and growth, which coincided with an increase in women joining the workforce. India, however, is an outlier. Even though women have made significant social and economic strides, like lower fertility rates, better education, and decreased maternal mortality, since the 1991 economic liberalization and with rising GDP per capita, the rate of women participating in the labor force hasn’t gone up, but rather gone down.

In this paper we analyze the relationship between economic freedom, GDP per capita, and the female labor force participation rate (FLPR) to provide a detailed survey of this puzzling feature of the Indian economy.

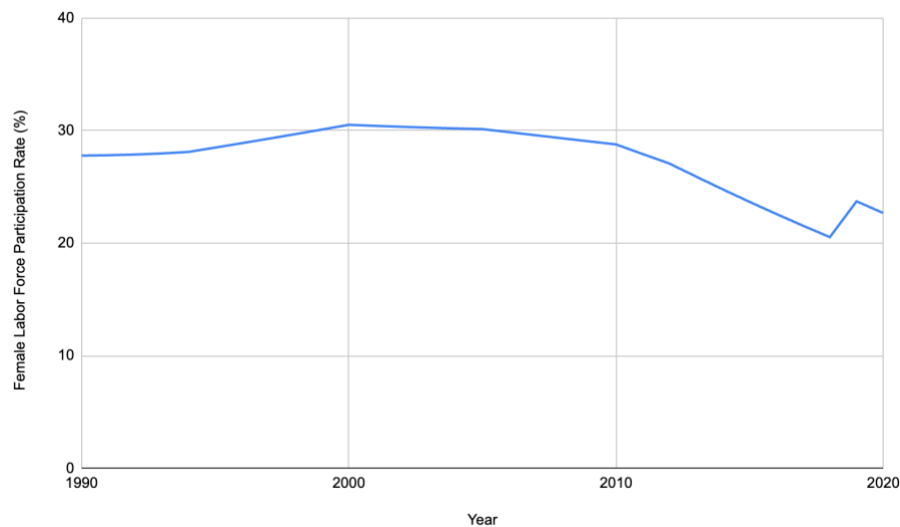
**Figure 3: GDP per capita and female labor force participation, 2020, world**



Source: Authors’ calculations. Log GDP per capita (constant 2015 \$US) for 2020 is from World Bank Indicators from World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data

files, and national estimates of female labor force participation rate (percentage of female population aged fifteen or older, modeled International Labour Organization estimate) from the World Bank Development Indicators, is from International Labour Organization (ILO) Modelled Estimates and Projections database (ILOEST), ILOSTAT.

**Figure 4: Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population aged 15+) (modeled International Labour Organization estimate), India, 1990–2020**



*Source:* World Bank Development Indicators from ILOEST, ILOSTAT.

India started liberalizing its highly controlled and autarkic economy in the late eighties, with the big bang reforms in 1991 leading to a substantial jump in the country's economic freedom. On the Fraser Institute's Economic Freedom Index, India's score jumped from 3.3 in 1975 to 6.72 in 2020. Though the score improved in absolute terms, India's cross-country rank declined from 62nd in the mid-1990s to 89th out of 165 countries in 2020, roughly on par with Sri Lanka and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Increased economic freedom lowers gender disparities (Fike 2023). In India, though, trade liberalization and decontrolling the domestic economy has had mixed results for women. Ganguly-Scrase (2003), Pradhan (2005), and Bhalla and Kaur (2011) find that higher income levels empower women to challenge patriarchal norms and strive for economic autonomy. Arora (2012) observes persisting gender inequalities, even with growing incomes. Furthermore, Edmonds et al. (2010) find that loss of tariff protection decreases education expenditure, disproportionately harming girls. Anukriti and Kumler (2019) find reductions in tariffs led to an increase in fertility rates for women of lower socio-economic status in rural areas, but for women of higher socio-economic status, their fertility rates decreased as tariffs fell.

Greater economic freedom encourages women to participate in the workforce by reducing wage gaps (Gwartney and Lawson 2004; Zweimuller, Winter-Ebmer, and Weichselbaumer 2007) and creating better employment opportunities for women (Stroup 2008;

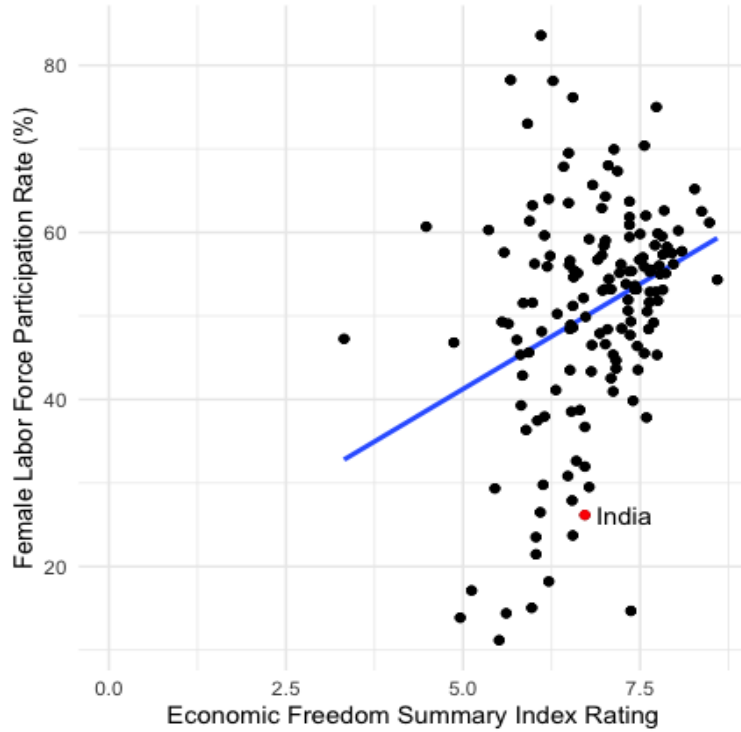
Wong and Stansel 2016; and Russell et al. 2020). Unsurprisingly, a country's FLPR is generally positively correlated with its economic freedom, likely through the mechanism of greater prosperity. The reason the mechanism is important is the experience of erstwhile communist countries. Most communist regimes minimized the role of the family and prioritized gender equality. They typically implemented policies to eliminate gender differences in the economy and promote female participation outside the home. Alesina, Giuliano, and Nunn (2013) find that countries that have experienced a period of communism have higher rates of female labor force participation. But the mechanism of economic growth might still be at play: richer communist countries tend to have higher FLPR than poorer communist countries.

As shown in figure 5, greater economic freedom relates to increased FLPR. But, India emerges as an anomaly with very low FLPR compared to other countries with comparable economic freedom as measured by Economic Freedom Index 2022. Additionally, despite its gains in economic freedom since the reforms in the nineties, the country's FLPR has *declined* (figure 6).

There is a lot of variation across Indian states, and the largest states are more populous than most counties. Therefore, it is useful to study the relationship *within* India. The most recent study measuring economic freedom across Indian states is from 2011. And for the 2011 Index within India, the relationship looks like the rest of the world, i.e., states with greater economic freedom also have higher FLPR (figure 7).

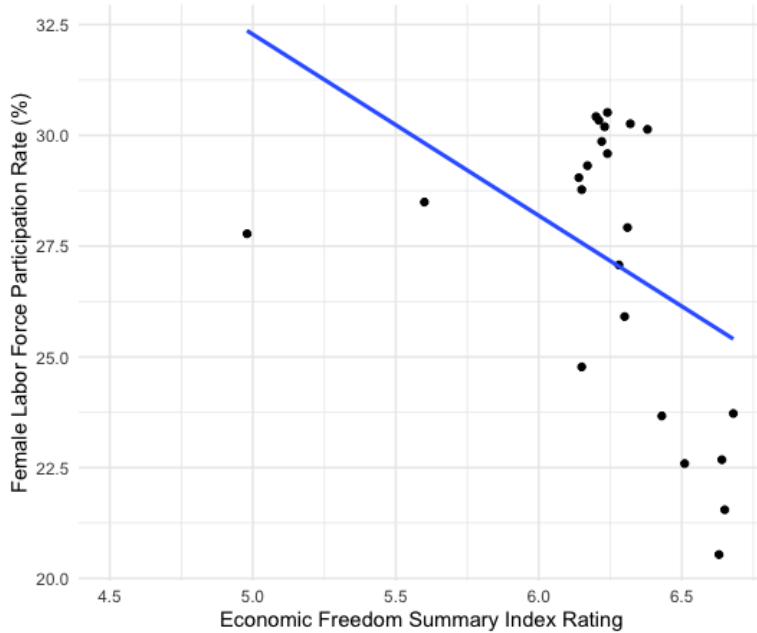
India poses a three-dimensional puzzle. Why is India an outlier with such low-levels of FLPR? Why is FLPR declining despite gains in economic freedom? And what mechanism explains the reversal of the trend at the sub-national level, where Indian states with greater economic freedom have a higher FLPR?

### **Figure 5: Female labor force participation and economic freedom, world, 2020**



*Source:* Authors’ calculations. National estimates of female labor force participation rate (percentage of female population aged fifteen or older, modeled International Labour Organization estimate) from the World Bank Development Indicators from ILOEST, ILOSTAT., and the Economic Freedom Summary Index for 2020 is from the Fraser Institute.

**Figure 6: Female labor force participation and economic freedom, India, 1990–2020**

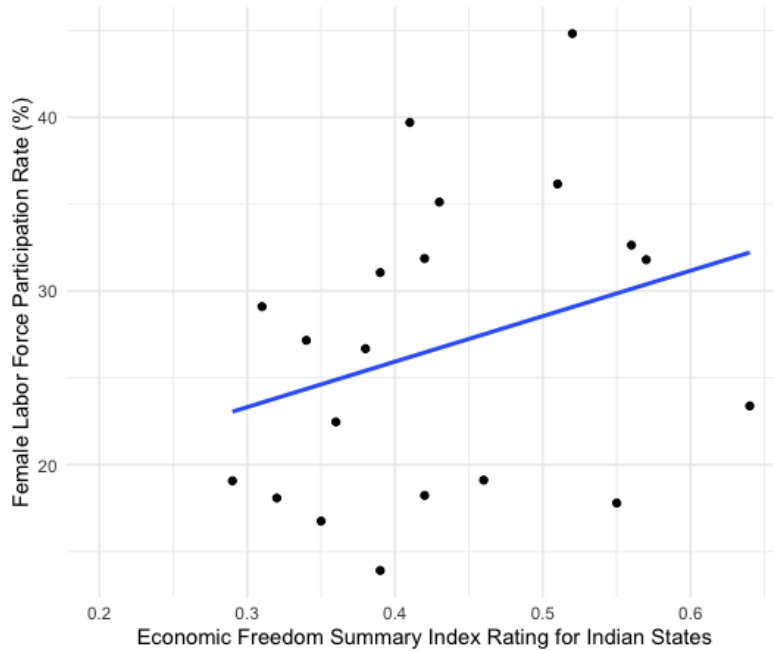


*Source:* Authors’ calculations. National estimates of female labor force participation rate (percentage of female population aged fifteen or older, modeled International Labour



Organization estimate) from the World Bank Development Indicators from ILOEST, ILOSTAT, and Economic Freedom Summary Index for 2020 is from the Fraser Institute.

**Figure 7: Female labor force participation and economic freedom, Indian states, 2011**



*Source:* Authors’ calculations. State-level estimates of female labor force participation rate are from the 2011 Census, and Economic Freedom Summary Index for Indian States is from the Fraser Institute.

This paper surveys the literature and trends related to the paradox of Indian women’s FLPR and economic freedom, including trends in FLPR, economic growth, and other socio-economic indicators. Section 2 details how women’s development indicators improved after India’s economic reforms. Section 3 delves into the puzzle that despite growing incomes and improving indicators, FLPR has declined. Section 4 reviews theories in the development literature explaining the drop in India’s FLPR. Section 5 discusses our analysis for the country’s declining FLPR. Section 6 outlines policy suggestions to elevate the position of women in India.

## 2. Economic Growth and Development Outcomes for Women in India

In 1947, after achieving independence from colonial rule, India, mirroring many other developing nations, embraced socialist strategies and protectionist policies in pursuit of development.

Under socialism in India, the government tightly controlled the economy and trade through a system known as the License Raj. This system, based on comprehensive licensing and control measures, was designed to align with the objectives of the Five-Year Plans.

The heart of this system was an industrial licensing policy, which determined everything from the size and location to the output and employment of most businesses. India, preferring self-reliance to dependence on foreign trade, enforced a range of restrictive laws. For instance, the Industries (Development and Regulation) Act of 1951 required government licenses for any new or expanding industrial projects, while the Companies Act of 1956 delved into details like director salaries and meeting schedules.

Only businesses with a license could access essential production inputs. However, the difficulty in obtaining licenses often meant that production couldn't meet demand, leading to rising prices. The government, to prevent exploitation of this system, imposed strict controls on prices and quantities. The Essential Commodities Act of 1955, for example, gave the state extensive power over the production and pricing of essential goods.

Third, an exchange control system was implemented. Exporters had to give their foreign exchange earnings to the Reserve Bank of India and were subject to strict regulations, as outlined in laws like the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act of 1973.

In addition, India also adopted import-substitution policies to shield domestic industries from international competition, which unfortunately limited consumers' access to high-quality products and producers' access to superior inputs.

Five, agricultural policy was another primary focus of the planners. The government insulated the sector from global markets and implemented comprehensive land reforms. These reforms included setting limits on landholdings, regulating tenancy, removing intermediaries from the colonial era, and consolidating land. The government-controlled food prices and subsidies, heavily influencing every aspect of agricultural production (Rajagopalan 2023).

Lastly, the banking system was overhauled to align with the Five-Year Plans. Major banks were nationalized in 1969 and 1980 to control credit distribution and ensure government funding. The Reserve Bank of India managed a complex web of interest rates, disconnected from the actual scarcity of funds.

Srinivasan (2000) argued that the collective impact of these controls was far more constricting than any single regulation. Securing an industrial license was just one part of the puzzle. It didn't guarantee an import license for capital goods, rendering the licensed capacity non-functional if imports were crucial. The real issue lay in the unpredictability of these regulations' application. They were discretionary, not automatic or based on clear rules. Though there were supposed principles and priorities for exercising these regulatory powers, in practice, they were largely ineffective. This led to a disjointed allocation mechanism, heavily reliant on quantitative restrictions, disconnected from actual market dynamics. The result? A muddled incentive structure that inevitably sparked rampant rent-seeking and political corruption. The regulatory system, initially envisioned to guide national development through planning, and as

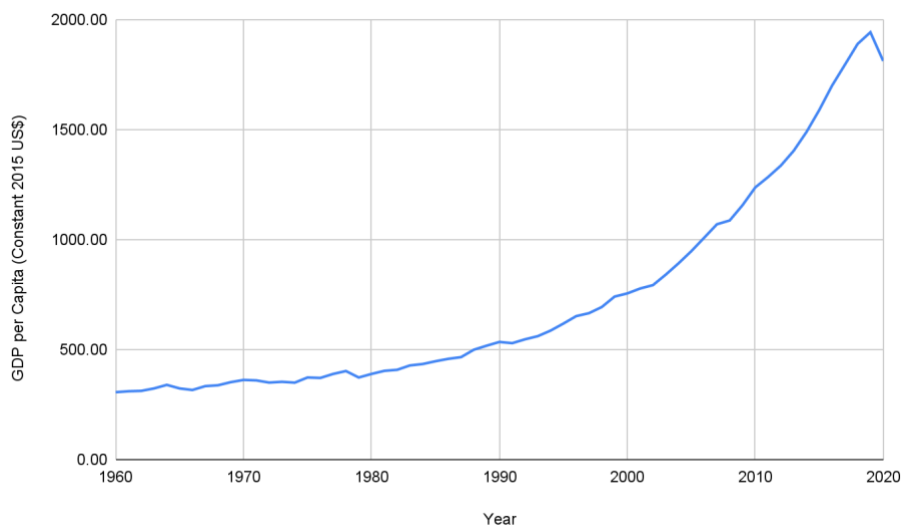
Srinivasan (2000) argued, ironically morphed into a deeply entrenched problem, undermining the very fabric of the nation’s political and economic system.

These interventionist policies ushered in decades of slow economic growth (see, for example, Bhagwati and Desai 1970; Ahluwalia 1985; Mohan and Aggarwal 1990; Srinivasan 2000; Roy 2006; Rajagopalan 2020; Narla and Misra 2021; Rajagopalan 2021).

In 1985, some partial reform measures were introduced, such as relaxing foreign exchange controls, industrial delicensing, and incentivizing exports (Panagariya 2004a). Then, in 1991, facing an imminent balance-of-payments crisis, India initiated several liberalization measures. Led by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, the country devalued its currency, slashed import tariffs, and deregulated industry. Such measures invigorated private entrepreneurship, enhanced domestic competition, and integrated India into the global economic system, boosting foreign investor confidence.<sup>7</sup>

The liberalization, a watershed moment in India’s economic history, catalyzed economic growth, molded a business-friendly landscape, and attracted foreign investments, significantly alleviating poverty.<sup>8</sup> Sectors such as information technology (IT), telecommunications, aviation, and consumer goods, now freed from regulatory controls, began to grow exponentially (Narla, Rajagopalan, and Shah forthcoming).

**Figure 8: GDP per capita (constant 2015 US\$), India, 1960–2020**



*Source:* World Bank Development Indicators, from World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed overview of the reforms, see Kelkar and Kumar (1990); Ahluwalia (2002); Panagariya (2004a); Panagariya (2004b); Rodrik and Subramanian (2005); Acharya (2006); Mohan (2006); Singh (2017); Mohan (2018); Kelkar and Shah (2019); Krishna (2020); Manur (2022).

<sup>8</sup> While academics differ in their sampling methods, indicators, and calculations to measure poverty, they agree that poverty has come down since 1991—the only question is by how much. For further details, see Planning Commission (2009); Datt, Ravallion, and Murgai (2016); and Narayan and Murgai (2016).

Benefits from the reforms permeated all societal strata though not equally. Differences arose between urban and rural poverty-reduction rates (Srinivasan 1999), between states' growth rates (Chakravarty and Dehejia 2016), and between caste groups' economic advancements (Munshi 2019).

The resulting increase in GDP per capita also helped advance women in India. The first mechanism is a decline in fertility rates. Greater prosperity also brought greater access to family planning tools that allow women greater control over the timing of childbirth; for example, the availability of birth control to unmarried women in the US in the 1960s enhanced women's autonomy over fertility (Goldin and Katz 2002).

The dip in and delayed timing of fertility counteract traditional norms, promoting women's participation in the educational system and the workforce (Field and Ambrus 2008; Miller 2010; Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer 2011). Second, both reduced child-rearing commitments and technological progress in the form of electrification and household appliances free women to work outside the home (Greenwood, Seshadri, and Yorukoglu 2005; Dinkelman 2011). Third, as countries develop, they often prioritize universal education, ensuring girls' access to schooling. Improved education equips women for non-agricultural, non-domestic jobs. Finally, rising income is both a cause and effect of economic structural transformation. This transformation facilitates women's prolonged workforce participation. For instance, Goldin (2006) highlights the rise in clerical jobs in the US during the 1930s–1950s, enabling women to work after marriage.

In India, since the 1991 reforms, women have fewer babies and have them later; they are healthier, more educated, and experience lower maternal and infant mortality. India is not unique, most countries that experienced trade and regulatory liberalization and consequent economic growth follow this trend. We compare India with Bangladesh, China, South Korea, and Vietnam—all countries that were at comparable levels of income in the 1950s and liberalized since the 1960s starting with South Korea and more recently with Bangladesh and India. In all these countries, key development indicators—fertility, life expectancy, infant and maternal mortality, and literacy—improved for women across the board after GDP per capita increased.

## 2.1 Declining Fertility Rate

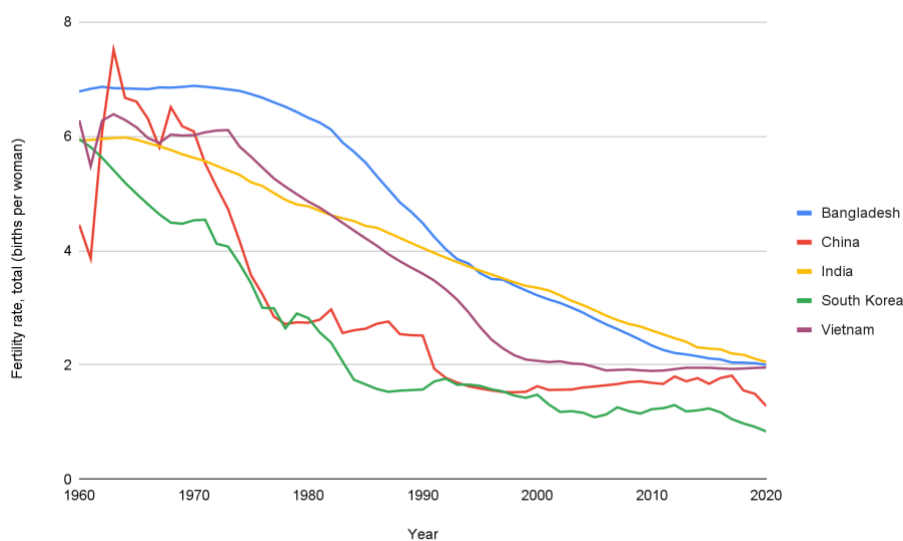
A decline in fertility rates is typically driven by improvements in living standards (Becker 1960; Visaria and Visaria 1995; Barro and Sala-i-Martin 1995; Jones, Schoonbroodt, and Tertilt 2008; Sengupta 2019; Doepke et al. 2022), via higher literacy, urbanization, industrialization, modern communication, transportation, and advancements in women's status, which are rooted in income growth. Similarly, there appears to be a significant negative relationship between economic freedom and fertility (Lawson forthcoming).

After Vietnam liberalized in 1986 and started growing richer, its fertility rate dropped, from 4.1 children per woman in 1986 to 2 in 2020. Likewise, following the commencement of economic reforms in the early 1980s in Bangladesh, with rising incomes, the fertility rate

plummeted from over 6 to 2 by 2020. The fertility rate also declined in China though an important difference is strong state-dictated population-control measures since the early 1970s (Zhang 2017). Finally, South Korea, the highest in GDP per capita in this group, currently has the world’s lowest fertility rate after rapid growth, urbanization, and family planning policies caused women to transition from having nearly 6 children on average in 1960 to 0.8 in 2020.

India mirrors this trend: economic freedom led to higher incomes, a better quality of life, and a decreasing fertility rate. The average fertility rate has effectively reached the replacement level of 2.1 children in 2020 from 4 in 1991.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 9: Fertility rates in Bangladesh, China, India, South Korea, and Vietnam (1960–2020)**



*Source:* World Bank Development Indicators from 1) United Nations Population Division. World Population Prospects: 2022 Revision; 2) Census reports and other statistical publications from national statistical offices; 3) Eurostat: Demographic Statistics; 4) United Nations Statistical Division. Population and Vital Statistics Report (various years); 5) U.S. Census Bureau: International Database; and 6) Secretariat of the Pacific Community: Statistics and Demography Programme.

## 2.2 Life Expectancy and Health Care Access

Economic development often brings improved health care, sanitation, nutrition, affordable housing, and clean-water accessibility, which in turn improve health and life expectancy

<sup>9</sup> The replacement rate refers to the number of children a woman needs to have on average to maintain a stable population. Regarding India, to point to one cause of the decline in the fertility rate, privatization of the cable television sector led to proliferation of television channels, which improved women’s status in rural areas. Jensen and Oster (2009) find that exposure to cable television reduced social acceptance of domestic violence and reduced son preference while enhancing women’s autonomy and decreasing fertility rates.

(Acemoglu and Johnson 2007; Balagopal 2009; Cervellati and Sunde 2011; Ram 2012; Ngangue and Manfred 2015; and Chakrabarti 2021).

In 1960, the average Indian was expected to live to the age of 45, with marginal differences between the sexes. By 2020, life expectancy was 69 for men and 72 for women.<sup>10</sup> Compared to other countries that liberalized economically, India still has considerable ground to cover.<sup>11</sup> China, for example, saw a stunning rise in life expectancy for women after its economic reforms in 1978, from 65 years in 1978 to 80 in 2020. Its GDP per capita (constant 2015 US\$) in 2020 was 10,358.2, compared to India's 1,813.5. Generally, GDP per capita and life expectancy rise together.

Economic freedom is also positively related to life expectancy (Esposto and Zaleski 1999; Fotros, Akbari, and Mirzaee 2013; Lawson, Murphy, and Williamson 2016; and Moga Rogoz et al. 2022). Gwartney et al. (2022) observe that life expectancy is 80.4 years for people of countries in the top quartile of economic freedom, while those in the bottom quartile have a life expectancy of 66 years.

Indian women's increased life expectancy can be attributed to economic growth, which also led to increased government revenues to implement targeted programs for women.<sup>12</sup>

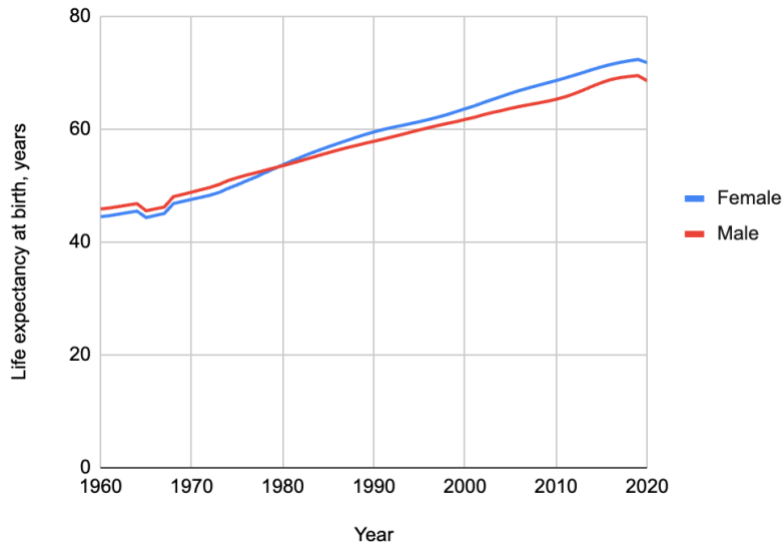
**Figure 10: Life expectancy at birth (years), male and female, India (1960–2020)**

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<sup>10</sup> Across the world, women tend to live longer than men, owing to various biological, behavioral, and environmental factors (Ortiz-Ospina and Beltekian 2018).

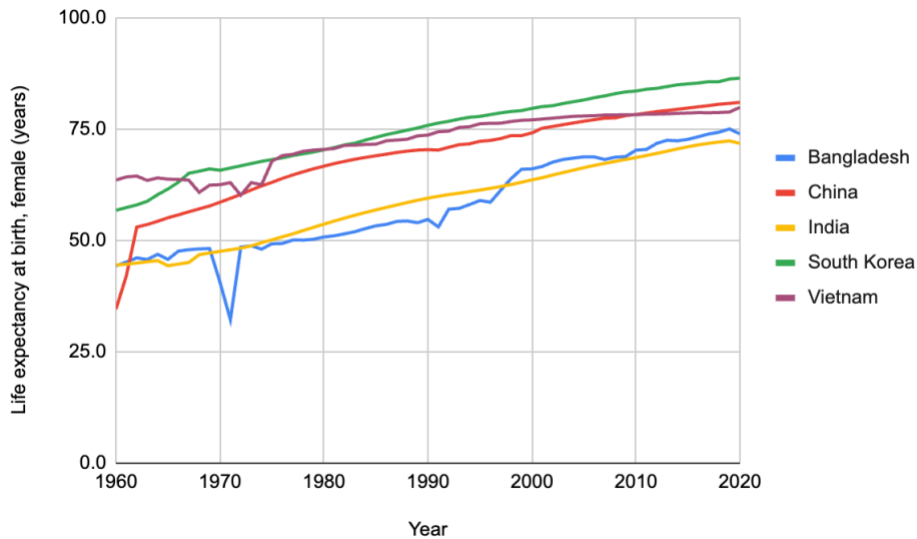
<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Indian women only have a 0.1-year advantage in health life expectancy, which measures average years of good health (World Health Organization 2021), owing to societal and cultural factors (Harris-Fry et al. 2017; Bharati et al. 2019; Hathi et al. 2021). Women and girls in the country are known to eat both last and least, only after their male counterparts have had their fill; the situation is usually even worse for women in marginalized communities (High Level Committee on Status of Women 2015; Sedlander et al. 2021; Sharif, Das, and Alam 2023). Jayachandran and Pande (2017) find that India has one of the highest stunting rates globally, with birth order and gender playing a substantial role. Further, over half of Indian women (aged 15–49) are anemic; the corresponding figure for men is 25 percent (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2021).

<sup>12</sup> The government has implemented numerous policies aimed at boosting women's health (Raj 2011; Paul et al. 2011; Reddy et al. 2011; Balarajan, Selvaraj, and Subramanian (2011); Khandelwal et al. 2014; Narayan, John, and Ramadas 2019).



Source: Ibid

**Figure 11: Female life expectancy at birth (years), in Bangladesh, China, India, South Korea, and Vietnam (1960–2020)**



Source: Ibid

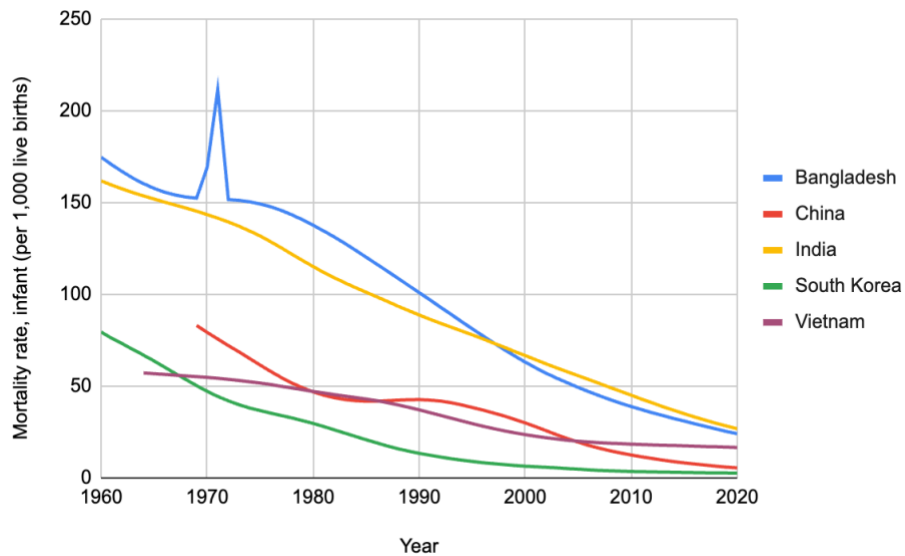
## 2.3 Infant and Maternal Mortality

With rising incomes, families can afford better sanitation, higher nutrition, and better health care, which lower infant and maternal death rates. Naanwaab (2018) and Sharma (2020) find that more economic freedom is also related to lower infant and maternal mortality. For example, in China, infant mortality fell from 52 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1978 (before reform) to 6 per 1,000 live births in 2020. In Vietnam, the corresponding figure in 1986 (before reform)

was 42; by 2020 it had fallen to 17. Maternal mortality followed similar downward trends in these countries.

India conforms to these patterns. The country’s infant mortality fell from 89 in 1990 to 27 in 2020. Maternal mortality, fell considerably from 384 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2000 to 103 in 2017, though it is still a concern.

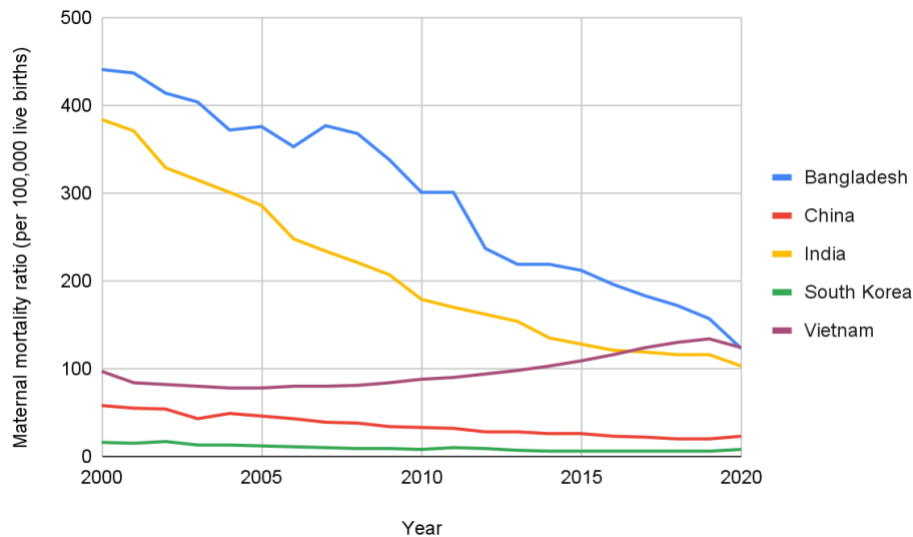
**Figure 12: Infant mortality (per 1,000 live births), Bangladesh, China, India, South Korea, and Vietnam, 1960–2020**



*Source:* World Bank Development Indicators from estimates developed by the UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (UNICEF, WHO, World Bank, UN DESA Population Division) at [childmortality.org](http://childmortality.org).

**Figure 13: Maternal mortality ratio (modeled estimate, per 100,000 live births), Bangladesh, China, India, South Korea, and Vietnam, 2000–2020**





*Source:* World Bank Development Indicators from WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group, and UNDESA/Population Division; Trends in Maternal Mortality 2000 to 2020, World Health Organization, 2023.

*Notes:* Data are available starting in 2000. Maternal mortality declined in China and South Korea pre-2000.

## 2.4 Education and Literacy

Typically, as an economy gets richer, more girls get educated. For instance, in 1981, Bangladesh’s GDP per capita (constant 2015 US\$) was 443.8 and female literacy rate (ages 15–24) was 27 percent; in 2020, the corresponding figures were 1593.3 and 96 percent. With additional disposable income, parents place higher emphasis on educating their daughters. More economic freedom also leads to more investment in human capital, which improves education outcomes (Hall, Sobel, and Crowley 2010; Nikolaev 2014; Feldmann 2017; and Feldmann 2021). With economic growth, as government revenues increase, there is also increased government spending on education.

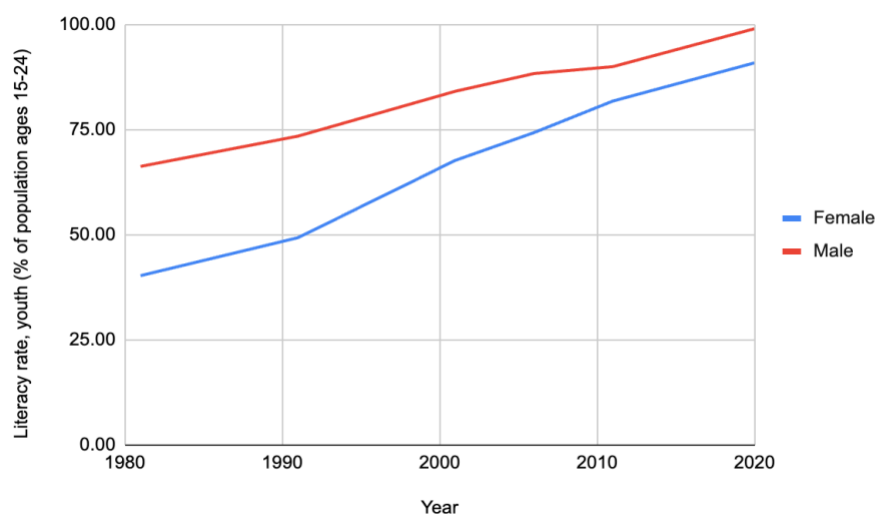
The pattern holds for India, whose female literacy rate (ages 15-24) improved from just 49 percent in 1991 to 91 percent in 2020; the corresponding male literacy rate rose from 66 to 99 percent. The gender disparity in education also fell considerably, as indicated by a rise in the gender parity index from 0.67 in 1991 to 0.97 in 2018. However, while several policies after 1991 encouraged Indian girls to attend school, median years of schooling for girls in 2019-2021 is just 4.9 compared to 7.3 for boys (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2021).<sup>13</sup> Families still prefer to spend their money on boys’ education. Kingdon (2005), Chaudhuri and Roy

<sup>13</sup> Regarding improvements in girls’ education, see Drèze and Kingdon (2001); Sarangapani et al. (2013); Venkatanarayanan (2015); Ayyar (2017); Karamala and Sultana (2018); Chandra (2019); Sahni (2014); and Kaur (2021). However, in school, gender inequalities persist owing to the persistence of stereotypes and safety concerns. See Borker (2021); Sahoo and Klasen (2021); and Bhowmick (2023).

(2006), Lancaster et al. (2008), and Saha (2013) observe a significant gender disparity—not confined to poorer states—in intrahousehold educational expenses.

Despite these persisting challenges in India’s education system, the enhanced economic growth since 1991 has significantly improved women’s educational opportunities and helped close the gap, though the progress varies across states (Deshpande 2007).

**Figure 14: Literacy rate, youth (aged 15–24), India, 1980–2020**



*Source:* World Bank Development Indicators from UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). UIS. Stat Bulk Data Download Service.

*Notes:* Data are available starting in 1980.

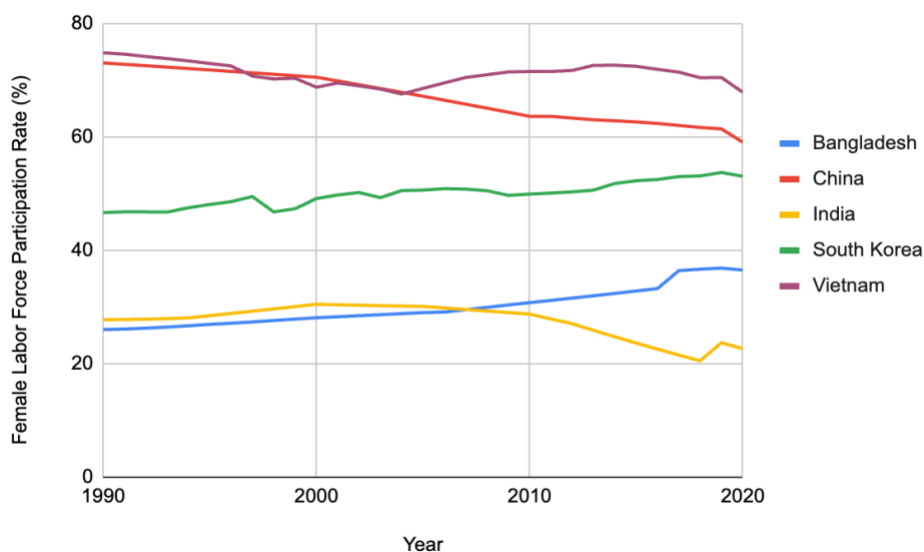
Higher GDP per capita leads to lower fertility rates, infant mortality, and maternal mortality as well as increasing life expectancy and access to education. Improvements across all these indicators usually predict a rise in FLPR. As the size and prosperity of an economy increases, structural transformation leads the poor out of agriculture, and more jobs are created; women, now more educated, healthier, and with fewer children, can take advantage of these economic changes and growing job market. These indicators are also typically associated with economic freedom. India has more economic freedom than Vietnam, China, and Bangladesh; yet improvements in socio-economic indicators and economic freedom in those countries—but not India—encouraged women to join the workforce.

### 3. India’s Female Labor Force Participation

Typically, the experience of the Asian countries is that economic growth following liberalization boosts FLPR. Bangladesh, China, South Korea, and Vietnam have followed this trajectory starting at different times, and FLPR in all these countries was higher India (2020 estimates).

The Indian economy is freer and richer than countries like Nepal, Pakistan, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, but its FLPR is lower (see table 1).

**Figure 15: Female labor force participation rate, Bangladesh, China, India, South Korea, and Vietnam, 2020**



*Source:* World Bank Development Indicators from ILOEST, ILOSTAT.

*Notes:* Data are available starting in 1990.

**Table 1: GDP per capita, economic freedom and female labor force participation rate, 2020**

Country	GDP per Capita (constant 2015 US\$)	Economic Freedom (rank of 165 countries)	FLPR (%)
India	1813.5	89	23
Pakistan	1409.7	130	23
Nepal	1018.1	103	28
Tanzania	1028.1	99	76
Zimbabwe	1213.1	163	60

*Source:* National estimates of female labor force participation rate (percentage of female population aged fifteen or older, modeled International Labour Organization estimate) and GDP per capita (constant 2015 US\$) are from the World Bank Development Indicators from, respectively, ILOEST, ILOSTAT, and from World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files, and the Economic Freedom Summary Index is from the Fraser Institute.

In 1990, around the time of the reforms, India's FLPR was 28 percent. This figure rose to a peak of 30 percent in 2005 but has declined since; in 2020, it was 23 percent. In contrast, India's male labor force participation rate has almost-steadily increased since 1991. Though it has decreased slightly in recent years, it remains significantly above FLPR, at 72 percent in 2020.

We must distinguish between India's low FLPR and declining FLPR, which are two separate problems.

The country has always had a low FLPR for myriad socio-economic, cultural, and structural reasons. For example, it was not until after liberalization that India focused on improving factors such as girls' education, infrastructure development, technological adoption, and international trade—all of which tend to increase FLPR.

Shortcomings in measurement methods partially account for the problem of a low FLPR (Kapsos, Silberman, and Bourmpoula 2014). India's FLPR calculation, in line with standard methods, is based on primary surveys and measures the proportion of women (15–64 years old) who are either employed (working for pay, profit, or family gain) or jobless but actively seeking employment. However, Indian national surveys often overlook unpaid workers, primarily women. Swaminathan (2009), Desai and Joshi (2019), Deshpande and Kabeer (2019), Deshpande and Singh (2021), and Deshpande (2023), argue that women are working outside the home but are not paid for it. In 2019, a national time-use survey showed that over half of the 200,000 women surveyed engaged in unpaid work. In a survey conducted in West Bengal, Deshpande and Kabeer (2021) find that marginal changes to the survey questions, such as not defining labor force participation in terms of a minimum number of days engaged in an activity,<sup>14</sup> increased measured FLPR from 18 to 28 percent. Such changes can better capture the seasonal nature of women's work, which is often informal.

Socio-cultural norms are also deemed factors behind the low level of FLPR. Norms may dissuade women from gainful employment or disincentivize employers from hiring women. Inadequate support systems for child or elderly care, safety issues, and scarcity of adequate job opportunities compound the problem.

While a low FLPR may be a consequence of faulty measurement methods and problematic social norms, the problem of a declining FLPR is different and needs further analysis. India's declining FLPR since 2005 illustrates a trend in one direction (women exiting the workforce from an already-low level) without a countervailing trend (women entering the labor force) (Deshpande 2023).<sup>15</sup> Women are either not entering the workforce at all or are quickly dropping out once they enter it. Rawal and Saha (2015) find that women's FLPR was 44 percent less than men's in 1999, widening to 48 percent in 2011–12.

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<sup>14</sup> The "usual principal activity status" of a person who is classified as being in the labor force is defined as the activity that satisfies the "majority time criterion" in the 365 days preceding the survey. This information is elicited from the head of the household.

<sup>15</sup> According to the 2022 *Global Gender Gap* report (World Economic Forum 2022), India ranked 143rd of 146 countries in terms of economic participation and opportunity, indicating one of the largest gender gaps in the world.

The puzzle is specific to FLPR: women have benefited on all other socio-economic margins associated with growth and economic freedom (Forsythe, Korzeniewicz, and Durrant 2000; Kabeer and Natali 2013; Bhattacharjee, Hnatkovska, and Lahiri 2015).

## 4. Explanations for India's Declining FLPR

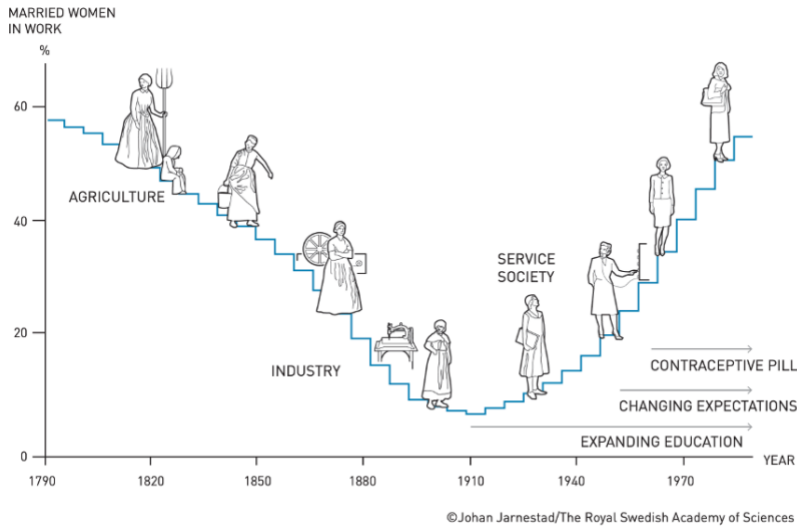
There are six main theories that explain India's declining FLPR. First, is the feminization-U hypothesis, which suggests that in a growing economy and with structural transformation, women's work participation first decreases and then increases. Second, the honor-income trade-off, where women weigh the importance of earning money against societal views on women working. Third, women's education levels can impact their choice to work. These first three points look at the reasons from the supply, i.e., women's side. The next three focus on the demand side factors affecting the labor market: fourth, whether there are good jobs available for women; fifth, if women need to move to find work; and sixth, how job opportunities and pay differ in various industries. These factors help us understand why the number of women in the workforce can change.

### 4.1 Supply-Side Factors

#### 4.1.1 Feminization-U Hypothesis

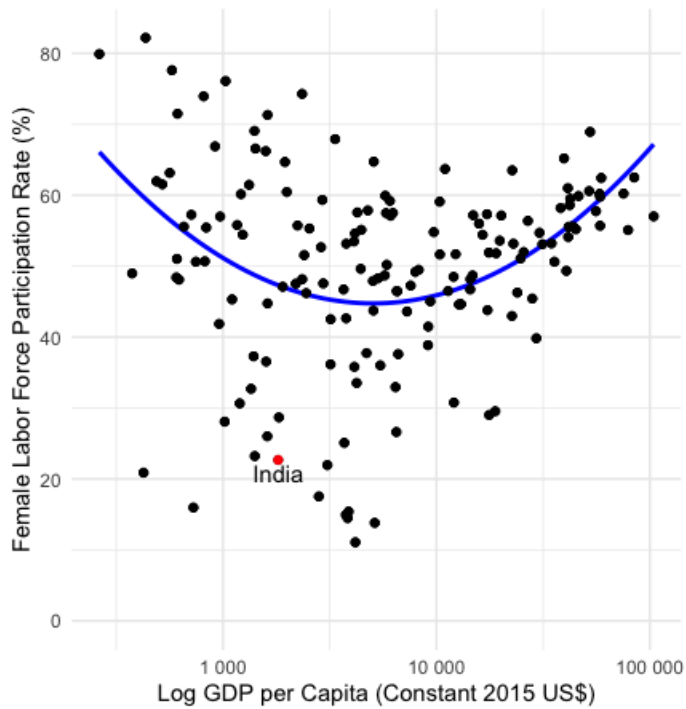
Goldin (1994) analyzed 200 years of US history and observed a U-shaped trend in FLPR over the course of economic development, i.e., as an economy develops, FLPR first decreases and then increases (see figure 16). Several scholars (Kottis 1990; Tansel 2002; Fatima and Sultana 2009) find that this U-shaped relationship between income and FLPR, dubbed the feminization-U hypothesis, holds across countries as well, i.e., as economies transition from agricultural to industrial, FLPR drops because the new wage-labor opportunities are male-dominated; later, as service-sector and white-collar jobs emerge, women re-enter the workforce (figure 17). A classic example from recent growth in Asia is South Korea, where development history shows a feminization-U relationship (Moon-Gi Suh 2017).

**Figure 16: The U-shaped curve between income and female labor force participation rate in the US, 1790-1990**



Source: Johan Jarnestad/The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, using Goldin's 1994 research.

**Figure 17: The cross-country relationship between income and female labor force participation rate, world, 2020**



Source: Authors' calculations. Log GDP per capita (constant 2015 \$US) for 2020 is from World Bank Indicators, and national estimates of female labor force participation rate (percentage of female population aged fifteen or older) are from ILOEST, ILOSTAT.

We find mixed evidence for this hypothesis. While cross-sectional data from Goldin (1994) and Mammen and Paxson (2000) support it, Uberti and Douarin (2023) argue that historical conditions deeply influence women's work trajectories during development: the U-shaped trajectory of FLPR is evident in countries with a history of plough-based agriculture but less prominent in countries where this practice is less historically prevalent and virtually non-existent in countries without the practice. Gaddis and Klasen (2014) find that the U-shaped relationship is weak and depends on the data used, particularly GDP estimates. They argue that the empirical evidence does not substantiate the hypothesis of a universal U-shaped relationship.

Klasen (2019) highlights that gender norms' influence on FLPR may cause deviations from the U-shaped curve, as in India, where FLPR fell despite rising incomes. For instance, the norms governing family structures matter. In India, women in joint families are less likely than women in other family structures to hold formal jobs because of family responsibilities such as child and elder care (Dhanaraj and Mahambare 2019). This contrasts with China and Japan, where joint families support women in formal employment.

For India, however, studies, so far, do not find support for the feminization-U hypothesis (Lahoti and Swaminathan 2016; Deshpande 2021). Though it is convenient to rely on culture to explain the difference, it's useful to note that Bangladesh has recently seen a rise in FLPR and GDP per capita concomitantly (Rahman and Islam 2013).

#### 4.1.2. Work as an Inferior Good: The Honor-Income Trade-off

Many have argued that a trade-off between income and honor explains declining FLPR: as family income increases, women sacrifice their participation in the economy to better preserve their family's honor in the community (Das and Desai 2003; Eswaran, Ramaswami, and Wadhwa 2013; Evans 2022).

At least three types of evidence cast doubt on this conjecture, though. First, marriage tends to affect women's labor decisions. Afridi, Dinkelman, and Mahajan (2016) note that women tend to drop out of the workforce after they get married, prioritizing household duties, a trend evident in both urban and rural areas (Neff, Sen, and Kling 2012). However, in India, often the honor and chastity of the unmarried daughter are the prime concern, perhaps even more than the honor of the married daughter-in-law, because they affect the daughter's prospects in the marriage market.

Second, FLPR in India shows a U-shaped trend with respect to education: both the least and most educated women are most active in the labor force. If family honor was the sole determining factor, only women from the poorest backgrounds would be in paid jobs, since high-income and high-status women have more honor or status to lose. However, women at both ends of the income spectrum are most likely to be engaged in employment.

Third, while India has norms restricting female movement, some Islamic countries impose similar restrictions and for reasons related to preserving honor. Yet India's female-to-male labor force participation ratio is lower than those of many Muslim-majority countries, such

as Uzbekistan and Indonesia. Furthermore, if female-male interaction at the workplace was a major concern, then all-female environments would have arisen, as in Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and, increasingly, Kashmir (Karimi 2008; United Nations 2019; Gupta and Mohammad 2022; Omar 2022). The challenge is not strictly about trading off labor supply and honor. In regions such as West Bengal, Islamic religious practices like veiling do not significantly affect FLPR (Deshpande and Kabeer 2019). And culturally similar Bangladesh would not have an FLPR at higher rates than India.

Thus, although societal traditions do influence women's lives, the honor-income trade-off does not provide a convincing explanation for India's FLPR trends. FLPR does tend to fall as household incomes increase, but this is likely because of an income effect, in which work becomes less appealing for women (Deshpande and Kabeer 2019). Also, social and cultural norms place a high value on mothers raising children, instead of relying on strangers at daycare. While work may turn into an inferior good for these reasons, the income effect is distinct from upholding honor or following cultural norms.

#### 4.1.3. Rising Education

The declining FLPR in India has also been attributed to increasing female education (Kingdon and Unni 2001; Das and Desai 2003; Rangarajan, Kaul, and Seema 2011; Klasen and Pieters 2015). The argument is that to attain higher levels of education, women delay entering the workforce. However, not only is FLPR lower among younger women (aged 15-24) who would now be in school, but FLPR has declined even among those aged 25-59 (Kannan and Raveendran 2012; Chatterjee, Desai, and Vanneman 2018).

Education can boost wages, incentivizing more women to join the workforce (Chatterjee, Desai, and Vanneman 2018). And women's education yields higher returns than men's. Kabeer and Natali (2013) emphasize that gender equality in education and employment boosts GDP per capita, but Kabeer (2012) argues that outcomes are better when women's employment expands.

More Indian women are getting educated. However, this increase in education does not usually translate into gainful employment. Swaminathan (2008) notes that after 1991, educated women were not joining the workforce at the same rate as men.

This curious phenomenon can be partially explained by the trade-off between education and dowry, as spending on higher education often means offering a smaller dowry. Adams and Andrew (2019) argue that education improves marriage prospects, as men favor educated but non-working wives (Dhar 2022). The Patriarchy Index (Ghai 2018) also finds a positive correlation between high-levels of patriarchy and the proportion of higher-educated women who are out of the labor force.

Thus, the decline in India's FLPR cannot be entirely explained by the idea that rising education leads women to delay entry into the workforce. The problem is not caused by delayed entry but increased exit.



## 4.2. Demand-Side Factors

### 4.2.1. Limited Desirable Jobs

Scholars argue that lack of desirable job opportunities leads women to exit the workforce (Rodgers 2012; Chaudhury and Verick 2014; Chatterjee, Murgai, and Rama 2015). Desirable jobs are typically those with job security, safe working conditions, and good wages. And educated women, like educated men, usually prefer white-collar jobs. However, in India, while the educated population has been rising, desirable white-collar jobs represent a mere 7 percent of all jobs, creating an excess supply of educated individuals looking for these roles (Klasen and Pieters 2015; Desai and Joshi 2019). This pushes people into the informal economy. After the 1991 reforms, the urban informal sector also grew because of rising demands for labor flexibility, which the formal sector could not meet. Though the formal sector saw a productivity boost due to the reforms, it could not accommodate the changing labor force.<sup>16</sup>

One question is if women, especially highly educated women, are overly selective about their employment options relative to men. The case of civil service jobs, attractive because of their stability, benefits, and status, is instructive (Poonam 2018; Marwaha 2021; Mangal 2022). The civil service exam is extremely challenging, with a selection rate of less than 1 percent of applicants and typically requiring multiple attempts. All else equal, educated women seeking only desirable white-collar jobs, would take this exam at the same rate as or a higher rate than men. Yet, in 2020, twice as many men took the preliminary exam compared with women (United Public Service Commission n.d.). Even though women have greater success with fewer attempts, men also take many more attempts and delay entry into the workforce to get such desirable jobs (Mangal and Singh forthcoming). This suggests that women may be halting attempts because of external factors, most likely marriage, and not necessarily because of high-status white-collar job opportunities.

Thus, while there may be limited desirable jobs available, other socio-economic factors also seem to be at play, causing the FLPR to decline. Section 5 expands on this theory to show that rather than women waiting for ideal positions, jobs are scarce in general, causing the FLPR to fall.

**Table 2: Female civil service candidates, 1990–2022**

Year	Selected candidates	Number of women	Proportion of women
1990	940	131	13.9
2000	427	85	19.9
2010	921	203	22

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<sup>16</sup> The rise of the informal sector should be understood in the context of structural shifts, which transformed labor dynamics from agriculture to manufacturing or services and prompted rural-to-urban migration.

2020	833	238	28.6
2021	685	177	25.8
2022	933	320	34.3

Source: United Public Service Commission (n.d.)

**Table 3: Number of attempts of recommended candidates, 2001–2021**

Year	Number of attempts	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
2001–02	M	27	57	92	78	44	19	16	9	342
	F	15	26	28	12	2	2	0	0	85
2011–12	M	86	152	162	140	49	55	45	29	718
	F	36	41	57	36	12	3	8	10	203
2021–22	M	42	107	108	108	102	69	27	32	595
	F	28	44	63	47	23	18	9	6	238

Source: United Public Service Commission (n.d.)

## 4.2.2 Migration and Mobility

Migration in India is a potential factor causing declining FLPR. First, most migration is rural to urban, and urban women are less inclined to participate in the workforce compared to their rural counterparts (Srivatsava and Srivastava 2010), although FLPR for both groups has been declining. Rural women are largely self-employed and work in agriculture. In urban areas, lack of job opportunities near the home, higher family income, and greater household responsibilities may be keeping women out of the labor market (Chatterjee and Sircar 2021). Second, women tend to migrate for marriage, not employment: in 2011, 86.8 percent of female migrants moved for marriage, while the majority of men migrated for better job opportunities (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 2020).

State-specific government services pose another challenge. Migrating women often lose access to welfare schemes, given the lack of service portability across states (Tumbe 2018; World Economic Forum 2021). This makes them less likely to migrate.

Further, women migrating after marriage often lack access to education and form weak social networks (which can provide employment opportunities), and are bound by societal structures in which male family members' approval is required for them to work (Allendorf 2012; Saraswati, Sharma, and Sarna 2015; Poushter, Bishop, and Chwe 2018; Chatterjee and Desai 2020; and Pande 2022).

However, Kaur (2004, 2006), Palriwala and Uberoi (2008), and Roy (2006) find that marriage-related migration frequently leads women to enter the labor force. Though few women

migrate for economic reasons, it rose from 3.2 percent of the female workforce in 2001 to 5.7 percent in 2011. On the other hand, Klasen and Pieters (2015) observe that migrant status does not affect FLPR.

More broadly, it seems that women's labor supply has not matched demand. For instance, despite a post-liberalization construction boom, women did not benefit significantly (Bhattacharya 2021; Dore 2022). Construction work often requires migration and is associated with poor working conditions, minimal legal protection, and low wages (Bhattacharyya and Korinek 2007; Banerjee and Raju 2009; Mazumdar, Neetha, and Agnihotri 2013). Those factors, coupled with rising household incomes, mean only women in the poorest families take such jobs.

### 4.2.3 Sectoral and Wage Gaps

India's economy has seen a decline in the agricultural sector and a boom in the services sector. The experience of other Asian economies where manufacturing took off and led to an employment boom has not been the Indian experience (Murthy 2005; Nayyar 2012; Basu 2015; Basu 2018). This anomaly is deemed a factor behind the declining FLPR, as the manufacturing sector boosts FLPR (Prillaman et al. 2017).

From the early 1990s to 2020, female employment in agriculture fell by 17 percent, while that in manufacturing saw negligible growth (Rustagi 2013; Deshpande 2023). Mechanization in agriculture led to job losses, especially for women (for example, Dasgupta and Verick 2016; Ghani et al. 2016; Deshpande 2023). Jobs in the expanding services sector did not offset decreasing agricultural opportunities and they often demanded skills many women lack (Lahoti and Swaminathan 2016).

Klasen and Pieters (2015) determine that changes in the sectoral composition of employment may have caused FLPR to fall. Women typically thrive in pink-collar roles such as teaching and nursing (Goldin 2006) rather than high-skill tradable-services jobs, like engineers and IT which were more directly impacted by liberalization. However, growth in tradable services (that is, those that can be traded across borders, such as IT and financial/business services) has positive spillover effects on non-tradable services (such as real estate and hospitality), favoring women (Avdiu et al. 2022). For every 10 percent increase in employment in tradable services, there is a 9.1 percent increase in female employment in non-traded services compared to 4.2 percent for men.

The declining FLPR might also relate to the fact that only some sectors liberalized. Even though certain sectors that are dominated by men, such as agriculture, were not liberalized, men in those sectors found better employment options in sectors such as construction that followed the boom in urbanization and services. However, women, especially those with agricultural backgrounds, lacked such opportunities, as they either would not migrate for work, did not possess the requisite skills, or companies did not want to hire them. Consequently, many withdrew from the labor force (Jhabvala and Sinha 2002; Mehrotra and Sinha 2017; Verick 2017).

In countries such as Mexico, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Cambodia that have higher FLPRs than India (Carr and Chen 2002; Simavi, Manuel, and Blackden 2010; World Bank Group and World Trade Organization 2015; Lopez-Acevedo and Robertson 2016), the textile sector—dominated by women—grew. Bangladesh, with societal structures similar to India’s, saw an increased FLPR because the booming export-ready garment sector contributed to women’s education and work prospects (Heath and Mobarak 2011).<sup>17</sup> But India’s textile sector remained stagnant despite liberalization, limiting women’s opportunities (Livani and Solotaroff 2019).

Another reason for this sectoral explanation might be that women were not part of the decision-making process at the highest level during the 1991 reforms (Narla and Shah 2023) and therefore the sectors that benefited most from liberalization were male dominated. However, while structural transformation led to changes in sectors in which women are employed, the accompanying shift in employment does not wholly explain the persistent decline in FLPR.

Relatedly, scholars suggest that prominent wage gaps are a cause for declining FLPR (Menon and Rodgers 2009; Banerjee and Veeramani 2017). However, Bhattacharjee et al. (2015) assert that gender wage gaps in India have fallen, especially within lower-wage sectors. This reduction is credited to a shift from manual to non-manual jobs, which generally have smaller wage gaps.

## 5. Discussion

While the six supply- and demand-side factors may contribute, none of the explanations fully explain India’s declining FLPR, as both supply- and demand-side elements are playing a role. Multiple factors are keeping women out of the workforce. Further research must consider these factors to inform policies that can effectively address and reverse the trend.

We argue that the country’s declining FLPR potentially lies in ‘jobless growth,’ a critique frequently leveled at India’s development path following liberalization. In recent decades, employment elasticity has fallen, and a 10 percent upsurge in GDP is linked to a mere 1 percent boost in employment (Papola and Sahu 2012; Misra and Suresh 2014; Centre for Sustainable Employment 2019; Basole 2022). This sluggish job growth naturally affects all labor force participation including FLPR. Das and Desai (2003) and Fletcher et al. (2017) attribute the FLPR decline to scarce job opportunities rather than cultural norms. Deshpande and Singh (2021) highlight factors that do not relate to household duties—such as lack of flexibility in jobs, difficulties commuting to and from workplaces, and seasonality of certain types of employment—which influence women’s employment patterns. Deshpande and Kabeer (2019) note women’s desire for jobs that do not interfere with their household duties, suggesting the FLPR decline may stem from lack of job opportunities for low- to medium-skilled jobs in particular. When employment opportunities do arise, women are likely to seize them and find

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<sup>17</sup> One sector that liberalized to women’s advantage is aviation. Today, women represent 12.4 percent of all pilots in India, the highest percentage globally (International Society of Women Airline Pilots 2022).

alternatives to manage their household responsibilities. But McKinsey (2017) estimates that approximately 90 percent of the thirty-six million new jobs generated in India since 2015 have been taken by men.

Sub-national trends also point to this explanation. States experiencing positive job growth experience a higher labor force participation overall (see figure 18). This relationship holds for FLPR as well (figure 19). However, state GDP growth inversely correlates with job growth (figure 20), supporting the notion of ‘jobless growth’. With economic growth, the proportion of new jobs to existing ones diminishes, causing a declining job growth rate and impacting FLPR.

This trend points to the lack of job growth as a key factor limiting employment for India’s working-age population. This idea of a “demand-pull”, i.e. a growth in jobs leading to a higher demand for female labor warrants further investigation.

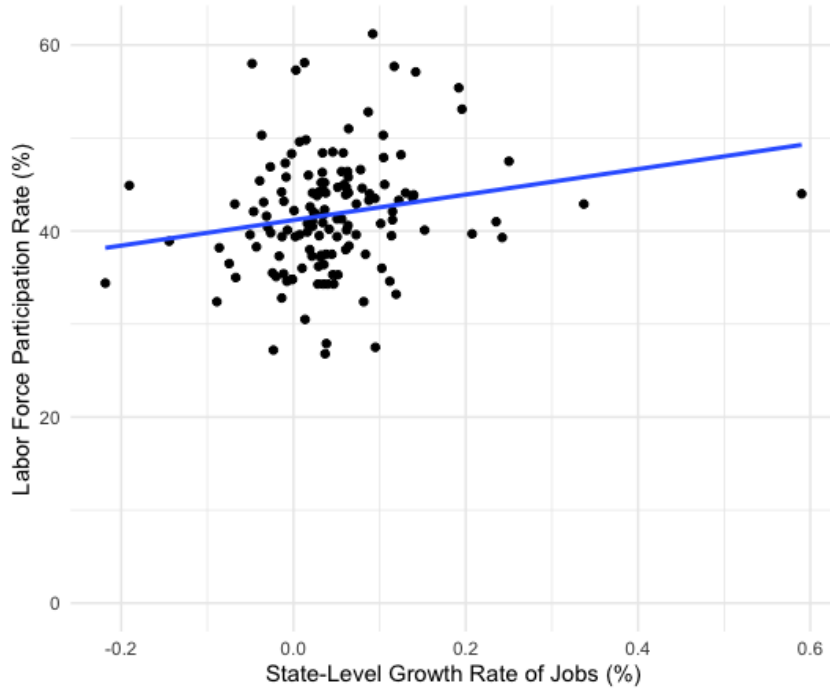
If women are simply choosing to leave the workforce, there is no problem. However, if women are being forced, directly or indirectly, to leave their jobs or if women cannot find work, then problems arise.

To address this complex issue, policy interventions need to target job creation for women and improve infrastructure and public amenities that will allow them to participate in paid work. Desai and Joshi (2019) find that schemes aimed at enhancing transportation infrastructure and programs such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme that expand work opportunities for women have a positive correlation with FLPR. Similarly, Sedai (2021) and Lei, Desai, and Vanneman (2017) respectively find that access to clean piped water and better transportation infrastructure increases salaried employment; women and their children lead healthier lives, which frees up women’s time to participate in paid work.

Women must also be more involved in policy making to address women-specific concerns. And in the push for evidence-based, data-driven policy making, the data must include gender.

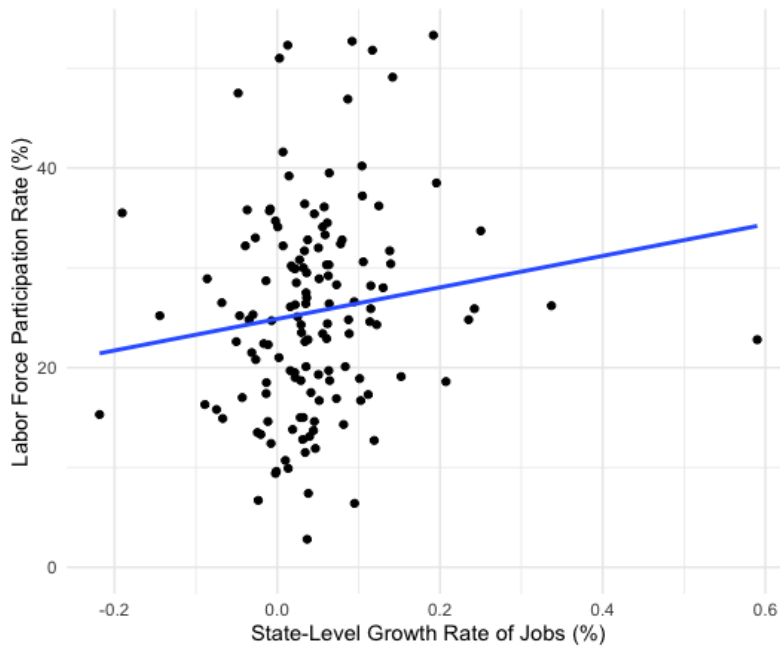
Improving India’s FLPR would fuel economic efficiency and other key development outcomes. Women’s participation in paid economic activities does not only increase the size of the economic pie—India will be 27 percent richer if it bridges the gender gap in employment (*Economist* 2018), it also pays social dividends such as boosting women’s agency, reducing domestic violence and augmenting children’s human capital. Therefore, it is crucial for policy makers to target interventions to increase FLPR and ensure that the benefits of economic growth are more equitably shared.

**Figure 18: State-Level Growth Rate of Jobs and Labor Force Participation, India, 2017-2021**



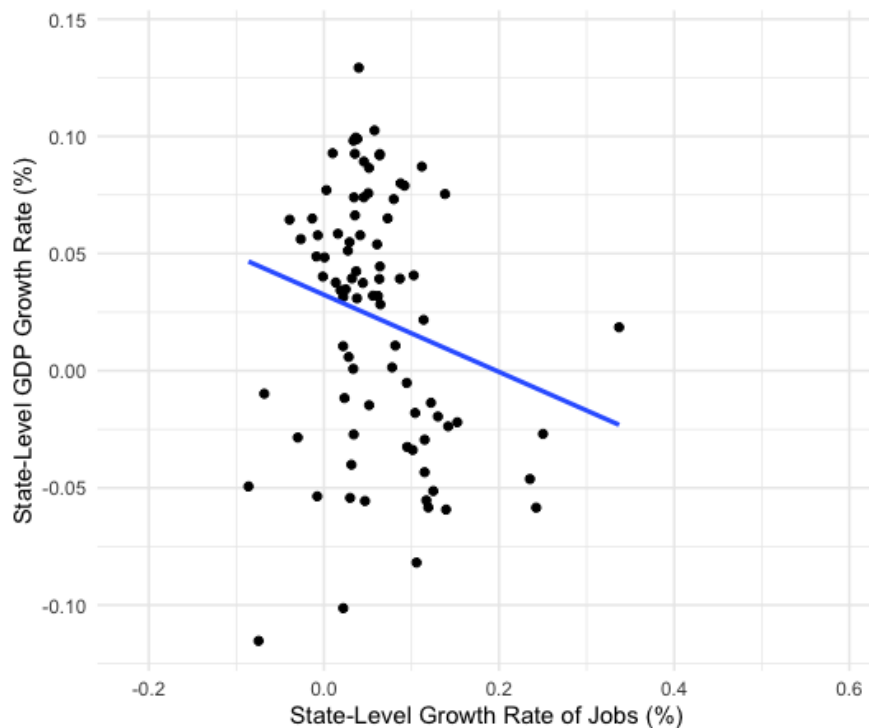
*Source:* Authors' calculations. State-Level Growth Rate of Jobs and Labor Force Participation for all ages at usual status (Rural+Urban) are from the Periodic Labour Force Survey for 2017-21.

**Figure 19: State-Level Growth Rate of Jobs and Female Labor Force Participation, India, 2017-2021**



Source: Authors' calculations. State-Level Growth Rate of Jobs and Female Labor Force Participation for all ages at usual status (Rural+Urban) are from the Periodic Labour Force Survey for 2017-21.

**Figure 20: State-Level GDP Growth Rate and State-Level Growth Rate of Jobs, India, 2017-2021**



Source: Authors' calculations. State Gross Domestic Product at constant 2011-12 prices is from the Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation for 2017-21. State-Level Growth Rate of Jobs for all ages at usual status (Rural+Urban) is from the Periodic Labour Force Survey for 2017-21.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we find that the relationship between economic liberalization and female labor force participation in India is not straightforward. Despite the significant strides made by India in terms of economic freedom and economic growth, post the 1991 reforms, these advancements have not translated into an increased participation of women in the workforce. This phenomenon starkly contrasts with patterns observed in other economies, where liberalization and the consequent economic growth typically led to a rise in FLPR.

India presents a three-dimensional conundrum. First, it has low FLPR and is an outlier to the Asian liberalization experience. Second, despite greater economic freedom and increases in

GDP per capita, FLPR is declining. Third, this inverse relationship does not hold true at the sub-national level, where economically freer Indian states experience higher FLPR.

We try to understand the mechanism through which economic freedom impacts FLPR. Typically, economic freedom is associated with greater prosperity and better living conditions, which lead to several positive outcomes for women, like a decline in infant mortality and maternal mortality, decline in fertility rates, increase in life expectancy, and increase in access to and level of education. All these indicators lead women to join the workforce.

Since the 1991 economic reforms, Indian women have been having fewer children later in life, enjoying better health and education, and seeing reductions in maternal and infant mortality rates. This pattern mirrors the experiences of countries that have experienced liberalization and consequent economic growth. Comparing India with peers like Bangladesh, China, South Korea, and Vietnam, which had similar income levels in the 1950s and liberalized at different times, reveals that while they all show improvements in key development metrics for women following a rise in GDP per capita, India diverges in one aspect: unlike the others, where FLPR rose, India's FLPR has decreased.

This means that the explanation does not lie in socio-economic indicators for women or in typical measures of female well-being, but in another factor within the economy impacting FLPR. Scholars solving this puzzle for India typically provide six main reasons that explain changes in women in the workforce. On the supply side, we do not find strong and persuasive evidence for the feminization-U hypothesis, the honor-income trade-off, and higher levels of women's education in explaining both the low and declining FLPR. On the demand side, the lack of high-status white-collar jobs, migration, and job opportunities differences across different industries are also not persuasive, especially since the sectoral and sub-national variation in FLPR also weakens these explanations.

One explanation we find convincing is rooted in India's jobless economic growth. We find that states experiencing positive job growth also experience a higher labor force participation overall and have higher FLPR. In other words, job growth can "pull" women into the workforce. This area merits further analysis. The consequences of the declining FLPR are far-reaching for women's economic empowerment, financial independence, and overall well-being.



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