

Gender, social change, and urbanisation in North India



In brief

- In the coming years, India will seek to reap the benefits of a demographic dividend that will maximise the growth potential of its economy. However, this potential dividend will likely be squandered if half of the country's population—namely women—face continued steep barriers to social and economic empowerment.
- This study examines how gender, urbanisation, and social change interact, drawing on new survey data from the north Indian urban clusters of Dhanbad (Jharkhand), Indore (Madhya Pradesh), Patna (Bihar), and Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh).
- The findings suggest that physical distance plays a significant role in constraining women's economic empowerment. Requirements to travel large distances for most jobs place a prohibitive cost on women entering the labour market.
- Kinship structures and a household's physical surroundings explain significant variation in women's autonomy and mobility. A woman's position in the household emerges as one of the most significant factors as does a household's urban/rural location.
- Future policy should be geared toward investing in safe, efficient transport for women in urban spaces. Making travel in urban spaces less onerous is likely to generate significant opportunities for female entry into the labour market.

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Overview of the research

In the year 2021, over half of the world lives in urban areas. Over the next four decades, the global urban population is expected to grow by 2.7 billion, while the world's rural population is expected to shrink further. Nowhere is this transition more apparent than in India, which is expected to see its urban population rise from 338 million (as per official census data) in 2010 to 875 million in 2050. Given the sheer demographic magnitude of urbanisation unfolding in India, understanding the multiple political, economic and social implications of this massive structural shift is vital for the country's future.

Urbanisation is as much a social process—transforming behaviour, culture and social institutions over time—as it is an economic and spatial process. Urbanisation transforms core societal organizations such as the family, the nature and density of social interactions, the nature of work and diversity of occupations, and individual freedoms and personal autonomy. This begs the question: what does India's rapid urbanisation mean for social hierarchies and social cleavages in the country?

The focus of this research is on how gender, urbanisation, and social change interact across four north Indian urban clusters. While the project is motivated by a concern with India's low (and, by some measures, declining) female labour force participation (FLFP), it also focuses on the larger ecosystem within which labour markets function. The study seeks to shed light on new, gender-disaggregated data on labour markets, social attitudes, empowerment and individual agency, and asset ownership and use. Specifically, the study drew on highly granular survey data to ask the following questions:

- How is women's work defined and how do measurement and reporting errors influence survey-based data on women's engagement in the labour force?
- What supply-side or contextual factors determine women's entry into the labour force?
- To what extent does work improve women's agency and bargaining power within the household?
- How do household factors affect women's physical mobility outside of the home?

For this project, data was collected through surveys of both men and women in the urban clusters of Dhanbad (Jharkhand), Indore (Madhya Pradesh), Patna (Bihar), and Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh). An urban cluster consists of a core major (census-defined) city and surrounding areas that constitute the periphery of the city. As a result, the sample encompasses the core city, small urban areas in the periphery, as well as peri-urban villages that are plausibly economically dependent upon the city. In each urban cluster, the researchers sampled approximately 3000-3500 households.

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The survey features three separate questionnaires in addition to a module on time use. Each of the three questionnaires—household, male primary respondent, and female primary respondent—is further subdivided into discrete modules. In total, the survey contains twelve distinct modules ranging from education and employment to intra-household decision making.

Much of the political economy literature has focused on the role of social norms as a barrier to female economic and social mobility. While social norms are certainly an important determinant of women’s agency, the survey was designed to explore the influence of factors shaping women’s social and economic engagement at the individual, household, and societal levels.

Policy motivations for the research

As India urbanizes, the issue of women’s economic engagement is more than a mere academic puzzle. For starters, India’s economic future is premised on the fact that it will be able to generate a sufficiently skilled workforce to sustain and enhance economic growth. India seeks to reap the benefits of a “demographic dividend” a period over which a very large share of the population will be of working age due to recently increasing life expectancies and lower fertility rates. However, this potential dividend will be squandered if half of the country’s population is not productively employed. The Government of India’s 2017-2018 Economic Survey, its flagship publication on the health of the Indian economy, singled out India’s gender gap in the labour force as a factor that adversely affects the growth potential of the Indian economy.

The issue of women’s engagement with the Indian economy is an issue of increasing salience for Indian policymakers, as they grapple with the twin challenges of “jobless growth” and gender inequality.

Indeed, Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself has regularly acknowledged the importance of these issues for India’s development. During his inaugural Independence Day speech in 2014, Modi spoke of the severe gender inequalities plaguing the country. Subsequently, the prime minister explicitly addressed the female labour force dilemma India confronts, stating that “financially empowered women are a bulwark against societal evils” and that providing them with economic opportunities should be a key priority for government.

Policy impact

This research project intends to provide policymakers, researchers, and civil society with new data on the ways in which gender, social change, and urbanisation interact in a region of the country which demonstrates broadly sub-optimal outcomes on women’s agency and economic empowerment. We believe that this research not only uncovers heretofore poorly understood gender inequalities but also contributes to the formulation of public policies that can reverse their growth.

Key research question	Summary of the key findings
<p>How is women’s work defined and how do measurement and reporting errors influence survey-based responses of women’s engagement in the labour force?</p>	<p>In contrast to men, only a small share of women report they are engaged in work. However, once domestic duties are factored in, 8 out of 10 women participate in “work,” while male work participation hardly changes. While the degree of measurement error across survey modalities is smaller for women than men, there is a significant degree of reporting error. This discrepancy is primarily concentrated among rural households that own farmland, suggesting that the difference stems from the fact that agricultural work women engage in is not reliably classified as work. Furthermore, recorded labour force rates are significantly higher for women when a woman fills out the household roster than when a man completes this task. Taken together, these findings suggest that how you measure, and who does the measuring both have an impact on labour market statistics.</p>
<p>What supply-side or environmental factors determine women’s entry into the labour force?</p>	<p>Requirements to travel large distances for most jobs place a prohibitive cost on women entering the labour market. The magnitude of these effects are far greater than the impact of the primary wage earner of the household losing his/her job or other family members coming to assist the woman in household duties.</p>
<p>To what extent does work improve women’s agency and bargaining power within the household?</p>	<p>Women who work exercise greater say in important decisions around the home. However, this “work advantage” exhibits significant heterogeneity across decision types, decision-making domains, and definitions of work. Working women report the greatest gains to agency when it comes to cooking but work has very little pay-off when it comes to household decisions of a budgetary or financial nature. The work advantage is the starkest for women who work in more traditional employer-employee relationships outside of the home. In contrast, women who are engaged in household farm work enjoy almost no agency benefits to their labour.</p>
<p>How do household factors affect women’s physical mobility outside of the home?</p>	<p>Kinship structures and a household’s physical surroundings explain significant variation in women’s autonomy and mobility. A woman’s position in the household emerges as one of the most significant factors as does a household’s urban/rural location.</p>

Policy recommendations

- **Devote greater attention to the gendered nature of survey responses.** The Government of India devotes massive resources—both human and financial—to conducting large-scale sample surveys of the employment/unemployment status of its citizens. This study demonstrates that the identity of the primary respondent has a significant impact on the quality of the data that is collected through such surveys. When a woman is asked to provide details on the employment activities of members of the household, women’s participation in the workforce is less likely to be under-reported. This holds true even when the female primary respondent is reporting on women in the household other than herself. Therefore, in designing large-scale surveys, greater attention should be paid to the identity of the principal respondent, especially when survey enumerators seek to collate the responses of both men and women inside a given household.
- **Create employment opportunities for women that take physical distance into account.** Much of the debate over women’s participation in the labour force poses a false binary between working and not working, but this characterization is not amenable to work near the home, like agriculture or part-time work, which make up the bulk of women’s labour in India. Our research suggests that the impact of distance concerns on women’s preferences to enter the labour market may be more severe than is commonly assumed, even more than income effects and lack of assistance at home—the major economic explanations for why women choose to leave the labour force. Future policy should be geared toward investing in safe, efficient transport for women in urban spaces. Making travel in urban spaces less onerous is likely to generate significant incentives of female entry into the labour market.
- **Invest in behavioural interventions that take intra-household dynamics into account.** Our research finds that a woman’s position in the household has significant impacts on her physical mobility which, in turn, can affect labour market entry. In particular, daughters-in-law are especially mobility constrained. They also typically enjoy less agency over intra-household decisions than either wives or mothers of the household head. Given the prevalence of joint family households in India, policymakers should consider behavioural interventions that might raise awareness and seek to remedy sub-optimal intra-household dynamics.