

SOCIAL NORMS, COMMUNITY AND FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION

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Abstract

At the present date, policy initiatives to absorb greater numbers of females into the labour force focus on improving working conditions to assuage conventional concerns of harassment, maternal leaves, etc., and by improving educational outcomes. However, according to the National Family Health Survey, employment of women falls sharply with an increase in wealth, conveying the continued mentality that women are at best secondary earners and their employment is a matter of mere economic necessity. The link between education and employment is also not as expected.

This paper seeks to analyse the behavioural roots of female labour force participation, in the context of culture, community, and immediate social circle, so as to better supplement existing policy initiatives with behavioural understanding. Through qualitative and quantitative inferences, the author aims to understand the degree of influence these factors have on individual career decisions as well as the abstract quality of 'active ambition'. The paper also tries to analyse the link between active ambition and the optimum utilisation of intra-household bargaining power to reach optimal outcomes for the individual, combining behavioural insights and a normal game theoretic form. Finally, the author proposes policy recommendations incorporating the behavioural insights gleaned in the above two sections, keeping in mind social underpinnings of goal-identification and goal-achieving capabilities of individuals, especially from the immediate family in early childhood to avoid detrimental temporal lags.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A long-term trend of declining female labour force participation (for instance, from 30.3% in the year 1990 to 20.5% in the year 2019) in India has baffled policymakers and scholars alike. In this paper, we consider the intrinsic satisfaction from work as one of the motivating factors for women to work. The demographic group considered for the study are women from the middle-upper income class background with a certain level of educational attainment. The barriers considered are the insidious barriers to realisation of this motivation. In literature, the myth of the 'gender ambition gap' goes as follows: in terms of career choices, with age and motherhood, women lower their career goals.

This line of thought believes that there is a distinct difference in the degree of ambition owing to a subconscious acceptance of the notion that the role of

home-maker and child-bearer falls solely on women. This is contradictory with literature in sociology and psychology that shows girls to have higher aspirations than boys in working-class environments. It is this contradiction that leads us to look more closely at the interim developmental period.

1.1 Background and Motivation

The broad hypothesis goes as follows: the trajectory of the community's history in the context of women empowerment impacts the active ambition of the individuals of the present generation owing to the active guidance available to them, leading to an 'active ambition gap'.

Coupled with implicit expectations (wherein boys are taught at an early age that not attaining higher vocational achievements is not an option whereas this expectation is not always placed on girls), this evolves

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into a 'gender active ambition gap' which leads to a temporal lag in the realisation of active ambition.

In this paper, the behavioural roots of an individual's ambition are considered. Here, visible ambition is defined keeping in mind the following criteria: the individual has a broad, overarching goal (say, to be a part of the corporate world or to earn a PhD) that is considered for the long term. This is considered to be an aspiration. Aspiration is defined as an individual's ability to identify and set goals for the future while being inspired in the present to work towards those goals (Quaglia and Cobb 1996). While this is the primary meaning of ambitions, other factors have to be considered as well. These include (i) *direction* (the steps that need to be taken) and (ii) *drive* (taking the needed steps). These additional factors are considered keeping in mind the aspiration-attainment gap where high aspirations are not always proportionate to attainment outcomes for some demographic groups (Gutman et al 2008). Therefore, in this paper, active ambition is represented as an average of a) clarity of future goals, b) satisfaction with the steps taken so far (assuming greater clarity with the interactions with diverse peer groups and differing degrees of efforts) and c) the extent of conviction of continuation of work despite the tremendous social backlash, including that from immediate family circles.

1.2 Scope of Research

This research endeavour has a narrowed scope from simply 'females' to consider females from two communities namely Marwaris and Bengalis in the age group of 18-24 years.

This hypothesis is explored in the case of the Marwari and Bengali community owing to their differing histories. Hardgrove (2004) sums up an aspect of the differing histories of the two communities as follows:

"Marwari intellectuals' debates over widow remarriage, women's seclusion, female education,

and dowry did not arise until the second quarter of the twentieth century, about eighty to one hundred years after Bengalis wrestled with very similar issues. Indeed, many Marwaris themselves regard Marwari women—or even their own community as a whole—as simply 'backwards and conservative' compared to their proximate and pioneering Bengali neighbours."

The Marwari community, as compared to the Bengali community, was late in carving out its national and political identity and grappled with issues on various fronts prior to explicitly coming to terms with the issue of women empowerment. Initially, educational attainments for females were introduced in the domestic front with courses on home science, etiquette, etc. being offered to females to educate them for the future role (at that time) of being a wife and a homemaker. Later, educational attainments in the 'respected professions' (primarily, teaching) became more common. In many pockets of the society, however, further educational attainment for women was not allowed as a woman being more educated than her husband was frowned upon. Along similar lines, work post-marriage (if at all) would be with the husband's and in-laws' permission (discontinued in case permission was not granted). Post childbirth continued work obligation was even further out of the question. Along the same time, the Bengali community prided itself on its educational achievements, with women earning advanced degrees (postgraduate and doctoral) and continuing to higher posts on the job front.² Today, other than in select pockets (which are far lesser in number), the Marwari community (especially those within the upper middle-higher income class) extends support to higher educational and vocational attainments for its daughters.

The difference in active ambition, hence considered, is studied with regard to the following:

1. The nature of the support (active guidance or active support).
2. The nature of conversations and narratives the individual grew up with.
3. The presence of role models within the family.

¹ Neither the hypothesis nor the results are intended as an insult to the two chosen communities, Marwari and Bengali, or affiliated individuals (of any gender) from those communities. The growth trajectory of the women empowerment movement in the context of these communities is recorded in public/digital memory and the differences arise in a historical context. The results in the present day are a reflection of the impact of this history in implicit ways. Moreover, neither the hypothesis nor the research supports the general myth that women lack aspirations as compared to men and subscribe to traditional norms of gender roles.

² Data, however, on specific occupations to illustrate the point was not found.

The hypothesis, however, differs from the ‘gender ambition gap’ widely discussed in the literature as it considers the difference in the formative years as opposed to the later years. Given the historical background, in this paper, a detailed analysis of Marwari and Bengali women in this context has been made. Therefore, our primary hypothesis is that *Marwari females within the age group of 18-24 have less active ambition than those from the Bengali community.*

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

While delving deep into the topic of trends in female labour force participation, certain paradoxes have been observed in literature and empirics. The two primary paradoxes are the relation between (i) trends in female education and female labour force participation and (ii) the relation between trends in household income figures and female labour force participation.

The Global Gender Gap Index by the World Economic Forum measures the extent of gender-based gaps among 4 key dimensions. Two of them are especially important to be noted in this case:

1. Educational Attainment
2. Economic Participation and Opportunity

One of the key policy steps taken towards absorbing a greater number of females in the workforce at all levels has been to increase access to better education and skill enhancement. This, alongside measures to improve workplace conditions for women and build awareness around the need for educational and hence career-oriented outcomes for women (among other reasons, as a means of financial independence), is believed to be a crucial component in providing opportunities for the girl-child.

Figure 1: Percentage of Gender Gap Closed to Date (2020)



Source: Global Gender Gap Report, 2020

Table 1: India's Rankings (2020)

SUBINDEX	COUNTRY	RANK	SCORE
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT	INDIA	112	0.962
ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION AND OPPORTUNITY	INDIA	149	0.354

Source: Global Gender Gap Report, 2020

As per the Global Gender Gap Report (2020), while the educational attainment gender gap around the world has been closed by 96% to date, only 58% of the economic participation and opportunity gap has been closed. In India specifically, which will be the focus of this research, the difference in score and rank for both sub-indices (0.608) along with the long-term puzzling trend of steeply declining female labour force participation, for both rural and urban sphere, is troubling and the reasons behind it remain unresolved.

Economic growth or increase in family income is not the panacea in this case. It is often a matter of discussion in the literature (Sinha 1965; Boserup 1970; Durand 1975) and most recently statistically illustrated by the World Bank that there is a U-shaped relation between real GDP and female labour force participation.

Examining the issue further through a sociocultural lens, the constraints to female labour force participation most often discussed are external such as:

1. The stigma attached to women earning (Klasen et al. 2015).
2. In higher social classes, the prestige attached to non-working female members and the ‘income effect hypothesis’ wherein females are considered secondary wage-earners.
3. Workplace conditions and instances of workplace harassment, sexual or otherwise.
4. The demands of the work-life balance are placed, conventionally, mostly on women (Mehrotra and Parnida 2017).

However, these explanations and literature conventionally place disproportionate weightage on wages and earnings as a reason for an individual choosing to work, like in the popular 'labour leisure trade-off' wherein the returns to labour are monetary (wages) and leisure is what provides mental satisfaction and/or pleasure. According to the definition of the two layers of ambition provided by Turner (1964), this falls under the category of material ambition (extrinsic satisfaction).

An individual's choices which determine whether the potential is realised or not are influenced, to a great extent, by the aspirations of the young people. It is also influenced by the aspirations of their parents and the opportunities available to them (Bandura et al. 2001)

Schoon et. al (2007) note that girls consistently have higher aspirations than boys from similar working-class backgrounds. Parents also tend to have higher aspirations for their daughters because of the construed undesirable alternative outcomes for women in light of the social narratives around gender roles. Family background variables such as parental education, parental income, and social class among others have been shown to influence parents' aspirations for their children (Kao and Tienda 1998; Schoon et.al 2002; Schoon et. al. 2007). However, despite this, males also consistently enjoy a higher occupational status, career advancement, and financial rewards (Schoon et al. 2007).

The gap that exists between aspirations and achievements owes, in part, to the choices made by individuals. The choices made by individuals determine whether their potential is explored and nurtured or remains untapped. Consequently, this shapes the future trajectory of their lives (Bandura et al 2001). With individuals existing in a sociocultural paradigm, among others, the impact of community and related factors on an individual's choices, both conscious and unconscious, offer an interesting study.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Primary data for this study was collected using Google Forms. It was supplemented by open-ended interviews with the respondents. This methodology has been elaborated upon by Piore (2006). To

conduct empirical and statistical tests, dummy variable regression analysis has been employed.

3.1 Google Form Survey

The Google Form survey had 93 respondents within the age group of 18-24 years. 46 respondents belonged to the Bengali community whereas the remaining 47 were from the Marwari community. The respondents were spread across Kolkata and Delhi. The data collected thenceforth was pertaining to (i) age, (ii) rating of approval/acceptance within the community of working females, and (iii) the number of working females in the present generation.

3.2 Open-Ended Interview

The open-ended interview was conducted with the above respondents' pool as a follow-up to better understand the attitudes and perspectives. It broadly followed the structure of the questionnaire with follow-up questions at the interviewer's discretion. The questionnaire can be found in the Appendix (A.1.) at the end of the paper.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Relationship between community and the present attitude within the family in the realm of influence towards higher educational and vocational attainments.

To understand the relationship between the community and the present attitude within the family in the realm of influence towards higher educational and vocational attainments, the author proposes the following regression model:

$$\text{Model 1: Present Attitude towards Working Women} = b_1 + b_2 \text{ Community} + u_1$$

In the above model, Community is a dummy variable taking value '1' for the Bengali Community and '0' for the Marwari Community.

The regression results are as follows:

Table 1: Regression results for Model 1

	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-stat
Intercept	7.085	0.121	58.104
Community	1.067	0.173	6.154*

*: Significant at 95% level

R-squared: 0.293

F-statistic: 37.877

Standard Error of Regression: 0.835

Source: Author's Calculations

The regression results suggest that the differences in present attitude towards working women as perceived by the respondents were approximately 29 per cent explained by the independent dummy variable, community, taking value '1' for the Bengali community. The attitude was found to be higher (i.e., more favourable) in the Bengali community than in the Marwari community, with a coefficient of 1.067. As such, while some incremental difference was perceived to exist, the results do not quite suggest the same.

4.2 Relationship between community and the number of working women in the previous generations in the extended family within the realm of influence.

Under the open-ended interview structure, the following observations were significant to note from the interview of 56 respondents (28 from each community):

a) While all 56 respondents had immediate goals in mind (as to pursuing higher education or getting a job), there was a stark difference as to when this clarity had been reached.

Model 2: Number of working women in the previous generation = $b_1 + b_2 \text{Community} + u_1$

Community is a dummy variable taking values '1' for Bengali and '0' for the Marwari community.

The regression results are as follows:

Table 2 : Regression results for Model 2

	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-stat
Intercept	3.702	0.221	16.741
Community	1.580	0.314	5.026*

*: Significant at 95% level

R-squared: 0.2173

F-statistic: 25.265

Standard Error of Regression: 1.516

Source: Author's Calculations

The dependent variable in the above model is able to explain 21.7 per cent of the variation in the number of working women in the previous generation by the independent variable, dummy variable, that takes 1 for the Bengali community. Results are found to be statistically significant.

4.3 Relation between number of working women in the current generation and the previous generations and the community

To understand the relationship between the number of working women in the current generation and the previous generations and the community, the author proposes the following model:

Model 3: Number of working women in the current generation = $b_1 + b_2 \text{Community} + b_3 \text{Number of working women in the previous generation} + u_1$

Community is once again as a dummy variable taking value '1' for Bengali and '0' for the Marwari community.

The regression results are as follows:

Table 3: Regression results for Model 3

	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-stat
Intercept	2.212	0.345	6.395
Community	1.306	0.275	4.748*
Number of working women in the previous generation	0.523	.081	6.443*

*: Significant at 95% level

R-squared: 0.567

F-statistic: 59.154

Standard Error of Regression: 1.174

Source: Author's Calculations

The results suggest that the variation in the dependent variable (number of working women in the previous generation) can be explained to a great extent (~56 per cent) by the independent variables, community, and number of working women in the previous generation. These results are found to be statistically significant.

4.4 Open-Ended Interview

To understand the relationship between the community and the number of working women in the previous generations in the extended family within the realm of influence, the author proposes the following model:

Under the open-ended interview structure, the following observations were significant to note from the interview of 56 respondents (28 from each community):

a) While all 56 respondents had immediate goals in mind (as to pursuing higher education or getting a job), there was a stark difference as to when this clarity had been reached.³

b) Girls with working members in the immediate family or in the extended family with repeated interactions (to be considered close) had this clarity for a long period of time, whereas those without had the realisation much later. They were able to quote incidents, references to conversations, or anecdotes about a family member's work that had struck with them in their early days and made them explore in that direction, giving rise to greater confidence and clarity in their goals.

c) For those respondents who had clarity earlier, the following general trends were observed:

(i) They ranked their family first for the influence in giving them this clarity.

(ii) They felt that they had taken active steps in realising their goals.

(iii) They were satisfied with the progress they had made.

(iv) They were confident that their goals would be realised.

On the other hand, those who had had this clarity later:

(i) They ranked their peer group and friends circle for pushing them into action and helping them gain clarity (all felt that clarity came from college friends while it was a mix of college and school competition and friends that pushed them into action).

(ii) They felt dissatisfied with the progress they had made and with missed opportunities.

(iii) They felt that they needed more time to gain further clarity in order to know what steps to take.

(iv) They lacked the confidence that the gap could be covered up.

(v) Everyone felt that they would have been more proactive if they had been pushed.

vi) They felt that they had the support but not the parental influence or guidance.

d) Bengali girls had exposure to 3 working female members at the very least and a legacy of past accomplishments in the family. This had the following consequences:

(i) They had active guidance and their immediate family was heavily invested in guiding them and pushing them to find their interests and to be ambitious.

(ii) They felt that they had something to prove and also had the confidence that it could be done since someone known to them had previously accomplished it.

e) Those without exposure to working members in the family, and more significantly without working females in the family (as in the case of 15 of the 28 Marwari respondents), felt that they had the support of their family in whatever decision they took but not their active guidance.

f) Those with working women in their families had work-centred and ambition-centred conversations which provided new information or guidance even at home while those without it felt that work-centred talk was limited to their current academic occupations and questions about their decisions pertaining to their future, with a lesser extent of active guidance.

g) 38 out of 56 respondents felt that they interacted more with their mothers than their fathers.

h) Out of 28 Marwari respondents, 16 had grown up without an explicit narrative about their working or married future (neither). Discussions were focused mainly on academics with the primary focus being more immediate.

i) Comparing the 2 communities, more of the Marwari respondents could recall incidents of casual references to a settled life in the near future such as

- Parental discussions on marriage post-college education.
- Refrain from opting for careers requiring frequent travel because she would have to settle down eventually.

³ There was a difference in the confidence attached to these goals, some feeling they were too trivial or generic to be classified as 'goals' and were merely obvious stepping stones.

- To adjust and learn how to compromise because of differences in the outlook of parents and future-in-laws about the job and other aspects post-marriage This was even for respondents within 18-21 years of age, and similar references were recalled as having been heard before.

At the end of the interviews, respondents were required to answer some questions (see Appendix A.2.). The average of the responses to the questions was taken as a proxy variable for ‘active ambition’. The participants were also asked whether they considered their family to be the primary influence or source of active guidance when it came to the formation of aspirations (with a great degree of clarity) and the formulation of steps taken to achieve those aspirations.

4.5 Ambition and Family Influence

We will now study the relationship between active ambition as obtained in section 4.4 and family influence. For this purpose, the author proposes the following model:

$$\text{Model 4: Ambition} = b_1 + b_2 \text{ Family Influence} + u$$

Here, family influence is a dummy variable taking value ‘1’ for active and ‘0’ otherwise. ¹

The regression results are as follows:

Table 4: Regression results for Model 4

	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-stat
Intercept	7.5	0.18	39.79
Community	1.06	0.25	4.14*

*: Significant at 95% level

R-squared: 0.2411

F-statistic: 17.16

Standard Error of Regression: 0.96

Source: Author's Calculations

The results suggest that 24 per cent of the variation in the dependent variable, active ambition, could be explained by the independent variable, perceived family influence. These results were found to be statistically significant.

4.6 Active Ambition and Community

Besides family influence, it is also imperative to study the relationship of active ambition with the community.

For that, the author proposes the following model:

$$\text{Model 5: Ambition} = b_1 + b_2 \text{ Community} + u_1$$

Once again, community is a dummy variable taking value ‘1’ for the Bengali community and ‘0’ for the Marwari community. The regression results are as follows:

Table 5: Regression results for Model 5

	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-stat
Intercept	7.809	0.106	16.741
Community	0.809	0.314	5.026*

*: Significant at 95% level

R-squared: 0.3486

F-statistic: 28.9

Standard Error of Regression: 0.56

Source: Author's Calculations

The results suggest that 34 per cent of the variation in the dependent variable (Active ambition) could be explained by the chosen independent variable, community. These results were found to be statistically significant.

4.7 Link between Active Ambition and Utilisation of Intra-Household Bargaining Power

In ‘Interactive Decision Theory’ i.e., game theory, rationality is assumed such that every player chooses to maximise their own payoffs. Thereby, the resultant strategy chosen is the equilibrium strategy. This outlook follows in the literature of intra household bargaining power and household decisions on issues such as budget allocation and whether or not women should work. In this regard, it is important to note the important role played by perceptions. Additionally, the final action chosen by each member depends on two other factors namely (a) perceived payoffs and (b) available action set.

The existence of adequate bargaining power for the woman in the household is not adequate. The utilisation of this bargaining power for optimal outcomes in the educational or vocational sphere is needed. Even in cases of familial support (translated into adequate bargaining power in the household pertaining to decisions to close the aspiration-attainment gap), other factors at play lead to the underutilisation of this bargaining power.

It was found, according to the survey presented in section 4.4, that the females who even felt that they had the support of the family but not the active guidance owing to lack of working experience compared to the other working members or compared to other households with work experience. Thus, they lacked clarity from an early age. This translated to a lack of awareness of a) their exact goals and b) the steps needed to achieve those goals.

While they felt their parents would be supportive of whatever decision they would choose to make (within financial constraints, regardless of gender), they were not quite sure of what decisions needed to be taken. The time lost in achieving that clarity made them believe that many opportunities had been lost and that, with the extent of competition in the workplace, they would be at a disadvantage compared to their peers (males and females both) who had consistently shown greater initiative in working towards reaching their goals.

4.8 Interaction Between Parental Aspirations and the Girl's Aspirations

The community's trajectory in female empowerment and the record of working members in the family shape the narrative around the 'family legacy' centered on higher attainments. The awareness that trickles down to the child is crucial in the formation of aspirations at an early age (Gutman et al. 2008). This was also observed in the open-ended interviews conducted. The extent of awareness decides the finite action set available to the child:

$$A = \{a_1, a_2, \dots, a_i, \dots, a_n\}$$

According to the theory of intertemporal choice, these different action sets cumulatively lead to outcomes that are realised at different stages over time. These outcomes include intangible outcomes such as confidence, exploration, clarity and initiative (among others). In either case, if we were to consider the interaction between parental aspirations and the girl's aspirations to be in a normal form coordination game, with expected payoffs replacing final payoffs, then it would be formulated as shown:

Table 6: Normal form game between the parent and the girl

	Passive Child		Active Child	
Passive Parent	(1,1)	(i)	(1,3)	(iii)
Active Parent	(0,1)	(ii)	(3,3)	(iv)

Parents' expected payoffs here are linked to the expected outcomes for a child's growth and their own fulfilment of the role of a supportive parent in their child's endeavours. The child's expected payoffs are linked to their limited action sets and the extent of clarity available to them. We can observe the following from the above game:

a) In state (i), if the parent is passive (even providing support to decisions undertaken) in the sense of lacking any narrative surrounding the future for the child or active discussions related to the same, and the child is passive owing to limited action sets available, limited available information at an early age and limited exposure to competition (the peer circle cannot be assumed constant and to have an extensive impact from an early age for all individuals due to a high degree of heterogeneity in those conditions), then the outcomes are low at (1,1). In this case, an equilibrium is reached because the only way to break the disequilibrium is to shift to state (ii) wherein the child achieves greater payoffs. Again, however, limited action sets and clarity lead to the state of inertia for the child, creating a huge time-lag of shift up until the peer group is influential enough to cause the shift. In such cases, a higher equilibrium could be reached but only after a temporal lag.

b) In state (ii), the active child even without the active guidance of the parents is able to attain higher payoffs. In these cases, the bargaining power of the child can, in some cases, translate to parents becoming more active in discussions and narratives owing to higher payoff obtained in state (iv) as they feel they are better-off fulfilling their role of support as well as have consistent efforts of the child in front of them.

c) Again in the case of state (iii), the active child receives a very little payoff than in the case of the passive child. However, if parental narratives and upbringing assert a great degree of influence on the aspirations of a child (as they have found in the literature), then in many cases, this can again lead to the outcome mentioned in state (iv) with active child and active parent.

Hence, it can be seen that for the above game, the equilibrium outcome is state (iv) with both the parent and the child coordinating to be active in the attainment of aspirations. While state (i) does not appear to be an equilibrium, it remains so unless the inertia on part of the child is overcome due to the influence of peer groups and other circles. At that point, moving from (i) to (ii) leads to the higher outcome of (iv). Until that point, state (i) can be counted as ‘bad equilibrium’ for the game, leading to stagnation at an early age.

Again, the formation of the drive at an early age is also important keeping in mind the social narratives surrounding females working, which is more insidiously heard. Further, in order to overcome the workplace bias towards men, especially in leadership positions, more initiatives are required by women. This temporal delay at an early age can lead to competitive disadvantages at later stages. Moreover, the ‘default aspirations’ as set by society for men and women continues to be different: A girl is told that not working is also an option (whatever educational attainment she may have) whereas a boy is told that working is a necessity, leading to a difference in drive owing to the baseline default aspiration and effort required.

5. CONCLUSION

Active aspirations of a child are formed in the formative years itself. For selected groups, an attainment–aspiration gap may arise due to a lack of knowledge or other overwhelming explicit and implicit narratives about assigned roles for their groups. These can be as insidious as simply guiding conversations towards a particular end for one group and the other end for another.

The role that the immediate family plays is crucial in the development of aspirations. Rather than the gender ambition gap in later years as focused upon in the literature, the root of this ambition gap can be traced back to an ambition gap that is not simply gender-related. This formative gender gap traces its roots back to a community’s history of women empowerment, rather than the current regressive or progressive stance towards working women.

This impact of history is something that has not been explicitly considered in policy initiatives despite the

large-scale impact it has on choices from an early age. Going by the inter temporal choice theory, these choices not only shape characteristics and future confidence of children but can also lead to a temporal lag in realising potential and clarity. This temporal lag is especially harmful in light of the following:

- a) The bias towards men in the workplace that requires an extra edge from the woman’s end to seek opportunities.
- b) The currently competitive workplace scenario for men and women alike.

Keeping in mind the above, the ‘active ambition’ of an individual relative to the socioeconomic circumstances surrounding employment and the nature of work (including both field of work and post allocated to the individual) determines the extent of active participation of females in the workforce, where the default alternative is still outside of the workforce. Especially within the middle-income and higher-income class groups where wages below a certain socially acceptable standard disincentivise work in the absence of greater active ambition to overcome the social norms surrounding the alternative for women, which is a stable, married life.

With a high degree of correlation found between community history in terms of the number of working women in previous generations and the active ambition of females of the current generation, it is crucial that active steps be taken to put not just men and women on an equal footing for the opportunity, homogeneously, but to do so keeping in mind heterogeneous community history with regards to women empowerment.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Current Policy Initiatives

Some of the policy initiatives taken by the Government to increase female labour force participation are as follows:

- a) Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017
- b) Issuance of an advisory to the States under the Factories Act, 1948 for permitting women workers in night shifts with adequate safety measures.
- c) Collaboration with country-wide Women Industrial Training institutes, National Vocational

Training Institutes, and Regional Vocational Training Institutes for providing vocational training to women.

d) Protective provisions for creating safe working conditions for women.

e) The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, ensures equal remuneration to men and women workers for same or similar work without any gender-based discrimination.

6.2 Author's Recommendations

The issue needs to be tackled at a much earlier stage since the above policy initiatives target:

a) The role of women as secondary (or primary breadwinners) and hence the focus on wages.

b) Security concerns related to women working.

c) The concerns of women at later stages (the maternity leave), where again, the paid maternity leave has disincentivised greater hiring of women by companies.

In the literature, the role of ambition in female participation in the workforce has been widely discussed, more so in instances where the work is found to be in dissonance with widely held perceptions of female characteristics (as in the case of women in politics which goes against the view of females avoiding conflict and the term power, with negatively viewed connotations attached to it perceptually). Hence, it has to be considered that the issue of female labour force participation is also a question of implicit perception and awareness barriers.

The issue of 'active ambition' needs to be targeted on a broader scale, especially for the women of middle and higher social and income strata where resource considerations are not the primary constraining factor. Having female role models and being exposed to varied working narratives needs to be a provision. This is also supported by data where the number of working women in the current generation was also found to be linked to the number of working women in the previous generation. This can be explained not only by variations in perceptions and support to working women but also by the exposure to female working role models and their narratives, as was found during the open-ended interviews. Moreover, nearly 68% of respondents felt that they interacted

more with their mother than with their father, adding support to the need for female role models in the workforce and for the counselling of parents so as to provide active guidance to the girl child. Snippets of conversation or narratives were found to play a guiding role in forming a child's perceptions and giving direction to their curiosity in their formative years.

Keeping in mind the above, the following policy recommendations are made:

a) Counselling sessions with parents at an early age as different career options (all-inclusive, not those segregated for being suitable for women) require different steps. Hence, counselling is needed to reach those steps and enable them to provide active guidance to their children.

b) Active discussions about future goals in schools from an early age, through fairs or competitions.

c) A broader awareness program about accomplished women in all fields, both technical and otherwise, to be undertaken in collaboration with schools.

d) The same is to be undertaken on community levels with role models selected being from various communities, so as to engender a greater sense of relatability.

e) Awareness about the broader impact of reforms so far, such as the number of females opting for work in technical backgrounds (which are typically occupationally segregated as male-dominated).

f) Collaboration with the media to not only focus on the narratives of rigorous demands of work-life balance for women but also the narrative of women working as simply pursuing their dreams so as to overcome narratives of the career-family choice explicitly and exclusively for women.

g) Encourage women to join schools, vocational training programs; undertake confidence-building programs (this is for women belonging to lower social strata).

A broader policy recommendation is to carry out these awareness programs in a targeted format, targeting different communities with their different histories and social norms. This can be done keeping in mind the demographic structure within a state and the percentage-wise composition of communities living within it. The above would call for Centre-State collaboration.

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APPENDIX

A.1. Open-Ended Questionnaire

1. Do you have a goal in mind pertaining to higher vocational attainments?
2. If yes, when did you first realise this was a goal and was the primary shaping factor?
3. How many working members do you have in your immediate family or extended family within the realm of recurrent interaction? How many of these are female in the present and previous generations?
4. What are the steps that you have taken towards achieving this goal and when did you begin?
5. Retrospectively, are you satisfied with the steps taken? Do you feel that you could have taken the further initiative? If yes, what factor(s) do you think would have propelled you to take further action?
6. In your peer group, do you believe that others who have been more proactive are ahead of you? Do you feel this gap can be covered without significant outcome differences? What steps will you be taking towards covering this gap, if any?
7. What are the most common topics of conversation with your family and your peer group?
8. In realising this goal and in shaping your perspective so as to take steps towards the attainment, rank the following in terms of their influence:
 - a) Immediate family
 - b) Extended family (on the basis of interactions or news pertaining to their achievements)
 - c) Friends/peer groups (specify school or college)
 - d) Other (specify)
9. What is the narrative surrounding your future that you have grown up hearing if any?
10. What is the degree and nature of support provided by your family? What is the difference between this influence and the one provided by your peer group?

A.2. Questions for Active Ambition

- a) Rate awareness about the steps needed to achieve your goals (on a scale of 1 to 10).
- b) Rate your satisfaction with the steps you have taken to do so (on a scale of 1 to 10).
- c) Are you certain you would continue with your career despite social backlash for doing the same at any point in time? (10 taken in case of yes, 0 in case of no)

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