Stigma of sexual violence and women's decision to work

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Abstract

Our study is motivated by two disturbing evidences concerning women in India. On one hand, crime against women is on the rise while on the other, women's labor force participation rate (WLFPR) has been declining over the last three decades. We estimate the extent to which the decline in WLFPR can be assigned to increasing instances of crime against women. We argue that an increase in crime against women, increases the non-pecuniary costs of traveling to work, particularly in a traditional society marked by stigma against victims of sexual crimes. Our findings suggest that women are less likely to work away from home in regions where the perceived threat of sexual harassment against girls is higher. The estimate is robust to various sensitivity checks. Moreover, the deterrence effect of crime responds to the opportunity cost of work on one hand and the stigma cost of sexual crimes on the other.

1. Introduction

Women empowerment in India in recent times is confronted with two serious predicaments – a rising trend of sexual crimes against women and a steady decline in the work force participation of women. While there is some interest to study these two issues separately, not much has been done to link these two disturbing pieces of evidence. In this paper we aim to bridge this gap in the literature by empirically examining whether violence against women is preventing them from joining the labor market.

The issue of rape and crimes against women in India has attracted much public as well as media attention in recent times both in domestic as well as the international press. The infamous Nirbhaya gang rape case that happened in Delhi in 2012 was one such shocking case that shook the collective conscience of the civil society in India and led to mass protests across India (Biswas, 2012). A careful study of the data, however, reveals that this was not a one off case – this is part of an alarming trend of reported rapes in India which has been rising for quite some time (Iyer, Mani, Mishra, & Topalova, 2012). Many of these cases do not get reported in the media; although at a policy level they are, perhaps, equally important. In fact, such a trend is not limited to India either. Among international agencies and policy makers, there is a growing recognition of widespread prevalence of violence against women globally. In its first systematic review on violence against women, the World Health Organization reports that globally, 35% of women have experienced some violence either by an intimate-partner or by a non-partner (WHO, 2013).

Feminist discourse sees rape as an instrument of controlling women and therefore, is instrumental in supporting patriarchy. Brownmiller (1976) in her classic book Against our will: men, women and rape describes rape as “a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear” (p. 15). Since then, this view was iterated by many other scholars. Griffin (2015) for example argues that “the threat of rape is used to deny women employment. In California, the Berkeley Public Library, until pushed by the Federal Employment Practices Commission, refused to hire female shelvers because of perverted men in the stacks. The fear of rape keeps women off the streets at night. Keeps women at home. Keeps women passive and modest for the fear that they be thought provocative (p. 21)

In the decade following the publication of Brownmiller’s book, a number of survey based studies provided empirical support to her qualitative assertions. In one of such study Riger and Gordon...
be stronger for such families. We argue that India’s declining work- 
effect of crime against women on their workforce participation will 
which have more conservative values and therefore the deterrent 
fact that women fear rape most, stems from a patriarchal mindset 
most feared crime against women, the cultural values underlying 
ereation in the studies cited above. While it is found that rape is 
1 We use the phrase ‘women’s work force participation’ and ‘women’s labor force participation’ interchangeably in this paper to mean the proportion of women working in, or looking for, gainful employment.  

(1981) used telephone interview of 1620 people living within the 
the city limits of Philadelphia, San Fransisco and Chicago. They classi- 
ified women’s strategy against possible attacks in two groups – iso-
lation and street savvy. In the first strategy, women choose not to 
expose themselves to situations which they thought could be dan-
gerous such as going out to streets at night. Street savvy strategies 
on the other hand involves tactics that would reduce risk when 
exposed to danger such as wearing running shoes and keeping 
pepper spray in bags. In their data, very few men used isolation 
tactics while 41% of women took recourse to isolation tactics. 

In another study Warr (1985) analyzed responses of a mail sur-
vey of Seattle residents done in 1981. Compared to other forms of 
crime, fear of rape is most significant for women. For age less than 
35 rape is the most feared crime – more feared than murder, 
assault and robbery. It ranks second for women in the age group 
36–50 and declines to ninth for women above age 66. Among 
women in each age group, the perceived seriousness of rape is very 
high – virtually similar to that of murder. In response to the ques-
tions regarding the coping strategy, the two most prominent 
strategies are home security precautions and social and lifestyle 
precautions. However in the data, there is little correlation 
between fear of rape and home security precautions while there is 
a strong correlation between fear of rape and social and lifestyle 
precautions. 

The studies cited above reveal that in response to the pervasive 
fear of rape, women often adopt the strategy of avoidance by mod-
ifying their lifestyle. We extend their position by arguing that in 
India quitting workforce can be one possible avoidance strategy 
taken by women. More importantly, we argue that the fear of rape 
is often conditioned by family culture – a woman hailing from tra-
ditional family values will fear rape more than her liberal counter-
part. Such fear may induce women to quit the labor force which in 
turn leads to low overall women’s work force participation rate. 

We must emphasize at this point that our study along with the 
body of scholarly work cited above, which are based on the U.S., 
shows that the fear of rape among women and their response to 
such fear cut across societies. Therefore, the conventional way of 
viewing societies in a traditional/modern binary and assigning 
patriarchy as a characteristic of traditional societies do not hold. 
This makes our work robust to churning of cultural values in India 
that emanates from the socioeconomic transformation that India 
experienced after economic liberalization started in 1991 
(Nielsen & Waldrop, 2014). 

The contribution of our work mainly rests on two focal points. 
First, we view women’s low participation rate in the work force 
in India as a response to pervasive fear of sexual crime against 
women. Second, we probe an area that was not taken into consid-
eration in the studies cited above. While it is found that rape is 
the most feared crime against women, the cultural values underlying 
such fear is not well analyzed in the literature. We argue that the 
fact that women fear rape most, stems from a patriarchal mindset 
that sees body as pure and as a property of some male member – 
her prospective husband. Such values will be stronger for families 
which have more conservative values and therefore the deterrent 
effect of crime against women on their workforce participation will 
be stronger for such families. We argue that India’s declining work- 
force participation of women can partially be accounted for by ris-
ing crime against women (Fig. 1). 

The trend in women’s labor force participation rate (WLFPF) 
reflects a stagnancy for an extended period of time between 
1983–84 and 2004 before it started to decline between 2005 and 
2010 (Lahoti & Swaminathan, 2013). Lahoti and Swaminathan 
(2013) further mention that WLFPF declined in rural as well as urban 
India during 2005–2010. In rural areas it declined from 33.3% to 
26.5% while in the urban areas it declined from 17.8% to 14.6%. 
Besides the declining trend over time, the level of WLFPF in India 
has been much lower than in other Asian economies (Verick, 
2014). The low level of WLFPF has serious implications for India’s 
GDP. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia 
and Pacific finds that had Indian women’s work force participation 
rate been the same as that of their male counterpart, India’s GDP 
would increase by 60% between 2016 and 2025 (Mathew, 2016). 

In this paper, we investigate whether crime against women has 
played a role in keeping WLFPF low in India.2 Anecdotal evidence 
suggests that incidence of assault on women discourages them to 
go for work (Gupta, 2013). This finding is also observed in a survey 
based study by Sudarshan and Bhattacharya (2009). In a survey of 
non-working women in Delhi, they find that safety concern is an 
important factor that stops women from working outside home, sec-
ond only to their engagement in domestic work. Our own calcula-
tions based on state level cross section data show that there is 

2 There is newly emerging literature that looked into the role of several socio 
economics factors including income in explaining the declining women’s labour force 
participation in India. We accept that there are many factors that shape women’s 
labour force participation in India. Our paper however, complements the existing 
literature by proposing another explanatory variable – crime against women.
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