



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.

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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

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(1981) used telephone interview of 1620 people living within the city limits of Philadelphia, San Francisco and Chicago. They classified women's strategy against possible attacks in two groups – isolation and street savvy. In the first strategy, women choose not to expose themselves to situations which they thought could be dangerous 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 survey 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 questions 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 modifying 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 traditional family values will fear rape more than her liberal counterpart. 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 consideration 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 workforce participation of women can partially be accounted for by rising crime against women (Fig. 1).

The trend in women's labor force participation rate (WLFPR) 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).¹ Lahoti and Swaminathan

(2013) further mention that WLFPR 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 WLFPR in India has been much lower than in other Asian economies (Verick, 2014). The low level of WLFPR 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 WLFPR 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, second only to their engagement in domestic work. Our own calculations based on state level cross section data show that there is a negative relation between specific crime rates such as rape, abduction and kidnapping and WLFPR (see Fig. 2). Despite these general trends, we have not come across any study which has established (theoretically or empirically) that greater incidence of crime would cause lower work force participation of women. On the contrary, some studies have found positive correlation between these two (Mukherjee, Rustagi, & Krishnaji, 2001). It could be the case that working women are more active in reporting crime and this leads to the observed correlation, as the authors themselves point out. Similar suggestion is also made by Iyer et al. (2012) where they find that the incidence of crime against women is higher for *panchayats* which are reserved for women. Such pattern, they argued, can be explained by rise in the reporting of crime (rather than actual incidence of crime) that is associated with greater empowerment of women.

Our work also adds to the body of research that has been devoted to studying women's labor force participation (WLFPR). It has been found that patterns of social organizations, the organization of the family and the kinship system play a major role in women's decision to participate in the labour force (Chamlou, Muzi, & Ahmed, 2011; Fernández, 2007). WLFPR varies considerably between developed and developing countries as well as across developing countries, with the lowest female participation rate being recorded in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia (Verick, 2014). However, while in recent times WLFPR has increased in the first two regions, it has fallen in South Asia (Gaddis & Klasen, 2014). There is a substantial variation within South Asia as well. Bangladesh witnessed a rapid increase in WLFPR while the situation is particularly grim in India (Rahman et al., 2013).

There are a handful of papers that try to explain the puzzling phenomenon of stagnancy/decline of WLFPR in India. Klasen and Pieters (2015) did a comprehensive study by analysing the WLFPR in urban India between 1987 and 2001. They attributed the stagnancy of WLFPR in India to a combination of supply and demand side factors. On the supply side, rising family income and education of husbands are found to reduce WLFPR by a significant extent. The authors also found a standard U-shaped relation between WLFPR and education. Furthermore they find that the positive effect of education on WLFPR has declined as more women are choosing to pursue higher education. On the demand side, their paper

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.

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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