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DISCUSSION PAPER

Reviving Female Labour Force Participation in India: Need to Challenge Social Norms

Akshita Sharma

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Akshita Sharma

Despite an improvement in women's education and health outcomes, India's formal and informal female labour force participation (FLFP) has declined in the last two decades.

ABSTRACT

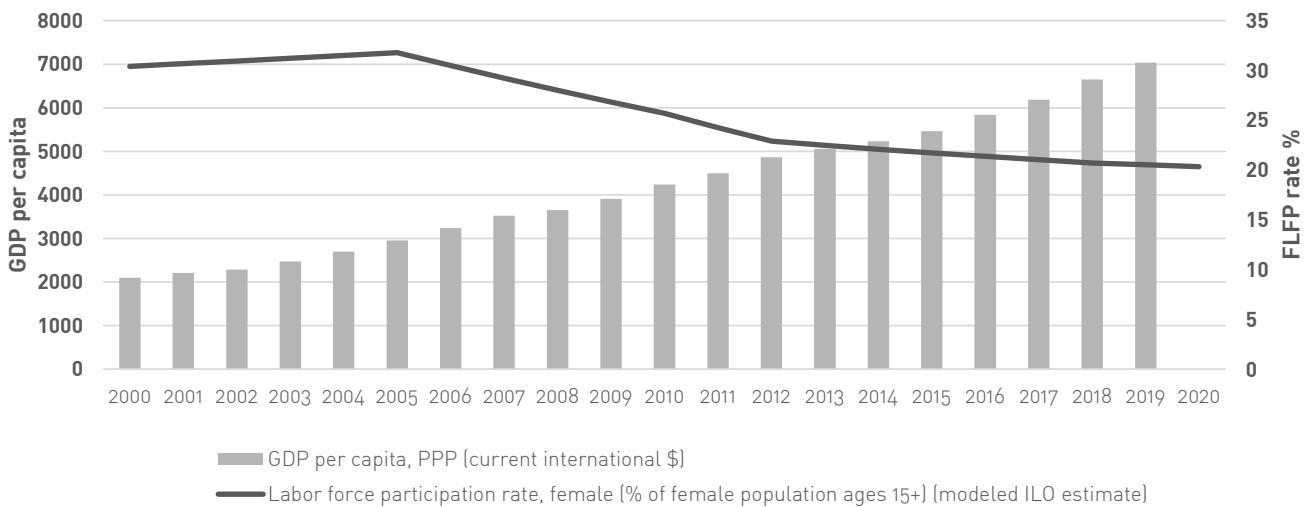
The participation of women in the workforce aids not only societies and countries. Despite an improvement in women's education and health outcomes, India's formal and informal female labour force participation (FLFP) has declined in the last two decades. While the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a sharper fall in the labour force participation of both men and women, recovery looks particularly slow for the latter. This indicates that there are certain factors at play that are constraining FLFP in India.

This paper aims to examine the role of social norms in impacting both the supply of and demand for female workers in India. Although social and gender norms are deeply entrenched and internalised in our society, they are not irreversible. Challenging these norms is crucial to drive the socio-economic development of women.

INTRODUCTION: ECONOMIC GROWTH SANS FEMALE WORKFORCE

There are 656 million women in India, constituting half of the country’s population (The World Bank n.d.). Despite this, India’s growing economy has witnessed an ever-declining (figure 1) female labour force participation (FLFP) for the past two decades. From 2004-05 to 2017-18, the FLFP declined by about 45% in the rural areas (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 2019: 51). Only one-fifth of the female population constituted the workforce in 2019, which is one of the lowest in the world.

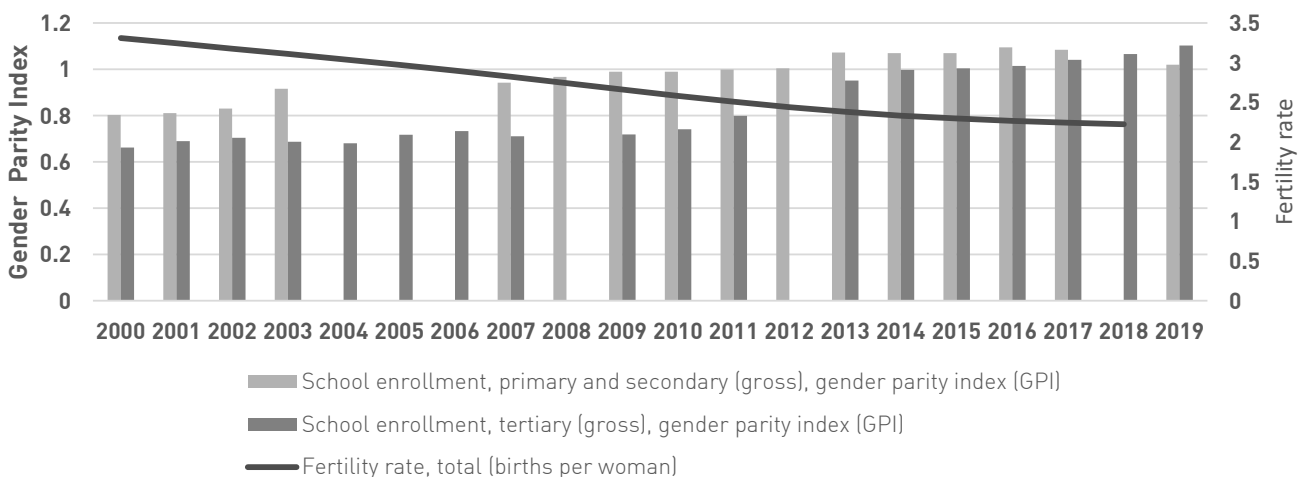
Figure 1: GDP per capita vs FLFP (1990 - 2020)



Source: The World Bank n.d.

While India witnessed improvements in gender parity in education, the number of women who participated in the workforce continued to decline. In recent years, an equal or higher number of girls have enrolled in primary, secondary and tertiary education as compared to boys. The rise in female literacy rate led to an increased demand for better family planning services and higher cost of women’s time (Parikh 2001), leading to a downfall in the fertility rate from 3.3 births per woman in 2000 to 2.2 births in 2018 (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Gender Parity in Education and Fertility rates



Source: The World Bank n.d.

This not only illustrates positive outcomes for Indian women as they become more educated and more capable of employment than before, but also reflects a shift in the societal beliefs about how women must lead their lives.

Despite these positive outcomes, the dwindling FLFP indicates that economic growth is leaving India's women behind and that their contribution to this growth is plummeting. Even though the male labour force participation has also seen a decline, it stood at 76% in 2019, four times that of FLFP in the same year (The World Bank n.d.). Even in 2015, when India became the fastest growing economy in the world, the FLFP rate still stood at only 22% of the female population.

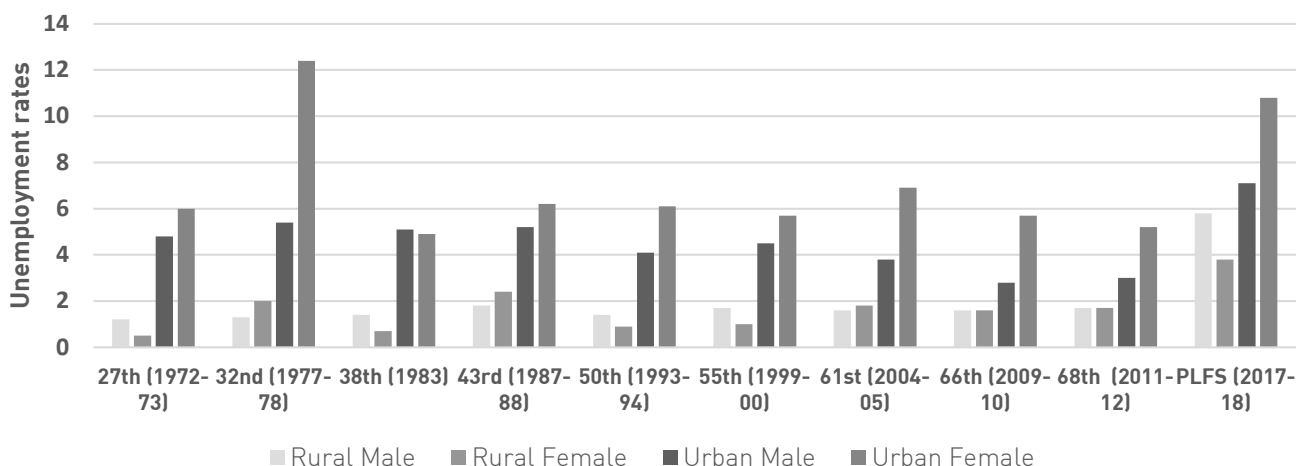
Women already contribute to the economic growth through unpaid care work at home (catering to the needs of the family, children, elderly, ill), which contributes to 35% of India's GDP (Agrawal 2019), and may prefer not to partake in any other full-time roles. Nonetheless, declining FLFP is of policy interest as paid employment empowers women economically in a country like India, which ranks 112 out of 153 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index ¹ (World Economic Forum 2020: 5).

LOCATING WOMEN IN INDIA'S WORKFORCE

Among the women seeking participation in the labour force, a large portion is unable to find suitable jobs. In 2019, the female labour force's unemployment rate stood at 5.23% (The World Bank n.d.).

Looking at the rural-urban divide, unemployment among urban women far exceeds that of rural women, rural men and urban men, a trend that can be observed since the 1970s (Figure 3). Unemployment among rural women is higher or at par with that of rural male. The factors behind such trends will be more evident in the following sections.

Figure 3: Unemployment rates (%) according to usual status (ps+ss) from 1972-73 (NSSO surveys) to 2017-18 (PLFS)

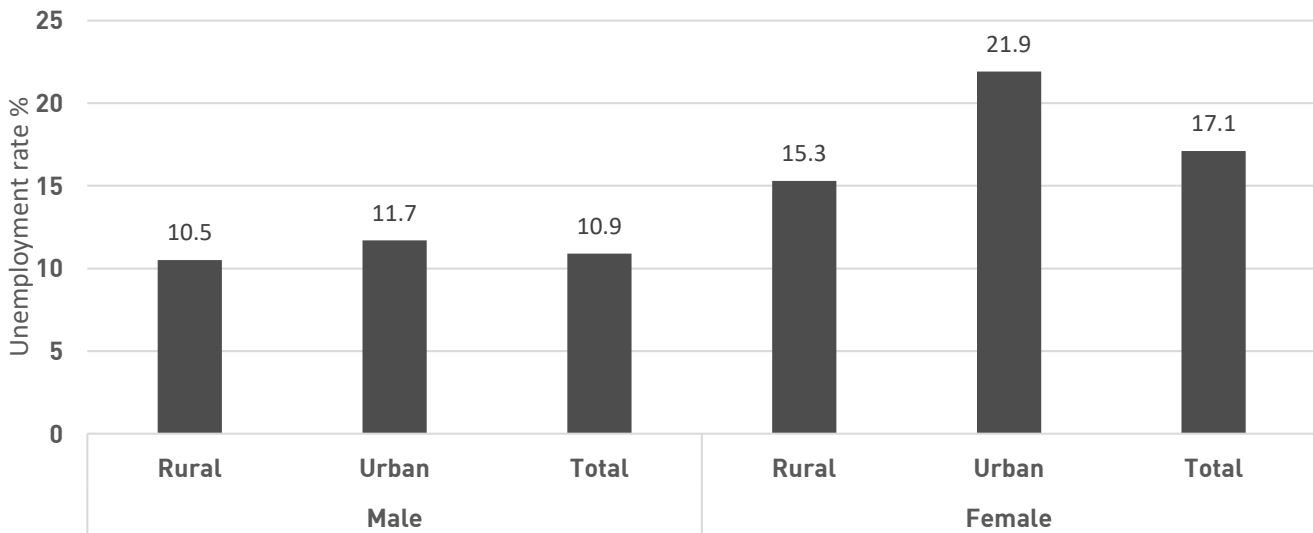


Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 2019: 83

¹ Global Gender Gap Index measures the extent of gender-based gaps among four key dimensions (Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment) and tracking progress towards closing these gaps over time.

The adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the female labour force led to a sudden rise in the unemployment rate to 17.1% in May-August 2020 (Figure 4). Several reports show that when compared to men, more women lost jobs during the pandemic (Bera 2020), and despite the recovery in the labour market, female workers are being left behind, especially rural women (Rukmini 2020). Deshpande (2020) found that the “likelihood of women being employed is 9.5 percentage points less than that of men, compared to the pre-pandemic period”.

Figure 4: Unemployment rate (UER) (%), May-August 2020



Source: CMIE 2020: 5

It is also crucial to explore the type of work employed women are engaged in. More than half of the female workers in rural areas are self-employed, 31.8% earn regular wages, and only 10.5% work as casual labour (Figure 5.1). Under self-employment, most rural women work as helpers in households, while 19% are employers (Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.1: Distribution of female workers by broad status in rural sector employment (2017-18)

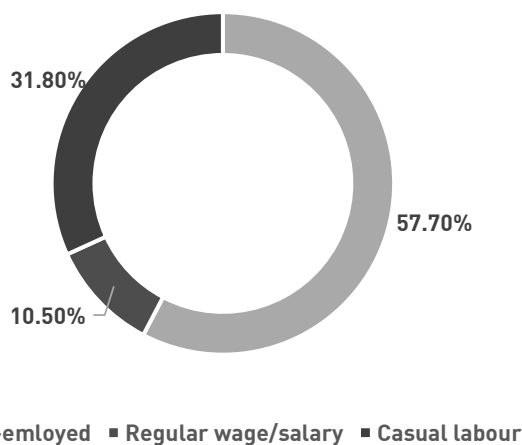
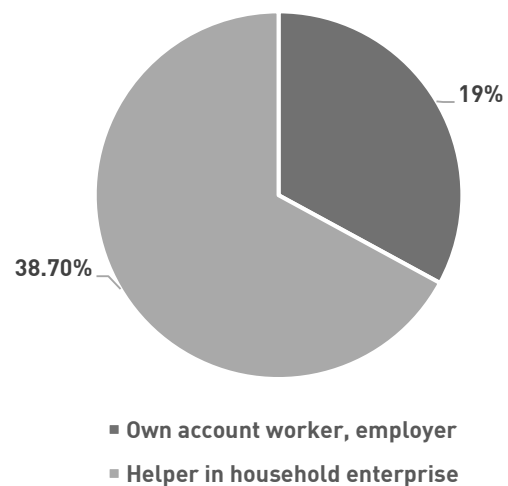


Figure 5.2: Breakdown of self-employment in the rural sector



Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 2019: 77

The nature of work in urban areas is different, with 52% of female workers involved in casual work and 34.7% self-employed (Figure 6.1). Here, a larger proportion of self-employed women are employers, and 11% are helpers in households (Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.1: Distribution of female workers by broad status in urban sector employment (2017-18)

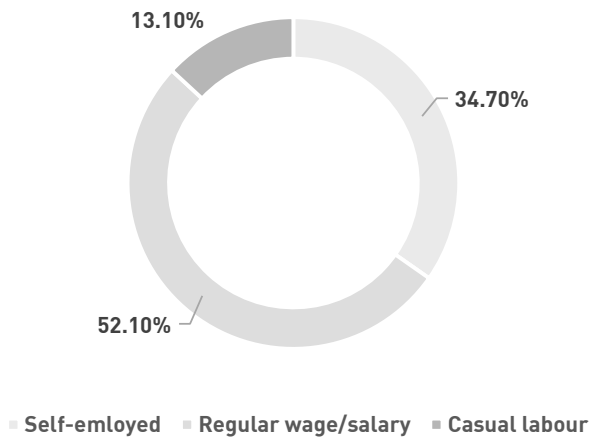


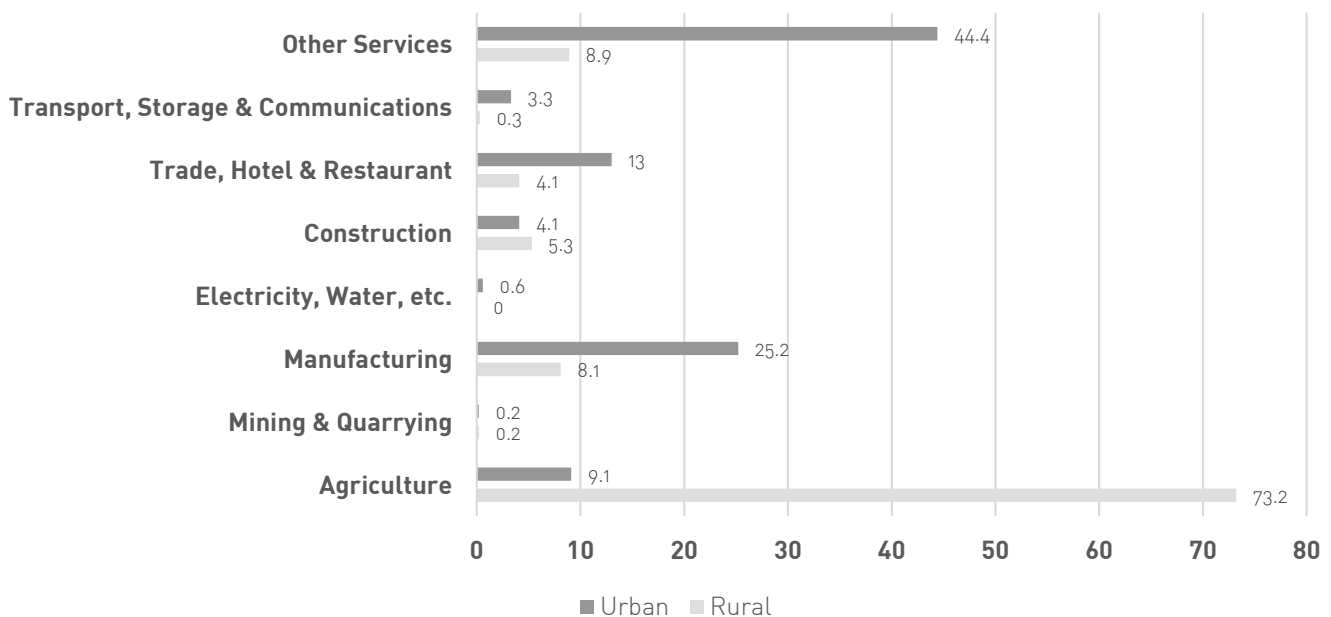
Figure 6.2: Breakdown of self-employment in the urban sector



Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 2019: 77

The employment structure seen above can be corroborated by observing the industry-wise female employment across rural and urban areas. In rural areas, where the prevalence of self-employment is high, 73.2% of women are employed in agriculture. In the urban areas, where more women earn regular salaries, manufacturing (25.2%), trade, hotels and restaurants, and other services (44.4%; beauty parlours, grocery shops, food stalls) are common forms of employment among women.

Figure 7: Distribution of female workers (per cent) by broad industry division (2017 - 18)



Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 2019: 78

In light of the above discussion, the following is puzzling: if the gender parity in education is as high as it has ever been, women are more literate, the fertility rates have fallen to the lowest in India's history, then why are women still withdrawing from the workforce? There are undoubtedly other factors at play that are constraining women's economic participation.

SOCIAL NORMS: THE ONE BEHIND THE CURTAINS

The factors behind a declining FLFP in India belong to both the market's demand and labour supply. This implies that FLFP is driven by a woman's willingness to work at the given wage rate and prevailing labour market conditions, as well as the employers' willingness to hire at the market wage rate, cost of capital, price of output and other exogenous variables.

Existing economic literature discussed below has ample evidence to explain the following. On the labour supply side, women's participation in the labour market is constrained by the amount of unpaid care work they undertake at home, the level of education, and the level of household income. Meanwhile, on the labour demand side, women's participation in the labour market is constrained by occupational segregation, lack of adequate jobs, wage gaps, employment conditions, and other labour market conditions.

While the constraints to FLFP exist at multiple levels starting from the individual level to families and societies, and from firms to industries and the government, social norms play a critical role in influencing these constraints and hence, labour market outcomes for women (Gauri et al. 2019: 2).

Social Norms Uphold Barriers to Female Participation in Labour Markets

Social norms are informal rules or shared beliefs that govern a social group's behaviour (ibid). Social norms indicate to the members of a social group what is socially acceptable or unacceptable and how to behave while conforming to their social role (e.g., mother, father, brother, sister). For women, these norms impact the kind of work they do, wages/promotions they receive, harassment policies, and gender-friendly infrastructure in workplaces.

In India, social norms surrounding women dictate that they are primarily caregivers who manage all household responsibilities and tend to children, the elderly, and the ill. Hence, their place belongs at home, and they don't need to engage in work outside if their husband earns enough. This gender role of a woman persists throughout her life as she transitions from one subordinate role to another — a daughter, a sister, a wife, and a mother. Hence, social norms structurally restrict women from economic opportunities all their life, impacting both supply of and demand for female labour. This section discusses the supply- and demand-side constraints to FLFP in the backdrop of these social norms.

Labour Supply-side Constraints

Despite improvements in educational attainment, the unemployment rates among rural and urban women for each level of education shot up post 2011-12 (Figure 8.1 and 8.2). The India Skills Report 2020 states that despite "having sound employability scores (40%) through the previous years, only one in four

Indian women are working presently” (Wheebox 2020: 23), indicating that better education has not necessarily converted to higher employment.

Figure 8.1: Unemployment rates per cent according to educational attainments for rural females of age 15+ years

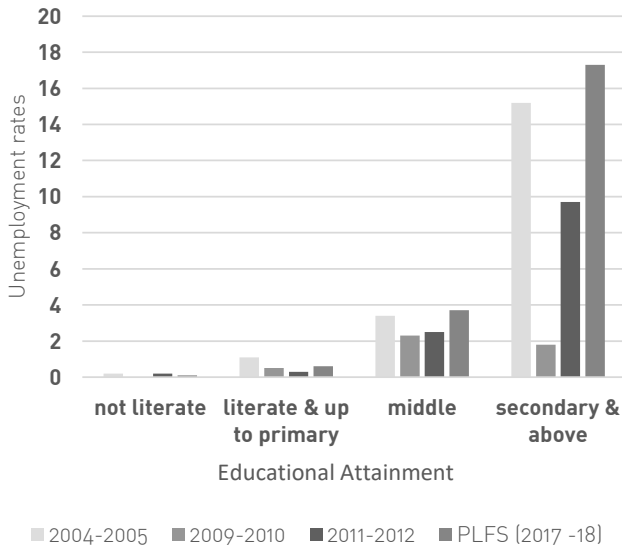
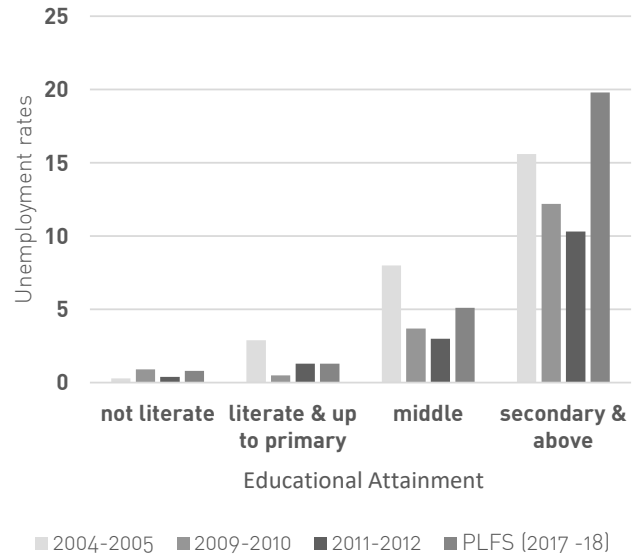


Figure 8.2: Unemployment rates per cent according to educational attainments for urban females of age 15+ years



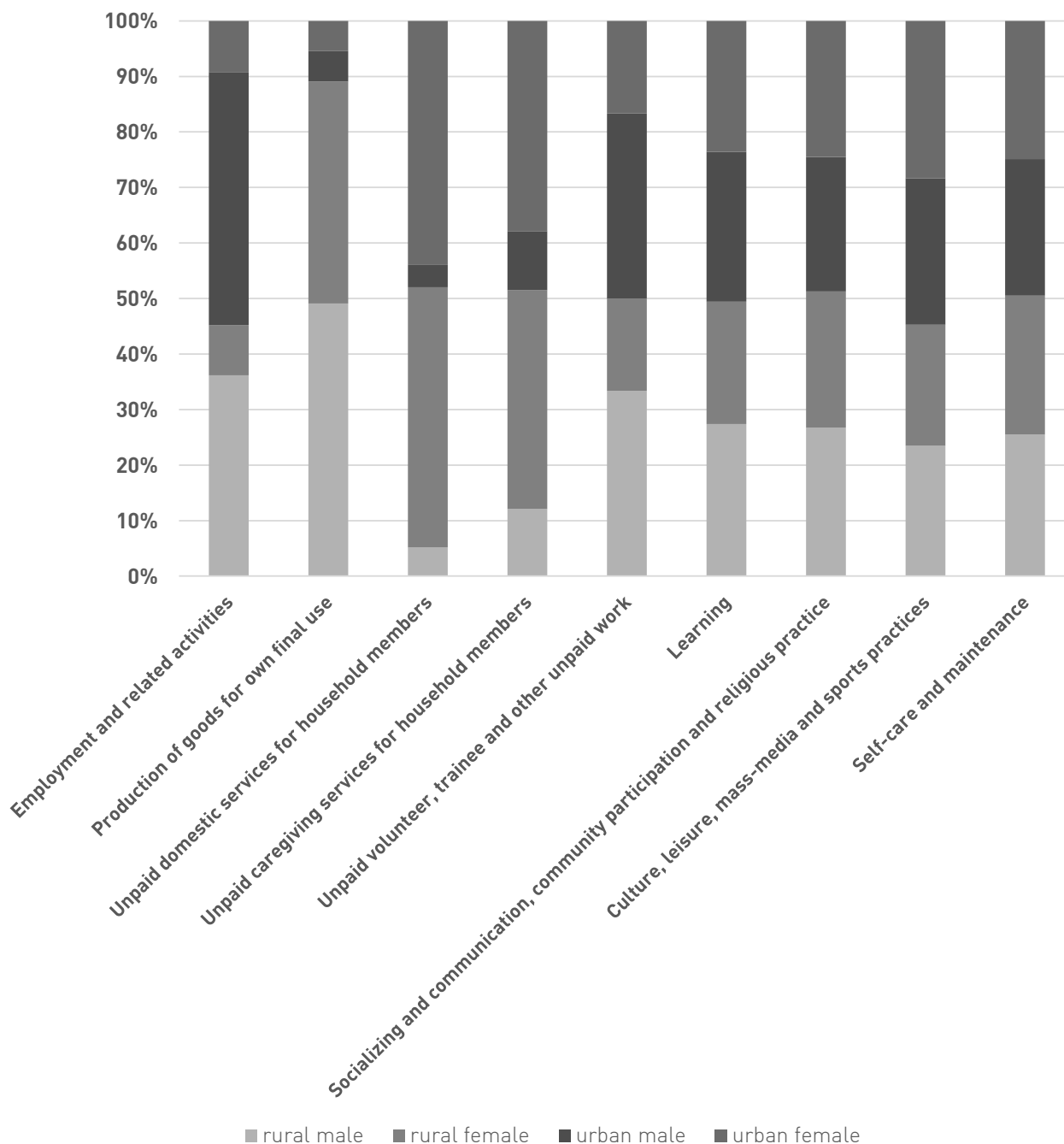
Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 2019: 84

These trends can be connected to social norms and patriarchal systems that bind women to unpaid care work at home. With household responsibilities inevitably falling on women, the option of gainful employment is reserved for times of financial stress where women’s earnings serve as a secondary source of household income.

A study conducted in rural and urban Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi, and Mumbai found that about 50% of adults believed that a married woman should not be working outside the home if the husband earns a decent living (Coffey et al. 2018: 48). In the World Values Survey (2012: 10), while 66.6% of women and 63.3% men agreed that “having a job is the best way for a woman to be an independent person”, 59.3% of men and 43.4% of women also believed that when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women. About 75% of surveyed individuals agreed to the statement “when a mother works for pay, the children suffer” (ibid: 11). It is also interesting to note that such norms are “more binding” among wealthier and upper-caste households, which could explain the low FLFP in urban India (Fletcher 2018: 3).

Thus, it is not surprising that females spent 16.9% of their time on unpaid domestic services for household members while men spent only 1.7%, according to the Time Use Survey 2019 (Figure 10). It is apparent that women spent much less time (4.2%) on paid employment and related activities as compared to men (18.3%).

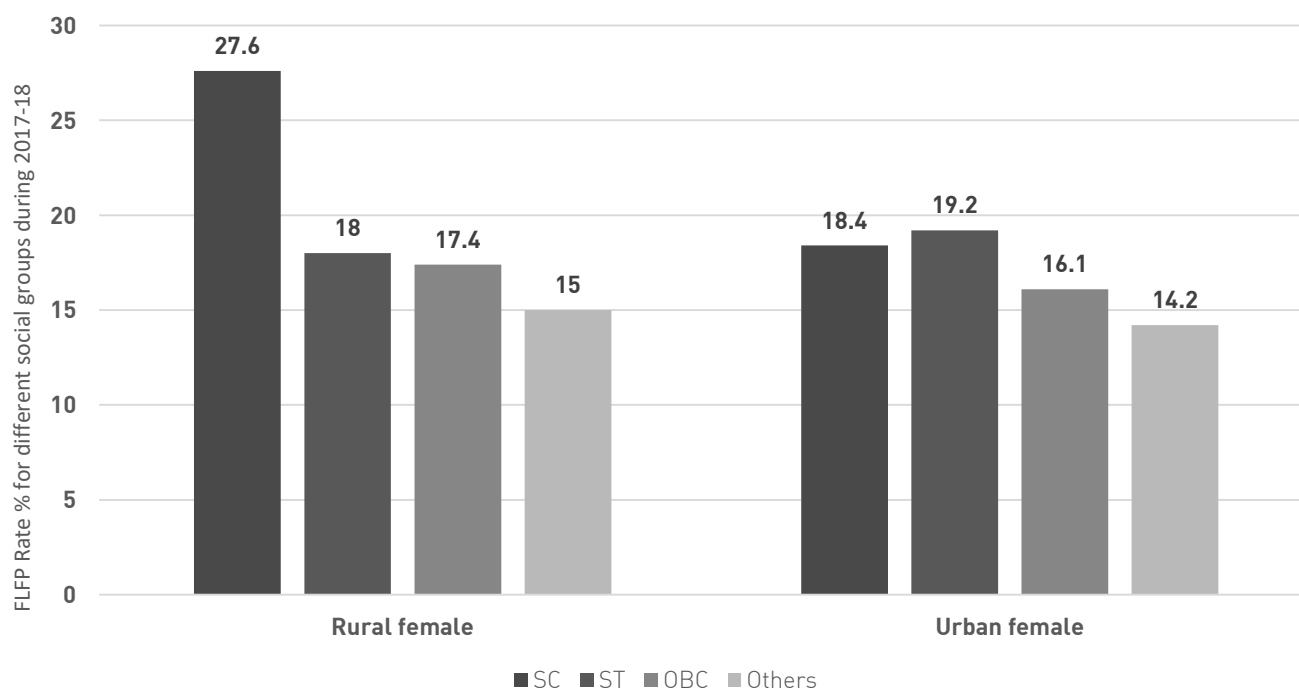
Figure 9: Percentage share of total time in different activities in a day per person of age 6 years and above



Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 2020: X

Studies show that another social factor restricting FLFP is the level of household income, termed as the income effect. Educated women tend to marry more educated men who earn higher incomes (Chatterjee 2018: 857). When the household income increases and the reliance on the women’s wages falls, it incentivises women to drop out of the labour force and focus on their “status production”. Families and caste groups gain status by a woman’s seclusion from the labour market, except in cases of white-collar governmental jobs, which are considered highly respectful and thus, receive family support (Desai 2019: 67). This income effect can be seen in the figure below, showing that the more economically deprived the social group, the higher its FLFP; inversely, the better-off groups have a lower FLFP.

Figure 10: Female Labour Force Participation Rate (per cent) for different social groups during 2017-18 above



Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 2019: 91

Men control women's lives under patriarchal institutions to a large extent, and women's own internalised patriarchy influences the labour market decisions they make. According to the National Family and Health Survey (2015-16), 16% of surveyed women do not participate in decisions regarding their own healthcare, household purchases, and visiting relatives. Seventeen per cent of women's employment decisions are made by their husbands, while 61% of women take joint decisions with their husbands (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2017: 531).

Women also suffer restrictions on mobility, driven by safety concerns. Only 41% of women are allowed to go to the market, health facility, and places outside the village or community, while 6% are not allowed to do any of the three. An interesting observation is that, while the percentage of women allowed to go outside rises with an increase in household wealth, it does not increase with increasing years of schooling (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2017: 540). When curbing women's freedom is a norm, their participation in the labour market becomes challenging. This, coupled with women's household responsibilities, tells us why they prefer regular part-time work (Rathore 2018) that can help them manage household chores on the side, mitigating the double burden of work that they would bear with full-time work.

As women's household roles persist, their autonomy is restricted by way of limited access to bank accounts and phones. Only 53% of women have a bank account that they can use themselves, 40% of women hold knowledge of microcredit programmes, and 46% have a mobile phone (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2017: 537). Most women depend on word-of-mouth in their families and communities for information on employment and entrepreneurship opportunities (UNDP 2015: 24). These norms also limit women's network size (Fletcher 2018: 16).

Ghai (2018) further lists migration as an understudied supply-side constraint to FLFP. Migrant women face safety concerns and the problem of inadequate accommodation, which disincentivises them to migrate to cities for work. While commuting and at workplaces, women's safety in public spaces is a concern for both women and their families. Unfortunately, due to rampant patriarchy, sexual harassment is also normalised. The National Commission for Women (NCW) has seen an increase in sexual harassment complaints from workplaces (FICCI 2017). A UN Women study conducted in New Delhi shows that 95% of women aged 16 to 49 felt unsafe in public spaces. With the onus of being safe falling only on women's shoulders, it isn't surprising that a high perceived level of neighbourhood crime is associated with lower FLFP (Jayachandran 2020: 7).

Labour Demand-side Constraints

Most women are employed in agriculture and manufacturing, both of which have witnessed the slowest job growths, indicating that demand for female labour supply has taken a hit (Ghai 2018: 14). It is also crucial to note that labour markets are gendered, meaning that occupational segregation is based on what is considered women's work and men's work. Professions dominated by women such as teaching, nursing, domestic help, and so forth (ILO 2014: 5) are extensions of the care work women undertake at home. Thus, the social norms that define household work as women's primary responsibility also impact the kind of jobs they are offered.

How labour markets are structured is often unfavourable, with labour laws often discouraging employers from hiring women. In fact, these "protective legislations" have reinforced gender roles and discrimination in the labour market. Women are prohibited from working night shifts in specific factory processes, underground mines, and several other industrial operations such as glassware manufacturing, metalworking, solvent extraction plants etc., which indirectly set standards for what is considered women's work.

Paid maternity leaves and the recent amendment of the Maternity Benefit Act to include 26 weeks of paid leave also reinforce social norms against working women in the absence of similar paternity leave. Since small and medium businesses and start-ups might be unable to afford to pay maternity benefits or have an employee on leave for long, they might prefer not to hire females at all. A study by LocalCircles (2018) found that 46% of SMEs and start-ups hired mostly men in the preceding 18 months. Thus, these legislations make it uneconomical for employers to employ many women or to pay women the same wages as men.

Employers also fail to undertake measures to make workplaces gender-sensitive and inclusive. A study by FICCI and EY found that 36% of Indian companies and 25% of MNCs were not compliant with the Sexual Harassment Act 2013 (FICCI 2015: 5). Other than this, childcare facilities and proper creche facilities are unavailable, making it challenging for women to join the labour force when social norms mandate that it's their primary responsibility to look after children. Thus, because of the absence of paternity leave, unavailability of childcare and the expense of maternity leave, women are structurally pushed back into the house to take care of the child because there is no other alternative.

Compounding this is the fact that women often earn less than men. According to a report released by IIM Ahmedabad and Monster India, the gender pay gap stood at 19% on average and has increased from 2017 when it was 15%

(WageIndicator Foundation 2019: 5). Thus, instead of accepting low paying jobs despite being educated, women choose to remain out of the labour force altogether. Fletcher et al. (2018) notes that “as long as there exist norms against women’s market engagement, we expect to see gender-based discrimination in hiring, legal or otherwise, and gender wage gaps that cannot be explained by common sources of observable variation in wages persist”.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND BEST PRACTICES

Social norms impact both the female labour demand and supply, thereby constraining FLFP in India. It must be noted that even though social norms only partially explain India’s low FLFP, challenging and mitigating them will be highly beneficial for women in the labour market. Social norms being as persistent and entrenched as they have been, cannot be changed at once. The transformation of norms will be an intergenerational process, requiring continuous strategic actions.

Facilitate Easier Balancing of Work and Family

There is a need for the de-feminisation of unpaid care work and caregiving at home, an economic decoupling from the idea that only women must undertake household responsibilities. Chapman et al. (2019) suggest innovative policies like providing monetary incentives to co-parents for sharing the household burden so that mothers can join the workforce. Paternity leaves must be at par with maternity leaves, so that gender norms are not reinforced.

Policies to help mothers manage household chores easily and make them less time-consuming can go a long way. For instance, in Indonesia, the shift to labour-saving LPG cooking fuel increased FLFP. In Brazil, winning a lottery for free child care increased the likelihood of the mother’s employment from 36% to 46%. Subsidised day-care services in Nicaragua had similar effects (Jayachandran 2020: 17).

Shift Gender Norms That Define What Women’s Work Should Be

Several studies have tried to measure the impact of changed gender norms and attitudes on female employment. In Uttar Pradesh, where the objection to FLFP is prevalent, showing promotional videos to families about job opportunities in carpet weaving for women improved employment outcomes for them. Another study periodically conducted 45-minute sessions with adolescents, teaching them about “gender roles, recognition and (in)tolerance of gender discrimination, and interpersonal skills”, found that there was a large shift towards gender-equitable behaviour that persisted even after the programme ended (Jayachandran 2020: 18).

Studies show that better earnings of women can lead to both a rise and a fall in inter-partner violence (IPV), with attitudes to women’s economic independence being the deciding factor. While in California, better earnings led to a fall in IPV, a study in Bangalore shows that employed women faced more IPV. Jayachandran (2020) recommends that it is important to shift views about masculinity so that men do not feel threatened by the woman’s better earning capacity. This must

be undertaken by strengthening domestic violence laws while also encouraging behaviour change through communication and media campaigns.

Industry-wide efforts to challenge gender norms can prove useful to businesses too, as empowered and experienced women would then be more capable of joining better positions at different firms. As the number of women in the labour force increases and female employment outside the home is normalised, these social norms will dissolve over-time.

Facilitate Women Networks, Increased Support and Interaction

As discussed earlier, women get information about employment opportunities predominantly via word-of-mouth. Due to the norm of women leading more socially secluded lives than men, they are only part of small networks. A study conducted with women affiliated with Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) Bank in Ahmedabad, India, looked at the impact of two-day business training on the businesses run by these women (Field et al., 2016). It found that women who attended the training with a friend reported: "higher volume of business and higher household income four months after the program ended, compared to the control group". They were also less likely to call themselves a housewife (ibid: 2). Another study in Chile showed that exposure to role models increased the business profits of participants. Thus, freedom of mobility and cooperation is essential to improve economic outcomes for women's businesses and even to boost their self-esteem (Jayachandran 2020: 11).

Ensure Social Security and Women's Safety at Work and While Commuting

Since a large proportion of women are working in the informal sector, they are not covered under formal labour laws, which could include social security, healthcare, and minimum wage benefits. Thus, it is crucial for social security to be tied directly to workers and not indirectly through employers (Chapman et al. 2018: 4). Women, especially those that are migrants, must be provided with the infrastructure that makes them feel safe and secure. The Working Women Hostel Scheme, launched in 2017 to provide safe accommodation for working women along with daycare facilities, is a step in the right direction (Ministry of Women & Child Development n.d.). Gendered compartments in metros, buses and other public transport are also beneficial to protect women against perpetrators. Women's safety in workplaces must be guaranteed by strict adherence to the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013.

Ensure Women's Control over Their Own Money

Not having control over their own money can undo the autonomy that women gain when they are employed. Jayachandran's (2020) study shows that female entrepreneurs might invest less in their businesses under pressure from their husband. The returns to capital on grants given to women in Ghana, India and Sri Lanka were lower for women who have other entrepreneurs in the house, indicating that these grants were being utilised by other members of the house (ibid: 12). Hence, women resort to hiding money that can otherwise improve economic outcomes for their businesses.

Jayachandran (2020) recommends that instead of cash transfers, capital can be provided in-kind as the latter has led to a higher return for women entrepreneurs. In Uganda, providing loans through mobile-money help made it less accessible to other family members and helped women invest more in their business. Even in India, payment of MGNREGA wages into the bank accounts of female workers increased women's participation in the programme (Fletcher 2018: 14).

Fix Gender Pay Gap and Diversify Women's Jobs

The gender pay gap must be bridged, and organisations must be audited based on gender performance. There is also the need to diversify women's jobs away from those that are extensions of domestic care work. However, social norms must normalise women in these new roles, or it will inevitably lead to unemployment. For this, behaviour change, communication, and interventions to normalise women in alternative roles is necessary. It is crucial to increase women's representation in public administration, police, judiciary, and higher executives levels so that families feel encouraged to invest in women's education and promote independence (Ghai 2018: 40).

Need for a 'Big Push'

Because of the low FLFP, employers might not find building a gender-integrated workplace economical, leading to the discouragement of women from joining the workforce altogether. Herein lies the coordination problem, which can be solved by a 'big push', which is a policy strategy to bring women into the workforce in large numbers (Jayachandran 2020: 12), triggering a positive feedback loop to improve outcomes on the employers' end.

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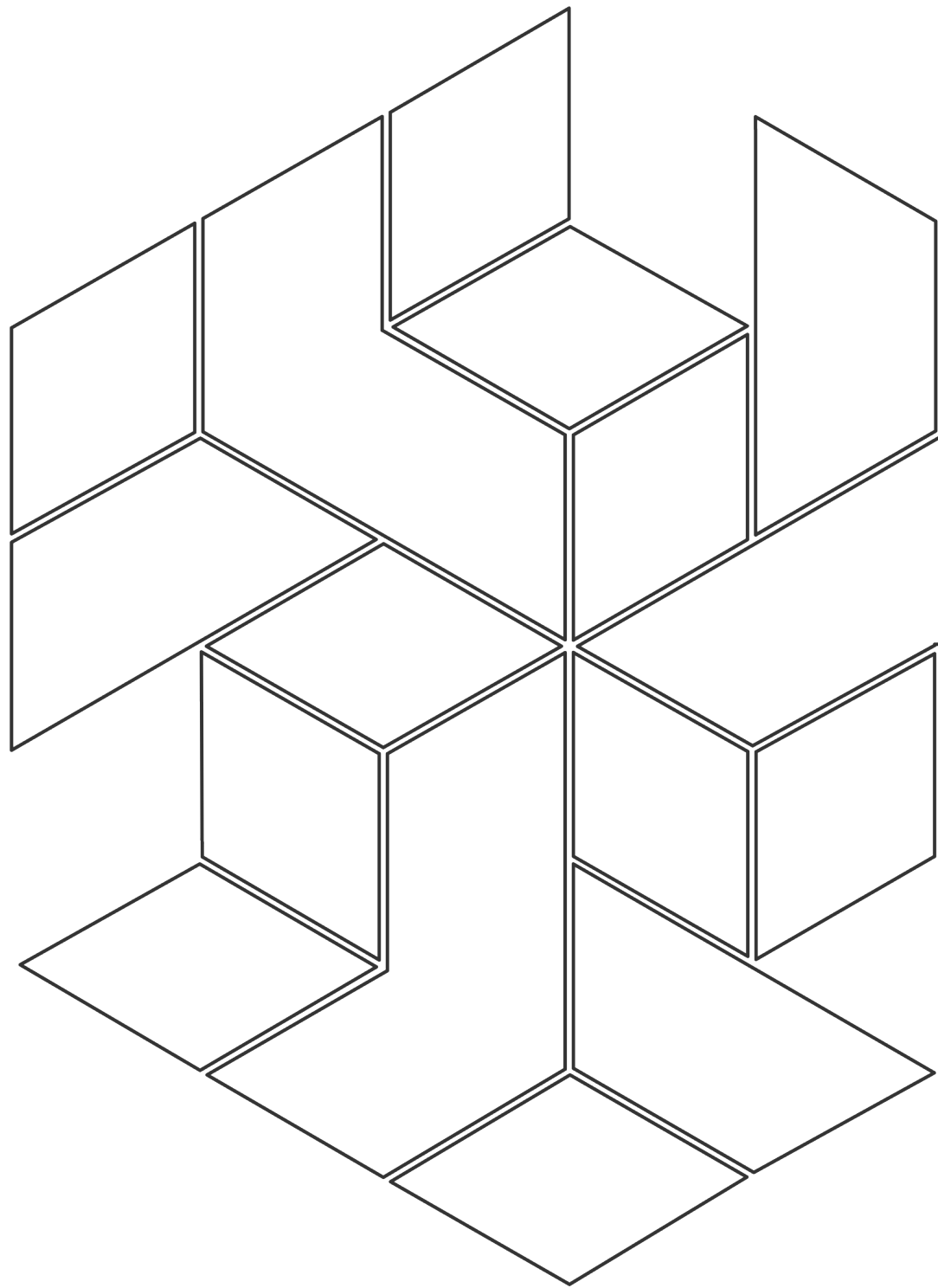
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