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To What Extent Does Labor Force Participation Empower Women?

By Karolin H. Lehmann

Abstract

This paper critically examines the relationship between women’s labor force participation (LFP) and empowerment, particularly in the Global South, utilizing Naila Kabeer’s empowerment framework. By challenging the orthodox conceptualization of LFP, the study reveals its methodological limitations as a measure of women’s economic engagement. By emphasizing the dynamic nature of empowerment as a multifaceted process within the formal and informal sector, this paper highlights the interplay of agency, resources, and achievements within Kabeer’s framework. Drawing from global examples, it demonstrates the varied impacts of paid work on women’s decision-making in both private and public spheres. While acknowledging the potential of LFP to enhance women’s empowerment, the paper underscores the significance of contextual factors in shaping this relationship. By shedding light on the complexities and nuances of women’s labor and empowerment, the study offers valuable insights for policymakers and researchers striving for gender equality and women’s empowerment worldwide.

Keywords: Labor force participation, Empowerment, Feminization of labor

Introduction

Ever since the Millenial Goal was adopted by the United Nations in 2000, the concept of gender equality has been given more significance in development strategies worldwide. Fifteen years later, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was launched, which reinforced the global dedication to women’s empowerment (UN, 2021). Given the political climate (whether that be the influences of Karl Marx or John Stuart Mill) and the onset of the “feminization” of labor that occurred during the Industrial Revolution, women’s labor force participation has been viewed as the panacea for gender equality and empowerment (Forget, 2003). Although the impact of paid labor on women’s empowerment has been widely studied by feminist researchers and economists alike, much of the debate brought forth little consensus on the subject (Kabeer, 2008). Therefore, by introducing Naila Kabeer’s empowerment framework and critically assessing the methodologies of women’s labor force participation, this paper explores the nexus between paid work and empowerment. Using examples from countries in the Global South, the objective of this essay is to explore the contextualities of the relationship and answer the following research question: To what extent does labor force participation empower women?

Before answering the research question, key concepts used in this paper need to be defined, explored, and understood. Through critically examining the definitions and historical significance of the labor force participation (LFP) rate, the first section of this paper will highlight the main methodological issues with using such an orthodox conceptualization of labor. In the second part

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of this essay, Naila Kabeer’s framework for women’s empowerment will be introduced. Before concluding, the third section connects the methodology of LFP to Kabeer’s framework of women’s empowerment, thereby exploring the nexus between them.

**Women’s Labor Force Participation: A Critical Assessment**

The labor force participation rate is a common statistical indicator that measures the level of active participation in the labor market. It measures the number of people in the labor force as a percentage of the overall working-age population (ILO, 2023). To better understand what the labor force participation rate represents, it is important to highlight how the ILO defines labor. A person is considered to be working, and thus counted as a participant in the labor force, when they are either in waged and self-employment or actively searching for paid labor.

**Figure 1: The Labor Force Participation Rate of Women and Men across the Globe in 2021**

(Women’s percent in green; men’s percent in purple)

As shown in Figure 1, the LFP rate for both men and women has significant differences across the world. Strikingly, in all seven regions, women tend to be less active than men. This begs the question if women’s labor can be accurately depicted by the LFP rate shown in Figure 1. According to the ILO, the labor force participation rate is supposed to provide “an indication of the size of the supply of labor available to engage in the production of goods and services” (ILO, 2023). Yet, citizens who are studying, retired, disabled, sick, engaged in housework, or working informally are, by definition, not measured in the labor force participation rate (Verick, 2014).

The LFP rate is a useful measure when it comes to quantifying labor activities in the formal economy that contributes to the gross domestic product of a country. However, it does have some shortcomings when it is used as an overall measurement of labor. Firstly, by dismissing domestic, care, and unpaid labor, the ILO’s definition of (women’s) labor force participation only represents a simplistic, neo-classical measurement of work (Moghadam, 2003, pp. 44-48). This modernized
definition of labor has arguably rested upon the false notion that women have only started working during the age of industrialization. This, of course, is misleading. Women have always worked (Jenson et al., 1988). Depending on the regional context, women have been considerable contributors to the economy and community alike. Thus, feminist scholars such as Gardiner (1997) and Himmelweit (1995) redefined labor as a purposeful activity that produces valuable goods or services which can be provided to another person. By expanding the meaning of work, predominantly women’s activities such as caring for children, the processing of food for storage, sewing clothes for personal use, repairing one’s house, as well as agricultural activities within animal husbandry (such as milking), are included as well. Whilst such definitions are still uncommon among international organizations, some national statistical agencies in Fiji and India, for example, do provide a broader, more inclusive category of labor (Anker, 1983). In Fiji, a person must take care of over ten chickens in order for it to qualify as labor force participation. In the case of India, the 32nd National Sample Survey introduced a new category that accounted for unremunerated household activities such as gathering goods, sewing, tailoring, and weaving (Anker, 1983).

Secondly, the LFP rate provides no indication of the quality of employment, such as wages, benefits, or working conditions. Especially within labor-intensive industries such as textile manufacturing, labor has been notoriously performed under adverse conditions and historically dominated by women’s labor (Moghadam, 2003, p. 34). Nike’s sweatshop scandal in the 1980s and the Rana Plaza accident of 2012 are just two examples representing a global stagnation of labor standards known as “the race to the bottom” (Mosley & Uno, 2007). Thirdly, the indicator does not reflect labor activity in informal economies which is the main sphere of labor activity in developing countries (Bonnet et al., 2019). Women are especially vulnerable in informal economies, as they are seen as “cheap” alternatives to men (Pearson, 2004). This is further amplified by the fact that the national LFP rate tends to mask regional disparities, especially between rural and urban areas (Moghadam, 2003, p. 45). Thus, unreported differences in labor market opportunities may hide the challenges faced by certain demographic groups such as young or elderly workers.

Lastly, the measurement and recording of who is employed or searching for employment do not follow a universal practice. Thus, differences in the census and/or survey methodologies make cross-country comparisons less accurate. In the case of the Middle East, for example, Moghadam (2003, p. 45) points out that a national census bureau may produce vastly different LFP rates than a labor force survey, the latter being rather costly. In the sub-Saharan context, Anker (1994, as cited in Adepoju & Oppong, 1994, pp. 64-75) explains that women’s LFP is generally underreported due to the timing of the reference period of administered surveys. These often collided with the seasonality of (agricultural) work that many women were participating in. Other factors that contribute to such measurement issues are the wording of the surveys or censuses, as well as the conditions under which they are administered. Studying different keywords used in surveys distributed in Kenya, Anker (1983) observes a stark difference in survey responses when the word “work” vs. “job” was used. The respondents viewed a “job” as paid employment, while for them “work” encompassed all activities necessary for maintaining a family’s well-being regardless of whether they are paid (Anker, 1983).

Kabeer’s Empowerment Framework

Next to the measurement issues of LFP, much of the debate on the nexus between paid work and empowerment has been stifled by the incoherent use of empowerment methodology.
Marked by unclear definitions, empirical studies on women’s empowerment and development often resulted in a “one-size-fits-all” approach that transcended cultural boundaries and contextual settings. One of the most influential and systematic studies on women’s empowerment was performed by Naila Kabeer. Her empowerment framework enables researchers to measure and analyze the empowerment of women in different contexts (Klasen & Schüler, 2011). Kabeer defines empowerment as the “process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 1). Her conceptualization of empowerment is built on Sen’s Capability Approach (Sen, 1999). In his work, Sen pivots the focus to a person’s capabilities and agency which foster empowerment. Thus, empowerment is both an outcome as well as a temporal process that provides the freedom to choose (Sen, 1999). In her framework, Kabeer (2008) conceptualizes empowerment through three interrelated dimensions: agency, resources, and achievements. Agency refers to the ability of individuals to make choices and decisions about their lives. It includes aspects such as self-confidence, self-esteem, decision-making power, and the ability to negotiate and advocate for one’s rights. Achievements are the outcomes of empowerment, such as increased income, improved health, and greater participation in economic, political, and social life. Resources denote material, social, or economic tools that can be used to pursue a person’s goal, such as housing, land, finances, and education. Paid labor, which is measured by the LFP rate, is categorized as a resource. Access to such resources depends on the intersecting parallels between gender, class, race, and other divisions of social standing (Kabeer, 2008). As such, achievements are not possible without agency, and agency is difficult to attain without the necessary resources. Yet, current achievements also set the stage for future agency, thus creating a virtuous or vicious cycle (Kabeer, 2008).

Kabeer’s framework emphasizes that empowerment is a multidimensional and dynamic process, and it is not just about having access to resources but also about the ability to use them and turn them into desired achievements. It highlights the importance of agency and decision-making power in driving changes in the three components, and how those changes can be sustained over time. Therefore, the framework underlines that empowerment is both an outcome of the interactions between individuals and their environment, which includes institutions, policies, and social norms, and also a process based on a person’s context. For women that context is predominantly taking place in the private domain, which is often invisible to empirical researchers. This specification is important because the discourse on empowerment (i.e., agency, resources, and achievements) and paid labor draws on the divide between the public and the private sphere.

The Nexus between LFP and Empowerment: Examples from the Global South

As outlined above, the disjointed definitions, methodologies, and measurements of LFP and empowerment have contributed to a misunderstanding of women’s labor which, arguably, leads to a simplistic perception of the benefits of women joining the paid labor force. Using Kabeer’s empowerment framework, the next paragraphs explore the extent to which access to remunerative work might contribute to increasing the life choices available to women within both the private and public domains.

According to Kabeer (2008), participating in the paid labor force, under the right conditions, has the ability to foster women’s agency and choices through improvements in women’s economic autonomy, increasing women’s visibility and mobility in the public domain, and creating stronger voices within the private sphere. Having access to and participating in waged labor can mobilize other resources needed to create agency and gain achievements. Education and access to land and financial services such as credit, which have all been shown to correlate with
measurements of agency, are easier to acquire when one is engaged in the waged labor force (Kabeer, 2008).

In the context of the Middle East, Moghadam (2003, pp. 33-36) argues that women who participate in paid work have more decision-making ability within the family. By contributing to the household’s financial budget, women are able to increase their bargaining power when it comes to spending, children’s health and education, and overall decision-making. Moreover, financial autonomy gives women the choice to exit an abusive relationship with their partner. Yet, in the same manner, depending on the context, women participating in waged employment can also contribute to household conflicts and tensions, especially between husband and wife. Research performed in India by Dhanaraj and Mahambare (2022) showed that women who are in paid employment experience more intimate partner violence and a higher degree of marital control compared to women who strictly work domestically. A wife’s access to remunerative work can be seen as a threat to male authority and their role as the primary breadwinner (Kabeer, 2008). Thus, depending on the value of loyalty to the husband and the strengths of family ties, studies have shown that women from South Asian countries such as India or Bangladesh tend to “bargain with the patriarchy” (Kabeer, 2008, p. 13). As such, women go to great lengths, such as taking on an extra workload or giving up control over their finances, to gain their husband’s approval to participate in paid labor instead of going against their wishes, thus prioritizing their marriages over economic autonomy (Kabeer, 2008; Kabeer 2002). Therefore, the complex social relationships within a household can significantly alter the extent to which paid work enables women to make choices and decisions about their lives.

Another crucial aspect of this discussion is the consideration and conditions under which women take up paid labor. Due to occupational segregation, men and women tend to be grouped into different industries or hierarchically within the same industry, where women perform lower-paying and lower-status work and have not made significant gains in entering male-dominated fields (Kabeer, 2021). Even when women work in the same occupation as men, they will still earn less which contributes to the patriarchal phenomenon known as the gender wage gap (Moghadam, 2003, p. 69). Therefore, Kabeer (2008) differentiates between fulfilling and alienating work, where fulfilling work provides intrinsic satisfaction whereas alienating work is done purely as a means to an end. As such, women who have entered the workforce due to economic compulsion (i.e., household poverty) may not experience their work as being empowering, especially when it is performed in hazardous conditions. Interestingly, there seems to be a temporal element to this argument. In a survey study of women factory workers in Cairo, Hoodfar (1998) points out that even though the majority of women workers reported having joined the workforce to escape poverty, they later on also believed it would increase their strategic life choices. In a study of Mexico City’s household dynamics, Benería and Roldán (1987) found that women feel empowered by being in paid work even though their wage is low and employment unstable. These are important findings, given that labor conditions within neoliberal globalization have arguably increased job insecurities and weakened labor rights.

The relationship between empowerment and women’s LFP can also be seen as an important step in bridging the public-private divide, which has historically secluded women. Kabeer (2008) argues that paid work in the public domain can be transformative for women as it increases visibility and allows them to gain a different perspective on their lives outside of traditional family roles and relationships. This is essential for engaging in a public “collective struggle” and creating a pathway to citizenship (Kabeer, 2008). Thus, some feminist scholars have argued that whilst participating in the labor force may not always in itself empower women, it can be instrumental in
the overall empowerment process (Jenson et al., 1988, p. 6). By entering the labor force, women not only transform the nature of the labor market but also the nature of gender norms as it creates a “pathway to social and gender consciousness,” which provides substantial social benefits for women (Moghadam, 2003, p. 34). Whilst this transformation is accompanied by struggle, tensions, and ambiguity, feminist scholars argue that it is an important process that “altered the terms of gender subordination for the better” (Benería et al., 2016, p. 124).

Although the social benefits of LFP, and thus the participation and visibility in the public domain have been established, it is once again crucial to take into account the aforementioned struggles, tensions, and ambiguities of the private. Some researchers suggest that modernization and participation in the industrial labor force “reduces, marginalises and devalues women’s work,” which, for example, was complementary to men’s work in nomadic times in the Middle East (Moghadam, 2003, p. 69). Here, the contexts of the patriarchal gender arrangements of a society are important to consider. Though millions of women have joined the labor market in the past two decades, women still account for just 39.2% of the global workforce (World Bank, 2023). Moreover, there is robust statistical evidence from time-use surveys that women globally spend more time on work than men, with women working an average of 425 minutes per day whereas the average man works roughly 375 minutes per day (Charmes, 2019).2 Highlighting once again the limitations of the LFP rate, this also shows how spending more time in the paid workforce does not decrease the amount of domestic work at home. Thus, as women enter the paid workforce, the division of unpaid work within the household remains unchanged, resulting in a “double burden” for women (Kabeer, 2021).

**Conclusion and Final Remarks**

This paper has attempted to provide some insights into the complex relationship between formal women’s labor participation and empowerment. It has become clear that focusing on employment as understood in orthodox neoliberal economics and its corresponding indicator, the (women’s) LFP rate, does not accurately reflect women’s experiences in labor markets. By introducing a prominent empowerment framework and linking it to a more comprehensive measurement of women’s labor, this paper draws a more contextual analysis of their reciprocal relationship. Moreover, this paper has highlighted the opportunities and drawbacks of increasing women’s participation in the workforce in order to further empower women. Women’s labor force participation can empower women to an extent that is guided by institutional, political, economic, and cultural conventions. As shown by the various examples cited above, these conventions do not tell a universal story. Intersectionality and socio-economic context, both in the private as well as the public domain, matter greatly when it comes to the paid-labor/empowerment nexus. Joan Robinson famously said that “[t]he misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all” (Robinson, 1962, p. 46). Applying this to the context of this paper, it can be concluded that women’s participation in the labor force is not a universal key for empowerment and often is accompanied by struggle, hardship, and exploitation, but it is better than not participating at all.

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2 According to the time-use survey, the average woman globally spends 276 minutes on unpaid work and 152 minutes on paid work, while men spend 110 minutes on unpaid work and 266 minutes on paid work (Charmes, 2019).
References


