

FEMALE LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES*

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last twenty-five years an increasing number of women have joined the labor market, allowing for the partial closing of the gender participation gap. Globally, the female labor force participation rate increased from 50.2 to 51.8 percent between 1980 and 2009, whereas the male counterpart decreased from 82.0 to 77.7 percent. As a result, gender differentials in labor force participation rates fell from 32 to 26 percentage points.

Female labor force participation rates have also converged across countries due to rapid rises in participation in countries that began with very low rates (mostly in Latin America and the Caribbean and in the Middle East and North Africa) coupled with small decreases in countries that began with very high rates (mostly in Eastern Europe and Central Asia). More than half of women are now economically active in Sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean, whereas participation rates exceed 60 percent in South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa.

Changes in female participation rates over the past quarter century can be explained by the combined effect of economic development and falling fertility. On a global scale, growing economic opportunities for women, especially in manufacturing and services, have accompanied economic development. Consequently, there have been more robust market incentives for women's labor force participation in the form of an increase in the demand for female labor and, occasionally, higher absolute and relative wages.

Besides, economic development has made it possible to improve infrastructure including electricity and water, which can reduce time

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constraints and alleviate transaction costs associated with market work, especially for women.

This paper attempts to estimate the impact of the underlying determinants of female labor force participation in developing countries. Based on data from the World Values Survey and the United Nations' 2011 Human Development Report and a sample of twenty-one developing economies¹ we find that the female labor force participation rate is dependent on society's norms with respect to single parenthood, the housewife's role, whether men are better political leaders and executives, and the importance of good work hours. On the other hand, using a sample of fifty-five countries², we are able to show that the female labor force participation rate is a function of society's norms with respect to the housewife's role, and whether men have more right to a job, of the adolescent fertility rate, and of the log of *per capita* GDP. Depending on the sample used, society's norms and/or the log of *per capita* GDP explain over sixty-percent of the total variation in female labor force participation rate across developing economies. Both the total fertility rate and urbanization do not seem to exert any influence on a woman's decision to participate in the labor force in the second sample. Statistical results of such empirical examination will assist governments in developing countries identify areas that need to be improved upon in order to increase female labor force participation and hence contribute to economic development.

This paper is organized as follows. In the next section, a selected review of the economic literature on female labor force participation is presented. Then the formulation of a statistical model to be estimated is discussed. Theoretical underpinnings for the inclusion

¹ The sample consists of the following countries: Argentina, Bulgaria, Chile, China, Egypt Arab Republic, India, Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, Mexico, Moldova, Morocco, Peru, Poland, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovenia, South Africa, Turkey, Ukraine, and Vietnam.

² The sample consists of the following countries: Albania, Algeria, Argentina, Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Chile, China, Croatia, Czech Republic, Egypt Arab Republic, Estonia, Ethiopia, Georgia, Ghana, Greece, Guatemala, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, Kyrgyz Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Malaysia, Mali, Mexico, Moldova, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, South Africa, Tanzania, Thailand, Turkey, Uganda, Ukraine, Uruguay, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Zambia.

of explanatory variables are presented in this section. Statistical results are reported in the subsequent section. A final section gives concluding remarks as well as policy recommendations.

2. SELECTED REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Psacharopoulos and Tzannatos (1989) examine the definitions and theories of female labor supply and relate them to statistical evidence from 136 countries in the early 1980s. They find support for the view that, during the transition from an agrarian subsistence economy, the female labor force participation initially decreases and picks up late after a crucial level of development has been attained. Based on data from 130 countries around 1980 and 2008, the 2012 World Development Report team finds that the relationship between economic development and female labor force participation is clearly U-shaped.

According to Goldin (1995), the reasons for the downward sloping portion of the U-curve are probably sought in a combination of initially strong income effect and weak substitution effect and a change in the locus of production from home to factory, whereas those for the rising portion are found in a change of education of females relative to males as educational resource constraints are relaxed and in women's ability to obtain employment in the white-collar sector after graduation. She wrote that in the early 20th century the United States underwent changes in education similar to those currently under way in Latin America. In both instances, secondary education advanced quickly in a short period of time and levels for girls and boys were very alike. Many Latin American countries currently find themselves at the base of the female labor force participation U-shaped function. She finds that in all but the Caribbean female labor force participation rates for those from 25 to 44 years of age are in the 20 to 40 percent range.

According to the 2012 World Development Report, women's employment has also been driven by changes in education and family structure. An average overall increase of 21 percent in female labor force participation across 10 Latin American countries can be attributed to delays in the timing of marriage and childbearing as well as lower fertility. More education, on the other hand, contributes an additional 42 percent of the increase. However, Chioda *et al.* (2011) show that urbanization, household technology, and the sectorial structure of the economy seem to matter little in bringing more women into the labor market.

Building upon the first priority area for policy going forward of the reduction in gender gaps in human capital, namely those addressing female labor force participation, in this paper we wish to empirically analyze the effect of the various determinants of this participation using two samples of developing countries. We first examine the impact of social norms on female labor participation using data from the 2005-2007 World Values Survey and a sample of twenty-one developing economies. We then revise the statistical model to account for the effect of *per capita* income, fertility, and urbanization using a sample of 55 developing countries.

3. THE STATISTICAL MODEL

If we assume that various social norms affect the female labor force participation rate in a developing country, we can state the following statistical model:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{FemLFPR} = & \beta_0 + \underset{(-)}{\beta_1 \text{toajob}} + \underset{(-)}{\beta_2 \text{boys}} + \underset{(+)}{\beta_3 \text{Approval}} + \underset{(-)}{\beta_4 \text{Political}} + \\ & + \underset{(-)}{\beta_5 \text{Housewife}} + \underset{(+)}{\beta_6 \text{Goodhrs}} + \underset{(+)}{\beta_7 \text{Income}} + \underset{(-)}{\beta_8 \text{Executive}} + \epsilon \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

where *FemLFPR* = Female labor force participation rate, in 2009.

toajob = Percentage of women who think that men should have more right to a job than women, 2005-07.

boys = Percentage of women who think that university education is more important for boys, 2005-07.

Approval = Percentage of women who approve of woman as a single parent, 2005-07.

Political = Percentage of women who think that men make better political leaders than women, 2005-07.

Housewife = Percentage of women who think that being a housewife is as fulfilling as working for pay, 2005-07.

Goodhrs = Percentage of women who think that good hours are an important part of a job, 2005-07.

Income = Percentage of women who think that husband and wife should both contribute to income, 2005-7.

Executive = Percentage of women who think that men make better executives than women, 2005-7.

A woman's decisions about participating in the labor force over her life cycle tend to be molded by traditional perceptions of gender roles and the family (where for the most part the husband is the major breadwinner while wives take care of the home and children) and society's prescriptions on women's place in the labor market. Norms tend to affect expectations and preferences, which in turn are translated into economic outcomes.

Recent studies provide evidence of culture shaping a woman's labor supply by documenting its relationship with the economic participation of women in their country of origin (see, for instance, Fernández *et al.*, 2004; Fernández, 2007a, 2010; Fernández and Fogli, 2007; Fogli and Veldkamp, 2011; and Farré and Vella, 2007).

Goldin (1995) hypothesizes that the response to the question of whether men should have more right to a job than women is a reflection of a powerful social norm that

“societies frown upon husbands who are unable to provide for their families, as if it were a sign of indolence and being negligent of his family”.

Thus, for this very reason, in a developing country where a higher percentage of women share this view, the female labor force participation rate tends to be lower.

On the other hand, we would expect a higher participation of women in the work force if a larger fraction of women hold the view that husband and wife should both contribute to income. As to the perception of women's role in the household, as more women agree with the statement “Being a housewife is as fulfilling as working for pay”, the more they adhere to traditional gender roles and identities (see, for example, Fortin, 2005, and Fernández, 2007b). This greater adherence then is expected to lead to lower labor market participation among women.

Since more education has contributed to a rise in female labor force participation, women's perception about the importance of a university education necessarily influences their participation decision. If a larger fraction of women in a developing country perceives that a university education is more important for boys than girls, we would expect their participation in the labor market there to be lower. On the other hand, approval of the woman as a single parent may have a positive impact on female labor force participation as it is tantamount to society's acceptance of women's economic independence. The more widespread this acceptance is, the more likely more women would be brought into the labor market.

Job quality, captured as good hours, is also influential in women's labor force participation. Women in developing countries tend to join the labor market more when the opportunity for good work hours arises. On the other hand, they would be more reluctant to look for jobs when they perceive that men either make better executives or better political leaders.

We next examine the effects of both norms and other factors such as economic development, fertility, and urbanization on female labor force participation rate by specifying the following statistical model:

$$\begin{aligned}
 FemLFPR = & \beta_0 + \underset{(-)}{\beta_1 toajob} + \underset{(-)}{\beta_2 \ln GDP_{pc}} + \underset{(-)}{\beta_3 TFR} + \underset{(-)}{\beta_4 AFR} + \\
 & + \underset{(-)}{\beta_5 Housewife} + \underset{(+)}{\beta_6 Approval} + \underset{(?)}{\beta_7 Urban} + \epsilon
 \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

where $\ln GDP_{pc}$ = The natural logarithm of *per capita* purchasing power parity GDP, in dollars, in 2009.

TFR = Total fertility rate, in 2009.

AFR = Adolescent fertility rate, in 2009.

$Urban$ = Fraction of the total population living in urban areas, in 2009.

and all remaining variables as defined above.

Following the 2012 World Development Report, we postulate a semi-logarithmic relationship between economic development as measured by purchasing power parity *per capita* GDP and female labor force participation. This U-shaped relationship may be explained as follows. Worldwide, for very poor countries, a large labor-intensive agricultural sector coupled with significant numbers of poor households is manifested in a high female labor force participation. Unearned incomes are so low that women in these countries are willing to join the labor market even when wages are rather low.

As these economies develop, *per capita* income increases leading to an increase in female unearned incomes (through higher male earnings). As a result, women tend to withdraw from the labor force. Also, there would be renewed social pressure against women joining the paid labor market.

However, a point will be reached where further economic development results in more education for women, hence more employment opportunities and higher wages. Female labor force participation rises again.

As indicated earlier in this paper, a decline in fertility rate has allowed more women to participate in the labor market. We choose to include both the adolescent and the adult fertility rates since we wish to examine the impact of these two different age cohorts on the overall female labor force participation rate.

As people are progressively concentrated in urban areas, more economic opportunities become available to women and social norms also change in favor of more female participation in the workforce. On the other hand, urbanization may cause a weakening of a social network due to a loss of geographic to closeness to extended family which implies a loss of economies of scale in home production such as child rearing as well as household chores. Bicerly and Gundogan (2009) would go as far as hypothesizing that migration of women from rural to urban areas might even have created a mismatch between the demand for and the supply of skills which then may negatively affect their labor force participation. The impact of this variable then becomes an empirical question. Data for all variables are from the 2011 Human Development Report and the 2005-07 World Values Survey.

4. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Table 1 gives least-squares estimates of regression coefficients in equation (1) for a sample of twenty-one developing countries. We observe that four explanatory variables are statistically significant

TABLE 1 - *Dependent Variable: Female Labor Force Participation Rate*

	<i>Coefficient Estimates</i>	<i>t-Statistics</i>
<i>Intercept</i>	31.218	1.352
<i>to a job</i>	0.198	0.557
<i>boys</i>	0.543	0.940
<i>Approval</i>	-0.080	-0.423
<i>Political</i>	0.959	2.190**
<i>Housewife</i>	-1.392	-3.297*
<i>Goodhrs</i>	0.551	2.985*
<i>Income</i>	0.275	1.081
<i>Executive</i>	-1.090	-3.026*

Adjusted $R^2 = 0.574$

*Significant at the 1 percent level.

**Significant at the 5 percent level.

and all but one coefficient estimates do have the anticipated sign. As the fraction of women in a developing country who think that being a housewife is as fulfilling as working for pay increases by 1 percentage point, we would expect a decrease of 1.39 percentage point in its female labor force participation rate, other things being equal. All else equal, a one-percentage point increase in the fraction of women who think that job quality in terms of good hours is important is expected to lead to an increase of 0.55 percentage point in female labor force participation rate, while the latter is expected to decrease by about 1.09 percentage point for every one percentage point increase in the fraction of women who think that men make better executives than women. We also observe that the goodness of fit of the model is very good as attested to by the high value of 0.574 of the adjusted coefficient of determination.

A backward elimination stepwise method was applied to arrive at a revised model, the regression results of which are reported in Table 2. The goodness of fit of the model is slightly improved as

TABLE 2 - *Dependent Variable: Female Labor Force Participation Rate (Revised Model)*

	<i>Coefficient Estimates</i>	<i>t-Statistics</i>
<i>Intercept</i>	49.101	5.916
<i>Approval</i>	-0.117	-1.118
<i>Political</i>	1.051	2.545*
<i>Housewife</i>	-1.016	-3.442**
<i>Goodhrs</i>	0.465	2.890*
<i>Executive</i>	-1.055	-3.357**

Adjusted $R^2 = 0.604$

*Statistically significant at the 2.5 percent level.

**Statistically significant at the 1 percent level.

indicated by the higher value of 0.604 of the adjusted coefficient of determination. Qualitatively, the results remain the same. We also observe that the removal of the *Approval* variable reduces the explanatory power of the statistical model and thus keep it even though its coefficient estimate does not have the anticipated positive sign. We suspect that this may be due to the severe extent of multicollinearity among explanatory variables and this is confirmed by the sample correlation coefficient matrix reported in Table 3.

All else equal, as the fraction of women in a developing country

TABLE 3 - *Sample Correlation Coefficient Matrix*

	<i>Approval</i>	<i>Political</i>	<i>Housewife</i>	<i>Goodhrs</i>	<i>Executiv</i>
<i>Approval</i>	1				
<i>Political</i>	-0.556	1			
	-2.915				
<i>Housewife</i>	-0.308	0.734	1		
	-1.410	4.706			
<i>Goodhrs</i>	0.623	-0.643	-0.357	1	
	3.475	-3.657	-1.666		
<i>Executiv</i>	-0.483	0.858	0.471	-0.442	1
	-2.403	7.287	2.326	-2.146	

Note: Bold t-statistics imply statistical significance at the 5 percent or lower level.

who think that being a housewife is as fulfilling as working for pay increases by 1 percentage point, we would expect a decrease of 1.02 percentage point in its female labor force participation rate. All else equal, a one-percentage point increase in the fraction of women who think that job quality in terms of good hours is important is expected to lead to an increase of 0.47 percentage point in female labor force participation rate, while the latter is expected to decrease by about 1.06 percentage point for every one percentage point increase in the fraction of women who think that men make better executives than women.

Table 4 gives least-squares estimates of regression coefficients in equation (2) for a sample of fifty-five developing countries. We observe that three explanatory variables are statistically significant and their coefficient estimates do have their anticipated sign.

TABLE 4 - *Dependent Variable: Female Labor Force Participation Rate (Complete Model)*

	<i>Coefficient Estimates</i>	<i>t-Statistics</i>
<i>Intercept</i>	170.661	6.473
<i>lnGDPpc</i>	-10.409	-3.671*
<i>to a job</i>	-0.450	-3.639*
<i>Housewife</i>	-0.425	-2.765*
<i>Approval</i>	-0.067	-0.612
<i>TFR</i>	0.557	0.289
<i>AFR</i>	-0.070	-1.180
<i>Urban</i>	0.071	0.632

Adjusted $R^2 = 0.633$

*Significant at the 1 percent level.

The goodness of fit of the model is very good as indicated by the high value of 0.633 of the adjusted coefficient of determination. From this sample it appears that we are still operating along the downward sloping portion of the U-shaped curve representing the relationship between economic development and female labor force participation. All else equal, as *per capita* purchasing power parity GDP increases by \$10 (as its logarithm increases by 0.747) we would expect female labor force participation to decrease by 7.78 percentage points (=0.747 times -10.409). Likewise, a one percentage point increase in the fraction of women who think that men should have more right to a job than women is expected to lead to a decrease of 0.45 percentage point in female labor force participation rate, while a 0.425 percentage point decline in this rate is expected for every one percentage point increase in the fraction of women who think that being a housewife is as fulfilling as working for pay, *ceteris paribus*.

A backward elimination stepwise method was applied to arrive at a revised model, the regression results of which are reported in Table 5. The goodness of fit of the model is slightly improved as indicated by the higher value of 0.649 of the adjusted coefficient of

TABLE 5 - *Dependent Variable: Female Labor Force Participation Rate (Revised Complete Model)*

	Coefficient Estimates	t-Statistics
<i>Intercept</i>	166.717	8.729
<i>lnGDPpc</i>	-9.931	-5.254*
<i>to a job</i>	-0.397	-4.757*
<i>Housewife</i>	-0.412	-2.966*
<i>AFR</i>	-0.057	-1.347

Adjusted $R^2 = 0.649$

*Significant at the 1 percent level.

determination. Qualitatively, the results remain the same. We also observe that the removal of the adolescent fertility variable reduces the explanatory power of the statistical model and thus keep it and its coefficient estimate does have the anticipated negative sign. While a t-test implies statistical insignificance of this explanatory variable, this is possibly due to the severe degree of collinearity between itself and the logarithm of purchasing power parity *per capita* GDP variable, as shown by the sample correlation coefficient matrix reported in Table 6.

TABLE 6 - *Sample Correlation Coefficient Matrix*

	<i>lnGDPpc</i>	<i>to a job</i>	<i>Housewife</i>	<i>AFR</i>
<i>lnGDPpc</i>	1			
<i>to a job</i>	-0.317 -2.434	1		
<i>Housewife</i>	0.105 0.770	0.502 4.223	1	
<i>AFR</i>	-0.662 -6.429	0.041 0.298	-0.028 -0.206	1

Note: Bold t-statistics imply statistical significance at the 5 percent or lower level.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper we use two statistical models and data from two samples of developing economies to empirically analyze the impact of several explanatory variables on the female labor force participation rate. From the statistical results we are able to draw the following conclusions:

1. Within the set of twenty-one developing economies used in this study, social norms, which exert influence over household member preferences over home and market production as well as the division of labor between spouses, do mold women's preferences and, consequently, their decisions with respect to participating in the labor market. Specifically, we find that the female labor force participation rate is dependent on society's norms with respect to single parenthood, the housewife's role, whether men are better political leaders and executives, and the importance of good work hours. Governments in these countries need to continue to encourage society's norms that are favorable to more women's participation in the workplace while discouraging those that have a negative effect on such participation.
2. Within the set of fifty-five developing economies used in this study, social norms in conjunction with the level of economic development and fertility do exert a statistically significant impact on female labor force participation. Specifically, we are able to show that the female labor force participation rate is a function of society's norms with respect to the housewife's role, and whether men have more right to a job, of the adolescent fertility rate, and of the log of *per capita* GDP. Depending on the sample used, society's norms and/or the log of *per capita* GDP

explain over sixty-percent of the total variation in female labor force participation rate across developing economies. Regression results also indicate that for this group of countries the log of *per capita* GDP exerts a negative impact on participation, implying that they are still operating along the downward sloping portion of the U-shaped curve representing the relationship between economic development and female participation in the labor market.

3. Like Chioda *et al.* (2011), we also find that urbanization does not seem to exert any influence on a woman's decision to participate in the labor force in the second sample of fifty-five developing countries.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of various determinants on female labor force participation in developing countries. Based on data from the World Values Survey (2008) and the United Nations' 2011 Human Development Report and a sample of twenty-one developing economies we find that the female labor force participation rate is dependent on society's norms with respect to single parenthood, the housewife's role, whether men are better political leaders and executives, and the importance of good work hours. On the other hand, using a sample of fifty-five countries, we are able to show that the female labor force participation rate is a function of society's norms with respect to the housewife's role, and whether men have more right to a job, of the adolescent fertility rate, and of the log of *per capita* GDP. Depending on the sample used, society's norms and/or the log of *per capita* GDP explain over sixty-percent of the total variation in female labor force participation rate across developing economies. Both the total fertility rate and urbanization do not seem to exert any influence on a woman's decision to participate in the labor force in the second sample. Statistical results of such empirical examination will assist governments in developing countries identify areas that need to be improved upon in order to increase female labor force participation and hence contribute to economic development.

Keywords: Female Labor Force Participation, Per Capita GDP, Housewife's Role, Single Parenthood, Developing Countries, Views on Men as Political Leaders or Executives, Good Work Hours

JEL Classification: O12, O15, O40

RIASSUNTO

La partecipazione della forza lavoro femminile nei paesi in via di sviluppo

Questo studio esamina l'influenza di varie determinanti sulla partecipazione della forza lavoro femminile nei paesi in via di sviluppo. Sulla base dei dati del World Values Survey (2008) e del Human Development Report dell'ONU (2011) e di un campione di 21 economie in via di sviluppo, si riscontra che il tasso di partecipazione dipende dalle norme vigenti nel paese circa i genitori single e dal ruolo delle casalinghe e dall'orario di lavoro. In un altro campione di 55 paesi si dimostra che il lavoro femminile dipende dalla legislazione del paese circa il ruolo delle casalinghe, se è opinione diffusa che gli uomini abbiano maggior diritto al lavoro, dal tasso di fertilità adolescenziale e dall'andamento del PIL pro capite. A seconda del campione considerato, la normativa e/o l'andamento del PIL pro capite spiegano per il 60% la variazione totale della partecipazione della forza lavoro femminile nelle economie in via di sviluppo. Nel secondo campione né il tasso totale di fertilità né l'urbanizzazione sembrano influenzare le decisioni delle donne circa la scelta di lavoro. I risultati statistici di questo studio suggeriscono ai governi dei paesi in via di sviluppo le modalità per individuare le aree di intervento per aumentare la partecipazione femminile al lavoro.