

Reflection on Reasons for Declining Women's Labour Participation Rates: Continuum of Paid and Unpaid Work for Women in India

Srishty Anand and Subhalakshmi Nandi

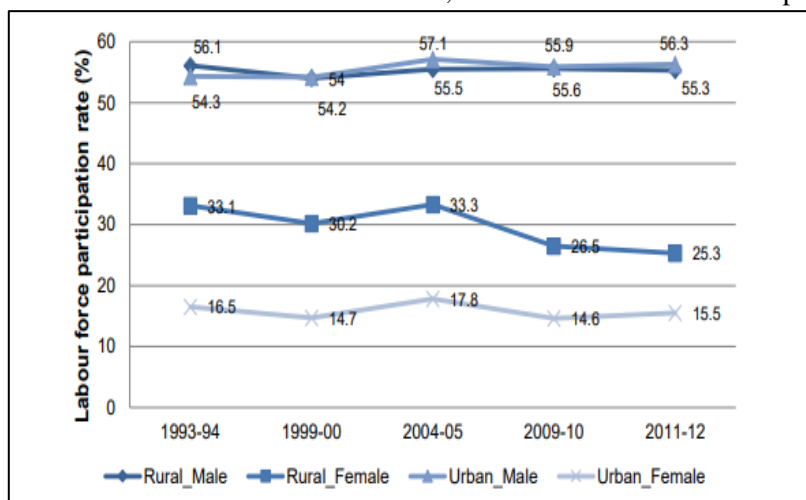
International Center for Research on Women, New Delhi, India

Abstract

India has recorded declining female labour force participation rate since 2005. Between 2005 to 2017, while the economy has been growing, the decline has been recorded from 29 percent to 24 percent. In addition to this, on an average, Indian women spend 354 minutes daily on unpaid care work. In this context as part of a larger project funded by the Ford Foundation, undertaken by ICRW, this paper will present trends and analysis of women's workforce participation based three rounds of NSS (National Sample Survey) data from India. Further the paper will present analysis of relevant civil society initiatives, government policies and schemes related to women's work to understand enablers and barriers for women's access to and sustainability in undertaking livelihood options. The perspective will be based on the environment in which the women works including her immediate household work which includes unpaid work (care and domestic), workplace (mobility, transport, creches and so on) and macro conditions of work (social security, occupational safety and so on). Overall the paper will map the reasons behind the decline in women's economic participation along with institutional provisions keeping in mind the continuum of paid and unpaid work to grasp the problem better. Largely, the paper is rooted in building an understanding around Goal 5 'Gender Equality and Empowerment' of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs).

Introduction

India's female labor force participation (FLFP) rate has remained visibly low; the ILO (2013) ranks India's FLFP rate (27 percent) as 121 out of 131 countries, one of the lowest in the world. In 2013, India had the lowest FLFP rate in South Asia, with the exception of Pakistan (24 percent) (World Bank 2017). The trend of declining FLFP rate in India is not new, with a declining trend being seen from the mid-70s onwards. However, the decline has been faster post- 1990s after the introduction of



economic reforms with an exception of increase in FLFP in the period 1999-2000 to 2004-05 (ILO 2014). This is also accompanied with stagnant formal employment while informal work increased from 89 per cent of the total workforce in 1989 to 92.4 per cent in 2004-05 (Palriwala and Pillai, 2011). Figure 1 shows a clear divergence in participation between male and female as well as rural and urban India. On the other hand,

the GDP growth went up to 5.7 percent during the 1980s, further to 6.2 percent during the period between 1991-92 to 2004-05 (Jha and Negre, 2007), reaching an all-time high and indeed impressive rate of 9.4 percent in 2006-7 percent (Palriwala and Pillai, 2008).

The average FLFP rate declined by 11.4 percentage points, from 42.6 to 31.2 percent during the period spanning 1993-94 to 2011-12. In the course of this decline, the drop was concentrated in between the year 2004-05 and 2011-12 is concentrated and in rural India. Of the of 19.16 million that dropped out of the labour force, 53 percent of this is in the age group of 15- 24 years, 32 percent within the age

group of 25-34 years, and about 15.6 percent in the age group of 35 years. This shrinking of female workforce in absolute number, as large volume of literature suggests, is explained by educational attainment, socioeconomic status and household composition (Andres et al, 2017). Concurrently, disaggregated data further also shows that in rural areas, proportion of women engaged in domestic duties increased from 35.3 per cent in 2004-05 to 42.2 per cent during 2011-12 and in urban area, it increased from 45.6 percent to 48.2 per cent in the same period (NSS 2011-2012). In addition to this, during 2011-12, in both rural and urban areas, across the age groups, 92 per cent of women in both rural and urban areas, for women of age 5 years and above as well as for women of age 15 years and above, are engaged in domestic duties in their usual principal status. The primary reported reason by around 60 percent of these women is that there no other member to carry out the domestic duties. On the contrary, of the remaining 8 percent, the proportion of women who were not required to spend most of their time on domestic duties but still pursued domestic duties due to non-availability of work, was the highest in the age group 15-29 years - about 25 per cent (NSSO 2011-2012).

These trends, at the time, is in contrast with global feminization of workforce as well as existing understandings of a positive correlation between the globalization of the economy and participation of women in economic activity. Given this backdrop, this paper explores (a) possible factors affecting women's economic participation, and the (b) overall policy approach through which this is addressed.

Given care work is not going to disappear, the law, polices and schemes must ensure that other actors assume more of the responsibility to reduce and redistribute some of this work. The 'care diamond' provides a comprehensive framework to address this. It incorporates roles and accountabilities of the family and household, markets, the public sector and the not-for-profit sector in care provisioning.

Method and Materials

This paper is based on literature review of peer-reviewed papers, official policy documents, and some grey literature between the year 2011-2019. In terms of data set regarding labour movement and patterns in India, the literature reviewed for this paper predominantly based their analysis on empirical evidence from National Sample Survey (NSSO) data sets for all rounds between Round-50 (1993-94), Round-55 (1999-2000), Round 61 (2004-05) and the latest available Round-68 (2011-12). The post-liberalisation phase in 1991-92 in India has been seen watershed moment for the economy and this has been reflected in the economic trends. The paper has looked around studies to understand the determinants of decline and the kind of correlations that have been drawn. In exploring the nature of women's work, the literature of heavy focussed on domestic and care economy related issues which has been explored through the length of the paper and have found to have implications of women's participation in the labour market.

Discussion

Factors Affecting Women's Economic Participation

Women's movement since the 1970's marshalled against ignoring the unpaid economic work and domestic work in the accounting system and challenged how paid work alone did not imply economic inequality because domestic and unpaid care work continues to have a firm grip on women's life as illustrated in the introduction. The social role of women as caregiver is deeply embedded in the question of what constitutes women's work. Within the capitalist logic, this is termed as the unpaid work (includes domestic and subsistence) and care economy which maybe paid (for example, Anganwadi workers and domestic workers), underpaid and unpaid (familial duties).

This section pivots around a critical question of how women's care and domestic work is reinforced despite the economic growth of the Indian economy. This is analysed in congruence to the economic trends elaborated above, setting the context for where women are- as part of the work force and in the social organization of domestic and care work.

1. Paid and Unpaid Work Co-exist for Women in India

Figure 2 demonstrates two strong conclusions, first, time spend by women doing all kinds of work combined (paid and unpaid) exceed that of men leaving less time for leisure, education, political

participation and selfcare. Second, despite the decline in the labour force their unpaid work remains accounts for nearly two-third of total work.

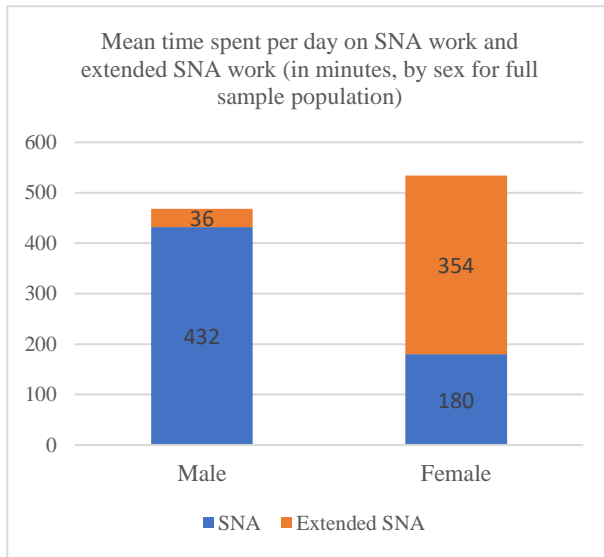


Figure 1: Mean time spent per day on SNA work and extended SNA work in India (Source: Budlender 2008)

The three pronounced trends of women’s work that can be argued for are: first, continued trend in form of work performed by women and their historic concentration in unpaid work despite their participation in the labour force and enrolled in schools in different age cohort. Secondly, in the same vein, the number of women working as housemaids has quadrupled between 1999 and 2004 which amounts to doubling the share of the sub-category ‘private households with employed persons’ in the total service (tertiary sector) employment of women. (Palriwala and Pillai, 2011). Thirdly, Palriwala and Pillai conclusively argue that, ‘self-employment is on the rise and accounted for 61 per cent of female employment in 2004–05 (largely consisting of unpaid family labour)’ (2010, p. 512). While they acknowledge the increase in skilled and decently paid jobs outside the agricultural sector, the growth is

concentrated in occupations with long working hours, adverse terms of employment, minimal or zero social protection for e.g., in trade, hotels and restaurants, education, and personal and community services. This indicates feminization of work in the direction which is an extension of pre-existing forms of labour i.e. domestic and care work.

It is important to recognise the continuities in nature of roles that women which they are performing. ICRW in its work recognises how this present, highly skewed distribution of care work is by default and not design (Gammage et al, 2018). This default setting has been galvanized by normalized social and state ordained understanding of care work. As discussed, even though the fall in participation of labour force has been corresponds to enrolment in education, there is nonetheless a significant rise in unpaid domestic work from 30 percent in 1983 to 42 percent in 2011-12 (Abraham, 2013). It can be safely argued that provision of care is being fulfilled by women ubiquitously and is only increasing. For example, the increase in domestic work despite falling fertility rate can be explained by acknowledging not just the childcare and rearing but also caring for the young, sick and elderly. Additionally, the drudgery is added by labour-intensive household chores—such as fetching fuelwood and hauling water.

This above discussion implies that paid work does not translate into off-setting or substitution of the unpaid domestic and care work. These frames the rubric of reference to ‘double or triple burden of work’. Within the framework of the care economy, the women are not just labouring bodies but are caregivers who are entitled to rights and benefits rather than being penalised by means of time poverty.

2. Implication of Women’s Life Cycle Stages on Their ‘Work’

As discussed in the introductory section, the drop in FLFP 2004-05 and 2011-12 is in rural India. Further disaggregated data shows that the drop is to the tune of 53 percent among the age group of 15-24 years and 32 percent within the age group of 25-34 years. One of the widely cited reason of this is the increase in enrolment of females in educational programme which suggests that the norm around education of girl child has shifted towards their acceptance of educational attainment. Andres et al (2017) in their work surmise that education explains this drop only partially. To take this argument further, one must acknowledge other structural institutions and cultural norms that have historically challenged the role of women as workers and constricted their choice to work. The paper explores implications of some of these determinants, like marriage and childbearing, that reinforces longstanding norms and a more recent shift in the meaning of the notion of ‘status’.

The role of females as caregivers impacts their participation in secondary and higher education and is applicable both before and after marriage. Andres et al (2017) argue that at different the levels

of educational attainment do not incentivise women to be part of the labour force uniformly. The FLFP rate is highest among illiterates and college graduates in both areas and drops for below secondary and secondary educated creating a U-shaped relationship between level of education and FLFP in India, across all rounds of NSSO survey data during the post liberalization period in 1990. These group which has the highest participation rate also experienced the largest drops in FLFP rate during this period.

The relationship between marriage and participation in labour force varies from rural to urban. To begin with, the participation rate is higher in rural areas as compared to urban for both married and unmarried females. In rural areas, the FLFP rate of married women exceeds that of unmarried women in all time periods while an inverse trend is noted in urban location. The decline in the FLFP rate was evident among both married and unmarried females in rural areas but was stagnant at low levels, irrespective of marital status, in urban locations. This combined with the 32 percent drop that occurred within the age group of 25-34 years point towards factors other than education attainment (Andres et al 2017).

Table 1: Work Participation rate of men and women with no children and children below 3 years. Source: Based on unit level estimates of NSSO-EUS, 2004-05

	2004-05		2011-12	
Number of children	Male	Female	Male	Female
0	90.7	46.0	90.2	34.6
0- less than 3	94.5	39.8	94.1	28.6

There is also a correlation between the women’s labour force participation and childcare which is modelled on male breadwinner and female caregiver.

Therefore, this link between educational attainment, marriage and childcare can be explained by factoring social status of household that is imbued with the economic status of the family. Abraham elucidates, ‘upward social mobility of households is symbolised by labour market participation of males, marginalisation of women in the labour force and domestication of women...’ (2013, 100). This implies that women substitute their potential wage from paid work with ‘status production’ activities such as education of children, ensuring healthcare of the family.

3. Gendered Nature of Employment

In India, some of the sectors in which women have been predominantly pre- and post-liberalization is in school education, nursing, community health work and domestic work as well as in manufacturing and construction, albeit with limited skill and low pay.

In education, health and domestic work, a clear replication of women’s gendered and care roles are seen in the labor market. It can be safely argued that provision of care is being fulfilled by women ubiquitously and is only increasing, not only within households but also as part of paid employment generated by the government. An example of state commissioned underpaid worker are the Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) in India who are part of world’s largest childhood nutrition programme called Integrated Child Development Programme (ICDS). The AWWs under ICDS are paid a stipend for the ‘volunteering’ on behalf of the state to provide day care and creche facility which is paradoxically executed by other women with the same familial responsibilities.

Moreover, some of the common notions and gendered assumptions in the public discourse pertains to a desire that women should not go out to work and should also ‘balance’ the care and domestic chores with earning an income. This is echoed within public policy and markets. Therefore, this requires us to unearth not just numerical declining female labour force participation but also recognise the patriarchal prejudices that are at play. Raju (2013) interrogates the construct of home-based work in India and argues that it is not same as the western construct of an autonomous working individuals home-based

work is performed within the boundary of the home, largely by women, which in turn essentializes the primary location of women at home depriving them from the labour 'market'. We see the burgeoning of illiterate or lowly literate sections of home-based workers and that of marginal groups, in informal employment. Home-based women workers are also married, low paid and engaged in unprotected employment. This complicates the idea of 'home as workplace' by relegating women to home and simultaneously dissuading them to from access to public space affecting mobility and their participation in the market. In doing so, the women bear the 'pecuniary penalty' (Folbre, 1999) implying forgoing potential income for the same working hours. Palriwala and Pillai sets the pretext for this in the official recognition of the 'productive potential' of women's work in the 1985 Seventh Five Year Plan which went on to suggest 'that women's earnings were a surer way to improve the conditions of poor families (and children); women's informal income earning work was to be a path out of poverty' (2011, 1065).

Following this, all the conscious policy decision that have followed to enhance women's participation in agriculture, artisans, public sector roles, have underpinnings of women combining their unpaid domestic and care work with some supplementary income. It is therefore imperative for the institutions in the 'care diamond' to reevaluate the 'gendered familialism' that is emerging from Indian social, employment and wage policy. The phrase 'gendered familialism' is used by Palriwala and Pillai (2017) to mean that 'women's paid work is accepted but not encouraged and its full complement remains unacknowledged...' and 'that care work is a private responsibility, women's responsibility, and is embedded in familial relations, thereby defining the pool of carers and care receivers' (2017, 1065-66).

Discussion on Policy Analysis

Care work – both paid and unpaid – is deeply feminized. The following discussion segues into unpacking the components of the 'care diamond' as a framework for designing policies and actions; in other words, placing the onus on State, market, household and not-for-profits as contrast to the current discourse with strong undertones of women and their families as a site for caregiving. Below we provide a few reflections and pointers on how it is being responded to in the Indian context in recent years.

Improved Measurement of Work and Data Sets

The method of national accounting such as NSSO is internationally conceptualised and standardized at the International Conference for Labour Statisticians (ICLS) under the aegis of ILO, at regular intervals. This is a critical discussion point because it informs the economic decisions and policy making and lends to the language of women's economic empowerment. Until 18th ICLS (2008), the accounting system was centred around economically gainful activities, thereby traditionally excluding all activities undertaken by households that produce services for their own final use (i.e. unpaid household service work performed by household members or by volunteers). In simple terms, it implies nonrecording of several tasks performed by women, excluding it from the calculation in the GDP. In the subsequent ICLS, 'work' distanced from implying production from merely including market-oriented economic output to focus on work that contributed to the well-being of population (children, chronically ill, elders), whether paid or unpaid. The definition of 'work' was revised to encompass 'activities performed by persons in order to produce goods or services for use by others or for own final use' (ILO 2013, emphasis mine). This expansion of definition of 'work' widens the range of who the laboring bodies are. The political aim of this augmentation of meaning was to eliminate the systematic exclusion of women's work which if when included in the production valuation and assigned a monetary value would constitute between 10 -39 per cent of GDP (UNRISD, 2010). This valuation is critical to Indian economy specifically to visibilise the unpaid work by women.

In the model of 4R's- recognize, reduce, redistribute and represent, this stride in valuation is a step towards 'recognition' to transform the rendering of care work away from the pre-ordained 'natural' role of women. In order to capture the nuances of nature of work more rigorously, critics and feminist economists have opined that NSSO does not capture simultaneity and multiplicity of women's work and have argued for adopting the Time use surveys (TUS). TUS gained momentum after the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Women's Conference to primarily develop an approach to account for value of non-market household production by estimating the value of time spent on undertaking unpaid work. TUS is quantitative summaries of how individuals allocate their time over a specified period of time– typically over 24 hours of a day or over the seven days of a week, for example, role of cooking

as well childcare performed at the same time. As opposed to the data sets like NSSO and Census, this methodology foregrounds the unremunerated work. In order to capture the nuances of nature of work critics and feminist economists have opined that NSSO does not capture simultaneity and multiplicity of women's work and have argued for adopting the Time use surveys (TUS). In 2019, the Indian government has launch its second nationwide Time Use Survey to the data collected in the non-market non-SNA activities, proper quantification of the economic contribution of women in national economy, which remain unobserved in other social surveys, and study of the gender discrimination in the household activities is possible.

Amending Legislations

Maternity leave policy is lauded in principle since it systematically reacts to the care economy by intervening to create scope for paid leave and flexible work arrangements that can better accommodate workers with care responsibilities and how care can be provided. The amendment of the Maternity Benefit in 2017 protects women's employment, and well-being during maternity by paid maternity leave from the original 12 weeks to 26 weeks now. This is, however, limited to the formal economy which excludes nearly 93 percent of the informal economy. Such a legislation also lays ground for the differential care regimes in the country. In its limited scope, the act mandates employers, both public and private, to uphold this law of the land. However, the fear of women facing a backlash of the law in terms of discrimination at the time of entering into the workforce.

For informal sector workers in India, a statutory mandate for maternity entitlement is enshrined in the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013. The Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana (IGMSY) was instituted in 2010 as a pilot of conditional cash transfers to women during their pregnancy in lieu of their wages loss. The scheme was rechristened Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) in 2016. The budget requirement for implementation of maternity entitlements has consistently been low; in 2017, it was 30% less than what is required for universal coverage.

Conclusion

As we move towards achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, more specifically the goal on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women, it is essential that we centre-stage women's rights, and position care work as state obligation to provide, enable and regulate all players in the 'care diamond'. Family is reiterated as the critical location where the care is given where women in different stages of their life continue to be the primary caregiver while being continually marginalized in the labour market. Care and domestic work should be addressed - through recognition, reduction and redistribution. The story of domestic and care work cannot be narrated without alluding to impacts it has on lived realities of women globally and more so in India, especially in creating the construct of the 'domesticated woman' rather than that of a citizen and economic actor. Further, this has to be grounded in the voice, representation and leadership of women themselves.

Despite the steps taken by the state to improve the accounting and recording of broad category of work, the apprehensions about what outcomes will translate into in terms of schemes and implementable actions, remains to be seen. Moreover, the analysis of care policy overall should be informed by a gender transformative approach, rather than essentialising women's work as mothers and caregivers alone.

Our literature review points to some other factors that merit mention but they are not the central point of this paper. However, the analysis of locating women's withdrawal from the labor market must also be seen in within a context of unemployment and jobless growth, as well as within gendered assumptions arising from norms and stereotypes within policy design. There is limited literature on how women's economic participation is affected by prevailing gender norms operate in intrahousehold decision-making, in mobility and access to jobs, in training and skilling initiatives, and in recruitment and sustenance of women in jobs. ICRW's current research focuses on exploring some of these questions, and will provide insights for future research, policy and action.

Endnote

ⁱ We would like to acknowledge the contribution of Prof Dipa Sinha, Ambedkar University, Delhi and Dr Sona Mitra, IFMR-IWWAGE for this paper

ⁱⁱ Labor force participation rates includes those who are 'active' in the labor market i.e. those who are employed as well as those who are 'seeking employment' (unemployed).

ⁱⁱⁱ As per the classification of activity statuses, persons with activity status codes 92 (attended domestic duties only) and 93 (attended domestic duties and were also engaged in free collection of goods, sewing, tailoring, weaving, etc. for household use) were considered to be engaged in domestic duties. (NSS 68th Round 2011-2012)

^{iv} Anganwadi workers

^v Total Fertility Rate (TFR) had declined from 4.4 per woman in the early 1980s to 2.5 in 2010 (downloaded from <http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-Common/srs.html> on 25-2-2013)

^{vi} For example, Rangarajan et al. (2011) estimated that 44 percent of the share of women who withdrew from the labour force during 2004-05 to 2009-10 chose to engage in education. Neff et al. (2012) also argue that the decline in FLFP in rural areas during the period of 2004-05 to 2009-10 is partly due to the effect of education, wherein nearly a quarter of the working age group, consisting of young females (15 to 24 years) have moved into higher education. Kannan and Raveendran (2012) estimated that within the total drop in FLFP during the same period, about 27 percent of this drop may be accounted for by additional enrolment in education (Andres et al 2017).

References

- Abraham, V., (2013) 'Missing Labour or Consistent "De-Feminisation"?' , Economic and Political Weekly, pp. 99-108.
- Andres, L.A., Dasgupta, B., Joseph, G., Abraham, V. and Correia, M., (2017) 'Precarious drop: Reassessing patterns of female labor force participation in India.', The World Bank. Available at: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/559511491319990632/pdf/WPS8024.pdf> (Accessed on: 18 May 2019)
- Budlender, D., (2008) 'The Statistical Evidence on Care and Non-Care Work across Six Countries. Gender and Development Programme Paper No. 4', UNRISD, Geneva.
- Chaudhary, R. and Verick, S., (2014) 'Female labour force participation in India and beyond', New Delhi: ILO. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@asia/@ro-bangkok/@sro-new_delhi/documents/publication/wcms_324621.pdf (Accessed 23 May 2019)
- England, P. and Folbre, N., (1999) 'The cost of caring', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 561(1), pp.39-51.
- Gammage, S., Hunt, A., Langou, G.D., Fuentes, E.R., Isnaldi, C., Aneja, U., Thomas, M. and Robino, C., (2018) 'The Imperative of Addressing Care Needs for G20 countries', Gender Economic Equity Taskforce. T20 & W20 Argentina. Available at: https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/TF4-4.3-Policy-Brief-on-Care-June_final.pdf (Accessed on: 17 May 2019)
- Jha. P., and M. Negre. (2007) 'Indian Economy in the Era of Contemporary Globalisation: Some Core Elements of the Balance Sheet', Macroscan. Available at: www.macrosan.org/anl/may07/anl170507Indian%20Economy.htm (Accessed on: 17 May 2019)
- Palriwala, R. and Neetha, N., (2010) 'Care arrangements and bargains: Anganwadi and paid domestic workers in India'. *International Labour Review*, 149(4), pp. 511-527.
- Palriwala, R. and Neetha, N., (2011) 'Stratified familialism: the care regime in India through the lens of childcare', *Development and Change*, 42(4), pp.1049-1078.
- Palriwala, R. and Pillai, N., (2008) 'The Political and Social Economy of Care: India Research Report 1'. Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD).
- Raju, Saraswati. "The Material and the Symbolic: Intertionalities of Home-Based Work in India." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2013, pp. 60–68. Available at: www.jstor.org/stable/23391138 (Accessed on: 21 May 2019)
- Report II. 'Statistics of work, employment and labour underutilization: Report for discussion at the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians, ILO (Geneva, 2–11 October 2013)
- Sinha, D. (2017) 'Budget 2017 Disappoints, Maternity Benefit Programme Underfunded', NDTV, Available at: <https://everylifecounts.ndtv.com/budget-2017-disappoints-maternity-benefit-programme-underfunded-9831> (Accessed on 29 May 2019)
- UNRISD, (2010) 'Research and Policy Brief 9: Why Care Matters for Social Development', Available at: [http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/\(httpAuxPages\)/25697FE238192066C12576D4004CFE50/%24file/RPB9e.pdf](http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/(httpAuxPages)/25697FE238192066C12576D4004CFE50/%24file/RPB9e.pdf) (Accessed on: 19 May 2019).