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Economic Liberalization and Its Impact on Women in the Indian Workforce

Shruti Rajagopalan and Kadambari Shah¹

education and employment for women, invomufJETA5-6(w)-7, inv7(ot)7(n t i)7(nv)-13hno13(e)gy ufJ-13(m)7(c

Wong and Stansel 2016; and Russell et al. 2020). Unsurprisingly, a country's FLPR is generally positively correlated with its economic freedom, likely through the mechanism of greater prosperity. The reason the mechanism is important is the experience of erstwhile communist countries. Most communist regimes minimized the role of the family and prioritized gender equality. They typically implemented policies to eliminate gender differences in the economy and promote female participation outside the home. Alesina, Giuliano, and Nunn (2013) find that countries that have experienced a period of communism have higher rates of female labor force participation. But the mechanism of economic growth might still be at play: richer communist countries tend to have higher FLPR than poorer communist countries.

As shown in figure 5, greater economic freedom relates to increased FLPR. But, India emerges as an anomaly with very low FLPR compared to other countries with comparable economic freedom as measured by Economic Freedom Index 2022. Additionally, despite its gains in economic freedom since the reforms in the nineties, the country's FLPR has *declined* (figure 6).

There is a lot of variation across Indian states, and the largest states are more populous than most counties. Therefore, it is useful to study the relationship *within* India. The most recent study measuring economic freedom across Indian states is from 2011. And for the 2011 Index within India, the relationship looks like the rest of the world, i.e., states with greater economic freedom also have higher FLPR (figure 7).

India poses a three-dimensional puzzle. Why is India an outlier with such low-levels of FLPR? Why is FLPR declining despite gains in economic freedom? And what mechanism explains the reversal of the trend at the sub-national level, where Indian states with greater economic freedom have a higher FLPR?

Figure 5: Female labor force participation and economic freedom, world, 2020

Under socialism in India, the government tightly controlled the economy and trade through a system known as the License Raj. This system, based on comprehensive licensing and control measures, was designed to align with the objectives of the Five-Year Plans.

The heart of this system was an industrial licensing policy, which determined everything from the size and location to the output and employment of most businesses. India, preferring self-reliance to dependence on foreign trade, enforced a range of restrictive laws. For instance, the Industries (Development and Regulation) Act of 1951 required government licenses for any new or expanding industrial projects, while the Companies Act of 1956 delved into details like director salaries and meeting schedules.

Only businesses with a license could access essential production inputs. However, the difficulty in obtaining licenses often meant that production couldn't meet demand, leading to rising prices. The government, to prevent exploitation of this system, imposed strict controls on prices and quantities. The Essential Commodities Act of 1955, for example, gave the state extensive power over the production and pricing of essential goods.

Third, an exchange control system was implemented. Exporters had to give their foreign exchange earnings to the Reserve Bank of India and were subject to strict regulations, as outlined in laws like the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act of 1973.

In addition, India also adopted import-substitution policies to shield domestic industries from international competition, which unfortunately limited consumers' access to high-quality products and producers' access to superior inputs.

Five, agricultural policy was another primary focus of the planners. The government insulated the sector from global markets and implemented comprehensive land reforms. These reforms included setting limits on landholdings, regulating tenancy, removing intermediaries from the colonial era, and consolidating land. The government-controlled food prices and subsidies, heavily influencing every aspect of agricultural production (Rajagopalan 2023).

Lastly, the banking system was overhauled to align with the Five-Year Plans. Major banks were nationalized in 1969 and 1980 to control credit distribution and ensure government funding. The Reserve Bank of India managed a complex web of interest rates, disconnected from the actual scarcity of funds.

Srinivasan (2000) argued that the collective impact of these controls was far more constricting than any single regulation. Securing an industrial license was just one part of the puzzle. It didn't guarantee an import license for capital goods, rendering the licensed capacity non-functional if imports were crucial. The real issue lay in the unpredictability of these regulations' application. They were discretionary, not automatic or based on clear rules. Though there were supposed principles and priorities for exercising these regulatory powers, in practice, they were largely ineffective. This led to a disjointed allocation mechanism, heavily reliant on quantitative restrictions, disconnected from actual market dynamics. The result? A muddled incentive structure that inevitably sparked rampant rent-seeking and political corruption. The regulatory system, initially envisioned to guide national development through planning, and as

Srinivasan (2000) argued, ironically morphed into a deeply entrenched problem, undermining the very fabric of the nation's political and economic system.

These interventionist policies ushered in decades of slow economic growth (see, for example, Bhagwati and Desai 1970; Ahluwalia 1985; Mohan and Aggarwal 1990; Srinivasan 2000; Roy 2006; Rajagopalan 2020; Narla and Misra 2021; Rajagopalan 2021).

In 1985, some partial reform measures were introduced, such as relaxing foreign exchange controls, industrial delicensing, and incentivizing exports (Panagariya 2004a). Then, in 1991, facing an imminent balance-of-payments crisis, India initiated several liberalization measures. Led by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, the country devalued its currency, slashed import tariffs, and deregulated industry. Such measures invigorated private entrepreneurship, enhanced domestic competition, and integrated India into the global economic system, boosting foreign investor confidence.⁷

The liberalization, a watershed moment in India's economic history, catalyzed economic growth, molded a business-friendly landscape, and attracted foreign investments, significantly alleviating poverty.⁸ Sectors such as information technology (IT), telecommunications, aviation, and consumer goods, now freed from regulatory controls, began to grow exponentially (Narla, Rajagopibera(e)7(n)-20(t)7(rGra)6(t)-13(e)-6(re)6(l)7(a)7(rhono)-onoTf1t17 Tm0 g0 G(7)JTJETQq0.00000912

Benefits from the reforms permeated all societal strata though not equally. Differences arose between urban and rural poverty-reduction rates (Srinivasan 1999), between states' growth rates (Chakravarty and Dehejia 2016), and between caste groups' economic advancements (Munshi 2019).

The resulting increase in GDP per capita also helped advance women in India. The first mechanism is a decline in fertility rates. Greater prosperity also brought greater access to family planning tools that allow women greater control over the timing of childbirth; for example, the availability of birth control to unmarried women in the US in the 1960s enhanced women's autonomy over fertility (Goldin and Katz 2002).

The dip in and delayed timing of fertility counteract traditional norms, promoting women's participation in the educational system and the workforce (Field and Ambrus 2008; Miller 2010; Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer 2011). Second, both reduced child-rearing commitments and technological progress in the form of electrification and household appliances free women to work outside the home (Greenwood, Seshadri, and Yorukoglu 2005; Dinkelman 2011). Third, as countries develop, they often prioritize universal education, ensuring girls' access to schooling. Improved education equips women for non-agricultural, non-domestic jobs. Finally, rising income is both a cause and effect of economic structural transformation. This transformation facilitates women's prolonged workforce participation. For instance, Goldin (2006) highlights the rise in clerical jobs in the US during the 1930s–1950s, enabling women to work after marriage.

In India, since the 1991 reforms, women have fewer babies and have them later; they are healthier, more educated, and experience lower maternal and infant mortality. India is not unique,

plummeted from over 6 to 2 by 2020. The fertility rate also declined in China though an important difference is strong state-dictated population-control measures since the early 1970s (Zhang 2017). Finally, South Korea, the highest in GDP per capita in this group, currently has

(Acemoglu and Johnson 2007; Balagopal 2009; Cervellati and Sunde 2011; Ram 2012; Ngangue and Manfred 2015; and Chakrabarti 2021).

In 1960, the average Indian was expected to live to the age of 45, with marginal differences between the sexes. By 2020, life expectancy was 69 for men and 72 for women.¹⁰ Compared to other countries that liberalized economically, India still has considerable ground to cover.¹¹ China, for example, saw a stunning rise in life expectancy for women after its economic reforms in 1978, from 65 years in 1978 to 80 in 2020. Its GDP per capita (constant 2015 US\$) in 2020 was 10,358.2, compared to India's 1,813.5. Generally, GDP per capita and life expectancy rise together.

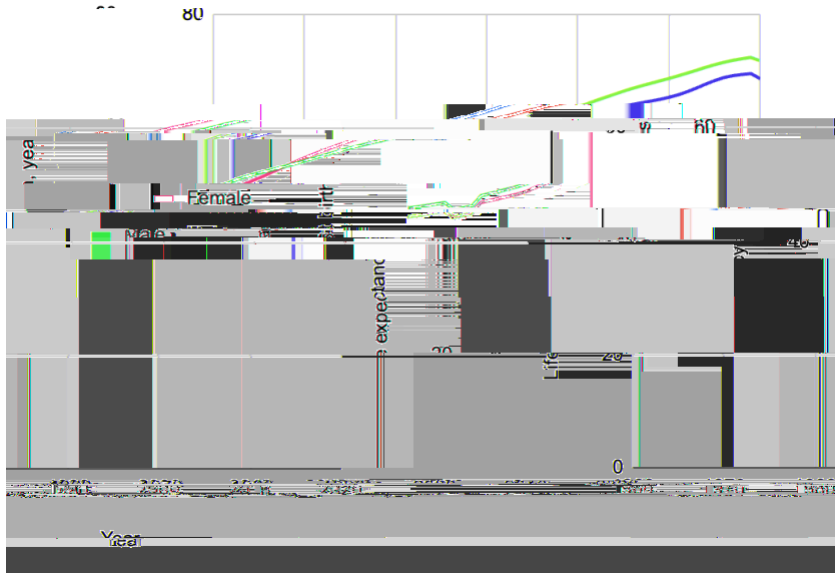
Economic freedom is also positively related to life expectancy (Esposto and Zaleski 1999; Fotros, Akbari, and Mirzaee 2013; Lawson, Murphy, and Williamson 2016; and Moga Rogoz et al. 2022). Gwartney et al. (2022) observe that life expectancy is 80.4 years for people of countries in the top quartile of economic freedom, while those in the bottom quartile have a life expectancy of 66 years.

Indian women's increased life expectancy can be attributed to economic growth, which also led to increased government revenues to implement targeted programs for women.¹²

Figure 10: Life expectancy at birth (years), male and female, India (1960–2020)

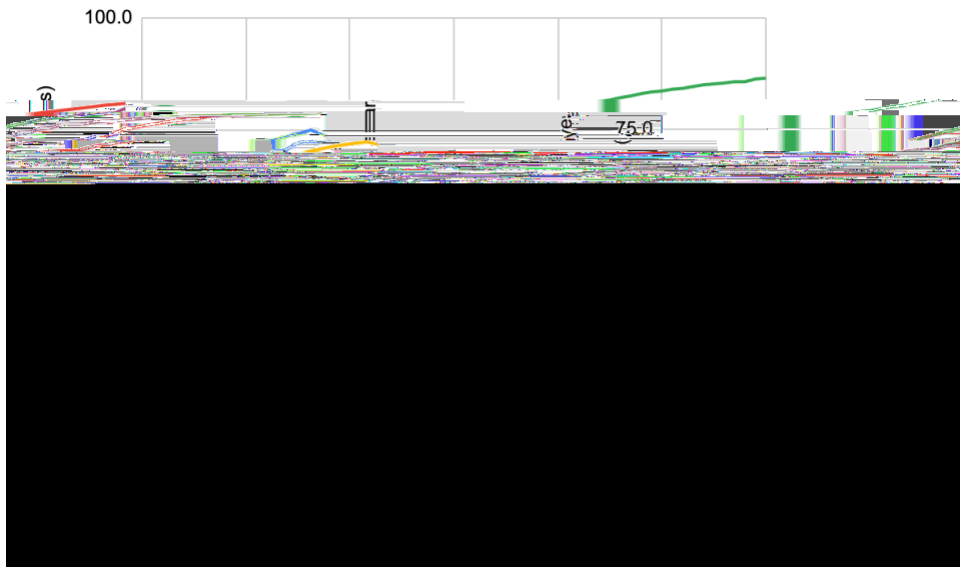
¹⁰ Across the world, women tend to live longer than men, owing to various biological, behavioral, and environmental factors (Ortiz-Ospina and Beltekian 2018).

¹¹ Moreover, Indian women only have a 0.1-year advantage in health life expectancy, which measures average years of good health (World Health Organization 2021), owing to societal and cultural factors (Harris-Fry et al. 2017; Bharati et al. 2019; Hathi et al. 2021). Women and girls in the country are known to



Source: Ibid

Figure 11: Female life expectancy at birth (years), in Bangladesh, China, India, South Korea, and Vietnam (1960–2020)



Source: Ibid

2.3 Infant and Maternal Mortality

With rising incomes, families can afford better sanitation, higher nutrition, and better health care, which lower infant and maternal death rates. Naanwaab (2018) and Sharma (2020) find that more economic freedom is also related to lower infant and maternal mortality. For example, in China, infant mortality fell from 52 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1978 (before reform) to 6 per 1,000 live births in 2020. In Vietnam, the corresponding figure in 1986 (before reform)

In 1990, around the time of the reforms, India's FLPR was 28 percent. This figure rose to a peak of 30 percent in 2005 but has declined since; in 2020, it was 23 percent. In contrast, India's male labor force participation rate has almost-steadily increased since 1991. Though it has decre

The puzzle is specific to FLPR: women have benefited on all other socio-economic margins associated with growth and economic freedom (Forsythe, Korzeniewicz, and Durrant 2000; Kabeer and Natali 2013; Bhattacharjee, Hnatkowska, and Lahiri 2015).

There are six main theories that explain India's declining FLPR. First, is the feminization-U hypothesis, which suggests that in a growing economy and with structural transformation, women's work participation first decreases and then increases. Second, the honor-income trade-off, where women weigh the importance of earning money against societal views on women working. Third, women's education levels can impact their choice to work. These first three points look at the reasons from the supply, i.e., women's side. The next three focus on the demand side factors affecting the labor market: fourth, whether there are good jobs available for women; fifth, if women need to move to find work; and sixth, how job opportunities and pay differ in various industries. These factors help us understand why the number of women in the workforce can change.

4.1 Supply-Side Factors

4.1.1 Feminization-U Hypothesis

Goldin (1994) analyzed 200 years of US history and observed a U-shaped trend in FLPR over the course of economic development, i.e., as an economy develops, FLPR first decreases and then increases (see figure 16). Several scholars (Kottis 1990; Tansel 2002; Fatima and Sul 2014) have also observed a similar trend in India. The decline in FLPR is attributed to the feminization-U hypothesis, which suggests that in a growing economy and with structural transformation, women's work participation first decreases and then increases. This is due to the honor-income trade-off, where women weigh the importance of earning money against societal views on women working. Additionally, women's education levels can impact their choice to work. These factors help us understand why the number of women in the workforce can change.

Source: Johan Jarnestad/The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, using Goldin's 1994 research.

Figure 17: The cross-country relationship between income and female labor force participation rate, world, 2020

Source: Authors' calculations. Log GDP per capita (constant 2015 \$US) for 2020 is from World

as Uzbekistan and Indonesia. Furthermore, if female-male interaction at the workplace was a major concern, then all-female environments would have arisen, as in Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and, increasingly, Kashmir (Karimi 2008; United Nations 2019; Gupta and Mohammad 2022; Omar 2022). The challenge is not strictly about trading off labor supply and honor. In regions such as West Bengal, Islamic religious practices like veiling do not significantly affect FLPR (Deshpande and Kabeer 2019). And culturally similar Bangladesh would not have an FLPR at higher rates than India.

Thus, although societal traditions do influence women's lives, the honor-income trade-off does not provide a convincing explanation for India's FLPR trends. FLPR does tend to fall as household incomes increase, but this is likely because of an income effect, in which work becomes less appealing for women (Deshpande and Kabeer 2019). Also, social and cultural norms place a high value on mothers raising children, instead of relying on strangers at daycare. While work may turn into an inferior good for these reasons, the income effect is distinct from upholding honor or following cultural norms.

4.1.3. Rising Education

The declining FLPR in India has also been attributed to increasing female education (Kingdon and Unni 2001; Das and Desai 2003; Rangarajan, Kaul, and Seema 2011; Klasen and Pieters 2015). The argument is that to attain higher levels of education, women delay entering the workforce. However, not only is FLPR lower among younger women (aged 15-24) who would now be in school, but FLPR has declined even among those aged 25-59 (Kannan and Raveendran 2012; Chatterjee, Desai, and Vanneman 2018).

Education can boost wages, incentivizing more women to join the workforce (Chatterjee, Desai, and Vanneman 2018). And women's education yields higher returns than men's. Kabeer and Natali (2013) emphasize that gender equality in education and employment boosts GDP per capita, but Kabeer (2012) argues that outcomes are better when women's employment expands.

More Indian women are getting educated. However, this increase in education does not usually translate into gainful employment. Swaminathan (2008) notes that after 1991, educated women were not joining the workforce at the same rate as men.

This curious phenomenon can be partially explained by the trade-off between education

4.2. Demand-Side Factors

4.2.1. Limited Desirable Jobs

Scholars argue that lack of desirable job opportunities leads women to exit the workforce (Rodgers 2012; Chaudhury and Verick 2014; Chatterjee, Murgai, and Rama 2015). Desirable jobs are typically those with job security, safe working conditions, and good wages. And educated women, like educated men, usually prefer white-collar jobs. However, in India, while the educated population has been rising, desirable white-collar jobs represent a mere 7 percent of all jobs, creating an excess supply of educated individuals looking for these roles (Klasen and Pieters 2015; Desai and Joshi 2019). This pushes people into the informal economy. After the 1991 reforms, the urban informal sector also grew because of rising demands for labor flexibility, which the formal sector could not meet. Though the formal sector saw a productivity boost due to the reforms, it could not accommodate the changing labor force.¹⁶

One question is if women, especially highly educated women, are overly selective about their employment options relative to men. The case of civil service jobs, attractive because of their stability, benefits, and status, is instructive (Poonam 2018; Marwaha 2021; Mangal 2022). The civil service exam is extremely challenging, with a selection rate of less than 1 percent of applicants and typically requiring multiple attempts. All else equal, educated women seeking only desirable white-collar jobs, would take this exam at the same rate as or a higher rate than men. Yet, in 2020, twice as many men took the preliminary exam compared with women (United Public Service Commission n.d.). Even though women have greater success with fewer attempts, men also take many more attempts and delay entry into the workforce to get such desirable jobs (Mangal and Singh forthcoming). This suggests that women may be halting attempts because of external factors, most likely marriage, and not necessarily because of high-status white-collar job opportunities.

Thus, while there may be limited desirable jobs available, other socio-economic factors also seem to be at play, causing the FLPR to decline. Section 5 expands on this theory to show that rather than women waiting for ideal positions, jobs are scarce in general, causing the FLPR to fall.

Table 2: Female civil service candidates, 1990–2022

Year	Selected candidates	Number of women	Proportion of women
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2020	833	238	28.6
2021	685	177	25.8
2022	933	320	34.3

Source: United Public Service Commission (n.d.)

Table 3: Number of attempts of recommended candidates, 2001–2021

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Year

migrate for economic reasons, it rose from 3.2 percent of the female workforce in 2001 to 5.7 percent in 2011. On the other hand, Klasen and Pieters (2015) observe that migrant status does not affect FLPR.

More broadly, it seems that women's labor supply has not matched demand. For instance, despite a post-liberalization construction boom, women did not benefit significantly (Bhattacharya 2021; Dore 2022). Construction work often requires migration and is associated with poor working conditions, minimal legal protection, and low wages (Bhattacharyya and Korinek 2007; Banerjee and Raju 2009; Mazumdar, Neetha, and Agnihotri 2013). Those factors, coupled with rising household incomes, mean only women in the poorest families take such jobs.

4.2.3 Sectoral and Wage Gaps

India's economy has seen a decline in the agricultural sector and a boom in the services sector. The experience of other Asian economies where manufacturing took off and led to an employment boom has not been the Indian experience (Murthy 2005; Nayyar 2012; Basu 2015; Basu 2018). This anomaly is deemed a factor behind the declining FLPR, as the manufacturing sector boosts FLPR (Prillaman et al. 2017).

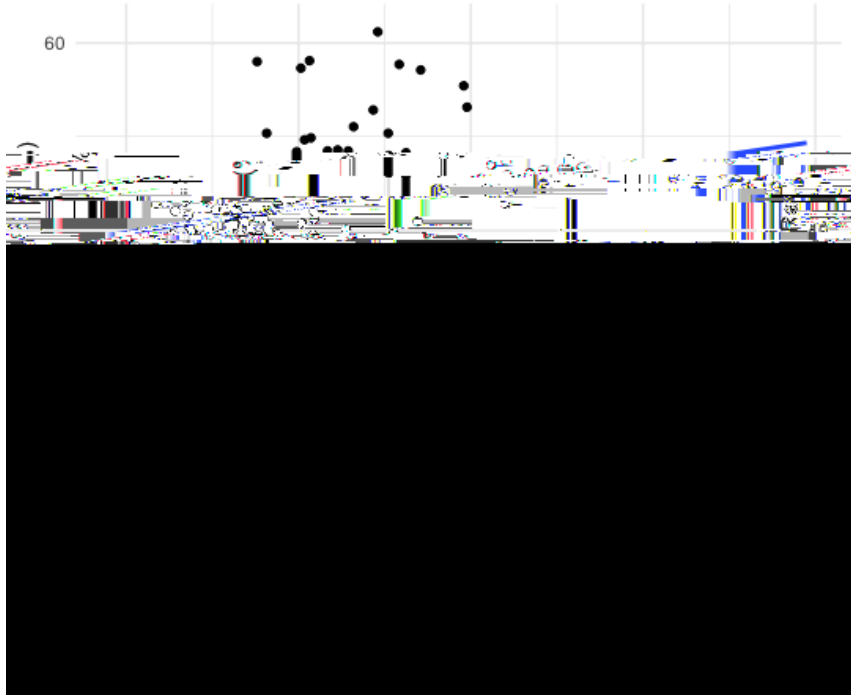
From the early 1990s to 2020, female employment in agriculture fell by 17 percent, while that in manufacturing saw negligible growth (Rustagi 2013; Deshpande 2023). Mechanization in agriculture led to job losses, especially for women (for example, Dasgupta and Verick 2016; Ghani et al. 2016; Deshpande 2023). Jobs in the expanding services sector did not offset decreasing agricultural opportunities and they often demanded skills many women lack (Lahoti and Swaminathan 2016).

Klasen and Pieters (2015) determine that changes in the sectoral composition of employment may have caused FLPR to fall. Women typically thrive in pink-collar roles such as teaching and nursing (Goldin 2006) rather than high-skill tradable-services jobs, like engineers and IT which were more directly impacted by liberalization. However, growth in tradable services (that is, those that can be traded across borders, such as IT and financial/business services) has positive spillover effects on non-tradable services (such as real estate and hospitality), favoring women (Avdiu et al. 2022). For every 10 percent increase in employment in tradable services, there is a 9.1 percent increase in female employment in non-traded services compared to 4.2 percent for men.

The declining FLPR might also relate to the fact that only some sectors liberalized. Even though certain sectors that are dominated by men, such as agriculture, were not lib2 Tf1 0u-192 reW*nBT/ to,9

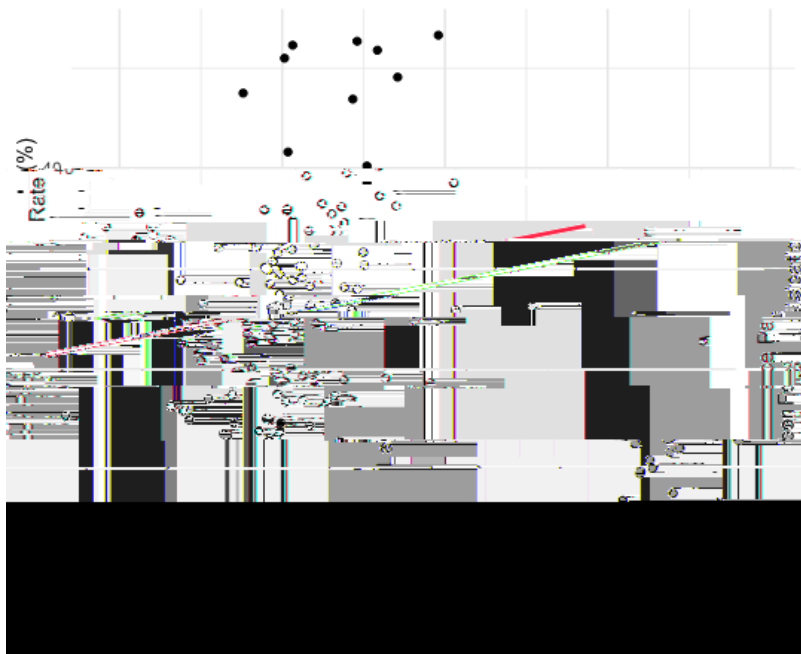
In countries such as Mexico, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Cambodia that have higher FLPRs than India (Carr and Chen 2002; Simavi, Manuel, and Blackden 2010; World Bank Group and World Trade Organization 2015; Lopez-Acevedo and Robertson 2016), the textile sector—dominated by women—grew. Bangladesh, with societal structures similar to India’s, saw an increased FLPR because the booming export-ready garment sector contributed to women’s education and work prospects (Heath and Mobarak 2011).¹⁷ But India’s textile sector remained stagnant despite liberalization, limiting women’s opportunities (Livani and Solotaroff 2019).

alternatives to manage their household responsibilities. But McKinsey (2017) estimates that approximately 90 percent of the thirty-six



Source: Authors' calculations. State-Level Growth Rate of Jobs and Labor Force Participation for all ages at usual status (Rural+Urban) are from the Periodic Labour Force Survey for 2017-21.

Figure 19: State-Level Growth Rate of Jobs and Female Labor Force Participation, India, 2017-2021



Source: Authors' calculations. State-Level Growth Rate of Jobs and Female Labor Force Participation for all ages at usual status (Rural+Urban) are from the Periodic Labour Force Survey for 2017-21.

Figure 20: State-Level GDP Growth Rate and State-Level Growth Rate of Jobs, India, 2017-2021

Source: Authors' calculations. State Gross Domestic Product at constant 2011-12 prices is from the Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation for 2017-21. State-Level Growth Rate of Jobs for all ages at usual status (Rural+Urban) is from the Periodic Labour Force Survey for 2017-21.

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