



## **Marriage and Labour Force Participation: Seeing India through Claudia Goldin's Lens**

*Sangeeth Mathew Philip and Pragati Jain*

*Central University of Rajasthan*

---

### **ABSTRACT**

The social institution of marriage has often posed as a barrier to women's careers and their overall well-being. Claudia Goldin, who won the Nobel Prize in 2023, has focused on the several factors which lead to a low Labour Force Participation of women where marriage and its related components like unpaid care work, motherhood penalty and use of contraceptives are also focused. The current study tries to view India in the light of her findings and understand where the country stands in these aspects and suggestions which could be implemented so as to create a more progressive atmosphere and encourage more women in the workforce, which is essential for advancement in both economic and social perspectives.

*Keywords: Marriage, Labour Market, Unpaid Work, Women Empowerment*

---

### **Introduction**

Claudia Goldin won the Nobel Prize for Economics in the year 2023 for her contribution to the advancements in understanding the outcomes in the labour market for women (Abraham & Kesar, 2023). For the same, she took the case of the United States and tried to understand the different complex factors that affect women's participation in the labor market. Her main focus was how marriage has slowed down the rate of participation, where she explains how marriage-related responsibilities such as unpaid care work and pregnancy cause a hindrance to the advancement of women's careers.

The World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report suggests it requires 134 more years to eliminate gender parity (Kaul, 2024). The report, which considers the aspects of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, quality of health, and political participation, ranks the nation at 129th position out of 146 countries in 2024, which implies that it has fallen two ranks from its position in 2023 (Pti, 2024). In light of Claudia's findings, the current study is focused on understanding the interplay of several factors, such as age of first marriage, skewed distribution of unpaid care work, and motherhood penalty, in affecting the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) of women in the Indian context.

---

### **Unpaid Care Work and Motherhood Penalty**

The institution of marriage stands as a considerable obstruction to women and their careers. Claudia points out to the fact that both men and women end up on the losing side when women are forced to prioritise motherhood over their careers. The incidence of the phenomenon of women being denied the choice of perceiving their careers following their marriage is a major concern. The problem has differing impacts on the rural and urban areas, where the issue is getting worse in the rural areas, with the highest reduction seen in the LFPR of rural married women as per the latest National Sample Survey report. In the urban areas, although the situation regarding LFPR has not worsened, the fact that it is remaining stagnant stands as a significant cause of concern (Mahajan, 2018). It is also to be understood that this phenomenon does not stand the same for unmarried women, where an increase in their LFPR from 37 percent to 50 percent has been seen from 1999 to 2011. In contrast, the LFPR of married women is only 20 percent, pointing out the fact that the institution of marriage serves as a weighty barrier for women.

A burden that falls disproportionately on women is one of unpaid care work. The data published by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2018 on care work tells that 46.7 percent of women testify that excessive unpaid work is the reason why they are absent from the workforce, while for men, it is 6.3 percent (Addati et al., 2018). As per the data published by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development in 2016, it was reported in India, on average, women spend 352 minutes per day on unpaid care work, while men spend 52 minutes only (Sanghera et al., 2019), which is just one-seventh of women's time spent on the same. The disparity is so significant to an extent that no country in the OECD has had this much of a gap of 300 minutes (Statista, 2024). It is observed that if women are engaged in paid work activities, there is a reduction in this difference. However, the gap still remains there, as women spend twice the time men spend on unpaid care work. It is also to be understood that irrespective of the locality of residence, the burden of unpaid care work is more or less similar, with women in urban areas spending 43 percent of their time and women in rural areas spending 47 percent of their time on these activities (Nikore, 2024). The excessive burden of unpaid care work also leads to a scenario that narrows the chances of

women getting into work in the formal sector, and instead, they opt for informal sector jobs. As per ILO reports, out of the women who are employed in India, a massive volume of 92 percent is employed in the informal sector (Elgin & Elveren, 2021). Informal jobs provide more flexibility to manage the "double burden," but such jobs do not offer much security, and the gender pay gap is also higher in these sectors. When people in India are asked about the gender pay gap, most of them are unaware of it and thereby deny the same. It is a fact that the gender pay gap is seen less in high-profile jobs and is much more visible when jobs in the informal sector are observed. An exception for the same can be mentioned in Kerala, where mostly men and women are paid the same remuneration without discrimination, which also includes the case of daily wage laborers (Kaur, 2023).

Claudia points out how motherhood becomes a massive hurdle for working women, where the challenges of taking a break to take care of the child and then coming back to work poses a substantial issue. "Marriage bars" as framed by Claudia refers to the practice where the organisations refuse or show less interest in hiring a married woman or a woman who has taken a break for looking after her child. Here, the unwritten rules of the organisations come into the picture. The burden of childbearing is also a sizeable concern, particularly for working women. Initiatives like Anganwadi and "Sangini Centres" run by Self-employed Women's Association (SEWA) offer a lot of relief to them and it was also reported that the women who utilised this service were able to earn more (Kathuria, 2021)

---

### Age of Marriage, Pill and Labour Force Participation Rate

Claudia Goldin states that a lower age of marriage leads to higher chances for enrolling/continuing higher education. Coming to the Indian scenario, although there has been an improvement in the median age of first marriage for Indian women, still the condition is not satisfactory, as the NFHS-5 reports state that the median age of first marriage for Indian women stands at 19.2 years (Singh et al., 2023). Child marriage, which is a fundamental violation of human rights (*Child Marriage*, n.d.), has been consistently reducing in India over the past few decades. However, with that being said, the child marriage rate among women aged 20-24 as per NFHS-5 is still 23 percent, with West Bengal and Bihar having a highly alarming rate of 41 percent each (*Women Related Data: NFHS 5*, n.d.). Jammu and Kashmir has the lowest child marriage rate in the country at 5 percent (The People's Archive of Rural India, n.d.).

Claudia mentions how the pill worked well in delaying the pregnancy and thereby providing more space for women to be engaged in paid work or make the desired advancements in their education. India has seen a significant increase in the use of contraceptives which stands at 67 percent as per the NFHS-5, which was 54 percent during NFHS-4. It has also been reported that 71.8 percent of the women using contraceptives rely on modern methods such as sterilization, condoms and pills (Ewerling et al., 2021), which is a good sign of progress. Employment status has been observed to have a profound impact on the use of contraception, where it was seen that 66 percent of employed women use contraceptives, while the percentage drops to 53 for unemployed women.

The correlation between the usage of contraceptives and LFPR has been positive in the Indian Context as the rate of LFPR has increased from 27 percent in 2015 to 33 percent in 2023 as per the Indian Labour Organisation estimates (*World Bank Open Data*, n.d.). The LFPR for women in India declined from 2015-16 to 2019-20 from 27 percent to 26 percent which could be seen as an aftermath of Covid-19; the same was observed from the global level too, irrespective of gender differences. Despite the increase in the LFPR, India is far behind the global rate, which stands at 49 percent. Although the rate of contraceptives in India is even higher than the global average, an aspect to be concerned with here is that the sole voice regarding whether to use a contraceptive is low for women in India as per NFHS - 5. Here, from a general perspective, one might think that having a child should be a joint decision, but when given more thought into it, the burden of raising a child falls disproportionately on women, mainly owing to the physical and mental stress during the pregnancy and after the same too. So, it would be more fitting if the voices of women were given higher weight in this regard.

---

### Conclusion

In light of Claudia Goldin's findings on the factors that lead to the low representation of women in the workforce, this study tried to assess where India stands in terms of these factors. In most of the aspects, India requires a lot of improvement.

Unpaid care work is three times more for women than men on a global basis, whereas the same is around 17 times in the Indian context, and this has forced many women to enter into the informal sector for flexible jobs, but at the cost of lesser security and gendered disparities in remuneration. Joint efforts in domestic work are essential to reduce this skewed burden of unpaid care work. The age of first marriage for women stands as a critical factor in their career advancements, and adequate steps should be taken to increase the minimum legal age for marriage of women in India so as to give them more space for their careers. Marriage bars, the unwritten rule of giving less preference to married women, particularly after their pregnancy, should be avoided. Finally, motherhood should remain as a choice, not as an enforcement by any means, and measures to provide accessible childcare facilities like Anganwadi should be initiated more in number, to reduce the burden of motherhood.

The cost of not educating girls and women amounts to \$10 trillion on a global level, as per a report published by UN Women in 2024, with low-middle-income countries like India ending up with the most enormous losses (Root, 2024). So, it is high time that we take appropriate measures to create a progressive atmosphere where gender biases are reduced, and everyone has a space to thrive in their own respective spheres.

---

### Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that there is no potential conflict of interest.

---

**References**


---

- Abraham, R., & Kesar, S. (2023, October 10). An acknowledgement of women's work in economics - hits, misses, and a long road ahead. *Hindustan Times*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/an-acknowledgement-of-women-s-work-in-economics-hits-misses-and-a-long-road-ahead-101696875659892.html>
- Addati, L., Cattaneo, U., Esquivel, V., & Valarino, I. (2018). Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work. In *ILO eBooks*.
- Child marriage*. (n.d.). United Nations Population Fund. <https://www.unfpa.org/child-marriage>
- Elgin, C., & Elveren, A. Y. (2021). Informality, inequality, and feminization of labor. *Women S Studies International Forum*, 88, 102505.
- Ewerling, F., McDougal, L., Raj, A., Ferreira, L. Z., Blumenberg, C., Parmar, D., & Barros, A. J. D. (2021). Modern contraceptive use among women in need of family planning in India: an analysis of the inequalities related to the mix of methods used. *Reproductive Health*, 18(1).
- Halim, D., & Rivera, S. (2024, March 16). Love, marriage, and development: 4 observations. *World Bank Blogs*. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/love-marriage-and-development-4-observations#:~:text=In%202015%2C%20on%20average%2C%20women,women%20and%2030%20for%20men.>
- Kathuria, S. (2021, January 19). Enhancing women's employment is key to economic recovery. *Hindustan Times*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/enhancing-women-s-employment-is-key-to-economic-recovery-101610976913528.html>
- Kaul, V. (2024, August 1). *World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report 2024: 134 Years to Parity, India Ranks 129th*. Frontline. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/economy/wef-world-economic-forum-global-gender-gap-report-2024-india-challenges-gender-equality/article68318597.ece#:~:text=India%20has%20the%20fourth%20lowest,in%20labour%20force%20participation%20rate.>
- Kaur, M. (2023, November 15). *Claudia Goldin's findings and their relevance in Indian context*. Feminism in India. <https://feminisminindia.com/2023/10/27/claudia-goldins-findings-and-their-relevance-in-indian-context/>
- Mahajan, F. a. K. (2018, July 4). The marriage penalty on women in India. *Mint*. <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/V3DIsv4QctPf3qz31Y8rXK/The-marriage-penalty-on-women-in-India.html>
- Mitali Nikore. (2024, June 14). *Building India's Economy on the Backs of Women's Unpaid Work: A Gendered Analysis of Time-Use Data*. Orfonline.org; OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION ( ORF ). <https://www.orfonline.org/research/building-india-s-economy-on-the-backs-of-women-s-unpaid-work-a-gendered-analysis-of-time-use-data>
- Pti. (2024, June 12). *India ranks 129 on Global Gender Gap index; Iceland on top: WEF*. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/business/Economy/india-ranks-129-on-global-gender-gap-index-iceland-on-top-wef/article68280347.ece>
- Sanghera, T., Sanghera, T., & Indiaspend. (2019, March 25). *Indiaspend*. Indiaspend. <https://www.indiaspend.com/how-unpaid-work-keeps-indias-women-poor-and-unequal/>
- Singh, M., Shekhar, C., & Shri, N. (2023). Patterns in age at first marriage and its determinants in India: A historical perspective of last 30 years (1992–2021). *SSM - Population Health*, 22, 101363.
- Statista. (2024, August 9). *Average minutes per day spent on unpaid work in OECD countries, as of 2016*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/521908/time-spent-work-unpaid-countries/>
- The People's Archive of Rural India. (n.d.). *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) 2019-21: Jammu & Kashmir*. People's Archive of Rural India. <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/library/resource/national-family-health-survey-nfhs-5-2019-21-jammu-kashmir/>
- Women Related Data: NFHS 5*. (n.d.). Drishti IAS. <https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-news-analysis/women-related-data-nfhs-5>
- World Bank Open Data*. (n.d.). World Bank Open Data. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=IN>
- World Bank Open Data*. (n.d.-b). World Bank Open Data. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS>