Socioeconomic and Demographic Factors associated Women’s Labor Force Participation in Rural Bangladesh

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KEYWORDS
female labour force, married women, rural Bangladesh

ABSTRACT
This paper assesses the socioeconomic and demographic factors influencing married women’s participation in labor market. Using the logistic regression this study found that women’s age, head of the household, women’s education, poverty status, small family size, husband’s unemployment, and rural locality have a significant positive effect on labor force participation. On the other hand, ownership of the household and husband’s education has shown a negative effect. Poverty in an overall perspective is found to be the major determinant of the labor force participation of married women.

Background
Women’s participation in the labour force is frequently believed to improve their socioeconomic status in the family as well as in society. Joining in the labour market for women has different implications in providing them with an opportunity to earn additional earnings (Karim, 2012a; Karim, 2012b; Sarkar, Reza & Hossain, 2014, & Sarkar, 2015). It also helps them to contribute to the improvement of their status in the family and society as well (Heath, 2012). Over the decades, the issue of women’s labour force participation has received diverse reviews from family researchers and practitioners since it is considered a driving force to change the status of women by strengthening their economic role in the household (Hadi, 2005; Schuler, Hashemi, & Badal, 1998; Schuler, Hashemi, Riley, & Akhter, 1996; Karim, 2012a; Karim, 2012b; Murshid, Akincigil, & Zippay, 2015). Women’s income generation from paid labour has also been significantly related to the issue of their socioeconomic status, especially in the context of traditional family relationships (Baden et al., 1994; Baden, 1994; Jahan, 1994; Karim, 2006; Karim, 2012a; Karim, 2012b).

Bangladesh Labour Force Survey data revealed not only that a greater part of the population remained outside the labour force but also that females were ranked first, although their numbers decreased by 4.4 percent in 2016 compared to 2013. For women, uneven outcomes from the labour market participation are leading contributors to their overall socio-economic disadvantage position (UN Women, 2015). Evidence also indicates that, over a lifespan, differences in labour market participation rate and pay jointly generate huge cumulative income disparity between women and
men (UN Women, 2015).

Patriarchal Family Structure and Women's Labour Force Participation in Rural Bangladesh

In most developing countries like Bangladesh there is a patriarchal system of social setting. In this tradition, men hold the sovereign power to control households and society as a whole while women are ascribed to a lower hierarchy compared to men (Karim, 2012a; Karim, 2012b; Baden, et al., 1994; Cain, et al., 1979; Jahan, 1988). As a result, women are socially, legally, and politically aggravated in their positions and in many cases, they are subordinated as a production unit in order to bear and rear children (Balk, 1997; Jahan, 1994; Karim, 2006; Ahmad, 2001). Specifically, in the context of a third world country like Bangladesh, there has been an immense disparity between men and women with respect to their representation in access to income, labour market participation and control of the earned income (Baden et al., 1994; Baden, 1994; Jahan, 1994; Karim, 2006; Sarkar, Reza & Hossain, 2014, & Sarkar, 2015), politics, public policy-making, and in almost every field of society (UNDP, 1995).

Scholarly researchers also indicate that traditional family and societal norms, unequal power relations between men and women, limited access to jobs in formal sectors have significant influences on women's participation in economic activities (Baden et al., 1994; Baden, 1994; Jahan, 1994; Schuler, Hashemi, Riley, & Akhter, 1996; Balk, 1997; Hadi, 2005, Mandel & Semyonov, 2006; Karim, 2006a; Karim, 2006b, & Karim, 2012). Particularly, in respect to unpaid family worker, BBS (2009) reported that women (6.8 million) are more than doubled in performing housekeeping tasks compared with the men (3.5 million) which designates the negative appraisal of women labor force in terms of economic contribution. Previous studies that focused on women's participation in the public sphere also reported that traditional and persistent barriers hindered the access to labor market for women (Hoyt, 2005; Khan & Ara, 2006; Karim, 2006; Sarkar, Reza & Hossain, 2014, & Sarkar, 2015). It is notable that women's access to non-agricultural sector as well as decision making position is limited compared to their male counterparts (Hashmi, 2000; Jahan, 1994 & Hoyt, 2005). Women in Bangladesh are not generally allowed to join income-generating activities without any resistance by their spouses in most cases. The husbands encourage them to join earning activities if the husbands have access to that money (Hadi, 2005). Sharing the control of income from that investment with husband at the beginning is a part of women's strategy to make their new roles acceptable to their spouses (Hadi, 2005; Mandel & Semyonov, 2006; Naved, 1994). Although females' educational achievement has increased, over the decades, they are behind of men in terms of bachelors and masters degree attainment (BBS, 2012). Therefore, they are getting a slim opportunity for different jobs especially in professional sectors where bachelor or masters degrees are required. Moreover, the existing socio-cultural norms and parents' demands enforced on girls to get married before reaching a degree, result in the discontinuation of their studies because of the additional family responsibilities (Sarkar, Reza & Hossain, 2014, & Sarkar, 2015).

Trends of Women’s Labour Force Participation in Bangladesh

Over the last two decades, both in the urban and rural areas, women's labour force participation increased. For example, in the urban areas, labour force participation was 20.5% and 34.5% in 1996 and 2010 respectively, while, in the rural areas, the participation rate increased by 19% from 17.4% (BBS, 2012). Specifically, in the rural area, men's labour force increased from 23.9 million in 1996
to 30.2 million in 2010 while, for women, it was respectively 3.8 million and 13.2 million. Similarly, documents also suggest that in the urban areas, men's labour force increased from 6.7 million in 1996 to 9.3 million in 2010 while women's labour force increased from 1.6 million to 4.0 million. More evidently, despite of having varieties of challenges, during the period of 2005-2010, women's labour force participation rate increased by 8.7% compared to the male workforce increase of 1.4%, which suggests a considerable growth between the overall population growth rate (e.g., 1.37% in 2011) and labour force participation rate (BBS, 2012). Labour Force Survey (2010) showed that among the total employed population only 12.5% were in the formal sector and 87.5% were the informal sectors. Survey data also shows that the rate of labour force participation in both the formal and informal sectors also varied by gender. For example, among the total population, of the males 14.5% and 85.5% were engaged in the formal sector and informal sector respectively while, of the females 7.7% and 92.3% were employed in the formal sector and informal sector respectively (Table 1). Moreover, the rate of labour force participation in the formal and informal sectors also differed according to urban-rural locations. Particularly, in the urban areas, about 27% and 72% males involved in the informal and formal sectors respectively compared to 19% and 81% females (BBS, 2011). On the contrary, in the rural areas, about 11% and 89% male labour force was occupied in the formal and informal sectors respectively compared to 4% and 96% female labour force (BBS, 2011). For the mentioned period, this sector-wise analysis indicates the slim growth of women’s participation in both the formal and informal sectors compared to their counterparts.

Table 1: Employed persons in formal and informal sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Bangladesh</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>85.5</td>
<td>92.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Labour Force Survey (LFS), 2010

Socioeconomic and Demographic Factors Associated with Women’s Labour Force Participation in Rural Bangladesh

In the recent years, rural women’s participation rate has surpassed the urban one, signifying the mounting trend of their attachment to different income generating sectors (BBS, 2012; 2015, & Khatun, 2016). Over the past decades, rapid expansion of microfinance in both the urban and rural areas has also supported women’s labour force in different sectors e.g. poultry, livestock, small business (Rahman, 2006; Munir, 2016). In addition, changes in the educational attainment rate, the age at marriage and decline in the fertility rate of women are likely to have pushed them (both the married and unmarried women) into the labour market. Specifically, employing Labour Force Survey (LFS) data with sampled women, Khatun (2016) examines push or pull factors of female labour force participation in the context of urban Bangladesh and unveiled that the level of education was associated with their participation in the labour force. Evidence suggests that women’s involvement in home-based economic activities has also pushed them into the labour market in Bangladesh. For instance, in a study of women and labour market in Bangladesh, Amin (2005) discloses that female-headed household, smaller family size, lower educational attainment, living in urban areas, lower levels of household wealth and microcredit have a positive impact on participation. In a study of gender and
labour market, Rahman (2006) examines the trends and determinants of the female labour market and revealed that women as household head, a higher level of education (SSC+), residence in the urban area, being unmarried have a positive effect while land ownership, low level of education, having young children, and educational attainment of the household head have a negative impact on their participation in the labour market.

In a study of the role of poverty and gender norms on labour market outcomes, Bridges, Lawson, & Begum, (2011) investigate the influencing factors on female labour force participation and found the positive association between intensity of the poverty and the probability of women’s participation in paid employments. Previous study disclosed that women with young children were found to be positively associated with self-employment and negatively associated with wage employment (Bridges, Lawson, & Begum, 2011). Marital status also has a significant effect on women’s labour market participation. Particularly, unmarried women are more likely to participate in the job market because of the fact that paid labour force participation usually requires long hours of work (Bridges, Lawson, & Begum, 2011). Employing cross-sectional research design with sampled married women, Hafeez & Ahmad (2002) examined the impacts of household income, couples’ educational attainment, women age, family size and asset ownership status and household structure on labour force participation and revealed that women's age and educational attainment were strongly affecting factors. In addition, this study reported that household size had a positive association with the female labour force participation. In an identical socioeconomic context with sampled married and educated (at least secondary school education) women aged 15-60 years, Ahmad, & Hafeez, (2007) analyzed labour supply and earning functions and explored that the level of education and economic desire were the influential factors affecting women's labour force participation decision. More specifically, this study showed that women having a higher education degree are more likely to participate in the labour market. The aforesaid study findings resemble the traditional economic interpretation of Becker's (1965) theory of household production and time allocation. Specifically, the scholarly study which emphasizes on factors of women's labour market participation also recognizes that education is one of the significant factors of women's entering the labour market (Becker, 1965; Khandker, 1986). In a study on the benefits of women's education within marriage, Benham (1974) noted that formal education improves an individual's ability to acquire and incorporate necessary information. It also enhances an individual's capability to perceive the changing conditions and to respond effectively (Benham, 1974). Using survey data to identify the significant factors of labour force participation, Azid, Khan & Alamasi (2009) studied the labour force participation of married women in Pakistan and found that women's age, education level, household poverty, family size, number of girls (5-15 years), women as head of the household, number of daughters (over 15 years of age), husband with unemployment and low-income status, and rural locality were significantly and positively associated with the labour force participation of married women. On the other hand, this study also revealed that household asset ownership status, household per capita income, nuclear family status, the number of sons (over 15 years of age), and infants, and husband’s educational attainment were negatively associated with the labour force participation of married women (Azid, Khan & Alamasi, 2009).

Using similarly designed (cross-sectional) research, Faridi, Chawdhry & Anwar (2009) examined the socioeconomic and demographic determinants of women labour force participation and found that marital status, having an educated husband, and number of children positively and significantly influence women’s participation in the labour market, while husbands’ participation in income generating activities, participants with an early age group of 15-24 years, household assets, children with an age group of 0-2 years and 3-6 years decrease the probability of women’s participation in economic activities (Faridi, Chawdhry & Anwar, 2009). Applying time-series analysis, Thamma-
Apiroam (2016) examined the influencing factors of labour force participation among married women in the context of the United States during the years 1975-2002 and revealed that women's education levels, divorce rate, decisions to work, men's income, and unemployment rate were strongly associated with the main variable of interest-labour force participation. Similarly, employing a panel data set between the year of 1984 and 2000, Arango & Pasoda (2016) estimates the determinants of the labour force participation decision among married women in Colombia and found that women's educational attainment, children between 1 and 2 years of age, and the presence of other unemployed at home, previous involvement and labour market decisions were the primary influencing factors of married women's labour force participation (Arango & Pasoda, 2016).

**Objectives**

The main objective of this paper is to explore the socio economic factors influencing the women's labor force participation in rural Bangladesh.

**Methodology**

In the present research, a cross-sectional research design was engaged as its aim was to explore the association between socioeconomic factors and labor force participation in a single point of time. Moreover, this research design is also known as time and cost-effective, although longitudinal design might be an effective way to find out better outcomes over the period (Olsen, & George, 2004). The study was conducted in Paba Upazila, a sub-District under Rajshahi District, Bangladesh. Six Villages were surveyed through the Village Organization (VO) of BRAC for selecting the study participants randomly. The study surroundings have rural characteristics as required for the attaining the study objective. Since the current study aimed to explore the association between socioeconomic and demographic factors and married women’s labor force participation, it restricted the sample with predefined conditions. Precisely, it included both the currently working and non working married women as study participants (N=351) as required. A questionnaire survey was employed using face-to-face interviews. Rural communities in Bangladesh are considered a conservative social setting, where only male interviewers were not suitable to conduct interview sessions with the women. All interview sessions with the participants were conducted in the participants’ familial settings where their confidentiality was maintained as it should be. To carry out the data analysis properly, the researchers applied the SPSS 15 version for conducting the logistic regression.

**Participants’ inclusion criteria were:**

Women aged from 18 years to 60 years living with their husbands.

**Exclusion criteria:**

Physically challenged and mentally ill.

**Ethical Consideration**

For the present study, we ensured them that the opinions and responses would be used only for research purposes and necessary information would be preserved in a confidential manner. Moreover, before the interview sessions, a purpose of the researchers was the reading of the questions clearly; a verbal consent was taken from the participants.

**Results and discussions**

**Socio-Demographics of the Study Participants**
It demonstrates that the majority (N=169) of the husbands’ (51.6%) earned income was below 10000 Taka. The income levels of the rest of the husbands were distributed almost equally including 26.7% of the husbands’ income was 10001-15000 Tk. and 23.7% earned 15001-20000 Tk. while 46.8% of the wives’ income was below 5000 Tk. and 28.2% of the wives’ earned income was in the range of 5001-10000 Tk. and the remaining wives’ earned income was above 10000 Tk. It also demonstrated that 55.5% of the wives’ educational qualifications were below SSC level and 34.0% had completed SSC while 6.2% and 4.3% completed Bachelor and Masters Degree respectively. It also shows 12.3 % husbands’ had below SSC level of education, while 39.7 % had attained the Secondary School Certificate, 26.5%, 15.5% and 6% completed HSC, Bachelor and Masters Degree respectively. Average family size was 6.2 and no children were 2.8. 47% women have some assets in their possession. Participants’ mean age were 34 for wives and 39 for husbands.

**Women’s Age**

Age is an important demographic characteristic of an individual that influences his/her decision making aspects of labour force participation in many ways (Salway, Rahman, & Jesmin, 2003). For example, the increase in women’s age may increase the rate of their labour force participation since year of experience and high wages are correlated with the older age. In the present study, for the married women of 15-60 years, age is found to be positive. This finding indicates that increasing age raises the probability of married women’s labour force participation. Specifically, this result implies that women’s labour force participation increases by 1.2 % when the age increases by one-year.

**Women’s education**

Universally, education is perceived as the diverse feature while it comes to the issue of a decision to participate in the labour market. Women’s level of educational attainment influences their participation in the paid labour force in many ways. In the current study, we have found that, on average, married women with at least HSC level of education probably increase their participation in the paid labour force by 2.4 % at an increasing rate. In addition, women with Bachelor degree are 6 % more likely to be involved in paid work compared to non-Bachelor degree holders since the higher level of education enhances their skills and creates the diverse opportunities for them to accommodate with the competitive job market.

| Analysis for Some Selected Variables on Women's Labor force Participation |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|------|---|
| Variables                   | Coefficient b   | S.E  | P-value |
| Age                         | .59             | .60  | **    |
| Head of Household           | .1.10           | .50  | **    |
| Women’s Education           | .34             | .28  | ***   |
| Household Assets            | .77             | .66  | ***   |
| Household Income            | -.22            | .64  | **    |
| Household Poverty Status    | .34             | .51  | ***   |
| Number of Children          | -.24            | .47  | **    |
| Husbands Educational Attainment | .24          | .72  | **    |
| Husbands Income Status      | -.22            | .64  | ***   |

*Source: Field work 2013- 2016*
**Head of Household**

A head of the household has a significant influence on women's labour force participation. The current study showed that women who headed the households are 2.7% more likely to participate in the labour force. Evidence also supported the present study findings. In absence of male members, women lead the family and involve in income generating activities for strengthening the financial status of their family.

**Household Assets**

Women's asset ownership status has diverse impact on their labour force participation. In the present study, more than one-third of the married and working women revealed that they came from the households with poor or no assets. Our study shows that women having poor household assets are 11% more likely to participate in the job market because of the fact that women's adequate asset ownership status may facilitate some non-wage income, leisure time and help to perform a secured livelihood as well.

**Household Poverty Status**

Household poverty status has an influence on women’s labour force participation. The present research found that married women with poverty prone households are 21% more likely to participate in the income earning activities. This finding also postulates that poverty limits married women's access and participation to work.

**Household Size**

Size of household affects women's labour force participation in different ways. For instance, in the family, women's probability in labour force participation decreases, if labour supply is available. On the other hand, growing number household members may also be supportive of the married women’s participation in income earning activities by reducing their involvement in carrying out household responsibilities. For the current study, survey data revealed that a larger size of the household was positively associated with women's participation in income generating activities. More specifically, findings show that one additional family member increases the likelihood of married women's association with the paid labour force by 6.8%.

**Number of Children**

A previous study found an association between women's decision about labour force participation and number of children. The present study found that among the married women, more than two small or school-age children in the household decrease their probability of labour force participation. The probable explanation may be that small and school going children in a household increase the time allocation for care giving preventing women's labour market activities.

**Husbands’ Educational Attainment**
In rural Bangladesh, husbands usually act as the main breadwinners and head of the households. Therefore, women’s decisions about labour force participation are mostly affected by the personal characteristics (e.g., level of education, wealth and income, employment status, attitude to women) of their husbands. In a study of marital status, children and women’s labour market choices, Duncan, Prus, & Sandy (1993) also exposed that husband’s educational attainment significantly affects the probability of women’s participation in the labour force. In the changing societal context of Bangladesh, especially in the perspective of educated families, it is expected that educated husbands held non-traditional gender roles that ignore gendered social norms and allow women to participate in the labour force. A prior study found that women with educated husbands are less likely to involve in income generating activities while women with uneducated husbands are 12.5% more likely to be economically active.

**Husbands’ Employment**

Husbands’ employment status is a crucial factor associated with women’s labour force participation. For the present study, we found that women with unemployed husbands are 26% more likely to be involved in income-generating activities. In addition, these findings show that the husbands’ higher income level was negatively associated with their wives’ labour force participation. In Bangladesh, males are considered the primary breadwinner and in most cases, they are also responsible for maintaining the household expenditures. In a study on labour supply behaviour of married women, Blau and Kahn (2005) showed that if changes (particularly increases) occurred in female’s labour supply, their husband’s income may be dropped which ultimately arises challenges for women’s involvement in economic activities. Sultana, Nazli, Malik, & Kazi (1994) also noted similar findings, that is enhancement in the men’s wage rate reduces the women’s time allocation in labour market.

**Location of Household**

The location of a household (urban vs. rural) has a significant impact on married women’s labour force participation. A previous study noted that rural women are more likely to participate in income earning activities in informal sectors compared to urban women since rural women are from poor financial status, greater sized family and traditional social practice. On the other hand, urban women have higher educational attainment, sufficient knowledge and skills compared to rural women that encourage them to be economically more active in the formal sectors (e.g., corporate and official jobs).

**Conclusions**

In the current study, we examined the factors associated with labour force participation of married women in the context of rural Bangladesh. The study findings show that mainly family financial strains and husbands’ attitudes toward family wellbeing enforces married women into the labour market. Moreover, this study revealed that socioeconomic status variables also affect women’s participation in both the informal and formal sectors. For example, age and wealth status were positively and childbearing status was negatively associated with women’s labour force participation in rural Bangladesh. Similarly, wives’ and husbands’ educational attainment were also positively associated with labour force participation. In the changing socio-economic condition of rural Bangladesh, policies related to educational and vocational training for the existing job market are required. As rural women are increasingly involved in productive activities, support is needed to address men’s gender role in order to recognize women’s financial contributions in the family domains.
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