



One of the most important indicators of the labour market is the participation rate. FILE PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

An overview of the Labour Force Survey 2022



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The quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2022 has been of interest to everyone, particularly to policymakers and researchers, and especially in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. There is no denying that, for evidence-based research and policy formulation in the country's labour market, it is crucial to have regular data regarding key labour market variables.

One of the most important indicators of the labour market is the participation rate. According to the LFS 2022, though there has been no notable change in the overall male participation rate over the years, the female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) experienced an increase from 36.3 percent in 2016-17 to 42 percent in 2022. This rise in participation rate, though impressive, needs to be analysed in detail as the area-wise FLFPR shows that the rate has increased in rural areas (from 38.6 percent in 2016-17 to as high as 50.9 percent in 2022), but has fallen in urban areas from 31 percent (2016-17) to 23.6 percent (2022). This fall can be partly attributed to the negative impacts of the pandemic on the urban labour market.

With the majority of Bangladeshi women working in the informal sector (91.8 percent, per the LFS 2016-17), it is likely that they have been hit hard during the pandemic. In addition, evidence shows that there has been a gradual fall in the proportionate involvement of women in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector, primarily due to increased automation. This trend has continued into recent years, affecting women's participation in non-agricultural, urban based activities. However, it should also be examined whether part of this fall is related to increased enrolment in education.

The other side of the FLFPR is the rise in the participation rate in rural areas, especially in recent years (a 12.3 percentage point rise between 2016-17 and 2022). This trend cannot be explained that straightforwardly. The most convincing explanation can be related to a more avid role of women as unpaid family workers in rural areas due to a gradual rise in labour migration (both internal and international) of males, with rural farm- and non-farm-based activities now being performed by an increasing number of women. Another explanation could be a gradual expansion of rural-based small and medium enterprises, which is often argued to be a sector with a significant number of female entrepreneurs.

An expansion of microcredit, for which the primary client base is rural women, might have helped women get involved in different small-scale, self-employment activities. Urban to rural reverse migration during the pandemic may be another reason behind the opposing trend of rural and urban participation rates of women. One noteworthy point here is the sector-wise distribution of employment. Though the official gender-wise disaggregated statistics is not available yet, combining information on the two sexes, agriculture-based employment shows a rising trend, and as much as 45.3 percent of the employed

workforce in 2022 (40.6 percent in 2016-17) is found to be in agriculture, while 17 percent and 37.7 percent are in industry and service sectors (20.4 percent and 39 percent in 2016-17), respectively.

Despite the absence of recent gender-disaggregated data, the pattern in area-wise (urban versus rural) FLFPR of the 2022 survey as well as the trend in sector-wise FLFPR till 2016-17 (during 2016-17, 59.7 percent, 16.9 percent, and 23.5 percent women were in agriculture, industry, and service sector jobs, respectively) indicates that the female workforce is gradually becoming more concentrated in the agriculture sector, which is informal by nature and is relatively low-skilled and low-paying (or even not paying at all).

While analysing the trends and patterns of FLFPR, however, we must keep in mind that this participation includes both paid (wage employment and self-employment) and unpaid work (unpaid family work). According to the LFS 2016-17, as many as 29.1 percent of women were found to be engaged in unremunerated work, conducted under the ownership of other household members. Though we do not have corresponding recent data on the types of employment, based on a broad categorisation of employment data, more than half of the employed women (53.62 percent) are reported to be engaged in own-use production of goods, and this figure is as high as 62.6 percent for rural women.

Therefore, despite an increase in the participation rate in recent years, women's involvement in the labour market is still being significantly determined by their traditional roles involving home-based production processes, rather than for marketed paid activities or profit-based entrepreneurial work.

As for men, though there has been a slight decline in both rural and urban areas, the trend and pattern of male labour force participation is consistent with the international figures. However, for the labour market, it is the rate of unemployment rather than the participation rate that is generally a matter of concern. In this regard, another crucial finding of the LFS 2022 is the fall of the unemployment rate to 3.6 percent, from 4.2 percent in 2016-17. This fall has been observed in both rural and urban areas, with the unemployment rate in the former in 2022 found to be 3.4 percent, and the rate for the latter being 4.2 percent. This trend should be analysed in light of the conventional way employment/unemployment is defined: that a person is employed if he/she has worked at least one hour in a seven-day period prior to the survey. The shortcoming of this definition in the context of Bangladesh is that a large mass of people tend to work on a temporary basis, either in return for remuneration or even without any remuneration at family farms. This type of employment is mostly temporary and ad hoc in nature, without sufficient remuneration – and an unemployment rate based on such a definition is likely to underestimate the actual scenario of unemployment in the country.

Therefore, it is crucial to

have alternative definitions of unemployment (often termed as under employment) – based on hours of employment, desire for additional work, etc for future policy formulation. In addition, for effective policy formulation, in addition to hours of work, quality of work, especially the wage earned by the employed person, should be taken into consideration. Given the overwhelming degree of informality, for assessing the labour market scenario, it is also essential that the trend of informality is analysed.

While analysing the labour market data, one crucial aspect that we need to examine is that of the labour market profile of youths. Given that Bangladesh is going through a demographic transition, with the youth (15-29 years old) constituting 36.53 percent of the total labour force, it is important that our policy focus is on utilising this demographic dividend. However, according to LFS 2016-17 data, the rate of youth unemployment (10.6 percent) was higher than the national average (4.2 percent). Though we still do not have the corresponding information from the latest LFS, we need to deal with the twin challenges of youth unemployment and youth NEET (youths not in employment, education, and training) for the optimal utilisation of our favourable demographic profile.

In order to attain the country's development goals, it is crucial for there to be timely availability of data on the labour market, preferably on an annual basis. Due to a problem of applicability with the conventional data on unemployment, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) should also publish data on alternative definitions of unemployment based on hours of work, weekly earnings, desire for additional work, etc, for effective policy formulation. Internal as well as international migration are an important issue, so the LFS needs to incorporate detailed information on migrants. For certain information, such as wages, hours of work, education (especially classification of tertiary education according to types of educational institutions), greater disaggregation of information is required. Besides, for certain important sectors (such as RMG), a separate section containing sector-specific relevant questions would be useful.

It is also essential to invest in skills and education while focusing more on the quality of education. With increased automation of industries and the importance of 4IR-related technologies, greater focus is needed on updating the existing curricula of training programmes, providing relevant skills training and, more importantly, dealing with the challenges of skills mismatch. Needless to say, TVET programmes must be at the core of the strategies while dealing with the challenges facing the labour market.

In addition to policy initiatives, to properly prepare our labour force for the growing needs of the market, on the one hand it is crucial to stimulate private sector investment, while on the other hand it is imperative to provide monetary and non-monetary incentives to small-scale entrepreneurs. To remove the bottlenecks in boosting female employment, the prime focus must be on dealing with certain inherent constraints like child marriage, women's safety and security in the public sphere, along with policy interventions towards dealing with the challenges related to gender-centric norms.

Why do we fail to utilise our RTI Act?

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Upon the adoption of Bangladesh's Right to Information (RTI) Act in 2009, many had considered it the most revolutionary law of the land. But 14 years on, no large-scale scandals have been unearthed, no earth-shattering investigative journalism has shed light on major corruption. The NGOs, journalists, and civil society members who most celebrated the entry of the law hardly pay it any attention. The avowed objective of the RTI Act of "increasing transparency and accountability of public offices, decreasing corruption of the same and establishing good governance" remains a pipe dream.

In a country with such a politically-oriented population, why has RTI not caught on? Clearly this is one law that allows citizens to play a meaningful role in monitoring the

Official Secrets Act.

Most people do not realise that the RTI Act was meant to open up a large portion of such undisclosed information so that citizens could use them to monitor the work of the government. The law not only created an opportunity for people, but also a responsibility for them to play a critical role "so that good governance shall be established".

The situation was compounded by the fact that there was little debate in the country on the pros and cons of the law, either in Parliament or outside, before it was enacted. Neither the population nor the public officials tasked with responding to people's information requests fathomed the revolutionary nature of the changes foreseen in the law.

Unlocking government records and opening them up for public scrutiny is clearly the basic goal of the law. The best way to promote a real understanding of this would be to project the law as an instrument to facilitate citizens' access to government records, rather than "information" in general.

Moving on, the term "public

– such as national sovereignty and integrity, public safety and security, foreign relations, individual privacy, fiduciary relationship, etc – are generally accepted as justified in public interest, they are often used as excuses by DOs who cite them as reasons for nondisclosure without providing any justification.

The few ordinary citizens who take the trouble to use the RTI law as a civic responsibility have little expertise or capacity to challenge such decisions through appeal and complaint procedures. Even the Information Commission often lacks the capacity to justify its decisions in favour of nondisclosure with proper reasoning. And yet, in most countries where the law is well entrenched, it is mandatory to give full justification of denial. For instance, a decision of the Central Information Commissions of India clearly stated: "If no specific reasoning is given to justify denial, the information must be provided."

Another problem frustrating users is the general predilection of many DOs to avoid their responsibility by claiming that the information requested is missing. Faced with such



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

work of the government and other public authorities, and keep them under surveillance. Are citizens held back by fear of retaliation from the authorities for seeking sensitive information, lack of understanding about the law and its intricate facets, distrust of the authorities to open up to the public? Or is it the frustrations of many users of the law who find their counterparts in the administration abusing its provisions to deny them information? Clearly, it is a combination of all these factors.

Some of the stumbling blocks in the use of RTI are confusion, uncertainty, misunderstanding, even doubts and anxiety – whether among users of the law, public officials, or in the Information Commission itself.

The term "information" itself is the source of much confusion. In a country with a long history of colonial and authoritarian rule, "information" normally connotes government edicts, rules, regulations, and some general knowledge on matters governments wish the people to know in order to regulate and control them. These are mostly "open" information, created and disseminated by the government itself through various measures. Beyond such ordinary information, there lies a vast range of information related to matters of governance, often of a sensitive nature, which the authorities have kept "hidden" from the people through laws like the

authority", from whom citizens are to seek information, also creates confusion. Many do not realise that this is not limited to the executive branch only, but also extends to the legislative and judiciary arms of government; yet, few requests have been addressed to the latter bodies. In most RTI-mature countries, these sectors are equally the target of citizens' inquiry and surveillance. Attention towards them will increase the range for citizens to apply the law.

As a general rule of thumb, all institutions, bodies, or offices which benefit from and/or use public funds are to be considered as "public authority", including NGOs receiving foreign funds. Even some private entities can be brought into the RTI fold if the government exercises some control over them.

Private banks, for example, which report to the Bangladesh Bank could be asked to share that information with the public. Even private restaurants are subjected to RTI enquiry in countries where the law requires periodic government inspection of their premises to ensure they are complying with hygiene and health standards.

But what about dealing with rejection of RTI requests or being denied information? Public Information Officers (called "DOs" in Bangladesh) tend to reject RTI requests on grounds that they fall under the exemption clauses provided in the Act. While the grounds for nondisclosure

denial, information seekers have been known to abandon their pursuits altogether.

As maintenance of public records is mandatory under the law, any delinquency in this regard should lead to serious administrative measures against those guilty. According to one decision of the Central Information Commission of India: "By practice, 'missing file' cannot be read into as exception in addition to exceptions prescribed by RTI Act. It amounts to breach of Public Records Act, 1993 and punishable with imprisonment up to a term of five years or with fine or both." The challenge is to enforce this clear response.

In order for the RTI Act to succeed, what is crucial is active collaboration among citizen groups, for whose empowerment the law was enacted in the first place. These groups include all civil society groups (including RTI activists and enthusiasts), NGOs, journalists, academics, and relevant professional groups. They must unite to address the challenges, to deal with the misuse and abuse of the provisions of the law – through intervention of the judiciary where necessary – and to help the small community of its earnest users who are ill-equipped and struggling against all odds to keep the transparency ball rolling. It is time to energise the RTI forum and ensure regular interaction between the civil society and the Information Commission to address critical roadblocks.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Fissure

5 Elizabethan collar

9 Some messages

11 Violinst Stern

13 Book part

14 Caesar's land

15 Roofing supply

16 Sound systems

18 Crop loppers

20 Wish undone

21 1998 De Niro movie

22 Casino acts

23 Once called

24 Okra unit

25 Lanner

27 Mocker art

29 Bulldog backer

30 First lap

leader

32 Small songbird

34 Numerical prefix

35 Hide-aways

38 Pride members

39 Downloadable read

40 Tennis's Roddick

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DOWN

1 Takes ten

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3 Used car listing possibility

4 Pewter component

5 Ceremonies

6 Manual reader

7 Senior's transit perk

8 Bizarre

10 Caron of "Gigi"

12 Lawyer's workload

17 Toe count

19 Patella, e.g.

24 Burger topper

25 Rock genre

26 "Twelfth Night" heroine

27 Golf goal

28 Copy

30 Velvety flower

31 Dangers

33 Hit the runway

37 Lawyer's org.

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STEAMUP APE
TINGE AROSE
ENTER RARER
REESE PITS