UC San Diego
CENTER ON GENDER EQUITY AND HEALTH

Understanding agency and norms around women's employment in Bihar

RESEARCH FACTSHEET

Women's low labour force participation is a prominent development concern in India. Recent increases in the national female labour force participation (FLFP) rate, specifically among rural women, reflect a shift towards low-paid, informal work and work as unpaid helpers.[1] Further, employment trends differ widely across states,[2] making it important to examine sub-national data. These state-level variations underscore the need to better understand the contextual realities of women's employment, including the nature of work in which women engage, whether they have agency to make decisions about work, and prevalent social norms that affect both the demand and supply of women's labour.[3]

This factsheet offers a summary of women's work in Bihar across three distinct aspects—prevalence, work-related decision making, and social norms—to inform knowledge and action to support women's employment in Bihar.

Indicator	Bihar (women)	Bihar (men)	India (women)
% employed in the last 12 months (age 15-49)	17.5	74.9	31.9
% literate	57.8	78.5	71.5
Women aged 20-24 years married before age 18 years	40.8	-	23.3
% women with a bank or savings account that they use	76.7	-	78.6
% women allowed to go to three specified places alone (market, health facilities, places outside the village/community)	43.2	-	42.3

Source: National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-21)

Below, we present descriptive statistics (weighted for survey design and sampling weights) offering a picture of the prevalence of women's work in Bihar, as well as agency and norms surrounding that work, as reported by men and women in Bihar.

[1] Deshpande, A. (2023). 'Illusory or real? Unpacking the recent increase in women's labour force participation in India.' Centre for Economic Data and Analysis, Ashoka University. https://ceda.ashoka.edu.in/illusory-or-real-unpacking-the-recent-increase-in-womens-labour-force-participation-in-india/
[2] Government of India (2023). 'Annual Report Periodic Labour Force Survey, July 2022 – June 2023.' Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, National Sample Survey Office. https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/AR_PLFS_2022_23N.pdf?download=1
[3] Azim Premji University (2023). 'State of Working India 2023: Social Identities and Labour Market Outcomes.' Centre for Sustainable Employment. https://publications.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/5166/1/State_of_Working_India_2023_ebook_revised.pdf

FIGURE 1: Prevalence of currently working for pay (A) and running or helping to run a business (B) among women and men in Bihar, India.

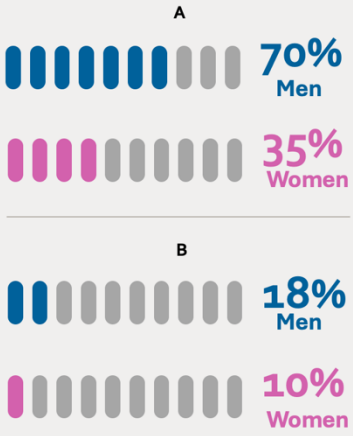


FIGURE 2: Patterns of business ownership among women and men in Bihar, India.

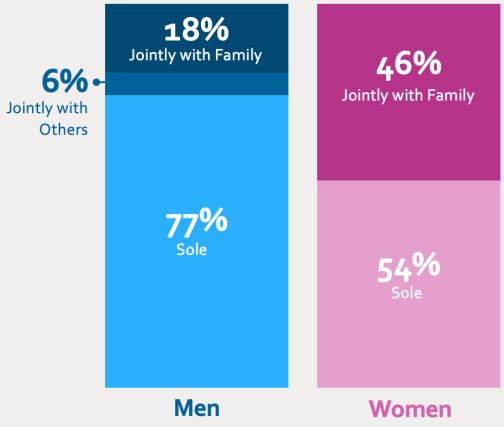
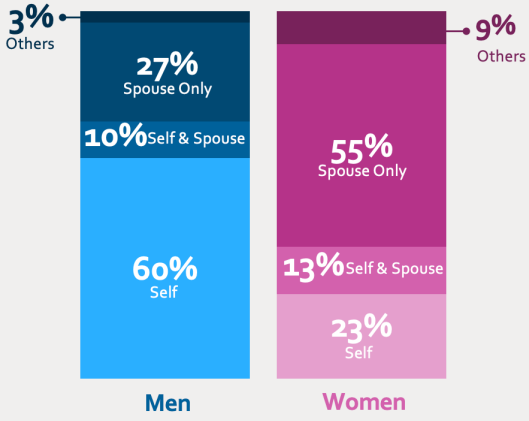


FIGURE 3: Final say on decision to work among married women and men in Bihar, India.



Prevalence

Women and men's paid work & entrepreneurship

The percentage of women in Bihar who work for pay is about half that of men: 35% of women versus 70% of men. Similarly, running or helping to run a business was more common among men (18%) than among women (10%).

Of those who run a business, a higher percentage of men report being sole owners (77%), compared to 54% of women. Six percent of men also reported owning jointly outside of the family, but women owned only solely or jointly with family members.

Agency

Decision making about work

Among married respondents, women had less overall ownership over the decision as to whether they should work than men. Three in five men (60%) reported that their decision to work was made entirely by themselves, while fewer than one in four (23%) married women made that decision alone. More than half of married women (55%) indicated that only their spouse had the final say about whether they work for pay, as opposed to 27% of men. Deciding whether to work in partnership with one's spouse was somewhat more common among women (13%) than men (10%).

Among unmarried respondents, decision making on working was more

FIGURE 4: Final say on decision to work among unmarried women and men in Bihar, India.

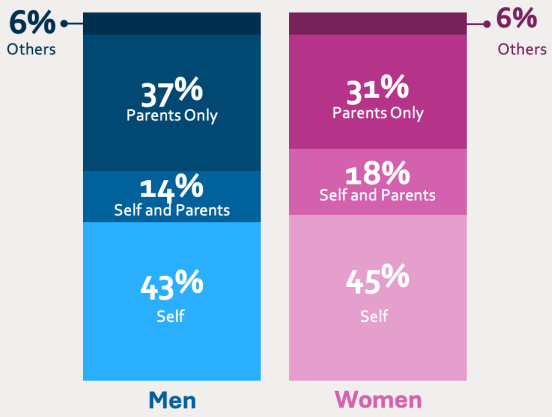


FIGURE 5: Prevalence of career advancement (A) and salary negotiation (B) among women and men in Bihar, India.

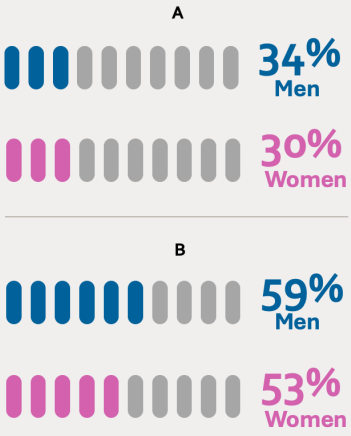
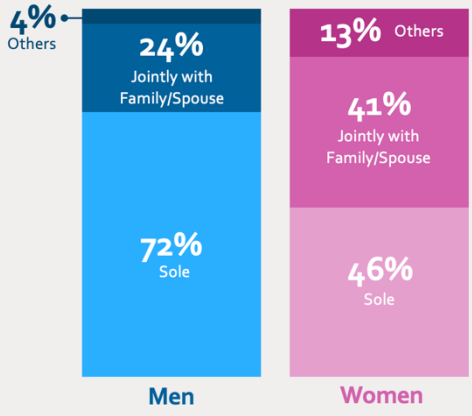


FIGURE 6: Patterns of main financial control of business, including the ability to sign loans, leases and contracts, among women and men in Bihar, India.



equitable between men and women. Approximately two in five men (43%) and women (45%) reported that their decision to work was made entirely by themselves, i.e., they were sole decision makers about their own paid work. About half of unmarried respondents indicated their parents were involved in the final decision as to whether they should work, with parents either solely responsible (37% of men and 31% of women) or jointly responsible with respondents (14% of men and 18% of women).

Career advancement

Of those who currently worked for pay and were not in a leadership position, a slightly higher percentage of men reported that they feel they could advance their position if they wanted to (34%), compared to 30% of women. While more than half of working respondents indicated that they negotiated to raise their current salary, this was more common among men (59%) than women (53%).

Financial control of business

Among those who run a business in Bihar, a much higher percentage of men report having sole financial control of the business (72%), compared to 46% of women. Similarly, only 24% of men reported joint financial control with their spouse or family, while 41% of women reported joint financial control (92 women, 155 men). Reporting that financial control was entirely in the hands of others (either spouse, another family member, or someone else) was more common among women (13%) than men (4%).

FIGURE 7: Descriptive norms related to women's work among women and men in Bihar, India. "How many women in the community work outside the home?" (A) and "How many women in the community run a business?" (B).

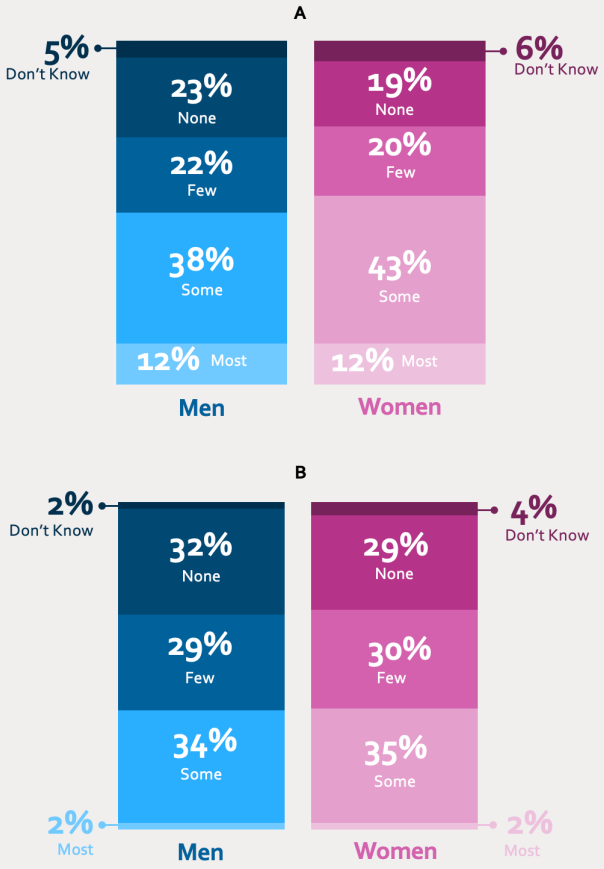
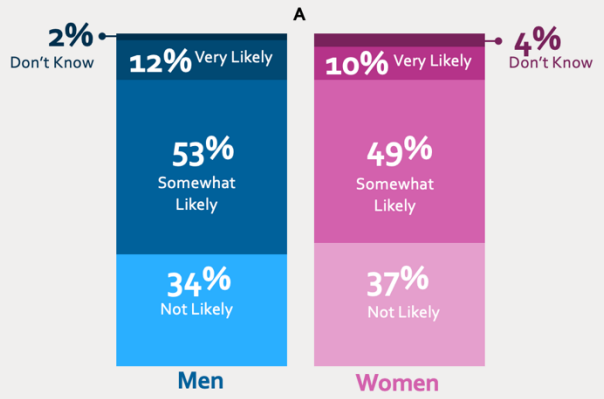


FIGURE 8 A: Sanctions related to related to women's work among women and men in Bihar, India. "If a woman works outside the home for money, how likely is it that she will be criticized?"



Norms

Descriptive norms about women in the workforce

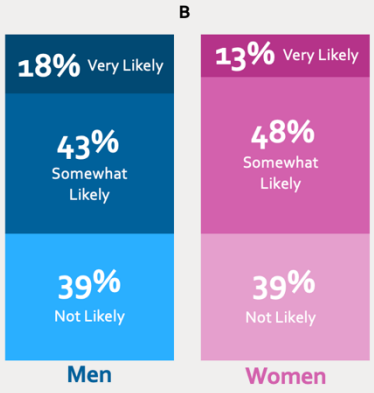
Only 12% of men and women think that "most" women in their community engage in paid work outside their home. In contrast, 38% of men and 43% of women think that "some" women in the community work outside their home for pay. This was similar to the levels of respondents who felt that women's paid work outside the home was more uncommon, as reported by both men (22% of men thought that "few" women worked for pay outside the home, while 23% thought that "no" women work for pay) and women (20% of women thought that "few" women worked for pay outside the home, while 19% of women thought that "no" women work for pay).

Women's business ownership was not perceived as common, with only 2% of men and women opining that "most" women in their community run a business on their own. Approximately one in three men (34%) and women (35%) think that "some" women in the community run a business, while 29% of men and 30% of women think that "few" women run a business. Thirty-two percent of men and 29% of women reported thinking that "no" women in the community run a business on their own.

Sanctions on women's work

More than half of respondents indicated that there were perceived sanctions on women working for pay. Approximately half of men (53%) and

FIGURE 8 B: Sanctions related to related to women's work among women and men in Bihar, India. "If a woman leads an enterprise, how likely is it that she may be criticized by her family or community?"



women (49%) think women are "somewhat" likely to be criticized for working outside the home, while 12% of men and 10% of women think women are very likely to face criticism. In contrast, 34% of men and 37% women believe women in their community who work for pay are "not likely" to be criticized for doing so.

Norms around entrepreneurship were similar, but slightly more polarized. While 18% of men and 13% of women think women are very likely to face criticism for being business leaders, nearly two in five men (39%) and women (39%) opine that women in their community who lead a business enterprise are "not likely" to be criticized for doing so.

This factsheet highlights important issues surrounding women's work in Bihar, including limited agency regarding the decision to work and restrictive social norms, in addition to gender gaps in the prevalence of paid work. Far fewer women than men work for pay or have sole ownership of a business. Married women are less likely to have the final say on whether they should work for pay (compared to married men), and women are also less likely to have financial control over a business. A substantial proportion of both men and women believe that women are likely to face criticism for working for pay or for leading a business. The inequities in agency and norms surrounding women's work in Bihar are important components to consider for policies and programs aimed at advancing women's economic empowerment in the state.

Data presented come from a cross-sectional survey conducted in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra between September – October 2022. The survey was designed by the Center on Gender Equity and Health (GEH) at the University of California San Diego, with advisement from the International Institute for Population Sciences, and UN Women. Ethical approval was provided by the Sigma Institutional Review Board in India (#10026/IRB/22–23), and verbal consent was obtained before interviews. The survey encompassed six districts of Bihar and was sampled to be representative at the state level using multi-stage stratified, population proportionate to size household sampling. One respondent aged 18 years or older was randomly selected in each sampled household. The final survey sample in Bihar included 2,141 men and women aged 18 years and above (1,030 men and 1,111 women).

For more information: geh@health.ucsd.edu

UC San Diego
CENTER ON GENDER EQUITY AND HEALTH

THE GENDER PROJECT
THE GENDER EQUITY AND DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH PROJECT