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Examining determinants of women's labor participation rate in developing Asian countries

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ABSTRACT

Purpose — *The study aims to analyze the impact of women's involvement in parliament, women's education, fertility rates, female unemployment, and female entrepreneurship on the female labor participation rate in developing countries in Asia.*

Method — *This research is quantitative study utilizing secondary data obtained from the World Bank Indicators. The data collection involves documentation and literature review. The methodology employed is panel data analysis with a Fixed Effects Model (FEM) for six developing countries in the Southeast Asia and East Asia region for the period of 2011 to 2021. The data are processed using the Eviews 10 application.*

Result — *Our findings indicate that women's involvement in parliament has a positive and significant impact on the female labor participation rate. Conversely, the female unemployment rate has a negative and significant effect on the female labor participation rate. Meanwhile, women's education, fertility rate, and female entrepreneurship show no significant impact on the female labor participation rate.*

Novelty — *While a number of studies have explored the factors influencing the female labor participation rate, research on labor force participation rates in Southeast and East Asia has yielded inconsistent results. Hence, there is a need for further investigation to fill this knowledge gap, providing a deeper understanding of the factors influencing the female labor participation rate in the context of developing nations.*

Keywords: *female labor participation rate, education, health, female empowerment*

INTRODUCTION

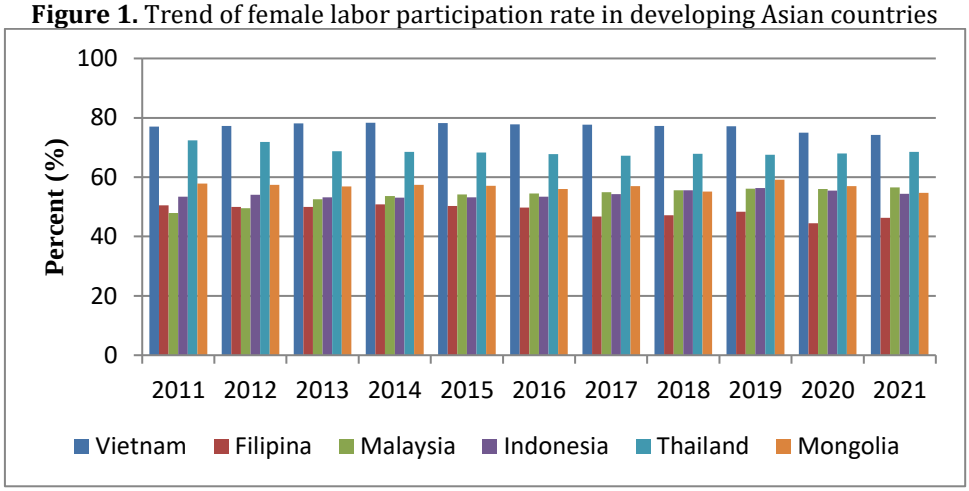
Female labor participation rate serves as a key indicator in measuring gender equality and women's involvement in a country's economy. The level of women's participation in the workforce reflects the significance of their role in economic and social development (Verick, 2018). This has garnered widespread attention from researchers and development experts worldwide (Lahoti & Swaminathan, 2016; Gammage et al., 2020; Klasen, 2020; Jayachandran, 2021). However, data indicates that women's participation in the labor market still lags significantly behind that of men (World Bank, 2022).

In 2019, the OECD recorded that the labor force participation rate in the Asia-Pacific region reached 74% for men and 53% for women. In 1994, the female labor force participation rate in East Asia was 70.8%, which then declined to 63.3% in 2014 (Tanaka & Muzones, 2016). According to the World Bank, the average female labor force participation rate in Southeast Asia in 2022 was 54.69%. This indicates the significant contribution of women to the economy, yet factors such as social norms, limited job opportunities, economic development, educational levels, and fertility rates serve as constraints to their participation (Klasen, 2019; Al Faizah et al., 2020).

Therefore, this research is crucial for economic development, as achieving gender equality in education, health, politics, and female empowerment, especially in the economic sector, is a key goal of sustainable development.

Figure 1 illustrates that during the period of 2011-2022, Vietnam had the highest average female labor participation rate at 77.10 percent, while the Philippines had the lowest average participation rate at 48.59 percent. Thailand followed Vietnam as the country with the second-highest average female labor participation rate. It was then followed by Mongolia, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Furthermore, Malaysia experienced a stable female labor participation rate of 53.77 percent during the period 2011-2021.

Figure 1. Trend of female labor participation rate in developing Asian countries



Source: World Bank Indicators (2022)

In the context of the relationship between women's participation in the labor market and development, factors such as education, fertility rates, unemployment, as well as the political and business involvement of women play a crucial role (Altuzarra et al., 2019; Zhou & Kan, 2019; Al Faizah et al., 2020; Assaad et al., 2020; Del Rey et al., 2021). The number of women still in school can impact their participation rates in the workforce (Setyowati, 2009). Higher education levels tend to enhance women's employment opportunities, develop their skills, and boost career potential (Elsayed & Shirshikova, 2023). Furthermore, human capital such as education can reduce unemployment rates in a region (Aisyah & Pratiwi, 2020).

On the other hand, high fertility rates can limit female participation in the workforce due to pressure to care for children (Brinton & Oh, 2019; Maulida et al., 2023). In line with this, Kharisma et al. (2017) indicate that women are often perceived as household members responsible for managing the household and children. Female unemployment also poses a significant barrier, with high unemployment rates creating constraints in finding jobs matching their qualifications and skills (Faaliyat et al., 2021).

In addition to these factors, the involvement of women in politics, especially in parliament, can influence policy-making and initiatives that support gender equality and women's employment opportunities (Al Faizah et al., 2020). Women in political positions can advocate for policies that support women's roles in the workforce. Furthermore, female entrepreneurs can serve as role models, inspiring other women to pursue careers beyond the home and making them successful examples in the professional world (Nasir et al., 2019).

The increase in female labor participation can enhance a country's economic productivity. Subsequently, improved economic productivity can lead to increased activities, particularly in the industrial, transportation, and agricultural sectors (Rofiuddin et al., 2019). By involving more women in economic activities, a larger human resource pool can be efficiently utilized (Klasen, 2019). Furthermore, engaging more women in the labor market can enhance diversity and

inclusivity, fostering a more innovative and dynamic work environment due to diverse backgrounds and perspectives (Shore et al., 2018).

While numerous studies have explored factors influencing the female labor participation rate, the results are not always consistent, and research on female workforce participation rates in Southeast and East Asia is still very limited. Therefore, further research is needed to fill this knowledge gap. This is crucial to provide a deeper understanding of the factors affecting the female labor participation rate, especially in the context of developing countries in the region.

Based on the description above, this research aims to analyze the impact of women's involvement in parliament, women's education, fertility rates, female unemployment, and female entrepreneurs on the female labor participation rate in developing Asian countries.

METHOD

This research is quantitative study utilizing a population from developing countries in the Southeast Asia and East Asia region. The study's sample comprises six developing countries (Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Mongolia) from that region, with annual data spanning from 2011 to 2021. The data were obtained by accessing the World Bank Indicator website. The study is conducted on these sample countries due to a declining trend in female labor participation rates within them. Despite the significant economic contribution of women's workforce participation, social norms and economic factors constrain their involvement. The chosen timeframe takes into account the potential impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on female labor participation rates.

Key variables are drawn from previous research accessible in various countries (Altuzarra et al., 2019; Zhou & Kan, 2019; Al Faizah et al., 2020; Assaad et al., 2020; Del Rey et al., 2021). This research focuses on the Female Labor Participation Rate (FLPR). The data utilized comprises the percentage of women aged 15-64 engaged in economic activities, as estimated by the International Labour Organization (ILO). Additionally, women's involvement in parliament is measured by the percentage of parliamentary seats held by women in a given country. The study also encompasses variables such as education, fertility, unemployment, and female entrepreneurship as factors influencing the female labor participation rate.

This research utilizes the panel data analysis method, a combination of cross-sectional and time-series data. The estimation methods encompass the Pooled Least Square (PLS), Fixed Effects Model (FEM), and Random Effects Model (REM). Two tests, namely the Chow test and the Hausman test, are conducted to determine the most suitable model. This study applies the following statistical model to estimate the female labor participation rate in developing countries:

$$FLPR_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 WIP_{it} + \beta_2 EDUC_{it} + \beta_3 FER_{it} + \beta_4 FUR_{it} + \beta_5 EPR_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}$$

The FLPRit reflects the percentage of women aged 15-64 who are employed, WIPit depicts the involvement of women in parliament, EDUCit reflects the percentage of women with education, FERit mirrors the fertility rate, FURit indicates the female unemployment rate, and EPRit represents the number of female entrepreneurs. Regression coefficients β1 to β5 refer to the impact of independent variables, while β0 is the constant parameter to be estimated. ε signifies the error in this analysis, and "it" represents panel data.

Hypotheses development

Women involvement in parliament and female labor participation rate

With the increasing involvement of women in parliament, it is expected that there will be an increase in the female labor participation rate. Active participation of women in the political decision-making process can create policies that support the economic empowerment of women, reduce gender disparities in the labor market, and stimulate overall growth in female workforce participation (Kumar, 2002).

H1: Women's involvement in parliament has a positive impact on the female labor participation rate

Women education and female labor participation rate

The increase in the education level of women has a positive impact on the female labor participation rate. With higher education, women can develop the skills necessary to support themselves economically (Quadlin et al., 2023). Education also provides broader knowledge, expands job choices, and enhances opportunities to secure positions with better salaries.

H2: Women's education has a positive impact on the female labor participation rate

Fertility rate and female labor participation rate

The increase in women's fertility often leads to a decrease in their participation in the workforce. This is due to higher fertility rates, which tend to bring about greater family caregiving responsibilities. Women with more children need to invest more time and energy to meet family needs, thus limiting their availability to engage in formal employment in the labor market (Cameron et al., 2023). This phenomenon is known as the "trade-off" between fertility and participation in a professional career.

H3: Women's fertility rates have a negative impact on the female labor participation rate

Female unemployment and female labor participation rate

The higher the level of female unemployment in a region or country, the lower the female labor participation rate within it. This may be attributed to a lack of job opportunities that align with women's skills or education, as well as unfair treatment or restrictions on access to certain jobs based on gender (Stamarski & Hon Hing, 2015). Additionally, social expectations limiting women's mobility in the workforce can contribute to their lower participation in economic activities.

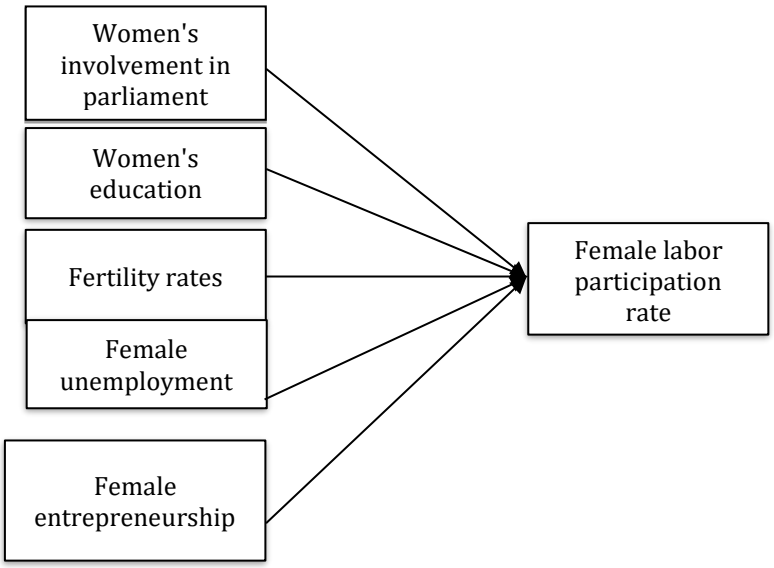
H4: Female unemployment has a negative impact on the female labor participation rate

Female entrepreneurship and female labor participation rate

A high level of female entrepreneurship in a region or country tends to create an environment where women are more actively involved in the workforce. Successful female entrepreneurs serve as inspiration for other women, motivating them to engage in various economic sectors (Khan et al., 2021). Moreover, the success of female entrepreneurs can generate new job opportunities, enhance female labor force participation, and reduce gender disparities in the workplace.

H5: Female entrepreneurship has a positive impact on the female labor participation rate

Figure 2. Research framework



Source: Developed by the authors (2023)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 illustrates descriptive statistics results indicating the characteristics of specific variables. The analysis reveals that the variable of female labor participation rate has a maximum value of 78.32 and a minimum value of 44.51, with a standard deviation of approximately 9.97. Additionally, the mean and median of all variables fall within their respective minimum and maximum ranges, suggesting a tendency toward a normal distribution of the data.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	FLPR	WIP	EDUC	FER	FUR	EPR
Mean	59.89217	18.59066	101.4751	2.243467	3.023533	1.543571
Median	56.04450	17.11712	100.6701	2.145500	3.286000	1.644088
Maximum	78.31900	30.26052	117.7570	3.127000	7.313000	2.528625
Minimum	44.51200	4.800000	91.37968	1.331000	0.239000	0.662139
Std. Dev.	9.974854	7.020400	6.364749	0.547777	1.613764	0.417671
Observations	60	60	60	60	60	60

Source: Eviews 10, processed (2023)

With a total of 60 observations, this analysis offers a comprehensive overview of the distribution of these variables in the sample data. Overall, these results suggest that the data tends to follow a normal distribution pattern, laying a solid foundation for further interpretation regarding the observed population characteristics.

Hypotheses testing

The results of the econometric model estimation using the Pooled Least Square (PLS), Fixed Effects Model (FEM), and Random Effects Model (REM) approaches, along with the model selection tests, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Result of econometric model estimation for panel data

Variable	Regression Coefficients		
	PLS	FEM	REM
C	92,5728	60,0035	88,7726
WIP	0,4671	0,1183	0,5451
EDUC	-0,0003	-0,0540	0,0942
FER	-8,0517	1,0287	-9,5566
FUR	-1,8809	-0,5716	-2,1968
EPR	-11,7687	1,6896	-13,2887
R^2	0,7714	0,9841	0,7989
Adjusted R^2	0,7503	0,9808	0,7803
Statistic F	36,540	302,807	42,907
Prob. Statistic F	0,0000	0,0000	0,0000

Model Selection Test
(1) Chow
Cross- Section $F(5,49)$ = 105,9711; Prob. $F(5,49)$ = 0,0000
(2) Hausman
Cross-Section random χ^2 (5) = 411,9275; Prob. χ^2 = 0,0000

Source: Eviews 10, processed (2023)

The results of the Chow test and Hausman test indicate that the optimal estimation model is the Fixed Effects Model (FEM), as evidenced by significant F and X^2 probabilities, both valued at 0.0000 (< 0.05).

The probability value of the F-statistic in the Fixed Effects Model (FEM) is 0.000, which is lower than the significance level α (0.05). This suggests that variables such as women's involvement in parliament, women's education, fertility rates, female unemployment, and female entrepreneurs collectively influence the female labor participation rate. A t-test is conducted to determine whether the independent variables have an impact on the dependent variable individually or partially. By comparing the t-statistic probability with the significance level α (0.05), we can ascertain whether each independent variable has an effect on the dependent variable.

Table 3. t-test result

Variable	Coefficient	Prob.	Conclusion
WIP	β_1 = 0,1183	0,074	WIP positive impact on α = 0,1
EDUC	β_2 = -0,0540	0,299	EDUC no effect
FER	β_3 = 1,0287	0,638	FER no effect
FUR	β_4 = -0,5716	0,086	FUR negative impact on α = 0,1
EPR	β_4 = 1,6896	0,127	EPR no effect

Source: Eviews 10, processed (2023)

Table 3 indicates that female involvement in parliament has a positive impact on the female labor participation rate, while female unemployment has a negative effect. However, women's education, fertility rate, and female entrepreneurs do not significantly influence the female labor participation rate.

The coefficient for Women's Involvement in Parliament (WIP) is approximately 0.118, suggesting that a one percent increase in women's involvement in parliament will enhance the female labor participation rate by 0.118 percent. The coefficient for Female Unemployment Rate (FUR) is around -0.572, indicating that a one percent increase in female unemployment will decrease the female labor participation rate by 0.572 percent.

Discussion

The impact of women's involvement in parliament on female labor participation rate

The findings suggest that women's involvement in parliament has a positive and significant impact on the female labor participation rate in developing countries, supporting our research hypothesis. This finding aligns with previous studies by Lv & Yang (2018) and Al Faizah et al. (2020), illustrating that when women are politically empowered, they are inclined to address gender discrimination through regulations and actions. This proactive stance contributes to an environment where women's rights are protected, fostering an increase in female workforce participation. In essence, political empowerment plays a crucial role in shaping policies that encourage women's economic involvement and active contribution to society.

The impact of women's education on female labor participation rate

The findings indicate that women's education does not have a significant impact on the female labor participation rate, contrary to the research hypothesis. Despite women's high educational attainment, cultural factors play a significant role in hindering active participation in the workforce. This aligns with the findings of Aboohamidi & Chidmi (2013) and Kiani (2013), emphasizing the prevalence of social norms that encourage women's involvement in household roles. Therefore, despite achieving high education levels, women may face cultural barriers limiting their involvement in the workforce. However, it's crucial to note that Tasseven's (2017) findings in our context suggest that specific educational interventions can positively influence the level of female labor force participation, indicating potential improvement pathways within certain educational frameworks or programs.

The impact of fertility rates on female labor participation rate

The fndings indicate that fertility rates do not significantly impact female labor participation rates, contrary to the research hypothesis. While social norms may impede mothers from working outside the home, our qualitative findings align with Mishra et al. (2010) and Hartani et al. (2015), suggesting that the physical and mental demands of pregnancy and childbirth can affect women's capacity to work. The additional time and energy needed to care for themselves and their children may result in reduced working hours or decisions to cease working entirely among pregnant and nursing women in our specific research setting. This highlights the intricate relationship between fertility levels and women's labor force participation rates within cultural and social contexts.

The impact of female unemployment on female labor participation rate

We found that female unemployment has a negative and significant impact on the female labor participation rate in developing countries, in line with our research hypothesis. This aligns with the studies of Tansel (2002) and Yildirim (2014), supporting our hypothesis. Our qualitative findings indicate limited job opportunities for women, influenced by gender discrimination and a lack of education and training. The absence of further supportive infrastructure hinders active female participation in the workforce within the specific socio-economic context we examined.

The impact of female entrepreneurs on female labor participation rate

The findings indicate that female entrepreneurs do not have a significant impact on the female labor participation rate, contradicting the research hypothesis. This aligns with the findings of Terrell & Troilo (2010), illustrating that structural constraints such as social norms, limited access to education, and workplace inequality hinder the influence of women's entrepreneurship on increasing the female labor participation rate. Cultural factors and gender stereotypes also

play a role in shaping women's career choices, ultimately affecting overall workforce participation rates. However, Pignatti's (2020) research in our specific context shows that support for female entrepreneurs can positively impact the female labor participation rate. This support becomes a crucial factor in helping women overcome barriers in entrepreneurship, including gender stereotypes, discrimination, and the burden of household responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

The research aims to analyze the impact of women's involvement in parliament, women's education, fertility rates, female unemployment, and female entrepreneurs on the female labor force participation rate in developing countries. The research results, utilizing the panel data method with the selected Fixed Effects Model (FEM) approach, indicate that women's involvement in parliament has a positive and significant impact on the female labor force participation rate, while female unemployment has a negative and significant impact on the female labor participation rate. When women are politically empowered to garner support and influence decision-making, they tend to take steps to protect women's rights. On the other hand, female unemployment is caused by a lack of job opportunities available to women. However, women's education, fertility rates, and female entrepreneurs do not significantly impact the female labor participation rate. Therefore, the government is advised to enhance women's involvement in parliament through quotas, training, and institutions supporting gender equality. Increasing women's employment can be achieved by providing business incentives, establishing empowerment institutions, and improving skills. The limitations of this study lie in the scope of factors influencing the level of female labor participation rate. Therefore, future research could include additional factors such as government policies, economic conditions, culture, and technology. Additionally, using primary data and involving more countries could contribute to stronger generalizations.

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