CHAPTER VI

EPILOGUE- THE ECONOMICS OF WOMEN, MEN AND WORK: NEED FOR NEW TROPES TO ENCODE HISTORY

Our study, through the previous chapters had taken the story of the skill, resilience, strength and vulnerability of the women weaver through a long period of History, from the pre-colonial to contemporary times. In the process, the study has also sought to graph the challenges that the women in this industry have had to grapple with in the past, the kind of changes that they are currently facing and the Government response to their position and role in the industry.

From the chapters, earlier discussed, four interconnected analytical issues suggest themselves. Firstly, that, there is a deep (and biased) gender construction of women’s labour vis-à-vis her actual contribution to the silk industry. Secondly, for women in Sualkuchi, market relations appear to be an important site of material subordination. What follows, is therefore, the need firstly, for a feminist politics that allows us to view women’s labour from their own perspective and secondly the need for measures to engender Government policies and academic research.

This chapter presents the major findings and conclusions of the study based on a discussion and critique of the issues mentioned above.
From the evidences discussed and presented in the third chapter, the study has shown that, throughout a long period of the silk industry, stretching at least from the 4th century B.C, the labour of women has been crucial in sustaining this industry through the vicissitudes of several centuries. One of the most important contentions and conclusions that the study draws is that, firstly, the notion of the Assamese women’s natural weaving skill is a patriarchal construction—a myth, which can be traced back to the Ahom period. The fact that a girl could not be given in marriage unless she had attained proficiency in weaving shows that an ideological compulsion to weave existed in traditional Assamese society. This, in turn, acted as a kind of subtle mechanism to harness more effectively the unpaid labour of the womenfolk in the production process. When the British arrived in Assam in the early 19th century, they found a valley self sufficient and rich in silk, where every woman was a "born weaver". The colonial masters however did not do much to promote or encourage this industry. Perhaps because by that time the notion that silk weaving was something that the women folk performed during their leisure had become so strongly entrenched, the British thought of silk weaving as a private affair. Hence, despite occasional episodes of bureaucratic favour, the silk industry was left to its own fate. The colonial Government of Assam began to show some interest in the silk industry in the mid 1880s but on the whole, Assam’s silk policy was inadequate: it was far from consistent and lacked a clear plan. The Government’s main instrument of policy, The Industries Department,
remained a weak and ineffectual body perpetually starved of funds.\textsuperscript{1} Policies that the British took to develop this industry consisted of a series of slow and half hearted measures that do not seem to have benefitted the women weavers of Sualkuchi in any way. The study has reasoned that, the colonial attitude towards the silk industry, in fact reveals a deep seated gender bias. This is evidenced from the fact that development efforts were not directed towards the women. Silk extension workers were male, the staff of the Guwahati Weaving School were almost always all male and the few stipendiary of the institute also appear to be male.\textsuperscript{2}

Nonetheless, despite gross neglect, Assam’s female dominated silk industry did not die out. This was an amazing feat and the study has tried to show that it was the labour of the women folk, and the fact that it was so intrinsically linked to their lives that despite severe odds, the silk industry survived the colonial onslaught. In the contemporary period, the labour of the women continues to be crucial for the survival of this craft. Other than the large numbers of paid migrant labour who have found employment in the loom enterprises in Sualkuchi, there is another category of women workers whose labour is equally important in the sustenance of this craft. These are the women of the weaving households who do almost all the preparatory process leading up

\textsuperscript{1} See, Reports of the Industries Department-1929, 1930, 1938-1939
\textsuperscript{2} See, Reports of the Industries Department., 1938 See also, Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, File 111-1-68M of 1913 and, Agri, B, May,1814, Nos.17-19
to weaving. Their labour is taken as voluntary and what is worse, their contribution is not even acknowledged. The division of labour in production and marketing is everywhere very close to ideological norms about the gendering of tasks and appropriate behavior. If anything the measured input of women in the process of silk weaving is underestimated in normative statements. Women’s labour or *jugar dhara* is calculated and included in the final pricing of the product. The rate is calculated as the same which would have to be paid to a skilled migrant or paid employee. But the returns were never paid to the women in the household. It may be mentioned here that *jugar dhara* only means providing assistance to the final task of weaving, so women’s labour is not seen as productive labour. This free labour is expected of her. We spoke to Digambar Kalita who told us that the women in his household helped with all aspects of the preparatory processes. When we asked him if he had ever thought of sharing the cash profits with his wife since her assistance was so vital for his business, Kalita replied that he gave his wife a *mekhala chaddar* on every festive occasion.

Women in Sualkuchi are not only home makers— they are reelers and winders and dyers and supervisors too. But standard categorization of occupations means that these women will always remain invisible.

This discrepancy between ideology and practice leads to men having greater—in fact, total control of the means of production, i.e. the looms

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<sup>3</sup> This was gleaned from conversations with Rita Das, Laxminath Nagar, Sualkuchi, on August 17-18<sup>th</sup> 2008, and from Kabita Baishya, Naktola, Sector, 1, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2008

<sup>4</sup> Interview with the Respondent, August, 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008
and yarn and cocoon than would be the case if women's tasks were actually recognized. In Sualkuchi thus, marriage and kin ties are so intertwined with economic activities so as to produce a structure in which the role of the male as head of the household as well as the economy are inseparable. Thus here, patriarchy is seen as more than a form of male dominant family structure. It is also an independent socio-economic system of production. In this basic unit of patriarchy, household production is organized and directed by the male head of the family in his name. Production is generally directed by the women only in the man's absence.

The material subordination of women in Sualkuchi has been researched in two institutional sites. The first is within the household, where intra household divisions of labour or gender divisions of tasks have been explained as one of a social process of decision making. This again, is in part influenced by patriarchal norms. The work has focused on some of the features of intra differentials of fall back and unequal conjugal contracts have been invoked to explain gender asymmetries in command not only over decision making but also over resources, autonomy and welfare which would partly explain why women in Sualkuchi, despite their skill are not in a position to demand control or at least a share in the resources.

In sum, what has been sought to be illustrated is that, economic self interest can penetrate even the most intimate domains of family life.
However, this does not imply that household decisions can be explained in purely economic terms. It merely suggests that the boundary between a service extracted and a gift freely given within the threshold of the household is indeed very narrow and likely to be camouflaged by the prevailing patriarchal norms which in all likelihood will work to the disadvantage of the women in the household. The fact that women in Sualkuchi have internalized the notion and belief that helping the men folk in the silk production is part of their daily chore further reinforces the feminist belief that the workings of patriarchy are complex and works in myriad and subtle ways, surviving, precisely by making allies of the exploited.

The second institutional site of material subordination appears to be the market. Women have always had an ambivalent relation to the markets. In their liberating aspect, markets create new opportunities for exchange and accumulation, break through existing social barriers and transform relationships that impede their expansion. But feminists also caution that commercialization often also takes the path of least resistance. Faced with intransigent social structures and rigid hierarchies such as those based on gender, race or caste, the expansion of commerce builds on these hierarchies, altering and reshaping them in the process and transforming the life experiences of those involved. Sometimes these processes lay the bases for transforming hierarchies over the longer run; at other times they deepen the hold of existing authority structure; and at still others they create new forms of authority and control, more subtle.
and difficult to identify precisely because they work through the market. In the context of Sualkuchi, the study has been able to show that the vast number of waged women weavers, are actually women who are stuck in the lower rungs of the economic hierarchy and hence, it must be understood that although women's economic participation may bring her a certain measure of economic independence as an individual, the overall pattern of women's work actually indicates that her work is not sufficient for autonomous economic development within the society. In fact, an analysis of the labour market and labour relations in Sualkuchi, reveal that life cycle vulnerabilities, employment probabilities, skill acquisition and, income and their security (differentials not justified by productivity or by demand and supply) are stacked against women. Wages are low; there are no creche, and few pucca toilets. There are no muster rolls; Provident fund, gratuities and lay off compensations are ignored. Women in an advanced stage of pregnancy simply have to leave their jobs. Also, the fact that these women see working as a temporary phase in their lives (till their marriage) means that they are less concerned than men about the intrinsic interest of their work and its long term prospects. Thus, in the more visible public arena, where vast numbers of migrant women are engaged, patriarchal notions work in covert ways. As the study has shown, the employer's belief in the relative docility and

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Submissiveness of women as compared to the men is an important factor in their preference for women workers. Indra mohan Baishya, referred to earlier, told us that he preferred to hire female workers because they are more obedient and more adjusting. Mr. Bokul Das told us that weaving is a craft that is more suited for feminine hands and hence loom owners like himself preferred to hire female hands and that women were also more disciplined compared to the male weavers as the latter take regular breaks to smoke or simply laze. The expressions used by employers to describe this characteristic were diverse: “more hardworking’, ‘more submissive’, ‘less troublesome’. Employer’s appreciation of women workers for their docility can also be related to the position of women within the family which socializes to patriarchal notions of docility and submissiveness. This also perhaps also explains that when women arrive at the labour market, they have already internalized patriarchal notions of “appropriate behavior” and hence, are more willing to take on a greater burden of work from their male employers with fewer complaints. So, in discussing women in Sualkuchi, we do so in a context which assumes an unequal and definitive bias against women’s labour. This would also partly explain the fact we do not come across any case of gendered resistance and struggle acted out in the theatre of the market place. The workers so called submissiveness can also be understood as emanating from the subordinate position they hold within

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8 Information gathered from a cross section of loom owners, especially from a gentleman by the name of Bokul Das, Laxminath Nagar, Sualkuchi, September, 21st 2007

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their households. For the vast numbers of migrant labour, thus, the working women forming the foundation of ‘male’ marketing systems are caught in a pincer. Government apathy and the lack of a trade union movement, limit their capacity collectively to improve their working conditions.

In the course of this work, a search for gender empowering action in marketing systems revealed very little. The Government is of course, well aware of the fact that there is substantial involvement of women in the silk industry. For instance, the Government in its budget proposal of 2008-2009, noted that, "... Handloom and sericulture is an important sector in the economy of Assam. It not only provides direct employment to the full-time workers but also provides supplementary income to lakhs of rural households for whom sericulture and handloom is a family tradition...." The Ministry’s of Textiles Annual Reports also notes the substantial involvement of women in the sericulture and handloom industry. None the less till date, the state Government has not taken any initiative to bring the weavers under protective laws or to ensure their job security or even to ensure that minimum wages are paid to them. There are of course, any number of schemes under the Directorate of Textiles and Handloom Weaving and the Central Silk Board. (CSB) But has been noted in the Fifth chapter, the Government’s own data about the physical and financial achievements made by the Directorate of Handloom and Textiles,

7 http://assamgovt.nic.in/budget_speech2008-09.asp
8 http://apparel.indiamart.com/annualreport/sericulture.html see also, http://texnic.in/annualrep/arch08htm

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Assam during 2001-2002 to 2002-2003, and for 2006-2007, reveals that the development target for the silk industry in the state has been far from achieved. More relevant for the study is the fact that none of the schemes are visible in Sualkuchi. The CSB, again, has its own development schemes and program, which include those which are fully funded by the Centre, those financed by Centre and State both, and those which are externally assisted. Some of the most important of these include the Catalytic Development Scheme “... targeted to motivate State efforts towards productivity, quality and market support....” Another scheme launched with the support of The United Nation’s Development Programme (UNDP) for the development of Non-mulberry silk - tasar, muga and eri in states like Assam. The Central Silk Board is also supposed to be implementing “....the Sub-program which among others, aims to impart necessary training and skill up-gradation to the farmers particularly women in good management practices, (emphasis added) provide technological support in pre-cocoon and post cocoon processes including reeling, spinning and processing of silk through pilot initiatives and provide replicable models of entrepreneurship. Nearly, 10,000 beneficiaries are proposed to be covered with an estimated direct employment generation of 3.5 lakh man years. ...”

9 Planningcommission.gov.in/plans/planel/five/8th/vol2/8v2ch6.htm. See also, Ministry of Textiles-Annual Report 00-01, and, http://db.nedfi.com/content/handloom-textile-assam
The above schemes have been specially mentioned here to also highlight the fact that on the one hand, the Government talks of improving the socio-economic condition of women and on the other it continues to be fixated with gender biased terminologies like ‘man years.’ As far as women in Sualkuchi are concerned, the Central Silk Boards schemes have not affected the weavers here at all.

In fact, women of Sualkuchi are practically out of the direct focus of development programs. Policy errors have in fact resulted from a lack of analysis of rural patriarchy forces. One of the most crucial areas of policy shortsightedness has been in the area of rural credit. Credit, it is argued, delivers a range of particular benefits when targeted to low income women. It is seen as a critical input for increasing women’s employment in small scale enterprises. Further as many studies show, increases in women’s incomes improve the unique livelihood enhancement functions women perform for their households as brokers of the health, nutritional and educational status of other household members. It is also argued that credit represents a form of economic empowerment which can enhance women’s self confidence and status within the family, as independent producers and providers of a valuable cash resource to the household economy. Whatever the reasons for targeting women, the tremendous increase of credit availability for women must be seen as a positive contribution to efforts to challenge gendered terms of access to productive
resources and opportunities. In the case of Sualkuchi, as the study has observed, despite their skill in silk processing and weaving, very few women are entrepreneurs or "master" weavers themselves. One of the reasons is that marketing is a male bastion and women entrepreneurs have to work through middlemen. Co-operative societies like the Assam Samaby Resham Pratishtan do not help to solve the credit problem for the weavers since they advance yarn to the weavers but do not advance cash credit. Women like Rinku Moni Das who has been previously referred to, borrow money from relatives or money lenders in times of need.

It may be mentioned here that one of the major sources of institutional Finance in the North East is the NEDfi or North East Development Finance Institution which was incorporated under the Company's Act 1950 on August 9th 1995. After the creation of the Ministry of DONER (Development of North Eastern Region) it has come under the control of the Ministry. The NEDfi has provision for providing soft loans to women entrepreneurs, to set up their own production units. But the point of argument is that women in Sualkuchi have very little chances of being able to take advantage of these schemes because as noted, they are rarely entrepreneurs themselves, in fact, they do not

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11 Anne Marie Goetez and Rina Sen Gupta., "Who Takes the Credit? Gender, Power and Control over Loan use in Rural credit Programs in Bangladesh", in, Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath (ed), op.cit. vol ii, pp.95-96
12 Rinku Moni Das, Haripur, Jan 1st and 2nd January, 2007 and again between, 17th and 18th August 2007
13 Information accessed through, www.nedfi.com
even control the means of production. As far as the migrant workers are concerned, they do not have the means to invest the initial capital required for availing of the loan. In fact labourers with weaving skills are most likely to be employed by urban middle class women in the towns who have the initial capital to start their enterprise. We met Manti Baruah and her sister Shamalie Baruah at the NEDfi Hat (where exhibition of handloom products from the North East are regularly held) in Guwahati, who have taken advantage of the NEDfi loan scheme and have set up a handloom enterprise at their residence. The workers are Bodo women who design and embroider shawls and kurtas. The wages paid to these workers are once again at piece rate. The point that is constantly being reiterated, is, that programs for the welfare of the women are unlikely to attain their goal unless frameworks of development and urban social change are rethought and re-worked, from the point of view of needy women and unless their problems at the ground level are addressed. As is clear from the study in the case of Sualkuchi, this seems to be far from happening. In fact Sualkuchi is perhaps a living example of the pitfalls of micro-credit. If patriarchy and patriarchal factors in Sualkuchi explain structural factors that constrain the development of women, proximate causes that affect their economic status, includes economic policies and economic conditions. As we have seen, economic

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14 This is not to say that urban women entrepreneurs do not require or should not be provided with assistance to become economically self sufficient but that Government focus more often than not misses its target and benefits of development schemes do not percolate down to the poor women who are in need of credit schemes the most. Here one must refer to the critique of micro credit discussed earlier. See also appendix v.

15 Conversation with Manti and Shyamalie Baruah, on 30\textsuperscript{th} March, 2009

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policies may hinder or facilitate the well being and advancement of women and economic conditions may be detrimental or conducive to improvements. Too often government policies aimed at the economic uplift of the women tends to be reduced to a set of compensatory measures for women taking them further away from the path of economic welfare that men might be trekking.

The Assam Government has of course, has an impressive hierarchical bureaucratic set up, and placed under the Department of Textile and Handloom Weaving ostensibly to promote the silk industry in the state. However, this does not in any way seem to have augured well for the silk industry or the vast numbers of women involved in it. Toing the neo-liberalists line, the task of Government agencies are expressed in achieving profits through an increase in production, establishing niches, a regular clientele and product diversification so as to create a steady global demand. Already around a 100 households have been 'adopted 'by the Government to produce non-traditional items like quilts, curtains, cushion covers exclusively for a global clientele. Embroidery, beadwork and crystals have also been introduced in the weaving process to make the product more acceptable in the International market.16 While there is nothing apparently wrong per se in such a policy, a cause for concern over the recent

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16 Information provided by Mr. N.N Rana Patgiri, Director of ARTFED, in Jan 2nd and 7th 2007
months has been the world wide economic meltdown affecting the countries which are the main purchasers of Assam silk products. In fact the FIEO (Federation of Indian Exporters Organization), coordinator, Mr. Subash Mittal, has expressed fears that as western nations reel under the impact of an economic recession resulting in a compression of global demand for traditional items of import from countries like India, it is estimated that an estimated 5 lakh people are likely to be rendered jobless in the export oriented Indian handicraft sector (especially textiles) alone. In Sualkuchi, there is every likelihood that in case downsizing measures are adopted, the migrant labourers who are currently working in the export oriented looms will be the first to be fired. If that happens, these women would find the ground shifted off their feet.

A main contention as well as concern of this study, thus, has been the fact that Sualkuchi has been co opted into this whole process of globalization, without having a firm policy and scheme for the welfare for the weaving community. In fact as suggested in the previous chapter, the basic approach of the Government towards the silk industry in the state seems to be flawed. For one, there is no-pre defined handloom policy for the state and the State Government appears to wake up to the needs of a policy when the Central Government details a Textile policy. Schemes are launched from time to time according to the needs of the time. But none of these schemes as noted are

17 Mr. Subhash Mittal, ND.TV,India,27th Jan, 2009
women-centric and very few of them make the weaver a part of development planning. Secondly, none of these schemes are specifically aimed at turning Sualkuchi into the hub of silk production. Instead of strengthening the silk industry, and taking concrete steps to stop the adulteration of muga with the cheaper tosh, the government is shifting its focus to the development of the silk industry to places in upper Assam. But, to repeat a point, the most glaring defect in the Government attitude towards the silk industry is its gender blindness. In fact neo liberal policies are not simply gender blind, but gender biased, by virtue of that blindness. By failing to take into account the asymmetry of gender relations and women's subordination in economy and society, neo liberal policies in Sualkuchi, are guilty of three types of biases. As has been suggested in the previous chapters, first, the Government has conveniently ignored the implications of gender division of labour within the household and secondly, as a natural corollary to the first, has ignored women's unpaid work in the silk industry. Third, it has ignored women's intra household gender relations by focusing on the household as a micro unit of economic decision making. For instance, we find mention of families engaged in weaving and sericulture, but the data is not broken by sex and hence we have no way of knowing how many women are actually involved in the craft. The result of these biases is that

19 View the NEDfi Data bank and the tables showing number of families engaged in sericulture, accessed through, http://db.nedfi.com/content/kamrup-district
policies shifts the costs of adjustment from the paid to the unpaid economy, and, as a result, disproportionately on to women who are the primary workers in the unpaid economy, and subordinated by gender relations within the household.²⁰ The empirical evidence from Sualkuchi of the effect of neo liberal policies on women also has revealed a bleak picture. While the expansion of the silk industry here, has provided women with the opportunity to increase their participation in an important sector of the economy, yet the concentration of women in the industry does involve the exploitation of a weaker socio economic group. Moreover neo liberal policies have done little to bring the labour of the women of weaving households into focus. If anything, these women continue to be more or less shut out from any direct contact with the market since men handle the marketing arena. Women workers both in the market and the households, as mentioned do not control the looms nor has the Government envisaged or announced any plans to give women greater assess to the means of production. As observed, Gender specific Government policies such as subsidies and cheap credit arrangements for women's enterprises that could aid women in developing their own non-subsistence enterprises are conspicuous by their absence.

More importantly, what has also followed from an acknowledgement of the diverse inequalities between men and women is the

²⁰ Gita sen., "Gender, Markets and States: A selective Review and Research Agenda", in Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath (ed) op.cit., vol ii, p.433
difficulty in developing a single feminist politics. While acknowledging the contributions of the various strains of feminism, the study has adopted a socialist feminist framework, as it best represents an ideology which can help in the development of analyses of women’s work, waged and unwaged, in relation to men, to the working class and to capital. An important socialist feminist belief is that since women’s world view and their life experiences are likely to be different from the men’s, it is important to understand the daily experiences of women to represent the viewpoint of the women from her own perspective rather than adding her in as an afterthought. With this basic socialist feminist insight, the study has collected field data through conversations with members of the weaving households, both men and women, with the migrant workers and Government officials to piece together the story of the life and world of the silk worker.

Since conceptual biases regarding women’s labour has impacted the development policies of the Government, there is thus, an urgent need to engender mainstream development frameworks, programs and projects which will better lead to policies which promote and sustain more equitable development along gender lines from the beginning. Towards that end, the Government of Assam in the current year, (2008-2009) has decided to introduce

21 See, for instance, Nancy Mandell., (ed), Feminist issues: Race Class and Sexuality (Canada 1995) pp10-11,
See also, Alison Jagger., Feminist Politics and Human Nature (Sussex, 1983) p.63
Gender Budgeting with 100% funds earmarked for the benefit of women.\textsuperscript{22} How far this translates into reality, of course remains to be seen.

Given the Assam Government's Neo liberal stance, it is especially important that researchers and policy makers begin to address the gender dimensions of these processes in specific contexts in order to prevent further structural constraints and burdens for women and to integrate them into community development. The kind of strategies that can be supported and/or developed to foster these processes are gender analysis of neo-liberal policies and their impact on local communities, on households, and on production structures, to name a few examples. State policies are gender biased because they have failed policies to examine systematically the relationship between formal and informal economic development and the gender dimensions of these processes. As discussed throughout the study much needs to be done to examine empirically the hidden dimensions of neo liberal policies, and translate these ideas into practice, particularly in regard to local development and urban policy. As argued, much depends on how planning and political processes are defined and whether local power is understood to include power relations within the households or not. Household relations therefore provide a starting point for understanding both the diversity and the similarities in local women's approaches to mobilizing resources from the start. Social equity criteria would

\textsuperscript{22} See, http://assamgovt.nic/budget_speech2008-09.asp
require that, at the very least, if both men and women are weavers, both be entitled to become beneficiaries of any commercial reform. Moreover, it is imperative that State policy should be directed towards creating the incentive and support structures so that women would want to participate, would be able to overcome the possible resistance of men, and thus be able to participate effectively.\(^2^3\)

As far as social science and historical research in the North East is concerned, the roles of women in the various sectors of the economy remain largely un-documented. Discussions in sociology and social anthropology\(^2^4\) and economic history\(^2^5\) have yet to incorporate analysis of both the collective work and the private household work of women in general. As we have endeavoured to show, where women are concerned, other factors, primarily patriarchy as it affects notions of labour and the earnings and control over resources of both men and women are at least as important in determining women’s place in the labor market and must be taken into account while organizing empirical research. Moreover, it is important to move away from conventional categorization of occupations and standard approaches to gathering information especially through household surveys, as these present a false picture of the


position of the women in relation to the men. Both groups are affected by
discrimination in the labour market but women are also subject to patriarchal
norms, much of which remains hidden by conventional approaches to the
gathering and analysis of labour market information. Gender outcomes in the
labour markets do not reflect natural or objective differences between men and
women, but rather reflect the outcome of discrimination and disadvantage, and
the behavioral reactions by workers and employers. Hence, there is a definite
need to define a research agenda that will explore the relationships among
gender, markets and states, taking account of the recent and continuing
processes of market liberalization, regionalization and transformation of the
relations between the Government and the civil societies. In order to understand
what market liberalization or the formation of regional economic blocs might
mean for women, one needs to look beyond market activity per se to non
market activity and to women’s well being more generally and point to new
directions for empirical research.26 Viewing the liberalization process in the
North East through the lens of gender could lead to more equitable policies and
could provide a different outcome, one more beneficial to women’s
organizations and to poor communities in general. What is needed, (and what is
missing) in the North East are micro level studies which gather and review micro
evidence on gender inequality and productivity for a particular community and
attempt to synthesize their findings to produce some estimate of the

26 Gita Sen., op. cit., vol ii, p.431
implications of failure to reduce male bias for the country's sectoral and aggregate outcome. Gender awareness in macroeconomic analysis requires that we look at economic models from the standpoint of women's lives in which much time is devoted to unpaid work in social production as well as to paid work in production; and that we recognize unequal gender relations as an intervening variable that structures economic processes at macro, and micro levels. A gender perspective also means recognizing that women stand at the crossroads between production and reproduction, between economic activity and the care of human beings, and therefore between economic growth and human development. They are workers in both spheres—those most responsible and therefore with most at stake, those who suffer the most when the two spheres meet at cross purposes, and those most sensitive to the need to better integration between the two. This conceptual framework rest on the argument that production and reproduction, market and non-market activity are intrinsically linked and organized by relations of power. Factors affecting one tend to affect the other. The labour of women is critical to both; but women have relatively little autonomy to make decisions about either. Increased involvement in income earning activities rarely frees women from the tasks of reproduction, although tasks may alter and be performed to different rhythms. Major economic processes such as market liberalization and structural

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27 Daine Elson, "Gender Awareness in modeling Structural Adjustment", in Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath, (ed), op.cit., vol ii, p.369
adjustment reforms alter the demand for women in markets, but also affect the resources available for household maintenance\(^{28}\) and has to be kept in mind by policy makers and academics alike.

At this point, it has to be noted that while the organization of the institutional world remains one which is congruent only to the traditionally male patterns of social life, in the crucial area of public debates and discussions about development in the North East, the issue of gender has become central. In fact, over the last two decades or so, feminists have challenged many of the central assumptions of the field of economic history. Seminars on gender themes are regularly organized by the various Universities in the region. Gender analysis has also enriched the basic concept by demonstrating that attention to the different activities of men and women does make a difference. While it is largely mistaken to assume that the battles of feminism have been largely fought and won, what is heartening is that women's history or gender history is no longer an unknown area of historical studies, even though that may be still in the peripheries of the discipline. The literature on gender history is increasing by the day and there is a very definite attempt at taking the knowledge about history forward so that the invisibility of the woman can be removed as far as possible and a true assessment of the existing gender relations can be made in the pages of History.\(^{29}\)

\(^{28}\) Gita Sen., *op.cit*, vol ii, pp.431-433

\(^{29}\) Manorama Sharma, "Locating the Women in History: the Need for an Imaginative and Sensitive Methodology" in Amrendra Takhur (ed,) *Proceedings of North East India History Association, xxvii session*, (Goalpara, 2007), p.85
While the basic conceptual framework is in place, however, it needs amplification, and much empirical work still remains to be done. Gender as a conceptual framework has a great deal to offer that can enrich the debate about liberalization and the new political economy. By consistently focusing on the links between production and reproduction, by pointing to the important influence of noncompetitive structures and by drawing on a rich tradition of non-governmental program implementation and activism, a gendered analysis can direct research and policy analysis in directions where it would not otherwise go. Women’s roles are multifaceted, women’s identities are multilinked. There is strength in gender diversity: there is also strength in women’s shared culture and values. As the study has demonstrated, redefining labour along feminist lines means that we also need to re-think the nexus of productivity, wages, and trade and labour standards. The non feminist approaches either ignore the gender biases historically embedded in some standards or the gender biases that are produced and reproduced by markets. It is in the contention of this study that neither a simple reliance on de-regulated markets nor on labour standard regulations defined in terms of "market related work", or mechanical trade linked schemes can bring about an improvement in the conditions of work. A feminist perspective fundamentally changes the meaning of labour and work.

30 Gita Sen., op.cit., p.435
31 Irene tinker, “The Making of a Field: Advocates, Practitioners, and Scholars” in Lourdes Benneria and Savitri Bisnath (eds), op cit, vol i, p 96
helps us rethink the theoretical parameters of the debate and come up with new policies that can be more conducive to attaining upward harmonization for both genders across the development divide in the context of the changing world economy. If effective policies are undertaken to improve women's individual access to productivity enhancing technology and credit, women's incomes are likely to increase, possibly to the point at which many more women could rent or purchase looms on their own account. This type of change could have repercussions on the social relations of production in the patriarchal mode, strengthening women's ability to negotiate better terms of access to their husband's enterprises in patriarchal relations.

Thus, that economic analysis that is gender aware, in the sense of recognizing that all economic activity works through and within gender relationships has the potential to generate both a better understanding of the development processes and a better understanding of the policies required to diminish gender inequality. In order to organize empirical research, we need a major change in our view of reality, a major change in what needs to be measured, and a major change in our thinking about the way in which families and households participate in economic activity. The reality of the huge unpaid contribution of women in the households to economic value needs to be
accepted; adopted as a benchmark fact, it would change nearly all of our deliberations about economic and social policy.\textsuperscript{32} It does not automatically follow that better research methods will help to improve the position of women. It is an open question as to whether the extensive monitoring of women in individual workplaces has done much over the last few years to radically improve their position, however, without an adequate baseline to measure differences, it is difficult to see where and how improvements can be identified. For this reason alone it is important to de-mystify existing analysis and to show how, and in what ways, they serve to obscure the real experience of women.\textsuperscript{33}

This study, hopes to have cleared a little more of the mist veiling the lived experiences of the women silk weavers of Sualkuchi, both in the household and the labour market, and it has also sought to impress upon the need for a feminization of the concept of labour itself. So that women do not remain the invisible workers.

\textsuperscript{32} Duncan Ironmonger., "counting outputs, Capital Inputs and Caring Labour: Estimating Gross Household Product", in Lourdes Beneria and Savitri Bisnath (eds)., \textit{op.cit.}, Vol I, p.320

\textsuperscript{33} Paraphrased from, Irene Bruegel., "Sex and race in the Labour Market", in Mary Evans., (ed) \textit{The Woman Question} (New Delhi, 1994) p.192