Chapter- IV

Women at the Labour Market in India Since 1990

In India, with the process of liberalisation, even though the structural adjustment policies, and globalisation were in vogue in the last quarter of the twentieth Century, there was, in fact no real radical break observed in the labour market for women between pre and post-reform period. Though in certain sectors labour power of women workers were still in demand, but the new economic policies instead of breaking down the on going traditional trends, aggravated them to cause further deterioration of women’s economic position. The policies of liberalisation, such as structural adjustment policy, (SAP), have basically benefited big capital. It was not aimed to benefit the working class women or for uniting them and creating international solidarity. On the contrary, women worker’s mobility and their opportunities have decreased adding to their problems.

Ever since India launched its structural adjustment policies, there have been numerous debates about its possible effects on the Indian woman. The pessimists, including many economists and feminists from India have felt that SAP, with its emphasis on globalisation of markets and limited role for the state, could only lead to a worsening of the women’s
situation. What gives credence to such feelings is the fact that even after the launch of new economic policies, the progress and development that are usually associated with these policies are yet to take place in India.

Though women workers constitute an important segment of the total work force in India, around 90 per cent of these women are engaged as wage labourers in the unorganised sector. Very little changes have taken place in the role and status of the vast majority of women work force in India. Most of the Indian women, in comparison to men, still bear the burnt of poverty, landlessness, homelessness, under-employment and destitution. They are also very often subjected to different kinds of economic and sexual exploitation in the labour market.

The low economic status of women in India has been one of the major factors for their low status in social and other fields. The Indian women are the most exploited ones in Indian society. They have been regarded as the balancing force in the family and in the national economy, which has not only made it difficult for them to become integrated as a permanent part of the work force, but also susceptible to unscrupulous or discriminatory treatment in the employment market.

The data related to women's employment in India shows that while the proportion of women population has remained more or less constant at
about 49 per cent of the total population, their proportion as workers against the total women population a also against total workers has declined continuously. Most of the women were found to be employed in the unorganised sector with a meager wage rate.

In the Indian society, the social activities associated with the males differ from those of the females. For example, women are primarily expected to look after household activities, whereas male members are considered to be bread-earners. In the Indian context, there are basically four factors which are related to female employment in India: (a) Growing inadequacy of the income of the principal breadwinner; (b) Temporary fall in the family's income due to accidental circumstances; (c) Death of the main bread winner; and (d) women's desire for economic independence, and securing a higher standard of living for the family.

The WTO and MNC led economic reforms have only aggravated the conditions of poverty and marginalization of people in general, and women in particular, in a country like India. Women faced extreme retrenchment and unemployment, irregular employment practices and exploitation. Furthermore, through the creation of productive and non-productive labour discourse, the works done by women as producer in

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the agrarian and home-based sector for sustenance and survival has been totally devalued and rejected. Hence, the overall contributions made by women's labour have been statistically “invisible”.

The overall female work force in India has expanded very slowly in both rural and urban areas over the entire post-reform period of the last decade. The number of subsidiary workers increased much faster vindicating the huge gap between the numbers seeking work and the numbers getting it. In urban areas women were employed mostly in the service sector, mainly as casual workers in the flexible labour market engaged in economic activities like garment manufacture, electronics and the lower-end jobs in the IT (Information Technology) industry. Women either had to increase their skills and qualifications and try to maintain their position in the labour market or sink in the tidal wave of changes. In this type of scenario, several factors that stood against women, who were mostly seen trapped in the bind.

**Labour Market and Women's Employment**

The basic concept of 'work' has undergone a change in the recent period as a result of the introduction of New Economic Reform Policies. Sub-

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contracting has become the norm in almost all the industries in which women seek employment, e.g. the garment industry, light metallurgy, consumer goods and food processing. Entry into and exit from the work force was frequently taking place at various points in each woman's life. A peculiar characteristic with regard to women's employment that was observed was the complete absence of any 'continuity'. The place of employment and the type of work were constantly changing, often several times a year, for women workers. For individual women workers, the work performed was generally for short period, which was followed by uncertainty. This process created a large number of female work force which neither had any particular skills nor an identity of being "workers". This phenomenon not only had an adverse effect on women economically, but also socially.

In the case of women workers it has been observed that their personal and family-based problems also influenced their access as well as the pattern of their employment in various types of production organisations. For example their age, educational status, occupation of the household head, marital status and the number of children they have become important variables as far women's employment's are considered. 

and unmarried women were preferred to old and married women. Since the speed and overtime work are crucial, young and unmarried women with comparatively less family and childcare responsibilities are preferred in most of the sectors. Caste and community relationship also seemed to affect women workers employment in various industries. It had strong influence on the participation of women in various industries.

Observations based on some survey studies show that there has been a marked tendency for men to move out of the traditional household activities in the recent period, as it became increasingly unremunerative. However, the families as a whole did not abandon those activities and their women were expected to carry them out. For example, in self-cultivation, women performed all kinds of primary processing of agricultural produce like seeds selecting, caring for cows and other animals and manual labour on their own plots. In handloom weaving also the same trend was observed. Women did most of the production work while the marketing and sales were left to men. In

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handloom weaving, the earlier taboos associated with women sitting on
the loom have broken down. Observations from the study of traditional
jari (golden thread) industry of the Hoogly district in Eastern India
showed that men had left this work in search of better paid work in the
powerloom factories that were growing in the nearby areas. The family
looms are being run more often by the women to produce somewhat
inferior goods. The orders and the marketing of these products were
negotiated by the men of the family. Women were expected to run the
domestic looms and perform the work of processing the yarn, besides
their load of housework. Men usually took no part in the processing work
which traditionally has been women's responsibility but, inspite of the
maximum work done by women, sales proceeds of the goods do not come
to women directly as they are handled by men only.9 Similarly, in other
household-based activities too women have been bearing the major load
without having access to the income generated by these activities earned.

More non-household units have also came up in the recent period, in
which both men and women have found employment. But even in these,
women were being offered less remunerative; the continuity of their jobs
too is not certain. Like in weaving, they are given work on the cheaper

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handloom goods where productivity and piece rates are lower.\textsuperscript{10} Same is the case with jari (golden thread) work, where women are given work only for the routine task.\textsuperscript{11} Women have thus being pushed into working more intensively as unpaid family labour or as cheap labour for uncertain work.

The survey report of female workers in the Tiruvanthapuram's garment industries also shows such poor working conditions for women. Here of the total women workers surveyed, 96 per cent were employed as casual workers. The employment of women here varied from firm to firm, depending upon the product that, the firm catered to, and also in accordance with its states in the production chain. Most of the small units, as also the subcontracting units seemed to be fully run by casual female workers; only a small group of permanent workers were employed. The survey reports showed that women were mostly absorbed in units that were catering to the export demands. Such women accounted for about 80 per cent of the total women workers.


**Table 12: Employment Characteristics of Women Workers in Tiruvanthapuram's Garment Industry**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Proportion of workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nature of Employment</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>96.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Market Type</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export</td>
<td>76.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancillary</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of Export Firm</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Exporter</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subcontracting units</td>
<td>43.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job work</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The proportion of female workers always differed in these industries. A large proportion of female workers dominated the subcontracting and the job work units\(^{12}\) (which was about 80 per cent of the women workers). The study revealed that the employment of women was high in the lower rungs of the production chain where uncertainty in production was higher. Distribution of female workers showed that female workers were mostly concentrated in labour-intensive processing works. Hence, the number of women employed in these types of units also depended on the type of processing that each unit specialized in, and the nature of production of these units. In fact most of the job working units and

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subcontracting units undertook only finishing operations which were clearly the most labour-intensive tasks. Thus, the proportion of female workers remained considerably higher in these units.

Women workers have been seen constantly changing their place of work. The distribution of workers across average number of employment days revealed that 68 per cent of the female workers belonged to the category of 101-200 days of employment. The women workers in general were always seen on the move, looking for employment. After completion of contract labour in one factory, they moved to another in search of new employment. Employment has definitely become flexible with the movements in the market demand. But contractual labour has increased to a large extent in the recent years. Most of the time a great number of women workers remained unemployed, or were seen as looking for new job. The newly recruited women workers are often employed as trainees with no or very less remunerations, and in the process they suffer monetary loss.

A survey report of Tiruppur Knitware Units showed that out of the 296 female workers, 35 per cent of the workers received no wages during the


training period, which ranged from 1 week to the extent of 3 years even. These trainees were highly underpaid and in many cases unpaid. The wages also differed among various units in accordance with the kind of job. For example, for jobs, which did not require much education or skill, the training period tended to be low with low wages. On the other hand, for skilled jobs such as cutting and stitching the training period tended to be longer. Besides, since employments in these units were mostly seasonal, women workers were required to change units frequently. Examples from various other sectors like, electronics sector, service sector and processing sectors also showed that women got crowded mostly in the unskilled low wage jobs in India.

The sectors, which were being set up with foreign collaboration, have brought about a major shift in the production process in the recent years. For e.g. the food-processing industries shifted from subsistence farming method of rice, millet, corn and cash crops to the production of strawberries, gerkins, mushroom and flowers. Large coastal tracts in south India have switched from paddy-cultivation to prawn farming.

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This shift has also affected women workers badly, as many of them have lost their job in this process. The present development paradigm based on its faith on liberalisation has brought new burdens for women in India.

A biggest section of unorganised women workers in India were found in the agricultural sector, and they have been adversely affected by the recent policies of the government. The 6 per cent subsidy which farmers used to get has been reduced and the costs of inputs like electricity, water, fertiliser, etc, have been increased.\(^\text{18}\) As a result, the farmers have not been able to sell their products at a reasonable price. Due to this development the rural unemployment has also increased. Even basic facilities available to them earlier were stopped. In the last six years, wages in the rural agricultural sector have come down drastically.\(^\text{19}\) Real wages of both men and women agricultural workers have decreased but those of women have decreased comparatively more. The difference between wages of men and women has also widened.


\(^{19}\) Ricshand, (ed.), *Economic Liberalisation in South Asia* (Delhi : Macmillan India Ltd., 1999), pp. 227-251.
During last 5-6 years, around 2 lakh industries in the small-scale sector where women worked in large number have closed down. More women were forced to accept extreme exploitative and discriminatory working conditions in the name of flexibility in the labour market. At the same time, women became the first victims of retrenchment by the employers. Infact, all this shows that the claims of increase in the work participation rate of women were all baseless.

The export-import liberalisation also made an adverse effect on women's employment in India. In 1990's there was a very big emphasis on export and the government provided many concessions for exports. However, no benefit was provided to the workers who were engaged in export processing zones, (EPZ's), where mostly women were employed. In these export production units, the owners were getting huge benefits, but women workers were still very poorly paid and there were no other benefits provided to them either.

Mostly unmarried women were recruited in the EPZ units. Most women workers here did not have a pleasant experience because of unhealthy working conditions, low pay, no leaves and exposure to the sexual

harassment. Protective legislation was not implemented either in EPZ units. Though, more and more women have been getting the chance of regular employment but on the whole very little have been done to improve the long-term status of women. There has hardly been any positive change visible in the condition of women workers. No protection was provided to the women workers in terms of occupational safety. Their working hours stretched to 9-10 everyday with a lunch breaks of half an hour only. These units remained close for one day in a week but workers were not paid for these off days.

In most of the EPZ units, women were engaged in the works like packaging, assorting, cleaning, cutting, etc., which means that women did the jobs, which did not require any skill. These units are generally large in number and hence they have to compete with other units to get contracts from big companies. Despite this, the work availability is sometimes irregular, as there are days of 'no work' when the unit could not get new contracts. And, since the wages are given on the daily basis, the women lost their wages in "no work" situations.

in these units revealed that there were days when there was no work, and there were days when there was an overload. Overall, the working conditions in these units were generally very poor.

A fieldwork conducted by me in one of the toothbrush-packaging export unit in Delhi revealed that the situation here also was similar as in the above mentioned sectors. In this unit the women were required to sit on the floor or stand and work all day. Besides, as they worked on old machines there was a great danger of injury to these workers. The employers did not bother to replace these old machines as they anyhow got ample of workers even without much investment. An employee from this industry, Parvati Singh, who has been working in this particular unit for last two years, told me, that her job was to fill the tubes. Although the work was done through the machine she needed to be very alert and sit in a specific position and see to it that the tubes were put at the right time. Sometimes she even had to work continuously for 3-4 hours or even more at a stretch. During my visit I also found that while these factories were large in area, the ventilation and light was inadequate. The machinery in which work was done was known to cause accidents and if accidents occurred, the workers were not even compensated for it. Parvati told me that although her employer benefited hugely from the products manufactured in this factory by exporting the goods, yet the working conditions for workers remained same as before; rather conditions have worsened with time.
Another worker Jaya, in the same industry whom I interviewed (toothbrush-packaging unit) told me that she lost two of her fingers while working on a machine. Her job was required to put the brushes in plastic sheets and press them through a machine. These machines were known to cause accidents but the employers took no preventive measures. She was not compensated. On the contrary she was told to change her position, as she could not do the amount of work she did before. Rita, another worker I interviewed told me she had also injured her finger while working in one of such units.26

Inspite of all the hazards most women chose these types of units to work because they could get work easily here and could thus earn some money. But only the women who had another adult or adolescent women at home to take care of their children worked in these industrial units, as no child care facilities were available to these women workers at their workplace.

26 Survey and Interview Conducted in one of the Export/Import Unit of Toothbrush Packaging in Okhla Industrial Area, New Delhi, India, on 10th & 11th November 2001.
Similar situation was prevalent in garment industries like in the CEPZ units, where women constituted a substantial section of the workforce. Here, most of the women were employed as machine operators and helpers. But it is contractors or the agents of big manufacturers and exporters who run most of these garment-producing units, and they prefer employing women workers on contract basis. Hence only 12.5 percentage women were employed here on a permanent basis.\footnote{Nair Ramchandran Kiran and Siddagangamma, "Women Workers Still Exploited and Still Underpaid," \textit{Social Welfare}, vol. 47, no.2. May 2000, pp.3-5.} But, even the workers with permanent status did not have any job security. Absence from duty for a couple of days or any objection expressed in doing overtime work becomes sufficient reason for their dismissal. As the workers here were recruited purely on an informal basis, they did not have any feeling of job security. Though some of the women considered themselves permanent workers, they were not treated in any way different from the casual/contract workers.\footnote{Human Development Report, \textit{Human Development in this Age of Globalisation}, UNDP, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp.25.} This was quite evident from the manner in which they were retrenched from the work. Though under the globalisation and liberalisation provisions the product of these sectors were getting access to the global market, but still women employee's condition remained as bad as before. Interviews of women
workers taken by me in the NOIDA Export Processing Zone revealed about their extremely poor working condition. A women worker Shilpa said, "women workers are exploited here and are always in the fear of loosing the job". She also said, "there is a register that marks the number of times we use toilet even. If we exceed a total of five minutes in all the visits put together, then we are threatened to be retrenched."

Another worker Leela, said, "I lied about my marital status at the time of recruitment. I have a three months old baby. He has been sent off to Kerala to be raised by my parents, as we cannot afford putting him in a private crèche and also can't afford to take leaves." These were the voices of women who were employed in the NOIDA Export Processing Zone (NEPZ is located 24 Km from New Delhi in Uttar Pradesh). The elaborate security system in the fenced area of these NEPZ prevented workers from assembling, which showes the amount of exploitation being meted out to the female workers. Women consisted of 40 per cent of the productive workforce in the NEPZ, which was established in 1985. The 143 units here employ roughly 17,000 workers, of whom women constituted nearly 4,000. The proportion of women workers has steadily increased here between 1994 and 1996; the number of women workers has tripled while that of men has only doubled.29 Women get the preference here as

29 Interview and Survey Conducted in NEPZ Units in Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India, from 18th Dec.-23rd Dec. 2001.
workers because they are generally hard working, easy to control and willing to accept monotony and have nimble fingers. They are also generally easy to be laid off and are less inclined to join unions. Their productivity in these jobs were also much higher than that of men.

The fear of job loss among many women workers were so strong that many of the women in these units even refused to talk and reveal the reality about the working conditions where they work. Women employed in garment, latex and electrical units were mostly migrant women who came from nearby cities or villages to work in these units in town. The majority of these women were semi-skilled or unskilled workers. According to one employee, Babu Ram, of one of such units, "the employers here insist on recruiting unmarried women in the age group of 20 to 30". However, I have found as young as 11 years old girl working there for more than 10 hours a day earning between Rs 700 and Rs 900 a month in such units.30

A woman supervisor, Revti Devi, who works in a garment factory in NEPZ, and whom I interviewed said that in her factory also single women were preferred for employment. Married women were employed only if they had work experience in the similar field. Pregnancy tests were

30 Interview & Survey Conducted of the Workers, in a Garment Unit in NEPZ, Noida, India on 19th Dec. 2001.
conducted on job seekers, and were dismissed if they were found to be pregnant after taking up the job. As there is always a surplus of female workforce, employers never hesitate to terminate the service of women worker. In these units the working conditions are extremely poor. Most of the women I have spoken to said that overtime work was compulsory. They put in at least 12 hours of work almost every day. Compulsory overtime work for three hours is a routine for all of them.31 A young woman, Shanti from Kerala, who works in a leading lamp manufacturing unit in Bhagirath Palace in New Delhi, told me that her work includes checking of the finished lamps, which she performs standing for more than seven hours. Though chairs are provided to them but as one could perform more work standing, she prefers to work like that to get more pay. Leela Amma, another women I interviewed in the same factory, who works as a supervisor said "when the Labour Inspector visits the factory all the women workers, were asked to tell the inspector that none of them are paid less than Rs.1,800 a month, which is definitely not true". She alleged even though the factory does not make contributions to the Provident Fund, deductions are made from worker's salaries.32

One of the garment-exporting units I visited in Okhla Industrial area,

31 Interview and Study conducted in a Garment Factory in Nehru Place, New Delhi, India 21st Nov.2001.

32 Interview and Study conducted in a Lamp-Manufacturing Unit in Bhagirath Palace, New Delhi, India on 26th Nov. 2001.
New Delhi, known as "Neelima Traders", had 600 women and only about 100 men. A commercial executive of the company, Ram Chandra, told me that his company preferred single women like many other companies. He said the reason for employing them is that, "they are more obedient, they work hard and do not get involved in union activity. We prefer women workers in the age group of 18 to 30. Ninety-eight Per cent of the women here fall in this bracket. Married women would ask for maternity leave or go on for leave on some pretext or the other so single women are preferred here."  

Another garment unit I visited in Okhla industrial area, which employed a good number of women, the majority of workers were semi-skilled. According to the company's secretary, Ratan Lal, most of the women workers were in the age group of 20-30. Working conditions in these units were extremely poor. Many women workers fall sick or faint due to overwork and unhealthy working environment. These workers were not provided any housing facility either. They live in nearby slums, as it becomes convenient for them to commute to the work place from there. 

Survey reports of gem units in Jandewalan New Delhi, also showed

33 Interview and Survey Conducted in one of the Garment Export Unit, 'Neelima Traders', in Okhla Industrial Area, New Delhi, India, on 12th Dec. 2001.

34 Fieldwork Conducted in the Garment Unit in Tuglakabad Industrial Area, New Delhi, India on 10th Dec. 2001.
similar hardship faced by women employed in the various units in these area. A worker from Assam Gautam Burman, who works in Delco Industries Pvt. Ltd. said in a conversation with me, that 40 per cent of the workforce consisted of women in these units. The units showed an increasing preference for female hands. The jobs in these gem units were hazardous, since the filing of a jewel or a gem produced lot of dust. But these units were not bothered to provide masks or exhaust fans at work places, thus breathing problems were common here. Nobody could refuse to work overtime and if a woman worker was found to be pregnant then on some or the other pretext she would be dismissed.35

In the last few years the Multinational Companies (MNCs), have also entered the Indian labour market very fast and started working through various methods to get their work done. They also started working through home based services, which were earlier done by few local companies like Lijjat papad, Pickle companies and other such small product companies. The research report showed that MNC's started recruiting women in the home-based work; women were involved in large numbers in such works. Reports showed that women, at home stitched buttons on T-Shirts for the final product of Benetton, or made shoelaces

35 Fieldwork Conducted in Jhandewalan Gems and Jewelry Units, New Delhi, India, on 8th Jan.2000.
at home which were sold with Nike shoes, etc.\textsuperscript{36} Thus, many products of the Multinational companies were produced within the house by women workers, and this practice has become very common among urban women workers, especially in Metros. In this trade women tried to do as much work as they could by working longer hours and taking the help of their children, and sometimes with the help of the entire family. This new trend of work has increased very fast in the last decade and the MNC's are using it as a strategy since it is most convenient for them, because they spend little and benefited more.\textsuperscript{37} All this is a result of the new economic policies and openness of the market. In the last 4-5 years, work participation of women has increased in home-based sectors.

The shift towards globalisation, however has sounded the death knell for various household-based industries which, in the past, gave employment to a large number of people. For example, exports of cotton and cotton yarn have badly hit handloom weavers in many parts of the country.\textsuperscript{38} Similarly, the policy of allowing imports of silk yarn from China had led to a crash in the demand for the domestic silk.\textsuperscript{39} Similar trends were seen in many hitherto decentralized and low-tech industries like

\textsuperscript{38} Ghosh Jayati, "There is an Alternative to the Policies of Liberalisation," \textit{The Voice of the Working Women}, vol. 21, no.3, May-June 20001, pp.9-11.
processed foods. Artisans in traditional industries, whose skills usually were very specific to particular industries, were also hard-hit, in the face of the competition from modern industries sponsored by global, high-tech firms like Pepsi.\(^{40}\) The former had no option but to look for work in some low skilled occupations, with uncertain and poor returns.

Another popular home-based unit which I visited in West Bengal was the 'Murhi Makers' of West Bengal who were facing tremendous pressure from the market for their sustenance. These units were doing good business earlier, but for the last 7-8 years, their condition started deteriorating. Thousands of women in villages of West Bengal were facing grave crisis. Their only livelihood was frying 'Murhi' (Puffed rice, 'Murhi' is made out of rice and prepared only by the women in the villages of W. Bengal.) Women used to fry 'Murhi' for the whole day since midnight. In the evening they used to deliver the 'Murhi' to the Mahajan, got the rice for the next day and the remuneration for their delivered product. They used to get around Rs 100 for frying 80 kgs. of rice. They were doing this job quite happily for the past many decades and followed by many generations. But now, a new attack has come on them due to the technological advancement and globalisation. The Mahajans have installed machines, which could fry 40 bags of 'Murhi' everyday and also

they have started exporting the product to the West. The 'Murhi' looked good, though the hand made 'Murhi' are tastier to eat. As the machine made 'Murhi' has captured the market very fast, the women workers in these villages started loosing their only livelihood. Most of these women's lives and their families sustenance depended on this work only, in these villages in West Bengal feminisation of poverty took place. As such women were compelled to migrate from villages to cities for their survival; they took up jobs of prostitution or domestic help for their living.41 Thus, the traditional households began to loose their viability in the last few years. There was an intense pressure on women of such households to take up some paid work for making up the shortfall in the real income of the households. But, inspite of the fact that the number of women needed work went up, they were disadvantaged by their limited mobility and poor quality marketable skills and, therefore, ended up with very poor paid jobs.

According to government statistics another sector where women's employment has increased in the last decade was part-time employment in the service sector. Women as a domestic service providers or women employed in the big firms as cleaners or housekeepers or employed in the entertainment industry or with media has gone up. All these jobs were

41 Fieldwork Conducted in Gobindopur Village of Bankura and Shalun Village in Bardhwan District (West Bengal, India), on 27th March 2000.
such where women workers were paid measuring their working hours and days. They were not paid regular salary or benefits. They were not eligible to have any specific rights either.\footnote{Fernando Nimalka, "Globalisation", (a Special Issue on Globalisation and Discrimination), \textit{IMADR Yearbook}, vol. 6, 1999, pp. 97-99.}

Thus, all these observations revealed the fact that women workers were more and more victimised and exploited in the present labour market situation in various sectors and have been loosing jobs in all possible occupations. Whenever there were changes in the production process or technological upgradation for the purpose of increasing the productivity it were the women who were the first to be retrenched or replaced.

\textbf{Women Workers & Policies of the Government}

The labour market has shown a stubborn attitude towards women workers with a rapidly growing labour force. The position of the average women worker who perhaps represented the most vulnerable part of it has been deteriorating. Women constituted half of the population of India. Unemployment and joblessness became the general feature among women in the labour market in India. Their participation in the unorganised sector in India was always very high. About 96 percent of
women workers worked in the unorganised sector.\textsuperscript{43} The wages of these women workers were generally very low. Often they were paid less than half of the wage paid to men workers. The Minimum Wage Act never existed in many sectors where women work in large numbers. Even where there was a provision of minimum wages act, it was very often not implemented.\textsuperscript{44} Beside the overall working conditions of these women workers, most of the time, were very pathetic. They were mostly living at the edge of poverty and without any job security.

After the introduction of the economic liberalisation policies by the government, the organised sector started shrinking and the unorganised sector started expanding.\textsuperscript{45} This had a direct effect on employment, particularly on the employment of women workers. Job security, better wages and working conditions, which were hitherto synonymous with the organised sector, vanished fast.\textsuperscript{46} The threat of closures, retrenchments and VRS hanged over the employees like Damocle's sword and the first victims of these policies were mostly women.

The government in its eagerness to keep the fiscal deficit at a low level

\textsuperscript{44} Ghosh Joyati, "Gender Concerns in Macro-Economic Policy", Economic and Political Weekly, April 30, 1994, pp. 2-4.
has reduced the planned expenditure and mobilised resources through selling and cross holding of shares of public sector undertakings. This, in turn, caused resource crunch to the public sector undertakings. They could neither expand nor modernize their industry to be able to face the international competition. As a consequence employment avenues in the public sector have also shrinked. In this process women became the major loosers. With the reduction in the public sector investment in infrastructure facilities, the private sector investment too has declined.\textsuperscript{47} As a result, the rate of growth of the industrial sector has declined and employment opportunities have reduced further. As a result women were pushed out from the organised sector to the unorganised sector. In 1986, out of the total number of unemployed women registered in the employment exchange, 16.92 per-cent were women. This has increased to 23.08 per cent by 1997\textsuperscript{48}, with this trend continuing in the following years.

A hue and cry has been made about the development of villages after introduction of the policies of liberalisation and structural adjustment in India. But nothing was said about agricultural labourers who constituted the bulk of the rural population, among whom women constituted


significant proportion. These policies state that the allocation made to education, health and employment generation programs would be sanctioned through the Panchayats. However, the number of states, which have well functioned panchayats, could be counted on the fingertips. Under such circumstances these programmes hardly benefited the rural people, particularly women in the villages.\(^49\) Thus, the policies and budget proposals of the Government of India have intensified the already prevailing crisis in the economy. Under such economic crisis women were the hardest hit. Women as citizens and as members of working class suffered a lot due to the government policies. The number of women who benefited by the concessions provided to the corporate sectors and to the small investors was also insignificant.

In 1995, illiteracy among adult women in India was 34.5 per-cent, while that among adult males was 62.3 per-cent. In the same year, economic activity among adult women in India was 41 per-cent, while that of men was 85 per-cent.\(^50\) Education is one of the most important means to increase women's knowledge, skills and self-confidence and to improve their opportunities, and this is the task of the States and the Government. But this task has never been taken care of. Huge difference

\(^{49}\) Azhar Roomana, Female Employment in India (Delhi: Independent Publishing Company), 2000, pp. 54-58.

in literacy rates between women and men indicated that women have not been given ample opportunity to prepare themselves to serve the country at par with their male counterparts. One change to which the Indian Government has shown its commitment has been making significant cuts in public expenditure. At the first go, the government has declared its intention to cut down on the expansion of the public sector workforce, though till recently, it had been very tardy in carrying out these changes.\textsuperscript{51} During the 1980s, women had been some of the main beneficiaries of the fast expansion of public activities, particularly in the rural sector. Therefore, in the period from 1983 to 1993, there was relatively faster increase in the workforce participation rates of rural women with at least middle-level school education (this increase was due to the expansion of several health and rural welfare services in the public sector). The increase was mainly in what they have called in modern white-collar jobs, including professional, technical as well as administrative and related work.\textsuperscript{52} However, lately it was declared that due to the additional public funds required for these services it has become difficult to absorb more educated women. Thus, the rates of unemployment among educated women in India have also always been


high, especially for women with middle-level education. In urban areas, women's employment in modern white-collar jobs has grown, and this was particularly reflected in the fast rise in the workforce participation rates of women degree holders.\textsuperscript{53} This was possible due to the expansion of several industries like financial and banking services, computer-related sectors, Information Technology and entertainment in the private sector and, therefore, it has proved to be more robust.\textsuperscript{54} Nevertheless, the private sectors have also been trying to reduce their permanent workforce, particularly in the unskilled and semi-skilled categories in order to reduce their committed costs.

In the technical and vocational training also women were not allowed to get training in many areas. It was said that women were unfit to do hard work and hence, it was useless to provide training facilities for them. By denial of training they were deprived of jobs in most of the manufacturing industries in the organised sector. In other countries, women successfully operate milling machines, crane spinning machines, public bus and tram, control traffic without any assistance of male counterpart. However in the Indian context women were considered unfit

\textsuperscript{54} Menon Sindhu, "Work at Night... in the Day Intensification of Women's Labour", \textit{Labour File}, Published by Information & Future Trust, vol. 5, no. 5, May 1999, pp. 9-11.
for all these jobs.\textsuperscript{55}

In India, a majority of women were engaged in low paid or unpaid occupations like agriculture, family enterprises and the informal sector. Women had little possibility for savings, credit or investment, and very limited security.\textsuperscript{56} Although their work in these areas was of tremendous importance for the well being of families, communities and nations, but it was poorly measured in official statistics. Women always worked with lower status and pay than men in almost all the jobs and occupations.

Introduction of technology in the unorganised sector and import liberalisation has thrown millions of workers in the unorganised sector out of job. The large majority of these workers were women.\textsuperscript{57} Though technological development has opened up opportunities in the organised sectors, but to get an entry in these areas a specific education and training is required, which is lacking drastically among women workers. The number of women workers in the organised sector also decreased day by day. One of the main reasons of this was due to the unemployment among youth. Many elderly women were being forced to


give up their jobs in favour of their sons. For e.g. in the reputed Indian companies like the BCCL, ECCL, CCL (all public sector coal companies), the management constantly persuaded the women employees to give up their jobs for their sons and son-in- laws or to take up a 'golden handshake'. In these organisations, if any male worker died, the management was reluctant to give his widow a job, but was ready to pay Rs.2000/- per month. Some unions have even signed a settlement with the management by which only a male dependent of a worker who dies would be given a job; the widow would only get financial compensation. In BCCL alone, 183 women gave up their jobs in favour of their sons in the year 2000.58

Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS), was another government policy that was in reality a new terminology of retirement, but with a difference, i.e. some good amount of money was being given to the outgoing employees for the future. When this scheme was launched in 1991, it did not attract much attention of people but as the time passed by, people started feeling more insecure and unsafe about it. This was true with every public sector and in the banking industry too. Most of the Indian banks have already sent thousands of their employees to home through this scheme. In the SBI alone, 33000 out of a total 2.30 lakh employee

have opted to avail of the scheme. The situation was the same in other banks also.

Women employees were frequently pressurised to take up VRS. The argument went thus: "you are so lucky to have been offered VRS. You would get so much money, now you would have an opportunity to stay back at home and look after your children and the family and fulfill your responsibilities towards them properly. They were denied of your attention all these days because of your job." As women's responsibility was considered mainly to look after the family and children, the VRS was projected as an opportunity for them to fulfil this responsibility effectively. The idea was that women shouldn't have any other ambition or objective. Her only reason to work should be to earn some extra money for the family and through VRS she was getting some money so she should stay back at home. This pressure on women at times became unbearable. One women employee in the public sector undertaking in Bangalore attempted to hang herself in the factory, unable to withstand the pressure of voluntary retirement (her friends of-course rescued her). For women of 35-40 years of age, staying away from the family becomes a problem because of their tight family bondage and children's


education. The organisations generally take advantage of this, and transfer the women employees who are reluctant to accept VRS, to distant places.\footnote{There is a Way Out, The Voice of the Working Women, vol. 20, no. 5, Sept. Oct. 2000, pp.9-10.} As such when they have to choose between VRS and transfer, they readily choose the former.

Women employees who have worked for 10-15 years in bank or in any other public sector command certain respect in the community and also have self-confidence. But all this has gone with VRS. As expressed by one of my interviewee, Mrs Manjula Nath an ex-employee of 'State Bank of India', "I not only lost my job but also my identity in the society, even in my house."\footnote{Interview taken by me of an Ex-SBI Employee, Ms. Manjula Nath on 23rd October 2000.} These types of government policies have caused lot of mental tension for women employees and have had an adverse effect on family relations. The concept of VRS came with the process of liberalisation and new economic policies. The scheme lured the employees, mainly women employees with the promise of getting lump sum money. But in reality VRS showed them an exit "gate" from the labour market in the present condition of cutthroat competition, thus, depriving them of their right to work and live with economic-independence and self-respect. Overall, the policies of the government have been instrumental in increasing the discrimination, exploitation and uncertainty at the labour market for women.
**Job Segregation & Wage Discrimination**

Gender-based segregation in occupations is one of the prominent and endurable aspects of labour market in India. The concentration of men in higher level jobs while women occupy lower ones, both within and between occupations and industries, is a common feature. What is also typical is that in the segregated labour markets, women get clustered in fewer occupations than men do.\(^6\) Thus, job segregation and women's lower level of pay presents a clear picture of inequality. This type of segregation also confirms the accepted fact by the society, that woman still are considered to be first responsible for reproduction and family. If they work, they become only second earners or contributors of an additional income. This in a way legitimizes their low wage and disadvantages they face in moving up in the labour market. Job segregation, wage discrimination in all the sectors has increased within the last decade.\(^6\) Women's access to employment, restrictions and segmentation exists in almost all the sectors. Women are put in most uncertain and low paid conditions of work. Casualisation of work also became common in employment pattern practiced in the present labour

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Women in Indian labour market have a long history of losing their hold on their occupations whenever there is a change in the production methods. The reasons behind these were also fairly repetitive. Women were considered unfit to work with fast moving, power driven and complicated machines, supposedly because of their "weak physique" and "poor intellect". Actually, there exists a general assumption that women are supplementary earners of their families and, therefore, they do not really need or deserve the higher wage rates. The employers who are generally males and the male dominated trade unions subscribe to this myth, which shows that there was a marked bias against women on the part of those who determine the demand for labour.

Majorities of women are seen concentrated in the occupations at the bottom ranks of the occupational hierarchy. This phenomenon has always been present in organised as well as unorganised sector employment. Even at the professional level, women tend to cluster in low-paid stereotyped occupations, such as secretarial work, nursing and teaching (mainly in nursery and primary schools). An educational gap between men and women in India also plays a significant role in

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hampering the upward mobility for women workers.\textsuperscript{66} Many parents in India, even today, are reluctant to invest on their daughter's education as compared to their son's, as there is a believe that women in the end would have to take over household responsibilities. To an extent, the male-female earnings and mobility gap is, therefore, explainable by women's inferior years and quality of education. In India there exist multi-dimensional gender inequalities at different levels, which affected women's occupational performance and bargaining power in the labour markets.

Liberalisation has affected female concentration in most occupations, except clerical and sales, and has confined them to low paid and low skills occupations, which also perpetuated their segmentation.\textsuperscript{67} For example in the Garment industry, men workers were employed in the higher category tasks such as supervisors and cutters on time-rate wages, where-as women workers were absorbed in the low category, low paying jobs on piece-rate wages. For example, in the CEPZ units, the production process consisted of a large number of different activities, (like, checking of raw materials, pattern making, cutting, stitching, embroidery, padding, buttoning, labeling, thread cutting, final checking,


ironing, packing and selling), and each activity was entrusted with a specific group of workers. Women are employed here only as machine operators (i.e. in the task of stitching) and they have to work continuously for several hours without rest. It is only after assessing their productivity, that the employers fix their wage rate. In the assembly line units too, similar type of division of labour is practiced; men are employed exclusively in the cutting and supervising section while women are appointed as operators and helpers, which are categorized as low category jobs. 68

Table 13: Nature of Work of the Respondents in Different Types of Garment Units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Units</th>
<th>CEPZ</th>
<th>ASSEMBLY</th>
<th>REGISTERED</th>
<th>UNREGISTERED</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of work</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Higher Category</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutting</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>66.6</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checking</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub Total</td>
<td>64.0</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Lower Category</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stitching</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>55.1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embroidery</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ironing</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buttoning/Labeling</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Packing</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub Total</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>83.2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>86.1</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. All Categories</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>34.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Women workers in India also became victims of gender-based wage discrimination along with the job segregation. And the difference widened after the introduction of the liberalization policies. The most highly educated women were not the least discriminated either. Wage discrimination was prevalent in all the sectors of the labour market. This wage disparity between men and women with equal skills, efforts and responsibility under similar working conditions was evident of the severe gender discrimination in the industries. For the same type and amount of work, the females received only 70 per cent of the males earning. The available data from the garment Industry clearly shows that women workers were paid lower wages than men for the same task performed. For example, in the cutting section and assembly line units men were paid Rs. 2,000-Rs. 2,400 while women were paid Rs 1,500-Rs. 1,800 per month. In the checking and supervising sections, the payment for the men varied between Rs.1,300-Rs.1,600 while for the women it rated between Rs. 1,000-Rs.1, 200 per month.

Discrimination by gender in the mode of payment was common in every sector, but it was quite severe in garment industries. While 65 per cent of men got time-rate payment and non-wage benefit, only 30 per cent of

women got such benefits. Differences also existed in the mode of increment and assignment of the overtime work. Overtime work was assigned more to women. For example, 27 per cent of women did overtime work for 2-4 hrs, including Sundays, whereas men were not forced for the overtime work as they did not like to work on Sundays; they preferred working overtime for more than two hours on working days.71 Though women workers were quite conscious of the discrimination meted out to them but they tolerated it because of the problems of mobility and lack of alternative employment opportunities.

Women were mostly employed on contract basis in an insecure working condition. They work for longer hours, almost 12 hours a day, particularly in the EPZ units. Although the EPZ units' products commanded wide market both within and outside the country, these workers were not in any way profited. They were not paid any extra rate for overtime work, which was imposed on them as a daily routine.72 Difference in wage payments was also practiced here even for the same work done by women as men.

It became evident from the survey report of EPZ units that about 83 per cent of women workers were receiving wages less than or equal to Rs.50 per day in the EPZ units. For the skilled category the average wage rate varied between Rs.40 to Rs.100, and only in few cases festival allowances and bonuses were given to the women workers. The condition of women workers worsened by the fact that woman workers were mostly concentrated in the subcontracting units in less skilled and less paid processes.

**Diagram-I**

**PYRAMID EFFECT OF WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT**

Note: It works for management and wages too.

A big proportion of women workers in these units belonged to the age group of 15-20, i.e. the adolescent-age category. They were preferred by the employers mainly because they had less domestic responsibilities as compared to married women. The decline in the proportion of workers in
the age group 21-25 was mainly because of the withdrawal of female workers from the labour market after marriage. However, it was found that after a short span of 5-10 years of marriage and child bearing, most women returned to labour market, while only a few kept out of it.\textsuperscript{73} However, job-availability for these workers was very limited since the employers prefer to employ unmarried girls.

The gender composition of workers also differed among various industries. The employment of female labours varied across firms depending upon the firm's position and status. A large proportion of female workers dominated in the small and home-based units. The number of women employed also depended on the type of work that each firm handled and the nature of their production. Nevertheless, in every industry employment of women was found to be high in the lower categories, but without any certainty. Most of the workers in these sectors were casual or temporary workers who kept on moving from one place to another.

Due to the discrimination, women's employment opportunities, consequently, became limited as employers had a clear preference for men in providing jobs. Limited accesses for women in male-dominated occupations and positions, be it at the pre-entry or within the institution,
was based on stereotyped decisions rather than on rational choice.\textsuperscript{74} As a consequence, there were several non-labour market factors too, which crucially influenced the recruitment process and career chances even after entering the labour market.

The wages of women workers in different industries have been lower than those of men, partly due to the long standing traditions, social customs and pre-conceived notions that women were inferior to male workmen in respect to their average turnout, and partly due to their inexperience and inferior vocational training. This in turn, reduced the demand for female labour in the employment market. Though the Constitution of India clearly states, "equal pay for equal work for both men and women," this provisions, however, has not been fully implemented. Earnings of women workers were lower on the whole as they received less vocational training than men and had less work experience. As a result they were disproportionately bunched in the low paid occupations. The discrimination was so much rampant that they were paid lower wages even in those jobs where they were employed side by side with men on identical jobs.

The wages paid to women were not always determined not always by economic, education or a skill criterion, but was also the result of the

cultural attitudes and practices, and power structure in the society. Wage discrimination was also due to the fact that there was a commonly accepted notion that men were in general more efficient than women, and since women's income were considered only as a supplementary earning because men were considered as principal earners.\textsuperscript{75} Whatever might be the reasons, such practices of wage discrimination have discouraged the participation of women workers in various activities.

In NEPZ units, it was found that women workers were made to signe for one figure, but the amount paid was different. Women were paid single overtime rates when they were entitled to double overtime. Most of the women workers in NEPZ units did not even possess cards that entitled them to the benefits under the Employees State Insurance (ESI) scheme. As a result, many women were unable to avail themselves of maternity and other health benefits. Some of the units did not even make regular contributions towards Provident Fund or bonuses etc.\textsuperscript{76}

Another clear example of wage discrimination was observed in the survey report conducted by NLI of "Hair processing Industry in Eluru districts in Andhra pradesh". Here, 50 big and small companies were engaged in this trade. On the whole around 2500 workers were engaged in these


\textsuperscript{76} Study Conducted by me in NEPZ Units in Uttar Pradesh, India from 18\textsuperscript{th} Dec.-23\textsuperscript{rd} Dec. 2001.
works out of which around 2000 were women workers. Women workers performed around 10-11 hrs duty per day (the 8hrs. workday were not implemented here). The work included untangling and combing of the hair and to remove the foreign bodies like dust, etc. from the hair. Men performed only the loading and unloading activities. Though women were more in number, there was no uniformity in wages paid to men and women. Women workers were paid Rs. 25/- to Rs. 50/- per day, while men were paid Rs. 40/- to Rs.60/- per day. PF, ESI or maternity benefits were also unheard of in these units. Only the women workers who had been working for more than 5 years received festival allowance of Rs. 200/- while those employed for lesser periods received Rs.100/- only. But this depended upon the whims and fancies of the management. 77

The recent trends in the position of women labour in general have not been very encouraging, nor could these signs be ignored as irrelevant in the changed perspectives. Post-reform period showed no exception to this pattern. Discrimination against women in India, in continuation of the long history of their marginalisation at the labour market, continued in the modern economy too. Their marginalisation in respect to wage and job is very much prevalent.

Feminisation of Work

This is another common feature of employment trends in India and the post-reform labour market, inspite of various changes, adopted the tendencies, which were seen moving more towards the “feminisation of work”. Over the past decades, in India, the new open economic policies have led to a spurt in women’s industrial employment. So much so that feminization of the workforce in various sectors has come to be accepted as a reliable indicator of the level of a country’s economic development. This hypothesis rested on the fact that woman in general were seen as more flexible in their approach to the labour market. 78 They were not only more docile and easy to discipline into working at high pressures in repetitive tasks but also in precision-demanding jobs. They were also, in general, observed as willing to put up with arbitrary adjustment in working conditions that the employers considered necessary for the unit to survive in the fiercely competitive global markets. 79

The other sense in which the term “feminisation” has been used referred to the relatively rapid growth of women-type of jobs. Usually in India, the gender-based specialisation was recognized by the tasks within each industry or productive activity. Women, in all likelihood, were confined to

non-mechanised rather than mechanised jobs. This prevented their participation in industries like electricity, gas or basic metals and metal-based fabricating industries. Over the time, there has also been a trend towards feminisation of employment in agriculture. Like in Kerala, where, men of other states migrated to replace local women in agricultural activities. Many such instances were also available from other states.

In urban areas, the tendency of trying to fit the experience of Indian women into the global pattern of post-SAP developments led to very serious threat, which was faced by the entire women labour force of India. Due to the lack of upward mobility in all the sectors of employment the concentration of women workers always remained at the lower level, both in the service sectors, as well as in the manufacturing sectors. Their upward mobility to managerial levels was also very restricted. There existed a very strong under-current of discrimination in giving jobs of comparatively greater importance to women. There were two reasons for this: first, the household responsibilities of women

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deterred them from total dedication to their jobs, and secondly, partly employer's were reluctant in giving them greater responsibility. However, the other side of the picture was that adequate structure of support to liberate women from their household chores, including childcare was never available, which greatly affected their efficiency. Besides, in corporate sectors, the prevalence of social inhibitions and prejudices also deprived of upward movement.

Employers in India mostly shared the patriarchal attitudes that considered men as the primary earners. If male workers were available they were more acceptable than women, even if women had been working on the similar type of jobs for longer time. Upward mobility seemed to be limited and restricted due to the age factor, which also had an important bearing on the promotion of the women workers. Horizontal mobility was a common phenomenon for women workers in any industry. Upward mobility was attained only through horizontal shifting across units. After a particular age, job mobility seemed to have moved in the downward direction, for the women workers, which was mainly the low skilled and low paid category.

84 Burra Neera, "Cultural Stereotypes and Household Behaviour: Girl Child Labour in India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 36, nos. 5-6, Feb. 3-10, 2001, pp. 481-487.
The overall pattern of women's employment in India showed that it has responded very little to most of the developments that have taken place in the country. The promotional effort to improve their prospects in the labour market and to ensure them equality of opportunity and treatment has not been provided to them. Rather the labour market became more gender-biased in the last decade.

Table 14: Female Labour Force Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Female workers as % of female population</th>
<th>Male workers as % of male population</th>
<th>Population ratio of females per 1000 males</th>
<th>Female workers as per 1000 male workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>61.11</td>
<td>972</td>
<td>504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>33.37</td>
<td>61.90</td>
<td>964</td>
<td>525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>32.67</td>
<td>60.52</td>
<td>955</td>
<td>516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>27.63</td>
<td>58.27</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>23.31</td>
<td>54.04</td>
<td>946</td>
<td>408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>27.93</td>
<td>57.12</td>
<td>941</td>
<td>460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>14.22</td>
<td>52.75</td>
<td>930</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>19.67</td>
<td>52.62</td>
<td>934</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>22.27</td>
<td>51.61</td>
<td>927</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Exploitation and Sexual Harassment:

Exploitation and sexual harassment at the work place is also a common feature at the labour market in India. The women workers face these problems almost in their everyday working life in all professions, sometimes from their superiors and sometimes even from their peers and subordinates. As women in the traditional Indian society has always had a lower status than men. It has been difficult for men to accept women as equal to them in capacity and skill. As such, the exploitative and discriminative attitudes were very much prevalent in Indian labour market condition.

Women workers in India never got the treatment equal to that shown to men workers. Most of the women workers, whether they were in the white-collar jobs or in the blue-collar jobs, did not receive adequate respect or co-operation from their male counterparts or superiors. According to a recent study, a majority of working women, except in the teaching professions, were the victims of severe sexual harassment and exploitation. Theoretically, a women worker in a work place is equal to any male worker in an identical position as regard to the powers and privileges. But in actual practice, the prevailing notions about women get blurred, because generally, the society considered women an inferior to men. Her position in the work place too is influenced by these prejudices,
no matter what her legal rights and actual capabilities were. Though, the exploitative attitude on the basis of sex is gradually reducing since women have started attaining higher positions in employment, nevertheless, it still exists.

The feeling that woman are inferior and, as such, are not capable of performing their jobs as efficiently as men, has created further problems for women holding superior positions. For, example they find it difficult to enforce discipline, since the very idea of obedience to women disappoints men. Most of the time women workers at the work place face neglecting attitude and over-work or indications of hostility, contempt or even indifference and avoidance towards them by men. Most of the time women workers working in the private companies told me in an oral conversation that they do not have job satisfaction from the duties they perform. The main reason they mentioned for this was lack of facilities and congenial environment for performing their duties effectively.

The survey conducted by me in fisheries in Digha, in West Bengal, here fishing industries showed the extent of exploitation and harassment

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suffered by women workers. A women worker named Lokkhi Mandal who works in the 'Deepak Fisheries Ltd.' as a grader told me that most of the workers here were women, and all of them faced mental and physical torture by their male supervisors. Female employees here were not allowed to leave the factory premise without permission. They lived in the factory premises only and if they needed to go out, gate passes were issued to them. Besides, they could leave only on grounds of medical treatment or to visit temples. The place where women workers lived were inadequately ventilated and poorly illuminated. In most cases only one exit was provided. The place for cooking and store were extremely unsatisfactory and overcrowding was very common in these residential premises. Overall the living conditions were inhuman. Here, female employees worked from 9.00 a.m. onwards till beyond 7.00 p.m. Lokkhi Mandal told me she was promised a monthly salary of Rs. 1300/- with free accommodation and food. In reality, however, she was paid only Rs. 1100/- and, moreover, she was charged for food and other facilities from her salary. As a result she received just Rs. 200 to 300 at the end of every month. She also said that there were also several cases where women workers were sacked after six months of work without being paid any money.88

88 Fieldwork and Interview Conducted in 'Deepak Fisheries', Digha, (West Bengal), on 10th April 2000.
The survey and interview conducted by me in another such factory 'Kokon Fisheries' in Junput, (West Bengal) also revealed a similar picture. Here also workers revealed similar situations. When interviewed, some of the women workers stated that they were promised the job of packers but after joining they started working as peelers and out of the monthly wage of Rs.1450/- the amount of Rs 550/- was deducted towards food charges, even though the food provided was not worth the high charges made. As women workers resided within the factory premises only, they were woken up everyday at 4 o'clock in the morning and they worked from 5 a.m. till 10.00 p.m. If any worker couldn't work for a day due to some reason, an amount of Rs. 55/- was deducted from her salary. Four basins of fish were given to each worker for peeling every day. If they are unable to complete the allotted work then they were marked absent for that day. Even women who had been working there for 5 to 9 years, did not receive any additional benefits apart from salary.89

89 Survey and Interviews Conducted in 'Khokon Fisheries', Junput (West Bengal), on 9th April 2000.
The women workers who make beedies from the tendu leaves in Bhatar Village, (Burdwan district, West Bengal) also revealed the similar situation during my interview with them. Some workers here told me that the contractors generally supplied them tendu leaves of inferior quality and demanded a minimum 1000 beedies from those leaves. The male contractors frequently harassed these illiterate women workers and exploited them in various ways. These workers received very little for such tiring job but still they worked because they badly needed this little income for their survival.90

Most of the women workers who work in such small-scale units, suffer, severe harassment and exploitation but still they continue to work because having migrated from nearby villages or cities, they were badly in need of money for themselves as well as for their families. These workers have very less choice and hence continue to work under extremely poor conditions. Even women, who work in offices and perform white-collar jobs beyond their traditional role, face similar problems. In an IT Company in Delhi known as 'Roneetec Enterprises', I interviewed a woman employee named Nita Rajora who worked in this organisation as

90 Fieldwork Conducted on Beedi-makers, Bhatar Village, Burdwan District (W. B.), on 25th March 2000.
Public Relation Officer. She said, she had a considerable job responsibility and worked under the formal condition of complete equality with men. Her job required mutual adjustment with her male colleagues but she never received necessary co-operation and authoritative power for taking individual decision required for performing her job efficiently.91

Though in recent years women have done comparatively well in jobs relating to administrative ones but, even in these positions they have encountered various difficulties related to discrimination and exploitation, and have faced prejudices against their chances of success in their career or within their job. They have to cope with continuous suppression at the work place. As men are not prepared to accept women even as equal, let alone as superior, they do not cherish working under women or taking orders from them. Women are seen treated differently in the labour market and there exists a strong relationship between their traditional social status with the employment status.

**Double Burden**

It has often been cited that household work constrained or limited the type of work that women could take up or combine with domestic work.

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91 Interview of a Women Employee in a Private Company, 'Roneetec Enterprises,' Safdurjung Development Area, New Delhi, India, on 12th Jan. 2002.
It has also been found that women who were married found it increasingly difficult to combine domestic work and outside work. Besides, in the case of women, despite their heavier contribution to productive labour, the domestic responsibilities remained with women only. Thus, the fact remains that child and family responsibilities did influence women's access to employment, even though the number and age of children did not count.92

As for to the autonomy and decision making in the family and its link to productive employment, it was based on age. In the case of young workers who were unmarried, the decision-making rested with the household head. Unmarried women contributed their entire income to their parents. The spending of the income too was reported to be largely controlled by the household head. Marriage was generally seen as a break in the labour market participation by most of the women workers. Around 60 per cent of the unmarried workers surveyed by NLI in various industries were, in general, short term workers and in most cases discontinued their work after marriage.

As regards the control over the income of the women workers, in 80 per cent cases it were the fathers of unmarried workers, and the husbands of

the married workers. The study showed that married women workers had comparatively higher autonomy in income control as compared to unmarried girls.93

Table 15: Income Control

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member Who Controls Income Of Women Workers</th>
<th>Proportion Of Workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FATHER</td>
<td>41.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HUSBAND</td>
<td>39.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOTHER</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SELF</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHERS</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Survey data of NLI, Noida, India, 2000.*

As far as spending of income earned under different heads was concerned a large proportion of the income of the women workers was spent on food and clothing for the family members. Debt repayment also constituted an important spending.94 The pattern of spending revealed


the conditions under which women were forced to join the labour market.

Indian women have always worked to play a vital role in the economic activity of the household, although they as workers, most of the time, have been regarded as dependent adjuncts of their husbands, partners or closest male kin. But, in addition to their participation in the labour market, they were always required to maintain household responsibilities too. Women maintained the dual responsibilities of both "reproductive" and "productive". Over the last decade women in India increasingly have taken up the paid work outside the home to augment personal and family income over and above their traditional family role.

**Trade Union Participation**

The scenario of Indian women workers participation in the union was generally very gloomy in the Indian labour market. It was always tougher for women than men to engage themselves in the trade union activities. Of the total women workers only less than 5 per cent were members of the trade union. Women workers who were members of the union also played only a passive role. Due to more and more casualisation and fragmentation of the workforce in the industries, the trade unions were finding it difficult to sustain the sense of collectivity and solidarity among the workers. Union activities were limited in units where mostly women workers were employed. The reasons cited by women workers for not
joining the union varied. The oft-cited reason was the lack of time. Also their double burden of work and family prevented them from taking interest in the union activities. Opposition from the employers side was also one of the reasons. Besides, resistance from family members is also a reason for not joining the union. As there is a general perception that trade union activities were men's affair only, less women workers were involved in these activities. Another important reason given by women for not joining the union was their temporary nature of employment.95 Women workers were reluctant to join trade unions. Trade unions also faced difficulty in organising women workers because of the casual nature of their work.

The female workers were mostly employed in industries with high degree of uncertainty, and this supported the fact that female workers were less involved in trade unionism.96 Out of the 300 workers interviewed during the field survey by NLI in various export-oriented industries, only 4 female workers have participated in the union and only one factory-level strike was observed in these units. Apparently, most of the employers of these export-oriented units were of the view that since a large proportion of the work-force were females in these units, the


control and management of labour was comparatively less problematic for them.97

Women workers in general were largely unaware of the various labour legislation's, such as minimum wage, ESI and other welfare provisions, and therefore, they were deprived of these facilities. They were most of the time not provided even those facilities, which were included under their working rights.98 Though the membership and participation in the trade union possessed greater significance for the workers, as the trade unions could bring fundamental shift in the working conditions by their approach and could also provide wide arena for the workers activities and bring more confidence within the workers, yet the women workers in general are averse to the union activities and hesitate to participate in it. Women workers' attitude is not very favorable towards strikes and political actions for the fulfillment of their demands from the employer. Very few women workers favour this kind of unionism. Women are generally peace-loving, though union is a powerful factor to achieve the job security but still women in general do not prefer to go to the trade unions to get their grievances redressed. The general feelings about the trade union among women workers are that they are not meant for

97 Varma, A.P., Rehman, M.M., Chauhan, S. Poonam, Women Labour in India (Noida, V.V.Giri National Labour Institute, 1996), pp. 84-96.

female workers. Though, of late, few women, both white-collar and blue-collar workers, have come forward and participated in the strikes and in demonstrations and some of them even courted arrests even and resorted to picketing to press their demands, but still, more or less they remained as the passive supporters.

**Conclusion**

The present study reveals that women in a country like India are vital and productive workers, engaged in diverse tasks despite their statistical absence in the measures of labour force participation. Studies have revealed that in India many households were depended only on the earnings of women. The recognition and improvement of the economic role and contribution of women as providers and sustainers of families would go a long way in reducing poverty in India. Women fulfilled the major responsibility for domestic chores regardless of their labour force participation. When domestic work, home-based economic work and labour outside the home were combined, women were seen as working for longer hours than men, particularly in poor households.

The relatively low female labour force participation rates in India could be explained by the fact that women’s economic activities are generally under-remunerated. The traditional cultural norms against women’s labour force participation, and the frequently held view that the activities
engaged in by women were economically unproductive, have led to under-remuneration of women's work in India. The Indian government was also seen involved in practicing the ongoing trend of discrimination and underpaying of women labours. Another factor that greatly effected women's labour in India has been their low levels of literacy, which restricted them opportunities for gainful employment.

A vast majority of the Indian rural women worked on their family farms as unpaid workers. Most of the land they farmed were either owned or rented by men in the family. Thus, their lack of land ownership tended to decrease the importance of their economic contribution in the agricultural activity too. The exploitation of women in the home-based sector was another form of female seclusion in India, and the belief that home-based work allowed women to earn money without venturing out of their homes actually did not provide any benefit to women workers. Such gender-biased ideology has benefited many exporters and traders in the recent past who were mostly men.

In India, even the decision of joining the labour market in most cases were usually not taken by the individual women worker, but depended largely on the decision of the household heads. The household heads, who are mostly the male members of the family not only decide about the women's entry to the labour market, but they also play direct or indirect
role in choosing from different categories of work to be taken up by women.

The observation of my study is that in the formal labour market in India women have been exploited in diverse ways, mainly through labour market segmentation, that resulted in limited and low-paying employment opportunities for women. Certain dimensions of the economic system, the government policies in particular, and the nature of the informal sector have affected women's employment. Observations show that many large industries resorted to contracting practices, employing a sizeable women workforce as casual workers who remained in the informal sector. Thus, many large industries have benefited hugely by hiring women labour as casual workers, thereby denying them the benefits of the regular employees. Women workers in the informal sector have been particularly vulnerable to this type of inherent exploitative situation.

The multinational corporate world, which entered the Indian labour market in the recent past, has also been biased vis-a-vis the employment of women. The unmarried women were seen as unstable as they show tendencies to discontinue their jobs after marriage and the subsequently family responsibilities. On the other hand many married women were not
provided jobs as employers regarded them as having greater priority to their families.

Women in the Indian labour market were rarely considered for the corporate management jobs as they were thought to be incapable of making tough decisions or taking career responsibilities. Women’s occupation was regarded as only something to fall back upon, and a second source of income for a family. They were generally supposed to be not in need of a career, but only of a job. Employer’s always discriminated in hiring women in jobs with a high pay. Labour laws which mandated that women should not work night shifts and must be granted maternity leave were also used as convenient excuses to screen out potential women workers by the employers.

The NSS estimates of 1998 showed that most males were employed in relatively stable jobs. Between 51 to 53 per cent of males were employed in principal status jobs and only 1.3 per cent to 1.9 per cent in subsidiary status, whereas a significant proportion of females who were employed had unstable jobs. Only 20.6 per cent to 21.8 per cent of females were employed in positions of principal status, and about 7 per cent to 8 per cent in subsidiary status.99

The NSS 1993-94 household survey reports showed that 29 per cent of rural and 42 percent of urban women were engaged only in household works. Subsequently, the reports also showed that 58 per cent of women in rural areas and 14 per cent in urban areas were actually maintaining kitchen gardens, household poultry, collecting firewood, husking paddy, grinding food-grains, preserving meat, preparing gur (sweet), making baskets, etc.; in other words they were engaged in economic activities.\textsuperscript{100}

Most of the work women performed in general remained unrecognized, leave alone being rewarded with suitable remuneration. It has been observed that woman as "workers" vastly undercounted in the subsequent censuses. This was particularly true of non-wage work, work carried in and around the home, i.e. part of so-called "socially productive labour". This was also true for all kinds of unorganised sector labour. Women's work was considered more "invisible". Rather, it has been made invisible by the census and statistical studies of work force. The impact of discrimination at the labour market has affected women's status in the society. It affected their opportunities in public life and exposed the gender-blindness of the States' development policies. Most women spend several hours doing work for which they could never expect to receive

\textsuperscript{100}Sundaram, K., "Employment-Unemployment Situation in the Nineties: Some Results from NSS 55\textsuperscript{th} Round Survey," "Economic and Political Weekly", vol. 36, no.11, March 17, 2001, pp. 931-939.
any payment. A standard feature of inter-family division of work in India was that woman's responsibility for the entire housework was considered as non-negotiable. Even when entrusted with additional tasks outside the household, she was not allowed to abrogate her responsibility for the former.

Women's overall position in society and in the economy depended on the degree of autonomy that they enjoyed over their own lives. Indian women were seen mostly deprived of by the traditions of patriarchy even in the labour market. In their most rigid form, these traditions aimed to enforce complete control over the entire reproductive and productive labour of women. As such, one could say that in the Indian patriarchal ideology, women were regarded more as a highly flexible resource of the household rather than as its full-fledged members. Patriarchal authorities in India necessarily wanted to confine women to the limited private space of the household. But, they also strive to ensure that woman's action in the private or public domains are tailored to fit in with the designs and needs of the former.

In the patriarchal system in India, the built-in bias is observed within the household, which has been against investing time and resources for increasing the productivity of women's labour. Till the time the average Indian women attains the age when she can join the job market, she
concentrates on building up her marriage-oriented skills. In the process, she does not get the chance to develop market-oriented skills; rather these get progressively eroded. However, over the time, society's perceptions about the desirable marriage-specific skills have also altered. In the recent years, a new trend has developed which shows growing convergence of the marriage-specific and market-specific skills among women. For example, urban middle classes in India have now developed a preference for brides with good earning capacity. Nonetheless, because of the unequal sharing of the household work in married life, the market-specific skills of wives tend to get degraded while those of the husbands get polished. Households in India strongly induced women to closely identify themselves and their well being with their marital families. Neither parental families nor the society at large provided them with viable, socially approved options outside the latter. This close identification of patriarchal authorities within the household have the power not only to impose on women their preferred pattern of the sexual division of labour, but also to change its content and form whenever necessary.

Thus, the observation of my study which is based on surveys, interviews and research reports, shows that the Indian women's experience in the aftermath of market reforms were not in the positive direction. Labour market data of the recent years strongly underlined the gender
differences in the labour market. It has been observed that recent changes in the policies have created further problems for women, chiefly of poverty and inequality. It has not improved the opportunities for women in the labour market; rather women have been adversely affected in terms of job loss, migration, exploitation and discrimination in the labour market in India. Economic liberalisation process has not changed the gender-biased attitude of the labour market; rather labour markets were becoming structurally gender-biased in India.