WOMEN'S WORK AND WELL-BEING:
THE MICRO PROCESS

This chapter attempts to reflect on the findings from the fieldwork carried out in a village in Kancheepuram district, Tamil Nadu state. The chapter is organised as follows. The first part outlines the necessity for a micro enquiry, criteria for selection of the state and the district, and the methodology employed. The second part provides a description of the village and its socio-economic setting. In the third part, the micro process that mediates the association between women's work and well-being is discussed. The fourth part sums up the discussion and findings.

A. FIELDWORK: THE CONTEXT AND APPROACH

We have seen in the previous chapters that the analysis suggests certain broad but contrasting patterns. These contrasting findings raise a number of important issues having implications for theoretical claims and policy. The theoretical claims, presented in the first chapter and extended further at the beginning of the fourth chapter, posit that earning an income through participation in work would enhance women's autonomy, physical health, and reproductive outcome. We have found already that despite a higher autonomy, earning women tend to have a disadvantage in health and nutrition and reproductive functionings vis-à-vis non-working women in general as well as non-working women with similar capabilities such as literacy and household living standard.

The contrasting results neither provide a total empirical support to the theoretical claims nor invalidate them fully either. Instead, the findings lend only limited support to the theoretical claims. This not only poses difficulties in generalising the validity of the theoretical claims, but also raises a number of
important questions. For instance, why does women's work impinge differently on different aspects of their well-being — beneficial effect is pronounced in one aspect and not in other aspects? Why do earning women tend to have a lower health and nutrition despite their higher autonomy than do non-working women in all the four states? The findings and the questions following them underscore the need to identify the process underlying the association between women's work and well-being.

The coexistence of diverse patterns tends to indicate, at the outset, that the effects of women's work on their well-being may differ in different aspects and may move in different directions. This poses a question that, for instance, why does women's participation in work enhance their autonomy and lower their bodily health and reproductive outcome? Is anything inherent in the paid work, which is detrimental to women's health and nutrition or reproductive functionings? We have seen that the theoretical claims postulate that earning an income through participation in labour force is likely to enhance women's health and nutrition and reproductive functionings. This is partly because of exposure to knowledge and awareness on healthcare aspects and improved receptivity to use the resources or healthcare facilities and partly because of favourable intrahousehold resource allocation, especially in the allocation of food and healthcare. Therefore, the differential effects of women's paid work seem, at the outset, somewhat counter-intuitive.

Then, why does women's paid work increase their chance or probability to suffer from lower bodily health and reproductive outcome? It is likely that a number of factors may be undermining the potential, positive influence of paid work on their well-being. But, even after controlling the potential effects of other explanatory factors, as we have noted from the logistic regression analysis, paid work does not show a positive and significant association with women's nutrition and reproductive health. It needs to be emphasised here that the present nutritional and reproductive health is the outcome of a complex web of factors. Arguably, some of them may be structural and relate also to their past
socio-economic contexts and life experiences. For instance, the regression results reveal that absence of material poverty (or low standard of living) and capability deprivation (adequate educational attainments) play significant role in enhancing women's nutrition. These present material and capability deprivation are the cumulative outcome of their past and present aspects. Therefore, more than looking at mere one-to-one present association (or lack of it) between women women's work and well-being, the larger process underlying such association needs to be understood to place the findings in a proper perspective.

By revealing the nature and extent of influence of some of the structural factors like poverty, literacy, caste and religion, and also nature of work on women's well-being, the regression analysis seems to signal that a complex process underlies the association between women's work and well-being. While discussing these aspects, we have tried to identify from the data and attempted to relate, wherever possible, them with both working (or earning) and non-working women. We have noted that working women suffer disproportionately from many of these aspects, and also attempted to hint how these aspects would affect adversely working women. However, such an attempt is far from sufficient to identify the process or to offer a coherent explanation on the findings. This calls for a detailed examination on a number of important aspects.

The data, however, does not contain detailed information on a number of aspects that are relevant, both explicitly and implicitly, to an examination of the process. Therefore, the data does not enable us to identify the process mediating the association between women's work and well-being fully. It is also relevant to add here that capturing such process was not an objective of the NFHS-2, as its primary purpose was to provide national and state level estimates on a range of aspects concerning fertility, mortality, family planning, and so on. Such an absence forces us to go for an empirical enquiry into the process. Besides help identifying the process mediating the association between women's work and well-being, such an empirical enquiry may also enable us to contextualise the
findings and the ensuing discussion. Toward this objective, fieldwork was carried out in a village in Tamil Nadu state.

It is important to recall and reiterate here that we have noticed at the national level, from the macro indicators of women's work participation and well-being, that the major states exhibit at least four competing patterns. We have selected from these four groups of states with varying macro patterns (which are presented in Appendix One) one state each — Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh — for a detailed and multi-staged analysis. Besides examining the issues discussed in the first chapter, this selection was also intended to capture the diversity, if any, in the association between women's work and well-being among these states, presuming that their varying socio-economic settings might play an important role, and thereby lead to varying nature of results or association between women's work and well-being.

We have seen all through the analysis that the findings emerge without significant variations in all these four states irrespective of their varying economic and social settings. Though the findings indicate contrasting patterns on aspects of well-being, these patterns manifest in all the states of our analysis. Indeed, the absence of dissimilar or radically different patterns, in terms of nature and extent of association, in any of these four states seems to signal some generality in the process behind the relationship. Due to this invariable nature of the findings, fieldwork is carried out in one of the four states of our analysis, Tamil Nadu. This obviously raises a question why Tamil Nadu is preferred to other three states? A couple of factors have driven us to select Tamil Nadu for carrying out such micro enquiry.

First, Tamil Nadu as also a couple of other states with both relatively higher work participation and well-being of women lays the basis for our research: women's participation in paid work enhances their well-being. Second, besides being a home to a large proportion of disadvantaged social groups such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, it also houses a large number of poor people. Among all the Southern states, for instance, incidence of material
poverty is relatively higher in Tamil Nadu (21 per cent in 1999-2000). Third, as observed by Dyson and Moore (1983), social norms against women are expected to be relatively less intense in Tamil Nadu as a part of South India, which is likely to affect favourably women’s well-being. These factors have steered us to select Tamil Nadu state for our micro enquiry.

We have selected Kancheepuram district, one of the northern districts of Tamil Nadu, for carrying out the fieldwork. The district remains at the bottom as far as female work participation rate is concerned. For instance, the district with a female work participation rate of 20.68 per cent in 1981 and 21.77 per cent in 1991 remain the third lowest after Kanniyakumari and Chennai districts. Though it has marginally improved its position in 2001, with a female work participation rate of 23.46 it continues to remain at the bottom. On the contrary, the district remains at the top as far as women’s well-being is concerned. For instance, the Human Development Report of Tamil Nadu reveals that the district with a ‘Gender and Development Index’ of .710 ranks second, after Chennai district (which is not only fully urbanised but also the capital of the state) in 2001. The district, however, has a good representation of both Backward classes and Scheduled Castes (Dalits, hereafter).

The district is also famous for silk weaving, which is confined largely to the Kancheepuram region, the northern part of the district. More importantly, the district tends to have yet another interesting feature. Agriculture continues to be a repository for a sizeable proportion of the workforce, especially for women, in the district. Thus, it seems to represent, to some extent, the agrarian character of the state. Yet, it also benefits from growing industrialisation, because of being close to Chennai, mainly export oriented factories and automobile manufacturing industries. Indeed, some of the industrial estates are located around the border of Kancheepuram district itself. Thus, the district, having moderate access to new forms of industrial employment to women, also seems to reflect the rapid changes undergoing in the state economy.
This assumes added relevance due to two reasons. One, while discussing the impact of women's work, especially employment in the export oriented factories, on their well-being, we have noticed, in the second chapter, contesting claims. The characteristic of the district noted above would enable us to examine the influence of factory employment on women's well-being. Two, the analysis in the fifth chapter indicates that nature of work seems to have a differing influence on women's well-being. Therefore, a district having both agriculture as a main occupation and a reasonable access to factory employment to women may both represent the characteristics of the state and may also allow us to examine the differing impact of these varying nature of work on women's well-being. Due to these factors, Kancheepuram district became the preferred choice.

A village called Pulipakkam was selected for fieldwork, as it resembles the district's socio-economic characteristics fairly well. These aspects, elaborated in the second part of this chapter, include, among other things, settlement of diverse social groups, reasonable access to economic opportunities both agricultural and factory employment to women, and moderate access to educational and modern healthcare facilities.

Intensive fieldwork was carried out during October, November and December 2002 and also during May and June 2004. As stated already, the fieldwork intends to capture primarily the micro process mediating the relationship between women's work and well-being. Therefore, rather than surveying a large number of women to find out the nature and extent of association between women's work and well-being, we preferred an approach giving due emphasis to identifying the process by selecting a limited number of working women. After all, NFHS-2 surveyed a large number of women (4676 ever-married women in Tamil Nadu, for instance) — both working and non-working — and employed advanced methods and clinical tests to ensure accuracy in the measurements, to an extent that the attainment of such perfection in indicators may not be possible for an individual researcher. Therefore, instead of duplicating NFHS-2, what we intend to do here mainly is to supplement it by collecting information on a range
of aspects concerning the process that are not captured by it and thereby fill the gap created by it.

However, understanding of the process also requires, and hence should begin with, an examination of the nature and extent of association between women's work and well-being. Therefore, we also collected necessary information that would help us to understand the nature and extent of association between work and well-being among that limited number of working women. Expectedly, the fieldwork should also help contextualise the findings by informing about the influence of a number of important aspects such as nature of work, poverty, educational attainment, caste and a host of other factors. Obviously, an enquiry into the process requires ipso facto an examination of these and other related aspects. Therefore, in an attempt to assess the influence of these and other related factors, we selected working women with varying educational (illiterate and literate with varying levels of education), economic (poor and non-poor) and social characteristics (Dalits and Other Backward Castes) and different types of work such as agriculture, factory employment and teaching.

A two-pronged strategy was employed in the fieldwork. In the first stage, broad but semi-formal type of discussions were carried out at regular intervals with groups of women working in agriculture, export factories and a couple of teachers. Though these discussions were largely question-answer type, a higher degree of flexibility was consciously maintained all through the discussion to elicit elaborate answers and to allow women to discuss in detail any related aspect they wished. Emphasis was paid to identify the common and contrasting nature of the process, wherever possible. It is important to mention here that we had separate discussions with women engaged in agriculture (around 15-20 women), factory employment (10-12) and teachers (3-5) with different social background such as Dalits and Backward Classes, as it was found to be difficult. given the social fabric of the village, to be elaborated in the next part, to have a joint discussion of these working women with differing social background.
In the second stage, we had detailed, repeated discussions individually with four women each from agriculture and factory work, and two school teachers. The focus here was to understand, from the personal life histories of these working women, the perceived effect of their participation in paid work on a variety of aspects concerning their day-to-day life and how it weakens the influence of other structural constraints such as gender hierarchy and power, and the influence of social norms, as well as their perception and outlook towards their well-being and other related but relevant aspects such as children’s well-being. Towards facilitating to elicit information on these aspects, we employed a largely flexible approach to allow discussion on any related subjects. Though a standard questionnaire was not used to elicit information, we have tried to collect some basic information commonly across all working women. The approach all through the fieldwork was informal, interactive and open-ended.

**B. PULIPAKKAM VILLAGE**

Pulipakkam village is situated in the outskirts of Chengalpattu town. Though the village is only two kilometres away from the Chengalpattu town, it has all the essential characteristics of a typical village. It is bordered by paddy fields in the west and north, Kanthaloor village in the east and a bit of Eastern-ghats Mountain and Kulavai Lake in the south. Maraimalai Nagar, which has emerged recently as an industrial estate and continues to attract export oriented factories, is around 12 kilometres away from the village. The village has a tarred road, and hence has direct access to bus services to Chengalpattu. The village is also the headquarters of Pulipakkam village Panchayat. The village has a Post Office, a Village office, a part of it is also used as a Panchayat Office, a Government primary school, a public distribution shop (known popularly as ration shop), a Co-operative Bank, a sub-primary health centre (or sub-centre), two balwadis (crèches) and two public wells.

The village is composed of (or divided into) two geographically contiguous but socially isolated parts. The first part of the village is the Ur (meaning the
mainland) and the second part is the Colony. The Ur is home to a diverse group of communities. These include socio-economically privileged groups such as Brahmins, Muthaliyars, Naidus, Kanakkars and Kammalars. Also living here are communities that are considered to be socially backward but economically progressive like Vanniyars and Nadars. Moreover, communities that are both socially and economically disadvantaged such as Sembadavars (Fisherfolk), Ambattans (Barbers) and Vannars (Dhobis) also live in the Ur. However, these disadvantaged social groups or communities — together numbering around 60 households — live in a separate edge of the Ur. While these diverse social groups are predominantly Hindus, a couple of Muslim households also live here. In the Colony, only Dalits reside.

Table 6.1 presents the information regarding the population of the village. Given the socio-economic divide between the Ur and Colony, and also against the backdrop of our finding that caste can potentially influence and exert an important role on women’s well-being, the figures are given separately for both the Ur and Colony. The village shelters 3011 people who live in 700 households, with an average of 4.3 persons per household. The overall sex-ratio, 1033 women per 1000 men, is favourable to women, as they (1530) outnumber men (1481). Within the village, the ratio is relatively higher in the Colony than in Ur, and the advantage of Colony emerges more so in the 0-6 age group. Not only is the ratio in the Ur lower than in the colony, but also it favours boys.

Social interaction between the Ur and Colony is less common except in rare, inevitable circumstances. Even within the Ur, Brahmins do not interact closely with others. They, comprising 15 households, live in a single street known as Brahmin Street. While Vanniyars — who constitute around two third of the population in the Ur — maintain economic interactions with Dalits, social interaction between them is much less. Since almost all the public service facilities including the ration shop and Panchayat office are located within the Ur, Dalits come here regularly to use these facilities. People from the Ur, on the
contrary, rarely go to the Colony. There are separate temples both in the Ur and Colony, and hence socio-cultural interaction is also quite limited.

**Table 6.1: Basic Information on the Population of the Village (Year 2002)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ur</th>
<th>Colony</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>757</td>
<td>724</td>
<td>1481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>768</td>
<td>762</td>
<td>1530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1525</td>
<td>1486</td>
<td>3011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Household Size</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female-Male Ratio</td>
<td>1014</td>
<td>1052</td>
<td>1033</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Less than 6 years**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ur</th>
<th>Colony</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female-Male Ratio</td>
<td>831</td>
<td>1210</td>
<td>933</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Village records

Agriculture is the principal economic activity in the village. Around two third of the households depend on agriculture for subsistence. Paddy is the single major crop, and IR 50 and Ponni are the two leading paddy varieties cultivated in the village. Cultivation of other crops is an uncommon and isolated phenomenon by a few individuals. The village benefits from Kulavai lake and also from the adjacent Palar river basin. These together with private motor pump sets and bore-wells provide access to water to almost all the paddy fields in the village. Such access helps sustain the paddy cultivation (two crops a year) without much water shortage. The village has a rice mill, which is used to process the paddy.

Most of the paddy fields in the village belong to Vannaiyars. Dalits are the landless group, and hence constitute the vast majority of the agricultural labourers. Besides agriculture, a smaller proportion of men, mainly from the Colony, are also involved in sand mining related activities, construction works and other casual employment. Nadars and Muslims are engaged predominantly in petty trade and commerce. Poverty is widespread in the village. This is mainly because most of the households depend on agriculture for subsistence. On average, agriculture provides employment for four to five months spread across two seasons. Incidence of poverty is relatively more intense and visible in
the Colony than in the Ur. This is understandable given the fact that people from the Colony not only constitute the major chunk of agricultural labourers but also possess hardly any assets or landed properties.

The village has access to piped drinking water, which comes on every alternate day. Since pipe water is not sufficient to meet all the requirements, households depend on the two public wells and adjacent private wells available in the village for other purposes. Most of the households lack basic amenities like adequate shelter, toilets, and other facilities. Most of the houses in the Colony are one-room huts thatched with palm leaves. In the Ur, there are a sufficient number of tiled and concrete houses with all basic amenities. Many households, especially in the Colony, depend on open and public sources for their private needs. Almost all the houses in the Ur and more than three fourth of the houses in the Colony are electrified.

The village has a Government primary school, which was reported to be established as early as 1925, and hence literacy levels are relatively high. Also, the village has access to schools located in Chengalpattu, which cater to the higher education of students from the village. In the village, there are 282 children in the age group of 6-10 years. Among them only 158 children (73 boys and 85 girls) study here and the rest (124) go to the schools in Chengalpattu. Similarly, among 158 children who study in the village school, around 121 children eat midday meals regularly. Normally, poor households send their children to the village school. The mass of the students, therefore, come from the Colony, since most of households in the Colony are poor. Economically well-off households both from the Ur and the Colony opt for private schools located in Chengalpattu. Within the village, people from the Ur are relatively more literate and educated than those from the Colony. There are a good number of degree holders in the Ur, but the number of such qualified persons is very few in the Colony. There is no hospital in the village. Nevertheless, a qualified allopathic physician and a traditional *Siddha Vaidyar* live in the Ur and offer treatment to those approaching them even in the wee hours. However, due to its proximity to
Chengalpattu, the village has access to Government Medical College hospital, and also to a number of modern speciality clinics and nursing homes located there.

C. EXPLORING THE PROCESS

Women, both from the Ur and the Colony, participate actively in the labour market. As also to the majority of men, agriculture is the main source of employment to a vast majority of female labourers in the village. A small proportion of women, mainly from the Colony, also engage in construction work and animal husbandry. However, these are secondary occupations, and are taken up mainly when agricultural jobs are not available. Most of the female agricultural labourers work in the paddy fields located in and around the village. They go to other villages to take up agricultural work very rarely. Instead, women from other villages come here to carry out agricultural work mainly during the times of transplanting and winnowing.

A gender division of labour exists in agriculture making certain activities the preserve of men and while others as that of women. For instance, while ploughing appears to be the preserve of men, transplanting is carried out overwhelmingly by women. Though weeding and winnowing are carried out mostly by women, often men also carry out these activities. What leads to such division remains far from clear. Nevertheless, a couple of aspects, which can potentially shed some light on this division, deserve a mention. Ploughing demands a lot of physical energy (or stamina), as it requires handling of bullocks or hand tractors. Also, it requires some amount of knowledge or understanding on the depth of ploughing, which seems to vary depending on the type of crop and soil. Due to these (and possibly other) reasons, ploughing continues to be the preserve of men. On the contrary, more than stamina, transplanting requires dexterity and physical flexibility (for instance, transplanting requires squatting on the haunches for hours together) for which women are typically considered to be more suitable than men. This gender division of labour in agriculture is
also observed in other villages of Tamil Nadu (Mencher 1993; Kapadia 1995, p. 209-11).

Women’s daily wages vary across agricultural activities. On the whole, however, they receive relatively lower wages than men even for the same agricultural activities. In addition to a lunch, women receive Rs. 30 for transplanting, weeding and winnowing. Harvesting yields them relatively higher income. Besides being entitled to one marakka (equivalent to 3 kg) paddy, they receive Rs. 40 for harvesting. By contrast, men receive Rs. 80 for ploughing, which is done almost exclusively by men. However, for winnowing, which is also done by women, men receive slightly lower amount Rs. 60, which is almost double the wage of women. A detailed enquiry into the determinants of these wage differentials is beyond the scope of the present attempt.

Nevertheless, it needs to be mentioned here that discussion with female and male agricultural labourers and also with paddy field owners indicate that this difference seems to be related to, and also a result of, the social norms, to wit: men are the main breadwinners of the family and therefore they need to be paid high to take care of the family and women as the caretakers and secondary earners whose income is supplementary to other income. We will demonstrate later that this perception is rather erroneous, as women’s earning, though lower than that of men, is central to the subsistence of the household. Again, part of this wage difference appears to be related also to the perceived hierarchy, rather than sequence, within agricultural activities: ploughing, harvesting, winnowing, and weeding.

Recent industrialisation, especially setting up of industrial estates or parks in the outskirts of Chennai (which border Kancheepuram district), such as Maraimalai Nagar, Kooduvanchery and Tambaram, has provided employment opportunities to more women than men. A growing number of women go out to work mainly as tailors or helpers in the export oriented factories that have come up in these industrial centres and parks. The employment opportunities are confined largely to younger, and especially unmarried, women. However, some
of these women continue to work in the factory or begin taking up factory employment even after their marriage. Women’s wages in the factories vary from Rs. 900 to 1700 per month depending on the type of work, experience and education. On average, factory wage per day does not seem to be substantially higher than a daily agricultural wage. But women working in factories tend to receive a regular, lump sum income unlike agricultural labourers. This regularity in income, as we shall see soon, seems to impinge on women’s well-being.

It is important to note here that factory employment benefits mainly literate women, as some amount of education is considered a prerequisite to acquire the skills required for it. We have already observed that literacy is relatively higher in the Ur than in the Colony. It seems that women from the Colony have seized the new employment opportunities more vigorously than those from the Ur. This obviously raises a question why do women from the Colony take up factory employment more than those from the Ur? If literacy is the principal criterion, obviously women from the Ur could have predominated the female factory workers from the village. It appears, therefore, that besides literacy, certain other factors are enabling women from the Colony to take up factory work. We will have occasions to discuss some of those factors soon. On the contrary, around two third of the women engaged in agriculture, and other allied activities are illiterate. Nevertheless, even among women engaged in agriculture illiteracy is relatively less among younger than older women (especially 40 years and above).

Female work participation is noticeably higher in the Colony than in the Ur. Two mutually reinforcing factors are at work here. One, social norms against women’s mobility and employment are less severe in the Colony which houses socially disadvantaged groups. This is partly because these social groups, with neolocal or uxorilocal marriage customs, do not generally follow the living norms that the rich, patrilineal, patrilocal communities do (Bardhan 1993, p. 149). Partly studies also relate this less rigid social norms and higher mobility to
participation in the labour market. For instance, Gough (1978) traces the evolution of South Indian kinship, which discriminates less against females, and relates to the mode of production and distribution in which women’s labour was important for the survival and development of the family (cited in Dharmalingam and Morgan 1996, p. 188). On the contrary, Miller (1981) contests that there is nothing intrinsic to the operation of rice cultivation, which requires specifically female labour in the Southern Indian states, as argued by Bardhan (1974). Instead, she argues that culture defines the gender roles (Miller 1981, p. 113).

Notwithstanding these contesting claims on the relative influence of culture and economic relations, there is some agreement that the poor or disadvantaged groups do not adhere to strict norms against women also because their survival depends on effective cooperation, than among the privileged groups where women tend to have a symbolic position (Dreze and Sen 1995, p. 158). Thus, studies also underline the likely influence of economic factors such as poverty for the higher participation of women in the labour market. The influence of economic factors on the participation of women in the labour market becomes all the more striking in the Colony, as we can observe from the next paragraphs. Also, we observed that even in the Ur, where norms against women’s employment is relatively rigid, women from many of the poor households engage in agricultural activities to eke out a living.

Women’s participation in paid work appears to be central to the subsistence of most of the households in the Colony, as these households live almost in abject poverty. This is because most of the households in the Colony are landless agricultural labour households. Their hut-based houses signal the magnitude of their material poverty. These households hardly own any assets except their labour power. This is especially true in the households where male members are also engaged in agriculture. How does women’s earning become central to the subsistence of the household? We have already found that women’s wages are relatively lower than that of men’s wages. However, though their wages are low,
they hardly retain any income for their personal expenses. Rather, they contribute their entire earnings to meet the subsistence needs of the household. By contrast, though income of their spouses or other male members is relatively high, most of them spend or retain a good portion of their daily income for their personal expenses. Thus, in terms of contribution to household subsistence as a percentage of total earning, women’s contribution becomes equal to, if not higher than that of, men’s contribution. Our field observations, therefore, clearly reinforce similar findings observed in other parts of Tamil Nadu (Mencher 1988; Kapadia 1995, p. 207).

Our micro enquiry, thus, seems to reinforce the macro observations noted already in the first and fifth chapters that material considerations will most of the women to enter into the labour market. However, an attempt was also made to probe further on this aspect. When asked why do they go for work, most of the women replied rather spontaneously that their work is virtually necessary to feed their family members. Even most of the women employed in export factories also responded similarly. Towards probing further on this aspect, the following hypothetical question was asked: will you stop working if your husband or other household members get higher income adequate enough to meet the subsistence needs? A division was perceptible among them: many agricultural labourers opted to withdraw from the labour market while a few said that they would continue to work. Women working in the factories replied that they would continue to work for some more time even if their spouses get better jobs. Not only do they don’t want to work for long but also they indicated that it may not be possible for them to work for long in the factories. Therefore, they preferred to earn as much as possible during that span of time.

Three important questions need to be posed here. One, does participation in paid work, as our analysis suggests, enhance women’s autonomy within the household? Two, do these jobs, as the theoretical claims posit, increase their perception and concern regarding their well-being? Also, do such perception and concern vary between jobs: for instance, between agriculture and factory
employment? Three, whether such autonomy and perception help them to attain better health and nutrition and lead to favourable reproductive outcome? Towards addressing these questions, we begin here with a discussion on the day-to-day life of these working women. Female agricultural labourers' hours of work are long and arguably arduous. They get up around 5 a.m. and carry out domestic maintenance activities for around three hours. They go to the field around 8.30 a.m. and work till 3 p.m. While coming home, they gather as much firewood as possible. Immediately after reaching home, they carry out another spell of domestic and caring work, which lasts up to 9 p.m. Thus, on average their working day goes beyond 15 hours.

When enquired about whether their spouses recognise their long working hours and share household responsibilities, most of them replied that their husbands hardly recognise their long working hours and heavier work burden, and rarely help them sharing domestic maintenance and caring work. When probed further that during their illness, who performs these tasks and importantly do their husbands perform (or help them to carry out) the domestic work? Herein, the views remained mixed. A few women replied that their husbands help them in performing the maintenance activities when they are ill, while many others suggested that their grown-up children, mainly daughters, or relatives help them in carrying out these activities. These aspects, if taken together, tend to convey a gender division of labour within the family. Does this division manifest among women working in export factories or schools?

The gender division of labour also persists among the households of female factory workers and teachers, albeit at a weaker level. Women working in export factories also get up around 5 a.m. and carry out domestic maintenance tasks till 7.30 a.m. Since factories are away from their homes, they leave home around 7.45 a.m. so as to reach the factories before 9 a.m. A few factories send their vehicles to the village around that time, and hence women should be ready by that time. Though their regular working hours are from 8.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. (which also vary depending on the factories), many women do overtime work to
earn more. A few women said that their over time work is almost compulsory, and should work even if they do not wish to do so at times. Therefore, they come home normally around 6.30 p.m. and begin doing domestic maintenance and caring work, which normally go up to 9 p.m.

It is important to mention here that the spouses of women working in export factories share some of the caring work, mainly getting the children ready to go to school. Also, they feed and nurse their children till their wives come home from the factories. When asked whether their spouses share the maintenance and caring work on Sundays or other holidays, they said that their spouses do often do so. It is also relevant to add here that sharing of domestic maintenance and caring work by the spouses of women employed in factories is partly out of compulsion, as their wives leave early to reach the factories on time and come home late in the evening. By contrast, female agriculture labourers and their husbands go to work almost around the same time but the latter come home later or go out again after coming back from the field. Also, women employed in the export factories are relatively younger and have small children, whereas most of the female agricultural labourers have grown-up children, who assist their mothers. So, the compulsion to do the caring work is relatively lesser among the spouses of female agricultural labourers vis-à-vis women engaged in export factories.

It is also relevant to state here that the spouses of school teachers and those working in export factories are literates. Discussion with them conveys that they do not adhere strongly to the social norms regarding the gender division of labour and hierarchy. Though they harbour the notion that domestic maintenance and caring work is mainly women's responsibility, they do not have strong inhibitions in sharing domestic maintenance and caring work, if needed. Most of the school teachers as also a small number of women engaged in export factories either opt for the services of domestic servants when they are pregnant and have small children or their parents or relatives stay with them for a reasonable period in assisting them. When enquired about whether such
phenomenon is in place, many of them replied that they normally do not go to work when they are pregnant or have small children.

A phenomenon, which has been practiced predominantly by the advantaged social groups and to some extent by richer households among the disadvantaged groups, is also helping the younger, mainly recently married, women in easing their domestic work burden. It seems that incidence if dowry is pervasive in the village irrespective of the social and economic statuses or groups. The major difference seems to be only in the amount of dowry. An important part of this dowry is called seervarisi, which consists of utensils and domestic appliances (like rice cookers and mixer-grinders) that are considered to be necessary to manage a house. This is based on the presupposition that daughters should leave their parent’s home immediately after their marriage or go to a new house. Many women opined that the dowry is clearly on the increase over time and taxes their parents economically. What leads to such an increase in the prevalence of dowry is beyond the scope of the present enquiry. Nevertheless, these utensils and domestic appliances not only reduce the time needed for domestic maintenance but also ease the work burden. Many younger working women in agriculture and export factories said that besides jewels they received necessary domestic appliances including rice cookers and mixer grinders as a part of their seervarisi. Though older women also received jewels and utensils, mixer-grinders and rice cookers formed part of the dowry only from the recent past. Many of the young school teachers as also some of the women engaged in export factories have access to many of the domestic appliances, which reduce their work burden.

This varying extent of division of labour also manifests in the extent of autonomy enjoyed by these working women. Female agricultural labourers seem to enjoy some amount of autonomy within the household. As stated already, their income is virtually necessary for the survival of the family. This not only provides them some recognition of their economic contribution but also enables them to have a say on how to spend their money and enhances their role
in making decisions on day-to-day aspects concerning their life. They seem to enjoy a fair degree of mobility as well. A part of it is due to, or associated with, their employment or rather economic compulsion, since they have to meet their friends and relatives or fellow workers to explore the possibilities for better employment opportunities or seeking economic benefits. A part of it stems from their willingness to help their parents and relatives or to seek benefits from them. Over all, they tend to move around freely.

When asked about the likelihood of abuse and physical assault by their spouses, almost all the women agreed that their spouses abused them for a variety of reasons including taste of food, late coming, unwillingness to give money for alcohol consumption, and so on. Many women agreed that they were physically mistreated or assaulted by their spouses, and the likelihood of assault appears to go up, if the spouses consume alcohol. Many women informed that they keep silent or do not argue with their spouses to avoid confrontation or coercion as that would possibly lead to physical assault. This seems to raise a paradoxical situation. Those who argue and express their opinion or disagreement get physically mistreated and assaulted, whereas those who keep silent or do not express their disagreement get escaped from such coercive attitudes. The incidence of physical assault is not only a dehumanising act in itself, but also conveys the lack of bodily safety even within the home from life intimates. Equally, absence of physical assault in itself cannot be considered, at the outset, as a mark of greater autonomy.

Taken these things together, female agricultural labourers seem to have some amount of autonomy within the household. But, the crucial question, which assumes prominence given the findings emerging from the analysis, is that does that autonomy help them to attain better health and nutrition and reproductive outcome? Let us examine whether the autonomy enjoyed by the female agricultural labourers enable them to attain better health and nutrition and reproductive outcome. When enquired about how many women took up agricultural work to improve their health and nutrition or to have some financial autonomy, only a few of them replied. As noted already, most of them
mentioned household poverty as an overarching factor compelling them to take up paid work. Though a few women also opined that it is better to participate in work than to remain idle at home, it appears, by and large, that these poor women's entry into labour market is necessitated by their economic compulsion. Thus, participation in paid work is not a conscious decision to enhance their well-being, but rather most of the female agricultural labourers are forced to work. Poverty induced female employment assumes importance given the larger context of our study. We have already seen that poverty induced female employment need not necessarily enhance women's well-being, mainly health and nutrition and reproductive outcome. Let us examine whether this macro pattern undergoes any change at the micro level.

Seemingly, our empirical observations and discussions underpin this macro finding to a large extent. These poor women showed manifestations of well-being deprivation. They looked visibly pale, anaemic and underfed. Here, two mutually reinforcing aspects need to be examined. Since poverty is associated with lower well-being of working women, do women with lower well-being engage predominantly in paid work? On the contrary, does poverty induced work participation lower women's well-being? Towards addressing these issues, we had discussions with women who have just begun taking up agricultural work and those who have been working fairly long time. While discussing about the health and nutrition of young female agricultural labourers, a distinction needs to be mentioned. Many young women do not have a positive attitude about agricultural work. Some of the young women, who belong to the not-so-poor households, do not seriously hunt for the employment opportunities. Instead, they take up agricultural work mainly when demand for female labour is high such as during monsoon when all the fields are cultivated around the same time. The other category of young women, who predominate in number, are from poor households and therefore hunt seriously for the availability of agricultural work and take up whatever employment opportunities available to them.

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The former tend to have relatively better health and nutrition than the latter. The former, who prefer to be engaged in work rather than idling at home, use their income for personal purposes. Their income is either a saving for future or addition to the family income to meet the current expenditure. Many of these young women say that it is better to have an income, as it reduces their economic dependency. They tend to attach some amount of importance to their health and nutrition, and are somewhat receptive to use modern healthcare facilities. The latter, on the contrary, had to work to ensure food for all the members. A fairly large proportion of the latter would stop working, if their spouses or other members get higher income. They often skip their meals to allow their children to eat enough. They do, however, want to have good health and nutrition, but many constraints, mainly lack of money and time, undermine their willingness.

It is relevant to recall here that Chengalpattu town, which houses the Medical College Hospital, is only two kilometres away from their village. When probed that why didn’t they make use of the free government healthcare services available at Chengalpattu, they replied that often they had to both bribe to get proper treatment and buy additional medicines from outside. However, we also noticed a certain degree of unwillingness among them to use those facilities. Most of the older agricultural female labourers are relatively less receptive to seek proper healthcare and accord less importance to their health and nutrition. Thus, it appears from the above discussion that many of the poor women not only entered the labour market with lower well-being but also they did so due to other considerations such as meeting the subsistence needs of the family, which tend to affect their well-being adversely.

Why do many of the poor female agricultural labourers attach lesser importance to their health and nutrition? A number of complex factors are jointly at work here, and at least three of them invite a discussion. To begin with, we have already indicated that material poverty seems to limit their opportunities to seek better and timely healthcare. Indeed, we have already seen that poverty is known to lead to poor health and nutrition of women (Gopalan 1992; Ravindran
1995). In fact, many female agricultural labourers expressed their economic hardship as one of the major constraints. But, their poor health and nutrition is dictated by factors other than their economic disadvantage. Patriarchal norms, for instance, appear to play an important role. This manifests mainly in the form of lack of enough freedom for women to go to hospitals or to seek proper healthcare as they wish, apathy towards women’s health by male members, and making the sanction of male members as a necessary factor for seeking healthcare. We have already seen that women’s participation in paid work has been growing steadily over the years. But, the social norm that men are breadwinners and women are caretakers continues to be strongly held by both women and men. When enquired about their opinion on this perception, many women feel that it is men’s responsibility to take care of the economic needs of the family. It is likely that such perception may be steering them to believe that their well-being is next only to that of men and male children.

Third, the lesser concern regarding their well-being relates to some extent to their lower education, as a sizeable proportion of these older women are, as we have already noted, illiterates. They are not very keen to know the various facilities and resources available within their village or nearby town that can be potentially used to enhance their well-being. This is partly because almost all of them work within their village. They, unlike women employed in export oriented factories or school teachers, go out to town or other places only when it becomes necessary. Also, part of it is due to their lack of adequate concern regarding their health and nutrition. We have already observed that many women looked visibly pale and anaemic. Also, they informed that their work leads to severe body pain or fatigue. They attach little importance to such aspects, as these are considered as normal and routine. For fever and other common ailments, they normally manage with ad hoc or homely remedies. Seeking proper, timely medical treatment for these ailments is considered to be an anomalous behaviour.
However it is also important to add that absence from the labour market due to sickness or disease means lack of food on that day. Hence, they work keeping their health at bay. Healthcare is sought only when sickness would make their working difficult or impossible. They abstain from work only if the situation becomes uncontrollable. Even then, proper and quality healthcare becomes a rarity than a necessity. This is despite the fact that they live in a place that is close to the town, which has a sufficient number of hospitals. This, then, raises yet another question. Does a regular income, less rigid patriarchal norms, and individual consciousness mean better health and nutrition of women? The discussion with women working in factories and school teachers indicates that it is likely so. But before discussing these aspects, the extent of autonomy enjoyed by the school teachers and those working in factories need to be discussed here.

Though women engaged in export oriented factories come from households with relatively higher economic status than that of agricultural labourers, they are certainly not from rich households. Their income is also crucial to the survival and well-being of their families. In fact, they have almost the similar characteristics as agricultural female labourers, except three. First, the former are literate with relatively higher years of schooling than that of female agricultural labourers. Second, the former are relatively young than the latter. Third, the former have regular employment and thereby have access to a regular income than the latter. The regular income and literacy seem to play a role in enabling them to attaining relatively higher autonomy. These three aspects, which will be discussed later, appear to have an effect on their well-being.

Female factory workers seem to enjoy relatively higher autonomy than agricultural labourers within the household. They not only retain some money for their personal expenses, many of them save in one form or other. This ranges from savings in the factory as a part of their requirement, savings in insurance or banks, and so on. They have fair degree of freedom in making small purchases like clothes, cosmetics and small jewelleries. Similarly, they have relatively greater mobility than female agricultural labourers. Most often, they do not
require or seek permission from, and the escort of, their husbands or male members to go to hospitals, markets or towns. Further, they visit their parents or relatives and friends frequently. When enquired about the incidence of abuse and physical assault by their spouses, many of them agreed that they have been abused number of occasions. But only a few women agreed that they have been physically mistreated by their spouses. Teachers seem to enjoy far higher autonomy than women working in export factories. Indeed, they decide together with their spouses on aspects like how many children to have and where to send them for education. This varying extent of autonomy is also reflected in their health and nutrition.

As mentioned already, though factory wages are not high, wages are distributed monthly. Since teachers and factory workers bring a lump sum payment as a monthly salary, their economic contribution to the household gets due recognition both from themselves and other members. More than that, their incomes are not fully spent on consumption expenditure. They save some money for future household consumption as well. This is besides their contribution to the Provident Fund and Employee’s State Insurance (ESI). They also retain some money for their daily travel to the factories or schools, and also for food, and other expenses including cosmetics. This gives them an edge over agricultural women in having some control over a part of their earning. The seasonality and irregularity in employment and distribution of wage on a daily basis seem to constrain female agricultural labourers in gaining a control over their income.

Women working in factories and teachers attach adequate importance to their health and nutrition not only as a means to carry out their work and earn an income, but also as an end in itself — to lead a healthy, dignified life. Women working in factories make use of the healthcare facilities available within their factories as well as those attached as a part of ESI. If needed, they go to private hospitals and qualified private practitioners or specialists in Chengalpattu. School teachers normally prefer quality healthcare as they not only have
resources but also have a positive attitude towards seeking proper healthcare. It also merits a mention here that their education might be complementing other factors towards gaining a positive outlook towards better well-being.

The influence of patriarchal norms against their health seems to be less severe. We have observed already that female school teachers and factory workers are literate with relatively higher years of schooling than female agricultural labourers both in the Colony and the Ur. This is equally true for their spouses and other male members as well. This difference in literacy is manifest visibly in their attachment to, and approach towards, social norms. While many illiterate male agricultural labourers retain and spend a portion of their earning on their personal needs, they are not in agreement with the notion of their spouses keeping some money for their personal needs. They view that it is women’s duty to seek consent from male members if they want money for their personal requirements. On the contrary, spouses of female factory workers and teachers—most of them are literate—clearly recognise that their spouses have personal requirements and hence need to keep some amount of money at their disposal. Their lack of adherence to social norms manifests in other aspects as well.

They face much less constraints in deciding freely on aspects related to their physical well-being such as health and nutrition. They hardly seek permission from, or need protection of, male members to obtain adequate and timely medication. Quite often, they go alone to hospitals during their return from work places. Their spouses and other male members do not see it as an aberrant behaviour. Instead, they tend to attach some importance to the health and nutrition of their spouses. Here again, female factory workers and school teachers tend to outperform the agricultural labourers. Their regular travel as a part of their work enabled them to gain knowledge on various aspects. During the course of work, they seem to discuss regularly with their colleagues and friends a number of issues including welfare schemes. Women working in factories exhibit a keen interest to know places or types of similar employment where they can get a higher income than their present earning.
Nevertheless, irrespective of the nature of work, all working women have a common approach on a couple of aspects. Many women prefer small family size and want to give their children quality education. Two children is the norm in the village. Families go for a third child only when the two happen to be sons or daughters. Almost all of them are positive towards the use of birth control measures. Female sterilisation is the single most common method used by these working women. They try to use the facilities available within the village on antenatal care. Many of them, especially younger women, have delivered their babies at government hospitals. They also prefer a small family size and are positive about using birth control measures. They seem to have definite plans for their children’s future, and tend to prefer private and English medium schools located in the town.

D. SUMMING UP

The discussion reveals that a complex process mediates the relationship between women’s work and well-being. The process is interwoven with a host of mutually reinforcing factors. These include, but are not confined to, a clear recognition of women’s economic contribution both by male members of the household and women themselves, some degree of freedom to decide independently on aspects that impact on their livelihoods, some amount of control over economic resources, adequate freedom of mobility, women’s consciousness of their well-being, and receptivity and ability to use resources and services towards that end, male members’ appreciation and positive outlook towards women’s individuality and well-being and hence equal allocation of food and healthcare, lesser attachment to social norms and values against women by both male members and women, and so on.

Does women’s employment and ability to earn an income influence this process? Is such influence uniform across households? Our discussion reveals that women’s employment may influence the process. But the extent of its influence depends on a number of factors. The conditions that facilitated women’s entry into labour market, nature and place of work, and regularity and size of earning
are some of the factors that determine the extent of influence. Since these factors vary enormously across women, the influence of these factors is uneven and distinctly different. Even if these factors are similar, other factors tend to condition the influence of these factors and thereby make their influence dissimilar. Women's education and age structure, household living standard, education and attitude of male members are some of these factors that condition the influence. This, however, does not imply that women's employment and earning has very little influence of its own. Instead, to realise the full potential of women's economic contribution, certain factors become necessary. The significance of these factors is discussed in detail in the concluding chapter.