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WOMEN, WORK AND WELL-BEING:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF FOUR INDIAN STATES

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There is a reasonable measure of agreement, especially in the South Asian context, that women's participation in paid work would enhance their well-being. This proposition, propounded originally by Engels (1972/1884), appears to have attained an important place in the debate concerning women and development since the last three decades, and continues to remain so even at present due to a number factors. Further, it also has a rare advantage of having some backing from approaches that differ substantially such as Marxian and Neo-classical as well as 'Women in Development' and 'Gender and Development.'

In many developing countries, a large proportion of women seem to take up paid work mainly out of poverty. Most of these poor women, who also lack adequate educational attainment, tend to predominate in low paid, bottom-level jobs, such as agriculture, other casual or informal, assembly-line, and so on. Besides poverty, the social norms underlying intrahousehold resource allocation and gender division of labour, and hence the responsibilities associated with that, and a host of other factors not only disadvantage them but also raise a number of important issues. Some of those issues, especially the influence of poverty induced work participation and the nature of work on women's well-being, form the basis for the present study.

Employing the capability approach, which defines well-being as the ability to attain valuable functionings (Sen 1982), three aspects of well-being — Autonomy, Health and Nutrition, and Reproductive Outcome — are selected for analysis. On the face of it, the proposition gains significance in India, where women's well-being as also their participation in paid work is low. Given the varying socio-economic and cultural milieu of India, four Indian states, such as Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala and Uttar Pradesh, are selected (based on the macro-level indicators of
women's work participation and well-being) for detailed analysis. The analysis is confined mainly to the National Family Health Survey data 1998-99. The macro analysis is complemented with intensive, qualitative fieldwork from Tamil Nadu.

The analysis suggests that while paid work tends to enhance women's autonomy, it does not seem to do so in health and nutrition and reproductive outcome. These contrasting patterns emerge unchangingly in all the four states. A disaggregated analysis, in terms of similar household living standard and educational attainment, seems to indicate the prevalence of these patterns among poor and non-poor households as well as among illiterate and literate women up to ten years of schooling. Indications of change, favouring earning women, manifest among rich households and also among women with higher education mainly in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. A hierarchy in well-being seems to go in line with the hierarchy in nature of women's work. However, only the women engaged in higher nature of work tend to outperform non-working women.

The coexistence of contrasting patterns raise a number of questions. Why does paid work impinge differently on different aspects of well-being? Why do earning women seem to have lower health and nutrition and reproductive outcome despite their higher autonomy (than non-working women)? This calls for a micro enquiry into the process underlying the association between women's work and well-being. The micro enquiry suggests that working women face a number of structural constraints, which besides adversely affecting their well-being also tend to weaken their ability to convert their earning into better sources of well-being. Therefore, attainment of certain capabilities appears to be a prerequisite, if paid work is to yield expected beneficial results fully. The findings have implications for policy and call for further research.