Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION
Work is essential for the development of the societies. In all the societies of the world, both women and men work. Though, women’s work is unlike that of men. Women engage not only in paid work but also in unpaid work in the household, where they are responsible for the bulk of housework, childcare and other forms of physical labour. A large part of it, however escapes enumeration, as it is perceived only as 'housework'. It is assumed that participation in the labour force and in income generating activities increases the status and decision making power of both women as well as men. With employment, they do not remain as ‘objects’ of social change, but become ‘agents’ of it. They cease to be only ‘consumers’ of economic goods and services, but turn ‘producers’ (Devadas 1999). It is further assumed that this involvement in the production process brings about changes in awareness and attitudes, which may have long term benefits such as access to health and education, savings etc. Economic independence of women, in particular, is supposed to create far-reaching social changes and prove a necessary weapon for them to face discrimination. This process of gaining control over material assets, resources, services and ideology is defined by the term ‘empowerment’ (Bhattacharya 1995).

Dodd and Guitterez (1990) are of the opinion that although empowerment has been a social work “buzzword” since the 1960s, there is a need to systematically examine the root word – “power”. What power does employment give to the workers, more specifically women? Long before the word empowerment became popular, women in the west were speaking about gaining control over their lives, and participating in the decisions that effect them in the home and community, in governmental and international development policies. The word ‘empowerment’ captures
this sense of gaining control, of participating and decision-making. More recently the word has entered the vocabulary of development agencies, including international organisations and the United Nations (Karl 1995). In grassroots programmes and policy debates, empowerment has virtually replaced terms like welfare, upliftment, community participation and poverty alleviation to describe the goal of development and intervention. It appears to have become the key solution to many social problems like high population growth rates, environmental degradation and low status of women. Various governmental and non-governmental efforts are being made for providing employment opportunities, poverty alleviation and income generation for the poor, specifically women. These are supported by integrated programmes for literacy, education, provision of basic needs and services and fertility control (Gopal 1997). Effectively, though such interventions take on a segmented approach and are far removed from the socio-economic realities of the lives of the people whom they intend to benefit. Throughout the world, ‘women’s empowerment’ has been known to originate out of a number of critical dialogues, discussions and debates generated by the women’s movements. Women’s movements have often been closely connected with working-class struggles. In the Philippines, women were active in peasant organisations from 1930s onward and in workers’ movements in 1950s and 1960s. These joint actions were instrumental in bringing about some beneficial legislation, such as higher wages, health benefits, maternity leaves and equal pay for equal work. The contemporary Indian women’s movement encompasses and links such issues as work, wages, environment, civil rights, violence, caste, class, allocation of basic resources, consumer rights, health, religion, community and individual and social relationships (Kumar 1995).
As far as women in the workforce are concerned, their working lives have undergone various changes that have occurred as a result of industrialization. From the outset of the industrial revolution, the one feature that was common to all women's work was low pay. In 1838, only 23 per cent of all textile factory workers were men (Boston 1980). Since women were paid on an average half of what men were paid, it is not surprising that they were employed in large numbers. During the nineteenth century, many thousands of women in Europe, the United States and India laboured in the unhealthy factories of the industrial revolution. For many this carried the traditional role of their mothers and grandmothers, who had dominated the weaving trade before mechanisation (Lown and Chenut 1983). Today, women workers still predominate the industry, which has been forced into rapid restructuring to cope with recession. In India, for example, women are entering the workforce in increasing numbers as multinational companies search the world for cheap and 'docile' labour force (Chapkis and Enloe 1983).

Unorganised Sector

Informal or unorganised sector is usually defined negatively by pointing out to the absence of characteristics that belong to the formal sector. These are regularity of work, better earnings, existence of non-wage and long-term benefits, protective legislation and trade union protection (Papola 1980, Banerjee 1985). On the other hand, the unorganised sector suffers from excessive seasonality of employment. Majority of workers do not have stable or durable avenues of work. The primary concern regarding labour in the unorganised sector is that most of them live below the poverty line. Their access to the basic amenities of life such as food,
clothing, health, education and other forms of social security is extremely poor. One of the reasons for this is that they lack the organisations, which can effectively represent their issues and problems at the national level – the Trade Unions. The very structure and nature of the unorganised sector renders it more or less impossible for the functioning of the trade unions.

Women’s employment in the informal sector is rising due to various reasons. With the adoption of structural adjustment programmes, women tend to lose ground in the formal sectors of the economy. Further, the growth of ancillarisation and industrial employment through subcontracting has been gaining importance. Stagnating and falling incomes of the households ensure an increased entry of women in the labour market. The process of globalisation, export oriented industrialization, and relocation of the industries from the developed to the developing countries also leads to increase in employment in the informal sector. Women’s employment is often favoured in many of these industries. In the process of ‘development’, therefore, women are most susceptible to marginalisation. Traditionally, women’s employment has been limited to those activities, which are closely linked to domestic and household duties. Due to socio-cultural attitudes vis-à-vis women’s participation in the labour market, they have been occupying activities related to agriculture, forestry, fishing, animal husbandry, garment manufacturing, food processing and so on. Over the years, with the pressure of population on available land and natural resources, economic compulsions have necessitated women’s participation in the labour market. Economic necessity often compels women to accept low paying jobs, thereby making their ‘aspiration wages’ lower in comparison to male workers. Such ‘depressed wage’ phenomenon is responsible for the increase in women’s participation in the labour
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Wage cost advantages of the employers therefore, determine the pattern of such female employment. Additionally, the constraints on women's work outside home provide the basis for promoting contractual and piece-rate work. It is sometimes argued that women prefer to work from home because in this way they can look after their children, also attend to household chores and make a living. True, in the absence of better quality programmes of child care, non-participation of male responsibility in housework, women may prefer to work from home. But there is a serious implication for work shifting to home; the process of a woman's becoming a worker and building solidarity with co-workers is impaired.

The intensification of globalisation of the Indian economy over the past decade has dramatically influenced Indian social life, both economically and culturally. With liberalization and opening up of the economy to global competition, entrepreneurs have been forced to reduce costs, which is why they employ more 'flexible workforce'. A downward homogenization of labour conditions compels workers to accept more and more inferior conditions of work. This leads to an intensification of the process of informalisation, casualisation and feminisation of the labour force. Data reveal that women's wages and female to male wage ratio continue to be low (Kundu 1993). This is particularly marked at the lowest end of the labour market, i.e., at the level of home-based work.

Home-based Work

Broadly speaking, home-based work refers to that economic activity, which is carried out at a worker's own home or any other place but
not in the employer's establishment or on hired premises. The ILO defines "homework" as work carried out by a person to be referred to as home-based worker: (a) in his/her home or any other premises of his/her choice other than the workplace of the employer; (b) for remuneration; (c) which results in a product or service as specified by the employer irrespective of who provides the material, equipment or other inputs (quoted in Singh 2000).

Home-based work is done either for an employer or an agency, or, in some cases such workers work independently producing goods and services that they carry to the local market for sale. Generally, however, the work is done for an employer or a contractor engaged by an employer on a contract job normally at the worker's homestead. This kind of industrial contracting and subcontracting restricts interaction among workers, which act as a major constraint in labour group formation. Contractual and informal arrangements reduce managerial and supervisory costs of the employers and save them from facing any demands of the workers for their rights. In such circumstances, they can easily evade legislation on labour rights.

Undercounting and under-valuation of home-based work is fundamental to the economic sub-ordination of home-workers, especially women home-based workers. The contribution of home-based work is not part of the official statistics, and since policy does not start with the presumption of a distinct contribution by home-based workers to economic activity, hardly any allowance is made for the asymmetric effect of macro-economic policy on home-based work (Singh 2000). It is the most inconsequential form of work going by the complete absence of it in
almost all major official policy and planning documents, though it is in these production forms that the real economy is evident. As mentioned earlier, women's labour in the home-based work is often seen as supplementary household labour. Their productive work is assumed as an extension of their domestic duties – 'helping out' their husbands or their sons or brothers, who are perceived as the household's breadwinners. Therefore, the undercounting of women home-based workers is particularly acute. There are other biases at work also. It is often assumed that working from home is only an activity in which persons indulge only in their leisure time. But, it has been found that for them home-based work is the major or the only source of income. It is actually their leisure that they give up, as their workday is not defined.

In our study of women embroiderers in the chikan industry of Lucknow, the above-mentioned circumstances of the women would be explored. Embroiderers are forced to conform to the structure of the society and the industry as women and also as workers. This burdens them with various health problems and affects their sense of well being in more ways than one.

The Chikan Industry

The organisation and productive relations in the chikan industry fit wholly within the contemporary capitalist world. The embroiderers work in an industry in which low skills and intensive labour are becoming the norm. Women make the finest as well as the crudest work, yet they are connected in that the makers of fine work derive their basic living from making inferior work for the mass market, or sub-contracting it to less
skilled women. The way in which embroiderers make a living is increasingly the pattern for many workers around the world who are underemployed, poor and exploited (e.g. Beneria and Roldan 1987, Singh and Kelles-Viitanen 1987, Collins and Gimenez 1990, Prügl 1996).

Female seclusion, sexual segregation and ideologies of gender difference inhibit self-assertion among embroiderers, and ensure many embroiderers’ ignorance of the market for and prices of the products they make. Women have always been a cheap source of embroidery labour, but only recently have they come to dominate all skill levels in the craft, from the lowest to the highest, as chikan has been transformed into a mass market commodity. The transformation of chikan embroidery from a largely male dominated craft into one from which men have disappeared altogether has occurred simultaneously with an overall decline in the quality of chikan products. The feminisation of chikan production is taken by embroiderers and manufacturers alike to be indicative of decline; but the association of women and low quality conveniently ignores the fact that undervalued female labour suits the needs of the rapidly developing manufacturing industry.

This thesis has tried to explore the labour process in the chikan industry and the position of women in it. What are the terms and conditions that the industry creates for them? What are the social and cultural restrictions within which these women are required to function? Why are they unable to organise themselves to give a common voice to their issues and problems? What are the implications of these for their health and well being? For this, women’s own perceptions of their health and well being as an outcome of their social, working and living conditions
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have been studied. Besides, the workers have been categorized into four groups on the basis of their locale (rural and urban) as well as mode of employment (home-based and centre-based). This was done with the purpose of comparing their different circumstances and the affects thereof on the lives of the embroiderers.

In the following chapter, we have tried to evolve a perspective of women workers. It includes tracing their history along with the industrial revolution and the workers' movements, discussing the dynamics of the sexual division of labour, and their place the contemporary industrial society. In chapter 3, the problem to be studied has been conceptualised, and the methodology of the study has been worked out.

In chapter 4, a brief history of chikan embroidery and its association of Lucknow have been provided. Also, in order to develop an understanding of the structure of the industry, the multistaged chikan production process and the different specialists involved in each stage are described. In chapter 5, apart from drawing a demographic profile of the chikan embroiderers in all the four categories, we provide an account of the social and ecological perspectives of their lives. Chapter 6 describes the embroidery work, wages, working styles, and other work related issues of the embroiderers as well as female sub-contractors. We also discuss in this chapter, the process of acquisition and transmission of chikan skills. Following this, the health and well being issues of the embroiderers have been captured in chapter 7. These include their nutritional intake, symptoms of health problems, their family planning practices, pregnancy and childbirth related issues and also their access to and utilisation of healthcare services.
In the concluding chapter, we discuss how the socio-cultural structures of the women's lives render them vulnerable to the patriarchal and capitalist system of functioning of the chikan industry. This ensures their further decline into the depths of destitution and deprivation, which is expressed in the condition of their health and the quality of their lives.
References


