Chapter 2

PERSPECTIVES
ON
WOMEN WORKERS
When we look at the various categories and statistics of work, we have to ask what is being counted as work. For many years now, in many societies, only work outside the home - productive work - has been counted as 'real' work. As it is also linked to pay or income, official statistics also refer to the number of people in 'economic activity' as those involved in work.

The concept of work developed into modern times by way of a long march from the presumed original role of ensuring subsistence. Historically in the Greek Civilisation, work needed for the satisfaction of material needs was held to be degrading and largely left to the slaves. Higher callings such as philosophy and politics were not classified as work (Mèda 1995; Piore 1995). The pertinent point is that work as a concept was limited in ambit, pejorative in usage, and without any claims to central ideological value (Lyon-Caen 1996).

Gradually, over the ages the concept of work was transformed: from instrumental/utilitarian (work for survival or subsistence) to individual (work as a psychological imperative intrinsic to human nature); then from ethical (work as a spiritual calling and source of redemption) to social (work as an implied contract of social obligation, as a process of socialization, to maintain social solidarity and cohesion). These developments culminated in the secularization work as a factor of production in the industrial machine. This further leads to the industrial concept when work was the lever of authority and control. As industrialism gathered momentum, the scales tipped towards urban living and structured employment. Idealism faded in the face of extreme instrumentalism of the labour market. These trends were mitigated by the new collective solidarity
of organized labour and a public conscience that gave rise to labour reform. A further consequence was another paradigm shift in the role and meaning of work. Employment became the conventional indicator for the allocation of national welfare and for assessment of the public liabilities of the citizen. To speak generally, work in industry lost the factor of aspiration and was deprived of ethical sanction (Kelly 2000).

The change was never complete. Because a 'civilization of work' had emerged (Castel 1996), however, work was sanctified as the touchstone of citizenship as well as economic utility. The concept of work as a human imperative took on greater importance, as work became the most significant channel to social affiliation and relationships and defined community standing. These trends reflected the new primacy of economic considerations in the ideology of the state. The citizen was valued first and foremost, as 'economic man'. In the evolution of western societies, these many concepts of work have emerged. None was completely dropped off at the gate of the Industrial Revolution; at the threshold of the post-industrial order, none has been completely abandoned (Kelly 2000).

The Industrial Revolution swiftly transformed Great Britain from a mainly agricultural country into the 'Workshop of the World'. It compelled the parliament to reform itself, and raised the middle class to political power as well as to affluence. It also created the modern wage-earning class - the proletariat which, nominally free, can live only by selling its labour for a wage. This, of course does not mean that there were no wageworkers before the Industrial Revolution, but it does mean that only with the revolution did the wage earners became conscious of themselves as a class, and began to make a common cause over an area wider than that
of a single occupation or industry. In creating the proletariat, the Industrial Revolution gave birth to the Labour Movement. During the last years of the eighteenth century and early decades of the nineteenth, there was a gradual growth of the working class point of view. Though long before the Industrial Revolution there were trade unions and strikes as well as friendly societies, and other organisations consisting of manual workers. But, until nearly the end of the eighteenth century these bodies seem to have had little contact with one another, and little consciousness of a community of view and interest. The sense of unity came only when the Industrial Revolution began to form all the workers in the common mould of the wage-system (Cole 1960).

The Labour Movement is an organisation, or rather many forms of organisation, based upon the sense of a common status and a common need for mutual help. A trade union or a cooperative society is not, by the mere fact of its existence and adoption of a certain method part of the Labour Movement. The term 'movement' implies a common end, or at least a community of purpose, which is real and influences people's thoughts and actions even if it is imperfectly apprehended or largely unconscious. The growth of a clearly articulate Labour Movement is, however, by no means a single continuous process. We can divide the whole history of the movement from the Industrial Revolution onwards to three broadly distinct phases. First comes a period which is chiefly one of revolt - a succession of uprisings, using different means and forms of organisation against the new industrial conditions and the new capitalist power in the society. The second phase stretching approximately from 1848 to eighteen eighties, was the period of acclimatization to capitalism, and acceptance of industrialism as the basis of the social order. This
explains its moderation. From revolting against capitalism, the workers passed to the task of organising their forces within it. They built up stable trade unions and cooperative societies, and began to send a few workmen to represent their point of view in the Parliament. In this period, the Labour Movement regarded as a complex of organizations assumed something like its modern form. But at that time, it could only fight for better wages and conditions, for recognition and for the right to organize freely, and to build up its unions and cooperative societies into strong protective bodies. It did not challenge capitalism; rather it accepted the capitalist system, and tried to work within it for the improvement of the workers lot. The alliance of liberalism and labour, a marked feature of the mid-Victorian compromise was the clearest expression of the transitional period in the growth of the working class movement. The third phase beginning in the eighteen eighties was marked by the emergence of socialism as the creed of a growing body of workers. There, accompanied it, first, a great extension of the scope of trade unionism, which for the first time since the collapse of 1834 began to make an effective appeal to the poorer and the less skilled grades of workers, and secondly, the rise of labour as an independent political force. Under socialist influence, the exclusiveness of the trade union movement was gradually broken down and the idea of working class unity found practical expression in both the Industrial and Political affairs (Cole 1960).

The modern Labour Movement, though its structure and policy differ from country to country is dictated by certain conditions, everywhere fundamentally the same. It is the child of modern capitalism out of Industrial Revolution, and its essential basis is the modern class of wageworkers – proletariat – among whom it arises as the expression of an
essential community of class, interest and experience. Its most universal and spontaneous form is the trade union – the association of wage-workers for the protection and improvement of the standard of life. As the movement grows, it passes through a process of differentiation. As the wage workers develop their common consciousness, they create political and propagandist bodies of their own, for the dissemination of the working class doctrines and for the conduct of working class political agitation. First labour and socialist parties and then communist parties arise in many countries and gradually establish international relationships. Sometimes, these political and propagandist bodies are based structurally upon, or intimately linked up with, the trade unions. Cooperation, like trade unionism, is a movement arising spontaneously among the workers for their mutual protection. Trade unions, cooperative societies, political parties and socialist organizations – these together make up the modern working class movement.

Women And Labour History

The failure to include women in labour history has had its effect on the development of the labour movement, especially trade union movement. It has tended to reinforce the attitude that women workers are not part of the class struggle, an attitude that has perpetuated the sexual division of labour and, the sexual divisions within the trade union movement. From the outset of the Industrial Revolution, the one feature, which was common to all women’s work, was low pay. Before the Industrial Revolution women earned less as day labourers than men even for the same work (Boston 1980). This tradition of unequal pay, low pay and low evaluation of women’s skills which formed the basis of the pay and
status of women workers entering the textile industry in the early nineteenth century and other areas of industrial labour subsequently. The productive role, which women had played as part of the economic unit of the family, was largely forgotten in the social and economic changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution (Boston 1980).

Working Class Women and Industrialisation

Louise Tilly and Joan Scott, in their study, "Women, Work and Family", studied the experiences of working class women during the process of industrialization in Europe. They raised new questions, which emphasised the importance of breaking down the barrier between work and family in the study of labour history. Further, they effectively challenged the 'misleading' interpretation of industrialization which suggested that it was virtually synonymous with women working in textile mills. While industrialization did mean that women increasingly assisted their families financially by earning an individual wage, such employment neither provided the only, nor the predominant form of wage-earning activity for women. Rather, women remained concentrated in 'traditional' sectors of the economy while occupations such as domestic service expanded as England in particular industrialized. In the cotton textile mills, the vast majority of women workers were between the ages of 16 to 21 and single. Married women generally worked as paid labour only if financially necessary, especially if they were married to men in low-paying jobs.

Michael Anderson, in his study of the Family Structures in Nineteenth Century Lancashire, pointed to the importance of family as a
resource during the industrializing period. Women’s employment patterns revolved around the family rather than the reverse.

While the state was concerned with ‘male individuals’, the Industrial Revolution was based on the labour of ‘child and female individuals’. In 1838 only 23 per cent of textile factory workers were adult men (‘Annual Report of the Women’s Protective and Provident League 1875’ in 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. In different branches or geographical areas of textile industries women did different work. Men quickly gained a dominant position in the cotton industry by controlling the most skilled jobs, those of spinning and weaving. The sexual divisions in labour were, thus, quickly established. Once established, these divisions became entrenched by a sexual pay structure, which paid women about half the male rate. Women working in exclusive female work earned even lower rates. It was against this picture of entrenched divisions between men and women workers, divisions that mirrored the social and legal status of women that the early trade unions began to organize. From the beginnings of trade unions organizations, a variety of attitudes emerged towards what was seen as ‘the problem of female labour’. The most exceptional attitude emerged in a few of the textile unions, who established the first mixed unions for men and women workers. Some men trade unionists while they were not prepared to open up their membership to women, did believe that women should be organized separately and on rare occasions offered support to that end (Boston 1980). Since few trade unionists considered the issue of the ‘rights of women’, the attitudes, which evolved in relation to the organization of women, were adopted in response to women’s economic position. The fact
that women were paid about half the male rate for the same amount of work meant that they, as cheap labour, were seen by men as a potential, or actual threat to men’s jobs. But, with very few exceptions men did not challenge the wage rate paid for the job; they challenged the women’s right to the job. Sarah Boston in her book *Women Workers and the Trade Union Movement* discusses these circumstances and their implications.

‘Nowhere did anyone suggest any way around the problem other than trying to control entry, reasoning with the employer and hoping that the practice would somehow go away. So, women continued to take jobs at half pay, because they needed bread ‘that day – that hour’ and ‘poor women became the enemy of poor men’. For most craft unions a state of warfare between men and women workers seemed the inevitable future until some day when women could be eliminated from the workforce.’

But, in 1830, the Ramsay Congress of Spinners passed a resolution urging women to form their own organization. During the 1830s and 1840s many women textile workers did take action and organize separately. In 1833, in Glasgow women and men spinners and power-loom weavers combined to raise money to fight for equal pay. Such cooperation was even more evident in a series of disputes in the bookbinding trade in London in the 1830s and 1840s. Women textile workers were by no means the only women workers to take action or to organize separately. Nor were the textile unions the only ones to support a policy of separate organization for women. The Grand National Consolidated Trade Union of Great Britain made a specific point in its charter of laying down guidance for the separate organization of women. The textile unions became the pioneers of mixed unions. They negotiated rates based on ‘the rate for the job’ and not on a rate for ‘the sex of the worker doing the job’. The fact that the unions
organized so widely in the cotton industry enabled them to achieve through collective bargaining and agreed to a list of wage rates in spinning. This historic agreement was known as the 'Blackburn List'.

While women workers did protest, strike, demonstrate and organize, there is little evidence that their action had any real effect in terms of protecting or improving their wages, hours and conditions except in the textile industry. Even there collective bargaining only achieved fixed wage rates. In all industries women workers were appallingly exploited in the 19th Century. Bad work conditions, excessively long hours and outrageously low wages were the norm. Outside the textile unions, male trade unionists almost entirely washed their hands off the plight of women workers. The Government became the main body concerned with their protection. In 1844, an act was passed restricting the hours of women employed in textile factories to 12 hours a day. The employers quickly found a way of evading the act: they employed women on relay systems, making it virtually impossible for the inspectors to discover the hours actually worked. To try to stop such evasions the 1850 Factory Act was passed. It laid down that the 10-hour legal maximum working hours for women textile workers must be fixed between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. or 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. As such, the Act of 1850 was an important turning point in the history of English factory legislation, since by it a normal working day was for the first time expressly established (Hutchins and Harrison 1911). In the 1860 factory legislation was extended tentatively to include certain sanitary provisions as well as regulations about the fencing of machinery. The 1842 Mines Act and the Act of 1844 restricting the hours of women working in textile factories marked the beginning of the long history of legislation relating to women workers. From the outset of protective legislation the trade union
movement has looked to parliament rather than organisation to deal with some of the most critical problems relating to women workers. The history of women workers' struggle for better wages, hours, conditions and opportunities is closely linked with legislation.

While the organization of women workers was, before the 1870s, mostly confined to the textile unions, the roots of that organization had been strongly laid. The social and economic position which women were forced into by the Industrial Revolution created the conditions, which made it difficult to organize women, even though the behaviour of the textile unions showed that it was by no means impossible.

In 1874, Emma Paterson founded the Women's Protective and Provident League. The League was set up as a central body to help with the establishment of individual unions. This help extended financial assistance, advertising, convening meetings, and generally giving advice as to how a union should be organized and administered.

If we explore the role and position of women in trade unions we find that there operates an institutional mobilization of bias which sets a trade union 'agenda' and which excludes a number of issues which are specific to women workers. This agenda not only serves to limit the articulation and representation of women's interests within unions but also to direct women's activities away from collective organisation in unions. The main growth of union membership all over the world during the 1970s was among women workers and the decline in union membership during the 1980s and 1990s has been least rapid among women workers. However, there are still proportionally fewer women in trade unions than men. Why?
In an attempt to respond to this question we can discuss the issues of organization and the issues of recruitment. In the literature on organization, the following arguments have developed, linked to workplace, skill levels and part time working. Firstly it has been argued that women tend to work in small, scattered workplaces where it is generally more difficult to organize (Ellis 1981; Aldred 1981; Beale 1982). Many women are employed in small firms, in isolated groups, in the informal economy and in home working. Because of the nature of their work, many women are employed in small work groups even where the employing organization is large. This makes communication with wider union structures difficult. Secondly, Ellis and Aldred argue that organization has always been greater among skilled workers who have greater bargaining power, whereas women are employed more in unskilled work (Ellis 1981; Aldred 1981). Munro (1999) finds this viewpoint problematic. According to her, the concept of ‘skill’ cannot be understood without reference to social definitions in the context of a sexually segregated labour market. Are men better organized because they are more skilled, or are they defined as more skilled because they are better organized? Does women’s work involve less objective skill content, or is women’s work defined as unskilled because women are less well organized? The relationship between skill and organization is thus, an important one. Thirdly, it has also been argued that it is more difficult to organize part time workers, and that 40 per cent of women work part time (Aldred 1981; Beale 1982). Part time workers have fewer legal protections than full time workers, which may make organization more risky for part timers. While this does point to added difficulties to organization, Munro (1999) is of the view that part time working alone is not a good indicator of the level of
union organization. Where a firm or organization is unionized, part time workers are just as likely as full time workers to be union members.

In terms of recruitment, we have already discussed earlier that historically, some unions have barred women from membership and many have only reluctantly admitted women members (Boston 1980; Drake 1984). Although the world has witnessed an increase of women union members over the years, yet the comparative failure to recruit more women in the unorganized sector may be linked with problems of isolated work groups discussed earlier.

A considerable attention has been paid to the role of trade unions, impact of trade unions, function and structure of trade unions etc. in India. (Sheth 1968, Holmstram 1977). However, most of these studies kept themselves confined to the problems of male workers, and not much attention was paid to the problems or expectations women members from their trade unions. Until the First World War, there was no organised and effective trade union of industrial workers in India. Organised efforts in the form of trade unions started from early twentieth century. The Madras Labour Union (MLU) was formed in 1918 (Karnik 1977). Almost at the same time, some trade unions had come up in different industrial centres of India such as Bombay, Calcutta, and Kanpur. The trade union organisation formed in Kanpur was called the Kanpur Mazdoor Sabha (KMS). Gandhiji’s leadership of the textile workers in Ahmedabad had triggered off the systematic approach to unionism in India. In 1920, the All India Trade Union Congress came into existence, which was closely associated to the Indian National Congress. This had provided a platform to launch many more trade unions in close association with various political parties of India
Perspectives on Women Workers (Sheth 1968). In the early trade-union activities, the participation of women workers was almost negligible, barring the period of 1940s and 1950s. E.g. the legislation on women's rights to equal pay for equal work was passed long ago, but even the active trade unions have not been able to secure complete implementation of this legislation (Gajalakshmi, 1998).

Having discussed the position of women in the labour history, we move ahead to review the theoretical and operational aspects of women's working lives. Therefore, the following part of the chapter has been divided into two sections. Section I will focus on the theoretical analysis of women's labour, while section II will throw up the operational and policy issues in this regard.

Section I

Sexual Division Of Labour

The major difference of interest between men and women in the labour market stems from the hierarchical division of labour market by sex. Increasing involvement in wage labour has had a limited effect on women's subordinate position in the society. While women have moved in greater numbers into professional and administrative jobs, they remain concentrated in low-paid work, in part-time work, in low-grade work, and in home-making. Despite the introduction of legislation in the field of equal pay and sex-discrimination, the difference between men and women workers in terms of pay and skill levels has changed very little (Munro, 1999). Here, it would be beneficial to consider the general theoretical approaches which seek to explain causal relationship for the disadvantageous position of women in the labour market: the neo-classical
theories, the institutional theories of segmentation, and the gender or feminist theories. While the neo-classical theories explain the sex-inequalities in terms of differences in human capital, the institutional theories relate sex-differences in the labour market to the structure of labour market. The feminist theories on the other hand present a historical approach and explain the subordinate position of women in the labour market in terms of cultural factors relating to the status and role of women in society (Chandola 1995).

For the neo-classical theorists, the difference in human capital (e.g. domestic responsibility, differences in physical endurance, education and training, hours of work and turn-over) which influence productivity and labour supply conditions lead to inequalities in sex. Accordingly, the crucial factor responsible for lower level of earnings for women is the lower level of human capital, which in turn leads to lower levels of productivity. Though the productivity differentials may only partially be explained in terms of male/female differences in human capital as far as the capitalist countries are concerned, this factor assumes greater importance in case of developing countries. A number of country case studies reveal that those developing countries where the educational levels of women are lower than those of men, earning differentials between the two sexes have been observed (Anker and Hein 1986). The lower levels of education and skill may lead to an inferior position of women in the labour market (Anker and Hein 1986). However, several assumptions on which the human capital approach rests have been questioned by both labour market segmentation and gender theorists. Two of such important assumptions are: inability of women to maintain continuity of labour supply due to their important role of household work and rearing of children, and the assumption of equality
of opportunity for men and women in the market. The other assumptions of mobility of labour and factors of production, overall demand and supply interrelationships as determinants of wage rates, the homogeneity and substitutability of labour, though theoretically sound, lack empirical validity (Loveridge and Mok 1979). The neo-classical model represented 'ideal type' conditions and has been influencing the thinking of the labour market theorists for over a century.

The institutional theories of labour market segmentation relate sex-differences in the labour market to the structure of labour market. They explain how men and women get trapped into separate segments of the labour market in explaining inequalities. The segmentation theories got a fillip at the end of the 1970s at the height of the anti-poverty programmes. These theories can be considered as the refinements of the neo-classical theories in which they view the labour market as segmented or stratified by institutional barriers. The different segments function as independent markets having their own demand and supply schedules, indicating the imperfections of the market, differing consumer tastes and preferences and varying responses to changes in price. It means that the supplier faces an imperfect market rather than the perfectly competitive market, as visualized in the neo-classical models. The wage rates are determined not by the overall demand and supply functions, but on the basis of the demand and supply functions prevalent in the sub-markets or within the specific segments of the labour markets. A sound theoretical base to the theories of labour market segmentation has been provided by Doeringer and Piore (1971), who presented a dual market theory. They categorise jobs into primary and secondary sectors. The primary sector jobs are characterized relatively as 'good' in terms of remuneration, stability and opportunities for
promotion, and secondary sector jobs with low pay, less security and little scope for advancement. Since men are perceived as ‘more stable’ they are more likely to be employed in the primary sector, and women are more likely to be relegated to the secondary sector jobs. Loveridge and Mok (1979) offer the following explanations for such perpetual segregation, based on class, race and sex in terms of stigmatization of certain groups:

“Stigmatisation is a social process by which a dominant group attributes impunity to features of a subordinate or foreign or outside group...it is normally a defence of an economically privileged position which cannot be rationally justified. It is normally, psychologically internalized and often unconscious. Although resulting from a group ideology, it is therefore exercised unknowingly in everyday individual actions”

Another approach presented by the Marxian economists relates the discriminatory mechanisms of the labour market to the power and domination theory. This is essentially a historical approach, which explains the phenomenon as resulting from the capitalistic mode of production. It emphasises the role of women as producers in partnership with men on equitable and non-exploitative basis during the pre-capitalist form of production. This relationship vanished with the emergence of the capitalist form of production governed by men, and women were relegated to constitute the ‘industrial reserve army’. In this process, the labour market got segmented into the relatively separate markets for men and women, restricting occupational choices for women. Women, thus, got crowded into these occupations along with other disadvantaged groups - low-income, insecure, and less-stable jobs. According to the overcrowding
approach, women have to compete for limited women-specific jobs within themselves in the overcrowded segment of the labour market. This depresses their wages. On the other hand, women have no competition with men in a large number of male-specific jobs. This helps in maintaining higher level of wages for men. This process has continued perpetually, though unconsciously. In the historical institutionalization of markets, the attachment of stigma becomes a 'job characteristic' (Loveridge and Mok 1979). On institutionalization of the sex segmentation of the labour market, even if there are no restrictions to the entry of women to certain jobs, they unconsciously feel that only certain specific jobs are meant for them. Thus, on the one hand, because of women's belief that their choices are restricted, and, on the other hand, discriminatory practices of the exploiters, women are thrown to peripheral jobs (Papola 1982). Thus, the dual market approach centers on the following propositions: firstly, the labour market is segmented into two broad segments, viz. primary and secondary sectors. Secondly, the wage employment determinants of the two sectors are different. Thirdly, the mobility of workers between the two sectors is limited, with the result that the women workers are crowded into the secondary sector. Finally, the secondary sector is overcrowded and suffers from underemployment. The dual market approach has been criticized because it does not provide insights into the sex segregation that occurs within the primary and secondary sectors (Anker and Hein 1986).

The gender or feminist theories find the basic cause of discrimination in the labour market in cultural factors. The subordinate position of women in the labour market is attributed to the responsibilities of domestic work, particularly childcare. The characteristics of the occupations women tend to perform are also shaped by their domestic roles. The problem is
accentuated when one considers the long-term effect of women's double burden on their psychological built and physique, resulting in loss of productivity. Therefore, the changes in the structure of the labour market will not ipso facto bring about an improvement in the position of women unless it is accompanied by a shift in their position in the household; otherwise women will continue to be crowded in the secondary sector (Jelin 1982). Another view presented by the gender theorists takes a historical approach in trying to explain what they feel are the processes leading to male domination in particular circumstances. Anne Witz (1968), for instance, argues how patriarchal control during the process of professionalism of medical practice closed off routes of access to medical skills and knowledge to women as well as their opportunities for legitimate practice. Feminist theories also stress that women's occupations tend to be extensions of their domestic roles (e.g. teaching children, cleaning, servicing). Moreover, just as women's domestic work is devalued within most societies, so are these occupations and skills.

For the neo-classical theorists the crucial factor responsible for lower levels of earning of women is the lower level of productivity. The labour market segmentation theories on the other hand view the labour market as stratified by institutional barriers and explain how men and women get slotted into separate segments. The different segments function as an independent market. As a result the wage rates are determined by the demand and supply functions prevalent in the sub markets or the specific segments of the labour markets. The gender theorists find the basic cause of discrimination in the labour market in cultural factors. Like other developing countries, in India a large portion of the activities are undertaken in the unorganized sector. This sector is low paid, lacks
security, bargaining power, and state privileges. It essentially has the features of the secondary sector in which women are disproportionately high. Women not only get slotted in specific sectors and within each sector, into specific occupations, but also further get crowded into a narrow range of specific types of jobs. This tends to increase competition among them, thus further depressing their earnings (Chandola 1995).

The nature of hierarchical labour market, i.e. a market divided by sex has important implications for the trade unionism, which is based on the maintenance of division and operates through a restricted trade union agenda (Munro 1999). The maintenance of control in the early craft organizations necessitated the maintenance divisions within the working class. Power for the craft worker lay in control over the supply of labour and exclusion of all unskilled labour. However, capitalist relations were based in pre-existing sexual hierarchies of power. It could be argued that with the rise of capitalist production, the necessity to exclude unskilled labour became largely synonymous with the necessity to exclude female labour.

**Feminisation Of Poverty**

Feminisation of poverty is not just a catch phrase. It refers to the gender bias in poverty and a tendency towards the impoverishment of women. The term, feminisation of poverty, was first coined by Diane Pearce in 1978; ever since, many studies have described the factors which make women prone to victimisation. In this context, we need to make a clear-cut distinction between the two phenomena: feminisation of poverty and impoverishment of women. The former can be defined as an increase
in the number or share of women among the poor. The latter refers to the worsening of women’s living standards, i.e. women in general and poor women in particular are getting even poorer. Although the level of economic development is the primary determinant of poverty in general, economic growth is not the remedy for female poverty either in developing or industrialized countries. Despite rapid economic growth and high standards of social security, there is still a growing tendency towards the impoverishment of women and the feminisation of poverty in many industrialized countries.

After more than a decade of preoccupation with ‘stabilisation’ and growth by the early 1990s, mainstream policy institutions pronounced a renewed interest in attending to the problems of global poverty. These concerns were given greater voice and urgency through a series of global summits that inscribed the early part of the decade and signaled at the very least, a discursive shift in the development policy (Razavi 2000). One of its outcomes has been the ‘New Poverty Agenda’ (Lipton and Maxwell 1992) of multilateral development agencies, which identifies ‘labour intensive growth’ as its central tenet.

Recently, there has been some apprehension about the way women and their needs are being addressed in anti-poverty analyses and policies, and concern that gender subordination – an equity issue – is being collapsed into an agenda about increasing welfare (Jackson 1996). The links between gender and poverty have also been captured through the gender-disaggregation of well being outcomes, which has served to highlight significant female disadvantage (UNDP 1995). Yet, it is being increasingly argued that such interlinkages have escaped careful analytical scrutiny. The
gender analysis of poverty also needs to unravel how gender differentiates the social processes leading to poverty.

At the conceptual level, poverty is increasingly seen as a multidimensional phenomenon, which includes market-based consumption (or income) as well as the public provision of goods and services, access to common property resources and intangible dimensions of a good life such as clean air, dignity, autonomy and low levels of disease and crime. The proponents of the conventional approach argue that income/consumption measure is still the 'best single proxy' for poverty since it can incorporate non-market goods and services and a wide range of other utilities and disutilities, through 'shadow prices' into a monetary equivalent that is easy to compare over time and across contexts. Their critics argue that common property resources and state-provided commodities have usually been ignored in practice, and the consumption of non-traded goods has been under-estimated (Baulch 1996). One of the more positive outcomes of the money-metric approach has been to look more directly at what people can do or be – indicators of physical quality of life (Morris 1979) or functionings (Sen 1985a). Ironically, the work on social indicators seems to meet the requirements of neo-classical micro-economic analysis, individualism far more easily than the poverty line measures. Given that these beings and doings are directly measurable on the individual, gender inequality can be made more readily visible. The framework has inspired a large body of feminist research on well being outcomes documenting significant and sometimes alarming incidents of female disadvantage (Jackson 1996, Mukhopadhyay and Higgins 1988).
International comparisons of female poverty and the feminisation of poverty are still rare, but on the basis of official statistics some 'stylised facts' can be developed on key relationships between economic development and the economic status of women (Allen 1992). The Population Crisis Committee (PCC) published a report entitled 'Poor, Powerless and Pregnant' (1988), which was based on aggregate statistics and previous research, including information on social, economic and political inequalities between men and women. If the results of the PCC are combined with some of the indicators of economic development – derived from the World Development Report (World Bank 1988) – we can say roughly that the lower the GNP per capita of a country, the poorer the women and the greater the inequality between men and women. General inequality has been measured by variables concerning educational attainment, condition of health, labour force participation rate, etc. by gender. Among twelve countries with the lowest living standards of women and the greatest inequalities between men and women there are five of the world's poorest countries. The 'positive correlation' between the level of GNP and gender inequalities in economic, social and political variables seems to be evident. Cultural and religious values, traditions and underlying economic inequalities in the distribution of income and wealth also explain the poor economic status of women and gender inequalities in the economy.

But everything does not count in GNP, especially if we study poverty as the value of living standard. The main importance lies in the quality of life, and not in the possession of material assets. This kind of approach emphasizes the importance of those features in the economy that relate to the fulfillment of what have been seen as the 'basic needs' of
people (Sen 1987b). The impact of cultural values on gender bias in poverty has recently been discussed in many studies (Sen 1987a; Sen 1987b; Sen 1987c). In these studies the gender bias in poverty was studied by means of statistics on nutritional levels and population structure. The indicators of poverty usually vary from the level of distribution of individual income to life expectancy and mortality rates. In the least developed countries, demographic data are usually the only available source of information that can be used to study economic deprivation and poverty. Sen (1987a) has pointed out an interesting relationship between the gender bias in poverty and income activity of women. Considering the Asian and African countries by regional blocks, it seems that the female-to-male economic activity ratio coincides exactly with the female-to-male life expectancy. This makes it possible to argue that higher economic activity of women – participation in productive activities in the formal sector – goes with social and economic structures that are more favourable to the overall position of women in the society and act against gender bias.

In many studies the productive activity of women refers to women's unpaid employment. This kind of view is very approximate since unpaid work – both in formal and informal sector is also productive. Work in the informal sector is most often agricultural and household work and in some places also service or manufacturing work. The original Boserup (1970) hypothesis, that a lower relative involvement of women in formal productive activities may bring about a greater gender bias and vice versa, is to some extent confirmed by Sen's comparison of Asian and African low-income countries.
While women's economic activity and participation in wage labour has become more general all over the world, the share of woman-headed households in the total population has been simultaneously growing (Clark 1986). In some industrialized countries the share of woman-headed households, with no adult male in the family, has grown to as high as 20 to 40 per cent. The common factors behind these changes in family structures are: more divorce and teenage mothers in developed countries (Peterson 1987; Pressman 1989) as well as increasing male unemployment and immigration of husbands to urban manufacturing areas in developing countries.

In industrialised countries, the change in family structure has become one of the most important factors in the feminisation of poverty during the 1970s and 1980s. Many studies have stressed the importance of marital status as a secondary factor of women's poverty (Corcoran, Duncan and Hill 1986). Although the labour market status of women had improved during the 1970s and 1980s in many industrialised countries, the occupational segregation of the labour market and wage differentials by gender still exist. Traditionally, women have worked in the sectors and occupations 'less productive' than those dominated by men. In developing countries, most of the work done by women remains unrecorded because of the extensive informal sector (Allen 1992).

From a gender perspective, broader concepts of poverty are more useful than a focus purely on household income levels because they allow a better grasp of the multidimensional aspects of gender disadvantage, such as lack of power to control important decisions that affect one's life (Sen 2000). Along somewhat similar lines it can also be argued that confining the
analysis of gender inequality to basic well being outcomes alone serves to convey that female disadvantage is largely a matter of poverty (Kabeer 2000). This is misleading for two reasons. On the one hand, prosperity within a society may help reduce gender inequality in basic well being outcomes, but intensify social restrictions on women’s autonomy. On the other hand, focus on basic needs failures such as child mortality misses out on other dimensions of gender disadvantage among the poor, which do not take extreme forms, such as women’s heavier workloads. In recent years issues of empowerment and autonomy have entered poverty through a number of different channels.

The persistent poverty and disease syndromes push the women and their families to a state of decapitalisation and indebtedness to meet day-to-day contingencies (Gumber 2000). The high incidence of poverty cuts their household budget both ways, i.e. not only do they have to spend a large amount of money and resources on medical care, but are also unable to earn during the period of illness. Very often they have to borrow funds at very high interest rates to meet both medical expenditure and other household consumption needs. Thus, they are pushed further into a zone of permanent poverty.

The sixth five-year plan (1980-1985) noted that the low status of women in large segments of the Indian society cannot be raised without opening up of opportunities of independent employment and income for them. The report of the working group on employment of women (1978) had pointed out, “a policy of promotion of women’s employment has to go hand in hand with the broader social policy of strengthening women’s

\[1\] Issues related to empowerment of women will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.
participatory roles and their ability to exercise their rights with autonomy and dignity”. Otherwise the increased employability of women will only further increase the load on women, and reduce them to mere beasts of burden (Gajalakshmi, 1998).

Section II

The Unorganised Sector

According to the 1991 census, the size of the workforce in India stood at 314.73 million, which accounted for 37.29 per cent of the total population. On the occupational distribution front, the workforce has been categorised into organised and unorganised sector. Those employed in the unorganised sector accounted for 8.5 per cent (26.75 million), while the unorganised sector accounted for the remaining 91.49 per cent (287.98 million) of the total workforce (Davala, 1994). Amongst women, about 96 per cent worked within the unorganised sector in 1991. Women’s presence in the unorganised sector, thus, is not only extremely high, but is on a steady rise over the years – 94 per cent in the 1970s (Gopalan 1995).

The official definition of ‘unorganised sector’ for statistical and administrative purposes follows what, for want of a better term is called the residual approach, i.e. the labour working in the unorganized sector is that part of the labour which does not work in the organized sector. The organized sector, in turn, is defined as that part of the labour force which is employed in all enterprises in the public sector and most of the non-agricultural establishments in the private sector which employ a minimum of ten workers with the use of power or twenty workers without the use of power (Papola 1979; CMIE 1989). According to the Central Statistical
The unorganized sector includes all those un-incorporated enterprises and household industries (other than the organized ones) which are not regulated by any legislation and which do not maintain annual accounts or balance sheets" (Davala 1994). The trade-unions define the unorganized sector as consisting of 'productive activities' carried out by 'loosely formed groups', which are bound by 'informal contracts' (Davala 1994). This usage of the term treats the nature of employment relationship as a crucial determinant to characterize labour force as organized or unorganized. The categorization of employers, units or establishments for a workable definition is even more problematic in the context of changing structures over time, thereby, accentuating the problem of classification of organized and unorganized workforce. For example, registered factories even in the public sector may employ workers on a casual or contractual basis. On the other hand, workers may be regular permanent employees in informal production units. Such problems raise the question about what exactly constitutes 'unorganized sector' in which more than ninety per cent of the work force is engaged. Are the persons whose employment is characterized by uncertainties, irregular payments, and low bargaining power termed as unorganized workers; or are the workers facing a high degree of underemployment, involved in home-based activities, working in sub-contracting units without much legal protection categorized as unorganized workers? (Rustagi 1997). Perhaps unorganised sector could thus be viewed as a blanket term to describe all the above mentioned categories of workers. Thus, unorganized labour exists across sectors, industries and categories of employment.

India’s industrial development has followed a mixed economy approach since independence, thus giving impetus to growth of small-scale
industries. It continues with lower levels of technological inputs into production, and decentralised process, and perpetuates exploitation of the workers (Gopalan 1995). Like other developing countries, in India, large portions of the activities are undertaken in the unorganised sector. The non-conformity of this sector to a regulatory framework has prompted observations such as the following:

"The informal sector creates a decentralized model of economic organization, which makes formal coordination and planning difficult and problematic. Informal activities distort the factor resource and product markets variously; consequently competition and the official measures of economic performance are also distorted."

(Briassoulis 1999)

However, the most dominant cause of concern among policy makers for almost three decades now is how to prevent the workers from getting marginalized under such circumstances. In addition to the uncertainty of job status, the systematic exclusion of labour from availing certain minimum social benefits, e.g., employees' state insurance, workers' compensation, provident fund, gratuity, pension, maternity leaves, etc., has been widely documented (Das 2000). Poor working environment, long hours of work, and unprotected handling of hazardous substances are all characteristics of the informal enterprises. A specific problem encountered by the labour in this sector is the 'invisibility' of their actual work status and contribution. This potentially reaffirms the social exclusion that they are subjected to (Das 1998). While talking of the unorganised/informal sector, we talk of two different entities. First, there are traditional vocations, mainly artisanal, fixed according to caste and involved in the production of
handicrafts or goods for the pre-capitalist subsistence economies. The second category consists of the enclaves of casualisation and subcontracting within the ‘modern’ sector and the impoverished artisans-turned-proletarians working as wage-labour with the ‘enterprises’. There is additionally, within the unorganized sector, the huge small-scale sector, which falls between these and the unorganized industry proper. Unorganised sector labour would, therefore, include workers working in such enterprises as well as the traditional artisans. (Nigam 1997). Nigam argues that while the traditional sector functions on a different logic, owning to a certain extent the work and the products of their labour, the workers in the second comprise the really alienated labour. Their work is not their own, for which they would be prepared to overwork themselves, without leave, without job security, without health cover and without the minimum operation of labour laws. In the event of falling sick, their labour cannot be substituted by that of other members of the family. In a sense, this part of the unorganized sector combines the worst features of both, the subsistence economies of the past and the insecurities of modern wage labour (Nigam 1997). Despite the negative characterisation of this sector as being ‘clandestine’, ‘illegal’, and ‘unregistered’, its relevance and potential at least in generating employment have risen (Castells and Portes 1989, Llosa, 1990).

According to the 1991 census, women constitute 28 percent of the work force (Table 2.1) and 96 percent of them are located in the unorganized sector (Table 2.2).
Table 2.1 Distribution of the Indian Labour Force by Sex (1991) (in millions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Persons</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>846.3 (100.0)</td>
<td>439.3 (51.9)</td>
<td>407.0 (48.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Population</td>
<td>317 (100.0)</td>
<td>226.4 (71.4)</td>
<td>90.6 (28.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organised Sector</td>
<td>26.8 (100.0)</td>
<td>23.0 (85.8)</td>
<td>3.8 (14.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unorganised Sector</td>
<td>290.2 (100.0)</td>
<td>203.4 (70.0)</td>
<td>86.8 (30.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures in parentheses denote percentage.

Table 2.2 Estimated Labour Force in Organised and Unorganised Sectors (1991) (in millions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sectors</th>
<th>Persons</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organised</td>
<td>26.8 (8.5)</td>
<td>23.0 (10.2)</td>
<td>3.8 (4.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unorganised</td>
<td>290.2 (91.5)</td>
<td>203.4 (89.8)</td>
<td>86.8 (95.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>317.0 (100.0)</td>
<td>226.4 (100.0)</td>
<td>90.6 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures in parenthesis denote percentages of total.
Source: Davala, 1994:5, Based on 1991 Census figures.

Over the last few decades, work participation rates of women have been rising (Table 2.3). The rise of female participation in the unorganised sector is more due to compulsions than any change in work ethos. In a labour surplus economy like India’s with low employment avenues and increasing cost of living, females have been increasingly pushed into the labour market. The rise in employment of women seems to be an outcome of the employers’ preference for female employees, as there exists gender differentiation of wages. Such employment of females due to economic compulsions has been breaking many existing cultural taboos of the Indian society. These circumstances have been worsening the conditions of working women to a large extent. They not only take up all or most of the household chores, but also undertake income-generating activities under stringent working conditions. The nature of their
employment is confined to manual, monotonous and repetitive tasks (Rustagi, 1997).

Table 2.3 Work Participation Rates in India (1971-91) (in millions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Persons Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>34.17</td>
<td>52.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>35.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>29.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>36.70</td>
<td>52.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>38.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>29.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>37.68</td>
<td>51.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>40.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>30.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Varma, et.al, 1996, Based on Census figures.

Women workers are concentrated in the industrial categories such as agriculture, forestry, fishing, manufacturing and services (Table 2.4). Women labour is mostly found in the agricultural sector or in the unorganised small industrial units or as home workers. The majority of the women workers in rural areas are labourers engaged in weeding, sowing, harvesting and threshing. In tea plantations, women are considered more efficient in plucking leaves, which ensures their employment. In the textile industry, weaving is generally carried out by men, while women are involved in spinning and other pre and post weaving activities. In construction, men do the mason’s work, while women carry headloads of construction material. In all the cases, women’s occupations are low paying. The second major part of the workforce are the home-based workers, estimated anywhere between 5 to 20 million; about ten per cent of them are women workers (Sharma 1997).
### Table 2.4 Total Main Workers by Industrial Categories in Organised and Unorganised Sectors (1991) *(in millions)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industrial Category</th>
<th>Main Workers</th>
<th>Workers in the Organised Sector</th>
<th>Workers in unorganised sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture,</td>
<td>191.3</td>
<td>139.4</td>
<td>51.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forestry, Fishing,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunting, etc</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining and</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarrying</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing,</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gas Electricity,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Water</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade and</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport,</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storage and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Services</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>285.9</td>
<td>221.7</td>
<td>64.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes: Figures in parenthesis denote percentages of total main workers in each industrial category.*

*Source: Compiled from Datt, 1997, Table 6 (p.4) and Table 9 (p.8), based on Census figures. Economic Survey Information is used for workers in the organized sector.*

Economic necessity compels them to accept such low-paying work, 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 market (Ramaswamy 1994). The discriminatory treatment against women, however acts as a justification for the employers to employ them as a cost effective device in the industrial machinery. Additionally, the constraints on women’s work outside
the household, due to social taboos and their need to look after the children and attend to other household chores, provide the basis for promoting contractual and piece rate based work. Job contract system also 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 the demands of the workers for their rights. In such circumstances, legislation on labour rights can be easily evaded.

With liberalization, privatization, and opening up of the economy to foreign capital and global competition, entrepreneurs have been forced to reduce costs and tend to employ relatively more ‘flexible’ workforce. A downward homogenization of labour conditions is increasingly being witnessed which compels workers to accept more and more inferior conditions of work (Ghosh 1996). The changes underway in the overall employment scenario as a result of the overall ongoing economic reforms in the country is leading to an intensification of the process of informalisation, casualisation and feminisation. The following issues are thrown up in this regard:

The curtailment of public expenditure constrains the growth of employment mainly in the regular organized government sector. The closure of public sector loss-making units hits this protected workforce including female employees. Additionally, the curtailment of government spending allocated for various employment schemes reduces the potential for women’s employment, especially in the rural areas.
The introduction of voluntary retirement schemes, in a bid to enhance productivity and efficiency has led to widespread retrenchments and redundancies, leaving a substantial number of erstwhile-organized workforce without any source of employment. Women employees are the worst hit under such schemes as they are generally employed in the low-productivity jobs (Ramaswamy 1994).

There is also the issue of ‘technological advancement’, which has an impact on women’s work when male tasks get automated. It increases the pressure of work on those tasks which are reserved for (or are generally given to) women at the lower end of the production process. Such intensification of women’s work is visible when, for instance, women are left with the packaging and labeling of ‘overproduced’ goods (Ramaswamy 1994).

Increasing recourse to informal arrangement regarding women’s employment proves beneficial to the employers but at the cost of the rights of workers. In effect, women workers are facing a dilemma. On the one hand, if the legislation regarding workers’ rights is faithfully implemented, their employment declines. On the other hand, the non-implementation of such rights boosts employment potential, but with an uncertain work environment.

Labour Legislation and Women

The Indian constitution provides for special steps to be taken by the government to improve the conditions of women by establishing separate institutions. The directive principles of state policy, through articles 39 and 42 give necessary protection to women workers. Article 46
directs the state to "promote with special care the education and economic interests of weaker sections of people". This is also considered a directive to improve employment opportunities and conditions of women workers.

The government simultaneously promulgated legislation for the protection of women working in factories, mines and plantations.

**Working Hours of Women Workers**

The Factories Act, 1948, the Mines Act, 1952 and the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 prohibits the employment of women except between 6 a.m. and 7 p.m. However, the women workers in fish curing and fish canning are exempted from these provisions in order to prevent damage and deterioration of raw material. The Mines Act, 1952 (Section 46) prohibits the employment of women in any part of the mine which is below ground. The Mines Act also forbids lifting heavy weight in excess of 65 pounds per adult woman and 55 pounds for adolescents. Moreover, the Factories Act (Section 22(2)) prohibits the employment of women on certain dangerous occupations. It permitted women to work for not more than 9 hours a day; 54 hours a week. According to this act, they were exempted from night work.

**Safety of Women Workers**

The Factories Act (Section 27) prohibits the employment of women in any part of the factory for pressing cotton, in which a cotton-opener is at work. It also prohibits (Section 22) women to clean, lubricate or adjust any part of the prime mover or of any transmission machinery while the prime mover or transmission machinery is in motion. The
Factories Act (Section 34) provides that no person shall be employed in any factory to lift, carry or make any load so heavy, which is likely to cause injury. The Indian Merchant Shipping Act prohibits the recruitment of women except as nurses to the employment on board sea-going ships.

**Special Provisions for Health and Welfare**

The Factories Act (Chapters III, IV and V), Mines Act (Chapter V) and The Plantation Act (Chapters III and IV) provide for special provisions for women regarding health, safety and welfare. These provisions, *inter alia* include separate provisions for latrines and urinals, washing facilities, creches, rest facilities, etc. To give effect to its recommendations the Factories Act, 1934 empowered the local governments to make rules providing for creches. Under Section 58(d) of the Mines Act, 1952, the Central Government is empowered to make rules to provide for suitable room for the use of children under six years belonging to women working in mines.

**Maternity Benefits**

The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 1988, the Employees State Insurance, 1948 and the Plantation labour Act, 1951 provide, *inter alia*, for protection of workers by way of payment of cash, medical bonus and leave with wages. According to the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 1988, a woman worker who has put in not less than 80 days work in the establishment can claim the maternity benefits from the employer.
Equal Remuneration and the Law

Article 39(d) of the constitution proclaims equal pay for equal work for both men and women as a Directive Principal of State Policy which has to be read into the fundamental rights as a matter of interpretation. Article 14 of the Constitution enjoins the State not to deny any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws, and Article 16 declares that there shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state.

The seventh plan draft (1985) maintained that “a number of social enactment have been put on the statute books for removing various constraints which hinder women’s progress. In spite of these measures, they have lagged behind men in different spheres, especially in education. According to the 1981 census, only 14 per cent of total female population in the country fell in the category of ‘workers’. In the 1991 census, it was 22.73 per cent.

Despite the presence of all the other measures, women have been and are being increasingly exploited. Part of the reason for the relatively large employment of women in the informal sector is the absence of any legislation to protect their rights as workers or their special rights/interests as women. As mentioned above there are laws which prohibit the employment of women workers during certain period, particularly the late night hours, restrict the employment of women in mines, place limits on the load that they can be expected to carry, provide for maternity leave and crèches for the children of working women. Although meant to protect the
rights of women as workers, the legislative restricts the employment of women in many sectors, especially in private organised sectors. Entrepreneurs in the private organised sector maintain that women's employment is not flexible based on these legislations, thereby rendering women unsuitable for many tasks (Rustagi, 1997). As private sector employment is driven mainly by profit motive without consideration for working conditions. On the one hand, these organisations do not encourage female employment while on the other whenever they do so, they try to evade many legal benefits which are the rights of women workers. This could be one of the most important reasons why the female labour force is pushed more and more into the unorganised sector where no laws are followed for the protection of their rights.

Women's Work and Health

The most substantial work to be developed in occupational health prior to the industrial revolution in Europe can be credited to Bernardo Ramazzini. Ramazzini (1770) made recommendations for physicians to take note of the occupation and social situation of working men and women when making a formal diagnosis. This opened up an entirely new branch of medical study, which later became established in the twentieth century. He wrote:

“Workers of this sort are drawn from the peasant class; so, when they are attacked by fever they betake themselves to their huts, and leave the affair entirely to nature; or else they are carried off to hospitals and they are treated, like everybody else, with usual remedies, purging and venesection. For doctors know nothing of the mode of life of these workers who are exhausted and prostrated by unceasing toil...”
The industrial revolution in Britain saw many consequences for ordinary working women in terms of their livelihood, family relationships and gender divisions in and outside paid work. Their labour was marked by overwork, malnutrition and subsequent illness. Morbidity and mortality were added ingredients to an environment where the pursuits of profits overrode the concerns for health (Wilkinson 2001). Occupational health during the nineteenth century was largely linked with parliamentary reforms and public health movements. The reforms spearheaded by the likes of Chadwick, Peel, Shaftesbury and Southwood-Smith contributed to creating the platform for further developments in the twentieth century.

Conventional models of relationship between health and work, developed in the context of western industrial societies, are based on notions of work that fail to account for the experience of growing numbers of individuals. They also draw on ideas about the nature of science that have been challenged from a number of perspectives. Finally, they assume modes of political organisation which can no longer be taken for granted in societies where risks are often global and yet individuals’ experiences of work may be more and more fragmented (Daykin 1999). Traditional understandings of the relationship between health and work have drawn upon relatively narrow models of work. For example, they have focused on paid employment in the productive sector to the exclusion of many other areas of labour, particularly those occupied by women (Tancred 1995). Many other activities such as caring for dependents or performing domestic work within the household (Doyal 1995) may involve unrecognized physical and psychological risks similar to those of paid employment, as well as specific risks, such as isolation, arising from the social setting in which they are carried out. This debate suggests that notions of work are
socially constructed and the same can be said of concepts of health and risk. Hence, the meanings attached to women's health and work (and the actions consequent upon them) are constantly negotiated rather than given. This applies to the labelling of women's health and illness behaviour within the workplace (Virtanen 1994) as well as to the attribution of occupational causes to ill health and accidents (Green 1992).

Attention is now being paid to the ways in which changing patterns of employment are creating new patterns of production and distribution of risks and hazards for women. The concentration of economic power together with mobility of capital and resources has led to the globalisation of many occupational hazards. The transfer of traditional and new manufacturing risks to the third world by multinational corporations attracted by low production costs, weak labour organisation and the lack of regulatory systems is a continuing cause for concern (Elling 1981). This adds to the burden of occupational ill health which is already much greater here. Attention has also been paid to the health implications of changes in work organisation. New forms of labour such as home working may bring individual and environmental benefits and costs (Williams 1996). But, it is recognized that home-working can also lead to increased hours of work in poor working conditions, as well as isolation and the loss of relaxation and recovery time. Further, patterns of gender segregation in employment are also strongly linked with the distribution of occupational hazards (Doyal 1995).

Apart from paid employment, for many women domestic labour takes up a major part of their lives, but we know relatively little about how this affects their health. There are two reasons for this ignorance. The first
is the social and physical invisibility of household work. If domestic labour is 'natural' for women, then surely it is 'good' for them is the assumption (Doyal 1999). Work is a complex activity which is difficult to analyse even when it is formally defined and contained within a place of paid employment, such as a shop or factory. Tasks carried out in the domestic arena can be even more varied making it difficult to estimate their impact on well being.

Hence, every woman is a working woman. Whether she works at home or outside, the mental and physical health hazards are innumerable and varied. Women in the developing countries spend most of their time in survival tasks. Maintaining households and generating income are essential to keep the family and economy alive. Also, girls are socialized in an atmosphere where they are taught to bear with the given physical, mental and external environmental. They have to accept not only their roles, but also others' roles in their lives. Understanding and fulfilling their responsibilities well is their only prerogative. This submission and sacrifice becomes a part of their personality and rarely does a woman oppose this mindset. However, the discrimination in almost all spheres of life is too blatant and traumatizing for them. Inability to express or lay down their views, and cause any change in the circumstance fills them with a great deal of mental anguish. The strain of domestic and occupational work coupled with mental stress takes a heavy toll on women's health.

Women's Empowerment : Policies and Programmes

The women's movement in the west brought to the fore, the need for the empowerment of women. The women's movement realised that
despite tremendous gains for women in the social, economic and political sphere, they were still far from participating equally in the society (Gopal, 1997). This movement in Europe stressed the consciousness that women’s personal experiences can have political implications. In the 1960s, students and civil rights movements gave an impetus shaping the topics and language of current feminist theory. The source of the concept of women’s empowerment can be traced to the interaction between feminism and the concept of “popular education” developed in Latin America in the 1970s (Walters 1991).

Feminism developed at a time when the participation of women in the workforce was rising very fast. The 1970s tackled the causes of women’s oppression (Capitalism and Patriarchy) describing society as a structure of oppressors and the oppressed. By widening the Marxist concept of production to include household labour and childcare, feminists could highlight further sexual divisions (‘domestic labour’ force) as well as women’s unequal status at work (‘reserve army of labour’). The feminist movement has emerged as a social force in the past few decades. The issues and ideas proposed and discussed as part of the feminist critique of the male dominated perception of social reality has greatly influenced the overall understanding of the social and economic life, in particular that of organisation of economic activities. The feminist critique in this area began with the analysis of the intra-household division of resources, powers and benefits and concluded that the benefits accruing to the family or the household do not necessarily trickle down to the women in the household. It has now moved into other areas focusing on the psychological structure of the sexist society, the deprivation of the housebound housewife, the restrictiveness of the modern family, the trivialisation of women’s interests
and powers, the socialisation into sex defined roles and entrenched ideology of male superiority (Kiran, 1994). The concerns and ideologies of the feminist movement aimed very broadly at improving women’s status in the society. These ideologies also reflect the economic and social conditions of specific milieu in which they emerged.

Empowerment is described both a process and the result of a process which enables women to gain access to and control of material as well as information resources (Chandra 1997). Women’s development is directly related to national development. The effective management and development of women’s resources, that is their abilities, interests, skills and other potentialities are of paramount importance for the mobilisation and development of human resources. The development of women is an integrated and unified concept, stretching across economic, social and cultural fields. However, since poverty is the single biggest cause of backwardness, the economic and social sectors such as health, education and employment are generally deemed to be very crucial for women’s overall development. Further, the attention paid to the role of women in relation to the development process has been limited. Women’s concerns were generally seen by planners as those of ‘welfare’ rather than ‘development’.

Employment of women in the rural unorganised sector is principally traced to nine employment systems. These are agriculture, dairying, animal husbandry, fisheries, social and agro-forestry, khadi and village industries, handlooms, handicrafts and sericulture. The first five sectors are broadly classified as agriculture and allied occupation, the last four are categorised as village and small industries sector.
**Empowerment through Economic Schemes**

Women’s participation in income generating activities is believed to increase their status and decision making power. Yet, women in the informal economy are weak and vulnerable. It is believed that only by the process of coming together can they get empowered. Hence, empowerment of women through cooperatives can be a viable proposition of strengthening women’s ability to take charge of their lives. Cooperatives are seen to offer a range of economic and social benefits. Producer cooperatives, where women work together in a common workshed outside their homes may have particular benefits because they challenge the norms of female seclusion and unequal division of labour. We need to discuss here, the government’s efforts for the empowerment of women through various schemes and programmes with respect to employment.

**Support to Training and Employment Programmes for Women (STEP)**

The programme of STEP, launched in 1987, aims to upgrade the skills of poor and assetless women, mobilise, conscientise, and provide employment to them on sustainable basis in the traditional sectors of agriculture, small animal husbandry, dairying, fisheries, handlooms, handicrafts, khadi and village industries, sericulture, social forestry and wasteland development. In addition to the training and employment support, the three special features of this programme include – ‘Gender Sensitisation’, ‘Women in Development Inputs’ and provision for ‘Support Services’.

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Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK)

The national credit fund for women called the RMK was set up in 1992-93 with a corpus fund of Rs. 31 crores with a major objective of meeting the credit needs of poor women, particularly in the informal sector. It was set up as a society under the Societies Registration Act, 1860 and is being managed by a governing board. The minister of state for women and child development is the chairperson of the kosh. The kosh has evolved and finalised its lending policy and has disseminated credits to over 250 NGOs in various parts of the country.

Indira Mahila Yojana (IMY)

The scheme of Indira Mahila Yojana was launched on 20th August 1995 in 200 blocks throughout the country. IMY is a strategy to coordinate and integrate components of all sectoral programmes and to facilitate their convergence to benefit women.

Mahila Samriddhi Yojana (MSY)

Mahila Samriddhi Yojana was launched on 2nd October 1993 through the network of 1.32 lakh rural post offices. The scheme aims at promoting self reliance and a measure of economic independence among rural women by encouraging them to have an account of their own in the post office into which they may deposit whatever amount they can save. For an amount upto Rs. 300 with a lock-in period of one year, the government contributes 25 per cent as incentive.
**Power to Women in the Grass Roots Politics (Panchayats)**

Another unique means of empowering women is to make them responsible in managing the development programmes in the grass roots level as members of Panchayats. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Indian Constitution aimed at ensuring equal access and increased participation in political power structure for women. It is expected that the Panchayati Raj Institutions would play a central role in the process of enhancing women’s participation in public life. The Panchayati Raj Act made it mandatory that in the gram panchayat level, one third of the members should be women representatives of the total seats. The one-third reservation for women in the Panchayati Raj institution is based on the view of empowering of women in all spheres like social, economic and political by means of providing them the opportunity to participate in the administration of local self-government.

**Health Policies and Programmes for Women**

There have been both international and national initiatives for women’s health. We will briefly deal with some of them here.

*International Initiatives*

The *International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)* made it clear that human beings have to be at the centre of concern for population and development. It further clarified that advancing gender equality and equity and the empowerment of women, elimination of all kinds of violence against women and ensuring women’s ability to control their own fertility are the basis of population and development-related
programmes. Also, women were acknowledged as the poorest of the poor despite being key actors in the process of development. Governments were urged to take all appropriate measures to ensure universal access to health care services, including those related to reproductive health care that covers family planning and sexual health.

The Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) focussed on concerns around women’s health. Women’s health is defined to include their emotional, social and physical well being and is determined by the social, political and economic context of their lives, as well as by biology.

The Convention on Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was ratified by India in 1993. This convention is the only human rights treaty that affirms the reproductive right of women. As part of the commitment to this Convention, governments agree to take all appropriate measures including legislation and temporary special measures, so that women can enjoy all their human rights and fundamental freedoms.

National Initiatives

The National Population Policy 2000, among its 12 strategies for action calls for decentralisation in planning in planning and implementation, convergence of services delivery, empowerment of women for health and nutrition, and meeting unmet needs through improved service delivery. The socio-demographic goals set for the year 2010 in the Action Plan of NPP pertain to several important issues such as maternal and child health, promotion of delayed marriage for girls and universal registration of marriages.
The National Health Policy 2001 accepts that the public health system has had limited success in meeting the preventive and curative requirements of the general population and that the state investment in public health is declining. It further accepted that although balanced regional development was one of the objectives of centralised planning, attainment if health indices has been very uneven across the rural-urban divide, and between the better endowed and the more vulnerable sections of the society. Here, the gender divide is acutely striking.

The National Policy for Empowerment of Women 2001 includes among its objectives the following:

(i) the enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by women on an equal basis with men in all spheres – political, economic, social, cultural and civil;

(ii) equal access to participation and decision-making by women in the social, political and economic life of the nation;

(iii) equal access of women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public office;

(iv) changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women;

(v) elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child; and

(vi) mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process

Among its policy prescriptions, it suggests that a holistic approach to women's health which includes both nutrition and health services be
adopted and special attention be paid to the needs of women and girls at all stages of the life cycle.

All the three policies echo a common concern around the need to stabilise population at a level consistent with the requirements of the national economy. The improvement of women’s overall health status does not find a place in them, presumably because meeting women’s unmet needs for basic reproductive and health services is assumed to sum up the women’s agenda (Das 2002). Further, the National Policy for Empowerment of Women 2001 speaks of the declining female-male sex-ratio as an instance of gender disparity, but it has been completely neglected in the National Population Policy 2000 or in the National Health Policy 2001. Also, the National Health Policy fails to make any specific mention of malnutrition, nor does it suggest any policy, strategy or intervention in the nutrition programmes except to term it as a ‘complementary initiative from the social sector’. On the other hand, the National Policy for Empowerment of Women and the National Population Policy make no mention of the mental health problems of women. The National Health Policy 2001 acknowledges the links between the ‘complementary initiatives’ and the ‘non-health determinants’ such as rural development, food production, sanitation, drinking water supply, education and public health. But, it makes no contribution to defining strategies for ensuring investments in social sectors.

The present health programmes in India are based on ICDS and RCH strategies rooted in the purely technological approach which focuses women as targets, NGOs as providers, privatised medical care and on an irrational reproductive health of women (Qadeer 2002).
The various issues related to labour and the evolution of labour movement and also the position of women in this regard, have been influencing labour in both the organised and unorganised sectors. Home-based workers, who are the worst form of unorganised labourers, suffer even more. The experiences of workers in the Chikan Industry have been no different. Women workers in particular, a large number of whom are home-based workers, bear the brunt of the problems even harder.
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