CHAPTER - 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context of the Study

The notion of ‘work’ and ‘employment’ for women is complex. While economic factors predominantly determine a man’s participation in employment, the reasons why women work, or do not work or whether they work part-time or full-time can be diverse and are often rooted in a complex interplay of economic, social, cultural and personal factors.

In India, as in other parts of the world, fewer women participate in employment as compared to men both in urban and rural areas. But more women work as compared to men. This is the backdrop against which this thesis analyses issues such as what constitutes ‘work’ or ‘employment’, the economic contribution of women, what gender relations emerge in employment under overlapping class, caste and community identity (religious groups) and finally how such gendering of work has many significant and related consequences. Rural women have less access than men to productive resources, services and opportunities, such as land, livestock, financial services and education. Numerous studies underscore the social costs of rural women's lack of education and assets, linking it directly to high economic costs: wasted human capital and low labour productivity that stifle rural development and progress. To understand women’s work status in India’s rural areas and to examine the nature of women’s employment, data from large scale National Employment-Unemployment Surveys is analysed.

The thesis builds on Goldin’s (1995) pioneering work and revisits the determinants of female labour force participation in India to examine the influence of economic (wealth ownership, income classes), cultural-social (socio-religious groups), personal (age, education, marital status, household dependency level) and regional factors on women’s decision to participate in ‘work’ or ‘employment’. Logit framework is used to estimate the probability of being in the labour force and focus is on women aged 15-59 years in the rural areas.

Theoretically, female labour supply is often modelled using the framework of the time allocation model (Becker, 1965), which posits that women make their labour supply decisions not only considering leisure and labour trade-offs, but also home-based production of goods
and services (including caring for children)\(^1\). Seminal work done by Goldin (1995) explored the U-shaped relationship between female labour supply and the level of economic development across countries. Initially, when the income level is low and the agricultural sector dominates the economy, women’s participation in the labour force is high, due to the necessity of working to provide for consumption of goods and services. As incomes rise, women’s labour force participation falls, only to rise again when female education levels improve and consequently the value of women’s time in the labour market increases. This process suggests that, at low levels of development, the income effect of providing additional labour dominates a small substitution effect, while as incomes increase; the substitution effect starts dominating\(^2\).

The key contribution of this dissertation is that it explores the dimensions of women’s participation; both within the labour market and outside, across socio-religious and socio-economic groups. The interface of class, caste and religion (community identity) with labour market outcomes of women has been explored and it is seen how specific attention to social and cultural variables has relevance for discussions on women’s employment (Neetha, 2013). The importance of explicitly drawing distinctions between class, religious and caste categories in the analysis of female employment pattern is highlighted in the thesis. The novelty of this study is that it uses a detailed and very large Indian household survey dataset conducted by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO). Stylised facts from the data are presented in a later section. It is not a study of purely economic aspects but leans heavily on Feminist Theories also, as Gender Relations form the backdrop of the analyses.

1.2 A History of Gender Relationships

There are two levels at which women and men interact with each other: there are large-scale, more impersonal gender relations and intimate gendered relationships (Holmes, 2008). At the large-scale level women as a social group are compared to men as a social group. Concerns at that level are with general patterns in how the two groups are positioned in relation to each other within society. The usual framework employed to understand gender relations is the common sociological framework of social stratification and the associated inequalities.

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\(^1\) Hence the need to consider participation of women workers in activities which are outside the production boundary and officially considered as being ‘out of labour force’

\(^2\) The income effect is the change of hours of work of an individual with respect to a change in family income. The own-substitution effect is the change in hours of work of an individual with respect to change in their wage, holding income constant.
‘Social Stratification’ refers to the different layers within a society, the hierarchies organised around different groups. The major forms of stratification occur around class, caste, ethnicity or religion and gender. Women’s social position has historically been and continues to be one of disadvantage. A lot of research has been done on gender inequalities which mention that women typically have worse jobs, get less pay and are likely to be poorer. Continuity of women’s relative disadvantage has been the focus of much research particularly through the 1980s and 1990s. There has also been a growing emphasis on complexity and diversity. Much of empirical research demonstrates that major continuities of inequality still confront women in the labour market (Arber & Ginn 1995; Hakim 1996; Rubery et al 1999). Gender relations which operate at a large-scale level (studied in the thesis) impact gendered relations which are at a more personalised and intimate level.

1.3 Conceptualising Continuities and Changes of Gender Relations in Employment

Research regarding gender relations in work and family has been evolving over recent decades (Irwin, 2005). Initially continuities in inequalities were focused but this has given way to recent concern with complexity and diversity. Researchers are now trying to understand how change in gendered employment patterns connects to change in social organisation more widely. Changes in labour demand include commodification and the search for cheaper and more flexible sources of labour, characteristics which are identified with female labour. In respect of change in female labour supply, a number of features have played a crucial role. These are: positive change in the availability of women as the source of labour which is facilitated by the change in the duration of child bearing and rearing commitments over a woman’s life, favourable changes in norms regarding the employment of women, increased educational opportunities for women, their enhanced educational success and their increasing perceived value to employers, women’s own aspirations for independence and autonomy, growth in the importance of female earnings for household income maintenance and women’s claims to greater autonomy and social participation being reflected in the labour market and the family.

A prevalent opinion is that continuity of inequalities is the key to understanding women’s experiences. Women mainly engage in part-time work which is largely segregated from full-time work, carries low pay and limited prospects of employment rights and provides secondary earnings (Hakim 1996, Walby 1997). The growth of the part-time employment has confirmed women’s marginal position within employment. In 1996 Hakim emphasized the
limited extent of long-term change in women’s full-time employment rates, and the very limited prospects for the gender equality even with women’s increased participation arguing that rising part-time employment rates do not alter women’s social position fundamentally. This fact has been corroborated by the findings of one of the chapters later in the thesis.

There has been a shift in the system of gender relations over the twentieth century, resulting in a change of the pattern of inequality between men and women. The change has taken up a complex form with polarisation playing an important role in which a minority of highly qualified women are well-positioned, effectively escaping the disadvantages and vulnerabilities confronted by the majority of women. Hence a need to develop and apply an intersectional approach to gender analysis has been emphasised by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Recent research thus focuses more on issues of diversity, complexity and contextual specificities in the reshaping of gender relations within the hierarchies of class, caste, social and religious groups.

1.4 The Challenge

Women constitute 40 per cent of the global workforce. Their active engagement in productive employment contributes to faster economic growth and its long-term sustainability. Despite the breakthrough made in advancing towards gender equality in the world of work during the last few decades, women still continue to be over-represented in more precarious, informal, less remunerated and unpaid work than men. This is largely due to the slow progress in social change in many societies, burden of unpaid care work that mostly women continue to undertake, and gender blindness of macroeconomic and development policies. In 1995 the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing set global objectives for action in the world of work. These included the promotion of women’s economic rights and independence, women’s equal access to resources, employment, markets and trade, improved training, the elimination of occupational segregation and all forms of discrimination in employment and occupation, and a better sharing of family responsibilities between women and men. A lot of progress has been made towards achieving these goals, but even in the present day, gender disparity both in terms of opportunities for and quality of employment persists as emphasized by the below-mentioned points:
1. Female employment-to-population ratios have generally increased over time, but remain at levels well below those of men, thus missing out on the productive potential of women as key resources in development;

2. Nearly one-fourth of women work as unpaid contributing family workers, meaning they receive no direct pay for their work;

3. Entering formal employment, women receive less pay and benefits than men workers in similar positions;

4. Women continue to face higher barriers for access to education and training due to persisting gender bias in many societies;

5. There is clear sex segregation in occupations and sectors that are generally characterized by low pay and precariousness, often in informal employment arrangements. In some countries the share of women in vulnerable (own account and unpaid family work combined) employment is over 75 per cent.\(^3\)

1.5 Research Problem

With this background as a referral point, the thesis has tried to conceptualise change in gendered relations to employment and their consequences in the Indian economy. Considering the Employment-Unemployment Survey (EUS) data of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), the thesis has explored the gendered relations in the employment patterns and has tried to establish if there is a reshaping of the relations due to broader changes in social position of women and men and change in norms about women’s and men’s roles. To summarise, the main research objectives of the thesis are as follows:

i. To see the change in the pattern of female employment between 61st round, 2004/05 and 68th round, 2011/12; with a historical enquiry into the trends, from the 50th round (1993-94) to the 68th round (2011-12).

ii. To present a disaggregated analysis of the trend of female employment across class, caste and religious identities and regions.

iii. To study the employment status with respect to the categories (Self-employed, Regular wage work or Casual work) and the type of work done (paid or unpaid) The main objective is to find a causal relationship between the

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composition of work done by female workers and the social hierarchies woven around gender

iv. To analyse the emergent patterns of gender relations, especially in female employment. There is a significant change in the participation levels amongst women in the two rounds under study. So the thesis seeks to find out if an increased participation by women in 2004-05 (61st Round) has contributed to their integration into paid employment or has it just confirmed their marginalisation (Humphries and Rubery, 1992). The thesis also tries to see if there is a continuum of the disadvantaged position of women in the labour market which has resulted in the rather low female labour force participation in 2011-12 (68th Round), in a snapshot framework of cross-section points with unit level data.

1.6 Motivation

Gender analysis is the study of the different roles of women and men in order to understand what they do, what resources they have, and what their needs and priorities are. Gender analysis can be used as a tool to address differentiated access to and control over resources and decision-making within rural communities and households. By understanding how different members participate in and are affected by development interventions - who stands to gain and who stands to lose - gender analysis helps planners to avoid costly errors of the past and design programmes and projects that are effective, efficient and equitable.4

The need to develop and apply a more ‘intersectional’ approach to gender analysis, which pays careful attention to the differences and relationships between women (as well as between women and men and men and men) within particular social and geo-political contexts has been highlighted by the International Labour Organisation5. Analysis of how different groups of women are situated differently within and are affected differently by local and international socio-economic and political power relations, structures and processes is gaining ground in ILO literature. So, it’s very essential that we integrate the elements of class, caste and gender, otherwise our understanding will remain partial (Duvvury, 1989). There is a large literature on gender disparities in India that examines the phenomena along the single axis of the declining sex ratio, educational disparities, differential labour market

5 ILO working paper, 2008
outcomes between men and women, health outcomes for women and so forth. The this has attempted a study of the overlap or intersection with the help of exploratory and econometric tools. The other observations from Indian economy which motivated the present doctoral study are:

i. Puzzling trends and patterns in data reflecting the peculiarity of female employment

ii. The interconnectedness of female employment with other social parameters which are outside the realm of the standard labour market analysis (Neetha, 2013)

iii. A major gap in the existing literature viz. the limited attention paid to the overlap of class, caste, religion and gender

The aim of the study is to look beyond the quantitative aspects of female participation and focus on the relationships being created in the process of female employment.

1.6 Outline of the Thesis

The thesis is organised in the following manner; chapter 2 makes a succinct review of literature. The theoretical underpinnings of female employment and the empirical research in the field have been enumerated. Theory of intersectionality has been elaborated upon, as the study in the thesis is based on the said theory. Chapter 3 provides a detailed description and explanation of the official statistics used in India to measure female employment. A comparison of the two main data sources, Census and National Sample Survey (NSS) has been made and then the data used in the thesis, Employment Unemployment Survey (EUS) Data of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) has been detailed out. Chapter 4 makes an overview of employment in rural and urban areas with respect to NSS data. This is a historical enquiry into the employment situation prevailing in the Indian economy with an emphasis on the period from 1993-94 to 2011-12. Difference in male female work force and labour force participation levels in rural and urban areas get highlighted through this exploratory analysis. The existence of two types of gaps comes to light from this study. They are:

(i) a gap between the labour supply and employment generation levels i.e. an employment-demographic gap

\(^6\) Refer to chapter 4 for definition
(ii) a gap between male female employment levels along the rural urban divide.

The second type of gap which may also be referred as a gender gap is taken up for detailed study in the thesis. Chapter 5 thus tries to ascertain if this gap is universally present in the Indian economy or if it is just regional (region specific). Interstate variations in labour force and work force participation levels of male and female workers of all ages have been studied for this purpose. The data for this study has been referred from the National Sample Survey Employment Unemployment Survey Reports. Performing paired t-test it has been found that the gap is significant. Consequently, the reasons for low female labour force participation have been studied in chapter 6. Estimation of female employment within the stratification of economic class has been done to delineate the factors influencing the female labour supply decisions. This is where the interconnectedness of the economic, social, cultural, demographic and religious variables comes to light. The importance of such an intersection is clearly brought forth and so in chapter 7 female work force participation under the overlap of class, caste and community identity is studied. Chapter 8 studies the interconnectedness within the overlap of the employment status of female workers. It is established that there is greater participation of women in self-employment. Such an observation leads to chapter 9 where a disaggregated analysis of paid and unpaid work has been done under stratification lens. Chapter 10 concludes.