Chapter Two

'Triple Burden’ on Women’s Work:
Mobilising Strategies for Women Workers

Although women’s work force participation has increased after 1991, qualitative improvements or better conditions have not necessarily accompanied the quantitative increase in employment. Feminists argue that employers prefer to employ women for additional employment generation precisely because they assume women are willing to accept lower wages, work under inferior conditions and lower security of contract than men for similar work.

Structural adjustment, economic reforms, the transition from centrally planned to market economies and globalisation have tended to exacerbate women’s vulnerability, and thereby increased their overall economic marginalisation. The reduction in government spending on social sectors had a direct impact on women workers. As a result of increased mechanisation ushered in by the policies of liberalisation, traditional industries such as coir, cashew, tobacco, handicrafts, handloom, and khadi where women are employed in large numbers, were in crisis. The result invariably was a decline in women’s employment. Broadly, four trends with regard to the impact of globalisation on employment and income of women workers are visible: increase in employment in some sectors without security of employment, loss of existing employment without creation of new employment, changes due to new technologies and growing informalisation of work.

This chapter is divided into three sections and discusses some of the issues related to women workers in the informal sector. The first section elucidates trends in women’s work participation rates and problems encountered while enumerating women’s unpaid work in the Indian context. The second section uses Marxist theory on labour relations/division of work and the feminist theories on patriarchy to understand the multiple layers.

---

1 Exemplified by debates on feminisation, discussed in the Chapter One
2 Informalisation defines work as casual, part-time, non-permanent. The work is pushed out of factories/formal work-places to small sweatshops, homes and informal arrangements with looser contracts and fewer social security benefits. Some argue that the increase in international sub-contracting has seen a consequent increase in informal work. Breman studies the concept of informalisation not in the specific context of the informal sector, instead he uses the changes in industrial production (work being characterised as flexibilisation of production) i.e. actual contracting out of work, replacing time wage with piece-rate and permanent with casual workers to understand the phenomenon of informalisation. In the context of the above arguments the concept of informalisation is articulated.
in the category of 'women and work'. The last section discusses mobilisation of women workers by organisation/ unions in the unorganised sector to articulate the dissent of these workers. The philosophical underpinnings of three grassroots organisations (SEWA, Working Women's Forum (WWF) and All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) are used to better understand their mobilisation strategies.

The central argument of this chapter is to be able to define the category of 'women and work' keeping in mind the larger debates on informalisation, feminisation, and gender division of work. Thereby, elucidating, the 'triple burden' on women's work; inside the household, outside of it and within the larger economy i.e. as women, as women workers and as women workers in the informal sector.

Changing nature of women and work

Women's work in India is invisible, unrecognised, and unremunerated. India has a total of 397 million workers, out of which women constitute roughly around 123.9 million, 106 million of women workers work in rural areas and 18 million work in urban areas. Only 7 per cent of India's labour force is in the organized sector while 93 per cent is in unorganized sector. 96 per cent of the women workers are concentrated in the informal sector. Often, women are not recognised as workers and their unpaid work is not accounted for in many instances. For most workers work in the informal sector is defined as part-time, self-employed, odd jobs, casual wage labour with no employment security. Added to this is the double burden of production and reproduction on women.

For women workers in the informal economy the double burden of combining the tasks of production and reproduction is even more arduous because they are already engaged in activities that require long hours to obtain a subsistence wage...we discuss the problems of women workers in the following order: (a) the larger issue of double burden of work, (b) women workers and their invisibility, and (c) conditions of work as well as discrimination.

Many argue that the conditions of work and terms of employment are exacerbated due to larger developmental priorities and policies of the state (e.g. globalisation, reduce in subsidies, closure of factories, informalisation of work and small scale industries etc).

---

In their critique of the National Perspective Plan (NPP) for Women 1988, some women’s rights groups and organisations argued that the vulnerability of women workers were largely caused due to mainstream developmental policies of the Indian State and before the state could take action on the NPP’s recommendations to engage women in the developmental process it was important to articulate the above mentioned stand.

"...recommendations to bring women ‘into the mainstream of development’ ignore the reality of women’s marginalisation being the result of such ‘mainstream’ development and the critiques of such policies brought up by the women’s movement”. The whole move towards modernisation backed by the government in coir, beedi, match, textiles, tobacco plantations, coal mines and other industries is resulting in a massive displacement of female labour. Between 1974 and 1981 alone 28.64 lakh workers of whom 14 lakh were women, were displaced by the installations of power looms. In the textile, jute and mining industry the employment of women declined by 30 per cent to 60 per cent. In electronics, pharmaceuticals and heavy industries it went down by nearly 50 per cent. A similar trend is now emerging in the railways, banks, insurance and post and telegraphs.  

Opportunities for employment in the organised sector in general, and more specifically for women, have decreased, as a result of SAP. Policies of liberalisation are typically associated with an absolute and relative decline in formal sector employment (due to closure of more than 6 lakh factories) with unavoidable negative consequences for informal sector employment as well. In the post-1991 period, the share of the unorganised sector in total employment has increased distinctively. The proportion of women workers employed in the informal sector is higher than the proportion of men workers employed in this sector. Therefore, there is a distinct “gender aspect to the problem of informalisation”.

Overall there is an increase of contractualisation of work and under-employment in the informal sector with no protective legislation for workers. A micro-study conducted in the electronic sector by Chacchi in 1999 pointed out that women constitute 40 per cent

---

6 Ibid, pg 22  
7 Though there is substantive difference in the meaning of terms informal sector/ unorganised sector and formal sector/organised sector, but for the purposes of this research these terms would be used interchangeably.  

75
of workers in this industry, and the figures are projected to grow further. The study conducted in 24 manufacturing units in and around Delhi showed that 37 per cent of the women employed are involved in assembly work, while 23 per cent are involved in soldering, and 27 per cent are involved in both. The data revealed a wide ranging differential in wage, with only 16 per cent of men and women getting the same wages. Majority of women get wages less than that drawn by men for similar or even identical work. In many units, minimum wages are not paid. Much of the new employment is concentrated in the export-oriented zones where conditions and terms of work is linked to demands in the global markets. Consequently work is very insecure due to no employment security.

The work participation rate for women has increased to 25.68 per cent in 2001 compared to 22.73 per cent in 1991 and 19.67 per cent in 1981. The work participation rate for women in urban areas increased to 11.55 per cent in 2001, as compared to 7.18 per cent in 1971 and 9.74 per cent in 1991. While in the rural areas it increased from 15.92 per cent in 1971, to 27.20 per cent in 1991 and 30.98 per cent in 2001. In comparison to women, the male work force participation work was 51.93 per cent in 2001.

Within the category of women workers, rural SC/ ST (Scheduled Caste/ Scheduled Tribe) women have a much higher work participation rate. The high work participation rates for women in specific trades do not indicate higher levels of welfare; on the other hand it points out that women take up whatever work comes their way out of economic compulsion. High participation rate together with high indicators for educational capabilities and asset/ income generation becomes meaningful from a welfare point of view, this has not been the case in India, where women’s work participation rate has been low, indicating that most of the work women engage in has been entered as subsidiary work.

Out of the total women workforce in India, only 15 per cent work in the rural areas whereas 85 per cent work in the urban areas. In rural areas, the women working in the unorganised sector is mainly concentrated in agriculture, dairying, small animal

---

9 Ibid, pg 75  
10 Ibid, page 76  
husbandry, fisheries, *khadi* and village industries, handlooms, handicrafts, and sericulture. While in the urban areas, women are generally employed in large numbers as construction labour and domestic helpers.\(^{14}\) Amongst rural women, majority (87 per cent) are employed in agriculture, whereas in urban areas, about 80 per cent are employed in unorganised sectors like household industries, petty trades and services, building and construction.\(^{15}\)

The NSSO Survey for 2004/05 suggests that there were just under 15 million women workers in the unorganised sector and more than half of them were involved in home-based work for different types of industries for instance: *zari, charkha*, other handloom work, sticking *bindi*’s, stitching labels, food processing, also potentially hazardous work involving acids. Most of the workers were poorly paid on a piece-rate basis. Other than home-based work, these women have been mostly employed in textiles and garments, engineering and chemical industries, leather, and miscellaneous products such as imitation jewellery and petty cosmetic items. Women worked long hours and often involved other family members such as children in their work.\(^{16}\)

Some distinctive features that emerge from a comparison between the 50\(^{th}\) (1993/94) and the 55\(^{th}\) (1999/2000) rounds of NSS on employment reveal a sharp fall in the work participation rates of women steeply in rural areas and significantly in urban areas. Many argue that this fall in employment rates are due to reduced government subsidies, mechanisation processes (which demand skilled workmen), shutting down of factories in the organised sector due to SAP. In urban areas, the data shows a decline in women’s share of employment in agriculture, manufacturing, construction, mining and quarrying, electricity, water, and gas and even in several sub sectors of services. There has been an increase in the share of women’s employment in education, health services, hotels and restaurants, communications as well as in personal services and most importantly in retail trade. Such developments have taken place in the context of overall absolute decrease in agricultural employment of women. Women’s share in the non-agricultural informal sector employment had also fallen from 21.5 per cent in 1993-1995


77
to 19.5 per cent in 2004.\textsuperscript{17} For self-employed rural women, the trend in employment in the years 1999/2000 to 2004/2005 rose from 57.3 per cent to 63.7 per cent; also a fall in the share of casual labour from 39.6 per cent to 32.6 per cent was noticed. In urban areas, there was increase in the share of self-employed from 45.3 per cent to 47.7 per cent and a substantial drop in the share of casual wage work. For both men and women in urban areas, real wages for casual work in 2004/05 on average declined compared to 1999-2000. Along with trends in overall increase of women's work as self-employed and decrease in casual work, there was dramatic increase in rates of unemployment in 2004-05 especially for women.\textsuperscript{18}

In the year 1999/2000, women in the unorganised/ informal sector constituted: wage workers (29 per cent), home-workers as disguised wage workers (21 per cent) and self-employed (71 per cent). In 2004-2005, women constituted 70 per cent of the self-employed workers (increased from 15 million in 1999/2000 to 21 million in 2004/2005), and wage workers (30 per cent) in the unorganised sector. At least some part of this increase in self-employed workers can be attributed to the increase in home-workers. Women casual workers constitute of 47 per cent of women wage workers. These casual workers were mainly engaged in construction (39 per cent) and manufacturing sectors (29 per cent) etc. A smaller proportion (20 per cent) is engaged as domestic workers in private households. Regular workers formed about 53 per cent of the women wage workers. Out of these, nearly 54 per cent were employed by private households in domestic services. As they mostly receive a salary on a regular basis in majority of the cases, therefore, they are probably categorised as regular workers. Nearly 13 per cent of the regular women workers in the unorganised sector worked in the education sector as primary school teachers, anganwadi workers and even ayahs and sweepers who received a regular salary.\textsuperscript{19}

A crucial issue for women is the decreasing days of work available in agriculture and the consequent growing demand for non-agricultural work. Women in particular are the worst affected because the opportunities for non-agricultural work are extremely

\textsuperscript{17} N. Neetha and Indrani Mazumdar, ‘New Developments in Labour Hiring and Women’s Employment in Urban India’, in Centre for Women’s Development Studies, Seminar on, Globalisation and the Women’s Movement in India, India International Centre Conference Hall II, 20\textsuperscript{th}-22\textsuperscript{nd} Jan 2005
\textsuperscript{18} N. Neetha and Indrani Mazumdar, ‘New Developments in Labour Hiring and Women’s Employment in Urban India’, in Centre for Women’s Development Studies, Seminar on, Globalisation and the Women’s Movement in India, India International Centre Conference Hall II, 20\textsuperscript{th}-22\textsuperscript{nd} Jan 2005
\textsuperscript{19} Jayati Ghosh, Never Done and Poorly Paid: Women’s Work in Globalising India, Women Unlimited, 2009
limited. The increase in women’s work is noticed essentially, only as “marginal” workers. The workers work for less than six months a year due to non-availability of work. In the last ten years the increase in the number of women “main” workers, i.e., those who have work for more than six years has been just 3 million and the corresponding figure for men has been 5 million. At the same time, the number of women marginal workers has increased to 27 million, which exceeded the increase in case of male marginal workers by 1 million. The other significant aspect is the changing patterns of hiring labour, with most women being employed either on a contract basis that deprives them both of the guarantee of a regular income and the benefits normally accruing to permanent workers. The intensified economic exploitation of the work force (especially after liberalisation policies), the suspension of labour laws and increasing unemployment have led to increasing poverty.

There is a growth in the 2005 estimates of subsidiary, self-employed, non-agricultural activity in urban areas particularly for women. Women in the age group of 15 to 59 were engaged in the domestic duties by principal status in 2004/05 (53 per cent in rural and 65 per cent in urban areas). In the rural areas, the activities included fetching water, collection of firewood, and preparation of cow-dung cakes. In the urban areas the activities included fetching water, sewing, tailoring, and tutoring children. These activities are included in extended SNA and not included in the realm of economic activity for work participation for women. Women are a section of invisible workers who more often than not are involved in strenuous and monotonous work. They spend nearly 35 hours a week on care of children, old and sick at home and household maintenance compared to less than four hours spent by men.21 Women’s work is highly under enumerated; unpaid labour is most often not accounted for.

"...there are many studies to show that women work for longer hours and contribute more than men ... the average hours of unpaid work done by married women outside the home varied from 6.13 to 7.53 hours per day, some of them working more than 10 hours each day. Apart from domestic duties, women engaged in agricultural operations work on an average about 12 hours on the farm and in taking care of cattle at home"22

20 Ibid, pg 74
In India, housework came to be located within studies that drew attention to the ‘double burden’ of women. A significant part of the “care economy”, along with other aspects of social reproduction, is excluded in the enumeration of economic activity within the household and work participation rates of women. Specifically, it excludes unpaid non-marketed labour within the household especially by women, including the processing of primary produce for own consumption, handicraft production for domestic use, unpaid services for the rest of the household such as cleaning, child care, preparation of the food etc. The NSSO definition is capable of capturing women’s work better than the Census definition since it is designed to include activities like unpaid helpers who assist in the operation of an economic activity, in which women are likely to be found in sizeable numbers.

Over a period of time, the employment rate of women has been found to be highly sensitive to the definition (for enumerating ‘women workers’) and method of data collection. Usually the major cause of under-enumeration is the ideological definition of the man as main breadwinner and women’s work being considered secondary and supplementary. Other than this conceptual understanding, critiques also claim that there is major underestimation of data pertaining to the informal sector due to the difficulty of identifying and estimating the work done in this sector. Women are mostly engaged in those activities which are most difficult to capture and measure.

The Committee on the Status of Women in India (1974) and the follow-up document of the National Plan of Action for Women called for steps to improve the database of the employment of women, especially in the unorganised sector. This subsequently resulted in the setting up of the National Task Force on Women in the Unorganised Sector in 1987 which submitted the Shramshakti Report in 1989. The 32nd round of the NSS in 1977/78 made two innovations while enumerating women’s work. One was the introduction of a new sub-category for those exclusively engaged in domestic work and especially in the collection of fuel, fodder, or working in household industries. The second innovation was an exclusive set of probing questions directed towards those otherwise categorised as doing household duties. These innovations were

---

25 Mala Khullar (ed), *Writing the Women’s Movement: A Reader*, Zuban: An imprint of Kali for Women, 2005
26 Ibid, 2005
modified and enlarged in later rounds. It is still a big challenge to enumerate women's work which is characterised by trends of contractualisation, casualisation, and flexibilisation in the informal sector. Also, systematic biases in employment, with respect to factors such as caste, gender, education, and skill are likely to be reinforced to redefine work for women.

In the formal sector, women workers are viewed by management as the least flexible workers and therefore less desirable while in the informal sector women workers are seen as the most flexible and hence most desired.\(^{27}\) To understand the reason behind why women workers are more flexible as workers, it is important to deconstruct the meaning of worker in the specific context of women and work. The Marxist theory of labour relations, division of work and the feminist theory of patriarchy are important frameworks to understand the multiple layers which underlie the category of women and work.

**Conceptualisation of the category of women and work**

Historically, according to the Marxist theory, it was class society that gave birth to patriarchal ideology and the subordination of women. This theory broadly holds that the abolition of private property and the establishment of a socialist society as essential requirements for women's emancipation.

The nature of capitalism was analysed within the theory of alienation. Capitalism, referred to the entire process of commodity production, was inherently exploitative. Exploitation was understood with the theory of power. Class position of an individual defines the state of power or powerlessness. Under capitalism, society is usually divided into the bourgeoisie (haves) and the proletariat (have-nots). The class structure constitutes the economic base, which manifests itself in social, political, and cultural forms (superstructure). The proletariat's exploitation, in which surplus value is extracted from their productive labour, forms the core of their oppression.\(^{28}\) Hence, oppression is a result of capitalist organisation and based in a lack of power. Marxist theory perceived the exploitation of men and women as deriving from the same source and assumed that their oppression is similar in structural terms. Therefore, there is hardly any difference between class-based oppression and gender-based oppression.

---


\(^{28}\) The surplus labour, which is inherent in profit, is derived from the difference between the actual and necessary labour time of the worker

81
Marxist theory was more of an all-encompassing theory of class exploitation and gender was a small component. In the German Ideology, the division of labour in early pre-capitalist society was discussed in familial terms, as historically, the family reflected the division of labour in society.29 Within the family, the conflict between man and woman was represented as class conflict, with the man representing the bourgeoisie and the wife representing the proletariat.30 Critiques claim that the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are positions of power derived from a relation to the economic means of production, not to the sexual act of reproduction (within the institution of the family).

The historical materialist theory/analysis should incorporate women's relations to the sexual division of labour in society as producers and reproducers. The reciprocal relationship, between family and society, production and reproduction defines the life of women. The study of women's oppression must deal with both sexual and economic material conditions if we are to understand oppression, rather than merely understand economic exploitation. For a comprehensive understanding of the sexual division of labour within the family, it is important to study the concept of patriarchy, which legitimises women's oppression, within and outside the family in more than one ways.

For radical feminists, patriarchy is defined as the male hierarchical ordering of the society. The patriarchal system, preserved through the sexual division of labour within the institution of marriage in the family is rather implicit. Patriarchy is located within women's reproductive selves and is manifested through male control and power. Woman's position in this power hierarchy is defined in terms of the patriarchal organisation of society, not in terms of the economic class structure. Patriarchy is often theorised to be rooted in biology rather than in economics or history. According to Firestone, "the sexual imbalance of power is biologically based". Men and women are anatomically different and differently privileged. The domination of one group by another is embedded in this biological male/female distinction.31 It is important to stress the characterisation of patriarchy as an overarching structure. On one hand, it helps us reject biological determinism, on the other, hand it helps us comprehend that power exercised by men over women is not an individual phenomenon but part of a structure. It also helps us question the stand taken by radical feminists. Gerda Lerner argues that patriarchy “is

29 Friedrich Engels, 'The early development of the family', a free press pamphlet, The selection is also the first two chapters of The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State, International Publishers, New York, 1942
30 Marx and Engels, Communist Manifesto, 1848
31 Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex, Bantam Books, New York, 1970
the manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general".32

Patriarchy, therefore, is a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, exploit and oppress women.33 This domination is expressed through men’s control over property and patrilineal succession. Another way in which this argument can be interpreted is to look at how patriarchal forces play a substantial role in enhancing and maintaining the gender and sexual division of labour within and outside the family. In this context, the issue of women’s work needs to be critically studied. When we study the Marxist theory of women’s oppression, the question of women’s work within the debate of gender division of labour comes through as an important component for discussion.

Unpaid work for women is one manifestation of the unjust terms of social division of labour between men and women.34 Within the household, women engage in work that “frees” the male worker to work longer hours for capital and so increases the rate of surplus value.35 Domestic work, mostly done by women, is often not recognised in terms of work or paid in monetary terms. Therefore the Marxist feminists argue it is an important factor, which enhances the production of capital and increases the gender gap where women are left to do a certain kind of work.

Conceptually the multiple roles played by women at different levels of economic life are not perceived because of the definition of work as “for pay or profit”. There are in fact seven categories of work performed by women in rural and urban India. These are: wage and salaried employment, self-employment outside the household for profit, self-employed in cultivation or household industry for profit, self-employment in cultivation for own consumption, other subsistence activities in allied sectors like dairing, other livestock rearing such as poultry, goats, pigs; other work includes fishing, hunting and cultivation of fruits and vegetable gardens, activities related to domestic work, such as fetching fuel, fodder, water, forest produce, repair of dwelling, making cowdung cakes, food preservation. Lastly, added to this is domestic work such as cooking, cleaning, care of the children the aged and the sick.36

34 Brinda Karat, Survival and Emancipation Notes from Indian women’s struggles, Three Essays, New Delhi, 2005
35 Selma James and Maria Rosa Dalla Costa, The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community, Bristol Falling Wall Press, 1973
Marxism provides a clear acknowledgement of the social necessity of the work women engage in but often does not explains why it is women who engage in "women’s work". In other words, even if unwaged household work is profitable to capital, there is no explanation of why it is women who perform this labour. Therefore, critically looking at Marxist theory of women’s oppression one could conclude that the acknowledgement of women’s work and theorising of subordination of women is intrinsically linked to the nature of capitalist production. There are missing linkages between the analysis of women’s subordination and the role patriarchy plays in perpetuating it, which limit Marxist understanding of women’s work.

The women’s movement has been instrumental in questioning patriarchy in many ways. It can also be studied in three distinct time periods or ‘waves’ to understand its history and trajectory. The women’s movement in India is conceived to be issue-based and heterogeneous, (with many autonomous groups in the 80s and women’s wings of political parties in the 90s as its part), which work together by creating broad based alliances on various issues. Some of the issue’s that the women’s movement has been actively working around are: discrimination against women (manifested in female foeticide, female infanticide, low sex ration, higher level of illiteracy); violence against women (e.g. child marriage, dowry, sati, custodian rape, rape, domestic violence, honour killings, communal violence, police violence); articulation of dissent against policies adopted by the state (for instance the emergency, population policies, insurgency, policies of globalisation, liberalisation, other development projects which lead to massive displacement); political participation in various people’s rights movements and reservations for women in local governing bodies and parliament; and basic rights (right to live, shelter, water, food, health, reproductive health, and work). Overall, the attempt is to contextualise these issues on the basis of class, caste, age, religion, region, sexuality to understand the multilayered understanding of gender based discrimination.

The Indian State’s conceptualisation of development, and women’s empowerment from the late 60s till date, has always been in contention with the ideological premises of

38 Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women’s movement in India, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1992
39 As one historian of the women’s movement, Radha Kumar sees it: the contemporary women’s movement encompasses and links up a range of issues— work environment, ecology, civil rights, and health. It is also a network, which encompasses party-based, professional, and independent groups.
the women’s movement.\textsuperscript{40} The five-year plan documents have no mention of women as workers. On the other hand, the first five-year plan reiterated ‘women’s legitimate role in the family’. The second plan did mention women workers but with a patriarchal and protective attitude towards women to safeguard them from industrial hazards. In the third plan, there was no mention of women as workers in the chapters on employment, personal requirements, training programmes, and labour policy. The solitary mention found was about imparting training to women for family planning and midwifery.\textsuperscript{41} There was immense criticism from the movement with regard to women’s role in the community development programmes that involved training women in skills of ‘family management’ and ‘home economics’. The Committee on Status of Women in India for the first time brought to light the specific issues and question of invisibility of women workers in the informal sector of the economy.

Thus, to articulate the level of exploitation faced by women as workers, it is important to first establish a gendered critique of development policies initiated by the state and then probe into the politics of gender division of labour at the workplace and within the household. The discrimination at the societal level, within the household, is in other words reflected in the gender-based discrimination in the work place and in the larger economy. To understand the extent of this discrimination, it is important to qualify the nature of work women do within and outside the premises of the household. Also, to be able to have a critical understanding of the category of women workers, it is important to theorise their position as that of being triply exploited i.e. as women, as women workers and as women workers in the informal sector.

Women’s domestic labour performs an important function for capitalism through the maintenance and reproduction of the labour force, but housework is increasingly devalued. Even when they are employed, women are at a distinct disadvantage in the labour market because of their dual productive/ reproductive role. Thus, most women serve as cheap labour reserve to supplement male labour and keep wages down.\textsuperscript{42} Women engage in ‘unskilled’ work because they enter the job market already determined as

\textsuperscript{40} Mary E John, ‘Gender and Development in India, 1970s-1990s, Some Reflections on the Constitutive Role of Contexts’, \textit{Economic and Political Weekly}, November 23, 1996
inferior bearers of labour rather than engaging in ‘unskilled’ jobs because they are the bearers of inferior labour.\(^{43}\)

The gender division of labour in industry is an extension of social division of labour in society. Whenever a job is done exclusively and predominantly by women, it becomes classified as being less skilled and of low value. On the other hand, where domestic labour is concerned, women are usually assigned exclusive responsibility for housework. It becomes ‘women’s work’ not because women are more biologically suited to perform them, but because they belong to the domestic economy, which is supposed to be the woman’s sphere. The most important characteristic of work done for one’s household is that it is not remunerated in any way. Sometimes it is acceptable for men, to do the same task, provided they work as wage labourers, for example, as hotel workers or domestic servants. But presumably these men, like other men workers, would not readily do the same tasks in their own homes for no pay. The assumption here is that women are more suited for “un-waged work”, and can afford to do it because there is no necessity for them to earn. Woman’s wages are mostly treated as supplementary.\(^{44}\)

The sexual division of labour in the society is reflected in the division of labour in the workplace. This is then used to argue that the activities or segments where the women are concentrated are low skilled. The consequence of this sex-typing of jobs is two fold: even women with requisite skills find it difficult to get into the so called "male" jobs and the ones in which the women are concentrated are categorised as "low skilled" and receive lower wages.\(^{45}\)

Patriarchy plays an important role in wage determination: the structure of wages along with social attitudes imposes real constraints and compulsions on women making them especially vulnerable.\(^{46}\) With the massive incorporation of women into the labour force, gender subordination was no longer defined solely on the basis of male subordination in the home, but on the limitations to gender equality in the work place and


\(^{46}\) Nirmala Banerjee, Women in the unorganized sector, Sangam books, 1985
in the state. Thus, the shift from “private to public patriarchy” reinforces control on women.\textsuperscript{47}

A major aspect of the gender differentiation of the labour force is generally referred to in the literature as women’s ‘secondary status’ in the labour market; also noted by Lim:

Women’s rates of pay tend to be lower than those of men doing similar or comparable jobs; women form a ‘reserve army’ of labour, easily re-hired when firms want to expand again. This tends to be explained in terms of ‘women’s role in the family’ or ‘women’s reproductive role’. In a sense this is true, but it is an ambiguous explanation, is that for many people ‘women’s role in the family is an ahistorical fact, given by biology. What has to be stressed is that women’s role- even if she is a ‘female head of household’. For it is the female role to do the work which nurtures children and men, work which appears to be purely private and personal, while it is the male role to represent women and children in the wider society. It is the representative role, which confers social power.\textsuperscript{48}

There is an overarching set of controls, which characterises the work for women. There is a range of controls varying from control over self, over one’s own labour power, labour, type of work contract, means of production, raw materials, output, proceeds of the output, income, skills, etc.\textsuperscript{49} In other words, women workers have practically no control over their own conditions of work, starting from the process of doing the work till the proceeds of the work are received. There might be structural constraints, which are specifically linked to the informal sector, such as the casual nature of work, insecurity in terms of employment and income associated with flexible labour. But even within this sector, the women workers, just by virtue of being women, constitute a section that is doubly exploited. In the era of globalisation and informalisation, it is important to base any gendered critique of these policies on the pre-existing position of women in society and the labour market.

It is important to contextualise the category of women as workers within the broad canvas of feminist literature on gender and development to gain insight into the dynamics of the role played by women workers in the labour market within a wider agenda of developmental politics. Three distinct theoretical paths in the field of gender and development can be noted: Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), Gender and Development (GAD).  

WID subscribes to the modernisation theory that assumes traditional societies as authoritarian and male-dominated whereas modern ones as democratic and egalitarian. Therefore, it aims to eradicate oppression (as faced by women in traditional societies) in modern societies. Liberal feminists have also to a large extent accepted and endorsed this worldview. In the 1970s, arguing on these lines, Boserup’s documentation of the regressive impact of development on women’s lives and livelihoods signalled the start of liberal feminists’ advocacy of the integration of women into development, as workers and producers.  

Kabeer reviews the works of feminists and agrees mostly with Marxists on class analysis, but diverges on issues of gender relations. She relates to WID, WAD and GAD with the help of three perspectives: “dependency feminism”; “global capitalist patriarchy and male violence”; and “capital accumulation and the social relations of gender”.  

The dependency feminist view the inequalities between women and men as part of the global economy with the use of the traditional Marxist-Feminist framework. They view sexual inequality as just another aspect of perpetuation of the inequity created by capitalist accumulation. Kabeer draws parallel between this and the WID critique of mainstream development theory, which ignores structural causes and focuses on individual dynamics of power relations between men and women with absence of the gender question in mainstream development theory. Second group, who focus on global capitalist patriarchy and male violence, has been represented in the feminist writings of Maria Mies who contributed significantly to the extension of the Marxist-Feminist critique in identifying the female body as the site of patriarchal violence. This stand taken

---


88
by Marxist and dependency feminists for radical structural change has not translated into
efforts to address Third World women’s immediate needs.\textsuperscript{53}

The Socialist Feminists who dominate GAD have evolved from WID failures and
WAD limitations. This analytical framework emphasises gender relations in both the
labour force and the reproductive sphere. The GAD model focuses not just on women but
on social relations between men and women and uses gender relations as a category rather
than ‘women’. The advocates of this group expect the state to intervene in the overall
development by introducing programmes to support the work of social reproduction,
namely the care and nurturance of children. Kabeer’s third group of feminist
structuralists, capital accumulation and social relations of gender, is clearly an elucidation
of the GAD model. She is of the opinion that GAD goes beyond Marxist analysis on
production to the areas of social reproduction. GAD opens up new strategies for feminist
interventions.\textsuperscript{54} It is important to somehow ascertain the category of gender and dissociate
with the category of women to understand the complex politics of women as workers.
The limitation of using women as a category is owing to the assumptions of essentialising
and not questioning the homogeneity of them as women and as worker. Arguing on the
same lines, some post structuralist and postmodern theorists question the very premise of
the category of women’s work; for instance Scott notes:

If we write the history of women’s work by gathering data that describes the
activities, needs, interests, and culture of ‘women workers’, we leave in place the
naturalized contrast and reify a fixed categorical difference between women and men. We
start the story in other words, too late, by uncritically accepting the gendered category (the
‘woman worker’) that itself needs investigation because its meaning is relative to history.\textsuperscript{55}

For the purpose of this research the category of women workers are used within
the larger framework of gender relations without essentialising the category of either
women or women workers. The multiple layers of exploitation within the household, the
society and the labour market is explored to contextualise their situations of deprivation.

\textsuperscript{53} Nalini Vishvanathan(co-ordinator), Lynn Duggan, Laurie Nisonoff, Nan Wiegersma (eds), \textit{The Women, Gender and Development Reader}, Zed Books Ltd, 1997
\textsuperscript{54} Nalini Vishvanathan(co-ordinator), Lynn Duggan, Laurie Nisonoff, Nan Wiegersma (eds), \textit{The Women, Gender and Development Reader}, Zed Books Ltd, 1997
The structural changes due to informalisation of work especially within the informal sector have drastically affected the nature of work for women. Number of organisations have been actively involved in creating a collective struggle for specific issues of women workers. The next section is an overview of three organisations: WWF, AIDWA, and SEWA who have over the years articulated dissent of women workers especially working in the unorganised sector.

Mobilisation of women workers by women’s rights organisations

This section discusses some issues and mobilisation strategies of women workers by three women’s organisations: Working Women’s Forum (WWF), SEWA, and All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA). The first two organisations work primarily with women in the informal sector. Both are registered trade unions of women workers and have in a way challenged the notions of traditional trade unionism. AIDWA is a mass-based organisation with membership in almost all the states in the country with a strong anti-imperialist ideological position on various issues related to oppression and exploitation specifically with regard to women workers and also for women in general.

The WWF is a grassroots organisation, exclusively involved in mobilising poor working women, based in Madras. The mobilisation of women workers was primarily based on credit to relieve women engaged in subsistence occupations in the informal economy from the clutches of moneylenders and middle-men by providing them working capital at low rates of interest. The larger objective was to provide women certain amount of autonomy, access, and control over resources and enhance their contribution to household income. The forum has two channels of credit: through nationalised banks and through its own cooperative credit societies.

The forum was formed in 1978 when the President of the forum and her allies decided to break away from the women’s front of the Congress party and decided to form a women’s organisation that would be apolitical (i.e. non-party oriented and women-intensive) but believed in political action. After its formation, the main objective of the forum was to empower poor working women both in their productive and reproductive roles. Empowerment is understood as providing some degree of control and decision making power, access to resources and raising the level of consciousness of both their class and gender status. The activities of the forum can be listed under three broad groups:

57 The WWF will be referred to as the ‘forum’ for this section
the credit programme, the family planning and health programme, and social conscientisation activities. The forum mobilises the ‘micro entrepreneurs’ in the urban informal sector, and the home-based producers in the rural areas of three southern states and some other cities in northern India.  

The forum started its activities amongst the self-employed vendors in the city of Madras. As the forum spread to other areas involving agricultural wage labour and home-based workers, the class character of the oppression of women was articulated by their membership. With the sharpening of this focus, the forum registered itself as a trade union. In March 1981, the forum named itself the National Union of Working Women. Contrary to perceived notions of difficulties in organising unorganised sector workers, the forum’s initiative proves that this sector is organisable. Also to a significant extent, gender and class consciousness among the women has led to the understanding that solidarity is strength and from the organisation’s perspective to be able to build solidarity amongst this section of the workers is a big challenge.

The core of the organisational structure consists of its members constituted into groups, with a group leader nominated from within it and the organisers. The group leaders loan money to groups and reports to the forum’s organisers on all matters relating to the organisation. Loans are not given to individuals but to groups with group leaders providing the guarantee as well as the responsibility of collecting the dues. The group leader also cultivates among their members the spirit of the women’s collective. The organisers form a vital link between the groups and the forum. They come from working class backgrounds and their main task is to extend the activities of the forum to other rural areas and urban slums to screen the new groups formed, assess their genuine credit needs, and to negotiate with the banks for loans and help the groups in repayment.  

The forum through its work has developed a holistic perspective on women workers and their issues which are not always directly related to their work alone. The women workers come up with several issues: the lack of control over what they earn, a significant responsibility for the household’s survival, frequent child births, alcoholism of husbands, desertion, the burden of routine household chores, confined living with restricted mobility, being treated as a burden by the family owing to excessive dowry

---

58 It covers the following women workers: informal sector workers in Madras city, agricultural labourers and shandy (wholesale market) workers in Dindigul taluk, Madurai district, Tamil Nadu, agarbatti workers in the slums of Bangalore city, Karnataka, lace makers of Narasapur, Andhra Pradesh, rural non-agricultural workers in Bidar district, Karnataka, silk weavers in Kancheepuram, Tamil Nadu, chicken embroidery workers in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, and night schools for migrant workers in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh.

59 Kalpagam, Labour and Gender: survival in urban India, Sage Publication, 1993
demands in society. In their activities there is scope for interlinkages between all aspects in the life of women workers in the informal sector.

SEWA also works within the parameters of the informal economy, in various sectors. \(^{60}\) SEWA is one of the pioneering organisations, which has successfully taken up the cause of women workers by providing social security for its members. The main thrust of SEWA’s work revolves around women belonging to the informal sector who, according to them, are the most marginalised section within the category of women workers.

The emergence of SEWA can be traced back to the insecurities \(^{61}\) of casual and ‘self-employed' \(^{62}\) women workers in the Textile Mill City of Ahmedabad. In 1917, Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association (TLA) was formed under Mahatma Gandhi’s patronage. Ela Bhatt started SEWA as a union for informal sector women workers, which was initially operated under the patronage of the TLA. SEWA was registered in 1972 as a trade union that aimed at organising poor women in the informal economy aiming at full employment and self-reliance at the household level. The TLA was a conventional trade union (in terms of employer-employee set-up) that had a women’s wing. It did not really protect and support the interests of the women workers who were engaged in casual work.

---

\(^{60}\) Brief description of the organisational structure and various unions, trade associations, cooperatives, federations and other supportive services as part of it is discussed in the fifth chapter. This section only concentrates on the philosophical underpinnings and mobilisation strategies of SEWA. 

\(^{61}\) Insecurity was meant in terms of work and wages. Mostly all the women were scattered and unorganised with extremely low wages. All had acute problem of working capital, market place, raw material, transport, and storage. The middlemen would exploit them. They had no protection of any labour laws despite working for 18 hours a day. They mostly had unhygienic living conditions; faced occupational health hazards, also the percentage of female and infant mortality was high. They had no access to markets, banks, governmental bodies or courts. They were invisible in the eyes of the planners. They faced severe harassment from the police. Above all, they were non-skilled and, therefore, had no income security. They had intense needs for fair credit, maternity protection, fair wages for whatever work they were engaged in.

\(^{62}\) See 1991 SEWA Annual Report, according to this document:

Self-employed is a broad term covering all the workers who are not in a formal employer-employee relationship. Both traditional and modern occupations come under SEWA’s definition of self-employed, from the bartering of goods to capitalistic piece-rate work.

The self-employed women come from three broad categories:

- **The home-based worker producer**
  - Women quilt makers, bidi workers, incense stick makers, carpenters, block printers, bamboo workers, blacksmiths, junk smiths, spinners, weavers, food processors, handicrafts workers and artisans in the urban and the rural areas, potters, cobblers and weavers constitute this group.

- **The petty vendors**
  - Women selling vegetables, eggs, fruits, fish, eatables, garments, milk and consumer goods produces in their slums constitute this group.

- **The manual labourers and providers of services**
  - Women working as agriculture labourers, construction workers, cattle-holders, brick plant workers, head loaders and cart pullers, fuel wood pickers the forest and mountain labourers, waste pickers, fisherwomen, cotton-pod openers etc. constitute this group.
on a piece-rate basis. Therefore, due to difference of ideologies, in 1981, SEWA split with the TLA and started work independently as an organisation.  

Now, SEWA operates in a number of other Indian states under an umbrella federation called SEWA Bharat, though it has primarily grown out of the SEWA Gujarat experience. The organisation strives to attain “the second freedom” (the first one being the political freedom asserted by the national freedom struggle), which means the attainment of social and financial security for thousands of women workers in the unorganised sector. SEWA is both an organisation and a movement and has spread to six states of India. Its annual membership fee of Rs 5 has facilitated a steady growth in membership over the years. At the beginning of 2003 its all-India membership was 7,04,166 and the Gujarat membership was 4,69,306. By 2009 the all India membership of SEWA was 12,56,944 and the membership for Gujarat was 6,31,345. SEWA believes in the joint action of trade union and cooperatives, federations and self-help associations in rural and urban areas.

Two movements contributed to its emergence. The first was the trade union movement. However, as is evident from the earlier discussion, SEWA, in its structure, organisation and functioning, has grown beyond its trade union roots. Traditional trade unions are concerned primarily with the organised sector – i.e. with white collar workers incorporated within enterprises or with factory workers in registered factories. They employ the twin strategies of recourse to law and pressurising through withholding labour as the primary means of getting benefits for their members. Apart from dealing directly with employers, the trade unions also use their numbers and their closeness to political parties to put pressure on employers, and even on the government from time to time.

---

63 Many authors have theorized that SEWA was expelled by the TLA due to difference of approach (especially to understand the multi-layered notion of exploitation of women workers and dalit workers). The reasons why it was expelled is not within the scope of this research. The stand taken is to point out the new beginnings of SEWA outside the broader patronage of TLA.

64 As discussed in Chapter One, the term unorganised sector has been widely used in India and not yet been defined precisely, but it is usually used to describe a type of work that is small, unregistered uncertain and unprotected. Thus, the unorganised sector is largely understood as being opposite of the organised sector, which is characterised by large firms, protection of labour laws and organised trade unions. The main defining characteristic of the unorganised sector is the precarious nature of the work. Employment is not permanent and workers are not covered by adequate social security. Therefore, the workers in this sector have little bargaining power and collective bargaining is rarely employed. The contribution of this sector to the economy is often grossly undercounted and underrated. SEWA works with women workers in the informal sector. The term unorganised sector is used interchangeably with the informal sector for the purpose of this research. This is due to the commonality, the two terms share on the basis of their relationship and similar nature of work patterns, which has been elaborated above.

65 SEWA Annual Report 2003, SEWA publications, Ahmedabad

66 http://www.sewa.org/About_Us_Structure.asp

67 Ponna Wignaraja, Women, Poverty and Resources, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1989, pg.74
Unfortunately neither of these strategies is available to workers in the unorganised sectors. Thus, it is not surprising that the new SEWA union with its focus on women in the unorganised sector went beyond conventional trade unionism. Its main aim was to organise poor illiterate women in the rural and the urban sectors to empower them with the capacity to bargaining.\textsuperscript{68} SEWA attempts to ensure socio-economic security for self-employed women and to avert unwarranted risks, associated with the unorganised sector. Since there is no employer-employee relationship in the unorganised sector, its strategy has been to negotiate with the government for policy changes specifically for this sector. One important aspect that derives directly from SEWA’s association with the TLA is the Gandhian influence on its ideology.

The other movement, which contributed to SEWA’s growth, was the women’s movement in India. As the women’s movement gathered momentum, it became apparent that the struggle of poor women went beyond gender conflicts and purely economic issues to an inter-related set of problems including the social, cultural, and political aspects, which had to be addressed if the poor women were to benefit. It also became clear that poor women needed a more comprehensive basis for organisation. It is interesting to note that SEWA as an organisation has never addressed the nature of ‘woman’s work’ to produce an overarching critique of patriarchal structures which characterise most of the work women do, be it in the organised or in the unorganised sector. There has also not been any attempt to link up the gender division of labour operating both within and outside the family, with the social and sexual exploitation of women in general. Most importantly, there has been an over-emphasis on women workers and their rights without going into the politics of the position of women in society. In their understanding of woman’s role and status in society and economy, SEWA seems to fall back upon the Gandhian formulations.

SEWA adheres to what can be called a feminine philosophy, since it believes in non-violence, instead of retaliating with violent means for arbitration and reconciliation. Overall, it strives for a quiet, fiercely determined resistance to exploitation. SEWA draws a great deal of inspiration from Gandhi’s work, and believes that he was instrumental in getting Indian society to recognise women’s importance in the world of work and social

\textsuperscript{68} SEWA transcends the boundaries of these traditional trade unions by working in close quarters with the panchayats through gram sabhas, taluk, district, and municipal level government, with the state, the national government and with international agencies. The stark differences between SEWA and other trade unions are evident from SEWA’s stand on globalisation and structural adjustment programmes, which seem to contradict the views of traditional trade unions which denounce these policies by critiquing them outrightly.
change. However, in this context, it is not very clear whether the attempt is to essentialise or to romanticise their so-called ‘feminine philosophy’.

A discussion on the Gandhian principles and ideas regarding the place and role of women in the Indian society is necessary to understand the way in which SEWA uses, or has adopted the Gandhian ideology. Gandhi gave the Indian women confidence in themselves. He made them realise that they have a significant and dominant role to play within the family, that both she and her husband are equal and that within the family they both have similar rights. In a path-breaking intervention, he not only involved women in politics, but also made them realise that the national movement could not succeed without their active involvement in the struggle. Gandhi ultimately empowered women in the family and within the institution of marriage. This reconstruction of women and femininity did not perpetuate into a structural analysis of the origins and nature of the exploitation of women in society and within the family. In fact, Gandhi’s views were essentialist in nature. He reaffirmed women’s position as mothers and wives in the household. Gandhi believed in the doctrine of ‘the separate spheres’ whose roots lay in biology. The differences between sexes were explained in term of ‘natural difference’ that legitimised different social and cultural role for men and women in society and provided the basis of moral prescription regarding the behaviour of women and the interactions between sexes. In Gandhi, women’s weakness was turned into strength. Gandhi links his understanding of women’s weakness and its transformation into strength as part of the same strategy that was embodied in the conceptions of satyagraha and ahimsa. The “non-violent movement”, he asserted, “is to enable the weakest human beings to vindicate their dignity”. The woman, in Gandhi’s view, remained weakness personified. The difference was that while “she may be weak in body... she can be strong in soul”. Gandhi projected the spinning wheel as the weapon for the strong in soul.

SEWA’s ideology draws heavily from Gandhian philosophy and traditions of truth, non-violence, communal harmony, removal of untouchability and propagation of khadi and village based industry. There is no attempt to question the Gandhian notion of

---

69 As expressed by Kalima Rose who has worked extensively with SEWA, for more details see, Kalima Rose, Where Women are Leaders: The SEWA Movement in India, Vistaar Publications, New Delhi, 1992, pg. 31
70 This interpretation of Gandhi’s take on women has been argued by Sujata Patel, for further details, see Sujata Patel ‘Construction and Reconstruction of Women in Gandhi’, Economic and Political Weekly, February 20, 1988, pgs 125-130
72 Ibid, pg 127
73 Ibid, pg 128
biological determinism and essentialism that is instrumental in articulating the dual role
of women inside and outside the household. Here, the role outside household is strictly in
terms of women’s involvement in national movement and nation building. When it comes
to women’s role, within the sphere of the household, it is limited to household chores,
which reiterates stereotypes of gendered division of labour. SEWA in organising women
workers has attempted to use the Gandhian philosophy of femininity in terms of turning
the very weakness of women into their major strength.

There is an intrinsic link between SEWA’s non-addressal of issues regarding the
politics of gender and the stand they take on globalisation. A common feature in both
these contexts is SEWA’s disinclination towards questioning the pre-existing structures,
be it the forces of globalisation or the position of women in society. However, when we
deal specifically with its stand on globalisation, a fundamental contradiction emerges
between SEWA’s overall approach and its Gandhian roots. In sharp contrast to Gandhi’s
advocacy of a self-sustained village economy and his critique of machines being an
undesirable feature, specific to western civilisation, SEWA propagates the integration of
the global to the local. What seems to be a positive take on Gandhian philosophy is its
politics of organising women in large numbers by articulating their vulnerable position in
society vis-à-vis their work.

Facing globalisation with a pragmatic and pro-poor attitude has enabled SEWA to
at least intervene actively in the lives of thousands of women by training them to cope
with certain insecurities that emerged after globalisation. SEWA has been instrumental in
fighting the cause of informal sector women workers through campaigns and through
dialogues specific to labour policies with the Indian State, also with international
organisations.\textsuperscript{74} It has also been influential in terms of networking and reaching out to
align with international organisations that work on similar issues.\textsuperscript{75} Its basic thrust is to

\textsuperscript{74} One of the many issues SEWA lobbied with the state for was to take up a maternity scheme for landless
agricultural workers, who constitute 75\% per cent of the female population. In 1987, the state of Gujarat
with SEWA’s help began implementing the maternity protection scheme through the Labour Ministry.
SEWA meanwhile continues lobbying with the central government to launch this programme nation-wide
for self-employed women.

\textsuperscript{75} SEWA is one of the founders of WIEGO, a worldwide coalition of institutions and individuals concerned
with improving statistics, research, programs, and policies in support of women in informal sector of the
economy. It is a co-founder of HOMENET, which organizes the home-based workers at the grass root
level and mobilize them for their rights. SEWA is also associated with STREETNET, which aims at
increasing visibility, voice and bargaining power of street vendors throughout the world. SEWA has taken
an initiative for establishing regional network of grass root workers and their organisations engaged in
traditional handicrafts in SAARC countries and other neighbouring countries in South Asia. Global Trading
Network (GTN) is a joint initiative of the World Bank and SEWA. It endeavours to build autonomous
organise the poor women workers in the informal sector, to empower their members with sustainable income and provide for socio-economic security in order to pull them out of the viscous cycle of poverty.

SEWA does not attempt to link the growing informalisation of work status with the growth of structural adjustment programmes or broader structures of globalisation. On the other hand, it believes that the forces of globalisation can be beneficial to the poor in certain ways. They sometimes fall into the web of narrowly defining globalisation as the opening up of the economy and markets. SEWA's struggles aim at reaching the global market to the poor workers who cannot otherwise access it. SEWA in many ways acts as an intermediary between the government at the policy level and the poor women at the grassroots level. It networks between the global, national, and local levels to guarantee employment and remuneration to this category of women workers in the informal sector.76 SEWA might legitimise the forces of globalisation to some extent; nonetheless is aware of some of the fallouts of liberalisation policies and their adverse impact on certain key sectors where their members work in large numbers. For instance, in the construction and the garment sector, the employment loss or reduction in wage rate is often associated with mechanisation, which is characteristic of the forces of globalisation.77

SEWA seeks to protect its members from adverse changes after globalisation by equipping them with adequate training for greater skill and technological competence. SEWA’s programme includes educating them, helping them market their goods, helping them gain greater access to the markets, courts, governmental bodies and also helping them in harnessing resources and managing finances. Above all, SEWA seeks to provide them with alternative employment opportunities and social security measures. It believes that after the policies of globalisation have come into being some sectors have been beneficiaries in terms of employment and income. Globalisation has also helped them in a way to reach out to the international bodies for support and legitimacy. With their emphasis on women's economic agency, processes of decentralisation and the reduction of the role of the state, it is perhaps not surprising that SEWA is being projected as an

76 World of Work: India: Self-employed Women's Association (SEWA), No. 36, November 2000, also see www.ilo.org.
77 Impact of mechanisation on the construction sector and especially women workers is a part of the Fifth Chapter
ideal model not just for the third world countries, but even for first world nations who are seeking to dismantle their welfare systems in favour of neo-liberal policy orientations.\textsuperscript{78}

Overall SEWA has managed to organise and support the cause of women workers in the informal sector by bringing in favourable policy level changes at the grassroots level. But these efforts have not been addressed towards linking it with the issue of gender division of labour within and outside the household. Although SEWA principally work with women workers, they fail to achieve what they call ‘empowerment’ for these women. The members cannot achieve empowerment based on economic and social security without questioning their exploitative position in society. In its ideological underpinnings there is a general dearth of understanding ‘exploitation’ which women workers face based on any gender-based ideology. Exploitation is defined unidimensionally in terms of the context of the informal sector only. SEWA characterises their members as the vulnerable victims of formalisation of work simply because they cannot organise and evolve a united voice against these kinds of work patterns. To organise these women and make their dissent visible, SEWA came into being. SEWA does not develop any broad linkages between growing formalisation of the labour force and the predominance of women doing certain kinds of jobs in the informal sector. Instead of merely holding formalisation responsible for deterioration of the conditions of work done by women, it is also important to question the politics of why women are favoured to do jobs which are casual, lowly paid and irregular. It could be deduced from this analysis that the growing discrimination against women workers in the informal sector is not just due to the characteristics of formalisation of work patterns, but also due to the underlying predominance of gender discrimination in the overall labour market.

Another organisation which works with women workers is AIDWA. It was founded in 1981, is an all India organisation with a presence in 21 states, and a membership of over eight million women.\textsuperscript{79} It is organised on a federal basis, with its head quarters in New Delhi.\textsuperscript{80} Its organisational strength lies in thousands of grass-root units elected from the village and the district neighbourhood levels, going up to the state

\textsuperscript{78} This is discussed at length by Mary E. John, for further details see, Mary E. John, ‘Feminism, Poverty and globalisation: an Indian view’, \textit{Inter-Asia Cultural Studies}, Volume 3, Number 3, 2002, pg 361
\textsuperscript{79} Introducing AIDWA document
\textsuperscript{80} Patricia Loveridge, ‘Approaches to Change: The All India Democratic Women’s Association and a Marxist Approach to the Woman Question in India’, in \textit{Indian Journal of Gender Studies}, 1994, 1:2. Also see conference document of AIDWA in Madras, where the organisation’s Constitution, Programme and Statement of Aims and Objectives were formulated
and finally the Central Executive Committees at the national level. The principle of 
decentralisation is actually practised in the three-tier structure of AIDWA. Unit 
committees can be formed as soon as there are more than 50 members. Any member of 
AIDWA is eligible to be an elected member of these committees. Any woman above the 
age of 16, who subscribes to the AIDWA constitution and programme, is eligible for 
membership of the organisation with provision to renew it every year. The unit 
committees, district committees and state committees elect members for the central 
executive committee. AIDWA does not accept funds from any foreign funding agency or 
from the government. Its activities are run and financed by membership fees, individual 
donations and through fund collection drives.  

AIDWA is also the women's wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or 
the CPI (M). But it claims to be an independent mass based organisation, which is merely 
affiliated to the party. It is part of the seven sisters in the organised women's movement 
in India. It believes that the emancipation of women in India requires fundamental 
systematic change. Women's issues concern an integral part of a larger socio-political and 
economic system and cannot be addressed in isolation or only within a male-female 
relationship framework. Over the years, it has developed a critique of the state in India, 
which according to them represents the narrow interests of powerful elites of the capitalist 
and landlord classes and has a stake in strengthening patriarchy as an ideology, intrinsic 
to its interests. Overall it works around issues of capitalist-created inequality, wages, 
unemployment, discrimination in jobs etc. Alongside this there has been a conscious 
effort to link up the struggles against class, caste, gender, and patriarchy within and 
outside the private realm of the family by AIDWA. 

The organisational philosophy aims to achieve democracy, equality, and women's 
emancipation. In policy and in practice, it upholds secular values against all forms of 
fundamentalism. Its main focus is among the poorer sections of working class women 
who constitute the majority of India's female population. Economic independence, the 
right to work with equal wages, a minimum income (with respect to self-employed

81 Patricia Loveridge, 'Approaches to Change: The All India Democratic Women's Association and a 
Marxist Approach to the Woman Question in India', in Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 1994, 1:2. Also 
see conference document of AIDWA in Madras, where the organisation's Constitution, Programme and 
Statement of Aims and Objectives were formulated 
82 The other organisations, which comprise the seven sisters, are All India Women's Conference affiliated to 
the Congress, Mahila Dakshata Samiti with the Janata Party, The National Federation of Indian Women 
with the Communist Party of India, others are Joint Women's Programme, Centre for Women's 
Development Studies and the Young Women's Christian Association. 
83 Introducing AIDWA Document
women workers), are all crucial components of the advancement of women. The provision of social security services including: accessible education, health facilities, old-age security are equally important. According to AIDWA, women's subordination is not only intrinsic to capitalist systems but also an essential requirement for its existence. This subordination is expressed and maintained not only through the unjust terms of social division of labour between men and women, but also in terms of women’s unpaid work.84

AIDWA derives its gender politics from the Marxist understanding of women’s oppression. This is perhaps the reason why it falls short of certain critical insights necessary for a holistic articulation of women’s subordination. It does make an effort to link up the concept of broad patriarchal structures that influence women’s position in society. Though it claims to raise issues of gender division of labour in the society, it fails to deal with the issue of sexual division of labour critically. In other words, there is no attempt to question the theory of biological determinism in order to understand why women alone do certain ‘women specific tasks’.

Just as legislation is seen as a precondition for social change, in AIDWA’s view, raising public awareness and influencing government policy is also understood as tactics for short-term gains in the struggle for women’s equality. What is stressed, however, is the need for broader change in the socio-economic sphere and a programme to bring about such change. The other level of AIDWA’s approach then is the promotion of long-term and radical social, political, and economic change. Raising public awareness regarding the nature of women’s oppression and the exploitation of the working class is one aspect of this strategy. What characterises both strategies is the emphasis placed on mass mobilisation and the need for change from below.

AIDWA takes a strong anti-imperialist/ anti-globalisation stand, especially with regard to women workers in the agricultural and rural areas. It argues that their conditions have substantially deteriorated, once these policy measures were implemented post 1991. AIDWA addresses the problems of women workers through multidimensional strategies including agitations, mass mobilisations, legal interventions, campaigns, seminars, publications, and counselling. These are implemented through formation of self-help groups and cooperatives. It has been part of numerous interventions, both through mobilisation of women workers and lobbying for reversing macro policies of government in favour of women.

84 Brinda Karat, Survival and Emancipation Notes from Indian women’s struggles, Three Essays, New Delhi, 2005
Over the years, AIDWA has been instrumental in building struggles all over the country. Some of their specific interventions have been in the area of food security, equal wage, and minimum wages for women workers, women’s land rights, and joint ownership rights in land. It is actively involved in organising dalit women against upper caste oppression and also deals with issues specific to tribal women and women of minority communities. AIDWA intervenes in mobilising women in favour of the election of the pro-women democratic and progressive candidates to the parliament, state assemblies and local bodies. It was part of the joint and successful effort to achieve one-third reservation of seats for women in local bodies and is now campaigning for the extension of reservation to the higher elected bodies.

To further the struggle for women’s rights, AIDWA believes that the first priority is to organise and mobilise the mass of women in struggles to better their own lives on issues of vital importance to them. It is also committed to co-operate with other women’s organisations and groups (such as: trade unions, peasant organisations, youth and students and professional associations) to form a united movement throughout the country.

AIDWA’s analysis of women’s oppression is pitched at two levels. The first issue is the growing marginalisation of women in the economic and productive sphere that is related to the kind of discrimination faced by women in the work place. These discriminatory practices would include poor working conditions, low salaries, and restrictions on promotional opportunities. The second issue addresses the oppression women experience at the societal level, particularly violence against women resulting from communal and caste-related conflict. They argue that women are oppressed on the basis of their gender, as members of an exploited class and as citizens. Struggle for women’s emancipation is intrinsically linked with issues of national sovereignty and the protection of the inalienable rights of people to decide their own course of development. AIDWA links their movements to anti-imperialism struggles.85

In most of the AIDWA publications it is evident that a lot of emphasis is given to macro structures. What is noticeable here is that while much attention has been paid to the larger structures responsible for women’s subordination, there is no discussion concerning oppression as it is perpetuated at the micro level. As such, a number of questions remain unanswered. How exactly is power exercised among individuals? Are oppressive relationships at the interpersonal level a direct product of the larger structure?

85 All India Democratic Women’s Association, Perspectives, Interventions and Struggles 2001-2004, March, AIDWA Publications, New Delhi, 2005, pg. 31
What is the relationship between the operation of power at the macro and the micro levels? Will class struggle, involving the removal of the concerned government and other large structural changes, be enough to change power dynamics at the micro level and that of gender? AIDWA's analysis of oppression faced by women and the strategies of their emancipation will necessarily remain incomplete, unless it can reconcile its understanding of macro-issues with its micro-level experiences to evolve a holistic theoretical framework.

To sum up, one can argue that women's organisations singularly cannot bear the onus of organising dissent and evolving a worldview of fighting for workers rights. The ultimate responsibility of implementing policy changes and improving the situation of women workers lies with the government and the state machinery. The laws have to be compatible with the notion of empowerment for women workers and their overall development. The attempt of women's groups to articulate the problem using both "practical interests" and "strategic interests" to develop an understanding of gender interests and working in tandem with the government is important to bring any grassroots transformation in the lives of women workers.

...two ways in which women's gender interests could be derived: these were termed respectively 'practical' interests those based on the satisfaction of needs arising from women's placement within the sexual division of labour, and 'strategic' interests those involving claims to transform social relations in order to enhance women's position and to secure a more lasting re-positioning of women within the gender order and within society at large. The intrinsically political potentially transformative nature of strategic interests needs re-emphasizing.86

One cannot underestimate the functions of women's workers trade unions/ mass based organisations like WWF, SEWA, and AIDWA in influencing policy measures. However, what remains a lacuna in their critique of some of the policy measures adopted by the government is overlooking the overarching gender insensitive approach of the Indian State. Instead, the attempts by these organisations have been to point out the absence of certain policies or demand newer policies for the upliftment of women workers. It is important to articulate the dissent of women workers by organising them to

demand for policy changes and equally critical are the actual changes in policies. All in all it is a two way process of development and change. The initiatives of these women’s organisations working with women workers mark a starting point to probe into the possibilities of bargaining for gender sensitive policies with the Indian State and articulating the ‘triple burden’ on women workers.