

Working Paper No. 186

**The Trauma of ‘Wage Employment’ and the
‘Burden of Work’ for Women in India:
Evidences and Experiences**

by

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April 2004

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Abstract

Approached from any discipline – demography, economics, sociology etc., - women’s participation in paid employment and particularly participation *outside* the household domain has uniformly been given a positive connotation. In demography, for example, the seemingly high correlation between increase in female WPR and reduction in fertility rate has catapulted this statistical finding into a policy decision, wherein growth in population in populous LDCs is sought to be controlled through, among other things, larger participation of women in paid employment. In economics, where the study of poverty is a major preoccupation, wage employment is central among the prescriptions for poverty reduction. Further, paid employment for women is also generally associated with greater economic independence resulting in better household nutritional status as well as better scope for education of girl children. Sociological studies of women’s participation in wage employment stress the enhanced status and autonomy that such work participation provide for women, which in turn confers on them greater decision-making power. The celebration of statistical increases in female work participation rates has, more often than not, hidden the fact that most employed women have no formal ‘worker’ status; this in turn means that recourse to any form of action for redressal of grievances becomes infructuous, since legal recognition as ‘worker’ is a necessary condition for most courses of action.

At another level, there is increasing documentation of the ‘Triple Overlap’ of gender stratification, economy and family (Blumberg, 1991). Insights from these studies provide an understanding of how housework is the aspect of family life most resistant to change. Occupational demands and expectation continue to be based on the assumption that the worker is an individual who is relatively free of domestic and family responsibilities. Further, an underlying dimension of modernization is the increasing centrality of individual goal attainment (Bernhardt, 1993). This has important, and, more often, *negative* implications for women. For women to become *modern* or compete with men on equal terms would imply that they are unburdened by household duties and childcare. Otherwise they must make adjustments at a personal level, for example, by working part time or by limiting the sizes of their families, if they wish to combine the two roles. The division of tasks within the family or its reorganization so that both genders share the responsibilities, is not yet a subject of negotiation for most households, whatever their social and economic level.

An important consequence of combining the tasks of production and reproduction is that it has a serious impact on well-being. For the poor, and poor working women in

* This paper was presented at a National Seminar on “Globalization and Women’s Work” organized by the V V Giri National Labour Institute, New Delhi, on 25 and 26 March, 2004 at New Delhi.

particular, the wages received are no compensation for the high work intensity and the pervasive practice of sexual harassment that they have to put up with on a day-to-day basis. And yet, the aspects of how intensification of work time as well as the work itself impact on well-being have received scant attention in literature. This paper attempts to address some of these issues.

The paper is organized as follows. In Section I we provide a brief overview of the statistical dimensions of the problem of employment, unemployment, and [officially documented figures of] declines in female work participation rates [WPRs]. This section also discusses the conceptual inadequacy of our national data systems to capture the range of activities that women in particular are engaged in, as well as the inability of these systems, as they are presently organized, to recognize the changes in the organization of these and other activities over time. Section II reviews select literature that attempt to synthesize the themes of women, work and well being, as well as provide a conceptual framework to contextualize the varied nature of women's work. Section III reproduces highlights from conversations with women workers on the themes of 'women, work and health' based on two studies conducted by the present author.

We have preferred to concentrate on the most vulnerable of our laboring population, namely, women workers, since understanding and documenting the context in which they work and live, and the manner in which they cope with and negotiate these varied spaces, bring out quite starkly the dynamics of contemporary capitalism in developing countries. In most of these countries including India, economic growth has thus far never been able to address issues of unemployment, adequacy of wages, social security; further, investment in basic infrastructure such as fuel, sanitation, drinking water, etc., have always been and continue to remain abysmally low and neglected. In addition, the search for cheap prices has more often than not been translated to mean search for cheap labor with women-labor bearing the brunt of the changing nature of capitalist onslaught.

The Trauma of ‘Wage Employment’ and the ‘Burden of Work’ for Women in India: Evidences and Experiences

Introduction

The changing nature and the range of issues that many developing countries, including India, are experiencing in the period of globalization in particular, raise several issues of concern that state and civil society organizations are forced to grapple with. The first is the *growth dilemma*. The need for growth is not disputed but the resolution to the problem of a growth that is near jobless and unsustainable still eludes us. The second is the *work dilemma*. Our societies are increasingly unable to provide quality employments in large numbers; worse existing protected [howsoever inadequate] employment is rapidly acquiring a flexible character, which in our context means underpaid, insecure, unprotected employment. The third and equally important issue is the perception of *ill being* that is increasingly becoming manifest in several ways – in macro-level indicators and in micro-level qualitative studies. While the need to address all of this from a *gender* perspective is important [because of the differential impacts of policies and practices on men and women at all levels, and in all spheres], this paper will focus on women in particular because of the specific nature of economic violence experienced by them.

Approached from any discipline – demography, economics, sociology etc., - women’s participation in paid employment and particularly participation *outside* the household domain has uniformly been given a positive connotation. In demography, for example, the seemingly high correlation between increase in female WPR and reduction in fertility rate has catapulted this statistical finding into a policy decision, wherein growth in population in populous LDCs is sought to be controlled through, among other things, larger participation of women in paid employment. In economics, where the study of poverty is a major preoccupation, wage employment is central among the prescriptions for poverty reduction. Further, paid employment for women is also generally associated with greater economic independence resulting in better household nutritional status as well as better scope for education of girl children. Sociological studies of women’s participation in wage employment stress the enhanced status and autonomy that such work participation provide for women, which in turn confers on them greater decision-making power. The celebration of statistical increases in female work participation rates has, more often than not, hidden the fact that most employed women have no formal ‘worker’ status; this in turn means that recourse to any form of action for redressal of grievances becomes infructuous, since legal recognition as ‘worker’ is a necessary condition for most courses of action.

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goal attainment (Bernhardt, 1993). This has important, and, more often, *negative* implications for women. For women to become *modern* or compete with men on equal terms would imply that they are unburdened by household duties and childcare. Otherwise they must make adjustments at a personal level, for example, by working part time or by limiting the sizes of their families, if they wish to combine the two roles. The division of tasks within the family or its reorganization so that both genders share the responsibilities, is not yet a subject of negotiation for most households, whatever their social and economic level.

An important consequence of combining the tasks of production and reproduction is that it has a serious impact on well-being. For the poor, and poor working women in particular, the wages received are no compensation for the high work intensity and the pervasive practice of sexual harassment that they have to put up with on a day-to-day basis. And yet, the aspects of how intensification of work time as well as the work itself impact on well-being have received scant attention in literature. This paper attempts to address some of these issues.

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We have preferred to concentrate on the most vulnerable of our laboring population, namely, women workers, since understanding and documenting the context in which they work and live, and the manner in which they cope with and negotiate these varied spaces, bring out quite starkly the dynamics of contemporary capitalism in developing countries. In most of these countries including India, economic growth has thus far never been able to address issues of unemployment, adequacy of wages, social security; further, investment in basic infrastructure such as fuel, sanitation, drinking water, etc., have always been and continue to remain abysmally low and neglected. In addition, while the process of greater openness and integration of capital has no doubt relocated production and employment in a number of manufacturing sub-sectors typically described as more labor-intensive, this is, however, accompanied by:

1. Declining labor intensity of production not only in capital-intensive goods but also in labor-intensive goods [Chaudhuri, 2002].

2. Negligible growth in organized sector employment [India, Government of, Planning Commission, 2001].
3. Deterioration in the quality of employment, howsoever measured, whether in terms of status of employment, duration of employment, skill requirement of employment, etc., [India, Government of, Planning Commission, 2001 and 2002]

The search for cheap prices has more often than not been translated to mean search for cheap labor with women-labor bearing the brunt of the changing nature of capitalist onslaught.

I Employment, Unemployment, and Declines in Work Force Participation Rates: Dimensions and Issues at Stake

In the space of just two years the Central Planning Commission of India constituted two Committees to examine the ‘problem’ of growing incidence of unemployment and under-employment in the country.¹ Our purpose here is not to discuss the politics of why, within a space of two years, we have had two official committees set up by the same department to examine the same theme. Rather, for us the important aspect in both the Reports is the very considerable emphasis that has been placed on the lack of interface between employment and what passes for economic development in the country. In the process both the Reports have discussed the aspect of ‘quality’² of existing employment and of that being generated in the economy.

Both reports emphasize the fact that there has been a steady decline in the job creating capacity of the economy, which decline has accelerated since 1993-94. This decline needs to be noted in the context of a deceleration in population growth, a significant deceleration in labor force growth, but a significant acceleration in GDP growth between 1983-83 and 1993-94 and between 1993-94 and 1999-2000 from 5.2 percent to 6.7 percent per annum. The Reports point out that the growth in GDP is accompanied by a significant decline in labor intensity in production in almost all sectors, barring a few, and also in the aggregate; the labor intensity [measured as employment elasticity to value added] declined from 0.52 to 0.16 [India, Government of, Planning Commission, 2002: 24]. As a result of the decline in labor intensity of production, the employment growth fell to 1.07 percent per annum [between 1993-94 and 1999-2000] from 2.7 percent per annum in the past [that is, between 1983 and 1993-94] in spite of acceleration in the growth of domestic product from 5.2 percent [between 1983 and 1994-94] to 6.7 percent [between 1993-94 and 1999-2000]. This in turn means that the capacity of job creation per unit of output went down about three times compared to that in the 80s and early 90s. The organized sector’s employment generating capacity [measured in terms of employment elasticity] came down to near zero; in the public sector, it has been negative in most cases. Thus the major source of employment generation and for labor absorption is the unorganized sector of the economy whose employment weightage is as high as 92 percent [of the total employed labor force] [Planning Commission, 2001: 34 and Planning Commission, 2002: 2 and 26].

On examining all major sources of information, the Committees found that the rate of unemployment in India has increased significantly in 1993-94 and was above 7.3 percent in 1999-2000 compared to 6.0 percent in 1993-94 on Current Daily Status [CDS] basis.³ The number of unemployed has increased from 20.13 million in 1993-94 to 26.58 million in 1999-2000. Nearly 74 percent of the unemployed are in rural areas, while 60 percent of the unemployed are educated [higher secondary and above].

A point that both the Committees stress is the fact that, an unemployment rate of 7.3 percent should not be read as implying that those employed have ‘decent’ jobs; on the contrary, the Committees have extensively discussed the phenomenon of the quality of existing employment and of that being generated in the economy. One dimension of this ‘quality’ is the level of income that the employment provides. That a large part of the employment generated in the economy provides very low levels of income is very evident from the fact that whereas unemployment even according to the most expansive measure, namely, CDS measure, was only 7.3 percent, the percentage of population in poverty was as high as 26.1 percent. Thus being employed need not necessarily enable an individual/household to rise above the poverty line.

Quite a few researchers have examined the issues relating to employment and unemployment discussed above from a gender perspective [Ghose, A. 1999 and Hirway, I. 2002, to mention two]. Among the several important points made in these articles, a few are extremely crucial for our theme. From 1977-78 to 1993-94, the labor force participation rates of females declined while that of males remained stable. As a result, female labor force grew at a slower rate [1.8 percent per annum] than male labor force [2.2 percent per annum] and the share of females in labor force fell from 33.9 percent in 1977-78 to 32.4 percent in 1993-94 [Ghose, A. 1999: 2602]. Hirway [2002], discussing the steeper [than males] declines in female work participation rates as revealed in the subsequent NSS Round for 1999-2000, argues that:

It seems to us that the concepts and methods used by NSSO to net work and workers, are not able to capture the work of the poor, and particularly of women, satisfactorily...It is possible that the decline in the WPRs in the nineties is due to the expansion of non-reported [by the NSSO] part of the workforce that is employed in what is known as ‘difficult to measure’ sectors [such as, subsistence work, home based work or informal work] of the economy [ibid: 2032].

Hirway was instrumental in getting, for the first time, the Central Statistical Organization of the Government of India to provide official visibility to women’s work burden by collecting data on various household and non-household activities through the Time Use Survey [TUS]. The Survey was conducted in 18,591 households; spread over 6 selected states, namely, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Tamil Nadu and Meghalaya. The main objectives of the Survey, to quote the Report (India, Government of, 2000), were “to collect data for properly quantifying the economic contribution of the women in

the national economy and to study the gender discrimination in the household activities” (ibid:xi). The Report classifies activities using the 1993 System of National Accounts (SNA). It makes use of three categories: SNA, Extended SNA and Non-SNA.

The SNA activities consist of *primary* production activities, like crop farming, animal husbandry, fishing, forestry, processing and storage, mining and quarrying; *secondary* activities like construction, manufacturing and *tertiary* activities like trade, business and services. Extended SNA activities include household maintenance, care for children, sick and elderly. Non-SNA activities include learning, social and cultural activities, mass media, personal care and self-maintenance. **Table 1** captures the weekly average time spent by men and women on these three broad categories of activities.

Table 1: Weekly average time (in hours) spent on SNA, Extended SNA and Non SNA activities by sex and place of residence

	Activities	Rural		Urban		Total	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Combined States	SNA	42.31	22.53	41.06	9.16	41.96	18.72
	Extended SNA	3.74	33.95	3.44	36.44	3.65	34.63
	SNA+ Extended SNA	56.05	56.48	44.50	45.60	45.61	53.35
	Non-SNA	121.98	111.50	123.47	122.44	122.42	114.58
	Total	168.03	167.98	167.97	168.04	168.03	167.93
	Total Persons	22285	21130	10305	9549	32590	30679

Note: (i) The figure of total time for each may not be exactly equal to 168 due to effect of rounding.

(ii) Activities were classified using the 1993 system of National Accounts (SNA). For details of activities under each category refer text.

Source: India, Government of, 2000. The Report of the Time Use Survey, CSO, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, New Delhi, April, p.56.

Comparing data on WPRs based on the NSSO and the TUS, Hirway [2002] draws some very crucial conclusions that have significant policy implications:

- 1) The WPRs based on the TUS are higher than those based on NSS for males as well as females.
- 2) The differences between the two sets are higher for women than for men.
- 3) The extent of underestimation of workforce under NSS rounds, as well as the differences between male and female WPRs within a state, is not the same across

all the states. Neither are these differences related to the level of economic growth of a state.

- 4) Dividing work into ‘paid’ and ‘unpaid’ categories [*Table 2*], Hirway finds that, while the share of unpaid SNA work is significant in India [for both men and women] in terms of the number of persons engaged in it, as well as in terms of the time spent on such activities, however, uniformly across all states, the number of women engaged in unpaid activities as well as the time spent by women in such activities was higher than that on paid activities; women also spent more time on unpaid activities than men.

Table 2: State wise Distribution of Time Spent (in Hours) in SNA activities by Mode of Payment and Sex (Participants)

States	Male			Female			Total		
	Paid	Unpaid	Per Cent Time on unpaid activities	Paid	Unpaid	Per Cent Time on unpaid activities	Paid	Unpaid	Per Cent Time on unpaid activities
Haryana	33.09 (1152)	18.12 (1347)	35.38	4.13 (215)	25.34 (1494)	85.99	20.06 (1367)	21.37 (2841)	51.58
Madhya Pradesh	29.41 (5247)	23.34 (6311)	44.25	14.31 (3072)	15.75 (4391)	52.40	22.99 (8319)	20.12 (10702)	46.67
Gujarat	44.37 (3959)	14.17 (3897)	24.21	17.18 (1747)	13.87 (2541)	44.67	33.26 (5706)	14.05 (6438)	29.70
Orissa	31.25 (2103)	22.42 (2589)	41.77	8.00 (583)	18.18 (3235)	69.44	20.55 (2686)	20.47 (5824)	49.90
Tamil Nadu	41.42 (5633)	13.36 (4863)	24.39	21.8 (3034)	10.32 (4280)	32.45	32.74 (8667)	12.04 (9143)	26.89
Meghalaya	17.34 (374)	35.39 (740)	67.12	7.83 (196)	25.34 (692)	76.39	12.65 (570)	30.44 (1432)	70.64
Combined Stats	36.54 (18468)	18.12 (19747)	33.15	14.87 (8847)	15.18 (16633)	50.52	27.16 (27315)	16.85 (36380)	38.29

Source: Report of the Time Use Survey, Central Statistical Organization, Government of India, (2000). (Quoted in Hirway, I. 2002:2032)

- 5) Hirway hypothesizes [in the absence of time series data] that the decline in the NSS-based WPRs in the nineties could be a result of the increased share of the unpaid component of the SNA in the nineties, and hence, in a way is not really a decline but a shift, indicating deterioration in the quality of employment.

[An] increase in ‘the difficult to measure’ sectors of the SNA work as well as in extended SNA work do indicate a deterioration in the quality of employment. The former indicates an increase in employment with low productivity and low wages, while the latter indicates an increased burden on women who are primarily responsible for carrying out unpaid domestic services [Hirway, 2002: 2035]

Taking SNA and extended SNA activities together, the Government of India’s own Report [2000] makes the following important observation, extremely significant to our attempts to link women, work and well-being:

*If we take SNA and extended SNA activities together... women were found to be working for longer hours than men. If we work out the average of women’s work to the total work of male and female, it works out to 55%, which compares quite well with the figure of 53% quoted in the UNDP Human Development Report for 1995. Therefore if extended SNA activities are included in economic activities, the contribution of women will be **higher** when compared to men (emphasis added) (India, Government of, 2000:81).*

In a nutshell, what the above discussion brings out is the complex interrelationship between ‘work’ and nature of economic growth; the categories of employed/unemployed used by our data systems to denote those in the workforce and those outside it has an built-in bias towards excluding large numbers of activities and therefore workers from the category of ‘employed’. This bias is also reflected in official discussions on ‘underemployment’; as of now, the extent of underemployment is read from data that asks men and women to state whether they are seeking/available for work irrespective of the kind or amount of work they may be currently involved in, whether paid or unpaid. The discussion on the nature of growth reveals the inability of the economy to generate ‘quality’ employment, thereby pushing more and more persons into the informal sector, where they could be returned in data systems as ‘employed’ and yet be below the poverty line. The harshness of such a situation is experienced more by women, who have to combine the tasks of production and reproduction with serious consequences to their well being. In the Sections to follow, we discuss the multi-dimensional nature of women’s work and the multi-layered contexts in which their work is situated; these have several adverse repercussions for women’s well being, particularly in a context where women are not officially recognized as workers [Swaminathan, 2002], where their domestic chores have to be performed in environments that are increasingly getting degraded and where the insufficient economic returns to their work makes them economically and socially vulnerable both at the workplace and in their domestic environment.

II Work, Work-Intensity and Well-Being: A Review of Select Literature

Nothing could be more apt than to begin the discourse on work and well-being with a summary of Sass' documentation of the hitherto unwritten story of women's role in the origin of occupational health and safety legislation in the United States and Canada (Sass, 1999:109-45). According to Sass, workplace safety and health legislation is embedded in the history of the varied women's movements during the 20th century, beginning with the social work movements. Quite a few middle-class women, ["who were otherwise barred from professions and a university education except at a small number of women's colleges" (ibid: 112)] sought an active public life and plunged into the organization of settlement houses in the slum areas of America's large urban centres. These women, working in settlement houses, investigated the relationship between living and working conditions. They saw first hand the effects of housework and child labour, and the bitter consequences for women working long hours in the retail trades and sweat shops in the major urban centres as well as in small cities throughout the U.S. Sass takes pain in emphasizing the fact (a point extremely relevant for our case studies) that the studies brought out by these women relied primarily on *narratives*, describing how workers and their families, the poor, the unemployed, the injured, and those made ill at work actually *experienced* the brutal effects of existing policies and practices (emphasis added) (Sass, 1999:113)

Sass goes on to document, how, over the years, different layers of the intelligentsia systematically discredited the work of these pioneering women. Further the development of the Factories' Acts in the 1830s and subsequently, completely undermined workers' experiences and also succeeded in disconnecting the worker from the perpetrator of workplace injuries and ill-health. Thus, for example, Sass points out, after an accident or illness, the employee deals directly with a claims officer of the Compensation Board, the employer has no legal obligation thereafter.

In an economic society, what dominates our thinking about occupational health and safety is workers' compensation. Today, occupational health and safety is driven by workers' compensation costs rather than by prevention.

Our language reinforces this understanding. For instance 'accident' has come to mean something like an earthquake or tornado or flood, where no person is to blame...

... The word "accident" relieves employers from suit and compensation from fatalities, illness, and injuries, consistent with the triumph of a market ideology deflecting workers and their organization from prevention...

...The official discourse is by inspectors, medical officers, industrial hygienists, industrial engineers, industrial and behavioural toxicologists, and psychologists. And here 'power' is invested in the 'official' language, which may or may not be relevant to the worker or workers who are suffering. Workers' discourse is silenced, and they are subjected to a cost-benefit analysis and trade-off (Sass, 1999:130-132)

In a telling update to his historical account, Sass points out that there were approximately 39,300 work fatalities in the US in 1993; more than 8 million work-related injuries occurred in the same period; 2,40,000 of them resulted in permanent disability; annually, 40,000 to 70,000 deaths could be attributed to occupational disease, with an additional 3,50,000 nonfatal occupational illness cases (ibid: 116). And, yet, “less than 2 percent of journals used or recommended by faculty instructing in Human Resource Management mention occupational health and safety in a substantive manner” (ibid: 116).

The current renewed interest in issues of work and well being has come largely from feminist preoccupation with redefining ‘work’ to capture at one level, the varied nature of women’s work including domestic, wage and non-wage work, and at another level, to understand the impact of macroeconomic factors on women’s work burdens. This in turn has led to questions of the *effort intensity* of women’s work and therefore to issues of women’s well-being. Given the very nature of this exercise, it has resulted in a fair amount of research and documentation of women’s experience of their employment and the adverse impact that the multiple nature of their work is having/has had on their health and well-being. The works of three authors, in particular, need to be mentioned in this context, those of Maria Sagrario Floro (1995a, 1995b) and the joint work of Cecile Jackson and Richard Palmer-Jones (1998, 1999).

Placing her discussion of women’s well-being and the allocation of time in the context of economic restructuring, Floro (1995a) argues that the effects of macroeconomic policy reform must take into account both the level of output produced and the resulting changes in the level and intensity of work for individuals (ibid:1913). Illustrating her point with an example, Floro (1995a) points out that the removal of food price subsidy as during structural adjustment is usually analyzed in terms of changes in monetary income. What is not generally acknowledged is the more important changes that take place in the household, namely,

- a) changes in the quantity and quality of non marketed goods and services necessary for the survival and maintenance of the household;
- b) changes in the strategies that household members, particularly women, tend to employ to earn income, and at the same time continue to produce non-marketed goods and services.

The effects of price subsidy removal on their well-being may be underestimated, particularly if household consumption levels do not decline significantly as a result of an *increase in the length and intensification of work time*. The consequences of such coping strategies on the well being of these household members are not taken into account in either traditional measurements of living standard or in traditional analysis of policy reform... There are long term serious economic and welfare consequences of these responses that make such a topic important for both economists and policy makers (emphasis added) (Floro, 1995a:1914)

In a similar vein, Floro suggests, if one wants to examine the nature of poverty, one should ask not just what things are poor individuals and households deprived of, but also equally important, what they are compelled to do in order to survive (Floro, 1995b: 2). The analytical framework suggested by Floro, includes an exploration of the effects of time use on well being, the latter being defined in terms that incorporate both the *length of the working day* and the *incidence of work intensity*. Using the notion of joint production, Floro carries forward the analysis in order to examine the particular use of time by women in poor households in the form of overlapping activities to mitigate the effects of low incomes (ibid: 18).

Jackson and Palmer-Jones suggest methods to overcome the shortcomings in the ways we have thought about gender and work with an over reliance on time as a proxy for burden, effort and equity (1999:562). The authors propose an analytical focus on the significance of the experience of work to illuminate both *direct* and *indirect* connections between work and well-being.

By direct connections we mean how the burdensomeness of a task depends on the type of body one has (female/ male, large /small, healthy/unhealthy, experienced/ inexperienced), which we conceptualize as *body capital*. Body capital is the cumulative outcome of the bodily endowment at birth, the health history and social relations of work and so on, of the person to date, and which affects how burdensome a particular task *feels* to a gendered subject... By *indirect* connections we mean the ways in which these perceptions and experiences of burden enter into social relations of work, in both wage labour markets and intra-household negotiations over work, of time allocation more broadly (Jackson and Palmer-Jones, 1999:562).

The implications for policy and research of the above way of looking at the body, well-being, ill-being and work are tremendous. The most significant among these relate to those aimed at:

- a) alleviating poverty through programmes such as food-for-work;
- b) dismantling and/or making infructuous existing protective legislation for labour, thereby, not just adding further to the considerably large numbers of unprotected workers, but, worse, encouraging greater bodily exploitation of workers because of the characteristic features of such unprotected employment, namely, piece-rate payment, long hours of work, nil benefits etc.

The authors in fact suggest that poverty reduction may be facilitated by “*reducing* the burden of work and *raising* the capacity for work” and, again that, “rest should be considered a form of productive consumption” (Jackson and Palmer-Jones, 1998:25) (emphasis added). The implication of this for research and development policy might be that we need to reconsider the crude use of time inputs above as a measure of work burden,

since an individual engaged in work producing fatigue needs time to recover, which should be factored into measures of work contribution” (Jackson and Palmer-Jones, 1998:26).

The current preoccupation with increasing efficiency and productivity narrowly defined and measured in terms of output per unit of capital/per unit of labour etc., cannot accommodate concerns such as the above, namely, reducing work intensity and raising capacity for work. On the contrary what one routinely encounters through field level studies is the continued and pervasive exploitation of the labouring poor (men and women) through limitless extension of the working day, through the practice of forced overwork for which the worker receives no pay, through linking wages to impossible targets such that workers always receive less on the plea that targets have not been met, etc. In their constant struggle to reach these targets, workers force themselves to stay put at their workplaces, to avoid going to toilets and even skip meals. Thus, the disadvantages and disabilities under which the poor (and poor women in particular) labour are several, multi-dimensional and spread over multiple spaces. We now turn to a discussion that attempts to conceptualize this varied nature of women’s labour.

II.1 Women’s Labour OR Keeping Intact the Essence of Capitalism and Patriarchy

Peter Custers’ (1997) discussion of women’s labour in Asian economies using feminist critique and extension of Marx’s labour theory of value is useful to comprehend conceptually the empirical findings of our field data. Custers’ discusses both factory-based work [the case of women workers in Bangladeshi garment factories] and home-based work [the case of women home workers stitching garments in West Bengal] to drive home the point that the critique and extension of Marx’s labor theory of value formulated during the second feminist wave can well be applied to women’s labor in the Third World. In the case of Bangladeshi garment factories, Custers’ very meticulously records how the appropriation of surplus value is achieved through “the practice of forced overwork for which the workers receive no pay, prolongation of the probationers’ period far beyond the legally fixed maximum, children being obliged to do overtime work like adults, and many other illegal practices that amply demonstrate the owners’ drive to appropriate as much labor time as possible, and increase the rate of workers’ exploitation to the maximum...Thus, Marx’s view regarding the extraction of ‘absolute’ surplus value remains as relevant to understanding conditions in Third World industries today as it was for the analysis of conditions in Britain in the 19th century” [ibid: 357].

In the calculation of labour time, Marx looked at only the time spent in producing commodities for capitalist entrepreneurs, which way of looking at value creation ignored domestic chores (largely performed by women) as well as other non-waged work, again largely performed by women and more so in third world countries. According to Custers, a conceptual breakthrough was achieved when Della Costa pointed out that household labour does not just create use values but exchange values as well in the form of commodity labour power. “Women at home produce when they give birth to children and raise them

(future labour power), and they produce when they restore the strength of the labouring capacity of living workers (present labour power)” (Custers, 1997: 364).

Applying the above concept of labour time to his investigations, namely, the time they toil over the garments and the time they took to do household chores, Custers’ notes that the home workers in West Bengal (stitching garments at piece rates) perform 15 hours of labour per day, out of which more than half is non-waged. (ibid: 364).

An interrelated theme that Custers’ discusses is that of the sexual division of labour for which he provides a useful distinction between ‘social’ and ‘sectoral’ division of labour between the sexes, which distinction enables us to comprehend the manner in which capitalism and patriarchy intermesh to keep intact the subordination of women despite increasing participation of women in wage labour. By ‘social’ division of labour, Custers’ refers to the three Cs (cooking, cleaning and childcare) that women throughout society are disproportionately burdened with, and which division has remained almost ‘fixed’ and universal. The Time Use Survey (India, Government of. 2000) referred to earlier, bears testimony to the domestic burden that women in India have to shoulder almost with negligible help from their male counterparts. The ‘sectoral’ division of labour between men and women refers to the division of tasks within a given sector-agriculture, industry etc. The sectoral division has over time changed with changing forms of production and demands of the market and capitalist system; yet the need to preserve male power over women means that the subordination of women continues and can be identified by the persistence of wage discrimination against women, men’s monopoly over machines, definition of skill, etc.

The relevance of Custers’ analysis of women’s labour to our paper lies in the fact that it provides an extremely useful framework to contextualize the narratives contained in Section III and to analyze how the varied and time consuming (but invisible, unrecognized, unmarketed and unpaid) activities of women sustain the capitalist system; in the process the system not just exploits women but also renders them vulnerable to ill-health and thus compromises on their well-being.

III Observations Based on Narratives by Women Workers: Women’s Experience of the ‘Violence’ of ‘Work’

For analytical purposes, observations based on women’s narratives can be grouped into two:

- a) those pertaining to the structure and functioning of the households to which the women belong; and
- b) those related to conditions of work at the work-site including the gendered ‘experience’ of such employment.

We are aware that the nature of stress that women experience cannot be neatly divided between that experienced at home and at the worksite; but the above distinction enables us to focus as well as highlight the fact that, to some extent, even minimal investments in basic infrastructure at the living and worksites could go a long way in relieving households, particularly women, from the wretched conditions under which they work and live. These narratives are based on two field-based studies that the author was involved in: one, a joint study, entitled, “The Costs of Work” [Jeyaranjan and Swaminathan, 2001], and two, a study based on the lives and experiences of garment workers of the Madras Export Processing Zone [MEPZ] [Swaminathan, 2002].

The ‘Costs of Work’ study begins by outlining the socio-economic transformation taking place in a district (Chengalpattu), close to the metropolitan city of Chennai in Tamil Nadu. The nature of transformation includes the change over from a predominantly agrarian based economy to an industrial one, the consequent impact of this transformation on the occupational profile of the labour force, and, the social implication of this change, namely, the *visibility* it has given to the Dalits of the region, hitherto involved *only* in agricultural work. The study then focuses specifically on what this transformation means for women. We have sought to capture for women the wide-ranging impact of straddling several spaces simultaneously over a day. Women’s *experience* of ‘work’ at each of these sites (mainly home and work place) and their perception of health forms the core of this analysis against the backdrop of their induction into ‘modern’ employment which is equated with ‘non-farm’ or ‘industrial’ employment’; the latter again being equated with ‘development’. The MEPZ study complements the above study in that it depicts starkly the terms on which workers [women in particular] are inducted into what is otherwise an *organized sector* employment; the harsh conditions of work and the humiliating experience of this work at the factory is in addition to the oppressive atmosphere and burden of tasks that the workers face at the household level. While the experiences of the women workers at both the field sites are similar in many respects [whether at home or at the factory], the degree of harshness is greater at MEPZ – compulsory overtime, immediate retrenchment if worker refuses overtime, impossible targets, restricted use of toilets, preference for unmarried girls and pervasive practice of sexual harassment – even if wage-wise, MEPZ workers are paid better than non-MEPZ workers.

Overall Perceptions on Wage Employment

The discussion on the question of how ‘beneficial’, or, what kind of ‘benefits’, factory employment has conferred on them as individuals and on their households, brought forth very interesting responses from the women workers covering several related themes. This, in turn made it difficult even for the respondents to arrive at unidimensional or straightforward answers to the question. We reproduce a few of the observations to give a flavour of the interrelated themes involved in the answers.

Before going to work I used to feel miserable for being a burden to my parents

and I also suffered because of poverty. Now the situation is better because I have an income. We are able to afford fish once or twice a month and egg once a week. Earlier I found it difficult to take care of my children; now I can spend on them and am also educating them

[A 35-year old respondent who took up work after becoming a widow and after being shunned by her in-laws.]

Though there is improvement in the quality of food after going for work, the quantity has come down considerably. Mutton is consumed once a week; fish twice a week, and eggs occasionally. We are able to buy more vegetables now.

[17-year old unmarried respondent]

In the house elderly grandfather and grandmother are there along with father and brothers. All household work including cooking, washing, vessel and house cleaning have to be done by me alone since all other able-bodied family members are male. Father is a drunkard and takes money from me for drinking. If money is refused it creates a problem. I had no problem regarding food as long as my mother was alive. But since mother's death due to cancer, I have to shoulder the entire family responsibility, including finance. I am so overburdened with work that I am unable to eat properly

[22-year old respondent who was forcibly married to her paramour. Now in her parent's house after her husband took a second wife]

I am living with my mother. We have borrowed Rs.10, 000/- for my sister's marriage, which loan has to be repaid with interest. There is no other income except mine. With this income we are able to repay the loan and feed ourselves. The quality of food has improved though the quantity has not. Mutton is cooked on festival days while cooking of fish depends on the availability of time

[32-year old respondent, a widow]

After I started going to this factory my status has improved and I am respected by my society. I have borrowed Rs.20,000/- for my brother's education. Before this job the quality of food that we ate was less, but quantity was sizeable; now it is vice-versa.

[28-year old married respondent]

I have a loan of Rs.4, 000/- taken for the purpose of my husband's job. To some extent there is an improvement in the financial position of my family. Due to shortage of time invariably I do not eat in the morning; I have only coffee. Also, due to shortage of time I am able to cook only vegetables. Only occasionally do I cook non-vegetarian.

[38-year old married respondent]

I have borrowed Rs.20, 000/- for the kerosene-selling business of my father. I have to repay this loan monthly to the bank. Due to my employment, the financial position of my family has improved. Also, after this employment the quality of food has improved but quantity has come down. I have to do considerable amount of household work in the morning before I leave for the factory. In the evening mother takes care of everything

[Unmarried respondent, age not specified]

Almost all respondents in both the studies mentioned above gave us an idea of the composition of their households, the number of earning members in the households and the contribution of each to the running of the household. It was clear from the narrations that each one of their earnings was crucial for the sustenance of the families particularly given the limited aspirations of the household to invest in a 'pucca' roof over their heads, a bore-well to ease their water problem and replace wood-fuel with kerosene or gas, provide some level of education to the younger generation; all this apart from the almost inflexible life-cycle expenses that makes or breaks these fragile households. The gendered nature of households came out quite clearly in the manner in which the different members shared housework, the differential contribution made by each to meet common expenses of the household and the consequent differential levels of stress experienced by the different members on a day-to-day basis just to keep the household going.

Several other comments [based on the narratives reproduced above] are in order here:

1. There is no doubt that wage employment has improved the self-worth, and self-perception of the workers, married or unmarried, apart from conferring monetary benefits on them.
2. The observation that wage income has enabled the families to improve the quality of food consumed has to be juxtaposed against the respondent's own inability to consume food before leaving for work [because of want of time] and also because [a point we will discuss later] of the odour pervading the work areas leading to loss of appetite and reduced intake.
3. All married respondents and quite a few of the unmarried ones, spoke of the burden of housework that they had to shoulder with little or no help from male members. The burdensome nature of this work has, in addition, a lot to do with the poor infrastructure in terms of water, fuel and sanitation, - a structural constraint that we have alluded to, in our earlier section.
4. The inequitable manner in which households function comes out in the way in which wage-earning, female members are made to borrow and repay loans taken either to fund education of their brothers, support the businesses of male members of the household, marriage of younger siblings, etc. While there is justifiable pride in being able to help one's family, a little probing also brought out that not many

brothers would borrow to support the education of their sisters or support sister's business ventures.

We now move on to discuss, specifically, women's experience of their work at the household level.

III.1 The Burden of Household Chores and the Consequent Compromise on Food Intake

In almost all the cases involving women workers we have clear evidence of the many spaces that are being straddled simultaneously and the constant negotiation that goes on to keep to time and targets resulting in enormous strain. The workday for the women and married women in particular stretches over almost 16-18 hours leaving them exhausted. In fact 'tiredness' is the single most common complaint recorded by us. In a sense therefore lowering the burden of work as well as raising the capacity for work would go a long way in alleviating the burden due to excessive work.

For most women (married as well as unmarried with intensity increasing for married women) the daily work schedule is somewhat as follows: their day starts around 5.30a.m. After almost two and a half hours of 'work' at home, they have to rush to catch a vehicle (either a public bus or company bus) to the factory. In the absence of any alternative mode of reaching the factory, missing the bus was tantamount to losing the day's wages. The stress involved in leaving home to catch the bus to reach the workplace in time is enormous. Almost all women workers reported inadequate time to have any meal before leaving for work.

There is no way in which women, [married and with family in particular], can relax immediately on getting back home after a day's work. Again the work stretches for almost three to four hours before the woman can call it a day. Women with small and/or growing children were particularly stressed since if they failed to cook the evening dinner within a reasonable time, they have to put up with their children going to sleep on an empty stomach. Very few women reported receiving support on a regular basis from their partners or the male members of the household. Besides, on days when the public tap went dry or some such calamity befell the household, the strain on the women was so enormous that she almost had to forego her leave or wages or both.

We reproduce a few of the almost uniform narratives that we recorded on the theme of the 'Tasks to be done by our respondents before leaving for the factory and after reaching home in the evening'.

My mother, sister-in-law, sister and I wake up daily at 5.30a.m. My mother and sister-in-law do the cooking. My sister sweeps the front [courtyard], washes the dishes and clothes and then gets ready to leave. I can leave for work only

after I have fetched water. There is a common/public tap at a distance of about five minutes. We do not have a well or tap at home. All the required quantity of water has to be got from there. This is a bigger job than any other. If the job of fetching water is completed only then does it feel like all the other chores are completed.

As I have to start daily at 8 a.m., I cannot eat at all. It has to be skipped. For lunch we have to eat whatever we manage to rustle up in a hurry in the morning. At night whatever remains from lunch is eaten. The food for all three meals is prepared once in the morning. I can eat good food only on holidays. Only on holidays can we leisurely/patiently prepare chicken, eggs, fish, meat and eat satisfactorily. On other days it is just half measures [‘Araikurai].

[Unmarried respondent aged 21]

*We wake up every morning at 5.30 a.m. My sister cooks and leaves for work. I help a bit with the cooking. Then I clean the courtyard, draw kolam, wash dishes, sweep and swab the house and such other activities in a hurry and **leave without even being able to eat**. I have to run because at 8.55 am, the company rings a bell. We have to be inside before that. At 9 a.m. they ring another bell. By then we should have started our work. If we are even 2 minutes late, the gate is locked and we have to return home. There is no other way. The company timings are from 9 a.m. till 6 p.m. Compulsory overtime of one hour has to be done in the evening everyday. If necessary, one hour in the morning and two hours in the evening has to be done. ‘Those not doing this can stay home’-that is how strictly they talk without even a little bit of conscience. The company provides no bus facility. For those who come from a distance an amount of Rs 100/- p.m. is given. For those coming from nearby places the 100 rupees is not given. I walk daily for 15 minutes to reach the company. It takes the same amount of time in the evening. When there is urgent work like in the past 3 years, in the morning from 7.30-9 a.m. and in the evenings from 6-8 pm overtime had to be done. Those who disagree to do overtime, are given one week or one month’s leave and asked to discontinue after that. So the company gets to pay one less salary for a month. Not only that, they dump the work on someone else. But if the workers do not get salary for a month if they have to stay home what will happen to the family.*

As my sister does all the cooking and the bore has solved the water problem, I am able to do overtime daily. But if you look at earlier times we suffered a lot. At that time I just could not manage and would come home and cry. On some days, I would even cry in the company.

[Unmarried woman, aged 25, working in garment unit in MEPZ]

I wake up daily at around 5 a.m. put the motor on and fill the brackish water.

Then I get 5 pots of water from the public tap for drinking. I make some tiffin for the morning and lunch. After the children leave for school and by the time I leave, I feel enough is enough. My older daughter keeps saying she has to study and does not do any work. Only in the evenings she washes the dishes. Nobody else helps me with the housework. They wake up, do their own thing and leave.

*My company timing is from 8.15 a.m to 5.15 p.m. I return home at 7.30 p.m. It takes 30-35 minutes to reach the company gate. I go by bus and the entire company workers wait together at the gate around 8 a.m. From the gate to our company is quite a distance. So our company bus transports us from the gate to the company. **In the morning, I cannot eat in all the hurry.** If we miss the bus, we reach late. If we go late, they do not let us in. In the evening, it takes, 45 minutes to reach home. If there is work, then in the evening, they have one or two hours of compulsory overtime. Everyone has to do it and if we refuse, then we have to leave the job. Everyday after doing overtime, I have to do the housework and sometimes I think to myself “why was I born a woman”, and feel very frustrated. At times, this causes tension. My husband and I have fights at home. Sometimes the fight starts as a verbal one and becomes physical. Then we stop talking with each other for some days. But he definitely would never say that I should not go to work.*

[Married woman aged 38]

*Daily after completing all the work at home, when I go to work, I feel fed up. **In all the hurry, I do not feel like eating in the morning. So I do not eat in the morning at all but after reaching the company and at the time of starting work, my stomach starts burning.** I feel hungry and I feel like eating anything/something. But what can I do. I can eat only at lunchtime. Lunchtime is for 1/2 hour only. That time just flies because this is the time for everyone to talk, laugh, go to the bathroom, wash one’s hands. In the remaining time we cannot eat with satisfaction. We just eat as if it is a routine, a duty. Similarly in the evening, after overtime, we go home very tired after 8 p.m. As soon as I get home I feel I could just sleep. Sometimes I have no appetite and do not eat at all. I eat contently only on leave days.*

[Divorced woman, aged 28, staying with parents and working in MEPZ]

Elsewhere [Swaminathan, 1999], we have alluded to the adverse consequences on women in particular of low levels of investment in basic infrastructure such as fuel. The above narratives bring out even more starkly and graphically how the patriarchal constitution of the household *in addition* makes women bear the brunt of the burden of household tasks; the latter have to be performed under any circumstances and however poorly developed the infrastructure.

III.2 At the worksite : The Trauma of Wage Employment

The nature of stress experienced at the worksite is not just varied but also very blatant at times. For convenience of analysis, we have grouped the narratives under different heads to bring out the complex manner in which the organization of work and the conditions under which the job is carried out takes a toll of the workers lives, mentally and physically. In the Chengalput study [Jeyaranjan and Swaminathan, 2001], where most of the units are pharmaceutical units, work is carried out in batches. Discrimination between workers begins at the gates of the factory itself when workers are grouped into batches; young women have almost no say in the choice of batches. Who gets into which batch depends very much upon how 'friendly' a worker's relationship is with the supervisor. At the MEPZ garment units there is no batch work but individual targets to be met. While specificities of different jobs and different industries require different kinds of work organization, we found a remarkable level of similarity in the experiences of the workers [in both our studies despite their different settings] as far as the conditions under which workers had to carry out their tasks.

Work Process and Targets to be fulfilled

The pressure on the workers is kept up by fixing impossible targets for each process of work. For example, in the pharmaceutical industry, bottle washing is predominantly a female task. The usual demand is to wash 1000 bottles per day per worker. However, the workers manage to wash only 700 to 750 bottles in a day. Targets in packaging and filling vary depending on the size of the bottle and the capsule or tablet. In strip packing, 9000 to 10000 pills are to be packed. In filling, a minimum of 250 bottles is to be filled. In packaging, a four-member team has to pack 60 boxes, each containing 100 bottles. Batch taking has a target of 600 liters of the raw concoction. If a mechanized material handling system is in place in the production unit, fillers have a target of filling about 6000 bottles during a shift. The target list is a long and detailed one varying with the nature of product, level of mechanization, nature of the input material and the packing requirements. However, what is clear is that these targets are stiff and the workers are kept on their toes to keep pace with the machines. The intensity of work increases with stiffer targets when the order books overflow.

Workers in other industries also experience similar stiff targets and unfriendly and unhealthy work environment. For instance, in salt packing, there are five clearly discernable sub processes and all these processes are inter-linked. A team of eight members is required to complete a process. Many such teams are engaged in the production unit with specific targets. Among the tailors and checkers of the garment export units, the target varies depending on the nature of the garment that is being stitched for exports. Tailors are normally expected to meet a target of 150 pieces a day. Those who work as checkers have to check around 600 meters of cloth on both sides for defects.

Thus, the work conditions in the factory are clearly defined with specific targets. Breaks for lunch and tea are minimal. Many units insist on over-time work. However, none of the units take care of the health problems of its workers.

In one hour 100 pieces and therefore in 8 hours 800 pieces have to be completed before leaving. Whether it is a small job or a big job, the same rules apply, i.e. people who have small jobs can complete 100 pieces in one hour easily. But persons doing big jobs cannot complete 100 pieces in an hour. Those people who are unable to finish have to stay compulsorily and work overtime and complete the work before they leave. Those who are still unable to finish, their identity card is taken away and kept with the management. This implies that our attendance gets cut since both in the morning and evening entry can be made only with the identity card. If we do not have the I-card, even if we come to the company, they do not mark us. As a result our salary gets cut.

We are very scared of such a situation arising and therefore have to work very hard. As a result we feel very tired. Only tea is provided to those doing overtime. If due to particular circumstances we are unable to do overtime and inform them in advance, then that day they do not let you take the tea and lunch break or even go to the bathroom and compel you to finish the work that very day. Even if we do not eat they are not concerned. They just want the work to get done.

We cannot complete 800 pieces in one day. Only if we work extremely hard can we finish that. From morning till noon we work very fast. But in the afternoon it is not possible to maintain that speed. We do not have the strength. But only if that is also very fast can we finish. That is why we feel very tired. The back hurts a lot. Hand and legs feel weak. Legs swell up. Even if we lift our heads while stitching we are shouted at. After all this if we have to go home and do the housework, pay attention to our family, we will just die.

[Young woman worker in a garment unit]

In the company an individual does each job separately. There is no work that is done in a group. Both men and women stitchers do the same work. Each day a minimum of 500 pieces should be finished. However late it gets or whatever the time it has to be completed before we leave. We can finish it only if we do not look around, do not go to the bathroom, and do not get up to drink water. Only this way can we finish. That is how we do it everyday.

[Young woman worker in garment unit]

We do not have a permanent job only temporary. In this company there is work only for 6 months after which they will remove us. Then they will recruit new staff and begin work again. I do the soldering work. We do not do any work in groups but only individually. Everyday we each have to complete

3000 pieces. Only if we can do that can we work here. If that is not possible, we are given 2 chances. The third time they request you to look out for another job. We actually cannot do 3000 pieces but somehow do it. We can do it only if we do very hard work. That and overtime has to be done. During overtime more pieces have to be done. Further, compulsory overtime has to be done. Those who refuse have to go home. There is no doubt in that. There is no difference in the work that women and men do. It is the same work. Neither men nor women have promotion, as this is a 6-month work period.

[Woman, aged 28, separated from her husband, removed her 'thali' so that she could be employed in the above soldering unit; the latter employs only unmarried women]

Regulation of Even Essential Physical Movement in the Workspace

The organization of work coupled with the pressure to meet targets very often means that workers can hardly take time off even to visit the toilet. In fact most units regulate work time so strictly that they close the toilets 15 minutes before the closing time. For menstruating women, the ordeal of dealing with such a requirement is so enormous that they end up absenting themselves on such days. Almost all women workers have reported disorders of the menstrual cycle. We reproduce a few of the responses to give an idea of the varied nature of the complaints that we have recorded. We are aware (a la Messing, 1997; 57) that research on dysmenorrhoea (or painful menstruation) is conditioned by attitudes that view it as having a primarily psychological base. But the overwhelming nature of the problem (as revealed by these narratives) has convinced us that work-related dysmenorrhoea needs to be addressed seriously and urgently.

During menses there is severe pain in the leg and I suffer from mental depression. Before I joined this factory I used to bleed for two days, but after joining this duty bleeding is there for nearly five days; white discharge is more almost everyday. I visited the Employees State Insurance Hospital but have not been cured.

During menses bleeding is as usual, but accompanied with severe hip and leg pain. I feel depressed on those days for being born a woman.

My periods are delayed and sometimes irregular. Due to constant change of posture, there is numbness and swelling of legs, particularly at such times. Feel depressed and curse myself for having been born on such days.

During menses unable to change cloth and have to remain in the wet panties; white discharge has increased.

After joining this company, period has become irregular, bleeding is also less. But white discharge has become severe to the extent of requiring a change in panties. Unable to change panty since there is no facility. It also leads to itching in the vagina region sometimes.

During menses, I get very angry with myself for taking up work in the factory. Stomach pain and pain in the hip make it very difficult to continue with work.

[The above observations are from workers interviewed in Chengalput, Jeyaranjan and Swaminathan, 2001]

The women workers at MEPZ narrated how accessing toilets for as basic a human function as urination, was converted into a humiliating experience; in addition, women have to endure the embarrassing remarks of the male supervisors when they ventured to visit the toilets for any emergency.

There are totally twelve toilets. All of them have water. But every evening at 5 p.m. they stop the water at the top. The reason given for this is that workers go to the toilet around that time to wash their faces, apply make up. Because of this their work might suffer and so sometimes the toilet is locked. But at other times the toilet is open. We cannot go to the toilet often. Each of us has a token number. This number is noted and we are scolded. “You are given tea time and lunch time breaks. That is when you should go to the toilet. If you go often I will tear your chit, remember that” – they scold us. Especially during periods if you were to see us, it is torture. If you suddenly get your periods they do not give a small pad or anything. We have to go to the cutting section and ask for waste cloth. The cutting section is very far. Even if we go and ask, the way they look at us is disgusting. “What, the red light has leaked” – they ask openly. We feel shy and do not go and ask there. We bring cloth or pad from home. In an emergency, girls who forget to bring pads or cloth go to the cutting section and ask for waste cloth, come back and cry. They send her back in a very upset and angry state.

During periods even if we have severe stomach ache, we are not permitted to sit down and take a short break. Till we complete those 800 pieces, we are not allowed to get down from the machine. They verbally abuse – “shaniyankal, [witches] one gets fed up just trying to get them to do their work”.

[Young unmarried woman, aged 21, garment worker in MEPZ]

There are 9 toilets in four units. We have a token system to go to the bathroom. The toilet is clean and has water. That token has a number. How often has the owner of the token gone to the bathroom can be made out by looking at that number. If we do go to the bathroom the number on the token is entered against the person’s name. We cannot go to the bathroom without the token. They look at the register and check how many entries are against which person. If there are many entries against one person, then the person is called and warned. Along with that they reduce the increment. We should not get out of our seats

or go to the bathroom often. If we do that then they shout at us. During periods, we do not get pads or anything in our company. We carry it from home. In case we get it unexpectedly in the company, we use waste cloth or we use the cloth used to wipe our hands. If anyone has very bad stomach cramps, they do not allow us to sit on the floor. They are just concerned about their work being done. They do not care about the workers.

[Married worker aged 38 in a shoe unit in MEPZ]

Work Intensity and Consequent Inability of Workers to Eat at the Workplace

We have already noted that almost all women reported not being able to eat any meal (for want of time) before leaving for work. This means that the first solid meal taken by these workers is around noon. The workers attribute their complaints of constant stomachache and acidity to the prolonged gap in intake of food spread over their working day. This apart, the intensity of work is such that workers are hardly able to make use of their lunchtime to eat their meal at leisure.

*In the afternoon we have a half hour lunch break. **In that half hour we cannot eat properly because the stitching material pieces have to be counted and stacked.** We have to wash our hands and by the time we even touch our food, 10 minutes have passed. At 1.25 the first bell is rung and everyone has to sit at the machine. At 1.30 the second bell is rung. At that time we should have started working. All in all it is a ten-minute break. In this time we have to eat, wash our boxes, visit the bathroom. So we eat very fast. We eat as if to fulfill a duty and days go on in this manner. In the morning as there is no time to eat we rush to work without eating. In the night there is nothing special for dinner. Only what remains from the morning.*

[Woman aged 25, in a garment unit at MEPZ]

Sexual Harassment at the Workplace

Relationships between women workers and male supervisors/colleagues are another area, which generated enormous stress. The women we interviewed were able to discern the subtle manner in which they experienced discrimination; younger, relatively better-looking and better-dressed women were able to wrangle several favours from their supervisors such as choosing the batches they preferred to work, promotions etc. The day-to-day operation of such discrimination at the worksite inhibited the emergence of any solidarity among the women workers. However, all women workers and younger, unmarried workers in particular, spoke of the constant and humiliating verbal and physical abuse that they suffered at the hands of the male supervisors and sometimes at the hands of the owners of the units that they worked in.

The supervisors behave in a particular way with men and a particular way

with women. They may scare some men but they do not treat them without respect. But with women they behave very badly. Women do get scared. The supervisors speak in a threatening and arrogant manner. “Bitch you have grown your body like that of a buffalo, and you do not even know how to do this!!”

You know how to apply make up but do not know how to do this. What is this? Why have you come like ghost ‘pey’ with all your hair left loose.” You can see the world through this churidar.” Looking at the breasts “this is very sharp” they speak with double meaning. Not just the supervisors but also the men who work with us harass us sexually. There is a girl in our company who walks in a particular way. They harass her a lot as she has large breasts. “Look at that AK47 coming”: if that woman talks back they say, “look at how she speaks, she has the guts, if she was a little more beautiful, we would not have been able to hold on to her”.

There is no connection between the owner and us. The manager, supervisor and the workers cannot get along. Regarding the manager; if someone new comes looking for a job, he recruits those who look soft or good looking. He talks with them, laughingly tries to touch them. Holds the woman’s hands and brushes his hand over it [runs his hand over it]. Flirts a little. Those who go along get good salaries. If they refuse he shouts crazily. When supervisors talk with women they do not make eye contact. They look at the breasts. They pretend to teach/train and try to touch the breasts with their elbows or the back of their hand. Some women who are alert avoid it. Few who are careless do nothing but shout at the man: “ if only he had sisters”. The supervisors pretend to stand near the machine and touch your legs. If we stare at them angrily they say sorry or look silly. But till now no case of rape has taken place.

[Young woman garment worker aged 21, MEPZ]

I have to tell you about the owner. There cannot be anyone worse than him. Our owner refers to women without any respect. ‘Look at that ‘Shiriki’ – [a colloquial degrading term for girl]; ‘whose hair [pubic] is she plucking there instead of doing her work.’ He does not differentiate between married and unmarried women. He shouts at everyone equally. Seeing the owner, the supervisor follows suit and shouts too. The owner does not even give the minutest amount of respect. He talks in an unbecoming/horrible manner. The supervisors see this and they too do not give any respect. They are even more arrogant than the owner. Most of the days we cannot tolerate it and start crying. There have been days when we have not had lunch. There have been times when I have thought about it all night, which gave me a headache and I could not sleep. The manager just drools over women. When he stares, I feel like taking an iron box and rubbing it on his face.

[Young woman garment worker aged 25 in MEPZ]

The men who work with us, and the supervisor speak with double meanings. They harass us regardless of age. They look at newly married women and say 'this sister worked very hard last night and is sleeping here.' If the bra is visible, 'wow the banian looks new' and they laugh. If the saree has moved, they say good morning. They ask laughingly, 'shall we go for a movie.' On Sundays and on leave days when we have overtime, they drink a lot on the premises. The manager also ogles at the women when he gets an opportunity and flirts. If a girl is a little beautiful the supervisor and manager speak to her. They behave distastefully towards those who are dark and ugly, they just behave hatefully towards them. If we look at the status of the worker it is very bad. They behave as if they are threatening a dog to get the work done. They get it done without a conscience. Generally women are not respected in the company.

The owner, manager and the supervisor do not get along with the workers. We have to adjust to all this and do our work. When they talk with women they size them up while talking. They do not make eye contact while talking. They look at the breasts instead and their eyes seek our consent. If we question this or go against any of this, we get a memo. So we are in a situation where we cannot question or go against. They pretend to check if the work is okay and rub against us. If we are smart we can move away and escape. Otherwise we are trapped and can do nothing. Nothing else has happened. Maybe some offence can take place or has taken place but I do not know.

[Married woman garment worker aged 38 in MEPZ]

Workers' Perception relating to Employers' Preference for Unmarried Women

In the perception of the employer, an unmarried person works actively/fast [surusurupagu], they will not take leave often, they will not talk back or against the supervisor or manager. If the supervisor or manager ('site adital') sexually harasses, they will adjust. If there is overtime in the morning or overtime in the evening they will do the overtime and then go. But married persons will not be like that. They do not do overtime. They take leave often, "mother-in-law is unwell, child is unwell; relatives have come." They cite some excuse/reason and ask for permission or leave. They talk back, ask questions. This is not suitable to the management and if a person is married even if she has experience, they will not employ her. If there is a lot of work, i.e. on days when there are lots of orders daily one-hour overtime in the morning and two hours overtime in the evenings is compulsory. Those who refuse are asked to leave. I am able to do overtime as my sister-in-law looks after the chores at home. Some persons who are unable to manage the household work and company overtime keep complaining. I feel terrible when I see that. They say that they keep tossing and turning but cannot sleep.

[Young unmarried woman worker aged 21 in MEPZ]

Women between 18-25 years and men between 20-35 years are recruited. Persons who have completed their 10th grade or more only are recruited. The pertinent school certificates have to be handed over to the company. Only then does the company recruit the person. This is basically to cross check the age of the person. I have studied only till 4th grade but I do not know how they took me. It maybe because I joined the company when it had just started and maybe also because of my 10 years experience prior to this. When the company was just starting, they recruited persons who had not studied much. But now that is not the case. Now they mostly recruit unmarried girls. These days they do not recruit married women. The reasons for this are that unmarried girls work briskly/fast; they adjust to any situation; it is convenient to ogle 'site adital' at them. They comprehend things told to them quickly. They obey the supervisor, owner and do not talk back; they simply accept the remuneration given to them that may not be in keeping with the work they do. But they do not question that. If it is a married woman then she does not behave as mentioned above but quite the opposite. They may have a thousand problems at home. They come to the company and keep talking about them, which obstructs their work. They take leave often. Even if something is said in jest, they do not adjust and go and waste their time with the owner. They magnify the problem. Hence they do not recruit married women.

[Married woman worker aged 38 in shoe unit in MEPZ]

Majority of the persons who work in our company are unmarried. I removed my 'thali' [symbol of married females] and wear some chain. I told them that I am not married and that is why I was recruited. The employers feel that unmarried women work fast and briskly, they do not take leave often; work sincerely; they adjust to the owner's, supervisor's, manager's behaviour; they do evening overtime and also Sundays; they finish any amount of work fast in the given time. They work for low wages. Married women are not like that- they take leave often; they do not work fast; they do not adjust even to the smallest thing; they give some excuse and do not do overtime.

[Married woman worker aged 28 separated from husband in soldering unit in MEPZ]

The preference for unmarried, young girls over married women has been successfully posed as one of 'efficient, willing and available for compulsory overtime work'. This way of posing the issue masks the ruthless drive by the employers to extend the working day in their search for maximum profits. In a classic Marxian way, this ruthless extraction of labour by forced overwork provides the employers with an illegal source of both absolute and relative surplus value. By using various forms of threat [as evident from the narrative below] the employers have been able to increase targets as well as extend the working day without increasing payments for overtime. Due to the limitless extension of the workday, workers are left with very little time to devote to their household chores – a phenomenon that married women in particular are not be able to cope on a day-to-day basis. Hence the preference for unmarried girls over married women.

We did not sign any agreement while joining the company. When we complete one year we receive a confirmation order. Along with this the company rules are also given in writing which contain the following instructions: Leave should not be taken; you must come regularly. No complaint or remark should come against you. When required you should do compulsory overtime. You should come on time. You should obey the supervisor, manager. If you do not follow all these rules you will be dismissed from the company. One copy is retained by the company and one by us. An identity card is given. There is no other agreement/contract. If we work following the rules we can work as long as we want. If they want to remove someone they do not give advance notice. Suddenly, out of the blue they inform that you do not have to come. Otherwise they say “look for a job in another company. You do not have to come from tomorrow”.

[Young unmarried woman worker aged 21, garment unit, MEPZ]

Perceptions Relating to How Work Impacts on Health

As we breathe this dust daily, a lot of people suffer from respiratory problems. One person had to undergo an operation to clean his lungs as they were blocked with the dust. Due to this several persons got scared and left. A lot of people have piles problem because they have to sit continuously at the machine. The body becomes thin because of sitting at power machines. We have ulcer problems because a lot of people come without eating in the morning. Headaches are caused by intense concentration on stitching for 8 hours. As all this dust falls on our heads we have dandruff problems and hair fall. Ache around the shoulders is also common. “If you are unable to finish the work given to you, don’t come stay at home. Why do you come here and make my life miserable” the supervisors shout at us. Sometimes I feel like dying.

[Unmarried garment woman worker aged 21, MEPZ]

Daily we go to work without eating. A lot of people have ulcer problem, headaches, stomach ache, especially during periods when we do not get any rest; sitting constantly at the machine gives us lower back ache, middle back ache, pain in the legs and arms and swelling in the legs. Sore throat as we drink cold water. A lot of dust falls on our heads and causes dandruff and hair fall, skin problems. If a target is set for the day, then it has to be completed. If we are unable to finish they ask us not to come to work. We are afraid of that and we work without going to the bathroom or for water, without lifting our heads from our work. Only if we do that can we finish. But it is almost impossible to finish that work in a day.

[Married garment woman worker aged 38, MEPZ]

Within units of production, work environment vary depending on the process. Most

work places particularly machine rooms, are generally clouded with suspended fine particles; in sections like packing where such suspended particles are less, the odour of chemicals is pervasive resulting in loss of appetite and therefore reduction in intake of food. In some units protective gears are provided to the workers. But these gears hinder the rapid movement of the workers. With such gears on their body, workers complain that it would be impossible for them to achieve the set targets. Hence most of them do not use the protective gears. The problem could be a combination of both: the stiff targets that are set without any consideration for the gradual slow down in the bodily movement of the workers as well as the ill design of such gears.

When the company had started each of us was given a separate mask, cap, coat. Now for the past 2 years we are using the same. We wash them only once in a week. Only when visitors, buyers come to the company we are asked to wear the mask, cap, coat. At other times they are not bothered. We also do not wear them. The reason being that we cannot wear all that and produce 800 pieces in a day. It is not comfortable. There is a lot of free space in the company. But here and there one can find bundles of pieces that we stitch. So it is not clean. A lot of dust all around. If you see someone's head and dress they are white in colour. As this dust flies in all directions we do not switch on the fan. We do not get any breeze and it is very stuffy.

[Young unmarried garment worker, MEPZ]

Given the nature of work conditions in the industrial units of the region, the workers in general perceive that their health condition is deteriorating. Their perception is based on their experience of the time and work regiment, the nature of material they handle in their work, their interaction with the machinery in the production process and the nature of their work.

IV By Way Of Conclusion

We began by highlighting the declining employment generating capacity of the economy, the inability of the economy to create 'quality' employment, the growing problem of unemployment coupled with the conceptual inadequacy of our data systems to capture women's 'work' in particular. Invisibility of women's work apart, the complex interplay between the structure and functioning of the household and the structure and functioning of the worksite has several negative implications for women:

- The equation of development with increasing work participation rate for women has tended to suppress the 'costs' of such development to women, namely high work intensity stemming from a combination of enormous energy expenditure both at home and the workplace.
- The conditions under which women work in the factories as well as carry out their household tasks on a day-to-day basis render their lives extremely stressful.

The lack of investment in basic infrastructure such as sanitation, drinking water and fuel, compounds the problem even further. Further, since investment in keeping workplaces safe for workers is almost negligible, the workers are subjected to a whole host of health hazards.

- The varied ways in which women are subjected to harassment [sexual and otherwise] at the workplace have severe implications for their health and well-being. The narratives that we have reproduced in our paper capture vividly the not so pleasant facets of the lives and experiences of these ‘working’ women.
- Through overt and covert policing, employers of MEPZ in particular, have so far succeeded in disallowing any form of sustained collective action on the part of workers to enable the latter to improve their lot either financially or physically. Other ways in which the development of any form of association of workers is rendered extremely difficult is:
 - By employing [women] workers strictly only for limited periods. Even the service of the most productive and punctual worker is retrenched after this stipulated period.
 - Not drawing up any formal contracts with any of the workers, particularly women. Hence there is no notice period and the workers need not be assigned any reason for abrupt termination of their service even if it is within six months.
 - So designing the layout of the work area that it actually discourages any form of socialization.
 - By rendering infructuous recourse to any form of legal action, since technically, there is no recognition of workers as ‘workers’.
- While the methodology of narratives is grossly inadequate to establish any degree of causality between a particular ‘work’ and its attendant adverse outcome, the strength of this method lies in the enormous insights that it gives into the manner in which people’s lives are ordered in particular socio-economic contexts. As Jackson and Palmer-Jones [1999] point out, “[T]he burdensomeness of work, and its implications for well-being is not only a function of its physical arduousness, it is also related to the social relations and valuations of work and personal experiences of the pleasure and pains of work”[ibid: 560-61].

Despite the fact that, decades after the 1975 International Year of the Women, the program of integrating women into the developmental process has not in the least changed the basic capitalist and patriarchal structure in which women are caught up, much of development policy still continues to espouse the same ‘integration into the development process’ syndrome. A whole series of studies [Koczberski, 1998; Mies, 1994 – these contain further references] analyzing the effect of ‘development’ on women has meanwhile shown that almost everywhere, development means more work for women for their sheer

survival, more state control over their immediate life, particularly in the sphere of reproduction and health, and generally more violence and destruction of their dignity and integrity. The present paper is one more contribution to this growing literature on the 'violence' of gender-biased development. It is our contention that the issues that we have outlined above cannot be redressed solely within the existing legislative and administrative framework since the latter is not geared to address and tackle structurally in-built inequities and/or inimical patriarchal forces.

End Notes

- ¹ The first Committee, chaired by Montek Singh Ahluwalia, submitted its Report in July 2001. It went by the name of Task Force on Employment Opportunities. The second committee, chaired by Dr. S P Gupta, submitted its Report in May 2002. This committee was called the Special Group On Targeting 10 million Employment Opportunities
- ² We are aware that the term quality is highly loaded. For the purposes of our discussion, quality of employment encompasses the following: whether being employed enables the person to rise above the poverty line; the nature of employment, namely, whether employment is regular, casual or temporary; does the employment impact adversely on health; what is the nature of interface between employment and education. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, some of these aspects have been discussed in the paper.
- ³ The National Sample Survey Organization [NSSO] of India collects detailed information on the employment status of the population through large-scale, nation-wide sample surveys in which individuals are categorized as employed or available for work but not employed, using different criteria. Rates are calculated as percentages of the total labor force. The NSSO provides four different measures of employment and unemployment, each of which captures different facets of the employment-unemployment situation. One of these is the Current Daily Status [CDS]. Based on the reported time disposition of the person on each day of the reference week, person-days in employment [unemployment] are aggregated to generate estimates of person-days in employment/unemployment. The person-day unemployment rate is derived as the ratio of person-days in unemployment to the person-days in the labor force. This measure captures the within-week unemployment of those classified as employed on the Weekly Status. The CDS-measure of unemployment is widely agreed to be the one that most fully captures open unemployment in the country [Planning Commission, 2001: 15-16].

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