

Women's work in the India in the early 21st century

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It is impossible to understand women's work in India – or indeed anywhere else in the world today – without situating it in the specific trajectory of capitalism in that location. Throughout its history, capitalism has proved adept at causing patterns of labour supply to change in accordance with demand, and this is particularly so in the case of female labour. Women have been part of the working class since the beginning of capitalism, even when they have not been widely acknowledged as workers in their own right. Even when they are not paid workers, their often unacknowledged and unpaid contribution to social reproduction as well as to many economic activities has always been absolutely essential for the functioning of the system, as noted so effectively for India by Jain (1982) several decades ago. All women are usually workers, whether or not they are defined or recognised as such. In all societies, and particularly in developing countries, there remain essential but usually unpaid activities (such as cooking, cleaning and other housework, provisioning of basic household needs, child care, care of the sick and the elderly, as well as community-based activities), which are largely seen as the responsibility of the women. This pattern of unpaid work tends to exist even when women are engaged in outside work for an income, whether as wage workers or self-employed workers. Women from poor families who are engaged in outside work as well usually cannot afford to hire others to perform these tasks, so most often these are passed on to young girls and elderly women within the household, or become a “double burden” of work for such women. These processes are also integral to capitalism: the production of both use values and exchange values by women is essential for the accumulation process, and if anything this reliance has become even more marked in recent years.

This means that the issues relating to women's work employment are qualitatively different from those of male workers (Beneria and Sen 1981). Just increasing paid employment does not always mean an improvement in the conditions of women workers, since it can lead to a double burden upon women whose household obligations still have to be fulfilled. So there has to be a focus on the *quality*, the *recognition* and the *remuneration* of women's work in developing countries, as well as the *conditions* facilitating it, such as alternative arrangements for household work and child care. All of these are critically affected by social relationships as well as economic policies and processes, which determine whether or not increased labour market activity by women is associated with genuine improvements in their economic circumstances.

Several features reflect the intertwining of capitalist development with women's work in India as in other parts of the developing world: the significance of female labour in the extraction of absolute and relative surplus value; the role of unpaid labour; the ways in which women workers have affected capitalist practices of the management of labour and in turn been affected by it; and the part played by women in forming the reserve army of labour. Custers (2012) has shown how the gender division of work is flexible, changing over time according to the need to preserve not just male power over women but also to ensure the greater economic exploitation of women to suit the needs of capital. Segmented labour markets then have major effects in depressing women's wages and allowing for even greater extraction of surplus value from their work. There are many strategies for increasing working hours and reducing wages of women, which contribute to increases in both absolute and

relative surplus value. Piece rate work is a particularly significant weapon in this regard, particularly because it also combines other advantages such as reducing the need for supervision. This use of patriarchal social relations becomes fundamental to the accumulation process itself, which actually *requires* the continuing impoverishment of certain sections for its very success.

All this helps us to understand certain paradoxes in the patterns of women's work in India in the past few decades. With respect to women's work, there have been four apparently contradictory trends: simultaneous increases in the incidence of paid labour, underpaid labour, unpaid labour, and the open unemployment of women. A significant part of the explanation for the paradoxical combination of increasing paid work, unpaid work, underpaid work and open unemployment of Indian women lies in the macroeconomic processes.

The macroeconomic context

While the Indian economy has been seen globally as a "success story", and growth rates have accelerated recently without the kind of financial crises that other emerging market economies have experienced, there are problems with the pattern of growth. More than six decades after independence from colonial rule, the development project is nowhere near completion in India. It is also clear that over time, some elements of that project seem even less likely to be achieved than in the past, despite relatively rapid economic growth. Of course, there are some clear achievements of the Indian economy since Independence – most crucially the emergence of a reasonably diversified economy with an industrial base. The past twenty five years have also witnessed rates of aggregate GDP growth that are high compared to the past and also compared with several other parts of the developing world. Significantly, this higher aggregate growth has thus far been accompanied by macroeconomic stability, with the absence of extreme volatility in the form of financial crises such as have been evident in several other emerging markets. There has also been some reduction (although not very rapid) in income poverty.

However, there are also some clear failures of this growth process even from a long run perspective. An important failure is the worrying absence of structural change, in terms of the ability to shift the labour force out of low productivity activities, especially in agriculture, to higher productivity and better remunerated activities. Agriculture continues to account for more than half of the work force even though its share of GDP is now only around 15 per cent. In the past decade, agrarian crises across many parts of the country have impacted adversely on the livelihood of both cultivators and rural workers, yet the generation of more productive employment outside this sector remains woefully inadequate. Other major failures, which are directly reflective of the poor status of human development in most parts of the country, are in many ways related to this fundamental failure. These features include: the persistence of widespread poverty; the absence of basic food security for a significant proportion of the population; the inability to ensure basic needs of housing, sanitation, adequate health care to the population as a whole; the continuing inability to ensure universal education and the poor quality of much school education; the sluggish enlargement of access to education and employment across different social groups and for women in particular. In addition there are problems caused by the very pattern of economic growth: aggravated regional imbalances; greater inequalities in the control over assets and in access to incomes; dispossession and displacement without adequate compensation and rehabilitation.

This suggests that a basic feature of Indian economic development thus far has been exclusion: exclusion from control over assets; exclusion from the benefits of economic

growth; exclusion from the impact of physical and social infrastructure expansion; exclusion from education and from income-generating opportunities. This exclusion has been along class or income lines, by geographical location, by caste and community, and by gender. However, exclusion from benefits has not meant exclusion from the system as such – rather, those who are supposedly marginalised or excluded have been affected precisely because they have been incorporated into market systems. So there has been in India a process of exclusion through incorporation, a process that has actually been typical of capitalist accumulation across the world, especially in its more dynamic phases.

One crucial reason for this is that aggregate output growth has not been accompanied by similar increases in employment. In particular, formal employment has stagnated, and even paid employment in general (in the form of regular or casual work) has fallen as a share of total employment. Most of the recent increases in employment have been in the form of self-employment. This growing army of “self-employed” workers, who now account for more than half of the work force, mostly have been excluded from paid employment because of the sheer difficulty of finding jobs, but are nevertheless heavily involved in commercial activity and exposed to market uncertainties in the search for livelihood. Therefore the Indian economy shows a paradoxical trajectory of high aggregate growth with inadequate or poor employment generation. And this has directly impacted on the lives of women in India.

Estimating women's paid and unpaid work

The point that work participation rates as described by official surveys are not really good indicators of the productive contributions of women is particularly valid in large parts of India, where much of the economic activity of women, whether in the home or outside, is simply not recognised as such by other household members and even by the women themselves. A significant part of women’s work is not just unpaid, therefore: it is also socially unrecognised. This is true of not just social reproduction, but other economic activity where women’s work is rendered invisible by social perceptions. That is why many social scientists take women’s work participation rate as one of the proxy indicators of women’s overall status in society and of gender empowerment. It is not just because paid work provides income individually to women rather than to male members of the household. It is also because the productive contribution of women is typically less recognised in societies where women are undervalued in general.

In this regard, the difficulties inherent in the statistical system, of identifying, enumerating and quantifying the work performed by women, must be noted. Since many of the activities associated with household maintenance, provisioning and reproduction - which are typically performed by women or female children - are not subject to explicit market relations, there is an inherent tendency to ignore the actual productive contribution of these activities. Similarly, social norms, values and perceptions also operate to render most household-based activity “invisible”. This invisibility gets directly transferred to data inadequacies, making officially generated data in most countries (and particularly in developing countries) very rough and imprecise indicators of the actual productive contribution of women. All this means that the data on the labour force participation of women are notoriously inaccurate. Not only are the problems of undercounting and invisibility rife, but there are often substantial variations in data across countries which may not reflect actual differences but simply distinct methods of estimation. Further, even statistics over time are known to have altered dramatically, as a result of changed definitions

of what constitutes "economically active" or because of more probing questions put to women, or simply due to greater sensitivity on the part of the investigators.

Obviously, given the nature of women's participation in economic activities, which involves a substantial amount of unpaid labour, overt participation in the labour market or in what is declared to be "economic activity" does not capture the full extent of women's work. The major Indian sources of data in this matter, the Census of India and the National Sample Surveys, have increased their attempt to recognise women's work by asking probing questions that seek to establish women's involvement in economic activity. However, this is still defined to include only participation in work for the household farm or enterprise, and does not include housework, childcare, care of the sick and old, and related activities associated with social reproduction. It also does not include related work necessary for provisioning for the household, whether it is fuel wood collection in the rural areas, or attempts to obtain access to clean water in the urban areas, activities that are typically the responsibility of the women of the household.

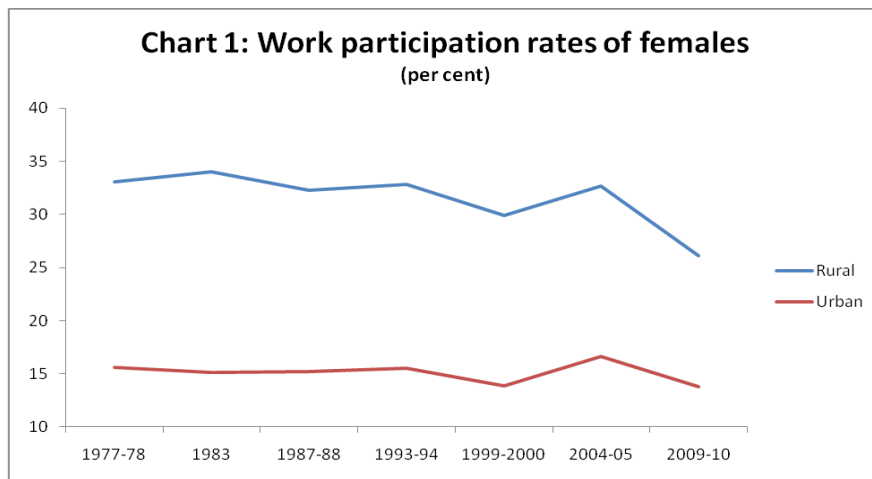
Recently there have been attempts to capture some of the evidence on unpaid work by women, through time-use surveys. These in general show not only that a very substantial amount of women's time is devoted to unpaid labour, often at the cost of leisure and rest, but also that such unpaid labour may actually have been increasing over time, especially in the past decade. There are several reasons for this. The structural adjustment policies which have squeezed various types of government expenditure have in effect meant a reduction in access to a range of public goods and services for ordinary citizens, which tend to affect women especially adversely as the additional burden typically falls on them. Cutbacks in per capita health expenditure and the increase in user charges for such services typically reduce the extent to which the poor especially use such facilities. Quite apart from reducing their own access to health facilities, this in turn increases the burden of labour on women in poor households, as the responsibility for caring for the sick who cannot be hospitalised typically falls on them. Worsening or urban infrastructure conditions, such as drinking water and sanitation, imply greater time spent in ensuring minimally clean water supply for the household. Inadequate access to fuel for cooking requires more time spent collecting firewood, or going in for more time-consuming and labour-intensive forms of cooking. And so on.

Sometimes the increase in women's unpaid labour results not from cutbacks in public expenditure so much as from the attempt to fulfil other social objectives. A case in point is the nation-wide attempt to conserve and regenerate forest resources through decentralised village-level Joint Forest Management Committees (usually with one representative from each household) which set aside areas to be developed as forest, prohibiting any encroachment, including for minor fuel wood collection (which still remains the dominant source of cooking fuel across rural India). This has led to very major increases in the time spent for fuelwood collection, as the women now have to travel much further away from their homes to access even minor amounts of such resources. In turn, such increases in the unpaid labour time of mothers often implies that other household tasks have to be shared, typically among elder girl children. There are numerous micro studies that indicate this tendency, in both rural and urban areas.

Recent trends in patterns of women's work

It is true that, compared to many other countries, there has been relative stability of aggregate female work participation rates in India, which have remained quite low over time. But there are wide variations and differing trends across states and rural and urban areas, as well as changes in the pattern of work. For urban women, the increase in regular work has dominantly been in services, including relatively low-paid domestic service, along with some manufacturing. In manufacturing, there has been some recent growth of petty home-based activities of women, typically with very low remuneration, performing outsourced work as part of a larger production chain. But explicitly export-oriented employment, even in special zones set up for the purpose, still accounts for only a tiny fraction of women's paid work in urban India. Meanwhile, in rural India self-employment has come to dominate women's activities even in non-agricultural occupations, largely because of the evident difficulty of finding paid work.

It is worth examining some of data that confirm these trends. Chart 1 indicates the movement of female work participation rates in India from the late 1970s onwards. Several features of interest emerge from this chart. First, rural participation rates are nearly three times the urban rates, though they still remain relatively low at only around 30 per cent compared to around double that in most East Asian countries. The urban rates in turn have remained really low, especially in comparison to most other countries in the region, especially East and Southeast Asian countries.



Source: NSSO Employment and Unemployment in India, various issues.

Second, the longer term trend appears one of gentle decline even within these relatively low rates, which is truly remarkable in a rapidly growing economy. The experience of most other developing countries in phases of rapid growth has been that of rapid and often substantial increase in female overt work participation, as dynamic capitalism tends to draw in women to expand domestic labour supply for paid employment. Thus not just East and Southeast Asian countries but also South Asian economies like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka experienced significant increases in female work force participation, especially during their supposed "take-off" stages of export-oriented growth.

The third feature that is indicated by Chart 1 is that 2004-05 was something of an outlier in terms of increasing female work participation, whereas 2009-10 indicates a reversion to the longer term trend of gradual decline. This raises the pressing question of why women’s work participation rates have been so low in India and have remained low despite rapid economic growth and many other changes in society.

Suppose we decide that for whatever reason, 2004-05 was an unusual year within this dataset. Consider the change in women’s employment status for the most recent decade as a whole, that is, from 1999-2000 to 2009-10. Table 1 provides the details for women in the age group of 15 years and above. These details are quite startling, given that the 2000s were a decade of unprecedented rapid GDP growth for the Indian economy. In this decade, the number of women aged 15 years or more increased by 86.5 million. But only 8.9 per cent of them (7.7 million) joined the labour force, and only 7.5 per cent of them were described as gainfully employed. This relative lack of increase in the number of working women in a period of major economic expansion is more than just unusual - it is also hard to explain in terms of most standard economic approaches.

Table 1: Change in work status of women 1999-2000 to 2009-10

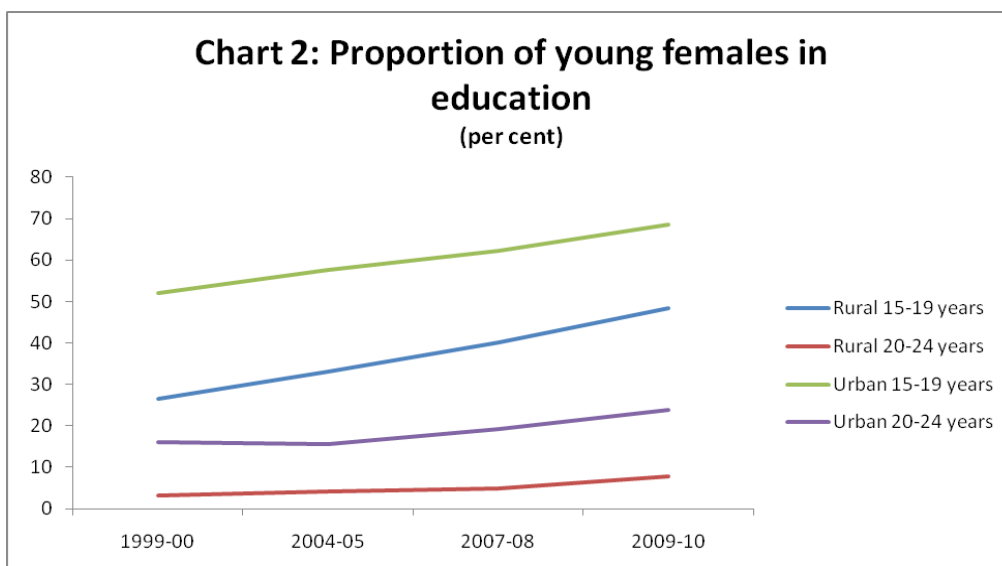
(millions of women aged 15 years and above)

Increase in Total Population	86.5
In education	17.5
In Labour Force	7.7
Unemployed	1.1
At Work	6.5
Self-Employed	2.4
Regular Employees	4.2
Casual Employees	-0.2

Source: NSSO Employment and Unemployment in India, 2011.

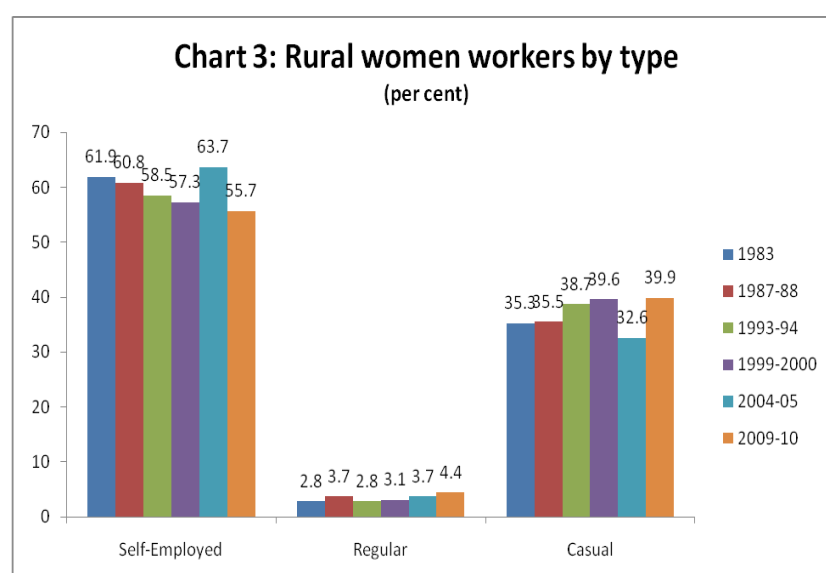
Note: The absolute numbers have been derived by applying NSS participation rates to the estimated total population above 15 according to the Registrar-General of India.

The really large increase – accounting for more than 20 per cent of the increase in number of women overall – was in education. Of course this was dominantly confined to younger women, but it is clearly a process to be greatly welcomed. Chart 2 shows that the most recent period has experienced the biggest increase in the number of young women in education. This is particularly prevalent for urban girls aged 15-19 years, nearly 70 per cent of whom are now studying as their principal activity. But the recent relatively fast increase in education for girls even in rural areas is a positive sign.



Source: NSSO Employment and Unemployment in India, various issues.

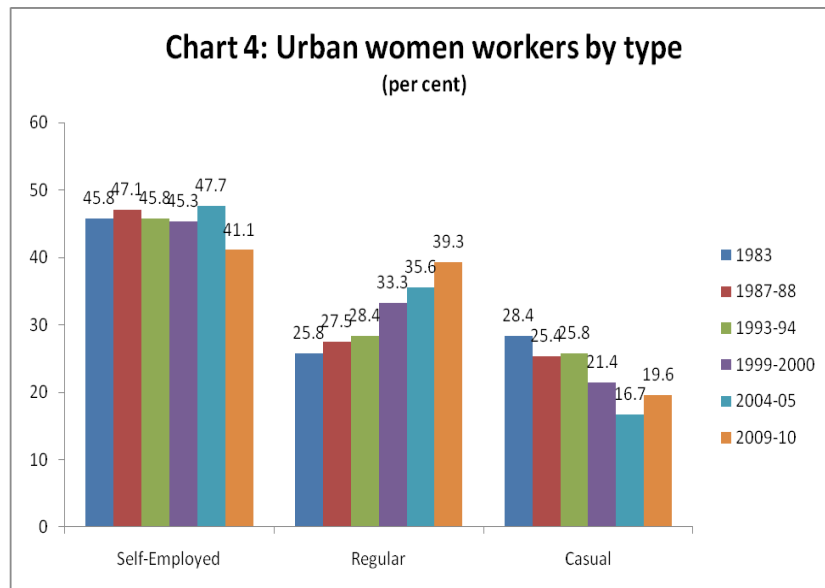
When we look at the patterns of employment of the relatively few women who are recognised as gainfully employed, even in this aspect the apparent *lack* of change appears to be more striking than any dynamism. Chart 3 shows the distribution of women workers by type of contract. Once again, the year 2004-05 appears as an outlier, when there was apparently a big increase in self-employment and an associated decline in the share of casual work. The medium term process has been of decline in self-employment and increase in casual work of women, with regular employment persistently occupying a negligible space.



Source: NSSO Employment and Unemployment in India, various issues.

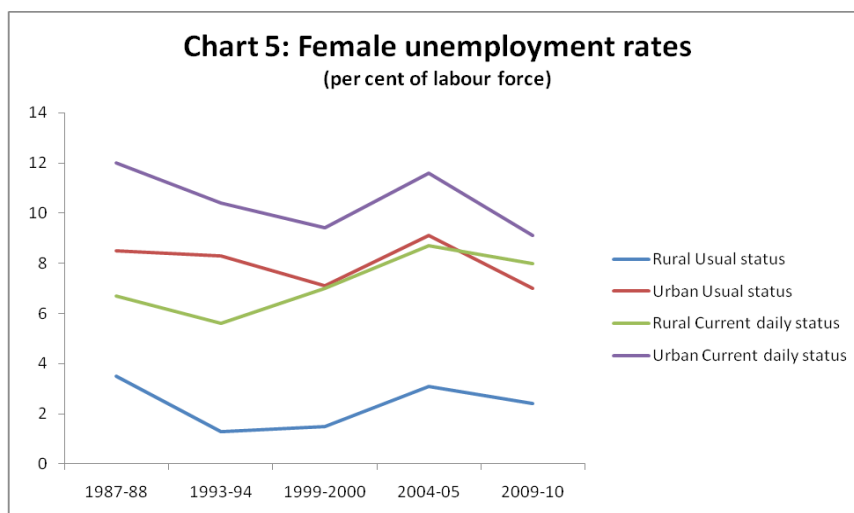
In urban areas, as shown in Chart 4, a somewhat similar process seems to have been at work in terms of the relative shares of self-employed and casual workers. But the real story for

urban women is the increase in regular employment, which has continued into the most recent year. When this was first observed for 2004-05, it created much joy in official circles, until it was pointed out that the largest increase in urban regular employment of women was in the form of domestic service – as maids, cooks and cleaners, hardly the most desirable or dynamic forms of work. This accounted for 3 million more urban women workers in the period 1999-2000 to 2004-05, far exceeding the increase in “export-oriented” sectors like garments, leather and IT-enabled activities. A similar process has been evident in the most recent period as well, with domestic service becoming the most “dynamic” source of regular female employment in both urban and rural areas.



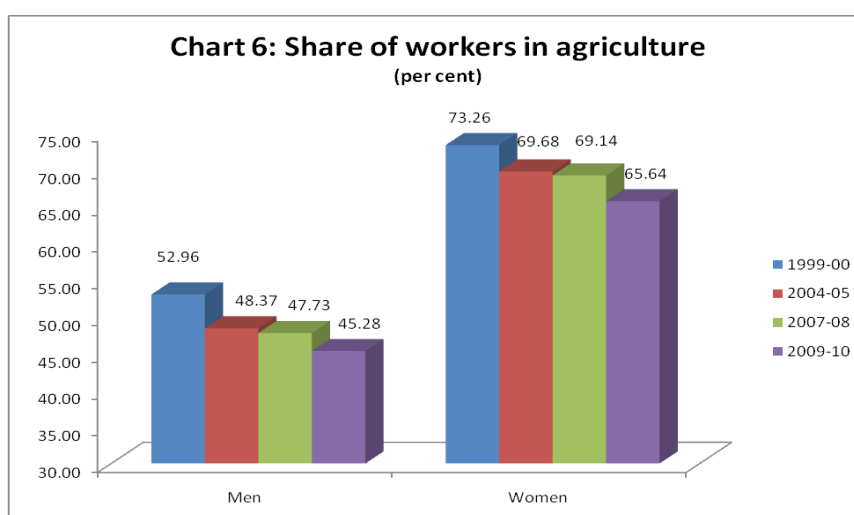
Source: NSSO Employment and Unemployment in India, various issues.

The evidence on female unemployment rates adds to the uneasiness involved in including 2004-05, which seems more and more to have been an unusual year. Even excluding that year, Chart 5 suggests that open unemployment rates for women have remained at fairly high levels over the period of high economic growth. Throughout this period, more than 7 per cent of urban women who count themselves as in the labour force were unemployed and actively looking for work but not finding it, as their usual principal activity. In terms of current daily status – the activity that they pursued on an average day in the previous week – the rate of open unemployment has been even higher, at around 10 per cent. In rural areas, as expected, both rates were lower but still current daily status unemployment was significantly high at more than 8 per cent, and show a major increase compared to the late 1980s.



Source: NSSO Employment and Unemployment in India, various issues.

All this confirms the more fundamental problem of the Indian economy, that economic growth has still not generated a process of employment diversification, including for women. Even more than men, and substantially so, women workers remain stuck in low value added but arduous work in agriculture. Around two-thirds of women workers are still employed in agriculture as their principal economic activity, while the share for men workers has fallen to less than half. For both men and women this is actually an appalling rate of employment diversification. Every single development success that we have seen in history has been associated with a movement of workers away from primary activities to more value added work in secondary and tertiary sectors. The stubborn domination of agriculture as the primary source of work for most of our workers (especially women) is a particular problem given the agrarian crisis that has persisted for nearly two decades in the Indian countryside, which makes involvement in such work increasingly fraught and financially unviable.



Source: NSSO Employment and Unemployment in India, various issues.

Unfortunately, recent public employment has not bucked the overall trend of low average real wages and casual or non-permanent contracts for women workers. While a privileged minority of women in government employment continue to access the benefits of the government behaving as a “model employer”, new employment for the purpose of providing essential public services has been concentrated in low-remuneration activities with uncertain contracts and hardly any benefits. This is true of school education (with the employment of para-teachers) as well as health and nutrition (with reliance on anganwadi workers and ASHAs). Indeed, recent provision of basic public services in India has increasingly relied upon the underpaid labour of women workers. The introduction of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme has provided a different kind of public employment, which should offer a maximum of 100 days work to rural households at minimum wages. Thus far it has not managed to achieve this, and there are numerous other difficulties that make it difficult for women workers. Even so, women have been actively participating in this scheme, so that more than half of the employment days provided have gone to women workers, well beyond expectation. This is despite emphasis on heavy earth work at daily wages. Given the nature of the work, the scheme typically involves self-selection by the poor in rural India, and there is already evidence from field surveys that suggests that it has had the impact of significantly reducing distress migration and improving the bargaining position of workers, especially women workers. This in turn is reflected in some decline in gender wage gaps in rural India in the most recent NSSO data. However, it is important to ensure that the scheme is made more flexible in the type of work that can be undertaken, as well as more transparent and accountable as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has envisaged.

Conditions of self-employment among women show many of the disturbing tendencies of wage employment. The most important form of female self-employment is cultivation. But the enormous contribution of women to agricultural production, as farmers, unpaid workers on family farms and agricultural labour, is largely unrecognised. And their work is more precarious than that of men because they are typically denied land rights and all the associated benefits, such as access to credit, extension services, subsidised inputs, etc. As cultivation has become volatile and insecure, women farmers have been especially adversely affected. Meanwhile, women’s self-employment in non-agriculture is largely characterised by both low expectations regarding incomes and remuneration and substantial non-fulfilment of even these low expectations. Despite some increase in high-remuneration self-employment among professionals and micro-entrepreneurs, in general the expansion of self-employment seems to be a distress-driven process, determined by the lack of availability of sufficient paid work on acceptable terms.

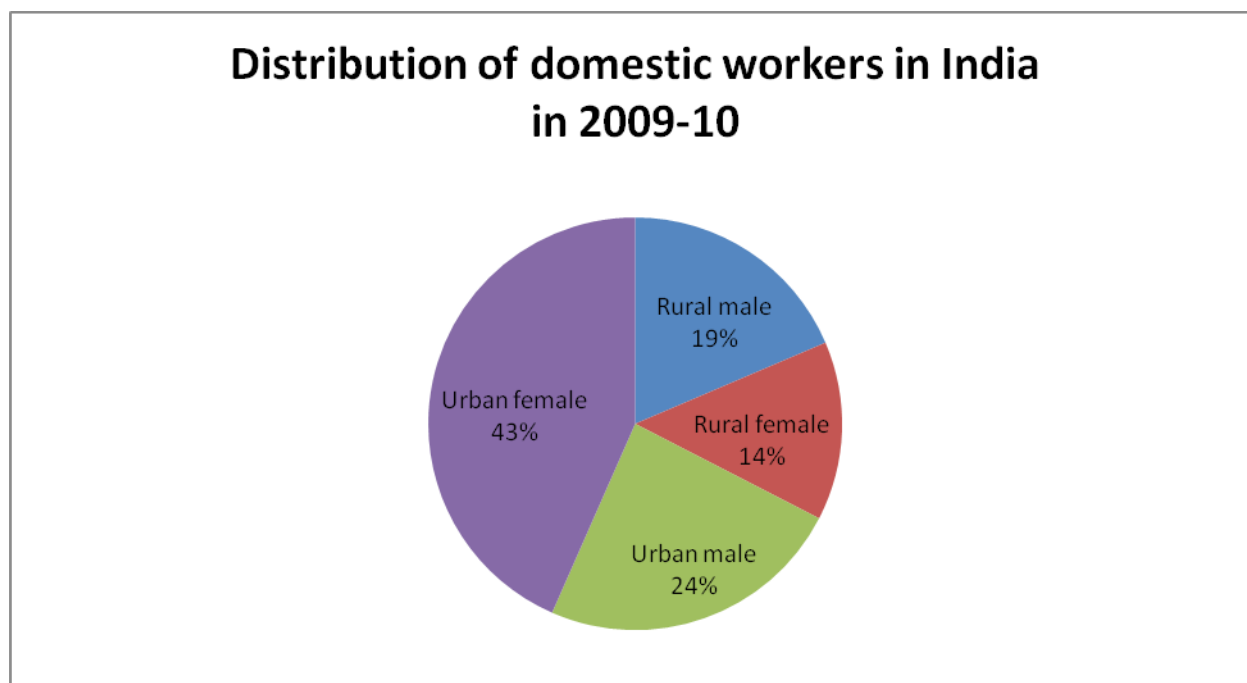
These conditions would suggest that distress migration among women is also on the increase, and this appears to be the case. There is evidence of a substantial increase in economic migration by women, both within and across borders. This reflects both “push” and “pull” factors, so not all of it has been distress-driven. Migration is a complex process, which can be a source of either empowerment or exploitation of women, depending on the context and the factors that have influenced the decision to migrate. Women migrants have been significant in cross-border labour movements, especially within Asia, and their remittances have played an important role in shoring up the aggregate balance of payments of the country in the past two decades. They work in dominantly in service activities and the care economy, which means that demand for their work is less dependent upon the business cycle in host economies than is the demand for male migrants in production work. But in distress-driven

cases, there is often a fine line between voluntary migration and trafficking of women and girl children. While the official data sources are relatively poor at picking up internal migration, especially when it is short term in nature, there is micro evidence suggesting a substantial increase in such migration in the past decade, largely driven by agrarian crisis and the paucity of adequate income-generating activities across much of India. A major problem is the inappropriateness of public policy with respect to migration, and particularly female migration for work. Not only is there hardly anything in the way of assistance or protection for migrants, but the fact that all public service delivery and citizenship rights in India are residence-based means that short-term migrants are denied both access and rights.

A consideration of the extent of unpaid work by women indicates that a very substantial amount of women's time is devoted to unpaid labour, often at the cost of leisure and rest. Such unpaid labour is likely to have been increasing over time, especially in the past decade. Public policies have played a role in causing unpaid labour time of women to rise, either because of reduced social expenditure that place a larger burden of care on women, or privatised or degraded common property resources or inadequate infrastructure facilities that increase time spent on provisioning essential goods for the household, or simply because even well-meaning policies (such as for afforestation) are often gender-blind. When the health services are inadequate, women (especially mothers) not only suffer the most, but they also have to bear the responsibility of looking after the sick and the old. When schools lack basic facilities or charge higher fees, girl students find it difficult to attend and get relegated to household tasks. When cooking fuel and clean drinking water are hard to come by, women have to somehow provide them for the family.

The case of domestic work

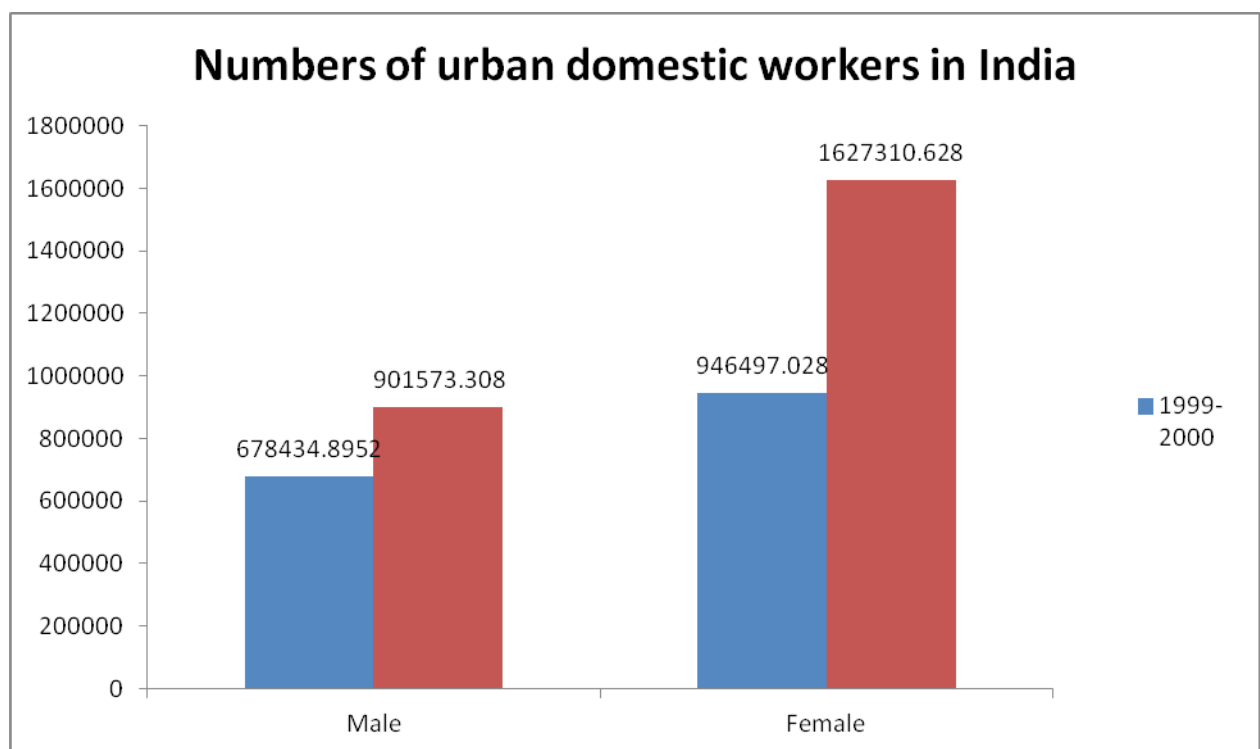
Women workers dominate in both paid and unpaid domestic work. This activity has also become increasingly important as an employer, especially for urban women. Chart 7 describes the distribution of domestic workers (defined as those who are engaged in this as their usual activity as either principal or subsidiary work) across area and gender.



Source: NSSO Report No 537 on Employment and Unemployment in India, 2009-10

It is evident from Chart 7 that of total domestic workers in the country in 2009-10, more than two-thirds lived in urban India and 57 per cent of them were women. This is a lower rate of female involvement in this type of employment than in many other countries, and reflects the combination of several forces: the long history in India of the affluent employing domestic servants, which created aspirations of such hiring patterns also among the newly affluent; low employment generation in other activities as well as uncertain household income generation prospects that have increased the supply of such workers; and changes in income distribution and GDP growth patterns that have created a new middle class that is able to afford to demand such workers.

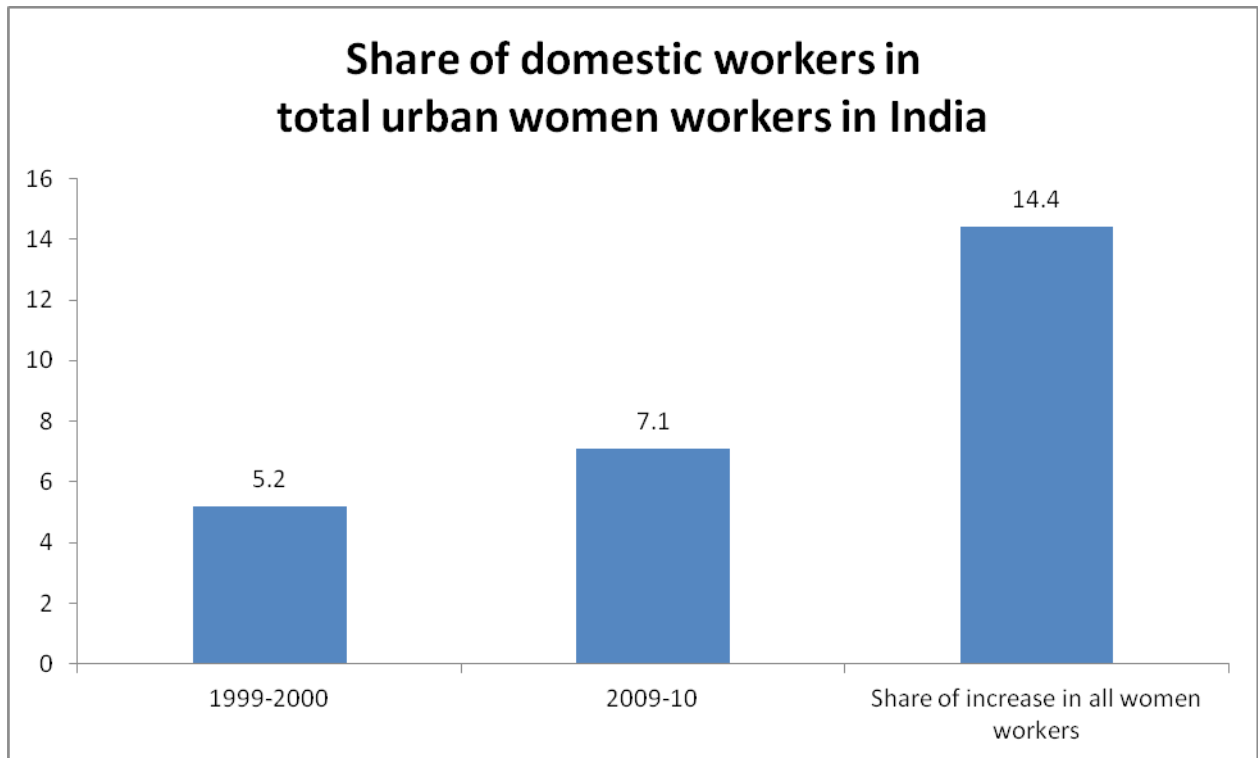
However, while overall female share of such work is not as high as in some other countries, Chart 8 suggests that the rate of feminisation of such work has been increasing, especially in urban India. Over the decade of the 2000s, 75 per cent of the increase in the total number of domestic workers was accounted for by women.



Source: Estimated from NSSO Report No 537 on Employment and Unemployment in India, 2009-10 and population figures from Census of India

Not only is this activity becoming more feminised, but it is becoming more important in the total employment of women, especially in urban India. The NSSO Survey of 2004-05 showed a dramatic increase in the number of women engaged in domestic service, but several other anomalies in the data from that report suggest that some of the features suggested in that report were more in the nature of outliers. However, even if the comparison is made only between 1999-2000 and 2009-10, as in Chart 9, it is clear that especially in urban India, domestic work accounts for a growing and increasingly significant share of the total employment of women. (The shares are much higher if only principal status activities are considered and if self-employed workers are removed from the analysis.)

Further, of the total increase in the number of women workers in the entire decade, a whopping 14.4 per cent was accounted for by domestic work. This suggests that more remunerative and desirable work is simply not available even for women who wish to enter the labour force, and they are forced to seek this employment as the only alternative. The continuing perception is that such work, especially when performed by women, essentially adds to family incomes rather than is the main source. This further operates to reduce the reservation for women workers and reduce the potential for increased wages and better working conditions.



Source: Estimated from NSSO Report No 537 on Employment and Unemployment in India, 2009-10 and population figures from Census of India

The growing significance of domestic work in paid employment in India makes it all the more imperative to ensure that such work is given dignity and occurs under decent conditions with adequate pay. At the moment, because of the personalized nature of such work, the informality of most contracts and the difficulty of monitoring conditions, as well as the generally adverse labour market conditions, most such work takes place under extremely difficult and oppressive conditions, with low pay, little or no limits on working hours, lack of autonomy and respect of the workers, and almost nothing in the form of worker protection or social security.

It is unfortunately the case that as long as overall productive employment generation remains so sluggish, there will be continuing pressures on both male and female workers that can force them to accept working conditions that are poor and even sometimes degrading. However, both public policy and labour mobilisation can play roles in improving such conditions even when the overall employment scenario is bleak. At present, domestic workers

are unprotected by almost all labour legislation. none of the labour laws, such as Workmen's Compensation Act 1926, Inter State Migrant Workers Act 1976, Payment of Wages Act 1936, Maternity Benefit Act 1961, Minimum Wages Act 1948, Equal Remuneration Act 1976, Employee's State Insurance Act, Employees Provident Fund Act, Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972 are applicable to them. However, they have been recently included in the Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act, 2008. Some states have taken the initiatives to issue Minimum Wages Notification.

Thus, for example, even admitting domestic work under the provisions of Minimum Wages legislation can play some role in improving the remuneration of these workers. It is true that such minimum wage legislation is more honoured in the breach in India, where the conditions of excess labour supply and poor generation of decent work opportunities have combined to create desperation on the part of those engaging in such work. Even so, coverage under the minimum wage laws increases the bargaining power of domestic workers and can begin to contribute the improvement in their working conditions.

Mostly such legislation and even official recognition of domestic work as economic activity that should be subject to labour regulation and provide some degree of labour protection has not come on its own as a “gift” from officialdom, but has resulted from prolonged efforts at mobilisation or workers and lobbying the government. In India, minimum wages are determined by state governments, and there is wide variation in both coverage and level of wages across states. In the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, employment in domestic work was included in the schedule of the Tamil Nadu Manual Labour Act 1982 only in June 1999, after prolonged demands by associations of such workers, NGOs and others. Nearly a decade later in January 2007, the Tamil Nadu Domestic Workers’ Welfare Board was constituted, and a few months later there was a preliminary notification for a Minimum Wage Act for domestic workers, which also specified wages for particular tasks and working hours. A number of other states, such as Karnataka, Kerala and Rajasthan, have also included domestic workers in the minimum wage laws, but implementation is patchy at best.

In some states, such as Kerala, the specified minimum wages have been set relatively low and are well below the actual market wages (because of the role played by outward migration and remittances in affecting labour demand in Kerala). However, the state government has also included domestic workers as members of the Kerala Artisan and Skilled Workers’ Welfare Fund, which has the important implication of allowing them to avail of social security schemes. This has linked with the movements for association of such workers: the Kerala arm of the National Domestic Workers’ Movement has been registered as a trade union in Kerala from 2008, and it has been appointed to issue labour certificates for the social security fund to its members. Obviously implementation remains a problem, but this is aided by the attempts at unionisation of such workers and related collective action, as have occurred in Kerala, Mumbai and elsewhere. What is required is professionalising the relations between employer and employee, which can only be done through a combination of organisation, legislation and institution-building.

Another issue is the use of child labour in domestic work, in both paid and unpaid forms (and even, in extreme cases, as bonded or unfree labour). While Indian law prohibits the employment of children below 14 years age in certain (usually “hazardous”) occupations through the Child Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Act 1986, the ban was only extended to domestic work in 2006. However, there is hardly any monitoring or attempt to implement this law, and empirical studies suggest that the use of child labour in domestic work remains significant. Some recent media reports of ill-treatment of children (usually migrants from poor rural families with little autonomy or ability to seek redressal) engaged in domestic

work in middle class urban households have highlighted the extent to which such practices remain rife. On a national level, attempts to include domestic workers under social protection laws and policies have also still been limited, despite public interest litigation designed to identify the gap and use the courts to require governments to meet their obligations for protecting the rights of domestic workers.

The Government of India has still not ratified the ILO Convention on Domestic Work, which was passed by the International Labour Congress in 2010. This Convention clearly outlines the basic rights of domestic workers, and provides guidelines on terms and conditions of employment, wages, working hours, occupational safety and health, social security and the avoidance of child labour. Ratification is obviously just a first step in a longer process, but it will prove to be an important step in ensuring the dignity of all workers in the country. However, regulation and monitoring needs to be done sensitively or it may be counterproductive by restricting women's mobility, as has been observed in the case of female migrant workers.

Conclusion

How can this description of women's work be located in the trajectory of capitalist development of the Indian economy? Essentially, it can be argued that such practices of gender discrimination, along with other forms of social discrimination, are not simply "backward" practices that will be washed away by capitalist progress, but rather have become the base on which the economic accumulation process rests. In other words, capitalism in India, especially in its most recent globally integrated variant, has used past and current modes of social discrimination and exclusion to its own benefit, to facilitate the extraction of surplus and ensure greater flexibility and bargaining to employers when dealing with workers. So social categories and particularly gender divisions are not "independent" of the accumulation process – rather, they allow for more surplus extraction, because they reinforce low employment generating (and therefore persistently low wage) tendencies of growth.

Changes in such a trajectory are not likely to come about through the natural dynamism of economic markets, since it is precisely the gender discrimination that is used in markets to deliver better profitability conditions. Nor are changes likely to be delivered by a benevolent paternalistic state explicitly operating in the best interest of all citizens. Rather, the economic history of India (as elsewhere) suggests that greater social recognition of women's work, as well as better remuneration and conditions of such work, come about through struggles and social movements that give voice to such demands and force both governments and the public to respond. The fact that such voices have been getting louder recently is therefore at least one possible source for optimism.

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