

WP 01/2013

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Women and Work in South Asia: Changes and Challenges

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*WORKING PAPER NO.
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NEW DELHI
2013

Published by:

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ISBN: 978-81-88315-37-6

Subscription Amount: ₹ 50/- / US \$ 10

WOMEN AND WORK IN SOUTH ASIA: CHANGES AND CHALLENGES*

*Preet Rustagi, Dev Nathan, Amrita Datta and Ann George***

1.1 Introduction

This paper examines a number of questions that have a bearing on women's employment in South Asia. The characteristic features of the region such as the predominantly rural, agrarian economy; patriarchal stronghold; influence of traditional gender based division of labour, the time spent on domestic and care responsibilities by women influence and affect the supply of women's labour for economic activities. Other aspects which appear to have an impact on women's labour force participation in developing countries relate to the extent of poverty and vulnerability, low levels of literacy and poor access to economic resources.

There are variations in the patterns and nature of women's work participation by the age of women as well. Since women in certain locations are constrained by the socio-cultural norms that affect their mobility and public participation, especially during certain phases of their lives, such as newly married women or women in reproductive years, for instance. However, some of the traditional norms may be undergoing change due to various factors, such as education, exposure through media and changing aspirations, migration, or a situation of male migration that leaves women behind to take care of all responsibilities.

The global trends in age cohort wise women's labour market participation reflect an inverted U pattern, with lower rates during the younger ages gradually increasing as women cross the reproductive years. Another issue relates to the increasing participation of girls in schooling for a longer period thereby delaying their entry into labour markets. A lowering of child labour is noted for many countries as a direct outcome of the efforts to universalize education at least for the 5-14 year olds. These aspects vary from country to country.

Understanding the work patterns of women in South Asia poses an interesting set of challenges both in terms of the supply and demand side factors. Over the years, the participation of women has been rising ever so gradually, yet it remains among one of the lowest work participation rates in the world (shared along with North Africa and West Asia). Given the larger share of the population of South Asia and women as a proportion of the world, these indicators affect the overall world averages as well.

The case of the lower work participation of women is also associated with the overall economic growth and job creation in any country or location. However, it is interesting that even where employment is generated, women's share in the labour force is subject to other factors, ranging from the literacy and skill set dimensions to other perceptual and attitudinal aspects which deter employers from demanding women workers for certain tasks. Gender based segregation and discrimination in the labour markets are noted with women

* This was prepared as a background paper on Gender and Labour Markets in South Asia for the World Bank, Washington D.C. Section 3.6 of this paper has appeared as part of an article (Datta and Mishra, 2011) in the Indian Journal of Labour Economics (IJLE); we are grateful to the IJLE for permission to reprint this.

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commonly concentrated in certain occupations, largely manual, low skill requiring, low returns and so on.

In many cases, the burden of care work leaves women little time which is inadequate for undertaking full time jobs. Women (as documented for developed countries) have witnessed a sharp rise in the share of part time work compared to that of men's share (ILO, march 2010). In countries which have time use statistics for work contribution of different members of the household, such as India and Nepal, the share of women's contribution in unpaid work activities is remarkably higher compared to that of men. This is over and above the women's contribution in economic activities (as measured by the SNA activities).

1.2 Labour Force Participation Rates

The labour force participation rates (LFPR) of women is not only low, there are wide differences in the male-female rates across most of the South Asian countries. While the LFPR for women across the world is close to 52 per cent, other regions which are similar to South Asia with much lower rates are the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). After the MENA region, South Asia has the highest median male female gap in LFPR, which is a little above 30 per cent (ILO, 2010).

Table 1
Labour Force Participation Rates by Sex and Women's Share in South Asia

| Country | Adult (15+) labour force participation rate (per cent) | | | | Women's share of the adult labour force, 2010 (per cent) |
|------------|--|-----|-------|-----|--|
| | 1990 | | 2010 | | |
| | Women | Men | Women | Men | |
| Bangladesh | 62 | 89 | 58 | 84 | 40 |
| Bhutan | 25 | 84 | 45 | 80 | 33 |
| India | 35 | 85 | 34 | 81 | 29 |
| Maldives | 20 | 78 | 58 | 78 | 42 |
| Nepal | 48 | 80 | 61 | 76 | 46 |
| Pakistan | 11 | 86 | 23 | 85 | 20 |
| Sri Lanka | 46 | 79 | 44 | 74 | 38 |

Source: KILM, 2010.

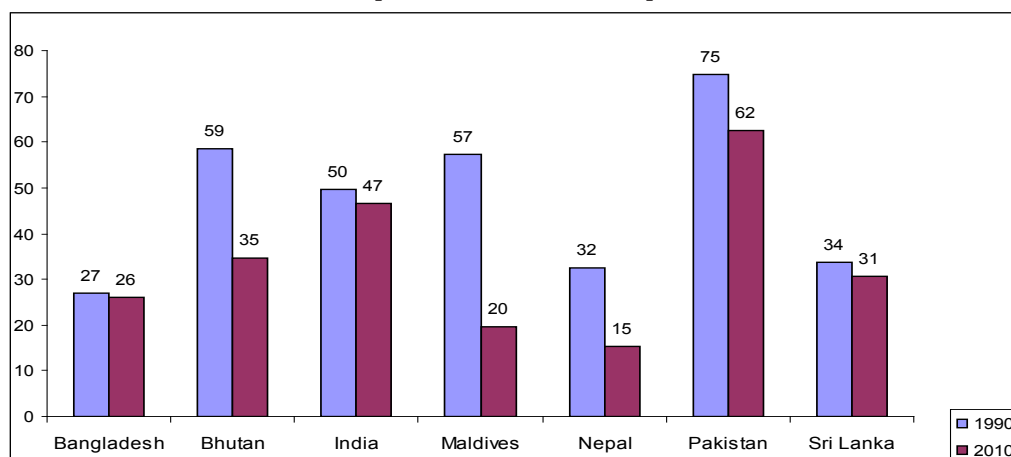
Given the large share of young children in the population, the adult LFPR for women above the ages of 15 years is higher, as shown in Table 1. The gaps among male and female LFPR are shown in graph 1.

The decline noted in gender gap in LFPR from 1990 to 2009 is not always due to increases in female LFPRs. Often this turns out to be at least partially an outcome of the fall in male participation rates too. Many countries across the world have displayed similar trends.

1.3 Employment Status

The share of wage and salaried workers for South Asia is increasing gradually from 10 per cent in 1999 to 15 per cent in 2009. However, this is way lower than the rest of the world, with only Sub Saharan Africa displaying somewhat similar rates. The share of men in the category of wage and salaried workers is one-fourth, with much smaller increases. It

Graph 1
Gender Gaps in Labourforce Participation Rates



Source: ILO, 2010.

has been noted in ILO (2010) that the increases in women's participation are generally for countries where the rate has been very low.

Bulk of the women in South Asia are involved as contributing family workers, nearly 51 per cent in 2009, which declined from 63 per cent in 1999. The share of men in this category is much lower and declining with only 14 per cent of them in 2009 recorded as contributing family members. This is an indirect reflection of the lower access and control over economic resources women have compared to men.

The stark difference in the share of own account workers is another indicator which highlights this difference among male and female workers. While the male own account workers are 59 per cent, women constitute only one third of all workers in 2009 (up from 26 per cent in 1999).

A majority of workers are in the category of vulnerable employment. While the share of women in vulnerable employment has been declining from 89 per cent in 1999 to 84 per cent in 2009, the fact that more than four-fifth of women workers are still in it signifies the nature of work participation of women in South Asia. The share of men in vulnerable employment is 73 per cent in 2009, down from 76 per cent in 1999.

This is a reflection of the high levels of poverty in the countries of the region together with its dependence on agriculture for providing jobs. The slow and gradual shift away from primary sector into non-agricultural activities, especially for women is a factor to be examined in detail. In India, feminization of labour in agriculture is associated with male migration into other more lucrative and better paying jobs including urban non-agricultural ones (Rustagi, 2010).

Table 2 shows the characterization of South Asia as a region which is predominantly, poor and dependent for employment on primary sector activities like agriculture and livestock and allied activities. According to the international dollar a day poverty line, more than half

of the people in Bangladesh and Nepal live below the poverty line, while in India which makes up for more than 70 per cent of entire South Asia's population about 41 per cent live below a dollar a day. In terms of the Human Development Index, which is a composite of education, longevity and PPP per capita income, Sri Lanka is the highest ranked in South Asia. Most of the countries of South Asia come under the category of low to medium HDI countries. As showcased by the relatively high values of the Gender-Related Development Index (GDI), the inequalities in South Asia are especially stark along gender lines suggesting a lack of gender equity in most of these countries.

Table 2
Dependence on Agriculture, Rank in Terms of GDP and HDI and GDI

| <i>Country</i> | <i>Head Count (per cent people below the international poverty line of 1.25\$)</i> | <i>% Employed in Agriculture</i> | <i>HDI</i> | <i>Gini Coefficient</i> | <i>GDI (rank)</i> |
|----------------|--|--------------------------------------|------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| Bangladesh | 50.5 | 48.1 | 0.469 | 33.2 | .539(121) |
| Bhutan | 26.2 | 43.6 | 0.619 | 46.8 | - |
| The Maldives | | 11.5 | 0.602 | - | .744(85) |
| Nepal | 55.1 | 65.7 | 0.428 | 47.3 | .520(128) |
| Pakistan | 22.6 | 43.6 | 0.490 | 31.2 | .525(125) |
| India | 41.6 | - | 0.519 | 32.5 | .600(113) |
| Sri Lanka | 14 | 31.3 | 0.658 | 41.1 | .735(89) |

Source: WDI and UNDP

The South Asian region is lacking in gender equality because the efforts of individual countries have not yet been broad, sustained or serious enough and in particular focus has been lacking on the systemic economic, political and legal changes that could make progress take place on multiple fronts (UNDP, Asia-Pacific HDR 2010)

The question remains whether economic empowerment can be viewed primarily as employment generation and women's access to paid jobs in the context of this region, where most of the contribution of women to the economy have been in unpaid spheres of work or family/disguised labour.

Women are under-represented in economic, political and legal institutions across the region resulting in deficits in power and the voice thus resulting in the widespread inequalities remaining unchallenged. Illiteracy and a lack of knowledge about their basic rights and ability to exercise them in many parts of the region further prevent women from challenging discrimination. In Nepal, in 2008 about 33.2 per cent of seats were held by women which was the maximum for this region while the minimum was 5.8 per cent in Sri Lanka suggesting a lack of female presence in the corridors of power.

In many situations, the ability to exercise their basic rights may be constrained by social pressures and stigmas resulting from common perceptions in society. Patriarchy is one such system of social organization which is fundamentally structured around the idea of male superiority. Although the percentage of households headed by females have increased over

time, these households are still comfortably in the minority, with about 23.4 per cent of households headed by females in Nepal being the maximum, while on the other hand only 10.4 per cent households in Pakistan were headed by women.

Table 3
Political and Economic Participation

| | <i>Female headed households (% of households with a female head)</i> | <i>Firms with female participation in ownership (% of firms)</i> | <i>Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%)</i> |
|------------|--|--|--|
| Bangladesh | 10.1 | - | 18.6 |
| Bhutan | - | 9.11 | 10.7 |
| India | 28.2 | 31.31 | 8.5 |
| Maldives | 33.7 | - | 6.5 |
| Nepal | - | 27.35 | 33.2 |
| Pakistan | - | - | 22.5 |
| Sri Lanka | - | - | 5.8 |

Source: WDI

Across much of South Asia, women acquire fewer capabilities than men as can be seen by indicators of health and education across the region. Even with capabilities, women are still constrained by the lack of opportunities and face barriers to paid work or get jobs that don't reflect or utilize their skill sets.

These capabilities and opportunities reinforce each other as capabilities are required to obtain opportunities and opportunities help build capabilities resulting in a never-ending cycle of gender inequality.

Cultural pluralism in South Asia, which is home to several major religious groups, including Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians as well as many smaller, more localized traditions followed among the multi-ethnic populations of the region define the customary values and form the basis very often for the legal systems followed in most countries of the region. These may result in many community based and personal laws to be followed, which may further constrain gender equality. These laws especially include those pertaining to divorce, marriages, guardianship and inheritance which limit gender equality despite provisions made in the constitutions for the same. (UNIFEM, 2003; MHHDC, 2000).

Every society has ideas about what men and women should be and do. Some of these ideas may support equality while some may not. These attitudes/norms are firmly embedded in history and tradition and notions of hierarchy and power equations within families. Unquestioned attitudes shape laws, policies and public institutions including those viewed as gender neutral and render them blind to distinct gender needs while at the same time creating barriers to change (UNDP, Asia-Pacific HDR 2010)

Hence, most women in this region are governed by social values, customs and norms, subjugated to the power of the male heads of households that impose restrictions on their mobility, autonomy in terms of decision making, sexuality, health, reproduction and so on. Even the universality of marriage (with the absence of the right to choose one's own partner),

along with the poor access to property (since inheritance in most cases follows patrimonial, patriarchal systems) constitutes segments of their lives wherein women are made to feel disempowered and dependent (Rustagi, 2007).

Thus, women in South Asia remain hindered by barriers in many areas of daily life and the regions rankings for many gender gap indicators are often close to or lower than those in Sub-Saharan Africa.

2.1 Job Creation for Women in South Asia

Most of the countries of the region have opened up their economies over the last two decades or so, having initiated economic policy reforms under the structural adjustment programmes at different points of time, that have intensified over the 1990s. Industrialisation, modernisation, technological innovations and changes have made inroads, affecting economic growth, structures and patterns of production and employment. By the turn of the century, although different countries were located at different levels of growth and development, the growth experienced has been low in labour absorption and resulted in increasing income and social inequalities (MHHDC, 2000; Mukhopadhyay, 1999).

Table 4
GDP and Population in South Asia – 2007

| Country | GDP per capita, PPP (const 2005 in \$) | GDP per capita (const 2000 in \$) | GDP growth (annual %) |
|------------|---|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Bhutan | 4568 | 1277 | 19.1 |
| Bangladesh | 1172 | 439 | 6.4 |
| India | 2600 | 686 | 9.1 |
| Maldives | 4907 | 3244 | 6.6 |
| Nepal | 991 | 246 | 3.2 |
| Pakistan | 2357 | 654 | 6 |
| Sri Lanka | 4007 | 1140 | 6.8 |

Source: WDI

Within the region too, each of the countries are at diverse stages of their economic and social development. While Nepal and Bangladesh have the lowest per capita GDP of 991 PPP\$ and 1172 PPP\$ respectively, Bhutan and The Maldives have the highest levels with per capita GDPs of 4568 and 4907 PPP dollars respectively. However, India which accounts for over 70 per cent of the entire population of the region has a per capita GDP of 2600 PPP dollars (figures based on 2005 construction for the year 2007).

Although each of the countries are at different stages of development, the region as a whole suffers from inadequate rates of productive employment growth, persistent poverty (about 40 per cent of the entire population of the region was said to be below the dollar a day poverty line in 2005) and is marked for its inequalities and human deprivations especially along gender lines.

The region is characterized by high levels of low productivity informal employment and persistence of high levels of unemployment leading to widespread economic and nutritional poverty. There has been an endemic increase in unemployment over the past few decades apart from 3 country level episodes of declining unemployment - in India from 1980 to 1990, in Pakistan from 1990 to 2004 and in Sri Lanka from 1990 to 2000.

Further, much of the low productivity work is concentrated in the agricultural sector and the continued dependence on agriculture means that the performance of this sector is essential for the development of the region. Additionally, shifting of workers from agriculture to non-agriculture, either industry or services, is critical to the growth process.

Although most of the countries have shown reasonable progress in economic growth in terms of GDP, progress in terms of human development is still lacking considerably and these asymmetries reflect income inequalities in the region (Bhalla 2007).

2.2 Characteristics of growth paths in South Asia

The ratio of international trade to GDP of the South Asian economies has been growing since the 90s. This is in line with the experience of the rest of Asia (South-east and East Asia) with liberalization and integration into global production networks. As a result of the splitting up of production by tasks across countries there has been a growth of trade in intermediates across borders. As a result of the growing trade in intermediates, international trade grows faster than global income during periods of expansion, and, conversely, international trade contracts faster than global income during periods of contraction. Consequently, employment in more trade-intensive sectors is subject to greater fluctuations than employment in less trade-intensive sectors.

While the rise in the ratio of international trade to GDP has been in line with that in other regions, a peculiarity of South Asia is that of the rise in the share of services in GDP even at relatively lower levels of per capita income. For the middle-income East Asian economies the share of services in income is around 35 percent, while for the low-income South Asian economies the share of services in income is around 50 percent, which is a proportion otherwise only achieved in high-income economies. The reasons for this somewhat different growth path of South Asia have been the subject of analysis (e.g. Ghani ed. 2010) but are not yet fully understood.

Along with high rate of growth of services, there has been a tendency for South Asian exports to be concentrated in medium to higher technology levels, skill-intensive products more akin to exports from middle-income countries. Only Bangladesh is an exception to this, following the now conventional path of labour-intensive exports in line with its condition as a low-income country. The reasons for this middle-income-like composition of exports from India have been much analyzed, with the connections drawn to both labor market policies that increase the effective price of labour (see Meghnad Desai) and a combination of labour market policies and poor infrastructure (ICRIER). Labour market policies can

increase the effective price of labour, beyond that which workers earn by adding costs due to compliance or, more likely, non-compliance with regulations, most notably the requirement of bureaucratic permission to retrench workers in units employing more than 100 workers. Such restrictions add more to costs where labour costs are a major component of overall costs, such as in garments, as compared to, say, automobile production, where labour costs are a relatively small portion of total costs.

The result of this growth path is that fast growing sectors have shown steep decline in employment elasticity, while sectors/subsectors with higher or rising employment elasticity are experiencing low growth. As a result of this growth path, the structure of employment and production is imbalanced with very high proportion of workers in agriculture (54 per cent) but low share in GDP (20 per cent); high share of services (50 per cent) in GDP but low share of employment (28 per cent); share of manufacturing in both employment and GDP much lower compared to East Asian and South-east Asian Countries.

The result is that South Asia is characterized by a high level of informality, as reflected in the extent of non-employees in the labour market. It is estimated that about 80 per cent of workers are not employees. There, however, are some differences in this among countries of South Asia. Bangladesh has a large proportion of employment in garment export manufacturing within the formal, large-scale sector; while in Sri Lanka most employment in manufacturing units is within the formal sector.

South Asia is the region with the highest proportion of informality in the labour market, higher than Sub-Saharan Africa, where the extent of informality is about 77 per cent (ILO, 2011, p. 28). Along with high incidence of poverty, this combines to make South Asia, along with Sub-Saharan Africa and Indonesia, a region of 'Very High Vulnerability' (ILO, 2011, p. 31). Within South Asia, however, Sri Lanka and Maldives both rank better than the others as 'High Vulnerability' countries.

2.3 Sectoral Distribution of Women Workers

South Asia has come to be characterized by a high share of services in GDP. The share of services has increased from 40 per cent in 1980 to more than 50 per cent in 2005. This was so not only for India but for all the economies of South Asia. The service sector also accounted for more than 50 per cent of growth in the region (Ghani, and Kharas, 2010, p.8). The service sector is particularly important in South Asia, growing from 40 per cent of GDP in 1980 to more than 50 per cent in 2005. This was so for all the South Asian countries.

Women have been part of the story of service sector development in South Asia. Nevertheless, of women in the work force, only 28 per cent were in services, as against 76 per cent in East Asia and 54 per cent in South-east Asia. Men's sector-wise employment in South Asia is more like that in South-east Asia, but women in South Asia have largely been left behind in agriculture.

Table 5
Sectoral Distribution of Women and Men Workers (2004-2007)

| | <i>Women</i> | | | <i>Men</i> | | |
|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | <i>Agriculture</i> | <i>Industry</i> | <i>Services</i> | <i>Agriculture</i> | <i>Industry</i> | <i>Services</i> |
| South Asia | 55 | 17 | 28 | 32 | 24 | 43 |
| East Asia | 11 | 13 | 76 | 13 | 25 | 62 |
| South East Asia | 30 | 17 | 54 | 34 | 23 | 43 |

Source: ILO

This broad sectoral distribution of women workers, is mirrored by their status as workers. With women largely in agriculture, it is no surprise that their dominant status is that of 'contributing family workers'. In contrast, only 12 per cent of men are contributing family workers.

Table 6
Distribution of Employed Persons by Status in Employment by Gender (2004-2007)

| | <i>Women</i> | | | <i>Men</i> | | |
|------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| | <i>Wage and Salary Workers</i> | <i>Own-account Workers</i> | <i>Contributing Family Workers</i> | <i>Wage and Salary Workers</i> | <i>Own-account Workers</i> | <i>Contributing Family Workers</i> |
| East Asia | 86 | 7 | 5 | 80 | 13 | < 1 |
| S-E Asia | 52 | 23 | 23 | 52 | 34 | 9 |
| South Asia | 30 | 22 | 46 | 44 | 40 | 12 |

Note: The rows do not add up to 100 since 'employers' has been omitted.

Source: The World's Women 2010, Table 4.6.

3.1 Limitations of Looking Only at Overall Changes

Going through the picture presented so far, it would seem that not much has happened in the sphere of women in the labour force in South Asia. They are largely in agriculture, and as contributing family workers and own account workers. These point to the weaknesses in the position of women in the labour force. But to merely look at this overall picture would miss the fact that some important changes have taken place in the labour market. These changes may not be such as to change the gross picture. But it is important to look at these changes because they show what can be done and thus point in the direction of policies necessary to overcome the excruciatingly slow transition that seems to be taking place in South Asia.

It is at the margin that change is likely to occur and, when this spreads, the trends in the margin could overwhelm what was the centre. It is to these changes at what are still the margins that we turn. In the subsequent case studies we look first at the gendered structure of labour forces, which would mean the influence of gendered structures on the labour force. Along with this we also look at the influence of forms of working on gender relations and gender identities. Gender relations and identities not only influence labour force structures, but are also, in turn, influenced by forms of working.

In this section, we examine specific case studies of women's employment in garments sector; export processing zones; information technology and ITES; and the impact on women's participation in the context of micro credit initiatives and male migration.

3.2 Women in the Garments Sector in South Asia

The garment industry in developing countries has been an important vehicle for women's entry into the labour force. The picture in South Asia, however, is somewhat mixed. There is a similar percentage, around 80 per cent, of women in the garment labour force in both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. At the other end too there is a similar percentage, around 20-25 per cent of women in the garment labour force in Pakistan and India, with Pakistan towards the lower end of that range. Why are there these variations in labour market outcomes for women?

Bangladesh has built its position in the garments sector on the basis of low wages – wages are lower than in the other South Asian countries in this comparison. Low wages is combined with assembly line production in large factories with around 2,000 workers. This combination has resulted in Bangladesh becoming an important source for the 'cut-make-trim' (CMT) tasks in woven garments' production and, more recently, mechanized production of knitted garments. Most intermediate materials are sourced from outside the country, but Bangladesh has concentrated in managing these low-skill tasks in garment manufacture. Its garment sector, in fact, is expanding rapidly in the face of rising wages in China combined with many buyers 'China plus One' policy in sourcing supplies.

On the other side, Sri Lanka started out with a potential labour force, including women, which is somewhat more educated than in the rest of South Asia. This would raise wages, particularly with the opportunities that educated women have to migrate to West Asia and other regions. High wages can be offset, but the choice is between high volume, assembly line production as in China and/or high value production. Sri Lanka has gone the way of concentrating on high value production, so that its unit value of production is \$12.2 per kg, as against around \$7 for Bangladesh and India and just \$5 for Pakistan. Hourly wages too are higher than in the rest of South Asia - \$0.35/hour as against the low of \$0.21 per hour in Bangladesh.

Table 7
Women in the Garments' Labour Force in South Asia

| | | <i>Bangladesh</i> | <i>India</i> | <i>Pakistan</i> | <i>Sri Lanka</i> |
|----|---|-------------------|--------------|-----------------|------------------|
| 1. | Unit value of garment exports to US+EU (\$/kg) (2005) | 7.55 | 7.64 | 4.89 | 12.21 |
| 2. | Women in garment labour force (2004-5) (%) | 80 | 23 | 20 | 80 |
| 3. | Educational Attainment in Manufacture (2002-6) | 4.6 | 5.2 | 4.6 | 8.8 |
| 4. | Hourly wages (\$) (2004) | 0.21 | 0.27 | 0.26 | 0.35 |

Source: 1. Calculated from Adhikari, Ratnakar and Chatrini Weeratunge, 2006, "Textiles and Clothing in South Asia: Coping with Post-Quota Challenges," UNDP, Colombo

2. Various sources

3. Barry Bosworth and Annemie Maertens, 2009, "The role of the service sector in South Asia in economic growth and employment generation," quoted in E. Ghani, 'Is Service-led growth a miracle for South Asia?' in *The Service Revolution in South Asia*, ed. Ejaz Ghani, p. 71, Delhi, OUP

4. Bangladesh: Growth and Export Competitiveness, 2005, World Bank, Dhaka

These two paths, that of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, show the difference between what is called the 'high road' and the 'low road'. The first is based on high wages, and better labour conditions, competing on skill-based higher productivity; while the low road is based on low wages and low-skill labour, with poor labour conditions.

While pointing to this difference between high and low roads, we should be careful not to make the error of mistaking the 'low road' as not being of any benefit to the workers concerned. For young women in rural Bangladesh employment in a garment factory is something to look forward to, even if the reality is somewhat less than expected and involves various forms of exploitation. Nor should the 'high road' be understood as fulfilling all the requirements of decent work. Finally, both high and low roads depend on the ability to compete.

In the employment of women there is also the influence of the organization of production. Where artisanal production, viz. where an individual worker tends to perform all the stitching functions in making a garment, the traditional identification of men as tailors, defines such work as men's work. But where production is organized in an assembly line system, with each individual worker performing just one task, such as stitching on a pocket, then the work no longer is defined as being skilled. Such work can then become women's work. When such assembly line production is combined with high employment, women get preferred in employment.

Two factors may be working here. One, is that women's labour, with a low opportunity cost can be cheaper than men's labour. Two, is that women may be more controllable as 'docile labour' than men. Both together result in a preference for women in low-skilled, assembly line production in big garment factories.

Finally, on the organization of work, when work is mechanized, as in the case of knitwear, there is again a gendered definition of skilled work as being that of men. Large-scale knitwear production, unlike large-scale woven garment production, tends to be the province of men as skilled machine operators. Where knitwear is produced with manually moved knitting equipment, there too men are preferred to women. In knitwear units women's tasks are confined to stitching, trimming and checking.

In both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka there is a dominance of assembly-line production in medium to large factories, employing more than 80 per cent women. The difference between the two countries is that even in assembly-line production there is a difference in skill level – low skill in, say, shirts in Bangladesh and high skill in, say, brassieres in Sri Lanka. The educational levels required or preferred are also correspondingly higher in Sri Lanka than in Bangladesh. In the former, school graduates are preferred while in the latter a modicum of literacy is accepted.

In the above contrast between skilled labour, done by women in Sri Lanka and not done by women in Bangladesh, there is an important question we need to answer: If women's wages could be uniformly lower for the same educational level than men's wages, why do Bangladesh factories not employ more women even in the skilled tasks in mechanized garment production? In the very competitive market, and the low end of garments' manufacture, is

anything if not competitive, firms employing more skilled women for lower wages, would drive out firms employing more skilled men for higher wages. So, why do individual firms not take this route?

Is it that training in skilled garment work is given to men alone in Bangladesh? But what factories ask for is not pre-skilled workers, but those with reasonable literacy and numerical abilities. The rest of the training of skilled workers is more a 'learning by doing' matter. It is only now that some centres for training skilled garment workers are coming up. So, the training route is probably not the reason.

There is a restriction on women's working hours in Bangladesh – they cannot be kept at work beyond 8pm. This restriction would raise the effective wage rate for women beyond their nominal wage. This is a labour market factor that could influence women's employment as a whole, low-skilled and skilled. Why should it affect women's employment in skilled jobs?

One needs to look into non-market factors, specifically the definition or identification of women and men as non-skilled and skilled workers respectively. While artisanal production is an 'old' identity definition of men's work, skilled work is a 'new' identity definition of men's work.

It should be pointed out that women not being accepted as 'skilled workers' is not confined to Bangladesh's garments industry. The same holds true for skilled work in Tiruppur, the centre of India's export knitwear industry, where it was noted that there is a 'gendered definition of skill' (Chari, 2004).

Then, it would also be necessary why women in Sri Lanka are accepted as 'skilled workers'. Is there something in the history of women's position in Sri Lanka, with its not-so recent matrilineal past, along with the present high levels of education of women in Sri Lanka, which makes them acceptable as skilled workers in garments?

Again, why do India and Pakistan both have similar low proportions of women in garment manufacture? In Pakistan it is likely that socio-cultural norms are barriers against the employment of women outside the home. In India there is the artisanal nature of woven garment production and the mechanized production of woven garments. In both cases there is a identification of men as tailors or as operators of machines, going against the employment of women.

The artisanal nature of woven garment production was reinforced by the now abandoned Indian policy of reservation of garment manufacture for small-scale units. Though this policy has now been ended, established structures of enterprises are not easily transformed. At the margin, however, new garment units are on a large-scale, with assembly line production systems. As would be expected, the proportion of women in these units is now around 80 per cent, as in similar units in Bangladesh. This transformation is taking place mainly in South India, while North India remains the preserve of artisanal production defined as the work of men.

Indian labour laws are the same in South India as in North India. Yet, there is a difference in the size of units coming up in the two regions – much larger in the South than in North India. The oft-cited provision restricting employers' right to lay-off workers in units with

more than 100 workers does not seem to have as much of an effect in South India as in North India. Why? It could be that the dominance of possibly 'docile' women in garments' employment in South India is seen as negating the labour law restrictions. Further, the widespread system of paying a 'retention wage' for skilled workers when units are closed in the off-season could also be a way of getting around the difficulties of laying-off workers. With a retention wage the workers are not technically laid-off, but also do not cost as much as keeping them in regular employment would.

Why is the identification of women as income earners much more widely prevalent in Bangladesh than in Pakistan? There are two points to be made here. First, it is interesting that both North India and Pakistan are quite similar in proportions of women in the garment labour force, while South India is similar to both Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. The Eastern part of South Asia as also South India plus Sri Lanka have had weaker forms of patriarchy. So, it could be that the influence of patriarchal definitions of womanhood as excluding income earning, is stronger across Pakistan and North India, than in the other regions considered here. This is in line with the thesis that there is historical belt of 'classical patriarchy' across the Indo-Gangetic plain, along with some other regions of the world.

The second point is that with an existing history of a widespread micro-credit system, women in Bangladesh have now come to see income earning as an integral part of their new identity, and men too have come to accept this change. There is a change in social norms in Bangladesh with the decline of the old ideal of the good woman as one who does not go outside the home and who does not earn an income, and its replacement by one where going out and earning an income are marks of self- and social esteem. In fact, the garment worker 'aapa' (elder sister) from the city who brings presents for younger siblings and others at Eid, has now become a staple character in Bangladeshi TV serials.

It should be noted that identity definitions are changing in North India too. A recent Bloomberg report (Srivastava, 2010) pointed to the factories in North India manufacturing lingerie, presumably in assembly-line manner. These are relatively small units with around 90 workers, size chosen so that the lay-off restrictions would not apply. What is interesting is that 90 per cent of workers in these factories are women (personal communication, Mehul Srivastava, Bloomberg News).

From the above comparisons, what influences the gender structure of the labour force in garment manufacture in South Asia?

- Industrial policy and the consequent decisions of firms whether to adopt artisanal or assembly-line production systems
- The educational status of women
- Labour market regulations that restrict women's working hours
- Socio-cultural factors (gendered identity) of older or more recent vintages that hamper or promote the entry of women into working outside the home
- Gendered definitions of skill, including those of an artisanal and machine-operator types
- The preference of employers for 'docile' women workers when it comes to large-scale units

What the above means is that besides labour market and business strategy issues, it is also necessary to bring in gendered definitions of identity in understanding the gender composition of the labour force in garments' manufacture in South Asia. At the same time, it can be seen that these gendered definitions of identity change over time. The important question for research to inform policy is: what brings about a change in gendered definitions of identity? An answer to this question needs to be combined with labour market and business strategy analysis to understand the changing gender composition of the garments' labour force in South Asia.

3.3 Gender and Labor Issues in the Export Processing Zones in South Asia

Creation of export processing zones (EPZs), now converted to special economic zones, has been an important economic strategy of countries to boost export oriented industry for several years. EPZs refers to geographical areas demarcated for the purpose of setting up industry, by giving several incentives like liberal tax and tariff concessions, infrastructural support and exemptions from some of the legal regulations. EPZs are promoted by countries for increasing its connection with the global economy, for earning foreign exchange through increased exports, for garnering benefits of foreign direct investment like technology transfer, for creating linkages of the global economy with the domestic side and most importantly, for employment generation (Shah, 2008; Milberg and Amengual, 2008).

While one of the primary objectives of EPZs is to boost employment, there is widespread apprehension regarding the quality of employment within these zones. The ILO, which has monitored and scrutinized the labor conditions in EPZs for almost 30 years, continues to be concerned about the lack of "decent work" created in such zones (Milberg and Amengual, 2008). Issues of gender and labor are highly co-related in EPZs, as many of them have predominance of women in their work force. Feminisation of labor raises the larger issue of gender stereotyping. Women become preferred workers because of perceiving them as good workers for doing 'not so good jobs', in which working conditions leave much to be desired. As such labor issues bear the gender dimension within it.

It is in the context of these general apprehensions that this paper examines the literature on gender and labor issues in EPZs in South Asia, in order to see how far these apprehensions hold true. Three countries, namely India, Bangladesh and Srilanka are selected for the discussion given that all three countries have had a long tradition of operating EPZs. India, Srilanka and Bangladesh established their first EPZs in 1966, 1979 and 1983 respectively. A discussion of gender and labor issues in EPZs in these three countries is given in separate sections below.

Case of India

Although India had set up export processing zones much earlier than the other two countries, the relative importance of EPZS to Indian economy is far less than the other two countries. The share of EPZs in a country's exports is an indicator of the relative importance of the zones to the country's economy. In India, EPZ exports correspond to a modest 5 per cent

of total exports, while the share reaches a fifth and a third, respectively, in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka (Aggarwal et al., 2008). However, the share of EPZ in exports has risen to 10 per cent in 2007-08 (Murayama and Yokota, 2009). India's EPZs are also different in that there is much more heterogeneity in the firms when compared to that of the EPZs in the other two countries. The share of female workers in India is also comparatively low than other countries and is seen to be declining. Whereas women accounted for 48 per cent of the SEZs labour force in the early 1990s, by 2008, the proportion had dropped to 37 per cent.

Gender issues in Indian EPZs

The empirical evidences on gender and labor issues in Indian EPZs are mixed, with different studies showing quite opposite results.¹ On the question of whether there is segmentation of work based on gender, one study finds that it is indeed so in the garment units in the Noida SEZ, where tailoring and sewing was mostly done by men (Neetha and Varma, 2004). Women were employed in trimming, checking, packing etc. However the experience from south Indian garment units from Bangalore and Tiruppur were different, where women were predominantly engaged as tailors (Murayama, 2008).

Different results are found with regard to working conditions like working hours, overtime practices, overtime compensation, night shifts, provision of leave and other facilities, across the different EPZs. One study on EPZ workers found that majority of the workers felt their wages to be similar to or higher than the workers in the domestic tariff area (Kundra, 2000). The working conditions were perceived to be good or very good by more than majority of his respondents. But another study reports that most of the workers in Noida EPZ are paid less than the minimum wage, which, however, might still be more than workers got outside the EPZ (Mazumdar, 2001).. The author of this study also finds several malpractices like the presence of unrecorded workers on company payrolls and non-payment of benefits due to the workers, namely that of health insurance or provident funds. The conclusions also depend on to the differences in the reference points used for comparison. For instance, some other authors examining Noida SEZ have found that employment practices and wage levels are close to those prevailing in the urban informal sector of the economy (Neetha and Varma, 2004).

Similarly one study on Madras EPZ finds the wage level to be less than that of the minimum wage level (PRIA, 1999). Yet another study of three SEZs, including madras does not support the argument but says that wages in the zones are not higher than what exists outside. Again, there are other studies reporting good working conditions in EPZs with some caveats and exceptions (Pratap, 2009). With regard to legal protection of labour in EPZs, India's labor laws allow trade union formation in the EPZs. However, attempts to unionise the workers are discouraged by investors and zone authorities using several strategies including controlling workers from establishing contacts with outside trade unions.

Summarizing the gender and labor conditions in EPZs in India, Murayama and Yokota says that the only conclusion which is possible, in the absence of comprehensive surveys

on EPZs, is that the wage levels of workers in EPZs are not much higher than those outside them and flouting of minimum wages is also not uncommon (Murayama and Yokota, 2009).

Case of Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has initiated market driven reforms since the latter half of 1970s. Setting up of export processing zones throughout the nation has been a central strategy in its reforms. The importance of export processing zones is brought clear by the figures, presented earlier, namely that nearly one-third of Srilanka's exports is from its EPZs. Garments and textile industry dominates the EPZs. Feminisation of labor is very striking. It is said that young, predominantly unmarried women have formed the backbone of the nation's shift towards export oriented industrialization (Middleton and Hancock, 2009; p. 2).

Studies show that labor conditions facing these women workers are far from decent.² Following the global recession, markets have revealed their negative side. With orders falling from US and EU, the workers in EPZs are facing job losses and deteriorating working conditions (Gunadasa, 2009). Although comparable data is lacking, it is generally held that wages in EPZs is comparable to rest of the economy. The caveat, however is that wages are same despite EPZS showing better productivity and longer working hours (Sivananthiran, 2007). Besides, wages are not annually revised to accommodate inflation. Gender stereotyping is found in that superior technical jobs are offered more to men (Bharathi, 2007). The ILO principle of equal pay for equal jobs is often ignored (Perman, Duvillier, David, Eden & Grumiau, S, 2004).

The cost of living is high for the women workers given that many of them leave their homes and stay in boarding houses for working in EPZs. They have to bear the cost of their accommodation, meals, medical expenses, clothing, furniture etc (Bharathi, 2007). In addition they have to pay fines from their salaries for not reaching targets, which is often unrealistic. Gross violation of decent work could be seen in practices of making deductions from their pay as a penalty for visiting toilets more times than the allotted weekly limits of it, for coming late and for refusing compulsory overtime work (Busser, 2005). Studies have found that women are forced to work in night shifts, although ILO convention No. 89 prohibits women working at night in order to meet foreign demands. In addition transport facilities are not provided for women doing night shift work (Bharathi, 2007). Women are forced to work for more than the legal maximum number of hours of overtime work without any additional social benefits (Busser, 2005). Research on EPZ workers also claims sexual harassment to be common place in these zones (Hewamanne, 2003).

With regard to legal protection of labor, the law in Srilanka gives workers in EPZs the same right to join unions as other workers. However, like in India, employers use several tactics to avoid trade union formation including, threatening, intimidating and demoting of workers (Busser, 2005 and ITUC, 2009).

However, the grave picture of labor conditions facing women workers is not a homogeneous one. Middleton and Hancock (2009) in their study says that labor conditions are grave in domestic firms, or firms operating in poor regions, generally producing unbranded products.

Labor conditions are much better in firms owned by OECD countries and in private EPZs. There are EPZs which have given workers employer contribution for social security services, cash bonuses, paid annual leave, free meals, subsidized accommodation and transport. Some have set up health and safety measures (Moran, 2002).

Some studies have focused on the impact of EPZ employment on women empowerment, cautioning against considering these women, who resiliently brave through adverse working conditions, as mere victims (Hancock, 2006). These studies point out that their employment has allowed them to improve their living standards and improve their voice and status in their families.

On the whole, studies on EPZs in Srilanka show that working conditions in some EPZs to be very exploitative and very grave. At the same time, there are EPZs which have adopted good practices.

3.3 Case of Bangladesh

Although Bangladesh is a latecomer in setting up EPZs, the role of its EPZs to its economy is quite significant. One-fifth of the country's exports come from its EPZs (Aggarwal et al., 2008). Bangladesh EPZs, similar to that of Srilanka is dominated by the garment and textile firms. A high proportion of them are foreign owned. Similar to Srilanka, there is feminization of labor force in Bangladesh EPZs, where female workers account for 64 per cent of total EPZ employment.

In general studies have given good reports about labor conditions in EPZs in Bangladesh. To begin with the employment generation of EPZs in the state is higher than that of the organized manufacturing sector in the domestic tariff areas. Wages and working conditions in garment units in EPZs are reported to be much superior than the non-EPZs garment units. Minimum wages are higher than the statutory minimum for Bangladesh and higher than those paid in non-EPZs units (Murayama and Yokota, 2009). Studies on specific EPZs report positively like a study on Dhaka EPZs report that labor laws are implemented to a large extent (Zohir, 2001). This means complying to several good practices in different aspects like provision of leave, maternity leave, non-wage benefits, festival allowance, prior notice of a certain period before being asked to leave the job etc. Although overtime work was often asked of them, compensation for it was paid. The study also noted some room for improvement with regard to some of these 'terms' of work. There are differences in the operation of these terms across different types of firms within the same EPZs.

Studies have also taken note of the empowerment effects of the employment in EPZs in terms of improved intra household relations (Zohir, 2001). A change in the attitude among the EPZ workers is brought in a study where majority of the women workers thinks that if a woman is unhappy in her marriage she can move out to live separately. It is also observed that in case of a marriage not working out, daughters are being accommodated in their parental home showing that daughters are looked at less as a burden at present (Zohir and Yunus, 2000). However, there is lack of social transformation and their employment has also increased their risk of harassment.

One striking negative aspect of the EPZs in Bangladesh is that the country did not give freedom of unionizing for workers in the EPZs till recent times. Even then, there are restrictions in the operation of workers associations like the prohibition of links with political parties and a moratorium on strikes and lock outs for some years. On the whole, a more positive picture emerges with regard to labor and gender conditions in Bangladesh, when compared to the mixed pictures from India and Sri Lanka (Murayama and Yokota, 2009).

A review of EPZs across the world, came to the following conclusions about South Asia (Bangladesh and Sri Lanka):

- *Wages:* Wages tend to be higher among workers in EPZs than in other sectors of the economy
- *Overtime:* Workers in EPZs tend to work more hours (excessive and often illegal overtime) when compared to other sectors of the economy
- *Health and safety:* Workers in EPZs in Bangladesh tend to have health benefits more often than other workers, especially those in the informal economy
- *Freedom of association and social dialogue:* Most studies find few unions both inside and outside of EPZs alike (Milberg and Amengual, 2010).

3.4 Women in IT Services in India

The large share of services in GDP is common to most South Asian countries, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The share of services increased from 40 per cent in 1980 to more than 50 per cent in 2005. This is in contrast to the situation in East Asia, where services account for around 35 per cent of GDP (Ghani, 2010). The service sector also accounted for more than 50 per cent of growth in South Asia.

In addition services provided employment opportunities for women. Within services women make up 30 per cent of workers in Information Technology (IT, in effect software services) and Information Technology Enabled Services ITES, or call centres and other Business Process Outsourcing, BPOs). In IT and ITES the growth has been fuelled by the boom in outsourcing of such services from the developed economies, and exports account for more than 90 per cent of the revenues of the major Indian IT companies.

The rapid growth in export of IT and ITES is due to a combination of factors, by now well analyzed. IT and ITES are not much affected by India's (and South Asia's) notorious infrastructure deficits. These services depend on good and reliable telecommunication networks, including broadband connections, which are more easily established than other types of infrastructure. Telecommunications has made IT services transportable. With telecommunications networks established within both developed and developing economies, and with existing differences in wages, there has been what Jagdish Bhagwati in an early analysis called the 'splintering and disembodiment' of services (Bhagwati 1984).

The development of tertiary education and technical education meant that there was a substantial pool of qualified persons on the supply side, with the additional advantage of knowing English. Graduates comprised fully 72 per cent of the labour force in IT and ITES (Mehta and Sarkar, 2010, p. 329), much higher than in manufacture. The supply of qualified

persons was initially based on the government-owned IITs. Subsequently, however, a host of private institutions of various types were set up in response to the increasing demand for training in IT services.

Offshore provision of such services from India competed not with other developing countries, but with developed countries. As against the onsite provision of these services in the high-income and high-wage countries, India successfully established off-site provision of these services from low-income countries, even if the employees in this sector earned wages relatively higher than those of the rest of the labour force. In a way, if China successfully established offshore manufacturing, India did the same in offshore provision of services.

An additional factor in the rapid growth of the IT-based (IT and ITES) sector is the absence of tariffs in their export, unlike the case of manufactures. With IT services becoming both transportable and tradable, wage differences came into play in influencing the geography of service provision.

The final factor is the business environment in IT services, which grew up outside of the 'license raj' framework and even outside the labor framework of manufactures. With a high-level of employment of graduates there was not the consciousness among employees of being workers; rather employees considered themselves professionals. This self-perception discouraged unionism in the sector. Further, once the sector got established the government excluded it from the labour regulatory framework and even declared IT services an 'essential service', which meant that, under the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA), there was no right to strike. Consequently, there was no inhibiting factor of labor regulations (particularly the requirement of government approval for any form of lay-off or retrenchment in units with more than a hundred workers) in the growth of IT service providers.

Given the important role of women in IT-based services, which is the only sub-sector of either manufacture or modern services where they account for more than 30 per cent of the labour force, it would be useful to look into various dimensions of women's participation in IT services.

The large-scale participation of women in ITES has brought attention to otherwise neglected factors of the lack of safety in public spaces. The numerous incidents of assaults on young women working late night shifts have revealed the poor state of public safety. The *Delhi Human Development Report* (2007) pointed to the urgent need to make public transport and public spaces safer for women.

Within workplaces, including those of BPOs, there are reports of sexual harassment of various kinds (Upadhyaya and Vasavi, 2006). Such sexual harassment issues are usually ignored in India, but the sheer numbers of young women working in the BPOs might force attention on this workplace matter.

In IT services, as compared to ITES, women are a smaller proportion of the labour force – about 20 per cent in IT as compared to more than 30 per cent in ITES. ITES has a relatively flat labour force structure, with large numbers of employees in various forms of call centre operations and just a few in supervisor positions. But IT service itself has a

more elaborate labour force structure, with programmers, task managers, team leaders, and so on. Length of service is usually correlated with seniority in the labour force structure. While women were 19 per cent of the labour force at lower levels, i.e. with up to three years experience, they were only six per cent at senior levels, with up to ten years' experience (Kalghatgi and Seth, 2003, cited in Kelkar et al, 2005).

The smaller proportion of women in higher positions is related to the constraints that women face in advancing their professional careers in the face of continuing domestic responsibilities. Overall, the difficulty in combining domestic responsibilities including child-bearing and child care, with professional careers, especially where frequently long workdays, including weekends and overtime, disadvantage women's career prospects (Upadhyaya, 2010). Further, due to domestic responsibilities they shift jobs less frequently than men. In particular, women find it difficult to relocate, something that is necessary to climb the corporate ladder. A survey in 2003 found that 52 per cent of women are not open to relocation, as compared to 28 per cent of men (Kelkar *et al*, 2005, p.122). Inability to work long hours, difficulties in shifting jobs and, most importantly, in relocating all mean that women tend to get promoted to higher positions less than men.

If IT enables offshore provision of services, it also allows for flexible working hours and work from distant locations, including home. But these flexible work regimes, while they allow women to combine domestic and professional responsibilities come in as a negative factor in the matter of promotion. This type of intersection of domestic responsibilities and employment opportunities could lead to the development of what the Japanese label 'the mommy track', an inferior women's track with fewer promotion opportunities.

Some women do put in heroic three shifts a day, including one in domestic work and child care at home, and make it to the top of the profession. But there they encounter double standards. As a senior manager from one of India's IT majors put it, "If you complain, it is seen as a sign of weakness. If you are aggressive, you are a bully. If you have a mentor or friend in the office, you are having an affair. Some of these perceptions are changing now, but only marginally" (quoted in Kelkar *et al*, 2005, p.125). Stereotyping of women as soft and having good inter-personal skills serves to put them into various human resource management positions, but becomes a restricting factor with respect to similar management positions on the technology side.

In addition, when the few women do reach near the top, there is the lack of a social network in addition to men's resistance to their authority. Getting to the top is very difficult for women, but when a few women do get there it is lonely and even difficult to stay on at the top. Besides the glass ceiling, there is also what is now being called the 'glass cliff' – it is easier for women than men to fall off the cliff from senior positions.

Women's participation in IT sector job would be expected to have positive effects on not just their own self-esteem but also on their status within their families and in society. This does happen, but in a differential manner, depending on professional status. Women in call centres and back-office work, as mentioned earlier, have few prospects of promotion. Such women reported that there was little change in their familial or social status. But women in

management reported a rise in social status (Kelkar et al, 2005).

Within families, however, women reported that their control in familial spending extended only over their own incomes. “Major decisions regarding property and family income were still taken in consultation with, and approval of men” (Kelkar et al, 2005, p. 121). Along with that there was little sharing by men of domestic responsibilities; at best, they took up child-care when women were busy with other tasks. There were thus somewhat limited changes in gender roles at home.

IT sector employment and socio-cultural transformations: Expanding the boundaries of gender norms

Many of the studies reviewed for this note have looked at the social transformative capabilities of IT sector skeptically, where they find entrapment of labor under capitalist norms. For instance, some studies find it as neo-colonizing of the Indian workforce, where the employees are supposed to change their identity to suit client requirements and are compelled to eradicate their Indian identity to the maximum (McMillan, 2006). Scholars have criticized this work, naming the employees as cyber coolies, doing mundane work for western consumers, instead of seeking a higher purpose career through further education (Ramesh, 2004).

As for the dimension of gender, what essentially many of these studies, point out is how, the social divides in terms of gender get translated into the labor divisions within the IT sector, instead of the other way around, where working in this modern sector leads to the transformation of the social divides. But, it is important not to miss the small but definite widening of the boundaries which could, over time, lead to substantial transformation of the norms ascribed to women in both family and public spheres. Again, as pointed out with regard to the gendered structures of the labour force, it is a matter of ignoring the important changes that are actually taking place at the margins of gender relations. As a result these analysts miss the transformations of gender norms and resultant changes in gendered identities that are occurring as a result of the new everyday practices of millions of young women, not only in the IT sector and call centres in India, but also in garments’ manufacture in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

As McMillan (2006) points out in her study on call centre employees, a most visible and striking transformation is that of the young women appropriating the night space in Indian society- where women’s respectability used to be maintained by limiting her activities under respectable notions of time and space. That young women are sent and supported by their parents for doing this night job could be seen as a major breakthrough for women. Despite the hardships of the job, many women experience the joy of this newfound freedom. Tara and Ilavarasan (2009) in their study point out, how middle class parents willingly send their daughters to call centres, following what have now become accepted. At the same time, this new behaviour forces society and administration to confront the dangers women face in the public spheres, and even in private, employee arranged transport.

Women employees in the IT sector are especially able to redraw some of the social boundaries due to both financial and other forms of empowerment which they acquire from the job. In juggling pressing demands from work and family (Hussain and Dutta, 2008) even though there is indeed a rise in their spouses' sharing of domestic responsibilities, the juggling is mostly achieved by purchased services. Increasing trends of eating out etc. have reduced women's actual labor, in the manner that is generally quite widespread in East and South-east Asia. Their financial empowerment has also enabled them to ignore some criticisms, which gradually pushes the norms, leading to an expansion of freedom. For instance women are found ignoring in-laws' criticisms against coming late from work and gradually the elder generation adjusts to the new requirements. In the objective discourse of gender discrimination, one should not fail to note the satisfaction which women themselves express from meeting the challenges of their job, the identity they acquire as IT employees and the heightened respect and status they acquire in family and society. Even if they do not directly confront patriarchal structures, there is nevertheless some change in the norms, both within the family and outside.

Challenges to Gender Identity

The above analysis points to two conclusions. One, that women's labour market outcomes in IT are the result of not just labour market factors, but also the pre-market identity of women as domestic carers. Two, that changes in women's familial and social status, are also affected by their labour market participation and status.

These conclusions are also corroborated in other studies of gender positions in other sectors - in garments (Hirway, 2010; Tiwari, 2010; and Barrientos, 2010) and non-timber forest products (Kelkar et al, 2010). In the case of IT the rupture with gendered stereotyping is more substantial, involving, for instance, travel and work at night. The paternalistic labour regulation restricting women's work at night has been challenged not only in the IT sector, but also by women (and corporations) in other export sectors, e.g. leather products in Chennai. Bangladesh, on the other hand, continues to have restrictions on women's working at night, which restricts their garment factories to an 8am to 8pm working time.

In IT besides night working, there is an additional challenge to gender stereotyping – of men as skilled and women as unskilled or low-skilled workers. IT being a new industry does not have the carryover of an age-old gender typing. Thus, women professionals in IT are not seen as being less-skilled than their men counterparts. As pointed out, there are factors inhibiting women's promotion in IT careers, but these are not related to notions of being less skilled.

This note has also pointed to the changes, even if limited, in gender identities in domestic work. Thus, besides looking at gender identities as inhibiting women's progress in the workplace, it is also necessary to look at the factors leading to changes in gender identities. While gender identities influence labour market outcomes, they are also, in turn, influenced by women's labour market participation, position and practice.

3.5 Micro-credit and Gender Transformation

Micro-credit has been an important vehicle for the entry of women into own-account work. It has usually meant a shift from the status of contributing family worker to own-account workers. There are two aspects of micro-credit that are of importance with regard to women's participation in the work force.

The first is the shift from self-consuming, subsistence production to commercial production. The other is the changes in gender relations that are brought, most often as unintended consequences of changed economic practices.

Transforming Domestic into Commercial Activity

Where women themselves use the loans, they are invested in a number of income generating activities – rearing poultry, goats and cows, homestead vegetable and fruit gardening, pond fish culture, etc. At one level this is a continuation of activities that women were already carrying out. The earlier activities, however, were carried out on a smaller scale, and that too for household self-consumption. With credit provision there is the new requirement of repayment, which requires that activities earn cash. This leads to the transformation of the nature of the activity, even if the type of labour does not change. In place of production for self-consumption, the women are forced into production for sale, in order to earn the cash to pay the regular installment on the loan. Thus, what was in scale a petty and domestic activity for household self-consumption is upgraded in scale and changed in nature into a commercial activity for sale.

The transformation of women's domestic activities into commercial ones is not new. But such transformations have usually been carried out by male protagonists and even changed in stature in the process. Women are domestic cooks, while men are chefs, a "...task has only to be taken over by a man and performed outside the private sphere in order for it to be thereby ennobled and transfigured" (Bourdieu, 2001, 60).

It is not only in the upgrading of a domestic activity into a high profession that men-centeredness is seen. This also occurs in the small-scale or micro-enterprise transformation, where men tend to takeover the management and control function. Such a men-centered transformation could occur even in an otherwise-matrilineal society like that of Bhutan. A study of gender issues in Bhutan points out, "While women did comprise the work force for such activities ['own business'], decisions were taken by men (100 per cent). The study suggests that as economic options widen and households move away from subsistence based activities, women may not be perceived as capable and equal partners in the new economic opportunities" (Royal Government of Bhutan and UN Agencies, 2001, p.12.)

The critical difference that micro-credit to women has made in patriarchal Bangladesh is that it enabled women themselves to be the agents of the transformation of a domestic activity for household consumption into a commercial activity for sale. While the location or site of this labour may not have changed and remained within the homestead, the nature of the productive activity changed from being private production for household-consumption to commercial activity for sale. Since this transformation was carried out through the medium

of women's own loans, women thereby remained not just the labourers, but were also identified as the agents of this transformation.

Before the micro-credit system took root, all of women's labour remained within the definition of domestic work, work done for the care and service of the household. Within this there was no distinction between so-called productive and domestic / unproductive tasks. All tasks undertaken by women were uniformly regarded as being within the realm of domestic labour. But when the product of this labour became a commodity and the result of it a cash income, and when this transformation was carried out by credit taken by women, the very nature of this part of women's labour in the household was transformed. It acquired social recognition and, importantly, women's own self-recognition as income earners.

That the critical part in this transformation of the recognition of women's role was played by their ownership of the credit used, can be seen by a counter example where such a transformation did not take place, though the activity changed from domestic production for household consumption to commercial production for sale. This was in the earlier IFAD Marginal and Small Farm Systems Development and Crop Intensification Project (MSFSDCIP) in Kurigram. In this project, of the early 1990s, in contrast to the process based on women's SCGs, men were trained to produce vegetables for the market, and were provided credit to do the same. Investigation showed that in practice women did most of the labour of growing vegetables, except that of taking the produce to the market for sale. But despite performing all this labour, their labour was not recognized, but dismissed as merely being part of their domestic work (Nathan, 1993). This is in sharp contrast to the clear recognition with women's SCGs that the women are themselves the protagonists of the new commercial production.

There is a higher knowledge needed in the shift from production for household consumption to production for the market. For instance, raising a couple of hens is not the same as raising twenty or so of them. Particularly since the hens are financed through loans, the women need to protect themselves against the risk of the birds dying. Thus, they need better knowledge of caring for the birds. They also need support services, like vaccination, etc.

Whether it is in vegetable production or aquaculture there is a jump in knowledge required to handle commercial-scale as against domestic activities. For instance, small household ponds may be fished very intermittently and casually for household use. When women had access to capital, not through micro-credit but of their own and did not have any training, there were instances in the Faridpur area of the Aquaculture Development Project, where women undertook the wrong kind of stocking – they stocked too many, or too small or not of the right composition of species. Women who had been provided training along with credit did not make the same mistakes.

Thus, it should be seen that even if the commercial activity is the same as the former domestic activity, there is a higher knowledge needed to increase the scale of operations. It is not just a question of doing more of the same thing, but doing it differently, applying higher knowledge of the production processes and investing more labour in care and management.

The training, whether by the NGO itself, or as in this case by a government department in conjunction with the NGO, is then a necessary part of the transition from domestic to commercial production. There is an enhancement of the knowledge and management skills of the producers (women) in this process.

3.6 Impact of Male Migration on Women: Some Evidence from South Asia

In South Asia, migration for work is mostly male migration, though female migration has increased in recent years. Little research has been done on women influenced strongly by migration, who themselves have not moved but live in village based families where males have left to seek work in other parts of the country, or in other countries. Hugo (2000) contends that families of migrants left behind not only have to deal with the absence of their men, but also the influences of newly acquired money, goods, ideas, attitudes, behaviours and innovations transmitted back to them by the migrants. According to Willis and Yeoh (2000), such household rearrangements can represent an opportunity for a restructuring of gender relations. Just as women's migration, especially for employment, can prove to be 'empowering', male outmigration may also provide opportunities for greater responsibility within the household for wives left behind. At the same time, such responsibility may prove to be a double-edged sword. While the absence of a husband may provide greater freedom, there may be economic disadvantages, especially if remittances are irregular or non-existent.

This section discusses the impact of male migration on women's work, on women's decision making in the household, on new roles and women's mobility, on old fears and insecurity, and on patriarchy.

On Women's Work

The main motivation for migration is to secure an increase in income, and a better life for the household. Often, male migration leads to a rise in household income, and improved standards of living. In a study based on NSS data for India for (64th Round for 2004-05), Ravi Stivastava (2011) calculated remittances per internal migrant as Rs. 18,122 per household per year, and remittances per international migrant as Rs.64,546 per household per year. The total of remittances was Rs.493.5 billion, of which about two-thirds was from internal migration. The impact on women's work would be a combination of income effects due to higher income, and of household labour shortage, due to a withdrawal of adult male labour.

Mascarenhas-Keyes (1990), in a study of a Catholic upper caste village of peasant origin in Goa, India found that male migration led to withdrawal of women from agricultural work. In the case of Nepal, Loshkin and Glinskayam (2008), using data from the 2004 Nepal household survey, found that male migration for work has a negative impact on the level of market work participation by the women left behind. The impact is the strongest for women in the age-group of 25-35 years and for women who have completed 11 or more years of education. Gulati (1993) studied 37 low income households in Alakad, in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, from where men had migrated to West Asia. She found that this migration led to radical changes, and male dominated families transformed into female dominated ones. This

stream of international migration was able to multiply family incomes by 5-10 times, and women controlled the spending and investment of these remittances.

At the same time, studies also show that the remittances sent back are simply not enough. Jetley (1987), in a study of poor peasants and landless families in rural Uttar Pradesh finds that the additional income through remittances does not substantially change the economic status of the family, and neither does it help it come out of the subsistence level. Instead, women left behind have to assume, in addition to familial and domestic responsibilities, the role of a breadwinner, and older daughters take up household chores, and are surrogate mothers to younger siblings. In a study of women of Saora tribe in Orissa, where men migrate mainly to Assam, Geeta Menon (1995) finds that income from migration does not mitigate poverty. Neither does it make amends for the problems women face in the absence of men. Paris et al (2005), in a study of male outmigration from rice producing regions of eastern Uttar Pradesh find that there is a marked increase in women's agricultural work, including a wide range of farm tasks, a heavier workload, and less time for domestic tasks and childcare.

On Women's Decision Making in the Household

The structure and composition of a household is a crucial variable to understand the impact of male migration on women. Using data from a large-scale survey in 33 states in India, Desai and Banerjee (2008) argue that women living in nuclear families experience migration differently from their counterparts who live in joint families. The former, unlike the latter, experience both higher levels of autonomy and greater responsibility. Evidence for this is also found in micro studies, such as Gulati (1993), where, the case of Rehana, whose husband migrated to Saudi Arabia, a week after their wedding, leaving her behind with his extended family is documented.

'My position is rather awkward. Of the 13 persons living in this house, I am the only outsider... Although I am married to the most important person who is everyone's hope, I have very little freedom of movement, speech or action. I cannot go out of the house without the permission of my mother-in-law or, if she is not around, my sister-in-law. Also, they do not want me to go out of the house unescorted'. (pp 38).

Specifically related to nuclear households, Paris et al (1995) find that due to male absence, women have to take over tasks traditionally done by men particularly during land preparation and other tasks during the peak-cropping season. Their participation in decision-making related to farm has also increased. Mascarenhas-Keyes (1990) has found that absence of men for prolonged periods of time made their wives the de facto head of households. They became self-reliant, managed the household, as well as remittances, and supervised farms and house building. The fact that these households were largely nuclear, have implications for greater autonomy of women's autonomy and influence in the family.

In the case of Pakistan, before the advent of single male migration to the Gulf areas for work, women had supposedly no role in managing agriculture and other non-domestic activities. But after the substantial male migration, all this has changed (Lefebvre, 1999). Hastings and Pnina (1991) have found that prolonged absence of men enable women to have

greater decision-making power regarding land, children's education and household finances, and that these are not passed back to the men once they return.

To the contrary, Jetley (1987) argues that though women may be making decisions regarding the daily subsistence of the family, major decisions, such as purchase and sale of land, expenditure on ceremonies, etc. are made by the men, when they visit. Thus, the authority structure of the family remains unchanged.

On New Roles and Women's Mobility

Menon (1995), in her study of the Saora tribe, where male-only migration is prevalent, finds that migrants' links have remained with lands and their families through the females left behind, making the women upholders of tradition and protectors of household economic assets and family members. She argues, that these roles, on the one hand, prevent women from leaving, and on the other, give the men confidence to move out. The main problems faced by women in the absence of male relatives included, increased workload, additional burden, illness, food and medicine shortage, labour scarcity, problems in childcare, and, indebtedness.

Gulati (1993), in her study of male migrants to the Gulf from Kerala has found that the migration of men breaks down women's isolation, increases mobility and brings them into contact with a wider network of institutions than were in their purview before. This results in their gaining greater confidence and taking on more responsibilities. Some of them even take on income generating activities. Yet, there are extraordinary situations when women do need, and invoke, the support of the network of relatives, friends and even institutions. She also finds that women are very careful about how they spend their remittances. High on their priority is to buy land and build a house, as well as invest in gold jewellery – tangible goals in an uncertain world.

Migration also acts as a catalyst to social change. Gulati (1993), in a case study of an illiterate muslim woman, Hameeda, whose husband Jamal was an early migrant to Saudi Arabia, narrates,

'When Jamal is visiting home, he takes me out to the movies. He never insists that I should cover my head. My mother is very orthodox, and would never have permitted me such liberty. But she is in such great awe of Jamal that she does not interfere with anything he wants me to do on his short visits. Actually, now several women in our neighbourhood have stopped covering their heads and go to the movies in short-sleeved blouses. You need someone to take the initiative and introduce these small changes.' (pp 31).

On Old Fears and Insecurity

For women left behind, male migration is not easy, and migration is viewed as a period of hardship (Hoodfar, 1996). Often, women's apprehensions about male migration are related to (the fear of) divorce and desertion (Menon, 1995). Jetley's (1987) study throws light on the insecurities women face, when left behind by men. She finds that one-third of the women interviewed were positively unhappy about their men migrating, and one-half regretted the long absence of male members of the family. Ram Nath Singh (1989), in a case study on impact of outmigration on Khutauna Block in Madhubani, Bihar, finds that while

outmigration has brought transformation in social conditions, as well as social attitudes, it has also let to migrants developing extra-marital affairs in urban areas.

Gulati (1993) finds that in the absence of their men, women turned to religion for solace. They have to cope with the tension of living jointly with their relatives, face the difficulties of managing the children and take care of them. At the same time, they have to endure the emotional strain of long separations from their spouse.

On Patriarchy

Has male migration been a catalyst in the reorganisation of gender relations? Has it been able to make a dent on the institution of patriarchy? Jetley (1987) finds that when male migrants return home for a fortnight or a month every year, in rural Uttar Pradesh, India, they seldom help in household chores, though they are used to cooking, cleaning and washing in the city.

Often gender roles remain rigid for men. In the case of Bangladesh, (Siddiqui 2001) finds that when men migrate, women undertook household tasks performed by men. To the contrary, when women migrate, the men left behind didn't take to household tasks which were earlier undertaken by women. In such a situation, the extended family was a support mechanism.

Migration sometimes leads to a hardening of existing social norms. In the case of Pakistan, Balchin (1996) finds that after male migration to the Gulf in the 1970s and 1980s, the practice of *purdah* has increased. She argues that this could be symbol of higher social status. Lefebvre (1990), in a study of two Pakistani villages argues as male international outmigration provides greater economic possibilities for maintaining *purdah*, which contributes to the increased seclusion of women.

Migration is both gendered and gendering (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992). While migration being gendered is associated with the 'male' character of outmigration, it is also a gendering process, in the sense that can enable women to command a personal income, negotiate public spaces; foster their autonomy and esteem, and enhance their agency and well-being.

In essence, migration is motivated by an aspiration for a better life. Be it the Saora tribals in Orissa, or the landless and small peasants in Uttar Pradesh, or migrants from Kerala to the Gulf, an innate desire to improve the life of their families is what initiates the process of migration, and sustains its trajectory. In the rural heart belts migration is not just about moving up the economic ladder. Migration symbolises modernity, and the possibility of upward (social) mobility. Migrants from the city bring back with them not just goods and goodies, but also new ideas and attitudes to a stagnant rural society. While women may have reservations about their men migrating, and endure in their absence, they also aspire for economic and social change, and are agents in providing a conducive atmosphere for male migration. This is crucial for understanding complex gender roles and relations which define and govern the migration process in subtle, but fundamental ways.

The Connection between Cheap Male Migrant Labour and the Work of Women Left Behind

Initially migration is seasonal or circular, with periodic returns to the source village. For those migrating with low levels of education or skills, otherwise termed the vulnerable, this might be the life-long pattern. In which case women, children and the aged are left behind. But for those with somewhat better education and skills, initial circular migration may turn into permanent migration where the whole family migrates.

Economic Contractions and Rural Women's Work

The effect of employment protection measures in the context of an economic downturn would vary with the type of workers, whether fully urban or migrant, and even the type of migrant. Since the job losses are in industrial, predominantly urban, employment, it might be readily assumed that an urban-centered employment programme or other safety-net measures would be adequate to deal with the negative welfare effects or urban job losses. But while an urban-centered job scheme would cover those workers who are fully settled in cities, it would leave out of its ambit those who, on losing their jobs, are forced to return to their rural homes. This secondary effect, in which an economic downturn of urban origin is transmitted to the rural economy, can easily be missed in the analysis and thus in framing policy responses to economic downturns. Consequently, in order to assess the nature of crucial safety measures, it is necessary to take account of the nature of migration. In this section we summarize some of the literature on the nature of rural-urban migration in Thailand (Nathan and Kelkar 1999) and India (Bhaskaran and Mehta 2010; Deshingkar and Farrington 2009).

One type of labour movement includes "commuting" migrants – those who travel from (primarily) rural to urban locales for daily work. There is the widespread phenomenon of men who live in villages commuting every day to work in the cities. This occurs not only around the major metropolitan centres, but also around smaller towns in the countryside. Then there are the seasonal and long-term migrants, both of whom retain connections with their places of origin.

For both circular and seasonal migrants, the rural home and economy plays an important role in the creation and recreation of labour power. It is women's agricultural and household labour in source areas that subsidizes the low wages that employers pay seasonal and other non-permanent migrating men in destination areas (Meillasoux). In such an articulated structure, the rural areas serve as the source of cheap, surplus labour during times of economic expansion. The flexibility requirement of many industries and services is met by men returning to their villages in the off-seasons; which means that rural production, by women, is what supports this flexibility of labour employment. Further, during economic contractions, these remote rural areas also provide a cushion in sustaining the consumption of the vulnerable migrant workers, who are the first to be unemployed and are forced to return to their places of origin.

The circular nature of much migration means that there are strong connections between urban and rural economic conditions. In particular, migration can be seen as an important transmission mechanism of the global financial crisis and the attendant global economic slowdown. Even if the immediate impact of the slowdown is urban-centred, the income fall is transmitted to the rural economy through a fall in remittances from migrants. This is compounded by the increased demands on rural income due to the consumption requirements of migrants who have lost their urban jobs. As a result of this connection, income losses due to urban lay-offs were quickly transmitted to rural areas, through a fall in remittances and, then, the return of job-losing migrants.

For agricultural labourers the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) came into effect much before the Atlantic financial crash. It provides for up to 100 days of employment for a poor, rural household. Subsequently, an emphasis on the employment of women was added to the scheme, with the provision that women must constitute at least one-third of those employed under the scheme. Given that before the crash, NREGA days were not fully utilized, the scheme provided an automatic stimulus – the number of days of employment sought in areas affected by the economic crisis, chiefly return migrants who had lost their urban jobs, could increase with demand until the full 100 days were used up. The amount spent on NREGA could increase or decrease depending on the demand for rural employment. In this case, the amount spent on NREGA in 2008-09 was double that originally provided for in the budget. The total number of days of employment under NREGA in October 2009 was reported as 1.2 billion person days to 31 million households (Ministry of Rural Development, 2009).

Table 8
NREGA in India, 2008-09

| | |
|------------------------------------|---------------|
| Employment provided to households: | 31.2 millions |
| Of Total Persondays: | 1224 million |
| SCs | 29.9 % |
| STs | 21.8 % |
| Women | 50.8 % |
| Others | 48.3 % |

Source: <http://www.nrega.nic.in/>

India's Ministry of Rural Development pointed out that the programme had been successful in addressing "the problem caused by reverse migration as thousands of unskilled workers return home due to slowdown in infrastructure and other sectors" (Indo-Asian News Service 2009). Reports show (Hirway 2009) however, that not all return migrants were willing to take up the low-skilled, manual labour jobs being offered under NREGA. Workers in the diamond industry were not willing to take up the NREGA jobs on offer, and preferred to take up other urban jobs which paid less than what they had earned in the diamond sector; though there are also reports (*The Economist*, September 2009) that some laid-off diamond workers did take up NREGA work. What is likely is that rural migrant workers in construction, the other sector that suffered a major downturn, were the ones who largely took up the manual construction jobs that NREGA offered.

4.1 Impact of Gender Relations on Labour Market Structures

There are many types of workers and the movement from one to the other can itself constitute an improvement, e.g. from contributing family worker to own-account workers to employee is generally an improvement of status in the work force. Even as employee in low-wage employment of a regular type is generally an improvement over own-account work in the informal sector. While not losing sight of the goal of decent jobs, there should not be a rejection of jobs of lesser quality.

In moving towards decent jobs, an expansion of the formal sector can play a key role. Women's employment in large factories provides scope for forms of organization of trade unions, which can be instrumental in the struggle for better income and working conditions

However, even with the category of employees, the low opportunity cost of women's labour results in women's employment with low wages, concentrated in low-skill sections. Many working women are based not in formal places of employment but operate from home. This high proportion of home workers, while it provides an opportunity for women to combine income-earning work with domestic work, not only restricts women's work, but also promotes the employment of child labour. Children may initially be drawn in to supplement adult labour in peak demand seasons, but, over time, such children tend to drop-out of school, thus adversely affecting their own future earning potentials. At the same time, the double burden restricts women's economic activity, even in own-account work.

Additionally, women's lack of assets, responsibility of providing for household, particularly for children's needs, and the absence of social protection nets, restricts risk-taking, further confining women to less-risky but low-productivity activities.

Where women do enter manufacturing, gendered notions of skill exclude women from more-skilled jobs in manufacturing. But when women get higher education they are able to improve their position in the labour force, even taking skilled jobs in manufacturing or even becoming professionals in IT and IT-enabled services.

As professionals again the double burden and child-bearing, however, restrict women's advancement as professionals. This makes it difficult for women to compete with more mobile men/women and attain the higher managerial levels.

To sum up the above, there are divisions of labour, e.g. between high-skilled and low-skilled workers, or lower-level professionals and higher-level managerial staff with gendered identities. But these are not the old gendered identities of non-workers and workers or of light and heavy work. While new technologies (automation and digitization) are dissolving old identities, new gendered identities are being created.

4.2 Impact of Labour Market Changes on Gender Relations

As mentioned earlier, it is not just gender structures and relations that affect the labour market outcomes for women. The influence is also the other way around with labour market conditions of women affecting gender relations and gender identities. With a shift from contributing home workers to own-account workers or employees, there are changes in gender relations, both within the household and in the community. Labour market positions and outcomes can be important drivers of changes in gender relations.

At one level, there is a movement from mediated access to resources to ownership or direct income. This itself allows some leeway to make decisions. As the well-known 'cooperative-conflict' theory, applied by Amartya Sen to the household, predicts, women with independent access to resources and income can improve their bargaining power within the household. This could lead to better well-being outcomes for themselves and their children. There is an increased role in household decision-making, though not prominently so in major matters. Further, as own-account workers, women are no longer just workers but also learn to manage a resource and a commercial enterprise, however tiny it might be; i.e. there is an increase in capabilities, in addition to the better well-being outcomes. The shifts in women's work status usually increase women's self-esteem and dignity.

With women's movement into higher income activities there is even a reduction of women's work burden, largely through commercialization of many tasks of domestic work and, in a somewhat limited manner, through sharing of domestic burdens by men.

Whether as own-account workers or as employees women also move into formerly tabooed spaces, such as markets in the former case or night work in the latter case. These shifts are also breaking down norms of seclusion or purdah, away from the symbolic violence of masculine concepts of honour. Women are formulating new concepts of honour, related to education, income-earning, mobility, and so on. As would be expected there is opposition to these changes in gender relations and identities, often reflected in increased gender violence, both in private and public spaces.

In one way or another, women's varied positions within the labour force are creating new spaces for women, with new challenges. How can these challenges, some old and many new, be met?

4.3 Policy Measures

For the vast majority of women as contributing family and own-account workers, there is the need for a redistribution of assets and measures to enable them to set up effective control of assets and income earned from them. Measures to increase productivity in agriculture, particularly in the rain-fed crop regions of South Asia are needed to improve the current low productive agriculture. But, even more than for men (for whom this transition is occurring) in a labour-abundant economy, there is pressing need to transfer women from farm to non-farm and, even, urban occupations. This long-drawn out transition in South Asia needs to be speeded up in order to reduce women in agriculture, and thus even increase per capita incomes of those who remain.

The transfer of surplus labour of women is crucial, particularly in the large South Asian economies of India and Pakistan. For that improvements in infrastructure and labour/ investment policies are needed to promote large-scale entry /advance in labour-intensive manufactures to take advantage of the likely shift in world manufactures away from China, where wages and costs are going up.

In order for women not to remain confined to the low wage and low skill sections of

the labour force, attention needs to be paid to increasing the education and skill levels of women. But given the strongly prevalent notion that women cannot be skilled workers, some type of affirmative action would be needed at both skill and managerial levels.

Transitions, however rapid, would still take time to create better jobs for women. So long as women and their households remain below the poverty line there is a need for social protection measures to supplement below poverty level incomes. Universalization of social protection and improvement in public provision of education, and health and safety in public transport and public spaces would help upgrade living conditions.

The double burden of women comes through as a crippling feature of women in the labour force. How can this be dealt with? As the market grows, there would be a commercialization of a number of care activities. As in most of South-east and East Asia domestic cooking by individual women can be substantially substituted by cheap and good quality street food, which could also provide large numbers of jobs. What is needed is regulation to check on the quality of food, something that is quite deficient in South Asia.

In entering new work spaces, women are frequently subject to sexual harassment. These new problems in work spaces are not adequately dealt with either by the law or by trade unions. Legal education of women workers can supplement and support various forms of collective action against sexual harassment, whether in public or private spaces. This also requires the promotion of new forms of masculinity, those that reject force and domination as definitions of masculinity.

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