

# **Women, Paid Work and Empowerment in India: A Review of Evidence and Issues**

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## **1. Introduction**

India is one of the developing countries where women's participation in the workforce continues to remain quite low, both in absolute and relative terms. As per the recent estimates, 28.7 percent of women as against 54.7 percent of men participated in workforce in 2004-05. Not simply such low participation, rather a progressive range of factors—to which paid work is considered to be a critical input—make a higher participation desirable.

Arguably, the low empowerment of women in India, notwithstanding the conceptual and measurements issues it gives rise to, is one of the factors which provides some persuasive appeal and policy significance to women's higher participation in paid work. The paper is an attempt to review critically the association between women's paid work and empowerment in India.

As a prelude, we seek to assess the extent of women's participation in paid work during the last three decades (section two), and offer a glimpse into the nature and quality of women's work in India (section three). A discussion on the probable causes underlying women's participation in paid work becomes necessary (section four) so as to assess and contextualise the empowering potentials of women's paid work (section five). An attempt

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will also be made to reflect on the issues arising from the assessment with a view to suggest, if necessary, possible directions for further work (section six).

## **2. Women's Paid Work: Differing Sources and Trends**

There are at least three terms, namely female participation in *labour market*, *labour force* and *workforce*, which are used interchangeably while analysing women's participation in economic activities. These terms are indeed related, but denote different dimensions. While labour force includes all types of employment status, labour market participation excludes unpaid family workers who do not enter the market (Elson 1999, p. 614). Similarly, labour force consists of both employed and unemployed, whereas workforce captures only those who are employed. Given the primary intent of the present review, women's participation in the workforce—that is, paid work—would become the preferred focus of our discussion.

Confining our attention primarily to paid work and relating it to aspects of empowerment does not imply that unpaid work—subsistence related economic activities, domestic maintenance work and caring labour—performed by women is unimportant and unrelated to their empowerment. Though these kinds of unpaid work do not fetch a direct income, they are no less productive than paid work, since the latter are parasitic on the former (Sen 1990, p. 70). These unpaid activities reproduce, on a daily and intergenerational basis, the labour force that performs the paid activities (Elson 1999, p. 612).

Notwithstanding the significance of unpaid work, paid work is associated often with certain characteristics, mainly immediate economic rewards and hence associated decline in economic dependency together with social recognition and standing, which are considered to be critical inputs to women's empowerment and well-being. Paid work has, therefore, attained some prominence in the policy discourses on gender and development in the South Asian region, where social norms, religious practices and legal entitlements restrict or deny women's access to, and their claims on familial, economic resources (Agarwal 1994; Kabeer 2001).

There are two major sources of data, such as economic tables of decennial Censuses and quinquennial rounds of the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), that provide estimates on women's workforce participation in India. Table one, given below, presents female workforce participation rates (*FWPR*, hereafter) from these two sources for the last three decades in India. At least three interrelated aspects can be identified from table one.

One, the NSSO offers relatively higher FWPRs than does the Census. The higher FWPRs of NSSO are in consonance with, and partly an outcome of, its broader definitions. The major difference is that NSSO considers activities relating to non-market output of primary sector other than cultivation as work, whereas Census does not do so (Jacob 2001). Nonetheless, the difference, which stands as high as 15 percentage points in the seventies, has narrowed down over the years, and remains as low as three percentage points at present. This is understandable, as a lot of improvements have been made, both on definition and data gathering processes, in the last two Censuses (Krishnaraj 1990; Menon-Sen and Kumar 2001).

Two, Census figures suggest a steady but marginal increase in FWPR since the 1980s. By contrast, NSSO estimates indicate a fluctuation in FWPR over the years. For instance, while FWPR has increased from 21.6 percent in 1983 to 28.6 percent in 1993-94, it has come down to 25.9 percent in 1999-00, and increased again to 28.7 percent in 2004-05. Notwithstanding this fluctuation, NSSO figures do suggest an increase in FWPR during the last two decades. However, the increase in the post-reform period (1993-2005), quite marginal in size, is relatively lower than the pre-reform period (1983-1994). By contrast, the Census suggests a relatively higher increase in the post- than the pre-reform period. Nonetheless, contrary to the decline in workforce registered between 1993-94 and 1999-00, the recent NSSO survey suggests an improvement in both women's and men's workforce between 1999-00 and 2004-05.

**Table 1: Female Workforce Participation Rates in India, 1971-2005**

Census		NSSO	
Year	%	Year	%
1971	13.9	1972-73	28.2
1981	19.8	1983	21.6
1991	22.3	1993-94	28.6
2001	25.7	2004-05	28.7

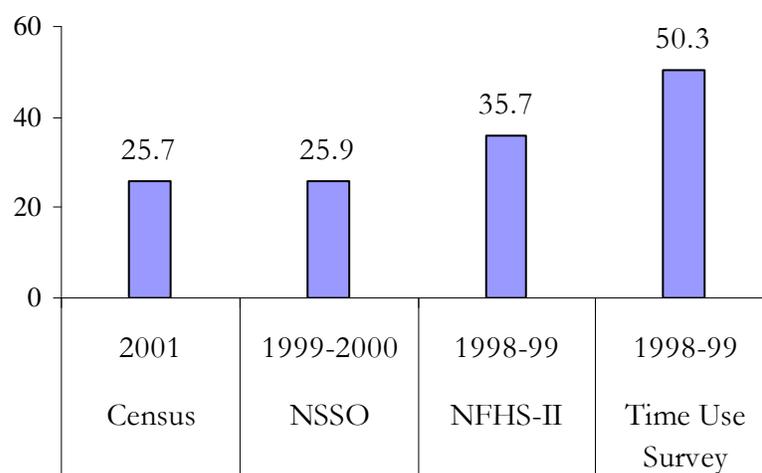
Sources: Visaria 1998, p. 24 for Census figures up to 1981, [www.Censusindia.net](http://www.Censusindia.net) for 2001 provisional figure and NSSO 2006, p. 76 for various years.

Three, it appears that a little more than one-fourth of women (28.7 percent) in India participate in workforce at present. This is only marginally higher than the FWPR of 28.2 percent in 1972-73. Both the low FWPR and its slow growth are not commensurate with the consistently higher growth in the Indian economy underway since the last two decades. The absence of a higher growth in the workforce despite a consistently higher growth in the Indian economy relates, to some extent, to the debate on jobless growth. Apart from the nature of economic growth and pace of employment generation, a number of socio-cultural factors exert enormous influence in keeping it resistant to growth. Added to this is the underestimation of women workers by the data sources.

It is important, however, to add here that FWPR varies considerably not only across the states in India, but also between regions and social groups within states as well. Across states, Mizoram has a FWPR of 47.5 percent followed by Himachal Pradesh with 43.6 percent in 2001. These are some of the smaller states, in terms of size and population, in India. Among larger states, FWPR is higher in Andhra Pradesh with 35.1 percent. At the other end, FWPR remains low in Kerala with 15 percent, followed by Uttar Pradesh with 16.5 percent. Further, FWPRs are consistently higher in rural than urban India: 32.7 percent as against 16.6 percent in 2004-05. While Mizoram with 54.6 percent and Kerala with 15.9 percent remain at respective ends in rural India, Mizoram with 40.5 percent maintains its lead in urban India as well and Jharkhand with 6.2 percent comes at the lower end in 2001.

In recent years, a couple of surveys other than the Census and NSSO have also offered estimates on FWPRs in India. These estimates, given below in figure one, indicate how underestimated is women’s work in India. The FWPR arrived at from the time use survey conducted in six Indian states in 1998-99 stands as high as 50 percent, which is almost double the workforce participation rate of Census (2001) and NSSO (1999-2000). The FWPR from the NFHS-II (36 percent) is almost ten percentage points higher than the Census and NSSO figures of 26 percent.

**Graph 1: Female Workforce Participation Rates in India: Varying Estimates**



Seemingly, the time use survey might have captured the multitude of economic activities performed by women through an alternative yardstick of time spent. However, it also appears from the time use survey that though a significantly large number of women perform economic activities (both for subsistence and a wage), but do so for only a short time, both in absolute and relative terms (Hirway 1999).<sup>1</sup> Also, NFHS-II data covers women belonging to 15-49 years, and thereby leaves out older women. Such an omission might have led to an upward bias, as workforce participation is found to be lower at both ends—younger and older age groups.

That being said, it may be useful to add here that if own-subsistence production and other related economic activities performed by women who are not in the workforce are added along with the activities that constitute work as per NSSO definition, the FWPR in 1993-94 will increase from 32.8 percent to 58.1 percent for rural—which is even higher than that of male WPR of 55.3 percent—and from 15.5 percent to 40.9 percent for urban India (Jacob 2001, p.8). This would mean that the revised or extended estimate of rural FWPR of NSSO in 1993-94 would be higher than the FWPR of the time use survey as well. Nonetheless, these alternative and revised estimates do not simply signal the extent of the underestimation of women's work in India, but also the scope for progress. Admittedly, though some corrective steps have been initiated toward addressing the invisibility, more and sustained efforts are required to end the veil of invisibility completely.

### **3. Women Workers in India: The Sectoral Picture**

Table two, given below, shows that as per 2001 Census, 80 percent of women workers in rural India are found to be in agriculture and related activities, either as cultivators or as labourers. This is three percentage points lower than that of NSSO's estimate of 83 percent in 2004-05. In urban India, the corresponding Census figure is much less with 15 percent, though NSSO offers a marginally higher figure of 18 percent in 2004-05. Thus, a substantially large proportion of the rural women workers are engaged in agricultural activities, which, understandably, is contrary to the urban phenomenon noted above.

Over the years, the share of women workers in agriculture has come down in both rural and urban India, though the rate of decline varies between regions. For instance, the decline is rather marginal in rural India from 86.2 percent in 1993-94 to 85.4 percent in 1999-00 and further down to 83.3 percent in 2004-05. In urban India, though the proportion has declined substantially—seven percentage points—from 24.7 percent in 1993-94 to 17.7 percent in 1999-00, it has increased marginally to 18.1 percent in 2004-05.

**Table 2: Distribution of Women Workers in India, 2001** (Figures in %)

	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Urban</b>	<b>Total</b>
Cultivators	37.1	4.1	33.0
Agricultural Labourers	42.9	10.7	38.9
Household Industry	5.6	12.8	6.4
Other Workers	14.4	72.4	21.7

Source: Census 2001 cited in CSO 2004.

Interestingly, in both rural and urban India women's share in manufacturing employment has increased over the years. While manufacturing sector constituted 7 percent of women's employment in 1993-94, it has increased to 8.4 percent in 2004-05 in rural region. Similarly, 24.1 percent of women workers were in manufacturing in 1993-94, and the proportion has increased to 28.2 percent in 2004-05 in urban India.

Though women's share in construction, stands as low as 3.8 percent in 2004-05, has been on the increase in the urban region from 1977-78 to 1999-00, this seems to have reversed in 2004-05: from 4.8 to 3.8 percent. A similar increase, though marginal, is also found in rural region as well. Again, while women's share in other services has also declined from 26.4 percent in 1993-94 to 20.7 percent in 2004-05 in rural region, it has increased marginally from 35 percent to 35.9 percent during this period in urban India.

Broadly, women workers can be classified, in terms of the reference period used, into two categories, such as principal and subsidiary statuses. Women workers in the principal status are employed full time or regularly, whereas women in subsidiary status are seasonal or part-time workers. It appears that around 26 and 19 percent of all women workers belong to the subsidiary status in both rural and urban India respectively in 2004-05. Further, the subsidiary status women workers have increased over the years in both regions. In 1999-2000, for instance, the percentages of women subsidiary status workers were 23 and 16 respectively in rural and urban areas.

These would imply at least two things. One, it could be either that a large number of women are taking up paid work when employment opportunities are available and withdraw when such opportunities shrink

or vanish. This goes well in line with the finding emerging from the time use survey, mentioned earlier, that more women do take up paid work but for shorter time in combining with their unpaid activities. Two, it could also be possible that not only a good degree of women's employment continues to be seasonal in nature, but also it has increased over the recent years.

The first aspect relates partly to an empirical finding from India that when households climb up the economic ladder, there is a tendency for women to withdraw from the workforce. This would, then, imply that not because of the seasonality but because of an improvement in economic condition such withdrawal takes place. Indeed, there has been a sustained economic growth along with, of late, a reduction in poverty in India. Whether these are sufficient enough in rendering women's earning not-so-essential or merely complementary is far from clear, and hence calls for detailed but separate enquiry.

The second aspect would impinge on the nature of employment available and indeed accessible to women. Interestingly, the NSSO data suggests that regular wage and salaried employment (RWS) of women has increased well along with a decline in casual jobs over the years both in rural and urban India. For instance, RWS has increased from 2.7 percent in 1993-94 to 3.7 percent in 2004-05 in rural India. Equally, casual labour has declined among women from 38.7 percent to 32.6 percent during this period. A similar trend is evident in urban India as well. While RWS has risen from 28.4 percent in 1993-94 to 35.6 percent in 2004-05, the share of casual labour has come down from 25.8 percent to 16.7 percent. These seem to suggest, on the face of it at least, an overall improvement in the quality of women's employment.

Equally, the NSSO data also suggests that self-employment among women has increased in both rural and urban India: from 58.6 percent in 1993-94 to 63.7 percent in 2004-05 in rural and from 45.8 percent in 1993-94 to 47.7 percent in 2004-05 in urban region. Empirical studies from India reveal that much of self-employment of women also embodies some of the characteristics of casual work, which—despite its seasonality and low earning—is the primary source of income for one-third of women workers in rural India. The increase in self-employment, which absorbs as high as

64 percent in rural and 48 percent in urban India, along with concurrent decline in casual jobs may also mean that women are increasingly forced to find their own ways to eke out a living. If this is true, it does not signify an improvement, but is rather a regressive phenomenon.

Since material deprivation dictates women from poor households to take up whatever employment opportunities are available, it is poor women who predominate in the low-paid, casual or irregular jobs. A look at the NSSO data suggests that a secular decline in women's share in casual jobs goes in tandem with a rise in household income (captured through Monthly Per capita Consumption Expenditure or MPCE, for short) in both rural and urban regions. Equally, women's relative share in RWS increases steadily, in both rural and urban regions, well along with an increase in household income. As stated already, more than one-fourth of women workers in India are endowed with irregular jobs. The irregular work appears to be the major factor contributing to women's lower income in India (Unni and Rani 2003). Engagement in these jobs, thus, not only lowers their potentials to earn higher incomes, but also reinforces their poverty.

Nonetheless, a higher proportion of women workers in India—nearly 40 percent—take up multiple economic activities. This not only appears to be the obvious coping mechanism to avoid hunger and deprivation, but also compensates for the lower earning from less paid activities. It is also possible that such multiple work would allow women to manage their dual responsibilities of breadwinning and domestic maintenance and caring work in a much more efficient manner (Unni and Rani 2003). The irregularity in employment and hence the need to take up multiple activities underlines, among other things, the significance of public policy in alleviating poverty and associated welfares programmes towards that end.

The concentration of more than 95 percent and 50 percent of poor women in casual labour and self-employment taken together in rural and urban areas respectively relates to yet another important aspect—namely, the informal sector—which has begun to get growing attention in the policy discourse on employment. It appears that women workers constitute 32 percent of the workforce in informal employment in 1999-2000. Similarly, women workers in the informal sector constitute 72 percent of female

workforce in the country. Within informal employment among women, around 76 percent are in agriculture and the remaining are in non-agriculture (Unni 2002). Also, around 75 and 68 percent of women workers in non-agricultural activities in rural and urban areas in 1999-2000 are in informal sector.

Agreeably, the estimates on the informality in women's employment or the number of women workers in informal sector differ depending on the definitions and approaches employed. But, what emerges quite strikingly is that a substantially large proportion of women workers, which is as high as nearly three-fourth, in India are likely to be found in the informal sector characterised by, among other things, insecure income, harsh conditions of work, lack of access to productive resources and no organised institutional support for labour rights and entitlements.

Aspects on labour rights and entitlements relate obviously to how organised or unorganised women workers are in India. Since much of the informal sector is unorganised, it would imply that a significantly large proportion of women workers continue to remain unorganised. Estimates based on NSSO data (1999-2000) suggest that 95 percent of women workers are in unorganised sector, and the remaining are in organised sector. Regionally, while only about 3 percent of women workers in rural India are organised, around 20 percent of women workers are organised in urban India (Sakthivel and Joddar 2006).

It may be useful also to examine the share of women's employment in the organised sector in India. While women constituted nearly 14 percent of workers in the organised sector in India in 1992, the increase during the decade is rather marginal. In 2002, women constituted around 18 percent of the workforce in organised employment in India. Women's share is relatively higher in private sector (24 percent in 2002) than public sector with 15 percent (CSO 2004).

#### **4. Women's Paid Work: The Major Determinants**

Women's participation in paid work is, as is clear from various studies, an outcome of multiple, often overlapping, factors of both a push and pull nature. To begin with, a number of studies, mainly micro studies, attribute—

either explicitly or by implication—poverty as the primary factor propelling women to take up paid work outside their homes in India (Krishnaji 1987; Panda 1999; Jose 2006). Specifically, most of these studies find a preponderance of poor over non-poor women in the female workforce, which has obviously led one to arrive at, and indeed signify, the above finding.

The NSSO data (1999-00) indicates that 48.3 percent of women engaged in casual work are from poor households. The percentage is relatively higher in urban (61.3) than rural (47.2) India. Also, while 42.3 percent of self-employed women in urban India are from poor households, the corresponding proportion is relatively lower in rural area (26.9). Combining the three categories—casual labour, regular salaried/wage employed and self-employed—together suggests that around 35 percent of women workers in India are from poor households. The share of urban (38.7 percent) region is marginally higher than rural (34.7 percent). Similarly, nearly 33 percent of women engaged in non-agricultural activities are from poor households, the corresponding regional proportions are 31.4 and 34.5 in rural and urban areas respectively (Unni and Rani 2003).

If poverty were the primary factor forcing women to take up paid work in India, FWPR would possibly be higher in all the poor states in India. Indeed, FWPR continues to be high in some of the poor states like Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan. However, there are also poor states in India, such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa, which continue to have quite low FWPRs. This seems to indicate that a number of other factors also mediate the association between poverty and women's paid work in India.

Studies also relate the variations in women's participation in workforce across regions or states in India to the variations in agro-climatic regions and cropping patterns. Specifically, states or regions which practice paddy cultivation seem to require greater involvement of women's labour when compared to wheat cultivation (Bardhan 1974). The consistently higher FWPRs in most of the south Indian states where paddy cultivation is predominant, such as Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, seems to lend some support.

If the cropping patterns or cultivation of paddy demand female labour more, FWPRs would have equally been high in all paddy cultivating states irrespective of regions. The abysmally lower FWPRs in Kerala, West Bengal and Orissa, which are, by and large, rice cultivating states, tend to reveal that the association is far more complex than suggested. Indeed, Miller (1981) claims that there is nothing intrinsic to the operation of rice cultivation, which requires specifically female labour. Instead, she argues that culture defines the gender roles and thereby plays a crucial role in promoting or dissuading women's participation in paid work (Miller 1981, p. 113).

It is well established that social norms constrain women from taking up paid work in India. Specifically, by treating women's participation in paid work away from the homes as something aberrant to what is being considered as appropriate and ideal for womanhood, social norms actively discourage and devalue women's participation in, as well as limit their opportunities for, paid work. However, the intensity of social norms against women varies considerably both across regions and among social groups within regions in India (Dyson and Moore 1983; Agarwal 1994).

Though recent studies do not dispute the north-south divide, they do suggest that changes are happening which call for a reconsideration of such simplified perceptions (Rahman and Rao 2004). Similarly, the norms against women's employment vary substantially among social groups in India. Notwithstanding these regional and social variations on the prevalence and practice, social norms in India not only reinforce, in complex and changing forms, domesticity as the traditional and preferred sphere of women, but also actively dissuade women's employment outside their homes.

As mentioned already, empirical studies from India suggest that when economic condition of the households rises, there is a tendency for women to withdraw from workforce and practice seclusion (Sen and Sen 1985). This is because non-participation of women in outside work is often considered, due to social norms, as the symbol of women's higher status. With an increase in economic status, households seem to adopt the values and norms associated with, and followed by, richer households and advantaged social groups. Viewed in this way, poverty reduction is likely to be a regressive deterrent to, rather than a progressive tool for, women's

paid work and weakening of social norms (Dreze and Sen 1995; Jackson 1996). This underlines the progressive role and reach of public policy in both promoting women's employment and weakening the influence of social norms independent of poverty reduction.

A discussion on employment generating welfare schemes becomes relevant here. The Government of India has initiated a number of welfare programmes aiming to alleviate poverty and also to create and strengthen social infrastructure in both rural and urban regions. Admittedly, these policies were not aimed explicitly at increasing women's participation in paid work. Nonetheless, the overarching approach in most of these programmes is the creation of gainful employment both for women and men, as rural unemployment, which is often disguised in nature, is closely associated with poverty. However, the question that springs immediately is that do such welfare programmes attract more women than men workers?

The evidence is overwhelming that such employment generating social welfare programmes are associated with higher participation of women. In fact, the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme (MEGS), an employment-oriented welfare programme carried out in Maharashtra state since 1972, received wide acclaim for attracting substantially large number of women in taking up paid work generated under this scheme. The recent National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA, 2005) is also inspired, to a considerable extent, by the success of MEGS. The preliminary assessments on NREGA do indicate that relatively more women than men participate in wage employment generated by it (ISST 2006).

Besides these, there at least 17 major welfare programmes or schemes, introduced during the last three decades or more (1970-2005), that have employment generation, both wage employment and self-employment, as a major focus. Some of them are the following: Rural Works Program (1970), Food for Work programme (1977), Training for Rural Youth in self-Employment (TRYSEM, 1979), National Rural Employment Programme (NREP, 1980), Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP, 1980), Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP, 1983), Jawahar Rozgar Yojna (JRY, 1989), and Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS, 1993). Whether these programmes have offered employment opportunities to women more than men may be of some relevance to know.

Women constituted around 10 percent of beneficiaries in wage employment generated jointly by NREP, RLEGP, JRY and EAS in 1985-86,<sup>2</sup> the percentage rose to 25 percent in 1990-91. The share of women reached 30 percent in 1995-96, but which came down to 27 percent in 1999-00. As mentioned earlier, some of the welfare programmes, such as IRDP and TRYSEM, are aimed at creating self-employment for women and men. It appears that women formed 12 percent of beneficiaries of self-employment created jointly by both IRDP and TRYSEM in 1985-86, the percentage increased to 32 in 1990-91. The proportion of women increased to 34 percent in 1995-96, which rose further to nearly 45 percent in 1999-00 (CSO 2004).

We have already seen in the previous section that self-employment among women in India is on the increase over the years. As stated above, there is an equal increase in self-employment generated by the state assisted welfare schemes as well. This obviously forces us to ask whether these increases in self-employment are separate, isolated phenomena, or part of the larger picture? If the overall increase in self-employment registered in India is contributed also by the self-employment generated by the welfare schemes, it seems to convey the reach of public policies to women. Nonetheless, it will be useful to assess to what extent these welfare policies have contributed towards the overall increase in self-employment in India.

It is poor women who constitute the bulk of women beneficiaries under these schemes. Also, much of these poor women workers are likely to be illiterates or have low educational attainments. Hence, a brief discussion on the association between women's education and employment is of some relevance here. Studies examining women's education and employment find a unique U-shaped pattern in India (Kingdon and Unni 2001; Das and Desai 2003; Olsen and Mehta 2006). The association suggests that participation in paid work would be higher among illiterate and highly educated women, and lower among women with little education.

The NSSO data reveals that around 75 percent of female labour force in rural India is illiterate in 1999-00. Though the proportion has begun to decline over the years, from 86.2 percent in 1983-84 to 79 percent in 1993-94, nearly three-fourth of women who participate in labour force are illiterates. Though the percentage in urban region is relatively lower than that observed in rural region, it is not so low, in absolute terms, either. For

instance, around 41 percent of urban female labour force is illiterate in 1999-00. Nonetheless, the proportion has declined, as in rural region, over the years from 56.5 percent in 1983-84 to 44.5 percent in 1993-94 and further down to 41 percent in 1999-00.

The fact that illiterate women constitute nearly 75 percent and 41 percent of labour force in both rural and urban India tends to signal the interplay of poverty and social disadvantage in influencing women's employment. This also relates to the quality of employment, both in terms of nature of jobs, income earning potentials and extent of regularity, available to them. These aspects are likely to mediate the influence paid work can have on women's empowerment. Nonetheless, there is yet another means through which women's education is likely to increase their participation in workforce.

Demographic studies postulate that an increase in education would go well along with a decline in fertility, which would enable women to participate in workforce.<sup>3</sup> While there is some evidence from India that education lowers fertility, but whether such lowered fertility necessarily increases the participation of women in workforce is far from obvious. Interestingly, what we can observe from the available empirical evidence is the pattern contrary to the above: that is, women engaged in paid work seem to have a higher family size than those who do not participate (Krishnaji 1987; Ravindran 1995).

Nevertheless, the employment opportunities associated with the export-oriented factories also relate to women's education, as they require some years of schooling. Globalisation and women's employment in developing countries in general and South Asian countries in particular continue to remain a highly contested terrain, with claims and counter-claims. While India has registered a spurt in economic growth and export-oriented services after economic liberalisation, how has this impacted on women's employment in India calls for a careful, detailed investigation.

Though the increase in women's workforce is far from satisfactory in the post-reform period, there has been some improvement in women's employment in manufacturing in India. This is more so in urban than rural India. How much of this increase is due to the reforms initiated as a part of economic liberalisation is important to assess, as the increase may not be a

mere isolated phenomenon unrelated to the changes happening in the economy. A recent study which examined the growth of employment in manufacturing industries after liberalisation reveals that women constituted 12 percent of the workforce in all manufacturing industries, and 13 percent of workers of export-oriented manufacturing industries in 1995-96 (Goldar 2002).

State and industry specific studies suggest that the proportion would be much higher. For instance, women constituted more than 60 percent of export-oriented garment manufacturing industries in Andhra Pradesh (Chakravarty 2004). Similarly, 45 percent of workers enrolled in the payrolls of call centres in India were women (Mitter, Fernandez and Varghese 2004). While women workers dominate, constituting 70 to 80 percent of the total workers, in the export processing zones based in Chennai and Mumbai, the share is much lower (around 30-35 percent) in Noida export processing zone in India (Ghosh 2002).

There are contending views, however, on the association between education, types of activities performed and wage rates received by women workers. For instance, Chhachhi (1999) finds little association between women's education and the types of tasks carried out by women employed in the electronics industry in Delhi, Chakravarty (2003) underlines the significance of education in enabling women engaged in garment manufacturing units in Andhra Pradesh to quickly adapt to the situation and acquire the necessary skills.

Thus, it appears that globalisation-led export oriented factories provide increasing incentives and opportunities for women to take up paid work in India. Yet, the share of such workers in total female workers would be substantially lower, given the overarching rural, agricultural nature of women workers in India. Also, studies note that relatively higher proportions of women workers in export oriented manufacturing sectors were young, unmarried and somewhat educated.

Women's participation in paid work is, as appears from the above, a joint outcome of a number of overlapping factors. These factors are likely to mediate the influence paid work would have on women's personal and social spheres. The next section attempts to assess, through the review of empirical studies, the empowering potentials of women's paid work in India.

## 5. Paid Work and Empowerment: The Evidence

The influence of paid work on the personal and social spheres of women continues to be the subject of enquiry for a growing number of empirical studies in India. Some of these empirical studies, mainly the qualitative ones, try to discern how paid work influences the personal or social spheres. Yet others, primarily the quantitative ones, attempt to measure the extent of paid work's influence on a host of variables. The empirical studies purport to assess the influence of women's employment on what they define as *empowerment*, *autonomy* and *status*, and the variables so included are claimed to represent various dimensions of these concepts.

What is empowerment and how is it related to, or otherwise different from, autonomy and status? Are these really competing concepts denoting different aspects of women's personal spheres? Or, alternatively, are these different terms used to indicate aspects which are essentially same or closely related? Since empowerment is said to be a process, is it possible to measure successfully the complex process without losing the nuances? Do the dimensions or variables being considered by some of the empirical studies necessarily constitute the essential elements of empowerment?

These and a host of other important issues raised by the growing theoretical literature on empowerment, show up deficiencies in the empirical studies, not apparent at the outset. Yet, what also makes these empirical studies important is that taken together, they have the potential to suggest the proximate factors that can possibly effect some changes in women's personal spheres. Viewed in this way, the empirical analyses can help indicate the potential, or lack thereof, of paid work in bringing some change in aspects of women's lives. A review of these studies is, therefore, of some use. We begin with the review of quantitative studies followed by the qualitative ones.

One of the empirical studies that examined systematically the influence of women's paid work on different dimensions of their autonomy—based on the definition of Dyson and Moore (1983)—is by Dharmalingam and Morgan (1996) in two villages in Tamil Nadu. The influence of two types of paid work, such as beedi-rolling and agricultural

work, is assessed in relation to the following three aspects of autonomy: i) Perceived economic independence, ii) Freedom of mobility and iii) Spousal interaction on issues of finance and family size.

The analysis suggests that women's participation in paid work, irrespective of the type of work, goes well along with a marked improvement in their perception of economic independence. But the influence of paid work on the other two aspects is not statistically significant. Thus, the influence of paid work on the dimensions of women's autonomy does not seem to be uniform: the extent of influence is likely to vary across the varying dimensions of autonomy. Also, an enhanced perception on economic independence does not necessarily translate into increased spousal interaction on finances—suggesting a gap between perception and practice.

Nonetheless, women in village one have far higher autonomy in all these three dimensions than those in village two. Though this significant variation underscores the relevance and differing influence of context-specific factors, such variation is not entirely unrelated to, or uninfluenced by, the paid work available in the village in question. For instance, the authors underline the differential influence of different types of paid work for the substantial variation on women's autonomy between the villages: 'the greater autonomy in village one could result because more women in that village work in non-agricultural (mainly beedi-rolling) activities' (p. 198).

Though it is far from conclusive from the above findings that paid work necessarily leads to an enhancement in all the three dimensions, especially on the spousal interaction on family size—which is said to be related to strategic life choices and hence forms an integral part of female empowerment (Kabeer 2001)—the indirect influence paid work exerts on these aspects do not render it unimportant either. For instance, the higher mobility found in the village one is likely to be associated closely with, and to some extent even necessitated by, the type of work, such as beedi-rolling, performed predominantly by women in that village.

We have already observed, from the secondary data, that women's casual labour in India is on the decrease along with an increase in self-employment. The analysis of Agarwala (2002), which compares and contrasts the influence of wage work from family work and self-employment on the

dimensions of autonomy in Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh, gains importance here. The dimensions of autonomy being considered are women's role in economic decision-making, freedom of spatial mobility and access to and control over economic resources.

The quantitative analysis suggests some interesting patterns. To begin with, participation in paid work, irrespective of the type of work, is likely to enhance women's autonomy significantly. Thus, women who take up some form of paid work are far more autonomous than those who do not do so. The related finding that all the three types of work, such as wage work, self-employment and family work, exert positive and significant influences on all the three dimensions of autonomy is well in line with, and thereby reinforce, the above finding.

It is plausible to find a significantly positive influence of women's wage work and self-employment on their autonomy. But, what makes the results interesting, indeed surprising, is the positive and significant influence of family work on all the three dimensions of autonomy, since family work is often considered—rather erroneously—as an extension of women's domestic responsibilities. That does not imply, however, that the extent of influence of types of work is invariably the same. Wage work appears to have the largest influence, followed by self-employment and family work (Agarwala 2002, pp. 1381-2).

The analysis of the role of home-based work (garment production) on dimensions of women's *empowerment*—measured through control over earnings and participation in household decisions—in Ahmedabad, Gujarat (Kantor 2003) indicates that the association between home-based paid work and empowerment is far more complex. It appears that women home-based workers have control over their earnings, and thereby access to income is empowering. But, the extent of control seems to decline along with an increase in their earnings, which is considered to be the indicator of the success of their garment production enterprises (pp. 434-5).

Further analysis suggests that not simply access to income, rather control over it is associated significantly with participation in decision-making (pp. 440-1). The absence of a significant association between access to income and decision-making does not render women's earnings unimportant, since access to income is virtually necessary to have—and

thereby facilitates—control over it. Also, the association found between control over income, which in itself is a manifestation of autonomy, and participation in household decision-making, though on the expected lines, underlines the interaction between different dimensions and their mutually reinforcing benefits.

A comparative analysis of women's autonomy across four states with varying levels of women's participation in paid work and well-being, such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, offers a somewhat mixed picture. The dimensions of autonomy considered, using NFHS-II data, are women's participation in household decision-making, freedom of mobility and absence of spousal violence (Jose 2006). The analysis suggests that women who participate in the workforce tend to have higher freedom of decision-making and spatial mobility than non-participating women. The extent of participation in decision-making and mobility goes up, if working women earn an income. Expectedly, higher economic contribution to the family and control over income tend to increase earning women's participation in decision-making and freedom of mobility significantly.

It, thus, appears that to improve and maintain women's autonomy, what is far more important is paid work than mere participation in non-remunerative work. Also, the influence of paid work goes up along with a hierarchy in jobs, such as Low, Medium and High. At the same time, larger percentages of earning women tend to experience domestic violence than women who do not participate in the workforce. Thus, higher participation in decision-making and mobility tends to coexist with a higher incidence of domestic violence. The findings not only indicate that the influence of paid work may not be uniformly positive in all dimensions, but also raise an important question: Why, despite having a higher decision-making and mobility, do earning women experience a higher incidence of domestic violence? Before delving onto this issue, let us examine whether other empirical studies come up with contrasting results on domestic violence.

Apart from these studies, there is a second group of quantitative studies that include paid work as one of the potential determinants of women's autonomy in India. The review of these studies is also of some relevance here. Bloom, Wypij and Das Gupta (2001) examine the

determinants of women's autonomy in Varanasi, a city in Uttar Pradesh. The dimensions of autonomy analysed include a) control over finances, b) decision-making power and c) freedom of movement. As we can see, some of these aspects also find a place in some of the studies reviewed above.

The analysis, based on multivariate logistic regression models, suggests that employed women are much more likely to have higher control over finances (more than three times), higher decision-making power (more than four times) and higher freedom of movement (nearly twice) than those who are not employed (pp. 73-4). Interestingly, paid work emerges as the most influential explanatory variable—denoted by higher odd ratios—in both control over finances and decision-making power, and the second most influential factor after 'contact with natal kin' in higher freedom of movement (p. 73, Table 4).

A comparative analysis on the determinants and dimensions of female autonomy in Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh (Jejeebhoy 2000) offers rather mixed findings. Economic decision-making authority, child-related decision-making authority, mobility, freedom from spousal threat and access to economic resources are the six dimensions of autonomy analysed. While women engaged in wage work (during the last 12 months) have greater decision-making authority and access to resources than those who do not do so in both states, paid work enhances women's mobility significantly in Uttar Pradesh—where seclusion is relatively intense—more than in Tamil Nadu. Contrary to the above, wage work is associated with higher incidence of spousal threat in both states (Jejeebhoy 2000, pp. 224-5).

The findings hold good even when some of these dimensions are combined to form a composite measure of autonomy (Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001). The analysis suggests that paid work has a positive and quite significant effect on a composite measure of autonomy—which consists of four aspects such as economic decision-making, mobility, freedom from spousal threat and access to and control over economic resources—in Tamil Nadu, but the influence is less significant (only at 10 percent confidence level) in Uttar Pradesh (Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001, p. 704). The findings indicate that the association between paid work and autonomy is not invariable irrespective of regions or contexts. Rather, region-specific factors

may influence and alter the nature and extent of the association. Yet, that may not dissipate or wane the significance of paid work entirely.

Yet another comparative analysis on the determinants of autonomy in Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh reinforces the above findings. Autonomy is measured through freedom of mobility and participation in household decision-making. The analysis suggests that better market opportunities for female labour (captured through the proxy measure of higher wages for women) increase their freedom of mobility and participation in household decision-making. Thus, the authors conclude that 'outside economic opportunities for women matter a great deal in enhancing their autonomy within the household' (Rahman and Rao 2004, p. 260).

One of the findings of an empirical examination (Moursund and Kravdal 2003) whose focus is on the interaction between female autonomy and contraceptive use is worthy of mention here. It appears that cash earnings seem to have a positive and significant association with women's contraceptive use in India. The influence of cash earning on contraceptive use holds good even when it is combined with other related economic indicators to form a combined index of economic autonomy (p. 296). Thus, the influence of paid work extends to aspects that are related to the strategic life choices.

The quantitative studies, taken together, convey that paid work is likely to enhance women's autonomy in India, though the regional base of the analyses is limited to only few states—Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka in the south, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh in the north (or central), and Gujarat in the western India. Nonetheless, the positive influence of paid work prevails in most of the dimensions of autonomy, some of them also find place in most of the empirical studies. By contrast, paid work is likely to increase women's chances of domestic violence, however narrowly measured. Against this backdrop of largely positive quantitative findings, let us examine the qualitative studies.

The qualitative studies that examined the influence of paid work on the lives of women offer conflicting views. For a start, the findings of Bhatti's (1980) empirical examination on the influence of beedi-making on women's *status* in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh lends credence to the above quantitative analyses. While 77 percent of women engaged in beedi-rolling

felt that they were treated better in the household since they earned an income, another 72 percent of women responded that their views in spending decisions had greater weight (p. 31).

Based on these and other associated findings, Bhatta concludes that 'the status of women within the family is favourably affected' and most importantly the enhancement in economic and social status of women is associated with 'certain attitudes among women which deviate from the established traditional modes of thinking. These deviant attitudes relate to the desirability of women to work, the acceptance of women's role as contributors to household income, a consciousness of the value of acquiring a skill' among others. 'While these deviant attitudes do not constitute a challenge to the established custom, they do indeed create dissent within the bounds of traditions' (p. 32).

Mencher's (1989) description and discussion of the personal life stories of seventeen women—from labouring, marginal land owning and large land owning households—from Tamil Nadu and Kerala indicates a complex and varying picture which is too difficult to generalise. While more than half of the earning women were found to retain their income, that such access and retention signify their financial autonomy is far from clear. Nonetheless, what also appears reasonably clear is that paid work does seem to be associated with some positive effects as well: 'having control over the family purse strings, and especially the fact that some of the money comes from her own work, does seem to improve the status of women within the household' (p. 128).

On the contrary, the analysis of Standing (1985) on the changes and dynamics in personal and familial spheres of women workers in Calcutta indicates that the effects of women's employment would be far from uniform and hence far more complex. Employed women seem to have a control over some of their incomes (p. 234). Importantly, women do value their work and economic independence associated with that, and therefore they refuse to become dependents on other, mostly male, members (pp. 243, 248). Also, paid work seems to effect some changes in household decision-making to the extent that some women recognise their increased role in decision-making (p. 248).

At the same time, she emphasises that control over income does not necessarily mean an enhanced capacity to determine the conditions of women's own lives. Similarly, the positive changes and influences brought in by the independent income of these employed women are far from sufficient in altering the existing power relations within the home. Power is a cumulative outcome of a complex web of sources with diverse bases, of which the economic base constitutes but one. Whether paid work necessarily has the force to penetrate into and weaken all these structural bases and tilt them towards women's favour is a moot but unavoidable question. Yet, this also calls into question the grand expectations and belief that paid work can, on its own, produce magical results.

Almost similar is the finding emerging from the analysis of women beedi-rollers in Tamil Nadu. By highlighting the exploitative conditions and absence of collective bargaining of women workers, Gopal (1999) argues that the adjustment and adaptive processes resorted to by these working women deprive them of bargaining power and unity against their employers. Not aware of the real reasons for which certain terms and conditions are imposed on them, the poor women workers try to compete with each other while they are perpetually depending on each other as well. Under such conditions of exploitative terms, paid work might bring in very little changes in altering radically the sources and bases of disempowerment which these women are endowed with.

Thus, the qualitative studies paint a rather mixed picture: paid work does bring certain benefits, but those benefits are far from sufficient in effecting lasting changes in women's personal spheres. The inability to bring lasting changes does not, however, necessarily imply that paid work is unimportant altogether. Rather, what these qualitative studies attempt to convey through these not-so-satisfactory images is certain aspects that characterise much of women's work in India: the exploitative terms and conditions, low-end and less-paid jobs, absence of benefits and security, and lack of representation and collective bargaining.

The question that springs immediately is whether organised institutional interventions can help address or mitigate the precariousness and insecurity associated with women's jobs. What is the evidence from India? As is well documented, a number of institutional initiatives attempting

to organise women workers have come up in India. These initiatives vary substantially in terms of their objectives, approach and activities (Antony 2001). But the question is how and to what extent did these initiatives help address the various overlapping yet discrete sources of disadvantage? These initiatives have benefited, to varying extents, poor women in valid ways, and the impacts were felt by them at both individual and collective levels. The benefits generated by these interventions to poor women can broadly be grouped into four.

One, these interventions enabled the poor women to get better prices and higher incomes, and hence led to an increased access to economic resources. Two, these interventions also helped them securing identity as workers and through that access to a number of social schemes which were denied to them previously. Three, these initiatives provided them a sense of collective bargaining and togetherness which helped them to protect them, though minimally, from various forms of exploitation and to bargain for certain benefits which are not possible to negotiate individually. Four, these initiatives also helped them to devise and implement various alternative schemes and benefits, which are unavailable to them.

Does access to these vital resources and benefits help expand their ability to make strategic life choices, which were unavailable or denied to them? It would seem, from the above, that most of these benefits from these interventions were rarely available to them before. Therefore, it is fair to expect that access to these new sources of benefits is likely to go with an expansion in their choices and abilities to make such choices. Also, access to these resources is not only the result of a process involving various collective struggles but also strengthens their efforts for further intervention.

At another level, these interventions raise a foundational issue. Many of these successful institutional interventions had to start, either by sheer necessity or for additional benefits and expansion, a number of welfare programmes for their members. By complementing, and to some extent duplicating, the role that is supposed to be played actively by the state, don't these initiatives facilitate—at least by implication—the state from abdicating from its social responsibility? To put it differently, do these beneficial interventions help the state to transfer its onus of social protection to the poor individual workers? These aspects require detailed examination.

## 6. Discussion

Women's participation in the workforce in India continues to be quite low. Paid work does not appear to be the preferred choice of many women in India. Instead, it is the economic compulsion that makes women's participation in paid work inevitable and virtually essential for household food security. Therefore, low-end, less-paid jobs become the primary preserve of most of the poor working women. Does this indicate the ability of social norms to withstand and undermine economic incentives, or, alternatively, the inability of economic forces to penetrate and weaken the regressive bases of social norms? The phenomenal changes happening in the Indian economy since the last two decades seemed to have offered some opportunities and scope for progress. Yet, the opportunities are not only far from sufficient but also contested.

The empirical studies reviewed above suggest a largely positive association between women's paid work and dimensions of autonomy or empowerment. The question that follows immediately is what kind of jobs did these empirical studies include in their quantitative analyses? Clearly, most of these studies analyse the types of employment which signify the so-called less paid, low esteem jobs. The findings convey that even those jobs do have the potential in significantly influencing women's autonomy in India. The influence would be, therefore, far greater, if the paid work is regular and quality is better. This underscores the need for more and better jobs for women.

Herein, at least two aspects merit a mention. One, much of the empirical analyses treat paid work as an undifferentiated variable. This tends to make the findings lacking, as women carry out a wide range of activities, often multiple, for a pay. Hence, detailed and systematic analyses differentiating the different kinds of paid work are necessary, as they can inform whether the influence of paid work would vary together with varying kinds of, and reasons underlying, women's paid work. Two, it is also important to compare and contrast the influence of new generation jobs associated with globalisation and export-oriented employment with that of

traditional types of women's employment on their empowerment in different regional settings.

The empirical studies examine the influence of paid work on different dimensions of autonomy and empowerment. Though these dimensions are certainly important, they are not the only dimensions worthy of analysis. Indeed, some dimensions of autonomy and empowerment, such as decision-making, mobility and access to or control over income, find place in almost all the empirical studies. Though these aspects might have been included after careful consideration of a number of relevant factors, the over-representation of some of these dimensions limits the scope of the empirical findings. Also, some of these dimensions may not be unrelated to paid work altogether. For instance, mobility is likely to be very much a part of, or a prerequisite to, women's participation in paid work. Therefore, the association between paid work and mobility is bound to be largely positive.

This raises a couple of aspects for consideration. We have already observed from the empirical findings that women's paid work is less likely to go with freedom from spousal threat or violence. Does this convey that the influence of paid work may not always be unchangingly positive in all dimensions? If this is true, then there is a critical need to extend the existing empirical analyses by bringing in some structural factors. For instance, does the influence hold good in aspects or dimensions related to strategic life choices? Does participation in paid work enable women to attain aspects of freedom that would alter the existing power dynamics in the household? Does paid work bring in aspects of benefits or freedom that are unavailable or denied? Consideration of these aspects, which would also invite the additional challenge of tackling the measurement issues, would obviously indicate whether paid work is capable enough in effecting changes which are structural and long lasting.

### **Endnote:**

<sup>1</sup> For instance, women spent, on average, 18.72 hours per week in main SNA activities as against 41.96 hours by men per week.

<sup>2</sup> Some of these programmes, such as JRY and EAS, were started only after 1985. The lack of disaggregated data by each programme does not enable us to assess the participation of women with respect to these programmes separately.

<sup>3</sup> Studies also postulate that participation in paid work provides a variety of incentives to lower fertility. This includes, but by no means confined to, from delaying age at marriage, reduction in reproductive span of working women to making more child bearing as expensive and adversely affecting their earning and promotion possibilities, and so on (Mason 1993).

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