

DO WOMEN WORK IN INDIA?

A Review of Women's Studies on Women's Work⁺

Hildegard Scheu

PROLOGUE

"My wife does not work", says Ramakrishna to the census enumerator. While he is answering the enumerator's questions, his wife Kamala is cooking the mid-day meal, preparing tea for him and the guest and feeding the infant. Early that morning, she ground five kilos of flour, pounded the rice, carried four pots of water from the well, milked, fed and cleaned their three buffaloes and went to the dairy co-operative centre to deliver the milk. In the afternoon, she will go to their paddy field to weed, to cut fodder for the buffaloes and to collect firewood from the nearby forest. In the evening, she will go once again to fetch water and then prepare the evening meal. Kamala is one of millions of Indian women who "do not work", according to her husband and the statistics. What then is she doing? Is there something wrong with the perceptions of women's activities and with the statistics on women's work?

INTRODUCTION

The International Women's Year as well as the investigations of the "Committee on the Status of Women in India" (1971-1974)¹ have undoubtedly stimulated research on women in India, especially on the economic activity and the impact of development on women, particularly on those women belonging to the urban and the rural poor. The Committee's Report "Towards Equality" (1974) provides evidence for a growing deterioration of the status of women in India.

According to the report, the participation of women in the labour force

⁺) I would like to thank Angela Siscamanis and V.Srinivasan for the editing assistance rendered.

increasingly declined, women lost employment in the non-agricultural sector due to structural changes in the course of industrialization, that is, the mechanisation of production and the shift to the factories, the destruction of household industries and the decline of traditional marketing in the villages, etc. Women were virtually excluded from modern production and trade and relegated to low skilled, low paid, tedious or arduous occupations in the unorganized sector (cf. *Towards Equality 1974*: 152 ff.)².

Alternatively, they have had to fall back on agriculture where their participation rates have been steadily increasing. New employment opportunities emerged only for highly educated middle and upper class women in the services and professions, but these are a negligible minority among employed women in India (ICSSR 1975: 71 ff.; cf. Kaul 1973).

Another indicator for the worsening conditions of women is the declining sex-ratio of the total population, from 972 females per 1000 males in 1901 to 933 in 1981 (cf. Sen 1983a: 28, Table I). Several studies reveal that females get lesser food and lesser health care, that morbidity and mortality rates are higher among females than among males (cf. Batliwala 1983, Khan et al. 1983, Bardhan 1974). There is also an increasing gap between women and men in literacy, education and training for employment, and a decline of women's political representation (cf. *Towards Equality 1974*: 263 ff., 287 ff.).

In spite of legal provisions aiming at equality and in spite of the rhetorical recognition of the need to integrate women into development, the development process has obviously had an adverse impact on the great majority of Indian women. These findings and conclusions have led to new questions and to a shift in the focus of social science research on women.

Until the seventies, anthropologists and sociologists were primarily concerned with women's role in the family, marriage and kinship networks. Studies on "working women" were mainly restricted to the role-conflicts of western-educated, married middle and upper class urban women employed in the organized sector, where their participation has remained conspicuously marginal (cf. Kaul 1973).

In the last ten years, a growing body of literature has emerged dealing with women's economic roles³. The deficiencies of census and large scale survey data on women's labour force participation and the inadequacy of existing methodologies and conceptual frameworks to record and understand women's economic contribution have been emphasized. The neglect of women's major role in agriculture have been recognized and the need for gender-specific studies on the impact of agricultural development has been stressed. "Women's studies" with a specific focus on gender as an analytical category and with an interest in identifying the roots of women's continuing subordination and oppression in the economy and society have emerged in India (cf. Desai et al. 1984; Agarwal 1983).

The following review of research on women and work in India will firstly provide a broad categorization of the existing studies with a brief summary of the questions and issues dealt with. Secondly, it will address itself to three

major issues:

- a) The biases and problems in conceptualizing and measuring women's economic participation;
- b) the changes and regional variations in female labour force participation;
- c) the impact of agricultural development on women's work and living conditions.

MAJOR ISSUES IN WOMEN'S STUDIES ON WOMEN'S WORK

According to their major focus, the studies on women and work can be classified into five broad groups:

1. Several studies analyse the declining trend in women's labour force participation, the large inter-state differences, the variations in employment patterns over time and between states and regions (Ambannavar 1975, Chatterji 1984, Gulati 1975a, Gulati 1975b, Sen 1983a, Sen 1983 b). The analyses are either macro-studies based on census and other large scale survey data⁴ - using correlation and regression analyses - or alternatively, region-specific micro-studies combining available data with specifically ascertained data from household surveys, interviews and other empirical methods. A review of these studies reveals the complex reality of women's labour force participation in relation to demography and culture, and most importantly, within a specific socio-economic context. These studies also stress the deficiencies inherent in the available statistical data, making meaningful analyses difficult.
2. A second area of great interest is the working and living conditions of women working in the unorganized sector, that is, in home based production (e.g. beedi: Bhatti 1980, cashew: Nair 1979, coir: Mathew 1979, garment: Kalpagam 1981 and lace industry: Mies 1980), working as self-employed small vendors (e.g. selling vegetables, flowers, self-made food-stuff etc.: see Noponen 1981), rendering their services (sweepers: Karlekar 1982, domestic servants etc.) or working in agriculture and related occupations (dairy: Mitra 1984, fishery: Gulati 1984). These studies provide empirical evidence for the exploitation, discrimination and vulnerability of this category of women workers as well as the significance of their contribution to their families' income. Several studies reveal the arduous and often hazardous working conditions which involve long hours of work, low wages and the lack of minimum welfare provisions, as legislative provisions are flouted by the employers. Such micro-studies, based on household sample surveys, questionnaires, interviews, observations etc., are mainly descriptive. They provide detailed documentation and valuable insights, but most of them lack an analysis of the findings within the wider socio-economic context. Only a few exceptional studies provide conceptual and theoretical linkages

(Mies 1980, Kalpagam 1981).

3. The impact of the agricultural development process on women's work and general living conditions is another issue of growing concern (Agarwal 1984, Kelkar 1981, Mencher and Saradmoni 1982, Mies 1984, Omvedt et al. 1981, Saradmoni 1983, Sethi 1982). In some recent studies, women scholars draw attention to the gender dimension of the socio-economic implications of the agricultural development strategies, adopted in the course of the "green revolution" (esp. Agarwal 1984 and 1985). Not only are different classes differentially affected, but also women and men within the same class. Until now, development planning as well as agrarian studies were based on the "household approach" with its implicit assumption that the household is a unit of convergent or even homogenous interests and that all members of one household equally benefit or are equally affected by existing development strategies. This assumption must be questioned, given the existing gender division of labour in agricultural field work as well as non-field related work and child care, and the differences between women and men in their access to income, food and health care.

The mostly region-specific studies collected data and information on a wide range of issues related to women's employment opportunities and patterns, their access to land and other means of production, their total work loads, their contribution to and control over the household income, their role in decision-making inside and outside the household and their self-perceptions and consciousness about gender inequalities and socio-economic changes. So far, however, no study has emerged that has addressed all of these issues, although the existing studies highlight both the complexity and the diversity of the effects of technological changes in the agricultural sector on women, by socio-economic class and by region.

4. Evaluation studies of governmental and non-governmental development programmes for women reveal several constraints and contradictions within existing schemes (cf. Jain 1980, Mazumdar et al. 1979, Mehra 1983, Tellis-Nayak and Costa-Pinto 1979). The inherent middle class bias prevents them from reaching out to the vast majority of poor women who are burdened with work as well as the need for better paid jobs. Income generating programmes for the "upliftment of women"⁵ often treat women as merely passive recipients of employment opportunities, training and credit facilities. Empirical data reveal that employment per se does not alter the subordinate character of women's work nor discrimination against women. The existing inequalities in access to land and other means of production as well as the prevailing gender division of labour are not challenged (cf. Dixon 1978, Sharma, undated). In the last fifteen years, several organizations have emerged which organize poor women working in the unorganized sector in both urban and rural areas⁶. Studies on their organizational efforts and programmes reveal that they are able to improve the employment and working conditions of their members. There are, however, also several constraints related to the participation of the women members in decision-making pro-

cesses and the predominant focus on economic goals (cf. Jain 1980, Krishna Raj 1980, Noponen 1981, Sebstadt 1982).

5. In recent years, several studies and papers have emerged which highlight and discuss methodological, conceptual and theoretical issues (Agarwal 1982, Jain and Chand 1981a and 1981b, Krishna Raj and Patel 1981, Menon 1982, Mies 1980, Sundar 1981). One of the major concerns is to analyse how and why women's participation in the labour force is seriously underestimated as well as to explain why women's work tends to be invisible and is regarded as secondary and subordinate to men's. Some studies use innovative methods to record and document what women are actually doing. All these issues are clearly interrelated; several analyses aim thereby at a clearer conceptualization of "work" and the different forms of women's work, a conceptualization which will make women's work visible - to the society as well as to the labour force statistics and thus to the planners and policy makers.

PROBLEMS IN ACCOUNTING FOR WOMEN'S WORK

Ideological Biases

The dominant values in India include the perception of women primarily as mothers and wives and the restriction of women to the house. The seclusion of women is a sign of higher caste and class status. Women's non-participation in, or their withdrawal from, agricultural or other work outside the house is related to the socio-economic position of their families. The values of the dominant classes shape the social definition of all women as housewives, although a considerable proportion of women of the lower classes are engaged in agricultural and non-agricultural production.

The prevailing "housewife ideology"⁷ serves to conceal and thus leads to a devaluation of women's productive activities, which are perceived as a mere extension of household work and regarded as secondary and subordinate to men's work. According to Maria Mies (1982), the underlying ideological bias is the consideration of women's activities as "natural" consequences of her biological ability to give birth. Child-care, housework and subsistence production are regarded as an extension of women's physiology or "nature" and as such not recognized as work.

The devaluation of women's economic contribution is further reinforced by the growing commercialization of the economy: "work" gets the meaning of "paid work", "participation in an income-earning activity" or "gainful employment". Such work is regarded as productive, in so far as it contributes to market production and thus to the national product (cf. Benerġa 1982:122ff.). But most of the work women do in an economy that is still largely based on

subsistence production is unpaid - and thus "invisible", unrecognized and unrecorded.

Conceptual and Measurement Problems

These ideological biases are deeply embedded in concepts used in the labour force and the national accounting statistics. There are conceptual and methodological problems in measuring labour force participation in an only partly monetized, predominantly subsistence economy. The main problem is to define what constitutes "economic activity" as well as to determine who is to be defined as a "worker" (cf. Benerfa 1982, Krishna Raj 1983⁸). These problems are intensified in the case of women, who are doing the bulk of unpaid subsistence labour. A great proportion of their work is defined as "non-economic", i.e. housework, but no clear dividing line can be drawn between domestic work and productive work carried out at home⁹. Processing of grain, for example, one of women's domestic activities, is part of a production process if it is carried out in mills. On the one hand, a woman who is collecting firewood regularly for home consumption, thus reducing the expenditure of her household, is considered to be engaged in household duties. On the other hand, a woman gathering firewood regularly to sell it at the market is considered to be economically active and her labour is recognized as productive. In addition to the inherent difficulty in defining productive work accurately, there are practical problems in obtaining precise records of women's productive activities because of the following characteristics: core domestic work (such as cooking, cleaning, washing, etc.) and productive activities (such as grain and fuel processing, household dairy work, field work etc.) are interlinked; production for self-consumption and market production are intermingled; and participation of women in productive activities is intermittent over a day or a week as well as over the life cycle (Jain and Chand 1981a : 35).

The recording of women's participation in the labour force is not only affected by the exclusion of activities performed by women from the definition of "economic activity", but also by the criterion used to define a worker. In India, the definition of worker varies from one census to another. In 1961, persons were classified as workers when they did "some regular work of more than one hour a day throughout the greater part of the working season" (Census of India 1961, 1966). Thus, women who worked as unpaid family workers or were engaged in other work in addition to household work were included. The 1971 census classified workers according to their main occupation. Women who were engaged primarily in housework were thus classified as non-workers even when they also performed any "secondary work" (cf. Census of India 1971, 1972). The 1981 census classified as "main workers" those persons who worked for six months or more during the preceding year, and as "marginal workers" those who worked less than six months (cf. Mukherjee 1984 : 2). Several analyses of changes in women's labour force

participation attribute the variations - especially the drastic decline from almost 28 per cent in 1961 to 12 per cent in 1971 - at least partly to the conceptual shifts in the definition of worker.

The classification of women workers is also affected by biases on the part of the enumerator and the respondent, who are both usually male and thus reflect a male perspective of female economic roles (cf. Agarwal 1982)¹⁰.

Alternative Recording Methods

The inherent inadequacy of the labour force approach in determining women's economic contribution and the interest in making women's work visible to researchers, development planners and policy makers have led women scholars to search for alternative methodological tools.

One of the few studies so far is Devaki Jain's and Malini Chand's (1981a) time allocation study. They recorded the time spent on all possible activities by women, men and children for 15 hours a day, on two consecutive days, six times during one year. This method reveals the segregation of activities by age and sex and provides a profile of the work of women. Jain and Chand (1981a : 35) point out that the dominance of women's activities in and around the house, which usually account for half a day or even more, leads to an underreporting of women's work in production. The time allocation method yields more accurate estimates of women's economic participation, but it is an extremely time consuming process and thus not practicable in large scale surveys.

In their research on women in rice cultivation, Joan P. Mencher, K. Saradamoni and Janaki Panicker (1979; Mencher and Saradamoni 1982) asked literate women to keep diaries on all activities pertinent to agriculture, and they designed picture charts for distribution among illiterate women. These charts, one on agricultural operations performed by the women and one on household income, were marked by the women each day of the week for several weeks. Local research assistants collected the charts every week and checked how accurate the recordings were. Although there are several problems regarding the accuracy of this methodological tool, it seems worthwhile in obtaining data on women's participation in agricultural activities and their contribution to the household income.

ANALYSES OF FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION

There are three main characteristics of women's labour force participation in India. First, the long term trend indicates an overall decline since 1921, both in the percentage of women workers to the total female population (from

32.7 per cent in 1921 to 20.8 per cent in 1981) and in their percentage to the total labour force (cf. Sen 1983a: 28; *Towards Equality*: 153).

Second, there are very large inter-state variations in the percentage of women's labour force participation: it is high in the Southern and Western states, and in the North Eastern hill states, which have a large tribal population; it is low in the Northern and Eastern states (specifically Punjab, Haryana and West Bengal), and medium in the Central states. These differences have remained significant over the last two decades (Sen 1983a: 15). A widespread assumption attributes these inter-state variations to cultural factors. The influence of Islamic culture, for example, and its valuation of *purdah*¹¹ in the Northern and Eastern states results in the confinement of women to the house and therefore a low labour force participation rate. Tribal women and women of scheduled castes¹² have traditionally worked in agriculture. Thus, women's participation rates are higher in those states with a high proportion of scheduled castes and tribes population. Apart from these cultural and demographic variables, several socio-economic variables related to the demand and supply of female labour in agriculture have been suggested and analysed¹³.

Third, the most striking change over time is the increasing participation of women in agricultural wage labour. While in 1961, 23.9 per cent out of the total percentage of women workers were agricultural labourers, in 1981 the percentage was 44.8. During the same period, there was a decline in the percentage of women cultivators (farmers and tenants) in the female labour force from 55.7 to 37.5. This progressive shift in the status of women workers from cultivators to agricultural labourers is seen as one of the main indicators for the increasing impoverishment of the rural population. The loss of land for subsistence cultivation and/or the inadequate growth of productive employment opportunities on family farms forces women into wage labour (cf. *Towards Equality*: 163, Brandtzaeg 1979).

Analyses of Supply and Demand Factors

Several studies based on census and other large scale survey data provide considerable evidence for the hypothesis that increasing poverty of the rural population is the dominant factor for the high and increasing participation of women in agricultural wage labour, in the context of an overall low and declining female labour force participation. Gita Sen (1983a, 1983b¹⁴) finds positive correlations between the high proportion of agricultural labourers in the rural female population and several variables indicating regional impoverishment. These variables include: a low proportion of wheat and rice in the gross cropped area¹⁵, low rates of agricultural growth, low annual incomes of agricultural labourer households, high rates of inter- and intra-district male migration and high inequality in land ownership. Ruchira Chatterji (1984: 12 ff.) points out that the state-wise increases in female labour

force participation are closely related to the growth rates in poverty levels, thus corroborating the hypothesis of a close interrelationship between poverty and women's economic participation.

While these findings emphasize the importance of the supply aspect of female labour force participation, the studies also test demand orientated hypotheses. One expectation is a higher demand for agricultural labour in high growth areas in general, and especially, a higher demand for female labour in predominantly rice growing areas, because women perform specific tasks like transplanting and weeding in rice cultivation. In fact, however, the proportion of female agricultural labourers is low in high growth regions, and it is also not especially high in rice cultivating states. This result leads Sen (1983a: 19 ff.) to the assumption that the demand for women agricultural labourers may be met by migrant labourers drawn from outside the state or region and not by women who are indigenous to the region. In so far as this assumption is valid - studies on migration patterns of women agricultural labourers are still lacking - the emphasis is on the preponderance of the supply side pressures as opposed to demand side factors, because it is most likely that women workers migrate from poorer regions due to the pressing need for wage labour.

In examining the patterns of employment and changes therein, Chatterji (1984: 16 ff.) finds no evidence for the demand related hypothesis that the participation of women in agricultural labour increases absolutely and more than that of men due to an increased labour demand in female-specific operations. With the exception of ploughing, which is an almost exclusively male task, no clear gender-specificity emerged and female labour has been used increasingly not only in predominantly female operations like transplanting and weeding but also in predominantly male activities like sowing and harvesting. Further analysis of variations in the female-male wage differential provides support for the alternative hypothesis, that is, that the relatively low cost of female labour has been a factor in women's preferential employment.

The Validity of the Inter-State Variations

According to Gita Sen and Chiranjib Sen (1985), one of the reasons for inter-state variations could also be the unjustified "exclusion of a considerable range of women's tasks from so-called 'economic activity'" (p.WS-52). Their analysis revealed that in states where women's labour force participation rate is low, the number of women engaged in activities like free collection of goods, work in household poultry or dairy, sewing, weaving etc. in addition to their core domestic work is high, and vice versa. If these activities were recorded as economic participation, the inter-state variations would decrease.

The Effects of Marital Status and Child-Care Responsibilities

Analysing the work patterns of women by age, Sen and Sen (1985:WS-54f.) found that female labour force participation is highest in the age group 30-44. Women aged 15-29 are particularly responsible for domestic duties alone. Marriage and child-bearing is probably a major factor. Sen and Sen conclude that child care and domestic work determine the division of labour between women of different ages and marital status within one household, but are not likely to be determining factors for the participation of women in the overall labour force.

THE IMPACT OF AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT ON WOMEN

A large body of agrarian studies provide considerable evidence that the agricultural development which has taken place in India during the last two decades, has resulted in the increasing impoverishment and marginalization of small and marginal farmers, in the eviction of small tenants, in an increase of landlessness and thus in a sharp increase in the number of agricultural wage labourers. While the dependence of rural households on agricultural wage labour increased, the average annual days of agricultural employment as well as the average daily real wage earnings and the average annual wage income have declined at the all-India level. Agricultural growth has had no significant impact in reducing the incidence of absolute poverty in rural India, according to Bina Agarwal, who reviewed several studies on this issue. It seems that "a significant minority has been getting further impoverished, and inequalities among the poor have been increasing" (Agarwal 1985: 18).

Women workers in agriculture - cultivators and agricultural wage labourers - constitute 82.3 per cent of the total female labour force, and roughly 90 per cent of the rural female labour force. Agricultural labourers form the single largest category of women workers, 44.8 per cent. While their share in the female labour force nearly doubled during the last two decades, the share of agricultural labourers in the male labour force considerably declined. Women comprise one-third of the total agricultural labour force; in some Southern and Central districts there are actually more women than men who work as agricultural labourers (cf. Mukherjee 1984:6,9).

An examination of the impact of development strategies and changing agrarian relations on women is the departure point for most of the studies on women in agriculture under review. Some of the studies analyse the development implications on women of different socio-economic classes, divided according to the land ownership status of their families (cf. Agarwal 1984, Mencher and Saradmoni 1982). Other studies focus on women who depend

entirely, or to a great extent, on agricultural wage labour (e.g. Mies 1984). These women belong to the landless or marginal landowning households, and the overwhelming majority belong to scheduled castes (especially in South India: Mies 1984) or to scheduled tribes (mainly in the North).

The specific implications of the development process on women are diverse, and are dependent on a wide range of factors, such as caste and class membership, cropping pattern, the traditional gender division of labour and changes therein, and, of course, the kind of technological inputs and the extent to which the economy is commercialized.

The Impact of Agricultural Development on Women's Employment Opportunities and Wage-Earning Capacity

Most of the region-specific studies emphasize the importance of women's work in agriculture. The labour force participation rates revealed by many of these studies contrast strikingly with the census figures of the corresponding region, thus providing further evidence for the underestimation of female labour force participation. In fact, in some Southern and Central districts women constitute the main labour force in agriculture; Maria Mies (1984: 84) reports that 70-80 per cent of all field work in the three studied villages in Andhra Pradesh is carried out by women. Gail Omvedt et al. (1981), Mencher and Saradmoni (1982), and Agarwal (1984), all stress the importance of women's agricultural labour as well as their predominance in specific operations.

The impact of agricultural development on women's employment opportunities and patterns are manifold. Some studies (e.g. Agarwal 1984) report that the employment available to women has increased during the last two decades. This is considered to be due to improved irrigation techniques and agricultural inputs, such as high yielding varieties, fertilizers, etc., which lead to higher yields and which therefore require an increased labour input. Omvedt et al. (1981: 11) reports that the women themselves have an ambivalent attitude towards the greater availability of work. On the one hand, they feel that this increases their total work load, which leads to greater exhaustion. On the other hand, additional work offers the prospect of securing basic food on a year-round basis.

Other regional studies reveal that the average yearly employment opportunities available to women have decreased due to various ongoing processes: loss of land for self-cultivation; loss of employment in the crafts and household industries; and population growth (e.g. Mies 1984).

These factors lead an increasing proportion of the rural population to depend on agricultural wage labour. Increasing unemployment among men due to technological innovations as well as their increasing migration to the cities in search of better paid jobs, forces more and more women into wage labour in order to secure basic subsistence for their families. The large

number of women seeking wage labour has resulted in increasing competition among women and thus in a reduction of the average employment available to each of them. The process of impoverishment and marginalization of women is further exacerbated by the introduction of new technologies, especially when female-specific operations are mechanised. Women are then pushed out of employment and because the new technologies are operated mostly by men, the women never gain the opportunity to improve their employment skills. Women's participation in rice processing, for example, decreased significantly with the introduction of modern rice mills, in which virtually no women are employed (cf. e.g. Harris 1977). Women are relegated to the most labour-intensive, strenuous work which requires simple tools and pure physical energy, if they are employed at all.

Several studies reveal serious underemployment and seasonal unemployment among women from landless and marginal landowning families. Furthermore, the abundant availability of surplus labour allows the employing farmers to keep wages below the subsistence level and to play women of different castes off against each other (cf. e.g. Mies 1984: 164 ff.). This political ploy serves to maintain the low wage rate because it precludes the possibility that the women will organize themselves and demand higher wages.

The Marginalization of Women's Work

The overall and increasing dependence and powerlessness of women is also a direct consequence of state legislation and rural development programmes. Discriminating land legislations and inheritance laws prevent women from access to land as the main means of production (cf. e.g. Saradmoni 1982)¹⁶. The minimum wage laws uphold the discrimination in wages against women (Mencher and Saradmoni 1982: A-155)¹⁷. Most of the rural development programmes neglect women's vital role in agriculture. Women are almost excluded from employment training and agricultural extension programmes; credit schemes are directed towards men as the "head of the household", and most co-operative societies register only one member of each household (usually the "head of the household"), thus excluding women from important decision making processes. These biased development programmes exacerbate women's decreasing control over the means of production and result in their decreasing income earning capacity, thus contributing further to the marginalization of women's work and devaluation of women's economic contribution.

Bina Agarwal stresses the "need for a special focus in policy on the employment and income requirements" of impoverished women, as well as the necessity to consider "the gender implications of any income and employment impact of technological change" (Agarwal 1984: A-50; see also Mencher and Saradmoni 1982: A-156, Sen and Sen 1985: WS-55 f., Sundar 1981: 870).

The Importance of Women's Wages for Family Maintenance

The policy recommendation offered by several authors is particularly important in light of the fact that women agricultural labourers are found to contribute approximately 50 per cent to the pooled household income and often even more, although their wages are lower than those of men. Women's earnings are not "supplementary" to the household income, as assumed by male development planners, but are crucial for the survival of the families, who are often below the poverty line.

A large number of women are also the sole income earning members of their families. According to the estimate of Mayra Buvinic and Nadia N. Youssef (1978), approximately 18.7 per cent of the households in India are de facto female-headed. This relatively large and increasing number of female headed households is mainly due to male migration to the cities. Often the women are left behind in the villages, where they have to work on the family land or do agricultural wage work to maintain themselves and their children. Abject poverty is more prevalent in female-headed compared to male-headed households.

Several studies report that while women spend all their earnings on food and on the other basic needs of the family, men spend as much as they want on their personal needs (such as beedis, alcohol, even luxury goods such as a radio) and give whatever they like - or the remainder - to their wives for the maintenance of the household. Mencher and Saradmoni (1982: A-165 f.) state that this is taken for granted by both the men and the women, but Mies reports in her study that women "criticised the fact that the so-called bread-winners considered the income to be private property whereas they, the women, had to see how they could manage the household" (Mies 1984: 162). Mies noted further, that when the man receives his wage mainly in cash, it is more likely that he will control the money. The poorer the family, the more likely the control over money is in the hands of the woman.

There are considerable variations in the wages paid to agricultural labourers throughout India and even within the same region. In general, women receive one third to half in wages less than men, even if they do the same work. As several studies report, this wage disparity is explained among both women and men with the assumption that women are physically weaker and cannot perform as heavy and as much work as men, and that men's tasks require more skill. These presuppositions are questioned by several authors as merely ideological assumptions not in tune with reality. For example, Mencher and Saradmoni quote transplanting, a highly skilled, hazardous and back-breaking task, which, because it is done by women, is usually regarded as easy and not very skilled. Differences between women and men in productivity have never been measured (cf. Mencher and Saradmoni 1982: A-153 f.)¹⁸.

The Implications of Wage-Earning on Women's Consciousness and Status

In what manner employment affects women's self-perceptions, their autonomy and decision-making power in their families and their status in the society is a matter of ongoing debate (cf. Mencher 1985).

Most of the women agricultural labourers belong to scheduled castes or tribes; their labour has the lowest prestige in the hierarchy of rural female labour, and they are compelled to work due to pressing economic needs. Thus, the class position of these women is more likely to determine their social status than the fact that they are "gainfully employed". Omvedt et al. (1981) stress that the "existence of the wage by itself gives women little economic independence", because the "families are so close to subsistence level that it matters little who decides what to spend it on, since most money must go for food" (p.32).

Regarding their position in their families however, field studies indicate that women who work outside the house have on the whole greater self-confidence as well as mobility as compared with women who are confined to the household. Govind Kelkar found that the most expressive and assertive women of her sample are those who are full-time wage earners and who provide in a major way for their families. These women are highly conscious of their roles as primary income earners. They also make important decisions about income expenditure (Kelkar 1981:75).

The wage-earning activity of women, however, has not led to any changes in the gender division of labour within the household. As it has been in the past, women continue to bear the sole responsibility for household labour and child-care in addition to their full time job¹⁹.

The subordinate and inferior position of the women towards their husbands is rarely openly questioned by the women themselves, unless there is encouragement either through researchers' provoking questions or through a women's organization, which provides a forum for the women to discuss their problems frankly²⁰.

EPILOGUE

Women work in India. Now, at the end of the International Women's Decade, this statement can be made on the basis of scientific evidence provided by a considerable body of Women's Studies, apart from the evidence provided by mere unbiased perception. Women work, on the average, many more hours than men, their work and economic contribution is unquestionably of main importance in providing basic subsistence. Women's needs for better employment and working conditions, however, for access to land, technology and

training have remained peripheral to the mainstream development planning.

The development process has undermined women's traditional economic roles, has marginalized their labour in agricultural as well as industrial production and has led to greater imbalances not only between the social classes but also between the sexes.

Women's studies have stressed the androcentric and patriarchal biases of most of the social science research, development planning and policy making. They have challenged several concepts used in development planning, which are transferred from the industrialized West and which are based on social myths. These include the assumptions that the household is a homogenous unit, that the man is the "head of the household" and the "breadwinner", and complementarily, that women are basically "housewives" and "supplementary earners"; that their role in the economy is marginal; and that all domestic work is non-productive.

Further conceptual, theoretical and methodological research is clearly needed for an adequate understanding of women's socio-economic predicament and for conceptualizing a development perspective for women in India.

Notes:

- 1) The Committee was constituted by the Government of India in 1971.
- 2) The Committee used the differentiation of the organized and the unorganized sector to classify women workers.
"The organized sector is characterized by modern relations of production and is regulated by laws that seek to protect the security and working conditions of labour as well as by labour organizations that can engage in collective bargaining. This includes the entire public sector of services and industry, as well as that part of the private sector which is regulated. The unorganized sector, which includes agriculture as well as various industries and services, is characterized by the absence of all these protective measures and machinery. ... The status of women workers in India is obvious from the fact that 94 % of them are found in the unorganized sector leaving only 6 % in the organized sector." (ICSSR, 1975: 63)
- 3) According to a review of women's studies, more than one third of the research on women undertaken during 1975-1980 fell within the area of women's economic roles (Krishna Raj 1983: 4). The Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) promoted research on women working in the unorganized sector, especially on rural women.
- 4) These are in particular the National Sample Survey in its various rounds, and the Rural Labour Enquiry.
- 5) The term indicates the paternalistic approach from above, which is inherent in the "weaker sections" or "target group" approach of planned

development in rural India.

- 6) The largest and best-known organizations are the "Self-Employed Women's Association" (SEWA) in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, the "Working Women's Forum" (WWF) in Madras, Tamil Nadu, and "Annappoorna" in Bombay. SEWA and WWF have several other branches in different parts of the country, SEWA in the North and WWF in the South.
- 7) The implications of the social definition of women as housewives are emphasized by several studies, e.g. Kelkar 1981, Sundar 1981, Mies 1980. The concept of "housewifization" was introduced into the discussion by Maria Mies (1980:131): "I define housewifization as a process by which women are socially defined as housewives, dependent for their sustenance on the income of a husband, irrespective of whether they are de facto housewives or not. The social definition of women as housewives is the counterpart of the social definition of men as breadwinners, irrespective of their actual contribution to their family's subsistence." These definitions underlie most of the development concepts and programmes and result in the invisibility of women as producers and "leads to defining the bulk of women's subsistence work as non-work and hence open to unrestricted exploitation" (Mies 1980:132).
- 8) "The use of labour force approach means a prior decision is made on whether a person is economically active or not on the basis of a screening question. This approach is inapplicable to developing economies because (i) Much of the production is family based and for home consumption, (ii) there are seasonal variations due to the agricultural cycle, (iii) the length of the working day is not uniform, (iv) wage work is on daily basis, (v) there are multiple economic activities." (Krishna Raj 1983:34).
- 9) The debate on the nature of housework and the relationship between reproduction, subsistence production and production of exchange values is a recent one in India and relies heavily on neo-marxist and socialist-feminist concepts and theories developed in the West (cf. Krishna Raj and Patel 1981; Menon 1982; Mies 1980). Maria Mies is one of the German feminists who has worked on the issue.
- 10) Males are usually classified as "head of the household" and thus tend to be canvassed about the employment status of family members. It is their perception of whether the women in the family are workers or not.
- 11) *Purdah* is a Persian Word widely used in India, meaning "curtain". It refers to the veil Moslem women have to wear outside the house as well as to the seclusion of women in general, their confinement to the sphere of the house and the separation of the worlds of women and men.
- 12) Scheduled castes is the official term for the untouchable castes.
- 13) Gulati 1975a, for example, correlates state level data of the 1971 census for six demographic and economic variable - per capita income, cropping pattern, female literacy level, male work participation rates, proportion of scheduled castes and tribes in the population, and the sex ratio - with the female labour force participation rate. This approach does not yield

- any significant relationship, and she confesses that it may be too aggregative to be sensitive to differences caused by such factors. Sinha (1975) stresses in his critical comment on this study that the data used are defective because of serious underestimation of women workers in the 1971 census, and especially, because there was considerable variation in the extent of underenumeration across the different states. This distorts the analysis of the data at the state level.
- 14) The first study is based on state level census data (1971 and 1961), the second uses district level census data.
 - 15) The underlying assumption is that the extent of dry land in a region, and hence the extent of area devoted to coarse foodgrains (such as jowar, millet, gram, pulses), can serve as a crude index of regional impoverishment. Wheat and rice are cultivated in richer areas.
 - 16) The historical process of this development has been analysed by Saradmoni (1983).
 - 17) Mencher and Saradmoni (1982) note that "many of the minimum wage laws that were passed in the late 70s and early 80s accepted in one form or another discrimination by sex, either by listing a different wage for males and females or indirectly by providing for a lower wage for those kinds of work performed by females" (p. A-155).
 - 18) Omvedt (1981) comments on the farmers' statement that "women are lazy": "This may well be true and has to be evaluated in terms of their other work burdens as well as their lower pay." (p.11)
 - 19) Kelkar (1981: 68) quotes a remarkable exception in one of the villages studied, where older men are doing housework, while the women are very active in the fields. She attributes that change in the sexual division of labour to the full involvement of women in agricultural production.
 - 20) Maria Mies' study on women agricultural labourers (Mies 1984) is one of the recent studies providing an analysis of women's consciousness and of their own organizations. Current trends in research on women in India indicate a growing concern for the understanding of rural women's consciousness and for the functioning and impacts of women's grass roots organizations. A review of these studies is planned.

Bibliography

- Agarwal, Bina. 1981. *Agricultural Modernisation and Third World Women: Pointers from the Literature and an Empirical Analysis*. World Employment Research Working Paper No. WEP 10/WP 21, Geneva: International Labour Office.
1982. *Work Participation of Rural Women in the Third World: Some Data and Conceptual Biases*. Background paper for the Technical Seminar

- on Women, Work and Employment, mimeo. New Delhi: Institute of Social Studies Trust. Forthcoming in: Kate Young (ed.), *Serving Two Masters*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
1983. *Women's Studies in Asia and the Pacific*. Chapter on India. Occasional Paper No.4. Programme on Women and Development. Kuala Lumpur: Asian and Pacific Development Centre, 8-18.
1984. *Rural Women and High yielding Variety Rice Technology*. In: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.19, No.13, 39-52.
1985. *Agricultural Development Strategies and Ecological Imbalances: The Indian Context*. Paper presented at the Asian Regional Conference on Women and the Household, mimeo. New Delhi: Indian Statistical Institute, Jan.
- Ambannavar, Jaipal P. 1975. *Changes in Economic Activity of Males and Females in India: 1911-61*. In: *Demography India*, Vol.4, No.2, 345-364.
- Bardhan, P. 1974. *On Life and Death Questions*. In: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.9, Nos.32-34, Special Number, 1293-1304.
- Batliwala, S. 1983. *Women in Poverty: The Energy, Health and Nutrition Syndrome*. Paper presented at a workshop on Women and Poverty, mimeo. Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, March.
- Benería, Lourdes. 1982. *Accounting for Women's Work*. In: *Women and Development. The Sexual Division of Labour in Rural Societies*. New York: Praeger Publications, 119-147.
- Bhatty, Zarina. 1980. *Economic Role and Status of Women: A Case Study of Women in the Beedi Industry in Allahabad*. World Employment Programme Research Working Paper No.WEP 10/WP 15. Geneva: International Labour Office, Dec.
- Brandtzaeg, Brita. 1979. *Women, Food and Technology*. In: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.14, No.47, 1921-1924.
- Buvinic, Mayra and Nadia N.Youssef. 1978. *Women-headed Households: the Ignored Factor in Development Planning*. Report submitted to AID/WID. Washington D.C.: International Center for Research on Women, March.
- Chatterji, Ruchira. 1984. *Marginalisation and the Introduction of Women into Wage Labour: The Case of Indian Agriculture*. World Employment Programme Research Working Paper No.WEP 10/WP 32. Geneva: International Labour Office, March.
- Census of India 1961, Vol.I, Part II B (ii) *General Economic Tables*, pp.16-18, 1966.
- Census of India 1971, Series 1-India. Paper 3 of 1972: *Economic Characteristics of Population (Selected Tables)*. New Delhi 1972.
- Desai, Neera et al. 1984. *Women's Studies and the Social Sciences: A Report from India*. In: *Women's Studies International. A Supplement to the Women's Studies Quarterly*, No.3, April, 2-6.
- Dixon, Ruth. 1978. *Rural Women at Work: Strategies for Development in South*

- Asia. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press.
- Gulati, Leela. 1975a. Female Work Participation: A Study of Inter-State Differences. In: Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.10, Nos.1 and 2, 35-42.
- 1975b. Occupational Distribution of Working Women: An Inter-State Comparison. In: Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.10, No.43, 1692-1704.
1978. Profile of a Female Agricultural Labourer. In: Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.13, No.12, A 27 - A 35.
1981. Profiles in Female Poverty: A Study of Five Poor Working Women in Kerala. Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation.
1984. Fisherwomen on the Kerala Coast. Geneva: International Labour Office.
- Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). 1975. Status of Women in India. A Synopsis of the Report of the National Committee on the Status of Women (1971-1974). New Delhi: Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
- Harris, Barbara. 1977. Paddy Milling: Problems in Policy and the Choice of Technology. In: B.H. Farmer (ed.). Green Revolution? Technology and Change in Rice-Growing Areas of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press.
- Jain, Devaki. 1980. Women's Quest for Power: Five Indian Case Studies. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.
- Jain, Devaki and Malini Chand. 1981a. Report on a Time Allocation Study - its Methodological Implications. Paper presented at the Technical Seminar on Women's Work and Employment, mimeo. New Delhi: Institute of Social Studies Trust.
- 1981b. Patterns of Female Work: Implications for Statistical Design, Economic Classification and Social Priorities. Paper presented at the First National Conference on Women's Studies, mimeo. Bombay: SNDT Women's University.
- Kalpagam, U. 1981. Labour in Small Industry. Case of Export Garment Industry in Madras. In: Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.16, No.48, 1957-1968.
- Karlekar, Malavia. 1982. Poverty and Women's Work: A Study of Sweeper Women in Delhi. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.
- Kaul, Inge. 1973. Zur Diskussion der gesellschaftlichen Position der Frau in Indien: Ein Literaturbericht. In: Internationales Asienforum, Vol.4, 599-614.
- Khan, M. E., S.K.Ghosh Dastidar and R.Singh. 1983. Nutrition and Health Practices among Rural Women - A Case Study of Uttar Pradesh, India. Working Paper No.31. Delhi: Operations Research Group.
- Kelkar, Govind. 1981. Impact of the Green Revolution on Women's Work Participation and Sex Roles. Paper presented for the International Labour Office Tripartite Asian Regional Seminar, Rural Development and Women, Mahabaleshwar, India, April. Geneva: Inter-

- national Labour Office.
- Krishna Raj, Maithreyi. 1980. Approaches to Self Reliance - Some Urban Models. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.
1983. Research on Women and Work in the Seventies - Where do we go from here?, Research Unit on Women's Studies, mimeo. Bombay: SNDT Women's University.
- and Vibhuti Patel. 1981. Women's Liberation and the Political Economy of Housework. Paper presented at the First National Conference on Women's Studies, mimeo. Bombay: SNDT Women's University.
- Mathew, Molly. 1979. Women Workers in the Unorganized Sector of Coir Industry in Kerala. ICSSR Programme of Women's Studies, mimeo. New Delhi: ICSSR.
- Mazumdar, Vina, Kumud Sharma and Sarathi Acharya. 1979. Country Review and Analysis on the Role and Participation of Women in Agriculture and Rural Development in India. ICSSR Programme on Women's Studies, mimeo. New Delhi: ICSSR.
- Mehra, Rekha. 1983. Rural Development Programmes: Neglect of Women. In: Rekha Mehra and K.Saradmoni. Women and Rural Transformation: Two Studies. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- Mencher, Joan P., K.Saradmoni and Janaki Panicker. 1979. Women in Rice Cultivation: Some Research Tools. In: Studies in Family Planning, Vol. 10, No. 11/12, 408-412.
- Mencher, Joan P. and K.Saradmoni. 1982. Muddy Feet, Dirty Hands: Rice Production and Female Agricultural Labour. In: Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 17, No. 52, A 149-A 167.
- Mencher, Joan P. 1985. Women's Agricultural Labour and Landowners in Kerala and Tamil Nadu: Some Questions about Gender and Autonomy in the Household. Paper presented at the Asian Regional Conference on Women and the Household, mimeo. New Delhi: Indian Statistical Institute, Jan.
- Menon, Usha. 1982. Women and Household Labour. In: Social Scientist, Vol. 10, No. 7, 30-42.
- Mies, Maria. 1980a. Capitalist Development and Subsistence Reproduction: Rural Women in India. In: Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2-14.
- 1980b. Housewives Produce for the World Market: The Lace Makers of Narsapur. World Employment Programme Researching Working Paper No. WEP 10/WO 16. Geneva: International Labour Office, Dec. Published 1982: The Lace Makers of Narsapur: Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market. London: Zed Press.
1982. The Dynamics of the Sexual Division of Labour and Integration of Rural Women into the World Market. In: Lourdes Benerfa (ed.). Women and World Development: The Sexual Division of Labour in Rural Societies. New York: Praeger Publications, 1-28.
1984. Indian Women in Subsistence and Agricultural Labour. World

Employment Programme Research Working Paper No. WEP 10/WP
34. Geneva: International Labour Office.

- Mitra, Ashok et al. 1980. *The Status of Women: Shifts in Occupational Participation 1961-71*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.
- Mitra, Manoshi. 1984. *Mata Aur Gau-Mata: The Women and the Sacred Cow in Diary Production*. Mimeo.
- Mukherjee, Mukul. 1984. *Women in Agriculture: A Statistical Overview*. Paper presented at the Second National Conference on Women's Studies, mimeo. Trivandrum.
- Nair, Arvindakshan. 1979. *Women Workers in the Cashew Industry in Kerala*. ICSSR Programme on Women's Studies, mimeo. Delhi: ICSSR.
- Noponen, Helzi (formerly Hilde Jeffers). 1981. *Organizing Women Petty Traders and Producers: A Case Study of Working Women's Forum, Madras*. Mimeo. Berkeley: University of California, Nov.
- Omvedt, Gail et al. 1981. *Effects of Agricultural Development on the Status of Women*. Paper prepared for the International Labour Office Tripartite Asian Regional Seminar, Rural Development and Women, Mahabaleshwar, India, April. Geneva: International Labour Office.
- Saradmoni, K. 1982. *Women's Status in Changing Agrarian Relations: A Kerala Experience*. In: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.17, No. 5, 155-162.
1983. *Changing Land Relations and Women: A Case Study of Palghat District, Kerala*. In: Rekha Mehra and K. Saradmoni. *Women and Rural Transformation*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- Sebstad, Jennefer. 1982. *Struggle and Development among Self Employed Women: A Report on the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)*, Ahmedabad, India. Washington: US Agency for International Development, Office of Urban Development, March.
1985. *Women and Self Reliance in India - the SEWA Story*. London: Zed Press.
- Sen, Gita. 1983a. *Women's Work and Women Agricultural Labourers: A Study of the Indian Census*. Working Paper No.159, mimeo. Trivandrum: Centre for Development Studies, Febr.
- 1983b. *Women Agricultural Labourers - Regional Incidence and Employment*. Working Paper No.168, mimeo. Trivandrum: Centre for Development Studies, April.
- and Chiranjib Sen. 1985. *Women's Domestic Work and Economic Activity: Results from National Sample Survey*. In: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.20, No.17, WS 49-WS 56.
- Sethi, Raj Mohini. 1982. *Female Labour in Agriculture: A Case of Punjab*. Chandigarh: Punjab University, Department of Sociology.
- Sharma, Kumud. Undated. *Policies for Employment Generation: Impact on Women*. ICSSR Programme on Women's Studies, mimeo, New Delhi: ICSSR.
- Sinha, J.N. 1975. *Female Work Participation: A Comment*. In: *Economic*

and Political Weekly, Vol. 10, No. 16, 672-674.

Sundar, Pushpa. 1981. Characteristics of Female Employment: Implications of Research and Policy. In: Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 16, No. 19, 863-871.

Tellis-Nayak, Jessie B. and Selena Costa-Pinto (eds.). 1979. Towards Self-Reliance: Income Generation for Women. Indian Social Institute Programme for Women's Development, New Delhi. Indore: Satprakashan Sanchar Kendra.

Tellis-Nayak, Jessie B. 1982. Education and Income Generation for Women: Non-Formal Approaches. New Delhi: Indian Social Institute.

Towards Equality: Report of the Committee On The Status Of Women In India. 1974. New Delhi: Government of India, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare.

Note:

The ILO working papers cited are preliminary documents. The responsibility for opinions expressed in them rests solely with the authors. This circulation does not in any way constitute an endorsement of these opinions by the ILO.