WOMEN WORKERS AND DISCRIMINATION IN INDIA

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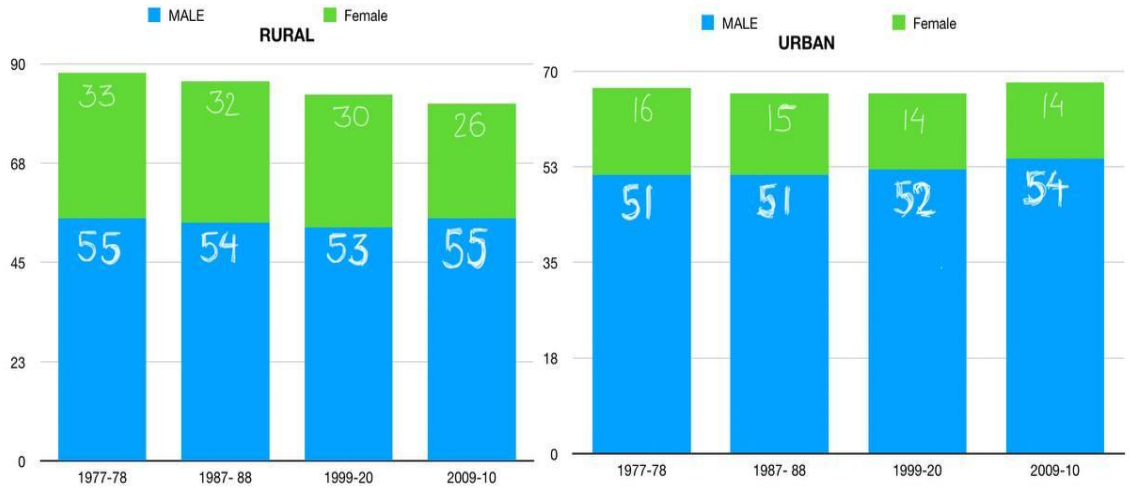
Indian society is conditioned to believe that nature intended women to be mothers and men to be protectors, that a women's place is the home and a man's the world; that ultimately women are responsible for the kitchen and the children, whereas men are accountable chiefly to their public roles, as wage-earners and head of families.

Clearly, our ideas of male and female natures derive less from empirical facts and observations and more from norms and expectations that govern our lives.

Hence we see that according to a report by National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) for the year 2009-2010 workforce participation rates for women in urban area is only 14% to total population as against 54% for men and 26% women form the workforce in rural area as against 55% men.



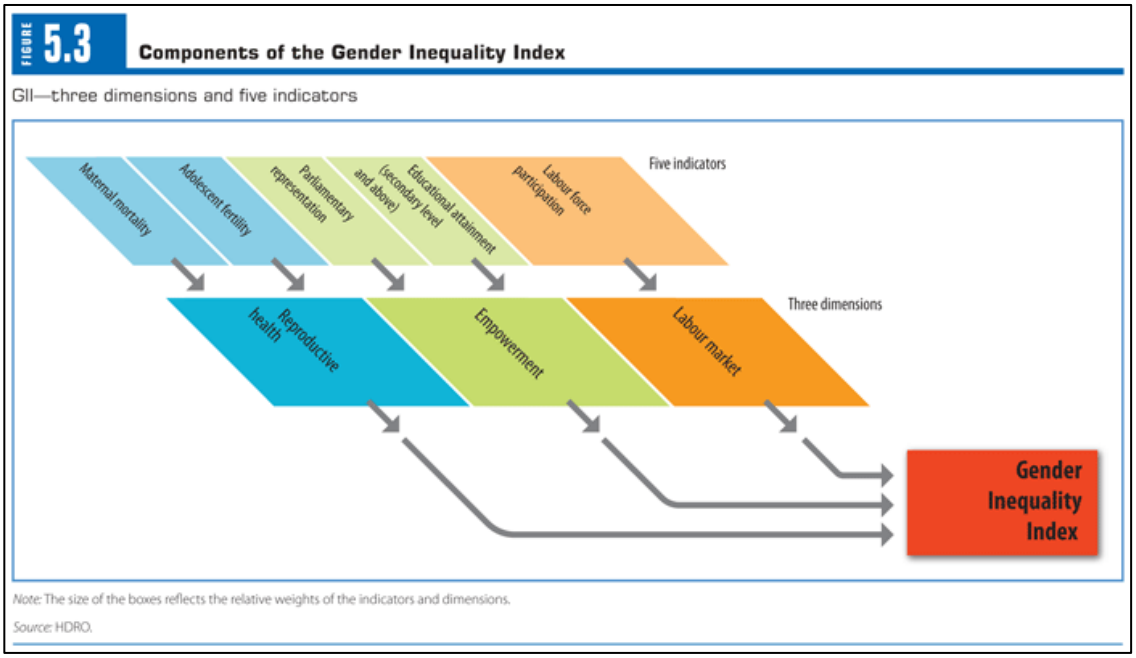
Mainstream economics has traditionally not given much attention to gender analysis. However, more recent contributions from the fields of labour economics, development studies, and feminist analysis recognize and substantiate the role of gender equality for economic growth and socio-economic development.

Such analytical frameworks have enriched the understanding of issues such as 'missing women's work' and unpaid household labour, the 'care economy, gender equality in labour market and so on. Still, the focus has usually remained at the analysis of the micro-level; engendering macroeconomics and macro-economic policy remains an underdeveloped area in research and even more, in political practices.

In India, there has been progress in gendering policy with attempts on gender budgeting and training on gender issues. But the understanding of engendering macroeconomic policy and what it means to undertake at the macro level is still at a nascent stage. Towards this end we have to engage with policy makers/analysts, development

practitioners, research institutions, civil society organizations and the academia.

The following is the Gender Inequality Index (GII) by the United Nations Development Programme;



The Gender Inequality Index (GII) reflects women's disadvantage in three dimensions-reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market for as many countries as data of reasonable quality allow.

The index shows the loss in human development due to inequality between female and male achievements in these dimensions. It ranges from 0, which indicates that women and men are equally, to 1, which indicates that women fare as poorly as possible in all measured dimensions. Two indicators measure the health dimension: maternal mortality ratio and the adolescent fertility rate.

The empowerment dimension is also measured by two indicators: the share of parliamentary seats held by each sex and by secondary and higher education attainment levels. The labour dimension is measured by women's participation in the work force.

The Gender Inequality Index is designed to reveal the extent to which national achievements in these aspects of human development are eroded by gender inequality, and to provide empirical foundations for policy analysis and advocacy efforts.

Ideology underpins patriarchal social norms, values, traditions, and customs which have created asymmetrical gender relations, and which in turn have been internalized by both women and men.

The family as the primary social unit is seen to be a central location of unequal gender relations and to be the earliest instrument of social control.

Within the family, gendered and generational stratification are reflected in the degree of access of family members to resources and control of resources, even those generated by themselves, in the division of household labour, in authority in decision making, and in the control of sexuality.

Asymmetrical relations are reflected further in a hierarchic gendered labour market and in a "glass ceiling" that impedes women's access to decision-making positions in the public sphere.

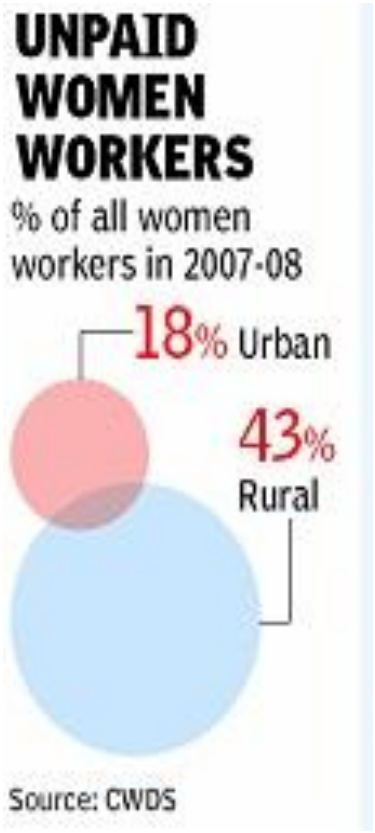
"Power" tends to be defined in binary terms of dominance and subordination despite the evidence of contradictions within specific circumstances. As Kandiyotti (1988)[1] points out, patriarchy implies "a monolithic conception of male dominance", and classic patriarchy had a specific pattern of three generational patrilocal households, early marriage of girls into male headed households and transfer of dowry to men, invisibility of women's labour, and submission to all men.

In the rural sector women have a major contribution in agricultural activities. Except for ploughing, they perform all major work like sowing, weeding, manuring and harvesting.

Storage is also considered responsibility of women in rural India.

However, women in agriculture are unpaid family workers or wage employees. They are rarely employers or own-account workers in agricultural sector. Similarly women largely manage allied activities in the rural sector. For example, they generally manage milch cattle such as cows, buffaloes and goats. Women are exclusively responsible for managing and handling dung either for manure or fuel purposes. These activities are performed by women in rural setting besides their normal activities of cooking, bearing and rearing of children and taking care of the family. Their reproductive and productive roles are so inter-twined these are not only inseparable but the latter is undermined. Women's work is taken for granted and treated as a norm to adhere to, indoctrinated in women at a very nascent stage as young girls to give foremost importance to housework, labouring in the field, taking care of animals in rural areas , cultivating the land, harvesting it and yet not have any power over decision making nor have any power over resources resulting from farm work.

According to a report by CWDS (Center for Women's Development Study) for the year 2007-08, 43% of women in rural area are workers in the rural economy and yet are unpaid for their productive activities.



One of latest government surveys conducted on the topic in 2010 found that 84% of all rural women in India are now engaged in one or the other agricultural activity.

A number, which presents a remarkable rise from the pre-liberalization period before 1990, when rural women in India did not even have the critical right to till the land they were living on with their families.

But the dichotomy inherent to this development lies in the fact that women now are in an increasing number working on the land they are dwelling on, but they rarely possess any ownership, or management rights to this land.

A position, which is weakening and oppressing the women's agency, as well as in certain ways debilitating the productivity of agricultural work. [2]

Clearly the unpaid workforce in rural areas is largely composed of peasant wives or daughters working on/cultivating/supervising land owned by either husband/in laws or father/parents. In urban areas, on the other hand, unpaid workers are more evenly distributed across industries.

Of the 43 per cent of unpaid workers among the urban self-employed in 2007-08, more than two thirds were in community and personal services (including domestic workers, teachers, launderers, beauticians, etc), a little less than one fourth in manufacturing (primarily homebased piece rated work).

This makes it difficult to any longer accept that unpaid work by women is solely a feature of 'traditional production systems/sectors that are outside the contemporary monetized value exchange economy associated with 'modern' capitalist social relations.[3]

Domestic work is the single largest sector employing women in urban areas.

What is significant is that even though 90% of domestic workers are women, yet domestic work is not even included in the central government's list of scheduled employment.

Hence domestic workers get no recognition as workers, and are consequently, bereft of a law governing payment of wages.

On the International Domestic Workers Day [9 January 2013] , three main demands were placed before the government by the National Domestic Workers Movement organisation.

1. Inclusion of Domestic Workers within the purview of the Protection of Women Against Sexual Harassment at workspace Bill 2010.
2. Support ILO convention 2011 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers.
3. A Comprehensive Legislation for Domestic Workers.

Similar observations can be made with regards to India's huge informal sector. According to a 2011 paper of the International Labour Organization, 83.8 % of South Asian women are engaged in so called 'vulnerable employment'.

The work that these women are doing can in most cases be qualified as 'casual labour', piece-work such as the manufacturing of garments and other small items, produced within the restraints of the workers' household.

Informal labour is generally qualified by the absence of decent labour conditions as recommended by the ILO and a lack of any sort of secure and sufficient wages. Women workers present a considerable share of this so called informal workforce, a share that has in fact risen substantially over the last 20 years.

Precisely this increase in the informal economy has to be critical because it mirrors the developments in the formal economy. Obviously, women's employment in the official and recognized sphere of the formal economy has to be the desired aim of any economic policy directed at women workers.

But while the percentage of women employed in the informal economy remains high, the

number of Indian women engaged in formal, secure and recognized labour is still minimal. Only 14-15% of workers in the formal sector are women, their numbers hardly rising over the past years.

National average of women, above the age of fifteen working in urban India is only 20%. Most of the women are employed in areas with least growth. Maximum number of women drop out of job market in their 30's and 40's for childcare.

In 1974, the government of India produced the *Towards Equality* report, which unpacked in a systematic and fundamental manner the horrifying nature of the discrimination that women were subject to and proposed a series of far reaching changes that needed to take place for justice to be done to women.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s women's activism demanded an end to sexual harassment at workplace; they called for trade unions to be more sensitive to issues concerning women and demanded that women's labour be accounted for in more precise terms.

During this period, the famous *Shramshakti* report on women workers in the informal sector was commissioned (the commission that produced the report was headed by Ela Bhatt of SEWA and set up by the government of India in 1988).

The report, when completed, provided a detailed account of women's working lives, the economic exploitation and social and sexual humiliation they faced in the course of their work, the challenges to their health and the state of the country's laws with respect to women workers. The report demonstrated that the use of cheap and exploited female labour was central to industrial and economic growth (and to capitalism).[4]

Theoretically speaking, there are three different spheres of women's work or labour: the first sphere where the woman is totally restricted to the household, performing all the so-called duties and work within these confinements and not engaging in any interaction with the world outside the family. This recognition, and thereby the confidence that a women can gain from her work, increases gradually.

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In the second sphere, a woman would already be engaged in wage labour and work in the informal economy or in agriculture, but without actually being recognized as a worker.

In this sphere, the woman would be involved in various kinds of small-scale productive work, working either on piece rate payments or, in agriculture, for the benefit of the family.

In the third sphere, she has acquired employment in the actual formal economy.

Now, in the second sphere, when the woman is working in the informal economy, she often still works from home, remaining confined to the restrictive and casual ally treated sphere of the household. Overburdened with the multiple tasks she now has to accomplish at home, there is a risk of getting entrapped in this stage. Without any interaction with the knowledge-society, the home worker doesn't have any opportunity to enhance her capabilities.

It definitely is essential, therefore, to move on from this sphere that restricts women to the confinement of home; the strangulating boundaries of domesticity.

Not treating the second sphere as the ideal condition of work, it can be argued that the second sphere does present a step forward, providing the woman with at least a small income and therefore the chance, to be recognized for the work she is doing. This recognition and therby the confidence that a women can gain from her work, increases gradually.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), for instance, is a very good example of the fact that the

state can legislate change. In MGNREGA's case, this change occurred in the form of gender wage parity.

Work in wage labour, as long as performed under constructive working conditions, has also proven to increase a women's confidence by supplying her with independent income that contributes to the family's revenue.

This income presents an important factor if we discuss the empowering effects of women's labour, a point that stands irrespective a women's qualification, literacy and education: If the women's income is comparatively lower than the income of the family's male members, she is often pressured to give up her work which is regarded as not profitable for the family. And as a gendered wage-gap, where women are getting less money than men for the same work, is in fact prevalent in India, this scenario is likely to happen in a majority of households. These gender-specific wage differences can be regarded as a symptom of the patriarchal structure of the society we are living in, where a women's work generally seems to be of less worth than a man's.

Women's integration into the labour market thereby becomes a question of India's societal structure, a patriarchal structure that is mirrored in a gender specific wage gap. In order to enable the structural change that we call emancipation or empowerment, women first have to be diverted from their traditional roles as housekeepers and be involved in the 'knowledge society' . It is true that women are currently shouldering a 'double-burden', performing the traditionally female household work plus modern wage labour.

A report released in 2010 by Catalyst (a membership non-profit) that aims to increase work opportunities for women, says only about 11% of Indian CEOs are women.

And of these CEOs, over one third are from the families that founded or own the business, according to data from executive search firm EMA Partners International cited by the Catalyst report. At one end a group of women CEO's like Chanda Kochar, Naina Lal Kidwai lead the march for equal rights at the workplace, at the other, millions of poor women struggle to get the basic pay and recognition for their work. The most ubiquitous reason for the same being that women are denied education and resources and opportunities to develop themselves thus resulting in mass discrimination reflecting in literacy rate, higher education , professional job front etc. A comprehensive policy change and change in mindset of the people at large and legislation to support it will alone result in positive change in the future.

1. Kandiyotti, Deniz Bargaining with Patriarchy, Gender and Society 2 (3) 274-90
2. Informalisation of Women's Work in India- Interview quote by Govind Kalekar held on 23rd January 2012 (Govind Kelkar is the Senior Adviser: International Center for Research on Women, and Rural Development Institute, New Delhi, India. Earlier from April 2004 to March 2012, she worked as senior consultant with the position Senior Advisor: Programme and Research' ,Economic Empowerment Unit, UN Women, South Asia Office, New Delhi.)
3. GENDER DIMENSIONS: EMPLOYMENT TRENDS IN INDIA, 1993-94 TO 2009-10 Indrani Mazumdar and Neetha N.© Centre for Women's Development Studies, 2011
4. V.Geetha; *Patriarchy* (Stree 2007)