



SYMPOSIUM ON WOMEN'S LABOUR:  
CONDITIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

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WOMEN IN THE UNORGANISED SECTOR  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO KERALA

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Introduction

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part attempts to present a macro-level picture of work participation by women in India as a whole as well as Kerala State and also the extent to which working women are concentrated in the unorganised sector of the economy in India and Kerala. Having given the macro background, we offer on the second part of this paper insights gained on the basis of micro-level studies of the working women in Kerala drawn from the different occupational categories. We concentrate for this purpose, on questions relating to conditions and consequences of working in the unorganised sectors.

Part I

Women workers in India form a rather small proportion of the country's total female population. Going by the 1981 census of Population only one-fifth of the total women are in the labour force. The remaining over-whelming majority, comprising of around 80%, is made up of women, who are classified as non-working, because they are not economically active in the sense of participating in any economically productive activity.

Of those women who work, two-thirds are engaged full-time in work whereas the other one-third are classified as marginal workers.

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Marginal workers are defined as those who have been economically active some time during the year but have not been so for the major part of the year.

Marginality is principally a female phenomenon. While one out of every three working women is only marginally occupied in economic activity, this is true of only one out of twenty-five working men.

Two major sources of statistical information on work participation by women in India are (1) the decennial Population Censuses and (2) the National Sample Surveys (NSS). The latter cover employment once every five years. We have relied principally on the former because information is available for a longer time period.

Table I presents the macro picture of work participation, by men as well as women, as it has evolved since the turn of the century. It cannot escape notice that (1) women's work participation rate in the country as a whole has been significantly lower than that of men and (2) the relative gap between men and women in this regard has been increasing so that while during 1901-21, women's work participation rate was a little over half that of men, in most recent years, 1961-81, women's work participation has been markedly less than half of the rate for men.

Table I - Percentage of Economically Active Population, 1901-1981, All India

Census period	Percentage of economically active among		Women's work participation as a percentage of men's work participation rate	Term used for denoting the economically active
	men	women		
1901	61.11	31.70	52	Actual workers
1911	61.90	33.73	54	Actual workers
1921	60.52	32.67	54	Actual workers
1931	58.27	27.63	47	"Earners"
1951	54.05	23.30	43	"Self-supporting"
1961	57.16	27.93	49	"Worker"
1971	52.75	14.22	27	"Main activity Worker" + non-workers having secondary work
1981	53.19	20.85	39	"Main activity worker + marginal workers."

- Notes : (1) Data for 1941 was not tabulated on a full count basis due to pre-occupations in the Second World War.
- (2) The reduction in work participation rate of women between 1961 and 1981 has not yet been fully analysed though it was expected that in view of the definitional change introduced for the 1981 census the 1981 rate would be closer to the 1961 rate. The fact that it is not so is possibly because of the ordering of questions on work participation in 1961 yielded higher work participation responses.

Sources: Census of India, 1901 to 1981.

Is declining work participation genuine?

The demographic factor apart, one major factor responsible for the declining work participation rates for men as well as women is the changing concepts of work used in recent censuses. It would appear that this tightening in the definition of work operated particularly against women. So, a part at least of the

enlarging gap between men and women in regard to work participation could be considered purely statistical. At the same time, however, it is an acknowledged fact that many traditional avenues of employment got closed under the impact of modernisation as traditional industries gave way to modern industries and that this affected women's employment particularly adversely. At the same time, although the census data for recent years indicate a decline in women's work participation this is not quite supported by evidence from other sources of information. For instance, although the census figures show decline in women's work participation from around 28% in 1961 to 14% in 1971 ( a sharp change by any standard), the NSS data show virtually no change during this period. For the subsequent period also, the female work participation has possibly remained stable, although unadjusted figures yielded by even NSS would indicate a decline.<sup>1/</sup>

#### Occupational distribution

The 1981 population census gives us sector-wise distribution of workers, by four broad categories, which is reproduced in Table II.

It can be seen that (1) While nearly 63 per cent of the male workers are engaged in agriculture, the corresponding proportion for working women is 78 per cent; (2) the proportion of working women engaged as agricultural labourers, to be distinguished from cultivators who have an interest in land either by virtue of ownership or

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<sup>1/</sup> See K C Seal Women in the Labour Force in India: A Macro Level Statistical Profile International Labour Organisation (ARTEP), Women in the Indian Labour Force, 1981.

Table II. - Distribution of Workers by Sex, and Broad Occupational Categories, 1981.

Occupational categories	W o m e n			M e n		
	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban
I Agricultural Work						
i) Cultivators	33.0	36.9	5.1	43.8	55.3	5.3
ii) Agricultural Labourers	45.6	49.6	6.3	19.8	24.3	4.7
II Non-agricultural work						
iii) Household industry	5.2	4.2	17.9	3.7	3.2	5.5
Iv) Other workers	16.2	9.3	66.6	32.8	17.3	84.5
<u>Memorandum items:</u>						
1. Work participation rate exclusive of marginal workers	14.1	16.5	7.6	51.2	52.2	48.2
2. Work participation rate inclusive of marginal workers	20.9	23.9	10.6	53.2	54.3	49.7

Source: Census of India, Series I, India, Paper 3 of 1981.

lease or both, is more than twice that for working men; (3) While the respective proportions for working men and women engaged in household industry do not diverge widely between the urban and rural sectors, there is a marked difference between the proportion of urban working women engaged in household industry and that of urban working men; and (4) the proportion of working women engaged in 'other work' is almost half of that for working men.

It ought to be noted also that work participation of urban women is less than one sixth of work participation of urban men. While almost half of the urban male population in India is engaged in work, hardly one out of every thirteen urban women is economically active.

#### Women in the organized sector

The term organized sector refers to that segment of the Indian economy which offers regular employment, as for instance, in the case when one is employed in corporate establishments or government offices and institutions. In this sector, as Jan Breman puts it, "we are dealing with a set of labour relations which are functionally or hierarchically related, with employment situations which can be based in official statistics and finally, with labour whose working conditions are controlled by law<sup>2/</sup> Labour performed outside of this sector can be said to be engaged in the unorganised sector.

A narrower definition would exclude persons engaged on work as cultivation from employment in the unorganised sector on the grounds: (a) that they are working on land which is self owned or given to them under some arrangement of lease so that there is considerably greater security of work which a cultivator enjoys; (b) they work for themselves or their households and are, therefore, possibly as exposed to the vagaries of exploitation to which persons working in wage employ-

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<sup>2/</sup> See Jan Breman, Labour Relations in the Formal and Informal Sectors. Report of a Case Study in South Gujarat. International Journal of Peasant Studies, April, 1977.

ment in the unorganised sector are generally subjected.<sup>3/</sup>

Most, if not all, employment in the unorganized sector is irregular in the sense that one generally gets employed and paid from day to day, regardless of whether work is rewarded on time or piece rate, so that there is virtually no security of work.

A study for 1971 which divides occupations into traditional, modern and mixed occupations shows that while 8.4 per cent of the working men were engaged in modern occupations, the corresponding figure for working women was only 3.9 per cent.<sup>4/</sup> It is certainly possible to argue that all modern occupations are not necessarily performed within, what may be considered as, the organized sector. Still, it will not be unreasonable to assume that the bulk of the employment in the modern occupations would be accounted for by the organised sector. So, as an indication of the gap between men and women, the figures given above can be taken as of interest.

According to NSS (27th Round) also, while as many as 14.2 per cent of the working men were "working in enterprise/profession as a regular salaried employee or wage labourer", the corresponding percentage for working women was only 4.3.<sup>5/</sup> There can thus be little

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<sup>3/</sup> See K C Seal, op. cit. The NSS (27th Round) draws distinction between cultivators working in their own right and those working as helpers. While three-quarters of the women cultivators work as helpers, only two-fifths of the men cultivators are so classified. Clearly the status of most women cultivators being that of a helper, it cannot be considered as particularly high even though this status can be said to lead to greater job security. It certainly indicates the marginality of women cultivators.

<sup>4/</sup> See Ashok Mitra, et al. The status of women, Shifts in Occupational Participation, 1964, 1971, (1980).

<sup>5/</sup> See K.C. Seal, op cit.



doubt that most working women are outside the pale of the modern, organised sector.

#### Work Participation in Kerala State

As can be seen from Table III, work participation of women in Kerala State has also been declining more or less continuously, practically all through the present century. However, while women's work participation in Kerala was somewhat higher than in the country as a whole at the turn of the century, it is no longer so now. In 1981, fewer women (17%) were found to be economically active in Kerala than in the whole of India (21%). But this phenomenon has to be viewed in the light of the fact that thanks to the relatively fast growth of population in Kerala over the first seventy years of this century, the age structure of Kerala's population should have diverged further from the rest of the country. That is why work participation rate declined for both men as well as women in the State. Lately, however, there is evidence that due to the spread of family planning, population growth in Kerala is tending to lag behind that in the country as a whole. Literacy also has been increasing markedly faster in Kerala, than in the rest of the country so that both men and women in Kerala tend to spend longer in schools than in the rest of the country.

It is noteworthy that while work participation rate for women is lower now in Kerala than in the country as a whole, the urban rural difference is less sharp in this regard in Kerala. For the country as a whole, work participation rate for urban women is less

TABLE III - Work Participation Rate: by sex, 1901 to 1981.

Census Year	Men	Women	Women's work participation rate as per cent of men's work participation rate
1901	57.3	32.7	57
1911	53.8	28.9	54
1921	51.1	24.9	49
1931	50.0	35.9	72
1951	46.7	18.3	39
1961	47.2	19.7	42
1971	45.2	14.6	30
1981	45.3	17.0	38

Source: Census of India, 1901 - 1981.

than half that for rural women whereas in Kerala State the urban rate is two-thirds the rural rate.

As regards the distribution of working women in Kerala according to the major occupations they pursue (see Table IV), the major differences with the all-India picture are that (1) in Kerala hardly one out of every 20 working women is classified as a cultivator whereas for the country as a whole one-third of the working women are so classified, and (2) in Kerala, more than four out of every ten working women are occupied in work other than agriculture and household industry, whereas in the country as a whole only one out of every six

working women is so occupied. At the same time, the urban-rural disparities in regard to the occupational distribution of working women are only less sharp in Kerala than for the country as a whole.

TABLE IV - Distribution of Workers by sex, Sector and Broad Occupational Categories, 1981, Kerala.

Occupational Distribution	Women			Men		
	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban
I Agricultural Workers						
(1) Cultivators	5.1	5.7	1.5	15.8	18.8	2.8
(2) Agricultural labour	43.0	47.8	14.2	23.4	27.2	6.9
II Non-agricultural Workers:						
(1) Household industry	8.2	8.5	5.8	2.8	2.8	2.7
(2) Other work	43.8	38.0	78.5	58.0	51.3	87.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<u>Main item</u>						
i) Work participation rate (excluding marginal workers)	12.8	13.5	9.7	40.8	40.9	40.2
ii) Work participation rate (including marginal workers)	17.0	18.2	11.9	45.3	45.7	43.4

Source: Census of India, 1981.

The fact that a significantly larger proportion of working men as well as women in Kerala are engaged in work other than agriculture and household industry than in the country as a whole, could in itself be taken to suggest that possibly the organized sector is more prominent

in Kerala. This comes out sufficiently clearly from Table V in which an attempt has been made to construct a comparative picture for Kerala State as well as the country as a whole.

TABLE V - Distribution of Working Persons by Sex and Sector, India and Kerala, 1971.

	M e n		W o m e n	
	India	Kerala	India	Kerala
I 1. Agricultural Sector	67.44	46.91	80.71	53.70
2. Non-agricultural sector	32.56	53.09	19.29	46.30
II 3. Organised Sector	10.91	11.84	6.41	11.32
4. Unorganised Sector	89.19	88.16	93.59	88.68
5. Unorganised Sector excluding cultivators	43.46	66.35	63.83	84.04

- Notes: (1) Given the distribution of the working force between the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors on the basis of the population census, the distribution between organised and unorganised sectors has been arrived at by dovetailing that distribution with the information available for the non-agricultural sector from other sources, especially Employment Market Information (EMI) which collects data for almost the entire organised non-agricultural sector since 1966.
- (2) Figures in Row (4) are the residuals worked out on the assumption that all agricultural employment and the employment in the non-agricultural sector not included in Row (3) comprise the total employment in the unorganised sector. A narrower definition of the unorganised sector which excludes cultivators will give us the figures in Row (5).

It can be seen that (1) there is no major difference between Kerala and the rest of the country in the proportion of working men employed in the organised sector; (2) there is, however, major differ-

ence when we come to the working women employed in the organised sector since the proportion for Kerala is almost twice as high as for the country as a whole; and (3) though the proportion of working women in the unorganised sector including cultivation is lower in Kerala than in the country as a whole, this is no longer true of employment if cultivation is excluded. Thus, at the macro-level, the employment of women can still be said to be much more concentrated in the unorganised sector of the economy in Kerala than in the country as a whole.

## Part II

Our observations, about working women in the unorganized sector in Kerala are based on intensive case studies by the author covering life stories of five women belonging to the bottom of the income pyramid. These women were chosen taking into account the broad occupational distribution of female working population in the State. While one of the women studied is an agricultural labourer, two are women engaged in industries, one in coir and the other in brick making. Of the remaining two, one is a fish vendor and the other a construction worker. In almost every case the family was studied for a period of two years.

Clearly, if the above sample of five was to be statistically representative, the choice should have been of three women engaged in agriculture and one each in the secondary and tertiary sectors. However that sort of representation was not what was being aimed at.

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6/ See Leela Gulati, Profiles in Female Poverty, A study of Five Poor Working Women in Kerala, 1981. Hindustan Publishing Corporation, New Delhi

If one could do a larger number of profiles, one would probably have tried to have women working in still different occupations so that one had an idea of the kinds of similarities that existed between them.

The five working women studied are not untypical, in spite of the individualities of each one of them. There is no reason therefore why one should not take the liberty of drawing some broad inferences and making some generalisations on the basis of these profiles, if only to spur further enquiry and research.

Why do women work in the unorganized sector?

By and large, on the basis of our micro-level observations of women workers, it would appear that women go to work because of the irregular nature of employment that their men are involved in and the low incomes they make. By taking to work these women feel that it can both minimize the number of days either of them is without work and also supplement the family's income. All the women in these case studies started work as young children supplementing the incomes of their parents who also were in casual wage labour. The construction worker came from a family of artisans forced into unskilled wage labour with the decline of the handloom industry. The brick worker was an orphan children who started going out to work at the age of seven or eight to pay her keep. The agricultural worker's parents were involved in the same wage labour and the coir worker's mother also was defibring coir.

What is the range of occupations open to women?

As regards the kind of work opportunities open to women working in the unorganized sector, very often the choice is made for them in the sense that they go for the type of work their parents or relatives are involved in. Very often they are initiated into these jobs as children. Gaining entry into new work sites even if it is the same kind of work or moving into an altogether new area of work, even if it is totally unskilled is still difficult. Competition for these jobs is often intense and unless one has the right 'contacts' and advance information by word of mouth where job opportunities are going, getting new and different kinds of work pose problems. Sometimes even if work is available, distant locations of work sites create problems of getting to work and back. Usually women prefer to stick to the same kind of work they are familiar with and pick locations that are close by. Four of the five women in our case studies are even today in the same occupation as their mothers and grand mothers were. It is only the construction worker who has moved away from the job she did as a child. But she had to move downwards from a relatively skilled job of weaving to an unskilled job of a construction worker./

The similar nature of work

Though all the five women we have studied are working in different occupations, the kind of work open to them is quite similar in many ways. Whatever the occupation, the job description essentially remains the same, being generally unskilled, low paid and physically exhausting. Three out of these five women are basically headload transporters of

goods. The construction and brick workers both work almost exclusively as headload transporters. Even the agricultural labourer, when she is not transplanting or weeding, she is doing headload transportation. In essence, the difference between one job to another is not much. In large part, the work for women consists of a narrow range of non-descript jobs, mostly calling for unskilled labour and manual strength. Though this holds good for men as well who are in casual wage labour, the problem is more serious for women since the overwhelming proportion of women workers are restricted to only these kinds of jobs.

#### Sex discrimination in wages

One of the important consequences of working in the unorganised sector is that in wage payments discrimination exists on the basis of sex.

Wage payments are made for men as well as women either on piece rate or daily rate, basis. Of the five women studied, four work for wages. Out of these four, two are paid on piece rate basis and two are paid on daily rate basis.

The kind of sex discrimination women are subjected to can be both open and subtle. In coir and brick work, women are restricted to only certain jobs that are low paid, while in construction even when they do the same job, they are paid less.

Regardless of the system of wage payment, women get paid less than men in each of the four occupations. However, discrimination is not necessarily open. In brick making, men do not engage in head-



load transporting, the least paid work, and women never graduate to better paid work. A man can some day hope to become a moulder of clay into bricks but a woman can never. In construction where there is some overlap in work between men and women, there is both open as well as concealed sex discrimination. Women's daily wage is markedly less than men's.

In agriculture, sex discrimination is of the open type in that the women get paid less than men for the same job, but there are hardly any better jobs that even men can graduate to in the course of time.

In coir industry, on the other hand, sex discrimination is of a completely concealed or subtle variety. Because jobs are typed as male and female, and given the different piece rates fixed for those jobs, women end up getting distinctly lower wages than men.

#### Scope for vertical nobility

In none of these occupations studied, do women seem to have any scope for improvement in pay and work status. While for men there is some opportunity for learning and advancement, for women it is virtually a dead end. For example, in the construction industry, a man can become a mason if he is willing to learn the hard way and has the right contacts. In brick industry, while a man becomes a moulder in due course, women remain headload carriers all their lives. In coir too, the position is virtually the same. A woman husk beater may one day become a small contractor, still she will get paid less than the least paid man in the industry.



In traditional agriculture, the scope for vertical mobility is equally non-existent for both men and women. Some men may take on the status of a semi-cultivator like the coir worker's husband. Likewise, while the fish vendor remained a head load vendor all her life, her husband improved his position during that interlude in his life when he owned his own catamaran and a couple of nets. In other words, women begin at the bottom of the ladder and remain there all through their working life.

What is the norm?

With low wages and virtually at the bottom of the pyramid in status, with no scope for any improvement either in wages or job description, even women who have worked all their lives entertain the desire to give up work as soon as they possibly can. This is because the kind of work they do confers on them no prestige, nor offers them any kind of self respect or stimulation or an opportunity for advancement. By doing jobs that are hard, dirty and underpaid, neither the society nor the employer or the women themselves value or take pride in their working status. In spite of working and contributing to the family's income, women do not gain any status either in their own self estimation or in the social estimation. In the neighbourhoods where these working women live, the households which can afford not to send their women to work, specially manual work, gain in social esteem.

Still, of the five families studied, only one has made a serious, continuing effort to see that the female children are not pushed into their mother's work. The coir worker's two daughters

have gone to school regularly and both the parents appear to be equally earnest in seeing them through school so that the girls are qualified for better, preferably non-manual jobs. In the other four families studied, grown up daughters have already taken to mother's work and the ones still growing up have dropped from school and will most likely, follow suit.

#### Commitment to the family

The working women's commitment to the family in these households is far greater than that of the men, judging by whatever standards. Whether it is in terms of commitment towards the children or of wage contribution, the women seem to shoulder a greater sense of responsibility. Working women in the groups studied seem very often to be faced with the problem of desertion by menfolk so that they end up having to shoulder the complete responsibility of financing and running the household. Since most working women are married to men who are also in casual wage labour, this is a direct consequence of the instability of their economic situation. The man can hardly support the family even to start with and as the children arrive the situation becomes worse. One escape route for men is to leave their women. But when this happens, it is often when the household responsibilities are the greatest, with two or three young children to be supported and cared for. Whatever the reason, women rarely consider this option of walking out on their children. In the households studied, only men have walked out, not women. Therefore, in the sense of attachment to the children also, women's commitment is stronger than man's. In the

few cases of desertion I came across in the course of these studies, men have always moved out leaving the children to the care of the mother.

In three out of the five families studied, the working woman is now the principal earner. The construction worker has been deserted by her husband for several years now. The grown-up son, who has had eight years of schooling, is still to settle down to work. The daughter in her early teens, has yet to start going out to work. The brick worker's husband has retired from his work as a boatman. Her grown up sons and daughters are married and living separately with their own families. The grown up unmarried daughter earns her own keep and also saves a little for her marriage. The fish vendor's husband has not gone out fishing because of ill-health but at least two out of her five sons might soon start earning their keep. The eldest son, who has been to school, however, proved a liability because he would not dirty his hands and clothes doing fishing or any other manual work. The other two sons are too young to take to work. While the grown up married daughter is looking after her own family, the girl still in her early teens is occupied full-time doing household chores when the mother is out vending fish. So for these families, existence itself would be problematic if our principal respondents were not working. They are the mainstay of their families. In the other two families, i.e., of the agricultural labourer and the coir worker, the husbands are fully involved in work and are contributing to the upkeep of the family.

### Wage sharing

If one were to judge ~~the commitment of these women to the~~ family by the proportion of their wage or daily earnings which they take back home and compare it with what their husbands contributed when they were earning and living with them, women's commitment is clearly stronger than men's. Women invariably brought back home a larger proportion of their wage than their men.

Still another way of judging the commitment to the family would be the readiness to take up any job. Whereas women were prepared to take up any job when there was no work available in their own occupation, men generally tended to stick to their own occupation. While the agricultural labourer took up job in construction and brick making, her husband would do only loading and unloading of trucks.

### Sex discrimination in child rearing

In the households studied it was found that boys stayed longer in schools than girls. Boys were not expected to do virtually any household chores. They were also allowed much greater freedom to spend whatever wages they earned. On the other hand, girls had to do all the supporting household chores even when if they went to school. Often they were withdrawn from school when they were needed full time in the house. Girls also ended up contributing most of what they earned to the upkeep of the house when they went out to work.

Possibly among many other reasons for the attitude of partiality towards boys on the part of the women was that they hoped to be locked

after by their sons in their old age. Also while sons brought in dowry, <sup>Moreover</sup> the daughters were great liabilities. / in the case of the sons there was some hope that they would move into possibly a regular, permanent job, ~~the~~ dream most women aspire for, whereas the daughter probably will work all her life for a low wage and be hard up.

#### Sex discrimination in food distribution

Even in terms of food distribution within the household, discrimination seems to obtain against women and female children. Women and grown up girls are always supposed to take their meals after the men and grown up boys have taken.

Not only do men spend a larger part of their earnings on eating out but also in the meals they take at home they get preferential treatment. The brick worker's grown up, but still unmarried son spent the major part of whatever he earned on eating out. Still when he came back home his mother served him larger quantities of food. Also he got more rice than tapioca. Even on days he did not go out to work, he did better than women of the household in terms of food intake, particularly the brick worker herself.

Food distribution within a large-sized low income household of the agricultural labourer having a family of seven including herself, her working husband, two daughters and three sons showed that shortfall in calorie intake worked out separately for each member of the family was different for men, women, boys and girls. On non-working days the calorie intake of the working woman herself fell short of the minimum



necessary intake by 50 per cent as against her husband's shortfall of 26 per cent. More significantly, while the teenage son's shortfall was the least, regardless of whether it was the working woman's working or non-working day, the girls and younger sons had higher shortfalls in calorie intake.

### Conclusion

Pulling together the main strands of our observations, it would appear that women who work in the unorganized sector come from households where the parents are in casual wage labour and also tend to get married to men who too are in this sector. Once married to men who do not have regular jobs, the irregularity itself introduces a certain amount of instability in their marital relationship, very often forcing on women more responsibilities than they can shoulder. This in turn makes it even more difficult for them to help their children, particularly daughters to do any better. All their aspirations and efforts are built around getting their sons out of the insecure existence hoping that they will do better.

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