

Reclaiming ‘Agency’, Reasserting Resistance

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1 Introduction

This article examines how concepts of women’s ‘agency’ have been appropriated and transformed by neoliberal discourses. Within this framework, the exercise of agency is sought in women’s strategies for survival rather than struggles for transformation, and at the level of the individual rather than the collective. Post-modern preoccupations with the subject and the recognition of ‘difference’ have been incorporated alongside liberal definitions of the ‘rational individual exercising free will’ to pursue and legitimise neoliberal economic policies involving intensified exploitation of poor women’s labour in the name of ‘women’s empowerment’.

Meanwhile, the emphasis on women’s agency marginalises analysis of oppressive structures, and shifts the focus away from patriarchal ideologies. This has left assumptions about women’s relative ‘efficiency’ as workers (or micro-entrepreneurs) unchallenged in much of the literature on Gender and Development (GAD). This article draws on some experiences, approaches and perceptions of women involved in rural labour movements in India, and looks at their implications for questions of structure and agency. It also suggests that in situations where women have waged collective struggles, these struggles are likely to be accompanied by a questioning of precisely those patriarchal gender relations which compel women to be more ‘efficient’.

2 ‘Agency’ and capitalism

The notion of agency has historically been rooted in the construction of the individual in Enlightenment thought, within which agency can be understood as synonymous with what Ahearn describes as ‘socially unfettered’ free will (2001: 114). The attribution of agency to an individual in this context is contingent

on his (the individual concerned is inevitably male) ability to exercise ‘rational choice’ and act accordingly.

If the conceptualisation of agency as free will is central to the philosophical underpinnings of capitalism, it has also been argued that historically, it became an inextricable part of a dominant ideology which emerged at the specific conjuncture of the rise of European capitalism fuelled by slavery and colonialism. The ‘Protestant work ethic’ identified by Weber glorified ‘the accumulation of wealth and the individual’s responsibility for his/her own salvation. Wealth accumulation ... in fact signified God’s approval of an individual, but only when coupled with appropriate conduct: hard work, strict discipline and a constantly inward-looking concern with improving one’s own character’ (Fiedrich and Jellema 2003: 38). As capitalism matured, this notion of the ‘work ethic’ and individual responsibility became increasingly dominant, forming part of an armoury deployed to extract ever greater surpluses from the metropolitan working class and – via missionaries in particular – from Europe’s colonial subjects.

3 Feminist approaches to agency

Feminists have challenged these notions of agency on several levels. The contrast between assumed – or desirable – male ‘activity’ and female ‘passivity’ constitutes one of several binary oppositions (for example, public/private, rational/emotional), which structure liberal discourse. Liberal feminists of the first and second wave have countered this by arguing for women’s capacity to exercise agency as ‘rational individuals’. However, as Jaggar (1988) points out, this accepts the ‘normative dualism’ of liberalism which posits a hierarchal relationship between mental labour and manual labour, mind and body; culture and nature, reason and instinct.

Moving beyond notions of 'equality' with men, socialist feminists sought to understand agency in relation to power and ideology, exploring the nature of the material structures of patriarchy and the construction of masculinity and femininity in the context of a commitment to social transformation. The fact that these debates took place within a collective movement for change meant that they were compelled to transcend the 'structure'/'agency' dichotomy which dominated mainstream social theory. They attempted to address the apparent contradiction that 'to assume that the multiple voices of women are not shaped by domination is to ignore social context and legitimate the status quo. On the other hand, to assume that women have no voice other than an echo of prevailing discourses is to deny them agency and simultaneously, to repudiate the possibility of social change' (Riger 1992, cited in Gardiner 1995: 8).

Significantly, socialist feminists asserted that agency was located at the collective as well as the individual level. Despite this, however, the women's movement in the West continued to ignore, marginalise or exclude Black and Third World women's experiences and individual and collective struggles.

4 'Agency', 'race', gender

Historically, Black and colonised women's experiences of sexual violence, exploitation and dispossession, and the re-shaping of the internal relationships within colonised societies in ways which in many cases intensified women's subordination, testify to the variety of ways in which dominant constructions of both 'race' and gender shaped their lives. But these experiences were made 'invisible' in colonial discourses: when colonised women did appear, it was frequently in the context of their perceived need to be 'rescued' from 'their' men and/or 'backward' societies (Mani 1987) – a perception which is still prevalent within development discourses and elsewhere.

White women were also implicated in this 'infantilisation' of black women, for example, in the relationship between missionary women and the women in colonised societies whom they sought to 'help'/'save'.

It was the continuities with colonial discourse in 'white feminist' approaches to 'Third World' women in the 1970s and 1980s, which led to Black and Third

World feminists explicitly raising the question of agency in this context (see, for examples Carby 1982; Amos and Parmar 1984). These continuities were particularly striking within discourses of 'development' (Mohanty 1991; Bagchi 1999). Socialist feminists from the Third World had put forward cogent critiques of the 'Women in Development' approach – which was rooted in neoclassical economics and liberal feminism – and this had led to a greater recognition of gender as a social construct and its material basis in patriarchal relations. But power relations inherent within the 'development project' itself, in which Third World people are the 'objects' of development for overwhelmingly white 'experts', continued to shape Gender and Development theory and practice (White 2003).

Mohanty highlighted 'the construction of "third world women" as a homogeneous "powerless" group often located as implicit *victims* of particular socio-economic systems' in Western feminist discourse (Mohanty 1991: 57). She argued that:

universal images of 'the third world Woman' (the veiled woman, chaste virgin, etc.), images constructed from adding the 'third world difference' to 'sexual difference', are predicated upon (and hence obviously bring into sharper focus) assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated and having control over their own lives. (Mohanty 1991: 74)

These critiques were linked to the rise of broader postmodern ideas about individual subjectivity and 'difference' and in particular a critique of totalising 'metanarratives' in development which led to the emergence of post-developmentalism (Marchand and Parpart 1995).

These critiques clearly contributed to a greater emphasis on the notion of women's 'agency' within mainstream GAD approaches. Women were no longer invariably seen as passive victims; there was an increased focus on women's ability to make decisions and choices under given circumstances.

But rather than challenging the power relationship between GAD 'experts' and the women who are the 'objects' of their study and policymaking, this focus on agency has been pursued in a way which has effectively marginalised feminist approaches, through two interrelated effects.

4.1 Marginalising analysis of patriarchy

First, the concept of 'agency' has worked to invalidate the concept and analysis of women's oppression. Describing someone as oppressed and lacking in choices, it is implied, is to portray them as a victim and deny them agency. This not only shifts emphasis away from any systematic analysis of specific oppressive social structures and institutions (particularly material ones), it also – by equating 'oppression' with 'victimhood' – fails to acknowledge the possibility of those who are oppressed themselves engaging in struggle for structural change. The ideas of structural power and the potential for collective struggles for social change, which as we saw earlier are vital to a socialist feminist understanding of agency, are thus ignored and so, inevitably, are historical and contemporary Third World women's movements.

Second, the preoccupation with identifying the exercise of agency has shifted the focus away from the study of ideology which socialist feminists had elaborated and developed in the context of patriarchy. Those working within the GAD framework have preferred to emphasise – and often simplify – ideas like the 'patriarchal bargain' (first developed by Kandiyoti 1988) in which women within patriarchal households make deliberate compromises in order to protect their own present or future interests. The individual exercising 'free will' thus reappears here, albeit acting within the material constraints imposed by patriarchal power:

women may sacrifice their immediate welfare for future security; this would be perfectly in keeping with self-interested behaviour, and need not imply a gap between women's 'objective' well-being and their perception of their well-being (Agarwal 1994: 434–5)

However, as Kandiyoti has subsequently argued in a rethinking of the 'patriarchal bargain', a focus on 'subordinates' rational decisions to conform rather than rebel' can mean 'concealing the evidence of hegemony by relabelling its effects' (Kandiyoti 1998: 142). In the process, analysis of the complex effects of ideology often comes to be regarded as 'attributing "false consciousness" to women', and thus ceases to be considered a legitimate avenue for investigation.

Similarly, 'rational choice' rather than the operations of specific patriarchal ideologies are emphasised in discussing women's collusion with or active

participation in the oppression of other women – for example in discussions of son-preference among women in North India (Agarwal 1994; Kabeer 2000). Once again, we are presented with a vision of atomised individuals acting rationally to maximise their self-interest.

Against this background, the use of the concept of 'agency' has the effect of reassuring us that women do in fact exercise 'choice' in situations where the structural constraints represented by the operation of patriarchal institutions and ideologies mean that women are simply 'choosing' survival (see Wilson 2007 for a more detailed discussion).

5 Agency and neoliberal economic policies

Historically, as we have seen, the concept of 'agency' has been associated with the 'free' individual and, more specifically, with the capitalist notion of 'enterprise'. Not surprisingly then, it is in this context of the 'entrepreneurial spirit' that 'agency' is now discussed within the discourse of neoliberal economics which has risen to global predominance since the 1970s.

The notion of agency has become particularly central to dominant development discourse, policy and practice around gender. Postmodern preoccupations with the subject and the recognition of 'difference' – the 'decoupling of the cultural politics of recognition from the social politics of distribution' (Fraser 1997, cited in Beneria 2003: 25) – have been incorporated alongside liberal definitions of the 'rational individual exercising free will' to pursue and legitimise neoliberal economic policies in the name of 'women's empowerment'.

Two interlinked elements of these policies are first, the promotion of micro-enterprise, and second, the withdrawal of the state from social service provision.

5.1 Micro-enterprise

For more than a decade, micro-enterprise has been promoted by development institutions and aid donors as an indispensable strategy for achieving both poverty reduction and women's empowerment. Micro-enterprise combines an emphasis on the original 'Women in Development' objectives of widening women's access to the market through education and training, with an explicit focus on the notion of 'entrepreneurial spirit' waiting to be released.

However, as a number of writers have argued, a feminist assessment of micro-enterprise would require an examination of the impact of such loans on intra-household gender relations (Kabeer 1995; Mayoux 1995, 2002; Murthy 2004). Clearly, questions such as who actually controls the household's expenditure of the loans, how women's already heavy work burdens are affected by their involvement in micro-enterprise, and how 'feminisation of debt' affects relationships within the household need to be answered before a micro-enterprise project can be considered 'empowering'.

But from the perspective of 'agency' – and these development interventions almost invariably claim to discover women's hitherto unrecognised potential for exercising agency – what is perhaps most striking is the uncritical assumption that agency operates at the level of individual rather than social change, and must be directed towards 'moving up' existing hierarchies of power, not demolishing them. Micro-enterprise, as Mayoux notes, is 'widely seen as a viable and less socially and politically disruptive alternative to more focused feminist organizational strategies' (Mayoux 1995: 66) (see also Chakravarti, this *IDS Bulletin*).

5.2 The withdrawal of the state

Neoclassical economic theory has always regarded individual freedom as increasing in inverse proportion to the involvement of the state in the economy. Within the neoliberal discourse of development, the agency and empowerment of poor women has been increasingly conceptualised in terms of the withdrawal of the state from social provision. In the context of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) directed neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, individual women and women's non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were argued to be freed to exercise their agency as they took over a variety of roles in community service provision in areas like health, education, and sanitation, activities which were often reflections and extensions of women's prescribed roles in dominant gender ideologies (Elson 1991; Bisnath 2001).

Both the promotion of micro-enterprise and the shifting of responsibility for service provision from state to 'community' involve a strategy of intensified exploitation of women's labour to provide a 'safety net' for the effects of neoliberal economic reforms.

As Bisnath points out:

within mainstream development discourse of the 1990s, (empowerment) was often used by organizations focused on enlarging the choices and productivity levels of individual women, for the most part, in isolation from a feminist agenda; and in the context of a withdrawal of state responsibility for broad-based economic and social support. (Bisnath 2001: 11)¹

'Recognising poor women's agency' can thus be understood here as 'making poor women responsible for development' – without questioning the neoliberal status quo and its devastating impact on their lives.

6 The paradox of 'empowerment'

In fact, it can be argued that there is a basic contradiction in the notions of agency and 'empowerment' as they are applied within the context of development. On the one hand, empowerment is supposed to be achieved by women themselves (in contrast to earlier 'top-down' approaches to development) through the exercise of agency, but in practice it is expected to take place through development interventions which take place within a framework with its own dynamics of power. As Fiedrich and Jellema put it (2003: 60), there is 'an unresolved ambiguity about who is driving the change process and towards what ends'. This contradiction is highlighted by the fact that empowerment has been described by GAD theorists as requiring that women 'should feel that they have been the agents of the transformation' (Young 1997: 371). It appears that the power relationships highlighted by Mohanty and other black and Third World feminists are still in place: the women whom development interventions seek to empower are still implicitly regarded as 'poorer, weaker sisters'.

But the core paradox at the heart of the concept of women's empowerment, and that which differentiates it most clearly from feminist approaches, is that it does not acknowledge that giving more power to any group implies taking power away from other groups. Rather, it relates, as in the era of the missionaries, to the individual's responsibility for self-improvement. Thus one of the definitions most widely cited by development institutions explains that the empowerment approach 'seeks to identify power less in terms of domination over others (with its implicit assumption

that a gain for women implies a loss for men), and more in terms of the capacity of women to increase their own self-reliance and internal strength' (Moser 1993: 74).²

7 'Efficiency' and 'altruism'

The pioneers of microcredit, the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, were among the first to champion women's greater efficiency and the 'altruism' which was assumed to be its cause, arguing that, first, women 'have better repayment rates and are therefore better credit risks than men' (Hossain 1987, cited in Agarwal 1994) and second, that the benefits of additional income earned by women are more likely to enhance 'family welfare' and particularly the welfare of children, than that earned by men (Yunus 1994).

This instrumental approach has become part of the development orthodoxy. But a feminist analysis would involve questioning the conditions – both material and ideological – which ensure that women take primary responsibility for meeting children's needs, and which rule out the option, presumably available to men, of defaulting on loans, thus making them more 'efficient' and creditworthy as micro-entrepreneurs.

Similarly the World Bank has argued in the context of 'gender empowerment and poverty alleviation' that giving women land rights will increase overall efficiency in agricultural production (King and Mason 2001), notwithstanding the fact that its own policies have severely limited and undermined women's access to and control over land. These arguments once again centre upon two interlinked assumptions. First, there is the idea that women are always 'harder workers' – this once again is linked to women's greater commitment to, and responsibility for, meeting children's needs. Second, there is the assumption that women will expend less resources (in terms of both leisure time and luxury consumption) on themselves.

Women's greater 'efficiency', whether as farmers, labourers or micro-entrepreneurs, is thus clearly linked to the structures and practices of patriarchy at the level of both economic relations and ideology. Yet despite this, the discourse of 'efficiency' has become so ubiquitous that even writers operating within a broadly socialist feminist framework have tended to treat its underlying assumptions as given.

In fact, the emphasis on women's 'altruism' and commitment to meeting others' needs, especially

when contrasted to the absence of these qualities in men, could be argued to undermine even demands for gender equality, since in the absence of an analysis of patriarchy it implies that these qualities are uniquely feminine. The moralistic overtones of the development literature's oft-cited contrasts between women's 'good' spending (on food, children's clothes etc.) and men's 'bad' spending (on alcohol, cigarettes, entertainment etc.) are distinct echoes of the Victorian discourse of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Such continuities are consistent with the moral framework of neoliberal economics which ascribes 'duties' to the poor as a condition for the enjoyment of 'rights'. As Molyneux (2006), Chakravarti (this *IDS Bulletin*) and others explain, they also fit into new, specifically neoliberal constructions of the 'good' woman.

8 Agency and 'efficiency' in the context of collective movements – some experiences

The following experiences suggest some potential approaches to agency which go beyond the validation of 'impossible choices'. They also suggest that women's relative 'efficiency' cannot be taken for granted: it is contingent on specific power relationships (structured in this case by gender, class and caste in particular) and specific ideologies, which are themselves targets of movements for social transformation.

Dalit women agricultural labourers in Bihar in eastern India have been at the forefront of a movement being waged during the last three decades led by a left party, the CPI(ML). The movement is centred around demands for a living wage, land redistribution and an end to caste-based oppression – demands which strike at the roots of agrarian power in the region. Women labourers have played a central role in wage struggles, as the agricultural tasks carried out in the period of peak labour demand when wage demands are put forward are largely those performed by women. It has therefore frequently been women who have initially placed wage demands before employers, and subsequently collectively refused to work. Women have also led marches of thousands to physically occupy land for redistribution, and have been at the forefront of resistance and protest against the repression unleashed by the landowners and the police. It is women who, armed with bricks, small scythes or household utensils, have driven the police out of their villages when they have arrived heavily armed in

midnight or dawn raids, or who have surrounded police jeeps and snatched back those arrested, even forcing the police to apologise in some instances (Wilson 1999a).

In a context where larger landowners belonging to upper castes long considered sexual harassment and even rape of *dalit* women to be their birthright, the movement began in many areas with campaigns to bring these rapists to justice.

For many *dalit* women, the fact that they are now able to challenge these practices which symbolised and reinforced gender, caste and class power is the most important aspect of the movement. On numerous occasions women told me that the men from the higher caste landowning families who employ them to work in their fields used to sexually harass and abuse them, physically assault them if they missed a day's work, or refuse to allow them to take breaks to drink water, telling them to drink the muddy water in the drainage canals, but now they no longer 'dare' to do these things.

These struggles also led women to openly challenge oppressive gender relations within the household. In many cases, this has begun with conflict within the home over a woman's participation in the movement, with her husband or in-laws attempting to prevent her from being involved.³ Women have organised collectively against domestic violence, men abandoning their wives, and the increasing incidence of dowry among poor *dalit* families, although the question of whether tackling gender oppression within the family should be a priority remains a contested one for the movement at a local level (Wilson 1999a). As has been noted in other contexts (Eisen Bergman 1984; Molyneux 1998) a key factor in strengthening such challenges has been the presence of a relatively autonomous women's organisation linked to the CPI(ML).

Initial questions for a feminist consideration of structure and agency to address here might be – did the movement simply make it possible women to express openly anger which they had already consciously felt? Or alternatively, did the ideas they were exposed to through the work of the party and specifically the women's organisation lead them to question relations which they had previously considered acceptable (such as men's violence within the home)? Or were there, as I would argue,

elements of both of these in a process which, crucially, was catalysed by the experience of collective struggle, and of being able to challenge authority and bring about change?

Examining this process might require for example an exploration of the contested notion of 'izzat' (honour or respect), which both women and men frequently cite as one of the principles being fought for. Within the dominant upper caste ideology, *izzat* is a feudal patriarchal concept which is closely linked to property ownership. Women can easily damage or destroy it if they do not conform to prescribed behaviour but it is essentially seen as 'belonging' to the patriarchal, property-owning family and its male members. The idea of the *dalit* poor having *izzat* is seen as a contradiction in terms. However, *izzat* has become a site of struggle on several levels.

On one level, there is an attempt to claim *izzat* in its existing form by sections of the *dalit* communities – this is reflected in the adoption of upper caste practices associated with women's subordination, such as dowry and (where possible) withdrawal of women from labour outside the home.⁴ On another level, the *izzat* fought for by women collectively resisting the sexual violence they face as women workers in the fields is conceptualised differently by them – this gender and class struggle over *izzat* changes its meaning. In fact it runs counter to the dominant discourse of *izzat* which dictates that men must protect women from contact with 'outside' men in order to preserve family honour. These struggles imply that a woman who leaves the 'protection' of the home and moves freely in public spaces has the right to *protect herself*. Thus *izzat* can 'belong' to a woman independently. This change becomes explicit when women demand *izzat* within the family in the context of campaigns against domestic violence.

This very preliminary account suggests a need to go beyond static dichotomies of 'self-interest' versus 'false consciousness' and 'structure' versus 'agency' and address the distinct ways in which ideology itself becomes a site of struggle, shaped by, and in turn shaping, changing material relations. The complex interaction between changes in 'ways of thinking' and perceived changes in the balance of social, economic and political power brought about through collective struggle was often expressed by the *dalit* labourer women I spoke to in terms of 'fear'

and the way it had shifted: on the one hand, the landowners, though still powerful, now 'feared' to assault them, on the other, they described themselves as 'no longer afraid' – 'we are even prepared to face bullets'.

But the decline in 'everyday' violence in the fields has been accompanied by the rise of organised terror. Landowner's armies with links with the state and dominant political parties have carried out a series of massacres of agricultural labourers in which women have been targeted for the most brutal violence. Individual women activists have been assassinated. The movement has struck at the roots of feudal and patriarchal power in the region, but clearly the battle is far from over (Wilson 2006).

9 Questioning 'efficiency'

Arguments about efficiency, like those about empowerment which are framed by the same dominant development discourses, assume that control over resources such as land or capital will be bestowed upon women by external agents, rather than taken by women themselves. In situations like that described above, where women have waged struggles themselves, these struggles have frequently been accompanied by a questioning of the precise complex of gender relations which make women supposedly more 'efficient' producers/workers.

In the Bihar case, the oppressive domestic relations which women began to challenge included the ever-present threat of violence, but also women's primary responsibility for children's welfare, and the absence of the 'leisure' time which men can devote to political activity.

Savitri Devi, a woman delegate attending the Jehanabad District Kisan Sabha (Peasant Association) conference, explained how all of these are linked while introducing a song entitled 'give women respect in society':

a woman gets up in the morning, she has to wash the utensils, wake the children, take them to the fields to relieve themselves, prepare the meal ... the man just gets up, goes to relieve himself, comes back, and if the food isn't ready, he'll start hitting her ... (Wilson 1999b)

Women activists at the village level, particularly younger women with children, who travelled widely,

addressed public gatherings, assertively confronted officials and other powerful figures, and on occasion spent several nights away from home, were challenging dominant notions of the 'good' woman, not only in terms of space (by voluntarily entering public spaces for reasons other than direct economic compulsions) but in terms of time – in expending time on activism which would otherwise have been spent on domestic labour. The latter was in many cases a continuous source of conflict with family members and viewed as an unresolved dilemma by the women concerned. Nevertheless, it can be argued that these women are involved in the process of formulating alternatives to the norms of behaviour which are shaped by patriarchal ideologies and material structures, and are currently being reinforced by neoliberal interventions. This is something which those writers who accept dominant assumptions relating to women's greater efficiency and altruism fail to do.

These experiences also lead us to question the assumption in some recent work on gender and development that feminist concepts of emancipation are invariably external impositions, with women in 'developing' countries inevitably being more concerned with notions of 'security', 'responsibility' and 'respect'. In an example of this approach, Judy El-Bushra writes that these 'different' priorities and 'values':

frequently involve(s) women carrying out their existing, subordinate roles even more efficiently but 'that exploitation is a price they are willing to pay for the public acknowledgement that they make important contributions to society, and for the removal of doubt about the security of their marital and other relationships. (El-Bushra 2000: 83)

Increasingly widespread generalisations of this type take the invisibilisation of resistance one step further by constructing all desire for structural change as not only irrelevant, but alien. As Amina Mama (in Salo 2001) has argued in the context of a critique of the equation of 'African feminism' with the 'politics of survival', such approaches are 'deeply conservative' in their elision of the obvious fact that women in Africa (and elsewhere) 'do have aspirations that go far beyond securing their survival: political, economic, social, intellectual, professional and indeed personal desires for change'. They are also clearly consistent with the new constructions of the 'good' woman in the context of neoliberal social and economic interventions.

Furthermore, in contexts where women are struggling to redistribute power through collective movements (as opposed to being the object of attempts to grant them individual 'empowerment' without disturbing the status quo), the assumed dichotomy between 'liberation' and 'respect' as objectives becomes problematic. As we have seen, the meanings of notions such as 'respect' may

themselves be contested and transformed in ways which challenge patriarchal relations of power. If we are to reclaim 'agency' as a feminist tool of analysis, we need to start by re-asserting the connections which neoliberal discourse has tried to sever, between agency, desire for change, collective action and the possibility of revolutionary social transformation.

Notes

- 1 That this has continued is confirmed by a World Bank study which notes that surveys of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) have found that 'predominant thematic areas of discussing empowerment are governance, gender, and community participation. Governance is discussed particularly in the context of decentralization and service provision. Here, empowerment strategies focus on strengthening agency and 'voice' through education, capacity building, and enhanced knowledge' (Alsop and Heinsohn 2005).
- 2 Fiedrich and Jellema cite a USAID-funded report (Ashe and Parrot 2001) as 'merely making explicit the assumptions buried in other, softer versions' when it lists 'behavioural change', 'hard work' and 'an ethos of self-improvement' as indicators of successful 'empowerment' (2003: 45). Dominant discourses on environment and population are also illustrative in this respect.
- 3 As discussed earlier, struggles over gender relations often take place *between* women who are differentially positioned within household hierarchies, particularly in the context of the joint family or 'corporate household' (e.g. between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law). In the areas of Bihar referred to here, such households were the norm even among landless *dalit* families (Wilson 1999b).
- 4 It is important to note that given their conditions of work and the attacks they face, women may themselves prefer to withdraw from paid labour. A similar point has been made by black feminist writers critiquing the liberal feminist assumption that waged work is by definition liberating (hooks 1984). At the same time, since it is usually younger women, and in particular young married women, who are withdrawn from this work, this can also be seen as resulting in greater control over them by both men and older women.

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