

BOOK EXCERPT

A new book examines if economic opportunities for women have eradicated misogynistic cultural norms

An excerpt from 'Wives and Widows at Work: Women's Labour in Agrarian Bengal, Then and Now,' by Deepita Chakravarty and Ishita Chakravarty.

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Manjunath Kiran / AFP

In contemporary India, girls often get married before the age of 18 years though the practice is barred by law. However, over the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the rate of underage marriage has been declining in most states that previously had a high incidence of the same. Although West Bengal (among the top-ranking states in underage marriage for decades) has also experienced a considerable decline, the rate of underage marriage has not come down as sharply as in many other states such as Rajasthan or Uttar Pradesh.

West Bengal began the journey with a historic high. The failure of the state and the comparative success of many others to eradicate child marriage at a faster rate has led West Bengal to the top-most position, according to 2015-16 data, in the incidence of underage marriage in India. It is important to note that in terms of per capita income, sex ratio, literacy rate and in many such development indicators, West Bengal is not

among the poor performers. There is thus an obvious contradiction: between many other development indicators which are not bad and the age at marriage which is the worst.

The uneven pattern of the incidence of child marriage in different states is a combination of several factors and therefore it is difficult to pinpoint the exact reasons in every case. But state initiatives in many directions targeted at the development of girl children have surely been one of the most important factors behind the significant decline in underage marriage of girls in recent years. Tamil Nadu, Haryana, Gujarat and some other states started taking such initiatives as early as the beginning of the 1990s.

Much later, especially after the 2011 Census suggested a disturbing decline in the child sex ratio, almost all states followed suit and included policies targeted at improving the condition of the girl child in their agenda. However, the first and almost the only policy aimed at the girl child in West Bengal was adopted as late as 2014. There is no reason to think that the states which introduced such policies earlier or pursued them more vigorously than the others were particularly gender-sensitive in their approaches. At the same time, it is difficult to deny the positive impact of such populist ventures at least in some of these states. But it needs to be also noted here that the girl child-oriented policies adopted by early takers have not always shown expected outcomes.

The prevalence of endemic poverty and illiteracy are considered to be among the major causes for the persistence of underage marriage of girl children. Existing literature also highlights that the increasing incidence of dowry even among the lower strata of Indian society and long-term cultural traditions leads to child or adolescent marriages in West Bengal.

We focus instead on the implications of a relatively less discussed question of the availability of new work opportunities and the nature of work available to women and girls for the persistence of underage marriage and underage motherhood in the state. The prevalence of small-holding agriculture, on the one hand, and the existence of less inequality in landholding, on the other, generate relatively low demand for agricultural labour in West Bengal in general and for women's labour in particular. However, it is difficult to say whether the opportunity of paid employment only in agriculture can lead to a rise in the age of marriage. The example of present-day Andhra Pradesh is suggestive. In this predominantly rice-cultivating state, the work participation rate of women in rural areas is among the highest, a large proportion of them actually work as agricultural labourers. The state stood at the fourth position in respect of child marriage in 2015–16. Working as an agricultural labourer does not require any formal education (such as minimum years of schooling), so it is not in contradiction with early marriage.

Rajasthan provides one more important case that needs some explanation. This north-western state also shows a high rate of women's workforce participation in the rural areas. At the same time, a persistently high incidence of child marriage is a characteristic feature of this state though there has been a significant decline in the incidence in recent years. It is actually not a contradiction again if one takes a closer look at the nature of work women engage in, in the rural areas of this state.

Relatively, a very high proportion of women (895 per 1,000 rural female workers, according to 2011–12 NSS data) are concentrated in the agricultural sector in rural Rajasthan. This is one of the highest in India. But Rajasthan is not a rice cultivating state and only 51 per cent of land in this state is under the net sown area. Data reveal that a large proportion of women are actually engaged in grazing cattle and therefore reported as self-employed by the National Sample Survey (NSS). It is clear that no specific training or education is required to do this work and therefore there is no contradiction between cattle grazing and early marriage. On the contrary, paid work in industry needs some formal education such as minimum years of schooling and training for skill formation. All these are likely to delay the age of marriage. It seems this is what has happened in the case of Tamil Nadu within India and also in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka in South Asia.

Increasing opportunities for factory work dragged women out of the domestic sphere in a significant way in postindustrialisation Europe. The recent experiences of export-led manufacturing of the newly industrialising countries of East Asia and the more recent export-oriented industrialisation in the South Asian countries of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka led to quite a similar increase in women's paid work outside the home. In India, while women's work is still dominated by agriculture in the rural areas, the picture is a bit diverse in the urban areas.

Women's work is significantly dominated by professions, primarily in the education and health sectors, in those states that record generally lower female work participation rates. Surely most women engaged in education and health services are from the middle and the upper classes. On the contrary, the states which show generally higher female work participation rates such as Tamil Nadu and Karnataka suggest the highest concentration of urban women in production-related work followed by the professional and services categories dominated mainly by care work. It is quite likely that poor women in these states participate mainly in manufacturing or production-related work.

Instances are women's high rates of participation in bidi-binding in Andhra Pradesh, coir spinning in Kerala and garment-making and textiles in Tamil Nadu. Though bidi manufacturing takes place under a factory system in many parts of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, even today it is generally a very low-skilled job and often undertaken by girl children along with their mothers. On the contrary, garments and textiles are relatively more skill-based and constitute important manufacturing activities highly linked to the export sector. Influenced by the received ideas (women's characteristic docility, etc.), employers in such activities prefer women workers, women who have been to school at least for some years.

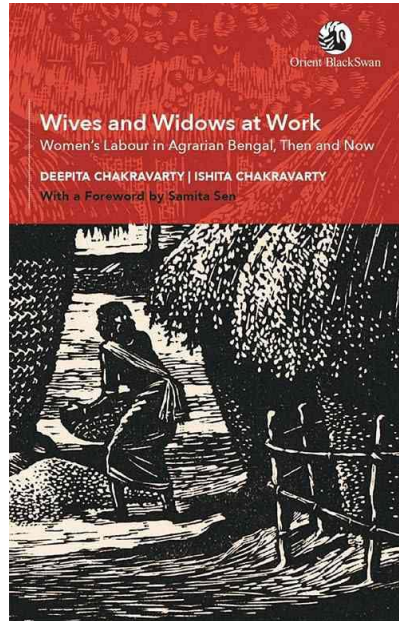
Urban women in West Bengal predominantly engage in paid personal services, including domestic service. The other two important sectors in the state which absorb women in considerable numbers are professional and production-related work. It is true that in the absence of large-scale mass-producing manufacturing activities over the years the share of personal services is increasing all over India in poor women's work.

It is also mostly the poor women who are married early and give birth to children early in contemporary India. To join this expanding services sector hardly requires any level of schooling. On the other hand, it has been repeatedly argued and documented in the industrial organisation literature that industrial factory work, especially in the export sector, requires some amount of schooling. Schooling automatically delays age at marriage. The absence of labour-intensive industrial activities in West Bengal failed to pull women out of the home in large numbers as it has happened in Tamil Nadu within India and in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka (in South Asia), Thailand, Indonesia and other East and Southeast Asian countries.

In these countries, typical export-oriented industrialisation resulted in increasing economic opportunities, particularly for young women. New industrial work opportunities, especially in the export sector, are contingent upon some level of school education, as mentioned earlier. Let us take the example of Bangladesh: the cultural specificities of this country are similar to West Bengal because of historical reasons. Female workforce participation in Bangladesh, which was even lower than West Bengal in the early 1980s, shot up to around 40 per cent in the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is mainly a result of the extraordinary performance of the garment manufacturing industry since the middle of the 1980s.

Female share in new industrial employment in Bangladesh, mainly generated by garment manufacturing, grew from 39 per cent in the mid-1990s to around 60 per cent by the year 2000. Note that Bangladeshi society, traditionally characterised by early marriage and early motherhood, experienced an increase in the age at marriage of women from the 1980s. This was exactly the decade when the garment industry took off and demand for women's labour increased phenomenally in the country.

They have documented how factory employment created strong incentives for delaying marriage in Bangladesh to a notable extent. But it also needs to be mentioned that in spite of the significant growth in the employment opportunities for women in the garment manufacturing industry in Bangladesh and a simultaneous increase in the age of marriage, the country is still among the top in the incidence of child marriage. Probably, economic opportunities for women have not yet expanded enough to eradicate the deeply entrenched cultural norms.



Excerpted with permission from Wives and Widows at Work: Women's Labour in Agrarian Bengal, Then and Now, Deepita Chakravarty and Ishita Chakravarty, Orient Black Swan.