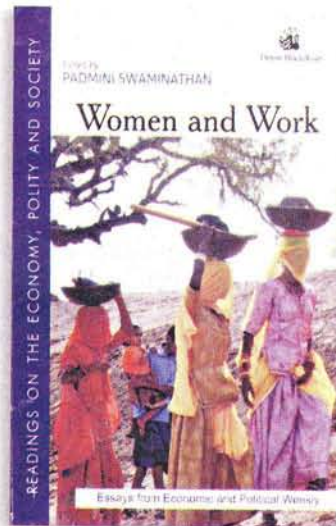


Invisible labour

The book argues for a gendered and political perspective on the trajectory of development and its impact on women. BY T.K. RAJALAKSHMI

IS work necessarily emancipatory and empowering for women in a context of patriarchal structures and capitalist mode of production? Do national surveys capture and enumerate women's work and the value of this work to the national income adequately? These are some of the questions posed in the compendium of articles selected from *Economic and Political Weekly* that focus on the multifarious dimensions of the world of work for women. Questions which remains invisible to policymakers, not only in terms of computing this work and its value in an academic sense but also in terms of addressing the macro-level issues about the growing size of informal work and the high participation of women in such work. The articles, carefully selected and edited by Padmini Swaminathan, a professor at the Centre for Women's Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, cover a range of women's work, the policies, or the lack of policies, that shape and influence such work and the need for a gendered and political perspective on the trajectory of development and the consequences



Women and Work

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it has had for women. The articles have been written over a two-and-a-half-decade period. The oldest one in the series, "Dynamics of Sexual Division of Labour and Capital Accumulation", written by Maria Mies, was published in 1981.

The collection is divided into four sections which, on the face of it, look disparate but are in fact connected in the way each section looks at the world of work of women, first conceptually and then interrogating the data systems that themselves incorporate invisibility. The third section is about sectoral perspectives that look at the myriad

forms of labour and the conditions of work where women can be disempowered despite being employed. Finally, there is the section on critiquing the policies themselves. The introduction, by the editor, begins aptly with an excerpt from the seminal report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1975), the first such report to emerge in post-Independence India. It underscored how the debate on women's employment was not only a social or economic issue, but one with deep political and cultural dimensions. Therefore, many of the papers embody the notion that the nature of women's work,

whether as farm labour, in the export processing zone, in the bidi industry or even as bar girls, constitutes economic exploitation characterised by low wages. Hence, Padmini Swaminathan writes that "we do not have to labour the point that almost all the articles included in the volume in different ways allude to deteriorating work and living conditions".

In fact, what is lacking is a broad and specific theoretical framework that locates all these experiences of exploitative work in a capitalist mode of production. Questions of political economy, then, are just relegated to the background while micro-level details and experiences dominate. This is not to say that all the essays lack a theoretical framework; in fact, most of the papers do encompass a broad political understanding, which may or may not be rooted in an economic doctrine. Padmini Swaminathan rightly points out that the concern regarding the paradigm of development needed far more and in-depth investigations integrated with gender concerns. A lot of time, she says, has been spent in policy evaluation studies that went no further than giving information about women being beneficiaries. The problem is that the policies themselves need to be critiqued much more harshly than is being done at present. For instance, a major part of the government's efforts at creating employment are directed at creating scheme-based work at low wage rates. Much of these scheme-



RABHA TRIBAL WOMEN digging sand from the Batha river in the Loharghat forest, about 60 km from Guwahati. A file photograph.

RITU RAJ KONWAR

based work employed women, poor women mainly, and have largely tackled the social determinants of well-being without addressing the well-being of the workers themselves. These are issues that may need to be explored in the coming years given the increased and exaggerated emphasis by the Indian state on social policy interventions.

MODES OF PRODUCTION

The first section explores the consequences of what Padmini Swaminathan calls the enmeshing of capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production. In fact, the coexistence of these two forms has had devastating consequences in social relations, the expressions of which have been seen in increased violence against women, a trend that has become all-pervasive. However, the

central argument in the paper by Maithreyi Krishnaraj on women craft workers shows how craft, characterised by low returns, is reserved exclusively for women, while mobility is the preserve of men. She writes that the women are not helpers in the family craft but the main contributors; they perform the role of risk-bearers, providing the household with the basic minimum subsistence that allows the male members to seek alternatives. The craft labour is in addition to all the domestic tasks. The important argument here is that when macro changes, through a loss of demand for traditional products, competition-induced displacement, loss in resources through land policies, and urban-based industrialisation, reduce the opportunities for remunerative employment

for a whole section of the population, women, like the craft workers in the study, reduce the severity of the impact of these macro changes on the household through their subsistence activities. Yet, they are undervalued by both the market and the household.

In this section, Maria Mies, writing on the women lace workers of Narsapur in West Godavari district in Andhra Pradesh, says how the social definition of women as housewives was a necessary precondition for the unlimited exploitation of their labour in the domestic industries and the informal sector. And production for the world market has made the sexual division of labour both in society and in the family not more equal but more unequal. In the process, women have become the losers on all the fronts, writes Maria Mies.

Through their reproductive and productive work, they enable the family to survive, even when the men's income is insufficient. While men free themselves from the act of production itself by becoming agents, traders, etc., women are not able to do so. Maria Mies writes that it was not only the traditional ideology that kept women domesticated; modern, material forces were equally responsible. The division of labour between men and women was not static and the dynamics of change sometimes reinforced, legitimised and maintained the asymmetric and unequal relationship between men and women.

Other papers in this section include Bina Agarwal's "Work Participation of Rural Women in the Third World" (published in 1985) which focusses on the need for taking corrective

measures in the data-gathering process and calls for re-examining analytical concepts as they relate to women; Prem Chowdhury's paper on "Women and Work in Rural Haryana", written in the early 1990s, which shows how, despite high participation by women in agricultural activities, their cultural and social evaluation has always been on the lower side; Ujvala Rajadhyaksha and Swati Smita's "Tracing a Timeline for Work and Family Research in India", which reviews the literature on women's studies and social sciences in India, beginning from the mid-1970s to the mid-2000s. This chapter offers a historical insight into the gradual change that came in the understanding of women's studies and social sciences and the separate trajectories they followed in the areas of work and family research. It laments an apparent disconnect and gaps of perception between the women's studies perspective and psychosocial research, where the focus has been more on the individual. This paper as such does not add much to the overall debate.

In Section II, which is about women's invisibility in data systems, all the four articles throw considerable light on how national data systems not only ignore or under-enumerate the economic contribution of women but also are not conceptually and technically equipped to deal with the peculiar circumstances where women are forced to take up activities to sustain the household. Joan Mencher and K. Saradmoni's article, written in 1982, on women rice cultivators

in three States, emphasises how every innovation in paddy cultivation threw women out of work even as there was an urgent need to create additional employment for the women. In the next article, "Valuing Work" by Devaki Jain, published in 1996, the author wonders whether time can be used as an appropriate measure to evaluate work, especially of women who lack assets. There are problems in the manner in which questionnaires on employment and unemployment enumerated female work. The system was not designed to capture the myriad productive activities that women engaged in. Further, looking at the employment and unemployment situation in the 1990s, Indira Hirway focusses on the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data, saying there has been no satisfactory explanation for the decline in the work participation rates in the 1990s. NSSO data did not capture satisfactorily, she says, work in the subsistence sector and informal or home-based sector.

Deepita Chakravarty and Ishita Chakravarty's paper on "Girl Children in the Care Economy", published in 2008, looks at the paradoxically high proportion of girl children engaged as domestic workers even as work opportunities for adult women have been shrinking. The fact is that this phenomenon is not confined to West Bengal alone and could be a pointer to a larger crisis of survival in society, where both girl children and adult women have been forced to sell their family labour for domestic or other work. In ur-

ban areas, even where there are schools, the number of out-of-school children among the poor continues to be high.

The essays in Section III, comprising five papers, look at the actual working conditions in sectors such as domestic labour, the bidi industry and the leather tanning industry; the breakdown of traditional *jajmani* relationships; and the interplay of patriarchal structures and capitalist relations of production which results in both empowering and disempowering situations for women.

Going beyond working class women, one paper looks at the problems faced by women scientists in four institutes of excellence. Uma Kothari's paper looks at women's paid work and rural transformation, J. Jeyaranjan and Padmini Swaminathan look at the resilience of gender inequities in a Chennai setting, Meena Gopal's work is on women bidi workers, Millie Nihila looks at the tanning industry, and the paper by the Forum Against Oppression of Women studies the specific case of the bar dancers of Mumbai.

CONCEPTUAL BASIS

Section IV, the last section, explains the conceptual underpinning for the selection of the articles in the volume, critiquing policy and its implications and consequences for work. The most interesting essay in this section is the one by J. Jeyaranjan, who looks at the pro-poor policies for women in Tamil Nadu, especially the working of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. It argues effectively how dovetailing

the MGNREGA with other pro-poor social schemes like the highly subsidised rations or self-help credit programmes has contributed to its success here despite the fact that it is quite organically delinked from the main macroeconomic policies of the government. Jeyaranjan's village-based study, located in Thanjavur district, argues that the transformatory potential of the MGNREGA is limited as it is a "social policy which is distinctive from and unrelated to the economic and industrial policy of the country". He says that while welfare policies like the MGNREGA, the public distribution system (PDS) and the State-sponsored SHG credit programmes may alleviate poverty when implemented in letter and spirit and thereby empower women, it cannot transform rural economies characterised by low economic growth, poor investments in infrastructure and nil generation of decent employment.

This book has been carefully compiled and what it shows is that more such studies need to be done, locating the micro within the framework of macro policies which, despite the veneer of various social policy schemes, continue to be directed at the unbridled accumulation of capital and profits at the cost of labour. The social policy schemes themselves need to be exposed for what they are—the measly entitlements they encompass and how they have successfully managed to shift the debate from basic demands like land reforms, decent wages, decent and stable employment and social security. □