Gender, Poverty and Employment in India

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Abstract

Development theories recognise that employment is central to the alleviation of poverty and the enhancement of well-being. This means that at the practical level, it is understood that labour-intensive growth and greater labour-force participation by women are necessary elements for poverty reduction. At the level of discursive practice, the gender and poverty debates treat labour as an abstract category. In recognition of this lacuna, this paper attempts to address two principal questions: a) Does poverty have a woman’s face in India? and b) What are the linkages between women’s situation in the labour market, education levels and their poverty? The paper attempts to answer these issues by reviewing the changes that have occurred in the reported level of women’s economic activity, women’s status in the labour market, gender differentials in poverty and the impact that gender mainstreaming in employment and poverty have had on women’s lives. Drawing inferences from national level surveys, policy statements and legislative framework, the paper argues that poverty needs to be understood more holistically - in terms of lack of access to services, lack of personal security, low social status and lack of control over labour and employment. The paper concludes by advocating for policies that directly affect the quantum and quality of women’s participation in the labour market such as those concerned specifically with regulating gender relations in employment and those concerned with balancing work and familial responsibilities.

Poverty also has outcomes with respect to sexual division of labour, which are affected by the regulation of the wider social environment in which men and women make decisions. For example, personal laws, regulated by cultural institutions, indirectly affect women’s access to land and other immovable assets, thereby excluding them from control over their labour and often even skills that can lead to better quality employment.

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Introduction

An assessment of employment and poverty alleviation strategies in India is a complex exercise because of the extensive range of work categories, multifarious modes of employment, and varied types of deprivation prevalent in the country. The issue is significantly exacerbated in the study of women wherein the concepts and categories used to analyse women’s status fail to reflect the nature and extent of their work and consequently, undermine their economic contribution to the household and economy. It is now widely accepted that single-dimensional measures of women’s employment and poverty have little relevance without the corresponding qualitative information on access to employment, characteristics of work, earnings and control over earnings, and economic resources.

The dominant development agenda recognises that employment is central to the alleviation of poverty and the enhancement of well-being. This means that at the practical level, it is understood that labour-intensive growth and greater labour-force participation by women are necessary elements for poverty reduction. Nevertheless, it has been noted that at the level of discursive practice, the gender and poverty debates treat labour as an abstract category. In other words, the existing conceptual literature, including policy documents on gender-specific work intensities, is scanty. This is more so in the case of literature pertaining to the relationship of women’s work with individual well-being, household income and poverty reduction. In recognition of this lacuna, this paper attempts to address two principal questions, viz., a) Does poverty have a woman’s face in India? and b) What are the linkages between women’s situation in the labour market, education levels and their poverty? The answers to these issues are expected to emerge from a review of the changes that have occurred in the reported level of women’s economic activity, women’s status in the labour market, gender differentials in poverty and the impact that gender mainstreaming in employment and poverty has had on policy.

Women, Employment and Poverty: How Big is the Problem?

Poverty has been traditionally understood to mean lack of access to resources, productive assets and income resulting in a state of material deprivation (Baulch 1996; Cagatay 1998). This approach emphasises a deficiency in private consumption. The unit of analysis is the household, and measurement as well as policy interventions remain restricted to incidences and programmes which specifically address women’s poverty as related to female-headed households. Although a priori there is reason to be concerned with female-headed households as they form 10 per cent (NSSO 1999-2000) of the total households, it has also had the effect of disguising other types of linkages between gender and poverty.
especially linkages emanating from the gender bias in resources, labour, credit, market, education and skill training, which exist for a majority of women.

While there is a lack of conceptual clarity on the issue of work, the fact remains that because the principal survey instrument for gender-poverty comparisons in India is the National Sample Survey Organisation’s (NSSO) household consumption survey, wherein consumption data have been collected at the household level, it is almost impossible to estimate the linkages between gender, women’s participation in the labour force and poverty. In order to address this issue, this paper evaluates gender disparities for men and women in poor households.

**A Prelude to the Story of Exclusion — Socio-Demographic Indicators:** The condition of Indian women has improved substantially during the last twenty years in terms of various indicators such as literacy, life expectancy and maternal mortality. In terms of literacy, for example, there has been a notable rise in the number of literate women per 1,000 over the last three decades. While this figure was only 187 literate females per 1,000 in 1971, it went up to 541 in 2001, signifying a rise of 65 per cent in 30 years. The corresponding figures for male literacy, on the other hand, were 395 per 1,000 in 1971, which rose to 758 in 2001—a rise of just 47 per cent. Female literacy has, in fact, been steadily improving over the years and the proportion of literate women increased from 39 per cent in 1991 to 54 per cent in 2001 (Rustagi 2002; Menon-Sen and Shivakumar 2001).

The life expectancy at birth has also been improving over the years with women today living up to 63 years, which is almost double the number of years that their mothers hoped to live, viz., 32 years in 1951. Further, it is true that gains in terms of human development seem to have benefited women in that fewer women die today due to pregnancy-related causes. However, on the negative side, the statistics on maternal mortality are still unacceptably high, as nearly 300 women die each day during childbirth or of pregnancy-related causes. Similarly, though there is an improvement of almost 10 percentage points in female infant mortality rates (IMR) over the last decade, the gender gap in IMR is still negative, and in 2001, over 71 girls did not survive their first year. Again, as regards the sex ratio, which is the litmus test for women’s welfare and status in society, while the adult sex ratio for India stood at 934 per 1,000 males in 2001, which is an improvement over the last decade when it stood at 923, the child sex ratio is alarmingly low at 927 girls for every 1,000 boys. These averages, however, tell only a part of the story in that there are wide differences in the above indicators between different regions/states, urban and rural areas and finally, between communities. For example, consider the gender gap in literacy, where though there has been a decline of about 3 percentage points from 24.5 to 21.7 between 1991 and 2001 for all-India, the gaps have remained glaringly high for disadvantaged groups such as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes at 26 and 23 percentage points in 2001 between men and women respectively.
(Census of India 2001). Such differences are perhaps not so surprising in a large country like India. Nevertheless, the impact and effect of these differences need to be analysed and contextualised within the changes that the Indian economy and society have been experiencing during the past two decades. Specifically, two major trends have left their mark on the Indian economy – the relatively fast pace of liberalisation and privatisation during the last decade and a greater degree of localisation and decentralisation of political processes. The first calls for an examination of women’s status in relation to poverty, while the second requires greater understanding in terms of protecting women and promoting equality in the labour market as well as in the broader politico-legal structures of society.

_Segregation and Segmentation of Women in the Labour Market — A Story of Exclusion_: Data on long-term trends in growth rates of population, employment and labour force are revealing in this context. The most obvious feature is that the rate of growth of employment declined sharply from 2.07 per cent during the period 1983 to 1993-94 to 1.07 per cent during the period 1993-94 to 1999-2000 (Planning Commission 2002). Although a part of this decline may be associated with a fall in the growth of labour force in the intervening period, the data clearly reveals that the growth rate of employment, which stood at 0.98 per cent for the period 1993-94 to 1999-2000 is less than that of the labour force, which was 1.03 per cent for the corresponding period, thereby indicating an increase in unemployment. This has significant connotations, especially for women in India, as in a scenario wherein paid work is itself difficult to get, a decreasing trend in the growth of employment may have resulted in further disguising their participation in the labour force. The last point is especially evident from a comparison of data derived from the NSSO (1993-94 and 1999-2000), which reveals that women’s participation in the labour force in both rural and urban areas has declined during this period. However, the fact that the growth rates of employment for women by weekly and daily status are higher as compared to those by usual status, may indicate that there is growth in short duration employment where naturally women abound (Kundu 1999). This may indicate that women are increasingly being forced to take up employment outside the home.

Further, based on information about the distribution of workers in different sectors and according to employment status one can argue that though women’s visibility in the workforce has improved in the last two decades, a clustering of women in high risk, short duration, low wage employment continues to be the norm. Sector-wise, women workers are more concentrated in the primary sector compared to their male counterparts. As a whole, 70 per cent of all women workers were employed in the primary sector (in 1999-2000) as compared to 47 per cent males and correspondingly, the share of female workers in the secondary and tertiary sectors was much lower than those of male workers. It has also been noticed that male
workers witnessed a much sharper shift from primary sector to secondary/tertiary sector employment as compared to female workers over the period. While the percentage of male workers in the primary sector declined from 65.5 in 1977-78 to 57.0 during 1997-2000, this percentage had gone up from 14.2 to 20.2 in the secondary sector, and from 20.3 to 32.8 in the tertiary sector, during the corresponding period. In the case of female workers, on the other hand, the percentage of women employed in the primary sector fell from 89.8 in 1977-78 to 70.0 during 1997-2000, while that of workers in the secondary sector increased from 14.2 to 20.2, and in the tertiary sector, from 20.3 to 32.8, during the corresponding period. It merits mention here that the primary sector is largely unorganised and earnings in this sector are much lower than those in the secondary and tertiary sectors.

A large proportion of women workers are employed in the casual category than their male counterparts in both rural and urban areas. A trend towards greater casualisation has been observed along with a decline in the number of both male and female self-employed workers. Although it is difficult to judge whether a shift from self-employed to the casual category suggests an improvement or deterioration in the quality of employment, an increase in casualisation is considered to be indicative of the latter. It is observed that while the proportion of casual workers has increased over the years, this has been sharper in the case of men than women, and has occurred more in rural than urban areas. However, in urban areas, the proportion of casual female workers decreased during the period 1993-94 to 1999-2000. Overall, the proportion of regular female employees in the urban areas increased from 30.8 per cent in 1977-78 to 38 per cent in 1999-2000, but in the rural areas, it remained almost constant at around 3.5 per cent. Thus, on the whole, the employment status of women workers has not deteriorated over the years vis-a-vis male workers, but a much larger proportion of women, particularly in the rural areas, are employed as casual workers as compared to male workers.

Any assessment of women's participation in the labour force must therefore, grapple with a number of issues with the most obvious one being the problem associated with the definition of work, and the official recognition of the work that a vast majority of women perform as being part of the labour market. The second relates to an acknowledgment of the limitations of working with statistics, which under-value women's work.

Recognition of these limitations of conventional labour force participation measures has led the NSSO to collect information on the time spent by men and women in different tasks. The activities recognised by the national accounting systems (SNA) are largely undertaken by men, while the share of women's involvement in what is termed as extended SNA activities, or unrecognised economic work, is very high. While women spend 19 hours per week on SNA activities, men's involvement in the same is much higher at 42 hours per week. Further, of the hours
spent by women in economic activities, 51 per cent is devoted to unpaid work (CSO 2000; Rustagi 2002).

**Gender Discrimination: How Equal Are Women in the Labour Market?**

The consideration of categories of labour into which workers can be drawn leads to the questions of how workers, particularly women, gain access to various types of employment and the mechanisms by which it occurs (Baud 1992). In the context of India, only a very small group of women have access to the formal sector. A large majority of the women work either in the agricultural sector or tend to be concentrated in ‘informal’ employment ranging from household work to traditional productive tasks. However, given that only a small number of Indian women workers are officially recognised as workers, it is especially important to examine the nature of employment, and forces which determine their presence in specific sectors and occupations. In order to meaningfully analyse the patterns of women’s employment, it is vital to contextualise it within the dualistic hierarchies that exist, particularly that of the rural-urban and the organised-unorganised.

**Women in the Unorganised Labour Market:** It is now widely accepted that an overwhelming majority of women and men in India work in the informal or the unorganised sector and the pace of growth in this sector is much higher than that in the organised sector. While employment in the unorganised sector increased from 278.72 million in 1983 to 368.89 million in 1999-2000, in the organised sector it increased only marginally from 24.01 million to 28.11 million during the corresponding period. Till very recently, data on the unorganised sector was not readily available for all industry divisions of this sector except for some sectors for which NSSO conducted occasional surveys. Hence, attempts have been made to arrive at a general estimate about the size of the unorganised/informal sector through what is known as the residual method.

UPSS employment for the years, 1987-88, 1993-94 and 1999-2000, for different sectors has been estimated at the one-digit level for both males and females. It is observed that between 1987-88 and 1993-94, female employment in the unorganised sector grew by 4.72 per cent as against 3.56 per cent of male employment. However, during the period, 1993-94 and 1999-2000, there was an absolute decline in the rural female employment (the growth rate was -0.17 per cent per annum as against 1.45 per cent per annum for males). Female employment, as a whole, stagnated between 1993-94 and 1999-2000 and there was an absolute decline in the rural female employment. As a whole, between 1987-88 and 1999-2000, female employment in the unorganised sector grew by 2.47 per cent per annum as against 2.60 per cent for males. While during 1987-88 and 1993-94, there was an impressive
growth in all sectors, except construction, during 1993-94 and 1999-2000, there was negative growth in the primary sector and a slow growth in manufacturing, and financial and community services. Trade, transport and construction were the leading sectors, which absorbed female employment in the unorganised sector.

The negative growth in employment in the primary sector needs to be situated within the context of the labour market, where a concomitant increase in households with small land holdings has been observed in the rural areas. More significantly, it has also been noticed that with a rise in the diversification of economic activities among labour households, the proportion of wage earning men and women in rural labour households has decreased.

Further, it is well recognised that male and female labour markets often supplement each other. In India, as in most countries in Asia, men and women perform a different set of activities in each sector. Many studies including NSS data show that women are hired for the more manual, less mechanised and less regular employment (Table 1). This is in contrast with male employment, which tends to be more skilled and regular. Apart from the obvious discrimination of a sex-segmented labour market, women face the added disadvantage of earning lower amounts for similar tasks performed. According to NSSO statistics, casual female workers earn substantially lower wages across activities in different sectors as compared to their male counterparts.

### Table 1: Percentage Share of Employment in Different Unorganised Sectors

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<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>64.20</td>
<td>62.77</td>
<td>57.70</td>
<td>87.45</td>
<td>79.60</td>
<td>77.52</td>
<td>71.72</td>
<td>68.46</td>
<td>64.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining &amp; quarrying</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity, gas &amp; water</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>5.76</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>4.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>10.15</td>
<td>10.50</td>
<td>14.20</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>7.56</td>
<td>8.07</td>
<td>11.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport, storage, etc.</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>3.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial &amp; community services</td>
<td>7.45</td>
<td>8.84</td>
<td>7.13</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>5.99</td>
<td>6.24</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>7.87</td>
<td>6.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All sectors</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: NSSO Reports on Employment and Unemployment.*
Micro-level studies also suggest that the most significant changes have occurred in the urban unorganised sector with women gaining entry into formal manufacturing industries such as garments, electronics and food processing (Table 2). However, a persisting problem in most industries has been that women are located at the bottom levels of the hierarchy and are being increasingly pushed into the status of casual or part-time hired workers.

### Table 2: Industries Which Employed More Females Than Males, 1991

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>NIC Group</th>
<th>Number of Workers in Hundreds</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Percentage of Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Processing of edible nuts</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>596</td>
<td>67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacture of bidis</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>6669</td>
<td>14,547</td>
<td>69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spinning, weaving and finishing of coir textiles</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>617</td>
<td>259</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic services</td>
<td>960</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>5,760</td>
<td>4,197</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: NIC - National Industrial Classification, 1987*  
*Source: Registrar General, India, Census of India, General Economic Tables*

To a very large extent, in an economic situation, wherein access to regular employment is declining and the better-off and more powerful groups in society grab the scanty opportunities, it is inevitable that men will have access to better employment and resources as compared to women, given the structural and institutional constraints associated with women's access to education and training.

**Women in the Organised Sector:** Organised sector employment is often considered as a ‘luxury’ in India as it employs only 8 per cent of the total labour force. Further, as the organised sector witnessed near jobless growth during the period 1981-2001, both men and women have had to work in the unorganised sector, which is characterised by low wages and little or no job security. It is noteworthy that organised sector employment has been and continues to be excessively male-dominated. According to the statistics published by the Ministry of Labour in 1999, women comprised only 17 per cent of the total workforce in this sector (Table 3). A sector-wise profile of employment shows that the proportion of women was highest in the most backward and low-paying segment of the organised industry including agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing, and lowest in electricity, gas and water. In terms of absolute numbers, the largest concentration of women workers was found in community, social and personal services.
Table 3: Employment in Organised Sector – India

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year (ending March)</th>
<th>Total Employed (lakhs)</th>
<th>Percentage of Women Employment to Total Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>223.1</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>245.8</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>259.6</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>279.4</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997 *</td>
<td>278.0</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998 *</td>
<td>281.9</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999 @</td>
<td>281.1</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: @ Data as per Quarterly Employment Review
   * Data as per Quick Estimates.

Source: Directorate General of Employment and Training, Ministry of Labour

Two broad distinctions can be made in organised sector employment, viz., that of the public and private sectors. While the public sector is the largest employer of both men and women in the organised sector in India, it employs more men than women, i.e., 60 per cent of all women and 71 per cent of all men employed in the organised sector. The factors responsible for this have already been explored (Srivastava 1999; Duraisamy and Duraisamy 1995). It has been found that higher wages and greater job security characterise public sector employment and therefore, in a job-scarce economy, where societal attitudes favour men and where women’s employment is considered as supplementary, women naturally find themselves at a disadvantage while looking for jobs. Further, gender bias and patriarchal values deny girls and women access to appropriate education and training, which are prerequisites for finding a job in the organised public sector. According to the data collected by the Ministry of human Resource Development, Department of Education, females constituted only 43.6 per cent of the total number of students enrolled in classes I-V, 40.4 per cent in classes VI-VIII, and 38.9 per cent in classes IX-XII, during 1999-2000. The gender bias becomes even more apparent when seen in terms of the number of girls per 100 boys enrolled in schools and colleges. These figures were 77 girls per 100 boys in classes I-V, 68 per 100 in classes VI-VIII, 65 per 100 in classes IX-XII, and 64 per 100 at the University level. The fact that girls lag significantly behind boys in higher education explains why public sector organisations, which are almost monopolistic in areas such as electricity generation and transmission, and petroleum and gas, areas that require highly qualified and trained staff, employ more men than women.

Notably, while the growth rate of male employment has been almost equivalent to that of employment in the organised sector at 1.12 and 1.39 per cent
respectively, the growth rate of female employment has increased by almost three times. Even discounting the fact that women’s employment increased from a very low base, it is still noteworthy that women are slowly but steadily attempting to find a toe-hold in the male-dominated organised sector. However, a comparison of male and female recruitments reveals that the women-friendly tertiary sector employs 35 per cent women. But, in the primary sector, this figure drops to a dismal 6 per cent. This may be attributed primarily, to the continuing large gender gap between male and female educational training. According to NSSO estimates (1983 and 1999-2000), while there has been a substantial rise in the proportion of women having completed secondary and graduate education from 1.2 and 0.3 per cent to 3.6 and 1 per cent respectively, the male-female educational qualification gap has also increased from 5.2 and 1.2 per cent to 10.1 and 2.4 per cent respectively. This gap can, in turn, be attributed to the persisting gender biases in society that consider women’s education as unimportant as women workers are largely perceived to be temporary and supplementary wage earners.

Women’s employment in the organised sector also needs to be contextualised in the existing politico-economic situation of the country. Since 1981, there has been a decline in organised sector employment, in general and in employment in the public sector, in particular. However, it is also true that the private sector has seen a marginal rise in the employment rate, particularly in the financial service sector and in recent years, in the information technology sector. Since these are seen as the sunrise sectors, even the Planning Commission, in its plan document on employment generation in 2002, emphasises the need to promote these ‘employment-friendly sectors’. The statistics and literature on employment practices are revealing in this context. For purposes of illustration, let us consider one segment of the financial sector, viz., banking, and the information technology industry since the former has been considered as ‘a woman friendly’ occupation for almost three decades and the latter is seen as an industry that will herald women’s equality.

**Banking:** Available statistics reveal that a higher proportion of women are employed in private sector banks, especially private sector foreign banks (30 per cent in 1996) in contrast to their counterparts in the public sector (13 per cent). Similarly, it is apparent that while there is a male-female gap in all banks, private sector foreign banks employ a substantially higher proportion of women at the officer and manager levels (30.85 per cent) than the public sector, which employs only 13.16 per cent of women.

This apparent contradiction between lower employment of women in the public sector, as a whole, where there is a clear wage and job security advantage, and higher employment in the upper echelons of private sector foreign banks, where, again, there is a similar if not higher wage advantage, may be attributed to
the affirmative policies of the latter. Although it is now widely recognised that women are more constrained due to their reproductive and care-giving functions, it seems that the public sector banks still adhere to the traditional criteria and do not favour newer recruitment policies such as lateral entry or affirmative women-friendly policies. There is also a need to look beyond the logic of numbers to understand the push–pull factors that effect either high or low participation rate of women in the above sectors. The push factors account for the aspirations of women workers and changing family norms in favour of working women but disfavour career women, while the pull factors include the perceived image of the sector and shift in gender relations at the workplace, among others. Statistical evidence shows that banks have, during the last decade, cut back on employment of lower level secretarial staff and that private sector foreign banks almost entirely recruit higher qualified persons, which will adversely affect women as a majority of them are still constrained by societal biases which deny or at least restrict their access.

Information Technology: Rapid growth in the information technology sector since the early 1990s has caused some segments of the Indian intelligentsia to believe that this ‘revolution’ has the potential to effect fundamental transformations in gender relations. Its potential to open up new avenues for women as a gender-neutral employer continues to enjoy popular consensus. However, a recent study by Rothboeck, Vijaybaskar and Gayathri (2002) argues that the outcome is neither automatic nor inevitable. On the contrary, it is observed that very often factors inherent in the society and labour market threaten the gender equality objectives and empowerment achievements in this sector. The IT industry in India is also influenced by mediating factors in society as a larger proportion of women are employed in the IT industry, but, in the low-end technology segment. In fact, a majority of them are employed in the so-called IT-enabled sector. There is thus a need to identify ways in which these technologies are intertwined with social and economic forces.

Along with the hype heralding the IT sector as a gender-friendly industry, there has been an increase in supporting material predicting large labour market benefits for women. However, the less critical analyses have not examined women’s employment in the IT sector within a structural and institutional context.

Sex Segregation in the Indian Labour Market — Changes in Gender Relations in Employment: The foregone discussion reveals that Indian labour markets are significantly characterised by sexual segregation. While women have made significant inroads into previously nearly all-male arenas, marginally reducing the vertical segregation of the sexes at the workplace, the labour market still remains overwhelmingly male-biased and increasingly horizontally segregated. What is, however, of concern is the fact that women’s entry into male arenas of work has also
been determined by a fall in investment in these sectors. A plethora of evidence and micro-surveys reveal that women still experience severe occupational segregation. Since the late 1980s, and more evidently in the 1990s, though the pattern and structure of employment changed for both men and women, the labour market segmentation is still centrally structured by the inequalities in power, and women are still crowded in jobs and occupations, characterised by lower rewards and less power, such as bidi making, nursing, mid-wifery, pre-primary teaching, mat weaving and housekeeping.

While it is difficult to establish a linkage between women’s employment and absolute poverty, it can be argued that poverty contributes to women’s continued segregation in the labour market by denying them equal access to skills, resources and education. More importantly, these trends indicate that women’s employment in the labour force is largely determined by macro-economic policies that impact poverty.

Gender and Poverty

For the last few decades, women’s activists in India have been arguing that women are poorer than men. Most often, they have used empirical evidence derived from the labour market with regard to the feminisation of certain occupations to establish a relationship between gender and poverty. In recent years, however, this phenomenon of stretching the evidence on feminisation of certain labour processes in order to validate the feminisation of poverty thesis is being challenged. On the contrary, it is now believed that feminisation of poverty is a complex fact and that there is a need to carefully examine the various nuances of the differential experiences that poverty engenders for men and women.

Gender Inequalities in the Labour Market and Overall Poverty — Is There a Relationship?: It has been suggested that apart from traditional explanations based on agricultural growth and inflation rates, some other variables such as gender differentials in access to commodities and services determine men’s and women’s capabilities to function (Sen 1987). This approach encompasses a wide range of variables including visible ones such as adequate nourishment and appropriate skills to more complex ones such as the ability to participate effectively in the community. In a paper, Ghosh (1998) explains that as this approach incorporates the problem of social exclusion and marginalisation in the idea of poverty, it is particularly relevant to women. It not only extends the concept of poverty beyond the income criteria to incorporate access to means of satisfying one’s basic needs, but also includes deprivations originating from social exclusion.

While it was widely acknowledged that poverty is a multi-dimensional concept, it is only in the last decade that the need for a multi-dimensional aggregate welfare indicator has been felt. Sen (1987) has been particularly articulate in not
only bringing the issue of gender differences in poverty to the forefront, but also in promoting the use of gendered indicators to estimate relative poverty. In India too, therefore, prior to the recognition of these limitations of standard poverty measures, income poverty was used as the welfare indicator. The typical basis on which income poverty is measured is the poverty line, which defines the level below which people are considered to be absolutely poor. Poverty line is conventionally defined in terms of the cost of a basket of goods covering basic consumption needs. In practice, in India, the latter is determined in terms of food expenditure to attain a recommended calorie intake supplemented by a small allowance for non-food items. In order to differentiate between the poor and the non-poor, a head count ratio is used, which provides a count of the proportion of population for whom consumption is estimated below the poverty line.

The NSS surveys, used to estimate income poverty in India, reveal that the proportion of poor living below the level of the poverty line has been steadily falling. While in 1983, 44 per cent of the population was considered to be absolutely poor, by 1999-2000, this figure had dropped to 26 per cent. There has been a lot of discussion about these trends (Sen and Patnaik 1997). It is posited that the most important reason for the decline in poverty ratios was the increase in the real wages of unskilled labour in both urban and rural areas, and across the range of agricultural and non-agricultural activities, and the relatively large scale increase in the proportion of households with land (Sen 1996; Ghosh 1998). According to the NSS data, the growth in average daily wage earnings at 1993-94 prices was higher for the period 1993-94 to 1999-2000 as compared to the period 1983-88 to 1993-94. Further, the growth in average daily wage earning has been higher for women in all categories except for that of casual labour.

As regards the structure of poverty, the data reveal that a larger proportion of the poor live in rural areas and that the rural poor account for three-fourths of all the poor. Further, in rural areas, certain occupational categories such as rural labourers show a higher incidence of poverty and groups such as the self-employed show a lower incidence of poverty. This has serious implications as statistics reveal that the proportion of self-employed is falling amongst both men and women and that there has been a rise in the casualisation of the labour force. To reiterate, the self-employment share in the total workforce declined from 62.6 per cent in 1977-78 to 56 per cent in 1999-2000. The share of regular salaried workers went down from 7.7 per cent in 1977-78 to 6.7 per cent in 1999-2000. This implies a rapid rise in the casualisation of workforce, in both the rural and urban areas, and amongst women and men, more so among women.

In terms of social groups, it emerges that the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are considerably over-represented in the below poverty line estimates. Although it is difficult to obtain gender-differentiated estimates, it can
be deduced by pooling various NSS data sets that women are the more disadvantaged group. Firstly, female-headed households have recorded a higher incidence of poverty. Secondly, poor households have a higher proportion of adult females than adult males.

In India, the labour market and institutional factors mediate to reinforce women’s unequal status. Gender inequalities are both the result and the cause that determine both the individual household’s and the broader community’s poverty in that they contribute to the inter-generational reproduction of poverty. In such a scenario, an analysis of poverty, especially women’s poverty, may be better understood by using the new measures articulated in the United Nations Human Development Reports, viz. the Gender Development Index (GDI) and the Human Poverty Index (HPI), which incorporate variables associated with longevity, knowledge and a decent standard of living. These composite estimates reveal that women in India suffer from gender discrimination. With a GDI figure of 0.553, India ranks amongst the medium to lower cohort of countries with respect to gender equality (UNDP 1999).

Substantial gaps between men and women can be noted in welfare indicators associated with health (MMR, IMR), education (literacy rates, educational levels) and labour force participation (WPR, LPR). This indicates that in India, women have fewer opportunities of improving their capability for participating effectively in society and economy and implies that women in poor households are caught in a vicious cycle between poverty and gender inequality.

Women and Poverty — Is Women’s Poverty More Severe?: Poverty, as traditionally understood in terms of the poverty ratio, shows a declining trend in the country for all households. It can also be inferred by using wages as an indicator that the quality of employment improved during the period 1993-94 to 1999-2000 for all categories, except that of the casual labour in agriculture where it improved only marginally for both men and women. However, there has also been a rise in casualisation of the workforce across all categories, and this rise has been higher amongst women than men.

There are other reasons for concern. In an earlier section, this paper has pointed out to various trends and patterns of other indicators of deprivation, particularly those related to survival and knowledge. The trends of the macro-indicators highlight various ideas with the most important among them being that though some processes have favoured poverty reduction, a large majority of the population still faces deprivation. This continued deprivation has serious implications for women, especially for those classified as part of non-poor households. At all these levels, gender and age-based power relations still shape the distribution of work, income and assets.
Earlier, when a higher proportion of households was classified as poor, it was widely believed that women would benefit through various anti-poverty programmes and development policies. With the recent macro-changes in economic policies, leading, in turn, to major changes in social and distributive policies, those who vacillate between poor and non-poor households have been particularly affected. It is feared that a further reduction in social transfer to the poor because of cuts in public expenditure in health and education and the lessening of subsidies on basic needs, will adversely impact women in the above households. There is also growing evidence in literature that women continue to be systematically discriminated against and structurally disadvantaged over a wide range of welfare indicators in recent years (Kabeer 1994).

The example of the State of Kerala is often cited in relation to the reduction in poverty ratio, both at the rural and urban levels in India, as here the mean consumption figures are not impressive. This can undoubtedly be ascribed to the high welfare indicators that the state boasts of in relation to women and the performance achievement of these indicators can, in turn, be related to the state’s long-term investment in social and redistributive policies. The larger social benefits that accrue to society because of focused investment in women’s education and health are thus evident.

Engendering Policy: A Status Report

Women and Poverty Alleviation Programmes: Since Independence, the Government of India has advocated gender equality in all its policy documents and commissions. The Indian Constitution of 1950 guarantees all women equality before the law (Article 14); no discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex and place of birth [Article 15(1)]; special provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children [Article 15 (3)]; equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state (Article 16); State policy securing the right to an adequate means of livelihood [Article 39(a)]; equal pay for equal work [Article 39(d)]; provisions for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief (Article 42); and promotion of harmony and abolition of practices derogatory to the dignity of women [Article 51 (A)(e)].

Apart from the above Constitutional provisions, a wide range of legislations protecting women and promoting equality in the labour market were also introduced. But by the early 1970s, it had become evident that despite their prevalence, these provisions and legislations were rarely, if ever, implemented and more seriously, their enforcement was often merely confined to organised sectors. Since then the Indian government has thus been trying to engender its social policy in order to ensure that none of its women-oriented programmes has any negative
consequences. The aim has been to effect structural and institutional changes in favour of women’s welfare. The need for a conscious effort to focus on poverty reduction programmes for women has also been felt. Several anti-poverty measures and programmes have thus been periodically implemented with varying results. In spite of a strong affirmative policy intent, however, women have been unable to benefit from these policies due to structural and institutional factors (Table 4).

Table 4: Share of Women in Employment Generated under Poverty Alleviation Programmes in Rural Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Number of Families Assisted under Self-Employment Programmes (IRDP+TRYSEM)* (Million Families)</th>
<th>Per Cent Share of Women</th>
<th>Total Number of Man-Days Generated under Wage Employment (NREP+RLEG+JRY+EAS)** (Million Man-Days)</th>
<th>Per Cent Share of Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985-86</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>11.52</td>
<td>564.0</td>
<td>9.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986-87</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>16.61</td>
<td>701.5</td>
<td>15.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987-88</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>20.77</td>
<td>674.9</td>
<td>18.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988-89</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>24.53</td>
<td>691.5</td>
<td>20.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989-90</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>27.00</td>
<td>864.4</td>
<td>22.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-91</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>32.29</td>
<td>873.8</td>
<td>24.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991-92</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>35.20</td>
<td>809.2</td>
<td>24.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992-93</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>35.22</td>
<td>782.1</td>
<td>24.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993-94</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>35.47</td>
<td>1075.3</td>
<td>22.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994-95</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>35.42</td>
<td>1225.7</td>
<td>22.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-96</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>34.16</td>
<td>1239.4</td>
<td>29.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996-97</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>31.39</td>
<td>730.1</td>
<td>30.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997-98</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>35.73</td>
<td>639.4</td>
<td>33.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-99</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>34.65</td>
<td>221.0</td>
<td>27.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2000</td>
<td>0.37@</td>
<td>44.09</td>
<td>137.01 #</td>
<td>27.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* IRDP: Integrated Rural Development Programme
* TRYSEM: Training of Rural Youth for Self-Employment
** NREP: National Rural Employment Programme (during 1985-89)
** RLEG: Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (during 1985-89)
** JRY: Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (since 1989-90)
** EAS: Employment Assurance Scheme (since 1993-94)
**@: Swarn Jayanti Swarozgar Yojana (Swaryarics)
# Jawahar Grams Samdhi Yojana and EAS

Source: Department of Rural Employment and Poverty Alleviation, Ministry of Rural Areas and Employment, New Delhi
Jayathi Ghosh (1998) classifies India’s poverty reduction programmes into the following categories:

1. Those relating to access to food, through a public distribution system (PDS) and other items;
2. Those devoted to promoting self-employment through the provision of assets, assistance in marketing, etc.;
3. Those devoted to providing lean season employment or other forms of wage employment;
4. Those addressing other basic needs such as health, sanitation, housing and educational facilities.

The previous decade also saw the mushrooming of a large number of self-employment schemes in the country. Women are specifically targeted by many of these schemes, as it is believed that self-employment will help them to balance their family responsibilities while ensuring economic independence. It is also believed that through the provision of selective training, especially in non-traditional occupations, these employment programmes can positively influence occupational segmentation in the labour market. Three such prominent programmes have been discussed below:

a) **Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP)**, launched in 1979, is amongst the largest and most popular credit-based poverty alleviation programmes. It provides credit through commercial banks to below poverty line households allowing them to purchase assets that will result in viable self-employment in future. The scheme stipulates that 30 per cent of all IRDP beneficiaries should be women.

b) **Support to Training and Employment Programmes for Women (STEP)** was initiated in 1983 with the aim of upgrading the skills of poor women with no assets through specific training for sustainable employment in traditional skills such as agriculture, dairying, sericulture, fisheries, handloom and handicrafts.

c) **Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA)**, launched in 1983, aims at providing self-employment opportunities to women of poor households according to their skill, aptitude and local conditions to enable them to participate in an organised manner in social development.

Assessments reveal that the main problem with credit-based self-employment schemes such as those listed above is that the provision of credit is in itself inadequate for successful self-employment. Further, while the linkage of credit-asset-self-employment seems to be theoretically sound, in reality, this linear linkage is difficult to achieve because of the faulty or lax implementation of these schemes and because they make no allowance for either women’s needs or the specific
requirements of the region. Recognising the clear-cut correlation between employment security and human development, the Government did launch certain schemes to ensure an increase in employment levels and thereby income to poor households. However, the performance of these schemes has also been marred by the poor involvement of women. This has often been attributed to the failure to attract women as well as the absence of additional facilities for child care, and lack of flexible working hours (Ghosh 1998).

**Poverty Alleviation Programmes — Success and Failures:** With the failure of the “trickle down” model of growth, the patterns of policy intervention for poverty alleviation have varied considerably, ranging from the provision of direct food subsidies to ensuring basic needs through employment generation to guaranteeing access to credit for livelihood security. The dominant notion underlying all these interventions is that access to productive employment leads to income augmentation in the short run, and to poverty reduction in the long run. However, this recognition of the need to move away from growth-mediated poverty reduction to a welfare-based strategy has also resulted in the re-evaluation of the reigning paradigm of development and has consequently catapulted women’s issues, especially questions of their employment and economic security, to the centre-stage. It is seen from the above discussion that in most social welfare schemes wherein women are the beneficiaries, the target remains elusive due to the prevailing social norms and skewed power relations in society. However, the scenario is not entirely bleak as variations of some of these programmes have been successfully implemented, as is obvious from the following widely quoted success stories.

1) **Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS)—Employment Security for Women Workers:** The EGS was launched in the 1970s in Maharashtra, a major state of western India, for guaranteeing employment to all adults willing to do unskilled manual work on a piece-rate basis. The main objective of the EGS was to improve household welfare in the short-run and contribute to the development of the rural economy in the long-run. Although the EGS was not conceived as a women’s employment programme, the available data shows that women’s participation in this scheme over the last two decades has been consistently high (Datar 1988, Dev 1996; Dev and Ranade 2001). Many believe that the main reason for this was that it allowed women to work in the vicinity of their villages, and it offers work on equal wages criteria. A third set explains the women-friendliness of EGS in terms of the fact that women’s labour as well as wage labour were seen as supplementary and it was, therefore, natural for women to participate in a higher proportion in the EGS. This is further corroborated by the data from rural Maharashtra where it is seen that women from medium and small landholding households were participating in EGS. In other words, EGS seems to suit persons who do not require continuous
employment and need flexibility in choosing their work. A majority of the women in rural poor households fit the bill in that they need to balance their productive, reproductive and care roles with the monetary compulsions of the household. In the absence of EGS, they would have to resort to wage labour in private agriculture, which is characterised by more discriminatory features and greater rigidity.

2) **DWCRA – Women’s Empowerment through Skill Training and Access to Credit:**
This programme aims at improving rural women’s economic and social status by introducing them to income generating skills, and productive and sustainable economic activities. Women members are organised into groups, provided with initial seed money, trained in a marketable skill and encouraged to function as entrepreneurs. Recognising women’s familial responsibility, the scheme has attempted a convergence with other programmes, especially those connected with the Departments of Women and Child Welfare, Health and Education. The importance of the DWCRA model needs to be stressed as it is amongst the few schemes which avows to empower women through economic means. The success of the scheme has been attributed to two of its intrinsic features, viz., the creation of thrift and credit societies, which enable women to mobilise funds for credit without depending on middlemen and moneylenders; and the training imparted to women in an employable or marketable skill. While established social mores prevent individual women from accessing both credit and raw materials, and later marketing them, the DWCRA model offers women a way to overcome these barriers.

3) **Self-employed Women’s Association (SEWA), Trade Unionism and Women’s Empowerment:**
SEWA, a trade union for women in the unorganised sector was formed in 1972 when it was felt that the traditional trade union model was ineffective in organising and representing the problems of women workers. SEWA adopted a multi-pronged strategy to achieve its twin goals of women’s empowerment and poverty reduction. As its members are women workers in the informal economy, it has, through organisation, ensured minimum wages for them in the short-run, and aims to achieve work security in the long-run. The unique feature of this model is that it runs a contributory social security scheme, which covers health insurance, life insurance and asset insurance. The reasons for SEWA’s success have been well documented (Lund and Srinivas 2000) and are attributed to the successful politicisation of gender issues at the local level and to the effective organisation of women workers around core access and control issues.
Conclusions: Women, Labour Market and Poverty Alleviation

Recent literature on poverty includes indicators of vulnerability, powerlessness and lack of voice in order to widen the concept beyond income and living standards. The significance of this is often under-estimated, especially in relation to policies concerned with women’s employment as women’s presence or absence in paid employment and in specific occupational categories is crucially structured by the environment created by state policies. This is evident from the discussions on poverty, gender and employment that have hitherto taken place. It is clear that poverty needs to be understood in terms of lack of access to services, lack of personal security, low social status and lack of control over labour and employment. This has implications for a whole range of policies which directly affect the quantum and quality of women’s participation in the labour market such as those concerned specifically with regulating gender relations in employment, viz., Equal Pay, Discrimination Acts, Education Bills etc., and those concerned with balancing work and familial responsibilities, viz. childcare policies, maternity benefits etc. Poverty also has outcomes with respect to sexual division of labour, which are affected by the regulation of the wider social environment in which men and women make decisions. For example, personal laws, regulated by cultural institutions, indirectly affect women’s access to land and other immovable assets, thereby excluding them from control over their labour and often even skills that can lead to better quality employment.

State policy in India appears to be aware and committed to alleviating women’s low status vis-à-vis the labour market through poverty alleviation programmes. There is, however, a yawning and elusive gap between policy and practice, rhetoric and reality. What is the implication of this? There is a need to go beyond the rhetoric and take into account factors which result in societal passivity on issues concerning women’s work. While women’s quiescence is presumed to be the main factor responsible for their low labour market status and material poverty, it is time to understand men’s role too and deal with strategies employed by them as principal patriarchal agents in order to develop a successful social mobilisation plan.

The long-term aim of this plan should thus be to move from participation to partnership. Today, women workers have been given or allowed the opportunity to take part in the labour market with a view to alleviating the poverty of their households. The imagery is static, women workers are perceived as efficient managers in that they can manage to take on the additional responsibility of productive work, while managing their domestic responsibilities and therefore, given the role of a conduit as is evident from the various programmes. It is time to review the existing national policy on women as well as the myriad poverty alleviation-employment boosting programmes with women participating in the review as partners in development.
Such an exercise requires a broad-based, but close collaboration – between policy making bodies and implementing agencies, employers and employees, formal sector workers and informal sector workers, trade unions and civil society organisations. The main issue plaguing women workers, especially self-employed and casual labourers in the unorganised sector, is the lack of cross-reference between the various policy instruments and programme interventions. For example, most of the present implementation problems arise because a wide range of government agencies and departments have responsibilities for increasing women’s participation in the labour force, on the one hand, and effecting poverty reduction, on the other. At the practical level, it may be worth looking into solutions such as streamlining administrative procedures and developing the equivalent of the much-used liberalisation terminology, viz., a ‘one-stop facility’ for women.

Several models of co-operation and collaboration exist and need to be replicated urgently. To name a few, SEWA, Annapurna, and the Working Women’s Forum are successful examples of models that have brought the issues concerning women workers to the centre-stage, besides being instrumental in mainstreaming women’s issues into state policy, and implementing labour standards amongst unorganised women workers. These models share a common feature in that they have all invested time in socially and politically mobilising not only women, but also other social partners. Simultaneously, there is also an urgent need to involve traditional employers and workers’ associations which are the seats of power in India. In conclusion, it can thus be said that while gender mainstreaming in poverty is taking place through debates and policy implementation at various levels in India, it is important to affix this firmly within the context of labour standards.
Appendix I

Chart 1: Percentage of Weekly Average Time Spent on Various Types of Activities by Sex (Rural)

Chart 2: Percentage of Population below the Poverty Line
Note

1 In this method, the size of the unorganised sector is estimated by subtracting the number of workers employed in the organised sector given by the Directorate General of Employment and Training (DGE & T) of the Ministry of Labour, from the figures for total employment provided by the NSSO. The latter is estimated by applying the WPRs of the NSSO to the mid-year population obtained by linear interpolation. Two limitations need to be noted here. The DGE & T does not give data on organised employment by rural-urban location and the employment it reports is an understatement because of the growing apathy among the firms to report to DGE & T.

References


