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**Quality of women's employment:
A focus on the South**

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Abstract

This paper is a theoretical discussion and literature survey, which examines themes, related to quality of women's employment in the South Asian and African regions. To do so the following issues are explored further. What are the key determinants that influence the links between gender and employment quality? Which institutional and economic factors increase women's participation in the labour force, and what is its relationship to quality of employment opportunities available? In the geographical areas under consideration this means that an examination of informal sector activity is of paramount importance. Addressing these issues will set the stage to investigate measures to reduce low-quality employment, sometimes from unionised labour and at other instances from consumer groups. This exercise will bring out some emerging themes of the importance on enhancing the quality of women's work.

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Quality of women's employment: A focus on the South¹

1. Introduction

The last three decades have witnessed the increasing visibility of women, which is partly an outcome of social and political movements that have championed women's rights. Feminist scholars have equally been in the forefront in making women's contribution to the political economy visible through related scholarship and research (Boserup 1970, Benéria 1982, Humphries 1995, Humphries and Rubery 1995). Counting women into the big-picture, therefore, is a fundamental first-step in recognising their role in socio-economic structures.

Along with women's increasing visibility, it is necessary to analyse the constraints and conditions within which women contribute to the economy. Women's wellbeing is not measured merely in terms of access to resources but also in terms of their sense of worth and dignity. Forms of employment, quality of employment and access to social security condition this, which are also invariably linked to women's wellbeing. Employment opportunities available to women need to realise their potential capabilities. In other words, it is imperative that women have access to occupations that are non-segregated so that acquiring skills and upward mobility within the occupational ladder is an option. Similarly the quality of women's employment – which is usually linked to the forms of employment – also has a bearing on women's wellbeing. High incidence of women's participation in the informal sector, part-time work, own-account work, and non-unionised labour is established, and these activities have a high probability of being low-quality employment (Klein 1997, Sosin 1999).²

The relationship between forms and quality of employment to women's wellbeing is fairly clear, and it can also be linked to Sen's notion of entitlements and capabilities (Sen 1990). Access to economic resources, an entitlement, does not suffice to empower women: it is a necessary condition but not a sufficient one. Women also need to realise their capabilities, and this is determined by a variety of socio-economic and political-economic factors. Clearly the types, forms and quality of employment factor into the socio-political institutions also bear upon the wellbeing of women.

Several studies on intra-household bargaining have pointed to the need for women to have access to social security and welfare benefits (Agarwal 1997, MacDonald 1998). Social welfare schemes are critical to women on several grounds. Women's ability to participate in economic activities depends upon access to childcare benefits and facilities – an issue perhaps particularly important to Western countries. In the absence of extended kin structures to provide informal care-giving tasks, for instance in conflict-ridden areas, women, and especially female-heads, need good childcare facilities in order to participate in the market. The very absence of social services in care-giving may be a factor that relegates women to part-time, low-quality jobs.

¹ This paper focuses on evidence from the South Asian and African regions in applying and elaborating on the theoretical points mentioned in the introductory sections. These two areas alone do not constitute the "South" either geographically or politically. Yet in this paper for convenience I coin these areas "the South".

² It is sufficient to mention here that some of these issues will be explored in greater detail later in the paper, but its relationship to women's wellbeing is noted here.

Access to social security, such as health care and education, is important for women who associate their wellbeing with that of their family, particularly their children. If children have ready access to schools and hospitals in close-proximity, it frees-up women's time to engage in formal economic tasks, which need not be low quality and/or part-time. Since women's wellbeing is intricately linked to their ability to access social welfare programs, this feeds into quality of women's employment issues – and of course, to women's empowerment. This then becomes a basis for realising women's entitlement and capabilities.

Analysing quality of women's employment requires the following issues to be explored further. What are the key determinants that influence the links between gender and employment quality? Which institutional and economic factors increase women's participation in the labour force, and what is its relationship to quality of employment opportunities available? In the geographical areas under consideration this means that an examination of informal sector activity is of paramount importance. Addressing these issues will set the stage to investigate measures to reduce low-quality employment, sometimes from unionised labour and at other instances from consumer groups.³ Looking at case studies of measures to reduce low-quality employment requires reviewing cases of industrial relations machineries that have contributed to the growing awareness of enhancing the quality of women's employment.

The entry point to probe the relationship between gender and employment quality is an overview of economic and feminist theories on gendered labour markets, which is the focus of section 2. This theoretical discussion provides the background to analyse the evidence from South Asia and Africa. Therefore, the ensuing sections of this paper, sections 3 and 4, goes onto do so. In each of these sections, the key features relevant to the region are brought to the attention of the reader. Section 5 shows that there are underlying structures and processes that cut across despite the very diverse manifestations of women's experiences in the South Asian and African region. This analysis also helps to look at existing efforts by workers organisations to incorporate concerns of fellow women workers, and if they have been successful in remedying the quality of working conditions for this social group. The penultimate section, section 6, therefore, investigates the activities by formalised labour organisations as well as the challenges of organising informal sector workers. The concluding section, section 7, highlights the main findings of this study and identifies areas of further research that needs to be done to improve our knowledge base so as to be better able to inform the policy-making process

2. *The link between gender and quality of employment*

The quality of women's employment is a global issue. However, the pertinent issues to women workers in developing and developed countries are different. Partially, this is simply because the employment opportunities available to women reflect the level of economic development in each country. For example, "atypical forms of employment" in developing countries imply home-based, self-employed, and/or informal sector workers; while in developed countries the same terminology captures a different dimension, i.e. usually part-time and/or temporary, contract-based workers. Accordingly, the issues and policy prescriptions are likely to differ widely. Even though there may be national specificities, gendered labour markets remains an issue for the North and South.

Rationalising the existence of gendered labour markets has been subject to much analysis, and it is apt to begin with a review of prevailing theories. A synopsis of theories provided by economists and feminists who have contributed to understanding the nature of gendered labour markets will be presented in this section of the paper. Summarising the literature will be the

³ The best example of this comes through garment-buyer lead auditing of Economic Processing Zone (EPZ) factories and working conditions in developing countries.

basis of looking at current trends in South Asia and Africa. Specifically, do existing trends provide credence to theories provided by either economists and/or feminists? Labour market issues for South Asia and Africa is presented in the sections 3 and 4, respectively, to show how the theoretical framework helps make sense of the evidence.

2.1 Explaining gendered labour markets: Interpretations by orthodox economists

Explanations for the existence of segregated labour markets are not new. From as early as the 1970s feminist sought to explain the gendered nature of labour markets (Bergman 1974). Similarly, economists too have provided various rationales. Since the labour market is considered a critical domain of economists, the key economic themes are recapitulated below.

Neo-classical economists' interpretation of segregated labour markets is based on the rationality of employers and workers. Workers seek appropriate employment after taking into account their endowment levels, constraints and preferences; likewise as profit maximising agents, employers will pay workers the worth of their marginal product. Interactions of these two factors are argued to result in competitive-efficient labour markets. According to this theory, women workers are paid lower wages because of lower human capital levels, truncated labour-market participation, and minimal skill and training, acquired during employment. These factors make women choose economic activities that reflect their constraints and preferences, i.e. low paying jobs, flexible work, part-time work, etc. Lower monetary rewards are also supposed to compensate for women's "better" working conditions. In short, some portion of women's salary and wages is taken in non-wage form.⁴

A key limitation of neo-classical theory, however, is that it does not move beyond to look at the underlying mechanisms that hinder women from making different choices. Are there social-cultural norms that impinge upon women affecting their human capital? For example, women are unable to compete with men on an equal footing because usually they have not acquired the appropriate education levels. This in turn is linked to patriarchal norms and attitudes that factor into parents' decision-making process, usually with adverse consequences against girls. Similarly women have less skill and training experience than men because, a) they do not have the same labour market opportunities as men, and b) because family responsibilities lead them to exit-and-enter the labour market (Anker 1997: 315-18).

The explanation provided by neo-classical economists is a static account of the status quo, but also its' correspondence with labour market trends is debatable. Formal sector employment is limited in low-income countries, but yet there are an equal proportion of "highly" qualified-educated men and women. According to neo-classical theory women employees ought to be equally represented in formal sector jobs. Women are not, however, adequately represented in formal sector employment. Does this imply the existence of gender-based discriminatory practices in the labour market? A study done in Peru notes that even with female education levels surpassing male education levels during recent years, there has not been any change in gender wage-differentials (*ibid*:331).⁵

Increasing incidence of female-headship also implies that women have to work continuously if they are to earn a living, and they need not be withdrawing from the market as

⁴ The compensating differential model obviously has little relevance in the "real" world. Women's work is no longer only low-paying, working conditions are also deteriorating and is an issue that needs to be addressed analysing the quality of women's work.

⁵ For an up to date survey of related literature for Latin America, see Galli and Kucera (2003).

before. Finally, economic pressures on households have pushed women into the labour force in increasing numbers, since families are unable to subsist on one-earner income.

Variables that influence workers to seek particular types of jobs also factor into employers decision-making process. Since women workers supposedly have high-rates of absenteeism, turnover and lack flexibility, with reference to over-time, night-work, working on leave-days and so forth, they become high cost workers. From the profit-maximising employer's view, the rationale for preferring men above women is clear. However, interview-based studies done in Sri Lanka, Cyprus, Ghana, Mauritius and India challenge the validity of these assumptions. While women do have a higher absentee rate, the average difference for the two groups of workers is small. More controversially, the study also indicated that the labour turnover rates for women and men were the same. Women leave jobs for family reasons, but the turnover rates for men and women are comparably similar because men constantly seek alternative and better employment opportunities (Anker 1997:319).

In spite of these challenges, the usual suggestion and policies from neo-classical theory and conservative quarters is that policy-making ought to focus on increasing the human capital of women. Evidence from country studies mentioned above reveals that better access to education need not necessarily provide women with high-paying, high-skilled and better jobs. Even evidence from Scandinavian countries, where there are egalitarian educational achievements, there is a substantial degree of difference between occupations that men and women choose (Anker and Melkas 1997:341).⁶

2.2 Perspectives from the heterodoxy – A synopsis of institutional and marxist views

Feminist theories have critically evaluated neo-classical interpretations of gendered labour markets, but before this neo-classical theory has been criticised from within the discipline of economics itself. Institutional and Marxist economics have provided the backbone of these criticisms. The basic gist of these heterodox schools of thought is that labour markets are segmented due to factors of class, race and/or ethnicity, and that moving from one segment to another is not feasible for many workers.

Dual labour market theory too attributes the segmentation of the labour market into primary/progressive and secondary/static sectors to differences in educational levels, skills, experience and productivity markets. But they proceed onto argue that there is little mobility between the two sectors because of institutional and structural factors. For example, firms in the primary sector have a degree of market power that insulates them from competition. Here firms can be discriminating buyers: i.e. they are not necessarily looking for “cheap” labour but for “good” labour.

The concept of dual labour markets can easily be incorporated to consider the gender dimension of labour. Since primary sector jobs have relatively good pay and work conditions, job security, and career advancement, these employers prefer men employees because of the associated “cost of women employees”. Consequently, there is a greater likelihood of women workers crowding into secondary sector employment, where wages and working conditions are low, and there is little upward mobility (Anker 1997:321-23).⁷

⁶ However, wage-differentials between men and women are relatively low compared to other European countries. The reason for the contradiction between high occupational segregation, and low wage differentials has been examined in a previous literature-review covering Europe as well (Ruwanpura 1999).

⁷ Anker (1997) notes that some of the distinctions between primary and secondary sector is less marked because of increased subcontracting and globalisation (1997:322). This observation in itself, however, is critical for the analysis of quality of women's employment because women are found in greater numbers in subcontracted work.

Institutional and Marxist interpretations of segmented labour markets is important as they accentuate dimensions of power, class, race, ethnicity, and so forth, and these theories move beyond simple economic agents and variables. But by factoring the gender dimension feminists have provided the most critical contribution to uncovering gendered labour markets, which will be the basis for analysing the focal dimensions of quality of women's employment in South Asia and Africa.

2.3 Feminist thinking on labour market realities

Economic agents do not exist in a vacuum. They are habituated into cultural and social practices that bear upon their behaviours and decision-making patterns in the economic sphere.

Women are not in a favourable position in the labour market since patriarchal ideologies influence perceptions of women workers. Patriarchal culture and norms relegate women into secondary status in the family and society. Domestic chores and care-giving activities performed by women are unpaid and undervalued, and these activities are seen as the prime responsibilities of women. Men, on the other hand, have the task of "working", an activity that is both paid and valued.

Though socio-economic changes have changed women's role from basic tasks of childcare and household work to "working" woman/wife/mother, patriarchal norms that colour people's decisions/behaviour appear to be resistant to change. Gender-based discrimination, therefore, continues unchecked with women bearing the brunt of societal/patriarchal perceptions. Specifically, the gender division of labour is instrumental for girls to accumulate less human capital. As there is greater value placed on male labour, it is rational for parents to emphasise the education of boys over girls. Patriarchal values perpetuated at the level of the household, gets reflected in labour market relations: women may have lower educational levels, skills and training because of intra-household decisions.

Similarly, patriarchal perceptions on gender roles are also reflected in the economic occupations of women. Since women are the primary care-givers in the family they are found in care-giving occupations, for example, nurse, doctor, ayah/nanny, teacher, mid-wife and doctor, attract a greater proportion of women. Hence patriarchal relations provide a convincing partial explanation for the existence of sex-based occupational segregation. Furthermore, feminist argue that part-time, temporary and atypical forms are mostly "female" occupations because they are a reflection of the dominance of women rather than being a cause of it.⁸

Gender theories explain not merely the gendered formal labour market, it also moves on to decipher the predominance of women in the informal sector. Women, predominantly dominate home-based and subcontracting work, where the basis is the putting-out system, and are paid piece-rate. Work in the informal sector is poorly paid. More importantly, it offers women little social protection, it is unorganised, employment is insecure, and there are no social security benefits. The preponderance of women in the informal sector may indeed be determined by their preference to combine work with domestic-childcare activities, but its' increasing significance is partially because "putting-out" systems are set-up to make use of cheap female labour.

With globalisation, "Third World" women's (cheap) labour is well utilised through sub-contractual systems. In Sri Lanka, export promotion villages (EPV) were set-up to utilise women's labour into export-producing activities by allowing them to combine domestic and income-generating activities. Similarly, in India, bidi-making, the largest non-agricultural

⁸ Interestingly studies have noted that there are no pre-determined reasons to consider any particular occupation as being inherently more or less flexible. Low pay and flexibility are associated with typically "female" occupations because these are female occupations (Anker 1997: 329, Almond and Rubery 1998:688).

occupation for women, is mostly a home-based industry making use of cheap women's labour. No longer are informal sector occupations in Third World countries located in the agricultural sector. They are increasingly located in the non-agricultural sector too – testifying to putting-out systems emerging, particularly with globalisation, in order to utilise cheap women's labour.

Given the theoretical sketch, the task now is to look at global evidence. Clearly there will be a difference in the application of feminist theory to different regions.⁹ Since regions/countries have different levels of economic development, the existence of gendered labour markets and/or informal labour markets is linked to each country's level of development. Analysis of quality of women's employment issues should, however, not be detracted, i.e. the specificities and conditions may differ, but deteriorating conditions of women's employment does need careful and close scrutiny. To do this, we need to turn to the regional picture - and we will begin with presenting evidence from formal labour markets in South Asia.

3. “Formal” labour markets and women workers in South Asia

Inadequacy of data in developing countries is generally noted. Absence of data for women is particularly acute in countries of the southern region, and South Asia is no exception. Limitation in data in itself testifies to biases in South Asia. Analysing “formal” labour market trends for women workers in South Asia is based on the acknowledgement of patriarchal structures within which women operate, and therefore, the constraints women workers do face.

South Asian women have entered the labour force in increasing numbers primarily because of changing socio-economic structures. With liberalisation and institution of structural adjustment programs, household incomes have become deficient due to increasing cost of living. One-earner households are no longer able to sustain the wellbeing of the family on a principal wage. Supplementing household incomes have been necessary, and women have joined the labour market in a quest to relieve economic stresses placed on the household (Verma and Bano 1998:81).

Economic determinants, however, do not permit women to participate in the market on an equal footing with men workers. Striving for a toehold in the labour market is fraught with constraints for women workers, particularly since cultural and social norms position women in a secondary or marginal status. In the South Asian region, where patriarchal institutions are a ubiquitous feature, there is a close relationship between patriarchal norms and labour market trends.

Occupational segregation is a central instrument for perpetuating patriarchy since it reinforces gender division of labour, pays low wages, and maintains women's economic dependence. For example, in Pakistan the practice of *purdah* and seclusion leads women workers to be segregated into the informal sector, since they do not then have to come into contact with men, which is perceived as a loss in respectability. Even where women work in the formal labour market, they are primarily relegated to services that have contact only with women (Mohiuddin 1997:179). Concurrently the gender division of labour reinforces occupational segregation by weakening the status of women in the labour market (Verma and Bano 1998:87). This vicious cycle maintains women in a secondary status, with their entitlement and capabilities levels well below par. Analysing the quality of women's employment is a necessary imperative because there is a higher probability of working women

⁹ The appropriateness of drawing together from gender theories for this project is apparent. Since the project's focal point is quality of women's employment, feminist theory provides comprehensive explanations to analyse emerging trends in developing and developed nations. Hence, this review broadly incorporates a feminist analysis of women's employment issues for the South.

facing deplorable working conditions, labour standards, and wage levels given the pervasiveness of patriarchal norms and values.¹⁰

Despite of the strong presence of patriarchal institutions in South Asia, the experiences of workingwomen are diverse. While women's presence in the formal labour market is negligible in India, this is not the case in Sri Lanka. Reasons for these differences can be attributed to patriarchal institutions and social welfare policies.¹¹ Specific dynamics of the labour market process in South Asia and the role of the particular position of working women needs to be analysed so that it will be possible to make a case for gender-conscious state intervention, social welfare and legislative changes.

3.1 Conceptual problems and undercounting of women's work

Women's commitment to participate in the labour market is of course constrained by the sexual division of labour in the household. However, the gap that exists between myth and reality of women's economic activities leads to under-counting of the role of women workers. Women are the mainstream in terms of labour input, but because of myth-reality gaps their access to productive resources or support services is severely limited (Mohiuddin 1997:168). While this status quo weakens the position of women in the labour market, the welfare of the household is maximised because of the unpaid and invisible tasks performed by women.

According to India's National Sample Survey (NSS) definitions and estimates, every woman services 1.5 men workers (Deshpande and Deshpande 1997:547). Women still have to provide care for children, old and disabled people, and the figure estimated by NSS excludes these social groups. Domestic and care-giving tasks take-up women's time, placing time and physical constraints on the ability of women to participate in the labour market.

Given these constraints is women's workforce in India big? According to NSS data women workers constitute below 15.0% of the workforce; the definition utilised are a worker who is regular and salaried. When international standards are utilised, women workers constitute around 25.0% of the Indian labour force (*ibid*:546-7). Definitional issues do determine the degree of labour force participation by women, though this may not be a reflection of reality. In order to rectify conceptual gaps the notion of "marginal workers" was introduced by the 1981 census in India. Marginal workers constitute "people who reported work for sometime during the year but not long enough to qualify as 'main workers'", and accounting for women workers in the labour force with this definition increased the total number of women workers from 19.7% in 1981 to 22.3% in 1991 (Kundu 1997:441-42).

¹⁰ This section of the paper will focus on women's participation in the formal labour market. Extensive women's labour force participation is not a key feature in most South Asian countries, but there are regional variations. It is necessary, therefore, to begin with an overview of women's activity rates to provide plausible explanations for country-specific variations, and analysing work conditions. This exercise will set the stage to look at why women in South Asian countries prefer home-work, informal sector employment and self-employment: issues that will be dealt with in section 5.

¹¹ Strong state intervention in providing social security has been a noted attribute of post-colonial Sri Lanka. Since egalitarian distribution of welfare services did take place, men and women have similar levels of human capital and health indicators (note however, that there are pockets of marginal groups – for example, Tamil plantation workers have markedly lower indices from the Sri Lankan average). Gender equality in access to welfare services has placed women in a favourable position in social, economic and political institutions. Yet, partially much of the PQLI achievements of Sri Lankan women could also be attributed to a social and cultural space that is more accommodating towards women. In this respect, while gender egalitarian provision of social welfare is a fundamental first-step in improving the status of women, social welfare systems also need to be based on a gender conscious premise.

Pakistan provides another example of undercounting. Here women workers in the agricultural sector are reported as part-time workers, because they a) engage in both domestic and agricultural activities, b) husbands do not report women's work either because they fear losing respect or such work is considered "wifely duties", or c) this work is done within the confines of home or in a sexually segregated environment. According to labour force survey data, the activity rate for women workers in rural and urban areas is 14.5% and 8.5%, respectively; however, in reality it is estimated that figures are 55.0% and 25.0%, respectively (Mohiuddin 1997:169-70).

Sri Lankan women's labour force participation rates are highest in the South Asian region: labour force participation rates for women during the 1985-86 and 1994 have been 31.0% and 32.2%, respectively (Department of Census and Statistics 1995:56). While these figures are official data, implying that there still could be some undercounting, these participation rates are comparatively high for women in a developing country. Matrilineal and bi-lineal descent systems, female inheritance patterns, and women's access to education factor into giving Sri Lankan women a favourable position in the socio-economic structures (Agarwal 1996). Women clearly profit from liberating cultural and social spaces, but this does not mean that inequities in gender relations are non-existent in Sri Lanka. Social norms and values does infuse labour market decisions made by women, and occupational segregation continues to pervade the labour market in Sri Lanka – an issue which will be picked-up later.

Conceptual definitions are pressing issues that need to be accounted for on a project that deals with the "quality of women's employment". In Third World countries where definitional variations exist, which are mostly determined by the infusion of patriarchal norms and values, there is a specific need to attack the biases inherent in data-gathering exercises. The specific impact on the quality of women's employment is obvious enough. By definition where sections of underemployed or marginal women workers are left out, it is unlikely that the qualitative dimensions of their employment will even get the necessary recognition.

Clearly the very lack of extensive data and studies on occupational segregation, wage differentials, etc., attest to the marginal status of most women workers. In order to build upon a comprehensive quality of women's employment program, an increased emphasis has to be placed on systematic conceptual definitions that do mirror the reality of women's contribution to political-economic structures. This ought to be considered a first step, since refinements to a project on the quality of women's employment has to begin from the fundamentals of qualitative data gathering. Bearing in mind the very lack of comprehensive and systematic data in South Asia, and most other developing countries a few stylised facts on these labour markets will be looked at. The stage will be set for looking at the preponderant presence of women workers in home-based, self-employment and informal sector activities in South Asia rather than in the formal labour market.

3.2 Women workers in South Asia – Evaluating recent trends

Women's participation rates in the formal labour market have witnessed rapid increases at the international level. Similar patterns are observable in South Asia too. During the 1980's, women's employment in urban India increased 4.33% per annum; these rates were faster than the growth rates for men, at 3.12%, and population increases for women, which was 3.18%. Work participation rates of women workers witnessed similar changes: the increase for women workers between 1983 to 1993-94 was 1.97%, while the change for men workers during the same period was 1.55% (Deshpande and Deshpande 1997:547).

In terms of labour absorption by industrial categories, there are diverse economic opportunities for women but occupational segregation is rife. Data for the former reveals the following: nearly 80.52% of women workers were absorbed into the non-farm sector, with 59.02% in the tertiary sector, 20.51% in the secondary sector, and 20.47% in the primary sector. However, women were found overcrowded in nursing, teaching, domestic and clerical work

occupations: in 1983 these occupations employed nearly 1/3rd of the women workforce, and by 1993-94 the proportion had increased to 4/5^{ths} (*ibid*:548-53). Since these observations are made for the urban sector, there is little evidence that socio-cultural prejudices against women employees is ameliorating due to industrialisation, modernisation, liberalisation, or higher literacy rates of women (Kundu 1997:443).

Gender biases are apparent in the high degree of gender-based occupational segregation in Sri Lanka too. Occupations that avail themselves to women are limited to “female” occupations, such as teaching, semi-skilled and unskilled production work –mostly in garment industries, and domestic service (Malhotra and DeGraff 1997:382). For 1985/86 Sri Lankan women’s representation in the major occupations were as follows: 9.2% in professional, technical and related occupations, 0.3% in administration and managerial positions, 5.0% in clerical and related work, 5.9% in sales work and service work, 52.7% in agriculture and fisheries, and 21.0% in production and related work (Department of Census and Statistics 1995:59).

In spite of the relatively better status of Sri Lankan women, most women continue to be occupied in the agricultural sector; and even though 21.0% of women are occupied in the production sector a greater proportion of these women are in the garment sector. A sector, which is notorious for employing educated women workers in low-skilled occupations with little upward mobility, and where working conditions are poor. For example, women workers in EPZs are not allowed unionisation, have less leave days vis-à-vis other sectors, maternity leave is related to the occupation of the woman worker, the choice of foregoing overtime is not available to these workers, and face constant sexual harassment with little recourse to institutional and legal protection.

Occupational segregation in Sri Lanka is particularly worthy of further consideration. Education levels of Sri Lankan women are high, with literacy rates of 83.1% in 1990/91 (*ibid*:20), but yet occupational segregation exists. This status quo is partially attributed to differences in the type and quality of education received by girls and boys at primary, secondary and higher education levels. Girls tend to follow education streams of arts and social sciences, while boys pursue science and engineering subjects. Furthermore, men rather than women are predisposed to pursue professional and vocational training at post-secondary level (Malhotra and DeGraff 1997:382). Women entering the labour market are, therefore, particularly unprepared to benefit from the limited remunerative avenues of employment that have emerged with economic growth in Sri Lanka.¹²

Since Sri Lankan women are relatively better positioned in society and have achieved high education levels, they have lofty job aspirations. However, since development patterns in Sri Lanka have been uneven, the job opportunities created do not match the aspirations of women job seekers (*ibid*:380). Economic development, *per se*, will therefore, not lead to tight labour markets eradicating gender-based occupational differences. Development needs to be based on planning that reflects the aspirations of workers, otherwise, the mismatch between employment created and jobs sought will not be eradicated. Furthermore, since occupational segregation does exist in Sri Lanka, it is not merely the gendered labour market but also the impact current employment has on women’s wellbeing that should also be of concern to development planning. Specifically, building on women’s capabilities requires not merely realising their entitlement relations but also their aspirations. These variables need to be taken into account at the policy-making level if labour market opportunities are to positively feed into women’s wellbeing.

¹² This line of reasoning bears similarities to the experience of Nordic countries (Anker and Melkas 1997). Still, there are further issues that factor into the Sri Lankan case.

3.3 Women's participation in the labour market: Understanding changes

Interpreting the general trends of women's increasing work participation in South Asia should be done with much care. Kundu (1997) points out that the current system of sub-contracting in the urban economy in India is such that women-workers are no longer reporting in the self-employed category because they get work on a regular basis. Regular sub-contracted work, however, reveals nothing about the working conditions and wage rates. This is an important observation since the author proceeds to note that the incidence of poverty is high among such workers, especially where sub-contracted work is of a more casual nature (*ibid*:447-9).

Diversification of economic opportunities for women workers also need not necessarily have positive implications for their economic wellbeing. A case in point is the increase in regular sub-contracting work, which attracts women workers but does not necessarily lead to better working conditions and/or higher wages. Sector-based distribution and diversification of the workforce in India has not been consistent. During the 1980's women workers in agriculture did decline: during the 1983-87 period the decline for women workers in rural India was from 87.8% to 84.8%, while for urban India the decline was from 32.0% to 29.4% for the same period. The process of sectoral shifting of the workforce however, has stalled during the 1990's: the percentage of workers in the agriculture has remained either constant or moved up (*ibid*:447). The necessity to be cautious in making hasty conclusions from general trends is obvious. Particularly, since the feminisation of the workforce does not expose the growth in the informal sector, and women's high representation in this sector, a sector notorious for inferior working conditions, and lesser remuneration. This warning heeds true to all South Asian countries, since women do actively participate in the informal sector in all of South Asia and not merely in India. In Sri Lanka too there were 17.7% of women workers in the own account category in 1985/86 and it declined to 13.4% by the 1st quarter of 1994 (Department of Census and Statistics 1995:58).¹³¹⁴

Women's segregation into "female" occupations implies that there is a greatly likelihood of these occupations been low-paid, and gender-based wage differentials do reflect these biases. Gender-based wage discrimination is apparent in India even where wage differentials are standardised for education, but is much more high when wage differentials are not standardised for education (Deshpande and Deshpande 1997:556). Women employed in menial tasks of housekeepers, cooks, maids and sweepers experienced the worst wage discrimination, while nurses experienced the least discrimination (*ibid*:557). Even in the latter occupation, however, there was wage discrimination. Much of occupation based wage discrimination, and wage discrimination, in general, is related to the social attitude towards women workers.

Wage discrimination exists in Pakistan too, though male-female earning differentials have been dropping during the 1979-88 period: it was 63.27% in 1979, dropped to 33.09% in 1985-86, but has risen slightly to 36.92% by 1987-88 (Ashraf and Ashraf 1998:322). In Bangladesh, wage discrimination is most severe: on average women workers earn only 1/3rd of men worker's earnings. Specific gender gap in earnings for Bangladesh is as follows: female/male earnings ratio for manual and non-manual labour is 35.0% and 27.0%, respectively, for skilled labour and small business the ratio is 60.0% and 51.0%, respectively, and for professional and managerial occupations it is 86.0% (Mahmud 1997:254).

Labour market trends, clearly, reflects social attitudes that considers women's work to be inferior to that of men. It is also an extension of human capital discrimination faced by women,

¹³ Though it should be noted that 1994 data excludes the Northern and Eastern provinces, and should, therefore, be treated with caution.

¹⁴ Protective labour legislation in atypical forms of employment is lax, there is little institutional support, and state support to small-scale women entrepreneurs never reaches them. For these reasons, the quality of women's work in own account work is not of high calibre, and the need to focus on these issues is emphasized in this paper. These themes will be explored in greater detail in section 5.

since girls are discriminated against in getting access to education. High illiteracy rates, of 70.0%, for Indian women reflect gender-based human capital discrimination. In India even amongst educated women, women who had tertiary education was low – and without tertiary education women were probably forced to accept low paid work upon entering the labour market (Deshpande and Deshpande 1997:558).

Occupational segregation is visible in the formal labour markets in Pakistan too. This occurs despite there been few women workers in the formal sector. A classification by occupation groups provides the following data: 39.0% are production workers, 26.0% are professionals, and 13.0% service workers (Mohiuddin 1997:175). But within these occupational categories much segregation is observable. Most production workers were in the industrial sector employed as spinners, knitters, weavers, etc; and they are generally confined to unskilled jobs.

It is not merely occupational segregation that is disturbing in analysing the quality of women's employment, but also extent to which loopholes in labour laws are utilised to keep women workers as temporary workers. Workers are considered permanent in Pakistan after working continuously for a six-month period, at which point they become eligible for labour benefits including maternity leave. However, employers circumvent their obligations towards workers by keeping women workers on a temporary basis: a nation wide survey of factories revealed only 20.0% women workers were in regular employment vis-à-vis 50.0% for men workers (*ibid*:178).

Clearly the existence of such practices does not bear well for quality of women's employment, since basic laws protecting women workers are circumvented through "illegal" employer practices. Ensuring employer adherence to legislation is possible only where the machinery for implementing legal statutes is in place, but such vagrant violation of labour laws also highlight the need for effective unionised protection for women workers.

Though women professional workers in Pakistan are in "female" occupations, such as teachers, health care personnel, and social workers, women are both over-represented in the professions and wage discrimination against women professionals does not exist either. Women's over-representation in the professions is measured in terms of women's share in the professional labour force vs. their share on the total labour force: the former is estimated at three times that of the latter (*ibid*:179). High representation of women in the professions is in keeping with the rules of seclusion, since women's-only establishments require the services of women professionals. Certain categories of women clearly benefit from gendered ethics, because job opportunities and upward mobility is a possibility for these women professionals. Wage discrimination is also absent in these categories of professional women workers because of high demand, government sector employment, and low overall participation rates.¹⁵

Gender-based discrimination in the labour market is not merely unjust for women workers, it is also economically harmful to the country. From the perspective of the wellbeing of women workers, the consequences are apparent. Working conditions, types of employment, and wage-levels clearly have an impact on the wellbeing levels of women workers. Given trends in South Asia, where occupational segregation and wage-based and human capital discrimination is high it is unlikely that they obtain high quality employment. Anti-discrimination employment laws, comparable work policies, and quota reservation laws are all necessary first-steps to attack vertical and horizontal occupational segregation. Legal instruments are essential basic steps, but

¹⁵ Anker and Melkas (1997) similarly note the potential benefits of occupational segregation for women workers in Europe. Trends for professional women workers in Pakistan illuminate similar benefits, albeit in a gender constraining context. Such trends may be grounds for applaud, but from a feminist perspective the seclusion ethics has the potential to keep a greater proportion of women and women workers in a marginal status. Therefore, there is a need to be cautious in making optimistic claims from trends that benefit only a small proportion of the female population.

it is also necessary to engage in activism that seeks consciousness raising – especially since patriarchal institutions are well ingrained in India, and low literacy rates of women testifying to strength of patriarchal gender relations. Along with legislative changes, there is a need to ensure that girls have better access to education and women's access to social welfare is better placed. The importance of social welfare in eradicating unequal gender relations and promoting the status of women is apparent not only from the state of affairs in developed countries, but also by comparing within South Asia the status of women in Sri Lanka vis-à-vis her neighbours – where women's status is comparably much higher.¹⁶ However, it is imperative to recognise that implementing legislative and public policy changes does require gender-conscious planning.

4. Job “growth” in Africa and its implications for women workers

Overall growth rates in the African continent have increased from 1.9% in 1994 to 3.7% 1996 (ILO 1997:1). But economic growth is still below par, and growth patterns are not similar across the African continent: Lesotho, Mauritius and Uganda have exceeded 8.0% growth per annum, but these countries are exceptions to the general trends observed in Africa (*ibid*:1). Similarly, Physical Quality Life Index (PQLI) achievements have lagged behind in the African continent, and a majority of African countries are in the low-ranked end of PQLI tables. It is not simply that human and social development is low there also exist a gender-bias in access to basic human resources of education, training and health. For example, female literacy for sub-Saharan Africa remained at 45.4%.

In the context of “dismal” economic growth and human development, how exactly do women workers fare? Participation rates in 1990 for women workers ranged from 10.0% in Mali to 48.0% in Burkina Faso, and Burundi, and for sub-Saharan Africa (excluding South Africa) the average rate was 30.0% (*ibid*:21-23). However, since employment in the formal sector is limited women workers are hardly represented in public and para-state organisations. Furthermore, with limited employment opportunities in the formal labour market, women workers are found in agricultural and self-employment activities since these are the most common types of employment available to women.

In this section of the paper, an overview of the critical issues pertinent to women workers in the formal labour market will be considered. Particular issues that will be touched upon in this review will include the prevalence of gender-based wage discrimination, occupational segregation, and women's access to education and training, and the concomitant implications for women's participation in the labour market. Analysing formal labour markets is critical for focusing on the conditions of women's work in Africa, since it will provide the context for bolstering the primary source of job growth in the region, which is expected to be the informal sector (Glick and Sahn 1997:814). In other words, since the primary source of employment creation is predicted to be in the informal sector, there is an essential need to examine the particularities of women's position in formal labour market. This exercise will underscore possible rationales for the proliferation of informal sector activity in Africa, and its particular association with women workers.

Labour market opportunities are intricately connected to human capital endowments of workers, and access to human capital is a gendered process. Gender discrimination, which is usually based on “non-economic” criteria of social and cultural values, does have negative implications on improving demographic outcomes of low female participation, high fertility,

¹⁶ The relatively high wellbeing of Sri Lankan women should not be considered the holy-grail. As pointed out, women here too face gender-based discrimination in the labour market, albeit of a lesser magnitude. The essential issue to bear in mind is that even in South Asia, women's relative wellbeing and their status as women workers is intricately linked to their access to social wellbeing.

infant mortality, and malnutrition (Cohen and House 1993:462). Recognising gender-biases in socio-economic processes, therefore, needs to be emphatically noted: the spill over effects of discriminatory behaviour does not only negatively impinge on women workers, but also has a long-term impact on economic development itself.

Focusing on the specific issue of human capital endowments, better schooling is important in itself for improving girls access towards education, as it is a basic step at attempting to close the gender gap in economic opportunities and earnings. For example, in Guinea girls compose only 32.0% of total primary school enrolments, with the gender disparity in enrolments increasing sharply at higher levels. Data for 1993 reveals the following trends: girls in lower secondary and upper secondary was at 25.0% and 20.0%, respectively, and at university this figure was down at 6.0% (Glick and Sahn 1997:816-22).¹⁷ More recent studies have shown that for the period 1960-1990, the lowest average annual growth in total years of schooling for girls has been in the African region (Klasen 1999:15).

With girls having limited access to education, it should come as no surprise that their economic opportunities are limited too. A study done in Kahrtoom, Sudan found that 2/3rd male-female differences in earnings could be explained by differences in human capital endowments (Cohen and House 1993:462). In Nigeria too, similar patterns are observable. Adult literacy for women was at 41.0% in 1992, and consequently low labour force participation rate for women, at 37.2%, are found (Weaver 1997:143-44).

But improving access to education does not necessarily eradicate gender-based discrimination in the labour market. "Discriminatory socialisation" at different levels also bears upon the choices women make and the access they have to educational and vocational training. The former is determined by women's ability to meet familial and social obligation while working, and it is this that will strongly affect their decision to enter the labour force. Huasa women in Nigeria provide a case in point, where seclusion norms generally constraint women into home-base activities in the informal sector (*ibid*:147). Human capital investment, therefore, requires recognition of the gendered aspects to educational and vocational training. Once again the experience of Guinea too provides ample evidence of existing gender-biases in educational and vocational training. Young women's access to vocational training is limited because: a) the number of institutes offering programs to women is limited, and b) the types of programs and areas of study open to young women are both limited and reinforce gender-based occupational segregation.

Policies that gear towards eradicating the gender gap in the labour market has to recognise fully the different levels at which discrimination against women take place, and move towards implementing appropriate strategies at different levels of human capital investment. Specific issues need to be tackled at each level: a) why are there less girls in primary schools? Why does this low rate decline further at higher education levels? b) and how does post-secondary and vocational training institutes perpetuate the occupational segregation in the labour market? These are all specific issues that need to be explored in the African context, since these are basic parameters that factor into the quality of women's work opportunities and their wellbeing in the labour market.

Gender discrimination at the level of human capital investment does obviously get reflected in the labour market in the form of occupational segregation. This outcome is no different from

¹⁷ Guinean experience of girls and women's access to human capital investment is a particularly disturbing trend, since Guinea is also a country in which matrilineal structures are prevalent. Where matriarchal and matrilineal structures are prevalent it is common to expect the status of women to be relatively better. This, however, is clearly not the case in Guinea; and should be a cause for concern since either it reflects policy-making infused with patriarchal values that marginalize girls and women, or patriarchal values replacing matriarchal/matrilineal cultural values at the policy-making level.

that of South Asia, and is simply only more severe in Africa due to the relatively high levels of open unemployment as well as massive underemployment.

Education is key to public sector employment, a sector noted for suitable working conditions, fringe benefits, and salary levels for men and women workers. Within the public sector, therefore, there is a tendency towards equal representation of men and women workers in professional or managerial occupations.

In Guinea the public sector employs 47.0% men and 53.0% women,¹⁸ and there is also a greater proportion of women in private sector employment too. Women workers in wage employment are concentrated mostly in teaching, nursing and secretarial work, and though these occupations are relatively skilled tasks, pay increments and career mobility within them is limited. This segregation is even more acute in private sector unskilled and skilled employment, where women workers are virtually non-existent (Glick and Sahn 1997:798).

Similar patterns may be observed in Sudan too. The Public sector hires a greater proportion of women, but egalitarian wage distributions do not take place, this despite government rhetoric on improving the status of women. Wage differentials can be partially explained through the lack of work experience women workers employed in the Public Sector have, since these women workers tend to be younger and unmarried (Cohen and House 1993:471).¹⁹ The formal (private) sector in Sudan is no panacea for women workers either. White collar jobs in the private sector for women workers is generally confined to lower levels, such as typists or clerks; and at the manual blue collar levels there are virtually no women workers in skilled and semi-skilled jobs (*ibid*:468). In Nigeria too, women are concentrated in agricultural, wholesale, and retail trade sectors, where these women workers are mostly in the categories of self-employed (36.4%) and unpaid family workers (46.2%) (Weaver 1997:145).

The high representation of women workers in limited echelons of the public sector, but their virtual absence in the middle and low-level occupations in the private wage sector is in keeping with gender-based occupational segregation trends similar to South Asia.²⁰ The

¹⁸ A study done for Conakry, Guinea found that with retrenchment in the Public sector, women workers were more likely to be disadvantaged than men workers. Discrimination in the formal (private) labour market provides a strong incentive for women workers to forsake wage sector jobs and accept non-wage employment in the informal sector (Mills 1997). Women workers in such cases chose this option only because jobs in the informal sector were more readily available, and the expected value of non-wage employment was greater than the expected value of searching for formal sector employment (*ibid*:65). Women choosing employment in the informal sector reflects that transitional unemployment brought about by Public sector retrenchment places, a) women at a disadvantage because of gender-based segmentation in the formal labour market, and b) bear upon the quality of women's work. Similar findings were obtained in a study done in Anambra state of Nigeria. With structural adjustment policies and retrenchment of workers in the private and public sector, women have been moving back to rural areas in search of employment in the farm and non-farm sectors in rural areas (Arene and Aneke 1998). The authors, here, argue that this trend need not necessarily be negative, but ought to be recognized by development policy-makers as a potential source of employment and income generation for women (*ibid*:124). This is worthy point to be noted for a project on the quality of women's work: i.e. in the African region if the rural and informal sector are potential sources of employment generation, then what are the necessary steps which will ensure the wellbeing of women workers? Such issues need to be explored in greater detail, since possible recommendations for improving the quality of women workers would have to deal with missing markets, informational asymmetries, and the like, and in particular explore the gender dimension to these institutional impediments.

¹⁹ This in itself reveals possible gender discrimination faced by married women workers in the Public sector at the point at being employed or the inability of women to continue working upon marriage because of social constraints. This supported by findings for Uganda, where married women are paid less than unmarried women (Appleton, Hoddinott and Krishnan 1999:291).

²⁰ There is little clarity as to whether there is segmentation of occupations within the Public Sector in African countries, since such data is missing. Judging by the Nordic experience, it would not be too far-fetched to hypothesize that vertical segmentation of Public sector occupations in Africa and South Asia is likely to be prevalent as well. Furthermore, it is simply not occupational discrimination within the public sector that policy-makers ought to be concerned with, but there is also a need to examine the degree to which gender-based pay discrimination occurs within the Public sector in Africa.

minority of women who are highly educated do have access to employment that is secure and stable, but the majority of women – who have little or no education – get relegated to the informal sector. Education, therefore, is important in determining which segment of the labour market women workers are able to gain access, but this still does not guarantee elimination of wage discrimination.

Though most African countries have undertaken legislative reforms aimed at equal pay, which though a laudable step, need not necessarily be effective. Where occupational segregation exists due to cultural factors and/or “discriminatory socialisation”, it is unlikely that equal pay laws will effectively eradicate gender wage differentials. This is a particularly important point, since a study for Uganda, Cote D’Ivoire and Ethiopia found that the gender wage gap was made narrower than it might otherwise be because women are over-represented in the Public sector (Appleton, Hoddinott and Krishnan 1999:304). In other words, women may be paid the competitive wage in the formal (non-Public) sector, but men are overpaid in these sectors because of nepotism towards men or discriminatory behaviour towards women workers (*ibid*:291). Consequently in all three countries wages of men were greater than women’s wages, but since women were more likely to be in the public sector, where gender differences in wage are mute, the “real” gender-based wage differentials were not exposed.

Africa is a region that is differentiated by particular cultural and political factors. But there are few fundamentals pertinent to all women workers in the African region, i.e. they are positioned at a disadvantage. Partially the vulnerable position of women workers is linked to low economic growth and human development, but cultural and social values too reinforce economic insecurities faced by women. The key point to be borne in mind is that economic growth is largely dependent upon the wellbeing of women. Improving the status of women, therefore, is not simply about social justice and human rights but also has implications for economic growth. In the wake of structural adjustment and retrenchment in public sector employment, how does one reconcile contradictory movements in socio-economic processes that impacts on the quality of women’s work? Does exclusive focus on economic indicators brings short-term solutions but is myopic in the long run? These issues clearly have to be spelt out if the quality of women’s work is to be protected by policy-makers.

5. *Informalization of women’s work: Dynamics between economic and institutional factors*

The impact of changing economic structures on the quality of women’s work was noted in section 2. Economic restructuring and globalisation has set in motion specific demands on types and forms of women’s labour. Cheap, docile and nimble fingered women workers for export processing zones provide the best illustration of the new types of labour required through the globalisation process. Migrant labour provides another example of the globalisation process, where women workers have migrated to foreign countries (mostly) as domestic workers. Neither of these forms of employment, however, has brought into place institutional measures to protect women workers, exposing women to vulnerable situations.

These women workers are, however, critical to the economic growth potential of the country; and women migrant and factory workers in Sri Lanka serve as a good example of their importance to the economy. In Sri Lanka the largest foreign currency earners are in the garment trade and migrant labour, which are two sectors predominated by women workers. However, women workers are provided little legislative protection, institutional support, training, or organisational capabilities, with their living and working conditions ranging from mediocre to

deplorable states (Shah and Menon 1997, Samarasinghe 1998). For these reasons, therefore, it necessary to analyse these sectors for issues involving the quality of women's work.²¹

Similarly as was noted in the preceding section, public sector employment is no longer a viable and/or sustained avenue of employment for women workers. Downsizing of the public sector has two particular ramifications for women workers. On the one hand, provision of childcare services and social security is curtailed with women having to bear the cost of this adjustment process in the form of more domestic activity. On the other hand, retrenchment of workers from the Public sector means that women workers need not necessarily have access to high-standard jobs. Examples of these processes were highlighted through evidence from Africa. Consequently, women workers being pushed into the informal sector because of retrenchment in the Public sector was distressingly high. In this section of the review, specific issues of globalisation, labour market flexibilization and informalization of employment will be probed into. Once again, evidence from South Asia and Africa will be used to decipher how these factors bear upon the quality of women's employment.

5.1 Home-workers, gender ideologies and the political economy

There is considerable overlap in the issues faced home-workers across the globe. Home-workers across the world face similar problems, and indeed if there is a difference, then this is mostly based on issues of magnitude rather than on issues of quality. Yet, there is a need to consider this hidden workforce in South Asia and Africa, which the scattered evidence from Africa helps testify. This is partial indication of the non-recognition of home-workers as active participants in the economy. The need to consider the informal sector is not merely linked to exploring the quality of women's employment, but also because the informal sector is a potential basis for national development (Amarteifio and Davies 1995:36).

Where there is a rapidly growing labour force, the informal sector increasingly provides a large part of income-generating activities. Since employment creation is no longer limited to the formal sector, then there is a need to explore the extent to which work created by the informal sector factors into wellbeing levels of workers. The need to create decent work should no longer simply be the requirement only of the formal sector, it should also be a prerequisite of the informal sector. Since a disproportionate share of women are found in the informal sector, for example according to 1981 statistics in India 53.0% of the urban informal sector was made up of women workers, and in Zimbabwe and Nigeria women workers in the informal sector constituted 30.0%-40.0% (Osirim 1992:80). Creating decent work in this sector then requires an analysis of women workers in this sector. We begin, however, with a consideration of the gender ideologies that do factor into homework, and the particular role of women.

The discourse on modernisation and economic development inherently ignores structures and power relationships that exist between different individuals in any given society. Since a level playing ground does not exist in the political economy, the process of capital accumulation does have differential effects on women of different classes. Gender relations too factor into the power relationships and social roles of men and women. The perpetuation of gender relations and ideologies is crucial to the reproduction of women's subordination, and homework needs to be contextualized within gender structures and global relations. Women's contribution to household survival, through subsistence production and cash income, is documented, but much of the critical role played by women to maintaining the wellbeing of households gets scant attention from the mainstream. Conventional thinking, based much on patriarchal assumptions, continues to influence development thinking and there is evidence to support this

²¹ On perusing the issue of labour market flexibility and informalization of employment this review, for reasons of word limitation, will focus on the growth of home-based activities, non-unionisation of these sectors, and the related implications for women workers.

particular point. The next sub-section looks at the relationship between development, economic growth and the informal sector.

5.2 Making home-workers visible: The case of South Asia and Africa

Gender equality is a stated goal of development (World Bank 2001). However, development projects that encourage women's income-earning activities operate on the assumption that women's time is free and that women would be idle if they were not engaged in production (Prügl 1996:41). Indeed micro-projects geared towards income-generating activities do stabilise household income and positively contribute to the perceived status of women. Still at the same time they contribute to maintaining the patriarchal *status quo*. An example from Sri Lanka can be mentioned here.

The export promotion villages (EPVs) in Sri Lanka was set-up with government assistance to utilise the women workers into expanding economic activities brought about by liberalisation. This project did spur income generation for women workers, but did little to question existing gender relations (Jayaweera and Dias 1989). Such projects, therefore, fundamentally contribute to perpetuating gender ideologies that relegate women's role in the unpaid economy, for example, caring tasks, to a secondary status. Consequently women labour for long hours in homework and earn very little income.

Micro-enterprise development projects, therefore, have to re-think the basis on which they operate if patriarchal biases are to be broken and quality economic activities for women are to be created. However, it is not merely gender ideologies that needs to be addressed in a project on quality of women's employment, there is also a need to locate homework in the context of the global political economy.

Rural production in most developing countries is based on the putting-out system, with intermediaries providing raw material and paying on a piece-rate basis. For example, the increased presence of garment factories in many developing countries did coincide with a rise in the number of home-workers. Home-workers are, therefore, embedded in the capitalist system of production²² that take advantage of women's labour, which is cheap, abundant, and defined within women's household tasks.

The utilisation of cultural norms of seclusion in Lahore, Pakistan for homework is an example of the fusion between "traditional" gender ideologies and "modern" capitalist relations that continues to relegate women into a marginal status in the political economy (Weiss 1996, Ibrahim 1996). The gendered space, which is derived from class norms too, is used in such a manner as to get women do same/similar work as men. They are, however, paid less because the myth of "man the provider" prevails through its fusion with seclusion norms in Pakistan (Weiss 1996:83).

Another example can be drawn from South Asia. In India traditional household industries are declining, reflecting a decrease in craft production, but home-based workers continue since they are drawn into systems of industrial production. Resorting to sub-contracting does benefit EPZs and MNCs since unionisation is circumvented, high wages are not paid, and employment guarantees and benefits are avoided (Portes 1994b). But it is also a solution for women who are struggling to make ends meet, in the face of increasing economic pressure (Hahn 1996).

²² This is a key issue. Even though home-workers do work in isolation, there is a need to base strategies that does highlight the inter-links between women home-workers across divergent political economic context. Networking home-workers across the globe is necessary to raise awareness of conditions of work within which they do operate. SEWA, in India, illustrates the possibility of home-base women workers becoming more aware of their rights, of opportunities, and access to information. This networking group, therefore, accentuates the need to base strategies of confronting exploitative working conditions in the informal sector (Walia 1997:5).

Therefore, where government schemes do promote home-working projects, demand for products may be regularized but wages and working conditions are essentially left out of the purview.

Decent work is not simply employment and access to income; it is also about creating quality employment and improving conditions of work. Explicit deregulation of the labour market pursued through new economic policies and strategies is hardly conducive for home-base workers, since existing labour laws and regulations does little to redress the particular status of women workers in the informal sector. In India, for example, IMF/World Bank requirements to push forth labour deregulation is a cause for concern, since it is detrimental to both men and women workers, with women workers in the informal sector likely to carry a greater burden (*ibid*:224). Another issue linked to neo-liberal economic policies is the industrial restructuring taking place in India, which has lead to women workers ending-up with out-work and sub-contracting work where they are underemployed. In India, women workers in home-based work is the lowest paying sector for women workers (*ibid*:224).

Yet there are rare instances in which women workers in the informal sector may be economically well-off vis-à-vis the formal sector. According to studies done in the informal sector in Sierra Leone women workers in the informal sector are not the lowest paid. In fact they are paid much more than their counterparts in the formal sector, and they prefer working in the informal sector rather than in the public sector. This is for the simple reason that public sector employment does not pay workers salaries on time (Amarteifio and Davies 1995:37). Economic empowerment in this instance, however, does not necessarily imply other working conditions are conducive for promoting the quality of women's employment.

Partially improving conditions of work may be addressed through improving the inter-linkages between the formal and informal sector.²³ Furthermore, there is also a need for access to credit, support structures, childcare facilities, etc., so that a) multiple roles of women workers are recognised, and b) informational asymmetries are accounted for. Providing these ancillary support structures will also lead to the recognition of the changing demands on women's labour within the household. Here there is a need to explicitly factor in these roles since women's participation in the labour market is determined to a large degree by their particular position and role within the household. The importance of focusing on the latter is because self-reliance of women home-workers can only be built upon by recognising their position within the household and the labour market.

The SEWA scheme, for example, has two concrete goals of full employment and self-reliance. The former is achieved by assuring workers income, food, and social security, which then become the basis for women workers to be self-reliant. By striving towards these goals, the SEWA program also has provided training programs, disseminated information, and organised women workers into committees. All of which have helped women to become self-reliant, built upon their capabilities, and help improve their productivity levels. Such projects goes to show that low productivity levels of women workers in the informal sector is due to lack of skills, access to inputs, and knowledge (Walia 1997: 6-8).

A study done in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso helps to underscore this particular issue further (Dijkman and van Dijk 1993). By looking at the gender-segregated nature of informal sector activities,²⁴ Dijkman and van Dijk have shown how no real difference in formal education exists for men and women workers in the informal sector. However, informal training and

²³ Examples here include attempts made by individuals in Bangladesh to promote hand-woven material into high-quality fashion and garments, and in Sri Lanka getting local women to provide luncheon food for factory working women (This information was obtained through personal conversation with Auret van Heerden, Free Labour Association, Washington, D.C., U.S.A.). Here too, however, there is a need to ensure that quality-working conditions are maintained, and working arrangements are based on contractual agreements.

²⁴ In Southern Africa too, there is a visible gender-based segregation of informal sector activities, with most informal sector activities pursued by men being more lucrative and having greater potential for growth (Osirim 1992: 78-9).

apprenticeship skill training is not readily available for women in the informal sector. This aspect perpetuating gender-based segregation in the informal sector, with women consequently occupying low-skill/low-paid/low-productivity jobs in the informal sector (*ibid*:277-8). In order to counteract low productivity levels home-based and informal sector workers, there is also a need to deal with the constraints that women workers do face. The study in Burkina Faso does provide further credence to this point, the constraint women workers face in the informal sector neither lack of access to capital nor inability of movement (*ibid*:276). The close link between low productivity levels and human capital endowments, therefore, has been a critical factor that indeed should be considered in improving the quality of work for women.²⁵

5.3 Counting gender reality – The role of making home-workers visible

The above discussion emphasises the importance of home-based work for women workers, but its' role in employment generation and promoting economic growth is fairly obvious too. Since home-based workers comprise a significant share of the workforce, there is a need to look at its relationship to the formal sector so that the particular position of women in home-based work can be promoted. The informal sector as a whole is under-enumerated, but home-based workers particularly tender to be neglected in official labour force surveys. Partially of course, it is because the gender reality of non-standard employment is neglected in economic policies. Such limitations are also because patriarchal perceptions continue to colour public policy and economic thinking.

Though there may be conceptual and empirical difficulty in accounting for home-based workers, there is need to recognise that home-based work is not simply an extension of women's unpaid domestic work (Chen, Sebstad and O'Connell 1999: 605). There is a qualitative distinction that needs to be appreciated by policy-makers, with the evidence from South Asia and Africa providing ample fodder for advocating this issue further.

Besides this, there is also a need to show the links that do exist between the formal and informal sector. Some sub-sectors of the informal sector exist because of the formal sector, and consequently have apparent links. The work of Portes (1994a, 1994b, 1994c) reiterates this point highlighting the fact that there is a component of informal sector activities that exist through various sub-contracting arrangements that supply to the high-income market (1994c:167). Moreover, increasingly home-workers under subcontracting arrangements produce for both the domestic and export market (*ibid*:167). And the discussion on setting-up EPVs in Sri Lanka to produce for the export market brings into prominence an instance of the state consciously promoting homework and informal sector activities! Furthermore, employers do prefer to sub-contract work because it is a cost-reducing strategy (Chen et al.:607). When goods produced for the export market is labour-intensive and prohibitive labour legislation and standards exist, then there are incentives to bypass such regulation by resorting to supply-chains and subcontracting (Portes 1994a:433). In other words, a significant portion of workers in the informal sector are "disguised wage workers" that work for formal sector firms, but are not formally employed by them (Portes 1994b:119). In this sense the prevalence and perpetuation of informal sector activities have directly benefited from formal sector firms that have been interested in increasing labour flexibility and lowering labour costs (Portes 1994c:167, Chen et al. 1999).

In much of the instances where there has been in a growth in the informal sector, and hence home-base work, it has been associated with economic and institutional changes. There has

²⁵ This statement should not be simply read, since it is equally necessary to recognize that most women's inability to build upon their human resource endowments is linked to patriarchal cultural norms, gender ideology, and structural constraints they do face (World Bank 2001).

been an increase in that participation of women workers in income-generating activities, but there has also been a decline in the quality these new jobs. All of these characteristic features, therefore, facilitate the viewpoint that macro-economic policies and regulations affect the informal sector. The case for protecting and promoting it through public policy, legislation, and sectoral interventions is apparent, and so there is room to do further research to explore the extent to which the gender-aware macro-policies may have helped enhanced quality employment opportunities for women.

6. Organising women workers

6.1 Trade unions: Bastions of male-privilege?

An obvious starting point to look at efforts to improve the status of workingwomen is the role of trade unions and trade relations in general. While in-depth studies of gender-related issues in union activity is scant, existing literature shed light on the directions taken by unions in the face of liberalisation in South Asia and Africa.

During the pre-liberalisation phase there was little attempt made by policy-makers to restructure the export-import economy inherited from the colonial past, with the concomitant implication of the international division of labour becoming an ingrained facet of most developing nations. With this *status quo*, the phase of liberalisation in most developing countries was a concern with creating an institutional infrastructure to encourage a liberal flow of foreign aid and investment. Though trade union activity was strong during the pre-liberalisation period, most unions were ill prepared to adapt to the structural and compositional changes in the workforce. For example, in Sri Lanka 1.5 million new jobs were created with the opening up of the economy, which expanded the working class but there was a qualitative difference in the workforce. In 1980 in the building and construction industry of the 150,000 employed only 57,881 workers were registered with the Employees Provident Fund, the rest of the workforce were employed on a short-term, unregistered basis (Fernando 1988:168). Since the workforce was scattered and fragmented, traditional unions were not in a position to consolidate the interest of a fractured working class.

It is not simply the structural changes in the working force that unions were unable to cope with, but also compositional changes in the gender of the new industrial proletariat that posed a challenge to unions. The latter trend too posed an issue that traditional unions have been unable to grapple. Where women workers have been present in unions, their level of participation has been low because domestic responsibilities have acted as constraints on their effective participation. A study done for a pharmaceutical company in India found that women workers were both more committed to unions and were conscious of the exploitation faced by them on account of their gender and class. But they were hampered from effective participation in the unions because of their domestic obligations (Sastry and Joshi 1996). In such circumstances it is no surprise that labour issues of working women do not get the attention they ideally should – namely, without a gender presence in the collective bargaining and labour negotiations process, economic rights are likely to take precedence over labour rights of working women.

Along with the new challenges faced by unions, the increasing segmentation and differentiation of the workforce too lead to the de-radicalisation of union activity in many developing countries. In the case of Sri Lanka, the state intervened in union struggles, leading to the pacification of union militancy on the grounds that workers gained benefits through political patronage. Similarly, in Nigeria the adversity of recessions and military rule restructured the labour movement, with the traditional unions increasingly being co-opted into the state machinery (van Hear 1988). Efforts to incorporate workingwomen's labour rights and interest heeded little attention by many of the traditional unions.

In exceptional circumstances women workers gained some concessions through traditional unions due to political manipulation. Working women in the tea plantation sector in Sri Lanka illustrates this point, where feminist activist made politicians aware of the particularly vulnerable and dependent status of tea-pluckers in the plantation sector. Feminist activism of highlighting the deplorable working conditions and wage remuneration of tea-pluckers was used by the leader, also a politician, of the union representing tea-plantation workers to negotiate for improving the working conditions of women in the tea-plantation sector. However, it was not the gender consciousness that lead the union to espouse the status of workingwomen in the tea-plantation sector, but rather the ethnic dimension. Manipulating ethnicity as a factor, the working conditions of working women in this sector was improved, but whether this serves as a positive illustration of a measure to improve the quality of working women may prove to be controversial.

A less controversial case of attempts to improve the quality of women's work in the South Asian region is an outcome of consumer pressure groups that have attempted to ensure quality working conditions of women working in garment factors. The auditing undertaken by Verité, on behalf of garment buyers, such as GAP, Claire Lizborne, Tommy Hilfiger, etc., serves as an example of positive outcomes of consumer campaigns that benefit workingwomen in developing countries.²⁶

6.2 Facing the challenge of organising invisible women workers?

Organising women workers in the informal sector, however, is a much more daunting task. As most home-workers are invisible, or to use Portes words "disguised wage workers", and are constantly trying to reconcile domestic chores and family responsibilities with income-generation they tend to be seldom organised (ILO 2003:88). Moreover, the lack of recognising homework as a separate form of employment leads to the usual data collection problems (*ibid*:88). And ironically, one should, however, not miss the critical point that women largely perform homework – which begs the question, the extent to which patriarchal perceptions and attitudes inform the lack of recognition of homework as a distinct form of employment?

The challenge of organising workingwomen in the informal sector has, however, not gone completely unheeded. In the African region there have been instances in which efforts have been made to protect women workers in the unorganised sector. Unionisation of domestic workers in Namibia, organising market-trading women in Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, serve as examples of the possibilities of unionisation of informal sector workers (Date-Bah 1993:47-8). While much of these efforts have come into being in recent years through the guidance of inter-departmental projects implemented through the ILO, and their history is short there are positive benefits that should be noted here. Some of the key benefits have been the ability of women to access funds, training and marketing outlets, and improve their work sites. Such outcomes signify the potential advantages that can be derived from organising women workers, where workingwomen in vulnerable situations are provided protection and the necessary institutional structures to improve their status and the space for empowerment.

The specific cases of measure to improve the quality of employment for women in developing countries is scattered, but the few cases that have been documented does show the options that are available. But once again, it should be reiterated that any new efforts and projects should aim at radical reformation rather than mere tinkering – the latter is unlikely to sustain itself in the face of economic adversity and crisis.

²⁶ There is, however, no studies that have examined the role of consumer pressure groups and how such attempts help to reduce low-quality employment of women in developing countries, clearly an area worthy of further research.

7. Conclusion: Where do we go from here?

There is little doubt of the important contribution working women make towards economic growth and development. But gender inequality in the labour market remains a pervasive feature in most societies, with this review on South Asia and Africa highlighting some key themes. Moreover, as important as women's contribution is to the development process, there is little attention paid to recognising the links between the quality of employment available to working women, their social well-being, household welfare, and economic development itself.

In conclusion it can be said that women workers do have very specific experiences in the labour market, which are dependent upon dynamics of age, location, education level, class, and ethnicity. These factors, however, do not merely interact with each other. They are also embedded in patriarchal values and institutions which has an impact on the economic opportunities that avail themselves to women, and the choices made by women. Accounting for cultural and social values in economic decision-making is important, not merely because it implies opening up constraining spaces women face but also because it paves the way for sustained economic development. Much of this ultimate goal is dependent upon qualitative data gathering on the women's role in the political economy.

Equally, there is also a need for legislative initiatives which recognises that equal pay laws itself will not eradicate gender wage differentials, since the latter is intricately bound-up with occupational segregation. And this in turn is linked to gender relationship and roles, which are ingrained by patriarchal norms and values. This indeed is a vicious circle, but one that needs to be broken if women's wellbeing is to be a serious goal of socio-economic development.

The evidence from South Asia and Africa, though scattered, also highlights the precarious status of women workers. Economic changes only exacerbating vulnerabilities faced by women workers. It needs to be emphatically stressed, there, that a project on the quality of women's employment must be based on a two-pronged approach. In the first place, there should be explicit recognition of social, cultural and patriarchal institutions impinging upon the status of women. Moreover, there should be acknowledgement of the degree to which these institutional constraints interact with economic factors, making the economic domain a gendered process – thus, having particular implications of the quality of women's work.

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