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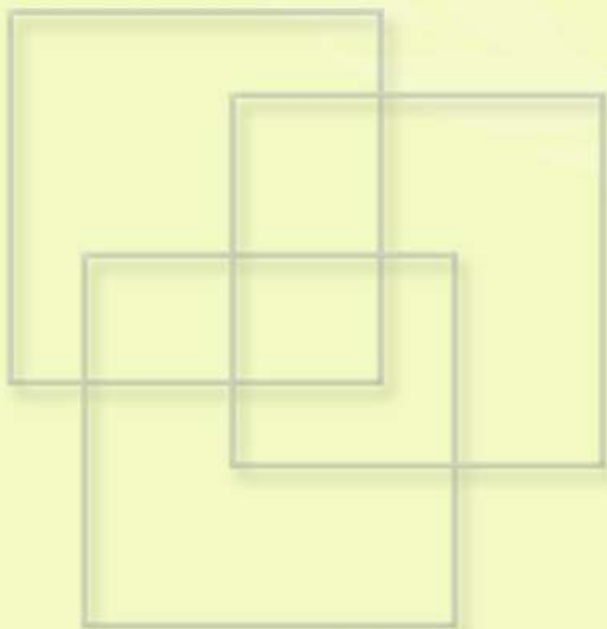


International
Labour
Organization

ILO Asia-Pacific Working Paper Series

Enabling women's work

Ratna M. Sudarshan
October 2014



DWT for South Asia and Country Office for India

ILO Asia-Pacific Working Paper Series

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Preface

The International Labour Organization (ILO) is devoted to advancing opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work. It aims to promote rights at work, encourage decent employment opportunities, enhance social protection and strengthen dialogue in handling work-related issues. As countries in the Asia and the Pacific region continue to recover from the global economic crisis, the ILO's Decent Work Agenda and the Global Jobs Pact provide critical policy frameworks to strengthen the foundations for a more inclusive and sustainable future.

As part of an ILO project on Female Employment Trends in South Asia, this paper by Ratna M. Sudarshan reviews the situation facing women in the world of work in South Asia. Drawing on a discussion covering measurement, education and skills development, employment opportunities and social norms, she provides an encompassing policy framework. In this regard, she highlights three key areas for policy-makers: 1) identification of the issues; 2) policy design that addresses the time burden, public transport, safety, education and skills, and legal rights; and 3) gender-responsive monitoring and evaluation.

This paper is part of the ILO Asia-Pacific Working Paper Series, which is intended to enhance the body of knowledge, stimulate discussion and encourage knowledge sharing and further research for the promotion of decent work in Asia and the Pacific.

Tine Staermose

Director, ILO DWT for South Asia and
Country Office for India

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Abstract

Women's work participation rates in South Asia, with the exception of Nepal, are low compared to other regions. Wider access to education and skills training, the emergence of new industries and new work opportunities, notably in the information technology (IT) sector, are changing the aspirations and work-related decisions of younger and educated women, but mediated by accepted normative behaviour. Social norms continue to influence work-seeking behaviour, resulting in persistent concentration of women workers in certain occupations and as home-based workers. A policy framework that would create more enabling conditions for women to take on paid work outside the home, and to do so in ways that are empowering and not exploitative, would have to apply a gender lens to macroeconomic policies and their gendered impact, address issues of job creation, and support processes that enable women to make considered choices. Among the core constituents of such a holistic framework would be measures to reduce the time and energy spent on home maintenance through investments in drinking water, sanitation, electricity and cooking fuel; ensuring access to, and completion of, education and skill development courses, career counselling, and forms of mentoring; ensuring facilities for childcare; ensuring safety in public spaces, and in the workplace; and putting in place strong monitoring and evaluation systems using gender-disaggregated information to assess and modify programmes and interventions as needed.

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1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that sustained economic growth in South Asia will require higher levels of work participation by women and sustained reduction in the gender gaps in work participation rates (see, for example, GoI, 2013; World Bank, 2011). Data suggest that despite an upward shift in growth rates in the region, at a macro level little change is seen, with the female labour force participation rate remaining around 27 per cent. In the case of India, there is a trend decline despite an environment of positive growth (Abraham 2013). A high level of women's work participation with a low gender gap can be viewed as an indicator of gender equality; thus, in Europe, the European Union's Lisbon criteria set the minimum targets for all member nations' employment rates of women and men at 60 per cent and 70 per cent respectively.¹ Gender equality in employment rates is a meaningful goal to set if, apart from its implications for economic growth, it also translates into empowerment of women.

The concept of "empowerment" and its measurement has been much debated (ASPBAE, 1993; Batliwala, 2007; Cornwall and Edwards, 2010; Kabeer, 1994; Kabeer et al., 2011). Gaining greater control over one's own life (variously measured through enhancement of mobility, decision-making, choosing a life partner, and so on) and an enhanced sense of self-esteem are at the core of empowerment as is commonly understood. Arguably, the notion of "empowerment" itself is one that ought not to be imposed from outside any given context: recognition of the constraints poor women live under suggests that a better way to understand "empowerment" is to see this as the increased ability of women to negotiate the constraints of their everyday lives (Cornwall and Edwards, 2010). Kabeer et al. (2011) argue in the context of Bangladesh, that change at the level of women's individual consciousness and personal relations, whether or not these lead to societal changes and changes in power relations between men and women, are significant and a pathway to wider change.

Overall, the last two decades have witnessed strong growth in the region, although the slowing down of the global economy as a result of the financial crises of 2008 and 2011 has affected South Asia as it did other regions. The Twelfth Five Year Plan document for India emphasizes that the need to return to a higher growth path remains the first priority, while ensuring that this growth is inclusive and sustainable. While different interpretations of "inclusive" are noted, there is finally a reliance on a trickle-down process through which the benefits of growth would reach all groups of people. Employment is one way of distributing benefits of growth; however, it is a subsidiary goal of the macroeconomic framework. High rates of growth also make it possible to redistribute income through subsidies or wage-for-work programmes. Applying a gender lens to this macro framework helps to highlight the areas where some modifications to accepted approaches could greatly enhance the gender outcomes, as discussed ahead. A policy framework for enabling women's work that is empowering needs to address the issue of expansion of opportunities for work as well as recognize the actual conditions of women's lives and support them in their endeavours to negotiate small but significant changes.

Global comparisons show the South Asian region to be at the lower end in terms of women's workforce participation, with high gender gaps (illustrated in Table 1).

¹ Council of the European Union 2000, cited in Ilkkaracan (2012).

Table 1: Labour force participation rates (LFPR) and gender gaps, 2012

Country	LFPR of Women (15+)	Gender gap in economic activity (men and women 15 +)	Percentage of women in adult labour force
Rwanda	87	-1	52
Nepal	80	7	51
South Africa	44	16	45
Brazil	60	21	44
China	64	14	44
Bangladesh	57	27	40
Sri Lanka	35	41	33
India	29	52	25
Pakistan	24	59	22

Note: Column 2 is the difference between labour force participation of adult men and adult women. Column 3 is the share of women in total labour force and is inversely related to the gender gap.

Source: ILO's Key Indicators of the Labour Market (KILM), Version 8.0.

This paper addresses the question of how policy can help to enable and encourage higher levels of work participation by women, in a manner such that this also leads to empowerment. The second section offers a brief description of the factors that influence women's work decisions. Section III discusses education and skill development, and the transition from education to work. Section IV looks at emerging work opportunities, and ways in which occupational segregation might be reduced. Section V examines the implications for women's work of the gendered allocation of care responsibilities, and the institutional support that help to reduce work–family conflicts. Section VI concludes by summarizing the emerging implications for a policy framework that would be supportive and enabling for women workers.

2. Women's work and social norms

Economic development, with corresponding structural change and a movement away from agricultural–rural to industrial–urban economies, has been associated across the world with an initial decline and later increase in women's work participation (often referred to as the U-shaped hypothesis), while men's work participation tends to remain steady, even though male occupations show similar changes. The much greater volatility of women's work participation stands in contrast to the relatively steady levels of men's work participation across income, education, age, marital status, or location. In her analysis of changes in women's work patterns in the United States of America (USA) and other OECD countries, Goldin (2006) suggests that a long period of “evolutionary change” preceded the “revolution” of the last few decades, where three key aspects of the “revolution” relate to: (a) “horizon”, that is, whether women see their labour force involvement as long and continuous or brief and intermittent; (b) “identity” or women finding individuality through their work; and (c) “decision-making”, that is, whether labour force decisions are made fully jointly by women who are married or are in a long-term relationship, or whether women are secondary workers and base their decisions on those made by their husbands/partners.

In East and South-East Asian countries (and more recently in Bangladesh), the rapid growth of labour-intensive export industries catalysed social change and drew women into the labour force (see, for example, Horton, 1996; Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004; Lim, 1990). Social norms are slower to change in the absence of strong demand for a female workforce from growing sectors. The traditional expectation in South Asia is that men bear the primary responsibility for earning household income, while women have the responsibility of

household management, child and elder care, and maintaining community and kinship bonds. The specific ways in which individuals and households respond to economic change is mediated by such pre-existing norms and values. In general, women take on paid work in response to household survival needs and economic opportunities and to the extent possible given their care responsibilities. The emergence of new roles for men and women in the context of economic development rests on the emergence of new aspirations and the construction of new social identities, leading to joint rather than sequential decision-making on work, and a sharing of both income-generating as well as care-supporting responsibilities. All too often, however, maintaining an unfair distribution of domestic work is the price that working women have to pay if they want to take up work as well as maintain marital harmony (Kabeer, 2007; Swaminathan, 2004).

Embedded in the economic development literature is the idea that latecomers to development do not need to traverse the same slow evolutionary paths, but can leapfrog and catch up with early industrialisers (Gerschenkron, 1962). In a somewhat similar way, the role of international conventions (e.g. international labour standards) and goals, such as those set by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), tends to encourage a focus on certain selected indicators that are expected to catalyse larger changes, and to fast track the achievement of these targets. The role of the state and its ability to develop strategies and create institutional structures to substitute for a slow and evolutionary process becomes central to such an effort. Government programmes and budget allocations can play a major role in supporting women's work participation. This can be done indirectly, as a result of better education, infrastructure, and so on; or directly, by specifying a quota for women (e.g. the 33 per cent quota in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005). Policy "for women", however, is itself embedded within a larger macroeconomic policy framework. In practice, in a globalizing world the thrust of public policy is often in a direction that increases women's care burdens for example, by increasing informalization and lowering social security, and through privatization of health, which in turn leads to greater devolution of care to the family and women (Kabeer, 2007).

State action apart, economic development is associated with higher levels of education and falling fertility rates, and these changes have implications for gendered roles. However, the South Asian region has shown itself to be somewhat resistant to role changes: "In South Asian countries, historical gender roles, spaces and stereotype roles are embraced even under changing conditions" (Chaudhary and Verick, 2014). As a result, women's work participation rates have shown little change, and in India, a downward trend in work participation rates is seen from the National Sample Survey (NSS) data, especially in rural areas. Bangladesh is the exception in showing a high rate of growth of female employment, although overall levels of participation remain low.

Kapsos et al. (2014) provide valuable insights through their investigation into the likely explanations of declining female work participation in India. They investigate the role of increased attendance in educational institutions, increased household consumption levels, changes in measurement methodology, and lack of employment opportunities, on the observed decline in workforce participation as seen in NSS data. Each of these provides a part of the explanation. Their analysis confirms, on the one hand, that marriage continues to influence the decision to work, while, on the other, there is a lack of suitable work opportunities. On the data itself, they suggest that errors in classification of women into "unpaid family workers" and women in "domestic duties" may provide a partial explanation for the sharp increase in work participation rate in 2004–05 followed by a sharp drop in 2009–10. Another explanation for the rise in work participation rate in 2004–05 is the poor performance of agriculture in that year. Looking at the period 1994–2010, they find that female employment growth largely took place in occupations that were not growing overall. In other words, women continue to seek work in traditional areas of women's work, and so remain concentrated in certain occupations, despite slow growth of the sector. During this period, while increased participation in education and withdrawal of women from the workforce due to higher household income together explain 39 per cent of the decline in the female workforce participation rate, the remaining 61 per cent is due to lack of employment opportunities and other factors. Due to a number of factors, including social norms, women in India have limited choice in

terms of occupation (Rustagi, 2010).² As a result of being concentrated in occupations experiencing little or no employment growth, there is little change observed at an aggregate level. A large part of the observed reduction in women's work has been in agriculture, and non-agricultural home-based work in various manufacturing sub-sectors. The growing sectors are construction, trade and repair, and other services. In Sri Lanka, too, the faster growing sectors, such as construction, trade and transport, are male-dominated.

The fact that women are often found to be unpaid family workers, or piece-rate home-based workers, encourages their invisibility in national statistics. The first step in any discussion on women's work is thus necessarily revolves around how the work is defined and measured. Once the broad characteristics of women workers have been established, an immediate concern is improving conditions by ensuring a minimum wage and a minimal level of social security to cope with ill health and old age.³ The larger policy question remains one of understanding in what ways women could be enabled and encouraged to access work in growing sectors, and/or what policies could stimulate the demand for products of traditional occupations where women workers are concentrated.

2.1 Measuring work

Micro studies suggest that there is considerable undercounting of women's work, and this is partly a result of the concepts used and partly because of data collection methods. The "invisibility" of work that is informal (fully legal, but unregistered and unrecorded), and especially when conducted at home, particularly affects the enumeration of women workers. Women's work is invisible when it is characterized by overlapping multiple activities, seasonality, and when it is home-based and sub-contracted. There is a sharp contrast between a worker with a set and regular routine of going out to work at fixed times every day, to a fixed place, with a clearly visible employer; and a worker who does not leave the house, works for variable number of hours and variable timings in the day, and who is also simultaneously cooking, completing other household chores, and looking after children. If we think of women working from home, more often than not they are engaged in piece-rate work, handed down through a chain of contractors and subcontractors; they may or may not receive the payment for their work themselves, and they may not see themselves as "workers".

Evidence that national labour force surveys tend to undercount women workers comes from a comparison of what smaller surveys that are able to ask probing questions, are able to capture, compared to the official national surveys. For example, the NSSO 2009–10 survey for the age group 15–59 showed a male work participation rate of 81 per cent in rural Bihar, and the female work participation rate as 10 per cent.

² Urban areas have a wider range of occupations, and greater dissimilarity emerges among male and female distributions. Duncan's Index of Dissimilarity – $D = \frac{1}{2} \sum (X_i - Y_i)$ indicates the percentage of people who need to change occupations to make the male–female distributions equal. For 2004–05, $D = 16.85$ per cent in rural and $D = 28.75$ per cent in urban areas (data from table 4, NSS 61st round, from Rustagi, 2010).

³ In this connection, it can be noted that in 2009, the "One-UN Social Protection Floor Initiative" was launched. The minimum floor is expected to be such that "over the life cycle all in need have access to essential health care and to basic income security which together secure effective access to goods and services defined as necessary at the national level". The Third Meeting of the UNESCO Forum of Ministers in charge of Social Development from South Asia was jointly organized by UNESCO and the Ministry of Social Services of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, on 20–22 February 2011 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The forum concluded with the adoption of a political declaration, affirming political will and determination to promote and expand the scope of social protection policies in the region. In the declaration, ministers and heads of delegations including Dr Narendra Jadhav, Member, Planning Commission, from India, agreed to, among other commitments, "increase public funding to build the capacities of the social sciences in the region, through evidence based research, analysis and statistics; adopt a comprehensive approach to social protection, encompassing preventive, protective and promotional measure that address both individual and community risks and deprivations; strive to move towards a universalized, rights-based, gender sensitive approach in the extension of social protection and advance the agenda for a social protection floor in the region, ensuring universal access to essential social transfers and services". See <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/most-programme/forums/forums-of-ministers/south-asia/third-regional-forum/> [25 July 2013].

Corresponding data from a survey by the Institute of Human Development in 2011 suggests 93 and 62 as the relevant percentages (Jhabvala and Datta, 2012).

The extent of undercounting in national surveys has come down from the 1970s to today, and this improvement is the result of sensitizing investigators: many women will at first report they are “housewives” or non-workers; however, probing will reveal that they are engaged in work that may be unpaid, part of the household enterprise, home-based and mixed in with household chores, and so on (see, for example, Jain, 2005; SARH and SCOPE, 1996). The introduction of Code 93 in the “usual principal status” activity codes used by the NSS has helped to capture a part of otherwise unaccounted work of women in India (Table 2).

Table 2. Activity status categories

Activity status	Detailed activity categories	Codes
Workforce	Worked in household enterprises as own account worker	11
	Worked in household enterprises as employer	12
	Worked as helper in household enterprises (unpaid family worker)	21
	Worked as regular salaried/wage employee	31
	Worked as casual wage labour: in public works	41
	Worked as casual labour in other types of work	51
Unemployed	Did not work but was seeking and/or available for work	81
Out of Labour Force	Attended educational institutions	91
	Attended domestic duties only	92
	Attended domestic duties and was also engaged in free collection of goods (vegetables, roots, firewood, cattle-feed, etc.) sewing, tailing, weaving, etc. for HHs. use	93
	Rentiers, pensioners, remittance recipients, etc.	94
	Not able to work due to disability	95
	Others (including begging, prostitution, etc.)	97

Source: See http://mospi.nic.in/Mospi_New/upload/nssso/ins66_10.pdf for more details; accessed on 15 September 2013.

NSS data shows that while women constituted 32.2 per cent of the total workforce in 2004–05, their contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP) was about 19.8 per cent. Using an “extended SNA” definition that includes, for example, women who are engaged in free collection of goods (or Code 93 above) gives an estimate of 25.3 per cent (Raveendran, 2010). This low contribution – as measured – is a product of concentration in informal activities, often unpaid family work, low productivity/wage, undercounting due to perception of women and of investigators, exclusion of processing of primary products for own consumption, and exclusion of care work. Time spent by women on care is not included in standard definitions of work, which takes “contribution to the GDP” as its test of inclusion. The international definitions include production of goods for self-consumption within the production boundary of the United Nations System of National Accounts (UN-SNA); however, this is not included in the definition used in India. The broader the definition used, the greater will women’s economic contribution be measured.

The need to be able to quantify time spent on non-SNA work arises also from the fact that without this information, there may be unrealistic expectations around work participation, especially by women. Dissatisfaction with the ability of labour force surveys to capture women’s work, as well as some of the characteristics of the workforce, can be addressed to some degree by using time-use statistics. Because time-use statistics quantify the allocation of time by individuals, typically over 24 hours, they provide more complete information than that gathered through labour force surveys, provided the data is also collected on context variables (e.g. where, for whom), and informal and subsistence activities can be clearly captured.

Hirway and Jose (2011) present a comparison of National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) (1999–2000) and Time Use Survey (TUS) (1998–99) data for India and demonstrate the greater capture of work; although they point out that the definition of work in the two surveys is not identical, with the TUS including travelling time and time spent in fetching water. The TUS covered six states and table 3 shows the difference in the findings of the two surveys.

Table 3. Estimated work participation rate from NSSO and TUS

	NSSO 1999–2000		TUS 1998–99		NSSO 1999–2000		TUS 1998–99	
	Rural M	Rural F	Rural M	Rural F	Urban M	Urban F	Urban M	Urban F
Haryana	46.2	17.7	58.7	61.5	50.2	10.0	54.5	39.8
Combined states	51.0	25.3	63.3	58.2	50.9	12.8	59.3	30.9

Note: M : Male; F: Female.

Source: Extracted from table 1, Hirway and Jose (2011).

While the TUS shows a higher work participation rate for both men and women, the difference is more striking in the case of women, as table 3 shows. For Haryana, the picture of women’s work participation is completely different when TUS data is used and even higher than that for men in rural areas. This could be because “Haryana has well-developed agriculture and animal husbandry (dairy industry) where women’s participation as unpaid family workers is predominant. Also women in Haryana participate in the collection of water, fuel wood and fodder as well as in small and household-based manufacturing”, which are better captured by the TUS (Hirway and Jose, 2011, p. 79).

TUS data also enables quantification of time spent in subsistence activities. While men spent an average of 0.97 weekly hours on these activities, women spent 6.11 weekly hours. Similarly, while men spent 2.17 average weekly hours on non-SNA activities (household maintenance and care), women spent 20.61 average weekly hours on this (ibid., pp. 85–86).

Understanding the characteristics and context of work and the intermeshing of economically productive activities with domestic and care work strengthens the argument for greater resource allocation to infrastructure and technology that will reduce the drudgery of this work: thus, investing in ensuring drinking water, sanitation, electricity, cooking fuel, child and elderly care, better tools and implements for daily use, and so on is essential.

3. Education and work participation

A positive link between higher levels of education and higher levels of women’s work participation is established by data. In Sri Lanka, work participation rates for women with tertiary education are 70 per cent, and for those with advanced level qualifications above 45 per cent, against an overall average of just over 30 per cent. Gunatilaka (2013) finds that “having a degree has the single largest effect on participation, suggesting that university education increases the probability of participation by 45 per cent. This positive association needs to be compared with the negative impact of marriage (27 per cent), widowhood (25 per cent) and being of the Islamic Moor ethno-religious category (17 per cent)” (Gunatilaka, 2013: 27). The critical stage appears to be secondary education. In India, a clear U-shaped association between education and work is seen, with highest levels of participation among illiterate and university educated women, in a cross-sectional analysis. However, time-series analysis suggests otherwise (Abraham, 2013; Anandan and Anchayil, 2010). In Bangladesh, the provision of a stipend to girls up to higher secondary level has led to a better gender balance

in enrolment. A recent study found that when asked about the most significant new resource in their lives, 80 per cent of the over 5,000 women sampled identified education (Kabeer et al., 2011). While a positive association between education and work is seen in Bangladesh, only a small share of educated women is in paid regular work. The overall picture suggests that education above secondary level acts as an a significant encouragement to women to work, while at lower levels of educational attainment an increase in household income may actually depress work participation due to the income and status effect.⁴

Low levels of education are associated with low household income, and poverty acts as a driver of high work participation by women. As household income rises, while some women continue to work, withdrawal due to the income and status effect has also been observed. The India Human Development Survey (IHDS) is a national panel survey which was conducted in 2004–05 and 2011–12. It attempted to capture the diverse sources of women’s work, and found that between 2005 and 2012, women’s work participation rates for those between 15 and 59 years dropped from 58 to 54 per cent for rural women and from 23 to 20 per cent for urban women (Desai, 2014). In their analysis of a household survey conducted in 1996, Pradhan et al. (2014) find a U-shaped relationship between female workforce participation and the level of education of the household head. As women’s education levels go up, they are able to participate in “non-stigmatized” jobs. A village study by Carol Vlassof, although it cannot be compared directly to any national findings, suggests that with greater economic prosperity women appear to exercise choice regarding work. Vlassof’s study finds a fall in the percentage of women in wage labour, from 33 per cent in 1975 to 16 per cent in 2008; a fall also in unpaid work at home and in own fields, from 52 per cent to 32 per cent; an increase in unpaid home-based work, from 14 per cent to 46 per cent; and an increase in the percentage of women having two or more hours of leisure per day, from 10 per cent to 60 per cent.⁵

Kabeer et al. (2011) find that educated women are less likely to express a preference for a son, are more likely to be mobile in public spaces, and show other signs of greater control over their own lives. However, the transition from being educated to becoming a paid worker is not automatic. Especially in the case of first-generation learners, there is a lack of awareness of opportunities and role models (Krishna, 2013). Systematic career counselling in addition to investment in skills training and ensuring marketable skills would encourage educated girls to seek out new work opportunities.

At the same time, there is a higher level of unemployment among educated women than educated men suggesting that educated women see themselves as jobseekers and that there are fewer acceptable opportunities for them. It could also reflect the weaker ties of women to existing labour market networks. Thus boys are directed into existing labour networks in ways that girls are not.⁶ Data from the Indian NSS shows that unemployment rates for women in both urban and rural areas are higher than for men, but have shown a fall as the work participation rate increases, suggesting that jobseekers did find work (Shaw, 2013). In Sri Lanka, unemployment rates among women educated beyond the “O” level is greater than for men, and the duration of unemployment has been consistently higher (Gunatilaka, 2013). Moreover, a high level of non-participation is also seen among highly educated women. Thomas (2011) draws attention to the fact that between 1999–2000 and 2004–05, the increase in urban female population in India was 16 million; of which 8 million had at least secondary school education and 3 million had graduate degrees. Yet 44 per cent or 7.1 million stayed out of the labour force; of the 3.2 million increase in urban female population with graduate education and above, 1.7 million were “attending domestic duties”. He suggests that social constraints are likely to be weak for urban educated women and, therefore, it is more likely that there is a lack of employment opportunities leading to their withdrawal from the labour force (ibid., p. 213). The NSS 68th Round (2011–12) shows more women working in urban areas with an increase in the absolute size of the urban female workforce as well as some

⁴ This is an example of “Sanskritisation”, a term used by Srinivas (1962) to describe the process by which lower-caste groups adopt values and practices of higher-caste groups—here, higher status is being associated with women’s withdrawal from paid market work. Given the close correlation between educational attainment, caste and household income levels, an increase in education signals improvement in social and economic status.

⁵ Carol Vlassof, presentation made at Delhi Policy Group on 10 March 2014, based on Vlassof (2013).

⁶ A point that has been made by Munshi and Rosenzweig (2006), who find that girls from lower-caste households were able to make better use of new opportunities as they were not locked into existing networks and group expectations as the boys.

increase in workforce participation rates since 2009–10 (Shaw, 2013).

In a field study by Institute of Applied Manpower Research (IAMR), completing secondary education emerges as a motivation more for the value it adds to girls in the marriage market than for considerations of work (IAMR, 2013). Whatever the parental motivation, education beyond higher secondary level reduces the entry barriers for regular paid work and opens up the possibility of accessing new opportunities.

Ensuring universal education up to secondary level may be a necessary condition for increasing work participation in the regular, formal, new economy, but may not be sufficient in the absence of other supportive interventions. Education does not necessarily alter feminist consciousness and can instead become a way of enhancing women's contribution to the family and the economy without altering the status quo with regard to domestic responsibilities and other community-related expectations (Manjrekar, 2013; Stromquist, 1995). As a result, there are many challenges, particularly for women in education-to-work transitions.

Recent literature on India suggests that education has only limited impact on gender equality norms (see, for example, Manjrekar, 2013; Mukherjee, 2013; Santhya et al., 2013). Niven has noted a "circumscription" in the behaviour of British Bangladeshi women (Niven et al., 2013). Rao's study of the Bangladesh Female Secondary School Stipend Project finds an impact on enrolment but no evidence yet of the impact on age at marriage, work or voice in marriage (Rao, 2012). Kirk finds that, while an objective behind policies for hiring of women teachers in Pakistan was to encourage girls' enrolment and school participation, the presence of women teachers seems to have furthered the socialization of girls such that prevailing patterns of gender relations were not questioned (Kirk, 2004). In a study of women workers in the IT sector in Bangalore, Vijayakumar (2013) suggests that young women have "flexible aspirations". Girls value their ability to adapt to circumstances and also recognize that marriage could change their circumstances. As a result, they were far less likely to develop any long-term career aspirations compared to boys, who also faced constraints but did not expect these to change (Vijayakumar, 2013). From this evidence, limited as it may be, it seems that while educational participation of girls has gone up, the educational process has had only a limited impact on gender norms in society.

An increasing number of educated young people in the job market forces an examination of issues that make the transition to work difficult, not automatic, especially in the case of women. The recognition that there is a mismatch between available skills and those that will be demanded as industry expands is reflected in India's National Skill Development Policy (GoI, 2009). The policy sought to correct the weak market responsiveness of the earlier training courses. In 2006, a tracer study conducted by the World Bank found that employers wanted stronger "soft" skills and different technical skills: only 32 per cent overall (and less than 19 percent of women) of the Industrial Training Institute (ITI) graduates found work. This forms the baseline for an on-going effort to strengthen outcomes of vocational training (World Bank, 2013, p 15). The current policy seeks to link training to anticipated job openings and to encourage a modular approach. So far, efforts appear to be concentrated in urban areas and low-end service sector activities requiring minimal training. The target that has been set is that 500 million persons, or roughly 37 per cent of the population, would be "skilled" in 2022. The special challenges facing girls, especially in rural areas, will call for additional efforts to complement training, including issues of mobility and safe transport to work. Even with skill acquisition, gender norms and biases against women can limit sectoral mobility. For example, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) found that training women construction workers in masonry and other skills did not enable women to access different work opportunities, and an important reason behind this is negative perceptions regarding skills and capabilities of women construction workers among male builders, engineers, supervisors, and clients. Trained women themselves were reluctant to go far from home for work. In this particular case, organizing trained women into a cooperative has enabled them to access work as a group.

4. Work opportunities

Women's concentration in certain occupations is documented in data for all South Asian countries; with structural change and development of the faster growing sectors not always creating jobs that absorb women. Chakraborty's analysis of occupational gender segregation in India using NSSO data for 1993–94 and 2004–05 suggests that while there are sectoral differences, women continue to be more likely to join traditional stereotyped jobs that are socially perceived as suitable for women (Chakraborty, 2013). Similar findings are reported for Bangladesh and Pakistan (Ahmed et al., 2008; Akter, 2005). In Sri Lanka, too, despite higher levels of workforce participation by women and higher average educational levels, occupational segregation is observed (Ruwanpura, 2004). One reason might be a mismatch between women's skills/education and job requirements. But many other factors also come into play. These include marriage and attitudes towards women's work outside the home; time spent on household responsibilities, ranging from child and elder care to provisioning of water, fodder and fuel; distance to work and availability of safe transport; women's own comfort levels in male-dominated workplaces; and other such reasons which encourage women to seek work that is socially acceptable for women and that is compatible with gendered responsibilities within the home. One such factor is the question of location, and whether a change of residence is required to access work. Given patrilocal norms, women's ability to access work that requires a change in residence is lower than that of men.

At the same time, evidence of changing norms is seen in the increased independent migration of women for work, often as domestic workers, both domestic and international. Within South Asia, Nepal has the highest proportion of female migrants, followed by Sri Lanka, where 89 per cent of all women migrants migrated as housemaids (Thimothy and Sasikumar, 2012). Changing norms are also evident in women taking on new roles when husbands migrate, as noted by field studies in Bihar, where some women were seen to have stepped forward to perform tasks normally undertaken by men such as ploughing (Datta and Misra, 2011). Munshi and Rosenzweig (2006) find that among lower-caste girls and boys in Mumbai, girls were in a better position to respond to new opportunities. The growth of English language education, expansion in software and service industries, and the fact that girls, unlike boys, are free from group expectations regarding labour market choices has created this situation. Jensen (2010) also finds that girls may benefit more from new opportunities.

The failure to secure "good" jobs can discourage educated women from seeking other work (Das, 2006). "Equal pay for work of equal value" is perceived as being best met within the public sector. Public employment is a preferred choice of work for women, offering as it does both security and status. Public employment accounts for a high share of educated women workers in Sri Lanka and is an employment sector of choice (Gunatilaka, 2013). In India, there is a clear and strong preference for government work for both men and women, and households see this as acceptable work in the case of women. A field study in Kerala showed that women come to work on MGNREGA worksites, and even though the work itself is manual labour, it is perceived by them as "government work" and, therefore, work carrying a high status, not comparable to other manual work (ISST, 2009). There are constitutional reservations for women in public sector jobs in Bangladesh that are accessed by a small minority of educated women from urban families that are better off. Also, an important by-product of the family planning programme in Bangladesh was the opening up of "respectable" employment for women who had completed at least secondary education (Kabeer et al., 2011). However, in Bangladesh proportionately greater work opportunities for women have been created by large non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private garment companies than seen in the rest of the region. The revealed preference for government jobs has had unfortunate outcomes as well. For example, several policies and schemes meant to benefit women suffer from low allocations and unrealistically low unit costs in India. Schemes, such as the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) and National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), employ women as frontline service providers and have followed the practice of recruiting women on an honorarium basis which reinforces the extension of care roles women are supposed to perform at home. Their work in the community remains unaccounted in the same way as their work at home (Mehta et al., 2012; Eapen and Mehta, 2012).

The “secondary earner” attitude, added to norms of patrilocality in marriage, reduces the range of options for married women. Even highly-educated professional women face a narrower range of options as a result. The percentage of women employees in the central government has increased slowly, from being 7.5 per cent in 2001 to 10.09 per cent in 2008 (CSO, 2011). Women who join the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) nonetheless have to contend with the implications of patrilocality norms in marriage. Thakur (1999) finds in her study of women officers that patrilocality, or the expectation that women should work where the husband is located, means that if women are unable to comply with this, the result often is that they leave the job or their marriage breaks up. Maitreyi Krishnaraj, in noting the reluctance of trained women scientists to work at places other than where the spouse is based, has recommended short-term contracts to prevent permanent withdrawal of trained women scientists.⁷

Bangladesh has been more successful than other countries in South Asia in generating work for rural women in and around their place of residence by enabling small enterprises, building on women’s existing work and skills, to emerge. The rapid expansion of microcredit programmes of both NGOs and the government has led to an increase in borrowers (90 per cent of whom are women) from 11.14 million in 2004 to 35 million in 2012; and this has been mostly used for poultry, livestock and other local non-farm economic activities. Between 2000 and 2006, there was an increase in the share of livestock and poultry raising in women’s work from 12.6 per cent to 35.2 per cent. The result is an increase in women’s work participation, as well as diversification in sources of income (Rahman and Islam, 2013). It is instructive to contrast this experience with that of the Support for Training and Employment Programme (STEP) of the Ministry of Women and Child Development in India which aims to strengthen women’s roles and enhance their earnings within traditional sectors of work. Although women’s participation in the dairy sector has expanded greatly, it is a moot point as to how much of this expansion could be attributed to support (training and credit) from STEP and how much of it reflects the pull effect of a fast growing sector with well-organized and widely spread cooperative and marketing networks. Other sectors, including handlooms, handicrafts and poultry, showed little transformation (ISST, 2007, 2013)⁸. A similar approach is proposed in the Twelfth Five Year Plan for India: “At the policy level, there is a need to give priority to women in the National Rural Livelihood Mission (of the Ministry of Rural Development). NRLM will facilitate the creation of self-help groups of women at national scale and provide credit to SHGs to enable them to undertake self-sustaining economic activity” (GOI 2013, p 133).⁹

Mehta et al. (2012), drawing upon the reports of the Working Group of Feminist Economists (WGFE) set up for the Twelfth Plan (Government of India), are critical of the central role given to microcredit for promoting self-employment among women and argue that a much more holistic effort is needed with a stronger focus on high quality employment. They point out that studies have shown that self-employment so generated is at best supplementary work; without continuous support from agencies such as NGOs or banks, poor women are unable to design viable new enterprises; very often, the money is put into family activities controlled by men; or to expand existing low productivity enterprises.

The growth of the ready-made garments sector in Bangladesh is another example of the successful induction of women workers and in this case involving female migration to Dhaka for work. Even though there are serious concerns around conditions of work, there has been a positive empowerment effect of this regular paid work (Kabeer et al., 2011). The IT sector in India has similarly generated substantial work and a significant share has been taken up by women; importantly, there has been an increase in the share of women at senior levels (NASSCOM and MERCER, as cited in Kelkar, 2013). IT companies are leading the way in devising

⁷ As said during meetings of the Working Group of Feminist Economists (WGFE), New Delhi, 2011.

⁸ Programmes that seek to draw women into new forms of work can also fail if they do not take note of the pre-existing household economy. In her study of 27 self-help groups (SHGs) in three villages in Tamil Nadu in 2005–06, Kalpana found that women did not wish to open group enterprises but made the scheme work for them – in 11 of 13 SHGs that got a loan, the money was equally distributed to members, used for various needs, and the loan repaid; the SHGs maintained the fiction of group enterprises in various ways (Kalpana, 2011). The observed behaviour, that is, women taking loans to plough into existing household enterprises while on paper using this for new enterprises, is consistent with women seeking to consolidate household income from a single activity, whereas the intervention was seeking to diversify sources of income.

⁹ http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/12th/pdf/12fyp_vol3.pdf.

solutions to easing work–family conflicts for women, including practices such as flexible working hours, flexible leave usage, transportation policies, policies on sexual harassment, crèches, and so on (Hill, 2014). Call centre work has attracted a large number of educated young women, most of whom are graduates (Mitter et al., 2004). The knowledge that work is available in IT-enabled services of various kinds has led to the opening of a large number of private computer training institutes and both girls and boys access these with the intention of subsequently working in the sector (Nandi, 2010; Sudhamani and Sharon, 2010).

An experimental study demonstrated some shift in attitudes towards work and family transitions, including a greater willingness to take on paid work, delaying age at marriage, working after marriage and so on, among young women from rural areas who were encouraged to access work in the IT sector (Jensen and Oster, 2009). It is important to note that this study included not just providing information about availability of jobs in nearby urban areas, but also a three-year counselling process, recruitment in groups, and work that brought higher social status as well as higher pay.

Even though the IT sector has opened up new opportunities for women, constraints imposed by unchanging gendered roles are equally evident here. For example, in Kerala, the Akshaya project sought to train both men and women IT entrepreneurs. However, no investments were made in providing supportive infrastructure for childcare, nor into exploring what constrained women in work. As a result, it was seen that even though women completed the training successfully, they were less able than men to operate tele-centres after the training. Factors such as household care responsibilities placed constraints not faced by men (Mukhopadhyay and Nandi, 2007). A comprehensive approach that includes aspects beyond training per se is needed to enable training to translate into entrepreneurship/wage work.

One of the most socially acceptable, as well as largest employments for women in terms of absolute numbers, is teaching. In India, the education sector accounts for over 12 per cent of all female non-agricultural employment.¹⁰ Teaching, involving working with children, with four to five hours spent in the educational institute each day, and with regular vacations, is considered “suitable” for women given their household responsibilities. During an evaluation of teacher training programmes in Rajasthan in 1993, it was observed that participation of women teachers in these programmes was negligible. Women found it difficult to stay away from home, could not find substitute caregivers, at times faced opposition from family members, and their own motivation to develop professional skills was low. The Adhyapika Manch (a forum for women teachers), set up in response to these findings, tried helping women teachers to become more professional about their work, and seek out practical solutions. As Jain (2004) points out, such a forum went beyond the issue of ensuring full access to schooling for girls, and went into questions around gendered roles for adult women within households. But eventually it was discontinued for lack of funds and commitment by those in charge of the programme (ibid.). Other studies make the same point, that women “take to teaching because it is considered respectable, the spaces of education are presumed to be feminized spaces, teaching is a natural extension of their mothering capacities, but most important, it is permissible within the demands placed by families, especially the matrimonial family” (Manjrekar, 2013).

A mixed picture emerges from the above discussion. An environment in which new work opportunities are being generated acts as a powerful “pull” factor in urban areas, and arguably the policy focus needs to be on measures to enable women to access this work: skill training, transport, conditions of work at the workplace. In rural areas, however, there has been a stronger focus on encouraging self-employment opportunities for women through extension of microcredit and, to a limited degree, support for marketing. However, access to land remains a primary concern.

Women in rural areas face a different set of opportunities and constraints compared to women in urban areas. Rural women are experienced cultivators, managing natural resources to sustain their livelihood. This includes

¹⁰ NSS data analysed by G. Raveendran, personal communication

collection of water, fuel wood, fodder, and minor forest produce for household consumption. The ownership of land in South Asia is skewed and the majority of poor rural households either owns a small piece of land or are landless. Moreover, inheritance rights in land vary widely in the region, but overall women's landownership remains weak, despite several progressive legislations in favour of women. Studies suggest that there are some areas, including north-east and south India, Sri Lanka and Nepal, where women marry either in their natal villages or nearby villages, where close kin marriages prevail, where the purdah system does not exist and where women's labour force participation is high or medium, that are also more conducive to women's landownership. Regions where women face the most resistance to their claims are north-west India, Bangladesh and Pakistan (SANGAT, 2008).

Independent access to land, through single or joint titles, could enhance women's agency. However, land is increasingly in demand for corporate and industrial use and the reality is that further redistributions will yield small per capita acreage. The Twelfth Plan Working Group on Disadvantaged Farmers, including women, recommended the creation of "Public Land Banks" or PLBs, which could be managed at the gram panchayat or block level. Owners of land could deposit land available for leasing to the PLBs, which would lease out this land to designated categories of vulnerable farmers. Various incentives could be offered to the landowners (Agarwal and Sharma, 2012). A recommendation that forms part of the draft National Land Reforms Policy¹¹ in India is for the creation of a land pool by each state, formed out of agricultural wasteland, unutilized land acquired for development purposes, land made available with correction of records, and so on, to be then distributed to eligible landless poor. It recommends distribution to landless families to be done in the name of the women in the family. To get over the problems of uneconomically small landholdings, it recommends that group titles may be given to women's groups for joint cultivation and investment in productive assets.

Kerala provides an interesting illustration of the impact of the changing agricultural economy on women's work. Despite high levels of education, there has been a decline in the female work participation rate since 1981. This appears to be the result of several different factors, including aversion to manual labour by newly educated youth; keeping of land fallow even by small landholders because of the absence of lease provisions and rising wages; shift in cropping patterns towards perennial crops, such as rubber, coconuts, among others, which generate less demand for labour, especially female labour (which is high in paddy cultivation). Additionally, there has been shifting of female agricultural labour towards self-employment, and decline of traditional industries like coir, cashew, handicrafts, and handloom which are female labour-intensive (Anandan and Anchayil, 2010). For this reason, active labour market interventions are warranted.

The current agricultural extension systems and advisory services tend to engage largely with male farmers even though there is evidence of increasing share of women farmers. The issue is not just one of increasing coverage to ensure inclusion of women farmers, but to introduce processes that would enable assessment of whether the actual needs of women farmers are being identified and met. This calls for a shift away from the traditional top-down approach of disseminating information and training. A consultative design process is recommended which would start with the collection and analysis of household-level information about livelihoods, opportunities and aspirations, followed by context-responsive interventions and subsequent evaluation to see to what extent needs were met (Jafry and Sulaiman, 2013).

For older women, many with low literacy levels, migration to urban centres is less of a realistic option than for young educated women. The emergence of smaller urban centres and the gradual merging of rural and urban areas in this way reduce the sharpness of the divide; however, migrating away from land will continue to be difficult for a long time. There are also different views on the relative benefits of rural-based local development and urban-based growth. Women in agricultural or non-farm home-based work, who have low mobility and may also have low levels of literacy (India, Bangladesh), would be in a position to access and contribute to

¹¹ Released on 24 July 2013.

local development-oriented enterprises.¹² The potential for such enterprises has been only weakly demonstrated so far through programmes such as STEP, weavers' cooperatives and a few such examples because these interventions remain targeted, and in their implementation if not in the design the programmes pay inadequate attention to forward and backward linkages. The potential for a trajectory of growth built on local enterprises has been demonstrated in other countries, notably in Italy (Mehrotra and Biggeri, 2007). In Bangladesh, microcredit programmes have stimulated small enterprises on a wider scale, a high proportion being managed by women, leading to the possibility of graduation of these into larger and more productive enterprises. If this is successful, it would demonstrate a different pathway to more productive employment that is achieved without any large-scale migration or collapse of the prior economic structure. Local development and the gradual up scaling of small enterprises could both enhance women's work participation and stimulate growth of the "missing middle" in manufacturing.

5. Social norms, caring labour and women's work

Women's entry into work outside the home does not necessarily lead to changes and reallocations within the home in "caring labour". This can lead to high levels of stress and reduce the perceived value of the earnings from work.¹³ So much so, that it has been rightly said that in some situations less work is needed: "reducing the burden of work and increasing the capacity for work" might better facilitate poverty reduction (Jackson and Palmer Jones, 1998). Field studies confirm that the workday for women and married women in particular extends to 15 hours and more, and the most common complaints are of constant tiredness (Swaminathan, 2004). A study in Sri Lanka found that entering the workforce increased women's hours of work by three hours per day, while husband's working hours were the same whether the wife worked or not (cited in Gunatilaka, 2013).

Care concerns increase the opportunity costs of work for women. The work participation rate of married women is well below that of others. In addition, social norms of seclusion in certain communities restrict women's choices. While the ratio of male to female work participation rates in 2009–10 was 2.54 for all workers, within the group of Muslim women, where seclusion norms are stronger than among other social groups, the ratio was 4.4; for scheduled tribe (ST) women who face weaker seclusion constraints, it was 1.7. Other social norms that influence work choices include the tradition of a pooling of household income, and the high value placed on social identity through marriage and motherhood. In addition to their care responsibilities, women are expected to play a key role in maintaining traditions.¹⁴

The importance of the marital household in interpreting these norms and influencing women's work decisions is the reason why the impact of marriage on levels of female work participation rate is far greater than the presence or absence of children in this region (Sudarshan and Bhattacharya 2009; Pradhan et al., 2014). NSS data (2009–10) shows a small difference between the work participation rates of married women (33.4 per

¹² Udyogini, an organization started in the early 1990s to provide micro-enterprise management training to poor rural women, has (with other institutions in Africa, supported through a World Bank initiative) developed the concept of, and manual for, Grassroots Management Training (GMT). Their experience shows that women very often seek livelihood security rather than enterprise growth; because they continue to combine paid work with household work they are reluctant to convert to "full-time" workers. See <http://karmayog.org/nonprofits/profiles/profiledis.asp?r=240&id=20667> [accessed on 15 December 2012].

¹³ Mukhopadhyay explored the interaction between economic activity and well-being outcomes, based on a household survey of a sample of women workers in export-oriented production, and found that women's stress and mental "ill being" were inversely related to household size; age, marriage and level of education were associated with increased stress levels; and, interestingly, working persons showed lower stress levels than those who did not work (Mukhopadhyay, 2003, pp. 115–16).

¹⁴ As Partha Chatterjee has argued, by separating "material" and "spiritual" concerns, and arguing that Western science and technology were relevant only in the material domain, it was possible for India to learn from the West in matters of economics without threatening the identity drawn from national culture. On the other hand, the home represents spiritual concerns and women are seen as its core. Hence, the social roles of men and women correspond with the separation of social space into the home and the outside world (Chatterjee, 1989, p. 624).

cent) compared to those who are in households with children under 5 (30.2 per cent).¹⁵ A study in Delhi showed that 43 per cent of unmarried women were working/willing to work compared to 19 per cent of married women (Sudarshan and Bhattacharya, 2009). The marital household could also encourage a woman not working before her marriage to do so after getting married. Among very poor families, compatible skills often determine marriage, thus girls from bidi-rolling families tend to marry into other such households.

The sample used by the IAMR study in Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Gujarat found more women joining the labour force after marriage (IAMR, 2013). The decline in agricultural employment opportunities along with restrictions on mobility may have kept women's work participation low before marriage. After marriage, and with a change in residence with marriage, both opportunities and "permission" to work were likely to be higher. Comparing time allocation of agricultural women workers in the two states, the better functioning of aanganwadis in Gujarat reduced the time spent by women on caring for children, this being an average of 3.62 hours in UP and 1.67 hours in Gujarat for the sample. However, home-based workers spent 5.75 hours in rural Gujarat and 4.96 hours in urban Gujarat in caring for children.

In Sri Lanka, widowhood is associated with lowest rates of labour force participation (24 per cent in 2008), followed by married women (39 per cent in 2008), while single women's participation rate is over 50 per cent (Gunatilaka, 2013). In Bangladesh, marriage is likely to discourage paid work requiring migration, and have less of an impact on self-employed or family workers (Rahman and Islam, 2013).

Institutional support for day care for infants/very young children is seen only in a few scattered interventions. Among the better known are mobile crèches working with children of construction workers in different cities in India. The presence of quality day care might be expected to make a substantial difference to the female work participation rate. The need for quality day-care services from the perspectives of both the young child and women as mothers, particularly working women in the informal economy, has been made repeatedly (see, for example, Anandalakshmy and Chatterjee, 2009; Datta and Konantambigi, 2007; FORCES and CWDS, 2012; GoI, 1988; Swaminathan, 1985; UNICEF, 2009).

European countries have been leaders in childcare provision and, interestingly, child-centred and human capabilities are getting renewed impetus. There has been a shift in policy perspectives in Europe towards a "social investment" approach rather than the passive post-war welfare state approach. Despite other cutbacks in the mid-1990s, however, family and child benefits experienced a growth in fiscal terms (Razavi, 2007). However, in South Asia, "A significant barrier to the provision of day-care facilities is the ideology that care is a familial and female responsibility" (Chigateri, 2013). So far, the policy focus in India, for example, has been via laws requiring employer provision of day care in the organized sector or through schemes, such as the Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for the Children of Working Mothers, both of which have limited outreach (FORCES and CWDS, 2012). Universal provision of quality day care is yet to become an integral part of the policy framework enabling women's work.

An implication of care responsibilities is that women choose work that is within the home or near the home, making it easier to be present in the home when required. For example, this preference is clearly expressed in the finding that working women in the sample mostly walked to work – 68.5 per cent in UP, 75.6 per cent in Gujarat (IAMR, 2013). Similarly, the NSS 2009–10 66th Round shows that 33 per cent of rural and 27 per cent of urban women over 15 and engaged in "domestic duties" were willing to work if the work was on household premises (NSSO 2013, 22).

Evidence on changes in social norms towards women's work is mixed. While at a macro level little change seems evident, there are examples of high profile women in business and other careers; and increasing numbers

¹⁵ NSS data analysed by G. Raveendran, personal communication.

of educated women in new industries to suggest that attitudes may be changing (Kelkar, 2013). One programme instituted by the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India, the Women Scientists Programme, seeks to respond to the observation that many women scientists drop out early in their careers for family-related reasons, and offers scholarships to allow them to return to research and make a re-entry into work.¹⁶

As long ago as 1974, the Commission on the status of women had said:

The real difficulty lies in the failure of the economy to absorb all its labour power and to appreciate the need for an institutionalised pattern of labour utilisation that takes note of women's roles as housewives and mothers. So far, in spite of occasional lip service to the idealised image of women in these roles, little attempt has been made to assess its productive value. Still less attention has been given to providing the necessary infrastructure to remove women's disabilities in the labour market. Education alone cannot remove these disabilities. (GoI, 1974, 5.268).

The Commission recommended “specific provisions for part-time employment”; however, it was not until February 2012 that any further mention is seen of this suggestion. In his speech to the 44th Indian Labour Conference (2012), the prime minister said:

In order to bring more women into the work force, it is necessary to understand the constraints that they face in balancing their family and work responsibilities. Although the provision of crèches is now built into our regulations, including those for MGNREGA, this is clearly not enough. We would also need to make provision for part-time work which would have the same characteristics as in full-time employment.¹⁷

This understanding finds a place in India’s Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2012–17) as well, with the chapter on employment noting:

As household incomes rise and budget constraints relax, women weigh the trade-offs between available employment opportunity and home making more carefully. The only way to slow down the declining female work participation rate is to make the work environment more conducive to women, and provide for the genuine needs of home-making and child care (GoI, 2013, 22.51).

The emergence of part-time work after 1950 had altered the paid work opportunities of married women dramatically in Western countries, and even after many decades, in 1997, 40 per cent of women in the United Kingdom (UK) worked less than 30 hours a week, compared to 8 per cent of men (Costa, 2000). Although the situation in South Asia is very different given that most women are in informal employment, the expansion of quality day care for children, as well as the possibility of opportunities for regular part-time work with benefits, merits serious consideration.

6. Towards a policy framework

The objectives of a policy for strengthening women’s workforce participation could be summarized as enabling higher levels of participation, sustained over the working-age period, and in a broader range of activities; while ensuring that the time-burden of care work remains reasonable.

¹⁶ See <http://www.dst.gov.in/scientific-programme/women-scientists.htm>. [14 April 2014]

¹⁷ <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=80297> [23 February 2012].

Certain “transition” points along the life cycle have special significance for women’s work participation decisions. These include the completion of education and the transition from education to work; and marriage and birth of children. A policy framework encouraging and enabling women’s participation is one that is constructed with active awareness of the “gender-specific” constraints that face most women. This calls for “micro” analysis and insights to be integrated into macro policies. Usually, inclusion of women is interpreted as ensuring coverage of women, for example, through quotas, but very rarely do gender issues influence design. The overarching policy framework needs to focus on removing the constraints to women’s work (as recommended so long ago by the Commission on the Status of Women 1974) and on encouraging investments that will generate “good” jobs. Addressing “gender-specific constraints”, such as care responsibilities, would help to avoid the emergence of “gender-intensified inequalities” around work, of which occupational segregation is one example.¹⁸

An “engendering” is needed at all levels of the policy process: in the identification of issues, design of policy, its implementation and evaluation.

6.1 Identifying the issues

Gender-responsive policies need to be contextually developed and therefore an essential ingredient of policy for women’s work is to have in place systems for identifying the relevant issues. This can be done through pre-project gender assessment, gender-sensitive project coordination, participation of affected women in decision-making, gender budgeting and benefit-incidence analysis, collection of sex-disaggregated data, and evaluation using a gender and equity lens.

The need for gender-disaggregated data has been recognized since the mid-1990s and the annual publication of the report Women and Men in India by the Central Statistical Organisation (CSO) has been one outcome. The WGFE 2012 identified some of the sex-disaggregated data that is currently not available and for which regular information should be collected to assist in appropriate planning. This includes (Mehta et al., 2012):

- Employment conditions, paid and unpaid work
- Migration
- Health access and outcomes
- Education, skills and training
- Access to food and nutrition outcomes
- Use of public facilities
- Control over private and public assets
- Access to credit
- Access to land
- Access to and impact of flagship schemes
- Fiscal and monetary gender-disaggregated data

¹⁸ Gender-specific constraints refer to social norms and practices that apply to men or women by virtue of their gender; gender-intensified inequalities reflect norms and customs on, for example, distribution of food, health care, and access to property; gender-imposed forms of disadvantage reflect discrimination in the wider public domain (Kabeer, 2008; Commonwealth Secretariat Discussion Paper no. 3, Jan 2009).

A gender budget exercise carried out in Kerala shows how the decisions on investment can change when the effort is made to identify women's concerns. The Government of Kerala had decided in 2010–11 to have a major focus on infrastructure, in the wake of the global financial and economic crisis, and as a result of a gender-budgeting exercise decided to introduce a focus on women-friendly infrastructure. A major scheme for women was formulated covering even sectors normally excluded from a gender-budgeting exercise, and cooperation across departments was obtained by arguing that a reduction in the burden of unpaid work will enhance women's ability to take on paid work. There was commendable cooperation from the different departments including Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC), Public Works Department (PWD), police, ports, housing, as also health, social welfare and IT sectors. Both physical and social (including skill development) infrastructure was identified. As a result, investments went into women-specific areas, including separate toilets for women at all public spots, for example, in ports, bus stops; low-rent accommodation and hostels, especially for women migrating for work; dedicated buses, night shelters and waiting rooms for fisherwomen; facilities for skill enhancement; and counselling and health services for women survivors of violence (Mishra, 2011).

6.2 Designing policies

There is a fairly wide consensus today that increasing rates of economic growth and eliminating poverty requires the creation of employment opportunities.¹⁹ There is very little understanding or even acceptance that there is a gender dimension to this analysis, and that applying a gender lens to the overall macro policy framework as well as sectoral policies modifies the specific interventions and investment priorities quite substantially. This is so even if a more radical critique of the development path is not made. The WGFE for the Twelfth Plan argues strongly that for the inclusion of women, livelihood-led growth needs to be at the centre. Recognizing the nature of work in which women are concentrated has implications for city planning and the use of space, for example, to allow home-based work, street vending and to integrate waste pickers into municipalities.

As noted earlier, women's decision to work is influenced by a different set of factors than men's and an ambivalent picture emerges regarding the ability and willingness of women to access new and emerging work opportunities. When household income and the economic situation allows it, women, far more than men, exercise a choice and do not necessarily take up paid work outside the home even if available. While the decision not to work may reflect voluntary choice and an expressed preference for relationships and responsibilities of family and community, the goal for policy would be to ensure there are no external barriers to work.

Specific areas for policy action to encourage and enable women's access to work outside the home are suggested below.

1. **Reducing time burden:** The domestic work burden needs to be reduced; investments to ensure universal provision of drinking water, sanitation, electricity and cooking fuel need to be stepped up. This is already on the policy agenda, but the gap between intent and reality remains very high. The silos within which government departments work means that while houses for the poor may be constructed under one scheme, providing these houses with toilets, sanitation facilities, drinking water or electricity, each requires a different set of programmes. Without a practical and meaningful convergence, there will be no change in women's capacity to work. According to a recent McKinsey report, 50 per cent of public spending on basic services does not reach people, and 46 per cent of basic services are not within reach of the average household (McKinsey Global Institute, 2014).

¹⁹ Thus a recent McKinsey report (McKinsey Global Institute, 2014) points to new non-farm jobs as a critical element of inclusive reforms. Construction would be the biggest contributor to accelerating job creation.

2. **Public transport:** An often expressed reason for why women do not take up paid work is the travel required and safety concerns. Investments in public transport, and also in toilets and lighting at bus and train stations, should be a priority. Inclusive planning that makes space for street vendors could have the double dividend of greater safety, through the “eye on public space” that the regular presence of vendors could create. Adding a gender lens to the transport sector reveals gender differences that are otherwise not visible – differences in the intensity of transport usage, trip purpose, trip patterns, distance and frequency of travel and mode of transport. Women frequently travel with children, or carrying head loads (Mehta et al., 2012; Eapen and Mehta, 2012).
3. **Ensuring safety and gender-based harmony:** Freedom from violence and sexual harassment in public places and within the home mutually reinforce one another and help to create an environment conducive to women’s work and mobility. Safety within the workplace is the responsibility of employers and government regulations help to ensure this. Safe transport and good lighting in public spaces are aspects of infrastructure investment that have special relevance for working women. Firm action to prevent violence against women is needed. Women’s work that takes them away from the home and into public spaces makes them more vulnerable to harassment and abuse. This is more likely when it is felt by lookers-on that in some way working women are “transgressing” norms and, therefore, the first cohorts of women in any new type of work especially need the support of a well-trained police force and maintenance of law and order.
4. **Education and skills:** Education and training are expected to open up new opportunities for the individual, and enhance the growth prospects of the economy. With slow expansion in formal and regular work opportunities, skills development has been accorded a high priority in the last few years as an alternative pathway to work. Most skill development programmes are associated with poverty alleviation efforts and are targeted at early school leavers or workers. Past experience suggests that only a small proportion of those with skills certification are able to access regular wage work, and the majority who become self-employed workers are likely to remain in the informal economy as self-employed workers. According to a cross-country study by Gindling and Newhouse (2014), for example, the proportion of self-employed workers who are, or have the potential to be, successful entrepreneurs is around 10 % irrespective of the income level and across countries. The policy challenge is to encourage more opportunities for regular wage work, which many studies have shown is more strongly correlated with stronger empowerment effects for women; address the issue of a gender-responsive and supportive informal economy environment for the self-employed; and, recognizing that so far skill training has largely focused on low-end occupations, address challenges in enabling occupational mobility for both men and women.
5. **Women’s legal rights:** Women’s legal rights range from the freedom to work, to own property, land and inheritance rights, to protection from violence and sexual harassment. Marriage and divorce laws can increase women’s bargaining power within the household. The institutional framework created by the law opens up opportunities. Specifically in relation to work, the law ensures equal remuneration and protection from sexual harassment. In practice, these laws are not always adhered to, and, moreover, some situations persist where there isn’t full equality between men and women, resting on a sense of what would ensure safety and suitability of work for women. Night work for women is one example. An amendment to the Factory Act in 2005 allowed women in India to work at night, thus opening up opportunities in shift-based call centre work and other night shifts. The employer has the responsibility to ensure safety and transport facilities and a study showed reasonable responsiveness of employers to safety considerations (ASSOCHAM, 2005). In Sri Lanka, night work and some types of part-time work are not open to women. Gender wage gaps persist despite the Equal Remuneration Act. In Bangladesh, women’s wage was 66 per cent of men’s wage in 2006, and 84 per cent in 2010. In the case of salary, women’s average salary was 54 per cent of men’s in 2010. Similar gender wage gaps persist across the region thus calling for firmer measures to improve implementation of legal provisions for equal remuneration.

6. **Support for caring labour:** Maternity benefits are an essential benefit, although it has been noted that when this is to be fully borne by employers in the private sector, there can be a tendency to discriminate against women. Marriage and the situation of married women calls for thoughtful adjustments to work schedules to make it more likely that married women would continue to work/seek work. Regular part-time work, flexibility in working hours, working from home, and other such arrangements should be open to both men and women, but are likely to make more difference to women's work participation than to men's. Across all categories of work, the availability of quality day care for young children needs prioritization. As an additional benefit, child and elder care is simultaneously an employment opportunity for women.

6.3 Gender-responsive monitoring and evaluation

The assessment of policy design and implementation offers an opportunity to “tweak” interventions to enhance gender responsiveness. Tools such as sex-disaggregated benefit-incidence analysis and evaluation frameworks that are participatory and ensure feedback from all stakeholders need to be incorporated into all project evaluation (Hay et al., 2012).

In summary, women face many constraints: relaxing just one may not be enough to change their work-related decisions. There are no magic bullets, and multiple coordinated action is needed to make the decision to engage in productive work more attractive and less stress-inducing for women, given that existing gendered roles and responsibilities around childcare and household management, and other social norms (patrilocality, household pooling of work, tasks related to religious ritual and kinship), will change only slowly. In her review of the literature, Duflo finds that there is a strong correlation between economic development and women's rights. This poses the question of whether policies are required to improve the condition of women, or whether as countries develop positive effects will follow (Duflo, 2012). The arguments in favour of policy action ultimately rest on the belief that the process of change could be made more congenial.

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Enabling women's work

Women's work participation rates in South Asia, with the exception of Nepal, are low compared to other regions. Wider access to education and skills training, the emergence of new industries and new work opportunities, notably in the information technology (IT) sector, are changing the aspirations and work-related decisions of younger and educated women, but mediated by accepted normative behaviour. Social norms continue to influence work-seeking behaviour, resulting in persistent concentration of women workers in certain occupations and as home-based workers. A policy framework that would create more enabling conditions for women to take on paid work outside the home, and to do so in ways that are empowering and not exploitative, would have to apply a gender lens to macroeconomic policies and their gendered impact, address issues of job creation, and support processes that enable women to make considered choices. Among the core constituents of such a holistic framework would be measures to reduce the time and energy spent on home maintenance through investments in drinking water, sanitation, electricity and cooking fuel; ensuring access to, and completion of, education and skill development courses, career counselling, and forms of mentoring; ensuring facilities for childcare; ensuring safety in public spaces, and in the workplace; and putting in place strong monitoring and evaluation systems using gender-disaggregated information to assess and modify programmes and interventions as needed.

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