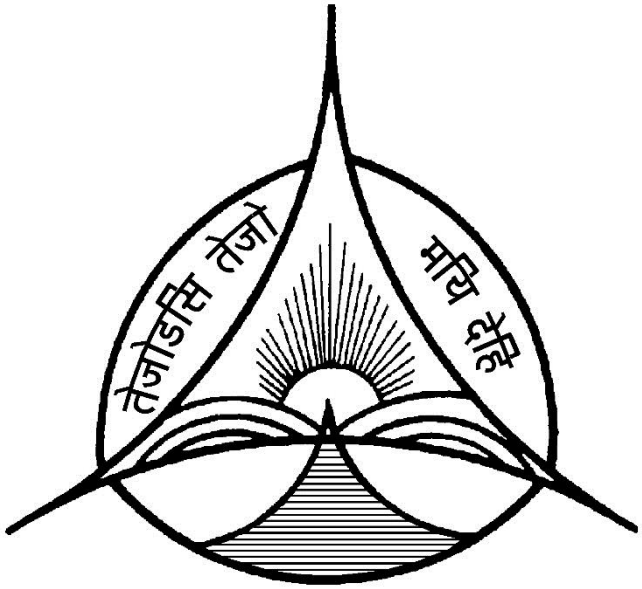
THE JMC REVIEW

An Interdisciplinary Social Science Journal of Criticism, Practice and Theory



Volume 1

2017

A GENDERED EMPLOYMENT CRISIS AND WOMEN'S LABOUR IN 21st CENTURY INDIA

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From the end of the first decade of the 21st century, a severe crisis in women's employment in India became apparent from national employment surveys. Work participation rates among women have fallen at a devastating pace to the lowest levels recorded in the history of independent India. And yet, such a crisis in female employment is not a serious matter of public debate, and still less for policy makers, commentators, and even the women's movement.

Why falling employment rates among women has failed to become newsworthy, despite unequivocal evidence from large-scale surveys by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), is indeed a question to be asked. One of the arguments in support of liberalisation and globalisation was that it would open up greater opportunities for women's employment. Even critics of neo-liberalism believed that women would become the preferred workers of an increasingly flexible workforce. As liberalisation and its enabling neo-liberal policy framework established roots in India, the striking visibility and impressions of larger numbers of young women in the urban workforce perhaps made the data on falling female work participation rates difficult to believe.

After all, some new forms of employment that could not have even been conceived of by earlier generations have indeed emerged for women. The salesgirls in malls or the prominent faces of women in media and advertising are noticeably part of our daily sense world in the neo-liberal era. Women domestic workers are part of every middle class household. Generations of students are used to women teachers at every level of their education. And of course, from call centres to more technical IT occupations to apparel manufacture, some of the most talked about industries and services of the neo-liberal age, do not seem to be placing as much premium on masculinity as was the case earlier. In some, women workers may actually be preferred.

It would seem that *hyper visibility* of select faces and occupations and of a significant number of particularly middle class women working in newer forms and venues of employment has *masked and invisibilised* the far more widespread losses of women's jobs that have taken place across both rural and urban India. The scattered confinement of millions of women who have lost employment within and outside their homes and households has had no such concentrated visibility as the high profile forms of women's employment, whose images flood the public eye.

Although women's need and demand for income among the poorer sections of society is indeed palpable, those women who are unable to search for or find employment are neither visible nor heard of in the public domain. They remain the most unorganised social force and their concerns clearly need a more effective voice and representation than has been the case so far. Their condition seems to be today primarily represented as statistical numbers. Nevertheless, these numbers deserve due respect because they tell us of the many whose faces have been hidden and whose voices have not been heard. Further, they also help us to understand the scale of the employment crisis being faced by women in India today.

This paper seeks to first unpack the data on women's employment in India; take a closer look at the social differentiation that is evident in such data; analyse developments and conditions in some prominent segments of women workers, including some all-women classes of workers; discuss how neo-liberal policies have engendered the crisis in employment; and finally, attempt to sketch some alternative measures to deal with the crisis.

What the Data Tells Us

Female Work Participation Rates (WPR) and Numbers of Women Workers Have Both Fallen

Contrary to the worldwide trend of increasing rates of women's employment, in India the clock has been moving in reverse, and women's work participation rates (percentage of workers in the female population) have been falling. Figure 1 shows female work participation rates from 1983, but it is the sharp decline since 1993–94 and the precipitate fall from 2004–5 that best gives us a picture of the situation of women's employment under liberalisation.[1] As is clear from the graph, it is in rural areas that the fall is most marked. In

1983, 34 per cent of the rural female population was in the workforce; but by 2011–12, this had dropped to less than 25 per cent, which is the lowest ever in the history of independent India. In urban areas, which are commonly assumed to have higher levels of employment opportunities, female work participation rates were actually always abysmally low (see the lower line in the graph), even in the 1980s when they were less than half the rural rates. Extraordinarily low and stagnant rates of women's employment in urban India have persisted across the neo-liberal decades, but a significant decline in the 1990s and again after 2004–05 is also noticeable in urban areas.[2]

Where Figure 1 gives us the *ratio* of workers to the female population, Figure 2 presents the *numbers* (estimated in millions) of male and female workers over five years from 1993–94 to 2011–12 (rural and urban combined). When ratios are converted into numbers of workers, the percentage shares of women in the workforce also become visible (shown in brackets). What is most striking in the graph is the widening gender gap in employment or, to put it another way, the falling shares of women in the employed workforce.

What the two figures indicate and what needs to be borne in mind are:

1) From 2004–05 to 2009–10, more than 21 million women were ejected from the workforce, and since there must have been some new entrants during the same period, the actual numbers of those who have lost their jobs would have been much more. While low employment growth is a known phenomenon, it is indeed strange that the scale of absolute losses of employment by women have not been so noticed.

2) The absolute fall did not continue into 2011–12, although female work participation rates continued to fall. Still, the number of women workers in 2011–12 was still well over 19 million less than in 2004–05.

3) Importantly, the absolute drop in number of workers is specific to women, and has resulted in a widening gender gap in employment. The share of women in employment dropped from 33 per cent in 1993–94 to just 27 per cent in 2011–12. Thus, this trend of a decline in women's share has continued since 2004–5, even when the absolute numbers of women workers have not fallen.

Figure 1

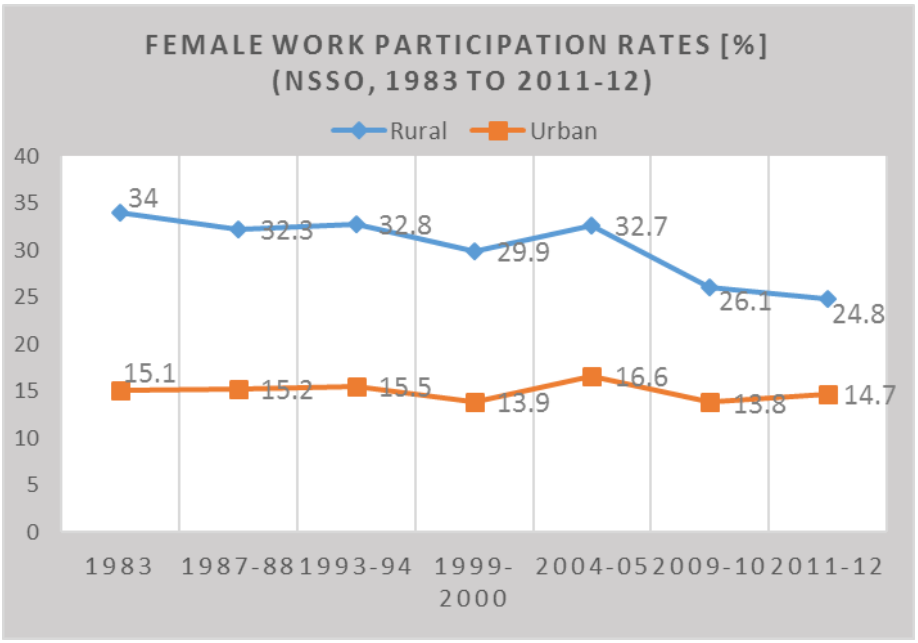
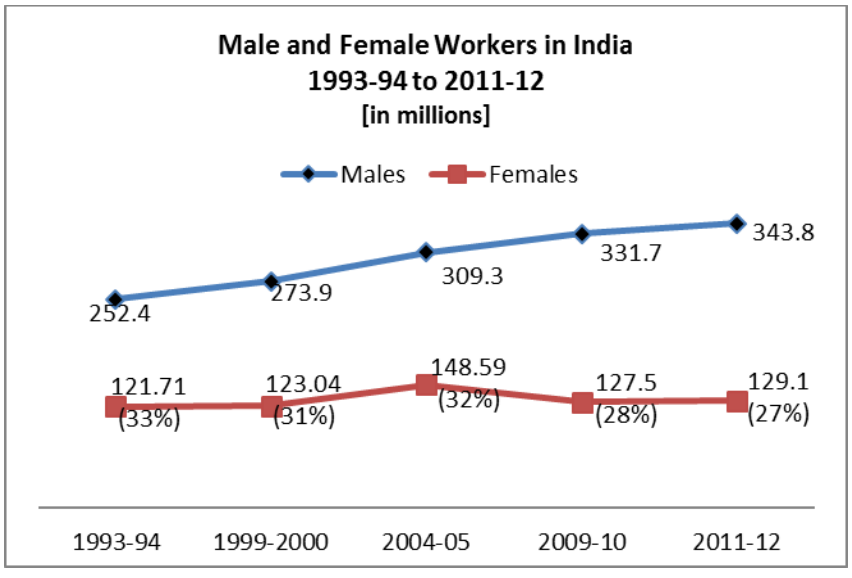


Figure 2



4) Workforce figures in the two graphs include unpaid workers who may be working with other household members but would not have any independent income. Since unpaid workers constitute around 40 per cent of the female workforce in comparison

to around 15 per cent among male workers, the gender gap in paid employment is even greater than appears in Figure 2. (Further calculations show that *among paid or income earning workers*, women actually held a mere 22 per cent of jobs in 2011–12, i.e., 5 percentage points less than what is seen when unpaid workers are included.)

5) Finally, these workforce estimates refer to what is called usual status principal and subsidiary employment for the year preceding each survey.[3] They therefore include a large number of workers who found employment for only a few weeks or months in the year, as well as many who suffered retrenchment or intermittent loss of work in the given year. It is always important to bear in mind that standard workforce figures actually include a significant number of the unpaid and the underemployed, and hide, within their numbers, many who face instability of both employment and income and may face intermittent unemployment or even longer-term unemployment for a major part of the year.

Sharpest Falls in Work Participation Rates among Tribal and Dalit Women

Some key insights into the nature of the crisis in women's employment have emerged from N. Neetha's analysis of NSSO data on female work participation rates *across social groups* from 1999–2000 to 2011–12 (N. Neetha 2014). The analysis brings out the differentiated levels of experience across social groups and gives a picture of which sections of women have been worst affected by the employment crisis. It indicates some commonalities of experience, and yet ultimately highlights the phenomenon of differing levels of decline in employment rates among women, leading to aggravation of social inequalities.[4]

As is well known, hierarchies of economic status in India also have a history of being correlated with caste/community hierarchies. Stigmatised social groups such as Dalits (Scheduled Castes [SC]) and Tribals (Scheduled Tribes [ST]) are generally found to be concentrated among the economically marginalised.[5] From 1993–94, the NSSO started putting out data on employment by social groups, beginning with the three categories of SC, ST, and others. From 1999–2000, a separate category was included, comprising the large swathe of intermediate castes/communities who are recognised as being socially and

educationally disadvantaged and classed in the category of 'Other Backward Classes' (OBC).[6] The category of 'others' has, since then, comprised primarily upper castes.

More recently, as the evidence of marginalisation of the largest religious minority in India (Muslims) has come to the fore in public debates, there is a special interest in looking at data on Muslims separately.[7] Muslim communities/castes are counted in the 'others' category along with upper castes, and those defined as backward in the OBC category. Some Muslims are counted in ST categories, but SC status has not been granted to any Muslim community (Deshpande 2008). Based on her analysis of unit level data from NSSO surveys, Neetha has usefully extracted and presented the data for Muslims separately, rather than just including them within the upper caste and OBC social groups.[8] Her analysis of female work participation rates by social groups is presented in Table 1.

A preliminary baseline condition, which is also evident in Table 1, is that female work participation rates have been, and still are, the highest among STs and SCs—communities where restrictions on women going out to work have historically been of a lower order. They are lowest among Muslims followed by upper castes—communities and castes with traditions of cultural taboos on women working outside their homes. The situation among OBCs falls between these two ends.

And yet, it is particularly striking that the fall in female employment rates has been the greatest among STs and SCs—the two social groups which are among the poorest and most marginalised of all social groups in India. The indications are, thus, that the poorer sections of women seem to have been disproportionately affected by the employment crisis. In fact, the table shows that the degree of decline in female work participation rates lessens at each ascending level of the social hierarchy.[9]

Table 1: Female Work Participation Rates across Social Groups, (1999–2000 and 2011–12)

Rural India	1999-00	2011-12	Difference between 1999-00 and 2011-12
ST	43.8	36.6	-7.2
SC	32.5	26.2	-6.3
OBC excluding Muslims	31.4	25.6	-5.8
Muslims	16.1	15.3	-0.8
Upper castes excluding Muslims	24.6	21.3	-3.3
Total	29.7	24.8	-4.9
Urban India	1999-00	2011-12	Difference between 1999-00 and 2011-12
ST	20.4	19.6	-0.8
SC	18.5	17.3	-1.3
OBC excluding Muslims	16.8	16.5	-0.3
Muslims	9.7	10.5	0.7
Upper castes excluding Muslims	11.2	13.4	2.2
Total	13.9	14.7	0.8

Source: Adapted from Table 1 in N. Neetha (2014). 'Crisis in Female Employment: Analysis across Social Groups', *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 22.

The Ubiquitousness of Graded Inequality

An article of faith among neo-liberals is that the growth of unrestricted and competitive market forces (considered to be impersonal and purely quality/product/merit based) enables the breakdown of caste hierarchies, and provides for greater freedom for all to enter the labour market as equal citizens. While it has been countered with evidence showing persistent inequalities across social groups, giving rise to a global range of literature on social discrimination and exclusion, the related larger frameworks need not detain us here.

The question before us is, what has been the social impact of the primary social role given to unrestricted market forces that has been the object of neo-liberal policies? There can be little

doubt of accelerated penetration of market forces deep into the crevices of even India's hinterland society and economy. Accelerated momentum has indeed ensured that market forces have become the prime force determining employment growth or rather lack of growth, and now determine the patterns and structures of employment across the country more than ever before. Neetha has argued that social and cultural inequalities continue to have a strong bearing on employment outcomes, even when the latter are determined by market forces. She suggests that contrary to expectations of the market leading to a weakening of inequalities based on gender and caste/religion, it actually worsens and reinforces them. Her data on employment by social groups supports such an argument since it shows that any growth in employment opportunities for women have favoured the more privileged castes, while the less privileged have been losing out much more.

But first, as evident from even a cursory look at Table 1, what is striking is that no social group has been able to escape the decline in female work participation rates in rural areas, and employment rates for women from all groups can be seen to have fallen in India's countryside. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that *the level of decline moves inversely along a scale of graded inequality*, with ST women having seen the greatest fall, followed by SC women and then OBC women. Within the rural caste hierarchy (here excluding Muslims), employment rates among upper caste women have also fallen, but in comparison to the other caste groups, the decline seems to have impacted them the least.

In urban areas, on the other hand, upper caste women seem to have been in a unique position of actually increasing their work participation rates by around 20 per cent across a little over a decade.[10] The positive difference of 0.7 per cent in the female work participation rate among Muslims (that too, on the lowest base) is too small to be significant, but a positive difference of 2.2 per cent for upper caste women seems to indicate an upswing for them in the urban job market.

It bears mention here that in 2011–12, 46 per cent of India's upper caste population lived in urban areas in comparison to 30 per cent of OBCs, 24 per cent of SCs, and barely 11 per cent of STs.[11] Far greater levels of urbanity and therefore of urban embedded social networks,

higher educational levels, and relatively greater access to better quality employment seem to have given a boost to upper caste women in urban employment.

Overall, the work participation data for all women as well as disaggregated by social group suggests that the *compelling reasons for falling employment rates among women lie in the agrarian heartland of India*, where almost no community has escaped the crisis. However, before discussing the agrarian crisis, let us first try and address the question of how and why urban women from the upper castes have been able to increase their participation rates.

Why Upper Caste Women Appear to be Improving their Employment Rates in Urban India

The distinguishing features of upper caste women's employment that have been highlighted by Neetha's analysis include:

1. Among upper caste urban women workers, a consistently higher proportion (half or more) have been regular workers, with casual workers remaining equally consistently below 8 per cent across all survey rounds (1999–2000 to 2011–12).[12] Among all other social groups in urban areas, the share of regular employment has been increasing, but has yet to reach the halfway mark, while the share of casual labour varies from double the share among upper castes for OBC women workers to five times among STs.

2. A greater proportion of upper caste women workers are employed in the tertiary sector in both rural and urban areas, and relatively greater proportions are in education in comparison to any other social group. Further, among upper caste women working in education, around half are employed in higher education. Among other social groups, the share of higher education was much less or negligible among SC/ST women.

3. One-third of upper caste women workers had written job contracts for more than three years, strikingly more than any of the other social groups. In all, 40 per cent of upper caste women workers had written job contracts of variable durations in 2011–12, in contrast to less than 25 per cent in all other social groups. Amazingly, a majority of upper caste women workers were eligible for paid leave (57 per cent in

2011–12), in comparison to around one-third who were similarly entitled among all other social groups.

Taken together, the analysis shows that a greater proportion of upper caste women were in better quality, more stable, and more formal modes and conditions of employment in comparison to all other social groups, of which a most significant condition was access to paid leave. The quality of employment that upper caste women are involved in may have been made possible by easier access because of their position of relative social privilege. However, of equal importance is the fact that their better quality working conditions also appears to have encouraged more upper caste women to take up employment, and perhaps helped them to better withstand the waves of loss of employment. Therefore, the analysis implies that the relatively better quality of employment accessed by urban upper caste women is a significant factor in their being able to improve their work participation rates.

The movement towards reversing the long-standing pattern of relatively smaller proportions of upper caste women entering employment might of course be heightened by the fact that baseline employment rates among women from other social groups are also particularly low in urban India. But it is still not unreasonable to argue that public perception of increased levels of women's employment actually rests on a narrow and largely upper caste social base, rendering the wider situation and experience of women from other social groups invisible. If so, a course correction towards a meaningful recognition of the reality of the socially differentiated experiences of women is long overdue.

Nevertheless, it may well be that the increasing proportions of upper caste women in employment (particularly in better quality employment) also signifies ongoing processes of erosion of the upper-caste led social tradition of confinement of women and restrictions on their employment outside their homes—in which case, the question of opportunities or rather lack of opportunities for women's employment assumes even greater urgency and significance for women in contemporary India. [13]

The importance of better quality employment—particularly access to paid leave, and its role as an enabling force for upper caste women to increase their employment rates—also implies

that denial of such facilities has been a factor in the larger phenomenon of excessively low female employment rates in urban India. So far, a variety of income generation programmes for women, whether initiated by the government, NGOs or even corporates, have largely focused on generating below-subsistence incomes for women participants, while expecting sustained entrepreneurial energy from them. It is doubtful that women will feel encouraged to engage for any length of time in such activities and forms of work without enabling provisions of ensuring minimum wage incomes or paid leave. Issues of paid leave or incomes that are at least equivalent to statutory minimum wages have not been considered necessary conditions for, or integral to, several of the schemes whose purported objective is what is frequently called 'women's empowerment'. No wonder then that despite several decades of talk about 'empowerment' and several waves of income generation schemes and skill development programmes targeting women, our present condition is marked by a discouraged female workforce and declining women's work participation rates.

The situation of Muslim women, among whom the work participation rate has historically been the lowest, appears, on the face of it, to be somewhat exceptional. In rural areas, the fall in work participation rates among Muslim women has been the least in comparison to other social groups, while in urban areas their employment rates have actually marginally increased.[14] Why this is so remains a question, and is probably because, as is well known, Muslim women workers are most concentrated in home-based work (in both rural and urban areas). Studies have shown that women home-based workers have been increasing in number, even as female work participation rates have been falling. So does the rising graph of home-based work represent a way out of the employment crisis for women? The available evidence suggests the contrar—that home-based work is itself in crisis.

Volatilities in Home-based Work/Employment

Home-based work by women in India is primarily in manufacturing. Their work/tasks are done in their own homes rather than a factory/workshed. As already discussed, studies have shown that the share of home-based work in women's employment has been increasing, particularly in manufacturing (Chen and Raveendran 2014: 16). An increasing share of home-

based work in women's employment in times of declining female employment rates warrants a look at developments in this important segment of the female workforce. As we shall see, even when the number of home-based workers has been expanding, there are hidden losses of employment and income within.

In 2011–12, women constituted 42.8 per cent of home-based workers in India, significantly greater than the share of women in the country's overall workforce which was a mere 27 per cent that same year. The enormous and increasing weight of home-based work as a form of employment among women is doubly evidenced by the fact that (a) the 16.05 million (more than 160 lakh) women home-based workers in 2011–2 constituted close to one-third of the non-agricultural female workforce,[15] (b) that even when the absolute number of women workers fell (after 2004–5), the number of women continued to increase on an average by 5 lakh per year, and (c) in 2011–12, more than 68 per cent of women workers in urban manufacturing were home-based.

A few industries dominate the profile of women in India. *Beedi* manufacture (34 lakh), manufacture of apparel/readymade garments (close to 30 lakh), textile manufacture—predominantly handloom (26 lakh), and around 23 lakh may be found in home-based retailing. Of these, only home-based retailing may fall into the genuinely self-employed category, although the incomes from such petty self-employment have tended to be either the same level as poorly paid piece-rate workers or even less. It is in manufacturing that the realities of the system of home-based work really demonstrate their essential character.

Developments in beedi and handloom epitomise what is happening to women in home-based manufacturing, despite the unique and so-called traditional nature of these two industries.[16] Home-based women became the majority of beedi workers several decades ago. They work at home, rolling beedis, and are paid at piece wage rates fixed per 1,000 beedis rolled.. While the past two decades have seen a decline in beedi production output (to an annual average of around 750 billion beedies after peaking at 1.2 trillion in the mid-1990s), the number of women beedi workers has continued to increase—by 14 lakh between 1999–2000 and 2011–12 (Kannan and Raveendran 2012). In other words, the current situation is of more beedi

workers, with less beedies to roll per worker. Since payment is made per 1,000 beedies rolled, fewer beedies means less income per worker. Related to this phenomenon is quick and often sudden shifts in number of workers from one state to another, which means that although the aggregate number of beedi workers may be increasing, several of these workers are simultaneously losing their jobs and becoming unemployed/underemployed.[17]

Beedi workers had a long tradition of unionisation from the pre-independence era and are covered by labour laws designed especially for them, and which specifically include home-based beedi workers. However, a relatively small number of beedi manufacturers/traders have perfected the practice of moving from areas of wage increases to areas where workers are not organised and accept lower wages. They have ensured that beedi workers are today spread across 14 states in the country. Interestingly, beedi tobacco is grown only in three districts in western India, and the forest areas from where tendu leaves are collected are generally not the areas where beedis are rolled. In the traditional areas of beedi manufacture, workers had tended to get organised and started availing of statutory minimum wages and some other benefits.

Beedi manufacturers, on the other hand, are always looking for ways to push down wage rates. With the constant threat of manufacturers moving and depriving workers of their employment, the gap between statutory minimum wages (per 1,000 rolled beedies) and what is actually received by beedi workers has been widening, even where workers had some level of organisation. Since manufacturers now claim that their survival is being threatened by anti-smoking legislation, in several cases even unions have negotiated wages below the statutory minimum. So, the *twin processes of less work/income per worker and the widening gap between bare survival wages (minimum wages) and actual wages* have become defining features of the most organised segment of home-based work, indicating decay and crisis of the beedi industry in 21st century India.

Handloom has a far longer history in India, although the spread of power looms from the 1960s had overwhelmed handloom very quickly. Unable to compete with cheaper mill and power loom products, handloom lost the position it had at independence—that of being the

second largest employer in India after agriculture—and its workforce became increasingly dependent on protective subsidies and procurement by government for survival. Nevertheless, because of its large workforce as well as special *swadeshi* status in India's freedom struggle, handloom was initially offered some protection and basic support in government policy. Promotion of cooperatives constituted a key element of the policy concerning handloom in the early years after independence. In the neo-liberal era, the privileged position accorded to handloom was dismantled, its cooperatives were starved into extinction, and other support and protection was progressively bypassed or extinguished. An often forgotten fact is that handloom was the first sector to be hard hit by liberalisation, when diversion of cotton and yarn to higher priced global export markets, combined with non-enforcement of hank yarn obligations for handloom weavers, led to shortages for handloom workers who got priced out of the yarn market, and could no longer access the raw materials to sustain their activities or incomes. The first suicides as a distress response to the impact of neo-liberal policies in India was of handloom workers in the 1990s.

In more recent times, as crisis in handloom has deepened, aggravated by the changing contours of India's own apparel mass market, the industry has seen an exodus of its male workforce. It is in such a context that there has been an increase in numbers and shares of women in handloom. As 36 lakh men exited handloom across the 15 years between the handloom census of 1995–96 and the last one of 2009–10, the number of women handloom workers increased by 9 lakh. As a consequence, by 2001–10, 77 per cent of the handloom workforce in India were women, up from 61 per cent in 1995–96.[18] The point to be noted is that accelerated feminisation of handloom has taken place at a time when handloom workers were reduced to being among the poorest of the country's workers. The handloom census of 2009–10 recorded that 57 per cent of handloom households were below the poverty line (BPL), including 10 per cent in the extreme poverty category, and household earnings (from all sources) averaged less than ₹2,500 per month (Mazumdar 2017).

With handloom workers' livelihoods having been destroyed first by delayed payments to handloom workers' cooperatives for government subsidised procurement of handloom, and then by the abandonment of such procurement, an increasingly debt-laden majority of

handloom workers now work under master-weavers and other private employers/traders (independent workers dropped from 43 per cent to 25 per cent across the two censuses). Repeated rounds of starvation deaths and suicides by handloom workers provided the context for the increasing subordination and accelerated feminisation of handloom workers, even as, and despite the diminished number of workers, handloom cloth production had not fallen, and the proportion of full-time workers had risen. Multiple levels of skill, work experience and hard physical labour required by handloom was earlier shared between men and women in a household. Now the burden is falling more on the women. A situation of *intensified work for low returns* has emerged as the principal experience of women in handloom as well.

Unlike beedi and handloom, home-based work by women in apparel manufacture cannot, in India, be considered traditional, although some traditional manufacture of 'ethnic' wear may still be found in some pockets.[19] The overwhelming majority and increasing numbers of women in home-based work for apparel are involved in more contemporary modes of manufacture of readymade garments. Elsewhere I have argued that behind the significant surge in home work in commercial stitching lies the story of the shift from custom tailoring to readymade garment manufacture. Such a shift includes a deskilled format of repetitive specialisation in one or other part process that was perfected on the garment factory floor and then moved to the homes of women (Mazumdar 2017).

Exaggerated notions of global value chains and global markets as being the sole determinants of production networks in India have led to exaggerated hype about the role of export work in the home-based sector. While there are indeed a few pockets where home-based workers are integrated with global apparel chains, the majority of them in manufacture of readymades work in informal production/distribution chains providing cheap readymade garments to local and regional networks of markets. Export oriented readymades have become far more concentrated in larger factories, in which women workers are clearly the majority in south India, but still not a majority in the north. However, the framing of studies of home-based workers in apparel and value chain analyses has been overwhelmed by global discourses with a focus on exports. As a result, few studies have addressed the question of the location and conditions of home-based workers in relation to domestic markets.

Nevertheless, the few available studies point to extremely low earnings by home-based workers, even where apparel work has been regularly available and the shifting of procurement from higher wage to lower wage areas/regions has also to be noted. Unni and Scaria (2009) note that the availability of cheaper labour was the reason for a shift in large-scale outsourcing of embellishment activity from Delhi to Bareilly.[20] Mahadevia (2013) showed that the mean monthly earnings of garment home workers getting work through contractors was as low as ₹2,113, while the earnings of those who worked directly for traders was a little more, at ₹2,556, but obviously still below subsistence level.[21]

My own study of in Delhi (2007) showed that work availability in apparel manufacture, which was fairly widely available for home-based workers in the 1980s and early 1990s, had sharply declined, and particularly embroidery work had given way to mechanised embroidery within factories; the consequence was that even nominal piece rates had fallen for the few home-based workers who were still getting embroidery work. Nevertheless, the increase in the number of home-based workers among all women working in apparel/garments from 63.7 per cent in 1999–2000 to 85.5 per cent in 2011–12 demands more detailed research on a cross-regional basis to arrive at a better picture of the trends. So far, indications suggest that even where there has been stability in demand and regular work for women home-based workers in apparel manufacturing, earnings are exceedingly low. And within the increasing numbers, there are stories of the same volatility and shifts across areas that has been seen in other forms of home-based manufacture.

Agrarian Crisis: Feminsation/Defeminisation of Agriculture

During the 1990s, as field studies documented increased burden of work in agriculture by women in a situation where large numbers of men seemed to be migrating out of the sector, scholars and activists had begun talking about feminisation of agriculture. Such an understanding was strengthened when the census of 2001 showed that the share of women in the agricultural workforce had increased to 39 per cent from 35 per cent in 1991, and the NSSO showed an even greater increase in women's share in 2004–5. Since then, however, the picture has changed. Where the census of 2011 showed a marginal drop in women's share

in the agricultural workforce by a little less than 2 per cent over 10 years, the NSSO survey that immediately followed showed a steeper fall in the share of women in the agricultural workforce from the all-time high of 42 per cent in 2004–5 to 35 per cent in 2011–12. Despite some variations in ratios and numbers, what both census and NSSO figures show is a similar pattern of increasing shares of women in the agricultural workforce, followed by a reduction.

Census 2011 had of course also shown a historical first for India—an absolute fall in the number of cultivators. Close to 90 lakh peasants moved out of self-cultivation in the first decade of the 21st century, reducing the number of cultivators from 12.7 crore in 2001 to 11.8 crore in 2011. Agricultural labourers, on the other hand, increased by 37.5 lakh. These are telling figures that indicate the scale of pauperisation of the Indian peasantry.

Table 2 gives the figures for cultivators and agricultural workers by sex across the two censuses of 2001 and 2011. It shows that the reduction in the number of *women* cultivators is strikingly greater, with their numbers having fallen by more than 59 lakh—more than double the fall among male cultivators. To put it another way, women accounted for around 69 per cent of the peasants pushed out of or exiting self-cultivation in agriculture across the first decade of this century.

As a result, the proportion of women among the class of cultivators also fell from 33 per cent to 30 per cent. More surprisingly, the proportion of women among agricultural workers also fell from 46 per cent to 43 per cent. So while a larger number of women cultivators are becoming labourers, even more men are becoming agricultural labourers. That the number of women agricultural workers increased by more than 1.2 crore is remarkable enough, even more remarkable is the increase by 2.5 crore of male agricultural labourers, more than double the additional number of women agricultural labourers.

Table 2: Cultivators and Agricultural Workers in Census 2001 and 2011.

	Workforce in Agriculture (In lakhs)		
Census categories	**2001**	**2011**	**Difference**
Female cultivators	418.96	359.85	-59.11
Male cultivators	854.16	827.06	-27.1
Female agricultural labourers	494.46	615.89	+121.43
Male agricultural labourers	573.29	827.4	+254.11
All cultivators and agricultural labourers	2340.87	2630.2	+289.33.

Simplistic or formulaic propositions are generally difficult to apply in India where demographic scale, regional histories, physical and social topographies, and modes of agriculture and cropping patterns are so diverse. Nevertheless, that a momentous shift is indeed taking place from peasant cultivator to agricultural labour, as well as to non-agricultural worker (a major part going into construction), is unquestionable. That this change is taking place in a context of severely constrained employment growth in other sectors and instability to the point of crisis is living testimony to the fact that the capitalist path of development and its present neo-liberal prescriptions are incapable of dealing with the agrarian crisis or of resolving the agrarian question.

The situation at the end of the first decade of the 21st century in India is one in which 14 per cent of the country's GDP, which is agriculture's share of India's product, continued to support and was supported by 65 per cent of the female workforce, and 50 per cent of the male workforce. Non-agricultural development was demonstrably incapable of absorbing both those who were exiting agriculture as well as those who remained as underemployed, unemployed peasants and agricultural labour.[22] Women workers have been the first victims of this.

The Roots of Crisis

Unemployment, underemployment, and instability in employment of course affect both men and women, and are inbuilt into the path of capitalist development. In the present stage of capitalist development in India, these are horrendously pronounced, since displacement from agriculture converges with displacement by labour-saving technologies in non-agriculture that is not confined only to industry, but also affects services. Even the vast labour-intensive informal sector cannot sustain employment anywhere near decent incomes as the conditions of its more labour-intensive work deteriorate in the face of competition from cheaper products of labour- saving technologies. Under neo-liberal policies, these innate characteristics of capitalist development have indeed manifested in heightened form and scale.

Although well known, it bears reiterating that the broad set of policies that have had a directly adverse impact on rates of employment include (a) dismantling barriers against the unfettered inflow of foreign goods leading to a decline in local manufactures, erosion of livelihoods and employment based on local production, as well as displacement of labour from industry (b) encouragement to private (including foreign) investment in highly capital-intensive and labour- displacing technologies in agriculture and industries, while simultaneously opening the door for Indian investors to take their capital and jobs out of the country (c) removal of various market support and protections for millions of small producers, reducing them to penury, and (d) denigration and undermining of labour laws and protections for workers against mass retrenchments and closures.

Also well known is that cuts in rural development expenditures, opening of the seed and fertiliser markets to deep penetration by private profiteers (including MNCs), have led to a rising burden of increased agricultural input costs for farmers/peasants in agriculture. Further reduction in the number of rural branches of public sector banks and changes in the norms of priority sector lending; egging farmers to shift to commercial crops exposed to price volatilities in global markets; reluctant and tardy implementation of minimum support prices and state procurement of major food crops—leading to distress sales by farmers and often at

below production costs—these have all led to a generalised mismatch between high input costs and low returns from agriculture for the mass of the peasantry. This is an agrarian crisis of unprecedented proportions. The devastating impact on the livelihoods of the rural populace and the extraordinarily limited nature of any mitigation by National Rural Employment Guarantee Act are also well known. Nevertheless, despite its limitations, the increasing importance of work for women through MGNREGS is evident from their enhanced numbers, as also their rising and now majority share of work under this scheme.[23]

It may be underlined that for women, the struggle against the employment crisis, and particularly its gendered effects, has a significance that goes beyond economic dimensions and economic policies. Experience has shown that the right to work for women forms an essential part of other ongoing struggles—against violence, against discrimination and misogynistic targeting of women, against stigma and ostracism, against caste-based atrocities, as well as against erosion of food security. In the ability of women to resist and fight back on all these fronts, work, employment and income are what has the potential to provide enduring support and also inner and outer strength, as any activist knows. Survivors of violence who are in sustained struggles for justice, inevitably—or at least very often—also put forth their need or demand for employment/income to keep themselves going.

At the same time, we know that in a social structure that is largely premised on women being available for most of each day to look after the needs of their households and family members. These needs constantly inhibit women from asserting their own needs. Women make compromises by often adjusting to very poor quality home-based employment at piece rates and accepting pittance wage rates and incomes for arduous labour in order to be able to combine employment with their daily household chores. And so the denial of employment opportunities for women in a socially restrictive milieu is turned into a personal/domestic crisis of overwork. It is the tragedy of our times that even such poor quality home-based employment is eluding women as the number of days that they are able to access it have shrunk in recent years. With declining work availability, their need compels them to work even longer hours and at a frantic pace in order to extract the maximum income out of the short periods when work is available. Even as poor wage/income rates, unhealthy conditions

of work, defrauding and shortchanging through rejections and non-payment of dues, etc., are among the major issues confronting such home-based workers, most studies show that their principal demand/need in the contemporary moment is for more days of work.

A New Dynamism Among All-Women Classes of Workers

Amidst such an otherwise dismal picture of declining economic opportunities for women, a new dynamism among all-women (or overwhelmingly female) classes of workers in some services has emerged as a significant phenomenon. That such dynamism has emerged from all-women classes of workers at this point in time is interesting in itself, but an equally striking phenomenon is that such dynamism has been routed through the mixed gender trade unions, and has not sought or been sustained by all-women unions or organisations. There can be little doubt that the growth of *sustained* organisational capabilities among women trade unionists and development of women's leadership through and in mixed gender worker organisations is no longer such a rarity.

Foremost actors in this striking phenomenon are *anganwadi* workers and helpers of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS).[24] Employed by the government for supplementary nutrition, immunisation, health check-ups, and referral services to children below six years of age, anganwadi workers and helpers number more than 24 lakh (2,436,336 in 2013) as per the available government records. Officially defined tasks/duties of anganwadi *helpers* include daily cooking and serving food to the children and mothers, cleaning the premises and the children, fetching water and also mobilising and bringing children to the centre.[25] Similarly, anganwadi *workers* are charged with a list of 21 tasks/duties, which importantly include monitoring and recording the growth of each child, pre-school education/development activities, maintaining records of and reporting on child and maternal health indicators and developments to a host of officials and institutions, providing health and education counseling, facilitating immunisation drives, conducting various surveys, etc. For these duties, anganwadi helpers are presently paid a monthly 'honorarium' of ₹1,500 by the central government, and workers are paid ₹3,000.[26] Even this pitiful amount is the outcome of small raises achieved by periodic struggles for better wages

by anganwadi workers' unions over some two-and-a-half decades. Of these workers, approximately half (10–12 lakh) have organised themselves into unions across every state in the country, almost all of which are affiliated with central trade unions of mixed gender.

A second scheme run by the Ministry of Health under the National Health Mission (NHM) uses a cadre of trained female community health activists or 'Accredited Social Health Activist' (ASHA), each catering to a population of 1,000.[27] The tasks/duties of ASHA workers, whose numbers stood at 894,525 in 2014, include being the first port of call for all health related needs/demands of deprived sections of the population, especially women and children; to create awareness on health; to provide a minimum package of elementary curative care and promote good health practices; to provide information to the community on determinants of health such as nutrition, basic sanitation and hygienic practices, healthy living and working conditions and information on existing health services; to monitor the condition of pregnant women and escort them for pre-natal and post natal check-ups and public health institutions equipped for deliveries; to facilitate immunisation, contraception and prevention of common infections including reproductive tract infection/sexually transmitted infections (RTIs/STIs); to counsel on breast-feeding and complementary feeding, and care of the young child; to act as a depot to hold essential provisions to be provided to all habitations—these include oral rehydration therapy (ORS), iron and folic acid tablet (IFA), chloroquine, disposable delivery kits (DDK), oral pills and condoms, among others. In sum, the ASHA is both an elementary healthcare worker as well as a link worker between the established public health care centres/hospitals/administration and the common people. It was only in response to widespread demonstrations by ASHA workers who found themselves actually working for nothing that an 'honorarium' of ₹1,000 per month was introduced. Public ferment among ASHA workers also led to the revised framework for the NHM specifying an objective of providing an income of ₹3,000 to ASHAs through a combination of honorarium and incentives, although, in practice, even this low-level objective is still to be achieved.

A third scheme that employs a large cadre of honorarium-based workers is under the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE), or what is commonly

known as the mid-day meal scheme being implemented in all government primary and upper primary schools. Unlike anganwadi and ASHA workers, the cook-cum-helpers employed under the the mid-day meal scheme (one worker per 25 enrolled children) are not exclusively women. However, given the nature of the task and the paltry 'honorarium' of ₹1,000 per month, and that too for 10 months in a year, it is not surprising that 85 per cent of mid-day meal workers are women. Their designated duties include checking attendance of number of students present, cooking and serving, and cleaning up after. They are selected/appointed/employed by school management committees, and supervised by the staff of the school. In July 2014, parliament was told that 2.57 million cook-cum-helpers were employed under the mid-day meal scheme. So, we can estimate that around 2.2 million women are employed as mid-day meal workers.

The universal characteristic that defines the government's approach to this army of 5 million women is that they are not recognised as workers. Denial of worker/employee status has meant that these workers are deprived of statutory rights to minimum wage, social security, health benefits, and other employment rights. That these millions of workers continued to work for a pittance as wages itself signals the lack of employment opportunities that they otherwise have, their greatest incentive being the regularity of work and guaranteed wages (however low or delayed). This is what the government has been banking on and the fact that such practices are largely reserved for cadres of women reflects tacit knowledge of the employment crisis for women.[28] What is remarkable is that all three categories of so-called women volunteers have actively asserted their identities as workers in unions, and have today become extremely important contingents of the country's trade union movements.

Domestic workers constitute another category of workers who have become feminised as well as proliferated, albeit due to the changes in the private sphere of social organisations of middle class families in urban India rather than government policy. It is indeed a twist of fate that domestication or confinement of women to the domestic sphere of their own households, combined with the prevalence of caste taboos on performing certain tasks, should have laid the social ground for domestic work as a line of employment for women. Today the mass conversion of women into domestic workers has become normalised in an urban milieu of

little or no employment opportunities for women. Many in the contemporary moment have forgotten or may not know of the feelings of degradation through which hundreds of women from artisanal and peasant families (whose sense of dignity was associated with independent employment/craft) made the transition to becoming domestic menials, adding numerical multi-caste ballast to a form of labour that was earlier confined to a few caste groups. Yet, there can be little doubt that over time a section of domestic workers has responded to the emergence of a critical mass of women domestic workers with a new sense of assertion and self-worth. On the one hand, this may be a factor in the negotiating patterns of domestic workers with employers in fixing of wage rates and timings, but it also appears to be feeding an expanding potential of organisation or unionisation more than ever before. The coming period will no doubt show us what direction will be taken by the twin phenomena of the emergence of domestic workers as a distinctive social force in the urban milieu, and the accelerated momentum of their entry into the landscape of labour and labour movements.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

We have long heard the slogan 'there is no alternative' (TINA), made famous through frequent repetition by Margaret Thatcher (Prime Minister of the UK from 1979 to 1990) and endlessly since repeated to justify imposition of neo-liberal policies across the globe. The TINA factor assumed that there could be no alternative to the open market as it was the only system that worked, and which required progressive dismantling of job protection, labour rights, and the welfare measures and institutions that had been put in place over the major part of the 20th century. Yet clearly the protracted recessive conditions in the economy at a global and national level since the financial crisis of 2007–8, and the periodic bursting of several bubbles before, has been telling us for some time that the free market economy is rotting from within. Rampant unemployment, enhanced social inequalities, and simmering social conflicts that are ever ready to explode into violence, have become universal features of the neo-liberal era, as have unending wars that have left no part of the world completely untouched.

What is clear, however, is that alternative policies that can address the problems that have been spawned by neo-liberal policies, including our own gendered employment crisis, can no longer be sought in historical precedents or models, although the 20th century had thrown up many models where unemployment was eradicated. The political survival of such models was a different story, and with the collapse of the political regimes of most of the socialist countries, followed by the robbing and dismantling of socialist institutions, such alternative models carry less traction with the popular imagination. Yet, it is possible to argue that the process and practice of building a movement placing employment and women's right to work at its centre, will throw up demands and measures upon which an alternative policy framework can be built.

Notes

[1] Since 1991, following the neo-liberal turn in policy, there has been far deeper penetration of markets into previously untouched areas and spheres of life. After 1991, the first of the larger employment survey rounds by the NSSO was in 1993–94, which has since provided a benchmark for evaluation of trends under liberalisation.

[2] The data is only up to 2011–12 because of the unfortunate situation that although decisions were taken to conduct more frequent and up-to-date employment surveys by the NSSO, rather than every five years, none have been conducted since 2011–12. So now we have neither the quinquennial survey nor any other, and more than five years have elapsed since the last round. At the time of writing, no new employment survey had been conducted by the NSSO or was yet in progress. One wonders whether the establishment has lost interest in gathering any further information on the employment situation in India.

[3] According to NSSO definitions, the activity on which a person spent a relatively long time (i.e., major time criterion) during the 365 days preceding the date of survey defines the 'usual principal activity status' (UPS) of the person. Along with principal status activity (which may include only domestic duties), a person may be also simultaneously pursuing another economic activity (any economic activity) for a relatively shorter time in a subsidiary capacity. This latter activity was considered as his/her subsidiary economic activity, referred to as 'usual subsidiary economic activity status'. To best capture women's work, the combination of principal and subsidiary status employment referred to as 'usual principal plus subsidiary status' (UPSS) is what is generally used.

[4] Neetha has used unit level data for her analysis, which has brought out more aspects than do the NSSO reports on *Employment and Unemployment Situation Among Social Groups In India* that are available for 1993–94, 1999–2000, 2009–10 and 2011–12.

[5] One indicator of the persistence of disadvantage experienced by SC and ST communities is their relatively greater proportions in the rural populations and lower proportions in urban populations. According to the 2011 census, STs constituted 11.3 per cent of India's rural population, and barely 2.8 per cent of the urban. SCs constituted 18.5 per cent of the rural population, but only 12.6 per cent of the urban. Further, despite reservation (quotas) for both groups in education, gross enrolment ratios (GER) in higher education, which is calculated as the percentage of students in higher education (of all ages) among the 18–23 age group of the population, shows that relatively less proportions of young people from SC and ST communities make it to higher education. For

the SC population, GER was 19.9 per cent, and for STs, 14.2 per cent, as compared to the national GER of 24.5 per cent (inclusive of all social groups) in 2015–16. See *All India Survey on Higher Education (2015-16)*, Ministry of Human Resources and Development, Department of Higher Education, New Delhi < http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/statistics/AISHE2015-16.pdf>.

[6] Scheduled Castes constituted 16.6 per cent of India's population in the 2011 census, and STs another 8.2 per cent. OBCs are not counted in the census, but are included as a separate category in the NSSO surveys since 1999–2000. NSSO estimates suggest that OBCs constituted 43.1 per cent of the country's population in 2011–12.

[7] The issue of Muslim marginalisation in India became a national issue after 2006, following the publication of a Report on Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India (Sachar Committee Report). The Committee showed that literacy rates among Muslims was lower than the national average, unemployment rates were higher than all other social groups, poverty among Muslims was far greater than among upper caste or OBC communities, and close enough to the situation of SCs and STs to merit a comparison. With a population of 183 million Muslims, India has the second largest population of Muslims in the world (next to Indonesia, and more than Pakistan and Bangladesh), but they still constituted just 14.2 per cent of India's population in 2011.

[8] It should be borne in mind that NSSO surveys provide fairly good aggregate estimates, but cannot really provide a good picture of smaller communities. So the situation of large minorities may be captured.

[9] Muslims may be considered as a special group in Neetha's table, and it is important to remember that they include all their internal hierarchies as well.

[10] An improved situation among upper caste urban women is no doubt because of their longstanding *commanding position* in the urban populace and in urban social networks. Already in 1999–2000, more than half the urban population was upper caste. Even though this share had dropped to 41 per cent by 2011–12, with other social groups migrating to urban areas in larger numbers, in rural populations the share of upper castes continued to decline from 31 per cent in 1999–2000 to 23 per cent in 2011–12.

[11] See NSS Report No. 563(68/10/.

[12] It is important to bear in mind that although regular work in NSSO does not imply permanency of employment or security of service, it does suggest sustained employment with regular monthly incomes (however low the incomes might be), rather than daily wage uncertainties that casual workers face.

[13] Emulation of upper caste traditions (Sanskritisation) has long been as a part of the search for status among other caste groups as well. Such emulation had earlier led to the imposition of restrictions on women's employment among caste groups seeking status through adoption of upper caste traditions. In the present moment, such emulation can be expected to continue with more women from other caste groups now increasingly finding status and social advancement through entering employment.

[14] Yet, the changes in Muslim women's work participation rates are so marginal that it could be argued that stagnation rather than decline is the trend in Muslim women's employment.

[15] Home-based workers constituted just short of 32 per cent of the female non-agricultural workforce in 2011–12, which is almost three times the 11 per cent share of home-based workers in the male non-agricultural workforce that same year.

[16] The beedi industry as we know it actually commenced at the beginning of the 20th century (1902), but the very idea of leaf-wrapped tobacco smoke developed in the late 19th century.

[17] For example, between 2009 and 2010, the states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Kerala reduced their beedi workforce by some 6 lakh, while in West Bengal the number increased by about 7 lakh.

[18] In the states of Jharkhand, UP, Bihar and Uttarakhand, the average monthly earnings were even lower—less than ₹2,000 per month.

[19] It is well known that tailoring in India was earlier an exclusively male profession, although development programmes for women by the social welfare institutions of the early years after independence, to the mahila mandals of the 1960s, and through the several vocational training programmes for women in later decades (which generally included some training in stitching and a sewing machine), all promoted the idea that the vocation of stitching/tailoring, as such, suited femininity.

[20] Unni Jeemol and Suma Scaria, (July 2009), "Governance Structure and Labour Market Outcomes in Garment Embellishment Chains", Working Paper no. 194, (Ahmedabad: Gujarat Institute of Development Research). The

embellishment here largely refers to the stitching on of sequins/beads, which is an activity that, unlike embroidery, has not seen mechanisation.

[21] Mahadevia D. *et al*, 'Home Based Workers in Ahmedabad, India: A City Report', WIEGO IEMS study, 2013

[22] According to census 2011, the non-agricultural workforce comprised 50.1 per cent of all male workers and 34.9 per cent of all female workers.

[23] Women accounted for 56 per cent of workdays under MGNREGS in 2016–17.

[24] The ICDS, which provides supplementary nutrition and pre-school education through a network of anganwadis established per 800–1,000 population for the 0–6 age group, was initiated in 1975 and initially covered a limited area, but has since spread across the country. It was a flagship central scheme for the government of that time. Under the present regime, the financing of the scheme has been partly transferred to the state governments.

[25] In the early stages of ICDS, helpers were largely illiterate, but in more recent years, literacy is being considered as a necessary qualification for selection.

[26] Over the years, state governments have been using the anganwadi workers for several additional tasks, and under pressure from unions, almost all state governments have been compelled to supplement the central honorarium. This supplementary amount varies across states, but still does not raise the salary to more than the equivalent of $2 a day for the most part, and even where it is slightly more, certainly remains below the statutory minimum wage.

[27] Initiated for rural areas as the National Rural Health Mission in 2005–6, with the inclusion of urban areas it has been renamed the National Health Mission.

[28] Of course, this regularity and wage guarantee is today under great threat from the government through budget cuts and attempts to transfer the central government's financial commitments for these schemes to states without necessarily ensuring concomitant transfers of funds.

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