



WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT Work in Progress



*Edited by
Pamela Philipose and Aditi Bishnoi*

Cover photographs: Amit Thavaraj (above) and Sarada Lahangir

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Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	v
<i>About the Contributors</i>	vii
<i>Editors/Partner Organisations</i>	ix
Overview	
Women's work: Vital but Still Invisible and Underpaid	1
Section 1	
Seizing every Opportunity, Sizing every Situation	7
Section 2	
Hanging on in Hard Times: Workers' Rights and Wrongs	49
Section 3	
Moving in Circles or Moving Forward?	109
Section 4	
Finding Voices, Making Breakthrough	163
<i>Selected FES Publications</i>	199

Foreword >>

Recognition for the scope and worth of women's work has been a long time in coming. The old adage, "a woman's work is never done", reflects the drudgery, monotony and unaccounted nature of the work women do within the home. But if the value of this work was largely unacknowledged, a similar treatment seems to have been accorded to the work women do outside the home. As economist Dr Padmini Swaminathan observes in her Overview, women and their 'work' either becomes invisible in data systems or gets captured in categories that fall outside the purview of protective legislation. This, despite the fact that several national surveys have attempted to highlight the economic and social value of women's work – Towards Equality Report (1974) and the Shramshakti Report (1988) are two sterling examples of such documents. More recently, the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (2007), chaired by noted economist Arjun Sengupta, has noted that women constitute 32.3 per cent of workers in the unorganised sector, and that nearly half of them – around 80 million – are involved in home-based occupations. This data indicates the extremely variegated and complex nature of the activities women undertake in the nature of work.

Women's Feature Service (WFS), in collaboration with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, embarked upon a project to map the vast terrain of women's employment in India – not in an academic manner but through readable journalistic accounts from across the country. This book emanates from that process. While the majority of these features focus on urban realities, there are some extremely interesting accounts from rural India as well. Together these stories plot transformations of various kinds. What does it mean, for instance, when a woman sweeper in a railway station becomes a porter? Do assumptions of masculinity undergo a change in the process? What consequences emerge when women migrate on their own for employment – both for themselves and their families? Does the fact that women professionals today choose not to follow their husbands when they are transferred to other cities and countries because they value their own jobs at home, reflect new family dynamics in urban

India? The questions that these stories raise are as numerous as they are intriguing.

The book is laid out in four distinct sections. The first, *Seizing Every Opportunity, Sizing Every Situation*, captures the various professional choices women make, including the desire to be taxi drivers. In the second section, *Hanging On In Hard Times: Worker's Rights and Wrongs*, there are graphic accounts of the manner in which women are routinely deprived of a fair wage and good working conditions. It is well known that one of the major reasons for female migration in India is marriage, but there is a small yet significant proportion of women who are migrating for work. The third section in this book, *Moving in Circles or Moving Forward? Women and Migration*, unearths the promise and tribulation of such mobility. Finally, *Finding Voices, Making Breakthrough*, looks at some innovative ways in which women's potential for income generation has been unleashed.

Each piece in this book attempts to bring to the reader the realities on the ground through the voices of women workers themselves. The words they use often express their traumas and tribulations, but there are also words of hope and courage that speak of the will to change destinies.

In order to facilitate discussions on crucial issues related to the development process in India, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) has published several books and papers of which this publication is a part. Within the overall gender approach the Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality Project of FES India aims at the economic and political empowerment of women. Facilitating workshops and roundtables, action-based research and publications are an integral part of this work.

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About the Contributors >>

Pushpa Achanta, an engineer by training who now lives in Bengaluru, writes extensively on issues of rights and development.

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Editors >>

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Partner Organisations >>

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is a private cultural non-profit institution committed to the ideals and basic values of social democracy. It was founded in 1925 as a political legacy of Friedrich Ebert, the first democratically elected President of Germany, with the aim of furthering political and social education of individuals from all walks of life in the spirit of democracy and pluralism. The India office of FES works with policy makers, academic and research organisations, trade unions, and NGOs.

Women's Feature Service (WFS) is a non-profit media organisation specialising in gender and development issues (www.wfsnews.org). It produces over 300 articles for the media annually, building awareness about women's lives, rights and issues. Recognising that public policy is made by individuals and institutions, in and outside governments, WFS also makes its work available to varied audiences. In addition, it partners national and international agencies to highlight issues of current concern.



Overview >>

Women's work: Vital but Still Invisible and Underpaid



Overview >>

Women's Work: Vital But Still Invisible and Underpaid

Padmini Swaminathan

A remarkable 'achievement' of economic 'development' in post-Independent India has been, not just the growth of the informal sector and of those being employed informally, but also the phenomenon of 'informalisation of the formal sector'.

What is also truly remarkable is the consistent manner in which disproportionately larger numbers of women and their 'work' either become invisible in data systems or get captured in categories that fall outside the purview of protective legislation. Over the years, official documents such as the Towards Equality Report, the Shramshakti Report, the Report of the Time Use Survey – to mention the more important ones – have traced the trajectory of the simultaneous exclusion and (peripheral) inclusion of women in paid work even as the enormous time spent in unpaid – not to be equated with unproductive – work was shown to sustain not just the household but also the country's economy.

These documents strongly recommended, among other things, the enactment of new laws, the modification and expansion of coverage of existing laws and the stringent implementation of all laws in the spirit of enhancing the status of marginalised women, so that they can move from being non/second class citizens to persons with full citizenship rights. In the process, they laid bare the continuing disjunction between development processes that expressly require the contribution of women in both their productive and reproductive roles and institutions, including legal ones, that were set up to regulate development outcomes.

In 2004-05, of the 148 million women workers in the Indian economy, 142 million – or almost 96 per cent – were unorganised workers. This

included 91 per cent of women workers in the unorganised sector plus those working informally in the organised sector. In terms of status of employment, the bulk of unorganised sector employment is self-employment followed by casual employment. The self-employed category consists of own account workers, employers and unpaid family workers. Statistics reveal a decline in the proportion of own account workers and employers but an increase in the share of unpaid family workers.

That in 2004-05, the bulk of women workers should still overwhelmingly belong to the self-employed category and also dominate the 'unpaid family workers' category within the category of self-employed, is a telling comment on how 'India Shining' has not only bypassed women but is actually overburdening the bulk of them while not compensating them adequately.

Literacy has an intrinsic relationship with employment. An analysis of literacy levels of the 'worker' population for 2001 revealed a disturbing contrast between male and female workers. While almost 71 per cent of male workers were literate, the corresponding figure for women was only 36 per cent. In other words, while 'development' may have increased the work participation rate for females, it did not get translated into a greater proportion of literate women becoming workers, as had happened in the case of men. This national picture of relatively greater illiteracy among the female worker population was repeated even in socially and economically developed states such as Tamil Nadu.

The debates among feminists and women's studies scholars around issues of relatively larger numbers of women workers being crowded in low paying jobs and in tasks designated as 'unskilled', need to also factor in the question why employment and education were moving in opposite directions as far as women were concerned.

Also to be noted is the proportion of population returned as 'non-workers' and the proportion of 'literate non-workers' among males

and females. For the country as a whole, 48 per cent of males had been returned as 'non-workers' against 74 per cent for females. The urban areas had a larger proportion of population categorised as 'non-workers' when compared to the rural areas. However, unlike in the case of males, the rates of literacy for female 'non-workers' were higher than the rates of literacy for females in the population in general. This was the case in both rural and urban areas.

The same held true for states such as Tamil Nadu, underlining the phenomena that social and economic development were not necessarily gender just. Despite the fact that Tamil Nadu revealed 'higher than national level' work participation rates for females, these rates were still far below the rates obtaining for males. Further, the rising levels of female literacy in the southern state were not reflected in the literacy levels of the worker population.

This, then, clearly demonstrates that 'development' has not been able to reverse the trend of literacy and employment moving in opposite directions for females, both at the national level as indeed in states whose economic and social indicators of development are better than the national figures.

Even legislation has not helped. An important law in post-Independent India is The Maternity Benefit [MB] Act, 1961. Over the years, the Courts have had to deal with several cases from aggrieved women workers who have alleged the denial of benefits under this Act despite, according to them, being eligible for them. I conducted a content analysis of a few cases filed for relief under this Act to help comprehend, among other concerns, the categories of workers who had been so denied, or given less than entitled benefits; the nature of establishments that denied such benefits; the reasons cited by establishments for denying benefits and the reasons for the Courts' acceptance or rejection of arguments by employers/petitioners.

The larger question that the exercise evaluated was the oft-repeated argument that India had the necessary laws but they were poorly

implemented. The ways, for instance, in which women employed by state governments had been excluded from provisions of the Maternity Benefit Act were several and varied. For one, contrary to all norms of justice, the State had employed women workers but used nomenclatures such as daily, ad hoc, casual, and so on, and then justified the denial of maternity benefit on the grounds that even the amended Maternity Benefit Act applied only to regular and temporary workers, not those termed as casual, daily or ad hoc. Two, while recruitments had followed set procedures, appointment letters had been arbitrarily changed to render the woman employee ineligible for any benefit, maternity or otherwise. Three, when the Supreme Court came down heavily on state governments for denying maternity benefits to women employees in this way, the bureaucracy came up with other ways of making them ineligible, namely, by citing that women employees on consolidated mode of payment of salary were not eligible for benefit under the Act.

It is against this background that the contribution of feminists and gender studies to macroeconomics needs to be recognised. They have questioned the assumptions on which economic policies were anchored, the methodologies that limited an understanding of economic problems, and the solutions that macroeconomics uncritically offered. Nevertheless, the relegation of gender to the social at one level, and the anxiety of feminist researchers – including feminist economists – to be seen as ‘practically relevant’ all the time, at another level, was one small example of the continuing tensions that keep surfacing. This was largely also because macroeconomic policies have failed in their basic objectives but those who propound them have no qualms in transferring these failures to the ‘social sector’ – a euphemism for considering all these problems as ‘women’s issues’.

How feminists continue to engage with this concern is a never-ending and ongoing challenge.

Section I >>

Seizing every Opportunity, Sizing every Situation



Takes More than Courage to Scale Corporate Ladders

Smitha Sadanandan

Imagine a life filled with music and holidays, a loving and supportive family, understanding peers, an accommodating boss, good friends and a rewarding career in a wholesome work environment – basically every working woman's dream.

Well, with determination, organising skills and the support of a few dependable people – including helpful family members – the myth that women cannot have both a family and a career can be firmly laid to rest. In Gurgaon, Haryana's boom city that has relentlessly worked to shed its rough-and-tumble image to become one of India's key offshore and outsourcing hubs, that is exactly what women professionals have been doing.

If "brand image, women-friendly policies, growth prospects and a safe work environment" prompted Heera Pratap, 32, to take up her position as a manager with a Multi-National Company (MNC) in Gurgaon, Preeti Snehi, 40, a manager with another MNC here, chose her job for the "challenge" and the "work-life balance" it offered.

"I wanted to have a successful career and yet be able to spend enough time with my family. In my job, there is neither any undue pressure on me nor do I need to put in any extended working hours. However, when the need arises to wrap up some urgent work, each one of us in the office considers it our vital responsibility to do whatever it takes to finish the task and prevent delays," said Snehi. "Some of us, depending on the job profile, also have the flexibility of working from home at times," she added. For both Pratap and Snehi living near their work place enabled them to become efficient multi-taskers.

Women have proven that they can handle work pressure, besides exhibiting a strong sense of professionalism. In fact, Noida

(Uttar Pradesh)-based Roma Nawani Sachdev, working as a general manager for the Gurgaon-based IBM Daksh, listed professionalism and constant skill-enhancement as the essential elements for any long-term career. While she loved her job in corporate communications and was happy working in an environment that instilled in her a “joy of accomplishment”, Sachdev had to reckon with a one-hour commute to work every day. But she would not allow this to become an excuse for making a late appearance. “I reach on time because very often my day begins quite early. With my job comes a certain set of responsibilities and I do not shy away from them,” she said.

Time was of the essence for Delhi-based Swati Sehrawat, 27, an assistant manager with a multinational bank in Gurgaon, too. However, this “punctuality driven person” admitted that at times her plans went awry due to traffic snarls during the 90-minute commute each morning from her home in Delhi. “If I reach office late, I end up having to hurry through my work. This further upsets all the activities I have planned for the day,” she rued.

Since family demands are known to be even more of a factor in shaping a woman’s career than that of a man’s, it was not at all surprising when many office-going women spoke of being stretched to the limit if they did not have additional help. Most of Gurgaon’s career women interviewed acknowledged they could not have made it without some form of familial support. Most often there was a mother or mother-in-law who pitched in with household chores, and a domestic helper who ran errands and cooked. In fact, Sehrawat saw her husband’s mother as a constant source of support, despite the ubiquitous stereotype of the difficult mother-in-law. “I get a lot of help from my family members and colleagues in office,” she said.

For those who had children, their day began with navigating through a maze of responsibilities. For them, it was a race against time to get the household chores done, prepare the child – or children – for school, and rush off to office. Success on the home turf depended

on how able a manager she turned out to be. Of course, again, none of this would have been possible without the family pitching in.

"One needs a 360-degree support system," explained Sujata Reddy (name changed), 29, a Human Resource professional with a leading MNC. "I cannot travel and do late night shifts; I have a son and he is totally dependent on me. My in-laws stay with us, so I can count on them to take care of him," she added. But whenever her little boy falls ill, Reddy and her husband take turns to stay at home. "It is all about getting your priorities right in life," she observed.

Those looking for the perfect work-life balance depended heavily on efficient time management although commuting ended up taking a lot of their time. It was a little easier for the ones residing in Gurgaon, but the daily commute for women coming in from Delhi or Noida was killing. Some used their own vehicles, others office-provided cabs, but the traffic ensured that, on an average, at least four to five hours were spent on the road. The metro, when it came to Gurgaon around 2010, certainly made things easier for some, but it was also exhausting to have to use different modes of transport to reach the workplace.

Many of the women interviewed clarified that because of their considerable responsibilities at home, they would have liked a little bit of flexibility in choosing their working hours, even though they were prepared to work for the same length of time. Some were lucky to have bosses who understood this. Reddy's manager accommodated to the occasional late arrival, caused by a doctor's visit or a parent-teacher meeting. "Of course, I knew I had to deliver the job at a given time, there were no allowances made for my gender. All I needed was a little bit of understanding and some capacity for adjustment," she said.

Over the last few years, multinationals operating out of India such as IBM, American Express, HSBC, Genpact, Accenture, PWC, Agilent and TCS, among others, have hired an increasing number of women.

Consequently, many have adopted multi-pronged programmes and initiatives aimed at empowering women employees to play key roles “in the growth and development of the organisation.”

While all this may project a rosy picture of the work scenario for women in hubs like Gurgaon, the reality may be a tad more complex. It is a fact that women at the higher echelons of the corporate ladder are finding the scenario changing for the better. “Companies are not gender-biased anymore,” remarked Mukul Moghe (name changed), 34, a manager with an MNC in Manesar, Haryana. “Men neither feel insecure about working with women nor have problems reporting to bosses who are women. My boss, who is a lady, is highly knowledgeable and competent. She has been very understanding whenever I required time off for domestic emergencies,” he said. At the same time, Moghe felt that a similar level of understanding was not easily forthcoming from men. He added, “High-pressure roles also involve late nights, which are difficult to manage for a woman with a family. Because of this, there is a general perception that companies avoid employing women for such roles.”

Insiders, however, also felt that managements were coming under greater pressure to maintain ‘diversity’ in the team, so the number of women professionals was only going to grow in the future. But the more things change, the more they remain the same. A woman’s ability to achieve her full potential as a corporate professional is still crucially dependent on the support system she manages to put in place.

Professional Choices Independently Made

Amrita Nandy

When men move for work it is taken for granted that their wives would follow them, even at the cost of disrupting their own careers. Defying this age-old norm is a small but increasing number of women.

Days after the wedding, as her husband left for London and his parents returned to their home in Bengaluru, the bride, 25-year-old Vidhu, followed neither party. Instead, she moved into her parents' house in Gurgaon, where an exciting job as a human resource specialist with a large private company awaited her. Her 'unique' situation puzzled many at her workplace. Vidhu put it this way, "Just because I was living away from my husband even after eight months of marriage, I was asked by a male colleague if my marriage was okay. It seemed inconceivable to people that as a wife I chose not to follow the man!"

In the Indian work-marriage-family setting, Vidhu, a highly skilled, well-paid woman who migrates for her own career, is an anomaly. Data from the Census and National Sample Survey (NSS) acknowledges that migration by women 'national' and international, has risen. As per the 64th NSS report, the most prominent cause for female migration is marriage: for 91 per cent of rural and 61 per cent of urban migrants.

A caveat may be that all married women's migration is being classified as "marriage-related". A study by the Centre for Women's Development Studies, a Delhi-based autonomous research institute, covering 5,000 individual migrants and their households across 20 states, also underlines that marriage-related female migration has increased.

Most female migrants are generally poor 'solo' workers in search of better employment or those who follow their migrant husbands

or relatives. Ritoo (name changed), 34, is a textbook case. As a young bride, she shifted to Delhi from a village in Uttarakhand. An alcoholic husband, abusive marriage, four children and decades of factory work later, Ritoo ventured into sex work in Delhi's 'hotspots'. Later, with the help of an 'agent' she went off to work in brothels in Malaysia and Singapore. During a telephonic chat from Malaysia, she admitted, "Working away from Delhi is good. Even if I land in trouble, my family won't come to know about my work. So I don't mind being here for a few months every year. I earn good money for my four children, including three daughters. But I don't come here just for money... I finally have someone here who truly loves me!"

As a single parent and an only breadwinner, Ritoo earned her family's regard for saving them from financial destitution and being a 'good mother'. Yet, in the case of married, well-heeled women like Vidhu, the need to earn and stay away may be seen as superfluous and a defiance of social norms by some. The subtext that underpins the question directed at Vidhu by her colleague was: if it is not for money, why work, and live away?

Middle/upper-middle class women professionals, who live apart from their husbands (and children, if any) push the boundaries of an old, explosive debate and its usual narratives on gender roles, agency and autonomy. Madiha Ali (name changed), 50, is a global meeting planner, who facilitates large conferences and seminars for pharmaceutical companies. Although not a migrant per se, Madiha has travelled for nearly two to three weeks every month for more than 20-odd years of her working life. In 2011, for instance, she travelled to several destinations, including Morocco, Paris, Barcelona, Denmark and Turkey. "My need to work is beyond money; it is about my independence and to realise my potential to the fullest. Some of my friends in India used to say that a wife's place is in the house, not outside. I think men and women are equal and both can be providers. When I travel, my current husband cooks and goes grocery shopping. When he is

busy, I perform these chores. If roles are flexible, women's lives can be enriched," remarked Madiha, whose former husband did not approve of her hectic travel schedule.

Despite all the excitement about girls' education and women's independence, the question whether their professional aspirations can coexist with marriage has always been a hypothetical one. Often, the marital household runs on the traditional division of functions, untouched by calls for elasticity of roles and autonomy.

Having spent more than a year juggling between her duties in her marital home in Ranchi, Jharkhand, and her workplace in Patna, Bihar's state capital, Aradhna (name changed), 45, a self-confessed 'feminist', came to the conclusion that it is "not easy" to find the balance. "From expecting me to be a housewife to respecting my work, my husband's attitude has changed. Yet, when I go home on a holiday, the curtains are kept aside for me to wash, among other 'womanly' chores," she revealed. Vidhu recalled that some of her MBA batchmates who had married rich businessmen could not work because a 'working woman' did not fit into these families' socio-cultural schema.

As someone who helps highly skilled women professionals with employment and training, Sairee Chahal, co-founder, Fleximoms, an online job platform for mothers seeking flexible employment, expressed her "disappointment" at young women's reluctance towards careers. She commented, "They are keen to comply with traditional notions of womanhood. Some reject great job opportunities because it may upset their husbands!"

Based on her research on women professionals of the Indian Information Technology (IT) industry, Dr Jyothsna Belliappa, author of *Gender, Class and Reflexive Modernity in India* (Palgrave-Macmillan), found that, "At a certain position, travel becomes important especially if you lead a multi-site team. So women choose roles in accordance with the support structures at home, which they have to create for themselves."

The pressure to conform to conventional roles of a married woman/mother – mainly caregiving and household activities – arises not just from esoteric cultural codes but from official policies of the State as well. Following the recommendations of the 6th Central Pay Commission in 2008, the Government initiated the (paid) Child Care Leave (CCL) directed only at mothers. It grants leave “for a maximum of two years...for taking care of up to two children whether for rearing or to look after any of their needs like examinations, illnesses, etc.” Supriya (name changed), 43, availed of this leave frequently while she was coping with her transfer from Chennai to Delhi. Thankful for the leave, she said, “In my absence, my eight-year-old son lives with his grandparents. My husband visits him every evening to teach him. Everybody had to adjust. This is not ideal.”

While such leave is certainly beneficial, it does not subvert the norm of the woman as the exclusive caregiver but instead perpetuates it unquestioningly. Anjali Sinha of Stree Mukti Sangathan put forth some valid concerns, “Can fathers not look after their kids? Why are they exempt from this leave? And why the silence on caregiving for the elderly? Instead of further burdening working women, the government should create better social support systems such as crèches and anganwadis.” Meanwhile, many state governments have introduced the CCL for women.

Really, what is the big fuss about seeing Mummy as an autonomous being, just as Papa is? There are scores of fairness creams and detergents for a woman to choose from, but for her own life, there’s just the same old, prescriptive homemaker cutout, airbrushed from time-to-time. For all her other aspirations, a woman gets them “at her own risk” of self-doubt, guilt, stress and the embarrassment of non-conformity.

What Does it Take To Be a Woman Engineer?

Sreelekha Nair

“During our time, umpteen choices were not available like they are today... engineering to my father and me was personified in the form of the civil engineer who had come to build the bridge across the river in our village. We did not know that all engineers are not specialists in building bridges (Laughter) ... Basically, [it was] after two or three years in college, when I had to go to into the field for work, that my teachers told me to opt for Electrical Engineering. I was the only girl interested in Civil (Engineering)...”

That was the 1960s and Annapurna (name changed), 68, who retired as Chief Engineer of the Kerala State Electricity Board, was not the only youngster of her generation who thought that engineers were only those who built bridges.

Many young women then seemed to be stuck with the image of “that man who came to build bridges”. It was an overtly masculine yet ‘gender neutral’ concept. Those who entered the field adjusted to the prevalent situation and practices. It never crossed their minds that they could not cope with the demands of the profession. What they were slightly conscious of was the fact that they did not have many female colleagues.

Times, however, are quite different now. There is a considerable change in the way the profession is imagined and understood. Quite literally a lot of water has flown under the bridge that the engineer in Annapurna’s village had built in the early 1960s. But the answer to the question about the change in the image of engineering is a complex one, intertwined with the history of the evolution of the profession in terms of its disciplinary growth, diversification and popularity among female students. The answer to the question is also closely connected to the one sided linkage between the technical and social as well as the prevalent notions of ‘physicality’ and ‘strength’ associated with the masculine, as opposed to the ‘nimbleness’ and ‘weakness’ that is linked to the feminine.

So, what has changed? The fact is that engineers are no longer only seen as those who 'climb the post' and 'build bridges'. The proliferation of disciplines such as Information Technology and Computer Engineering has allowed for the wider participation of women in the profession than ever before. The association of physical strength with the profession remains, but the argument about the innate intellectual inferiority of women is now never made. It seems that the latter notion can no longer be a justification for the exclusion of women and is almost completely absent in the Indian scenario.

But certainly the distinction between those fields in engineering that demand 'strength' and those that don't, remains. And although there has been an undoubted shift in the way the profession is perceived, the basic idea of an engineer as a person who is "associated with buildings and telephones and automobiles" remains, according to Prof. Jyothi Sankaran, Head and Professor of Chemical Engineering Department at TKM College of Engineering, Kollam, Kerala.

Sankaran, who did her Bachelors in Chemical Engineering from the University of Calicut (1975-1979), believes that the gendering of disciplines is in accordance with the demands of the practical work in the field. She categorises Chemical Engineering – her area of expertise – as a discipline that imposes some restrictions on the women who practice it. Going up the flare stack to check for unwanted gas in the field of pollution control can be very exhausting for women, according to her. Therefore, as is the case in the rest of the world, women chemical engineers in India, too, tend to spend more of their lives as chemists and in pharmaceutical industries. In fact, defining a separate labour market for themselves has been an escape route for women globally.

Barring women from working at night has also acted as legal enforcement for the restrictions placed on the participation of women engineers in chemical industries. Said Sankaran, "I have been part of the annual inspection team constituted by the Kerala

Pollution Control Board as an academic nominee. The team has to inspect, report and suggest remedial measures for pollution and waste in institutions such as hospitals and industries of various kinds, like rubber processing, spices, pharmaceuticals, textiles, and so on. I have been associated with this work from 2003 onwards, albeit on alternate years, and have found that the five-member committee has always been made up of men. I have been the only woman on it, except for the last three times. Nevertheless, the other members have been accommodating and I had an excellent experience working with them, both personally and professionally... I never felt like I am a woman... And, in any case, I can [comfortably] walk into the Mechanical Department and be at ease with the [male] teachers there... I behave like a man there...and they cannot exclude me saying that I am a woman..."

This brings us to the question: is engineering really acting as a gender bender? Prof. Sankaran thought of herself as a man – a sign of success in engineering – while Annapurna chose to wear a high-necked blouse with long sleeves and a white sari in order to neutralise the (overt) differences in gender between her and her fellow male workers, especially the workmen whom she had to supervise.

But why do women feel the need to 'be men' in order to prove that they are good in their work? This is not a dilemma confined to just professional women engineers in Kerala or elsewhere in India; this predicament is a universal one. The difference between various countries is only a matter of degree. The evolution of the relationship between gender and engineering has been similar in the US as it has been in India, despite the fact that many women in the US had, in fact, entered a 'clearly male' field like mining early in the history of the profession. The concept of professionalism in the US or elsewhere is not just a question of a border dispute with other disciplines, but is in inverse proportion to women's presence in the field.

In a study that the US-based academic Ruth Oldenziel did in 1994, she found that the more professionalised a field was, the lesser was

the number of women who entered it. Similar was the case with membership to professional associations.

So, clearly, gender and engineering in India has followed the same path as it has in many other countries. The introduction of newer disciplines may have encouraged women to enter them, but these specialisations are limited in terms of their growth.

To assess the participation of women in engineering as a discipline, therefore, would necessarily mean having to assess as a whole their participation in various branches of the profession. Going by that measure, engineering continues to reflect the broader reality of unequal gender relations in society. It could be a long while before real equality comes to mark its presence.

Business Acumen, Home Made

Azera Parveen Rahman

Varanasi-based Sangya Pandey, a homemaker and mother-of-three, was a very busy woman. The hours preceding meal times were the most hectic as the kitchen became the epicentre of furious activity: vegetables being chopped and pots of curry being stirred in sync with hot rotis being turned over on the skillet. Day-after-day, Pandey made these items to be served to eager and hungry family members? No, and here's the twist, Pandey produced all this delicious home-cooked fare, not for her own family, but for guests at a five-star hotel.

Be it cooking 'homely' meals, fashioning gourmet chocolates, teaching crafts like glass painting and candle-making or expertly designing clothes, homemakers have scaled up the activities they always enjoyed doing in their routine lives to discover a vocation. In the process, these talented women not only gained financial independence but got to ride a new wave of confidence and self worth.

Pandey was among the growing tribe of housewives-turned-chefs that the Gateway Hotels and Resorts of the Taj group had taken into its fold in order to cater to the latest addition on their vast menu: home-cooked food, or *ghar ka khana*. Even as it spelt comfort for the body and soul to the weary traveller, the fact was that these five-star meals were probably the most authentic representation of local cuisine, prepared by local homemakers. "The only difference between cooking at home and cooking for hotel guests is that I have to cook slightly larger portions," revealed Pandey, one of the two housewife-chefs at the Varanasi property of the hotel group in 2013.

Pandey specialised in Saatvik food, a form of pure vegetarian cuisine that is devoid of garlic and onion. "I come to the hotel at around noon, after doing my household chores, and start preparing for lunch in a separate kitchen. I choose what I want to make, depending on the availability of seasonal vegetables.

In winters, I make items like gobhi matar, kadi pakodi and aloo methi. In summers, the menu changes,” she said, adding that she was happy to accommodate special requests from guests, even if they were not on her menu.

According to Natarajan Kulandai, the corporate chef of the Gateway Hotels, 19 housewife-chefs, who were working across their 22 properties, whipped up 17 different cuisines and they all were a huge hit with the guests.

If five-star guests were enjoying Pandey’s food, students living far from home in the national capital were devouring Sarika Khan’s specialties. Said Khan, a homemaker from Bhopal, living in Delhi, “I remember my brother, a former Delhi University student, used to often call up my mother and complain about the food. He missed her home-cooked meals terribly.”

After her marriage, when Khan came to Delhi, she thought it would be a great idea to turn out a small-scale ‘tiffin’ service for out-of-station students. “The idea was to give them an as-close-to-home kind of feeling through healthy and tasty food at decent prices because students live on a tight budget,” she recalled.

Happy with the response to her ‘tiffin’ service, she was catering to 10 students. Khan said that it also helped that the money she made from her cooking supplemented the family income. Her husband’s salary was a modest Rs 30,000, and she managed to save around Rs 15,000 every month through this effort. “It is difficult to sustain the family on one person’s salary in a big city like Delhi. For a homemaker like me, such an initiative is also a confidence booster because not only am I managing things at home, I am also able to take care of some expenses and be economically independent,” she explained.

While the reasons behind their decision to start a small business were not always driven by financial concerns, money did play a major role.

However, most home-bred women entrepreneurs declared that they also felt empowered and confident in the process.

Take Meerut-based Monica Katula. Well-known in her circle for making delectable chocolates, her 'work' made her feel great about herself. The 37 year-old, mother of three had always enjoyed baking and an urge to learn new things made her enrol for a short-term chocolate-making course. "Ever since then I have regaled my family and friends with my creations," said Katula. Married for 15 years, the turning point came when she decided to send a box of her homemade chocolates to her nephew as a birthday gift. "He couldn't believe that they were homemade! He asked me to make some more batches to distribute among his friends. That was my first official order," she reminisced fondly.

After that, things just fell into place. "Diwali was around the corner, and one of my friends asked if I could make a few boxes of chocolates; she did not want to go in for the usual sweets. From that point, my work spread by word-of-mouth," Katula added.

Apart from orders for personal consumption, Katula also catered for larger occasions like weddings, anniversaries, birthdays and festivals. Her charges varied depending on the intricacy of the box on offer. "My aim was never to make money. This was not a full-fledged business. I saw myself as a housewife who made chocolates when someone placed an order. It made me feel good about myself. The fact that strangers called me up to ask for my homemade chocolates had to mean that I was good at it," she observed.

For Siddhika Bahl, a young married woman, the decision to pursue her interest in designing clothes was to give her creative energies an outlet. "I had been married for a year and while I did want to be a good homemaker, I also desired to pursue my passion for designing clothes," said Bahl, who had studied design at a fashion institute. Her "clientele" was largely limited to family, relatives and friends

and occasionally a garment would become a great hit much to Bahl's delight.

Clearly, whatever the age group or economic status of these entrepreneurs, the unifying factor that bound them was their need for self-affirmation. Sama Sharma, another Delhi-based homemaker, who taught candle-making and glass painting – activities she counted among her hobbies – to teenagers in the neighbourhood every afternoon, iterated that it is important for every woman to feel good about oneself, even if she is “only” a housewife. “I enjoy being a housewife. But everybody has some talent, and I think all homemakers should explore the opportunity to take up professional work,” Sharma said.

Agreed Pandey, “I am not doing something very different from what I usually do, and yet I get to learn so many new things when I cook in the hotel. Besides this, the appreciation that I get from strangers is priceless.”

Labour Markets and Sex Work

Geeta Seshu

Poverty and limited education push women into labour markets at an early age, but the sheer economic reason of getting better incomes pushes them out of other labour markets and into sex work. This was revealed by a path-breaking, pan-India survey of sex workers conducted in 2009 and released in 2011.

A majority – over 70 per cent of the 3,000 females surveyed in 14 states across India entered sex work by themselves. The higher incomes they could access weighed significantly in that decision, given the often harsh working conditions or worse incomes in other labour markets, the survey categorically stated.

According to well-known economist Dr Rohini Sahni, “Sex work as work should be placed in the context of women’s choice rather than our own understanding or preferences.” In the post-HIV context, hygiene or control of the ‘high risk’ population dominates surveys of sex workers, but there is no information on the economic aspects of their work, Sahni remarked.

Sahni and V. Kalyan Shankar of Pune University’s Department of Economics analysed the data emerging from the survey, which was conducted under the aegis of the Centre for Advocacy on Stigma and Marginalisation (CASAM) as part of the Paulo Longo Research Initiative (PLRI) on sex work research.

The women who had participated in this unique survey came from different backgrounds, ages, language, cultures and states as diverse as Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Goa, Nagaland, Uttar Pradesh, and so on. More than 35 civil society organisations and individuals fanned out to administer a questionnaire to the sex workers, chosen in areas where they were not collectivised so as to preclude any influence in the responses.

What they found was that poverty and limited education pushed women into the labour force at early ages and sex workers were no exception. While 60 per cent were from rural family backgrounds, 65 per cent from poor family backgrounds – with 26 per cent of middle class origins. Half of them had no schooling while the educational levels of the others were seven per cent (primary schooling up to Class IV), 13.4 per cent (secondary schooling up to Class VII), 6.5 per cent (up to Class X) and 11.3 per cent (up to Class XII).

The percentages of those who were forced (7.1), sold (2.8), cheated (9.2) or were devadasis (0.6), as against the 79.4 per cent who said that they had entered sex work of their own volition, was an interesting indicator for the ‘force’ versus ‘choice’ debate in many discussions on sex work.

“There is a lot of misinformation on this issue because of our obsession with trafficking. Very few women are forced into sex work but the public narrative is overwhelmingly that of force,” observed anthropologist Professor Andrea Cornwall of the University of Sussex, UK, and part of PLRI, a global network of academics and activists engaged in research on sex work.

The findings of such a survey would give recognition to the labour of women in sex work as well as start a discourse on their working conditions; a precursor to determining their rights, Professor Cornwall added.

Of the 3,000 women surveyed, 1,158 said that they had entered sex work directly, 1,488 said they had experience of other labour markets before or alongside sex work, while 326 had other work identities but the sequence of their entry was not known. Unscrambling the data, Sahni revealed that the sex workers listed a range of activities they did before getting into sex work: puri and papad-making, domestic work, tailoring, working in beauty parlours, doing agricultural labour or construction labour, or peddling anything from bangles to socks to fruit and vegetables.

On being asked why they had left their earlier occupations, the predominant response was economic – low pay, no profit in business, no regular work, insufficient money to run the home. The harassment and harsh working conditions they faced as unorganised labour, coupled with insufficient income, made them consider sex work as a more economically rewarding option, according to Sahni.

Respondents assessed that they made incomes between Rs 500-1,000 per month (2011 data) in other labour markets, and revealed that there was an immediate jump when they came into sex work, citing incomes ranging from Rs 1,000-3,000, with a substantial number saying they earned anything between Rs 3,000-5,000.

Interestingly, an examination of the categories of those forced/sold/cheated or involving an element of abuse was roughly similar across those who entered sex work directly and those who entered after working in other labour markets, at 22.1 per cent and 24.8 per cent, respectively. However, those sold were much higher in the category of direct entrants, and the agents involved in this abuse were husbands, lovers, friends and acquaintances.

Another interesting aspect emerging from the preliminary analysis of the data was that 60.27 per cent of women who entered the profession were in the age group of 19 to 22 years. While some of them may later go on to work in other labour markets (at 23-26 years of age), the females from other labour markets who enter into sex work do so at 19-22 years, with others in the 23-26 year or 27-30 year age groups.

The survey yielded a rich store of data. In time more data through surveys such as this will provide a clearer picture. But, according to Sahni, going by the evidence thus far some middle ground can be established to address the reality of sex work and demystify simplistic and stereotypical narratives about it.

Stardust and Sawdust: The Showbiz Trail

Surekha Kadapa-Bose

It is not for nothing that Mumbai has been idolised as the quintessential city of dreams and dream-makers. Besides being India's financial capital, it is also the hometown of showbiz and attracts a lot of talent from small towns across India each year. Census 2011 data has revealed that the rate of urban migration had reduced – Mumbai added only about half a million to its population between 2001 and 2011. But what these figures don't tell is that the influx into the glamorous world of Bollywood, as the Hindi film industry is popularly known, television, fashion and advertising industries, has not declined in the least.

Everyday, hundreds of newbie actors, writers and technicians come to tinsel town in the hope of becoming the next Deepika Padukone or Ranveer Singh. But as the popular 1950s Hindi film song goes: *Ai dil hai mushkil jeena yahan, zara hatke, zara bachke, yeh hai Bombay meri jaan* (Oh my heart, it is tough living here, be careful, this, after all, is Bombay).

No one can vouch for the truth of these unforgettable lyrics better than Hindi TV serial actor, Garima Shrivastav, who came to Mumbai from Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh in 2005 with her scriptwriter husband, Yogesh Vikrant. She recalls, "The first hurdle was getting used to living in a one-room tenement and sharing it with five others! Coming from a city like Allahabad, where in most middle-class homes each member of the family gets a room to themselves, this was a real shocker. It also required a lot of adjustment, sacrifice and understanding the needs of those with whom we shared a roof."

Shrivastav has been a part of the cast of popular prime time soaps such as *Rahe Tera Aashirwaad* (Colours channel), *Parivaar-Kartavya Ki Pariksha*, *Choti Bahu* and *Phir Subah Hogi* that were aired on the popular general entertainment channel, Zee TV. As a newcomer in the city, all the adjustments were for her to make. What she had going for her was the advantage of age – she was in

her mid-20s when she ventured into television to make a name for herself. Moreover, Shrivastav said that having her husband and elder brother-in-law, Shantibhushan Singh, a TV serial writer, to guide her through the transition and shield her from con artistes and other “unwanted elements” that inhabit the glam world, was helpful.

However that was not the case with Ahmedabad-resident Bhumika Brahmbhatt. Barely 20 years and with no real friends except for the few she had made while hosting a cookery show in her hometown in Gujarat, this young “struggler” was taken aback by the fast-paced Mumbai life when she landed in the city somewhere in mid-2010. She recalls, “Friends whom one meets a few times back home, change when you come to live with them. This is especially true if they are in the same profession. The insecurities of the industry get to everyone.”

Such was her situation that besides looking for quality work she was out on the streets within two months searching for a place to live. “Adding to all the tensions was the culture of this city where people are warm but in an impersonal way. That is when homesickness really hits you hard and you are tempted to go back,” elaborated Brahmbhatt, who has worked in a reality show on TV, essayed a small role in a daily soap, *Hamari Saas Leela* (Colours channel), and done some modelling.

While feelings of loneliness and depression are common for those living alone in a big city, it can lead to dangerous circumstances for those trying to find a foothold in the entertainment industry. In their desperation for work and a better life, many get trapped by fake agents and talent hunters. Explained Brahmbhatt, “Networking is necessary but it has its hazards. Cons on some social networking sites woo girls with promises of job offers. But after one or two unsavoury incidents one starts recognising the fakes.”

Even though there may not have been a regular job for those struggling to get a foothold in the industry, the one thing that has

remained constant has been the financial crunch. That did not, however, mean that they were completely on their own as they tried to make ends meet. Parents and elder siblings usually understood the difficulties and even though many disapproved of the profession they did their best to ensure that at least the basic necessities were met. Yet, every rupee needed to be spent judiciously. So instead of taking an autorickshaw or bus from the local train station, a two- to three-kilometre daily walk back home was a common experience for many aspirants.

Old-timers, who made the city their own, like writer Anuradha Tiwari, did learn a thing or two about getting over the tough times. "When I came to Mumbai from Delhi back in 1996, I knew it was good to know the city one was migrating to, so in a sense I was actually well prepared for this move," said the writer, who has penned the screenplay of popular films like *Fashion* and *Jail*.

Here's what she did; while studying in Delhi, Tiwari made some good contacts in Mumbai and landed up in the metropolis with a group of friends. Living as a paying guest with two male friends did raise a lot of eyebrows at that time "but in a new place one learns to ignore several things". Tiwari added, "As long as one is grounded, focused and knows how to go about getting what s/he wants, migrating to any place need not be a problem. And Mumbai is still the safest city and so single girls do feel secure travelling home after late night shifts."

For single women, the process of becoming familiar with a new set of realities was hard, but for women who came with families, and had their children here, no amount of preparation was good enough. Take for instance young mother and TV scriptwriter Aparajita Saha, who has written for shows like *Uttaran* (Colours channel), *Rab Ne Mila Di Jodi* and *Dulhan* (Zee TV). After she gave birth to twins, finding any permanent help to look after the children was a real challenge. Had she been in Delhi where her parents and relatives lived, bringing up the kids would not have been a problem. "In Mumbai, I have had

to take a sabbatical to look after my babies. To go back to work not only would I have to start looking for projects afresh – people in this industry have a very short memory – I would have to live with the fear that I have left my kids in the wrong hands,” she rued.

Saha also recognised that the problem was not going to go away in a hurry even after the children were older. “I don’t want my kids to be cooped up at home but there is simply no outdoor space in this city. The lifestyle in Mumbai is so different. Here one cannot drop in at a friend’s place without notice and vice versa. No doubt we love this city but we also feel like going away so that our children can get a better childhood,” she said.

For work, security, professionalism, success and money there was no better place than Mumbai. But there was a price to be paid, especially for women. After all, as the song went, *yeh hai Bombay meri jaan...* this is Bombay, my dear.

The Bright Lights of Television Journalism Beckon

Manisha Jain

Lights! Camera! Roll! A young camera person focused the lens on an attractive actress who was very much in the news. As the subject sat cross-legged under the klieg lights, waiting to be interviewed by the anchor, a group of young professionals stood by for the shoot to begin. Once the camera rolled, the anchor began a gentle questioning with a gracious smile. After the recording was done, it was a mad rush to get the footage edited and readied for telecast.

What was special about this scenario was that the camera person, the production persons, the anchor, the producer and the editor of the programme being readied for telecast by a prominent network were all women.

The fact that women had increasingly made their presence felt as media professionals is well known. Data generated by the Global Media Monitoring Project 2010 (GMMP 2010), which scanned 1,365 newspapers, television and radio stations and internet news sites across the world, revealed that female reporters were responsible for 37 per cent of stories as compared to 28 per cent, 15 years ago.

Less documented, however, was the fact that over the last decade television had emerged as the most sought after medium for young women media professionals fresh out of journalism school. They entered the field with stars in their eyes. Undoubtedly, the glamour quotient of television was a major draw, but there was more to it than that. The fact remained that the proliferation of 24-hour television news channels had transformed the media scenario radically from the days when the state-run Doordarshan was the only show in town. News television had unassailably overtaken print journalism at two levels: One, in terms of its ability to disseminate information faster and, two, in terms of sheer reach and pervasiveness.

This was why, long after the glamour factor of news television had worn thin, women in news television remained committed to

their chosen field. Despite the punishing pace and tough working conditions, these women were more than willing to work until the wee hours of the morning; they did not think twice about putting marriage plans on hold indefinitely; and were prepared to sacrifice their social for their professional lives, given the pressures of prime time.

As Kumkum Binwal, a producer with a news television channel, eloquently put it, "My personal life has taken a total backseat. For me, life is just about news breaks, interviews, soundbites and editing." Would she be willing to exchange this for the more sedate pace of print journalism? Replied Binwal firmly, "No. I was meant for television. For me, chasing news with a camera is very exciting and gives me a lot of satisfaction." In fact, it gave her confidence and emboldened her in her interactions with people from various segments of society. "I have been trained to treat a criminal just as I would a perfumed celebrity on my programme. In this field, you have to be prepared to interact with just about anyone," she revealed.

Of course, Binwal was also the first to admit that her personal life had suffered a great deal because of the endless working hours the job entailed. "I wonder what I will do after marriage? The timings are so unpredictable, you never know when you will finally make it back home," she observed ruefully.

Archana, an anchor with India News, echoed Binwal. In her late twenties, she "just has no time to socialise and cannot even think of marriage, given the long hours". Said she, "I am responsible for news bulletins and the deadline pressure is immense. This is the kind of work that you cannot drop midway. You just have to complete the responsibilities you have before you pack up for the day or night."

Archana had made up her mind that post marriage she would set up her own production house. "That way, I will be able to call the shots," she stated. She was also clear that she would not like to marry a journalist because there would be far too many "ego clashes".

Dolly Joshi, who worked for a television channel that focuses on women, was very excited about her chosen profession and looked forward to reaching office every morning and beginning yet another day of news gathering. Recounting her first day at work, she laughed, "I was so nervous and so fixated on getting things right that I messed up the whole shoot!"

Like Binwal and Archana, Joshi too had come to the conclusion that the job required total involvement and that marriage was a strict no-no. She also learnt how important it was to be mentally tough. She said, "One has to be prepared to face opposition, even attacks."

Having learnt to read situations more clearly, Joshi discovered that a little diplomacy and caution went a long way, "I find one has to be very careful about handling the people you are interviewing, especially men. You have to be very prudent and cautious because you can easily get misunderstood." At the same time, as a television news journalist, she knew she could not let important questions remain unanswered. "People turn nasty when faced with tough questions, which does not mean that you do not ask them those questions. One has to rise to such challenges and carry on with courage and determination," she added.

These were television newswomen on the learning curve, but were they making a difference? According to the Global Media Monitoring Project 2010 data, women mediapersons were helping to break stereotypes. Stories filed by female reporters were twice as likely to challenge gender stereotypes as against those filed by their male counterparts.

The challenges, however, remained especially those stemming from biases and discrimination. Binwal observed that her male colleagues always seemed to get the creamier assignments and ended up being better appreciated by the boss. "You would have thought that an emerging profession like news journalism would be relatively free of such gender biases, but that is really not the case," she noted.

Despite some prominent women journalists having made their way into the highest echelons of news television, most women in the field have had to be content with more modest profiles and performing drudge work. As in most other professions, the glass ceiling also loomed large. But as more women enter the field, the scenario may undergo a radical change.

Barefoot Teachers as Change Makers

Sarada Lahangir

This is a story from Sanbahali and Junapani, two nondescript villages situated on the 3,000 square foot plateau in the Sunabeda sanctuary area of Nuapada district in Odisha. In 2011, 519 families of the Chakutia Bhunjia tribe, officially classified as “primitive”, were living in the area, dependent mainly on minor forest produce and shifting cultivation where land is cultivated temporarily and then abandoned.

It was in this unlikely scenario that four young women dared to go against tradition, break taboos and step out to work as teachers in an ashram school run by the Chakutia Bhunjia Development Agency (CBDA), a local development agency. What Triveni Chatria, Chandini Chatria, Jayashree Jhankar and Laila Majhi had done was significant not only because of the money they brought in for their families, they were earning a princely monthly salary of Rs 5,000, but because they were inspiring many other young women to follow in their footsteps.

“Earlier, we were only four girls who had passed matriculation. Now we are at least 15,” said Chandini, 18, in 2011. Achieving this may not be a big deal for girls living in towns, but it meant a lot in a community that believed in early marriage and followed age-old beliefs. Girls were generally not allowed to wear blouses, petticoats or don chappals (open footwear), and once they attained puberty, they were not allowed to visit the homes of their relatives.

Triveni put it this way, “To achieve what we have so far has caused a lot of trouble for us and our families. By working as teachers we have gone against tradition.” As the oldest of the four, Triveni was teaching students of Classes VI and VII, while the other three took classes for the primary section of the school.

The hurdles they had faced in this journey of self-discovery were both similar and different. Each one had faced ostracism by the community for three years, because not only had they dared to wear

chappals, they had also gone out of the village and enrolled at a residential high school at Komna, some distance away.

Recalled Jayashree, "Until Class V in the local primary school, I used to wear a sari without blouse. But then I had to switch over to the school uniform and found wearing my earlier dress very uncomfortable." Once she broke with tradition by wearing footwear and the school uniform, senior members of her community began to threaten her parents with social boycott. "My parents were scared but I pleaded with them and fortunately they agreed to support me," she added.

Although Triveni and Chandini managed to convince their parents, Laila was not so lucky. For many days nobody at home spoke to her, and because she wore chappals she was not allowed inside the kitchen. But the young girl held firm to her decision to study. When she failed to convince her parents, she went on a hunger strike. Being the only child, her parents had no option but to finally relent.

They realised that they had been wrong when their daughter became an earning member of the family. Kumudini, Laila's mother no longer had to go into the forest to collect minor forest produce to keep the family going. Said she, "Laila is our only child and I feel proud of her as she helps us shoulder our financial burdens."

The others, too, were contributing to their families in remarkable ways. Jayashree's younger brother was studying for his matriculation in a local college and it was she who helped to meet the additional expense of keeping him in a private hostel.

Chandini's mother, Ratibai, was also proud of her daughter. Ratibai, who had got married at the age of 10, recollected her misery as a child, "I was married and became the mother of four children before I even realised it. I had never stepped out of the village because local customs forbade it. Women were not even allowed to visit their parents' home after marriage. I accepted this as my destiny. But I am happy that my daughter has not met with the same fate."

According to the data provided by the CBDA, in 2011 male literacy among the Chakutia Bhunjias stood at 51.51 per cent, while female literacy rate was just 18.27 per cent. It had only been a few years since some Chakotia Bhunjia boys had appeared for their high school examination for the first time.

Dhansing Chakotia, a father to seven children, including Triveni, had never attended school himself but he wished “that my children should learn and do what we ourselves could not. Triveni is my youngest daughter. When she showed interest in studying, I decided to send her to high school. Of course, it cost me in many ways. My family was not invited to any social function, nor did anybody attend our functions. But the villagers slowly understood the value of education.”

Apart from teaching in the school, these young women along with their male counterparts who had completed their matriculation, had formed a regional resource group that met once a month and discussed various local concerns. They also campaigned for girls’ education in other villages.

According to Himanshu Mahapatra, the CBDA development officer, changes in attitude and lifestyle are crucial for any social change. “We had been trying to make this community understand that they should cooperate with us and discard old customs and superstitions in order to improve their lives. I am happy that these women have managed to bring about many changes in attitudes among people here,” he said. Mahapatra added that over the last three to four years, the girls had been able to achieve more than what the CBDA had accomplished through its activism over the last two decades.

But many, like Chaitanya Jhankar from the neighbouring Gatibeda village, were also deeply perturbed by these developments. “We believe that the souls of our forefathers stay with us in our houses and they witness everything. If we try to break any rules they will punish us. So we cannot allow anybody to break our traditions,” said the disgruntled 70-year-old.

Tough words, but Triveni, Chandini, Jayashree and Laila had not allowed themselves to be fazed by such attitudes and had, in fact, learnt to draw courage from each other. As Laila put it, "The courage shown by Jayashree, Triveni and Chandini really keeps me going." She, in turn, was poised to encourage others.

Proud to be Porters

Aditi Bhaduri

The railway station at Raipur, the capital of Chhattisgarh, one of India's poorest and least developed states, is like any other. The one distinctive feature of this voluminous terminal is the fact that it has not one, but two women porters, each of them donning the signature red jacket of the Indian railway porter.

What were the factors that pushed these women from conservative backgrounds into a profession that is arguably one of the most masculine in terms of the physical strength and stamina it demands?

Parasai Sahu was born and grew up in Rajnandgaon, which lies about 64 kilometres from Raipur. The pleasant looking and always smiling woman studied until Class X. When she turned 18, her parents got her married to a man who worked as a bus conductor, earning a modest salary. But the fragile state of his health meant that Parasai had no option but to look for a job to provide for her two children and old parents-in-law. So she requested her uncle, who was working as a porter in Raipur station, to help her get a sweeper's job at the station.

For four months, Parasai worked as a sweeper, earning a modest Rs 2,400, which helped to supplement the family income. Her husband meanwhile gave up his job as a conductor and began working in the village cycle repair shop. This meant a decrease in the family income and Parasai was in constant search for a more paying occupation.

Opportunity came in the form of Maanbai, 30. Never in her whole life would Maanbai have thought that one day she would inspire another woman to seek a better future. But Maanbai, even if she did not acknowledge it herself, had already established herself as an unusual woman. In 2009, she was appointed as the first woman porter at Raipur railway station.

Maanbai had been married to a porter who had worked here. When her husband fell ill and died, the station authorities gave her his job on sympathetic grounds. The work was arduous, without doubt, but as the sole earning member of her family she had little choice but to carry on with all the courage and strength she could muster.

Unknown to her, she was also quietly playing a part in transforming someone else's life. Remarked Parasai, "When I was working as a sweeper, I would see Maanbai doing her duty as a porter everyday. She seemed so confident and in control that I wanted to emulate her." So she gathered the nerve to approach the station authorities and ask if she could do similar work. To her huge surprise, they agreed. She was given a form that she filled up with the help of her uncle and, finally, in October 2010, Parasai, like Maanbai started working as a station porter.

When I met her in early 2011, she was in her training period. According to the procedure a station officer would thereafter evaluate her work. But Parasai's training was not exactly a cakewalk. She had to undergo a medical test to get a fitness certificate that entailed running a distance of 400 metres and walking for 200 metres within five minutes while carrying a weight of 40 kilos. She had managed to pull it off successfully.

Parasai recalled her first encounter with a passenger, "I was nervous on the first day. I fervently wanted my work to be appreciated. It was a family that had hired me and paid me for the first time. I earned Rs 30 on that occasion and I remain grateful to them to this day."

However, life as a woman porter had its challenges. It was not the punishing nature of the work as much as the jealousy of male porters that occasionally queered the pitch. The male porters wasted no opportunity to harass the two women. Rued Parasai, "I don't think many of them liked it when Maanbai and I began working as porters. They felt we were intruding into their territory and would always pass snide remarks about us. Sometimes they even dissuaded

willing passengers from hiring us. Our job requires us to smile and be pleasant to passengers in order to get their custom. But even that was misinterpreted by our male colleagues, who floated rumours that we flirt with the passengers.”

Things came to a head when a male porter physically threatened Maanbai and Parasai. The women were forced to report this to the station master, who fortunately stood by them. Things became more peaceful after that incident and both the station authorities and the passengers had subsequently been supportive in general. “Once I saw three VIPs. I don’t know who they were, but when they saw us – me and Parasai – they were so encouraging they gave me Rs 10 as tip,” recalled Maanbai.

The main problem they encountered was that passengers were often reluctant to hire them. “Sometimes they feel sorry for us and prefer a male porter to carry their luggage; sometimes they are worried that by making a woman carry their luggage they would be committing a sin,” revealed Sahu. She added, “What they don’t understand is that they are helping us when they make us work and that we need this work to survive.”

In 2011, Maanbai and Parasai were the only women porters at Raipur station making an average of Rs 100 a day. The official rate for the services of a porter was Rs 20 for every 40 kilos of luggage. However, passengers would sometimes tip them a few extra rupees. They got no free days and had to apply for leave when they wanted a day off.

For Maanbai, working as a porter was an imperative, but for Parasai it was totally a matter of choice. So what did her family think about her unconventional job? “They do not mind it. My husband is encouraging. I make about Rs 3,000-4,000 a month, which is more than he does,” she said.

Despite the fact that she made more money Parasai’s husband was still the primary decision maker in the family. She said she handed her

entire earnings to him every day. From this sum, he gave her money to travel to work and to get something to eat. He also decided on how the money was to be spent. "We rarely buy anything for ourselves. We buy what the children want. We don't have a TV, so we would like to buy one in the future. We are saving up for that," she said.

Parasai's daily routine was hectic. Out of the house by six in the morning – commuting took about four hours every day – she was back home only around eight at night. In her absence, who looked after the house? "My daughter and my mother-in-law cook, clean and manage between themselves. I wash the clothes," she said. Her husband did not, of course, contribute to handling the daily chores.

The tough work schedule of these two women could faze many a strong man. But neither Maanbai nor Parasai regretted being porters. Explained Parasai with great enthusiasm, "We are village women. We are strong and used to hard labour. I do not find the work tiring. I am very happy to do this work and enjoy it."

If it was Maanbai who inspired Parasai, she, in turn, had inspired others. The women in her neighbourhood kept asking her whether they could also apply for such a job.

Women Cabbies Hit the Highway to Work

Pamela Philipose

Livelihood choices for young women with modest educational qualifications tend to be both limited and limiting, which was why the option of young women training to be drivers did appear to be intriguing.

Small initiatives in metropolitan India were being made in this direction, driven largely by two trends. On the one hand, there was a growing section of women professionals, who kept late hours and were looking for the security of hiring competent women drivers; on the other, there were a large number of young women with modest education from underprivileged backgrounds on the look out for more remunerative professional choices.

Take Chandni, who lived in Govindpuri, a resettlement colony at the heart of Delhi. She found herself stitching salwars (traditional Indian pants) at Rs 25 a piece to help her family, but the 21-year-old hated it. Said Chandni, "That's when someone told me about an organisation that was planning to train women to drive. I was excited because I always loved cars."

"Yes, Chandni was in one of our early batches," smiled Meenu Vadhera, Secretary, Azad Foundation, a non-profit that trained women from disadvantaged backgrounds to step on the accelerator of change. To achieve this, the Azad Foundation, began working in a strategic alliance with Sakha Consulting Wings Private Limited, a for-profit entity, to train women drivers and run women-only cab services. The Foundation forged partnerships with the Maruti Institute of Driving Training and Research, which handled the training side of the operations; the Delhi Police's Crime Against Women Cell, which gave members courses in self-defence; and with civil society organisations like Jagori and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) to lend supportive services like counselling.

Until September 2011, over 30 women had received training as well as licences to drive in the city. Of them, eight, including Chandni, got commercial licences. Chandni's commercial licence, in fact, allowed her to drive any vehicle, including taxis, apart from heavy vehicles like buses and trucks.

The Azad Foundation provided training to many a women coming from extremely difficult circumstances. At least 95 per cent of them had personally experienced violence. Revealed Vadhera, "They have been beaten by fathers, husbands, brothers, *devars* (husband's younger brother) – faced verbal abuse, even acid attacks and physical assaults that caused fractures." According to her, many had been attacked for just wanting to be independent.

Of course, once they were on their feet and had a regular income, it was a very different story. They gained an understanding of their rights, learnt to fight back, and developed their own networks. "It's as if they get wings. We open bank accounts for them; they get insurance cover, uniforms and mobile phones. They become totally changed people," Vadhera added. Being earning members immediately raised their status within their families as well.

But why did the Foundation single out driving? Vadhera, a graduate of the London School of Economics with a Masters degree in Social Policy and Planning, explained, "We chose this field because it is one of those mainstream activities that pays well. Our women drivers make anything from Rs 5,000 to Rs 12,000 (2011 data). The field has been completely male dominated and our intention was to break the glass ceiling and expand the career choices of lower middle class women."

There were, of course, innumerable structural hurdles. First there was the all-pervading cynicism they faced inherent in the question, 'How can *you* drive?' The second hurdle was to acquire a formal identity. Said Vadhera, "Nobody teaches poor women to keep their personal

documents in order. Many who come to us don't even have birth certificates. So the first challenge is putting together all the relevant papers and then engaging with the bureaucratic requirements of providing the training to be a driver."

The third challenge was finding the time and money for the training. "There are tremendous opportunity costs involved, because training can take 10 to 11 months, 10 hours a day. During this period these women cannot earn. This means a great deal of negotiation at home since objections are constantly raised but it is best this negotiation takes place at this stage rather than later, because after they become drivers they have to keep long hours anyway," said Vadhera.

Shanno Begum, 36, a driver trained through this process, recalled the tough times she faced. "I was a young widow with three children. There was no money to buy food, no one to cook. Fortunately, my two teenaged daughters were pillars of support and gave me the confidence to carry on."

The training period was difficult for 23-year-old Saroj as well but it was all worth it, when she became the proud possessor of a commercial licence. Said the quiet, confident young woman, "At times, I didn't have money to even get on to a bus to come for training. My father, who makes a living by transporting things on his rickshaw, would constantly grumble about the expenses. My mother stood by me. That's why, when I got my first salary of Rs 4,000, I gave it to her. My father's attitude changed slowly. He kept telling me to come by his work area so that he could tell everyone, 'Look, this is my daughter and she drives a car.'"

Magical – that's how these women described their feeling after having actually become a driving professional. Shanno felt she was "flying in the sky". Coming from a conservative Muslim family she had to completely reinvent herself to do this. "When my husband died of kidney failure, life lost all meaning. But I had to put food

on the table and within 15 days was out on the streets vending vegetables. I then opened a small dhaba (roadside eatery). I would have been running it still if this opportunity to learn driving hadn't come my way," she said. Comfortable at the wheel, she reeled out the names of the cars she had driven: Omni, Xylo, Innova, Indigo, Swift, Accent, Santro and Tavera. Her ardent wish was to try her hand on an imported vehicle.

The road to professionalism came with its share of red lights. "I remember, I had just finished my training and was apprenticing when I banged the car I was driving – a Santro – into an obstruction. It was so unnerving, I thought I wouldn't be able to drive again," recalled Chandni. In fact, all the women drivers had such stories to tell, but they had learnt in time to keep their nerve.

Then there were night duties to be handled as well. "Some of the women don't feel happy doing night duty and we don't push them, but others are quite comfortable with it," informed Vadhera.

The women also faced negative attitudinal responses. There were times when those who hired them as their drivers treated them poorly, expecting them to double up as domestic help. They also came across aggressive male drivers on the road, and some even tried to get physically intimate. "Once they start earning, they need to protect themselves financially because they suddenly appear as very attractive propositions for unemployed youth who may like the idea of living off their earnings," remarked Vadhera.

That was why, training for Vadhera was not just about imparting a skill, not just about changing a punctured tyre or handing a minor engine problem, it was about preparing the women to negotiate life on their own terms. "While working with a group of women, we always emphasise that training is more than driving. It is about empowerment. It's about redefining driving as a woman's preserve," said Vadhera.

Shanno expressed the hope that she could set up her own driving school one day; Chandni wanted to enrol for her Bachelors degree; while Saroj, who was already in her first year of an arts' degree was in no mood to settle for marriage like most of her peers.

The transformation that Vadhera was looking for was definitely underway.

Section 2 >>

Hanging on in Hard Times: Workers' Rights and Wrongs



Spin and Stitch: Lives of Textile and Garment Workers

Pushpa Achanta

Big spenders, who pay humongous amounts of money for branded clothing, hardly realise the struggles of those who produce them. Categorised as 'garment and textile workers', the majority of those who comprise this sector are women.

According to a 2009 study of the Apparel Export Promotion Council of India, the textile and garment manufacturing hubs of Tirupur in western Tamil Nadu, Gurgaon in the National Capital Region (NCR) and Bengaluru, the capital of Karnataka, contributed between 55 to 60 per cent of India's total apparel exports. While many of the workers in Tirupur and Bengaluru are women, in the NCR 80 per cent are male migrants from states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

A 'note' on Indian textiles and clothing exports by the Union textile ministry dated March 26, 2012, pegged the turnover of the textile industry at USD 55 billion at prevailing prices, with domestic demand accounting for 64 per cent. World Trade Organization (WTO) data on international trade ranked India as the third largest global textile exporter, coming up behind China and the European Union (EU); and the world's sixth largest clothing exporter after China, the EU, Hong Kong, Bangladesh and Turkey.

Yet, the people toiling to achieve these figures get minimal benefits. In early 2013, there was a screening of a documentary by Surabhi Sharma, titled 'Labels from a Global City', on the lives of garment workers in Bengaluru. In the discussion that followed, Madina, a garment worker for 10 years, shared the realities of her working life. She said, "Where earlier I stitched around 60 pieces in an hour, these days we produce nearly 150 pieces. Any gap or error means that we have to work extra without pay. This we have to do even if we are unwell, tired out, expecting a baby or facing a personal emergency. Failure to fulfil the target attracts a penalty."

Aged around 30, the cheerful mother of two school-going children revealed that she had been deserted by her husband. Fortunately, she had the support of her brother and mother, with whom she was living in the city. Many others, however, have not been so lucky.

A significant number of Bengaluru's garment workers, who come from adjoining rural districts such as Ramanagara, Devanahalli and Doddaballapur, belong to poor families and commute every day or share small rooms in the city. An alien environment, minimal knowledge of labour laws, lack of confidence and financial constraints force them to continue with their ill-paid jobs. Garment workers rarely have the agency to negotiate for better terms. Those who muster up the courage to complain sometimes face dire consequences. Some have even been silenced forever to serve as a warning to the others. There was, for instance, the case of 17-year-old Roopa, who was employed at a large garments firm in Bengaluru. Her body was found with burn injuries in March 2010.

Typically, garment workers have to be on their feet for nearly 12 hours a day, in dark, overcrowded spaces. They suffer from backaches, respiratory infections, failing eyesight and are allowed just two or three strictly timed breaks to visit the wash room. Floor supervisors, who are often men, admonish or harass them verbally, physically and sexually.

Being contract workers they do not receive provident fund, health insurance or bonuses although some employers falsely claim that they give these benefits. The workers are too afraid of being laid off to request for leave. H.N. Nagaratna, who suffered a debilitating electric shock in November 2004 during the course of her work at Texport Creations, was forced to resign after she returned from medical leave. The company had provided her with minimal help, and misrepresented facts to the Chief Inspector of Factories.

Jobs have been lost on account of misunderstandings between workers and supervisors apart from financial mismanagement that can lead to shutdowns. Again, this happens without proper notice or the

outstanding dues being paid, violating the Factories Act. Additionally, for women there are no maternity benefits.

Other abuses take place as well. Former garment worker, Yashoda revealed, "Middlemen or employers sometimes manipulate the age of young textile workers without their consent to avoid being penalised for employing child labour. Warnings from the Labour Department whom we had notified did not seem to deter others from doing the same."

According to Stefanie Karl, international verification coordinator at the Netherlands-based Fair Wear Foundation (fairwear.org) that monitors working conditions and labour practices in the garment industry, "Factory owners must provide sufficient wages and a congenial operating environment to all employees. India and other nations may earn a bad reputation in Europe due to poor labour standards and work conditions." She also pointed out that some brand owners violate rules and do not necessarily mandate fair labour practices along the supply chain.

For instance, Bombay Rayons, the manufacturer of international labels like GAP, Tesco and H&M, initiated disciplinary action against the employees who reported its labour and gender rights violations in December 2008 instead of implementing corrective measures.

There, however, have been some organisations providing succour to these workers, like the Garment and Textile Workers Union (GATWU) and the Garments Mahila Karmikara Munnade (Women Garment Workers' Front in Kannada). Launched as a registered body in 2006 and affiliated to the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI), GATWU has around 2,000 members (2013 data). While fighting on behalf of garment workers for labour rights, GATWU has intervened when its members have faced problems at textile production factories, as was the case with Choice Apparels in 2005. In that instance, the company had violated human and labour rights by verbally abusing workers and enforcing exploitative working hours.

GATWU, established near Mysore Road where many garment factories are located and the Peenya industrial belt, has been reaching out to around one lakh garment workers in Bengaluru. Through pamphlets and oral campaigns, the union has mobilised members who pay a small annual fee to join. On some Sundays it also runs awareness sessions on the rights of garment workers.

Said Prathibha R., a GATWU member and former garment worker, "Since 2001, Karnataka's garment workers had been on a daily wage of Rs 101. Relentless appeals and advocacy raised this amount to around Rs 130 in 2009. But it decreased in 2010 due to the government declaring the higher amount as a typographical error. Although the state government notified wage revisions in 2011, the implementation is inconsistent." The minimum monthly wage in the Bengaluru region was around Rs 4,472 as of November 2012.

The other group, Munnade has encouraged women garment workers to discuss their problems with colleagues. A former vice president of the collective, Saroja, herself a garment worker for 15 years, and her peers collaborated with a Bengaluru-based child rights groups to pressurise apparel manufacturers to deliver relevant benefits for garment workers and create childcare facilities mandated under the Factories Act. At times, the Munnade has handled domestic and other harassment cases of the workers as it is linked to Self-Help Groups (SHGs) near their homes. Incidentally, its bi-monthly Kannada newsletter, *Sooji Dhaara* (Needle and Thread) highlights textile workers' challenges besides suggesting measures of redress.

Acknowledging various concerns raised at the National People's Tribunal on Living Wage as a Fundamental Right of Indian Garment Workers, organised in Bengaluru in November 2012, Sripad Rao, Deputy Labour Commissioner, Karnataka, had disclosed, "Workers should articulate their grievances formally as in the Industrial Dispute Act. I will discuss this matter with the higher authorities

on coming up with a need-based monthly living wage between Rs 15,000-20,000 as the Asia Floor Wage Alliance suggested." He also wanted all stakeholders to come up with a process to mitigate workplace violence.

Despite such pioneering steps and suggestions, garment workers in India are still a long way from getting a fair deal.

Construction Workers on Precarious Scaffolding

Tripti Nath

Rajni and Chidami, a couple from Mau Rampur in Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh, took turns to attend to their two-month-old infant, Aashiq, as they toiled away at a construction site for a stadium in New Delhi.

As Rajni got busy digging, Chidami rushed to check on the baby lying on a bed of plastic bags. It was 1.45 pm but a meal was nowhere in sight. The relentless pace of work carried on well past the lunch break. Barring a handful of male labourers smoking beedis (local cigarettes) and haggling over the price of a packet of fresh coconut pieces with a pavement vendor, there was no sign of any food. For water, the workers walked almost half a kilometre to fill up their grimy plastic water bottles that lasted them for a couple of hours. There was no shelter, either from the sun or the rain. When it suddenly started to rain in torrents, about 50 workers ran for shelter under a huge container truck.

At another construction site in the city, at least a hundred men and women including a few who were mere teenagers laboured away day and night. There was only one toilet that operated as a Sulabh Shauchalaya for them and as far as crèche facilities for their children were concerned, they were nowhere in sight.

Venkatamma, 45, had come all the way from Hyderabad to work at yet another construction site in Delhi along with her 15-year-old daughter, Jyoti. She was using a wet towel to cover her head as she hauled headloads of earth to the stadium-in-the-making. Not a single worker could be spotted wearing basic safety gear like gloves, boots or helmets.

These were the deplorable conditions in which thousands of workers – many of them women with young children – had slaved to build state-of-the-art stadia and other facilities during the run up to the XIX Commonwealth Games that were held in Delhi in 2010.

They had come from as far away as Jhansi in Uttar Pradesh and Warangal in Andhra Pradesh, and were putting up with harsh living conditions and great upheavals in their personal lives. They bore all the hardship in the anticipation that they would earn some extra money for themselves as an insurance against the vicissitudes of the times. But even here they were shortchanged. Take the case of Rajni and Chidami. All they got for a day's work was Rs 110 each, although the contractor claimed that they earned Rs 300 to Rs 350 for an eight-hour shift.

There was, in fact, a lot of ambiguity about wages and the number of working hours. Some women from Jhansi had alleged that they were not being paid every day. A typical complaint was one from Shanti. She said, "They pay us once a week and that too not the due amount. If we are owed Rs 770, we get paid Rs 330. They always hold back some cash." And this, as an overseer had revealed, when these workers did 12-hour shifts arrived for work at 8 am and continuing until 7.30 pm.

A four-member monitoring committee appointed by the Delhi High Court underlined this reality. It had reported in March 2010 that workers at Games-related construction sites were not being paid the minimum wage and were made to work overtime for no extra money. It had also pointed out to the sub-standard accommodation the workers had been given as well as the lack of hygiene and sanitation facilities.

For the workers, many of whom were young women with small children, there was clearly a choice between starvation in their villages and exploitation in the national capital. If they had stayed back at home, they would have got much less – even when jobs were available – than the measly wages they were getting on such construction sites in Delhi. It was the lack of options that caused workers like them to fall prey to the machinations of the contractors and sub-contractors who hired them and housed them in abysmal conditions with total disregard for basic health care and welfare. At the Jawarharlal Nehru stadium site that had hosted the opening and closing ceremonies of

the Games there had been only the most primitive community bathing facility available and only one toilet for 120 workers.

Subhash Bhatnagar, a member of the Delhi Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board, a government body, pointed out that workers – men and women – on the Games sites were being paid only Rs 140 to Rs 150 for 12 hours when the government prescribed daily wage for an unskilled construction worker was Rs 203 (in 2010) for eight hours. Observed Bhatnagar, “They were not being paid overtime at any site but were being made to work for 12 hours at a wage that was less than the prescribed minimum wage for eight hours. This constitutes a violation of the Minimum Wages Act. Besides, the authorities were also in breach of the provisions of the Interstate Migrant Workers (Regulation of Employment and Condition of Services) Act, 1979.”

Having personally visited at least 15 of the over 25 Commonwealth Games sites in Delhi, Bhatnagar was convinced that the living and working conditions of these labourers, who had come from over a dozen states in the country, were exceedingly poor. Apart from wages, he was dismayed by the lack of safety and other social security provisions spelt out under the Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service Act, 1996).

As Bhatnagar put it, “The nature of the work is hazardous but the government paid no attention towards enforcing the safety norms. Failure of safety provisions had already caused more than 60 deaths of construction workers working on different sites. Despite repeated orders by the Delhi High Court and deadline extensions, a large number of construction workers at different Commonwealth Games sites had either not been registered or been issued identity cards. Until they were registered, they were not entitled to any social security benefits provided by the Board. These included children’s educational support, medical care, maternity benefits, immediate assistance in case of accident and pension that can be claimed after the age of 60.”

In their race against time, contractors during the construction of the stadia resorted to blatant anti-labour policies and took all kinds of liberties with the law. While the corruption and lack of preparedness of those who organised the XIX Commonwealth Games grabbed the headlines, not enough attention was paid to the actual working and living conditions of the men and women who had built the sports venues.

It is a tragic irony, and a comment on the callousness that has come to mark post-liberalisation India, that a government which spent close to USD10 billion in hosting the world's third largest multinational sporting event, proved to be so uncaring about ensuring the basic rights of the workers who had made the XIX Commonwealth Games possible. Why were they not paid their legally prescribed wages, provided the necessary housing and sanitation facilities, and given protective gear? This question needs to be answered before India thinks of embarking on its next mega event to showcase itself.

Home Alone: Women Workers in the Informal Sector

Pamela Philipose

In a cramped dwelling tucked away in the warren of bylanes that mark the neighbourhood around Asia's largest mosque, Delhi's Jama Masjid, sat Naseem Bano as she had done everyday for as long as she could remember. Once the household chores were done, her bowl of bone beads would emerge. She would then thread them into necklaces, ready to be marketed as an artifact of beauty from the rich repository of Incredible India's handicraft traditions. But no matter how hard Naseem worked, and for how long, it was unlikely that she would earn more than an eighth of the daily minimum wage for workers in the Capital.

"We never make more than Rs 25 a day. But we do this work, hour after hour, day after day, because we need every rupee to keep our households running," said Naseem, who despite being only 45, constantly complained of backaches and numbness of the feet from sitting three to four hours at a stretch, often late into the night to craft these objects of beauty.

Sita Kumari, 35, made bindis from her home in Manakpura, near Delhi's Karol Bagh. The contractor supplied her with the material from which she fashioned the attractive cosmetic embellishments. She then placed these on small cardboard pieces for distribution and sale. While the work would seem simple enough, it was extremely laborious. What was she paid for this? A pittance: Rs 3-4 for 144 packets of plain bindis, and Rs 12 for the same number of 'fancy' bindis, that required fixing additional bling. Sita echoed Naseem, "Even if we work non-stop we can only hope to make around Rs 15-20 a day. Not being trained in anything else, we have no escape if we have to live."

Naseem and Sita were just two of the many women who make up India's home-based work force. According to the 2007 report of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector

chaired by the late economist, Arjun Sengupta, 32.3 per cent of workers in this sector comprised women and more than half of them – nearly eight crore – had home-based occupations.

Said Sudha Sundaraman, General Secretary, All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), which had been organising these women for many years, "It breaks one's heart to see the conditions they work in, how after a full day's hard work they end up getting just a few rupees. The most shocking aspect is that over the years their wages have actually fallen even as the cost of living has risen several-fold. The global economic crisis has hit this section very hard." For Sundaraman, this was an irrefutable proof of how women have continued to be pushed into the most exploitative sectors of work. "They who most need protection, find themselves falling between the cracks, unable to access any of the government's welfare provisions," she remarked.

AIDWA had documented the varied work performed by these workers. In 1989, it conducted a survey in Pune city (Maharashtra) and identified around 150 kinds of home-based work. Almost a decade later, the organisation did a study in Delhi's working class areas and identified around 48 types of piece-rate work. These included not just making handicrafts and bindis, like Naseem and Sita did, but embroidering fabric, filling chuna (edible limestone) into containers, fashioning key rings out of thick metal wires with pliers and even semi-specialised work like assembling TV parts, making insulators for ironing elements, and chemical washing of car parts.

The study also found that after working for an average of nearly seven hours a day – often with help from other family members – home-based workers in Delhi managed to earn an average of only Rs 32.54 per day. The full extent of their situation became clearer when their wages were compared with the statutory minimum daily wage in the city, which was around Rs 250 (2011 data). Majority of them did more than one sort of piece-rate work. Additionally, it was found that an ever-increasing number of women were driven

to such work because of a shrinking job market. Sometimes a crisis in the family; the death of a husband or sudden expenditure owing to of illness in the family, or even when the children needed extra milk, compelled many to take up these occupations.

Insecurity continued to dog them nevertheless. Work was largely seasonal, with only a very small section getting work throughout the year. According to AIDWA, women got work for an average of 15.96 days a month and 6.99 months in a year. While the piece rates of 43.01 per cent of women had remained the same over time, only 16.06 per cent said that they received higher rates. What was even more disturbing was that 40.93 per cent reported their piece rates had actually decreased, but they were helpless and could do nothing about it for the fear of losing even this piffling income.

Said Kamala, who had been organising women home-based workers in Delhi since 2006, "The trouble is that we have no identity as home-based workers. Everybody pushes us around. The contractors, the suppliers, even the police. We spend our whole lives working like this. What happens when we are too frail to work? Who will support us then?"

This was precisely why groups like AIDWA repeatedly petitioned both the Central and Delhi governments to formally recognise this category of workers, provide them with identity cards, ensure guaranteed employment and comprehensive social security, including a contributory provident fund programme and insurance scheme. Underlined Sheba Farooqui, secretary of the Janwadi Mahila Samiti, "Issues of food security have been raised as well. These women need to be provided with Below Poverty Line cards so that they can buy food grains at a subsidised rate."

Till 2011, there had been little progress in this regard, apart from the passing of a weak law, the Unorganised Sector Worker's Social Security Act in Parliament that merely stated that social security was required to be provided to unorganised sector workers. It did

not lay down any specific financial provisioning, nor did it ensure the implementation of social security schemes for such workers. Moreover, the one requirement under this law, the setting up of state level boards for formulating social security and welfare schemes with only advisory powers – had not been implemented as well.

Said Sundaraman pointedly, “How has this law helped the hundreds of thousands of women in home-based work? Neither have attempts been made to set up the separate boards mandated by the Act, nor has the government tried to enumerate them. Many of these women are performing highly hazardous activities, working with shards of glass and toxic chemicals. Who is looking at their health needs? A worse injustice than this, given the neo-liberal paradigm that marks India’s economy today, is hard to imagine.”

The reality bore her out. Ironically, though these women were actually sparing their employers the costs of running establishments, paying electricity bills and instituting labour regulations, yet, they ended up getting shortchanged in terms of a proper wage. Said union leader Kamala, “Most of our women are ignorant about their rights. They are just grateful that they get a little money without having to leave their homes. We are struggling to make them more aware of their rights, but it is a long and difficult process.”

History has thrown up innumerable instances of such exploitation. The British poet, Thomas Hood, wrote on the shirt-makers of his day in his ‘Song of the Shirt’ (1843), working till their “brain begins to swim” and their “eyes are heavy and dim”. Hood could just as well have been writing about the invisible lives of scores of India’s home-based women workers.

Home Space as Work Place

Shalini Sinha

Home-based workers in India, most of whom are women, receive only meagre earnings, although it is they who end up paying for the space, utilities and equipment needed to produce their products. They also have little or no legal and social protection, nor workers' benefits. Moreover, isolation from other workers makes them extremely vulnerable to exploitation by contractors and subcontractors. Irregular work orders, arbitrary rejection of goods and delayed payments are also common. Since, remuneration is erratic and insufficient, they find it difficult to save money to invest in new machinery or training, which lowers productivity.

Compounding all these employment challenges is the major issue of urban housing. Unlike many other poor urban-based workers in the informal sector, who leave their homes to pursue their occupations, home-based workers remain confined within the four walls of their houses. Housing issues, therefore, become livelihood issues for them.

Most of them work out of cramped spaces, with little room for the storage of raw material or finished goods. Drainage facilities and garbage disposal systems are invariably non-existent, and often rodents and insects scurry around as they work. Sometimes, a monsoon deluge and leaking sewers can damage the goods and supplies that keep their livelihoods going. Poor and inadequate housing, therefore, has extremely serious implications for workers in this sector.

The lack of urban services, such as adequate and affordable supply of electricity, water, sanitation and transportation, are again factors that impact the livelihood potential of these workers. For instance, precious hours that can be used for income generating work have to be employed in collecting water. Electricity supply, which is vital for home-based work is either unaffordable or affected by frequent

load-shedding. Most home-based workers have access only to illegal connections administered by vested interests who control the slums, or buildings they live in. Consequently, bills can vary tremendously and are sometimes unnecessarily inflated. But the worst cut of all is that some of these poor workers have to shell out commercial rates for their power. Their already meagre earnings are thus further eroded.

Another serious concern is occupational health and safety. Many home-based workers are overworked, exposed to dangerous chemicals, and even forced to work under unhealthy conditions. Yet, it is difficult to regulate their working conditions because homes are not categorised as workplaces.

Every time city authorities have turned a blind eye on the basic infrastructural requirements of those living in slums, or conducted periodic demolitions of shanty towns they have only made the lives of this already marginalised section of society even more vulnerable. It is not just their living spaces that have been undermined or destroyed in this way, but their work places, too. Tragically, there has been very little information generated on the profile of these workers and hardly any regulatory or protective mechanisms for them have been put in place. City planners have never acknowledged their existence or responded to their needs. Powerful stakeholders, who exercise a strong influence on urban public resources, such as corporations and real estate developers, further tilt the scales against them. The increasing imposition of single-use zoning regulations has rendered home-based workers without any legal protection.

Given the large numbers of these workers and their economic significance, it is vital that they are allowed to emerge from the shadows. There are good reasons for policymakers to pay attention to them. After all, their work has a direct impact on poverty alleviation at a time when the organised sector is experiencing jobless growth. Besides this, most home-based products, such as handicrafts and textiles, have significant employment and export potential.

The home as a vital economic unit has to be recognised by urban authorities and decision-makers. Mixed use zoning regulations can facilitate home-based work, and provide accessible, reliable and affordable infrastructural services to this section of workers. Matt Nohn, a development economist, urban planner and policy expert, has suggested a more efficient and equitable approach to regulating land use and promoting a balanced mix of uses that allow different sections of the population to fruitfully interact with each other. As he put it, “Unless home-based production is zoned as a permissible use in residential areas, overly used zoning regulations would automatically stigmatise urban workers as informal, if not illegal, subjecting them to various forms of socio-economic exclusion and exploitation”.

The critical need of the hour, then, is to reform the way cities are planned and built, so that we move towards a concept of inclusive cities, where space and livelihood opportunities are made available to even the most marginalised worker.

Who's Afraid of Trade Unions?

Geeta Seshu

Every morning, scores of young women alight from local trains at Nala Sopara station in Thane, near Mumbai, to make their way to the numerous factories in the area. Here they assemble and manufacture anything from electrical goods to garments to gems and jewellery and machine parts. The job is hard and the pay is abysmally low and yet the self-esteem and camaraderie the women experience as they interact with their friends on their way to and from work is a major attraction for many.

"I know I don't get much money and I have to travel a great distance to get to my place of work, but I still like working in a factory. It feels good to tell someone when they ask what I do. I don't say 'ghar ka kaam' (housework), I can proudly say 'Main factory jaati hoon (I work in a factory)'." This was how Laxmi Kadam, 27, described her professional life when the writer met her in 2010. She had been working for six years with MDR Electronics, an engineering unit manufacturing cables and electrical switches in Nala Sopara, north-west of Mumbai.

Numerous academic studies have been done on the feminisation of labour and of the working conditions of women in small units. A 2006 Planning Commission report of a Working Group on Social Security for the Eleventh Five Year Plan pegged the total workforce in India, unorganised and organised sectors, at 39.7 crore. Further, while the organised sector made up seven per cent of this workforce, of the remaining, the unorganised sector, as per the report, was almost entirely made up of women – around 12 crore or about 95 per cent.

While the proportion of women in the urban workforce was always known to be less than that of their counterparts who worked in agriculture, the plight of women in the 'organised' sector was no better. "The sector is organised but the workers are not," said Sukumar Damle, who was Maharashtra state secretary of the All

India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in 2010. A major problem, especially in 'protected' areas like the Santa Cruz Electronics Export Processing Zone (SEEPZ) had been obtaining access to the workers, as any kind of unionisation is severely dealt with.

Damle referred to a solitary instance of unionisation in this area, in Peerless Fabrikkerne (India) Limited, a joint venture between an Indian company and Peerless Fabrikkerne A/S (Denmark), manufacturers of speakers and other electronic equipment. "The women get a salary of around Rs 4,000 (2010 data) per month and around three years ago, a few of them came to us because they were worried they were not getting their Provident Fund dues. While they had been working for several years and were 'permanent', there was no record of their service – no appointment letter or other documents. They did get an identity card so that they could enter the SEEPZ security-protected area but it only bore the company's name on it," said Damle.

The women were too frightened to approach the Provident Fund Commissioner, so the AITUC, through its Engineering and Metal Workers' Union, sent a letter. Another letter was sent to the Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) to avail any of the medical benefits.

The letters created a furore and the company's management immediately began seeking out the union leaders amongst the women. Subsequently, only 19 of the 50 women joined the union and managed to get a stay order against any dismissal. In the meantime, the union tried to get various authorities, from the Provident Fund Commissioner, the SEEPZ Development Commissioner and the ESIC Regional Commissioner to look into their complaints. But even that proved to be a struggle, elaborated Damle, and added that the women were pressurised to state before the visiting ESIC inspectors that they had a five-day week and that they got more money than they actually did.

Explained labour lawyer Gayatri Singh, "As far as unorganised workers are concerned, there are no minimum wages, no benefits and no unions. It is very difficult for workers to unionise and whenever they take up an issue, the companies close down only to open elsewhere."

For women workers, the issue is complicated by the Factories Act, 1948, which prohibits night shifts for them, except under certain conditions. It is the responsibility of employers to provide safe working conditions for their workers but when women in the fisheries industry demanded better working conditions they were beaten up and their protest fizzled out.

The small units in the distant suburbs of Mumbai and townships in the neighbouring Thane district were beyond the pale of organised union activity or even the right to question existing wages or work conditions. On an average, the women said that they were getting around Rs 90-95 per day. With overtime, this amount could go up to around Rs 150 per day. As some of the money got whittled off in transport costs, around Rs 20-25 depending on the distance to be travelled, finally they took home only around Rs 4,000-4,500 per month.

This amount was at least Rs 75 (per day) less than the stipulated minimum wage for semi-skilled work in the engineering industry and the women were well aware of the fact that the mandatory register maintained at their office for the inspection of labour officials of the government showed a different wage.

"I have been working since 2004 and only now my salary is around Rs 4,000-4,500. The amount varies because I sometimes get money for a train 'pass' (a seasonal ticket for the suburban train). The company has a bus for us but that takes time so we end up taking an autorickshaw to the station," explained Jaya Pawar, 36, who worked in MDR's department making cables and sockets.

As a practice the women got a half an hour lunch break and were served tea at their workstation twice a day. The workstation itself was merely a long bench and the women got individual high stools to sit on, with no backrest. "They don't want us to get too comfortable, otherwise we won't work as fast as we should," laughed Laxmi, adding that the supervisors discourage any talking at work. Mobile phones were not allowed and the women were fined if the phones rang or they were caught chatting at work.

There had been no instances of sexual harassment in their unit and a major reason for that was the fact that the owner was strict about any interaction between women and male employees as well as the interface between the women and the male supervisors. The women adhered to a dress code and were not allowed to wear jeans or big earrings. "If anyone is seen to be unduly fashionable, or they don't drape their 'dupatta' properly, or laugh too loudly or don't sit properly, they are immediately told to conform or leave," said Maya Kadam, 32, who was planning to quit after marriage, which was only a few months away. She added that a majority of the employees were not against these restrictions as it made the work environment more secure.

Recruitment was by word of mouth and an employee got a commission if she brought a friend along who could stick around for a length of time. For the women, a majority of whom were school dropouts, factory employment was a way out of poverty as well as a better alternative to jobs as domestic workers or beauty parlour attendants. But with the wages remaining constant and the spiralling cost of living, escaping from poverty seemed more remote than ever.

The names of the workers have been changed to protect their identity.

All Work and Poor Pay: Nursing Injustice

Sreelekha Nair

"I was passionate about becoming a nurse... My mother too was a nurse... She had served for around 30 years when she passed away unexpectedly... People still respect her and say that she was a 'good' woman. I worked (in a hospital in Bengaluru) as a nurse after my diploma in nursing for around seven years before deciding to do further studies and get out of the clinical area... I realised that my mother remained the 'good woman' because she made considerable adjustments and compromises for that... I tried my best to comply but at some point the conditions of work in the hospitals and the attitude of the doctors got on my nerves. I could not take it any more and decided to quit and become a teacher. Of course, I am a nurse basically but I get respect because I am a teacher..."

This statement from a faculty member of a private nursing college affiliated to the Rajiv Gandhi University of Health Sciences in Bengaluru, Karnataka's state capital, reveals more than just her life story. She was actually providing a picture of the multiple facets of nursing and the injustices that mark the working conditions and status of nurses. In addition, the story also reflects the ambivalence of nurses when they talk about their work. On the one hand is the respect the profession gives them; on the other hand are concerns about their working conditions.

There are two main avenues of employment for these compassionate yet strong professional women: public sector hospitals or the multitude of private outfits that have mushroomed across cities and small towns. A comparison of the working conditions in these two sectors can easily be made on the twin scales of remuneration and basic work environment.

Take an average government hospital. The implementation of the 6th Pay Commission recommendations has reportedly brought in some positive changes in the lives of nurses here – they get a fairly

good pay packet and, at times, even their working conditions have been described as “better”. Yet, a poor nurse-patient ratio made the work “back-breaking”.

The private sector, though, was a different story altogether. Exploitation marked the experiences of nurses here. Critical areas of neglect and mismanagement existed and rules were often flouted to make higher profits. It was the staff and nurses at the lowest echelons who bore the main brunt of these conditions. It was their salary scales that were compromised, not that of the specialist physicians whose power and mobility cannot be controlled by hospital managements. Moreover, the contractual agreement that nurses entered into included signing a “bond” that required them to work in the hospital for two to three years. Confiscating nursing certificates has become the established practice to restrict their professional mobility. Arrangements of this kind prevent nurses from seeking other placements without the knowledge of their current employers. Such injustice was made possible because of the unregulated, profit-centric nature of the health sector today.

The fact that many of these professionals are migrants was another factor that often went against them. Migrant nurses – especially from Kerala – formed the largest segment of this workforce. These women moved to urban centres like Delhi and Mumbai with the support of their friends, other nurses and relatives, and were vulnerable in an unfamiliar setting and city. What made things worse were personal circumstances forcing them to take up the first job that came their way, never mind the low pay or killing hours. In fact, fresh diploma holders were the ones who were given very low salaries, with their lack of experience being cited as the reason for this. Even the most professional private sector hospitals paid salaries around Rs 6,600 (2011 data), while in mid-sized hospitals, the pay packet was around Rs 3,000 to Rs 4,000. This despite several protests and the Sixth Pay Commission that gave nurses in the public sector a better deal.

Of course, a look at the working life of nurses is incomplete without taking into account aspects like their living arrangements,

transportation and on-duty facilities. While many big hospitals do offer accommodation within their premises or in areas close by, easing the pressure on them to find lodging and daily transportation, this largely served their own purpose. Hospitals were able to cut a substantial part of their costs on house rent allowance that they would otherwise have had to pay. In any case, the kind of accommodation provided was of minimal standards and offered no privacy.

In addition, the ever innovative entrepreneurial class that dominates the health sector in India even made the provision of transport – often in ambulances – an assertion of their right to control the movement of nurses. It made it easy for them to impose overtime work at short notice in the event of a shortage of staff. In many hospitals, during duty hours there were no rooms for them to rest or change their clothes.

The nurse-patient ratio in India is a poor 1:30. It is worse in the general wards, which could be as high as 1:50. Fewer nurses only meant that those on duty would have to put in additional hours. But then there was no set system of extra compensation. In 2011, after prolonged protests by nurses of the All India Nurses Federation, an organisation formed by the public sector nurses, and sporadic strikes by nurses in the private sector, some hospitals claimed they were taking measures to pay overtime.

According to the nurses, the abysmal situation they found themselves in had been largely exacerbated by the fact that as a group they have not been able to unionise and traditional trade unions have been negligent towards the rights of this section of workers.

The nature of the work, seen as an essential service, further constrained unionisation. In the past, efforts in this direction were confined to specific cases, such as violent physical attacks or sexual harassment, or issues like changes in uniforms. There were also important stories of struggles and exceptional displays of leadership. For instance, the Delhi Nurses' Union emerged a winner in many of its negotiations with managements and the government during the 1990s.

But the growing hierarchy within the profession has only aggravated the exploitation of nurses by creating divisions that come in the way of collective bargaining. The proliferation of various nursing diplomas and certificates in numerous nursing institutions only increased the divide. While highly specialised nurses were at one end of the spectrum, the employment of nursing auxiliaries and assistants, who are paid much less, made the average well-trained nurse an easy target.

Unfortunately, policy measures initiated by the government to improve the status of nursing have not really been implemented. These measures, in any case, were invariably driven by the broader objective of widening the institutional healthcare system in India.

In the absence of government intervention, individual nurses had developed their own strategy to get a better deal. This chiefly entailed migrating to greener pastures – and that could be anywhere in the world, especially to developed countries that offered better pay and avenues for professional development.

According to a 2010 World Health Organization report, job insecurity for contractual staff, low pay and lack of a conducive work environment, were just some of the key unresolved issues related to nurse retention in India. Given the ever-increasing demand for nurses around the world, India stands to lose more of its nursing professionals. This is something it just cannot afford. If nurses are to be retained in India, then there is no alternative apart from reforming their exploitative work environment.

No Babies, Please

Surekha Kadapa-Bose

A few years ago when actor Aishwarya Rai-Bachchan's pregnancy led to her ouster from a major film project, it had brought the spotlight once again on the undercurrents that every pregnant woman experienced at the workplace.

More than 120 countries around the world have taken the welfare of pregnant women into account by ensuring paid maternity leave and health benefits by law. Even the Indian Constitution has guaranteed freedom of choice to a woman. The Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 ensures that pregnant women are not discriminated against. The Act states that an employer cannot refuse to hire a woman because of her pregnancy related condition as long as she is able to perform the major functions of her job. It further adds that an employer cannot fire or force an employee to leave because she is expecting a baby. Moreover, even the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, has directed the State to make adequate provisions for maternity leave and benefit to women employees. In fact, it is illegal to dismiss someone on account of pregnancy or any illness during pregnancy and an employer who violates the provisions of the Act is liable to imprisonment up to three months or fine up to Rs 5,000 or both.

Big Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs), public and private sector banks, the Information Technology Enabled Services sector, and other multinational companies are generally known to be sensitive to the needs of their female staff, especially when they are pregnant. Such organisations have made provisions for maternity leave, which may vary from three to six months.

But does all this make the professional life of an expectant woman easy? Unfortunately, no. There have been numerous instances of subtle discrimination where situations caused women to give up their regular work. Take the case of Chandigarh-based Gulshan Kaur

(name changed). Although this popular worker had been a regular employee in a private bank for over two years, when she became pregnant she realised that it was not easy for an expectant woman to catch a break in the fast-moving financial circles. She recalled, "I suffered from severe morning sickness during the early days of my pregnancy. Nausea, vomiting and giddiness made me feel very sick. When I asked my boss for a month's leave, he flatly refused. I even offered to go on leave without pay. But even that didn't work out and I was forced to resign."

Gulshan was unable to fight for her maternity leave or any other benefits as she was working on an off-roll basis. According to this arrangement, although she was paid a salary, she was not given a salary slip. This prevented her from availing any benefits. Her situation was more or less like that of a daily wage worker. As an off-roll employee she was also dependent on the sympathy of her seniors for perks that came her way.

Similar was the case of Deepika Kulkarni (name changed), who worked in a fast-food restaurant in Mumbai. Despite having discharged her duties perfectly, owing to the fact that she did not suffer from any pregnancy-related problems during the first six months, Deepika's immediate boss was always looking for ways to fire her. The reason: her maternity leave entitlement.

Observed F.J. Dy-Hammar, Chief of International Labour Organization's (ILO) Conditions of Work Branch, who oversaw the report, *Maternity Protection at Work*, "In all parts of the world, working women who become pregnant are faced with the threat of job loss, suspended earnings and increased health risks due to inadequate safeguards for their employment."

This impacts society. Across the globe, women have contributed to household income. In fact, in many homes, it is women who provide the main source of income. According to the ILO, in India alone, an estimated 60 million people live in households maintained only

by women (2011 data). These include Below the Poverty Line (BPL) families as well as those who were upwardly mobile.

So what happens when women are forced out of employment? Do any of them go to court? According to Anita Irani, a matrimonial lawyer attached to Majlis, a Mumbai-based centre for rights discourse, "The majority of pregnant women bear the trauma of working in an unfriendly atmosphere rather than approach the court. How will they prove the harassment? It is so subtle. A court case involves money and women need a job. They would rather silently take a break and look for another job later than voice their angst."

This scenario has not been restricted to India alone. Pregnancy discrimination complaints filed with the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) jumped 39 per cent from 1992 to 2003, according to a recent analysis of government data by the Washington-based National Partnership for Women & Families. During the same time, the nation's birth rate dropped nine per cent.

With the legal route seldom even considered, many women, especially in industries like hospitality, IT, media and entertainment, where the hours are long and night shifts commonplace, have resorted to hiding their condition for as long as they could. When it comes to the entertainment industry, the situation can get even trickier. Anuradha Tewari, writer of the film, *Heroine*, which was to star Aishwarya Rai-Bachchan before she became pregnant, has been quoted as saying, "This is the visual medium. The character in *Heroine* couldn't have been pulled off by someone who was pregnant."

Producers and directors in the Hindi film industry have been considering adding pregnancy clauses in future contracts to safeguard themselves against any such losses. But, according to Anita Bafna, an advocate in the Bombay High Court, they may have such a clause in the contract and even get the female actor to sign it, but it would not hold any water in a court of law.

Both Bafna and Irani agreed that in high profile jobs, pregnancy could lead to many problems. But both also pointed out that ultimately a woman's right to bear a child had to be protected by society.

Penalised for Pregnancy

Sharmistha Choudhury

When Reema Paul (name changed) switched jobs, lured by a better salary and brighter prospects, she happily signed the contract that set down certain terms and conditions for her first year at the Kolkata branch of one of India's top electronic chain of stores. It was a mere formality, she thought. With her experience and zest for success, she felt she would have only a few problems. Little did she know that soon she would be on her way out, not because her work had been found unsatisfactory or because she had been guilty of some grave misconduct, but simply because she had 'dared' to get pregnant.

"My contract stated that I would not be allowed any leave for the first year," recounted Reema, "but how was I to imagine that I would be penalised for my pregnancy? I always thought that women employees in the organised sector were entitled to maternity leave." Obviously, she had thought wrong. When a heavily pregnant Reema applied for leave, she was asked to hand in her resignation letter.

Mothers and motherhood have traditionally and, often patronisingly, been glorified in our country although employers clearly do not share this attitude. Despite the promises of the Maternity Benefit Act of 1961, pregnant working women have continued to get a raw deal.

Over two decades ago, in 1991, the Supreme Court of India had ruled in favour of pregnant employees in the celebrated Mrs Neera Mathur v/s Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) case. Mrs Mathur had been appointed by the LIC on September 25, 1989. She was put on probation for six months and was to be confirmed, subject to a satisfactory work report. She applied for maternity leave on December 27, 1989. On February 13, 1990, she was discharged from service during her period of probation. The reason cited for termination was that she had deliberately withheld the fact of being pregnant at the time of filling up a declaration form prior to being appointed.

When Mrs Mathur moved to court, it directed LIC to reinstate her. Furthermore, on perusing the aforementioned declaration form, the Court was shocked to note that it required women candidates to provide information about the dates of their menstrual cycles and past pregnancies. The Court considered this to be an invasion of privacy of a person and a violation of Article 21, which guarantees right to life and privacy. It, therefore, directed the LIC not only to reinstate Mrs Mathur but also to delete those columns from its future questionnaires.

In 2012, newspapers reported the case of Indrani Chakraverty who had been working for a Delhi design firm, Idiom Consulting Ltd, for some years. Suddenly, in August 2009, when she was expecting her first child, she was told over the phone that she had been sacked. She filed a criminal case against the company for violating the Maternity Benefits Act of 1961 and on July 26 last year she won Rs 7.5 lakh as settlement money from the company on orders from Delhi High Court.

While Mrs Mathur and Indrani were able to file cases against their employers, not many women have been able take their fight to the courts. Reema couldn't. "I did not hand in my resignation," she said, "But I never went back, because they made it amply clear that they would not have me back." She admitted that perhaps things would have been different if she had approached the office of the labour commissioner, as her trade unionist father had suggested. However, companies bank on the fact that a young woman, who has delivered her first baby, and whose in-laws may not be terribly keen on her going back to work immediately after, would be too stressed out to challenge her employers with legal action.

When Reema's employers were contacted to enquire about their policy towards pregnant employees, and about the treatment meted out to her, they simply stated that Reema had never been an employee. "I have my contract and other proofs," Reema said, with a wry smile.

Shikha Sengupta (name changed), who was employed in a Non-Government Organisation (NGO), faced a similar predicament when she conceived. When she applied for maternity leave it was promptly accepted. The next few weeks passed by in a whirl as she savoured the experience of motherhood for the first time. Then it was time to get back to work and learn to juggle a baby and job. Or so she thought. Two days before she was due to join office, her boss called her up and told her to enjoy her leave for some more time because the new project she was supposed to be put on had not come in yet. An unsuspecting Shikha was delighted with the extended leave.

A week later, she was told that the new project had fallen through and as there was not enough work in hand, they would not need her services for the time being. Expectedly, the NGO never took her back. "Was I terminated?" mused Shikha. "I don't know. My brother suggested that I go to court but I thought that would jeopardise my future in the sector. Nobody would touch me with a barge pole if they knew I was the kind that took legal action against employers. So if I lost in court I was done for. I decided to simply look for another job."

Things did not turn out as she had expected. "Having a baby is something so different from all that you have ever done or been through in life that it throws you completely out of gear," she said, adding, "If I had a job to go back to, I would have adapted to the life of a working mother. But looking for one made all the difference." In the beginning, she postponed job hunting telling herself that she would wait out the weaning period. Then, gradually, she fell into the rhythm of devoting her entire time to the baby that the thought of looking for a job all but faded from her mind. That both her in-laws and parents encouraged her to be a stay-at-home mother – for the first few years at least – did not help matters. As her child became more independent and did not need constant attention, she began to feel the first pangs of frustration. "It's been a two-year career

break already and I seem to have already lost the zest for going out to work. If a job does not come by soon, maybe I shall lose the will to work altogether," she sighed.

Said Kolkata High Court lawyer, Mayukhmoy Adhikari, "In no civilised nation can a woman be asked to resign from her job or be terminated because she is pregnant. In such cases she should immediately file a complaint with the police, write to the Women's Commission and then take legal action. The trick is to never resign from your job even if asked to do so, and to make sure that you formally report for work after your maternity leave is over. If the company then terminates you or transfers you to a difficult location or post, you can either take the matter up with the labour commissioner or go straight to court. The law is on your side."

Be that as it may, lived experiences reveal the grim reality that maternity still pushes hundreds of women out of employment, with them being most vulnerable in sectors where the rate of unionisation is nil or very low. Concluded Reema, "Your boss is sure to love babies but s/he will surely not love you if you are carrying one."

Struggle for Contraceptive Rights

Anusha Agarwal

“My husband says that taking care of these matters is a woman's job. He asks me, ‘do you want to make me look unmanly by using a condom?’” Those were the words of Suman (name changed), 26, the resident of a resettlement colony near Delhi's Rajouri Garden, who worked in middle class homes in the neighbourhood in order to supplement her family's income.

Suman was one of the women spoken to in the course of a research paper on maternal health issues of domestic workers living in urban clusters and shanty towns across India's capital city of Delhi. The field work covered select patches near Budhella, Keshopur and Hasthsal villages (near Vikaspuri in South West Delhi); slum settlements near Rajouri Garden and Mayapuri; and resettlement colonies near Tughlakabad and Sangam Vihar (South Delhi). The paper that emerged, entitled ‘Living On the Edge: Maternal Health Issues of Domestic Women Workers’, revealed the clear lack of a well-defined and workable system of maternal and neo-natal health for domestic women workers in the informal economy, and the critical need for such support.

Largely migrants, most of these women lived in makeshift homes and led extremely vulnerable lives. While Delhi was the site of the research, the findings that emerged could hold true for any big city in India. Rural distress and poor access to paid labour in the hinterland had ensured a constant flow of women and men in search of unskilled employment into the urban centres of the country. Simultaneously, there was a sharp increase in the numbers of middle class women pursuing professional careers and looking to shift the household workload that inevitably falls on their shoulders, on to the poor women employed in their homes as domestic workers.

These domestic workers had few support structures, little education and almost no bargaining power. Adding to their many deprivations

was their lack of access to affordable and quality contraception and maternal health care. Even their partners failed them, as was evident in Suman's case. According to the research, 73 per cent of the male partners of the respondents did not concern themselves with family planning in any way and the use of condoms was very low.

Pregnancy brought its own share of traumas. A majority of respondents, 77 per cent, continued to work almost until the time came for them to give birth. This was since most of the women bore the sole responsibility of taking care of their household. They could neither afford hired help nor forego their monthly or daily wages. Being in the informal sector they received no paid maternity leave, so they carried on at their hard grind even in the advanced stages of pregnancy.

A woman from Sangam Vihar near Tughlakabad Fort spoke for many when she said, "My husband doesn't earn anything. He is a useless drunkard. How can I, the sole bread earner for the family, stop working for so many months? Who will support us?"

What was striking about the findings of the investigation was that although most of these women went to a hospital or saw a doctor during their pregnancy, a large number of them, 66.6 per cent had delivered at home as opposed to a hospital (23.3 per cent) or a clinic (10 per cent). Talking to the women provided insights into why this was the case in a major metropolis like Delhi with innumerable health facilities.

The reasons varied. In some cases, it was the lack of financial resources. Revealed Laxmi (name changed), who lived near Budhella village, "We don't have enough money to have a vehicle ready for us at all times. If there is no means of transport, we have to give birth at home." In other cases, it was the lack of education and the inability to make an informed choice. Savita (name changed), said she conformed to family diktat by delivering at home. As she put it, "My in-laws told me that it was customary to call the 'dai'

(traditional birth attendant) home for helping with the delivery. What is the need for wasting money in hospitals?" In fact, 53.33 per cent of respondents revealed that the decisions on healthcare during pregnancy were made by the "elders" of the family, who were more likely than not to hold conservative views on such issues. The pregnant woman herself contributed little or no inputs in this decision making process.

The lack of personal agency when it came to contraceptive and maternal healthcare manifested itself in different ways. During the focus group discussions, some housemaids revealed how they often requested their women employers for morning-after pills after they had had sexual relations with partners without having used contraception of any kind.

This appeared to be a fairly widespread phenomenon and again underlined the lack of access to information and contraceptive services among migrant domestic women workers in urban clusters. It pointed to the larger reality of a health delivery system that had several inherent weaknesses. Even in something as basic as information generation, there were many gaps.

These were women who had spent their best years on an unrelenting double shift – working furiously to clean up other people's homes, cook other people's food, and look after other people's children, even as they struggled to feed their own families, clean their own homes and keep their own children in schools. Yet, they did not figure in government policies or benefit from social welfare initiatives and programmes.

Time then that India's domestic workers got fairer compensation for their work as well as adequate support structures, including access to quality health and contraceptive care.

Social Welfare Workers left without Social Welfare

Amrita Nandy

Amidst the high footfall at Jantar Mantar, Delhi's protest hub, and the thousands of cracked feet, dusty slippers and grimy shoes it sees every day, the tiny, bare and soft feet of a ten-month-old baby stood out. On her fours, she looked for space to crawl but was jailed by the legs that surrounded her. In an intriguing way, her baffled expression reflected the helplessness of the women who were ringed around her.

Who were these hundreds of women? Why did they come all the way to the country's Capital from distant hamlets? They were the ASHAs (Accredited Social Health Activist) and mid-day meal workers who are among the largest and fastest growing groups of working women in the country. They had repeatedly been staging protests in the heart of India's capital but to no avail. Their situations signified the ruthless attitude of the government towards lakhs of underpaid, overworked contractual workers.

One of the batches that was demonstrating at Jantar Mantar was from Punjab. The women had come from places like Bhatinda, Moga, Muktsar, Barnala, Gurdaspur, Amritsar, Taran Taran, Ropar and Mohali. Each one had a story of her own, although it was striking how similar all their accounts were.

As Paramjit Kaur Mann, 33, General Secretary of the ASHA Workers and Facilitators Union of Punjab, put it, "An ASHA worker in Punjab earns up to Rs 700 to 800 a month. This is neither the statutory minimum wage of Punjab – which amounts to Rs 5,200 – nor a fixed rate, but a performance-based compensation. Now imagine how much they make her work for this measly sum. Each ASHA is supposed to attend to the needs of 1,000 people."

A long, long list of tasks has been assigned to an ASHA. She is supposed to create awareness about health; maintain the village health register, health cards, immunisation cards; counsel people

on healthy practices; coordinate with various village and block level authorities on health and sanitation issues; escort pregnant women to health centres for pre-natal and ante-natal check-ups and deliveries; provide medical care for minor ailments; interact with self-help groups and attend community meetings, to name a few of her 'duties'.

A few feet away from the Punjab women, in a large tent that seemed small because of the hundreds seeking shade under it, were ASHA workers from Baghpat, Bulandshahar, Amroha, Ghaziabad and other parts of Uttar Pradesh. One of the protestors, Lakshmi, 31, a resident of Hapur, expressed her anger about the working conditions she had to put up with, "I have been an ASHA for the last seven years but I regret choosing this work. We are paid less than unskilled labourers but it is not just about the money. We have to accompany women in labour to hospitals at odd hours without any transport or allowance and we get screamed at by doctors and nurses who do not even give us a place to sit or a bathroom to use. There is no dignity, no system in place. Payments get delayed by months. Sometimes if the child is stillborn, they even deny us payment! Is the government helping us or exploiting us?"

Observed another worker from Punjab, "The work is disproportionate to our mandate and payment. We were even asked to handle the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (National Health Insurance Scheme) cards and promised an incentive of two rupees per card. Those payments were never made. Then, we were asked to conduct a 1.5 month long survey on cancer's prevalence in the state. It was an intensive survey where one needed to record the medical history of all members of a family. We resisted it but doctors and others in the medical community threatened us into silence by saying that they would have us fired."

Anecdote after anecdote revealed the difficulties and oppression an ASHA experienced unlike the claims of being the 'first port-of-call' that she was envisioned to be as part of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) in 2005. During their Delhi protest, the ASHAs from

two different states by overcoming language barriers could piece together the realities of their working lives and agree on the need to fight for a better deal.

Mid-day meal workers have fared no better. Hiring lakhs of contractual labourers implied little obligation for the government and a denial of statutory benefits to the worker, such as job security, an eight-hour work day, paid leave, travel and dearness allowance, bonuses, and so on. Employed as cooks for the mid-day meal scheme of the Sarva Sikhsha Abhiyan (SSA) run by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, it was thanks to the efforts of these women that the government could claim a 96 per cent hike in school enrollment in the age group 6-14 (Annual Status of Education Report Rural 2012). Yet, Lakhwinder Kaur, President, Mid-day Meal Workers Union of Punjab, an affiliate of the New Trade Union Initiative, described them as “grain that is pounded mercilessly”. She explained, “In Punjab, a mid-day meal worker is paid Rs 1,200 for cooking and cleaning seven days a week, whereas in Chandigarh they get Rs 1,900 for the same job. Both rates are less than the state’s minimum wage.”

The experiences told a story of great exploitation. If there was no water in the school for cooking, these workers were made to lug it from their own homes! In Muktsar, a young cook was fired from her job because she had taken leave to deliver a child. A woman in Faridkot had suffered 90 per cent burns while cooking at the school, but the government did not pay a paisa towards her treatment, which cost nearly Rs 60,000. Years after the accident, she was still not totally cured. To cover accidents of this kind, Lakhwinder and her colleagues were demanding an insurance cover of Rs 2 lakh per worker, among other benefits.

Globalisation has pushed a large number of women into the unorganised sector where there is no social security to speak of, nor fair working conditions. It is also well-known that the government is the largest employer of female contractual workers who are paid modest honorariums dependent on the various “flagship” schemes

promoted as social welfare initiatives. But surely there is an irony here when interventions meant to lift people out of poverty ends up impoverishing the very workforce that keeps them going. Can there be a more glaring example of the government's apathy towards these poor "project workers" than the fact that they have even been left out of the ambit of the Protection of Women against Sexual Harassment legislation? The vulnerability to sexual assaults and violence faced by such women workers was only too obvious.

Having protested yet again in Delhi and submitted yet another memorandum demanding regularisation of work, dignity and labour benefits, it was heart-rending to see the women from Punjab ask for directions to a gurudwara nearby. Prayers, it seemed, were their last hope, as they prepared to spend another sleepless night on the floor.

Sanitary Workers Get a Raw Deal

Pushpa Achanta

“The street has just been swept but, look, it is still so filthy. The garbage has not been cleared. These municipal workers never do their job properly.” Such comments are commonly heard across Bengaluru’s middle and high income neighbourhoods. While these very same people do not hesitate to throw trash from their homes out on to the streets, they are always quick to transfer the entire responsibility of keeping their city clean on to the shoulders of poorly paid, ill-equipped municipality workers, known as ‘pourakarmikas’ in Kannada.

Clad in a sari and an overcoat, and equipped with a broom and trolley containing a couple of garbage bins, ‘pourakarmikas’ in the Garden City start their day at around 6 am, sweeping and collecting trash from the streets. To do this back-breaking, potentially hazardous work, they are not given any sort of protective gear – no gloves, no masks, no protective footwear or clothing are made available to them.

Thirty five-year-old Dhanamma (names have been changed to protect identities), a ‘pourakarmika’ for 17 years, has a hectic schedule managing her home and a very demanding job. For this mother-of-three, the worst part of the day is when she has to segregate the garbage collected from homes and offices. ‘Pourakarmikas’ are not just responsible for collecting the rubbish, they are forced to manually separate it. This despite the fact that the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), or the Bengaluru Municipality, had mandated that waste separation must be done by the disposers at the source.

This puts municipal workers at great risk since they come in direct contact with garbage that includes metal, glass, hazardous substances, human waste (sanitary towels, toilet paper), food, and so on – all of which can cause infections, wounds, rashes and diseases. Revealed Dhanamma, “Respiratory infections and eye sores are routine because of the dust. Further, since we have to bend and sweep for nearly four to five hours regularly, our back, legs and hands ache badly.”

Despite the hazardous nature of their occupation, the salaries they get are hardly commensurate with the hard work entailed. 'Pourakarmikas' are paid anywhere between Rs 5,000 to Rs 7,500 per month, which is insufficient to survive in a city like Bengaluru. To make ends meet, many take on other jobs such as cleaning apartment complexes or doing domestic work, during off-duty hours. A 'pourakarmika's' second job profile is rarely different from her first, because she is barely literate and lacks employable skills.

Apart from their meagre pay and poor working conditions, there are other challenges 'pourakarmikas' have to face because they are not permanent workers. The fact is that the BBMP has not recruited directly after 1994. As a result, delayed salaries, unexplained pay cuts and violation of minimum wage guidelines are commonplace. The contractors who hire them treat them without respect and at times even decrease their wages citing billing deductions by the municipality.

'Pourakarmikas' are paid by cheque, and this means that they need to have a bank account and be familiar with operating it. This becomes a major problem. Given the semi-literate status of many of these women, and the fact that they may be living in a slum and lack a residential address or voter identity card, they may not even have the documents necessary to open an account.

For women like Dhanamma, not getting a day off in the week or holidays during festivals, although they are entitled to them, creates additional difficulties. Yet, they are not compensated in any way for working overtime, or on holidays. As for the benefit of something as basic as a toilet, they can forget it – they are left to manage this aspect as best as they might.

Work life for the 14,000 contract 'pourakarmikas' across eight BBMP zones in Bengaluru could get better if they unionised. Attempts have been made in this regard. Over 2,000 municipal workers in north and east of the city came together under the banner of the BBMP Guttige Pourakarmikara Sangha (BBMP Contract Workers

Association) – the only municipal workers’ union registered since 2010 and affiliated to the All India Trade Union Congress.

According to Balan, a city lawyer, who has helped these workers form the union, “It is not easy for ‘pourakarmikas’ to organise because they are spread across the city. Moreover, being largely from the dalit community, which has been exploited over the ages, they have yet to learn to assert their rights. They fear the wrath of the contractors who are above the level of their immediate supervisors.” To address the gender specific concerns of the ‘pourakarmikas’, the union has set up a women’s wing with its own secretary.

The Sangha encourages the contract ‘pourakarmikas’ to demand their rights and entitlements including the daily basic of Rs 194 and dearness allowance, which was notified in November 2011. Also when BBMP workers decided to strike against the lack of payment of wages and arrears in 2012, they were supported by the union.

‘Pourakarmikas’ can take lessons from the experiences of domestic workers in the state. In north Karnataka, specifically in north-east Bengaluru and Gulbarga, domestic workers had formed the Karnataka Domestic Workers’ Union (KDWU) way back in 2003-04. Domestic workers from south Bengaluru have also set up their own group, the Domestic Workers’ Rights Union (DWRU), with around 2,000 members from south Bengaluru, Mysore and other towns. Both groups have a small membership fee, issue photographic identity cards and educate the women about their rights. Further, they reach out with information on tackling the violence that they face in their homes or work places.

Chennamma, 50, an active member of DWRU, spoke for her group when she said, “Take the case of my friend Ayesha, who is elderly and underpaid but has no way out as she is unable to find an alternate job at a convenient location. Apart from fair wages and benefits, we want dignified treatment and the recognition of our labour as workers.”

House Work/Care Work: Hierarchies Among Domestic Workers

Geeta Seshu

“Someone must think of us and our plight. After all, we leave our homes and our children to look after your home and your children. Yet, we get no respect, we are thrown out if we fall sick and, after working continuously all week, we get a pittance,” remarked Vimal Hirwai, a domestic worker of 30 years, when the writer met her in 2010.

A proud member of the Maharashtra Molkarin Ghar Kamgar Sanghatana (MMGS), an organisation affiliated to the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), Hirwai, recalled a time when she did all the housework for barely Rs 70. “The times must change, how long can we work like this without even being recognised?” she said.

Hirwai's daughter, Laxmi, and granddaughter, Geeta, were also members of the union but while Laxmi was working as a domestic, Geeta was a private 'nurse'. The story of these three women, from different generations, provided a fascinating insight into the world of domestic workers, encapsulating changes in working conditions and salaries, even as it underlined the fact that the recognition that had eluded Hirwai's work continued to elude that of both her daughter and granddaughter.

The hierarchy among domestic workers was fixed: those who undertook cleaning chores were at the bottom; placed a little higher were those who cooked and the patient or baby care workers were at the top. Moreover, the wages and status of the three also varied depending on the type of work, geographical location of employment, and experience, or simply driven by market necessities.

“It has been next to impossible to organise these workers,” said Eknath Mane, President of MMGS in 2010. He went on to highlight the inconsistencies in their remuneration. According to him, while in some areas the cleaning job (dusting, sweeping and mopping)

fetches workers around Rs 200 a month; in others, for the same work the monthly salary was Rs 500. But the one thing common to everyone was the uncertainty of tenure: a worker could quit or get fired or be replaced if she fell sick and did not turn up for work for more than three days!

The task of computing a fixed wage for such variable standards of work was also onerous. Said Sukumar Damle, Maharashtra State Secretary, AITUC, "We decided not to get into individual negotiations on wages because it was not possible to get into the fights between the employers and their maids." But the MMGS did take up disputes regarding non-payment of wages and harassment.

Although the enactment of the Maharashtra Domestic Workers Welfare Board Act in 2008 did not address the fixation of wages, it did lay down important provisions like ensuring ration cards for domestic workers, and making available medical benefits under the Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC).

"In our efforts to ensure the implementation of the Act, we have organised agitations and even stormed the residence of the state labour minister Hasan Mushrif but he said that the government had no money to set up a board and implement the Act!" said Mane, adding that the MMGS had also been working on a campaign to ensure domestic workers got rations through the public distribution system.

This advocacy had the desired results. Informed Mangala Chavan, 28, "Earlier, when we went to the ration shop we would be told that there was no rice or kerosene. Now if the shop-owner says he doesn't have any grain or kerosene, we file a complaint. We have *himmat* (confidence) and have learnt to fight." In addition, the Sanghatana organised the Jeevan Madhur and Jeevan Mangal insurance policies for them through the Life Insurance Corporation. "Every month, agents come to our office and collect the money. Besides, we have even managed to obtain bank accounts," informed Sangita Pandale, 35. This was a big step in giving legitimacy to their existence, as opening a bank account was

denied to them since they lived in rented accommodation and did not even possess ration cards.

In 2010, domestic health care workers were getting a higher daily wage – Rs 200-250 for 'ayahs' (helpers or attendants) and Rs 700-750 per day for private nurses. While regulation was non-existent, unrecognised nursing training institutes and placement bureaus had mushroomed, fuelled by the increasing demand for geriatric care or the need for an extra hand in nuclear families to assist people with post-operative care or disabilities.

Naturally, patient care work was preferred over cleaning, as it was better paying and had fixed 12-hour shifts. Whereas the government recognised nursing institutes required candidates to go through a rigorous three-year course, institutes like the Sumit Academy where Hirwai's granddaughter Geeta had enrolled, were charging Rs 4,000 for a three-month course that gave training in total patient care. "Not everyone can go for a government course, where you need to have a Class X pass certificate. So we don't have a choice but to go to the private institutes," said Geeta. She added that while the 'nurses' worked under the guidance of the doctors their patients consulted, the ayahs were given tasks like cleaning or changing the patient.

"But this is not easy work and it is difficult to find people with the disposition for it," observed Harkishan Bhambhani, who was running the Bina Ayah's Section, an agency for the placement of attendants. The Ayah Section was an offshoot of Bina Nurses Bureau, started by his mother Gopi Bhambhani in 1963. Around 500 'ayahs' were registered with the Bureau and a 12-hour shift earned them Rs 250 per day, while an eight-hour shift fetched Rs 210, with an extra Rs 20 for travel from the railway station to the place of work.

While there was no formal training provided, an orientation in terms of the kind of work, hygiene, safety and the subtle distinction between ayah work and that of a domestic worker was explained to the recruits. "We fix the rates and take Rs 200 per month from the ayahs as our service charge. They are assured of placement, since at

any given time, we have a waiting list of 10-15 patients per day," said Harkishan.

The Bina Bureau provided private nursing care for both hospitals and home care. Both Gopi and Harkishan were keen that more regulation be introduced in the sector to weed out fly-by-night operators.

Fatima John Dantas, 43, nurse, who was taking care of a disabled patient in Cuffe Parade in south Mumbai, felt that the Bureau's hostel facility was definitely a boon. "I earn Rs 700 for a day shift and Rs 750 for night shift with a 10 per cent commission to the Bureau. With food and travel expenses, I manage to save Rs 10-12,000 a month. Yes, the work is tough and we don't get weekly offs unless we are ourselves sick. But I am a single woman and this work is best for me," she said.

Of course, the agencies did receive complaints of harassment and, sometimes, ill-treatment; there were payment issues and some clients had to be blacklisted. However, Harkishan had the last word, "People have to realise, or be forced to realise, that these workers provide a very important service. This work is both a necessity and a luxury and there is a growing demand for it."

Sexual Harassment within the Television Industry

Surekha Kadapa-Bose

In early 2000, Kamala Sahani (name changed) was working with a television director in Mumbai. Every Saturday, a well-known columnist from Delhi used to fly down to the city to give his “creative inputs” for the daily soap. He would stay at a posh south Mumbai hotel and expect one of the director’s creative assistants to meet him in his room to “discuss the script”. The “discussions” were known to go on till he flew back the next day.

When an unsuspecting Kamala first went for one of these ‘meetings’, he started raining compliments on her – “he began by saying how beautiful I was and how the dress I was wearing was suiting me”. Uncomfortable with the way the conversation was going she walked out. “I went back to the production company’s office located in Worli, a well-connected commercial district in Mumbai, and I told my director that the next time this guy really wants to give input, he would have to meet us in our office and not in his hotel room,” she recalled. Kamala was alert and so she was able to save herself from a potentially difficult situation. But not many have been as lucky as she was.

Ever since the turn of the century that saw the mushrooming of over a hundred 24x7 entertainment and news channels in India, the television industry has been churning out content on the hour every hour, creating the space for employing a huge work force – producers, directors, writers, actors, anchors, technicians, and so on. Thanks to the instant fame it offers, the industry has become the preferred destination for scores of young, small town women and men, who harbour dreams of making it big in India’s entertainment capital.

By and large, the reputed production houses that usually have a clean record – even a remote complaint of harassment against an employee is taken seriously and s/he is let go immediately – work with established talent. So it’s the beginners who are the most vulnerable.

Unfortunately, a majority of the youngsters who come from the far flung corners of the country do not know what to expect and end up

becoming easy targets for devious casting agents, fake producers or 'start-up' production houses that can sexually and financially exploit them on the pretext of making them a 'star'.

Anamika Yadav, who heads a motion picture production company, Rajkumari Films Combines, has seen many newcomers fall in the trap of unscrupulous elements. She explained, "When girls come to Mumbai they have this notion that in the world of glamour, sexual exploitation is part of life. They befriend an agent or someone from an obscure production house to 'learn' how to behave in this new world, which is very different from the small towns they have come from. They feel they have to dress differently, learn to wine and dine properly. More often than not these fake agents, who promise them the moon, are the ones who take undue advantage."

But, according to Bhumika Brahmbhatt, who has acted in few reality shows and soaps, it was impossible to avoid agents in this industry as it was routine to get introduced to programme production houses through them. "Cons are a huge stumbling block in this profession. I have been through a couple of such encounters but was wise enough to sense the danger in time. It would start with an offer of a coffee at a well-known coffee shop and from there it would go further. After a couple of false starts a girl does come to know who is genuine and who is not. Once you realise you are being taken for a ride, then you have to just put your foot down," she said.

Besides being in danger of sexual exploitation, agents also entrap youngsters financially. Although it is common for agents to get a commission for helping an artiste land a role in a daily soap, there have been instances where newcomers have been cheated of lakhs of rupees on the pretext of getting a 'high profile' assignment only to be disappointed in the end.

Industry veterans, however, claimed that many a time the newbies set themselves up for a bad fall. Garima Sharma, who had worked with Star TV for a while and then went on to running a blog, mumbaimag.org, recalled an incident when she and four of her colleagues were

auditioning starlets for a new show, "One girl, who is now a big name on TV, told us, 'I am willing to do anything to get this role'. It was just us women taking auditions but had there been five men on the panel, they could have easily taken advantage of such a blatant offer. I feel girls do need to know the rules and boundaries."

Kamala has also taken some rather embarrassing screen tests. "Many a time when these young girls aged 16-17 years come to our production house to audition we feel like loaning them our own T-shirts or dupattas (long stole). They think that wearing a minuscule dress or behaving in a suggestive way may land them work," she elaborated.

Yadav felt that it is the fear of being left behind that sometimes forces women to go down this road. The fact is that the industry is flooded with young talent every year and the competition is tough. The over ambitious want to reach the top fast and that has its pitfalls. "If one is talented, the work gets noticed and offers of better roles will definitely come in. Fast bucks and the desire to make it to the top quickly is a definite way of getting hoodwinked. If things don't work out, go back home and wait for good opportunities," she advised.

Of course, to tackle genuine complaints there are redress groups such as the Cine & TV Artists Association (CINTAA), which has been around for two decades now, as well as the Network of Women in Media, India (NWMII), where quick action is taken. For instance, in March 2013 when Chennai-based Sun TV news anchor S. Akila was suspended after she complained of sexual harassment by her superiors, the NWMII called for Akila's immediate reinstatement. An inquiry into the case was also initiated.

But television industry veterans spoken to still insisted that "exploiters exist in all industries, and in television things are not so bad. No girl can be forced into doing anything she doesn't want to". But as Akila's case indicated, things are not always what they seem. What also became clear was that nobody in the industry seemed to have heard about the Vishaka Judgment.

Vishaka Verdict, What's That? Confronting Sexual Harassment at Work

Pushpa Achanta

Vishaka Guidelines Against Sexual Harassment at the Workplace: this means little to most working women, regardless of industry, sector (private or government, informal or organised) or location (office, factory, hospital, hotel, educational institution, or home office) and irrespective of educational qualification or professional experience. What has contributed to this dismal scenario is not just a lack of knowledge about the law and its provisions but also the overwhelming impression that a complaint could well end up finishing the complainant's career. In fact, though the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013 supposedly addresses many relevant aspects, it also penalises complainants whose accusation cannot be proved, even if true.

After the Bhanwari Devi case, which resulted in the Supreme Court issuing the Vishaka guidelines on sexual harassment in 1997, it was the cases involving Phaneesh Murthy, a former senior executive at Infosys Ltd. and iGate Corporation, and David Davidar, who headed the Indian and Canadian arms of the publisher, Penguin, that threw the much needed spotlight on the issue of workplace harassment.

Observed Amruta A. (name changed), a project manager in the India office of a large global information technology firm, "Although even 'developed' countries do not address these issues satisfactorily, at least in these incidents the men were penalised. In India, women in similar circumstances might not have got justice within or outside their organisation. In fact, they often end up stigmatised."

Two cases – one involving a medical officer at the Indian Institute of Management-Bangalore (IIM-B), and the other of a doctoral candidate at the University of Mysore – only corroborate Amruta's statement. Both women had filed sexual harassment complaints

against the men they 'reported to' in 2011. While the medical officer's case moved forward with a lot of assistance from Vimochana, a reputed non-profit organisation in Bengaluru that advocates for gender rights – they helped her deal with the police and also raised a public outcry on the delay in action by IIM-B, which finally led to his dismissal – justice has eluded Sarita, the doctoral student. Her tormentor was simply transferred to another institution.

Such are the ground realities of a woman's professional life in India that when a male colleague leers, makes sexist remarks or jokes verbally or electronically with her, she invariably resorts to trying to avoid him as far as possible. Perhaps, one or more may adopt such tactics as staring back, ignoring the harasser or even telling him to change his behaviour, but if the colleague is in a position of power this too becomes difficult as it is likely to invite a backlash.

Remarked Pavitra (name changed), a young female worker in a medium-sized private firm, "We get accustomed to such attitudes and incidents in public spaces, educational institutions and elsewhere from our childhood that we dismiss them as 'normal'. Sometimes, we do not even notice them. Further, it is very difficult to complain about such incidents."

Anyway, the string of disappointing cases that have been reported does not really inspire any real confidence in the system. Take Rina Mukherjee, a senior reporter with *The Statesman* in Kolkata whose services were terminated in October 2002 after she complained about the repeated episodes of sexual harassment by Ishan Joshi, the then news coordinator. Her case was finally resolved in 2013. This happened after the West Bengal Commission for Women and the Bengal Women Journalists' Network, the state chapter of the Network for Women in Media, India, wrote to the publication in 2003 supporting Mukherji and highlighted her issue widely.

Although the Industrial Disputes Tribunal ordered back payment of full wages to Mukherji and her reinstatement, *The Statesman*

ignored the order. Further, two libel suits against Mukherji are pending in Delhi and Kolkata (2013).

Of course, as is the case in most organisations in India, the publication did not have a committee to address sexual harassment at the workplace as directed under the Vishaka guidelines. This body must comprise at least 50 per cent women who are primarily external to the organisation and one of them should head it. Further, all employees, irrespective of their gender or position must be aware of the definition and nature of sexual harassment.

This was also true in the instance of Akila S., a news anchor/producer at Sun TV, Chennai. Akila raised her voice in March 2013 about the sexual advances by V. Raja, the chief editor, and Vetrivendhan, the Reporters' Coordinator, both of whom were her immediate supervisors. "I approached the police as there was no one to assist me at the channel. The firm created a sexual harassment committee after I complained and also initiated an inquiry by a neutral person, which is currently in progress," she revealed.

Raja, who was arrested and released on bail within three days, resumed work. However, Vetrivendhan and he were later suspended from their duties along with, Akila and a supportive male colleague. Moreover, their female co-workers were allegedly coerced into signing a false statement against Akila.

In all instances that have come to light, the complainants have received oral and other kind of threats. "My employer and the perpetrator least expected my determined fight back considering the delayed response or inaction by the stakeholders and attempts to tarnish my image apart from personal trauma. But I hope to inspire other women who have undergone similar experiences," said Mukherji.

Cases like Mukherji's and of the medical officer give hope – as do factors like the unionisation of the workforce or the widening of the ambit of the sexual harassment law.

In public sector organisations, for instance, employees working at different levels belong to unions, which is of some significance. According to K.S. Vimala, the vice president of the Karnataka chapter of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), "As women are active members of these unions, gender issues have begun to be given importance to some extent."

In addition, it is good that domestic workers, whose place of work is hard to define as it may vary and is often the house of another, have been brought under the ambit of the Act. Implementation may be difficult, like it with most legislation in India, but that's another matter. "A male employer tried to molest my friend Asha (name changed), a domestic worker, when his wife was away. When Asha reported this to the lady, she did not believe her and forced her to leave without paying her dues. Further, she laid the blame on my friend for having misbehaved with her husband," recalls Rosy, a young domestic worker in Bengaluru.

Unfortunately, while such instances are not rare, women continue to draw strength from Bhanwari Devi's example. Despite the acquittal of her assaulters, she has bravely continued to live among them advocating for the rights of children and women in her area and inspiring people everywhere.

Real Life at The Call Centre

Manisha Jain

It is 3 am. Abdul, who sells anda-parantha (omlette and unleavened bread) at a stall outside a brightly lit Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) office complex in Noida's Sector 37, is busy flipping hot 'paranths' on his tawa (skillet) and beating eggs, which are then carefully folded on to each parantha.

His customers, over a dozen of them aged between 19 and 35 years, stand around his cart impatiently. Bleary eyed and tired, they gratefully grab the food that is on offer, while chatting randomly about their work, the latest "flicks" in town, or the 'look' of the season. Dim bulbs light up the small wooden tables where they are seated. The scene outside the office complex belies the late hour. It is milling with people, everyone making a beeline for their favourite bite, even as the moon shines on their dinner plates.

For the rest of the world, this may seem like a scenario straight from a ghost planet, but for those who keep the call centre hubs of the country humming, lunch at 8 pm and dinner at 3 am is normal. They catch up on their slumber when others in the city are out and about making a living. And while they make their way to their work stations in the various cyber hubs of the country, most others are making their way to bed.

At first glance, these diners at dawn appear a happy and happening lot, sporting the latest clothes, hair styles and fashion accessories. But a deeper understanding of their lives reveals a different story. Many are here for a simple reason: a lack of work options.

About a quarter of the total workforce in the Indian BPO sector comprises women and they tend to be confined to the lower echelons of this USD 40 billion industry, either having to respond telephonically to customer queries or to key in data entries. The authors of *Gender and the Digital Economy: Perspectives from the*

Developing World argued that such employment has particularly helped a section of women to develop skills and acquire both income as well as professional and personal confidence but they also pointed out that far from ending biases, the traditional division of labour in their homes remained.

There are other, less articulated, disadvantages. Once entrenched into the BPO circuit, these women stand the risk of severely undermining their health. Take Sarita, 28 (all names in this section have been changed). She was compelled to quit her two-year-old job at a blue-chip BPO on the Noida Expressway, because of severe medical problems. A sincere worker, she was given a heavy workload and was constantly pushed to perform better. Recalled Sarita, "They would keep telling me to stretch my shift and keep increasing the workload. I went through extreme stress and soon realised that my body was crashing and could no longer take the daily pressure. I fell into a severe depression and, of course, my bosses did nothing to help me. Finally, I had to take expensive treatment in an outstation hospital and foot the bills myself." She added, "In any case, the work was too taxing and hardly gave me creative satisfaction. I asked myself why I was doing this: the salary was not that great. I was always doing overtime and was always being told to 'stretch my shift'. And all towards what end?"

Was this job really worth the constantly tired eye muscles, depression and a digestive system thrown out of kilter? Certainly not and Sarita moved on to doing something that made her happy and was quite different from sitting before a computer with headphones strapped to her ears. She taught dance and also did choreography, something that gave her the creative release she always yearned for. As luck would have it, she has been successful in her new field.

Deepa, another young BPO employee, suffered severe eye problems owing to the long hours spent at the computer. She had to go in for high-powered spectacles but, after a few months, her employers forced her out of the job, categorising her as "medically unfit".

Meanwhile, Deepa's eye problem worsened, preventing her from taking up a remunerative job.

The point that needs to be stressed is that these young women did not get the backing of their employers once they began succumbing to poor health caused by their work. Given the fact that there was a large pool of unemployed youth in big cities, the management could afford to follow a relentless "hire and fire" policy, leaving their former employees in a lurch with health problems and mounting medical bills.

Archana Gupta, who worked for a BPO in the National Capital Region, asserted that her erratic and irregular working hours had played havoc with her stomach. She suffered from gastric disorders and found herself getting increasingly irritable owing to lack of sleep. "It was as though my digestive system was getting contradictory signals, since we constantly moved from the morning shift to the night shift. I would notice that during my off-days, when I kept my usual sleeping hours, I would suffer from constipation," she recalled.

But it was not just her digestion that was affected. According to Gupta, what was perhaps most disturbing was the disruption caused to personal and family interactions. Sleep, nature's sweet restorer, really came at a premium. "I just longed to sleep. On weekends when the family wanted to do something together – go for a ride or catch up on a movie – I found myself invariably opting out, so that I could get some shut eye," she shared.

Even those who otherwise enjoyed their work, had to sooner or later face the adverse impacts that came with the job. Maya, 27, worked in a call centre in Delhi, and was enthusiastic about her "unusual" job that entailed keeping "US time" and talking with an American accent. Of course, to her utter dismay she discovered that she was spending most of her free time visiting doctors, whether it was for gastric problems, eye disorders, insomnia or just plain backaches. Her long hours at the computer led to an acute attack of lumbago, a condition that can be

addressed over time but hardly ever gets completely cured. Suddenly for Maya even the pay packet that once seemed so attractive, given that she only had a graduate degree, started to lose its lustre.

There was another factor that most of the women interviewed pointed out: fear of the dark. Elizabeth, who shuttled between Meerut and Noida in order to keep her job at a call centre, had to depend on her brother to pick her up from a designated spot in Patparganj, in East Delhi, miles away from home. If her brother got delayed by even a few minutes, she shivered with fear as she waited alone on a desolate stretch of road in the wee hours of the morning.

Due to the endless media stories on crimes of all kinds being unleashed on female BPO employees, many women suffered from paranoia about travelling alone in the night, even if it was in an office cab. Their anxieties have kept them awake at night, and some have even reported serious psychological and nervous disorders.

It is surprising, given the growing presence of women in this sector, to find employers generally insensitive to their female workforce. Over the last two decades, the Indian BPO industry has grown from strength to strength, establishing itself as an international market leader. Time, therefore, that it instituted international best practices in terms of protecting the health, rights and well-being of its female employees.



Section 3 >>

Moving in Circles or Moving Forward? Women And Migration



Goodbye, Hello: Migrant India's Brave New Daughters

Preet Rustagi

Women have since time immemorial migrated in India. However, the change to note is that earlier this migration was largely related to marriage or conducted as part of the family, now more and more women are also migrating alone.

The negative aspects of such migration are well documented. It is known that women's labour is often exploited; that there are low economic benefits in the jobs they did and that the terms and conditions of such employment are not clearly laid down.

But there is a more positive aspect, which may not be very significant as far as proportions or numbers go, but is nevertheless important to highlight. For instance, a large number of women in India today are migrating alone for education. They move from small towns and even remote villages to metropolises such as Delhi or Chennai, to study all kinds of courses. Once having adjusted to the urban milieu, and perceiving broader horizons, many among them are reluctant to go back to their places of residence and live as they once did. They prefer to seek employment and pick out those social avenues that could entail a change of social perspective which, in turn, translates into different social outcomes – in the context of marriage, personal relationships, in the ways of life.

There are other developments, too, that are providing a fillip to migration in the country. The crisis in the agricultural sector is a major factor. On the one hand, the costs of agricultural inputs have risen exponentially; on the other, an array of developments from variable weather conditions to degradation of land have resulted in declining returns for the farmer. This has seen men move out of agriculture in large numbers, leaving the women behind to tend to the farms and resulting in what is termed as the feminisation of agricultural operations. But women, too, are increasingly joining the men in such migration to urban areas.

In this context, a study I had done on women and migration, based on Census and National Sample Survey (NSS) data, was particularly interesting. The NSS data actually provides information as to how many women migrate and for what reason. Obviously, it pointed to the fact that a large section of female migration could be attributed to marriage and only a very small proportion, to work. But the fact is that while few women report that they are moving for work at the point of departure, a large number eventually does end up working. This shows that, to some extent, migration is providing women the opportunity to enter the labour market and increase their public participation in a manner that they themselves are not able to originally envisage.

If we look at women's employment again from a statistical point of view, the largest segment within the regular women's workforce, especially in urban areas, is involved in domestic work. This is a peculiar and particular kind of pattern as far as women's work is concerned. If we look further at what this means for women, a very interesting scenario unfolds. Although a large number of studies view domestic work purely from the negative perspective, in terms of lack of opportunities and rights, I tend to look at it more from the point of view of the potential for economic empowerment that it offers to women. The fact that these women are actually able to go out of their homes creates opportunities that they otherwise would not have had, given their lack of education or access to skill developing avenues. In other words, domestic work allows for an easy entry into the work market.

We would generally tend to look at such work, from the women's status point of view, as something demeaning and which entails a loss of social status. But once one starts earning money and adding quite a substantial share to the household income, a new dynamic is set into motion. These women then begin to be seen as contributors, both at the family level and within the social context in which they are located.

From the surveys we had undertaken in the slums of Delhi, for instance, a large number of women reported that they had at first

concealed from their husbands and other family members the fact that they were working as domestic help. But some of them also reported how, subsequently, once the nature of their work came out into the open, it was generally appreciated.

Women also talked about the demonstration effect they had on other women. Some of these women were, in fact, in families that were going through immense economic hardships owing to poor avenues of employment that were available to the men. The women themselves held the traditional view that leaving one's home and working in somebody else's would undermine their social status hence they did not venture out. Such notions were soon discarded once the benefits from domestic work came to be perceived.

We need to remember, also, that the very act of entering into the labour market enables a woman worker to interact with the world in a way she could not have done earlier. Even the perception of inequalities and injustices that mark her situation get clearer through this process, and some women are able to leverage their individual and collective strength to get a better deal for themselves. In cities like Mumbai, we have seen the emergence of fairly strong domestic workers' unions. As workers, the women begin to realise what they had missed out on in life, perceive what is feasible, what is available and form their own ideas about how they and their families could do better for themselves.

These women, for example, tend to take specific and particular interest in educating their children, not just the boys but also the girls, because they do not want them to go through what they themselves had to experience. Such education ushers in a generational change. We now hear of a maid's daughter scoring the highest marks in a board examination, or getting into jobs that would have been impossible to access a generation earlier. So we are really talking of remarkable transformations.

The movement from a rural to an urban setting, irrespective of the job at the other end unleashes many significant developments

in a woman's life. Most notably, it loosens somewhat the hold of social conventions and compulsions. In rural India, the hierarchies of caste and religion, family traditions and norms, dictate everything from inter-personal relations to the broader social milieu. Given the deeply entrenched feudal social structures, one cannot do certain things even if one is educated and has very different perceptions about whom one would like to marry and what one would wish to do with one's life. After all, even going with the husband to see a movie in a rural setting is sometimes difficult to envisage.

In a study undertaken in Noida, a city in the National Capital Region, a large number of women workers who had migrated from rural regions of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Bihar actually said that they were now able to articulate many things they could not have done earlier – even with regard to tabooed subjects like their own sexuality.

So, clearly the urban milieu, with all its problems and frustrations, does entail a kind of freedom for the woman migrant. It provides her with some space to do things her way and imagine a new life for herself.

Farmer to Domestic Worker: Choices at the Crossroads

Tarannum

Meet Susheela, Rukmini, Sarla, and Ganga. They are friends who share a common past and perhaps even a common future. These women from the OBC (Other Backward Classes) community are domestic workers in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh. None of them had ever thought that there would come a time when they would have no option but to leave their native villages and small farms in Chhattisgarh to build a new life in a city situated in another state.

Migration from the predominantly tribal, insurgency-hit state in eastern India is not a new phenomenon. In the book, *In Search of Livelihood: Labour Migration from Chhattisgarh*, published by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar National Institute of Social Sciences, authors Y.G. Joshi and D.K. Verma have noted that, "Seasonal labour out-migration is today a regional characteristic of the area, involving nearly a million population which, barring few southern states, moves nearly to all parts of the country. The labour migration from this area... is a part of household survival strategy of the marginal farmers and landless workers who are unable to find work locally... Nevertheless migrating out for work has become an essential component of household economy for a large section of the poor population..."

Susheela's household could well have been one of the marginalised ones that Joshi and Verma wrote about. It was a failed harvest that had brought her about a decade ago to Lucknow, over 700 kilometres from her home in Bilaspur. She said, "I came with my husband's parents, to work as a labourer on a flyover. Due to bad crop there was a huge loan to be repaid. Around three dozen families from my village got work on that flyover."

Later, while Susheela's father-in-law went back to tend to the small family farm, she and her mother-in-law, Rajbala, stayed back in Lucknow to find work either as construction workers or domestic

workers, simply because “there was no way our small land holding in Bilaspur could feed a large family of 13”. Susheela may have started off as a seasonal migrant but her move became a permanent one.

Statistics of the UP Labour Department revealed that there were around 22,000 migrant domestic workers from other states coming into Lucknow alone and, of these, around 3,000 were from Chhattisgarh (2012 data). Though they came in search of better prospects the transition was hard, physically and emotionally. Susheela said, “I had to leave my one-year-old daughter in Bilaspur in the care of my father-in-law and husband, who is a mason. Everyday, I wanted to go back to her, but my mother-in-law told me that we needed to earn so that we could pay off our debts.”

Saving money in a big city, however, was easier said than done. Susheela’s friend from Bilaspur, Rukmini, 25, who also worked in Lucknow as a maid, said, “Initially, the biggest problem we all faced was of language. The Hindi dialect spoken in Lucknow is different from that of our native place and it took a long time getting used to it.” Negotiating unfamiliar city routes, living in one-room tenements in squalid slums and surviving on subsistence wages, arbitrarily fixed, were just some of the other problems.

What kept Susheela going were the biannual visits back home. “We used to save money and then, twice a year, we’d go back to hand it over to my father-in-law. While returning, we would bring back foodgrain so that we didn’t have to buy it from the shop,” she recalled.

In this way, it took Susheela and Rajbala eight years to repay the loan and then acquire an additional small piece of land in Bilaspur. Said Rajbala, 65, “My husband thought that buying a little more land would help us settle back home. But that never happened. Lucknow has become our home now.”

For the last 10 years life had been fairly constant for Susheela. Her husband and daughters – she had three now – had eventually

joined her in her Patel Nagar home in Lucknow. Her only connect with Bilaspur were the annual visits to her sasural (marital home) to collect her share of the produce from the farm.

But life in the city had worn her out. Every morning, the dusky, 35 year old woman, woke up, completed a few household chores hurriedly and was out for work by 7.30 am. As a domestic worker she toiled in a dozen households in the Indira Nagar and Nishatganj localities of Lucknow before heading back home only in the evening. Her monthly earnings? Anywhere between Rs 8,000 and Rs 10,000 that were barely enough to survive, considering how expensive everything was, with a daily commute generally involving a bus and rickshaw ride.

It was well established that domestic workers were among the most exploited and under-represented members of the workforce in India. Although there is the Domestic Workers (Registration, Social Security and Welfare) Bill 2008, which seeks to regulate and improve their conditions of work, it has remained on paper. Implementing even minimal protections was difficult given that the work was conducted in the private space of the home and that there was a singular lack of will on the part of the upper and middle classes, as well as governments, to address the specific concerns of these women.

Yet, despite the difficulties of her life, Susheela insisted that she was a happier woman today. She was just grateful that she had some money every month and was oblivious to the fact that she was being exploited in the process of earning. For her, what was most important was that her immediate family was with her.

The move out of the village had also impacted Sarla, who had come to Lucknow with her entire family. She found it difficult at first to make an entry into the labour market because of her nine-month-old daughter, but she did find work cleaning homes and washing dishes. Her husband and brother-in-law were working as bricklayers for housing projects in the city.

While Susheela and Sarla had their families by their side, Rukmini was still waiting for her 11-year-old daughter and husband to join her. In the last 10-odd years that she had spent in the city, Rukmini had not been able to save enough to support the entire family. While her elder daughter lived in Bilaspur, the two younger daughters, aged nine and four, were with her in Lucknow. "They are too small so I have them here with me," she explained. When asked whether she would like to go back to Bilaspur, she responded with a question: "What will I do there?" When this writer met her in 2012, she had plans to call her eldest daughter over and teach her domestic work. Her husband would join them later.

Interestingly, Susheela's and Rukmini's 'prosperity' had encouraged many of their friends and neighbours in the village to migrate. Sarla and Ganga were once Susheela's neighbours. Said Sarla, "It helped to have people from the village here. It helped us cope with the initial difficulties we faced."

These were courageous women who took the plunge into an unfamiliar world and survived. They all believed that leaving the village behind had proved a boon it had brought them independence and regular incomes which "ensures food on our plates", as one woman put it. But what about their living conditions? The education of their children, especially their daughters? The unrelenting pace of work because if they did not work, they did not eat?

Those questions remained unanswered.

Catching the Train to Survival

Ajitha Menon

It was still dark when Akhtari Begum, 45, left her shanty in rural Kalipara Samsan area of Budge Budge in North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. She had woken up at 3 am, as she did every day, freshened up and then walked to the auto stand 15 minutes away carrying a heavy load of 30-40 coconuts. After an auto ride of another 15-20 minutes she reached Budge Budge Station, from where she caught the first local train to Sealdah, Kolkata, at 4.45 am.

“There are 15 women coconut sellers who travel to Sealdah every morning on this train. We return together on the 10.20 am local train after selling the coconuts at the Kole market there. We have to travel daily because Budge Budge has a very small market and we have no buyers for the coconuts here,” said Akhtari.

Most women vendors came into Kolkata on the south-eastern local trains and while there was no formal estimate of their numbers, roughly for every 20 male vendors there would be about two or three female vendors making their way into the city. It goes without saying that all of them came from families placed below the poverty line (BPL).

Migration had been an intrinsic part of Akhtari's life. Born in Muzzafarpur, Bihar, she had moved permanently to West Bengal after marriage to Alam, who worked in a jute mill. She then became a daily migrant to Kolkata when she started selling coconuts to augment the family income. “I have been travelling every day for the last 15 years. I have four children and extra money was needed to provide for them,” she added.

While two of her older daughters were married, the youngest was still studying. Her son was a school dropout and a vagabond. Giving a glimpse into her daily routine, Akhtari said, “Like all the coconut sellers I buy roti-sabzi from a stall near the market and eat before returning. Once back home, I do the household work and cook for

the family. I try to wind up work and go to sleep by 8 pm every day so that I can wake up on time.”

Life was not easy for the women vendors like Akhtari, who travelled from the suburbs and districts to the state capital Kolkata everyday to sell their wares, which varied from coconuts to vegetables, fruits, flowers, fish and rice. “We carry heavy loads but are not given space in the vendors’ compartments. The male vendors muscle their way in and occupy all the space. We are forced to travel in the ladies’ compartment,” said Sahida Bibi, 50, another coconut seller in the group, who had been working to supplement the earnings of her son, who was a contractual labour. “My husband is blind and unable to work. I contribute the major share to the family income, which averages around Rs 5,000 per month. Of this, around Rs 3,000 goes in the treatment of my husband,” she added.

Harassment and abuse were the major problems the women vendors faced. “Travelling in the ladies compartment in the early hours is a nightmare. Drunkards sleep on the seat and refuse to budge. They vomit and even defecate in the compartment. They pass lewd remarks and often etch obscene graffiti on the walls. The RPF personnel turn a deaf ear to our pleas for help or demand money to act,” reported Saira Bibi, 40, a flower vendor, who travelled daily by the Midnapore local to Howrah station.

Most of the women sold produce acquired after borrowing money from lenders, who gave them cash in advance and then charged a heavy interest on the returns. “I earn about Rs 1,400 per week but my loan from the moneylender is Rs 2,300. I keep Rs 700 and give Rs 700 to the money lender every week while the Rs 2,300 loan remains intact. It will remain till I die,” bemoaned Mahiruh Bibi, 49, a vegetable vendor hailing from Pokepali area in North 24 Parganas. This mother of seven had a paralysed husband. One of her sons was a jute mill worker while another worked as a daily labourer.

Many of these women had been physically assaulted several times. "We are very poor. Earlier, at times we travelled without ticket and the railway staff and police used to beat us and throw us out of the trains. But now we have managed to acquire the 'Izzat' cards issued for BPL passengers for Rs 25 per month. At least, the harassment from the railway staff has reduced," informed Usha Pramanik, 42, a fish vendor, hailing from Gordor village in Diamond Harbour in South 24 Parganas. As she vendes seasonal fish like boal, hilsa, puti and bhetki in the market near Sealdah station every day, her income was seasonal, dwindling to a pittance at the end of winter when the water bodies in rural areas dried up.

According to railway officials, women comprised 30 per cent of the total 'Izzat' card holders under the Eastern Railway in 2012. Yet, acquiring an 'Izzat' card was often traumatic. Elaborated Kalpana Mandal, 39, of Mograhat in Diamond Harbour, who sold vegetables in Kole market in Sealdah along with her husband, "Merely showing our BPL cards was not enough. First, there was the harassment to just get the railway forms. We had to run around for almost a month before we got our hands on them. Then they had to be signed by the local counsellor for which we had to beg and plead and pay touts. It took about three months and a lot of sweat and tears, for the process to get completed."

Then there was also political harassment under a system called *tola neva*, or fixing vending spots in the markets near the station. Local goons, owing allegiance to different political parties, gave out spots to the vendors in the train itself after collecting money as a bribe. "It's either 'pay the demanded rate or lose your spot'. Women vendors are bullied more since they are unable to fight back. If they refuse to pay the rate, the space is allotted to another and they are threatened with physical harm. The market traders' associations are supposed to issue passes to the vendors but it's never done and that is why we have no fixed place and have to pay the weekly charge to the goons," rued Saira.

Despite the severe odds, the women vendors had to take in their stride the short-term migratory trips they made from rural to urban areas. It was their innate grit and determination that kept them going, day after day, year after year.

Primary Care Givers turn Primary Bread Winners

Shwetha E. George

Imagine, for a minute, this scenario: on a bright Tuesday morning in Piravom, a small town in rural Ernakulam district, Ammini, 53, hadn't brushed her teeth nor eaten breakfast till 11.30 am. No, she was neither ill nor did she have a domestic crisis. But being the sole caregiver to two granddaughters – one aged five and the other two-and-a-half years – left her with simply no time for herself. "I have knee pain, back pain and am almost always gasping for breath but I am responsible for them," said the elderly woman. Why weren't the girls with their mother? As a full-time nurse, she was working in another town in order to gain an experience certificate that would enable her to seek a position abroad.

Like Ammini's daughter-in-law, Anju, 25, was also living in a hostel, while her mother, Aliyamma, 53, looked after her one-year-old son back home in Pathanamthitta in central Kerala. She, too, had a tough daily grind. Up by 5 am, she tried to finish all her chores by 8 am before the baby was up.

Anju, who saw the infant on weekends, was hoping to get work in the West and to make that happen she had enrolled for a course to help her crack a qualifying examination. She was preparing to move to Canada in a few months and her mother had agreed to take care of her son until things settled down. To Anju, the prospect of leaving her boy was "heart breaking" but "the option of not going abroad didn't exist".

Bijimol, 31, had left her son with her mother, Leela, 57, when he was just 45 days old. "I was a nurse with the Ministry of Saudi Arabia then and I couldn't resign for two more years since my earnings were quite significant," Bijimol recalled. Consequently, both her son's grandmothers had taken on the task of bringing up the infant. Post her Saudi tenure, Bijimol by then a mother of two gave her International English Language Testing System (IELTS)

examination in order to be able to join her cousin in Australia. And what about her kids? “If I am lucky, I can get my children in six months,” she said.

The exodus to the Middle East has long been a part of Kerala’s history and popular discourse. Each outbound journey of this kind comes with a heavy price. The tensions and trauma that emigrant nurses from this state, hailing from the lower and lower-middle class strata, undergo in their race to gain employment abroad, have taken a toll on them and their closest relationships.

In their 2011 working paper, entitled *Emigration of Women Domestic Workers from Kerala: Gender, State and Policy of Movement*, Praveena Kondo and T.J. Varghese, at the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, categorised Kerala as the “largest sending state within India” with a most recent survey showing “that 14.6 per cent of its emigrants are women”, both employed and otherwise. They have also referred to Sri Lanka and the Philippines, countries that have a sizeable number of women emigrant workers and which have witnessed “domestic chaos” emerging from “the relative neglect, even abuse, of children and alcoholism among men.”

At the Association of Learning Disabilities (ALDI) clinic in Kottayam, Dr V.V. Joseph, the chief trainer, has had several children coming to him with psychosomatic disorders—recurring headaches, pains in the abdomen, asthma and occasionally epilepsy. Sibling rivalry was also common and took severe forms. Many children were clearly depressed.

According to Dr Joseph, since mothers are the primary caregivers, their absence leaves their children vulnerable, with some being abused at the hands of domestic help or fathers and other male relatives in the home. “The husband of an NRI nurse is a subject of scorn in our society. He either has a lesser paying job or is unemployed, even alcoholic, and could take his frustration out on the child,” explained Dr Joseph.

The mother, when she returns, would then try to over-compensate for her absence, driven by a sense of guilt. The child would be pampered and showered with gifts of cash and kind. The message she sought to convey is this: "Look, I am working hard and doing all this for you." According to Dr Joseph, the child could interpret those words in an entirely different way: "Look, it is your fault that I have to work so hard." Remarked Dr Joseph, "The mother's guilt only contributes to the child's behavioural problems."

In Bijimol's case, she would try and make it a point to speak to her son on the phone everyday. She would breakdown whenever she learnt that he was sick or had a fall. But what really broke her heart was when her one-year-old refused to let her pick him up when she came home on leave. "I was devastated. He is five now but still prefers to sleep with his grandmother," she sighed.

Anju, too, was worried constantly about not being able to build a relationship with her son. "What if he holds my absence against me, as he grows older?" she wondered. Every time she came home, she noticed how poorly her son was eating and how prone he was to throwing tantrums. But she knew she could do nothing about this because she was not around for most of the time.

The mother of a four-year-old son, Jisha left for work in the UK when her child was three months. For the initial few years she would come home on the occasional two-month leave but slowly, over a period of time, she found she had absolutely no control over the boy. "Here, my family would ridicule me when he didn't listen to me. In UK, they accused me of abandoning my son," she rued.

These were women under great pressure. An education in nursing was an expensive proposition for most nursing aspirants from middle-income backgrounds. They ended up taking loans to get their degree. Migration, whether to the Middle East or the West, required additional investment – anything from Rs 5 to 15 lakh. In this way their debts kept rising. Marriage and children translated into the added

responsibility of having families dependent on their earnings and the pressure to keep working was continuous and unrelieved. The option to take a break just did not exist because they had become a kind of cash dispensers. At the same time, they were not spared the stigma and criticism caused by having “abandoned” their children.

As Dr Joseph put it, “In most of these homes, the woman has had to trade her role of being the primary caretaker in the family with becoming the main bread-winner. In the process, she loses her parental rights, her personal time, and her space within the family structure. There is a continuous struggle against patriarchy.”

Teenage Girls and the Big City Move

Hema Vijay

Meet N. Vijayalakshmi. Until 2011, this resident of India's fireworks capital in the Sivakasi district of Tamil Nadu was rolling crackers. But a year later Vijayalakshmi was living in Chennai and studying to become a nurse at the V.H.S. Campus of the M.A. Chidambaram College of Nursing. She could do this because of financial support from Udavum Ullangal, a Chennai-based organisation working extensively to empower underprivileged girls with education and jobs.

Her old life in the village made young Vijayalakshmi shudder in horror. "I used to roll out crackers from home. Factory owners had a work-from-home arrangement. We were never given gloves. I had to scoop in the chemicals with my bare hands and ended up inhaling quite a bit of these harmful substances. Now that I am studying nursing I understand how much I was at risk," she recalled.

Vijayalakshmi was one of the lucky few who had managed to escape to the city. She stayed at the college hostel, along with a few girls from her own district and some from other regions within the state. "Back home, only affluent girls got to go to college. The rest of us fell into the fireworks trade," she explained. In 2012, both her parents were still working as factory labourers and were happy that at least Vijayalakshmi could move to Chennai and begin a new life for herself.

The experiences of C. Mohanapriya, 18, another beneficiary of Udavum Ullangal's interventions, were no different. Coming from a small village in the Virudhunagar district, where "some girls don't even get to go to school", she was happy to have had the opportunity to migrate and study in a big city. Having completed her nurse's training, Mohanapriya was gearing up to look for a good job. "Back home, I can only hope to earn a salary of Rs 3,000 or Rs 4,000," she revealed. This was half of what she could get if she remained in Chennai. Even after accounting for expenses like food and hostel accommodation, she felt she would be able to save

enough to send some money back home. But this did not mean that she had forgotten her counterparts back in the village. Said Mohanapriya, "My mission in life is to help girls like me, especially my friends, to accomplish what I have been able to do."

Curiously, nursing seemed to be the preferred career option for these rural girls. Vijaya, 20, who had come from Udankudi village, about 70 kilometres away from the town of Tuticorin, shared her story. "My father passed away some years ago and my mother is a simple homemaker. Girls in our village end up in the salt and chemical factories near our village, working in extremely difficult conditions," she said. Vijaya knew well that she was fortunate to have escaped that fate and had no plans to return to the village in a hurry. "There is no hospital in the vicinity so how would I be able to make a living there?" she asked.

Once upon a time migration out of the villages in southern Tamil Nadu had meant one of two things: the movement of men out of the village in search of work, or the movement of women because of marriage. But this had slowly changed. Migration of young women in search of education or work was no longer uncommon. Sankar Mahadevan, founder of Udavum Ullangal, which had helped hundreds of girls to move to Chennai for a better education, observed, "By arming rural girls with independence and financial strength, a desirable twist to an old gender tale is being brought about."

But while a megacity like Chennai presented itself as the beacon of hope for scores of young women, no move of such decisive proportions could come without its share of challenges – be it dealing with city slickers, overcoming loneliness or something as basic as decoding the local dialect.

C. Vijayalakshme, principal of M.A. Chidambaram College of Nursing, had seen many young women grapple with the demands of city life. "The girls migrating from rural areas struggle a lot at first but they eventually manage to find their space. What they need is

counselling and guidance, especially during their first three to six months in the city," she explained.

Young Vijaya, for instance, had difficulty in communicating with people. "Moving to Chennai was tough – unknown faces everywhere and then having to pick up 'Madras Tamil', which is totally different from my Tuticorin Tamil dialect took a lot of adjustment," she reminisced.

Mohanapriya found her studies in English tough to handle, since her school education was in the Tamil medium. Fortunately for her she found that her friends and classmates were always willing to clear her doubts.

Physical safety was the other area of concern. Becoming familiar with city routes, negotiating market places, knowing how to deal with sexual harassment and even living alone in a hostel were big hurdles. Of course, things became easier if hostel accommodation was available and the girls at the M.A. Chidambaram College were lucky in that respect.

Because it was rare to have parents and other relatives drop by, given the prohibitive costs of travel, these young women discovered the importance of forging strong personal bonds with classmates and colleagues. Said Vijaya, "For me, personally, staying in a college hostel has been a god-send. Otherwise living alone in a big city like this would have been very risky and lonely."

In their research paper, *Female Migration To Mega Cities of India*, demographers Dr K.C. Das and Arunanand Murmu have pointed out that this trend of women migrating from villages to towns and cities was only going to accelerate, not just in Tamil Nadu but in the rest of the country. As they put it, "Most female migrants now moving to cities are either illiterate or semi-literate. There is, therefore, a need for policy making that enhances the security, empowerment and opportunities for such women in terms of education and employment."

Since many of these young migrants did not have the advantage of accessing good hostels and were often forced to settle for insecure living and working conditions, there was a critical need for initiatives like the Safe Migration Project started by the Kolkata-based Jabala Action Research Organisation (JARO). In association with gram panchayats, JARO was keeping a track of those women and girls who had migrated and even provided them with a safety net at the destination point. They also had a rehabilitation strategy in place for those who got drawn into sex trafficking.

Meanwhile, young Sandana Mary, 19, had just moved from Sivakasi to Chennai to join Vijaya, Mohanapriya and others. She had been working at a fireworks factory for a whole year after having successfully completed Class XII, because her family could not afford to send her to college. "Nobody should be forced to give up studies, like I had to. Now I am planning to do a diploma course. One day I hope to have a post-graduate degree in nursing," said this focused young girl.

Many like Mary dreamt big and hoped to escape the grinding poverty of their lives. The inmates of the hostel attached to the M.A. Chidambaram College were more than willing to take them under their wing. Having made the transition themselves, they realised the importance of education and employment for future well-being.

A wealth of understanding was reflected in the words of Vijaya's new friend, A. Indra, when she said, "We want to tell young women back home that there is no need to be afraid of the big city. All of us should develop the capacity to stand on our own feet."

Skilled, Trained Women Look for a Way Out

Sapna Shahani

Lillian D'Costa, 32, left the idyllic village of Saligao in north Goa where she had spent her childhood years, and moved to Bengaluru, in neighbouring Karnataka in 2006. "I had reached a point where I wasn't growing any more and realised I needed a change," she recalled. "I'm sure that Goa offers a better quality of life than many other states, but that's if you're economically well-placed. If you're young and need opportunities for growth, Goa does not work."

Ashwina Souza, 23, left her family in the southern Goan town of Vasco in 2010 to pursue a Ph.D in Industrial Psychology in Mumbai. Said she, "My seniors told me that the faculty in Goa was not as good as in Mumbai. Besides, in a place like Mumbai, there are so many industries and they need people like us. Among my circle of friends, many have left Goa – perhaps six or eight out of 10."

These are voices of two young women professionals from a state that recorded the highest per capita income among all states in 2009-10, according to the central statistical office. However, a study by the Labour Bureau of the Ministry of Labour and Employment also revealed that Goa recorded the highest unemployment rate in the country. What was worse, according to another study conducted by Goa's Ministry of Labour in 2009, only one-fourth of those employed in the state were women.

These figures imply that not only is Goa's wealth not distributed equally across all sections of society, its working women are clearly the marginal players in the state's economy. Unless efforts are made to reverse this trend, Goa stands to lose young talent, with many youngsters like D'Costa and Souza being forced to leave home for educational and employment opportunities in other states. Indeed, they are left with little choice, given the rising inflation and high cost of living in Goa.

Perhaps in response to the impending crisis, Goa became the first state in India to announce a dole for jobless youth in 2011. But such political gestures turned out to be merely symbolic. There still wasn't much public discussion about creating jobs for the state's 80,000 people registered with the Employment Exchange. The Goa Chamber of Commerce carried a telling piece of information on its website: "Roughly about 15,000 graduates come out of Goan colleges every year. The government on its own will not be in a position to provide employment to these youths..."

There is a widespread consensus in Goa that higher education in the state did not prepare graduates for real jobs. While it focused on primary education – ranking 11th among all Indian states in terms of performance – higher studies appear to have stagnated. Public perception is that it is best to earn one's degree or post-graduate qualification outside the state if one can afford to do so.

Said Aldina Gomes, a lecturer at the Carmel College for Women in Nuvem, "As a professor, I'm a little critical about how academics is handled here. Everyone has to study humanities but they don't really have a connection to the subject. They won't pursue humanities as a career but will end up doing something completely different... There is a clear lack of vocational guidance for students as well as career opportunities. There should be many more entrance exams, job-specific courses and certificates that can get you jobs."

Of course, women students are still full of expectations. Zaheera Vaz, 20, about to start her Master's degree course in Political Science at Goa University in 2011, was keen to have extra-curricular activities that could help her develop her analytical skills. Nashoma De Jesus, 22, who was in the process of finishing her Master's degree in International Studies, would have liked to gain more field experience. "The education system is too theoretical. We need more exposure while we're studying. Internships should be mandatory," she argued.

But this requires more investment in higher education, as Sabina Martins, a prominent women's rights activist and school teacher with a Ph.D in chemistry, pointed out. "I did my research in carbon, which can be prepared from coconut shells. I thought since Goa has so many coconut shells and carbon is in high demand, being used for water purification and in so many other applications, it should be easy to make carbon this way. I went to see the only plant that does this in Goa and discovered that someone from outside the state was running it. Planning here is devoid of research," she remarked.

Those who don't leave the state and were lucky enough to find jobs after they graduate have complained of getting measly salaries, sometimes as low as Rs 4,000 a month. Aglin Barretto, 23, a postgraduate in Counselling Psychology and working in two schools as a counsellor, was taking home a mere Rs 5,000 per month.

Both opportunities and salaries are lower in Goa than elsewhere and that is a source of angst for young women like Skitter Faia, 32, a PR professional with a firm in state capital Panaji. "I hear a lot of people talking about job security and I think that means a government job where you can work or not work and still take a salary home," observed Faia. Others felt that appreciation and promotions don't easily come to women employees. Clara Rodrigues, 24, a journalist based in Saligao, rued the fact that the glass ceiling obstructs many ambitions women may harbour, "We need opportunities to grow vertically in the organisation."

But this does not mean that women have stopped dreaming of personal growth and freedom. Interestingly, one of the reasons why many young women have chosen to migrate out of the state is to free themselves from the diktat of conservative families and the norms that marked rural life. D'Costa said, "As a single woman living outside the state, you don't have to rush home, or face judgmental people in the village who are always assessing you, or hear that your

phone isn't accessible. These are the constraints I experience every time I return to Goa."

Despite the stereotypes fostered by the coastal tourist belt, life in Goa's hinterland is fairly restrictive for young women and the general outlook is narrow. Souza shared a personal anecdote, "Once in college, a teacher asked us why we wanted to go to college. Students gave all sorts of answers. Some argued that it was their ticket to leave home; others said it was their certificate for marriage; still others just wanted to 'pass time', while a few talked of how it was the best way to make friends. Only three of us – out of a class of 60 – said they were in college to pursue a career."

She and others like her want the state to be more pro-active about broadening professional vistas. Not only will this bring economic benefits to the state, it will mean more women in the workplace, they argued. For instance, they pointed out, Goa – with its educated population – is eminently suited to emerge as an IT hub, yet little is being done to achieve this.

Said D'Costa, "The government wants to invite only 'clean' industries to the state. With its good roads, broadband connectivity and relatively cheaper land, it could easily attract the IT industry. IT companies were moving out of Bengaluru to places like Chennai and Vellore, but why aren't they coming to Goa? Bengaluru was once known as a retiree's city, but now it has reinvented itself as a world city. Why can't Goa make the same transition?"

To keep pace with the hopes and expectations of women like D'Costa, Goa would need to do much more to expand employment opportunities for young professionals.

Outsider/Insider: Finally a Foothold

Ninglun Hanghal

'Girl from Manipur molested, allegedly by Gurgaon neighbour'; 'North East girls molested by Air India staff'; 'Dana Sangma suicide: Amity denies discrimination'... Media reports on the insecure lives of women who come to the Capital from India's Northeastern states to study or seek gainful employment are a legion.

According to the North East Migration and Challenges in National Capital Cities 2011, a study by the North East Support Centre & Helpline, over 314,850 people had migrated from the Northeast to Delhi and other cities between 2005 and 2009. Delhi, of course, has emerged as one of the most popular destinations – University of Delhi is a magnet for those interested in higher studies, while the sparkling lights of the retail and BPO sectors in the National Capital Region (NCR) have beckoned unemployed youth.

But such opportunities apart, life in the NCR is far from salubrious, particularly for women from the Northeast, who have been subjected to racial discrimination and even violence. Incidents of physical violence, rape and even murder are not uncommon experiences. The reasons for such bestial acts are varied. For instance, women could find themselves under attack in the patriarchal milieu of north India because they look different, or appear "modern" and "free".

Shang and Renu, who have been living in Delhi for a couple of years, preferred however not to dwell on the "dangers" too much. Ever since the two friends, who were both in their early 20s, came to the city from Manipur, they simply played it safe. They lived in a relatively safe middle-class colony in south Delhi with their relatives, and worked at a gift shop in a high-end mall located just a few kilometres away. For assisting shoppers and keeping a cheerful demeanour all day, they earned a modest monthly salary of anything ranging between Rs 10,000 and Rs 13,000. "It's nice working here," said Shang, with a soft smile, adding, "you will find that most showrooms here have staffs from the Northeast."

Shang was right. Just a few metres away, at a skin and body care products counter, Jolly and Margaret, also in their early 20s, were busy at work. Dressed in white coats and aprons, the two girls pleasantly explained the benefits of the range on offer to prospective customers. For their hard work – they are mostly on their feet and have to be patient with everyone who visits their kiosk – they earned Rs 20,000 every month. Both the girls lived in rented accommodation. While Jolly stayed with her brother, who worked in a BPO, Margaret shared her home with a cousin, who was employed in a shopping complex.

When asked about the hardships they endure in a city like Delhi, these young women remarked that the harassment, discrimination and bad behaviour they encounter is so common that such behaviour has almost become “normal” for them. Street stalkers, misbehaving cabbies, random bystanders who stare are part of their daily life. But they have learnt to deal with the risks by making sure that they travel in groups, and by bonding with colleagues and friends.

In fact, these are among the most common coping mechanisms reported. For instance, all the young women we spoke to told us that they invariably had a colleague, friend or relative from their home state at their workplace on whom they depended when things got tough or emotionally draining in a highly competitive office environment. Moreover, they make it a point to live with their siblings, relatives, or friends – cultural ties helped to create a sense of security. There are spin-offs of such arrangements: sharing a flat helped save money – and although they hardly earned enough to send money home on a regular basis, savings came in handy for gifts during festive occasions.

Most young northeastern women with a high school certificate or college degree preferred to work in malls and shopping complexes because they felt safer and the timings suited them. They could usually get off by 10 pm and catch an autorickshaw back home. For those doing the graveyard shifts, like BPO employees, the risks were much higher. A major unaddressed issue is the transportation

arrangements made by BPO employers for those on night shifts.

Khanching from Manipur, who worked for a UK-based outbound insurance telemarketing company in south Delhi, began her daily shift at 3.30 in the afternoon and got off past midnight. Although she had been doing this job since 2008, hardly a day went by when she was not on her guard. Like other women we talked to, Khanching, who earned around Rs 18,000 per month, also lived in a middle-class neighbourhood, with her younger brother, a college student.

The problem often was that the vehicle that dropped women like Khanching home could not access the narrow lanes of many residential colonies in Delhi. So they were dropped off on the main road and often had to make their way at that late hour past groups of young men, some of whom may be drunk. But Khanching found a way out even in this challenging scenario, "Since my cab cannot come up at my doorstep, it's my male colleagues – also from the Northeast – who drop me," she revealed. She also showed us a bottle of Spray COP alert which can temporarily disable an assailant. Although she made sure to carry it in her bag every day, she had fortunately never needed to use it.

Among the scores of young women working in the retail and BPO sectors, were several young women entrepreneurs, too. Take the five Mizo women who run a beauty parlour in south Delhi. Mazami, who managed the salon, came to the city in 2008 and her friends joined her later. At their home-cum-salon, they pitch in and do everything together. They share the rent; they rustle up meals and, of course, work jointly. The parlour opened at 10 am, and the women worked through the day, cutting hair or doing facials and the like until 8 pm. Sunday was an off day and they spent it by going to church and visiting relatives across the city.

In Delhi, the beauty business meant big bucks. Mazami, who managed to make over Rs 20,000 a month, revealed that it was also a demanding line of work. "Sometimes I get very tense," she

said. The bulk of her customers were from the Northeast. “People from our region do not feel very comfortable going to other parlours because of the language barrier. They feel free and comfortable here,” explained Mazami. Undergoing training at Jawed Habib Hair & Beauty Ltd when I met her in 2012, she had big plans for the future and was looking forward to expanding the parlour.

Her words were a reminder of the inherent resilience and never-say-die spirit of these young women of the Northeast. Despite the shabby treatment meted out to them, they have kept themselves and their families going. While support structures were few, those that did exist were a great help in times of trouble. There were also groups working to change attitudes and build bridges between different communities. Some ran helplines and websites, so that complaints could be registered.

What was interesting was that although every woman was aware of the dangers of living in a city like Delhi, none of them were fazed. They believed they had made the right decision by migrating to the big city and wanted to make the most of the opportunities that come their way.

Gulf Journeys of South Asian Women

Pamela Philipose

The journey of life has often entailed travel out of places we call home, to locations and cultures that are unfamiliar. Migration, quite clearly, has emerged as one of the cardinal realities of our times. Every year hundreds of thousands of people leave their places of residence in search of a better source of livelihood and they hope for a brighter future. In 2012, there were at least 190 million migrant workers globally and women constituted nearly half this number. Yet, despite their numbers, women remained invisible and their contributions to national and family incomes went unrecognised.

“It’s time to consider migration through the gender lens, given the rising feminisation of migration,” said Dr S.K. Sasikumar, senior fellow of the V.V. Giri National Labour Institute (VVGNI), Delhi. Sasikumar has co-authored, along with Dr Rakhee Timothy, Associate Fellow, VVGNI, a study, *Migration of Women Workers From South Asia to the Gulf*, which has strongly recommended policy making on migration that is sensitive to women and their rights.

The study, supported by UN Women and released in 2012, dwelt on the realities of migrant women workers in five major countries of origin – Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – as well as those in six receiving countries - Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia (which, incidentally, has the highest number of migrant workers from South Asia), and the United Arab Emirates.

What made women migrant workers particularly vulnerable? The reasons ranged from subjective factors like their lack of literacy, information, and the ability to express themselves in the local language, to objective circumstances like criminalised recruiting networks and indifferent regulation. What added to their difficulties was the fact that they inhabited the lowest echelons of the job market – by far the largest proportion of them worked as domestic workers. Timothy pointed out, “Because of the highly personalised

and isolated nature of domestic work, there is a higher chance of these women facing problems, including physical assaults.”

The study highlighted the widely prevalent ‘kafala’, or sponsorship system, that existed in most Gulf countries and which bound the migrant domestic worker to her employer. A worker who came in through the ‘kafala’ route was entitled only to temporary resident status and had to work for the same employer for the entire period of the migration.

What typically happened in these cases was that employers took away the passport and related documents. Fear of deportation forced the domestic worker to then accept every situation she found herself in and accede to every demand that was made of her. According to Dr Jean D’Cunha, global migration advisor for UN Women, there was an urgent need to reform the ‘kafala’ system.

Anecdotal evidence cited in the study revealed that women have had to face non-payment of dues and have suffered physical and verbal abuse on a daily basis. They could be the target of everyone within the employer’s family – from the children to the adults – and this could extend to sexual violence as well. Justice in such cases remained elusive, often even when murders and rapes had occurred. Domestic workers in the Gulf were expressly excluded from even the modest protective legislation for migrants that was offered by countries like Kuwait and Qatar.

An important observation made in the study was the need to adopt a more women-centric approach to policy making on migration. Existing policies either invisibilised women or employed a patronising attitude towards them in the name of ‘protecting’ them. According to the authors, one of the striking aspects of South Asian emigration policies was that they did not treat men and women uniformly.

The example cited was of the public outrage in Nepal that followed the sexual assault and death of a young Nepalese woman in the

Gulf in 1998, which led to the country banning female migration. The ban remained in place until 2003. Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and India had all placed restrictions on women travelling abroad for domestic work at some point or the other. Pakistan stipulated that only women above the age of 35 were entitled to work as domestic help outside the country.

Such arbitrary rules violate a woman's right to free movement and employment. Migration is an important source of mobility and is a human right. Instead of placing restrictions on their movement, it would be far better to have put in place measures that ensure the safety and security of female migrants. In fact, restrictive policies have only made migration even less safe because many women are then forced to adopt risky ways to migrate.

Some countries – like Sri Lanka – have learnt from past experiences and evolved comprehensive pre-departure orientation programmes, especially for women from rural backgrounds. Timothy underlined the importance of orientation programmes, “Women migrants, we find, are vulnerable and face discrimination at every point of the migration cycle – during exit, transit, destination and return. At the point of exit, for instance, we find they don't have crucial information about what their new jobs entail, or even on something as basic as the language and customs of the people they will now be living with.”

What has been conspicuous is the unavailability of accurate data and proper documentation. Said Sasikumar, “Data on migration, especially gender disaggregated data, was very poor and scattered. For instance, there were no statistics available on the contribution women workers made in terms of the money they sent back, although we know that a country like India, for instance, earned \$55 billion through the remittances of people migrating from its shores.”

This lack of proper accounting has meant that women are not given their due recognition for having turned around household economies

and redefined development narratives in their home countries. Their numbers are significant – in 2010, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries received 6.45 million female migrants from South Asia – and their impact has been considerable. For instance, women migrants from Nepal, by buying property with money earned through their hard labour in foreign shores have been challenging the feudal, male-centred land ownership norms in their country. It was interesting to note also that less women than men lost their jobs in the Gulf after the global recession, indicating that the demand for female labour in sectors like care work and domestic service remains high even in the era of financial turbulence.

The contribution of the faceless woman migrant from South Asia needs to be acknowledged, and her life made more secure.

Tight Rope Walk of Emigrant Women Workers

Shwetha E. George

Although women from Kerala had been migrating as domestic workers for over two decades, it was only recently that the Malayalam media had begun to focus their situation. Shocking revelations of physical, sexual and psychological abuse – at the hands of both Arab and Malayali employers – have surfaced.

The story of Usha, 39, was revealing. She had been thrice to Kuwait and was waiting in her Kottayam home for her next placement there. The very first stint she did was with a Kerala family. The wife was a full-time nurse and the family's breadwinner. The couple had two children, a boy of six and a girl of five months. "I suffered everything at the hands of that family, except physical abuse," she recalled. The boy was "extremely spoiled", according to her. Once he kicked her so hard in a sleepy state that her front tooth broke.

The pay she received was a pittance. A year later, she found that she had no money to buy even a few gifts for people back home, or to clear her debts. Once back home, she vowed not to return. But her two sons were still in school, the house needed repairs and her husband – a driver in Kuwait – got her another job through an agent there.

Her new family was extremely strict. Even calling home was not allowed. She was promised a salary of Rs 5,000 a month but the actual amount deposited in her bank account was less. "When my mistress's sister and two kids also started staying in the same flat, I asked for a raise and got a salary of Rs 6,000," she elaborated. Looking back Usha felt those years were the worst in her life. The fact that she had no ready cash – her salary was sent home by cheque – added to her feelings of abject humiliation. A point came when she couldn't take it anymore. Recalled Usha, "When I told my employers I wanted to return home, they immediately called my husband and demanded he buy my return ticket. I was given 13 dinars a few

hours before boarding the flight – which was insufficient to even make a call to my husband from the airport.”

Leela, 53, went to Qatar in 2006, as a nanny and domestic worker. Her employer, too, was a Malayali nurse with two kids, the youngest a year old. “I was responsible for all the cooking, cleaning and full-time care of the infant. I bathed her, fed her and she even slept with me. The mother worked in a local hospital and her work shifts left her with little time or energy to attend to matters at home,” she said.

Back in Kerala, Leela was working as a maid thrice a week for a doctor in Changanasserry. She was planning to return to the Gulf, hoping things would be better during her second stint, “I’d advise any young woman willing to migrate to ensure two things – one, she must know who her employer is and, two, she must have a relative/contact she can trust in that country.”

Then there were other traumatic dimensions of such migration that rarely surfaced. For instance, in 39-year-old Molly’s case, it was not the work experience that demoralised her but the grim reality of having been abandoned once she came back home. “My younger sister who had come to look after my three kids stayed on permanently. She and my husband decided to live together during the five years that I was employed in Kuwait,” she revealed.

Informed about the affair, Molly did come home on a 45-day break, and her worst fears were confirmed. But she never went back and instead began working as an employee of the Kochi branch of the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA). The home she had helped build with the money she had earned during her five-year stint in Kuwait was now being occupied by her sister. Worse still was the fact that her husband, in a fit of anger, had burnt her passport shutting all work options to the Middle East.

Pushpi, manager of the SEWA branch, observed, “It’s ironic but true that migrant women workers are often more insecure about their

status in the families they leave behind than in the families that employ them abroad.”

While not much can be done to secure personal relationships, what was clear was that the uncertain conditions of women migrant workers needed urgent redress. Remarked Praveena Kodoth, Associate Professor, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, “There is uncertainty in this arrangement. Who is the employer? What are the terms and conditions of payment? Answers to these questions are dictated by the legal framework of the Gulf countries.”

In the United Arab Emirates, for instance, under the ‘kafala’ system, all native Arabs have the natural right to sponsor a non-native. Some of them ‘sell’ this right to a Malayali agent who, in turn, is repaid by the woman migrant he hires. “He gets back the amount he paid for sponsorship rights by re-collecting his fee from the migrating woman labourer. Invariably, he becomes her de-facto employer with all kinds of de-facto rights,” elaborated Kodoth.

The agents called the shots; they chose the employer and also helped the woman jump jobs without proper documentation because, in a way, they controlled ‘the informal labour market’. But things could become really bad for the woman if her employer took possession of her passport, which is not uncommon with Arab employers. In case the employed women fled the workplace, their employers were supposed to hand over their passports and other papers to the Indian embassy. But this is rarely done, and the fugitives are then, eventually, at risk of falling prey to those who control the informal job market.

Was there a way out of this maze? According to scholars, emigration procedures need to be urgently relaxed so that these women workers are not forced to circumvent the rules. Secondly, Indian embassies should be more pro-active. Unfortunately whenever the State had intervened, it had only made the system more bureaucratic. When the State demanded more paper work it made it easier for unscrupulous agents to step in.

The consequences of illegal migration are, of course, extremely traumatic. Rosie, a widowed resident of a coastal village near Thiruvananthapuram, left her three daughters and migrated to Qatar 12 years ago. She ran away from her first employer, an Arab, after three years of unspeakable abuse. She survived with the 'help' of a Malayali agent who got her work in Malayali households in the Gulf every three months. One of Rosie's friends revealed that she doesn't step out in daylight because her Arab employer has reported on her and she was on police records. Sometimes she spoke to her daughters – all inmates of a convent in her village – on a borrowed cellphone. In 2012, Rosie had reportedly applied for a royal pardon through the Indian embassy – her only hope of coming home after a decade.

Powerless and Faceless in a foreign land

Deepti Lal

In 2011, Ruyati Binti Satubi, an Indonesian domestic worker, was beheaded in Saudi Arabia after she was held guilty of killing her employer's wife. While the Indonesian government as well as Satubi's family had been informed about the proceedings the execution happened without any notice. An eyewitness claimed that Satubi, a mother of three, had endured a great deal of abuse, including being punched and kicked, before the murder took place. Her case drew international attention because of the beheading, but there have been several women working in situations like she had to face, without any recourse to either media attention or the support of the local authorities.

In fact, incidents like these have prompted two organisations, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, to single out the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for abuses faced by domestic workers employed in the country. There have been several documented cases of employers cutting the ears of domestic workers, burning them with irons, and even forcing nails and needles into their bodies.

Bindu (name changed), 36, was spared extreme violence but she was not a happy employee. She had left her home, husband and four children back in a rural district of Nepal, to work as a housemaid in Saudi Arabia. She did this to support them since the 'agent' had promised good money. Bindu recalled, "There were 15 of us, who had jobs as housemaids, and we came via India as the Nepal government had at that point banned the movement of domestic maids to Saudi Arabia, following incidents of violence and ill treatment."

Bindu found employment in a Saudi household and was made to take care of three children, apart from handling all the household chores including cooking. All she got to eat at the end of the day was bread and potatoes. Said Bindu, "I was so sick of bread and

potatoes that I went hungry for days, but no one even bothered. I could have endured this, if the family had at least given me my wages on time. Month after month they would say they would pay me 'next month', but 'next month' never came. It was not as if there was any shortage of funds in that home – vast amounts of shopping was being done every day. But when it came to my wages they said they were short of cash. After six months, they handed me only three months' salary."

Bindu's was not an isolated case. Thousands like her have faced similar if not worse conditions in the Kingdom. According to one arrangement, maids work for housekeeping companies who, in turn, contract out their services. They were brought to their workplace in buses and then taken back. They are locked inside their dormitories once they finished work and were not allowed to go out after work hours. Most of them did not get a single day off. If they fell sick, it was leave without pay.

But these women have been better off than individuals like Bindu, who live at the sole mercy of their sponsor. On her arrival, Bindu's passport, her gold earrings and some currency had to be submitted to her employer for "safe keeping".

One night Bindu found her 'sir' in the room where she was asleep with his one-year-old baby. When she fled from the room and informed her 'madam' about the incident, the woman started shouting at her. She was told that she should not have run away and that now the master will be very angry. Bindu walked out of that house in the early hours of the day when everybody was asleep – without money, passport, or any document that could prove her status.

Approximately two million women from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, India and other countries worked as migrant domestic labour in Saudi Arabia (2012 data). They were routinely underpaid, overworked, confined to the workplace and are frequently subjected to verbal, physical and sexual abuse. Since they were

excluded from the protection of any labour legislation, they were vulnerable to serious exploitation. Saudi Arabia did not have laws that protected the right of workers to form trade unions and bargain collectively. Independent labour unions did not exist and the migratory sponsorship system, under which most migrant labour was recruited, put foreign workers at the mercy of their employer or sponsor who processed their residence permits.

Maya (name changed) came to Saudi Arabia after her divorce. She left her one year old in her village in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. She was 18 when she arrived. Fair complexioned, with waist-long tresses, she was an attractive woman. On the very first day her 'madam' chopped off her hair with a kitchen knife saying it was 'haram' for a maid to be 'attractive'. Maya remembered that it was the month of Ramzan, "I was not allowed to eat throughout the day, even though I am a non-Muslim. Then I would have to cook and serve all night because that was the pattern of life during Ramzan. In the morning, when the adults went off to sleep, I had to take care of the children, feed them and clean the house." She did all this with the minimum food and under extremely stressful conditions – including being abused verbally and physically for being "irresponsible". When she couldn't bear the situation any more, she chose to walk out, like Bindu had done, without her money, passport or residence permit.

Many maids work as illegal migrants as well. Not having the required papers made them even more vulnerable, and they had no option but to exist like ghosts to keep supporting their family back home. Some could not even go back if they had an option, because conditions at home were even worse. One woman revealed her quandary, "How do I support my child and what do I eat if I go back?" So she carried on, hopping from one household to another, before the officials could trace and deport her.

Unlike Maya and Bindu, some who ran away made the mistake of approaching the police. Ponamma S., a Sri Lankan domestic worker,

described to Human Rights Watch her experience of approaching the police after escaping from her employers: "A senior officer came. I complained that Baba had beaten me up. Baba claimed that he was not there at the time. Then they asked if Baba paid me. I said, 'For one-and-a-half years I have not been paid.' I refused to go back to Baba. I insisted to go to the embassy...The police told Baba to drop me at the embassy, but he took me back to the house...The lady beat me really badly. She told me, 'Anywhere you go in Saudi Arabia, they'll return you back here. Even if we kill you, the police won't say anything to us. If you hadn't run, we would have killed you and thrown you in the trash.'"

The story of domestic workers in this region is a never ending saga of a system that can only be termed as modern day slavery.

A Mobile Workforce that Creates Lustrous Fabric

Ratna Bharali Talukdar

Pronita Brahma, 25, was one of over 25,000 women, mostly from the Bodo tribe, who migrate seasonally to Sualkuchi, the largest silk village in lower Assam's Kamrup district, to work as a contractual weaver. Sualkuchi has a century old tradition of silk weaving.

An expert weaver, Pronita first came to this silk cloth producing pocket from Mohoripara village, around 65 kilometres away, about 10 years ago. Like most of her counterparts, Pronita – who supported a family of five back home – was unmarried and lived in cramped rented dormitories in conditions that were far from congenial or healthy.

Villages like Mohoripara in Kamrup as well as others in lower Assam's Baksa and Barpeta districts were mostly inhabited by the Bodos. The families of these migrating women were either landless or possessed a small holding that could barely provide them with a square meal. Employment and livelihood opportunities were very limited and it was this factor that prompted a sizable number of their residents to migrate. Those with weaving skills normally migrated to Sualkuchi only to return after eight to nine months in order to either work in their own fields or as contracted agricultural labour. Later, once the money was over, it was back to weaving.

A Sualkuchi weaver could expect to earn anything between Rs 2,500 and Rs 4,000 in a month by working on a traditional loom. After paying for the rented accommodation as well as other living and transportation expenses, very little was left. Unorganised, they didn't even know how to raise their voices against the exploitation they experienced.

Most women took loans in advance from their employers and ended up working almost as bonded labour in order to pay them off. A weaver got Rs 700 for a chador and Rs 300 for a mekhla – the two-

piece mekhla-chador makes up the traditional attire of the Assamese women. It took three to five days to weave a chador, depending the design and the motifs used.

Generally, the women came to Sualkuchi for a few years and then with the little money they managed to save, they started life afresh in their own villages – sometimes in different occupations. But because of the stagnation of wages and the spiraling prices of essential commodities, it was difficult to save very much anymore.

Pronita's employer, Manoj Kalita, while admitting that women weavers worked under very tough conditions, argued that the status of loom owners was no better. An owner of 16 looms, he said, he and others like him had been able to provide some social security to these migrant women, although they may have failed to give them economic security. Observed Kalita, "A sizeable number of these women have settled here permanently, marrying local boys. Once they were proud of their status as expert weavers, now they prefer to work in urban areas as sales girls or in other low-paid sectors."

Kalita understood why the women weavers had drifted to other occupations. "When we used to pay the weavers Rs 500 for a piece of chador, the price for a kilo of dal was only Rs 18. Now we pay them Rs 700, but the price of dal has gone up to Rs 64," he said.

The problem, according to him, lay in the fact that most consumers of silk products have a fixed budget. At the same time, the price of silk yarn had increased because of the lack of policy direction on the part of the government. Neither does the Assam government subsidise the yarn nor does it help in its procurement. Without such interventions, profit margins for loom owners were falling, which is why they could not pay the women weavers better.

Although it was one of most prolific centres for silk-weaving, Sualkuchi has had to depend for its raw materials on the outside markets. Its weavers traditionally wove pat (mulberry) and muga silk.

The pat silk thread came from Bengaluru, and loom-owners were forced to pay whatever price quoted. As for golden muga silk-thread – although it is procured locally, it remained expensive since the demand far outstrips supply. Mulberry silk cost over Rs 1,800 per kilogram while muga could range anywhere between Rs 12,000 and Rs 15,000 per kilogram.

But what could help to turn around this otherwise adverse situation was a device, known as the 'chaneki', which has been introduced by the Central Silk Board (CSB) as part of its loom upgradation programme. The innovative device, which cost around Rs 5,000, had been designed by Dipak Bharali, a science graduate who came from a silk village himself, with the aim of maximising the weaving skills of the women and increasing the productivity of looms. The 'chaneki' helped cut the time taken in threading the weft thread bobbins for spot design or motif making almost by half. On traditional looms, weavers were required to insert the weft thread manually to make a particular design – this took time and often the weft thread snapped and had to be replaced.

The decision of the CSB to make the 'chaneki' available for loom owners at a subsidised rate of 80 per cent in March 2012 had ushered in some remarkable changes for both the weavers and owners.

Pronita was upbeat about the new device and hoped to increase her earnings – not because of a wage rise but because of a rise in her productivity. "It is for the first time in my life as a weaver that such a transformation has happened. Not only does the device help me save time, it ensures greater productivity. I can now think of saving some money finally," she said.

Perhaps, in time, women like her could go back to their villages, practice their craft, ensure product diversification, and emerge as entrepreneurs in their own right. Meanwhile, Bharali hoped to carry on doing his bit to help women like Pronita realise their dreams as weaving professionals. He was now looking to design computerised

designs and motifs. He said he wanted to urgently improve the economic conditions of weavers so that their work became a sustainable and profitable. He recognised that they were the key persons who can make or break the entire industry. “The survival of a tradition of weaving that went back a century depended on them. This meant we need to keep working at developing weaver friendly upgradation techniques,” said Bharali.

Pronita’s long-term career as a weaver depended crucially on precisely such initiatives. Otherwise, it may just not make sense for her to leave her family for such long spells and sweat it out on the looms of Sualkuchi.

Tamil Women in Kerala's Brick Kilns

Shwetha E. George

A trip into the countryside in Kerala revealed clusters of women workers balancing basketloads of mud on their heads, fashioning bricks out of them and stacking them according to pre-fixed technical norms, even as they cooked food for their families and kept their dwellings clean.

They even stood in line to get the collective family wages because their husbands could neither be trusted to remember correctly the number of work hours they had put in, nor be thrifty with the cash they got. It is the women who generally take all the decisions regarding the family's monthly expenditure. Rice and sambar was the standard fare in most homes.

The brick manufacturing season in Kerala normally began after the rains and stretched to April, before the next monsoon set in. They followed a circular migratory pattern, coming from Tamil Nadu to Kerala and returning, only to come back again. Middlemen, or 'brokers', located in Tamil Nadu and hailing from places like Salem, Theni, Kambham and Usilempetty, simply rounded up 20 to 25 families from their respective villages and got them to migrate to the leased paddy fields on the Kerala side of the border, where these kilns were located. The employer or employers – leaseholders to brick kiln sites sometimes partner with the landowner – arranged for the required transport.

But before they moved out of Tamil Nadu, there was an important transaction to be made. Elaborated M.K. Mohanan, who has been a partner in a brick manufacturing unit in Ernakulam for the last 15 years, "The bus starts only after I have paid Rs 30,000 per family to the broker." The money was paid as a surety amount to each family – the wages and weekly expenses for six months are extra. So the total cost for getting 20 families from Tamil Nadu to the worksite works out to approximately Rs 5 lakh, including transportation costs.

Potentially, there is an annual turnover of Rs 40 lakh to be made from one acre of leased farmland, but employers like Mohanan first need to make sure of two things. He explained, "I have to ensure the quality of the mud as well as the quality of the labour. Without tight supervision, the labourers can cut corners to make their work easy and this will affect the quality of the bricks."

Like profit-driven entrepreneurs everywhere, Mohanan made no bones about what he was looking for in his workforce. According to him, Oriya migrants were "too quiet"; the Assamese, "too intelligent" and the Bengalis "too aggressive". He believed a Tamilian workforce which comprises more than 50 per cent women, suited him best. He had figured out, apparently, that women are less aggressive in demanding their rights – a feature valued by owners and employers in a state like Kerala where an active trade union movement has resulted in regular strikes and shut downs.

"I strongly believe that it is the presence of the woman that has kept the Tamilian male worker well-behaved in our brick kilns. Money gets saved, discipline is maintained and children stay well within the boundaries of their living space. The shacks are also kept neat with the kitchens exceptionally clean," observed Mohanan, approvingly.

Since it was the women who queued up for wages and negotiated for the allotted weekly expenses, they had plenty of bargaining power. They refuse to fund their husbands' alcohol binge and this invariably causes a lot of domestic squabbles. So far, Mohanan has had to intervene only twice in 15 years in cases of domestic violence because "the Tamilian woman labourer will not endure physical abuse". In fact, according to him, there were many instances where the wife had hit her husband back if he dared raise his hand against her.

But although employers had reason enough to laud the role of the women in keeping this labour network going, their lives were, in fact, far from ideal. The average age of the woman worker in these

kilns was 20. They were also likely to have only basic literacy since they married generally by the age of 16 and became mothers before they had turned 20. Early motherhood and hard physical labour had clearly taken a toll on their health. Anaemia levels were high and so also the number of stillbirths, which indicated how these women worked themselves to the bone, even during pregnancy, while not having adequate access to nutritious food or healthcare.

Said Revathy, 23, mother of three children aged between seven and three, "In Tamil Nadu, we don't get work. But here, in Kerala, my husband and I together earn around Rs 700 a day." She considered this as a good enough wage and did not want to sound "ungrateful" by complaining unnecessarily about her living conditions. She had ensured that her two older children have an uninterrupted education by leaving them back with their grandmother at home, and although their education was expensive she did not want to compromise on this because she wanted desperately for her children to be able to live better lives than that of their parents.

Once the monsoon set in – a period that stretches from June to October each year – work in the brick kilns ceased and these families returned to their villages in Tamil Nadu. During this period, the only money to be made was from agricultural activity, mostly sugarcane harvesting. A few even own land, but the holdings were too small to be productive and made no real difference to their financial status.

This is why work opportunities in the brick kilns were a lifeline for many. Besides, over the years, they had become used to life in the neighbouring state. Said young Sumathy, from an arid region like Salem in Tamil Nadu, "We like Kerala. Although things are more costly there, there are compensations. For one, there is plenty of water and we enjoy our baths in the river."

But a little closer questioning resulted in dissatisfactions spilling out. Women spoke about how their work hours – generally between 8 am to 5.30 pm – should be reduced to nine hours. To be at the

site by 8 am, they had to wake up by 4.30 am and complete all their household chores, which, of course, included the daily trek to collect water.

Moreover, as with their counterparts in the other informal sectors, women in brick kiln units were paid less than the men. The wage was fixed at Rs 40 an hour for the men and Rs 30 for the women. Overtime work up to 7 pm netted them an additional amount of Rs 70 an hour, but again this is applicable only to the men because the women usually had to rush home to attend to the evening chores.

Mohanan saw no reason why the women should complain. "They are even given a Sunday off every two weeks. They have access to cable television, including the very popular Sun Direct," he said. With a touch of righteousness, he added, "I also give them cakes and sweets on all festival days."

But cakes and sweets cannot mask the fact that the "homes" of these workers were made up of bent asbestos sheets and that their toilets were deplorable without any roofs or doors. The lives of the migrant brick workers of Kerala may be marginally better than in states like Bihar and Odisha, but their existence was still a rough, tough grind, that wore down the body and the spirit.

Red Bricks and Border Crossings

Sarada Lahangir

Nilabati Bangula's family was among the thousands who migrated seasonally to work in brick kilns on the outskirts of cities like Cuttack and Bhubaneswar in the state of Odisha. Originally from the village of Belpada in Bolangir district, it was poverty and landlessness that forced the family into this unregulated sector in conditions that can only be described as tragically derelict.

The makeshift hut in which they lived, adjoining the Rana brick kiln factory near Barang in Cuttack, was a little bigger than a chicken coop. Erected out of broken bricks and mud, it had a very low roof – about three metres from the ground – fashioned out of crude material.

"We have no other way of earning a living, otherwise why would we leave our homes to slave here?" remarked Nilabati, 35, when this writer met her in July 2012. Migration was a yearly ritual for her family of six – four adults and two children. They came to seek work at a kiln in November and typically returned to their village before the rains. After a few months at home, the migration cycle would start all over again – usually after Diwali. All the adults in the family – Nilabati, her husband, mother-in-law and brother-in-law – worked as 'chhanchua' (brick moulders).

A contractor had brought the family to Barang after paying an advance of Rs 15,000. The money was desperately needed for the marriage of Nilabati's sister-in-law. So all the work that was being done by them was basically to repay that advance, and hopefully save something for the future. Most days, they worked from 6 am to noon, and then again from 3 pm to 10 pm. The food allowance given to them was Rs 100 per head per week – which came to about Rs 400 for the whole family – and was used to buy the week's provisions at the local weekly market.

What did they manage to get in a mere Rs 400? Elaborated Nilabati, "We can't afford to buy rice at Rs 20 per kilo in the open market so we usually get the poorest quality of food items, like broken rice. We buy dry or rotting vegetables and discarded portions of meat at exorbitant prices. We are often forced to eat chicken feed, which sells at Rs 3 to 4 per kilo in the regular market but which is sold to us at Rs 7 to 8 per kilo."

As for the water they drank, it was the same water that was used to mix the clay for the bricks. When I met Nilabati, her biggest anxiety was how to arrange for treatment for her five-year-old daughter, Rukmani, who was suffering from jaundice, possibly because of the poor quality of water that was available. Every day, Nilabati said, she pleaded with the owner of the brick kiln to either get her daughter to a doctor or let the family go back to their village. "But he doesn't say anything," the anxious mother revealed.

Going by Nilabati's daily schedule brick-making was certainly no easy work. First, clay was mixed and balls made out of it. These were then moulded into bricks. The wet bricks were carried into the field for drying and flipped over until they dried. Thereafter, the sun-dried bricks were carried, headload by headload, to be fired. The finished bricks were finally transported to the market.

Nilabati found the work hard, often back breaking and endless, and everyone in the family, including the children, ended up working seven days a week. Their wages depended on the number of bricks churned out every day. So while the men prepared the clay, the kids helped transport it to the site and the women would fill the mould and prepare the bricks for drying.

Generally, since there were no breaks given, women on the site were also expected to work during pregnancies and illnesses. One woman working at Nilabati's brick kiln put it this way, "We are poor, so the owner treats like cattle. Like cattle, we too cannot raise our voice against any cruelty done to us by the master. Like

cattle we are forced to live in dingy shells, where we have to enter bent double.”

According to Dr Rajkishor Sahu, a medical doctor based in western Odisha, who has worked on occupational hazards in the region, “Each type of work has its own set of health hazards, ranging from infections and fevers, contamination and toxicity-related diseases, respiratory and gynaecological problems, injuries and accidents. Malnourishment takes a huge toll, especially on children.” The brick kiln workers were toiling away without welfare, health support, insurance or sick leave. Dr Sahu also pointed out, “We have seven- or eight-year-olds looking no more than four. And there is a local saying that after four or five years in the brick kilns, young workers start looking like old people.”

As contractors exerted tremendous control over these labourers, they were forced to work even when they were sick or injured. The supreme irony was that although Nilabati's family had been working day and night, making at least 1,200 bricks per day, they didn't have any idea of how much the owner would pay them in the end.

A chat with Nilambar Swain, who was overseeing a brick kiln unit near Barang, was eye-opening. Off the record he informed that while the actual rate was Rs 300 for every 1,000 bricks made, in reality workers were being paid at the rate of Rs 150 for 1,000 bricks. The remaining Rs 150 went to the middleman. Even at the lower rate, Nilabati's family should have long paid off their original debt of Rs 15,000 and made at least Rs 7,800 at the end of six months after deducting the food allowance they received. But in most cases, because the workers were illiterate and didn't have bargaining power, they ended up getting only a small sum to cover their travel expenses to go back home.

This was basically “survival” migration, seasonal in nature and that occurred under distress conditions. Women and children were the worst affected. Observed Bhubaneswar-based social activist Amrita Patel, “Although migration is an empowering process – a move

made for better livelihood options – in Odisha, the migration of women is disempowering, with their dependency on a patriarchal order getting even more intensified. They have no established social safety nets and have to bear the burden of childcare in often hostile conditions.” As for the children, they missed out on education, health care and a normal childhood.

Despite the fact that the state government had set up a special labour cell to monitor migration, both within the state and outside, and to keep tabs on agents involved in illegal practices, the move had largely been ineffectual, according to Patel. She also believed that there needed to be some grievance redressal mechanism that was non-existent.

Alekh Chandra Padhiary, State Labour Commissioner, admitted that around 1.8 million people migrated from Odisha every year but only 50,000 of them were registered. As a result, it was virtually impossible to ensure that migrants didn't end up getting a raw deal.

The first thing that migrants lost when they moved out of their villages was their identity. Umi Daniel, Thematic Head, Migration, Aide et Action, a non-governmental organisation, argued that given this, just keeping tabs on contractors was not enough – the government must be more pro-active in protecting the interests of seasonal and regular migrants, many of whom didn't even know their basic rights.

Their numbers are considerable. A 2012 study entitled 'Migration in KBK Region', jointly conducted by International Labour Organization (ILO) and Aide et Action, which covered 100 villagers of Kalahandi, Bolangir and Nuapada districts, found that migration from these districts had risen by 20 per cent between 2009-10 and 2011-12. Of these, 51 per cent were men and 49 per cent were women – women like Nilabati. They urgently needed help.

Section 4 >>

Finding Voices, Making Breakthrough



RedeŶning Women's Work – Lessons from SEWA

Shalini Sinha

The rising crescendo around women's work in the labour discourse, and the issues that they face, has a silent note—that of their inclusion in the mainstream trade union movement. Trade unions in India have mostly confined themselves to the formal sector, and even there, have largely remained deaf and mute to the needs of women workers. In 2002, the last year for which trade union membership figures are available, only about one-fourth of registered union members were women. Efforts to focus on women's issues and build their representation in leadership roles have remained rhetoric, half-hearted and ineffective.

At the macro level, trade unionism itself, as it has traditionally existed, is facing several challenges owing to the advent of liberalisation and globalisation, and its inability to cope with the changing political economy – the rising demand for labour reforms, a capital friendly State and the growing informal economy.

In India, 97 per cent of women workers are employed in the informal sector. Their earnings are not commensurate with their labour, and they have very few workers' benefits and protection. Patriarchy, caste and class come together to push them into positions of vulnerability, where they largely remain, invisible and voiceless.

The biggest challenge is that women are not recognised as 'workers'. The absence of a clear employer-employee relationship, non-existence of a common work place as in the organised sector, high incidence of under employment and multiple employers, are the major hurdles in organising these women. Many are so busy surviving, weighed down as they are by the double burden of income generation and unpaid care, that finding the time to devote to an organisation is hard.

Very few women's organisations have managed to build strong, vital organisations that can benefit from economies of scale, greater access to resources and influence. This is why the success story of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is so significant. Born as a labour union in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, in 1972, with just 600 head loaders, street vendors and home-based stitchers, SEWA has, since then, grown consistently, increasing its membership and bringing within its fold many more occupations and geographical regions.

Notably, SEWA demonstrated a new way of organising within trade unions, particularly in developing a strategy specific to women workers in the informal economy. It evolved innovative structures and programmes, which were more suited to the needs of informal women workers, were less patriarchal and open to change.

What were the ways in which SEWA set itself apart from traditional trade unions? First, it brought together workers from many different trades ranging from urban street vendors to rural livestock breeders, unlike most trade unions which organised workers of one trade. It also sought to build the identity and solidarity of its members as workers. In doing so, it challenged the very notion of 'work', which traditionally did not encompass the kind of work that women do in the informal economy, as self employed workers, with no clear employer-employee relationship.

Sharing her frustration at the hurdles she faced while registering SEWA as a trade union, Ela Bhatt, the founder of SEWA recalled, "The Registrar of Trade Unions would not consider us as 'workers'; hence we could not register as a 'trade union'. The hard working chindi workers, cart pullers, rag pickers, embroiderers, midwives, forest produce gatherers can contribute to nation's gross domestic product, but heaven forbid if they be acknowledged as workers! Without an employer you cannot be classified as a worker..." (*We Are Poor But So Many*, Ela Bhatt, 2006: 18)

What was noteworthy was the fact that its members were all women, and generally very poor. At the heart of the SEWA philosophy was the idea of building grassroots leadership and today it sees itself as a movement “of the women workers, by the women workers and for the women workers”.

In order to prepare women to take on these roles of leadership, not only did SEWA create an ‘Academy of Learning’ for its members but in an effort to take capacity building to the very doorstep of the woman worker, it developed a cadre of barefoot trainers, who conducted community trainings at the village and mohalla (community) level. As a result, grassroots women were able to actively participate in all the democratic structures of the SEWA Union, including the Trades Council and the Executive Committee. In addition, local leaders managed every activity and programme of SEWA.

“A sun has risen in my mind!” was how one SEWA member described the impact of the capacity building she received, while another one reflected; “My confidence has increased because I have learned that I am not alone. There are many poor women at SEWA.”

There was one more thing that made SEWA unique – the fact that it included workers who were generally not in factories. The large factories offered economies of scale for organising workers who were on wage contract, and where organising strategies were directed towards negotiating with a visible employer. SEWA’s organising strategies, on the other hand, factored in vulnerable women workers who worked in non-factory settings; in homes as home-based workers or as domestic servants, in fields as agricultural workers or in public spaces as street vendors.

In doing so, it developed a host of innovative strategies and approaches. At a local or national level, where there was an employer, however disguised, as was the case with beedi or agarbatti workers, it focused on engagement and negotiations with the employer.

Where there was no employer – as with vendors and rag pickers – the approach was to identify institutions that affected the lives of workers (for instance, city authorities, municipalities and the police) and negotiate with them on the relevant issues.

In these struggles, SEWA achieved many successes, not just in ‘work’ specific issues such as increases in wages and making statutory bargaining forums accessible to women workers but also in bringing changes in the wider environment, such as legal recognition for workers in the informal economy.

Besides organising for higher wages or enterprise benefits, SEWA provided other essential support services to its members – savings, credit, and insurance, childcare, health services, among others. In order to do so it developed a host of membership-based organisations linked to the Union, all of which were owned by the women who were members of SEWA, but functioned as independent entities. For instance, SEWA bank was established to address the financial needs of savings and credit and the micro-insurance programme of SEWA provided risk coverage for health emergency and asset loss to its members.

Few organisations in the world have systematically and effectively promoted the collective strength and voice of poor working women, as SEWA has done. And yet, as this model has demonstrated, the driving force for organising comes from within women themselves. Organising and the act of building an organisation became key in their search for dignity, and for justice and empowerment.

As Savitaben, a rag picker and member of SEWA put it, “Joining SEWA released an energy in me; I felt things could change for me and for others like me and I wanted to do everything to make the change.”

A Little Ambition and Some Infotech

Ranjita Biswas

Joka, on the southern fringe of Kolkata, is better known as the site of the premier Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta. But outside that huge complex, where future corporate honchos are being given world-class training, lies a world where unemployment among the youth is high and where middle and lower middle-class families put together scant resources to educate their children so that they can get jobs in adulthood. Often they fail miserably in the process.

In 2010, women here enrolled in a training course in software provided by the Jeevika Development Society, a non-governmental organisation working in Joka. They did this in the hope of getting a decent job. For instance, Riya Mondol, 18, from Bishnupur, who had completed her secondary level schooling, was hoping to “establish” herself and “improve the economic conditions at home”. So were her course mates, Jhumur Santra, a graduate, who had been married for seven years and had a four-year-old daughter, and Anisha Gazi, who used to leave her six-month-old baby with her mother while she attended classes. These women had managed to complete the basic Information Technology (IT) course and move to the advanced course.

Jeevika's course had two basic components: LINKAGE or Livelihood Initiatives through Knowledge initiative, classes for which were held from 11 am to 3 pm. This was followed by the second component, the MAST or Market-Aligned Skill Training model. Additionally, they were trained in spoken English as ways to present themselves during interviews for mainstream jobs.

All this was courtesy Jeevika Society's collaboration with the Kolkata-based Anudip Foundation for Social Welfare, a non-profit outfit that creates improved livelihoods through IT training for the unemployed and marginalised poor in remote rural locations.

Anudip was founded in 2006 by the San Francisco-based husband-wife duo, Radha Ramaswami Basu and Dipak Basu. Corporate high-fliers and entrepreneurs, they decided to use their experience to bring IT training to rural and peri-urban people who fall behind their urban counterparts in terms of employment because of their lack of modern skills.

The idea for Anudip came out of the findings of an Information Needs analysis by Reuters Foundation/Stanford University. It was carried out in 2005 by a team led by Dipak and Alakananda Rao, General Manager, Anudip, who was formerly with ActionAid International. "When we asked the people we had interviewed what was their most pressing need, they replied unanimously, 'Work; give us a job'," revealed Rao. "This study showed that the local level of education had not bridged the economic gap between the urban and rural populace because of the lack of opportunities – importantly the lack of livelihood opportunities," she added.

Anudip was formed to meet this need. Co-founder Radha Basu emphasised, "Our model is not charity-based; many NGOs provide monetary help, but that's short-term. Unless skill and entrepreneurship capabilities develop, the long-term goal of empowerment is not achieved. We aim at social enterprise and economic stability through a process of 'learn and earn'."

An absence of employment opportunities means people with no alternatives are forced to migrate to nearby urban centres in search of payable work. It was also seen that IT training allowed graduates to secure better jobs or start successful IT businesses in small towns or within their communities, either singly or in small groups.

Anudip's work was located in West Bengal – having started out in the Sunderbans delta region, it spread to north Bengal. By 2010, it was running a total of 23 training centres across the state. To keep the centres self-sustaining, the students paid a nominal fee that covered infrastructure costs. Between 2007 and 2010, close

to 2,500 people mainly from impoverished areas like Metiabrus in south Kolkata had received training.

One of the long-term goals shared by Anudip's founders was to set up MERIT (Mass Employment through Rural IT) Centres with the idea that the organisation would execute back-office support functions while providing employment opportunities to rural youth. The focus was on equitable wealth creation processes through services like data capturing, cleaning and indexing, as well as accounting and designing. "We believe in a 'bottom up' policy – listening to the needs of the local people and designing the programme accordingly," explained Rao. It also meant that rural people could learn the basics of IT in the local language, Bengali.

Take for instance, Asma Khatun, 30, an employee at Anudip's BPO at the Kolkata office under the MERIT scheme. She came from the lower middle-class area of Garia located in southern Kolkata. Her rise in IT related work with clients – some even based abroad – served as an example of how aspiration combined with hard work can yield impressive results. Said Asma, "I lost my parents early but my brothers looked after me well. I had always wanted to be independent and now I can afford to be so."

In addition to the IT training, Anudip also had a micro-entrepreneurship development programme for women. After the basic and advance training was completed, business startup proposals were sought from those interested in taking the plunge. If approved, the organisation guided the applicants in carrying out market surveys in the chosen locations. They were also helped in working out a clear concept of market demand, supply, rates, competition and management. With the initial cost for the start-up being provided by Anudip, an agreement regarding the terms of repayment of the incubation costs from the second year of the venture was worked out. At Pailan, near Joka, two young women, Manorama Naskar and Nandita Mondol, benefitted from this programme and opened a cybercafé besides a computer training centre.

Helping to develop the entrepreneurship training model was US-based Jessica Sawhney, who used to work with a bank on the Wall Street but later joined Anudip as a volunteer. In 2010, she was working with Anudip as part of a year-long fellowship from the American India Foundation, established after the Gujarat earthquake in 2001. Said Sawhney, "It has been an amazing experience working here, listening to people from the less advantaged sections and trying to prepare them to be entrepreneurs using their basic skills. They are intelligent people but need a bit of guidance and confidence-building."

But since it was not enough just to train people, Anudip also looked into placement, so that its trained students found good jobs. It even tied up with corporate houses and offices in order to achieve this. At the end of the day, it was all about finding sustainable employment. As a young girl from Metiabrus put it, "I want to work. I want to help my father." A small step for her, which, with some basic IT training could prove a big leap into the future.

Cutting Fodder to Keying Data in just Six Months

Hemlata Aithani

Until mid-2009, Puja, 18, and Bimla Devi, 35, used to spend their days like any other village woman in the state of Haryana. They cooked meals, tended to the cattle and even worked in the field. Never in their wildest dreams had they imagined that they could one day be sitting in an office working away furiously in front of a computer.

This, however, became the remarkable reality of hundreds of women in Tikli and Aklimpur villages when a Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) centre set up a shop in the heart of their village later that year. Their agrarian way of life did not change, they still cut fodder for their cattle and cleared the cattle sheds, but along with all that they also learnt to use a computer adeptly. A first-of-its-kind women-only rural BPO in India, this centre was started by Harva, short for harnessing value of rural India.

Remarked one of the women in the BPO, "I never thought I would be able to work on a computer. It was such a big thing. But now working on the keyboard comes so easily to me. We come here for eight hours and do our job. I'm so proud of myself."

So, how did these simple women get the hang of using a high-tech device like professionals? Bimla learnt to type 35 to 40 words a minute, mine relevant pieces of information from a pool of data, and even make data entries perfectly after going through a three to four month rigorous training course.

But accomplishing this was no mean feat, especially motivating these women to step out of their homes. It took a lot of persistence to get them to break the rigid cultural and social barriers of their male-dominated society. It was the persuasive powers of Ajay Chaturvedi, a banker, with a degree in business management from the University of Pennsylvania, USA, and a BE from BITS Pilani, that worked like magic on them. "When we heard of Ajay's proposal we were elated that we would be trained and get jobs," recalled Puja.

It all began with 500 women, who were selected for training in computer basics. "Irrespective of their formal education, they were picked for their ability to read and write, and some basic understanding of the English language, apart from their willingness to learn," informed Chaturvedi.

Training was provided free-of-cost and during the course they learnt about office culture and etiquette, elementary English and communication skills, apart from Microsoft Office computer applications. Initially, imbibing all this was difficult for them, recalled Archana, 29, the mother of a teenage daughter and a toddler son. "We were shy, a bit hesitant and all of a sudden had to deal with machines and technology. But gradually, with training and motivation, we picked up fast," she said.

Their determination not only got them through the tough training period but they were rewarded with a short-term employment as well. Out of the 500 women selected, 200 completed the course and 50 were deployed in various projects. In 2010, 20 women were working on different projects, which involved data mining, with another 30 in line to get work as new projects came in.

While the opening of the BPO created jobs for these rural women, Chaturvedi emphasised that the effort was in no way an NGO (non-government organisation) project, aimed solely at social welfare, with little attention to accountability.

"This is a business venture with a conscience and social responsibility. I am a capitalist, who is bound to see whether or not a business model is viable and profitable. After ensuring this, the social cause can be served. If I create value, create business and opportunities, it will benefit everyone, including the villagers," he explained.

He was frank in admitting that he did not employ women out of charity. "Women are overall superior beings, far more hardworking and serious. They can do a job in half the time than men can. They

are good at multi-tasking, efficient and can work at a stretch without taking breaks, whereas men tend to always take many small breaks during work hours," he observed.

Chaturvedi proudly gave the example of a 25-year-old woman, a Class VIII graduate, who had learnt all the characters on the computer keyboard in just three hours, "something that is not easy even for people like me," he smiled.

Interestingly, the BPO centre was not Chaturvedi's only rural venture. This entrepreneur had left his lucrative job with Citi Bank to tap rural talent and opportunities. By 2010, he had already dabbled in community farming for non-rain-dependent cash crops in Uttarakhand and wanted to expand the project to 10,000 acres across the country, a move that stood to benefit 10,000 farmers in the next four to five years.

Of course, the success of his BPO model in Tikli, Aklimpur and other surrounding villages did a lot more than just provide employment. Working at the BPO centre helped enhance the image and status of women in a state notorious for its patriarchal social structures and skewed sex ratio. It proved to be their ticket to economic freedom, even though in a modest way.

Bimla, a mother of a girl and boy, whom she had made a point to send to school, was over the moon when she received her first salary of a little over Rs 2,000. "Whatever little amount I got, it was mine. It was a result of my hard work and I realised its worth," she recalled.

Added Suman Devi, 28, another young mother of two, "This has created a greater sense of economic empowerment and security among us. We spend the money on ourselves and contribute to household expenditure, apart from saving some for the future." Reena, 18, the most vocal of the lot, gave her take, "I feel city people always think rural women are illiterate and uncultured, but we have proven them wrong. We are educated and all we need is

an opportunity to prove ourselves. Since the villagers know we are getting salaries every month, they also want to send their girls and daughters-in law over here.”

There were other learnings, too. Their stints in the BPO made them more efficient in terms of time management and multi-tasking. “Earlier, we used to spend the entire day doing household chores. But after joining the BPO, we make it a point to finish all housework by 10 am, and leave for office,” said Bimla.

Apart from being a source of financial independence, the BPO centre became a place for them to make friends; their very own space amidst 20 computers in a two-room centre nestled amongst sprawling fields. “We have bonded really well. During our breaks we share our happiness and sorrows, married life, problems and issues, at home or outside. It gives us a lot of emotional support,” said Manju Yadav, 25, who has a daughter.

Their tryst with office work whetted appetites for long-term assignments that would guarantee regular work and income. As these remarkable professionals ‘keyed’ in their success stories, they found that their vistas had also broadened immeasurably.

Employment Builds Lives

Aditi Bhaduri

Amidst the changing Kolkata skyline one building has remained reassuringly same. Shuruchi, the all-Bengali cuisine restaurant, began a trend of sorts by being the first to have an all-women staff. Over the years, several thousands have made their way to this eatery to tuck into authentic local food at rock-bottom prices. But hidden behind this modest building is a huge welfare enterprise – the All Bengal Women's Union (ABWU) founded by some far-sighted women way back in 1932.

At the time it was founded, Calcutta (Kolkata) and Bombay (Mumbai) had a large population of migrant labour living without their families. Also, the two World Wars saw an increase in the presence of sailors and soldiers in the city. Both these factors led to a rise in prostitution. So a group of women got together under the guidance of Maharani Suniti Devi of Cooch Behar and formed the ABWU, to specifically address the issue of trafficking and homelessness of destitute women. From supporting pro-women legislation to providing food, education, shelter and livelihood to women in prostitution, ABWU's mandate was clearly defined.

When the Bengal Suppression of Immoral Traffic Bill was placed before the Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1932 and a support petition was drafted, the members of the ABWU took an active part in the signature campaign. In 1932, the Calcutta Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act and the Children Act was introduced to enable the police to rescue women and children from brothels. On April 1, 1933, the Bill was passed. The law may appear anachronistic in the present day but at that point it was seen as an important initiative to reach out to trafficked women. The campaign was one of the first political activities that the women of Bengal had participated in through the ABWU.

After the passage of this Bill, the ABWU started a home for rescued girls called the All Bengal Women's Industrial Institute at Dumdum.

A founder member of the ABWU - Romola Sinha - later became the first Chairperson of the Central Social Welfare Board in West Bengal.

Through the decades, the home has given shelter to innumerable girls and destitute women, especially during the Second World War, the great Bengal famine of 1943, and later through the terrible violence that marked India's partition, when Bengal in the east of India was partitioned to form East Pakistan (which later became Bangladesh), with the state of West Bengal remaining within the Indian Union.

In fact, partition had posed numerous challenges for the ABWU. A large number of women victims of atrocities came to the city seeking shelter. Many were pregnant and others had lost their families. The ABWU had opened its doors to them but clearly there was an urgent need for more space. It was then that the sprawling complex on Elliot Road, where the ABWU is currently housed, was given to the organisation by the government. Almost 200 refugee women got shelter there and a maternity ward was started for unmarried refugee mothers from East Pakistan (at the request of the government). Many of these girls were given vocational training and jobs; some were even married with ABWU's help. To this day, long after the refugee problem had receded, the organisation has remained a beacon of hope for poor, vulnerable and destitute women.

Over the years, the ABWU grew in scope and size. The government gave it more land and monetary grants and it began several related programmes in keeping with the mission it had embarked upon over 70 years ago. Besides providing shelter, it has been imparting educational and vocational training to destitute single girls and women. It also set up an After Care Home for girls, some of whom are government sponsored; a Children's Welfare Home for girls; and an Old Age Women's Home for those with no families or there abandoned.

Children have been equally cared for at the ABWU. When the writer visited the children's welfare home in 2010 she met Shyamali (name

changed) a teenager, who often got extra coaching under the loving but firm eye of Kasturi Mukherjee, the then Vice President of the ABWU. Looking at Shyamli, who was particularly good at dancing, it was hard to imagine that the child had faced violence early in life. Poverty had forced her to work as a domestic help with a family in Odisha when she was nine. Her employers tortured her so badly that the neighbours complained to the police and Shyamli was rescued. She was enrolled in ABWU's primary school, where children have been receiving quality education along with mid-day meals. In addition, meritorious students have been helped to complete their education through a special aid fund. Many students at the school, which opened in 1950, include runaways or destitutes rescued by the authorities and sent to ABWU's home; some even come from the neighbouring slums.

The restaurant Shuruchi, however, has undoubtedly proved to be ABWU's most successful venture. Started in 1952, it initially offered only a take-home food service. But as ABWU's work expanded, so did Shuruchi. In 1972, it became a two-room restaurant where 105 people could be seated at a time. In 2010, it had a staff of 28 women, which included 14 from ABWU's homes. According to Kalpana Dey, a staff member, the women were like "one big family and this means a lot to all of us personally".

Apart from Suruchi, the ABWU has a production unit as well where woven and block printed saris and other items like children's clothing, and handcrafted items such as bed and table linen have been produced. The shop has two in-house sales a year; one during spring and the other during the famed Bengali 'Durga Puja' festival. Many of these products have been sold to outlets like Good Companions, an upscale handicraft shop on Kolkata's Russell Street.

For Anwara Khatun (name changed) making block prints on the sari gave her a sense of achievement and purpose in life. She was one of the many destitute women, referred to the ABWU by the local police, who had since been able to live a normal life.

Kalpana Dey expressed with a quiet sense of achievement, "We are a non-profit organisation run by women for women. Our greatest achievement is when we see a smile on the face of a woman who had found herself in difficult circumstances and now leads a life of dignity and meaning."

A Stimulus Package to Wake up Enterprise

Roshin Varghese

Vijaya Biradar single-handedly set up her sari selling business; Vasumathi Bhaskar created a multi-food industry from scratch and Anitha Jain's passion for bikes and cycles led her to run a successful cycle mart.

The common force behind their success? The Bengaluru-based not-for-profit NGO, Association of Women Entrepreneurs of Karnataka (Awake), whose stimulus, start-up, sustain and support programmes have been the key to making many ordinary women into entrepreneurs. Since its inception in 1983, Awake has touched the lives of thousands of women in Karnataka and has provided innumerable first-generation women entrepreneurs the inspiration and technical support to start their own work – from small-scale papad-making to high-tech biotechnology.

According to Dr Rajeshwari Shankar, a veterinary doctor by profession and Awake secretary in 2010, "Our outreach has touched the lives of close to 2.5 million people since its inception over two and half decades ago."

K. Jayalakshmi, 54, an expert at making masala powders, began her relationship with Awake when she signed a memorandum of understanding to use the drier, pulveriser and sealing machines they had at their Bengaluru headquarters to create her signature masala powders.

A few years on and not only did Jayalakshmi produce the masalas she also became an instructor with Awake and helped the organisation to put in place an entrepreneurship development programme. "I had zero qualifications. What I did have was nearly three decades of experience in billing, accounting, making masalas, and juice making," she said. And she has been putting all this knowledge to good use by sharing it with others looking to start their own businesses.

Anitha Jain, another Awake success story, set up a cycle mart in Mandya, a bustling town midway between Bengaluru and Mysore. She attended a programme run by the organisation that helped her identify the products, start her cycle shop, monitor its growth, and take care of the finance, marketing, sales and overall management. She believed that Awake “gave women a chance to prove themselves”.

Living near Bijapur, Vijaya Biradar, who got married at the age of 13 and became a grandmother at 33, had reared goats and chickens in her backyard for the longest time. Then she got associated with Awake and since then has been running her very own profitable sari business. She subscribed to the theory that a woman “needs only common sense, determination and training” to create a small-scale business.

What Awake has been credited with is making women from urban and rural India realise their aspiration to be socially and economically self reliant, irrespective of their academic or economic background. Going by a modest estimate, the organisation has supported more than 20,000 start-ups over the last three decades.

It all began in 1983, when seven women were awarded with the ‘outstanding women entrepreneur award’ by a well-known social club. One of the awardees, Madhura Chatrapathy, who went on to become the founder/president of Awake, felt the need to support women who were keen on starting enterprises but were discouraged by the hurdles of bureaucracy and lack of awareness. The association has been reaching out to women only – 80 per cent from rural areas and half of them from low-income backgrounds.

Rajeshwari Shankar has called the ‘four S module’ – comprising Stimulus, Start-up, Sustenance and Support – as the reason for Awake’s success. In fact, these considerations have governed their activities from the beginning. First, stimulus was provided to potential women clients, by motivating them to transform themselves

from housewives into entrepreneurs. Start up came in the form of entrepreneurship development programmes. This could mean anything from guiding budding business women in registering their company and helping them apply for bank loans to making them understand the workings of a small business. Providing the know-how on marketing, management and technical up-gradation made up the sustenance programmes. And the support was provided through networking with national and international agencies.

Varied technical training classes have been made available at Awake – from the Japanese art of bonsai and quilt making to the manufacturing of herbal cosmetics and setting up a catering business. Budding event managers, chocolate makers, fabric painters, candle makers and computer operators have also been nurtured.

Though Dhanvanti Jain, the dynamic 36-year-old vice president of Awake in 2010, became an entrepreneur when she was still in her teens, the Awake experience proved to be a learning curve for her. Jain noted, “I thought I knew a lot, I know there is much more to learn.”

Revathi Venkatraman, who had served as a president of the organisation, believed that Awake's main strength had been in the area of training, so setting up “a training academy of international standards to be benchmarked against the best in the world” was on the agenda.

Women Learn to Negotiate the Recycling Market

Geeta Seshu

"I have a dream that one day women ragpickers can come together and form an association for a 'plastics bank', where we can get the profit the *seth* (owner) makes. If women gain the knowledge of this business they can become owners instead of only being the gatherers of all this garbage," emphasised Laxmi Kamble, the remarkable leader of Dharavi Project for ragpickers in Mumbai, who was a ragpicker herself.

When this writer met Kamble in 2011, her main aim was to train women to identify the plastics. According to her, there are around 107 kinds of plastic waste and only an A-1 karigar (skilled worker) can determine the true value of each. Only through training, she insisted, can people obtain the correct price for their goods in the recycling market and negotiate a good deal. She also talked of ensuring a safe space for them to keep their children while they were out on the streets picking up and sifting through garbage.

The biggest stumbling block to Kamble's dream was that ragpickers were at the lowest end of a chain of the unorganised industry of garbage collection and resale in big cities. According to her, there was no recognition for her work and that of scores of women who laboured from dawn to collect garbage from streets, housing colonies and business districts and then performed the equally onerous task of sifting through the material and sorting out every useful bit for its eventual sale to big traders and recycling companies.

"Leave alone the recognition for our work, there is no respect for us as people either," she stated, adding that people stigmatised ragpickers as "dirty" and "useless". They were routinely harassed by civic officials and the police and forced to pay a *hafta* (a weekly bribe) in order to gather on pavements to sort out their pickings.

In 2011, estimates of the amount of garbage generated in a metropolis like Mumbai was around 7,000-10,000 tonnes a day with

a little more than half of this being collected by the civic body - the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). While this went to a dumping ground in Deonar in North-East Mumbai besides two other smaller landfills in Mulund, the dry waste - a humungous amount of plastic, paper, glass, electronic scrap, metal scrap and thermocol made its way to the recycling centres.

As per the going rates then, if a ragpicker could collect an average amount of dry waste worth around eight rupees (depending on the weight and quality of the plastic) she could sell it to a middleman for Rs 10. He, in turn, would make Rs 15 for this and by the time it reached the big factory where the processing and recycling was being done, its price would be anywhere between Rs 18-25.

A typical area had around 10 small dealers who bought the garbage from these women and sold it to two or three bigger dealers. The waste went through elaborate processing - plastics got sorted and segregated on the basis of colour, hardness and quality. Later it got crushed into tiny bits by machines. This was then washed and sent to a processing unit where it got converted into little plastic pellets and was eventually made into toys, bottles, caps, bag handles and other sundry items.

Kamble was of the opinion that if women were given space for sorting out their collections they would be able to sell directly to the companies. Acorn India, which had launched the Dharavi Project in 2008, had begun cautiously by initially recruiting 500 members to do this work for them. "At the moment, we have only given them identity cards and run programmes for their children. We are exploring the situation to see how best we can help them," Vinod Shetty, the organisation's director, revealed.

Even though for four hours of work, a ragpicker could hope to make anything from Rs 100-150, for women employed in garbage collection godowns the money was a pittance: Rs 110 for nine hours of work — from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., with an hour off for lunch. Sharada Jogandale was employed in a crushing unit in Dharavi. She

wanted to leave her job for something more lucrative. The long hours, the dust and heat of the airless unit and the supervisor who barely allowed them a break, had aged her beyond her 25 years.

Another woman, Jogtin, who was working in a crushing unit in the same area, wanted out as well. The women, and men, got no safety equipment, no gloves, no masks or shoes. In fact, even as this writer was at the unit, when Jogtin asked the supervisor for a bit of soap to wash her hand covered with grease before she went for her lunch break, the latter refused to give her until she finally went off work in the evening. So, Jogtin scrubbed her hands with the already greasy water and went off complaining under her breath! Kamble, too, was coping with ailments like asthma, while other women routinely complained of skin infections and respiratory problems.

Of course, despite their miserable working conditions, ragpickers were making attempts to organise themselves to get a better deal. Several Mumbai based non-governmental organisations were helping them in this effort. Parisar Vikas, the project for women ragpickers launched by Stree Mukti Sanghatana (SMS) in 1997, pioneered the organisation of groups of ragpickers and trained them to segregate waste, sell the dry waste and convert the wet (biodegradable) waste into compost.

In 2011, Parisar Bhagini Vikas Sangh, a separately registered NGO, had over 3,500 women members across Mumbai and Pune. It had formed cooperatives of women ragpickers that undertook garbage collection from housing societies, hospitals and malls. Jyoti Mhapsekar, the driving force behind SMS, brought a strong environmental concern to the work, along with an understanding that their getting together would eventually empower them.

Increasing consumerism had only led to the generation of more waste. The value of the recycled waste also increased manifold, with paper and even plastic bottles commanding a premium. But if

incomes from recycling increased so did the expenses. Consequently, the lives of these women did not see much improvement.

What was disturbing was that big traders had started muscling their way into a business that was being seen as a very lucrative one. Sunita Patil, who was working with Parisar Vikas, remarked, "Once the task of sorting out the garbage is done, scores of people crop up to claim ownership." Buyers of dry waste had also started approaching malls and hospitals to pick up the waste directly, completely bypassing the women, she added. Patil cited the entry of a private company at the Deonar dumping ground as an example. "They recruited security guards and the women were not allowed to bring the garbage out," she said.

There were other problems cropping up as well. For instance, housing societies increasingly showed a reluctance to pay for a job their sweepers could do even though the latter didn't do garbage composting. Government policies - which stipulate that civil society organisations be involved in the recycling process - were not being implemented, complained Patil.

But Kamble remained optimistic, "Earlier, old men used to say that if four women come together, there'll be trouble. To my mind, it is exactly the opposite: if four women come together, only good can come of it."

Waste Pickers show there's Strength in Numbers

Suchismita Pai

The World Bank estimates that one per cent of the urban population in developing countries earns a living through waste picking and recycling. India has one of the highest recycling rates in the world, thanks mainly to the army of waste pickers – mostly women – present across various big cities and small towns. Even though these self-employed women have occupied the lowest rung in the informal economy and have generally been treated with contempt, waste pickers in Pune have shown that there is indeed strength in a union.

The process of transformation started in May 1993 when veteran labour leader, Dr Baba Adhav organised a first of its kind 'Convention of Waste Pickers' in this bustling city of Maharashtra in a bid to enable them to fight for their rights as legitimate workers and rally for a better future for their children. The meet was attended by over 800 local waste pickers, and from this process emerged the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP), a union of scrap collectors. "Every woman in the union is amazing," remarked Lakshmi Narayan, general secretary of KKPKP.

A chance meeting with a child waste picker during an academic exercise in 1990 compelled Narayan and Poornima Chikarmane, an activist and academician, to delve deeper into the lives of these workers. The women, they realised, did not even think of their back-breaking labour as 'work', but were keen that their next generation be educated.

What was needed was a change in their dismal working conditions as well as powers to negotiate a better income. Knowing that the collection and segregation of scrap at source could offer both, Narayan and Chikarmane initially helped 30 waste pickers to get an identity card from SNDT University, which enabled them to collect scrap from its premises. As anticipated, not only did their earnings improve dramatically, since source segregated scrap fetches better

rates, but now they put in fewer hours of labour and their physical working conditions became better.

“But individuals and small groups had no power to counter the threats from other claimants to ‘wealth in waste’, so there was an imminent need for these women to establish an identity for themselves as ‘workers’,” recalled Narayan. The KKP KP proved to be a perfect platform. Once registered as a trade union, it not only represented the collective identity and interests of scrap collectors, it also gave them a platform to voice their grievances and concerns. And unlike conventional unions, it focused on social development activities such as credit provision, education and child labour issues.

Suman Mariba More, now in her 40s, recalled how she would toil from dawn to dusk, walking for miles with her sack to collect scrap and sort it with the help of her children. “All that changed after 1993 when I joined the union. Since then I have been working for four hours and get more money since the waste has to be picked up from the doorstep. The quality and condition of waste is also much better,” she said. Door-to-door collection proved to have some social benefits as well. Simple pleasures like a cup of tea, a friendly chat or proper lunch breaks, in addition to getting soap to wash their hands and feet were just some of the unsaid advantages.

Over the years, the KKP KP evolved with the growing needs of its 9,000-plus members, 80 per cent of whom were marginalised women. Their identity card, endorsed by the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC), entitled them to benefits like interest-free loans and educational support for children. Two insurance programmes were started for them. For life insurance, members pay a yearly fee of Rs 50, while the state government matches that sum and the central government contributes Rs 100. There is also a medical cover of Rs 5,000, the premium for which is paid by the PMC.

For More, a higher income and health insurance meant that she could afford proper medical care instead of indulging in self-medication.

Not only were her sons educated, her daughter-in-law was a computer engineer from an upper caste family. Even her daughter was married only after she turned 18 and “that too with no dowry”, declared the proud mother. Where her work was concerned, More no longer segregated the waste at home but went to the nearest shed provided by the municipal corporation.

The KKPKP always took a keen interest in the welfare of its members. In 2009, it aided 72 families of a demolished slum through the Rajiv Awas Yojana rehabilitation scheme. It also ensured the enrollment of elderly members eligible for the Indira Gandhi pension plan. Said Maitreyi Shankar, Treasurer, KKPKP, “Enrolling in state schemes can be tedious. On an average, it takes at least 15 man days to put all the required documentation together. We assist them every step of the way.”

For the KKPKP, initially, it was hard work building credibility. “Ensuring that waste pickers themselves as well as larger society saw their labour as work was the starting point. We had to quantify their actual contribution to the Solid Waste Management (SWM) system. A study to establish that they indeed helped the Pune and Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporations save several crore rupees in waste handling costs was undertaken and it proved beyond doubt that these recovery operations were extremely valuable,” said Narayan.

Armed with hard numbers, the KKPKP called for the integration of waste pickers into the waste collection/disposal system at the point of waste generation itself - that is, access to waste in homes, offices or businesses. The Management of Solid Waste laws of the year 2000, requiring segregation of wet and dry waste, door-to-door waste collection and processing, proved beneficial. In 2005, the KKPKP had launched a pilot programme with the PMC, where waste pickers were integrated into door-to-door work, paving the way for the establishment of SWaCH, a wholly workers’ owned cooperative.

The SWACH door-to-door waste collection initiative based on recovery of a fee from service users and the provision of infrastructure support by the municipality brought together two interests: it upgraded the livelihood of waste pickers, as well as ensured sustainable solid waste management. Through its 2,150 members, most of whom are members of KKPKP, SWACH has serviced over 390,000 households in 15 municipal administrative wards of the PMC, ever since it began.

Work benefits apart, under the Right to Education Act, over 100 children and grandchildren of KKPKP members were enrolled in 2012 into good local schools with efforts on to raise this number to over 150. "It is all about dignity, respect and quality of life," emphasised Narayan.

Though waste pickers have come a long way, many challenges still remain. For one, the fee for waste collection remains as low as Rs 10 or Rs 20 and yet women do not get paid on time. People also expect a high level of professionalism from these women without paying them their professional due. When 70 waste pickers were cheated out of half their daily wages by a contractor, KKPKP members held a peaceful dharna in March 2013 to resolve the issue.

While that hurdle has now been crossed, there are always new ones to be fought. As Narayan put it, "It's never over."

Toilet Revolution in a Rice Mill

Sharmistha Choudhury

Data from the Census of 2011 brought to light the grim fact that nearly half of India's 1.2 billion people have no toilet at home. More people own a mobile phone! Meanwhile, as policymakers pontificate about the need to change "mindsets" to inspire people to use toilets, women employed in scores of rice mills across South Dinajpur district in West Bengal set an example by launching a movement demanding the right to toilets in their workplace.

Shukla Oraon, a young woman worker of Joardar Rice Mill, which falls under the Gangarampur Police Station in South Dinajpur, spoke freely about the difficulties women workers were facing. She said, "For years, women workers were denied access to toilets in the mill. The men had a toilet for their use but women were asked to go outside in the open fields." In 2013, of the 150 workers employed at Joardar Rice Mill, 20 per cent were women.

The problem was manifest not just in this one mill but in most of the other rice mills dotting the district. Revealed Haimanti Murmu of Shree Laxmi Rice Mill, situated just opposite Joardar, "We faced regular abuse and insults whenever we wanted to go to the toilet. For one, we were asked to go out in the open. This was difficult as there would be people about during the day and we had to search for a spot hidden from public view. Then, if we were slightly late in coming back, our wages would be deducted."

What made matters more difficult was the fact that the workers in all these mills were not unionised. According to Zero Linda, a tribal woman rice mill worker, "Being a predominantly rural area, there was no culture of unionisation here. So neither was there adequate knowledge of labour laws nor the conviction to unite and struggle for basic rights. Moreover, since not a single woman worker in any of the rice mills was a permanent employee of the company; they were all casual labourers working on a no-work, no-pay basis; they

were not just deprived of innumerable rights but were also under the constant threat of being thrown out of employment if they displayed the temerity to challenge the mill owners."

But as the saying goes: the more the repression, the greater the rebellion. In May 2012, the women workers of Joardar revolted. Unionised by the Trade Union Centre of India (TUCI), they decided that they would no longer use the open fields. And if there was a crackdown, they would fight back. "We cornered the manager, Mansoor Ali," recalled Linda, adding, "There were some 30 of us. We shouted slogans and told him in no uncertain terms that we would not settle for anything less than a separate toilet for women." Within an hour, the manager showed signs of relenting. Soon he was assuring the women workers that they could use the men's toilet if they wished.

But this suggestion enraged the women even more. Oraon picked up the story, "We told him that we would agree to this on the condition that the men stopped using that toilet. We also told him that we knew the law and that our union would file a case against the mill authorities if they did not give us a separate toilet."

Incidentally, Section 19 (1) of The Factories Act, 1948 (Act No. 63 of 1948), as amended by the Factories (Amendment) Act, 1987 (Act 20 of 1987), has mandated that "(a) sufficient latrine and urinal accommodation of prescribed types shall be provided conveniently situated and accessible to workers at all times while they are at the factory; and (b) separate enclosed accommodation shall be provided for male and female workers."

According to Manas Chakraborty, district TUCI leader, "Generally, mill authorities used to rely on the fact that rural workers had little knowledge of the law and so they quickly buckled under this threat of taking recourse to the law." As pressure from the women workers increased, the mill owner, Ashok Kumar Joardar, was compelled to intervene. The very next day, a separate toilet for the women was constructed within the premises of Joardar Rice Mill.

"We were greatly encouraged by the Joardar incident," said Murmu, "so we raised the demand in our mill too." The result, however, was different in the Shree Laxmi Rice Mill. There, the women were asked to use the men's toilet and the men were asked to relieve themselves outside the mill, in the open. "We accepted this as a temporary compromise and began our fight for separate toilets for both men and women," she added.

As per Chakraborty, the struggle for women's dignity in the workplace and especially the right to separate toilets had started way back in 1989 at the Salas Rice Mill under Tapan Police Station in the district. "That movement was brutally suppressed by the police and many workers had to go to jail," he said. Laxmi Pahari, a veteran of that campaign, added, "We did not get separate toilets then but at least that struggle inculcated in the women a greater sense of dignity. The seeds were sown for a greater, more successful struggle. And today, 20-odd years later, we have begun to win."

Of the 42 rice mills in the district, less than 10 had separate toilets for women. "Before the Joardar movement, not a single mill did," chipped in Chakraborty, "So this was indeed a beginning. Now the challenge is for the women to unite and get at least their legal rights. Only then can we think further."

Lack of sanitation has been a huge problem in India. Statistics have revealed that India loses approximately 6.4 per cent of the GDP in health costs, productivity losses and reduced tourism revenue due to inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene. While releasing the Census 2011 data, Registrar General and Census Commissioner C. Chandramouli had noted, "Open defecation continues to be a big concern for the country as almost half of the population does it. Cultural and traditional reasons and lack of education are the prime reasons for this unhygienic practice."

Perhaps, policymakers can start the process of transformation by lending support to the women workers and grant them their right to sanitation by enforcing the law in mills and factories.

A Goodbye to Work

Shwetha E. George

What does it mean to be 'retired'? How does one suddenly put a stop to the 9 to 5 schedule of 30 years and instead live a life free from the hectic conferences and endless meetings that had once been a part of daily routine? Dr Achamma Thomas, 72, a retired Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology from the Government Medical College in Kottayam, Kerala, had some practical advice, "Be mentally prepared and plan for that life long before you give up working. And, yes, pray that your health will not betray you mid-way."

Daisy Mathew, 60, took the VRS (voluntary retirement scheme) option available to government employees the very year it was introduced and, thereafter, enrolled for a one-year residential course in clinical pastoral counselling run by the Thomas Mar Athenesius Institute of Counselling in Kottayam, affiliated to the Serampore University, Calcutta. "My plans were definite. I knew I wanted to be a counsellor all along," said Daisy, who had worked with the State Bank of Travancore for 29 years. What hastened her plunge into counselling was a three-month crash course she had undertaken during her banking years. "That helped me relate better with my clients, understand their worries, and guide them to take the right financial decisions," she elaborated. Daisy is now involved with the institute where she studied and derives great satisfaction from her new vocation.

Most retired professional women are happy to get a break from their killing schedules after having balanced the demands of home and workplace for years. But they did admit that they could not have done it without a strong support system at home.

Bala, 73, who was a literature professor at the Assumption College in Changanassery for 30 years, was blessed with "the best mother-in-law in the world", who raised both her children and ran her home during those tough years. Achamma, on the other hand, depended on her domestic help of 40 years. Also, fortunately, her husband was a plastic surgeon, who kept regular hours.

“Gynaecology is extremely demanding and I have had to rush for emergencies at midnight,” Achamma recalled. At the junior level, every third day brought on a 24-hour clinical duty. When promoted to associate professor, she had to be on call 24-hours daily unless she was on casual leave. Then, as Head of the Department, she was responsible for all the units in her department in addition to the regular clinical and academic duties. A packed schedule meant there were numerous times when this committed doctor had to cancel family get-togethers, leave a movie theatre half-way and even forego long holidays with her children.

By 55, she had had enough. “I decided that I was going to spend all my free time with my family. I learnt cooking and started to tend to my garden. My grandson was born in my house and I raised him until he was four years,” she said, with a happy smile.

“As long as you work, your job gives you an identity, a financial role and prestige,” observed Daisy, “but post-retirement life is not about any of these things – it’s about self-actualisation and satisfaction.”

Susan Varghese, 74, a retired professor of Sociology at Andhra University, was glad she moved to Vellore in neighbouring Tamil Nadu a decade earlier. Although a widow who lived alone, she kept herself blissfully busy by signing up at her local Senior Citizens Association and Senior Citizen Book Club and becoming both a Sunday school teacher and a consultant with her former department on post-doctoral work. “Vellore has an academic environment that is almost welcoming to retired professors like me,” she said.

According to Susan, voluntary work with non-government organisations, taking up a hobby or travelling for the pleasure of it, were just some of the common after-retirement activities that were available to educators although, she admitted that teaching often remained their most-preferred vocation. This was true in Bala’s case, who after retiring at 55, continued to teach at various private institutes for another eight years.

At 51, Beena R., a respected Maths teacher, had already begun thinking of all the post-retirement activities she wanted to pursue; leading her list of fun things was a visit to a pilgrimage destination once a year – although for her too teaching remained a top priority. “Teaching is my passion so my retirement plan definitely includes taking tuitions,” she said.

Being content is the primary goal for many at this stage, shared the women who were interviewed. According to Daisy, most people of her age try to ward off all sorts of negativity and sadness – feelings that “can occur in plenty” when one suddenly seems to be without purpose. Drawing from her counselling experience, she added, “Menopause followed by a reduced sexual libido contributes to the darkness. The sudden transition from being an earning member in the family to a dormant one can be a difficult reality to deal with.”

Bala, who was getting one-third her last salary as pension, was more optimistic in her outlook. She said, “The slide in financial freedom can be managed. As it is I am not interested in shopping anymore because I don't step out of the house daily.” Her husband was diagnosed with multiple myeloma and visits to the hospital and diagnostic centres had become part of her daily routine. What was most important, Bala felt, was to hold on to one's self-esteem, “One shouldn't feel sorry for oneself. Never feel that your life is over.”

Added Accamma Chacko, 82, retired Nursing Superintendent and Professor of Pediatric Nursing, Christian Medical College, Vellore, “My colleagues and I are not worried about money. We have saved enough and we get our pensions.” Accamma divided her time between running a special school, giving weekly classes in pediatric nursing in various private institutions and caring for her husband, Dr Chinoy, who had been diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease.

Most of these women did not live with their children. Bala and Achamma visited their sons in the Middle East almost every year. Daisy had two married daughters but both lived separately. Her

husband ran his own insurance consultancy firm and so the couple was busy with their separate work schedules. Said Beena, whose only child, a daughter, was preparing for her post graduation medical entrance tests, "Children should have their own lives after marriage. No grandparent will say 'no' to babysitting, but it is difficult work. So it has to be an occasional responsibility." Daisy, however, added, "There does come a time when you are not able to live on your own – and it is then that children come into decision-making."

Since Kerala, which has a large ageing demographic, does not have many old-age homes, for many, the convenient option was to join their children. Care giving, home nurses were usually recruited although for many this was an expensive option since it meant additional outgoings of at least Rs 20,000 in terms of salaries for the helpers.

This may not be the ideal situation for women who had led fiercely independent lives, but as Bala observed, "most of us don't want to be a burden on our children and add to their worries by being the obstinate parent who refuses to live anywhere but in her own home".

The idea was to 'accept' the change in life. But the moment the word 'accept' was used, it seemed to indicate a situation of dependency. As Daisy observed, "You may feel sorry for yourself, but accepting life as it is – that is the beginning of a positive outlook." In that spirit, she added, "With some planning and understanding, life in the so-called twilight zone can actually be quite wonderful."

Selected FES Publications >>

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This book explores one of the major themes in contemporary India – the nature, worth and reality of women’s work – through comprehensive, reader-friendly journalistic accounts from across the country. While the majority of the stories included in this collection focuses on urban realities, there are some truly remarkable reports from rural India as well.

Together, these features plot transformations of various kinds. What does it mean, for instance, when a woman sweeper at a railway station becomes a porter? Do masculinist assumptions undergo a change in the process? What consequences emerge when women migrate on their own for employment – both for themselves and their families? Does the fact that women professionals today could choose not to follow their husbands abroad because they value their own jobs at home too much, suggest the emergence of new family dynamics in urban India?

The questions that these pieces raise are as numerous as they are intriguing. And each story attempts to bring to the reader the scenario on the ground through the voices of women workers themselves. The words they use often express their traumas and tribulations, but there is also talk of hope and a display of courage that reflects a will to change destiny.