

Readers' Forum

==== Taking Charge ====

So many Indian women living in the US face battering by their husbands despite being educated and earning members of the household. They are reluctant to leave their husbands' homes because of various factors. Our upbringing for one, fear of causing pain to the family living in India, embarrassment within the Indian community, and lack of confidence in the fact that they could bring up the children by themselves force the women to keep on suffering silently. Women who do take courage to leave do not fare well either. I have seen women left with meagre means to bring up the kids and men entering into another marriage, usually going back to India to get a younger girl to spite their ex-wives and flaunt them at parties while the poor ex-wives try to stay away from community gatherings to avoid embarrassment. Why should they be the ones to feel the shame? I could never understand. Also, these women have to suffer crude jokes and shameless comments from other Indian men. They think that a divorcee has no morals what so ever.

Seeing all this, I wonder what choice do the women really have?

One thing is encouraging though. In recent years, my friend, who is a social worker with the government, has seen a lot of Indian women coming to seek advice about their legal

rights. They might go on staying in a relationship but they do not take abuse easily. They have started to talk back and threaten the men with legal action. There is a woman I know from Punjab, who called the police and they took her husband away. He came grovelling back to her, asking her forgiveness. The police and his colleagues have helped tame him down.

Then there was another lady who changed locks on her husband and would not allow him back until he signed her up as an equal partner in all the family assets.

He was forever threatening her to force her out on the streets. Some

women might also start live in relationships with other men, without bothering to marry. You might consider me a hypocrite when I say I do not condone them, but interestingly such relationships seem to be thriving well. Well, there is a lot to be done to help women. But it seems several of them are not waiting for help and are taking matters in their own hands.

Renu Mahajan, Canada

==== Still Marginal ====

It is hard to believe how little direct influence women have over what happens in our society. In an electoral constituency, where half the voters are women, and where concerns for education, family health and food are paramount, most contestants up for elections are usually male. They speak to a largely male audience. The women, who work long hours and worry and sacrifice all their time and effort for their families and homes, fussing with the tea, hushing the children, stay forever in the periphery, and they are hardly ever acknowledged. Politics is 'men's business'.

Technological advances have meant the decline of employment in manufacturing units, and the growing dominance of service industries. This might have meant more jobs for women, but not necessarily better working conditions. Most women are still underpaid, and



work mainly in similar jobs and fields. Women are still under represented in many sectors of industry, the professions and public services.

More and more women are getting involved in paid work. There is no job that they cannot do, and they are entitled to equal pay for equal work, the same terms and conditions at work, and the same opportunities for promotion. Giving women the opportunity to realise their potential in all spheres of society is increasingly important. Only by involving both sexes equally in all the sectors can we develop human resources on really democratic lines.

**Lakshmi Narasaiah,
Anantapur, A.P.**

===== Sudden Turn =====

I went to work yesterday for this guy named Bob Allen who has a daughter named Mikela who works in the office. She told me that things are great for her ever since her father, Bob went to India and came back enlightened. He had gone on a two month trip to Delhi, Varanasi, Agra, Calcutta and Khajuraho. On one of his train rides he met a family (father mother and daughter) who were travelling on the Howrah express with him. The family didn't have much money, but the father was paying for his daughter's education (which is quite an expected thing in India). Bob had been the kind of father who always made his kids do everything for themselves, finance their entire education, etc, because he grew up with that type of upbringing, and he thought it is the way to build character and ensure that your kids have a healthy independence. So his son Robert is running his own business and Mikela was trying to support herself through college. Anyway, Bob, was so touched by the fact that this



father, who had very little money, was spending what he did have on his daughter's education that when he came back to San Francisco he called up Mikela and said that he had decided that he was going to help her and wanted to pay for her college tuition. Mikela was overjoyed because she was having a really hard time of working so many hours and trying to do school as well. She immediately transferred colleges from Arizona to San Francisco and is now finishing up her education. Pretty funny thing, how one incident can make a person change their mind so fast.

Paige Passano, USA

===== A Raw Deal =====

There has been a massive absorption of women into the urban informal unorganised sector in recent years. Although this type of employment has drawn a vast reservoir of women into the work force, the prospect of a major breakthrough for women workers seems to be bleak because of the approaching saturation point of such patterns of employment.

Introduction of cost-effective laboursaving devices and automation have drastically reduced employment

potential in the organised sector. The service sector is one arena for absorbing a greater number of women who have a certain degree of education and skill, but remains completely sealed to the relatively uneducated, and unskilled majority of India's women workers. Naturally the pressure is bound to be on the informal and unorganised sectors where low-paying, low-status jobs seem to be the only major avenues for the poor to earn a livelihood. But even in unskilled agricultural labour,

gender differences and skill differences tend to keep women in a state of acute subjugation and vulnerability.

During the months of July and August, 1992, we conducted a study in Goalbari and Krishnapur villages in Bankura District of West Bengal* focussing on wage-earning agricultural workers. The sample we selected consisted of 50 households from each of these villages, out of which 25 were chosen from the general castes, 13 from the Scheduled Castes and 12 from the Scheduled Tribes. Out of the 100 sampled households, there was a total of 158 casual agricultural labourers, of which 85 were male and 73 were female.

Seventy-one out of the 100 homes had women workers — a total of 84 women. On the basis of the nature of their employment women workers were classified into three categories: (a) self-employed, (b) wage workers, and (c) salaried workers. Within our sample 10 women (12 per cent) were self employed, 73 (87 per cent) were agricultural wage-workers, and only one (1 per cent) belonged to the salaried income group (a primary school teacher). There was no evidence of attached female workers in the sample. Other than the women who were engaged in casual farm

labour, four per cent were cultivators, seven per cent worked in household industries, and two per cent were engaged in other occupations. Our questions for the female respondents focussed on various socio-economic and cultural aspects of their lives, as well as some regarding their attitudes and beliefs.

Since the vast majority of the labour force in rural areas is engaged in agricultural activities, the source and amount of income of these wage earners can be easily identified. It is very difficult, however, to apply this straightforward approach to self-employed workers. In order to measure the earnings attributed to the labour of self-employed workers accurately, it is necessary to know (among other things) the amount of labour contributed by all persons in the household employed in such enterprises, factors which are very difficult to measure. Partially due to these constraints, we limited our sample to the 158 (85 male and 73 female) wage-earning agricultural workers.

In the two selected villages of our study, no marked sex-division in type of labour was noticed, except for work on land preparation, for which mainly attached male workers (*mahindars*) were employed. Wages were mainly paid in kind, and they were paid fully by the land-owners at the end of the week.

The average number of working days per month for males (16) was higher than for females (11.4). We classified all the female agricultural workers as marginal workers — that is, they were employed for less than 15 days during the reference month of our study. The extent of the wage differential is reflected by the ratio of female to male average daily wages: female wages were less than 69 percent



of the male wage rate. Total wages earned by males was much higher than for females in both the villages and among all the different caste groups, as the males earned more per day and worked more days than females.

More than three-fourths of the 84 female respondents report that they contributed the whole of their income towards the maintenance of their family. Women workers did not enjoy equal status in making major day-to-day family decisions.

According to the female respondents questioned on the dynamics of household decision making, we found that in slightly over one half (52 per-cent) of all cases, decisions were taken mainly by the male head of the family. In 42 per cent of the cases, major decisions of the households were taken by joint consultations, whereas in only two percent of the cases were such decisions taken mainly by the women of the house.

Most of the female respondents felt that a married woman without her husband has no status in their society. Therefore, they felt they had to show due deference to the male members of the family.

Out of 78 ever-married women

respondents of our sample, only 17 (or 22 per cent) considered sons and daughters to have equal values. Equal preference for sons and daughters was found to be much more prevalent among the Scheduled Tribes (40 per cent) than it was among the Scheduled Castes (20 per cent). Among the respondents from the general castes, only one individual reported having no gender preference. Of the 78 ever-married respondents, 16 (or 11 per cent) felt that there should be only sons in a family, and none preferred only daughters. Women themselves reported that as the mothers of girls, they lacked status and were targets of maltreatment by husbands, in-laws and even their own parents.

Son preference, irrespective of caste groups, can be explained both by economic and cultural factors. Economic factors include greater use of male workers in agricultural operations, expectations that sons would bear financial responsibility for the family, old age security for the parents and the present dowry system. Cultural factors include the need for sons to carry on the lineage and to perform their parents' funeral ceremonies and other religious rituals.

Most of the children in the families that we interviewed were either drop-outs or non-starters. A relatively better situation for boys was apparent from the responses regarding aspiration levels of education for boys and girls. While 44 per cent of the total respondents felt that education for girls was either useless or it was only required for getting a better match in marriage, none considered education useless or necessary for getting the boys married.

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