

# The Invisible Workers:

## Women's Unrecognised Contribution to the Economy

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More than in any other area, it is in the recording of the work done by women, that serious inaccuracies and measurement failures occur. As a result, their participation in the economy is undermined. Census after Census, women's contribution has been rendered invisible by failing to quantify their work inputs, especially in agriculture and the unorganised sector. There are basically two kinds of work. Work for which payment is received and work for which no payment is made. Women are known to work longer hours than men and to participate in the work force to a far greater extent than is measured by the data gathered in the census. But a lot of the work they do is unrecognised, leave alone rewarded with equal remuneration. Thus, our mechanisms of data collection cause a loss of significant information.<sup>(1)</sup> This has an impact on the status of women in the society, their opportunities in public life and the gender blindness of development policies.

Traditionally, men spend most of their time on tasks for which payment is received or tasks that are clearly within the realm of "economic activity." Hence, there is not much

variation in the percentage of men reported as workers (roughly 50 per cent of men), regardless of the methodology used for data collection. However, while a large number of women work outside the home and are remunerated for the work they do, most women spend several hours doing work for which no payment is received. "Men are concentrated in the market-oriented side of the continuum of work and women in the statistically less visible, non-monetised subsistence production and domestic side; they account for 60 per cent of the unpaid family workers, and 98 per cent of those engaged in domestic work."<sup>(2)</sup>

Work for which no payment is received includes two categories of tasks:

a) Tasks that are considered as

necessary for survival but which are not included in "economic activity" and in calculations of National Income in any country, that is, domestic work like cooking, cleaning, child care, caring for the sick or elderly or handicapped. These are arduous tasks that have to be performed on a daily basis and from which there is no respite. These are also tasks that are traditionally perceived as "women's works" or roles within the home, or work of a housewife, that is, women engaged in these tasks are reported as "not working". UNDP's Human Development Report for the year 1995 estimates that once a woman has a child, she can expect to devote 3.3 more hours a day to unpaid household work, while her paid work declines by only about one hour. And a woman with a child under five can expect to



Women transplanting rice

1) Aasha Kapur Mehta, "Roman Indices for Developing Countries: A Gender Empowerment Measure," *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 26, 1996.

2) IBRD, *Gender and Poverty in India: A World Bank Country Study*.

Table 1: Percentage of Population comprising Main, Marginal and Total Workers by Gender.

|                  | 1991  |        | 1981  |        | 1971  |        |
|------------------|-------|--------|-------|--------|-------|--------|
|                  | Male  | Female | Male  | Female | Male  | Female |
| Total Population | 100   | 100    | 100   | 100    | 100   | 100    |
| Main Workers     | 50.93 | 15.93  | 51.62 | 13.99  | 52.51 | 11.87  |
| Marginal workers | 0.62  | 6.32   | 1.03  | 5.77   |       |        |
| Total workers    | 51.55 | 22.25  | 52.65 | 19.77  | 52.51 | 11.87  |

Source: Calculations based on census estimates

put in 9.6 hours of total work every day. Women who work full-time still do a lot of unpaid work.

b) Tasks, which are recognised as economic activity and which should correctly be included in calculations of National Income but are often missed. These are tasks for which no payment is made when they are performed for the family, such as subsistence activities like kitchen gardening, post-harvest processing, feeding of farm hands or hired labour, livestock maintenance, gathering of fuel, fodder, water and forest produce, unpaid labour in family farm or family enterprise and so on. Again, these are tasks that are generally performed by women. Since these tasks are performed together with work that a housewife does in any case, women performing these tasks tend to report themselves as “housewives” or “not working”.

Thus, we see that statistics regarding the percentage of women who work or “do not work” are very sensitive to the methodology used for data collection.

Maithreyi Krishnaraj’s <sup>(3)</sup> paper identifies seven categories of work performed by women in rural and urban India. These are :



- i) wage and salaried employment;
- ii) self-employment outside the household for profit;
- iii) self-employment in cultivation and household industry for profit;
- iv) self-employment in cultivation for own consumption;
- v) other subsistence activities in allied sectors like dairying, livestock rearing such as poultry, goats, pigs, etc. and fishing, hunting and cultivation of fruit and vegetable gardens;

3) Maithreyi Krishnaraj, “Women’s Work in Indian Census: Beginnings of Change,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 25, Issue 48-49, 1990.

vi) activities related to domestic work, such as fetching fuel, fodder, water, forest produce, repair of dwellings, making cowdung cakes, food preservation, etc. and

vii) domestic work such as cooking, cleaning, care of the children, the aged and the sick.

And yet a marginal 22.3 per cent of women were reported to be working in the 1991 census. Data on labour force participation are available mainly from two sources: the decennial census and the quinquennial National Sample Survey.

### Official Statistics

Census estimates for 1991 report 51.5 per cent of the male population as workers (50.9 per cent as main and 0.6 per cent as marginal) as compared with 22.3 per cent of the female population as workers (15.9 per cent main and 6.3 per cent marginal). NSS estimates 54.5 per cent of males and 28.6 per cent of females as workers.

Based on work force participation rates for males and females in the three census surveys since 1971 and five NSS quinquennial surveys between 1972-73 and 1993-94, (Tables 1 and 2 above) it can be said that:

Regardless of source, i.e., Census or NSS, over 50 percent of males are reported as workers.

Table 2 : Worker Population Ratio by Sex (Census and NSS Survey), 1971-94

| Year of Census | Persons |        | Males |        | Females |        |
|----------------|---------|--------|-------|--------|---------|--------|
|                | NSS     | Census | NSS   | Census | NSS     | Census |
| 1971 Census    |         | 34     |       | 52.7   |         | 13.9   |
| 1972-73 NSS    | 40.7    |        | 52.7  |        | 27.8    |        |
| 1977-78 NSS    | 41.6    |        | 53.4  |        | 28.9    |        |
| 1981 Census    |         | 36.8   |       | 52.6   |         | 19.8   |
| 1983 NSS       | 41.8    |        | 53.5  |        | 29.3    |        |
| 1987-88 NSS    | 40.9    |        | 53    |        | 28      |        |
| 1991 Census    |         | 37.5   |       | 51.6   |         | 22.3   |
| 1993-94 NSS    | 42      |        | 54.5  |        | 28.6    |        |

[Source: Pravin Visaria, based on census and NSS estimates as reported in *Level and Pattern of Female Employment, 1911-1994*, in Papola, T.S. and Sharma A. N. (edited), 1999, *Gender and Employment in India*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, p. 24]

Female work force participation rates vary considerably between census and NSS estimates. The 1971 Census reported 11.9 percent of women as workers, (13.9 percent according the table given by Visaria above) the 1981 Census, 19.8 percent and 1991 Census, 22.3 percent. While the estimates improve with each decade, the basic fact of considerable under-enumeration does not change. NSS estimates improve further on Census estimates but also suffer from a strong downward bias.

NSS estimates show that most males are employed in relatively stable works. Between 51 percent to 53 percent of males are employed in principal status and only 1.3 percent to 1.9 percent in subsidiary status. A significant proportion (about 25 percent) of females who are in employment have unstable jobs. (20.6 percent to 21.8 percent of females are employed in principal status and about 7 percent to 8 percent in subsidiary status.

The relative stability of male employed is corroborated by Census data which report 1.03 percent males as marginal workers in 1981 and 0.6 percent in 1991 as compared with 5.8 percent and 6.3 percent females working in the marginal category at corresponding points in time.

### Evidence from Micro Studies

A plethora of micro studies provide detailed estimates of measurement failure. A few of these are cited below and they show the gross inaccuracies inherent in the statistics given above.

In the 1970s, Jain and Chand<sup>(4)</sup> found that 20 out of 104 females reported as non-workers in a West Bengal village in the Census, were actually winnowing, threshing, parboiling or working as domestic servants for eight to ten hours a day.

Gail Omvedt<sup>(5)</sup> found 239 women workers in one area where the census counted 38 and 444 women workers

in another area where the Census listed 9.

Ratna Sudarshan's<sup>(6)</sup> work shows that while the 1991 census gave the Female Work Force Participation Rate for Punjab as 4.4 percent, NCAER, during a probe, got 28.8 percent.

Swapna Mukhopadhyay's<sup>(7)</sup> survey of 5,981 women workers in six cities found that the Labour Force Participation Rate of women was four times greater than that stated in the Census.

4) Jain, Devaki and Chand, Malini, April 1982. *Report on a Time Allocation Study: Its Methodological Implications*, New Delhi: Indian Social Studies Trust.

5) Omvedt, Gail. April 1992. *The Unorganised Sector and Women Workers*, *Guru Nanak Journal of Sociology*, Vol.13 (1); pp 19 -61.

6) Ratna M. Sudarshan, *Employment of Women, Trends and Characteristics*, National Seminar on. In Search of New Vistas, Women's Vocational Training Programme, Directorate General of Employment and Training, New Delhi, July 30-31, 1998.

The invisibility of women's work is shockingly clear from the following example. Prem Chowdhry<sup>(8)</sup> refers to an inquiry into dairy development in Ambala, which reported no female to be a worker in animal husbandry. In fact even a cursory familiarity with agriculture shows, women are very clearly allied with animal husbandry, from bringing in fodder, cutting chaff, preparing food mix for cattle, giving water and feed, bathing and cleaning cattle, cleaning cattle sheds, treating sick cattle, making dung cakes, storing them, making compost etc. Yet their contribution remained invisible. The NSS 1993-94 household survey reports that 29 percent of rural and 42 percent of urban women were engaged only in household work and were without work even in the subsidiary status. Subsequently, they noted, that 58 percent of women characterised in this way in rural areas and 14 percent in urban areas were actually maintaining kitchen gardens, household poultry, collecting fish, collecting firewood, husking paddy, grinding food-grains, preserving meat, preparing gur, making baskets etc., or in other words they were engaged in economic activities.<sup>(9)</sup> NSS calculates the percentage of wrongly classified women as constituting 17 percent of women in rural and 6 percent in urban areas. The NSS further states that "an upper limit of women worker population ratio can approximately be obtained by raising the ratio of women workers by this percentage" but does not take the

7) (Swapana Mukhopadhyay, *Women in the Informal Sector in Employment Promotion in the Urban Informal Sector* edited by M.S. Ramanujam, I.C. Awasthi and Gayatri Pandey. p.298).

8) Chowdhry, Prem. 1994. "High Participation, Low Evaluation: Women and Work in Rural Haryana," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 24..ppA-140-141.

logical next step and make the correction.

### Some Reasons for Statistical Invisibility

The statistical invisibility of women's work or measurement failure could be due to several factors. The literature on the subject identifies the following among others:

- Bias of the interviewer.
- Bias of male head of household/ respondent.
- Poorly constructed questionnaires.



- Cultural bias regarding women working outside the home and under-reporting of it.
- The nature/style of women's work where they perform several tasks in a day for small amounts of time, so classification based on one main activity is difficult.
- Dominance of domestic work leading to under reporting of other work.

9) Sarvekshana, October-December, 1997, "A Note on Participation of Indian Women in Household Work and Other Specified Activities," 1993-94.

- Mistaken perception of women's roles by respondents and interviewers.
- Intermingling of production for self-consumption with production for sale.
- Contribution to economic activity at pre-marketing, less visible or non-monetised stage.
- Contribution to 'family' occupations like agriculture, animal husbandry, weaving, cottage industries, where the contribution of women gets merged with that of the family and becomes invisible.

### Work and Inequity

In the context of employment in the organised and unorganised sectors of the economy, it needs to be noted that

- A marginal 4 percent of women and 10 percent of men work in the formal sector.
- The share of organised sector jobs held by women increased from 12 percent in 1981 to 15 percent in 1995. Data from the Ministry of Labour show that the number of women in the organised sector increased from 28 lakhs in 1981 to 43 lakhs in 1995.
- Within the organised sector, 56.8 percent of women are in community, social and personal services, 17.7 percent in manufacturing and 5.2 percent in finance, insurance and real estate.
- Within urban areas, 46 percent of women work in the tertiary sector especially in domestic services and education.
- In rural areas, 86 percent of women are in agriculture, especially cereal crop production and animal husbandry. In the secondary





sector they work in household industries such as *beedi* manufacture, cashew processing, coir products and processing of minor forest products.

- In rice cultivation for example, seeding, transplanting, weeding and threshing are women’s jobs. Ploughing is done by men. In mining and quarrying they are engaged in stone quarrying as irregular casual workers. In the secondary sector in household industries they work as helpers. In construction work, men do the skilled work of brick laying while women mix mortar and carry head loads.
- Wages paid to women are lower than wages paid to men. In some villages where the husband is a permanent labourer, the wife works for the same employer without a contract.
- Activities which are in the male domain, such as ploughing,

irrigation, levelling and so on are paid more. Those in the female domain, e.g., weeding, transplanting, winnowing etc. are paid less.

- Operations, which use machinery and draught animals, are performed by men. Operations, which demand direct manual labour, are performed by women.

In “*Muddy Feet, Dirty Hands*,”<sup>(10)</sup> Mencher and Sardamoni refer to the Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry Report which notes that the agricultural operations in which women were mostly employed were weeding, transplanting and harvesting and that ‘they were seldom employed in strenuous operations like ploughing’. Questioning the assumption that all female jobs need less strength, Mencher and Sardamoni

10) Mencher, J.P. and Sardamoni, K., 1982, December, “*Muddy Feet, Dirty Hands*,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Review of Agriculture, p. A151.

quote a comment made by a male anthropologist who reported that when he asked a man why males did not do transplanting and weeding work, he was told: “No man can keep standing bent over all day long in the mud and rain. It is much too difficult, and our backs would hurt too much”.  
To Sum Up

These are extremely serious issues that reflect the complex, exploitative and inequitable socio-economic system in which we live. The continued unreliability and inaccuracy of data pertaining to work force participation of women denies their contribution to currently accepted definitions of economic activity by making it statistically invisible. This is a matter of immense concern. Several initiatives have been taken to sensitise enumerators for the 2001 census regarding the different activities that constitute work. It is hoped that efforts will be made to ensure that the data reported by the 2001 census correctly reflects the ground reality, as statistics have a crucial role to play in determining policy.

*This paper is based on a presentation made at a Symposium organised at the India International Centre by UNDP and Mahbub ul Haq Centre for Human Development on The South Asian Human Development Report, 2000 on 9th October, 2000.*

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