

WE recommend that you read this book and read it again, because it points to and provides the kind of information that the women's movement urgently needs to gather, and suggests how to go about gathering such information. If we are to understand what is happening in the lives of working women in this vast country, we need to shake off our ignorance and start collecting information about regional, caste, class and other variations so that we are enabled to visualize relevant solutions to our problems. It is indeed unusual for an economist to try and learn about the real life situation of working women by carefully detailing profiles of women from different occupational groups. Leela Gulati has chosen five women: Kalyani the agricultural labourer, Jayamma the brick worker, Sara the fish vendor, Devaki the construction worker and Kesari the coir worker. Through a close relationship and interaction with these women over a long period of time, she observed their lives closely, recording minute details of their daily struggle for survival. All the five women live on the outskirts of the city of Trivandrum, where Leela Gulati also lives. She could walk over every day to the homes or worksites of most of them, talk to them, their neighbours, co-workers and employers, see them at their different tasks. She also held long dialogues over a period of time with each of the women.

She discusses in her introduction how she went about choosing the women whose lives she was going to study. We reproduce some extracts because they tell all those of us who are interested in understanding the reality of women's lives in this country, not just the kind of work we need to do but also one good way to go about it: "Both Kerala and the problems of the poor as such are already much researched... What is different about my profiles is that they deal with, I believe, the poorest of the poor, namely the poor working women... I knew that I just could not knock on any door and subject the persons there to the kind of intensive questioning I had in mind. I first needed to build a sort of rapport with the

BOOKS

Profiles In Female Poverty

—A Study of Five Poor Working Women in Kerala by Leela Gulati

respondents... Let me illustrate my method of selection by explaining in detail my choice of the female agricultural labourer Kalyani. I first tried to pick up conversation with women workers in a nearby construction site. There was one woman construction worker who was far more responsive and open than others. She showed some curiosity in the questions and topics I would raise. Once she was reasonably certain that I was not being contemptuous in my interest, she invited me to her house...She introduced me to... 12 women over the span of a few visits and explained to them the purpose of my visit. The women were rather amused that somebody wanted to study what they were doing...Of these 12 women I found out that not only was Kalyani living in possibly the humblest of huts but also she was the most cooperative, forthcoming and unreserved in her conversations with me. So I decided on her. From the very outset I knew also that the person whom I chose for my study would have to be a person who would trust me, accept me as a friend, and persevere with me for a long period...My four selections were made more or less similarly. I tried first to meet 10 or 12 women engaged in a particular occupation and then narrowed down my choice to one of them, on the base principally of her willingness to cooperate. In fact, even in the choice of the occupational group itself, particularly when it came to choosing the brick and construction workers, I was influenced considerably by the consideration of accessibility."(1-5)

In simple, spare language, Leela Gulati keeps the reader constantly aware of the dull, wearing, daily struggle that

is the life of poor, working women in this country. Her methodology is a break-through as compared to the style favoured by so many sociological studies—distribute a questionnaire, collect answers, mostly in "yes" and "no" form to a number of stereotyped questions, and do a statistical analysis on which one then proceeds to base various vast generalizations.

The narrator's tone throughout remains matter-of-fact, even when relating the most harrowing details, and she links all the details as they are actually linked in life—the back-breaking work, the phases of unemployment, the accidents and sicknesses, the indebtedness that results, the worry for the children's future, the depression that arises from thinking of old age, and the fact that in any case, women do not have much time to think. There is no attempt to blame any particular individual for what the woman suffers, yet a common pattern of oppression does emerge, from her descriptions of the lives of these five women.

The Backbone Of The Labour Force

In all the occupational groups studied, certain jobs are by custom closed to women and this becomes a way of relegating them to the lowest-paid and most strenuous jobs. Thus, in agricultural labour, digging, preparing the fields, manuring and applying fertilizer are all men's jobs. But transplanting, a "messy and backbreaking job" (18) is normally reserved for women. So also, "in the brick industry there is an extremely rigid compartmentalization of work on the basis of sex. Women are used here exclusively for the unskilled job of

carrying headloads...but they do not have access to any of the other jobs, such as moulding, shaping, stacking and arranging bricks in the kiln. These are all exclusively male job...all such other jobs carry much higher wages, some nearly twice as much as women get for their load-carrying jobs.” (40-41)

In the coir industry, headload transporting (which is a typically female occupation in all the other occupational groups) and retting of husks “are entirely in the hands of men (while) defibring is left entirely to women. Though both men and women work on piece rate basis, the wages they earn differ significantly...Compared to the daily male wage of between Rs 12 and Rs 17.50, the wage of between Rs 3.26 and Rs 3.60 which Kesari makes as a husk beater in a day, is clearly extremely low...Could she not count 4-5,000 green husks in a day? Could she net transport on her head 1,500 to 2,000 husks in a day? “Of course I could”, is Kesari’s response, but she has never considered doing it, ‘In any case, is that option at all open to us women?’”(148-9)

Blatant discriminatory payment to men and women doing exactly the same work is also prevalent. Thus in construction work, women are confined to headloading jobs but men doing the same jobs are paid more than women though “Nobody really claims that men transport larger quantities than women.” (113)

The myth of women’s physical weakness and inability to do a “man’s work” is effectively shattered by the picture of the exploitative conditions under which these women work. They do terribly exhausting jobs—four of the five jobs described involve walking fast at an almost running pace, carrying heavy weights on the head. In some parts of the construction industry, they have to carry rough-hewn pieces of granite, each weighing about 40 kg, and end up transporting about one ton in the course of a day. Transporting cement mixture for long hours causes blisters on the hands and feet, but the employers do not even provide protective gloves. Devaki, the construction worker, had two

accidents. Once a hammer hit her chest so hard that four years later, she still suffers from chest pain, and another time, she fell unconscious while loading bricks in the heat.

Leela Gulati has a gift for observing the significant and characteristic motions of labouring women. Manual labour is despised in this country. Leela Gulati’s acute and detailed observations show that there is a great deal of skill and dignity in these women’s work, evident in the way they do even the most menial of jobs. Here is a description of Jayamma’s brick carrying: “She carries a small piece of old towel to be twisted into a coil on top of her head on which rests a wooden plank, two feet by eight inches. The plank is used as a base on which the bricks can be placed. An adult woman carries 20 bricks at a time. She herself has to stack the bricks on the plank on her head while standing. The technique of doing it is first to stack the bricks two at a time, starting from the centre of the plank, and then to place one brick each time, on either side of the pile. Once 20 bricks are stacked in this fashion, she starts walking with a swinging rhythm, supporting the bricks with one hand and using the other hand for balance. She has to walk fast, virtually run, in order to dispose of the load quickly. When she reaches the brick kiln, a man will be standing there to receive and stack the bricks she carries. He cannot help her unload the bricks as she would lose balance. The danger is two-fold: the bricks may fall and break, or she may sprain her neck in the process. Actually the main brunt of this weight carrying falls on her neck. So Jayamma unloads the bricks herself, two at a time from the sides, handing them over to the waiting man. Thus the whole operation of loading, transporting and unloading falls on her. The man helps her only at the final stage.” (39-40)

Because they are kept on the lowest rung of every work group and are never allowed to do the more skilled jobs which are all done by men, women are obviously the first to be eased out by mechanization. In the coir industry, each

husk-beating machine can replace 100 women. Before the women’s resentment found a voice, 400 such machines had already been installed in Kerala between 1965 and 1974. Wherever technology, even the most simple, is introduced, men take control of it, and women are pushed into destitution. Thus even fish vending women lose out in competition with male cyclist vendors and merchants who transport the fish in trucks. The cyclists cater to bigger and more distant markets. Speed is an advantage because fish loses its freshness very fast. Thus men are able to sell to customers like hotels and clubs, who can pay more, while women like Sara must literally run barefoot, and on an empty stomach, over distances of 20 to 30 kilometres every day, just to get the lowest-priced fish to low-income households who can pay them only a trifle over what the fish originally cost.

Women Aspire To Earn

Though in his introduction to the book, Marvin Harris argues that paid work does not have a liberating impact on women in non-affluent conditions, it is significant that these women, do see their paid employment as a welcome break from household drudgery: “Kalyani confesses that she herself cannot stand the confusion in the house for a single day. So she prefers to be at work just to get away from all this.” (13) Similarly, Sara’s daughter Glassey “is looking forward to the day when she can go out with her mother and be able to sell fish instead of being exclusively confined to household chores, day in and day out.” (82)

Considering how taxing and ill-paid the work outside is, the eagerness of the women to achieve the status of earners is a telling comment both on the unrewarding nature of housework and on the paucity of alternatives available to these women.

The status of the employed woman is also significantly linked to her nutrition level. Though the married women eat least, unmarried girls who are earning can eat more. Thus, while discussing the distribution of food in Jayamma’s

household, the researcher notes : “Who does worst in this regard ? Not Vanaja (the unmarried daughter) because she is an earner in her own right and insists that she too must have full freedom to do what she likes with her wage.” (60)

Holding Up Heaven

The most striking fact that emerges while reading about these five working women is that they are in every sense—financially, emotionally, and as toilers—the mainstay of their families. “All the five women studied had or have husbands who are or were engaged in casual wage labour” (164) and were frequently dependent on the woman’s earnings as the only regular income. Many of the daughters and mothers of these women were in a similar position. The fact that men are supported by wives, daughters, mothers, confirms the trend noticed by other researchers, of an increasing number of woman-headed households among the labouring classing.

Whatever the woman earns goes into providing absolute necessities for the family. For instance in the case of the terribly overworked woman fish vendor, who is perhaps the poorest of the five women studied: “Though there are four able-bodied men in the house, they have come to depend on Sara for the day-to-day running of the house. Still, while the men not only spend their time but also money (when they can get hold of it) as they please, Sara has neither known leisure nor got much choice in spending the little money she makes every day. All of it must be spent just to keep the family alive. Sara’s husband has not been working for some years now...However, even when he worked, his own (as distinct from the family’s) claims on his earnings always came first. The first son, whom they sent to school with great difficulty, has proved more of a liability than an asset. The second and third sons, who are no shirkers as far as work is concerned, do not feel any strong obligation to help Sara in running the household. They probably bring home some fish and contribute a fraction of what they earn, when Sara is really down

and out. The rest of what they earn they spend on themselves...” (95)

Women are the ones who see to it that everyone is fed every day, and they also do the long-term planning and worrying for the children. The woman does the daily shopping on her way back from work since these families live literally from hand to mouth and buy their rations daily. Since she is the one ultimately concerned with the daily details of survival, she ends up eating last and least. We are told of Jayamma the brick worker: “Anant, the young unmarried son...can and does spend the major part of whatever he earns on eating out. Still, when he comes back home he must be attended to most. Jayamma serves him larger quantities of food. ..So, in the distribution of calorie intake within the household, Anant does relatively the best, even on a day when he is not working—naturally, it is Jayamma herself

who eats more of tapioca than rice, who eats only the left-over of fish and who, in the end, has a shortfall in calorie intake on both the days she is working and the days she is not working.” (60)

Mothers To Daughters

At a very early age, girls are withdrawn from school to take over the role of housekeeper. In spite of the heavy responsibility they shoulder, they are undernourished: “Though more than 12 years old, Nirmala looks just an eight year old. Though very frail, she has a gentle face. She is the one who fetches water, collects firewood, cooks the midday meal, buys the required grocery and looks after the children. She works from seven in the morning till six in the evening. Nirmala has seen virtually no childhood...” (13) And yet, her 16 year old brother Niren, who “loiters around street corners and...when he does find work once in a while... never shares his



wages with the family but spends it all either on movies or in eating places with friends" (12) is better fed than she is: "Between children, the two girls seem to be worse off (in calorie intake) and this anyone can notice by simply looking at them." (26)

This is a common pattern in all the five households. Thus Sara's daughter Glassey "has a sweet face but looks definitely small and very undernourished for her 14 years. Sara stopped her after she had attended school for three years. Now she is the full-time housekeeper— By the age of ten, Glassey, like most other girls from fishing households in the village, had mastered virtually all the chores necessary to run a house....." (82) Her 19 year old brother Stellas attended school for eight years and then refused to study further. He now insists on dressing in the latest fashions and cannot find work because "he hates to do manual work, particularly if it soils his hands and clothes...The major part of the day Stellas spends outside his house playing or watching people play cards..." (79-80) However, even such male members who are a drag on the family, are perceived as more important than the hardest working female member. Thus Stellas' mother Sara "is frankly partial to men in the distribution of rice. Men get a larger share per capita of rice than women, that is, Sara herself and Glassey." (94)

Myth Of The "Good Marriage"

Wherein does the importance of the man reside? There is some indication in the fact that the notion of "a man in the house", presumably as protector, has a hold on the women's minds. Thus the non-earning husband of Suvarna, daughter of Jayamma, developed a habit of going and staying with his mother for long periods of time. Though he contributes nothing to family income, and Suvarna supports both children, yet she "is happy whenever he comes back, because she feels it is better to have a man around the house than none." (48) Similarly, three self-supporting women (Devaki, her mother and sister) all

deserted by their husbands, decided to move closer to the house of the son Keshavan so that they would have a "sense of security." (106)

Perhaps there could be no better indicator of the scant value attached to a woman's work than the fact that even though she may be supporting herself



and the children, the husband considers himself injured if no dowry was paid. Devaki, the construction worker, maltreated because dowry was not paid, returned to her mother.

There, she supported herself and the children from her own earnings. This, Leela Gulati says, "seems to be the pattern in practically every other household belonging to this income-cum-occupational group..." (104) Yet whenever Thangappan visited her, he constantly complained and even beat up Devaki on the grounds that he had been tricked into marrying her without payment.

Parents' aspirations for their daughters are in terms of attaining "respectability" through a good marriage. In practice, this means the girl gets confined to the house so that she may not make a "bad" marriage with any boy of her fancy. Thus Devaki, though herself the victim of an arranged marriage and dowry demands, plans to give her daughter a large dowry even if it means making no provision for her old age. Her "strict instructions to Vimala are not to go out, not even in their own front yard, when Devaki and Chandran are out at

work. So Vimala feels virtually a prisoner in her own house." (126)

But when the "good marriage" is made, the man being educated and from a richer family, the woman is only too likely to end up like Mercy, Sara's daughter, who her family considers "well married": "...for over two years, ever since his marriage, Manuel sits at home doing virtually no work at all...Mercy has been vending fish and supporting Manuel. She kept going out fish vending till the last day before her delivery..." (78-9)

Sexual Harassment— Deterrent To Employment

In spite of their attempt to find protectors in men, these working women have little protection from sexual harassment of various kinds. Infact, men avoid working on the same construction sites as their female relatives because sexual harassment is perceived as an inextricable part of the work routine for women.

This dimension of women's work experience, which is crucially important because it operates to curb the independence they have as earners, has not been sufficiently explored in the book. The sub-title given to the one page in the book which deals specifically with this issue, tends to reduce its importance: "Moods at work." (114) The seriousness of the sexual attacks faced by women may be gauged by the fact that it acts as a deterrent to their taking up employment: "No parent would send young unmarried girls to construction work, if it could be avoided. Devaki herself is quite aware of these risks and is determined that she will never let her own daughters take up this work." (109) Leela Gulati's description here is not detailed enough: "...younger women have to learn from experience how to ignore frivolous remarks and gestures all of which may not be quite innocent... When work is inside a building, there is always a chance that some of the masons will try to take some physical liberties with the young women workers...Since it is all part of the game, workers do not pay much attention to these goings on..." (114-5)

The greatest danger for the woman

is that her reputation will be damaged, and her husband will start suspecting her. Devaki, who was living intermittently with her husband, was accused by neighbours of having had an illegitimate child, but nothing was said about the husband openly having relations with another woman. A woman accused of immorality can lose her job, but a man's promiscuity is taken for granted: "...it has happened to many women of her class that their husbands make fresh alliances during the months immediately before and after their deliveries." (104) These double standards of sexual morality, and how they affect women's lives, need to be studied in depth, in the context of various communities, castes and classes.

Exploring Women's Reality

On the last page of her book, Leela Gulati concludes that "...in actual practice, I have found that in the families I have studied, the surviving men or women of the older generation are being looked after more often by daughters than sons..." Yet, despite this reality, too often parents imagine that their sons alone will provide for them, and therefore discriminate in their favour, depriving the daughters of their fair share in whatever little there is. This is something we all need to understand and explore further.

In simple, understated language, she challenges the myth that discrimination is based on women's supposedly smaller contribution to production. These five profiles consistently indicate active discrimination against the employment of women in any but the poorly-paid, unskilled, dangerous, monotonous, laborious, dead-end jobs.

Even the most accurate and detailed profile should not, however, mislead us into believing that Leela Gulati's method is a short cut to understanding the living reality of millions of working women in India. This type of observational study cannot stand by itself. It needs to be combined with many other ways of digging out facts and piecing them together.

It is to be expected that a number of the profiles end on a pessimistic note. Given their life situation, whether we focus on the particular women Leela

Gulati has described, or whether we think about the millions of women working at similar jobs who resemble those profiled in so many respects, their future prospects are even more bleak than their present struggle. The small number of jobs that women presently have, the poorest paying and most insecure, are being wiped out at a swift pace by the growth of simple technology.

For Kalyani, the agricultural labourer, "the prospect of any improvement in the basic food intake in the foreseeable future will thus have receded even further...So the struggle to live must go on with the rules rigidly set." And, "When Sara has time to think of what lies ahead, the future looks to her so bleak and hopeless that she regrets why she had this free moment to think."

But two of the five profiles end on a somewhat more hopeful note. Devaki, the construction worker, "sees in the prospect of a factory job for her son her own economic security and her family's social security. And she has the tenacity to go to the extreme end to achieve her objective." Kesari and Tamaram have so far been able to make both ends meet. They will also see the children through school."

Why the future for some of these working women appears to be so bleak while it is more hopeful for the others is never systematically assessed. But Leela Gulati seems to suggest that it is because of luck and "hard work and planning." For example, Kesari has only two children to provide for. In addition, "When a hard working and enterprising man like Tamaram joins an outwardly meek but determined woman like Kesari, it does appear that however big the handicap with which they start, they will ultimately make it. Does this not give one some hope?" Similarly, luck comes to Devaki when she is hired by a foreign couple as a domestic servant. Her determination and planning, make the most of this opportunity to further her own and her family's welfare.

Leela Gulati describes the women with bleaker futures as both less fortunate and less enterprising. For example, in describing the future

prospects for Kalyani and her family: "The neighbours feel that both of them live from day-to-day and do not worry about tomorrow. The feeling is that most of their money is spent on eating out either by themselves or with children and they are never sufficiently concerned about the future." In this and other cases, Leela Gulati appears to assess these women in somewhat similar ways. She has praise or criticism for them based on whether they squeeze the absolute maximum out of their tiny income and opportunities, and tends to ascribe, too much of their fate to whether or not they are adept at steady hard work and careful planning. This interpretation of the profiles contradicts clear indications in most of them that these women are living extremely insecure lives on the edge of disaster arising mainly out of forces totally beyond their own control. A concluding chapter would have helped. In it, the author could have made clear that, despite a few exceptional cases, the future for the millions of working women in India is extremely grim if the present social structure is not changed. The vast majority of the women described are being pushed out of the few unskilled low-paying occupations still open to them. They live a hand to mouth existence.

To emphasize areas of their lives that are somewhat dependent on personal choices without carefully balancing these observations against the social forces that constantly overwhelm them is to strengthen the existing powerful prejudices that the poor remain poor because they are not sensible enough, they produce more children than they can support, they spend money imprudently, and they suffer more because they are also ill-fated.

Leela Gulati's emphasis on narration of minutely observed facts of everyday living sometimes tends to make the tone a bit monotonous. It could have been made more interesting if, occasionally, the women workers were allowed to speak for themselves in the first person. This would also give the reader relatively greater insight into the way these women perceive their own problems. □