Eroding citizenship : gender and labour in contemporary India
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This chapter presents an analytical framework linking gendered labour regimes, domestic regimes and citizenship in practice. The framework is composed through a combination and reconstruction of four strands of theories: labour process theories; labour market theories; feminist theories on gender, identity, work and the household; and theories of capabilities, entitlements and citizenship. The first section defines and describes the analytical framework used in this study. The second section elaborates the research questions, research methodology and the dynamics of power/knowledge in the research process.

**Gendered Labour Regimes**

The starting point for conceptualising gendered labour regimes is labour process theory. This approach points to the significance of the technical and social organisational aspects of production and the necessity for labour control as an essential condition for capitalist production (Friedman, 1977; Edwards, 1979; Burawoy, 1985). The shift from structuralist accounts based on ‘the logic of capital’ to theorisation of workers’ subjectivities, their agency in determining whether labour control operates on the basis of consent or coercion, and the significance of state intervention, provide an important point of departure for this study. Burawoy’s framework is particularly useful for analysing economic restructuring. He focuses on the conditions for the reproduction of labour power as a crucial determinant of different forms of labour control. Starting with a critique of the economic determinism implicit in H. Braverman’s work, Burawoy argues that the process of production has two political moments. One of these is the labour process, i.e. the technical and social organisation of work where men and women not only transform raw materials into useful things but also experience and reproduce particular social relations. The other moment is the ‘distinctive political and ideological apparatus of production which regulates production relations’ (Burawoy, 1985: 8).

The notion of production or factory regime refers to the combination of these two aspects in an overall political form of production. Factory regimes are distinguished in terms of the degree of state intervention on one hand and interfirm competition on the other hand. Market despotism characterises the period
of early industrialisation (Marx’s satanic mills) which emerged from historically specific conditions such as workers’ total dependency on wage employment for their livelihoods; the separation of mental and manual labour; the deployment of methods of absolute and relative surplus value extraction to deal with competition; the lengthening of the working day, the intensification of work and the introduction of new machinery (Burawoy, 1985: 123-124). The state is separate from and does not directly shape the form of factory regime. The shift to another form of factory regime occurs with state intervention, which breaks the ties that bind the reproduction of labour power to productive activity in the workplace. Social security, especially the guarantee of a minimum wage and legal regulation of industrial relations such as trade union recognition, collective bargaining and restrictions on arbitrary firing, fines and wage cuts, shape a different kind of factory regime. Hegemonic factory regimes emerge where workers’ total dependence on employment is broken. The state, though institutionally separate, regulates relations between capital and labour, and coercion is replaced by consent.¹

For Burawoy, the primary theoretical distinction and hence generic character of factory regimes is the presence or absence of state regulation. However he acknowledges that empirically specific factory regimes may vary depending on different labour processes and inter-firm competition, as well as on the degree of state intervention. This leads to different constellations of paternalistic, patriarchal, despotic or hegemonic regimes. However, for him, despite the ‘important variations among despotic regimes and hegemonic regimes, the decisive basis for periodisation remains the unity/separation of the reproduction of labour power and capitalist production’ (Burawoy, 1985:127).

Burawoy’s concept of factory regimes as a combination of two political moments linked to the labour process and political and ideological apparatus of production, plus his highlighting of the role of the state and competition are important departures for a theorisation of gendered labour regimes. However, there are problems with his ‘capital logic’ argument concerning the periodisation of factory regimes, his dismissal of export-oriented agri-business and free trade zones as empirical anomalies and his relegation of the question of gender to ‘originating outside production’ (Lee, 1998).

Ching Kwan Lee’s study challenges the institutional determinants of factory regimes by suggesting that the gendered nature of the organization of the labour market is a critical determinant of workers’ dependence. Comparing factory regimes in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, she demonstrates the significance of local-based networks and familial ties in creating two distinct types of gender identities and regimes, although the labour process and the role of the state is the same. Women workers depend on rural networks for survival and resources. These networks are then exploited by management to control labour. This suggests a major lacuna in Burawoy’s distinction between dependence on the enterprise and dependence on the state as being the main feature distinguishing despotic and hegemonic regimes (Lee, 1998: 381). In making the labour market
and gender central to the constitution of labour regimes, Lee’s work adds a new dimension to the conceptualisation of factory regimes.

Labour market theories, particularly the segmented labour market approach, identify the significance of institutional factors outside the workplace in structuring the labour force. Forms of control then are linked not only to the labour process, but also to localised labour markets. In this sense the labour market acts as a filter between skill and the wider economy and class structure. Therefore, often the production process is overlaid by the labour market process. In the Indian context the significance of the labour market has been repeatedly stressed in numerous studies. Primordial ties determine access to jobs and have operated as a form of labour control; they also have provided the potential for organisation and resistance (Bremen, 1996).

Burawoy and Lee’s work therefore provide a framework for a revised conceptualisation of (1) gendered forms of labour control and (2) the nature of labour regimes by linking state, factory regimes and labour markets. However, I differ from both in relation to the way state intervention/non-intervention is interpreted. In both Burawoy and Lee’s formulations, state intervention/non-intervention is seen as given. Though Burawoy acknowledges the importance of the role of large-scale capital and workers’ struggles in making the transition from despotic to hegemonic regimes (‘the drive of labour to establish minimal levels of security in unemployment as well as employment’) (1985: 261), the focus of his analysis is on the internal abode of production (see Thompson (1989) on Burawoy’s neglect of external factors). As a result, the mere existence of legal entitlements is presented as sufficient basis for differentiating factory regimes. Lee focuses on the non-implementation of legal entitlements in Hong Kong and Shenzhen to classify the state in both cases as non-interventionist and argues for enterprise autonomy in determining the nature of factory regimes. What is missing is a notion of process – the provision of legal entitlements is only a first step. It is workers’ struggle and organisation that forces the implementation of these state-defined entitlements. Lee says for instance that ‘women workers in neither factory had recourse to state welfare or collective bargaining rights’ (Lee, 1998: 65), yet these rights were there on the statute books. She notes in the Appendix that workers in Shenzhen took collective action towards the end of her research, using legal entitlements to pressure the local Labour Bureau. The nature of the factory regime could change precisely due to the existence of state-based entitlements and workers’ struggles to implement them.

The absence of a discussion of intra-household relations is a major lacuna in Burawoy’s framework. Burawoy sees gender as predetermined outside the production process, yet does not feel the need to integrate the ‘hidden abode of reproduction’ into his analysis. Gillian Hart has shown how an understanding of the connections between workplace, household and community politics is important not just to understand women’s capacity to organise as workers; but also illustrates the ways in which men’s capacities are affected as well (Hart,
Lee's study demonstrates the significance of intra-household relations and allocations in determining the choice to work, the reproduction of the ideology of 'familialism' in managerial and shop floor discourses, and the changes in women workers' lives as a result of waged work.

I propose to extend the Burawoy/Lee framework in two directions: showing how legal entitlements, as one form of state intervention, are also gendered; and introducing the concept of 'citizenship in practice'. This concept expresses women workers' agency both in relation to gendered labour regimes and within domestic regimes.

To incorporate gender more fully into this framework, I use R.W. Connell's elaboration of 'gender regimes', which allows for the inclusion of gender, class, ethnicity and subjectivity in a more explicit way in the analysis of factory regimes. Connell's distinction between a gender order and a gender regime is also useful. Gender order refers to a historically constructed pattern of power relations between men and women with concomitant definitions of femininity and masculinity. Gender regimes are more specific, based on a structural inventory of a particular institution or on particular arenas such as the school or factory. Gender is seen as a process, as a fluid category socially created, with negotiations over relations that are bearers of gender.

In this study a multi-faceted conception of gender is adopted. This works: (1) on a symbolic level: images of masculinity and femininity; (2) at the level of individual and collective identity: meanings of sexual difference which affect self image; and (3) at the level of social structures: the availability of resources, accessibility of social institutions and power positions marked by gender norms and gender symbols (J.W. Scott, 1988; Sevenhuijsen, 1998:81). Such conceptualisation moves beyond locating gender as predetermined outside the production process (à la Burawoy) and emphasises the construction and re-construction of gender identities within the production/labour process as well. It questions both the notion that 'patriarchy' is a monolithic structure, located only in the family, and the assumption that the labour market is benign – a view that pervades many studies on Indian women industrial workers. Along with an investigation of structures, such an approach makes it possible to examine the deployment of gender ideologies when that affects the processes of 'gendering' – within the workplace, labour market and the household. Although the focus in this study is on the gendered nature of labour control, gender is not seen as the primary mechanism. The study examines the mobilisation and deployment of multiple identities highlighting the interlocking nature of class, caste, gender, regional, and religious identities by employers and workers within and outside the production process (Chhachhi & Pittin, 1996a).

The concept of 'gendered labour regimes' applied in this study then incorporates the interplay between state intervention (in the form of legal regulation/de-regulation), managerial strategies of labour control and restructuring, worker's subjectivities/identities in resistance and constitution of
labour control, as well as the influence of social institutions of the labour market. I define gendered labour regimes as:

negotiated orders that emerge through the interplay between state intervention (implicit and explicit legal de-regulation), managerial strategies and practices of labour control and restructuring, worker’s subjectivities/agency and the social institutions of the labour market and the household.

It should be noted that all aspects are not equal – structural power hierarchies enter into determining outcomes. The nature of a ‘gendered labour regime’ is a product of internal dynamics as well as external dynamics. It is a product of state intervention in the form of legal regulations of the labour-capital relation, with embedded gender contracts; and of changing industrial policy regimes on one side, and the labour market and household on the other side.

Domestic Regimes

Understanding the nature of the household/domestic regimes is essential to understanding gendered labour regimes, and women workers’ subjectivities. The feminist re-formulation of Amartya Sen’s model of cooperative-conflict provides a way to conceptualise domestic regimes since it has the ability to deal with issues of gender and power within the household (Sen et al., 2003; A. Sen, 1990b). Sen applies an entitlement approach to intra-household distribution. Recognising that entitlements are a legal concept and that household relations are not governed by law in all matters, he proposes a broader view bringing in notions of legitimacy. He conceptualises household decision-making as a bargaining process between parties whose bargaining power depends on their position as individuals within the larger economy. Cooperation is the general mode of relations within the household, leading to a certain allocation of resources and duties. However, since some of these outcomes are more favourable to one party than to others, there are seeds of conflict within ‘cooperation’.

Where there is conflict of interests, the results of decision making depend on who has the greater bargaining power. Bargaining power is determined by a range of factors. These include: ‘strength of breakdown/fall back position’ – the options available outside which determine how well-off an individual would be if cooperation failed; ‘perceived interest response’ – the extent to which members identify their self-interest with their personal well-being; and ‘perceived contribution response’ – how a contribution is perceived by others. The latter point is a significant one and links with feminist theories that emphasise non-economic, qualitative factors that determine bargaining.

Feminist extensions of Sen’s model have elaborated on the significance of familial ideologies about roles and responsibilities, claims, obligations (implicit, normative) which affect the power dynamics within the household. Henrietta Moore conceptualises these as ‘local theories of entitlement’ which combine
conjugal contracts, i.e. the terms on which all forms of income, produced by the labour of both husband and wife are divided to meet their personal and collective needs with broader ideologies/cultural norms in society. She points to the dynamic nature of local theories of entitlement (cultural norms, ideas, values) which are not just constraints but are also resources used in bargaining. Thus cultural norms set limits but are also instruments of change (H. Moore, 1994).

These conceptual extensions have led to a re-valuing of Sen’s proposition, (a restatement of the Engelian assumption) that:

Outside earnings can give the woman in question (1) a better breakdown position (2) possibly a clearer perception of her individuality and well being and (3) a higher ‘perceived contribution’ to the family’s economic position. (Sen, 1990b: 144)

Sen tends to see access to waged work as a sufficient basis for transformation in gender relations. Feminist research has long pointed out that while wage work may be a necessary condition it is not a sufficient one. Issues of power and ideology enter into the bargaining and negotiation process between household members. Bargaining power is therefore never simply determined only by economic factors. As Moore states, local theories of entitlement which are ‘Socially and historically specific views about the rights, responsibilities and needs of particular individuals’ are important in defining the nature and outcome of bargaining and negotiation (H. Moore, 1994:87). Drawing on the convergence between bargaining models and feminist re-conceptualisations, I use the concept of domestic regimes. This concept allows attention to be accorded to power differentials; significant normative understandings and practices which enter into intra-household decision making; allocation, access and control over resources; and the ‘social processes that perpetuate domination and engender resistance’ (Agarwal, 1997; H. Moore, 1994:91; Wolf, 1992:22).

Domestic regimes are conceptualised as a locus of competing interests, rights, obligations and resources, where household members are often involved in bargaining, negotiation and possibly even conflict. Socially and historically specific views about the rights, responsibilities and needs of particular individuals which draw on normative understandings and practices, linked to accepted power differences and ideologies determine the dynamics of relations within the household. (Adapted from H. Moore, 1994:91)

Variations in domestic regimes and local theories of entitlement determine women’s agency and affect their strategies of collusion or resistance and the possibilities for transformation.

Issues of transformation connect to a perennial issue in social science research: the relationship between structure and agency. Giddens’ theory of structuration provides a general framework to account for the connections between structure, agency and power. Structure emerges from practice even as practice always presupposes social structure. Social actors are ‘knowledgeable
agents, with complex forms of ‘practical consciousness’ (Giddens, 1986:281). Labour process theory has also been caught between the dualism of ‘objective structures and voluntary subjects’ and the construction of a full theory of the missing subject is seen as the most important task facing labour process theory (Thompson, 1990). In response to Braverman’s capital logic argument, a control-resistance paradigm has tended to dominate post-Braverman labour process theory (Wardell, 1990). Some labour process theorists have argued that a fuller account of subjectivity can be found in Foucault’s analysis of power and subjectivity. The view Foucault takes regarding the productive and individualising effects of power on subjectivity is seen as more illuminating than the perspectives offered within labour process theory (Knights, 1990:328). This kind of approach has been adopted by some recent studies on women workers in Third World contexts (see Salzinger, 2003; Lee, 1995).

In dealing with the micro-dynamics of power relations, however, researchers looking at the labour process and intra-household relations have turned to the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971), James Scott (1985, 1990), or Pierre Bourdieu (1977). For instance, Burawoy’s analysis of the manufacturing of consent through shop-floor practices – game playing – as well as Sen’s analysis of women’s subordination of their self interest to the interests of the family are based on a Gramscian notion of hegemony and ‘false consciousness’. James Scott’s rejection of this conceptualisation and analysis of ‘everyday forms of resistance’ and ‘hidden scripts’ is echoed in feminist analysis of covert strategies of resistance within the household (Agarwal, 1997; Kandiyoti, 1988, 1998). It has been pointed out that in fact Scott’s analysis re-labels the effects of hegemony by merely acknowledging the outer limits of peasant resistance (Mitchell, 1990; Kandiyoti, 1998). Scott has been faulted for ignoring gender relations, while Bourdieu’s theory of practice has been criticised for a reliance on ‘social reproduction’ which does not allow for ‘agency and/or social change’ (Hart, 1991; H. Moore, 1994:77).

In her latest work, Kandiyoti has gone further. Through a revaluation of her earlier argument on ‘bargaining with patriarchy’, she has suggested that concepts developed for class struggle and consciousness cannot be applied to gender relations. She argues that the intersection of gender with other forms of inequality based on class, race, ethnicity, the cyclical nature of women’s power in the household, and ‘the complex emotional (and material) calculus’ that informs these life cycles, make it difficult to fit gender relations into frameworks dealing with more permanent social hierarchies (Kandiyoti, 1998:144). While the significance of the life cycle is indeed an important consideration, Kandiyoti’s own discussion illustrates examples where she continues to apply concepts derived from class analysis: hegemony and false consciousness, covert forms of resistance, and the outer limits imposed by ‘doxa’ on what is culturally possible.

Rather than opting for one framework in preference to another I use all three approaches. Contrary to Kandiyoti’s position, I feel it is possible to apply
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concepts from broader frameworks dealing with class domination and resistance in general in a nuanced way to gender relations within the workplace and the household. A focus on women workers in particular implies dealing with both class-based systems of domination as well as with structures of authority within the household. Gendered labour regimes construct and replicate familial ideologies within the workplace, while local theories of entitlement intersect with an awareness of rights derived from the workplace. Acknowledging that gendered labour regimes and domestic regimes represent different systems of domination, I use the notion of ‘negotiating autonomy’ specifically to analyse changes in gender relations within the household. Autonomy is used to refer to the processes that allow for an expansion of choices rather than a set of attributes which can be measured. This notion allows for a more grounded analysis rather than an open concept of ‘female agency’ per se and the more ambiguous and loaded concept of empowerment. The concept of empowerment is today used in a loose way ranging from female literacy as an example of women’s empowerment and agency to more comprehensive formulations which are then converted into indicators (see Kabeer 2000b for a distinction between an instrumental and process-oriented approach to empowerment). I find the term ‘empowerment’ too heavy to describe the non-linear, often reversible, constantly negotiated dynamics of gender relations in the workplace and the household. I use the concept of ‘citizenship in practice’ to characterise expressions of individual and collective agency at the workplace and the assertions of autonomy within the household.

Citizenship in Practice: Capabilities, Entitlement and Public Action

The concept of ‘citizenship in practice’ is linked with a broader framework of analysis: ‘social exclusion’ which examines the relationship between livelihoods, well-being and rights. Although originally applied in the West European context, the social exclusion approach has been adapted and extended to the analysis of developing countries (see articles in Gore et al., 1995; Appasamy et al., 1996). Hilary Silver has shown how different approaches to social exclusion are grounded in different paradigms of citizenship and social integration: solidarity, specialisation and monopoly, each of which results in different processes of exclusion. The value of the social exclusion approach is that it makes the issue of citizenship central to development policies and discussions on poverty, deprivation, employment and social integration. As Gore et al. state:

Citizenship has always been important in development policy analysis but usually as a silent term, implicitly structuring debates and suggesting analytical and policy priorities, though its nature has not been spelled out. A concern with social exclusion makes the significance of citizenship within development
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debates explicit and it directs attention towards what the condition of citizenship actually is by focusing on incomplete citizenship. (Gore et al., 1995:8)

The value of the approach, particularly for policy analysis, is three-fold. It is descriptive, in that it uses a broader notion of poverty and even vulnerability to include areas of rights; analytical in that it can address issues of globalisation, economic restructuring and social institutions; and normative since it deals with issues of social justice, extending to ethical claims which go beyond legal recognition. Gore et al. in fact suggest that this approach goes beyond Amartya Sen’s capability approach which remains individualistic.

In contemporary discussions, two dominant normative frameworks – the work of Amartya Sen and Guy Standing – connect with a rights-based approach to development. Both have conceptual roots in Marx and Rawls, though their emphasis on development as freedom and distributive justice may differ. Such an approach re-establishes the principle of universalism in citizenship-based entitlements, and recognises agency as well as the role of the state as a major actor in social provisioning. Sen’s entitlement approach offers both a normative framework and an identification of the enabling conditions for the translation of rights into well-being and freedom. Significant for this study, the entitlement approach is applicable to the world of paid work as well as intra-household relations (Sen, 1990b). Moving away from a needs-based approach, which is passive, capabilities are about what a ‘person can do and be’. Hence, capability is an active dynamic concept, involving choices and the context in which they are made.

The transition from capability to achieved functionings, i.e. what a person is able to achieve, is based on ‘entitlements’ and ‘entitlement exchange mappings’, i.e. the command a person has over resources, ‘using the totality of rights and opportunities that he or she faces’ (Sen, 1983: 18). A set of entitlement relations comprises inherited and legally acquired assets (education, health, skills, and property), rights to state provision of goods and services, and the rights to use these endowments. The enabling conditions for turning capabilities into effective functionings therefore include not only state-based entitlements and individual endowments, but also public action. Public action refers both to state action and social and political movements (Dreze & Sen, 1989a:19) Distributive justice in this approach requires equalisation of capabilities, moving away from Rawls’ focus on primary goods.

Guy Standing extends this approach to include self-control and security as basic capabilities/functionings and applies notions of social justice to the labour market in the era of global flexibility. Citizenship security and occupational security are made more specific and refer to three principles: ‘basic income security (so that choices are made in real freedom), universal representation security (voice) and the difference principle (reforms are justified only if they improve the position of the worst-off)’ (Standing, 1999b:351). These principles have been incorporated to a large extent in the ILO concept of ‘Decent Work’
which includes labour market security, employment security, income security, work security, job security, skill reproduction security and representation security (Standing, 2002b; Rodgers, 2001; ILO, 1999, 2001).

Neither Sen nor Standing opposes liberalisation/globalisation per se, arguing instead for the process to be supplemented with regulatory controls over the market. For instance, it has been noted that Sen has maintained a ‘tactical silence’ on issues of international and national power blocs as well as on the nature of the state which could prevent the realisation of development as freedom (Patnaik, 1998. See also Gasper, 2002, for ambiguities in Sen’s conception of capability and agency). Both thinkers also do not incorporate feminist concepts fully into their analysis, though they do address issues of gender inequality (Robeyns, 2001). To do so I would add Nancy Fraser’s additional evaluative standards to the principles mentioned above: the leisure-time equality principle, the equality of respect principle, the anti-marginalisation principle, and the anti-androcentrism principle which together could constitute a basis for gender equity (Fraser, 1997:44-51).

Drawing on the gendered approach to citizenship elaborated in the earlier chapter, this study extends the framework discussed above by focusing on issues of power, entitlements, and agency through analysis of gendered labour regimes, domestic regimes and citizenship in practice. It focuses on the structures of constraint in the public and private spheres. In addition, it relates the micro-level experience of women workers in the electronics industry, both at their work and at home, to broader issues concerning entitlements and citizenship in the era of economic restructuring.

Diagram 1.1 Schematic representation of conceptual framework
Research Questions

While using the conceptual framework elaborated above, my research process was guided by a number of questions, both analytical and empirical. Some of these relate to the immediate situation in India, where the shift towards liberalisation of the economy and major changes in industrial policy since 1991 are ushering in significant transformations in the structure of Indian industry and employment. Other questions are, in a sense, perennial and relate more to theoretical debates and discussions about the specificity of women's work, the role of the state, and the dynamics of structure and agency at the workplace and within the household. The key analytical question relates to the significance of gender, in conjunction with class and other identities, in understanding the processes and responses to contemporary patterns of economic/industrial restructuring. The empirical questions central to this study are: what changes have occurred in the work and lives of women workers in the electronics industry in the context of economic/industrial restructuring, and how have women workers responded to these changes?

Moving into the world of women workers, the first question focuses on the supply side. I examine the social background of women workers, the regions and the households they came from, their reasons for going out to work, and the different trajectories by which they came to be workers in the electronics factories in Delhi. Based on these findings, I address the arguments of labour market theories as well as those culturalist accounts of women's work which emphasise the determining role of the family in the controlling women's labour in South Asia. Is women's entry into industrial employment only a consequence of 'distress' or a 'household strategy', or are there also other motivations? Is the entry of women into wage work seen by their families and community, and by the women themselves as an anomaly, a temporary sojourn outside the household, or are there different notions of the legitimacy of women's waged work? As more women enter the labour force, is there any change in the dominant perceptions of women's waged work?

The second series of questions arising address the demand side. Why do employers hire women? Are women indeed a 'naturally constituted flexible' labour force, or are there specific gendered mechanisms of labour control which construct them into an ideal workforce? Is there a difference between companies owned by domestic capital, and companies linked to multinational capital in the electronics industry regarding patterns of recruitment and forms of labour control? Do changes in the labour process result in different kinds of gendered labour regimes? What managerial strategies are deployed to deal with liberalisation and increased competition in the industry, and how does this affect women workers? In what ways does state intervention through legal regulation/de-regulation affect managerial strategies and worker's responses? Which aspects of flexibility are resorted to, and is flexibility the only managerial strategy to deal with industrial restructuring? In dealing with these questions, I
undertake a comparative analysis of four co-existent gendered labour regimes, differentiated according to the period when they were established, domestic/multinational capital, labour process and size of enterprise.

The inquiry reverts to the household/domestic regimes as another site for women’s labour and the construction of identities. What changes have occurred within households as a result of economic restructuring? How have these changes affected women? Is women’s waged work a significant asset which decreases the vulnerability of the household, or is it marginal? What other assets do women workers have which decrease vulnerability? What kinds of changes have occurred in household budgets, and how have these affected intra-household gender relations? What implications do these changes have for women capacity to negotiate autonomy? What happens to women and men workers who have lost their jobs as a result of industrial restructuring, and how does this affect gender relations within the household? I compare and analyse gender-differentiated effects of economic restructuring and the process of increasing vulnerability, by looking at women workers’ positioning in domestic regimes.

The fourth area of inquiry relates to the dynamics of collective action, individual agency and structural constraints in the workplace and in the household. How far did the women workers in my case study confirm the stereotype of women workers as docile, marriage-oriented and submissive to factory and family systems of authority? In 1987 I had studied one company manufacturing televisions and interviewed 100 women and men workers (Chhachhi & Pittin, 1996a). This first exposure to workers in a modern industry had shown that these women workers were different in terms of their background and consciousness from the women workers I had met in earlier years in the traditional textile industry in Bombay and Ahmedabad (Chhachhi, 1983). The women in the electronics factories were not docile, nor did they view their work as a temporary phase before marriage and exit from the labour market (Chhachhi & Pittin, 1996a).

This research conducted in the 1990s, with follow-up in 1999-2000, uses a larger sample of factories in the electronics industry (20, including the one studied in 1987). This enables a more comprehensive as well as comparative exploration of the ways women expressed their agency. I examine if there are any differences in awareness and forms of struggle between an ‘older’ section of women workers and a ‘younger’ section of new entrants into the electronics industry. I also interview men and women unionists to see if there are any gender differences in interests, needs, demands and forms and methods of organisation and struggle, and what implications these have in the era of restructuring.

Both individual and social agency (through resistance and collective organisation at the workplace) and individual agency (expressed through negotiations for autonomy within the household) are explored as ways in which women workers engage in the ‘practice of citizenship’. In demonstrating the
significance of the practice of citizenship I seek to address the victimology that continues to pervade some Indian studies of women industrial workers. Whether it is women in the unorganised sectors or in the modern garments and electronics export-oriented factories, the stories that emerge depict women as the poorest of the poor, discriminated against at all levels, unorganised, unorganisable, and helpless victims. This view is not incorrect but it is partial. It does not take into account women's agency, and the covert/overt methods women deploy either to maintain or to better their work and life situations. Such a view also tends to be static. Indeed it slides over the existence in India of a number of innovative organisations (such as SEWA and Working Women's Forum) which show that women workers, given the opportunity, do organise despite debilitating conditions of work and existence. Such an approach constructs and reinforces – be it inadvertent – the notion of the passive ‘Third World woman (worker)’ (Mohanty 1988; Ong, 1991).

**Research Methods**

The research for this study was conducted as part of a larger project titled ‘Women Workers and Organisational Strategies in India’. The main database is a case study of the electronics industry in Delhi. The methodological approach draws on Burawoy’s extended case study method to arrive at generic explanations: it looks at similar phenomena to explain differences and particular outcomes (Burawoy, 1991). The data for this study were collected in different phases, and consist of the following sources:

1. Case study of one enterprise manufacturing televisions in Delhi in 1987, involving interviews with 100 women and men production workers, employer and managers.
2. Between 1988-1990, archival research on Legislative Assembly debates (1920s to 1960s) on labour laws and family laws. Part of this research is included in Chapter 2.
4. In 1999-2000, a follow-up survey of 100 workers from the sample above.

The research was conducted in the industrial areas around Delhi. Delhi is the fourth largest location for the electronics industry in India. It has a significant position because of a large concentration of small-scale enterprises making consumer electronic products. In 1994, per capita production in Delhi was the highest of all locations of electronic production, though Delhi ranks 4th in relation to total electronics production. Delhi also has 9.4% of the share in total exports of electronic products. In terms of employment as well, Delhi provides the highest employment compared to other states. The employment figures for
all India in 1994 were 320,000, with Delhi generating employment for 45,000 (Rastogi, Tripathi and Venkatesan, 1996:173).

**Figure 1.1 Delhi electronics production**

![Pie chart showing electronics production](image)

The electronics industry covers a wide variety of products that include components, consumer goods, communication and defence and computers. For this study the consumer goods and components sectors were covered. To select the enterprises to be studied the directories of establishments listed by the electronics industry associations were consulted. These gave information on capital investment and total number of employees. A selection was made on the basis of capital investment and a random sample drawn of large and small-scale enterprises. The small-scale sector is defined in terms of investments in plant and machinery, with a ceiling which is periodically revised. An additional sample of tiny enterprises was drawn from the directory of flatted factories (multi-storied buildings in the industrial estate that house tiny enterprises). However, these directories only listed registered enterprises. Therefore, visits were made to areas where other tiny/unregistered enterprises are situated, and selection in this case was based on whatever enterprises were found.

Though the enterprises had been identified in terms of capital investment and product, there was no information on the number of production workers and whether women were employed at all. Initial visits to some enterprises proved unsuccessful in getting this information, and there was considerable suspicion and resistance from managers. The list of identified enterprises was then submitted to the Electronic Component Industries Association (called ELCINA), which provided information on the total number of production workers, as well as on the employment of women on the basis of information available to them. A second round of selection was made on the basis of the number of workers
employed, to enable identification of enterprises where the Factories Act and other labour legislation is applicable.

Using the criteria of employment, the universe of enterprises was divided into five classes – Large: 101-500 workers; Medium: 21-100 workers; Small: 11-20 workers; Tiny: 1-10 workers; Non-enterprise/Home-based workers. ELCINA provided a letter of introduction addressed to the large- and medium-sized selected enterprises, with a request to facilitate the research. Many of the employers contacted responded favourably, but a number also refused permission. The final selection of 20 enterprises compiled in 1994 was based on a combination of the selection process delineated above and access.

Selection of workers

The focus of the research was on women production workers. The total number of workers interviewed is 263. These include 132 currently employed women workers; a control group of 70 men from the same enterprises as currently employed women workers; and 61 ex-workers (30 women and 31 men). The total number of women workers (currently employed – 132, plus those who recently lost their jobs – 30) is 162. The study does not include executives, administrative staff or technical personnel.

Two methods were adopted to meet and interview workers. Employers were contacted and interviewed. Those who agreed, allowed us to interview women production workers in the factories. In this case, the employers selected the workers based on the criteria specified, i.e. that women and men in different job categories in the production process be represented. The second method was to contact trade unions and non-governmental organisations, who introduced us to women working in the enterprises chosen. In this case it was not always possible to ensure that every job category in the production process was represented. This method was also used for identification of home-based workers and workers who had lost their jobs. In both methods, there was usually a snowball process where workers introduced us to other workers, and one contact led to another. In the total sample, 58 percent of the workers were interviewed by the first method and 42 percent by the second method. This ensured a certain ‘balance’ in the overall data. In addition to workers, employers, trade unionists, managers and government officials were also interviewed.

Data collection and research techniques

The study uses a triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods. The first phase of research was part of the collective project mentioned above involving the whole research team. It was exploratory, with the objective of identifying the contours of the issues to be studied and formulating the questionnaire. Based on purposive sampling, women workers from different industries, with a range of demographic characteristics, coming from large, small, medium and home-based enterprises, as well as workers who had lost their jobs, were interviewed. These
qualitative open-ended interviews made it possible to explore many dimensions and provided a rich basis for sharpening the research questions and for designing the survey questionnaire provided fora for intensive discussion for the quantitative data collection. The pre-tested structured survey schedule was then used to interview 132 women workers, 70 men workers and 61 job loss workers from 20 enterprises. The schedule contained 157 questions, many of which provided for quantitative data. The questions covered issues relating to the workplace, household and neighbourhood. Each interview took around one and a half to two hours.

Interviews were conducted in the workplace, sometimes during lunch breaks and sometimes at worker's homes. I conducted almost three-quarters of the interviews, alone or with a research assistant. At different points during the research, one male and two women research assistants carried out the rest of the interviews. In addition, a structured questionnaire was used to interview employers (managers and owners), which elicited information on the company, technological changes, employer preferences and practices and views on recent changes in industrial policies.

The use of quantitative data in this study is indicative and exploratory, rather than oriented towards statistical generalisations. Following a triangulation approach, the broad patterns identified by the quantitative data provided a basis for further analysis through the use of qualitative data. Open-ended interviews were conducted with 60 women workers from the main sample (about 25% of the total), 61 women and men workers who had lost their jobs, and with women and men trade unionists. These interviews provided in-depth qualitative data. Where there was sufficient trust and rapport, a tape recorder was used. In other cases, information was written down during the interview, with additional observations added afterwards.

A wide range of issues were addressed in these interviews concerning attitudes to work, multiple identities, intra-household bargaining, covert and overt resistance in the workplace and negotiating power relations within the household. A life story approach was used in the interviews with the women and men trade unionists. This approach delved into the influences which made them into organisers, and their subjective reflections on being local leaders. Focus groups provided fora for intensive discussion particularly as they spontaneously emerged in the context of strikes and court visits. These were a rich source of data and part of the participatory research methodology. In the next section, the process of research itself is discussed.

Reflexivity, Identity, Accountability: Dilemmas of Feminist Research

...One day you must tell me your full and complete story, unabridged and unexpurgated. You must. We will set aside some time for it, and meet. It's very important.' Manek smiled. 'Why is it important?' Mr. Vanaik's eyes grew wide.
'You don’t know? It’s extremely important because it helps to remind yourself of who you are. Then you can go forward, without fear of losing yourself in this ever-changing world. (Mistry, 1996: 604)

What could be simpler, one might imagine, than asking those whose stories had not been told, to tell them. But we were constantly reminded that speaking thus, from below, needs courage. The women we interviewed were opening doors on their private lives, often drawing on areas of experience that had never been exposed to scrutiny before. And in doing so they were challenging centuries of silence. (Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989:27)

In this section I would like to present some reflections on the research process itself, which inevitably involves dealing with issues of power stemming from the location and identity of the researcher, inequalities in the research process and the question of accountability (Wolf, 1996a:2). Even to pose these questions is to locate myself within the anti-positivist critique in social sciences. Before dealing with the micro-politics of research, I locate my approach in relation to the broader issue of epistemology and knowledge production.

Research on woman and work in India has tended to follow the feminist empiricist approach. Indian women economists' work on the census, recognition of unpaid labour and the household, the highlighting of existing techniques as male-biased, and the need for 'objective data' belong to this tradition. This was the concern for instance of Economists Working on Women's Issues Group (EWIG) formed in 1981 which stated that given a field dominated by emotional reactions and subjective valuation, their aim was to provide a solid basis of unbiased data to their theoretical analysis. Increasingly, however, there is acknowledgement of other 'less objective' sources of data. These women economists have often combined different methods: participant observation along with field surveys, national survey data with case studies, as well as individual profiles (Jain and Banerjee, 1985). Increasingly, male economists too are recognising the value of micro-studies and qualitative research to understand processes of industrial restructuring due to 'the embeddedness of labour markets in institutions' (Mathur, 1994:486; see also an earlier discussion between anthropologists and economists in Bardhan, 1989). A multidisciplinary perspective would necessarily challenge the positivist notion of objectivity dominant in the economists' analysis of women's work and labour markets.

Feminist standpoint theories in the contemporary period argue for such a paradigm shift. A standpoint is a 'position in society from which certain features of reality come into prominence and from which others are obscured' (Jagger, 1989:382). Feminist standpoint theorists such as Nancy Hartsock, Allison Jagger, and Sandra Harding have argued that women have an 'epistemic privilege' which leads to a more total understanding and hence to better knowledge. The basis for this lies in women's ontological location in the sexual division of labour, which is different from that of men in that it is relational; has a unity of body and mind, nature and culture; and is interpersonal. A corollary
to this is that the viewpoint of the oppressed, the subjugated, is a more sound basis for knowledge creation. This has been further developed with the notion of ‘double vision’. A major contribution to the discussions on feminist epistemology has come from women from the South and women of colour in the U.S. who have disrupted the ‘category ‘woman’ by bringing in issues of colonial/imperial/class locations and highlighting the politics of knowledge production (Mohanty, 1988, 1991; Narayan, 1989). Extending the differentiation between women Sharmila Rege has argued for a ‘dalit feminist standpoint’ as a more emancipatory position in relation to the Indian women’s movement (Rege, 2003).

These views have been criticised for being essentialist and for creating a hierarchy of knowledge, since the logical conclusion would be that ‘the greater the oppression, the broader or more inclusive one’s potential knowledge is’ (Wieringa, 1995:3; see also Nielsen, 1990a; Wolf, 1996a). While discussions continue on foundationalism versus relativism implied in the position that knowledge is socially situated, my own position is close to that articulated by Nancy Hartsock who gives a feminist historical materialist interpretation of Marxist dialectics and argues that the criteria for privileging some knowledges above others are ethical and political as well as purely ‘epistemological’. Thus the view from the margins or view from below (which draws on heterogeneous locations and not just class) can become the basis for transformation – from individuals into resistant, oppositional and collective subjects. Haraway, poses the central dilemma thus:

... to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognising our own 'semiotic technologies' for making meanings, and a no nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real world'. (Haraway, 1988: 252)

I follow Haraway in taking the standpoint of ‘situated knowledges’ and ‘conscious partiality’ in this study.

The politics of reflexivity and representation

Contemporary feminist research is characterised by self-consciousness, a reflexivity, which has made confronting the methodological issues of the ‘self–other’ relationship in the field almost a *sine qua non*, an authorisation to qualify as ‘feminist’. As Daphne Patai points out:

A current popular strategy is that of ‘situating’ oneself by prior announcement: ‘As a white, working class heterosexual...’ or ‘As a black feminist activist...’ Sometimes these tropes sound like apologies, more often they are deployed as badges. Either way, they give off their own aroma of fraud, for the underlying assumption seems to be that by such identification one has paid one’s respect to ‘difference’ – owed up to bias, acknowledged privilege, or taken possession of oppression – and is now home free. But this posture ignores the fact that ‘difference’ in today’s world comes packaged in socially constructed disparities.
Much more than a verbal acknowledgement of personal and group identification is required. (Patai, 1991: 149)

The issues raised by the feminist interrogation of research methods and the implications of a feminist methodology are complex. In dealing with them, one has to walk a tightrope between the danger of self-obsession, a kind of autoethnography, and reflection which can contribute towards a deeper awareness of the limits as well as the possibilities of research. I have hesitated in writing this section. Anthropology and sociology have now moved towards reflexivity, there is growing recognition of the politics of representation, and there is a sophisticated corpus of feminist theoretical work on epistemology and methodology. Nevertheless, there remains scepticism in academic writing about integrating ‘in the ethnographic account itself the interaction between subject and object, between the researcher and the wider situation in which the research takes place’ (Schrijvers, 1993:144). Usually, such reflections appear in separate anthologies on fieldwork or in an appendix. However, I believe that it is important to present these issues as an integral part of the methodology and approach followed in the study, since the neatly structured, standardised presentation of research methods in the earlier section is premised on deep and strongly felt epistemological, methodological and political principles.

My concern focuses particularly on the link between the dilemmas I faced as a feminist researcher and the broader discussion on issues of power, the insider/outsider debate, and the contrary pulls of academic scholarship and activist demands. My starting point has been different from that of an academic entering the field for the first time. Therefore, I experienced the issues of access, power relations in the research process, and the issue of participatory/action research from a different vantage point. Nevertheless, I also faced the contradictions, problems, ethical dilemmas and frustrations documented by recent feminist discussions.

The presentation of the lives of working women in this study is one expression of my many years of association with the labour movement and the women’s movement in India. This association has been based on activism, and my choice of telling their stories is in many ways intertwined with my own political formation as a student at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi in the 1970s. Influenced by the radical atmosphere at the university and the student movement, my interest in industrial workers came from an exposure to Marxism. Coming from an upper-middle-class professional family background, socialised within its class seclusion and rationalisation of the visible inequalities in society, my exposure to a different worldview began from the radical sociology of the 1970s, particularly the work of A.R. Desai when I was an undergraduate in Madras.

Involvement in an attempt to build a weavers’ co-operative as part of the National Service Scheme program in a village, Vippedu, near Madras, during this period made me aware of the realities of rural life. It also made me aware of
the difficulties in dealing with problems of poverty and exploitation, given entrenched power interests in rural areas. From a social work perspective, my subsequent exposure to Marxism led to a shift in interest towards urban and rural working-class movements. Along with writing an M.Phil. thesis entitled ‘Towards a Theory of the Labour Movement’, I was involved with left-wing groups which emphasised theoretical study (study circles) and activism. Although during this early phase our concerns were often more theoretical than practical, and in many ways romanticised ‘the working class’, at the same time we were conscious of the limits of ‘arm-chair theorising and ivory towers’. We built links outside the university with workers’ movements and with workers in surrounding industrial areas, such as the railway workers and coal miners in Dhanbad, Bihar.

Similar to the trajectory followed by many feminists at that time, my concern and involvement was not then specifically with women. Seeing ourselves as Marxist feminists, a number of us associated with the newly emerging women’s movement in Delhi took a critical perspective. In the early meetings, we trotted out the classic positions on the significance of class first and women’s emancipation second. However, it was not long before the women in the group became conscious of sexism within. A turning point was the way women were marginalised during a campaign for industrial workers affected by the burning of the Harig India factory in Ghaziabad.

In addition, we were finding it increasingly difficult to deal with the polemical and aggressive style of discussion within the group. Tentative exploratory ideas were shot down, and every statement had to be backed with a footnote or page number from Capital Vol I, II or III! The breaking of the myth of equality as ‘comrades’, as well as increased involvement in the women’s movement led to a shift in my position. Starting with a women’s caucus which began to discuss questions of socialist feminism, I became more involved in the women’s movement, which was focusing on issue of dowry murders and rape which cut across class lines. This also led me to focus on working-class women rather than the generic ‘working class’.

In the 1980s, some of these radical university-based groups dispersed, and some disintegrated. A number of us had made a critical reassessment of our politics and moved from the idealist notion of building a new, more authentic revolutionary party to a role where we could use our research and analytical skills for investigations useful to workers’ organisations and for workers’ education. A number of intellectual and political influences informed this shift, ranging from Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed, to Gramsci’s notion of ‘organic intellectuals’, to left movements especially in the United Kingdom which had set up workers’ centres, and developed alternative industrial plans.

We started a labour research, education and documentation centre, and for several years were involved in research which was defined as immediate and relevant for workers, which involved the participation of workers’ organisations and was used by them for bargaining and struggle. This involved, for example,
doing an analysis of the Bombay textile industry during the historic 1981 strike and producing a document which was used by the union to negotiate and was widely published in newspapers to influence public opinion (Chhachhi & Kurian, 1982).

At this time I was a full-time activist also working in a women’s support centre, Saheli, where I was involved in providing personal and legal support for women from diverse class backgrounds. During this period I was also doing research on women workers and their experience of retrenchment from the Ahmedabad textile industry and was involved for one year as a research assistant doing interviews in an IDPAD-sponsored research project on women garment workers in Delhi (Chhachhi, 1983). This combined involvement in the labour movement and women’s movement, and a commitment to activist research, was characteristic of a number of women’s groups in that period (see Gandhi & Shah, 1992; Kumar, 1993:106-112; Kannabiran and Kannabiran, 1997).

This biographical account shows that my entry into the ‘field’ was different from that of a first-time researcher. I had related politically with women and men workers for some years. I did not have romanticised views about ‘helping’, yet I was also aware of the strongly held reservations about using this kind of research to further one’s own career. Many of the features presented as characteristic of feminist research, such as ‘research for women, by women and with women’ were integral aspects of the work in which we were engaged. There was also an emphasis on training workers to undertake their own ‘workers enquiry’ into working conditions. When I read contemporary feminist literature on accountability and polyvocality, it did strike me that this was not completely new, although the principles which informed our research in that period came from a workerist rather than feminist perspective.

This political formation remained an influence long after I became an ‘insider/outsider’ (no longer an activist with street credibility!), located as an academic in the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. Formally, my location had shifted in a double sense, i.e. from an insider to an insider/outsider, and from an activist to an academic. However, these distinctions are not very useful, since one is never an insider even when studying one’s own culture, as has been pointed out by many researchers (Srinivas et al, 1979). Although I was based in Holland, I continued to relate to the women’s movement in India, albeit in a different way, through involvement in South Asian workshops with activists in the region.

The collective research project undertaken between 1993-1996, of which my research on women workers in the electronics industry was a part, was initiated with activist researchers from the women’s movement and was formulated as an action research project from the perspective of the movement. Being based ‘back home’ for three years enabled also a more direct ‘activist’ involvement with groups working on the issue of personal laws and communalism, labour rights and anti-militaristic campaigns for peace and democracy in the region.
These shifting and multiple locations were in one sense smooth, given my past as well as continued link, yet in another sense different and difficult, given both the changes in the context, nature of groups and my own political developments. These contrary pressures also characterised the research process as I struggled to remain an academic rather than once again a full-time activist!

Entry into the ‘field’

The first issue that confronts a researcher entering the field is access. Due to prior familiarity, meeting workers was not difficult. Without any recommendations or references except for an initial contact, I along with a male research assistant walked into union offices, explained what we were doing and were offered help. We were introduced to some workers who put us in contact with others and, except for two incidents, workers shared their time with a generosity which was overwhelming. This was in sharp contrast to gaining access to employers. After numerous futile trips to factories where we were either politely refused or had doors shut in our faces, I realised that I had to use “contacts” if this aspect of the research design were to be fulfilled. Through ‘contacts’ I was introduced to ELCINA – the electronic component manufacturers association – and due to the high-level reference, access to owners was facilitated.

Almost every researcher in India that I know of, irrespective of gender, has had to use class and patriarchal links to gain access in rural or urban settings (see articles in Srinivas; Shah and Ramaswamy, 1979; Ganesh, 1993). While this is understandable, given local power structures and the factory owners’ suspicion of competitors as well as labour-oriented ‘trouble makers’, what was unacceptable to me was the intransigence of government officials and their refusal to allow access to information. At the local Assistant Labour Commissioner’s office, I was told that the university letter of introduction was not enough (I had letters from the ISS as well as from an Indian university), and that I had to get permission from a minister. Once again I had to use ‘contacts’ to meet the Labour Commissioner himself at the Head Office. Although he gave me permission to consult records (while forewarning me that they had no data on child labour since it did not exist!), lower-level administrative officers still withheld information. When I asked for the records of factory returns, I was told to come the next week and to bring along a radio from Holland! At the Assistant Commissioner’s office, I was told it was not necessary for me to see the records and they would tell me whatever I wanted to know. I refused to resort to bribery though that would have given access.

The anger and frustration of dealing with government officials in particular was compounded by the fact that the records I had asked for were not confidential: they were published regularly, though in a truncated form, in Labour Bureau reports, and should in principle be available to the public.14 What this experience brought home to me was the difficulty that researchers without
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any upper-class or political links face. There continues a vicious circle whereby class privilege and power structures are reproduced in academia. The only non-class asset which seemed to cut through this barrier was regional solidarity. My research assistant, who often had to face humiliating treatment because of his simple manner and unsophisticated English, was able to build an instant relationship with managers, officials, unionists and workers if there was a Bihari connection.

Reports on fieldwork have highlighted the pressures exerted on women to conform to gender norms, particularly in highly patriarchal settings. These pressures have been noted by foreign women as well as insiders, ranging from dress codes, to not speaking to men, to being lectured on being unmarried, to social censoring of attitudes and styles (Schenk-Sandbergen, 1995; articles in Panini (ed.), 1991; Abu-Lugod, 1988). Since my research did not involve residence and was in a highly urbanised context, I did not experience many of these demands. I did not have to make efforts to dress differently since I anyway wore Indian clothes, and there was also an element of ‘protection’ in that we usually went to meet and interview as a team, sometimes with one man or two women together.

At the same time, class and gender entered into the construction of me as ‘the other’ in various ways. Men workers and trade unionists in particular would not look directly at me and would address their response to my male colleague even when I asked the questions. I tried to accept this as a sign of respect rather than negation. In some instances, more in-depth interviews with men were carried out by my male colleague since it was clear that the men would feel more relaxed with him. This had the advantage that responses to issues such as sharing of housework were more truthful, and comments were made in a joking spirit of shared male understanding.

Being a woman researcher had advantages in a negative/positive sense. Managers were often amused and patronising about the fact that my concern was with the ‘problems of women workers’, and did not see it as serious or threatening. This turned out to be an advantage because they spoke more freely and allowed me to wander around the factory, sit for hours in the production department and meet the workers. In many instances I did not challenge these attitudes, and even deployed essentialist, conventional notions of womanhood (‘faking’ mentioned by other researchers) to gain access and acceptance.

The self – other dynamic also operated in interactions with women workers. Being a woman did imply a different kind of rapport with women workers. The interview would often move very innocuously into areas of personal life and mutual identification of a shared positionality as women, though this differed in relation to marital status and age. During the earlier period of research in 1987 when I was unmarried, there was a closer bond with younger unmarried women, many of whom shared their fears of the pressure to get married and enviously asked me to describe in detail my life as a single working woman. In 1994 I identified more with (and probably due to that) had more mutual sharing with
married women, and marriage and children were two areas on which intense conversations on issues such as child care, schooling, and men’s responsibility took place. Unmarried girls placed me in the role of ‘didi’ (elder sister) which, although creating a kin-based relationship, was also hierarchical.

At the same time, class differences and my privileged position also entered to undercut the momentary mutual self-identification based on the commonality of womanhood. I was continuously reminded of the lessons I had learned while working in the women’s resource centre. For example, in the discussion with Jaswanti and Suneeta (see Introduction) regarding dealing with her addict husband, I suggested she contact a women’s organisation which had an office in that area. Immediately, Jaswanti said that that would be useless, they were upper-class and would ruin her case. Clearly I too was placed in the same category and had to keep quiet. I did however later give Suneeta the address of a woman lawyer and the organisation just in case. There were many such instances where I had to struggle with my own feminist and political impulses and the constant reminder that I was not fully one of them.

The researcher is often depicted as one-sidedly extracting information from research subjects. The process however is more complex. Acknowledging the subjectivity of respondents, the interaction is also one where the research subjects selectively and strategically present themselves and negotiate the interview as much as the researcher does.

Even as class and other privileges break through any romanticised notion of shared sisterhood, and in that sense the relationship between researcher and researched is not one of equality, at the same time it is possible to create relationships which lead to mutual benefit. An interesting and significant aspect of my experience of the micro-politics of the research process was the recognition and respect that many of the women and men workers expressed for the research. This may again be due to the urban context, but even when I stated that the research would not necessarily lead to any immediate benefit for them, the workers seemed to value the work, which they saw as legitimate and useful. This was the basis for the generosity with which they shared their time and also the expectations and demands made of us in contributing our resources and privileges as educated professionals where we could, as in the Calcom struggle.

This brings me to one of the major ethical dilemma of feminist research, i.e. of truth and honesty and the ways in which one represents oneself in relation to the research subjects. Feminists have agonised over fieldworkers’ deception in relation to their research subjects. Such deception contradicts a key feminist principle of establishing a relationship of equality in the research process. It is exploitative and dishonest since one expects honesty and openness from respondents about their private lives. Diane Wolf mentions the guilt she felt about lying about facts such as her marital status, income, and religion, and other feminist researchers have spoken about similar deceptions (Schrijvers, 1993).
The way I represented myself was also selective. Workers whom I met often knew, for example, that I was married, had a son, and worked in Holland. I did not tell them my husband was a Pakistani, although I did say he was a trade unionist and ran a labour research and education centre. Since I was already dealing with charges from employers of being a spy for Philips, I did not want to have to deal with accusations of being an enemy agent as well! Given the tensions between the two countries, it seemed foolish to bring in an element of suspicion. As it happened, even this bit of withheld information became known to some of the trade unionists. Entering a trade union office in the industrial area, I saw photographs on the wall of my husband with the union president! I subsequently met the union president and he told the local unionists to help me.

As other researchers have found, discovery of half truths turned out to be less problematic than I had thought (Wolf, 1996a:12; Schrijvers, 1993). I received knowing looks at my next visit and that was all – no mention was made of my husband or his nationality. Since the research was in its last stages, I do not know if this acceptance was superficial. However, from past experience I have found that often our assumptions about people being intolerant, conservative and narrow-minded are mistaken. They are usually able to accept difference and unconventional lifestyles in others as long as it does not encroach upon their lives. In a rural setting or a closed community, social resistance may be greater, but here again, over time researchers have experienced acceptance in spite of being ‘unconventional unmarried girls’ (Panini, 1991:6). So, while maintaining honesty in relation to our research subjects does not have to be like standing in court and promising to tell ‘the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth’, at the same time resorting to deception is usually unnecessary and implies a lack of respect for the people with whom we are interacting.

The issue of truth in relation to other respondents such as employers, managers, and government officials is however a different matter. Given the power structure and total control over information in these cases, a strategic deployment of different identities was the only way to get access. Managers from large and medium enterprises thought I was a spy for Philips from Holland. Small and flattered factory owners thought I was from the tax department, and government officials thought I was a journalist or political activist trying to create ‘labour trouble’.

After a disheartening initial period of closed doors and curt refusals, I printed different visiting cards and got different letters of introduction – I was at various times from Holland, or else attached to an Indian university, or a researcher for a policy-oriented project for improving women’s status. All these multiple locations were true and yet they had to be selectively deployed. The strategic play of multiple identities is inevitable in dealing with power structures. The questions of research for whom and for what become crucial – such choices cannot be avoided in the field. ¹⁷

The proposal for this study had mentioned that the research would be action-oriented. While some general aspects of what this implied were referred to, it
was ‘the field’ itself that raised issues which drew me into participating jointly with women workers in actions which had specific goals. In the first month of research, we stumbled onto the strike by workers from Calcom Pvt. Ltd. mentioned in the opening paragraphs. As we sat with the workers outside the factory gate and pieced together the reasons for the strike, we realised that there was need for publicity and support.

We contacted journalists and also wrote a brief account of what had happened, and the demands of the workers. We wrote English and Hindi versions, which were given to the press. This action, which emerged out of joint discussion, then laid the basis for continuous involvement in the struggle where we provided information, established links with other groups, took part in strategy discussions, accompanied the workers to court and participated in numerous *dharnas* and demonstrations. Two interventions we initiated as researchers were significant as the strike continued in the face of management intransigence. We contacted the Peoples’ Union of Democratic Rights, a civil liberties group, and they carried out an investigation, which was released at a press conference where the union leader and workers were able to present their viewpoint to the press (PUDR, 1995).

We also felt that apart from publicity, links should be built with other unions and women’s organisations. After discussions with women’s organisations, it was decided to have a solidarity demonstration on March 6th 1995. For the first time in Delhi, women from a wide range of organisations marched with women workers through Okhla industrial area, culminating in a *dharna* outside the Calcom factory gate with street plays, songs and speeches (*Times of India*, 7th March 1995). On March 8th, International Women’s Day, women workers addressed the rally of all women’s organisations in Delhi. These interventions were significant not only in informing the public, boosting the confidence of the workers, and establishing links with the women’s movement, but also in pressurising the union leader to continue the struggle and the labour commissioner’s office to deal fairly with the issue. In a sense these actions functioned to create a public eye, a role akin to ‘moral guardianship’.

Throughout this process we consciously kept in the background, aware that if we became too noticeable, it would affect the possibilities of access in other factories. As it happened, our identification with and intervention in the struggle did affect the research. Reports by journalists on the Calcom case led the Labour Commissioner’s office to institute an inquiry into payment of minimum wages in the electronics industry, and some of the factories on my sample list came under investigation. (Appendix I,II,III) In spite of my high-level letters of introduction, we were literally chased out of these factories. Two owners agreed to meet us but spent the whole interview session explaining that they had been maligned and were actually good employers!

Apart from this case, we were also involved with workers who had been illegally retrenched, as well as with individual workers who were fighting cases such as illegal dismissal and suspension. Even though our involvement came
from a dual identity as researcher/activists, and whatever resources we could mobilise were used by the workers, I was conscious that my role was one of support and solidarity and at various moments I had to withdraw. In spite of the pressure, we resisted a leadership role, even if at times we felt that the struggle was going in a ‘wrong’ direction. The dilemma I faced continuously was not simply a struggle between the imperatives of the academy and the pull of activism, but also the recognition that the situation in fact demanded full-time activism. Knowing my own limitations – I was not a union organiser – I sought to deal with this by building links with other unions, organisations and lawyers, who would prove more useful than I.

In the discussions on action research, there appear to be two positions. One view, while acknowledging that this type of research is closer to feminist principles, states that problems of logistics, timing and, crucially, the way academia devalues such approaches, make it difficult to ‘practise what one preaches’. Diane Wolf feels that such an approach to research remains restricted, since it requires challenging the structure of academia, the valuation of products, and ‘...how progress is viewed, how “theory” is understood, how PhDs are awarded, how tenure is granted and how women’s studies is regarded’ (Wolf, 1996a:3). On the other hand, there are numerous examples where feminist researchers have transcended the dichotomy of academic/activist and initiated projects and actions which have been useful for the women who were researched (Mies, 1983, 1990; Schrijvers, 1991; Risseeuw, 1988).

On the basis of my experience as well as that of other activist/researchers in India, the issue is posed here in a somewhat different manner. Although I agree with the emerging consensus that the distinction between insider/outside is a meaningless one – as stated earlier, no one is ever an insider – there is a difference if one lives in or is engaged in issues concerning the country where one does research. M.N. Srinivas puts this point in a straightforward way (unfortunately using the generic ‘he’!):

The fieldworker cannot spend a year coldly aloof, merely pursuing data, unless he is a robot. The question then is not whether the fieldworker should involve himself in the affairs of the people he is studying, but how far should he go.

(Srinivas, 1979: 5)

Ramaswamy’s experience is illustrative: he got involved in advising trade union leaders, made warm friendships and even inadvertently was party to a violent attack on rival workers. His concluding statement that he had happily flouted accepted canons of research methodology, but that this meant that these ‘canons, themselves required re-examination’, creates an opening for alternative methods of research (Ramaswamy, 1979).

For a politically committed feminist researcher, the question of choice does not arise. There is no way one can decide not to respond at all. Diane Bell describes this in her three ‘experimental moments’ in doing ethnography:
When I was living in Australia I felt as if I was always in the field. On a daily basis I was enmeshed in the cut and thrust of issues which bore directly on my research and confronted the grim realities of engaging with questions of social justice in cross-cultural contexts. (Bell, 1993: 31)

The ‘field’ is not a narrowly bounded, isolated village or community, but also wider economic, political and social structures within which the respondents as well as the researcher are located.

This connects with another discomfort I have with the present positions: they tend to ‘overload’ the issues of location/identity/responsibility onto just one situation – the researcher/researched dynamic in abstraction from the rest of society. Even if there are limits to what can be done immediately for the people we are researching, we do not exist only as researchers and academics, and our feminism is not restricted only to academia. The issue should not be framed only by the contrary pulls of dual allegiances. Multiple identities and multiple locations open up the possibility of the many ways and many arenas in which we can be politically accountable to ourselves and to the people we study. For example, as part of the collective research project, we organised a public symposium with representatives from the employers’ association, labour ministry, trade unions and women’s organisations and academics on ‘Strategising for Change: the Role of Industry, Government and Labour in a Changing Economy’ where the issue of economic restructuring and workers’ rights was heatedly discussed (see ISS/FREA 1997).

We had also planned a Women Workers’ tribunal where women we had interviewed would present testimonies to a panel of well-known public figures. The verdict was then to become the basis for a class action/public interest litigation to ensure that workers’ rights were non-negotiable and had to be protected as India continued with its program of structural adjustment. This proposal could not be fulfilled since it required far greater organisation and consultation between trade unions and women’s organisations than we had anticipated. At an individual and collective level, we researchers continued with advocacy through fora such as newspapers, television, and interviews.

Clearly, these initiatives would not bring immediate benefit to the women concerned, but they were efforts towards making their situation visible, and highlighting the need for justice. This brings me to the other aspect of ‘overloading’ implicit in the question – did these initiatives lead to political and economic change? It is somewhat presumptuous to expect that small projects initiated to help women improve their economic position, or the provision of training and information or public advocacy would lead to empowerment and transformation of entrenched structures of discrimination and exploitation. Setting up a feminist norm which is unrealistic can lead to paralysis, and in fact this has been one consequence of the discussion of feminist dilemmas in fieldwork. People have opted out rather than deal with the issue and think of the multiple ways in which it is possible to contribute, to be socially responsible and
use the research for purposes other than career advancement. This remains an issue, whether one is an outsider or insider.

The self-evident nature of social responsibility is one reason why hardly any study on women workers in India by Indian women so far includes a discussion on location, positionality or accountability. This confluence of academic/activist research is increasingly changing as a new generation, trained in women/gender studies has emerged, without necessarily being involved in social movements of any kind. It is one of the ironies of the women’s movement that its demand for institutionalization of women’ studies has led to the creation of professionals in that field who have little or no link with the movement. Since 1986, the division not only between activism and research, but also between research ‘which would benefit the movement ... and research aimed at academic excellence’ emerged in India, reflected in quite acrimonious debates in Women’s Studies conferences (Kannabiran & Kananabiran, 1997: 277). Kannabiran & Kannabiran see this shift in activism from a rooted Third World revolutionary praxis to research bound to another context – intellectual discourse in the West which was alien to the majority of feminists in India.

Notwithstanding the ongoing debates on positionality, the process of research remains a fraught one. However, much as we identify with our subjects, we are not they. Class and other differences remain, and their words are always mediated by our own perceptions. However, we can choose to use those words in ways which could challenge some structures of domination in different fora. This study is a contribution to that process.

Notes

1 Burawoy is quick to point out that this consent is never to the exclusion of coercion, but that coercion is circumscribed and regularised (Burawoy, 1985:126).

2 See Feminist Economics 9 (2-3), 2003, entitled ‘A Special Issue on Amartya Sen's Work and Ideas: A Gender Perspective’ for a review of Sen’s work and discussion on his notion of gender and power.

3 Ultimately however, given the messy reality of multiple identities and the capacity for social reality ever to escape our full comprehension – that indeed is the creativity of human agency in both perfecting the arts of domination and in challenging them – we can only work with an awareness of the value and the limits of the concepts available.

4 The notion of autonomy has been criticised for being Western and individualistic and therefore inapplicable to contexts where social relations are conceived as communitarian. Such a position romanticises and homogenises ‘communitarianism’ in non-Western cultures.

5 Sen draws also on Adam Smith and Aristotle in developing the capability approach (Sen, 1990b:43).
Sen's work now forms the basis of the human development indicators HDI and GDI and is an important influence in the recent policy shift towards Decent Work in the ILO. Both the HDI/GDI and Sen have been criticised (Sen et al., 2003; Staveren and Gasper, 2002). Although Martha Nussbaum’s capability approach is more comprehensive and has been embraced by feminists for dealing with issues of emotion and care, I find Sen’s approach deals more with enabling conditions and therefore moves beyond a normative statement of constitutional principles.

Robeyns argues that Sen’s capability approach is an open framework and requires extension and incorporation of feminist concepts (Sen et al., 2003). Standing has focused on women as a vulnerable group but has not fully incorporated gender analytically. He has recently addressed the issue of care work and linked it to the need for security (Standing, 2001).

The research project was funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Directorate General of International Cooperation, The Netherlands. It covered five industries: plastic processing, diamond processing, pharmaceuticals, toiletries in Bombay and the electronics industry in Delhi.

Wolf delineates power and the unequal hierarchies or levels of control that are often maintained, perpetuated, created and re-created during and after field research as the central dilemmas in fieldwork.

Debates and discussion on this issue have proceeded at a different pace in various disciplines, and it is not possible to do justice to these developments in this chapter. In the 1960s, the crisis of western sociology and the post-empirical crisis in knowledge led to a paradigm shift through the challenges posed by ethnomethodology, the hermeneutic and Frankfurt schools, and the writings of the New Left. Although different in their focus, purpose and levels of analysis, these approaches provided a basis for an acknowledgement that knowledge is socially constructed, that there is no such thing as an objective pure, neutral, and disinterested perspective, and that knowledge and truth claims are historically and socially situated (Nielsen, 1990a). Alvin Gouldner’s critique of methodological individualism and call for a Reflexive Sociology presages in many ways the development of feminist standpoint theories in the 1980s (Gouldner, 1970:489).

See Dorothy Smith, 1991, and Sandra Harding, 1991. Although Maria Mies is not included among standpoint theorists and is known more for her methodological postulates for feminist research, she too bases those postulates on similar epistemological and ontological principles (Mies, 1983, and more explicitly Mies, 1990).

As Diane Bell notes, ‘Regardless of its rigour and innovative nature, such work will be deemed “women”, treated as a special case, and placed within the genre of “confessional literature” or simply labelled “self-indulgent”’ (Bell, 1993:3).

These views were common in the social movements of the 1970s and also coincided with a critical re-evaluation of academic fields, particularly anthropology. The reinvention of anthropology ‘led to a call for a more reflexive and critical
anthropology, greater social responsibility and an insistence that all knowledge is political’ (Hale, 1991:122-123).

14 I had planned to file a public interest legal case on access to information for researchers, but had to abandon that due to time constraints – again faced with the dilemma of activism vs. academism.

15 I was reminded of my work in Saheli, a women’s resource centre. While helping a migrant woman who had been raped, I was pained to discover that she felt a closer identification with the police officer than with upper-class me. Many instances taught me the illusion of pre-supposing sisterhood on the basis of gender, as I learnt respect for context and the importance of non-imposition.

16 ‘Successful immersion may create more sensitive researchers and ethnographies but cannot change where we come from and where we return to’ (Wolf 1996a:10). Basic differences in class background and social status remain.

17 As Gerrit Huizer put it, ‘In dealing with the continuous choices springing from the paradox of combining relativity with morality, I have been directed by holding a “view from below”’ (Huizer, 1979:10).

18 The research assistants were activists in the student movement and women’s movement.

19 See Kannabiran & Kannabiran (1997) for reflections on institutionalization within the women’s movement and the emergence of a division between activism and research.