Eroding citizenship: gender and labour in contemporary India

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CHAPTER 3

Segmented and Overlapping Labour Markets: Social Characteristics of Workers in the Electronics Industry, Delhi

In this chapter, the workers in the case study are introduced – the social background of women and men workers, the regions and the households they came from, the reasons women joined the workforce and the different trajectories by which they entered the electronics factories in Delhi. Labour market theories as well as culturalist accounts of women’s work, particularly in the South Asian belt of classic patriarchy, have argued that:

- Women workers come primarily from extremely economically deprived households
- Women enter the labour market only under ‘distress’ conditions: Sudden adversity pushed them to seek wage employment
- The deployment of women’s labour outside the household is a ‘household strategy’
- Low endowments (education and skills) and social factors place women and lower castes in the lower end of a segmented and stratified labour market (Harris, 1989, Kannan, 1994:1942)
- Female-headed households are the most vulnerable group (Amis, 1994:639, NIUA, 1989:52)
- Labour market segmentation based on caste and gender in rural areas is reproduced in urban labour markets (Deshpande, 1984:39)
- Particularistic ties (kin, caste and regional networks) determine access to jobs and often function as a form of labour control (Breman, 1994)
- Labour mobility across labour status boundaries both horizontally and vertically is extremely limited
- Workers outside the ‘citadel’ of permanent secure jobs remain at the bottom of the work hierarchy (Breman, 1996:16-17; Harris et al, 1990:47)

In this chapter, some of these conclusions are corroborated while others are challenged. The data from this study confirm the heterogeneity of the labour
market, its social organisation along particularistic kin and regional networks, and the placing of particular categories of women in different gendered labour regimes and gendered hierarchies. This reaffirms the continued significance of segmentation and compartmentalisation of the Indian labour market. Recent analysis of the social institutions of the labour market also shows how labour control exists not only in the sphere of production, but also is embedded in localised labour markets. Lee's study described how workers' dependence on networks for survival and resources constituted a form of labour control which management incorporated in its strategies for disciplining rural Chinese women in the export electronics factories in Shenzhen. On the other hand, the data challenge the notion of women workers as a homogenous category of 'distress entry workers'; as the poorest of the poor, concentrated only in the lowest ends of the labour market. The use of the 'household strategy' model to explain women's entry into waged work is also criticised. My data conform more closely with alternative motivations and insights along the lines presented by a number of studies on women workers in Asia (Wolf, 1990, 1992; Lee, 1998; Kabeer, 2000).

Women Workers in the Delhi Electronics Industry: A Demographic Profile

The women in the case study were predominantly young: sixty percent with a larger number between twenty and thirty years of age. A significant number (thirty nine percent) were older women above the age of thirty. More than half of the women (fifty-six per cent) had never married (which included a number of older women), thirty-five percent were married, and the rest were single women who were widows, divorcees or had been deserted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Category</th>
<th>Never married</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Single*</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very young (15-20)</td>
<td>12.12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young (21-30)</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>13.64</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>48.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older (31-50)</td>
<td>10.81</td>
<td>21.21</td>
<td>7.58</td>
<td>39.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (per cent)</td>
<td>56.06</td>
<td>34.85</td>
<td>9.09</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 132 currently employed workers in sample.
*the category single women includes widowed, divorced and deserted.

Religion and caste

In the sample, women were predominantly Hindu (ninety per cent), with the rest Christian, Muslim and Sikh. Regional and certain religious backgrounds were fairly significant in recruitment. In factories owned by Sikhs or Sindhis, for
instance, there were more workers from those communities, while factories which recruited migrant workers from Kerala had a larger number of Christian workers. There were a much smaller number of Muslim women in general. However, they were employed in factories, in the tiny as well as large enterprises, belying the assumption that these women would only be involved in home-based work due to purdah norms.¹

The caste composition of the sample reveals a predominance of non-Brahmin castes, and very few women from a scheduled caste background.

### Table 3.2 Caste composition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste</th>
<th>Per cent of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brahmin</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Brahmin</td>
<td>65.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled caste</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (per cent)</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 132

A number of studies have shown caste to be significant either at the higher levels of jobs or at the very lowest levels of employment: higher castes tended to be represented in highly paid jobs, and lower castes in the unorganised, irregular jobs (Harriss, 1989b; Breman, 1999a:22). In this sample, there was no significant difference in the educational levels of Brahmin and non-Brahmin women. However, while non-Brahmin women were distributed fairly evenly across all four gendered labour regimes, the Brahmin women tended to be concentrated in the larger factories where working conditions were much better. The few Brahmin women who were employed in the tiny units with no legal protection were either widows or deserted women. In recruitment strategies, it appeared that regional background and education were more significant than caste. Casteism did play a role in interactions between workers, particularly in attitudes towards scheduled caste workers, but caste did not seem to be a determinant of factory employment in the electronics industry.

### Education and skill

A large number of women in the sample had had twelve years of schooling, and some had even higher qualifications. In addition, a significant number of women (thirty seven percent) also had diplomas or certificates in tailoring, typing, data entry, education, and as beauticians. There has been a shift in educational requirements for employment in the electronics industry. In the eighties, a secondary school certificate was adequate, but in the nineties the minimum requirement was 12th pass and above. The translation of educational background
into ‘employer-defined’ skill designations, however, is arbitrary. This is illustrated in the table below:

**Table 3.3 Educational levels and skill designations (skill as defined by the employer)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill category</th>
<th>Literate</th>
<th>SSC pass</th>
<th>12th pass</th>
<th>Graduate</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-skilled</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly skilled</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (per cent)</strong></td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 132

**Table 3.4 Job designation and wages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job</th>
<th>Minimum wage</th>
<th>Maximum wage</th>
<th>Percentage of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No designation</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpers</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>2609</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operators/Wire Girls</td>
<td>1050</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asst. Technician</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>2250</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technician</td>
<td>2550</td>
<td>2700</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Control</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>2230</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior Engineer</td>
<td>1919</td>
<td>4000</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line Supervisor</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>4500</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 132 Sample of currently employed workers

The lack of connection between education and skill designation is immediately noticeable in the unskilled category. Here nineteen percent either had a bachelor's degree, or were pursuing their education through correspondence and had passed the twelfth standard. There is a roughly similar distribution in the semi-skilled category and the skilled category, though the latter shows somewhat what *a priori* reasoning would expect. The women were involved predominantly in assembly work – the labour-intensive section of electronics production – though some were also involved in checking and testing. The distribution of workers across job categories in the sample is given below. These designations were also arbitrarily classified according to employer-defined skill categories in different factories, and wage rates within each designation varied considerably, as the table shows. The definition of skills is a contested and gendered process and we will examine the construction of ‘women’s skills’ in the context of different forms of labour control in the next chapters.
The demographic profile of women workers in this case study confirms broadly the general characteristics of female employment in electronic factories in India, as well as in other countries. Studies were conducted in the nineteen eighties of women workers in electronic factories in Bombay/Pune, the Santa Cruz Export Processing Zone, Kandla Free Trade Zone, and in the subcontracted units of Keltron, (a public-sector electronics company). These studies, as well as studies conducted by the Labour Bureau, show that the women employed were all predominantly young and unmarried (Sen & Gulati, 1987; Labour Bureau 1984; Pore, 1984; Trikha, 1984). Another study conducted in 1992 of electronic factories in three different locations (Bombay/Pune, Bangalore/Mysore and Solan) showed again a preponderance of young and unmarried women, although the Bangalore sample noted a significant percentage of married and older women as well. Nirmala Banerjee’s study of three firms of different sizes manufacturing televisions in Calcutta again documented that the women workers were predominantly young with secondary education (Banerjee, 1995).

However, there is a difference from the profile of the typical worker in electronics that emerged from studies of world-market factories in other countries. These portrayed the women workers as young and unmarried, with high rates of turnover. In my study as well as in other Indian studies, although a large percentage of women workers were never married, the presence of married women is significant, and women workers have also worked for a substantial number of years. In my sample, thirty-nine percent had worked from one to three years, forty-two percent had worked from three to ten years and eighteen percent had worked for more than ten years. The presence of older and married women reflects a difference which is related to the history, growth and structure of the Indian electronics industry.

Women workers in this case study entered the labour market in different periods, moving into electronics factories established at different times. Twenty percent of the workers had entered the labour market in the 1970s and joined the first electronics factories set up in Delhi’s industrial areas. As part of the industrial policy to encourage small-scale entrepreneurs, special industrial complexes were built, and loans and other facilities provided to set up tiny units. Flatted factories as well as other small-scale units were established in Okhla Industrial Area (OKHLA). These factories first manufactured radios, then black and white televisions, and subsequently colour televisions. Some of these factories had upgraded into large units, and workers had stayed with them. Most of these women had worked in the same company for ten to over twenty years.

In the mid-1980s, another phase of expansion in electronics production took place in Delhi, and a number of large units were established with collaborative/subcontracting links with multinational companies. These units produced colour televisions and were now moving into the manufacture of video recorders. Women who joined these factories included those with long service records in the same company (ten years), as well as others who had changed jobs and were 3-5 years with the present company. The final category was new entrants to the
labour market, who joined factories established in the 1990s, all of which were large units linked with multinational companies (mainly Japanese). These factories have been set up in New Okhla Industrial Development Area (NOIDA), which adjoins OKHLA but falls under the jurisdiction of the Uttar Pradesh state government. Their establishment is a direct result of economic liberalisation and the new economic policy of 1991.

Some women in these factories had been in their present job less than a year. It is in this latter gendered labour regime that the workforce fits most closely the stereotype of the typical woman worker in electronics – predominantly young and unmarried with secondary school education. Rather than a static profile of ‘the woman electronic worker’, the picture that emerges is multi-layered showing three waves of women’s entry into the electronics industry in Delhi. The presence of different generations of women workers – new entrants who are predominantly young and unmarried; young married women who had worked for some years; and older, married women with over 10-20 years of service – is a significant indicator of the continuity in the demand for women’s labour in this industry.2

Social Composition of Labour Regimes: Segmented and Overlapping Labour Markets

Where did the women and men in these factories come from? Were they predominantly rural migrants, undergoing a process of proletarianisation similar to the experience documented in newly established industries in Malaysia, Java, South China and Bangladesh? Again, this study shows a more complex picture. There were indeed long-distance rural migrants, but a substantial number of workers were from Delhi and its environs, and from diverse social backgrounds. There were broadly three major streams of labour supply into the electronics industry. A large number of male workers were short-distance migrants from rural Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and a few from the neighbouring state of Haryana. Long-distance rural migrants from Kerala, predominantly single women, formed another significant stream. The third stream was men and women from middle- and lower-middle-class and working-class households from Delhi itself. These heterogeneous and differentiated labour markets catered to different gendered labour regimes, with segmentation as well as overlapping circles of recruitment, reflecting managerial recruitment practices. There was class as well as social/cultural distance between categories of both men and women workers in the production process. The chart that follows shows the social composition of workers in each gendered labour regime. I have used a descriptive sociological categorisation of class differences based on occupation of main earner, male or female to highlight the social characteristics of the different streams of labour. I have indicated per capita household income of different categories to provide a sense of their economic status.3
Labour market in Delhi

Delhi is quintessentially a migrant city, and immigration has been a major reason for its urban population growth. In 1981, for instance, migrants constituted around 49 percent of the urban population of Delhi (Jha, 1990:48). Political factors led to two significant waves of in-migration, in 1941-51 due to resettlement of Partition refugees, and again in the 1970s of Bengalis from Bangladesh. However, there continues to be a steady stream of labour migrants into the city. It is estimated that around 200,000 migrants come into Delhi every year and settle in the slum clusters around the city. Majumdar’s study of the urban poor in Delhi concluded:

...the most effective and dynamic force will not be simply the increase in the number and size of the cities but their progressive proletarianisation. The future city will be one of the working class recruited largely from the rural migrants and it is they who are likely to shape the social profile of the city. (Majumdar, 1979: 29-30).
Since 1991 there has been a steady increase in migration into the city, and in 2000 was more than one and a half times the natural growth in population. (GOD, 2000:3) Early studies on in-migration into Delhi found that the vast majority of rural migrants came from the adjoining provinces of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana (Majumdar, 1978, 1983; DDA, 1986; Yadav, 1987). Later studies have pointed to the increasing flow from Bihar as well. A survey of 500 workers in the small-scale manufacturing sector in Delhi found that Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh supplied the largest number of workers (71.8 per cent) with 10 per cent from Western Uttar Pradesh and the remaining from Delhi and Haryana (CEC, 1993). The Economic Survey of Delhi 1999-2000 survey found the largest stream of migration to be from Uttar Pradesh (49.6 percent), with 11.8 percent from Haryana and 10.9 percent from Bihar. A recent study on daily labour markets in Delhi found that Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh ranked highest in order of significance as regions of origin for migrants (Singh, 2002). None of these studies mention workers from Kerala, who are a growing section of the workforce employed in the electronics and export garment factories in Delhi’s industrial areas. The focus in these studies has been on male migrants, either single or with families, and not on women migrants. Therefore, it is the stream of independent female migrants from Kerala that forms the first subject for the description of labour supply to the electronics industry.

Migrants from Kerala: first and second wave

There were two categories of women migrants: early migrants from the first wave in 1984-85 and a subsequent ongoing stream in the 1990s.

First wave migrants

The entry of migrant workers from Kerala into the Delhi labour market started in 1984. Since then a steady stream of young unmarried girls in particular has continued to come to the city, as jobs were available in the export garment and electronics factories. There does not appear to be a system of a formal labour contractor recruiting the girls, though they often came in groups. The usual pattern seemed to be recruitment through an individual’s kin and friendship networks. Whenever workers went home to Kerala on leave, they would return with relatives or friends. Within a period of three to four months, the new migrants would have found a job either in the same unit as their relatives or in other electronic factories. A common pattern was the migration of an elder sister, with the younger sister following after a few years. Workers came predominantly from two districts in Kerala: Allepy and Kottayam. Most of them came from small farmer households, and 80 percent were Christians.

A number of women migrants who had come to Delhi in the 1980s as unmarried girls were now married to men from Kerala. In some cases they had met their husbands in Delhi itself and in others they had got married to men in
their home towns and the men had followed their wives to Delhi and found jobs. In a few instances, women came after marriage with their husbands to Delhi and took up work after their husbands had left for the Middle East. Many of the first wave male migrants from Kerala had tried, some successfully, to get jobs in the Gulf. Coming to work in Delhi was seen as a stopover en route, a way to obtain the money to pay labour contractors for the coveted Middle East jobs. Apart from their own earnings, a number of men managed to make the required payments with the dowry they got after marrying. Leela Gulati notes that migration to the Middle East was at a high point in 1987, and marriages contracted during this period were often to acquire travel money and establish contacts in the Middle East (Gulati, 1997). In the mid-nineties, a number of these men had returned and tried to find jobs in Delhi, usually in other industries.

Most of the married women from Kerala left their children there, usually with their natal family. Some of the early migrants, however, had arranged for their children to join them in Delhi once they themselves were settled and the children were of school going age. Yashoda’s household was typical of those early migrants. She had come to Delhi in 1984 with her uncle, who got her a job in Monica Electronics. Her uncle arranged her marriage a few years later to a Keralite already working in Delhi. In 1991, her husband got a job in Dubai. Yashoda had two children. One was left in Kerala, and the younger child, together with a cousin (who was also employed in an electronics factory), lived with her in Delhi. Her total household income was Rs. 6200 per month (salary plus remittance from her husband). The breakdown of monthly expenditure was:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rent</td>
<td>Rs. 1600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crèche</td>
<td>Rs. 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>Rs. 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>Rs. 700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 child in Kerala</td>
<td>Rs. 300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>Rs. 3600</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was therefore possible for Yashoda to save and also buy a washing machine and other consumer items.

Such a household was not immune to economic pressures and could easily slip into a lower income category, as Celine and Ramani’s cases illustrate. Celine had a permanent job in Monica Electronics where she had worked since 1984. She had married a few years previously and her husband had left for the Gulf. After three years, he returned and got a job as a printer in a small-scale printing unit. The ban on lottery tickets in 1994 by the Delhi government had caused a major crisis for these small units, many of which then shut down.
Celine’s husband had been unemployed for two years and was finding it difficult to get a job in spite of having technical qualifications.

Ramani’s husband, also Gulf returned, managed to get work as a technician in a private air-conditioning unit on a piece-rate basis. His income had always been irregular but it enabled them to save, send money home and visit their daughter in Kerala at least once a year. For the last six months though he had been unemployed. During the period of research, a number of the migrant households investigated were dependent solely on the earnings of the wife, the husband having become unemployed. Though exposed to vulnerability, these migrants present a different picture from the one normally associated with labour migrants in general as being the ‘poorest of the poor’.

First wave migrants from Kerala were now 30-35 years old, and had around ten years of service in the same factory. The long service records of many women workers in the case study point to the ‘stability’ rather than complete ‘flexibility’ of the work force. This is contrary to the conclusions of other case studies of the electronics industry, where ‘natural turnover’ is cited as a special feature of women’s suitability for this kind of employment. Job security had also changed migrant aspirations, and for some of them Delhi was beginning to be seen as another home.

Anamma, for instance, came to Delhi with her husband in 1980 and got a job in Control and Switch Gear through relatives already working in Delhi. Her husband worked as a store-keeper in another factory. She had moved up in the last 15 years from assembly work to final checking, and was considered a skilled worker due to seniority. Initially, Anamma and her husband had sent remittances home to their families in Kerala, but stopped after they had a child. The decision to keep the child with them rather than with their family in Kerala reflected the stability of their situation. Both of them now had permanent jobs with a per capita monthly income of Rs.1536, which was close to the statutory minimum wage for semi-skilled workers. Other than annual visits home, recurrent expenditure was rent of Rs. 800 for a single room with a shared toilet and kitchen. They had been able to save money, and Anamma had even bought land in Badarpur on the outskirts of Delhi. Long-term migration had created dual options for such households and they alternated between planning to return sometime to Kerala and staying on in Delhi. Anamma had put her child in an English-medium school, keeping in mind that she may return someday to Kerala after selling off the land. She was also planning to join a co-operative housing scheme to build a house on the land in Badarpur.

Second wave migrants from Kerala

Young, unmarried girls constituted the second and continuing stream of new migrants. The unmarried girls usually lived two or three in one rented room, sharing a toilet and kitchen with other workers also from Kerala. Rama, for instance, shared the rent of a single room and cooking expenses with another
woman worker friend, in a house where the other two rooms were occupied by a married couple and two other girls. Some residential arrangements were based on kinship, with brothers and sisters sharing rooms. Friendship was the base of other sharing arrangements. All the young unmarried girls lived clustered in the main migrant colony of Gobindpuri. A major consideration was the security and protection provided by the migrant community in the neighbourhood.

All the migrant women (first and second wave) had studied up to the 12th standard, and in most cases also had a diploma for typing. Some had more advanced secretarial skills such as shorthand in English. Migrant men from Kerala were more technically qualified than women, usually possessing diplomas as electricians or laboratory technicians. There were two main reasons given for migrating to Delhi: absence of any industry or employment prospects in Kerala; and the prospect of earning more money in Delhi. As Ramani put it:

There are no factories in Kerala – only the coir industry which we consider dirty work; only harijan (untouchable) women work there. Boys can still get some jobs as mechanics but there is no work for women. How many can get jobs in schools and colleges – there are too many educated girls in Kerala.

Contrary to the image of industrial labour migrants as unskilled, driven by necessity to accept any job, these women’s self-image was of being ‘educated and skilled’, their reference point being white-collar jobs rather than ‘dirty lower caste and low-level industrial work’. The same applied to the men, as Madhusudan, a male migrant from Kerala, explained:

There is some kind of work available in Kerala, but we do not want to do it. People look down upon us. When we are working in Delhi they think we are doing very well. My family was very happy and told everyone when I sent Rs. 500 extra last month after we got a bonus payment.

The statements about the lack of employment in Kerala corroborate the assessment of the downside of the ‘Kerala model’. Kerala provides an example of public action in the promotion of basic human capabilities. The position of women in particular scores high on social indicators, with literacy rates of even scheduled caste women better than the all-India figures. However, social development has occurred along with economic backwardness. Unemployment, especially of educated youth is very high (Kannan, 1999; Mathew, 1997). In the 1980s in particular, the traditional coir, handloom and cashew industries declined, and there were very few opportunities for alternative employment for women. The presentation of this situation by the migrant workers interviewed emphasises the ‘choice’ aspect rather than the imperative to migrate for employment. According to them, the electronics and garment factories were clean and modern, were located in the capital city and had prestige value. In this case, employer preference for migrant labour coincided with the migrants’ aspirations.
Regional and kin networks were crucial for migrants' entry and survival in the labour market. These networks provided access to jobs, the Kerala (Malayali) Association provided social support and cultural affinity, a Keralite trade unionist was consulted informally on labour disputes, and residential clusters provided security from harassment in the neighbourhood. As Lee's study points out, such regional networks provided for the reproduction of labour power at a much lower cost than if employers were to pay for recruiting, housing and protecting workers (Lee, 1998:84). Part of the cost of reproduction (childcare and schooling) was transferred to families in Kerala, as women left babies and young children to be bought up by their mothers and mothers-in-law. These conditions played an important role in labour control.

Male migrants from the hinterland

Many male workers in the electronics industry had migrated from Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Bihar. Most of the workers from UP came from small farmer households. The Bihar migrants were mainly from landless households. Migrant male workers consisted of two different categories: settled migrants and migrants with active rural links. Settled migrants were workers who had migrated to Delhi in the late seventies and early eighties, mainly from Uttar Pradesh. Eventually they had married and brought their family to the city. Their links with their villages of origin became primarily social in nature. These settled migrants constitute a major component of industrial worker households and are discussed in the next section.

The main category of male migrants with active rural links usually migrated without their families. Workers from Bihar, who were landless and lower caste, returned to their villages during the harvesting season and fitted into the circulating migration pattern described by Breman (Breman, 1996:84-85). Most of them had temporary jobs, and this was an important factor in living alone in the city. On the whole, however, even these single male migrants did not see their stay in Delhi as temporary and over time rural links were limited to sending remittances whenever possible, with a yearly visit home. A second segment consisted of migrants from the neighbouring state of Haryana. They maintained a dual location as industrial workers as well as farmers. For instance, Vijender Singh, assistant engineer at Weston, commuted daily from Kondal village near Faridabad to the factory. He also worked on the farm. Such migrants came from marginal farmer backgrounds, and the family could not survive only on returns from agriculture. Despite their rural links, these migrants were primarily dependent on urban wages for reproduction of their labour power. When workers lost their jobs, their household situation deteriorated sharply, as the village offered only a temporary refuge (see Chapter 6).

A third segment of labour consisted of young boys between the ages of 12 and 16 years employed as helpers, primarily in the tiny enterprises. These were often runaways from neighbouring towns, or they came from the slums around
the industrial area. A number of them slept in the corridors or ground floor verandah of the flatted factory complex. They returned home once a fortnight, or when they received their wages.

Workers from Delhi and neighbouring small towns

The third stream of labour, both women and men, came from Delhi itself, as well as small towns such as Faridabad and Ghaziabad. There were distinct and separate class segments from which labour was recruited: working-class households (differentiated into two segments – a middle-income and a low-income category) and middle- and lower-middle-class households.

Working class households: first and second generation

A large section of men workers came originally from Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, but they had lived in Delhi for over fifteen years at the time of the study. In the space of ten to fifteen years, they had made a transition from being migrants to becoming city dwellers. Balwant Singh’s story was typical of the Purabis who had come to Delhi in the late seventies. In 1973, at the age of 18, Balwant Singh had left his village, Khergaon in Garwal, Uttar Pradesh, to look for work in Delhi. In the village he left behind, his widowed mother and three younger siblings just managed to feed themselves from her pension as a schoolteacher and from the produce from a small plot of land. For a year Balwant Singh drifted doing odd casual jobs. He then got work in Weston (then called Sangam Electronics). Though he had passed the 12th standard, he started work as a helper. In 1980, all the workers from the unit were shifted to the newly set up Nickitasha factory in Faridabad. New workers with Industrial Training Institute (ITI) certificates were being recruited for Sangam’s black and white television manufacturing unit in the Okhla Industrial Estate, now renamed Weston. Balwant did the ITI course on his own and rose to the category of technician. After ten years, he was working in the quality control department doing final checks of the newly introduced colour television sets. He used to make regular annual visits home. He married in the village, and brought his wife to live in Delhi.

Clearly, employment in the organised sector was a major factor in migrants' decision to bring their wives to the city. This was akin to a commitment to continue life in the shehr (city) rather than the gaon (village). This group of early rural migrant workers was, in terms of social base and consciousness, fully constituted as an industrial proletariat. A number of women workers in the sample came from these households. Their husbands were also (or had been) industrial workers, employed either in the electronics industry or in other factories. Some of the older married women were 'crisis entry' workers – death or unemployment of their husbands had pushed them into factory work. Others had joined the factory along with their husbands, as managers urged the men to bring their wives to work in the expanding television units.
The next group were second-generation industrial workers, i.e. unmarried daughters and sons of the men and women who had joined the factories in the mid-seventies. They had a strong sense of identification as industrial workers, having watched their parents participate in union organising and struggles. The first- and second-generation workers described above had a certain level of economic security, a regular income from one or two earners, and the stability and identity of organised sector workers.

**Poor working class households**

A third section of workers from Delhi came from extremely poor and vulnerable households. Apart from a few married women whose husbands were unemployed or employed in irregular casual jobs, these were single women – widows, divorcees or deserted women – or older, unmarried women. The household income in this category ranged from Rs. 350 to Rs. 1433 (monthly) per capita, which is below the statutory minimum wage level for unskilled workers. Widows who were sole earners constituted the poorest group. In households where the father had died and daughters have taken over the provisioning of the household, a new phenomenon – the elder sister syndrome – had emerged. These ‘elder sisters/daughters’ were often the only or main earners for their families. Some households were surviving solely with the income from two daughters. Shama has worked in a large-scale television factory for more than 15 years, since her father died. She has been the only earner for a household composed of her mother and younger sister. She financed her sister’s education until her sister graduated. Shama was making arrangements to get her sister married. Her sister had also started work in the same factory until her marriage was fixed, to help earn her ‘dowry’. A number of elder sisters had taken on the role of educating their siblings; in the process sacrificing the possibility of getting married themselves. Such households could rarely move out of a precarious survival situation; the elder sister could rarely withdraw from wage work.²

The workers from poor working-class households lived in *jhuggis* (illegal squatter settlements) or one or two rented rooms in neighbouring low-income colonies of Gobindpuri, Kotla and Dashshinpuri. Rented accommodation added additional pressure for a regular monthly income. The stark picture that emerges is the extreme dependency of these households on wage work, and particularly on female earnings. The average family size was 5.3, and the average number of earners was 2.8. In a number of households, there were only two female earners. Female earnings in households where there was also a male earner (usually brothers) ranged from 33 percent to 48 percent of total family income. These households were barely able to cover basic subsistence needs, since both men and women earners were slotted into jobs with low levels of income. Compared to the working class households linked to the organised sector described above, these households reflected the predominance of informal sector employment.
An analysis of the employment status of all the household members in this category shows that it was women who had more regular jobs than men in their households. Female earners were employed either in electronics or in the export garment industry, while some older women were in domestic service. Men were in either irregular casual jobs in small scale engineering units, or did freelance repair work of household appliances such as air-conditioners. These economic and social characteristics of workers implied a complete dependence on wage work. They held on to their present job with desperation.

**Middle- and lower-middle-class households**

Another group from Delhi were first-time industrial workers, mainly from lower-middle-class families. They lived either in complex or nuclear households; and a number of them had fathers who had retired from government service as Class IV employees. The occupation of fathers in government service included administrative or technical work in the customs department, civil engineering, telephone department, and in the municipal corporation. These households had either a regular income or a pension ranging from Rs. 900 to 1500 to fall back on. They lived in *janta* (government subsidised) Delhi Development Area flats, which they owned. In the newly established multinational factories, women from a similar background were recruited from neighbouring small towns such as Faridabad, Ghaziabad and NOIDA. Their fathers also had government jobs, but at lower levels of civil administration such as peons, drivers, and security guards. In many of these households the brothers were studying or getting some technical training while the daughters were, in most cases, the other main earners in the family – their contributions ranging from 50-75 percent.

Women from slightly better off middle-class homes, with a per capita monthly income ranging from Rs. 1973.33 to Rs. 3500, were employed particularly by the newly established multinational companies. The family size was smaller, and these were households which could afford and did invest in the education of their children. Malini Singh, who had a B.Sc. Engineering degree, for instance, had two sisters. One had a MBA and was married, and the other sister was still studying. Her father was a Superintendent Engineer employed by the Uttar Pradesh government. Her mother has never worked outside the home, and they live in a three-room flat subsidised by the government. She had worked for six months in a telecommunications firm before joining Panasonic.

A group of men workers also came from this background – households where the father had retired from a government job and was receiving a pension. These men workers lived with their families in government-subsidised housing in colonies such as Dilshad Gardens, Kalkajee, and Patpatganj. Although a few of them had received some technical training, most of them did not have any special qualifications. In the factory, they often worked as foremen or supervisors, and most of them were Punjabis. Younger men recruited in the
eighties, however, usually had a diploma from the Industrial Training Institute or some private technical institution.

Examining the ‘Distress Entry Thesis’ and Reasons for Wage Work

In this section, the contribution of women workers to the family economy, the reasons they took up waged work, and the distress entry as well as household strategy thesis are critically assessed. Households have been classified on the basis of per capita monthly income (total household income by household size) and then placed in statutory minimum wage categories specified for the Delhi electronics industry in 1994. Rather than using the dubious poverty-line estimates, I have used the minimum wage categories as the available official norm. Per capita monthly income (total household size by total household income) is indeed a crude measure since it assumes that all members of the household have the same needs and that income is pooled equally. Both assumptions are problematic since variations of need with age are not accounted for and individual incomes are not necessarily equally shared – a point highlighted by feminist deconstruction of intra-household relations. Adult equivalence scales are considered a better measure. However these are also based on subjective a priori assessment of consumption patterns and needs of children and women as seen in the minimum wage discussion elaborated in Chapter 2. All measures of income distribution and inequality involve ‘social judgement’ and none can be seen as completely value free. I have therefore used a simple measure and then classified households in relation to statutory norms specified for that period.

The minimum wage for the electronics industry includes recognition of human capital along with an assessment of basic needs, since it differentiates between skill levels. Such a classification is therefore wider than the simple basic needs minimum wage and also allows interrogation of the assumption that the minimum wage should be able to meet the basic needs of a four-member family (discussed in Chapter 2). On the basis of this classification (Table 3.6), 65 per cent of the workers’ households fell in the low-income group, which is below the stipulated minimum wage. The middle-income category, which includes the minimum wage stipulated for unskilled and semi-skilled workers, had 10 per cent of the households. 25 per cent of the households were in the high-income category, which includes the minimum wage specified for skilled workers in the Delhi electronics industry.

The average family size of the total sample was 4.5. 54.5 per cent were in the lower category of two to four persons, and 15.1 per cent were in the higher category of more than seven persons. The average family size in the sample studied was slightly lower than the average for urban Delhi based on the 1991 Census, which was 4.99, itself lower than the overall average for Delhi which
was 5.06 (Economic Survey of Delhi, 2000). Empirical reality thus questions the four member family norm which is the basis of minimum wage calculations.

Table 3.6  Household categories: Per capita income group (monthly) by minimum wage categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income group</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower (Below Rs. 1419)</td>
<td>65.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle (Rs. 1420-1843)</td>
<td>9.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher (Rs. 1844 +)</td>
<td>25.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 132

The data also shows that a majority of households in this study were dependent on the earnings of two and three income earners. The average number of earners was 2.15 and average number of dependants 2.52.

Table 3.7  Household categories by male/female distribution of earners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income group</th>
<th>Single income</th>
<th>Two incomes</th>
<th>Three or more incomes</th>
<th>Total households</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1* 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>28 10 26 2 18 2 -</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>86</td>
<td>65.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>- 2 8 2 - - -</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>- - 12 14 6 - 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>34</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28 58 46 132</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Per cent 21.2 43.9 34.8 100

N = 132

*Gender of earners is as follows:
1. One female earner
2. Two female earners
3. One male and one female earner
4. Two males and one female
5. Two females and one male earner
6. Three females
7. Two males and two females

The data show that gaining a higher income (equivalent to the minimum wage of a skilled worker and above) required a larger number of earners. All households in the higher-income category had at least two earners, with a larger number with three earners. Gender-differentiated returns in the labour market are reflected in the table, which shows a larger number of households with two
male earners and one female earner (14 households [Column 4]) in the high-income category, while households with two female earners and one male earner (18 households [Column 5]) are predominantly in the lower-income category. Overall, households dependent solely or predominantly on female earnings (Columns 1, 2, 5 and 6) fall into the lower-income category.

Single income households (28 households [Column 1]) were all female-headed, constituting the poorest and most vulnerable group, and all were in the lower-income category. An important finding of this study is that a majority of the other households were also significantly dependent on female earners. The number of households with no male earner at all (42 households [Columns 1, 2 and 6]) constituted 31.8 per cent of the total. Of these, two-thirds were sole female earners and one-third were households with two or three female earners.

The significance of household dependence on female earning also emerges from the data on the rest of the households that had male earners as well. Households with two male earners and one female earner (18 households [Column 4]) constituted 13.6 percent of the total. Households with two female earners and one male earner (24 households [Column 5]) were 18.2 per cent. Overall, the data show that in half the households (50 per cent), the responsibility for household provisioning rests predominantly on women workers.

Figure 3.2 Respondents' income as a percentage of total household income
Data in the charts above show that total female contribution to household income was high: 46 per cent contributed from fifty to hundred percent and 38 per cent contributed from twenty five to fifty percent of total household income, with only 17 per cent contributing less than twenty five percent. The data thus indicates a shift in the structure of male provisioning, and challenges the myth of the male breadwinner gender contract implicit in labour legislation.

This aggregate picture needs further definition to delineate the reasons that women entered into wage work, and the nature of their economic contribution.

**Reasons for work**

When the women interviewed for the study were asked why they worked, there were usually two standard responses: 'majburi' (economic necessity) and 'time pass'. The young, never married girls tended to respond with the latter. Both these responses would confirm the view that women entered employment due to distress, or were forced by circumstances, or were temporary sojourners in the factory, waiting to get married. My earlier research with women workers in textile, garment and electronics factories had alerted me to the fallacy of resting content with these initial responses. Unravelling the diverse motivations which propel women to take up employment requires going beyond initial responses. These are often a reiteration of dominant gender ideology, elicted by the nature of the question itself. There is a problem in the way the question is posed: it already implies that the entry of women into waged work is an anomaly requiring explanation. The question incorporates the ideological assumption of the male breadwinner model, and has a middle-class, upper-caste, male-dominant gender ideology bias.9
There are many caste groups as well as sections of traditional working-class communities where women do work outside the home, and there is no stigma attached to this fact. Women textile workers I had met in Ahmedabad coming from the dalit (scheduled caste) community never questioned the fact they had worked or that their daughters too would work. The issue for discussion was whether the textile mills would hire them, and whether there were any possibilities for the much coveted government jobs (Chhachhi, 1983). Karin Kapadia’s study in rural South India also highlights the striking contrasts between upper-caste and dalit norms regarding women’s breadwinning roles. (Kapadia, 1995) The idea implied in the term ‘time pass’ – that young girls are only working temporarily till they get married – is often an illusion. Many girls continued to work ‘temporarily’ for years, before marriage and even after marriage. The phrase ‘economic necessity’ in itself does not say anything about the reasons for work. Clearly, no woman (or for that matter any man) would slog for eight to ten hours in monotonous work, subjected to discipline and control by supervisors and employers, if they did not have to – given needs/wants otherwise not attainable. As Lee puts it “…citing an increase in income says too little about for whom and for what purpose the money was intended…” (Lee, 1998:73). It is also necessary to delve further into the processes by which the actual decision to work was made, and whether this decision was based on consensus or resistance within the household. These are processes which are ignored or assumed in the ‘household strategy’ approach, based on the assumption that the household is a conflict-free arena.

In the following section I apply Naila Kabeer’s two-way classification of responses of women garment workers in Bangladesh, based on the kind of ‘agency’ women had and the extent to which the dynamics around the decision to work were characterised by consensus or conflict. Kabeer identified five patterns, as follows:

1. **Reluctant agency, uncontested decision making** – women affected by sudden adversity who saw factory work as a contraction of choice
2. **Active agency, uncontested decision making** – women from very poor backgrounds who viewed the availability of garment employment as an improvement in their opportunities to work
3. **Active agency, consensual decision making** – women who made an active choice to work and whose contribution was valued
4. **Active agency, negotiated decision making** – women who choose to work but had to negotiate with parents or husbands for approval
5. **Active agency, conflictual decision making** – women who decided to continue work in spite of opposition and resistance within the family

(Kabeer, 2000:100)

I use ‘choice to work’ rather than the term agency. I look at both the range of reasons given for going out to work, and the processes around the decision to
work. I highlight the roles of circumstance and agency, and of individual and collective interests within the household.

'No choice, uncontested decision making and own choice, uncontested decision making'

For women from poor households, it was clearly the needs of basic survival which caused them to work. This category consisted mostly of married women whose husbands were either unemployed or had irregular jobs, often as piece-rate workers for contractors. For women from households which survived on irregular income from the informal sector, a job in the electronic factories – even in the tiny units with low wages and bad working conditions – provided the possibility of a regular income, and that was crucial. Another section of women from poor households had to take up waged work due to the sudden death of the only (male) earning member of the household. Kamlesh’s story for instance is a classic one. Married at the age of 14, she never finished school, had two children and then her husband died. Her in-laws refused to support her, so she returned to her mother who lived alone, and started working in a tiny electronics unit. Now 40 years old and having worked for eleven years in the same unit, she says she has ‘no choice but to work’ to ensure her son’s education and daughter’s marriage.

The other category of ‘distress entry’ workers were deserted and divorced women. Rani, for instance, had been deserted by her husband a few years after her marriage. Initially she had stayed on her own and started working in an export garment unit. When it was clear that her husband would not return, she returned to her widowed mother’s house. Through the personal recommendation of her younger sister who had been working for three years in a tiny electronics unit, she got a job in the same unit. In numerous cases, widows and deserted women found they got no support from their in-laws. On the contrary, when adversity struck, they were often abused and hounded out of their marital home. The only support they had was from their natal family. Here too, however, they had to strive not to be seen as a burden. For instance, Rani’s natal family was already struggling and there was no way she could have stayed on without earning her own livelihood. Her natal family consisted of her widowed mother, two brothers, a sister-in-law, nephew and younger sister Meena. Till the elder brother started earning, their widowed mother had worked as a domestic servant. When she stopped, Meena began work in an electronics unit at the age of 18. She was now 25 years old, still unmarried, and the second main earner for the household. She continued to work so her younger brother could study. Thus in Meena’s case, her reasons for work continued to be economic, but the nature of that need had shifted from supporting the whole family to contributing towards improving the career chances for her brother.

In relation to the decision to work, neither Rani nor Meena, nor the other household members had a choice. Some of the women who had been forced to work due to sudden adversity did see this compulsion to work as a ‘curse’, a
punishment due to ‘bad karma’. This would indeed fall into Kabeer’s first category of ‘reluctant agency, uncontested decision making’. However, most of the others from poor households had both made the decision and found the job themselves, and were also supported by family members. Bina (mentioned in the introduction) went around on her own checking different factories until she managed to get a job. For these women, a regular income was a major boon. There was no major distinction between married and unmarried women in relation to intra-household dynamics.

Another group of women from a different cultural context also fit into this category. For the women migrants from Kerala, the reason to work arose neither from the threat to basic survival or conscious improvement in standards of living, but simply from the imperative to earn one’s own living. This was particularly true for the rural migrants from Kerala. Although motivated by economic need and lack of employment possibilities in Kerala itself, these women would not have starved if they had stayed on in Kerala. It was part of the cultural milieu that women worked; there was no stigma attached to working outside the home, and household members were supportive of the decision to migrate. Some have argued that this ‘progressive’ attitude towards women’s work has enabled the acceptance within Kerala of the mass migration of women to distant places in India.10

‘Own choice, consensual decision making’

General improvement and raising the standard of living were the reasons given by a second group of married women coming from both industrial and middle/lower-middle-class households. Children’s education was a key reason and, interestingly, there was no distinction made between education for girls and for boys. Sandhya came from an organised-sector working-class household; both she and her husband worked in the same electronics factory. She said she started working initially primarily to save money so she could send her two children (a girl and a boy) to a good school. Both the daughter and son were now studying at Frank Anthony, a school that the middle- and even upper-middle-class parents send their children to. A few years before, her husband had been fired. Now the household managed only on her income.

For this group, the decision to work was made jointly. At times, husbands had found out about jobs available in their own factory. In other cases, women had heard about jobs from friends and relatives. None of these married women reported resistance or opposition to their working from their husbands. As Sandhya said, ‘Only my mother-in-law complained, since I was no longer around to attend to her every need. But once I bought her a sari from my salary, she stopped complaining.’
'Own choice, negotiated decision making'

A third group of young, unmarried girls were working to earn their dowries. The increasing phenomenon of young girls taking up employment to save for their marriage cannot be understood only in terms of a ‘household strategy’, or as motivated only by personal need. For some from better-off households, a good dowry was a passport to a good marriage in a higher income group, or a means to satisfy personal desires to acquire the latest consumer goods. For others, it was a fearful response to the rise in dowry demands given the latest consumer items – television, refrigerators, washing machines, cars – which were becoming a condition for marriage which their households could not fulfil. For a significant section, their earnings were the only possibility of a dowry at all, since fathers and brothers were unable to fulfil their customary obligations to provide it. ‘Working for my dowry’ and ‘time pass’ were often, however, euphemisms. These responses were public scripts which legitimised and ‘non-perceived’ the fact that often the daughter’s earnings were a necessary and major contribution to household income and consumption.

Further inquiry revealed that more complex family dynamics might be operating for these young unmarried women who went out to work. The decision to work was often based on the ‘unspoken’ realisation that fathers or brothers were under considerable tension and worried about their inability to provide a dowry. These girls actively sought work to relieve and take on the ‘burden’ they represented within the family. In most cases, their actions were accepted without any clear acknowledgement of the actual reason. Poonam’s father, for instance, neither opposed nor accepted. He just said that ‘the job would keep her busy’. Some did face opposition, particularly from elder brothers, but were able to get support from other family members to counter this opposition. Many girls mentioned how their mothers interceded on their behalf and convinced doubtful male members of the household. In most cases these girls did have to negotiate, persuade and convince one or another male family member to be able to take up work, fitting the fourth pattern identified by Kabeer.

‘Own choice, uncontested decision-making’

A group of young unmarried women coming from better off middle-class households entered into employment as a personal career choice. These girls all had higher education qualifications and a diploma in electrical engineering from polytechnics. Some of them had already worked briefly in other companies. Even in their present jobs, they continued to keep their options open. Those working in the newly set up Panasonic factory said they were waiting to see if they would get an increment at the end of that year, and if not they would just quit. This confidence that they could exercise choice even for a particular company arose from a specific demand for young women with institutional training in the new multinational companies. A small survey of polytechnics in
New Delhi showed that a large number of such persons were enrolling, and the institutes reported a 100 per cent placement rate.

**Concluding Remarks**

The great diversity in the economic and social backgrounds of women in the electronics industry, and the various reasons given for going out to work, suggest that ‘distress entry’ or poverty is inadequate as the only explanation for women’s entry into the labour force. Certainly, some women were distress-entry workers, but a significant section had joined work for a range of other motivations. What also emerges from the data is the shift in reasons for work. Women may initially take up employment to fulfil either a personal or a broader household need. But once that need is met, due to household life cycle changes or changes in economic circumstances, they may well continue to work for other reasons. Though there was a regular turnover in the electronics factories due to marriage, a large number of women continued work even after marriage. Unlike a section of married women garment workers in Kabeer’s study, and the ‘disobedient daughters’ in Wolf’s study, there was no case in my sample of women who had experienced absolute resistance from family members and openly defied them by continuing to work. The absence of a pattern of active agency with open conflict and defiance could imply that family control was so strong that without consensus no woman, married or unmarried would take up employment. In a sense this is true, given that women resorted to numerous strategies of persuasion and negotiation to gain acceptance of the right to work. Alternatively, however, this could also reflect the fact that resistance and opposition was not so very strong or intransigent. Fathers and brothers, who were the main opposition, appeared amenable to change. I suggest there were two reasons for this: the particular way in which employment in the electronics industry was viewed socially; and changing perceptions of women’s work in general.

The garments and electronics industries were the two main industries employing women in Delhi. While the large presence of women within these factories can become in itself a factor for making this form of employment acceptable, a sharp distinction constantly emerged in my discussions with workers and their families between the garment factories and the electronics factories. The garment factories were seen as sites for corruption: fashion shows, foreign buyers, the whole gamut of ‘tight revealing clothes – the west-export’, created an ambience which was ‘immoral’. Young women, who worked in ‘export’, as the garment industry was called, were considered to be exposed to these bad influences and thus ‘loose’. Whenever cases of sexual harassment or elopement were mentioned, these were somehow to do with the ‘export’ girls. Employment in the electronics factories, on the other hand, was seen as safer and also had prestige value. Workers mentioned television brand names with pride, associating themselves with the production of coveted consumer items.
There was something more 'glamorous' about working in a television factory with its high-tech image than in the export garments sector. Particularly among the middle-class families, the unmarried women, as well as their family members told other relatives and neighbours that they/their daughters were working with such and such company. They did not specify that they were assembly-line production workers. There was a prevailing notion that 'educated girls and boys' worked in the electronics industry. Thus, this kind of employment was more socially acceptable.

**Table 3.8 Should women work?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Should</th>
<th>68</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Only if necessary</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should not</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 100
Follow-up Household Survey, 2000

Furthermore there appear to be shifts in the general perceptions of both women's work and the eligibility requirements of the marriage market. In discussions with a range of household members, many stated that these days what potential grooms look for is a "kamane wali ladki" (an earning girl). Grooms, on the other hand, were rated by the girls family according to whether they had a government job and "upar ke kamai" (income above the wage). These were regarded as highly desirable, testifying to the openly cynical acceptance of bribery and corruption as a necessary source of livelihood. In a follow-up survey of 100 households from the original sample of 132, we explicitly asked older family members – fathers, mothers and also husbands – what they felt about women working in factories. Their responses were overwhelmingly that women should work, ranging from statements such as 'nothing wrong with it', to more positive affirmations that 'women must stand on their own feet', that women 'should contribute to the household', and that 'these days every household needs two earners'. Another section of respondents also accepted the need for women to work due to 'majburi' (economic pressure), albeit reluctantly. Only a minority felt women should not work, even though their own wives or daughters were working.

The initial opposition from male family members had less to do with restrictions on women working, than with feelings of failure in being unable to fulfil customary male roles. This issue is examined in later chapters. The construction of a specific type of female working force is the result not only of supply factors, but also of particular managerial practices of labour control. The next chapter moves into the 'hidden abode of production', to look at the ways in
which these women were constituted as workers in different kinds of gendered labour regimes.

Notes

1 The sharp contrast between two Muslim women I met shows how stereotypical notions need qualification. Nur Jahan, a Bihari Muslim migrant, worked in Shiv Shakti, a television component unit in the tiny flatted factory complex. She followed us outside after we left. She said she had overheard our discussions with the owner and had a lot to tell us since she had worked for ten years in this unit. We arranged to meet at her house the next evening. We found the house in the migrant slum behind Girinagar, but Nur Jahan was not at home. Her husband and uncle interrogated us, polite but extremely suspicious. We waited for over an hour till it became clear that Nur Jahan would not return until we left. We were unable to meet her again. I met 25 year old Aliya in the Texla factory, a large unit, and then spent many hours with her at her house in Jamia Nagar, located close to the Muslim university, Jamia Millia. She and her sister were the only earners in the household since their father had died. She had finished secondary school and then had registered as ‘the first Muslim girl’ at a night school to get a technical diploma. Aliya was a union leader, and was very active and articulate. Both Muslim women, in spite of the difference in age, level of education and social background, were proud of their work experience and aware of their rights. However, while Nur Jahan remained under the close surveillance and control of male patriarchs, Aliya had a greater degree of autonomy.

2 The Labour Bureau 1984 study which surveyed 20 factories manufacturing radio and television sets had noted that in the period 1980-1984, the total employment of women increased, but the percentage of women’s employment remained constant at 29.4 per cent. (Labour Bureau, 1984: 6)

3 See Ursula Sharma (1980, 1986) for problems in identifying class as a basis for classification. The limitations of income/consumption as a measure for poverty and classification have also been pointed out in numerous studies. Although per capita monthly income is a crude measure, it gives some sense of the number of people who live off the total income of the household.

4 She mentions that in practically all the cases of married migrants she interviewed, the dowry and family assets were sold or pawned to meet migration expenses (Gulati, 1997:318).

5 Village studies have questioned the assumption that it is the poorest sections that migrate from rural areas. B. Banerjee’s study of 1,615 migrants in Delhi concluded that although most migrants came from non-land-owning households, the largest component was not from agricultural labour households (Banerjee: 1986:23-24). Other studies have argued that it is younger sons of prosperous farmers and almost entire families from the broad category of the rural poor who have a higher propensity to migrate (Dasgupta & Laishley, 1978:191). The CEC survey found that over 56 per cent of the workers came from small to marginal farmer households, and
only 28.8 per cent from rural landless households (CEC, 1993:9). A longitudinal
study of a village in Western Uttar Pradesh notes that while in 1970 out-migration
was from richer strata; in 1987 there was an increase in permanent and seasonal
migration from the poor stratum (Saith and Tankha, 1992:15).

The CEC survey, which looked primarily at workers from small-unregistered units,
found that 72 per cent had left their families behind in the village (CEC, 193:8).

These married women, especially the ones from Uttar Pradesh, had migrated at
marriage. In contrast, the women workers from Kerala were autonomous female
migrants. See Thadani & Todaro, 1984, and Karlekar, 1995, for differences in male
and female migration.

Lourdes Beneria’s study on Mexico (1991, 1992) points to the links between the
emergence of such an ‘elder daughter syndrome’ and the economic crisis. However,
earlier studies on the garment industry in India as well as other studies show that this
phenomenon was the result of ‘household crisis’ which then becomes persistent due
to processes of economic restructuring (Chhachhi & Pittin, 1996a).

As Naila Kabeer points out, the question ‘Why work?’ is not asked of men
anywhere in the world – it is assumed that they have to work (Kabeer, 2000:85).

Migrant women from Kerala are employed in significant numbers in the fish
processing units of Gujarat, Maharashtra and as far away as Bengal (See Warrier,
2001; D’Meelo, 1996; Saradamoni, 1995).
Flatted factories