Eroding citizenship: gender and labour in contemporary India
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Citation for published version (APA):

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CHAPTER 6

Citizenship in Practice:
Organization at the Workplace and Negotiating Autonomy in the Household

This chapter extends the discussion on citizenship in practice and the relationship between employment and women's autonomy. In Chapters 4 and 5, workers' responses to managerial authority and control have been discussed. In this chapter, the focus in the first section is on the process of organizing, i.e. the dynamic of relationships between workers in the context of collective organizing; the specific relationship of women workers to trade unions; and the experience of women trade union leaders, based on individual profiles of two women union leaders reflective of two phases of unionisation in the Delhi electronics industry. Two rather distinct patterns of women's relationship to unionisation in the electronics industry are explored, reflecting the difference between gendered labour regimes forged in the pre- and post-liberalisation periods, the age and social identity of workers and the changing culture of trade unions. In the second section the link between employment and domestic autonomy is highlighted, addressing the issue of the impact waged work has on women workers' ability to challenge the structures of authority and control within domestic regimes.

Unionisation and women workers in India

In the sample, half the women workers were in unionised factories. This is unusual, given that the unionised workforce in India as a whole is small. According to the 1991 Census, the size of the labour force was over 310 million, with 28 million in the organised sector. The verified membership of twelve national trade union federations is over 12 million. The unionised workforce thus constitutes approximately 5 per cent of the total labour force and 40 per cent of the organized labour force (Venkata Ratnam, 1997a:1). The majority of the organized sector labour force is in the public sector or in government employment, which is not covered by collective bargaining. According to Venkata Ratnam, only 2 per cent of the labour force is covered by collective bargaining. Given that over 96 per cent of women's work is in the unorganised sector, the level of unionisation of women workers is extremely low. However, in spite of being a miniscule number, unionised women workers have been
militant. They have organised into unions, asserted their rights and challenged managerial prerogatives. Studies of women workers in the pharmaceuticals industry, iron ore mines, and tobacco processing and the export garment industry testify to the capacity of women to organise around general as well as women-specific demands. A significant case was the struggle by women pharmaceutical workers against the ‘marriage clause’ and early retirement age for women (Sen, 1990; Datar, 1989; Gothoskar, 1992). For the unorganised sector, SEWA has emerged as a model of alternative forms of organisation for women workers. It has played a key role in making women workers visible, pushing for international and national legislation, and forming coalitions with other unorganised sector workers (Jhabvala & Subramanya 2000; Jhabvala, 1994).

**Unionisation in Okhla Industrial Area**

Three phases of unionisation can be distinguished in the electronics industry in Okhla Industrial Area, where most of the electronics factories studied are located. In the first phase, there were trade unions in some of the larger units of GLR 2 type enterprises, but these were pocket unions which settled for ad-hoc agreements. The second phase of *classical militant unionism* started in the eighties, when many of these pro-management unions were supplanted by a more militant leadership. Almost all the unions were affiliated to national trade union federations linked to political parties. A number of factories had multiple unions, which is a general characteristic of unionism in India. The main issues taken up by unions were regularisation of the workforce and implementation of basic statutory rights.

The garment industry was the first to be organised: workers were finally granted ESI, Provident Fund, leave and bonus benefits. Additional demands included uniforms, socks and shoes. In the dyeing industry, the main issue was temporary contracts. Workers were made permanent through union pressure. In the electronics industry too, the initial struggles were over statutory benefits and regular contracts. Located in enterprises established in the pre-liberalisation era, these unions were engaged in fighting closures, illegal retrenchment, withdrawal of statutory rights won in the 1980s and the casualisation of the workforce. In the 1990s, a *new militant unionism* emerged in the enterprises established in the first phase of liberalisation. The main issues that led to union formation were implementation of minimum wage revisions and retrenchment of workers. This was a period when factories began to relocate their units from Okhla to other industrial areas such as NOIDA, Ghaziabad, and Gurgaon.

Women workers have been active as leaders and participants in both classical militant unions and in new militant unions. To illustrate the differences and similarities of the two kinds of union struggles and the specific experience of women workers, I focus on the experience of two women workers: Jayshree Dey from GLR 2 and Sushma from GLR3. JD formed a union in 1987, which has
changed affiliations a number of times and is the only woman union leader in a formal sense in the electronics industry in OIE. Sushma is the ‘informal’ leader of a union formed in 1995, formally headed by a male area-level unionist affiliated to the AITUC. Both are workers and plant-level union leaders. Although there are many similarities in their experience, there are also significant variations that reflect age differences as well as different attitudes towards struggle. The variations also reflect two distinct patterns of unionisation and women’s participation in collective organizing in the electronics industry.

Classical Militant Unionism and Women Workers’ Participation

Women workers in GLR 2 exhibit highly developed worker identities, politically awareness and militancy. Although unions were headed by men, a number of women held posts on plant-level union committees. In some cases, gendered union hierarchies were also challenged, though this challenge was not couched in gender terms. The profile of JD, a woman union leader, highlights the constraints as well as the possibilities for women workers’ involvement in the classical pattern of unionism. JD is exceptional since she headed a union, yet she is representative of women workers of a certain generation of workers.

JD – a profile

Jayshree Dey, 45 years old, has worked for 30 years in Ahuja Radios. Starting as a wire girl, she demanded a change in her designation after 20 years, since she was in fact doing the work of a Junior Engineer. The management sent her for a six-month in-house training course, but did not change her designation or increase her salary after the training. She had fought and was still fighting to get her new designation accepted. At the time of the interview, she had been suspended from the factory and was fighting 47 cases in the Labour Court.

JD’s impetus to become involved in organizing workers arose out of frustration over her own issue and the indifference of the union. When JD found that the management did not respond to her requests for a change in designation and rise in salary, she decided to join the union. In the factory there was a pro-management union. It had established a set pattern of making settlements of a small wage increase every year, and had avoided taking up any other issue. This union refused to take up JD’s case. She then decided that she would have to fight for herself and for other workers.

That’s when I decided that if I got a chance I would work for the workers. Only when one feels the needle pierce one’s own skin, can one understand the pain of the needle. Workers were dissatisfied with the union. On my own, I began to help other workers. I wrote appeal letters for them, and got some charge sheets and memos withdrawn.
JD would go directly to the owner rather than the management with these issues and get them resolved. Part of JD’s confidence came from knowing she was a ‘good worker’ – she did her job well and over the years had become an all-rounder, able to handle different tasks in all departments. As she got more and more complaints, she began to expose the tie-up between the management and the union. The transition from fighting for a personal issue to fighting for workers’ rights in general led to a challenge to the pro-management union.

At that time there was tension within the union over the latest ad hoc agreement which ignored the new legal regulation on minimum wages and only gave workers an increment of Rs. 125. The union split and workers pressurized JD to stand for elections. Initially she refused, saying that she preferred to work this way for the workers rather than be a leader, but finally agreed and won the election with an outstanding majority.

Taking over the union leadership, JD tried to initiate a new style in union – management negotiations. Rather than an annual ad hoc settlement, she put forward a charter of demands. This included long-pending needs such as Dearness Allowance, House Rent Allowance, Conveyance Allowance, and canteen, as well as new demands such as an education allowance for workers’ children. An important aspect of the new relations she wanted to forge was an abjuring of abuse and violence that were generally associated with militant unions.

I always pay a lot of attention and put in effort to avoid *gali-gloch* and *mar-peet* (abuse and fights). We struggle for our rights but do not engage in abuse and fights.

There was also a very conscious awareness of the differences between men and women unionists. Despite the difficulties and problems she had faced as a woman trying to run a union, she was vehement that women could and should be union leaders.

Women are *shakti sheel* – they are extremely strong. They have a lot of patience and can bear anything. Gents get angry very quickly and they often cannot solve problems. A woman uses different ways to convey to the other person that they are doing an injustice – they have empathy. Till today I have not raised my hand – if anyone else had been in my place and gone through what I have… Many times the workers get impatient and say ‘Madam, why don’t you use the *chappal* (slipper)? Some union leaders also tell me, ‘Madam, if you use your *chappal* and talk then they will fold their hands and give you the report’.

The issue of violence – the threat of it against her and her refusal to resort to it, played a major role in the attempts by management and the workers from the old union to dislodge her from the leadership. When attempts at bribing workers did not work, the management organized a meeting of pro-management workers, removed JD’s name from the union and ‘elected’ a new union leadership. When JD challenged this, she was physically threatened within the factory.
Next day when I went to work, the *dalals* threatened and mocked me, saying that I should send in my resignation since another General Secretary had been appointed. I said when I did not go to the meeting, nor did other workers, the meeting register was not there, so how can a new election have taken place? Then when I was testing in the Quality Control Department, 10-12 *dalals* surrounded me and said, ‘Hand over all the union records. Otherwise you will be beaten (*jute khaoge*)’. I said if you have the courage then just touch me and see. They said they had lots of courage but they would give me 24 hours and if I did not comply, then I would be beaten so badly that I would not even remember the name of the union. About 70-80 workers had now surrounded me. I quickly wrote out a short leave application for my supervisor saying that ‘in front of you, 10-20 people have *gheraoed* and threatened me, and you did not do anything’. Then I went home and, with the person who has been guiding me, went to the police and filed a FIR. I gave a copy of the FIR to the management and called a general body meeting with all the workers.

Although JD continued to receive physical threats and was heckled and surrounded a number of times in the factory and in the labour court, she was not in fact beaten. She knew that this was because she was a woman:

I was a lady so I was saved. The *dalals* keep telling me, ‘If you were a man, you would have been thrown into the hospital long ago’.

In the prevailing climate of violence in industrial areas, no woman leader could manage without male support. JD had received support from a number of men trade unionists in the area. The management had refused to recognize her as the union leader, and she had then taken the case to court, including the charter of demands. She was handling 47 cases without any financial support, except for union dues which were miniscule and did not cover the expenses of lawyers, travel, and paper work. Although she had received support in the form of advice as well as legal representation from local male unionists, this support was periodically withdrawn, and she had been betrayed numerous times. The Ahuja management and the pro-management union workers put pressure on the unionists and lawyers who helped her. After initial help, they began to pressurize her to compromise with offers of a ‘full and final’ settlement.

After five years of struggling practically single-handed, and changing affiliation to six unions, JD was suspicious of other unionists. The long drawn-out legal process was another debilitating feature of the industrial relations system, along with corruption and bribery. The only way JD managed to get cases moving was to appeal directly to the Labour Court judges. In the increasingly rare case of what she called a ‘pro-labour judge’, she would get a positive hearing, but in general she was faced with postponements and delays. Her experience made her advocate extreme disciplinary action against bribery and corruption.

The British period was good. If someone stole or took a bribe, their hands were cut off. Today the government should also pass a law that whoever takes a bribe
should have their hands cut off. A law should be passed which can help the union to function and get benefits for workers. The Labour office eats money and keeps quiet, inspectors eat money and keep quiet, the police eat money and keep quiet. If a worker is beaten and goes to make a report, the police do not file it, yet when management makes a false report then they quickly file it. Government should take strict action against this.

A crucial factor in JD's capacity to sustain her struggle for workers' rights was the economic situation of her family and support from family members. JD's household was lower-middle class. Her husband worked as an engineer in the government-owned television station, Doordarshan. She had one married son who had a job as a salesperson in a private company. They lived in their own three-room house, along with their son, daughter-in-law and grandchild. JD had started work to earn money for her son's education, but had continued working long after he got a job.

Family members gave reserved support to her union work. Her husband was generally supportive, saying that since it gave her satisfaction to do this work, they had to accept it. However, he was a bit resentful that she spent all her money, and his, on the legal cases. But there was mutual respect in their relationship, and she could say in his presence:

Sometimes he gets angry and tells me to leave all this – that I should take sanyas (retire from public life)! Sometimes my son reacts and opposes me, saying, 'Stop all this'.

All this tension affects my health. I return from court and collapse saying 'hai ma-hai ma' (mother help me) – I have a back problem. Then I cannot help my daughter-in-law who has to handle all the housework – there is a small child. I get so tired after the court that I cannot do any household work.

In spite of being free from immediate pressures of childcare and domestic labour, with a grown-up married son, JD still felt guilty at not fulfilling her role as a mother-in-law and grandmother. On issues relating to women's domestic roles, she had deeply felt essentialist notions. Although sharply aware of the unfairness of gender differences, she did not feel men could or should take up domestic responsibilities.

Where women want jobs there [the management] does not give them because women have family problems – today the mother-in-law is ill, tomorrow the sister-in-law. The next day the child is ill, and the next the husband is ill. A man, on the other hand, will still go to office even if his wife is ill, but a woman will not do that. That is a woman's nature.

Although she felt there were women-specific demands such as maternity leave and crèche which were important to fight for, she was generally sceptical about women workers' capacity to organize. She had no woman member in her union, although they did support her informally. Unlike the men, women workers got frightened when the management threatened that if they joined 'madam's union, none of their children would get a job in the whole of Okhla'. The fact that most
of the women were older was a major reason for the passive support they gave to JD's union.

A woman has a fixed time to work. At a certain age she can do service. A man can get work at any age. He can do any kind of work. If he does not get a job, then he can run an auto rickshaw, sell vegetables, or become a helper, but a woman cannot do this. For her, a job has to be respectable. In a good firm like Ahuja Radios, women are safe and that is why there are women workers who have worked for many years – 30-35 years. I myself have worked for 30 years.

In addition to the lack of any future job prospects, for this section of women, the respectability of the job was also important. The new jobs available to young women in the garment and new electronics units were seen as suspicious.

If they are hiring unmarried girls, there is some other reason as well. Women cannot be safe in the factories that hire only ladies. For a woman, everywhere there is danger and danger.

In an unconscious rendering of what made it possible for her to become a woman union leader, JD emphasized the pressures that women workers have to face to organize.

Women are difficult to organize because of majburi (necessity) – either their husband does not earn enough or she earns for the children’s education. Only that woman can move out to work who is safe in every way. Only that woman can fight for her rights. If she does not have backing, then she can be spoiled. She is pushed down and not allowed to succeed. Management has fostered many kinds of fleas (pitoo palee hain) which can harass a woman.

Respectability, an economically stable household, support of family members, no pressing domestic responsibilities – all these factors made it possible for JD to lead a union with primarily male membership. What sustained her, however, was a curious mixture of religious conviction and communist ideology. She was deeply religious, regularly went to the temple and was active in the Durga Puja committee. She admired saints such as Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and historical figures like Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. As a child she always spoke up if she felt something was wrong, even if it concerned her brother or father. She supported the Communist Party:

I feel the best party is the Communist party. No king and no subjects. Work hard and eat. Work according to your capacity and live – don’t take away anyone’s rights.

At the same time, in response to a question on why God did not give justice to the exploited workers, she said:

It is because God is with them that they are still alive and continue – otherwise capitalists would have swallowed them up the way a big fish swallows a small fish. It is God who gives them the courage to struggle and fight. Injustice will be undone, if not today then tomorrow. Look at the capitalists: they are not relaxed.
They have to take sleeping tablets to sleep and even then, they do not sleep. They cannot eat everything, only boiled stuff. We can eat everything and digest it; we enjoy a full life. We go where we want to freely, while they have four bodyguards to protect them wherever they go. They are trapped on all sides. They have money and money, but nothing else.2

JD's only formal education was up to secondary school, and after 10 years of service, six-months of in-house technical training. But she had strongly developed and articulate views on general economic and political issues, a strong sense of rights, justice, and fair play, combined with religious faith. She felt liberalization had already led to increased competition, automation and unemployment, and would ultimately finish off the unions. Democracy could only function if there was discipline and if everyone did their duty properly. JD was called 'Madam' by her co-workers, a term used for women from a higher-class background. JD's Brahmin social identity added to her status, and she constantly moved in discussion between seeing herself as a worker and as someone who was helping the 'poor workers'.

Although JD is exceptional in being a woman union leader, there were a number of women workers in GLR 2 type enterprises who were active plant-level leaders. JD came from a fairly secure background. Aliya, a 25-year-old Muslim girl, and Jaswanti, an older divorced woman, were union committee representatives, both of whom came from extremely vulnerable backgrounds. Both were the only earners in their households and had no male support. What was common to all three women, however, was relative freedom from domestic responsibilities and childcare, a crucial determinant of women's participation in unions. All these women had highly developed worker identities, pride and confidence in their work and a strong sense of rights and injustice. This generation of women unionists is now being eliminated through the dismantling of the GLR 2 type of gendered labour regimes.

New Militant Unionism and Women Workers' Participation

In the 1990s, a new militant unionism emerged in GLR 3 type factories in the industrial areas of Delhi. Prior to this, there were no unions in these enterprises. The predominant employment of young, unmarried women and migrant labour in these factories seemed to confirm the managerial rationale and stereotype that women were docile by nature. In fact, in ME the company had first hired men, who attempted to start a union. These workers were dismissed and after that primarily unmarried young women were recruited. The absence of unions, however, did not mean that women workers were completely passive. We have already seen the assertions of collective agency in demanding dignity at work in the struggles against the foreman and for toilet breaks. The informal organisation within these enterprises also highlights the differences between men and women in relation to demands and attitudes towards unions. A brief description of this from ME illustrates these differences and questions the
assumption that women who do not join unions are necessarily docile and passive.

In ME a structure to handle grievances was set up called a sansad. The sansad had representatives from management and workers. Although it accepted grievances on a whole range of issues, discussions and settlements usually reasserted managerial prerogatives. In 1987 women workers were strongly opposed to unions.

If a union comes there will be fights, strikes, lock outs – too many problems. If a union is inside, then it is OK and can help us, but an outside union will lead to too many fights. (Ramani, ME, 1987)

The rejection of unions was not in itself a rejection of a workers’ organization. The distinction many women made between an internal union and an outside union was with reference to the political affiliations of unions and inter-union rivalry, which led to violence characteristic of many industrial areas. Nor were the women passive. They had initiated and organized around demands which they felt were crucial to them as women workers. The most pressing issues for them were lack of transport facilities and uniforms. Transport was essential to avoid the sexual harassment women faced in public transport buses, particularly late evenings when they worked overtime. A company bus which picked up and dropped off the women also would allay the fears of parents, particularly of unmarried young women. The demand for uniforms was based on costs of clothes and sensitivity to economic backgrounds. As Sarla explained it:

Due to the fact that women in the factory come from different economic backgrounds and many cannot afford to wear a different dress every day of the week, we thought it would be nice to solve the hassle of what to wear everyday if we had uniforms. This also meant that now girls do not envy each other or pass nasty remarks and compare clothes. (Sarla, ME, 1987)

The demands were presented to the sansad and the management agreed to provide both – a company bus and uniforms. These demands, and the fact they were granted, exacerbated the tensions between the women and the men. The men interpreted these demands in a very different way.

Girls do not know how to raise demands. They fall into the trap of the management. They ask for general facilities while the real issue is wages. (Madhusudan, ME, 1987)

This company tends to favour the women. Why? Because they keep quiet and accept everything. Onida has a big name, now the girls have a bus, uniform, so they are just happy with that. They don’t ask for wages. (Naresh, ME, 1987)

The men had been indifferent to the women’s initiative, though some had supported them half-heartedly. The young women had in fact not been very active on the wage demand, but had supported the men on the issue of bonus. After a long period of negotiation, management did grant the bonus with different rates – 20 per cent for women and 40 per cent for men.
The example above illustrates how women workers' demands were different from the demands put forward by men. This was an important factor in their attitude to unions at this stage. In spite of not belonging to unions, women workers did organise and assert their rights, though in a lateral way. In other GLR 3 type enterprises too, after two to three years of service, it was the young women who initiated the first forms of organizing against the offensive behaviour of the foreman and on the issue of clocking of toilet breaks (see Chapter 4). In the mid-nineties, the informal organisation of women workers was propelled into more formal organisation, and in all these enterprises women formed unions. The key issue was the lack of implementation of minimum wage revisions. The process of informal organisation and action in pursuit of their demands in the earlier phase laid the basis for engagement in a new militant form of unionism. The following profile of a woman leader highlights the new consciousness of this section of workers.

Sushma – a profile

Sushma, 22 years old, had worked for five years as an operator in Calcom Electronics. She had finished secondary school and done specialized training offered by the company in another unit. A spontaneous struggle that she initiated became the springboard for the formation of a union in the factory, and she was the de facto union leader at the plant level. Although the union was affiliated to the AITUC and headed by an area-level male unionist, Sushma was the key figure in the negotiations with management and in maintaining the unity of her fellow workers.

In the first few years after starting work, Sushma was very quiet and even disinterested in workplace issues. She had joined Calcom to feel useful rather than due to economic need. Her family was economically stable even though her father had recently died. The family business, where her two brothers worked, earned enough for the family consisting of her mother, a sister and herself. Her father’s death had been a shock, and her decision to take a job was an attempt to deal with that loss.

When I began work in Calcom, I was undergoing a very bad period in my life. I came here to distract myself from other worries. I was very close to my father. He adored me, and let me do what I want. I used to have a very quick temper and yell and shout at the smallest feeling of intolerance. My father saw to it that things were exactly as I wanted. When he died suddenly, I could not recover from the shock. I just lay in bed, not speaking, not eating for days. I was just lying down – my mind was blank, not functioning. They finally sent me for treatment and I was hospitalised. My family kept telling me to do whatever I wanted to – get involved in something.

She joined a religious group and became a ‘brahmachari’, attending religious meetings and wearing only white. Her religious conviction gave her deep satisfaction and a renewed sense of purpose in life, and she felt that she
should work and earn even though there was no real necessity. Sushma saw this religious conversion, as well as a desire to do something useful for others, as the main reasons for the way she responded to the injustice and humiliating way in which the workers were treated.\textsuperscript{3}

The experience of organizing had changed Sushma in fundamental ways, and she saw herself as a union organizer even if she did not continue in the present job.

Earlier I used to think of marriage to Sunil [her boyfriend] and that I am nowhere in life without him. These last few days have left deep impressions. I feel I belong here – to the struggle of the workers. I am needed here. I am loved and trusted by all of them; this is what I want. Now when Sunil comes to meet me, I tell him off. I say I belong to the streets. You stay with your respectable family and don’t spoil the name of your family by marrying me. He says he is willing to do anything for me. He even got his mother to meet me here. He feels that he can pay for a course in fashion technology and I can get a good job after that. But it is not money I need. Money has never meant anything to me. All that I value and shall fight for is truth and justice (sachai aur nyay). I am no longer ashamed of the number of police cases against me, though earlier I would have found it unimaginable.”

By stepping out in the streets, Sushma and the other factory young women had transgressed the boundaries of respectability — a barrier to women’s participation in public spheres in general, but specifically strong for young unmarried women. As a leader, however, Sushma had to face additional threats. The management threatened to kidnap her, and she and another girl who was active were surrounded a few times by thugs in the evening. The threat of sexual harassment and the charge of immorality were constantly present, so Sushma rarely moved alone. Her boyfriend, who had a car, often picked and dropped her off. During the hunger strike outside the Assembly building, where the Calcom young women and young men spent three days and nights, Sushma’s boyfriend often stayed late and discussions would be held in his car parked on the roadside. An attempt was made to file a case of prostitution against Sushma and two other young women under the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act (SITA). Fortunately, even though the police had been muttering that ‘immoral traffic’ was going on, they could not deny that several constables were on night duty, and a number of mothers of the workers were at the site as well. The charge was not formally filed.

Even as Sushma and the other young women in the leadership of the struggle had to be cautious about charges of immorality, their response to threats of physical violence was to resort to violence themselves. This marked a major shift from their earlier views on unions.
'The only way to get things done is by beating them up'

In one incident, Sushma and the young women reacted to the jeering of the supervisor by beating him up and pushing him into a ditch outside the factory gate. Sushma contacted her male relatives who sent goondas to the manager and threatened him. In another incident, one of the other active women leaders was accosted by a group of goondas at the tea stall and threatened. She was told to stay at home and not prevent the other workers from working. She stood up and bared her chest saying:

‘Use a knife, kill me if you want but you cannot coerce me.’ Since it was noon, the goondas could not do anything so they left, saying ‘We will return in the evening and teach you a lesson’. In the evening as the girls were returning home, the goondas surrounded them and started terrorizing them, asking for me. I was at the union office at that time, but when someone came rushing in to tell me what was happening, I rushed there and with the other girls thrashed the goondas and handed them over to the police.

In spite of lack of experience and the fact that this was her first engagement in a struggle, Sushma knew how to deal with the police. She was also aware of laws that specified that women could not be kept in the police station in the absence of women police. She used this effectively when a bribed policeman tried to detain her after the beating up of the manager. The young women had a pragmatic attitude to bribery as well. Their attitude was ‘khao par hamara kam karo’ – eat but also do our work. Slogans shouted during the demonstrations and dharna also celebrated a resort to extra-legal methods.

What is the medicine for the management? Shoes, slippers and beatings.
(Management ki kya dvahi, jutee, chappal aur pitai.)

Violence was seen as necessary and effective. The young women resorted to it in much the same way as the men trade unionists did, but with the knowledge they were ‘protected’ to a certain extent because they were women. The ease and frequency of violence in the industrial area is illustrated by the account the area-level trade unionist gave of an encounter at the Labour Office over the Calcom case.

We went to the LC office and saw that the Calcom manager was sitting there. I told him the girls are dying – they are freezing and were drenched in the cold rain and hail at night. Don’t you have any humanity? Why don’t you make some compromise and come to a settlement and let the girls go back to work. He replied he did not want to talk to me. ‘I don’t even want to see your face, get out of here.’ Then I got angry. I pulled him out of the chair and began to beat him up and dragged him out. He ran to the DLC’s room but I chased him and gave him a few hard slaps. He collapsed on the floor. I told the DLC that if he picked him up, I would break his hands. By this time, other people rushed in and began to beat the manager with shoes and slippers. The DLC kept saying ‘Call the police’ – then he too got hit by another worker. The manager was bleeding – someone
had pulled his tie and he was choking. A few minutes more and he could have died. Anyway, then the fighting stopped…

Power and legitimacy: Female leadership

The Calcom struggle involved young women as well as young men – the only workers who had continued to work were the migrant women workers from Kerala. The leadership was in the hands of the young women and they, particularly two of them, were acknowledged as representatives who spoke on behalf of all the striking workers. Sushma was called ‘Mata’, a trope evoking cosmological maternalism – goddess cum social worker. This is a strong image often deployed in the national movement: its application to a young, unmarried girl provided social and moral legitimacy.

Relations between the young women and the young men were a reversal of normal roles. In the meetings to discuss strategy, the young men rarely spoke. One boy played a very active role, but more behind the scenes. He kept the files and did all the running around, making copies, filing and submitting documents. The young men even saw their presence in the struggle as a supportive one, although they were equally affected by the issue of change of designations. They saw their role as protective against police and goonda harassment, as well as against any sexual harassment.

Relations with the trade union

The relationship between the plant-level primarily female leadership and the area-level male trade unionist was a mixture of dependence and suspicion. The trade unionist was known in the area as a militant who managed to get workers’ dues by using a mixture of legal and extra-legal methods. His attitude towards the young women was paternalistic. Although he acknowledged the militancy of the leaders, he saw them as naïve and emotional. In the industrial area, his union has the largest number of women workers as members. The main reason for this, according to him, was that women felt safe in his union.

Earlier, the main problem was that women workers would hesitate to come to the union office or to meetings because they were worried that their family members would scold them or the management would see them. But now they have seen that the union office is a safe place. They can come here and they are not harassed in any way.

The union had around 30-40 women, called ‘delegates’, in different factories, mainly garment and electronics. The trade unionist believed strongly that women workers could and should be leaders, but only of women workers and they needed training and guidance. So far, however, there was no woman member in his union committee.

In his handling of the ‘Calcom girls’ struggle’, the trade unionist found his authority being continuously challenged, and he was forced by the
democratising pressure of the young workers to change from his standard techniques. Initially, he would let the leaders stand in front during public events, but he did not fully consult with them or discuss the negotiations he conducted with the management and the labour office. This led to suspicion and distrust. Soon rumours started floating that he had been bribed. The young women began to meet other unionists and politicians, and Sushma even tried at one point to register an independent union. The trade unionist was then forced to agree to consult the women leaders, and in certain instances allow them to negotiate directly with the management and the labour office officials.

The interaction between the plant-level female leadership and the male union leader was in one sense a more general issue of democracy characteristic of militant struggles, where the rank and file workers are often left out of union negotiations and decisions. In this case, it was the young women who maintained pressure on the union to be more democratic and more militant. The workers at various points took decisions on their own, and the union was then forced to follow up and deal with the consequences. The decision to have a hunger strike during the dharna outside the State Assembly building was made by the workers as they sat for the second day at the roadside. The trade unionist arrived the next morning and was informed that all of them were on hunger strike. Given this fait accompli, he was forced to support the action. Internal democracy and democratising the union structure were principles that workers asserted spontaneously throughout the struggle.

For the union, this struggle was one of many. The trade unionist was keen, given the militancy as well as delicacy of it being primarily a young women's struggle, to settle the case soon. As the struggle continued, the issue being negotiated changed. Discussion between management, the union, and the labour office now focussed more on getting the workers back to work, rather than on the issue of minimum wage and designations. The workers opposed this. The trade unionist tried to pressure them to stop the hunger strike and the dharna. They refused, saying there had not yet been any concession from the management. Finally, the trade unionist almost had to go on strike himself to get them to agree to stop the dharna! He refused to negotiate further until they agreed, so after marathon meetings the workers finally left the dharna site and let the struggle continue in the High Court.

The tensions between the male trade unionist and the female leadership reflect the ways in which the structure of the union, styles of functioning and patriarchal attitudes forestall the active, continued participation of women and the consolidation of female leadership. In this particular case, the male unionist was not able to undermine and control this leadership, although attempts were made. At a certain point, when rumours of bribery were circulating about him, he began a counter rumour that another quieter girl should replace Sushma since ‘her character is not good’. That such attempts did not succeed was a testimony to the workers’ conviction that Sushma would protect their interests. The presence of outsiders like us, activists from women’s and democratic rights
organisations, and the publicity the case received, also played a role in ‘protecting’ the young women.

A new consciousness

The transformation of these young women from being ‘quiet as mice’ to being militant activists, asserting rights and negotiating with management, labour commissioners and the Chief Minister, occurred in leaps. As they said, ‘We are learning new strategies everyday and finding new sources of confidence and strength in ourselves.’ They exhibited a clear class consciousness in terms of rights and entitlements due to them as workers. At the same time, this consciousness was tinged with casteism and an ambiguity in relation to feminism.

In solidarity with the Calcom struggle, the union had mobilised all its other branches, including the sweepers union, to join the demonstrations outside the owner’s residence. Some of the Calcom young women refused to sit close to the ‘bhngis’ (sweepers), creating dissension and distrust within the union. The young women often made statements concerning their equality with the young men, and the fact that they were even better than the young men in work as well as in organising. At the same time, they did not protest when, in his speech, the trade unionist accused the owner’s wife of immorality, ‘of going to night clubs with the driver’. They obliviously chanted slogans such as:

- The owner has died, hai hai,
  Carry the body across the Jamuna, hai hai,
  Wife cries as she breaks her bangles, hai hai.

- Malik mar gaya, hai hai,
  lash autahi, jamuna par,
  bivi royi, churi tore, hai hai.

The ambiguity in the views of these young women points to the difficulties of unilinear and stagiest classifications of workers’ and women’s awareness. They asserted simultaneously class, caste, feminist and non-feminist consciousness, expressing multiple identities and multiple locations.

Two generations of women workers: A comparison

JD and Sushma represent two generations of women worker leaders. There are clear differences between them, most sharply in their attitudes to violence. JD consciously initiated a new style in union functioning by refusing to resort to violent methods. The young women led by Sushma took violent methods for granted, and in that sense questioned the essentialist notion of women as being non-violent. JD combined sensitivity to women-specific issues with deeply-held essentialist views about women’s nature. Sushma challenged a number of gender roles and norms: the good behaviour required for marriage and the acceptance of male leadership. At the same time, the experience of both these
women highlights the structures of constraint within which women leaders operate in the arena of industrial action. Both were free from domestic responsibilities. They also had to rely on male support and ensure that they were morally respectable. Sushma had to stop meeting her boyfriend during the hunger strike and constantly prove her good character.

There remain continuities between the two generations of women workers in dealing with prevailing gender ideologies. Even as their experience shows a rupture with the traditional mould of feminine passivity and docility, it remains constrained within the wider structures of patriarchy in union structures and in society. These assertions of citizenship in practice through collective action point also to the truth of Ramaswamy’s statement that, ‘The key to the entire question of the worker’s ability to deal with the employer is not so much linguistic competence, socio-economic status or technical knowledge, as self-confidence’ (Ramaswamy & Ramaswamy, 1981:108).

It could be argued that the Calcom struggle was a flash in the pan, and the young women recruited in GLRs 3 and 4 would return to docility after the failure of the struggle. This may well happen, but what is important is the learning experience that these young workers have gone through, and the ways it has changed their own self-perception. As Elson points out, even if they lose their jobs, they would have acquired something permanent: ‘more self confidence, more organisational and advocacy skills, more knowledge of how their society works’ (Elson, 1996:50). This learning process was evident as Sushma reflected on the struggle after a few months:

> There are many things we have learnt from this experience, especially if one has to organize in a new unit. We should first form a union inside and get it registered. We need to save money from our salaries before we go on a long dharna or when we are thrown out. We could have supported the South Indian girls who are still working inside, though for how long I cannot say. But now one is more prepared for such situations.

The spectacular transformations noted above in the context of collective action were only one side of the changes women workers in unionised enterprises have undergone. A more subtle process of change also occurred within the household, involving women from both unionised and non-unionised enterprises.

**Negotiating Autonomy within the Household**

This section examines the ways in which women workers have negotiated autonomy within the household. The process of negotiating autonomy varies in different domestic regimes and also in relation to the life cycle status of the woman within these regimes, i.e. whether she is a daughter, mother or wife. One important aspect that emerges from this study is the variation in the structures and forms of internal patriarchal control, of power and entitlements in domestic regimes based on household type – complex, nuclear or sub-nuclear. Patriarchal
controls are more stringent in general in complex households that are composed of the respondent’s family plus other adult members. They include in-laws, own married son/daughter with children, elder relatives and other relatives. Nuclear family households composed of a married couple, or a married couple with their children, tend to be more egalitarian. Sub-nuclear households that do not include a married couple, but are composed of widows, divorcees, unmarried siblings or friends, are relatively free from extreme forms of internal patriarchal control.

Framing the discussion as a response to H. Moore’s question, ‘What kind of difference does employment make to the women themselves and how do they perceive the advantages and disadvantages of waged work?’ (Moore, 1994), I examine three aspects of the transformational potential of women’s waged work. These are: perception of income earning and control over income; marriage choice and exit options; and perceptions of gender roles. At an aggregate level, 64 per cent of the women workers stated that their status within the household had improved considerably since they started working, while 36 per cent per cent said that their status had not changed.

Table 6.1 Marital status and change in social status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of status</th>
<th>Never married</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Single</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No change</td>
<td>18.18</td>
<td>15.15</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>36.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved</td>
<td>37.88</td>
<td>19.70</td>
<td>6.06</td>
<td>63.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (per cent)</td>
<td>56.06</td>
<td>34.85</td>
<td>9.09</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 132

There was no significant difference between married and unmarried women in terms of how they perceived changes in their status within the household. In their own words, improved status meant ‘more respect’, ‘greater role in family decision-making’, ‘consultation in decision-making’, ‘being treated like adults’ and ‘family members now take my views seriously’. The comment ‘no change’, however, did not necessarily imply that their position and standing within the household was negative - a number said that their status had always been good. Also, improved status did not necessarily mean that women had absolute control over their income, or that their financial contribution was formally acknowledged in all cases. Overall, however, their involvement in waged work did increase their ‘value’ within the household.

The Engelian assumption that waged work is a sufficient condition for improving women’s status has been qualified further with A. Sen’s notion of ‘perceived income contribution’. In Chapter 3, we noted that women were making substantial contributions to total household income. They were bringing in cash from outside, making their contribution visible. There was a regular monthly flow of their contributions into household budgets. A majority of them
(68 per cent) contributed their total wage to the household budget, while 20 per cent contributed around half the wage, keeping a certain amount for themselves. Only 12 per cent did not merge their wages into household budgets at all. Despite the substantial and visible nature of women’s earnings, the translation of this into ‘perception’ and further into greater autonomy was not automatic. Gendered cultural norms, rules and practices, conferring different degrees of power and entitlements enter into the process across domestic regimes, with a sharp distinction between the ways in which the income of daughters and wives are perceived. In the following section, we discuss the variations in income management systems, and issues of power, control and choice as women negotiate degrees of autonomy in different ways.

Wives

Perceptions concerning the income of wives and their control over that income depended on household type, as well as on the income of the husband. In complex households, wives tended to hand over their wages to the ‘household manager’, who was usually the mother-in-law. The corporate, patrilineal, patrilocal and hierarchical structure of complex households meant that wives had little direct access, let alone control, over their incomes. At the same time, they did use their agency to access that income indirectly. One form which was very common was through income retention: overtime earnings and bonus payments were kept back. Another indirect way was to use imperatives of work to get money, for instance for new clothes, so that they were ‘dressed decently like other workers’. In nuclear households, there were three systems: women handed over their income to husbands; placed it in a joint pool, or kept their wages themselves. The joint pooling system was the most common. Often, it took the form of a box placed in the kitchen, with contributions from husband and wife for daily expenses. Earmarking of income was also more evident in nuclear households, especially where the husband also had a regular income. Wives spent their wages on medicines or children’s education, while the husband made large payments for rent and electricity.

The existence of different systems of income management does not however tell us much about changing power relations. Wives who kept back their wages did not necessarily have absolute control over that income. Bina, for instance, kept her wages hidden because her husband, who had irregular jobs, tended to fritter the money away on cigarettes and drink. She would respond to his demands sparingly, trying to make sure that the money was used for food and her child’s school expenses. Hiding the wages often led to marital conflict and sometimes violence. In this case, the wife’s control over her income did not imply a transformation – it was more a desperate survival strategy. Similarly, the handing over of wages to the husband did not imply that absolute patriarchal control prevailed. The handing over was often symbolic, an unspoken strategy which bowed to cultural norms of the male head of the household and bolstered
the male breadwinner illusion. Men, particularly those with regular jobs, were often reluctant to take or use their wife’s income and would often put the money back into the common pool with access for the wife, or buy a gift for her. In real terms, these wives had a greater degree of autonomy in deciding how to use their income. This ‘play’ on paying obeisance to cultural norms and simultaneously undermining them was a common unspoken strategy followed in nuclear households.

In neither complex nor nuclear households did wives mention direct confrontation and assertions of absolute control over their incomes. Yet in both situations, mainly through covert strategies, wives were able to claim and use parts of their income autonomously. This did not mean that they spent it on themselves; more often than not the retrieved portion got disbursed in household expenses. However, these ‘reclaimed wages’ did provide a sense of self-worth and independence. It was only in situations of open marital conflict that wives overtly used their earning capacity to bargain. This could often rebound on women, as Mina found out.

We were fighting over buying something and I told my husband that I could do what I wanted, since it was my money after all. He got furious at that, walked out and did not eat at home for four days. He only relented after I apologised and promised never to say ‘my money, your money’.

Independent access to an income did notionally strengthen a woman’s fallback position, but this did not necessarily mean that women used the ‘exit option’ in every case. Sunita, for instance, chose to leave her drug-addicted husband and live with her mother, but was hesitant to ask him for a divorce. Jaswanti, who did use the exit option to divorce her drunkard husband, was heckled and insulted whenever she went to court. She recalls with bitterness how someone called out to her in public, shouting, ‘A woman who takes her husband to court is a prostitute’. The social opprobrium attached to divorced women, which limits the possibility of remarriage, plus the continued need for male protection, make ‘exit’ an option only in extreme cases. Even as these examples show that wives tended to accept rather than openly challenge patriarchal authority and control, they also point to covert forms of gaining some areas of control over their income. These strategies of ‘stooping to conquer’, highlighted by Bunmi Dipo Salami in her study on Nigerian women, have been documented in different cultural contexts. Even if not transformative, they do point to female agency which has been facilitated by their wage-earning capability (Dipo-Salami, 2002; Kabeer, 2000).

Single women

This group of women includes widows, divorced and single women who are the main earners in the household and also had full control over their income. Ratni Devi, a widow who worked at Weston, highlights the significance of waged work and the transformation in her status after she lost her job.
Now that the factory has closed, my son and other male relatives will not think of my working or going out anywhere. They feel I should stay at home. Fifteen years ago when my husband died, I took up factory work. I was admired by my relatives for being economically self-reliant. They were also relieved that I would not ask them for money. Now they feel there is no need. Earlier if I went out, the neighbours would think I was going to the factory. Now if I step out, they'll wonder where I am going.

For younger single mothers, the situation was far more difficult. Those who returned to their natal homes experienced both security and insecurity. While they knew they would not be thrown out and their children would be taken care of, there was continuous pressure not to be seen as a burden. Negotiating space in such a situation took different forms, with most of these women setting aside their own needs and desires and consciously contributing to the broader needs of other family members, lest they be seen as selfish.

In the sample, 11 percent of the women were never married older women between the ages of 31 to 50. They represent the ‘elder sister’ phenomenon mentioned earlier – women who had virtually given up the possibility of marriage because they had taken on the role of main ‘male provider’ of the family. In most cases these women were able to exercise a great deal of autonomy. They proudly mentioned that they had taken on the role of fathers, and spoke of the respect that other family members had for them. Crucial decisions on brothers’ education and sisters’ marriage were initiated and handled by them. In some cases, older male relatives such as a maternal uncle intervened, but in these cases too, women mentioned that they were treated with equality – as proxy men. These women had acquired a tremendous sense of self-worth and confidence and status within the family. However, they were often faced with the stigma of being unmarried, and this restricted their mobility. Here negotiation involved acceptance or challenge to the wider patriarchal structures of society.

**Daughters**

As mentioned in Chapter 3, even where the reason given for working by unmarried daughters was ‘dowry/time pass’, the actual contribution their wages made to the household were euphemised, leading to a non-recognition/non-perception of daughters’ earnings. In most cases where daughters were either major earners or making a significant contribution to daily expenses, unmarried daughters handed over their wages to the mother, often keeping some for themselves. In cases where household needs were not so dire, daughters put the money into a savings account. *In no case did daughters hand over wages to the father, the formal head of the household.* This concurs with a strong cultural norm, especially in North Indian Punjabi families, where parents cannot eat from a daughter’s hand. This restriction is even more stringent after marriage, when fathers in particular cannot even have a glass of water in a married
daughter's house. Even where the daughter was the main earner, her wages could never be flaunted before elder males, since it would be seen as an insult to their traditional role as providers.

The second way in which the income of daughters was non-recognised was through its use on consumer items. These items were used by family members, but were seen as items for her dowry or ‘extras’. Although contributions from her income were consumed within the household, they were labelled as hers, again dissociating the link between the daughter’s earning and improvement in standards of living. The lack of overt recognition of the daughter’s earnings did not mean that there was no change in the status of the daughter. Daughters could and did use their ‘non-recognised’ contribution to household income to bargain and assert choices when it was necessary. A number of them mentioned that they would choose their own marriage partner rather than have a traditional arranged marriage. This again was not presented as defiance of parents, but rather that it would be their choice ‘in consultation with parents’. Some of the girls had delayed marriage, refusing proposals because they wanted to study as they worked. There were quite a few girls like Poonam, for instance, who was doing a BA by correspondence and had stalled her parents attempts to get her married. ‘It is my job and my degree that will provide me security in the long run – not marriage.’

Gender roles

Two aspects are examined in exploring gender roles: the division of labour within the household, and perceptions of marriage and male/female roles and responsibilities.

Numerous studies have pointed out that the gender division of domestic labour is the most resistant to change. Care work within the household remains primarily the responsibility of women. It is tied closely to domestic ideologies extolling the virtues of women as selfless, devoted, altruistic and sacrificing. These ideologies provide the social rationale for unpaid labour, enmeshing it in personal relations and thereby obliterating the boundaries between work and familial relationships. Some argue that the function of domestic ideologies is precisely to dissolve these boundaries to maintain the invisible, unpaid, unrecognised domestic labour of women (Sangari, 2001:282). Studies in India suggest that women’s entry into wage work does not lead to a redistribution of household tasks between men and women. Rather, it can lead to a redistribution of tasks among available women (Sharma, 1986:144).

Almost all the women workers in this study were involved in domestic labour. Only 15 per cent, predominantly unmarried young women, said that they did not do any housework. The majority of women workers (79 per cent) spent up to four hours daily, with a few who spent up to 8 hours daily on domestic labour.
Table 6.2 Domestic labour and marital status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hours of domestic labour</th>
<th>Never married</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Single</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No domestic work</td>
<td>13.64</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 hours</td>
<td>42.42</td>
<td>30.30</td>
<td>6.06</td>
<td>78.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-8 hours</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>6.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>56.06</td>
<td>34.85</td>
<td>9.09</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 132

The data from this study show that the percentage of married and unmarried women engaged in domestic labour are almost equal, and that young unmarried women do have domestic responsibilities. However, the significance of freedom from biological reproductive tasks as a key factor in both employer preference as well as ability of women to take on waged work emerges with the data on childcare. A large number of women in the study – 73 per cent – had either grown-up children or did not have children. Amongst those who did have children, only two used a crèche in the community, while most of the rest (20 per cent of women workers) left their children in the care of female relatives. 6 per cent made arrangements with neighbours and friends, confirming the general observation mentioned above on the redistribution of domestic labour tasks between women.

Table 6.3 Childcare and marital status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Childcare</th>
<th>Never married</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Single</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crèche</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female relative</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13.64</td>
<td>6.06</td>
<td>19.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6.06</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>56.06</td>
<td>13.64</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>72.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (per cent)</td>
<td>56.06</td>
<td>34.85</td>
<td>9.09</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=132

The data show that freedom from a specific aspect of reproductive work, childcare, was important for women’s entry into waged work, and that the primary responsibility for care work remains with women.

The chart below confirms this further, showing that men’s contribution to domestic labour was limited. Only in 5 per cent of the households did men do all the tasks associated with domestic labour, while in 47 per cent of the households, men did nothing at all. However, a large section did contribute by doing external jobs such as shopping and paying bills, thereby confirming the external/internal divide. In some households, men also cooked, looked after
children, and were responsible for repairing things in the house. These households were all nuclear.

There was a sharp distinction between older and younger men. No young man (brother/son) contributed, although fathers and husbands did. Even though the number is small, it is important to note that there was a change in the traditional division of domestic responsibilities. Part of this change was attributed to unavailability of women, for instance if they did overtime. But in many cases, there was a conscious articulation of sharing household tasks. Despite its rigidity to change, a process of democratisation in sharing household tasks was occurring in some households. A similar observation was made by a study on women workers employed in NOIDA (Soni-Sinha, 2001).

Figure 6.1 Men’s contribution to domestic labour

![Pie chart showing men's contributions to domestic labour]

Changing views on marriage, work and typical gender roles among daughters emerged strongly through a focus group discussion on the television serial Ramayana. The Ramayana is a classic story from Hindu mythology in which ideal role models of husband/wife; filial obedience and virtues of right and evil are reiterated. Every Indian irrespective of religion knows the story of Sita and Ram. The television serial became a hit, and workers were given time off even during Sunday overtime to watch it. The focus groups formed semi-spontaneously as we sat together in tea stalls after work, during the hunger strike, and in the hours sitting outside the labour court. The groups consisted of primarily unmarried girls. The discussions were extremely animated since everyone knew the story, had strong views on it and immediately related it to their own lives.

I highlight two significant issues that emerged out of all the discussions: a strong identification with Sita as a wronged wife and a simultaneous confirmation as well as a challenging of the ‘ideal’ gender role model. The abduction of Sita by Ravana and the suspicion cast on her after her rescue was raised as a reflection of how society and men treated women. As NT said:
All of us women have a Lakshman Rekha draws around us: we cannot go wherever we want, have to be back at night and we know we are in danger if we step out alone. Sita, like us, was aware of this but she was tricked and because of her goodness, she stepped out of the circle.

Indeed, all the women workers, married and unmarried, had restrictions on their mobility. All the young girls had restrictions on being alone in public spaces, had to be back before dark and get permission to do overtime. The discussions were not so much on the restrictions on mobility, which were seen as necessary in an unsafe city like Delhi, but hinged on issues of sexuality and male suspicion. The fact that Ram suspected his wife and subjected her to the Agni Pariksha (Test of Fire) was deplored. Many women linked Sita’s fate to their own situation where if anything happened, neighbours and relatives would immediately point fingers at them. As working women, they found that the onus of proving their innocence had become heavier. In the discussions, some questioned while others accepted that ‘society is like this’. None could envisage a society where women had complete independence and freedom of mobility.

A similar contradictory perception of the ideal husband/wife role model was expressed. The polarised ideal qualities of husband and wife symbolised by Ram/Sita were seen as good and correct, but almost all the women stated that this ideal was unrealistic and could not be emulated. The strongest statement on this came from one of the Calcom women:

‘If today a man is not like Ram, then why should we be like Sita?’

These young women expressed a more pragmatic and less romanticised view of marriage and men, a point noted by Kabeer in her study of Bangladeshi garment workers (Kabeer, 2000:171). While marriage remained a necessary objective, it was not seen as taking predominance over work and study. As we had stated in earlier work, ‘In computer terms, marriage and associated domesticity are the “default setting”, the norm, the ever present point at which one arrives, or to which one returns, although other possibilities may (temporarily) intervene’ (Chhachhi and Pittin, 1996b:110). Despite the ‘non-recognition’ of daughters’ contribution to the family economy, their involvement in waged work did strengthen their fall-back position and expanded the horizon of choices available to them, without an open acknowledgement of the source of that strength. The fact that daughters have taken over the traditional responsibilities of fathers and brothers to provide for their dowries heralds a major shift in the material structure of patriarchal authority, even if at an ideological level there has been no overt, direct challenge to elder male authority.

The complexities of internal power dynamics and cultural norms within the household make it difficult to identify the transformational potential of waged work. As Kabeer points out, formal control over income was not as important as the expansion of choice and options due to wage work. The resort to covert strategies, particularly by young wives, the ‘games’ played by wives in nuclear
households and the non-recognition of daughters’ earnings in this study all confirm Kabeer’s major finding that male protection remains socially significant, even though male provisioning has been undermined in many cases. It is important to note that waged work here is regular and visible - an important qualification to Sen’s blanket endorsement of waged work per se. The data in this study illustrates another important aspect - younger women, the daughters in particular represent a new kind of woman worker: they are aware of rights at their workplace and in relation to the family. Their views on male protection are far more cynical and overt acceptance more pragmatic. These young women are aware that the getting a good dowry for a good stable marriage no longer holds. Dowry demands continue and refusal to meet them often leads to murder. Public exposure of this by the women’s movement and the media has had an effect and these women express their disillusionment with the idea that marriage means lifetime security. So while the discourse of earning one’s dowry may still be used to explain their entry into waged work yet many see employment as a more reliable and long-term basis for security. In many instances, they are crossing the threshold of ‘habitus’, challenging the moral economy of the family and traditional notions of marriage.

Reflections on Agency: Consent, Resistance and Transformation

In both gendered labour regimes and domestic regimes, women workers have used their agency in overt and direct ways, as well as in covert, indirect ways. Do these acts of individual and collective agency imply a rupture of consent and a move from resistance to transformation? In contemporary studies, there is a tendency to valorise indirect forms of resistance as women’s agency, stopping short of what these acts imply in terms of structural change. On the other hand, structure is invoked as the constant and ultimate constraint. Rather than swinging the pendulum between structure and agency, a more nuanced understanding is needed. Conceptions of individual or collective transformative agency and struggle are certainly limited if their dialectical relation with determining material, epistemic, institutional and ideological structures is seen as a one-way process. However, if these structures are conceptualized as both reproduced and transformed via agency, then a different understanding of consent and agency emerges (Sangari, 2001:365). In addition patriarchies are linked with other structures which intersect in myriad ways combining congruence and contradictions. Both domination and resistance can no longer be conceptualised as relatively fixed binary categories. As we have seen, gendered labour regimes and domestic regimes as systems of power relations function simultaneously ‘through coercion or the threat and practice of violence, through making a wide social consensus drawn from and dispersed over many areas of social life and through obtaining in various ways, different degrees of consent…’ (Sangari, 2001:371).
Drawing on Sangari’s observations, analytical distinctions need to be made between consent resting on material arrangements which guarantee women rights, compensations, or protection; consent resting on local theories of entitlement which offer at best precarious, and at worst illusory rights, compensations or protection; and consent resting on forms of coercion which push women towards normative behaviour. The consensual, ‘contractual’ elements combine agential power with subjection for women, and produce a mixture of consent and resistance. Thus women’s agency is both complicit and transgressive. The data discussed above point to elements of all three forms. However, the information also suggests that despite the ambivalence of the specific forms of resistance discussed, there are processes which have undermined the material basis of traditional forms of control in domestic regimes.

I would argue further that there are two other significant social factors in contemporary India which reflect the changing nature of traditional patriarchies and influence the process of their preservation/reconstitution/transformation.

Liberalisation has initiated a new individualistic, liberal and market-oriented discourse on women’s rights through the mass media. Media analysts note a shift from general social issues to the resurgence of the ‘family’ since the 1990s in the content of television serials and advertisements. The family is being packaged and marketed as a dynamic entity that allows for continuity and change (CFAR, 2002). In numerous serials, there is a continuous and heightened debate on the roles of men and women in the family, on their respective rights, responsibilities, obligations and violations. In the end, of course, ‘traditional’ values – the good chaste wife and mother – are reasserted, with women subordinating their lives for the collective welfare of the family. Similarly in advertising, a niche customer – the super homemaker – is being targeted. Women’s aspirations for freedom of choice and decision-making (factors identified by qualitative product market research) are promoted by advertisements for ovens, washing machines, and other consumer durables, and are simultaneously translated into product acquisition. As Sivadas points out, women’s power is converted into ‘product power’ (quoted in Vij, 1999).

However, the media portrayal of women as independent, assertive and conscious of their rights, and their simultaneous containment within a traditional or consumerist mould is neither viewed or read uncritically nor bought wholesale by consumers. It is the contradictions, the ambiguities, the dilemmas and soul-searching that constitute the conversations and discussions around the television serials. The ‘family’ is today part of a daily publicly contested discourse, even as attempts are made to reconstitute it as a private sphere.

As the women in this study are both producers of television and consumers of the images televisions transmit, they are not immune to these broader social processes. Even as they assert collectively and individually citizenship rights enabled through waged work, (i.e. the assertion of industrial and social citizenship) they are also subject to the forces of ‘market citizenship’. It is
possible to imagine that these contesting notions of citizenship would inform future struggles for women's autonomy. Ironically, it is the very process of liberalization, through which this notion of citizenship is articulated, that is also undermining the enabling conditions which were leading to changes in traditional structures of gendered control in domestic regimes and also to challenges to managerial authority in gendered labour regimes.

Notes

1 This issue is posed these days in terms of the link between employment/economic independence and empowerment. I prefer to use autonomy rather than empowerment. See Chapter 2 for elaboration.

2 This mixture of views came out sharply in discussions about the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and the Hindu right's call for building a temple on the site. On the one hand, she used rational logical arguments to assess the competing claims by Hindus and Muslims and at the same time asserted that Ayodhya belonged to Ram as a matter of faith.

3 In Chapter 4, the gendered forms of labour control and workplace discipline have been elaborated, as well as the incident that sparked off the struggle which led to the formation of the union.

4 'For most women, trade unions meet at the wrong time in the wrong place about the wrong things. For most trade unionists, women are the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time going on about the wrong things' (Campbell, 1982).

5 Households of migrant workers have not been included in this discussion.

6 This was literally a line drawn by Ram's brother Lakshman around the hut when he left her alone in the forest on her bidding to follow a deer. Sita stepped over the line to feed a mendicant and she was kidnapped and taken off to Lanka. This line symbolises the protective boundary for women - transgression of which leads not only to violence against women but also general destruction.

7 Similar questions have been raised in discussions on South Asian historiography, particularly the valorisation of moments of resistance in the early writings of the Subaltern school. See discussions by N. Gooptu, 2001; S. Ortner, 1995; D. Haynes and G. Prakash, 1991; R. O'Hanlon, 1988.