Contingent workers: Women in two industries in Mumbai

Gandhi, N.; Shah, N.

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
SNAPSHOTS OF A MOVEMENT

Women make their own almanac. "We left for the city after the birth of my first child" one might remember. Another had said she had got her first job the day Indira Gandhi was assassinated and a few recalled marriages being cancelled because of the communal riots. The event makes the date or at least goes into the fixing of dates. Our own almanac notes that we became `alive' when we joined the women's movement in the 1980s. We had existed earlier, but now we were conscious of looking at others and ourselves with another eye. We became alive to another World - a beautiful as well as tragic one. Women ceased to exist as missing numbers in sex ratios, or percentages of illiterates or in the rising rates of maternal morbidity. The voices and stories of the women we met imprinted themselves in our minds, haunted our emotions, and fuelled our actions. From them, we learnt what it was to be a woman. For there was not a moment when they were unaware of the paradox that is woman: aware of our bodies, its strengths made into weaknesses; aware of unhappiness or violence at home but unable to leave it; aware of our dreams, but powerless to fly. Aware that life for all of us means cheerfully rationalising our compromises, making our own little paths and seeking our own forms of happiness.

Our campaigns were small but powerful, creating waves in the media and parliament. We introduced legal reforms, new groups and magazines and a grudging Public Consciousness of women's issues. It was called the new phase of the older Indian women's movement. This loose network periodically came together in 'conferences' where we converged to share our thoughts, actions and energy. Five hundred women attended the first two conferences held in Mumbai in 1980
and 1985. The last one in Bihar (1997) hosted 6000 women who had taken time off, paid their own way, travelled for two to three days in unreserved train compartments, to share their issues, ideas and strategies. These conferences are organised every three years by a loose coalition of women's organisations from all over the country, which regrouped after each conference to give space to other groups to take up the challenge of the next conference. The pains of collective functioning across a huge country, raising money through donations, and organising on a shoe string budget were more than compensated by the sheer energy generated by the mass of women, talking, dancing, and eating together.

The differences between us are uncountable, pluralism abounded. Not only are there differences of class, caste and religion but also of region and local customs, which changed the nature of gender relations, our priorities and methods. Rural poor women were most concerned with issues of landlessness, access to work and survival. The urban poor feared homelessness. Muslim women needed to meet as a minority group. Battered women struggled against the violence. Single women, lesbians, displaced women, dalit women, tribal women... the list can go on. To think of us as one category is problematic. There is no denying these differences. Would we allow our differences to divide us, or enrich our politics? In spite of their differences, women are not confused about the domination of men, of higher classes and castes, over their lives, their bodies, work, and whose word informs laws, everyday life and community practices. We find that women do like 'women's spaces' and that the various shades of difference blend into a shared empathy on various occasions. And there have always been shared strategies that hold women together, strategies against the State, employers, religious practices, and patriarchal practices.

We were workaholics within the small autonomous groups, juggling between paid work, family responsibilities and the movement. Our triple roles were taken to fever pitch and it did not matter that many of us burnt out, dropped off or limped away. We were fiercely independent and strong advocates of women's employment. We were sure that paid work and wages were the most crucial issues for women's creativity, empowerment and participation in militant struggles. We had marched alongside the wives of striking textile workers, supported trade unions and dreamt of the confluence of
the women's and labour movements. But the world was more complex than Marxism would have us believe. Highly paid women found themselves battered but were unable to leave home. Skilled workers were trapped between low paid, insecure jobs and back breaking domestic work. Was it the family, the labour market or their own wishes, which made women enter and exit the labour market? Factory-based women have recorded the lowest levels of participation in militant union activities, whilst informal sector workers have been fighting for union recognition and for their right to be recognised as workers. These questions had to be perceived in the context of a rapidly dwindling manufacturing sector and the decline of the organised labour movement. Finally the 1991-92 communal riots of Mumbai came as a powerful blow that ideologically paralysed us. Working class colonies went up in flames and neither the Left nor the moderate political parties could do anything to quell the right wing wave. The choice was to stick to conventional theories or look for alternative ones.

It is one of our favourite pastimes to narrate to one another anecdotes of women's acts of resistance, usually with a sense of theatriics in which the mouse always outwitted the cat. A particular one we came across when we were studying home-based workers went like this. Tarabai is a factory worker and mother of four. "Not a very talkative man, I had to interpret my husband's actions. Every month he would buy the rations of wheat and rice. Every morning he would leave some money for daily expenses in a box over the stove. It was never enough for vegetables, dal and masala. But he wanted good food. Now what to do? So I asked him to find me a job. No! In desperation I found this home based work. His gloating smile said, see, I goaded you into finding a solution. That was the sort of man he was. Once the kerosene stove had to be repaired. The flame would flutter out or tar the vessels, both of which meant time and energy scrubbing. It was time to bury it. I spoke to my husband, no reply. I tried again, a scornful look. No amount of home-based work would give me enough to buy it. So I simply refused to get up in the morning. No hot water, no tea and later no lunch tiffin to take to work. I forced my eyes shut till he left, then took the kids to my neighbours for some tea. He tested me for two days and then purchased a new stove!" We speak of these anecdotes but when we write, it is about collective struggles, movements and
campaigns, or very unusual acts of bravery. Should we not consider acts, which are non confrontational but achieve their purpose as a struggle? Is women's individual agency transformative? Is there a connection between individual and collective agency?

In the course of one year, two symbols of Independent India were destroyed. Hindutva right wing forces destroyed the Babri Masjid and secularism. And the Nehruvian mixed economy based on a socialist model was dismantled to usher in the new economic policies. The World Bank's structural adjustment policies opened the Indian economy to world trade and capital. Like many activists and theoreticians, we feared the onslaught of multinational companies, consumerism, deepening poverty and unemployment. The pace of change was terrifying. And no one could have articulated it better than Mangala. "All the men and some women in our family have been permanent factory workers. Then the mills shut down. We thought, never mind, other factories will come in their place. But bowling alleys and eating-places came up. The union continued its struggle, but many older workers committed suicide. There are no new factories and the old ones are shedding people like broken hair. I then thought, our days have gone but my daughter can work. They were taking young girls in garment making. I sent her to the industrial estates; the large ones had moved out of Mumbai, the small units were shutting because of foreign goods. Tell me where have all the factories gone? At my age all I can do is sell vegetables on the wayside. But what about my children? Where are the jobs? You tell me what we can do?"

These are some 'textual' snapshots that freeze certain moments and events in time, in our lives, and in the Indian women's movement and give the context of our involvement in the women's movement and women's labour in the changing economic scenario. We were concerned that women with their vulnerable position in society and the labour market would become the targets of these changes.

THE CONTEXT

Restructuring had already become a buzzword. Terms like globalisation, restructuring were not only part of the theoretical or political discourse but had become part of everyday usage. With the introduction of
Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs), liberalisation measures, the globalisation of production and markets and technological innovations, the neo-liberal economics paradigm had permeated both the developed and developing countries and was being actively promoted by the International Financial Institutions like International Monetary Fund, World Bank and World Trade Organisation.

In India, Structural Adjustment Policy changes were officially introduced in 1991 in the wake of fiscal profligacy and balance of payment crisis. There was a strong criticism of its earlier protected and largely state directed industrialisation policies that had bred inefficiencies, corruption, a bloated bureaucracy and a slow growth rate sardonically called “the Hindu rate of growth” of 2 per cent per annum. The euphoria of industry and the middle classes at the ‘opening’ of the Indian economy was in sharp contrast to the fear and opposition from the labour movement, some political parties and progressive social movements. The opportunities of new, highly paid jobs, endless options for consumer products and the entry of global media promised a new world for the middle and upper classes. But the threat of closure, retrenchment and unemployment confronted the majority of the poor specifically older workers and women. Studies in Latin American and Africa indicated that poor women and children were hardest hit with the introduction of structural adjustment programs (Cornia et al, 1987; Cagatay and Gunseli, 1990; Beneria, 1991). Macro studies and projections of the Indian economic situation revealed a gloomy picture of unemployment, rising prices, deteriorating labour market conditions and a process of industrial stagnation (Mundle, 1991; Ghosh, 1991). On the other hand, a few economists (Deshpande, 1992; 1993), industrialists and planners argued that these policies would introduce flexible low paying jobs and new opportunities for women.

In this chapter, we elaborate our research questions, the structure of the book, our conceptual framework and use of three key concepts-Flexibility Strategies, Household & Household Strategies and Agency & Structure.

**OUR RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This is an enquiry into women’s experiences of the various dimensions of change in the manufacturing sector in the context of industrial
Chapter 1

restructuring. We explore how women have been affected in large, medium, small and tiny enterprises. How do women workers strategise for workplace security? The cut in direct transfers by the State forces working class households to adjust their expenditure and earning patterns. How do women experience these adjustments and how were they affected by them?

The aim is to understand the micro, localised effects of macro changes, at the firm/production level, at the household and at the level of the individual woman. We could also observe the relationships between employer-employee, men-women, different types of women and their individual and collective agency. Whilst the emphasis is on women, it has also given us an opportunity to interact with entrepreneurs, professional managers and male workers. In order to understand these processes, we look at two growing industrial sectors with domestic and export markets that employ women in large numbers: the plastics processing and diamond polishing and jewellery industries.

We began with studies of each industry separately but in the course of data collection and production of monographs, we saw the usefulness of combining the data of our two industries for a richer and varied understanding of women’s labour, in debating conceptual frameworks and sharing the process of writing. Nandita Shah has collected the data and written the monograph on the plastics processing industry and Nandita Gandhi has studied the diamond polishing and jewellery industry. The two researchers worked together, reading, editing and modifying all the chapters. Initially, Nandita Shah wrote chapter two, four, five and part of chapter one & eight. Nandita Gandhi wrote Chapter three, six, seven and part of chapter one & eight. But such a division could not be maintained throughout the process of writing. Both the researchers have worked together on each chapter in subsequent drafts. For the final round, Nandita Gandhi has done the overall editing and Nandita Shah has taken care of the tables, bibliography, design and layout.

Outlining of the conceptual framework in this chapter is followed by chapter two, which elaborates on the dilemmas of feminist research. The location of the research is Mumbai, a rapidly de-industrialising city. It states the method of selection of the two industries and sample of women workers. Chapter three provides the context of the post Independence economic policies, the gradual change and the
dismantling of the economic model through reforms and the impact on the manufacturing sector, the workforce and the social sector. Chapter four is an introduction to the women in our sample and their households. It links the macro economic policies to the micro level or household strategies of expenditure reduction, income generation and networking and examines how they are affecting women. The fourth, sixth and seventh chapters present quantitative and qualitative data and form the main body of this book. Chapter five highlights the specific impact of the liberalisation policies on the plastic processing and diamond polishing and jewellery manufacturing industries. Chapter six analyses the three strategies of flexibility as they are being used in firms and their potential consequences for women workers. Workers in both the formal and the informal sector experience the threat of employment insecurity. Chapter seven explores individual and collective forms of resistance and organising. How do women strategise in the face of fear and insecurity? In the concluding chapter eight, we return to our research questions, our data and put forward some policy recommendations.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A Backdrop

A substantial part of feminist discourse and research has focused on the question: is industrialisation a gendered process and specifically how does it absorb and shape women's labour? This rich and multi layered body of literature has significantly touched on such concerns as women's exclusion from modern industry, their selective inclusion in global factories, the role of capital in gender relations and the existence of patriarchal relations at the workplace. One of the earliest, influential contributions was Boserup's 'Women's Role in Economic Development' in 1970, which showed that in the course of industrialisation, women lost their traditional occupations and were excluded from wage labour in the factory. Her arguments were based on labour force data that showed a lower percentage of wage labour amongst women than when production was in small and family enterprises. Boserup cited a variety of reasons like labour protection laws, levels of skill and education, domestic responsibility, social customs and high fertility rates amongst specific groups of women dissuaded employers from employing women (Baud, 1992). Her thesis was taken up by theorists who drew upon
Marxism, feminism and the dependency theory, to give it the status of a theory of ‘female marginalisation.’

Socialist feminist writings in Britain and North America analysed this process as a byproduct of the capitalist separation of production and reproduction, as a result of surplus labour supply and the mutual co-operation of patriarchy and capitalism (Eisenstien, 1979; Hartman, 1981). Capital was as much the beneficiary of the sexual division of labour within the household as were men as it helped secure women’s cheap and flexible labour. Women’s labour within the household and at the workplace was seen as an integral part of the dynamics of capital and labour. Some Latin American writers saw marginality arising from the imbalance created by the dependent nature of capitalism and the abundant supply of labour. They argued that the nature of industrial growth in peripheral economies reduced the overall demand of labour. And women lost out because of lack of education and their domestic responsibilities. Based on data from the Brazilian census, Saffioti (1978) found that a large number of women were employed in the textile industry and in agriculture. By the 1950s and 1960s, or the beginning of the ‘Brazilian miracle’, there was an overall increase in women’s industrial employment but their share relative to men declined i.e. women had a low share in the fastest growing industries.

The Female Marginalisation theory had a strong emotive and political appeal. Women’s groups often used it as a slogan to bring about gender awareness amongst policy makers and planners. At the grassroots level, it helped explain processes and gave an impetus to the establishment of income generation programs. There were numerous studies and observations from different countries to support it. In India, micro studies showed how women were displaced from traditional work e.g. harvesters took over manual cutting, simple equipment like pesticide sprayers were given to men, electric flour mills displaced women grinders and fishing nets were made by machines with nylon thread (Gandhi and Shah, 1991). It also influenced the policy debate, at the time called ‘women in development’ (WID) debate. It gave visibility to the issue of exclusion of women from productive labour at various forums. International conferences, UN agencies, governments bodies and academic institutions made space for separate projects for women, modified policies and re-organised data collection systems. However, subsequent studies have critiqued this theorisation (Beneria and Sen, 1981; Scott, 1986; Horton, 1999) as theoretically partial,
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statistically untestable and questioned its validity as a general theory. Its relevance waned as academic attention shifted in the 1970s, from exclusion to the selective inclusion of women according to age and marital status in the labour process in factories producing for the world market (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Safa, 1981).

Globally, women's employment was increasing in spite of a decline in traditional sectors and economic stagnation in several countries. Multinational companies in the industrialised countries found it cheaper to relocate their production units or sub contract part or the whole product out to avail of cheap labour in Brazil, Mexico, South East Asia and later Malaysia and Indonesia. This was possible because technological developments allowed the manufacture and assembling of parts in different locations. Third World governments set up free trade zones or export zones with exemption from taxation and bans on trade unionism for these global factories. The data and debate on the New International Division of Labour sharply brought into focus 'women oriented work', the preference for young, unmarried women, their unskilled, insecure jobs and poor work conditions in industries like electronics and garments in the Global South. Women, it was found, accepted lower wages and were quick to pick up sewing or assembly work because of gender socialisation and adaptability to monotonous tasks (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Lim, 1978; Safa, 1981). Studies showed how different economic situations and capital interacted with the form and strength of gender inequality in societies to include, segregate or exclude women from the labour process (Hartman, 1979; Walby, 1990). This body of literature provided important theoretical insights into the exploitation of women workers, the gendered nature of the labour market (Cockburn, 1981) and the collusion between the state, capital and patriarchy.

The two glaring inadequacies in this theorisation was that it concentrated mainly on export oriented industries and bypassed the many domestic industries in the informal sector, which were employing women who were not necessarily young and unmarried. Secondly, it was concerned with the 'demand' side or the needs and strategies of capital and not the 'supply' side or the women workers. Wolf (1992: 9) comments, '.....women themselves were missing, rendered undifferentiated, homogeneous, faceless and voiceless by analyses that, according to Ong(1988:84), attribute much more personality and animation to capital than to the women it exploits'. Feminist scholarship
evolved to bring in the ‘supply’ side without jettisoning the ‘demand’ side, women’s choices along with intra household decision-making, the empowering aspects of the negative and positive side of paid employment, changes in gender relations and women’s autonomy (Beneria and Roldan, 1987; Ong, 1988; Wolf, 1992; Saptari, 1995; Kabeer, 2000).

These studies have shown the interconnections of gender relations, the labour market, the household and women as these influence women’s access to employment, the nature of their work, their skill and designations and sense of security. In the light of these theoretical insights, several possible frameworks for examining women’s labour have been put forward. Banerjee (1999) found that the balance between institutions and sites of control over women shifted in society to influence women’s status and work in particular periods of industrialisation. She draws on case studies from eight East, Southeast, and South Asian countries to find a similar, initial pattern of industrialisation, which provided fresh opportunities to women. Subsequently, as industry switched from labour intensive to more sophisticated technology, women’s entry and retention in the labour market impinged on each society’s tradition of patriarchy, history of women’s work and state intervention. Walby’s puts forward a more elaborate framework of different forms of gender regimes or patriarchy, which arise from different articulations of inter-related structures of patriarchy. Gender relations are interwoven with class and ethnic relations. ‘Changes in the economy as a whole cannot be understood outside of an understanding of the transformation in the structures of gender relations, the change from a private gender regime or private patriarchy, to a more public gender regime, or public patriarchy. These changes in the form of gender regime are proceeding rapidly, giving rise to new forms of opportunity and inequality’ (Walby, 1997:65). Notably she also incorporates Giddens’ notion of agency and structure, constantly interacting and recreating each other.

In the context of this theoretical backdrop, the introduction of the new economic reforms in India and the subsequent industrial restructuring, we found three concepts - Flexibility Strategies, Household and its strategies, and Agency and Structure of relevance for our investigations. The concept of flexibility strategies gives us the possibility of looking at changes at the firm level and the responses of workers in the context of industrial restructuring. The concept of the
household is used to place the woman worker within familial relationships of co-operation and conflict. The outcomes of household negotiations are not static and have different implications for women. Lastly, the body of literature on the concept of agency and structure allows for a focus on the individual and the collective within the workplace, trade union and the household.

**Flexibility Strategies**

Analyses of the workplace and conditions of workers have been dominated by the use of the Labour Process Theory. The theoretical framework, originated from the works of Marx and Braverman, has generated up a formidable body of literature. It focuses on the role of technological and organisational changes for capitalist production and its implication for the nature of work and control over workers (Burawoy, 1979; Thompson, 1983, Braverman, 1974). Labour Process theorists have scrutinised the Taylorist and Fordist production methods, the process of deskillling, intensification of management control, and ways in which capitalism conceals the social character of the production process and surplus creation from the workers. Feminist scholarship made a critical contribution to the Labour Process theory by pointing out that the workplace is an arena where gender identities are defined and redefined by the selection and allocation of jobs. Skill definitions are based not only on training and education but also on gender prejudice. Jobs identified as ‘women’s jobs’ were usually downgraded in the skill hierarchy. The process of deskillling not only implied capital’s control over workers but also male control over women (Cockburn, 1985; Beechy, 1987; Beneria and Roldan, 1987; Baud, 1992; Walby, 1997; Chhachhi and Pittin, 1996). These contributions placed the relations of capital and gender along with that of capital and labour. Other critiques pointed out that the labour process theory has confined itself only to the labour process without consideration for the economic environment, market competition, state intervention and the crisis in Fordist production.

**The Concept of Flexibility Strategies**

The sweeping changes in Western economies during the 1970s and 1980s, a realignment of international capital, technological innovation, the decline of the manufacturing sector and the success of Japanese production techniques encouraged a return to a more conservative
economic model of deregulation and privatisation. These changes were interpreted by academics and policy makers as a crisis in the dominant, post World War system of mass production or the 'Fordist' model and the emergence of what came to be called the 'flexi firm' model and the notion of flexibility. In a broad sense it has been defined as 'the capacity to change'. Boyer emphasised the 'ability of a system or sub system to react to various disturbances.' Michon said, '...flexibility becomes imperative in the context of rapid change...' Atkinson defined 'dynamic flexibility' as '...changes to institutional, cultural and other social or economic regulations and practices, which permanently increase the capacity to respond to change' (Cahiers Economicques de Bruxelles, 1987).

In the pioneering work of Piore and Sabel (1984), flexibility was introduced by a vertical disintegration of the manufacturing process into a number of individual 'flexibly specialised' firms, which functioned with mutual co-operation as a network, with computer controlled machines and a skilled labour force. For the French Regulation theorists, flexibility or neo Fordism was a new form of capitalist control. For others it would result in a 'core' and 'periphery' workforce or a flexible workforce for a better-managed flexible firm. Many looked at it as a decisive shift from the past and Fordist model to a new, non-Fordist one (Pollert, 1991). The common point of departure for most theories using the framework of flexibility is the crisis in the Fordist model of mass production and its inability to maintain the rate of production, rigidity of the process and wage levels. And that it would be increasingly necessary for industry to turn to flexible strategies in order to survive. Therefore restructuring of the labour process or flexibilising them and the creation of a flexi-labour force are particularly highlighted.

The amorphousness of the definition of flexibility has prompted theorists to use typologies, diagrams and outcomes. The figure 1.1 gives the main differences between the Fordist and post Fordist models.

Elson (1996) has classified three dimensions of flexibility. Flexibility in the organisational structure includes the de-centralisation of production by sub contracting, creating split units, relocation of main or branch units and backward/forward integration. Flexibility in the pattern of production means doing away with the notion of job description and the rigid divisions between different types of job, in
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Figure 1.1: Characteristics of Fordist and Post Fordist Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fordism/Mass Production</th>
<th>Post Fordism/Flexible Production</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Size of Firm</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Scope for small and large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Specialized dedicated machinery</td>
<td>General purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>Narrowly trained</td>
<td>Broadly trained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conception and execution separated</td>
<td>Conception and execution integrated</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fragmented and routine tasks</td>
<td>Multiskilled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Narrow job classification</td>
<td>Broad job classification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>Hierarchical &amp; formal</td>
<td>Flat hierarchy &amp; informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Output</td>
<td>High volume</td>
<td>Large and small batches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limited range of products standard products</td>
<td>Varied/customised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive Behaviour</td>
<td>Strategy to control market</td>
<td>Fast adaptation to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Framework</td>
<td>Centralised</td>
<td>Decentralised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National/multinational</td>
<td>Local institutions which</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Keynesianism</td>
<td>fuse competition &amp; cooperation</td>
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(Source: Schmitz, 1989 quoted in Hewitt et al, 1992)

favour of a generalised, on the job, training for all types of work for all workers. Flexibility of the labour market focuses on streamlining of workforce, regulating wages and working hours, casualising its permanent workforce and curtailment of collective bargaining. The use of flexibility strategies result in greater numerical, functional, wage and production flexibility for the employer. Atkinson (1986) defines these as: numerical flexibility in which employers change work hours and number of workers according to their production requirements at short notice. Functional flexibility promotes multiple skills amongst workers to increase efficiency. Wage flexibility allows employers to increase and decrease wages or change terms of payment according to requirements.
The Critique of the Concept

Critiques of the flexibility strategies can be grouped around its core areas i.e. of the organisational fragmented 'flexi firm' and the 'flexi workforce' or new polarisation of 'core and periphery' workers. Amin (in Pollert, 1991) uses survey data to challenge the viability of the flexi firm and demonstrate that small firms were not as profitable as medium sized ones and the large ones were fast catching up. It was difficult to pin point if firms were organisationally fragmenting into smaller units because as in the case of split firms they could be under the same management. And it need not be a strategic decision but more of a response to cyclic pressures or recession. Such oversights may be due to the narrow spatial focus on a small, leather goods manufacturing area of Italy or Third Italy and the manufacturing sector to the exclusion of the growing service sector (Milne et al, 1994). Studies on clusters and industrial districts (Nadvi and Schmitz, 1993) have probed the problems of networking for employers and the employed (Knorringa, 1996).

The most contentious propositions are on the 'flexi workforce' and the polarisation of 'core' and 'periphery' workers as they challenge the basis of the Labour Process Theory, Braverman's theory of the deskilling process and the inherent antagonism between capital and labour. The flexibility strategies theory brings together the flexi firm and flexi workforce and argues that changes in technology and organisation of work will create flexi workers and a core of multi skilled workers organised in self-regulating work groups. This model provided a potential for a more egalitarian and co-operative relationship between capital and labour.

The term 'flexible workers' is a relatively new one with no clear definition of its own or modifications to the earlier one. The debates on the formal and informal sectors largely used the term 'informal/unorganised sector workers' to define those who fell outside the definition of the formal sector. As a result of labour movements in many parts of the world, the formal sector workers have struggled for and won a high level of employment and income security. As against this accepted and idealised type of employment was the informal sector, with tenuous employer-employee links, irregularity and insecurity. Feminist scholarship and activism has categorised a variety of informal sector women workers. Cornoy (1997), in his study of Silicon Valley
based computer professionals, found that they not only voluntarily opted for part time and irregular employment but also thrived on it. Though their work status and terms were similar to informal sector workers, they could not be categorised along with them.

'Core' workers are skilled ones or those who have been trained to be multi skilled as a result of technology and are given jobs with income security. The 'periphery' workers are semi or unskilled workers on short-term contracts. The terms are vague as the nature and type of skill is undefined which means they can easily be identified as permanent/temporary or secure/insecure. Can a majority of workers who are temporary yet integral, as in the case of the hotel or diamond polishing industries, be called peripheral? Whittington (in Pollert, 1991) found that the tasks of core professional workers were being fragmented and sub contracted. A gender dimension was added in this polarisation and the core workers were generally viewed as male. Atkinson found the majority of the numerically flexible workforce was female who might be in part time jobs, or work at home. Walby (1997:72) found that women clerical workers with 'staff' conditions are considered unskilled and 'production' workers salaries could not be placed either in the core or peripheral categories. Standing (1999) has linked 'labour deregularisation' with the 'feminisation of labour force' arguing that insecure, low wage jobs attracted the employment of women. Feminisation refers to two processes: a rise in female labour force participation in the face of a fall in male participation rates and the feminisation of certain jobs that were traditionally performed by men i.e. the substitution of men by women. Elson (1996) has critiqued this thesis by pointing out that though there was a rise in women's employment it was not possible to prove that it was because of substitution. Rather employment could have risen because of the proliferation of low waged, flexible jobs. Walby (1997) finds the theoretical connection between deregularisation and rate of women's employment too simple and one which does not take into account the interaction between gender relations, class, changes in production, investment and technology.

The notion of flexibility strategies has serious drawbacks as an analytical concept as it fails to look at the broader process of capital accumulation, the relation between small and big capital, the absence of a focus on workers and their agency and the ground level restructuring (Pollert, 1991). It neglects to study the market and the shift from a
mass market phenomenon to a volatile market. Its definition is too amorphous and covers a wide range of social reality. What has been celebrated as ‘new’ or the flexible process will have to be seen in a historical perspective along with the older ones. So far there has been little work on the gendered aspects of flexibility (Stobbe, 2000).

However, we believe, it is too premature to write it off as a ‘fad’ or ‘fetish’ (Pollert, 1991). The concept needs to be reconstructed with multitudinous empirical data coming from a variety of firms, industries and countries to form a base for its development into an analytic concept. It provides an initial framework to capture some of the new changes in Fordist and post Fordist production, for exploring the dimensions of restructuring at the level of firms and the changing status of the worker. It has the potential to overcome the problems with the Labour Process theory and include the international dimension of capital transfers, crisis in production, the role of the state and market competition.

The “Household” and “Household Strategies”

A closer link was established between the dynamics of the household and its connection to the macro socio-economic processes during the 1980s when several studies including the United Nations sponsored studies of Latin America and African countries (Cornia et al, 1987) found an adverse impact of the World Bank’s structural adjustment programs (SAP) on women and children. Because of the methodological difficulties of establishing a direct link between macro policies and the poor standard of living, some economists saw, ‘the key to understand the dynamics of poverty lies in the study of household strategies and responses to insulate against the adverse effects if any of SAPs’ (Shariff, 1999:192). The conventional use of the concept of household strategies and secondary data has been able to establish links between specific policy changes and socio-economic action like migration but it has not come to grips with the processes involved in choosing from possible options. Recent scholarship has critiqued the household economics approach and re-examined the household and its strategies (Feldman, 1992: 9).

The Household as a Split Collective

A distinction is usually made between family and household. Family tends to be used for relationships of descent, marriage, and adoption.
It refers to a set of cultural rules, expectations, values which define the kinship group and the behaviour of kin to each other including rights and responsibility, obligations, marriage rules, responsibilities and rights in children. The family is part of a wider kinship group whose members may be living in more than one household (Shah, 1972). Households, on the other hand, are defined in terms of the actual domestic arrangements made at the ground level for day-to-day survival, managing labour, allocation of food, money and other resources and decision-making patterns. For the purpose of our study, the term ‘family based household’ (Baud, 1992) seems most appropriate. The family based household (from now on called household) is based on kinship and residence and represents a set of relationships through which reproductive activities, division of production and domestic labour, acquisition, exchange, consumption are defined primarily to meet the needs of those who live together. The wider debate around the household is centred around what happens within or intra household relations.

Becker’s theory (1981) of New Home Economics, which has dealt with the household at length, treats it as an undifferentiated unit, primarily and solely governed by altruism and for the goal of welfare maximization. This assumption of “joint utility” of the household members presupposes aggregation of individuals, their tastes and preferences and subsumes the diversity within it. This analytical merger of the individual and the household gives one identity to both so the household is treated as an individual and the individual as a household in miniature (Wolf, 1992). Becker’s household uses rationality to maximise individual utility in the face of economic scarcity. But as it cannot always act in total tandem, one or two persons assume the responsibility of taking decisions for all in their best interests. Social science till recently had assumed this “model of a consensual harmonious household” (Ganesh, 1997:7). This conceptualisation overlooks the basic inequalities, hierarchies and power relations within the household based on gender and age. Specifically, it subordinates the views of members other than the household head’s on collective welfare (Sen, 1990), hides the distributional inequalities within the household (Chen et al, 1981; Miller, 1981; Mahmud and Mahmud, 1985; Jain and Bannerjee, 1985; Kabeer, 1994), “buries the subordination of individual (women) within the household” (Galbraith, 1974:35); and shows that rationality is not always the driving force behind decisions (Kabeer, 2000).
The family based household is like a split collective constituted by individual members who are bound to each other by ties of blood or marriage, care for each other, share many aspects of life from survival to social life as well as dissent and negotiate with each other. Fathers, husbands and older brothers are considered responsible for the ‘collective welfare’ of the household. But men in positions of power cannot implement their authority unless they have social sanctions and some consensus amongst members in the household. The intentions behind some decisions could come from purely selfish or purely selfless motives (Kabeer, 2000) and an agreement can be arrived at through discursive efforts and/or use of overt and covert forms of abuse and violence, threat of desertion or withdrawal of social protection. The household, thus, becomes a site of caring, bargaining and conflict between its members (Hartmann, 1981; Beneria and Roldan, 1987; Agarwal, 1988; Sen, 1990; Kabeer, 1994).

Theoreticians have used game theory bargaining models to suggest that different members with their different conflicting preferences engage in decision-making through a process of bargaining or negotiation and co-operation. Members tend to co-operate because of their need for stability in critical areas of their lives and as long as the gains of co-operation outweigh gains from what could be achieved by individuals on their own. Bargaining power is reflected in the relative strength of members’ access to extra-household resources or their fall back positions (Agarwal, 1997; Kabeer, 2000). Sen (1991) has brought in the questions of ideology and perceptions in his analysis. His model of household decision-making incorporates a notion of co-operative conflict along with the issues of gender and power within the household. He emphasises that besides the actual value of productive contributions, what matters is orientation, form and location of these productive activities. Is it market exchange oriented or subsistence production oriented? Is the payment in cash or kind? Is it located at home or outside? Secondly he asserts that the person likely to ‘end up in more of a mess’ is likely to have the least bargaining power. Thirdly he elaborates on what he calls the ‘perceived interest response’. If individuals within a household perceive their long-term interest to be best served by subordinating their own personal well being in the short term, then they are least likely to be favoured in household allocation outcomes.
Feminists and institutional economists have further pointed out that not every member has the same 'voice' (Katz 1997:31) or the right to enter into the household’s bargaining process and not all decisions are bargained over. They have elaborated on determinants of intra household bargaining power, which go beyond economic assets to include external support systems, social norms and institutions, perceptions about needs and contributions and the political and social resources available to the individual member (Agarwal, 1997; Guyer, 1981; March and Taqqu, 1986). What is perceived as women’s low interest is not lack of knowledge but their inability to pursue their self-interest and because of other constraints. ‘Women are less likely then men within the family to press for outcomes which reflect their personal well being or their individual interest’ (Kabeer, 2000:29) and tend to use more clandestine ways to secure their own self interest while appearing to comply with the existing norms. This compliance need not imply complicity (Agarwal, 1997). Resource allocation decisions of one period affect the threat points of the subsequent period. Not all household decisions are bargained over. ‘At any given time, for a given society, some decision will fall in the realm of what Bourdieu terms as doxa - that which is accepted as natural and self evident, as part of undisputed tradition (Agarwal, 1992: 184).

“Household Strategies”

The important part of understanding the link between the macro and the micro levels of change is not only the household but how households “strategise”. The concept of “household strategies” is controversial as it carries forward some of the same problems associated with the household. If the household is a collective of individuals, co-operating and conflicting over decisions according to their age, gender and power positions, it means that there is not one but several strategies. But the term “household strategies” implies that it emerges from the household and is being implemented by all its members. So without considering the decision-making processes and whether they were based on unitary, co-operative or non co-operative models, the concept presupposes there is an outcome, which is called a household strategy.

Secondly, it tends to imply a well thought out or pre-planned action on the basis of a cost benefit and time analysis. The decision to migration might be such an action. A strategy could also be an unplanned response to unavoidable circumstances. It could be a one-
time action or a continuum of adjustments that different members of
the household make by changing many areas of their existence. A
planned action implies rationality and conscious choice. But for most
of the poor, choices are very limited. Strategies are also bound by the
constraints and options that are set by the socio-economic location of
the household, the domestic power hierarchy and family ideology, the
nature of the social network and the inter-family mutual support system
(Bardhan, 1990).

Looking at it from a different angle, Wolf asks, ‘Household strategy
research can answer the question “What is a strategy?” but it cannot
answer the question “What isn’t a strategy?” because everything is
subsumed under the umbrella of a strategy. A strategy is everything a
household does, and everything a household does is a strategy’ (Wolf,
1992: 20). This approach has no way of recognising consequences
which might have come from inaction or of past responses like applying
for a job which may have materialised after some time. Or that some
people may not have any choice because of survival issues. The alternative
term ‘coping mechanisms’ or ‘survival strategies’ implies only those
immediate responses to adversity and thus becomes a defensive term
which excludes other responses for the maintenance of the household’s
standard of living or to improve it or any form of radical measures.

In spite of its drawbacks, the concept of strategies has been useful
in countering structuralist approaches and to emphasise that
individuals, whatever their base of resources (few assets) and whatever
the structural constraints (including traditions) have the agency to
make choices. The decision making process is not always rational or
democratic but reveals the dynamics and actions of members of the
household. Researchers, recognising these limitations, have continued
to use the concept. By “strategies”, we mean those responses, planned
as well as unplanned, made by members of the household, for specific
purposes or objectives and which are likely to bring about short term
or long term changes. We can make a distinction between those
strategies used for coping with basic survival and other strategies. The
process of strategising becomes important as it can link resource
mobilisation and the purpose of the strategy with the specific emphasis
on the different members of the household’s involvement in decision-
making, implementation and changes in their lives. Any elaboration
of the process of strategising should also focus on individual members’
passive, antagonistic or ambivalent behaviour towards decisions or everyday forms of resistance. The processes of strategising and resistance are not static and continue even after the apparent decisions are made or enforced in the household. The processes are often contradictory in nature and bring out gender, age and power hierarchies and different types of impact on individuals.

**Agency and Structure**

Feminist theory can hardly escape giving importance to the dialectical relationship between agency and structure, as the very definition of feminism implies struggle for change. In a general sense, feminism has sought to understand and end women's subordination (Jaggar, 1983). In India, during the Reform or the Nationalist Movements, the term feminism developed a connotation for a more radical brand of politics. When the ideology of feminism gained currency in the 1980s, it was used as a label to tarnish activists. Feminism, for the Indian women's groups during the 1980s, was the theory which unravelled the oppression and exploitation of women by understanding the patriarchal control of women's fertility, labour, mobility and sexuality in order to transform society into a more egalitarian and just one (National Conference of the Women's Movement, 1997). This definition drew upon what is now called the second wave or the 1970s and 1980s feminisms, which was more or less united in seeing women's oppression operating at the level of different social structures. For example, the structures of patriarchy operated within the family or the various institutions of society; those of capitalism exploited women's labour within the household and labour market and also benefited from the structural link between the household and the workplace.

The feminism of the 1970s was also noted for its strong theoretical urge to look for an overarching analysis for women's oppression so as to collectively mobilise against it. Analytical reasons usually centred around State control over women's fertility, male control over property and other resources, men's use of violence or women's marginalised position in the labour market with roots in capitalist and social structures. Feminism was also seen as a challenge and a celebration that women carried with them into all areas of their lives. Activists were not only part of campaigns and the movement but carried their ideology home. Academics questioned the andro-centric nature of their disciplines to
make some path breaking contributions in history and sociology. The celebratory aspects included creating and using women's spaces, rousing March 8 rallies and pride in one's body and sexuality. What was common to these various struggles and studies was that the explanation lay in either the structure of patriarchy or capitalism. Later there were some innovative contributions by feminists who analysed gender relations from the perspectives of production, reproduction, socialisation and sexuality (Mitchell, 1971) and attempted at bringing together different but overlapping structures (Eisenstein, 1979; Hartmann, 1981; Young et al, 1981). In these theories, women were predominantly seen as victims, entangled within these structural tentacles and who had to struggle against odds, to not only survive but also challenge patriarchal structures and collectively change them.

Agency was linked with an understanding of patriarchal structures and the formation of 'consciousness'. The feminist notion of consciousness was derived from the orthodox Marxist model of consciousness developed by Kautsky, Lenin and Lukas. Workers had what was called dual consciousness or actual consciousness and militant consciousness that arose from their position in the production process. Within the Marxist theoretical stream, there have been some pathbreaking contributions by theorists like Thompson, Althuser and Scott (Callicinos, 1989). In these writings on history and resistance, they have given different weightage to ideology and the material base, and to agency and structures, and their relationship with agency and structure. Thompson saw the formation of class as a 'happening' and Scott and subaltern study groups wrote about the covert forms of everyday resistance of colonised or oppressed people. Althusser conceived of history as a process without a subject and saw human agents as 'bearers' or supporters of objective structures and subjectivity itself as a construct of ideology (ibid).

The feminist critique of the orthodox Marxist model began with questioning the subsuming of gender in the concept of class. Women had specific issues such as a particular position in the labour market and production process; gender discrimination; a double burden of domestic and paid labour; their entry and exit from employment was controlled and physical and verbal violence. Women had to struggle as workers and as women. Studies have shown that women's militant consciousness has not only emerged from factories but from homes and the Informal Sector (as in the case of wives of British miners and
the SEWA hawkers in India). The issues they have taken up are not only wages and work but also violence, sexual harassment and reproductive rights. Black and Asian women critiqued the racist and patronising attitudes, the stereotyped images and the denial of their experiences and struggles by white women in the women's movement in Britain and the United States of America (hooks, 1982; Parmar and Amos, 1984; Trivedi, 1984; Mohanty, 1991; Essed, 2000). It became necessary to include a third concept of race in the two existing ones of class and sex in feminist theory.

In the feminist version, women's consciousness was derived from the dominant structures of patriarchy, caste and class. Women had to be 'made' conscious of these structures of oppression through rap sessions, mass mobilisation and propaganda. Those who refused to 'become' conscious were considered victims of patriarchy/capital or at worst reactionaries. 'Correct' consciousness meant membership in organisations and participation in collective struggles. Women's groups and feminist theorists emphasised women's participation, obstacles and sacrifices in collective struggles. Individual women and movements were held up as examples. Women's participation in spontaneous and militant actions was also documented (Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989; Gandhi and Shah, 1992; Fernandes, 1998). An analysis of the public/private domains and women's lack/access to power had led to the demand for more space and opportunities for women in the political process and labour market. Women were also seen as individuals in oppositional but non-confrontationist struggles but by and large the focus was on collective struggle. This is not surprising, as it was believed that only collective struggle would lead to transformative change in society.

A major blow to the strategies of 'consciousness raising' and the emphasis on collective struggles came with the challenge from post structuralism and post modernism. These theorists challenged some of the fundamental concepts underlying feminism like 'woman', 'class', and 'social structure' for their assumption of homogeneity. They refuted the tenets of materialism i.e. the primacy of economic relations and the doctrine that consciousness was dependent on matter. The three architects of post structuralist thought, Derrida, Foucault and Lacan also attacked as futile the search for a single cause or origin and instead favoured looking at and analysing experiences. Post structuralist analysis has highlighted the failure of theory to situate the individual as a subject
within material relations. It has pointed out that such analyses inflates the significance of structure to such an extent that individual behaviour seems a mere ‘blind’ unfolding of the structures in action (Giddens, 1979).

The concept of agency emerged not only as a reaction to structuralism but also to the patronising tone of ‘false consciousness’. It was also a response to the decline of many progressive movements in the wake of globalisation. This has generated a wealth of material on what has been called ‘the weapons of the weak’ (Scott, 1986), ‘resistance within accommodation’ (Anyon, 1984 in Basu, 2000: 29), manipulation and bargaining as forms of women’s protest. Kalpagam (2000) sees in the process of self-formation and women’s existential experiences an important part of feminist politics, which has been ignored by the movement. Women have creatively strategised from a basis of limited options and sometimes successfully changed their situations or their attitudes. Even in failure, some have emerged empowered.

The concept of agency draws on the rationalist tradition and notions of self-interest. Humans, as rational beings, select the best or optimal ways to realise their goal of material gain. ‘Rational choice’ explanations have been criticised, modified and refined, as it became evident that rationality was itself culture specific, individuals are not always rational in taking decisions nor do they compute or compare, with any large amount of information, their objectives, choices and outcomes. People can only sometimes be purely objective and logical. But for the most, people make decisions keeping other social relationships with kin, the wider community and their cultural environment in mind. And besides ‘material capital’, people strive for accumulation of ‘symbolic capital’ like honour, good reputation etc. (Bourdieu, 1977). Feminists have shown that women’s notion of self interest is different to that of men “not only because they embody differences in the capacity of social actors to mobilise material capital, but also because the actors are positioned unequally in relation to the accumulation of symbolic capital. It is also in the nature of such hierarchies that those in positions of dominance are best placed to pursue officialising strategies, for example “…men’s pursuit of private advantage is often presented as being in the legitimate interest of their household and wider community...” (Kabeer, 2000: 44).
Most intentional explanations see agency as an interpretive process. In Bourdieu's work (1977), agency has been defined as the capacity of individuals to change their circumstances and respond creatively to social constraints. The notion of agency takes a form of purposive agency within the limits of 'habitus' and is associated with creative interpretation of rules. Sewell (1992) sees agency as inherent in all humans and compares it to the capacity for language that improves as the person picks up the cultural schemas and resources in his/her particular cultural milieu. Sibon (1999) differentiates the actor from the non-actor. According to him, an actor is the locus of decision and action and can be an individual or a collective e.g. organisations, households, unions, committees, etc. However, those entities which do not have an identifiable means of taking decisions or means of acting on them or taking responsibility for actions are not actors. So, general categories like the State, which consists of several departments, bodies and divisions, or 'man', which encompasses men of different classes, race, and religion, etc. or the upper, middle and lower or working and capitalist classes regardless of differences and without any identifiable methods or organisation of taking decisions cannot be called actors. Groups within these general categories like the judiciary as an arm of the state, men's groups fighting against the rights given to women, or the industrialist class of a region can be called actors.

Agency springs from desires and beliefs but functions within a matrix of social structures, cultural norms and practices. Therefore any adequate theory of agency must also invoke structures to help explain human action. The idea that there is an active presence of structure in agency and a making of structure by agency has been formalised by Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu. Giddens (Layder, 1994) shuns what he calls the phoney war between structure and agency and locks the two together in his 'duality of structure' theory. Social practices include everyday informal and formal skills, which help people creatively interpret situations, norms and rules. It is through these social practices that people modify circumstances while simultaneously re-creating them. Instead of a focus on people's purposes, intentions and desires, Giddens emphasises their capacity for action and to make a difference in the social world.

Similarly, Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' (McNay, 2000) refers to the basic knowledge people have as a result of living in a particular culture. Social inequalities are established not at the level of institutions
but through the subtle inculcations of power relations upon the individual. 'Symbolic violence' or a form of domination can be exercised with the complicity of the individual e.g. male domination. The concept of habitus denotes not only a process but also praxis as it establishes an active and creative relation between the subject and the world. Individuals have a practical sense of what to do, without its explicit articulation, which is shared by members of the community. Giddens and Bourdieu have demonstrated the inherent connections between agency and structure.

Both the structuralist and poststructuralist positions offer important insights but have only a partial understanding of the problematique of agency and structure in the context of change and usually neglect the issue of power (Walby, 1992). Folbre (1994) addresses some of these problems in her framework for collective action which she calls ‘structures of constraint’. Constraints, for her, define choice. The four basic categories of constraint are described as ‘sets of asset distributions, rules, norms and preferences that fosters group identity and creates common group interests. It generates patterns of allegiance and encourages forms of strategic behaviour based on social construction of difference’ (1994:57). These constraints place individuals in similar circumstances and create similar realms of choices (ibid: 54). She emphasises both identity and interests and elaborates that ‘...people occupy multiple, often contradictory positions, because they belong to multiple groups’ (ibid:51). The notion of identity sees people in relational terms and within different contexts. The multiple identities appear, disappear or assert themselves at different times and in different situations. Women also belong to different categories of age, sexual preference and marital status. Some come with birth like religious or community identities i.e. they are 'given groups', and other identities may be 'chosen' like political affinity (ibid). Sometimes one identity assumes predominance on others e.g. during a communal riot, all other identities are submerged for the religious one. Women and men can choose to oppose one identity if they disagree in principle or if it is violative of their basic rights (Chhachhi, 1994).

Assets comprise of material, human and social resources, which can tilt the balance of power in favour of one individual or group as against another. Political rules are those agreed upon by some form of formal representation or discussion, e.g. constitutional rights or labour laws. Some social norms are also part of rules like incest taboos or fair
trade practices. Social norms are rules through practice and are not enforced by any state body though they may be enforced by social organisations like caste groups or panchayats (elders of the community). Patriarchal norms are not officially enforced but are considered ‘natural’ and socially sanctioned. Preferences usually refer to an individual’s tastes and form a basis for collaboration e.g. film buffs or gourmets. They are personal and at times quite irrational but they do emerge from particular cultural and social environments. In a sense they are also ‘acquired’ tastes. These four basic categories of constraint (assets, rules, norms and preferences) can help define types of collective or individual identity. These can be gender based or according to age, class or sexual preference (Folbre, 1994).

For us and for the purpose of the study, women workers are not only agents but they are knowledgeable agents. Secondly, this knowledgeability is a practical part of the everyday interventions in life, which is used in numerous ways to alter their situations. Lastly there is a mutual interdependency of agency and structures. Agency is limited or enabled by structures and in turn structures are emergent from practice and constituted by it. Agency can be directed at structures, which are oppressive. Individual women feel supported and strengthened by a collective movement even though they may not be participating in it. Feminist politics seeks to critique existing oppressive structures and ideologies whilst advocating for transformative change in society. Individual acts, unless highlighted by a movement, cannot bring about policy and institutional changes. Our concern is to find how and with whom and against who women use their individual agency and collective agency. What types of actions undermine different agencies? How can acts of resistance and struggle by women workers get dynamically linked with the collective strategies of social change?

In this study, we have attempted to combine the concept of agency with Folbre's framework for collective action to explore individual and group actions, the personal and other objectives for actions, the nature of the action, the personal or public sphere of action, the overtness and covertness of action and women's understanding of the consequences of their actions.

CONCLUSION

We began by using ‘textual’ snapshots to give a glimpse of our involvement in the Indian Women's Movement and issues of women's
labour. Global economic restructuring and liberalisation came to India in 1991 along with a host of radical changes in the work and lives of working people. It was our concern to investigate what changes were likely to affect or were affecting the working lives of women. Specifically, our aim was to understand the micro, localised effects of macro changes, at the firm/production level, at the household and at the individual (woman) level. Our study is connected to the larger body of work on the gendered nature of industrialisation and the induction and shaping of women's labour. Our theoretical framework, thus, includes those conceptual tools used in exploring the diverse issues related to women's labour.

Two bodies of literature elaborating the Marginalisation Theory and the New International Division of Labour, along with the earlier theoretical work on women's labour, have added immensely to our understanding of the complex interaction between the 'demand' and 'supply' side of labour, capitalism, patriarchy, women and the household. The theoretical backdrop to our study is Walby's framework of gender regimes or patriarchy and the changes in the structures of gender relations, which give rise to new forms of opportunity and inequality. The empirical data on women's workplace experiences and industrial restructuring is analysed by the controversial concept of flexibility.

The concept has serious drawbacks as it fails to look at the broader process of capital accumulation, the relation between small and big capital and because of the absence of the workers and their agency. It has several definitional problems like the amorphousness of the term flexibility, the inappropriateness of terms like the 'core' and 'periphery' and it has made dubious claims to being a new process of production while in fact there are several older versions and not all industries have accepted it. We felt, however, that it is too premature to write off the concept as it is still relevant to some industrial sectors and as it gave us scope to capture some of the new changes. Restructuring at the level of the firm has taken place through the use of strategies of organisational flexibility, the production process and labour market.

The household and household strategies are also much critiqued concepts which nevertheless have been used but with precaution. We have called the family based household a 'split collective' or a group which cares for each other, survives together and has age and gender hierarchies. It is not a harmonious unit but a site of bargaining and negotiations between different members of the household. So there is
not one household strategy but there are several strategies, which may conflict, be used coercively or with persuasion. Both concepts allow us to explore the adjustments in the household and how they are affecting women. Lastly, the concept of agency runs through the data and analysis as women strategise, resist and participate in overt and covert struggles. Folbre’s adaptation of the theory of agency and structure developed by Giddens and Bourdieu forms the basis for our analysis.

Endnotes

1 The Babri Masjid, a mosque was demolished by Hindu right wing forces in 1991. There was communal violence all over India. Mumbai was one of the worst hit cities.

2 The notion of the New International Division of Labour (NIDL) was the new version of the earlier dependency theory or the ‘underdevelopment’ or ‘world systems’ theory developed by scholars like Gunder-Frank, Wallerstein and Samir Amin. It stated that the centre or the industrialised countries thrived on the exploitation of the Third World or the periphery. So the pattern of development in poor countries was not only the result of the world capitalist system but in particular of the unequal trade relations. The NIDL shifted attention from the sphere of circulation of commodities to that of production, from the problem of global realisation of surplus value to that of the globalisation of production (Henderson, 1989). These insights highlighted trends like the flight of capital to the Third World, world market factories, technological changes, the de-industrialisation of the West and a new type of women’s employment.

3 Banerjee (1999) gives the example of China and Vietnam, which have had a long history of women working in textiles so they could easily move into the new labour intensive global factories. Chinese women were supported by the state and unions to acquire the skills for technologically upgraded production. In South Korea, there was resistance from the management and men to women moving into skilled jobs.

4 American studies have often used the term ‘contingent’ labour for those outside non-standard employment relationships.