Contingent workers: Women in two industries in Mumbai

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Studies and doomsday reports by Indian and international economists predicted that women would be badly affected by the sweeping policy changes introduced since 1991. When we interviewed women workers, they spoke to us of their hopes and aspirations; of increased insecurities and new opportunities. Was it as bad as they said it was, or was it worse? What were the different ways in which women were likely to be affected? This was the challenge of going out into the field for answers. Would we succeed in reaching women workers? We looked forward to interacting with them, but were also apprehensive? What was the best method for finding our answers? How could we infuse our feminism into our methods? Often, a description of the research process is missing so research studies appear as a linear instead of the zigzagging, overlapping process of formulations, reformulations, indecisions, planning and negotiations that it usually is. In this chapter, we would like to raise some of our concerns and perspectives as we narrate the stages of our research process, the research design, and methods as they evolved.

**OUR METHOD**

**A Pilot Study**

After formulating our broad research questions but before finalising our method, we felt we had to meet workers, speak about our concerns, and get some feedback, suggestions and ideas. This was the formal beginning of the project ‘Women Workers and Organisational Strategies’ which started in 1993 with the assistance of the Department of Development Co-operation and the Institute of Social Studies in The Netherlands. As a pilot study, we conducted 26 in-depth interviews,
with women who were home based, in small and large enterprises, self employed or had been laid off.

Sunanda was an assembly line worker who augmented her income by doing domestic work in nearby houses in the evenings and holidays. ‘Sometimes these small workshops close overnight if there are no orders or they send us home if there is no electricity, or a shortage of raw material. My wages are low so I keep the other option open. In these houses I sometimes get food for the children. So in spite of the double work I carry on.’

Bharti continued working in a nearby gems cutting unit after marriage. But her mother in law who used to look after her children, now needed to be looked after. So Bharati left work. Her income, of course, is missed in the family and she feels totally cut off from her working world. She spoke yearningly about getting back as soon as the children could go to school by themselves.

Anita’s small room was crowded with furniture, appliances, a huge black and white TV and shelves of gleaming steel utensils. She used to be a packer in a foreign company. ‘The plant moved out of Mumbai, most of the women and older workers were forced to “voluntarily” retire. Some men were kept in the old plant, which was converted into an office. After almost twenty years of work, I feel lost and lonely.’

‘Diamond polishing is good work with good pay. My uncle took me along for training. Many people drop out but I could pick up the work, and polish with speed. If the boss gives me hard diamonds, I simply leave the job and find another unit. All of us are on piece rate so we come and go as we please. But girls in this industry get a bad name.’

Walking down the busy, office area of South Mumbai, we came across a group of women sitting on hunger strike. Gauri told us that after trying other avenues, they wanted the government to intervene and give them back their employment. Their employer considered them temporary and had laid them off as part of his restructuring plan. The trade union leader said their case was legally weak as they were temporary workers even though they had worked for eight to ten years. The labour minister promised to look into the matter. The labour commissioner advised litigation. The women’s commission said it would publicise their case.

‘When the textile mills shut down, my husband not only lost his job, he lost his courage. He said now you people manage by yourself.'
I had never worked in my life, so I sent my daughter out to work. But it is not like earlier times, there are no permanent jobs and benefits. Our standard of living used to be much better. Now I have to constantly think of ways of cutting costs.’

Each woman was interviewed in the course of four to five visits. As we sat with them in their homes, interrupted by water and ration shop timings, the comings and goings of family members, household chores, loud TVs, we glimpsed parts of their lives and heard some exciting as well as some sad stories. At the workplace, they presented a different face, one of a busy worker as they quickly but cautiously responded to our many questions. We caught a whiff of latent hopes, unflagging spirits and a fear of losing work.

We had almost instinctively turned towards in-depth interviews. A throwback to earlier times when as activists of the contemporary women’s movement, in the 1980s, we had extensively used oral testimonies, women’s voices and personal narratives to reveal invisible issues. Underscoring this method was the belief that women’s experiences and perceptions helped us understand their realities, reflections and reactions to the various structures and ideologies of gender inequality. A strong case for women’s viewpoint or the standpoint theory has been built by several theorists like Jaggar (1983), Harding (1993) and Stanley and Wise (1983), who consider it not only plausible but also logical for research on women. This theory has been widely accepted with perhaps different names and meanings. For example, Marxist researchers reject the liberal position of a neutral, non-partisan observer and elaborate on the domination of the ruling-class viewpoint and ideology. Like the standpoint of the oppressed, women’s standpoint provides a view, which is not only different, but has the potential to be impartial and comprehensive. According to standpoint theorists, psychological studies have shown that boys and girls have different reactions and views and women writers have been found to have a propensity for particular topics, styles, or a different female ‘gaze’. Women’s lives and experiences, thus, could be the starting point for a less distorted picture of society.

In the course of our activism and research process, we came to recognise that the stated perceptions of women are not ‘complete truths’. Women are aware about their own experiences, their feelings, their choices and situations but they too internalise dominant societal values (Kabeer, 2000). Women have spheres of knowledge. For example,
women were acutely aware of the processes at shop floor level, but did not know too much about happenings at the firm/industry level or about linkages with macro factors. We found that individuals belonging to different groups like employers, male workers and unionists, had different spheres of knowledge and experiences of the workplace and talking to them helped us contextualise the situation of women workers.

Another critical input into the standpoint theory has been the concept of differences. Women are not only different from men but also from each other with each having a distinct way of reading the world (Farganis, 1994). In a well-argued paper, Rege (1998) has shown that, without dalit (untouchable) women's voices and experiences, the women's movement in India was epistemologically disadvantaged in its theorisation. She takes the examples of some of the main campaigns of the 1980s, like violence against women, dowry and uniform civil code, to illustrate her point. At the same time, she also recognises that 'dalit women' are not a homogeneous category, and '... such a recognition underlines the fact that the subject of dalit feminist libabyrinth knowledge must also be the subject of every other libabyrinth project, and this requires a sharp focus on the processes by which gender, race, class, caste, sexuality – all construct each other' (Rege, 1998).

Women workers too do not form a homogeneous group. The popular image of a woman worker is that of one behind microscopes or on an assembly line. However, 98 per cent of working women are in the informal sector doing unskilled and daily wage work. Due to the painstaking efforts of organisations like the Gujarat based Self Employed Women's Association, categories of women in the informal sector have been studied and their dreadful working conditions exposed stimulating public and policy debates. Numerous studies on women in domestic work, on construction sites, and in garment production have created another popular stereotype of women as lowly paid, daily wage workers. We realised that this stereotype did not fit all workers. To differentiate different groups of workers, we evolved a set of criteria and labour categories. We were able to enumerate seven categories of workers amongst our sample of women. This helped us cut across the dualism of formal/informal sectors, organised/unorganised workers, permanent/irregular status, etc. We were able to explore whether restructuring was creating a new variety of workers, whether or not women were preferred for certain jobs and whether the boundaries between skilled and unskilled were distinct or blurred. This differentiation of the
categories has lead to richer data and yielded clues on the nature of strategies for different sets of women.

Our version of a reconstructed standpoint theory enabled us to use both the qualitative and quantitative methods. In one to one, in-depth interviews, women often bring in their own points of view. On the other hand, researchers can also selectively hear what they want to. The more formal and sample-based quantitative method helped us net the views of a larger group of women. We formulated a questionnaire by laboriously drawing out variables and categories from the in-depth interviews, studying other questionnaires and trying ours out on each other to gauge its ‘friendliness’, duration and adequacy (refer to appendix 2).

Using The Quantitative Method

The pilot study showed us that there were two approaches to our broad research question. One option was to select some workers’ colonies and interview a random sample of women workers at home, to try and understand the changing nature of their work and lives. The second option was to select specific industries and interview women at their workplace and home. The former focused on working women in poor localities and the changes in their work, work relations and conditions, household relationships and coping strategies. We called this the “neighbourhood approach”. Access to women would have been easy through community organisations working in their neighbourhoods. Informal sector women like those in domestic work, self-employed trade and daily wage labourers at construction sites would have been netted in such an approach. And it would give us a good idea of neighbourhood dynamics. The second “workplace approach” meant the selection of a few industries and accessing a sample of women through the firms or specific workshops. This approach had the advantage of presenting a picture of the nature of changes within firms. It would be possible to make sub sector links from large to small firms. It was not easy to make a choice as each approach had its advantages and disadvantages.

We chose the second approach, as it would give us a picture of women’s perceptions of industrial restructuring as seen within their firms. Dialogues with employers, male and female workers, and trade unionists would help seeing the larger picture of the nature and changes within a specific industry. We were aware of the potential difficulties
we would face in accessing women through their employers in their firms. Employers might censor our questions and perhaps restrict the time with their employees. Also as our emphasis was on understanding women and their households, we would have to visit many of them at home. We expected many women to be reluctant to take us from the workplace to their homes and from their homes to their workplace.

Our interview schedule had 157 questions on various aspects of women workers' lives. It covered different aspects of the production process, changes in production over a period of five years, wage structures, problems experienced at the workplace and women's strategies to deal with them. At the household level, the questions tried to capture a household's financial stability, division of labour between women and men, and strategies of adjustment. Data for a five-year period was collected from households and the workplace on changes in expenditure on health, education, in the status of household earners and male and female workers in firms. The last section went into the worker’s perception of workplace problems, what she considered as important issues and her participation in solving issues at the individual and collective levels (see Appendix 2 for interview schedule).

Selections
The pilot study showed that the city was rapidly changing. Its manufacturing base and its potential for employment had come under severe strain during the past decade. The organised manufacturing sector and employment in it was dwindling and the informal sector was growing in output and employment (see Chapter Three). The once dynamic and strong trade union movement has become fragmented with a rapidly declining membership. The growing gap between the rich and poor is palpable in the daily life of the city. The city elite would like Mumbai to be another Singapore with shopping malls and sleek office areas. Entertainment centres have been built in the premises of closed textile mills, industrial estates are lined with empty workshops, huge malls and shopping centres are occupying the city's landscape together with a growing number of street hawkers, slums and pavement dwellers. The city is on the threshold of a transformation, the old not quite dead and the new not yet born making it the first choice for our research.

The selection of industries was more difficult. How were we to decide on an industry in a city, which was inhabited by a variety of
modern and traditional, small and large industries? From employment
data in the Annual Survey of Industry and the Factory Inspectorate for
NIC three digit codes for industries, we short listed eight industries:
electronics and electricals; the plastics processing; pharmaceuticals;
clocks and watches; the gems and jewellery; readymade garments; the
leather and rexin and the soap/ cosmetics/ toiletries industries. We
used the following criteria to hone down to two industries namely the
plastic processing and the diamond polishing and jewellery
manufacturing. These were:

- Industries with a high export potential and likely to be affected
  by liberalisation and international trade.
- Industries with a chain of production firms from large to small/
tiny firms and home based workers would give us scope
forexamining different changes.
- Industries unlikely to close down or move out of Mumbai in
  the course of data collection.
- Industries other than the well-researched ones like the
garments, electronics, leather and processed foods.

The problem arose of gaining a representative sample of firms and
women workers, when there were practically no data available. The
data at the factory inspectorate and in the directories and associations
of manufacturers were old, unusable and not gender specific. An initial
round of selection was attempted by telephoning the firms but we
soon realised that telephone numbers had changed, or they did not
employ women workers or had shifted to new premises. Visits to some
firms and discussions with employers helped create a sample based on
the structure of the specific industry. The president of the association
of plastic manufacturers estimated that at the end of 1993, there were
21,000 companies of which 60 per cent employed less than nine
workers, 37 per cent employed between 10 and 99, and three per cent
employed more than 100 workers (AIPMA, 1993). These numbers do
not include unregistered tiny firms, home based workers, or rag pickers.
Most of these firms register some workers but keep the rest on contract.
We tried to remain close to this spread of firms/workers in our selection
of plastics processing firms.

The apex body of the diamond processing and jewellery industry
is the gems and jewellery export promotion council, set up to monitor
exports. It had no data on numbers of workers, or their unit-wise break
up. The export zone authorities could only give us numbers of firms on their premises. Polishing firms spread all over the city are usually categorised by the number of scaifes (rotating wheel) in use: small firms have between four to eight scaifes; medium ones between 9 and 15; and large ones have over 16. The export firms may have polishing plus jewellery manufacturing facilities. These may have as many as over 100 individually manned scaifes. In our brief survey of an industrial estate, we found that small firms usually have between 1-20 workers (each scaife has two workers); medium firms have 21-100 workers and large ones have over 100 workers.

The 360 women workers interviewed belonged to 94 firms in the plastic processing industry and 73 firms in the diamond processing and jewellery manufacturing industry. The selection of women workers in the firms was based on the criteria of religion, age, marital status, number of years in employment and participation in union activity. In some of the small firms, only one or two women were working, so more firms were covered while in the medium and large scale ones, the attempt was to capture women doing different tasks and thus about three to four women were interviewed.

Table 2.1 Sample of Firms and Women Workers in the Plastics Processing Industry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of Firms</th>
<th>No. of Firms</th>
<th>No. of Workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home based</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiny (1-10)</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small (11-20)</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>31.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (21-100)</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large (101+)</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=94</td>
<td>n=180</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.2  Sample of Firms and Women Workers in the Diamond Polishing and Jewellery Industry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of Firms</th>
<th>No. of Firms</th>
<th>No. of Workers in</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Workshops</td>
<td>Export Zone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small (11-20)</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (21-100)</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large (101+)</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>71.6</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Ways of the Field

We were extremely apprehensive on the first day of our field visit even though we had planned and set up a meeting with an employer of a small firm. Employers were the ‘gatekeepers’ to our access to workers within firms. They had to be convinced that we were not labour inspectors, income tax officers or trade unionists. Some of them employed minors or did not pay the minimum wage. And all of them were suspicious of unionists. Letters from educational institutes usually opened doors. Many of the export diamond jewellery employers asked us to fax our questions before giving an appointment. Family contacts or friends phoning in or introducing us saved a lot of explanations. We approached the employer through unions in only three cases. Another method was convincing the president of a manufacturing association or secretaries of industrial estates. A recommendation from one employer gave us access to others and we were able to locate several clusters of workshops and subcontracted chains. All except one employer gave us interviews. We wondered whether it was class affinity or our gender, which made employers more co-operative. Many of them found the idea of women talking ‘industry’ very unusual and went out of their way to explain the policies and problems of their firms and industry.

The attitudes of the employers changed when we asked them for permission to interview workers. The suspicions returned. How could interviewing workers help in writing about industry? A fresh round of explanations had to be given. At this time we made use of our social work credentials and ‘helping women in distress’. Only that part of
the questionnaire, which dealt with the bio data of the worker was shown to them. Permission was grudgingly given, selected women from different age groups, marital status and religious backgrounds and those 'friendly' to the management were chosen, supervisors were made to 'walk' by to overhear the interviews, a jewellery unit left an intercom open so the manager could hear our dialogue with the workers. In such an atmosphere, how were we to interview workers?

After a few weeks in the field, we developed a way of working in pairs, with each other or with an assistant. Whilst one researcher interviewed the employer, maintaining eye contact, and seeking out his views on the economy, the market situation, and production problems, the other took detailed notes and recorded her observations. Tape recorders seemed to unnerve both the employers and the workers, so we stopped using them. After asking for permission to interview the workers, one of us continued speaking with the employer or kept him 'busy' whilst the other went to interview the workers.

Trade unions provided easier entry to reach the workers. We had contacted the Hind Majdoor Kisan Parishad, Hind Majdoor Sabha, Communist Party of India, Communist Party (Marxist), Shramik Sangathana, the Shiv Sena and three independent unions. The unionists were delighted at our interest in labour studies and gave different types of information on the industry, the decline of unionism, and workers' attitudes. But not many of them had members in our industries. Workers felt free to talk knowing they had union protection. In one unit, the local leader asked us to help a woman worker with marital problems, in another we were asked to conduct a meeting on need for women's participation in trade union.

Contacts with local leaders, local party firms and community organisations of working class neighbourhoods gave us an easy passage. People respected and identified with them. Though many of these organisations had been working for a number of years in a neighbourhood, we were surprised to find that their information about working women was extremely limited. Some knew home-based workers. The rest were 'factory workers' who left early in morning and came back late. Little was known about their workplace or type of work.

Workers helped us contact other workers. Diamond polishers in particular seemed to have built up networks of contacts. They met regularly at certain bus stops or at particular areas at train stations. We
would often spend the night in that part of town and meet the workers before their early morning shift started. On holidays, workers would take us around their neighbourhood to meet other workers. Workers’ involvement created a snowballing effect for contacting other workers.

We and the Workers

Educational qualifications, recommendation letters, and class could act as ‘disqualifications’ for building a rapport with workers. But they were curious about us. Why did we, women from a different class, caste and educational background, want to come to factories? A disturbing fact was that we were coming from the employers and we wished to interview them. They could not quite refuse but were uncertain about the repercussions of talking to us. Our first move was to establish our credentials as researchers independent of their employers even though we had come after taking their permission. Then we spoke to them of our women’s groups, women’s common problems, of legal cases, the different ways women’s groups help women, of trade unions and the women’s movement. Our credentials were our activism and concern for women and workers. And as we asked them questions, they too asked us some. Many women asked for names and contacts of lawyers, doctors and charitable trusts. Some asked us personal questions - were we married or did we have children? One of us who is not married was badgered with amazement and questions like - ‘you do not want to get married!’ from younger women waiting to get married and the married women who could not conceive of such a choice. Such discussions broke the ice and helped in building a rapport. Women workers understood our devices to deal with employer’s control over the interviewing process. They responded with ease and understanding if we suddenly shifted a question of workplace problem to questions around household status whenever a supervisor was around.

The class and educational ‘disqualifications’ did not disappear, but we could temper them somewhat by various efforts. An introduction by different people was only a first step. We had to reach out to them through our minds and hearts and establish a rapport. Women workers and their household members were intrigued by our interest and not a single worker refused to talk. In keeping with the Indian tradition of hospitality, women welcomed us in their homes. Women were more at ease at home and many did not want us to approach their workplace. As a strategy if the worker had taken us to the unit, especially in
diamond firms, we approached the employer through another source like the association or the neighbouring employer and behaved as if we had not met that worker. In conversations with workers, it was easy to slip into talking about each other, about issues in our lives as women, of society’s expectations and parental hopes. Whenever we shared our problems with them, we referred to the differences in our class situations but also pointed to our similarities. In one neighbourhood, whilst chatting with two workers, we hit on the idea of approaching their boss for jobs so that we could share their experience of working in a plastic unit. They advised us on how to present ourselves without giving away our class. It turned into a hilarious session with the workers making fun of us. At the unit or workplace, we would often join workers in whatever they were doing like finishing a product or packaging (this was not possible for diamond processing). Our clumsiness would turn into a huge joke and this would ease the initial awkwardness.

We backed up our introduction as members of women’s groups by inviting women to our organisations. Many of their problems needed referrals to a lawyer, or medical advice, or police help. We referred them to our friends and other groups and followed up on their progress. Word about this sort of support spread amongst other workers. But we were acutely aware that our support had limitations. In one incident, some workers had gone on a flash strike. We found them outside the gates of the export-processing zone. We telephoned their union for help. The unionist was most upset at this ‘outsider’ interest. We decided not to confront the unionist or directly intervene in a situation in which we could not assist them on a long-term basis. We constantly reminded ourselves to not create a negative state of affairs, which the workers would have to face or bear with after our departure from the field.

An important part of rapport establishment is building trust. We always assured workers of confidentiality. Employers who asked about the responses of workers after the interviews were given vague replies or politely refused. We took pains to respect workers’ time, space, privacy and mood and not to let our own pressures of data collection dominate. An interview consisting of 157 questions, most of them open ended, took a considerable amount of time. Add to that the time taken in explanations and information about the research and researchers. We tried our best to have small breaks with gossip and small talk to ward off ‘interviewee fatigue’. Sometimes women slipped from one topic to
the other, or we shifted from workplace to home. In one case there were union elections, and women were most eager to speak about the politics within the union. We had to wait for a week to go back to fill in the rest of the information. It was very intrusive visiting workers at home on holidays when they were busy cooking or socialising. Some of them spoke to us during their lunch break as they ate their sparse meal of rice and chillies. We would return feeling depressed and angry at ourselves, at research and its methods.

We identified this discomfort as our frustration with the power relations between the researcher and the researched. We have been aware of these unequal relations but from the other side. In the early 1980s, the mass media saw women activists as a ‘source’, to be interviewed and photographed, whenever journalists wanted to. We looked on our relations with the mass media as a mutual need - they needed ‘stories’ and we needed publicity for our issues. Soon we became acutely conscious of the power of journalists. The print media literally had ‘the last word’, on our words, the tone of our articles, or on placement. At another level, our encounters with First World feminist scholars, interested in the women’s movement in different countries, reflected the same dynamics. Much has been written about Western scholars studying women from the working class, peasants or lower castes in Asia, Latin America and Africa. And about ‘studying down’, their perception of the Third World, of Third World women as a homogeneous group, and of the production of knowledge (Mohanty, 1991; Spivak, 1988). We believed that there could be a different relationship between feminists and scholars from the two worlds. Except in some rare cases, we found that a First World/Third World feminist exchange too was underlined with unequal power relations and did not turn out to be an opportunity for a sharing of ideas and information for the theorising on the women’s movement.

As researchers this question confronted us when we documented two contemporary Indian movements. In both cases, we felt on par with their leaders and activists. Not only could they challenge our objectives and ideas but also they gave an input into the research design and method. And we were writing and making presentations, knowing fully well that all our interpretations and conclusions were going to come under intense debate and if necessary, under attack. In both cases, we were encouraged to do the research, as it would add to the repertoire of information on the women’s movement. We were ‘studying
sideways’ which has the potential of reducing power differences (Schrijvers, 1991: 162).

But this does not hold true for our relations with working class women. We were middle class, educated, women looking for information that would go into the making of papers and books and we would not in any way directly change their situation. We were not only uncomfortable and disliked the unequal relations but also felt frustrated with our inability to do something for our respondents. Ideally we would have preferred participatory research, an interactive process, which seeks to bring both the researcher and the researched together to plan and execute research in a collective manner. Activists have been particularly partial to this form of research because it attempts to come to grips with the hierarchical relations between the researcher and the researched and provide a potential link with advocacy and direct action. It also helps in demystifying research, allowing for a larger ownership of the research process and its outcome. There have been several examples (Mies, 1979; Schrijvers, 1997). Many forms of gathering data and using them for action and advocacy have been used in India. SEWA’s study with hawkers, SPARC’s research with pavement dwellers, Jagori’s involvement with single women are a few examples.

A critical look at some successful attempts at participatory research has shown that this potential can only be realised under certain conditions. Individual researchers or organisations need to have strong links with women or the poor developed over years of working with them. Mies (1979) confesses that it was the presence of a social movement that allowed her to implement her conscientising process of research, interactions with rural women, and efforts at empowerment. Berninghausen and Kerstan (quoted in Wolf, 1996) found that they were unable to implement most of Mies’ postulates in their Javanese based research. A strong case has to be made to the people or women to motivate their involvement, e.g. an impending crisis situation or their suppression as a minority or group. People are usually reluctant to set aside their daily wages or domestic and survival problems for a study, which may or may not benefit them directly. A loose time frame allows for detailed explanations necessary for a group with an uneven level of literacy and commitment. These are difficult conditions especially for individual researchers, most of whom are not connected to movements, groups or campaigns. They may not be invited by women’s groups or community organisations to conduct research.
Despite our live link with the women's movement and our predisposition to such a form of research, we went back to a more conventional form. None of the trade unions we knew had a substantial number of women workers in our selected industries. They lived in different colonies spread through the city. We were also aware that though we have worked with women in distress, we did not have a strong fall back support for women workers as we were not directly working with them. Our actions might make women more vulnerable than they already were. We integrated our activism in the process of research in the form of support at the individual, unit and policy levels. We referred women to our own organisations or those who could help them out. We established a project, which emphasised strengthening various skills for women so that they are in better position in the labour market. At the firm level, we interacted with their unions. We provided information about specific problems of women workers including requesting employers to provide us time to discuss and conduct sessions with a doctor from a local hospital on gynaecological problems, or shared the specific problems of women with the unions whom we had interviewed. For policy changes, we organised a national seminar of activists and academics and a tripartite symposium, which began a dialogue between industry, labour and government as part of our research process.

It was impossible for us to reduce the inequality between the women and us but we tried to reduce the distance between us. We had consciously woven into our research process, a method of interaction and dialogue with women workers and support for some of their problems. But that does not resolve the issue of power and control within the data collection process and writing.

Filling Gaps

The advantage of the quantitative method of data collection is in providing a broad based picture of workers, their situation and changes in their lives and work. It allows certain definitiveness when one could say 50 per cent or 80 per cent of our respondents said this or that. One of the objectives of this study was to show the position of women workers and influence planners, unionists and economists who are accustomed to, and tend to put their faith in, 'hard' data. 'Counting' also helps one to hear what was said most often and not get caught in one's own preconceived notions (Kabeer, 2000). Interviews with some
selected women workers, employers, male workers and unionists were also meant to verify some aspects of the data given by women. For example, many women were not sure whether their employer was a sub contractor or a sub contractee. Many workers were uncertain about the number of workers and conditions in the workplace five years ago. Such data had to be derived from interviews with employers. Male workers had more information on the pace, changes and production within the unit. They were more aware about past attempts of organising workers and their effects.

We also wanted to capture the varied explanations behind the answers in the schedule and to contextualise them through in-depth interviews. This new data would bring alive the dynamics and relationships behind the factual answers. For example, our quantitative data gave us data on women and men’s working hours and domestic work, but no information on how women balanced their domestic and paid labour within and outside the household. How did women negotiate and make adjustments within the household? How did they perceive their earnings and status in the household? At the workplace, we could gather data on the growth or decline of the number of workers, the sexual division of labour of tasks, changes in pace and production or types of wage systems. Our probes focused on issues like the effect of multiskilling on women workers, certain wage systems, the management strategies used for maintaining a balance in the workforce and their reasons for employing women workers. We tried to see the ways in which paid work of the women affects the household dynamics, their ability to negotiate and participate in processes of decision-making. A series of probes were conducted on individual and collective organisation at the workplace. Such probes gave us insights into the differing degrees of participation in collective organising, the successes and failures of individual and informal strategies of women workers and a glimpse into the lives of women leaders.

Some questions lost some of their meaning when they were reduced to a few answers. For example, when we asked women if they had restrictions imposed on them by their family, the majority said there were none. Later, during discussions, we found out women had so internalised restricted mobility that family members were not required to verbalise rules. The processing of data had its own problems. The questionnaire had many open ended questions, which gave the interviewee the possibility of multiple answers. We wished to capture
the diversity. However in collating the answers we had to categorise them and the diversity could only be used to substantiate or add to the categories. Some information invariably ‘fell out’ in this process of combining and categorising.

Five per cent of our sample of women workers was selected for in-depth interviews. We attempted to keep variations like marital status, income contribution, education, different wage systems, skills and size of firms. Active women leaders were interviewed at length. Twenty five unit owners with different forms of production, in large and small firms, or relocated ones, using different flexible strategies and with and without unions were interviewed. Triangulation or the combination of the quantitative and qualitative methods helped us complement the findings of one with the other, enrich the database and provide insights and theoretical leads. The figure below gives the three phases of the research process.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter puts forward our trajectories in the field and highlights our underlying concerns. Research is never a linear process as it appears in the final version of a study. As methods are outputs of belief and perspective, we have indicated how we have attempted to interweave our political beliefs into the design and execution of the research study. We have drawn on the advantages of both the qualitative and quantitative methods to complement and enrich our data. We have discussed our emphasis on women as respondents but also taking into account differences amongst women and views of others like employers.
The criteria for selection of two industries, the number of firms and the sample of women interviewees have been substantiated. And finally, we recognised the existing power relations between the researchers and researched and the need for activist research to be connected to processes of change.

Endnotes

1 A team of four researchers studied five industries - the electronics, pharmaceuticals, soaps and cosmetics, plastics and diamond polishing and jewellery by conducting 610 interviews with women workers under the project “Women workers and Organisational Strategies”, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague and FREA-India

2 This approach had been usefully developed by Harris, Kannan and Rodgers (1990) for showing the loopholes in the categories for workers devised by the Census. More details on the Labour Status Categorisation can be found in Chapter Six in this book.

3 A maximum of four women workers were interviewed from each firm.

4 This refers to two books- ‘When the Rolling Pins Hit the Streets: the anti price rise movement in Maharashtra, India’ by Nandita Gandhi, Kali for Women, 1994 and ‘The Issues at Stake: theory and practice in the contemporary women’s movement in India’ by Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, Kali for Women, 1991.

5 Mies (1979) describes an experiment with a group of students, using research and street action to help battered women to highlight the issue and seek governmental aid. Both the student researchers and the battered women were involved in the research process and action. Schrijvers (1997) describes research with a transformative approach on two occasions with a group of peasant women and refugees in Sri Lanka. A conscious and deliberate attempt was made via dialogues between the researcher and the researched to create an egalitarian space for sharing the objectives, process, and actions that might come up during the research process. The process of research influenced the participants, the initial research objectives and finally the research findings.

6 SEWA (personal interview) mobilised all its members who were hawkers for a massive data collection exercise to help build a legal case for them. They finally won the public interest litigation case in the Supreme Court. SPARCS (1985) works with people living on pavements conducted a massive study in the face of police action and eviction. Pavement dwellers also participated in conducting surveys. In both cases, the data collected was extensive and rich as they were culling out information from amongst their own people. It was a matter of life and livelihood for the people who saw the studies as one form of action. The studies gave a voice to two invisible groups of people and drew the attention of the state authorities to form policies for
them. In a very different way, Jagori, a Delhi based women's group helped initiate a campaign around the issue of single women (widows, divorced and unmarried women), their discrimination and social status through a research project (Bhaiya, 1996). Delighted that someone was concerned about them, more women wanted to be interviewed, which lead to the formation of small groups of single women in working class colonies. This method was adopted in different cities where Jagori had contacts with local community based groups. There was an interweaving of research, discussions and strategies.

7 Run with your dreams project was established in 1998 to assist young women to continue their higher education and vocational skill development.

8 A national level seminar and symposium was organised in New Delhi- 'Policies and Strategies for Working Women in the Context of Industrial Restructuring' from 22-25 September 1997 and public symposium provided platform for perspectives from Labour, Industry and Government.