Contingent workers: Women in two industries in Mumbai

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We have seen how women responded to household adjustments amidst unequal gender relations through a strategic mix of co-operation and bargaining that helped fulfill at least a part of their own objectives. In this chapter, we look at their reactions to the liberalisation policies induced industrial restructuring and the use of old and new flexibility strategies by firms. Labour market flexibility strategies were specially being used for controlling the number and wages of workers. How did women view these controls and respond to them? Women in the plastic processing and diamond polishing and manufacturing industry have worked and survived under extremely insecure conditions. Were they resigned to these exploitative conditions of work? What was the nature of their resistance and what were their attempts to improve their situation, as individuals or through collective organising? We will show that the impetus to respond and the nature of the response emerges as much from the organisation of the production process as it does from the organisation of the household.

ISSUES AND ACTIONS

‘As long as you are alive, you have to do something, manage, adjust or fight’

Women were aware of their secondary and vulnerable positions in the household with its gender and age hierarchy, patriarchal practices, the sexual division of labour and their virtual non-identity outside of family and kin relationships. Women were in small and big ways, bargaining, resisting and strategising for a better fallback position and future empowerment, in spite of the heavy personal toll inflicted on them by expenditure reduction, income increasing and networking adjustments.
Individual and Collective Strategies

At their workplace, women had knowledge of the production process, were aware of the exploitative conditions at the workplace and had worked out for themselves different responses and strategies.

The majority of women, outside of the 33 per cent new entrants, had been employed for numerous years in the same industrial sector. Forty per cent had shifted jobs and had a fairly good perception of conditions in their own and other firms and in the labour market. During our interviews with them, they could reel off basic information on different wage structures in the large and small firms, in the export zone and industrial estates, the number of years their wages had not been revised and the advantages of a secure job versus a piece rated income (refer chapter 6). 'The labour scene is bad,' said Swati from a small plastics firm. 'A few years ago, it was easy to get a job. Now, not only in my estate but also in other ones where my brother and father work, they are throwing out people. I have no idea why all this is happening. You should talk to our machine operator, he knows what the boss is up to, where the orders come from and where they go.' Male workers had more details on the nature of changes being introduced as they extensively exchanged industry gossip with their co-workers, supervisors and friends in other firms in their workplaces and the small teashops in every industrial estate.

Shop floor changes were impossible to ignore or bypass. Most of the 'secure' workers from large export firms, in and out of the export zones, were aware of the threat of having their jobs obliterated by automation, relocation of the plant, sub contracting and backward integration. The traditional flexibility strategies used for controlling the numbers and wages of the 'moderately' and 'insecure' workers in the medium and small firms had placed a question mark before the workers' livelihood security. And in the backdrop was a state bent on a single-minded pursuit of structural adjustment and liberalisation policies for providing industry and multinationals with a free market environment. With their very survival at the workplace at stake, women were keenly aware of their insecurities and prioritised specifically the wage issue over others.

There were different ways of seeing the wage issue. For some, wages were below the officially designated minimum level. For others the piece rate and daily wage had not been revised for a few years. For the gala diamond polishers, they could have been higher, whereas
the export firm workers had high wages, which they thought should be higher. They would have liked good physical conditions, ventilation, proper lighting and the availability of toilets and restrooms. Diamond dust, plastic dust and backless seating arrangements were the main cause of health problems. What were the channels open to women to take up their issues?

Sixty six per cent of women had no form of official body or trade union for a redressal of their grievances or taking up their issues. Some had themselves formed informal groups, which were more like social clubs and for moral support. Only 15 per cent of the workers had a union operating at their workplace. But, as the table below shows, having access to trade unions is quite different from its utilisation for one's purposes. The majority of them did not use the medium of unions but directly took up their issues with the authorities.

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<th>Table 7.3 Type of Action taken by Different Categories of Workers</th>
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<td>Type of Action</td>
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<td>No action</td>
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<td>Approach authority</td>
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<td>Approach trade union or older workers</td>
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The scenario was that with or without a union, the majority of the women were more inclined to take up their issues, directly at a one to one level, with their employers or supervisors. Why were women using an individualistic approach as against an organised collective one? How women decide to act depends on structures like the piece rate wage system, bureaucratic unionism, lack of resources, and the dominance of patriarchal beliefs and practices. Different identities based on age, class, caste or regional group and in our case the marital status of women also come into play to gauge the risk or consequences of their actions (Folbre, 1994).

**WOMEN IN UNIONS**

Two accounts give us a glimpse of the women worker’s perspective.

- **Name:** Shobhabai
- **Age:** 40 years
- **Marital Status:** Married with 2 children
- **Work:** 20 years in a plastic processing unit

*We have a lal vavta (red flag) union for many years. They are very good people. Because of them and our nice boss, we have a good daily wage, all benefits like medical and leaves and permanent status. The factory produces plastic cans for the Godrej Oil. Sometimes there is no work and we are given a break. But I don’t mind because we are given half the wage. Our supervisor tells us when to come and when not to. These last few years, the factory has not been doing well. There is just enough work for us. No surplus orders are coming and there is hardly any overtime. I am not worried because I never liked doing overtime. It bothered my family.*

*My husband has a permanent job in an office. With both our salaries, we have been able to buy a good room in a housing society. My children are about to finish their education in an English medium school. Hopefully they will get good jobs. I would like them to study further but let’s see what they want to do. They don’t have to work in a factory. I would like them to work in an office or a foreign company. They pay well.*

*My work here is very simple. I have to check the items and pack them. When I joined the factory, there were only a few men. We stayed in our room and did not interact with anyone except the supervisor.*
Gradually we started making friends with the other women. We grumbled about our work with each other. The men’s work is quite different from ours. They work on the machines on a per piece basis. Sometimes they do overtime so we can work on the finishing and packing in the morning. They are better paid than we are. They were the ones who went and got the union.

The leader (I have only seen him once) is a soft-spoken man. He negotiated with the boss and got us minimum wages and then a raise every three years. We used to do all sorts of work earlier. After the union was formed, we did fixed jobs, got break wages and overtime. We did not have to strike or anything. We have a provident fund and medical. But there is no travel allowance. What I really do not like is the “late” mark. Sometimes, especially in the monsoons, you might get late. If we come late three times we are marked absent. That’s not fair. Now there is this new thing. The management gives you compensation to resign. Some workers have taken this offer. The union is against it. But I think if you are going to retire in a few years, you might as well do it now.

I have never been to a union meeting. Some of the men meet and go to the union office to tell the leader what is happening. None of the women have seen the office or been to any of the party’s actions. Why should we be involved in other strikes? My husband does not like my joining all this union stuff, he says if we get involved we will lose everything. Unions also can be quite violent. I prefer doing my work and going home.’

Name: Sharmila
Age: 27 years
Marital Status: Unmarried
Work: 5 years in diamond jewellery export unit

When I joined this export house, I was young, had no experience, and did not even know what work or union meant. I have now been working for five years looking after the machine for polishing gold in the manufacture of diamond jewellery. Our department has only women. I am very outspoken, so the other girls asked me to represent them in the union. In the inter department meetings, I could put forward our problems. Slowly I began to understand how a union works, how meetings are held, what the leader does, how negotiations take place,
why we opted for a Shiv Sena union. I would not have been able to get involved if not for time off for union work during working hours. I have to reach home to cook. If there are additional meetings, I finish the cooking in the morning.

Now I would like to get involved in the union, I think I am good but my friends tell me I am mad to get involved in union politics, which can be as dirty as electoral politics. The members of the present elected panel don't want me to stand for elections. My friend told me that some of the boys were writing dirty things about me on the toilet walls. They want to ruin my reputation. My family is also against my standing for elections. They say, why get involved in all this. It is enough to earn well and relax at home. But I am so angry. Why can't I be on the panel? The girls are ready to support me. Why should it always be the same old boys? And what have they done for us so far? They get all the advantages of a panel member like average wage without doing work, sit in meetings but do nothing for us. Why should I be targeted just because I am a woman? The management has no problems in dealing with a woman, why should the other panel members have? I am determined to stand for elections, come what may.

I have always had to struggle to get what I want. It has never come easily. Since my mother died when I was young, I have been fighting and working. My father was in the mills. After the big strike, we lost everything and my father refused to work. My brother is younger than me. I helped him finish his school and told him to get a job. I have been the main earner in the family and I also do all the housework. My father helps with the shopping and some odd jobs. He is more worried about my marriage but cannot find a suitable boy.

**Nature of Participation**

Women in large firms, export firms and a few medium firms, except trainees and new entrants, in both industries were members of unions. When asked why they were not active in union activity (only 4 per cent had approached unions), they were genuinely bewildered and said, 'But we are, we pay our dues, attend elections and support union actions.' The underlying question in their statements was: 'Is there something else we should be doing? Is this not what is expected of us?'

The women were aware of the benefits of union agreements. One woman said, 'Our union does not have to do much. Every three years
they sit down with the bosses and work out an agreement. Our wages and bonuses and other benefits are raised. And on that whole deal, the union takes a commission, which is cut from our increments. I think it’s not fair, but that’s how it works.’ Many of them had come from families who had worked in the textile mills and been active in unions. Their families considered some amount of participation as part of their workplace requirement. The union provided the structure for a department-wise representation of workers, elections, negotiations for three yearly agreements, and action in case of retrenchment or production problems. Neither the union nor the management did anything overtly to exclude women or dissuade them from participation.

A succinct analysis of the table indicates that women were passively supportive but uninvolved in union functioning. Their participation was restricted to paying dues and supporting strikes or other actions decided by the union. Women were representatives of their departments but there was no active involvement in the structure of the union or its activities. Women were not present in any union committees nor were they leaders. This is a common pattern noted by the All India Coordinating Committee for Working Women (AICCCWW, 1987) in a study of 336 unions in Maharashtra, Tamilnadu and Kerala, which said that ‘women members of the union made up just eight per cent of the total membership and women office bearers were only 34 in number.’ They observed strikes, but were seldom present in mobilisation, they sat in dharnas but did not call for one. Mostly women workers were happy to go along with the union’s periodic agreements and actions.

A few had tried to talk about their own issues but only four per cent found a supportive response from the union. Transport was one issue that clearly differentiated men’s and women’s experiences and demands. Standing in long queues at bus stops or crowded train platforms, tired and worried about time and sexual harassment made women value transport services. Men, on the other hand, were more interested in encashing the travel allowance. Women also wanted all-women transport as the sexual harassment in the company buses would lead to fights between workers of different departments. In one case, there was a tussle between women wanting an allocated room for lunch and as a restroom while men wanted it for indoor sports like carom and ping pong.
Women were bitterly aware of the difference between 'common' issues and 'women's' issues and men and women's participation. When Suraj Diamonds went on a flash strike to support a suspended colleague, the union expected all the workers to stage a dharna at the gates. After two weeks, the men started drifting into other small jobs and the women were left to carry on the strike. One of them said, 'We warned them that if they did not come to the gates, we would not stay either. It is not fair that we sit in the hot sun whilst they are busy elsewhere. They are not the only ones losing wages.'

**The Larger Problem with Unions**

Mumbai, an industrial city and financial capital of the country, has had a colourful and dynamic labour movement. The Congress affiliated Indian National Trade Union Confederation and the communist led All India Trade Union Confederation had the advantage of an early entry with their organisation of the textile workers. The Committee of Indian Trade Unions (Marxist) and the socialists followed. By the 1970s, the workers made a shift from 'ideological trade unionism' to 'business trade unionism' with leaders like R J Mehta's and Dutta Samant, the right wing Shiv Sena and Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh and internal shop floor unions (Ramaswamy, 1988: 17). This could have been the result of several factors like the over centralisation with bureaucratisation and politicisation of the early, large federations which led to an alienation from workers and their issues. At the same time, the trends in employment were rapidly changing with stagnation in the share of the secondary sector (manufacturing sector) and a marginal increase in the tertiary sector that favours the skilled workers, sending the rest to the informal sector (refer chapter 3). Trade union federations found a steady decline in the rate of membership as industrial restructuring, downsizing and other methods for the casualisation of the workforce were being introduced. The new trade unionists emphasised monetary issues and neglected formulating a policy on retirement schemes, automation, sub contracting, and other methods of restructuring. Whereas the early Left trade unions had at least discussed the issue of women's participation, the new leaders remained quite oblivious of women's needs.
Women's Views

Internal unions seemed to encourage the participation of women as they consisted of elected long term or popular members from amongst the workforce. They worked alongside others and were available during work hours. External unions have a non-worker leader, who might be affiliated to a national union, a political party or is an independent charismatic leader. Most unions in the export zone had moved from internal unions to becoming external ones because of political compulsions and bureaucratic procedures. For example it would be difficult for an internal union to get labour department approval or the right political backing to pressurise the management. With an external leader, the management could not play the divide and rule game with workers. An internal union could easily be split by either bribing some workers or with the creation of a new one. When a major labour dispute closed down Suraj Diamonds, the management refused to recognise the workers union, the Mumbai Kamgar Kranti Sanghatan quoting insufficient information on the number of registered members (Financial Express 1-1-1991). Some workers claimed that an external union was better because an internal one could be pressurised and turned into a chamcha (pro management union). One of the compelling reasons for external unions was that the management could not victimise worker leaders. Most of the firms in the export zone had opted for the rightist Shiv Sena, known for its militancy, strong-arm tactics, and links with the government.

One of the most common problems women had with external unions was that they could not approach them with ease, have common discussions, or chalk out actions. The external leader or his workers seldom visited the unit. Women had to take off time to find the union office and sometimes waited endlessly for an appointment. Or they had to contact the local leader who in turn would represent their case to the leader. Secondly, the external union did away with horizontal links in favour of direct links with individual unit workers or unit leadership. Women shied away from these formal processes because of lack of confidence and time.

Secondly, women found themselves unwelcome in electoral politics. Electoral politics was seen as a public space not suited for women and the few women who dared venture into it were targets of slander, jibes of being unfeminine, and accusations of neglecting the family for the
pursuit of power. Various tactics were used to dissuade women, notably character assassination like in the case of Sharmila and the vulgar graffiti in the men's toilet. Similar tactics have been noted in other areas like the panchayat level as well as the assembly and parliament elections (Dutra, 1998). Thirdly, if women were successful in getting elected they found there were new problems in store for them. The majority of the committee or panel were men. Women felt excluded by male camaraderie, language, style of functioning and timings. Meetings were called after work in the evenings or on holidays without any regard for women's domestic responsibilities. Discussions were conducted informally at dinner or at public functions and announced as decisions in union meetings. Women disliked but had to bear with, vulgar language and jokes. There was no attempt to initiate a newcomer to the rules and protocol of the union. Fourthly, other stronger and meaner tactics were used against women. In a pharmaceutical company (Gothoskar, 1997) the male leadership 'allowed' a panel of women to win the election but refused to support their functioning. After some time, the women gave up in disgust, which further reinforced the general notion that women were incapable of decision-making and holding organisational responsibility. Lastly, responsibility rested with the leader who had to perform at all times. Women were not able to take on a leadership role because of their double responsibilities of home and work. Women often needed a backup or someone to share responsibilities but very few unions attempted to experiment with collective leadership or structures.

The union was a medium, which provided an opportunity to women to develop their organisational skills but it could also function a barrier, which restricted women's participation. Women kept away because they felt like unwelcome guests or intruders in a totally a male space. Unionists behaved in, very much the same manner, as the women's male kin expecting them to be supportive without coming in the way of male functioning and decision making. Women should follow directions, but not give directions; come to meetings, hear the proceedings but not offer any opinions. As most women lacked self-confidence, oratory powers, organisational skills and assertiveness, they could not confront men and their methods. The unresponsiveness to women's issues often drove women to seek help from the management especially for issues like sexual harassment. 'The boss would play big brother and help us out. If we told the men, they would only fight
amongst themselves and sometimes the girl's brother and his friends would join in. Finally nothing would happen to the teaser and there would be a big fight amongst the boys.'

Sometimes the management was receptive but at other times they could play off one worker against the other. 'They listen more to men than us. They think that we don't understand anything. Also they were afraid of men and we were no threat to them.' Caught between the class and gender contradictions, women found themselves in a very vulnerable position. It is not surprising that they preferred to opt for a passive involvement in the union structure and activities but took up short spontaneous actions of their own like slowing down production, absenteeism in crisis periods, sulking and walkouts, which because of its informal nature did not alienate them from the management or the union.¹

THE COMPLICIT WORKER

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<th>Name:</th>
<th>Jayshree Kadam</th>
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<td>Age:</td>
<td>21 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital Status:</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
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<td>Work:</td>
<td>Diamond polisher for 6 years in a gala</td>
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We went to visit Jayshree, the older of the two sisters working at diamond polishing, across the zigzag lanes of the sprawling Jogeshwari East working class colony. Their room, at the corner of two roads, was extremely neat with shelves of cooking vessels, a bed, table and cupboard. 'My father died when we were quite young. Our mother did odd jobs in the colony and raised us. I did not finish school. It was so boring and no matter how much I studied I would fail. So I said let it go to hell, I will work! I don't care what people say. How long can my mother keep feeding us?

We asked Jayshree if she liked being a piece rate worker. 'Only karigars or skilled workers are piece rated. That is because skilled workers have the freedom to do work whenever they want and whenever the boss wants. If we polish more diamonds, we get more money. And the more quickly we produce, the more we earn. After six years, I am quite good. But I do not earn as much as the Gujarati men who work day and night. There is no way we can compete with them. It's like being in different teams of men and women's races.'
Being piece rated is not bad. But there must be some system. Our piece rate has been the same for almost five years. We get no bonus for Diwali, just some sweets. We went in a group to tell the boss and he said I don't want to insult you by giving anything and I am not in a position to give you a good bonus. So we get nothing, he is too smart! How is it that the gala next to us can give bonus?

Have you ever thought of going to another unit? 'Of course, but I do not have contacts with other supervisors. And I am afraid, that what if I go to another gala and find that the supervisor is bad or the workers are rude or unfriendly? It's all the same so I might as well stick it out here. Sometimes employers phone and check on us. What if he does not give me a good recommendation because I left him?

How do workers in the galas take care of their problems, make demands and negotiate? 'Piece rate workers have no unions. Today they are in this unit and the day after tomorrow they are elsewhere. There is no unity amongst them. Galas close every other day. Sometimes, if the boss does not like his workers, or he is not making profit, he will simply shut down and put his machines in a godown. After a few months, the prices are better, or there is more raw material in the market, and he will reopen in another industrial estate. What can a union do in this situation?

According to me, the best thing is not to make a fuss. If you do not get what you want in one gala, quietly leave it. My policy is give and take. If you are accommodating, then you can claim a right to ask for leave or better diamonds. They appreciate the fact that I have stayed on for six years. I might be made supervisor of the girls' section. When my mother was sick, I asked for a loan. No other worker has got a loan here. I don't make a fuss to do overtime, so when sometimes I ask for time off they cannot say no. That's the only way here. If there is an issue like the bonus, the only solution is to go up to the boss and ask directly. If he does not agree, you leave. Raise a demand only if you are ready to leave.

The 'Free Worker'^2

There is no feminine for the word 'karigar'^3 or a skilled worker in the Indian languages, as traditionally women were not taught skills. But women like Jayshree in the diamond polishing industry totally identified with the word and concept in describing themselves and
their work. The tacit terms of the contract between the karigar and employer included employment according to need, piece rated payment, freedom to discontinue employment and no other obligations on part of either the employer or the employee. The worker was proud of his/her liberty, independence and control. It also gave a sense of achievement and competition. And it was this sense of ‘freedom’, so deeply imbibed by the workers, which overshadowed their sense of security, group identity and strategies.

‘I don’t know why the piece rate system exists. From what the older workers told me it’s always been there. It’s a good arrangement. I know several boys from Surat who work for some months, live frugally, do overtime, earn well so they can go away to their villages for farming. The Bombay boys take a break once a year in the summer season. For us women it is good because we can earn well and save up for the future.’

For the worker, it was the sense of freedom and the promise of an enhanced rate linked with speed, which acted as a powerful bait and challenge. Undoubtedly, this bait worked as there were short-term benefits to the piece rate system. The worker could gradually pick up speed and aim for a higher number of finished pieces. Combined with overtime, the worker could push her wage ceiling upwards. This incentive system also worked for the employer who had to juggle an erratic raw material supply with an adequate number of workers and breakneck delivery deadlines. It appeared like a fair deal for both the worker and the employer: the concept of a ‘free worker’ alongside that of a ‘free employer’; the promise of enhanced wages alongside profitability; the skill of polishing alongside the skill of diamond categorisation and management.

As we have described in Chapter six, the benefits of the piece rate system are illusory. The worker was really only ‘free’ to walk out of employment as the employer controlled her/him in most other aspects, and women more so than men. The employer decided the type of skill that a new worker should acquire. Women were rarely trained for highly skilled positions. With practice, a worker did develop enough speed to reach a standard level of a number of polished pieces. The challenge was to surpass the base level but the supervisor or the employer placed ‘speed breakers’ by giving ‘hard’ diamonds or used the strategy of ‘quota restriction’. Many women complained, ‘Supervisors are afraid of the male workers as they might beat them up or get angry so they palm off
the difficult diamonds to us women.' The other bait was overtime. 'Put in more hours and earn more.' In the diamond polishing *galas*, overtime was seen as an incentive for workers and treated as an extended working day with the same wage. Overtime jobs went to migrant workers, local men and lastly to women. Most industrial estates enforced the prohibition on night shifts for women. Women did not have the same opportunity to make extra wages. Theoretically workers and employers were free to hire, fire, join and leave. But in reality, workers who wanted to retain their jobs in a particular unit were expected to be regular. Ninety two per cent of the workers said long leave was only granted after seeking permission. Mobility of workers was limited through a system of checking and recommendations.

The advantages of being a 'free worker' existed but only for the highly skilled and the majority of male workers. The highly paid workers were the skilled artisans from Bengal who made moulds for jewellery and studded diamonds on jewellery. In the polishing section the skilled job was shaping the 'ghat' or rough diamond, which involved a six-month training period, concentration and patience. Only 11 per cent of the women workers were doing this task. Women were not in a position to avail of even the potential benefits of the piece rate system. But in spite of this, the lure of the piece rate was too much for women and the lower skilled men to resist. They looked down on their export zone counterparts as 'tied down' and controlled workers. Short-term benefits along with the aura of being a *karigar* outweighed the consideration of long-term benefits.

#### As the Complicit Worker

The piece rate system as it exists in the diamond polishing industry has cleverly used the past in its present functioning, keeping its spirit and basic framework without the corresponding cultural context and production relations. The earlier *karigar*, were trained within the family, had an alternative livelihood like a piece of farmland or his own home. He worked to serve a limited and/or seasonal requirement at the behest of wealthy traders or the aristocracy. The present day *karigar*, can be men or women, who are trained in workshops by employers, have no other means of livelihood and worked for mass production. He/she sold his/her labour power in the market within the capitalist mode of production with no control over the labour process, time or the finished
products. Yet the aura of being a ‘free worker’ and the benefits of the piece rate payment prevailed. The present day worker considered it an alternative to the time payment system with prospects of making good money. In accepting the system’s terms and conditions, the worker became a complicit part of the system, the ‘culture’ of the piece rate system and finally of his/her own exploitation.

This peculiar culture generating an intense sense of competition and intra-group rivalry as it focuses on the worker as an individual and rewards personal skills. Workers judge themselves and each other by their speed and earnings. Competition amongst men was fiercer than amongst women. Long hours and excruciating concentration often led to tantrums and fights. To keep up their stamina, the workers insisted on the best quality of food, to keep up their spirits they wore good clothes, and to maintain their lifestyle they were always on the look out for soft diamonds and were willing to change jobs for a little better payment. We learnt that it was not uncommon amongst migrant men to exchange good quality diamonds with lower quality ones and sell them in the parallel market. Talking was not encouraged whilst working on the scaife. This was not very conducive to camaraderie. Workers were used to moving in and out of units, and tended not to build any long-term relationships with their co-workers. Mobility depended on the employers competing with each other as subcontractors in getting regular orders. There was a general air of each one for oneself. This promotion of individuality mitigated against constituting workers as members of a class with similar interests and identity. Although the feeling was strongest amongst the migrant male workers, it rubbed off on all those who were working there, including the women workers.

By succumbing to the lure of short-term benefits, the worker was in reality reinforcing the interests of the employer. The informal sector galas gave a high piece rate/consolidated wage because it was cheaper for them to do so given the vagaries of the market. Some of the firms in the export zone used the polishing galas instead of setting up their own polishing units because it was economic to do so. However, the system and the prevalent culture of the karigar succeeded in collapsing the interests of capital and labour instead of highlighting its antagonisms. The lack of an interest in trade unionism is not surprising in this context.

Contrary to what most piece rated polishers believed there were unions in their industrial areas. The Diamond Workers Association, a
Maoist oriented union (Red Star, 1995) was mostly limited to workers from Kerala, with the Gujaratis and Maharashtrians keeping away. Very few workers responded to their appeals. And the unions had not been able to devise ways of coping with the mobility of the workers or the concept of the ‘free worker’ or take up issues like poor working conditions, injury compensation and medical facilities.

**MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

- **Name:** Sunanda  
- **Age:** 25 years  
- **Marital Status:** Married with three children  
- **Work:** 4 years in a medium sized plastics unit

**Question:** Why did you choose to work in this unit?
Sunanda: ‘I did not choose it. It just happened. I live close by. My husband lost his job even though it was a permanent one. He got some money but it was used up in putting up a pucca roof and tiles in our room. At that time we thought he would get another job. But now factories don’t want peons in their offices. He would not take any work, saying that it should be a good job. Finally after a year, there was no money, we started borrowing and then people stopped lending. My neighbour told me about this job. I was so desperate that I just begged the boss to take me.’

**Question:** What work do you do and what is your payment?
Sunanda: ‘I check the plastic items and finish them by scraping off extra plastic or rough edges. Now I am quite good at it. There are three other women like me doing this work. We get paid by the day. Sundays and holidays are not paid. I started out at a very low rate of only Rs. 18 and am now getting Rs. 60 a day. But there are no other benefits or allowances given. The boss said that everything is included in the raised pay.’

**Question:** Do you think the daily wages are good?
Sunanda: ‘Yes, they are more than what other plastics workers get in the industrial estate. But we are never sure unless we get permanent jobs. And after all these years, the boss could make me permanent. There are too many people looking for jobs. If I were to loose this one, I may or may not find another one.’
Question: Isn’t there something you can do about it?
Sunanda: ‘What can I do? My husband asks me to keep quiet. He feels that if one makes demands one will be thrown out. Then we will lose everything. I had heard that in the neighbouring unit a man had tried to organise the workers and the boss shut down overnight. The workers sat outside the unit for almost a month and then got tired and found other work. Unions have tried but cannot do anything because these units are not large or very profitable. My boss is very careful that the workers do not get together. We are not allowed to go out to the canteen for lunch. Even tea is served inside the unit. My only hope is to be a good worker because loyalty is respected. If I need time off or leave then I tell one of the older workers to ask on my behalf. They cover up for me. But I dare not ask anything beyond that.’

‘I have been missing my periods for some two years. I think it could be the plastic dust. My back is always painin g because I am sitting on the floor and bending over to work. The ventilation is bad on the loft. There is such a shortage of space. But whom can you talk to about such problems? My other hope is my children. I am working so that they can be educated and that they will grow up and look after their old parents. When I am at work, my neighbours and my mother look after them. I always give them gifts and do things for them. Without them I would be dead. My husband is a good man but quite unreliable. I do not give him all my earnings. Some of it I keep in the chit fund we started amongst us women in the neighbourhood. It will come in handy if anyone of us were to fall sick.’

**Controlling Workers**

At the crux of capitalist production is the control of the labour process and by extension the workers who individually or as a group resist these attempts. The restructuring of the production process through flexibility strategies gave employers numerical and wage control over workers. At the shop floor level, workforce policies, supervision, aggression and prevention of unionisation were some of the strategies used by managements. These strategies were applicable to mainly medium and small sized firms in which the ‘moderately secure’ and ‘insecure’ women were employed.

The decision to employ women was in itself a management strategy. Employers preferred women as they were ‘docile’ and ‘fresh,’ which
meant that women were new, inexperienced in the ways of the labour market and ignorant of trade unionism with very few contacts within or outside the workplace. For most women, it was their first job, which they were lucky to get with their low level of skills and education levels. The alternative would have been domestic service or household chores for the family. It was easy for employers to control women. An unusual firm had decided to employ an all-women workforce as the employers found they could discourage unionisation and prevent theft of small diamonds. By giving women better wages, benefits and facilities than the *galas*, they had a steady workforce to fulfil their regular, ongoing production. In most medium and small firms, women were the back up force to the number of men as well as the unskilled category to do tasks unwanted by men. Plastics product firms routinely hired lower caste women for sorting of plastic items. The strategic balance of gender, caste and region was a conscious attempt to divide workers.

'Our boss is so sharp, he does not allow any talking amongst the workers. He has his 'spies' reporting to him.' Workers reported that employers were so alert about any organising attempts that they prevented workers meeting in canteens or corridors. If any organising took place, employers supported each other through credit and executing orders. 'After a month the workers lost patience. It was an example for the entire industrial estate', said Aarati.

At the extreme end was management-provoked violence amongst workers, unionists and against workers. Management and multiple unions in large firms e.g. automobile plants and public sector units often engage in Byzantine intrigues and murderous violence. The only incident of violence amongst our sample was systematic harassment of workers to accept voluntary retirement schemes. Whilst the scheme itself was a policy and management decision, its implementation by lower level executives and supervisors often involved some sort of coercion. Workers get no help from trade unions as most of them oppose such schemes. By accepting retirement, they cease to be union members. So workers are deprived of a possible union involvement in the negotiation of a better deal for retirement, re-training or financial advice.

As most workers had no recourse to formal union bodies, the majority of them or 82 per cent of the workers took up issues directly with their employers or with the help of some older workers. The most they could manage to ask for was time off for personal reasons. Older workers and favoured ones were granted some concessions. This sort
of ad hoc favouritism entrenched the system of patronage, loyalty and strategic individualism, thus overshadowing collective bargaining in favour of a direct employee-employer relationship.

In a similar vein was the use of paternalism as a strategy to keep workers away from unionisation. Some of the large plastics products firms made a show of paternalism by giving workers more benefits than the other units in the area or used the language of ‘family’ and ‘looking after’ to fudge the issue of control and power. Ramaswamy (1997) argues that Indian workers, unlike their Western counterparts, do not want only a contractual but a long-term relationship with their employers. They often look towards their supervisors or employers to help solve family problems or to give jobs to their sons or relatives. Workers appreciate such a personalised relationship. A large, unionised jewellery export firm owner said, ‘I maintain individual contact with each worker, so I meet each worker every 60 days. The meeting is brief but they feel nice talking to one of the owners and airing whatever problems they have.’ In the smaller plastic units, the number of workers and space was small, so personalised relationships were possible especially with long term workers. The boss attended the wedding of his worker’s family or helped in the hospitalisation of a sick member. For the worker the employer was an important contact besides his kin network and union to be tapped in times of crisis. This sort of patronage blunts the edge of collective bargaining. Unionism implies workers’ rights and workers’ struggles while paternalism implies humanitarianism and philanthropy on the part of the employer for his workers.

**GENDER LOGIC**

It took fifty years of constant propaganda and free education for working class households to consider sending their daughters to school. So strong is the gender ideology of women’s reproductive work and household duties that it stays like a solid foundation in people’s minds on which are built newer shapes with different hues. Our study shows that macro economic changes and transforming social values have to some extent liberated women from the home, but paid employment had different meanings for men and women. For women, paid work was an extension of household duties, controlled and supervised by household members. Women had been ‘allowed’ to move from the four walls of the home to the four walls of the workplace. But the household continued to cast
its shadow on women's activities at the workplace.

Their being workers and wage earners did not give women the freedom to decide on their continuation and participation in collective organising at the workplace. A fine blend of gender and economic considerations on the part of household members and women permeated the nature of their decisions and actions. Household members considered women as 'contingency' workers helping the household with a wage contribution or with a surplus income to augment its standard of living. Their role was to hold on to whatever was available as a wage and not jeopardise their jobs by engaging in action even if it could enhance their wages. Conversely, it could be argued that because women were considered 'contingency workers', it should have given them greater freedom to earn, experiment with organisation, discontinue work or try to enhance their wages. Whereas men, being the main earners, would be pressurised by their households to make a stable income without breaks or any jeopardising behaviour. Sangeeta voiced the peculiar gender based rationale of the household. 'My brother tried to organise the workers in his unit and was thrown out. My parents did not say anything to him. But I am not allowed to do anything, not even talk to the leaders. He was unemployed for some time and then found another job. His wife worked to cover up for the absence of his wages. My parents say why should a girl bother about all this. I too feel it is a difficult thing and it's better to just do your job and move on.'

Women were aware of the patriarchal hypocrisy in considering their wages as marginal as most of their households were poor or moderately well off. Even the better off households lived in despairing physical conditions and in violent, communally tense areas. Sixty eight per cent of the women were contributing their total wages to the household income pool. The majority of women were aware that their wages, though not crucial, were necessary especially in the light of the adjustments being made in the household. They too did not want to endanger their wages through brash action and conflicts with employers. On the other hand they felt entitled to a better wage, benefits and facilities at the workplace. The foremost consideration of women in taking any action in the medium and small, unorganised firms was the lack of solidarity amongst workers. The piece rated workers shrugged off unionisation and worked 'harder' at enhancing their wages or individually negotiated with their employers but at the risk of loosing
their jobs. The unskilled plastics products workers had no unions and were afraid of dismissal in a surplus labour market. Only the large firm workers could depend on their unions to transact wage agreements.

For male household members collective bargaining, with its promise for better wages, was too distant a possibility in their schema of present daily survival. And there was the nagging danger of losing the economic along with the social or family reputation. Women’s households were worried about gossip and character assassination associated with mixing with men and keeping irregular hours. Gossip was likely to affect a young woman’s marriage prospects. Bharati was asked by her mother, ‘Why do you want to be a leader? You will soon have to set up your ‘ghar sansar’. Young women were well aware of these concerns and took steps to prevent humiliation, e.g. having a brother as escort, sent out the message to the neighbours that she had the sanction of other family members. ‘My neighbours will now gossip about how my father is losing control over his daughter and how it can only lead to disaster, meaning I will elope or get pregnant,’ laughed Sharmila.

Married women workers said that their families were unsupportive of union activity because they feared a reduction of time and energy at home. Seventy per cent of male members of the family did practically no regular work at home except in times of illness or crisis. They did not think that political activity on the part of women should curtail their privileges as the main breadwinners. Significantly there were no married women amongst active union participants. Even if the family members in some cases were considerate, they feared that ‘society’ would gossip about how they as married women were neglecting their families because of aspirations to be a neta. Said one woman, ‘Very few mothers-in-law would say, fine, I will look after the home you go be active in the union. They will not mind me working but I should not take on other things.’

AGENCY AND STRUCTURES, SILENCE AND RESISTANCE

‘Pani me rehna chahate ho, toy magar se bheatar?’ (If you want to live in the same waters, will you antagonise the crocodile?)

- Lalita, plastics industry worker

Women had developed an understanding of the firm, its owners, the labour market, exploitation and resistance. They may or may not have a ‘critical consciousness’ about the creation of surplus value, but were
Individual and Collective Strategies

aware of their class position and their vulnerability in the workplace hierarchy. They were hemmed in by a variety of constraints, ranging from gender ideology within the households and trade union, to aggressive management strategies and the constraints of the production process. Their tenuous position in production, their lack of skills, experience, education and their insecure employment placed boundaries on the nature of their resistance and desire to improve their security levels. Women used a variety of strategies, sometimes two of them simultaneously and often allied with different actors. In attempting to understand their resistance, we inter related women’s levels of security, their perception of security, and their position in the production process with some enabling and constraining structures.

Lateral Strategies

Seventy six per cent of ‘insecure’ workers were below the age of 30, with an average 7th standard education, from poor households (41 per cent from HCI-1 and 52 per cent from HCI-2) and had joined the labour market at an early age. Most of them were semi skilled polishers or unskilled plastics product workers in tiny, small and medium firms. Most industrial estates and the workshops were facing the threat of severe foreign competition, rising production and infra structural costs. Employers aggressively nipped any attempt at worker organisation. Seventy five per cent of these workers had not participated in any form of organisation mainly because there were no external unions and they were too afraid of dismissal in the absence of protective legislation.

Fear was a predominant feeling - fear of closure, unemployment and of a household on the brink of survival. Young women, with their minimum levels of education, skills and economically desperate situations, had joined these units as an alternative to domestic service. Their paid and unpaid labour stretched to an average of nine to ten hours. Their main issues were low wages, poor work conditions and deteriorating health, but they clung on as factory jobs gave them self esteem and dignity. In this context, women developed ‘lateral strategies’ to build individual safety nets. Many of the insecure workers, if they could, invested in chit or revolving funds in their neighbourhoods. A strong kinship network existed which helped to take care of each other. It was common for women to make meals for migrant men or look after their neighbours’ children or give emergency loans. Catering to
and cultivating patrons within the community, the local leader or the boss’ family was another strategy. ‘I cook for the boss’s family in the morning, get his lunch to the factory and then fill in a full day. The other women make fun of me but it might save my job when they are thrown out,’ said Parvatibai, a sorter in a small beauty accessory manufacturing unit. Married women were particularly keen on investing in their children’s education. ‘My children have to get out of this pigsty and live and earn elsewhere. If they can get government jobs, it would be the best thing. But for that, they have to study. They will have a better future than me.’

Forty five per cent of the ‘moderately secure’ workers said that they did not participate in any collective bargaining because of fear of dismissal or harassment. Instead, the group formed informal groups amongst themselves, functioning like workplace social clubs. Said Sangeeta, ‘Most of the girls are not interested, they come for work and go home but five of us plan programs or picnics or pujas with the boys. The Gujarati boys do not join us. We go to weddings together and if one of us lands in trouble, the rest helps out by talking to the boss or as the last resort, find the worker another job.’ These informal groups functioned sporadically during Ganpati pujas or other festivals. Women did minor tasks while the men saw to the organisational and financial responsibilities. Co-workers and the employer contributed money. Region, language affinity and tradition seemed to play a role in keeping these groups together. Informal groups had mainly Maharashtrian workers who lived in the same neighbourhood. The diamond workers coming from the working class colonies of Jogeshwari and Borivili seemed to have extended this concept from the neighbourhood community to the workplace. But there were no incidents of these informal groups becoming training grounds for taking up economic issues or for the formation of unions. They provided another kind of space for information gathering and networking.

**Confrontationist Strategies**

‘Secure’ workers belonged to the large and export firms, were young and married with about 10 years experience at the workplace. They had acquainted themselves with the functions of the union, wage increases and settlements. Workers were also aware that the presence of a union kept the management from violence, most forms of
discrimination, and arbitrary behaviour and gave workers a feeling of collective strength. Having procured the coveted three main securities, 'secure' workers could identify other issues like facilities, transport and sexual harassment and raise them with the management or trade union. Their issues and involvement in the general activities of the union made them realise that they would have to struggle for a foothold in that male space. Few women chose to strategise vis a vis the union in a 'confrontationist' mode to make space for themselves or enter the union decision making process. Most were either constrained by their families, patriarchal notions, violence and their own lack of confidence. The majority chose to use 'supportive' strategies or support the union by paying their dues, attending meetings and participating in whatever action it initiated.

Women using 'confrontationist' strategies fight a lonely and bitter struggle that are not usually accepted by other women, the union and are ignored by the management. Their struggle refutes the general notion of non-participation in unions as a result of household duties, mobility and lack of interest. They demonstrate that these very real constraints need not hold them back and that they can take leadership, militant action and organisational responsibilities. Such struggles have been successful if women have had access to a sensitive male leadership, a strong women's wing and/or support of the women's movement.

Strategy of Reciprocity

The category of 'moderately secure' workers had a larger number of younger and unmarried women than the other two categories. Sixty seven per cent came from HCI-2 or moderate households and contributed most of their wage to the household. They had immediately joined work but their work experience was limited to less than five years. What differentiated this group from the other two was that the diamond polishers amongst them had higher wages than the official minimum and the plastics product workers had both above minimum wages or union representation. But a sense of insecurity prevailed as they were conscious of the rapid changes in their medium and large firms, which could lead to closure and unemployment. The diamond polishers' complicity with the piece rate system culture prevented them from showing solidarity with other workers or joining unions. The plastics workers were faced with increasingly aggressive management
strategies to either prevent unionisation or circumvent it by using court cases, enforced retirement schemes and manipulative tactics like temporary status to permanent workers. The alliance between the political group and its liberalisation policy and a management caught in fierce competition with foreign goods placed formidable barriers to women's strategising abilities.

Most workers used the 'strategy of reciprocity', an individual centred, one-to-one approach with the management and union. At the workplace, they directly approached the employer for demands other than wages, permanence and unionisation. Time off, leave, and transport allowance were some of the issues for which workers negotiated by showing their loyalty, willingness for overtime, and patronage privileges. Patronage included the employer granting his chosen workers a promotion to being supervisor or a sub contractor. Workers contacted any union or unionist who could help them. As there were few large unions or federations working in industrial estates, workers would go to any small splinter group union or even local musclemen or mafia for help. Many of these 'business' unions had set up shop in industrial estates. They had individual worker-clients who approached them with particular issues like compensation, gratuity, wage increases or compensation for terminating employment. These professional unionists were equally good negotiating with words and blows. If they were successful, the worker had to pay a fee or commission to them.

CONCLUSION

Women's resistance and strategising is intricately linked with the nature of the production process, enabling or constraining structures and characteristics like age and marital status. Having been in paid employment for an average of four to five years and having shifted jobs, women were aware of the exploitative conditions of capital, the labour market, and their own vulnerable positions. Labour market flexibility strategies in most firms had posed a threat to the 'secure' as well as other workers. But having worked under insecure conditions, workers were more concerned about enhanced wages and benefits. There was little the majority of them could do about wages and benefits, as they had no access to formal union bodies. Workers therefore had to resort to individual actions or negotiations with employers.
Fifteen per cent of the women were members of unions and supported them through membership and participation in actions. There was, however, no active involvement of women in the union structure or in its actions. Women felt they were not welcome in union elections or allowed to put forward their own issues. Yet they were expected to be a part of all ‘general’ issues and strikes. In part this problem and attitude was connected to the decline of the labour movement, its limited strategies and gender bias. Women would have been more inclined to participate if there were internal unions with familiar leaders instead of the existing external unions with political figures or party leaders. Women needed the support of their male colleagues and unions to enter the election fray and gain organisational experience. If the gender bias of male workers’ could have been curbed, women might not have found it necessary to take up issues like sexual harassment with the management.

One of the main constraining structures, which prevented ‘moderately secure’ workers (specifically the diamond polishers) from collectively organising, was the culture of the piece rate wage system. It presented an illusion of freedom and enhanced income that did not hold true for most semi skilled and skilled workers and women. It worked largely in favour of the employer whilst workers were proud of being ‘karigars’ and competed against each other, thus become complicit in the system and their own exploitation. The other dual strategy used by the management was the combination of control and patronage. Workers were tightly supervised and controlled so that they could not organise and in case of organising the firm was closed down. Through patronage, employers built a direct relationship with workers based on loyalty, which promoted individualism and undermined organisation.

There is a body of feminist literature on the patriarchal nature of the household and the workplace and the link between them. Patriarchal/gender logic defies the economic and has its own rationale for women’s participation in the labour market but actively prevented participation in unions or any organising activities. Only a small number of women could bear the combined gender bias of the household members and the union. Most women reconciled themselves to available work and wages and refrained from formal union participation. Rather, the majority of the women strategised outside the pale of unions by
developing a range of strategies for individual safely nets and basic security.

The ‘insecure’ workers were more inclined to use ‘lateral’ strategies of building contacts amongst co-workers, neighbours, kin, and even the employer’s family. Another form of lateral strategising was the formation of informal groups, which organised Ganapati pujas, and picnics. They brought workers socially together and increased their relations with each other in the absence of any formal bodies. Very few women used ‘confrontationist’ strategies as they took a high toll on individual women. If women used them they did so to create space in male dominated trade union structures. Strategies of reciprocity were used to establish direct contact with employers and trade favours like loyalty for time and leave concessions. This included trade unionists who negotiated with employers on specific issues for a fee.

**Endnotes**

1 Sarkar and Bhowmik (1998) found that women workers in tea plantations showed a persistent disregard for formal union participation, but were more militant than men when provoked by managers, workload issues and other pending problems. There were cases of women beating up managers, going on flash strikes or gharamao member of the management.

2 The ‘free worker’ concept was mainly prevalent amongst diamond polishers. Daily wage earners in plastics industry did not perceive themselves as free workers.

3 The ‘karigar’ is seen as an independent worker who is not paid according to time but according to the number of pieces. The concept probably evolved from the manufacture of crafts and continues to mean a piece rate, assignment or article based paid worker who has no one employer or location. It is still used for the traditional crafts but does not include piece rate machine workers in the new industries like plastics processing and excludes unskilled home based workers.

4 Buroway in his book ‘Manufacturing Consent’, succinctly elaborates on how the piece rate system is used as a game by the management to create an atmosphere of competition and higher production (1979).

5 De Neve (1999) found a strong caste factor amongst piece rated workers in Surat. The Saurashtra Patels dominate the diamond polishing industry in Surat. Many of the employers had been karigars themselves and had through hard work and help from their kin set up their own units. Every karigar nurtured the same dream. This identification with employers made the workers not only condones violence but
disallow any horizontal identity links with other workers and labour rights. However, in Mumbai, the caste factor operated only amongst the Gujarati employers and workers. Maharashtrian workers came from different lower caste communities.

6 The tradition of Ganpati festivities goes back to end of the 19th century when reformer and freedom fighter Balgangadhar Tilak popularised the family puja to a community one. (Sarkar, S., 1983) The migrant workers in textile and other manufacturing factories kept this tradition alive in the working class colonies of the city. Through the years these community pujas have become big and commercialised with the government of the day favouring them with cheap electricity and other facilities for electoral popularity.