Contingent workers: Women in two industries in Mumbai

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Citation for published version (APA):

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The impetus for this study came from our dialogues with women workers, their deep concern and adverse experiences of change in their lives and at their workplace. Women and the economic reforms were becoming a dominant theme for issue-based struggles. Activists from different parts of the country at the national conference of the women's movement had narrated various impacts on employment, household poverty and increasing violence. Academics as well as activists had undertaken studies and surveys to gauge the impact of the economic reforms on the poor and on women. Our study is part of this concern and debate. We have attempted to analyse the complex, multi layered relationships between industrial policies, restructuring, women workers and their households in the city of Mumbai, India. The study shuttles between the macro and the micro; from industrial policies to firm level changes; from the household to the workplace; and from women's perceptions to their strategies. Through the words, experiences, perceptions and struggles along with the collected data we gathered from women, we have traced some of these changes in their lives, in their sense of security and strategies at their workplaces and households. In this concluding chapter, we summarise our findings, discuss their implications for women as workers and as women and finally specify some areas of state policies and tasks for the women's movement that can help empower women workers.

PROBLEMATIC POLICIES

The backdrop to this exploration is the new economic reforms, ushered in during the first part of the 1980s and then once again in 1991, which shifted India from its protected economic model towards an open, neo liberal one. India's industrial policy changed from import
substitution and encouragement of indigenous industries to a liberalisation of regulations allowing for imports, de-licensing of reserved items in the manufacturing sector and the entry of foreign companies for manufacture, trade and investment. These economic reforms were determined by four different groups of actors namely economic advisors, the ruling party politicians, external forces like the World Bank and influential older industrialists and younger industrialists. The interplay between these four groups was relevant for the analysis of the unfolding of the liberalisation process.

The political group used a mix of skillful strategising and manipulation to introduce and continue the reforms with enormous consequences. It can be argued that such strategies were necessary for political expediency and a deflection of political opposition, but it does not explain its repeated usage for the different stages of implementation. This strategy was not only a skillful but also a devious way of bringing in liberalisation through the backdoor. The political group did not outline “India’s sovereign response” to the changing international scenario of globalisation and there was no mention of how it would avoid the mistakes of the Latin American and African countries. In public, each political group had reiterated the twin objectives of industrial growth and poverty alleviation, but it was the industrial sector that was given priority. The first phase of liberalisation favoured the new industrial class, multinationals, foreign investors and traders.

In the absence of state protection and with the entry of foreign capital and competition, the small-scale industry faced severe problems of survival. The plastics processing industry was under severe pressure as de-reservation and liberalised imports allowed products from China, Taiwan and Italy into the country. At the same time, large raw material manufacturing companies, with state assistance, prevented an inflow of cheaper raw materials into the country. The small-scale sector was caught between price and product competition and the high cost of production and many firms had to fold up.

Changes like the devaluation of the rupee, partial convertibility of the rupee, decontrolling regulations for gold, changes in the export/import policies and foreign investment aided the emerging diamond polishing and jewellery industry. This industry continued being ‘protected’ as it was totally export oriented and made a contribution to the foreign exchange reserves. As a result of this policy and the
boom in demand for low priced diamond studded jewellery in the United States and Japanese markets, there was an expansion of firms in the export zone and the formal sector. However, the entire industry was dependent on raw material or diamond roughs from the Antwerp market, which was controlled by the De Beers, a multinational company. The fall in consumer demand and recession in both these countries prompted De Beers to reduce the raw material supply, sending most of the small players into a frenzied struggle for survival.

Liberalisation policies and integration into the globalised market failed to substantially increase the general rate of growth and induced a ‘jobless growth’ in the industrial sector. Comparisons of data from the pre and post liberalisation periods show that there were yearly variations but the rate of growth of the manufacturing sector had declined by about 2.5 per cent (Mani, 1998). The industrial estates meant for the small-scale sector were empty and dismal. There was a slowdown in the rate of employment and a reallocation from the formal to the informal sector (Sundaram, 2001). Women had a relatively small share of the formal sector and that too in the public sector. Most public sector units, in case of not performing well, were under a wage freeze and slated for privatisation.

Allocations for social development, namely education, health and food security, were not reduced but neither were they enhanced or the quality of services improved. The political group used the same technique of liberalisation through the backdoor so that the deterioration in social services would reduce its utility and thus pave the way for privatisation.

TRACING IMPACTS IN THE HOUSEHOLD

Mumbai is a potpourri of different cultures, languages and people from different parts of the country. The majority of women in our sample were second-generation, Hindu, non-brahmin migrants from the hinterland who had settled down in working class colonies at the outskirts of the city. In a city starved of space, their families had managed to procure for themselves small room and electricity, a common water tap and common toilet. In spite of the politicised atmosphere and violence of working class colonies, young women were mobile and formed a sizeable number in the formal and informal sectors of the economy. These young, literate women were from poor households. The majority of the households consisted of four to five members and
had half of them in the labour market. Their joint income was at the level of subsistence with a per capita income between Rs 421 to Rs 840.

**Household Dilemmas**

Economic reforms like the stabilisation and structural adjustment programs, depending on the specific characteristics of development in the country, have particular impacts on different categories of people. As it is difficult to establish a direct connection between macro level changes and its micro level impact, most researchers use the method of a pre and post reform analysis with selected indicators like employment rates, nutrition, consumption and expenditure levels. The other approach has been studying household strategies used for insulating itself against the adverse effects of economic changes. We have attempted to bring the macro and the micro level processes together for a more precise and holistic understanding of the impact on the lives of women within the household.

The dilemma before us was that, on the one hand, we needed to use the second approach and on the other, the household could not be treated as a single, homogeneous unit. Feminist scholarship has established that the household has a gender and age hierarchy and inequalities in the distribution of resources and allocation of labour (Chapter 1). We have called the household a 'split collective' i.e. a group of individuals, with different demands, needs and inequalities, living together. If the household cannot be regarded as one homogeneous unit, then it is axiomatic that there cannot be one household strategy but different strategies. Our data (Chapter 4) supports the feminist discourse on the inequalities within the household and the negotiations and strategies of different members of the household. It also showed that the theoretical problems of the two concepts of the household and household strategies could be overcome by a careful differentiation between members and their strategies.

**Household Adjustments or Women's Adjustments?**

Women accepted making household cost reductions as part of the women's domain or their household duties and readily implemented them. They would have preferred general compliance and were upset when husbands did not follow them or brothers were favoured. Most of the expenditure reduction adjustments involved additional labour
and time on the part of women, had an impact on their health and/or meant a radical shift from the home to paid employment at the workplace.

Women spent more time buying in bulk at wholesale markets, carrying foodstuff or vegetables home on holidays, saving fuel by cooking only once a day and purchasing cheaper quality food grains which required cleaning. Reducing clothes, outstation travel and entertainment curtailed small pleasures in a life full of hard work. Men had control over their own money and ways of combining work and leisure when they went to their villages or building social networks in teashops. The young men in the home, as future earners, were given more liberties than the women. Besides challenging men on keeping their side of the bargain, women found alternative ways like disguising outstation travel as pilgrimages, pooling money with other workers to buy snacks and postponing the purchase of clothes through better maintenance.

Reduction in the number of items for meals and lower intake of fruits and meat combined with their long working hours was bound to weaken women's physical constitution. The average Indian woman has a high level of anaemia resulting from malnutrition. We do not have data on their health status but circumstances, which could lead to long-term health impairment, were present. The high pollution levels caused by vehicular traffic in Mumbai, the densely populated working class colonies, lack of open spaces, irregular garbage clearance, open sewers and a work environment of diamond dust and plastic fumes were hazardous factors. Unfortunately, this condition was further exacerbated by the disregard for quick medical attention. Our qualitative data indicates that women would wait for a miraculous disappearance of symptoms, using home remedies or self-medication, before seeking out the doctor. Over 77 per cent of the women interviewed reported severe and acute health problems. The other adjustment, which had a long-term impact, was removal of children from school or switching them to municipal schools. Education was an investment in the future and parents were cautious of withdrawing children from schools.

Women and men played a role in developing social networks and mutual aid support systems. The adjustment that radically changed women's lives was entering the labour market. Some did so willingly, others had no choice and a few believed that they were only going in for a short period to tide over a crisis. Economic compulsions had as
much weight as patriarchal compulsions and maintaining the household's social status. Economic needs alone would have driven all poor women into the labour market but many stayed behind because of children or in favour of younger/older women. Some parents would rather have their unmarried daughters stay at home whilst they looked for an eligible groom. In other households, there was a great deal of negotiations and persuasion as unmarried daughters used a range of persuasive arguments about benefits and safeguards: work will add to their experience, bring in additional income, and be a qualification for marriage. They reassured parents that they would observe rules on mobility and socialising, and take care of their domestic duties. That these arguments were persuasive were evident from the fact that the majority of the young, unmarried women had accessed their jobs and apprenticeship with the help of their family members and neighbours. For married women, the patriarchal expectations of gender roles were strong barriers to overcome. Wives, regardless of whether they were from poor or better off households, had to ensure that no part of their household duties would be neglected. Sometimes mothers or mothers in law were asked to help out with the children or household work. Men hardly ever did any household work except in times of crisis or illness. Once in employment, women had to negotiate overtime hours, which were particularly resented by male members of the household. Women avoided wages becoming an area of contention by giving their wages over to their husbands or fathers in law. This act simultaneously established the rationale for paid employment and warded off opposition by counter arguments. But like the unmarried daughters they also kept overtime and bonus money with them as savings or to purchase jewellery, with or without the knowledge of their families.

**Adjustments and Security**

All our respondents said that they were making one or another adjustment within their households. Why did women go to such lengths to implement household adjustments? Women, primarily, saw themselves as members of a household and only secondarily as individuals. They were acutely conscious of the hierarchical, patriarchal order in the household and in society and of the odds against attempting to survive independently. They believed that if they did their part, men would be morally pressured to fulfil their obligations. This belief in the ‘patriarchal contract’ kept women rooted in seeking their own
security in the general welfare of the household. According to women, a prospering and secure household was one that pooled incomes to achieve a decent standard of living, own a legally cleared home without fear of evictions or communal and mafia violence, and one which had a social standing within their community. Women wanted to contribute in whatever way they could to the building of such a secure household. Participating in the income pool through paid employment was one way of contribution but they were also shrewd enough to keep aside small amounts for a direct access to financial resources. The amounts were never very large but it gave them a sense of independence and control. Employment and not wages were seen as their individual security. Employment meant that they had wages, which could be diverted from one family to another or natal one or for other needs. In spite of the pain and stress, women were hesitant to give up employment because it was their only asset, which gave them a feeling of self-worth, acted as back up for other negotiations in the household and empowered them for the future.

Why did the male and elderly in the household ‘allow’ women to join the labour market? A majority of the interviewed women (except the single women) told us that they were able to persuade their parents or husbands because they projected their employment as a short term one in order to contribute to the household. Male and elderly members supported their employment as they were assured of gains without having to make any financial investments or domestic changes on their part. Women’s argument for employment fell in with their view that members of the household should make adjustments to tide over the economic crisis, changes in the labour market and rising prices. Women’s employment and earnings did not have the same status as that of the male members of the household. They were considered ‘contingent workers’, those put out in the labour market as reserves (until others found jobs or the crisis passed), as supplementary earners (for surplus income) or to reduce the demands on the other earning members of the household by looking after their own needs like clothes and entertainment. So household members supported women in finding jobs but were not interested in upgrading their skills. The male members allowed women to work but did not share their domestic responsibilities. In some cases it was a social status symbol for a family to say their daughter or wife had a permanent or well paying job. But
they actively dissuaded women from seeking promotions, skill enhancement and from struggles for better conditions. And they continued to see women as ‘contingent’ workers after several years of paid employment and after having become accustomed to their earnings.

As we shall see in the next section, this short sighted and short term view of women’s employment as ‘contingent’ has allowed the employers to take advantage of the households’ claim and control on women’s labour, to treat women as secondary workers and employ them cheaply in low skilled, insecure positions.

Revisiting the Household

Our data and interviews showed that women had a notion of the household as a social, emotional, economic and reproduction unit, crucial for their individual security in a patriarchal society. They were aware of the gender and age inequalities and negotiated with the males and elderly decision makers with strategies that were a mix of appeasement, manipulation and confrontation. Coming from a vulnerable position, women’s strategies were a balance between individual survival, building a fall back position and the welfare of the household. We believe that the concept of the ‘household’ has an ideological and discursive value and cannot be abandoned easily. In using the concept, we need to see the household as a group of individuals living together, related by blood or kinship, sharing certain interests as well as having different and at times conflicting needs. We have to analytically integrate the inherent gender and age inequalities between its members.

Our data also indicates that there are different strategies used by different members of the household. However, there is also a common or what can be called a ‘household strategy’ which is meant for all members but could have been decided by a few, with or without the consent of the rest of the household. Usually there is full or reluctant agreement, as total disagreement would mean a split in the household. Women accepted the decision of the elders/male members as a ‘household’ decision to be collectively implemented. This did not mean that they did not negotiate with the decision makers but they were prepared to not push their own point of view if it would lead to a situation of confrontation. Women devised their own alternative,
parallel strategies even as they went along with the overall household strategies.

**FLEXIBILITY STRATEGIES**

The last twenty years has seen a worldwide global movement of economic restructuring and liberalisation. Promoted by the International Financial Institutions like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and World Trade Organisation, the developed and developing countries are introducing Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs), liberalisation measures and globalising production within the neo-liberal economics paradigm. Terms like globalisation and restructuring are not only part of the theoretical or political discourse but have become part of everyday usage. In India, since the introduction of the new economic policies in 1991, corporate India has begun a process of restructuring to meet the demands of the global market. There is little material on how this restructuring is taking place in the industrial sector. Our study has investigated the nature of changes implemented by firms by using the framework of flexibility strategies. Were firms in India using the new post Fordist flexibility strategies to gear themselves for price and product competition? How were women experiencing these changes?

**Three Categories**

In order to link the nature of the changes to women workers, we have categorised them into three groups using the indicators like employment, income and union security. We found that not all women workers fit the stereotype of informal sector, low paid, unskilled women workers. There are women who were well paid, semi and skilled workers. Nine per cent were ‘secure’ or those who had all three of the securities. These women worked in large firms of both the industries. Thirty seven per cent were ‘moderately secure’ or had one security, which could be above minimum level wages or union protection. These were the semi skilled diamond polishers or well paid medium firm plastic processing workers. But half of them or 52 per cent were ‘insecure’ workers or those who did not have any of the three securities. As one woman said, ‘My hands are my security’. These were workers mainly in the small diamond polishing firms and small and medium plastics processing firms.
Three Strategies

In the case of small-scale sector and Informal Sector firms in both industries, the rationale for restructuring was ‘basic survival’ and for larger, Formal Sector firms, it was competing through ‘expansion and export’. The latter followed what we have called the New Flexibility Strategies or those developed to move away from the Fordist model of production. The Informal Sector firms were already implementing an older, traditional version of flexibility strategies which they intensified as they fought for survival. The framework of flexibility strategies has three dimensions namely strategies of the organisational structure, the production process and the labour market (Elson, 1996). Flexibility in the organisational structure included the de-centralisation of production by sub contracting, creating split firms, relocation of main or branch firms and backward/forward integration. Flexibility in the pattern of production meant doing away with the notion of job description and the rigid divisions between different types of job, in favour of a generalised, on the job, training for all types of work for all workers. Flexibility of the labour market focused on streamlining of the workforce, regulating wages and working hours, casualising its permanent workforce and curtailment of collective bargaining. Firms selected the use of some flexibility strategies according to their access to credit, state legislation, the production process and nature of the workforce.

We have not looked at the implementation process, the problems and successes of these strategies at the firm level. One of the main criticisms of the labour process theory has been its emphasis on the labour process from the management perspective. Industrial relations studies have combined the management and labour perspectives of new changes (Mathur, 1991). We have concentrated on the worker’s perspectives, as our primary focus was to look at their workplace experiences and strategies. Our data indicated that firms concentrated on two outcomes in their use of flexibility strategies: numerical and functional flexibility.

Large firms introduced an integrated package of all three strategies designed to economise as well as expand the production for the export and domestic market. Automation and mechanisation restructured and reduced the number of jobs. Workers were retrained to be multi skilled as earlier differentiated tasks were merged together. Women were made
redundant as men easily picked up their low skilled jobs. Quite contrary to what was put forward in the feminisation theory, we found that there was a masculinisation of jobs as men were taking over women's jobs in plastics processing firms. In both industries, women were doing men's jobs but were not taking them over. For example, in the small plastics processing firms, women were encouraged to sit on machines to 'practice' and subsequently to fill in for absentee male workers without being promoted to a machinist's job. In a few instances, women were moved into newer categories of work which had not been sex typed. Employers were using both gender notions and restructuring of the production process to deskill highly paid, skilled male workers. Displacing one set of male workers with another would have caused tension and possible worker unrest. Moving women into the newly created jobs offset such a possibility.

Both the large and smaller firms used subcontracting as a strategy. The larger firms concentrated on core products and gave off peripherals to smaller sub contractors or specialised sub contractors. The smaller firms also reduced their work process by retaining the machine-based part of the production and sub contracting smaller jobs to ex workers or other sub contractors. As mostly women were involved in peripheral tasks, they found themselves without a job or working for a smaller sub contractor. The formal and informal sector firms used the traditional flexibility strategies of piece rate and daily wage systems. The culture of the piece rate wage system in small and medium firms helped employers to dismiss workers as and when necessary.

Vanishing Securities
The three main component parts of the new flexibility strategies, i.e. automation, sub contracting and multi-skilling of workers, has led to the casualisation of the workforce especially of women workers or the 'secure' section of women workers who mainly work in large and some medium firms. Very few men and hardly any women could take advantage of the multi skilling process (Piore and Sabel, 1984). Nor were women considered ideal 'core' workers to be retained as permanent workers. Large firms resorted to the use of the voluntary retirement scheme and pay compensation to reduce their women workers. Trade unions in quite a few firms saw no option but to get a fair price as compensation. Co-workers, unions and often the members of women workers' families persuaded them to accept retirement schemes.
The 'moderately secure' and the 'insecure workers' were from diamond polishing firms, which had over minimum wages, or from plastics firms, which gave more than the minimum wages and/or had labour protection. The firms practicing traditional flexibility strategies did not have the resources and management techniques of the large, formal sector firms but they were nevertheless successful in moving workers from insecurity to greater insecurity. Unionised plastics processing firms bypassed laws and unions by legally dismissing 'temporary' women workers. The other 'moderately secure' workers were the diamond polishers who were threatened by impending closure as the De Beers Company or the largest suppliers of rough diamonds had reduced the inflow of raw materials. Many had already shut down and there was immense competition amongst the survivors. There were no increments and more overtime as employers cut down the size of the workforce. The 'insecure' workers were at such a rock bottom level that any further attempt at intensifying labour market strategies would have driven them over the edge of survival. Insecure workers, especially the older women from the tiny and small plastics processing firms, were fearful of dismissal as their firms shut down or were re-located elsewhere.

'CONTINGENT WORKERS'

From our qualitative interviews we could surmise that entering the labour market for most women was not a matter of their right to work but a negotiation to 'help' the household tide over a crisis. Members of their household saw it as a small part of their overall adjustment strategies, and women as 'contingent workers' or reserves necessary during crisis to be mobilised as back up workers. Women were not given (nor did they expect to be given) the same identity of a worker/earner as men. Our data showed that women's wages were not included into the joint household pool but used as surplus income for daily consumption, occasional purchases or sickness. They were not supported by a reduction in domestic work or in fulfilling the obligations of overtime and in skill training. Rather the requirements of paid employment were often held against them as impinging on their domestic work and gender roles. A restructuring of gender relations was silently occurring with members of the household revising some of the restrictions on women like prolonging their education, granting
them more mobility and delaying marriage but there was no change in the fundamental notion of gender division of labour in the household, the supremacy of the mother, daughter and wife identity or in the control over their labour, sexuality and fertility.

Women said that they were aware that their social identity and survival were linked with the household as a collective of pooled incomes and family support. Their main strategy was negotiation and not confrontation, except in cases of broken ‘patriarchal contracts’. We have highlighted different forms of oppression as well as the possibility of strategising to achieve one’s goals. Our data on wage control showed the strategic way women handled their wages. By giving their entire wages in cash or kind to the household, they manifested their intentions of support, appeased the male and elderly hierarchy but at the same time retained control over wages and surreptitiously saved part of it in the form of jewellery or chit funds. They compromised an immediate control over wages for their larger objective of employment. They viewed themselves as ‘contingency workers’ for the household and in the workplace, but were aware of the necessity of balancing the two as neither one by itself (the household’s domestic role and low wages/irregular jobs at the workplace) would have sustained them. Women continued in employment, in spite of the constant balancing between paid work and household chores and mental anguish, for their own sense of self worth, security, for future negotiations and self empowerment.

The liberalisation policies have not provoked industries into hiring ‘fresh’, young women workers or households into deploying young women into the labour market. We have shown that the labour market is not gender neutral and does not work purely on the economic reasoning of supply and demand. Employers work out overall workforce strategies as they juggle to survive and compete keeping in mind the vagaries of the market, competition, collective bargaining and the disadvantages of a flexible labour force. They used existing gender ideology to draw young women into the labour market and placed them in ‘women’ type of jobs or unskilled and low paid ones. It was also part of a strategy to divide workers along gender, caste and community lines for a favourable bargaining power. Women were part of the ‘contingency’ plan to counter male employment, minimise labour costs and prevent collective bargaining. Despite the realities, they saw
women as temporary, working for supplementary wages and as workers who would withdraw from the labour market for household requirements.

The term 'contingency workers' has parallels like 'secondary' workers and 'flexible' workers who are irregular, low skilled and poorly paid. These terms have their origins in Marx's exposition of the reserve army of labour theory, which holds that various groups of workers move in and out of the labour market according the requirements of capital. The reserve army consists of the floating reserve, the stagnant reserve and the latent reserve and is a pre condition and a consequence of the capitalist accumulation process. Marxist theorists like Braverman (from Baud, 1989) put forward that housewives enter the labour market as a reserve force as capitalist production had taken over some of their household chores. Women were pulled in when other forms of labour were already utilised into unskilled jobs as part of the general process of deskilling of work in capitalist production. Beechy (1977,1978) suggested that women were employed when there was a boom in the economy and returned to the family during recession periods.

Our data refutes the concept of 'the reserve army of labour' and the propositions put forward by Marxist theorists. On the one hand, our findings confirm Braverman's thesis that women were employed as 'fresh' labour in a reserve capacity but it challenges the rest of his proposition. There were a large number of married and unmarried women in both the industries. They did not have the benefit of western capitalist production lightening their household chores or reducing the time spent on domestic labour. And not all of them joined as unskilled workers as in the case of diamond polishers. Beechey's proposition, which was based on analysis of the post World War II rate of women's employment also cannot be generalised. Women had been employed since the inception of the diamond polishing and plastics processing industries and continued in employment in spite of the crisis that had hit them. The main criticism of the reserve army of labour theory has been that it views women's employment from the perspective of capital and does not explain sex segregation in women's employment, their low paid and better paid jobs and gender relations (Walby, 1997). In trying to understand the relations between women's employment, the labour market and capital, it is useful to see the linkages between the nature of production, the changes in the
production process, men’s work, gender ideology and women’s employment.

We have re-formulated the older concept of ‘reserve army’ by introducing a new term ‘contingent’ as it implies a reserve or back up workforce but has the scope of going beyond the boundaries of capital and its requirements into arena of the household and gender ideology. Our data from the workplace showed that women were contingent to male workers and to the employers’ overall strategy. In the diamond polishing workshops, they were a semi skilled back up group to the migrant male workers for the purpose of regularity and stability. But employers preferred migrant men as they were skilled, fast and did a high amount of over time hours. In the plastic industry, women were employed mainly for lower end jobs to support male machine operators. Women were in sizeable numbers in labour intensive production in medium and small firms. Large, automated firms had smaller numbers of women as there were few unskilled jobs. Women were often retrenched when large firms relocated or were automated. Sophisticated machinery needed a skilled and regular workforce rather than a reserve force. Women were a contingent part of the employer’s balance of caste, region and gender balance to deflect collective bargaining and lower labour costs, which is probably the reason why not many women were retrenched in spite of economic crisis. Census data reflects a growing rate of women’s work participation in the informal sector (refer Chapter 3).

The term ‘contingent’ has also been used to show women’s employment status within the household. The household had, through persuasion or reluctantly, ‘leased’ women out to the workplace or allowed them to enter the labour market. Male members of the household devalued women’s work and wages as well as their identity as workers. They were projected as ‘contingent’ to the household’s overall plans and strategies even whilst their wages were absorbed in daily consumption. The overt patriarchal control over women’s labour was manifested in the selection of work, time of entry, overtime and participation in collective organisation. Women and employers were aware that members of the household had the power to withdraw them from work. Their perception of women’s employment holds out in the case of the three groups of ‘pro-work’ women (or those who had to persuade their household members to allow them entry into the
labour market); the 'reserves' (or those whose household members saw employment as helping out during a crisis) and the 'cloistered' women (who fell in with their male relatives insistence on home based work). But could the 'survivor' group of very poor women or single women (refer Chapter 4) be included as the household's perception of 'contingent workers'? These households survived on a daily basis with the bare essentials on the edge of crisis. They may not have other decision makers in their households and their wages were directly used for survival, but their own perspective of themselves was close to that of the 'contingent worker'. Most women also saw themselves as reserves who were in employment because they chose to be temporarily in employment (as in the case of the better off household women) or out of economic desperation until times improved. Or their view of themselves as reserves was based on their meagre earnings, non-permanent employment and their inability to lead a socially sanctioned independent life. They viewed themselves as 'contingent' in a somewhat oblique way i.e. they hoped their 'contingency' in the workplace would help them overcome their contingency in the household.

**WOMEN'S RESISTANCE**

Our data showed the close link between women's knowledge, class position and subjectivity mediated by the structures of constraint. Just a few years of experience of the workplace gave women an awareness of capital, the labour market, the exploitative conditions and their own vulnerable position. The majority of women were informal sector workers who stressed income security over employment security. They had no hope of permanency, no labour legislation or unions to support them. The piece rated diamond polishers had accepted the piece rated wage system based on speed and payment. They not only did not value permanency but also found it an encumbrance. All of them were aware of the changes being introduced in the production process, market fluctuations and the potential threat to their employment. What was missing in the responses of the women was any enthusiasm for collective action.

A minority or 15 per cent of the women belonged to trade unions and had the advantage of regular increments and benefits. But their participation in unions was supportive rather than proactive. They
paid their dues, supported actions and when asked helped mobilise workers for strikes. Our data confirms that they did what was expected of them not what they would have liked to do if the circumstances were different. For example, familiarity with leaders (worker leaders in internal unions), a more congenial and understanding atmosphere (instead of the male dominated space of unions), more women members in leadership (would have given them confidence) and support from the management and union in familiarising themselves with union activity. Very few women, like Sharmila, would have liked to take up the battle for leadership without male workers or the union leadership's patronage. However, the 'business' like leadership of unions in the diamond export zone, its rootlessness in the labour movement and its inclination towards right wing conservatism could hardly be expected to play a different role.

Outside of the unionised firms, the worker-employer relationship was one of resistance, accommodation and struggle. Employers played a subtle game of direct control through threats of dismissal and closure of firms; of patronage and through feeding the culture of the *karigar* or free worker. On their parts, the 'moderately secure' and 'insecure' workers were more inclined towards using lateral strategies or building individual safety nets through savings, strengthening one's kinship relations and informal groups. Workers also worked out a 'reciprocal', or give and take relationship with the management and the union. Workers worked out a one to one relation with employers with loyalty and obedience in favour of time off and leave. Unions were asked to step in specific crises for negotiations with employers and were paid for their labour.

The backdrop to the nature of workers' resistance was the abjuration of the state's role in protecting labour, the decline of the labour movement and lack of support from the workers' households. The unplanned nature of the implementation of the liberalisation policies and the unwarranted speed of the political class in bringing in the open market economy ushered in for rapid changes in the existing labour laws. Unfortunately, the labour movement has been unprepared and too weak to counter these moves. The tide has turned against the working class and its struggles. Many women said that they did not have the sanction of their households for making demands or taking part in any form of struggles. Male members of the household prevented
them from supporting or being active in struggles and instead encouraged them to look for short-term wage benefits.

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

In the context of globalisation, neo liberal economics encourages capital to dictate its site of operation vis-a-vis governments of nation-states. Governments of the Third World usually compete with each other in depressing the living and working standards of working people in order to attract more foreign direct investment in their own countries. This is actually leading to a downward spiral in the living and working conditions of people. Neo liberal economics does not place the human being or his/her dignity and security at the centre of its policies. It is the market that allocates on the basis of the existing distribution of wealth, income and skills. The disadvantaged will have unequal competition with those who are advantaged. It does not seek to redistribute wealth or build safeguards to create equal opportunities. Such economic policies will always exacerbate inequalities especially gender inequalities given society's patriarchal bias. Peoples' movements will have to bring these agendas centre stage. A redefinition of development and its benefits have to be undertaken. Instead of a 'level playing field' for the capital, 'a level playing field for the poor' has to be evolved. If the ultimate objective of present notion of development is raising the standard of living of the people and poverty reduction, the state will have to generate employment, incomes and demand to fuel economic growth and ensure growth of human capital. A clearer pro-people stance has to be played by the state especially in regulation, supporting and supplementing the market and in provision of basic needs of all.

The space and scope for people, NGOs as well as national governments to influence and formulate independent policies is narrowing as global corporations and international development agencies define the agenda for the future of the world. The recent development to abolish hard won legal rights is an indicator of the times to come for workers. A policy for women's employment has to include strategies for challenging the sexual division of labour and gender ideology inside as well as outside the workplace. Notions of masculinity and femininity affect skill definitions, wages, working conditions, participation in organisations as well as access to resources,
education, training and mobility within the labour market as well as the household and society in general.

The global protests against the neo-liberal agenda are crucial and have been growing (Shiva, 2002; Naples and Desai, 2002). We think it is necessary for studies on the new economic policies to put forward their findings as well as practical suggestions for improving women workers' lives. In this section we would like to concentrate on some micro level recommendations keeping the macro demands in mind. We believe, there has to be recognition of intrinsic worth of all human beings. All people are entitled to a healthy, sustainable means of livelihood with dignity. It needs to be underlined for those sections that have been rendered vulnerable by structures, processes and policies beyond their own control and not of their own making.

Though acknowledging the problem with the 'individual' emphasis of human rights approach, we find that the framework can provide an effective basis for proposing policy recommendations in the areas of right to sustainable livelihood, the right to live in dignity, the right to healthy living and the right against any form of discrimination and violence. Our starting premises are that women form a separate, vulnerable and discriminated group of workers in the workforce, with little access to formal sector employment. Their informal sector employment is irregular, unskilled and not enough to survive on. Secondly, women do not form a homogenous group and should be categorised for policy formation and implementation. Women headed households need special attention. Our research has also highlighted the situation of specific categories of women. Even as policies have to be holistic, integrated and comprehensive in addressing the multiple dimensions of women worker's lives, specific policies have to be formulated for particular categories for women. Thirdly, women should not be perceived as victims of capital or patriarchy but as active agents negotiating, strategising against their oppressive conditions. Lastly, policy recommendations need to be implemented at different levels of the government, industry, civil society and by women workers themselves. Policies for urban industrial working women can be highlighted and focused around following areas:

- Policies for access- include access to employment, education, training, credit etc.
- Policies to improve the quality of employment, including her position in the household.
Policies to preserve employment and to protect material and human resources and assets

**Access to Employment**

Firstly right to work, right to means of production and means of livelihood should be made fundamental rights. More pro-active role needs to be played by government to ensure that 'Hands do provide security'. A clear emphasis needs to be given to education, type of education of poor and especially of women.

Women's access to employment is limited (amongst other reasons) because of lack of education and skills. The central and state government has a free education policy for girls but there is no follow up on the number of dropouts. Girls usually drop out from the seventh standard. Special attention and incentives should be given to girls and parents for them to return to school.

Women are not taught specific skills and are themselves diffident to take up skill training. The government's existing ITI network has a low number of women students. With improvement of courses and optimal use of space and teachers, women can be guided into taking special skill training. The researchers have begun a vocational training course for the upgradation of teachers' skills and vocational courses for women through a non-governmental organisation. Such attempts can be duplicated at the city and state level. Extra allocations of funds will be necessary for tying up the training institutions with job placement organisations or industries. Trainings for jobs have to be combined with additional inputs around building other life-skills towards critical awareness about women's status, improvement in negotiating skills and programs around building and maintaining women's assets including savings.

**Quality of Employment**

Government regulated minimum wages ensure only the bare essentials of survival but even that basic level is denied to workers in the informal sector. Factory inspectors usually avoid reporting as employers complain of low profitability, threaten closure and bribe them to keep quiet. Minimum wages need to be strictly implemented with ward level committees of workers.

Medium, small and tiny sized firms in industrial estates have a minimum level of infrastructure. A provision for ventilation, seating
arrangements, and toxic fumes and matter has to be included and enforced by factory inspectors. Regulations for industrial estates should also include these features so they are included in the cost of hiring or purchase of the premises.

The existing labour legislation, i.e. the Industrial Disputes Act, the Factories Act, the E.S.I.S. Act and the Minimum Wages Act, should not be withdrawn but strengthened to cover all workers.

It has been a long-standing demand of the representatives of the informal sector workers, trade unions and NGOs (Non Governmental Organisations) that workers should be registered as daily or piece rated workers with an identity card. This single act would provide information on the number of irregular workers and access to them for welfare measures. Social welfare for the informal sector workers can be implemented by levying a cess on employers in industrial estates. Social services can be dispensed to the workers through existing government infrastructure and tripartite boards.

According to the Supreme Court guidelines in the Bishakha Case, every government, quasi government and private organisation is to have grievance committees for hearing and deciding on cases of sexual harassment. Informal sector workers in small and medium firms are routinely subjected to harassment. It should be made mandatory for every industrial estate and export zone to have its governing body set up a grievance cell for complaints. CEDAW should be implemented. This will require co-operation between women's groups, official bodies, trade unions and employers. Women's groups can play an active role in disseminating information about sexual harassment and redressal procedures in industrial zones and estates.

They can also raise the issue of the definition of skills and equal pay for comparable work so as to tackle gender inequality at the workplace.

International consumer and workers groups have attempted social audits at the firm level to ensure workers' rights. They have to be made mandatory not only for export firms but for all production units.

**Regular Employment**

The main concern of informal sector workers is irregular employment. Employers have complained that it is not possible for them to predict the vagaries of the market. Legal protection has to be given to the
informal sector worker in the form of regular employment, notice period, compensatory pay or some form of unemployment insurance. The central and state government have to ensure macro policies that will absorb workers in labour intensive units and occupations. The Employment Guarantee Scheme needs to be expanded and improved for urban workers. The focus of such employment schemes can be on building infrastructure, slum development and housing. The National Renewal Fund should be extended to cover the unorganised sector and a substantial part should go into the retraining of workers.

**Gender Policy**

Gender discrimination and the gender division of labour are the two main issues for women wanting to gain access to and remain in employment. Sharing of household chores will go a long way in lessening the double burden on women. Employers and women workers need to know that they must not be confined to the lower end tasks and need to be encouraged to upgrade their skills. The quality of women's employment is intrinsically connected with patriarchal prejudices in the home and in society. Policies that will ensure women's right to property and assets, right to violence free homes, workplaces and streets will tackle some of the structures of constraints. Issues of gender discrimination need to be taken up not only by women's organisation but also by all organisations. Television spots, other audio-visual campaigns have been particularly effective in raising the consciousness of people and informing them about potential legal violations. The government can, like its other program propaganda in the mass media cover the issue of gender discrimination in society.

**Social Security**

Central and state allocations for the social sector have been stagnant and in some cases have increased slightly but the quality of public services has deteriorated. People are generally turning away from them towards private services. Experts have recommended optimal use of resources and an emphasis on specific programs. Girls' education, decrease in drop out rate, health and nutrition can be specific programs. The ESI scheme needs to be strengthened and extended to cover medical insurance for individual workers. It is self-defeating for the public
distribution system to sell food grains at the same price as the market. The poor have to be given access to subsidised food grains. State policy should actively encourage the building of support organisations, co-operatives and credit services.

**Trade Union Participation**

A special provision needs to be added under the legislation for trade unions ensuring a quota for women at the central committee level and a separate wing for women workers headed by a woman leader. This will provide the impetus for unionists to look for active women and train them for leadership. They need to be rethinking on the style of union functioning which is alienating for most of its members but especially for women workers. Democratising of union functioning is crucial for more active participation.

Unions also need to hold educational workshops for its members on information about their rights, labour laws, the market and other issues. Unions need to represent the interest of all workers and not only the 'secured workers'. They need to deal with workers more holistically and include other issues in their lives. Area wise Labour Associations can be effective to tackle problems related to the household, workplace and neighbourhood.

The implementation of these policies has to foreground women’s agency and the strategies employed in their lives. They should seek to evolve coalescing strategies, which attempt to overcome the false dualism between workplace and household, wage work and domestic labour, private and public.

**Endnotes**

1 The term contingency workers and contingent worker are synonymous and have been used interchangeably in the different chapters.

2 This section is based on the joint draft policy paper prepared by the WWOS team for the National Seminar: Policies and Strategies for Working Women in the Context of Industrial Restructuring held on 22-25th September, 1997. It was organised as part of the early phase of this study by FREA and ISS and supported by the Department of Development Co-operation, The Netherlands. Details of the discussions are available in its report available at FREA, e-mail: aksharacentre@vsnl.com