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Paid Work, Women's Empowerment and Gender Justice: Critical Pathways of Social Change

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This paper explores the contradictions and contestations that characterise debates about the relationship between paid work and women's empowerment. It suggests that this absence of consensus appears to reflect differences of context. It reflects other factors as well. It reflects changes in the social meaning of work over time. It reflects differences in the way that empowerment is conceptualised: the emphasis given to the personal and the political, to individual and collective action, and to agency versus structure in processes of change. Finally, contestations reflect the nature of the work in question, since varying terms and conditions of work hold out varying potentials for transformative change in women's lives. Evidence suggests that shifts in the balance of power within individual women's lives do not necessarily translate into shifts in underlying structures of constraint. The paper suggests that it is the capacity of women to organise around their needs, interests and rights that is most likely to result in public recognition of their rights as workers, as women and as citizens.



Introduction: The Nature of the Debate

This paper is intended as a contribution to the agenda-setting activities of the Research Programme Consortium (RPC) on Pathways to Women's Empowerment, a consortium with key partners located in the UK, Ghana, Egypt, Bangladesh and Brazil. The work of the Consortium is organised around three central research themes: empowering work, bodily integrity and the politics of voice. The focus of this paper is the theme of empowering work, or more specifically, the transformative potential of paid work, including its implications for voice and bodily integrity. This focus can be seen as one strand in a broader research agenda on the material dimensions of women's empowerment, an agenda which would also include women's property rights, access to credit, social transfers, skills training and other kinds of economic resources. Different resources have their own forms of materiality in that the changes associated with them are likely to take concrete shape through somewhat different pathways in women's lives. In order to keep the discussion in the paper focused, I will deal primarily with paid work but draw on research relating to these other economic resources for illustrative purposes.

Drawing on Gardiner (1997) and Himmelweit (1995), work is defined as purposeful activity carried out with a view to producing a valued good or service and one which can, in principle, be delegated to someone else. The first part of the definition recognises that not all activities count as 'work', that it is the purposeful character of an activity that defines it as work. The second part distinguishes work activities from those purposeful activities that people have to perform for themselves and that cannot, by their very



nature, be delegated to others, such as personal care (eating, sleeping etc) and leisure activities (watching a movie, gardening for pleasure, etc)¹.

My interest in this paper is with a particular sub-set of these work activities, specifically those which yield command over goods and services other than those produced by the activity itself, either through the direct sale of labour to others (as in waged work) or through the sale of the products of labour (as in self employment on farms or enterprises). Whatever value women may attach to the unpaid care work that they carry out within the family in their roles as mothers, wives, daughters and so on, in so far as this work is socially defined as their biological or social destiny, one about which they have very little choice, it constitutes a major constraint on their other life options. We are interested in the extent to which access to paid work might help to transform the life options available to women – including the extent and terms on which they undertake unpaid care work.

Interest in the transformative implications of women's paid work has grown considerably in recent years with the 'feminisation' of labour markets in the context of increasing integration of the global economy and the move to flexible work arrangements across the world (Standing 1999; UNRISD 2005; Chen *et al.* 2005; Beneria 2001). Women have emerged as the flexible labour force par excellence, often gaining jobs in contexts where male employment is stagnant or declining (Kapsos 2005). Some of these new opportunities have been taken up in the context of migration, both internally, generally from rural to urban locations, but also internationally: women make up an increasing percentage of international labour migration, and the majority in some countries (UNFPA 2006; Sassen-Koob 1984; Oishi 2005). The increased presence of women in paid work has not served to make many inroads into the long-standing gender segmentation



of occupational structure. While educated women may have expanded their share of managerial jobs, they still face a glass ceiling in the higher echelons of management. Poorer women continue to be disproportionately represented in casual and poorly paid activities at the informal end of the labour market (Anker *et al.* 2003; Chen *et al.* 2005). In addition, the poorer the region, the more likely women are to be found in self-employment/contributing family labour rather than waged/salaried labour (ILO 2008).

However, debates about the relationship between paid work and women's empowerment predate the phenomenon of the 'feminisation of labour' and while they draw on the work of theorists of different political persuasions, conflicting views do not fall neatly into different sides of an ideological divide. Liberal and Marxist researchers, including feminists of both persuasions, have argued that paid work holds the promise of women's empowerment (Zaretsky 1976; Bergmann 2005; Blood and Wolfe 1960; Omvedt 1980; Blumberg 1991; Sen 1990a; Joekes 1987; Safilios-Rothschild 1976; Kessler-Harris 2001) while dependency theorists as well as many radical and socialist feminists offered more sceptical, often pessimistic, accounts of this relationship (Beechey 1978; Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1983; Saffiotti 1980; Hartmann 1981; Elson and Pearson 1981; Mather 1985; Kopinak 1995).

These contradictory viewpoints about the relationship between paid work and women's empowerment reflect a variety of factors. They reflect differences in the contexts in which the analysis is carried out and hence differences in the cultural meanings and experiences of paid work in women's lives. They reflect differences in the conceptualisation of empowerment by those carrying out the analysis and in the kinds of evidence sought to support one position or another. They reflect the tendency to generalise from specific locations or points of

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time to other locations and historical periods (Lim 1990). They reflect the complex and contradictory nature of social change so that the erosion of certain aspects of gender subordination may be simultaneously accompanied by the intensification or emergence of others (Elson and Pearson 1981). They reflect the extent to which the focus is on the objective evaluations of the conditions of women's work or on the subjective evaluations of women workers themselves (Wolf 1992; Standing 1991). And finally, they reflect conflicting empirical findings, sometimes from the same context and in relation to the same phenomena: such findings may reflect differences in the methods used, the sample studied, the period under study or the interpretation given to the data.

This paper reviews the literature on paid work and women's empowerment in order, first of all, to disentangle the conceptual, contextual and empirical strands of the debate and secondly, to identify the gaps in our knowledge. Section 2 of the paper addresses some of the sources of contradictory findings and conclusions, including differences in context and conceptualisations of empowerment, and suggests an analytical framework that can help to integrate some of these different conceptualisations. Section 3 reviews the empirical literature on the relationship between paid work and women's empowerment in the domestic domain while section 4 reviews the literature on working women's struggles for empowerment in the public domain. Finally, section 5 draws together the main strands of the discussion, makes their links with bodily integrity and the politics of voice, the other themes of the RPC, and suggests questions for future research on women's empowerment.



Contestations over the Implications of Paid Work: Context, Meanings and the Terms of Participation

The geography of gender: the significance of 'context'

'Contextual differences in gender ideologies and practices give rise to regional variations in the gender division of labour in production and reproduction, the "geography of gender" (Townsend and Momsen 1987)'

Context, a key concept in the social sciences, is also critical in research on the relationship between women's paid work and empowerment because context embodies the broad conditioning factors – political, social and economic – which help to shape the availability and acceptability of different kinds of work for women and hence how it is experienced. The significance of social contexts can be factored into the analysis on women's work through an appreciation of spatial variations in the institutionalised power relations of gender, the gendered 'structures of constraint' (Folbre 1994). Feminist theory has drawn attention to the intertwining of ideological and material factors in the constitution of these gendered 'structures of constraint' and to the particular importance of rules, norms and practices associated with kinship and family in shaping the gender division of roles and responsibilities in production and reproduction that characterise different contexts. Although these rules, norms and practices are rooted in the domestic domain, their influence is evident in the wider public domain of state, civil society and market relations, particularly, but not only, in the less monetised economies of the world. Contextual differences in gender ideologies and practices give rise to regional variations in the gender division of labour in production and



reproduction, the 'geography of gender' (Townsend and Momsen 1987).

The early literature mapping this geography of gender used a broad-brush approach, drawing on data from the 1960s and 1970s to draw about some 'stylised facts' about regional differences (Boserup 1970; Goody 1976; Caldwell 1982; Cain 1984; Dyson and Moore 1983; Whyte and Whyte 1982; Kandiyoti 1985, 1988). This collective body of work was useful in countering earlier tendencies to view the gender division of labour as natural, and hence universal, and in emphasising the need to understand gender relations in terms of the norms, values and practices that prevailed in particular contexts. In the context of this paper, it can be seen as documenting the 'initial conditions' against which we can assess the implications of subsequent changes in women's work that have taken place as a result of significant shifts in national and global economies. Since such changes are likely to act on, and through, these initial conditions, they introduce a degree of 'path-dependence' to the pathways of empowerment possible in particular contexts.

The early 'geography of gender' literature showed that countries which combined highly corporate organisation of family and kinship relations with strict controls over women's mobility in the public domain generally reported lower levels of female labour force participation than the rest of the world, low levels of state support to women, and hence high levels of female dependency on male breadwinners and guardians. These strongly corporate forms of patriarchy were largely found in a belt of countries stretching from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA region) and the northern plains of the South Asian subcontinent, including Pakistan and Bangladesh. The countries of East Asia (viz. China, Korea and Taiwan), while not geographically contiguous, shared some of the basic features of corporate patriarchy. However, female labour force participation was much higher in this latter region, a



reflection of rapid rates of labour-intensive export-oriented growth in the 'economic miracle' countries and the role of the state in promoting women's incorporation into the work force in socialist China.

Most of these countries were – and many continue to be – characterised by patrilineal kinship systems in which property and descent were transmitted through male offspring. Women joined their husbands' families after marriage, often losing contact with their own. Control over property, income, labour and other resources was vested in the senior male who acted as household head and guardian of the family. The economic devaluation of women resulted from their lack of property rights, limited access to productive activity and (in parts of the region) the practice of dowry. This combined with their cultural devaluation resulting in the strong son preference which characterised these regions, in some places manifest in excess levels of female mortality and what Sen (1990b) describes as the phenomenon of 'missing women'.

A somewhat less rigid set of gender relations characterised the organisation of kinship and family in South-east Asia and, to some extent, Sri Lanka and the southern states of India. Kinship and inheritance were generally bilateral and there was also a higher incidence of matrilineal systems. There was greater flexibility about post-marital residence, allowing women to retain contact with their natal families after marriage. Income was generally pooled within the household but often managed by women. Exchange at marriage could be reciprocal or favour the bride's family. Son-preference was weaker or non-existent and the stark gender inequalities in child mortality and overall life expectancy generally absent. These were also countries which reported higher levels of female labour force participation, mainly in agriculture and trade.

The literature on sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) suggested highly complex, lineage-based homesteads, with



considerable gender segmentation in household arrangements, often entailing non-coterminous units of production and reproduction and separate accounting systems within the conjugal unit. Women and men were assigned responsibility for separate aspects of household provisioning. According to Frank (1988), 'Typically, the African child bearing family is segmented, consisting of a husband and father who is head, but not necessarily a breadwinner, and an economically autonomous wife and mother, each of whom is more strongly affiliated by lineage than conjugal bonds' (1988: 5).

However, as might be expected, there were important variations in the social organisation of kinship and gender relations across the African sub-continent (Palmer 1991). While women in much of eastern and southern Africa enjoyed usufruct rights to land through their husbands' lineage group, their labour contributions tended to be subsumed in the cultivation of 'household fields' over which men had ultimate control. In West Africa, it was common for both women and junior men to provide labour on household fields which were controlled by the compound head but they also had separate own-account holdings over which they exercised independent rights of cultivation and disposal. Matriliney was more common in the West African context and allowed married women to retain links with their families of origin and gain access to land as members of their own lineage groups. There was also a greater frequency of polygamous marriages in West and central Africa. Polygamy contributed to a pattern of separate spousal budgets, assets and income flows and could include separate living arrangements. Female labour force participation rates in SSA were found to be higher than other regions of the developing world and included farming on own-account or family holdings as well as high levels of trading.

In the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region, different cultural influences gave rise to diversity in house-





holding arrangements: 'Indigenous, Hispanic and Afro-Caribbean cultural influences have intermeshed with differing economic, demographic and political circumstances to produce a vast array of household forms, not to mention varied and often elaborate networks of exchange with kin' (Chant 2002: 169). Nevertheless, there were some common features, reflecting the intersection of colonialism and slavery in parts of the region as well as development trajectories which led to early urbanisation in this region of the developing world.

A gendered public private divide, associated with Spanish and Portuguese influence, was evident in regions with marked Hispanic influence, particularly among the upper classes. It was less in evidence among the black and indigenous populations. Women's economic activity was generally higher in populations with a strong African or Asian presence than among Spanish speaking populations. While legal marriage was an ideal social norm, partnerships between women and men often took the form of consensual or visiting unions, particularly among the black and indigenous populations. This appeared to reflect both indigenous cultural practices in some areas of Latin America as well as the precariousness of marriage in situations where male mobility was an integral aspect of household economic strategies. One result of this was a high incidence of female-headed households in the region as well as complex extended households made up of children from different unions. Studies from the Caribbean and urban Latin America stressed 'matrifocality' as a characteristic of household organisation, particularly in lower-income urban areas.

This is clearly a highly stylised account of the 'geography of gender'. It obscures the considerable spatial variations within regions that become apparent at lower levels of aggregation as well as variations across class, caste and other axes of social differentiation. Nevertheless, it



provides a useful framework for the purposes of comparative research. From a comparative-static perspective, it draws attention to the specificities of gender relations in different parts of the world, the range of gendered identities and interests which they spell out and the associated differences in the availability, acceptability and meaning of women's paid work. These underline the need to be cautious in generalising about the meaning of work across different contexts.

From a comparative-dynamic perspective, this account reminds us that the changes in the global economy in recent years, including the changing relationship between states and markets, will have played out through very different sets of gender relations. Women's experiences are likely to reflect the interaction between gendered structures of constraint which prevail in their particular contexts and the changing nature of market opportunities generated by growing integration, or failure to integrate, into the global economy. As the considerable literature on the 'geography of welfare regimes' reminds us, the role of the state mediates this interaction, offsetting, reinforcing or modifying the effects of market forces. State action will therefore have a role to play in determining the extent to which past norms and practices governing the gender division of labour and associated identities and interests continue to influence the present. Where these new opportunities emerge on a large enough scale, or where state action serves to legitimise these opportunities, what may not have been considered socially acceptable in an earlier era becomes an accepted norm with the passage of time.

The different pathways through which gendered forms of social change play out in these widely differing contexts explain some of the contestations over the meaning and implications of paid work. They support Kandiyoti's point (1988) that women are likely to deal with the implications of patriarchal power in their lives





(‘bargain with patriarchy’) very differently within the corporate patriarchal structures which prevailed in the countries of the Middle East, South Asia and China compared to the relative autonomy displayed by women in more segmented family structures, such as those which prevail in West Africa.

They also help to explain differences in emphasis in the politics of gender advocacy around women’s work. This is the point made, for instance, by Moghadam (2006) in her explanation for the importance attached by many secular feminists in the MENA region to the promotion of women’s economic rights and the reform of discriminatory family law, and their wariness of policies which might serve to strengthen their maternal roles. As she points out, in the European context, ‘the highly unequal distribution of unpaid work and especially caring labour underlies much of the inequality found in employment and reproduced in social security’. The main issue in Middle Eastern countries, in contrast, is the highly unequal distribution of paid work and explicitly discriminatory family laws: ‘The masculine nature of the labour force and the predominance of the discourse of motherhood is surely why MENA feminists tend not to engage in a maternalist politics or advocate for policies pertaining to women’s care work’ (2006: 104)².

‘... underline the need to be cautious in generalising about the meaning of work across different contexts’

Individual empowerment and gender justice: different dimensions of transformative change

A second source of disagreement in debates about the transformative potential of women’s paid work relates to the different ways in which the concept of empowerment is used in the literature. Let me illustrate this with reference to a recent article by Pearson (2004) contesting what she terms ‘the Engelian myth’: the view that ‘women’s empowerment, or emancipation as it used to be called, lies



in their incorporation into the paid work force' (2004: 117). We will return to the Engelian myth later in the paper. What I would like to reflect on here is Pearson's suggestion that empowerment and emancipation are inter-changeable terms. I believe that treating them this way conflates two somewhat different concepts with somewhat different histories and thereby loses sight of an important analytical distinction in the study of social change in women's lives.

Empowerment is indeed, as Pearson suggests, a relatively new term but I do not agree that it is a substitute for the older and now less widely used concept of 'emancipation'. I would suggest instead that the concept of empowerment comes closer to what used to be called 'liberation' in this earlier literature, another term that appears to have disappeared from contemporary feminist discourse. An article exploring 'the woman question' in Turkey by Kandiyoti (1987) illustrates this point. The article posed the question 'what is the relationship, if any, between "emancipation" and "liberation"'? Her attempt to answer this question, and the distinction she makes between the two concepts, is worth repeating here.

Kandiyoti uses the concept of 'emancipation' to discuss the formal extension of civil and political rights which a modernising state and an enlightened elite had extended to women in Turkey. Emancipation here refers to the formal-judicial recognition of women as citizens but could be extended to encompass other aspects of state-society relations which relate to women's status and rights as citizens³. She traces the concept of liberation, on the other hand, to the Western women's movement of the 1970s and its emphasis on the politics of 'feminist consciousness'. There is, she argues, no necessary relationship between emancipation and this notion of liberation. Women's gendered subjectivities – 'the stuff of which consciousness is made' – are the product of the social relationships in which they are embedded, and the norms and values which these



embody. In the context of the Middle East, this meant that 'a secure sense of gendered self (was) achieved as a by-product of the most restrictive and oppressive controls over female sexuality' (1987: 333). Under these circumstances, the emancipation of women through the extension of the formal rights of citizenship was neither preceded by, nor guaranteed, the feminist transformation of their consciousness. Indeed it was quite possible that such rights would be resisted if they were seen to undermine the traditional protections that went with women's dependent status within patriarchal kinship structures.

It is this focus on changing subjectivities that the concept of 'empowerment', as it is used by many feminists today, shares with the earlier concept of 'liberation' – with one important caveat. In the seventies, a kind of self-confident feminism prevailed that assumed it knew what a feminist consciousness looked like, the circumstances under which it would emerge, the priorities it would express and the forms of struggle it would engage in. This has given way today to a more diverse and more cautious range of feminisms, aware that the terrain on which women and men acquire their gendered sense of self and social identity is more varied and more complex than was assumed in the era of 'women's liberation'. Most feminists today recognise that a feminist consciousness has to be forged through processes of reflection, contestation and struggle in relation to specific structures of patriarchal constraint in particular contexts.

It is these notions of selfhood and inter-personal relationships that are not addressed in Pearson's view that:

'Most feminists today recognise that a feminist consciousness has to be forged through processes of reflection, contestation and struggle in relation to specific structures of patriarchal constraint in particular contexts'



Poor women need money but increases in wages will not on their own make women either less poor or more powerful. Improvements in the conditions and returns to work must be coupled with expectations that the state will ensure that they achieve a minimum income; that they have access to affordable and high-quality education, health and transport services; and that their environment is healthy and their lives are not blighted by community and domestic violence (2004: 118).

Not only are these objective conditions missing from the contexts in which the majority of poor men and women in poor countries are working, but dominant ideologies about women's place within the family and the social order may not provide the conditions in which such expectations appear realistic or even conceivable. As desirable goals for public action, therefore, there is little to disagree with Pearson's statement. But it sets the bar too high as the basis for an analytical understanding of the slow, and often painful, processes by which marginalised groups in many parts of the world become willing and able to take some control over their lives. In such contexts, as Shireen Huq observes (2005), women have had to learn to assert their dignity as human beings before they can begin to claim their rights and entitlements as citizens.

At the same time, it is precisely its association with ideas about the individual and individual agency that explains the enthusiasm with which the concept of women's empowerment has been taken up by dominant agencies within the development community, including the World Bank (World Bank 2001; Buvinic and King, 2007). What is missing in much of this mainstream literature is the concern with gender justice as an integral component of the wider project of social justice that characterises the feminism that Pearson represents. What is also missing is



recognition of the 'potentially liberating implications' of the collective struggles through which women in different parts of the world have sought to pursue the goal of gender justice (Pearson 1998: 184; Chhachhi and Pittin 1996).

The concept of economic citizenship put forward by Kessler-Harris provides a useful organising principle for exploring this set of concerns. She defines economic citizenship in terms of the capacity for self-support, generally through the ability to work in an occupation of one's choice, as well as the customary and legal acknowledgement of full personhood, with all this implies for expectations, training, access to and distribution of resources, and opportunity in the market place. The complexity of women's exclusion from economic citizenship, its ideological, material and legal dimensions, means that their struggles in the economic terrain have the potential for opening up access routes to other forms of citizenship. The re-evaluation of family roles could also, in principle, provide the respect and resources necessary to women as competent actors in the public arena. But historical experience shows that while maternalist feminist politics which promote the values of motherhood and family commitments have often succeeded in extending social rights, they have generally done little to advance women's economic citizenship – and have often served to curtail it (see Hernes 1987; see also Winkler 1998).

Kessler-Harris's (2001) arguments are made from the standpoint of western industrial societies where, as she puts it, 'prevailing beliefs in the sanctity of the market make access to it the only practical route to empowerment as citizens' (2001: 13). However, we can also argue for the importance of women's economic citizenship from a developing country perspective on the basis of the secular rise observed in the percentages of women, particularly women from lower income households, that have entered the labour market in search of paid work (Kabeer 2008).



Paid work has become one of the primary routes through which the vast majority of women in developing countries enter the public domain and it is largely around livelihood issues associated with work, land, wages, forests, water and basic amenities that women from low income households have tended to mobilise. The question we need to explore concerns the circumstances under which women's economic activities provide 'access routes' to the status and rights of citizenship.

Clearly, differences in how we understand the transformative potential of women's paid work has implications for the stance we take and the questions we ask. We may choose to evaluate this potential from women's own perspectives and priorities or we may evaluate it against the benchmark of their status and rights as citizens. The first approach can be seen as a 'journey without maps'. It eschews external value judgements and relies on the subjective standpoint of women themselves, their assessment of their own lives and the changes that they would like to see. However, if we accept that the subjectivities of both women and men are constructed through their interactions in highly unequal gender relations, that these demarcate the boundaries within which their beliefs, values and visions take shape, some minimum normative criteria will be necessary even in this open-ended approach if we are to avoid the cul-de-sac of cultural relativism. The other approach is more explicitly normative, a 'journey in a desired direction'. The specific routes may vary from context to context as might the definition of the desired direction, but from the feminist perspective adopted here, we are interested in the extent to which paid work opens up access routes through which women can claim their rights as women, as workers and as citizens.

I would like to retain the distinction between empowerment and emancipation for the purposes of this paper and to treat them as dual pathways of social change





which may or may not converge⁴. This suggests a research agenda that encompasses both meanings of change and requires us to explore the circumstances under which access to paid work leads to progress along one or other of these pathways as they play out in the real world. It also suggests attention to the circumstances under which the two pathways might intersect, with changes in one leading to changes in the other. To undertake such an analysis, we need some conceptual signposts, grounded in an understanding of what we might mean by empowerment, to help us distinguish between cul-de-sacs and trajectories in our assessments of changes associated with women's work.

Sign-posting pathways of empowerment: choice, agency and transformative change

'Paid work has become one of the primary routes through which the vast majority of women in developing countries enter the public domain ...'

With this in mind, I would like to return to some ideas about women's empowerment put forward in earlier work⁵ and consider how they can be reformulated to encompass the dual understanding of social change that informs this paper. As in that paper, we take the idea of choice as the starting point of our discussion, defining power as the ability to make choices. However, not all forms of choice can be taken as evidence of power or empowerment. We need to distinguish between the mundane choices that we all make in our every day lives, regardless of our place in the social order, and the more strategic choices which signify a degree of control over one's own life. Empowerment then refers to the expansion in the ability to make strategic choices by those who have been denied this ability. People who exercise a great deal of choice in their lives – to the extent of imposing their choices on others (Dahl 1957) – may be very powerful, but they are not empowered in the sense in which the term is used here because they were not disempowered in the first place.

We can conceptualise the capacity for choice in terms



of three dimensions: agency, resources and achievements. These dimensions are so closely inter-related as to be indivisible: their mutual interactions shape the possibilities for changes in the lives of disempowered groups. Resources refer to the range of different material, human and social resources which people are able to draw on in pursuit of their goals. The distribution of these resources will reflect their position within intersecting relations of class, gender, race and other social divisions. Material resources feature most frequently in the development literature and include income earnings, the primary focus of this paper, as well as credit, cash transfers, land, housing, equipment and other productive assets. Human resources are generally defined in instrumental terms as human capital and refer to physical labour power, education, knowledge and skills embodied in individual human productivity. However, the concept can be extended to include the intrinsically valuable quality of human resourcefulness, the cognitive capacity for reflection, analysis, imagination and purposive action. Finally social resources encompass the various relationships and networks to which people belong and the claims and obligations which these embody.

Agency operationalises the concept of choice. It refers to the capacity to define one's goals and to act on them. It goes beyond observable behaviour to encompass the meanings, motivations, skills and purpose that people bring to their actions, their 'sense of agency'. Agency is thus closely bound up with human capability. Agency has been conceptualised in a variety of ways in the social sciences. Economists have interpreted agency as decision-making power. While earlier work tended to treat decision making as a solitary activity, more recent literature acknowledges the fact that a great deal of decision making takes place between people and entails the use of bargaining power in attempts to influence decision-making outcomes. Political scientists have focused on the exercise of power in the





context of political decision making: the ability to impose one's will on others through the legitimate use of authority, by 'manufacturing' consent or suppressing dissent through the strategic management of decision-making agendas; by resort to coercion or the threat of violence (Lukes 1974; Gaventa 1980).

Hirschman's work on 'exit, voice and loyalty' (1970) provides a useful entry point into a discussion of different categories of agency from the perspective of the disempowered. We take 'voice' to refer to the different ways in which people seek, individually or collectively, to bring about desired forms of change in their lives. As Hirschman pointed out, the capacity for voice is closely related to the ability to 'exit' unfavourable situations or relationships. The exit option in turn depends on the various kinds of resources that different actors have to fall back on, should they have to carry out this threat. It thus draws attention to the terms of access to various resources, the extent to which they are available independently of the social arrangements that the actors in question may be threatening to leave. Independent access to material resources is likely to be important in shaping exit options along with alternative social relationships, state provision and legal support. Women are more likely to voice their dissatisfaction with abusive relationships with husbands if they know that they have a job to fall back on or that they will not be rejected by their natal families or that they can count on legal custody of their children. Workers are more likely to protest unfair employment practices and risk dismissal if theirs is not the only income supporting the family or if they have the bargaining clout of the union behind them or if they know that the law is on their side.

The issue of 'loyalty' has received less attention in the economic literature but it has a particular relevance to the analysis of power. Loyalty lies somewhere between voice and exit. A benign interpretation of the absence of protest

'Agency operationalises
the concept of choice'



or exit on the part of subordinate groups within particular relationships might be that it signifies a genuine consent to the prevailing state of affairs: loyalty between women and men within families, for instance, may reflect long standing relationships, joint stake in the welfare of children or the shared experience of oppression on the basis of class, caste or race. Loyalty to partners on the basis of love and affection or of shared oppression could very well mute women's willingness to protest gender inequality.

However, the absence of protest also lends itself to less benign interpretations. It may reflect the ability of more powerful groups to confine opportunities for voice to 'safe' issues that do not challenge the status quo (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). It may reflect their capacity for violence to silence and intimidate. Or it may reflect the power of hegemonic ideas (Gramsci 1971) and habitus (Bourdieu 1977). As Scott (1990) points out, consent may be based on a 'thin' hegemony, awareness of injustice but resignation to an unchangeable social order or a 'thick' hegemony based on internalisation of inferiority. Both dominant and subordinate groups accept the way things are because they cannot imagine any alternative to it: inequality becomes naturalised as part of self-identity and position in the social order and hence taken for granted. But, as Scott also points out, consent and loyalty may be more apparent than real, based on an awareness of the absence of choice, the weakness of one's exit options. In such cases, it may conceal a range of covert strategies (the 'weapons of the weak') through which power relations are resisted or subverted.

All of these different forms of agency, and limits to agency, are relevant to the analysis of women's empowerment. We are interested in women's ability to make strategic choices in relation to their own lives and to exercise voice and influence in the relationships that matter to them. We are also interested in the rules and resources that enable or constrain their capacity for agency. We are





equally interested in women's silences and what these might signify. We therefore give importance to the cognitive dimensions of agency in our conceptualisation of empowerment. The meanings, motivations and purpose that people bring to their actions helps us understand their silences and whether their failure to act in certain ways reflects a choice on their part or the perceived absence of alternatives. It is important to note that influence does not always have to operate through active bargaining and negotiation or the explicit articulation of voice to influence the direction of change. Change can also occur in responses on the part of dominant groups to perceived risks to public reputation or social standing or through a silent acknowledgement of shifts in the balance of power.

The achievement dimension of empowerment draws attention to the concrete outcomes of choice. Achievements are important, both because they affect people's sense of agency and because present achievements provide the basis on which future agency is exercised. Clearly, there may not be a one-to-one relationship between what people set out to achieve and what they actually achieve but in some situations, the willingness to set out to do something may be as significant as their success in this endeavour. While persistent failure to achieve one's goals is likely to be demoralising, the willingness to challenge power, to struggle for one's rights, can represent achievement of a kind, regardless of actual outcomes. It may also have unintended consequences and unanticipated impacts which provide the basis for future change.

The discussion in this section places ideas about choice, voice and agency at the core of our conceptualisation of empowerment but it suggests the need to qualify these ideas to capture their relationship to power. The first qualification is procedural: it relates to the conditions of choice but is neutral with regard to its content. As we pointed out, meaningful choice necessarily implies



alternatives. There are well-recognised material dimensions to choice because the resources that people are able to draw on shape the alternatives available to them. What we have added here is the importance of the cognitive dimensions: conceptions about what is possible, desirable or conceivable in one's life are shaped in important ways by the society in which one lives and one's place within its social order. The structures of rules, norms and resources which prevail in different societies thus provide the conditions for – and set social limits to – the exercise of agency.

The second qualification is more substantive in nature. It relates to the content of choice and its consequences in relation to these social limits on agency. It is based on the distinction between the myriad and mundane choices that all social actors exercise in their everyday lives, regardless of their place in the social order, and the strategic life choices that shape the direction and quality of their lives. As our discussion of the 'geography of gender' suggests, the structures of constraint that prevail in different contexts will determine which kinds of choices are likely to have strategic consequences for women's lives. A woman who chooses to take up paid work or marry someone of her own choice is exercising a strategic form of agency in contexts where women have been denied the ability to make such choices. They have less strategic significance in contexts in which these choices are taken for granted.

The third qualification is also substantive in nature. It recognises that the strategic exercise of agency does not necessarily destabilise wider structural inequalities. Individual women refusing to pay dowry for their daughters or to accept lower wages than men may be striking a blow against the practice of gender inequality but they do not change the institution of marriage or the gender segmentation of the labour market. As Hayward (1998) puts it, they do not 'extend the social limits on what is possible' for women in general.





Furthermore, it is possible for women to exercise strategic agency in ways that violate the rights of others. Both women and men have varied subjectivities and subject positions. As a result, their location at the intersections of gender with race, class, caste and other social inequalities may give women identities and interests in common with men who share their positions of privilege or oppression. It may equally lead them to deny the humanity and rights of other men and women who do not share these privileged or oppressed positions. Analysis by Yuval-Davies (1994), for instance, cautions against allowing purely procedural ideas about agency to provide the primary definition of empowerment. She notes that women can become strategically active through involvement in fundamentalist religious movements without ever questioning the politics of these movements with regard to the rights of others, men or women.

'... meaningful choice
necessarily implies
alternatives'

Similarly, Batliwala and Dhanraj (2004) point to the success of Hindu fundamentalist parties in India unleashing forms of collective activism among Hindu women from both higher and lower castes which depart in definitive, but destructive ways from traditional norms of femininity within the region. Women from these parties have been in the forefront of assaults against religious minorities, including the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992, the communal riots in Bombay in 1993 and the anti-Muslim pogroms in the state of Gujarat in 2002. Such women may be exercising highly strategic forms of agency, but their actions violate human rights of men and women from religious minorities and hence the basic principles of social justice.

There is, in other words, no straightforward relationship between individual empowerment and pathways to social transformation. A concern with the explicitly feminist goals of women's rights, economic citizenship and social justice therefore requires an explicitly



normative perspective on women's choice and agency. It draws attention to its transformative potential, the willingness to question and challenge the injustices faced by women as women, regardless of their position in the socio-economic hierarchy. It also draws attention to their willingness to question and challenge the injustices faced by others. Following Fraser (1997), we can think about these struggles in terms of three categories of 'justice claims'. The first of these claims relate to representation, the struggle to articulate an organised voice in the public domain, to participate as equals in collective forums of decision-making. The second relates to redistribution, the struggle for greater equality in access and control over valued resources of all kinds, including over one's own labour, and hence in the terms of participation in the economy. The third relates to recognition, struggles centred on cultural practices that ascribe lesser worth to some groups relative to others. Struggles for recognition from a gender perspective relate to biological and social constructed differences between women and men and their influence on their capacity for choice and agency. These include social definitions of women as lesser human beings; the naturalisation of the unequal gender division of unpaid domestic labour and women's primary responsibility for care and housework; the discrimination, disparagement and negative stereotypes that women encounter in all walks of life; the sexual objectification of women and their vulnerability to sexual harassment and assault; the denial of women's control over their own bodies and reproductive capacity; and constructions of the public-private divide such that domestic violence and other violations of women's rights are tolerated within the 'private' domain.

Most feminists stress the importance of women's collective reflection and action in the struggles for gender justice (Sen and Grown 1988; Kabeer 1994; Agarwal 1994; Rowlands 1998; Sardenberg 2008). Changes at the level of





individual consciousness and capacity are essential in processes of social change, but as history has shown, the collective struggles of the oppressed for representation, redistribution and recognition have proven far more effective in challenging the structures of oppression than individual acts. At the same time, the fact that gender injustices are bound up with other forms of social injustice mean that gender identities and interests will not be uniform across socio-economic groups. Indeed, women and men who have shared experiences of oppression on the basis of their class, caste or racial group are likely to have overlapping interests and priorities that may over-ride their conflicting gender interests. For such women, more than others, struggles for gender justice are inextricably bound up with broader struggles for social justice.

'As history has shown, the collective struggles of the oppressed for representation, redistribution and recognition have proven far more effective in challenging the structures of oppression than individual acts'

To sum up our discussion in this section, the conceptualisation of empowerment that informs this paper touches on many different aspects of change in women's lives, each important in themselves, but also in their inter-relationships with other aspects. It touches on women's sense of self-worth and social identity; their willingness and ability to question their subordinate status and identity; their capacity to exercise strategic control over their own lives and to renegotiate their relationships with others who matter to them; and their ability to participate on equal terms with men in reshaping the societies in which they live in ways that contribute to a more just and democratic distribution of power and possibilities.



Paid work and pathways of transformative change: conceptual insights

How does the dual conceptualisation of empowerment outlined in the preceding section relate to our concern with women's access to paid work? A useful starting point for addressing this question is the distinction between fulfilling and alienating work. As Gagnier and Dupre (1995) suggest, many forms of paid work are meaningful and fulfilling in themselves. Paid care work is one example, offering an intrinsic satisfaction because of the inter-personal nature of the relationship between the carer and those they care for, but most professional occupations and many skilled blue collar jobs also offer a sense of accomplishment and job satisfaction that goes beyond the income earned through that work⁶. Work is likely to be experienced as alienating when it is external to the worker, not fulfilling in itself, merely a means to an end: 'Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labour is shunned like the plague...'

This suggests that one important factor differentiating the implications of paid work on women's lives relates to the considerations that lead them into, or keep them in, such work. Work taken up under extreme forms of economic compulsion, the 'distress sale of labour', is usually work that is inherently undesirable, entailing hard physical labour in the blazing sun or freezing cold or occupations like sex work, domestic service or begging, which are socially devalued or stigmatised. The compulsion in question may not always stem from dire poverty but from some threat to household living standards, and the work in question may be difficult but not intrinsically undesirable. In both cases, it is the absence of choice that is the primary source of alienation⁷.

A focus on the motivations which lead women to take up paid work opens up the possibility that even where work





is undertaken as a means to an end, it may be satisfying for reasons that have little to do with its inherent characteristics. Indeed, given the informal nature of much of women's paid work in contemporary labour markets, it is highly unlikely that many working women value their paid work as an end in itself. Most are likely to value it for reasons which reflect their beliefs about what they can achieve through their work. In other words, the forms of satisfaction that women obtain from paid work are likely to be instrumental rather than intrinsic. But this does not mean that the instrumentality in question is purely, or even primarily, practical. It may entail strategic considerations relating to aspects of women's subordination. There are examples of this from the literature:

'Work is likely to be experienced as alienating when it is external to the worker, not fulfilling in itself, merely a means to an end ...'

Hoodfar (1997) reports that the women she interviewed in low-income neighbourhoods in Cairo unanimously declared, regardless of their marital, educational or employment status, that a woman's primary duties were to her husband, her children and her home. However, over half also believed that women 'should' work and an additional 15 per cent said that they should work if they were educated. One reason for the stress on education is that it increases the likelihood of access to state employment and hence social security and protective legislation. While the most frequently volunteered reason for women to work was the difficulty of living on one income, the next in importance were women's need for security should marriage fail and the respect women received from husbands for their contributions, the greater equality of the partnership (1997: 135). The value that women gave to paid work thus appeared to combine adherence to traditional domestic ideologies with their own views about the changing nature of marital relationships and desired models of marriage.

Lee's discussions with young, mainly unmarried, women workers in Shenzhen similarly revealed this



combination of practical and strategic considerations (1998). Most of the workers 'almost universally and automatically' cited poverty at home as their reason for taking up work but over time, it became clear that while poverty constituted the respectable explanation for their work, the one that they communicated to strangers, they had other motivations for taking up paid work, including the desire to escape from parental controls and to expand their horizons.

The majority of married women interviewed by Beneria and Roldan (1987) in their study of home-based workers in Mexico city reported that they had always taken it for granted that they would work for a living. However, their attitudes to work combined economic compulsion with other more strategic life choice possibilities. They had to work if they wanted to achieve a basic standard of living or education for their children but they also wanted to work to secure a minimum degree of autonomy and control over their lives. These reasons led a number of them to articulate and defend the right to work (1987: 138).

These subjective dimensions are relevant to the processes of change that we are interested in because of their implications for women's sense of identity and self worth. They are also important for women's agency. There is a greater likelihood that women will be willing to fight for their right to work, and their rights at work, if they derive some degree of satisfaction from the work they do. However, just as not all forms of economic activity are inherently fulfilling, so too not all forms of economic activity lend themselves to strategic goals.

We have already noted the importance of context in shaping the opportunities for work available to women and the social meanings attached to paid work by women. Within particular contexts, there are different aspects of work which are likely to have a bearing on its implications for women's lives: its visibility, to women themselves and to



others, the returns it yields, the relationships associated with it and the possibilities for transformative change that these hold out. In addition, the responses of family, and of the wider community, will also influence how women experience their work. The likely relationships between different aspects of paid work and their implications for women's lives provide some general hypotheses for future research into this question.

The physical location of work, whether it is within or outside the home, has featured frequently in the literature on women's empowerment. While there is considerable divergence about the implications of work undertaken outside the home, there is much greater convergence in the view that work undertaken within the home is least likely to effect any significant changes in power relations, either within the family or outside it. It is considered to be more compatible with, and hence more easily subsumed within, the unpaid domestic tasks that women perform within the household. It is thus less easily perceived as an economic activity and hence less valued. The other aspect of home-based work is the limits it places on women's contacts with the world beyond the ascribed relations of family and kinship, a feature that takes on particular significance in cultures which practise female seclusion.

Returns to women's work are likely to have a bearing on its transformative potential for a number of reasons. Earnings influence the extent to which women are seen as having value in the family, by themselves and by other family members, and can enhance their ability to exercise voice in family matters. In addition, the returns to women's work have implications for their 'exit' option: women who earn well and reasonably regularly can more credibly threaten to opt out of abusive relationships within the family than those who continue to be largely dependent on the earnings of dominant family members.

Given the significance of the returns to women's work,

'There is a greater likelihood that women will be willing to fight for their right to work, and their rights at work, if they derive some degree of satisfaction from the work they do'



we would also expect that the resources that women are able to mobilise for their economic activities will have a bearing on their experiences of paid work: both because such resources affect the productivity of their efforts but also because these resources may themselves constitute independent pathways of empowerment. Access to land, credit, education, training and so on are examples of such resources (see Agarwal 1994 for a discussion of this in relation to land). Indeed, in contexts where women are expected to take up paid work as a matter of course, the resources that they are able to mobilise in relation to their work may have a greater significance for their lives than the fact of access to paid work.

However, if women's earnings are to strengthen their exit options, they must also have some degree of control over their earnings. This draws attention to the nature of the relationships which govern women's economic activities. Different forms of labour relationships embody different principles of control (Whitehead 1985). In principle, working for oneself rather than for others offers greater likelihood of control over the pace and conditions of work and over the proceeds from one's labour. The implications of working for others is likely to vary according to the nature of the relationships involved as well as the work location. On the one hand, working for other members of the family or within wider kinship networks may carry certain benefits in terms of consideration for women's familial obligations and health, but these are likely to be of a paternalistic nature. Moreover, the value of women's contributions are more easily obscured in familial forms of production and can be more easily appropriated. On the other hand, working for employers other than family may mean submitting to a more punishing pace and conditions of work but it is less easy to obscure the nature of their contributions, particularly if their remuneration is contractually specified.

Working in the public domain can dilute the authority





exercised by dominant family members but subject women to control by other authority figures. Waged workers are subject to the discipline of employers while self-employed women have to deal with the police, municipal authorities, middlemen, moneylenders, labour contractors, traders, pimps and so on. On the other hand, a potentially transformative feature of paid work in the public domain is not only that it is more visible to women themselves and to others, but that it allows them a vantage point outside the 'given' roles and relationships of the family from which to reflect upon their lives. Migration, which further extends the physical distance between home and work, offers other possibilities for transforming women's consciousness and capacity for agency as it takes them outside the familiarity of the contexts in which they grew up.

Work outside the home thus offers the possibility of new forms of identities along with those ascribed by their familial roles, exposure to different ways of life and possibilities for an expanded range of 'chosen' social relations, including personal friendships, political affiliations and civil society organisations. To that extent, it also appears to hold out greater possibilities for women to engage in collective struggles to improve the terms and conditions of their work and to demand their rights as citizens.

Although the conceptualisation of empowerment put forward in this paper revolves around the questions of choice, voice and agency, it is important to note that social transformations in women's lives do not always occur as the intended consequences of their actions. They may represent unintended consequences: women who take up paid work outside the home in contexts where female seclusion is the norm may do it simply in order to survive or to improve their family's standard of living, but their actions can expand the possibilities for other women to consider breaking with norms. Social transformations can also occur through the intended or unintended actions by



actors other than the disempowered, and at considerable distance from them. Trade union demands in one part of the world that employers pay a living wage, regardless of the location of their workers, can have repercussions within global value chains for the bargaining power of women workers in other countries. The passage of a human rights convention that explicitly recognises women's rights as human rights in a distant international forum can shift the terms of struggle for those seeking to promote the safety and security of undocumented migrant workers in the shadows of the global economy.

In the next sections of the paper, we draw on the empirical literature for evidence of how the various changes in women's lives and life choices play out in relation to work. We will explore the impact of work on personal aspects of women's lives: their sense of self-worth and identity, their capacity to exercise strategic choices in their own lives and on their relationships with those that matter in their lives. We will then examine its implications for women's pathways to citizenship and social justice. We will be assessing the transformative potential of different kinds of paid work from the vantage point of the three categories of justice claims discussed earlier. We will ask about the opportunities they provide for women to exercise an organised voice in the public domain, their struggle for representation. We will examine the nature of the demands they mobilise around to assess their implications for gender inequalities in the terms and conditions of their engagement in the market place, the struggle for redistribution. We will also explore women workers' struggles for recognition that gender differences in needs, interests and constraints have implications for their capacity to take up market opportunities on equitable terms.





Paid Work and Pathways of Women's Empowerment: Empirical Insights

Women's self-employment and pathways of empowerment

Most studies of women's home-based work have supported the hypothesis of limited change. They note that such work may be favoured by women themselves or imposed by their families precisely because it does little to challenge gender norms. In an early study from rural Andhra, higher caste women were found to opt for such work, despite the fact that their families were poor and returns from the work were low, because it allowed them to maintain their secluded status (Mies 1982). The only other option available to women was agricultural wage labour but this was considered demeaning and carried out by women from the lowest castes. Another early study of Egyptian women in craft production reported that men collected the raw materials, marketed the goods and received the remuneration so that women's contact with outsiders was 'deliberately restricted' (cited in Greenhalgh 1991). The majority of the women saw their work as a family obligation about which they had little choice.

Similarly, I found that the high concentration of Bangladeshi women in home-based piece work in London, with male family members acting as intermediaries with factories, reflected a desire on the part of their families to minimise women's contacts with members of the wider society and to ensure that they gave priority to their domestic responsibilities (Kabeer 2000). Both the women themselves, and their families, saw their earning activities as



something that they did in their spare time rather than a contribution to the family's standard of living. My conclusion echoed that of Mitter's earlier study (1986) of the same category of workers that women's ability to earn may have shifted the balance of power within the family, 'but only slightly' (1986: 60).

Kim's more recent research (1996) on home-workers in Seoul stresses the limited impact of their work on women's class consciousness. Because they accepted the primacy of their family responsibilities and the subsidiary status granted to their paid work, they saw little reason to demand a fairer deal: 'it is better than nothing'. And the fact that their only contact in the production process was with the agent who supplied the work and collected the finished product, they had little idea of their location in a larger value chain and little sense of solidarity with others in the same work (1996: 324).

Studies that have carried out a more disaggregated analysis of home-based workers offer some nuance to this general finding of limited change. In her study of home-based workers in urban India, Kantor (2003) reports that the extent to which they controlled their earnings was more significant than the size of their earnings in explaining variations in intra-household decision-making patterns. Control over earnings was in turn more strongly associated with women's primary than secondary earner status (suggesting female-maintained households) and with working on an own-account than a sub-contracted basis.

Beneria and Roldan (1987) found that while access to paid work appeared to have bolstered self-esteem among most of the home-based workers they interviewed in Mexico City, the most significant changes were reported by those women whose earnings constituted a sizeable share of the household budget, particularly those whose husbands remained steady providers: the changes in question included more joint decision-making in areas that used to



be exclusively male⁸, the greater likelihood that women would visit their parents or relatives without prior consultation and less willingness on their part to submit unquestioningly to husbands' directives. Despite the 'limited and slow' nature of these changes, Beneria and Roldan suggest that they had considerable value for the women themselves and could constitute the basis for their attempts to make changes in the future (1987: 162).

Greenhalgh's (1991) detailed analysis of case studies of self-employed women in different regions of the world illustrates the influence of the 'geography of gender' in shaping the forms taken by their self-employment as well as the implications of their involvement in paid work. In India, Taiwan and Egypt, local belief systems, drawing on familial ideologies and religious values, promoted the ideal of female domesticity. In Egypt, this was also overlaid with norms of female seclusion. Both considerations explained the restriction of rural women in Egypt to home-based activities with male kin acting as intermediaries. In Taiwan, the women studied were mainly in male-dominated family business, generally located within or close to family headquarters, hence their work 'could be combined with – and, when desired, subordinated to, their primary reproductive duties' (1991: 18). Her findings of limited impact of these activities on women's position in the family hierarchy conform to the general picture.

Female self-employment in urban areas in south India, Ghana and Thailand took the form of trading in the public domain but with somewhat different degrees of autonomy from family structures. While norms of female seclusion are not as restrictive in the south Indian context as in the north, women vendors in Madras relied on male kin to procure supplies from wholesale markets, to protect them in the public market place and to 'chaperone' them when they had to venture outside their familiar territories. They were expected to turn over their earnings to their



husbands and 'undoubtedly had little say over how they were spent' (1991: 20). Women traders in Ghana and Thailand, on the other hand, made their own decisions regarding what and where to sell, arranged their own credit and sold their own goods. Furthermore, traders in Accra, Ghana, who were from the Ga community, both owned property separately from their husbands and had access to rotating credit associations which facilitated their ability to operate outside male control.

Despite this relative autonomy over their businesses, Greenhalgh found little evidence that it translated into commensurate control over their profits. Women traders in Thailand were expected to contribute to their children's education with or without their husband's help, and in many cases husbands appropriated some of their wives' income to pay for their own personal expenditures, which might include gambling and drinking. In Ghana too, women controlled their own incomes but a great deal of it was used up on financing children's education or loans to extended kin. In many cases, husbands were refusing to honour their traditional obligations to provide monetary support to their families. 'Their work in the family enterprise did not lead to the acquisition of independent economic resources nor was it intended to do so...women were enmeshed in larger webs of family relationships and the relations of inequality that structured the family stretched into the realm of the enterprise' (1991: 22). Male behaviour thus curtailed the scope of the changes that accompanied women's independent earning activities.

Development interventions have also played a role in increasing women's access to incomes. Studies of the impact of conditional cash transfers, an increasingly widespread form of development intervention, also support the hypothesis of limited change in gender relations within the household. While such transfers are not, strictly speaking, market returns to labour, the cash is



generally transferred to women on condition that they ensure children's regular attendance at school and monthly health check ups. Qualitative evaluations have reported a greater sense of self-esteem among women in receipt of these transfers in countries like Brazil and Mexico. One evaluation of Bolsa Familia in Brazil (Suarez *et al.* 2006) found that the processes through which women registered and received the transfers brought home to many of those living in poor and isolated areas that they belonged to a social entity that went beyond the confines of their neighbourhood. It provided them with their first experience of their citizenship. It also reported a number of changes in intra-household relationships, including a reduction in domestic violence of households studied and increased access by women to health services.

'... the variable that proved most influential in enhancing women's role in decision-making was their experience of paid work which was generally work outside the home'

There is less evidence that access to conditional cash transfers brought about concrete changes in family relationships in the Mexican context. Here a quantitative study by Adato and Mindek (2000) found that receipt of these transfers had minimal impact on women's role in household decision-making, increasing it significantly in only one out of the eight areas of decision-making studied. This absence of impact could reflect the small size of the transfers as well as the fact that the programme did little to challenge women's prescribed roles as wives and mothers. While the study does not comment on this, the variable that proved most influential in enhancing women's role in decision-making was their experience of paid work which was generally work outside the home.

The impact of development interventions on women's economic agency have been more widely studied in the context of microfinance programmes. Unlike conditional cash transfers, these programmes are premised on women's capacity for entrepreneurship rather than on their socially-ascribed familial roles. Loans are offered on quasi-market terms, although interest rates are generally lower than those



charged by informal lenders. The other distinctive feature of these programmes is that they are generally provided to groups of women rather than to individuals. The 'group' aspect of microfinance has the potential to create new kinds of 'chosen' social networks among women, different from the ascribed networks of kin and family.

The most striking impacts associated with access to micro-credit have come from India and Bangladesh, contexts where women have had little or no access to capital of their own and where there are severe restrictions on their opportunities for paid work. A study from Bangladesh revealed the hidden but often painful costs of near-total economic dependence on husbands and helped to explain the value women attach to their access to loans and their access, often for the first time, to earning opportunities (Kabeer 2001a). It found that women were far more likely to exercise a role in decision-making in households where loans had gone to women rather than to men. At the same time, the study pointed to the co-operative basis of intra-household relations: for many women, one of the things they valued about their access to microfinance was their ability to release their husbands from exploitative forms of waged work or from usurious debt relationships.

More generally, studies of microfinance have reported a variety of positive impacts, including increased asset ownership by women; greater mobility in the public domain; a greater say in household decision-making, including in more strategic decisions relating, for instance, to reproductive behaviour and the purchase of major assets; renegotiation of abusive relationships; greater freedom to visit and receive their own family members; and (according to Murthy *et al.* 2005) an increased willingness to allow adolescent daughters the same freedoms they allow their sons (Holvoet 2005; Kabeer 2001a; Hashemi *et al.* 1996; Schuler *et al.* 1996). These impacts tended to be



stronger in households where women's economic contributions were more significant (Hashemi *et al.* 1996).

There are also studies that either report negative impacts, such as increased levels of domestic violence, male appropriation of women's loans (Goetz and Sen Gupta 1996; Rahman 1999) or no impacts at all (Kabeer 2005a). While some of the methodological reasons for these differing findings are discussed in Kabeer (2001a), it is evident that differences in the organisational strategies utilised by microfinance organisations may also have a role to play (see review in Kabeer 2005a and b). This is well demonstrated by Holvoet (2005) who compared decision-making patterns among women borrowers with different organisations and varying durations of organisational membership. She found that loans to women were more likely to enhance women's voice in household decision-making than loans to men: such households were more likely to report female-dominated decision-making or negotiated decision-making rather than male-dominated or norm-governed decision making. She also found that loans to women as group members were more likely to increase their voice in household decision-making than loans to women as individuals. Finally, she found that organisations that paid attention to the nature of relationships between group members (eg. frequency of group meetings, processes of group formation and intensiveness of training) brought about a greater shift in decision-making patterns than organisations that did not pay attention to these issues.

'[Holvoet 2005] ... found that loans to women as group members were more likely to increase their voice in household decision-making than loans to women as individuals'

Research on microfinance in the context of sub-Saharan Africa where female borrowers were often already engaged in various kinds of economic activity report somewhat different impacts. Johnson's study from Malawi (2005) offers mixed findings as far as relations with male members of the household were concerned: some women reported fewer arguments and greater appreciation on the



part of their men while others reported male resentment at having to assist in loan repayments as well as at the amount of time women spent in their microfinance activities. She also found that women whose access to microfinance allowed them to expand their businesses were expected to take greater responsibility over time for all categories of household expenditure, without necessarily gaining a greater say in particular categories. In Cameroon, Mayoux (2001) reported that women's greater access to credit had the effect of reducing men's sense of obligation to contribute in cash or in other ways to the household.

These findings echo the findings reported by Greenhalgh in her analysis of the changes that accompany women's trading activities in the Ghanaian context. However, Solomon's analysis of a microfinance programme in rural Ghana (2003) offers a somewhat different perspective. She found that the availability of loans fed into on-going bargaining processes within marriages: while men did indeed use their wives' access to loans as the justification for reducing their own contributions to collective household expenses, women in turn used their husbands' reduced contributions to extract concessions of their own: in one case, to bring a halt to child-bearing, in another, to insist on children's education in the face of husbands' resistance. She concluded that access to loans 'reinforced pre-existing practices of women's maintenance of separate and independent incomes ...and presented many women in Tamale with new opportunities for deepening their long-held independence in polygynous marriages' (2003: 166). In other words, the price they paid for their greater independence was a greater share of financial responsibilities.



Women's waged employment and pathways of empowerment

Much of the recent literature on the impacts of waged employment has focused on export-oriented production in manufacturing and agriculture. These tend to be better paid than waged work in production for the domestic market, often count as 'formal', and may explain some of the more positive findings reported by some of these studies. However, the studies in question also highlight the importance of life course to women's experiences of waged work. Evaluations of these jobs from the perspective of young unmarried women have been largely positive although there are regional variations. There is, for instance, a considerable difference between the picture of 'dutiful' daughters painted by Kung (1983), Salaff (1981) and Greenhalgh (1985) in studies from the East Asian context (Hong Kong and Taiwan), where parents exercised control over when, where and for how long their daughters would work, and the 'rebellious' daughters portrayed by Wolf (1992) in Indonesia where young women often took up jobs in defiance of parents' wishes and retained control over their own wages.

Even within the Indonesian context, there appear to be differences in the implications for waged work for young women within the stricter patriarchal relations of East Java described by Mather (1985) and those in Central Java studied by Wolf. By and large, however, studies of young factory workers have tended to stress their enhanced sense of self-determination; their greater role in making strategic decisions about their lives, including when and whom (but not necessarily whether) to marry; the translation of their status from economic liability to their parents to economic asset; and escape from the surveillance of family and kin, often through migration to other areas or even other countries (Wolf 1992; Wilson 1993; Kibria 1995 and 1998;



Kabeer 2000; Lee 1998; Ong 1987; Dannecker 2005; Eraydin and Erendil 1999; Cheng-Kooi 1996).

Access to waged work, and more generally, to independent economic activities outside the home, appear to constitute a greater threat to male authority in the context of conjugal relations than in other family relations. Studies have documented husbands' resistance to the idea of their wives taking up waged work and trading activities in contexts as varied as Tanzania (Sender and Smith 1990), South Africa (Sender 2002), Kenya (Francis 2002), Chile (Bee and Vogel 1997), Mexico (Gates 2002) and Bangladesh (Kabeer 2000). Such resistance reflects anxiety on the part of men that wives' access to waged work will make them 'insubordinate' or unfaithful, undermine their own roles as family breadwinners and lead to the neglect of housework.

One way to interpret the fact that so many women do not simply override their husbands' wishes but engage in complex strategies to obtain their consent, often at considerable costs to themselves in terms of double work burdens or loss of control over their income, is that keeping their marriages intact is important to them. This may reflect personal reasons of love and affection for their partners, their joint stake in the welfare of their children or sympathy borne of shared experience of adversity and oppression. Alternatively, it may be that the prospect of greater autonomy offered by independent earnings is not sufficiently attractive to over-ride the insecurities of going it alone, particularly if there are children involved. Whatever their motivations for choosing 'loyalty' over 'exit', we find that regional variations in the structures of patriarchal constraint give rise to considerable variations in women's strategies for 'bargaining with patriarchy'.

Gates (2002) reports that wives and daughters working in export factories in Mexico's northern border engaged in strategies of 'offers' and 'threats' to obtain consent from dominant family members to take up paid



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work: offers included financial contributions to the household, continued responsibility for housework and, in the case of daughters, the offer to look after themselves; threats, generally made by wives, included the threat of 'exit'. The literature from Latin America suggests that while a great deal of marital life among lower income households has historically consisted of a succession of consensual unions, greater possibilities for paid work mean that while poorer women may still continue to be abandoned by husbands, many more are now taking the initiative to leave their husbands and to set up their own households (Jelin and Diaz-Monoz 2003). At the same time, other studies suggest that negotiations are often successful: in her study of women working in the cut flower industry in Colombia, Sanchez-Friedmann (2006) notes examples of husbands who agreed to change their behaviour in the face of their wives' threats to leave.

Studies from West Africa suggest that women whose independent businesses were sufficiently profitable did not generally seek divorce, as their husbands feared, but opted to set up their own households and establish a position of 'virtual autonomy' *vis-à-vis* their husbands (Roberts 1989; Cornwall 2002). This reinforces the point made by Solomon that women may use their earnings to attain a degree of independence within marriage – even when it implies taking on greater financial responsibility.

In India and Bangladesh, however, where family structures continue to be organised along tight-knit corporate lines and where women on their own are socially vulnerable, married women generally do not make threats that might destabilise their marriages. Instead they engage in forms of bargaining which keep intact the public image of the husbands' breadwinning role, but seek to increase their 'backstage' influence in decision-making processes (Chen 1983; Kabeer 2000; Basu 1996; Vera-Sanso 2000). They may also opt to secretly keep back some of their



earnings or to open up bank accounts in their own names without informing their husbands. My study of Bangladeshi garment workers found that it was only when husbands have violated some aspect of the marital contract which women found unacceptable (such as failing to 'feed' the family, taking a second wife or lying about their first one) did some of them choose to opt out of marriage.

An alternative interpretation of these complex strategies of 'wielding and yielding' (Villareal 1990) pursued by women in order to take up paid work, sometimes risking their relationships with their partners in the process, is in terms of the importance they attach to such work. Clearly, some of this importance relates to household poverty and the need for additional earnings. However, as we noted, it also reflects their beliefs about the potential of paid work to bring about important changes in their lives and there is sufficient evidence from different parts of the world to suggest that, while the impacts in question are not uniform across the world, their beliefs are not entirely misplaced. Among some of the more widely documented impacts associated with paid work in different contexts is evidence that women do receive more respect and acknowledgement from husbands and other family members, that they do have more voice and influence in strategic household matters, that they are more likely to take their own health status more seriously, that they value some independence of purchasing power, that they have greater mobility in the public domain and a stronger negotiating position in the sexual politics of the household, including the ability to renegotiate or 'exit' from abusive relationships (see review in Kabeer 2008).

It is not simply access to an income of their own that makes the difference: exposure to new ideas, experiences and relationships also plays a role. In her study of the flower industry in the Dominican Republic, Raynalds (2002) found that women who worked as waged labour on others'





farms as well as unpaid family labour on their own farms began to claim part of the proceeds of the family farm as a form of 'wage'. Similar claims were not made by women who only worked as unpaid family labour. Ver Beek (2001) found that women workers in the maquiladores in Honduras were not only more likely to vote than women working in informal activities, they were also more likely to believe that they could influence government policy.

The literature on waged work undertaken in the context of migration provides mixed findings as to its implications. This will clearly reflect difference in the conditions under which migrants work but it also reflects differences in the motivations that led them to migrate. The diversity of motivations is evident in studies of international women migrants from Bangladesh, Philippines and Sri Lanka (Oishi 2005; Sidiqqi 2001). These report that for many women, particularly young unmarried women or older women without children, migration represented an adventure, a broadening of horizons. Some had migrated to support their families, some to make use of their skills, and still others to escape problems at home, sometimes abusive in-laws, but most often, abusive, alcoholic and unfaithful husbands or husbands who had taken other wives. The frequency of the latter reason in the Philippines context, where divorce is illegal, explains why female international migration is often referred to as the 'Filipina divorce' (Zlotnik 1995). Dannecker (2005) reported that migration to Malaysia provided Bangladeshi women with the opportunity to critically evaluate the more restrictive interpretations of Islam prevalent in Bangladesh from the perspective of the greater opportunities allowed to women within Malaysian interpretations of Islam.

However, along with the various positive forms of change in intra-household relationships that have been documented in relation to women's paid work, studies have

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also pointed to evidence of 'inertness', or resilience to change, in some aspects of these relationships. One such aspect relates to the domestic division of unpaid labour. While some studies suggest that the size of women's earnings or the share of their contribution can lead to some changes in the gender division of unpaid domestic labour (Zohir-Choudhury 1998; Newman 2001; Cravey 1997), many more studies testify to what Pearson describes as 'the impressive resistance of men to an equal involvement in domestic work' (2000: 225). As a result, evidence that women are working a 'double day' or a 'second shift' is among the least controversial findings in studies on women's work in different parts of the world (Koch Laier 1997, cited in Pearson 2000).

The other resilient aspect is domestic violence. In some cases, contradictory findings may reflect the failure to distinguish between different categories of work. For instance, the finding that women's paid work was associated with lower levels of physical forms of domestic violence in urban Bangladesh (Salway *et al.* 2005) but higher levels in neighbouring urban West Bengal (Sen 1999) may reflect the fact that while women in both samples were largely engaged in poorly paid and casual forms of waged work, employment opportunities for women in the Bangladesh context included regular waged work in export garment factories, an option that was missing in the West Bengal sample.

However, the more general absence of a consistent relationship between women's involvement in paid work and the incidence of domestic violence reminds us that domestic violence is the product of a complex interplay of power relations within and beyond the household, and only partly determined by economic factors. This is well illustrated by a comparative study of Kerala and West Bengal (Batla *et al.* forthcoming). Women's paid work, distinguishing between regular and irregular work, was



found to have little bearing on the incidence of domestic violence. Instead, the economic factors that were most strongly associated with lower levels of violence were women's ownership of their homes and, in the case of Kerala, ownership of land. In addition, higher levels of violence were reported in households in which husbands were irregular wage labour. The non-economic factors which appeared to increase the likelihood of domestic violence included husbands' alcohol consumption, dowry demands either before or after marriage, and whether either the husband or wife had witnessed domestic violence as children.

The study also drew attention to the importance of social relationships for the experience of domestic violence: violence was lower when women had the support of their natal families or 'someone to talk to'. Other studies have also pointed to the relevance of social relationships. In Bangladesh, studies of domestic violence among microfinance loanees found that while the initial access to credit often led to an increase in domestic violence as husbands sought to appropriate their wives' loans, violence declined with duration of membership, particularly when microfinance programmes also included training in their activities. In addition, Hashemi *et al.* (1996) found that membership of microfinance groups was another factor that explained a gradual decline in domestic violence as husbands and in-laws realised that domestic violence could no longer be kept within the privacy of the home.

Unfortunately, very few studies on women's paid work explore the impact of different kinds of paid work on women's social relationships, beyond those of the immediate family. Thus while Ver Beek (2001) tells us that women who had been working for some time in the export zones in Honduras were more likely to express political agency than those who had just joined, we do not know whether it was their individual experience at work which



politicised them or a result of their contact with organisations active in these zones. The few that do offer information on the scope for new relationships through work offer contradictory findings, perhaps reflecting the variety of working conditions under which these relationships are forged. Some suggest that participation in paid work erodes opportunities for sociability. In Vietnam, young women working in export garment factories complained that long hours of work left them with little opportunity for social interaction (Kabeer and Van Anh 2006). In Ecuador, Korovkin (2002) found that only one-third of flower plantation workers were active members of *mingas* (community labour associations) and assemblies, in contrast to two-thirds in the remainder of the community. Similar evidence was reported by Dolan and Sutherland (2002) among vegetable workers, the majority of whom lacked the time to participate in community-related activities.

On the other hand, studies of women working in the Colombian flower industry (Meier 1999), in the fresh vegetable industry in Kenya (Dolan and Sutherland 2002) and in factory work in Bangladesh (Kabeer 2000), India (Gandhi and Shah nd.), Indonesia (Wolf 1992), China (Lee 1998) and Malaysia (Ong 1987) all reported increased social interactions among women workers, most of whom were of similar age and class backgrounds and, in some cases, the opportunity to meet women from other parts of their countries. Studies of microfinance from the South Asian and the Latin American contexts suggest that group participation was an important aspect of what women valued about their experience: many cited the support and solidarity of their groups as their most important resource in times of crisis (see review in Kabeer 2005a). In their exploration of the 'sociability' aspect of participation in microfinance groups in Tamil Nadu, Murthy *et al.* (2005) found that 83 per cent of members reported an increase in friendships compared to 26



per cent of non-members, with a higher percentage of the former reporting friends from other castes.

It will be clear from even this limited review of the relevant literature that generalisations about the impact of paid work on women's personal choices and relationships are difficult to make with any confidence because these impacts vary so much by women's life course and upbringing, by the nature of the work in question, by the acceptability of different kinds of paid work in different contexts, by the reactions of men within their households, by the concessions women have to make to take up paid work and by the room for manoeuvre provided by the wider community. The potentially empowering aspects of work do not always occur in tandem with each other and their effects may be curtailed or offset by negative aspects of the work itself or by repercussions associated with work.

'... forms of work that take women into the public domain and outside the circle of kin-based control offer greater likelihood of the kinds of changes we associate with empowerment'

Nevertheless, if we can make any generalisations on the basis of our discussion, it would be that forms of work that take women into the public domain and outside the circle of kin-based control offer greater likelihood of the kinds of changes we associate with empowerment. They are more likely to promote women's voices in the domestic domain and their capacity to negotiate the terms of their relationships with husbands and other dominant members within their families. They are also more likely to give rise to new kinds of identities for women beyond those ascribed on the basis of their gender, a greater sense of their own agency and, in many cases, a greater awareness of their own individuality. For instance:

In urban Turkey, Eraydin and Erendil (1999) report that young women taking up factory work were shifting from 'seeing themselves solely in relation to their families to assume more individualistic and autonomous identities' (1999: 267).

In rural east and southern Africa, peasant women's access to cash earnings has meant 'that (they) no longer see



themselves as economic dependents, but as economic supporters with dependents' (Bryceson 2000: 57).

In Bangladesh, women in garment factories are pushing back the social limits on their life options by redefining the norms of female propriety to emphasise individual responsibility rather than social control (Kabeer 2000).

In Malaysia, for all the discipline imposed by their factory work, Ong (1987) reports that the economic autonomy and widening horizons of young working women had begun to threaten male power within the home.

In Latin America more generally, Guzman and Todaro (2001) suggest that despite the casual and poorly paid nature of much of the work available to women, participation in the labour market has allowed them the right to choose their destinies 'as individuals, not only as family members': it has fostered their ambition to remain in the labour market and it has promoted their entry into a new social realm, thereby creating a new community of reference and solidarity (translation by Cecilia Ugaz).

The question we address in the next section of the paper is whether and how changes in the individual consciousness and capacity for agency brought about by increased participation in paid work translates into a greater awareness on the part of women workers of their rights as citizens and a greater willingness to engage in collective action to claim these rights.



Paid Work and Pathways to Gendered Citizenship

Struggles for justice through work: representation, recognition and redistribution

The possibility that access to paid work can provide the basis for women's emancipation is at the heart of Engels' famous thesis (1972) but it was concerned with a particular form of paid work viz. wage labour in public forms of mass industrial production that could forge shared class interests between men and women. It had little to say about the emancipatory potential of the various forms of self-employment and home-based activities in which increasing numbers of the working poor, and working women in particular, are to be found today. Given the nature of the forces driving the current phase of globalisation, there are few reasons to expect that women's growing involvement in paid work will generate a commensurate expansion in their rights, both at work and beyond it. Instead, we have seen cutbacks in protective legislation, the privatisation of welfare and the means-tested targeting of social protection as social policies become increasingly 'residualised'. We have also seen the declining membership of trade unions, the organisations through which workers have traditionally made their claims. It is not surprising therefore that a recent review of welfare entitlements for women workers in export-oriented employment concluded that 'pressures for labour market 'flexibility' and fiscal restraint combine to deny vast numbers of women – regardless of their employment status – any meaningful access to welfare' (Razavi and Pearson 2004: 25).



My concern in this paper, however, is less with the achievement of women's welfare entitlements as with their collective willingness and efforts to claim them, their collective agency. As the empowerment literature recognises, the exercise of collective agency by subordinate groups has an experiential value of its own, one that is separate from the instrumental value of achieving tangible goals (Kabeer 1994; Edwards 1992; Agarwal 1994). As Edwards puts it: 'it can be a liberating, identity-shaping, empowering process, a confirmation and a strengthening of the self' (1992: 96). A similar point was made by the National Commission on Self-Employed Women in India, chaired by Ela Bhatt, founder of India's largest trade union of self-employed women: women's engagement in collective action to claim rights and resources not only generates bottom-up pressures on the structures of power, but the process of self-organising can have a transformative effect on women's sense of selfhood, their confidence in the public domain and their ability to negotiate the terms on which they sell their labour (Government of India 1988).

This section of the paper extends our concerns with women's consciousness and capacity to exercise strategic forms of agency from the domestic to the public domain. There are a number of reasons why we would expect collective action to be harder for women workers than for men. Women generally have fewer options than men in labour markets which remain highly segmented along gendered lines. They tend to be concentrated to a greater extent in casual, dispersed, isolated, part-time, irregular and often home-based activities, a reflection of their disadvantaged access to skills and assets, the constraints imposed by their domestic responsibilities and gender discrimination in the labour market (Hosmer-Martens and Mitter 1994). They are also often in direct competition with each other – for work, for orders for their products, for space to sell their goods. Such activities do not lend



themselves to self-recognition of shared identity and interests. As the ILO notes, 'the needs and problems of such a diverse work force are as varied as the barriers and constraints they face in organising' (2004: 45).

The absence of market alternatives weakens their exit options, making them less willing to jeopardise their current jobs through union activities and protest actions – regardless of how poorly paid or exploitative these jobs might be. In any case, the absence of legal protection and social security in most informal jobs makes protest a highly risky activity. Their bargaining power is further weakened if they are the primary providers for their family and have children and other dependents to support.

'The absence of market alternatives weakens their exit options, making them less willing to jeopardise their current jobs through union activities and protest actions ...'

Women also face resistance from dominant members within the family if their participation in collective action is believed to reflect on their family's social standing or interfere with their capacity to carry out their domestic duties (Rose 1992; Jhabvala 1994). And in cultures where women are brought up from childhood to comply with cultural norms about female docility and subordinate status, where their lives may be controlled to a large extent by the decisions of dominant family members, they are unlikely to have the courage to stand up to powerful actors in the economic domain, be they employers, middlemen, traders, municipal authorities, police and so on. Describing the difficulties that poorer working women face in acting collectively on their own behalf in the Indian context, Sinha (2006: 11) suggests: 'one of the most powerful barriers to organising is fear. Women have been brought up in fear of their men, their employers and their communities. They live in constant fear of losing their livelihoods, of starvation, of losing their children to illness and of being thrown out of their houses...'. Others have spoken of women's 'fatalistic approach to life', their belief that they can do little to change the circumstances of their lives (Purcell 1981 cited in Chhachhi and Pittin 1996: 96).



In addition, a major barrier to women's capacity to organise around their needs, interests and rights as workers has been their lack of representation in the mainstream trade union movement. The trade union movement in advanced capitalist countries evolved in response to the needs and priorities of the largely male work force that came into existence during the earlier Fordist system of standardised mass production. As Silver (2003) points out, the capacity of traditional trade unions to defend the interests of their membership rested on both structural and associational power. Their ability to use collective strategies like the closed shop, collective bargaining and threat of strike action to win gains for their members rested on the structural power endowed by their strategic location in the economic system. These gains in turn strengthened the organisational capacity of the unions, since they could rely on the loyalty and financial backing of their own membership to pursue further gains.

As an organisational form, trade unionism could be transplanted with relative ease to the large public sector enterprises and capital intensive forms of production which characterised the earlier import-substituting phase of industrialisation in developing countries. However, it failed, even then, to reach out to the vast majority of workers in these countries who were located in informal activities characterised by easy entry, low earnings and the absence of a clear-cut employer-employee relationship. As a number of authors have pointed out, the attitudes of mainstream unions towards such workers were often characterised by fear and hostility: they perceived such workers as a threat to the privileges they had won through their organised collective actions (Breman 1996; Spooner 2004; Chhachhi and Pittin 1996; Gandhi 1996; Horn 2002). In some contexts, state regulations curtailed the possibility of union membership and collective bargaining agreements in the informal economy. As a result, less than 10 per cent



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of workers, and even lower percentages of women workers, were members of trade unions in most of these countries.

Since the 1970s, changes in the world economy have eroded the basis of the power of organised labour and reduced the size of their membership. The new hyper-mobility of capital, its ability to pursue cost-cutting strategies on a global scale, has meant that multinational companies can relocate, or use the threat of relocation, to bring the competitive pressure of the large pool of unemployed or underemployed workers to bear on the unionised work force. Moreover, the fragmentation of production processes and the pursuit of flexible labour market strategies has replaced the stable workforce of the earlier period with a disaggregated, dispersed, largely informal and, as we noted, increasingly female work-force: the structure of such work inhibits the emergence of collective identity and collective interests. The difficulties that women workers face in becoming unionised by virtue of their location in precarious forms of work would therefore appear to have been further compounded by these changes in the environment for organisation.

At the same time, there are a number of changes, some rooted in the processes of globalisation itself, which have opened up new possibilities for organisation among sections of the working poor who had hitherto been excluded from the labour movement. The internationalisation of the women's movement, its advocacy for women's rights in different spheres, and its ability to make links between grassroots activism, the state and the international development community has been one aspect of this. In addition, declining membership of trade unions has led to the realisation on the part of many trade unionists that the future survival of unionism depends on organising informal workers, a disproportionate percentage of whom are women (Gallin 2001; Chun 2008). Finally, there has been a proliferation of



organisational efforts of varying scale and orientation that explicitly seek to address the needs and interests of women workers. This section of the paper explores the literature on these organisational efforts in order to draw out their insights into women's struggles for representation, redistribution and recognition.

Paid work and the struggle for representation

The compartmentalisation of the literature on collective action around representation, redistribution and recognition, and the privileging of certain kinds of organisations over others within different bodies of literature, has prevented a full appreciation of the diversity of forms through which women's struggles for economic justice have occurred. The labour movement literature tends to privilege trade unions as the authentic expression of working class interests and the primary means through which women workers will gain their rights. The literature on new social movements has focused on the politics of recognition in which class identity is overshadowed by other kinds of group-based identity. Research on autonomous women's movements, on the other hand, has been largely concerned with a number of quintessentially feminist issues, including violence against women, reproductive and sexual rights and women's participation in the political sphere. In addition, the literature on NGOs tends to focus on planned interventions within mainstream development programmes without taking account of the heterogeneity of the NGO sector and the more radical tendencies within it.

The reality is that working women organise, and are organised, in ways that cannot be contained within any one of these compartments. The various kinds of work that they do, their location at the intersection of production and





reproduction, the availability of political space for public action and of cultural space for gendered forms of public action all mean that their needs and interests find collective expression and support through a variety of different organisational forms: 'old' and 'new' trade unions, co-operatives, national and trans-national networks, associations of various kinds, development NGOs, women's organisations and human rights groups. This diversity of organisational forms is far more representative than any single form could be of the variety of contexts and market locations in which women workers are to be found.

The aim of the discussion here is to illustrate this diversity. It is beyond the scope of this paper to assess the strengths and weaknesses of different kinds of organisations but we need to bear in mind that the legitimacy of their claims to represent women's voices will vary considerably. Rosa (1994) makes an important distinction between organisations of women workers and organisations for women workers. The former exemplify women's efforts to organise on their own behalf. The latter may have the effect of displacing such efforts. Alternatively, they may play an important role in strengthening the capacity of women workers for self-organisation through the provision of various kinds of support services and training as well as through advocacy efforts to gain recognition for their rights. It is also important to recognise that these different kinds of organisations, both 'for' and 'of' women, vary considerably in their internal democracy and their relationships with their constituencies.

The mainstream trade union movement was, and remains, an important site in which women workers have waged – with some success – the struggle to articulate a distinctive voice. A common strategy for women labour activists reluctant to break with the mainstream union movement has been to reform the unions from within. For instance, the Union Women's Network was set up in



Mexico in 1995 with funds from international labour organisations for the purpose of conducting leadership training for women within the trade union movement (Brickner 2006). In Peru, the Flora Tristram Centre, a women-only organisation set up in 1979, had a specific orientation to women workers and programmes in order to promote their capacity to exercise voice and leadership within their unions (Mauleon 1996).

Trade unions, in turn, have responded by setting up special committees and secretariats to deal with women's issues. The San Pedro de Macoris Free Zone Trade Union, a women-led union in the Dominican Republic studied by Dunn (1996), was the product of such committees. It was able to win recognition from the government with the support of one of the country's main trade union federations and to use this recognition to establish a base for creating a national union of affiliated trade unions from other zones in the country. It works closely with other trade unions, with NGOs and with church groups who provide its members with information, training and other forms of support. Rosa (1994) provides examples of the work done by the women's committee within the Malaysian Trade Union Congress in designing its own educational programmes on the legal rights of women workers, leadership skills and public speaking.

Elsewhere, women-only unions have been set up as an alternative to women's committees within male-dominated structures. These are often founded by women activists who have become disillusioned by their experiences in the mainstream trade union movement. As Chun (2008; see also Rosa 1994) relates, the Korean Women Workers Association was set up by working women who took part in the struggle of the Korean labour movement for democracy in the 1980s. It was seen as a separate but complementary component for the broader struggle for democracy and independent unions. However, it became evident over time



that the male-dominated Korean Confederation of Trade Unions had little time for women workers fighting plant closures and illegal employer practices as part of the massive de-industrialisation of labour intensive export processing zones which began in the late 1980s.

The consequences of their neglect meant that it was largely women workers who were laid off in the aftermath of the Asian crisis in 1997–98 to be rehired on a flexible basis. It was the central Korean Women Workers' Associations United, that provided a lifeline to women in informal work. However, as an NGO, it could do little to mitigate the consequences of informalisation. In 1999, three new women's trade unions were set up to fight the exploitation and abuse of women workers in the informal economy. All three believe that the existing unions – whose leadership and priorities were largely male-dominated – were not equipped to protect the needs and concerns of the vast majority of women who were employed on non-standard contracts. They draw support from the Korean Women Workers Associations United, but retain their independence from the male dominated unions.

In Nicaragua, the MEC, the Working and Unemployed Women's Movement, was founded in 1994 after repeated conflicts between the national and regional women's secretariats and the largely male leadership of the country's largest trade union confederation (Bickham Mendez 2005). The MEC leadership had extensive networks with women unionists elsewhere in Nicaragua and the Central American region and, with the support of NGOs based in Canada and Europe, founded the Central American Network of Women in Solidarity with Maquila Workers which is made up of autonomous women's organisations from the region. In Bangladesh, disillusionment with the partisan and confrontational politics of the main trade unions, which were all affiliated to the country's political parties, as well as the belief that



women workers were more likely to be comfortable with women organisers, led to the setting up of Working Women and the Independent Garment Workers Union, both led by women activists from the more progressive parties (Dannecker 2002; Mahmud and Kabeer 2006).

These are all examples of organisations focused on women workers who share a common workplace, a common employer and hence a commonality of experiences and interests. Attempts to organise the more geographically and occupationally diverse workforce that make up the informal economy have posed a different kind of challenge. While these workers are to be found working in a variety of different conditions part time or full-time, regularly or irregularly, at home or outside it, in geographically dispersed or concentrated locations, for recognisable employers, for themselves, for middle men and subcontractors what unifies them is that they fall outside the definition of 'the standard worker' that defines state regulation and traditional trade union activism. Efforts to represent the voices of these workers have had to adopt hybrid forms and diverse strategies. We distinguish here between two broad categories of these efforts: those that take livelihood activities as their entry point and those that organise around access to livelihood resources.

SEWA is perhaps the paradigmatic model of organisations that take livelihood activities as their point of entry. It covers informal workers across a range of industries and sectors and takes common occupations rather than shared work place as its organising principle. Its strategy is to combine co-operatives among its membership in order to protect and promote their livelihoods with union activities to promote collective bargaining (Jhabvala 1994; Rose 1992). SEWA has inspired other organisational efforts, both within India and elsewhere. An example from India is KKPKP, Pune which has organised informal waste pickers and garbage collectors, who are drawn from the



'Attempts to organise the more geographically and occupationally diverse workforce that make up the informal economy have posed a different kind of challenge'

'untouchable' castes and represent a highly marginalised section of the informal work force (Chikarmane and Narayan 2005). Another example, this time from South Africa, is the Self-Employed Women's Union. This was registered as a union in 1993 with a membership predominantly drawn from black women working at the survivalist end of the informal economy (Devenish and Skinner 2004). However, its attempts to affiliate to COSATU, the largest trade union federation in the country, were resisted by sections of the largely male leadership who accused SEWU of discriminating against men. In 2004, SEWU had to be liquidated as a result of a financially crippling law suit. In 2005, after the demise of SEWU, COSATU took the decision to launch a new union to organise in the burgeoning informal economy.

Organisations that focus on access to resources as their point of entry for mobilising the working poor generally focus on resources which have generic value, such as land, shelter and social security. The Alliance which works with slum dwellers in Mumbai takes the right to shelter as the basis of its activities (Mitlin and Patel 2005; Appadurai 2001). It is a network made up of three rather different organisations that have been working together since 1986 to promote security of shelter for the urban poor. The Society for the Protection of Area Resources Centre (SPARC) is an NGO rooted in social work among the urban poor in Mumbai since 1984. The National Slum Dwellers' Federation is a national community-based organisation that has been fighting for housing rights since 1974. The third partner, Mahila Milan, came into existence when the two other organisations realised that their strongest allies in the fight for better housing for low income households were the female members of these households. The three organisations are united by their concerns with obtaining secure tenure of land, adequate and durable housing and access to essential utilities for its membership.



Representatives of the Alliance were present at a meeting of women and men from the shacks, backyards and hostels of urban South Africa when a decision was taken to set up a similar network for homeless people. The People's Dialogue on Land and Shelter was set up in 1991 with the objective of working with the future democratically elected government of the new South Africa to find solutions to poverty and deprivation rather than assuming their automatic delivery: 'This viewpoint recognised that democratic rights are often given best effect through conscious organisation and action based on the needs of a specific group'. The success of the Dialogue brought together a following of different community groups which constituted themselves as the South African's Homeless People's Federation in 1994, a formal network of autonomous community-based organisations consisting of 100,000 members, of whom 85 per cent were women, in receipt of monthly incomes of less than R1000.

In Bangladesh, organisations like Nijera Kori and SAMATA (Kabeer 2003; 2005c and forthcoming; Jones *et al.* 2007) have been promoting federations of landless groups of men and women in rural Bangladesh since the late 1970s. They draw on Freire's 'pedagogy of the oppressed' to encourage their membership to reflect on, and to question, the power inequalities which keep them in their place and to take collective action in pursuit of their rights. The issues in question tend to reflect local concerns so that they revolve around claims to land in areas where there is unused public land to which the poor have legal entitlement, while in other areas they revolve around wage struggles. However, certain issues are pervasive, such as the violations of women's rights and corruption of public officials. The tactics used by these organisations range from demonstrations, occupations and face-to-face confrontations to petitions, campaigns and alternative forums for dispute resolution. They also rely on the





support of localised networks of sympathetic progressive lawyers, journalists and politicians.

Deere (2003) documents the growing involvement of rural women in three different kinds of organisations in Brazil: rural unions, MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*) the landless people's movement which mobilises around the right to land, and the autonomous women's organisations which are today linked through the National Articulation of Rural Women Workers (*Articulacao Nacional das Mulheres Trabalhadoras Agricolas or ANMTR*). The autonomous rural women's organisations were formed at the regional level by women who were affiliated to the unions but felt the need to create their own space to deal with gender issues and women's concerns. Although some had reached leadership positions within the rural unions as well as within the MST, they were frustrated by the lack of attention to their gender-specific demands within these organisations. It was the pressure exercised by these autonomous organisations that also led to gender issues being taken up more seriously by the national labour movement. The autonomous women's organisations prioritised the need to promote women's participation in the rural unions because access to state social security in the countryside was conditional on membership of rural unions and they recognised the priority that rural women gave to social security.

Savings and credit are other examples of generic needs around which women's collective actions have revolved. While microfinance organisations have increasingly begun to emphasise financial sustainability objectives as their overarching goals (see Copestake *et al.* 2005), a number of organisations continue to use credit as a means to reach out to and organise informal workers rather than treating credit provision as an end in itself. The self-help group approach in India was begun by a number of socially-aware NGOs to achieve this goal. CYSD which works with poor tribal



women in India's poorest state is an example of this kind of organisation. It uses the self-help group approach to encourage women to save and lend to each other as a means of building group cohesion and strengthening livelihoods and as a basis for making policy-based demands to public authorities (Dash 2003; Dash and Kabeer 2005). BRAC in Bangladesh combines provision of credit with training in women's legal rights as well as providing legal advice and support to enable its members to deal with violations of their rights in local communities (Chen 1983). ProMujer in Bolivia uses microfinance services not simply as a means of promoting women's entrepreneurship but also to build solidarity among women so that they can act as pressure groups to secure better health and education services and pursue common political objectives (Velasco and Marconi 2004). Studies of both CYSD (Dash and Kabeer 2005) and BRAC (Kabeer and Matin 2005) point to their achievements, not only in strengthening the livelihood security of their membership but also in promoting their participation in the wider community, including a greater willingness to vote, and in the case of CYSD, taking collective action to protest against male alcoholism and demand schools

It is important to recognise that this proliferation of organisational forms reflects the availability of democratic space for civil society activism. The importance of political context to the processes by which women's work provides an access route to citizenship rights becomes glaringly obvious when we examine contexts where this space is restricted or not available. Restrictions on trade union activity in the context of export processing zones in many countries has led to the greater prominence of alternative community-based organisations, which include church and mosque groups, women's groups and welfare organisations (Rosa 1994; Piper 2004).

The importance of political context is illustrated by Lyons (2006) who compares organisational efforts to



'Restrictions on trade union activity in the context of export processing zones in many countries has led to the greater prominence of alternative community-based organisations ...'

address the situation of migrant workers in Singapore and Malaysia. As she points out, both have strong authoritarian governments, but the 'room for manoeuvre' for civil society actors is far more restricted in Singapore. The government has communicated an implicit but unmistakeable 'off limits' message to civil society organisations, including the trade unions and women's organisations, about certain issues, including the rights of foreign women working as domestic maids. The few organisations that work with migrant workers manage their agendas so as to avoid attracting government hostility. It has largely been UNIFEM that has taken up the cause of female migrant workers in this context.

Malaysia, by contrast, not only allows more space for civil society activism but also recognises the right of registered migrant workers to become trade union members. There are also over 250 women's organisations in the country, many with an explicit feminist orientation. Some are active on migrant workers' rights. While Sahabat Wanita, a national organisation of Malaysian women workers, refers migrant workers to organisations that deal directly with their concerns, it sees its own role as one of changing the mind sets of local workers who perceive migrant workers as a threat to their jobs. Tenaganita began by promoting the rights of women workers in the plantations and in the industrial sector but has expanded over time to include some of the most marginalised workers including single mothers, trafficked women, domestic workers, sex workers, migrant workers and people with AIDS. It has both an explicitly feminist agenda as well as an internationalist perspective, based on solidarity among all workers.

The Chinese context represents a more extreme example of the restrictions on political space: here the All China Federation of Trade Unions is the only legally permitted organisation for workers. Those attempting to



organise independent unions can be arrested for treason. What have emerged in this context are labour-oriented NGOs which have taken advantage of the official emphasis on education and services for migrant workers to make contact with workers in the export zones. The Christian Industrial Council, which is based in Hong Kong, uses the provision of health and safety training as a means of gaining access to factory workers in trans-national companies. It also provides legal and medical support services. Knowing that these jobs are not for life, it is concerned not only with women's current problems but with bringing about longer term changes in their consciousness and their economic options: 'Our challenge is how to sustain changes for women workers when they go back to the same agricultural and patriarchal family, for example, through consciousness raising and micro-credit organisations' (cited in Maquila Solidarity Network 2001).

Similarly, the Chinese Working Women Network (Ngai 2005) uses a community-based organising model which combines welfare support with education on rights for migrant workers in the Shenzhen export processing zone. It established the Centre for Women Workers in 1996 to provide education in labour rights, protection against work place discrimination, reproductive health education and training for migrants' return while the Occupation Health Education Centre was set up as a specialised unit of legal support for migrant workers. A mobile Health Express provides health outreach to migrant women, informing them about potential occupational hazards and advocating for better occupational health safety. It has also begun a co-operative to assist women who want to leave factory work to engage in alternative economic activities.



Redefining the agenda: redistribution and recognition

Along with mapping the diversity of associations through which women workers' needs and interests are represented in the public domain, the literature on working women's struggles also provides some insights into the nature of the demands that motivate women workers to participate in these associations. Traditional trade unions were, and continue to be, largely organised around redistributive demands. However, their definitions of redistribution are often interpreted in ways that marginalise the specific concerns of working women. For instance, Deere (2003) notes that while rural women were extremely active in the landless people's movement in Brazil, the movement's demands in terms of the joint adjudication and titling of land served to rule out the possibility for discussing women's land rights. Attempts by the Women's Secretariat of the Movement to raise gender issues were regarded as divisive and the women in question were told to join the autonomous women's organisations.

'... for women workers, the demand for transport was a response to the sexual harassment they faced in public buses ...'

In India, Chhachhi and Pittin (1996) describe how demands by women workers in an electronic factory for uniforms and transport were rejected by male workers as trivial, unrelated to the 'real' struggle for wages. Yet for women workers, the demand for transport was a response to the sexual harassment they faced in public buses, particularly late in the evenings, which undermined their ability to do overtime, while the demand for uniforms was a cost-saving measure to reduce the need to have a variety of different clothes for work. Even where the more progressive of the Indian trade unions were willing to fight for women's rights, Hensman (1996) notes that they did so from a masculine standpoint⁹: 'equal pay for the same work, not for work of equal value; the reservation of 20% of jobs in all industries and services for women...but not for an



equal opportunity policy; protection and benefits for women, but based on the assumption of a rigid domestic division of labour. All these leave untouched a hard core of male privilege, loss of which would be perceived by most male workers as unthinkable' (1996: 200).

It is evident from the literature that those organisations that are firmly grounded in the practical realities of women's lives have been the most successful in attracting and retaining women workers in their membership. These are often women-only, women-dominated or women-led. They tend to organise within the communities and neighbourhoods in which women workers live rather than at the work place. They hold their meetings at times and in locations that allow women workers to participate. They recognise the importance of women's shared struggles around work, family and personal life as the basis for building trust and solidarity. They seek to take up issues that make sense to women who are struggling simultaneously to make a living and care for their families. As a result, such organisations are more likely to address the gender-specificity of women workers' demands, in many cases combining struggles for recognition with redistributive demands.

In a number of contexts, the struggle for recognition has to begin with the struggle for women's basic right to work. In Mexico, for instance, a Gender Working Group was set up by women with trade union, NGO and university backgrounds when it became clear that the working group convened by the newly elected Fox government to reform the labour laws took an extremely narrow and highly traditional view of women's roles (Brickner 2006). The Gender Group took the failure of Mexican labour law to recognise women's basic human right to work as the starting point for their own deliberations. They noted that Mexican women were considered legal subjects only insofar as the laws referred to



'... those organisations that are firmly grounded in the practical realities of women's lives have been the most successful in attracting and retaining women workers in their membership'

and protected their biological function as mothers. To promote equal rights to, and at, work, the Group proposed, among other things, equal remuneration, protection against dismissal on grounds of pregnancy or family responsibilities, sanctions against sexual harassment and work place violence, affirmative action and finally, 'the responsibility of both men and women for child care' (2006: 67). Their advocacy efforts drew the attention of the left leaning parties and several of their proposals were incorporated into the party's own official demands. As Brickner points out, a small, but sufficiently dedicated group of women can have a remarkable influence on the public policy discourses about women's labour rights.

In Brazil, as we saw, the early struggles of rural women throughout much of the 1970s and 1980s was for recognition as workers and for the right to join rural unions. The unions themselves had operated on the assumption that it was sufficient for the male household head to be a member of the union, that women could gain social security benefits through their husbands and that, in any case, women did not work in agriculture (despite the fact that many were farmers, unpaid family workers and casual wage labourers). For rural women, however, union recognition of their status as workers was critical if they were to gain access to the social security rights enjoyed by male workers. The autonomous women's organisations and the Rural Women's Commission of one of the new trade union federations collaborated in a campaign for rural women to declare themselves as rural workers in the 1991 population census, rather than as housewives or unpaid workers.

Deere suggests that the women's organisations gave priority to women's membership of rural unions because they recognised that the struggle to win the associated right to social security unified all women workers, whether waged or self-employed, landless or landowning. They also believed that a unified movement was the precondition for



taking on the more politically controversial struggle for women's land rights. Finally in 2000, over a decade after women's demand for land rights had been formally incorporated into the 1988 Federal Constitution, women in the rural unions came together with autonomous women's organisations to demand women's land rights and the issue took on national significance.

SEWA's decision to register itself as a trade union of 'self-employed women' challenged two aspects of the dominant discourse about 'work' that prevailed within government and trade union circles (Rose 1992). It drew attention to the economic nature of the activities of workers who were largely invisible in official labour force statistics, who were not covered by the government's labour legislation and who had been ignored by the trade union movement. It also challenged the view of government and trade union officials that trade unions could only be formed by workers in clear-cut employer-employee relationships. SEWA argued successfully that unions that were formed for workers were as valid as those that were formed against employers.

SEWA's redistributive politics give priority to the livelihood security of its membership before addressing their desire to improve the terms and conditions of their economic activity. The formation of co-operatives provided the basis for joint economic activities in marketing, storage, and service provision as well as for the provision of support services. SEWA Bank is its largest co-operative and provides credit and savings services to members as well as, in partnership with nationalised insurance companies, an integrated insurance and maternity benefit scheme. There are also child care co-operatives and midwife/health co-operatives.

SEWA's union activities include struggles over wages, job security, better working conditions, social security and social services and changes in policy and law. These



activities deploy direct collective actions such as lobbying, demonstrations and sit ins. However, as Bhowmik and Patel (1997) point out, SEWA does not generally take the confrontational forms associated with traditional trade union activity in India. SEWA uses surveys and discussions with different occupational groups to identify their main problems and informal education classes to discuss these problems in the context of their rights and entitlements. These discussions serve to raise issues around which workers are prepared to take collective action. It also provides legal education and support to members who face periodic encounters with the police and the law and it runs a legal advisory centre to deal with complaints and cases lodged by members.

The decision by the women activists who helped to set up the KKPKP to register the organisation as a trade union rather than an association also reflected the politics of recognition: recognition on the part of the public as well as the waste pickers themselves that what they did constituted work. As Chikarmane and Narayan (2005) found, most of the women who were engaged in waste picking regarded it as 'rummaging through garbage': work was equated with 'a secure job in the government or in a company'. Based on a study it carried out with the ILO, organisers with the KKPKP estimated that the annual direct contribution made by waste pickers to solid waste management in the city was Rs. 185 million. They used their findings to argue for and win local government recognition of the union. A municipal register was set up with the help of the Union which endorsed waste pickers to collect scrap. The Maharashtra State Government subsequently directed other municipalities to register waste pickers, issue identity cards and integrate them into municipal waste collection through their organisations or NGOs. Municipal endorsement of their identity cards has transformed the image of waste pickers in the eyes of the public and in their



own. In addition, the union has been able to play on public sympathy for the inhuman conditions under which waste pickers work to win support for its demands.

The Alliance in India gives central place to negotiations, consensus building and 'precedent setting' in its current strategy. It avoids affiliation to any political parties, working with whoever is in power, but has developed complex affiliations with various levels of state bureaucracy which help it in its work. It encourages daily savings by its members, both as a source of security in times of crisis but also as the basis of daily practical relationships between federation members. It also encourages its membership to undertake self-surveys, a useful tool to clarify who they are, what they do and what their problems are but also as evidence to support the slum dwellers' claims to a secure place within the community. Thus when the state needed to clear out dwellings that had sprung up along railway tracks in order to increase railway efficiency, it agreed to resettle, rather than evict, the families who had been living there. The need for a process to establish individual household entitlements was met through a community-based survey which allowed each of the 30,000 families who had lived in the designated area to be surveyed and enumerated. Finally, the Alliance encourage their members to design and exhibit the kind of housing most suited to their needs as a way of influencing the municipality's efforts to provide low-cost housing.

The People's Dialogue in South Africa drew on many of the Alliance's tactics to build the Homeless People's Federation (HPF): collective planning exercises such as census enumeration, barefoot town planning and house design, using full-scale mock-ups; local and international exchange visits; the initiation of collective savings schemes; and the promotion of female leadership. All member organisations of the Federation are involved in savings collectives with credit managed at the grassroots level by





members themselves and all are involved in struggles to attain security of land and affordable housing. To promote the material security of its members, the HPF set up the uTshani Fund as a community-managed revolving loan fund, capitalised by foreign donors and government grants, which specialises in extending housing loans and bridging finance for the housing subsidy system. It serves as a conduit for subsidy transfers from the government to the Federation, extending finance directly to savings collectives. Federation members rely on a combination of the housing subsidy, a small top-up loan and their own savings in order to meet their shelter needs.

'MEC's slogan is "Jobs, Yes – but with Dignity"'

The MEC in Nicaragua decided to register itself as an association, rather than a trade union, of working and unemployed women in order to distance itself in public perceptions from the adversarial politics of the traditional trade union movement and to define itself as an organisation of 'women from the base'. The organisers were very aware of the fears of women working in the *maquilas*, many of whom were sole providers for their families, of any form of collective action that threatened their jobs. The MEC consequently eschewed the 'old' confrontational forms of collective action, such as demonstrations and strikes, which they see as out of key with the realities of footloose global capital. Nor does it support the boycott tactics of northern-based campaigns which have often led to job losses. As one of its members said, 'Our people are tired of these confrontational methods. We need to propose alternatives' (Bickham Mendez 2005: 136).

MEC's slogan is 'Jobs, Yes – but with Dignity'. Its strategies revolve around negotiation and lobbying, media campaigns and pushing for change through institutional channels, particularly labour legislation and legal mechanisms. Where it is likely to evoke public sympathy, it plays on women's identities as women and as mothers (often single mothers) rather than as workers. In addition, it



provides a variety of training and educational programmes for both employed and unemployed women, including market-oriented skills, human, civil and labour rights, social issues such as domestic violence and sexual abuse as well as sexual harassment at work and, in response to requests from programme participants, martial arts of self-defence. Workers who have been through some of their training can join the organisation as human rights promoters.

One of the first actions of the Korean Women Workers Association after it was founded in 1987 was to set up a Women Workers' House which offered a day care centre and a laundromat service along with training on women's leadership and work based issues. It worked to mobilise the wives and children of male workers to participate in strike action at the same time as attempting to change the attitudes of husbands of its members to persuade them to take on a fairer share of housework. Based on her analysis of working women's struggles in South Korea and the Philippines, Cheng-Kooi (1996) suggests that organisers from working women's organisations have shown a greater willingness than male trade unionists to work with women activists from women's organisations who are accused of being middle class separatists. Women from labour-based organisations have found that issues such as domestic violence, the double burden of paid and unpaid work and reproductive health issues which have been the focus of women's organisations are problems faced by working women. Similarly, the largely urban-based women's groups have become more aware of their isolation from grassroots struggles and have used their resources to publicise and support collective action by women workers.

In South Africa, SEWU use training of various kinds to promote the practical skills and strategic consciousness of its members. Its practical skills training was aimed at strengthening members' capacity as market actors and included training in a number of traditionally male



dominated skills. It was provided through externally accredited trainers and partly paid for by members. Education in broader development and empowerment issues was conducted internally and free to all members. It focused on building up the self confidence of its membership and strengthening their organisational skills, such as lobbying and negotiation, managing savings and bank accounts, legal literacy, dealing with sexual harassment and violence and workshops on occupational health and HIV/AIDS issues. SEWU also negotiated with local government on behalf of its membership, gaining facilities such as shelters for street traders and the installation of water supplies and toilet facilities. It placed a great deal of emphasis on policy influence at different levels but its greatest success was in Durban where it was most active. Its demands for overnight accommodation, child care and storage facilities for street traders are evident in the comprehensive set of services provided by the Durban City Council, in contrast to other cities of South Africa.

In Malaysia both Sahaba Wanita and Tenaganita combined educational and social services providing practical assistance as well as building confidence (Rosa 1994; Yan 2003). Training covered such issues as employment laws, family laws, land rights, sexual harassment and women and politics. Sahaba Wanita focused on promoting the rights of women workers in factories and plantation estates. They ran kindergartens in areas where women live which widened their networks. Tenaganita was set up to 'promote and protect the rights of all women and migrant workers within a globalised world' (Lyons 2006: 11). Its activities include information sharing, advocacy and support services relating to migrant workers' health and rights; community-based interventions to promote health care and reduce HIV/AIDS; a programme for domestic workers, legal support and campaigns for migrants who have been arrested, detained or deported and



a help desk for trafficked women and children. It has an explicit human rights framework which has informed its successful efforts to establish reform amendments to rape laws, model contracts for overseas domestic workers and a Domestic Violence Act. It also has a strong internationalist perspective and works closely with other organisations at both national and global levels to promote workers' rights.

In summary, the literature on collective action by women workers' organisations suggest that they have sought to bridge the hitherto dichotomous concerns of class and gender in ways that reflect women's location at the intersection of production and reproduction. Class issues have been re-interpreted from a gender perspective while gender issues have been recast in class terms. Demands for equal pay for work of equal value, for equality of access to training, promotion and other economic opportunities have been added to redistributive demands for better wages, decent working conditions, social security, security of shelter and the right to organise. Protection against sexual harassment in the work place and in the streets and the right to maternity (and parental) leave and child care support have been added to feminist struggles over domestic violence and women's reproductive and sexual rights. The merging of struggles for recognition and redistribution allow women workers to transcend the public-private divide which served to compartmentalise their concerns within the traditional trade union agenda and closed off the possibility of public action around 'private' forms of injustice.

Mobilising strategies in the absence of structural power

A final set of insights from the literature on collective action by, and for, women workers relates to the strategies through which they have sought to achieve results.



'... the construction of networks of solidarity must often begin with the workers themselves'

Subordinate economic actors do not have the structural power that traditional trade unions were able to bring to bear in the pursuit of their goals. They have drawn instead on other kinds of resources and developed other kinds of strategies, creating an alternative politics of struggle around economic citizenship. Discursive strategies, information politics, legal activism, public advocacy and associational resources are closely intertwined in these alternative routes to citizenship (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Bickham Mendez 2005; Chun 2008).

Discursive strategies take a variety of different forms. Some are inward focused and aimed at the membership itself, while others are focused outwards on external actors whose attitudes and behaviour the organisation seeks to influence (Best 2005). 'Inward focused' strategies may aim to promote the skills and employability of members, and we have cited examples of this. They also seek to develop their personal and political capabilities as well as their sense of identity as workers and citizens. Indeed, given that collective identity and interests cannot be taken for granted on the part of a dispersed and fragmented workforce, the construction of networks of solidarity must often begin with the workers themselves. As Best points out, the literature on social movements provides some rich conceptual insights into the cultural processes through which problems and opportunities are framed and individuals motivated to act out of feelings of solidarity with each other. These processes work best through face-to-face interactions which are rooted in the structures and problems of everyday life. As one of SEWA's mobilisers declared, 'It is no joke, building a bank for illiterate women. How do we illiterate women do things? By walking... By talking to each other. This is how we built this bank. By walking all over this city, talking and talking to our sisters' (Rose 1992: 173 cited in Best 2005).

The political significance of these everyday



interactions in the construction and consolidation of the social ties which make up the fabric of organisations is well illustrated in Dunn's account of the establishment of a women-led trade union in the Dominican Free Trade zone. Interviews with working women, particularly the poorer ones, had suggested that they saw themselves as individuals working to earn a living rather than industrial workers with a shared experience of exploitation which they could act collectively to change. Based on her interviews with the founding members of the union, Dunn described how a committed group of workers was able to overcome this attitude and build support for the idea of a union within the zone:

They, and a core of other union members, establish personal contact with women at work, during lunchtime or on the bus from work. They share personal experiences about work, family and life in general. These contacts form a basis for building trust and friendships. ...Relationships at work were extended by personal visits to each others' homes at nights and on weekends. In building the union in the early days, these casual visits became more formalised and house meetings were organised in several communities. There, problems were discussed and support in the form of advice and assistance was given. ...these contacts helped to improve communication and establish friendships across a wide cross section of workers and factories. Poor working conditions and other common problems that the union needed to address were identified. Committees were then set up in the communities which met regularly or more frequently if there were urgent problems...Despite threats from the factory owners and the Secretary of Labour, employees continued meeting in the communities to plan their strategy... (1996: 219–220)



While a particular incident where a pregnant employee was kicked by a supervisor and lost her baby became the focal point for the massive demonstrations, culminating in the inaugural assembly which set up the union, it is evident that the groundwork for this outcome had been painstakingly laid earlier. As Dunn points out, these painstaking processes of building support for a union gave women workers the opportunity to imagine a new kind of trade union, one that was responsive to their practical needs as well as their strategic interests:

'... these painstaking processes of building support for a union gave women workers the opportunity to imagine a new kind of trade union...'

They want a union that will serve their interests that relate not only to wages and working conditions but also to their personal development, their well-being and their security. On a practical level, they want a union that sees the need for improved transport to and from work, especially late at night and over long distances. It would struggle to eliminate sexual harassment and the sexual division of labour in the workplace. It would help them to deal with domestic violence, some of which is directly or indirectly related to their role as workers. They need a union that can lend support to their struggles for child-care facilities and child maintenance ... that will value their ideas and contributions in areas other than administrative work and arranging food for events' (1996: 221–222).

Information politics – the generation and use of credible information to make and justify demands – is woven into the discursive strategies of many of the labour organisations discussed in this section. SEWA, KKP KP and the Alliance have all used research of various kinds to establish the value generated by the activities and contributions of their membership to press their claims, whether it is to obtain municipal endorsement of waste



pickers, state provision of social security to informal workers, or revision of labour force statistics to recognise the 'economic' nature of activities in the informal economy. The MEC in Nicaragua relies on its organisers to keep track of changes in working conditions in the factories in which they work, workers' grievances and management practices, since very little public information exists on these matters. It has also carried out diagnostic studies to generate more concrete and complete data on working conditions, pay scales and benefits within export factories to serve as the basis for proposed legislative reforms, including an initiative to reform the national labour code.

Legal activism plays an important role in the strategies of these organisations. Again, an emphasis on legal training appears to cut across most of the organisations discussed in this section, connecting 'inward' with 'outward' focused strategies. The law is an important resource for marginalised workers, the basis on which they can make their claims for justice. Most countries recognise a range of legal rights for workers but these are seldom enforced in practice. This gap provides leverage for workers to demand implementation but also to demand additional rights. Organisations like Nijera Kori and Samata who work with landless women and men in Bangladesh place a great deal of emphasis on knowledge of the country's constitution and laws for its membership in order to legitimise their struggles for land, housing and basic security. It also seeks to strengthen their ability to use the courts to back their struggles when disputes with powerful employers or landlords cannot be settled through informal means.

The labour organisations working with export garment workers in Bangladesh have lobbied for several years for an increase in the minimum wage. However, the militancy of recent protests has not only led to an upward revision of the minimum wage but also finally the adoption of a new Labour Code, one that has been in committees



since the early 1990s. In addition, the main export employers association has had to set up an arbitration centre because of the success of labour organisations in using the labour courts.

Labour organisations working with marginalised workers have learnt to make skilful use of legal activism and information politics to take their struggles for economic justice into the wider community. They have used stories, pictures, media, the internet and a variety of other means to draw the attention of the general public to the conditions under which they work and to challenge employers and corporations to demonstrate social responsibility. As Chun points out, while trade union-led efforts to secure material gains for organised workers, who appear already privileged to many sections of the public, can be dismissed as narrow and motivated by self-interest, the struggles of some of the more marginalised sections of the workforce have used 'cultural frames' which resonate with public notions of justice and fairness. Their appeal is strengthened by demands that appear to go beyond the interests of the immediate membership: demands for minimum wages, for social security, for safety in the work place and so on.

Finally, women's organisations have sought to expand their associational power in order to compensate for their lack of structural power. We have touched on examples of the alliances, coalitions and campaigns through which these organisations have sought to build networks of solidarity beyond their immediate membership. In an era of intensified globalisation, when the power of capital has been strengthened by its capacity for global mobility, it is not surprising that efforts to build solidarity have taken an increasingly international form. The growing influence of feminist advocacy networks within the international policy arena has played an important role in this. As Bickham Mendez points out:

'In an era of intensified globalisation, when the power of capital has been strengthened by its capacity for global mobility, it is not surprising that efforts to build solidarity have taken an increasingly international form'



The UN and its world summits have been especially significant in creating spaces for trans-national political organising. Preparatory processes for international conferences in Mexico City in 1975, Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995 have reinforced global coalition building among women's organisations. ...National, regional and trans-national networks have intensified and linked women's organisations working on a wider range of issues, facilitating the trans-national circulation of feminist demands, practices and discourses... (2005)

It is also significant that, in 1995, the year of the third UN Conference on Women in Beijing and the year after the UN Social Summit that the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions declared its willingness to go beyond narrow class-based interests in its commitment to 'a world that is not divided by sexism, racism and xenophobia: these are divisions which undermine our capacity to work together for a better future. We will only realise our human potential when we create conditions of freedom and mutual respect that end domination and exploitation' (cited in Waterman 1998: 279). It was around this time that the language of gender mainstreaming was also evident in its statement of goals: 'Ensuring the full integration of women into trade unions and promote gender parity in activities and decision-making at all levels is one of the constitutional aims of the ICFTU'. The Confederation has been become increasingly open to accepting less conventional labour organisations. SEWA was finally admitted as a member in 2006, many years after its affiliation to the confederation had been severed by its expulsion in 1982 from the national textile workers trade union to which it belonged.

SEWA itself has been a driving force in the internationalisation of women workers' organisations,



helping to set up networks like StreetNet, which brings together organisations working with street traders in different parts of the world and HomeNet which brings together organisations working with home-based workers. It was also one of the founding members of WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment Globalising and Organising) an international network of academics, policymakers and activists who seek to collect data, generate information and carry out advocacy on behalf of women workers in informal work.

Some forms of women's work also lend themselves in obvious ways to trans-national activism. The signing of NAFTA, for instance, gave rise to a number of networks of labour and women's organisations in Canada, United States and Mexico (Dominguez 2002). There have also been a number of regional and international migrant workers associations such as Migrante International and the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women.

Yamanaka and Piper (2005) have pointed out that, in the absence of adequate domestic laws to protect migrant workers, activists have sought to promote the rights of migrant workers by deploying the legal arguments and moral standards embodied in international conventions to which their governments have signed up. A number of reports have commented on the significance of CEDAW as a tool to hold governments accountable for the rights of a group of female migrant workers, particularly those working in private households and the informal economy, who fall between the legal systems of home and receiving countries (UNIFEM 2004). Keck and Sikkink (1998) also note what they refer to as the 'boomerang effect': when civil society organisations lack channels to influence their own governments, they may work through like-minded organisations in other countries who activate their own governments or work through international organisations to exert the necessary pressure. In the same vein, the



growing movement to hold international corporations to account for the basic rights of their workers has been able to draw with some success on the core labour standards of the ILO.

There is a recurring suggestion in the literature on the organisational struggles of women workers that women workers organise differently from men. As Best notes, this claim has been made by Rose (1992) in relation to SEWA. Rose suggests that SEWA's philosophy of struggle is an 'especially feminine philosophy which adheres to non-violence, to arbitration and reconciliation, and most importantly, to a quiet fiercely determined resistance to exploitation'. Others have also expressed this claim: Cheng-Kooi (1996) refers to a distinctive 'women's way of organising' (1996: 249) while Hosmer Martens and Mitter cite the view expressed by women trade unionists in the Caribbean that 'women have a different style of trade unionism from men and there is a need to affirm this when organising within the free trade zone' (Hosmer Martens and Mitter 1994: 188).

Certainly, women-led organisations appear to express a preference for negotiation over confrontation, with militant tactics treated as an option of last resort. SEWA eschews the traditional trade union tactics, opting instead for a style of negotiation that does not threaten the livelihoods of workers whose weak bargaining power makes protest difficult. In Nicaragua, the MEC was set up as an explicit rejection of the traditional tools of the labour movement in a system of global production. Dunn (1996) reports that many of the women workers in the export industry in the Caribbean context felt intimidated by the 'confrontational style of traditional, male-dominated unions' which they felt was less effective for dealing with free zone managers: 'A more negotiating style would be more effective in improving wages and working conditions, yet reduce the risk of dismissal' (1996: 222).



'... women-led organisations appear to express a preference for negotiation over confrontation ...'

Mitlin and Patel (2005) provide a revealing account of the strategic change in organisational direction that took place within the NSDF when the Mumbai Alliance was formed. The NSDF had been a predominantly male organisation engaged in agitational politics which brought it into frequent confrontations with the state. Its leadership recognised that their movement had not progressed beyond marches and demonstrations and observed that women, who appeared more willing to be active around their agenda of security of tenure and basic amenities, were more comfortable with the pragmatic approach favoured by SPARC. The Alliance now gives central place to negotiations, consensus building and 'precedent setting' in its strategies for winning security of shelter for slum dwellers. It avoids affiliation to any political parties, working with whoever is in power, but has developed complex affiliations with various levels of state bureaucracy which help it in its work.

If women do indeed have a different way of organising, the explanation may not have to be couched in essentialist terms associating women workers with a 'feminine' form of struggle. It could very plausibly reflect the very factors that make it so much more difficult for women to organise: a learned docility; fewer choices in the labour market and weaker 'exit' options out of any given form of employment; the dispersed nature of their employment; their greater social embeddedness in family and kinship relations and the constraints imposed by their domestic and child care responsibilities. Organisations that are responsive to women workers' needs are often women led, and are likely to be more successful in attracting and retaining women members because they take account of these differences in their objective conditions and subjective worldviews (Hensman 1996).

This is suggested, for instance, by one of the few studies that has explored the reasons why women workers



join organisations. Bellman (2004) explored this question with women maquila workers in Honduras and Nicaragua. She found that 23 per cent had joined a women's organisation compared to 11 per cent who had joined a union while 54 per cent expressed interest in joining a women's organisation if they could compared to 35 per cent who expressed interest in joining a union. While the reasons for their preferences overlapped, and included both the individual benefits and risks associated with membership, the value given to solidarity and preference for collective action, women workers who expressed a preference for women's organisations were more likely to point to experience of sex-specific problems at work and to the importance of female leadership.

It may also be that many aspects of what appear to be women-specific modes of organisation reflect modes of organisation specific to vulnerable workers of either gender. What is common to the examples of women's organisations that we have discussed in this section is the priority that they attach to the livelihood security of their membership. To that extent, they appear to prioritise (to use Silver's terminology) Polanyi-type struggles to 'de-commodify' labour, to protect it from the vagaries of market forces, over Marx-type struggles based on class-based antagonism to the power of capital. Even those organisations that seek to take on more challenging and 'transformative' demands around working women's collective interests have done so on the basis of redistributive strategies which take their need for livelihood security as their starting premise. The avoidance of confrontational strategies where these might compromise jobs, the priority given to demands for livelihood support, social security and the capacity to save as the precondition for taking on the more challenging demands are some of the ways that these organisations have attempted to deal with the vulnerability of their membership.





As paid work across the world becomes increasingly informalised, it is becoming increasingly apparent that new types of organisational strategies that depart from the traditional repertoire of actions associated with the old trade unions are proving more successful in recruiting and retaining workers from the informal economy (Chun 2008). Trade unions are increasingly learning from social movements, of which the women's movement is an example, about repertoires of action which have evolved from the marginalised status of these workers and their lack of structural power. As Gallin argues, trade unions have been most successful in their attempts to organise in the informal economy 'where the traditional labour movement intersects with the broader civil society' (2001: 245).

Conclusion

The aims of this paper have been twofold. The first was to review the literature on paid work and women's empowerment in order to disentangle some of the contradictions, contestations and complexities which characterise the relationship between the two. The second was to identify some of the gaps in our knowledge about the relationship and hence directions for future research. As far as the first objective is concerned, the analysis in the paper has pointed to some of the factors behind conflicting views about the relationship between paid work and women's empowerment. It suggests that these conflicting interpretations are partly related to contextual factors. The cultural meanings and values attached to paid work for women, particularly work outside the confines of the home, vary across cultural contexts and it is likely that the experience and implications associated with such work will vary considerably across these contexts.



Secondly, it is evident that the concept of empowerment itself is used differently by different researchers. Some focus on individual empowerment, others on structural change. Some are concerned almost entirely with the domestic domain; others tend to discount changes within the family and personal life and are focused almost entirely on the work place and the broader public domain. These are not necessarily contradictory conceptualisations: taken together, they provide a more holistic framework within which to explore changes associated with women's work and the possibility that progress on some aspects of gender relations may be accompanied by deterioration on others.

Thirdly, paid work itself is a highly differentiated phenomenon and it is likely that different kinds of paid work will have different impacts on women's lives. It is necessary therefore to have a more disaggregated view of paid work and to ask about the kinds of paid work that are likely to constitute pathways of women's empowerment. Within particular contexts, the factors which appear to influence the impact of paid work on women's voice and influence within the familial context include visibility, the magnitude and the regularity of earnings, the extent to which it can be controlled by women and the extent to which work provides access to new ideas, experiences and relationship, thereby expanding women's horizons and sense of possibilities.

And fourthly, not all forms of paid work, regardless of their impact on women's subjectivities and self worth, offer equal access routes to citizenship. While it is clearly easier for women working outside the home to come together in collective actions for their rights, the dispersed nature of informal work does not lend itself to the development of a collective consciousness of shared exclusion or exploitation.

There are very few evaluations of the extent to which membership of different kinds of organisations promote



this consciousness on the part of working women or translate it into a willingness to mobilise around their needs and interests.

What the paper does point to are the diversity of ways in which organisations have sought to overcome these constraints on women's collective action, the gender politics of voice and representation in the world of work. It highlights both the diversity of forms through which women workers have been mobilised and the repertoires of collective action through which their organisations have sought to compensate for their lack of structural power. As we have seen, this has entailed moving away from the narrow focus on the workplace and purely class issues to a broader agenda which straddles home, community and work place. The greater flexibility of these strategies has allowed organisations to extend their efforts to women workers who are the hardest to reach: home-based workers, domestic workers, migrant workers and workers in the informal economy more generally. One of the key insights emerging from the literature reviewed for this section is that women workers' struggles for recognition of gender difference, its implications for how they organise and for their interpretation of the redistributive agenda, is helping to reconfigure meanings and expressions of citizenship in more inclusive ways.

'... the dispersed nature of informal work does not lend itself to the development of a collective consciousness of shared exclusion or exploitation'

Despite the large and growing literature on paid work and women's empowerment, there are some glaring gaps. For one, there appears to be a great deal of concentration on some aspects of this relationship but not others. There also appears to be a great deal of concentration on some regions but not others. For instance, the literature on women's empowerment in relation to microfinance programmes is out of all proportion to the numbers of women who have access to such programmes. This is likely to reflect donor interest in these programmes as a means of empowering women within a market-based paradigm of



development. At the same time, a great deal of this literature comes from South Asia so that we know far more about their impacts there than elsewhere. There is also a disproportionate focus on women's waged work in export-oriented sectors, particularly in manufacturing but much less about the impacts of the other more widely prevalent forms of wage labour in which women work. This means that a disproportionate amount of this literature comes from a few countries in Asia and Latin America. Finally, there is a disproportionate focus on women's empowerment in the domestic domain and far less attention to the processes by which they become empowered as workers and citizens.

On the basis of the discussion in this paper, we can identify some broad sets of questions that could be explored as part of a future research agenda on women's empowerment. First of all, we need a better sense of what empowerment means from a cross-cultural perspective. Our discussion of the 'geography of gender' reminds us that, despite the spread of market relationships associated with globalisation, the gendered structures of constraint continue to operate very differently in different parts of the world. What women will value about their work and the pace of change they will seek to achieve are also likely to vary considerably. We need a far more nuanced understanding of their worldviews and the meanings attached to empowerment in societies where women are embedded in highly corporate family structures and relationships compared to those where they enjoy a greater degree of relative autonomy. We also need to understand better the extent to which social policies in different countries serve to offset or reinforce the workings of patriarchal culture.

Secondly, we need to move beyond the compartmentalised nature of the literature on collective action in order to better understand the variety of different





'... we cannot take it for granted that women who have challenged power relations within the home will also participate in public action for their rights'

ways in which women mobilise around livelihood issues. What demands are women workers willing to mobilise around, what kinds of resources do they draw on, what strategies do they deploy and what kinds of organisations best serve these processes? What constitutes an enabling environment for this to happen and how do women's struggles for citizenship rights vary between more or less enabling environments? We can evaluate different forms of organisation claiming to represent women workers in terms of the scope they provide for democratic participation and their accountability to their constituencies. We can also evaluate them from the point of view of their demands: the extent to which these respond to the needs and interests of their immediate membership and their potential for bringing about social change. And we can explore the extent to which struggles for economic citizenship open up 'access routes' to other kinds of citizenship.

Third, there is an important research agenda concerning the processes that empower women within the domestic domain and those which enhance their capacity for collective action. The structures of constraint do not operate seamlessly across the public-private divide: we cannot take it for granted that women who have challenged power relations within the home will also participate in public action for their rights nor can we assume that women who are active in collective struggles for social justice have managed to renegotiate power relationships within the home. There are a number of questions we might want to ask in relation to this conundrum. What are the processes of personal transformation through which working women begin to challenge power relations in the domestic domain? What are the processes of personal transformation which give rise to a collective consciousness of gender injustices and active political agency? How does empowerment operate across the public-private divide?



Under what circumstances does women's agency in the public domain allow them to renegotiate relationships in the private domain? Under what circumstances does women's enhanced agency within the home lead to greater agency in the public domain?

Fourth, we might want to address the challenge posed by Batliwala and Dhanraj. How do women workers interact with other workers, both women and men, in the context of unequal religious, caste, racial, migrant and other identities. We have seen how gender identities differentiate the way that working men and women might experience class but we have not touched in any detail on how labour organisations address the intersections of class and gender with other forms of social identity. These social divisions sometimes run very deep. To what extent has it been possible to organise around shared insecurities and exploitative working conditions in order to transcend some of these social divisions so that the 'social limits of what is possible' is extended for all workers in vulnerable forms of work?

Fifth, there seems to be a resounding silence on the more positive roles that men might, and do, play in processes of women's empowerment. Given that most women in much of the world live within patriarchal families and kinship structures, men are likely to be critical to the processes by which women empower themselves and gain recognition as citizens. We have noted some of the more negative instances of men's roles within the home and in the public domain. Yet there is also evidence that the quality of male support within the family may help to explain which women take on public roles and which do not. Sudarshan notes from research from the Indian context that women are more likely to participate in public forums when they have support from their families. Schmukler (1992) cites research from urban Argentina suggesting that women with leadership roles in the public domain have been able to successively renegotiate



household authority to generate more supportive behaviours from their husbands. Fathers, brothers, sons and husbands do not necessarily respond in identical ways to changes in gender roles and relations in the household. Men who were brought up to take more responsibility within the domestic domain are likely to be more supportive of working wives, as are men who are married to feminist women (Gutman 1996). It is also likely to be the presence of responsive men within the labour organisations that will help to explain which kinds of trade unions and labour organisations have learnt the importance of building female leadership. Further research on women's empowerment will need to factor men into the story – both to note the implications of their resistance to change but also to document the factors which transform them into allies in struggles for gender justice.

'... there seems to be a resounding silence on the more positive roles that men might, and do, play in processes of women's empowerment'

Finally, and specifically in relation to the key themes of the RPC, we might want to explore whether and how material pathways to empowerment are connected with struggles for bodily integrity and the politics of voice. Some of these connections have been touched on in this paper. We have seen how livelihood struggles provide the basis for politicising women around collective forms of action. To what extent does it provide a pathway into the formal political sphere? Alternatively, we could explore whether feminist struggles for formal political representation evolve differently when they are driven by the voices of women from different class backgrounds. We have also noted how the politics of recognition can serve to redefine the labour movement's agenda to include issues of sexual harassment in the work place and on the streets, maternity leave and support for child care and in some cases, domestic violence and the gender division of labour at home. What kinds of organisations allow such redefinitions to occur and how do these redefinitions translate into concrete entitlements?

The main message that emerges from this paper is that



while it is difficult to make any sweeping generalisations about the impact of women's access to paid work on their sense of selfhood and identity, on their ability to make meaningful choices in their own lives and to participate in reshaping the societies in which they live, it is evident that the expansion of economic opportunities for women has been a powerful force for change under many different circumstances. As Segiuno's study of successive waves of the World Values Survey shows, it has led to changes in gender norms and stereotypes that confine women to purely domestic roles and to a willingness on the part of women, but also of men, to envisage an expanded range of possibilities for women. What we need to understand better is how these changes can be translated into concrete improvements in the everyday lives of women and their families and into their rights and entitlements as women, as workers and as citizens within the political domain.





Notes

- 1 Of course, multi-tasking may mean that leisure and work may be carried out simultaneously: minding children while watching television. Western literature on time use surveys shows that while hours of leisure are roughly similar between women and men, women's free time is likely to be more fragmented and less likely to be pure free time/time in adult only company (Diane Perrons, personal communication).
- 2 However, it should be pointed out that it is not maternalist politics per se that has dominated European feminism but the need to give value and recognition to women's unpaid care work in order to equalise the terms on which men and women enter paid employment (Diane Perrons, personal communication).
- 3 In her analysis of the 'mobilisation without emancipation' of Nicaraguan women by the Sandinista government, Molyneux (1985) also discusses emancipation in terms that suggest women's citizenship in the broad sense of the word: 'All women have seen some improvements in their legal rights through the enforcement of equal pay and labour laws and through reforms designed to tackle discrimination in the family. Nevertheless...it remains true that relatively little is done to dismantle other mechanisms through which women's subordination per se is reproduced in the economy and in society in general...' (1985: 282).
- 4 The distinction can be illustrated by the example given by Paterson (2005) of a young woman from Baluchistan, one of the most conservative areas in Pakistan and in South Asia more generally who became the first woman from her nomadic



community to be educated and to win a scholarship to study in the United States. As Paterson points out, she might have chosen to use her newly found freedom to opt for life in the United States, to take a well-paid job, date men and marry a man of her choice. Or she might have chosen, as she did, to return to her community to fight for the right of other young girls to get an education. Should only the more worthy choice count as evidence of empowerment?

- 5 Kabeer (1999). A longer revised version is to be found in Kabeer (2001b) and can be downloaded from www.sida.se.
- 6 We might add that there are many other activities which may be classified as unskilled but which provide fulfilment to those carrying them out, independently of monetary remuneration. Bhatt and Jhabvala (forthcoming) discuss the satisfaction that many women gain from their embroidery work, regardless of whether it was paid or not, the satisfaction that comes from creating something of beauty.
- 7 I found, for instance, that women who had entered the garment industries in Bangladesh as a result of the death or abandonment by husbands were far less likely to value their work than those who entered to improve their standard of living or gain some purchasing power of their own.
- 8 In Bangladesh too, where male-dominated decision-making is widespread, shifts in decision-making patterns tend to take the form of increased joint rather than increased female-dominated decision-making. In Tamil Nadu, on the other hand, where there was considerable evidence of joint decision-making, women's access to microcredit was associated with an increase in female dominated decision-making.



- 9 Nevertheless, these demands may challenge other kinds of boundaries as in the case related by Illina Sen (1990) of the vigorous campaign carried out by the contract miners' union (which had mixed male and female membership) in Chhattisgarh, for maternity rights to be granted to women casual labourers.



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