Gendered Exclusion: Domesticity and Dependence in Bengal*

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In Western Europe, industrialization brought far-reaching changes in the family-household system by separating the household from the workplace. Factories, especially, took work away from home and eroded the integrity of the household. The spatial separation between the household and the workplace became the foundation for a conceptual separation between the community and the market. Families were separated from trades, consumption from production, women's activities from men's. These separations, often expressed in the generalized formula of a "private-public" divide, have underscored a thoroughgoing gender division of labour far beyond the original divisions supposed to be rooted in biological reproduction. In industrialized Europe, the working-class household's needs could not be met from the combined economic activities of its members: men, women and children. Rather, the daily bread was to be "won" by individual wage earners and clearly the breadwinners were to be men. In contrast, the home became the site of women's reproductive activities devoid of assignable exchange value. Wives' and daughters' unpaid work was increasingly underwritten by family ideology and was eventually to be covered by the "family wage" paid to husbands and fathers.

In South Asia this type of household arrangement did not take effect among the working classes in the early phase of industrialization and is still not yet widespread. No clear separation of the household and production was effected: the household's own productive functions proved tenacious and in poor households, especially, women combined consumption, wage earning and reproduction, often simultaneously. The notion of a male wage earner as the single source of the household's sustenance – the single male breadwinner – was not a ubiquitous one and the inception of the modern factory system was not critical in this regard. Factory industry was introduced in India in the mid-nineteenth century. Yet the demand for a family wage was not heard until the 1920s and then only at the instigation of British labour reformers and activists. The notion of a "fair wage" based on a family of five to be paid to individual male factory workers became concretized in industrial bargaining and state policies only in the 1940s and 1950s. Even then, the workers of the "organized" sector to whom these arrangements exclusively applied, were a bare 20

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per cent of the total manufacturing employment in 1951.[1] Obviously, a large number of workers earned wages from a wide variety of production and service activities. For many of these workers a broad notion of a male provider grew in significance. Such a notion was already institutionalized in the family – in property and labour arrangements which subordinated women and children.

This paper attempts to trace the increasing importance of the notion of a male provider in Bengal in eastern India from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. In Bengal, and arguably in South Asia, the phenomenon and the ideologies associated with a male provider did not follow from a separation of production from the household. Rather, I will argue, it was a progressive differentiation of men's and women's work which led to a devaluation of women's work and to an ideology of female dependence. The paper is organized in three sections. The first section examines the importance of the family in the deployment of women's labour and its significance in India's capitalist development. Women's access to their traditional sources of independent earnings was reduced by the establishment of mills and factories which in their turn progressively excluded women. The second section focuses on how women were marginalized in industrial work. On the whole, women became dependent on male wages or on family-based economic activities as in the case of small peasant farms. Moreover, as the third section attempts to show, a growing commitment to an ideology of domesticity tended to divest women's activities of economic value and promoted female dependence on male earnings.

WOMEN'S WORK AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

In recent years, researchers have pointed out that South Asian capitalist development, under the aegis of the colonial state, depended particularly on the state's ability to harness the non-capitalist relations of production. The state's long-term revenue and economic policies were premised on the continuation of small peasant agriculture which, in the case of Bengal, helped rather than hindered market penetration.

Small peasant farmers relied upon unpaid family labour. From roughly the 1860s two significant processes transformed the functioning of the rural household: the increase in the unpaid component of women's and children's labour and the decline in its paid component.[2] The imbalance within the household economy was exacerbated – control of capital and

[1] J.N. Sinha, *The Indian Working Force: (Its Growth and Changing Composition)*, Census of India, 1, Monograph 11 (1961).

[2] Sugata Bose, *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital. Rural Bengal Since 1770*, New Cambridge History of India, III-2 (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 66–111.

capital-intensive labour concentrated in the hands of men while women undertook labour-intensive tasks of low status and poor reward.[3]

In the 1890s G.A. Grierson, a British revenue officer, attempted to quantify women's contribution to the household budget. According to his estimates, artisans in Gaya derived 44 per cent of their earnings from "supplementary" activities, of which women contributed at least 30 per cent. Women worked on the family farm, for hire in transplanting seasons and reared cattle.[4] In the household of the agricultural labourer, the "supplemental" income, amounting to 40 per cent of total earnings, derived primarily from women's miscellaneous activities. In small cultivating families, women not only worked on the family farm but provided about 20 per cent of the supplementary income by cattle rearing and grain processing.[5] We do not know how Grierson collected his data, so one cannot assume that his quantitative assessment is absolutely precise. But his figures do indicate the importance of women's labour in the maintenance of the household in Bihar at the close of the nineteenth century.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, another British observer, F.H. Buchanan, had found that though women were paid very poorly for grain processing, their principal sustained work throughout the year, they made up for it by weeding. Among agricultural labourers, women's total earnings exceeded that of men.[6] By the early twentieth century, in Muzaffarpur, more than half the "supplementary" income of the agricultural labourer, crucial in the lean periods of March and October, was provided by women.[7] In Saran, for instance, women predominated in many occupations.[8] Even in Bengal, women were associated with a wide range of non-agrarian activities.[9] An accelerated agrarian crisis after World War I increased the small and marginal cultivator's dependence on women's "supplementary" income.[10]

Even if women contributed almost half the household income, or even more, Grierson accepted the income from male resource (land, craft or

[3] Nirmala Banerjee, "Working Women in Colonial Bengal: Modernization and Marginalization", in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi, 1989), pp. 283–288. Also see Amartya Sen, "Family and Food: Sex Bias in Poverty", in idem, *Resources, Values and Development* (Oxford, 1984).

[4] G.A. Grierson, *Notes on the District of Gaya* (Calcutta, 1893), p. 121.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 112.

[6] F.H. Buchanan, *An Account of the District of Purneah in 1809–10* (Patna, 1928), p. 444.

[7] C.J. Stevenson-Moore, *Report on the Material Condition of Small Agriculturists and Labourers in Gaya* (Calcutta, 1898) [hereafter *Stevenson-Moore Report*], p. 364.

[8] *Bihar and Orissa District Gazetteer* [hereafter *BODG*], Saran (Patna, 1930), pp. 85–86.

[9] In 1901, there were 1.4 million women in agriculture, 462,000 in grain processing and 200,000 in making and selling forest products: *Census of India* (1901), VI, 1, p. 197.

[10] Lord Dufferin, Report Submitted to the Viceroy; P. Nolan, *Report on the Condition of the Lower Classes of Population in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1888) [hereafter *Dufferin Report*], Main Report, pp. 7–9; *Stevenson-Moore Report*, pp. 23–24.

labour) as the "main" earnings. The rest, including women's varied activities, was labelled supplementary. It was not the source or the proportion of the income as much the sex of the earner that provided a consistent basis for this categorization. Women's work, if not their earnings, was marginalized.

Women's work was associated with poor returns, and was casual and intermittent. In Bengal and Bihar a very large number of women traded in fuel.[11] Women collected cowdung and litter, and made cowdung cakes with them and carried them to the market to sell. It was a labour-intensive and poorly rewarded occupation. Thus women collected and sold firewood, grass and fodder, made baskets, ginned cotton, cleaned and sold farm or cottage products. Grierson remarked that women usually made up the household's deficits "by odds and ends, supplemental sources of income, such as cutting of fuel in the *jangal* and the like".[12]

Some skills were widely disseminated and often handed down through generations of women. Spinning, for example, was compatible with domesticity and seclusion, undertaken at home and in intervals from housework. Thus spinning formed the employment of the largest number of women in Bengal. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Buchanan presumed that in Bihar all adult women spun because "all castes are permitted to spin [. . .] and this is an employment suited well to the jealousy of the men [sic]."[13] But, he added, women were suffering from a declining demand for yarn.[14]

Hand-spinning was hard hit by competition from cotton mills and women were able to earn only one *anna* a day. Yet, as A.C. Chatterjee, a government labour surveyor pointed out, hand-spinning would continue so long as "it provided a small income for purdah women and widows who were not prepared to leave their village to enter factories".[15] Despite its declining fortune, cotton spinning and weaving remained in popular memory as a most suitable occupation for women. In 1931, it was "carried on in the household with the help of women".[16] A woman wrote in a popular journal,

> Dependent women are not always welcome [. . .] earlier they would weave or spin [. . .] "*Charka* is my husband and son, *charka* is my grandson, it is due to *charka* that there is an elephant tied to my door" [. . .] whether, as in the old

[11] *Census of India* (1911), VI, 1, p. 549.
[12] Grierson, *Notes on the District of Gaya*, pp. 111–112.
[13] F.H. Buchanan, *An Account of the District of Bhagalpur in 1810–11* (Patna, 1939), pp. 607–611.
[14] Buchanan, *An Account of the Districts of Bihar and Patna, 1811–12* (Patna, 1928), p. 647.
[15] A.C. Chatterjee, "Notes on the Industries of the United Provinces", 1907, quoted in G.M. Broughton, *Labour in Indian Industries* (London, 1924), p. 59.
[16] R.K. Das, "Women Labour in India', *International Labour Review* (October–November 1931), p. 383.

saying, one could actually have an elephant tied to one's door, I do not know. But [spinning] certainly provided a means of earning money within seclusion [. . .][17]

Spinning, however, like other superior crafts for extended markets where women worked in the household unit as helpers, did not always give direct access to markets. Many women spun thread for the male members of the family to weave.[18]

There were some tasks which women generally performed for their own families but occasionally extended for sale in the market. These included animal husbandry, making and selling of dairy products, preparing vegetable oil and producing and selling forest products. Much the largest employment in this category was in grain and food processing. In textile industries men were still three times as numerous as women but in food processing women, chiefly employed as rice pounders, huskers and flour grinders, outnumbered men by six to one. The processing of grain was usually a part of most women's domestic routine, often undertaken also for sale. Thus, "husking and boiling rice [. . .] is done entirely by women".[19] In the early nineteenth century Buchanan noted that all grain processors were women and a few of them were able to purchase, process and retail grain in shops.[20] The *dhenki* was used for cleaning and husking rice which was part of the daily routine of housework, though sometimes women would sell cleaned rice.[21]

Quite frequently, women assisted the men in the household by selling the products of the business. Among the Agraharis in Bihar, "the women are not secluded as among the Agrawalas, but take part in business of their husbands by selling rice, flour".[22] Among the Mallahs, the fishermen and boatmen caste, "their women work in the village and sell fish".[23] In Hooghly, half the fish-sellers were women.[24] Among the Gauras of Cut-

[17] Manorama Ghose, "Banganarir Kaaj" [Bengali women's work], *Mashik Basumati*, 1 (1922), p. 33.

[18] *Report of the Census of the Town and Suburbs of Calcutta* (1881), p. 144. To every 1,000 men, there were 19,737 women spinners but only 207 female cotton weavers, 442 cotton cleaners, pressers, and ginners, 498 yarn and thread sellers, and 624 dyers: *Census of India* (1901), VI, 1, p. 497.

[19] Major Ralph Smyth, *Statistical and Geographical Report of the 24 Pergunnahs District* (Calcutta, 1857), p. 27. The "domestic" industries of rice – pounding and husking and the parching of grain – "naturally fall to the women's lot": to every man in Bengal there were 27 women and in Bihar and Orissa there were 16: *Census of India* (1911), VI, 1, pp. 548–549.

[20] *Ibid.* Also see p. 402.

[21] The decline in household grain processing is traced in Mukul Mukherjee, "Impact of Modernisation of Women's Occupations: A Case Study of Rice Husking Industry in Bengal", in J. Krishnamurty (ed.), *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Survival, Work and the State* (New Delhi, 1989).

[22] *Bengal District Gazetteer* [hereafter *BDG*], Monghyr (Calcutta, 1909), p. 134.

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] *BDG*, Hooghly (1912), p. 176.

tack, the women sold milk and dairy products but they eschewed field labour of all kinds.[25] In Saran, "[Ahir] women, who are very hardworking, add to the family earnings by making and selling cowdung cakes, milk, ghi, and curd".[26] In fact, "it is regarded as a woman's job to dispose of the articles that her husband makes, grows, or catches, such as pots and household utensils, milk, ghee and fish".[27] In some caste-specific artisan (handloom and pottery) and service (laundry and sweeping) occupations, women usually had no independent role but had to work as part of the household team.

A few independent professions were followed by women without reference to their male relatives. But such activities were strictly limited and the largest such occupation for women – midwifery – was devalued by ritual pollution. Only low-caste women could practise as midwives. In most districts of Bihar, midwives were chamar women. In Bengal proper, women from Hari, Muchi, Dom and other castes could practice midwifery.[28]

Among the low castes, men and women often worked together at basket weaving, tea gardens, coalmining, field labour, *jhum* cultivation, etc. While women did not usually work on the cotton loom, they wove jute, which was much heavier work. In Bengal, apart from prostitution and midwifery, women were registered as actually outnumbering men in three occupations. "Two of these are domestic industries to which women are well-suited": silkworm rearing and the making of twine or string.[29]

Many of these traditional occupations declined in the twentieth century. The characteristic features which had made them more accessible to women also made them vulnerable to "modernization". Many of women's crafts were basically for daily use and, therefore, had potentially large markets. Competition had already substantially eroded the textile handloom industry and some other artisan industries. Women, limited by their lack of time, skill and capital, used easily available raw materials and locally made crude implements. Consequently, their productivity was low. With the development of transport these commodities became items in a large network of trade involving capital, information and mobility. Their production was easily and profitably mechanized. Women could not compete with the new machines because of their initial low productivity. Factory-produced goods, such as utensils and clothing, gradually replaced women's hand-made products. In addition, commercialization and the pressure on land curtailed access to forests and commons – to food and

[25] *BODG*, Cuttack (1933).
[26] *BODG*, Saran (1930), p. 45.
[27] *Census of India* (1911), V, 1, p. 549.
[28] The 1901 Census returned some male midwives who were either dependents or, as in Decca, assistants who cut the cord but took no part in the delivery: *Census of India* (1901), V, 1, pp. 478–479.
[29] *Census of India* (1911), V1, pp. 548–549.

fuel. In 1881, women were engaged in a third of the agrarian occupations and in two-fifths of "making and selling" occupations. By 1921–1931, women's share in the latter occupation had been reduced to a little over a quarter. The biggest losses were in food processing, forest products and caste-specific occupations.[30]

Apart from the secular decline in women's non-agrarian occupations their association with domestic work led to a systematic undercounting of women's work.[31] Only visible work by women in fields or markets was taken into account. A curious and arguable understanding of a direct connection between impoverishment and women's visible work underlay official statements. Government officers tended to use the invisibility of women as an index of the prosperity of a region.[32]

The low workforce participation rates of women in eastern and northern Bengal relative to western and central Bengal and Bihar may reflect only the proportion of women who worked outside the home. In 1911, in Bengal proper, the ratio of workers to dependents was 36:64, while in Bihar and Orissa it was 48:52. This ratio was more marked in the case of agriculture: in Bengal, 1:2 and in Bihar and Orissa, 4.7:5.3.[33] Women's participation in agricultural work would thus seem to be the lowest in eastern Bengal. Yet, in Rajshahi, where "women do not work for wages", they helped in cultivation, in weeding crops, husking rice and weaving gunny bags.[34] In contrast, in Bihar districts, or among the poor of western Bengal, women were active in agricultural operations and petty trading.

Lower wages and the perception that their earnings were secondary meant that women often entered the labour market when they had exhausted other alternatives. Sometimes they were pushed into the labour market by the inadequacy or discontinuation of male earnings. Non-economic reasons like widowhood, desertion or barrenness might force women "to go out to work". In Bihar in the early nineteenth century it was difficult to get female domestic servants except widows and old women "who have lost all their kindred".[35] The situation seemed similar

[30] Banerjee, "Working Women in Colonial Bengal", pp. 283–288.

[31] The definition of women's work changed in each Census. The Census of 1881 registered women in the husband's occupation. In 1901 and 1911 "women and children who work at any occupation, of whatever kind, not being merely an amusement or of a *purely domestic character* [were] entered" (emphasis added): *Census of India* (1901), VI, 1, p. 486. In addition, respondents often did not register women's employment. Census figures should be taken as rough guides.

[32] The Magistrate of Tipperah, *General Administration Report for the year 1884*, para 21. Also see Banerjee, "Working Women in Colonial Bengal", p. 289.

[33] In total the female workforce participation rate in Bengal was about two women to seven men, as compared with Bihar and Orissa which had one woman to two men workers: *Census of India* (1911), V, pp. 548–549. For district-wise breakdown see Banerjee, "Working Women in Colonial Bengal", Table 6, p. 289.

[34] Rajshahye Division, pp. 3–4 and Chittagong Division, p. 4, *Dufferin Report*.

[35] Buchanan, *Account of the District of Bhagalpur*.

at the close of the century. Widows and old women without children formed the largest proportion of destitutes in the villages.[36] Such women would have to migrate or hire out their labour.

Married women, especially those with children to support, worked outside the home when male wages were depressed. But they did not work at similar occupations all the year round.[37] They provided labour on family lands during the busy season when wages were higher and the demand for labour was greater. In the lean season, when men could not find work, women would undertake either subsistence activities with low returns or hire out their labour at exceptionally low wages. In twenty-two villages of Muzaffarpur, the supply of labour exceeded its demand by 68 per cent and "only one-third of the female labouring population found work after the male population was satisfied".[38] Women might often enter the labour market when the demand for labour was at its lowest and withdraw when the situation was improving. This not only kept women's bargaining strength in the labour market very low but it also helped maintain women as a flexible supply of labour.

The gender division of labour in agriculture is illuminating. In Bengal, ploughing and sowing were done exclusively by men, while transplantation and weeding were the duties of women. In transplanting, women "are said to be more proficient [. . .] and some women are so proficient, that they will not work for others at daily rates of wages, but will earn much more by taking contracts for definite areas".[39] Such divisions of labour usually appeared in the form of long-established custom. In fact, transplanting was a relatively labour-intensive job and was undertaken when grain prices had risen.[40] In families without stores of grain it was imperative for women to work for hire in this season. Women transplanters were paid either the same rates or less than men depending on the supply of labour. But the rules for such division of labour were not universal. In eastern Bengal, for instance, women were not seen to take part in field work, even in busy seasons.

A CASE OF WOMEN'S EXCLUSION: THE JUTE INDUSTRY IN BENGAL

The decline in women's traditional occupations was symptomatic of a more general agrarian trend. British concern to ensure a steady flow of revenue from the agricultural sector led, in 1793, to the Permanent Settlement in Bengal. The detrimental effects of demographic change, high rev-

[36] Main Report, p. 5, Presidency Division, p. 7 and Burdwan Division, p. 3, *Dufferin Report.*
[37] Report of A.K. Roy, Joint Settlement Officer, p. 6, *Dufferin Report.*
[38] *Stevenson-Moore Report*, p. 364.
[39] *BDG*, Bankura (1908), p. 104.
[40] Noakhally Division, p. 3, *Dufferin Report.*

enue demand and spiralling rent caused repeated crises which, however, were not acute enough to force a very large proportion of poor men, women and children to migrate from the Indian countryside to the cities. Indeed, the relatively small demand for labour generated by private British plantation and industrial capital required no wholesale expropriation of Indian peasantry. In fact, commercialization of agriculture combined with near stagnant production created a more than adequate labour surplus in Bengal's countryside.

Those groups in rural society whose access to capital was limited or non-existent steadily grew more and more impoverished. Their response to poverty was, however, gendered. Though the declining incomes from land, labour and crafts affected women more negatively than men, the need for cash to meet rent and revenue demands propelled men to overseas colonies and to the city to earn a supplementary income. Wives and children were left to work more intensively for subsistence in the rural economy. Only in times of acute distress did families migrate together – including mothers, wives and daughters. Sometimes women, too, came to the city alone, usually to escape familial harassment or destitution in the village. These women were often unable to maintain a link with the village home, unlike most men in the predominantly male urban labour market. The migrant men who retained a "rural connection" devised complex strategies of survival which included resources obtained from both village and city occupations. The typical working-class family was spatially fragmented and was as crucially dependent on the unpaid (or poorly paid) labour of women and children in the rural economy as on men's industrial wages.

Indian factory industry, from its very inception in the mid-nineteenth century, preferred and employed chiefly men. Even the two major textile industries – jute in Calcutta and cotton in Bombay – had about one woman to four men in their workforce. Over time both these industries drastically reduced the number of female workers. Even then, jute was the only factory industry in Bengal to employ a significant proportion of women. Others, such as the metal and printing industries and the railways, did not employ women at all.[41] Bengal was not exceptional in this regard. R.S. Chandavarkar has shown that the same situation existed in Bombay.[42] In the 1930s, C.M. Matheson's investigations into textile centres revealed similar trends. Ahmedabad cotton mills alone employed a relatively large proportion of women.[43] Women played a very minor role in organized "factory" industry, and certainly no "tradition" of women's factory work ever developed in the first century of modern industry's operation.

[41] *Census of India* (1901), VI, p. 83 and (1921), V, 2, pp. 374–376.
[42] R.S. Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (Cambridge, 1994).
[43] C.M. Matheson, *Indian Industries – Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Oxford, 1930).

In the case of the jute industry, a predominantly male labour force had in the first instance developed from the character of local labour supply and was then confirmed by the gendered pattern of long-distance migration. Bengal's first jute mill was established in 1855. By the 1880s, jute had become a thriving industry employing about 30,000 workers. In the early years the industry depended on local labour and migrants from Bengal districts. Almost a fifth of its workers were women. Towards the close of the century, men came from Bihar, the United Provinces and Orissa, thus reducing the proportion of women in the workforce. Bengali men were concentrated at the more skilled and higher paid end of the mills, but women's relatively "unskilled" jobs were progressively taken over by migrant men. Women were reduced to about 12 per cent of the workforce.[44]

Jute mill owners made little attempt to interfere in migration or to recruit women. Indian industrial entrepreneurs have been repeatedly evaluated (and usually found wanting) according to the principles of economic rationality that are presumed universally applicable. Less than adequate attention is given to the specificities of their labour strategies. From the beginning and up to the 1970s, one of the chief features of this strategy was a discernible preference for casual and contract labour. Jute mill managers operated with disorganized factor markets and a volatile international market. They were required to maintain high and steady margins of profit in the face of frequent fluctuations in the prices both of raw jute and jute goods. They were not engaged in a relentless quest for ideal standards of competitive production. They preferred casual and manipulable labour, deployable at will and for such short- or long-term periods as suited them, rather than a "settled" and "efficient" workforce.[45]

The industry did not need "individualized" or "proletarianized" workers. Rather, "single" male migrants, who had a buffer in their "rural tie", were best able to provide the casual labour that industry desired. Men, in particular, were preferred because they had control over migration decisions in the household. Generally speaking, familial ideology determined the organization of work according to gender and age. There was no need to "free" labour from family authority.[46] Instead, male heads of household retained their flexibility in the urban labour market by commanding more intensive work from women for an increasingly lower

[44] *Report on an Enquiry into conditions of Labour in the Jute Mill Industry in India*, S.R. Deshpande (Delhi, 1946).

[45] Sen, "Women Workers in the Bengal Jute Industry"; R.S. Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Indian Capitalism, National Commission on Labour*, Report of the Study Group for Jute (Delhi, 1968).

[46] Samita Sen, "Unsettling the Household: Act VI (of 1901) and the Regulation of Women Migrants in Colonial Bengal", in Shahid Amin and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *"Peripheral" Labour? Studies in the History of Partial Proletarianization*, Supplement 4 of *International Review of Social History* (1996), pp. 135–156.

allocation of resources. Women's cityward migration followed a different pattern. They left their villages when their rural resources were exhausted – either accompanying their displaced families or alone, having been denied access to household resources because of widowhood, barrenness or unchastity. Such women were less prone to pay periodic visits to the village "home". Even if conventional wisdom has exaggerated their abrogation of the "rural tie", there must have been steep hurdles to the deserted or deserting wife's return to the village. Certainly, most women migrants had fewer rural or household resources to draw on by way of insurance. As a result, they were often more "proletarianized" in the conventional sense than men – a disadvantage in the insecure urban labour market.

It was a sudden acceleration of "single" male migration from neighbouring provinces at the turn of the century that began the process of women's marginalization in the jute industry. In this period their employment did not decline in absolute terms. The first significant retrenchment affecting women came in the 1930s. Enormously high war profits had encouraged a rush of investment, and the depression found the industry tremendously over-extended. Mill owners were forced into a sustained reduction of labour deployment.

But their "rationalization" did not affect the workforce uniformly. Mechanization proved more adverse for women. Installation of new machinery enabled a few men to do jobs that had required many women. By long habit, the assumption that women were unable to handle complex machinery had become a conviction. At a time when the economy was shrinking, male-dominated trade unions were happy to encourage this myth. In this, too, the jute industry was not exceptional. In the 1920s women, concentrated in reeling and winding in the Bombay cotton textile industry, were threatened by mass retrenchment. These women were able to unionize and resist mill owners. In the jute industry, however, the effects of the 1930s' crisis and subsequent "rationalizations" did not help to consolidate women's interests.

In the jute industry, despite increasing gender segregation, women were not exclusively departmentalized. No task in the jute industry was considered a female preserve or specifically related to perceived "feminine" skills. Women were neither encouraged to settle as in plantations, nor did they work in male-female units as in coal mines. By the 1920s, however, though there was no work in the mills reserved exclusively for women, some work was designated as men's work, as work women could not do. Women, when employed, were strung across a few of the lower paid jobs. Their "horizontal" segregation sometimes also overlapped with "vertical" segregation. As increasingly fewer women were employed, they were given select jobs across the floor where they worked along with men. Their position, as a result, should have been less vulnerable to specific and systematic threat. However, since the labour-intensive tasks done by

women, such as feeding, receiving and sewing were susceptible to mechanization, their jobs did become more precarious than men's. At the same time, since their interests were not obviously cohesive in the workplace, it was difficult for women to find a common cause against the fractional challenges posed by employers.

The attack on women's jobs increased in renewed "rationalization" in the 1950s. Employers wanted gradually to eliminate women: they could not be employed in night shifts, they had to be paid maternity benefit and provided with crèche facilities. Trade unions, faced with spiralling male unemployment, were once again susceptible to these arguments.[47] Since direct retrenchment was difficult, early retirements and "natural wastage" replaced women with men. Some women could be persuaded or coerced into giving up their jobs to a son.[48] Women workers found it difficult to resist the combined onslaught of the family, the unions and the employers. A survey of the National Jute Mill in the 1970s found 2.6 per cent of women in a workforce of 16,386. Almost half of even these women were casual workers.[49]

The periodic changes and sectoral shifts in women's industrial employment can only be understood in the context of wider perceptions of gender that operate within the labour market. Employers draw on varying characterizations of women to sustain their strategies. This can be seen as of the late nineteenth century, when the state began to legislate on employment conditions to "protect" women and children. Government officials, middle-class philanthropists and trade unions, in their zeal to protect the "family" and ensure "family wages", continually emphasized the "supplementary" nature of women's earnings.[50] When employers were faced with buoyant markets and shortage of labour, they countered these with arguments about the need for women's contribution to the household budget. In the 1920s and 1930s, faced with increasingly expensive "protective" legislation, the need to "rationalize" and cut back on labour, they encouraged these stereotypes. Managers argued that there was no point in increasing women's wages or paying maternity benefit because the money was bound to be handed over to a male "protector".[51]

[47] Arjan de Haan, "Towards a Single Male Earner: The Decline of Child and Female Employment in an Indian Industry', *Economic and Social History in the Netherlands*, 6 (1994), pp. 145–167.

[48] Interviews, Manager, Bally Jute Mill, September 1989; Personnel Manager, Fort Gloster Jute Mill, August-September 1989.

[49] Sisir Mitra, "The Jute Workers: A Micro Profile", Centre for Regional, Ecological and Science Studies in Development Alternatives (Calcutta, 1981).

[50] "[T]he reason advanced in support of [lower wages for women] has been that while owing to the universality of marriage and the joint family system men have to support a large number of dependents, women workers [. . .] have not to support even themselves fully": S.G. Panandikar, *Industrial Labour in India* (Bombay, 1933), p. 187.

[51] Curjel, D.F., Report of Dr Dagmar Curjel on the conditions of Employment of Women Before and After Childbirth, 1923, unpublished, West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta,

The desirability of a male breadwinner was the basis of "family wage" arguments. An article in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* stated, "millions of breadwinners, men, and women and children are sweated and fleeced off their pitiful wages which are reduced almost to a vanishing point [. . .] How can a man burdened with a family maintain himself on Rs. 10 or 12 a month?"[52] R.N. Gilchrist, government labour officer, suggested to the Indian Jute Mills Association (IJMA), "The incentives to women's work should also be lessened, for the women would be well occupied in the home and in the plot". This was offered as one means of reducing the unemployment problem and avoiding payment of unemployment insurance. Gilchrist suggested,

> In respect of both income and expenditure it is the family and not the individual that is important in relation to the standard of living [. . .] It is impossible under the present standards of earnings for the men to be considered the "rice-winner" of the family. The women must go out to work also [. . .] From all parts of India evidence is forthcoming that it was necessity which drove women to work in the mills and mines [. . .][53]

Such existing perceptions of gender influenced employers. These employers also used arguments about women's housework and childcare responsibilities, their physical weakness, their "lack of commitment" to non-familial work and their inability to handle machinery to sustain hierarchies of skills and wages. Thus, employers reinscribed gender hierarchies.

Gender-ghettos became entrenched through personalized and informal recruitment. The role of *sardars* and jobbers in direct recruitment has been repeatedly stressed. While such intermediaries were indeed key players in ensuring labour supply and maintaining labour control, recruitment was usually through myriad social networks based on kin, caste and regional affiliations. This "system" became the norm in large-scale industries at the end of the nineteenth century and remains so even now.[54] For the urban poor, such "ties" played a role in providing access to crucial urban resources: jobs, credit and housing. However, two other significant factors played a role. First, male supervisors' notions of what kind of work was appropriate for women influenced the pattern of their employment. Male values of segregation and male workers' interest in retaining control and use of women's sexuality and labour were written into the hiring practices. Moreover, the supervisors and clerks could extract sexual favours from women in return for access to jobs, which increased the opprobrium of factory work for women and ensured their withdrawal from such jobs

Commerce Department Commerce Branch, April 1923, B77 [hereafter *Curjel Report*], Appendix B, Sl. Nos 7 and 15.

[52] "Politics and Labour", *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 4 April 1928.

[53] R.N. Gilchrist, *Labour and Land* (Calcutta, 1932).

[54] B. Foley, *Report on Labour in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1905); Mitra, "The Jute Workers". For the Bombay case see Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism*.

when higher male earnings allowed them to do so. Second, women rarely had scope for upward mobility: they could neither expect promotion within their own jobs nor shift to other more lucrative jobs.

The better-paid male workers used the informal recruitment system effectively to exclude women from the more prized jobs (such as weaving and spinning in jute and cotton mills). Possibly they feared that the introduction of women would threaten their ability to maintain high wage levels. But why did weavers and spinners not use their "personal" channels to recruit their own mothers, wives, daughters or sisters in well-paid jobs thereby augmenting their household resources? Their "nepotism" was extended to brothers, sons, nephews or fellow villagers rather than to female kin. Obviously, the few who might have desired better incomes for their women relatives were unable to contravene established rules of gender segregation. So, weaving jobs went to male protégés while wives and daughters were given jobs in preparing or finishing. In part, this reflected the preference for male rather than female earners in the family. The better-paid workers were better able to maintain non-earning adult female relatives, and often did so. To have wives living in various modified forms of seclusion and domesticity in the city signalled higher social status, and this prompted better-paid workers to bring their wives to the city. In turn such practices contributed to the clustering of women at the lower rungs of the job ladder. Since their "own women" did not work, the better-paid workers had no obvious interest in promoting women for better jobs.

The employers' arguments about skill, the lower wages they paid to women and their emphasis on domesticity and motherhood enhanced women's marginalization in industry. Employers argued that women married young and they came to work too late for requisite apprenticeship. The demands of housework and childcare hampered women's "career" commitment. Moreover, women had to be apprenticed to men workers, an arrangement not acceptable to either. None of these arguments adequately explains the progressive characterization of women as "unskilled". In jute mills, for instance, the classification of tasks as "unskilled" often bore little relation to the actual amount of training or ability required. Skill definitions were saturated with gender and age perceptions. The work of women and children, usually lumped together, was deemed inferior precisely because it was women and children who did it, rather than because of any intrinsic quality in the work itself. Women and children carried into the workplace their socially subordinate status which served to define the value of their work. Far from being an objective economic fact, calculable from investment or productivity, skill was an ideological category imposed on certain kinds of work by virtue of the social subordination of the workers who undertook them. In turn, the encapsulation of gender and power in the way the notion of "skill" was applied, confirmed, perpetuated and even intensified the marginalization of women's and children's work.

GENDER IDEOLOGIES: THE HOUSEWIFE AND THE MALE PROTECTOR

Employers drew on current gender perceptions shared by the state, the middle classes, male and often even female workers. The gendering of the organized industrial workforce can, therefore, only be appreciated in the context of a wider social phenomenon: the relevance of gender in mediating class identity.

The key to this process was a growing emphasis on marriage. A preference for cheap and malleable labour led employers to recruit young and unmarried women in many areas of Europe, America, China and Japan. South-east Asian development in the 1970s was also heavily dependent on the "feminization" of industrial labour. In India, this strategy has never been of significance. Even in the 1950s, the average age of marriage among the working classes was 7–11 for women.[55] Available single women were widows who constituted about 20 per cent of the female population in Bengal at the turn of the century. But these women were burdened by housework and childcare.[56] Nirmala Banerjee has shown that women's workforce participation peaked after the age of 35 when they were already married and had children.[57]

From the early nineteenth century, a heterogenous range of marriage and cohabitation practices were brought under the scrutiny of the state. Through legislative and institutional means, an attempt was made to impose a singular definition of marriage derived from high-caste Hindu and upper-class Muslim customs. The regulation of marriage was relevant on several counts.

In pre-colonial India, family was the vehicle for the quotidian application of labour where division of labour was based on gender and age, and control over the processes of production was vested in the male head of the family. In colonial India, family continued to play a crucial role in deployment of labour. The informal and casual recruitment practices of industrial employers reinforced the role of family, even in cases where labour was required in greater quantities as in the very large-scale and long-distance migrations to Assam and overseas colonies.[58] But the "pre-capitalist" family could not just be made over to the new needs of colonial capitalism.

It was the supposed immunity of the family from legal regulation that made its labour arrangements more coercive and exploitative. From 1857 the colonial state explicitly abandoned the project of "civilizing" the "pri-

[55] *Social and Economic Status of Women Workers in India* (New Delhi, 1953).
[56] *Report on the Census of the Town and Suburbs of Calcutta* (1881), II, p. 50.
[57] Nirmala Banerjee, "Poverty, Work and Gender in Urban India", Occasional Paper No. 133, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences (Calcutta, May 1992).
[58] M.R. Anderson, "Work Construed: Ideological Origins of Labour Law in British India to 1918", in Peter Robb (ed.), *Dalit Movements and the Meaning of Labour in India* (New Delhi, 1993), pp. 87–120.

vate" domain of Indian family. A deviation from this policy, as in the case of the Age of Consent Bill (1891) raised a storm of controversy. But legislative interventions in the direction of Brahminical orthodoxy were not ruled out and indeed happened relatively quietly. Colonial laws repeatedly interceded to elevate the powers of the male head of the family.[59] The role of the paterfamilias was elevated to new heights. Indeed, through the regulation of inheritance and marriage laws, familial control over women's bodies – their labour and their sexuality – was considerably enhanced. Women's ability to resist coercive extraction of labour was reduced. Women were denied the right to escape unhappy or oppressive marriages by flight, divorce or migration. To this end the state appealed, at convenience, to either the contractual or the sacramental understandings of marriage.[60]

Increasingly, from the nineteenth century, a variety of elite discourses delineated marriage and the containment of women as the crucial marks of status. The organization of marriage, motherhood and domesticity and the way these were defined for women became the key, not only to the reproduction of class identity, but also to the quotidian maintenance of class barriers. The separation of the poor and the middle classes became overlaid with distinctions of high and low culture, moral purity and laxity, order and lawlessness. A specific characterization of gender relations was central to such distinctions. The upper castes (usually also upper and middle classes) upheld the sanctity of lifelong female monogamy and the chaste, modest and secluded demeanour of elite women. The home was marked out as women's only proper domain, homemaking and childrearing their only legitimate concerns.

An idealized femininity became further enmeshed in nationalist discourses. These drew on an amalgam of the Victorian "angel of the hearth" ideology and on existing Brahminical standards of women's chastity, segregation and seclusion. The home was the locus of the nation, children its future citizens. Women were the custodians of these two vital national resources. Not only were they charged with a sacred duty; their only possibility of fulfilment lay in the performance of these duties. This reified notion of domesticity became increasingly crucial to characterizations of women and their work. Domestic tasks, subsumed within definitions of femininity, were stripped of their labour content and denuded of their economic value for the household. The physical and social invisibility of elite women's work further denigrated women's remunerated work. However, the effectiveness of the ideology of domesticity as a mark of status lay not in preventing poor women from working, but in promoting

[59] Bernard S. Cohn, "Law and Colonial State in India", in J. Starr and J.F. Collier (eds), *History and Power in the Study of Law* (Ithaca, 1989).
[60] Sen, "Unsettling the Household".

the claims of middle-class women to the highly valued domain of exclusive housewifery and childcare.

The "domestication" of elite women in the nineteenth century affected women across various sections and classes. Women's labour was co-opted within "family" economic activity whether in agriculture, manufacturing or trade. Their other occupations were intermittent, often paid in kind and with very little exchange value. The products of women's activities were either directly consumed in the household or regarded as secondary contributions to the family's economic activity. All these activities became extended "housework". The wives of men who migrated to the city found even their paid work subordinated to the cash remittances of the men.

Elite women, too, suffered relative devaluation of their contribution to the household. Middle-class women began to lose direct access to resources – especially food – and their new "domestic" activities were dependent on men's cash earnings. They cooked, cleaned, decorated, learned to maintain household accounts, supervised domestic servants and the education of children. But in all these cases, the resources came from men: food and decorative material had to be bought in the market, education and domestic servants had to be paid in cash. In the village and in the city, access to sources of cash was becoming crucial. The men earned the cash in wage, salary, rent or profit. Their women found significant portions of their labour subsumed within domesticity. Consequently, women's productive role was marginalized and their labour devalued.

But the ideal of domesticity strained against reality. Middle-class male reformers advocated women's education in response to colonial criticism of the low status of Indian women. They pleaded their cause on broad liberal humanitarian grounds, but usually found the need to "train" good wives and mothers a better sell.[61] Within a few decades, however, from the end of the nineteenth century, educated women began to aspire towards professional employment as doctors and teachers. The logic of a gender-segregated culture helped. Women doctors and teachers were required for women patients and students. Moreover, in the case of widowed women or those otherwise denied access to familial resources, access to remunerative work was vital. Middle-class women's employment gathered momentum in the 1930s with rising educated male unemployment. Married women joined widows in a range of formal and informal wage earning. The 1950s opened the floodgates. Between 1951 and 1961, women's participation in educational, scientific, medical and health services more than doubled from 200,000 to 459,000.[62] The partition and the influx of

[61] Women's own writings on the subject are analysed in Himani Banerjee, "Fashioning a Self: Educational Proposals for and by Women in Popular Magazines in Colonial Bengal", *Economic and Political Weekly* (October 1991), pp. WS51–62.
[62] Sinha, *The Indian Working Force*, p. 115.

refugees from East to West Bengal helped familiarize the presence of women across a wide variety of professional and service employment.[63]

The ideal, however strained, also proved remarkably adaptable. The economic compulsions behind women's work and the requirements of family survival allowed an expansion of the concept of the *samsar* (typically, household). So long as a woman justified her waged employment in terms of "need of the family" her commitment remained basically directed towards the home and family.[64] An anonymous article in one of the longest running women's Bengali journals articulated the extension of the household into waged work thus:

> if the earning husband falls ill, will women stay crying by their bedside? That day, if necessary, the woman will leave her home to earn money, will stand in the workplace with hundreds and thousands of other men and women. If the husband is weak and the son dead, will the land not be tilled? Will she stand by the door starving with tears in her eyes? [. . .] Today we need women who combine womanliness and *shakti*.[65]

In this way, the concept of *samsar* could be expanded beyond the home. This flexibility strengthened the ideology of domesticity; it became more ubiquitous and almost inescapable. An exceptional economic need, especially that of the family, became the only acceptable justification for women's work across classes and communities. It then became easier to co-opt and appropriate women's waged work within the familial context. As a result, women's ability to wrest any degree of autonomy on the basis of their cash earnings was severely circumscribed. The potential conflict between domesticity and paid employment was resolved to a degree, and the familial control of men over women retained.

Poor women, meanwhile, have to bear the double burden of domestic and paid work. Some women, not surprisingly, prefer to shed a part of their workload. Since domestic work is unavoidable, when they can afford it they choose not to work for wages. For the middle-class observer this is an affirmation of the ideology of domesticity. In a sense they are correct. Working-class women are engaged in ill-paid jobs in poor conditions, most of which are considered demeaning. Since poor (usually also low-caste) women cannot aspire to the "respectable" professions, their aspirations concentrate on domesticity which alone can confer a degree of status to working-class families. Besides most women enjoy little control over their earnings. The majority hand them over to the male "head" of

[63] The image of the working woman became a powerful literary and cinematic device in the 1960s. Satyajit Ray's "Mahanagar" and Ritwik Ghatak's "Meghe Dhaka Tara" are two outstanding examples of the sensitive problematization of this issue.

[64] Mary Higdon Beech, "The Domestic Realm in the Lives of Hindu Women in Calcutta", in Hanna Papanek and Gail Minault (eds), *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia* (Delhi, 1982), p. 131.

[65] Adarsha Ramani, *Bamabodhini Patrika*, 10 (1913), p. 301.

the household. Their wages, more than men's, are swallowed up in the family budget. They are rarely allowed (or even allow themselves) the luxuries of alcohol or tobacco.[66] Thus women prefer to remain confined to the household when male earnings make this possible. The men in the family are equally eager, when earnings permit, to withdraw women from factory work.

The nature of the work available to poor women – its monotony and its physical demands exacerbated by sexual harassment – tends to push them further into the family. Paradoxically, this trend is reinforced by the difference in the earning potential between husband and wife, but also results in furthering this difference by directing women towards even lower paid home-based work.[67] The 1970s survey of a jute mill reveals that an overwhelming majority of women workers were from the lowest castes and 70 per cent of these women workers believe factory work to be unsuited to women. They preferred "home-based self-employment" as in sewing. This response did not vary by level of income.[68]

For all these women, aspirations for a daughter or a daughter-in-law specifically excluded jute mill employment. Rather, marriage to a man who could afford to keep them out of the mills was more desirable. These attitudes were not universal, but women who preferred to continue to work, rather than hand over their jobs to sons on whose wages they thereafter became dependent, often found it impossible to withstand the combined onslaught of the management and the family. It is, then, not particularly surprising that researchers in the field find "the decline of female labour was not seen as something entirely negative".[69]

In the case of "traditional" industries like jute this trend is particularly noticeable because organized trade union politics has led to significant improvement in workers' wages. Male factory workers can now aspire to upward mobility: education for their sons and dowry marriages for their daughters. The withdrawal of wives from factory work is usually the first step in such a progression. But these confirmations of the domestic ideal create more difficulties for the women who do work in factories – and these women are quite often the primary earners in their family, if not virtually heading the household. It is notable that in the 1890s, women workers told a Commission that only "widowed" women and similar "unfortunates" work in jute mills for this was not considered "respectable".[70] Throughout the 1920s and 1930s observers commented on the

[66] Matheson, *Indian Industries*, Appendix II; *Social and Economic Status of Women Workers*, pp. 14–17.

[67] The wife consistently earned less than her husband, but contributed one-third of family income and her job was steadier: Beech, "The Domestic Realm in the Lives of Hindu Women".

[68] Mitra, "The Jute Workers".

[69] De Haan, "Towards a Single Earner", p. 160; *National Commission*, Study Group for Jute.

[70] *Report of the Indian Factory Commission* (Calcutta, 1891).

predominance of "single" women in the factories. These women were "single" not because they lived alone, but because they lived with men "who were not their husbands". The perception that such women were in immoral "temporary" marriages, if not outright "prostitutes" coloured attitudes towards women's work in factories, mills and other urban occupations.[71] The National Jute Mills survey found that more than half the women workers were the sole earners in their family. Usually these women were "single" with children and other dependents to support. Since women's average earnings were lower, it is not surprising that the survey found women-headed households to be poorer on average. But women in these families had a greater say in household decisions and in the allocation of resources. Of the women workers who were not "single", half were "forced" into mill work by the husband's loss of employment. These women were not considered the "head" of their families and were required to hand over their earnings to their husbands. It is not surprising that no women workers considered mill work "suitable" for women and most endorsed the role of the "housewife" as the most desirable for their daughters, even though the price for such desired marriages often crippled poor families.[72] The spiralling of dowry demands among the urban poor was noted by K.P. Chattopadhyay in his comprehensive survey in the 1940s.[73] It is now so obvious as to render "survey" irrelevant. Women interviewed have seen, in their lifetime, the change from "no payment" or brideprice marriages to dowry marriages. These women, who worked in the mill after their marriage, were given a few utensils and a few sarees at their marriages, but they pay cash, jewellery and other consumer items, such as bicycles and watches, to marry off their daughters and granddaughters in the hope that they, at least, will not have the misfortune of having to work in the mills. Basmatia, who bitterly watched her retirement benefit go up in the smoke of the sacramental fire at her granddaughter's marriage, remarked,

> Now you have to give so many things – money, furniture [. . .] Earlier this was not there. At my daughter's wedding I gave five utensils and the money she got as presents from family, nothing else [. . .] At my wedding there was nothing.[74]

The Indian woman worker is usually already a wife and mother when she enters the labour market. She has rarely had even a brief spell in her life cycle when she can aspire towards some autonomy. Even most young middle-class working women find "autonomy" elusive. Paradoxically,

[71] *Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India*, I, V and XI (London, 1931). Margaret Read was a member of this commission. She wrote three books which reflect such perceptions: *Indian Peasant Uprooted* (London, 1931); *From Field to Factory* (London, 1927); *Land and Life of India* (London, 1934).

[72] Mitra, "The Jute Workers".

[73] K.P. Chattopadhyay, *A Socio-Economic Survey of Jute Labour* (Calcutta, 1952).

[74] Interview, Titagarh No. 2 Mill, February 1989.

though women in India are increasingly divided by class and caste, their experiences of these differences remain interdependent. In one sense, the ideologies that underlie their differentiated conditions and shape their diverging experiences are bound in some common hierarchic norms. While in many effective ways, the interrelationship of work and domesticity is being worked out in distinctly different directions for middle-class and working-class women, a pervasive "value" of dependence continues to inhere in definitions of Indian femininity.

CONCLUSION

Women in Bengal were faced with a very different process of industrialization to the one commonly generalized on the basis of European experience. There was no significant separation of production and the household. Factories took men away to the city but left women and children to make a livelihood from the family farm, craft, general labour, foraging and gathering activities. Men's migration enhanced women's involvement in the family's ongoing economic activity. Moreover, industrialization itself was highly enclaved and the majority of Indian workers – men and women – were engaged at a range of informal employment in both rural and urban sectors.

Nevertheless, a gradually pervasive ideology of the male breadwinner emerged in South Asia. Women's economic activities were intermittent, casual and poorly rewarded in comparison with men's. The ownership of capital, assets and tools was vested in men. Migration enhanced already existing wage differentials. Domesticity co-opted large areas of women's work, divesting their work of economic value. Taken together, these factors prompted an implicit and explicit devaluation of women's contribution to the household's maintenance. And this was despite the continuing importance of the family-household economic activity as in the case of the family farm.

Women's contributions were made invisible by the entrenchment of husbands' and fathers' ownership of the labour of their wives and daughters. By extension, South Asian capitalist development became predicated upon familial deployment of labour rather than upon a labour market augmented by young men and women "free" from familial control. Women's family roles included productive and subsistence activities and these took precedence over industrial and plantation capital's demand for cheap female labour. As a result, women did not provide the kind of flexible labour that capitalist employers ideally preferred. Rather, family ideology helped men to acquire greater flexibility through the manipulation of women's and children's labour. Married women – most women entering the labour market were married – "supplemented" male earnings. They entered the labour market on unfavourable terms when a downswing in the economy suspended or reduced men's earnings, they withdrew when

employment conditions improved and men were able to "win the bread". Thus the flexible deployment of women's labour benefited the men in the family. Although at times this also benefited the employer by providing him with cheaper female labour, changes in the nature and content of women's work tended to take place in direct response to the changing needs of the men in the family rather than to employers' demands. On the whole, women operated at a remove from the emerging "modern" sectors and the urban labour market which helped entrench the notion of the male provider.