Towards Integration? Gender and Economic Policy

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Gender and Economic Policy

This final chapter tries to pull together the main themes that have emerged from the various contributions to this book. Overall, the volume can be seen as an exercise in integrating gender analysis and economic policy, focusing on the specific aspects of gender disparities and trade liberalization in South Asia. The formulation of economic policy is usually done in abstraction from the concerns of social policy, and without explicit reference to the socio-cultural characteristics of society. In support of this viewpoint, it is argued that macroeconomic policy has a shorter time horizon than social policy, so that the social context can be assumed to be constant over that period. For example, bringing about macro-economic stabilization in an economy needs quick measures to be implemented over a short period of time. The agenda of those concerned with social policy is necessarily a longer term one, since its implementation usually requires bringing about structural changes in gender and social relations. Consequently, it is argued that while the importance of each should be recognized as also their interdependence, the two sets of policies are best developed independently.

‘Gender’ is a category that finds a place in the economic analysis of feminist economists, but its influence on economic policy-making is weak. The result is very limited empirical information on the interplay between economics and gender, or social concerns more generally. That there is an interdependence between the two is evident both from the observable social impact of economic change, or alternatively the social underpinnings of economic activity. The social impact is manifested in consumption patterns, lifestyles, modes of dress, behavioural norms etc. The influence of social networks on industrial organization and entrepreneurial behaviour is equally well documented. (See for example Grief 1994; Palaskas and Harris-White 1993). Gender roles and relations, like other social and cultural norms, can be expected to respond to economic changes. As Swapna Mukhopadhyay puts it in this volume, there is a ‘static dimension’ and a ‘dynamic dimension’ to the context in which gender bias is to be examined. The static context — class, caste, ethnicity, religion — is generally the domain of sociological enquiry; the dynamic context — changes set in motion by new economic policy regimes — the domain of economists. It is difficult to find a direct correlation between economic reforms and gender relations. It is even more difficult to assess whether new gender roles that are necessitated when women start working outside the home are permanent, in the sense that if the work-imposed demands were to disappear this would not mean a falling back to the original position.
Recent analysts of development have found in the concept of ‘social capital’ a useful way of emphasizing the fact that the pattern of economic growth in any country needs to be internally generated and socially embedded to be sustainable. It has been observed that economic activity tends to build on existing social norms and networks. Those concerned with gender approach the concept of social capital more warily, because clearly patriarchy and the traditional sources of gender bias form part of these norms and networks. But one can still argue that the process of changing these norms requires that we understand them. Traditional structures imposed constraints on women’s behaviour that are completely unacceptable today; in return they guaranteed a measure of security and protection. Modernization, loss of kinship and loss of traditional social supports need to be compensated by new systems of security along with the new dimensions of freedom and autonomy that they bring in their wake. In that sense, ideally we need to pick the best from the old and the new.

Policy that attempts an ‘integration’ of economic and social concerns faces a stumbling block when it comes to methodology. This book has tried to be innovative in this respect. A ‘gender sensitive economic policy’ is at the least, one that is formulated with awareness of differences in gender roles and relations, so that existing inequalities and vulnerabilities are not intensified, and if possible are reduced. The first step is thus to understand the framework of transmission between economic policy and gender roles and relations. From a policy perspective, we need answers to several questions: what are the key indicators of gender inequalities in any given society? Can we track the pattern of change in these different indicators in response to faster economic growth, or to changes in the framework of economic policy? Can these indicators provide some kind of feedback to policy makers? How best can qualitative understanding of gender inequalities inform the formulation of policy?

The opening chapters in this book distinguish between ‘gender’ and its indicators, and present a framework for analysis of gender bias in a changing economic environment.

**Gender Bias and its Measurement**

Swapna Mukhopadhyay presents the specific objective behind the research presented here in the opening chapter. This is to develop a methodology for linking gender and economic policy, by tracking the behaviour of gender differentials in selected indicators over time and linking this behaviour to economic policy change. The first concern that guides the research method used in this book is the importance of interpretation with reference to context. The measurement of gender differentials is now a well-established research area, but such measurements are not always adequately sensitive to the context. Gender inequality is an ambiguous and multi-faceted concept, and its manifestations include cultural, social, legal, political and economic dimensions. The search for a small set of indicators that could chart the movement of gender differences has been pioneered at an international level by such
constructions as the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) (UNDP 1995). However, inadequate attention is often given to the context in which gender differentials are being measured. The interpretation of any indicator calls for good understanding of the cultural context, and for nuanced interpretation. This is particularly so in regard to such concerns as mental stress and violence, but is true also of more conventionally used measures such as work participation. (see for example EPW 1996; Saith and Harris-White 1998; Mukhopadhyay and Sudarshan 1997). Although the focus of the empirical studies presented here has been on quantification and measurement, the analysis of these emphasizes judgement and knowledge of context. A second primary concern of this study has been to expand beyond the set of indicators generally used. These are described here as ‘conventional’ indicators (health, education, employment, and income). Although it is widely accepted that violence against women is a universal phenomenon and an important indicator of unequal gender relations, it has usually been studied in a qualitative manner. It is difficult to open up debate (between qualitative and quantitative gender researchers, or between mainstream economists and gender analysts) unless there is some form of quantification. To this end, the programme of research on which this book is based has attempted the quantification of people’s levels of well being and mental stress. Bringing in these quantitative measures of well being/stress is seen as a way of capturing some dimensions of the intra-household changes that may result from changes in the external economic environment. Finally, the design of the research programme has had to deal with the fact that there is no available model structure that can adequately link gender differentials to macro policy change, even apart from the absence of adequate gender disaggregated data. The approach taken is as follows: Micro studies based on selected samples in the different countries are used to generate a picture of gender roles and relations using an expanded data set, and two macro studies present an analysis using available data.

The paper by Shobhna Sonpar and Ravi Kapoor provides ample grounds for caution in trying to link changes in ‘non-conventional’ indicators to economic reform. At the same time, there is an underlying agreement in their paper with the proposal made in the first chapter, for example the possibility of a link between economic reforms and mental health. Economic reforms that are accompanied by an increasing incidence of poverty among some groups, as well as by increasing inequality can have important consequences for mental health by generating stresses on the one hand and undermining sources of support on the other. Sonpar and Kapoor recommend the use of two measures that have been widely used in survey research. These are the GHQ (General Health Questionnaire) and SUBI (Subjective Well-Being Inventory). These can be used to expand the data set beyond the strictly conventional measures. At the same time, the authors point to the complexity of changing gender norms and the inability of any quantitative measure to be able to capture or understand adequately these dimensions.

These two introductory papers set out the basic framework for the empirical country studies. This framework is an innovative attempt to define measurable
indicators and to attempt an integration of gender and economic analysis. It also allows one to see if conventional economic analysis can throw greater light on gender issues by the use of a broader data set.

South Asian Experience: Some Common Themes

The second section of this book presents six studies that use the framework suggested above to examine the experience of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and of the state of Kerala in India. The last 10-15 years have been a period of reform all over South Asia, although the year in which new economic policies were introduced varies from country to country. A Structural Adjustment Programme was introduced as early as 1977 in Sri Lanka, soon after in Bangladesh, in the mid-eighties in Nepal, the late 1980s in Pakistan and the early nineties in India. The nineties have been a decade of policy belief that trade liberalization and the globalization of production and marketing networks would be able to create an environment for more rapid economic growth. While South Asian countries have experienced positive growth rates over this period, the impact on poverty is less clear. Likewise, the impact on gender inequalities is problematic because there is such a wide variety of experience. In the first phase of the project each country team did a careful scanning of available secondary sources of data for each of the five countries (the conventional indicators). This reveals the trends over the last two decades in labour force participation of men and women, including unemployment and earnings data where available; education; health and demographic behaviour, to the extent that data are available. This statistical overview sets the context for examining the impact of the new economic regime. Since this impact is not expected to be uniform across different groups, each country team has selected in the first phase a group of households in which women are working in EPZs or EOUs (with the exception of Sri Lanka, where six different groups were surveyed). This is justifiable since it is through changing patterns of work that many people would first experience the impact of liberalization: whether positively, through new jobs, or negatively, through the loss of jobs. The household surveys reported here largely focus on groups that have gained from new opportunities. Data on employment and conditions of work as well as a range of variables relating to intra-household matters, including labour use within households; perceived benefits of women’s workforce participation; decision-making and control over resources; family discord and violence and levels of stress have been collected. The household surveys were supplemented by a few case studies, to help in interpreting the findings. These studies are expected to provide some clues on how gender relations have been influenced by liberalization: with the caveat that the findings are not generalizable, and that they are focussed on groups that have gained new employment. Each of the papers presented here is based upon the larger studies done as a part of the project. Certain common themes run through these studies.
**Female labour force participation**

If new jobs are created for women in export-oriented production, it is possible that some women not previously in the labour force may get drawn into it. That is, there may be a net increase in female labour force participation. Macro data confirms such a trend, although the extent of change is small. Nonetheless, the fact that EPZs and export-oriented units have generated a substantial number of jobs for women can be used as an argument that liberalization is good for women by giving them access to income-earning opportunities. Even to the extent that new jobs have been created, one can conclude that this is so only after looking at a range of indicators and trying to assess the levels of well-being that emerge, as the introduction to this book has argued. However, the argument relating to work participation itself needs to be confirmed.

All of the country studies included here suggest that female employment in EPZs or export-oriented production is indeed high. They also show that the quality of this employment is generally poor. There is strong evidence that women’s workloads have substantially gone up and very little evidence of any change in the allocation of household duties and responsibilities between men and women. Although widespread harassment has not been reported (as found by other researchers, see for example Swaminathan, 2002) this may be due to reluctance to speak on the part of the respondent, or it may reflect the situation in the sample selected. Field insights confirm that employers’ ‘preference’ for women has much to do with their docility and inability to protest against discomfort (see also Thorat, 1995). The interesting and somewhat counterintuitive finding that emerges here is that women are positive about their new roles outside the household, despite the additional burdens of work and the poor quality of the employment itself. This cannot be attributed only to the increase in household economic security; women also report feeling positive about new social networks, new experiences and increased self-confidence.

The sample selected in each of the countries is purposive, with each household having at least one woman employed in export-oriented production. In comparison with average female work participation rates in the country as a whole, the participation rates are thus higher in the sample. In addition, it appears that these new export-oriented jobs have gone to women who were previously not working. However, the men employed in these jobs had generally been previously employed elsewhere.

Salma Chaudhuri Zohir in her paper on Bangladesh presents the findings of a survey conducted in the Dacca EPZ among 112 households and 246 members of households. It was found that 84 per cent of the women workers were migrants, and a third of the women who had migrated to the area had come alone: notable because they are from Muslim households, where the level of seclusion imposed on women is generally high. The average size of a household in the EPZ was found to be smaller than among the general population (3.3 as against 5.6), educational levels are higher, and more women than men, 61 per cent as against 49 per cent, were found to be regular earners. Of the regular workers, 98 per cent of women (and 79 per cent of men) were salaried workers. Many women previously not in the labour force were found to be working in the EPZs. In the case of men, however, EPZ jobs had replaced others.
Women seem to have gained more, workwise, than men: new jobs, more regular work, more benefits. In many ways the situation of these households is therefore very different from elsewhere in the country. This has had its effect on household arrangements. It was found that, in general, men and women ate together, and men were willing to share in household chores. As the authors put it, ‘They also washed clothes, provided nobody was around while they were doing so’. And the attitude towards education of children has become gender neutral, that is, the desire to educate boys and girls is similar. Overall, there are both positive and negative impacts of female employment. On the positive side, there is greater employment security for women, higher standing in the family and greater influence over household decision-making. Against this have to be put the negative impacts, which were perceived more strongly by women than by men, and included conflict over domestic chores, neglect of children and a perceived threat to the joint family. In addition the total workload of women has gone up, and they face a reduction in mobility, since apart from going to work and coming home there is neither time nor approval for any other kind of mobility. Moreover, the environment outside the house has not changed in respect of other matters apart from work: women had less access to formal banking than men, were less aware of any trade union activity, and had low participation in decision-making outside the household, in the public/community sphere. Despite the evidence of some change in gender roles within the household, few men wanted to see women’s influence in decision-making increase in public and community matters.

In her paper on India, Swapna Mukhopadhyay cautions that any one study cannot lend itself easily to generalizations, especially in a country as large and as diverse as India. Macro data on the Indian economy show a similar direction of change in men and women’s employment over the last two decades, although rates of change differ. The share of the primary sector has fallen, and that of the tertiary sector has gone up, with some closing of the gap between males and females in urban areas. One notable change is the increase in the incidence of regular employment for women in urban areas. As far as levels of unemployment are concerned, educated women seem to be generally worse off than educated men; wages earned by women are systematically lower than those of men. On the whole, liberalization has created new opportunities for a small group of educated, urban women, with an increase in low paying, low productivity jobs for others: a picture that is broadly confirmed in the other countries too. The systematic decline in the sex ratio in the 0-6 age group in India underlines the persistence of gender bias. The focus of the field surveys was to understand the manner in which an increase in female labour force participation may influence labour use within households. For this, a survey was carried out of 114 households and 272 individuals from these households, drawn from two locations in the states of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. One sample was drawn from workers in an EPZ, the other from workers in EOU. This was done so as to be able to contrast the situation of an EPZ, which is a created environment, with a more ‘normal’ one. The selected households all had at least one woman working in either an export processing zone or an export oriented unit.
nature of the work in the EPZs was such that women had better benefits and greater job security than men (as also seen in the Bangladesh sample). In the EPZ area, the women workers are largely migrants, living in a nuclear family context. This has necessitated some work sharing within the household, with a marginal change in men’s roles within the home, but the net effect is that women’s workloads have substantially gone up. Working outside the home is not accompanied by an increase in women’s control over their earnings. In the second sample, with women working in EOU, the household context is different, since the families here are locally settled agricultural families. Most households have one or more non-working women. As some women go out to work, there has been a redistribution of household work between the women in the household, resulting in some conflicts emerging between women in the family; men seemed largely unaware of these conflicts and certainly had not changed their contributions to household activities. Despite the increased workload, increased conflicts over housework, and harassment at work, women were positive about their work. While men were positive largely because of the increased economic security that resulted from women’s work, women also seemed to value highly the new social networks they gained access to, as well as their increased confidence and experience. Men either did not notice these changes, or did not see their value. It could be argued that this has resulted in sowing the seeds of change, in a ‘changing mindset about women’s agency among women’.

Household surveys were not conducted in Nepal. A review of data suggests that over the last few years, the rate of male migration from the hills to the terai regions, always high, may have gone up even further. This has left women with ever higher work burdens, including all agricultural activities. Despite having to live and work alone, the level of dependency upon males continues to be very high, a result of socio-cultural norms, high gender gaps in health and education, and limited access to earning opportunities. There may be differences in the experience of women from different ethnic groups, but overall, it is reported that the levels of male violence, and depression among women, are both high and increasing. Both trafficking of women and young girls, and commercial sex work, appear to be on the increase. It is possible that in Nepal, as in other South Asian countries, there has been some increase in employment for women in export oriented production, but clearly the scale is so small that an observer of the scene may not remark upon it. On the whole, there is little evidence of changing gender roles and in fact some worsening of the status quo because of high levels of domestic violence.

Rehana Siddiqui, Shahnaz Hamid, Rizwana Siddiqui and Naeem Akhtar, find that there has been some marginal diversification of women’s employment in the post-SAP period. The context in Pakistan is one where the share of women in manufacturing is very low to start with, and women workers are made more vulnerable by their concentration in certain occupations, informal contracts, and a lack of benefits. Gender disparities in education and access to health care are still glaring. For this study, a survey was conducted in three cities, among workers from 31 formal and informal establishments in the textile and garments sector, sports goods, surgical goods and fisheries, in other words, the main exportable products of the
country. Over the period 1987–97, fisheries show a decline in their share in total exports, while the others show an increase. In all, around 298 workers from 250 households have been interviewed. A high concentration of women workers was found in stitching and related activities. Gender biases are also evident in earnings. Even when wage rates are similar, earnings were reported to be differentiated by gender because of differences in the rate of overtime payment. It was found that a much higher proportion of women workers than men reported seeking treatment for ailments from private doctors. The authors suggest that this may be because women do not want to lose more than the minimum number of working days, and are willing to spend more on their treatment by private doctors in the belief that this treatment is superior. Economic hardship was an important explanation behind the incidence of children dropping out from school, with greater reluctance being evident in withdrawing boys from school. A wider range of jobs was acceptable for boys than for girls. The survey found that young women had a low level of control over assets or income, and it was older women within the household who exercised effective control. Men faced fewer controls on their spending. Women’s mobility was restricted to work/schooling; and the only sphere in which they could exercise effective decision-making related to household provision or child care. Employment outside the home has clearly added to household income and led to higher self esteem and an increased role in decision-making within the household, but both men and women were found to be reluctant to see more decision-making power with women.

The paper on Sri Lanka by Swarna Jayaweera has examined the impact of economic policy changes on women’s lives by looking at the experience of those working in the garment and textiles industries. The increased export orientation of industry has been the most visible result of Sri Lankan macro economic reform, and in this scenario garments have been a leading growth sector, while textiles have seen a mixed impact. Both are major employers of women. With garments, for example, 80 per cent of the labour employed in EPZs, and 90 per cent of that in the rural garment factories, consists of women between the ages of 18-30. As a spinoff from these garment factories, there has been an expansion in home based (sewing) work. In addition, large private textile mills have been opened. At the same time, withdrawal of subsidies has led to a collapse of village handloom industries, and the closure of public sector textile centres. The impact even within this one group of garment and textile workers has therefore been fairly heterogeneous. The survey conducted for this study has tried to capture this range of impacts and has not looked exclusively at those areas in which employment has clearly gone up. Garment factories in EPZs as also in rural areas have meant the creation of new work opportunities, mainly for women. However, there is no prospect of upward mobility for women in these factories, while this is not the case for men. New work has also become available to home based women workers, both on a self employed and sub-contracted basis. These new workers in garments are now part of a global market. Garment work was not seen to confer higher social status on workers. However, workers in a privatized textile factory felt that their status in the community had improved. This factory provided more spaces for women, offering access to middle level employment.
Handloom workers have stayed in this low return work, despite the general collapse of the sector, partly because state subsidy allows them to do so, and partly because of a lack of alternative employment. Textile workers retrenched from the public sector have been unable to find alternative work. For the latter two groups, having a reasonable level of education has not helped in finding other employment. Overall, there has been an extension of women’s productive roles for those employed in garments and in the private textile factories, but the quality of employment is poor, including heavy work loads, no job security, and no opportunities for upward mobility. The study also tried to examine the extent to which there has been any change in gender roles, through an in-depth survey of a sub-sample of the households selected above.

On the whole, there is little evidence of any change in gender roles, in for example a sharing of housework, or care of children, resulting in some role conflict. But there is a wide measure of gender equality in access to education and health care, and marital relations are not excessively patriarchal. Most men and women perceived positive changes resulting from women’s work outside the home, including greater economic security, self confidence and higher standing in the family. But at the same time, gender inequality is entrenched in many norms and practices that continue to be widely observed. For example, a majority of the women interviewed had undergone the ‘virginity test’ on marriage, and did not resent this, not even working women. Similarly son preference is present, although the situation of the girl child is probably better than elsewhere in South Asia.

Across South Asia, then, it seems that female work participation is high in export oriented production. In the EPZ areas, where most workers are migrants, there have been greater changes within the household. But women working in EPZs did not always disclose this to their families back in the village, suggesting that the attitudes to women’s work outside the home are still somewhat ambivalent. In the new households that have been created in the vicinity of EPZs, gender roles do appear to have changed somewhat with men making some contribution to household chores. Clearly, this is born out of necessity, and it is not clear that men (or women for that matter) regard the new roles as anything other than context dependent. It is unlikely, given the unchanged perceptions in regard to other matters such as women’s decision-making role that these new roles would survive if the couple were, for instance, to return to the village.

**Levels of well-being and stress**

Women are positive about their new roles as workers outside the household, but are they in fact better off? The households in which women have found work are better off in the sense of having more economic security; is this reflected in higher levels of well-being and lower levels of mental stress?
To answer this difficult and complex question, an attempt has been made by four of the country studies — India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan — to estimate the GHQ and SUBI, briefly mentioned above and discussed in detail in the paper by Shobhna Sonpar and Ravi Kapoor, and to correlate this measure with other characteristics such as levels of income, age, marital status and of course, sex. Levels of stress are found to be higher among women, but this is reportedly a worldwide phenomenon. More intriguingly, all four studies report lower levels of stress among those who are working in comparison to the non-working group.

In other respects, the findings from the four countries are in all cases credible, but not necessarily identical. For example, in India, an increase in age, marriage and education are all associated with higher levels of stress. This could be because of the physical hardships inflicted by age; the expectations and responsibilities that come with marriage; and the difficulty of meeting the expectations generated with education. However, a larger household size reduced stress, perhaps because it makes possible a greater sharing of responsibilities. In Bangladesh, an increase in household size, age, and migration increased stress, while marriage and higher incomes brought it down. Here, it seems that the greater work generated by larger households might be offsetting the work sharing possibilities to increase stress. Migrants probably have higher stress because their situation is more precarious with fewer fallback options. The effect of marriage in reducing stress may be linked to a sense of security, while that of income could be linked to greater coping mechanisms.

In Pakistan, age seemed to reduce stress for women, but increase it for men; an increase in income reduced stress levels more significantly for men than for women. The effect of age is probably linked to the marked increase in autonomy and control within the household that older women have in this culture. The gender difference in the effects of income suggests that economic security for women could be set off by non-economic considerations more than in the case of men. In Sri Lanka, education and marriage reduced stress and increased well-being, while age tended to increase stress and reduce well being.

In abstract terms, one can argue several possible ways in which any of these factors might work. For example, education can be expected to increase coping skills, perhaps increase opportunities and hence contribute to lower stress; on the other hand it could also generate new expectations and an inability to fulfill them might result in higher stress. Similarly larger households generate more work but also a stronger support system. The differences observed across countries therefore probably reflect the particular combinations most evident in that sample. But the fact that being a worker — despite the poor quality of the work, and all the other possible sources of higher stress — is associated with lower stress and higher well-being is important, and more than justifies the attention that is being given to this variable.

The Nepal study did not attempt this kind of analysis, but it has identified depression among women, and violence against women as a special concern, based on other data. It has been suggested that the reasons include low levels of social development as well as very limited economic opportunities for women, both of
which have made women highly dependent on males within a strongly patriarchal society.

Within South Asia, Kerala (and Sri Lanka) are held out as examples of the high levels of gender equality and social development that can be attained even at low levels of economic achievement. The case of Kerala is specially interesting because in many ways it shares a common tradition with other parts of India. More recently, some people have argued that the position of women is not as good as may appear from a review of ‘conventional’ indicators in Kerala, and that in fact women face high levels of male violence, and display other manifestations of mental distress. Moreover domestic violence and dowry deaths have increased even as women’s educational levels have increased. Mridul Eapen and Praveena Kodoth present an analysis of why, and how, the position of women has possibly been on the decline in this high achieving state. They suggest that social development in this area has gone hand in hand with changing social practices that have led to a strengthening of patriarchy and lower status for women. Family practices and structures have changed in such a way that even within the traditionally matrilineal groups women’s access to inherited resources has gone down. The patrifocal or male centred family has been encouraged through legislation and the adoption of practices associated with patriarchal family structures. This has eroded the traditional strengths that women had within a matriarchal tradition, which include less stringent control over sexual choice, an uncontested right to live in the natal home, a more positive attitude towards girls, and lineage through women. At the same time education and employment have not been able to compensate through greater access to independent earnings. This is because the emerging norms of masculinity and femininity direct women towards lower productivity and lower skill occupations. The net effect may have been that women are left with lower control over resources and a weaker position within the household. The high rate of out migration from Kerala to the Gulf countries has led to high remittances, which have been channeled largely into consumption, including large expenditures on dowries. The net effect has been an increasing observance of customs that are linked to the emerging ‘domestic’ and subservient role of women within the home. Overall, the Kerala experience has been that ‘education and employment have not played the transformative role so generally expected of them’. On the contrary, education and employment are being used to mediate new norms of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’, strengthening the notions of a male ‘worker’ and of ‘domestic’ women.

It seems then that we have a somewhat paradoxical situation that women’s increased participation in paid work outside the home has clearly added to the total burden of their responsibilities, and probably contributed to role conflicts within the home and higher levels of stress. And yet, the general levels of stress among those who are working are lower than among those who are not working, and women value their new roles for reasons other than the fact of greater economic security. It can perhaps be hypothesized that while the ‘static context’ shows little sign of change — in fact the case of Kerala suggests a retrograde movement as far as women’s position is concerned — it is still possible
that women’s work may lead over time to a stronger women’s agency. However, these studies also suggest that education has so far played a weak role in any social transformation of gender roles. The link between education and employment also seems to be weak. The fact of being educated may be used, as Swapna Mukhopadhyay suggests, as a screening device in offering employment, and not as a route to any occupational mobility. Although the levels of education among the women workers surveyed were higher than in the general population, this is not generally associated with a higher status in the community. And among those who have been retrenched, as shown by the Sri Lankan study, being educated has not helped in finding new work. The strongest finding about education comes from Kerala, where other forces have proved much stronger in influencing the position and status of women, and neither education nor work has been able to lead to any transformation.

**Intra household matters and the world outside**

This study has been motivated by a desire to see how far women’s work may have affected roles and responsibilities within the home. Women’s work outside the home could be an important conduit for change. The household surveys attempted to document the opinions of respondents regarding women’s decision-making roles. In all the countries, there is little evidence that women’s control over income or assets has increased as a result of their work outside the home. Where this control is high, as in Sri Lanka, it is the result of a more equitable context that is already in existence. Women’s mobility is also restricted, and although there is a high degree of toleration in so far as work timings are concerned, women are expected to and indeed need to be at home when not at work. The reporting of violence is low, but it exists, and a strong sense of the need to conform, to take care lest violence be provoked was evident everywhere. So that, despite the fact that women have placed a high value on the experience, confidence and social networks that come with work, there is little evidence that any observable change has actually occurred in their position or status. Women do participate in decision-making within the home; but should their role in this increase? In Bangladesh, women were found to have more autonomy in daily provisioning, and in respect of jewellery. While two-thirds of the women felt they should have more decision-making power in the community, only a third of the men thought so. Those who were opposed cited women’s lower levels of experience and knowledge, but also felt it would affect men’s dignity. A similar finding comes from Pakistan, with few men being in favour of increased decision-making by women either within or outside the household. It should also be noted that a large proportion of women felt that they were not equipped to have a greater say in decision-making. In India, women felt their role as decision-makers had gone up, although there is little objective evidence of this. In Sri Lanka, a much higher proportion of both men and women were in favour of increased participation by women in the community, than
were in favour of increasing their participation within the home. This could reflect the low participation in community matters, or as Swarna Jayaweera puts it, it could mean that ‘increase in decision-making outside the family was less problematic than an increase within the family’.

There is, on the whole, no evidence that women’s role as decision makers has greatly changed, and in fact given the demands on their time, even if attitudes had changed, active participation in community matters may have been difficult. But this has not happened so far.

The Macro Perspective

The country papers are based on the findings of household surveys and case studies mainly conducted among households in which women have found new work outside the home. It is difficult to generalize from these studies however valuable they are as micro perspectives, given the large size of the region and the heterogeneity of experience of different groups within each country. The third section of the book tries to present a macro perspective as well to examine the tools that are currently available for macro analysis of the gender-differentiated experience of economic reform.

The paper by Manju Senapaty briefly reviews available evidence on the impact of trade liberalization on employment. Her reading of the literature suggests that export oriented manufacturing has benefited women through the creation of jobs, and regular earnings may have increased their influence on household decisions. However, gender wage gaps persist and the quality of employment may be poor. All attempts to link gender and trade face the absence of reliable gender disaggregated data. Detailed data on employment of men and women in production sectors are not available. Using whatever data are available on the manufacturing sector for India, she finds that the female intensity of employment in this sector showed an increase from 30.16 per cent in 1987-88 to 30.33 per cent in 1993-94, which is an extremely small change. Further, in major export sectors in which female intensity has increased, the proportion of employment going to women was small. This makes the evidence of feminization and new work opportunities somewhat less convincing than from the country studies. Data inadequacies are a major reason for this, and must remain an important area for future research efforts. Apart from the absence of gender disaggregated data, the under counting and the relative invisibility of informal and home based workers is a further deficiency in official statistics at present. However, the development of the international trading regime is likely to have a major impact on some important female intensive sectors. For example, textiles and garments, are among the most important export sectors for South Asian countries, with a contribution to total export earnings ranging from 25 per cent in India, to 52 per cent in Sri Lanka, 60 per cent in Pakistan, and over 73 per cent in Bangladesh, in 1998. A review of the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC) and its impact on South Asia suggests that effective market access for developing countries is still low.
Accepting the limitations posed by data, what are the tools that are available for gender sensitive macro analysis? The paper by Anushree Sinha is an attempt to use a computable general equilibrium (CGE) model structure to examine the gendered impact of trade liberalization, using data on India. The disaggregation of data using a simple social accounting matrix framework is a necessary and interesting prelude to such modelling. This confirms the usual observations of women being concentrated in certain sectors, in low status labour categories, and at lower levels of earning than men. It is also seen that in all types of households the share of female unpaid workers is much higher than that of female paid workers, while the reverse is true of men. This brings to the fore the need to include the reproductive and non-market sector in any attempt to understand the allocation and re-allocation of women’s labour in changing economic environments, an area for future research. The preliminary exercises included here suggest that liberalization would bring welfare gains for all, albeit more for men. It is difficult however to read much value into the policy prescriptions of this model, simply because the assumptions are very restrictive and do not allow for simulation of situations closer to reality.

Both these macro economic perspectives recognize the specific nature of the constraints on women and the interaction between housework and work outside the home. But using available data, and existing methodology, clearly constrains the findings. It is simply not possible to introduce the kind of nuanced analysis that emerges from the country papers. Quite simply, there is a large research agenda here.

From Research to Policy

Ultimately, we want not just to understand the world better, but also to change it. In discussions of globalization and its possible adverse impacts, there is a ‘pro’ and an ‘anti’ position. The picture emerging from this book, however, shows up the shades of grey that lie between these positions.

One clear finding of the country studies is the poor quality of employment that has been generated for women. Although this new employment may have brought women into the global market, it is on terms unequal with men and in conditions of work that have not, so far, created any change in their situation within the home or outside it. Those who have found work have been able to contribute to improving the economic situation of the household and reducing the intensity of poverty, but they have not been ‘empowered’.  

It should also be remembered that a large number of people are excluded even from these minimal gains. The studies presented here

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1Economic empowerment has been defined as ‘economic change/material gain plus increased bargaining power and/or structural change which enables women to secure economic gains on an on-going and sustained basis.’ See Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala, p. 11.
have focused on the situation of those households where women have found some work. The Sri Lanka study gives us a little insight into the difficult situation in which those households that have not benefited in this way, find themselves.

In countries in which only a small absolute number of people have been drawn into the global economy, and a large majority are excluded — as seems to be true of South Asia — there can be no assessment of globalization that does not take a careful look at what is happening outside this limited sphere. This is an area for future research. However, South Asians who argue the need to look carefully at what would best serve the interests of the excluded are often accused of ‘localism’ and of an uncritical rejection of an economic policy approach that actually holds out the most potential of maximum gain for the majority of people. From a South Asian perspective, however, it is difficult to understand the tremendous rejection of what is loosely described as ‘localism’ by those who are strong proponents of globalization. For example in our present context, of trying to understand the changes that have taken place and those that have not taken place in women’s lives, there seems to be little gain in focusing exclusively on the ‘dynamic’ context of change, and ignoring the ‘static’ context. The static context, which is the social reality, shapes our experience of economic change and can, as the experience of Kerala shows, result in unexpected outcomes. If concern with the static social reality is a part of localism, it is a crucially important concern.

Limiting ourselves to the question of gender, change in gender relations can be initiated or led ‘from above’, through policy advocacy, legislation, international opinion and conventions, and so on. Or women themselves can demand it, ‘from below’. In South Asia, the former is far more visible. The basic reason has been well put by Shobhna Sonpar and Ravi Kapur in this volume: ‘conflicts of interest may be suppressed not only from the decision-making agenda, but also from the consciousness of the parties involved. Here both the dominant and the subordinate parties subscribe to accounts of social reality that deny that any inequality exists.’

If women’s agency is strengthened, it will increase their bargaining power, and influence the outcome for those issues that are on the decision-making agenda. What, however, of those matters that are suppressed even from consciousness? To what extent do the processes of liberalization and globalization contain the possibility of changing people’s perceptions of social reality, and hence of generating a demand ‘from below’?

In suggesting that increased participation by women may have sown the seeds of change, we are suggesting that liberalization may indeed contain the possibility of changing such perceptions. But the evidence so far is inadequate to suggest that such change has actually occurred up to now. The only situation in which it may have happened to some limited observable extent is those in which women have been drawn into global connections at a high end and therefore enabled to change the manner of their participation in social and economic spheres in substantive ways.

But for the large majority who have gained a global connection at the low end, for home based workers or women in EPZs with no prospect of any job mobility, it is business as usual.
From a policy perspective, the question is: what kinds of interventions could alter the external environment of the household in such a way that an impact is made both on the consciousness of men and women, as well as in their relative bargaining power, such that a movement towards more equitable and mutually supportive gender roles becomes possible.

Most of the papers in this volume have not attempted to formulate clear policy recommendations, with some exceptions. For example, the paper on Pakistan recommends schooling, child care and training as effective tools to empower women. It also recommends the need for shelter and effective legal cover to help women who are victims of gender-based violence. The role of education however, can be uncertain as the study on Kerala shows. The macro studies suggest that available tools are not yet sensitive enough to be used for gender sensitive policy analysis.

But even if no single, clear message is available of the kind ‘do this, and economic reform can be accompanied by greater gender equality’ the research presented here clearly demonstrates the need for economists to incorporate a gender dimension in their analysis. It is true that women’s work may hold the potential for strengthening women’s agency. It is also true that this will not happen unless the quality of the employment improves substantially, and unless responsibilities for household work are more equitably distributed. Indeed, if such changes do not happen soon enough, even the present levels of women’s work participation may become unsustainable. These concerns need to be made central to an assessment of economic performance. It is equally clear that such an assessment cannot be exclusively based on quantifiable indicators, and that it has to be embedded in social reality.

References


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