THE GENDER QUESTION AND DECENT WORK: 
AN ANALYSIS OF APPAREL INDUSTRY 
WORKERS IN CHINA AND INDIA

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Between 2000 and 2006, China and India emerged as the primary exporters of apparels in the world. This period also noted a significant improvement in employment performance, as reflected in the poverty reduction trends. A discourse on globalization led by women's organizations, feminist economists, and civil society, however, pointed two aspects of the process: the increased labour force participation of women, and unequal distribution of employment with women concentrated in low quality, casualized and informal work. Against this backdrop, this paper interprets gender-specific features of labour market, with attention to the apparel industries in China and India. While examining labour market trends and determinants of gender differentials in employment and wages in the informal and formal economies of the apparel sector, we illustrate two major deficits: gender equality and decent work in achieving just an inclusive growth. Our conclusion suggest that the ability of women and men to take advantage of the opportunities depends on their being included on terms of equality and dignity as a crucial part of the economic environment and institutional conditions in global value chains.

I. INTRODUCTION

A large number of studies carried out between 2000 and 2006 noted that China and India have significantly improved their employment performance, and that this is reflected in poverty reduction trends (Tewari, 2006; Hirway, 2006; Unni and Raveendran, 2006; Nathan, Reddy, and Kelkar, 2007; Gittings, 2005; Nagaraj, 2006; Kelkar and Nathan, 2005; SAARC, 2006; Song and Chen, 2006; Evans, Kaplinsky, and Robinson, 2006; Thorat and Fan, 2007). A noticeable growth occurred in the textile and apparel sector throughout Asia, with China emerging as the “No.1 exporter of apparels in the world today” (Tewari, 2006). With limited foreign direct investment (FDI) and few direct links with the major distribution networks until recently, the textile and apparel sector is India’s largest industry, accounting for nearly 20 per cent of industrial output, with direct employment of 35 million workers, and accounting for 12 to 16 per cent of total export earnings. India has a share of just 4 per cent in global exports of apparels, as against China’s 35 per cent (GoI, 2005).

Most studies attribute success in export performance of China and India as being due to their low-cost production and economies of scale (in the case of China). For example, a recent UNCTAD study described apparel factories in China employing thousands under one roof, with wages anywhere between US$ 0.70 and 0.90 an hour (UNCTAD, 2005). India and other countries of South Asia have even lower wages in the apparel sector than China. As noted by the ILO study (2003), hourly wages in China in the apparel industry in 2000 were 28 per cent higher than in India, 50 per cent higher than in Sri Lanka and four times as much as in Bangladesh. Yet, in 2002, China earned US$ 61.69 billion from exports of the apparel industry (Chan, 2005).

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A number of the analysis, however, point out that “corruption and inequality have grown worse, while China roars ahead in the global market” (Gittings, 2005). The vast majority of apparel industry workers are young women, migrants from rural areas, who are “trapped by a resurgence of feudal attitudes” (Gittings, 2005; Chan, 2005). Seeking independence from arranged-marriage pressure and patriarchal oppression, women seek connections to the “modern world” by working in factories. A large number of the older ex-workers (age 35 and above), relatively unskilled were “laid-off” (xiagang) from their jobs “receiving reduced wages or basic living allowance but remaining on the factory books – thus avoiding classification as ‘unemployed’” (Gittings, 2005).

There is official recognition of the seriousness of the problems of migrant workers. In a speech at Harvard University on December 10, 2003, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, articulated the threat that China’s migrant workers might end up in a “miserable plight as described in the novels by Charles Dickens and Theodore Dreiser” and said that China needed to take proper action to deal with the situation. Recently, in his Government Work Report (March 5, 2007), Premier Wen Jiabao, reported, “The Central Government has allocated 23.4 billion Yuan for employment and re-employment. New employment has increased by 11.84 million and 5.05 million were re-employed”.

The women’s movement, feminist scholars, other researchers and numerous civil society organisations in India have expressed deep dissatisfaction over current employment policies, for failing to incorporate women’s concerns or overlooking gender relations of inequality (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh, 2006; Kelkar, 2006; Heintz, 2006). They have pointed out two aspects of the process of globalisation: increased labour force participation, a process described as “the feminisation of labour” and the unequal distribution of employment, with women concentrated in low quality, casualised and informalised work. Furthermore, community perceptions are given weight in participatory assessments, even though these reflect social norms and values that tend to overlook gender inequalities in access to resources, voice and women’s vulnerability to violence and economic risks. Measures like GDI (Gender Development Index) and GEM (Gender Empowerment Measure) also show, on a number of counts, how everywhere in the regions “… women have markedly less chance to lead their lives in dignity and prosperity (Rodenberg, 2004). Nevertheless, these measures only superficially capture regional achievements in gender equality and have been subject to many misinterpretations (Schuler, 2006; Chant, 2006). While measuring gender disparities is often “considered a technical exercise, the decision to measure progress towards gender equality is political, as gender is often seen as a marginalized issue” (Moser, 2007).

Against this backdrop of the contradictions of economic development, this paper attempts to interpret the gender-specific features of labour markets with reference to the apparel industries in China and India. We examine labour market trends and determinants of gender differentials in employment and wages; terms of gendered exclusion and/or inclusion in the informal and formal economies of the apparel sector. We further illustrate the two major deficits: gender equality and decent work in achieving just and inclusive growth. Our conclusion suggests that the ability of women and men to take advantage of opportunities depends on their being included on terms of equality and dignity as a crucial part of the economic environment and institutional conditions in global value chains.

The study is based on analysis of available literature and policy discourse and reports produced by labour organisations and women’s organisations in China and India, like the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF), China Women’s News, the Chinese Working Women’s Network (CWWN), Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), and so on.
II. MACRO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: GENDER ANALYSIS OF GAINS AND CHALLENGES

China and India have achieved a remarkable drop in poverty levels. Their public investments in rural areas have significantly contributed to agricultural growth, improvement in real wages and non-farm employment (Thorat and Fan, 2007; K. Sundaram, 2007). Despite these successes, China and India account for 40 per cent of the world’s poor. Education and well-being (i.e. livelihood, security, and autonomy) of the poor are still not sufficient. The question is: despite government policies for inclusion and equality, why do women constitute the majority in poverty, illiteracy, and exclusion?

In a recent fact sheet for International Women’s Day (March 8, 2007), the ILO Bureau for Gender Equality, reported some global trends in women’s employment: “Today women face higher unemployment rates than 10 years ago. In total 81.8 million women who are willing to work and actively looking for work are without a job. This means that there are 22.7 per cent more unemployed women than 10 years ago” (ILO, 2007). And, “66 per cent of the world’s illiterate people are women” (UNIFEM Statistics on Women and Development, UN Statistics Division, 2007, Geneva).

Some recent researches in China (UNDP, UNIFEM and NDRC, 2003; Song and Zou, 2003; and Song and Giggins, 2003) revealed that the market economy has further marginalised women, largely due to their current disadvantaged socio-economic status and the existing social policy context. In a speech on International Women’s Day (2004), Mo Wenxiu of the ACWF pointed to the following employment trends:

● In the two surveys on Chinese women’s status (1990 and 2000) the employment rate for women has reduced by 12.6 per cent in 2000 compared to 1990. And, in the age group 18-49, it was reduced by 16.2 per cent.

● Women face difficulties in getting re-employed. According to the sample survey conducted by labour departments in 10 cities, the average age for the laid off women workers was 38; those with educational level of junior middle school and below accounted for 34 per cent; elementary level of skills and below accounted for 47 per cent. Among the laid off workers, women were the majority and it was more difficult for them to be re-employed compared with men. Even those employed, most of them were engaged in housekeeping, cleaning and restaurant services, which are low income in the community levels.

● Perception on women’s employment is backward. Enterprises openly declare that they only recruit male candidates. Even in recruiting civil servants, there was overt discrimination against women. Women’s appearance became a condition for employment. In some regions, more outrageously, women’s secondary sex characteristic was listed as a criterion. A study in five universities shows majority of women graduates were rejected politely due to their sex. On average, men get an offer after 2-3 interviews, while women need to go through 8-10 interviews.

● In 2004, in the city and township work units, women accounted for 38.5 per cent of the workforce. However, 74.7 per cent of women were employed in the service sector like hotel/restaurant; while banking, education and health and social welfare accounted for 40 per cent, 31.1 per cent and 2.2 per cent, respectively (Mo Rong, 2004).

● Women’s business undertakings face more difficulty for lack of capital, training and experience of management. Although there was a favourable policy of micro credit which targeted laid-off workers, in many places, additional terms and mortgages were attached so that the micro credit was not able to reach them.
Violation of women’s labour rights especially in informal sectors and migrant workers is rampant. Unregulated labour use, no contract with women workers, illegal use of female child labour, and pressing down women’s wage, unequal wage for work with equal value, lack of safety protection, are common. It has repeatedly happened that women’s body was searched after the work was over. Women workers in shoe and chemicals, and battery factory were often poisoned. According to a survey in 9 different types of factories in east coastal regions, 65 per cent of women workers were exposed to toxic articles and 43 per cent of them felt dizzy and had nausea, and skin problems.

III. MACRO-POLICY FOR GENDER EQUALITY

At the macro-policy level, the Government of China has accepted well the concept of gender equality. There is the constitutional provision for women to enjoy equal rights with men in governance, economic opportunities, and employment and also in social, cultural and familial spheres. The document “Strategies of Chinese Women’ Development (1995-2000), (2001-2010)” have been officially adopted in China’s national plan for economic and social development. In April 2004, the Information Office of the State Council issued a white paper of “China’s Employment Situation and Policies” and stressed the need to ensure equal employment rights for women.

In view of the widespread gender discrimination in a society gripped with patriarchal values, the Approach Paper to the 11th Five Year Plan (2006) has envisaged four major areas of attention for ‘gender balancing’ in India: Violence against women, economic empowerment, women in governance, and women’s health. The Plan proposes to “address the feminisation of agriculture and menial employment. It will seek to provide adequate and need-based training to women to ensure that they can enter all sectors of the economy and that too, on an equal footing with men. Special attention will be paid to the economic empowerment of women from the marginalised and minority groups”.

The reform of the national economic policies since the opening up of China has pushed women to seek self-employment and start business undertakings. The economic restructuring was efficient and growth oriented. The state-owned enterprises intended to improve the efficiency through reducing the employed workers, and women workers are the first to be retrenched (Guo, 2005).

Currently, the employment policies in China promote those who seek jobs in the non-public sector and take up work in informal employment. However, in the informal employment and non-public sectors, where women constitute the majority, labour conditions and workers’ rights do not receive due attention.

Moreover, there are gender-specific patterns in social structure, institutions, and practices that continue to decrease the capabilities and assets of women. A Gender Assessment Report of China (IFAD Report 1640, 2005), noted: “So, although many of the extreme forms of the traditional norms and related practices have been abolished at the macro policy level, the old gender order remains and manifests itself in the micro policies, implementation and practices in the allocation of assets, power, rights, status and opportunities.” The Assessment further observed that the perceptions of women as the secondary, dependent humans and men as the primary, independent “permeate all social institutions, whether government and its policies, market and its functioning, the community and one’s family” (IFAD, Report No. 1640, 2005).

In general, there is a gap and contradiction between the state’s macro policy level and the micro practice level and there is no law to guarantee an effective implementation,” (IFAD, 2006). For example, the labour law provides rest for four days in a month, but in practice migrant workers get one day or no rest for the entire month.
According to the report of the State Council’s Information Office, “China’s Employment Situation and Policy” (ACWF, 2004), about 0.13 billion were ‘floating’ workers from rural areas; rural workers across provinces were 0.1 billion. Women accounted for 30-40 per cent of these migrants. In the coastal and Special Economic Zones (SEZs), migrant women workers accounted for 70 per cent of the labour force in electronic, textiles and apparel industries.

Throughout South Asia, the informal sector workers have grown both in absolute and relative terms to the formal sector workers. In India in 2002, women and men informal workers constituted about 72 and 68.4 per cent of the workforce respectively in the country. High proportion of the informal workers were found in trade, hotels and restaurants, followed by manufacturing (UNIFEM and SEWA Bharat, 2002). It is to be noted that women’s entry into the workforce in South Asia has largely been in the informal economy.

IV. DISCRIMINATION, RETRENCHMENT AND VIOLATION OF LABOUR LAWS

A 2003 survey of 500 retrenched workers pointed out:

- Women’s household responsibilities, like caring work, cleaning, cooking, etc., became the excuse for refusing jobs to women candidates. In many companies in Shanghai and Dalian, pregnancy test is a prerequisite for recruiting women workers and pregnant women are not offered positions.

- It is difficult to access small finance for women’s undertakings. Although the government claims to encourage community employment, there is, however, no systematic planning in this regard. Community employment appeared small scale, sporadic and informal, and there is no provision of welfare, social security and protection for women. Since a great majority of such positions are held by women, their employment is marginalised and informalised.

- The re-employment rate for retrenched workers is low among women. Most of the women workers were retrenched because of the enterprise’s bankruptcy, deficits, or reform. Only 8.4 per cent of them were transferred to a new job; 25.8 per cent started self-employment and 63 per cent remained unemployed.

- Retrenchment and unemployment have caused an increase in family and marriage conflicts. Before the retrenchment, perceived harmonious families accounted for 80.4 per cent of families, and families with conflicts accounted for 12.4 per cent. After retrenchment, however, only 43.2 per cent of them perceived their families as harmonious. Family conflicts are due to reduced income for the household and adverse effects on children’s education. In Fushun City, in Northeast China, heavy industries laid off 40,000 women workers, and of these 18 per cent were divorced (Mo Rong, 2004).

- A study by Pan Suiming, conducted in Guangdong province in 2003, found that out of 158 sex workers interviewed, the first job for 82.5 per cent of them was not sex work and, on average, they searched for jobs 3.3 times before they joined the sex industry. Lower wage, no free time, no safety, poor work conditions and difficulty in findings jobs, were the main reasons for them to enter the sex industry. The sweatshop factory system, with its low wages and heavy workload, pushed women into becoming sex workers.

The “Series Reports on Women’s Labour Rights from Guangdong and Fujian Provinces” (China Women’s News 206) by Ye Haiyan and Wu Junhua, reported that bad working environment became a chronic killer of women workers, as many of them died in the work place after endless and sleepless over-time work. The China Women’s News (4 September 2006) reported violations
of labour rights such as forced over-time work, deliberate no signing of contract, no social security and pension, termination of contract during women’s pregnancy, sexual harassment and lack of safety protection.

The new labour contract law, which will come into effect in January 2008, aims at protecting workers from precarious, short-term employment conditions, has reportedly already had adverse effects. In the law it is stipulated that the employee who has continuously worked for 10 years in a workplace, or has signed two consecutive short-term contracts, the employer is obliged to sign a permanent contract with her/him. However, to avoid any added legal obligation when dismissing a worker after the law is in effect in early 2008, many employers have started to lay-off the workers who have worked for more than or close to 10 years, or signed two continuous short-term contracts. It is likely that one-off contract workers would increase after the new law comes into effect.

V. MIXED PICTURE OF CHANGE TOWARDS EQUALITY

The widening gap between policy and practice did not allow women to overcome the gender differential in wages and their concentration or predominance in informal sector and low-paid jobs. It did create, nevertheless, some space for positive change in terms of drawing the increased attention of the government for the autonomy of women. For example, a much talked-about law in Jilin Province allowed unmarried women to have a child of their own. Likewise, a survey of the ACWF in 2001 concluded that men’s domestic violence against women “was now ‘a significant social problem’ which occurred in 3 out of 10 households and caused the break-up of an average of one hundred thousand families a year” (Gittings, 2005). More important, Chinese women through media and research launched organised efforts at devising strategies to connect the informal/rural migrants/apparel workers with workers’ organisations/trade unions to support their attempts to gain respect as workers with rights and demand implementation of laws. To some extent, as a consequence of these efforts, the derogatory terms used by young men towards women assumed to be sexually available were reported to be on decline” (Gittings, 2005).

As noted elsewhere (Kelkar and Nathan, 2005) there has been a movement of women away from being ‘contributing family workers’ towards both ‘wage and salary workers’ and ‘own account workers’ in most of South Asia, with the exception of India, which only showed a marginal change in these proportions (NSS Rounds 1993-94 and 1999-2000). However, recent Employment-Unemployment data from the 61st Round for 2004-2005, show a sharp rise of regular employment for women in the recent decade of 4.5 per cent a year. K. Sundaram (2007) noted, “By gender, the rise in the share of the self-employed (and the off-setting fall in the share of casual labourers) between 2000 and 2005 is sharper for females than for males. Over the same period, the share of RWS [regular wage salary] workers in female workforce also records a significant rise (from 77 to 90 per 1000) while, for male workers, the rise in the share of RWS workers, while present, is more subdued.” This marked feature of “the growth of regular employment for women is to be weighed against their employment in low-paid jobs, often in subsidiary capacity, in the service sector, either in schools or hospitals or as domestic help in households (Unni, Raveendran, 2007). India has been appreciated for relative implementation of labour laws. But the very implementation of these laws (e.g. the provision of maternity benefits, daycare centres for infants of women workers, separate rest rooms for women employees, nursing breaks) goes against the employment of women in the organised sector. Women in the organised sector are generally employed as temporary, casual, or contract workers. They are usually either young unmarried girls or elderly or single women, all without much domestic responsibilities. A very large number of women in India’s unorganised sector are outside the factory premises in sub-contract units or as home-based workers, “because (1) it reduces the overheads on building infrastructure and
services for workers; (2) it gives employers the freedom of using or not using workers as and when needed; (3) it does not provide scope for scattered workers to unionise and bargain for better terms of employment; and (4) it saves of payment of social security benefits to workers” (Hirway, 2006).

VI. APPAREL INDUSTRY WORKERS

Women constitute the majority of apparel workers in China. In most places they earn less than men, even for equal work as skilled operators. They are often excluded from higher paid jobs, as well as opportunities for training and promotion, because of gender norms long entrenched in societies where women’s work is not valued, and where heads-of-households and public decision-makers have traditionally all been men. These roles carry over the workplace where they have a serious impact on the well being of women workers and their families.

Under the current policy environment, this large group of disadvantaged women is not able to organise themselves to defend their rights. They are helpless when their rights are violated. The Labour Law states that overtime should be restricted to three hours a day, and not more than 36 hours a month. Employers need to seek the consent of the labour union and workers if additional overtime is needed to meet production targets. However, a survey in Guangdong Province shows that 92 per cent of factories in the Pearl Delta Region demand additional overtime. Workers, in order to get higher wages and stable jobs, are forced to work overtime as demanded. Seventy per cent of enterprises demand more than 10 hours per week in overtime work, and some individual factories go up to 28 hours overtime work per week.

Hardly any approval is sought for these extra overtime work arrangements from the labour union or concerned workers. The factory sets up high work requirements for the base wage, and force workers to work overtime to fulfill the requirements. Workers’ overtime work is taken as part of the requirement to earn the given (living) wage, or even designated as “voluntary” overtime or “exercise” time.

Migrant workers are ignored structurally. They do not have household registration in the cities where they work, do not have the right to participate in elections and thus can have no impact on the local government. Further, because of their gendered social position, women are not able to take advantage of government policies on women’s rights and labour laws, including the recently revised law on Protection of Women’s Rights. It was further observed, “women are hesitant to solve the problem of violation of labour rights through the legal process. The reason is that it is costly and time-consuming. The minimum charge for a case of labour dispute for arbitration is Y520 (US$ 67) and the time to go through such an arbitration and appeal would take at least 11 months” (Ye Wenzhen, China Women’s News, 28 February 2006).

In a recent survey of 10 small to medium-sized factories (apparel, electronics, toys, and plastics) in Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (SEZ), it was noted that 70 per cent of the workers were women. A large number of them were in the age of 16 to 22 years called dagongmei (working girls). Usually an apparel factory employs 50 to 200 workers. Although Chinese law stipulated 8 hours of work a day, 40 hours of work per week, with at least one rest day; and a maximum of 36 hours overtime in a month. The factories’ norms were 12-14 hours of work a day; 90-120 hours per week, with no rest day; and over 250 hours of overtime work a month (Chan, 2005).

“Pregnant workers in footwear factories in Guangdong in China have been fired to avoid the payment of benefits” (Ascoly and Finney, 2005). The workers received piece rate payment, an average of Y 400-500, while the legal standard for such piece rate would be Y 610. Most workers lived in the dormitories provided by the factory, but rent, utilities and food bills were deducted from their basic piece-rate wages.
The Chinese Working Women’s Network (CWNN), likewise, reported that apparel workers have no labour contracts, no social insurance, or welfare benefits. There were cases of physical and sexual abuse, heavy penalties, and punishments. “There are no annual holidays. Overnight work is common when orders are pressing. Stress from poverty, long hours and loneliness make the young workers, who lack the support of friends and family vulnerable to illness and accidents…” Although China’s labour legislation is quite good, it goes mostly unimplemented so as not to put off investors. This position is supported by the official trade unions, which do not understand the gendered impacts of globalisation and operate from a nationalistic or protectionist position.

A large-scale apparel factory manager in the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong Province was reported to be maintaining “double book-keeping, fake workers’ time cards, and salary statements,” and would not allow any democratic participation of workers in monitoring codes of conduct (Financial Times, April 21, 2005). All this has resulted in the increased labour strikes and other forms of work stoppage. “The total number of arbitration cases has grown from 12,368 cases in 1993 to 184,116 cases in 2002. The number of collective cases arbitrated (involving more than 30 employees) has also increased, with more than 600,000 employees redressing grievances through the collective labour dispute arbitration system in 2002. Government officials also record an increase in the average number of employees per case …. There are other ways in which Chinese migrant workers assert their rights—using strikes and protests such as blocking traffic, which are increasingly reported by the media” (CWWN, 2005).

VII. THE GENDER FACTOR IN SKILLED AND UNSKILLED WORK

The apparel (or garments) industry in India employs 3.54 million persons (expected to employ 6.8 million by 2007). The industry produces 800 million pieces with a market value of US$28 billion (for detailed discussion see Hirway, 2006; Tewari, 2006). The export of apparel increased from USD30 million in 1970 to USD1 billion and then USD6.6 billion in 2003 (Ministry of Textiles, 2005). Against this rapid growth, some recent studies observed the increasing gender-based disparities in wages and capabilities, with women being pushed to the low-end of the workforce and getting segregated into “low-skilled, low-wage and low-quality employment” (Hirway, 2006). Increasingly, in the new apparel factories, young unmarried women are recruited as temporary workers, who receive no social security. The management perceives them as less capable of skilled work, less mobile and likely to be more absent than men from work because of domestic responsibilities.

What is important to know is that there is a link of the interpretation of ‘skilled’ and ‘unskilled’ work, which has a gender basis. In the first place there is a difference in the traditional skill base, which is carried over into the factory system. Tailors are traditionally men, and it is these men who were recruited as stitchers in the garment factories in and around Delhi. Further, as in Tiruppur knitwear, “Fabrication workers gain the skills that machine ‘tenders’ typically have in industries that are not fully automated, where there is a premium on learning ways of tinkering and adjusting machines to deliver different sorts of qualities. The premium placed on this knack lends to fabrication a reputation as one of the most skilled occupational categories kept completely out of reach for women” (Chari, 2004). But, as the author points out, “It is more likely the consequence of an older sector of all-male, semi-skilled permanent workers retaining their relative privilege as long as possible. Skills are crucial to the language of gendered labour market exclusion” (Chari, 2004), emphasis added.

In the tanning part of the leather industry there is a similar gender-based definition of skill. Skilled workers are those who operate machines, while the semi-skilled are those who use
hand tools. Women are excluded from both of these types of tasks. In the case of skilled workers, the archaic and paternalistic provisions of the Factories Act (1948), which prohibit the employment of women on or near any moving machine, is used to justify the exclusion of women.

In her study of knitwear industry in Tiruppur, Neetha (2002) observed that production of knitwear apparel largely depends on work done at home, with the finishing work usually done in sub-contracted units. Women constitute 70-80 per cent of the workers, working 7 days a week, without any social protection. Undoubtedly, this dispersal of the apparel industry has significantly increased women’s employment and they are now in a better position than the earlier position of wife/mother or daughter, engaged in unvalued, unrecognised work at home. However, by no measure this work is decent work, which allows them any enhanced dignity, opportunity for social dialogue and even an incremental freedom from their gendered existence at home. Such deficits in decent work were noted by Kantor, Rani, and Unni (2006) in their study of informal workers in Surat, Gujarat, i.e. gender disadvantage of piece-rate workers; 1.5 per cent of women employees have any association with a workers’ organisation; and women’s concentration in low-paying jobs. “In fact only 5 per cent of male workers earn less than the minimum value of the minimum wage per day (Rs.48.8) and 23 per cent less than the maximum value.” In the case of both salary and piece-rate women workers, it was seen that “overall 62 per cent of women earn less than the minimum value of the minimum wage, and almost 85 per cent earn less than the maximum value” (Kantor, Rani, and Unni, 2006).

In the emerging EPZ/SEZ apparel parks, there are reports of a general disregard for labour laws. Women are engaged in long hours of work, earn low wages and are subject to repressive conditions in general. The labour department officials seemed to be concerned only about reducing the cost of production by reducing wages and other labour costs. Such an economic growth approach ignores the fact that gender inequality within the home and inequality in the market, feed each other and perpetuates poverty and inefficiency.

The growth rates of capital in the unorganised sector are much lower, and there has been a marked decline in the case of India’s apparel industry. For example, with a very low employment rate, the growth rate of capital in the organised sector was 13 per cent a year during 1989-2000. As against this, the growth rate in the apparel sector (largely unorganised with small-scale units) was just 3.73 per cent during the period, and there was a much higher rate of employment (14.44 per cent a year in 1990s). The share of home-based women workers in the apparel industry rose from 58.9 per cent in 1995 to 93.1 per cent in 2000-01. The period noted a decline in the share of home-based male workers. However, the overall share of home-based workers noted an increase from 48.8 per cent in 1993-94 to 53.7 per cent in 2000-01. Surprisingly enough, despite the growth in employment and also in value-added products, there was a decline in labour productivity by - 0.05 per cent per year (Hirway, 2006).

VIII. GENDER—WAGE DIFFERENTIALS

Based on an analysis of data from China Statistical Yearbook (2002), it was noted that the human capital of women is lower in some occupations and sectors and higher in others, “but in all cases female wages are lower than that of males (Wang and Cai, 2006: 6). Some earlier studies pointed out China’s gender—wage differential on the basis of human capital theory (Gustafsson and Li, 2000; Mason, Rozelle, and Zhang, 2000). That, since women’s skills and educational attainments are significantly lower than men’s, there would be a systematic wage differential between the two genders in the labour market. And, women are most likely to be crowded in low-paid jobs due to their low human skill and low mobility (due to their domestic responsibilities).
A recent analysis of gender—wage differentials data from China Urban Labour Survey (conducted in 2001 in five cities: Fuzhou, Shanghai, Shenyang, Wuhan, and Xian) indicated that men have an advantage over women in all human capital indicators, such as schooling (0.12 years), job experience (0.06 years more other job experience and 3.04 years of more total job experience), membership of the Communist Party (24.98 per cent) and health status (good health status for men 57.4 per cent). But for urban workers there were no disparities between women and men in education and health. In fact, women employees were observed to be 2.85 percentage points higher in training received than their men counterparts (Wang and Cai, 2006).

Using data from a large-scale survey of non-agricultural employment in rural China, a recent research by Liu, Sicular, and Xian noted: “The low non-agricultural employment of rural women could also result from low human capital or from other social-economic factors. We find that even after controlling for other factors, gender is a significant determinant of the probability of non-agricultural employment” (Liu, Sicular, and Xian, 2006). Moreover, the gender gap has increased between the years 1989 and 1997, the years for which the data were available.

What is important to note, however, is that the human capital endowments did not determine the gender—wage differential, largely found in the within sector (intra-sector) wage gap. “Only 6.65 per cent of intra-sectoral wage differentials and 11.01 of inter-sectoral wage gap are caused by disparities in the human capital endowment between men and women” (Wang and Cai, 2006:14). Further, “Overall, 6.95 per cent of the total urban wage differential between females and males can be attributed to differences in individual endowment and the unexplained portion is 93.05 per cent, which may be attributed mainly to discrimination favouring males” (Wang and Cai, 2006).

Based on pre-assumed gender character, “employers simply pay lower wages to women regardless of their performance on the job. Moreover, women employees have fewer opportunities for promotion, irrespective of job satisfaction, which, in turn, means women have no decent work opportunities; they must work longer and harder to make ends meet leading to exhaustion and injuries from stress and overwork, a common problem reported by numerous apparel industry workers.

Based on the analysis of data from Occupational Wage Survey, Labour Bureau, Government of India, Hirway (2006) concluded that the gender—wage differential was highest in the apparel industry (2002-05) followed by silk textiles. That this wage differential is largely due to gender discrimination which encourages women’s engagement in low levels of occupation, like unskilled and semi-skilled work, low-level management work and other related productive work.

The apparel industry earns huge profits from women’s long hours of hard work, but does not proportionately invest their earnings in skill upgradation of the workers. In the context of globalisation, the major concern of the industry is in reducing the cost of production through informalisation of the work of producers. This concern is very myopic in itself, both for productivity and efficiency.

IX. AN UNDERSTANDING OF LABOUR MARKETS: DECENT WORK, EQUALITY AND INCLUSION

At a time when China and India have a growing impact on the global economy, efforts to improve the condition of their workers are important for workers everywhere. Wal-Mart’s recent agreement to recognise workers’ unions in China has received attention worldwide. But Wal-Mart and other corporations, like Google, UPS, Microsoft, Nike, AT&T, and Intel, have acted through the American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai (AmCham) and other industry associations (like US—China Business Council and the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China) to try
to block China’s Draft Labour Contract Law, which would significantly increase workers’ rights and advance their interests (for details see Costello, Smith and Brecher, 2007). These organisations have issued implicit threats that over 2400 foreign companies would leave China if the new legislation is passed.

Improving labour conditions in China and India, through decent work (as conceptualised by the ILO), gender equality (as one of the 8 Millennium Development Goals to be achieved by 2015) and inclusion (as enshrined in numerous macro-economic policies in industrialising and globalising economies) can help improve workers, both women and men, in China and India, and in the rest of the world, to resist a race to the bottom and encourage them to organise to demand human conditions of work on terms of equality and inclusion.

1. Decent Work

Decent work is understood to provide conditions of work with freedom, equality, safety, and human dignity. The paradigm of decent work includes that kind of work which is productive and secure; ensures respect for labour rights; provides an adequate income; offers social protection; and includes social dialogue, union freedom, collective bargaining and participation (ILO, 2007, http://www.ilo.org). With regard to gender inequality in employment, there is a growing international recognition that women form the majority of unpaid, underpaid or discouraged workers. Hence, a policy imperative: while creating the quality of productive employment opportunities, it is crucial that women are not “pushed into a segmented sphere of low-paid, exploitative services in which moral pressure condemns them to long hours and arduous working conditions. How to avoid this, and provide care work that is beneficial for those requiring care and those providing it, is a challenge for social and labour market policy” (ILO, 1999).

As we saw in the preceding analysis of macro-economic employment in China and India, the focus on economic growth tends to deflect attention from the quality of employment and the existence of gender inequalities in the labour market. The result is the increasing masculinisation of labour, market privileges, and asset accumulation. Women’s mounting responsibilities for coping with poverty do not seem to be conferring any leverage in respect of negotiating decent work opportunities from state and market institutions. “It is not enough to create jobs …much of the problem lies in the quality of the employment, and beyond that, its productivity, its remuneration, its role in people’s lives, its role in social integration” (Rodgers, 2006).

2. Gender Equality

The Task Force on Millennium Development Goals (MDG) 3: Education and Gender Equality, proposed the following set of indicators:

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<th>Education</th>
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<td>● Ratio of female to male gross enrolment in primary, secondary, and tertiary education</td>
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<td>● Ratio of female to male completion rate in primary, secondary, and tertiary education</td>
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**Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights**

|● Proportion of contraceptive demand satisfied |
|● Adolescent fertility rate |

**Infrastructure**

|● Hours per day (or year) spent by women and men in fetching water and collecting fuel |
Property Rights
- Land ownership by women, men or jointly held
- Housing title, disaggregated by women, men or jointly held

Employment
- Share of women in employment (wage and self-employment) by type
- Gender gaps in earnings in wage and self-employment

Participation in National Parliaments and Local Government Bodies
- Percentage of seats held by women in national parliament
- Percentage of seats held by women in local government bodies

Violence against Women
- Prevalence of domestic violence


A study carried out in three provinces of China (Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan) revealed that over 75 per cent of the agricultural labour force are women, and the poorer the area the higher percentage of women (quoted in IFAD, No. 1640, 2005). Another study on “The Impact on Women in Agricultural and Industrial Sectors after China’s Accession to WTO” (UNDP and China National Committee for Development and Reform, 2003), explicitly reported on the increasing marginalisation of women’s employment. It states that they are more likely to be laid off and more vulnerable than the male employees in similar conditions. Women employees are increasingly concentrated in labour intensive industries and informal sectors. The occupational level, stability, and welfare security are decreasing. In the sectors of garment and industries, women accounted for 60-70 per cent of employment, while in the capital and technology intensive sectors like transportation equipment manufacturing, women accounted for less than 25 per cent of employment. Even if women are employed in capital/technology intensive sector, they usually do the work in sections with low technological element, lower pay, simple and repetitive and physical labour. Women are rarely seen in managerial and technological stockings. Due to lower education and lack of on-job training, and household work burden, women find it difficult to move up in the career. Once laid off, it is very difficult for them to be re-employed in formal sectors and they have to enter into informal employment without much social security and safety.

3. Inclusion/Social Exclusion

Social exclusion derives from exclusionary relationships based on power and hierarchy, and intersects with other aspect of social disadvantage, such as gender, caste, ethnicity, religious minority status. It is a multidimensional process that prevents individuals or groups from access to institutions of governance, public services like health care and education, and economic resources as well as factors of production. Furthermore, exclusionary relationships are nurtured and maintained through systemic violence and denial of rights and have a causal dimension not only of poverty but also the factor leading to poverty.

Gerry Rodgers (2006) underlines that many decent work deficits can be regarded as labour market exclusion. “Many of the inequalities of the labour market, the process of informalization, the lack of security and voice, the discriminations to which particular groups are subject, can be understood as aspects of social exclusion; and the goal of social inclusion correspondingly requires action within the labour market”.
Exclusion from formal employment may lead to open unemployment or to different forms of informal work and under-employment, denying the dignity of livelihood in numerous cases. Moreover, as labour markets are shaped by global forces, exclusion from skills, capabilities, assets and recognition becomes a critical factor in non-inclusion or inclusion at very adverse terms. It is not surprising; therefore, that 70 to 80 per cent of the workforce in the informal sector are women, employed in low-paid jobs with long working hours.

X. CONCLUSION

Have women workers in the apparel industry advanced towards achieving gender equality and decent work? Is gender discrimination the inevitable consequence of globalisation? Or, things could be changed for a better world?

We look at these questions taking two major sites of production – first, women as wage workers in the apparel industry, and second, women as retrenched ex-workers in the informal economy. In both cases, whether as wage workers or retrenched ex-workers, there is the role of women as income earners, one which is different from their former and traditional status as dependent family workers. There is the increase in dignity that goes along with being a wage earner, often even the major income provider in the family. This is different from women’s work in family agriculture; women’s contribution would have been subsumed in the general household labour and not even acknowledged as productive labour.

With both wage labour and own-account production, women have greater prestige in the family and also have a greater control over how their income is spent, which is what Amartya Sen’s (1990) theory of household bargaining as cooperative conflict would predict. Women are able to direct more of the household income towards their own and their children’s well-being and even control or reduce wasteful consumption, as in the case of alcohol consumption by men among adivasi communities in Andhra Pradesh, India (Kelkar and Nathan, 2007). Kabeer (2001) in her study of women garment workers in Bangladesh and Swaminathan (2005) in a study of women workers around Chennai, India, point to the gains in self-esteem of these women. “There is no doubt that wage employment has improved the self-worth, and self-perception of the workers, married or unmarried, apart from conferring monetary benefits” (Swaminathan, 2005). Likewise, Delia Davin points out about Chinese women entering factory work, “Their wages, although low by international standards, often allow them to acquire savings or increase the resources of their natal families. Most migrants eventually return to their villages…. A period as a migrant usually enables young workers to improve their position within their home society” (Davin, 2004).

The commercialisation of what was formerly domestic production (micro businesses, crafts, etc.) has led to an enhancement in the methods of production. In the first instance, although based on an earlier form of household activity, even if the nature of the labour performed were the same, it is now performed not as a use-value but for its monetary value. Second, production for the market usually means a generalisation of the type of labour. For instance, craft workers and garment makers (organised by SEWA in Rajasthan and Gujarat) now not only reproduce the designs handed down to them by their grandmothers, but learn in specialising and generalising new weaves and designs as they respond to market demands (SEWA, 2000). From repeating by rote what they have learned, there is an enhancement of the capacity to generalise weaving and even innovate designs and thus strategically linking the producers to the market.

Does the development of new forces of production represent an advance in women’s economic work, the mode of self-activity of the producers? This is how one understands the meaning of more developed productive forces as more developed forms of labour. In the shift of weaving from being a household activity of women to being the main source of income, there is a
considerable advance in the forms of labour. From relatively fixed designs, specific to a particular community, women now learn to weave or embroider any design that is given to them, viz. any design demanded in the market. In the process, there is a generalisation of the capacity to weave or embroider. There is even some local development of the capacity to innovate and make new designs.

These are all definite advances in the women’s economic work, the mode of self-activity of the producers. While the older, ancient form of production gave satisfaction from a limited standpoint, the modern seems to give no satisfaction, following as it does the dictates of the market. But there is a higher human content in the labour, even if it appears only for the money it will bring. Something clearly visible in the transformation of decorative embroidery and weaving, from being a subsidiary household activity of women into a commercial art or craft production, is that it has become the main income source of women and their families.

The advances in the mode of labour, income earned, respect and dignity at home, greater control over the disposition of household income, increased well-being of women and their children—these are all the advances associated with the change from women as subordinate household workers to becoming income earners, whether as wage labourers or as own-account producers. Joan Robinson’s statement (1966), albeit in a different context, is apt even here: “The misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all”.

At the same time, this advance should not blind us to the inadequacies in the new forms of women’s incorporation in global chains. The advance is fitful as in the case of China and India. Further, as the late 1990s Asian crisis showed in East and Southeast Asia, there can be reversals of this movement, with market downturns forcing women back into household and domestic roles as they perform the role of shock absorbers to macro-economic downturns (Nathan and Kelkar, 1999). The uncertainties and risks of own-account workers, low wages and sexual harassment for those in the workplace, all associated with the new ways of women’s incorporation in global chains are only aspects of the lack of ‘decent work’.

The violence against women at work is well captured by Swaminathan, “… what one routinely encounters through field level studies is the continued and pervasive exploitation of the labouring poor (men and women) through limitless expansion of the working day, through the practice of forced overwork for which the worker receives no pay, through linking wages to impossible targets such that workers always receive less on the plea that targets have not been met, etc. In their constant struggle to reach these targets, workers force themselves to stay put at their workplaces, to avoid going to toilets and even skip meals,” (Swaminathan, 2005). Similarly, Davin quoting a Chinese worker, “Here you have to hold your urine until they give you the permit to go to the bathroom” (Davin, 2004).

In advancing the struggle of women workers for decent work, some major issues need to be confronted. First is that the gender differentiation of the labour force between a core of men who have somewhat decent work standards and a flexible mass of women workers who do not have these standards, largely proceeds on the basis of skill. Women are kept out of skilled categories or their labour, even though skilled, is classified as unskilled. This skill-based gender differentiation of the labour force needs to be confronted and changed if the conditions of women workers are to change.

Second, conditions of work at the workplace itself. The shift, in Marx’s terms, from exploitation of absolute surplus value (dependent on expanding and intensifying the work day) to relative surplus value (dependent on increasing the productivity of labour) and attendant changes in methods of organising work is what is required in order to achieve decent work.
Third, since women also perform most of the household labour, the enormous increase in women’s work burden with their entry into income-earning, needs to be tackled, if women are not to continue mining their bodies. The provision of sufficient infrastructure, like clean and efficient energy sources that would both reduce time in cooking and the health hazard from cooking, along with moves to bring about a sharing of household work, both together are part of a move to decent work for women.

Gender-based domination is complex. In the case of women, relations of domination have typically been both personal and community-based; joint reproduction in the family and home, without any control over productive resources, has meant that “imagining an entirely separate existence for the women as a subordinated group requires a more radical step than it has for poor peasants, working class or slaves” (Scott, 1990).

As noted above, development policy in macroeconomic analysis has shown some concern in bringing about limited change in formal institutions, while paying much less attention to informal institutions that govern day-to-day life, and working through informal constraints called codes of conduct or norms of behaviour. These form part of the tradition that we call culture, which affects women’s sense of the possible. “For those at the high end of the hierarchy, it provides the means to maintain their high position, whereas for those at the low end, it can limit aspirations, create discrimination and block mobility” (North, 1990). As Bourdieu (2001) argues, culture, therefore is a form of capital which makes it possible for certain individuals and groups (men in this case) to maintain and enhance their social, economic and political power. This type of social order plays an important role in the reproduction/perpetuation of gender inequality.

Gender equality is seen as only a goal, a social desirability to which many people think they should seem to agree. Surely, that is a step forward from non-discrimination. But both China and India still lack a critical mass of people who are willing to launch public action for women’s equality of access to livelihood opportunities: equality in employment/self-employment and control of property and assets and equality of reward or pay in work.

Importantly, the policy making is not the measures of all things needed to change the gender order of the society. Over 120 practitioners and researchers from China, India and other countries of Asia and the Pacific who participated in IFAD-UNIFEM-IDRC sponsored conference on “Development Effectiveness Through Gender Mainstreaming”, in May 2005, explicitly recommended “the need to close the vast gap between the policy rhetoric and social practice” or the lack of policy implementation. The strength of the masculine order of policy making is seen in the fact it dispenses with justification; the vision of male dominance is seen neutral and having no need to explain itself in social discourses aimed at legitimising it, since such discourses are also affected by the present system of social/gender relations where women’s inferiority and marginalisation (such as that of dalits and indigenous peoples) are maintained by domination and violence. Development intervention will therefore be required to close the gap between policy and practice and change the existing gender relations and social exclusion to equality- and dignity-based relations of inclusion.

There is poor conceptualisation of women’s economic roles and inadequate attention to home production, household work and unpaid family labour. Issues of women’s alienation and the stereotypes of men as producers and primary income earners are promoted by many factors such as culture, customary practices, polity, religion, and economy.

A gender-equitable answer lies in working out systems whereby society, industry and government organisations, share the cost of providing the social services required to keep working on a regular basis, like other employees (and not on two tracks—full-time employees on one track, with full promotion and career possibilities, and women employees with full domestic
responsibilities). Cultures do play a major role in interpreting human values. Cultures, however, are not static, not something given for all time. The sources of change are varied, including inter-cultural discussions and communications where information technology has a major role to play. The cultural ceiling that effectively debars women from contributing to the economy needs to be overcome in order to increase the potential of human society.

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