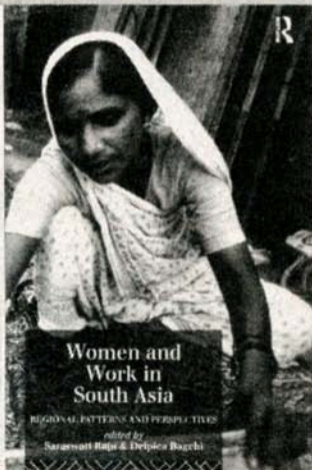


The Wages of Housework



DIGNITY AND DAILY BREAD

Edited by
Sheila Rowbotham
and Swasti Mitter



Women and Work in South Asia

REGIONAL PATTERNS AND PERSPECTIVES

edited by
Saraswati Raju & Deipica Bagchi

Sheila Rowbotham and Swasti Mitter, Eds. Dignity and Daily Bread: New Forms of Economic Organizing Among the Poor Women in the Third World and the First (New York: Routledge, 1994).

Saraswati Raju and Deipica Bagchi, Eds. Women and Work in South Asia: Regional Patterns and Perspectives. (New York: Routledge, 1993).

There is a women's organization in this country called "Wages for Housework." Its purpose is to make a claim on the value of the housework women perform that does not get paid. The so-called sophistication of capitalist economy rests on elimination of a substantive part of "silent" labor. No one has asked for a Nobel Prize in economics for pointing that out. The idea makes perfect sense, but if you mention it in civil

company of any liberal bent, people will sneer and laugh. It one of those absurd demands by feminists.

These two books stake claims which most economists will understand, even though they may not agree with their validity. The books presents, in a knowledgeable and practically useful form, the nature of women's work in the Third World, particularly South Asia and India. When the editors of the Rowbotham-Mitter volume noticed women in Gujarat marching in the streets demanding "dignity and daily bread," it struck a chord in their minds. The fundamental unfairness behind that demand should point to the level and intensity of oppression pervasive in the women's world.

Traditionally, in a world where unions are either shrinking into acceptable forms of compliance or are just plain castrated, women, especially in the Third World, were considered safe bets for trouble-free and cheap labor. In some areas like textile manufacture, agriculture and cottage industry, women's labor was simply taken for granted. When rapid industrialization arrived, women's working conditions, wages and workplace treatment further deteriorated. Machines, like men, quickly colonized women to a sphere of undignified work. This phenomenon affected women who served as ancillary support to major industries, such as self-employed women in the textile industry. Their peripheral status contributed to the empowerment of the management in humiliating them. The Rowbotham-Mitter book shows how women are responding to these forms of oppression. The article by Radha Kumar on "Women in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry, 1919-1940," is a good example of how women made the transition to industrialization possible and how their "ghettoization" in a specific form of labor produced strategic resistance. The editors are astute enough to provide a global map of this phenomenon, including Britain, Tanzania, Mexico, Malaysia and Philippines.

The volume by Raju and Bagchi is concerned more with South Asian region and provides quite an extensive methodological and situational variety. Women's work constitutes more than a quarter of labor for force in most South Asian countries. In India, that women make up 29% of the total labor force. Since women participate in official work (household and child-rearing work is not accounted for in these surveys) mostly in rural areas, their participation is greater in rural areas than in urban India. In some cases, the editors say, the idea that women's work is secondary and insignificant and that men are the main breadwinners in the family is challenged by the reality.

Women's work still remains hidden to the official

machinery of collecting statistics and therefore to the pens of policymakers. This book edited by Raju and Bagchi sheds some light on that problem and explains the myriad of problems associated with both the status of women as workers and the actual difficulties inherent in men researchers collecting such data.

The common thread between these two books, beside their common concern with female workforce, is the organization of women as workers for solidarity and collective identity. The book suggests that women's strength as an organized labor groups rests on their connection to and solidarity with social and family groups and their capacity of networking. Quite obviously, women workers tend to be more organized in rural areas than urban enclaves. They use the traditional family support networks as well as the community support built rock solid in traditional social patterns throughout South Asia.

The book is eclectic and pathbreaking in its scholarship. The photo essay by Doreene Johnson on women workers in Nimkhera village in central Madhya Pradesh portrays life that is too familiar to Indians and exposes our own complicity to the "obviousness" of its status. Meens Acharya's essay on household and non-household economies presents the concept of "chakra" in rural women's work. Like the nitrogen cycle in preliminary biology/ecology, the "chakra" shows the eternal recyclability of their work. Women participate in the unique work cycle in villages, beginning with cleaning to production of food that in turn results in the need to clean and produce more. Joyce Aschenbrenner's noteworthy article on women's role in community life and economic organization of a village in a Pakistani-Punjabi village illuminates the tenacity of family structures in the face of forced mobility and industrialization.

Together, the books bring us a new scholarship that is appealing to specialists and semi-specialists. For everyone else, the insights provided here give some practical relevance, that is, we should pay more attention to how the "other half works."

— Shekhar
Deshpande

