

# Political Economy of Women and Work

Review of Development and Change

27(2) 279–283, 2022

© 2022 Madras Institute of  
Development Studies

Reprints and permissions:

[in.sagepub.com/journals-permissions-india](http://in.sagepub.com/journals-permissions-india)

DOI: 10.1177/09722661221124380

[journals.sagepub.com/home/rdc](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/rdc)

**Farah Naz and Dieter Bögenhold, *Unheard Voices: Women, Work and Political Economy of Global Production*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, xv+197 pp., €93.08. ISBN: 9783030543631 (eBook).**

**Ishita Mehrotra, *Political Economy of Caste, Class and Gender: A Study of Rural Dalit Labourers in India*. Routledge, 2022, 224 pp., £33.29. ISBN: 9780429321894 (eBook).**

Labour markets do not exist in a vacuum. The market as a key economic institution cannot be isolated from the structures and other institutions governing civil society. The segmentation and graded inequalities characterising contemporary Indian labour markets reflect the larger social realities wherein a large section of historically oppressed castes continues to languish at the bottom of the social ladder. Upward mobility is restricted, entry barriers abound and equal access is denied. Humiliation, exclusion and discrimination are a quotidian reality of their worlds of work.

Among the worst disadvantaged in this scheme of things are dalit women, who are vulnerable to various forms of violence owing to their caste and gender intersectionalities. Labour markets have never been fair to them resulting in their concentration in the least paying and most exploitative forms of labour, whether in agricultural fields, factories or homes of upper-middle-class and high-class employers. Whether as frontline workers, sanitation workers, domestic workers or unpaid family workers, dalit women never get their due. Mehrotra's study on dalit agricultural workers in eastern Uttar Pradesh as well as Deshpande's seminal work on economic discrimination written a decade ago narrate a similar story of dalit women workers trapped in poverty, deprivation, discrimination and exclusion owing to their subordinate caste and gender status.

While Mehrotra discusses empirical evidence from India, Naz and Bögenhold's case study revolves around home-based women workers in Pakistan contributing towards the global football industry. The latter sheds light on the plight of informal women workers who are a part of global supply chains under neoliberal regimes. Parallels can be drawn between the lived realities of the industrial home-based women workers in Sialkot, Pakistan and those of their counterparts in India. Much like the rural female dalit farm workers that Mehrotra studied, the home-based workers in Pakistan find their labour market choices few and restricted. Incomes are scarce,

precarity is high, and discrimination and exploitation are widespread. They face multiple forms of discrimination as they not only bear the stigma of their caste, class and/or religious identity but are also not paid equal wages as men for the same work.

Informal economies in the global South are embedded in global industrial supply chains. It is being increasingly acknowledged that capitalist development has not translated into better working conditions, job security, socio legal protection, and elimination of precarity for millions of informal workers in India. Processes of globalisation have connected the world, but also reproduced the existing hierarchies as workers from the global South are proletarianised by the bourgeoisie running international brands in the global North. Home-based workers are at one extreme of the global supply chains and are rendered invisible despite their indispensability for sustaining industrial production. Outsourcing and subcontracting of manufacturing processes to lower middle-income and developing countries have been associated with the feminisation of the labour force as women and children comprise cheap labour. While international pressure has been able to control child labour to a large extent, the exploitation of women workers is difficult to regulate and continues unabated in almost all industries.

Naz and Bögenhold contend that liberalisation of the economy adds to the burden on women from poor households. A decline in public spending and the resultant expansion in the privatisation of social services makes these services unaffordable for the masses. The need for additional household income to avail of these services pushes women into precarious and low-paying employment such as informal home-based work. However, feminisation of the labour force does not by itself imply an improvement in the quality of jobs and working conditions. Women's home-based work is desirable for both patriarchy and capitalism as it facilitates the confinement of women as well as the extraction of surplus value. Mehrotra argues that feminisation of the labour force does not automatically result in enhanced women's agency partly because of their own internalisation of patriarchal value systems.

The International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Home Work Convention (C177, 1996) requires ratifying states to formulate a national policy on homework for the treatment of homeworkers at par with all other wage earners (ILOa, n.d.). This convention has been ratified by only 12 member states, Tajikistan being the only one from Asia (ILOb, n.d.). This convention recognises homeworkers as workers, besides emphasising their rights to organise, social security, occupational safety and health, maternity benefits and protection against discrimination among others. India must also ratify it and set an example for other member states.

The feminisation of labour force implies a rise in female labour force participation, that is, a greater number of women have access to paid work. However, the invisible nature of homework, its performance inside the private rather than the public sphere, and limited or no autonomy with respect to spending the income pose challenges to female homeworkers' empowerment and agency. Without equal pay for equal work, safe working conditions, freedom from discrimination, social security provisions and protective legislation, the transformative potential of the feminisation of the labour force cannot be harnessed. In the Indian context, the already declining trend in female labour force participation accelerated due to the pandemic. Women

workers, especially those in urban areas, are finding it increasingly difficult to return to the labour force mainly due to the increased burden of intra-household social reproductive labour during lockdowns. The reversal of earlier gains necessitates reorienting policy priorities towards not only raising the labour force participation but also enhancing the quality and conditions of work.

Narratives of homeworkers reveal that this form of work remains critical to not only their survival but also their self-esteem. It is preferred by many women as it can be performed alongside their household responsibilities imposed upon them due to an unequal sexual division of social reproductive labour under patriarchy. However, shifting the workplace from a factory to the household also shifts several overhead costs such as those of electricity, lighting and heating from the employer to the worker (p. 52). In light of this situation, increasing their wages to cover such overheads, providing childcare facilities, skilling and accounting for their work are crucial to ensuring greater visibility and eventual recognition of women as equal employees and workers.

A similar category of socioeconomically marginalised women workers in India is dalit agricultural workers in rural areas. While Naz and Bögenhold focus on working conditions, Mehrotra analyses negotiations and contestations with patriarchal structures and institutions. The gendered impact of contemporary capitalist globalisation on industrial production as studied in the former, and on the agricultural sector in the latter, has been far from positive. Central to both inquiries are the interlinkages among caste/class and gender, which mediate capital–labour relationships in industrial as well as agrarian settings.

Struggles and contestations waged by labour are not only against capital but also the state. The state–capital nexus is widely held responsible for the continual domination of the so-called upper castes and the resulting marginalisation of dalit workers. In India, it is mostly the former who own land, and the latter who work on the former's fields. Dalit women's everyday experiences of caste-based and gender-based subjugation are replicated in their worlds of work. Their forms of assertion range from open confrontations to wielding 'weapons of the weak' and negotiations.

There is no dearth of empirical evidence confirming the segmentation of urban labour markets (Deshpande, 2011; Thorat & Madheswaran, 2018; Thorat & Newman, 2010). Mehrotra points towards segmentation on the lines of caste, class and gender in rural labour markets as well. Multiple power hierarchies reinforce one another in the structural oppression of dalit women workers. Indian villages are changing, but caste remains a continuity. There is no level playing field for dalit women workers as their position in the labour market is mediated by power structures of caste, class and gender. Rural men's choice to migrate to urban areas is enabled by women's willingness to shoulder all unpaid domestic and care work, and child-rearing responsibilities in the household, in addition to wage labour. Women end up bearing a disproportionate burden of unpaid work, which is never accounted for, while their paid work also remains undercounted, undervalued and invisible.

Mehrotra observes that the sexual division of labour within the household extends to the agricultural sector where gender wage gaps persist. This form of

labour is low-paid and seasonal, and fails to emancipate women from the shackles of caste and patriarchy. But there is little choice for rural women, many of whose husbands migrate to cities in search of non-agricultural wage employment. Further, Mehrotra's contention that unfree labour is largely borne by women (p. 6) is instructive as male outmigration pushes a large number of women towards labour with debt or under feudal relations. Where women are in wage employment, informal negotiations for higher wages are common. Their assertions might not always involve direct contestations for fear of job loss. Nevertheless, dalit women remain conscious political actors waging struggles on the basis of solidarity arising from shared caste and gender identities.

The centrality of agricultural labour to rural women's experiences necessitates a gender-sensitive and -responsive approach to state policies on agriculture, irrigation and allied activities in rural areas. Public provisioning of essential services must be strengthened. There must be a push for rural women's employment within the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). Greater employment opportunities for women must be generated through state-run programmes with adequate wages, equal pay for equal work and no discrimination.

Deshpande (2011) brings together perspectives from a range of studies capturing empirical data on caste-based discrimination and inter-caste disparities in urban labour markets. Caste-based traditional occupational structures are a continuity in contemporary India. However, it is women who are expected to continue pursuing these occupations while men explore alternative livelihood opportunities. Women from privileged castes are likely to have better material conditions but they do not necessarily enjoy freedoms. Likewise, dalit women also find their autonomy increasingly compromised as a result of sanskritisation. Like the other studies discussed here, Deshpande's study also emphasises the significance of social identities in the Indian context, caste being critical to any analysis. She regards the caste system as the one that formalises exploitation. It can be argued that caste is the organising principle of not only society but also markets as economic relations are embedded within social relations, which are predominantly caste-based.

A large proportion of rural women's work fails to be captured in official statistics, as rural women are more likely to report themselves as not working despite being productive as contributing family workers. Dalit women are caught in a vicious cycle of low educational attainment, which severely restricts their capabilities for decent work and employment. These capability deprivations reinforce their material deprivation, adversely affecting their health and nutrition. This is worsened by gender wage discrimination in jobs, which are already low-paying, often hazardous and always precarious.

Mehrotra, as well as Naz and Bögenhold, offers insights from the field with respect to lived realities of the working class in the global South, be it poor women stitching footballs in Pakistan, or dalit women agricultural workers in rural Uttar Pradesh in India. The broader framework of capitalist globalisation makes these studies relevant as critical questions are posed regarding its impact on classes of labour. In the Indian context, caste identities are a key vantage point to

analyse labour market outcomes, which differ greatly for the so-called upper castes and dalits. Both these books are a valuable contribution to the political economies of agriculture and industrial production under neoliberal capitalism. Having brought narratives of intersectionally disadvantaged categories of women workers to the fore, these books add rigour to longstanding conversations on the gender, class and caste questions in labour under contemporary neoliberal market-led regimes.

## ORCID iD

Aishwarya Bhuta  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8213-4958>

## References

- Deshpande, A. (2011). *The grammar of caste: Economic discrimination in contemporary India*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198072034.001.0001>
- International Labour Organisation (ILOa). (n.d.). C177—Home Work Convention, 1996 (No. 177). [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:312322](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312322)
- International Labour Organisation (ILOb). (n.d.). Ratifications of C177—Home Work Convention, 1996 (No. 177). [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:11300:0::NO:11300:P11300\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:312322](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:11300:0::NO:11300:P11300_INSTRUMENT_ID:312322)
- Thorat, S., & Madheswaran, S. (2018). Graded caste inequality and poverty: Evidence on role of economic discrimination. *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies*, 4(1), 3–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2394481118775873>
- Thorat, S., & Newman, K. S. (Eds.). (2010). *Blocked by caste: Economic discrimination in modern India*. Oxford University Press.

**Aishwarya Bhuta**

*Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability*

*New Delhi, India*

*E-mail: [aishwarya@cbgaindia.org](mailto:aishwarya@cbgaindia.org)*