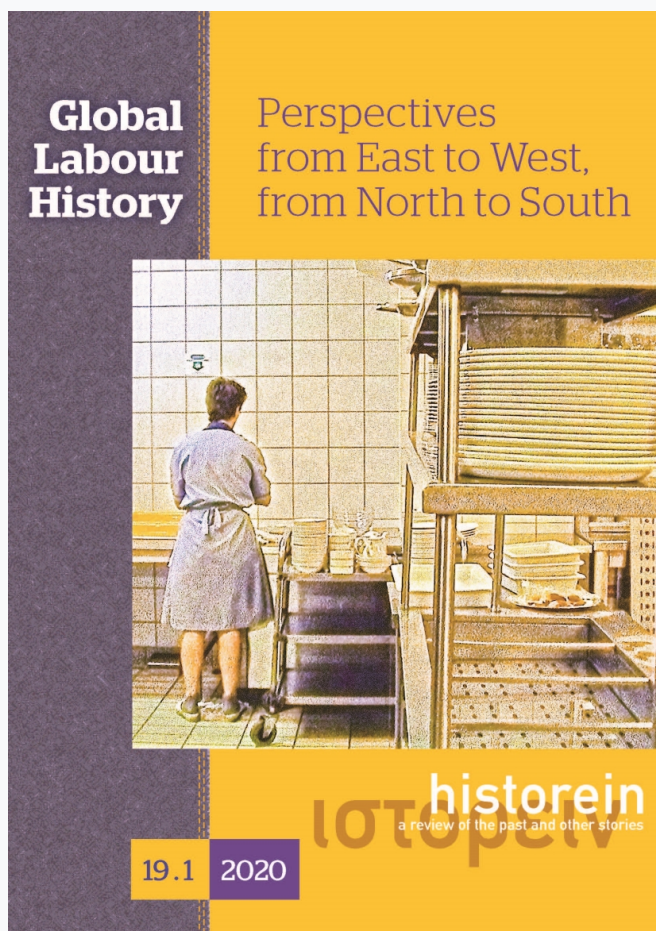


## Historein

Vol 19, No 1 (2020)

Global Labour History: Perspectives from East to West, from North to South



### State, Policy and Gender at the Workplace in India: A Comparison Over Time

*Manjapra Variathe Shobhana Warriar*

doi: [10.12681/historein.18648](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.18648)

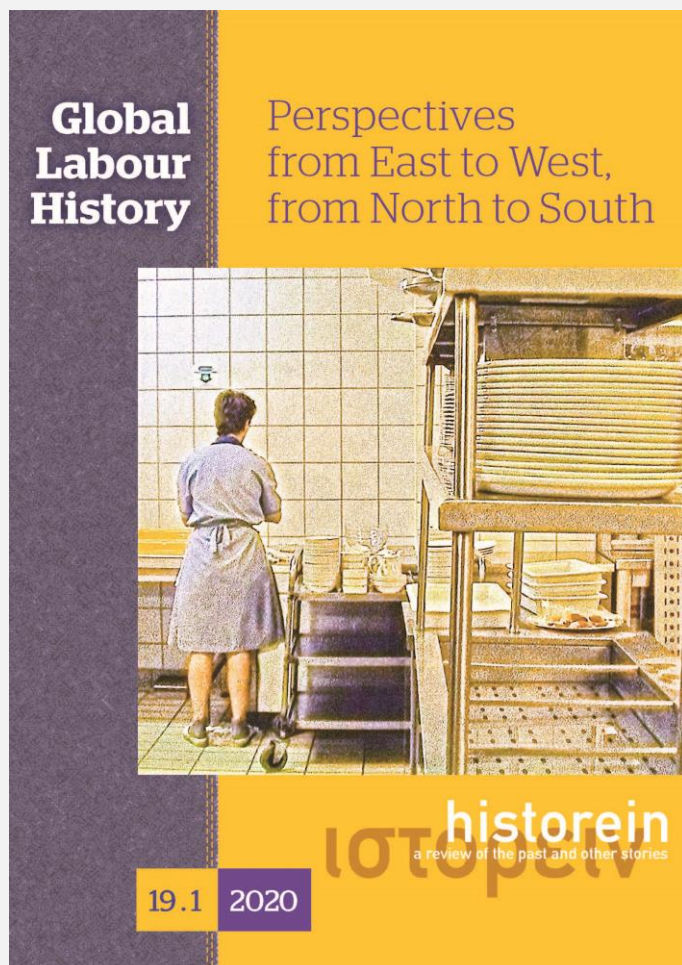
Copyright © 2020, Manjapra Variathe Shobhana Warriar



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### To cite this article:

Warrior, M. V. S. (2020). State, Policy and Gender at the Workplace in India: A Comparison Over Time. *Historein*, 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.18648>



## **State, Policy and Gender at the Workplace in India: A Comparison Over Time**

***Manjapra Variathe  
Shobhana Warriar***

**doi: 10.12681/historein.18648**

### **To cite this article:**

Warriar, Manjapra Variathe Shobhana. 2020. "State, Policy and Gender at the Workplace in India: A Comparison Over Time". *Historein* 19 (1). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.18648>.

# State, Policy and Gender at the Workplace in India: A Comparison Over Time

Manjapra Variathe Shobhana Warriar

Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi, India

This article compares the experience of comparatively “low-skilled” Indian women workers at two different historical locations – in the cotton mills of early twentieth-century colonial South India and in fish processing along India’s coast towards the end of the century. The mill work was studied using archival material and interviews with surviving workers of the period and the fish processing work through a survey and fieldwork conducted in the mid-1990s.<sup>1</sup> We study women workers’ entry and exit, degree of informality, the effects of laws and regulations on work, unionisation, workplace culture and women’s agency, to identify continuity and change in the gendered nature of work during the twentieth century, before and after Indian Independence, as part of the colonial economy of an “empire on which the sun never sets”, on the one hand, and when exposed to the gales of globalisation in the 1990s, on the other.

Modern factory work arrived in colonial India as organised work, subject to the colonial regulations that were informed by and aligned with the regulations in place in Britain. Post-independence, work fragmented into organised and unorganised forms, with new methods of organising work such as contracting and subcontracting becoming entrenched in factory work, eliminating unions from unorganised work. As in other parts of Asia, some occupations became feminised, as elucidated, for example, by Guy Standing.<sup>2</sup> The globalisation of production and the rise of supply chains saw production shift to low-cost destinations and, within these, women workers, with their lower “aspirational wages” and deemed docility and flexibility, being preferred over men. Such employment also tended to take place in conditions of precarity, devoid of security of tenure or wages or other benefits. The process marked an important shift in the evolution of work in developing countries implicit in the Harris–Todaro model of rural-urban migration, in which the informal sector serves as a waiting shed for workers before they enter the formal sector.<sup>3</sup> With globalisation, and the search for the lowest production costs, work that previously would have been undertaken in the formal sector now takes place in an informal setting. The formal and informal sectors, instead of being seen as constituting a dual economy, came to be recognised as necessary parts of a structural composite.<sup>4</sup> Laws seeking to regulate

formal and informal work proliferated but their enforcement became tenuous, contingent on local dynamics.

The ideology of the male breadwinner gradually pushed out women from mill work in colonial India as trade union activity to enforce laws improved earnings and benefits, particularly those that were women-centred. In the globalising India of the 1990s, as elsewhere in Asia, feminised occupations dropped out of the ambit of law and enforcement, expanding work opportunities for women but stripping them of the rights and benefits they were entitled to under the law.<sup>5</sup>

Gender ideology in society shapes the definition of skill at the workplace. When men interact with machines and productivity goes up, they are deemed skilled and their wages go up. When women work on machines, their work is seen to be rendered deskilled and their wages remain the same or go down. This has been differently argued by scholars such as Francesca Bettio, Sonya O. Rose and N. Neetha in the Indian context.<sup>6</sup> In recent times, fish processing offers a counterexample of a highly mechanised industry that employs only or mostly women to take advantage of their low-cost skills.<sup>7</sup>

Women's work in the cotton textile industry began with regulation and benefits that, over time and with enforcement under union pressure, led to women being displaced by men. By the late 1940s, women were fighting to keep their jobs in the organised sector. In early independent India, protective legislation such as the Minimum Wage Act of 1948 further accentuated the competition for well-paid factory work, and scholars such as Nirmala Banerjee have argued that all this resulted in the employers' preference for male labour in industries.<sup>8</sup> In the context of the cotton mills of Tamil Nadu, women represented a quarter of the workforce at their peak and made a difference to the culture of work and protest. The debate on women's employment has posited that the retrenchment of women from the workforce resulted from the supplementary nature of their work and the burden of mandatory maternity benefits on the employer.<sup>9</sup> Some cite technological change as a factor as well: technology eliminated certain functions altogether and gender decided who got to keep jobs in the departments that survived technological disruption.<sup>10</sup> The trend was not limited to the cotton textile industry.

By the 1990s, informal work became entrenched, as in many parts of the developing world. The history of women's employment in assembly line production of various types and the feminisation of work has been well documented globally from the 1970s. Increasingly, this has become the norm in many parts of the world. Cheap, precarious, docile young women as part of the garment sector have been documented in multiple case studies both in India and in other parts of the world.<sup>11</sup>

One way to overcome the hurdle to women's largescale employment raised by protective legislation is to employ women on informal terms. For employers, this means walking the thin line between observing the law on contract workers and their benefits in

letter and complying with the law in spirit. The fish processing industry that came up along the Indian coastline is a good example of informality at the workplace mediated by gender. The period of globalisation witnessed the opening of the Indian economy in the 1990s and the mushrooming of export-oriented fish processing units. It is in this context that the recruitment of girls/women from the villages of the state of Kerala to the fish processing units took place. Kerala's historical specificity has produced relatively greater social acceptance of young, unmarried women migrating for work, compared to elsewhere in India, accounting for the fact that most workers in the fish processing industry originate from that state alone.

In the cotton mills, women were part of the workforce right from the industry's inception in South India, in contemporary Tamil Nadu, although a maistry (jobber, recruiter) played a role in facilitating his kin to secure jobs at the mill. Initially, the entire family of the worker found work. In the case of the fish processing industry, the entry of women was by a process of multiplying links, at the centre of which stood the recruiter or agent, and every woman already employed served as a node of information for other village girls seeking to migrate for work. The recruiter-led migrant worker teams prospected for opportunities and moved to units anywhere on the coast.<sup>12</sup> The aspect of mobility and temporary migration seems to have become more frequent and structured as part of the work lives of the bulk of these women. That their social life would be unsettled and unstable was a given, as they were forever on the move, as "footloose labour", as described by Jan Breman.<sup>13</sup> This is in sharp contrast to the experience of women workers in the cotton mills in the early period of colonial industrialisation, when the process of the settlement of villagers in the cities contributed to the making of urban communities of workers' settlements and workplaces in the twentieth century.

Despite the existence of a range of acts to protect workers in independent India, such as the Interstate Migrant Workers Act of 1979, Contract Labour Act of 1970 and Minimum Wages Act of 1948, the work conditions for woman workers in the fish processing industry were far removed from the promised level of welfare. They were neither paid the statutory wage nor were the work conditions in line with the acts. Women were held captive for nine to eleven months in small, congested locations close to the processing units or above the processing plant. The status of the women was that of informal workers: there was only a verbal contract between the individual worker and the contractor, who managed them and to whom they were accountable. Getting the workers to deliver was also his responsibility: he was a contractor, jobber and recruiter, all in one. The contractor in this system controlled the production process but also had to bend to the mercenary demands of the production chain, which was controlled, ultimately, by the buyer in the export market for fish. In 1995, a public hearing on these workers' conditions and the need to address their labour rights was held.<sup>14</sup> The women's ability to keep their job was primarily dependent on the patronage of the agent (contractor). The lack of modern labour relations in a highly mechanised, modern global industry is striking.



## *Women and the making of the workplace*

The employment of women workers in the cotton mills of Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore in colonial South India peaked to a quarter of the workforce in 1938, after which there was a secular decline. In contrast, the workforce of the fish processing industry was almost exclusively women.<sup>15</sup> It was believed that only young girls with no prior work experience were employed in the prawn peeling and processing units. Our sample of 309 women workers in the processing units contained a fair mix of young and old, all of them forced to make the choice to migrate from their villages in different parts of Kerala, given the lack of sustainable employment opportunities there.<sup>16</sup>

In the case of the cotton mills in Tamil Nadu, with the setting up of factories by Indian capital after the First World War, job opportunities were plenty and women were invited to become part of the workforce.<sup>17</sup> However, the workplace was far from benign for the workers. Women's unpleasant experience of the workplace, both in physical and mental terms, has been well documented in the evidence to the Royal Commission on Labour across India. In the cotton mills in Madurai and Coimbatore, women's protests and union charters demanded that women-dominated departments be headed by women maistries and there is ample evidence of sexual harassment.<sup>18</sup>

The function of labour legislation was to accommodate women's wage work with domestic work – a balancing act that entailed some cost for the women involved.<sup>19</sup> Legislation such as the Indian Factory Act of 1881, and its subsequent additions, with pressure from the Lancashire and Dundee industrial lobbies, which perceived manufacturing in the colony as competition rendered unfair by low wages and poor regulation, provided the impetus for reform. As early as 1896, Dundee Chamber of Commerce wanted the colonial government to impose restrictions on the night-time employment of women in India.<sup>20</sup> Colonial capitalism connected the metropolis to the colony in the organisation of workplace relations and culture. Reforms consistent with norms prescribed by the International Labour Organisation influenced, defined, shaped and contributed to a moral discourse about the conditions for the employability of women.

The making of the Indian Factory Act of 1881 is evidence of the influence of British laws and practice on labour regulation and industrial management.<sup>21</sup> Protective legislation for women, such as against overwork, night work or long hours, was deemed medically necessary.<sup>22</sup> Despite the existence of legislation, it was hardly enforced. Legislation recognising trade unions was introduced in 1926 and with the Trade Disputes Act of 1929, an entire department was created to supervise the working of the factory act, addressing the disputes between management and labour.<sup>23</sup> This particular department compiled extensive information about unions in individual units. The unions filed annual returns to gain official sanction.

By 1922 in the cotton mills, women and children were excluded from heavy work and night work.<sup>24</sup> The department also proposed reducing working hours for women, the provision of creches and the disbursal of a maternity allowance. In heavy industries, women were replaced by men, which complicated matters in the cotton textile industry. Nine weeks' maternity leave was viewed as excessive and not in the financial interest of women, who were used to working around childbirth.<sup>25</sup> During a strike in Madurai in 1937, management cited the banning of women's night work for laying off 613 women in the ring-frame department.<sup>26</sup> By the 1930s, the chief inspector of factories recommended a reduced, eight-hour work schedule for women.<sup>27</sup> In Madras, the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills dispensed with women workers while in the Choolai Mills they were retained on lower wages.<sup>28</sup> In Madurai and Coimbatore, women continued to find work in the new mills.

In the fish processing industry, women's employment was tenuous. There was no written contract of employment and women decided to join the workplace based on the circulating reputation of the contractor. Their work was supposed to be seasonal, geared to market demand and the availability of catch, and therefore insecure, and could be terminated during lean periods. Working conditions were appalling, and work hours depended on the catch of the day and overseas orders. Worktime could stretch into leisure hours as women could be asked to work any time of the day or even late into the night, if required.<sup>29</sup> The blurring of borders between workplace and residence (in some cases, workers lived in rickety quarters above the processing unit while, in others, they lived in cramped, hostel-like units close by) made for pliable, captive workers. No labour laws applied to them, let alone welfare such as maternity benefit. Any attempt to unionise was thwarted by the surveillance and control regime that also was the contract system. On the rare occasions that women protested, they were summarily dismissed and sent packing, as, for example, in a Mumbai unit where women demanded better wages and working conditions.<sup>30</sup>

### *Securing workers by way of welfare measures*

Corporate paternalism in the form of housing colonies close to mills was a measure to stabilise, settle and control the workers by mill management. It also gave rise to loyalist unions in the cotton mills of colonial Tamil Nadu. The Buckingham and Carnatic Mills in Madras represents an early example of providing workers' housing. Its housing scheme helped the S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu-led Madura Labour Union gain dominance. This spawned demands for housing in other mills, such as the Meenakshi and Rajah mills in Madurai and the mills in Coimbatore, where some managements obliged.<sup>31</sup>

Transforming the work environment to incorporate women's issues became a matter of engagement for both managements and unions. The endorsement of the idea of safe time and separate, segregated space for women workers can be seen in the fact that women were let off earlier from work or that they were confined to certain departments.<sup>32</sup>

Conveniences such as rest rooms for women, creches with ayahs to care for the women workers' children and maternity benefit also came from such concerns. A Coimbatore Labour Union leader, C. Basudev, requested the Venkatramayya Enquiry Committee, set up by the government in 1937 to look into labour grievances after a series of strikes in the presidency, to introduce work cards, which could provide documentary proof of their regularity of service, which was essential to claim maternity benefit.<sup>33</sup> The demand for three days' menstrual leave for women workers, if they so desired, was also put forward by Basudev. This demand stemmed from the cultural practice of isolation and the touch taboo that menstruating women had to endure.<sup>34</sup> The management in several factories created separate spaces for women, such as canteens and rest rooms. In a mill in Coimbatore, the canteen was partitioned.<sup>35</sup> The appointment in 1941 of a woman as assistant inspectress sought to overcome women's hesitation in approaching male labour officers.<sup>36</sup> Though the setting up of creches and feeding rooms had a long history, women workers were not allowed the free time to feed their infants.<sup>37</sup> This created disputes as women complained that they were not let out, leading to unions, management, the state and affected women workers to negotiate rights through a gender lens.

The right to maternity leave was an important part of labour welfare in colonial India. The maternity benefit bill, presented to the Madras Legislative Council in 1932, led to the Madras Maternity Bill of 1934, which, in turn, became an act in 1935.<sup>38</sup> Long after the maternity benefit act was in place, the compliance of mill management remained an issue and evasion became the norm.<sup>39</sup> Factory inspections recorded violations. In 1939, the factory inspectorate received 17 complaints about the evasion of maternity benefit, 14 for non-payment and 3 for not reemploying women after childbirth.<sup>40</sup> The Rajalakshmi mill management coerced women workers, at the point of recruitment, to undertake that they would not bear children for five years, the union said.<sup>41</sup> The management of Choolai mills dismissed two pregnant women workers.<sup>42</sup> Maternity benefit figured in the list of demands in the strike at Mahalakshmi Mills, Madura, in 1938.<sup>43</sup> The Madura Mills proudly proclaimed that it paid three times as much maternity benefit as other mills and, moreover, that they paid 12 annas, above the stipulated eight annas.<sup>44</sup> To combat claims from the management of Coimbatore Mill that absenteeism was the reason the benefit was withheld from women, unions requested that a personal card system be created to record attendance.<sup>45</sup> Women accused maistries of tampering with entries concerning their work output and timekeeping.<sup>46</sup> The denial of maternity benefit persisted in the 1940s and remained an issue until as late as 1950. As a Communist Party document seized by the police states: "A large number of women are denied maternity benefit outright."<sup>47</sup> Maternity benefit provision, it was argued, would result in mill owners taking recourse to retrench women.<sup>48</sup> A memorandum from the South Indian Chambers could see no reason for "such compulsory internment" and argued for the lowering of the fine for nonpayment on employers from 500 to 100 rupees.<sup>49</sup>



During the colonial period, the Indian National Congress formed the ministry in Madras from 1937 to 1939. There were heightened expectations of reforms in favour of workers as V.V. Giri, who had considerable experience in working for workers, was labour minister. The 1938 Venkataramayya award in favour of workers suggested certain minimum wages for various categories of work, but weak enforcement of the award in the mills was a cause of unrest among workers.<sup>50</sup>

The idea of a minimum wage came up in the Madras Legislative Council as early as in 1929 and a committee was constituted to work towards it. The committee believed that standardisation of different kinds of work, for each of which a separate minimum wage had to be fixed, was in itself a difficult task, and that the fixing of a minimum wage would be virtually impossible. The Coimbatore Mill strike committee demanded fixing a minimum of 25 rupees for men, 20 rupees for women and 15 rupees for boys.<sup>51</sup> The taking up of the demand initially for a minimum wage and, later, for equal pay for equal work addressed a depressed wage structure whose status owed a great deal to the low wages paid to certain categories of labour in general and to women in particular.<sup>52</sup>

The categorisation of work and the different meanings given to it were usefully deployed and created a skewed wage market. Differential wages were premised on distinctions between male and female, and between urban (city mills in Coimbatore) and rural mills, all of which worked to the benefit of mill owners. As late as 1942, mill owners in rural Coimbatore justified lower wages, claiming that their workers were unskilled field hands. Piece rate wages depressed women's earnings. In the Rajah Mill in Madurai, where workers were given a dearness allowance (DA) to offset inflation, many women were left out, as they were on piece rate. The union demanded that reelers be given a uniform DA rate and that it also be disbursed to workshop employees and women cotton pickers.<sup>53</sup> Tagged on to payment of DA was a minimum output norm.

In the course of the adjudication of the dispute at Rajah Mills, Madura, in 1946, the opinion was that the distinction concerning the issue of the uniform wage rate to be paid to male and female doffers was artificial.<sup>54</sup> The industrial tribunal in 1946 wondered why there were differences in wages and recommended parity for men and women workers.<sup>55</sup> The Coimbatore mill workers union argued that "there is little difference in the quantity or quality of work between men and women."<sup>56</sup> When women were transferred from spinning to the reeling department, which was a lower pay unit, there was no objection in principle except that the transferred women's higher wages be protected.<sup>57</sup> Unions often made the case for equal pay for equal work. However, at a general level, women were deemed secondary wage earners which was inherently part of contemporaneous ideology.<sup>58</sup>

In the fish processing sector, the question of worker's benefits just does not arise as they fall into the unorganised, casualised segment of vulnerable workers. For the processing workers, a minimum wage was enshrined in law. However, neither the administrative mechanism of the state worked to enforce the law nor did the workers have a union to press their case. So, towards the end of the twentieth century, workers were paid

wages determined by market forces, namely, the bargaining power of the contractor who supplied the workers, against a backdrop of surplus labour, and the need of the fish processing units to recruit workers fast enough and on a scale large enough to fulfil their orders. Our survey of women workers' wages in the Vashi area of Mumbai showed that the earnings of the women were a little better than in Kolkata. The minimum wage earned by the lowest paid was not less than 1,000 rupees per month. A comparison with the figure of 14 out of 36 women getting less than 1,000 rupees per month in Kolkata indicates a relatively favourable wage situation in Mumbai. However, the Mumbai wage, when set against the higher cost of living in a megapolis such as Mumbai and also the work conditions in the units, was by no means any great advantage. Indeed, it was in Mumbai that women fish processing workers resorted to a strike and were sacked and bundled back home in no time.<sup>59</sup>

### *Workplace conditions*

In the context of the cotton textile industry, by the 1930s a number of workers' unions representing the interests of workers had been established. The All India Trade Union Congress grew, over a period of time, to become the link between the local mobilisation of workers and the national labour movement. Mill- and district-level unions came up as did their federations. They made representations for better working conditions in terms of working hours, workplace facilities as well as wage-related changes<sup>60</sup> and secured facilities such as the serving of tea to night workers, the installation of humidifiers in the cotton mixing department, creches, tiffin rooms and disbursement of maternity benefit.<sup>61</sup>

Fish processing women workers had a difficult work environment: they worked on slippery, wet floors with ice-cold fish. Work guidelines required them to wear gloves; however, many found them uncomfortable. The fact that these women were not enlisted as workers by the owner of the enterprise that profited from their labour but worked for the contractor meant that their workplace experience was fragmented and inorganic: a here-today, gone-tomorrow type of existence. A dimension that was already changing the face of the industry by the late 1990s was the mushrooming of peeling sheds in Kerala, where part of the work that used to be done in the unit was carried out close to where the raw material was accessed. These small-scale peeling sheds competed with the big processing plants in the distant coastal towns in the recruitment of workers. These were smaller outfits: ice plants or cold storage. In these asbestos-roofed sheds, women were hired to peel shrimp, clean and sort squid and crab. Some of these peeling sheds were cogs in the production process that catered to the bigger units for further processing. We found during our field visit that women were turning to these plants to look for work. This, as many of them told us, was convenient and close to their homes. The peeling sheds appeared attractive

compared to the dislocation, displacement and insecurity inherent in migrating to the distant locations where the processing plants were located, such as Tuticorin, Veraval, Kolkata, Mumbai, Goa or Mangalore.

There are major differences across the processing units in terms of the quality of facilities for the workers and the conditions of their employment. Scholars such as Alakh Sharma point out the problems in the unorganised sector, such as the large number of laws and the virtually absent ability of the worker to bargain on account of the absence of unionisation.<sup>62</sup> Their wages are low, the working conditions dismal and there is the utter lack of sensitivity in these units to even the basic human rights of the workers.

The migration of women from the villages of Kerala to the fish processing units all over the country is an example of the role of networks (kinship or acquaintance with the agent or his associates) and stereotyping (that women from Kerala are inherently skilled in handling fish, especially if they come from fish worker communities) in securing work. The initial lot of the outflow comprised women from the fishing community where mechanisation and modernisation have wrought havoc on the traditional modes of survival. Their traditional activity – net making, fish vending, fish drying – was shrinking. The initial phase of migration was characterised by the search for better opportunities. This was easily accepted in Kerala society, which was used to its men and women searching for work beyond the state as nurses, as well as migrant workers of all categories, in the countries of the Persian Gulf and in the bigger cities in India. This environment made it easy for women to migrate from their villages. Once the process began, it impelled other women to also pursue jobs outside their villages, as it became a legitimate exercise to improve the condition of the family.

That worker women went out to work, dressed better and lived better were equally important criteria for migrating. The example of visibly better-off *chechis* (elder sisters) motivated young women to trust the contractor to help them relocate successfully. At the same time, the narrative concerning the choice of workplace and of the contractor with whom they migrated influenced families in sending their women. The contractor had to be somebody trustworthy.

Horrible stories emerged about the working conditions in some of the units and some nasty ones about certain contractors, who were then shunned. An oral narrative of the life experience of someone known in the village became the basis for the worker in choosing a unit to work in. Apart from the positive stories, many terrible accounts of experiences of migrant women workers also circulated. Some of these related to sexual exploitation, prison-like regimentation of the women by the contractors, who would also retain a part of their wages.

## *Concluding remarks*

The experience of women workers in two industrial segments that employed a fair number of women workers, one at the beginning of the twentieth century and the other in its final decade, throws up striking similarities and differences. Dependence on a recruiting agent, whose caste/community linkage is the primary determinant of loyalty and trust, is a common feature, as is the experience of sexual harassment at the hands of the same facilitator of entry into organised work. The continuity of caste/community bonding over the decades is striking. A large number of women in the processing industry came from the fish worker community, which provided the initial base for the procurement of workers, given their skill and kin networks in the industry.

The mill industry emerged in India against the backdrop of colonial rule and the demand for cloth and yarn, initially for the First World War and later for a global market shaped by the British Empire as well as a weak domestic market. The fish processing industry is a quintessentially globalised industry in which the market forces of demand and supply work with remorseless logic, stripped of the need to satisfy claims to legitimacy. The colonial state followed an ideology of paternalistic modernisation, appointed royal commissions of labour, enacted laws to protect workers and enforced laws. Political parties sought to mobilise people in support of the nationalist cause and took up worker welfare to garner support. The domestic entrepreneurial class had to subsume their own narrow interests under the larger nationalist cause and bow to the demands of workers and their political patrons. Workers' rights were championed by myriad trade unions, amplified by the strong presence of communists in Coimbatore and Madurai.

Things changed after independence. In the case of the fish processing industry, hardly any pressure was exerted on the industry to improve conditions for workers. Domestic capital could exert pressure on political parties, for whom workers in the fish processing industry were numerically too small to matter.

This background means that the workers' bargaining power is limited in a structural sense. Their only recourse is to organise at great risk of being summarily sacked and to get the government machinery to enforce its own rules and regulations on the industry. Unionisation was an integral part of the development of the mill industry and unions themselves underwent internal struggles to finally champion gender equality in wages and workplace roles. In the case of the fish processing industry, unions could just not find a foothold.

Unionisation or lack of unions at the workplace had implications for the role of regulation. In the case of the mill industry, workers' movements emerged to demand the enforcement of state welfare legislation and the enhancement of the legislative scope. In the case of the fish workers, the Contract Workers' Act and the Interstate Migrant Workers' Act are not enforced, to any degree, but this disregard of the law goes entirely

unchallenged. Some voluntary organisations, trade unions and governmental bodies have been making isolated efforts to change the status quo.

In the case of mill workers, the workforce migrated from nearby villages and contributed to the making of urban centres around the mills. In the case of the fish workers, they were mostly drawn from some community and regional groupings in Kerala and dispersed along the coast, wherever fish processing units opened up, from Veraval in Gujarat on the west coast to Kolkata on the east coast, through Mumbai, Mangalore, Kochi and Tuticorin.

Wages in the mill industry were mediated by the state and could not dip below statutory minimum levels. In the case of the fish processing industry, the forces of supply and demand, untrammelled by either collective bargaining or the might and mien of a state that brooks no defiance of its laws, took advantage of extensive underemployment in rural areas.

Workplace protests were routine in the mills but rare and not tolerated in the fish processing units. Women workers with a mind of their own were sent off home without much ado.

The mill industry saw technological improvements that led to labour displacement in general, particularly of women. And the jobs that remained were deemed to rightfully belong to “primary wage earners”, that is, the male workers. In the case of fish workers, the industry was technologically advanced but needed the skill of women workers who knew how to handle fish/prawn. Employment was a function of the demand for fish, rather than of technological change.

In the mill industry, women received maternity benefits when they got married and undertook the task of reproducing labour. On the contrary, the married women in the processing units ended up far away from their families, living in hostels. The cost of childcare, if any, in the workplace, had to be borne by the workers themselves, rather than by the employer.

While political parties took an active interest in championing the cause of workers in the mill industry and organising their own unions, they hardly had any presence among fish workers. Any attempt to form an organisation was rewarded with dismissal for the workers who took the initiative. That fear was enough to keep the workers regimented and “disciplined”.

Sexual harassment at the hands of the maistry/agent was common in both industries. In the case of the cotton textile industry, unions backed the women in their protest against sexual harassers. Lightning strikes by women workers on issues such as “bad touch” (groping) when making a thumbprint to sign in to work or unacceptable behaviour from the maistry are well documented in the mills as sexual harassment. In the fish processing units, living in distant towns on independent earnings, far from traditional restrictions, did open up areas of freedom for single women, who constituted the bulk of the workforce. At the same time, in the new sites of impermanent residence, solidarities of

kinship and sisterhood came together to offer new meanings and agency just as, simultaneously, they became means of confinement, subjugation and authority. There are as many cases of sexual harassment as there are examples of girls making their choice to leave drunken households of domestic violence behind.

---

\* I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their useful comments and suggestions that have helped me improve the article, which draws, primarily, on my earlier work.

<sup>1</sup> See Shobhana Warrier, "Labour Rights of Workers in Fish Processing Industries in the context of Globalised Economy" (report submitted to Centre for Education and Communication, Delhi, 1998); Warrier, "Class and Gender: A Study of Women Workers in Cotton Textile Mills of Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore, 1914–1951" (PhD diss., Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 1993); Warrier, "Women and the Workplace," in *Exploring Gender Equations: Colonial and Post Colonial India*, ed. Shakti Kak and Biswamoy Pati (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Guy Standing, "Global Feminization Through Flexible Labour: A Theme Revisited," *World Development* 27, no. 3 (1999): 583–602.

<sup>3</sup> K.P. Kannan, *Interrogating Inclusive Growth: Poverty and Inequality in India* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2014), 192.

<sup>4</sup> Manuel Castells and Alejandro Portes, "World Underneath: The Origins, Dynamics, and Effects of the Informal Economy," in *The Informal Economy: Studies in Advanced and Less Developed Countries*, ed. Alejandro Portes, Manuel Castells and Lauren A. Benton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Angélique Janssens, "The Rise and Decline of the Male Breadwinner Family? An Overview of the Debate," introduction to *The Rise and Decline of the Male Breadwinner Family?*, ed. Angélique Janssens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1–23. She cites (19–20) Lina Gálvez-Muñoz's contribution in the same volume ("Breadwinning Patterns and Family Exogenous Factors: Workers at the Tobacco Factory of Seville during the Industrialization Process, 1887–1945," 87–128) on the Seville tobacco industry to show the various employers' strategies and phases of capital accumulation that shaped the gendering of the workforce. The study provides evidence of the exploitation of the flexible workforce of skilled female tobacco workers. The same, Gálvez-Muñoz points out, would not have been done with the male workers who had fixed work and pay. "However," according to Janssens, "as Gálvez concludes, for a correct understanding of the outcomes of the interplay between these historical actors, we need to remain aware of their differential and fundamentally gendered positions. The breadwinning *cigarreras* remained first and foremost associated with family and household responsibilities, and this determined the way they were incorporated into subsequent phases of capital accumulation."

<sup>6</sup> Sonya O. Rose, "'Gender at Work': Sex, Class and Industrial Capitalism," *History Workshop* 21, no. 1 (1986): 113–31.

<sup>7</sup> M.V. Shobhana Warrier, "Women at Work: Migrant Women in Fish Processing Industry," *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 37 (2001): 3554–62.

<sup>8</sup> Nirmala Banerjee, "The Weakest Link," *The IDS Bulletin* 12, no. 3 (1981): 37. "This process occurred in the textile industries where the cotton and jute mills were forced by government direction to provide maternity benefits and crèches for their women workers. As a result, the textile mills reduced the number of their regular women workers so as to avoid making these arrangements."

<sup>9</sup> Radha Kumar, "Women in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry, 1919–1940," in *Dignity and Daily Bread: New Forms of Economic Organization Among Poor Women in the Third World and the First*, ed. Sheila Rowbotham and Swasti Mitter (London: Routledge, 1994); Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial*



*India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Sen's work on the jute sector in Kolkata also establishes the trend of women being eased out of the workforce on account of a combination of factors, including maternity benefit provision.

<sup>10</sup> Kumar, "Women in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry." In the context of cotton mills of Tamil Nadu, women worked as spinners too but over time they became confined to the reeling and winding departments. When technological changes were introduced in these sections, their job opportunities completely shrank. Colin Creighton, "The Rise of the Male Breadwinner Family: A Reappraisal," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 38, no. 2 (1996): 310–37.

<sup>11</sup> Janet Henshall Momsen, *Women and Development in the Third World* (London: Routledge, 1991); Naila Kabeer, "Marriage, Motherhood and Masculinity in the Global Economy: Reconfigurations of Personal and Economic Life" (Working Paper 220, Institute of Development Studies, October 2007); See also Radhika Balakrishnan, ed., *The Hidden Assembly Line: Gender Dynamics of Subcontracted Work in a Global Economy* (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> N. Neetha, "Flexible Production, Feminisation and Disorganisation: Evidence from Tiruppur Knitwear Industry," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 21 (2002). Neetha, in her article on the garment sector in contemporary Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu, argues "that central to the success of Tiruppur is the feminisation and gendering of jobs, brought out through split production and modernisation. Feminisation in Tiruppur is the result of the combination of the two processes, women replacing men and also the creation of jobs specifically for women" (2045).

<sup>13</sup> Jan Breman, *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> This verdict was proclaimed by justices V.R. Krishna Iyer and Janaki Amma and advocates Indira Jaisingh and Nandita Haksar at Ernakulam, India on 23 June 1995. "The Jury's Verdict," *Samudra Report*, no. 13 (1995): 41–44.

<sup>15</sup> It was estimated that over 150,000 women were employed in these units across India in 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Warriar, "Labour Rights of Workers."

<sup>17</sup> See Warriar, "Class and Gender," 24–29.

<sup>18</sup> M.V. Shobhana, "Condition of Women Workers in Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore, 1914–1939," *Social Scientist* 19, nos 5–6 (1991).

<sup>19</sup> Robert Gray, "The Languages of Factory Reform in Britain, c. 1830–1860," in *The Historical Meanings of Work*, ed. Patrick Joyce (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 177.

<sup>20</sup> National Archives of India (NAI), Department of Commerce and Industry, F., no. 35, Factories [A], 1–4 April 1906.

<sup>21</sup> NAI, Legislative Department Proceedings, A, nos. 118–338, April 1881.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Friedrich Engels, in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, discusses the problems women faced after emerging from their work in modern factories.

<sup>23</sup> Tamil Nadu Archives (TNA), Chennai, Development Dept. (confidential), GO 4085, 30 October 1946. Gulzarilal Nanda drafted a bill on labour disputes. It was sent to labour minister V.V. Giri for his comments. It was introduced as a measure to curb political unrest created by communists all over India. Unions were to receive recognition only if it had at least 15 percent membership in a particular industry. However, the bill was dropped.

<sup>24</sup> TNA, Development Dept., GO 263 (Miscellaneous), 19 February 1923.

<sup>25</sup> TNA, Development Dept., GO 4104, 1 November 1946.

- <sup>26</sup> "Madura Mill Dispute Viewpoint of Workers," *The Hindu* (Madras), 6 October 1937.
- <sup>27</sup> TNA, Public Works and Labour (Miscellaneous), GO 321 L, 1 February 1930.
- <sup>28</sup> *Royal Commission on Labour in India: Evidence*, vol. 7, pt. 2, Madras Presidency and Coorg (London: HMSO, 1931), 186.
- <sup>29</sup> "The Jury's Verdict."
- <sup>30</sup> Warriar, "Women at Work."
- <sup>31</sup> TNA, *Indian Factory Administration Report*, 1942, 1946.
- <sup>32</sup> TNA, Public Works & Labour Dept. (confidential), GO 703, 27 February 1930.
- <sup>33</sup> TNA, Development Dept., GO 2711, 6 December 1937.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>35</sup> TNA, Public Works Dept. (Labour), GO 2092, 22 July 1944.
- <sup>36</sup> TNA, Public Works Dept., GO 2650, 12 October 1945; Public Works & Labour, GO 1132, 23 April 1945.
- <sup>37</sup> P.C. Joshi Archives, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, Coimbatore Mill Labour Union Records, Miscellaneous, ser. C, 1955, R.K. Mills vs. Chandrakanti.
- <sup>38</sup> The disbursement of maternity benefit is detailed in Warriar, "Class and Gender."
- <sup>39</sup> TNA, Public Works Dept. (Labour), GO 2493, Labour, 16 November 1934. In the Madras Presidency, section 4 (1) of the act stated: "No employer shall knowingly employ a woman in any factory during the four weeks immediately following the day of her delivery." Section 5 (1) specified: "The maximum period for which a woman shall be entitled to maternity benefit is seven weeks, three weeks before and four weeks after (delivery)."
- <sup>40</sup> TNA, Development Dept., GO 1564, 4 July 1940.
- <sup>41</sup> TNA, Development Dept., GO 2054, 23 August 1938.
- <sup>42</sup> "Madras Labour Union," *The Hindu* (Madras), 21 April 1926.
- <sup>43</sup> TNA, Development Dept., GO 3044, 18 December 1938.
- <sup>44</sup> TNA, Development Dept., GO 4104, 1 November 1946.
- <sup>45</sup> *Venkatramayya Committee Report*, Madras, 1938, 161, Tamil Nadu Labour Commissioner's Library (TNLCL).
- <sup>46</sup> *Janasakhti* (Madras), 21 November 1945. The union complained that the entries were not right, women were given 9 rupees per month as a doffer but were made to work as spinners, whereas spinning was a better paid department.
- <sup>47</sup> TNA, Development Dept., GO 1938, 13 May 1950.
- <sup>48</sup> TNA, Public Works and Labour Dept. (Miscellaneous), GO 1101L, 3 April 1930; Development Dept., GO 1052–53, 29 June 1936.
- <sup>49</sup> "Maternity Bill, South India Chambers' Memorandum," *The Hindu* (Madras), 26 June 1934.

- <sup>50</sup> Soon there was disillusionment among sections of labour as V.V. Giri, the labour minister, let the Lakshmi Mill strike drag on for 20 days. See memoirs of P. Jeevanandam, *Tamarai, Jeeva Shirrappu Malar, Supplement* (March 1963), Madras.
- <sup>51</sup> TNA, Development Dept., GO 2711, 6 December 1937.
- <sup>52</sup> TNA, Public Works and Labour, GO 2806, 5 October 1929. A committee was set up. For a discussion of the implications of wages, see Maurice Dobb, *Wages* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1929), 123, 126.
- <sup>53</sup> TNA, Development Dept., GO 448, 21 February 1938; Public Works Dept., GO 283, 12 February 1943; Public Works Dept., GO 1973, 15 June 1942. Here also the union demanded that the mills pay workers as recommended by the 1938 award, clearly signifying violation on part of the management of Kaleeswarar Mills, Coimbatore.
- <sup>54</sup> TNA, Development Dept., GO 3189, 20 August 1946.
- <sup>55</sup> *Award of the Industrial Tribunal*, 1946, Madras, 1947, 30.
- <sup>56</sup> TNA, Development Dept., GO 2711, 6 December 1937; Development Dept., GO 2059, 23 August 1938.
- <sup>57</sup> *Janasakhti*, 25 March 1939, Karl Marx Library, Madras.
- <sup>58</sup> Miriam Glucksmann, *Women Assemble: Women Workers and the New Industries in Inter-war Britain* (London: Routledge, 1990); Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, "Women's Labour Force Participation and the Transition to the Male-Breadwinner Family, 1790–1865," *Economic History Review*, n.s., 48, no. 1 (1995): 89–117.
- <sup>59</sup> Warriar, "Women at Work," 3559. See the cases of Suja Abraham, a woman worker in a processing unit who was harassed in Mumbai, and 250 migrant women who went on strike on 14 March 1997 demanding an eight-hour day.
- <sup>60</sup> TNA, Development Dept., GO 2059, 23 August 1938.
- <sup>61</sup> TNA, Public Works Labour Dept., GO 804, 16 March 1942.
- <sup>62</sup> Alakh N. Sharma, "Flexibility, Employment and Labour Market Reforms in India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 21 (2006). It cites the problems of flexibility in labour and labour reforms as having an adverse effect on the wages of women workers and the vulnerability of women as facilitating the lowering of wages.