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978-1-107-13328-0 - Women Workers in Urban India
Edited by Saraswati Raju and Santosh Jatrana
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Women Workers in Urban India

In recent years, Indian cities have emerged as spaces of anonymous identities and seamless opportunities, sites that are balancing both modernity and traditional forms of living. This book engages with the role of women workers who are joining the workforce in the cityscape and bringing to surface contradictions that this duality offers. While employment opportunities have opened up and are constantly expanding for women, this edited volume interrogates whether their working status is breaking gender stereotypes or reaffirming them.

It surmises that whether women are working in offices or from home, contributing to the IT sector or labouring as petty producers, they are unable to break out of the gendered codes that place them at the lower rungs of the occupational ladder. More importantly, the hierarchical social order, comprising of caste, class and ethnic identities seems to echo in the gendered structure of the labour market as well. This volume studies the intertwining of work with embedded patriarchal notions of women's place in designated spheres, and the overt and covert processes of resistances that women offer in defining new roles and old ones anew.

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Preface

Very often, cities are seen as spaces of anonymous identities and seamless opportunities. They have also been conceived as spaces of transition from traditions to modernity although its supposedly linear trajectory has long been questioned and contested. Indian cities, for example, continue to display an ambiguous mix of both – the so-called modern trends existing in close proximity with traditional values and anchoring. Women's work in labour market provides an interesting site to interrogate these contradictions.

The 'shining India' paradigm talks about the expanding new generation employment avenues of work for women and the recent official discourses eulogizes about rising incidences of employment amongst urban women. Much of the available literature, however, suggests that global capitalism, while providing new opportunities to women, not only exploits the prevailing gendered stereotypes, but it also rearticulates them.

The most recent accounts from India suggest that the growth in paid employment has taken place largely in the informal sector. Whether or not such informalization works in the interest of women is a debatable issue. While some maintain that emerging occupational avenues, such as those available in export processing zones or in case of Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), have helped women significantly to access labour market, there are others who contend that progressively increasing use of technology in urban context offers opportunities only to those who have education and appropriate skills. Moreover, it has been argued that even the export-oriented production is largely driven by informal work. Notwithstanding these propositions, the urban labour market has a range of women – in high-tech IT sectors working from posh offices or from home; they are in home-based work as

petty producers; they are, at times, in the so-called masculine professions even as the absolute levels may vary and be miniscule. Intriguingly, their location in varied professions – high-end technically advanced work and/or petty work; home-based or outside homes – does not seem to necessarily alter the socially constructed gendered codes that are instrumental in assigning them places at the lower rungs of occupational ladder. More importantly, the hierarchical social order, encompassing overlapping caste, class and ethnic intersectionalities that typifies India in general seems to echo in the gendered structure of labour market, whether they are salaried, self-employed or at home as paid as well as unpaid family labour. In other words, there are common threads running through the heterogeneity within the working women, both in terms of the types of work and the context in which such work is performed.

That said, it would rather be imprudent to argue that structures are super-efficient in erasing or overcoming sparks of the resistances and negotiations that women may manage to enter into by virtue of their access to paid work, however limited or indirect the struggle may be, through individual agency or collectively. Rather than positing structure and agency as binary opposites or privileging postmodernist take on individualized subjects over foundational metanarratives (such as overarching patriarchy, for example), the book proposes to juxtapose these appositional constructs and analyse the interplay of both. The complexities involved therein make it possible to theoretically study the intertwining of work with embedded patriarchal notions of women's place in designated spheres. In other words, pulling together the different strands of occupational diversity in which women are engaged, the main purpose of this book is to understand whether or not the new economic spaces, contingent upon neoliberal market changes, have been able to redeem women from the traditional gender relations in the sphere of work. What, if not so overtly, are the splashes which are marked by struggles and intercession by women questioning the status quo.

Overall, the working premise that binds through the volume is that the metro cities – presumable panacea of social change – continue to harbour socio-culturally engraved gendered norms irrespective of where women work. However, it would be of interest to trace the specifics of the various occupational avenues that engage women workers; to what extent they create differences and where they forge a collective identity amongst workers by virtue of being women. The underlining concern would also be to look into the disruptions that intersect the traditionally operative gendered specificities in the labour market. That is, what are the ways in which the resilience of

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traditional gender ideologies and structural constraints limiting women's options are maintained over time and importantly, the sets of circumstances under which such ideologies and constraints can be challenged, weakened, defused and renegotiated? Such a framing allows one to juxtapose the socially encoded gendered locations of women workers with the continuing and emerging material realities at the ground.

It is almost an impossible task to acknowledge who all contributed to this endeavour – directly or indirectly our lived experiences have been the culprit. And yet, transcending them to a visible and concrete outcome could not have been possible without our contributors who readily shared with us their understanding with much support and cooperation. We are grateful to them. The anonymous reviewers with their diligent and thought-provoking remarks helped us rethink and fine-tune many of our propositions. We would like to express our gratitude to them.

The idea of the book took shape when the first editor was on a Thinker-In-Residence program at the Alfred Deakin Research Institute (ADRI), Deakin University, Geelong Campus in Australia. We greatly appreciate the encouragement and bonhomie we received from colleagues there.

We both remain blissfully obliged to Jawaharlal Nehru University which has always been an academically active space: challenging, inspiring and cajoling at the same time! While Saraswati teaches at the Centre for the Study of Regional Development, it is the Alma Mater for Santosh.

The publication process has been joyful. We would like to acknowledge and thank the editorial team at Cambridge University Press for their collaborative and meticulous supervision at every stage of putting together the book.

Saraswati Raju
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