

1 Introduction

The relative positions of women and men in the labour market are products of their positions in the family (Beechey 1987: 6) as well as in wider arenas such as locality and state. This paper identifies changing labour market relations in West Bengal agriculture and argues that these cannot be fully explained without extending the analysis beyond paid work to the questions of **who does what work and why** inside labour-selling households. The study of changing work allocation between genders, generations and different kin within poor households is central to the theme of gender and poverty. Moreover, 'gender is crucial to specifying the interactions between intrahousehold processes and non-household institutions' (Hart 1995: 59).

Wage work in agriculture – particularly rice production – is the major source of cash income for poor men and women in rural West Bengal. In the 1991 Census of India, 5.8 million people in West Bengal were recorded as primarily crop cultivators (whether on their own or rented land) and 4.9 million as having agricultural wage work as their main occupation. Although on average women workers are paid less than men, recent reports suggest that the gap between male and female wages has been narrowing in a general context of rising average real wages. The trend towards equalisation of men's and women's wages has been tentatively linked to changes in the wider political economy in the state. West Bengal has (uniquely for India) been ruled since 1977 by a coalition Left Front Government, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)). Local-level collective wage bargaining, which is seen as characteristic of this regime, has been associated with a 'weaken[ing]' of 'patriarchy' (Sengupta and Gazdar 1997: 197).

However, in West Bengal, as elsewhere, average wages only tell part of the story of changing labour

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Linking Home and Market

*Towards a Gendered
Analysis of
Changing Labour
Relations in Rural
West Bengal*

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relations. Sengupta and Gazdar point out that because women in the six villages they studied hired out labour for fewer days per year than men and because those days were concentrated at times of high demand, the closing of the gap in average wages may disguise wage discrimination in particular tasks or seasons (*loc. cit.*). Furthermore, arrangements for hiring out labour vary within and across villages (Rogaly 1997a). Some employers and workers make deals covering just one day's work and refer to a prevalent going rate. Others are involved in pledges of labour in the future in exchange for an advance or loan. Still others arrange work at a piece rate: pay is directly related to quantity of rice seedlings transplanted or area of field harvested. Piece rates may be for gangs or individuals. There are also various forms of annual pre-commitments with either regular or lump sum payments. All the types of hired work arrangements in this list are archetypal. At the local level, there are important differences and the precise meaning of a labour-hiring institution is expressed in terms specific to that place.

The persistence of particular contractual forms in agriculture has been explained in theory and with reference to other contexts as well as West Bengal in terms of employers' strategies for accumulation, for social control, and the economic and social heterogeneity of the workforce (e.g. Bardhan 1979, 1983; Eswaran and Kotwal 1985; Binswanger and Rosenzweig 1986; Hart 1986; Evans 1993; Pal 1996; Rogaly, *op cit.*). Missing from most of the above is analysis of the ways in which work negotiations and deals struck **inside households over deployment to unwaged as well as paid work** form part of the decision to **hire out** labour in different types of arrangement. Because some contractual arrangements involve prior commitments to particular employers, those seen as 'responsible' for unwaged work may not be able to enter them. At the same time, as will be argued below, such 'responsibility' can influence and change the types of contractual arrangements employers offer to workers.

The 1991 census also indicated a low proportion of women to men among agricultural wage labourers. Women accounted for only 960,000 of those recorded – at 19.6 per cent the proportion of women in the total number of agricultural

labourers had changed little since the 1981 Census when it was 15.5 per cent. This has been explained by Amrita Basu with reference to a caste system which paradoxically permits social mobility for men but rigidly circumscribes women's roles. While the lack of polarisation between Hindu social ranks gives rise to possibilities for the relative status of particular local *jati* to be raised, the process entails emulation of high caste practices, including female seclusion. Women are seen as 'repositories of tradition' and are 'central to the construction and maintenance of lineages, kinship networks and caste boundaries' (Basu 1992: 13). However, by focusing – as Basu does – on the comparison of Bengali Hindu women with Bhil *adivasi* women in Maharashtra, the different ideologies of work and of gender with which most *adivasi* workers in West Bengal operate are obscured. Basu too easily elides being Bengali with being Hindu. Moreover, Basu misses the importance of seasonally immigrant women workers from Bihar, who are not included in the Census or National Sample Survey. While the low proportion of women to men among agricultural workers resident in West Bengal clearly limits the extent to which gender relations can be changed by a narrowing wage gap, it is precisely those women practicing seclusion and not therefore hiring out labour, who would stand to gain most from changing intra-household gender relations.

Indeed, although they associated the equalising of male and female agricultural wages with a weakening of patriarchy, Sengupta and Gazdar observed other processes working in the opposite direction. Patriarchy 'may have been strengthened' by the agrarian reforms of the Left Front Government, in as much as the reforms entailed 'the creation and consolidation of private property (as well as tenancy) rights in land, mainly in favour of male household heads' (*op cit.*: 197). Furthermore, *adivasi* women and girls showed less improvements in well-being (literacy and nutrition) since the early 1980s than men and boys from the same *jati*, who in turn had fared worse than *dalits*, Muslims and caste Hindus (pp.188–193). The systematic gender and caste/ethnicity-based deprivation continuing in the state into the early 1990s should provide a warning against a reading of the argument of this paper as *adivasi-women-are-better-off-because-they-are-more-involved-than-other-women-in-paid-work*. *Adivasi* women probably have benefited

from the narrowing of the gender wage gap more than other women but still rank last in terms of basic well-being indicators.

Processes deriving from the type of regime in power at the state level, as well as from prevalent ideas about appropriate work for women and men, need to be specified in any gendered analysis of changing rural labour relations in West Bengal. The next section of the paper provides a brief sketch of the practices of the CPI(M) in brokering employer-worker disputes in the countryside. It then draws on field-work carried out in two West Bengal localities in the early 1990s to trace changes in hired labour arrangements. In the third section, intrahousehold processes of work allocation are specified and are shown directly to influence the evolution of labour market relations. The fourth section concludes.

2 Changing Wage Labour Relations in West Bengal Agriculture

During the 1980s and early 1990s, rice output in West Bengal continued to grow rapidly following decades of stagnation (Rogaly *et al.* 1995). Growth in the production of rice has been associated with increased – though still seasonal – demand for workers. At the same time the Left Front Government had been the first in any Indian state fully to implement Panchayati Raj – governance structures at the ten-village, block and district level subject to regular elections on political party tickets.

The CPI(M) has relied on the countryside for the bulk of its support. This has involved a strategy of denying class differences between agricultural employers and their hired workers, manifest in West Bengal's CPI(M) affiliated peasant union – the Krishak Sabha – being unique in India in preventing the emergence of a separate agricultural workers' wing. At the local level, the challenge has been how to maintain the idea that workers and their employers have shared interests.

Wherever the CPI(M) had sufficient weight, local wage bargaining was managed by party cadres acting with the Krishak Sabha. Local cadres were

adept at understanding local power balances. The key was to keep both parties in wage negotiations satisfied that they had the best possible outcome – to appear sufficiently radical for workers (by, for example, organising wage strikes even after a settlement had been agreed) and sufficiently conservative for employers, who in many cases could not afford to pay much higher wages. Employers themselves were subject to exploitation by large-scale traders and processors (Basu 1992; Harriss-White 1995). However, the CPI(M) cadres include many more people of employer class than workers. Although Panchayati Raj has meant a great diversity in the caste and class backgrounds of **elected representatives**, party officials, including local level secretaries tend to be from employer households. Many such households include teachers (Bhattacharyya 1995) as well as other salary earners. Changes in labour market relations have been carefully managed without compromising employers' class interests.

While much of the economy of rural West Bengal revolves around rice production, its intensity varies by agroclimatic region. The two study localities² were selected to be illustrative (if not necessarily representative) of each of two of the main regions. The Purulia locality with an economy based on a single rainfed rice crop was characterised by undulating, red, laterite soils typical of the west of the state. The Bardhaman locality, down in the alluvial plains in the southern central part of West Bengal, possessed widespread groundwater irrigation, enabling the production of two crops per year. The two regions were linked by seasonal migration of agricultural workers. Not only were wages significantly higher in much of Bardhaman District, including the study locality, but employment could be guaranteed for periods of a month or more four times a year during the transplanting and harvesting seasons.

Data collection was concentrated around two periods: a lean season of little paid employment in Bhadra-Aswin (mid August–mid October) and the main harvest of the monsoonal rice crop in Agrahayan-Pous (mid November–mid January). The waged work and hiring-in of workers by 92 households was recorded in daily diaries to include amount, time, and form of payment as well as type

² Both are referred to by the names of their respective

districts.

of contractual arrangement. Twenty-six households, all labour-sellers, were further involved in an activity analysis: detailed study of what each member did with their time. The activity analysis was carried out by two research assistants, each of whom resided continuously in one locality. Four visits were made to the sampled household in each season. Recording the data required interviewing household members individually as far as possible and therefore a 'visit' actually entailed a number of journeys to and from each homestead.

I moved between the localities living alternate fortnights in each. All three of us spent time sitting, chatting and listening to gather ideas about work as well as conducting other fieldwork rituals. The data says a lot about practice and rather less (directly) about gender and caste ideologies. However, the former were used to provide signposts to the latter as '[e]conomic processes such as differentiation of tasks by gender...are actually a set of practical activities which operationalise gender ideologies. They are, therefore, in some sense the outcome of local ideas about the appropriate behaviour of women and men' (Moore 1992: 135).

The distribution of landholdings among households³ was skewed in both localities. However, in common with most of West Bengal, the agrarian structure was dominated by fragmented small-holdings, so that while, for example, there were a significant number of completely landless households in Bardhaman district, the median size of holding was 0.15 ha. In the Purulia locality, the distribution of landholdings – though still skewed – was more even than in the Bardhaman locality; most agricultural worker households cultivated some of their own land. Median landholding size was 0.51 ha. The value of selected assets, including land, live-stock and agricultural implements varied among worker households in the two localities from Rs 0 to Rs 100,000. Employer assets stretched up to Rs 600,000 in the Purulia locality and Rs 1.5m in the Bardhaman locality. So, while workers and employers were distinguishable by wealth, there was also economic differentiation within the worker group⁴.

³No attempt was made to measure the extent to which women had *de jure* or *de facto* land titles. In general, inheritance across all groups was patrilineal and most post-marital residence virilocal.

Agricultural workers belonged to a number of different *jati*, religious and ethnic groups in the Purulia locality, and included both *adivasis* and *dalits* in the Bardhaman locality. Caste Hindus did not hire out manual labour (with a few notable exceptions) nor did women from status-aspiring *dalit* or Muslim households in the Bardhaman locality. Ideas about the inappropriateness of women doing paid work for other households were used, especially by Bagdi *jati* households, to increase their status. As a result, women who broke through this ideology out of economic necessity faced lower wages: employers knew that lower payments would not be collectively challenged due to the lack of solidarity between those few Bagdi women who sold labour and other Bagdis (see Rogaly 1996).

It has been shown with regard to other parts of rural Bengal that ideologies of who should do what kinds of work are not uniform across caste/ethnic groups (see Mayoux 1982; Banerjee 1989–90; Bardhan 1993; Chen 1995). The same was true in the study localities. There was no common set of ideas at the level of the locality about what paid work women and men should do. Caste Hindus hold manual work by women outside the homestead in low esteem. Paid manual work for others ranks lower still. On the other hand, Santal society differentiates much less between the appropriateness of hiring out labour by women and men. Nevertheless, autonomy in relation to caste Hindu and Muslim employers is highly valued and there is a tradition of communitarianism which can enable Santal people to avoid pledging labour in advance. In both study localities Santals ran community grain banks for those hard up in the lean seasons. 'Untouchable' Hindus demonstrated less capacity or inclination to resist labour-tying arrangements compared to Santals.

The practice of hiring out labour by women and men from labour-selling households stood in marked contrast in the two localities:

Men in the Purulia locality worked a higher percentage of days in unwaged productive activities in both seasons than men in the Bardhaman locality. Own-account cultivation

⁴ Many studies classify rural worker households into landed and landless. The valuation of a broader basket of assets enables us to say more about the economic differences between such households.

was more important to agricultural worker households in the Purulia locality, the seasonal peaks in labour demand were lower and there was less seasonal labour-tying, which pre-committed men to particular employers in the Bardhaman locality.

In the Bardhaman locality the percentage of days men were employed was three times the percentage of women employed in both seasons. In the Purulia locality, the proportion of days worked in paid employment by men and women was equal in the lean season and **higher** for women than men in the peak season. This difference is a manifestation of the different ideas about the appropriateness of women hiring out labour in the Purulia locality compared to the Bardhaman locality. In the former, women from all the labour-selling *jati* hired out labour, whereas among some labour-selling *jati* in the latter, women hiring out labour were breaking generally agreed practice associated with status-raising.

Although employers' power to set wages has been constrained by the politically-motivated determination of the CPI(M) to limit open class conflict in the countryside, employers have found other means to control the workforce. The evidence collected in employers' and workers' diaries together with interviews during revisits to the two localities in 1993 and 1994 suggest that employers in the intensively cultivated areas have increased the use of seasonal-tying arrangements, gang-based piece-rated arrangements and the employment of migrant workers. Advances given in the lean season to local workers in exchange for a commitment to work on days of the employer's choosing in the peak season reduces the threat of labour shortage to the employer, while restricting the worker to the brokered going rate. Earnings for piece rate work are generally higher, but workers bound by a beck-and-call arrangement are unable to shop around for the best deal. Despite the heralding in much of the literature on India's rural labour markets of a trend towards 'casual' employment, in the Bardhaman locality more days were worked by local workers in seasonal labour-tying arrangements than in daily time rate arrangements.

Piece rate arrangements also tend to be an employer's response to labour shortage. They are resorted to most often when there is a rush to finish a job, particularly at harvest. The faster the work, the lower the quality, and hence the worse for the employer. Both labour-tying and piece-rate employment appear to have increased with the intensification of production. In particular, at harvest the rush to clear fields of summer paddy before monsoonal paddy cultivation requires both a secure supply of labour and speedy work.

The hiring of seasonal migrant workers, practised in southern central parts of present day West Bengal for at least a century, has increased rapidly in the last two decades (Banerjee 1989–90; Rogaly 1997b). Migrants include mixed gangs of men and women from labour-selling *jati* with different ideas about appropriate divisions of labour. In the Bardhaman study locality employers provided migrants with shelter in empty buildings inside employers' own hamlets. The cash portion of payment was made in arrears, with kind payments in rice made daily. Migrants were thus beholden to the employer who brought them to the locality. They could not switch employers at will because their shelter might be put at risk. Furthermore, they could not leave before the end of the pre-agreed period without losing the cash part of their wages. At the same time, the practice of housing migrant workers within employers' hamlets enabled continued social control of the workforce, through ethnic and caste division. Local workers' power is further contained by the ever-present knowledge that employers could hire more migrant workers.

In the Purulia locality, where most people cultivate just one monsoonal paddy crop without irrigation, there is a surplus of workers for most of the year. The lack of work and lower wages form part of the explanation for workers' migration to the intensively-cultivated areas of the state. However, dependency on rainfall means that productivity is related to the capacity of employers to transplant rice seedlings as soon as enough rain has fallen. At transplanting the labour market in the Purulia locality was tight, and the idea that transplanting was women's work tightened it further. Women's earnings in the transplanting season were higher than those of men (Rogaly 1997a). Women did not earn more than men for any task or in either season in

the Bardhaman locality, where the ideologically-based division of paid tasks between the sexes was far less evident, although far fewer local women engaged in paid work.

Changes in rural labour market relations in West Bengal cannot be explained without reference to changes in the system of local government, nor without acknowledging the ways in which the CPI(M) has sought to keep the support of rural workers, while employers have been able to use labour-tying arrangements and the hiring of seasonal migrant workers to maintain control as well as responding to production imperatives. The same imperatives combined with locally-specific ideas about appropriate work for women and men brought about relatively high earnings for women in the Purulia locality. Yet workers themselves – differentiated by wealth, gender and caste/ethnicity, and from households of varying size and composition – also make ‘choices’ affecting wages and contractual arrangements. Labour market processes are shaped by as well as at the same time influencing which women and men in worker households do which **unwaged** work and how that changes over time.

3 Unwaged Work in Labour-Selling Households

The livelihoods of agricultural worker households combine paid employment with **unwaged productive and reproductive work**.⁵ In the study localities daily reproductive work, including gathering fuels, all ‘dung work’ (such as preparing dung cakes for cooking fuel and regularly covering the floor with fresh dung), fetching water, cooking and serving food, was carried out almost entirely by women. Of the sampled households, the only one in which men had a major role in daily reproductive activities was all male. Generational reproductive activities including the feeding, bathing, supervision and general care of babies and very young children were also regarded as the primary responsibility of women. Men participated in the supervision of children – especially in helping older children with their studies – but to a far lesser extent. Babies were weaned onto solids over one to two years and it was observed that for women at work in the homestead

and elsewhere, breastfeeding took place at the same time as, or in snatched breaks from, other work. Child bathing and child minding were shared among household members, predominantly women. The care of very young children was considered a suitable task for women too old to carry out physically arduous activities.

There was a clear expectation by men and women that women and girls contribute labour power disproportionately to unwaged daily as well as generational reproductive activities. The construction of the notion of women’s ‘responsibility’ for daily reproduction of the household is not unexpected as it has been widely reported in other studies in South Asia and elsewhere. However, in order to understand how households deploy labour, we need to go further and ask **which** women carry out these tasks.

We would expect from studies such as Jeffery et al’s (1989) in Uttar Pradesh, for example, that new daughters-in-law entering a household outside their natal village would occupy the lowest point in the female hierarchy. In West Bengal too, joint households ‘have always tended to produce an **authoritative female** and a patriarch’ (Banerjee, *op cit.*: 195, emphasis added). Having the least power among women, we would expect new daughters-in-law to be given the most drudgery-intensive tasks inside the homestead.

However, among the agricultural workers in the study localities nuclear rather than joint family households were the norm, and more often than not there was only one adult female in a household. In these households, the **entire burden of daily reproductive work was borne by one woman**. Nevertheless, even in households with one woman and a girl, or two or three women, main ‘responsibility’ for the daily reproduction of the household still lay with one woman. This woman was not always the youngest female in age. Typically if a woman had a resident teenage daughter, the mother would be responsible for daily reproductive work. In joint households where daughter-in-law and mother-in-law were both resident, the daughter-in-law would be responsible. Where both a daughter-in-law and a daughter were resident, the former

⁵ The framework for analysing work allocation used here

was developed from Kothari (1991).

took prime responsibility for daily reproductive work.

Although this division of responsibility corresponded to the notions of a hierarchy of women as referred to above, there was some limited sharing of reproductive work among women in joint labour-selling households when the 'responsible' woman went out for paid employment.

In eight of the 14 sampled activity analysis households in the Purulia locality, prime responsibility for daily reproductive tasks switched between women at least once over the eight visits. Often this was to reduce the burden of a woman, who was hiring out labour, the burden being shifted either to a resident daughter, or to the mother-in-law. At peak work periods visits home by married daughters were common.

In the Bardhaman locality, switching of daily reproductive responsibility was only observed in two households, one of which was all-male. However, in five households, the person responsible for daily reproductive activities was regularly assisted by a daughter (three households), a mother (one household) and a son in the case of the all-male household.

In mixed households in both localities, male labour was only substituted for female labour when the women or girls were temporarily absent. The all-male household in the Bardhaman locality hired in female domestic labour at half the going rate for agricultural work (six rupees and one kilogram of rice against twelve rupees and two kilograms). Female household labour was never replaced in this way, providing further illustration of the gendered practice of daily reproductive work. Moreover, the meaning of a particular task changed according to whether it was done as unwaged reproductive work or in paid employment. While males would not carry out essential dung work such as spreading fresh dung on the homestead floor in households which included a female, such work was done by male employees in employers' cattle yards.

Thus, in both localities, while both men and women considered females primarily responsible for daily reproductive work, **which** female was responsible was also determined according to prevailing ideologies of female and generational hierarchy. For a given household size, however, the most important factor influencing the size of this woman's daily reproductive workload was the **number of non-dependent females in the household.**

The dynamic implications of the foregoing description are that women's roles change both with changing household structures and with changes in their kinship relations to other household members. A daughter-in-law one day may be a mother-in-law the next and it may be worth playing the waiting game and thus pursuing the status and accumulation of the household rather than battling out prevailing power relations from a position of limited power.⁶ Ideas about roles may also be seen as resources (Hart, this volume) and women might use ideas about the meanings of working for others or of not doing particular reproductive work to gain in subtle negotiations without rocking the boat of their potentially empowering life-cycle trajectory. On the other hand, joint households are 'extremely prone to tension' (Banerjee, *op cit.*: 195). Women may reject subjugation to a mother-in-law now, despite the promises of greater autonomy and choice later, preferring to cut and set up as a nuclear household with their husband to living with in-laws. This was found by Chattopadhyay and Jackson (1995) in a study in south Bihar. The price of being the 'sole' woman in an agricultural worker household is the ideologically ascribed position of sole responsibility for reproductive work.

The seasonal-tying arrangements increasingly used by employers of labour in the Bardhaman study locality represent a decline in employment possibilities for local women workers because of 'responsibility' for the daily and generational reproduction of labour-selling households. Women are more constrained than men in advance commitments of labour. The unchanging gender division of reproductive work contrasts with the self-exclusion by women from status-aspiring *jati* from hiring out

⁶ In their Uttar Pradesh study, Jeffery and Jeffery argued that this was a reason for lack of solidarity among

married women (1993: 110).

manual work at all.⁷ Yet the latter process, in limiting the availability of local workers, has been part of the reason for the greater incidence of labour-tying arrangements with men as well as the increase in the hiring of male and female seasonally migrant workers.

Unwaged productive work in the two study localities could be grouped into the categories of own-account cultivation, livestock – associated activities, crop processing, home manufacture and gathering of food and raw materials. Of the 306 adult days and 92 child days recorded in these types of work by the 26 agricultural worker households involved in the activity analysis, 107 and 18 respectively involved more than one category. Livelihood maintenance thus entailed combinations of productive activities. Some of the output of this work was sold and some consumed, but they had in common that tangible outputs were produced in the form of either cash following a sale, or goods for household consumption, and that the labour involved was not paid a wage. Adult men and women in the sampled labour-selling households were engaged in unwaged productive activities on a higher proportion of days than they hired out labour in paid employment (with the exception of men in the Bardhaman locality in the peak season). As we shall see, unwaged productive work (apart from own-account cultivation) also tended to be carried out by women rather than men.

The unwaged productive work done by members of labour-selling households varied across the study localities by wealth, household structure, caste/ethnicity and gender:

Households with land and/or livestock could more easily avoid the drudgery of paid agricultural employment. However, given the labour-intensity of the boiling, drying and dehusking involved in processing paddy and the clear cut sexual division of labour marking these out as women's tasks, more own-account production meant more work for women inside the household.

Whether households grazed livestock in the

Bardhaman locality depended on household structure. Only agricultural worker households with girls or old women grazed livestock as grazing work is time rather than energy intensive and has lagged returns. In contrast, in the Purulia locality, labour-selling households clubbed together to fund the cost of a *bagal* (herdsboy/girl).

Gathering of food and raw materials was more common in the Purulia than the Bardhaman locality and in the lean than the peak season. Food collected included gleaned rice and potatoes, wild greens, rats, snails and fish. Ideas about appropriate space determined who collected and from where. In the Bardhaman locality all Santal women were involved in collecting wild greens and other food away from the homestead, while married women of the status-aspiring Bagdi *jati* were more restricted. Food gathering was practiced, however, by Bagdi women borne in the locality.

Home manufacture was also more widely reported in the Purulia than the Bardhaman locality. There was less employment in the Purulia locality, especially in the lean season, and much more uncultivated land. Home manufacture in the Purulia locality included brooms, leaf plates and mats, patchwork quilts, making rope and carpentry. Men were only involved in the last two. While in the Purulia locality elderly women and girls were included in home manufacture, in the Bardhaman locality women reporting home manufacture (of winter wraps, quilts and embroidered mats) were those also 'responsible' for reproductive work in their respective households. The sole home manufacture activity reported by men in the Bardhaman locality was making fishing nets.

Who did which unwaged productive activity was determined in part by ideological and demographic factors and varied between the two localities and seasons. The work was mostly done by women (with the exception of own account cultivation). Which unwaged productive work was done by a

⁷ Women's self-exclusion is not simply determined by caste ideologies of work. Some women may appear to passively accept received ideologies but really be using

them to their own advantage in order to limit their workload.

particular household was also related to wealth. Women from **better-off** households had greater crop-processing burdens; and men from the latter households did more own-account cultivation than men from other households. However, women from **poorer** labour-selling households may have done more gathering and home manufacture out of compulsion. The extent of unwaged productive work could thus be seen either as a response to lack of year-round employment, or as a way of enabling greater 'choice' for workers regarding whether, when and under what conditions to hire our labour.

4 Conclusion

Employers' decisions about labour-hiring are critical in any explanation of labour market structure. They are not, however, as this paper has shown, all determining. Workers make choices too and their power is strengthened by possibilities for unwaged alongside paid work. In West Bengal the interaction between employers and workers in the labour market is mediated by the CPI(M), which, while being dominated by the employer classes, has been able very skilfully to garner electoral support from rural workers as well.

The CPI(M)'s brokering of wage negotiations has been referred to as a process of collective wage bargaining, which has in turn has been associated with a reduced gap between average wages for men and women, itself seen as a sign of weakening patriarchy (Sengupta and Gazdar 1997: 179; 197). Yet if the wage gap between women and men is becoming narrower, it affects those women not in seclusion, including many *adivasi* and migrant women. The low proportion of women agricultural workers in rural West Bengal reflects the specific gender ideologies of caste Hindu and status-aspiring *dalit* and Muslim households in areas of relative agricultural prosperity.

The pragmatic approach to employer-worker negotiation adopted by the CPI(M) at the local level is built on an implicit understanding of agricultural worker households' other **unwaged** productive and reproductive possibilities. The capacity of employers not to raise wages faster is based on the unwaged work performed (apart from own-account cultivation) mainly by women. On the other hand, this same unwaged work is part of workers' response to seasonal troughs in employment. It also provides the means for labour-selling households to resist fluctuation in wages. As has been reported elsewhere in South Asia, wages tend not to go down once a rise has been agreed (see e.g. Kapadia 1993).

Workers' actions are thus both contingent on and constitutive of the wider structures in which they operate. Gendered practices are locality-specific and are the outcomes of the interaction of multiple gender ideologies with others (e.g. ideologies of caste) and with demographic and economic variables. While a daughter-in-law may have less power in a hierarchical joint household than a mother-in-law, she may 'choose' to sit it out and wait her turn. On the other hand she may take steps to form a separate nuclear household with her husband, despite the sole responsibility for unwaged reproductive work, which would be likely to ensue. Who does which unwaged work and how that changes is strongly connected to the market for paid work, including the structures of contractual relations. As shown here, women constrained by ideas of 'responsibility' for reproductive work are less available for seasonal labour ties in intensively-cultivated areas (though such ideas may also be used by women to justify avoidance of drudgerous wage work). Ironically, the increasing incidence of such ties and of the hiring of migrant workers are caused in part by the seasonal tightening of the agricultural labour market, to which the withdrawal of women of status-aspiring *jati* from paid work contributes.

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