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## **Feminizing Responsibility? Women's 'Invisible' Labor and Sub-Contracted Production in South India**

By K. Kalpana<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Since the 1980s and 1990s, there has been growing global recognition and endorsement of women as economic actors whose income-earning activities contribute to the survival and livelihood security of impoverished households and communities in many parts of the developing world. Women's economic contribution is considered particularly valuable when population groups living below the income-poverty line have struggled to cope with the adverse social effects of neo-liberal economic reforms. Given this backdrop, the aim of this study is to examine closely women's experience of laboring in the lower end of the informal labor sector, their workspace negotiations and conditions of labor, and to assess the significance of women's work to the survival and well-being of their households. The paper focuses on a case study of home and neighbourhood-based food production units in order to show how women's labor in these units is shaped by the intersecting dynamics of household patriarchies on the one hand and the profit maximizing ends of private capital, on the other. Primary data was gathered through interviews and focus group discussions with women workers and owners of these units located in the working class and industrial belt of North Chennai, Tamil Nadu. The paper argues that there has been an excessive responsabilizing of the women who work long hours in unregulated workspaces and feed and care for their families, often in the face of male disengagement from supporting the household. While aid agencies and national governments valorize women for their efficiency in 'managing' household poverty and sustaining fragile livelihoods with skill and ingenuity, this study foregrounds the gender-unjust implications of vesting poor women with the prime responsibility for alleviating global poverty.

*Keywords:* Poverty, Women's Labor, Sub-contracting, Social Reproduction

### **Introduction**

Since the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a growing global recognition of women as economic actors, who make a vital contribution to the survival of low-income households and communities. International aid agencies and national governments have promoted women's income-earning and market-oriented activities, so that they might more effectively assist their families in coping with economic stress and livelihood crises. The validation of women's role as family providers has accompanied the re-assertion of poverty-related concerns in the late 1980s and the 1990s (Razavi 1997). These concerns were triggered by mounting evidence of the adverse social impacts of neo-liberal economic reforms or the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) on the world's poor, in particular on the health and well-being of women and children from

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marginalized communities – impacts that continue to have mixed, if not adverse, repercussions for women’s economic and social rights and entitlements in the 2000s and beyond (Cook and Dong 2011; Cornia, Jolly and Stewart 1987; Elson 2002; Kawewe and Dibia 2000; Razavi 2011; UNRISD 2005; Wamala and Kawachi 2007). Concomitantly, a growing body of research showed that where women had access to independent incomes, they tended to spend more on the essential consumption needs of the household, on food and health care and the welfare of children. Men’s earnings, on the other hand, were also directed towards recreational and personal consumption requirements. Dominant development actors, therefore, actively promoted women’s income-earning activities in order to meet the ‘anti-poverty’ objective of mitigating household distress among very poor population groups in a cost-effective and optimal manner (Razavi 1997). Women’s economic contribution came to be regarded as part of the safety nets that sustain households living below the income-poverty line.

Against the backdrop of the international development sector’s enthusiastic endorsement of women’s market engagement, this paper explores women’s experience of laboring in the lower end of the unorganized sector and assesses the significance of women’s work to the survival and well-being of their impoverished households in Chennai city, the capital of the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu.<sup>2</sup> The paper draws on an ethnographic study of home and neighborhood-based food production units, informally and yet securely linked to well-established private sector companies that rely on a feminized and ‘invisible’ work force and sub-contracted production chains as the prime strategies of capital accumulation. The paper aims to show how women’s work in these food production units is shaped by the intersecting dynamics of household and community-based patriarchies on the one hand and the profit maximizing ends of private capital, on the other. I discuss women’s motivations for engaging in paid work in home vis-à-vis neighborhood units and for choosing to work within neighborhood spaces when other avenues of paid work are not entirely unavailable to them. I discuss the ease with which women are able to enter, exit and re-enter paid work in keeping with life-cycle changes as well as women’s workspace negotiations for better working conditions and wage hikes. I seek to gauge women’s work burden and to understand its implications in terms of occupational health impacts. I also discuss the centrality of women’s earnings to the survival of their families, keeping in mind the different household structures that women belong to.

### **Women’s home-based work, gender relations and capital accumulation**

This paper is primarily concerned with women’s work performed within community and neighborhood spaces in the lower rungs of the informal economy. Home-based work or small-scale, labor-intensive activities carried out within the precincts of the home for monetary remuneration, constitutes an important sub-set of the informal sector. No matter how small-scale, under-capitalized and traditional a large number of survival-oriented economic activities in the informal sector might seem, we would do well to keep in mind that the sector rarely operates in isolation from the formal economy. Feminist researchers remind us that even subsistence production for survival, often undertaken by women of working poor households and communities, is not an aberration of the capitalist accumulation process but integral to it and even

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<sup>2</sup> This study is part of a research project titled ‘Changing Contours of State Welfarism and Emerging Citizenship: A Comparative Study of Tamil Nadu and Kerala’. The project was sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi. I thank Archanaa Seker and D. Manjula for their diligent and enthusiastic assistance with primary data collection.

necessary for its expansion (Mies 1980, 1981). Likewise, women's (paid and unpaid) productive as well as reproductive labor, performed sometimes as part of cross-border circuits of labour and migration, feeds into the capital accumulation strategies of both private capital interests and national economies in diverse ways (Custers 2012; Mills 2003; Mohanty 2003; Prugl 1999; Sassen 2003; Yeates 2009).

In the present phase of neo-liberal capitalist expansion in India and elsewhere in the world, a growing informalization of labor relations has taken place in consonance with the aggressive pursuit by global capital of cost-cutting competitiveness and of a flexible and cheap labor force, which is subject not to statutory regulations, but to market logic of hire and fire (Ghosh 2002, 2009; Standing 1999). In the emerging labor regimes, home-based production was found to be ideal in many ways, providing the flexibility in production structures that was much desired. Such work could be linked to larger chains of production and capital accumulation through diverse forms of sub-contracting, the 'putting-out' or 'domestic outwork' system, as it is variously known. Home-based workers, and women workers in particular, bearing the social identities of 'housewives' were seen as an optimal labor force by employers who could sub-contract and hire contingent rather than regular workers (Prugl 1996).

While theoretical analyses provide a broad brush stroke picture of how women's home-based work is functional from the point of view of capital accumulation, we need empirically grounded case studies that demonstrate how the relationship between women's low-paid and unprotected labor within community spaces and capital accumulation strategies play out in particular, local contexts. We need also to show how other actors such as trade unions, NGOs and local state actors and policies mediate this relationship, as this paper sets out to do. Re-thinking older frameworks that did not sufficiently engage with the perspectives of women workers themselves, feminist scholars assert that women are never mute spectators or inert beings acted upon by social structural forces, be they household patriarchs or oppressive employers (Pearson 1998). Heeding this, I foreground women's own testimonies of their lives and choices and the context-specific meanings (both positive and negative) they derive from participation in paid work or from being 'working women', even as I show how women's embedding in family and community spaces is central to the profit-accumulating strategies of private capital.

### **Study setting and methodology**

Given the 'invisibility' of women who undertake home-based work for the market, the field study began with a visit to the organizers of a prominent trade union (the Centre for Indian Trade Unions, CITU)<sup>3</sup> for assistance in identifying pockets of the city wherein women were engaged in home and/or neighborhood-based industries and trades in significant numbers. After repeated visits to these neighborhoods in the working class and industrial belt of North Chennai, we selected for study the tiny production units that make *appalams* or *pappads*<sup>4</sup>. Unlike most of the other trades that were transient and often disappeared from (and re-appeared in) those neighbourhoods, based on market vagaries and the availability and interest of the women workers, appalam making is well established and has a long history in the neighbourhood. It is estimated that about 1500–2000 workers (mostly female) are currently employed in the appalam industry in North Chennai.

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<sup>3</sup> A prominent and well-known national trade union in India, the CITU is affiliated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

<sup>4</sup> *Appalam*, *papad* or *papadum* is a thin, crisp, disc-shaped food based on seasoned dough usually made from black gram flour. It is consumed as a snack or an accompaniment to a meal.

In the neighborhood of Otteri, in which this study was conducted, 75 appalam-making units employ on average between 5 and 20 workers per unit.

The primary data collection carried out between January and March 2015 included observation of the appalam-making process in the neighborhood units, structured and in-depth interviews with a total of 60 women workers, focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted with the workers of two units and semi-structured interviews with the owner-manager of a unit and a trade union representative in charge of organizing the women appalam workers. Of the 60 women workers interviewed in Otteri, 51 worked in neighborhood units close to their residence and 9 worked out of their own homes. The women were selected for interview on the basis of the unit owners' willingness to allow the research team access to the units and the women workers' readiness to speak to us. We interviewed the women in their place of work based on their preference in this matter. In doing this, we sought to minimize the demands our interaction would make on their work time and daily routines. The trade union organizers of the CITU facilitated the initial contact between the research team and the unit owners and workers, allaying any fears the women might have regarding the sudden appearance of inquisitive strangers at their workplace.<sup>5</sup>

Our subsequent trust-building efforts with the unit owners and workers were successful, in part, because the three members of the fieldwork team (including me) had worked extensively with grassroots people's organizations earlier. Of the two research assistants on the project, one was a trained social worker and the other a community organizer-cum-NGO activist. I have had long-standing experience as NGO organizer and researcher of women's microcredit groups in the state of Tamil Nadu. Introducing ourselves, we informed the women that we were interested in making visible home-based women workers *as workers* by writing about their work-lives and their experience of laboring in both home and neighborhood workspaces. We added that we would strive to write about their work experience in ways that would inform and sensitize a broad constituency of readers who might include other researchers, activists and individuals working to influence policies. We took care, however, to disabuse the women of the notion that our interaction with them would directly produce any longed-for material change or positive transformation in their lives or livelihoods.

### **Home-based work in appalam and the entry of women**

In the 1950s, several entrepreneurs from Kerala (the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu) started the appalam business in North Chennai with the help of their extended families and supplied the product to local retail shops. With the rise of branding and marketing over the last few decades, big companies like Bindu, Ambika, Maan Mark and Popular Appalam, who export the product and earn foreign exchange, have established themselves as principal market players. As the market has grown, so has the demand for labor. Making large-sized appalams or the *pandi* appalams is a labor-intensive process and a skill that one acquires through adequate training. Interestingly, the transition from factory production to neighborhood unit and home-based production in North Chennai coincided with the entry of women into the trade. From the 1950s to early 1980s, established big players or trademark companies, as they are called in local parlance, directly owned

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<sup>5</sup> This initial contact point was of critical importance as we discovered. We attempted to build a rapport with women workers who made incense sticks (*agarbattis*) in similar neighborhood-based units in North Chennai, but failed to do so. This was due to the absence of an intermediary organization - NGO or trade union, that might have helped overcome the initial distrust.

and managed production units and employed male workers, who were paid monthly wages. The watershed change took place in 1981, following a trade union-led strike demanding higher wages.

After the strike, the companies decided to switch to piece-rate payment and to employ women workers simultaneously, aiming primarily to avoid labor legislation and payment of minimum wages. From 1981-82, the appalam companies began to put up boards asking for women to apply for jobs and advertising the presence of an appalam unit. Women first entered the trade as 'helpers' who would make the *papdi*, the premature version of the *pandi* appalams. The existing male employees accepted women's presence as subordinate workers (helpers) who earned a much smaller amount making the *papdis*. As women acquired the skills to make the large-sized *pandi* appalams, they began to enter the trade in large numbers, responding to the companies' selective recruitment of women workers. The entry of women and the introduction of a piece-rate system of wage payment proceeded in tandem with the exit of men, who sought higher paid employment elsewhere, and the emergence of unit owners, who formed an intermediary level between the company and the worker.

### **The sub-contracted production chain**

While women now constitute a majority of the appalam workforce, each unit might have one or two male workers who are involved in the stage of kneading the flour, which is seen to require brute physical strength. The distinct types of appalam piece rate workers include those who knead the dough, the *cutters* who cut the dough into small pieces, the *helpers* who flatten the cut pieces into tiny round shapes and the appalam *makers* who enlarge the pieces, mix them with rice flour and dry them. For every 100 appalams made, the payment is Rs.15 and is usually shared between the helper who is paid Rs.3.50 and the appalam maker who is paid Rs.11.50.<sup>6</sup> Women sometimes take along their daughters or younger siblings as their helpers to the unit. If the workers are overwhelmingly women, the unit owners are mostly men or in some cases, a married couple. The unit owner is the person who receives the raw material (sacks of flour) from the appalam company. S/he rents a house (also the owner's living quarters), recruits women from the neighborhood, manages the unit's affairs and oversees production activities. The unit owners also generally work alongside the workers and pay themselves wages on a piece-rate basis.

No more than 15-20% of the appalam work force in Otteri is home-based. The bulk of the women work at neighborhood units. The pervasive presence of neighborhood units, and the reason that appalam making is not solely a home-based activity, has to do with the process of production. The last stage of making the large-sized *pandi* appalams involves spreading them out to dry and requires physical space, usually an attached terrace. Those who set up and manage an appalam unit must ensure that their homes have the required space and the permission of the house owner, if rented, to run an appalam unit. Home-based women workers, who live in smaller tenements, make the small sized 'chips' appalams that can be dried in their front yards or on smaller terrace spaces. They obtain flour in the morning from the units close to their home and deliver the stipulated number of appalams to the supplier units by the end of the day. While appalam making from home is significantly lower paid than unit work, women who cannot leave their homes even for a few hours are able to find paid work by making chips appalam. We see how the appalam industry has optimally used the neighborhood residential spaces and women's life cycle related constraints in strategic ways to its advantage.

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<sup>6</sup> Those who knead the dough and those who cut it into small pieces earn Rs.27.50 and Rs.20.50 respectively for every five kilos of dough they work on.

### **Naming the employer: a political battle**

As part of a deliberately cultivated strategy to distance themselves from the workers, the appalam companies insist that each unit owner register the unit as an independent entity legally in his/her name. The company supplies the flour to the unit and establishes a regular relationship with it only after the unit is formally registered. Once the unit is registered, all transactions are conducted in the name of unit's owner. In the year 2013, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU)-led appalam workers union, filed a case in the labor court asking that the companies be held directly accountable to appalam workers for employee benefits and that they acknowledge their sub-contracted relationship to the units that receive the flour and supply the appalams to them. The companies in turn filed responses, claiming that they are no more than wholesale traders who buy from small traders or the 'real' manufacturers—the unit owners—and that they cannot, therefore, be held responsible for employee benefits. While the case has stagnated in the labor court after a few hearings, the CITU continues to maintain its position (argued in the court) that the supplier of the raw material is the real employer and cannot abdicate responsibility for the welfare of the workers. Currently, the only units that the appalam companies directly own and manage are the go-downs/sheds in which the storing and packaging of the appalams take place. The majority of workers in these units are also women, who unlike the appalam workers in the units, receive Provident Fund (PF) and Employees State Insurance (ESI) benefits that the companies regularly contribute to.

While a union does exist for the owners of the appalam units, it is generally acknowledged that it is a 'dummy' union managed by the appalam companies, with no real power to increase wages or offer benefits to workers. As the secretary of the CITU-led appalam workers union put it, 'We look at all unit owners as workers, even if they think they are above the workers'. When deposing before the labor commission in 2013, the workers union secretary declared before the commissioner that the office bearers of the unit owners union (also present at the meeting) were employees 'like us' and could take no autonomous decisions. All the office bearers present reportedly concurred, knowing that if they protested his statement, they would be in trouble when they returned to their neighborhood (Source: Interview with Union Secretary, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2016).

### **Why do women choose appalam work?**

The popularity of appalam-making among women in the Otteri area may be attributed to the familial nature of the neighborhood unit workspace. It was not uncommon for women to be working in units owned by their female kin. Two of the respondents were working in their sisters' units, while one was working in her mother's unit. A unit in which we conducted a focus group discussion (FGD) had 11 workers, seven of whom were sisters. The husband and mother of the unit owner, one of the seven sisters, also worked in the unit. The degree of comfort that women felt was reflected in their choice of attire. 30% of women said they wore nighties to work regularly, while 8.3% alternated between wearing nighties and saris.<sup>7</sup> Here we note that women almost never wear a nightie when they move out of their neighborhood to work. When asked why they had chosen appalam work, almost all respondents cited as the primary factor the advantage of combining the responsibilities of social reproduction and domestic care work. This advantage was

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<sup>7</sup> The nightie is a loose, flowing garment that is often worn by women in Chennai (and other cities as well) in and around their residential spaces, as a more comfortable alternative to the sari.

not only an outcome of the proximity of the workspace and its convenient location in the neighborhood. When asked if work in the units offered flexibility of timing in terms of coming to work late, leaving early and taking leave when required, 81.7% of the respondents answered in the affirmative. As a woman is paid for the work she does, she cannot be pressured to report for work at a fixed time every day.

Amongst the 60 respondents was a young mother, who left her infant at home and came to work in a neighborhood unit for approximately three hours every day. When her child grew a little older, she was confident that she would bring the child with her as she worked in her mother's unit. Children came to the units from school and spent time waiting for their mothers to finish work. Units sometimes doubled up as de facto crèches or nurseries, without any of the associated infrastructure.

Table 1 below shows the age break-up of the 60 women workers interviewed. The data indicates that appalam work in the units permitted women to manage household tasks and childcare alongside paid work. As the Table shows, women in the age group of 20 to 35 years, who are more likely to have younger children including infants and toddlers, constituted close to 42% of all respondents. Women in the age group of 35 to 50 years constituted 43% of the sample, while the oldest woman worker in the sample was 75 years old.

**Table 1: Age-wise distribution of sample respondents**

|   | Age (years) | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|-------------|-----------|------------|
| 1 | 20 – 35     | 25        | 41.6       |
| 2 | 35 – 50     | 26        | 43.3       |
| 3 | 50 – 65     | 8         | 13.3       |
| 4 | 65 – 75     | 1         | 1.6        |
|   | Total       | 60        | 100        |

The women were able to take (long or short) breaks from appalam work and re-enter employment fairly easily when their domestic arrangements and personal circumstances permitted it. Of the 60 respondents, 32 (53.3%) had taken breaks in the course of their working lives and re-entered appalam work. Twenty-one of the 32 women (66%) had taken short duration breaks of less than a year. And 17 of the 21 women had taken breaks that were less than six months in duration. The discussions with the women revealed that they were able to re-enter the workforce in the appalam industry reasonably quickly even after major life-cycle events that included marriage, child birth, childcare and its associated responsibilities. Besides flexible time schedules and the possibility of bringing children to the workplace, the likelihood that a young bride's husband and in-laws were accustomed to appalam work and would not object to her working in the locality soon after marriage, also explains how women were able to enter, exit and re-enter the workforce with relative ease in this sector.



### **Alternative job prospects and patriarchal social contexts**

The women interviewed were aware that an assortment of self and wage employment opportunities was available for women in and around their neighborhoods. Nonetheless, the preference for paid work in the appalam units was backed by women's conviction that alternative employment opportunities were dismal and involved drudgery. Besides, the same income or even more could be earned from appalam work in the units. A woman could push herself to work harder and longer and earn the money she required on a particular day. Comparing appalam work to domestic work in middle class homes, a respondent explained, 'I will not earn more money if I mop the floor twice'. Some women also expressed relief that they were spared the street sexual harassment that women routinely face when using public transport in the city and the discomfort and expense of a daily commute to work.

A few respondents also cited the absence of men in the workplace as a blessing. Besides the problems (of harassment) that male co-workers might pose, an all-woman workspace had other advantages. As one woman said, 'My husband will not send me for domestic work or anywhere else apart from this (appalam unit work). He suspects me of infidelity all the time'. A respondent averred that she was worried if 'others' (neighbors and relatives) would say something if she went out of home and the neighborhood to work. Another informed us that the proximate location of her work place allowed her to keep an eye on her teenage daughter at home. The imperative of safeguarding a young girl's reputation and protecting her from 'undesirable' relationships that might lead to cross-caste elopements is an ever-present concern that mothers of young daughters often express.

Amongst the 60 respondents, 10 were from the Scheduled Castes (SCs). The rest were the poor from the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and the Other Castes (OCs).<sup>8</sup> The social norms of female domesticity are stronger amongst these two groups and circumscribe women's choices with respect to paid work. When compared to women of the Scheduled Castes, those of the OBCs and the OCs in low-income neighborhoods are more likely to face caste and social status related barriers to working outside the home and the neighborhood. The question of mobility apart, the caste life-worlds that women inhabit mark certain types of paid work as socially acceptable and certain others less so. Caste-specific ideologies make it difficult for women from the socially advantaged and dominant castes to countenance certain types of employment such as housekeeping in shops and offices and domestic work in others' homes, because of involvement in sanitary work, considered to be socially menial. Appalam work, on the other hand, involves food preparation in workspaces situated within the neighborhood, enhancing its perceived status as 'respectable' occupation. It is necessary here to add the caveat that the small size of the study sample makes it impossible to draw any conclusion about the precise ways in which caste identities have intersected with women's choice of employment in Otteri and other neighborhoods in North Chennai. However we need to keep in mind that caste-mediated notions of 'respectable'

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<sup>8</sup> The Indian government classifies caste groups as Scheduled Tribes (STs), Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Class and Other Castes in decreasing order of social oppression and deprivation. The STs and SCs include the historically disadvantaged indigenous population of India that has endured the most severe forms of social discrimination and poverty. India's constitution has enshrined the principle of affirmative action for these social classes and castes. The term OBCs designates those castes that are deemed socially and educationally disadvantaged by the Indian government. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment maintains the list of the OBCs, SCs and STs and takes charge of implementing programs of social and economic empowerment for them. Policies of affirmative action directed at the SCs, STs and OBCs include reservations in public sector employment and higher education. The Other Castes are not covered by affirmative action policies, given that they constitute the socially advantaged and privileged sections of the population.

employment may also have shaped women's perceptions of what types of paid work are (or are not) available to them.

The paper has discussed, thus far, how the flexibility of appalam work, its all-women composition, its neighborhood location and the crisscrossing of the units by familial and kin-based social ties and relationships facilitated women's negotiations with household and community patriarchies, enabling them to secure and sustain access to paid employment. We turn next to the relationships between the women workers and the unit owners and the question of how the organizational dynamics of sub-contracted production as well as intermediation by the trade union shaped the work experience and the workspace.

### **Workspace negotiation, wage bargaining and trade union intermediation**

In the units visited, the women did not express dissatisfaction with the infrastructure available in the workspace. Some of the responses to our attempt to probe this dimension of the work experience underscored the women's perception of the workspace as an extension of the home/family space. One woman commented, 'Water, toilet, a place to sit and eat. We have everything here. It's more like a family.' Another opined that even when she did not carry her lunch, she shared the food of the other women in the unit and was happy that ties of friendship had made the workspace relatively pleasant to experience. According to the appalam workers union secretary, in a few units, the women had to go back to their homes for the use of toilets or visit the homes of their friends in the vicinity for this purpose. He added that not all unit owners permitted women to bring children and infants to the workplace. If a unit had a sufficient number of workers, the owner was likely to forbid women from bringing along young children, given the space constraints in most units. The CITU union, however, insisted that unit owners accommodate children, as it was deemed a pro-worker initiative.

The presence of a large pool of appalam-making units in the neighborhood allowed the workers to choose an alternative work environment in case of dissatisfaction with the working conditions. Quarrels with co-workers or a delay in payment by the unit owner could trigger an exit of a worker from a particular unit. Unit owners might also not give sufficient flour to workers they did not get along with, leading to tension and fights. Women shifted units if a new unit was opened closer to their homes, reducing the commute even further for them. The strict rules imposed by some owners with respect to timing and their reputation for being harsh and rude to workers put off women. If the business in particular units, measured by the quantum of flour regularly available, diminished for any reason, some of the workers would quit and join new units. As there was no mechanism that tied a worker to a particular unit, women were able to 'vote with their feet' as protest against work arrangements they disliked.

Insofar as wage hikes were concerned, the CITU-led trade union played a central role in securing yearly wage increases. The appalam workers' union formally presented a petition at the start of each year to the 'dummy' union representing the unit owners, with the implicit understanding that a strike would follow if the proposed increase was not accepted.<sup>9</sup> The years that big work strikes had taken place were 1981, 2013 and 2014. The strike action in 2014 was noticeable for the arrests of the women workers. Around 75–90% of the women workers usually participated in strike calls, excepting those who could not survive without the daily wages earned from appalam work. Sit-in and *gherao* protests (involving encirclement of buildings) were

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<sup>9</sup> Each year, the increase demanded (and obtained) was to the tune of Rs.1.50 for those who knead the dough for every 5 kilos, Rs.1 for the cutters for every 5 kilos and 50 paise for the appalam makers for 100 appalams.

organized outside the packing and supply depots and go-downs of the big appalam companies in order to foreground the responsibility of the companies towards the workforce. In January 2016, the wage increase was accepted as soon as the workers union submitted the petition and without any form of action on the part of the workers. Interestingly, it was the smaller companies that decided upon and initiated the wage increase, forcing the hand of the trademark companies in this matter. The small companies reportedly feared a strike more as they would lose their market (retail and other shops) to the trademark companies. With tonnes of stock in their go-downs, the big companies could bring their crates to the shops even during a period of strike. At the end of each strike, the small companies found that they had lost their regular buyers to the trademark companies.

The competition between small and large players worked to the advantage of the appalam workforce in terms of providing the workers and their union some leverage with respect to collective bargaining and wage negotiations. While the trade union could not prevent the transition from monthly wages to piece-rates (in the early 1980s), they had continued to organize the workforce through the 1990s and the 2000s, securing some wage relief for the workers. In the next section, we turn to the question of what employment in the appalam industry meant for women and the extent to which it financially sustained the different kinds of households that the women were a part of.

### **Women’s earnings and household survival**

When discussing women’s earnings from appalam work, a respondent mentioned that there were numerous instances of women making appalams ‘day and night’ to put their children through school or get them married. This perception was reiterated by several respondents who described appalam work in the neighborhood units as a means for destitute women to survive with dignity. It is note-worthy that many other types of home-based and piece-rate work in the Otteri area (such as stringing beads for necklaces) only allowed the worker to supplement the primary breadwinner’s income. However, appalam work was different insofar as it allowed its workers to be the primary earners of their families, should their household circumstances warrant it. Table 2 below shows the marital status of the 60 respondents in our sample.

**Table 2: Distribution of sample respondents by marital status**

| Marital Status     | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------|-----------|------------|
| Married            | 41        | 68.3       |
| Unmarried          | 2         | 3.3        |
| Divorced/separated | 13        | 21.7       |
| Widowed            | 4         | 6.7        |
| Total              | 60        | 100        |

As the two unmarried women (aged 25 years each) were part of their natal household consisting of their parents and siblings, we might regard the households of the 17 (13 + 4) divorced, separated and widowed women as the potential female-headed households in this sample. Of the 17, 6 are sole earners, whereas one other income earner (son, daughter, mother or mother-in-law) co-supported the households of the others. Of the 17 women, the households of 11 depended exclusively on earnings from appalam work, with the other income earner also employed in the appalam industry. Table 3 below shows women's earnings from appalam work (calculated for a month) for all 60 respondents.

**Table 3: Monthly earnings of sample respondents from appalam work**

| Women's monthly earnings (in Rupees) | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| <1000                                | 2         | 3.3        |
| 1000 < 2000                          | 16        | 26.7       |
| 2000 < 4000                          | 24        | 40         |
| 4000 < 6000                          | 10        | 16.7       |
| 6000 < 8000                          | 4         | 6.7        |
| 8000 < 10,000                        | 4         | 6.7        |
| Total                                | 60        | 100        |

As the Table shows, a major part of the respondents (40%) earned between Rs.2000 and Rs.4000 a month. The 8 women who earned upward of Rs.6000 a month included those whose economic need was dire as well as those who could work more hours per day, as they were free of childcare responsibilities. For instance, Kamala<sup>10</sup>, 42 years, makes Rs.10,000 a month from appalam unit work. Her husband works as a driver and earns a monthly wage of Rs.10,000 as well. Her two daughters (aged 18 and 21 years) are both in college. Kamala needs to finance their education. When the opportunity arises, Kamala also works as a catering helper in marriage functions to make some additional money. On the other hand, Susila, 56 years, makes on average Rs.1000 or less a month from appalam unit work. She is a diabetic and the primary caregiver of her mentally ill daughter, whom she accompanies frequently to the outpatient clinic of an NGO-provided mental health facility. Her family members also include her husband (a milk seller) and her grandson (a painter), both daily wage earners.

In order to obtain a sense of how important women's earnings were to the survival of their families, Table 4 below shows women's income as a percentage of total family income. Table 4 shows this break-up for all 60 respondents as well as for the 17 respondents who were divorced, separated or widowed.

<sup>10</sup> All names of respondents have been changed.

**Table 4: Share of women’s income in total family income for all respondents and for single respondents**

| Share of women’s income in total family income | All respondents | Percentage | Divorced, separated & widowed respondents | Percentage |
|--|-----------------|------------|---|------------|
| 0-25%  | 20              | 33.3       | 1   | 5.9        |
| 25-50%   | 27              | 45         | 7   | 41.2       |
| 50-75%   | 7               | 11.7       | 3   | 17.6       |
| 75-100%  | 6               | 10         | 6   | 35.3       |
| Total  | 60              | 100        | 17  | 100        |

As the Table indicates, 45% of all respondents were contributing between a quarter and half of total family income, while 21.7% contributed more than half of the total family income. As might be expected, a significantly higher percentage (52.9%) of respondents who were divorced, separated or widowed contributed more than half of family income. In the last category (75–100%), all 6 women contributed 100% of family income. All were *de jure* female-headed families, where the husband was dead or permanently absent. Four of the six women lived alone and supported themselves. Two of them had two dependent children each. The share of women’s income apart, the question of how women spent their earnings is also significant from the viewpoint of understanding how crucial women’s contribution was to household wellbeing. It was found that women’s earnings primarily financed welfare-enhancing consumption expenditure of their households and enabled them to meet the self-consumption needs they prioritized. The respondents identified food and house rent as the most common end-uses of their incomes, followed by children-oriented expenses (such as clothing and snack food), women’s own needs, health care and education related expenses and the repayment of debt of household members.

### **Being working women: a blessing and a curse**

Almost all the women interviewed asserted the identity of ‘working woman’ with pride in response to a question probing the dimension of self-identification. As women’s responses indicated, the (self and family) recognition that they made a significant contribution to family incomes was a critical factor here. ‘Yes of course, I am a working woman, I brought up my sisters with this money’, ‘I was able to take care of my son’ and ‘I stand on my own feet’ were some of the responses. A woman informed us that she had separated from her husband who had sought to control her. Resisting his domineering ways, she left him and supported her children with the wages from appalam work. Women’s status as income-earners enabled a measure of dignity within marriage, even when the wages they earned were not critical to family survival. For instance, one respondent acknowledged that her husband could not put her down during arguments, as she was

earning an income. Therefore, women persisted with appalam work even in the face of their spouses' disapproval, in a few cases. Married to a government employee who earned well, a home-based worker made appalams from home, despite her husband's unconcealed irritation at the sight of the flour and her work.

Three women testified to how the neighborhood unit work served as a welcome break for those who craved a few hours of 'escape' from home each day. One commented on the relaxing working atmosphere of the unit, which is a 'let out for all the sorrows at home'. Another asserted that she was happy only when she was working. For the most part, the respondents' families recognized and respected the women's financial contribution, driven as it was by the economic needs of the households. One respondent affirmed that her family was proud of her income earning and that they were accustomed to women working as her father had died early, forcing the children to fend for themselves. In a telling response to our question on what her family thought of her employment, another woman replied bluntly, 'There's nothing to think. There's a need and there's no choice'. When discussing the question of family support (or otherwise) for women's earning during a FGD conducted with 11 workers of an appalam unit, a woman emphatically said 'These days men also don't want women to sit at home. They don't mind us working anywhere as long as the money comes on time. "Don't ask me, you earn", is what they say'. Her co-workers enthusiastically endorsed her response as an accurate commentary upon a changing and lamentable state of affairs, marked by men's readiness to renounce their role as primary family provider.

While this employment provided women some leverage vis-à-vis household negotiations, laboring in the appalam industry was not costless, especially for the women who worked long hours daily in the units or at home. About 23.3% of the respondents reported that they spent, on average, between 5 and 7 hours, 25% between 7 and 9 hours and 28.3% between 9 and 11 hours a day on appalam work. Five respondents reported spending between 11 and 13 hours and two reported spending more than 13 hours a day on appalam work. Our discussions with the women workers included the issue of what kinds of household and personal arrangements had enabled them to engage in paid work. Each respondent mentioned more than one type of domestic arrangement that made possible her paid work so that there were a total of 82 responses to this question. Table 5 below, which presents the percentage break-up of the 82 responses, shows that the most frequently used strategy of the woman worker was that of starting the day early in order to fulfill multiple responsibilities, including unpaid and care work at home. The data indicates that sharing of household chores with male members of the household is a rarity and that women resorted, more commonly, to strategies amounting to self-exploitation.

**Table 5: Personal and household arrangements enabling women's paid work**

| <b>Personal and Household Arrangements</b>    | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|---|------------------|-------------------|
| Starting household (HH) work early in the day | 50               | 61                |
| Shifting work to female HH member             | 14               | 17.1              |
| Cutting recreation/ rest time                 | 9                | 11.0              |

|                                    |    |     |
|------------------------------------|----|-----|
| Shifting work to male HH member    | 5  | 6.1 |
| Using state or NGO provided crèche | 4  | 4.9 |
| Total                              | 82 | 100 |

The women reported multiple types of pains and ailments that they attributed to the physical demands of appalam work and the toll it took on their bodies. We elicited a total of 121 responses to a question regarding the health effects of appalam work, with each respondent reporting more than one kind of ailment or bodily discomfort. 20.7% of the ailments reported were those of lower back pain, 19% stiffness of the body, 17.4% wrist pain (due to the constant flicking motion required to flatten the dough), 14.9% upper back pain, 12.4% shoulder pain, 9.1% neck pain, 3.3% headache and 3.3% overall fatigue. One respondent stated that she received two injections a week at a nearby clinic in order to cope with the dust allergy induced by constant exposure to the flour. Yet giving up the employment was not an option for her.

### **In the eyes of the state: A manual worker?**

While the appalam-making women were absolutely certain of their identities as working women, the question of whether they were visible as *workers* in the eyes of the state remains. This question has to be addressed with reference to the women's registration and their interaction with the state government's Tamil Nadu Manual Workers Welfare Board. The Board was constituted in March 1999 in order to implement the provisions of the Tamil Nadu Manual Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Work) Act, 1982. The state government passed the 1982 Act after construction workers in the unorganized sector (many of them women workers) took to the streets in 1979 demanding unemployment benefits and minimum wages and began to unionize themselves. Large-scale mobilizations and demonstrations by construction workers took place in the year 1981-82, pressuring the (then) Chief Minister to promise and subsequently pass the Manual Workers Act in 1982.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, this was the first act to cover all workers irrespective of the employer-employee relationship since a permanent relationship with employers had to be demonstrated in all laws thus far.

The original intent of the Manual Workers Act of 1982 was to regulate employment and working conditions in the unorganized sector, as explicitly stated in the name of the Act. However, this objective has never been addressed and the welfare boards that were set up, subsequently to the Act, only offer relief and welfare measures to workers. Currently, the Manual Workers Welfare Board administers the state government's social security and welfare schemes for workers of both sexes that include compensation for accidental death or disability, funeral expenses, pension benefit when the worker completes 60 years of age, disability pension, education fellowships and marriage assistance for the children of workers, maternity benefits for women workers for two pregnancies and assistance for miscarriage or medical termination of pregnancy (Govt of Tamil Nadu 2013). The appalam workers union secretary estimated that the CITU-led union had

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<sup>11</sup> For more contextual information on the unionizing and protest action by construction workers, which led to the passing of the 1982 Act, see Geetha (1996).

facilitated the registration of close to 50% of the appalam workers in the neighborhood of Otteri with the Manual Workers Board and that it had been a struggle to accomplish this.

It appeared that the state bureaucracy had not made it easy for the workers to register with the Board and avail the benefits on offer. The workers are required to visit directly the Welfare Board to join as members, for renewal of membership, to obtain subsidies and other welfare and relief measures and so on. In an earlier period, the trade union was permitted to appear on behalf of the workers and submit the workers' documents. During the tenure of a particular state government (2006–2011), the rule had been changed, mandating that workers be directly present and that they represent themselves at the Welfare Board office. While the ostensible intention was to prevent non-workers from joining the Board, the workers had little time or energy to make the repeat visits required to process membership and other benefits. As the appalam workers' union secretary put it, workers who have to sacrifice wages of Rs.1000 in order to get a benefit of the same amount or a little more were hardly likely to consider it a worthwhile pursuit.

Whatever the shortcomings of the state's administrative procedures, the women appalam workers interviewed were forthcoming and emphatic on what they expected from the government and/or their employers that could enhance their work experience. With regard to social security provisions, several women asked for housing benefits, medical insurance, educational scholarships for children and old age and other pensions. One worker said, 'I have been working for 30 years and when I stop I will have only my wage to show for it. Unless the government decides to give me a pension'. Another told us, 'So many of us are single women who live alone and depend on the appalam money for our next meal. There should be a special welfare scheme for women like us'. With respect to their rights as workers, quite a few respondents asked that the current piece-rates be converted to monthly wages with provisions for a minimum wage and periodic wage revisions. While the wage did rise when the union announced protest action, the strikes were by no means costless for the women. As a woman described it, 'We sat in strike for a whole month to get an increase of 50 paise (for every 100 appalams made). How hard it was and how much our families suffered that month!' Several respondents asked that the Provident Fund and the Employee State Insurance (ESI) schemes be extended to them. One worker said in strident tones, 'During festivals, a bonus. And when we fall ill, we want leave and our wages too!' Significantly, the women's demands and expectations displayed a clear understanding of the precise measures and interventions required (both on the part of the state government and the 'real' employers—the appalam companies) to formalize their employment, improve the conditions of work and mitigate their current status as informal workers.

## **Conclusion**

In recent times, donor agencies and other influential actors in the development sector have valorized the skill and ingenuity with which poor women have tenaciously pursued fragile livelihoods in insecure, harsh economic terrains. Drawing on documented evidence of women's labor (subsistence, unpaid, low-paid) in rural and urban settings, dominant development discourses (as seen, for instance, in World Bank 1991 and 2012) have foregrounded women's agency as micro-entrepreneurs and managers of household poverty or as the ideal subjects of anti-poverty programmes who cultivate entrepreneurial subjectivities and contribute, in valuable ways, to the survival of their impoverished households and communities coping with the effects of neo-liberal economic restructuring (Chant 2008; John 1996; Kalpana 2015, 2017; Wilson 2013). Women's economic agency began to receive development policy attention from the period (1980s and 1990s)



that concerns and fears regarding rising poverty, unemployment and declining access of large sections of the world's poor to public services gained ground. Concomitantly, many scholars concur that there has been a growing informalization of the workforce in many parts of the world, driven by capital's pursuit of flexible, casual, irregular or contract labor, shorn of state protective legislation and subject to market logic of hire and fire (Standing 1999).

This paper closely examined the work experience of women appalam makers in Chennai city laboring in the lower rungs of the informal sector in an industry that, in a calculated manner, sought to informalize its workforce at the same time as it sought to feminize it. In the early 1980s, women entered an established industry that had hitherto been dominated by men, initially as subordinate workers (helpers) and eventually became fully trained appalam makers. The entry of women in large numbers, the introduction of piece-rate based wages and the creation of an intermediary level of unit owners were inter-linked developments that drastically changed capital-labor relations in the appalam industry of North Chennai. Even as men moved out of the industry seeking higher paid employment elsewhere, women emerged as a disciplined workforce willing and eager to accept the piece rate wages on offer. Women's primary responsibility for social reproduction, their immersion in care work and limited mobility or, in other words, women's relative lack of freedom became a resource for private capital, which scrupulously sought to avoid direct association with its feminized workforce. Observation of the units revealed that the appalam companies had optimally utilized neighborhood residential arrangements (both small and larger tenements) and women's life cycle related constraints and opportunities to create multiple worksites, some within women's homes and many in neighborhood units. The interviews with women workers demonstrated the ways in which patriarchal and possibly also caste-mediated social relations and ideologies have made available this workforce for exploitation by the export-revenue earning appalam companies, which have pursued sub-contracting and labor law-evading strategies of growth since the 1980s.

The trade union that had established its presence among the appalam workers of North Chennai since the inception of the industry in the 1950s led persistent struggles for wage hikes. In addition, market competition between the large, trademark companies and smaller companies played a part in securing regular (albeit small) wage increases. The presence of a large number of units in the neighborhood have also provided the workers the option of 'voting with their feet' if working conditions are excessively unpleasant or oppressive in particular units. Many women interviewed were grateful for the opportunity of paid work close to their residence, either because it strengthened their bargaining position and widened space for maneuver within marriage or because it provided them the means to feed and fend for their families, as single income earners. Nonetheless, women rued the toll that appalam work took on their bodies, even as they regretted that the flip side of women's financial independence appeared to be men's negation of responsibility for supporting their households. Several women spoke longingly of the ideal-typical image of male provider and the promise of economic security it held out, even as they deplored men's actual performance that fell far short of the ideal.

This study finds that women's labor, both paid work in appalam-making and unpaid work in social reproduction that they balance owing to neighborhood-centered worksites, is, undoubtedly, a safety net that enables their households to survive economic adversity. We might argue, therefore, that there has been a responsabilizing of women for household survival and livelihood security or a feminizing of responsibility, with mixed consequences for the women workers. The experience of the women appalam workers of North Chennai urges us to be mindful that women's work burden might be on the increase, especially in a context (like the present case

study) where the gender division of household tasks and chores remains, by and large, intractable, despite women's engagement in paid work. Their experience also underscores the need (of women's studies researchers and activists) to critique the gender-unjust implications of dominant development discourses that consign to women the prime responsibility for alleviating household poverty on a global scale. Discourses that celebrate women's resilience and their ability to survive adversity are particularly suspect when they are not accompanied by an equal, if not greater, concern with the conditions in which women are laboring, the monetary returns to their labor and their capacity to engage in collective bargaining and assert their rights and entitlements as workers.

We might however draw hope from the fact that, in the particular case discussed in the paper, the women, working within their homes and neighborhoods, have refused to remain invisible and have fiercely contested the efforts of private capital to invisibilize them. Registering with the Manual Workers Welfare Board, participating in strike actions led by the union, claiming and asserting the identity of 'working women' and articulating a clear set of expectations with respect to what they are owed, by the state and their employer, are some of them. The challenge before researchers and practitioners of women's studies is to trace the emergent patterns of women's engagement with labor markets in diverse regional and institutional settings, map the shifting configurations of their paid and unpaid work, ask how women are (or not) organizing as *women* and as *workers*, and identify the strategies by which women and their allies are seeking to counter the power of capital and wrest concessions from increasingly indifferent states.

In India, women's studies researchers have not remained detached observers or academics ensconced inside ivory towers. Seeking to engage substantively with the economic marginalization of rural women living in poverty, they built strong ties with women's rights groups and the women's movement in India. In fact, as Agnihotri and Mazumdar (1995) note, the impoverishment of the masses of rural women well into the post-independence years propelled academics towards the (then) emergent women's movement in the mid-to-late 1970s. In the early stages, women's studies researchers generated valuable information on the conditions in which women of the working poor in rural and urban areas lived and worked. They also played an important role in shaping policy-related advocacy work carried out within the movement (*ibid*). This legacy of exchange, dialogue and partnership between women's studies practitioners and movement activists and the dual identities of the former, as both researchers and participants in the women's movement themselves, is what we may need to renew in order to take forward research and advocacy in favor of social and economic policies that transform the lives of women workers in the informal sector.

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