

15

AN INTERSECTION OF MARXISM  
AND FEMINISM AMONG INDIA'S  
INFORMAL WORKERS

A second marriage?

*Rina Agarwala*

In 1979, Heidi Hartmann began her influential essay on Marxism and feminism with a warning:

The “marriage” of marxism and feminism has been like the marriage of husband and wife depicted in English common law: marxism and feminism are one, and that one is marxism. Recent attempts to integrate marxism and feminism are unsatisfactory to us as feminists because they subsume the feminist struggle into the ‘larger’ struggle against capital. . . . We need a healthier marriage or we need a divorce.

*(Hartmann 1979: 1)*

Hartmann’s essay spurred dozens of attempts to locate a more progressive union between gender, class, and other systems of inequality (Sargent 1981). In the 1990s, the “intersection of race, class, and gender” achieved a near-mantra status in feminist writings. Nevertheless, more than three decades later, the divorce seems to have been finalized. Marxism is scorned as the deadbeat dad; feminism’s wounded offspring are uninterested in mending past rifts or speaking of voids in their present lives. The separation cuts through journals, conferences and social movements in the North and South.

One of the greatest costs of the divorce has been a dearth of analyses on women workers, which has undermined our understanding of contemporary shifts in structures of production. These shifts, which I have detailed elsewhere, are simultaneously material *and* gendered (Agarwala 2008, 2013). Since the 1980s, the world’s economies have been turning away from interventionist state models to liberalize their economies and integrate with a global market. To reduce labor costs and accommodate competition, governments have enabled employers to hire “informal” or “precarious” workers who are not bound by regulatory and protective legislations. Informal labor, which is cheap and flexible, is not a *new* phenomenon, but its character in recent years has changed.

For decades, informal labor was considered traditional, marginal, of lower value and “feminine.” Poor women have long been used to enable capital to maintain low labor costs while simultaneously accommodating patriarchal norms among middle classes who demanded a “family wage.” In addition, unprotected labor in poor countries has long subsidized protected

of informal home-based work and into formal work outside the home (Fernandez Kelly 1994). Although early feminists pushed governments to document women's work in the home (and on the land and in the market), they failed to expose how the structures and power dynamics of women's non-standard work in the private sphere subsidize the public sphere. They also overlooked the vested interests that capital and male workers have in women's continued subordination at home. Because first-wave feminists did not highlight the importance of women's home-based work to modernization, capital accumulation and patriarchal power, they failed to make a case for why we should examine how women in the informal sector live and organize.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a "second wave" of feminists explained the inequality between sexes not as a static function of women's access to work in a modern economy, but as a function of power relations supported by institutionalized social constructs. To trace the social constructs, feminists entered the household to examine intimate relations between men and women. In doing so, they highlighted "patriarchy" as a relational system that enables male exploitation of women and subsidizes capital accumulation. These insights connected the public and private spheres and catalyzed interest in three previously under-examined forms of women's work. All three forms of women's work absorb a share of capital's labor costs and entrench patriarchal power relations by keeping women financially dependent upon men and relieving male family members from doing undervalued, underpaid work.

(reproductive work), low-wage productive work, and informal paid work inside the home).

First, scholars highlighted women's reproductive work, such as growing food, finding water, building and home repairs, clothing the family, caring for the ill, and watching the young and the old. This work reproduces a healthy workforce to service the productive, public sphere (Kautsky 1971; Molyneux 1979). Most significantly, capital benefits from women's reproductive work at no cost. Second, scholars highlighted low-wage, productive female labor outside the home. In rich countries, capital used such labor to create labor competition, undermine resistance from male labor, and create demand for consumer goods as working women could no longer produce goods in their homes (Brown 1975; Cobble 1993; Milkman 1987). In poor countries, such work has been especially pronounced in the recent surge of export manufacturing (Caraway 2007; Lynch 2007; Ngai 2005; McKay 2006; Lee 1998). Capital justifies its use of underpaid female labor through patriarchal ideologies that consign women to the family and provide them with few alternatives.

Third, scholars highlighted women's informal paid work inside the home. Informal work (even when it takes place on the street or in a workshop) integrates the home with the workplace, which secures its invisibility from state regulators, its precarity, and its attractiveness to capital. Informal work includes self-employment where workers operate a business from or near the home, and the home provides storage facilities, an office and a source for employees. This work not only absorbs the unemployed, it also produces cheap goods and services for low-wage urban workers. Informal work also includes contract work, where workers manufacture products in their homes and transfer the products through subcontractors who ultimately work for a formally registered company. This work enables capital to lower their labor costs and retain labor flexibility. In India, informal work occupies 93 percent of the labor force.

workers occupy

Although all three forms of women's work are prevalent in India, few studies have applied second-wave feminist insights on patriarchy, capitalism and women's work to the Indian context. Instead, first-wave feminism continues to inform Indian scholarship on women's work today.

The impact of first-wave feminism on the Indian state began during the Independence movement. In 1938, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, and Subhash Chandra Bose, then-President of the Indian National Congress Party, established the National Planning Commission (NPC) to outline a development plan for India. One of NPC's

*Marxism and feminism among India's workers*

twenty-nine subcommittees, entitled "Women's Role in the Planned Economy," examined how women could be incorporated into the emerging economy. As elsewhere at the time, the report focused on women as individuals. As Maitrayee Chaudhuri (1996: 214) argues, these views were "a radical departure from the concern of 19th century reformers and early nationalists [in India] where middle class women's issues stemmed wholly from their lives within the family." The report also emphasized "providing women equal opportunities as a matter of right to enable her to take 'full share in India's planned economy'" (Chaudhuri 1996: 213). Equal opportunities were offered in the public sphere, and inequality in the private sphere was viewed as unrelated and assumed to automatically dissipate with equality in the public sphere.

This framework pervaded government policy for the first two decades of independent India. From the moment India was declared a free republic in 1947, women's rights to suffrage, education and property ownership were incorporated into the Constitution, and women entered leadership positions in the new government (Katzenstein 1978). By the mid-1950s, Nehru had also passed controversial reforms to Hindu personal laws to protect women of the lowest castes.<sup>1</sup> In terms of the material basis of sex-based inequality, Nehru tried to reverse the long-held British attempt to undermine the recognition of women's work in India. As noted in the British *Report of the 1871 Census of India*,

Women and children in the family are consumers, not producers. Their comfort and support is largely the object for which men emerge in reproduction, that is, take an occupation. To enter the wives and daughters on par with the workers of the household is to confuse the object with the means employed in attaining it.

*(quoted in Kalpagam 1994: 17)*

In contrast to the British, the 1938 NPC Report referenced Engels and pushed for the incorporation of women into the production sphere to ensure their equal status to men. While the report highlighted the importance of valuing women's domestic work, its definition of productive work was limited to urban industrial labor outside the home. As a result, it omitted the bulk of Indian women workers in agriculture and informal, home-based sectors.

Moreover, as in the West, even the efforts to recognize the narrow band of women workers in the public sphere backfired as government attention to women shifted to welfare provision for mothers. In 1953, India created the Central Social Welfare Board to dispense welfare to women under the telling Ministry of Social and Women's Welfare. Welfare provisions became a "women's issue" and focused on maternity leave, childbirth assistance and restricted working hours for women. These provisions hurt women's chances of attaining employment. In addition, new social norms dissuaded women from working in the public sphere. Factory work was blamed for impairing women's child-bearing capacities, and full-time motherhood became valorized. As Samita Sen (1999: 143) writes in her book on women workers in India's jute industry, "In the postwar era, women workers became less workers, and more mothers who had to work." Few scholars at the time tried to address the reasons behind this change in government sentiment toward women.

In the 1970s, left-wing social movements among poor women reinserted women's work onto the national agenda. After decades of promised progress, poor Indian women, who could not afford to become full-time, unpaid mothers, asserted the failures of industrialization and its inability to automatically uplift the welfare of women. Unlike earlier Indian women's movements that focused on the right to work, the 1970s movements focused on the need to work (Omvedt 1993). Their organizations took place within radical left workers' movements that enabled poor women to highlight their marginal status along multiple identities, including class, caste and

Marxism and feminism among India's workers



Figure 15.1 Gender and Labor Articles (1970–2006)

Source: Data collected from: American Journal of Sociology (1970–2008); American Sociological Review (1970–2008); Contemporary Sociology (1972–2008); Economic Development and Cultural Change (1970–2008); Feminist Review (1979–2008); Feminist Studies (1972–2008); Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies (1975–2008); Gender and History (1993–2008); Gender and Society (1987–2008); Gender, Work & Organizations (1998–2008); Indian Journal of Gender Studies (1994–2008); International Sociology (1986–2008); Journal of Development Studies (1970–2008); Journal of Gender Studies (1991–2008); Politics and Society (1970–2008); Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society (1975–2008); Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society (1994–2008); Studies in Comparative International Development (1970–2008); Theory and Society (1974–2008); Women's Studies International Forum (1982–2008); World Development (1973–2008)

to the ICSSR in a memorandum entitled *Indian Women in the Eighties*, noting that government planners “tended to view women only through the screen of families and households and not as individuals in their own right ... development imperatives should hold explicit mention of women as a target group” (quoted in Agnihotri and Mazumdar 1995: 1874). Targeting women as a discrete group enables scholars and policy-makers to avoid examining the social relations that create women's subordination.

X discrete

As a result of these efforts, India's Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980–1985) included a chapter on women and development for the first time. In 1985, a new department was created under the Ministry of Human Resources Development to implement programs to increase gender awareness and improve the socio-economic status of women. Several employment-generating programs aimed to increase women's self-employment, especially in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> As well, efforts were made to count various forms of women's reproductive and productive work inside and outside the home in national labor force surveys (Agarwal 1985; Bardhan 1993). The 1993 Indian Census and the 1999 National Sample Survey on Employment and Unemployment (NSS) finally altered their questionnaires to better capture this broader understanding of women's work.

Unfortunately, however, the second-wave scholarship that explored linkages between women's work, patriarchy and capital made fewer inroads in India than it did in the West, Latin America and Africa. Nirmala Bannerjee (1985, 1999) and Hilary Standing (1991) provide some exceptions by analyzing the impact that patriarchy has had on the sexual division of labor in

outside the home in formally registered *bidi* factories, while their wives engaged in unpaid reproductive and agricultural work at home. Capital offered low wages, resting assured that women were subsidizing male workers' reproductive needs.

After some years, the contradictions of capitalism emerged, labor organized, capital was forced to alter its strategy, and patriarchy came to capital's rescue. By 1960, registered membership in *bidi* unions was 98 percent male (GOI 1988). *Bidi* unions, which began in the early 1900s, fought to attain employer protection for their work in the public sphere (Agarwala 2008). In 1966, the first national legislation to protect *bidi* workers (the *Bidi* and Cigar Workers Conditions of Employment Act) forced employers to provide minimum wages, annual bonuses, maternity benefits, social security and safe working conditions. To avoid being regulated, employers hired workers informally. Due to the lack of mechanization in *bidi*-making, informal *bidi* workers could be home-based. As a result, almost all *bidi* factories in urban India had closed down by the mid-1970s.

To locate workers who were willing to work in their homes and outside the jurisdiction of new labor laws, employers turned to women. Patriarchal norms had prevented women from participating in the labor movement (with the exception of those in the independence movement); women were now desperate for employment as their husbands were being fired from their formal jobs; and women were willing to work informally.

Today, the largely female workforce cut and roll *bidis* in their homes and take the finished product to a contractor's warehouse to get paid on a piece-rate basis. Contractors conceal the employer-employee relationship, so employers are not held responsible for their workers under the *Bidi* Act. Some contractors provide workers with raw materials, while others demand that workers buy their own raw materials out of their wages. Contractors often refuse to pay for pieces, citing "bad quality," but keep the pieces nonetheless. Insufficient raw material is often delivered, forcing the worker to pay for the amount needed to finish the order. Finally, contractors often demand sexual favors in return for payment upon delivery. In my interviews with sixty women *bidi* workers, nearly all spoke of incidents of sexual harassment by contractors. Finished products are ultimately received by a registered, retail manufacturing company to be labeled, packaged and sold to distributors. This last step is performed by formally protected male workers.

is this correct? or should it be "singular" "cuts" "rolls" "takes"

### Patriarchy in *bidi*

Today, patriarchal ideologies are used by employers, male union leaders, and even female workers to justify exploitative working conditions in the *bidi* industry. In addition to not being held accountable for providing benefits, employers pay low wages. Workers interviewed in this study were paid an average of US\$1 (Rs. 50) per 1,000 *bidis*, and rolled 500 to 2,000 *bidis* a day.<sup>4</sup> To justify their low wages and no benefits, *bidi* employers rely on patriarchal ideologies that do not recognize women's work in the productive sphere. As Ravindra Shah, the owner of the largest *bidi* employer in Bombay, said,

*Bidi* is just their part-time work. They have other work to do in the home. This work is just extra and good for them. It is not their bread and butter. This is why sometimes they show up for work and other days they don't. They don't need the money that bad so they don't come regularly. If they came regularly, I could give them work every day. What can I do?<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, male union leaders rely on patriarchal norms to blame women for not fighting capital for higher wages and more benefits. Women, by definition, are viewed as unable to fight. Classic