

Book Reviews

U. Kalpagam. *Labour and Gender: Survival in Urban India.* New Delhi: Sage Publications. 1994. 300 pp. Index. Hardbound. Indian Rs 285.00.

There is increasing realisation that the development of a society depends crucially on the development of its human capital. It is the quality, potential, and efficiency of each person in the society that determines the pace of development. The exploitation of the inherent potential of the manpower to its fullest is a *sine qua non* of the successful exploitation of all the other resources. It is only of late that the profession has started focusing on the issues of gender. The book under review provides a deep insight into these issues in the context of labour and survival amongst urban workers in an Indian state. Its main theme is labour and gender. However, because at subsistence levels of living the objective is not to maximise utility but to maximise the chances of survival, the issues take on a third dimension.

In traditional India, like other male-dominated, chauvinistic societies, gender roles were strictly defined. Females were assigned the responsibility of housework, whereas the males fulfilled the financial needs of the family. Lately, the traditional role of women in Indian society is changing. Increasing numbers of women are working in the formal and informal sectors as wage-earners. This book focuses on the problems faced by poor working women in the urban informal sector. Gender, as an analytical category of work, and survival, which has been ignored in most social research, provide interesting dimensions to the urban labour problem. In this regard, the author examines the role of planning and its effect on women workers in urban India, and studies the interaction between the state, the market, and the household. She suggests that the state should intervene in regulating the market forces to assure the survival of the very poor.

The Second Five-Year Plan of India, based on the Mahalanobis model, gave a boost to industrialisation. The development of the modern sector had a negative effect on the growth of household-based industries, where mostly women were engaged in various traditional activities. This caused a loss of employment, artisan skills, as well as the survival base.

This book is divided into ten chapters. All the chapters, except the first one, have appeared elsewhere as seminar papers or journal articles. The introductory chapter explores the meanings of "work" and "survival" which the remaining chap-

ters provide the theoretical and empirical insights for the points raised there.

The characteristics of a multi-structural system are discussed in Chapter 2. The author analyses labour market segmentation and traces its implications for female labour force participation by taking into account the element of patriarchy under different forms of production. She explains that if a woman works as a single worker or as family worker, there exists a patriarchal division of labour. Duties and work are assigned by men and, therefore, the female does not get an adequate wage rate and cannot fully utilise her abilities and skills in her work. If the woman is an employee in household industry or an unregistered workshop, the patriarchal division of labour breaks down and is modified by the prevailing market conditions; both men and women are jointly involved in the work. The patriarchal domination in the division of labour is also to be seen among hired labour in the registered factories, where female workers get lower wage rates than the reserve price of male workers.

Chapter 3 presents empirical work on the urban labour force in the informal sector, focusing specifically on female labourers in Tamil Nadu. This work is based on data from the different rounds of a survey designed to examine the characteristics and trends of the urban labour force.

Chapter 4 extends the Marxian notion of a "reserve army of labour" by examining the various roles of the female labour force in different industries. The author finds that female labour is cheaper in the urban informal sector, because the tasks that women generally perform do not require any specific skills, and there have been no attempts to provide them with a training which would enable them to participate equally in the labour market.

The impact of modernisation and the adoption of new technology on female employment is discussed in the fifth chapter. The author discusses the gender division of labour as well as the degree of independence gained by the working women in specific industries such as fishing, textiles, garment exports, and the coal mines. She finds that the role of the state in gender segregation and the concentration of women in lowly occupations is important to both these conditions as well as to improving women's status.

The case-study of the garment export industry in Madras is presented in Chapter 6. The chapter examines the characteristics of the labour force consisting predominantly of female workers, and it highlights the role of the trade union in this industry.

The last four chapters deal with the work, lives, struggle, mobilisation, and organisation of female workers in the urban informal sector. These chapters examine the struggle of the poor urban families and describes how the burden of ensuring survival is borne by the family members. In all these families, women bear the greater burden of generating household earnings besides taking care of the house-

hold. The analysis is strengthened by the author's personal contact with the households and the time she spent with these families in gaining their confidence. Chapters 9 and 10 highlight the activities of the Working Women's Forum (WWF) in Madras, and of the Self-employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Gujarat, which is exclusively involved in mobilising poor women. The activities of these fora extend over three broad groups: the credit programme, the family planning and health programme, and social conscientisation activities. Both the organisations profess their belief in the validity of the mutual self-help ideology.

The book thus provides useful information on the issues relating to labour and gender and the possibilities of female participation in the market as wage-earners in a conservative society. It takes into consideration not only the gender aspect in employment but also the status of women in many industries under different structures of production. The results drawn are based on interviews or on the available statistics. Though an attempt has been made in several chapters to relate such important economic variables as the role of the state and market to the social variables such as gender, the book lacks quantitative rigour. The author did not use any econometric models which would have enhanced the quality of the inferences drawn and facilitated an in-depth understanding of the interaction of economic, socio-cultural, and anthropometric factors. A comparative analysis of the problem, taking into account other regions of the country and/or any other country having the same social set-up, would also have greatly enriched the analysis. Focusing only on Tamil Nadu narrows the scope of the exercise, which otherwise addresses issues that apply in any developing country. Despite this limitation, the book provides a comprehensive understanding of a very important issue: how the division of labour between men and women takes place in poor urban families in order to maximise the chances of survival.

Hina Nazli

Pakistan Institute of
Development Economics,
Islamabad.