

## WHAT IS NEW ABOUT 'GENDER BIAS'?

*Swapna Mukhopadhyay*

### I. Introduction

Recent years have seen a proliferation of books, monographs, journal articles and other publications of various kinds on the theme of gender. Perhaps if one cared to calculate the rate at which publications in the area of Gender Studies have been pouring in, the probability that it may end up securing the position of a frontrunner is fairly high. Under the circumstances, a legitimate question may well be asked as to what is it that yet another new book in this field may hope to achieve. This introductory chapter provides an answer to that question.<sup>1</sup>

It is unlikely that there will be much difference of opinion about the fact that along with class, gender continues to be a basic criterion that structures most societies around the globe. In South Asia, the region which provides the main context of the research presented in this book, caste divisions combine with class and gender to generate what must be among the most complex and highly structured, and among of the most hierarchical societies in the world today: patriarchy being only one of the major principles of social stratification in them. Yet these are far from being stagnant societies or polities, sheltered and secluded as it were, from economic and political influences from the rest of the world. For over half a century now, the sub-continent has harboured what happens to be the largest democracy in the world. And over the last two decades or more, inward-looking autistic growth policies and central planning practices of the 'socialist' era in most

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<sup>1</sup> The research reported in this book is a subset of the work carried out under the project titled Gender Planning Network (Phase I) which has been supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) Canada under the programme area Micro Impact of Macro Adjustment Policies (MIMAP). The GPN (I) project, which seeks to look at the gender impact of macro economic reforms in countries in South Asia, has been designed, coordinated and supervised by the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST), India. For more details, see the ISST website [www.indev.org/isst](http://www.indev.org/isst) and the IDRC-MIMAP website [www.mimap.org/thematic\\_network/gender](http://www.mimap.org/thematic_network/gender).

of the countries of the region have been gradually giving ground to more open and liberal market-oriented economic reforms. It is legitimate to expect that these changes would have had some influence on gender relations in these societies. However, unlike sex, which is biological, 'gender' is a socially constructed category. Depending on the context, it may manifest itself along different dimensions in a whole range of different ways. In the language of econometrics, one could say that 'gender' is a 'latent' variable, in principle unobserved and unobservable. What one can at best hope to capture in terms of observed categories, are some of its overt manifestations. The challenge therefore is to figure out how best to identify and monitor 'gender bias', especially under such complex dynamic conditions.

Our modest attempt here has been to clear up some cobwebs that we feel have gathered over the years around the issue of identification of gender bias, especially those that depend critically on the analysis of its quantitative indicators. UNDP did a seminal service to the community of gender researchers and those working on human development issues in general by putting forward the concepts of 'gender development' and 'gender empowerment', and developing the corresponding indices. It served as the first step in putting in place a system of assessment of the gender situation across countries and over time. The inherent limitation of the exercise was acknowledged from the beginning by the group of experts who helped develop these indicators: a limitation that is common to all indices. There is the whole question of which variables to choose, how to decide on the weight assigned to each, and what procedure to choose for aggregation.

However, easy availability of large data sets and of computer technology to analyse them, has spawned a large body of gender research that mechanically expanded the UNDP exercise in every conceivable direction, without paying much attention to the *context* within which such exercises are being carried out. Although the very obvious forms of gender discrimination may not be difficult to

identify under any situation, the more subtle manifestations of bias may vary considerably from one context to another, and new mutations might well emerge under changing conditions. Any analysis of gender bias, especially in complex socio-economic situations, must therefore pay close attention to the context. The context within which we attempt to do this exercise has both a relatively static and a relatively dynamic dimension. The static context is that of South Asian societies, stratified by class, caste, ethnicity, religion and location. The relatively dynamic context within which these structures are located for the purpose of this set of research is defined by the processes of change that have been put in place in the macro economic policy regimes in these countries through recent economic reforms programmes.

Research from around the world seems to suggest that one set of indicators of women's secondary position in society that seems to be more universal, in the sense that they seem to cut across all contexts, is violence against women, or more appropriately perhaps, credible threats of such violence, along with the actual perpetration of it. In general, research on violence has been more in the nature of being qualitative research, oftentimes even anecdotal. Much of it has been carried out by activists, or by feminist researchers from disciplines such as sociology or social anthropology. For the most part, this set of gender research has generally not had much interaction with GD-induced quantitative gender research, which is a pity since both groups of researchers are interested in the same set of issues, i.e., the phenomenon of gender bias in society.

One of the new things that has been attempted in this book is to provide a forum of interaction between these two genres of gender researchers through the introduction of some 'non-conventional' indicators of gender bias designed to measure gender-related stress, anxiety and violence, which can then be mapped onto the other, more conventional ones. Apart from bringing in the dimension of gender-based mental health issues within a tractable form of inquiry, which is important by itself, we feel this will serve to provide a common platform for a

wider group of researchers interested in gender issues to interact with one another.

Considering that the dynamic framework of the inquiry is defined by the context of recent economic policy reforms, the proposed analysis of gender indicators has to be couched within that macro-economic framework. This leaves open the question of how best to trace the impact of changes in economic policy initiatives at the macro level onto gender relations in society: something that is played out mainly in the arena of the household and the community, and to a lesser extent perhaps, in the workplace. The direct line of transmission of such policy changes has to go through changes in the economic environment of the family, and secondarily through the social ramifications of these changes on the family, the community and the workplace. Ideally a macro model with a non-unitary model of the household sector reflecting a situation of intra-family inequalities and co-operative conflict embedded within it, could have provided the framework of such an inquiry. However in the current state of knowledge, neither does such a model, nor the requisite data or the estimation techniques for that matter, are available. The option that has been adopted here, therefore, has been to go about the task in a piecemeal fashion. We start by identifying areas or sectors of the economy, which have been known to be directly impacted by reforms, and design household surveys to do the analysis within such contexts. The current publication reports results of coordinated household surveys that were carried out in four countries of South Asia in the households of women workers working in the Export Processing Zones or Export Oriented Units in these countries, which are known to have undergone expansion under the new policy regimes. In the second phase of the project, a second set of surveys will have been initiated in the household of workers who have been retrenched under recent reforms. It is hoped that by piecing together such evidence from diverse contexts, one would be able to understand the nature of changes in gender relations that is taking place in these countries and what impact economic factors may have on changing basic social conditions. The household level analysis is supplemented

by research at the sectoral level, as well as research on gender modeling at the household and macro levels.

One could then perhaps explain the rationale for yet another book on gender by claiming that this set of papers seeks to put in place a consistent framework for gender analysis by demonstrating the importance of identifying the *context* of such analysis, and by highlighting the necessity of differentiating ‘gender’ per se from its various ‘indicators’. It also seeks to put in place a new agenda of gender research by expanding the existing set of gender indicators to include indicators of gender-related stress, anxiety and violence. The viability of such an approach is demonstrated through a coordinated set of household surveys designed for inter-country comparisons. The meso and macro level research serve to complement the household surveys in an attempt to close the loop. Although it has not been possible to do so in this set of papers, we hope that together, the various components of this body of research will provide the ingredients for integrated household and macro level gender analysis in future.

## **II. GENDER: THE INDICATORS AND THE CONTEXT**

### ***II.1 ‘Gender’ as separate from its ‘indicators’***

Any indicator, however good and appropriate it may be, can at best be an approximation of what it intends to measure. A set of indicators combined in an index has the advantage of representing the multiple dimensions of the phenomenon, but involves additional problems concerned with the choice of appropriate weights and method of aggregation. Identification of the instrument(s) of measurement with what is being intended to be ‘measured’, can create problems. In case of a complex and latent variable such as gender, the problems are restricted not just to the set of limitations that are common to all index numbers, but can in fact go much deeper. It may result in serious and very inappropriate conclusions.

Gender is a socially constructed phenomenon, the ramifications of which are primarily played out in the arena of inter-personal relationships, which indeed have powerful social and economic implications. Although overt discrimination is not difficult to identify, depending on the time, place and the context, second order or covert gender bias can have multifarious and complex manifestations. As a category, it is unobserved and unobservable, and like a chameleon, it might manifest itself differently under different contexts. Thus whatever indicator, or set of indicators, one might choose to characterize gender relations in a particular society with, unless properly contextualized, one could end up sending the wrong signals.

One could cite numerous instances of how things could go wrong. A study by the Helen Keller Foundation in Bangladesh had shown that in a sample of five thousand poor households in rural Bangladesh, nutritional levels of young girls were lower than corresponding figures for young boys, but that as household incomes and/or the size of land holdings increased, the differences got smaller. Projecting this trend, one could argue that beyond a certain level of household incomes, there may be no observable gender differences in nutritional attainments of young boys and girls. However even if it were actually so, there is no reason to take this as an indication that there is no gender bias in relatively more affluent households in rural Bangladesh. The bias could very well show up in many other forms, in more stringent restrictions on the mobility of young girls in such households, for instance.

Nor is it necessarily the case that all indicators of gender development will move together under all contexts. Not merely that they need not necessarily be collinear, under some circumstances, there may even be significant non-linearities in their relationships. An example of the inappropriateness of using non-contextualized indicators of gender development can be cited from the area of economics. Measured Female Labour Force Participation Rates (FLFPRs) are on an average low in the South Asian region. Although there are regional

variations, cross sectional data from India show that FLFPRs are relatively high for illiterate women from poor households. They are also high for women with high enough literacy levels. But there is a dip in the curve in between the two extreme levels of female literacy. This means that if female literacy rates are monotonically related with household incomes, which indeed they are for good reasons, the relationship between household income and female FLFPR will also be U-shaped. FLFPR will decrease as household incomes rise for initial ranges of incomes, but after a certain level of incomes are reached, the two rise together.

In the context of the caste- ridden society of India, this non-linearity has been explained by a phenomenon termed the Sanskritization process which is defined as the tendency among lower caste households to emulate upper caste social norms and practices, one facet of which is 'protecting' their women from paid work outside the home. Very poor households, which also have a disproportionately high representation of households from lower social strata, cannot afford not to send their women for paid work. But as households move up the income scale, there is an urge to move up the social ladder as well, and one of the ways in which they can establish their upward social mobility is by emulating the social practices of higher caste households. When income levels rise sufficiently high, and women become relatively highly educated, the relative benefits of women working outside the home supercede the perceived social costs and FLFPRs go up once again. Without understanding the social context, using one or the other indicator, or a combination of both as a measure of women's status especially for households that are to the left of the turning point in the curve, could clearly be problematic.

Thus the conventional indicators of gender bias such as gender differences in health and nutrition, education and skill development, political participation and decision-making powers, need to be put in their proper contexts before they can be used sensibly as indicators of gender bias.

## ***II.2 The 'static' context : Social systems and gender roles in South Asia***

South Asia is believed to be one of the most gender-insensitive regions in the world. The overt manifestation of this insensitivity, or bias, often starts from birth, at times even before that, and can be traced through a whole range of indicators in diverse areas through the life cycle of the child. An average girl child in the Indian sub-continent may be discriminated against in the natal family in terms of nutrition and health care, as well as of educational and skill development opportunities. Socialization of gender roles starts very early in South Asian culture. This is evident in the very different and distinctive time - use pattern of young girls and boys in South Asian families. Girls are taught domestic skills from a very young age, while young boys are generally spared from it.

A young girl in a representative household in the region will be conditioned from her childhood by rigidly enforced norms of womanly behaviour and bound by a hundred and one restrictions designed to prepare her for life after marriage, which is virtually universal for young women, subsequent to which she is likely to be placed at the bottom rungs of the internal power structure within the marital household. Insufficient dowry has been the cause of much harassment, mental and physical torture, even death, for an appallingly large number of Indian brides. Girls are often married off at an early age, and the primacy of the reproductive role that is ordained for them by widely prevalent social norms, translate into their being pushed into child-bearing from a very young age, and in frequent intervals. Preventable maternal mortality in the region is among the highest in the world.

Distinctive gender roles and responsibilities for men and women are ingrained in the South Asian psyche in a manner which is probably far stronger than in the West. The dominant Hindu tradition in this respect is based on the precepts of the Manu Smriti which looks upon the female as a complement to the male in the social order, but one who is distinctly subservient to the male. According to the precepts of Manu, a woman has to be under the father in her childhood, the



husband in her adulthood and the son in her old age. Similarly Islam, the other major religion in the region, assigns women's place squarely in the domestic sphere, under the protection of the male. The birth of a male child is usually greeted with much jubilation, while the birth of a girl child rarely evokes much happiness. After all, a girl child will go away to another household, would need dowry to be married off and it is no wonder that she is basically looked upon as a burden. The male child on the other hand is going to be with the family, look after parents in their old age, and according to Hindu beliefs, perform the last rites of the parents to deliver them from hell. It is immaterial how much of these beliefs and expectations are realized in real life. The beliefs persist and in many communities, the birth of a girl is deemed as a mini disaster, sometimes leading to female infanticide.

Much of South Asian society, especially in India, Nepal, and to a certain extent Sri Lanka, is also ridden with caste hierarchies. It has been argued that the caste system had evolved from the inner logic and dialectics of the Vedic philosophy for ensuring a holistic organization of the social system. In practice, this has hardly been the case. Caste hierarchies have split the South Asian society in irretrievable ways, the results of which can be seen in the sectarian politics of the region today. Although strictly speaking, caste is a Hindu phenomenon, the hierarchical social structure it postulates has influenced all other major religious groups in the sub - continent. Historically to a large extent caste hierarchies have been tied up with class hierarchies, in so far as upper castes have always had easier access to resources, opportunities and assets.

The high degree of social stratification along class and caste dimensions has had its implications for the gender dimension of society as well. Gender roles are rigid in the region, just as caste and class hierarchies are deeply entrenched in the social fabric. On top of it, being a region which houses the majority of the world's poor, endemic poverty is a fact of life for a large fragment of the South Asian economy. Gender discrimination and poverty are the two major factors that

determine the context within which the average South Asian woman spends her life.

While the picture drawn above is not universal, and there indeed are significant variations in these matters between different socio-economic groups within each country as well as between different countries, the situation described above characterizes the attitudes and behaviour patterns of uncomfortably large segments of the population in the region. In this context, one question that has kept cropping up is what, if any, has been the gender impact of economic reforms that all countries in the region have recently embarked on.

### ***III. 3. The 'dynamic' context : Economic reforms and gender in South Asia***

Ever since structural economic reforms were adopted in the region, apprehensions have been expressed regarding the impact of such reforms on poor and marginalized sections of the society, including women. A number of reasons have been cited for such views. These include arguments such as those advanced regarding an inherent bias against women in the operationalization of structural adjustment programmes, in so far as such market - centered programmes take a partial view of the total labour allocation process by ignoring altogether women's reproductive labour within the household (Elson 1994). There are also other general reasons cited that are likely to hurt both men and women, such as the probability of downplaying of labour rights concerns and job security requirements, privatization of publicly owned concerns leading to higher insecurities of private sector jobs, globalization leading to erosion of level playing fields of domestic concerns etc.. Women being concentrated at lower ends of job spectra in the labour market, these developments are likely to hurt women more than men. Apart from this, there are other likely fall - outs which, if true, may hurt women more than men. Such fall - outs include adverse changes in household economic environment leading to greater penury and more hardships at the household level which women as home managers have to face, reduction in

state responsibility in social sectors such as health care and care of the aged leading to increased work load for women within the family, and so on. There is also the question of making adjustments of various kinds such as in increased involvement in wage labour to bridge the gap in household economic needs, budgetary adjustments brought about by increases in prices, and livelihood restructuring adjustments induced by instabilities propelled by adjustment processes, and so on (Ghosh 1993, Mukhopadhyay 1998).

Most of these arguments are based on a priori reasoning. Not much information exists in the way of standardized evidence to either refute or corroborate the hypothesis that structural adjustment programmes have had a significantly gendered impact, and if so, what has been the precise nature of that impact. The important thing to do would be to clearly specify the macro framework and the structure of relationships at the macro level, to identify the channels of transmission, and to trace out the gender dimensions of the impact of change at the macro level to the household and the community in terms of the standard indicators of gender bias under identified contexts.

### **III. THE 'NON-CONVENTIONAL' INDICATORS OF GENDER BIAS**

#### ***III.1 Gender-based stress, anxiety and violence***

We have argued earlier on that gender discrimination can have very culture-specific manifestations, and unless one is familiar with the cultural context, standard indicators of gender bias may miss out on a lot of subtle nuances. However a whole range of micro studies from around the globe suggests that there is one set of potential 'indicators' of gender bias that seems to cut across social and cultural contexts. These have to do with the stress and anxiety of various kinds that women go through to a greater or less extent, as a *consequence of being born as women*. In South Asian societies, the region on which this set of research relates to, an average young girl grows up with an

abiding fear of unwanted sexual attention, or worse, molestation or rape. The fear and the anxiety of losing her sexual 'purity' is ingrained in young girls since early years through a process of social conditioning that puts a heavy premium on it. The important thing to note is that to a greater or less extent, this phenomenon cuts across all social and economic strata of the society, reflecting to a certain extent no doubt the objective conditions of personal safety that women live within this region. This is especially so for those women who are seen to be without a 'protector' (an adult male -- could be a father, a husband or a son : i.e., the single woman who is young and lives alone, the divorced woman or the widow ), and /or the 'fallen' woman (i.e., someone who is perceived to have broken the strict boundaries of 'womanly' behaviour by going against the prescribed moral norms of society : she becomes an easy prey) The ways of 'protecting' the purity of the women of the family can be many and varied. It could manifest itself in the form of imposition of strict restrictions on women's mobility, and on outside exposure, as for instance in case of Muslim women of the region, through the imposition of the 'purdah.' It could get reflected in the preference for marrying girls off at an early age, as is common among many communities in rural Indian sub-continent to ensure that her virginity is protected until she is safely handed over, like a piece of property, to her rightful owners, i.e., the husband and the in-laws. A woman victim of rape is deemed to be one that has lost the most valued thing in her life, i.e., her purity and her honour, which is considered to be a fate worse than death. A victim of rape gets doubly victimized by the insensitive law enforcement machinery and by society at large.<sup>2</sup> Even if a woman does not personally experience extreme forms of these indignities, a woman is lucky go through life in this part of the world without experiencing some kind of harassment on account of her gender. The unpleasantness and the

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<sup>2</sup> The Home Minister of India while debating proposed amendments to rape laws in the Indian Parliament had recently recommended death penalty to rapists by citing the reason that a raped woman suffers a 'fate worse than death'. Under the Huddood laws of Pakistan, if a woman wants the legal system to punish a rapist, she has to furnish two male eye-witnesses who would testify in her favour. If she fails to do that, she will be charged with perjury and will face death penalty. Cf. Mukhopadhyay ( In the Name of Justice..)

anxiety of having to go through such experiences is enough to create an endemic condition of stress. ( See 'Lajja' by Taslima Nasreen of Bangladesh).

The second aspect of this range of issues is domestic violence, of which there is enough evidence now to suggest that violence against women, and credible threat of such violence within the family, is far more widespread than it was believed to be the case. Nothing brings out the secondary status of women within the family more than unilateral violence, and a society which condones it and resorts to it as a method of establishing the superiority of the male, is clearly gender-biased even if the women in such societies are well taken care of in terms of nutrition, health care and education. It stands to reason therefore that if it was possible to get a set of indicators that could measure the extent of stress, anxiety and violence that women go through qua women in different situations, it would be useful to have them analysed along with the standard, or conventional indicators of gender bias in social, economic and political domains.

However anybody who has worked in the area of domestic violence knows that reliable information on domestic violence is very hard to come by and that even when it is available, such data are likely to have serious reporting bias. Apart from this, one must remember that actual perpetrated violence is only the tip of the iceberg. If one is looking at violence primarily because of one's interest in issues centering around women's status, then an equally potent indicator should be not just the actual recorded cases of perpetrated violence, however correctly that reporting may have been done, but also the credible threat of it, and that is something that may be perhaps harder to monitor.

The GPN project sought to address this set of issues by bringing into the fold of conventional gender research, the psychological dimension of gender as well. Two measures, GHQ (arising out of the General Health Questionnaire) and SUBI (the Subjective Well Being Indicator), were developed by extracting sections from already existing and widely tested questionnaires used by psychologists to

measure levels of stress and mental well-being in varied population groups to suit the requirements of the GPN research agenda. Although it has not been possible to decompose stress and anxiety levels attributable to separate causal factors such as gender, since these questionnaires have been canvassed to the entire sample of respondents, women as well as men, in our household surveys, standard multivariate analysis has been used to identify the effect of gender on stress levels. To highlight the newness of this category of indicators in the context of conventional gender research, and admittedly for want of a better terminology, we have termed them 'non-conventional' indicators of gender bias, although there is hardly anything very non-conventional about them.

### ***III.2 The links between Conventional and Non-Conventional indicators of gender bias***

It may generally be true that situations that are characterized by high values of conventional gender indicators, are also those that are marked by no violence and low gender-based anxieties. But this need not always be the case. Apart from the reasons cited above as to why it is important to include gender related stress, anxiety and violence for their own sake in analyses of women's status, it is also important to note that there are situations when these indicators may suggest strikingly different conclusions from those that are suggested by conventional indicators. It is when these two sets of measures tend to pull towards different directions that it becomes doubly important to pay heed to the insights provided by the non-conventional indicators. One may put up a hypothetical scenario to highlight this issue.

Consider a stylized situation where all conventional indicators move together and there is no problem of contextual complications as outlined in section II.1 above. Assume that there are two levels each for the conventional as well as the non-conventional indicators, i.e., 'high' and 'low', where high and low values

correspond to 'good' and 'bad' status of women respectively There can be four possible scenarios under these conditions as outlined in the Table below

Table 1

	Conventional	Indicators
Non-Conventional	I. (Low, Low)	II. (Low, High)
Indicators	III. (High, Low)	IV. (High, High)

For situations characterized by options I and IV in the above table, i.e., where both the conventional and the non-conventional indicators point towards the same direction, good or bad, there is no contradiction in the diagnosis being suggested by the two, and hence no problems. But in the off-diagonal cases, say option III, where conventional indicators are good (good education, good health care etc for women) but non-conventional ones are bad (women are subjected to many restrictions, strict rules of propriety are enforced, deviation from socially ordained norms attract strong retribution, including violence), how does one read the situation? Can one for instance, say unequivocally that women's status is good? Note that if the non-conventional indicators were not considered at all, on the basis of conventional indicators alone, one would indeed have to do that, and do that unequivocally! As we would argue later on, similar mistakes are committed' although perhaps not on such a blatant manner, when people hold up the case of Kerala in India or even Sri Lanka for that matter, as epitomes of gender development.

Similarly consider option II characterizing a situation where there is not much stress or anxiety among women but they have far less education than men, have lower nutrition and health care, etc. This can happen in very traditional societies where norms of patriarchy are so deeply entrenched and where the social construction of gender is so solidly engrained in people's minds that they are not questioned by anybody. Both men and women subscribe to them unilaterally. Women may have much less stress in such societies as compared to some

others where within the family and the community, different sets of people hold different views on gender roles and on issues such as women's place in society. In a survey of two thousand rural households spread over eight districts in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka in India, it was found that the women from UP were much less literate, had much lower exposure to the outside world in terms of labour force participation rates, and were worse off than the women from Karnataka in terms of several other conventional indicators of gender bias. However they reported much less friction within the family than the latter. It is interesting to note that the opinions of women on a range of issues, including their views on education and upbringing of girl children as compared to boys, child marriage, dowry etc., when mapped against those of their husbands on these matters, were far closer in UP as compared to the situation in Karnataka. This suggests that the values and perceptions of women and men are far more similar in UP as compared to Karnataka. It also suggests that for the very same reason, there is reason to suppose that there may be a higher degree of stress in the Karnataka households in the sample as compared to those from UP. The fact that the Karnataka women have had higher levels of education, that they have been more involved in paid work outside the home, and in general have had much greater exposure to the outside world than the UP women, in other words the very fact that they have better levels of conventional indicators, may be the main contributory factor to a higher level of stress. It is very likely that their greater exposure has led them to question traditional norms of patriarchy : a view that may not be shared by other members of their family, thereby causing tension in the family. It is little wonder that these women also report higher levels of domestic violence as compared to the women from UP.<sup>3</sup>

One can only hope that such tension is transitory : that men in these families will come around to the views of their wives, but it is not easy to figure out how soon, if at all. The thing to note is that at the point of conducting the survey, women were found to be more stressed out in one situation as compared to another and

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<sup>3</sup> Mukhopadhyay and R. Savitri



that it is imperative to look at both conventional as well as the non-conventional indicators before one passes a judgment on the status of women in a particular context.

### ***IV.3 Providing a common forum of interaction***

The inclusion of non-conventional indicators of gender bias not merely expands the scope of the analysis to encompass the psychological dimension of gender which has so far been largely excluded from the ambit of standard gender analysis, it has other potential benefits as well. One of the major fall-outs of bringing in the psychological dimension of well-being in a manner in which it could fit in with the methodology adopted by conventional gender analysis, has been to provide a common platform for different strands of gender analysis, hopefully towards greater enrichment of all. Until now, research on gender violence, although quite widespread, had mostly been of a descriptive anecdotal kind, which while being valuable in itself, has generally been carried out by different sets of researchers, using different kinds of methodology as compared to the more quantitative GDI-induced research. The use of psychological indicators of gender-based stress and mental well-being within the broad framework of standard gender analysis opens up new possibilities of multi-disciplinary research.

## **V. THE MACRO FRAMEWORK**

### ***V.1 The inefficiency of the efficiency argument***

We have been arguing so far that in order to investigate the impact of macro economic policy reforms on gender at the micro level, one needs to be able to interpret various conventional and non-conventional indicators of gender bias in a sensible and co-ordinated fashion. The other side of the requirement is that there needs to be a broader macro framework for such analysis than is generally used.

The rationale for looking at a broader macro perspective for a sensible gender analysis stems from the inadequacy of the standard macro framework from the point of view of gender.

Much of the rationale for deregulation and privatization under economic reforms stems from the argument that reducing barriers to free markets is good from the point of view of allocational efficiency. However considering that social norms make it imperative that the burden of reproductive labour be borne by women outside the sphere of the markets, the much-hyped allocational efficiency properties of markets is at best incomplete. To the extent the argument is valid, and there are many caveats to such validity, it is so only for a fraction of human labour use. It does not take into account the reproductive labour of women that takes place within the domestic sphere. The argument that domestic labour is not considered 'economically productive' does not absolve it from the fact that even so, the efficiency argument for marketization is essentially untenable.

Most available studies on women's work under the new economic regimes in the region, and indeed elsewhere as well, concentrate on the bw-productivity and insecurity of much of women's employment. Our studies go beyond that dimension to see what happens within the households when women avail of these market opportunities. By and large what we found is that when the external environment of the family changes, adjustments are indeed made in the overall living arrangements and labour use patterns of various members of the households. Since reproduction and home management continue to be the primary responsibility of women, even when women have full time, officially recognized market jobs, there is usually little sharing of home responsibilities across gender, and 'working women' generally end up carrying the double burden of work at home and work outside.

Although the nature and extent of labour market attachment of men and women are very different in these countries, with official statistics showing much lower

rates of market participation by women, recent evidence suggests that there is an increasing trend towards feminization of the labour force especially in certain segments of the manufacturing and services sectors, even by official counts, which generally undercounts women workers. The undercounting can be explained by a number of factors ranging from invisibility of women workers who are often home-based and/or unpaid family labour, to the fact that a number of activities women in these countries routinely carry out, and which should be seen as economically productive, are not perceived as such because they are deemed to be mere extensions of domestic activities and therefore are not recorded as productive activities.

In the area of women's work therefore, the challenge is to try to capture the impact of changes in the external economic environment of the family on not merely the market involvement of women, but also the effect it has on non-market productive work which by all accounts is very high in this part of the world, and to register the changes that it brings about on the burden of domestic work on women. Unless this can be done, the efficiency argument for greater marketization is faulty at best.

## ***V.2 Questions of data and models***

In order that this can be done, one needs to have a sensible model incorporating women's non-market productive work and their reproductive labour. There are many barriers to that possibility. The most obvious of them is the paucity of data. Most women in South Asia work in the agricultural sector and a very large majority work as unpaid family labour. They also are engaged in multiple activities, some of which is market-based, some purely domestic and some fall in a fuzzy zone in between the two. Many of these fuzzy zone activities are technically considered to be economically productive if one goes by the revised definition of productive work as defined by the UN System of National Accounts (1993). However, estimates of women's work using such definition are hard to

come by<sup>4</sup> There is also very little information on the nature of multiple activities of women. Apart from this, the quality of gender disaggregated data on various other dimensions of women's lives is also quite inadequate.

More problematic is to have a macro model that is capable of accommodating the non-market and home production activities of South Asian women. There are hardly any models that incorporate the domestic sector within a broader macro economic structure. A notable exception to this is the simple but elegant model developed by Marzia Fontana and Adrian Wood in the context of the Bangladesh economy.<sup>5</sup> It has not been possible to take advantage of this work in this phase of the research, but it is hoped that in the second phase of GPN work, one would be able to utilize this framework.

The other aspect of the problem is how best to incorporate the household sector within the macro framework. Most models of household behaviour assume that household decision-making is a unitary process, that there are indeed no serious intra-household distributional issues. If this assumption is not valid, and there is sufficient evidence from South Asian countries that it may not be, then the household decision-making process has to incorporate the non-unitary nature of the process, reflecting a situation of co-operative conflict.<sup>6</sup> There have been a number of applications of non-unitary models of household decision making, and this volume contains a survey of these models.

The attempt therefore has been to approach the problem from both the micro as well as the macro end and it is hoped one has made some advance towards closing the proverbial gap between the two.

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<sup>4</sup> Recently the Central Statistical Organization of India has produced a document based on a time use survey of women's work in six states of the country. However it would be difficult to use this data set in conjunction with other variables needed for estimating an economy-wide macro model.

<sup>5</sup> World Development, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Sen, 1990.

## **VI. A PREVIEW OF RESULTS**

The papers contained in this book constitute a subset of studies prepared under the GPN project. The country papers included in Section II of the book were specially written for this publication. They are a combination of vastly abridged versions of original country reports prepared for the project, as well as substantive new material that did not get included in the original reports. Others have been revised, in some cases quite thoroughly, for inclusion in the book.

This introductory chapter lays out the questions being explored in the GPN research agenda and the methodology that has been adopted for finding answers to them. It explains the rationale behind structuring the design of the project in the manner it has been done here, so that individual studies carried out under the project can be looked upon as components of an integrally linked system. Together, the studies provide some of the basic building blocks, albeit admittedly incomplete, of that structure.

The second paper in this section, written by Shobna Sonpar and Ravi Kapur, lays down the foundations of what, for want of a more imaginative vocabulary, we have called the 'non-conventional' indicators of gender bias. It provides an insight into the enormous complexities associated with interpreting psychological measures of stress and anxiety, more so if they have to be identified by source of causation such as gender. It reviews existing literature to show how in many societies around the world, women's status is defined in terms of their sexual relations with men, and how 'the ideology of power and subordination' structures the construction of gender identity in a society. The paper dwells upon the culture-specificity of gender roles and underscores the fact that control over women's sexuality is a key indicator of women's status in South Asian societies. The writers emphasize the need for rigorous gender analysis, not only for women but also for men, in order that 'egalitarian feminist goals' can be reached. The paper explains the basis of construction of GHQ and SUBI, the two key 'non-

conventional' indicators of gender bias that have been used in the household surveys along with other, more 'conventional', indicators in the country studies prepared under the GPN project.

The six papers contained in Section II are based on larger studies prepared under the GPN project. Chapters III, IV, VII and VIII use the work done in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka respectively. Among other things, they report condensed results of coordinated household surveys carried out in the households of women workers in export processing zones and export-oriented units in these countries. The survey in Sri Lanka incorporates additional data from some other kinds of households as well. These surveys and the supplementary research involving secondary data sources were carried out by research teams from the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) in New Delhi, India, Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) in Islamabad, Pakistan and Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR) in Colombo, Sri Lanka, respectively. Chapter VI on Nepal is based on a year's work done under the project by APROSC in Kathmandu, Nepal. No household surveys could be carried out in Nepal, and Chapter VI is a heavily edited version of the report prepared by APROSC and submitted to ISST at the end of the first year of the project. Chapter V on Kerala condenses the findings of a much larger report prepared by a team of researchers from the Centre for Development Studies in Tiruvananthapuram in Kerala, which is designed to understand why the average Keralite woman with remarkably high GDI levels continue to live under conditions of pronounced patriarchic subordination.

One of the novelties characterizing the papers in Section II is the incorporation in the survey questionnaires of modules on GHQ and SUBI, the two indicators of stress and mental well-being. These were canvassed along with other standard questions to adult men and women in the sampled households. The data thus generated have then been used to analyse the incidence of gender-

disaggregated stress and anxiety along with other standard indicators of gender bias in order to understand the impact of changes in the external economic environment of sampled households brought about by reforms-induced new job opportunities for women in the export sector.

It must be kept in mind that the results reported in this section of the book are objective assessments of gender conditions that happen to be very context-specific. It reflects the situation in small samples of households in four South Asian countries in the Network under what would in all likelihood be among the more positive features of trade liberalization regimes in these countries ; i.e., where new jobs have been created for women in EPZ's or EPU's. As mentioned earlier on in this paper, the second phase of the project would be looking into situations which have had a negative impact of macro economic reforms on the households. In particular, one would be investigating gender conditions in households where workers, men or women, have lost their jobs due to reforms-related factors.

It would be fallacious to read more into these results than they are designed to convey. If for instance, one has found that the women in some of the sites have been happy to have had the opportunity to work in the factories, it only suggests that the other options open to them at that point of time were deemed by the women themselves to be worse options. For instance in the surveyed households in Sonapat in India, women who did not have factory work, almost uniformly said they would have been happier if they also had the opportunity of doing a paid factory job. This does not mean that the conditions of work in these factories had in some normative sense been 'ideal', or that women's entry into the paid workforce had not necessarily been 'distress driven'. Nor should it be construed to suggest anything on the future stability of the employment being generated in these units. These jobs may indeed disappear in the face of volatility of export demand, as has happened elsewhere in the world. To derive

generalizations from these micro level results for analysing issues for which they were not designed in the first place would be unwarranted.

This of course does not answer the question how the micro evidence fits into the macro picture that is portrayed by some of the secondary data that has been reported in the papers in this section. Our answer to that is that it does not, and the whole point of this set of studies has been to admit upfront that at the current state of model building and data availability, it simply cannot. The project had started with the purpose of laying out a sensible framework of gender analysis simultaneously at the micro, meso and macro levels. We see these micro level results as building blocks that will in due course hopefully help one to complete the jigsaw puzzle of linking micro evidence with macro level data systematically, block by block.

Section III compiles a couple of the studies that were commissioned under the project to explore the macro and meso-level dimensions of the problem. Chapter IX by Manju Senapaty reviews the prospects of female employment in the region under the new trade regime. The paper by Anushree Sinha and N. Sangeeta explores the feasibility of extracting gender based information using a standard Computable General Equilibrium modeling framework (Chapter X). These two studies are part of the Regional Component of the GPN project designed to investigate problems that are not country specific, but may be of common concern to the region and beyond.<sup>7</sup> Chapter XI by Ratna Sudarshan concludes by pulling together the common concerns and the conclusions that bind the individual studies together.

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<sup>7</sup> In a companion paper within the regional component of the project, Anyck Dauphin has reviewed the growing literature on models of household decision-making in situations cooperative conflict under unequal intra-household distribution of resources. This paper is forthcoming in the GPN Working Paper Series. Also see MIMAP and ISST websites.



## VII. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The papers and reports included in this volume comprise of a subset of those that were prepared for the entire project. In particular, the country papers included in Section II of the volume are considerably abridged versions of much larger volumes that include a lot of other pertinent material including available secondary data on relevant variables and case study details from all the five countries. (See ISST website, and the website of MIMAP for the detailed reports and working papers). One has to keep in mind that this is a report of work in progress. In particular, one needs to remember that the results of the household surveys are applicable to the specific context within which they were designed. These need to be supplemented with results of other surveys characterized by very different contexts before they can be cited with any degree of generality.

What seems clear though that the process of economic reforms has been instrumental in changing the external economic environment of households affected by them in one manner or the other, and may have done it at a pace that has been faster than anything before. These in their turn, have brought about changes in the manner in which different members of the households adjust to the changed situation, and how they perceive such changes. New market roles for women need not necessarily bring about greater empowerment. The old order of hierarchies may persist and new forms of subordination may surface, reinforcing the unequal power equations between the sexes.

However with more and more women getting exposed to the external world, through schooling and the labour market, it is possible that subtle changes are indeed taking place in this bastion of patriarchy. One may just be on the threshold of a revolution where questioning of traditional gender equations by women within the families may usher in a new era of gender equality.

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