



Women, Work And Property

This article is based on extracts from Ursula Sharma's book "Women, Work And Property In North West India" and an article under the same title that she wrote for Manushi.

THIS study addresses itself primarily to two questions. Firstly, is it true, as many writers have suggested, that economic development, instead of improving women's position in society, may actually bring about a decline in their position relative to that of men? Secondly, is it true that the work which women do is a major determinant of the prestige and power they can attain in society?

Methodology

I chose the household rather than the village as a unit for study because I felt that concentration on the village unit arises from a tendency to view Indian society very much from the point of view of the male villager. In north west India, women enter a village at marriage, and their daughters leave it on marriage. The distinction between the village where one's parents live and the village where one's parents-in-law live is fundamental to women's social experience. A woman's social world consists of the different kinds of relationships she has in these two villages. But for men, who normally remain members of the same community from birth to death, the village unit is a continuity where men succeed to positions, titles, property, roles and offices. For a man, the village is a set of enduring relations between men. Women contribute to the perpetuation of this entity by producing children, but only in so far as these children are male.

I therefore chose to study a sample of households from two villages, one in

**The names of the villages and of the respondents are all pseudonyms.*

Punjab and one in Himachal Pradesh. Though I was not able to take a representative stratified sample, I tried to ensure that the main types of agricultural household and most of the castes were included.

Harbassi* is a large village, with a population of about 6,500, in district Hoshiarpur, Punjab. It is a relatively prosperous area, having benefited from green revolution improvements in technology and irrigation. Most farmers rely on wheat and maize as their main crops. It is the large landowners who are able to invest in large scale machinery or irrigation. Some of the former tenants have switched to paid work in towns while others have sunk downwards and are now day labourers on the farms. They have no security since they are contracted labour, and if they fall sick, must simply go without money.

However the standard of living of even the poorest villager in Punjab is far higher than that of the rural poor in Himachal Pradesh. One result of this prosperity has been a general withdrawal of women from direct participation in agriculture, among certain classes of rural population.

Chaili* is a settlement of about 1,000 people in district Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh. The average size of landholding per cultivating household is less than four acres as compared with eight to 12 acres in district Hoshiarpur. The soil is stony and difficult to cultivate. As in Punjab, the main winter crop is wheat and the monsoon crop is maize. In Chaili, the capitalist landowner is totally absent. Land is very fragmented and most agriculturalists supplement their income by earnings in the towns. Men migrate to the plains while women and children tend

the land.

I decided to carry out a comparative study of these two villages because I expected to find a marked difference between women in Punjab where their contribution to agricultural subsistence is relatively low, and in Himachal where their contribution is high.

Employment Opportunities

In all but the most poverty stricken families, the decision as to whether a woman will or will not work outside the house is not made by the individual woman herself. It is a family matter since it potentially affects the prestige of the household. In high or middle status families a woman's desire to take employment is not disapproved of, provided there is work available which her family regard as suitable, and provided there is money available for her training, but it is not expected of her as it would be of a boy. On the other hand, girls of poor families are definitely expected to help contribute to the family income. Once the decision has been made by the family that the woman should work, she is not likely to regard the paid work as in any way opposed to or marginal to her role as a woman. What the female role demands is the subordination of the individual woman's personal inclinations to the needs of the whole family group, whether those needs be primarily for prestige or for cash.

It is a common observation that an increase in prosperity among peasant farmers in India goes together with a withdrawal of their women-folk from outdoor agricultural labour. In Himachal Pradesh there are 100.71 female cultivators per 100 male cultivators working on their own land while in Punjab there are only 34.04 females per 100 male cultivators.

Again, there are 49.88, female agricultural labourers per 100 male labourers working for wages on the land of others in Himachal Pradesh, but only 12.70 females per 100 male labourers in Punjab.

In Harbassi, women of the labourer and tenant class had always worked in the fields and there was no indication that they would change this practice as long as the opportunity remained. It was only among the women in the larger owner-cultivator families who were largely Jats, that things had changed much. The withdrawal of women in this class from outdoor agricultural work has taken place over time and is probably not complete even today. There is certainly no reason to suppose that it has been solely a product of the green revolution. It is really a product of rising living standards in this group, a rise which has been taking place over a long period and for a variety of reasons.

The increase in mechanized capitalist farming discourages the participation of women in two ways. Firstly, capitalist farming involves direct contact with dealers, commercial firms and government—all the world of public commerce and the market from which women of “good family” are effectively barred. Secondly, at the lower end of the social hierarchy mechanization displaces both men and women of the labouring tenant class though probably more women than men, since any permanent farm servants who are hired will be men, and women are retained only for poorly paid seasonal work, such as sorting, planting and harvesting of vegetables at certain times of year. Any permanent opportunities of employment which mechanization creates are really only for men.

In the lower foothills of Himachal Pradesh, the vast majority of women do all kinds of agricultural work except ploughing, and in all probability, they have always done so. Even the wives of brahmin shopkeepers in Chaili work in the fields, though some of them can certainly afford to employ hired labourers if they consider it important to do so. The great reliance of Pahari households on

earnings brought in by migrant male members, and the consequent absence of many men for most of the year means that it is less and less likely that women will withdraw from agriculture in the near future. When Pahari women take over the share of work which their husbands formerly did, so that the men can go outside the village to work, they undertake a burden which brings them absolutely no additional credit or prestige. Not being paid, the agricultural work of the family labourer is no more “proper work” than is washing the utensils.

While the absence of men may be giving Himachali women more control over everyday decision making, this does

sexual division of labour, we need to know not only who normally does a particular task, but who gets blamed if it is not done. In households of all social classes in both Harbassi and Chaili it is women who perform such tasks as cooking, cleaning, washing clothes and utensils, and caring for small children. Children usually help a lot in the performance of odd jobs around the house. However, these tasks remain the responsibility of women. For example, in Himachal Pradesh, most men know how to cook and some can cook very well indeed. The same is true of many lower class Punjabi men, particularly those who have been in the army. But village men will hardly ever be seen doing this kind



not represent a very substantial gain in status. The wives of absentee husbands are still dependent on men for the precious cash which every household needs in order to survive. Women work harder than ever, but their labour does not generate cash income. The farms in this area, being small and unirrigated, seldom generate any surplus worth selling. Marketing produce also presents major difficulties, since transport is hard to arrange, and the woman farmer would have to deal with exclusively male staff at the local block development office, which would not be considered respectable for her.

The Work That Never Ends

To understand the significance of the

of work in their own homes. If the wife is sick some female neighbour or relative will take her place in the kitchen. This is because cooking is the responsibility of women. If the woman who normally cooks is unable to do so, then it is up to her to arrange for someone to take her place, and she will not appeal to the men of the household unless she has really exhausted all possibilities of a female substitute from her own household work team or from a neighbour's. The care of children is less exclusively the woman's responsibility but it is still the mother who will be criticized if the children are unruly.

I found it interesting that even women who actually spent more hours in the fields than on housework still tended to

identify their duty as women in terms of domestic work. "A woman's business is to cook and clean the house, and to look after the little children. These are the main things a woman has to do", said Sita, who spent most of her time cutting grass for fodder and weeding other people's fields. When asked which routine tasks they found more enjoyable and which least enjoyable, most women expressed preference for cooking, with sewing and knitting in second place. Tasks like collecting manure and threshing were least liked. I am still not sure how much these answers reflected actual pleasure felt in doing the tasks and how much they reflected the social value assigned to them. Making *chapati*? over a hot stove when the temperature in the shade is above 100 degrees fahrenheit does not seem to me a very enviable task. But in preparing and serving food, a woman experiences her family's dependence on her in a very direct way—she is conscious that she controls a vital resource. There is also the positive moral evaluation given to the preparation of food.

Another task which many women found interesting and rewarding was the care of cattle. In all households except those of a few big landlords who employed servants for the purpose, the care of the cattle was the woman's task. This is work which women take very seriously since it brings in a considerable cash income. It also gives women some pleasure and sense of achievement.

Women in Himachal Pradesh bear a very heavy burden of work. Few men spend much time in total idleness nor do the women think of themselves as slaves, but they do think of themselves as tied to a never ending cycle of work and activity. Domestic work is seen as being of itself without beginning or end. The Punjabi saying : "*Ghar dakamkadi na mukda*" ("Housework is never finished") makes just this point.

Purdah Mentality

One factor which limits women's access to employment is the ideology of seclusion. In most parts of the world

women are subject to some kind of control over their movements in public. In Britain there are places where a 'respectable' woman is not expected to go unescorted. In some Muslim societies a woman is not expected to appear in public unless escorted by a man and/or heavily veiled. In either case, a woman is regarded as responsible for anything that may happen to her if she breaks the norms, for any harassment or loss of dignity she may suffer.

Most women in north India observe a type of circumspection and constraint outside the strictly domestic sphere which is considered as being directly related to female sexual modesty and which is not demanded of men. One might argue that if we use the term *purdah* in this way, then women in practically all societies observe *purdah* in some degree, western women simply standing at the weaker degree of the spectrum.

Among Hindus in north India there is a general feeling that women's appearance outside the home is permissible provided that it is associated with some acceptable and definite feminine purpose or activity. But in practice such appearances are constrained by the norms of etiquette between the sexes which demand that a married woman avoid any senior male affine or veil herself before him. When the notions "senior" and "affine" are used in a classificatory sense, this category may include up to half of the adult population of a village in the case of a young bride. This has a considerable effect upon the freedom with which she can go about her daily business outside the house and communicate freely with other villagers.

In Chaili women enjoyed considerable freedom of movement—how else could they collect grass from the jungle, fetch water from the well, and do all the other tasks they had to do unaided? Yet women did not like to go through the marketplace or hang about in the public areas of the village. In Punjabi women were even more circumspect about their movements.

Both in Harbassi and in Chaili when women have to visit the market, they hurry through their business and return home briskly. They do not choose the

market as a meeting place for the exchange of news and gossip in the way that men do. While the market is avoided because it is public, the jungle land, or waste land lying between the fields of one village and the next is avoided because it is lonely. When villagers speak about the need for girls to avoid jungly places they are referring basically to the fear of sexual molestation. Many women have to go to the jungle in the course of their work, to cut grass, to graze cattle, to cut wood. But they do not go there unnecessarily and do not feel relaxed or comfortable there. In both areas older villagers explained that girls had not been sent to school in their young days because parents had been unwilling to allow their daughters to walk to school through jungle.

These principles regarding mobility of women in public places have to be respected by all women, but the rules sit more lightly on some women than on others. Women classified as daughters of the village, that is, those who were born there rather than married there, are allowed somewhat more latitude. Elderly women may also be allowed more latitude. The women to whom these rules apply most stringently are the young married women in their husbands' villages. At marriage a woman joins the household of her husband, a household of strangers where she has no automatic claims to love and respect, and will only receive them to the extent that she conforms to the norms governing the role of daughter-in-law. This involves self effacement and deference to all her husband's contemporaries and senior kin.

Unmarried women who break the sanctions placed on women's mobility fear that they will be unacceptable as wives if they do anything which might possibly mar their reputations. Therefore girls are counselled to err on the side of caution if they are in doubt as to how to behave. For married women it is the honour of the husband's family which is at stake. A woman must be on her best behaviour if she hopes to earn her in-laws' approval.

In neither Harbassi nor Chaili were

women actually in purdah, but both what I call the purdah mentality was still in operation. The restrictions on women's mobility and public visibility severely limit their opportunities for employment. In Punjab women of low caste can obtain seasonal agricultural labouring work and those who are educated can work as teachers, nurses and social workers. But in Himachal there is little seasonal agricultural labouring work, and in any case most women are fully occupied working their own holdings or those which they rent in the absence of their husbands.

In both areas the prejudice against women moving about freely in public militates against their seeking work outside their own villages, even when they are qualified and when work might be available in some other district. In one Jat family in Harbassi the daughter had passed her B.ed, with excellent marks, but was unemployed as there was no post vacant in the local schools and the parents were unwilling that she should go to live elsewhere. Married women are somewhat less restricted, especially in Himachal, and in the hills it is not unusual for a professional woman to take up work as a teacher or social worker away from home, living separately from her husband for the duration of the service.

In the generation of women born after 1947 it would be unusual to find one able to say of herself that she had never been near a school in her life, but few of the girls are ever educated in a way that will help them to get work. Nowadays the logic is not that it is wrong to educate girls but just that it is not worth it because they are not going to be seeking employment after marriage. In the high status groups education enhances a girl's position in the marriage market but seldom are they allowed to use their education to find employment.

Girls of all socio economic groups seem to enjoy their education and take it seriously, even if, being overburdened with domestic and farm work as they are in poor families, they are unable to manage a regular attendance. It is one

sphere in which they can be appreciated for their personal performance, yet in a suitably enclosed and feminine environment. A girl who can prove herself by exceptional academic performance may be able to persuade her parents to let her go on, but a less academic girl will stand a poorer chance, even though she needs the skills of literacy and numeracy just as much.

Another factor which deters girls of poor families from seeking paid work is that the wages for female labourers are much lower than those of male workers and the work available for women is seasonal and sporadic. There is little incentive for poor women to regard such work as a source of regular income.

There is a great deal of unemployment among men as well, but men have the advantage of being more mobile. They can, without prejudice to their reputation, move about alone in search of work and travel long distances if necessary. Secondly, personal contacts are particularly important for women. A young girl may have professional qualifications but her parents will be unwilling to let her go to work in a situation where there is no trusted person to "keep an eye on her" and vouch for her safety and welfare. Men may also hear about work simply by hanging about in public places, which would be quite unacceptable for a woman. A woman who has skills and wishes to put them on the market is inhibited for the same reasons. Some village girls in both Punjab and



Himachal earn money by taking in tailoring work but as they have no acceptable means of advertising their services in public, they have to rely entirely on personal contacts and recommendations while a male tailor can simply sit in a shop in the marketplace.

Women from wealthy farming families have to rely on male members of the household to market the farm produce and to bank the cash thus earned. Even where purdah norms are not directly enforced through gossip of neighbours or the dictates of male members of the family, they often have the effect of undermining women's confidence in their ability to deal competently with agencies outside the home, such as banks, lawyers and government officials.

Work Does Not Enhance Prestige

I found that the work women do does not carry with it control of resources. It is necessary to look at the specific nature of the relationship women bear to property, especially their effective exclusion from the inheritance of land, which is largely the basis of their dependence on men in the villages, and which may also be the basis for their symbolic devaluation.

Clearly, we are not here concerned with possessions as such, but with control of those resources which generate new wealth, either directly or indirectly. Land is without doubt the most important category of wealth generating property in an agrarian society.

In both Harbassi and Chaili, a major cause of women's powerlessness was their lack of direct control over property, especially over land. The Hindu Succession Act, 1956, entitles women as daughters, widows and mothers to inherit equally with men, but in practice few women exercise this right. Women refer to the land as "our land" because it is regarded as being held by the male head of the household on behalf of all the members, male and female. Women are in the position of junior mein who have not obtained the position of head

of household. The difference is that a woman can never be in such a position, and can never have direct control over land.

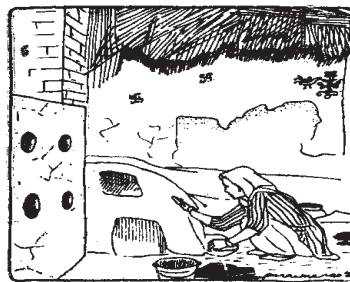
In both areas there was a strong feeling on the part of women that it was not right for them to claim land which their brothers might inherit. This was not so much because they did not feel any entitlement to such land. Rather it was because they did not wish to do anything which might antagonize their brothers. Many women, in spite of the dominant ideology that marriage is for life as far as women are concerned expressed fears that their marriages might break down or that their husbands might be unwilling to maintain them. A good relationship with her brothers provides a woman with a feeling of security and status.

Residual Heirs

The convention that women inherit property at marriage in lieu of the property which their brothers receive later, is a convenient fiction which serves to obscure the real difference between men's and women's relationship to property. In fact, the dowry gift purchases the cancellation of the daughter's right to inherit when she has brothers. The two obvious differences between dowry and inheritance are firstly, that land and other income generating forms of property are seldom given in dowry and even the movable property gifted in dowry is never all the movable property owned by the parents as is that inherited by sons. Therefore the amount of dowry given is likely to depend on the expectations of the bridegroom's family rather than on the concept of a fair share for the daughter. Secondly, the property gifted as dowry is given to the bridegroom or his parents with the bride. It is not given to the bride. Her in-laws may well distribute it to a wide circle of kin, and etiquette demands that the bride should gracefully acquiesce in such redistribution.

Land rights are transmitted through a thoroughly male inheritance system. Familial values are actually geared to

maintaining the maleness of the property system. Sons must be produced at all costs. A woman who has not borne sons will constantly be reminded that she has not yet done her duty. A man who fails to produce sons by his first wife may by custom marry again. The law prohibiting polygamy among Hindus has not been effective in this regard, so forceful is the imperative for male heirs. Adoption, usually of a brother's son, is another solution. In the past, female infanticide was not unknown among the propertied classes in Punjab and other parts of north west India, and even now it is likely that male children are given preferential treatment when resources like food or medical treatment are limited. This is the



likeliest explanation of the demographic imbalance between the sexes.

In short, while female children remain legally the residual heirs of male property, people see to it that there are male heirs to inherit, as far as it is within their power.

Even women who do have land registered in their names have only minimal control over the land they officially own. This is because the norms governing women's movements in public inhibit them from taking an active part in the management and administration of the estates. It is usually a husband or a brother who will act on the woman's behalf. Everything in the system of property tends to establish the primary control of income generating property in the hands of men. Women may have a good deal to say in the way land is administered and farmed. They may also have effective control of other forms of property such as domestic goods, clothing, furniture and jewellery, especially as they reach positions of seniority in the household. But they

have direct control over wealth generating forms of property. Even among labourers, once the tiniest plot of land is acquired, the property rules of male inheritance assert themselves.

The Basis Of Dependence

I do not think that ideology and dominant images of women, whether projected through the media or transmitted through tradition, are the primary reasons for women's position in Punjab and Himachal. I think the explanatory "key" is more likely to be women's dependence upon men rather than their submission to men. Women depend on men because men may own land and hold tenancies while women, on the whole, cannot. Such practices as purdah, avoidance of male affines, women's public invisibility, merely reinforce the primary economic dependence. This system of practices protects the male property system against attempts to modify it by legislation in favour of women. Ideology sustains the maleness of the property system in a very direct way. The ideology of the good sister ensures that women do not claim land which their brothers might inherit, and the ideology of deferential wife and daughter-in-law ensures that a woman will find it difficult to control land registered in her name, independently of the assistance of her husband or some other male relative.

Variations in the pressure and force of these ideologies and practices can be seen as responses to differences in the economic sources of women's dependence upon men rather than simply as regional or cultural differences. The ideology of dependence is required by the material structure of production.

Need For Independent Income

Village women are not, as is sometimes assumed, a different species from town women. After all, many urban women are only rural women who have migrated to a town. As in the case of urban women, the most urgent needs of village women can be boiled to two things—more income and more independence. □