

# **Maternal Employment and Changes in Family Dynamics: The Social Context of Women's Work in Rural South India**

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ALTHOUGH THE BROAD FIELD of women's studies includes research on gender inequality in the economic and political system as well as within the family, the demographic literature on women's status occupies a limited segment of this area. While a good deal of demographic research has been directed toward gender inequality within the family, relatively little attention has been given to such inequality within other social and political institutions. Interaction between gender inequality and other forms of inequality within society has also been largely ignored (Mason, 1984).

Given their interest in the demographic behavior of families, it has been natural for demographers to focus on gender inequality at the family level.<sup>1</sup> There is an important distinction, however, between conceptualizing intrafamily inequality as one of the manifestations of gender inequality in society, and seeing it as the primary determinant of women's low status. Frequently, by limiting our attention to family dynamics and to the cultural forces associated with these dynamics, we take inequality within other social and economic institutions as given.

This myopic approach is particularly problematic when it results in policy prescriptions that seek changes in family dynamics without addressing inequality within the broader structure in which the family operates. Most social scientists and policymakers are cautious about government interference in the private domain of the family. Hence, as long as the focus is restricted to intrafamily power structure, to decisions regarding time and resource allocation, and to associated changes in demographic behavior, public policy has only limited

room to maneuver, issues of inequality within the family being deemed outside the purview of public policy.

A World Bank (1991) study of gender and poverty in India provides an interesting illustration of this situation. The report argues, "Governmental intervention in the private domain where gender relations are rooted is problematic. The most effective—and perhaps the only legitimate—means by which public policy can affect household processes and reduce women's dependency is to alter the economic environment. In a sense, this means that the market forces should be allowed to influence the boundaries of culturally acceptable women's activity" (pp. xvi–xvii). However, the suggested changes in the economic environment are rather limited. The authors contend that "making women more productive—hence, more effective income earners—will reduce their dependency and enhance their status" (p. xv). This approach—implicating the family as the sole culprit in creating gender inequality and depending on market forces to equalize men's and women's bargaining power—obfuscates the role of the economic and political power structure in creating gender inequality in the first place.

The goal of this article is to examine the role of gender inequality within the political economy in shaping intrafamily dynamics associated with women's employment. In particular, we examine the relationship between maternal employment and child welfare in the context of gender inequality in the labor market, poverty, and lack of access to infrastructure in rural South India. We argue that in many developing countries women's domestic burdens may pose a greater impediment than child care responsibilities to participation in those economic activities that may yield higher income (for a discussion of the policy implications of this observation see Jain, Singh, and Chand, 1979). Rather than focusing solely on the tradeoff between women's childrearing responsibilities and market work, we study the gamut of women's work within the context of pervasive rural poverty in South India.

### Maternal employment, child welfare, and the family's economic status

In studies of the relationship between parental work and child welfare, fathers' *unemployment* and mothers' *employment* are the usual variables of analysis. This differential approach toward male and female employment is based on a vision of the family that sees the father as the primary breadwinner and the mother as the primary provider of child care who may be occasionally employed. Thus, the father's employment status and occupation are seen as the linchpin of the family's social class position, which in turn determines children's access to resources. In contrast, the mother's employment is seen as affecting the family through changes in care received by children, in the power structure within the family, and in family finances.

Two aspects of women's economic roles have received attention in the literature: (1) the disadvantages resulting from maternal absence and children's exposure to alternate forms of child care; and (2) the positive consequences of women's increased control over resources.<sup>2</sup>

In this article we accept the possibility that mother's time spent in childrearing and her increased control over resources both have beneficial consequences for children. We show, however, that the anticipated relationship between these two intermediate variables affecting child welfare and women's participation in nondomestic work is substantially modified by the nature of village economy in rural South India. In particular, the prevailing notions regarding the nature and value of women's domestic and nondomestic work are significantly altered once we examine them in the context of pervasive rural poverty, lack of access to modern conveniences, and inequality in the labor market.

Much of the literature on the relationship between maternal employment and child welfare implicitly focuses on the conflict between women's familial roles and their market activities. It is argued that for mothers of young children, participation in income-generating activities diminishes the time available for child care, which in turn results in poor health outcomes and higher mortality for children (Basu and Basu, 1991; Khan, Tamang, and Patel, 1990). This focus on women's reproductive role has a number of implications for social science theory as well as for public policy. In particular, the concern with child welfare persistently conflicts with endeavors to promote greater market-oriented female employment (Leslie and Paolisso, 1989). In developing countries this conflict has sometimes been addressed by promoting programs that emphasize employment in "traditional" skills such as sewing, knitting, or cooking and by promoting home-based or part-time work. These programs continue to operate despite the fact that frequently they are time-consuming, bring little or no income to the participants, and cannot be easily upgraded to offer women higher earnings (Buvinić, 1983).

In our preoccupation with the supposed conflict between children's need for care and mother's need for income (both for herself and for her children), we tend to ignore women's other domestic responsibilities. Domestic labor consumes a tremendous portion of women's time in poor areas, affecting both their care of young children and their opportunity to participate in the labor force. Numerous studies in India and in other developing countries show that in addition to such typical domestic activities as cooking and cleaning, poor women spend considerable time collecting firewood, preparing cow dung cakes, or cleaning grain (Agarwal, 1986; Jain, 1985; Jain and Banerjee, 1985). These activities are rarely considered economic, either by the national accounts system or by the women themselves (Jahan and Papanek, 1979). Although such activities are highly productive, they are usually called "marginal economic activity" or "expenditure-saving activity" (Anker, Khan, and Gupta, 1988; NSSO, 1980).

Many scholars, particularly those rooted in the tradition of social anthropology, have drawn attention to a particular feature of South Asian society, a strong normative preference for female seclusion (Sharma, 1990). Although the practice of veiling women, or "purdah," varies across regions and religious groups and is more prevalent in North India than in the South, a preference for confining women to the domestic sphere persists in most groups and is viewed as the basis of the dichotomy between male and female—or "public" and "private"—realms of activities.<sup>3</sup>

It is frequently argued that women's concentration in the private or inside sphere leads to their loss of power within the family by reducing their opportunity to earn income that is independent of their husbands or other kin (Acharya and Bennett, 1983; Omvedt, 1980).<sup>4</sup> The preference for limiting women's activities to the domestic sphere, however, is often overridden by economic necessity, and women in lower economic strata are much more likely to be employed than women in higher strata. Indeed, while poor women have a lower status in the community, they obtain a higher status within the family, whereas the converse is true for women in higher economic groups (World Bank, 1991). It is also argued that at any given economic level, the greater the portion of family income under women's control, the greater the amount devoted to children's consumption (Mencher, 1988). A combination of these two observations has led to a strong recommendation for increasing women's opportunity for wage-earning activities (World Bank, 1991). Increasing women's participation in "outside" economic activities is seen as a key to reduced child mortality, increased nutritional adequacy, and declining fertility.

Although this focus on the relative status of men and women within households addresses an important dimension of gender inequality, we argue that identifying the household as the primary source of gender inequality overlooks the complex relationship between different types of inequalities within the society. Additionally, this microlevel focus tends to underestimate the permeability between women's "inside" and "outside" work (Das, 1991).

The preoccupation with changes in intrahousehold dynamics is rooted in a microlevel approach to gender inequality which assumes that inequality between men and women operates at the family level and exists across all social classes, though social class position may modify the degree of inequality within the individual family (Papanek, 1989; Mencher, 1989). Focus on the roles of men and women within a particular social class ignores women's importance in determining families' social class position and organization of labor. As a result, research in this tradition consistently examines the impact of external social structures (such as social class) on women, ignoring the fact that women's roles and activities are critical to the formation and functioning of the larger social system. For example, Blumberg (1991: 22) argues that "the further down in the class structure, the higher the proportion of women who are economically active." Although this statement conveys the role of economic necessity in

pushing women into the labor market, it ignores the importance of women's labor in determining the economic status of the family.

In this article we argue that women's labor forms a crucial economic resource for the family as a whole. To some extent the concentration of women as unpaid workers in family enterprises may serve as a symbolic act of status production, "sanskritization," or "Geoffmanian labor" (Papanek, 1989; Srinivas, 1966; Collins, 1991). But in addition to the symbolic value of women's predominance in the private realm, we explore the possibility that there may be a strong economic rationale behind women's predominance in family enterprises. If so, women's concentration in the "private" realm is shaped by forces outside as well as within the household.

In rural areas of India, a family's economic and social status is closely linked to land ownership (Bardhan, 1985). Families who own land usually have greater incomes than landless agricultural wage laborers. Additionally, land serves as an insurance against unexpected catastrophes such as illness or unemployment (Cain, 1981). Even so, given droughts, crop failures, and other seasonal fluctuations, subsisting on farm income alone is often precarious, particularly for marginal farmers with very small plots of land (Walker and Ryan, 1990).<sup>5</sup> Hence, many families attempt to stabilize their incomes by diversifying; some family members work on the family farm, others toil as wage laborers.

While economic rationality dictates such diversification of labor, discrimination in the labor market ensures that it is chiefly women who work on the family farm and chiefly men who work as wage laborers. In most of India, female agricultural workers receive substantially lower wages than their male counterparts; additionally they are more likely than men to suffer from seasonal unemployment (Acharya and Panwalkar, 1989; Nayyar, 1989; Banerjee, 1985). From a family's perspective, then, women's labor on the family farm releases men to work as wage laborers or to engage in petty trade. Thus, women's concentration in domestic or nonwage activities is not simply a function of the family's place in the class hierarchy. Indeed, it can also contribute to the family's upward social mobility. Interestingly, research on family-based microenterprises shows that one of the mechanisms for the survival of small family firms is to rely on the labor of the female members within the family (Greenhalgh, 1991).

Thus, there exists a close connection between the structure of the labor market, the nature of village economy, and the seemingly private decisions of women to work on family farms. The nature of women's work influences both the family's economic condition and women's control over income. Ironically, these influences may operate in opposite directions. Women's unpaid family labor may reduce their direct control over resources, while it may increase access to resources by raising total family income.

Families' decisions regarding labor deployment are also closely linked to the nature of agriculture within the region, sex segregation of tasks involved, and availability of wage work in the area. In regions where the tasks on the family

farm can be performed either by males or by females, women's concentration in agricultural work may permit men to seek wage work. Where agricultural tasks are segregated by sex, such as in the rice-growing areas of southern India, male labor may be needed on the family farm regardless of whether women work there or not. Male and female unemployment rates also influence labor supply decisions. In areas where male and female agricultural laborers are needed for different tasks, typically performed at different points in the agricultural cycle, labor demand may also influence family-level decisions regarding who works where.

### Women's work in rural India

Information on the nature and extent of women's work in rural India, as in many other parts of the developing world, is sketchy. Pointing out the methodological difficulties in measuring women's work in India, Bose (1979) observes that data on *women workers* do not give a correct picture of *women's work*. This is because a great majority of women in rural India are engaged in agricultural and household activities that are mostly unpaid and frequently uncounted (Sen, 1982; Sen and Sen, 1985). Although agricultural and dairy production for own or family consumption is considered gainful economic activity by most standards, census enumerators—indeed women themselves—frequently consider these activities simply as extensions of domestic work. Thus, a number of studies have documented a “statistical purdah” with respect to counting the number of economically active women (Jain, Singh, and Chand, 1979; Jose, 1989).

Such activities as working for wages and engaging in petty trade are more likely to be counted. Thus, women who engage in economic activities in nonfamily settings are more likely to be captured in national statistics than women who work on the family farm or in the family business. Since women's participation in wage labor is related to absence of land ownership and to lower social class, statistics on employed women overrepresent poorer women and women from scheduled castes and tribes.<sup>6</sup>

In order to avoid problems associated with this undercount of women's work, we focus mainly on actual time-use patterns of men and women in rural Karnataka. The results we present below are based on a household survey conducted by the Institute of Social Studies Trust in 1989–91. This survey was conducted as part of a study of the relationship between maternal employment and child welfare.

### Data and sample description

The study was conducted in eight villages of Kanakpura Taluk, approximately 60 km. from Bangalore in Karnataka State in South India. The sample consists of 292 households with at least one child between ages 0 and 4 at the time of first

interview. The selection criteria also exclude families with very high income, defined as annual family earnings above 10,000 Rupees.<sup>7</sup> Hence, nearly 14 percent of households in the eight villages were omitted. In spite of this initial screening, the sample in fact contains several families with yearly income exceeding 10,000 Rs. The study was conducted over 18 months, and each family was visited several times to collect information on family structure, time use of the family members, family income, and child health and morbidity.

Our results are based primarily on time-use data collected for the index mother and her husband at two points in time<sup>8</sup>—first in an interview conducted between December 1989 and January 1990 and then in a second interview conducted between May and June 1991. In each round, the interviewer enumerated a number of activities (such as cattle grazing, wage work, land preparation for family cultivation) and asked each household member whether he or she had performed this activity in the previous four months, the frequency with which it was done, and the typical amount of time spent doing so. In addition, the interviewer asked about the time spent caring for children by all family members (excluding the mother) in the previous 24 hours as well as in the previous week. Children were weighed and measured at each interview. Data on immunization, illness, and treatment were also collected. Because villages were chosen for their proximity to at least one primary health care facility, we are able to examine family-based factors in child health without having to deal with the issue of health care availability.

Table 1 presents some basic characteristics of our sample. The mothers are fairly young, with mean age of about 23 years. A sizable proportion live in extended families, with nearly 35 percent living with mothers-in-law (and a small proportion with their mothers). About 28 percent of the fathers in this sample have obtained some level of schooling (as measured by literacy), while only 13 percent of the mothers attended school. At the initial survey, women were asked about their labor force status. Forty percent of the mothers indicated that they were either wage workers or worked in their own business, another 41 percent worked on the family farm, and approximately 19 percent considered themselves housewives. Table 2 shows the distribution of women's economic activity by daily hours spent and whether they worked in or near the home or away from home.<sup>9</sup>

The Government of Karnataka has made special efforts to develop sericulture industry in this area. This involves buying silk worms, growing mulberry leaves to feed the worms, and raising them until the cocoons are ready for sale. Many families in this area buy or lease small plots of land to grow mulberry leaves in addition to other crops for sale or family consumption. Nearly 70 percent own or lease some land, though many of the plots are quite small. Farm incomes are subject to substantial variability given the seasonal nature of agricultural production and sale and the vulnerability of agriculture to climatic conditions. Sericulture poses additional risks. Silk worms may contract a disease

**TABLE 1 Demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the sample by caste**

Characteristic	Higher castes	Scheduled caste/tribe
Mother's age (years)	22.5	23.3
Father's age (years)	32.7	33.9
Youngest child's age (months)	19.5	19.9
Sex of child (percent)		
Male	50	60
Female	50	40
Number of adults in household	3.1	2.7
Number of children in household	2.6	2.7
Grandmother coresides (percent)	40	30
Family owns land (percent)	80	50
Family leases land (percent)	10	10
Mother literate (percent)	20	10
Father literate (percent)	30	20
Hectares of land owned	0.5	0.3
Hectares of land leased	0.1	0.1
Total family income (quarterly in Rupees)	2058.7	1814.2
Percent of families with income stability across two quarters <sup>a</sup>	40	50
Family's weekly expenditure (Rs.)	158.5	163.1
Mother works for wages in business (percent)	30	50
Mother is unpaid family worker (percent)	50	30
Mother is homemaker (percent)	20	20
Number of households	174	118

<sup>a</sup>This variable reflects short-term stability in income across two interviews conducted approximately six months apart. This is a dummy variable, defined as 1 if the quarterly family income across two interviews differed by 1,000 Rs. or less, 0 otherwise.

and die, leaving the farmer saddled with his initial start-up costs. The farm families in our sample experienced substantial income fluctuation during the year. Less than half the families had roughly identical quarterly incomes at the two interviews, conducted approximately six months apart. Hence, in most of

**TABLE 2 Percent of mothers engaged in economic activity by daily hours spent and location of work**

Hours	Location		All economic activity
	In or near home	Away from home	
0	36	65	26
1-2	60	10	41
3-6	4	16	18
7+	4	8	15



our analyses we include two measures of family income—total family income (average of income from the two interviews) and a dummy variable indicating short-term income stability (difference in incomes for two quarters is 1,000 Rs. or less).

## Relationship between maternal employment and child health

Some recent studies on the relationship between women's economic roles and child survival suggest that children of employed mothers face greater health risks than children whose mothers are not employed (Basu and Basu, 1991; Khan, Tamang, and Patel, 1990). Unfortunately, these studies ignore the selectivity into female employment. Women who are involved in market work are more likely to be poor, landless, and belong to scheduled castes and tribes.

Table 3 compares the immunization and nutritional status of children by mother's employment category. Consistent with Basu and Basu's (1991) findings on child mortality, children whose mothers report themselves as wage workers or engaged in petty trade—categories of employment dominated by formally enumerated rural working women—are less likely to be immunized and more likely to suffer from poor nutrition than children whose mothers are

**TABLE 3** Percent of children aged 0–4 vaccinated and suffering from stunting and wasting by mother's type of employment

Variable	Wage worker/ petty business	Family worker	Housewife
BCG vaccination	65	82	77
Polio dose 1	70	88	83
Polio dose 2	63	81	78
Polio dose 3	49	63	69
DPT dose 1	67	88	83
DPT dose 2	63	82	78
DPT dose 3	48	64	69
DPT/polio booster 1	5	19	11
DPT/polio booster 2	2	10	0
Measles vaccination	19	30	35
Never vaccinated	26	11	19
Moderate to severe stunting <sup>a</sup>	18	16	14
Moderate to severe wasting <sup>b</sup>	34	28	29
Number of households	118	121	53

<sup>a</sup>Defined as being 2 or more standard deviations below the mean in height-for-age.

<sup>b</sup>Defined as being 2 or more standard deviations below the mean in weight-for-age.

**TABLE 4 Family socioeconomic status by mother's type of employment**

Indication of status	Wage worker/ petty business	Family worker	Housewife
Scheduled caste/tribe (percent)	53	31	34
Family owns land (percent)	58	86	51
Family leases land (percent)	36	52	25
Hectares of land owned	0.31	0.64	0.36
Hectares of land leased	0.04	0.09	0.03
Total family income (quarterly in Rupees)	1886.93	2013.23	2004.36
Family's weekly expenditure (Rs.)	153.26	162.05	172.14
Mother literate (percent)	11	14	15
Father literate (percent)	18	35	34
Number of households	118	121	53

family workers or housewives. On the other hand, the difference in health and nutritional status between children whose mothers work on the family farm and those whose mothers are housewives is relatively small.

Our results do not lead us to conclude, however, that maternal participation in wage work *causes* poor health outcomes for children. As Table 4 illustrates, women's economic activities are strongly correlated with family income and socioeconomic status. Wage workers and petty traders are more likely to belong to the scheduled castes and tribes, to have less education, and to have lower levels of family income and consumption. Hence, the apparent negative correlation between mother's wage work and child health is likely to be caused by the family's socioeconomic circumstances and may have little to do with maternal work status. In fact, in multivariate regression (results not shown), after controlling for family income, maternal education, and caste, we found little relationship between maternal wage work and child's weight-for-age. Similarly, there was little relationship between mother's working for wages and immunization status, once we controlled for the family's socioeconomic background (results not shown). It is possible that the absence of a statistically significant effect of wage employment on children's weight-for-age is due to two counterbalancing effects: a negative effect through the child's exposure to an alternate care provider, and a positive effect through an increase in the family's resources. To disentangle these two effects, in the next two sections we examine the relationship between maternal work and child care and between maternal work and resources available to children.

### Maternal employment and child care

Much of the concern regarding maternal employment is based on the notion that the mother is the natural caretaker for her young children. Hence, when the

mother is employed, particularly when she works away from home, children are left either without a caretaker or in the care of other siblings or grandparents. These children may not be fed appropriate food or may be more vulnerable to other health hazards such as accidents. This is particularly true when the alternate care provider is another child, such as an older sister (Engle, 1989).

Implicit in this argument is the assumption that mothers who are not involved in economic work are available for child care. Based on actual time-use patterns in rural Karnataka, we find that this is far from true. Most rural women spend substantial time in household activities, which include cooking and cleaning, fetching water, carrying clothes to a river or pond outside the village for laundering, and taking meals to family members in the fields. Many of these activities are conducted away from home and involve hauling large loads (firewood, water, laundry), hence are not easily compatible with carrying a small child. On average, women spent 6 to 7 hours per day performing these domestic activities, of which 1.5 to 2 hours were spent away from their homes and neighborhoods. In addition to the domestic tasks necessary for daily living, women also perform a variety of chores that are sometimes referred to as marginally economic or expenditure-saving tasks. These involve substituting the woman's time for hired labor or processed goods in such activities as cleaning, dehusking, and grinding grain, fetching firewood from nearby forests, and stitching clothes. Indeed, as Table 5 indicates, women's time spent in these domestic and expenditure-saving activities declines only slightly with their hours of economic work. Hence, regardless of their level of economic participation, most women spend a great deal of time in domestic activities that are not necessarily compatible with caring for their young children. As a result, almost all women rely substantially on older children, older women in the family, and even neighbors to look after their children.

Table 6 shows the amount of care children receive from their mothers and from other kin and non-kin by the number of hours of mother's work. Mother's time in child care mainly measures the amount of time she spends in such specific activities as feeding or bathing children but excludes the time spent watching children while performing other activities, and time spent holding and playing with the child. The bottom panel of the table shows all types of care provided by

**TABLE 5 Hours per day mother spent in domestic and expenditure-saving activities by number of hours in economic work**

Hours in economic work	Domestic activity	Expenditure-saving activity
0	7.2	1.3
1-2	7.9	1.5
3-6	7.7	1.5
7+	6.4	0.6

**TABLE 6 Hours per day of child care provided directly by mother and by others, by mother's hours of economic activity in various locations**

Hours of direct child care by mother <sup>a</sup>	Location		All economic activity
	In or near home	Away from home	
0	1.2	1.3	1.3
1-2	1.2	1.2	1.3
3-6	0.7	1.0	1.1
7+	0.8	0.8	0.8
<b>Hours of child care provided by others</b>			
0	3.9	4.4	3.8
1-2	4.7	3.6	4.6
3-6	4.8	4.8	5.0
7+	4.2	4.7	4.4

<sup>a</sup>Mainly includes time spent bathing and feeding children.

others, including playing with, talking to, feeding, and holding the child.<sup>10</sup> As the data indicate, there is a small decline in the time a mother spends in specific child care activities and a moderate increase in alternate child care with an increase in mother's hours of economic work. Children of mothers who do not work spend about 3.8 hours in alternate care, while children of mothers who work seven or more hours per day spend about 4.4 hours in alternate care. Our findings are similar to the results from two other Asian countries, the Philippines (Ho, 1979) and Malaysia (DaVanzo and Lee, 1983), which also show very little decline in mother's time with children as her time in economic activity increases, though they do show substantial decline in mother's leisure time and sleep. Additionally, we found that regardless of whether or not mothers participate in paid work, children spend substantial time (nearly 3-4 hours per day) under the supervision of other adults and/or children. Thus, if exposure to alternate care poses any risk to children, such as increased infection or accidents, these risks exist regardless of mother's involvement in economic activities, within or outside the home.

Our results also suggest that the question regarding the relationship between mother's participation in wage work and child's exposure to alternate care (which is frequently assumed to be inferior to maternal care) is often worded in a way that is not sensitive to the realities of village life. In fact, to the extent that policymakers are concerned about the nature of care children receive, they should focus on the tremendous domestic burden on rural women, since this reduces time available both for child care and for income-generating work.

## Women's work and resources available to children

The literature on the relationship between women's work and resources available to children focuses mainly on the differences in men's and women's preferred expenditure patterns. It is frequently argued that women are more likely than men to spend their income on food and other household necessities (Thomas, 1992; Mencher, 1988); hence an increase in women's control over resources is associated with better health outcomes for children. Tables 7 and 8 examine the relationship between the nature of women's work and total family income.

Data presented in Table 7 indicate that family income increases with the size of a family's landholding while women's participation in wage work declines.<sup>11</sup> At first glance, this seems to support the aforementioned argument regarding the cultural preference for women's withdrawal from outside work. But Table 7 also shows that although women from families with larger landholdings are less likely to work for wages or in petty business, their total workload is in fact larger than that of landless women. This observation is similar to the results presented for Madhya Pradesh by Sen (1983) and for Bangladesh by Cain et al. (1979), namely that except among landlords, there is little decline and even some increase in women's hours of work with larger land ownership, but much of this work is concentrated on the family farm instead of in wage labor.

Interestingly, these data also show that women's classification within a particular category of work status is far from rigid. Women who were wage workers at our first interview were employed on the family farm a few months

**TABLE 7 Family income, mother's participation in wage work and hours of economic activity, and family income by amount of land owned**

Land owned	Percent of mothers who work for wages	Mother's hours of economic activity	Total family income (quarterly in Rupees)	Percent of families with income stability <sup>a</sup>
None (father in business or government service)	43	3.0	2175	64
None (father an agricultural laborer)	63	3.9	1581	52
0.1–0.4 hectares	52	4.5	1616	50
0.5–0.8 hectares	41	5.4	1717	36
0.9+ hectares	33	5.3	2637	33
Total	45	4.9	1960	45

<sup>a</sup>This variable reflects short-term stability in income across two interviews conducted approximately six months apart. This is a dummy variable, defined as 1 if the quarterly family income across two interviews differed by 1,000 Rs. or less, 0 otherwise.

later and vice versa. Detailed interviews with a few of our respondents support this observation. Women frequently indicated an awareness of societal disapproval of their participation in wage work but nonetheless moved between wage labor and domestic work as needed:

C, mother of four, has one retarded daughter. She does not like working outside the home because "when I go out for work, the villagers talk ill about me. They say, 'She leaves even her handicapped child and goes for work.'" However, in spite of this disapproval, both C and her husband work occasionally as agricultural laborers. Additionally, they own 0.25 hectare of land and engage in sericulture.

P, mother of four, returned to work 20 days after a miscarriage even though she did not feel well. She stayed at home for nearly a year after the birth of her son but with her three daughters returned to work in 3–4 months. "Breast milk decreases when I go out for work. But what can I do? If there is no water, don't we go out to get water? And when there was nothing to eat, we have to go for wages." In addition to wage work, she also looks after the sericulture crop. Her invalid husband does wage work when he feels well enough.

N, mother of two, does not go out for wage work now. She works on the family farm of 0.5 hectare and picks mulberry leaves. She does not like sericulture because "there is a lot of heat. It makes the child sick when I breastfeed." Her husband keeps a shop and she helps out by working there about 2 hours per day. He does not do much work on the farm. N used to work as a wage laborer before she was married. Although it is not very good for family prestige, she believes that "Prestige is worthwhile only when your stomach is full." However, now she is needed on the family farm and in the shop.

D has five children. Her husband is believed to be a victim of witchcraft, and they both are convinced that he cannot do heavy work. D engages in a variety of activities including wage work, sericulture, and making and selling cane baskets. She is unusual in that she goes to the nearby town to buy pupa lyings, which is usually considered men's work. Her husband mostly stays at home and picks mulberry leaves to feed the worms.

These case studies suggest that women engage in a variety of activities depending upon the availability of work and the family's financial circumstances. Ethnographic research on North India by Sharma (1980: 88) documents similar phenomena and provides an interesting interpretation:

What the female role demands is the subordination of the individual woman's personal inclinations to the needs of the whole group, whether those needs be primarily for prestige or for cash. . . . In this respect her attitude to work is likely to be rather different from that of many British women who see their work role as something either conflicting with or subordinate to their roles in the family.

The role of an Indian village woman as paid worker is only 'marginal' in the family in the sense that she is likely to be paid less than men of her household. Her work is certainly not regarded as 'pin money'. Even richer families have not yet reached a

standard of living where extra income brings much scope for choice in expenditure. . . . So whilst in the community women are *devalued*, to the extent that they are offered less money than men for the same or similar work, within the family they are *valued* in the same way as a male earner in the sense that her contribution is taken seriously.

Thus, the gender-role ideology of female subordination does not necessarily dictate a woman's withdrawal from income-earning work; in fact, it may be perfectly compatible with her earning income for use by the family as a whole. Even in Bangladesh, with its strong inclination toward observance of *purdah* and female seclusion, researchers have observed many examples of such income-earning activities as producing handicrafts, husking rice, and developing feudal ties to rich households whereby women exchange labor for food and gifts (Abdullah and Zeidenstein, 1982). Hence, we must look deeper to ascertain whether there may be any other explanation for women's withdrawal from wage labor with increased size of family farm.

Results presented in Tables 7 and 8, though not conclusive, suggest an interesting hypothesis for women's concentration in the work of the family farm, that of economic rationality. As mentioned above, although total family income increases with the amount of land owned, income stability declines. Land ownership provides a potentially high income, particularly through participation in sericulture in this part of Karnataka, and a hedge against inflation or unemployment. But it also leaves the family more vulnerable to crop failure or to loss of income and investment through the death of silk worms. To deal with this uncertainty and to obtain some kind of income smoothing, males in many of the families in our sample worked as wage laborers in addition to working their own farms.

**TABLE 8 Family income according to whether mother participates in wage work and according to person with main responsibility for family farm work**

Land owned	Mother works for wages		Main responsibility for family farm <sup>a</sup>	
	Yes	No	Father	Mother
None (father in business or government service)	1796	2465	1316	2488
None (Father an agricultural laborer)	1677	1419	1490	1885
0.1–0.4 hectares	1405	1841	1535	1729
0.5–0.8 hectares	1872	1610	1500	2140
0.9+ hectares	2326	2789	2454	2916
Total	1745**	2134**	1831*	2084*

\*T-test significant at .05 level in one-tailed test.

\*\*T-test significant at .01 level in one-tailed test.

<sup>a</sup>Sample restricted to families who performed some cultivation or sericulture.

One frequently observed strategy is for the husband to reduce his hours of work on the family farm and to increase participation in wage work. At the same time, his wife assumes a greater share of responsibilities for the farm. Typical agricultural wages in our study area are 15 Rs. per day for men and 6–8 Rs. per day for women. In keeping with results from other parts of India (Nayyar, 1989; Acharya and Panwalkar, 1989), women workers are much more likely than males to suffer from seasonal unemployment. Under these circumstances, it is economically rational for women to assume a greater share of farm work and for men to concentrate on wage work. Table 8 illustrates this relationship. Although on the whole, women's work for wages is associated with lower family income, this relationship is not consistent at all landholding levels. However, women's assumption of primary farm responsibility is consistently related to higher family income.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, our empirical findings imply that women's concentration in work on the family farm has two opposite effects. On the one hand, by releasing men to participate in wage work, women increase the overall family income and, hence, their own access to resources. On the other hand, to the extent that wage income is related to bargaining power within the family, women may in fact be trading their personal autonomy to ensure a higher level of family resources. From a child's perspective, both effects are important and the consequences for the child depend on the relative magnitude of the two effects.<sup>13</sup>

## Discussion

Results we presented in this article show that research on the relationship between women's economic work and the welfare of her child must take into account the social context of this work. Macrolevel forces impinge on this relationship in at least two ways.

1 Irrespective of women's level of participation in economic activity, rural women in poor areas rarely have time to be the sole caretakers of their children. Given the mother's involvement in such activities as fetching water and firewood, or taking meals to family members working outside the village, most young children spend several hours per day in the care of other family members, frequently older siblings. Thus, the relationship between mother's participation in income-earning activities and child care is frequently governed by the requirements of her domestic responsibilities.

This argument is consistent with the results from other time-use studies in a number of developing countries. The exact nature of demands on women's time for domestic activities varies by region and by social class. But studies consistently show high domestic demands on women. These studies also document that women frequently spend less than an hour per day in direct child care (Leslie, Lycette, and Buvinić, 1988; Ware, 1984).



This observation has significant policy implications, particularly in contrast to past research on the relationship between women's work and child care. By consistently emphasizing the negative association between time spent caring for children and time spent in market work, investigators have largely ignored the nature and relevance of women's participation in domestic activities. Somehow research and policy attention are consistently directed toward the matter of choice between caring for children and engaging in income-generating work. Thus, issues of domestic work and the physical demands on women due to lack of investment in infrastructure and technology are taken as predetermined, and women's allocation of time in various activities is stripped of its connotations either for national productivity or for social equality.

This tendency to overlook the drudgery involved in women's domestic activities is particularly problematic when viewed in conjunction with the increased emphasis on creating income-earning opportunities. National and international women's movements as well as governmental and international agencies have increasingly advocated policies that improve women's participation in market activities. Unfortunately, it is rarely recognized that women's ability to participate in market activities is linked to the availability of infrastructure such as piped water and easy availability of cooking fuel.

2 Although a preference for women's confinement to the domestic sphere exists in much of India (though to a much greater degree in North India), economic rationality at the family level also provides an impetus for women's specialization in work on the family farm or in a family enterprise. Thus, women's specialization in the domestic sphere is not merely an outcome of the microlevel ideology of gender discrimination within the family but also a result of macrolevel inequality in the wage and opportunity structure.

While it is difficult to generalize from one district in Karnataka, the results presented in this article have substantial implications for the way in which the broad question of female labor force participation is framed. Our results argue for a greater recognition of the economic importance of rural women's activities, which are typically dismissed as solely domestic in nature or as extensions of their domestic role. In fact, women's work on the family farm not only contributes to the family income, but also releases male workers to participate in the cash economy, hence to benefit the family as a whole. Ironically, these results also highlight the quandary faced by most poor women. Although women's withdrawal from wage work and their concentration on the family farm is a rational economic strategy, this decision is made within the context of inequality in the labor market. As a result of women being relegated to work on the family farm, their income is contingent on the access to land provided by men and their work is largely invisible to other family members, to society as a whole, and to social scientists. Invisibility of women's work indirectly exacerbates the existing gender inequality at the microlevel (Banerjee and Jain, forthcoming; Agarwal, 1986) by devaluing women in general and female children in particular.

These observations suggest that microlevel policies directed at changes within the household (such as increasing women's access to credit and to wage work) must be rooted in the context of the macrolevel forces impinging on the household. A recognition that gender inequalities within the household are linked to gender inequalities at the societal level has strong policy implications. It suggests, for example, that increasing women's access to wage work, without modifying institutionalized inequalities in the occupational and wage structure between men and women, is unlikely to change the family rationale of maximizing male participation in the wage economy by transferring a greater share of farm work to women.

We have identified two dimensions of gender inequality—discrimination in the labor market and the burden of domestic activity—that directly influence the material conditions surrounding women's participation in nondomestic work and the allocation of women's time in various activities. The first, discrimination in the labor market, is more readily perceived as an outcome of gender inequality than the second. Domestic drudgery resulting from a lack of public investment in infrastructure and from a lack of public attention to preserving current sources of water and fuel is frequently seen as a hallmark of poverty rather than a direct form of discrimination against women. When such government inattention is viewed in light of the disproportionate physical burden it imposes on women, it is difficult not to see women's domestic burden as another manifestation of gender inequality in the political process.

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## Notes

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1 This process has been facilitated by the intellectual roots of many individuals within this field. A large proportion of scholars who focus on this issue were trained either as family sociologists (focusing mainly on power relations within the family and on women's double burden as workers and homemakers) or as

economic demographers (focusing on time-allocation decisions at the family level).

2 From a wide variety of studies on this topic, we selectively review some of the more prominent ones in the Indian context. For a broader review of the literature, see Leslie and Paolisso (1989).

3 For an interesting description of female seclusion in ostensibly open South Indian society see Ganesh (1989).

4 This assumption regarding the correlation between participation in nondomestic income-generating activities and increased power within the family is not universally accepted, either in India (Standing, 1985; Bardham, 1985) or in other developing countries (Safilios-Rothschild, 1990).

5 In rural India, frequently the only source of loans for unsecured expenditure is

the local moneylender. Interest rates vary across the country, but in our study area in Karnataka the rate can be as high as 10 percent per month. As a result, few families can afford to obtain even short-term credit to maintain themselves between crop yields or during a bad year.

6 Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are frequently used categories referring to groups defined by the Government of India as being historically disadvantaged.

7 In this portion of the state, the Karnataka Government has actively encouraged growth of the silk industry, mainly raising silk worms and harvesting the cocoons. Hence, some of the families in the study villages have earned very high income, leading to a discontinuity in the income distribution. A majority of the families have incomes below 10,000 Rs. per year, while a small proportion have very high annual incomes exceeding 20,000 Rs. We have chosen to focus on the lower 85 percent of the income distribution.

8 The strategy for collecting time-use data on the mother and on other household members differs slightly, and some approximation is involved in making the findings comparable.

9 We consider 24-hour recall for time devoted to child care to be more reliable than one-week recall. Hence, Tables 2, 5, and 6 are based on the 24-hour recall of women's work and child care arrangements.

10 Although this information based on 24-hour recall is unlikely to be absolutely accurate, it does provide a broad indicator for the amount of time the child spent with the caretakers.

11 We use ownership of land and size of

landholding to indicate the socioeconomic standing of the family. In addition to family-owned land, many families in our sample leased land. Families that own no land engage in farm work on leased land. Farm work includes sericulture, for which land may be either leased or owned.

12 Primary farm responsibility for women is defined as spending more time than her husband in working on the family farm. However, since the data for husbands and wives are not strictly comparable, some approximation is involved in the creation of this variable.

13 These results also have an interesting methodological implication. They suggest that the correlation between women's participation in independent economic activity such as wage labor and women's power within the family is likely to be stronger at the district level than at the household level. At the household level, women's labor force status may be in flux. Women work as wage laborers when the demand for labor on the family farm is low, but return to work on the family farm when needed. Thus, whether a study classified a particular woman as a wage laborer would depend on when the interviewer spoke with her. However, the power relationships within a family are more stable than the labor force status of its members. This would weaken the relationship between women's labor force status and her power within the family. In contrast, district-level comparisons of women's activities and their status are more stable because they measure (1) average levels of women's participation in wage work as well as the opportunities available to them and (2) more stable dimensions of gender inequality, such as differences between male and female mortality rates.

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