

## STATUS AND ROLE OF WOMEN WORKERS IN INFORMAL SECTORS

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**Abstract:** *Women's entry into the labour market is often seen as a step towards their empowerment within and outside family. But the extent to which women's engagement in informal employment affects their lives and status is a million dollar question. This paper based on field data from the two women centric industries namely rice mills and nursing homes of Burdwan (West Bengal), attempts to critically look into such process. This study finds that women's entry into the labour market does not automatically contribute to their wellbeing. Yet, I have noticed minor to moderate types of changes in gender relation within and outside family, women's work burden at home, their capacity to manage fund or save money for future and, on the whole, their status in family, work place and society at large. Notwithstanding variations in different types of informal employments, income from such endeavour is found to be vital for self-esteem of women workers and also the survival of poor families. Within a particular social matrix, therefore, even informal women workers are better placed as compared to those who fail to enter into such market or are forced to accept hard realities.*

### INTRODUCTION

Status of women in society in general and that of working women in particular has been a matter of intense scrutiny in India for ages. It is true that since time immemorial, they have been subjected to inferior status, denial of rights and victimisation. The scope of their participation in paid economic activities remained utterly limited for many centuries as they were secluded to domesticity. In the West, however, with the advent of an industrial society in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, women could end their seclusion and claim equal status in the work place. Yet, issues of role conflict due to their dual role at family and work place bothered them. The process of growth of self-identity and independence of women earners did not reveal its face until the society backed by feminist movements welcomed changes in the institutions of family and marriage since the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In case of India, women were traditionally assigned subordinate status and were confined to the prescribed domestic roles. Due to the strong presence of patriarchal value framework and male dominated social structure in the country, the role of women was traditionally defined basically in terms of marriage and reproduction. As these roles were not considered 'productive', patriarchy made women dependent on men for livelihood and security and this further reinforced their subordination in family and society. Creation and sustenance of

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gender inequality through patriarchal control over female sexuality took place through the institutions of marriage and family. Since marriage was viewed as 'essential' for a girl, parents considered them a liability. This again created a silent complicity to the culture of child marriage including payment of dowry because parents felt relieved by 'sending off' the daughters as early as possible.

Research on the social and economic life of women in independent India surprisingly did not notice major transformation despite changes here and there. For instance, we take pride, unlike many of our Western counterparts, to grant the right to equal political participation for women including their right to vote almost automatically with independence. The issue of literacy and equal legal rights of women also received the due attention of our political visionaries and administrators. The Indian state in particular has attempted to bring about desirable changes in the status of women, to empower them politically and to check gender violence through legal reforms. Yet, the legal, administrative and political systems did not always operate in the way they were expected to do; nor did they always produce consistent results (Agarwal, 1994; Basu, 2009; Ghosh 2013, Kishwar, 1999; Menon, 2000,). Here, it is also argued that a form of *neo-traditionalization* proceeded along with modernization in every sphere of our social life after independence (Singh 1973: x). If the Indian culture and civilization is endowed with adaptive capacity to integrate approaches or mix paradigms (Singh 2000), this will also have a telling effect on Indian women dealing with the age-old institutions of marriage and family in modern times. The caste and community aspects of social life also influence the social position of women workers. For Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe or Muslim women, there exist multiple sources of deprivation. These issues also determine the status and role of working women in a country like India. Their overall subordination and subjugation in the social structure can be related to explain their meagre presence in the formal sector of Indian economy and concentration in the informal and low-paid works. While their presence is felt mainly in the primary sector (56.29% in 2009-10, GoI 2013), their numbers are not much in the secondary sector. In the service sector, a small segment is concentrated in the community, social and personal service fronts. In contrast, men are in majority in the skilled manpower segment of both the organised and unorganised sectors (Bhattacharyya 2013: 256).

As compared to the earlier phases of Indian economy, the new liberalised phase starting from 1991 is often seen as 'liberating' for women as it throws open new avenues and opportunities for them in the service economy. The global workplace aligned to information driven economy is argued to be 'de-gendered'. It is true that in the context of global restructuring of capital, 'flexibilisation' and 'casualisation' of jobs have contributed to 'feminisation' of labour force. There are also instances to prove that women's entry into certain types of men dominated jobs has changed their work profile. A range of employment opportunities for young women has opened up in the IT sector, export units, the urban retail sector, hospitality services, shops and establishments, and the like. As a corollary, women workers employed in the organised sector constituted 20.4 per cent of the total employment in this sector as on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2010 and this is higher by 0.5 per cent as compared to the

preceding year (GoI 2013). But the same Government Report does recognise that “in the urban areas, 80 per cent of the women workers are working in the unorganised sectors such as household industry, petty trades and services, building and construction” (*Ibid.* 85). This reveals that the phenomenon called ‘feminisation of labour’ is actually informal sector driven. Needless to say, any and all types of jobs do not fetch the same type of status in real life.

It has been noticed that informal sector jobs are normally assigned inferior status in social circle due to low wage, lack of job security, manual and temporary nature. Such generalisation may however appear to be premature given diversity of employment conditions of women. The job of a skilled computer operator commonly called ‘knowledge worker’ offering service from home to her customers might not be equal to those of sales girls. Similarly, the status of a domestic maid and a domestic cook might differ as the latter may demand more wages. Apart from these differences, informal jobs might provide vital help to a large section of Indian women living in the margins with little or no scope for future mobility. The job of a domestic maid may fetch low esteem; but from the point of view of the job seeker one has to interpret the reality. The proverb that ‘beggars cannot be choosers’ applies to many informal sector job aspirants. Studies on consequences of marginalisation and vulnerability of women in social life has time and again linked prostitution, trafficking, dowry death and sexual violence as common tragedies faced by women along with normal ones like poverty, unemployment, early marriage, nutritional deficiency, miscarriage, and the like. It is worth noting here that even accomplished women face a ‘glass ceiling’ in career movement. Evaluation of women’s economic role through gender lens is only one part of the story. The other part of the story, which is of course related to the first one, depicts their low level of academic accomplishment, skill, and capacity limiting their ability to manage good jobs. Despite such constraints, women workers spend their income for the well being and survival of the family and hence even a ‘low-wage regime’ place them above those who remain confined to the household and are unable to find any placement. In the personal life of women workers too such placement has critical weight. We, therefore, need to understand the role and impact of such employment in the life and social space of women workers from holistic point of view.

It is worth noting here that while rice mills have witnessed marginalisation of women workers due to sickness, restructuring and technological up-gradation during the last two decades, the Ayyas (untrained nurse) working in nursing homes have also become target of managerial ‘rationalisation’ and shrinking work days in the competitive market. Needless to say, any proper assessment of their status and role should take into cognizance the overall context of economic compulsions like stagnant agriculture, higher inflation, market recession, and under-employment in contemporary India.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This paper is based on the field work that I conducted for my Ph.D on the women workers of rice mills and nursing homes in the district of Burdwan (Choudhuri 2014a). I have tried

to locate the role and status of these women workers within family, at workplace and society at large.

For collecting my data for this paper, I went through the following stages: *First*, a survey based on an interview schedule was conducted among 200 women workers of 20 rice mills and 20 nursing homes across the district of Burdwan during January to July 2010. The technique of purposive sampling was used to select the samples on the basis of marital status (unmarried, married, widow, divorcee/deserted, etc.) of the respondents. *Second*, six focused group discussions (FGDs) involving 8 women workers in each of these groups were done to discuss certain critical issues. *Third*, the data thus collected were supplemented by observation and case study materials as well as interviews of the owners, trade union leaders and managers to arrive at a holistic vision of the issue. I finally visited my field in the middle of 2013 to perceive changes in the perception of my respondents.

### **1. Status and Role within Family**

In the Indian context, family continues to play an over-arching role in the life of an individual. This is despite that fact that there is much change in the structure and functions of family in India. Though the concept of nuclear family in India is quite different from those prevailing in the West, there have been adaptive changes in the internal structure of our joint families particularly in respect to its authority structure, gender relations, role-expectations, mate selection procedure, inter-generational relations and the like. Yet, the private domain of a woman even in a nuclear family setup is governed by certain norms, values and institutions having gender connotations. Under such a context, the factors that normally become helpful for a woman to claim higher status are: income earning capacity, level of income, type of employment, marital status, role in the family, type of family, level of education and age. For a woman in marital relationship, however, the matter becomes complex as her relation with the in-laws including the quality of her conjugal life as well as strength of her parental family play decisive roles in determining her status and role in matrimonial home after marriage. Also factors like employment status of her husband, number and sex of children born, and economic well being of the family become crucial in this respect. As compared to this, unmarried, widow or divorcee women may enjoy better control over their income and thereby claim a better status. But, again such a condition depends on the economic condition of the family including her relative position and decision making power in the family hierarchy. It appears that it is not easy to ascertain theoretically the status and role of a working woman within family. Beyond objective conditions, subjective factors like feeling and attitude of a person also have to be taken into consideration. I have therefore tried to balance between the objective and subjective factors in deciding about the role and status of my respondents within family.

Before analysing my findings related to these questions, let me state the socio-economic background of my respondents. Thus, 70 per cent of my respondents live in nuclear families, 24.5 per cent live in joint families and 5.5 per cent stay alone. Again, 54.5 per cent of my

respondents have been living in marital relationship, 38.5 per cent are widow, divorcee, and deserted, and 5 per cent are unmarried. The literacy level of majority of my participants is found to be low and only 3.5 per cent have studied above 10<sup>th</sup> standard. Illiteracy (46.5%) or low level of literacy (30.5% studied upto 5<sup>th</sup> standard) also impinges on their mobility as well as capacity to bargain within and outside family. It should also be noted that 58 per cent of rice mill workers and 41 per cent of Ayyas (49.5% in all) are migrants. Again, 46.5 per cent of my respondents are members of Backward Classes (ST, SC, and OBC) and religious minority (Muslim). Majority of them also experience early marriage which provided a license to work outside family. A woman hailing from such a background normally suffers from multiple exclusion and deprivations. This is more so in the context of society in Bengal that could not recuperate the development deficit of marginalised communities despite reform movements (Ghosh 2012).

Considering such background, there is no doubt about the fact that entry into the current employment has enhanced the status of my respondents within family. The earning of women members is considered vital in their family because of two reasons: a) more than 60 per cent of husbands also work in the informal sector leading to poor economic conditions of the family; and b) women workers are the principal earner in nearly 35 per cent of cases. The widows, divorcees, and deserted women mostly fall under this category. If we make a comparative estimate of the employment status of my respondents with that of their parents, we would see that more than 70 of their mothers were unemployed and 68 per cent of their fathers had also worked in the informal sector. From a genealogical point of view, therefore, my respondents are better poised. Moreover, before joining the current occupation majority of these workers had worked either as domestic maid including cook or in informal jobs like stitching and embroidery, bidi making, and making of Puffed rice. Obviously, the current occupation is comparatively better with regards to payment and status.

Considering the importance of employment in the life of women workers, it is safe to argue that such jobs are neither secondary nor supplementary for the family. It is worth noting that the total earning of the family from all sources remain as low as less than 3000 a month in 2010 for 55 per cent of families. Hence, the earnings of women members are utilised to provide the bare necessities of life. The question that crops up in this context is: does such vital contribution change her traditional domestic role as mother or wife?

Unfortunately, despite playing significant role in managing the economy of the family, the women workers are not absolved from household duties. It is true that for the women, heading the household (35%), working life has begun only after uncoupling or death of husband. Hence, they had to play a decisive role to build up their family from scratch; nourish, grow-up and educate their children with so many constraints. Hence, it was unthinkable for them to get dissociated from household chores after attending their fixed duty. But, for those who merely assisted their husbands with monetary contribution, such fortunate development did not take place.

Thus, data cited in Table 1 show that husbands and sons help them mainly in marketing where as daughter's limited help is available in cooking, washing and cleaning activities. Given such limited help by family members, women workers are mostly entrusted with the entire responsibility to manage the house. As these families normally cannot afford the services of hired personal like maid, or purchase modern electronic goods like refrigerator, mixer grinder, washing machine or even cooking gas, the total volume of household chores basically fall on the adult women members. This means that women workers in the informal sectors have to perform 'double duty': at home and at work place. By any yardstick, hence, the women workers have to work for more than 16 hours a day excepting holidays or non-work days. Eventually, the services of minor children and particularly girls are utilised whenever there is any extra pressure on the mother and ironically this is at the cost of their education, training and development. It is also ironic that adult male members of these families are hardly concerned about the work load of female earners and the consequent negation of the role of girl children. Moreover, violence is not uncommon in such families and the major reason for such male acts is denial of share of income by women workers. My focused group discussions brought out these negative aspects of family life of women workers. We shall have to read data stated in rest of the tables from this point of view.

**Table 1**  
**Nature of Help by Family Members to Women Workers in Managing the Family**

Relation	Rice Mills					Nursing Homes				
	Marke- ting	Cook- ing	Dress Wash	Utensil Wash	House Cleaning	Marke- ting	Cook- ing	Dress Wash	Utensil Wash	House Cleaning
Husband	39	11	06	06	08	18	04	02	02	02
Mother-in-law	02	03	03	03	03	06	07	07	07	07
Son	26	02	01	01	01	22	05	04	04	04
Daughter	10	23	23	24	21	17	21	25	25	26
Other	12	10	10	10	10	14	12	12	12	12

The nature of domestic responsibilities of women workers, however, differs from family to family. In a joint family setting (30%), the women workers could distribute their work load. But, for the rest, living in nuclear families (70%), the scope of any extended member of the family helping the workers remain restricted. The issue of managing the daily household chores regularly is more challenging for the Ayyas who often have to attend night duties. But, during Focused Group Discussion, Ayyas have acknowledged that male members of their family, including adult sons of widow/divorcee mothers, hardly recognise that they too are leading a stressful life. One of my respondents lamented that no one in her family offers her even a cup of tea after she returns home. Rather, they all wait for her to do that. Some of my respondents also have to face the rage of their husbands for coming late or for failing to bring vegetable on their way back. The Santal women, living inside the factory, have to start cooking and taking care of their children both before joining and after completion of work, while their male counterpart gossip collectively, play card and often drink alcohol.

These experiences clearly reveal gender expectations that govern the daily discourse of working women despite their earning capacity and economic contributions for the family.

The responses of my respondents stated in Table 2 also prove that most members of their family consider their job as survival necessity. Hence, only a few family members (23) do not like the job of women workers. As compared to them, 211 (46%) family members have affirmed their choice and another 219 (47%) members do not object to the occupation of my respondents. One might, however, argue that those who do not protest may in fact be compelled to do so as there is hardly any alternative to this, given the survival needs of the family. Interestingly, one can notice that opinion of male and female members of the worker’s family differ widely. Thus, negative opinion (Don’t Like) about current occupation comes mostly from husband and sons, whereas Daughters have weighted more in favour of their mother’s current employment. The reasons could be that these male members do not want the workers to do outside work including the night duty done particularly by the Ayyas. The hidden gender preference of these male members including those who did not object to their occupation may be a subject of much deeper scrutiny for future researcher. I did not investigate on this aspect as it was beyond the scope of my research.

**Table 2**  
**Opinion of Family Members about their Work**

Family members	Rice Mills			Nursing Homes		
	Like	Don't Like	No Objection	Like	Don't Like	No Objection
Husband	34	06	30	24	03	14
Father/Father-in-law	10	01	01	08	01	10
Mother/Father-in-law	13	02	04	16	03	19
Son	24	08	35	21	07	33
Daughter	28	02	36	33	00	37
Total	109	19	106	102	14	113

It is also interesting here to know the relative position of women workers so far as their freedom to spend their own income is concerned. Thus, on the whole, more than 61 per cent of my respondents have acknowledged that they enjoy the right to spend their income on their own. Despite the domination of patriarchal institutions, therefore, employment offers some scope for individuality and expansion of right. Table 3 also shows that there are significant variations in this respect as Ayyas constitute a major chunk of those enjoying

**Table 3**  
**Right to Spend Income on their Own**

Answer	Rice Mills	Nursing Homes	Total
Yes	48	75	123
No	52	25	77
Total	100	100	200

such freedom. This could be related to the fact that women headed household constitute 54 per cent of Ayyas as compared to only 23 per cent of the rice mill workers. The findings of my survey can also be interpreted to mean that family in the Indian context normally obstructs freedom of women wage earners unless it is headed by women. Besides, employment does not automatically confer women the right to spend earned money or decision making power in everyday life. This is typically seen to be a feature of middle class Bengali family where male-female relationship is mostly governed by rules of patriarchy. But, my research proves that even among the working class families in Bengal, gender preferences on the rights of women earners did not change much. This is notwithstanding the fact that the number of minor girls and boys in the family does not signify any major gender preference. Again, the Ayyas, in particular, have accepted and practiced small family norms. But at the same time, the gloomy side of family relations has become clear to me when cases of domestic violence involving physical, mental, verbal and economic offences are revealed during the FGD sessions. The problem is more acute where the husband is alcoholic and unemployed. It appears that women's employment does not necessarily change power equation within the family. Only in women headed household, the situation becomes reverse provided the son is not adult. These women are seen taking most of the important decisions in daily life. But, presence of one or more adult sons/relatives even in such families invites troubles.

**Table 4**  
**Who Decides what and when to Spend?**

<i>Decision Maker</i>	<i>Rice Mills</i>	<i>Nursing Homes</i>	<i>Total</i>
Self	48	75	123
Husband	34	12	46
Son	07	06	13
Daughter	05	03	08
Others	06	04	10
Total	100	100	200

The right to spend own income as per one's wish is not enjoyed by 39 per cent of my respondents, and for most, such decision rests with their husband (see Table 4). Adult son, daughter and other members of the family also take decision about what and when to spend. Beyond ideological reasons, such decisions are also influenced by practical concerns. Thus, some of my respondents have acknowledged that they become dependent on their literate sons and daughters who are able to manage the fund better. The age factor also increases such dependency. This is more so as managing a family with meagre income calls for rigorous planning, mental exercise and adjustments, and the workers finds such intricate endeavours difficult after coming back from work. Despite such reliance on close blood relatives, Ayyas are better placed than the rice mill workers in spending fund on their own for the reasons mentioned earlier. It is worth noting here that all the 27 Santal rice mill workers, who stay inside the factory, handover their earnings to their husbands. A Santal nuclear family typically follows the tradition of Hindu joint family in subjugating women. It has been argued that as



a result of *sanskritisation* and *Hinduisation*, the tribal women have moved from a position of relative freedom to subjugation (Xaxa 2004).

If a woman worker has to seek opinion of her husband, son or other family members to spend her own earnings and if these family members keep the money earned by women workers (Table 5), it may reflect upon the limitation of the process empowerment of women through employment. In nearly 39 per cent of cases, money earned by the worker is kept with the family members most of whom are male (husband and son). In case of rice mill workers, this percentage is much more (52%). I have already cited reasons for such difference. It appears that employment opens up the possibility for such empowerment even though it does not guarantee it.

**Table 5**  
**Who Keeps the Money?**

<i>Person</i>	<i>Rice Mills</i>	<i>Nursing Homes</i>	<i>Total</i>
Self	48	75	123
Husband	34	12	46
Son	07	06	13
Daughter	05	03	08
Others	06	04	10
Total	100	100	200

Here I must also acknowledge a trend seen among senior workers. It has been seen that with age, women workers also start intervening in different aspects of family living including expenses made by adult male members. Sociologically speaking then even 'subjugated' members are allowed to exert pressure on the 'dominant' members of the Indian family after they attain seniority. The husbands and sons also gradually acknowledge such rights of wives or mothers. As a consequence, these families innovates a system of joint or collective supervision. In this sense, employment prepares the ground for subordination of patriarchy. Moreover, employment provides the opportunity to go out, meet unknown people, talk to them and take certain personal decisions instantly. Some of the workers are able to save money (23%) and educate most their children. It is not least an accomplishment that among 90 sons and 83 daughters of my respondents, only 3 sons did not go to schools though many had to drop out due to economic and other reasons. One of my respondent therefore told me candidly, "Had such employment not being available, I would have to join the rank of prostitutes to save my children". Such narrative proves that even informal employment produces positive results for marginalised women workers and this is more so in the long run when their children grow up and are able to help their mothers. The story of empowerment of women workers within family, therefore, has to seen in totality and from longitudinal perspective.

## **2. Status and Role in Work Place**

Status of women workers in any workplace is mainly decided by the types of work assigned to them and the wages paid for such work. Non-wage benefits provided to the workers, job

security and work environment are also considered major indicators of such status. From our analysis of the occupational life of informal sector workers so far, it is very clear that they are assigned the lowest status for being employed on temporary, daily or contractual basis. Also the types of work they do are normally considered inferior, unskilled, less heavy, and hence poorly paid. But, one cannot just generalise on these as status within a work unit is also judged on comparative basis. In other words, if a unit employs workers on different terms and condition, the status and role of these workers may differ. The rice mills resemble similar type of situation. Thus, women workers are employed as 'field workers' in rice mills who require no training and who may be dispensed with machines or male workers if required. Their role was only to dry the wet rice in the sun and often to clean husk from the rice. Traditionally, the Santal women staying inside the mill used to do these 'petty' jobs. Hence, they are assigned the lowest status by the management in the hierarchy of workers and are not consulted for taking any decision. Even though there was no clear segregation of places of work on the basis of gender identity, the women working at the *Chattal* formed a separate category by their collective presence in certain locations. By comparison, the machine rooms, the godown or places of loading-unloading of sacks were typically male dominated. The question of differential wage payment, however, does not arise as male workers are not employed for the type of work done by women. But, one may question the very logic of work differentiation based on gendered ideology. Women workers are offered only those types of jobs in rice mills that do not fetch much remuneration. By comparison, the male machine or contractual workers, engaged for different type of jobs, are paid higher wages. Even though women were employed in least-paid jobs, they surprisingly became the first target of displacement by machines. In the Jute industry of Bengal also, displacement of women workers in similar fashion was noticed (Fernandes 1999).

There is, therefore, prevalence of gendered notion about work despite claimed 'progress' and 'development'. It should be noted here that the attitude of male workers or managers towards the women workers in the past was so depressing that local workers did not ask their wives to join the work. The Santals however did not mind it as they came from outside and stayed inside the factory along with their family members. The change in attitude in this respect may partly be attributed to the activities of dominant CITU union in the industry. Due to the movement of the *West Bengal Rice Mill Workers' Union* (WBRMWU) since early eighties, discrimination on the basis of sex or other identities has lessened in the industry. The union then also saved them from sexual exploitation and other kinds of harassment that was normal in their daily life. Similarly, the credit to infuse some system of rules in their employment including wage increase goes to the credit of this union. The women workers then started calling themselves 'quasi-permanent' as the union gave them appointment letter and the employer could not terminate them easily. Interestingly, the male-dominated union had also tried to solve unruly behaviour like violence, drug addiction, and gambling of husbands and other adult male members. Moreover, appointment of lower level leaders from among the women members of union had symbolic value particularly for the women themselves. WBRMWU gave them a space to express their views and the women

leaders were known for their sincerity and uncompromising militancy. It was easy for women workers to approach these women leaders as and when required and even with sensitive issues. The male workers in rice mills also took these women leaders seriously.

Despite these positive developments, women workers have started losing their jobs due to mechanisation (Choudhuri 2014b). During the last 20 years or so, nearly 30 per cent of women workers have lost their jobs. The Santals women were the first to be displaced when drying machines were introduced though their husbands were retained for their physical fitness. The union did not do much to protect them who today stand at the mercy of managers and male co-workers to provide them some protection.

As compared to the rice mill workers, the Ayyas are not even considered employees and their working time stresses beyond normal 8 hours along with night duties. The tasks that Ayyas perform do not come under any technical category listed under medical science. The patient party pays them cash remuneration and they also often receive gifts/*bakshis* for dedicated service provided. Like the rice mill workers, the *Burdwan Town Nursing Home Ayya Union* (BTNHU) has been instrumental to force the owners of nursing homes to introduce some regularity in payment of wage including their engagement in a routine manner.

The Ayyas are also suffering from displacement syndrome today in the sense that the threat of not being engaged by any patient party looms large on their fate. Their volume of work is primarily dependent on the number of patients admitted to a nursing home. But, due to proliferation of nursing homes in and around Burdwan as well as in nearby cities and towns, the flow of outside patients has reduced now. Nearly a decade ago, patients from nearby district like Birbhum, Bankura, and Purulia use to come to Burdwan in large numbers for treatment. But, now these facilities are available in many places including their own town. Hence, the job of an Ayya has now become competitive.

Yet, given their job specification, the work of an Ayyas is viewed with humility and hence they also enjoy some status at work place. Thus, in the first place, they do not work under any direct supervision of medical staff though male compounders handle the technical aspects of treating a patient. Second, Ayyas come into direct contact with patient parties who normally hail from middle or upper section of the society. Third, their job is not devalued as the service they provide is often considered crucial. Fourth, it is also customary to call the Ayyas as *Mashi* in Bengali meaning mother's sister. Use of such kinship terminologies enhances their social standing within nursing homes. Fifth, as they gain experience, they have the option to learn some aspects of technicalities like inserting an injection, saline or taking care of a just born infant. Such 'on the job training' is helpful to find placement outside nursing home; that is service to a patient or old person at home. Sixth, the uniform provided by the management gives them a new identity. Finally, their close association with doctors and other medical experts enhances their social capital. Keeping all these factors in mind, we can say that Ayyas receive good treatment at work place as compared to the rice mill workers.

So far as the question of their satisfaction with the working condition is concerned, I have noticed very high level of contentment of my respondents and even representatives of trade unions in both rice mills and nursing homes. Obviously, the workers are very happy and satisfied with their job. I have stated earlier that 52 per cent of my respondents are fully satisfied with their job and another 45 per cent are partially satisfied. This means that less than 3 per cent of my respondents are not satisfied with their job. Only a few workers of rice mills have expressed dissatisfaction with the working environment and Ayyas have dissent mainly against the poor wage rate.

Even though workers have not expressed dissatisfaction with their current work, there are wider issues confronting them today. Thus, if we glance at their possible chance of seeking better jobs, the picture appears to be extremely gloomy particularly for the rice mill workers. There are several reasons for that. First of all, with their low level of literacy and skill, majority of the workers are unable to look for alternative or better jobs. In fact, after climbing the ladder from the work of a domestic maid to that of a moderately (as compared to earlier ones) paid job, the women workers face stagnation. Over 60 per cent of workers in both the rice mills and nursing homes have been working in their respective fields for more than 10 years. Second, competition for jobs in the rice mills and nursing homes has increased many folds these days. The local high caste unemployed youth have mounted their claim on jobs that were once considered 'degraded' and were the prerogatives of the migrants, Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and the Muslims. There is no doubt about the fact that being at the mercy of the management to retain their existing job, my respondents have expressed their satisfaction with the working environment. Finally, their capacity to bargain with the management has now become feeble due to weakening of the trade union movement in both the sectors. The status and role of women workers in the informal sectors therefore depends to a large extent on the capacity of trade unions to mobilise opinion and provide protection.

### **3. Status and Role in Society**

It is apparent from the discussion so far that women workers have been able to utilise their earnings for the well being of the family and to large extent were able to manage their life as a member of the family. Even though many of them are able to exert their individuality in shaping their family from scratch, it would be wrong to assume that they are 'individuals' in the Western sense of the term. In the Indian context, with elements of 'tradition' being able to reconcile with those of 'modernity' even in contemporary times, one can witness resilience of many traditional institutions in the life of working class women. Hence, family membership including those of caste and community are considered important along with class status.

Notwithstanding the influence of such social institutions in the daily life of women, employment did enhance their capacity to exert in social life. In particular, such employment has removed the distinction between paid work at workplace and unpaid work at home. By doing so, it has also allowed the woman the liberty to challenge given gender divisions

within and outside family. For instance, except for those who stayed inside the rice mills, majority of my respondents could move freely in public life to do the job. Again, their capacity to retain, save or spend their income could be materialised due to employment. In case of women-headed households, management of internal and external environment almost independently enhanced their ability to transgress the boundaries of caste, community and family. The neighbours and relatives, in particular, considered these changes vital. Within a particular social matrix, hence, working women are better placed as compared to those who fail to enter into such market.

It should be kept in mind that nearly half of my respondents from both rice mills and nursing homes hail from low-caste, low-class migrant families. Again, 41 per cent of them live in makeshift *Kutcha* houses in Government land. These factors are found important because among the relatives and neighbours, belonging to similar socio-economic standard, employment in rice mills and nursing homes are often matters of pride. Though informal employment are less remunerative and full of challenges, among a range of easily available occupations like domestic maid, cook, construction work etc., jobs in rice mill or nursing home are better. Rice mill workers are also provided with 1 kilogram of rice a day apart from fixed wage and other benefits. Keeping these factors in mind, we need to interpret the data cited in Table 6 on the impression of my respondents about any possible change of their status after employment in the eyes of three major groups of stakeholders, namely family members, relatives and neighbours. In order to appreciate change in their status after employment, I have intentionally used certain qualitative terms like ‘significant’, ‘moderate’ and ‘minor change’. This is because, I have felt that my respondents prefer to talk in qualitative terms in describing the change and any scaling (from high to low) of change in relationship also involves qualitative aspects of social life. As the scope of my study did not involve any survey of neighbours and relatives, there was no way I could verify the claims of my responds. In Table 6, the term ‘significant’ refers to major changes, ‘moderate’ refers to middle level changes and ‘minor’ refers to a few changes.

**Table 6**  
**Change of Status after Employment**

Status	Rice Mills					Nursing Homes				
	Signi- ficant	Moder- ate	Minor Change	No Change	Total	Signi- ficant	Moder- ate	Minor Change	No Change	Total
Family Members	18	30	26	26	100	28	36	20	16	100
Relatives	12	30	34	24	100	21	31	29	19	100
Neighbour	10	31	32	27	100	12	41	32	15	100

Table 6 reveals that women workers have mainly experienced minor to moderate types of changes in their status after employment. Yet, for some, there is no change of status even after employment. The number of rice mill workers opting for ‘no change’ option is more

than that of the Ayyas. The proportion of 'significant' change is also not promising and this is more so in case of rice mill workers. Surprisingly, jobs in the rice mills are more remunerative and productive as compared to that of Ayyas. Yet, the latter have noticed improved change in the mind set of their relatives and neighbours. The major reason for this is that the Ayyas mainly come from broken families (54%) as compared to the rice mill workers (23%) and hence expectations of their family members and relatives have been more positive about employment as compared to the rice mill workers who mostly stay with their husbands and other family members. It appears that opinion of family members, relatives and neighbours on the impact of employment varies from context to context and depends on the social milieu in which they live. In any mixed neighbourhood group, concern for the status of any informal worker would normally not generate any interest. The reverse becomes true if a worker lives with co-workers and/or with people working in similar type of occupation. On the whole, informal employment does create some impression in the mindset of family members, relatives and neighbours in descending order though the impact is neither strong nor always perceptible.

My query about the changing status of my respondents also led me to find out about their nature of relationship with neighbours and relatives. My understanding about the busy daily schedule of the workers and their scanty leisure time did point out that their social life is restricted to a limited circle except extra-ordinary situations involving exchange of mutual help. Data cited in Table 7 and 8 also demonstrate that most of my respondents maintain feeble and occasional contact with neighbours and relatives. Either occasionally or during periods of exigencies, they go to neighbour's house. Such exigency may arise if any neighbour calls them for their own need, if anyone is in trouble or if they have to seek any favour/help for themselves. Here again, the level of reciprocity is dictated to a large extent by class concerns of the neighbours. In other words, the level of reciprocity is more among the members of working class families or families with similar background. It may be mentioned here that Ayyas are a source of valuable information for many relatives and neighbours. They know about the best available doctor in any particular branch of medicine. Again, if a patient of the locality of any Ayya is admitted to the nursing home, she is assigned responsibility and importance to take extra care. Hence, they also visit neighbours home when there is any problem. Despite such occasional negotiations, it appears that, on the whole, women workers prefer to maintain a reserve life and visit their neighbours or relatives only during occasions or for any definite purpose. Nearly 9 per cent of my respondents also do not maintain any relation with these people. Such distance could as well be the characteristic of urban life in Burdwan. I have noted earlier that most of my respondents are burdened with double responsibility and consequently they cannot even spend their leisure time copiously.

It may equally be argued that as compared to relations inside work place, neighbourhood and kin relations are not so appealing for the women workers. It is likely that neighbours and even some relatives may not share a similar life style and may avoid them. There might also be personal reasons for avoiding any particular relative or neighbour. It is equally to be

**Table 7**  
**Nature of Relation with Neighbours**

<i>Frequency of Visits</i>	<i>Rice Mills</i>	<i>Nursing Home</i>	<i>Total</i>
Go Regularly	17	12	29
Go Occasionally	29	25	54
Go only if anyone is in problem	26	37	63
Go for own need	20	17	37
Do not go	08	09	17
Total	100	100	200

**Table 8**  
**Nature of Relation with Relatives**

<i>Frequency of Relation</i>	<i>Rice Mills</i>	<i>Nursing Home</i>	<i>Total</i>
Maintain regular relation	35	25	60
Maintain occasional relation	57	64	121
Do not maintain relation	8	11	19
Total	100	100	200

noted that economic condition of the families I have surveyed is so poor that they feel embarrassed to maintain any constant relation. One of my respondent aptly said, "I stopped visiting my relatives as I can't afford to go in empty hand. Moreover, if I go, they will also come. How can I feed them? Now I just call them over phone". Maintaining social relationship involves certain costs and it is also a reciprocal exercise. For some, however, media entertainment after work is addictive and comes in the way of relations. It is also too simplistic to argue in favour of old types of social relations in the age of modern electronic technology. We should hence refrain ourselves from any such value judgement.

## CONCLUSION

It appears that 'gendering of jobs' might not lead to any holistic women empowerment in all cases as a large majority of women are either pushed to the margin to join low-paid jobs or are displaced due to industrial reform in globalised India. Yet, within a similar social sphere, the working women are better placed as compared to the unemployed due to their earning capacity and other correlated 'capabilities'. More importantly, rice mill and nursing home workers earn better as compared to many other types of urban informal works like the job of a maid, cook, governess, stitching and embroidery, bidi making, making of Puffed rice, construction work, petty vendors, or tailoring. But income criterion is not the only yardstick to judge the status and prestige of a person in society. Such status is also not based on personal and familial identity. As we live in family, in the company of neighbours, and often maintain relation with relatives, many other aspects of social living get intertwined to make a complex picture.

Ironically, however, in recent past, women workers have witnessed large scale displacement due to re-structuring of the rice mill industry. The marginalisation of the women

workers, in particular, has brought back the discourse on gender inequality into forefront. The reluctance of the male dominated trade unions to fight such marginalisation in tooth and nail also reveals the hidden recognition of gender disparity. The Ayyas are also finding it difficult to work for more than 20 days a month. Displacement and marginalisation of women workers is yet not a public issue no one has even raised the matter to express sympathy for the retrenched women workers during the last one decade.

It may also be noted here that since economic liberalisation, certain new types of lucrative informal services like that of catering, beauty parlour, body massage, sales girls, or investment agents have become available. The displaced workers may also form self-help groups to explore many other possibilities. But, as of now, these services are mostly beyond the reach of my respondent and they also do not aspire for such jobs with little or no qualification. It is here that I find the role of trade union, NGOs and other stakeholders most appropriate for elevating the role and status of informal sector workers. Any effort to empower women through informal employment will be more effective if trade unions or NGOs come forward to train women workers and link them with schemes for micro-finance, self employment and marketing. Such linking would absolve them from the risk of retrenchment and consequent unemployment. There are many successful instances of such experiment from different parts of the country and we may hope so for workers of rice mills and nursing homes too.

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