

**Dynamics of Working Housewives:
A Case Study of Social Welfare Workers in Rural North India**

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1. Introduction

Since the 1990s in India, the development of women has been extensively promoted. Poverty alleviation and economic development through agricultural land reform and improved farming techniques have been major issues in rural India. However, since the 1990s, the government and international organizations have focused more on the topic of “women.” Several types of “women’s programs” including those focusing on maternal and child health, female education towards “Education for All,” and micro credits to alleviate the “feminization of poverty” have been introduced nationwide.

The implementation of these women’s programs resulted in the hiring of a large number of women who were educated up to the high school level as field workers to assist in the programs. In the 1980s, girls’ education became popular among upper- and middle-class households to improve their possibilities for marriage, well in advance of the national education reform of the 1990s. Parents from the upper and middle classes tend to send their daughters to high school so that they can marry into a good family with better properties or incomes. Many of these educated women became employed as field workers in social welfare projects and participated in several welfare policies such as those related to poverty alleviation, birth control, maternal and child health, and increased education by domestic and international organizations in the public and private sectors.

Although considered an opportunity for women, who are mostly excluded from the market economy by sociocultural restrictions on earning an income for their daily expenses, the compensation for their labor seems unfair. In other words, housewives are targeted for the role of servants in the smallest units of administrative organizations and are paid low wages. Thus, this situation requires that we question whether participating in public society and improving economic status is indeed a good opportunity for women or merely another type of exploitation. This study examines middle-class women in rural

Uttar Pradesh (UP) working as social workers from the viewpoint of the “housewifization” advocated by Maria Mies, while locating them in the rural labor market by analyzing ethnographical data.

2. Housewifization and “intimate labor work”

Compared to other areas in India, rural north India (including UP) is extensively marked by patriarchal societies with strict gender norms. Here, socio-cultural restrictions on working in public spaces for married women, especially from the upper- and upper-middle castes, are evident. In this case, why are these women allowed to engage in occupations related to social welfare in positions such as public health workers, teachers, and social workers? This can be explained through the argument of the domestication and “privatization” of women along with renewed gender norms developed by Hindu nationalists since the pre-independence period. These have assigned fixed gender roles to women as caregivers and protectors of their families, as well as certain nationalistic gender ideologies such as devotion, dedication, and affection to others (Fruzzetti and Perez 2002). Social welfare activities can be considered an embodiment of the gender roles and ideologies bestowed on Hindu women. Actually, these activities are an extension of women’s roles as they routinely engage in their daily lives and thus, are inherently accepted by society as jobs filled by women.

Boris and Parrenas designated labor work that encompasses a range of activities including household maintenance, personal and family maintenance, and sexual and emotional contact as “intimate labor,” defining the concept as “labor with any type of physical touch or emotional closeness, or personal familiarity, or close observation of another, or knowledge of personal information” (Boris and Parrenas 2010, 1-2). They also explain it as the “unpaid responsibility of women,” which includes the nonmarket economy or low-paid work done by lower classes or racial outsiders. Social work in India, a field in which mostly educated middle-class women are working, cannot be precisely categorized as intimate labor. Nevertheless, both activities are needed to respond to the physical, intellectual, and affectional states and other emotions of those who use these services. Female workers necessarily commit to the personal matters of village women during fieldwork, such as birth control, family health, sexual relationships with their spouses, the education and/or marriage of their children, and care of older family

members. These issues have been discussed and solved within family units and create emotional ties and dependencies between workers and clients. Hence, they can be located in the arena of intimate labor.

A series of social welfare programs have provided employment opportunities to women who engaged in unpaid domestic work as housewives, making women's economic contributions to households possible. As Mies revealed, since the introduction of the capitalist economy, married women became more responsible for unpaid housework including agriculture and manufacturing-related work; therefore, the status of women rapidly declined (Mies 2000). Given this trend of housewifization, the social welfare programs that created women's work opportunities in rural communities played a role in improving the status of women in their households and society.

However, job opportunities for women must be closely related to activities in the domestic or intimate arena. According to Boris and Parrenas, a common factor of intimate labor is the low wages. Although social work differs from unskilled manual labor such as peasant or construction jobs mostly assumed by laborers in the lower class, social work is also physically demanding. For example, health workers and social workers go door-to-door in many villages, meeting women and checking their economic and health status. In other cases, teachers working in rural areas teach and take care of schoolchildren every day for long hours, usually in dark classrooms without air conditioning facilities. Despite their hard work, they do not get sufficient compensation (at least the informants in my research complained about their salaries), health insurance, paid leave, or pensions. This limits women's economic roles to supplementing their household incomes. Considering this argument, it is likely that the government and international organizations have taken advantage of the given socio-cultural roles of women as caregivers and the image of devoted and dedicated wives and mothers, full of affection for others, to utilize educated middle-class women as convenient personnel. This can be viewed as the feminization or housewifization of social welfare work. To understand the nature and significance of social work from a gender and feminist viewpoint, in the following sections, I examine the status of female workers and their perspectives on their work by analyzing ethnographical data.

3. Profile of the focus area

This chapter focuses on female social workers in the rural area of Chandauli district, eastern UP, who mostly belong to the socio-economic upper or middle classes and were educated up to the 10th grade (high school) or more during the 1980s and 1990s. In Chandauli district, which is adjacent to Varanasi province and located near the border of the state of Bihar, 80% of the population is comprised of farmers and 37% of the households live below the poverty line. The rural middle class differs from the one in urban areas in terms of lifestyle and family structure. Unlike urban areas, upper/middle-class women assume many household chores including economic activities such as farming and harvesting as well as traditional family maintenance such as arrangement of rituals and ceremonies.

On the other hand, these women also enjoy modern lives and ways of thinking. The development of transport in recent years means they can easily access Varanasi by bus or taxi within a couple of hours. Varanasi, one of the most historical and cultural cities in India, has developed manufacturing and tourism industries. This combination of traditional and modern factors in one place influenced the surrounding provinces socio-culturally and economically. Not only do villagers in this area visit Varanasi for shopping and sightseeing, but they also send their children to private schools or migrate there for better employment. Middle-class women in this area have a strong interest in education for their children and enjoy their changing lifestyles while utilizing modern consumer goods and appliances including mobile phones. Household chores have been simplified through the use of home appliances and cooking utensils including gas cooking stoves and outsourcing various types of “housework” (e.g., polishing rice, milling flour, making cow dung fuel, etc.).

The recent spread of these consumer goods, outsourcing services, and education has increased the value and meaning of cash income more rapidly in rural societies, where self-sufficiency was once the main economic activity. Those who once possessed wide farmlands have begun to sell them as necessities such as shopping, medical and education fees, and wedding expenses have increased. Thus, they are required to get jobs to compensate for the financial shortage of sustenance.

These recent changes in their lifestyles and economic activities could be another reason why women attempt to financially contribute to their families. Ironically, the

simplification of domestic work, which has generated more leisure time for women, has also brought the necessity of cash, pushing them to engage in economic activities outside their homes. Consequently, women have been forced to assume more burden and responsibility than before.

4. Social welfare work in the study area

Since the introduction of Education for All in the 1990s, informal education, non-formal education, and school education for women and children spread throughout the country. Simultaneously, the Anganwadi program was initiated as a childcare program for preschool children, and many village women were employed as teachers or teachers' assistants. Unlicensed schools were also established in this region, because of insufficient government-licensed schools, offering education at inexpensive fees and employing educated women as part-time teachers. In addition, in this region, some programs (e.g., micro credit, maternal and child health, income generation, and awareness programs to empower poor women in the lower classes) were implemented by a Christian NGO named Mahila Chetna Samiti and a government organization called Mahila Samakhya (MS). These programs employed women with high school or higher education as social workers, while women with five to eight years of education were employed as supplementary personnel. A MS report indicated a serious shortage of personnel: more than 50% of posts were vacant, because of low salaries¹, absence of social security measures, and other attractive options in the market for educated women (Matthai 2014).

Family planning is another activity conducted in this area by the State Innovation in Family Planning Services Project Agency (SIFPSA) launched by the UP Government in cooperation with USAID. According to the state government, more than 20,000 women were employed in 2012 as public health workers in charge of children and maternal health, as well as family planning. Under this program, they are required to regularly visit each household in their designated areas. During these visits, the female worker monitors various aspects of the health of women and children, provides information related to health and family planning, advises and motivates women to adopt appropriate health and family planning practices, and delivers other selected services. These visits are also

¹ According to an MS report in 2014, the salary of social workers at the field level is Rs 4500 per month.

important for enhancing the credibility of services and establishing necessary rapport with clients.

The table below shows the status of male and female frontline workers and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANM) employed by the state government in 2012, indicating the shortfall of workers against the required numbers. The state government increased the number of these workers in accordance with the rapidly increasing population of UP, but failed to hire the required number. This could be attributed to an insufficient number of educated women or cultural restrictions imposed on them. Interestingly, it also shows a large gap in the number of male and female workers, highlighting a significant shortfall of male workers, who represent only 8% of the required number covered at sub-centers. There seem to be at least two reasons for this: men are less interested in taking up the post, which is perceived as a feminine job, or men seek different job opportunities to obtain higher salaries and better social security.

Table 1: Health and Family Planning Personnel in Uttar Pradesh, 2012

Particulars	Required	In Position	Shortfall
Health Worker (Female)/ ANM at Sub-center & PHC	24,213	22,464	1749
Health Worker (Male) at Sub-center	20,521	1729	18,792
Health Assistant (Female)/ LHV at PHC	3692	2040	1652
Health Assistant (Male) at PHC	3692	4518	-----

Source: Open Government Data (OGD) Platform India²

² <https://data.gov.in/keywords/female-health-worker>

Table 2: Number of Female Health Workers and ANMs at Sub-centers and PHCs

2005			2012		
Required	In position	Shortfall	Required	In position	Shortfall
24,181	18,146	6035	24,213	22,464	1749

Source: Open Government Data (OGD) Platform India³

However, a comparison of the number of health workers and ANMs in 2005 (see Table 2) reveals that the number of workers increased in the following seven years. This is likely because of the expanding employment market as the level of education of middle-class women increased and a gradual decrease in the restrictions on local women engaging in public activities, as the programs established credibility among local people. Briefly, social welfare work has become widely accepted as feminine work in society.

5. Case studies on social workers

During my fieldwork, which I have been conducting since 2003, I met several workers who were engaged in family planning and health programs, teaching at public and private schools, and involved in women's empowerment programs. Through informal conversations and interviews, I found that their stories on how they started working and why they continued to work in the field varied. In this section, I describe the stories of five workers from different programs to understand the meaning of their social work.

Case 1: Sangeeta [Health worker]

Sangeeta worked for a family planning and health program under SIFPSA and is a *Thakur* woman in her late 40s⁴. She received ten years of education up to high school, and married when she was 18 years old. Her husband does not work because of a mental disorder; therefore, she takes care of various types of work to maintain the household, including supervising the tenant farmers working their 25 *bighas* of land. She had two daughters, and when the eldest married, Sangeeta and her husband sold their land by the piece to gain cash to prepare for the wedding ceremony. At the time of the survey, their

³ <https://data.gov.in/keywords/female-health-worker>

⁴ The age provided for informants was the age at the time of the survey, which was conducted in 2012.

second daughter was studying at a junior college in the nearest city to the village, and they were anxious about her marriage, because of a lack of income and property. Sangeeta worked only during campaigns for polio vaccination, immunization and nutrition for mothers and infants, and promotion of contraceptive use or sterilization to villagers. Since her job as a health worker was irregular, she also taught sewing classes and tailored sari blouses and *salwar kameezes* at home to earn cash, in addition to renting a room at the house her parents-in-law built for them.

She used to awaken at 4:00 or 5:00 am, wash the dishes, bath, wash her clothes, cook breakfast and lunch, and prepare so that she could leave her home at 9:00 am. The Primary Health Centre (PHC) was a five-minute walk from her home. She stayed at PHC on immunization campaign days and helped nurses who vaccinated villagers, while visiting around the village and meeting villagers individually to consult with them on contraceptive use and sterilization or childcare and health during pregnancy. Clearly, these tasks were exhausting and painstaking despite the low wages⁵, but the income from SIFPSA was necessary for sustenance. At the end of each day, it was difficult to balance economic activities and housework.

Case 2: Swami [Social worker]

Swami, a social worker in her late 30s, is a *Thakur* woman educated up to the high school level and working for MS as a social worker. She had been widowed six months before the survey, which I conducted in 2012, and had just returned to work from her period of mourning for her husband, who was killed in a traffic accident. She has three children (two boys and one daughter), all of who were living at her in-laws' house; the oldest one was aged around 10 years. She was still in mourning, but told me that she decided to continue to work for MS rather than resign. She usually visited ten villages in rotation, and met with group members to discuss issues such as saving money, health, education, and domestic violence. She attended block-level meetings every month, in addition to staff meetings at the block office every week and province office every month. She had good relationships with her colleagues, who visited her to comfort her during her mourning period.

⁵ Sangeeta earned Rs 800 per month.

Widows are considered bad omens in this area; thus, they live modestly while wearing plain saris without accessories and are not allowed to participate in joyous occasions such as wedding ceremonies and the birth ceremonies of male children. However, Swami had participated in the MS programs for several years and had many ideas on how to improve the rights and status of widows. In addition, she had young children and had to raise them, rather than stay at home. As such, for Swami, working for MS as a social worker was a way to ensure sustenance and raise her children more independently while living with self-dignity as a human being, rather than as a widow.

Case 3: Sadna [Teacher of non-formal education]

Sadna is a *Thakur* woman in her late 30s educated up to the high school level and working as a teacher in the girls' education program conducted by MS. She married into her husband's family after graduating from high school and had two small children. Her father-in-law had already passed away. Her husband was a schoolteacher and owned enough land to cultivate rice, wheat, and vegetables for the family's own consumption. An acquaintance persuaded her to become a teacher in the MS program. While not eager, she decided to take the job. Before leaving to teach at 9:00 am every morning, she finishes all the household chores such as cleaning rooms, washing the dishes used the day before, and preparing breakfast and lunch. She leaves her small children with her mother-in-law until 2:00 pm, when she returns home. Her husband reluctantly agreed to her working for MS, because he wanted her to stay at home and take care of their children and his elderly mother. He told me that women going out to work in a rural society, where their seclusion is still widely accepted, is not a good idea. He also said that he wanted her to care for their small children and do the housework properly. MS workers had much work other than teaching girls, which tended to keep them busy. For example, they attended staff meetings at each block and district office at least once or twice every month.

Sadna seemed happy teaching and caring for the girls from poor households, and had a good relationship with other female colleagues at MS. However, she worried that her husband did not agree with her working outside the home, and felt an inner conflict between caring for her family and continuing her job. She told me that she intended to prioritize her husband's will if he continued to oppose her.

As indicated in the cases of Sangeeta and Swami, social welfare work was likely crucial for their sustenance, and Swami and Sadna enjoyed good connections and relationships with their colleagues or group members or students. However, it seems that the job opportunity did not always bring gender equality within their households. In Sadna's case, working outside for any reason other than the need for extra income was considered an immoral activity, because it gives women an opportunity to enjoy staying in the public sphere while not fulfilling the important roles of mother and wife. In the future, Swami's case could also be perceived as immoral, since she was working as a widow. Another worker, a Brahman widow whose husband died of cancer, was also working at MS to raise her three children. She was actively engaged in an activity to empower widows while wearing a colorful sari and full accessories. She was accused by her in-laws of losing her dignity as a Brahman woman, and was forced to leave her in-laws' house. Thus, while a financial safety net, engaging in social work could be a risk in terms of social relations and cultural norms.

Despite the risk, some workers tried to attain their wish to work, while negotiating the patriarchal situation by balancing their activities and local gender norms.

Case 4: Madhu [Social worker]

Madhu, a *Thakur* woman in her 40s with ten years of education up to the high school level, was employed in MS as a teacher of adolescent girls when I met her in 2003. She started working for a Christian NGO, Mahila Chetna Samiti, which provides micro credit to rural women. When the MS program closed the education program in 2004, she became a social worker helping poor women by implementing saving programs in several villages. She married when she was 18 years old and had three children—two daughters and one son. The eldest daughter married five years ago. Her husband's father used to own land of 50 *bighas*, but it was divided and given to his four sons, which meant it was not big enough to supply their own food. He twice attempted to operate his own business (running a public telephone facility and operating a CD/cassette shop at home), but both failed. Apart from supervising peasants working on their land, he engaged in support activities for a local politician almost voluntarily, and once stood as a candidate to become a block panchayat officer, but lost the election. At the time of my fieldwork in 2012, their son

was studying in Mumbai while staying with Madhu's older sister-in-law, and the youngest daughter was studying at high school.

Madhu visited villages daily and had meetings with group members to supervise their savings and share information regarding programs and services provided by the state government, such as MGNAREGA⁶, pensions, and food programs. She went around the village calling group members to attend the meetings. She also attended vocational training for poor women with group members, and ran regular meetings at block offices near Varanasi or Delhi.

When she started this job, she promised her husband that she would do the housework properly. She said that "he thankfully accepted my wish to work as a teacher, and so nice of him, he even takes me to school by motorbike when he has time." She gets up at 4:00 or 5:00 am, sweeps and polishes the floor, washes the dishes, baths, washes clothes, and cooks breakfast and lunch before preparing herself to leave her house at 9:30 or 10:00 am. She returns home at around 4 pm, and then starts cooking dinner after resting for a while. Her second daughter sometimes helps her, but Madhu does most of the household chores. She frequently complained about back and knee pains due to the hard work, but did not want to stop working outside, both because she needed an income to sustain their family and she did not want to stay at home.

Case 5: Usha [Teacher at an unlicensed school]

Usha, a *Thakur* woman in her mid-40s, was employed as a teacher at an unlicensed private school. She was married to a man who was 15 years older than her and who had lost his former wife to cancer. They had three children by the time she was 16 years old. Her father-in-law had already passed away before her marriage, and she took care of her husband, mother-in-law, and three stepchildren (two sons and one daughter) who were all married at the time. She had a son of her own, and he was working in Varanasi after completing an engineering course at a college in Varanasi. She regretted that she had to give up her education when she married, and convinced her husband to support her

⁶ Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act began in 2006, and provides at least 100 jobs with wages to people below the poverty line in a fiscal year.

continuing education after the death of her mother-in-law. She was attempting to achieve a master's degree when I met her for the first time in 2003.

While taking the master's course, she was employed with SIFPSA as an assistant to an office manager, but after completing her contract in 2009, she applied for the post of schoolteacher and obtained her current job. As the school starts at 9 am, Usha wakes at around 6 am, gets dressed, has a cup of *chai* and a light breakfast, and goes to the elementary school, which is about a 10-minute walk from her house. Usha was in charge of schoolchildren from first to third grade and taught Hindi, math, and social science. She returned home at 3 or 4 pm, and rested until dark while taking care of her grandchildren. Her daughters-in-law did all the household chores including cooking, cleaning, washing, making cooking fuels, and preserving rice and wheat harvested from their own land. They strictly kept *purdah* (Women's Seclusion), staying at home the whole day and never stepping out of their house alone. Usha's first stepson was working in Chennai as a factory manager, and they received sufficient remittance from him to recently install a modern kitchen with gas stove and construct a new bathroom so that they did not have to go to the field to use the toilet. Her husband, who works at a hospital as a guard, reluctantly agreed that she take classes and work outside the home, but he was ultimately happy with Usha's decision, as she earned enough to sustain them when he developed heart disease and had to resign from his job. When I interviewed her, she expressed her respect and gratitude towards her husband, saying, "I could enroll for education and obtain my job because my dear husband kindly let me do so."

On the other hand, she complained about the working circumstances under which she teaches and cares for students from morning until afternoon in a small, old classroom without air conditioning, which causes serious headaches during the hottest season. In spite of her efforts, the salary is extremely low; however, she did not quit her job, because she did not want to stay at home to do chores as a housewife.

In spite of the low wages and hard work, these women enjoyed working as teachers or social workers, and were determined to continue working. They also respected their husbands by expressing a sense of praise and gratitude for "letting them go to work," rather than insisting on their contribution to the household economy or ability to balance domestic chores and economic activities. In other words, they were attempting to repeatedly recognize their faithfulness and deference towards their husbands through

their narratives, occasionally as if they had never gone beyond local gender norms, despite being engaged in activities in the public sphere. This is assumed a strategy to negotiate with patriarchy, in which they (un)consciously emphasize their identity as Hindu women to dissolve the contradictions between Hindu wife/mother and working woman.

6. Concluding remarks

As seen above social welfare-related work (such as health workers, teachers, and social workers) is located between the intimate and public spheres, and is one of the few job opportunities that local married women facing imposed gender restrictions can engage in relatively easily. Social work contains two antithetical traits: first, it confines women to expected gender roles and an image of women on the one hand, and on the other, makes it possible for women to connect with others beyond existing gender norms. Second, it improves women's status and increases decision making in the household through economic independence, while also increasing the burden on women by adding work other than housework while their economic status remains secondary in the household. Female workers presumably do their work by balancing these traits while accepting what is beyond their control and pursuing possibilities to achieve what they want and benefit from.

Here, the problems are limited job opportunities and low salaries, which prove that women are assigned to activities described as "service," "volunteer," "dedication," and "devotion" by the government and other organizations providing welfare programs. Ironically, women's organizations use these images of social workers to make ends meet on a meager budget, since their first priority is the most subjugated women in lower strata rather than middle-class social workers. As Mies defines the concept of housewifization, the costs that primarily need to be covered by the public or private sectors providing the programs are externalized to these workers as if their labor is a "natural resource" freely or cheaply available like air and water. Mies also suggests that housewifization means the process of disorganizing or atomizing women workers to deprive women's political and bargaining power. However, the situation of social workers differs from her suggestion, which is argued from the viewpoint of a civilization movement by proletariats during the industrial revolution in western society. Female social workers in rural India

have also been deprived their bargaining power not because they are isolated or disorganized, but because they are exposed to the Hindu gender ideologies contoured and reinforced during the pre/post-independence period. Social welfare work is precisely appropriate for middle-class women who should praise the images of ideal Hindu wives, who ascribe to self-sacrifice, devotion, chastity, and benevolence. This is because it requires hard work for society while earning a modest salary, which restricts women in terms of the household economy. In fact, the overwhelming shortfall of male workers indicates that society perceives these jobs as feminine.

Nevertheless, the increase in vocational opportunities and options widening the lifestyles and working patterns of rural women causes another problem for them. Essentially, the increased options add further responsibility to women's decisions and make their lives more complicated and difficult than what is accepted as normal in the lives of rural women. The female workers analyzed in this chapter have to justify their decisions by comparing the sense of pleasure and satisfaction from achieving social connection to others and economic independence and contribution towards bettering the lives of others to the sense of anxiety and suffering in body and mind due to hard work and the socio-cultural risk of violating gender norms. It is characteristic of rural women like Madhu and Usha to attempt to perform their roles as modest and faithful wives and caring mothers by stressing their gratitude towards their husbands or responsibility to raising their children. The most important concern for women in rural society is being a good mother or wife, regardless of whether they are housewives or working women. However, women's lifestyles are increasingly diverging from fulfilling the role of good wives and mothers to advancing their own careers in urban areas.

Recently, the situation in rural areas has been changing, as the younger generations of women—especially among who are the daughters of the social workers discussed here—received better education than their mothers. Some of these women are able to obtain better job opportunities (such as manager or officer), although the option is still limited. Furthermore, their status in their households is increasing faster than it did for their mothers in terms of household economy. Therefore, we need to keep monitoring society's evolving situation.

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