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# When Daughters Migrate and Mothers Do Not: Girl Children's Paid Outside Work in West Bengal, India

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# When Daughters Migrate and Mothers Do Not: Girl Children's Paid Outside Work in West Bengal, India<sup>1</sup>

Deepita Chakravarty<sup>2</sup> and Ishita Chakravarty<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

As many of the discriminatory practices against girl children and women primarily take place within the household, the family seems to have a crucial role in determining such outcomes. However, it needs to be remembered that gender discrimination takes different forms in different socio-economic and cultural contexts. Decisions taken by the household are naturally informed by such broader considerations. This paper tries to understand the possible role of the family in determining the country's highest work- participation rate of the urban girl children in West Bengal, India. This seems to be a paradox as West Bengal is known for its historical bias against adult women's paid outside work. The paper also explores the possible changes in gender relations within the household with the changes in the relative decision making powers of the different adult members of the family. Our argument is based on both secondary and primary data.

**JEL classification:** J01, J16, J61

**Keywords:** Girl child domestics, internal migration, India

## 1. Introduction

Children are reported to be working in large numbers from most parts of the developing world, and a significant proportion of these working children are girls. In fact the incidence of girl children's paid work in the age-group of (5-11) years is higher than that of the boy children in the same age group. However, males outnumber females in work participation rates in all other age groups (ILO 2009). According to the 2001 Census India has turned out to be the home of the largest number of child labor in the world. Barring some states the

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Indian subcontinent though well-known for its low rate of women's participation in paid outside work records a considerably high incidence of girl children's paid work. Discourse on women's work in India, however, usually overlooks the working girl child. For a long time girl child labor was hidden from the history of children's work as well. Occasional references apart (for example, Burra 2006) all worries about children's work participation used to hinge upon the toiling boy children in some typical industries and services. It is only recently, that the girl child worker and her mostly invisible toils in both unpaid and paid housework have started attracting wider attention. In terms of reported (paid) employment girl children's<sup>i</sup> incidence of workforce participation out-weighs that of the boy children at least in some parts of the country. Urban West Bengal (WB) is a case in point.

In Urban WB working girl children are mostly engaged in domestic service. They are often found as live-in domestics within the four walls of urban middle class houses, away from the public gaze, and therefore mostly absent in public dialogue. These children usually migrate singly to the cities in search of work from rural interiors of the state. The workplaces are therefore far-off, isolated and completely strange in every sense to the uprooted live-in maid involving severe risks of being abused (Chakravarty & Chakravarty 2008)<sup>ii</sup>. The literature on the problems faced by women domestics on the move from the developing to the developed parts of the world (for example, Lan, 2008: Taiwan; Gamburd 2002: Sri Lanka) does not include the case of the migrant girl child maid. This is because discourse on global migration of domestics, on the one hand, obviously concentrates on adult women and on the other, on cross border labor movements.

Girl children's participation in paid work has generally been high in the urban areas of WB and in this regard, the state has come to the top during the recent years<sup>iii</sup>. However, it is interesting to note that women's work participation in this state, especially in the urban areas, is low in comparison with the states representing high work participation rates (WPR) for women almost over a century. Historians attribute this to a cultural bias against women's outside work in the state. This striking difference in the labor force participation behavior between the adult women and the girl children apparently seems to be a paradox and needs to be explained. Is this one more manifestation of gender and age -based discrimination which takes different shapes in different socio-economic and cultural contexts?

It is worth mentioning here that while the sex ratio in WB is above the national average it is still lower than 950. Moreover, over the last few decades there is a continuous decline in the sex ratio in the age group of (0-6) years. This is not all. The school dropout rate for girl children is still one among the highest at the high school level in 2009-10 in this state. Further, according to the latest National Family Health Survey data (2005-06), the maximum number of girls gets married before they complete 18 years.

As many of the discriminatory practices against girl children and women primarily take place within the household, the family seems to have a crucial role in determining such outcomes. However, it needs to be remembered that the decisions taken by the household are informed by the broader socio-economic and cultural practices. A number of empirical studies indicate that the extent of anti-female bias is substantially reduced with the increase in women's agency within the family. But there are inconclusive evidences as well (for example see Kambhampati 2009 for a detail exercise). This paper tries to understand the possible role of the family in determining the highest WPR of the urban girl children in a state like WB with a historical bias against women's participation in paid outside work. In this context, the paper also explores the possible outcomes in the character of gender relations within the household with the changes in the relative decision making powers of the different adult members of the family<sup>iv</sup>. Our empirical findings relate to both secondary and primary data. The secondary data sources used in this paper are the *Census of India* and the *National Sample Survey (NSS)*. As a substantial number of women and most of the girl children are engaged in the care economy in urban WB, apart from these secondary sources, we have collected primary information from the families of about 60 women and girl children domestics in and around the capital city of Kolkata. Our analysis mainly refers to the period from the mid 1980s to 2010 with occasional references to the earlier years. We begin with a set of stylized facts that turns out to be relevant in understanding our empirical findings. We have not tried to test the theoretical positions empirically. Rather our aim is to explain certain empirical trends with the help of existing theory with necessary amendments and extensions.

## **2. The Stylized Facts**

Focus on the household as a unit of analysis to understand the nature of women's work and gender relations was part of the women's movement of the late 1960s and the 1970s. The Second Wave Feminism generated some of the 1970s debates on domestic labor and the

family. However, the role of the family in determining the economic outcome has been pointed out in the *New Household Economics* of the 1960s in the neo classical tradition. Models in this tradition have considered the household as a unitary structure having a single utility function without differentiating between different household members. However, there can be ‘rotten kids’ whose selfishness can be kept under check by the altruism of some family members such as parents. (see, Folbrey 1986 and Beneria 2008 for a discussion). Despite the acceptance and wide use of these models (such as the models propounded by Becker 1981), feminist economists in the main criticized these ideas on several counts from the perspectives of gender inequality and women’s oppression (For example, Hartman 1979 and 1987; Folbre 1988, 2001; Katz 1991). These critiques pointed out that the models in the tradition of *New Household Economics* did not question the unequal power relation between the genders that characterized patriarchal households. In addition, it has been argued that these models can justify in the name of economic rationality highly discriminatory practices against girls and women. Examples are abound: dowry systems that result in female infanticides, or deliberate relative negligence of girl children’s health and educational needs based on the assumptions and social norms concerning male and female responsibilities, and what constitutes the “proper” gender division of labor. Clearly, the neo-classical theoretical explanations will not help us unravel the decision-making procedure within a poor family (in the context of a particular cultural setup) that leads to increasing incidence of girl children’s outside work participation, sometimes even to a distant city, when the boy children and adult women, mostly, are kept at home.

Taking a cue from Nash’s game- theoretic formulation of cooperative “bargaining problems” Sen (1990) looked at the intra-household relations by visualizing “family as a bargaining unit in which interactions between family members are characterized by both cooperation and conflict”(Agarwal 2009: 159). As long as cooperative arrangements are beneficial to each of the family members, they cooperate. There can be a number of cooperative solutions but the final outcome of these solutions will depend on the bargaining power of each of the household member. This conceptualization of course, is in contrast to the unitary household model of the Neoclassicals. Agarwal (1990) extends this argument to explain the large scale abandonment of women and children during the Great Bengal Famine of the 1940s (see Agarwal 2009: 158). She argues that a disaster (such as a famine) may cause dissolution of the woman’s fallback position while that of the man is sustained to some extent. The woman’s ability to contribute to the family’s economic sustenance and consequently her

bargaining power may decrease even to the extent where the man finds non-cooperation more advantageous than cooperation. This, in turn, creates a tendency towards the desertion of women and children. It has been pointed out that endowments (assets and labor power) and the ability to exchange them primarily determined the strength of the bargaining power within the family in relation to subsistence needs such as food (Sen, 1981). Apart from these two factors there are a few more which do not depend on the private property or market exchange such as traditional rights, social support systems etc. (see, Agarwal 1997 for a detailed discussion).

To stay with Sen and Agarwal's contention, inequalities among family members in respect of these factors will place some members in a weaker bargaining position compared to others. While gender is one significant basis of inequality age can be the other and gender and age together can be an even stronger basis of inequality. However, with the increase in the agency of the mother, the quality of life of the child is likely to improve.

Let us consider a situation where cultural inhibitions thwart women's (in the reproductive age group especially) participation in paid employment a great deal. So, like any other traditional society a woman does not only have property rights over land or larger animals but she is also constrained by the socio-cultural inhibitions about earning in exchange of her labor power. In this context, let us assume that male earning falls, which can happen either because of a sudden calamity or because of prolonged non-performance of an economy leading to crunch in production and thereby better employment opportunities. This will lead to decline in family income and the consequent decrease in the availability of food and other means of subsistence. The cultural inhibition notwithstanding women's outside work participation is likely to increase in this situation but not to the extent of a situation where no such inhibitions hold sway. So, to supplement family income children are likely to be sent for work. Again, given the strong preference for the boy child, the head of the family, having the highest bargaining strength, is likely to protect the boy child from the hazards of paid outside work. The head of the household will instead, choose to send the girl child for work first particularly when there is a significant market for such gendered labor. It is also likely that as long as the family can afford it will try to equip the boy child with some education thinking about future prospects. Let us remember, Agarwal's notions of social norms and social conceptions. That the girl child is the most dispensable member is more clearly borne out when families choose to sell her even in the flesh trade market as documented by some

empirical studies (Ganguly Thukral and Ali 2005; Nair and Sen 2005). However, when the girl child attains puberty she becomes the centre of honor for the family. It is worth noting here that while talking about the strategies followed in the Taiwanese households regarding daughters' joining the factory work, Wolf (1990: 5) quoting Greenhalgh (1985: 277), mentions: "Parents socialize daughters 'to believe that they themselves were worthless, and that literally everything they had – their bodies, their upbringing, their schooling – belonged to their parents and had to be paid for.... Since daughters permanently leave their natal home upon marriage, they must pay back their debt early in life. Because daughters were seen as 'short-term' members of the family, parents did not waste resources in schooling them'" (see also Chant 1998: 12, Webbink, Smits and Jong 2012:631). It will not be out of place to remember here that while criticizing Becker's unitary households, Folbre (1986: 19) says that the "rotten kid theorem" does not solve the problem of "rotten parents".

Turning to our context it needs to be clarified that the possibility of exchange of labor power is unlikely to give rise to any agency to the girl child. On the contrary, it might destroy all possibilities of acquiring capabilities which can provide her with a gainful employment in the later years. However, the outcome is somewhat dependent on the kind of job the girl child is engaged in. In a typically developing country setup the avenues where the girl children work are some typical industries or dirty jobs like domestic service.

As we are trying to explain a dynamic outcome, some of the assumptions are likely to change over time. Suppose, if the mother in the family starts earning substantially from her outside employment, there is a strong possibility of changes in the time allocation of girl children basically for two reasons with two completely different outcomes. First, the family may find it more important to keep the somewhat older girl child at home to take care of the household chores and look after the younger siblings when the mother is away for outside work. If, the mother can go for work and earn more than the child, the household may choose to keep the daughter at home as substitute. Clearly, the strong economic incentive weakens the cultural inhibition. In this case, the girl child keeps working without any monetary gain. However, the duration of work is also an important consideration in deciding whether the mother or the girl child will go out for work. Households prefer adult women to spend relatively less time outside home.

Secondly, if the mother is able to earn a substantial income in exchange of her labor power she is likely to achieve some agency and thereby a better bargaining position within the family. This empowered woman may now try to prevent her daughters from going out for work. Instead she would try to put them in school. "... outside employment often has useful 'educational' effects, ... These positive links between gainful female employment and the status of women are also relevant to the female child, in so far as they affect the importance that is attached to her development and wellbeing." (Dreze and Sen, 2002: 246). We will get back to these issues as we go along with our secondary and primary evidences in the later sections.

In sum, the suggested framework puts forward that in the context of economic decline (urban or rural) family income falls. Given the strong cultural inhibition to women's work outside home and widely prevalent discrimination against girl children, younger girls turn out to be the natural choice to take up the brunt of supplementary earning. However, this might change with changes in the "given conditions" for different reasons.

Before turning to the hard facts, we find that the data at hand are reasonably well explained by the proposed framework. But this is not to claim that it is a master framework that can explain diverse outcomes in different states of India with different specificities.

### **3. Do Mothers and Daughters Participate in Paid outside Work from the Same Family?**

Let us take a look at some macro –economic changes in the state since independence in 1947, in the context of which poor families were forced to make some difficult choices as part of their survival strategies. The significant and continuous decline in the large-scale industry, mainly jute and tea, since the late 1930s and later the engineering industry since the mid 1960s made large scale manufacturing unviable in the state. Along with these policy-induced difficulties, the militant trade unionism since the 1960s made it simply impossible to generate or even retain investments in the formal sector. These industries were also highly labor intensive in nature. Consequently, the formal manufacturing sector employment started declining continuously throughout the 1970s and the 1980s forcing the unemployed to enter into the informal economy accepting a significantly lower wage. As the formal manufacturing is mainly dominated by the "more skilled" male employees, the decline in this sector also affects them disproportionately leading to a general decline in the family income

of the worker households in the informal sector. It is expected in this context that to supplement family income female participation in paid employment would increase. Conceptual differences between the different censuses notwithstanding, while female WPR suggests a fluctuating trend till 1991 girl children's WPR was continuously increasing throughout this period in urban WB. This had led to the share of girl children in the total volume of urban working women as high as 6 per cent in 1981. But then there was a decline as female participation in general also started increasing since 1991.

How does the female work participation rate compare with that of the males in different age groups? We consider the WPRs of both females and males in four time points of the mid 1980s, the mid 1990s and the middle of and as well as the end of the 2000s.

**Table 1: Female and Male Worker Population Ratio (per 1000) for Different Age Groups in Urban West Bengal**

Age group	1987-88		1993-94		2004-05		2009-10	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
5-9	6	3	11	2	20	5	1	0
10-14	78	76	88	48	67	91	29	28
15-19	119	302	113	314	160	289	106	262
20-24	147	624	166	601	256	668	145	584
25-29	176	871	189	858	220	872	233	903
30-34	237	964	215	928	234	953	274	968
35-39	203	979	276	981	235	966	200	983
40-44	219	971	239	975	257	986	172	977
45-49	174	987	279	984	159	961	194	982
50-54	202	967	196	964	180	916	218	964
55-59	179	850	142	914	172	917	188	889

Note: NSS uses different types of estimation for worker-population ratio depending on the definition used. Here we have taken the measure of "usual status" employment. Usual status is defined as: the activity status (in this case worker) on which a person spent relatively longer time during the 365 days preceding the date of survey.

Source: NSS Report No 409, 515(61/10/1) Part I , Report No. 537 & Sarvekshana, Spl. No., September 1990

It is interesting to note that that except in 2004-05 there is a domination of female WPR over that of the males in the two youngest age groups (Table 1). In 2004-05 boys predominate over the girls in the age group of (10-14) years, a trend which is seen in all other age groups in all the four years under consideration. However, Table 1 also suggests a declining trend in female WPR for the age group of (10 – 14) years during the period 1993-94 to 2009-10. This decline can also be discerned for the youngest age group during 2004-05 to 2009-10.

This decline is unlikely to be a policy outcome as no particular policy effort to this direction could be noted during this period in the state. On the contrary, in 2007 the then Chief Minister of WB in a public meeting declared that there was no possibility of implementing the Child Labor Prohibition Act (which finally includes domestic servants also) of 2006 in the state in near future (Ananda Bazar Patrika, 1-01-07). However, there is a possibility that some of the employers might have voluntarily decided to abstain from employing child domestics after the Act was extended to include those engaged in paid house work.

There is yet another possibility that with the increase in the earning abilities of the working mother and the consequent improvement of her agency within the family the empowered woman is then likely to be in a better position to protect her girl child from working out. It is important to note here that there is a sustained increase in the work participation rate of older women, especially in the age groups of (25-29) years and (30-34) years since 1993-94. Yet, a substantial number of girl children still work in the urban areas of WB leading the state to the top in the country in this respect. Whether the mother will earn the agency of decision making within the family depends much on the kind of paid work she is engaged in. We will deal with this question in detail while reporting our primary survey in the next section.

It is important to note here that the decrease in the WPR is not restricted to the child population alone in 2009-10 but is also applicable to the most important reproductive age groups of (15-19) years and (20-24) years of the urban women in the state. Is it suggestive of a renewed trend of ‘housewifization’? According to the third National Family Health Survey the number of women getting married below the age of eighteen is not only the highest in the state but also is increasing. We noticed some such trends in our primary data reported later in this paper. We found that the relationship between the increasing trend of domestication of women or turning them into ‘proper housewives’ which Maria Mies (1989) describes as

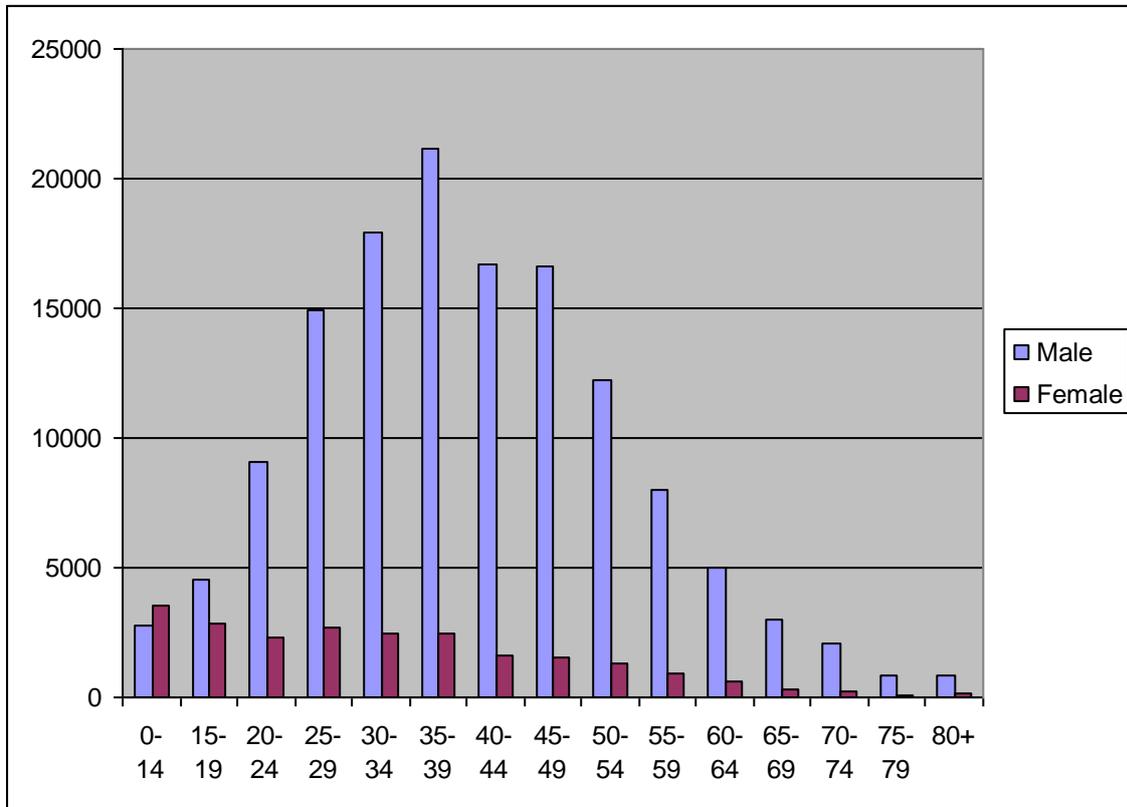
‘housewifization’ and the development of the working mother’s agency turned out to be quite complex.

In order to get an idea regarding the families that may send girls as well as older women for work we look at the monthly per capita consumption expenditure class-wise female work participation in urban WB. It can be expected that the girl children workers will come from the lowest consumption expenditure classes. Though, the WPR is the highest for the richest cohort of women in Bengal, their number being much lower compared to the three poorest consumption expenditure classes, it can be assumed that there will be a large intersection of poor families sending girl children as well as older women for work. In order to understand to what extent these families intersect we turn to the aspect of migration.

It has been argued that the emerging job market for women and girl children during the post partition years in WB was mainly paid domestic service. According to 1961 census, a substantial number of these working girls were migrants. In 1981 girls of 0-14 years constituted 54 per cent of all children who reported employment as the reason of their migration from different parts of the state to Kolkata. These girls constituted 19 percent of the total female migrants from within the state for employment to the city in 1981 when the percentage of the boy children migrants for employment constituted only around 2 percent of the total male migration for employment. Hence, a large number of girl child workers were likely to be single migrants for employment to Kolkata city in 1981. These girls were also not likely to have come from the same families which sent the mothers to work in the city as well.

How do the female migration at other age groups compare with that of the males? Figure 1 reveals that in 1991 women outnumbered men in migration for employment only at the lowest age group. Also, the gender gap in migration is the lowest in the age group immediately following the youngest one. As women get married mostly before the age of 18 in the state, the main concentration of migrated working women between 15 and 19 years is likely to take place around the lower boundary of the age group of (15 to 19). On the contrary, concentration of the males is likely to be around the higher boundary of the same age cohort. Our primary observation reported in the next section goes a long way to support this conjecture.

**Figure 1: Female and Male Migration for employment from different parts of WB to Kolkata City in 1991 for different age groups**

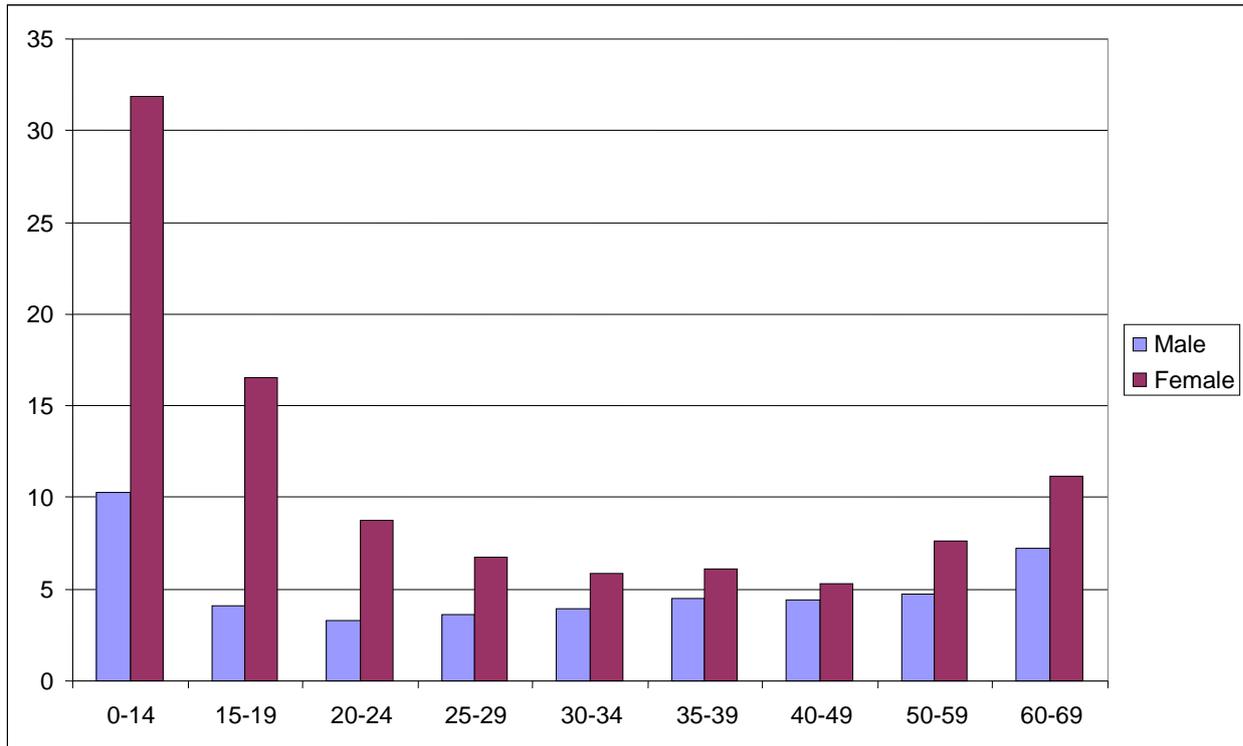


Note: Migration for all duration has been considered.

Source: *Census of India, 1991, 'Migration Tables'*.

It needs to be mentioned that the internal migration we are talking about is primarily distress migration caused by shortage of food in the rural areas. This is why during the 1980s internal migration decelerated as a consequence of the rural institutional reforms such as the redistribution of land to the marginal holders and the landless (Giri 1998). But, as the land reforms were not all pervasive<sup>v</sup> migration to the city in search of food continued by the lowest orders: the single migration of girl children for work is a particular facet of this process as argued in the framework earlier. Even in 2004, West Bengal Human Development Report notes a substantial amount of distress migration from agriculture and industries to services. Incidentally, according to latest NSS data, in urban WB around 50 percent women work in the services sector, dominated by the low-paid manual services<sup>vi</sup>. If we look at the migration for employment figures as a percentage of total female and male workers in the city for every age group we get some more interesting insights.

**Figure 2: Female and Male Migration for employment to Kolkata city from different parts of WB as a percentage of total workers in the metropolis in 1991 for different age groups**



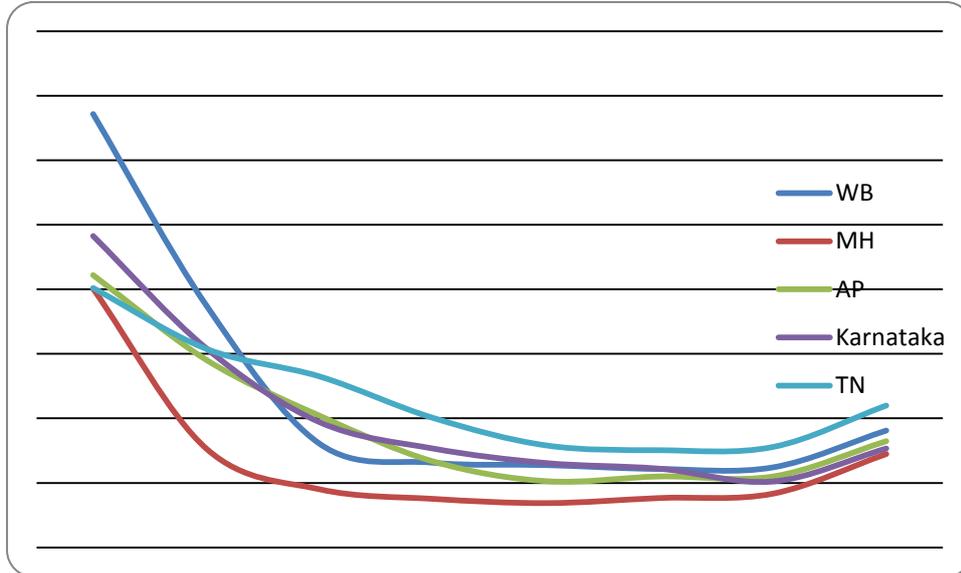
Note: The workers refer to both main and marginal workers.

Source: *Census of India, 1991*, 'Migration Tables' & 'General Economic Tables'.

In Figure 1 we have noted that in terms of absolute numbers male migration for employment is much higher than that of the females except for the youngest lot in 1991. But Figure 2 tells us that the migrants as a percentage of total female workers in the same year for every age group are much higher than that of their male counterparts. This is, however, not unexpected for women's WPRs among the distress migrants are likely to be higher compared to settled city dwellers. Secondly, we find that the gender gap in migrants as a percentage of total workers is the sharpest in the case of the youngest age group followed by the immediately next age cohort. In 1991, the percentage of girl children migrating to Kolkata for work increased to 56 percent from 54 in 1981.

The trend of girl children's single migration for employment continues in 2001. Unfortunately the level of disaggregation of migration data available for 2001 is comparatively more limited than that of the earlier years': data for migration for work from within the state to the cities/metropolises by sex and age are not available for 2001 census.

**Figure 3: Percentage of age-group wise migration for employment by women from rural and urban areas of the state to the urban areas within the state of enumeration in 2001.**



Note: Migration refers to 0 to 9 years. MH, AP, TN stand for Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu respectively.

Source: *Census of India*, Migration Tables, 2001

Instead, it gives the information of people migrating for work from different parts of the state to the urban areas within the state of enumeration. However, it doesn't really matter much from our point of view as the metropolises are the largest urban agglomerations of each of the states having these cities. This is particularly true for WB. 2001 census data suggest that the percentage of girls migrating for work from within the state to the urban areas of the state is 67 among all children migrating for work in WB (Figure 3). Also, there is, in fact, no reason to think that the distress migration has indeed declined in the recent years. 2004-05 NSS data revealed that parts of rural WB suffered from maximum food inadequacy in the country (Banthopadhyay 2007)<sup>vii</sup>. We address these issues again in the next section. Before closing the discussion on secondary data two more points are worth noting. First, the percentage of girls among all children migrating for work is the highest in WB when compared to the other states having large urban agglomerates. This was also the case in 1991. Secondly, while the percentage of women migrating for work falls subsequently for the later agegroups in all states under consideration, the fall is strikingly sharp for the reproductive agegroups in WB and so also in Maharashtra.

#### **4. Family, Girl Children and Work: The Micro Evidence**

The primary survey recorded here is intended to understand why the family chooses to send girl children to work out in more numbers than the boy children given the historical bias against adult women's paid outside work in the state. We decided to concentrate on the domestics alone as around 57 percent of the working girl children in urban WB are concentrated in this sector though there is a possible decline in the incidence of girl child domestics very recently as noted before. Domestic service is one of the most important areas of work for women in the state as well (about 20 percent women work in this sector) (Chakravarty & Chakravarty 2008).

*Save the Children* (2004, 2006) points out that, employing girl children as domestics is less costly than employing adult women. This is particularly true when domestics are appointed on a full-time basis. Apart from these more obvious reasons there are a few other causes for preferring girl children to the adult women by the employer families as live-in domestics by the employer families. The most important among them is that the girl child domestic can be expected to act as a natural caregiver as well as a playmate to the employer's child. Moreover she is supposed to be accountable for all sorts of odd jobs. A recent survey among the middle class households in Kolkata conducted by Chakravarty in 2010 supports these findings.<sup>viii</sup>

Chakravarty & Chakravarty (2008) have argued that in an increasingly urbanizing India the trend of both parents going out for paid work among the richer classes, has been on the rise in the recent years. WB still a poor performer though, in the field of adult women's WPR, shows a significantly high work participation of the urban women in the richest class of the state in the recent years. Such upper-class families seem to be in most urgent need of providing paid company to their children in the absence of hardly any institutional support such as crèches. However, the dynamic of the market pulling out the girl children from the rural areas to city houses has not been elaborated in this paper as the subject requires a separate study. In this paper we have concentrated mainly on the supply side factors.

For our primary survey we also chose, for the sake of convenience again, to concentrate primarily on the city of Kolkata, the largest urban centre in the state. Our interactions with domestics in the city as well as information from primary surveys on domestics conducted by others suggest that there are mainly three categories of domestics working in Kolkata:

residents of the city, daily commuters from nearby rural areas and live-in domestics. Reports on domestics by Save the Children (2004, 2006) show that the category of live-in domestics is significantly dominated by girl children. Girl children are also found in the city dwelling category of domestics but are mostly absent from the commuting category. We tried to talk to the family members, especially the mothers of the girl children domestics. Our focus being the work history of the girl child domestic, we also interacted with the older women with a long career in domestic service since childhood. Our findings reveal that adult women domestics were concentrated in the first two categories. However, no exhaustive list of domestics covering each of the above mentioned categories containing the information required for any systematic sampling procedure is available. So, we had to proceed informally to access as many (60 in all: 30 city based + 12 daily commuters + 18 families who have sent their children mostly daughters as live in domestics) families/ women as possible in each category. We began with the residents of the city. In order to get information on the other two groups we decided to concentrate on the two neighboring districts of the North and South 24 Parganas which are known to be the suppliers of women and girl children domestics to the metropolis.

The central question we try to address in analyzing the primary findings is: how the survival strategies of poor households are influenced by anti-girl child biases and the implications of the development of women's agency in this context.

We located a number of slums in different parts of the city which host the resident domestics. We could interact with altogether 30 women from two different slums in the city<sup>ix</sup>. Most of the families of these two slums have migrated from the North or the South 24 Parganas, the two adjacent districts of the metropolis, over the past few decades. More importantly this inflow of people from the same rural hinterlands is continuing and has even increased recently after the devastating storm, "AILA", in May 2009. We found only two working girl children hailed from such recently migrated families whose vulnerability seemed to be significantly higher compared to those residing in the city for a longer time.

Two generations of these migrated women are serving as domestics in the city. A number of our respondents seemed to be the main bread-earners, either in the absence of adult males in the family or in the case of irregular earning of the male members. So, these women are likely to command significant decision making powers within the family. When we asked the

women why they did not send their dropped-out daughters to work as live-in domestics- a common practice in their childhood- we were almost challenged. They wanted to know whether they should send their daughters to be killed and raped at the employers' place. It clearly shows the women's awareness about the frequent incidents of abuse of the girl children domestics in the city often reported by the media. These mothers reported that most of their children, both daughters and sons, went to school and didn't participate in paid work. While interacting with these mothers we could feel their eagerness to educate their children including daughters. This was surely not the case some thirty years back when these mothers were slogging at city homes as child domestics.

However, despite the fact that these women seemed to have earned some decision-making powers in family matters they were not appreciative of their identity as workers. They seemed to be quite keen to see their daughters pursue a different course of life, rather as 'happily-married' housewives than as domestics. Let us remember that there is a significant decline in the WPR of urban women in the state not only for the children but also for the reproductive age group in 2009-10 over 2004-05 as mentioned in the 3<sup>rd</sup> section. Domesticity was clearly preferred to paid outside work. Raka Ray in a study on Kolkata domestics (2000) came to more or less similar conclusions with ours. She observes that as domestic work in India is individualized, unorganized and also much stigmatized, 'domestic workers minimize their identities as workers and instead think of themselves as women and men, mothers and fathers, wives and husbands, daughters and sons'(pp.713-14). She also mentions that the individualized and isolated nature of the work, which causes such minimization of the worker –identity, is particularly applicable to live-in domestic service.

From the work history of our female respondents it was clear that most of them started working as girl children. Some started working as domestics at the age of 10/11years and others even at 6/7 years. As the average age of our respondents was 40 years they started working sometime in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is to be noted here that the secondary data show women and girl children to have outnumbered men and boy children in domestic service in the urban areas of the state for the first time in 1981 (Chakravarty & Chakravarty forthcoming). Let us also remember that WB economy was in shambles both in terms of industrial as well as agricultural performance especially during the 1970s. While agriculture somewhat picked up as a result of institutional reforms the industries were continuously doing badly. However, recent changes in the state economy led by the boom in the services sector especially in and around the metropolis have opened up opportunities both at the

higher as well as at the lower ends of the society. We have noted a significant increase in the older women's work participation in the age group of (25-29) years and (30-34) years probably both as professionals and as those professional women's domestic help. Our adult women respondents in the city seemed to be quite confident of their own bargaining power at the work place. Probably, their prolonged exposure to outside work in a metropolis has made them capable to utilize the increasing opportunities due to the service sector boom.

The second group of our respondents was the daily commuters to the city from the adjacent villages. Ananya Roy, in her survey conducted in 1997 found a large number of women domestics commuting daily from their rural homes which were connected to Kolkata by regular trains (Roy, 2008). In fact, as early as the late 1980s those local trains which carried hundreds of maids every morning from the villages of southern WB to Kolkata were described as 'jhee<sup>x</sup> specials' by the city elites.

We decided to conduct our survey of regular commuters in a village named Piyali, in the district of South 24 Parganas, situated about 70 kilometers away from Kolkata and is connected to the city by local trains at regular intervals. Here we could manage to talk to 12 respondents all of who commuted to the city daily to work as part time maids. All these women were from landless families, four were widows and two deserted by their husbands; the rest were married whose husbands have irregular incomes. So, in each of these cases women were likely to enjoy a certain amount of agency to influence the family decisions especially regarding children. Two of our respondents reported that they had worked as live-in domestics in Kolkata when they were very young. However, the working mothers reported that they did not send their children to work at present and, on the contrary, had put them in school. On enquiry it was found that only one girl child in the entire village had migrated to the city to work as a full time domestic in the recent years, whose widowed mother also worked as a part-time commuter maid.

One important difference between the commuter domestics and that of the settled city dwelling group seems to be that the commuting women do not enjoy the agency in their work places as the other respondents based in Kolkata have been enjoying for a considerable period of time. Our respondents take the train to Kolkata at 6 in the morning and come back home around 3 in the evening. Leave is allowed for any four days a month. Nature of work includes washing and cleaning. Extra service of various sorts is often asked for. Some of the

employer families give an annual increment of rupees 10 to 15 but most do not. Some threaten to sack if increment is asked for or leave is taken for more than four days a month. On the contrary, our respondents in the city dwelling group are generally not particularly unhappy about their working conditions. All respondents in the commuting category complained of the competitive nature of their job and according to them this very fact provided the employers with the opportunity of pursuing the practice of hire and fire at will. The anxiety of losing jobs seemed to worry the Piyali respondents most.

Roy (2008) reported about a village named Tetultola in the South 24 Parganas where a considerable number of houses sent their very young unmarried daughters to Kolkata as live-in domestics in order to meet the increasing consumption needs of the families. There she found such houses from which young daughters went to the city one after another. The village was quite far off from Kolkata. Our own surveys reported above also point to the fact that the incidence of girl children working as domestics from the city or from the adjacent areas has come down significantly. This goes a long way to support the decline in the girl children's WPR in 2009-10 over 2004-05 as reported earlier. But even according to 2009-10 NSS data the highest number of girl children in the age group of (9-14) is found to be working in the urban areas of the state. Save the Children earlier (2006) confirmed the same trend. We therefore realized that we needed to go to the interior villages to find out the sources of the live-in working girl children in the city<sup>xi</sup>.

We decided to go to the interiors of the North 24 Parganas, a district which is well known for its high rate of working girl children. Although the agricultural productivity in this district is quite impressive, 81.84 per cent of the households in the rural parts of the district still suffer from shortage of food (Govt. of WB, 2010). The village we identified is named Sandeshkhali, within the block Sandeshkhali II in the Sunderbans area. The block has the distinction of having the highest percentage (59.70) of Below Poverty Line (BPL) households. 15.36 percent of the households of the district can generally manage only one square meal a day, and that too not throughout the year. Migration for employment is a major coping strategy in Sandeshkhali II with the highest percentage of migration for employment in the district (Govt. of WB, 2010). However, the gender and age pattern of such migration is not clearly revealed in this report. But the report mentions two more important points. First, a large number of girl children are being trafficked from this area and second, a civil society organization, Jabala, is trying to ensure for quite some time, safe migration, to prevent the

exploitation of young girls and women who migrate from rural areas of the district to metropolitan cities and major towns in search of work. This along with the anecdotal evidence led us to infer that the incidence of girl children migrating for work was most likely to be quite high in this area.

After some efforts, finally with the help of a college student from a nearby village and a civil rights activist working in the same area we could talk to about 18 families who had sent their girl children to work to far off cities, even outside the state. A number of poor families depend on the income of such working girl children and on women who are regularly recruited by contractors. It seemed to be a rampant practice which was taking place in spite of the 2006 law barring the employment of children below 14 years also in paid domestic work. In the context of the large scale trafficking of girl children from this area of the state as mentioned above and also confirmed by media reports in recent years, our finding assumes particular significance. It is difficult to believe that all this is happening without the knowledge or perhaps even the connivance of the local power structure. At the nearest bus stand at Dhamakhali, a lone wall writing has focused the problem in quite a naïve way by asking whether the local people know where their daughters are going- to work out or are being trafficked. Interestingly, we have not found mothers migrating for work not even as domestics, a common experience in many other developing countries (for example, Gamburd 2002: Sri Lanka). Clearly, more than the economic considerations, it is the cultural factor of inhibition to older women's (especially after marriage) work outside home that determines the outcome here. Let us remember that some of our respondents in the city were migrants. But they came to the city as part of a household and not as single migrants. Secondly, in most of the cases boy children are kept at home and parents try to continue their education as long as possible, sometimes even with the support of the daughter's earning. We have noted earlier that the number of boy children migrating for work to the urban areas of the state is much smaller than that of the girl children for decades.

Though almost every household of the two localities (inhabited by the lower castes and tribes) sends their girl children for work outside, not many were willing to interact on the issue with outsiders like us. This is, however, not unexpected as in most of the cases the contractor-employer is a local person with political clout and recruits through agents appointed in the village itself. These agents are quite often close relations of the child who is being sold away for a pittance.

All our respondents were mostly landless, extremely poor and illiterate. They seemed to be almost in the dark about where exactly their daughters were working, about the nature of their duties or the amount they were getting. The contractor is supposed to pay the daughter's monthly earning to the parents in the village. While some complained that the contractors and their agents were not paying regularly others seemed to be satisfied. Among the eighteen respondents there were only two cases where families had sent boy children to work out though most of the families we talked to had both young sons and daughters. In one case a widowed father has offered his only child, a boy, to a contractor to work as domestic in a household near Kolkata and that too after the devastations of the AILA. In the second case, a widowed mother has sent both her daughters and the only son to work out. While the daughters never went to school, the son was in class V when he was sent to work. The mother reported the incidence of sending the boy out, as a great misfortune:

“It was only after the devastating storm AILA that I was forced to send the boy for work outside home. The boy studied till the 5<sup>th</sup> standard. My daughters were never sent to school.”

Parents in general seemed to be less interested in sending their minor sons to work away from home even when there was an option. A typical response of a mother in this context was: “unless a boy is orphaned he is not sent for work away from home”. Let us take one more example: A widowed mother has one son and two daughters. The son is about 20 years working as a daily wage labor in nearby places. Both daughters are younger than him and the youngest one has been sent out to Delhi for domestic work. The mother was asked why she decided to send the young daughter (about 14 years) so far off instead of her elder son when it was a common practice for men to migrate for construction and other types of work from Bengal to the other parts of India, her response was the following:

“The burden on the brother was too much therefore she had to go. How much the brother alone can do? I don't know how much the employers pay her as she has recently gone for work. I also don't have much idea about the kind of work she does, may be cleaning, washing the pots etc.”

This discriminatory attitude on the part of the family seems to be all the more grave in the context of the high rate of trafficking of girls reported from the area and the higher possibility

of girl children being sexually abused in any case. Clearly, the families in their survival strategies to cope with continuous abject poverty are being guided by their strong boy-preference. This takes us back to the theoretical conjectures put forward at the beginning.

Among our 18 cases of migrant domestics only two were adult women deserted by their husbands, who had decided to go to far off cities in search of work leaving their children behind. The families also endorsed their decisions probably because deserted women were not supposed to be as indispensable to the family as the married women<sup>xii</sup>.

Girl children in the village go to school cursorily and those who enroll usually drop out at the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> standard, the stage at which contractors recruited most of these cases for work outside home. However, they are usually withdrawn from work before they attain the reproductive age. The significance of marriage and reproduction as symbols of honor for the family clearly supersedes the purely economic considerations here. It is important to note here that while WB shows the highest percentage of women getting married below the age of 18 in the country as a whole, in the rural parts of North 24 Parganas it is as high as 80 per cent (Govt. of WB, 2010). Moreover, our respondents reported that even in landless and marginally landed families the amount of dowry for a girl to get married was quite high ( 15 -20 thousand rupees in cash besides valuables in kind).

We have not yet brought in the question of the mothers' agency in this context of girl children's migration for work from Sandeshkhali. Our survey in the city as well as in village Piyali revealed that the mother's earning by way of outside work made a significant difference in the fate of the girl child. The mothers in all the 17 families (except the one where the mother is dead) we visited in Sandeshkhali also worked outside for pay. As livelihood options are severely restricted these illiterate women mostly collect small-fishes from the adjacent river Vidyadhari and supply those to the local fisheries in return of a pittance. In a remote village like Sandeshkhali exposure to the media and other sources of information about the world at large is restricted, more so for the women. Such a situation is clearly not at all conducive to the development of the agency of the mothers in question. Let us remember in this context that there has been a long –standing debate whether paid work outside home necessarily increases women's freedom and agency in all places and under all conditions (see, Kogel, 2003 for a cogent discussion on this.)

## Conclusion

This paper tried to understand the possible role of the family in determining the country's highest worker-population ratio of the urban girl children in the Indian state of West Bengal with a historical bias against women's participation in paid outside work. The incessant non-performance of the economy led to a continuous decline in the family income of the poor in the state since independence. Given the strong cultural inhibition to women's work outside home and widely prevalent discrimination against girl children, younger girls turned out to be the natural choice to take up the brunt of supplementary income. However, in the cases where mothers' work and/or paid employment earned them an agency the fate of the girl children were found to be better. By focusing on West Bengal we, however, do not claim that gender discrimination is in anyway more prevalent in this state compared to other parts of the country. It is essential to note that gender discrimination takes different forms in different parts of India. Thus we find an increasing incidence of female feticide in Tamil Nadu with otherwise generally better social development indicators. Discrimination on the basis of gender is a highly complex issue that often works through several non-market institutions to determine the market outcomes<sup>xiii</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> According to the 2006 amendment of the 1986 Act of Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation, employment of children below the age of 14 years is prohibited in India including domestic service and hospitality trade such as in road-side restaurants and hotels. We therefore have considered the economically active population below the age of 14 years as child workers.

<sup>ii</sup> In the context of six Latin American countries Levison and Langer (2010) report similar isolation related abuse of child domestics.

<sup>iii</sup> According to the 2001 Census data and 2004-05 NSS data the WPR of urban girl children was the highest in WB among the urban areas of all major states in India. But, according to 2009-10 NSS data (on employment/unemployment, usual status) WB stands at the second position in terms of the youngest girl children’s (5-9 years) work participation rate in the urban areas after Uttar Pradesh (UP). In the case of girl children of the immediately older age group of (10 to 14) years, however, WB still shares the first position along with UP.

<sup>iv</sup> In the early 1980s, on the basis of a primary survey among working women in Kolkata city, Hilary Standing (1991) did not find any positive correlation between women’s participation in paid work outside and their agency inside the household.

<sup>v</sup> See for a critique of the land reforms in WB, Basu (2001).

<sup>vi</sup> This is, however, increasing becoming an all India feature during the post economic reforms.

<sup>vii</sup> Though, Planning Commission’s most recent estimates suggest a decline in poverty (both rural and urban) in 2009-10 in WB (The Telegraph, 22-03-2012).

<sup>viii</sup> Ishita Chakravarty, ‘Master, Mistress and the Maid: Changing Relationships in Post-colonial Kolkata (1951 to 2004-05)’, Minor Research Project Report submitted to UGC, June, 2010.

<sup>ix</sup> The locations of the slums were: Bagbazar- Galif Street area and Kalimata Colony beside the railway track connecting Dum Dum and Baranagar stations in the northern part of the city. The primary survey was conducted in early 2010.

<sup>x</sup> 'Jhee' refers to domestic maid.

<sup>xi</sup> Live-in domestics are enumerated at the place of work by the NSS or the Census.

<sup>xii</sup> Unmarried minor girls seemed to be the most preferred group of domestics followed by the destitute adult women by the employers.

<sup>xiii</sup> All personal information that would allow the identification of any person or person(s) described in the article has been removed.