

OCCASSIONAL PAPER

2011, No. 1

CSSSC-UNICEF
Social Inclusion Cell

*Girl Children, Family and Dirty Work: Paid Domestic
Service in the Indian State of West Bengal*

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Abstract

In India where participation in paid domestic service, like many other dirty jobs are still to some extent caste-based, girl children are emerging as yet another caste of workers in the care economy. This is happening with the increasing urbanization in the country in the past few decades. Along with the other metro cities of India, Kolkata, the capital of the state of West Bengal, records a very high participation of girl children, mostly migrants from the rural areas of the state, in paid domestic service. In fact West Bengal records the highest rate of work participation of girl children in the urban areas of the state and most of these girls below fourteen years are engaged as domestics, a job which is being perceived by the society as degrading. This tainted job also involves considerable risk and hazard. The aim of this paper is to understand the possible role of the girl child worker's family in determining the highest work participation rate of girl children in urban West Bengal, a significant number of who are not only in the domestic service but

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The authors are grateful to N Krishnaji, the late Anjan Ghosh , Nirmala Banerjee and Ruth Simpson for discussions. This paper has been presented at a workshop organized by the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata on April 19, 2010 and at the international conference organized by *Gender Work and Organization*, at the University of Keele, UK on June 21, 2010. We are grateful to the participants for interesting discussions. We are also grateful to Nemaï Gayen for his support in conducting the primary survey. Ishita Chakravarty wants to acknowledge the financial assistance for the primary survey from the University Grants Commission, India.

also have been sent to work as live-in domestics in far off cities. 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. Thus the paper tries to find out whether the perceptions of the workers' families, especially those of the mothers, regarding the much stigmatized paid domestic work, change with the development of their agency. Apart from secondary information our analysis is informed by long interactions with sixty families in Kolkata and the neighboring districts with a history of sending girl children for work.

1.Introduction

Baishakhi Pradhan , a twelve year old girl working as a domestic in a middleclass family was found hanged in her employer's residence on 10 July, 2009 (Kolkata, ABP, 11 July,2009). The dead body of another child domestic, Alo Sen,(aged 11 years) was reported to have been dropped on the street by her employers. (Kolkata, Pratidin, 29 July, 2008). Uma Mondal , also aged 11 and more fortunate, managed to flee from her employers place with severe burn injuries (Kolkata, ABP, 25 February, 2008). Yet another, aged about 15 years, escaped from her employer's place in one of the posh areas of the city of Kolkata with marks of severe injury all over her body, caused by beating (Kolkata, ABP, 7 November, 2009). In the last case the employers happened to be high officials of the government of India. Again, a senior official of the state police was reported to be involved in torturing a seven year old girl domestic who also managed to flee from her employers' place.

Such cases of abuse of girl children domestics in India ranging from beating, causing burn injuries, keeping in starvation and isolation to rape and murder are in fact quite regularly reported by the media not only from Kolkata but also from other metropolises and big cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore etc. (The Hindu,18 March,2010; The Times

of India, 1 May, 2010). Quite expectedly many other cases of abuse do not come to the police at all².

Among the areas which engage children in urban India in maximum numbers, paid domestic service needs particular attention because of some of its unique characteristics. It is being stigmatized by the society (Ray, 2000; Mehta, 1960) because paid domestic service is supposed to involve all the three categories of taint identified by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999). It involves physical taint because washing, cleaning etc. are associated with dirt. It is also socially tainted because the work requires a servile relationship of the employee with the employer. In fact, in 1999, the UN declared child domestic service as one of the forms of contemporary slavery. More importantly, the lower castes who supply much of the live-in girl children domestics were historically bound to the higher castes in various forms of servile relationships. Unlike other services paid domestic work is performed away from the public gaze within the four walls. This increases the vulnerability of the workers engaged in this service, particularly if they are children, more so if they are girls. The fact that the live-in women and particularly the girl children domestics are often reported to be abused as the objects of sexual pleasure by the male employers, attaches moral taint to the job. Popular fiction-writers in *Bangla*³ have often described women domestics (who are generally low castes) as seductresses⁴.

Scholars have pointed out that though there has been a marked dissociation between caste and traditional occupation among the higher castes in modern India, the lower castes have

² In a survey conducted by Save the Children on child domestics in the Indian state of WB (2006) some glaring statistics came out. It reported that around 68% of the children surveyed had faced physical abuse, 46.6% among them had faced severe abuse that had led to injuries. 32.2% had their private parts touched by the abuser while 20% had been forced to have sexual intercourse. 50% of these children do not get any leave, 37% never see their families. 32% of families have no idea where their daughters were working, 27% admitted they knew they were getting abused. 78% of workers receive less than rupees 500 a month.

³ The language spoken in the state of West Bengal.

⁴ For example: Narayan Gangopadhyay, Ektala, Bengal Publishers, Calcutta, 1953; Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, Smara-Garal written in 1947, published in Protul Gupta (ed.), Saradindu-Omnibus, Vol.7 (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1977).

found it difficult to move away from their traditional occupations (Rajawat, 2004). A number of menial and dirty jobs are being dominated, over the centuries, by the people at the lowest levels of the caste hierarchy. Along with scavenging and shoe-repairing, paid personal service is also a good case in point. Providing personal services to others has historically been accepted as the duty of the so-called lower or 'impure' castes. Poor women of such castes are thought to be particularly suitable for providing personal services to the higher classes who are often also the higher castes. Recent data suggest that the concentration of poor women in the informal employment in low-paid jobs dominated by personal services such as domestics continues (*National Sample Survey*, latest round, 2004-05). As lower castes in India heavily dominate the poorest section of the society as well, it is expected that the dirty jobs of domestics is likely to be also dominated by not only the poorest but also by the low-caste women⁵. Thus the untidiness involved in the nature of the work such as washing, cleaning, caring for the sick, the stigma of impurity attached to the workers because of their caste status and the low social prestige of the female gender have become conflated in the case of Indian domestic service.

In the recent years, yet another factor, i.e. the entry of the girl children in large numbers in the care economy has added to the vulnerability of one of the most marginalized sections of the Indian work force. With the increasing urbanization and the growth of the middle class, the metro cities and other big cities of India have started attracting a large number of very young girls, mostly migrants, in domestic service (see, Areeba Hamid, 2006). Thus in a traditionally caste ridden society, girl children, who are likely to be mostly from the so-called lower castes, are emerging almost as yet another caste to do the tainted jobs in the care economy of an increasingly urbanizing India. Despite the

⁵ While, we have not dealt with the caste issue in this paper it may not be out of place to mention that the work-participation rates of the Scheduled Caste (SC) women, one of the socially most downtrodden section of the Indian society is much higher than that of the women in general in the country. According to 2001 census it is 162 per thousand for the SC women and 142 per thousand for the women in general. A recent study on women's land rights in rural WB has also found that SC women dominate domestic service in the state (Broom and Das, 2009).

government ban in employing children below fourteen years also in domestic service in 2006, there is no indication of any change in this trend in the recent years.

However, there are significant differences in these incidences between the metros as well as between the states. Among the metropolises, Kolkata, the capital city of the East Indian state of West Bengal (WB), which has one of the longest traditions of domestic service (Banerjee, 2004), records a very high participation of small girls as domestics. In 1991 the urban areas of this state shows the highest concentration of working girl children (57 percent) in the paid domestic service when compared with the 15 major states of India (Chakravarty et al., 2008). Chakravaty et al. (2008) also maintain that in 1991 West Bengal stood at the fourth position with regard to girl children's work participation rate (WPR) in general in the urban areas of all states. All the three states above WB exhibit a clear decline in girl children's WPR in 2001 over 1991. West Bengal, however, shows a significant increase in the incidence of girl children working and moves up to the first position among the major states in the country in 2001. Even more striking is the fact that around two per cent of the urban girl children in the age group of five to nine years work outside home in West Bengal, while in the other states of the country⁶ children are scarcely reported to work for wages at this tender age. The data refer to the latest round of the NSS (2004-05), and show that in WB the WPR for girls in this age group is four times the WPR for boys in the same age group⁷. Let us remember that the work participation rate of women is generally low in West Bengal and more so in the urban areas. Moreover, this is happening when the number of girls per thousand boys in the (0-6) age group is continuously declining for the last thirty years in WB (Banerjee et al, 1997). According to the recent Census estimates, among the child domestics around 75 per cent are girls in the state of West Bengal. The percentage is likely to be even higher in the case of live-in domestics (Save the Children, 2006). This is not all. The dropout rates for girl children are the highest at every level in this state. Further,

⁶ UP, however, is the other state which shows 8 girl children per thousand working in the urban areas.

⁷ This is the only age group where females dominate males in WPR in Urban West Bengal.

according to the latest NFHS data the maximum number of girls is getting married before they complete 18 years.

While discrimination against women and girl children with respect to the elementary indicators of wellbeing such as nutrition, health and survival are well-documented in the literature the implications of work of a girl child are much less talked about. It is often believed that for a girl child paid domestic work in a household is safer compared to outside work. The employers justify their act of engaging a child to do dirty jobs by arguing that they are being benevolent. However, domestic service not only requires engagement in long hours of repetitive work with no chances of skill formation, but also involves, as the above evidence suggest, threats to survival, particularly for a live-in girl child. Long exposures to various sorts of abuse may cause trauma and lead to disturbances in the personality formation of the child. When we talk about benevolent middleclass households providing food and shelter to thousands of hungry girl children, we tend to lose sight of these more disturbing aspects. It seems unlikely that the parents, who send their daughters to far off unknown places as live-in domestics, are completely unaware of the risks involved. Therefore, in what contexts the families of such girl children decide to send them as live-in domestics is worth investigating. This paper tries to understand the possible role of the family in determining the highest WPR of the urban girl children (most of who are working as domestics) in a state like West Bengal 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 family with the changes in the relative decision making powers of the different adult members of the family. In the context of the multi-pronged stigma attached to paid domestic service and as well as to the large numbers of poor and low-caste women and girl children who render such service it will also be interesting to explore how the workers perceive their social identity. In this case we would try to assess whether the mothers who have developed some agency through their long term participation in paid domestic work, want their daughters to pursue the same career option or not.

As the discriminatory practices against girl children and women are primarily taking place within the household it is likely that the family has a crucial role in determining such outcomes. However, it needs to be remembered that the decisions taken by the household or for that matter the head of the household (often male) 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 (see Dreze and Sen,2002).

Our analysis is influenced by the ideas of the feminist thinkers who challenged the neo-classical formulation of the household as a unit of analysis to understand the nature of economic activities of consumption, production and general time use such as participation or non-participation in the paid labour market by different household members(Lloyd and Niemi, 1979; Becker, 1981). Models in this tradition have considered the household as a unitary structure having a single utility function and without differentiating between household members. Contemporary women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s immediately questioned the assumptions of the neo-classical utility maximization theory assuming a harmonious household presided over by an altruistic household head. Beginning with Heidi Hartman (1979;1987), feminist economists in the main criticized these models on several counts from the perspectives of gender inequality and women's oppression (for example, Folbre 1988, 2001; Katz, 1991). A major theoretical development in this tradition was brought in by Sen (1990) through his conceptualization of intra-household relations by visualizing family as a bargaining unit in which interactions between family members are characterized by both cooperation and conflict. The strength of the bargaining power within the household depends on the strength of the fallback positions of each of the members of the household. This idea has been further developed by Agarwal (1990) in order to explain different outcomes against women in developing countries. In our discussion of data we will be taking cues from these theoretical ideas.

We begin with a set of macro-economic trends in both women and girl children's work participation behaviors in order to situate the problem. As domestic service is primarily

an urban feature in India, our focus is mainly on the urban areas of the state. We then move on to discussing the question of migration and paid outside work of women in the state. From the secondary data analysis we basically try to demarcate the households likely to send their girl children as live-in domestics in the cities' middleclass families. We have not brought in the question of caste explicitly in this discussion. Our dealings with caste here is basically incidental. We feel a fuller discussion on caste in this context calls for a separate paper by its own right. Our main focus here is on gender and age. The secondary data sources used in this paper are the *Census of India* and the *National Sample Survey (NSSO)*. 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. The more minute questions which couldn't really be answered by the secondary data have been tackled through information collected from these long interviews.

2. Girl Children, Women and Work: The Macro Scenario

We begin with the analysis of secondary data in order to understand the possible role of the family in deciding which member would do what in the context of an overall economic decline by addressing women's work force participation behavior in the urban areas in general. This is simply because while working girl children are mostly concentrated in domestic service in the state of west Bengal, women are found in other occupations also. However, it needs to be remembered here that domestic service is one of the largest components of women's work in the state.

To begin with we try to situate our discussion in a broader frame of macro-economic changes that took place in the state since the independence of the country 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 policies induced difficulties the militant trade unionism since the 1960s made it simply impossible

to generate or even retain investments in the organized sector. These industries were also highly labour intensive in nature. Consequently, the organized 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 organized manufacturing is mainly dominated by the “more skilled” male employees, the decline in this sector also affect 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 work participation rate (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 (Table 1). Here, it is worth taking a note of the fact that though women’s WPR is not clearly suggesting any trend, women’s share in domestic service in urban West Bengal has moved up by about 30 percentage points during 1971 to 1991 (from 41.99 to 71.22). In these 20 years, an improvement in the percentage share of girl children among the women domestics in the urban areas of the state can also be noticed. Girl children constituted 14 percent of the total women domestics in the year 1991 (Table 2).

These changes were taking place in the broader historical context of large scale immigration of women, men and children from the bordering East Pakistan, now Bangladesh since 1946. Elsewhere (Chakravarty et al, forthcoming), we have argued that in a stiffly competitive informal economy with continuously declining wage rate women crowded the ‘feminine’ domestic service, by accepting an even lower wage. As poor males from the neighboring states of Bihar, Orissa and UP constituted historically a substantial section of the Kolkata domestics, it was they who were mainly replaced by the women. However, even in this context the strong cultural inhibition to women’s outside work still persisted. This perhaps explains the significant entry of girl children in domestic service in WB in the post-partition years. The second stage in the changing

profile of domestic service in urban West Bengal was thus arguably set by the migrating girl children from the rural areas of the state to Kolkata city in search for employment since the 1970s.

Table 1: Work participation rates (in percent) of women and girl children and the percentage of girl children in total female workforce over 40 years in urban West Bengal

Years	FWPR	GCWPR	Percentage of girl children in total female workforce
1961	5.12	0.24	1.89
1971	3.92	0.50	5.05
1981	4.66	0.86	6.33
1991	5.80	1.18	4.56
2001	9.21	1.77	3.75

Note: FWPR refers to women's work participation rate and GCWPR refers to girl children's work participation rate. Here, by girl children we mean the age group between 5 and 14 years.

Source: *Census of India*, different years, Part II-B (i), 'General Economic Tables'.

Table 2: Percentage of Women among Domestics and Percentage of Girl Children among Women Domestics in Urban West Bengal

Years	Percentage of women in total Domestics	Percentage of girl children (5-14 years) in total women domestics
1971	41.99	12.97
1991	71.22	14

Source: Same as above.

In order to get some idea about the caste composition of these poor working girls and also women in general, let us have a quick look at the work participation rates by different social groups focusing on the socially most deprived ones such as the Scheduled Caste(SC) and the Scheduled Tribe (ST).

Table 3: Percentage of SC+ST in total population and in main workers according to some relevant age groups in urban WB, 2001

Age group	Population		Main Workers	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
All	14.56	13.99	17.94	12.75
5-9	17.04	16.87	15.12	12.55
5-14	16.99	16.79	20.65	15.67

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

Table 4: Girl children's (5-14) work participation rate per 1000 and percentage of girl children in total women workers according to available caste data, Urban WB, 2001

Age group	WPR	Percentage of GC workers (5 to 14 years) in total women workers
All	17.7	3.75
SC	20.9	4.26
ST	27.4	4.78

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

Table 3 and 4 indicate a couple of interesting points clearly. First, the percentage contribution of SC & ST women and girl children in total population is significantly lower than that of their contribution in the female work force for all ages as well as for the (5 to 14) age group. However, this is not the case when we consider the male population (Table 3). But it is not unexpected also as the bias against women's outside work is likely to be more prevalent among the upper castes in India. This argument gets

a stronger support from the higher WPRs for SC and ST women when compared with the WPR of women in general. Table 4 suggests that the WPR for girl children is significantly higher in the SC population compared to that of the general population. In the case of ST population the gap is in fact even larger. Further, percentage contribution of girl children in total female workforce is also higher in the case of both SC and ST population when compared to the population as a whole.

Satish B. Agnihotri (1995; 1996) had pointed out a growing anti-female bias among the scheduled caste population in the 1980s. He showed that though the anti-female bias was particularly concentrated in what Oldenburg called the Bermuda Triangle for the Indian girl child (Oldenburg, 1992), between 1981 and 1991 the increase in the numbers of missing SC females occurred in all states except Kerala. Further, on the basis of 1981 Census data he showed that bias against girl children of 5-9 years was much greater in the SC population than the rest of the society. Thus the girls in SC households became differentially more disadvantaged than in other social groups in the same age group. It needs to be noted here that girl children domestics, who are the subjects of this study, have to start their working career in the same age group if they survive up to that age. While we have already mentioned that the question of caste is out of our purview in this paper, we do report some more interesting facets regarding caste from the primary survey again.

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 three time points of the mid 1980s, the mid 1990s and the middle of the 2000s.

Table 5: Sex-wise Usual Status WPR (per 1000) for Different Age Groups in Urban West Bengal

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

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

It is interesting to note that while girl children's (5 to 9 years) WPR is consistently higher than that of the boy children in the same age group, in all other age groups female WPR lags much behind that of the males. But Table 5 also indicates that for the age group just above the youngest one, i.e., 10 to 14 years, suggests a relatively lower gender gap and in fact, in both years 1987-88 and 1993-94 the female WPR for this cohort surpasses that of the males. So, the real difference between male and female WPRs mainly emerges in the later age groups. The decrease of WPR for the age group of (10 – 14) years during the period 1993-94 to 2004-05 is worth taking into account as the increase in the WPR for the youngest girls remains unabated.

There is a possibility that the significant increase in the WPR in the age group of 15 to 19 is just a shift from the earlier age group of 10 to 14 years. It is unlikely that this decline

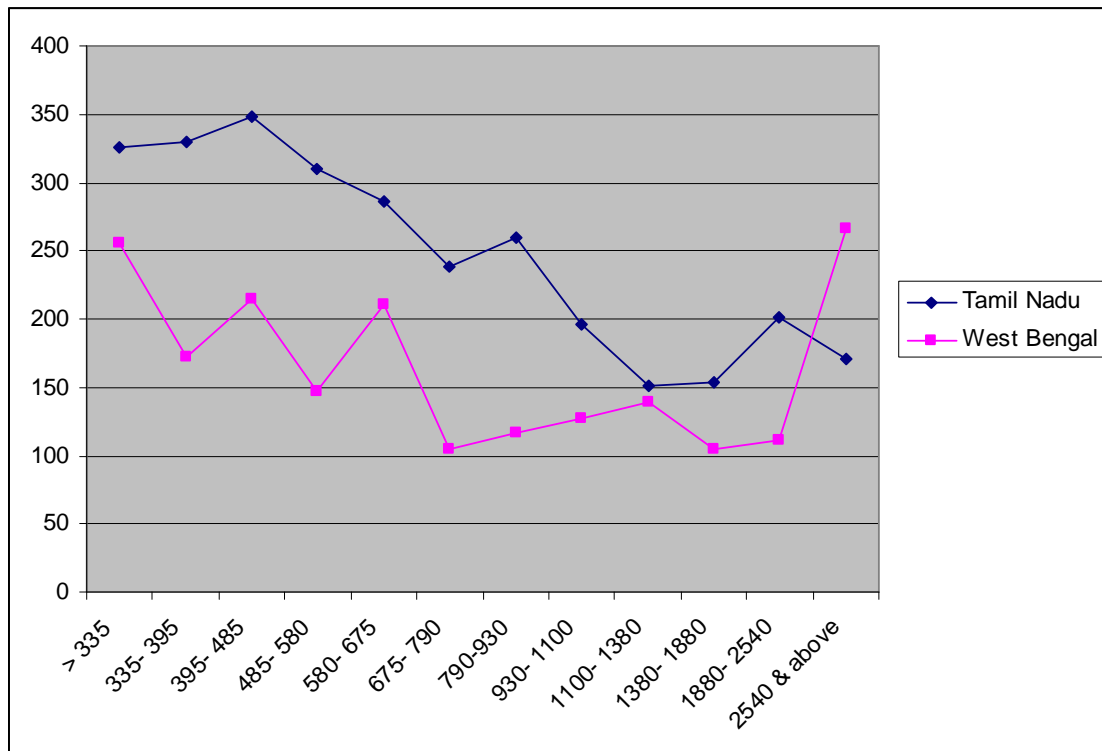
has taken place as a result of policy intervention because the WPR of girl children in the lowest age group (5-9) has in fact increased significantly during the same period. We notice a substantial increase in the WPR of women in the later age groups up to (25 – 29) years. Clearly, Table 5 suggests a somewhat different pattern of WPR for urban women in the reproductive age group compared to the earlier years of our concern. We will get back to this once again while discussing the primary data. It is also possible that as a result of the increase in the older women's WPR, the girls in the younger age group (10 - 14) are forced to withdraw from paid work outside home. Arguably girl children in the age group of (10 – 14) are expected to be able to take care of household subsistence work in the absence of the mother while younger girls (5 - 9) are not so indispensable at home. In this case, the girl child keeps working without any monetary gain (see, Karlekar, 1982 for some related discussion). However, only primary data can confirm this conjecture.

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 likely to be in a better position to protect her girl child from working out. But this doesn't sound tenable the moment we consider the fact that there is, in fact, a substantial increase in girl children's WPR in the age group of 5 to 9 years. However, all these can co-exist at a micro level if we are talking about different families. 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. We also bring in the case of urban Tamil Nadu (TN) in this context, precisely for the reason that the highest number of urban women work for pay in that state. Moreover, TN, once notorious for its large number of child workers, shows a decline in girl children's WPR along with an increase in the women's WPR in general in the recent years.

Figure 1 suggests a similar trend of decline in women's WPR along with an increase in the monthly per capita consumption classes in the initial consumption expenditure classes for both the states. However, it is much lower in WB at every level. While, this declining trend continues for the case of Tamil Nadu, the WPR suddenly goes up to the highest

point in the case of WB for the richest women. Also, it is only in the cases of the richest women that WPR for WB surpasses that of TN⁸.

Figure 1: Monthly Per-Capita Expenditure Class Wise Usual Status WPR (per 1000) for Urban Women in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, 2004-05



Source: NSS Report No. 515, Part I

It can be expected that the girl children workers will come from the lowest consumption expenditure classes in both the states. 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

⁸ However, this could have happened as a result of 'small sample problem'. It is difficult to verify this as this particular set of information is available only for the latest NSS round on employment and unemployment.

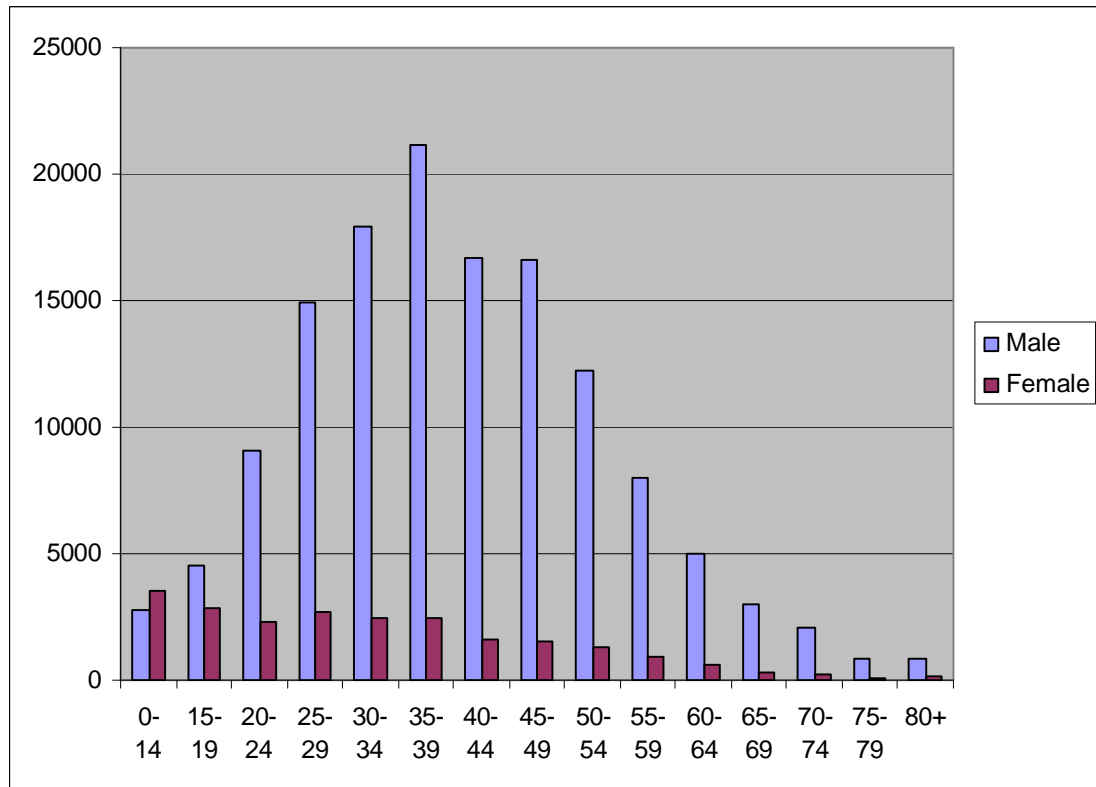
order to understand to what extent these families intersect we turn to the aspect of migration.

Rural-urban Migration: Girl Children and the Family

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 two 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 2 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 2: Migration for employment from different parts of WB to Kolkata City in 1991 by sex and age group



Note: Migration for all duration has been considered.

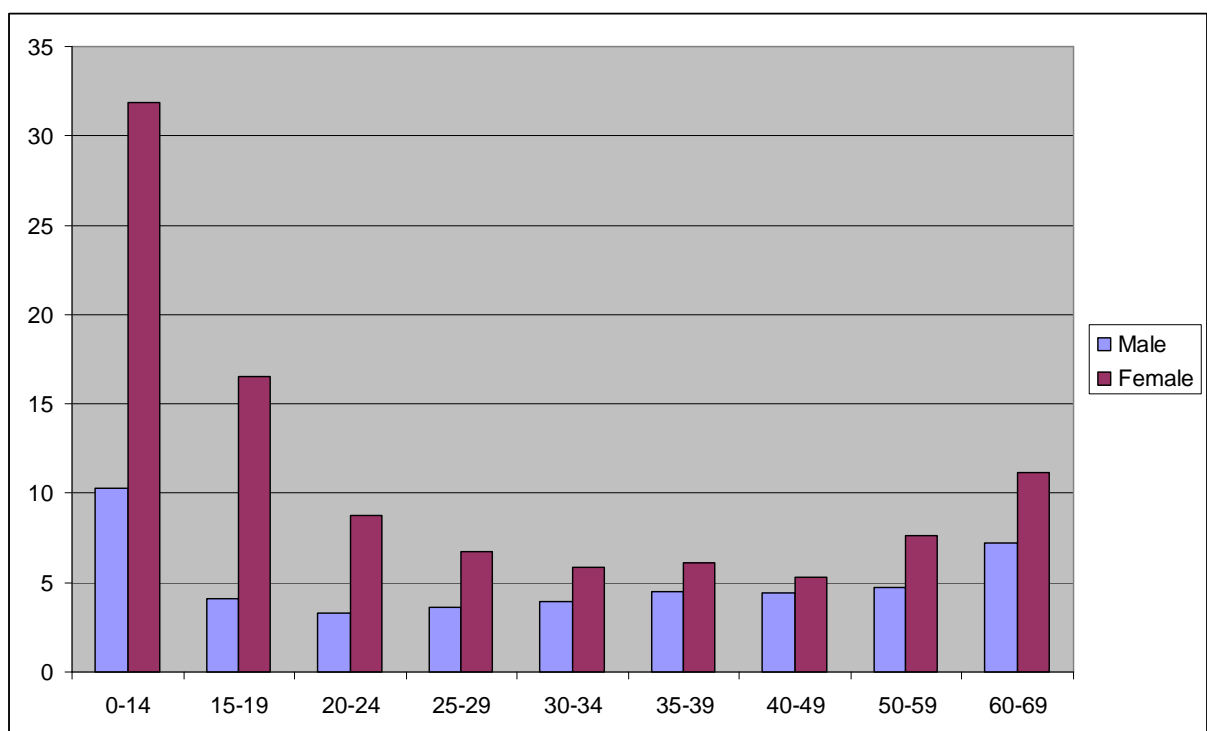
Source: *Census of India, 1991, 'Migration Tables'*.

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 (Giri, 1998). But, as the land reforms were not all pervasive⁹ 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. We take up these aspects with a micro focus in the next section. Even in 2004, West Bengal Human Development Report notes a

⁹ See for a critique of the land reforms in WB, Basu (2001).

substantial amount of distress migration from agriculture and industries to services. Incidentally, according to latest NSS data, in urban WB more than 50 percent women work in the services sector, dominated by the low-paid manual services¹⁰. 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 3: Migration for employment to Kolkata city from different parts of WB as a percentage of total workers (main + marginal) in the metropolis in 1991 by age and sex



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

In Figure 2 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 3 tells us that the migrant as a percentage of total female workers in the same year for every age group is 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

¹⁰ This is, however, an all India feature during the post economic reforms.

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.

Table 6: Percentage of female and male in total migration for employment from the rural and urban areas within the respective states to the state capitals, 1991

Metropolises	Migration for employment		Migration for employment	
	Female	Male	Girls (5-14)	Boys (5-14)
Kolkata	14.53	85.47	55.89	44.12
Mumbai	5.67	94.33	46.10	53.90
Chennai	12.12	87.89	46.02	53.98
Hyderabad	16.01	83.99	46.81	53.19
Bangalore	9.72	90.28	43.67	56.33

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

Moreover a comparison of percentages of girls and boys migrating for work from the rural as well as the urban areas of a particular state to the state's capital shows that Kolkata, the capital city of WB stands at the highest position in terms of percentage of girls migrating for work among all metros in 1991. This is not all. We identify a pattern in migration for employment in all metropolises from their hinterlands when we consider total migration: the percentage of women hovering well below 20. But when we turn to the migrant children who had to leave home for work we find that the percentage of girls goes up significantly in every state. This is, however, not really unexpected given the cultural inhibition to women's outside work in India in general with various degrees. In this case, WB once again offers an exception where the number of girl children migrating for work surpasses significantly that of the boys (Table 6).

The trend of girl children's single migration for employment continues in 2001. Data for age group -wise total migration for employment from within the state of enumeration to the urban areas of the state show that the percentage of girl children among all children migrated is around 67 in 2001 WB. Also, there is, in fact, no reason to think that the

distress migration has indeed declined in the recent years. 2004-05 NSSO data revealed that parts of rural WB suffered from maximum food inadequacy in the country (Banthopadhyay, 2007).

Mothers' Agency, Identity and Dirty Work

The term dirty work to refer to tasks and occupations that are likely to be perceived as disgusting or degrading, was first used by Everett Hughes (1951). Whatever, the stigma attached to some kind of work by society, a range of recent research have shown that people engaged in dirty work usually perceive their occupational identity with pride (to mention a few: Ashforth and Kreiner,1999; Emerson & Pollner, 1976; Gold, 1964; Meara,1974; Perry,1978; Simpson & Simpson,1959). In the context of this finding by other researchers this study through the following field survey attempts to understand the perceptions of the girl children workers' families about domestic service. As our primary focus was the role of the family in sending girl children for paid outside work we concentrated on the perception of the mothers and not on the working children themselves.

We chose, for the sake of convenience, 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 in 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 worker, we also interacted with the older women domestics with a long career in domestic service since childhood. Adult women domestics are 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 basically proceed informally to access as many women as possible in each category. We could talk to 60 women in all. 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.

Our respondents and their families dwelling in the city reported in the course of interaction about only two girl child workers in their locality at present. Further, our adult women respondents, none of who send their young daughters for work, contribute substantially to the household budget or are the sole bread earners. In most of these cases these adult women worked either as live-in domestic or as part time domestic in their childhood. On the contrary, we find a large number girl children have migrated not only to Kolkata city but also to Delhi from the interior parts of the state especially from the landless households to work as live-in domestics. These girl children, however, are withdrawn from outside work when they are around 16/17 years old for getting married. We did not find a single case of married young woman migrating for work from these interior villages unless she was either widowed or deserted. Also the migration of boy children for work is rare. 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. Most of the families of the first slum that we visited have migrated from the North or the South 24 Parganas, the two adjacent districts of the metropolis, over the past few decades. Among the eighteen respondents in the area only one belonged to a caste Hindu family. All others were from different scheduled caste rural backgrounds and mostly landless. More importantly this inflow of people from the same rural hinterlands is continuing and has even increased in the past few months after the devastating storm, "AILA", in May 2009. The two working girl children mentioned above are from this area

where vulnerability of such recently migrated families is likely 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, it's evident that these women are quite likely to command significant decision making powers within the family. When we asked the women why they didn't 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. It has been found that most of their children, both daughters and sons, go to school and don't participate in paid work. While interacting with these mothers we could feel their eagerness to educate their children including the daughters. This was surely not the case 30 years back when these mothers were slogging at city homes as child domestics. Thus though our adult women respondents were engaged in paid domestic service for quite a long time and had developed some agency thereby, none viewed personal service to be a probable career option for their daughters. However, mothers usually were keen to see their daughters get married rather than participate in paid work.

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 10/11 and others even at 6/7. 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 et al, 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. 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 every morning hundreds of maids from the villages of southern WB to Kolkata were described as ‘jhee¹¹ specials’ by the city elites.¹²

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 from different scheduled caste backgrounds (11 refugees from Bangladesh) all of whom commute to the city daily to work as part time maids. All these women are from landless families, three are widows, two deserted by their husbands and one a girl child; the rest are married whose husbands have irregular incomes. So, in each of these cases women are 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 do not send their children to work now and on the contrary have put them in school. On enquiry it was found out that only one girl child in

¹¹ ‘Jhee’ refers to domestic maid.

¹² See in this context a study on land reform and domestic service in Chile: David E. Hojman, ‘Land Reform, Female Migration and the Market for Domestic Service in Chile’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol.21, no.1 (February 1989), pp.105-132.

the entire village has migrated to the city to work as a full time domestic in the recent years, whose widowed mother also works as a part-time maid.

Our respondents take the train to Kolkata at 6 in the morning and come back home around 3 in the evening. Leave is allowed 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 more than four days a month. All respondents complained of the competitive nature of their job and according to them this very fact provides the employers with the opportunity of pursuing the practice of hire and fire at will. The respondents also indicated that they were facing a stiff competition from women across the Bangladesh border who have recently started entering the market by applying a wage cut. None seemed to be satisfied either with the conditions of work or with the social prestige involved. When we asked one of the respondents, Sadhana Mistri, an elderly woman why she did not send her daughter-in-law to work out and chose to perform the role herself, she ruled the question out as quite absurd. She observed remorsefully that it was her sudden misfortune, her widowhood, which compelled her to accept paid work in other people's houses. Another elderly lady, Chapala Mondol, complained that the employer families often treated them as sub-humans. However, the anxiety of losing jobs seemed to worry the Piyali respondents most. Rights at work did not appear to concern them much.

Thus, both the groups, the city-dweller domestics and the commuters, though seemed to have earned some decision-making powers in family matters, 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. This finding, though based on a very small sample, did not match that by Ashforth and Kreiner along with many others, mentioned at the beginning of this section, who indicated a certain pride among workers engaged in dirty jobs. The forms of tainted jobs studied by the above researchers, the socio-cultural contexts in which those were performed were obviously different from our case. However, 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.

In her 2008 study, Ananya Roy reported about a village named Tetultola in the South 24 Parganas where an increasing 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 out the fact that the incidence of girl children working as domestics from the city or from the adjacent areas has come down significantly. But according to 2004-05 NSS data the highest number of girl children is found to be working in the urban areas of the state. Save the children's reports also confirm this finding. We therefore understood that we needed to go to the interior villages to find out the sources of the live-in working girl children in the city¹³.

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 highest percentage (59.70) of Below Poverty Line (BPL) households has been observed in this block. 15.36 per cent 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

¹³ Live-in domestics are enumerated at the place of work by the NSSO or the Census.

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 is 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. Among them 16 were from scheduled tribe (Munda) and 2 from scheduled caste backgrounds. One interesting feature of the tribal community there was the fact that the Munda tribes were mostly settlers in the Sunderbans, uprooted from their original place of residence, for some contractual work, generations ago. Unlike other tribes in the rest of the state many of these people have lost marks of their distinct cultural identity (such as the Mundari language) and are therefore, difficult to differentiate from the scheduled caste people residing in the area. Scholars have observed the increasing degradation of the status of women among the uprooted Munda communities settling in North 24 Parganas and Nadia, possibly due to their long exposures to the patriarchal cultural practices of the neighboring Hindus and Muslims (Rana et al., 2009).

A number of poor families depend on the income of such working girl children and women who are being regularly recruited by contractors. It seemed to be a rampant practice which is 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 the 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 Dhamakhali bus stand, the

nearest to the village, 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 being trafficked. 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.

Parents seemed to be almost in the dark where exactly their daughters were working, 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 have sent boy children to work out though most of the families we talked to have 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 having been forced to send the boy out, again after the AILA, as a great misfortune. Parents in general seemed to be less interested in sending their minor sons to work away from home even when there is an option. 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.

Among our eighteen cases of migrant domestics only two were adult women deserted by their husbands, who have decided to go away to far off cities in search of work themselves leaving their children behind. The families also endorsed their decisions

probably because deserted women are not supposed to be as indispensable to the family as the married women are¹⁴.

Girl children in the village go to school cursorily and those who enroll usually drop out at the 4th or 5th standard, the stage at which contractors recruited most of our 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 honour 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 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 outside work made a significant difference in the fate of the girl child. Contrary to the findings of the recent research mentioned at the beginning of this section none of the working mothers seemed to perceive paid domestic work in high esteem and therefore a suitable career option for their daughters. The mothers in all the 17 families (except the one where the mother is dead) we visited in Sandeshkhali also work outside for pay. As livelihood options are severely limited 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 beyond 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.

¹⁴ Unmarried minor girls seemed to be the most preferred group of domestics followed by the destitute adult women by the employers.

Concluding Remarks

Scholars have shown that much of the paid domestic work is performed in the modern developed world by women of the racialized groups, often by immigrants from the less developed parts of the world (Anderson ,2000; Cole and Booth,2007). Anderson (2000) shows how racist stereotypes intersect with issues of citizenship, and result in a racist hierarchy which uses skin colour, nationality and religion to construct some women as being more suitable for domestic work than others. The demand for poor immigrant women or women of colour as the most suitable domestics in many parts of the developed world is replicated by the demand for girl children from rural low caste backgrounds in the homes of the urban Indian rich. However, unlike the global migrant women domestics from, say, Sri Lanka who are one of the main sources of foreign currency earners of that country (Gamburd, 2001) or the considerably qualified (even with college-level education) Pilipino migrant women domestics (Pagaduan,2006), paid domestic service is the career option of women from the economically poorest and socially most degraded sections of the society, in India. Illiterate women from landless rural scheduled caste and Muslim families have mostly crowded the care economy, one of the most poorly paid, insecure and unsafe areas within the unorganized sector. The stigma of dirt attached to this service seems to have originated from the workers' low social backgrounds and poor economic status. The marginalization of the Indian domestic workers has further increased with the gradual feminization of this service among the low castes. The men of the low castes who historically served the higher castes in all sorts of personal services have finally been able to shift this centuries-old burden to their women and especially to the girl children. Thus this multi-pronged marginalization – social, economic and that on the basis of gender and age - seems to have largely determined the attitudes of our respondents towards paid domestic service, in the Indian state of WB.

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