

## Struggles over work take place at home: women's decisions, choices and constraints in the Tiruppur textile industry, India

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# **Struggles over work take place at home: women's decisions, choices and constraints in the Tiruppur textile industry, India**

**Grace Carswell [6Oct; accepted version, pre-proofs]**

**Abstract:** *Examining women's choices around paid work in south India, this article shows the need to pay greater attention to the sphere of reproduction, and in particular the way that women endeavour to fit their productive work around their reproductive roles and responsibilities. Focussing on the region of the Tiruppur garment cluster in Tamil Nadu, India, it outlines the opportunities available to rural women, shedding light first on women's decisions whether to work or not, and second, on how women choose between particular types of work available to them. The article demonstrates the primacy of the reproductive economy in shaping women's movements in and out of paid work, particularly the importance of stage in life course, household composition and patriarchal control to women's decisions. Main findings of the article are that most women work, but their particular job choices reflect multiple social and reproductive constraints, while those who withdraw from work have been subjected to new expressions of patriarchy. The article advances understandings in feminist geographies of work by drawing on ethnographic insights to highlight the mutual embeddedness of the reproductive and productive economies.*

*Key words: women's work; caste; life course; garment industry; India*

## **Introduction**

Examining the choices that women in south India make around paid work, this article pushes labour geographies to move beyond a focus on the productive economy, and pay greater attention to the sphere of reproduction, and in particular the ways that women endeavour to fit their productive work around their reproductive roles and responsibilities. This article argues that it is not possible to understand labour in Global Production Networks (GPNs) without paying attention to the factors that influence the work decisions of half of the population. Focussing on the region of the Tiruppur garment cluster in Tamil Nadu, India, it outlines the opportunities available to women, and seeks to shed light first on rural women's decisions whether to work

or not, and second, on how women choose between particular types of work available to them. The article presents evidence that it is factors within the reproductive sphere that shape many of women's choices around work. In doing so it explores the ways in which women's movements in and out of paid work are shaped by issues not only related to the productive economy but also the reproductive economy: domestic roles and responsibilities, stage in life course, household composition and patriarchal control. It argues that demands of the household are central to women's decision making around work, and thus stresses the mutual embeddedness of the reproductive and productive economies. The article also shows how both the spheres of production and reproduction are shaped by identities of caste, stage in life course, as well as gender relations. It draws on and extends feminist geographies of work, particularly those that focus on women working in export industries. But it goes further, arguing that the debate about empowerment versus exploitation is insufficient and an exploration is needed of women's choices around work within the context of the alternatives that they face.

The article reveals that most women in this region are involved in paid work, but that, because of the changing demands in the reproductive sphere on women, their rates of involvement change with their stage in the life course. Rates of labour market participation first increase with age, before decreasing later in life, but with relatively high levels of participation amongst older women. The paper explores how women make decisions about work, and it becomes clear that the factors that matter most are those that enable women to balance their reproductive responsibilities with their jobs. The article also adds greater nuance to debates about the withdrawal of women from paid work, considering how 'status production work' by women plays an important role in keeping some women out of employment. It shows that the withdrawal of women from labour markets has less to do with shifts in the demands for their labour than with households' aspirations for upward mobility. A revealing divide was not between women in Dalit versus higher caste communities, but between different Dalit castes. In some Dalit communities, it was found, women's withdrawal from paid employment was clearly associated with strong socio-economic aspirations and a tightening of patriarchal controls.

The article is organised as follows: it first reviews the literature relevant to women, work and GPNs, followed by an introduction to more specific scholarship on India -

and Tamil Nadu in particular - around women and work. The following sections introduce the villages where the study was carried out, and consider the regional labour markets and job opportunities available to women. The next section explores decisions about whether to work or not, and the influence of factors such as position in life cycle, wealth group and caste. The following section explores how women's choices for particular jobs are shaped by features of the jobs themselves, such as working hours, the location and flexibility of work, wages and the nature of the work. The final section draws some conclusions and highlights the contributions the article makes to the wider literature introduced in the first section.

### ***Geographies of women, work and global production networks***

This study speaks to a range of literatures, ranging from labour geography, global production networks, and feminist geographies on work, to development literature around women's empowerment and their engagement with global export markets. First, this article seeks to advance geographies of labour by moving beyond the productive economy and zooming in on how productive lives intersect with reproductive roles and responsibilities within households. To date, labour geography has placed workers at the centre of its analysis primarily by focusing on the agency of labour (Coe and Hess 2013; Tufts and Savage 2009). While much early labour geography paid attention to the agency of organised labour (Herod 2001; Cumbers et al 2008), this has broadened out more recently to include more individualised and everyday forms of agency exercised by workers (Rogaly 2009, Carswell and De Neve 2013a). However, geographies of labour have rarely gone beyond the sphere of production or considered workers' embeddedness in the domestic economy. Coe and Jordhus-Lier have called for a need to 're-embed the agency of workers in the social relations that condition their potential' (2011: 216). Tufts and Savage similarly noted 'a need for an unpaid labour geography which links the role of household economies to the ability of workers to shape the economic landscape' (2009: 946). It is not just attention to social relations that is required, but there is a specific need to focus on the reproductive sphere in particular. Coe and Jordhus-Lier draw attention to the need for 'careful consideration of the articulation between the sphere of production and the sphere of reproduction, and the way in which the scale of the household – which is founded on unpaid labour and in turn produces labour power for waged work – connects with other arenas such as the work- place, the labour market and the regulatory spaces of the state' (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011: 224).

By focusing on how women's work choices and engagements with labour markets are shaped by the dynamics of the reproductive economy, this article not only considers the articulation between the spheres of production and reproduction, but further shows how this articulation is itself embedded in, and influenced by, intersecting factors of social difference such as age, life course, gender and caste. This agenda requires a focus on the household, looking at individual choices and decisions made within it.

Secondly, the article builds on calls within the literature on GPNs to pay greater attention to the sphere of reproduction. It suggests that the study of GPNs should extend beyond the factory gates at the sites of production and account for the ways in which GPNs are themselves shaped by the dynamics of the reproductive economies from where they draw productive labour. Kelly already noted the 'silence on the issue of how the labour force is reproduced' (2009:451) and called for attention 'to stretch beyond the workplace and even the labor market per se and into questions of social reproduction and the home' (2012: 438; 2009). He suggests that 'spaces of reproduction' should be considered as actors in GPNs, arguing that a GPN 'does not stop with a cluster of export-orientated factories in an industrial estate, but rather extends into local places, as landscapes, environments, and livelihoods are transformed.' He notes that rather than presenting transformations as 'impacts', (suggesting that the localities are in some ways 'passive recipient of change') it would be 'more appropriate to view them as processes of social embeddedness in which industrial development is necessarily entangled with community and household spaces of social reproduction' (2009: 456). Neilson and Pritchard (2010) have similarly argued for a need to complement 'vertical' analyses of trade and production networks with a 'horizontal' approach that explores the role of local factors, such as gender, age and caste, and of regional connections, such as commuting and migration, in the shaping of GPNs. A 'horizontal' approach reveals how agency is not merely fashioned by vertically linked production networks but as much by social relations and reproductive strategies that are themselves embedded in a wider regional economy and cultural environment. This article pays heed to these calls by presenting an in-depth examination of the spaces of social reproduction that shape women's variegated decisions around paid employment.

Thirdly, in line with a focus on the reproductive economy, the article also contributes to recent attempts at bringing gender and reproduction into the analysis of GPNs and at refining our understanding of the place of GPNs work in women's lives. Here, the article builds on a range of existing approaches by feminist geographers and ethnographers. Barrientos has sought to better integrate GPNs with feminist analysis in order to unpack the gendered dynamics of global sourcing. Drawing on her research on the cocoa-chocolate value chain linking Europe and cocoa-growing regions in Ghana and India, Barrientos argues that 'the value chain is not gender neutral, but interacts with gendered processes that affect its commercial functioning and vice versa' (2014: 801). This article takes this further by considering not only the gendering of productive activities, but also how women's reproductive roles impact on their decisions to work, the types of work they engage in, and the nature of their participation in GPNs. Here, we will see that while many women in South India do work, they are not all able to opt for the most desirable or best paid options, including work for global production networks. They often have to revert to less rewarding and less attractive alternatives, with limited upward career prospects, largely due to the demands and constraints put upon them by the household economy.

Fourthly, the article identifies a gap in the literature on women's work in export industries, with little attention being paid thus far to the detail of decision-making processes around work. Feminist scholars have 'exploded' the concept of work, examining the boundaries of the category 'work' and looking beyond solely waged work to encompass unpaid reproductive work (Lawson and England 2005). The conceptualisation of worker identities and the gendering of work have also been examined (Massey and McDowell 1984; Hanson and Pratt 1995; McDowell 1997; McDowell 2005; McDowell 2008), with a particular focus on the women employed in export industries in the global south (Wolf 1992; Momsen 1999; Mills 2003; Elson and Pearson 1981; Lim, 1983; 1990; Chant & McIlwaine, 1995; Kabeer 2002). There exists now a significant literature that explores the *impacts* of export jobs on women (Pearson 2007; Elson 1999) – much of the debate centring on the question of whether export jobs increase women's exploitation or enable a process of empowerment. Thus, Elson and Pearson argued that entry into such work does not end subordination, but transforms it and produces new forms of subservience (1981). In contrast, Lim argued that there are significant benefits for women working in global export factories noting 'the wages earned by women in export factories are

usually higher than what they could earn as wage labourers in alternative low-skilled female occupations' (1990: 109). Lim considered the complexities of export work noting that the consequences of such employment can be 'simultaneously exploitative and liberating' (1983: 88). However, there is very little literature to date that considers how women make employment choices – whether to work or not, and in what sort of job. This article seeks to address this, placing and understanding women's employment choices within the entire gamut of options and alternatives available to them, and exploring how women's engagements with GPNs are shaped by intersections of age, life course and other axes of social differentiation, thereby highlighting the mutual embeddedness of the reproductive and productive economies.

While few researchers have explored in detail women's decisions around work and how those in turn shape economic landscapes, there are some valuable exceptions. Ruwanpura's ethnographic research on pension reform and garment work in Sri Lanka, for example, highlights how 'anxieties linked to the household and reproductive sphere were the mainstay of female garment workers' labouring decisions' (2013: 147). She shows how women's priorities around work differed and shifted according to their stage in the life cycle. Thus employment decisions for younger women related to concerns over marriage payments; married women were focussed on mortgages and house construction; while older women were the only ones who saw their provident funds as the pension for which they were intended. Ruwanpura's study demonstrates how in 'women worker's decisions to enter, leave, remain or prolong their working lives.... the primacy of the gendered household economy was brought to the fore' (2013: 152) and notes that it 'becomes apparent that women workers' priorities are never divorced from the stresses placed on the household economy' (2013: 158). The importance of the life course to understandings of women's working lives has been noted by geographers elsewhere too (Pratt and Hanson 1993; Momsen 1993), while the concept of the 'work-life course' has been used to consider the differential impacts of economic development on men and women and on their households' livelihoods (Hapke and Ayyankeri 2004: 230). Below I show that in rural South India too women juggle paid work and non-paid work across their life cycle and that productive roles are made to fit in with reproductive responsibilities and the pressures of patriarchal power relations.

Another informative study of women's decisions around work is by Dominguez et al who explore both Lim and Kabeer's arguments about the choices that women make within particular labour market constraints. They argue that women are always 'simply making the best possible choices in a segmented and discriminating labor market' (2010: 191). Based on their research in Mexico and Central America, Dominguez et al contest the argument that export based industrial jobs are 'always the first choice of certain groups of women workers and that they necessarily represent a better alternative compared to any other income-generating activity that these women could engage in' (2010: 200). They present evidence that in some cases women had better and more dignified income earning alternatives outside this sector. This article similarly critiques the assumption that work for export markets or GPNs is automatically the most desired, feasible or acceptable form of employment for rural women in India. I therefore focus ethnographically on how exactly women come to make particular employment choices within diverse, but segmented, labour markets in which multiple employment options are available to them.

### ***Women and work in India and Tamil Nadu***

At this point, we need to turn to the specific context of rural south India, where this case study is located. In understanding lower-caste and lower-class women's engagements with labour markets in south India, we need to highlight a number of issues specific to the region. These include caste, age and gender relations. First, it is well known that in India the spheres of production and reproduction are shaped by the identities and relations of caste in significant ways (Kapadia, 1995; Kapadia, 1997; O'Reilly, 2011; Jeffrey 2001; Gidwani 2001). In relation to the participation of women in the labour market, for example, research from across India has revealed significant variations in the participation of women in both formal and informal labour markets by caste (Kapadia 1995; Kapadia 1997; Deshpande, 2011; Thorat and Neuman 2012; Deininger et al 2013). Corbridge et al recently noted that 'caste continues to shape people's access to secure and well-paid employment, partly because of the manner in which caste and class overlap but also because of continued caste prejudices among many people in Indian society' (2013: 253). And yet, while a number of recent studies have explored labour participation rates in India, their changes over time, and their gendered patterns, most studies pay little or



no attention to caste (see Shaw 2013; Abraham 2013; Sudarshan and Bhattacharya 2009; Himanshu 2011).

Elsewhere, I have explored the multiple ways in which caste discrimination shapes the livelihood opportunities, educational participation and political mobilisation of Dalit communities in contemporary Tamil Nadu (Carswell et al 2017). In what follows, I further reveal how caste and class – as interconnected markers of identity – shape rural women’s employment decisions in complex ways. While a major fault line runs along the Dalit/non-Dalit divide, the possibilities available to women in each of these groups are further affected by their relative class position, and in addition there are significant differences between different Dalit groups.

A second aspect of identity that is important as part of the reproductive sphere is age and stage in the life course. Arguing that stage in life course plays a critical role in women’s decisions around paid work, this article builds on other research in Tamil Nadu showing how participation in labour markets changes with age (Rao 2014; Vera-Sanso 2012; 2014). It considers how women negotiate the demands on them within both the productive and reproductive spheres, looking at age, alongside gender and caste, and other forms of identity and axes of social differentiation. In doing so, the article extends feminist geographies of work by drawing on ethnographic insights on the role of the life course and the intersections of gender, caste and others axes of social differentiation on women’s decisions around work.

Finally, across southern India, as Guérin *et al* have noted, gender is ‘an important source of segregation and discrimination’, with women being more likely to carry out agricultural work, work from home, have casual contracts and receive lower wages (Guérin et al 2014: 119). Within agriculture research by Harriss-White and Janakarajan suggests that ‘women have come to dominate the labour input into agriculture and provide over half of all farm labour, largely as casual wage labourers’ (2004: 172) This feminisation of casual agricultural labour has been observed across India (Kapadia and Lerche 1999; da Corta and Venkateswarlu 1999; Garikipati 2008, although there are exceptions, see Heyer 2013) and it has been noted that women workers are preferred to men because they are cheaper, more easily disciplined, work harder and do small unpaid jobs without additional payment or fuss (Garikipati and Pfaffenzeller 2012: 851). That women are cheaper to employ is critical, and women’s wages in agriculture have not increased as men’s: Guérin et al’s evidence

suggests that the gender gap for agricultural wages is increasing (2014: 125). Harriss-White notes that real wage rates for most women's tasks have been stagnant or declined over the past decade, while 'gender differences in wage rates in the non-farm economy greatly exceed those in agriculture' (Harriss-White 2004: 172-3; also see Heyer 2013).

Looking beyond agriculture, women are also increasingly employed in the non-farm sector. The western part of Tamil Nadu is dominated by the garment and textile industry, and within this industry employers similarly consider women to be good workers, being cheaper, easily disciplined and hard workers. While the Tiruppur garment industry is not entirely dominated by women (unlike, for example, Bangladesh's garment industry, see Kabeer 2002) women do make up a significant proportion of factory workers. Precise figures (of the workforce, let alone the breakdown by men and women) are rare but there are some estimates of the proportion of women to men in the Tiruppur industry: Neetha suggested that 'roughly over a half of the labour force are women and child workers' while she estimates that about 60% of tailors were women (2002: 2046-7). Since the 1990s, however, child labour has largely disappeared from the industry. Singh and Kaur Sapra suggest that women 'are now estimated to form roughly 65% of the total garment-related workforce' (2007: 95), but it is unclear how this estimate was reached. They observe that women are concentrated in the lowest paid sections of work and receive considerably lower wages than men (see also Hirway 2010).

Chari shows how different parts of the industry are dominated by men or women (ironing by men, checking by women, for example), but that other parts of the industry are mixed (such as tailoring), with women having entered the sewing sections of industry from the mid-1980s (2004: 64-68; 246). He notes that by the 1990s women had 'made strong incursions into stitching sections', but that 'most women workers remained consigned to the least paid, least skilled work in garment checking' (2004: 255). Today clear distinctions remain: sections of the industry such as knitting, dyeing, cutting and ironing remain entirely dominated by men, while checking work and all home-based work is dominated by women. Amongst tailors the division is more complex: in smaller units few female tailors are found, whereas in bigger units a larger proportion of tailors are women (perhaps as much as 70 to 80%). Across units of all sizes helpers to tailors are usually women and young men

(see De Neve and Carswell, draft). Women workers are, therefore, to be found in *particular sections* of the garment industry for reasons that will be discussed below.

In the context of widening transformations of both markets (with economic transformations associated with neo-liberalisation in India) and the state (with state programmes such as NREGA and subsidised food through the Public Distribution System), this article seeks to explore how women make decisions around paid work. This requires an understanding of not just the options but also the constraints that women face, and the processes and forces that limit their choices. Not all women work because of necessity borne by impoverishment, although many do. Some also choose to work to improve their livelihoods and enhance their own positions within the household. Given the booming textile and garment industries, there is now an ever-growing range of employment options available to women in the region: garment work (factory and home based), powerloom work, agricultural labour, NREGA work, etc. This range of employment choices is relatively new and cannot be overstated, or, as Rao reminds us, 'this choice is often unquestioned in neoliberal paradigms, but it has rarely existed for rural, low-caste, working-class women forced to enter low-paid work, often in near-bonded conditions' (2014: 81).

### ***Introducing the research and the villages***

Fieldwork was conducted in two villages I call Allapuram and Mannapalayam to collect both quantitative and qualitative information. A household survey was carried out in the both villages<sup>1</sup>, but the research went well beyond this and included in-depth field research over a period of a year (2008-9) with further research undertaken in 2011 and 2014, using a mixture of participant observation, case-studies, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with a large number of men and women from the villages. Using this mix of methods revealed much about the everyday lives of the villagers, as well as their aspirations, their perceptions and their hopes and fears.

The research was carried out in the Tiruppur garment region. Until the 1970s or 1980s most women in the villages worked in agriculture, either on their own land (for those from landowning Gounder families) or as agricultural labourers (Dalits), while

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<sup>1</sup> The 2008-09 household survey covered 240 households in Allapuram (100% of the households listed on the school census, plus a small number not on the list), 279 households in Mannapalayam (a random sample of 50% of households on the school census plus 88 households that were not listed on the census).

others engaged in service occupations such as barbers, dhobis and potters. With the rapid growth and development of the nearby industrial town of Tiruppur, a variety of other non-agricultural jobs became available (Chari 2004; Carswell and De Neve 2014a), and this article looks at how women have fared in this rapidly liberalising environment. The region has seen rising standards of living (Heyer 2012) and changing aspirations: houses are being extended and improved and consumer goods such as mobiles and motorbikes are expected and common.

The non-agricultural jobs available are mostly related to the textile industry, and fall into two broad categories: the *garment* industry (based in and around Tiruppur) producing ready-to-wear knitted garments (such as t-shirts and underwear) for the export and domestic markets (see Carswell 2013; Carswell and De Neve 2014a) and the *powerloom* industry which produces woven fabric, sold in the Indian market for further processing (Carswell and De Neve 2013b). The two arms of the industry are different in many ways: how they are structured, the labour relations within them and the nature of labour contracts for example. As both arms of the textile industry have grown, so these two villages have become increasingly affected by them, although in very different ways. Allapuram is closely linked to Tiruppur and its garment industry, while Mannapalayam has limited links to Tiruppur and is first and foremost a powerloom village. Allapuram is located about 20km southeast of Tiruppur and sends significant numbers of commuters to the town, to which it is well connected with a half hourly bus to town as well as many company vans collecting workers from the village. Here 25% of households cite the garment industry as being the primary source of household income. In contrast, Mannapalayam, located about 15 km south of Tiruppur, has poor connections to the town with no direct government buses or company vans going through the village. Mannapalayam is primarily a powerloom village, and this industry dominates the village in all ways. Gounder landowners set up small-scale powerloom units from the early 1970s, and 55% of households cite the powerloom industry as being their primary source of income (Carswell 2013).

In this region caste is a key factor of differentiation. Gounders are dominant economically and politically, owning almost all the land, wells and borewells. They also dominate both the garment industry (Chari 2004) and the rural powerloom industry. At the other end of the social spectrum are Dalits, with Allapuram having

two Dalit groups (Matharis<sup>2</sup> and Adi Dravidas<sup>3</sup>), whilst Mannapalayam has only a Mathari colony. Both villages have a number of other middling castes: dhobi, barber etc, none of whom own land and who are considered to be lower to middle-ranking socially.

### ***Livelihoods and labour markets***

At first glance there would appear to be a wide range of jobs available to women in these villages: agricultural work, state-provided NREGA work and textile work (Tiruppur-based garment jobs in Allapuram and powerloom work in Mannapalayam) among others. In terms of agricultural work, our research found, in line with findings from across India (Harriss-White and Janakarajan 2004; da Corta and Venkateswarlu 1999) that on average over half of all agricultural workers were women.<sup>4</sup> However, these two villages show that the picture is complex: in Allapuram there was no difference in the proportion of men and women working as agricultural labourers, in Mannapalayam a notably higher proportion of women work in agriculture compared to men (Carswell 2013). A key characteristic of agricultural work is that it is available locally and women specifically select work that is within easy reach of their homes. There are different arrangements: agricultural work is either paid on a daily rate (known as 'coolie work') or on a piece rate (either as so-called 'contract' work, when a group of workers is paid to do a particular task such as harvest a field, or per item, such as per 'stick' of tobacco threaded). Some agricultural activities are better paid than others, and each of the different arrangements has its advantages and disadvantages, which are well known to women (Carswell 2013).<sup>5</sup>

There are two main types of non-agricultural work available to women: powerloom work in Mannapalayam and garment work in Tiruppur, each of which will be looked at in turn. Powerlooms are operated in Mannapalayam on day and night shifts. It is

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<sup>2</sup> Also known as Arunthathiyars, but referred to locally as Matharis.

<sup>3</sup> Also known as Paraiyars.

<sup>4</sup> This contrasts to findings in Heyer's villages where a little of over half of agricultural labourers are men (Heyer 2013). Being less well linked to Tiruppur there are fewer attractive options for men in these villages, whilst Heyer also identifies the withdrawal of women from agricultural wage labour, which will be discussed below.

<sup>5</sup> Historically many Dalits in the area worked as pannaiyaal . Although formally pannaiyaal were men, in practice women were also employed by the same land owners. See Carswell and De Neve 2013b.

not, however, considered socially acceptable for women to work night shifts unless they are working alongside close kin members (husbands or brothers) and it is unusual to come across women loom operators. Almost all women, therefore, who work in the industry, do so as cone winders, which involves daytime work only preparing cones for the looms, by winding the threads onto them. The work is available in the *godowns* of powerloom owners, and is therefore local to Mannapalayam women. This work is less well paid than operator work, but - like operators - cone winders have access to the cash advances that are available in the industry. These advances are a source of credit for families at times of crisis, but serve to tie them to powerloom operators in a form of neo-bondage. Whilst our research found that the advances received by cone winders was significantly smaller than those received by operators (an average of Rs 21,000 compared to Rs 27,729 for operators in 2009), this is still a substantial sum of money exceeding the average annual income. Being indebted to powerloom owners means that workers (whether men or women) cannot take jobs elsewhere (Carswell and De Neve 2013b).

Tiruppur work is available to those able to commute into town, who are not indebted to powerloom owners. Indebtedness thus excludes many, but villagers living in Mannapalayam are also excluded because there are no public buses or private company vans driving through the village.<sup>6</sup> The story in Allapuram however is very different. Here there are ample state buses and company vans going through the village to take commuters into town. The wages for Tiruppur work begin (for a helper or *kaimadi*, learning on the job) at a rate that is comparable to agricultural work, but once some experience is gained rises to significantly more than can be earned in the village. But the working hours in this industry, are long and workers are frequently asked to work double shifts. The industry is, however, very varied, with jobs available at different levels to women, from helper to checker and trimmer to tailor. The industry also varies in that some units have more predictable work patterns with less overtime, while others see real ups and downs in work flows (De Neve 2014).

The final major type of work available to women in the villages is NREGA work. This is a government scheme introduced to this region since 2008, which provides 100

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<sup>6</sup> It is not merely bad luck that there are no buses running through the village, but this is a situation created by Gounder powerloom owners who try to maintain control over 'their' workers in the village by preventing buses and vans coming through the village (see Carswell and De Neve 2014a).

days of unskilled work to all rural households. The work has to be offered locally, and transport is supposed to be offered to workers if the work is more than 5km from their homes. In addition children can be brought to the worksite and are looked after by the workers. NREGA work is supposed to be available to anyone who wants it, and our survey of NREGA workers found that by far the majority are women (88%) and Dalits (76%) (Carswell and De Neve, 2013c). In 2011 workers in this region were required to clear a set length of road per day, but even when they had finished this distance they were not allowed to leave the site, thus workers may finish the work in just one or two hours, but had to stay on site until 4pm. The work was seen as physically very easy work, as well as being flexible as it requires no commitment to work every day. However, it is also seen as inflexible in that workers could not return to their houses in the middle of the day if needed. In 2011 NREGA pay levels were just under female agricultural wage levels and helped push up the latter over time (Carswell and De Neve 2014b).

As well as NREGA, the state in Tamil Nadu is also involved in a number of other welfare schemes that are important in the role they play in enabling certain choices to be made by women. As Heyer has written state provision through the public distribution system (PDS), mid-day meals in schools, as well as pensions and maternity benefits have all helped to make it 'possible for people to meet their consumption needs with less labour ... [and] also made it possible for women to spend more time at home and less time doing paid work' (2012: 104). These state policies, alongside economic liberalisation and associated employment opportunities, combine to create a context in which women weigh up the decisions around different types of work.

### ***To work or not to work?***

The first question to ask is *whether* women are in paid employment at all, before looking in more detail at how those who do paid work decide what jobs to take. Broadly speaking in this region the evidence suggests that *most* women are involved in some form of paid work. Our survey of two villages showed this clearly. In Allapuram out of a sample of 317 women aged 15 and over (excluding students), 58% were working, while in Mannapalayam out of a sample of 363 women aged 15 and over (excluding students), 70% were working. The lower labour participation

rates in Allapuram is in part due to the presence of the Adi Dravida community, as will be discussed below.

In both villages the likelihood that women are doing paid work is closely related to both their place in the life cycle and caste. Perhaps most important is the age of women, and Tables 1 and 2 show the employment status of women in each village, by age.<sup>7</sup> A first observation to make is that broadly speaking women's participation in the workforce starts off lowest in their first years of adulthood, when many young women are students: only 29% of women in Allapuram, and 34% of women in Mannapalayam in the 15-19 age group were working. From then the rates of working increase and even though women in their 20s are typically married with young children, their participation in paid work increases: in Allapuram 43% of 25-29 year olds work, while in Mannapalayam 73% of 25-29 year olds work. The rates of women working further increases as women return to work after having had children, with work participation rates reaching peaks of 82% of 45-50 year olds in Allapuram and 89% of 30-35 year olds in Mannapalayam. Even though women's work rates start falling as they age, the relatively high employment rates for women in their mid-50s to mid-70s is worth noting, with over 40% of women in their 50s, 60s and even early 70s still in paid employment in both villages. It is only in very old age when their bodies are no longer able to do physical labour that women stop working altogether (Vera Sanso 2012).

INSERT Table 1 – Allapuram: Activities of women by age group

INSERT Table 2– Mannapalayam: Activities of women by age group

Our findings are in line with what other researchers have recently identified in the region, although Heyer's findings are different. She found lower rates of women's employment: in her villages north of Tiruppur, the percentage of women aged 15 and over who were engaged in paid employment in 2008/9 was 54% (down from 73% in 1996, Heyer 2014: 219) and Heyer makes interesting findings related to differences between Dalits and non-Dalits and the process of 'becoming housewives' (Heyer 2014; see also Heyer 2012), which I return to below. Surveys more in line with our findings include that by Rao of five villages on the Coimbatore-Tiruppur district

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<sup>7</sup> This sample includes students.



border, which also found high overall female employment rates. In these villages, only 25% of Dalit women reported themselves in 2009 as 'not active in the workforce or engaged only in domestic work', and only 35% of OBC women claimed the same (Rao 2014: 86). In her study, age and stage in the life cycle also emerged as crucial determinants in the explanation of whether women are likely to work or not. Thus, Rao notes, 'the importance of life cycle in shaping the pattern of women's employment, as indeed men's employment, and its interaction with social and caste identity has to be emphasized' (Rao 2014: 86). Harriss-White has argued that labour markets are embedded in social institutions, and similarly highlighted the life cycle as one of the key institutions of identity which alongside others (gender, caste etc.) regulate economic behaviour (2010). In the context of urban Tamil Nadu, Vera-Sanso has explored 'gendered work trajectories' over the life cycle, noting that married women entered the workforce to cover the gap between family expenses and their husband's income, with the 'inadequacy or lack of male incomes' being the reason most entered and remained in the workforce (2012: 327). She argues that the demographic transition in India is creating 'long-thin families', with older people having to continue to work as they are less able to rely on filial support (Vera-Sanso 2014). Similarly, this research finds that the reliability of men's incomes being used for the household is a key factor for women's work decisions.

In Allapuram and Mannapalayam too, women's employment participation rates undoubtedly fluctuate over the life cycle. While more women may now be able to be less involved in paid work during some stages of their life cycle, such as for example when they have small children, there was no evidence of the systematic withdrawal of women from the labour force. Rather, persistently high levels of workforce participation among adult married women in their 30s and 40s were found, and relatively high levels of participation among older women in their 50s to 70s, suggesting on the one hand a continued need for women to work during considerably large chunks of their life time and on the other hand a pattern of women working till well into old-age, largely confirming Vera-Sanso's (2012 and 2014) and Kapadia's findings for urban Tamil Nadu (2010). Many women continue to work either to compensate for a shortfall in their husband's income or to finance the ever-increasing financial demands of contemporary life and rising aspirations. Nevertheless, below I draw attention to one pattern of housewifisation. A second factor that was considered, but found – perhaps surprisingly – to be relatively

*unimportant* in explaining women's participation in the workforce, is wealth group. In Allapuram, where we did a wealth ranking exercise, there was little difference in the percentage of women working by wealth group: amongst the 'very poor' group 58% of women aged 15 and over were working, exactly the same as the 58% amongst the richest group (and 53% amongst the poor and 51% amongst the medium group).<sup>8</sup> More important than wealth however was caste membership. Here, two patterns stand out. First, in both villages, the pattern of work participation between the higher caste Gounders and the lowest ranking Matharis is remarkably similar. Gounder women are thus as likely to be involved in productive work as Mathari women. However, there is a very important difference between their work: the majority of Gounder women are employed on own family farms or in own family powerloom units, while Dalit women are employed as labourers. Second, the most striking variation identified is between different Dalit groups, with the Christian Adi Dravidas of Allapuram standing out with a very different pattern of female participation in the labour market, as shown in Table 3 below.

INSERT Table 3 - Both villages: Activities of women by caste group

Whilst amongst all other caste groups in both villages the percentage of women working is approximately two thirds (between 65% and 72%), amongst the Dalit Adi Dravidas of Allapuram only 34% of women work and 59% do not work. This is the only caste group where a higher percentage of women *do not* work than the percentage who *do* work. In Allapuram, the Adi Dravidas stand out as a better educated, upwardly mobile, Christian Dalit community in which many households have benefitted from male members' better jobs in the Tiruppur garment industry as well as low-level government employment. This upward mobility - and the aspirations and expectations that go with it - has had a direct impact on women's work participation rates in this community.

In these villages, therefore, a striking variation by caste can be observed, but in this case between different Dalit castes, rather than between Dalit and non-Dalit groups. Among the Adi Dravidas, there is a clear pattern of what could be termed housewifisation. In a community where women used to work for the best part of their

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<sup>8</sup> These figures include students in the sample. If we exclude students from the sample, the figures are: amongst the 'very poor' group 58% were working, compared to 62% amongst the richest group (and 57% amongst the poor and 57% amongst the medium group).

lives, younger women are now withdrawing from the labour market, which is part and parcel of households' aspirations for social and status mobility within this upwardly mobile community. But unpacking whose choice it is to withdraw from labour is difficult in a context where social norms and expectations of what makes a 'good' wife and mother require women *not* to work. Not working can be seen here as part of Gidwani's 'quest for distinction' whereby a 'key source of distinction for households is their ability to withdraw family labor power, either completely or partially' (2000: 147). He notes that not only have high-status Patels been able to achieve distinction in this way, but recent social and economic changes have made it easier for previously subordinate caste groups to similarly withdraw family members, and especially women, from the labour market.

Elsewhere in Tamil Nadu Guérin et al have noted that women's labour market participation rates vary according to caste, with upper-caste women being less likely to work than middle-caste or Dalit women (2014: 6; see also Kapadia 2002). Similarly Heyer's research north of Tiruppur found that more non-Dalit women (53%) are only doing domestic work compared to Dalit women (35%). However, her research conducted over a 30-year period suggests substantial increases over time in the proportion of women only doing domestic work, with figures increasing from 22% to 35% between 1996 and 2008/9 for Dalit women, and 29% to 53% for non-Dalit women (Heyer 2014). She argues that this pattern of labour market withdrawal by Dalit women is because 'women themselves have chosen not to continue with work that is arduous, exploitative and poorly paid' (2014: 209). Similarly, Clarinda Still has argued for Andhra Pradesh that 'education allows these Dalit girls to become housewives, escaping a life of demeaning agricultural work' (2011: p1119). Therefore, 'not working' can be a choice that some Dalit women are nowadays lucky to be able to make: women whose families are now sufficiently well-off to enable them to avoid physically demanding, low status and poorly paid jobs.

Whether withdrawing from the labour market is a positive or negative development for women remains a moot point. On the one hand, I share observations by Heyer (2014), Still (2011) and Rao (2014) that for many of these women – for whom only the lowest paid and lowest status jobs are accessible – the ability to stay at home is perceived as a good thing, as well as indicating to the world that theirs is an upwardly mobile household whose female members do not have to engage in such

jobs (Kapadia 1995; Olsen and Mehta 2006). If taxing, physical toil on low status tasks is the only alternative to staying at home, the choice is probably not hard to make. On the other hand, however, this trend also risks contributing to what Kapadia has called a 'new and increasing patriarchalisation of Tamil society' (Kapadia 2010: 269). Women's withdrawal from the workforce is then as much an imposed as a chosen pathway. Whilst men may be seeking to enhance family status, at the same time they are enforcing patriarchal values and increasing their control over women who, in the process, lose some of the freedoms and influence they had in the past (Kapadia 2010).

The case of Joy, a 38-year-old Adi Dravida woman, illustrates this well. Joy simply did not have a choice as to whether to work or not, as she was not permitted to work by her husband. She told us that her husband 'never allowed me to work', and explained that he has a government job and 'so we need to maintain our level [status]'. Joy did not make a decision herself not to work, rather that choice was made for her. In addition to making the decision as to whether Joy could work, her husband also keeps control over her movements more generally, phoning her regularly throughout the day to check on her, and his narrative of 'caring' about her seems to be as much about closely controlling her. Joy recognised his attempts to control her. She told us her husband had only recently allowed her to join a self-help group, and explained 'he says he is earning and giving to me and I should be happy with that. But I know typing on computer, catering, beautician... But what is the use? I could earn equally but he keeps me like a doll "*bomai*". ... I don't like it!' This is not to suggest that Joy is entirely without agency, and unknown to her husband she has joined a savings group, and is making plans to purchase gold for her daughter. But over the key decision of going out to work, Joy is completely under the control of her husband.

And Joy is not unique: 59% of Adi Dravida women over the age of 15 do not do any paid work and this is new for Adi Dravida women, who, like other Dalit women, previously enjoyed greater mobility and autonomy than upper-caste women (see Kapadia 1995). Furthermore, many Adi Dravida women who are engaged in paid work, do so in family businesses: Maria works as a tailor in her brother's garment unit, whilst Selvi works in her husband's go-down. Here, there is a clear replication of the behaviour of rich Gounder women, many of whom work in the family farms or

businesses meaning men can oversee and control their movements. Furthermore, the discourse within the household around Selvi's work is that she is 'just helping out' and the work is not really necessary; the family wants to be seen as not *needing* their women to work, much like better-off Gounders. As Kapadia notes, this is not part of the Sanskritisation put forward by Srinivas (1956), but the (in her case, urban) lower castes are copying upper-class behaviour: 'these conservative rich castes continue to value the norms of female seclusion and, particularly, female subordination' (2010:269). While a detailed discussion of the agency and empowerment that paid work does (or does not) bring is beyond the scope of this paper, there is a real tension between women recognising the increased voice within the household that can come with paid work, and at the same time recognising that not working (and so meeting the ideals of motherhood and being a 'good wife') gives them status within the family, and in turn enhances their family's status within wider society. As such, this is not a simple and straightforward distinction between women being forced by men to withdraw from work, or it being women's own choice; rather women themselves are concerned about their families' status are involved in 'production of status' work (Papanek 1979), and may thus choose those options that are most likely to optimize the status and mobility of their households.

### ***Juggling job decisions: women's choices and patterns of paid employment***

Women who do paid work face choices and constraints in their decisions about what paid employment they take up. Their work choices are shaped by a number of factors related to working hours, location and flexibility of work, wages and the nature of work (in particular how physically demanding it is). Critical to women of all castes is to be able to combine paid work with their domestic responsibilities, or to fit their productive roles around their reproductive responsibilities.

For all women location of work and length of the working day are key factors to consider. Young unmarried women, less burdened by time-consuming domestic tasks and social responsibilities, are most likely to be working in the Tiruppur garment industry with its long working hours and daily commute. For married women, and particularly those with school-aged children, the industry's regular demands to work for a 'shift and a half' (or a 12-hour day) combined with the commute into town make Tiruppur work by and large impossible, the exception (as

we shall see) being those who cannot rely on their husband's income. Family expectations necessitate their presence at home to prepare food, take children to and from school, and perform all other domestic tasks. The story that Priya tells illustrates this well. Priya is a 26-year-old Adi Dravida woman who lives in Allapuram. Married with a primary-school aged son she has worked in the garment industry since she was about 14, first in a spinning mill, then as a *kaimadi* (helper to the tailor) before becoming a tailor. In Tiruppur Priya worked in the same factory as her husband and his sister, but after the birth of her son she stopped working in Tiruppur. She did some NREGA work, which although paid considerably less than what she had earned as a tailor, had the advantage of being local, having a relatively light work load and limited working hours.

While most women from Allapuram who worked in Tiruppur were unmarried (or had no children) there were exceptions. Thus Gayathri a 43-year-old MBC (Maruthuvar) woman lives in Allapuram and commutes to Tiruppur to work in a large export company. She has always worked in Tiruppur (even when her children were of school-age) initially as a checker, then as a helper, before working as a skilled tailor, and the reasons quickly became clear. Gayathri's relationship with her husband was breaking down: he was drinking and could no longer be relied upon to support the household. By the time he left Gayathri had been the sole-earner of the household for some years. But her need to return home to care for her children meant she kept working as a checker and helper (working fixed and shorter shifts) rather than taking up the more time-intensive but financially more rewarding job of tailor. As soon as her children were old enough to be left at home alone she switched to tailoring work, although she had long had the necessary skills for this work. Gayathri's career pathway illustrates how women's employment across the life cycle is shaped by the vagaries of their domestic life and the requirements of their household. It is clear therefore that life course is important here: most women who did have Tiruppur garment jobs dropped out on having their first child. Some switched to home-based garment work, such as checking and labelling, while others return to casual agricultural work or NREGA work.

The length of the working day is an important consideration for women needing to meet domestic responsibilities, and in contrast to the long hours associated with garment work, the working day of an agricultural labourer (8am to 3pm) is

considerably shorter. Similarly, NREGA workers are able to leave the worksite at 4pm. Furthermore, both of these are located close to women's homes, and women can take young children with them. Thus, for example, NREGA work was ideal for Saraswati who was very clear about why she did this type of work: 'You can have your children around and it is near home'. Married with two young children, Saraswati, is a 30-year-old Mathari woman from Mannapalayam. She worked for NREGA and had very nearly completed the full 100 days of work allowed under the scheme. But before she had children Saraswati worked in the powerlooms as a cone winder, and she expected to go back to this work as soon as her children started school. Powerloom owners do not allow children into the *godowns*, fearing accidents and so with young children Saraswati has few choices as to the work she can do. NREGA work is therefore an interim solution, bringing in some money and being better than nothing until she can return to cone winding.

In Allapuram a handful of small garment units have opened in the village in the last five years. These factories have proved to be extremely popular for women with young families. Priya, for example, mentioned above, used to work as a tailor in Tiruppur but had given up this work when her son was born. As soon as a small factory opened in the village, Priya was quick to join as a checker. Working in a unit close to her home and being able to work single shifts meant she could return home at the end of the school day and so combine relatively well paid work with her domestic responsibilities. As Priya pondered the advantages and disadvantages of this village-based company she explained: 'We don't have ESI (insurance) or PF (Provident Fund) here, but we can go home to eat lunch, and cook and do any other household chores. Here we don't do export quality, so they are a little more forgiving. In Tiruppur, we all worked [before] in export companies, where the work has to be done very carefully. The salary is a bit less here than in Tiruppur ... [but] we've got certain benefits here. For example, if I urgently need some money our employer will give us money. That is also an advantage. And similarly the company owner trusts us that we will work well.' But it is notable that she had downgraded in terms of skills: in Tiruppur she had worked as a tailor, whereas she was now working as a checker, so taking a drop in salary. This pattern of returning to lower skilled and lower paid jobs after having had children marks many women's employment trajectories.

Flexible working hours matter a great deal too. For the women of Mannapalayam, cone-winding work in the village powerlooms is one of the most attractive options, not only due to the location but also the flexibility of the job. Lakshmi, a 37-year-old Hindu Valaiyar (MBC) woman with two school aged children, explained that for her the big advantage of powerloom work is that ‘as long as we wind enough cones we can go [home] and come [back] as we like’. She returns home in the middle of the day to have lunch and do any domestic work that is needed. The importance of this kind of flexibility has also been noted in the urban context, where women discussing the different factories in Tiruppur explained that in smaller units workers could go to collect water when the municipal taps were running, whereas in larger export units they explained that ‘whether water comes or even a tsunami comes, we have to stick to our checking tables!’ (De Neve 2014: 195). Yet, even so, Lakshmi only manages to work as a cone winder because she can rely on her mother-in-law to look after her daughter after school. For others whose children are not yet at school or who lack kin support, even powerloom cone winding work is impossible: Saraswati (above) worked as a cone winder, but without any family help she had to give it up when her children were born. She did, however, plan to return to cone winding as soon as they were at school. For her, as for many young women in her position, NREGA work offers a welcome source of basic income to bridge periods during which they cannot take up regular paid employment. But all these women are limited to the less well paid winding work: powerloom operating work is rarely an option for women as working night shifts is widely deemed to be inappropriate for them. Thus, socially constructed norms and patriarchal control play a key role in constraining women’s choices too, even where they do participate in paid work.

A different type of flexibility that is important to some women, or to women at particular times in their life, is the ability to work on an ad hoc basis without having to commit to working a regular six-day week. The expectation for both garment and powerloom workers is that they are available for work six days a week, while neither agricultural or NREGA work require full-time or regular commitment. This is one of the reasons why NREGA work has been so popular among women in Tamil Nadu: they can do it as and when it suits them (Carswell and De Neve 2013c and 2014b). Women from all castes need such jobs for different reasons: those with young families, such as Priya, can combine it with domestic responsibilities, while older women, such as Ratha, may no longer be able to engage in physically demanding



agricultural work six days a week. Ratha is a 60-year-old Mathari woman from Allapuram who was widowed 12 years ago. Although she has 3 sons and a daughter family arguments have meant her sons refuse to support her. While Ratha normally works as an agricultural labourer, she takes up NREGA work when there is no agricultural work available. Additionally, agricultural labouring work is very physically demanding, whereas NREGA work is seen as 'easier' on the body and so women often do a few days or weeks of NREGA work if they feel unwell or weak. But when Ratha is up to it, she does agricultural work as it pays a little more than NREGA. As a widow with no family support, the rates of pay are extremely important for her, and in her decision-making she will prioritize wage rates over other criteria. Similarly, Gayathri (discussed above) for many years the main breadwinner, prioritized higher wages over other criteria. This meant she often left her children to fend for themselves after school, but she had little choice. It is striking that almost all the women with children commuting to Tiruppur were divorced or separated, or those whose husband's incomes could no longer be relied upon. They were therefore continuing garment work in order to earn better wages and make up for a lack of male incomes (Vera Sanso 2012). But to make Tiruppur work manageable, Gayathri chose to work in a factory that offered shift rates and allowed her to work single shifts while her children were small. She also chose a factory on the 'right' side of Tiruppur in order to shorten her commute. As her children grew older and were able to look after themselves, Gayathri began to do a 'shift-and-a-half' and started working as a tailor to obtain higher rates of pay.

### ***Conclusions***

This article has shown that women's decisions around whether to work and what work to opt for cannot be understood without an understanding of the reproductive sphere (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011). Exploring household spaces of reproduction (Kelly 2009, 2012) reveals how GPNs do not stop at the factory door: industrial employment reaches into, affects and is affected by household spaces of reproduction. Taking a horizontal approach (Neilson and Pritchard 2010) reveals how factors such as gender, age and caste shape GPNs. The article has explored how the intersections of age, life course and other axes of social difference shape women's decisions to work, so highlighting the mutual embeddedness of the reproductive and productive economies. Not only are women 'making the best possible choices in a segmented and discriminating labor market' (Dominguez et al

2010), but they are doing so with their reproductive economy - their domestic responsibilities and status concerns - at the forefront of their minds. Just as Ruwanpura noted in the case of Sri Lanka, 'anxieties linked to the household and reproductive sphere were the mainstay of female garment workers' labouring decisions' (2013:147).

Factors taken into consideration by women of all castes in the study villages include location of work, working hours, flexibility of employment, and degree of commitment required. Only once these factors have been considered do women look at wage rates in deciding what jobs to take. All these other factors are central to the reproductive sphere and so outdo considerations about wages or the nature of the work itself: the demands of the reproductive economy trump other forms of identity and difference, such as caste or wealth group, in shaping women's work choices. The study therefore not only highlights the need for feminist geography to give the reproductive sphere more empirical and analytical attention, but also calls for a stronger recognition of the mutually constitutive nature of the reproductive and productive sphere in women's lives. In revealing the relatedness of the productive and reproductive economies, the article shows how women's employment decisions are strongly affected by the constellation of relations of gender and patriarchy, in which women's decisions are rarely autonomous. It contributes to work on labour geography showing that work for urban employers within GPNs cannot be understood through just a factory or industry-based focus: decisions to work in global labour markets are closely related to women's alternatives within rural labour markets as well as their roles and responsibilities within rural domestic economies.

Clearly, women are negotiating complex and often contradictory pressures with an ever increasing need in most households for an additional breadwinner to either make up for insufficient male incomes or to meet rising standards of living and expectations of upward mobility. This is illustrated by the three key findings of this study. First, most of the poorer and low-caste women in these villages work to earn money (between 58% and 70% of women aged 15 and over). This is in line with village study findings from elsewhere in Tamil Nadu (Rao 2014; Heyer 2014; Harriss-White and Janakarajan 2004), which indicate high female labour participation rates. Second, the life course is a crucial determinant of women's involvement in such paid work (Pratt and Hanson 1993). Confirming the findings of other studies, women's

participation in the paid work force goes up, and then down, with age, and women continue to work well into old age (Rao 2014; Vera-Sanso 2012; 2014; Kapadia 2010). What is particularly striking is how many women *do* work throughout the child bearing and rearing years of their life, and how they manage to juggle their jobs to fit in with social norms, domestic responsibilities and patriarchal controls. Third, women's engagement with paid employment is primarily shaped by the demands the domestic economy puts on their time, place and energy. Whether a need for extra income to stay afloat, a desire for more money to fulfil the expectations of upward mobile behaviour or husbands' refusal to let them work in the face of household status mobility, the study concludes that women's decisions around work are deeply embedded in and shaped by the reproductive economy and patriarchal pressures. Rather than being driven by a desire for autonomy or frivolous consumption, much of women and men's earning are spent on housing and home improvements, life cycle ceremonies, consumer goods, health or education. Many of these expenses are closely connected to households' aspirations for upward mobility in a region that is deeply integrated into global production networks and where a range of employment opportunities are available to both men and women.

But what does such work mean to the women involved? Kapadia has argued that 'when impoverished women are forced, by family poverty and male unemployment (or male recalcitrance), to go out to earn a living, this is not a positive sign of female empowerment.... [it] is yet another sign of the many ways in which women are being instrumentally used by men – both their husbands and their employers – to further male interests' (2010:285). Here too, the employment of women is not only allowed, but is often needed to make ends meet or to live up to ever rising material, health and educational aspirations.

Moreover, the related process of women withdrawing from work can also be seen as a sign of tightening patriarchy. In the villages studied here, the group of women who have withdrawn from work across the age range, are from the Adi Dravida Christian community of Allapuram. This upwardly mobile Dalit community has benefitted considerably from reservations and government employment, as well as having a long-standing involvement in the Tiruppur garment industry. Their withdrawal from paid employment is strikingly different from both other Dalit groups and other castes, and suggests a more complex picture than simply the withdrawal of upper-caste

women from paid work (Guérin et al 2014) or the withdrawal of Dalits more generally (Heyer 2014). Here, it is a very particular group of Dalit women (Adi Dravidas) withdrawing from paid work, accompanied by a tightening of patriarchal norms and an increased preoccupation with status within this community (Papanek 1979; Kapadia 2010). Withdrawing from work altogether or working only in family businesses goes hand-in-hand with both the family being upwardly mobile and with men increasing their control over their wives' everyday lives. While many of these women are aware of how they are controlled by their husbands they are themselves also seeking to pursue status enhancement. The positive outcome in terms of giving up demeaning and back-breaking work needs to be seen alongside the loss of freedom, and greater dependence on the men of the household. One can only hope that with rising level of education, women's need to work in the most demeaning and taxing jobs can be replaced with a choice to work in better quality and higher status jobs that are both rewarding and empowering. But even then, as now, the main struggles over work are likely to continue to take place at home.

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Table 1 – Allapuram: Activities of women by age group

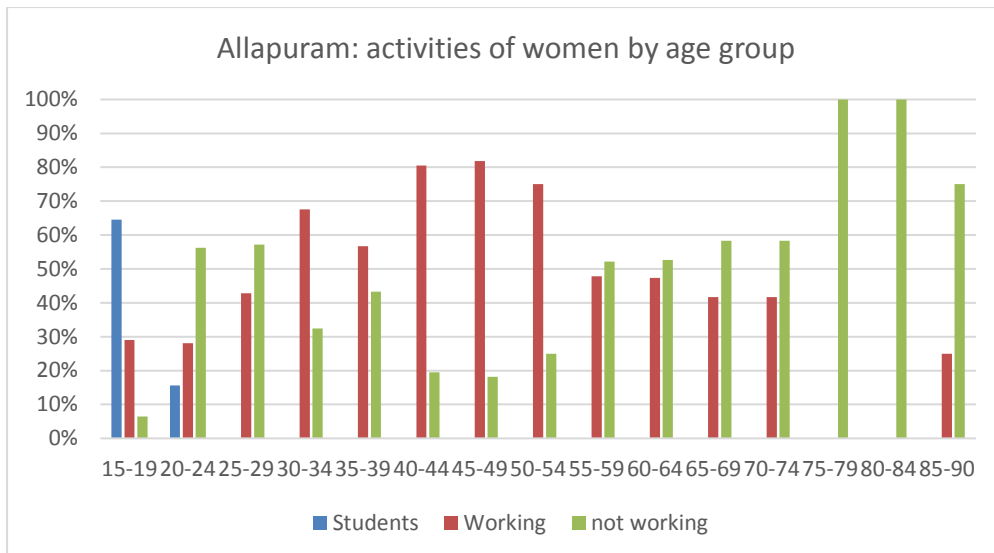


Table 2 – Mannapalayam: Activities of women by age group

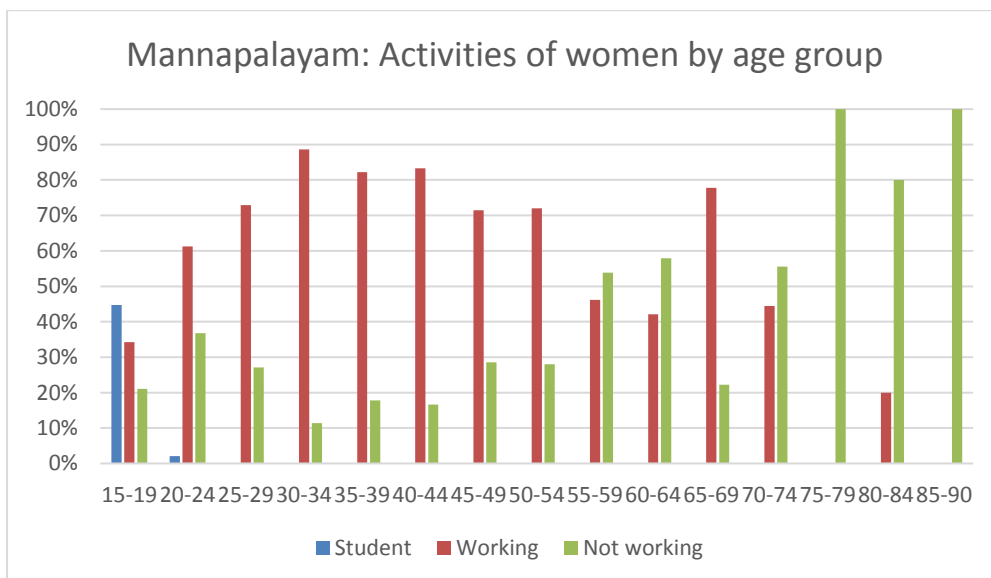


Table 3: Both villages: Activities of women by caste group

Both villages: Activities of women by caste group

