Boundaries of Home and Work: Social Reproduction and Home-Based Workers in Ahmedabad, India

Natascia Boeri

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

Recommended Citation

http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/1532
BOUNDARIES OF HOME AND WORK:
SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND HOME-BASED WORKERS IN AHMEDABAD, INDIA

by

NATASCIA BOERI

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2016
Boundaries of Home and Work:
Social Reproduction and Home-Based Workers in Ahmedabad, India

by

Natascia Boeri

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date
Hester Eisenstein
Chair of Examining Committee

Date
Philip Kasinitz
Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee:
Sujatha Fernandes
Ruth Milkman
Rupal Oza

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Boundaries of Home and Work:
Social Reproduction and Home-Based Workers in Ahmedabad, India
by
Natascia Boeri

Advisor: Hester Eisenstein

This dissertation critically questions the use of women’s labor in international development and global capitalism by examining women’s participation in the informal economy, a significant source of work for women in the Global South. Based on ten months of fieldwork in Ahmedabad, India, this study considers women’s experiences with informality when they participate in home-based work, the production of goods for the market in one’s own home. I ask how women’s place-based activities redefine their roles and positions across three spheres of social life: the family, the economy, and civil society (through their participation in a non-governmental organization, or NGO). I argue that the material consequences of neoliberal capitalism for workers can only be fully understood by also accounting for ideological and symbolic relations of power, which is possible with the analytical framework provided by social reproduction theory. Working with the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), a membership-based organization for women in the informal economy in India, I conducted a survey of one hundred home-based garment workers, follow-up interviews with thirty of the workers and spatial analysis of their homes, content analysis of SEWA documentation and media, and interviews with five SEWA directors and four local academics and activists.
This dissertation presents four main findings. First, the temporal and spatial aspects of home-based work create a worker who is always available, even when caring, and easily disposed of in the subcontracting system. Second, the characterization of informal workers as entrepreneurs, exemplified by the micro-entrepreneurial woman, contradicts actual experiences with informality. Third, women express agency in their choices and practices, yet, these actions are informed within a set of socio-cultural and economic boundaries, reproducing feminine domesticity. However, in my final empirical chapter, I argue that women envision resistance to the reproduction of power through their aspirations that their children find secure work in the formal economy. Notably, for their daughters, women emphasize the importance of mobility and leaving the home to “come forward in life,” and so transgress boundaries of feminine domesticity. These aspirations point to women’s understanding of their social position in this economic system, an acknowledgement that was left unsaid earlier in the interviews.

Analyzing women’s place-based activities reveals the role of their social reproduction labor across the institutions of the family, economy, and civil society. Women employ practices and discourses that reproduce, redefine, and at times resist these power dynamics. It is necessary to acknowledge the interdependence of production and social reproduction when considering the growing presence of informality in the contemporary economic landscape and the continuing use of women’s labor to support international development. Lastly, this dissertation highlights the necessity for transnational sociological knowledge, since individuals and communities of the Global South have faced precarity in social life long before the term entered Western discourse.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of many people and institutions. The Graduate Center offered early support for research, including the Doctoral Student Research Grant, the Provost’s Digital Innovation Grant, and a travel grant from the Center for the Study of Women and Society. Dissertation fieldwork was supported by a Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant from the National Science Foundation. After fieldwork, I was able to devote myself entirely to the writing of the dissertation thanks to an American Fellowship by the American Association of University Women. I thank all of these institutions for their support in this project and their confidence in me.

However, monetary support alone does not result in a completed dissertation. I would like to thank my committee for their guidance over the years. I thank Hester Eisenstein, my dissertation advisor, for believing in this project from the beginning. Her unique approach to feminism and unwavering critique of capitalism pushed me to think of new ways of understanding gender and the global economy. I would also like to thank Sujatha Fernandes, Rupal Oza, and Ruth Milkman for their contribution to this dissertation as committee members. Sujatha inspired me to think beyond the disciplinary boundaries of sociology. Rupal’s knowledge of India was an invaluable resource for this dissertation, and Ruth’s thoughtful feedback resulted in a stronger dissertation.

There are always moments of despair when writing, but it is because of my family and friends that I was able to persevere. Foremost, I would like to thank my mother and my husband, Robert. My mother offered much needed guidance on how to survive graduate school. From navigating Ahmedabad streets to endless pages of drafts, this adventure would not have been the same without Robert. At the Graduate Center, I am grateful for my friendships with Jacob
Lederman and Tommy Wu. The LIS Center offered a space of collaboration and encouragement, thank you in particular to Janet Gornick, Caroline Batzdorf, and Laurie Maldonado.

My research would not have been possible without the support of SEWA Academy, who offered me a summer internship and agreed to host me during my dissertation research. In particular, I would like to thank Namrata Bali, Mita Parikh, and Mirai Chatterjee. I also thank the SEWA Academy Literacy Department for their help in organizing visits to the fieldsites.

Research in Ahmedabad would have been very different if not for a number of colleagues and friends. Despite linguistic barriers, all of the staff at SEWA Research made me feel welcomed, and I will always cherish our memories from the Ellis Bridge office. In particular, I would like to thank Jayshree, my companion to the fieldsites, whose patience, humor, and advice made fieldwork a more enjoyable experience. Thanks are also due to Jigna and Khyati for their help on other projects during my time at SEWA. Others who have made an impact on my time in Ahmedabad, and so this dissertation, include Vaishali and her family, Rachna, Suneela, Mr. Christie, and Professors Chandrika Raval and Shailaja Dhruva. I want to thank in particular Kirit and Vasumati for being my family when I was far from my own.

Most importantly, I would like to thank the home-based workers who participated in this research. Many of these women opened up their homes to Jayshree and me, welcoming us to partake in a small part of their lives. Their strength and determination to make difficult circumstances better is an inspiration. Whether or not their dreams will be achieved, I do hope that the stories presented in the following pages contribute in some part to the seeing of workers as more than numbers and development as more than growth. This project would have been impossible without their stories, and I thank them for that.
# Table of Contents

*Acknowledgements* .......................................................... vi

*List of Tables* ........................................................................................................ ix

*List of Figures* ........................................................................................................ x

*List of Abbreviations* ................................................................................................ xi

Chapter 1. Women’s Labor in the Home, Community, and Economy .................... 1

Chapter 2. Ahmedabad: Textiles, Gandhi, and Hindutva ........................................ 43

Chapter 3. Methodology: Researching Women in the Informal Economy ............... 73

Chapter 4. Women’s Work and Informality ............................................................ 85

Chapter 5. The Gendered Entrepreneurial Subject .................................................. 118

Chapter 6. Boundaries of Family, Work, and Development .................................... 144

Chapter 7. Material and Symbolic Mobility ............................................................ 181

Chapter 8. Social Reproduction Challenging Constructions of the Economy .......... 213

*Glossary* .................................................................................................................. 223

*Appendix I. List of Interview Participants* .............................................................. 225

*Appendix II. List of Fieldsites* ................................................................................. 228

*Bibliography* .......................................................................................................... 229
List of Tables

Table 1. SEWA Goals and Eleven Points................................................................. 59
Table 2. SEWA Organizing and Development Strategies........................................ 61
Table 3. Job Aspirations for Children, by Gender .................................................... 206
List of Figures

Figure 1. SEWA Membership .................................................................................................................... 65
Figure 2. SEWA Governing Structure ....................................................................................................... 66
Figure 3. Cloth scraps left on the floor for the camera ............................................................................. 79
Figure 4. Asha's embroidery work ......................................................................................................... 99
Figure 5. Shanta adding embellishments to chaniya choli ................................................................. 103
Figure 6. Nita working at her machine ................................................................................................. 105
Figure 7. A working mother and her child ............................................................................................ 109
Figure 8. Shilpa's backyard with a former textile mill chimney stack in the background ........... 113
Figure 9. Working by the window for light ........................................................................................ 130
Figure 10. Orders to be completed ..................................................................................................... 137
Figure 11. Working and caring in the same space ............................................................................... 142
Figure 12. Son helping his mother with orders .................................................................................. 165
Figure 13. The road leading to Sarkhej ............................................................................................... 190
Figure 14. Effects of Home-Based Work and SEWA ....................................................................... 197
# List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BJP</td>
<td>Bharatiya Janata Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPZ</td>
<td>Export Processing Zones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAD</td>
<td>Gender and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOI</td>
<td>Government of India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICLS</td>
<td>International Conference of Labour Statisticians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICSE-93</td>
<td>International Classification of Status in Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labour Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEP</td>
<td>New Economic Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBC</td>
<td>Other Backward Caste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSS</td>
<td>Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAP</td>
<td>Structural Adjustment Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Scheduled Caste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEWA</td>
<td>Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEZ</td>
<td>Special Economic Zone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLA</td>
<td>Textile Labour Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNIFEM</td>
<td>United Nations Development Fund for Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WB</td>
<td>World Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WID</td>
<td>Women in Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WIEGO</td>
<td>Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WTO</td>
<td>World Trade Organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1. Women’s Labor in the Home, Community, and Economy

Invisible workers, in the shadows, the hidden assembly line—this is some of the imagery used to describe the workers and production process of home-based work. Home-based workers are workers who produce goods for the market from their own homes, and because of the location of their work contemporary forms of home-based work have historically been overlooked, misunderstood, and difficult to capture by researchers, the state, and development institutions (Allen and Wolkowitz 1987; Chen, Sebstad, and O’Connell 1999; Chen 2014). Women make up a high percentage of these workers, and in countries with low female labor force participation women informal workers are more likely to be working in the home (Chen 2012; ILO 2013). The high rate of women home-based workers is attributed to gender norms that restrict women’s mobility and gendered divisions of labor that encourage women to stay close to home because of domestic responsibilities (Chen 2014).

There are economic factors that support the presence of home-based work as well. Home-based work’s decentralized, flexible labor force and the advances in technology that have facilitated the use of outsourcing for global assembly lines have encouraged the proliferation of home-based workers to produce goods for local and international markets (Balakrishnan and Sayeed 2002; Carr, Chen, and Tate 2000). Home-based work is one of the most widespread forms of informal work—work outside of state protection and regulation—and represents a significant share of urban employment, especially in India where home-based work is 23 percent of urban informal employment (ILO 2013).¹ All of these factors have compelled scholars to make this

¹ When including formal and informal employment in India, home-based work makes up 18 percent of urban employment (ILO 2013).
invisible labor force visible, and so bring focus to the exploitative work conditions, lack of social protection, and miscalculation of their role in contemporary production processes and contribution to the economy (Balakrishnan 2002; Chen 2014; Sudarshan and Sinha 2011).

The mutual reliance between capitalism and gendered social relations has fostered the proliferation of home-based work in modern production processes, especially in the garment industry, which is the focus of this dissertation. Feminist sociologists, economists, and development scholars have been interested in examining how these processes intersect to explain women’s role in modern society. Early scholarship considered home-based work according to theories of capitalist and patriarchal relations of production and social reproduction (Benería and Roldan 1987; Mies 1982). Mies’ (1982) study of lace-makers in North India questioned the tendency for development institutions and practitioners to frame this work as an opportunity for women to join the global production process, pointing to the reproduction of material and ideological systems to support capitalist accumulation on a world scale, such as the construction of these workers as “nonworking housewives” to justify their low pay rate.

In *The Crossroads of Class and Gender*, Benería and Roldan (1987:10) examine women’s involvement in industrial homeworking in Mexico City to support a unifying theory of class and gender, in which “material and ideological factors are an integral aspect of our understanding of gender subordination, while women’s subordination is an integral part of our understanding of economic and social reality.” Home-based work in industrial and developed countries has also been a site of inquiry for feminist scholars, notably, Boris’ (1994) historical analysis of the gendered politics surrounding home-based work and attempts to regulate it and Allen and Wolkowitz’s (1987) study that addressed misconceptions of homeworking in the UK as advantageous for women seeking to balance work and family.
Beginning in the 1990s, academics, researchers, and policy makers turned their attention to defining and measuring home-based work and the informal economy in general (Chen et al. 1999; ILO 1997) and highlighting the role of home-based workers in the global assembly line (Balakrishnan 2002; Carr, Chen and Tate 2000). As unions and activists mobilized to bring social protection and regulation for home-based workers (Jhabvala and Tate 1996), free market supporters increasingly pointed to micro-finance as a tool of economic development, encouraging a misreading of the dependent homeworker as a self-employed micro-entrepreneur (Prügl and Tinker 1997). Elisabeth Prügl (1999) documents the historical and transnational discourses surrounding this “global homeworker movement,” finding that global constructs of gender and work were prevalent throughout the different approaches on how to define home-based work and workers’ needs, from exploited working mother, to handicraft producers of Third World culture, to micro-entrepreneurial heroine, to the androgynous home-based consultant or freelancer in rich countries.

These debates employ a definition of home-based work that relies on where the work is completed; yet, there is a dearth of literature that examines the significance of the space of work in home-based work (for exceptions, see Alikoç 2013; Bose 1999; Miraftab 1994). The meaning associated with space is important to capture because of the gendered reasons women have for participating in this work, which reproduce notions of private and public, but also because subcontracting is a production system that relies on these ideological divisions to provide a cheap and decentralized workforce. Studies of home-based workers and intra-household power relations account for space, arguing that because of work occurring in the home the empowering potential of work is minimized (Bose 2007; Kabeer 2000; Kantor 2005); yet, intra-household bargaining
theory reproduces neoclassical economic theories and attempts to address differences without tackling the power relations inherent in a capitalist economy (Bergeron 2009; Charusheela 2003).

In this dissertation, my aim is to return to Benería and Roldan’s call for a study of class and gender in ways that avoid analytical dualism of material and ideological relations, while also accounting for the significance of space. Adopting the approach used by Benería and Roldan as well as Mies, I argue that the best analytical tool to avoid this dualism is to examine relations of production and social reproduction (social reproduction being work that supports the sustenance of individuals and communities on a daily and generational basis, as well as the reproduction of the material and social relations of capitalism). Returning to Vogel’s (1983) *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, feminist scholars of social reproduction theory argue that this analytical approach allows for the inclusion of both material and ideological relations of power (Bakker and Gill 2003; Ferguson and McNally 2014; Ferguson 2008). It accounts for the subjective experiences of identity and agency, while remaining rooted in the possibilities of political intervention (Ferguson and McNally 2014). In this period of global capitalism and the continuing legacy of imperialism, examining the changing nature of social reproduction exposes the costs of globalization (Katz 2001a; Mitchell, Marston and Katz 2004) and maps out the spatial organization of global capitalism to explain individuals’ socio-spatial location in these relations (Katz 2001, Ferguson 2008).

Additionally, I apply this analytical framework to study home-based garment work across three sites, the family, the economy, and civil society, examined here in the form of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Previous studies that examined interactions of class/patriarchy and material/ideology often limited themselves to the institutions of the family and economy. However, the inclusion of social factors in international development (Bergeron
the proliferation of NGOs in civil society (Kamat 2003), and their replacement of state actors in development projects (Eisenstein 2009) requires the inclusion of these organizations in an analysis of women in the informal economy. Rather than examining women’s experiences in these three institutions as separate sites, I center my analysis in the space of the home. This approach is a place-based analysis of home-based work that examines the exploitation of women’s subordinate position in these three sites of power, but also asks if women’s daily practices can be examples of “resistance but also reappropriation, reconstruction, reinvention and relocalization” in transforming place through political struggle (Escobar and Harcourt 2005:3). Home-based work is a compelling production system to study this process as it is an example of the interdependence between productive and reproductive labor, private and public spheres, and informal and formal economies (Agarwala 2014).

In the following pages, I present findings from ten months of fieldwork in Ahmedabad, India to examine women home-based garment workers’ experiences with the family, work, and civil society. Working with a major and well-established membership-based organization for informal workers, the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), I ask how, with the entrance of paid work and civil society in their homes, women employ discursive and spatial practices that reconceptualize their roles in the public and private spheres. I apply a feminist social reproduction theory to examine how women’s labor is exploited in a flexible and fragmented production process, and I compare this process to the construction of the entrepreneurial subject in the mainstream development paradigm that relies on women’s labor to hide systemic inequalities. Examining women’s daily practices and experiences with these three institutions,

---

2 The inclusion of social factors in economic theory is characterized as the social turn in international development (Bergeron 2009).

3 Pronounced sēvā.
family, economy, and civil society, I ask where women reproduce relations of power and where they employ tactics to contest the social reproduction of power.

The remaining sections of this chapter include an overview of scholarship on the informal economy, home-based workers, and approaches to studying gender and globalization. I then present the theoretical framework that guides my research analysis. I end with an overview of the dissertation.

**Introduction to the Informal Economy**

The broad range of work that comprises the informal economy entered the development lexicon as the “informal sector” in the 1970s. Hart’s (1973) study of urban employment in Ghana illuminated a part of the economy that had been previously labeled (and dismissed) by development economists as the “traditional” sector by both orthodox and Marxist economists. Hart challenged Western understandings of informal sector activities as marginal and unproductive, arguing that this sector was in fact productive, dynamic, and had potential for growth. His contributions shaped future approaches to the informal economy and its role in economic development.

Responses from both ends of the ideological spectrum maintained a dualist approach to the formal and informal economy. Free-market economists viewed the informal economy as a response to onerous state regulation that was smothering the formal labor market and economic growth of the country. They found that strict licensing and overregulation restricted access to formal labor market, and one argument for deregulation and greater labor mobility was so that those in the informal economy would move into the formal (Mazumdar 1976). The World Bank (1989) began viewing the informal economy more optimistically, as a site of unfettered, innovative, and flexible entrepreneurship. De Soto (1989) reaffirmed the presence of informal work
as a response to excessive state regulation, arguing that workers choose to operate informally because of the costs associated with the formal economy. This literature emphasized people’s innate entrepreneurialism and the need to foster it through market access. Rather than formalizing labor, the answer was to formalize capital, even in petty commodity production, an offshoot of which is seen today in the form of microcredit.

At the other end of the spectrum, neo-Marxists viewed the informal economy from a structuralist perspective, analyzing the exploitative and hierarchical relations between these two modes of production. The work of Davies (1979) and Obreegon (1974) examined the informal economy as a marginalized economy on the periphery that enhanced the surplus value of the formal economy in the center. Others explained the relationship between the informal and formal economy as a continuum, in which the two are integrated with each other, with the informal economy in a subordinate position (Leys 1975; Moser 1978). These debates maintained the view that the informal economy played a marginal role in capitalist development.

Portes, Castells, and Benton (1989), on the other hand, argued that the informal economy reflects a process of informalization arising from capitalist accumulation. Rather than the informal economy being a subsidiary, it is an integral part of the economy, and is found in both industrialized and less industrialized countries. In fact, their definition of activities in the informal economy is similar to those activities in the formal economy, with the defining and differentiating feature being that informal activities are unregulated (Castells and Portes 1989:12). They argued that informalization was a growing phenomenon, partly in response to the global economic restructuring of the 1970s and 1980s (Castells and Portes 1989).

This approach pivoted the discussion of the informal economy toward being seen as an integral part of global capitalism (Hill 2010), and scholars understand informalization as a process
in capital’s need for a low-wage and flexible labor force (Standing 1999). Breman (1976) was an early dissenter from the dualism theory of informal/formal economy, arguing that the two cannot be demarcated as separate parts of the economy. Analyzing the economy along a continuum is a more useful analytical tool as it captures the dynamic and heterogeneous characteristics of informality (Hill 2010). It has also shifted attention to the precarious and socio-economic vulnerability associated with this work (Hill 2010), as evidenced in the ILO’s adoption of the “Decent Work” platform (ILO 2002a).

Governments and multi-lateral organizations recognized that there was a need for a common definition and measurement guidelines for the informal economy. The International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) in 1993 defined the “informal sector” as unregulated production units or enterprises depending on their size, such as microenterprises with one or two employees or the self-employed that would utilize family or occasional workers (ILO 2002b). The reframing of the informal economy through the decent work agenda expanded the definition of informal work to include the nature of employment (Chen, Vanek, and Heintz 2006). In 2003, the ICLS broadened the concept to include “informal employment.” The aim was to capture not just the share of work outside of legal and regulatory frameworks, but also the high degree of vulnerability faced by informal workers, due to the lack of secure work, worker’s benefits, social protection, and representation or voice (ILO 2002a). Because of the emphasis on working conditions as well as enterprise, the definitions would now include both persons employed in the informal sector (including own-account workers, employers, employees, contributing family workers in informal enterprises, and members of informal producers’ cooperatives) and persons employed informally outside of the informal sector (including employees in formal enterprises and paid domestic workers not covered by social protection, legislation or entitlement to employment...
benefits, and contributing family workers in formal enterprises) (Vanek et al. 2014:5–6). The “informal economy” is the umbrella term that covers the range of units, activities, and workers within these definitions and their output (Vanek et al. 2014:6).

Among developing countries for which there are data, around 60 percent of workers find work in the informal economy (WTO and ILO 2009). There are some variations across regions, but in most regions of the developing world, informal employment accounts for more than one-half of non-agricultural employment, including 82 percent in South Asia, 66 per cent in Sub-Saharan Africa, 65 per cent in East and Southeast Asia, and 51 per cent in Latin America (Vanek et al. 2014). In many regions of the world, including South Asia, women are more likely to be working in the informal economy than men (Vanek et al. 2014), and more likely to be in lower-earning and more precarious forms of informal employment (Carr et al. 2000; Vanek et al. 2014).

Informality is not just a phenomenon of developing countries, though, as the numbers above show, it is definitely a defining characteristic of their economies. Scholars have argued that informalization is present in developed countries as well in the form of non-standard employment (Standing 2011; Vosko 2010). Non-standard employment, employment that offers limited benefits and social protection, such as temporary, part-time, and own-account employment, has risen in high-income countries as a share of total employment since 1990 (ILO 2013).

Approaches to the Informal Economy

Recognizing the significance of the informal economy, institutions, policymakers, and scholars differ in their explanations of the role of the informal economy in capitalist economies and their suggestions for appropriate responses to it. This has been of particular concern in India, a country with the highest rate of informal employment in the world, 84 percent of non-agricultural
employment (ILO 2013).⁴ At the end of the last century, as it became apparent that the informal economy was not a “buffer zone” for workers waiting to enter formal employment, the informal economy began to be viewed favorably among free-market proponents. In fact, this flexible labor market with little government oversight was exemplary of the neoliberal doctrine. Economists tend to agree that the informal economy is a result of restrictive trade and labor regulation, high tax rates, and other red tape obstacles, and workers choose informal employment as a preference (Ihrlig and Moe 2004; Loayza 1996; Macias and Cazzavilan 2009; OECD 2015; World Bank 2001; WTO and ILO 2009). In its annual reports, the World Bank (World Bank 1995, 2001) has repeatedly called for greater wage flexibility and labor mobility with the aim of making informalization work for the poor. Remarkably, after the economic recession of 2008, pro-market institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF maintained their optimism about the informal economy and reaffirmed the need to deregulate the market. Rather than calling for financial reforms and stronger state intervention to prevent future crises, these institutions point to the informal economy as a source of job creation and a “safety net” (Loayza 1996; Singh, Jain-Chandra, and Mohommad 2012; World Bank 2013).

There is growing interest in the informal economy as a site for entrepreneurialism (Thanh Thai and Turkina 2013; Webb et al. 2013; Williams and Nadin 2010). The literature follows the view that those who choose to operate outside of formal regulations are rational actors weighing economic and social considerations within institutional and resource constraints and opportunities (Webb et al. 2013). Rather than a welfare approach that frames informality as a survival tactic,

---

⁴ Analyses of the informal economy tend to restrict definitions of informal employment to non-agricultural employment, though agricultural employment in developing countries is often informal and lacks basic social protection, as is the case in India (Vanek et al 2014). If informal agricultural employment were included in India’s informal employment rates, it would rise to over 90 percent (OECD 2014).
policies should be implemented to cultivate entrepreneurial activities (Gurtoo 2009). In searching for the entrepreneur, a range of workers in low-paying and menial jobs have been enveloped under its label, including waste scavengers (Rogerson 2001), day laborers (Valenzuela 2001), and homeworkers (Gough 2010). The development field has also begun to encourage developing entrepreneurialism in the informal economy, and, in particular, has targeted women’s potential for entrepreneurialism. The ILO project on Women’s Entrepreneurship Development and Gender Equality (WEDGE) was created to foster and support entrepreneurship among women to “create decent employment, achieve women’s empowerment and gender equality, and work toward poverty reduction” (ILO 2016). The World Bank (2012) considers microcredit schemes that support women’s entrepreneurship to be the most effective way to address unequal resource access for women.

Critical scholars of the informal economy, however, hold a different view on the role of informality in global capitalism. They argue that the lack of regulation, flexibility, and labor mobility found in informal employment is the result of unequal relations of production between workers and capital. With its degradation and fragmentation of work, informality plays a significant role in the accumulation of capital (Harriss-White 2003) within the flexible labor regime of neoliberalism (Harvey 1989; Lipietz 1986). These scholars debunk two myths of the informal economy—that informal workers are entrepreneurs and that the informal economy is outside of the purview of the state—by emphasizing the social relations of production (Breman 2013; Harriss-White 2003; Hill 2010). The informal economy is not a “safety net,” but a production process that is part of a new economic regime that relies on the downgrading and fragmentation of work for the profit of capital (Breman 2013).
Social relations of production in the informal economy are similar to those of the so-called formal economy as understood in classical Marxist thought, whereby the capitalist class owns the means of production and the proletariat owns only its own labor power (Marx 1976). In the formal economy, separated from the means of production, the proletariat has only her labor power to sell, and capitalists earn a profit through appropriation of the surplus value of commodities produced by workers. The informal labor is distinct from other forms of the capital-labor relationship, however, in that it is “incompletely separated from the means of production and subject to a range of non-capitalist methods of surplus production and extraction” (Hill 2010:36-37). A home-based worker is a good example of how informal work is incompletely separated from the means of production; she often invests her own money to buy the tools and material to produce goods, however, the contractors and suppliers have a great deal of authority over her during the production process. Furthermore, the socio-cultural processes that shape a home-based worker’s need to participate in this exploitative work provide the conditions in which capitalists can extract labor from workers at the lowest costs (Hill 2010:37).

Economists tend to focus on the technical relations of production and so mislabel informal workers as self-employed entrepreneurs. Breman (1996) argues that the subcontracting and own-account production system common in the informal economy is actually a disguised form of wage-labor. As in a formal wage-labor relationship, the production process of informality is one of dependency and vulnerability; for example, street vendors pay for their day’s produce on credit to the wholesale dealer and homeworkers depend on their subcontractors to provide orders. Neither of these are examples of the ingenious micro-entrepreneurs depicted in Hernando de Soto and the World Bank’s writings.

Though the informal economy is commonly understood as unregulated and beyond the
reach of the state, the state is not absent. The state’s legal power plays a crucial role in capitalism’s accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2005). The struggle between capital and labor is one shaped by the state (Burawoy 1985), and this is no different with informal labor (Harriss-White 2003). In this era of global competitiveness “informality should be understood as an expression of the state’s inability and/or unwillingness to control capital and those who own it” (Breman 2013:22). The state’s role is apparent when considering the consequences after implementation of the “Washington Consensus” in developing countries. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, IMF-imposed structural adjustment policies (SAPs) of trade liberalization, privatization, and deregulation resulted in a shrinking working class and growing informal proletariat (Carr and Chen 2002; Portes and Hoffman 2003). The establishment of Export Processing Zones (EPZs), industrial zones with special incentives to attract foreign investors, provided economic incentives, including tax exemption, state subsidies, and streamlined administrative services, and social incentives, such as limited application of labor legislation and suppression of unions (McCallum 2011). In India, establishment of such zones in India (called Special Economic Zones, or SEZ) relied on eminent domain to displace thousands from their homes and their means of livelihood in the name of development (Sampat 2008). Land displacement through SEZs and other development projects feed the circulation of labor, as workers migrate to urban areas in search of work, most often in the informal economy (Breman 1996).

In India, the state’s lack of protection and regulation for the majority of its workers is another form of the state’s affirmation for labor informality. State-mediated protection, such as social security and pensions, only cover workers in the formal economy, around eight percent of all workers in India (Jhabvala and Subrahmanya 2000). A universal welfare state that would overwhelmingly benefit the poor is seen as a “luxury” that India cannot afford. Instead, India
implements targeted anti-poverty and development schemes, such as food subsidies and guaranteed rural employment (Sen and Drèze 2013). Some have criticized these policies as subsidizing labor for capital, with the state intervening for the market, but not for workers (Harriss-White 2003:36).

The heterogeneity and fragmentation of informal workers have raised questions about the possibility of a class-based movement. Conventional trade unions are ill equipped to voice the needs of informal workers (ILO 1997), and a main consequence of informalization is the undermining of organized labor (Castells and Portes 1989). In Latin American, Portes and Hoffman note that the informalization of class structure is political as well as economic, as the transformation has “weakened the basis for organized class struggle and the channels for the effective mobilization of popular discontent” (2003:77). Movements have arisen in the form of erratic community-based mobilizations rather than sustained activities of union-based parties (Portes and Hoffman 2003). Attempts to incorporate informal workers in labor unions have had little success because of unions’ strategies to transform informal work rather than adapt their own strategies to the needs of informal worker (Chinguno 2010). Others argue that changes in the class structure still allow for the formation of class-based mobilization (Silver 2001; Wills and Simms 2004), and suggest that these new forms of mobilization might better address needs of workers beyond the workplace (Munck 2002) and on an international scale (Lindell 2010; Munck 2002). Studies have shown that informal workers are finding ways to organize in rich countries (Milkman 2006) and developing countries (Agarwala 2013; Cross 1998; Hill 2010). The ability of the labor movement to form new strategies that address the informalization of work will determine its future importance or decline (von Holdt and Webster 2008; Munck 2002).
The informal economy is a dominant feature of developing countries’ economies (Breman and Linden 2014; Harriss-White 2003), and it is growing in rich countries as well (Breman and Linden 2014; Sassen 1997; Standing 2011; Vosko 2010). Views of what to do about it differ widely, from free-market laissez-faire to welfare state intervention, but there is growing recognition that supporting the working poor is a means to reducing poverty and inequality. In this endeavor supporting women is key as they are overrepresented in the informal economy, and are often the most marginalized and exploited of informal workers (Carr et al. 2000; Swaminathan 2000).

Women and Home-Based Work

One of the most common sources of work in the informal economy, especially for women, is home-based work (ILO 2013). Home-based work is defined as remunerative work conducted in a worker’s own home or adjacent grounds, though it actually refers to two categories of work: the self-employed worker and the dependent subcontracted worker, or homeworker (ILO 2002a). Home-based workers are often assumed to be self-employed, as the International Classification of Status in Employment (ICSE-93), used to determine employment status in survey collection, does not differentiate between the two types of home-based workers. Yet, home-based employment is best understood to be “along a continuum of dependence, from being completely independent to being fully dependent on the contractor/middleman for design, raw material and equipment and unable to negotiate price of the product” (Unni and Rani 2005:4).

---

5 In this study, I included both self-employed worker and homeworker participants in the survey, but because the majority of the interviewees were homeworkers and most of the findings are based on these interviews, I focus on homework in the literature review.
6 There has been some attempt to design survey questions that better capture the differentiation within home-based work. India’s National Sample Survey of Employment and Unemployment Survey for 1999-2000 included questions on the nature of contract that allowed for estimates of homeworkers, but further surveys discontinued these questions (GOI 2007:5).
Industrial homework challenges dichotomous categories of work and home, and so theories must also bridge these binaries. It is both the modern economic system of deregulation and causalization as well as gendered divisions of labor in the home that have supported the proliferation of this work (Allen and Wolkowitz 1987; Mies 1982). Scholars agree that homework production is a compelling site to examine both economic and cultural factors that shape experiences with work and family. Homework provides possibilities to critically examine the “complex relation between gender definitions, women’s paid labor, and family labor” (Boris 1994:5), while Benería and Roldan (1987:1) write that home-based work reveals the “connection between economic processes and the dynamics of social relations.” The intersection of multiple social locations, such as gender, class, race, and caste, raises a number of possibilities in reconceptualizing our understanding of women, capitalism, and patriarchy.

In Boris’ (1994) overview of the history of homework in Europe and North America, she writes that homework preceded factory production, but it is undeniable that the shift from a family-labor system to the wage-labor system intensified its growth. Technology would change the type of work found in the “putting-out” system, for example, the introduction of the sewing machine made it more efficient for factories to produce shirts in-house, and so homeworkers’ tasks changed from creating the whole shirt to adding only the buttons. However, employers came to rely on the savings that homework provided them, and it became a required employment practice in face of “competition, low start-up costs, undercapitalization, and a highly seasonal and variable product” (1994:12).

Home-based work has a long history in India as well, but it was the arrival of colonialism that introduced the putting-out system (Hahn 1996). Similar to the experience in North America (Boris 1994), while rural homeworkers had greater autonomy in the production process, the system
transformed into the modern form of homeworking when it expanded to urban areas in India, as workers become dependent on the middlemen for their livelihood (Hahn 1996). With industrialization, and later liberalization, women lost their traditional occupations and were left out of the emerging male-dominated waged workforce (Hahn 1996). However, despite being pushed to the margins of the economy, women’s work in the informal economy remains linked to the formal economy; this is especially clear when considering the subcontracting system that many factories employ (Hahn 1996).

Capitalist production exploits the flexible and decentralized characteristics of homework to its advantage (Balakrishnan and Sayeed 2002), with the homeworker at the bottom end of global production chains (Unni and Scaria 2009). Employing casual workers allows for a degree of flexibilization and decentralization of production that cannot be achieved when workers are employed at a factory (Allen and Wolkowitz 1986; Balakrishnan 2002). Sub-contracted work, where the risks and costs of production are diverted onto workers, is especially attractive as an alternative to factories (Boris and Prügl 1996). The fluctuation of markets according to peak and lean season and changes in fashion allow owners to easily shift or stop production as necessary (Balakrishnan 2002). With work orders fluctuating from day to day, or the threat of it, workers cannot rely on a steady income. This benefit for suppliers comes at a cost to workers, who become burdened with unstable and vulnerable working conditions, in addition to footing overhead costs of production, such as machinery, utilities, and sometimes even the raw material (Sudarshan and Sinha 2011).

Economic factors alone cannot explain home-based work. There are clear socio-cultural factors involved in women’s participation in this work. For one, women choose to work at home in order to continue their care-giving and household responsibilities (Balakrishnan 2002). In
communities where women’s mobility is restricted, home-based work is their only opportunity to participate in paid work (Khattak 2002). Historically, the use of home-based work as a system of production and attempts to regulate it employ gendered constructions of women, the home, and their roles in the home and workforce (Boris 1994; Prügl 1999).

Despite working at home and the flexibility associated with this type of work, time is still a significant concern for home-based workers. A homeworker especially has limited control over the amount of work she receives (Allen and Wolkowitz 1987). Subcontractors have no obligation to provide orders regularly; they only do so when they have an order. It is common for days or weeks go by without providing any work; though, when there is a large demand, the homeworker is expected to accept the work and finish the orders within a given time frame. Earnings are linked to the number of pieces produced, encouraging the worker to complete as much as possible in her day—if she finishes only a few pieces, the blame is on her for the day’s limited earnings (Allen and Wolkowitz 1987). Subsequent orders arrive only once an order is completed and returned, so it is in her best interest to finish orders as quickly as possible.

Home-based work, much like capitalism, is a site of contradictions. This work has the potential to be both exploitative and liberating (Alikoç 2013; Miraftab 1994). Home-based work provides women with the opportunity to enter the public sphere of work without threatening their caregiving roles. However, the labor conditions for home-based work are exploitative and insecure. The economic involvement of women at home can encourage male members of the household to participate in unpaid work, yet women’s very participation in this work reproduces gendered divisions of labor (Miraftab 1994). Allen and Wolkowitz (1987) point out that because women’s social reproductive work is assumed to be their full-time job the entrance of paid work in the home is seen as woman’s use of her free time rather than a job. Despite women joining the
workforce through home-based work, the status quo of women’s subordination is maintained (Khattak 2002).

Scholars and activists working to bring attention to home-based work, including its classed and gendered constructions and its role in capitalist production, contribute to the rich debates surrounding women’s work in a globalized world. In the next section, I review this broader literature of women, work, and globalization. I present the changing nature of work as a result of globalization and its particular consequences for women.

**Globalization and Women’s Work**

The neoliberal restructuring of much of the world’s economy has had a far-reaching impact on the labor market and people’s experiences with work. One of the most dramatic phenomena during this period was the global feminization of work. The feminization of work signifies both the mass numbers of women joining the workforce and the increase of low-wage work and precarious work conditions. For decades, scholars have highlighted the rise of this feminized workforce, including in export-oriented production (Alarcón-González and McKinley 1999; Elson and Pearson 1981; Fernandez-Kelly 1984), the informal economy (Benería and Roldan 1987; Mies 1982), international and domestic migration for work (Kabeer 2000; Lim and Oishi 1996; Parreñas 2001), and sex work (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Lim and Oishi 1996). The major trends of economic globalization—deregulation, privatization, liberalization, and the shift to a flexible and export-oriented production—helped to construct these global production networks that are distinctly gendered (Pyle and Ward 2003). Feminist scholarship has been instrumental in highlighting the relationship between gender and global capitalism; debates vary, however, on the experience and interpretation of women’s participation in the workforce and the impact of women’s work on gender relations.
In her classic text on gender and development, Boserup (1970) argued that the modernization approach to economic and social development had marginalized women. Women’s traditional labor contributions at home and on the land were displaced in the shift from subsistence production to industrialization, leading to changes in women’s status and roles in the family and economy. The incorporation of women in the industrial workforce beginning in the 1970s reversed this position, as women came to be the preferred choice for a cheap, docile, and productive labor force (Elson and Pearson 1981). The continued economic marginalization of women despite their inclusion in the labor market raised questions regarding Boserup’s argument and that of the Women in Development (WID) school that capitalism could be a liberating force.

Benería and Sen (1981), in a counterargument to WID thinking, wrote that these earlier analyses of women and development were limited because they did not account for capitalist accumulation and women’s role in social reproduction, and they argued that the inclusion of both would allow for analysis of differences across gender and class. These insights, developed in the Gender and Development (GAD) agenda, broadened analyses of global capitalism to consider the social construction of gender and its intersection with class, race, ethnicity, and nation (Benería 1995, 1999; Bergeron 2001; Pyle and Ward 2003; Sassen 2000). Economic and social policies result in asymmetrical outcomes because of existing inequality in social relations. This is especially apparent when examining the harmful consequences of SAPs for poor and working-class women in the Global South (Afshar and Dennis 1992; Bakker 1994; Cornia, Jolly, and Stewart 1987; Sparr 1994). Economic restructuring increased women’s participation in paid productive work (Sparr 1994; Vickers 1991), while adjustment policies of cuts and privatization of government’s social services assumed women’s unlimited and unpaid social reproductive labor (Tsikata 1995).
Feminist critiques of the economic development model have persisted, and, beginning with the 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, women’s movements and organizations began to influence the international agenda (Bergeron 2003). Work by feminist scholars and activists was successful in encouraging development institutions, such as the United Nations and the World Bank, to include a gendered analysis in their research and policies on globalization and development (see UNDP 1999; UNIFEM 2000; World Bank 1995). Finally, women began to be seen as key actors for economic development, and the solution was to build women’s capabilities for their empowerment (Sen 1999).

The inclusion of gender analysis was accompanied by a larger shift in discourse from market-based development to a post-Washington Consensus that sought to integrate social and economic dimensions in development and to encourage sustainability over rapid economic growth (Stiglitz 1999). It would be, as the UNDP noted in its subtitle for the Human Development Report 1999, “globalization with a human face.” The agenda would strive for social, economic, and political transformation, rather than relying on a universal logic of the self-regulated economy (Sen 1999). This was the result of years of work and pressure by activists to develop an alternative development model, but some scholars note that the post-Washington Consensus, as supported by the World Bank and the likes, maintain colonial neoliberal practices (Bergeron 2003). The inclusion of feminist thought throughout these development initiatives raised questions of mainstream feminism being co-opted for the benefit of global capitalism (Eisenstein 2009) and the underlying political agendas (Eisenstein 2004). As evident in its World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development, the World Bank is clear in its support for gender equality because “it is smart economics” (2012:xiii). Of its three reasons why gender equality matters for development, one is for more efficiency and productivity and the other for improvements for the
next generation\footnote{The third being more inclusive governance.}—gender equality is important because of the ability to utilize women’s productive labor and social reproductive labor (in supporting the next generation of workers) for economic interests. The post-Washington consensus relies on a notion that paid work is inherently liberating for women, and competing discourses on the empowering potential of work have framed the gender and development debate in the past two decades.

Before revisiting this debate, a definition of “empowerment” is needed. Kabeer (2005) defines empowerment as the “ability to make choices,” and it is most useful to consider it in relation to three dimensions:

*Agency* represents the processes by which choices are made and put into effect. It is hence central to the concept of empowerment. *Resources* are the medium through which agency is exercised; and *achievements* refer to the outcomes of agency. (p. 15, emphasis added)

Many scholars of gender and development have used women’s participation in the labor market as an indicator of their increasing agency and thus empowerment (Chen et al. 2005; Kabeer 2000; Lim 1990). One popular argument that relies on this framework is the intra-household bargaining model, which maintains that when women participate in paid work their earning potential has a positive impact on intra-household power relations (Agarwal 1997; Anderson and Eswaran 2009; Basu 2006; Kabeer 2005; Rahman and Rao 2004). There are limits to this model, however, as some of the authors cited above have noted. For one, intra-household bargaining theory does not account for extra-household dynamics, such as the quality of work. Women’s access to work is often determined by already existing intra-household dynamics, limiting their options to less desirable work (Basu 2006). For example, home-based work has limited empowering potential for women because of the social determinants that shape women’s uptake
of this type of work, its exploitative work conditions, and the isolation from other workers (Kantor 2003). Others have also noted that the model does not easily account for qualitative factors, such as social norms, social perceptions, self-interest, and altruism that impact intra-household dynamics (Agarwal 1997) and might shape women’s decision to choose familial and communal harmony over individual autonomy (Agarwal 1997; Kabeer 2005).

Beginning in the 1980s, development institutions increasingly sought to support initiatives that foster women’s income-generating activities, such as microfinance and business development services (Chen et al. 2005). Microfinance, in particular, is seen as a powerful tool to reduce poverty (Arnopoulos 2010; Karim and Osada 1998; Khandker 1998) by delivering financial services to the poor (Khandker 1998) and supporting women’s entrepreneurial activities (Arnopoulos 2010; Rahman 1999; Torri and Martinez 2014). Donors, NGOs and finance institutions were swept up in the appeal of microfinance (World Bank 2000); though, some cautioned that microcredit is not a panacea, and that it is but one step in a process towards women’s empowerment (Khondkar 2002). Including capacity-building projects, such as financial literacy programs, in addition to access to capital is considered a more multi-dimensional approach to supporting and sustaining women’s economic wellbeing (Khondkar 2002; Torri and Martinez 2014).

The critique from critical feminists is that gender mainstreaming in development is implicated in the power structure of global capital. For one, feminist thought in development institutions “replaces real economic development with the ‘empowerment’ of women” without addressing the disastrous consequences of capitalist and neoliberal development (Eisenstein 2009:168). Empowerment has been misconstrued to be women’s economic participation, overlooking the exploitative practices inherent in our contemporary economic system and ignoring historical gender inequalities, while capacity building has been appropriated and depoliticized
from its leftist origins in the writings of Paolo Freire and liberation theology to support neoliberal ideology (Eade 2007:632). Approaching empowerment as the desired outcome disconnects its original meaning to bring "transformed power relations in the household or in public spaces” (Visvanathan and Yoder 2011:52). The reliance of these state and international institutions on women’s empowerment to combat global poverty reveals a move to avoid state responsibility (Eisenstein 2009). Furthermore, their dismissal of historical and geographic specificity for women risks a universalized (and exclusive) notion of what empowerment looks like. Postcolonial and anti-racist feminists have long contended that work has been a form of exploitation for historically marginalized groups (Charusheela 2003; Wood 2003), and the conditions of work in a capitalist structure will always be a source of exploitation, not liberation, for the poor and working class (Eisenstein 2009; Gimenez and Vogel 2005). Empowerment and capacity building have become development jargon with little meaning. The lack of critical analysis of global structures and processes places an unrealistic responsibility on women to “fix” global problems, and evades the underlying reasons for global inequality, and gender inequality more particularly.

The mainstream feminist empiricism of intra-household bargaining and microfinance development initiatives discussed above are examples of the influence of neoclassical and neoliberal economic models on feminist thought. In both, women are reduced to their economic contribution and the liberating potential of work is assumed without accounting for power dynamics. The household bargaining model, an economics theory that women’s increased earnings can translate into increased power in relations in the household, widely adopted as the essential feminist economic analysis because of its supposed value neutrality and scientific rigor, reproduces the positivist and rationalist epistemological boundaries of economic science (Bergeron 2009). This analytical framework does not consider what Charusheela (2003) terms the intersubjective
dimensions of economic interaction. According to Charusheela, intersubjective differences emerge from interactions within unequally structured relationships. The neoclassical economic model and feminist models based on it, “simply [note] that differences exist, but [do not see] the differences themselves as the product of interaction between the two differing parties” (p. 298, emphasis in original).

Despite the influence and inclusion of feminist theory, mainstream development models reproduce contemporary economic structures. As a social business enterprise, microfinance offers the opportunity to combine the seemingly contradictory goals of businesses and NGOs—profit and social goals (Karim 2011). But, as some scholars have noted, by integrating women in formal market and finance institutions, microfinance has become a neoliberal strategy for accumulation that captures previously untapped resources for capital (Elyachar 2005; Karim 2011; Visvanathan and Yoder 2011). From its early forms of informal savings and loan groups (centuries before organizations such as Grameen and SEWA Bank institutionalized microcredit) that emphasized “mutual assistance, cooperative initiative and organized worker unions…economic practices for the poor” have been restructured as a profit-making industry (Visvanathan and Yoder 2011). Microfinance is just another form of debt, a neoliberal strategy of dispossession by financialization (Harvey 2003) that produce crisis just as major financial institutions do. In India, where microfinance has proliferated with over 70 million borrowers, there are numerous examples of microfinance institutions charging exorbitant interest rates, forced loan recovery, and debtor suicides (Shylendra 2006). Observers have seen the commercialization of microfinance as profiting from the poor (Nair 2010). The non-repayment crisis of SKS Microfinance, a $250

---

8 Microfinance loans tend to charge interest rates of 20 percent or higher. Institutions justify the high rate to administrative costs and future development and add that it is lower than the rates of local moneylenders.
million company in Uttar Pradesh, India, which led to the collapse of smaller organizations and
the near collapse of SKS Microfinance in 2010, uncovered the reckless lending practices among
for-profit institutions (Ramakumar 2010; Venkateshwarlu 2011). While NGOs and the media
promote the success stories (Martinez 2008; Video SEWA 1995), researchers have found that
microfinance is often used for subsistence and survival rather than entrepreneurial activities, and
tends to place households in a cycle of debt (Pyle and Ward 2003).

When considering the investment in empowerment projects that focus on income-
generating activity, such as micro-finance, it is important to ask in what ways Third World women
are being reduced to their economic value for society (Charusheela 2003; Wood 2003). Feminists
argue that the goal of women’s empowerment should be a transformative process whereby women
decide their own means to empowerment (and what that is), not just inclusion in the current
economic paradigm (Keating, Rassmussen, and Rishi 2010). As it is, microfinance constructs
women as merely economic agents, without allowing for the potential of women as political agents
(Radhakrishnan 2014).

These debates surrounding gender, work, and development have often revolved around the
role of agency and structure in women’s labor market outcomes. Early feminist analysis of
globalization’s effect on women’s work focused on structural accounts of capital and work. Elson
and Pearson’s (1981) widely cited article on female employees of export factories, while revealing
important aspects of exploitation in global production, was criticized by some for providing a
limited understanding of women’s experiences with work (Lim 1990). These analyses framed
women as passive and did not account for “women’s own resistance and struggles that…derive

9 The founder of SKS Microfinance, Vikram Akula, had published an article in the Harvard
Business Review exalting the profitability of microfinance just a couple years before the crisis (see
Akula 2008).
from a strategy of their own” (Benería and Roldan 1987:8). Women’s employment patterns are not only responses to the needs of capital, but also arise from women’s “perceived opportunities and constraints” (Kabeer 2000:xvii). To account for agency and subjectivity, one needs to expand the analysis outside of the factory and examine power (and resistance to it) across multiple sites. Postmodern theorists argue that flexible accumulation, a mixed system of formal and informal production, occurs not only through relations of production, but in social and cultural spaces as well, and so we must theorize beyond a single measure of class identity as workers “struggle against new and varied forms of domination, and seek new ways of grappling with social realities” (Ong 1991:304). Examining sites and performances of agency recognizes the multiplicity of voices, and avoids representations of Third World women as victims in fixed oppressive and patriarchal structures (Mohanty 1984; Spivak 1988). However, the massive political and economic restructuring that has accompanied neoliberal capitalism necessitates an analysis of these structures and the violence that has accompanied it through patriarchal and racist relations of power. As Marxist and socialist feminists have noted, it is only by confronting the conditions that allow for capitalism that we can imagine an alternative vision to it (Eisenstein 2009; Gibson-Graham 2006).

**Theoretical Framework**

These debates have helped shape transnational feminist scholarship as it seeks to be more “attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and process” (Mohanty 2003:223). With that aim, in this section I discuss the theoretical frameworks that I employ in examining home-based workers’ experience with and resistance to power across multiple sites—the family, work, and civil society—that take place in the space of home.
Social Reproduction Theory

In seeking to capture dynamics of power across different institutions, this research benefits from feminist contributions to the concept of social reproduction. Bedford and Rai (2010) summarize social reproduction as having three key components:

1) biological reproduction, the production of future labor, and the provision of sexual, emotional, and affective services (such as are required to maintain family and intimate relationships);

2) unpaid production of both goods and services in the home, particularly goods and services of care, as well as social provisioning (by which we mean voluntary work directed at meeting needs in the community); and,

3) reproduction of culture and ideology, which stabilizes dominant social relations. (p.7)

Feminist theories of social reproduction accounts for the complexities of social locations while understanding that these locations interact within a dynamic set of social structures (Ferguson 2008). Located across a nexus of the state, the market, the family/household, and civil society, a social reproduction framework allows us to examine how institutions interact and balance power in those activities for the sustenance of life on a daily and generational basis (Bezanson and Luxton 2006). At the same time, gendered divisions of labor and cultural constructs of care oblige certain people to take on the bulk of social reproductive work, which limits their roles in economic, social, and political life. By examining people’s everyday material and social practices, social reproduction theory is a helpful tool to capture the abstract and material consequences of globalization (Katz 2001a).

Feminists in the 1960s and 1970s built upon Marx’s underdeveloped writings on reproduction to examine how these unpaid activities are necessary for and exploited by a capitalist
Questions remained as to the ability of a strictly class analysis to explain women’s oppression, and in *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, Vogel (1983) approached the social reproduction of labor power as a concept that unifies capitalism and patriarchy as an integrated process. Yet, the argument to analyze patriarchy and capitalism as related yet distinct systems gained ground, most famously articulated in Hartmann’s (1981) “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism.” There were also well-founded critiques of the inability of Marxist feminism to account for multi-cultural variations of gender inequality (hooks 1984; Joseph 1981; Molyneux 1979). A materialist feminist analysis diminished in the ensuing decades, unable to account for the multiple sites of inequality and power that would always come second in a structural Marxist analysis.

In recent years, feminist theorists have renewed interest in the centrality of social reproduction for a critical analysis of capitalism (see Bakker and Silvey 2008; Bedford and Rai 2010; Federici 2012; Gill and Bakker 2003; Katz 2001, 2001a; Mitchell, Marston, and Katz 2004). Social reproduction not only supports and sustains capitalist production, but it also contributes to capital accumulation (Gibson-Graham 2006). This scholarship provides an approach that overcomes dichotomous analytical categories of structure/agency or material/symbolic (Bedford and Rai 2010; Ferguson 2008; Laslett and Brenner 1989). In support of social reproduction theory, Katz argues that, “by looking at the material social practices through which people reproduce themselves on a daily and generational basis and through which the social relations and material bases of capitalism are renewed…we can better expose both the cost of globalization and the connections between vastly different sites of production” (2001:709). Below, I outline some of

---

10 Marx acknowledged the need of the reproduction of labor for capitalist processes, but his writings on it are limited. See *Capital* Volume 1, Chapter 23 and Volume 2, Part 3.
these contributions and how social reproduction theory provides an analytical framework to examine the everyday practices and experiences of women in the informal economy in relation to changes in the domains of production and social reproduction.

First is the historical role of social reproduction in capitalist processes and, more recently, for neoliberalism. In *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), Federici presents a gendered reading of primitive accumulation through social reproduction. Primitive accumulation during the transition to capitalism, according to Marx, included the dispossession of common lands in medieval Europe. Without a means of subsistence, a workforce was created that became dependent on capitalists for wage labor. Centering the analysis on the witch-hunts of the 16th and 17th century, Federici argues that this transition to capitalism also relied on a process of subjugation of women’s social position and control of their bodies (and reproductive functions) for the production of labor power. The construction of “femininity” is “constituted in capitalist society as a work-function masking the production of the work-force under the cover of a biological destiny” (2004:14). Since Marx and his contemporary followers accept capitalism’s definition of work, and, in turn, what constitutes class and class struggle, they fail to adequately recognize the significance of reproduction for capitalism and its potential as a site of struggle (Federici 2012).

The arrival of neoliberalism reinforces the centrality of social reproduction in an analysis of capitalism. Social reproduction feminists agree with others that the neoliberal restructuring of the global economy is a continuing process of capitalist accumulation (Harvey 2003), but they add that the process relies on the restructuring of the domain of social reproduction (Bakker and Gill 2003; Federici 2012; Katz 2001a). This accumulation by dispossession relies on 1) the destruction of subsistence economies, 2) de-territorialization of capital and financialization of economic activity, 3) disinvestment in the welfare state, and 4) the appropriation and destruction of the
environment (Federici 2012:101-102), all of which have caused tensions, contradictions, and crises of social reproduction as people struggle to secure the social and material practices necessary to support everyday life (Katz 2001a). Structural adjustment programs, which brought about many of these conditions, were implemented with the assumption that there is an infinite supply of women’s labor to replace the recently privatized social services (Elson 1998). As women joined the labor market, women’s time became more constrained since they continued to provide the same amount of care expected of them. The importance of assessing social reproduction needs, absent from the discussions of economic development in the 1980s and 1990s, began to appear with the shift in emphasis to gender issues found in the post-Washington Consensus (Bergeron 2003). As I discussed in the previous section, the development practices that came about from this social turn reaffirm a neoliberal ideal of self-empowerment, self-reliance, and individual responsibility (Hindess 2004), an apt example of this being the promotion of microfinance for economic and social development (a practice that I address as the construction of the gendered entrepreneurial subject in Chapter 5).

These processes are linked to the informalization of work as experienced by half of the world’s working population and the vast majority of India’s. Informalization is a desirable production system for capitalism because it shifts the costs of production onto the worker; it also shifts the costs of reproduction onto households and communities. I already discussed how the restructuring of India’s economy encouraged a pauperization of work (Breman 1996, 2013; Harriss-White 2003). Capitalism relies on the reproduction of labor, but its dependence on labor power conflicts with its need to accumulate surplus value. A common method is to lower the costs of labor, as we see with the paltry wages, lack of security, and fragmentation of work associated with informality, but these working conditions negatively affect workers’ ability to attain an
adequate level of social provisioning, and so can also be a potential threat to capitalism’s ability to reproduce itself. Working becomes work for survival rather than for earnings. It is on the shoulders of workers and their households to address the increasing difficulty to provide for their social reproductive needs. The consequence of this is an exacerbation of existing structural and even cultural inequalities. For example, Acharya’s (2008) study on marriage practices in Nepal finds that market penetration in the region upset the traditional organization of production, and, while development diversified job opportunities, prevailing discriminatory structures maintained women’s disadvantage in the labor market, and the arrival of consumer culture intensified practices of dowry in the region, even among communities that had not practiced it before.

Home-based work is one strategy to address the increasing tensions between production and social reproduction. Social reproduction theory acknowledges the structural changes that promote this fragmented production process, while also maintaining the cultural specificities of the work experience. As I will discuss in the empirical chapters, women justify starting or continuing paid work because they are able to work from home, which I argue reproduces expectations of feminine domesticity while allowing them to contribute economically to the household. Writing of the U.S., Staples (2006) writes that homework is a capitalist strategy to bring the production process into the home, taking advantage of the invisibility of this work to drive wages down and undermine collective action. This is the case in India as well. Homeworkers are paid at much lower wages than comparable work completed in a factory, and the fragmentation of work and workers’ isolation make it difficult to organize as a class of workers (Sudarshan and Sinha 2011). Social reproduction theory compels us to examine how, in an economic system that relies on the exploitation of labor and places the costs of social reproduction onto the worker, individuals and households employ strategies that attempt to resolve this conflict. Because it also
accounts for cultural practices, social reproduction theory is able to explain how market forces interact with social and cultural contexts that maintain women’s subordinate position in the economic and family spheres (Acharya 2008).

The distinction between work and labor is a second analytical tool of social reproduction theory that is useful for this study. Bakker and Gill (2003:19), drawing on Gramsci, define work as a process that “broadly mediates relations between social and natural orders,” while labor is “a particular aspect of work” which is “appropriated and controlled by capital in the labor-capital relation.” This approach uses a much broader definition of work, which includes the social, economic, and cultural activities of human beings, while labor is the alienated form of work within capitalism. With the commodification of labor, the worker, now dispossessed from her means of subsistence, is dependent on wage labor for subsistence; social reproduction forms of work become subordinate to productive labor, yet it remains just as necessary (Bakker and Gill 2003). In a capitalist system that relies on the production of labor power much of social reproductive activities are not “free,” but are “subject to all the constraints that derive from the fact that its product must satisfy the requirements of the labor market” (Federici 2012:99), and so these social reproduction activities can be considered part of estranged labor. This distinction of work/labor avoids purely structural analyses and allows for the inclusion of agency. In Gramsci’s definition of work, while much of their work is exploited by capitalism in the form of labor, human beings employ strategies to actively participate in and transform social life (Bakker and Gill 2003:22). Social reproduction feminists thus do not limit themselves to abstract concepts of households or economies, but rather “start with the concept [of] labor as a lived, creative experience, and train our analytic lens on the ‘survival strategies’ (and not just the formal paid labor) of those whose lives are the grist for the globalization mill” (Ferguson 2008:49).
There are two aspects of this approach that contribute to an analysis of home-based work. First, it adds nuance to women’s strategies in response to tensions created between the need to complete productive labor and address social reproductive needs. Rather than the home-based worker being a pawn to structural and cultural limitations, she is also actively addressing her particular circumstances. As I discuss in Chapter 4 and 7, through their labor, women believed that they could have an effective impact on their household’s wellbeing in the present time and, through their aspirations for children’s future economic and social mobility, in the future. Their survival strategies to support their and their families’ wellbeing are not solely located within the domain of paid labor, but encompass a variety of work activities (broadly defined) to address and potentially transform their situations.

This broader definition of labor also avoids conceptual frameworks that define unpaid care work as distinct from paid work. It is not the type of activity that defines it as labor, but its relation to the human subject; thus, activities can be considered estranged labor if it is appropriated and controlled in a labor-capital relationship. With this definition, can women’s domestic duties be understood as estranged labor? And if so, how does this reframe our concept of women’s daily experiences with home-based work? This approach contributes to a more complete understanding of how production processes penetrates diverse spheres of social life, and it questions the common analytical separation of public/private and work/home.

The daily schedules of women who are informally employed are not neatly divided into work and non-work time, and this especially true for home-based work. Research on home-based work has highlighted that women (more so than men) lack consistent blocks of time to focus solely on work activities and that they are frequently interrupted by family or community needs (Floro and Pichetpongsa 2010; Michelson 1998), yet this research relies on the distinction that unpaid
care work and paid work are separate. Even Alikoç’s (2013) gendering of Marx’s working day maintains domestic and maternal labor as separate and derived from patriarchal oppression, but not capitalist exploitation. In Chapter 4, I discuss the scheduling of women’s days and the techniques they employed to address an unsystematic work schedule. I argue that women’s unpaid work contributes to the production of value in their paid work for their contractors and the other agents further up the supply chain. I continue this argument in Chapter 5 by examining how women’s work (paid and unpaid) can be understood as embodied labor. Allen and Wolkowitz (1987) head in this direction with their compelling argument that contractors justify the low wages because women home-based workers’ are seen primarily as housewives who take on this work for spare money. I add that the temporal and spatial characteristic of this work also allows a capitalist production system to enter the home and restructure women’s domestic activities for its benefit. The ability for women to pause paid activity to address unpaid care needs seems to be a potential benefit, but it is also found in the inverse, work’s ability to interrupt women’s daily activities at any moment allows for a production system that is irregular and poorly paid.

Lastly, an important contribution of social reproduction theory’s contemporary reworking is the inclusion of subjectivity in its analysis by accounting for the embodied nature of work. Ferguson’s (2008) review argues that current strands of social reproduction theory address past criticisms that this theory relies too heavily on structuralism and reduces explanations of social life to the economy. Her argument is a response to Bannerji’s (1995) critique that Marxist feminism does not account for cultural social formation and so “create[s] an unbridgeable gap between self, culture and experience, and the world in which they arise and have little to say about political subjectivity.” Ferguson thoroughly agrees that subjectivity, and especially race and racism, are absent from the earlier theory, but she argues that current feminist scholarship offers solutions.
The work/labor distinction, by centering human action despite much of it being in the form of estranged labor, is one example. Another is the socio-spatial historical aspect of labor. Social reproduction explains how the laboring subject becomes gendered through assumed biophysical traits, but Ferguson writes that the “location of our laboring bodies...[is] crucially important in determining how individuals and groups take part in the process of social reproduction” (p. 51, emphasis in original). Influenced by David Harvey’s emphasis on capitalism’s use of space, Ferguson argues that our social reproduction activities are organized in and through space, and that these locations are a “complex unity” of socio-historical determined spaces of geopolitics and systemic social relations; she writes, “it’s not just what we do to reproduce, but where we do it that matters in an imperialist capitalist world” (p. 51, emphasis in original). Today’s capitalist process of accumulation and the globalized production system that accompanies it reinforce these geopolitics and social relations of class, gender, and race. Contributors to Bakker and Silvey’s (2008) edited volume employ this socio-spatial analysis of social reproduction to explain the migration of women from poor countries to be domestic workers in rich countries (Herrera 2008), the use of microcredit in South Asia as a strategy to use women’s social reproduction for the market (Lingam 2008), and the reliance of assisted reproduction technologies by women who have had to postpone childbearing because of their careers (Chavkin 2008).

A social reproduction framework locates the intersecting sites of subjectivity as socially mediated in a space that, today, is shaped by historical processes of colonial and capitalist constraints and resistance to it (Ferguson 2008). Past studies have examined how home-based workers’ multiple social locations of gender, caste, and religion shape their experiences with work (Abreu and Sorj 1996; Ghavamshahidi 1996; Khattak 2002; Weiss 1996). They also explain the role of capitalism in creating the conditions for this production system (Balakrishnan and Sayeed...
2002; Carr and Chen 2002; Unni and Scaria 2009). Yet, they miss the ways that capitalist processes and social locations interact to form a shared social space of relations. Social reproduction provides agency to human beings as they actively participate in work (broadly defined as creative activities), though much of this work is exploited in the form of labor under capitalist conditions. But framing labor as embodied also accounts for an individual’s social location, both in terms of her geopolitical location and her location in a set of social relations.

Social reproduction theory explains how the conditions of capitalism are inscribed on the different people because of their socio-spatial location. These social locations are in relation to capitalism, but experience and subjectivity are not reduced to an economic structure since capitalism, including the type of economic, family, state relations promoted within it, is understood to be a “set of practices by individuals and groups that act upon, reproduce and change over time” (Ferguson 2008:48). This theory helps illustrate “the ways that responsibilities for such [social reproductive] work are assigned to particular groups of people (women versus men, immigrants, low-income people, women of color) and institutions (state or non-state) and how these assignments and workloads are shifting in the contemporary period” (Bakker and Silvey 2008:4).

This is why, as I argue in the following chapters, the entrepreneur in the gender and development paradigm is a construct of the gendered and racialized subject (see Chapter 5), unequal power in the family shapes women’s experiences within the institutions of the economy and civil society (see Chapter 6), and the constraints on women’s mobility because of their social identities, such as gender, caste, and religion, are exploited by the capitalist production system (see Chapter 7).

**Constructed Boundaries of Work: Moving beyond Public/Private**

Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of *habitus* offers an additional analytical framework for this dissertation’s study of symbolic and material analyses of women’s experiences with informality
and development. Habitus is a system of dispositions that inform human aspirations and actions within a field, a socially structured space. This field reflects a social order (including power and domination) as unquestioned and is reproduced by human’s behavior. Yet, as human actions are a reflection of “strategies” to accumulate forms of capital (such as economic, social, and cultural), Bourdieu accounts for agency and social change in negotiation with structures of power. Here, I use the concept of habitus to examine women’s reproduction and resistance to power in the home. Habitus and the presence of social and symbolic boundaries helps explain how women are conscious of and participate in reproducing oppressive or unequal relations, but at the same time they also act out to change those circumstances, framing their participation in home-based work as an opportunity to support their children’s economic and social mobility. Feminist scholars have engaged with Bourdieu’s theories to help bring the significance of structural inequalities, such as class, back into feminist theory (Skeggs 1997).

This scholarship complements a theoretical framework of social reproduction, not only from the obvious connection to the social reproduction of power (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), but also because it provides a framework to understand the boundaries that inform, and at times are resisted by, women’s actions and experiences. In a review of the study of boundaries in the social sciences, Lamont and Molnár (2002) distinguish between symbolic and social boundaries. Symbolic boundaries are “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices” and are “an essential medium through which people acquire status and monopolize resources,” while social boundaries are “objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities” and are the result of socially agreed upon symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002:168). These analytical tools are useful for this study because they help explain how symbolic
boundaries associated with “woman” and “home” are manifested in the social boundaries that shape women’s experiences, including mobility restrictions, work opportunities, and division of labor. This framework also allows for the possibility of women to use these symbolic boundaries to confront and reframe the meaning of social boundaries (2002:186). This helps explain how women reproduce relations of power, while contesting them at the same time.

Examining the construction and use of symbolic and social boundaries allows us to critically question and move beyond assumed definitions of the public and private sphere, addressing a long-standing endeavor of feminist epistemology (Jaggar and Bordo 1989). A study of home-based work necessitates a reconceptualization of dichotomies such as public/private, work/family, and formal/informal because the material structures that support this production process do not themselves follow these rules. As I will argue in this dissertation, contract home-based work exploits both women’s productive and social reproductive labor because of the reproduction of these boundaries.

Plan of the Dissertation

Chapter Two is an introduction to the city of Ahmedabad, located in the western state of Gujarat, and the organization with which I worked while in India, the Self-Employed Women’s Association. This chapter provides context for the historical and political-economic settings that have influenced present-day realities of informality for women workers in Ahmedabad and the civil society organizations that aim to support them in their livelihoods. While much of the content in the following chapters remain in the setting of the home, women’s experiences with the family, work, and civil society are shaped by the transformations I outline in this chapter.

Chapter Three presents the methodology of this study. I discuss the importance of feminist methodology for international research on informal workers and the methods I used to collect data.
This chapter also reports on demographic data regarding the study’s participants. I end with a discussion of data analysis and the use of translators in this research. Methodology and methods were chosen for the ability to elucidate women’s experiences with the family, economy, and civil society, but also to acknowledge and address power relations inherent in the research process.

Chapter Four is the first empirical chapter; it provides readers with an introduction to home-based workers, the factors that shape their experiences with work, and their strategies to address tensions that arise from it. The first part of the chapter explains how the economic contexts of Ahmedabad pushed women into the labor force in order to support households with few options for gainful employment. I discuss how women’s social positions constrained their work choices to employment in the informal economy. The second part focuses on the characteristics of home-based work and the strategies that women employ to balance their work and care responsibilities when work takes place in the home. I examine the contradiction between the social forces that compel women to participate in home-based work and the actual practices of women’s productive and social reproductive labor. Using social reproduction theory, I argue that women’s participation in home-based work is a strategy to address their household’s precarious conditions within a limited set of possibilities. Women’s work possibilities are shaped by a range of economic, social, and cultural factors, including the division of labor in the home, women’s access to education and skill training, and the availability of work. I argue that these limits are advantageous for a capitalist system based on a flexible and fragmented production. Examining the strategies women employ to balance work and care helps uncover how aspects of social reproduction are incorporated as exploited labor for capitalism.

Chapter Five examines the construction of the gendered entrepreneurial subject in development discourses—the poor woman of the Global South who employs her entrepreneurial
abilities to pull her family and community out of poverty. Studies critical of this construction often focus on micro-finance institutions; instead, in this dissertation, I investigate a common setting for entrepreneurial work—the home. I examine two characteristics of entrepreneurialism that are also found in home-based, covering costs of production and autonomy of work. I argue that these characteristics are not sources of empowerment, as often claimed by micro-finance institutions, but rather are sources of exploitation for the home-based worker. I find that in this setting where women have to invest in their work and have the potential to work (and earn) as much as they are willing to, work and care become a form of embodied labor in which their sense of providing for their family is impeded by these two roles. I apply the concept of embodied labor to explain the contradiction between the entrepreneurial women as imagined by gender and development institutions and the realities of the home-based worker.

While Chapters Four and Five focus on relations of production, the sixth chapter centers on the relations of power in the family that shape women’s experiences with work and civil society. This chapter examines more closely women’s subjectivity as occurring within a set of socio-cultural boundaries. Women’s position in the family determines how they participate in the public spheres—having to choose home-based work so that they could stay home or restricting their participation with SEWA if it took too much of their time. Rather than limiting women’s agency to institutional forces, I argue that participants employed strategic practices that allowed them to maintain these boundaries, while resisting the power embedded within these spaces in what James Scott (1985) calls “everyday forms of resistance.” This chapter employs theories of social reproduction and Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to explain women’s agency and resistance within limited set of boundaries.
In Chapter 7, the final empirical chapter, I examine the concept of mobility for home-based workers. I begin by discussing the topic of mobility in the development field; I argue that restrictions on women’s mobility are often blamed on cultural factors, at the expense of social and structural forces. I briefly discuss the urban context of women and their mobility in the city before turning to my findings of how women maintain and contest symbolic boundaries. Among participants, women’s lack of mobility arises from their need to stay close to home to complete their care duties. However, I find that women’s preference for working at home contradicts their aspirations for their children, and notably their daughters, to leave the home for work. Women strive for upward mobility for their sons and daughters, but they emphasize the importance of outward mobility—leaving the home—for their daughters’ development and wellbeing. Their hopes for their daughters reveal their acknowledgement of and resistance to the injustices that they themselves have faced because of their intersecting social identities, including, gender, caste, class, and religion. While the previous chapters focused on the limitations that shape women’s experiences and everyday practices, Chapter Seven offers examples of how women address the inequality and injustices that they faced in their lives and their hopes for a better life for their daughters.
Chapter 2. Ahmedabad: Textiles, Gandhi, and Hindutva

Though Ahmedabad, the largest city in the Indian state of Gujarat, is not well-known outside of India, the historian Howard Spodek has rightfully labeled it a “shock city” of the twentieth century, so called for the city’s contemporary history of dynamic and often violent changes. This chapter highlights some periods when the city found itself at the center of new social and economic problems and opportunities, including, as the chapter’s title suggests, the rapid industrialization and urbanization of Ahmedabad as a result of the textile industries, the arrival of Gandhi and the influence of his moral order for labor organizing, deindustrialization and rise of informalization, and the Hindutva politics that exploited inter-caste and communal tensions for political gains.

Against this background, I discuss SEWA and its twin strategy of struggle and development for women in the informal economy. SEWA’s impressive growth in numbers and influence arrived in relation to a number of global social and economic transformations, most notably, the feminization and informalization of work that reified the importance of including women in economic analyses and the social turn in development practices (the inclusion of social factors in economic theory [Bergeron 2003]) that reflected many of SEWA’s multi-dimensional approaches to organizing and supporting its members.

A City Divided

The Sabarmati River divides the city of Ahmedabad in half. On the eastern bank is the “walled city,” founded in 1411 by the sultan Ahmed Shah and the city’s namesake. The wall has since been removed, but remnants of its twelve gates still remain. The walled city retains much of the city’s cultural heritage, with its historic mosques, markets, and pols relics of an illustrious past,
yet its debilitating infrastructure and high rate of poverty speak to its current use for the city. Many of its residents are Scheduled Caste, Other Backwards Caste, or religious minorities. To the west of the Sabarmati is the new Ahmedabad. Its sprawling residential high-rises and air-conditioned shopping malls attract those belonging to higher income groups.

Two maps of Ahmedabad in the first pages of Spodek’s (2011) portrait of the city—one representing the city at the beginning of the 20th century and the other at the start of the new millennium—illustrate the shift of the city center from east to west, with the 1917 map dotted by the many mills within and surrounding the walled city, while villages made up most of the western bank. By 2000, prominent institutions, including universities and government buildings, had moved to the western bank, leaving behind the chaotic walled city and the now quiet textile mills. East Ahmedabad is the old city, a crumbling picture of heritage and poverty. West Ahmedabad, notwithstanding the pockets of slums that serve the upper classes, is the planned “Smart City,” representing the city’s modernity and global connectivity (Bhatkal, Avis, and Nicolai 2015).

With 5.5 million people, Ahmedabad is the largest city in the western state of Gujarat, and one of the ten largest cities in India. As the economic and cultural center of Gujarat and the site of Mohandas K. Gandhi’s first ashram in India, Ahmedabad holds significant meaning for the state and nation. The city’s history in the struggle against colonialism laid the foundation for a strong civil society presence (Spodek 2011). One of these organizations, SEWA, has received international acclaim for its work with poor working women. With one of the fastest growing economies in India, Gujarat is often noted for its economic prowess. More recently, Gujarat gained national and international attention in 2002 for the communal riots that left over 2,000 dead.

---

11 Pols are housing clusters, often made up of one caste or religious community.
12 The capital Gandhinagar is just over 14 miles north of Ahmedabad.
throughout the state, with over 1,000 of the victims in Ahmedabad, and again in 2015 when Narendra Modi, Chief Minister of Gujarat during the riots and later the head of the BJP party, became Prime Minister of India. The pogrom and the ensuing success of the BJP in the state leads to disturbing, though certainly not novel, questions of the link between ethno-nationalism, capitalist development, and violence (Bobbio 2015; Shani 2007; Sud 2012). Today, Ahmedabad, the urban center of Gujarat—an exemplary state of the neoliberal development model, complete with a biennial business summit to validate its investor-friendly environment—has become what the historian Howard Spodek has called “a capitalist city out of control” (2011).

In the following sections, I present an overview of this city’s impressive and contradictory history in the 20th century as a site of the labor, women’s, and freedom movement, but also of a divisive form of nationalism and neoliberal economics. “Industrialization and the Emergence of a Working Class” introduces the industrial city and the arrival of Gandhi that would shape the spirit of the labor movement of the city for decades and continues to influence SEWA’s organizing approach today. The second half of the century was marked with caste and communal strife that was worsened by growing informalization and de-industrialization, as well as the rise of Hindutva (Hindu nationalism). “A Changing Economy” documents the shift from centralized, inclusive development to free market economics. “The Rise of Hindu Nationalism” covers the same period and the change from multicultural secularism to religious nationalism; “Neoliberalism and Hindutva” explores the relationship between economic liberalization and Hindu nationalism. I then shift to the role of civil society, with a focus on SEWA, in addressing workers’ needs during these periods of great change, and, conversely, the impact of these economic, political and social changes for civil society itself.

*Industrialization and the Emergence of a Working Class Movement*
Ahmedabad has historically been a center of trade and finance, with a strong and politically influential mercantile community. Reflective of Gujarati’s entrepreneurial spirit as well as the growing resistance to foreign rule over their economy, an early assertion of *swadeshi* (promoting indigenous manufacturing), Ahmedabad’s first textile mill opened in 1861 (Yagnik and Sheth 2005). While the city’s rich merchant class viewed this endeavor cautiously at first, they slowly recognized the potential of investing capital in this modern industry, and less than a century later the city had 76 mills, employed over 70,000 workers daily, and earned the nickname the “Manchester of India” (Yagnik and Sheth 2005). Ahmedabad’s mills were all owned and financed indigenously, in contrast to Bombay’s mills that were owned by the British and Parsi (Mahadevia, Desai, and Vyas 2014), reflecting growing sentiment among the elites of the city for economic nationalism and *swaraj*, or self-rule (Yagnik and Sheth 2011).

Migration to the city accompanied the growth of the industry, and the city grew correspondingly. Despite the rapid changes in Ahmedabad, the mills continued to reflect the caste hierarchy of the city, with Dalits occupying the most laborious yet poorly paid work (Patel 1988). Women made up a large percentage of the workforce, reaching 20 percent of the workforce in the 1920s; most were Dalit women who, out of necessity, would work alongside their husbands (Yagnik and Sheth 2005). While the mills provided employment for the poor, the working conditions were harsh, despite legislation passed to regulate work conditions in factories (Yagnik and Sheth 2011). Labor unrest intensified as workers began to identify a common source of exploitation, but lacked a common venue for bargaining power. Mill owners formed the Ahmedabad Millowners Association in 1881 to protect their interests; workers would not have a union until the Textile Labour Association (TLA) was formed in 1920 (Yagnik and Sheth 2005).
In 1915, when Gandhi arrived in Ahmedabad to establish his first ashram in the country, the city had a vibrant social and political life from the citizenry’s involvement in social reform projects to the *swadeshi* and nationalist movement. Gandhi, whose exploits in South Africa were followed closely on the subcontinent, was given a hero’s homecoming, and, on deciding to set his base in Ahmedabad, his work was financially supported by the city’s elites, including the industrialists (Yagnik and Sheth 2011). This relationship with the capitalist class as well as his practice of *satyagraha* (passive resistance) would influence his view of the relationship between labor and capital as one of mutuality rather than conflict (Patel 1984; Yagnik and Sheth 2005). Gandhi’s influence in a major 1917 labor dispute between mill owners and workers helped lay the foundation for the TLA, but it would also shape the union’s future strategies and tactics of negotiation and avoidance of confrontation (Breman 2004). After the TLA’s first few years, the lack of a strong leadership base, the absence of leaders belonging to the rank and file, and mill owners becoming less enthusiastic about compromise with labor resulted in a weakened labor union unable or unwilling to use more militant tactics (Patel 1984). Notwithstanding critiques from the left, the TLA, with its leadership of city elites and its close relationship with the Congress Party, maintained significant power in the city and would influence labor legislation in both the state and the nation (Breman 2013). Collective bargaining offered workers a life of security, stability, and dignity, but the changes to come, most notably the collapse of the mills and the informalization of the economy, would undermine whatever advances the union had achieved (Breman 2004).

*A Changing Economy: From Post-Independence to the 1990s*

Following independence, Gujarat welcomed Nehru’s emphasis on nation building through capital-intensive development and domestic production. Industrialization, coupled with land
reforms and natural and manmade disasters, led to rapid urbanization across the state as migrants moved to cities in search of work (Yagnik and Sheth 2005). Ahmedabad, the major industrial city in the state, absorbed much of this migration, growing from under a million people in 1951 to over 2 million three decades later (Yagnik and Sheth 2011). The city expanded in area as well, absorbing surrounding villages (Bhatkal et al. 2015). With infrastructure under pressure from its growing population, chawls (tenement-style housing) and slums proliferated (Bhatt and Chawda 1976).

Social and cultural changes accompanied the city’s growth. Gujarat’s mercantile ethos propelled a new entrepreneurial middle class, facilitated by government policies that supported development of small-scale industries and expansion in new industries, such as chemicals (Yagnik and Sheth 2005). The reservation system, a positive discrimination system of reserved spots for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in higher education institutions and public sector jobs, also provided a route for these historically oppressed groups to enter the middle class (Yagnik and Sheth 2005). As the city and its economy expanded, Ahmedabad became what Yagnik and Sheth call the three Ahmedabads: the walled city with its historic, though dilapidated, pols and markets, the surrounding textile mills with chawls housing the city’s working class and migrants, and to the west of the city, the cosmopolitan Ahmedabad, with its middle- and upper-class residents.

Gujarat became one of the most industrialized states in India, but that did not translate into social prosperity. Environmental degradation and state development projects displaced many of the landless poor to work in cities under extremely exploitative conditions (Breman 1996), and relations between capital and labor in the latter half of the 20th century became defined by its informalization (Breman 2004). The economic changes in the coming decades would redefine the nation and state’s approach to development, and, in Ahmedabad, this was epitomized by the
closure of its famous textile mills and the lack of support provided to its now unemployed workers (Breman 2004).

The economic dominance of the textile mills began to falter in the 1970s. The industry faced multiple crises, including domestic competition, state policies in favor of small-scale, decentralized production, changing consumer preference for synthetic materials, and the mill owners divesting from their own factories (Spodek 2011). This occurred at the same time as India’s economy was shifting from India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s socialist model to one of liberalization in response to the 1970s economic crisis. Economic reforms in 1985, supported by Rajiv Gandhi’s government, allowed for greater “flexibility” in the labor system. Following another economic crisis in the late 1980s, the IMF advised a structural adjustment program (SAP) that followed the tenets of neoliberalism—privatization, deregulation, and trade liberalization. The program, known as the New Economic Policy (NEP), was implemented in 1991 by the Congress-led government, and placed India’s economy under a neoliberal doctrine. The policies associated with the NEP relied on a one-sided reading of the complex issues affecting India’s economy, and the strategies chosen were political choices that placed an uneven burden on certain groups in society (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2002) and fostered a stratified and fractured workforce (Harriss-White 2003).

When the last of the textile mills had shuttered at the start of the 1990s, its former workers joined an expanding informal economy with few, if any, labor regulations to protect them. Many of the jobs were in service, such as driving rickshaws, street vending, and construction, but others included casual work tied to industrial work in the form of outsourcing (Breman 2004). Women in poor households, whose workforce participation in the formal sector had fallen after independence (Banerjee 1978), joined the informal economy to make up the loss of income from
male household members (Mahadevia et al. 2014). The mills and their related industries and commerce had been a principal means of livelihood for many of the working poor in the city, with up to a third of its residents dependent on the industry (Varshney 2002). It had also offered a source of social cohesion, as members of different castes and religions shared a common working class interest, fostered over decades of social struggle. Thus when the mills collapsed, so did the social infrastructure that could help tame inter-caste and communal riots (Breman 2002; Varshney 2002).

*The Rise of Hindu Nationalism*

By the 1990s, the Gandhian moral order of unity was displaced by an ethos of growth (Yagnik and Sheth 2005) and communal division (Mahadevia 2002). Gujarat became a model state of free-market development in the 1990s. During this period of tremendous economic growth, workers faced a downgrading of work as new jobs were not unionized, lower paid, and more precarious (Spodek 2011), and the state lagged on several human development indicators and exhibited high environmental degradation (Hirway 2000).

The urban sprawl and displacement further deepened divisions in Ahmedabad (Spodek 2011). While inter-caste and communal riots were frequent in postcolonial and post-partition India, these divisions increasingly became part of a planned political articulation of Hindutva. Hindutva emerged as an upper-caste ideology of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which calls itself a cultural organization in support of a Hindu nation, a nation that excludes Muslims and Christians. Its political arm, which would later become the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), gained ground in Gujarat in the 1970s and 1980s through mobilization against the reservation system and other policies that were perceived as displacing the upper caste elites from power. The party’s idiom of Hindu communalism began to define its political strategy more definitely in the 1980s, as it broadened its base by including Dalits and Adivasi in its cultural-awakening program (Nandy et
This form of social assimilation included the “Hinduizing” of groups that were formerly excluded from and discriminated against in the Hindu caste hierarchy (Hansen 1999). While conventional political analyses view the BJP strategy from the 1980s onward as one of Hindu-Muslim antagonism, Shani (2007) suggests an alternative perspective of deepening caste tensions displaced onto Muslims that supported the party’s rise to power in Gujarat and then the nation. This reworking of caste points to the fluidity of the system in relation to social factors, which in the 20th century were namely urban modernity, changing labor markets, and electoral mobilization, rather than the often interpreted rigidity of caste hierarchy (Hansen 1999:146; Vaid 2014).

Ingenious dissemination of Hindutva through mass mobilization by the Sangh Parivar (the term used to signify the RSS and its family of organizations) provided a means to unify formerly divided groups under the common goal of a Hindu nation. The most famous was the nation-wide movement to install a Hindu temple in Ayodhya on land that was at the time occupied by a mosque. In 1992, the mosque was successfully destroyed by an organized mob of Hindu nationalists, and the country exploded in riots. This political and cultural strategy was extremely successful. In 1995, the BJP emerged as the main political party in Gujarat, and in 1998 it gained national power for six years. In developing a strategy of mobilization through divisive politics, Gujarat became a laboratory for Hindutva. Political and communal riots made Ahmedabad one

---

13 In fact, post-colonial scholars have attributed modern definitions of caste groups and religious communities to colonial constructions by the British Empire for the purpose of classification and categorization (Appadurai 1993).

14 Ayodhya is a city in Uttar Pradesh. The Sangh Parivar’s argument for destroying the mosque was that it was built on the site of an important Hindu deity.

15 The BJP employed similar communal politics in Uttar Pradesh before the 2014 election, with riots followed by a strong showing for the party (Pai 2014).
of the most violent cities in the latter half of the 20th century (Varshney 2002), and at the start of
the new century the city would once again be defined by violence.

Gujarat was known as a volatile place with numerous incidents of inter-caste and religious
violence over the years; however, the communal riots of 2002 were especially horrific for their
magnitude, violence, and complicity of the state. The 2002 riots were sparked in a town not far
from Ahmedabad on February 27th. A train car of Hindu pilgrims caught fire during a clash
between the passengers and Muslim kiosk owners on the platform. Fifty-nine passengers trapped
in the car died. The next day, after a procession of the burned bodies through the city and
incendiary local news coverage of the events (Ghaseem-Fachandi 2012), Hindus in Ahmedabad
and other urban and rural areas in Gujarat broke out in violent retaliation against Muslims.
Government officials estimated 850 people were killed over the eight weeks of carnage, though
other reports estimated a death toll of 2,000 and over 100,000 displaced (Human Rights Watch
2002). Almost half of the deaths were in Ahmedabad, and the overwhelming majority of victims
were Muslim (Human Rights Watch 2002). The role of the state, through its failure to contain the
riots from the start and accusations of state machinery orchestrating and inciting the violence, have
compelled some to label the riots as a pogrom (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012; Spodek 2011). Civil
society was complicit too, either explicitly (such as the Sangh Parivar) or through its absence,
including organizations that maintained a Gandhian ideology; especially disconcerting was the
silence of SEWA, an organization with a wealth of social capital and resources, as well as a large
percentage of Muslims within its membership (Spodek 2011).16 The Sangh Parivar, however,
benefits from divisive politics, as evidenced by the BJP’s gains in the state after the pogrom,

---

16 When I asked one of the SEWA Directors about SEWA’s silence during these times, her
response was, “We tried but the atmosphere was such that our voices were not heard…it was a
very difficult time.”
especially in areas that witnessed the most violence (Spodek 2011). With each ensuing riot, greater social and geographic isolation between Muslims and Hindus have grown (Yagnik and Sheth 2005).

**Neoliberalism and Hindutva**

The two defining features of India in the 21st century—the arrival of economic liberalism and the rise of Hindu nationalism as a political force—are not as contradictory as they would seem. The failure of basic social reform (Frankel 2005) and the exclusion of the masses by the elite in post-colonial India left a vacuum that would be filled by the ideology of Sangh Parivar family (Corbridge and Harriss 2000). The rise of Hindutva in the 1980s occurred during a time of economic transformation and uncertainty (Jaffrelot 1996), and, in the 1990s, the threat of globalization to national culture and identity added fuel to the movement (Oza 2006). Through a convergence of economic progress and Hindu nationalism (Bobbio 2012), the BJP successfully produced a political construction of a new Hindu middle-class that would represent modern India (Fernandes 2006). This was especially successful in Gujarat, which came to be known as a laboratory for Hindutva politics.

Modi, in his tour of the state before the 2002 elections, used imagery of the Muslim enemy to rally supporters, but he also exalted the economic and social development of the state (Spodek 2011). The violence of BJP politics was quieted by the economic success of Gujarat (Jaffrelot 2008). The political ideology of economic liberalization, labeled as Gujarat-style development, and ethno-nationalism would later be adopted at a national level (Patel 2002).17 Remarkably, despite its overt religious ideologies, the BJP managed to envelop secularism within an economic

---

17 Once again, the approach proved favorable for the BJP. During the national elections of 2014, the BJP won a majority of seats in the Lok Sabha. As party leader, Modi was sworn in as Prime Minister.
discourse, with claims that only a privatized and liberalized economy will bring equality of opportunity, irrespective of one’s social status, and insisting on solely economic indicators to measure progress (Bobbio 2012). This conceals the still present role of the state in creating a business-friendly environment (Sud 2012), while excluding marginalized groups from state resources, namely backward castes, Adivasi, and religious minorities (Hirway 2014).

During Modi’s tenure as Chief Minister of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014, “ease of business” became the mantra. The period ushered in an era of regional competition to attract foreign and domestic investment to the state (Bobbio 2012). Free-market supporters have fallen wholeheartedly for Modi’s business-friendly gimmicks, including a biennial business summit, Vibrant Gujarat, and offering Tata Motors a factory-ready plot for its Nano plant after land disputes with the state government in West Bengal (The Economist 2015). Ahmedabad, as the state’s largest city, underwent extensive urban redevelopment. Beautification and infrastructure projects, including the Sabarmati River Front Development (SRFD) and Bus Rapid Transit System (BRTS), reimagined the cityscape to that of a world-class city, reflecting the urban renewal mission of other post-colonial cities (Chatterjee 2014). An aspect of the city in global capitalism has been the shift in urban governance from managerialism to entrepreneurialism (Harvey 1989). Chatterjee (2014) adds to the literature on urban entrepreneurialism by noting that, in Ahmedabad, urban governance combines neoliberal urbanism with ethno-religiosity. Ahmedabad’s municipal authority, headed by the BJP, presents formal scientific planning in its urban policies, but actually performs Hindutva ideology to hide the exclusion of minorities and the poor in urban planning; for example, political support of a Hindu procession with overt anti-Muslim provocations. In this urge to transform the industrial city to a global city (Bobbio 2012), urban politics emphasized middle-class aesthetics
and lifestyles, while overlooking the needs of the urban poor (Mahadevia, Joshi, and Datey 2013; Mahadevia 2002a).

**SEWA: A Union for Women Workers**

Over this period of deindustrialization and informalization of the labor market, along with rising neoliberal practices and communalism, SEWA grew from a department within the TLA to an internationally renowned organization. During this period, its organizing strategy for women in the informal economy developed significantly. This evolution reveals SEWA’s response as an organization to changing political and economic contexts, but it also hints at changes that women faced at home, in the labor market, and in civil society over the decades. This section presents a brief history of SEWA, and highlights how the organization modified, resisted, and reproduced changes in the city and country.

In *We Are Poor but So Many*, Ela Bhatt (2006), the founder of SEWA, recounts how she came to realize the need for a labor union for women informal workers. Bhatt was the head of the TLA’s Women’s Wing at the time, and she had recently conducted a survey to assess the impact of the mill closures on former mill workers’ families. In the field, Bhatt saw that, since men had lost their work at the mills, women had taken on the responsibility of providing for their households. While the TLA saw these women as “enterprising housewives stepping in to work at a time of crisis,” they did not believe that there was a need to organize them as workers (Bhatt 2006:9). Bhatt, on the other hand, recognized the possibility of organizing these women as workers, and so SEWA was established in 1972 as part of the Women’s Wing of the TLA.

Over time, the relationship between SEWA and the TLA started to deteriorate. SEWA was growing rapidly, and, because of the unique position of its members in the labor process, it had to expand its services and experiment with new methods of organizing; the TLA, on the other hand,
remained a top-down organization, and was unable to adequately change its approach to organizing in response to the changing economic conditions. After a disagreement over SEWA’s outspoken support of Dalits during a caste riot in 1981, the TLA asked SEWA to leave. According to Bhatt, the break was fortuitous. As an autonomous organization, SEWA was able to move in a direction that traditional labor unions would never have, such as combining organizing with cooperatives and developing a grassroots leadership structure.

In establishing SEWA, Bhatt sought to bring recognition to the significant economic contribution of women informal workers and to show that these workers could be organized. SEWA has been very successful in achieving this, and has grown significantly in size and scope. From a membership of 4,900 members when it left the TLA (Bhatt 2006), in 2013, SEWA had nearly 2 million members across fourteen states in India (SEWA 2013). Its members participate in four main types of trades and occupations: street vendors, home-based producers, manual laborers and service providers, and rural producers. It has grown to include 20 sister organizations that provide various services, including banking and microloans, health services, and capacity building. SEWA has gained national and international stature for its expertise on informal workers. It coordinates international networks for informal workers and has helped establish similar organizations in different countries. It is often asked to contribute expert advice to government

---

Some of the international networks include HomeNet, StreetNet, and WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing), and it has also provided assistance in developing similar organizations in other countries, including Afghanistan, Nepal, and South Africa (SEWA 2013).
and multilateral institutions,\textsuperscript{19} and has partnered with foreign state agencies and the private sector.\textsuperscript{20}

SEWA, guided by the extraordinary vision of Ela Bhatt, has succeeded in removing conceptual barriers regarding who counts as a worker and what counts as work (Bhatt and Jhabvala 2004). There is a wealth of scholarly work examining this first and largest union for women informal workers. SEWA’s success is attributed to its leadership, flexibility, and organizing strategy (Blaxall 2004), its emphasis on developing grassroots leaders (Datta 2003; Rose 1992), its dual strategy of struggle through organizing and development through cooperatives (Chen et al. 2005), and fostering a shared identity as workers for its members (Hill 2010; Ichharam 2006). Scholars and policy makers have documented how SEWA organizes informal and contingent workers (Hill 2010; Hotch 2000; Jhabvala 1994), addresses the negative impact of globalization on workers (Unni 2004), achieves women’s empowerment (Datta 2003; Rao 1996; Rose 1992), increases women’s wealth and assets (Baruah 2010; Unni 1999), and supports work-life balance (Chatterjee 2006; Hill 2010), among other accomplishments. Learning from the organization’s success is of particular relevance in the current contexts of growing informality (UNDP 2015; WTO and ILO 2009) and interest in women’s role in economic development (UN Women 2015; 1987).

\textsuperscript{19} In 1987, when the government established the first National Commission on Self-employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, Ela Bhatt was asked to be the chairperson on the committee and to contribute to its report Shramshakti (see SEWA 1989). SEWA was also a critical voice during discussions to pass legislation for informal workers at the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (Spodek 2011).

\textsuperscript{20} Examples of these partnerships include the ILO and WHO (SEWA 2013), Mastercard (Pandit 2014), and Vodafone (Chukkath 2016). SEWA has also been called an example of India’s regional power to promote development in the South Asia region by the Council of Foreign Affairs (Council of Foreign Affairs 2015); recently, it has partnered with USAID on a $1.5 million, three-year award to train women’s vocational skills in Afghanistan as part of a strategic partnership with the US, India, and Afghanistan (USAID 2015).
World Bank 2012). In fact, SEWA is often noted as an exemplary organization for women informal workers (ILO 2013; UNDP 2015).

Among these accolades, there are few studies that have assessed SEWA’s organizational transformations in response to changing political and economic contexts. Other than Bhatt’s (2006) book, there is no systematic study of the institutional and political challenges that SEWA confronted, such as the significant changes in the political economy and in international development, since it was first established. SEWA admits to having had to professionalize in order to sustain its far-reaching goals (Bhatt 2006:16; SEWA 2013), but there are no studies of how this professionalization and institutionalization has affected SEWA’s mission and its members. In the following section, I discuss SEWA’s organizational strategy, its leadership and membership structure, and the role of SEWA Academy. I locate these organizational decisions and practices in relation to societal changes, including, deindustrialization and informalization in Ahmedabad, the growing presence of NGOs for development, and rising communalism in the city. While this is not a complete picture of the organizational transformation of SEWA over four volatile decades, it does provide an introduction to understanding the contexts in which SEWA works, offering both opportunities and limitations for organizing informal workers.

Organizing Informal Workers: Twin Strategy of Struggle and Development

SEWA is committed to achieving what Gandhi called the “Second Freedom,” freedom from hunger and want (Chen et al. 2005; SEWA 2013). SEWA interprets this economic freedom as achieving two goals: full employment, with security of work, income, food, and social security (defined as health care, child care, and shelter) and self-reliance, allowing for economic self-sufficiency and autonomy, both collectively and individually (Chen et al. 2005:78). It employs an integrative approach in addressing these goals, guided by eleven points as described in Table 1.
SEWA addresses numerous aspects of workers’ lives, not just issues traditionally associated with the economy. Through this more comprehensive and holistic approach to organizing workers, SEWA offers an alternative perspective that includes both the social and economic factors that shape workers’ experiences. To achieve these eleven points, the SEWA movement incorporates a twin strategy of struggle and development in its organizing—a strategy that sets it apart from traditional trade union work.

From its experience organizing women informal workers, SEWA learned that to achieve full-employment and self-reliance for its members it must include both struggle and development in its strategy (SEWA 2013). Struggle, the building of collective strength and bargaining power through solidarity among workers, is an essential part of social change (SEWA 2013). Development is also necessary to help sustain the poor during their struggle and to aid them in developing their own vision for a just society (SEWA 2013). After it broke with TLA, SEWA began its development work in earnest in the form of cooperatives, beginning with Mahila SEWA.

Table 1. SEWA Goals and Eleven Points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FULL EMPLOYMENT requires that each woman has:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Employment. Have more members obtained more employment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Income. Has their income increased?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Nutrition. Have they obtained food and nutrition?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Health care. Has their health been safeguarded?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Childcare. Have they obtained child-care?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Housing. Have they obtained or improved their housing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Assets. Have their assets increased?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SELF-RELIANCE of each woman is achieved through:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Organized strength. Have the workers’ organizational strength increased?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Leadership. Has worker’s leadership increased?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-reliance. Have they become self-reliant both collectively and individually?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Education. Has the education of our members (and their children) improved?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Chen et al. (2005:3) and SEWA (2009).
Sahakari Bank in 1981 and following with trade cooperatives, social security, and healthcare cooperatives, along with many others that would offer social and economic support for its members. The long-term goal of the trade union and cooperatives remains the same, but the strategies employed to achieve short-term goals differ, providing SEWA and its members with a balance of radical and conservative tactics (Jhabvala 1994).

SEWA sees this dual approach as necessary for the sustainability of the organization and its members. Jhabvala (1994:133) writes that the positive image of cooperatives softens the “hard” image of the union, often portrayed by employers, the government, and police as “unreasonable, destructive, violent.” The cooperatives provide the union with potential allies that would normally be opposed to the confrontational image of unions, such as the press and middle-class. For members, the cooperatives embody the spirit of cooperation, build self-reliance through alternative employment, and provide workers with control of the economic system; the cooperatives can also set standards for work and help raise wages for other workers. Similarly, the trade union is vital in its support for cooperatives and for the success of the movement. The union has the capacity for “mass mobilization, pressuring tactics, fighting strategies, legal know-how and effective bargaining,” and it offers resources and knowledges that are difficult to foster among poor women’s cooperatives with “the weight of the economic system against them” (1994:134). In pursuit of SEWA’s two goals of full employment and self-reliance, it employs a range of activities that are grouped as organizing or development strategies, listed in Table 2.
Table 2. SEWA Organizing and Development Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORGANIZING:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Organization: <em>trade groups or cooperatives or producer groups</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Leadership development: <em>opportunities and training to become local leaders</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Collective bargaining: <em>trade-wise or issue-based</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Policy advocacy: <em>trade-wise or issue-based</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEVELOPMENT:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Financial services: <em>savings, loans, and insurance</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social services: <em>health, child care, and education (adult literacy)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Infrastructure services: <em>housing plus water, sanitation, electricity</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Capacity-building services: <em>training in technical skills, leadership, and other skills</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Enterprise development services: <em>skills training, product development, and marketing</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Chen et al. (2005:5).

This twin strategy can weaken a union as SEWA enters into dependent relationships with the government (through funding projects) and private industries (through contracts for SEWA’s cooperatives), and its development activities mimic those of an NGO, but the industrial relations structure of unions is ill-equipped to address the needs and demands of an expansive and heterogeneous informal workforce (ILO 1997). Munck (2002:116) writes that unions’ ability to organize informal workers will determine the “relevance of trade unions to the world’s workers of today.” Informality will not disappear; rather, informalization is an integral component of global capitalism (Castells and Portes 1989). How does a union organize workers when there is no common employer? How does a union, organized around trade, organize a worker who might be an agricultural laborer during harvest time, but embroiders quilts to sell year-round? How does a union organize a worker who does not identify herself as such? SEWA aims to develop an individual and communal sense of worker identity, but it is not bound solely by economic definitions of work and labor. Rather, because of the unclear divisions of when and where one is

---

21 See following section for a discussion of SEWA’s NGOization.
working in informal work, such as working out of one’s home or a vegetable vendor looking after her child while working, SEWA integrates a holistic organizational structure, supporting women’s economic conditions, but also building her capacities as outlined in SEWA’s Eleven Points. This provides SEWA with a means to address the intersecting inequalities that affect workers, not just their class identity, an aspect that unions have traditionally ignored (Cobble 1993). In its innovative and boundary-breaking approach to organizing workers, SEWA has proved that labor solidarity is still possible despite the exploitative and isolating nature of informal work, and labor scholars identify it as an exemplary organization for informal workers (Breman 2013:130; Munck 2002:125).

The NGOization of SEWA

In many ways, SEWA is an example of the NGOization of social action. But the SEWA Directors I spoke with rejected the NGO label, pointing to the twin strategy of union and cooperatives and its membership-based structure to distinguish SEWA from project-based NGOs (Interviews, April 2, April 30, May 27, 2014). Many grassroots and community-based organizations, including SEWA, however, fall under the category of NGO as civil society organizations. The transformation of SEWA from a trade union to a family of organizations that provide development projects, including microfinance, childcare, and health services, is, for better or worse, an example of NGOization, defined as the professionalization, institutionalization, depoliticization, and demobilization of social movements (Alvarez 1998; INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence 2009; Miraftab 1997). I do not use the terms NGO and NGOization to criticize SEWA’s work, but rather to situate the role of SEWA within a neoliberal model of civil society (Kamat 2004). I am interested in examining how SEWA responds, resists and even concedes to neoliberal capitalism, with the aim of moving beyond the binary generalization of “co-
opted NGO” versus “radical social movements” (Choudry and Kapoor 2013).

Being a trade union and a development organization, SEWA had to institutionalize and professionalize to sustain itself and to expand its dual strategy. Ela Bhatt started the union alongside informal workers, but as it grew she began recruiting professionals to help with organizing and leadership (Bhatt 2006:16). She writes that there was a need for “educated professionals who could speak on behalf of women when they themselves could not” (Bhatt 2006:8). In this statement, Bhatt is acknowledging the difficulty of grassroots organizations of the poor in translating their needs to those in decision-making positions. It is not because the poor are unable to articulate their demands, on the contrary, Bhatt (2006) and Jhabvala (1994) provide many examples of poor illiterate women who become leaders in their community through their activism, but, nevertheless, they do face barriers imposed by structural powers. Mobilizing workers provided strength in numbers, but to support policy change, the movement had to adopt the language of the state.

All of the SEWA directors that I met with belong to the middle and upper class and castes and hold university degrees, some from institutions in the United States and England. As educated, politically skilled, and economically privileged women, they provided social and cultural capital to the movement. Another driver of professionalization was the need for paraprofessionals when SEWA began to expand its scope into development activities. 22 For example, with the establishment of SEWA Bank, staff with financial education and licenses had to be hired

---

22 While SEWA publishes its membership numbers in its annual reports, it does not provide consistent and publicly available information for its staff. At the end of a manuscript on SEWA’s membership, Chen and colleagues (2006) provides some information on staff numbers. According to the report, in the state of Gujarat, there are 953 paraprofessionals for the 469,306 members. It does not state how many of its paraprofessionals reflect the communities that SEWA serves, though, in its definition of SEWA paraprofessionals, Chen and colleagues note that they are SEWA members and some are trained from the SEWA’s membership.
(Interview, May 21, 2014). A number of professionals arrived only to leave shortly afterwards, unable to adjust their preconceptions with the ideals and practices of the organization, namely, where poor workers are leaders (Interview, April 2, 2014). There were some professionals who arrived with open minds, and, recognizing the importance of SEWA’s work, spent the rest of their careers with the organization. In an interview with Lalita Krishnaswami, who has been with the organization since 1977 and is the director of SEWA Cooperative Federation, she describes the different generations of professionals that arrived to contribute their skills, but who also learned from the members and grassroots leaders (Interview, April 2, 2014).

Despite its professionalization, SEWA manages to remain committed to a grassroots process, with many of its organizers and leaders (though not directors) belonging to the communities in which SEWA works. It achieves this through a strategy of recruiting members, organizing them in local primary groups (e.g., trade group, savings-and-credit group), and promoting and building their leadership skills out of these local organizations (Chen et al. 2006). SEWA’s membership, and the many roles among its members, is best understood as a concentric circle. Figure 1 illustrates how leaders and representatives (and paraprofessionals, though they are not represented in the figure) come from its pool of members. In their report, Chen and colleagues (2006) explain that of its 2 million general members there is a smaller group of members who are more active, having participated in more than one service and being with SEWA for two or more years. Active members can attend training sessions offered by SEWA to take on leadership roles in the organization and their community (the “leaders” represented in Figure 1); representatives are elected members who form the Trade Council of SEWA’s governance structure.

---

23 Recipients of any of SEWA’s services are automatically considered members, since they are required to pay a nominal membership fee.
The governing structure is designed to support leadership and representation from working women (see Figure 2). The membership body is made up of members of various trade occupations, such as vendors, construction workers, and agricultural workers, from both rural and urban areas. Each trade has a Trade Committee made up of elected local leaders. This committee elects trade representatives to the Trade Council; in 2002, there were 1,421 representatives on the council (Chen et al. 2006:101). The council elects twenty-five representatives for the Executive Committee, which is the decision-making body of SEWA. Its ability to foster and support grassroots leaders is impressive, and SEWA Directors pointed to this aspect to differentiate the organization from top-down and project-based NGOs (Interviews, April 2, April 30, 2014).
SEWA Academy: Building Capacities, Building Leaders

To build members’ capacity as leaders, SEWA Academy, a university for the poor, was established in 1991. As a sister organization of SEWA, its goal is to take “the SEWA movement forward” through “training and capacity building, action-oriented research of its members, and by building strong communication channels, within the organization as well as with the outside world” (SEWA Academy 2016). Services for members include literacy classes, vocational training, and leadership training. SEWA Academy is also responsible for communication and offers research capacity for the family of organizations.

SEWA Academy’s capacity-building programs are for the “self-development of the worker in order that her talents may be encouraged and developed, and she develops self-confidence and leadership skills” (SEWA 2009a), and involves “a slow but steady progression of women to a state where they develop a critical consciousness towards the world in and around her” (SEWA Academy 2011:5). Programs, like skill training and literacy, are aimed at immediate results in improving women’s employment opportunities, while building women’s capacities. The programs developed women’s sense of worth as a worker and that her contributions, both paid and unpaid, are valuable to society. Community organizing also provided space for women to share their
experiences and learn from each other, developing individual and collective identities. This building of respect and recognition is necessary for women to develop a worker identity as well as agency to confront exploitative economic institutions (Hill 2010). Worker agency sustains the organization’s grassroots membership and its leadership base.

*The Politics of Identity*

SEWA’s success depends on creating and supporting a *shared* worker identity among its members (Hill 2010). Since the beginning of the organization, SEWA fought hard to show that these women, as waste collectors, home-based workers, and street vendors, among others, are workers providing significant economic contributions and that they could be organized across these different occupations (Bhatt 2006). In a society divided by caste and community, it is also a strategic decision to organize women on the commonality of their working class identity, despite their diverse backgrounds. In an interview, Mirai Chatterjee, director of the health and social insurance cooperative Vimo SEWA, explained that:

[SEWA] strategically and ideologically chose to focus on their identity as workers. And in a country that is so divided by caste and community, if you want to build a workers’ movement, and it’s not just SEWA, it’s all the unions and other labor organizations, we focus more on their common worker identity...If you provide work security, income security, food security, and social security as SEWA is trying to do, then all will benefit. These [caste and communal] divisions are likely to go down because there will be less inter-caste and inter-religious rivalry. (Interview, May 21, 2014)

Mirai went on to argue that focusing on the shared socio-economic relations among the working class is a potential avenue for overcoming communal tensions. Economic relations had a significant role in public violence of 20th century Ahmedabad. Deindustrialization, rapid
urbanization and modernization all contributed to the divisive social fabric of a city that had previously seen Dalits, higher caste Hindus and Muslims living and working side-by-side in the walled city (Yagnik and Sheth 2011). Mirai notes that today the working class still shares “deeply enmeshed social-economic relations”:

The contractor of a home-based worker may be a Hindu or the big merchant may be a Hindu but the Muslim women are the home-based workers. And even though they are from different communities they have a long social connection. So this binds not only them together, it binds the entire society together. Because in a way her perception—she has an identity as a Muslim woman, as a wife, as a mother, as a worker—but she also has an identity linked to that particular merchant or contractor who may be from another community. (Interview, May 21, 2014)

Keshab Das, a professor and researcher at the Gujarat Institute of Development Research agreed that the working class shared economic relations, but he was of a different mind regarding the nature of these relations. For him, the relationship was hypocritical, as the foundation was one of conflict:

Communalism helps a certain religious group to oust the other group out so as to capture a certain spaces or opportunities of work and life. By displacing you as a Muslim, I gain that space for myself. (Interview, April 19, 2014)

He went on to explain that after Muslims were displaced, Hindu-owned businesses still needed their skills:

---

24 After the riots, many Muslims fled from the city center to the outskirts of Ahmedabad.
While I will not allow you to take a house on rent (no Muslim is allowed to take a house on rent in this area\textsuperscript{25}), but in my garage or in my restaurant, I want a Muslim worker to come and work for me. And there are fairly good relations between me and the worker. (Interview, April 19, 2014)

Mirai admitted that, despite SEWA’s work in fostering a common worker identity among members, this approach “gets severely tested from time to time,” such as during the 2002 riots, because “we don’t live in a vacuum…We live in a society which was getting polarized and also our sisters are influenced by their communities, by their husband’s families.” However, she emphasized that, as SEWA members, women had a shared history that helped maintain ties, and she gave examples of Hindu and Muslim members helping each other during the riots and in the aftermath.

The organization was criticized for its lack of action during the 2002 riots (Bunsha 2005; Spodek 2011). SEWA did not speak out publicly against the state government, which was a questionable decision, made all the worse considering its membership consists of Muslims, Dalits, and other backward castes, its vast political network (one NGO representative noted that Ela Bhatt could have called Bill Clinton to intervene [Bunsha 2005]), and its headquarters located in the center of the riots. To the criticism, SEWA responded “we thought it wise to keep away from the mass media in such a turbulent, vitiated, and complex atmosphere” (SEWA 2002:34). The

\textsuperscript{25} Segregated housing in Ahmedabad is rampant, for example, many housing cooperatives in western Ahmedabad are comprised of homeowners who belong to the same caste or religious group. Segregation is also disguised under religious dietary restrictions (Ghaseem-Fachandi 2012). For example, during my search for an apartment in Ahmedabad many of the listings noted that only strict vegetarian cooking (no meat or eggs) was allowed in the building. During a tour of one potential rental, the owner explained that absolutely no meat or eggs could be cooked. His mother, a Brahmin who followed a strict diet and lived downstairs, would smell the cooking and become sick.
organization was active in providing relief in the camps during and after the riots (Spodek 2011), and its continuing work across castes and religion is noted as a “bulwark against the Hindutva brigade” (Yagnik and Sheth 2011).

However, this passivity during the riots also points to the importance of presenting an appropriate image when an organization receives funding from outside sources. As Jhabvala’s (1994:136) admitted, SEWA’s endeavor in cooperative work helps the union win “allies, sometimes even with the ‘enemy’,” such as partnerships with the State and private companies. For example, the director of SEWA Bharat in Delhi explained to me that they received contracts from corporations, such as the UK retailer Monsoon, hiring homeworkers to complete the work.

SEWA chose not to speak against the state government publicly, but it still became the target of the Gujarat BJP party. In 2005, the State of Gujarat accused SEWA of mishandling funds in a redevelopment project, known as “Jeevika,” and began a “special audit” of the organization, withholding funds related to the multi-year project and asking for reimbursement for its other projects with the state (The Hindu 2005). In response, SEWA pulled out of all its Government of Gujarat projects. In an interview, Ela Bhatt admitted that, “The space for voluntary agencies, especially those with Gandhian values, has shrunk in Gujarat and it has become difficult to work freely. There is no positive atmosphere in the State for our organisation to work” (Sharma 2005).  

Conclusion

26 As Prime Minister, Narendra Modi continues to politicize civil society organizations (Frontline 2014). Soon after coming to power, the BJP froze foreign funds for a number of NGOs, accusing them of violating foreign contribution regulations (The Hindu 2015). One of the NGOs is Greenpeace India, which has been campaigning against power plants, air pollution, and the country’s unsustainable use of natural resources, leading some to question this ruling as an attack on civil society organizations that disagreed with the government’s style of development (The Hindu 2015).
In 2011, the *Times of India* voted Ahmedabad as the “Best City to Live” in India; yet, over half of its inhabitants still live in slums, more than 75 per cent of the workforce are in the informal sector, and there are scars of past inter-caste and communal riots on the collective memory of the city (Yagnik and Sheth 2011). The shift towards a market-oriented, liberalized political economy, which include a withdrawal of the state and entrance of an unregulated job market, have had a detrimental impact on the lives of poor women in India (Ghosh 2009). While organizations like SEWA have helped highlight the needs of women informal workers, the majority of workers are still excluded from current development practices.

If economic changes presented a new source of income, social and cultural constraints on women’s mobility pushed them towards home-based work (Sudarshan and Sinha 2011). The riots of 2002 further constrained women’s mobility. For the first time rioters targeted women and children, with disturbing accounts of mutilation and sexual assault (Hameed et al. 2002; Sarkar 2002). Women became even more restricted in their travel as Ahmedabad became mapped into “dangerous” Muslim or Hindu neighborhoods (Yagnik and Sheth 2011). The two Muslim neighborhoods that I visited for this research, Fatehwadi and Vasna, are examples of the ghettos that sprung up after the riots as Muslims moved out of the inter-caste and inter-religious neighborhoods of the walled city to live with others like them seeking safety in numbers (Yagnik and Sheth 2011). The Hindu women I spoke with explained their choice to stay home to work because of fears of safety and the need to protect their children. The increasing geographical and social isolation for both of these communities hampers the possibilities for them to practice and envision a place for themselves in this society.

In India, where the political has veered towards an unlikely partnership between neoliberalism and ethno-nationalism, SEWA, with its support for inclusive development and
communal harmony, offers an alternative roadmap for the country. However, its links with the State and the private sector through funding and collaborations bring up questions of its ability to adequately address the free-market and xenophobic forces it is up against. SEWA’s strategic choices on how to address the social injustices faced by women workers points to the political, economic, and social influences on an organization’s approach. Kamat argues that civil society is “coalescing with global capitalists interests” during this “restructuring of public good and private interests” (2004:156), and as the Gujarati research Keshab Das noted, SEWA and the trade union movement in Ahmedabad in general had always taken a more collaborative approach in the labor-capital relationship because of its Gandhian ideology.

In the following chapters, I examine women’s experiences with work, family, and civil society in relation to these significant challenges to the economic and social structures of the city. These spheres cannot be examined separately as neoliberal technologies have redefined the role of capitalist production in public and private life (Mitchell, Marston, and Katz 2004). A mapping of women’s subjectivities in relation to these spheres, through their struggles to secure their and their families’ life necessities, exposes the consequences of global capitalism.
Chapter 3. Methodology: Researching Women in the Informal Economy

A study of women in the informal economy and the organization that supports them brings up a number of methodological questions. How did I gain access to a particularly hidden population? Do I risk assimilating to SEWA and its perspectives since I relied on the organization for access and institutional backing? How does the use of a translator alter the data in a qualitative study? How do I, as a white woman from a rich country, interpret and represent stories of Indian women in the informal sector? Though it is impossible to avoid all possible problems that arise when conducting social science research, the methods that I chose and my approach to data analysis seeks to reduce issues regarding power and representation in research, with the aim to minimize the impact of my privilege as a researcher.

As I discuss below, I employed a range of methods in this study, including a survey, interviews, spatial data, qualitative observations, and secondary data analysis. While the survey provides background information (demographics, socioeconomic status, work characteristics), most of the findings presented in this dissertation are based on qualitative data. While there are limits to “generalizability” in qualitative research, this study aims to understand women’s multiple subjectivities in relation to ideological and material forces, a goal that requires an exploratory focus, flexible methods, and cultural insights (Charmaz 2005).

My research approach is further informed by feminist methodology. Feminist methodology is sensitive to the potential exploitative practices of research, and facilitates research that seeks to transform oppressive social systems (Harding 1987). It provides the tools to critique power relations inherent in research by disputing the notion of the researcher as sole bearer of knowledge and the participant as the Subject/Other; rather, it recognizes that there is a multiplicity of
knowledges in the field. Importantly, it grounds the research to the material consequences of a social justice project and forces the researcher to continually question knowledge claims (Haraway 1988; Katz 2001).

In the following sections, I discuss my research approach to data collection, analysis, and writing. The aim is to provide an overview of my methods, but also to acknowledge the politics of the research process.

**Research Methods**

My first visit to Ahmedabad, India was in 2012 when I spent the summer working at SEWA as a research intern. After an unanswered request the previous fall to conduct research at SEWA (as one of the most well-known organizations for informal workers, they receive many such requests), happenstance provided me with a contact in the organization, the director of one of SEWA’s sister organizations. I contacted her and, after some discussion about my research interests, I was offered a position as an intern in the Research Department of SEWA Academy. That summer in Ahmedabad was an introduction to what would become the field site for my dissertation. While I had originally wanted to conduct research with SEWA Union, as I was primarily interested in the activities of the labor union, my position at this sister organization turned out to be fortuitous for my dissertation. My affiliation with the Research Department and working alongside its staff provided me with a wealth of knowledge and access to the practical aspects of how to conduct research on informal workers. SEWA Academy, as the organization aimed at women’s capacity-building and SEWA’s communication arm, turned out to be an ideal site to examine how gender and development discourses of “women” and “worker” are constructed and practiced in the field.
I returned in September 2013 as a visiting researcher to conduct my dissertation on home-based workers over the course of nine months. Because of the difficulty in accessing these workers (Sudarshan and Sinha 2011) and my limited knowledge of the city and language, I decided that collaborating with SEWA would be the best approach for completing this research. Asking women about their experiences with SEWA with a member of the organization present during the interview brings up questions of reliability in participants’ answers, but conducting this research without SEWA would have been difficult for a number of reasons. First, SEWA Academy’s staff has worked in these communities for years, with some staff members even coming from those same neighborhoods. The network that SEWA has established across the city provided me with access to a group of women who would have otherwise been very difficult to approach as an outsider. Second, the research staff had many years of experience conducting research on women in the informal economy. Their input proved to be a valuable resource during fieldwork and preliminary data analysis. Lastly, as a white woman from a wealthy Western country, conducting this research alongside a Gujarati woman who had an understanding of participants’ social milieu was invaluable, which brings me to my research colleague, Jayshreeben.

Jayshree volunteered to be the staff member that would support me in this research. My cubicle was next to hers during my first summer in Ahmedabad, and we got along very well. I was happy to hear that she was assigned to accompany me in the field. She had been with SEWA since she was a teenager, having been trained as a “grassroots researcher” and subsequently joining the staff.27 Her English skills were also impressive considering her socio-economic background; as a city off the tourist track, not many people in Ahmedabad spoke English unless they belonged to

27 Grassroots researchers are research staff recruited from the neighborhoods in which SEWA works. They are trained by SEWA in research skills, providing them with skills that are often acquired only by attending college, a luxury that many of these women could not afford.
the upper-middle and upper class. While her official role was that of a translator, Jayshree offered much more to this research. Rather, she was a “cultural broker” who offered cultural translations of what we saw and heard in the field (Hennink 2008; Temple 2002). I relied on her to explain the nuances and meaning behind participants’ responses and what we witnessed in the field. At times, she would also expand on a participant’s response, relying on knowledge from her research experience in this field, but also from her own life experience. During our rides to and from field sites, she would often talk to me of her experiences as a woman, mother, and worker, sharing stories that followed the themes of this research, such as working seven days a week to pay for her children’s school tuition, her relationship with her in-laws, and marriage rituals of her caste. Jayshree and I also had opportunities to discuss and reflect on the research process and findings throughout my time in Ahmedabad, a necessary practice when conducting cross-cultural and multi-lingual research (Temple 2002). Jayshree’s insights during field collection and preliminary data analysis provided a valuable perspective on what it meant to be a working mother in India. Because of her role in this research, I use the first person plural pronoun in the empirical chapters to indicate the presence and contribution of a translator and cultural broker (Hennink 2008).

Jayshree and I found participants for this research with the assistance of the literacy department at SEWA Academy. The literacy department organizes literacy classes in the low-income neighborhoods where many of their members live, including the neighborhoods where I conducted research. Their presence and work in the neighborhoods over the years, which included setting up a center, hiring literacy teachers from the community, and providing information about other SEWA services, helped to build a trusted relationship between the literacy staff and many of the women in those areas. In fact, the literacy staff member who would accompany us to the day’s chosen neighborhood was always the one who worked in that same neighborhood. Literacy staff
would contact the SEWA community leader in the neighborhood to arrange a day for us to collect data. Jayshree, a literacy staff member, and I would visit the home of the community organizer who would then invite home-based workers to her house who were interested in participating in the research. Many of the women would know the literacy staff member since she would have helped organize literacy classes in that neighborhood. Jayshree and I introduced ourselves to research participants by first conducting a survey of home-based workers. Following the approach of Cindy Katz’s (1991) ethnography of a Sudanese village, conducting surveys introduced me to the field and allowed home-based workers to familiarize themselves with the project and researchers. The survey also provided demographic background for the research, as well as work characteristics, care responsibilities, and experience with SEWA. We conducted the survey from October to November 2013 with a convenience sample of 100 home-based workers in ten neighborhoods. After receiving verbal consent, we would start the questionnaire. I would ask questions in English, Jayshree would then ask the participants in Gujarati or Hindi, and she would translate participants’ responses back to me in English. I recorded answers on a paper copy of the survey.

However, most of the findings I discuss in the following pages are based on the qualitative data. Jayshree and I returned to the field sites in January 2014 to conduct interviews. Thirty home-based workers were chosen from a purposive sample of survey participants for interviews and spatial analysis. Interview participants reflect the demographics and work characteristics as that of the survey participants. Interviews continued the discussion of work and care responsibilities, and further explored tensions or conflicts between these two roles, as well as their participation in SEWA. Interviews also focused on their daily routine, paying attention to both relations with other family members, especially male members, and relations with space and the material. Because of
time constraints, women were unable to participate in lengthy interviews, and most interviews were 20 to 40 minutes. After the interviews, Jayshree and I would visit the worker’s home, if we were not there already, to photograph her home and workplace. Often, we would be invited to stay longer for a cup of chai or to be introduced to family members. In the end, we would often spend between 30 and 60 minutes with participants, including the interview. The translation process in the field was similar to that during the survey data collection. However, for data analysis, I recorded the interviews and transcribed the English dialogue. In addition, I hired a research assistant to translate the Gujarati and Hindi dialogue into English. I included these transcripts, what I call “second translation,” as part of the interview data to analyze. Though interviewees gave permission for me to use their first name and their images in published material, I have changed the names of participants to preserve anonymity and in accordance with human subject regulations.

To capture the spatial aspects of home-based work, I took photographs of the homes, workspace, and participants at work. I complemented photographs with hand-drawn maps of the homes. I also took portraits of all survey and interview participants; as I discuss in the data analysis section, having these portraits turned out to be helpful during the analysis and while writing. As other qualitative researchers have noted (Low 2000), the camera proved to be an aid in the field in ways other than for data collection. Interviewing can be awkward because it diverges from natural speech patterns and because of the presence of apparatuses that are not often present in everyday conversations, such as notepads, questionnaire sheets, and recording devices. Most data collected in interviews are captured on paper and machine, but it then disappears from the participants, viewed again after researchers’ interpretations. The camera, however, was a device that women were more comfortable with during the data collection process (maybe because of the increased access to cameras due to camera phones), and a digital camera allowed participants to immediately
see the data that I was collecting. It also helped create a more congenial relationship between researchers and participants. Posing for the camera was often accompanied by laughter and jokes of how to stand or fix one’s sari. Some would call their children over to be included in the picture; other times, women would show off the intricate embroidery work that they had added to dresses. Furthermore, photographs of the homes captured features of women’s work and daily life that would have been difficult to do with interviews. Throughout this dissertation, I rely on these photographs to provide additional evidence to my findings. Through the act of photographing, participants also witnessed which aspects of their lives I was interested in recording, even the most mundane. For example, I would take a photo of their stored work under a cot or request that women leave the workspace as it was rather than cleaning up for the photograph (See Figure 3). I believe that the use of a camera contributed to creating a more open and participatory environment during data collection.

*Figure 3. Cloth scraps left on the floor for the camera*

Photograph by author.
Primary data, survey, interviews, and visual data were complemented by secondary data, including analysis of SEWA documentation, analysis of media reports on SEWA and informal workers, and interviews with SEWA Directors, academics, and activists. Utilizing the resources of SEWA Academy’s documentation center, I reviewed books, reports, and informational pamphlets. I also had access to the short documentaries produced by Video SEWA, a cooperative under SEWA Academy’s communication arm. Video SEWA began producing these films in 1984 to document issues affecting women working in the informal economy. Applying an “ethnographic reading” of these films spanning over three decades, I documented the changing institutional representation of the informal worker. I conducted interviews with directors of five SEWA sister organizations, including SEWA Academy, SEWA Bank, SEWA Bharat, Gujarat State Mahila SEWA Cooperative Federation, and Vimo SEWA.28 I conducted four additional interviews with local academics and activists. All interviews lasted an hour and were conducted in English. Interviews with SEWA directors focused on the history of the organization, how it has changed over the years, how SEWA supports informal workers, and current issues affecting workers. In my interviews with academics and activists, I asked about social, political, and economic changes in the city and what they believed to be SEWA’s role in the city and for informal workers. This secondary data helped contextualize research findings in the current discourse of development and the informal sector as internalized by SEWA, SEWA directors, and experts.

Description of Participants

28 SEWA Bharat is the all-India federation of SEWA member organizations. Vimo SEWA is health and social insurance cooperative. SEWA Bharat is located in Delhi, and the interview was conducted there. The remaining interviews were conducted in Ahmedabad. I attempted to conduct an interview with the director of SEWA Union, but she was unable to meet with me.
All participants were women and over 18 years of age. Most were married (over three-quarters). A third lived in joint families, and the remaining lived in a nuclear family household. The average household income was close to Rs. 12,000 a month (US $194), with most working household members employed in the informal economy. Three-quarters of the participants were Hindu, and one-quarter were Muslim. Among participants who are Hindu, the majority, 79 percent, belonged to Scheduled Castes (SC), seven percent were Other Backward Castes (OBC), and 15 percent were general castes. Scheduled Castes, comprised of the lowest castes including the former untouchables or Dalits, constitute 29 percent of India’s population and still face frequent discrimination (Shah 2010). Despite proclamations of the end of caste (Srinivas 2003), caste remains a powerful social force that shapes many aspects of society, including ideologies of work (Harriss-White 2003; Vaid 2014), with caste hierarchies being prevalent in the Indian Muslim community as well (Bhatty 1996). Making up 11 percent of the Indian population, Muslims are a minority community in India, and are increasingly targeted in communal tension and the Hindu Right propaganda. In Ahmedabad, the percentage of Muslims is around 13 percent, but they are overrepresented in this study to capture the high rate of Muslim women from low-income households who participate in home-based work.

I limited this research to garment workers. Over three-quarters of survey participants received their work from contractors, two participants received orders directly from retailers, and the remaining were own-account workers, receiving orders from neighbors. The type of garment

---

29 See Appendix I and II for list of interview participants and list of fieldsites.
30 The exchange rate here and throughout this dissertation is based on Rs. 61.76 to US $1. This was the average rate when I conducted the survey in October/November of 2013.
31 Scheduled Castes include the former untouchable castes; other terms commonly used are Harijans (children of god) and Dalits (the oppressed). Other Backward Castes are other historically discriminated castes. Both SC and OBC are constitutional categories that receive positive discrimination by the government.
work varied, as did the skills required for the work. Work ranged from producing the whole garment (though this was almost always own-account workers), to sewing borders to garments, to finishing work, such as closing buttonholes, ironing, and packing. I use the term “own-account worker” to refer to workers who have direct contact with the market and buy their own materials, while “homeworker” are workers who have an employment relationship and receive orders from retailers, subcontractors, and other intermediaries (Sudarshan and Sinha 2011). “Home-based work” is used to refer to both types of work or when distinguishing between the two is unnecessary.

To capture the impact of SEWA for home-based workers, only half of survey and interview participants were SEWA members, though the extent of their participation ranged from being a SEWA community organizer to having attended just one skill-training or literacy class. Of the participants who were SEWA members, the two most common services used from SEWA Academy were literacy classes (40 percent) and skill training (32 percent). The most prevalent services used were those offered by SEWA Bank (64 percent). These three services—financial, literacy, and skill training—exemplify the multi-dimensional development work of SEWA.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began while I was still in Ahmedabad so that I could discuss interpretations of data and preliminary findings with Jayshree and other staff members of SEWA Academy. At the end of my time in Ahmedabad, we invited community organizers of the neighborhoods where I conducted research to SEWA Academy for a presentation of my work. After discussing my findings, they offered their perspectives on the meaning and implications of the research findings. All of these discussions were considered as I wrote this dissertation. This process was essential for an experiential understanding of the organization’s approach to supporting informal workers.
Interviews and fieldnotes were coded thematically according to topics derived from my research questions and those that arose during fieldwork and analysis. I used qualitative data analysis software to label and organize quotes. Coming from an interpretive perspective, my aim was not to present findings that could be generalized for all home-based workers; rather, I chose stories that illustrate the unique locations of each of these women and their experiences with work and caregiving.

The photographs and maps I collected proved to be useful during analysis and writing. Since I met with most of the women only once or twice, as I was writing, months later and from thousands of miles away, I came to rely on their photographs to remind myself of the setting and the participant—their personality, behavior, and even way of speaking. A quick look at a photograph of a participant or her home would stimulate memories of the field—how hot it was that day, the long rickshaw ride to the area, what was my mood, what was her mood—that I did not feel as strongly by reading through my fieldnotes. Having these memories was very helpful as I constructed ethnographic stories of these women’s lives.

Interviews, surveys, and observations were possible because of Jayshree’s work as a translator. Her skills, attentiveness, and patience during what can be a cumbersome process of on-the-spot translation were commendable. However, because of specificity that qualitative analysis requires, I also hired Bushan, a researcher from a local university who was fluent in English, to conduct a second translation of the Gujarati and Hindi dialogue. This second translation offered word-by-word translation of the recorded interviews that was difficult to achieve in the field during the data collection. Furthermore, the use of a second translator addressed a critique I received from a reviewer of my dissertation proposal—using a SEWA staff member as translator could distort responses in favor of the organization’s point of view. Having the two transcripts for each
interview allowed me to locate when Jayshree’s translations diverged from women’s responses. However, I did not always see these differences as diversions; rather, Jayshree’s immersion in this particular social setting, both from her socio-economic background and her history at SEWA, offered valuable interpretation of the meaning behind women’s responses. While he might have offered more accurate translations, Bushan, as a middle-class and highly educated Indian man, would have found it difficult to immerse himself in the women’s stories and their situations. I use both translations for my analysis and include quotes from both in the findings. Qualitative data analysis software was used to link quotes translated by Jayshree to those translated by Bushan. Because the interviews have already been interpreted through the translation process, reflecting the grammar and diction choices of Jayshree and Bushan, I have edited many of the quotes, with the aim of readability rather than changing meaning. Both interpretations, as well as my own, cannot be seen as value-free; all three of us come from a position of power and privilege in determining what gets said and how. However, I found that the two versions offered a fuller picture of what transgressed during the interview, and helped to mitigate some of the inherent problems found in the translation process.
Chapter 4. Women’s Work and Informality

“In this dupatta work I am sitting and it seems like rest, but the back stiffens, the shoulders ache…one gets tired while sitting all day long.” Nikila, a homeworker, is describing the irony of her work. She is at home, sitting on the floor while looking after her toddler asleep in a small hammock nearby. Someone peering through the grate door would not immediately recognize her as part of a hidden assembly line of workers scattered across the city, all working towards the completion of a product to be sold on the market; rather, it would seem to be a domestic scene of a young mother taking advantage of her daughter’s nap to finish some household work. As this visitor continues down the narrow lane, she passes more women sitting in the doorway or on cots pushed against the pale blue walls of their homes, chatting with each other, and all with a scarf, needle, and thread in hand. These women are also part of that assembly line, having learned from one another of this work that can be completed at home, and asking a neighbor or family members to introduce them to a contractor.

Nikila, whose main job is an office cleaner at SEWA Academy, was explaining why she prefers working at SEWA to her home-based work. She explains that at the office she meets other women, but she also prefers it because there are moments when she can sit and rest. Once at home, whenever she finds a spare moment, she picks up the dupatta orders. It might seem like rest, but it is not. Her comment above speaks to the misconception of home-based work as

---

32 *Dupatta* is a long scarf worn with a women’s *salwar kameez* outfit (trouser and tunic). The *dupatta* work Nikila mentioned is sewing a beaded border to the scarf.

33 Nikila was one of two home-based workers we interviewed who had a main job outside of the home (both lived in Jamalpur). Jamalpur was one of two field sites that did not have a literacy center. Jayshree learned that Nikila received homework from a contractor, and asked her if she could introduce us to other homeworkers in her neighborhood.
“something to do” during a woman’s spare time at home, but she is also questioning the definition of work.

For decades, national statistics maintained a narrow definition of what was counted as “productive” and “of value” to the national economy, resulting in economic policies and practices that overlooked the diversity of work and the people who participated in those activities (Folbre 2001; Waring 1999). Of particular significance in these conventional economic measures was the exclusion of women (Beneria 1981; Waring 1999). Through activism and research, progress was made in broadening the definition of work and gaining a more accurate account of women’s activities, with two of the most consequential outcomes being the recognition of informal work and unpaid work in the home and community (Beneria 1992; Himmelweit 1995). Development economists began to highlight the contributions of the informal economy to countries’ GDP (Charmes 2012) and its link to the formal economy (Chen 2007). Feminist economists sought ways to incorporate unpaid work in economic analyses, measuring the time spent on this work or giving it a monetary value, to measure the economic value of these non-market activities (Folbre 2006; Ironmonger 1996). This “feminizing the economy” agenda relies on mainstream economic concepts to explain non-capitalist economic activities, and so it does not allow for the possibility of an alternative or non-capitalist economies (Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003); yet, these feminist interventions have challenged us to reconceptualize how we examine and understand the diversity of economies.

This chapter contributes to these discussions by focusing on a setting that holds both conventional paid productive work and unpaid care and household work. To offer a more complete picture of how these activities intersect, I employ feminist social reproduction theory’s definitions of “work” and “labor.” I define work to include the many activities of individuals that mediate and
transform social and natural orders, and I define labor to be those aspects of work that are appropriated by capital (Bakker and Gill 2003), not just those activities that are in the wage-labor system. This broader understanding of labor provides me with an analytical tool to reconsider which activities are part of capitalist accumulation strategies and what this process looks like. Bakker (2007) writes that the work/labor distinction frames social reproduction as not entirely mediated by capitalism, while also explaining social reproduction as being on a continuum from non-commodified work to commodified labor, such as domestic work, reproductive technologies, and sex work (Radin 1996). I agree that not all of social reproduction is appropriated by capitalism, in fact, as Bakker notes, this conceptualization allows for the possibility of alternative systems of social reproduction. As the geographers Gibson-Graham (2006) have argued, it is important to acknowledge the diverse forms of economies in order to offer possibilities for transformative feminist political projects. I also acknowledge the increasing commodification of care, especially in these neoliberal times. However, in this dissertation I want to examine how those tasks of social reproduction that are not immediately connected to wage-labor or commodity production are appropriated by capitalism in the pursuit profit. In a wage-labor system, it is workers’ unpaid labor-time in producing a commodity that creates the surplus value for capitalism. I argue that in home-based work women’s unpaid social reproduction activities are also exploited as surplus labor in a capitalism production system that profits from a flexible and fragmented labor force.

I begin the chapter by discussing the economic and social contexts that shaped women’s decision to choose home-based work. The informalization and feminization of work pushed women to join the workforce, and the feminization of work (characterized by low wages, insecurity, and irregularity) helped maintain social and cultural constructs of women’s role in the public and private sphere (Elson and Pearson 1981; Enloe 1990; Fernandez-Kelly 1984). Though
poorly paid and irregular, home-based work is a strategy for women to provide monetary contribution to their households while upholding their primary role to be that of mothers, wives, and daughters. However, despite paid work taking place in the home, women were still confronted with having to balance their work and family activities, especially when considering the irregularity of both home-based work and caregiving activities. In the following sections, I outline the various techniques women employed to address this tension, and I discuss how these practices contribute to the exploitation of their social reproduction work into labor. This chapter is an introduction to the home-based workers who participated in this study and their daily experiences with work and family, but it also sets the tone for this dissertation by questioning our conceptions of the relationship between work, family, and development.

**Women, Work, and Informality**

In the 1970s and 1980s, Ahmedabad experienced a significant shift in its economic foundations as the closure of its many textile mills signaled an end to the city’s history as an industrial center. A source of work for many of the city’s low-caste and Muslim male inhabitants (Patel 1988), the mill closures resulted in over 100,000 workers being laid off between 1980 and 1990 (Kundu and Mahadevia 2002), and it added to the growing informalization of work in the city. With the loss of a male breadwinner income, more and more women joined the informal economy out of necessity, but also because of the increasing feminization of the labor market (Mahadevia 2002).

What was this workforce that women were joining? While some women were already contributing to home-based family enterprises, this was a new form of informal employment that had substantial, while not always obvious, links to the formal economy (Hahn 1996). What is considered informal employment can vary greatly, from piece-rate home-based work to street
vending to daily wage construction work. A similarity across all these sectors of work is that its workers are “informally employed, without secure contracts, worker benefits, or social protection” (ILO 2002a). More recently, these very characteristics have encouraged free-market capitalism to approach the informal economy in a favorable light, framing the informal worker as a safety net for workers who apply their entrepreneurial skills in times of economic recession and slow job growth in the formal sector. The Dutch sociologist Jan Breman challenges this rosy picture of informal work, noting that the reality for these workers is a constant state of insecurity that “saps the energy to cope and erodes the strength to endure” (2009:32). Many of these supposed entrepreneurs are disguised wage workers, though they lack the protection that formal workers would have received (Breman 1996). In a similar vein, Pillai (2010) argues that the recent increase of self-employment in India is not a sign of new productive opportunities following high economic growth, but rather the lack of employment opportunities, especially for women. She writes, “the growing social and economic crisis is locking vast sections of women workers into a downward spiral of more labour for less income and an enhancement of gender based inequality in the world of work as a whole” (p. 154).

Women’s participation in the informal economy in relation to the past decades of economic restructuring is especially important to examine when considering the contemporary emphasis on women’s economic potential in the development field (see World Bank 2012). Yet, India’s economic growth of the past decade has not led to better jobs for women (Klasen and Pieters 2012). The women who join the informal workforce are neither examples of economic emancipation nor are they consciously destabilizing their gender roles; rather, women start work not as individuals but as part of “a collective effort to better the conditions of existence” for a network of kin (Chatterjee 2012:801).
In general, India has a low female workforce participation rate, especially in urban areas, with urban employment among women measured at 20 percent (Das et al. 2015). Despite Gujarat reporting the fastest gross domestic product (GDP) growth in India, its largest city, Ahmedabad, has the second lowest rate of female labor force participation among the major Indian cities at 11.7 percent (Shrinivasan 2013). To explain the low numbers of working urban women, Indrani Mazumdar, a senior fellow and associate professor at the Delhi-based Centre for Women's Development Studies, explains in an interview that "women are moving off the land and out of agriculture in large numbers but are not finding the jobs in other sectors of the economy that this transition was supposed to create…In mega cities, the demands on a woman's time—from care work, to time spent collecting rations—are even greater, making leaving home for work that much harder" (Shrinivasan 2013). With less time to spend on paid work, it is not surprising that home-based work is one of the largest types of work in the urban informal economy in India and that it is disproportionately female. Forty percent of urban women informal workers are home-based workers, compared to 12 percent among urban male informal workers, and the female rate has been rising steadily over the past two decades (Chen and Raveendran 2011).

Ahmedabad’s recent history is of course not unique. Similar processes can be found throughout the world as the decline of formal and state-sponsored jobs seen in post-Fordism (Harvey 1989) gave way to the intensification of informalization and the feminization of the global political economy (Castells and Portes 1989; Elson and Pearson 1981; Enloe 1990; Fernandez-

---

34 Women’s labor market participation is often underestimated because of their propensity to be working in the informal economy or working as unpaid family members. Labor market surveys and census data are increasingly including variables for informal work, but the nature of informal employment means that it is not easily captured by surveys (Chen 2007), and the two sectors in which women are concentrated, home-based work and street vending, are especially elusive (Carr and Chen 2002).
The differential effects of economic globalization for women and men are now well documented (Benería and Feldman 1992; Moghadam 1999; Sen and Grown 1987). Much of the literature has focused on sites that have more obvious ties to globalization, such as women working in maquiladora assembly lines (Alarcón-González and McKinley 1999; Fernandez-Kelly 1984), the migration of women from poor to rich countries (Parreñas 2001), or sex tourism (Hoang 2015; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998). These studies have highlighted how the consequences of globalization vary by gender, as well as along lines of class, race, ethnicity, religion, and nation, and they add to our understanding of a gendered political economy that moves beyond mainstream narratives of neoliberalism (Sassen 1996).

Yet, as Osirim (2003) argues in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, globalization has had an impact on most women within their countries, whether they participate in activities more evidently connected with globalization, as those listed above, or they hold roles in less obvious ones, such as subsistence farmers, agricultural workers and participants in the microenterprise sector. Here, too, I focus on these less obvious sites in which global economic processes have shaped daily practices but have also been transformed in conjuncture with the local milieu (Ong 1991). In this section, I examine women’s reasons for beginning home-based work. Starting paid work often stemmed from economic need, and the current economic climate offered few viable work options. But women also employed gendered notions of women’s duty to their family and the household to explain their decision and job choice, pointing to the agential aspect of why they work.

The Need to Work

While women’s earnings are often dismissed as “supplemental,” in a labor market of irregular, low-wage work, women’s labor force participation can help keep a household out of
poverty (Chen et al. 2005). In our survey, the vast majority of home-based workers (95 percent) began working because of economic need, and on average they contributed a third of the household income, around Rs. 4,130 a month (US $67) to the average monthly household income of Rs. 12,096 (US $195). Fifteen women contributed half or more of the household income; among them, six were the sole earners either because of widowhood or their husband’s disability. Regardless of how much they contribute, nearly half of participants believed their household and care work to be their most important role in the household, but they were grateful for the work because of the additional earnings it brought to the household. As one woman explained to us, “household work is my responsibility so that’s very important, but I like home-based work the most because it brings money.”

Allen and Wolkowitz (1986) point out that, because women’s domestic work is assumed to be their full-time job, the entrance of paid work in the home is seen as woman’s use of her free time rather than a job, reproducing the notion that home-based work is a “leisure” activity. Thus, when a woman begins home-based work, it has a two-fold effect of devaluing her paid work and unpaid work, reinforcing gendered divisions of labor and constructs of care. The location of home-based work in the domestic sphere, concealing its role in the production process, and women’s continual participation in the bulk of household and care duties, even after beginning paid work, diminish the significance of their productive activity and the potential for work to improve women’s position in the household (Kantor 2003; Pant 2000). This conception of women’s work departs from studies that argue home-based workers contribute significantly to household earnings (Sudarshan, Venkataraman, and Bhandari 2007) and that home-based work can be instrumental in alleviating household poverty (Tipple 2005) by questioning the interaction of material and ideological forces that devalue women’s paid and unpaid work.
The main earners in most of these households were also employed in the informal economy, working as construction workers, rickshaw drivers, and even contract homeworkers. With the only constant being the irregularity of work, all members of the family had to contribute in some way. It was common for most working-age adults to participate in work either as paid workers or unpaid family members, and no less common for children to be helping as well. Family members often had more than one source of income to make up for the low wages and insecurity of work. Over half of the women we surveyed had more than one type of home-based work. For example, Naseem in Vatva receives orders from two different contractors; from one she receives salwar and churidar orders and from the other she sews borders on dupatta. In Danimilda, Manjila does finishing work on jeans for a subcontractor, but she also takes orders from her neighbors to make blouses and sew sari fall.

This was a strategy that provided women with more frequent periods of work due to the irregularity and seasonality of garment work. Informants’ explanations of their work characteristics point to the various survival strategies that poor and tenuous lower-middle class households employ in these economic times. This was the case in the homes of Keshavnagar, a neighborhood in the northern limits of the city, bordered by a highway overpass to the west and the Sabarmati River to the east. We were in the living room of a relatively spacious three-story home. The home belonged to a family whose adult women, the mother and her two daughters-in-law, were involved with SEWA. Being a SEWA literacy teacher, our hostess knew many of the women in the neighborhood and had invited some of them to her home to take part in the survey.

35 Salwar and churidar are two types of cloth trousers.
36 The finishing work consisted of cutting hanging threads from the jean’s seams. Sari is an Indian dress worn by women, composed of a long piece of material (also called a sari) wrapped around a blouse and underskirt. Sari fall is sewing a border to the edge of the material to add weight and a better drape when the sari is worn.
We did not survey all of the women present in the room that day, but many remained while Jayshree and I conducted the questionnaires. They were vocal in their concerns of their families’ current economic situation, telling us of the lack of regular work for men and the increasing cost of living. While these women were working and contributing to their households, they were doing this out of necessity. Though many had been working for years, they framed their work as a temporary strategy until better work was found for their husbands and sons.

Most of the women in Keshavnagar who participated in the survey were thirty years old or younger. They worked because it was needed, even expected. As part of a joint family, their mothers-in-law had asked them to start work so that they could contribute to the household. They themselves recognized the need for more income in their homes. They told us of the high educational expenses for their children and the cost of food, but the main reason is the lack of a fixed income in their households since their husbands do not have regular work. Reflecting a trend among many households in developing countries following economic restructuring, the gap between household needs and household income resulted in the reallocation of household resources, often in the form of women’s labor (Floro 1995).

The older women in the room listening to us agreed—what was needed was stable work for the men in the neighborhood. In their explanations, they brought up memories of better days when men could find work that would provide for the whole family in the city’s large mills and so women could stay at home. Yet, similar to the family-wage ideal in western countries that obscured and ignored actual class and race power relations (Barker and Feiner 2004), these were likely idealized memories of the past since many Dalit women would work alongside their husbands in the mills because of economic need (Yagnik and Sheth 2005). Furthermore, by the time this generation of women had moved to Keshavnagar to join their marital households in the 1980s,
there were few jobs left at the textile mills, with many of the mills having already been shuttered and the rest following suit by the end of the decade (Breman 2004).

Today, the work available for their husbands and sons is casual labor, despite Gujarat’s rapid economic growth rate over the past two decades. These men do not have the required skills to be employed in the state’s new sectors of work, such as petrochemical, pharmaceuticals, and telecommunications. The cost of living is rising as well, especially food. Keshavnagar is too far from the city center for women to travel daily to the large market in the old city, where produce could be bought for less. This was especially on their minds since in the last year the price of staple foods had become more expensive because of inflation. Onions, which could be found for Rs. 10 a kilo a year before, had doubled in price to Rs. 20 a kilo. One woman worried that the cost of living would rise as Ahmedabad continued to grow, pointing to the high-tech corridor being developed just north of the city as proof.37

The laurels surrounding Gujarat’s economic growth during Narendra Modi’s tenure as the state’s Chief Minister focused only on its success in economic measures, such as GDP growth and rate of foreign investment (see The Economist 2015). Under Modi, development of infrastructure and other projects that support the growth of business and international investment were emphasized rather than inclusive policies that addressed the needs of the poor and working class (Hirway 2014). For the families in Keshavnagar, this form of economic development had not benefited them. Development meant higher prices; it did not bring the type of jobs that their families needed. “What we need is reliable jobs for our men,” they repeated, “we need good jobs for them. Write that in your report.”

37 She was speaking of the Gujarat International Finance Tec-city (GIFT City), a financial Central Business District currently under development. GIFT City is conceptualized to be the future global financial and IT center for Gujarat and India (see GIFT Gujarat 2011).
Good jobs were difficult to find however. This was why, they explained, everyone in the household had to work if they were able to. The same sentiments were expressed in the other neighborhoods we visited, such as in Rajivnagar. Kajal, a 46-year-old homeworker with three grown children, also compares the current economic situation to the past. Repeating the older women’s reasoning in Keshavnagar, Kajal explains that before she did not have to work as her husband’s earnings were enough to support a family, but now everyone has to help.

“Choosing” Home-Based Work

Choosing homework is not simply an economic decision but one that is guided by multiple and sometimes conflicting perceptions of one’s duties and roles. How do women grapple with internal and external factors in deciding to start home-based work? If home-based work is a telling example of how social and material conditions shape women’s experiences with work (Benería and Roldan 1987) and reveals the interdependence of production and social reproduction (Agarwala 2014), then an examination is needed of how they internalize the meaning of this work when it stems from these constraints. This reveals a more complete picture of women’s understanding of their role in production in tandem with their social reproductive labor and how it shapes their notions of gender, class, caste, and community, in which the “boundaries of a particular category are both constructed through and challenged by other social identities” (Fernandes 1997:5).

Women’s contributions are necessary and, when they decide to work, there are socio-spatial and cultural determinants that shape women’s choice. The women we spoke with were limited to home-based work because of domestic responsibilities (51 percent) and/or not being allowed to work outside the home (44 percent).38 Their network also determined their access to

38 Informants could choose more than one response to why they work at home and not outside.
work, with many of the women having found work through family and neighborhood contacts. Many informants had low education levels, with the average grade passed being the 8th grade.\(^{39}\) All of these factors limited women’s options to low-income informal jobs (Mitra 2005).

While for some women, especially those who were part of the Muslim community or lived on the outskirts of the city, working outside was never an option,\(^{40}\) it was not always the case that women never had an opportunity to work outside. We spoke with a handful of women who had previously worked outside of the home, but had to leave those jobs once they had children. Asha, a 31-year-old homeworker in Keshavnagar, who used to work at a jute factory in Usmanpura (a neighborhood south of Keshavnagar) and then at a small enterprise sewing decorations to *sari* and *sari* blouses in Mithakali (a well-off neighborhood closer to the city center). Despite living in a joint household, her in-laws did not provide her growing family with much financial assistance. It was expected that she and her husband would cover the financial needs of their immediate family members. With her husband’s meager earnings as a casual day laborer, it was necessary for Asha to work as well. Asha searched unsuccessfully for work in the neighborhood, and she eventually decided to look in the surrounding areas where there would be more opportunities.

At the factories, Asha earned between Rs. 2,000 and Rs. 3,000 a month (US $32 and US $49 respectively), working eight hours a day six days a week, two to three times more than what her husband earned from his irregular work. When she had her first child, Asha stopped work to care for her daughter and did not return to work outside until her daughter was two years old, this time at the factory in Mithakali. A year later, Asha became pregnant with her second child, again

\(^{39}\) This is much higher than the country average of 3.6 years of schooling for women (UNDP 2015), though this number does not differentiate educational attainments by urban and rural areas. Urban areas are more likely to report higher educational attainment.

\(^{40}\) I discuss women’s mobility in further detail in Chapter 6.
a daughter; she took another leave from work. After her third pregnancy, this time a son who died in infancy, she stopped working outside the home permanently.

When we met her, Asha was receiving orders from a retailer decorating blouses and sari—similar to the work she was doing in Mithakali (see Figure 4). She earns less as a homeworker, around Rs. 1,200 a month (US $19), working six hours a day and seven days a week, though it is seasonal work so her earnings fluctuate. Despite the lower earnings, she prefers working at home. When working at the factories, her days were more rushed. She would wake up early in the morning so that she could finish the household work, make chai, sweep the floors, and prepare lunch for her husband and father-in-law before heading to work. After her daughters were born, Asha was even more anxious when she was at work. She would worry whether her mother- or sisters-in-law were properly caring for her daughters, if they had been fed and clothed, if they had reached school in time. She tells us that the “tension of home” was with her at work. In addition, when she would return from a full day of work, she had the domestic chores to complete, helping her daughters with their schoolwork, cooking, cleaning, and washing. She tells us, “It is better at home than at the factories because I can complete my household duties, I can look after my daughters, and I can still do that decorating work.”

Before having children, Asha was allowed, even required, to work outside of the home in order to contribute to the household. However, after having children, her main responsibility was that of being a mother. Asha returned to work after her first two children, but in the end, she decided that home-based work was best, even if it meant lower earnings.
Asha was not the only home-based worker in Keshavnagar that saw working at home as a better opportunity to care for family and home. Her neighbor Usha had also worked in a small enterprise and stopped once she had children. After her first pregnancy, Usha did not return to her work at the factory because her mother-in-law was ill and was unable to look after the child. Usha earned less as a homeworker, but she also did not mind, telling us, “Now my house can be looked after, I can look after my children and my mother-in-law. And I can take care of the house. All of this is, and I still earn income. I can earn money by myself.”

Across the river, in Danilimda, a neighborhood in south Ahmedabad, Alka brought up similar notions of care to explain the benefits of home-based work in contrast to her experience working outside the home, “Every time I have to work in the factory from 10 to 6, but working in
the house is better. I can look after my children. I can sit, I can take rest, I can do work. And there is no fixed time for work.” In these responses, the desirability of home-based work arose from women’s perceived roles. By participating in home-based work, they could continue contributing to household earnings, an economic necessity, but they also believed that they could better complete their familial responsibilities. These responsibilities, such as childcare, cooking, caring for the elderly, were always present, even if the women would work outside. As one homeworker explained to us, “First we have to look after the children. Even if I go outside for work, I would still have to look after them.” Taking care of the house and family was their responsibility, and they did not easily admit to needing help, even if it was difficult to complete everything. As Shilpa, an especially busy homeworker, told us, “I need nothing, because this is my responsibility. All Indian women have this responsibility.” Scholars have remarked on the resilience of gender norms in the family, noting that, while “gender division of paid work is more flexible than used to be thought, the division of domestic labour has proved extraordinarily rigid” (Harriss-White 2003:28). Home-based work especially does little to challenge the divisions of labor in the home because of the work setting (Abreu and Sorj 1996:106).

Women had to work, but with limited resources, informal work was often the only option available to them. Their domestic responsibilities encouraged them to stay home, and home-based work provided an opportunity to address the economic and social needs of their households. Yet, women’s access to work is not determined by their human capital and cost and benefits rationality (Becker 1981), but by policies and practices that support the informalization of work for the accumulation and appropriation of surplus capital (Harriss-White 2003). Women’s domestic labor is key to this. In this time when productive work and social reproductive work are uncoupled and social institutions of support are under attack, the unpaid work in the home and community
provides much of the material and emotional support to sustain households. The stories presented above are examples of the strategies women employ to address the tension between providing monetary support and domestic support. By framing them as strategies, I acknowledge their participation in home-based work as partly an expression of agency to address what they believe is their contribution to their family and household, while also recognizing that these actions occur within a limited set of possibilities.

Later, I will discuss two other aspects that encouraged women to stay home, women’s notions of domestic femininity and socio-spatial and cultural restrictions on mobility; in this chapter, though, my aim is to examine how women’s work in the social reproductive domain are appropriated by capitalism in the form of labor. This is not to argue that women’s oppression can be explained solely by material dynamics, but to show how ideological constructs support dominating economic relations. Next, I examine how the spatial and temporal characteristics of home-based work provide capitalism with a source to accumulate surplus value.

The Space of Work and Care

The space and temporality of home-based work construct this work as appropriate for women. The lack of a rigid schedule and the ability to work from home are seen as more compatible for women than factory work. It maintains gendered constructs of women’s role in the private and public domain (Allen and Wolkowitz 1987), providing, as I discuss in Chapter 6, a means to appease supposed threats to a nation’s cultural orders (Ong 1991). The idea that home-based work provides ease and comfort because of its flexibility contradicts the fact that the irregularity of work orders and the urgency to complete those orders creates stress and uncertainty (Allen and Wolkowitz 1987). In addition, care work is often irregular and not easily scheduled into neat time frames, such as caring for a sick parent or helping a child study for exams. In the next
sections, I discuss the tensions that arise when paid work occurs in the same setting and at the same
time as women’s domestic and caregiving responsibilities, and I present the ways that women
attempt to ease these tension. Past scholars have noted that capitalism exploits the spatial and
temporal characteristics to its advantage, and I add to this argument by employing the conceptual
framework of a work/labor distinction to analyze how women’s social reproduction work is
exploited as labor. While women employ strategies to ease tensions caused by precarious work
conditions, their unpaid social reproduction activities become enveloped within an exploited
production system.

*Irregularity and the Expendable Worker*

The insecurity of home-based work was apparent for the women who participated in this
research. A quarter of workers surveyed answered that their primary home-based work was
irregular. When Jayshree and I returned to their neighborhoods for the interviews, we found that
five of the thirty women we spoke with were no longer working. For three, it was because their
subcontractor had permanently stopped providing them with orders. The two other women had
decided to stop their home-based work because the wages were too low to justify the expenses,
such as traveling to pick up orders or paying for materials. Even for the women who maintained
their home-based work, they were dependent on their subcontractors to provide an adequate
amount of orders, and this could fluctuate drastically from one season to another. A third of the
one hundred women we surveyed had seasonal work and reported a 60 percent decrease from peak
season earnings to lean season earnings.

It was for the earnings that Nita looked forward to Navrati, the Hindu holiday just a couple
of weeks away that was especially famous in Gujarat for its weeklong dance festival. For Nita and
many homeworkers in Ahmedabad, in the weeks before holidays or wedding seasons, they were
confident they would receive large work orders, some of which would be orders of *chaniya choli*. Working on *chaniya choli* brought a sense of pride; these were traditional Gujarati dresses—dresses for which customers would pay over Rs. 3,000 (more than a homeworkers’ weekly earnings) at Law Garden’s street market. Shanta, a young worker of Rajivnagar, saw this traditional work as one of the differences between her work and that of other homeworkers who sewed ready-made garments (see Figure 5). The elaborate dresses would be embellished with intricate hand embroidery and weighed down by small mirrors. Working on these dresses reminded her of the dance festivals to come, the event that many young Hindu women looked forward to the most in the year. Shanta admired the skills needed to work on *chaniya choli*, even if she only did the sewing work (the pieces were already embroidered when they were given to her to sew together). Her neighbors noted the extra care that was needed when working on these orders. If
they made a mistake they would have to pay for the cost of the material that was ruined, but also the cost of labor that went into hand-embroidering the dress. Shanta had not made a mistake yet, and she was confident that she would not.

Back in Sarkhej, Nita did not look forward to the season for these reasons. For her, Navrati brought large and regular work orders, meaning more money, but there were other reasons to appreciate the work that arrived before the holidays. For one, surprisingly, the contractor had decided to increase the piece-rate wages, and he had begun delivering the materials to her and picking up the completed products, saving her Rs. 30 for each trip in addition to the time spent commuting. This was peak season, and the contractor was in a hurry to produce as many orders as possible. He did not have time to haggle over wages or wait for the homeworkers to pick up the materials.

The large orders, however, meant that Nita would spend all day at her machine. Nita told us this in a rush as she was in a hurry to get back home to finish her orders. After completing the other interviews, Jayshree and I visited her home to see the work. She lives on the second floor of a building with her husband and two children; her parents-in-law live on the ground floor. To reach her apartment, we climbed up a steep ladder that led to a patio used for drying beans and rice, sleeping during hot nights, and storage space for any belongings that did not fit in the cramped two-room home. In the front room, Nita was sitting at her machine near the window facing the patio (see Figure 6). Not able to be interrupted from her work again, she welcomed us without stopping, her feet peddling rapidly against the treadle of the sewing machine. She lost her electric sewing machine, along with all of her family’s belongings, to a fire last year; with limited savings, she could only afford a manual machine. Before the fire, she would receive better-paid orders, but with a manual machine she can only do simple garment work. Now, her orders consist of sewing
borders on cloth to be used as a decorative cover for skirts, earning Rs. 8 per piece (US $0.13). When there are enough orders to work seven days a week, Nita can earn just under Rs. 1,000 a week (US $15.50). She has little time for rest in order to complete enough pieces to make up for the paltry wage rate. For Nita, festival season means long days hunched over a sewing machine, made additionally tiresome because of the manual machine, but it brought much-needed earnings. As we left, she continued her work, perspiration dripping from her brow as she bent over the machine and green gauze cloth.

Since home-based work is often determined by seasons, there would be periods of continuous orders, but it was often followed by lean periods. Lacking a permanent contract, homeworkers were dependent on their suppliers for work, and it was common for women to lose
work unexpectedly. In Danilimda, two of the women we spoke with were no longer receiving work from their contractors when we returned to conduct their interviews. Jyoti had been sewing borders on handkerchiefs, but now it was the end of January; the cold season was almost over and there was less need for handkerchiefs until mid-spring when temperatures would rise to above a hundred degrees Fahrenheit. Jyoti made do by sewing quilts from the scraps of cloth her husband would bring back from his job at a tailor shop. She would sell the quilts to neighbors for Rs. 75 apiece, more than what she earned with the handkerchiefs (at Rs. 2.5 per dozen, the most she earned with the handkerchief work was Rs. 175 a week), but there are only so many quilts to sell in one neighborhood.

Across the lane, her neighbor, Manjila, was no longer receiving orders as well. She had been working on the colorful jeans that were currently in style among Bollywood actors, and there was a large demand for cheap versions of these jeans at the city’s markets. While the jeans were constructed elsewhere, the women in Danilimda completed a finishing task of removing any hanging threads. The jeans would be returned to the subcontractors to then be given to another homeworker to iron, fold, and pack. But there were often many actors involved in the supply chain. Manjila did not receive the orders directly from a subcontractor; rather, she knew a woman in the neighborhood who had the contact with a subcontractor provided Majula with these orders. The neighbor began working at a hospital and stopped her home-based work; as Manjila did not know the original subcontractor, she lost this work.

Time and Schedules

Home-based work does not follow a defined schedule, but neither does the domestic responsibilities expected of women. Planned and unplanned needs would interrupt the ability to complete a work order, while an urgent work order would disrupt women’s domestic tasks,
resulting in a sporadic schedule where women are expected to be present and available for both forms of work.

Women did not often openly admit to difficulties with balancing their paid work and unpaid work. They would dismiss any possible conflicts, reasoning that they were working from home, so it was possible to do all. But they did employ techniques to cope with the added responsibilities. One of the most common was to lengthen and intensify their daily schedules by waking up earlier or completing their household tasks faster. Kaia plainly explained that since she began home-based work she just has to finish her household tasks more quickly. Asha wakes up earlier in the morning so that she has more time in the day. With a laugh, she tells us, “If we wake up early to do the [household work] then there isn’t much difficulty.” In Nobelnagar, Hansha explained, “I adjust. As such, I don’t face many difficulties as I have my routine. If I have to get up at 5 a.m. then I have to get up by 5 a.m. I do face some small difficulties, but I adjust.”

Women attempted to have some semblance of a working day by setting a schedule for their work. Kaia gave a typical response to our question of how they managed, “There is no difficulty. The children go to school, and by the time they return in the evening the work is done.” Kaia has three young children, between the ages of six and ten, but she lives in a home with three other couples who also have children. She has a few hours during the day when the children are out of the house to complete her work orders. Asha and Biliksha schedule their day similar to Kaia, waiting for the children to leave for school to start paid work. When the children are at home, it is impossible to work. If the orders are not completed by then, Asha waits until her children are asleep to finish.

The scheduling techniques described by Kaia, Biliksha, and Asha create space to allow for the completion of their work without interruption; yet, the boundaries of this workspace were often
framed around their caregiving roles. They would work in the middle of the day when their young children are at school as this is the only time that they are able to concentrate on their work. Other women we spoke with also worked in the middle of the day, when the needs of their household was less and they were less likely to be disrupted. For example, Lajvanti and her mother would wait until her father and brothers left for work before starting their home-based work. Vali would stop her work at midday to prepare lunch for her husband, who would have returned home from his job as a sweeper at the Gujarat High Court. They strove to schedule work around these tasks, and so emphasized the salience of their domestic roles.

Despite efforts to separate their paid work and unpaid care work, collisions occurred. When Jayshree and I visited Kaia’s home, her children along with those of her two brothers-in-law and their wives were home because of a school holiday. The younger kids boisterously followed us around, while the older boys sat in front of a television set feigning boredom. Kaia tells us that today, even if the children were at school, she would not have been able to work because her machine is broken and in the shop for repairs.

Other participants reflected on the need to accommodate their time depending on the tasks of the day. Hansha, a mother of three who wants to support her daughter’s education, explained to us that she prioritizes tasks depending on where she is needed, “If home-based work is urgent I do that, but if my daughter needs tutoring, I help her.” Women would also stop work whenever guests arrived at home or if they had to attend community or religious events. These events could take up a significant amount of time away from their work. And, as a sociologist at Gujarat University remarked, women have twice the number of events to attend as their husbands because of their attachment to two families, their natal and their conjugal. 41

41 See Chapter 6 for more on women’s experiences in the family.
These stories show that, despite women’s attempts to have a planned schedule, it was often difficult because of the continuous and sporadic nature of both care work and home-based work. Social reproductive roles are not well defined, and the irregularity of home-based work means that from day-to-day they would either have more or less time to complete their other tasks. With this constant shifting and presence of tasks, their multiple identities of worker and woman were always present, regardless of which task they were conducting. The young woman in Figure 7 illustrates this conflation of roles. She is adding beads to *rakhi*—a bracelet associated with the Hindu holiday Raksha Bandhan. While the young woman is working, she is caring for her infant who we see cradled in the nook of her legs.

*Figure 7. A working mother and her child*
Work like this, where a machine was not required, was easy to define as “leisure” activity. In Jamalpur, the women I spoke with all had contract work that involved adding beads to the ends of dupatta, the scarves women would wear over their shoulders. This was a second job for Bharti. A widow living with an older mother-in-law and two young sons, she shouldered most of the financial responsibilities for the household. Her main job was working the nightshift as a hospital peon.  

Bharti frames her home-based work as “restful,” it is work that she can complete at home whenever she has a free moment in the day from her other household responsibilities. (Nikila, the homeworker quoted at the beginning of this chapter and Bharti’s neighbor, notes otherwise.) Because beading does not require a designated workplace, like sewing a garment does, women would work on orders anytime their hands were free. This obscured even more the line between when one was working and not working, as seen in Figure 7. The categorization of women’s home-based work as secondary, completed during her free time, is found throughout industrial use of home-based work; it justifies the low wage rate and devalues women’s participation in the economic sphere (Boris 1994; Prügl 1999).

Home-based workers’ day, more than other types of work, reflects how the division of production and social reproduction are becoming difficult to define (Mitchell, Marston, and Katz 2004). In a capitalist system that divides these forms of work, a home-based worker attempts to create similar spatial and temporal boundaries to differentiate work and nonwork. Not dissimilar to when a worker leaves her house to work outside, by scheduling her work time when her care needs are less, such as when her children are at school, a home-based worker attempts to remove her care duties from a working space. Though, of course, a home-based worker (like many  

---

42 Though it holds a negative connotation in the West, the term “peon” is still used in India to signify a low-ranked office attendant performing unskilled work, such as cleaning or running small errands.
workers) is never able to completely detach from her care duties when she enters her workspace. Care and work are never so constant, and this is clear when work occurs in the home where the boundaries between the two are even more difficult to keep.

Unpaid Family Workers

A common technique to address insecurity of work was the use of unpaid family workers. When paid work takes place in the home, it is easy for family members to become unpaid workers, most often women and children (ILO 2013; Sudarshan and Sinha 2011). Family help also allows women to take on more than one type of home-based work. While this provided a somewhat more constant income, it was not uncommon for multiple orders to arrive at the same time. The help of family members was particularly necessary at these moments. These unpaid family workers are often overlooked in labor market data, but Sudarshan and Sinha (2011) argue that they should be included in the definition of home-based workers because of its prevalence.

Jaya, a young mother living in a nuclear household in Amraiwadi, works long hours sewing the gloves that upper-middle and upper class women wear while driving their mopeds in the city. Jaya reported one of the higher monetary contributions to her household among survey participants, nearly half of the household income. She was also one of the few women who mentioned receiving help from a male family member with her paid work. When there are large orders, “There are difficulties, but my husband helps in straightening the gloves. Gloves are inside out, so he helps to make them straight.” If the work needs to be completed urgently, Jaya would buy food from a canteen instead of cooking, “We have to bring meal from outside and eat. The most important is to deliver the work.”

43 While most studies, including this dissertation, focus on domestic responsibilities such as cleaning, cooking, and caregiving, Jaya’s comment points to women’s responsibility of having to schedule and manage time for herself and her family members.
Daxa, who had two types of home-based work, would have her sons iron the ready-made garments while she worked on the sewing machine. While most of the informants’ children helped after school, some children would stop their schooling in order to contribute to the household. Girls, especially eldest daughters, are more like to be pulled out of school early to help with paid work and the unpaid work in the household (Burra 2001). Shanta, the young homeworker in Rajivnagar, dropped out of school to start working when she was 12 years old, while her sister remained in school and is now attending college.

This use of unpaid family labor as a survival strategy is another source of exploitation of workers in capitalist production. It sustains inequality as children spend time working instead of studying, even dropping out of school to work fulltime. The process of learning where one stands in the class structure starts much earlier than when one enters the labor market, and the family is recognized as a first site of this process (Crompton 2006; Lareau 2003). In home-based work, however, children also form their sense of identity as a worker through the actual participation in home-based work.

This process became apparent during our visits to Jamalpur, a neighborhood located on the eastern bank of the Sabarmati River. We were conducting interviews at Nikila’s two-story pucca house. Her family had been in Jamalpur for a while, and they lived in the older section of the slum. Most of the homes in this area of the slum were permanent and on secluded and quiet alleys, a welcomed moment of calm in stark contrast to the busy atmosphere of the market road just

---

44 Pucca denotes a home made of concrete with a permanent roof. Other types of dwelling include semi-pucca, usually made of concrete walls and a tin roof, and kuccha, traditional dwellings made of mud and a straw roof, but also used to denote temporary homes of found material, such as plastic and plywood. Jamalpur, like many slums that have existed for some time, had all three types of housing types. The homes on the outer edge were kuccha and belonged to more recent migrants to the city, while families who lived in the area longer and had more resources, such as Nikila’s family, had built pucca and semi-pucca houses.
outside Jamalpur and the dirt lane enclosed by the cramped and slanting *kuccha* homes that led us here. Nikila’s home was at the end of the road, close to the river. It even had a backyard of sorts, as their home was at the edge of the neighborhood, against the overgrown land of a former textile mill (see Figure 8). Her family had constructed a small seating area in the back, a place to sit outside in the shade. We began our interviews in the back room with the door open to the backyard to let in light. As was often the case when we conducted interviews, in the room were Nikila’s family (her daughter, mother-in-law, and younger sister-in-law) and her neighbors (some waiting to participate in the study). Every other woman had a bowl on their lap, threading needles through the beads in the bowl and sewing them to the borders of a scarf. Even Nikila’s husband, who came home from work halfway through our visit, took a bowl and started working. Unlike sewing a

*Figure 8. Shilpa's backyard with a former textile mill chimney stack in the background*
garment, this work could be completed anywhere, picked up and placed aside easily. Both times that I visited their homes, this was what they were doing, threading and sewing beads to scarves whenever they had a free moment, sitting on the floor waiting for dinner or in the backyard to catch a breeze—any moment their hands were free.

While I was interviewing Nikila, I noticed that her daughter, a toddler, sitting nearby with a neighbor, was playing with the beads in the bowl. Later, when I starting taking photographs of the girl, Jayshree explained to me that the daughter was helping with the work, and in fact, her small hands were threading beads onto a string. Her mother nudged her to continue for me, smiling proudly at her daughter’s ability. Nikila and her family laughed as they told me that she is only three years old. This little girl, along with the others in the room, even during a time of leisure or rest, made use of their free hands to labor. When I returned a couple months later, the family was taking advantage of the cool weather by sitting in their backyard, with the old textile mill in the background. They were at “leisure,” with bowls, beads, and thread in hand. Even at the age of three years old, Nikila’s daughter was learning that play or leisure should be work.

*Women’s Labor*

Home-based work is a telling illustration of how material and ideological forces work in tandem in the reproduction of relations of power. With the informalization of work and the lack of social support from employers or the state, households are in a state of insecurity and often face cycles of poverty. Participants of this study began work because their economic contribution was needed. However, their job choice was limited because of economic and social conditions, and home-based work offered an opportunity to work while maintaining their primary role as caregivers. However, home-based work, with its fragmented and flexible production system, is a
global strategy to minimize costs of production for employers and capitalists (Carr, Chen, and Tate 2000). This hierarchical production structure takes advantage of gendered constructs to offer low paid and irregular work to “housewives” (Allen and Wolkowitz 1987; Benería and Roldan 1987), with little threat to existing class relations through collective action (Sudarshan and Sinha 2011) or to power relations in the home (Kantor 2005; Khattak 2002). In their study of homeworkers in Mexico, Benería and Roldan (1987:166-167) argue against analytical dualism that considers class and gender relations as semiautonomous systems; rather, class and gender are integral and integrated dimensions, ideology plays a role in economic relations as much as the material basis of society does for ideological processes.

My contribution here is the application of a social reproduction framework that distinguishes work/labor, and so does not separate the paid work and unpaid work activities of women if both are exploited as labor. The process of disconnecting production from social reproduction resulted in a tendency to analyze the relations in these domains as related yet separate, a practice that Benería and Roldan criticized. Adopting their perspective, I approach material and ideological relations to be integrated and seek analytical frameworks that allow us to overcome this dualism. In this chapter, I argue that one way to achieve this is to define activities by their relationship to the alienation process of capitalist production, rather than relying on capitalist definitions of productive work being those activities that result in the production of commodities. Women’s strategies to address their time and space constraints as home-based workers reveal how activities in the social reproduction domain are appropriated as labor. The irregularity of subcontracted work is an effective method for this process. Unpredictable work orders, seasonal work, prevalence of urgent orders, and lack of job security all contribute to a high degree of uncertainty regarding one’s daily work schedule. While women would attempt to create space and
stability for their home-based work, for example, through scheduling or taking on more than one type of home-based work, the irregularity of both their paid work and their caregiving responsibilities made it difficult to maintain boundaries between the two.

There are two ways that capitalism exploits the labor of social reproduction. One is by taking advantage of cultural and social norms that keep women in the home, providing a ready and cheap labor force. Social reproduction’s role in the appropriation of labor is not always apparent, but because women are compelled to stay home to complete these domestic tasks a production system is able to enter the home, justifying the work’s irregularity and low payment rate. The image of the young mother working on bracelets while cradling her infant is a clear example of how her caregiving work is being appropriated as a cheap labor supply by allowing her to participate in both roles concurrently. The possibility for women to interrupt their daily activities to complete work orders offers capitalism an attractive and profitable production system, while it is presented as a work option for women to better address household care needs, reproducing gender ideologies.

A second method, and related to first, is the use of unpaid family labor. When women have urgent orders or receiving more than one at a time, they would rely on other family members to help complete the work as unpaid workers. While some might argue that the piece-rate system resolves this issue, since the orders that family members complete result in higher earnings, this ignores the exploitative system that compels families to employ survival strategies to address their precarious condition (in part due to the very low wages of piece-rate work). In addition, this practice of relying on family members, and often children, encourages employers to continue the practice of irregularity of work. Because of this unpaid work, contractors are reassured that the orders will be completed. The use of child labor is another troubling factor. Not only is their labor
being exploited, but it also reproduces class relations, materially (in that children are denied schooling) and symbolically (as they learn their position in the class structure at a very early stage of life).

This does not mean that women are stuck in a system of exploitation in which they are powerless against larger economic and ideological forces. Rather, because work is conceived to include those creative activities with the purpose of transforming material and symbolic life (Bakker and Gill 2003), women’s participation in home-based work, while it invokes exploitation, is also an example of their agency. Women’s comments of working in order to contribute to their households are an example of the strategies that they employ to address difficult situations. While the “empowering” potential of these strategies is limited because they occur within an exploitative system, they still signify active participation by women to affect and, in some cases, transform their environment. Before moving on to this discussion of how women reproduce and contest power at work, in the home, and in civil society, the next chapter continues to examine the use of women’s labor in capitalist production against the construction of the gendered entrepreneurial subject.
Chapter 5. The Gendered Entrepreneurial Subject

Like many large Indian cities, Ahmedabad experienced significant changes in its economic, political, and social fabric as a result of economic liberalization, including the growth of a feminized workforce in the export industry (Elson and Pearson 1981) and the informalization of work (Breman 1996; Castells and Portes 1989). In the previous chapter, I discussed women’s experiences with informality and the strategies employed by women to address conflicting roles when work takes place in the home. In Chapter 6 I will discuss how these spatial and temporal strategies maintain the symbolic boundaries of family and work for women, but first I turn to a symbolic construction of the mainstream development paradigm, the gendered entrepreneurial subject. This construction reflects the social turn in the development field—the inclusion of social dimensions in economic development—that remains grounded in neoliberal thinking. Scholars have noted the use of feminism to achieve neoliberal goals (Eisenstein 2005; Fraser 2009), and, in the gender and development field, how the construction of the entrepreneurial woman has served the interests of the market in the name of development and empowerment (Keating, Rassmussen, and Rishi 2010; Rankin 2001). Similarly, in this chapter, I question the conviction that micro-entrepreneurialism is the answer to poverty and inequality, and ask how this discourse perpetuates social and economic injustices. Using the case of home-based workers, I argue that there is a contradiction between the gendered entrepreneurial subject as typified in the development field and the realities of informality as it exists in capitalism.

Civil society is active in the construction of this subject. The proliferation of civil society organizations involved in social and economic development, with the NGO as its most well-known form, fosters an idea that development has become more grass-roots and democratic than the past
monopoly by the state and market (Kamat 2003, 2004). However, this sector cannot be considered as autonomous from the dominant political economy, and NGOs are in fact involved and influenced by the “systematic reorganization of the political culture” (Kamat 2003:93). I find that SEWA, as a membership-based organization that is involved in substantial program-based development, including microfinance and capacity building, contributes to this construction of the entrepreneurial subject. After discussing the construction of the gendered entrepreneurial subject, I examine two films produced by SEWA to document how the organization employs strategic representations of women’s empowerment that are linked to hegemonic discourses of neoliberalism.

The second half of this chapter examines women’s actual everyday experiences with this entrepreneurial subject. Critical gender and development scholarship has been helpful in examining the intersection of capitalism, development, and gender; yet, most empirical studies have focused on the micro-finance industry and the women who use micro-finance services (see Karim 2012; Keating, Rasmussen, and Rishi 2010; Radhakrishnan 2015; Rankin 2001). I expand the discussion of the gendered entrepreneurial subject to include women who participate in home-based work and focus on the setting of work for the analysis. Many women who participate in micro-enterprises complete their work from their own home, and the characteristics of home-based work blur the line between the independent entrepreneurial worker and the dependent contract worker (Chen 2014; Prügl and Tinker 1997).

I find that two characteristics of entrepreneurialism, capital and autonomy, are present in home-based work not as sources for empowerment, as depicted by micro-finance institutions, but as sources of exploitation. I discuss the homeworker’s subjective experiences of her work in relation to the construction of a gendered entrepreneurial subject in development discourses, and
I show how characteristics of informal work can be misconceived as entrepreneurialism, specifically, owning the means of production and flexibility of work time. I ask how, through these practices, the gendered entrepreneurial subject is present in home-based work and what are workers’ experiences with this “entrepreneurialism.” Examining women’s experiences with informality in the home reveals the contradictions of the gendered entrepreneurial subject.

The Gendered Entrepreneurial Subject in Development

In the past three decades, there has been a surge of interest in women’s entrepreneurship in the Global South. Policy makers and development practitioners promote and encourage women’s entrepreneurial abilities from the conviction that increasing women’s market-based opportunities is key to lifting women, their families, and communities out of poverty (World Bank 2012). In a shift from earlier practices, the post-Washington consensus is that social and economic dimensions must be addressed to ensure inclusive and sustainable development (Stiglitz 1999), and increasing capabilities, especially women’s, is essential (Sen 1999). This new focus remains grounded in economic thinking, as empowering women is not only held to be the right thing to do but to be good business as well (Revenga and Shetty 2012).

In this environment, micro-finance projects, which uphold the self-help and individual entrepreneurship of mainstream development, have flourished with support from governments, NGOs, and social business enterprises. The beneficiary of this movement is specifically gendered female; the majority of borrowers of micro-loans are women (Reed 2011), and micro-finance institutions are often explicit about their gendered preferences in customers. Women, most often poor women in developing countries, are targeted as they are seen as more reliable in repaying loans and, presumed to be more altruistic than men, will use earnings to support their household (Prügl 1999). Providing women with access to credit is believed to have more positive effects on
household welfare than when men have access to credit (Pitt, Khandker, and Cartwright 2006). The entrepreneurial woman is seen as a driver for economic growth and development in her community, and her participation in work brings potential for societal transformations, including helping her household escape poverty and transform gender roles (De Vita, Mari, and Poggesi 2014).

The emphasis on women’s entrepreneurialism is in line with the construction of a gendered neoliberal subject. This process is reminiscent of the global market’s use of young women of the global South in production factories, reproducing gender constructs that define young women as docile, nimble, and cheap labor power (Elson and Pearson 1981). Supporting women’s entrepreneurialism reflects a shift towards including women as agents of development; yet, there remains a need to critically examine the use of women’s labor in these practices and discourses. Despite the inclusion of social factors in development, multilateral agencies, such as the World Bank, a prominent proponent of women’s empowerment through entrepreneurialism, retain economic-centric and colonialist discourses of neoliberalism; a prime example of this being the marketization of empowerment through microfinance while continuing to ascribe gender inequity to “traditional culture” (Bergeron 2003). The construction of the Third World Woman into the “rational economic woman” has been described as a tool to open financial markets in areas that are closed to global capital (Rankin 2001). Furthermore, in the enthusiasm for developing women’s entrepreneurial skills, a “universalized entrepreneurial womanhood” emerges from the conviction that there are basic principles of entrepreneurship and education that are universally shared by women in developing countries (Radhakrishnan 2015:267).

The rise of the entrepreneurial woman came at a time when the meaning of home-based work underwent a transformation. Rather than being seeing as a form of traditional craft production
or a hobby for idle housewives, home-based work began to be seen as an opportunity for women to develop and foster their entrepreneurial abilities (Prügl 1999). The focus on women as agents of development and the microenterprise movement created a reversal of values associated with womanhood and the home; womanhood is no longer limited to nurturance but now includes breadwinning as well, while the home became a site of nurturance and microentrepreneurial activities (Prügl 1999). In a study on microenterprise support groups in Nepal, Rankin (2001:29) argues that these women-only groups have a “functional role in anchoring the subjectivity of rational economic woman in a national civil society,” as they mitigate the threat to cultural ideologies that entrepreneurial (and public) activities might bring. Similarly, the appropriation of motherhood for capitalist production, under the guise that home-based work does not impede women’s ability to attend to their domestic responsibilities, resembles “nationalist rhetoric in constructing women as the antidote to capitalism” (Prügl 1999:98). The entrepreneurial woman is another example of how women “bear the burden of being cultural repositories, subjectively resolving the balance between the old and the new” (Oza 2006:7). Home-based work allows for the integration of women in the economy without disrupting imagined notions of gender and nation.

**SEWA’s Development Strategies**

SEWA’s development programs participate in this reproduction of the gendered entrepreneurial subject. While it began as a labor union, its dual strategy of struggle and development allows the organization to venture into new forms of support for its members, including movement-oriented approaches, but also cooperatives, microfinance, and capacity building. SEWA (2013) explains this detour into development as necessary to support women’s ongoing livelihood needs while also building collective strength and bargaining power.
women’s capacities, through literacy, access to capital, and leadership training, provides them with tools to develop their own vision of a just society. However, its overemphasis on socio-economic development (it has nearly twenty sister organizations just in Gujarat offering a range of services, from health to trade facilities to banking) and the ensuing professionalization and institutionalization required to support these programs is an example of the NGOization of social movements found among other community-based NGOs (Alvarez 1998; Kamat 2003a; Miraftab 1997). This is a move from consciousness raising and demanding transformative social change to “technical managerial solution to social issues of poverty and oppression,” such as developing skills for economic livelihood projects rather than addressing the structures that foster economic inequality (Kamat 2003:90). This process is linked to the neoliberal project of state disinvestment in social reproduction needs as NGOs have come to replace state actors in development projects (Eisenstein 2009). NGOs are presented as a grassroots and community-led alternative to the “top-down” approach of 20th century development; yet, scholars have questioned the ways in which NGOs are being incorporated into a neoliberal privatized model of civil society (Kamat 2004). SEWA, with its substantial ties, through funding and collaboration, to the state, global policy actors (such as the World Bank and the UN), foreign states (USAID 2015), and private corporations, including Mastercard (Pandit 2014), Vodafone (Chukkath 2016), and Primark (Primark 2016), are examples of its cooperation with the state and capital and part of the “development hegemony” (Kamat 2003a; Sahoo 2013).

Video SEWA and Representing Workers

SEWA’s approach to organizing women workers today reflects the ideological shift in the neoliberal development agenda, namely, through the construction of women’s empowerment to mean her entrepreneurial abilities. A look at SEWA’s multi-media productions demonstrates this
move. Two films produced by SEWA Video, one produced in 1984 and the other in 1995, are a
telling representation of this change and the organization’s representation of the “woman informal
worker” from activist to entrepreneur.45

*Manek Chowk* is SEWA’s first production, filmed in 1984. The film’s subjects are the
city’s street vendors, and the title comes from the film’s location, Manek Chowk, a neighborhood
located in the old city of Ahmedabad that is famous for its large street market. The film focuses
on one vendor, Rajniben, a vegetable vendor at Manek Chowk and a SEWA member. In her
protests of unfair treatment that vegetable vendors face from the authorities, *Manek Chowk* is overt
about the class dynamics at play. In a particularly shrewd comment, Rajniben accuses city officials
of ignoring street vendors and only listening to “those in multistoried buildings” (the middle and
upper class). SEWA does not change the presentation of Rajniben; she is presented as she is. She
sits on the floor surrounded by her produce; she is wearing old and tattered clothes (only wearing
the blouse and skirt usually worn under a *sari* and considered undergarments). Throughout the
film, Rajniben is visibly angry. She shouts at the camera and waves her hands in exasperation, at
times so forcefully that the baby in her lap starts to cry. SEWA, the organization, is absent. It is
neither a subject in the film, nor is it visible through the production of the film.

A decade after this first film, SEWA produced *I Am Shakti* in 1995.46 It has been screened
at multiple international film festivals and has received numerous awards. This film was made a

45 Video SEWA was established as a cooperative in 1984. It has produced 200 documentaries to
document issues affecting women informal workers. SEWA staff produces the films, and topics
are decided in collaboration with SEWA members. The cooperative also offers production
services; clients have included Women’s World Banking, the United Nations, and Star Plus, a
private television channel in India. The films are used both as development tools for women
informal workers as well as for international audiences, with screenings at international film
festivals. See more at www.videosewa.org.
46 *Shakti* translates to “power,” and is a Hindu female deity representing power and strength.
few years after the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991, and during a time when the gender
development field began to be defined by entrepreneurialism and women’s empowerment.
Rather than focusing on the class identity of informal workers, it follows one woman, Hiraben,
and the economic and social impact that she experiences since becoming involved with SEWA.
The theme addresses the multiple inequalities that poor women face in India, and shows how
Hiraben becomes empowered through SEWA’s capacity-building programs. The decision to
incorporate the multidimensional and intersecting identities of women is significant and needed;
however, it comes at the cost of ignoring structural inequalities. In place of the angry vegetable
vendor, fed up with the class inequalities that she sees every day, we are presented with Hiraben
who, with some help from SEWA, has been able to succeed within the structural limitations of her
society. She empowers herself by building her capabilities, and thus becomes a contributing
citizen. SEWA plays a central role in these films. The organization, its goals, and its successes,
becomes a focal point in the story and is the propeller of change. SEWA is also more present in
the production of the film, as the aesthetics and behavior of Hiraben in *I Am Shakti* are more
fashioned. She is well behaved, dressed nicely, smiles often, and speaks clearly. She portrays the
acceptable image of a working woman. Rather than being angry at the class dynamics in society,
she gives advice to viewers on how they too can succeed. Her demands are less threatening than
the first. She is not angry; she just wants the opportunity to succeed in this society.

Of course, these two films are not a complete representation of SEWA as an organization.
But as cultural objects of the institution, produced by SEWA itself and viewed by informal workers
and development practitioners, they offer insight into how SEWA represents itself in relation to
changing development discourses and SEWA’s growing role in the development field. Its first film
is an example of a participatory film production in which cameras were placed in the hands of
women workers, many of them illiterate, to capture their daily life and the issues they face (Interview, May 14, 2014). It was an experiment with film’s potential for the organization and its members. By 1995, when *I Am Shakti* was produced, SEWA employed conscious and deliberate strategies to present a particular message and to advertise its programming and services. In this later film, the organization had a much more visible presence in the film and Hiraben’s growth is tied to the SEWA programs in which she participated, with an emphasis on the productive potential of women if they are given the opportunity.

**The Entrepreneur and the Home-Based Worker**

Current development discourses rely heavily on the neoliberal notion of “empowerment” with its focus on individual responsibility and capabilities to address poverty. The construction of an entrepreneurial subject derives from this project to develop women’s economic skills and so to support their integration in the economy. This analysis considers the construction of the entrepreneurial subject in the homeworker. By centering the analysis in the domestic space, the space in which much of the enterprising woman’s labor is often located, I address the multiple institutions and settings in which expressions of neoliberal technologies occur, including in the family and home, and not just in the economic sphere (Ong 2006).

Because of the workplace setting and ambiguous employee-employer relationship, contract home-based work is often refashioned as self-employment, though it actually exhibits characteristics of both independent and dependent work (Chen 2014; Prügl and Tinker 1997). I examine two characteristics of home-based work, costs of production and indeterminate schedules,

---

47 Other early videos captured this participatory process, such as *Parde Ke Pichee* (Behind the Veil), which consists of a single scene of a group of Muslim women discussing why they do or do not wear a veil.

48 In fact, India’s census data does not distinguish between self-employed home-based work and contract homework (GOI 2007).
that are misconstrued as those of entrepreneurship, investing in one’s work and autonomy. First, it is common for homeworkers to bear a number of costs related to production. As the work does not occur in a designated workspace by the manufacturer, it is the responsibility of the worker to provide her own tools, materials, and, of course, workspace to complete the job. Second, because of the “autonomy” of home-based work, often discussed as the “flexibility” of deciding when to work, workers have to employ a form of self-management that differs from similar work conducted in a factory. Both of these processes gain particular significance because they occur in the setting of home where women’s other roles are performed. I argue that these are examples of embodied labor, in which the spatialization of labor constructs gender relations but also inscribes social differences such as race and caste (Ferguson 2008; Rioux 2015) that contribute to the appropriation of social reproduction for capitalist production.

I focus on the subjective dimension of home-based work, specifically in terms of balancing work and care. The production process, of course, has a significant influence on women’s experiences with work; here, however, I am interested in outlining how women interpret the experience of working in the home and internalize the meaning of their paid work and their caregiving. I juxtapose this subjective experience to the mainstream emphasis on the entrepreneurial woman in gender and development practice, critiqued from the left as the construction of a neoliberal subject (Rankin 2001; Wilson 2011). How does the subjective dimension of women’s participation in home-based work reflect this constructed subject and how does it diverge from it?

Owning the Means of Production or Exploitation?

As garment workers, most women used sewing machines and related tools, including machine oil, scissors, and needles, to complete their paid work. Homeworkers were expected to
purchase these tools themselves, since contractors did not provide them. If a machine broke (or was even lost permanently, such as Nita’s sewing machine after the fire) it was the homeworker who paid the costs of fixing or replacing the machine. And as the machine was her means for earning, it was essential to pay for these expenses so that she could continue working; though, a broken machine often results in a predicament since women depended on the money earned to pay for the repairs or replacement. Money would have to be found from somewhere, such as moneylenders (Bhatt 2006). For some women, who had a more secure situation and had been able to accumulate savings, they used this to cover unexpected costs. Kaia relied on her savings when her machine stopped working. She always placed a portion of her earnings in a savings account—it is meant to pay for her children’s private school tuition49—but when her machine broke, she used some of it to pay for the repairs. She was renting the machine, like the rest of the homeworkers we spoke with in Vatva, but the cost of repairs was her responsibility.

Depending on the work, homeworkers were also required to purchase some of the materials. Contractors would provide a partially finished product and any embellishments, such as lace or beads, but other materials were the homeworkers’ responsibility. Just as homeworkers were expected to provide for and maintain upkeep of the machines and tools necessary for the work, they also had to provide the threads, needles, and machine oil. Depending on the woman’s degree of mobility, some workers would buy thread and other materials directly from contractors.

Manisha’s contractor provides thread with his orders, but he deducts the price from her wages. She has few options to purchase threads elsewhere as she does not live near markets. As a young wife and daughter-in-law with a toddler to care for, it is difficult for Manisha to travel to

49 As discussed in Chapter 7, because of the poor state of India’s education system along with other factors, such as school’s distance from home, some families would send their children to private schools.
those markets where she could find thread for lower prices. The area where she lives, Sarkhej, is in the western outskirts of Ahmedabad and off a secluded road; it costs around Rs. 10 in a shared rickshaw to arrive at the end of the road where it intersects with the busier Jawaharlal Nehru Road. From there, she would have to pay for an additional shared rickshaw or bus to arrive at a market along Jawaharlal Nehru Road. To reach the city center, it could cost up to Rs. 50. The costs, along with the time required in this pieced-together transportation did not justify traveling to buy thread. This is a similar situation for Biliksha who lives in Fatehwadi, a neighborhood not far from Sarkhej. She is a young mother of two, living with her in-laws, and with limited opportunities to go outside her neighborhood. Biliksha buys threads directly from the same neighbor who supplies her with orders for school uniforms. She reasoned that if she bought threads at the neighborhood shop, she would spend Rs. 6 per spool, so she chooses to pay the Rs. 5 to the contractor for each spool. Her neighbor, Zarina, at 42 years old and with two grown sons, has greater independence to travel to the markets for better prices. There she buys the larger spools in bulk to save a few rupees.

Homeworkers are also responsible for providing a site for production and overhead costs. Women often do not devote a section of the house for work; rather, their work areas are within the domestic space of the house. 50 She would also have to pay for the electricity used for the machine and for light when working at night. Women’s production practices were an outcome of trying to keep these costs down. They would place their sewing machine by a window to use natural light instead of overhead light (see Figure 9), but in these cramped homes the daylight that entered was

---

50 In her research on male and female homeworkers in Mexico, Miraftab’s (1994) found that there was a gendered allocation of workspace. While male homeworkers would construct a separate space for work, female homeworkers were more likely to complete the work in the living area, and so were not separated from their domestic responsibilities.
Figure 9. Working by the window for light

Photograph by author.

often weak. If they could avoid it, few women worked after sunset since they would have to use electricity, though, the urgency of orders would at times require them to work through the night.

Having to pay for production costs was often mentioned as a negative aspect of their work. For the other characteristics of the production system, namely, low wages and irregularity, women were mostly compliant. They reported their piece-rate wages without complaint and noted that work was regular. After we asked if they believed their wages to be fair or if they ever asked for higher wages, women would answer that their contractor paid good wages and they were satisfied with it. The lack of dissatisfaction with their work arrangement is not surprising. Being isolated from other workers, they had limited knowledge of the market, market prices, and value of their
products (Chen 2014). Protest against unfair wages was risky as women depended on these earnings and contractors could easily find more compliant workers in another area.\(^5\) In this environment, workers were grateful for the work that they could find.

However, when asked to describe their work materials, women were quick to note that they had to pay for the threads, needles, and other costs. In fact, it was on this aspect of their situation that a handful of women were compelled to confront their contractors. Two women, Nita and Mohsina, stopped their work for this reason. When we met Nita for the first time in October, she had recently stopped accepting work from her contractor. Originally, her task was to topstitch material that would be used for chaniya choli (festive dresses), but then her contractor asked Nita to add an understitch as well. Nita refused because she would have to use more thread, and the cost for a spool of thread, for which she was already paying, would be too high of an expense to justify the low piece-rate wages. So Nita would not pick up any new orders until he agreed to offer more money to compensate for the cost of thread. When we saw Nita again a few months later, she had started working again with the same contractor. He had agreed to pay a higher piece-rate wage, Rs. 8 per piece rather than Rs. 5.5, and he was even dropping off the materials and picking up completed orders. Nita tells us, however, that it was a wedding season, so the contractor was in need of workers. After the peak season, he could easily return to the lower pay rate or even stop providing work.

Between our first visit with Mohsina and our second for the interview, Mohsina had stopped her paid work. When we returned, she told us that she was no longer receiving orders from the contractor. Similar to Nita, the costs of traveling and materials had been too high to justify the

\(^{5}\) SEWA Union has worked to address the vulnerability of home-based workers by negotiating for higher piece-rates and fairer working conditions with private enterprises and the State (Chen et al. 2005).
low pay. Mohsina had additional difficulties because of her disability. She told us that she was born with a weak leg, but it became worse after an operation when she was a teenager. Now, Mohsina relies on a crutch and it is difficult to walk long distances. Since she cannot travel easily and her husband is bed ridden, her eldest daughter would go by rickshaw to the contractor for picking up and dropping off orders. The rickshaw trip would cost Rs. 30. Mohsina also used her own thread on the orders, and she used an electric machine because she was unable to work with a manual machine. After accounting for these costs, the remaining earnings made the work unavailable, and so she stopped taking orders.

Why would women object to the system of contract home-based work only in these cases? They do not object to the low wages or irregularity of work, but they do when they have to use their earnings to cover costs of production. The machines, material, workspace, all the costs that would usually be borne by the employer are instead placed on the worker. While their exploitation from the unpaid, surplus labor remained hidden, workers are aware of their exploitation by contractors and manufacturers to cover the cost of production with their own earnings. The few instances when women made the decision to stop work (rather than the contractor stopping work), they pointed to these unfair costs as a reason. Because of the tenuous employer-employee relationship, lack of work contracts, and isolation from other workers, it is very difficult for homeworkers to fight for better wage and working conditions on their own (Prügl 1999; Sudarshan and Sinha 2011), and participants’ acquiescence to their work conditions corroborates this. But there was something about having to spend their already limited earnings to cover costs of production that women recognized to be unfair in the work exchange.

Home-based workers are often categorized as either fully self-employed or fully dependent workers, but work arrangements are not so clearly delineated, and sub-contracted home-based
workers are an example of this as workers bore many of the costs and risks of production despite being dependent on work from contractors and manufacturers (Chen 2014). Proponents of micro-entrepreneurialism highlight the opportunity for poor women who have limited access to the formal labor market to build their entrepreneurial capabilities by investing in their work. Yet, it is this aspect of their work that women acknowledged as an exploitative work process. The frustration they have towards needing to “invest” in their work goes against the development literature that presents the Third World Woman as only wanting a chance to develop her entrepreneurialism. Instead of women benefiting from this investment, they were compelled to pay for costs of production using the limited earnings that could have been spent for their household. It was this economic exchange that women deemed unfair. A similar subjective experience with home-based work is also seen in the autonomy of work and women’s managing of their time to complete work. In this case though, rather than the expenditure of earnings, it is the expenditure of women’s time that causes conflict and contradiction for women, their work, and their family’s wellbeing.

*Autonomy of Work or Disciplining the Self?*

In a study on business practices of women in Asia, the desire of greater autonomy was a significant reason why women left formal employment to start a business (Xavier et al. 2012). Neoliberal principles of profit, competition, and entrepreneurialism are most often associated with formal markets and jobs; yet similar economic subjectivities are emerging among poor women of the Global South as a result of NGO and government interventions (Karim 2011). While the women portrayed in case studies of microenterprise ventures are often described as entrepreneurs, the line between the independent self-employed worker and the dependent contract worker is often unclear. Is a woman who runs a small enterprise out of her home, whose products are sold to
manufacturers, a business owner or is she selling her labor? For example, Daxa owns three machines for garment work (one of which was paid by a loan) and receives various orders from different contractors. When too many arrive at once, she asks her sister and her teenage sons to help. Is Daxa enjoying the autonomy that comes with running an enterprise or is the flexibility and irregularity of this work taking advantage of her and her family?

The autonomy that entrepreneurialism provides is in line with the *homo economicus* subject, in which neoliberalism is not just a form of governing states and economies, but a form of governance over individuals as well (Foucault 2008). So what are the economic subjectivities of homeworkers, such as Daxa, in these neoliberal times? How does home-based workers’ status of being both dependent and independent workers affect their experiences of entrepreneurialism? As home-based workers, women experience a higher degree of autonomy than if they worked in a factory. They do not have to go to a designated place of work, they do not have to follow a strict working schedule, and there is no oversight during the time of production. These characteristics define homeworkers as more independent than factory workers, and, in fact, autonomy is a deciding factor as the flexibility of work allows women to complete their domestic responsibilities.

Home-based work provides workers with a flexible working day and limited oversight; yet, in the absence of scheduled work hours and managers, homeworkers would create and enforce these parameters themselves. Allen and Wolkowitz (1987) provide a compelling argument of how homeworkers are in fact very constrained in their daily work decisions. Despite employers’ minimal interactions with workers in the production process, manufacturers and contractors exert a high degree of control over labor through the segmentation of labor process, piece-rate pay

---

52 While there is no oversight during the time of production, contractors inspect the products and withhold payment if they judge the quality to be low.
system, and lack of formal work contract (Allen and Wolkowitz 1987). It was in the interest of workers to finish their current orders as soon as possible since they would not receive their pay or more orders until then. To complete the desired production output, workers enforced self-management in the absence of a manager’s direct supervision.

However, in contrast to workers on the shop floor, home-based work occurs in the home where women’s participation in the production process is juxtaposed with their duties in the domestic arena. This characteristic of home-based work creates frequent situations in which women have to choose between work and care—instances when their two seemingly different roles, as worker and as mother (or wife, daughter, etc.), collide. Of course, many workers are confronted with this challenge, but examining the constraints placed on homeworkers against the ideological construction of a gendered entrepreneurial subject provides insight on how a particular work situation—flexibility of work and limited oversight—exploits workers under the guise of autonomy. The self-management required by a homeworker becomes part of a “technology of the self” to maximize the entrepreneurial subject. How this process plays out for a homeworker is especially important to examine in a time when the worker is defined by her potential human capital and labor is no longer limited to the workplace (Balibar 1994). Employing the concept of embodied labor, I connect this process to the ways that gender and other subjectivities are inscribed on the body under capitalism conditions.

Shilpa’s comments on the negative and positive aspects of working at home provides clues to how actual experiences with entrepreneurialism becomes a burden as her desire to earn more and to provide care to her family come into conflict. After marrying, Shilpa started working in a factory in order to contribute to a joint family household income. However, when her husband’s younger brother married, the older couple had to move out with their two toddlers. Without her
mother-in-law to look after the children while she was at work, Shilpa began working at home. She prefers home-based work since she could properly care for her two daughters, now 14 and 12 years old. She is proud that they are both still in school, and herself having briefly attended post-secondary school (one of the few in this study to have reached that far), Shilpa was glad to be working at home so that she could be around to support her daughters in their studies.

There were aspects of home-based work, though, that made it more difficult, even if the work was similar to what she had been doing at the factory. When she worked outside, Shilpa knew that at five o’clock in the afternoon, her work would be finished. She could go home and focus on her domestic duties, help her daughters with homework, prepare dinner, and any other household tasks that she did not finish in the morning. With home-based work however, work was always present. When a contractor gives her an order, there are various methods of control that push Shilpa to finish the order quickly. A direct form of control is instructions from the contractor to finish the order in a specified amount of time, and, if needed, Shilpa would have to stay up until midnight or later to finish the order. Less direct, but just as persuasive, is that she will not get paid or receive additional orders until the current order is completed and returned. “This responsibility is not there when you work in a factory,” she explained to us, “at five, I am free to go. But here in the home, we have the constant tension of this paid work and of taking care of the home.” Working at home has not made it more difficult for Shilpa to complete her domestic duties. She and others noted that home-based work always made balancing the two easier, but, in reflecting on the differences, Shilpa adds how the entrance of paid work in the home alters her approach to care and household work. When she would leave the factory at the end of the day, she would not have to think about the garments until she returned to work the next morning. At home, however, she has
pressure to complete her domestic work, which is always present, as well as the orders that are also waiting, stacked in a corner of the house.

Later in the interview, however, Shilpa points to this characteristic of home-based work as also being a benefit. Because she works at home, she has the possibility to make more pieces and earn more. With time, Shilpa told us, she has gained experience; she works faster and is better at gauging how long each piece will take, “at [the factory] I have to sit from ten to five, but there is limited income, Rs. 2,5000. Here I am doing the whole day work, whenever I get free, I can do this work. So the income is more.”

Her explanation differs from most of the other homeworkers who noted that they earn less now than when they had worked in a factory. Shilpa was one of the few workers able to maintain
a minimum of an eight-hour workday at home. She starts work at ten in the morning, after completing her household duties and bringing her daughters to school, and works continuously until six in the evening. She will stop for lunch, but today, she tells us, “I have so much work, so I cannot rest.” She would work in the evening, but her husband does not allow it, “In the evening, I only do routine work, preparing food, chores, and so on. I definitely do not do this work in the night. My husband clearly says ‘no’ to this work at night.” She explains that her husband wants her to spend time with the family since she is working all day.

Her work commitment and confidence in her skills was evident, and she was willing to invest in her work. Shilpa owned an industrial sewing machine, which, at Rs. 15,000 (US $242), was more expensive than most of the sewing machines. When Shilpa began working at home, receiving orders from the same employer she had worked for at the factory, she had to make this investment because it was the type of machine required to complete the work.

Shilpa would seem to be an example of the entrepreneurial woman highlighted in development literature. She made a substantial investment so that she could continue her work at home. With more flexibility in working hours and her increasing skills, she is able to produce at a higher output and so earn more, than when she worked at the factory. An additional benefit is that it is easier to support her daughters, which, with a strict factory schedule was more difficult to achieve. Yet, at the same time, Shilpa told us that she experiences “tension” from working at home.

In her study on women’s health and wellbeing in a New Delhi slum, Snell-Rood (2015:54–55) discusses women’s use of the word “tension” to describe the stress from having to provide for and manage family troubles in an environment that returns little support for the women themselves. Snell-Rood finds that this tension is an “embodied burden,” by which women’s health is affected not only by material deprivations but also by the “fears and brooding over how to provide for their
families” (2015:154). Connecting this to social reproduction theory and the experiences of the homeworker, Shilpa’s comment about tension points to the embodied burden of caring for her family while working from home, but it is an example of embodied labor that exists in a capitalist production system. Her body and its physical potential to work within the set hours of a day becomes both a source of opportunity and limitation in caring and providing for her family. Shilpa’s appreciation of the opportunity to work more while, at the same time, having the tension of paid work in the home points to a reframing of responsibility that is placed on Shilpa when the amount of work she will complete appears to be her decision. Her family’s wellbeing becomes defined by her effort to work and her willingness to work “whenever I am free,” as she puts it—and as other women we spoke with also noted. Contributing to over forty percent of the household income, her work was more than merely pocket change; rather, it was a considerable means of income for her household.

In this same space, her domestic responsibilities remain present. She would rather work more, even in the evening, but her husband does not allow this, saying she should spend time with family—fulfilling her emotional duties to the family. Instead, she occupies herself by completing some household tasks, such as preparing food for the next day so that in the morning there is more time to work. With no set schedule, it is up to Shilpa to determine when she works and the length of her working day, knowing that the more she works the more she will earn. Her desire to work, as one of two earners in a tenuous economic condition, conflicts with the need to also provide care for her family. This tension, believing that she can earn more but prevented from it because of her other duties, becomes her embodied burden as she reflects on how her physical and emotional provisions to her family constrains the amount of monetary help she can provide to the household (and how her work, in turn, impedes her care).
Conclusion: Women’s Labor and Informality

In a period of economic crisis and retreating state support in public goods, changes that have affected poor women of the Global South the most; the remedy prescribed by international agencies is the poor woman of the Global South refashioned as an entrepreneur. However, the initiatives that development organizations support to foster the entrepreneurial woman cannot address the unequal balance of power that influence women’s experiences with work. Programs, such as microfinance, rely on the notion that women will benefit from engaging in these entrepreneurial activities. A popular image of a micro-entrepreneur would be the woman who, with some grit, sweat, and help from a loan, capitalizes on her sewing hobby, starts selling clothes out of her house, and expands to a large enterprise that employs and thus empowers other women in her community. Yet, behind the façade of microenterprises is the reality of possibilities for women. Scholars have already pointed out the complex social and cultural hierarchies that impede women’s success (Karim 2011) and the tendency to use loans for survival rather than entrepreneurial activities (Radhakrishnan 2015), let alone the profit-making aspect of microloans. This vision of the female entrepreneur has been unmasked, but what of the homeworker? Many of these entrepreneurial activities take place in the home, and in fact, it is often difficult to distinguish when a home-based worker is self-employed and when she works for an employer (Prügl and Tinker 1997).

How production processes play out in the home in interaction with women’s relation with this space is important to untangle when considering the development field’s use of the gendered entrepreneurial subject as the means to combat poverty, inequality, and cultural practices deemed oppressive. I argue that the two aspects of entrepreneurialism—capital and autonomy—are found in home-based work, but women experience these characteristics differently than how they are
illustrated in the microenterprise literature. Rather than profiting from their investments, homeworkers are required to pay for costs of production for the benefit of those further up the supply chain. In fact, in addition to manufacturer’s profiting from the homeworker’s unpaid surplus labor, they benefit from lower costs of production, as homeworkers would also have to use their earnings to pay for the tools and materials (Allen and Wolkowitz 1987). On this aspect of work, when women had to spend earnings on production rather than using the money for household needs, women confronted their contractors. For the second aspect, the flexibility of their work—deciding their work hours, place of work, and even type of work—is not the autonomy described by microenterprise supporters. Rather, as seen in Shilpa’s case, the homeworker is faced with an embodied burden of choosing between work and care.

Examining women’s experiences with home-based labor as an example of embodied labor acknowledges the connection between capitalist production systems and marginalized subjectivities. The construction of the gendered entrepreneurial subject conceals the exclusionary and unequal labor market for poor women in the Global South. The development literature emphasizes the importance of encouraging women’s entrepreneurial activities, yet, as I have discussed in this dissertation, women’s work options are limited. Rather, women choose home-based work because it allows them to be economically active while maintaining their gender roles. The setting of home is significant here because the temporal and spatial characteristics of their work become intertwined with their care tasks. In this setting where women have to invest in their work and have the potential to work (and earn) as much as they are willing to, work and care conflict with each other, by which women’s ability to provide for their families is impeded by these two roles. Whether it is having to pay for the costs of production, earnings which she could use for the household, or the ability to work yet another hour in the day, women are confronted
with the choice of which of her roles is more needed—a subtlety of the informal worker’s experiences that is lacking in the development literature. Paying for costs of production and perceived self-determination of labor is a common characteristic of home-based work, and it creates an illusion that workers seem to have invested and practice autonomy in the production of these garments and other products, obscuring the exploitation of the worker’s labor. Women’s actual experiences with informality in the home reveal the contradictions of the entrepreneurial subject constructed in the development literature as the characteristics that are used to define the entrepreneurial woman are also examples of her exploitation as a worker.
However, as I noted earlier, women are not powerless in these processes. In the following chapter, I examine the ways that women reproduce and resist power in the economy, the family, and civil society. I rely on Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus* to explain how women express agency within a limited set of boundaries. This approach helps address critiques from feminist scholars that critical studies of gender, work, and globalization overlook women’s agency (Kabeer 2000; Lim 1990). Including this analysis within a social reproduction framework that critically examines the ways “through which the social relations and material bases of capitalism are renewed” (Katz 2001a:709) maintains a commitment to exposing power relations that exploit women’s labor.
“What should I do if I am sitting idle at home? So I started this work.” Alka’s answer points to the devaluation of the many forms of women’s work, even by the women themselves. It follows the common perception that women participate in home-based work as something to do during one’s spare time, between washing clothes and preparing the evening’s dinner. In her comment, Alka is dismissing the value of her paid work and its contributions to the household, as well as the many other tasks that fill her day. Yet, the need for her to participate in home-based work is much more than just “something to do,” and her household and care responsibilities make it the case that there is, in fact, little time to be idle. Her comment is not a simple evaluation of why she works; rather, it points to the convoluted process in which women come to start home-based work and their experiences with informality.

In an earlier chapter, I wrote about my conversation with a group of older women in Keshavnagar and their concern of the lack of quality jobs for men. Repeatedly, in explaining why women were working, they said, “We need good jobs for the men.” The younger generation of women in Keshavnagar, in their twenties and thirties, acknowledged the need for women to contribute to the household because of lack of good work for the men in their community, but they also framed their participation in home-based work as something to do so they would not be idle. This concern of being idle seemed peculiar since these women were unlikely to have little idle or leisure time in their day. With increasing economic insecurity in poor households and retreating state support, women carry much of the burden to make up for deficiencies, and their time is increasingly strained (Floro 1995). Describing their paid work as a side job to do once they have completed their domestic responsibility diminishes the importance of their productive labor for
their family’s wellbeing. I found that this sentiment was not limited to Keshavnagar, as other younger participants shared similar explanations of working to pass the time.

These generational differences in women’s explanations of their need to work point to how the institution of the family shapes women’s everyday experiences with the material and social consequences of global processes of capitalism. Participants’ gender, class, caste, and religious identities have a significant impact on their experiences in the economic, family, and civic spheres. Yet, a more visible source of constraint and, at times, oppression, for women is their status in the family and community. This status is determined by a number of factors, including their age, marital status, motherhood, and presence of other women in the household (Dube 1997; Lamb 2000). Young women avoiding the perception of idleness is one example of how women frame their experience with work in a way that maintains social and cultural boundaries of women’s appropriate activities. Women’s position in the family influences the rules and expectations that shape their everyday experiences. These rules and expectations have an impact on their lives in the home, but also with work and civic participation. In the following pages, I examine women’s experiences in these three spheres in relation to their family status, and I ask how their daily practices reproduce relations of power.

Examining these boundaries helps explain how women’s actions occur within a limited set of possibilities, but at the same time offers opportunities to contest those boundaries and their limitations. Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of habitus offers a helpful framework in understanding how social and economic forces interact to shape women’s choices. Habitus, as a socialization process acquired by practice, is the ability to enact a role within a given social field. That much of this action is “unknown” reflects how social norms and power in a given field are embodied in a person and expressed through their behavior, feelings, aspirations, demeanor, and the like. The symbolic
boundaries through which people acquire status and resources frame the social boundaries that limit or provide material and symbolic resources (Lamont and Molnár 2002).

In this chapter, I examine how these symbolic boundaries are reproduced in the family, including by women themselves, but I also consider the ways in which these symbolic boundaries provide women with opportunities for contestation. James Scott (1985) called attention to those “everyday forms of resistance” that signify a silent ideological struggle of the subaltern against dominant groups. Cindi Katz (2001) distinguishes between the types of political responses that individual employ against power, including reworking, resilience, and resistance. In this chapter, I bring attention to women’s everyday practices and ask how they might be political responses to the relations of power that are embedded in their homes, work, and even civic opportunities. Following Harcourt and Escobar’s (2005:2) call for a politics of place, I center the analysis on those spaces in which “women define as their environment and what determines their livelihoods, being and identity,” including the body, home, and community. Examining women’s everyday place-based practices captures how women’s subjectivities are articulated, reflected, and formed in relation to space (Massey 1994), and it help avoids the overemphasis on structure in a social reproduction analysis (Ferguson 2008). For example, women often begin home-based work because it requires a skill that they already possess (having been taught by their mothers how to sew); this is an outcome of structural inequalities that provide women with few work opportunities, but it also points to women’s socio-spatial positions that encourages mothers to teach their daughters a skill to use in the home.

**Women and the Space of Family**

Woman’s status in her family shifts drastically over the years, more so than that of men. Women living in patrilineal and patrilocality cultures, such as in Northern India, experience a
distinct rupture when they marry and leave their natal home to join the household of their husband (Dube 1997). The bride’s move to her new home is marked by rituals of detachment from her natal family and incorporation into her marital family (Lamb 2000). Predicting this future move since birth, a daughter is viewed as “someone else’s property” and socially transient since she will eventually leave for a new family (Bhasin 1993).53

Women are thus visitors in both their natal and marital homes (Desai 2007). The delegitimization of women’s connection to her home is formalized by the lack of property rights for women in India, as women must rely on the generosity of their in-laws or natal male family members after abandonment, divorce, or widowhood (Agarwal 1995). This significant physical and social transition, with its resulting insecurity, is absent from the lives of men. Women continue to experience ambiguity and fluctuation in their relations with their previous family and new one for most of their lives, though a woman’s tie with her natal family often decreases over time as she builds more connections at her marital home, usually as a result of having children (Lamb 2000). This process of socialization and integration relies on the everyday tasks of household chores as well as symbolic practices of submission, such as veiling, that are the most stringent when a woman first enters the home, but then decrease with time (Dube 1988).

When a woman enters her husband’s home, she is confronted with a new social, psychological, and physical environment (Desai 2007), and her arrival results in changes to current relations within the family as well (Shah 1998). I remember a talk I had over lunch with Khyati, a SEWA staff researcher, of what it was like to move into a home as a new wife. When she married, she joined a large joint household, made up of her parents-in-law, their two sons (including

---

53 Lamb (2000) argues that the transient role a daughter occupies in her natal family does not mean that they are unloved or unwanted; rather, parents exhibit added intensity towards their daughters because of this looming departure.
Khyati’s husband), and their families. Khyati explained that everyone needs to conform after the arrival of a new family member, but it is especially difficult for the young woman as she is the one who is entering the home. Khyati had to adapt to her family’s way of living, their way of cooking, and it took a few years before she was accustomed to the new home. Though Khyati occupies a position of privilege, as a highly educated and higher caste woman, her remarks reminded me of Nikila’s sister-in-law who participated in this study’s survey. She had been living in Jamalpur for a couple of years already, but in contrast to her older sister-in-law, Nikila, who joked with her husband and mother-in-law, the younger wife was timid around her relatives. She spoke in a low voice and covered her face with the end of her sari when her older brother-in-law entered the room. Even after Nikila told her remove it to pose for a photograph, she kept it stretched out so that her face was hidden from the side. This performance of a deferential and submissive daughter-in-law follows the expectation that woman “should be like pliable mud—to be cast into a shape of his choice by the potter,” presumably to more easily discard her old loyalties and habits when adapting to her new family (Dube 1988).

The integration of the daughter-in-law in her new home does not come without contestation. Frustration is usually manifested in the relationship between the mother-in-law (sasu) and daughter-in-law (putravadhu), as this tends to be the most salient relationship for a new wife in her marital family. The mother-in-law maintains control over domestic affairs after her son is married, and she decides the daughter-in-law’s daily chores, movements, and interactions, even with her husband, but the sasu also holds an important role of welcoming and socializing her putravadhu in the family, all the more important since the daughter-in-law will look after her when she is older (Lamb 2000:72). This contradictory relationship of tension and tenderness between a
sasu and her putravadhu has long been a source of fodder for folk songs, tales, and TV serials (Chowdhry 1994; Raheja and Gold 1994).

In Keshavnagar, Usha and Asha were reticent in their answers during our first visit when Usha’s mother-in-law and other older women of the area were in the room. During the interviews, however, we were alone with the two young mothers, and they were more outspoken of the negative aspects of being a daughter-in-law. Asha was tired of having to give her earnings from home-based work to her mother-in-law, while Usha thought that looking after the children could be “really troublesome and hectic.” These frustrations were expressed in private, away from their elders, but daughters-in-law would sometimes participate in small acts of confrontation against family norms in the presence of their in-laws. Kashi, a home-based worker who participated in our survey, told us how she was tired of being bossed by her family, telling us, “they treat me like a worker, they should treat me like a daughter.” When we went to her home afterwards, her father-in-law was at home, and, according to the Hindu custom of purdah, Kashi was required to pull her pallav (the edge of the sari) over her face. Kashi, however, instead of holding the sari with her hands or pulling it low enough so that it stayed in place, held the pallav between her teeth, with the cloth only barely covering the side of her face. Kashi’s seemingly mundane action followed purdah while also resisting the nominal status she held in her household. These micro-resistances to feminine ideologies occurred through both silent and visible acts that question assumptions of women’s unequivocal submission and compliance, and point to women’s practices as efforts to portray an image of feminine domesticity and modesty rather than following them out of belief (Lamb 2000:197).

54 Purdah, its literal meaning being veil or curtain, is a system of seclusion found in Hindu and Muslim cultures that place restrictions on women leaving the domestic space, enforces a separation of public and private, and limits interaction between the sexes (Desai 2007).
When young women answered that they worked in order to avoid idleness, I wondered how much of this was to portray an image of domesticity. The women who shared this view were young, lived in joint households, and were responsible for the majority of household chores and childcare. Their roles and daily tasks are determined by their status in the family, and, as I noted in the beginning, saying that they worked to avoid being idle conflicted with their busy days that left few moments of rest. Women in general have fewer hours of rest or leisure than men because of their care duties (Floro 1995; Sayer 2005), but time inequality varies among women as well (Lamb 2000), and this dissertation’s survey reported unequal divisions of domestic work among women by age. Women forty years of age or younger were more often responsible for household tasks (such as cooking and laundry) and care of others than older women. The only task that women above forty years old (the age from which women are likely to have married sons [Lamb 2000:241]) participate in more often than younger women was grocery shopping. This often meant going to the neighborhood market to buy vegetables and other staple foods, but some women would travel to larger markets where they would find produce at lower prices.

The division of tasks among older and younger women is not insignificant as it contributes to women’s boundary maintenance, whereby their physical mobility and social interactions are controlled by actions and responsibilities beyond seclusion and veiling (Dube 1997:66). When shopping for daily produce, women would leave the immediate area of their homes to shop, and at times travel to markets outside of their neighborhood—a mobility that was often unavailable for younger women, either due to care responsibilities or cultural practices of women’s presence in public spaces. The act of buying groceries also pointed to greater autonomy over control of household money and consumption. As one daughter-in-law told us, she could not even buy snacks for her children without asking her mother-in-law for money. Going to the market was also an
opportunity to socialize with women outside of their immediate surroundings. One woman pointed out that buying vegetables was a chance to chitchat with other neighborhood women, and she would often stay longer than needed. This was also the task that, in the few households where male family members helped with household chores, men were more likely to engage in along with collecting water—the two daily chores that were conducted outside the walls of the home.

Young women had stricter standards to follow and could not be seen outside the home shopping leisurely to chat with neighbors. Their days were to be filled with chores and, if there was time left over, paid work. For young wives, this is the period of a woman’s life that is often understood as having the least autonomy, having joined a new, unfamiliar household (Vatuk 1987) and having to follow strict practices of modesty (Dube 1988). In their explanations, there was an underlying need to portray oneself as an active and contributing female member of the household. If they had a couple of hours free after completing their domestic chores, they found ways to make those hours productive (remembering previous chapters’ discussion of a production system that relies on these gendered divisions of labor in the home).

I find that women’s preoccupation with the avoidance of “idleness” is connected to their social position in the family and points the use of home-based work as a form of boundary maintenance for young women. Home-based work shapes and is shaped by women’s social relations in ways that maintain or reproduce what scholars have called “domestic femininity,” the construction of the ideal Indian (middle-class) woman to have qualities of self-sacrifice and devotion (Chatterjee 1989). Chatterjee centered his analysis on the legacy of colonialism, and scholars have continued to employ this concept to explain contemporary hegemonic constructions of womanhood and femininity in urban India (Radhakrishnan 2009; Ray 2000; Vijayakumar 2013).
In the next sections, I discuss how women learn their skills and their preference for this type work as a reproduction of that femininity. This ideal conflicts with previously understood work patterns of women belonging to lower castes, who historically have had to work because of their household’s economic condition. However, with the possibilities of economic mobility and anonymity that urbanization has brought, there has been an increasing sanskritization in Indian society, in which lower castes adopt practices of the upper castes (Shah 2010; Srinivas 1956), such as increased restrictions on women’s mobility. Women’s preference for home-based work can be understood as aspirations for upward mobility that maintain respectable femininity (Radhakrishnan 2009; Vijayakumar 2013).55

Before continuing though, I should add a note on the limited role of family relations in explaining power. Some scholars have noted that mothers-in-law, occupying a status of power over the younger women, play a significant role in reproducing the patriarchal order of women’s subordination (Chowdhry 1994; Wadley 1995), a sign of what some have called a patriarchal bargain (Kandiyotti 1988). Lamb (2000), however, notes the importance of the transient nature of family relationships and statuses. Women do gain power and authority with time, enjoying a period of autonomy that they did not have as daughters-in-law; however, as they age, they must relinquish (not without confrontation) their own position of authority to their eldest daughter-in-law, who then continue the cycle of “norms and values of kinship hierarchies” (Lamb 2000:240). Lamb argues for nuance in the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship, rather than relying on caricatures, and to contextualize this relationship within a kinship system of exchange and reciprocity. Focusing on relational conflict between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law also

55 For more on how home-based work is framed as an opportunity to achieve upward mobility, see Chapter 6.
misses the many disadvantages that aged women face in India as a result of multiplying structural inequalities (Vera-Sanso 2012) and patriarchal hierarchy (Ahmed-Ghosh 2009). Conflict and hierarchies between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship can be more emblematic of women’s limited actions within broader systemic oppression.

What I aim to show in this chapter is not that family relations are a cause of inequality, but rather that the family, as a site of ideological constructions and social organization (Collins 2000), is an ideal setting to examine the intersecting inequalities present in society. Women’s participation in work and civil society reflects the possibilities and limitations provided within a social field, which, in this case, is informed by a history of imperialism and capitalism. Women’s actions that maintain domestic femininity is a reflection of which sites they have access to exercise agency, and so provides women with a form of symbolic capital (even if not immediately useful).

*A Skill for Home and Work*

Home-based worker’s socio-spatial practices highlight their relations to space—how space shapes their daily lives, but also how women’s relations shape their experience with the home. Rabia, a SEWA community organizer in Vatva, explained that in their community women are not allowed to finish their education and instead learn a skill for the home. Home-based workers are performing to an ideal by staying home, but they are of course also working. The sewing skills that young women learned, often from their mothers, provided them with a skill for economic activity while also reproducing women’s role in the family (Abreu and Sorj 1996). Knowing how to sew can be used as an additional source of income for poor households, first at the woman’s natal home and then, if married, for her conjugal family.

Becoming home-based workers often seemed to require just a minor modification from their daily tasks as homemakers. Many women already had basic sewing skills, and some even
owned a machine for home use. Becoming a worker was then a simple process of finding orders. Except for a handful of women who had worked outside the home in small enterprises, starting home-based work did not entail any spatial changes; she could remain at home, without significantly altering the house or her presence in the house and continue to use a skill she already had, but this time for pay.

How Lata, a 39-year-old homeworker in Amraiwadi, began home-based work was typical of most of the women we spoke with. Decisions to start homework often arose from a significant life change; for Lata, it was moving out of her parents-in-law’s household. About nine years ago, she and her husband had to separate from their joint family household, which was growing after a younger brother married, to create a nuclear household with their three young sons. Her husband started a tailor shop in their new home, but now they had the responsibility of the entire household budget, in addition to the costs of renting their home. They were not earning enough from their tailoring, Lata tells us, “So my husband said that if the two of us are working like this and we are not getting much money then let’s leave it. He can get a job somewhere, and then we bring this home-based work, and I’ll do it.” They decided that her husband would find a job outside with more stable income, and, since they already had a sewing machine, Lata would find contract work to complete at home. Having learned how to sew as a child, this is the only work that she wants to do, “I was interested in this work since I was young. I had decided that I don’t have to learn any other work but this.”

The other women we spoke with echoed Lata’s experience of applying her sewing skills for work. Lajvanti, a young woman in Rajivnagar, has also been sewing since she was young; all the other women in her family know how to sew, and she learned from them. Shilpa, as well, learned from her mother. When she married, Shilpa was able to use this skill in her new household.
Having this skill was useful, especially since a wife or daughter-in-law could do this work at home along with her household tasks.

This is what Shanta, a young woman living with her parents in Rajivnagar, is also planning for. She left school after the 9th grade to help her mother with household work and to start paid work. Shanta does not mind having had to leave school. Unlike her studious younger sister who is now in college, she tells us that she did not enjoy school. Shanta is a skilled homeworker; after showing us a purse made of cloth scraps that she had designed herself, she boasts that she only has to look at an item of clothing to know how to replicate it.

Jayshree and I visited her home and sat on a cot while she showed us her work. The machine was against a wall, not far from the television so that she can watch her favorite TV serials while working. Next to the machine, under a window, was the plastic chair she sits on while working; when we arrived, there was a pile of cloth on it, orders she still had to complete. We asked if she had to make any changes to the home to accommodate her work. Shanta gives a small laugh; she has not thought of this. This is her natal home, a transient space for most young Indian woman (Desai 2007). It is not Shanta’s place to arrange this house for her work. She is not yet engaged, but her parents will likely start discussing marriage opportunities soon. She will enter a new home with her future husband and his family, and then, she tells us, she can think about arranging space for her work. At her marital home, Shanta plans to continue her home-based work. She knows that this work will be useful for her husband’s family.

Her sister finished school and is now continuing her studies towards a college degree; Shanta, instead, learned a skill for work that she could do after completing her household tasks. While Shanta will not have a college degree, seen by some parents as a route for “upwards”
marriage prospects (Still 2011), when her parents begin their search for her marriage partner, she
does have this practical skill to offer to her new home (Abreu and Sorj 1996).

Young women learning how to sew, along with other practices and rituals within the
family, is part of a socialization process that shapes and constraints their sense of self and their
possibilities for the future (Dube 1988). Sewing is framed as a skill for the home and so a natural
learning process for women (Abreu and Sorj 1996). The gendering of the skill devalues its
economic productivity and allows manufacturers to provide only meager wages to women workers
as women’s income is seen as secondary to their husbands, a process that Abreu and Sorj (1996)
calls “the domestication of homework.”

The practice of learning sewing skills illustrates women’s relations with space through
gendered socialization in the family. The home is a setting where she learns her gendered activities
and identity in the domestic and economic sphere. The process is intertwined with her other social
identities. Belonging to a lower caste, class, or religious minority, her economic activity is
necessary and planned for as mothers teach their daughters a vocational skill that can be utilized
within the walls of her home. And it also intersects with the economic production process that
exploits and reproduces these gendered ideologies to maintain a flexible and low wage workforce
(Benería and Roldan 1987; Mies 1982). Due to the circumstances in which home-based work
exists, women gain very little economic stability, and there is a lack of opportunity to challenge
gender relations in the home (Bose 2007; Ghavamshahidi 1996).

But where is women’s agency located in this process? In participating in home-based work,
do we explain their actions as blindly following the image of feminine domesticity, or what Kabeer
(2000) criticizes as representations of women as “cultural dupes” of a patriarchal system? This
skill also provided a form of reworking and resilience for women with limited access to resources.
Sewing was a resource for themselves in marriage prospects and for their families in times of economic need.

In the next section, I examine women’s explanations of why home-based work is their preferred type of work. Through these conversations, women’s agency shows through in both their choice of work and their reasoning for why this work is better, despite having to work with very limited set of choices. Applying a gendered analysis of habitus, women’s actions, aspirations, and possibilities are examined within a matrix of power relations, accounting for the interaction of both the subject and the structures in which she finds herself. It accounts for gender as a symbolic identification, but also an embodied existence expressed through space and time (McNay 1999). The space and time that habitus accounts for is significant here, as women’s actions differ according to variations of space and time.

Preference for Home-Based Work

In a previous chapter, I discussed Asha and Usha’s story of leaving their job at a factory to work at home after they had children. Home-based work was described as a preference—a better option in light of the other work available. In comparing home-based work to what it would be like if they worked outside, women frame their status as home-based workers through the difference from the other jobs available to them in the informal economy. In particular, home-based workers emphasize the ability to be a “good housewife” while also being economically active (Abreu and Sorj 1996). Among the types of informal work available, including home-based work, street vending, or labor and service providers (such as domestic worker, waste picker, or construction worker), home-based work was their preferred or only choice. Reports on women in the informal economy highlight the commonalities as well as particularities of these different sectors (Basu and Thomas 2009; Chen and Raveendran 2011). They do not, however, discuss how
the different types of jobs compare for the women who participate in them, and how they frame work, in this case home-based work, as different from that of other forms of informal work.

This difference was prominent in Kajal’s explanation of why she preferred home-based work. Kajal lives in Rajivnagar, a neighborhood in West Ahmedabad, with her husband and two teenage children. Rajivnagar is a mix of *pucca* (permanent) and semi-*pucca* (semi-permanent) residences. Most are single-story, two-room homes. Some blocks share a water pump; others receive water from the city’s water tank trucks, with large plastic containers to hold the water dotting the alleys. The residential blocks of Rajivnagar were quiet and clean, with the ubiquitous laundry hanging from homes. Outside, the main road is busy with shops and vendors selling goods (including the store where women buy their needles and threads), noisy construction, and the constant traffic. Jayshree and I had arrived by a road on the other side of railroad tracks, which cut the western bank of the city in half. The land on either side of the tracks is used as a dumping ground for residents’ trash, but it is also the home for a group of migrants that had come to the city for work; plastic sheets held up by strings and poles substitute as homes for these families. Across the road is a row of large outdoor wedding venues catering to the upper class of the city.

Kajal’s husband is a construction worker, but work has been irregular lately; he has only been able to bring home Rs. 5,000 a month (US $81). Her 16-year-old son is still in school while her daughter, 18 years old, helps with household work, Kajal’s home-based work, and teaches sewing courses at the SEWA Academy community center in the neighborhood. Kajal’s eldest child, a daughter, married a few years ago and now lives with her marital family.

---

56 SEWA’s community centers, located in neighborhoods and run by a community member, offer skills development and vocational training.
Kajal has been participating in home-based work for ten years. When we interviewed her, she was sewing the buttonholes in blouses, earning between Rs. 500 and Rs. 1,500 a month (US $8-24), depending on the season. She supplements this income by selling quilts that she makes with scraps of cloth. Despite the low earnings, Kajal prefers home-based work. Many of the women in her neighborhood are domestic workers, cleaning homes in Vasna, an affluent locality bordering Rajivnagar, just across the tracks. Comparing domestic work and other types of “random work,” such as street sweeping or construction, to home-based work, she tells us, “This work is better than that. This I only have to do from home, peacefully…outside, I would have to take the time, while at home I can sit for the work as per my convenience.” A neighbor sitting with us agreed, adding, “You can look after home and do work also.” Kajal brings up the space and time of home-based work that makes it desirable, but these characteristics also distinguish her status as a worker different from that of other women workers, who leave their home to engage in manual work.

Similar notions of difference between home-based work and “outside work” were heard in Sarkhej, a neighborhood on the western edge of the city. Manisha, a 22-year-old who participates in three types of home-based work, sari fall, chaniya choli, and dupatta borders, believes that home-based work is more “comfortable” and “better” because it is done at home. When we ask what is the difference between home-based work and work completed outside, she points to her education as a reason (she had passed the 10th grade, higher than the survey average of 8th grade). Her mother was a casual laborer who worked in construction, but she explains, “I am not going outside for that type of labor work. I am not able to do such labor work. I am an educated person and so I think it is better and feel comfortable working at home, sitting at home and working.”

In Amraiwadi, Jaya’s reasoning for why she did not work outside also relied on comparisons to outside work, but it was rooted in the need to properly care for her daughter.
Currently, she was receiving orders from her sister’s husband, who owns a small business enterprise. She went to this factory for a month to train, Jaya went to this factory for a month. She knew that she could continue working there or elsewhere, but she decided to work at home for her 5-year-old daughter. She told us that she has to stay home because “the outside is not a good place.” Now her daughter is young, but Jaya explains that her responsibilities to her daughter will be greater in a few years, alluding to the increased regulation of young girls at the onset of puberty (Dube 1988). Jaya expresses anxiety over her ability to care for and protect her only child, a daughter, from the “outside.”

This outside world that Jaya is wary of is not the one in which the modern middle- and upper-class Indian woman lives, though Jaya is cognizant of it, as Jaya later tells us her hope is for her daughter to go to college and find a formal job. In the case of her daughter’s aspirations, Jaya does not want her daughter to be a homeworker; instead, she hopes her daughter will leave the house so that she can “know the outside, how there is a city and all. She can go outside; she can learn many things.” I discuss Jaya’s hopes for her daughter further in Chapter 7, but here I point to the contradiction that Jaya holds for herself—needing to stay home to properly care for a daughter—and Jaya’s aspirations for her daughter to leave the house and learn about the “outside.” Jaya and the other women assume that when we ask about their working outside, it is in the casual labor work that is available to them, but for their daughters, they have other notions of what is acceptable work.

Poor and working class women often have to participate in some type of economic activity because of their households’ economic conditions; yet, participants’ explanations of why they work at home diverge from common perceptions of the Dalit or low caste and even Muslim woman working because of need. They reason that, despite working, they are following an ideal of
woman's dedication to family wellbeing, reminiscent of middle and upper class and caste’s feminine domesticity (Chatterjee 1989; Radhakrishnan 2009). Because of their decision to work at home Usha and Asha no longer worry about their children and household tasks while working, Kajal can look after the home “peacefully,” Manisha reasons that it is appropriate work considering her education, and Jaya is fulfilling her responsibility to stay home for her daughter. They construct their work as appropriate through a definition of difference from other women in similar social positions to themselves. As members of the lower class and caste, their work options are limited to the informal economy, but instead of working outside, in other homes as a domestic worker or in public spaces as a construction worker, they participate in work that reaffirms Indian femininity. This portrayal of difference remains rooted in classed notions of work and space, as it is the menial work available to them outside of the home that they do not want. For example, while Jaya works at home to better care for her daughter, Jaya hopes her daughter will work outside of the house, but in a professional setting.

Two exceptions to these distinctions that home-based workers employed reveal the differences within class that shaped women’s choice of work. In these examples, women did not have the option to work from home. Vali migrated to Ahmedabad four years ago from a small city in western Gujarat with her husband and three children. They found a small, one-room home to rent in Rajivnagar; her husband began work as a sweeper at Ahmedabad’s courthouse, and Vali collected paper waste from homes to recycle until she found a contact to provide her with quilt orders. Bharti is a widow in Jamalpur. With limited income, she also lives in a one-room home, which she shares with her mother-in-law and her two sons. Bharti’s main job is not home-based work, but as a night-shift hospital peon, caring for patients. She adds borders to scarves to earn extra income, working on it during the day when she is at home. When we asked what others
thought of her working at the hospital, especially a nightshift, she answered, “What would they think! They think that I take care of my children. The work is good. That’s all.” A neighbor sitting nearby added, “If she doesn’t work then how would her house be managed.” Vali and Bharti’s situations are such that they have to take these other jobs. For Vali, she was new to the city and did not yet have a network to find home-based work. As a widow, Bharti is the sole earner in the household and had to find work that would sustain her household. Women who had an investment in portraying feminine domesticity, for example, they were better-educated or had young children in the home, were more likely to participate in home-based work (Noponen 1987); households which were in more precarious conditions did not have that option.

_Work Orders and Gender Roles_

When women participate in economic activity at home, how does this work affect their relations in the home? Despite the hope that women’s earnings would be a source of intra-household bargaining power, increasing women’s access to income does not automatically translate into power because of the persistence of social norms in the family (Kabeer 1999). Home-based work is not seen as offering much empowering potential for women as it does not significantly change gender relations in the home (Pant 2000). The isolating nature of this work and its physical and symbolic closeness to domestic work result in women having few opportunities to develop a worker identity and feel entitled to the money they earn (Kantor 2003).

I found some examples when home-based work would disrupt traditional gender roles in the home, but only because of its precarious and exploitative characteristics. Because of the irregularity of the work and moments when large orders had to be completed immediately there were a handful of cases when home-based workers would rely on their husbands to help cover domestic tasks, if there were no other adult women in the household.
Home-based workers were faced with the constant possibility that their work would end, but the other possibility was the arrival of a very large order that had to be completed with urgency. This could cause significant disruptions, especially since a woman’s day was often filled with other duties. However, in a handful of cases, this aspect of the production process would sometimes upend traditional gender roles in the home. Out of the hundred home-based workers surveyed, only ten women would receive help from male family members, usually husbands and sons. All but one of them lived in a nuclear family, and so it was less likely that they could rely on other adult women to finish household tasks when large orders arrived. However, of this group, five of them told us that men only helped with buying vegetables or collecting water from the water trucks or neighborhood pumps. Notably, as I mentioned above, grocery shopping and collecting water are tasks completed outside of the home. Of the remaining five women, their husbands and sons helped with household chores in the house, such as cooking and cleaning. I spoke with two of these women in the interviews about why their husbands would help them, and they both pointed to urgent and irregular orders.

Darshana, a homewoker living in a joint family household in Rajavir, was accustomed to the home-based worker’s schedule. In fact, she had started home-based work because of its flexibility. Her contract work of packing leggings was in addition to the work she did for her husband’s own contract home-based work and looking after the family’s kindling business. With the prevalence of gas burners for cooking, the selling of kindling was not bringing in as much income as before. As there were fewer customers, Darshana thought to herself that she could take on a third job, “When I finish my household work, what should I do? There is work only when a customer comes, otherwise I just sit. So I have decided to take this work.” The synthetic leggings are popular among younger women in Ahmedabad, a modern alternative to the traditional cotton
salwar and churida pajamas. The work was monotonous, ironing, folding, and inserting leggings in their plastic packaging, but she could watch over the household easily while working, stopping at any moment if she was needed elsewhere, for example, if someone wanted to buy kindling. However, there are times, usually once a month, when the orders are quite large and the supplier needs them completed with urgency. Her supplier will drop off 700 pairs to be completed immediately. Jayshree gasps as Darshana tells her that she needs to wake up at 2 a.m. to finish the order. Darshana’s daughters and sons, who were watching television on a cot near ours, laughed at our response. “I just wake up. I wake up and finish the orders,” Darshana tells us, “My husband helps on those days. I only have to wake up and start to work. He helps prepare the children for school.”

Women still had other tasks to attend to when a large order would arrive. Darshana was one of the few women whose husband would help with household tasks if she did not have time to complete everything. Daxa was another one. She lives in Nobelnagar, not far from Rajavir. Daxa, similar to Darshana, also relies on various sources of home-based work. She receives orders from subcontractors for salwar, children’s wear, and ironing garments, as well dress orders from neighbors. With different suppliers, multiple orders would sometimes arrive at once. Daxa’s husband and her two sons help with cooking and cleaning when she has an urgent order. Her sons also iron garments if she receives sewing and ironing orders at the same time (see Figure 12). When her sons have school exams, however, Daxa does not let them work.
It is only in these moments that male family members would help with household tasks, recognizing women’s paid work as a significant economic contribution rather than seeing it as secondary to her domestic roles. As urgent orders had a number of consequences for women and their work, including the ability to earn money but also the need to maintain good relationships with contractors, it was necessary and allowable for women to place productive activities before other activities. Yet, we must ask if a man completing his wife’s chores because she wakes at 2 a.m. to finish a work order is actually destabilizing gender norms in the division of labor at home.

SEWA, Sewa, and Community Organizing
This section examines how relations of power in the home shape women’s experiences with SEWA. SEWA Academy community-based centers provide a possible source for women to break through oppressive or limiting spatial and social boundaries. Recognizing the difficulty women faced in traveling to the organization’s offices, SEWA built a presence within the community. These community centers allow SEWA Academy to reach women who would have not been able to leave their neighborhood to participate in an unknown organization. A second barrier to overcome was getting women to trust the organization, even if a center was in the community, and to recognize its utility. Rather than hiring an outsider to run the center, SEWA would find a member of the community to organize it. Additionally, SEWA offered services that would have a direct and immediate impact on women’s economic and social wellbeing, such as literacy classes and vocational skill training. Then they could also use the space to offer other capacity-building programs that were just as important but of less immediate value for women, such as “SEWA Movement and Leadership Training” or “Civic and Citizenship Training.” It would also use the space for meetings to share information of SEWA’s other services. For example, on our visit to Sarkhej, a staff member from Mahila Housing SEWA Trust joined us to give a presentation about her organization’s housing and infrastructure services for informal workers.

While women’s paid work kept them in the home, their participation with SEWA was an opportunity to leave their homes. At SEWA, they could gain practical skills, such as sewing or literacy, but it was SEWA’s strategy to provide them with other forms of self-development. The organization recognized that there was a need to need to sustain its grassroots leadership base for the organization, and encouraging worker members to develop their confidence and leadership skills was an important aspect of that goal (SEWA 2009a). The numerous steps SEWA would take
to bring women into the organization, provide them with ready skills, and steadily develop their leadership capacities is an example of how the organization organizes workers through *struggle* and *development* (see Chapter 2). In this way, the organization is able to reach women by offering tangible resources, and at the same time provides them with opportunities to participate in SEWA’s multidimensional strategy of development.

However, SEWA’s work does not occur in isolation. There are many barriers to overcome, and while SEWA addresses some of the core issues affecting women, the organization must work within an acceptable set of limits. In this section, I present two examples of how SEWA’s work on the ground is shaped by the social relations that exist in the settings where these activities take place.

First, I found that woman’s degree of participation was often linked to her material and social relations. Women with limited resources or time were less likely to be active members of SEWA; this was especially the case for young mothers living in joint families. Even the centers reflected the unequal social relations within the community. For example, out of necessity for a large space, most centers were located in the homes of families who occupied a higher status in the community; though, SEWA’s governing principle of caste and communal harmony required the center would be open to all members, regardless of caste or religion.

A second way that civil society participation reflects social inequality is the reframing of women’s activism as a service. SEWA, an acronym for the organization’s full name, is a play on words: the Gujarati and Hindi word *sewa* (pronounced as and interchangeable with the word *seva*) translates to “sense of service.” Traditionally, *sewa* signified “service to the husband” for women, but the term gained a political dimension during the nationalist movement for Indian independence as women appropriated the use of *sewa* from the home and family to the public sphere (Sarkar
Following independence, women continued employing notions of service to create space for their political and social activism while maintaining upper-caste and -class feminine respectability (Kumar 2003). *Sewa* reproduced colonial upper caste and class ideologies of sacrifice through servitude to the nation (Watt 2005), and this Gandhian notion of service was critiqued for maintaining a hierarchy of benevolent providers and pitied beneficiaries (Skaria 2002; Srivatsan 2006). Ciotti’s (2012) study of Dalit women’s political engagement in North India found that the idiom *seva* has been resurrected among low-caste political activists. She argues that the rise in the use of *seva* is linked to upward class mobility among Dalits, but that it is not merely a reproduction of upper-caste ideologies (a process of *sanskritisation*). Rather, Dalit and low-caste women appropriate the term for political mobilization and affirmation of their agency.

The women I spoke with who were active participants and organizers would frame their community work as a service. While SEWA emphasizes active verbs in its organizational material to describe women’s role in development, such as *shakti vekas* (capacity building), I found that in the field women’s conceptualization of activism as service allows them to participate in political action without direct confrontation to and risk from unequal relations and structures of power. The use of service, while reproducing class and gender ideologies, provided them with a means to participate in community development work to empower themselves and their communities. In this section, I argue that, in order to succeed in organizing women within a community, SEWA’s work *in practice* (in contrast to how its programs work *in theory*57) must rely, in part, on reproducing some of the social boundaries that the organization seeks to overcome.

57 I distinguish between an organization’s activities “in practice” and “in theory,” to highlight how planned goals and strategies often proceed in ways that are not planned or expected in the field.
To examine how social identities and relations shape involvement in community-based activism, in these next two sections I focus on a four women who are active members of the organization and who received training by SEWA to be local organizers and teachers. During the interviews, these women explained why this “social service” was important and how their active participation in SEWA had an impact on themselves as well as the women in their community.

Organizing within and beyond Boundaries

Zarina, an older woman in Fatehwadi who lives in a nuclear household with her husband and two grown sons, provides literacy lessons at the local SEWA Academy community center. She has been a member of SEWA for thirteen years, and, she tells us, is a “seven-star member”—one star for each of the programs in which she has participated, including Vimo SEWA, SEWA Bank, and leadership training. Zarina tells us that SEWA has had an incredible impact on her wellbeing, especially when considering what life was like for her when she was younger. When she married, she moved to her husband’s village and lived with him and his extended family who followed strict Muslim practices of purdah. She had few opportunities to leave her home, “There was restriction on where we can go. Even if we had to go to the hospital, we still would have to go in purdah.” That changed once she moved to Ahmedabad with her husband. She heard about a bank for women and went to learn more about it. As she became involved with SEWA through its services, Zarina decided that she would like to help SEWA with its work. From her experience in the village and seeing how women were similarly secluded in this urban neighborhood, she

---

“Active members” are members who have participated actively in SEWA programs for three years or more and have participated in more than one program (Chen et al. 2006). “Leaders” are members who receive special training for organizing and to support development in their community (Chen et al. 2006). In our survey, of the fifty women who participated in SEWA’s programs, 22 women were active members of SEWA, four were literacy teachers, and three were local organizers. For this section, I include community teachers and organizers who were involved in the second stage of research (the interviews), three literacy teachers and one local organizer.
recognized the importance of supporting women’s capacities. Zarina had been fortunate that her parents allowed her to finish her schooling up to the 9th grade and that she was literate. Neighborhood women would often ask her to read letters that they received, but Zarina wanted the women to read for themselves rather than relying on her. Working with the literacy department at SEWA Academy, literacy classes began in Fatehwadi and Zarina was one of the teachers.

As Zarina became more involved with the organization, both her and her husband witnessed a change. Her husband tells her that this work is good because now she is more active and not as timid as when they lived in the village. She tells us that “Now, I can go anywhere by myself only. I have gained this confidence thanks to SEWA.” When she first started participating in meetings she was too nervous to speak up and say her name, which would require saying her husband’s name. Now, Zarina can stand in front of a group of 500 or even 1,000 women and tell them her full name without fear.

Zarina believes that teaching literacy classes is one of her most important contributions. Through her literacy classes, Zarina seeks to serve the community. She believes building woman’s capacities has an impact not only on that one woman but on her children as well, and so the whole community will benefit from it. In her community, “women stay within the four walls of the house” and have limited exposure. In contrast to the groups of men one sees gathered around the city’s chai stalls, women do not often have the chance to meet and spend time with other women who are not family, with their outings being limited to family or religious reasons (Desai 2007).

---

59 It is common for women to avoid uttering their husband’s name out of respect. Instead, a wife would use an alternate title, such as “my son’s father.” Encouraging women to say their husband’s name aloud and in front of other people is one of the first issues tackled in SEWA’s capacity-building programs.
As a literacy teacher, Zarina uses the opportunity of having an audience of women to “bring awareness in them” by conveying the lessons that she learned from SEWA. Undergoing this self-development does not occur in isolation, but in collaboration. When Zarina incorporates capacity-building strategies in her teaching, she provides a space for neighborhood women to discuss their troubles and share stories, a space that would not normally be available to many women.

Zarina had the opportunity to be more active in SEWA, for a variety of reasons, including her age, status in the family, and, importantly, her husband’s support. Offering literacy classes was an opportunity to share what she learned through her participation and role in SEWA with women who could not take an active role. Take for example, her neighbor, Biliksha. As a young wife with two children and living in a joint family, Biliksha does not have many opportunities to leave her home because of restrictive family rules and her caregiving roles. As such, it was difficult for her to attend literacy classes and other SEWA programs, but she has learned from the women who could participate. We ask her what she learned. Sitting on the floor in Zarina’s house with her young daughter on her lap, she is quiet for a few moments and answers, “I can write my own name, [pointing to her daughter] her father’s name and all, write down a mobile phone number, and I learned how to use the mobile phone.

Through this community-based organizing, SEWA reaches women that an outsider would not have been able to. It would have been difficult for Biliksha to attend SEWA’s programs, especially those outside of Fatehwadi. However, because the organization had a visible presence in Fatehwadi, with the center around the corner from Biliksha’s home, and a direct association with the community because the organizer and many of the teachers where women from the area, the work of SEWA became accessible for women like Biliksha. While she did not participate in
the organization directly, she learned of topics and issues relating to women from her neighbors who could participate.

Zarina and Biliksha’s stories represent both the possibilities and limitations of SEWA’s work. SEWA aims to support and organize women workers, but social and cultural relations exists that prevent them from reaching many women, often the most marginalized. Zarina is able to be an active participant in SEWA because she has few barriers that prevent her from doing so. She is the eldest woman in her family, with no young children. With the salary of the three men in her family, her participation in home-based work is not as necessary as that of women who contribute to a large share of the household income from their home-based work. Zarina had the desire and will to become more involved with SEWA, and because of her social position, she was able to. Biliksha, on the other hand, has much more limited autonomy over her day. As a mother of two children and a young wife living in a joint household, she does not have much influence in her household. However, Biliksha still acquires information through Zarina and the other women who are active participants. While she cannot participate in SEWA, and maybe she does not have a desire to, she does receive some of its benefits.

Yet, even Zarina faces limitations because of her social position. Zarina is one of the few women whose husband not only allows her to do this work, but also encourages her to be involved. However, Zarina admits that if her husband forbade her from participating in the organization, she would have had to listen to him, telling us, “If he had a problem [with SEWA], then he wouldn’t have allowed me to go!”

Younger women would also be active participants of SEWA. Shilpa and Usha in Keshavnagar were literacy teachers, and both were thirty-years-old and mothers of young children. They came to know about the organization because family members and neighbors were involved
with it—having a family or neighbor connected with SEWA was often a main source of access. Both Shilpa and Usha talked to us of their work’s importance for other women, such as the disadvantages that illiteracy brings to women and how learning to sign their name or read bus numbers benefits women’s everyday lives, and also how they themselves have benefited from this work. As literacy teachers, this “social work” brought them recognition in their community, and they experienced a change in status as a result. Shilpa is seen as a “good woman” who has helped women in area, and she receives “blessings” from her community, while Usha tells us how she is able to interact with older women on a more equal level because of the training and experience of teaching. Through this work, Shilpa and Usha resist the passivity expected of the young Indian mother. Rather than being seen as “Kiranbhai’s wife,” Shilpa and Usha have a position other than that of wife or mother in their community, and are recognized in their community, even by their elders, for their development work.

Does women’s participation in SEWA and their community challenge or reproduce relations of power? Zarina, Shilpa, and Usha’s actions and understandings of those actions occur within material and social boundaries that inform their relations in their family and community. Women framing this work as a form of service temper their participation in an organization that seeks to overcome many of those barriers. They define it as “social work” or “good work.” Usha explains it as a “desire to serve someone” and Shilpa wanted to “do something that helps these women to awaken themselves.” The Indian sociologist Leela Dube (1988:17), in examining the socialization of the Hindu girl, writes how women are taught to accept the unequal division of labor and care as part of the feminine moral character of privation and sacrifice. Scholars have noted the use of service to support women’s political participation and questioned its use in
reproducing gender ideologies (Ciotti 2012; Sarkar 2001), similar to the socialization role of servitude according to Dube.

I find that from their responses, their work as literacy teachers remains grounded in gendered notions of women’s duty of service, yet they experience a change in themselves and in their status in the community. By framing this work as service, literacy teachers experience their own empowerment as they witness the change that they help bring to women’s lives and so their community. However, for the same reason that they frame this work as a service, these practices take place within a generally accepted set of limits on women’s role and status. As I discussed in Zarina’s case, her family status allowed her to be more involved with the organization. While Shilpa and Usha’s experiences with this work resulted in subtle shifts in their relationship with and position in their community, such as Usha teaching older women rather than the more commonly assumed order of young women obeying their elders, their use of *sewa* maintained the broader power relations of their community. Women would at times be active in the reproduction on these systems of inequality. Zarina, who earlier had lectured us on the negative practices of her Muslim community that keep women indoors, told us as we were leaving that her older son had recently become engaged. Jayshree and I gave her our congratulations, and I asked how the addition of another woman to the household would change things, since Zarina was currently the only woman in the house. She answered that it would be very helpful having a daughter-in-law since she would help with the household work, providing Zarina with more time to participate in paid work and in SEWA’s work, such as teaching classes. Because there remains the need to care, if Zarina decides to devote more time to *sewa*, someone else will have to fill that role. This explains part of the reason why it was easier for women with married sons or with older daughters to be community organizers, in addition to the status that being the eldest woman in the household provides them in
the community. This illustrates how women’s attempts to alter sources of power remain within a set of systems that shape both the purpose and action. Zarina’s comment that she would not participate in SEWA if her husband did not allow her to and her looking forward to the help of a future daughter-in-law, points to how her actions are limited by the social boundaries that are shaped by her position in society. Women address issues of inequality and deprivation within the limited set of possibilities available to them while avoiding direct confrontation of the structural inequalities that shape their relations in the family, community, and work.

*Maintaining Order*

Darshana (the homeworker whose husband helps with cooking and such when she receives large and urgent legging orders) was one home-based worker we interviewed who was also a SEWA community leader. She works at home for many of the same reasons already discussed, economic need, filling the hours of the day, having to stay home, and so on. However, a look at how and why she works in relation to family dynamics also reveals that home-based work is a device of boundary maintenance; it enforces the home as her appropriate place, it reproduces her relations to production as an invisible worker, and it maintains her subordinate position in the family. This is in contrast to her family’s reaction to her participation in SEWA, which required more time away from the home and her duties in that space. Her story points to experiences with work and civil society in relation to the family, and it is also a telling example of how change is cyclical, and how progress made can be reversed.

Darshana lives in a joint family household with her husband, her two daughters, two sons, and her mother-in-law; her father-in-law had passed away recently. Above them live her brother-in-law and his family, whose daughters also sew undergarments for the same contractor as Darshana’s husband. Her home is also used as a SEWA Academy community center, offering skill
training and literacy classes for the neighborhood women and young girls. This is work that Darshana believes is important for her neighborhood, but it is also a source of antagonism between her and her mother- and sister-in-law.

Her father-in-law supported her participation in SEWA, which required Darshana to make monthly trips to SEWA Academy, in the western part of the city, for meetings, saying that his daughter-in-law is educated (she had passed 10th grade, higher than any of the other women in the family) and that she should be allowed to go outside to work. This caused tension with the other women in her family, as they thought she should stay home to better care for the household. If she were unable to complete her household work because of a meeting, they would have to finish the chores for her. But her father-in-law was adamant in his support. Darshana told us that if she would arrive home late at night he would even tell his wife to prepare chai for Darshana, knowing that she was fond of tea and had likely not eaten. His wife often refused, resentful of the extra attention to this one daughter-in-law, so he would prepare it himself.

Now that her father-in-law had passed away, there was conflict between Darshana and her family members. The other women were more vocal about Darshana shirking her duties, and her husband was tired of the arguing. He told Darshana that the family should not fight, and she should “do whatever [mother] is saying.” And so, Darshana tells us, she will no longer work as a SEWA community organizer, and the training and literacy classes will no longer be offered from her home. She tells us how, since becoming involved with SEWA, the other women in the neighborhood know her and recognize her as a teacher, but what she will miss the most are her

---

60 Though Darshana did face resistance at the beginning, even from her father-in-law. She told us that when she first began going to SEWA, they would lock her out of the house when she returned. 61 SEWA community center organizers receive a stipend for their work and rent fee for hosting trainings at their homes.
monthly trips to SEWA when she would meet other women organizers. Instead, Darshana will remain at home. In this way, Darshana no longer defies spatial and social boundaries by openly participating in community organizing and traveling alone to other parts of the city. Despite the fact that Darshana’s work for SEWA was paid and that she only had to make trips outside of the neighborhood once a month, this was not acceptable for her mother-in-law.

Darshana explains home-based work as something to do during her free time, something to do while she waits for customers to buy kindling, framing it as a hobby that happens to pay and that offers freedom to decide when she will participate in it. This home-based work, rather than the more public community work, allows Darshana to portray herself as both the dutiful and productive daughter-in-law, completing her household duties and contributing through her home-based work, while not disrupting the order in her family. Rather, what is allowed is a low-paying, monotonous job that, supposedly, would not get in the way of Darshana’s other duties. She will complete her household chores on time, care for the kindling business, help her husband with his contract work, and, since there will be time left over, pack leggings when orders arrive. Yet, the irregularity of this work, lack of control over when orders would come, and the urgency required when an order would arrive could interrupt her role and even, at times, alter gender roles as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter examined relations in the home and how these limited or provided women with opportunities to participate in the public sphere. I also discussed the possibilities of women’s everyday practices in response to these boundaries as being a reworking, resilience, and resistance to power relations (Katz 2001). These place-based practices are indicators of how women’s diverse subjectivities shape their experiences in the home, economy, and civil society. In their explanations
of why they participate in home-based work, participants relied on a representation of the working woman that reflects the cultural practices and material conditions of their gender, class, caste, and religion in the modern urban setting. Women’s economic contribution was needed as households were in a state of insecurity; yet, their work options were limited by socio-cultural practices. The space and temporality of home-based work constructed this work as more legitimate. Women could still portray their primary duty as caregivers and frame their economic participation differently than that of women who worked outside the home. In this sense, home-based work reinforces an ideology of domesticity, reproducing the sexual division of labor while also devaluing the productive work of women (Abreu and Sorj 1996; Dedeoğlu 2010). While gender is a significant determinant of the type of work available to them, it was also a result of the intersection of their class, caste, and religious identities. Jaya’s contradiction of working from home to protect her daughter from the “outside” while also hoping that her daughter would attend college and find professional work outside of the home to “learn many things” illustrates women’s awareness of their limited opportunities in the labor market as they aspired for their daughters to escape the class boundaries they faced (in interaction with their gender and other social positions), something that I discuss in the following chapter.

But how does their participation in work affect women in the present? A popular method to answer this question is by looking at intra-household bargaining powers (Kabeer 1995, 2000), though scholars have noted that women’s economic participation does not inherently translate to greater autonomy in the family (Agarwal 1997), and this is especially the case when women’s economic participation is based in the home (Kantor 2005; Khattak 2002). Kantor (2005) argues that in order for the home-based worker to gain greater autonomy she needs improved access to economic resources in tandem with challenging power relations in the home. Participation in paid
work alone will not change woman’s status in her household (Khattak 2002). Furthermore, women are engaged in practices that perpetuate these unequal power relationships, explaining this as a “patriarchal bargain” (Kandiyoti 1988). Pant (2000:99), for example, discusses how women might “acquiesce to and actively perpetuate discriminatory practices in intra-household power distribution in order to assure their own longer-term security” as they lack access to resources. In the Pakistan context, Khattak (2002:38) adds that there is a “shared conceptions of hierarchies” that if maintained and reproduced can provide women with respectability, for example, participating in low wage and low status work in order to care for the home is valued greater than working outside of the home with slightly higher wages, but which requires caregiving sacrifices.

While critical engagement with bargaining power theory offers a more complete picture of the workings of power in the family, I disagree with the framing of women’s actions as a “patriarchal bargain” as it does not adequately account for the multiple sites of power. While it offers an explanation of the reproduction of power and of women’s own involvement in it, it remains focused on one source of domination. A more complete approach is to acknowledge the multiple symbolic boundaries that shape women’s access to resources and opportunities. These boundaries are informed not only by their gender but also from the multiple sites of subjectivity that they occupy. For one, this helps explain the unequal relation of power among women themselves in the family. Furthermore, as social reproduction theory would explain, women’s strategies are not only limited to the family domain, but are strategies that are very much connected to current political economy contexts. Women do not choose home-based work because it allows them to complete their domestic duties more easily; rather, it is the best option in a very limited set of choices. Lastly, boundaries change, and so, by examining women’s experiences in relation to these symbolic and social boundaries, power is not seen as a constant and fixed relationship, but
rather as variable, unpredictable, but also capable of being changed by the women themselves. Women’s explanations of why they work at home and their participation in SEWA captures how women use their symbolic resources, such as notions of femininity and service, to rework and shape their social boundaries. Darshana’s story demonstrates how these strategies do not always work, and how their impact is not always enduring.
Chapter 7. Material and Symbolic Mobility

Mobility, or the lack of it, is central to women’s participation in home-based work. Women’s experiences with mobility are tied to the symbolic and social boundaries that shape their daily activities. As social actors they reproduce these boundaries, but they also participate in reworking or contesting those boundaries. For example, women’s decision to work at home provides them with attainable resources at a familial level as they are reproducing notions of domestic femininity; at the same time, they are reworking those boundaries by contributing to their household’s economic wellbeing. As others have argued, home-based work allows women to earn money while reaffirming their gender roles as caregivers (Abreu and Sorj 1996; Pant 2000).

I build upon this argument by asking how might women’s place-based practices that limit their physical mobility become sites of contestation to oppressive relations of power and offer potential for future change? I focus on women’s mobility since this has become a site of inquiry and concern in the development field, with the tendency being to equate women’s access to greater mobility with freedom and progress. The emphasis is on getting women out of the home, and it assumes the opportunities this mobility will bring them, often meaning access to work (Law 1999). I compare this discourse to home-based workers’ experiences with mobility, and I ask, what does women’s construction and negotiation of their mobility convey about their present situation? Women do face a number of barriers that prevent and restrict their mobility in the city’s public spaces; however, they employ strategies (intentionally or unintentionally) that reconceptualize the home as only a private domain. Through their participation in work and SEWA, women rework and even resist oppressive social and material relations in ways that transform the meaning of home. In this way, I question the public and private spheres as distinct locations by reframing the home,
a place with a contentious history for women (Bowlby, Gregory, and McKie 1997) and workers (Boris 1994; Parreñas 2001), as a space of contradictory meanings. It can also provide opportunities for women to redefine their role in the public and private spheres. The potential of place to be a site of transformative politics does not necessarily mean looking for overt resistance to unequal social relations, but also includes “reappropriation, reconstruction, reinvention, even re-localization of places and place-based practices and the creation of new possibilities” (Escobar and Harcourt 2005:3).

Inclusion of mobility in the analysis emphasizes women’s place-based practices, but it also requires conceptualizing mobility to include both material and symbolic mobilities. By material mobility I mean the physical aspects of mobility, including movement from one space to another, but also the infrastructure, physical landscape, and resources that allow or prevent movement. The cultural meaning and significance tied to mobility and immobility result in the symbolic meanings that mobility holds for women, and, consequently, the meaning of place for women. Massey (1994) writes that the meaning of gender is produced through space, but that space itself is also constructed by social relations, such as gender. By asking how women experience and conceptualize mobility, this chapter offers an example of how social relations of production and social reproduction have constructed the home to hold different meanings and possibilities for women.

Next, I present an overview of the development literature and how it frames and uses women’s mobility. I compare this to women’s experiences with mobility in Indian cities, and, in particular, its significance for home-based workers. The last section asks how might women employ mobility to contest their social positions and relations of power. I present findings from interviews that illustrate this process, namely, through women’s aspirations for their daughters’
upward social mobility and the importance of outward mobility (leaving the home) in achieving this.

**Women’s Mobility in Discourses of Development**

Because of the significance of mobility in determining women’s access to education, health care, employment, and political participation, among others (UN Women 2015), policy makers and researchers have often included women’s control over their own mobility as one measure of women’s empowerment (see Hjorthol 2008; Kronlid 2008; Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender 2002; UN Women 2015; World Bank 2012). Women’s experiences with mobility are determined by gender norms, norms of women’s role as caregivers, codes of modesty, and codes of honor, as well as perceptions of public safety, especially in urban areas (World Bank 2012). Infrastructure and access to affordable transportation can also have a significant impact on women’s mobility (Kusakabe 2012). In the context of gender and development, mobility has come to mean much more than movement from one place to another: it signifies experiences with power in social relations. And it is understood to be a central aspect of women’s well-being (Kronlid 2008). However, there are two features in the development literature that should make us question the current focus on women’s mobility—the emphasis on cultural aspects that affect mobility and the use of women’s mobility for the benefit of the accumulation of capital.

First, despite the array of reasons that affect mobility, the tendency in the development literature is to focus on culture at the expense of other dimensions in which power is also present and which also determine social norms and practices, such as relations of class and caste. Most notably, in the South Asian context, the cause of women’s restricted mobility is often simplified to the cultural and religious practice of *purdah*, and is often constructed as a “pure constraint, and as a constraint of such magnitude that individual actors appear totally overshadowed by its
workings” (Kabeer 2000:40).\(^{62}\) Attaching women’s mobility to this ideological system obscures the possibilities of women’s agency and empowerment in their daily practices. *Purdah* undoubtedly does affect women’s mobility, but it occurs in conjunction with other social factors as well.

The focus on achieving *freedom* of mobility is one such example of reductive interpretations of women’s experiences; for example, the World Bank (2012:95) include “freedom of physical mobility” as a dimension of agency, and the UN Women’s *Progress on the World’s Women* (2015) repeatedly focus on “restrictions on” or “limitations to” mobility when discussing this topic. In their examples, there is an imbalance on the cultural side of social norms (*e.g.*, codes of modesty and honor) rather than seeing mobility as an outcome of intersecting social identities and structures. Overlooking the various dimensions of mobility risks simplifying women’s experiences with mobility and assuming that every woman shares the same notion of freedom. We have to ask how discourses surrounding women’s mobility in the Global South are a reproduction of modern colonial discourses that equate women’s freedom to travel as women’s liberation (Kaplan 1995).

This becomes more important when considering the second tendency in the development field, the use of women’s labor. How will women’s mobility benefit the global market? According to the World Bank (2012:27), women’s mobility, as a measure of agency and empowerment, is defined according to the ability of women to access and participate in the market. It also argues that global integration, through equitable and efficient policies, will lead to gender equality, including greater mobility, and more opportunities for women (World Bank 2012:36). Freedom of

\(^{62}\) Kabeer goes on to argue that individuals are social actors who “are mindful of the very real boundaries within which their agency must operate,” thus we should not assume that women are “cultural dupes” because they follow customs that others see as wholly oppressive (2000:40).
mobility is tied to woman’s access to the market; for example, attempts to address women’s mobility in gender responsive transportation and urban planning tends to be framed in “journey-to-work” (Law 1999). Women’s mobility is supported not for meaningful social transformation but for the potential to bring women into the market and, as women provide the majority of social reproductive labor, for their role in shaping the next generation of workers. As Bergeron (2003) argues, the post-Washington Consensus that reflects a shift in policy to inclusive development nonetheless remains embedded in the economics of neoliberalism.

**Mobility and the Home-Based Worker**

How do these discussions of mobility compare to the experiences of the home-based worker? With the growth of export industries in developing countries and the feminization of its workforce, scholars documented the changing role of women as they left their homes to work in factories (Elson and Pearson 1981). Employing gender and women’s sexuality to signify constructs of the nation (Chatterjee 1989; McClintock 1995), real and imagined reconfigurations of women’s roles as a result of globalization was seen as a threat to nations’ boundaries, and the response was embedded in “normative prescriptions of gender and sexuality” (Oza 2006:10). In Malaysia, for example, a moral panic emerged when young women migrated to urban industrial areas for work; the response of regulation and surveillance of women’s movement and behaviors contradicted the nation’s encouragement of women’s productive activities (Ong 1991). Anxiety over women’s economic participation and entrance in public spheres reveals the contradiction between economic and cultural interests, and similar responses are found in various contexts of economic liberalization, such as Bangladesh (Kabeer 2000), Sri Lanka (Lynch 2004), and Mexico (Fernandez-Kelly 1984). The persistence of home-based work counters the common perception
that global economic pressure brings women into the public space as workers and consumers (Ong 1987; Sassen 1988).

Home-based work, especially in the form of subcontracting, also became a part of the segmented labor market during this time (Benería and Roldan 1987; Mies 1982), and a new pattern of accumulation for transnational capital came to rely on a flexible production system of female and minority workers that mixed mass assembly in factories and in homes (Ong 1991). As I discussed in Chapter 5, the home became appropriated as a setting for capitalist accumulation with the transformation of the home, previously associated with nurturance, to being a site for entrepreneurialism (Prügl 1999) without threatening cultural ideologies of the nation (Rankin 2001). In this sense, home-based work pacifies anxieties over women’s changing societal roles as a result of the effects of globalization and liberalization in many Asian countries.

In home-based work, women’s mobility is a significant aspect of why they choose home-based work, and it reveals the interaction of the individual with culture, structure, and space. While there are market forces that encourage subcontracting (Balakrishnan and Sayeed 2002), women choose home-based work for a variety of reasons that arise from ideological and social constraints. Across borders and cultures, women participate in home-based work to better address their domestic responsibilities, from England (Allen and Wolkowitz 1986) to Brazil (Abreu and Sorj 1996) to Mexico (Benería and Roldan 1987). In the South Asian context, purdah is a significant factor (Khattak 2002), but there are other social and spatial realities that make it difficult for women to leave their homes for work. For example, Madhiva Desai (2007) expands the various ways in which women’s mobility is restricted, including cultural and religious practices, but by social conditions as well, such as illiteracy (making it difficult to travel), dependency on public transportation (rather than other modes of transport such as bicycles, scooters and cars, which are
more likely used by men), perceptions of public space as threatening, and domestic responsibilities which limit women’s time. Acknowledging the multidimensional factors involved in women’s restricted mobility reveals a more nuanced understanding of gender and power.

As with Desai’s (2007) list, women in this study provided a variety of reasons why they were unable or unwilling to work outside. From the survey, the majority of women chose home-based work instead of working outside the home because of household and care responsibilities (51 percent). Just under half of the women also noted that they were not allowed to work outside of the home (44 percent), while one-fifth of the women worked at home because they lacked other skills. In the interviews, participants spoke in further detail on why they work at home. They discussed the restrictions they face due to cultural practices, such as purdah, but their answers also pointed to social relations (including unequal domestic division of labor, perceptions of safety for women in public areas, and women’s higher rate of illiteracy, which make it difficult for them to travel using public transportation) as well as to infrastructure (distance, lack of reliable or affordable transportation).

Domestic responsibilities remained the most salient reason for being a home-based worker. Kaia, a homeworker in Vatva, did not know of any women in her neighborhood who worked outside. She imagined that it would be difficult, “Where would I leave my children? If I work from home, then the kids are with me. Even if they go to school at 12 pm, then I work quickly in the morning, make food, prepare them for school and so I don’t go outside for work.” Similar opinions were expressed in Hindu neighborhoods, such as Lata in Amraiwadi, whose response to my question of how home-based work was different to that of outside work was, “We can’t go out to work. I have three children!” In Sarkhej, Manisha added, “The whole responsibility of the house is on me, so I have to fulfill that.” For women who faced restricted access to the public sphere
because of their families, they were however allowed to participate in this type of work because it maintained spatial limits. Biliksha’s husband allowed her to take on home-based work only because it could be completed at home, telling her “You are sitting at home, so it is not a problem. You can start.” In Danilimda, Alka’s husband also allowed her to do home-based work because it would be completed at home, and it was “only a few hours of work a day.” Women’s experience with mobility is shaped by these symbolic meanings of home and care, but, as I discuss in the next section, women were also restricted by dominant cultural and physical practices that constructed the public sphere as difficult or even dangerous to access.

*Women in the City*

Desai (2007:9) writes that physical structure of the Indian city “reflects and reinforces inequalities in its social structure through not being equally accessible to both genders.” The public place is designed as a masculine space, constructed as dangerous and unwelcoming for the Indian woman (Desai 2007). This was the case in Ahmedabad. I found that, in addition to the gender norms that kept women at home, the city was not an easy place for women to traverse. Of course, women’s experience with public space varied depending on their social position. In fact, Ahmedabad was often noted as being a safe city for women, and the throng of young women maneuvering their mopeds on city streets verifies that.63

At the SEWA office, the young female staff who could afford their own mopeds would drive themselves to work daily. But the city was safe and accessible for whom? These women belonged to the upper-middle and upper class, with resources that the majority of women in the city lack. A friend of mine, a young woman belonging to the middle class, would commute to work

---

63 Gender norms persist even among the mobile in Ahmedabad, as it was rare for women to drive cars.
by moped, traveling eleven kilometers each way; participants of this study would have found it
difficult to commute half that distance.

Distance from city centers contributed to women’s seclusion and the higher likelihood that
they would not be allowed to work outside of the home. Looking at the survey results between
neighborhoods, there are four neighborhoods in which the majority of women mentioned
restrictions on where they could work, meaning, their families did not allow them to work outside
of the home. While two, Fatehwadi and Vatva, are Muslim neighborhoods, and are communities
that are often seen as more restrictive on women’s mobility, the other two are Hindu
neighborhoods, Rajavir and Sarkhej. These four neighborhoods were also located on the outskirts
of the city, at least ten kilometers or more from the center of the city with limited public transport. A neighborhood’s isolation could exacerbate restrictions on women’s mobility, as travel was more
difficult. In addition, without access to the other types of work, such as street vending, domestic
work, or construction, readily available jobs in other parts of the city, the only option was home-
based work. It was not only culture but also location and infrastructure that limited women’s
mobility.

Geographic remoteness in the city resulted in a more time-consuming and expensive
commute. This disadvantage would be a factor when deciding whether or not women would work
outside. In Nobelnagar, a neighborhood of mostly migrants near the Ahmedabad’s International
Airport, fifteen kilometers from the city center, Daxa explained that she stayed home to work
because the high cost of commuting to the city, “My house is far away from the city, so if I get

64 While ten kilometers might not be considered far in Western countries or for the better off, in
India this would be long distance to travel for a woman with few resources, especially if it is a
daily commute. For example, in a study based in Ahmedabad, “far” is defined as more than 15-
minute walk or 10-minute bike ride (Kantor 2000).
work I have to go over there and spend so much money for the travel. I cannot afford to spend that much money, so it is better to do home-based work.”

Illiteracy created another obstacle for women’s mobility. Unable to drive or to afford a rickshaw, many poor women in Ahmedabad relied on public transportation, a potentially hazardous endeavor since bus drivers had the habit of slowing to a roll without stopping when picking up passengers. But to navigate the bus system, they had to read the bus signs. Shilpa became a SEWA literacy teacher in her neighborhood to help women overcome this obstacle, among others. In her neighborhood, she witnessed the many problems that women face because of

65 In 2009, Ahmedabad began operating its Bus Rapid Transit System (BRTS). With designated lanes and platforms, BRTS is designed to be an alternative to the slower and overcrowded municipal buses; yet, at double the price of a municipal bus ticket, it is less likely to be used by the poor (Mahadevia, Joshi, and Datey 2013). When I lived in the city, I also noticed that the destination indicators on buses used Arabic numerals rather than Gujarati numerals.
their illiteracy. She explained to us that women have difficulty traveling because they could not read the bus numbers and destinations; they were ashamed to ask someone because they were afraid of being laughed at and asked, “You can’t read?”

In the Muslim communities, some women blamed strict interpretations of purdah. These women were older, the matriarchs of their home, and more likely to be involved in SEWA’s capacity-building programs. Zarina, for example, believes that women’s illiteracy is due to family’s enforcement of purdah, “Some parents teach their daughters, but some don’t in our caste. Like here [in Fatehwadi] these ladies are not allowed to leave their house without a burka. They teach their daughters up to 7th grade and then stop the school. They don’t allow them to study further.”

Rabia, a SEWA community organizer in Vatva with whom we spoke after completing the interviews, encountered difficulty in convincing women to join the center’s programs or leave the neighborhood to attend SEWA events. “Women sit at home and are taught to sew so that they work from home,” and because of their illiteracy, she tells us, “They are not able to take a bus and travel.” There is also a fear of leaving their community. Women were hesitant to visit other areas of the city because of fears of the “outside,” as one homeworker put it. In a city plagued by communal violence, notably the 2002 riots where over 2,000 Muslims were killed, communities became more insular, and the cityscape divided into neighborhoods labeled as “dangerous” for different communities (Yagnik and Sheth 2011). With each ethnic conflict and ensuing fundamentalist propaganda, women have increasingly become a subject of surveillance and policing by their communities (Khan 2007; Robinson 2010). Rabia would have to visit homes a number of times to talk to women and their families to convince them that it was safe to leave their
community as a group of women, “I had to show them that there is no rift between the Hindu and Muslims.”

Gender and women’s sexuality has become a central issue in the rise of communal tensions and Hindu fundamentalism, and scholars have noted the consequences for women’s political activities (Banerjee 2003; Robinson 2010) and their increasing exclusion from public space (Khan 2007). The 2002 communal riots in Ahmedabad were especially disturbing because of the violent and deadly attacks targeted at minority women. A fact-finding mission shortly after the events found that the sexual violence against women was planned and organized (Hameed et al. 2002), bringing some to question the attacks as having a symbolic purpose of ethnic cleanings (Sarkar 2002). These social and political currents are not only restricted to the Muslim woman. The alleged “Love Jihad,” a claim by the Hindu Right that Muslim fundamentalists have launched a campaign to abduct and convert Hindu and Christian women, plays into Hindutva’s campaign against the Muslim “Other” by utilizing images of Hindu women’s passivity (Rao 2011). Hindu and Muslim women’s sexuality are at the center of what Jeffery and Jeffery (2006) call the “Saffron Demography” that employs demographic numbers on Muslims’ high fertility rate and fears of a dying Hindu race as a source of divisive politics. Similarly, though in less obvious political ways, the presence of home-based work reinforce the construction of public space as masculine and unsafe for women, while also reaffirming the role of motherhood to support one’s respective community.

Feminist geographers understand space to be gendered, with the public sphere associated with masculinity and the private sphere with the feminine (Massey 1994; McDowell 1999). Movements in these spaces are similarly gender coded, with movement seen as masculine and passivity or stationary as feminine (Cresswell 2006). While in practice this public-private gender
divide is not as neat as it seems, women’s experiences with mobility and space is a reflection of how gender is constructed and understood (Massey 1994:179), and so women’s decision or constraint to work at home reflects their experiences with mobility and urban space. Their lack of mobility arise from a combination of social, cultural, and material restrictions. In addition, the rise of Hindu fundamentalism has further contributed to the coding of public space as dangerous for both Hindu and minority women. These conditions must be considered in relation to home-based worker’s framing of their work choice as a strategy to contribute economically while also maintaining and reproducing domestic boundaries as appropriate feminine space. Considering the lack of work options available to them and the exclusion of women from public space, working at home seemed the best option for women themselves or for their families.

**Contesting Mobilities**

Women’s difficulty accessing public spaces of the city does not mean that they were passive in relation to these social and cultural practices. Rather, work and participation in SEWA provided opportunities for women to rework and resist oppressive relations of production and social reproduction. First, I examine how SEWA’s work contributed to the ability for women to challenge their relations to production. As Hill (2010:178) argued in her study of SEWA, the organization’s success is due to the development of a worker identity among women, including building their self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-respect. She attributes this relationship to the possibility of women to engage in work-life reform. Here, I examine this building of a worker identity in relation to women’s everyday negotiations with family, work, and community.

Then, I look how mobility shapes women’s relations to production, and provide an example of one homeworker who attempts to lessen her exploitative situation in the subcontracting production system by going directly to the city center for work orders. While she still receives
home-based work, her movement out of the home and into the city holds symbolic meaning for
her and her goal of supporting her family, especially so because of her community’s cultural
practices of purdah.

Lastly, I discuss how women’s aspirations for their children and the significance of home-
based work in achieving those goals. I have already noted how home-based work is a strategy for
women to address unequal class and gender relations; here, I argue that women frame their
participation in work as a route to provide for the possibility of their children’s economic and
social mobility. Whether or not these goals are achieved is not the focus here (though this question
is not irrelevant for social scientists), rather, I examine what women’s dream for their children’s
mobility tells us about their own struggles. This struggle becomes clear when identifying the
gendered meanings of mobility for their daughters compared to their sons.

Building Confidence through Community Organizing

In Sarkhej, a Hindu neighborhood on the western outskirts of the city, Nirmala runs a
SEWA community center out of her home that offers many of SEWA Academy services.
Nirmala’s family is relatively well off compared to her neighbors. Unlike many centers that would
make second use of a living room or terrace for its classes, Nirmala devotes an entire room for
SEWA’s work. The room has plenty of windows, and it is well lit. Rather than bare cement walls,
they are covered in white tiles with flower prints. In the corner are two machines. SEWA posters
and hand-drawn sewing patterns are attached to the walls.

Manisha, a young woman who had recently moved to Sarkhej after her marriage, learned
of SEWA’s center from her neighbors. She lives just a few doors down, and decided to take a
sewing class. She tells us, “[The class] gave me many benefits. I did not know how to sew. After
learning how to sew blouses and other garments, I can earn money and it helps in the house.”
Manisha also gained confidence through her participation at the center. Through the center, she met other women in her area, which, as a newcomer, made her more comfortable in her new home. Manisha eventually gained enough confidence to confront her contractor over the low pay. She went with two other women to the contractor, and demanded that he pay them more money for the work. He refused, so they went to another contractor to ask for work, but said that they would only accept work if he would provide a reasonable wage.

Telling us about the experience, Manisha says, “At first, no one was ready to go to [the contractor]. We didn’t know what to say after going there. What if he says no? What if he does not give any money? We don’t know if we would get work elsewhere or not. But we all went there together and we spoke.” Even though the first contractor did not agree to their demands, they now had the confidence to stand up for themselves. Manisha tells us that, “Thanks to Nirmala, now I am not afraid. If there are any difficulties with the work or with anything else, I can face that person, even on my own.”

As women, and a new daughter-in-law as Manisha was, this fear of confrontation was understandable. Their original lack of confidence was not only an expression of the fear of losing work; Hill (2010:102–103) applies Honneth’s (1995) theory of moral injury to women working in the Indian formal economy, and argues that linking the moral with the material aspects of life reveals a holistic analysis of the economic marginalization and vulnerabilities faced by women. This marginalization and vulnerability results from women’s “non-recognition” at multiple levels of relations: interpersonal (low status in the household and community), state (not counted in national economic statistics and policy), and society (formal exclusion and low status) (Hill 2010:102).
SEWA’s programs sought to “renegotiate the social relations of recognition and respect” by bringing women out of their isolation (p. 104). When women participated in SEWA’s skill training classes, they were learning a skill, but they were also meeting other women in a space where they could share troubles and advice. As Rabya, the community organizer in Vatva, noted, she earns people’s trust slowly as women participate in the center’s activities. With this trust, families become more comfortable with allowing their daughters and wives to participate more actively.

One such activity is the exposure trip. Nirmala had taken the neighborhood women of Sarkhej on exposure trips to SEWA Academy’s Manipur center for trainings. These trips are an important component in SEWA’s capacity-building programs. In Manipur, women would attend training programs with sometimes hundreds of other members. Traveling to new places and meeting other women workers helped increase their self-confidence and notions of self-worth; they learned that they were not alone in their struggles, and that they are confronted with similar problems, despite having diverse caste and religious backgrounds.

It was trips like this that helped Manisha gather the confidence to confront her contractor. When he refused to provide her and the other women with higher wages, she recognized her value as a worker, and she decided that she would no longer accept his low wages. Instead, she found work from another contractor who would provide higher wages. Manisha’s increase in self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-respect is related to her engagement in SEWA and actively seeking to improve her economic wellbeing (Hill 2010). In fact, in the survey, most women pointed to their participation in SEWA as having a positive impact on their confidence, being able to deal with a crisis, mobility, and community involvement, more so than home-based work (see Figure
14). Remembering Darshana’s reaction to having to discontinue hosting the community center, what she will miss the most are her trips to SEWA to meet with other women organizers.

Figure 14. Effects of Home-Based Work and SEWA

“Going Directly”

Women’s spatial practices have a significant role in shaping their work relationships, and their restricted mobility made them more likely to have to rely on limited networks for work, such as neighbors and family (Mehrotra and Biggeri 2007; Rao and Husain 1987). Nearly all of the women we spoke with in the interviews noted that they received their work from someone who lived in the neighborhood. If the woman or her family did not know the contractor directly, they
would need a contact to introduce them. Nikila, for example, went to a contractor by herself, but her request was denied. She asked a neighbor of hers, who was receiving orders from this same contractor, to go with her and assure the contractor that she was a good worker. Without many options for work, they often acquiesced to the low pay and irregular work orders from their neighborhood subcontractors. It was not uncommon for workers in different parts of the city doing the same type of garment work to be compensated at very different rates. Dependent on subcontractors for their work, homeworkers’ lacked the power or knowledge to demand better prices (Carr, Chen, and Tate 2000).

Some women relied on their kin networks to find work. They would ask family to introduce them to contractors or even receive orders directly from family members. Chanda, an eighteen-year-old in Rajavir, started home-based work four years ago. Her uncle was acquainted with an owner of a small enterprise; he introduced Chanda to the employer, and, after she completed ten days of training at the shop, Chanda began working from home sewing straps to undergarments. Asha maintains a work relationship with one of her former employers, but she also relies on her sister-in-law, her husband’s sister, for some work. Asha’s sister-in-law is unmarried and without children, so she is still working outside of the home at a factory embroidering and adding other embellishments to blouses, as Asha once did before having children. Now, when there are large orders, Asha’s sister-in-law brings blouses home for Asha to complete.

These informal networks of work entail a different sort of relationship between labor and capital (Allen and Wolkowitz 1987). The person providing them with work is not the antagonist, but a neighbor or family, in similar circumstances as themselves. In addition, homeworkers were responsible not only to the subcontractors, but also the neighbors and kin who had provide the
contact. Angering the subcontractors could have had an impact on the people who had helped them find the work and who often also received work from the same subcontractors.

Zamila, an astute homeworker, recognized the disadvantages of taking work from a subcontractor. Zamila and her family, her husband and three children, moved to Ahmedabad from Patan, a district in north Gujarat, nine years earlier. In Patan, Zamila worked at home rolling beedi, thin cigarettes of tobacco wrapped in leaf. When she arrived in Ahmedabad, she did not have the contacts to continue this work; not that she minded since rolling beedi was tedious and unpleasant. The tobacco would stain her fingers and the smell lingered all day. Zamila had also heard of the health risks associated with the work and that there were public health campaigns against its use, so she reasoned there would be less work.66

After a few months, Zamila began searching for work in earnest. At the time, they were renting their home, and it added to the already high living expenses in the city. It was difficult to cover expenses with only her husband’s earnings, a rickshaw driver in a city with an excess of them. When asking around, they heard from neighbors that home-based work in this area was low-paid, and it would be best to go directly to the shops, avoiding the subcontractors who paid lower piece rate wages in order to receive their cut. For many women who participate in home-based work, receiving orders from subcontractors was the only opportunity to work, unable to leave their homes or lacking direct contact with retailers. This was especially the case in Fatehwadi, a Muslim neighborhood where most women did not work outside of the home and were not allowed to leave the area unaccompanied, though the distance of Fatehwadi from the city center exacerbated this. Zamila had decided that she would not let cultural customs prevent her from working. Later in the

---

66 One of the few types of home-based production that is regulated in India (the Beedi and Cigar Workers Act of 1966), beedi production in urban areas is now considered a sunset industry, in part because of the domestic and international campaigns to regulate its consumption (Agarwala 2006).
interview, she mentioned that her family is at a disadvantage because her husband is not educated. She blames her mother-in-law’s restriction to the home as a reason for this. Zamila believed that she could avoid the same outcome for her own children by working, but, more importantly, she was willing to break custom and leave the home for work purposes if it meant better wages, telling us:

“I thought that if I do something then it would be better. It would support me in house. So I learned that if you want to get some work, then you go directly [to the shops] only. If you go directly, then you would get to know everything!”

Learning that Shahpur, a neighborhood close to the city center, had a number of markets, along with the many small enterprises providing goods for vendors, Zamila and a neighborhood woman traveled to the area in search of work. Walking along the busy streets lined by small one-room shops, she asked around if there was work for someone with hand embroidery skills. Someone gave her an address and she went to it, finding a contractor in the garment production business. He was not a retailer, but since this contractor was one step higher in the supply chain, he offered better wages. Zamila was willing to travel to the city to fetch materials and return the products, and so she was able to receive a better price than the women who received orders from a subcontractor in Fatehwadi. He needed workers to embroider the neck of tunics with beads and other embellishments, and would pay Rs. 30 per piece completed.

Considering the disadvantages of receiving home-based work through an intermediary, Zamila stressed the importance of mobility, of leaving the community to travel to areas where there are better work opportunities. This mobility was essential in achieving her goal, saying, “I had this inside me that I have to do work and to take more work from [outside]…I can educate my children, this was my intention. So I had to go directly.” She recognizes the benefit that “going
“going directly” affords her, noting the differences between her and other women in the area who accept work from subcontractors at a lower piece-rate, often patching work together by taking orders from different subcontractor. Having a more direct contact with a supplier, she had relatively greater security. It was less likely for a supplier to close shop and leave, compared to the subcontractors living in the Fatehwadi. Zamila and her husband decided that she could leave the home if it meant access to more and better paid work. As the eldest woman in her household, with grown children and a sympathetic husband, Zamila experienced greater autonomy in this aspect than most women in this study. However, Zamila still limited herself to only home-based work; she explains that she only wants to work at home. The emphasis that Zamila placed on “going directly” contrasted to her equally steadfast resolve that she had to work at home.

*Working for Children’s Education*

Many of the women, including Zamila, saw their work as important because of the monetary contributions. Their earnings were often used for daily household needs, such as vegetables for the night’s meal. But another significant contribution by women was covering the costs of their children’s education. While the value of paying for daily expenses was dismissed, women did not devalue their contributions to their children’s education. In fact, for some women, such as Jaya, paying for their children’s education was the most important reason for working. She would work even more hours at the sewing machine or would take on loans if that were needed for her daughter to finish her studies. Bharti, a widow and the sole earner in the household, does not save any of her earnings because she decided that she should spend it on her son’s school fees instead.

---

67 Most families in the Fatehwadi rented. It was common for subcontractors to move, and homeworkers would subsequently lose their source of income.
Women home-based workers justified their participation in paid work to fulfill their domestic responsibilities. Nurturing and supporting their children’s development was one of these duties. While neo-Marxists would explain women’s actions as reproduction of the workforce, in the biological and cultural sense, I argue that women’s actions were also resisting class reproduction. Education was a means for their children to achieve economic and social mobility. Their hopes reveal an acknowledgement of and confrontation against the multiple sites of domination that they experienced as women, informal workers, members of schedule castes, and religious minorities.

The need for women to work to support their children’s education is linked to a neoliberal model that has affected the country’s public education system. Weakening state support (Jha 2005) and increasing privatization of education (Kumar 2008) have contributed to the current abysmal state of India’s public education (Chatterji 2015). Despite it being a public education system, there are a number of costs, including textbooks, uniforms, tutoring fees, and transportation, which adds to the strain on poor households. The expense was greater for families that lived on the outskirts of the city where a public school was not easily accessible. In Keshavnagar, Usha paid Rs. 600 (US $10) a month for her two children to ride to school in a shared rickshaw; this took up a sizable chunk of her monthly earnings of Rs. 2,400 (US $38). Some families sent their children to private schools since the public school was too far away. In Vatva, the workers we interviewed used earnings to pay for their children to attend a private school. Because of the low quality of public school education, women would also pay additional fees for after-school tutorials. An interview with Asha in Keshavnagar was cut short because she had to bring her children to their tutoring

68 A study on education expenditure in India found that poor households spend 3 percent of their monthly household income on education related costs, a significant increase from fifty years ago (Tilak 2009).
lessons. The two other women we interviewed that day, Usha and Shilpa, also sent their children to tutoring in addition to public school. After the interviews, on our way back to the office, Jayshree told me that she sent her two children to a private school, and they go to tutoring after school as well. To pay for this, her and her husband go to the markets to sell imitation jewelry every Sunday (the only day off in India’s six-day workweek).

Women recognized the importance of education, and they believed that, despite caste and community disadvantages, educating their children was an opportunity to achieve social mobility, a process that was seen as more complicated a few decades ago (Srinivas 2003). They pointed to their own lack of education and current situation as proof. Most of the women I spoke with had been unable to finish their own education, but they were adamant about providing education for their children, even for their daughters. For some, such as Daxa, education was the main motivator for participating in home-based work. As one of the most prolific homeworkers, she told us, “Any work that would give me income for their education, I will take any of it.” Naseem, whose husband had told her that she should look after the children instead of doing this paid work, insisted that she work so that she could pay her children’s private school fees. While her husband saw her labor as more useful in caring for the children, Naseem believed that she could better support her children with home-based work. Zamila, the homeworker who went directly to suppliers, was also motivated by education. Pointing to her mother-in-law’s illiteracy and lack of mobility as a reason for their current situation, she believes that her participation in home-based work is a route for her family’s advancement. That is why she was determined to find work outside of her community:

69 Jayshree would often bring jewelry to SEWA Academy to sell to her colleagues. There were a few other staff members that would do this as well to earn extra money, bringing in jewelry, clothes, or food bought wholesale at a market.
We have a great loss because my husband and my brother-in-law are not educated. Because my mother-in-law followed purdah, her sons could not do anything, for work and even in school subjects. But I felt that this ritual should not be there. I can do something so that my children could reach up to college. My elder son is going to college, my daughter studied until 12th grade, and my third son is in 9th grade.

It is not incidental that the women would emphasize the importance of education. Using their earnings for children’s education justified their home-based work, and women reasoned that this was providing for their children’s needs. The emphasis on education stems from women’s desire that their children experience upward mobility; a notion that, with the growing media attention on the new middle class in India (see Mustafi 2013, Varma 2013), has entered the imaginations of poor Indians. The economic changes in India over the past decades offered new opportunities for advancement (Kumar, Heath, and Heath 2002), and education was seen as a tool to move ahead (Munshi and Rosenzweig 2006).

Disrupting the Reproduction of Power: Aspirations for Our Children

In studying social mobility in India, scholars have tended to focus on the causes of mobility (Kumar et al. 2002; Mukherji 2012) and the meaning of this new optimism for individuals (Naudet 2008; Snell-Rood 2015; Vijayakumar 2013). What I am interested in here is what women’s aspirations for mobility signify about their current social positions. I argue that their goal for educating their children reveals women’s acknowledgement of their own identities and social positions, something that is obscured when women speak about their current situation.

I began asking women about their aspirations for their children after we had already completed follow-up interviews at two neighborhoods. We were in Keshavnagar, and our first interview was with Shilpa. During the previous interviews, in Jamalpur and Rajivnagar, it had been
difficult to find a way for women to speak of their class position as workers. When I asked them to compare home-based work to other work, they would compare it to the other forms of work that they had access to, such as street vending or domestic work. While the questions elicited interesting responses (especially in terms of the embodied and spatial meaning attached to these different types of work, as I discussed in the previous chapter), their answers did not address class differences. In Keshavnagar, I noticed that Shilpa, who having finished secondary education was one of the highest educated women in our study, had made a few comments about her daughters and their schooling. I wondered if Shilpa was in tune with the growing possibilities of social mobility occurring in India today, and if she herself had upwardly mobile class aspirations, or if not for herself, at least for her children. In answering, Shilpa, who was already speaking easily, opened up even more. She told us that her daughters wanted to become a teacher and doctor; she laughed and added that she had hoped they would fulfill her own childhood dream of becoming a policewoman to fight goondas.\(^70\)

After her interview we continued asking this question to participants. The response from most of the women, 16 of the 20 mothers to whom we asked this question,\(^71\) was that they wished their sons and daughters to have jobs that were not in the informal economy but in the formal economy (see Table 3).\(^72\) Some were ambiguous in the type of jobs they wanted for their children, 

---

\(^{70}\) *Goonda* is Indian English slang broadly used for people engaged in anti-social activities, such as extortion or bootlegging. Shilpa was inspired to this profession after watching a television show whose star was a female police officer.

\(^{71}\) We also asked three unmarried, young women who were still living with their parents what they would have liked to do instead of home-based work; one preferred being a home-based worker, another wanted to be a singer, and the third a teacher.

\(^{72}\) Mothers did not explicitly use the terms “formal economy” or “professional occupations” in their answers, but their descriptions of these desired jobs compared to their work point to an understanding of the differences between the formal and informal occupations. In recounting their answers, I use these terms for ease of reading.
others had specific professions, but none of these parents wanted their children to work in the kind of employment similar to their own. These job aspirations did not differ by gender, as they hoped both their sons and daughters would experience occupational mobility, but the types of jobs were gendered. Half of the daughters had professional aspirations in careers traditionally seen as feminine, such as teacher and airline steward.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Job Aspirations for Children, by Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female Child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional (unspecified)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airline Stewardess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As women explained their job aspirations for their children, they employed experiences with their own social position in contrast to the possibilities offered by formal employment. When speaking of their home and work experiences, women accepted their social and economic conditions. Home-based work could be a hassle because of the irregular work orders and finding time to finish their caregiving duties, but women were still grateful to have this extra source of income for the household. Their only remark when asked what would better their situation was for more home-based work. However, when speaking of their hopes for their children, it became

---

73 I was surprised by the answer of airline stewardess; in fact, the actual word they used was “pilot” (in English) rather than stewardess. Jayshree later mentioned that airline advertisements often depicted airline stewardesses as young women with makeup and dressed in Western-style dress suits. She noted that these girls had probably seen those ads and wanted to be those “pilots.”
obvious that the women were keenly aware of their class position, and they dreamed of better situations for their children. The precarious character of informal work and the consequences for everyday life came to the fore in these discussions. This is seen in Jyoti’s explanation of why she wants her sons to have government jobs, “If I educate them today so that their life gets settled, tomorrow they will get a good job. With good jobs their lives would be better.” When we asked her what was the difference between a government job and her own home-based work, she responded that, “There is a vast difference. The home-based work we might or might not get. But with a government job we would be definitely getting the salary. Even if we stay at home we would still be getting the salary.” Mothers wanted their children to have a secure livelihood, in contrast to the irregular work and income that they experienced.

In their answers, women pointed to the importance of education in attaining these goals. Hansha, a mother of three children, reflected on the difficulty that she and her husband face because of their lack of education and work opportunities, she remarked “There are many problems in my house, so I am doing this hard work. I will teach my children well so our economic condition becomes better.” Nita expressed regret that her parents did not encourage her to become educated, and she did not want to pass the same disadvantages onto her own children. Nita told us that “We weren’t educated by our parents, but we can do this for our children.” She hoped that her son would become a doctor, and she wanted her daughter to be a teacher, she reasoned that, “If they do good in their education, and get good jobs, then it is good for us.” Informal work was also seen as labor work, and participants did not believe that labor work was appropriate for an educated person. Manjila explained, “If they have studied this much, why do these jobs. They won’t do this laborious work. Why I should make them do this laborious work? I have done that. What would I get making them do this work?” Looking back at their own lives, they hoped that with education
their children would have better opportunities to enter the formal workforce. This would bring economic mobility to their children, but it would also secure their own futures.

*Outward and Upward Mobility for Daughters*

The jobs that they wanted for their children were in stark contrast to the opportunities that they had experienced themselves. This was especially the case for daughters. For sons, it was assumed that they would have jobs, and mothers hoped that they would have professional jobs instead of the informal and irregular work as that of their husbands. Their hope was that their sons could experience economic mobility. Aspirations for their daughters countered traditional work trajectories for their class status as well, but it also countered gendered notions of low caste and minority women’s role in society. Hoping their sons would have well-paying, high-status jobs addressed the class inequality that these families faced, but having the same hopes for their daughters implies a resistance to gender subordination and inequality. This became more apparent as women gave different explanations about the advantages of formal jobs for their daughters compared to sons. When speaking of their sons, the reasoning was placed on the characteristics of the job. For example, Jyoti’s main concern for her two son’s professional aspirations was that they find a government job because of the regular salary and the social status that comes with it. In contrast, mothers with daughters reasoned that educating their daughters and gaining formal occupations would allow their daughters to “move forward” in life.

In Nobelnagar, Hansha tells us that her daughter, who is now attending college, will receive an M.B.A. She is adamant that her daughter will not become a home-based worker, saying, “My daughter won’t do this type of work. I will not let her do this. I have spent my life doing this work and she should do the same?! She should get educated and I have a dream that she moves ahead in life.” Zamila, who attributed her rise in confidence to her home-based work which allowed her to
leave the home, and compared her own progress to that of her mother-in-law who followed purdah customs, believes her daughter could progress even more by finishing her education and working for a “business.”

Jaya’s explanation also derived from a sense of opportunity to learn. She was more explicit about the importance of leaving the home to have this opportunity, “[My daughter] can know the outside, how there is a city and all. She can go outside; she can learn many things. While sitting in the house we don’t know anything.” Jaya framed formal work outside of the home as different because of the space and use of body, “In this work, our strength is going, but in the outside when we do the job, we have to just use our mind. Not our hands and legs.” Home-based work was located in the home, and one used labor to complete the work. In contrast, she defines desirable work to be located outside, in the city, and a job in which one uses the mind; one’s physical strength is not expended with this work. Jaya is not only speaking of home-based work when she explains that “this work” limits the mind and tires the body. A street vendor who sells vegetables at the market explores the city, and a domestic servant works in the homes of the middle and upper class. But these are not the jobs she is alluding to when she wants her daughter to leave the home. A teacher or airline stewardess has physical jobs that exert energy, but Jaya does not define them as such. For Jaya, what she is defining is not so much the work and its requirements, but rather the social position that one gains with formal work in contrast to informal work. Remembering her comments in Chapter 5 of the dangers of the “outside” as being a reason to stay home and work, here we see that Jaya has a different conception of what “outside” means for herself compared to educated and professional women.

Education was an opportunity to enter the professional class and so advance in life, a goal that mothers had for both daughters and sons, but this had added meaning for their daughters.
While other scholars have linked changing perceptions towards girls’ education to marriage prospects, with families educating their daughters in order to find a better suitor (Still 2011, Acharya 2008, Vijayakumar 2013), I argue that participants had hopes for their daughters that seemed to resist gender norms for women. When speaking of daughters, they hoped their daughters would succeed so that they could “come forward” and “stand on their own feet,” an explanation that was missing when speaking of sons. In their explanations, they stressed the disadvantages of staying home and pointed to the opportunities that the “outside” held. While women strive for upward economic and social mobility for their children, for their daughters, the emphasis is also on *outward mobility*.

**Conclusion**

What does women’s material and symbolic mobility tell us about their experiences with institutions of the family, economic, and civic spheres? And how does it account for women’s experiences in these spheres because of their intersecting social locations, but also because of their relations to capitalism? Social reproduction theory explains subjectivity as a socially mediated space that, today, is shaped by capitalist processes (Ferguson 2008); this approach allows for an inclusive analysis of both social locations and social relations. Applying this theory to women’s mobility, I find that processes of production and social reproduction in capitalism provides a flexible and low-wage labor force while reproducing cultural and social inequalities that locate women’s proper place to be in the home. The anxiety surrounding women’s changing roles in the public sphere as a result of globalization is appeased as work is brought into the home. It is not just women’s relations to production at play here, but the intersection of her social positions and relations that reinforce each other. This process is tied to the use of space and geography by capitalism (Harvey 2001). One’s socio-spatial location determines her experiences with
production and social reproduction in capitalist conditions (Ferguson 2008). This is clear with home-based work since it is the intersection of women’s social positions that support a subcontracting system of production (Benería and Roldan 1987; Mies 1982); I add that women’s socio-spatial location in relation to the home is also involved in this process.

Women’s relations to the home reinforce and, at times, reconceptualize the meaning of public/private and production/social reproduction. What is particular about home-based work is that it is involved in both reinforcing and reconceptualizing at the same time. This chapter discussed the social, cultural, and material practices that restricted women’s mobility. These restrictions make it so that women participate in exploitative work conditions so as to maintain social and cultural norms (reinforcing dynamics of class, gender, and caste or community). However, women also employed strategies to reconceptualize their work in the home. In previous chapters, I discussed how women framed home-based work as the best option for them when considering their responsibilities in the home and the lack of other desirable work options. Here, I presented examples of how women used work and participation in SEWA to reframe their relationship with the home and mobility. Zamila insisted on the importance of “going directly” to find better earnings, while Manisha, through her participation in SEWA, gained courage to demand better pay. Zamila and Manisha reframe the role of women in the private and public spheres, but they returned to complete work in the home, reproducing their social relations. The place-based struggles that women are engaged in offers transformation (Harcourt and Escobar 2005) but also the reproduction of unequal relations.

Social reproduction distinguishes between work and labor, allowing for women’s expressions of agency in their actions. While much of women’s work is appropriated as labor (Bakker and Gill 2003), they do engage in practices that respond and address the injustices that
they face as a consequence of neoliberal globalization. Retreating state support and exploitative capitalist conditions, such as informality, compel individuals, families, and communities to employ strategies to ensure their everyday and generational sustenance (Katz 2001a). Women’s participation in home-based work, while reproducing the social and material relations of capitalism, is one such strategy that highlights how women’s creative activities are still present in the labor process. Previously, I discussed how staying home to work was a strategy for women to earn while maintaining appropriate symbolic boundaries. Here, however, I find that women’s participation in home-based work is also an activity to rework those boundaries and the mobilities associated with it through their aspirations for their children.

Women’s notions of mobility differed when they discuss their hopes for their children. These hopes highlight women’s understanding of their social relations in the production process that were not observed in discussions of their own experiences with work. Furthermore, I found that these aspirations are gendered. Women strive for upward mobility for their sons and daughters, but they emphasize the importance of outward mobility, leaving the home, for their daughters. For their sons, the idea of them being home-based workers was dismissed, but the reality that their daughters might work from home was very real, and mothers were adamant that their daughters would not do this work; instead, they would attend college and maybe even have a professional career. I argue that in their professional aspirations for their daughters, women are resisting dominant gender norms of their community as well as the social and structural inequalities that they face as women informal workers. The emphasis on outward mobility points to an acknowledgment of the injustices that they face in the home as women and workers. In stressing the importance of leaving the home, women did not want their daughters to merely have increased physical mobility, but saw it as a symbolic mobility of “moving forward.”
Chapter 8. Social Reproduction Challenging Constructions of the Economy

The social turn accompanying the post-Washington consensus (Bergeron 2003) would seem to be a welcome change for gender and development scholars and practitioners. The inclusion of social dimensions, including gender, to international development attempts to redress destructive practices of past decades that emphasized rapid growth over sustainability and to offer a solution for a more equitable future (Stiglitz 1999). Global policy institutions, such as the World Bank and the UN, have endorsed and promoted this strategy by including gender mainstreaming and gender responsive research in their development agendas. Most would agree that economic growth cannot be the sole motivator, and that it is just as important to ensure that growth is accompanied by inclusivity and sustainability. The increased emphasis on topics such as decent jobs (ILO 2002), women’s empowerment (World Bank 2012), and unpaid care (UN Women 2015) reveal the significant shift in development analysis from those that were limited to the state and market to a more multidimensional analysis of the effects and consequences of poverty and inequality.

Feminist and multi-cultural scholar-activists have undoubtedly had a hand in bringing concepts such as intersectionality and care work into the development agenda. However, there is a need to pause and reflect on the motivators and possible hidden agendas. Bergeron argues that this social turn is an attempt to “disarm resistance to development and globalization,” and that despite the World Bank’s inclusion of social and cultural factors, it “continues to frame its interventions through an economistic and paternalistic lens” (2003:414). She adds that mainstream development practices maintain social and economic spheres as separate and the economic as non-social, and so avoid the inherent inequality and relations of power in a capitalist system that affects
multiple aspects of social life. Thus the relationship between gender, globalization, and capitalism remains one of exploitation and appropriation, as economic development comes to rely on women’s labor through migration, export industries, and microfinance (Pyle and Ward 2003). Feminist economists have offered frameworks that “add on” to neoclassical economic thought, but what is needed is a deconstruction of the economy and how goods and services are produced (Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003) and an understanding of how social and economic “spheres interact to create gender subjectivities, norms and inequalities” (Bergeron 2003: 415). In this social turn, mainstream feminism has been “seduced” by capitalist ideology, while postmodern scholars have offered little concrete options for social change (Eisenstein 2009).

So then, the question is, what kind of analysis would offer a more complete picture of what is at stake and the tools to envision alternative economies? Feminist sociologists, political economists, and geographers have pointed to the potential of social reproduction theory to address material and ideological power relations (Bakker and Gill 2003; Bakker and Silvey 2008; Bakker 1999, 2007; Bedford and Rai 2010; Ferguson and McNally 2014; Ferguson 2008; Katz 2001, 2001a). This dissertation employs a social reproduction analysis to examine the experiences of women in the informal economy. In doing so, the goal is to avoid representing women’s experiences with work within an essentialist structural framework that deprives individuals of agency or specificity, while also accounting for the very real presence of a capitalist society that shapes our social relations and locations. Next, I review the main findings from this work. I follow this by a discussion of unanswered questions and possible directions for future research and policy practices that are more attentive to the multiple locations informal workers occupy as social beings.

Summary of Findings
There is a need to reconceptualize women’s roles and relations with the private and public sphere, and the related framing of family/work, informal/formal, and even stationary/mobility. Scholarship on women and work tends to reproduce the gendered and dichotomous relationship of private/public despite efforts to dismantle it, since these analyses do not question the process that links social reproduction and production in capitalism. As Cameron and Gibson-Graham (2003) note, while feminist economists have offered valuable contributions to reframing what is defined as productive and of value to our economy, they reproduce economist models without actually critiquing the definitions and methods. The result is an emphasis on care, which obscures the relations of social reproduction in capitalism. Delinking this labor from capitalist relations is a goal for some, noting that the term “care” is preferable to “social reproduction” as the latter does not distinguish biological reproduction from the reproduction of the labor force and of society (see Eyben 2012:19). What these scholars miss is that the relationship between the three forms of reproduction—biological reproduction (including sexual, emotional, and affective services), unpaid production of goods and services in the home, and reproduction of culture and ideology—is essential to a complete picture of capitalism and its consequences. It is only with social reproduction theory that we can adequately examine the interlinked relationship between persisting gendered divisions of labor in the household, the classed and racial implications of global care chains (Parreñas 2001), and the dismantling of the welfare state in providing and supporting much of society’s social reproduction needs (Bezanson and Luxton 2006).

As I have argued in this dissertation, social reproduction theory provides the tools to move beyond assumed notions of work, production, and the economy as defined by capitalism. An analytical framework that employs capitalism’s own definition of what counts as work provides a limited assessment of the broad spectrum of human activity (Federici 2012; Gibson-Graham 2006).
Adopting Gramsci’s work/labor distinction, Bakker and Gill (2003) start with the notion that much of human activity or work is a process of mediation and transformation of social and natural orders, and frame labor as those activities that are appropriated by capitalism and alienated from the broader concept of work. The implication of this is that it provides agency to human beings, rather than depicting them as puppets within an omnipresent system, and it also asks us to reexamine the meaning of labor, not by the definition that capitalism provides us, but to its relation to a capitalist production system.

Home-based work, and much of informal work, does not fit neatly into the dichotomous categories that material and ideological processes have constructed, and so it compels us to re-examine what we define as work and experiences with it. Home-based work’s links with capitalism and patriarchy are clear (Allen and Wolkowitz 1987; Balakrishnan and Sayeed 2002; Benería and Roldan 1987), but women also employ strategies to address the social and economic boundaries in which they find themselves. While women’s actions reproduce public/private and mobile/stationary domains, the entrance of paid work in the home reveals the limitations of distinguishing these analytical categories as separate. In Chapter 4, I discuss how women’s participation in home-based work is a strategy to address the precarious economic conditions of their households while providing for and maintaining the social reproduction needs of the family. The spatial and temporal characteristics of home-based work, namely irregularity and its location in the home, illustrate how capitalist production does not confine itself to its own constructed boundaries of paid and unpaid work; rather, it exploits value-producing unpaid labor expended to produce these goods as well as the value produced by women’s social reproductive labor that allows for a worker that is always available, even when caring, and easily disposed of.
The consequences of this are seen in the proliferation of the “entrepreneurial woman” in development literature. Under the guise of empowerment, mainstream development has endorsed the use of women’s entrepreneurial skills in addressing poverty and inequality in society, without acknowledging the historical processes of how capitalist power works in the present economic system. In Chapter 5, I examine the construction of the gendered entrepreneurial woman in relation to actual experiences with informality. Rather than enjoying the empowering potential of acquiring capital and autonomy, homeworkers use their earnings to pay for the costs of production and have to practice self-management in the production process—both of which benefit those higher in the supply chain. To explain this, I ask how is home-based work an example of the embodied nature of work? This framework questions assumed distinctions of when work is or is not considered part of capitalist production, and it highlights the significance of one’s socio-spatial location in this production process. I argue that it is women’s socio-spatial location that shapes the social relations that restrict them to home-based work and also supports the construction of their place in the global economy as that of the entrepreneurial woman. Examining workers’ temporal and spatial practices reveals women’s experiences with home-based work diverge from and conflicts with this construction. Rather, women point to the “tension” that they hold as they are confronted with decisions to divert resources and time away from their social reproduction activities for work needs (ironically, to earn more and so better support their family).

Many of the debates surrounding gender, work, and globalization concern whether to attribute everyday realities to structure or agency. While some argue that women working in export factories is an expression of their agency (Kabeer 2000; Lim 1990), others have pointed to the determining power of globalization and capitalism (Elson and Pearson 1981; Heymann 2006; Pearson 1998). This study bridges these distinctions by examining how women’s actions
simultaneously reproduce and contest power relations. Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* is helpful here to frame women’s actions as occurring within a field of possibilities; for example, while home-based work is a strategy to address the struggles that a capitalist system fosters, it is also an example of how women are limited by the economic and social orders in which they find themselves. In this study, I bring attention to women’s everyday practices with place, and ask how these actions reproduce power but might also be examples of reworking, resilience, and resistance (Katz 2001). I examine these practices across three institutions that affect and shape women’s symbolic boundaries—the family, economy, and civil society through their participation with SEWA. Women’s social locations within these institutions explain their actions; such as learning a skill to use in the home, choosing home-based work to provide better care, and framing their activities in civil society as service. It is important to contextualize these choices and decisions in relation to and within structures of power and domination so that we can understand women’s choice to work at home or participation in civil society as occurring within a limited set of options and possibilities.

My final empirical chapter addresses these boundaries by examining women’s notions of material and symbolic mobility. Women’s participation in home-based work is undoubtedly an outcome of their lack of mobility, whether it is due to economic, cultural, or social forces. However, I found that women reworked their experiences and understandings of mobility as a site of potential resistance to the boundaries that they faced. While women framed home-based work as a preference, they were adamant that their children would not do similar work. Instead, they had aspirations for their children to join the formal workforce, and women saw their contributions from home-based work as a route to achieve this goal. What is important to highlight for this study is not the possibilities of their children achieving economic and social mobility, but what women’s
aspirations denote about their own social positions. Women’s awareness of their social position becomes clear when listening to their hopes for their daughters. While they had dreams of economic and social mobility for all their children, participants wanted their daughters to experience outward mobility. In this case, home-based work was not a desirable choice at all as it would keep their daughters in the home, something that they were resolutely opposed to. In contrast to how women emphasized the need for themselves to stay home to work, their aspirations for their daughters point to women’s understanding of their own struggles as a result of their social position. While work and care constricted their choices and practices, women hope that their daughters would not experience the same restrictive mobility—in the material and symbolic sense.

**Implications for Future Research and Development Practices**

Focusing on home-based work, I examined the use of women’s labor in the family, work, and civil society, and asked in what ways do women construct and employ their subjective meanings in these spheres. I argue that social reproduction theory provides a more inclusive analysis of the structural, socio-spatial, and agential processes at work. There are three lines of research that this study speaks to and opens up new questions for further inquiry: the informal economy, international development, and civil society.

The informal economy is undoubtedly a major phenomenon in many low- and middle-income countries (ILO 2013), and scholars have argued that the characteristics of this work—insecurity, informality, and precariousness—are increasingly becoming the norm in employment relationships around the world (Breman and Linden 2014; Standing 2011). This move has occurred along with the devolution of state support for social reproductive needs (Bezanson and Luxton 2006). Applying social reproduction theory to other forms of informal work, including examples of it in the United States and other advanced capitalist countries, not only addresses the
consequences that increasing precarity has on workers and their families, but reveals how
capitalism relies on and perpetuates socio-cultural and socio-spatial relations of power and
difference. Further case studies on different forms of informal work as well as macro-analyses of
national and transnational governance regarding trade and social support are needed to provide a
fuller picture of the processes of neoliberal capitalism on social life.

The international community has come to realize that implementation of the Washington
Consensus has exacerbated inequality within and between countries, and international
development has increasingly turned to women to address global problems. This study critiques
the oft-praised initiatives of microfinance and microentrepreneurialism that employ neoliberal
strategies to use women’s labor for the accumulation of capital. By examining the spatial and
temporal practices of home-based work, I question the assumed empowering potential of
entrepreneurialism for women and their communities. There is need for further inquiry that uses a
critical and feminist sociological framework to uncover unequal relations and structures of power
in development practices and policies. The shift in development towards social factors and
sustainability over growth is a welcomed change, but questions remain to what purpose and whose
values are continuing to be supported by development institutions and organizations. As
development discourses have begun to include feminist frameworks, scholars that continue to
critically tackle the neoliberal logic of development have the opportunity to influence current
practices and even offer alternative agendas.

Related to this point is the role of civil society in development. People in many countries,
including in India, rely on civil society for the sustenance of daily and generational life, either
because the State has never offered such services or because it is withdrawing from this role. The
increasing significance of civil society, especially in the form of NGOs, requires further
sociological inquiry. In particular, despite beliefs that the inclusion of NGOs are leading to greater democratization of civil society, scholars have questioned the relationship between these NGOs and private interests (Kameet 2004). However, rather than reducing the wide range of organizations and movements into either good or bad aspects of civil society, it is more helpful to examine how these organizations, whether grass-root or transnational, interact with capitalist processes that have come to dominate social life in local and global contexts. As I have argued, relations of power exist in both local and transnational settings, and, while SEWA attempts to address economic and gender injustices, it exists within fields that hold relations of power and so must reproduce some of these relations. Critiquing SEWA’s reliance on development initiatives and its relationship to public and private funders does little to support the working women that are benefiting from SEWA’s development work today. However, acknowledging that there are inherent relations of power is a step towards addressing and overcoming those links.

In concluding, the aim of this dissertation is to demonstrate the usefulness of a social reproduction analysis in studies of gender, work, and globalization. This approach accounts for the structural inequalities of capitalist economic systems, and also provides space for subjective experiences and responses to relations of power. I applied this theory to home-based work in India’s garment industry, a phenomenon that reveals the material and ideological connections of gender and work in capitalism (Benería and Roldan 1987) and compels us to question assumed notions of the interaction between patriarchy and capitalism (Boris 1994; Prügl 1999). Because of the rise of international development institutions and the use of women’s labor in development practices, I add to this analysis the role of an organization in addressing the needs of informal workers. By addressing the ways that capitalism appropriates work as labor, including the relations
of power that sustain this process, but also the possibilities of contestation, this study aims to offer alternative visions of work (broadly understood) that moves us beyond so-called public and private spheres. Home-based work reveals how women’s social relations need to be reconceptualized beyond these dichotomies since capitalist production processes certainly do not follow these constructions.
# Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adivasi</strong></td>
<td>Tribal ethnic groups. Along with Dalits, Adivasi have been historically discriminated against in India.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>beedi</strong></td>
<td>Thin cigarettes of tobacco wrapped in leaf.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>chaniya choli</strong></td>
<td>Embellished and colorful outfit worn during festivals, consisting of a skirt and blouse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>chawls</strong></td>
<td>Tenement housing set up by the textile mills to house migrant workers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>churidar</strong></td>
<td>Similar to salwar, but tight from the knees to the ankles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dalit</strong></td>
<td>Literally, the oppressed, a term to signify the former untouchable castes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>dupatta</strong></td>
<td>Long scarf worn over the shoulders in a women’s salwar kameez outfit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>goondas</strong></td>
<td>Indian-English slang for people engaged in anti-social activities, such as extortion or bootlegging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Harijan</strong></td>
<td>Literally, children of god, the term used by Gandhi to signify the former untouchable castes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hindutva</strong></td>
<td>Hindu nationalism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>kucca</strong></td>
<td>Traditional dwellings made of mud and a straw roof, but also used to denote temporary dwellings made of found material, such as plastic and plywood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>pallav</strong></td>
<td>Decorated end of the sari. Hindu women use this part of the sari to cover their face.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>pol</strong></td>
<td>Enclosed housing cluster found in the old city of Ahmedabad, often made up of one caste or religious group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>pucca</strong></td>
<td>A dwelling made of permanent materials, such as concrete.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>purdah</strong></td>
<td>Literally, behind veil or curtain, a system of gendered seclusion found in Hindu and Muslim cultures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>putravadhu</strong></td>
<td>Daughter-in-law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>rakhi</strong></td>
<td>A beaded bracelet. Often given as a present from a sister to her brother during the Hindu holiday Raksha Bandhan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>salwar kameez</strong></td>
<td>South Asian outfit of loose tunic (kameez) and trouser (salwar).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>sanskritisation</strong></td>
<td>Process of lower castes adopting beliefs and practices of the higher castes, often with the aim of social mobility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>sari</strong></td>
<td>South Asian outfit worn by women, composed of a long piece of material wrapped around a blouse and underskirt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>sari fall</strong></td>
<td>The border sewn to the edge of the sari to add weight and a better drape when it is worn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sasu</td>
<td>Mother-in-law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>satyagraha</td>
<td>Literally, holding onto truth, practiced as passive resistance in India's Independence movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>semi-pucca</td>
<td>A partly permanent dwelling, often with concrete walls but a tin roof.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shakti</td>
<td>Power, also a Hindu female deity representing power and strength.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shakti vekas</td>
<td>Capacity building.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>swadeshi</td>
<td>Promoting indigenous manufacturing, practiced by the Indian independence movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>swaraj</td>
<td>Self-governance or self-rule, concept supported by the Indian independence movement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix I. List of Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fieldsite and Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education or Literacy Level</th>
<th>Caste or Religion</th>
<th>Family Status</th>
<th>HH Size</th>
<th>Monthly HH Income (Rs.)</th>
<th>Type of Work</th>
<th>SEWA Member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Amraiwadi                 | Parul | 45                      | Illiterate        | SC           | Married Nuclear | 5           | 7,500       | • Quilts, OA  
                             |       |                            |                   |              | 7,500              |             | Yes         |
|                           | Jaya | 24                      | 10th              | SC           | Married Nuclear | 3           | 9,200       | • Long gloves, Ct  
                             |       |                            |                   |              | 9,200              |             | No          |
|                           | Lata | 39                      | 3rd               | SC           | Married Nuclear | 5           | 10,472      | • Short gloves, Ct  
                             |       |                            |                   |              | 10,472             |             | No          |
| Danilimda                 | Alka | 30                      | 9th               | SC           | Married Nuclear | 3           | n.a.        | • Thread cutting, jeans, Ct  
                             |       |                            |                   |              | 3                   |             | No          |
|                           | Jyoti| 32                      | 8th               | SC           | Married Nuclear | 4           | n.a.        | • Handkerchiefs, Ct  
                             |       |                            |                   |              | 4                   |             | Yes         |
|                           | Manjila | 42               | 4th               | SC           | Married Nuclear | 5           | n.a.        | • Thread cutting, jeans, Ct  
                             |       |                            |                   |              | 5                   |             | No          |
| Fatehwadi                 | Zamila | 42                | 9th               | Muslim       | Married Nuclear | 5           | 26,160      | • Salwar kameez, Ct  
                             |       |                            |                   |              | 26,160             |             | No          |
|                           | Biliksha | 28            | 9th               | Muslim       | Married Joint  | 8           | 9,966       | • School uniforms, Ct  
                             |       |                            |                   |              | 9,966              |             | No          |
|                           | Zarina | 42                | 9th               | Muslim       | Married Nuclear | 4           | 19,870      | • Pillow covers, Ct  
                             |       |                            |                   |              | 19,870             |             | Yes         |
|                           | Jayshree | 60           | 7th               | SC           | Married Joint  | 6           | 16,360      | • Quilt, OA  
                             |       |                            |                   |              | 16,360             |             | Yes         |
|                           | Bharti | 35               | 8th               | SC           | Widow Joint    | 4           | 5,440       | • Dupatta border, Ct  
                             |       |                            |                   |              | 5,440              |             | No          |
|                           | Nikila | 26              | 10th              | SC           | Married Joint  | 8           | 21,050      | • Dupatta border, Ct  
<pre><code>                         |       |                            |                   |              | 21,050             |             | Yes         |
</code></pre>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Caste</th>
<th>Married Status</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Weekly Earnings</th>
<th>技能培训</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Keshavnagar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asha</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Married Joint</td>
<td>Embroidery, Ct</td>
<td>9,500</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usha</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Married Joint</td>
<td>Sari fall, OA, SEWA Literacy teacher</td>
<td>11,400</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shilpa</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Married Nuclear</td>
<td>Necklines, nightgowns, Ct, SEWA Literacy teacher</td>
<td>12,040</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nobelnagar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hansha</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>OBC</td>
<td>Married Nuclear</td>
<td>Closing buttons, Ct</td>
<td>11,008</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kanku</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>GC</td>
<td>Married Joint</td>
<td>Salwar kameez, OA</td>
<td>7,380</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daxa</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>GC</td>
<td>Married Nuclear</td>
<td>Salwar, Ct, Children wear, Ct, Ironing garments, Ct, Salwar kameez, OA</td>
<td>10,217</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajavir</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lajvanti</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Never married Nuclear</td>
<td>Patchwork, Ct</td>
<td>16,700</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chanda</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>OBC</td>
<td>Never married Joint</td>
<td>Sewing straps to undergarments, Ct</td>
<td>20,320</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darshana</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>OBC</td>
<td>Married Joint</td>
<td>Sewing straps to undergarments, Ct, Ironing and packing leggings, Ct, Family kindling business, SEWA Community organizer</td>
<td>13,300</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajivnagar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kajal</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Married Nuclear</td>
<td>Sews button holes, blouses, Ct, Quilts, OA</td>
<td>6,500</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanta</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Never Married Nuclear</td>
<td>Dupatta border, Ct, Chaniya Choli, Ct, Handbags, OA, Quilts, OA</td>
<td>40,350</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Caste</td>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Income</td>
<td>Goods Provided</td>
<td>Identity of Goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vali</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Nuclear</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>Chaniya Choli, Ct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pillow covers, Ct</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Quilts, Ct</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarkhej</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manisha</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Joint</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9,504</td>
<td>Sari decorations, Ct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dupatta borders, Ct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chaniya Choli, Ct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manjula</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>6th</td>
<td>GC</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Nuclear</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7,520</td>
<td>Dupatta border, Ct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sari fall, Ct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Family's pottery business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nita</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Nuclear</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10,195</td>
<td>Chaniya choli, Ct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vatva</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohsina</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Nuclear</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2,382</td>
<td>Petticoat, Ct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Salwar, Ct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Quilt, OA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Childcare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naseem</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Illiterate</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Nuclear</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7,026</td>
<td>Salwar, Ct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dupatta border, Ct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaia</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Illiterate</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Nuclear*</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7,260</td>
<td>Dupatta border, Ct</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Kaia's in-laws (including two brothers-in-law and their families) live in the same home as her and her family, but because they keep separate household accounts she categorized her family type as a nuclear household.

Key: HH, Household; SC, Scheduled Caste; OBC, Other Backward Caste; GC, General Caste; HBW, Home-Based Work; Ct, Contract HBW; OA, Own-Account HBW
## Appendix II. List of Fieldsites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fieldsite</th>
<th>No. of participants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Majority Caste or Community</th>
<th>HH Size</th>
<th>Monthly HH Income (Rs.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amraiwadi</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11,497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danilimda</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dariapur</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8,340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatehwadi</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14,522</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamalpur</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12,202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keshavnagar</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10,612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nobelnagar</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>GC</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9,969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajavir</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14,737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajivnagar</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17,121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarkhej</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10,585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vatva</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9,607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total/Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>35</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td><strong>n.a.</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>11,919</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: HH, Household; SC, Scheduled Caste; OBC, Other Backward Caste; GC, General Caste


of Progress in Ahmedabad. London.


Chinguno, Crispen. 2010. “Trade Unions and Workers in the Periphery: Forging New Forms of


Fernandes, Leela. 2006. *India’s New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.


Kronlid, David. 2008. “Mobility as Capability.” in Transport and Society: Gendered Mobilities,


244


Radhakrishnan, Smitha. 2014. “Subverting the Microfinance Myth: Gendered Livelihoods in Urban India’s Slums.” *Oppositional Realities* 1(3).


Robinson, Rowena. 2010. “Boundary Battles: Muslim Women and Community Identity in the


Spivak, Gayatri. 1988. “Can the Subaltern Speak.” P. 271 in Marxism and the Interpretation of
Culture. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.


Thanh Thai, Mai Thi and Ekaterina Turkina, eds. 2013. Entrepreneurship in the Informal


Video SEWA. 1995. *A Journey from Rs. 7 to Rs. 4 Lakh*. India: SEWA.


Video SEWA. 1984. *Parde Ke Pichee (Behind the Veil)*. India: Video SEWA.


