Home-Based Work and Issues of Gender and Space

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This article studies the experiences of a group of women workers involved in home-based work for a food processing unit in Kerala, where membership to Kudumbashree, the state-centric civil society organisation, is necessary for participation.
The theoretical aspects of space and gender, in the context of how they are mutually formed and how gendered spaces are produced in the workers' everyday lives are analysed. A geographical explanation of the formation of such gendered spaces under home-based production is presented, following which everyday labour relations and the framing of workers' response strategies, which brought capital and labour to the negotiating table, are illustrated.

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This article focuses on the experiences of a group of women workers involved in home-based work (HBW) for a food processing firm in Kerala.[1] I analyse HBW through the theoretical lenses of space and gender. Understanding the role of space in HBW illuminates the experiences in the everyday lives of the workers, and clarifies how they influence the social relations of gender. The focus hence is on how space and gender are mutually formed, and how gendered spaces are produced in the everyday work lives of the women workers.

Although the growth of HBW is part of a wider geographical transformation of employment patterns (Herod 1991), it has received limited coverage in the geographical literature, apart from a few exceptions (for example, Herod 1991; Zanon 1997), and has focused mainly on how women combine productive and reproductive lives and manage the journey to work (Christensen 1993). In this context, the focus on space is relevant because it is the domestic space, under HBW, that combines paid and unpaid work (Zanon 1997). Concerning gender, among all typically "feminine" occupations, industrial HBW appears most influenced by the gendered role of women (Abreu and Sorj 1996), which has gained further impetus as women, mostly mothers, play the major role (Miraftab 1996).

In this article, HBW and its theoretical underpinnings are studied through the case of the food processing industry (FPI) in Kerala, in the context of one prominent firm. I first review definitions and theoretical issues, reflecting on two central theoretical pillars – gender and space. A quick summary on the role of this industry in India and in Kerala precedes the case study, ending with reflections and conclusions.

Home-Based Work: Definitions and Theoretical Issues

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has defined HBW as the production of goods or provision of services for an employer or contractor under an arrangement whereby the work is carried out at the place of the worker's own choosing – often the worker's own home – normally without direct supervision (ILO 1995; Boris and Prügl 1996). HBW is rampant in rural and urban India, involving agricultural, non-agricultural, utilitarian, and artistic products (Huws 1995). Non-availability of reliable data at national/international levels poses a formidable problem; home-based workers (HB-workers) are invisible to society, literally; as they work within their homes, they officially do not appear in any statistics (Singh and Kelles-Viitanen 1987).

Although HB-workers are employed by a variety of industries, certain characteristics remain common (Boris and Daniels

1989). First, they are typically found in industries adapting a highly specialised division of labour, and contribute to only a fraction of the product. Second, they are always paid piece-rate, which is consistently lower than factory wage for the same work. Third, they are most common in seasonal industries, leading to tremendous fluctuations in employment rates. Most of them are married women between the ages of 25 and 45, often mothers with co-habiting husbands. The use of the home as a place of production conveys a personalised model of work relations, making employment in these units preferable to work in large factories (Miraftab 1996).

HBW has been viewed as an exploitative system because it allows employers to inexpensively expand production and capital to manipulate patriarchal social relations. The overlapping of capitalism and patriarchy has been crucial in encouraging the growth of HBW as a part of a broader employers' assault on the working class (Herod 1991). Herod (ibid) and Gregory (1985) list out various advantages that HB-workers offer, including the absorption of overhead costs (on office space, electricity); enabling experimentation with techniques (such as switching to piece-rate pay and setting lower wages); and abdicating long-term responsibilities (such as pension, and health and life insurance). Growing competition from imports also encourages domestic manufacturers to increasingly use HB-workers as a flexible labour force, quickly hired and fired in response to changing market demands. Additionally, traditional unionising methods subside under home-based production.

Now, we move on to our two major theoretical concerns: gender and space.

Gender and Industrial HBW

Over the recent decades, as securing formal employment has become challenging, women have resorted to informal survival strategies. Domestic responsibilities have encouraged many women to work close to and increasingly from, home, aggravating the gender dimension of HBW. Among typically "feminine" occupations, industrial HBW appears the most influenced by the gendered role of women, since learning processes appear "natural", the work supposedly being "feminine" in nature. This "naturalisation" of training has strengthened the link between professional attitudes and traditional female roles. Moreover, industrial HBW delicately balances the necessity of having paid work and maintaining the traditional role of wife/mother (Abreu and Sorj 1996). According to Raju (2013), women HB-workers, at any level, are trapped in socially encoded constructs essentialising women's primary location within the domestic sphere.

For women workers, the spatial juxtaposition of paid labour and unpaid domestic work has a double effect. Incorporating income generation into the domestic space undoubtedly simplifies juggling productive and reproductive responsibilities (Miraftab 1996), and permits the fulfilment of "housewifely altruistic" responsibilities (Devika and Thampi 2010). Industrialists have clearly recognised the exploitative value of maintaining married women at home as a surplus labour pool of HB-workers, and employing primarily young, single women in the factory (Boris and Daniels 1989). Employers have strongly preferred middle-aged mothers, with their seemingly self-disciplined, responsible, serious and punctual nature (Boris and Prügl 1996). As industrial homework has expanded to rural areas, employers generally claim that they have provided employment to many women, who might otherwise not find work; hence, HBW has been their "only option" (Mullings 2004). Broadly, the capitalist or neo-liberal state rationale for HBW lies in its "flexibility" for women workers who prefer to be, or must be, at home to care for the immediate family (Staples 2006). HBW is all too often undervalued as merely a pastime or hobby, with the money HB-workers earn termed as "pin money" (Bergan 2009).

Thus, in a diverse global economy, gendered ideologies support flexible modes of labour control and discipline because of their ability to naturalise arbitrary and constructed claims about worthy/less-worthy labour, and what kinds of bodies are best suited to particular tasks (Mills 2003). These production units depict a larger landscape that women have built, and are continuing to build, within a system structured around class and gender, shaped by operations of capitalism.

Briefly, what we see here is the intersection between the logic of capitalism and patriarchal practices, the interplay of class formation, gender stratifications, and the linkage between the individual, family/factory, state and global restructuring (Hsiung 1996).

Space and Industrial HBW

The Fordist logic of economic organisation has been shaped by capital's attempt to homogenise space and experience to create a relatively undifferentiated mass market stimulating consumption and profit. However, during the 1970s and 1980s, capital increasingly sought to fragment space and experiences to reassert differences between places in the uneven production of the geographies of accumulation. A crucial element in capital's offensive against the working class during this period was the fundamental restructuring and fragmentation of space at a regional, national and urban scale. This eventually led to alternative models that better controlled the spatial organisation of capital (Tufts 1998), creating new relationships between domestic space and work.

The "living room as factory" system (Hsiung 1996), and opening new workspaces to women, has removed production processes from a single location, scattering it over space (Tufts 1998). The role of space not only expresses, but also influences the social relations of gender. Most of the geographic literature on women combining productive and reproductive lives has focused on how they manage the journey to work. But this article, following Christensen (1993), explores another geographical option: that of bringing paid labour into the home. By converging work and family in one place, women eliminate the journey to work, creating entirely new issues and problems corresponding to their stage in life.

In this context, three questions – where geography is, what the basis of geographical understanding of home-based

production is, and what the spatiality of home-based production is – opens up three theoretical dimensions:

(1) Transformation of home space through the construction of work space: On how women reorganise domestic space to facilitate paid work in the home, for instance, by creating a separate work space. Miraftab (1996) argues that HBW affects the spatial arrangements in individual homes and urban zones, leading to work-friendly domestic spatial modifications.

(2) Women's changing geographical experience of HBW due to the home becoming the central area of waged work and family life: HBW affects women's spatial and social interaction by being spatially tied to the home, and simultaneously experiencing geographical isolation.

(3) How the home as domestic unpaid work space shapes the view of paid work at home: According to Zanon (1997), capital transforms the home from a place of family life to a private sphere of production, taking into consideration the role of a gendered division of labour in shaping the conditions of paid work within the home space. This further alters the meaning of "home" as a domestic space or non-work realm, shaping people's view of paid work in the home and the activities associated with this sphere. Therefore, spatial relations addressed in this context relate to how the home space transforms for women, as it is no longer simply a "place of family life".

The article now elaborates on the FPI in India and Kerala.

Food Processing Industry in India and Kerala

"Food processing" essentially involves post-harvest activities that add value to the agricultural product prior to marketing (Wilkinson 2004). The FPI is vast, covering agriculture, horticulture, plantation, animal husbandry, fisheries, and the manufacture of other edible products. The importance of the FPI is not recent; since 1988, there has been an exclusive Ministry of Food Processing Industries at the centre. However, it was especially after liberalisation in the early 1990s that the sector was given thrust (Rao 2009).

Food processing is now one of India's largest industries, ranking fifth in production, consumption, export, and expected growth (ILO 2007). With the entry of multinational companies, the total inflow of foreign direct investment between 1991-96 was Rs 5,270 crore ($1.2 bn). However, these entrants face tough competition from strong Indian brands such as ITC, Dabur, Amul, Godrej, etc, spurring innovation, facilitating sustained growth, and improving global competitiveness.

This industry is largely dominated by an unorganised segment, employing 84% of the sector's labour force and housing 99% of its enterprises (Rao 2009).

Agriculture and food processing have now joined the list of "global" industries, experiencing globalisation in even retail and service. The food chain that links the farmer with the consumer, once local, has now gone global, receiving attention within the framework of export-led industrialisation. Worldwide competition among globalised food chains has affected the labour market, with increasing round-the-clock schedules and flexibility in employment and working conditions. Hence, recent debates on the globalisation of this sector have concerned the global shift to more flexible labour relations. Along with labour flexibility, social relations of food have consistently been organised along gender, too (Allen and Sachs 2007), adding new dimensions to women's involvement.

These kinds of employment relations mainly depend on locally crafted labour contracts, which intersect local labour market conditions. Employers prefer local workers, since (i) given the long history of a place, most locals are experienced in the tasks associated with harvesting, processing and packing; (ii) locals are "on hand" year round, dismissed/rehired as needed; and (iii) employers "keep an eye on locals more easily than outsiders; the former can be kept under control better than the latter" (Rodriguez 1987: 310). In this context, Collins and Krippner (1999) have keenly observed this as the shift to a local labour force employed on temporary contracts, which can be accompanied by a simplification of the pre-existing supervisory system. It can be noted that despite the development of standardised, yet flexible, production systems, there remains considerable variability in different locales (Phillips 2006).

Following Phillips (ibid), we have to consider that strategies used by large multinationals are not exclusive, since the stress associated with intense competition and consequent pressures to lower prices/wages are also not exclusive to them. These factors increasingly affect even smaller players at local levels, who presently compete even with the leading global brands now available locally (Harun et al 2010). These smaller players, who participate in the global market but operate at local or rural levels, and for whom labour is the most easily available cushion and abundant factor of production against which competitive pressures can be buttressed, also employ these strategies.

Since the case study here concerns a Kerala-based food processing firm registered as a small-scale manufacturing unit employing mostly women HB-workers, we take a brief look at the place of food processing[2] in both Kerala's manufacturing sector and its small-scale industry sector.

Data on the state-wise share of food processing in total employment in 2003-04 (Rao 2009) shows that Kerala ranks first at nearly 48% (the all-India average is only 17%),[3] with about 1,274 (mainly small-scale) food processing units in Kerala alone. It is rich in coconut, spices, fruits, vegetables and seafood. Spices, pickles and marine products constitute its major food product exports. Two-thirds of the state's total export income comes from processed food. The FPI in the state commands nearly Rs 5,000 crore in exports, and has the potential to become a Rs 30,000 crore industry (EEU 2012). Kerala's share in the country's total food products export is almost 20%, despite its small land mass. Hence, the FPI stands as a priority sector in the state due to its potential for future growth, diversification, and possibility of generating substantial employment. In fact, the proportion of female workers in this sector is very significant, especially in Kerala, where it forms a huge 86% of the organised-sector labour

force (Rao 2009). The state in second place, Tamil Nadu, has only around 53%; this is a large margin indeed. The all-India average is only 28%.

Next, we briefly look at the share of food processing as a part of the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) sector in Kerala, which employs around 3.02 million people, almost 80% of whom are associated with unregistered units, and of which two-thirds are in rural locations. Within the MSME sector, the FPI comprises around 5.4% of enterprises, employs around 6.5% of its labour force (ranking third among all industries in the MSME sector in both enterprises and employment), and contributes almost 20% of its gross output. These may appear small components, but we must bear in mind that the FPI contributes significantly to employment (7.46% of total MSME employment in the state).

We now move towards the case study.

The Case

Description of the Firm and Workers

This case concerns HB-workers who work for a prominent food processing firm (henceforth the "firm") in Kerala. Fieldwork was carried out in two phases, during the second half of 2009 and in mid-2010. Apart from being prominent in the domestic market, this firm is a major exporter to the US, Europe, west Asia and south-east Asia, competing in the market for pickles, fruit jams, syrups, spices, curry powders, blended masalas, canned foods, rice and wheat products, snacks, etc. This is a private limited company, under proprietorship, categorised as a small-scale manufacturing unit. It commenced in 1995 and recently opened an exclusive export division. The Firm employs around 250 workers in its one and only factory, located in interior rural Kerala.

The firm initially targeted the domestic market with limited products, the entire production undertaken only within its factory. But on expansion into the export market, it introduced structural changes by contracting out a part of its production to women in the villages neighbouring the factory.[4]

These village communities are mostly involved in local agriculture and animal husbandry, with the men often also employed in the firm. The group of families I studied in these villages were heterogeneous – Christians, Nairs, Ezhavas, etc – but economically identical. Most people above the age of 30 were at most school-educated, but almost all young people below 25 were pursuing diplomas and college education. Most were nuclear families, and the women involved in the HBW were not the primary breadwinners (except where husbands had died or had abandoned them). On enquiring about its opting for home-based production, the firm responded:

> We observed that women did the cutting well…it was *natural* to them.[5] But it was very difficult to get female workers into the factory, and young girls would quit abruptly because of marriage. We noticed a huge female-labour pool in the vicinity who would not work otherwise because of restrictions from their family or husbands, so we utilised this labour pool by providing raw materials at their *homes*, asking them to process it for us. With this, both parties were happy: the women earned, and it was cheaper and faster for us, freeing us of legal ties.

This was initiated to involve the family members of the male workers employed in the factory, on the grounds that the women could utilise their free time at home fruitfully. The work assigned was mainly cutting mangoes and lemons, and preparing ginger, garlic, and other fruits and vegetables for pickles, jams, etc. In the beginning, only the family members of its direct employees were involved. The firm then began approaching other households in neighbouring villages with which it had little association. However, difficulties in managing them arose, which led to contracting out only to those who were Kudumbashree members. The firm explained,

> It was easy to manage our workers' families, but now we were dealing with a whole new set of women who were new to us, complicating things. At this stage, we decided to contract out to *groups*, not individuals. Since most were active members of Kudumbashree, we decided to put out a section of production to Kudumbashree units in this area, requiring that the units have at least one member known personally to the firm.

In this context, we look into the details of the decision regarding Kudumbashree membership, and why the firm was insistent on Kudumbashree membership for involvement in home-based production. We first look at the concept of Kudumbashree and the workspace peculiarities created under it.[6]

Kudumbashree

A superficial look at this decision may restate the firm's claims of seamless access to rural women; however, a deeper enquiry reveals complications. The following discussion relies on Devika and Thampi (2010) and Devika et al (2008).

Kudumbashree was initiated in 1998 by the Kerala government, and conceived as a state centric civil society, an autonomous body in the panchayats aimed at eliminating poverty within 10 years. In this initiative, a three-tiered structure was developed, composed of neighbourhood groups federated into Area Development Societies at the ward level, in turn federated into a Community Development Society at the panchayat level, composed exclusively of women from families identified as underprivileged.

According to Devika and Thampi (2010), Kudumbashree livelihood groups operated within an implicit set of spatial regulations and practices, which neutralised the transgressive possibilities of women's mobility into paid work. This has shown that, first, while women's mobility was actively justified, Kudumbashree livelihood activities, focused around the neighbourhood group, were often organised in a way that ensured a minimum breach of spatial location; moreover, younger women were often under the surveillance of older women. Second, the work spaces opened up by Kudumbashree were largely restricted to women, with a minimal presence of men. Although the men and other family members were initially sceptical about women's entry into the newly formed worksites, soon, convinced by the surveillance and the

domestic realm, they sent the women gladly. This major intervention in women's work spheres, according to Devika et al (2008), was geared towards the rationalisation of the domestic sphere.

Social Capital and Responsible Welfare

A much-needed focus here is on the formation and utilisation of the social capital that emerged as a by-product of these new civic associations. The self-help groups formed under Kudumbashree facilitated the venue where these women could learn to work together for a common goal, and to cooperate with mutual trust. This was indeed social capital, produced in and through Kudumbashree, which inevitably fostered reciprocity, facilitated information flows for mutual benefit, and created trust, which, once in place, were self-generating (Putnam 1993), and were expected to have positive effects on local-level development, poverty alleviation, and overall economic performance (John and Chathukulam 2002). Devika et al (2008) demonstrated how three kinds of competing authorities sought to utilise this newly produced social capital – the panchayat, the state, and the Kudumbashree Mission officials.[7]

It is therefore not inconceivable that the preference of this firm for Kudumbashree ran deeper than simply "access to the rural women", fulfilling the search for locally available cheap labour reinforced with strong social capital. Since Kudumbashree work had already gained acceptance among these communities, the HBW here also pass off as a part of it. Thus, by necessitating membership in Kudumbashree, the firm's benefits are endless, from easy availability of human power, self-surveillance and orderliness, and cooperation, to no restriction from the workers' families. With this one stone of "Kudumbashree membership" the firm hit not two, but many birds.

In this context, adding to Devika et al (ibid), there was one more agent – private capital – to absorb the benefits of social capital (already created under the self-help group of these women), and, without any overhead costs, to smoothly enter the rural neighbourhood and make full use of this state-centric civil society group.

Accessing the Home-based Units and Sampling

While interviewing the firm about the work-sheds, I noticed a reluctance to provide details about location, except for vague indications such as "interior villages". They stated that I could visit these locations only with the permission of superiors of the firm, and only accompanied by its staff. I could speak to workers only in front of the staff, avoiding questions about their – or any other group's – salaries. I was also asked to pay Rs 1,000 for data, this contribution intended for a fund targeting various poor-support programmes. After waiting two weeks from the first meeting to gain permission, and despite frequent contact, I was finally not given permission to visit these work-sheds; the reason stated was: "We can't give you the details of our worksheds because it may affect our ISO mark."

Realising that proceeding via the firm was impossible, I used my own means to find these work-sheds in the "interior villages", and proceeded to study them in a clandestine manner. I located three such units in the villages around the firm's factory (three with a population of HBW unknown even to the locals). While I was successful through this endeavour in locating the units and talking to the workers alone, its limitation was my having to remain content with the little information I received. What follows is based entirely on this information, which I gleaned through interviews.

Work Mechanics

The management did not directly interact with the workers for production. The head woman from each Kudumbashree unit, known to the manager, would approach the firm and seek orders; in fact, all communication from production units to the management had to proceed via her. Although each unit had registered under individual names ("Mythri" or "Pulari"), they were referred to by the head-workers' names ("Lakshmi's unit" or "Sharada's unit"). Each group had its work-shed close to a member's house (which, at times, even housed the work-shed). Hence, the workers were often responsible for providing the work space.

Initially, the workers had to collect the raw materials from the factory themselves. These included mangoes, lemons, ginger, chillies, onions, papayas, dates, and jackfruits (for preparing jams and jellies), and items for canned food, including tapioca, yam, etc. Finding this difficult, the women workers requested that they be supplied straight to their work-sheds, along with finger caps, knives, storing containers and vessels. On a typical morning, these items would be supplied to the work-sheds by the firm's vehicle, along with samples of cut pieces. The workers had to cut the items accordingly and return the output by 5 pm, when the firm's vehicle would come to collect it. This arrangement continues till date.

Raw materials vary by season, and payment varies by the weight of the cut items. Due to such variations, the head-workers, who are informed about the raw materials in advance, inform the other members of the group and get ready to work. Wages are paid to a group as a whole, on a weekly basis, and are distributed equally among members.

Since pickles are the flagship item of this firm, the main items provided are mangoes, lime, ginger, garlic and chillies. According to the workers, cutting ginger and chillies is the most highly paid job (paid at Rs 6/kg, as opposed to mangoes, at Rs 2-2.50/kg); this is far more gruelling work than processing mangoes, as the former is more corrosive on the hands.

During peak seasons, such as during festivals, some groups even cut 500 kilos of mangoes a day. August, September and December see a consistently high demand for pickles. But there are lean seasons too, such as the monsoon, when raw materials arrive only once a week.

Just as the nature of this work and its earnings are highly unsteady, there is no uniformity in group size either, which may vary between five and 20 women. During peak seasons, an average-sized group with 10 members earns

Rs 7,000-8,000 per week, but during lean seasons, this can fall to Rs 700-800 per week.

Worker Skills and Work Schedule

As Celia (2010) notes, here too workers' skills are often taken for granted. Even workers themselves fail to appreciate their own skills, considering this work simply as an extension of domestic work, and perceiving their remuneration as the firm's "charity". Celia points out that this had much to do with society's perception of women in terms of how women's "place" was conceived. Even body aches were neglected as "regular", and rarely regarded as an outcome of the hectic work. The employer justifies the low wages by saying that workers "do not undergo any special training", as all that is used are "women's traditional skills, transmitted from mothers to daughters informally" (Elson and Pearson 1981). Additionally, work schedules were also hard; one worker described her typical day:

> I rise at 4 am, finishing all my work by 6.30-7 am. I provide breakfast and pack lunch for my husband and children before 8 am. I then wash, clean, and bathe. On working days I hardly get an hour for myself, as we have to get ready by 8.30-9 am. There is no time even to eat lunch properly, as completion is always expected at 5 pm, regardless of quantity. After completing it, we prepare tea and eventually dinner for our families. We never realise that we have worked 3 continuous hours.

Another worker mentions:

> We often heard that we can earn money sitting at home, without special training, and without investments. But only when I entered this job did I realise that we have no time even to breathe. We are saved from only travel, which would have been preferable as we could have sat down at least during the course of the travel. Here, we have no time to rest.

However, despite this hectic routine, these women were willing to undertake this work as it required no "investment" or "training". They could care for their families and do their domestic work simultaneously, these advantages overpowering the problems of a tight routine. Besides, as Dhanalakshmi (2000) also observed, many responded that while this activity was not worth its income, there were other fringe benefits they enjoyed, such as group pilgrimages, purchasing clothes during festivals, meeting unexpected medical expenses, etc.

Importantly, most workers tried to portray only a positive picture. Their opinions on hectic work schedules, lower pay, and so on, began with the above statements, but always gravitated towards the firm's generosity in giving this opportunity to unskilled, uneducated, untrained women, who could work from the convenience of the home. Almost all interviewees stated: "What more can we expect?"

Everyday Labour Relations

A noticeable aspect, conventionally seen among women HB-workers, was the husband's opinion as a decisive factor. This factor often constrained my interview efforts as, upon arriving at their homes, I was greeted first by their husbands, in whose presence most women workers hesitated to offer work-related details, except peripheral information on raw material, work timings, or constant praise for the firm.

Upon asking one worker how she expressed her (or the group's) concerns regarding pay, or other work-related queries, I was interrupted rudely by her husband, who then ventured to sermonise on the firm's altruism towards these women, allowing them to engage in work in their free time. Hence, the Firm seems to portray itself as a sort of saviour, providing an income to unskilled rural women.

On another occasion, upon asking about any kind of union activity among the firm's direct workers, I was told by a worker's husband, a direct worker in the firm:

> In the firm, there is no trade union; moreover, they won't allow such activities. It is clarified before beginning employment that one leaves all union activity outside the factory gate.

Finding it difficult to conduct interviews at workers' homes due to the husbands' interference and their tendency to talk on their wives' behalf, I decided to visit the women's work-sheds. But here, too, there were constraints, as the women feared saying anything negative in the presence of the others. Hence, throughout my interviews, a free conversation was really hard as these workers belong to a very close-knit community, with the firm having personal knowledge of all its employees and their families. Workers were scared of their opinions reaching the firm's ears, which frequently resulted in a stony silence from my respondents.

Similar experiences can be observed in studies such as Pearson (2004) in Brazil and Mexico, which talked about the fear of aggression from intermediaries they relied on for work, or the fear that their work might be moved elsewhere.

Opening Up the Black Box

My fieldwork opened up several experiences, unrecognised by the workers as attempts to organise against the firm's interests. Similar to Bayat (1997), workers here also strive to progress and improve their lives, often calmly and quietly. While such efforts are dissimilar to the more familiar varieties of labour resistance, they cannot be ignored.[8] Following Tufts (1998), we acknowledge that the task of devising and organising strategies in new sectors and spaces, without prior experience, is doubly challenging. And adhering to Bayat (1997), these types of resistance and the nature of the underlying consciousness can only be understood from analysing contextual opportunities and restricting the factors shaping its possibilities. I address some of these everyday issues faced and mitigated by these workers below.

Cooperation and Competition

Right from initiation, one strict instruction from the firm was that groups could not interact or merge. During crises, only the leader was permitted to meet the firm's management and discuss their concerns.

However, this was not always adhered to. Interviews revealed that these worker groups, despite competing for raw materials and earnings, were very interested in monitoring one another. They approached the firm separately, as per the instruction, but

also put forward other groups' demands. Similarly, when one group observed another receiving special benefits, it would also demand the same. Thus, each group, consciously or unconsciously, is always vigilant towards other groups.

During my interview with the firm's management on the fixing of output among groups, I was told that the general practice was equal division. But upon discussing this with the workers, and gathering how consistently observant they are about the quantity of raw material provided to neighbouring groups (since earnings are based on quantity), I realised that groups may not actually be equally endowed. Despite the competition for raw materials and earnings, there is also implicit cooperation, not through formal meetings, but through informal interactions. Just as in Bergan (2009), in these groups, too, word-of-mouth communication predominated, as workers avoided open meetings for fear of losing their jobs and being away from home for long periods.

It was during one of these informal get-togethers that they decided not to work on Sundays, since that was the only day to spend time with the family and finish pending chores. Although the Firm was displeased at this, it relented after worker groups remained stubborn. This case thus deviates from the usual characteristics of HBW discussed earlier, where workers are usually separated and isolated. In this cluster, a new spatiality to the workforce was created, where each worker worked in a separate group, but an implicit and silent cooperation occasionally resulted in common demands and the resolve to fight together.

Another interesting practice was the lenience regarding Kudumbashree membership. Despite the firms's strict order, these groups used to admit non-Kudumbashree women, especially during peak seasons. A group leader said:

> They [the management] care little about each member in each group, as they interact only with the team leader during issues. So though they involve only Kudumbashree groups, it really doesn't matter who's working in them. Moreover, all members in a Kudumbashree group may not want to participate, so we are forced to call women from outside who are in need of money.

Interestingly, while each group was aware of this practice, there was no attempt to complain about it, thereby keeping it an "open secret" and avoiding losing orders due to a "scarcity of workers".

Three Issues

There have been several other instances where these workers have stood their ground; three are demonstrated below.

(1) Raw Material Collection: In the past, raw materials were not supplied to the workers' doorsteps by default; this required concerted action by the workers. When Kudumbashree groups entered production, it was initially their responsibility to arrange for collecting raw materials from the firm, with the lead member also collecting the details on the day's work. But this could not continue as the workers recognised that it was both a lengthy and an expensive process; instead, they insisted that the firm distribute the raw material to each group. Although the firm was displeased at the prospect of this additional responsibility, a noticeable reduction in the involvement of workers compelled them to address this issue. Consequently, a big problem regarding the collection of raw materials was solved.

(2) Work-Shed: Production was initially undertaken by groups sitting in work-sheds near the workers' houses. The cost of these work-sheds was borne by the workers themselves. To avoid this expense, these work spaces were often associated with a worker's – often the leader's – house. However, recognising the inconvenience of this arrangement, some groups commenced working in temporary sheds near their houses. Subsequently, a few groups collaborated through separate leaders, and approached the firm demanding (successfully) that while the workers could identify and provide the land to set up work-sheds, the firm must bear the building and maintenance costs.

(3) Festival Season: The months prior to festival seasons require groups to cut more than 500 kg of mangoes per day. Quantity as well as piece-rate would vary from Rs 2-2.25/kg, daily returns ranging between Rs 1,000 and Rs 1,125. But despite high earnings, workers were overwhelmed with work, and unable to attend to their household activities.

Although the quantity and time spent on work increased during these periods, the piece-rate usually remained unchanged, with only a packet of curry power or pickle provided at the end of the season as an additional "bonus". Although individual groups tried to express their concerns and demand hikes in the piece-rate during festivals, the firm remained stubborn. Knowing that individually they were weak, workers in different groups discussed demanding a hike in pay during festivals. Aware that the firm discouraged any inter-group cooperation, each group leader approached the management herself and expressed this demand. When the firm remained unwilling to give them a hike, each group professed itself unwilling to work. When the van arrived with raw mangoes, some groups simply rejected it and returned the load, citing "worker scarcity". Since the experience was simultaneous across groups, the firm had to accept their demand and increased the rate by Rs 0.25-0.75/kg. Later, a few workers reported that this is possible only during peak seasons, because "they can't afford to lose people during heavy work".

This instance supports Mullings (2004), who shows the extent to which workers were aware of the potential harm of the resistance strategy. And like in Sachs (1993), here, too, neighbourly relationships, which created spaces for sharing stories and experiences, were powerful enough to persuade workers to negotiate with the Firm over such everyday matters.

Conclusions

For a majority of the women, this was their first job outside of their household duties. Sometimes, even elderly and aged women re-entered this work. The biggest attraction, in their own words, was the possibility of working from home. As

Gerson and Kraut (1988) also noticed, these workers tended to portray traditional values, highlighting childcare and housework as primary. The husband's opinion remained influential in women's decision to work from home. Some workers opined that this work allowed them to meet neighbours and helped relieve "boredom". But highly noteworthy was the fact that both the firm and these workers were convinced that, considering the latter's lack of skill and training, this was their only option, indicating that the firm was also exploiting these workers' circumstances by highlighting their restrictions and weaknesses, and portraying itself as a saviour by providing them with an income.

We have observed that the general discussion of workspace under HBW focuses mainly on the transformed role of the domestic space in production. However, enquiries revealed that this transformation was not similar across workers. For instance, one woman stated:

> I haven't worked outside home, simply because my husband didn't like me to. But here, since work-sheds are close by and there are no strings attached, whenever he goes for his work, I can just join this group, earning some pocket money even without my husband's knowledge.

In another instance, a few women workers quit during stressful situations, finding it difficult to raise their voices, simply because their daughters or husbands were working in the same factory, and it could affect their relations with the management. In this way, the workspace, with its close-knit work atmosphere, which helped women participate in productive activity, sometimes also compelled them to stay away from certain work set-ups.

Observing the labour response, we saw that the Kudumbashree membership criterion effectively made full use of the social capital that emerged as a by-product of this women's group. However, it was this same social capital, in the form of strong neighbourly relationships, which brought the management to the negotiating table. Hence the home space, constrained though it is by gendered identities, supported the workers' subtle responses. It was these informal or cohesive community networks that hosted quick discussions and evaluation response strategies. Thus, this article goes one step ahead of existing studies by studying the strategies of negotiations stimulated by precisely these spaces; focusing not only on the new gender-coded spaces, but also on how these women negotiate such spaces in their everyday lives, and how they negotiate with capital through them.

Moreover, following Peck (1996), this work, focusing on the spatial aspect of HBW, pushes forward the concept's geographical boundaries, arguing that apart from the supposedly universal – transhistorical and transgeographical – context in which HBW strategies are shaped, local variants and permutations also shape it. Thus, industrial HBW has set an example for the ways in which local labour market structures are related to the dynamics of industrial restructuring.

NOTES

1 Scholars focusing on highly industrialised areas prefer the term homework, but those who study rural economies tend to study home-based work. Hence, we too use the latter term (Boris and Prügl 1996).

2 The "Food and Beverages" segment corresponds to Division 15, "Manufacture of Food Products and Beverages" in the National Industrial Classification 1998.

3 Figures on the actual numbers of workers are not immediately available; hence, these figures must be interpreted with caution. It could be possible that the actual numbers of women workers in this sector are low, but given the low work participation rate of women in Kerala, these proportions appear large. For this, I thank an anonymous referee.

4 Contracting-out is not brand new in Kerala, given the decades-old trends in beedi-making and cashew, which demonstrate a historical record of contracting out to remote villages and regions. See Isaac et al (1998) and Lindberg (2001).

5 Vijayan (1995), in her study of migrant women workers in the seafood processing industry, also reflects on the issue of women being considered to have "natural" capacities which suit time-consuming and repetitive work.

6 Although there is no direct involvement of the Kudumbashree Mission here, during my interviews with Mission officials, I heard of certain similar instances where the Mission mediated between the management and units, making sure that workers were given decent salaries and work conditions.

7 According to Devika et al (2008), the panchayats utilised their control of, and power over, the Kudumbashree groups and used them as cheap labour for development activities, such as during the 2007 chikungunya epidemic in Alappuzha district, where Kudumbashree women were entrusted with the unsafe work of chikungunya eradication, leading to several women contracting chikungunya or leptospirosis (p 97). No compensation followed, and the wages paid were a pittance. In other districts, there were instances of Kudumbashree women cleaning up public places in the panchayat as voluntary service, or for a negligible remuneration (ibid: 98). At some level, it was even felt that Kudumbashree women were useful not just to the local government, but broadly to extend the "eye of the State" as well (ibid: 99). Invariably, the state shifted welfare obligations to the local community, with Kudumbashree women entrusted with the work of implementing specific welfare projects, such as destitute rehabilitation. The Kudumbashree Mission office, which had the mandate of transforming underprivileged women into responsible economic agents through micro-credit and micro-enterprise, and from whom "responsibilised welfare" was required, connected officialdom to the domestic world, generating social capital and ensuring its use to these authorities (ibid: 100).

8 For more on "less familiar" varieties of labour resistance, see Padmanabhan (2012) and Neethi (2012).

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