Refusing Invisibility

Women Workers in Subcontracted Work in a South Indian City

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This chapter explores the relationship between capital accumulation and women's labour, using the case of women's paid work in a food-making industry carried out in homes and neighbourhood-based workspaces in a South Indian city.* The chapter discusses the creation of an informal and feminized workforce and its links to export revenue-earning companies that have pursued subcontracting strategies since the early 1980s. Women's work experience in the food production units is shaped by the intersecting dynamics of household and community patriarchies, the profit-maximizing ends of private capital, as well as the women's survival imperatives and their quest for financial independence. Resisting the "invisibility" that their principal employers seek to impose on them, the women workers have participated in strike action and registered themselves with the state government's informal workers' welfare board. In doing this, they have staked claims to their rights as workers vis-à-vis private employers and as citizens vis-à-vis the state.

Feminist theorists argue that the current epoch (the era of neoliberal capitalism) is an important moment in history to understand the relationship between capital accumulation and women's labour, and that accumulation strategies are built on women's labour in this period in global history perhaps more than in any other.¹ The chapter seeks to explore this relationship in the context of women's economic activity in a food-making industry carried out in homes and community spaces in select neighbourhoods of Chennai city, the capital of the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. It explores the making

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1 Nancy Hartsock, "Globalization and Primitive Accumulation: The Contribution of David Harvey's Dialectical Marxism", in Noel Castree and Derek Gregory (eds), *David Harvey: A Critical Reader* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 167–90.

of an informal and overwhelmingly feminized workforce, and discusses how the industry in question thrives on concealed and yet secure links between home and neighbourhood-based food production units, on the one hand, and well-established private sector companies, on the other. These export revenue-earning companies rely on a feminized and “invisible” workforce and subcontracted production chains as the prime strategies of capital accumulation. The chapter fleshes out the ways in which women’s ties to the family, their socially defined roles as primary providers of household care work and their circumscribed mobility, or, in other words, their unfreedom, acts as a resource that facilitates capital accumulation in the food-manufacturing industry located in the study area.

The chapter aims to show how women’s work experience in the food production units is shaped by the intersecting dynamics of household and community-based patriarchies, the profit-maximizing ends of private capital, as well as women’s survival imperatives and their quest for dignity and financial independence. It also discusses women’s involvement in collective bargaining activities and their efforts to resist the “invisibility” that their principal employers seek to impose on them. Scholars of labour movements note that the growing informalization of the workforce in many parts of the world has presented traditional trade unions with multiple challenges, such as a dispersed workforce hidden within homes and neighbourhoods; production processes that are geographically mobile and can shift elsewhere at short notice; the mobility of workers who may themselves move from one workshop to another, making it difficult for unions to locate them; and the blurring of the employer–employee divide in hybrid work arrangements. Research from other parts of the world (such as Brazil and South Africa) shows that even when industries subcontract work assignments through small workshops or home-based work, it has been possible to monitor work conditions and protect workers’ rights if local government actors and trade union organizers work synergistically.²

However, national, regional and local contexts vary enormously, and such synergies are not present in many cases. How do informally employed workers defend their rights in such instances? This case study in South India attempts to answer the question by showing how home- and neighbourhood-based women workers of a subcontracted industry managed to successfully defend their rights even when government agencies remained unmoved by the representational claims of trade unions and their workers. Drawing on theorization

2 Chris Tilly, Rina Agarwala, Sarah Mosoetsa, Pun Ngai, Carlos Salas and Hina Sheikh, *Informal Worker Organizing as a Strategy for Improving Subcontracted Work in the Textile and Apparel Industries of Brazil, South Africa, India and China* (Los Angeles, 2013), pp. 7–52.

of resistance and claims-making by informal workers in non-standard employment,³ the chapter discusses diverse forms of collective action by workers including *en masse* work stoppage and strike action, addressing wage-related demands to private employers and social protection-related claims to the state. The chapter argues that a particular conjuncture of circumstances has allowed the women workers to defend their rights as workers vis-à-vis the principal employers and citizens vis-à-vis the state, without privileging one set of demands over another.

1 Study Setting and Methods

The chapter draws on an immersive ethnographic study of tiny production units that make *appalams* or *papads*,⁴ clustered in the working class and industrial belt of North Chennai. It is estimated that about 1,500–2,000 workers (mostly women) are currently employed in the *appalam* industry in North Chennai. In the neighbourhood of Otteri, where this study was conducted, 75 *appalam*-making units employ on average between five and twenty workers per unit. Unlike most other trades that were transient and often disappeared from neighbourhoods due to vagaries of the market, *appalam*-making is well established and has a long history in the neighbourhood. The primary data collection for the study, carried out between January and March 2015, included observation of the *appalam*-making process in the neighbourhood units, structured and in-depth interviews with a total of 60 women workers, focus group discussions (FGDs) with the workers of two units, and semi-structured interviews with the owner-manager of two units and the key trade union representative in charge of organizing the women workers. Interviews with trade union organizers continued until mid-2016. Of the 60 women workers interviewed in Otteri, 51 worked in neighbourhood units close to their residence and 9 worked out of their own homes.⁵

3 Rina Agarwala, "From Work to Welfare: A New Class Movement in India", *Critical Asian Studies*, 38 (2006), pp. 419–44; Rina Agarwala, "Resistance and Compliance in the Age of Globalization: Indian Women and Labour Organizations", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 610 (2007), pp. 143–59.

4 *Appalam*, *papad* or *papadam* is a thin, crisp, disc-shaped food made from seasoned dough usually of black-gram flour. It is consumed as a snack or an accompaniment to a meal.

5 The grassroots organizers of a prominent trade union (the Centre for Indian Trade Unions, CITU) facilitated the initial contact between the research team and the unit owners and workers. Women were selected for interview on the basis of the unit owners' willingness to allow the research team access to the units and the women workers' readiness to participate

In the following sections of the chapter, I discuss the emergence of subcontracted production in the *appalam* industry and the corresponding feminization of the workforce; the organization of production relations; the somewhat ambivalent position of the unit owner in the production chain; the reasons that have led women to choose this form of employment rather than any other; the women workers' and trade union's actions to secure wage hikes; the centrality of women's earnings to the survival of their households, and their efforts to seek legitimacy and acknowledgement as workers in the eye of the state. In the concluding section, I discuss the key findings and lessons from this case study in the light of scholarly literature on the changing nature of capital–labour relations in contemporary times, workers' resistance and organization in informal work settings, and trade union strategies of mobilization of informal (subcontracted) workers from other parts of the world.

2 The Origins: The Making of an Informal and Female Workforce

In the 1950s, several entrepreneurs from Kerala (a state neighbouring Tamil Nadu) started the *appalam* business in North Chennai with the help of their extended families, and supplied the product to local retail shops. With the rise of branding and marketing over the last few decades, big companies like Bindu, Ambika, Maan Mark and Popular Appalam, who export the food item and earn foreign exchange, have established themselves as principal market players. The established big players or “trademark companies”, as they are called in local parlance, employed male workers who were paid monthly wages and directly owned and managed production units from the 1950s to the early 1980s. The monthly wage was Rs 800–900, provided the worker made 2,000 *appalams* a day. A radical change took place in the year 1981, following a strike led by The Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU)⁶ demanding higher wages. The companies decided to switch to piece-rates and to employ women workers as a strategy to evade labour legislation and demands for wage hikes.⁷

in the study. The interviews were held in the women's place of work based on their preference in this matter.

6 The Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU) is a well-known national trade union in India. The leadership of the union is affiliated to the Communist Party of India (Marxist), CPI(M).

7 This account of the history of the *appalam* industry in North Chennai is sourced from the author's interviews with trade union organizers of the CITU (conducted in January–March 2015 and a second round of interviews in April 2016).

From 1981–82, the *appalam* companies began to put up sign boards asking for women to apply for jobs and advertising the presence of an *appalam* unit. Formerly, even a large company employing thirty to forty workers or so would not have a name board advertising its presence. Sacks, flour scattered everywhere and the style of the house were the only identity markers that signalled *appalam*-making in particular homes in the neighbourhood. Women first entered the trade as “helpers” who would make a premature version of the large-sized *pandi appalams*. The male employees acknowledged their presence as subordinate workers who earned a much smaller amount as helpers. As the women acquired the skills to make *pandi appalams* and graduated from being helpers to *appalam* makers themselves, they began to enter the trade in large numbers, in response to the companies’ selective recruitment of women workers.⁸ The entry of women and the introduction of a piece-rate system of wage payment proceeded in tandem with the exit of men, who sought higher-paid employment elsewhere, and the emergence of unit owners, who formed an intermediary level between the company and the worker.

3 The Process and Chain of Subcontracted Production

The lowest unit in the production chain is the woman worker who works either in her own home or a neighbourhood production unit. The majority of women work in neighbourhood units. The distinct types of *appalam* piece-rate workers include those who knead the dough, the cutters who cut the dough into small pieces, the helpers who flatten the cut pieces into tiny round shapes, and the *appalam* makers who enlarge the pieces, mix them with rice flour and dry them.⁹ Women sometimes take along their daughters or younger siblings as their “helpers” to the unit. No more than 15–20 per cent of the *appalam*-making workforce in Otteri is home-based. Work in neighbourhood-based *appalam* units is generally higher paid as it is here

8 Information on women's entry into the trade is sourced from interviews with older women workers in the *appalam* trade and interviews with the Appalam Workers' Union secretary, Selvaraj.

9 The terms “cutter”, “helper” and “maker” are used in local parlance. In the year 2016, for every 100 *appalams* made, the payment was Rs 15 (USD 0.21) and usually shared between the helper who was paid Rs 3.50 (USD 0.05) and the *appalam* maker who was paid Rs 11.50 (USD 0.16). Those who kneaded the dough and those who cut it into small pieces earned Rs 27.50 (USD 0.38) and Rs 20.50 (USD 0.28) respectively for every 5 kilograms of dough they worked on.

that women make the large-sized *pandi appalams* that require skill gained through practice and training in the units. Home-based *appalam* workers obtain the flour in the morning from neighbourhood units close to their homes and deliver the stipulated number of *appalams* to the supplier units by the end of the day.¹⁰ In the last stage of production, the *appalams* are laid out to dry for several hours. The requirement of physical space – usually an attached terrace – makes it impossible for women who live in smaller tenements to make *pandi appalams*. Home-based workers usually make smaller-sized *appalam* “chips” that require less space for drying. Making the chips is deemed easier and low-skilled work and is therefore paid less. Home-based workers are likely to be women who are unable to leave their homes for paid work even for a few hours a day owing to domestic care work-related responsibilities. Women also migrate from home- to unit-based work over the course of their working lives, depending on shifting domestic responsibilities.¹¹

While the workers are overwhelmingly women, the unit owners are mostly men or, in some cases, married couples. The unit owner is the person who receives the raw material (sacks of flour) from the *appalam* company. He rents a house (also the owner's living quarters), recruits women from the neighbourhood, manages the unit's affairs and oversees production activities. The unit owners work alongside the workers and pay themselves wages on a piece-rate basis. They must ensure that their homes have the required space (to dry the *pandi appalams*) and that they have the permission of the house owner, if the house is rented, to run an *appalam* unit.¹² We found that the *appalam* industry in Otteri has optimally used neighbourhood residential spaces (larger homes with terraces attached as well as smaller tenements) and women's life cycle-related constraints in strategic ways and to its advantage.

10 Source: Research team's first-hand observation of the *appalam* industry in Otteri, North Chennai.

11 Source: Interviews conducted with a sample of women workers. The structured interviews included questions on women's entry into and exit from the industry in the course of their working lives.

12 Source: Direct observation of the *appalam*-making units and interviews with two *appalam* unit owners conducted as part of the field work for the study.

4 Why Do Women Choose Appalam Work?

The popularity of *appalam*-making among women in the Otteri area may be attributed to the familial nature of the neighbourhood unit workspace.¹³ It was not uncommon for women to be working in units owned by their female kin. Two of the respondents were working in their sisters' units, while one was working in her mother's unit. The degree of comfort the women felt was reflected in their choice of attire: 30 per cent of them said they wore nighties to work regularly, while 8.3 per cent alternated between wearing nighties and saris.¹⁴ We noted that women never wore nighties when they moved out of their neighbourhood to work. When asked why they had chosen *appalam* work, almost all the respondents mentioned the advantage of combining the responsibilities of social reproduction and domestic care work. Apart from the proximity of the workspace and its convenient location in the neighbourhood, work in the units offered flexibility of timing in terms of coming to work late, leaving early and taking leave when required: 81.7 per cent of the women interviewed reported that their workspaces offered this flexibility. As a woman is paid for the work she does, she cannot be pressured to report for work at a fixed time every day.

Amongst the 60 respondents was a young mother who left her infant at home and came to work in a neighbourhood unit for approximately three hours a day. When her child grew a little older, she was confident that she could bring the child with her as she worked in her mother's unit. Children came to the units from school and spent time waiting for their mothers to finish work. Units sometimes doubled up as *de facto* crèches or nurseries, without any of the associated infrastructure. Table 13.1 shows the age break-up of the 60 women workers interviewed. The data indicate that *appalam* work in the units permitted women to manage household tasks and childcare alongside paid work. As Table 13.1 shows, women in the age group 20–35 years, who are more likely to have younger children including infants and toddlers, constituted close to 42 per cent of all respondents.

The women workers' preference for *appalam* work also derived from a pragmatic assessment of other employment opportunities available in and around

13 All the material in this section is drawn from the testimonials of 60 women *appalam* workers interviewed for the study, and the research team's observation of the *appalam*-making units.

14 The nightie is a loose, flowing garment that is often worn by women in Chennai (and other Indian cities as well) in and around their residential spaces, as a more comfortable alternative to the sari.

TABLE 13.1 Age profile of sample respondents (Otteri, North Chennai)

	Age (years)	Frequency	Percentage
1	20–35	25	41.6
2	35–50	26	43.3
3	50–65	8	13.3
4	65–75	1	1.6
	Total	60	100

SOURCE: FIELD DATA, JANUARY–MARCH 2015.

their neighbourhoods. As they saw it, most of the alternative opportunities were dismal and involved drudgery. Besides, the same income or even more could be earned from *appalam* work in the units, where a woman could push herself to work harder and longer and earn the money she required on a particular day. Some women expressed relief that they were spared the sexual harassment that women routinely face on the streets when using public transport in the city, and the discomfort and expense of a daily commute to work. A few also cited the absence of men in the workplace as a blessing. Besides the problems (of harassment) that male co-workers might pose, an all-woman workspace had other advantages. As one woman said, “My husband will not send me for domestic work [in other homes] or anywhere else. He suspects me [of infidelity] all the time.” Another respondent stated that she was worried that “others” (neighbours and relatives) would disapprove if she went far from the home and neighbourhood to work. A third woman mentioned that the proximate location of her workplace allowed her to keep an eye on her teenage daughter at home. The need to protect girls’ reputations and watch out for “undesirable” relationships that might lead to cross-caste elopement was a concern often expressed by the mothers of young daughters.

Of the 60 respondents, ten were from the Scheduled Castes (SCs). The rest were from the poorer sections of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Other Castes (OCs).¹⁵ The social norms of female domesticity are stronger among

15 The Indian government classifies caste groups as Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes and Other Castes in decreasing order of social oppression and deprivation. The SCs include the historically disadvantaged population of India that has endured the most severe forms of social discrimination and poverty. The term OBCs designates those castes that are deemed socially and educationally disadvantaged by the Indian government.

these two groups and circumscribe women's choices with respect to paid work. As compared to SC women, OBC and OC women are more likely to face caste and social status-related barriers to working outside the home and the neighbourhood. We also noted that the caste life-worlds the women inhabit mark certain types of paid work as socially acceptable and certain other types as less so. Caste-specific ideologies make it difficult for women from socially advantaged and dominant castes to countenance certain types of employment, such as housekeeping in shops and offices and domestic work in others' homes, because of involvement in sanitary work (the requirement of cleaning toilets and bathrooms), which is considered to be socially menial. *Appalam* work, on the other hand, involves food preparation in workspaces situated within the neighbourhood, enhancing its perceived status as a "respectable" occupation.

The chapter has discussed, thus far, how the flexibility of *appalam* work, its all-women composition, its neighbourhood location and the crisscrossing of familial and kin-based social ties and relationships in the units facilitated women's negotiations with household and community patriarchies, enabling them to secure and sustain access to paid employment. We turn next to the question of the position of the unit owner within the subcontracted production chain.

5 The Unit Owner: "Self-Made" Entrepreneur or a Cog in the Wheel of Subcontracted Production?

While the unit owners received flour from the company, they invested their own money to buy other raw materials such as coconut oil, water and lime water. For 100 kilograms of flour received from the company, the unit owner was expected to deliver 120 kilograms of *appalam* and was paid Rs 8,200 (USD 113.75) by the company. If the quantity delivered fell short even by a kilogram or two, the loss had to be borne by the unit owner. After wage payment to workers and deducting the costs of raw material purchased, it was estimated that the unit owner generally earned between Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 (USD 6.9 and 13.9) for every 100 kilograms of *appalam* supplied to the company. The size of the unit (in terms of the number of workers) determined the production capacity and earnings of the unit owner.¹⁶

While the SCs and the OBCs are covered by affirmative action policies, the Other Castes (OCs) are not, since they constitute the socially advantaged and privileged sections of the population.

16 All the material in this section is sourced from interviews with two owners managing *appalam*-making units in the study area.

Unit owner Swarna's account of how she graduated from being a daily wagger in an *appalam* unit to starting her own unit illustrates the challenges involved in making the transition. Now aged 53 years, Swarna had begun to work full-time in *appalam* units from the age of thirteen. She started her own unit twenty years ago along with her husband, in order to create a more flexible work environment for herself, her mother and her six sisters; all of them currently work in Swarna's unit. Lacking the capital required to start a unit, she decided to approach the popular Tamil actor, "Superstar" Rajinikant, who has a reputation as a philanthropist. Accompanied by her sisters, she showed up at the home of the actor and pleaded their case successfully. Swarna and her sisters were given Rs 1,000 (USD 13.9) as well as a few sacks of flour, rice and oil to kickstart the business. Swarna spoke with pride of the initiative she had taken to approach the actor and seek his assistance.

Apart from workers' wages, the unit owners need to generate sufficient income to pay the rent for the premises (also their home) where the production takes place. A house that doubled up as an *appalam*-making unit was large-sized and therefore more expensive. The case of Sarala discussed here clarifies the position of a unit owner in the subcontracted production chain of the *appalam* industry. Sarala entered the *appalam* trade as her sister's helper, when she was sixteen years old. At the time of our study, Sarala ran a twenty-worker unit in a large-sized house whose monthly rental value was Rs 14,100 (USD 195.6). Sarala had paid the *appalam* company a (refundable) deposit of Rs 100,000 (USD 1,387) and the women workers in her unit an advance of Rs 100,000 that will be repaid when they leave the unit. Sarala claimed that the costs of running the unit have ruined her financially, pushing her into debt amounting to Rs 200,000 (USD 2,774). The particular company she transacted with paid less for the *appalams* as compared to other companies, but did not impose too many conditions regarding the terms of delivery.

According to Sarala, a unit owner has to keep lending small amounts of money to the workers, ranging from Rs 50 (USD 0.7) to Rs 100 (USD 1.4), in order to incentivize them to come on time and be regular at work. This was something she was unable to do, given her low cash reserves. When workers were tardy or took leave, it took the unit fifteen days to deliver *appalams* that ought to be made in a week. Sarala estimated that if her unit made 300 kilograms of *appalam* a day it would allow her to pay the house rent out of the profits. But her unit made only 150 kilograms a day and so she ended up paying the rent out of her own (piece-rate) wages for doing *appalam* work. Sarala was clear that she was a coolie worker like the other women workers in her unit. In her words: "I have the status or the 'name' of an owner ('owner amma'), but nothing more than that." She maintained that the *appalam* trade can be a

profit-making business for an “entrepreneur-owner” only if s/he is able to buy the flour directly from the market, establish contact with and procure orders from a large number of retail shops, and sell the *appalams* to a range of buyers (both shops and *appalam* companies), choosing higher prices wherever available. Being a single woman of limited financial means, the mobility, social and business networks and capital investment required to run a successful *appalam*-making business were out of the question for her.

6 Naming the “Hidden” Employer and Exposing the “Dummy” Union

As part of a deliberately cultivated strategy to distance themselves from the workers, the *appalam* companies insisted that every unit owner legally register the unit as an independent entity in his/her name. The companies supplied flour to the units and established a regular relationship with them only after they were formally registered. Once a unit was registered, all transactions were conducted in the name of the unit’s owner.¹⁷ In the year 2013, the CITU-led Appalam Workers’ Union filed a case in the labour court asking that the companies be held directly accountable to *appalam* workers for employee benefits, and that they acknowledge their subcontracted relationship to the units that receive the flour and supply *appalams* to them. The companies filed responses in turn, claiming that they were merely wholesale traders who buy from small traders or the “real” manufacturers – the unit owners. Therefore, the companies argued, they could not be held responsible for employee benefits. While the case has stagnated after a few hearings, the CITU continues to maintain its position (argued in the labour court) that the supplier of the raw material was the real employer and cannot abdicate responsibility for the welfare of the workers. The only units that the *appalam* companies directly own and manage are the godowns/sheds where the storing and packaging of the *appalams* take place. The majority of workers in these units were also women, who, unlike the *appalam* workers in the units, received benefits like Provident Fund (PF) and Employees State Insurance (ESI) that the companies contribute to.¹⁸

Although a union does exist for the owners of the *appalam* units, it is generally acknowledged that it is a “dummy” union managed by the *appalam* companies, with no real power to increase wages or offer benefits to workers. As the secretary of the CITU-led Appalam Workers’ Union put it, “We look at all

17 Source: Interviews with two unit owners and the CITU’s Appalam Workers’ Union secretary, Selvaraj.

18 Source: Interview with CITU’s Appalam Workers’ Union secretary, Selvaraj.

unit owners as workers, even if they think they are above the workers.” When depositing before the Labour Commission in 2013, the CITU union secretary declared before the commissioner that the office-bearers of the unit owners’ union (also present at the meeting) were employees “like us” and could not take any autonomous decisions. All the office bearers present reportedly concurred, knowing that if they protested his statement, they would be in trouble when they returned to their neighbourhood.

7 Strike Action and Wage Bargaining

The CITU-led trade union has played a central role in securing yearly wage increases for the *appalam* workers. The Appalam Workers’ Union formally presented a petition at the start of every year to the “dummy” union representing the unit owners, with the implicit understanding that a strike would follow if the proposed increase was not accepted.¹⁹ The years in which big work strikes had taken place were 1981, 2013 and 2014. The strike action in 2014 was noticeable for the arrests of women workers. Around 75–90 per cent of the women workers usually participated in strike calls, excepting those who could not survive without the daily wages earned from *appalam* work.²⁰ Sit-in and *gherao* protests (involving encirclement of buildings) were organized outside the packing and supply depots and godowns of the big *appalam* companies (not the homes of the office-bearers of the “dummy” union) in order to foreground the responsibility of the companies towards the workforce. The unit owners did not directly participate in the strike, but some of them sent their workers whenever collective action was planned. The unit owners, who were also workers in their own units, stood to gain if the wages rose.²¹

In January 2016, the wage increase was accepted as soon as the Workers’ Union submitted the petition and without any form of action on the part of the workers. Interestingly, it was the smaller companies that decided upon and initiated the wage increase, forcing the hand of the trademark companies in this matter. The small companies reportedly feared a strike more as they would lose their market (retail and other shops) to the trademark companies. With

19 Each year, the wage increase demanded (and obtained) was approximately Rs 1.50 (USD 0.021) for every 5 kilograms for those who knead the dough, Re. 1 (USD 0.014) for every 5 kilograms of dough for the cutters, and 50 paise (USD 0.007) per 100 *appalams* for the *appalam* makers.

20 Source: Interview with the CITU Appalam Workers’ Union secretary, Selvaraj.

21 Source: Interviews with *appalam* women workers and two unit owners.

tonnes of stock in their godowns, the big companies could deliver to the shops even during a period of strike. At the end of each strike, the small companies found that they had lost their regular buyers to the trademark companies.²² The competition between small and large players worked to the advantage of the *appalam* workforce in terms of providing the workers and their union some leverage with respect to wage negotiations. While the trade union could not prevent the transition from monthly wages to piece-rates (in the early 1980s), they continued to organize the workforce through the 1990s and the 2000s, securing some wage relief for the workers. In the next section, we turn to the question of what employment in the *appalam* industry meant for its women workers.

8 **Women's Earnings and Household Survival**

Several women workers described *appalam* work in neighbourhood units as a means for destitute women to survive with dignity.²³ It is noteworthy that many other types of home-based and piece-rated work in the Otteri area only allowed the workers to earn a supplementary or secondary income, whereas *appalam* work allowed its workers to be the primary earners of their families, if their household circumstances warranted it. Table 13.2 shows the marital status of the 60 respondents of our study.

TABLE 13.2 Marital status of sample respondents (Otteri, North Chennai)

Marital status	Frequency	Percentage
Married	41	68.3
Unmarried	2	3.3
Divorced/separated	13	21.7
Widowed	4	6.7
Total	60	100

SOURCE: FIELD DATA, JANUARY–MARCH 2015.

22 Source: Interview with the CITU Appalam Workers' Union secretary, Selvaraj.
23 All the material in this section is sourced from interviews held with the sample of 60 women *appalam* workers.

In Table 13.2, the two unmarried women (aged 25 years each) were part of their natal households consisting of their parents and siblings. We might therefore regard the households of the 17 (13+4) divorced/separated and widowed women as the potential female-headed households in this sample. Of these seventeen, six were sole earners, whereas one other income earner co-supported the households of the others. Of the seventeen, the households of eleven women depended exclusively on earnings from *appalam* work, with the other income earner in the family also employed in the *appalam* industry. All six women who were sole earners were part of *de jure* female-headed families, where the husband was dead or permanently absent. Four of the six women lived alone and supported themselves. Two of them had two dependent children each. Table 13.3 shows women's earnings from *appalam* work (calculated for a month) for all 60 respondents.

Table 13.3 shows that 40 per cent of the women interviewed earned between Rs 2,000 (USD 27.7) and Rs 4,000 (USD 55.5) a month. The eight women who earned upward of Rs 6,000 (USD 83.2) a month included those whose economic need was dire as well as those who could work more hours a day as they were free of child-care responsibilities. It was found that women's earnings primarily financed the welfare-enhancing consumption expenditure of their households and also enabled them to meet the self-consumption needs that they prioritized. The women identified food and house rent as the most common end-uses of their incomes, followed by children-oriented expenses

TABLE 13.3 Monthly earnings of sample respondents from *appalam* work (Otteri, North Chennai)

Women's monthly earnings (in Rs)	Frequency	Percentage
<1000	2	3.3
1000 < 2000	16	26.7
2000 < 4000	24	40
4000 < 6000	10	16.7
6000 < 8000	4	6.7
8000 < 10,000	4	6.7
Total	60	100

SOURCE: FIELD DATA, JANUARY–MARCH 2015.

(such as clothing and snack food), their own needs, health care and children's education-related expenses, and the repayment of debt of household members.

Almost all the women interviewed asserted the identity of "working woman" with pride, in response to a question probing the dimension of self-identification. As their responses indicated, the (self and family) recognition that they made a significant contribution to family incomes was a critical factor here. "Yes of course, I am a working woman, I brought up my sisters with this money", "I was able to take care of my son" and "I stand on my own feet" were some of the responses. One woman informed us that she had separated from her husband who had sought to control her. Resisting his domineering ways, she left him and supported her children with wages from *appalam* work. Women's status as income-earners enabled a measure of dignity within marriage, even if the wages they earned were not critical to family survival. Married to a government employee who earned well, a home-based worker made *appalams* from home despite her husband's unconcealed irritation at the sight of the flour and her work.

Three women testified to how work at the neighbourhood unit served as a welcome break for those who craved a few hours of "escape" from home. One woman commented on the relaxing work atmosphere of the unit, which is an "outlet for all the sorrows at home". Another asserted that she was happy only when she was working. For the most part, the respondents' families recognized and respected the women's financial contribution, motivated as it was by the economic needs of the households. In a telling response to our question on what her family thought of her employment, a woman replied bluntly, "There's nothing to think. There's a need and there's no choice." In the course of a focus group discussion held in an *appalam* unit, a woman emphatically said, "Nowadays men don't want women to sit at home. They don't mind us working anywhere as long as the money comes on time. 'Don't ask me for money, you earn', is what they say." Her co-workers enthusiastically endorsed her response as an accurate commentary on a changing and lamentable state of affairs, marked by men's readiness to renounce their role as primary family providers.

9 Citizenship Claims vis-à-vis the State

While the *appalam*-making women were absolutely certain that they were workers who added value to their families and society, claiming their entitlements as workers from the state was a different matter. The state government of Tamil Nadu has in place a Tamil Nadu Manual Workers Welfare Board, set

up in March 1999 in order to implement the provisions of the Tamil Nadu Manual Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Work) Act, 1982. Significantly, this was the first Act to cover all workers irrespective of the employer–employee relationship; in all previous laws, a permanent relationship with employers had to be demonstrated. Currently, the Manual Workers Welfare Board administers the state government's social security and welfare schemes for workers of both sexes, which include compensation for accidental death or disability; funeral expenses; pension benefit when the worker completes 60 years of age; disability pension; education scholarships and marriage assistance for the children of workers; maternity benefits for women workers for two pregnancies, and assistance for miscarriage or medical termination of pregnancy.²⁴

The Appalam Workers' Union secretary estimated that the CITU-led union had facilitated the registration of close to 50 per cent of *appalam* workers in the neighbourhood of Otteri with the Manual Workers Board, and that it had been a struggle to accomplish this. The workers were required to directly visit the Welfare Board to enrol as members, for renewal of membership, to obtain subsidies and other welfare and relief measures, and so on. As the union secretary put it, workers who have to sacrifice wages of Rs 1,000 in order to get a benefit of the same amount or a little more were hardly likely to consider it a worthwhile pursuit. Whatever the shortcomings of the state's administrative procedures, the women *appalam* workers interviewed were forthcoming and emphatic on what they expected from the government and/or their employers that could enhance their work experience. One of them said, "I have been working for thirty years and when I stop I will have nothing to show for it unless the government decides to give me a pension." Another told us, "So many of us are single women who depend on the *appalam* money for our next meal. There should be a special welfare scheme for women like us."

With respect to their rights as workers, quite a few women asked that the current piece-rates be converted to monthly wages with provision for periodic wage revisions. While the wage did rise when the union announced protest actions, the strikes took a toll on the women and their families. As one woman described it, "We sat on strike for a whole month to get an increase of 50 paise [for every 100 *appalams* made]. How hard it was and how much our families suffered that month!" One worker said in strident tones, "During festivals, a bonus. And when we fall ill, we want leave and our wages too!" Significantly,

24 Tamil Nadu Manual Workers Welfare Board and 13 Other Boards, "Information Handbook under 'Right to Information Act 2005'"; available at www.tn.gov.in, last accessed 8 December 2019.

the women's demands and expectations displayed a clear understanding of the precise measures and interventions required (both on the part of the state government and the "real" employers – the *appalam* companies) to formalize their employment status, to improve the conditions of work, to guarantee minimum wages and to extend the full gamut of social security provisions to them.

10 Discussion and Conclusion

Home-based work remains entrenched in many countries, as part of a growing informalization of the labour force. Such informalization has gained momentum as a consequence of neoliberal policies of economic restructuring adopted in India since the 1990s, and in other countries since the 1980s.²⁵ In a global climate wherein capital, pursuing cost-cutting competitiveness, seeks out a "flexible" and cheap labour force that can be hired and fired at will, home-based workers appear to be an optimal workforce for companies that can subcontract and hire contingent or contractual rather than regular workers. Women employed as home-based workers in such a system have subsidized capital accumulation by constituting a low-waged labour pool, providing and paying for infrastructure and other input costs as well as completely taking over the costs of labour reproduction.²⁶ Given this larger canvas, this chapter closely examines the case of home- and neighbourhood-based women *appalam* makers in Chennai city labouring in the lower rungs of the informal sector in an industry that, in a calculated manner, informalized its workforce at the same time as it feminized it.

In the chapter, I heed feminist researchers who emphasize that women's work, be it unpaid, subsistence-oriented or low-paid, is integral to capitalist

25 Jan Breman, "An Informalized Labour System: End of Labour Market Dualism", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 36 (December 2001–January 2002), pp. 4804–21; Agarwala, "Resistance and Compliance in the Age of Globalization", pp. 143–59; Ravi Srivastava, "Changing Employment Conditions of the Indian Workforce and Implications for Decent Work", *Global Labour Journal*, 3 (2012), pp. 63–90; Guy Standing, "Global Feminization through Flexible Labour: A Theme Revisited", *World Development*, 27 (1999), pp. 583–602.

26 Jayati Ghosh, "Globalization, Export-oriented Employment for Women and Social Policy: A Case Study of India", *Social Scientist*, 30 (2002), pp. 17–60; Jayati Ghosh, "Informalization and Women's Workforce Participation: A Consideration of Recent Trends in Asia", in Shahra Razavi (ed.), *The Gendered Impacts of Liberalization: Towards "Embedded Liberalism?"* (New York, 2009), pp. 1–36; Elisabeth Prugl, "Home-based Workers: A Comparative Exploration of Mies's Theory of Housewifization", *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 17 (1996), pp. 114–35.

accumulation.²⁷ However, as has been pointed out, there is need to flesh out theoretically and empirically “the manner in which capitalist relations of production operate on the ground to keep large masses of people perennially informal”.²⁸ Thus, it is important to provide a fine-grained and ethnographically informed account of how women’s work in different capacities as sub-contracted workers, self-employed, petty commodity producers, service providers or in their reproductive capacities, is linked to the process of capitalist accumulation and expansion. In the *appalam* industry in North Chennai, the entry of women in large numbers since the early 1980s, the introduction of piece-rated wages and the creation of an intermediary level of unit owners were interlinked developments that drastically changed capital–labour relations. Even as men moved out of the industry seeking higher paid employment elsewhere, women emerged as a disciplined workforce willing and eager to accept the piece-rated wages on offer.

As feminist researchers note,²⁹ women whose identities are ideologically constructed in ways that tie them to the family, household and subsistence production do not own their full labour power and do not therefore become free wage workers, in so far as their wage-earning opportunities are constrained by ideological constructions and material realities. This study of the *appalam* industry in North Chennai reveals how patriarchal and possibly also caste-mediated ideologies have made available a feminized workforce for exploitation by export revenue-earning companies that pursue subcontracting and labour law-evading strategies of growth. The chapter thus lays bare the modalities by which capital accumulation in a food preparation industry in Chennai city is “at its very core” a gendered set of processes, constituting a moment that cannot be understood without central attention to the differential situations of women and men.³⁰

27 Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, “Women Workers and Industrial Restructuring in Two Industries in Mumbai”, in Bharati Ray (ed.), *Women of India: Colonial and Post-Colonial Periods* (New Delhi, 2005), pp. 320–50; Maria Mies, “Capitalist Development and Subsistence Reproduction: Rural Women in India”, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 12 (1980), pp. 2–14; Maria Mies, “Dynamics of Sexual Division of Labour and Capital Accumulation: Women Lace Workers of Narsapur”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16 (1981), pp. 487–500; Prugl, “Home-Based Workers”, pp. 114–35.

28 Padmini Swaminathan, “Introduction”, in Padmini Swaminathan (ed.), *Women and Work: Essays from Economic and Political Weekly* (Hyderabad, 2012), pp. 1–17, p. 15.

29 Elisabeth Prugl and Irene Tinker, “Microentrepreneurs and Homeworkers: Convergent Categories”, *World Development*, 25 (1997), pp. 1471–82; Mies, “Dynamics of Sexual Division of Labour”, pp. 487–500.

30 Hartsock, “Globalization and Primitive Accumulation”, in Castrée and Gregory, *David Harvey: A Critical Reader*, pp. 167–90, p. 183.

The chapter maps the processes by which women workers acquired a political consciousness of their subordinate relation to capital, and gained the voice and visibility required to make claims vis-à-vis their employers and state actors. In this case, a crucial component of trade union mobilization of workers (both women workers and unit owners) was to *foreground and politicize their identities as “dependent workers”* in a triangular relationship (of *appalam* company, unit owner and worker), where power lay with the principal employers who gave out work orders, supplied the raw materials, checked for quality and adherence to production standards, and made payment to unit owners. Notwithstanding the trademark companies’ efforts to pass off the unit owners as the real producers or independent manufacturers, the owners clearly knew that they were disguised wage workers, not self-employed or own-account entrepreneurs. The women who owned and managed *appalam*-making units interviewed for this study, no doubt, displayed a spirit of enterprise and risk-taking in making the transition from working in others’ units to setting up their own units, besides investing considerable reserves of working capital. Nonetheless, they had no direct relationship with the market, lacked control over raw materials, products and deadlines, and were paid piece-rates themselves.

While discussing the organizing strategies of traditional trade unions versus new kinds of unions working among informal sector workers (mostly women workers in highly precarious employment situations) in India, scholars have observed that the latter tend to target the state rather than employers and to demand welfare benefits for workers rather than workers’ rights. The paradigm of “worker versus employer” is seen as having given way to “citizen versus state”, with demands too being shifted from workplace benefits to family-related social welfare benefits. In contrast, the traditional trade unions make workplace-related demands of the employer, such as minimum wages, permanent contracts for all workers, eradication of subcontractors and so on.³¹ In the case of the *appalam* industry of North Chennai, the trade union put forward both wage- and employment status-related demands to the employers and social welfare demands to the state, without emphasizing one at the expense of the other. To understand better how this was possible, it might be instructive to compare this case with that of trade union strategies and struggles in other parts of the world, especially where they involve irregularly employed workers in non-standard employment.

31 Agarwala, “From Work to Welfare”, pp. 419–44; Agarwala, “Resistance and Compliance in the Age of Globalization”, pp. 143–59.

Experiences of labour organization among informally employed workers in other parts of the world reveal that collaborative action between trade union organizers and government officials and institutions opened up spaces that enabled the protection of workers' rights and well-being. For instance, when the garment industry in Sao Paulo city of Brazil restructured in the 1990s and increased subcontracting through small workshops and home-based work, the Ibitinga Needle Workers Union was set up to help the largely female workforce improve labour conditions and register with the Ministry of Labour in order to get labour cards. In 2001, the union mobilized support from the labour courts in order to push local employers to sign a collective bargaining agreement so that home-based workers would be granted labour cards, and unions would have the right to oversee and inspect conditions in all workplaces. The Ibitinga Union, the Seamstresses' Union of São Paulo and Osasco, and the National Confederation of Apparel Workers (CNTV) of Brazil used a comprehensive strategy of educating home-based workers (on their rights as workers), pressure on government officials to intervene and direct negotiation with employers at the top of the supply chain in the garment industry. Significantly, trade unions active in the (increasingly subcontracted) garment industry forged alliances with government agencies and inspectors to pressure principal employers to conform to labour laws by fining offenders and referring cases to labour courts, where 90 per cent of complaints had decisions favourable to workers.³²

In South Africa, the South African Clothing and Textiles Union (SACTWU) sought to register all workers (including home-based workers) by bringing them under the scrutiny of regional Bargaining Councils, key institutions that resolved labour disputes and enforced laws. Like in Brazil, unions in South Africa worked collaboratively with government inspectors to initiate proceedings against employers for not complying with labour standards. Unions have persuaded the Bargaining Councils to extend their agreements to cover wages and working conditions of workers in informal sectors, including home-based workers.³³ The synergistic action between trade unions and government agencies in South Africa and Brazil stands in contrast to our case in India, where the state government was least interested in protecting the employment status of workers, responding to their demand for wage hikes or censuring the companies, despite the abundant evidence furnished by the CITU-led union with respect to the identity of the "real" employers in the *appalam* industry. Following the stagnation of the case in the labour court, the union organizer

32 Tilly, Agarwala, Mosoetsa, Ngai, Salas and Sheikh, "Informal Worker Organizing as a Strategy", pp. 7–52.

33 Ibid.

admitted (to me) that the union had neither the funds nor the time to fight exhausting court battles and feared that a legal route would simply destroy their case. In such a situation, a strategy of petitioning the companies and inviting them to conciliation talks while continuing to work in the *appalam* units would have demoralized the workers. And therefore, strikes and agitation were seen as the only way forward.

If government pressure and intervention on their behalf was not forthcoming, the workers' interests were inadvertently served by the market heterogeneity that prevailed with respect to the buyers of their product – the *appalam* companies. The struggle of small companies to survive vis-à-vis the large trademark companies had made them the allies, albeit unintended, of the *appalam* workforce, given the part they played in initiating the sought-after wage increase. Commenting on the bargaining power of the Appalam Workers' Union, its secretary Selvaraj said with some pride, "No other union, of either domestic workers, petty vendors, street hawkers or other informal workers, has the power to merely put forward a petition and get a wage raise." However, this state of affairs cannot be generalized elsewhere. In other districts in Tamil Nadu, including those close to Chennai, the prevailing wage in the *appalam* industry was 70 per cent less as compared to Chennai, and annual wage hikes did not take place as the union secretary confirmed.

It is important to note that a particular conjuncture of circumstances, including the strong base established by the trade union in North Chennai since the 1950s and market competition among the buyers of the product, has made possible successful collective action on the part of the women *appalam* workers. It was this conjuncture of circumstances that allowed the trade union to defend home-based women workers' rights as workers vis-à-vis their "hidden" employers and their rights as citizens vis-à-vis the state government's Manual Workers Welfare Board. And therefore, as the chapter has shown, the relationship between women's unprotected, low-paid labour and capital accumulation is mediated by state policies extending social protection to informal manual workers, trade union strategies of mobilization, market competition among the product buyers and the women's aspirations for a better life for themselves.

The women workers' struggles, however, are far from over, and their gains, hard-won as they are, remain fragile and tenuous. During the period of this field study (April–June 2016), a threefold increase in the price of the primary raw material (*urad dhal* or black gram) hit the *appalam* trade severely. The inflation impacted sales and reduced the demand for *appalams*. This in turn considerably decreased the production orders received by unit owners from the companies to which they remain attached, adversely affecting the generation

of employment in this sector. Registration with the Manual Workers Welfare Board and securing benefits through the assorted welfare schemes of the Board remain a bureaucratic nightmare for the women workers. We might, however, draw hope from the fact that the women *appalam* workers of North Chennai have consistently refused to remain invisible and fiercely contested the efforts of private capital to invisibilize them. Their experience of organizing as home- and neighbourhood-based workers located in the last rung of a subcontracted production chain highlights the strategies by which women workers and their trade union allies have sought to counter the organized power of private capital and wrest concessions from an increasingly indifferent state.