

# Does Paid Work Enhance Women's Well-being? Evidence from India

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Preliminary draft of the paper for presentation at "The 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the Capability Approach: Enhancing Human Security," September 5-7, 2004, University of Pavia, Italy.

## The Issue

Gender inequality is one of the central problems affecting the well-being and development of women and men today. No country or society is immune to, and free from, the relative deprivation of women vis-à-vis men. The extent and manifestation of women's deprivation varies enormously across countries and also among groups and regions within countries. In many countries, especially in the South Asia, female deprivation is evident even in such basic aspects as survival, health and nutrition, and primary education. In India, as in some of the other South Asian countries, the deprivation seems to have permeated other aspects of well-being.

Growing number of empirical studies from India reveal female deprivation in these and a number of other aspects. For instance, National Family Health Survey of India (1998-99) reports that mortality rate of girls (37 per 1000 live births in 1 - 4 age group) is 48 percent higher than that of 25 per 1000 boys. The Survey also shows greater incidence of malnutrition among girls than among boys (IIPS and ORC Macro 2000). Micro studies suggest that boys are preferred over girls in the provision of healthcare (Kynch and Sen 1983; Basu 1989). The female-male ratio of 933 women per 1000 men in 2001 not only reveals the shortfall of 67 women but also points to a large number of *missing women* ? women who were dead due mainly to the bias in the intrahousehold allocation of healthcare and food.<sup>1</sup> The female literacy rate of 54 percent in 2001 is well below the male literacy rate of 76 percent. Studies also note the prevalence of domestic violence in all parts of India (CWDS 2002).

The factors that lead to and sustain the lower well-being of women vis-à-vis men and the processes underlying it in India have been a subject of enquiry by a vast body of studies. It appears that the lower well-being of women in India is a cumulative outcome of a complex web of factors with a diverse origin: historical, cultural, ecological and economic (Bardhan 1974, p. 1303; World Bank 2000, pp. 13-4). Nevertheless, there is a growing agreement in the development literature that women's participation in paid work may enhance women's well-being. For instance, Bina Agarwal argues that the 'physical well-being of a woman (and her

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<sup>1</sup> Mari Bhat's (2002) estimates based on female-male ratios show that around 21.7 million women were found to be missing in India between 1911 and 1991 (p. 5109). See Klasen and Wink (2003) for various competing estimates concerning missing women in India and other countries and regions.

children) could depend significantly on her direct access to income (and productive assets like land) and not just access mediated through her husband or other family members' (Agarwal 1988, p. 534). Similarly, Amartya Sen argues that 'women's paid employment would enable them through a variety of ways to attain a higher well-being' (Sen 1990, p. 144). Also, Naila Kabeer argues that 'access to paid work can increase women's agency in critical ways' (Kabeer 2003, p. 181).

This proposition ? women's participation in paid work enhances their well-being, propounded originally by Frederick Engels (1972/1884, pp. 137-8), appears to have attained a central place in the debate concerning women and development especially since the last three decades due to the pioneering work of Ester Boserup (1970). Interestingly, it also has a rare advantage of having some backing ? either explicit or implicit ? from approaches that differ substantially such as Marxian and Neo-classical as well as 'Women in Development' and 'Gender and Development.' On the face of it, the proposition assumes significance in India, where women's well-being as also their participation in paid work is low.

Women's participation in paid work appears to have wider potentials besides enhancing their well-being. This is especially so in many of the South Asian countries including India, where social norms constrain women's access to economic resources and their participation in social spheres. Besides providing some access to an independent income, women's participation in paid work may also serve as a source of their self-worth and dignity (Chen 1995, p. 54; Kabeer 2000, p. 189), and become a major influence for social change in general (Sen 1999, p. 201). Further, it has been argued that women's participation in labour market can lead to output gains and poverty reduction besides enhancing women's well-being (Tzannatos 1999, p. 552).

How does women's participation in paid work enhance their well-being? The enhancement in well-being comes mainly through two distinct but related ways. First, participation in paid work may both make women's economic contribution to the household visible and reduce their economic dependency on other members of the household. An increased economic contribution and reduced economic dependency may enhance women's bargaining power and autonomy, and thereby lead to a favourable intra-household resource allocation. Second, participation in work away from home may increase women's mobility and hence exposure to, and interaction with, the outside world. These would weaken their attachment to social norms and increase their

receptivity to use modern healthcare facilities and birth control measures. The independent earning would give them resources and confidence to use these as means for better well-being (Dreze and Sen 1995; Sen 1999).

The present study attempts to examine the centrality of this proposition in India: does women's participation in paid work enhance their well-being. However, the diverse socio-economic milieu of India ? pronounced variation in cultural norms, economic growth, human development and gender disparities in well-being across regions ? calls for an examination in multiple settings. The study, therefore, intends to examine the validity of the proposition in three regions of India with varying cultural and socio-economic setting such as the North-Northwest, South and East. Such an attempt would help assess the wider potential of women's work on their well-being.

## Approach and Measurement

The capability approach ? propounded by Amartya Sen (1982) and expanded further by Martha Nussbaum (2000a) ? sees development as the expansion of individuals' capabilities or freedom. An individual's well-being is viewed in terms of her freedom to select from the combination of doings and beings valuable to her. The approach has received much acclaim for its sensitivity to the factors, both general and specific, leading to the deprivation of women's well-being. More recently, the approach also encountered serious criticisms.<sup>2</sup> Progressively expanding the philosophical base and reach of the capability approach, especially for gender justice, Nussbaum (2000a, pp. 78-80) has proposed, through years of cross-cultural discussion, ten central capabilities for quality of life assessment and political planning. The study attempts to examine the influence of women's paid work on two aspects of central human capabilities suggested by Nussbaum (2003, pp. 41-2) such as Bodily Health and Bodily Integrity.

Before proceeding further, it is important to ask whether capability approach recognises the importance of women's paid work for their well-being? Both Sen and Nussbaum acknowledge the importance of paid work for women's well-being. Sen (1990) identifies at least three important ways through which women's paid work can enhance their well-being. Women's paid work can lead to a better perception and concern among themselves regarding their well-being, recognition of their economic contribution to the household and the need for their due share in the

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<sup>2</sup> See Anderson (1999), Petit (2001) and Alkire (2002), among others, for the advantages and Pogge (2003) and Okin (2003) for wide ranging criticisms.

resource allocation by both themselves and other members as well, and give them an element of economic independence which becomes crucial in the times of separation or divorce and other contingent situations (Sen 1990, pp. 135-7).

Equally, Nussbaum also underlines the importance of women's participation in paid work for their higher well-being. She argues, for instance, that a woman who has no freedom to work outside their home does not have the same freedom of association as one who does (Nussbaum 2000b). Further, women who can seek employment outside the home have more resources in protecting their bodily integrity from assaults within it (Nussbaum 2002). Also, Robeyns (2001) identifies the various ways in which women's paid work may expand the vectors of functioning available to them. It may lead to a) psychological functionings like increased self-esteem, b) social functionings like having a social network, c) financial functionings like being financially independent, and so on (Robeyns 2001, p. 23). The capability approach, thus, seems to accord due significance to women's paid work for enhancing their well-being.

To examine the influence of women's paid work on their bodily health and bodily integrity, the study analyses the recently published National Family Health Survey of India 1998-99 data (NFHS-2, hereafter). NFHS-2 covered a representative sample of 90,330 ever-married women in the age group of 15-49 years. The survey was conducted during 1998-99 in 26 Indian states that constitute more than 99 percent of India's population. It employed a similar, systematic, multi-stage stratified sampling for each state. The survey also adopted uniform questionnaires and field procedures. It contains detailed household and individual level information on demography and health, as well as village characteristics (for details, see IIPS and ORC Macro 2000). The present analysis is confined mainly to individual and household level information.

In bodily health, women's ability to have adequate nutrition will be assessed through indicators such as Body Mass Index (BMI) and Iron Deficiency Anaemia. BMI is defined as the weight in kilograms divided by the height in metres squared ( $W/H^2$ ). This is based on the premise, due to Quetelet, that weight of a well-grown adult should be equivalent to the square of her height. Under-nutrition or chronic energy deficiency is usually indicated by a BMI of less than 18.5. The study treats that a woman is free from under-nutrition, if her BMI is 18.5 or above. To avoid the temporary fluctuations in the bodily weight, women who were pregnant at the time of the survey

and women who gave birth during the two months preceding the survey are excluded from calculating the index.

Anaemia is characterised by a low level of haemoglobin in the blood, and results mainly due to the deficiency of iron and some other micronutrients. Iron deficiency anaemia, one of the most widespread forms of women's malnutrition in the developing countries, is indicated usually by 11.9 grams/decilitre of haemoglobin in the blood. A woman is considered to be free from anaemia, if her haemoglobin in the blood is 12 grams/decilitre and above. As required, appropriate adjustments in the cut-off points were made for women who are pregnant, living at altitudes above 1000 meters and women who smoke since they need more haemoglobin in the blood. The bodily integrity will be examined through the following indicators: spatial mobility and free from physical assault. Spatial mobility is assessed through the absence of constraint in terms of permission from husband or other members to a) Go to the market and b) Visit relatives or friends. The study treats that a woman has freedom of spatial mobility, if she does not need permission from husband or other household members to go to *both* places. A woman is considered to be free from physical assault, if she has not been subjected to beating or physical mistreatment during the last 12 months preceding the survey.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, how is a woman treated as working or non-working for the present analysis? NFHS-2 has adopted the following procedure, commonly for all the states, to identify whether a woman is working or not. All eligible women were first asked, "Aside from your own housework, are you currently working?" Women who replied "no" were asked again the following probing question: "As you know, some women take up jobs for which they are paid in cash or kind. Others sell things, have a small business or work on the family farm or in the family business. Are you currently doing any of these things or any other work?" Women who replied "no" to both questions were treated as *non-working women* and those who answered "yes" to either first or second question were treated as *working women* in the present study.

It is important to state here that non-working women are of at least three kinds. First, women who are unwilling to work because of their higher economic and social position. Second, women who are unable to find a job due either to the non-availability of work or to socio-economic and

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<sup>3</sup> We have followed the procedures laid down in the explanatory note accompanying the NFHS-2 data to estimate under-nutrition and anaemia, and applied appropriate weights (individual, anthropometrical and anaemia weights) wherever necessary.

cultural disadvantages. Third, women who are either withdrawn from, or unable to enter into, the labour market either due to aspects relating to reproduction, or due to domestic maintenance or caring work.<sup>4</sup> This three-fold distinction is important in the capability perspective, since lack of freedom and opportunity to participate in paid work is different from unwillingness to engage in paid work even if it is available. However, due to lack of appropriate information on the reasons for not working, we have considered all the non-working women as a single group.

The diverse experience of India with varying regional patterns in terms of women's well-being, human development and economic growth provides an interesting setting for an empirical examination of the issue. Therefore, the study intends to examine the issue in three regions of India following the classification made by Dyson and Moore (1983): North-Northwest, South and East. The North-Northwest region includes the following five states: Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab and Haryana. Four states such as Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu are combined to form South India. The Eastern region consists of the following three states: Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal. These three regions differ substantially in terms of levels of gender inequality in well-being, economic growth and human development.

In the South India, socio-cultural norms against women are relatively less rigid, and hence women's participation in socio-economic spheres is relatively high or *vice versa*. Further, women's well-being is relatively higher and hence gender disparities in well-being are lower in this region. Despite a moderate economic growth, this region has a relatively higher human development. The pattern emerging from the North-Northwest region is in marked contrast to the Southern region. In the North-Northwest region, social norms against women are quite rigid and women's participation in economic and social spheres is relatively low. Women's well-being is relatively low and gender disparities in well-being are high. While this region has a higher economic growth, its human development is not commensurate with its economic growth. However, Uttar Pradesh, one of the major states in this region, with both low economic growth and low human development remains an exception. The Eastern region reveals yet another pattern. Social norms in this region seem to be neither rigid against, nor favourable to, women. Women's well-being and gender disparities in this region are somewhat moderate: neither high as

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<sup>4</sup> It is relevant to mention here that an analysis based on the 32<sup>nd</sup> and 38<sup>th</sup> rounds of National Sample Survey in India reveals that 90 per cent of the women attributed 'pressing need for domestic work' as the primary constraint for their non-participation in outside work (Kundu and Premi 1992, p. 69).

in the South nor low as in the North-Northwest. The region is relatively backward, both in terms of economic growth and human development. The differing socio-economic and cultural milieus of these three regions provide an interesting setting to explore the effects of women’s paid work on their well-being.

## Analysis and Findings

Table one presents the results at the aggregate level for India and also for the three regions. It seems that around two third of the Indian women are free from under-nutrition. However, the proportion comes down as far as free from anaemia is concerned. It appears from the table that more than half of women in India suffer from iron deficiency anaemia. Though a large percentage of women were not subjected to physical assault, an abysmally lower percentage of women have freedom of spatial mobility. Expectedly, women’s well-being is relatively higher in the South India. But, the North-Northwest region closely follows the South and also outperforms the East. The economic prosperity of the North-Northwest region can explain, to some extent, the relatively higher nutritional status of women. However, what is surprising, given the prevalence of rigid social norms against women in this region, is the relative better performance in the absence of physical assault as well. The Eastern region manifests a dismal picture on all the four indicators of well-being. With this backdrop, let us examine the influence of women’s work on their well-being.

**Table 1: Women’s Well-being in India** (figures in %)

Women's Well-being	India	South	N-Nwest	East
<b>1) Bodily Health: Free from</b>				
Under-nutrition	66.6	67.7	67.2	56.5
Anaemia	48.9	55.0	52.9	36.9
<b>2) Bodily Integrity</b>				
Spatial Mobility	22.6	31.7	19.7	15.8
Free from Physical Assault	89.0	88.2	90.2	86.1
Number of women	90,303	22,202	26,924	19,859

Note: Number of women reported may not be same for all the four indicators, especially for under-nutrition and aneamia.

Table two furnishes the extent of women’s well-being in relation to their work status. It appears that relatively large percentages of non-working women are free from under-nutrition and

anaemia than do working women in India. While working women seem to have higher spatial mobility than non-working women, relatively larger percentage of the latter are free from physical assault. Though participation in work tends to have a significant influence on women's well-being, it does not in itself enable women to attain a higher well-being. The larger pattern emerging from this table appears to favour non-working women in India. Does this pattern undergo any change in any of the three regions? It appears that the advantage of non-working women manifests in all the three regions despite their varying socio-economic contexts.

**Table 2: Women's Work and Well-being** (figures in %)

	India		South		North-Nwest		East	
	NW	WW	NW	WW	NW	WW	NW	WW
<b>1) Bodily Health: Free from</b>								
Under-nutrition	69.6	61.7*	75.8	59.1*	69.8	61.1*	58.6	50.9*
Anaemia	49.9	47.0*	59.2	50.4*	53.7	51.0*	38.6	32.2*
<b>2) Bodily Integrity</b>								
Spatial Mobility	19.5	27.7*	30.2	33.3*	16.9	26.8*	12.6	24.8*
Free from Assault	90.6	86.4*	91.5	84.9*	90.8	88.8*	87.9	81.0*
Number of women	56,539	33,742	11,217	10,984	19,405	7,508	14,600	5,251

Note: 1) NW and WW refer to Non-Working and Working Women respectively.

2) The symbol \* indicates the significance of Chi-square values at 5 per cent level.

Surprisingly enough, the analysis also reveals that the difference in well-being between non-working and working women is relatively small in the North-Northwest and large in the South. For instance, in the spatial mobility, where working women maintain an advantage over non-working women, the difference is relatively small in the South and large in the North-Northwest. By contrast, the difference in other indicators of well-being is relative small in the North-Northwest region and large in the South. It, thus, appears that except in spatial mobility, larger percentages of working women from the North-Northwest region are free from under-nutrition, anemia and physical assault than their counterparts from other two regions. The table also indicates that non-working women from Southern region have higher well-being than those from other two regions.

It is important to mention here that the theoretical claims linking women's work and well-being lay far more emphasis on their participation in paid work, rather than on their participation in

work *per se*. Admittedly, women's work participation is just a crude indicator of their likely economic contribution to the household, since women may also be working as unpaid family labourers in farms or enterprises. 'The actual economic worth of working women is likely to be related to whether they *earn* or not than to whether or not they *work* in productive tasks (Agarwal 1986, p. 176). Therefore, more than participation in work, women's ability to earn an income becomes important. To assess the influence of paid work on women's well-being, we have disaggregated the currently working women into *earning* and *non-earning* women (that is, those who earn an income and those who do not).

It is relevant to state here that there are at least four types of non-earning women. One, many of the non-earning women may be working in family farms or enterprises as unpaid workers. Two, some of the non-earning women may be working for others for a wage, but their wage may be received by other members of their family. Three, few of the non-earning women may be working for others not for a wage but rather as bonded labourers. Fourth, some of the non-earning women may be engaged in self-employment, but they may not be taking a regular salary or wage. Instead, they may be meeting day-to-day expenses from the proceeds of self-employment. Like non-working women, we have also treated all the four types of non-earning women as a single group. The data reveals that 67 percent of currently working women in India earn an income. The percentage is relatively higher (80) in the East, followed by South (78) and lower in the North-Northwest (49.6).

**Table 3: Women's Work and Well-being** (figures in %)

	India			South			North-Nwest			East		
Well-being	NW	NE	EW	NW	NE	EW	NW	NE	EW	NW	NE	EW
<b>1) Bodily Health: Free from</b>												
Under-nutrition	69.6	62.1*	61.4*	75.8	58.1*	59.4*	69.8	60.1*	62.0*	58.6	52.8*	50.4*
Anaemia	49.9	47.5*	46.8*	59.2	52.8*	49.7*	53.7	49.6*	52.5	38.6	35.8	31.3*
<b>2) Bodily Integrity</b>												
Spatial Mobility	19.5	19.5	31.7*	30.2	26.2*	35.3*	16.9	19.0*	34.8*	12.6	22.4*	25.4*
Free from Assault	90.6	87.9*	85.7*	91.5	86.8*	84.4*	90.8	89.4*	88.3*	87.9	78.6*	81.5*
No. of women	56539	11097	22628	11217	2412	8569	19405	3779	3717	14600	1038	4213

Notes: 1) NW, NE and EW refer to Non-Working, Non-Earning and Earning Women respectively.

2) The symbol \* indicates the significance of Chi-square values at 5 per cent level.

Does earning an income go along with an improvement in women's well-being? Alternatively, does lack of an income necessarily lower working women's well-being? Table three presents the results. It appears that participation in work without an income, though associated significantly with women's well-being, does not enable them to attain a well-being similar to, if not higher than that of, non-working women. Unlike working women, non-earning women do not have any advantage in spatial mobility over non-working women. This seems to imply that spatial mobility may come down, if working women do not earn an income. The table suggests that earning an income seems to have a significant effect on women's well-being. However, earning women in India tend to have a lower well-being than non-working women. Moreover, their well-being is even lower, though marginally, than that of non-earning women. The only exception, however, is spatial mobility. It seems that earning an income tends to go with an increase in women's spatial mobility in India.

In all the three regions, non-working women maintain an advantage in well-being over both earning and non-earning women. It seems that relatively larger percentages of non-earning women have spatial mobility than non-working women in the North-Northwest and the East. In the South, the reverse seems to be the case. However, earning women maintain their advantage over non-working and non-earning women in spatial mobility in all the three regions. We have noticed that earning an income seems to lower women's well-being in India, as relatively larger percentages of non-earning women have higher well-being than earning women. Symptoms of change are seen in some of the indicators in the regions. For instance, marginally higher percentage of earning women are free from under-nutrition than non-earning women in the South. The advantage of earning women extends to both indicators of bodily health in the North-Northwest. Also, higher percentage of earning women are free from physical assault in the East.

If we recall the question, posed above, that does earning an income go with an improvement in women's well-being, we get contrasting answers. In the North-Northwest, earning an income is likely to improve women's well-being than mere participation in work. By contrast, it seems that earning an income need not necessarily enhance women's well-being in the South and Eastern regions. These patterns raise a number of important questions. Why earning women seem to have lower well-being than non-working women in general? Despite the significant influence of paid work in all the three regions, why do earning women outperform non-earning women in only one region and not in other regions? One of the important factors could be women's lack of

control over their earning. It may seem plausible that women who earn an income will have a control over it. Often, this is not the case. It is possible that women who earn an income may hand over it to their husbands or other household members, who may, then decide how the income should be spent. Under such circumstances, there is much less reduction in economic dependence, even if they earn an income. They will continue to depend on others' sanction for meeting their healthcare and other requirements. Therefore, what is obviously more important than earning an income is control over it.

What is the extent of working women's control over their income in India and these three regions? The NFHS-2 asked all earning women "who mainly decides how to spend the money earned by you?" Earning women who replied that they mainly decide on how to spend their income are treated here as having control over their income. The data reveals that around 41 percent of earning women in India have control over their income. The percentage is relatively higher in the East (47.5), followed closely by the North-Northwest (47) and lower in the South (37). Thus, more than half of the earning women do not have control over their hardly earned income. As noted already, the difference in well-being between non-working and earning women is relatively large in the South, where more than 60 percent of earning women lack control over their income. This lack of control may be leading to earning women's well-being disadvantage. Let us, therefore, examine whether control over income enable earning women to attain a higher well-being than non-working women? Table four furnishes the results.

**Table 4: Women's Control over Earning and Well-being** (Figures in %)

	India		South		N-Nwest		East	
	NC	CI	NC	CI	NC	CI	NC	CI
<b>1) Bodily Health: Free from</b>								
Under-nutrition	59.0*	64.6*	57.8*	61.9*	59.4*	65.1*	48.8*	52.3*
Anaemia	46.2*	47.6*	49.2*	50.5*	52.8	52.0	30.8*	32.0*
<b>2) Bodily Integrity</b>								
Spatial Mobility	20.0	48.4*	24.5*	53.5*	23.7*	47.4*	10.9*	41.3*
Free from Assault	84.7*	87.1*	83.2*	86.4*	87.3*	89.3*	79.9*	83.3*
Number of women	13310	9304	5382	3181	1968	1743	2210	2003

Note: 1) NC and CI refer to 'No Control' and 'Control over Income' respectively.

2) The symbol \* indicates the significance of Chi-square values at 5 per cent level.

Table four suggests that earning an income, irrespective of women's control over it not, appears to have a significant influence on women's well-being in India. However, it also emerges from the table that earning women having control over their income seem to have relatively higher well-being than earning women who do not have a control. Thus, it appears that having a control over the decisions regarding the spending of their income is likely to go with an improvement in women's well-being in India. Interestingly, all the three regions echo this macro pattern. But, what is more important here is that does such control enable earning women to outperform non-working women? A comparison with table two indicates that it need not necessarily so. Relatively larger percentages of non-working women are free from under-nutrition, anaemia and physical assault than earning women having a control over their income in India and in all the three regions as well. Conversely, larger percentages of the latter have freedom of mobility than the former. Nevertheless, the difference in well-being between non-working and earning women having a control over their income is relatively less both in India and also in all the three regions.

The broad findings emerging from the analysis suggest that though paid work plays a significant role, it does not enable working women to attain a higher well-being than non-working women. Even control over decisions on how to spend their income does not empower earning women to outperform non-working women. On the face of it, the findings do not lend adequate support to the proposition under scrutiny. This raises a number of important questions. Why do working women, despite their income earning, experience a lower well-being? What constrains the earning women from converting their earning into source of higher well-being? As a prelude to addressing these questions, let us examine the factors leading to, or responsible for, under-nutrition in general.

It has been argued that 'under-nutrition is associated with a cluster of related, often coexistent, factors that together constitute what may be termed the *poverty syndrome*. The major attributes of it are: 1) income levels that are inadequate to meet basic needs of food, clothing and shelter; 2) diets that are quantitatively and qualitatively deficient; 3) poor environment, poor access to safe water, and poor sanitation; 4) poor access to healthcare; and 5) large family size and high levels of illiteracy, especially female illiteracy' (Gopalan 1992, p. 18, emphasis added). It is important to state here that these determinants relate to under-nutrition in general, rather than to women's under-nutrition. Since capability approach lays importance to specific factors that affect women and men differently, it is important to acknowledge that a number of other factors may

potentially complement the above in leading to women's under-nutrition. For instance, biological difference (aspects related to reproduction, especially pregnancy and lactation and the differential nutritional requirements arising there from), rigid social norms underlying the intrahousehold allocation of resources (that is, preferential treatment in the allocation of food and healthcare to men and boys over women and girls arising from the notions of men as breadwinners and women as caretakers) are a few of those factors.

It is clear from the above discussion that many factors other than poverty such as environment, sanitation and literacy also play a role in causing under-nutrition. Nevertheless, they are inherently related to, and hence viewed broadly as syndrome of, poverty. Thus, poverty appears to emerge as an overarching factor causing under-nutrition, as 'being poor almost always means being deprived of full nutritional capabilities' (Osmani 1992, p. 1). Viewed against this backdrop, the poor nutrition of earning women can well be related to, and indeed can be viewed as a manifestation of, their poverty. Capability approach considers poverty as not simply a deficiency in income but also of lack of capabilities such as literacy, adequate shelter and so on. This poses yet another question that do working women suffer disproportionately from these capability failures?

The NFHS-2 data shows that relatively larger percentages of earning women are illiterate than non-working women. For instance, 66 percent for earning women are illiterate, whereas only 45 percent of non-working women are illiterate in India. In the North-Northwest, around 67 percent of the former are illiterate, whereas the corresponding percentage among the latter is 60. In the South, around 64 percent of earning women are illiterate as against 24 percent of the non-working women. The corresponding percentages for the Eastern region are 79 and 54. Despite a higher human development and relatively higher well-being of women in the Southern region, illiteracy among earning women is almost to close to that of their counterparts in the North-Northwest. On the other hand, illiteracy among non-working women is much lower in the South than the North-Northwest. Recall here that well-being among non-working women is relatively higher in the South when compared to other regions. Also, the difference in well-being between earning and non-working women is relatively higher in the South, wherein difference in illiteracy between them is also high.

Similarly, larger percentages of earning women belong to households with low standard of living<sup>5</sup> in India and also in the three regions. For instance, 54, 74, 53 and 39 percentages of earning women in India, East, South and North-Northwest respectively come from households with low standard of living. The corresponding percentages for non-working women are 26, 42, 20 and 19 respectively. Thus, more earning women come from poor households than do non-working women. Additionally, relatively higher percentages of earning than non-working women belong to disadvantaged social groups such as Scheduled Castes and Tribes in India and in these regions. Admittedly, there is a fair degree of intersection between these three: illiteracy, material deprivation and social disadvantage. It is, therefore, likely that many of the illiterate earning women may also belong to economically and socially disadvantaged groups.

The NFHS-2 Report indicates that relatively larger percentages of illiterate women are undernourished and suffer from anaemia than literate women in India. Similarly, higher percentages of women belonging to households with low standard of living are undernourished and anaemic than those with medium and higher standard of living (IIPS and ORC Macro 2000, pp. 245,249). Again, social disadvantage goes well along with well-being disadvantage in terms of under-nutrition and anaemia (IIPS and ORC Macro 2000, pp. 245,249). Further, capability deprivation and socio-economic disadvantage also go along with relatively higher incidence of physical beating or mistreatment in India (IIPS and ORC Macro 2000, pp. 76-7; Deshpande 2002). Moreover, larger percentages of earning women reside in rural areas in India and in these regions. The incidence of physical mistreatment, NFHS-2 Report conveys, is relatively higher in rural than urban areas. Our detailed and multi-staged analysis (including Multivariate Logistic Regression analysis) in a related attempt in four Indian states ? Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh ? suggests that literacy, higher standard of living of the household, higher social group and urban residence and also a couple of other factors tend to have a positive and significant influence on women's well-being.

## Concluding Remarks

Does participation in work, especially paid work, enhance women's well-being in India? This question formed the object of enquiry for the present paper. We have examined the influence of

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<sup>5</sup> Information regarding the construction of the standard of living index including the variables used and values assigned to them is given in the NFHS-2 Report (IIPS and ORC Macro 2000, p. 41).

paid work in two aspects of ten central capabilities suggested by Nussbaum (2003) such as bodily health and bodily integrity. To assess the wider potential of women's work, we have carried out analysis, using NFHS-2 data, in India and also in three regions with varying social and economic contexts. The analysis suggests that relatively lower percentages of working women are free from under-nutrition, anemia and physical assault than non-working women. Earning an income, despite its significant influence, does not in itself enable working women to outperform non-working women. It seems that earning an income need not necessarily enhance women's well-being in India. However, having a control over income is likely to improve earning women's well-being. But, such control does not enable earning women to outperform non-working women. Nevertheless, earning women maintain an advantage over non-working women in spatial mobility. The discussion suggests that earning women suffer from a number of structural constraints such as illiteracy, material poverty and social disadvantage. Empirical studies and NFHS-2 data reveal that these aspects adversely affect women's well-being.

There is a fair measure of agreement that in many developing countries a large proportion of working women enter into labour market mainly out of poverty (Baden and Milward 1995). Much of these poor women who are also likely to suffer from pervasive capability deprivation such as illiteracy tend to predominate in precarious jobs. This is also true in India, as it is fairly agreed that poverty both material and capability, greater participation of women in the labour market and their concentration in lower rungs of labour hierarchy are inexorably intertwined (Bardhan 1993). Most often, these jobs which are physically demanding are not only seasonal and irregular, but more importantly fetch them little income and carry far fewer benefits. Given the lack of sufficient resources necessary for the survival of all members of the household, it is likely, as found by Mencher (1988), that a significant proportion of women's income might be spent on meeting household's basic subsistence needs. This is especially so when the households are dependent on women's income.

These poor working women are further disadvantaged as they most often bear not only the primary responsibility for domestic maintenance activities and caring labour, but also they have little access to services and facilities that ease their work burden. They tend to balance the triple responsibilities of breadwinning, domestic maintenance, and child and elderly care often at the expense of their health and leisure. Due to the household gender hierarchy and social norms underlying intrahousehold resource allocation, women's well-being, including health and nutrition,

not only becomes secondary to the survival of the household but also to the well-being of male members. Empirical studies from India suggest that under resource constraints households are likely to exhibit discriminatory practices in the allocation of resources favouring male members at the expense of female members (Behrman 1988; Browning and Subramaniam 1994).

The findings and the ensuing discussion tend to convey that participation in paid work in itself need not necessarily enhance women's well-being. This does not imply, however, that paid work lacks the potential to enhance women's well-being. Instead, the significant influence of paid work on women's well-being is undermined by a number of structural constraints. Working women encounter a number of difficulties in converting their paid work into a definite source of better well-being. Therefore, attainment of certain capabilities such as female literacy and free from hunger becomes almost a prerequisite, if women's earning is to yield expected beneficial effects on their well-being.

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