

Abstract

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The worldwide relocation and globalisation of low-value production to countries where labour intensive production is profitable, has led to new patterns of work and mobility, especially for women. In India and Tamil Nadu, the strategies of economic liberalisation and export promotion during the recent decades have created a large export sector of garments and leather industries, which has attracted many women. The increasing entry of women into the labour market has had significant impact on social and economic patterns, and not least gender relations.

This thesis deals with gender discourses among working class women and men, and is based on fieldwork conducted in Chennai in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, between 1999 and 2001. The thesis analyses how gender and gender hierarchies are discursively shaped, reproduced and reinterpreted among two groups of low income workers; export industry and construction industry workers. The main purpose is to show the importance of, and the possibility to, deconstruct and denaturalise social constructions that make unequal power relations seem natural and inevitable. It further analyses how the discourses affect, both in enabling and restrictive terms, the possibilities of action for women and men, and hence their economic and social situation. Finally the thesis also attempts to identify indications of discursive change and instability.

The analysis builds on a framework outlining discourses related to the field of gender and work. These are the practice of women's seclusion and limited mobility, the idea of men as breadwinners and women's primary role in reproduction, and the sexual division of labour. Further, discourses related to marriage, modesty and submission are given more attention than is generally done within this field. Discourse analysis is used as a tool for analysis and also as a theoretical point of departure, based on the assumptions of social constructivism.

A picture of rather stable discourses emerged among the construction workers, whereas among the export factory workers a lot of instabilities were detected. There were for most of the construction workers few or no choices of work, little room to challenge gender discrimination and poverty, and the discourses seemed fairly stable. The practice of going to work in an export factory is, on the contrary, in itself a challenge to many discourses; the regular breadwinning 'destabilises' the usual patterns of gender roles and division of labour, the mobility destabilises the patterns of seclusion and modesty, the new patterns of love 'affairs' and love marriage destabilise those of submission and chastity. But as new possibilities for women's mobility and independence emerge, women also undergo new ways of exploitation, dependence and stigmatisation. The new situation provides an overall instability, in terms of gender relations, identity, and social norms.

Keywords: Gender, gender discourses, development studies, feminist research, export industry, construction industry, working conditions, Tamil Nadu, India