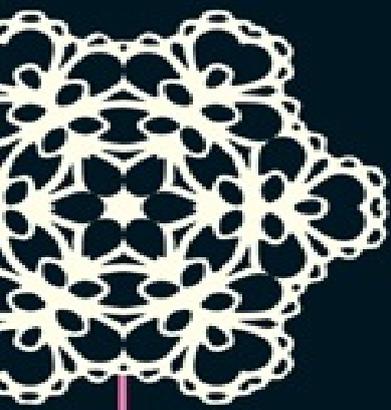


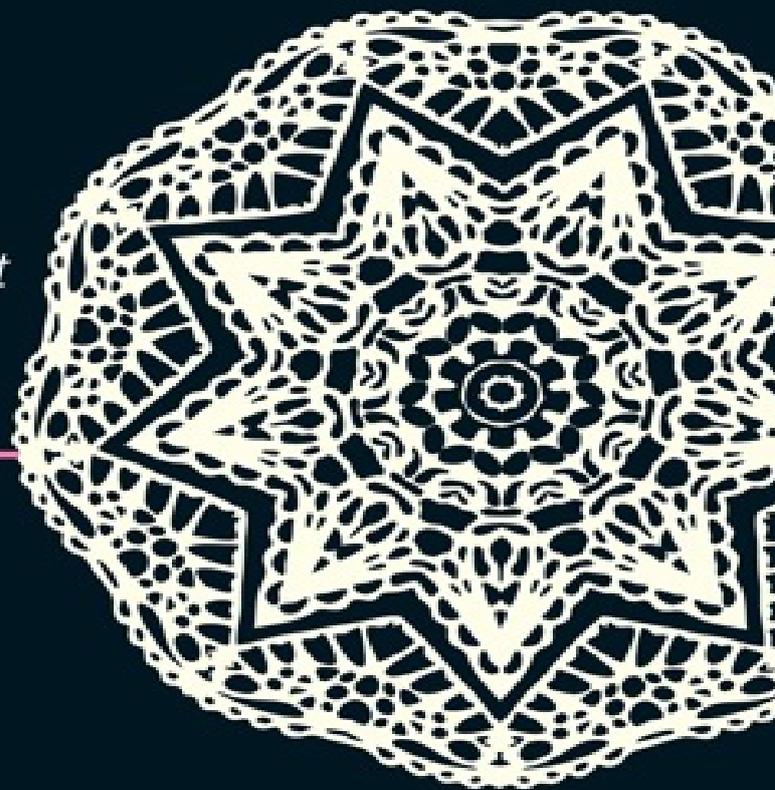
feminist
classics



Maria Mies

The Lace Makers of Narsapur

*... a graphic illustration of
how women bear the impact
of development processes*
—Chandra Talpade Mohanty



 SPINIFEX



MARIA MIES is a German feminist and activist scholar who lives in Cologne. She is the author of numerous groundbreaking works on women and globalisation. She has worked at the Goethe Institute in India, conducted fieldwork in Andhra Pradesh and was the founding director of the Masters in Women and Development at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague in the Netherlands. She is Professor Emerita at the University of Applied Sciences (Fachhochschule) in Cologne.

She has always combined activism and scholarship and was central to establishing the first shelter for battered women in Cologne. Maria Mies has been involved in resistance to genetic engineering and reproductive technologies, the fight against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), against the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and on issues of food security, all fundamental components of corporate globalisation. She is known around the world for the concept of 'housewifisation' and her writings on ecofeminism.

Other books by Maria Mies:

Indian Women and Patriarchy. Concept Publishers (1980)

Feminism in Europe: Liberal and Socialist Strategies 1789–1919 (1981)

National Liberation and Women's Liberation (1982, Rhoda Reddock)

Fighting on Two Fronts: Women's Struggles and Research (1982)

Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour (1986/1999)

Women: The Last Colony (1988, with Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Claudia von Werlhof)

Ecofeminism (1993, with Vandana Shiva)

The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy (1999, with Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen)

The Village and the World: My Life, Our Times (2010)

The Lace Makers of Narsapur

**Indian Housewives Produce for the
World Market**

Maria Mies



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Preface to the 2012 edition

I AM very happy that Spinifex Press is publishing this reprint of *The Lace Makers of Narsapur*. Because most of what I learned about the exploitation of women by capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism I learned through my empirical fieldwork in Narsapur, a small town in South India. This research project provided the background for my further practical and theoretical understanding of how women as 'housewives' through their 'invisible' work contribute to the process of Capital Accumulation (see Mies, 1986/1999).

I started this study in 1979. This was the time when feminists all over the world were engaged in a heated debate on the question: Why is housework not considered work? Why is this work not paid? Why are only men called the 'breadwinners'? Why don't women get a wage for their work? Why is the making of a car called 'productive', while a woman's work for her family, her husband, her children is only 'reproductive' work, as Marx had called it? In this context, we asked why does capitalism need this 'non-work' for its process of unlimited growth of money?

To change this situation, some feminists demanded a 'wage for housework'. Others, like myself, were of the opinion that men should share this non-waged work equally with women. That means they would have to do all the nitty-gritty jobs in the home which they usually do not even notice. They would have to spend much more time at home and much less time in the factory or in the office. The whole sexual division of labour would have to be changed and the labour power to produce ever more commodities for the capitalist market would shrink. Under such equal work conditions for men and women, capitalism could not have developed in the way it did.

My view was not shared by most feminists. But the discussion on housework under capitalist conditions went on for many years. Mostly, it was limited to a purely Western, Eurocentric perspective. Practically no one asked what this discussion meant for women in the poor countries of the global South.

Therefore my two friends, Claudia von Werlhof and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and I asked whether this whole discussion about housework would make any sense for poor women in Africa, Asia and Latin America? Didn't they have other, more important problems to solve? All three of us had lived and worked in the so-called third world, Claudia and Veronika in Latin America and myself in India.

At the same time a similar discussion took place among young researchers who had studied the work conditions in developing countries on the 'mode of production'. They had found that the majority of poor people working there were not 'proletarians' in the classical sense of the word. They were working for their own survival as small peasants, small artisans, small shopkeepers, ragpickers, housemaids, rikshaw-pullers, tailors and in all kinds of similar casual jobs. The UN had called this whole sector the 'unorganised sector'. We and others were not satisfied with this term and so we began calling this work 'Subsistence Work'. Because all these people did not get a regular income, they had no job security, they had no insurance when they were sick or became old. Often they did not even have a proper place to live. In the cities, many of them lived in slums. The labour unions were not interested in these 'non-proletarians'. But these people worked: they worked for their subsistence.

But what was 'subsistence' really? Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Claudia von Werlhof organised two conferences on the issue of 'Subsistence in Developing Countries' at the University of Bielefeld. One took place in 1978, the other in 1989.

Even before these conferences, we had asked what kind of labour was it that housewives did in their homes? Was this unpaid housework necessary for the permanent growth of capital: the 'Unlimited Process of Capital Accumulation', as Marxists called it? We came to the conclusion that this invisible labour was absolutely necessary for the ongoing process of Capital Accumulation, or permanent growth of money and capital, as it is called today. But we wanted to test whether this hypothesis was not only correct for women in the West, but also with regard to poor women in the South. Claudia went to Venezuela, Veronika to Mexico and I went to India to find out whether our hypothesis was correct there too. And it was!

Today, young women may wonder why feminists in those years were so keen to discuss theoretical stuff like 'capital accumulation', 'sexual division of labour', 'productive versus reproductive labour', 'production relations', 'wage labour or non-wage labour', 'subsistence' – all concepts that were heatedly discussed by the Left during the Students' Movement around 1968. You might ask: 'What was your aim? Your strategy, your tactics, your theory?'

The answer is that we did not have a proper 'theory' with which to legitimise our struggle. We were angry about how men's superiority over women and violence against women were accepted as 'normal' in all societies. So we started to fight against men's oppression and exploitation in all their manifestations. For this struggle we did not need a theory. We needed lots of anger and lots of energy. But we did not even have our 'own' language in which we could express our anger and our demands. The only language we could use were Marxist concepts which were governing the discourse in those days.

I also used Marxist concepts. But I discovered very soon that it was wrong to expect that social change would come only if you had a proven theory. I gained this insight in 1976, when my students and I were fighting to establish a House for Battered Women in Cologne (Mies, 2010). This struggle was successful not because we had a proven theory but because we were determined to stop this violence against women. I wrote an essay in which I explained what I had learned through our struggle. The essay, 'Towards a Methodology for Feminist Research' was published in English by Gloria Bowles and Renate Klein in their book, *Theories of Women's*

In this essay, I formulated seven theses for a new methodology that had to be invented if we as feminists wanted to study women's issues. The most important of these theses is that *You have to change a thing before you can understand it* (Mies, 1983). That means practice comes before theory, not the other way round.

When I began my research in Narsapur it was clear to me that I had to follow my own methodological principles.

But how did I do that?

I had lived and worked in India before. Since the early 1970s I travelled regularly to Hyderabad, the capital of the state of Andhra Pradesh. There I met a group of young women – students who were also 'infected' by the feminist virus. They wanted to do something against women's oppression by the patriarchal system. As their first step they decided to fight against the dowry¹ system. When I told them about my research project, one of them said: 'Why don't you go to Narsapur. In that little town on the sea shore women make lace, crochet lace. They are all very poor. But the man who exports these lace goods is a millionaire.'

As I did not know Telugu, the local language in that area, I asked one of the women, Lalitha, whether she would like to come along with me and help me as an assistant and interpreter. She agreed. Lalitha was one of the founding members of POW (Progressive Organisation of Women). POW was the first feminist organisation in India. Lalitha was not only a very committed member of POW, she was also an excellent activist. And she was a great singer. In those days, most of the political messages would not have reached the thousands of peasants, women, or poor people without songs. I would not have been able to do my research without Lalitha. She was an excellent interpreter, but she also understood my aim and my new methodology immediately. She knew the area around Narsapur, she knew the life of the women and she had an immediate rapport with them.

Our fieldwork was different from what researchers usually do. We went to the women, sat with them in front of their mud houses and chatted with them. But first the lace making women did their own research on us. 'Who are you? Are you married? Do you have children? Where do you come from?' Then they began to talk about their work, the lace making as well as their housework. They showed us the many different lace items they had made and gave us a lot of information about the man who exported their lace to 'foreign lands'. Several of them also told us freely about their husbands and men in general. In many cases the men had no job or had gone away or did not do anything to help the women to take care of the household. One of the women thought that men are 'useless'. I wrote down their life histories. When I read these life histories again today I am even more impressed than I was in 1979 by the openness and clarity of their thinking.

In the evenings we would all sit together and Lalitha would sing songs, including political ones. The women were enthusiastic and clapped to the rhythm of these songs. Looking back I think these life histories are the most exciting part of my book. The women would not have told us about their lives so freely if we had not gone to them.

The Lacemakers of Narsapur is the result of this research project. What I learned during my

fieldwork in Narsapur was that the women who made crochet lace were not middle class housewives who would do only 'reproductive work' as Marxists called it. They were poor women, sitting in their mud huts, making lace – tablecloths, doylies, lace handkerchiefs, blouses of lace – all objects for which they had no use themselves and did not even know what they were for. These lace goods were exported to Australia, England, the USA, Switzerland and other so-called 'developed countries'. Hence these women were proper 'producers', not only 'reproducers'. But what was different in their case was that they had to combine this production for the world market with the usual work any housewife has to do: cooking, cleaning the house, washing the clothes, feeding and taking care of the children and 'serving' their husbands. This combination of productive and reproductive work was new for me. At the time, in the West, the typical housewife was married to a man, called 'breadwinner', because he earned a salary or a wage from which all things could be bought to satisfy the needs of the members of his household. The Western housewives were – often still are – dependent on a male 'breadwinner'. But in the case of the lace makers in and around Narsapur, many of the women had no husband who could feed his family. Many men were unemployed or had only seasonal work. It was the women who, in spite of their extremely low wages, were the real 'breadwinners'.

I also wondered why they continued to do this badly paid work instead of working in the fields.

I learned that they considered themselves to be 'superior women' caste- and class-wise than women working seasonally on the fields of rich landowners. The lace making women called themselves 'gosha' women which means 'women sitting in the house'. This bourgeois concept of the *women sitting in the house* had been taught to them by Christian nuns who believed that a woman's 'natural' place was in the house where she would take care of the family. This is still the destiny for many women in the West today – if they have a husband who gets a full wage or a salary.

Even today, most people still think that housewives have plenty of leisure time. After finishing their main household duties like cooking, cleaning, taking care of their children, doing the laundry, women could – or should – use this leisure time to make beautiful things by sewing, knitting, crocheting etc. In other words, in their 'spare time', housewives make fancy items to decorate their homes or do other things (such as cooking and baking) to create a comfortable home for their husbands and children when they come back from work and school. In a sense these housewives are comparable to the poor women of Narsapur.

But the lace making women of Narsapur could never dream of having this type of home. Their craft was no 'luxury'. Lace making was a necessity for them; it was their work. Without this work they often did not survive, because their husbands had lost their jobs or had simply disappeared. In spite of their idea that they were 'gosha' women, they had to combine unpaid housework with badly paid and insecure, seasonal wage labour. It was this combination of reproductive housework and invisible productive work for the international market which made me understand for the first time how the capitalist world market functioned – and has continued to function until today.

The fact that most of the lace makers considered themselves to be 'gosha' women showed me that caste had not disappeared in India at all. Most of the lace making women belonged to what today is called 'backward castes'. But they were not untouchables, or 'downtrodden' people as they are called today. Most of the women working on the fields of landlords belonged to this group.

For me it was a great and exciting experience to live in India again (see Mies, 2010) and do this research with the lace making women in and around Narsapur. I learned much more than I had expected and I am still learning from the story of the lace makers.

The relevance of The Lace Makers of Narsapur today

There is another reason why I am happy that Spinifex Press is re-publishing this story. What I discovered in the late 1970s/ early 1980s confirms that the optimal labour force for capital then – and now – is organised exactly along the same lines which I had found among the lace makers of Narsapur. Like the poor women in Narsapur, many people – women and men – in the USA, in Europe, in Australia and in practically all industrialised countries of the West, are 'sitting in their house', making goods for the Global Market. They work on computers at home, or in call centres. They are isolated, work mostly for foreign contractors or for subcontractors whom they do not know. Like the lace makers of Narsapur they do not produce one whole item but only components of components which are then shipped to some other land where they are 'recombined' into a whole product: a car, a computer, a cell phone, a TV set, garments like T-shirts and the like. Like the lace makers, these workers are unorganised, they are rarely members of a trade union, they have to accept any wage and their work is only seasonal. They have no job security, many have no health insurance, they have no fixed labour time, no sick days, no social security, no right to a pension. They are totally dependent on the global market. If there is demand for some commodity, they may get a short-term job. If there is no, or less demand, they become unemployed. They are not insured against unemployment. These labour conditions have become the norm not only in poor countries, but in the richest countries of the world as well. They are the labour conditions under which the 'permanent growth of capital' was and is made possible.

The lace makers show the way. The conditions under which they worked never disappeared, as we can see now. Indeed these conditions have returned to the rich countries of the West from where they were exported.

When Claudia von Werlhof, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and I wrote the book *Women: The Last Colony* (1988) we put together all our insights and conclusions we had gained through our fieldwork in Venezuela, Mexico and India. In that book, Claudia published an essay entitled, 'The Proletarian is dead. Long live the Housewife!' In this article, she emphasised that in the future not only women, but also men would be *housewifised* because housework would become the prototype for the optimal exploitation of the labour force everywhere. Today this prophecy has come true including in rich countries. There is a growing number of women and men who do not find a properly paid job any more in the 'first labour market'. They have to accept any job where they can find one. More and more people in our rich countries sink below

the poverty line. Everybody calls this type of insecure, poorly paid work *precarious* jobs. Economists call this whole sector the *Precariat*. The concept *Proletariate* has disappeared from the public discourse

When I reflect on the reasons why the corporations and their spin doctors have invented the word 'precariat', I can only conclude that they want to hide the brutal reality behind this artificial concept. Nobody understands what this word means. Hardly anyone knows Latin or French any more, not even the Trade Unions can clearly define what precarious work means. Industry and governments take it for granted that the labour force is divided into these two sectors. When governments are told by the statisticians that the number of people who got a job has risen, they do not mention what kind of jobs these are.

When I read all this nonsense and hear and see what has become of our so called 'progressive' economies, then I think, the women lace makers of Narsapur were and are the image of the future for us. I hope that people in the West begin to understand that our famous 'developed economy' has been built upon work like that of the lace makers of Narsapur.

Maria Mies

Cologne, 17 January 2012

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1 *A dowry* is the money a bride's family has to pay to the family of the bridegroom, if they want to get their daughter married. And a daughter *has* to get married. An unmarried woman at that time had no place in the society.

Preface to the 1982 edition

THE World Employment Conference convened by the International Labour Organisation in June 1976 noted that women constitute the group at the bottom of the ladder in many developing countries, in respect of employment, poverty, education, training and status. Concerning rural women, the Conference recommended that measures be taken to relieve their work burden and drudgery by improving working and living conditions, as well as by providing more resources for investment.

More recently, in November–December 1979, the Advisory Committee on Rural Development urged the ILO to continue and extend its work concerning women in rural development, with a special focus on women in the disadvantaged groups.

The ILO's Programme on Rural Women, currently being directed by Zubeida Ahmad and Martha Loutfi, attempts to translate this recommendation into action. In view of the inadequate research done on employment patterns and labour processes, poverty and organisations of rural women, the main focus of the Programme has been on studies and field research sub-contracted to researchers in the Third World. The general approach of the Programme is to move gradually from a solid information base to the dissemination and exchange of information and insights through seminars and workshops, followed by the planning and implementation of technical cooperation projects to assist the poorest strata among rural women, in close consultation, where possible, with rural women's own organisations.

The present study examines a substantial household industry in Andhra Pradesh, India, in which secluded poor Christian and Hindu women produce lace which yields about 90 per cent of the State's handicrafts export earnings. Western women who buy the lace doilies, shawls, etc. are linked with poor women producing the lace through an extensive network of male agents, traders and exporters. The lace business has become very profitable for some traders and wealth generated among larger-scale farmers in this Green Revolution area has found a means of further accumulation by investment in this trade. Yet the producers – who are all women – are not considered 'workers' but rather 'housewives', in spite of a 6–8-hour day at lace work (in addition to about 7 hours of other productive work and housework). The structure of this industry, based on invisible producers, enables the accumulation of wealth by some traders and ensures the impoverishment of the workers. The illusion that the women produce lace in

their leisure time contributes to inhibiting the sole means of improving their lot – organisation.

This case study has broader implications for development policies. Often the establishment of home-based industries is seen as a desirable means of generating some income for women while allowing them to meet their domestic responsibilities. This study reveals that such a strategy, by not transforming the production and reproduction relations, may lead to the impoverishment of the women, and a polarisation not only between classes but between men and women as well.

Dharam Ghai,
Chief,
Rural Employment Policies Branch,
ILO.

Acknowledgments

EVERYONE who has done empirical research on women in rural India knows it is not easy to find women investigators who are ready to go to the villages and share the rough life of peasant women. In spite of educational and academic qualifications many urban women are still so handicapped by patriarchal norms and institutions that they dare not move beyond the radius of the cities and towns. I was very fortunate, therefore, to find two young women, Lalita and Krishna Kumari who were courageous enough to come along to Narsapur, to live in the villages among the lace-making women and share their life. But what was equally important was the fact that they had enough enthusiasm, empathy and commitment to the cause of women's emancipation to be able to establish a relationship of trust and friendship between the lace makers and ourselves. This rapport was also facilitated by the fact that the lace makers who were just in the process of forming a cooperative society were very keen themselves to discuss their situation and their problems with us and asked for our help. The general methodological orientation of the project, aiming at bridging the gap between researchers and researched, theory and practice, also contributed to a good relationship between the lace-making women and our research team. Lalita's and Krishna's capacity to communicate easily and in a friendly way with the rural women was as important as their work as investigators and interpreters. I mention their contribution to the project with special gratitude.

This study would not have been possible without the support and cooperation of a number of persons and institutions. I want to thank in particular Mrs. Antoinette Beguin, then Chief of the ILO's Employment and Development Department, and Mr. Dharam Ghai, Chief of its Rural Employment and Policies Branch, who sanctioned the project. I received particular encouragement and support from Lourdes Beneria, Subeida Ahmad and Martha Loutfi, who edited the manuscript. In India the staff of what was called the 'Women's Cell' of the Indian Council of Social Science Research took a keen interest in the project and helped to overcome administrative hurdles. I want to say a special word of thanks to Harsh Sethi, Kumud Sharma and Vina Mazumdar.

A note of thanks goes to Mr. N.P. Sen, at the time Principal of the Administrative Staff

College of India who generously offered me a local institutional base for my work.

I was fortunate in having the cooperation and assistance of the Directorate of Women's and Child Welfare and the Directorate of Industries of Andhra Pradesh who arranged contacts with officials and administrators at the district and local levels and helped in tracing available secondary material.

I found ever-ready cooperation from a number of Indian colleagues, particularly the colleagues at the Administrative Staff College. I want especially to thank Vithyal Rajan and Shantilal Sarupria, formerly of the Indian Institute of Economics. I also want to mention the very interesting discussions I had with Sarvesvara Rao and his colleagues at the Andhra University. Our research team received generous help from many friends who were neither professionally nor officially connected with the project. A special note of thanks goes to Saral Sarkar and O. Murthy who accompanied the work not only by their general concern and sympathy but also by their practical support. I also want to mention with special gratitude the work of Sarojini Rao who typed the many interviews with the lace workers. During the process of preparing the final report I received generous support from the Institute of Social Studies, for which I am very grateful. I want to mention especially the work of Rosalia Cortez, Rachel Kurian, and the various women who typed the manuscript. I want to thank Kurt Martin and Kumari Jayawardena for their valuable comments.

Finally, I want to thank all the women of Narsapur and Serepalem who so willingly extended their hospitality to the research team and were ready to share their work and life experiences with us.

Maria Mies
The Hague.

Chapter 1

Introduction

AT 264 million, India's female population is one of the largest in the world. About 8.25 per cent of this population lives in rural areas, mostly in the subsistence sector. The participation of women in the rural economy varies widely according to the specific forms of their production: they include tribal gatherers and hunters, slash and burn cultivators, settled peasants with plough cultivation, small proprietors, tenants or agricultural labourers without land, subsistence artisans, those engaged in household industries, and pedlars. No systematic research has been done as yet on the basic features of women's participation in this sector, or on the effects of capitalist development on their work and living conditions. But there is enough quantitative and qualitative data available to serve as a basis for an analysis of the trends affecting women's lives under the impact of this development.

Before the International Women's Year (1975), the Indian government set up a committee to investigate various aspects of the status of women. This Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) presented its report in December 1974. The picture that emerged from its 480 pages was gloomy, and pointed to a trend of growing deterioration of the status of women in India since the beginning of this century. The evidence for this deterioration was seen in the continual decline of the sex ratio since 1911, in the decline of women's measured work participation, their political representation and a deterioration of their health and educational standards.¹

These findings came as a shock to many who cherished the view that India was a country where women were more respected than in many parts of the world. The validity of the findings of the CSWI were therefore questioned. But these findings were fully corroborated by the research on the Status of Women of the demographer Asok Mitra who wrote that the past 30 years after Independence had reduced Indian women to an expendable commodity: expendable demographically as well as economically.² In 1977, the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) brought out a brochure in which the declining sex ratio was seen in relation to the declining proportion of women in the work force:

In the 40 years between 1911 and 1951, the gap between men and women in the population increased by 27 per cent. During the same period, women's proportion to the total work-force declined from 525 per 1,000 males (1911) to 408 per 1,000 males (1951). In the 20 years between 1951 and 1971, the gap between men and women in the population rose from 8.9 million to 19.9 million. In the same period, the number of women workers in agriculture declined from 31 to 25 million while [the number] of men increased by 34.3 million. In the non-agricultural sector, women workers declined from 9.3 to 6.2 million, while men increased from 32.8 to 48.4 million. The total number of men workers increased by 27 per cent

Even though alterations in census definitions of labour force participation render the precision of these figures questionable, there is indisputable evidence of a growing disparity between the sexes, both with regard to their chances for physical survival and employment. The most dramatic decline in female employment has been in the secondary sector, i.e. the industries, but also in trade and in commerce – sectors which had worked along capitalist lines ever since the colonial period. But between 1961 and 1971 this trend could also be observed in traditional agricultural occupations and household industries. The percentage of women employed as cultivators declined between 1961 and 1971 from 30.02 per cent to 7.13 per cent, that of agricultural labourers from 12.60 per cent to 11.80 per cent and of women engaged in household industries from 3.42 per cent to 0.77 per cent.⁴

Whereas until 1961 the proportion of women among cultivators had been between 289–498 per 1,000 men, this ratio fell steeply between 1961 and 1971 to a mere 135 women to 1,000 men. Similarly, the female ratio among agricultural labourers had been relatively stable since 1901, but between 1961 and 1971 it dropped from 819 women per 1,000 men to 498 women per 1,000 men, a decline of about 40 per cent.⁵

This decline in the ratio of women in their traditional rural occupations coincides with the rapid development of Indian agriculture in the Green Revolution period between 1960 and 1970. This period saw not only a general breakthrough in the increase of the production of food grains but also the reorganisation of Indian agriculture along commercial lines. Does this mean that there is a causal link between these two processes and that women's jobs are eliminated when agriculture is commercialised? The statistical data suggest this conclusion. It could be interpreted to imply that rural men are earning so much now due to increased productivity that they can afford to support a non-earning housewife. All evidence on rural wages and the growing number of people living below the poverty line belie such an interpretation. This then can only mean that rural women are *de facto* forced to continue to work, but that they are now defined as non-workers, i.e. dependants, both by statisticians and planners, and that their economic contribution to their families falls under the heading of housework and subsistence work. This means their work is *made* invisible.

The following analysis of the development of lacemaking as an export-oriented household industry may shed some light on the mysterious process by which women's work is pushed underground, while at the same time, capital accumulation is seen publicly as the main 'productive' activity.

Before turning to this analysis, a short discussion of some of the concepts used in the study and their theoretical implications is necessary, particularly the concepts *subsistence* and *subsistence production*.

Subsistence production is understood in the following to mean the *production of life* in its widest sense, the production of use values for the day-to-day sustenance as well as the production of new life. It can also be defined as survival production. This subsistence or survival production should not be confused with the self-sufficient subsistence economy of independent small peasants who produce only or mainly for their own consumption. This latter form of self-

sufficiency has long ago been destroyed virtually everywhere and this sector subsumed under the processes of capital accumulation. This does not mean that the various *forms* of subsistence production have fundamentally changed. Among the subsistence producers we find small peasants who sell part of their produce or become contract agriculturists, sharecroppers who produce cash crops as well as their own food, agricultural labourers who work only for 4–5 months per year for a wage and have to produce their survival for the rest of the time, contract labourers, village artisans and small traders. All these categories of workers have in common that the income they receive from the sale of their labour or their products and services is not sufficient to guarantee their survival, i.e. it does not cover their reproduction costs. Usually one form of subsistence production is not sufficient to guarantee the survival but a combination of several is required, e.g. wage labour *and* household industry, or share-cropping *and* wage labour, etc. Further, no single individual is able to guarantee her or his survival. Men and women and children have to work and combine the income from their various activities to produce their subsistence. This means that women are *not* housewives, dependent on the income of their husbands: they are in fact the last guarantors of the survival of the family through various types of work and services. Their subsistence production does not only include wage work but also various kinds of non-wage work in the form of housework and other services, possibly including sexual services. The myth that *men* are the breadwinners of their families helps to remove this type of work from public perception.

Subsistence production today, however, is a double-faced reality, depending on whether one looks at it from the point of view of the subsistence producers themselves who *have* to do this hidden work in order to survive, or from the point of view of commodity production or capital accumulation. The ongoing subsistence production of rural women, both in the form of housework as well as in the form of paid and unpaid work in agricultural production, forms the base upon which commodity production proper, or market- or surplus-oriented production, can be built up. From the point of view of the people – mainly the women – this continuation of subsistence production is necessary for their survival: since the wage that men and women get in wage-labour is not sufficient to cover the costs of the reproduction of labour power, a large part of the daily requirements for mere survival has to be acquired through other forms of non-wage labour. From the point of view of capital accumulation, however, this ongoing subsistence production of poor peasants and particularly poor peasant women constitutes the pre-condition for what has been called the *ongoing process of primitive (or original) accumulation*,⁶ which forms a logical and fundamental part of capital accumulation proper, at *all* stages of development and not only in its initial stages as in Europe in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. As subsistence production subsidises the wages of those engaged in wage labour, particularly men, there is no incentive to raise these wages to the point where they would cover the reproduction costs.

Hence, it is erroneous to expect that the labour spent in subsistence production will eventually be transformed into wage labour proper and subsistence producers into ‘free’ wage labourers. Following this argument, these hypotheses have been formulated:

- 1 Although capitalist development in agriculture presupposes the existence of subsistence

production as the base for ongoing primitive accumulation and capital accumulation proper, this development gradually erodes the economic and social base of the subsistence producers, mainly poor peasants and especially women. This leads to their pauperisation.

- 2 Whereas in Europe, pauperised peasants were drawn into the actual industrial labour force, in the underdeveloped countries this integration is possible only for a small fraction of this population. The vast majority is not proletarianised but rather marginalised and continues to exist at a falling standard of living.
- 3 The above applies particularly to women subsistence producers in rural areas. Due to their ongoing responsibility for the subsistence of the family – in household work and non-household work, as well as due to patriarchal and sexist norms and institutions, they cannot compete with men for the scarce job opportunities in the ‘modern’ sector. This compulsion to continue as subsistence producers turns them into a large pool of an extremely exploitable labour force, or a ‘marginal mass’.⁷
- 4 This process also leads to a polarisation between men and women: whenever market-oriented production is introduced (in the form of commercial crops, rural-based small-scale industries, etc.), the more ‘modern’ types of employment are usually monopolised by men whereas women have to continue their ‘traditional’ subsistence production.
- 5 This process does not lead to the transformation of all rural labour into full-fledged wage labour. Just as the men are only partly proletarianised, the women are only partly turned into dependent housewives.
- 6 The ideological consequences of this process are, however, that men are seen mainly as breadwinners and workers, whereas the women are mainly seen as housewives. This means patriarchal and sexist norms and institutions will rather be reinforced than abolished in this process.

These hypotheses have been tested among agricultural labourer women in Nalgonda District where market-oriented production in the form of commercial crops and dairy-schemes was introduced in recent years.⁸ These products were sold mainly in the urban areas of the home market. Only some products, like tobacco, were exported outside the country. In the following, I shall test the above hypotheses in the lace industry in the town and the surrounding villages of Narsapur, West Godavari District. In contrast to the agricultural labourer women, the lace makers of Narsapur mainly produce for export. Thus, they are not only integrated into a national market system but also into the world market.

My own motivation for this study arose from my discussions with many women in the years 1977 and 1978, when we all tried to come to a clearer understanding of the nature of women’s work and its relation to capitalism. Whereas most women looked at this problem only from the point of view of the housewife in the industrialised countries, some of us, who had a background of many years of work and experience among women in third world countries, could not reconcile ourselves with an analysis which excluded the majority of women, namely the masses of rural women in Asia, Africa and Latin America. We realised that the debate on the nature and value of domestic labour and its function for capital accumulation was incomplete unless the mass of unpaid or badly paid work performed by poor peasant women all

over the world for their mere subsistence was made part of the analysis. The many discussions and exchanges I had with my friends Claudia v. Werlhof and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen helped me to develop a theoretical framework for the study of women's subsistence work. The conferences on 'Underdevelopment and Subsistence Reproduction' which took place at the University of Bielefeld between 1977 and 1979 provided an important platform to test and clarify our theoretical approach. It was based on the realisation that rural women's subsistence work, though almost totally excluded from the calculations of national and international development planners, was not only absolutely necessary for the survival of their communities but constituted also the hidden basis for any take-off of development processes.

The initial plan was to study women's work – both in and outside the home – in three selected areas and types of subsistence production in India: (1) a rural household or cottage industry, (2) agricultural labourer women, (3) tribal women. The state of Andhra Pradesh was selected for the fieldwork, because this state had in recent years adopted a policy of rapid development and commercialisation of agriculture which also had an impact on rural women engaged in various types of subsistence work. Only two of these studies could eventually be completed: the study of the agricultural labourer women of Nalgonda District and the study of the lace makers of Narsapur in West Godavari District. The study of tribal women in West Godavari District could not be completed, due to lack of time. In 1977, I had an opportunity to make a field trip to Narsapur on the east coast of Andhra Pradesh, the centre of the lace industry. On that occasion I learned that more than 100,000 women were involved in this household industry, that their wages were extremely low, that the industry had existed already for about a hundred years, that all the lace was exported to Europe, Australia and the U.S.A., and that a number of private exporters had made huge fortunes from the sale of lace. I also heard that lace export provided the largest share of foreign exchange earned from the export of handicrafts for the state of Andhra Pradesh.

In spite of these facts, no systematic survey had ever been carried out on the lace makers of Narsapur. The project, therefore, provided an excellent opportunity to study the work and living conditions of the women engaged in this industry and to find out whether production for the world market had improved their economic and social conditions in the course of almost one hundred years.

A study of this rural industry is of particular interest for the following reasons:

- (a) It can give us an insight into the long-term effects of market-oriented production on women workers. It enables us to study the emergence of this industry, the mechanisms used to link housework to house industry within a historical perspective.
- (b) The historical perspective – the continuation of this industry for such a long time and its expansion with its full integration into the market system leads to a re-examination of certain theoretical assumptions, e.g. that house industries belong to the 'undeveloped' or 'backward' stages of early industrialisation and will disappear with fully developed capitalism. Within the framework of this study, it is not possible to draw out all the theoretical consequences from the empirical material, but I shall point out at least some of the relevant questions which require more research.

(c) What is also interesting about this industry is the fact that it is located in one of the main areas of the Green Revolution in India, namely the delta region of the rivers Godavari and Krishna. This region has become prosperous due to commercial farming in the last 10–20 years. The study of the lace-making women, who mostly live in the villages, provides an opportunity to look at the ‘other side’ of the success story of the Green Revolution. It can give us a clearer understanding of the connection between the pauperisation of peasants and women’s subsistence work in a house-industry and capitalist agriculture.

(d) The study has also special relevance in the context of present international and national development strategies for women in Third World countries. Many of these programmes see the solution for rural women’s problems in the establishment of income-generating activities, in small-scale industries and house hold industries. It is hoped that these industries will provide some additional money income to the women by which they can supplement the insufficient income of the men. The study of the lace makers of Narsapur, who have been following such a line since almost the beginning of this century, can teach us how far this policy is really in the interest of rural women and how far it is in the interest of those who control the market nexus.

It is significant that, in spite of the large number of women working in this household industry, hardly any reliable statistical information about them was available. No systematic census of all the lace makers had ever been undertaken. In the decennial censuses the lace makers are not even recorded under the rubric of workers engaged in household industries. Hence, the lace-making women of Narsapur share the fate of most women engaged in what is commonly called ‘the informal sector’: they do not exist statistically as workers, either in the calculations of researchers or of planners and politicians. Because of the almost absolute absence of reliable secondary data, the study had to concentrate on the collection of primary data. With the given constraints of time and financial resources, this could only mean making a qualitative analysis of the production and reproduction relations prevalent in this industry and their effects on women. It would be desirable, however, to carry out a systematic quantitative survey of the lace workers. It would help to shed light on the enormous amount of women’s work in the informal sector which feeds the process of capital accumulation.

1 Government of India, *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India*, Department of Social Welfare, New Delhi, 1974.

2 Mitra, Asok: ‘The Status of Women’, in *Frontier*, 18 June 1977.

3 Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), *Critical Issues on the Status of Women in India*, New Delhi, 1977, p. 5.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 25. For a more detailed discussion of these trends, see: Mies, M., ‘Capitalist Development and Subsistence Reproduction: Rural Women in India’, in *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1980.

6 Frank, A.G., ‘On Ongoing Primitive Accumulation’, in *Capital Accumulation*, New York, 1979.

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