# CAPITAL ACCUMULATION *and* WOMEN'S LABOUR *in* ASIAN ECONOMIES

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# The German Feminist School and the Thesis of Housewifization

Political economy as the science of the conditions and forms under which different human societies produce and exchange, and under which products are accordingly distributed each time—political economy in this expanded sense is yet to be created. The scientific knowledge we possess of economy so far is almost totally restricted to the evolution and development of the capitalist mode of production.[1]

This quotation from Frederick Engels forms the 'opening shot' in a now celebrated article by the German feminist, Claudia von Werlhof, in which she proposes a novel conceptualization of women's labour, which she appropriately calls 'the blind spot in the critique of political economy'.

In her attempt at theorizing women's labour, and indeed at re-analyzing the whole capitalist system, von Werlhof joined two other German feminists, Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, who like her have spent considerable time investigating the labouring conditions of rural women in Third World countries. Whereas von Werlhof and Bennholdt-Thomsen have done their main research in Latin American countries, Mies has spent a considerable period of time as a field researcher in Andhra Pradesh, India. All three women share the same critical attitude towards 'bourgeois' and Marxist economics, as was manifested by leading participants of the household labour debate described earlier. Von Werlhof, Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, however, have used their concrete, Third World experiences to formulate theses on women's labour which, they believe, are

more universal in scope than the thesis brought forward by the household labour debate.

Moreover, unlike the development feminists (to be discussed later), who silently adopt categories of, but never directly confront, Marxist economic analysis, these three German feminists have devised their theory as an open critique of Marxism. Thus, in the introduction to a joint book which summarizes the three authors' views, both women and colonies are identified as 'neglected spheres': 'The inclusion of these neglected spheres transforms previous social theories root and branch by placing new contradictions and relations centre-stage.'[2] Criticizing Marxism for seeing propertyless waged workers as the sole source of surplus value, of economic growth, the authors suggest instead viewing the relation between wage labour and capital as 'one part of a much more comprehensive contradiction between *human labour in general* (including non-wage labour) *and capital*, with an additional contradiction between waged and non-waged labour'.[3] In this book, von Werlhof, Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen have presented themselves as members of the same school of thought, as theoreticians sharing common themes and common theses.

I will review two theses of the German feminists here. First, I will discuss their thesis on '*housewifization*', a term which has been variously interpreted, but basically refers to the social definition of women as non-producing housewives. Next, I will review their thesis on the identification of women's labour with 'subsistence labour' (i.e., with women's responsibility for the upkeep of their families). Whatever one's ultimate judgement on the theoretical position these German authors take, their work, in my view, constitutes a crucial stage in feminist theorizing. It is one of the most serious attempts so far to overcome the patriarchal bias in Marxist economic theory.

## Domestication of Women: Common Theme in Feminist Literature

First, a general note on the theme of housewifization, or the domestication of working-class women. This theme has been popularized and elaborated by Maria Mies and others of the German feminist school. In her book *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, Maria Mies links the creation of the housewife ideology with the development of European capitalism.[4] Quoting extensively from historical sources, she illustrates how the ideal of the domesticated, privatized woman, 'concerned with "love" and consumption and dependent on a male breadwinner',[5] first spread among the bourgeoisie, then among small property owners (i.e., the petty-bourgeoisie), and finally among the working class. Even the concept of the nuclear family originally had 'clear class connotations', and was imposed on the class of industrial labourers—the modern proletariat.



Before discussing Mies' specific interpretation of the theme of domestication and its application to the lace sector in Andhra Pradesh, I would like to point out that this has been a common theme in feminist literature since the 1970s. Thus, several feminist authors have analyzed the 'domestic science movement', which gathered strength in the United States in the 19th century and reached its zenith in the first part of the 20th century. Led by prominent, well-to-do women and backed by vested male interests, the movement, according to Barbara Rogers, 'sought to provide a "scientific" rationale for confining women to unpaid, domestic work'.[6] The idea put forward was that women should see their task of domestic work as a vocation, and should turn their responsibility into a professional activity. In one of the essays quoted by the American historian Matthaei, it was argued that 'housekeeping is a many-sided business calling for theory and practice in scientific management'.[7]

Not coincidentally, Matthaei notes, the language employed resembled that of Frederick Taylor, the father of scientific management in industry.[8] In some articles published in conjunction with the campaign on scientific homemaking, it was suggested that housewives should emulate the rationalization being achieved in factory work. Time and motion studies should be made so as to 'revolutionize' housework! Meanwhile, the scientific basis of 'domestic science', as Ehrenreich and English have pointed out, was weak. According to them, the frenzy of cleaning and dusting, for instance, rested on an extremely dubious 'germ theory'—the failure to keep everything free of dust and germs was suggested as being 'akin to murder'.[9] Another tenet of the domestic science movement was the idea of 'maternal deprivation'—if mothers were not constantly available to take care of their children, the effect would be to increase juvenile delinquency. This theory, as feminists have pointed out, helped men to evade their paternal responsibility. Here again, facts were twisted to suit the ideology of the domesticated wife, free from wage work outside the home.

Furthermore, as Matthaei states, 'the scientific homemaking movement was logically followed by the glorification of consumption as the distinct vocation of women'.[10] In the pre-capitalist economy, women were involved in a variety of productive activities in and around the home, like weaving clothes, making cheese and churning butter. Articles on 'scientific homemaking' urged the replacement of homemade with store-bought goods, arguing, amongst others, that machine-made goods were superior in quality. When factory-based commodity production began gradually replacing women's subsistence labour, the 'scientific homemaking' movement provided ideological support to this economic development by suggesting a new vocation for women: 'on account of the change in economic conditions of production, ... women have gained a whole new field of economic activity, that of consumption'.[11] Thus, feminist research has amply illustrated that the ideology of the housewife, whose tasks are limited to house-keeping and consumption, has been consciously advanced by upper- and middle-class women, along with the industrialization of Western societies, through the 19th and 20th centuries.

## The Lacemakers of Narsapur: History and Evolution of the Production Sector

To clarify the strength of the thesis on 'housewifization' put forward by the German feminist school, as well as certain risks of over- and misinterpretation it harbours, I have chosen to structure my discussion around Maria Mies' book on the labour of women lacemakers in Andhra Pradesh. This work is based on field research carried out in the late 1970s in and around a small town, Narsapur, located near the coast. Here, impoverished women produce lace goods for the world market, relying merely on their hands and needles. Some were widows with children, others were married women with unemployed or wage-earning husbands. Mies and her colleagues arranged for group discussions, took numerous interviews, and gathered data through a household survey. The survey brought out that in a significant percentage of the families, women were the principal income-earners.[12] A large majority of the laceworkers belonged to a rural caste called Kapu, whose status had recently risen with the transformation of the agrarian economy. Mies' book systematically analyzes both the nature



of the production process in the sector and the dynamics of the sexual division of labour.

In order to understand the theoretical arguments Mies draws from her findings, it is necessary to first briefly summarize the historical emergence and evolution of the sector. The origins of the lace industry, Mies states, are 'closely connected with the history of the missions in the Godavari Delta'.[13] In the 19th century, missionaries connected with a Baptist Congregation mission, looking for potential converts, taught lace-making patterns to converted members of two Untouchable castes, the Malas and the Madigas, in order to help them survive in the face of famine. The missionaries provided the thread, and collected the finished goods which they sent as gift parcels to friends and dignitaries in Scotland, England and Ireland. Thus, in its first phase, the production of lace in Narsapur was not organized along commercial lines, but was a non-profit activity aimed at soliciting donations for missionary work.

This changed around the turn of the century. Two former teachers at the mission school, Jonah and Josef, stepped in to organize and expand lace production for export. According to Mies, they introduced the classical putting-out system into lace-making, which was already known to Indian businessmen in the 16th and 17th centuries.[14] Orders and designs were obtained from foreign sources, initially for collars, cuffs and attached lace. They distributed the work through a selected group of female agents who would visit the women artisans to give them threads and designs, and would subsequently come to collect the crocheted pieces. Some of them were also employed to stretch and sort out lace in the houses of the exporters. In any case, women were not only involved as producers, but held other positions in the production hierarchy as well. The method of payment employed by Jonah and Josef was the piece-rate system, previously discussed.

Along with the commercialization and expansion of production, the composition of the workforce also changed. Thus, Jonah and Josef brought in Agnikulakshatriya women who belonged to the fishermen's caste. Mies notes how these newly-recruited lacemakers, and the converted Untouchable women, were turned into housewives. Both apparently gave up work outside the home when they started lacemaking—the Agnikulakshatriya women had sold fish, and the Mala and Madigas had worked in the field. One of the factors which, she hypothesizes, was responsible for this transformation was the

ideology spread by the missionaries. The image of womenhood taught in the girls' schools opened by the missionaries 'was basically that of the housewife and mother'.[15] But confinement in the home, Mies states, is also a traditional status symbol in India. Thus, Christian converts may also have wanted to emulate the example of well-to-do castes in Hindu society.

Finally, in the course of time a third category of women were drawn into the lace industry—those from the more 'respectable' castes, living not in the town of Narsapur itself but in the surrounding villages. This, as will be further explained later, has increasingly occurred since the 1960s, and is closely connected with class changes that have taken place in villages in this part of Andhra Pradesh. Women were recruited in large numbers, in particular, from a caste of agricultural producers called Kapus. The example of the Kapu women illustrates the existence of secluded work spheres among more well-to-do castes. Kapu women interviewed as a part of Mies' research stated that they had always been *goshami* (they had always led secluded lives and been exempted from fieldwork).[16] Thus we note, at the outset, that the concept of the domesticated wife is not a purely Western concept, but has a long tradition among affluent sections of the rural population in South Asia itself.

The evolution of the lace-making industry in this century is rather uneven, at least till the 1960s. During the period between the two World Wars, and again immediately after the Second World War, the export of lace expanded considerably. The list of countries which became customers of the Narsapur merchants grew steadily, and by 1953 the market value of lace goods produced reached a record Rs. 6 million.[17] Yet, after this peak, the industry faced a setback which, according to Mies, was mainly due to the imposition of quotas by importing countries, and to the rise of machine-made lace in foreign markets. Shortly after the Second World War the lace merchants formed two associations to press for the removal of export restrictions and for the supply of a sufficient quota of thread, but these failed to curb the cut-throat competition in the sector and the situation remained anarchic. The lace merchants also failed to arouse the government's interest in the sector, at least until 1960.

An important moment in the history of the sector was the founding, in this year, of a Handicraft Advisory Board in Andhra Pradesh. A subcommittee of the Board made an on-the-spot investigation into lace-making in Narsapur. Its report mentioned that 100,000 women



were engaged in the industry, earning less than Rs. 15 per month on an average, and that about Rs. 1 million worth of lace was being exported every year from the town. In spite of the difficulties faced in the 1950s, the lace industry had emerged as, by far, the biggest handicrafts industry in the state in terms of production, export, workers and commercial establishments. The subcommittee's report suggested various measures to the government for promotion of the industry, such as credit aid and sales promotion. But whatever practical steps the government took primarily 'had the effect of changing the class and caste composition of the exporters'. The appointment of a Quality Marking Officer, for instance, according to Mies, was purposely intended to 'introduce a new group of exporters into the lucrative lace business and break the monopolistic tendencies of the older firms'.[18]

The new group of lace exporters who entered the lace business during the 1960s were mainly wealthy farmers—kulaks—who had benefited from the introduction of Green Revolution technology in agriculture. They looked outside agriculture for investment, and found the lace industry a suitable arena for earning quick and easy money. These kulaks were further attracted by the export incentives provided by the government, and by the bank loans available to those interested in investments in lace.[19] Of the various caste communities represented among the class of capitalist farmers, the Kapus were numerically the strongest. They were also the most successful in expanding into the lace industry. The entrance of the Kapus changed not only the caste composition of the merchants (formerly they were Christians, Brahmins and Vaishyas), but also that of the workforce. As noted earlier, the majority of lace producers today consists of Kapu women. They were obviously recruited by new merchants belonging to their own caste.

A third round of dynamic growth was achieved in the 1970s. Due to the extremely low production costs, lace goods and other Indian handicrafts became mass consumer goods available in big supermarkets in Europe, Australia and the US. Arab countries with their petrodollars also became important customers of the Narsapur merchants. In 1976, two years before Maria Mies made her field investigation, the total lace production of the Narsapur area was estimated to be Rs. 8–9 million, and there was potential for further growth.[20] Whereas a small percentage of lace was marketed in Indian cities, the bulk was either directly or indirectly exported. In 1978, lace exports constituted

no less than 90 per cent of the foreign exchange earned through the export of handicrafts from Andhra Pradesh. Yet, as Mies noted, 'if one looks at those who are actually gaining from this boom, one realizes that they are all men'.[21]

## Narsapur's Lace Industry and the Garment Industry in West Bengal: A Comparison

Before describing Mies' analysis of the work of lacemakers, it will be useful to review the production structure in the sector in comparative terms, by comparing, and where necessary contrasting, this with the structure in West Bengal's garments sector. This will serve, to a certain extent, to underline the broader relevance of Mies' analysis. To start with, the process of capital accumulation taking place in the two sectors—the lace sector in Andhra Pradesh and the garments sector in West Bengal—cannot be equated. The former is intimately tied to the world market. Thus, part of the accumulation of profits does not take place in Andhra Pradesh but in the importing countries where the lace goods are sold. In contrast, capital accumulation through the production of clothes in and around Calcutta is concentrated in West Bengal and in other states in the eastern part of India, as this production is almost entirely domestically oriented. Yet, leaving aside, for the moment, this important distinction, several points of similarity can be marked.

First, in both cases, production is organized on the lines of the putting-out system. This means that both the production tasks relating to lace-making and those relating to the production of *punjabis*, trousers, frocks and other dresses are delegated via a complex web of subcontracting. The main mechanism that regulates production is basically the same in both cases—*ostagars* in one, and agents in the other, distribute key raw materials (such as threads and/or cotton cloth) to the actual producers. After they complete their tasks, the finished products are collected by the *ostagars* or agents who pay the workers by the piece. Mies quotes R.K. Mukherjee to show that this system already existed in India in the 16th and 17th centuries, when 'rising entrepreneurs were at the earliest stage of development'. In eastern India *dadni* merchants were paid advances by European companies, so that they, in turn, could advance money to the weavers 'in



conformity with the "putting-out" system which had come into vogue'.[22] Thus, it appears that the present practice of delegation of production can be traced to this historical experience.

Another feature is that the production structure, in both cases, is dominated by a numerically small number of merchants. As I have noted earlier, the most powerful actors in the garments sector of West Bengal are big merchants of Calcutta's Barrabazar, who distribute the principal raw material, cloth, to numerous *ostagars* whose command over capital resources varies greatly. In the lace industry under review, the only raw material required for the production of lace is cotton thread, the distribution of which is virtually monopolized. According to Mies, in 1978 all the thread used in lace-making around Narsapur came from two firms—Alexander and Finlays and J and P Coats, based in Kerala. They supplied their threads to just three stockists, who had themselves become big exporters of lace goods.[23] But whereas the orientation towards the domestic market provides *ostagars* significant outlets for the independent sale of their readymade dresses, the export orientation of lace-making operates like a funnel. Reportedly, there were, in the late 1970s, merely 30 to 40 active exporters, 'of whom 15 to 20 are big exporters who do their business through commercial banks'.[24]

What complicates the analysis of production relations in both cases is the fact that the position of *ostagars* and agents often overlaps with that of skilled workers. In Moheshtola–Santoshpur in West Bengal, many tailors who are skilled in stitching *punjabis*, trousers and other dresses, themselves act as small *ostagars*. They not only spend time behind a sewing machine, but also subdivide production tasks and collect finished goods. Thus, they perform a double role, of both labourers and agents in the putting-out system of production. A similar phenomenon is observed by Mies for the lace industry of Narsapur. Here, considerable skills are required for *athukupani* (joining of 'flowers' or patterns together). According to Mies, many *athukupani* workers, in the course of time, have emerged as small agents themselves.

> These were women who were both craftswomen and knew something of the business. They learned about the prices in the local markets, they had to deal directly with the exporters, and some of them, or their husbands, later tried to start a business of their own.[25]

However, whereas this double role in Moheshtola–Santoshpur is exclusively performed by male workers, in Narsapur there are also women who hold the status of producer-cum-intermediary.

The fact that some women have emerged as intermediaries is partly a consequence of the differential nature of the division of labour in the lace industry. We have seen that in Moheshtola–Santoshpur, the manufacturing of *punjabis*, for instance, is divided into nine distinct production tasks, three of which are women's tasks (ornament sewing, hemming/button-fixing and handwashing). In the case of lace-making, the number of subtasks is less. Mies mentions three different types of lace work—*chetipani* or handwork, which is the elementary task of making a pattern or 'flower'; *athukupani* or attachment work, which means the joining together of the various patterns; and *kazakattu* which consists of fixing lace borders to pieces of cloth or joining several cloth pieces into a whole piece, like a tablecloth or a pillow case.[26] These tasks are all female tasks (i.e., women's production role is paramount). Male labourers are only employed in the very last stage of lace production, when lace is stretched and made flat, a task which is performed by older women or men in the houses of the exporters. In the horizontal division of labour in lace-making, which according to Mies has been organized to 'wrest control from the actual producers over their products',[27] there is hardly any place for labourers who are males.

A specific method of keeping control, which invites comparison with that used in the production of dresses in the Dumdum–Paikpara area of Calcutta, is the system of paying advances. As Mies notes, 'middlemen and exporters give money advances towards their wages to the artisans who then have to work for them to pay back the advanced wages'.[28] The advances may be 30 to 50 per cent of the wages, and the rest is paid when the lace is collected. In investigating the payment practices of the owners employing women as stitchers of frocks and blouses in Dumdum–Paikpara, we discovered a reverse kind of practice—payment of the wage is done only partly, when the women stitchers deliver the completed orders. Many owners keep the remaining part of the wage (up to 50 per cent) suspended, and pay an accumulated sum after about half a year. This method both serves to keep control over the dispersed workforce, and allows the owners to appropriate the interest on these 'savings'. The difference in the two methods referred to can probably be explained by the differential degree of poverty faced by the Andhra laceworkers and the Bengali



stitchers. The system of giving advances on wages, Mies observes, is partially an outcome of the extreme poverty among the lacemakers. 'Their consumption fund is too meagre to last them through till they have finished the work.'[29] Moreover, piece-rates in the lace industry being exceptionally low, the exporters can afford to pay the workers an advance as a kind of loan.

## Pauperization of Lace Workers versus the Enrichment of Exporters

I will review Mies' theoretical analysis, which takes us beyond the initial analysis of informal sector labour presented earlier. First, however, we should note the process of pauperization which has deeply affected the laceworkers. Mies has recorded some of the personal interviews taken in the course of her field investigation in her book. Those with rural women were carried out in a village called Serepalem where, Mies states, land alienation has occurred on a very large scale. Many poor Kapu women have started making lace for exporters because of their growing pauperization. Increasing poverty has forced them to take recourse to wage labour for an invisible employer (an exporter based in town), but their involvement in production for the world market does not appear to have enabled them improve their standard of living. Both women who are dependent on waged labour only, and those who are simultaneously active as workers and small agents, suffer. Some summaries of case histories Mies presents follow.

> Mahalaxmi is an 80-year-old widow, belonging to the Kapu community. She has been doing *athukupani* work since her marriage at the age of 13. In her childhood, she remembers, the family could eat well. Her father owned six acres of land, so enough rice was produced for subsistence. They also could eat eggs, *ghee* and chicken regularly, and could earn extra from the sale of processed milk in the market. When her husband, who owned 10 acres of land, was alive, things went relatively smoothly. The money she received for lace-making sufficed to buy all the daily necessities, except the staples. Today, Mahalaxmi has to maintain herself largely through lace work, but she is unable to make ends meet. Free resources, like fish, are no longer available, for 'all the fish have died because of the fertilizers they use', and Mahalaxmi can no longer afford to eat chicken or *ghee*. While the level of the wages

for lace work has remained constant for many decades, the price of essential goods, like clothes, has shot up. 'Now if I have to buy a *sari* it will be Rs. 30 to Rs. 70. That time I could buy it for Rs. 1.50 .... Today we are at a loss and they [the exporters] are making money.'[30]

Lakshmi and Venkamma are lacemakers-cum-small agents. Both were married to *coolies* (agricultural labourers without land). They learned the trade of lace-making in their childhood, and started crocheting at the age of 12 and 6–7 years respectively. Although they are Kapu women subject to the rules of seclusion, they became small agents in the course of time, moving around to distribute and collect work. In describing their role, both refer to the payment of advance wages by the exporters who supply them with orders. Says Lakshmi, 'The exporter first gives only thread. After half the lace is produced, he gives 50 per cent of the wages. The rest of the money he only gives after he has received all the lace.'[31] The income they earn as agents varies. Venkamma mentions that when visiting four villages to give thread and collect lace for Jonah and Josef, she could do 30 gross per month, earning Rs. 90, which appears to be the maximum. Today Venkamma is a widow whose two sons are active as *coolies* and bonded labourers. Their combined income is not enough to prevent a constant deterioration in the family's standard of living. Their access to fish is limited, and rice breakfasts have had to be given up. 'Five to six years ago we used to eat left-over rice in the morning, but now we have only coffee.'[32]

Nagamma, who is 40 years old, is married to an agricultural labourer who has been leasing some land, but is mainly working for others. The couple has to depend on the income from her husband's wages and what they get for her lace work. Her husband gets work for only three or four months a year. In the peak season he earns Rs. 5–6 per day. Nagamma says she started making lace when she was 10 years old. Her task is mainly *chetipani*. She and her two daughters together make six bundles per month, which earns them Rs. 16 only. Mies has calculated the family's average monthly income to be Rs. 75.33, which is well below their requirement to buy staples. 'Every year we have to borrow for consumption. We repay when my husband gets *coolie* work in the peak season.'[33] Nagamma has pawned and lost most of her movable property. 'First I pawned my golden earrings and my silver anklets. Then my brass vessels went and the silver tumbler ... Now nothing of the jewellery I got at my wedding is left.' Although Nagamma feels she is mainly a housewife and that her income is only supplementary to her husband's, both their incomes are necessary. 'When there is money, the control over it is in my husband's hands. When there is no money, the responsibility is mine. We have more than Rs. 1,000 debts.'[34]



The reverse side of this process of the pauperization of laceworkers is a rapid process of enrichment by a very small group of exporters. One example of a very successful venture is that of Shivaji and Sons, an exporting firm founded in 1948. Whereas the company's initial investment was no more than Rs. 800, which was borrowed from a private money-lender, today the firm is one of the big exporters in Narsapur. Its export volume, in the late 1970s, was reportedly about Rs. 3 million.[35] But the process of enrichment is best epitomized by the story of P. Venkanna, a thread stockist and exporter from the Palakol market, whose son was interviewed by Mies. According to the son, his father was originally a small agriculturalist owning five to six acres of land. Within a few years of becoming a lace agent, he managed to collect export orders through correspondence with importers in West Germany. Subsequently, he also got the distributorship for a thread factory. Due to this monopoly position, Venkanna and Son have now become one of the biggest, 'if not the biggest', lace exporters in the Narsapur area, challenging even the position of the oldest exporting firm. Venkanna's son mentions the company's increased capital strength since he himself entered the business, in 1971. 'My father's turnover was Rs. 3 to 4 lakh in thread business and now it is Rs. 40 lakh. His turnover in the lace business was Rs. 4 lakh at that time, and now it is Rs. 40 to 50 lakh.'[36] Moreover, because of the lace business, they have also risen to the class of rich kulaks for, according to Venkanna's son, they have been able to buy 40 to 50 acres of land. This contrasts sharply with the position of the majority of the members of the 'backward' caste to which they belong—former toddy-tappers who have turned agricultural labourers.

The conclusion to be drawn from these and other examples, according to Mies, is that a clear class polarization has taken place, which is also a polarization along gender lines. All the women involved in production relations in the lace industry, including those

who were agents, complained about a deterioration in their socio-economic position, and none of them had been able to accumulate any capital. They were 'downgraded rather than upgraded in their position'. On the other hand, the men involved in the lace industry, even if they had started very poorly, had been engaged in a 'rapid and spectacular process of capital accumulation', which enabled some of them to rise in class. While they had all come from landless, poor or middle peasant families, they not only became wealthy merchants, but 'all of them also became substantial landowners and capitalist farmers.'[37] While in the past, in the period preceding the introduction of the Green Revolution, women had controlled part of the marketing in lace, now they only occupied places at the bottom end of production relations in the sector. Polarization had pitted female producers against male non-producers. If looked at in isolation from its economic surroundings, class and gender positions in the lace industry virtually coincided: 'All women were *de facto* workers and all men were *de facto* or potential capitalists.'[38]

## The Working Day: Women have no Leisure Time

A separate section in Mies' study is devoted to the working day of women producers. The distinguishing feature of their working day (which is shared with the women garment workers in West Bengal) is that it broadly consists of two kinds of toil—household labour and waged labour. The lacemakers, as Mies notes, are engaged in the production of both use value and exchange value (i.e., values which are directly consumed by the family and values which are intended for sale in the market). To understand the exploitation of these women, it is necessary to look at their whole working day, and not just at the time they spend in waged work, as Marx's economic theory proposed to do. The assessment made by Mies thus forms an illustration of what has been stated earlier: Marx's theory of labour value was too limited. A theory of women's labour needs to take account of women's whole labouring time, including all the time spent on household chores and other productive activities which do not take the wage form.

The first part of the working day of the lacemakers is devoted to a whole series of household activities, such as child care, cleaning, fetching water and preparing food. As Mies notes, 'for most of these



work processes, the preparation and the transport of the raw material is also part of the activity.'[39] Since it is common for Hindu women to sprinkle their courtyard with *kallapi* (a mixture of water and cowdung), these components have to be collected and mixed. The courtyard is further decorated with *rangoli* (a white chalk powder), which is prepared by burning limestone and grinding it. In some of the work processes, the distinction between use value production and petty commodity production is blurred. This is true, for instance, of the production of cowdung cakes, which is a very elaborate process. The women make cowdung cakes as fuel for cooking, but they make an extra amount for sale. The domestic chores performed by women in Indian villages thus differs from the domestic chores performed by Western housewives. There is no clear demarcation between the spheres of production and reproduction in the Indian context.[40]

All the productive activities mentioned so far are concentrated in the morning. By about 10 a.m., the women start their second major task, which is the crocheting of lace. In many cases, household tasks and lace-making are carried out simultaneously. Tasks are generally divided between all the female members of a family, including young girls. If there are more women in the household, some would concentrate, for instance, on cooking in the morning, while others would be engaged in making lace. Taking account of variations for the number of women and girls in a household and the family's economic status, the average daily labour time devoted to lace-making is reportedly six to eight hours. This means that the total labour time of each lacemaker is exceedingly high: 'Grown-up women as well as their small female children work between 13 and 16 hours a day; 50 to 75 per cent of this time is spent on lace-making.'[41] And yet official sources, Mies charges, continue to define lace-making as a leisure-time activity or 'part-time' work. In practice, the producers of lace 'practically have no leisure time at all'. Their working day lasts from dawn until they go to sleep at night.

Finally, this evidence can be supplemented and corroborated with facts on the working day of women producers elsewhere. The findings reported for frock stitchers in Calcutta closely resemble those cited by Mies—the average, 'normal' working day of the stitchers turned out to be almost 15 hours, of which eight hours are spent on household chores. Whether they produce lace in Andhra Pradesh or clothes in West Bengal, the working day of homeworkers subjected to subcontract relations and the piece-rate system is equally divided between

household tasks and waged work, and it is invariably long. Neither does the length of the piece-rate workers' labouring day differ widely from that of women garment workers in Bangladeshi factories who are subjected to a time-wage system. The difference is only that a much larger proportion of the latters' labouring day is covered by their waged work. In all three cases discussed, the owners of capital refuse to bear the full costs of reproduction of women workers' labouring strength.

## Production for the World Market Embedded in a Rural Economy

I will now focus on some ways in which Mies' analysis of lace-making is distinct from, and moves beyond, the analysis of homeworking in garments production in West Bengal which I have made. One of these is the fact that Mies consciously highlights the lace industry's connection with agrarian relations. Her field investigation, as mentioned earlier, was carried out in both an urban setting (Narsapur town) where lace-making was originally concentrated, and in a village area some 9 km away from the town. Whereas the Christian and Agnikulakshatriya producers were town-based and had long since lost their relationship to the land, the Kapu women involved in crocheting in the village, being wives and daughters of poor peasants and agricultural labourers, formed a part of the structure of agrarian relations. In the West Bengal garments sector, we similarly analyzed production relations in an urban and rural setting. Yet we did not study the sector's interconnection with the village economy, even though the craft of tailoring first flourished in the countryside in Moheshtola–Santoshpur.

For Mies, it is very crucial to make an integrated analysis. As she points out, the more 'visible' agrarian relations, covering day labourers, small peasants, rich peasants and urban employers, have found considerable scholarly attention. But they are generally studied in isolation from other production relations, in particular reproduction relations, or the relations between women and men.

> Thus, the structural separation between these two spheres is reproduced and reinforced by research. Yet it should be clear by now that it is precisely this separation which leads to a mystified view of the totality of social relations. As far as women's labour is concerned, it will always remain 'hidden', unless we abolish this separation.[42]



Thus, Mies devotes ample attention not only to relations between women's household tasks and their lace-making, but also to the way the totality of women's work is 'embedded' in the agrarian economy.

As has already been stated, this has resulted in the understanding that the expansion and transformation of the lace sector since the 1960s was intertwined with the spread of commercial farming under the impact of the Green Revolution. Many rich farmers chose to reinvest their profits not in agriculture but in the lace industry, where quick money could be made. This draining of the rural areas and the transformation of agrarian capital into merchant capital, Mies states, 'has led to a polarization in the villages', for 'the pauperization of peasants provides the lace exporters in Narsapur with an almost unlimited reservoir of very cheap female labour'.[43] Women belonging to poor village households simply had to take to lace-making to supplement the insufficient income of their husbands. Their pauperization, as a consequence of the new farming methods, serves as the pre-condition for the further enrichment of the rich kulaks who have invested in the export-oriented lace industry.

This exploitation of women laceworkers by a class of rich peasants is explained well in one of the sections dealing with reproduction relations. Here, Mies notes that

> the women work as workers not only for the lace merchants and exporters, but also indirectly for the rich peasants, because their income from lace is all spent on the reproduction of the family, including the reproduction of the men who may be jobless wage labourers, poor peasants or artisans.[44]

Thus, the productive activity of the male cultivators is made possible by the women performing household tasks and other subsistence activities in the home. Yet the landowners employing the men do not bear the costs for the reproduction of their labour power. In short, the labour of the laceworkers is not just a hidden source of accumulation in the world market-oriented lace sector, but also is a hidden source of accumulation in the agrarian sector of the rural economy.

This web of interconnections between the household industry and the agrarian economy was not analyzed in the foregoing discussion on the production of garments in West Bengal. To an extent this can be explained by the differential evolution of rural relations. In the rural area of Moheshtola–Santoshpur, agrarian production lost its predominant position long ago. Whole villages here are engaged in the manufacturing of single items, like trousers and *punjabis*. Yet, if we carefully scrutinize the position of the homeworkers in the villages surrounding the nerve centres of garments production (such as women doing *sabudana* and women buttonholers/fixers or *chukai* women, we can only admit that their toil, too, serves a function in relation to the agrarian economy. They, too, are wives and daughters of peasants and agrarian labourers responsible for the upkeep of their families. In short, Mies' framework of thinking has a broad relevance for the analysis of rural-based industries. To understand the mode of exploitation prevailing here, and remove the mystified view about such industries created by their male beneficiaries, the totality of the agrarian and non-agrarian production relations has, indeed, to be analyzed.

## Dynamics of the Sexual Division of Labour—Interconnections with Changes in Class Relations

Mies' analysis regarding the sexual division of labour, and the changes it has undergone over time, is again embedded in her analysis of agricultural transformation. I have argued earlier, in the discussion on West Bengal, that the sexual division of labour in society is not fixed but varies. By comparing the situation in two distinct geographical areas, it was possible to show that there are different ways to ensure male dominance. What was fixed, and what was constant, was the fact that all women garment workers are home-based producers, and they are almost exclusively responsible for all household chores. Here, Mies' findings concur. The sexual division of labour, she says, is structured in such a way that 'men not only control certain means of production, but also the means of reproduction, namely their women.' Women carry the burden of all domestic tasks, including service tasks like preparing the bath water for their men, and washing their husbands' backs when they come home.[45]



Mies' historical approach enables her to bring out how the sexual division of labour has evolved over time, and how changes in women's social and economic status are closely linked to changes in class relations. Take, for instance, the changing position of the Kapu women who, as stated before, form the bulk of today's workforce in the lace industry. Their entrance into the sector first helped them to partially break their seclusion. Whereas previously they were *gosha* women who were not supposed to work outdoors, their status as wage workers made it necessary for them to contact the external world, the world of export business. This was particularly true of those women who were given tasks as agents and subagents, moving around to distribute thread and collect lace goods. These Kapu women were no longer homebound: they broke with traditional social norms to reach some degree of independence.

How were these changes related to changes in the class structure in the area? The massive entrance of Kapu women into lace-making was related to the 'overall process of pauperization' which affected many peasant families not sharing the benefits of the Green Revolution. 'The rise of the middle and rich peasants under the impact of the Green Revolution led to a polarization among the Kapu peasantry. Some became rich in this process and some lost their land and had either to migrate or become agricultural labourers.'[46] As Mies states, for peasant families with small holdings, the involvement in lace-making and trading was linked to their losing their status of independent cultivators and their getting de-classed. In order to understand the evolution of the sexual division of labour, therefore, an analysis of changing class relations is eminently relevant.

More recently, the changing composition of the group of merchants and agents in the lace business has, once again, had an influence on the position of women. It has deprived them of the little independence they had previously gained. I have already referred to the newest phase in which kulak peasants have become powerful participants in the accumulation process in the lace sector. The gender relations in the production process have concomitantly undergone a change, for the new generation of traders has replaced most of the former female agents with men. The excuse, according to Mies, has been the introduction of cycles to facilitate the work of the lace agents. This use of modern technology has served 'as an excuse to push women agents out of the trading sphere altogether'.[47] Once again, the transformation in class relations has affected the relations between women and men.

The dynamic process of transformation of production relations in the lace industry has ultimately resulted in a division of tasks between women and men which is much more polarized than what was observed for the garments sector in West Bengal. Here, all positions of economic power (of the *ostagars* and the merchants) are monopolized by males, but the actual production tasks (such as tailoring, finishing and ironing) continue to be the domain of both women and men. They are divided domains but, in Moheshtola–Santoshpur in particular, women do not stand alone as producers in opposition to male non-producers. In the case of the Narsapur lace industry, the situation is now almost fully polarized. As Mies argues, 'class polarization has also led to a polarization between men and women', for all lace producers are female and all lace traders are male.[48] In short, the dynamics of the sexual division of labour cannot be studied in isolation, but should be studied conjointly with the transformation in class relations in a given area.

## The Housewifization of Lacemakers and its Effect on Women Workers' Consciousness

In her discussion regarding the lace industry of Narsapur, Mies repeatedly refers to the concept of 'housewifization'. She prefers this term to the term 'domestication', since it forms a clearer counterpart to 'proletarization' and the social definition of men as breadwinners.[49] When reading her text, it becomes evident that she is aware of the fact that the women are not in reality turned into non-earning housewives, as the bourgeois ideal of domesticated women prescribes. I would like to stress this from the start, since her approach significantly differs from that of Claudia von Werlhof, whose views will be referred to later. Mies, thus, notes the contradiction that exists between the appearance of lacemakers' position in society, and a reality which does not confirm with that appearance. She calls the lacemakers 'semi-domesticated'. 'This means', she states, that 'in their social appearance they are housewives. But in reality they are wage labourers, fully integrated into a world market-oriented production system.'[50]

This does not mean that the social definition of laceworkers as housewives has no economic consequences. It has, for it facilitates



the ruthless exploitation of their labour by the lace merchants and the exporters of their produce. In a chapter on 'Profits and Exploitation', Mies points to the extreme underpayment of the laceworkers. *Chetapani* workers, on an average, got no more than Rs. 0.56 per day. With regard to the overall picture, Mies calculates the capital advanced by the exporter per day per worker to be Rs. 0.60. Even taking account of the difference in time (her investigation was carried out some 14 years before my own in West Bengal), the wage level in the lace industry is far below that of the worst-paid women workers in West Bengal's garments sector.[51] And although a precise calculation of the rate of exploitation is hardly possible, the approximate rate, according to Mies, is almost 300 per cent. 'This means that the exporters gain from one woman's daily production almost three times the amount they pay her as a wage.'[52]

To clarify how this works out for the women lacemakers themselves, Mies makes two further points. First, she looks at the daily consumption requirements of an individual *chetapani* worker (i.e., her minimum requirements for subsistence). These she calculates to be Rs. 1.60 per day. At the existing wage rate, a laceworker cannot even earn this meagre sum if she devotes her whole day of 14 hours work to lace-making alone. This illustrates the degree of underpayment of laceworkers. Mies refers to Marx's distinction between necessary and surplus labour (which I have also followed) where, as she also points out, necessary labour time only referred to the time required to earn money to buy daily necessities. The work that goes into the transformation of these commodities into use values for human consumption was ignored. Yet, if Marx's limited definition of necessary labour is followed, Mies states, it is clear that even this was not being paid for by the lace exporters. In short, the laceworkers were being 'robbed of their daily consumption fund'.[53]

Second, and to further underline the extreme underpayment of the laceworkers, Mies draws a comparison between their labour time and wages, and those of male agricultural labourers. Most of the latter have work for only six months a year, but their earnings are many times higher than those of laceworkers who toil all the year round. Whereas men's labour time (for six months) amounts to 1,440 hours, women's labour time (for 12 months, lacework and housework taken together) comes to 5,040 hours. A male agricultural labourer, earning on an average Rs. 5 per day, gets Rs. 600 in half a year, while a

lace-making woman gets only Rs. 90 in the same period. There is a huge difference in earnings, and this in spite of the fact that capital accumulation in the lace industry is taking place very rapidly. Mies explains the difference between male and female wages by the fact that 'patriarchal institutions and ideology have become a material force', a form of structural violence 'by which women are robbed of their just remuneration as workers'. Women are treated as 'a natural resource' from which labour power may be extracted at will.[54]

Thus, Mies is keenly aware of the economic function which the construction of the housewife ideal has for the owners of capital, and for the husbands of the laceworkers themselves. As long as lacemakers are seen as 'housewives' and 'non-earning wives', they can be subjected to almost unlimited exploitation by the lace exporters, as if their labour power was a freely-available natural resource. Moreover, the exporters' view is shared by the husbands of the laceworkers who also have an interest in seeing them as housewives, for it allows them to hold property rights over women's labour. In short, 'the definition of women as housewives has precisely this function: to treat their labour power as natural, freely available to their husbands as well as to the exporters'.[55] To reiterate, it is not that the economic position of the lacemakers in Narsapur can be equated with that of the non-earning, middle-class housewife of Western societies. But, by defining them as housewives, patriarchal society deprives the women producers of both respect and status and the most minimal economic rights.

In several sections of her book, Mies further develops her analysis regarding 'housewifization'. The social definition of men as 'breadwinners' and women as 'housewives' influences the attitude of government officials and exporters. They generally expressed the opinion, Mies, states, that the laceworkers are just housewives 'who do this work in their leisure time and as a hobby'.[56] But the same ideology also has an effect on the thinking of the laceworkers themselves. They too appear to be influenced by the prevailing ideology, and by the way they are defined by those owning the fruits of their labour. Thus, Mies lays special emphasis on the effect of the ideology of 'housewifization' on the consciousness of the lace sector's female workforce.

First, she notes a contrast between the self-conception of the laceworkers belonging to the Kapu caste and the Untouchable (*harijan*) women who were active as agricultural labourers. The latter were 'not domesticated or defined as housewives'.[57] Although, Mies states, their wages were lower than those of male agricultural labourers, the *harijan* women earned considerably more throughout the year than the women laceworkers. 'This fact and the fact that they work collectively in the field has made them bolder and more self-confident. They talked with contempt about the women who sit in the house all day long and make lace for a few paisa.'[58] Even though the female agricultural labourers were outcastes, they did not feel inferior to the laceworkers positioned much above them in the caste hierarchy. Kapu women, on the other hand, expressed their inability to do fieldwork, reflecting a fear of getting de-classed.



Second, Mies observes, the atomization of the laceworkers, and their isolation as homeworkers, had a negative effect on their feeling of mutual solidarity. There was no basic unity between the women workers. Only the women of one family, daughters and mothers, worked together as a unit. 'By and large, production is individualized', and this, Mies observes, leads to intense competition between the laceworkers themselves. 'All women try individually to get better wages from an agent, to sell some lace on their own or become a sub-agent for a bigger agent, in any case to have an advantage over the other women.'[59] Mies even draws an analogy between the 'extreme competitiveness and jealousy' she says existed among the women lace producers, and the 'rat-race observed among the exporters'.

These findings are not fully corroborated by my later findings for the garments sector of West Bengal. In the Dumdum–Paikpara area of Calcutta, we found that many stitchers of cloth realize the need for a common trade union organization which reflects the existence of a collective consciousness. Some frock producers, in particular, were found to have been engaged in an attempt to raise piece-rates, through joint efforts, by striking work at a crucial time. Such an initiative would have been unthinkable, if the women did not conceive of themselves as waged workers. Nevertheless, it seems only logical that the ideology which propagates that women are mere 'housewives' creates barriers to the development of a collective consciousness. As long as homeworkers do not perceive that they share the same existence as other women engaged in waged work, it is only natural that their self-organization remains impeded. The ideology of 'housewifization' does have this function of mystifying women workers' existence to themselves.

## The Limited Applicability of the Thesis on Housewifization

I will elaborate on the danger that reality is misinterpreted with the concept of 'housewifization', in particular given the way it is used by one of Mies' colleagues. But first I will try and explain how the thesis, as posed by Mies herself, already bears a certain risk of over-interpretation. The thesis is perhaps less generally valid than other concepts that have been put forward by contemporary feminists. First, Mies, like other feminists, argues that the concepts of the male 'breadwinner' and the female 'housewife' are intimately tied to the separation into two spheres—'production' and 'reproduction'. The dividing line between these two did not exist in the pre-capitalist era. As demonstrated by Mies for Andhra Pradesh, in the rural areas of most Third World countries, women today continue performing many productive tasks which involve the creation of use value and exchange value at the same time. As long as the production of commodities is not universalized, the capitalist drive to create two separate spheres of activity will remain incomplete.

Now, Mies' thesis is developed around a specific example—that of homeworkers in one geographic area of Andhra Pradesh. This case, as presented by her, brings out certain limitations to the concept of 'housewifization'. For although the housewife ideology facilitates the most ruthless exploitation, it struck roots because there was a whole pool of women available who, to a certain extent, fitted the prescribed ideology. As Mies points out, and as has been mentioned earlier, the large majority of laceworkers today are women belonging to the Kapu community, and they were already domesticated long before the foundations for the lace industry were laid. It was their preceding status as *goshami* women that made their incorporation as homeworkers in the industry feasible. The labour of other women, such as the *harijan* women who depend on wage labour in the field and who turned out to be comparatively more assertive, could not similarly be tapped.

How far is the thesis on 'housewifization' valid for cases other than the Narsapur workers specifically? Apart from lace-making, there are many more industrial sectors, both in countries of the North and the South, where women are working on piece-rates in their own homes. In some cases they are subjected to forms of commercial subcontracting, such as in the production of *beedis* in India and readymade garments



in the West. In other cases female homeworkers are part of a structure of industrial subcontracting, such as in the automobile sector.[60] Yet, in numerous cases, the social definition of women as 'housewives' does not apply. Thus, women who are employed in plantations producing commercial crops, such as in the tea gardens in India and Bangladesh, should be called 'proletarianized'. They have been drawn into wage labour outside the home, and they toil together in large groups. In these cases, women's status approximates that of the collective worker rather than the domesticated wife. At times their status resembles, even more, that of the classical proletariat than the status of their own husbands.

Moreover, we should also note that historical developments have not been unilinear. In certain periods of time, industrial entrepreneurs, along with male-dominated trade unions, have succeeded in ensuring a massive expulsion of women from factory employment by pointing at women's domestic responsibilities. Yet there have also been trends in the opposite direction. As feminist historians have pointed out, during periods of war, for instance, massive numbers of women have been brought in to work in factories, including factories where arms and ammunition were manufactured, to replace men sent to the war front.[61] Thus, whereas the responsibility for household chores is almost universally women's, men have not consistently tended to monopolize waged work in factories, workshops or service sector establishments. In many countries of the North, in fact, a gradual increase in the wage labour employment of women outside the home has been observed in recent decades.

Thus, the thesis on 'housewifization' appears to be less broadly applicable than other concepts that have been put forward by women theoreticians since the second feminist wave. In order to analyze the process of capitalist accumulation, both the concepts of patriarchy and the sexual division of labour have proved to be of decisive importance. They have helped to lay bare general structures of domination and subordination which had hitherto been ignored in economic theory. The concept of 'housewifization' perhaps does not deserve the same status in a Marxist–feminist theory. For although the social definition of women as housewives is a convenient device eagerly applied by capitalist entrepreneurs when it suits their profit aims, in real life domestication has never been the general fate of women belonging to the classes producing society's wealth.

## 'Housewifization' Misinterpreted: The Analysis of von Werlhof

Before concluding this chapter, I wish to point to a further risk involved in using the concept beyond that of over-interpretation mentioned earlier. Over the last decade, and in particular since the crash at the international stock exchange in October 1987, monopoly companies worldwide have initiated a vast process of restructuring and reorganizing. One of the methods they use to maintain profit levels is to decentralize (i.e., disperse their production of automobiles, electronic equipment and other commodities to smaller factories, workshops, and even the home). This method, which has been devised and refined by Japanese companies long ago, and which is now applied in both the industrialized North and the South, is also known as 'informalization'.[62]

Another tendency is the by now well-known propensity, displayed by industrial companies, in particular since the late 1980s, for the replacement of fixed by flexible labourers. The number of male and female workers who enjoy the long-term security of jobs with additional fringe benefits (like pensions and health insurance) has been decreasing over the last two decades. Instead, companies prefer to recruit their workers on a temporary or seasonal basis, through manpower agencies and/or labour pools, so as to be able to discard them any time the company so desires. While trade unions tend to go along with the dictates formulated by monopoly companies, there is no doubt that the flexibilization of labour relations leads to an increase in the rate of exploitation. Both the trends of informalization and flexibilization help to strengthen corporate profits at the expense of the male and female members of the working class.[63]

How does one analyze the process just summarized? Claudia von Werlhof addressed this question in a provocative essay written when the process of informalization/flexibilization was just gaining momentum. She philosophically took the standpoint of the Western housewife: 'Housework is the most difficult phenomenon to understand. If we have understood housework, then we have understood everything.' Furthermore, 'the women's question is the most general, not the most "specific", of all social questions because it contains all others, and in contrast to all other questions, it leaves no one out.' Thus, only from the position of women, 'only from below—at the bottom—can the whole be seen as a whole'.[64]



Claudia von Werlhof adopted the position of the housewife, and from her vantage point it seemed that the free wage labourer was about to disappear. Whom did she consider to be this 'free wage labourer'? Here she referred to the worker who, since the 19th century, presumably has furnished the 'classical' figure of the exploited victim of capital. He was

> an alleged equal and adult contraot partner of the entrepreneur: protected by law against arbitrary action and violence, enjoyed social security, was a permanent employee in a factory or office, freely organized in a trade union, and received a wage which was sufficient for him and his family to maintain an average standard of living: the citizen, 'human being', the member of society, the free individual.[65]

This free wage labourer, von Werlhof argued, is going to leave the stage of history forever. The proletarian wage labourer, she assured her readers, was a minority phenomenon during a particular phase of capitalism. His prevalence, moreover, was limited to a few areas of the earth. In any case, contrary to what Marx and his followers had expected, it is not the principle of organization of the wage labourer which will determine humanity's future but that of housework. 'The wage will be abolished', von Werlhof literally stated, and the real model of work under capitalism is housework, not wage labour.[66] The German author depicted the free wage labourer and the housewife as 'two poles of a continuum' of capitalist conditions of work and relations of production. Though developments are not unidirectional, on the whole they veer towards the housewife, who is the model of the individualized, unpaid labourer, life-long at the service of the free wage labourer. Being imprisoned and deprived of any rights with regard to her labouring conditions, she is the model that determines the future of humanity. For the sake of capital, the proletariat is to be abolished. Long live the housewife!

What is one to make of von Werlhof's analysis of the present-day process of restructuring capitalist production relations? At first sight her viewpoint appears to be very apt and attractive—it puts anybody striving for justice on the defensive. What, after all, is nobler than to identify oneself with those at the bottom end? Yet, von Werlhof's specific presentation of the thesis on housewifization is flawed in several respects. First, she gives rise to a Babylonian confusion of

speech by lumping together two distinct concepts: those of free and fixed wage labour. The concept of the free wage labourer was used by Marx, in a historic sense, to explain the position of those labourers who were no longer tied to the land, as feudal serfs in the European Middle Ages had been. 'Free labourers' then are not to be confused with the privileged working class which characterized Western, industrialized states in the decades after the Second World War.

The privileges enjoyed by major sections of the industrialized working class in the centres of the world economy, such as the United States, Western Europe and Japan, were not granted to waged labourers at the onset of the industrial revolution, but were the outcome of a long historical process. As Marx explained in *Capital*, initially capitalist entrepreneurs tried to extend the legal working day *ad infinitum*, and for much of the 19th century protective laws remained very few in number.[67] It was only through protracted struggle that industrial workers wrested more fringe benefits from the owners of corporate capital. As discussed here, an important milestone in the process of investing the fixed wage labourer with legal guarantees was the policy proclaimed by the owner of the American automobile company, Ford, shortly after the First World War. Since then, an aristocratic section of waged workers have enjoyed extensive fringe benefits. Thus, it is only the section of fixed wage labourers that constitutes an exception in the history of capitalism.

Second, while it is true that the position of the fixed wage labourers with their relative privileges is slowly being eroded, the new, flexible contracts being offered instead are wage labour contracts nonetheless. However individualized informal sector workers' labour, and however isolatedly homeworkers are forced to toil, the relation in which they stand to the class of manufacturers is that of waged workers. The piece-rate system, for instance, which prevails in much of the informal sector, while distinct from time wages, is nonetheless a capitalist form of exploitation.[68] Experience shows that the individualization of labour does not exclude payment of a wage, not even a fixed wage. Some women employed as homeworkers to do work behind computers in the service sector in the Netherlands, have fought for and won a contract which stipulates fringe benefits.[69] Thus, von Werlhof's thesis on the abolition of wages is decidedly wrong.

Finally, while it is correct to depict household labour as an extreme pole of isolated, hidden and unpaid labour, housewives in general cannot be depicted as being at the bottom end of society. My critique



of von Werlhof's viewpoint thus extends beyond her interpretation of actuality, to her philosophical starting point. What is characteristic of women who are most severely oppressed under capitalist patriarchy worldwide is that they carry a double burden of toil: housework plus wage labour. To ignore one part of their work at the expense of the other means to do women workers injustice, and once again make a part of their toil invisible. As the concrete investigation of lacemakers in Andhra Pradesh by Maria Mies confirms, most informal sector women workers carry a double labouring burden, resulting in a 15-hour working day. It is only from this double vantage point—and not from the vantage point of the Western housewife—that 'the whole as a whole' can be understood.

## Summary

This chapter has highlighted the thesis on 'housewifization', one of two major theses which have been put forward by Maria Mies, Veronika Bennholdt Thomsen and Claudia von Werlhof. Taking the debate within the international women's movement during the second feminist wave as their starting point, they have done substantial investigative work into the labouring conditions of women in Third World countries. All three women voice the same critique of Marxist economic theory, the focus of which, they argue, is too narrow. Instead of seeing the creation of an economic surplus as the outcome of the contradiction between capital and wage labour only, the German feminist school sees surplus value as the result of the exploitation of both waged and non-waged forms of labour. Without a broader conceptualization, the male bias in political economy cannot be overcome.

The most prominent representative of the German school, Maria Mies, has unravelled the social relations of production existing in the lace industry of the Narsapur area in Andhra Pradesh. The hierarchical relations in this sector, as pointed out, have much in common with those in the garments sector of West Bengal. In both cases, production is not concentrated in factories but organized along the lines of the putting-out system. In both cases, women are mainly involved as homeworkers. They are paid piece-rates for the dresses and lace goods which they fabricate. In both cases women's working day comprises household chores and waged work, and wage levels are too low to cover the value of women workers' labour power. Yet Mies

has broadened the scope of analysis by including agrarian relations in her field research. Thus, the review of Mies' study on laceworkers has helped to carry forward the analysis of the sexual division of labour under conditions of commercial subcontracting, initiated in my earlier discussion on garments production in West Bengal.

In her book, Mies has dealt at length with the theme of 'housewifization'. Like women belonging to the working class in industrialized countries, women laceworkers in Narsapur are socially defined as housewives. In name they are not 'breadwinners' of their families, and their waged work is termed a 'pass-time' activity by the exporters employing them. This ideology facilitates the practice of an extremely high level of exploitation. While profit levels are high, the women homeworkers are not even paid a subsistence wage for the long hours they toil each day. As Mies argues, they are even robbed of a part of their consumption fund by the exporters and agents who control them through the putting-out system. Moreover, their social definition as housewives and their atomization negatively affect their consciousness.

However, while Mies' analysis of the lace industry concretely demonstrates the relevance of the thesis on 'housewifization', this thesis, if not carefully handled, could lead to a misinterpretation of today's economic realities. I have sought to illustrate this with the example of von Werlhof's interpretation of this thesis around the recent process of the restructuring of production relations. Through increased reliance on the subcontracting of product-parts to smaller companies and to women working at home, Japanese, American and European corporations seek to enhance their competitive advantages. The process entails a 'flexibilization' of labour relations, and means that fringe benefits formerly enjoyed by fixed wage labourers are taken away. But to interpret the process as the abolition of the class of 'free' wage labourers, to believe that more and more workers are hurled into an economic position approximating that of the housewife, is not correct. 'Housewifization' is primarily an ideological device which serves to make women's exploitation invisible.

## Notes and References

1. von Werlhof (1988), p. 13.
2. Mies' introduction, in Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen and von Werlhof (1988), p. 3.
3. Ibid. Mies explicitly states: 'Orthodox Marxism's theoretical and conceptual apparatus is, therefore, no longer adequate for the demands of this new critique of capitalism.'



4. Mies (1986b), pp. 100–10.
5. Ibid., p. 103.
6. Rogers (1980), p. 23.
7. Matthaei (1982), p. 158.
8. For details on Frederick Taylor's view, see Chapter 11.
9. Rogers (1980), p. 23.
10. Matthaei (1982), p. 165.
11. Ibid., p. 164.
12. Mies (1982), p. 97. The household survey was conducted among 150 women. Mies concluded that in 30 families of the sample, 'or in 20 per cent of the cases, the women were the main working and earning members of their families'.
13. Ibid., p. 29.
14. Ibid., p. 34.
15. Ibid., p. 33.
16. Ibid., p. 33.
17. Ibid., pp. 36–37.
18. Ibid., p. 39.
19. Ibid., p. 42.
20. Ibid., pp. 51–52.
21. Ibid., p. 52.
22. Ibid., p. 35. For a discussion on the *dadni* system, see also Singh (1991), pp. 21–22, 32. According to Singh (ibid.), p. 21, the Indian artisans under *dadni* were essentially 'independent' producers who were tied to the merchant companies through debt bondage since they were controlled through the advancement of cash money. 'The *dadni* system, through which the particular group or groups of craftsmen were bound to a merchant or European company, was so widespread in India that by the end of the seventeenth century virtually every commodity for the market was procured through this system'. The replacement of the *dadni* merchants by servants and agents of the East India Company is recorded by Mitra (1978), p. 45; Mukherjee (1974), p. 240; and Sinha (1956), pp. 6–7.
23. Mies (1982), p. 56.
24. Ibid., p. 53.
25. Ibid., p. 59.
26. Ibid., p. 57.
27. Ibid., p. 59.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., p. 63.
30. Ibid., p. 77.
31. Ibid., p. 86.
32. Ibid., p. 87.
33. Ibid., p. 81.
34. Ibid., p. 82.
35. Ibid., p. 92.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., p. 95.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., p. 119.
40. Ibid., p. 110.

41. Ibid., p. 121.
42. Ibid., p. 73.
43. Ibid., p. 173.
44. Ibid., p. 109.
45. Ibid., p. 112.
46. Ibid., p. 117.
47. Ibid., p. 118.
48. Ibid., p. 117.
49. Mies has made this clear (ibid., p. 180, note): 'I want to introduce the concept *housewifization* because it expresses more concretely the specifically modern form of control over women occurring in this case than does the term *domestication*. I define *housewifization* as a *process* by which women are socially defined as housewives, dependent for their sustenance on the income of a husband, irrespective of whether they are *de facto* housewives or not. The social definition of women as housewives is the counterpart of the social definition of men as breadwinners, irrespective of their actual contribution to their family's subsistence' (emphasis in original).
50. Ibid., p. 110.
51. Compare, for instance, the level of wages of the laceworkers with that of the *dagtoli* women in the Moheshtola–Santoshpur area of West Bengal in Chapter 5.
52. Mies (1982), p. 148.
53. Ibid., p. 150.
54. Ibid., p. 151.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., p. 54.
57. Ibid., p. 111.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid., p. 60.
60. See, for instance, Mitter (1986).
61. See, for instance, Braybon (1982).
62. For details, see Chapter 11.
63. For the theme of 'flexibilization' see, for instance, Mitter (1986).
64. von Werlhof (1988), p. 168.
65. Ibid., p. 170.
66. Ibid., p. 171.
67. Marx (1977a), p. 252.
68. See Chapter 5. For a discussion on piece-rates, see Marx (1977a), p. 516.
69. Such contracts have, for instance, been obtained by tele-workers in the Netherlands, who do office administrative work behind computers at home.

PART 3

# Women's Role as Agricultural Producers