

Poverty, ecology and urban development

edited by

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First Published 1978

Reprint : 1983

Published by
Manohar Publications
2, Ansari Road Daryaganj
New Delhi-110002

Printed at
MEHRA OFFSET PRESS, NEW DELHI.

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Women and the Family: Coping with Poverty in the *Bastis* of Delhi

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The problem of urban poverty has been explored from many different perspectives, yet most studies in the past have depended on data collected from the household head who, in a large majority of cases, is male. This paper¹ focuses on the central role of women in the family, their responses to conditions of absolute poverty, and the ways in which they adapt and cope with these conditions. There are many dimensions to urban poverty, and the choice of focus understandably depends on the professional orientation and goals of those conducting the study. Thus, we find planners and architects concerned with the cost and utility of housing, labour experts concerned with the role of the informal sector in a modernising urban economy,

¹I am grateful to the Department of Social Welfare, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, Government of India, for providing the funding for this research project. The responsibility for the facts stated, opinions expressed, and conclusions reached, however, is entirely that of the author and not of the Department of Social Welfare. I would also like to express my deep gratitude to my research assistants, Sujit Deb, Padmaja Kelkar, and Poonam Narain for their contributions in carrying out the fieldwork, and to Alfred de Souza, who served as Project Director and whose collaboration and support have been invaluable. Doranne Jacobson's comments on an earlier version of this paper were most helpful. The research project was carried out in association with the Indian Social Institute.

and so forth. It is revealing, however, that most such studies ignore almost entirely the needs and priorities of women and the family. This is so despite the fact that females make up nearly half of the population of the urban poor, and the institution of the family, as in other social strata, continues to provide the underlying basis for their settlement and social organisation. In India, one of the special characteristics of urbanisation is that the different values and life-styles of different social groupings based on kinship, caste, religion and region of origin influence the migrant's adaptation to the urban situation in many important ways. These social and cultural variations thus form a central theme of this discussion, as indeed they should in any sociological study of migration and urbanisation in India.²

In the following pages, an effort is made to bring out the consequences of poverty for women and the family, the strategies women employ for coping with these conditions, and their basic needs and priorities. Throughout, I have attempted to indicate the policy and programme implications of the findings for integrated urban development. First, the setting of the study is described, the extent to which this physical environment can be manipulated for social ends, and the consequences of this harsh environment for women and the family. Next, patterns of migration, kinship networks, and family structure are discussed, followed by the allocation of roles and decision-making within the family. This is followed by a fairly extensive description of the employment and income of women in the *bastis* (squatter settlements) and a discussion of health and nutrition (which can be considered a measure of the impact of poverty on the family). Finally, the women's hopes for the future and their links to the wider community are discussed in an effort to present a realistic picture of their most immediate concerns and the existing channels of communicating these concerns to the wider society.

²For a discussion of the significance of these traditional identities and nodalities on the neighbourhood life of middle class migrants to Delhi, see Andrea Menefee Singh, *Neighbourhood and Social Networks in India*, Marwah, New Delhi, 1976.

SETTING

The present paper is based on a study of women in four unauthorised squatter settlements (*bastis*) in New Delhi which was carried out between April 1975 and January 1976. Along with approximately 600,000 other squatters, these people have since been shifted to resettlement areas on the outskirts of Delhi. However, the problems and processes discussed herein remain relevant to an understanding of the urban poor. The four *bastis* included in the study were selected for the range of caste and regional backgrounds of their migrant populations, and also for the variety of occupations in which women were employed.³ Let us refer here to these squatter settlements as Pallanpur, Devendrapur, Kaharpur and Hassanpur.⁴

Pallanpur was the largest *basti* included in the study with 252 families and a population of 1,193. Founded twenty years ago, it was located on a narrow strip of public land bordering a housing colony for upper level Government employees. Ninety per cent of the household heads in this *basti* had migrated to Delhi from the far-off State of Tamil Nadu, and the vast majority (84 per cent) belonged to the untouchable caste of Pallans, formerly landless labourers. Pallanpur was physically the most highly developed *basti* included in the study, with roughly 40 per cent of the structures *pakka* (i.e., brick and cement plastered walls with asbestos roofing), brick-paved lanes, and at least a dozen vegetable plots individually cultivated behind the *basti*. The municipality had provided three public

³The *bastis* included do not represent a random sample of *bastis* in Delhi, having for example, a much higher representation of Tamil migrants and lower representation of U.P. migrants compared to Delhi as a whole, and also a somewhat higher proportion of working women, especially domestic workers. For a good description of the squatter situation in Delhi in the early 1970s, see the Town and Country Planning Organisation study cited later (fn. 7) and also the article by Majumdar in this book.

⁴*Bastis* in Delhi are generally named after a nearby road, residential colony, or some other important marker. In order to protect the identity of the *bastis* included in the study and also to facilitate the reader's identification of the group under discussion, however, I have chosen here to give the *bastis* pseudonyms based on the name of the major caste group in each *basti*.

taps for safe water supply and two sets of public latrines, while the people themselves had planted dozens of trees and vines for shade, fruit, and the production of fodder for the goats which were kept by about 10 per cent of the families. The social organisation of this *basti* was highly integrated, with social, political and religious structures overlapping considerably. This was possible, at least in part, because of the unusually homogeneous population of the *basti*.

Devendrapur was only seven years old although most of the residents had lived in Delhi for at least fifteen years, moving to this *basti* from other nearby squatter settlements which had been demolished. It was also the smallest *basti* in the study with only fifty-five families and a population of 232. Situated on public land near a school and an upper level government housing colony, twenty-seven of the household heads (49 per cent) were Tamil, and twenty-five were Pallan. All of the other households in this *basti* were North Indians: twelve of these were untouchable Balmiki (sweeper) households, seven were Rajput, and the rest were caste Hindus (i.e., not untouchables) from Uttar Pradesh. The Tamil Pallans in Devendrapur were well-organised with a temple and an informal *panchayat*,⁵ but, falling just short of a majority in the *basti*, they did not dominate the social and religious life of Devendrapur to the same extent as the Pallans did in Pallanpur. The North Indian population was too heterogeneous, however, to develop a comparable level of religious or political organisation, and thus usually had to defer to the South Indians in major political decisions. Devendrapur was not as well developed as Pallanpur in terms of housing structures and lanes, but also had more open space and room for expansion due to its recent origins. Although a latrine and two safe water taps had been provided by the corporation, disputes between the North Indians and South Indians developed frequently over their use. Both water taps were situated within the Tamil section of the *basti* and the latrines

⁵The *panchayat* is literally a council of five but may in reality include any number of recognised leaders who meet to discuss local issues and problems. The formation of local *basti panchayats* has been encouraged by local politicians and officials who are reluctant to act on petitions presented by individuals.

near the North Indian section, and both groups sought to exercise control over these facilities.

Kaharpur was basically a Central Indian *basti* with most of its residents having migrated to Delhi from Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra. There were 111 households and a population of 583. The *basti* was first established twelve years ago, but it had twice been demolished and rebuilt in the interim. The majority of the families (58 per cent) belonged to the Kahar caste and had migrated from Madhya Pradesh. In the villages, Kahars traditionally work as boatmen, water carriers, water chestnut cultivators, and domestic servants for the upper castes; in Delhi, in fact, the term Kahar has come to be used as a synonym for domestic servant regardless of specific caste identity, because of this traditional association. There were also sixteen Rajasthani Dhobi families (traditionally launderers), nine Neo-Buddhist families from Maharashtra, five Muslim families from U.P., and a sprinkling of other service castes, mainly from U.P.

Kaharpur was located on public property on the edge of a *nallah* (open drain) next to a housing colony for middle level Government employees. The terrain was very uneven and generally lower than the surrounding areas so that flooding was a major problem during the rains. Since the public latrines were located between the *basti* and the *nallah*, floods would wash excreta down into the *basti* along with other wastes, creating a serious health hazard. There was one public water tap and a hand-pump located within the *basti*. Kaharpur gave the impression of being randomly settled because of its many dead-ends and internal cul-de-sacs, but this actually represented an intentional pattern of settlement which functioned both to express and reinforce the major social divisions within the *basti* by limiting physical access to caste clusters and thereby social interaction. Religious events were celebrated and caste-specific disputes were usually settled within these caste clusters, while the official *basti panchayat*, which included representatives from all of the major caste groups, dealt mainly with outside representations and the occasional issues of concern to the entire *basti* community.

Hassanpur was different from the other *bastis* included in the study in that it included three distinct housing clusters which had been settled at different points in time, the first one being

nearly fifteen years old. Situated on the edge of a large and relatively new upper class residential area, it had eighty-seven households and a population of 380. Cluster 1 was dominated by Muslims who had migrated from U.P., but also included a number of Hindus of different castes from U.P., including seven families of U.P. Dhobis. A few Muslim families also occupied some huts in Cluster 2 immediately adjacent to Cluster 1, but they were constructed in such a way that they faced away from the rest of the huts in Cluster 2 which were occupied by Rajasthani Berwas, an untouchable caste of leather-workers and landless labourers. Cluster 3, like Cluster 2, was also dominated by Rajasthani Berwas, but had two small sub-clusters attached to it. One of these sub-clusters was occupied by four Balmiki households from U.P., and the other by different Hindu castes from U.P., most of whom worked as *malis* (gardeners) in nearby schools and residences. Altogether then there were twenty-one Muslim households, eighteen Berwa households, seven U.P. Dhobi households, and the rest of the forty-one households were occupied by other Hindu castes, none of which had more than four families resident in the *basti*. Hassanpur had the fewest facilities of all *bastis* included in the study. There were two hand-pumps, one located in Cluster 1 and the other in Cluster 3, but no latrines or water tap at all. As in Devendrapur and Kaharpur, the heterogeneity of the *basti* presented certain obstacles to the development of integrated political and religious structures. The *basti panchayat* was dominated by Muslims of Cluster 1 and the Berwas of Clusters 2 and 3 could not seem to find many grounds for co-operation.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AND ITS SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

As the preceding description suggests, the settlement of *bastis* is not a haphazard process but involves a good deal of social manipulation of physical space. This manipulation may strengthen or limit social interaction in many important ways. Families of dominant castes clustered together in such a way as to largely exclude interaction with minority castes, except for the minimal interaction brought about by the necessity of sharing public facilities. One of the consequences

of this was that families belonging to minority groups in the *basti* had little recourse to social support in time of need and practically no power or influence in local political matters. But the amount of control that *basti* dwellers can exercise over their environment is limited. The physical environment of the *basti* is otherwise harsh and presents many obstacles to growth and development, especially when compared to the planned areas of the city. The most obvious disparity is in the gross inadequacy of public utilities and services.

The few hand-pumps and water taps found in these *bastis* had to supply water to all of the households for their basic domestic chores such as cooking, washing, cleaning, and bathing, and were clearly inadequate for meeting the needs of the population they were meant to support. Some household chores could be carried out at the water source itself, but several gallons of water a day still had to be carried back to the *jhuggi* (hut) and stored. This was normally done by the woman of the household (sometimes assisted by her children), and often required waiting in lines for a considerable amount of time. Even where public latrines were present, they were inevitably overloaded and poorly maintained, thus becoming health hazards themselves rather than promoting a hygienic environment.

The scarcity of water and facilities in the *basti* for bathing also affected social relations. The Muslim women in Hassanpur sometimes constructed small walls behind their *jhuggis* in order to bathe in privacy, but officials tore them down as soon as they came to their notice. Their only alternative was to bathe within the *jhuggi* itself, creating damp and unhealthy conditions since most of their *jhuggis* had only mud floors. Women of other caste groups, however, were accustomed to bathing publicly (fully clothed, of course, discreetly changing into a fresh *sari* afterwards without exposing themselves). These different bathing customs ended up being a source of antagonism between the Muslims and Berwas in Hassanpur since the Muslim men also bathed at the same hand-pump in the evenings when working Berwa women needed to use the facilities. The two groups were unable to reach a compromise over the use of the hand-pump since the Muslims at any rate considered it inappropriate and immodest for women to bathe in the open. Eventually, the Berwa women resorted to carrying water from

other more distant public taps for their bathing and household needs.

None of the *bastis* had covered drains, and as a result refuse and children's excreta would collect, attracting flies, and becoming a natural source of infection and disease. The total absence of electricity and lighting facilities in the *bastis* meant that school children either had to do their homework outside in public spaces during the day or in the evenings under street lights. Such an environment obviously put these children at a tremendous disadvantage in school, no matter how highly they were motivated.

There were also special problems related to the housing itself. As the record of repeated *basti* demolition experienced by these people suggests, there was no security of land tenure. The initial investment in building or buying a *jhuggi* which had mud-plastered brick walls and a thatched roof ranged from Rs 300 to Rs 600,⁶ a large sum of money for these people to get together at one time. In cases where there was a reasonable security of tenure, as in Pallanpur, the *basti* dwellers themselves gradually improved on their environment and dwellings over time. *Basti* demolition, however, wipes out the initial *jhuggi* investment entirely and requires a whole new investment. This results in mounting indebtedness and less adequate housing than would otherwise have been possible. Consequently, the vast majority of *jhuggis* in the *bastis* studied provided only minimal shelter from the heat, the rain, and the cold of Delhi's extreme climate.

The high cost of even this minimal housing relative to their income meant that families had to live in the smallest possible space, even where a low density of population might otherwise have permitted building more spacious quarters as in Devendrapur. The average *jhuggi* had one room measuring approximately 10'x15' which provided shelter, living space, and storage for an average of 4.7 people, and sometimes one or two goats as well. It is not surprising, therefore, that a very large portion of the daily chores and activities of the family were carried outdoors. This style of living, involving as it does frequent and extensive

⁶The estimated minimum cost of approved housing in the resettlement areas is around Rs 1,500-2,000. Resettled squatters were also required to pay a monthly rent of Rs 8-9 for the plots they were given.

face-to-face interaction and little privacy obviously requires a considerable amount of co-operation and social control. Thus, it could be particularly straining for those minority groups whose customs, beliefs, and values differ from those of their neighbours.

In the sections which follow, I shall focus on the dynamics of family life of squatters as revealed by interviews with 161 adult women (i.e., women fifteen years and older) who were selected by random sample from the 596 adult women residing in the four *bastis* described.

MIGRATION, KINSHIP NETWORKS AND FAMILY STRUCTURE

People who take up residence in squatter settlements are generally people of rural origin and low socio-economic status who have been forced by economic circumstances to look beyond the village for a means to support their family.⁷ When we asked the women in our sample why they had left the village, 81 per cent replied that they had left because they could not support themselves or their families in the village. The majority said that this was because of adverse agricultural conditions (e.g., drought) or that there was simply no work available in the village. More than half chose Delhi as their destination, however, because they had relatives, friends or caste-fellows who were also migrating or who already lived in Delhi. At the time of interview, in fact, 92 per cent of the women reported having kin living in Delhi other than those included in their own household. Thus, it can be seen that while economic factors influence the decision to migrate, the ties of kinship, caste and village exercise a strong influence in

⁷A similar conclusion was reached by T.K. Majumdar and his colleagues in their macro-study of squatter settlements in Delhi, *Jhuggi Jhonpri Settlements in Delhi: A Sociological Study of Low-Income Migrant Communities*, Part II, mimeo.; Town and Country Planning Division, Ministry of Works and Housing, Government of India, 1975, New Delhi, p. 12. Majumdar stresses social as well as economic reasons for migration, but does not distinguish clearly between reasons for leaving the village and reasons for choosing to come to Delhi as opposed to some other place.

shaping the direction of migration streams from the village to the city.

Extended kinship ties are particularly important to women in the city, for there is a strong reluctance among them to form close friendships with those who are not related by kinship or marriage. Unlike the village situation, however, where the members of a married woman's natal family would normally live in another village, in Delhi these categories of kin were almost as likely to reside in the same *basti* as were the members of her husband's descent group (e.g., HB, HF, HM). In fact, it was found that 41 per cent of the women's own kin living in Delhi resided in the same *basti* as the respondent. This compared to 48 per cent of the kin from the husband's descent group and 62 per cent of the husband's other kin (especially his sister) who would also normally reside elsewhere after marriage. There was also no difference in the frequency of women meeting with their own kin and with their husband's kin (women reported meeting 44 per cent of both categories of kin on a daily basis). Thus, the *basti* setting appeared to provide a setting for the intensification of the extended kinship group beyond what would normally be expected to occur in the village setting.⁸ These kinship ties provide valuable friendship and psychological support to women and the family in addition to other more tangible benefits. It is through these networks, for example, that people living in *bastis* generally find jobs, a place to stay in Delhi, help in an emergency, and even loans for such things as starting a business or constructing a *jhuggi*.

⁸There is some evidence that there is considerably more intra-village marriage and migration to villages where the wife's kin or husband's sister reside among low caste groups, especially untouchables in both North India and South India than among upper castes. These urban settlement patterns therefore may not reflect a radical departure from rural traditions, but rather a common response to poverty or crisis situations. See, for example, Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Changing Status of a Depressed Caste', in McKim Marriott (ed.), *Village India*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1955; Kathleen E. Gough, 'Caste in a Tanjore Village', in E.R. Leach (ed.), *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1960, pp. 42-5. I am grateful to Pauline Kolenda for bringing this to my attention (personal communication, December 1976).

Although the rural migrant has a strong network of kinship ties in the city, joint families are rare. In fact, 90 per cent of the families in the *bastis* studied were basically nuclear in structure.⁹ More than half of the women interviewed, however, said that they considered the joint family the ideal, viewing it as a source of togetherness, protection, help in times of crisis, and economic and social security. It could be argued that one reason for the predominance of nuclear families could be lack of space. Some of the families which were classified as joint actually occupied two or more *jhuggis* (and these were not always contiguous) although they shared expenses and ate together. Another factor is that in-laws often stay back in the village, and thus the basis for a full-fledged joint family is not always present even if money and space would allow.

These were not the only reasons, however, for there was a clear tendency for family structure to differ according to caste and region. For example, 82 per cent of the single person households were migrants from U.P. although U.P. migrants comprised only 24 per cent of the total households. Studies in other cities of India have also noted the tendency for U.P. males to migrate to the city alone, leaving their wives and children behind in the village.¹⁰ There was only one joint family among all of the migrants from U.P.,¹¹ in fact, and among the Muslims, Balmikis, and Dhobis from U.P., there was no joint family at all. Among the Kahar migrants from Madhya Pradesh, on the

⁹The analysis here utilise Kolenda's definition of the nuclear and joint family so that a family classified as nuclear often had widowed, divorced or single kin staying with them in addition to a couple and their children. See Pauline M. Kolenda, 'Regional Differences in Indian Family Structure', in Robert I Crane (ed.), *Regions and Regionalism in South Asian Studies*, Duke University, Durham, pp. 147-72.

¹⁰Rowe has found similar patterns for U.P. migrants to Bombay and Bangalore, and Lubell notes this trend in Calcutta. See William L. Rowe, 'Caste, Kinship and Association in Urban India', in Aidan Southall (ed.), *Urban Anthropology: Cross-Cultural Studies of Urbanisation*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1973, pp. 211-50; Harold Lubell, *Calcutta: Its Urban Development and Employment Prospects*, International Labour Office, Geneva, 1974.

¹¹Several researchers have pointed out that there may be both regional and caste (or class) based differences in the tendency to have joint families. See, for example, Kathleen E. Gough, *op. cit.*; Pauline M. Kolenda, *op. cit.*

other hand, nearly 20 per cent of the families were joint, but the Dhobis from Rajasthan lived only in nuclear families. Thus, it would appear that cultural as well as spatial and economic factors influence the family structure of those settling in Delhi. In the light of these findings, it is perhaps surprising that the majority of the women interviewed supported the ideal of the joint family, but attitudes do not always reflect actual behaviour, and this is a good case in point.

DOMESTIC ROLES AND DECISION-MAKING

Within every family, there are numerous domestic chores and responsibilities which must be carried out on a regular basis, and in traditional societies these are usually carried out according to a fairly strict division of labour which is based on sex. In a nuclear family, these duties must be shared among fewer family members than in a joint family, although the pattern of sex-role allocation probably does not differ much. In order to arrive at an understanding of how these roles are allocated within the family, the women were asked to specify the person in the family who had the primary responsibility for performing each of fifteen common domestic chores, and also the person (if any) who helped the most in a secondary capacity.¹²

The findings reveal that there are certain chores which could be labelled 'female tasks' since they were almost always allocated to females, whereas most other chores were either shared by husband and wife or were allotted to males in some families and females in others without any consistent pattern emerging. The tasks which were performed almost exclusively by women were cooking, washing utensils, washing clothes, cleaning the house, and preparing tea or coffee. About 20 per cent of the respondents said that daughters carried either primary or secondary responsibility for these chores, while less than 2 per cent of the women said that sons were given any responsibility

¹²The domestic chores listed were: cooking meals, cooking when you are ill, preparing tea or coffee, washing dishes, washing clothes, cleaning house, shopping for cereals, shopping for vegetables, buying the children's clothing, buying the husband's clothing, buying your own clothing, taking care of the children, taking care of children when you are out, medical aid for children, house repairs.

for these chores. Women also assumed the primary responsibility for caring for the children, and 73 per cent of them said that there was no one in the family who carried a secondary responsibility for this task. Forty per cent, in fact, said that there was no one to care for their children when they left the house (their children were left 'in the care of God', as they frequently said), and another 30 per cent said they never left the house without their children. The findings indicate clearly a great need for child-care arrangements in the *basti*, especially if we consider that 65 per cent of the women interviewed were employed. It should also be noted, however, that 9 per cent of the women said that their husband carried the primary responsibility for child-care and another 18 per cent said that the husband carried a secondary responsibility. Although a minority, it appears that males are ready to assume more responsibility for this critical domestic task than for other kinds of household work that are considered basically a woman's responsibility.

Surprisingly, there were no chores in which husbands were attributed the primary responsibility by a majority of respondents, although in some cases the husbands were given the primary responsibility somewhat more often than wives. The greatest responsibilities of husbands turned out to be buying their own clothing (48 per cent), shopping for cereals (43 per cent), buying the wife's clothing (39 per cent), buying the children's clothing (39 per cent), and taking care of house repairs (35 per cent). In the other chores listed, either the wife carried the primary responsibility or the responsibility was shared by both husband and wife. These findings indicate that the husband's major domestic responsibilities relate directly to the economic aspects of running a household and very little else. Thus, women carry an especially heavy responsibility for the domestic work of the family among the urban poor even though a large percentage of them work.

Comparing the responsibilities of sons with those of daughters, the findings indicate that role allocation based on sex begins very early in life and daughters carry far more responsibility for household tasks than sons. Sons were somewhat more likely than daughters to be given some responsibility for shopping for cereals and vegetables, and for house repairs, but even

so, less than 6 per cent of the respondents reported assigning any domestic responsibility to sons compared to about 20 per cent who assigned primary or secondary responsibilities to daughters. The most common responsibilities of daughters were washing dishes, washing clothes cleaning, house, cooking meals normally or when the respondent was ill, preparing tea or coffee, and child-care when the mother was out. Daughters appear to be an especially valuable domestic resource for women who live in predominantly nuclear families. As a consequence, however, the daughters' opportunities outside the home are more limited than sons' for such things as education or training.

While women are assigned the greatest responsibility for carrying out domestic chores, they do not exercise the major authority in making decisions in family affairs. When asked who makes the decision with regard to thirteen common domestic decisions,¹³ women said that they themselves make the decision in a majority of cases for only two items — planning the daily menu (78 per cent) and deciding whether or not to take up employment (57 per cent). The second item is of particular interest, however, since it indicates that women who work have in most cases assumed a personal responsibility to help support their families.

Surprisingly, husbands also were not credited with making the decision in a majority of cases for any item, though comparing only husband and wife, they were said to exercise sole authority far more often than the wife with regard to financial decisions (i.e., purchase or sale of property or jewellery, money spent on festivals or weddings). They also exercised somewhat more authority than women in deciding the age at which a son or daughter starts working, and the use of family planning methods.

On all items other than deciding the daily menu and wife's employment, more women said that the husband and wife make the decision jointly than that either the husband or wife makes

¹³The decisions listed were: planning the daily menu, wife taking up employment (or not), purchase or sale of property, purchase of jewellery, son's education, daughter's education, visiting relatives outside Delhi, visiting friends in Delhi, money to be spent on weddings, age at which son starts working, age at which daughter starts working, use of family planning methods (or not).

the decision unilaterally. This was especially so with regard to decisions about visiting relatives outside Delhi (65 per cent), visiting friends in Delhi (62 per cent), money to be spent on festivals (53 per cent), and money to be spent on weddings (50 per cent). Thus, while the allocation of sole responsibilities for common household tasks according to sex was fairly clear-cut, the process of decision-making turns out to be far less so. In fact, there appears to be a considerable amount of sharing in the decision-making process of squatter households with men and women both exercising an influence in many of the critical decisions within the family, but men generally holding the upper hand with regard to financial affairs.

EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME

The majority of the adult women in the *bastis* included in this study were employed and earning a cash income. Of the total *basti* population studied (including children), 40 per cent of the females were employed compared to 48 per cent of the males, and in the interview sample (which included only adult women), 65 per cent were employed. This female work force participation rate is unusually high when compared with Delhi's total population; only 5 per cent of Delhi's total female population were classified as workers in the 1971 Census. Participation in the work force, however, is not necessarily a consequence of *urban* poverty, for exactly the same percentage of women reported working prior to migration as reported working in Delhi. Women in slums, as in the village, were also more likely to take up employment in middle age than when they were young and newly married.¹⁴

Urban migration requires both men and women to seek out new types of employment since the majority were engaged in

¹⁴In Madras it was found that women above thirty years have a significantly higher rate of employment than those fifteen to thirty years. See Rama Arangannal, *Socio Economic Survey of Madras Slums*, Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board, Madras, 1975. A similar pattern of work force participation among rural female workers has been reported by Rama Joshi, 'Socio-Economic Conditions of Women Agricultural Workers', in S.M. Pandey (ed.), *Rural Labour in India: Problems and Policy Perspectives*, Shri Ram Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources, New Delhi, 1976, p. 80.

agricultural activities prior to migration, but the urban occupational structure offers far more limited opportunities to women than to men at this level of society. Table I shows the extent to which the employment of females differed from the employment of males in the *bastis* studied.

TABLE I : OCCUPATION ACCORDING TO SEX

Occupational category	Males		Females		Per cent female out of total workers
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	
Domestic	57	9.33	372	84.35	86.7
Unskilled labour	211	34.53	32	7.26	13.2
Semi-skilled	160	26.19	10	2.27	5.9
Skilled	80	13.09	2	0.45	2.4
Household industry	13	2.13	6	1.36	31.6
Business	62	10.15	11	2.49	15.1
Technical/Manager	16	2.62	2	0.45	11.1
Agricultural	6	0.98	4	0.91	40.0
Others	6	0.98	2	0.45	25.0
Total	611	100.00	441	100.00	41.9

As can be seen from this table, 84 per cent of the women workers were engaged in domestic service of some kind. This occupational category included the occupations with the lowest status and pay in the urban occupational structure such as utensil cleaners, launderers, sweepers, etc. Their next largest representation was in unskilled labour (7 per cent), business (2.5 per cent), and semi-skilled labour (2.3 per cent). It is particularly instructive that in terms of labour-intensive occupations the representation of women within each category of workers falls dramatically as one climbs the ladder of prestige and income from unskilled labour (13 per cent) to semi-skilled labour (6 per cent) and skilled labour (2 per cent). Their representation among the self-employed, however, was considerably better. They comprised 32 per cent of all those in household industry, and 15 per cent of those in business.

There was also considerable variation in work force participation rates of females according to caste and region. Table 2 gives the percentage of males and females who were employed

and the ratio of female workers per 1000 males for each of the major caste categories included in the study.

TABLE 2 : PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS ACCORDING TO CASTE AND RELIGION FOR TOTAL POPULATION

<i>Caste category</i>	<i>Male (Per cent)</i>	<i>Female (Per cent)</i>	<i>Female workers per 1000 males</i>
U.P. Muslims	58.82	12.28	209
U.P. Balmikis	47.02	31.58	659
U.P. Dhobis	31.82	31.58	992
U.P. Others	48.98	19.60	400
Rajasthani Berwas	45.28	47.06	1039
Rajasthani Dhobis	41.30	42.86	1038
Rajasthan-U.P. others	55.17	23.82	432
M.P. Kahars	44.57	41.38	931
Other Central Indians	50.00	25.00	500
Tamil Pallans	47.73	45.37	951
Other South Indians	55.56	45.10	812
Christians	28.57	33.33	1167
Not ascertained	45.00	43.59	969
Total	47.85	39.69	829

As this table shows, women in some castes are just as likely to work as men. Such castes include the Berwas, Dhobis, Kahars, Pallans and Christians.¹⁵ They are somewhat less likely to work than men among the Balmikis and other castes, though a substantial portion of the women of these castes were also employed. Among the Muslims from U.P., however, none of the women said that they had worked before migration, and in the city they had the lowest participation rate of any of the groups studied.

Not only do work force participation rates vary according to caste and region, but so also do ideas and attitudes concerning the appropriateness of different types of work for males

¹⁵Although Christians and Muslims do not properly constitute a caste, they have been grouped together here as a caste-like category in order to facilitate analysis. The reader should also bear in mind that the number of Christians included in the study was very small and, therefore, cannot claim to be representative of this community as a whole.

and females. This functions to limit the possibility of social mobility for both sexes, but especially for women since their opportunities are already far more limited than men's. As a result of these preferences, there is also a certain continuity from the rural to the urban setting in types of employment taken up by many of the castes included in the study. For example, most Balmikis, traditionally sweepers and scavengers, continue to follow this occupation in the city, but males often get jobs with the municipality or offices in Delhi which assure them of better pay, more benefits, and job security, while women generally get work only as sweepers in private homes. Berwa men and women, traditionally landless labourers, both get work in the city as unskilled labourers, but the women are not given a chance to rise above the status of coolie while the men often move up to semi-skilled or skilled positions. Pallans are also landless labourers in the village, but while most Pallan men find work in Delhi as unskilled labourers, Pallan women have shifted to domestic service in the *bastis*. This actually implies a rise in status for Pallan women, however, since domestic work such as cleaning utensils for caste Hindus was denied to them in the villages because of their untouchable caste status.

Some examples of the women's attitudes towards different types of employment may help to demonstrate how the process of limitation works. Women working as domestics said that utensil cleaning would be degrading for a man, but it seemed all right for a woman since she has to do this work for her own family anyhow. The Kahar women who worked as domestics considered domestic work more appropriate for women than daily wage labour, or, as they put it, 'outdoor work'. Berwa women, on the other hand, felt that coolie work was good paying work for a woman, but considered domestic work to be degrading and polluting. Even among the Dhobis (launderers), there were regional differences regarding attitudes towards work. Dhobis from Rajasthan would iron clothes but refused to wash them since washing is the more polluting work; Dhobis from U.P. did both, but assigned the job of washing to the women, while men did the ironing. With one exception (a domestic), Muslim women only took up work that they could do within their own homes such as tailoring. But women who

tailored for other residents of the *basti* were paid less than the market rates; even when they demanded higher prices it was found that their clients would simply refuse to pay more after the work was done. Thus, it can be seen that while the urban occupational structure offers highly limited employment opportunities to women, caste and regional values function to limit their options still further.

An understanding of these values, preferences and traditional skills is clearly important for the design of effective programmes for enhancing the employment potential of women at this level of society. Such programmes must also take into account the massive illiteracy and lack of modern, adaptable skills among the women. In the *bastis* studied, it was found that 88 per cent of the females were illiterate compared to 63 per cent of the males, and that females had lower rates of school attendance and attainment than males long after migration to the city.

In terms of income, women also fared very poorly when compared to men. It was found that working women worked an average of forty hours per week compared to the forty-eight hours per week for men, yet their average monthly income was only Rs 76 compared to Rs 192 for men. In other words, they earned less than half as much as men per unit of time worked. The low earning capacity of women reflects in part the fact that they are in a lower status and lower paid jobs than men, but it also reflects the fact that even when they are in the same occupation, they are usually paid less (e.g., domestic work which is one of their main sources of employment), and that their chances of promotion in occupations where men find some mobility (e.g., construction) are practically nil. Efforts to increase the earning capacity of *basti* women would thus seem to require a multi-dimensional approach which would take into account the complexity of the situation. In addition to long-term efforts to increase educational and literacy levels, more immediate and direct measures might include legislating a minimum wage for domestics and others in the unorganised sector, encouraging the development of women's workers associations and co-operatives, and requiring Government

contractors to lead the way in promoting women to semi-skilled and skilled positions.¹⁶

Few women actually liked their work, even though they did appreciate the income. Utensil cleaners complained of the polluting nature of their work, their lack of holidays (the majority worked seven days a week), and their employers' attitudes; Dhobi women complained of unpleasant experiences in going from house to house to deliver clothes and collect payments; unskilled labourers complained of the tremendous physical demands of their work. Nearly all of them complained of the difficulty and strain of working and also having to do all of their own family's domestic work. It is little wonder then that daughters are pressed into assuming domestic responsibilities within the household as early as possible.

Despite the highly limited employment opportunities of women in squatter settlements and the exceptionally low pay that they can expect to earn, it was found that they considered it necessary to work in order to provide for their family's most elementary needs. Ninety-one per cent of the working women interviewed said that they were working out of economic necessity. Even more interesting is the fact that 74 per cent of the non-working women interviewed reported that they had been employed at some time in the past and over half of these said that they would like to work again sometime in the future. Non-workers thus cannot be considered permanently out of the work force. The majority had left work because of such reasons as health (including pregnancy and childbirth), child-care responsibilities, or lack of employment opportunities, while only 18 per cent reported that they did not work because their husband's income was sufficient.

In fact, there was definitely a positive female work ethic in most castes in which women had a high rate of work force participation. Thirty-seven per cent of the working women said that they would continue to work even if their husband's income increased. Interestingly, positive responses to this question were highest among the women with the highest

¹⁶For a more detailed analysis and recommendations, see Andrea Menefee Singh, 'Women in the Unorganised Sector: The Need for Minimum Wage, Hiring and Promotional Guidelines', *Law and Society Quarterly*, 6 (nos. 1-4), 1976.

individual incomes indicating that the psychological rewards of working increase with income. Furthermore, 87 per cent of all respondents, including both working and non-working women, said that they expected their daughters to work after marriage. Reasons varied, but the most common responses were that they would like her to be able to stand on her own feet (32 per cent) and that it would probably be necessary due to poverty (22 per cent).

Given the expressed economic necessity for women to work, and the very small amount of income which they derive from their work, it is valid to ask just how they spend their money. The findings show that the earnings of women workers go almost entirely towards the most basic necessities of life for the family. Seventy per cent of the women workers interviewed listed food as their major item of expenditure¹⁷ and about 22 per cent said that their income was pooled with that of their husband and spent jointly on the family's basic necessities. Forty per cent also mentioned clothing, 22 per cent simply their children's basic needs, and 5 per cent their children's education. No other item was mentioned by more than 3 per cent of the respondents and none of the items mentioned could be considered personal luxuries. Most women expressed surprise, in fact, when asked who decides how their earnings were to be spent since they did not consider this a matter of choice. Considering the woman's stated spending priorities, it would seem that a substantial increase in women's earnings would go a long way towards raising the family's standard of living and resolving the conditions of absolute poverty in which squatter families live.¹⁸

¹⁷Most women gave more than one response to this question, so that the above percentages add up to more than 100. According to data on monthly food expenditure, however, the average family spends 85-95 per cent of their total monthly income on food.

¹⁸This argument is also developed further in the article cited—Singh, *op.cit.* A relevant question which has now been answered here, is just how male and female spending priorities differ. Observation suggests that a higher proportion of female earnings is spent on the essential needs of the family than of males.

HEALTH AND NUTRITION

The inadequate public facilities and services, and the unhygienic conditions of the *basti* environment which have been described earlier obviously have severe consequences for the overall health of the community. I would like to focus here on a few indicators of just how critical the problem of health and nutrition is among the urban poor, namely the quality and quantity of food consumed, the nutritional status of children, the incidence of illness in the family, and the unusually high rates of infant and child mortality. Together, these provide a good indication of the consequences of poverty for human growth and development.

Let us first discuss the quality of the diet of the poor. The women interviewed were asked to recall the number of times they ate on the day immediately preceding the interview and what food was consumed in each of these meals. The results are summarised in Table 3 according to the number of times each item was mentioned for all meals.

TABLE 3 : FOOD ITEMS CONSUMED IN DAILY DIET

Food item*	Respondents mentioning at least once (N=161)		Total times mentioned (all meals)	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Wheat	150	98.68	278	34.62
Rice	96	63.16	148	18.43
Corn/sorghum	3	1.97	4	0.50
Leafy green vegetables	5	3.29	6	0.75
Potatoes	24	15.79	26	3.24
Other vegetables	103	67.76	156	19.43
Dal (lentils)	124	81.58	173	21.54
Meat/eggs	12	7.89	12	1.49
No food	9	5.59	—	—
Total	—	—	803	100.00

*Chutney, coffee, tea and milk not included in this analysis.

As with slum dwellers elsewhere,¹⁹ the majority of the *basti*

¹⁹See, for example, Arangannal, op.cit., p. 23. This study found that although 99.57 per cent of the slum dwellers were non-vegetarian, few could afford to include animal protein in their daily diet.

dwellers included in our study were non-vegetarian, yet this table indicates that meat and eggs (both high-protein animal foods) were only rarely included regularly in the diet of the poor. Meat and eggs were mentioned by only 8 per cent of the respondents and were consumed in less than 2 per cent of the total meals described. Animal protein was simply too expensive for regular consumption. The most common items in the poor person's diet turn out to be wheat, *dal* (lentils), vegetables and rice respectively. In fact, further analysis showed that 26 per cent of all meals included only one cereal and nothing else. About 70 per cent of the meals, however, included some combination of a cereal (most often wheat) *dal*, and/or other vegetables. This demonstrates good economics in a sense, since recent research has shown that if wheat and *dal* are consumed in sufficient quantities, the basic protein and calorie needs of an individual can be met as well as most of the vitamin requirements. Therefore, it is also important to evaluate the quantities of food consumed, and their protein and calorie values.

The analysis of the nutritive value of total monthly food purchases as estimated on the basis of recall indicates, however, that the majority of the families did not get sufficient quantities of proteins or calories in their diets, especially the latter. The fact that nine respondents (6 per cent of the sample) said that they had starved the day before because they did not have enough money to buy food suggests just how marginal the existence of many squatter families can be. Further evidence of the inadequate diet of the population studied was provided by an assessment of the nutritional status of children under five. On the basis of anthropomorphic measurements (i.e., the upper arm circumference measurement),²⁰ it was estimated that at least 40 per cent, and possibly as many as 60 per cent, of the

²⁰Weight-for-age and height-for-age are generally considered the most accurate anthropomorphic measures of nutritional status, but these require time and equipment which were beyond the scope of this project. For a discussion of the upper-arm circumference measurement in community surveys of nutritional status, see Maurice King, Felicity King, David Morley, Leslie Burgess and Ann Burgess, *Nutrition for Developing Countries*, Oxford University Press, London, 1973. See also Murray Laugesen, 'Child's Bangle for Nutrition Screening', *Indian Paediatrics*, 13(n. 3), 1975.

children between the ages of one and five suffered from various degrees of malnutrition.

The problem of malnutrition, of course, is complex since it may be the result of an unbalanced diet, insufficient quantities of food, or even diseases (e.g., worms or dysentery) which reduce the body's ability to absorb the full nutritive value of the food which is consumed. Frequently, a combination of such factors is involved, which means that in order to be effective, the treatment must be intensive and complex. Thus, supplementary feeding programmes by themselves rarely make much of a dent on the problem of malnutrition. Environmental improvements, regular medical attention and non-formal education in nutrition and hygiene are measures which also need to be integrated into any programme meant to raise the nutritional status of the poor. Malnutrition is clearly a fact of life for the poor and is in need of immediate attention, for it has severe consequences for the life expectancy of the children of the poor, and also for their growth and development.

Although malnutrition is certainly a great problem in urban squatter settlements, there is some evidence that it is less severe than among the rural poor where an estimated 80 per cent of the children suffer from malnutrition.²¹ Life in the city, insecure and marginal as it is, is not as subject to fluctuations in food supply caused by drought and seasonal shortages that often interrupt the supply of food to the poor in the villages. In fact, many *basti* dwellers commented on the better quality of their diet in the city as compared to the village noting that they were able to eat more prestigious foods, had a greater variety of foods in their diets, and did not have to face periods of shortage in the city. Rice, for example, is generally considered a rich man's food in the village, yet 63 per cent of our respondents mentioned eating it in at least one of their meals the day before.

²¹See C. Gopalan and K. Vijaya Raghavan, *Nutrition Atlas of India*, National Institute of Nutrition, Indian Council of Medical Research, Hyderabad, 1971, pp. 74-75. We should point out, however, that there is some indirect evidence based largely on macro-level statistical data and inference, that urban diets may be less adequate than rural diets, especially in North-West India. See V.M. Dandekar and Nilakantha Rath, *Poverty in India*, Indian School of Political Economy, Bombay, 1971, pp. 9-10; and also the article by Judit Katona-Apte in this volume.

Nutrition plays an important role in community health, but the findings also indicate that environmental factors such as unsafe water, poor drainage and overcrowding are also related to morbidity patterns in the squatter community. Respondents were asked to recall the illnesses during the past one year of all members of the family. While this method may underestimate the actual occurrence of disease, the findings nonetheless reveal some disturbing patterns. For one thing, it appears that women are more prone to illness than men. Of all illnesses reported, females were afflicted in 75 per cent of the cases whereas males were afflicted in only 66 per cent. The most frequently cited ailments were fever, cough, malaria and diarrhoea, and females suffered from all of these symptoms and diseases more than males. In terms of households mentioning these ailments at least once, 56 per cent mentioned fever, 48 per cent mentioned cough, 40 per cent mentioned malaria, and 27 per cent mentioned diarrhoea. Thus, the unhygienic environment and crowded conditions of the *basti* could be held directly responsible for a large number of the afflictions cited, especially water-borne diseases such as jaundice, typhoid, dysentery, and gastroenteritis which together accounted for 14 per cent of all illnesses reported. Malaria accounted for 19 per cent of all illnesses and its emergence can be attributed at least in part to the collection of stagnant water because of poor drainage in the *bastis*. Twenty-seven per cent of the illnesses were described simply as 'fever' without further diagnosis, and we may assume that many of these cases were malaria which had not been properly diagnosed. Furthermore, in 26 per cent of the illnesses cited, no medical specialist was consulted. Limited public health services and the high cost of travel, consultation, and medicines relative to their income made it difficult for them to avail of proper medical care when ill. Inadequate treatment, in addition to constant re-exposure to the same sources of infection assures that illnesses tend to be chronic in nature.

The lack of a State-supported system of social security and the lack of personal savings or other resources for the poor to fall back on in their old age thrusts a major responsibility for their future maintenance on their children. As is well known, in India this responsibility falls almost exclusively on sons. This places a special importance on having enough children, and especially

sons, to assure one's sustenance when one grows old or is no longer able to work. Therefore, infant mortality becomes a matter of special concern, especially in the light of the recent sterilisation drive which was directed at the poor in particular. Maternal histories of the women interviewed revealed that the overall child mortality rate was 221 per 1000 children born live, and that female children were more likely to die than were males. All but three children died before the age of five. Altogether, sixty-seven females were reported to have died out of 283 female births compared to fifty-eight males out of 284 male births. In other words, the poor have little assurance of the survival of their children. Most women said that they wanted to have at least two sons lest 'something happen' to one or 'one turns out bad', but one daughter would be enough. Hence the tendency to continue bearing children until the minimum number of sons has been assured.

It was also found that mortality rates varied considerably according to caste. This probably reflects a combination of factors subject to cultural influences such as diet, weaning practices, child-care practices, pre-natal care, mother's employment, and so on. The highest mortality rate (444 per 1000) was found among the Rajasthani Berwas, a caste in which nearly all mothers may expect nearly half of their offspring to die at an early age.²² This is a particularly tragic finding and suggests that the large number of urban female unskilled labourers and their children deserve the special attention of welfare agencies. It also suggests a need for more critical research evaluating the reasons for variations in infant mortality rates among the urban poor.

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

Considering the tremendous hardships and disadvantages the *basti* family must endure in the urban environment, it is revealing to consider what the women would like to see the future bring. Seventy-one per cent of all responses related directly to

²²In a study of female Rajasthani construction workers in Delhi, Ranade also found that child mortality was around 40 per cent. See G.P. Sinha and S.N. Ranade, *Women Construction Workers: Reports of Two Surveys*, Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi, 1975, p. 11.

economic concerns, with 30 per cent of the respondents saying simply that they would like to be well-fed, 27 per cent well-clothed, 21 per cent to live well or in more comfort, 12 per cent to increase their income or salary, and 12 per cent to own their own house or some property.²³ Other economic concerns mentioned were the ownership of gold or jewellery, securing a good job, or acquiring other material comforts. The rest of the responses related mainly to the future happiness and well-being of their children and husbands.

Women's hopes for the future also varied according to caste. For example, none of the Berwa or Dhobi women mentioned economic concerns at all. This was particularly surprising since these groups had the highest proportion of female workers of any of the groups included in the study, and also because the Dhobis had the lowest income of all groups, taking home an average monthly household income of Rs 186.73 compared to the overall average of Rs 280.93. This raises some interesting questions about the relationship between caste-specific values and social mobility.²⁴

When asked specifically what they would like to see happen to their sons and their daughters in the future, some further differences emerged. Over half of the responses regarding sons, for example, related to their education (33 per cent) and employment (24 per cent) and only 15 per cent related to their future marriage. For daughters, on the other hand, 51 per cent of the responses related to their being married well or getting a good husband, while daughter's education and employment were mentioned by relatively few respondents (11 per cent and 7 per cent respectively). This may appear illogical, considering the fact that 87 per cent of the respondents had indicated that they expected their daughters to work after marriage. Yet, it also reflects the reality of their experience, that is, that a woman's well-being depends heavily on her husband's income, which is so

²³Most women gave more than one response. Therefore, percentages add up to more than 100 per cent.

²⁴See Satish Saberwal, *Mobile Men: Limits to Social Mobility in Urban Punjab*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1976, for an interesting discussion of the psycho-historical factors involved in the social mobility (or lack of it) among low caste groups.

much larger than her own, no matter how hard she works.²⁵ These attitudes of women probably play a critical role in shaping and limiting a young female's self-perceptions and goals, thereby helping to perpetuate her dependence in later life.

LINKS TO THE WIDER COMMUNITY

This description of women and the family in the squatter settlements of Delhi would be incomplete without at least some reference to their links to the wider social environment. These linkages (or lack of them) influence the way in which they cope with their problems and the control that they can exert over their future.

In terms of the more formal political, economic and social institutions of the *basti* and of the city, it was found that the participation of *basti* women was highly limited. Although 60 per cent of the respondents who were twenty-one years or older reported voting in the last election—a figure which compares very favourably with the all-India voting participation rates of women which was 49 per cent²⁶—their participation in the local political structures and processes was practically nil. They had no representation on local *panchayats* or associations, and were not allowed to participate in discussions at public meetings; in Hassanpur they were not even allowed to attend public meetings of the *panchayat* as observers. Community conflicts, therefore, even if they originated with disputes between neighbouring women and involved women directly, were eventually resolved through the *panchayat* by males. Similarly, the task of making representations beyond the *basti* to patrons, politicians, or administrative officials was considered men's work, even when the petition represented the interests of women.

Participation in the urban labour force is significantly higher, on the other hand, among *basti* women than among middle or upper class women. But the jobs *basti* women hold are at the bottom of the urban occupational structure, i.e., those with the lowest status and pay, and predominantly in the unorganised

²⁵Doranne Jacobson, personal communication.

²⁶Ashish Bose, 'A Demographic Profile of Indian Women', in Devaki Jain (ed.), *Indian Women*, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi, 1975, p. 170.

sector. The content of these links is, therefore, highly limited. According to a study by Sharma,²⁷ the vast majority of urban female workers are in occupations that require no education at all. In fact, only 12 per cent of the female population (including children) in the *bastis* studied were literate compared to 37 per cent of the males, a fact which reflects their low levels of participation in the educational institutions of the society compared to men. As a result of these complex factors, the economic power and influence of women is small at the individual or family level; the fact that they are unorganised and unrepresented at the institutional level also limits their power and visibility within the wider society.

In terms of the normal everyday activities of women, it was found that the caste and kinship groups provide the most common basis for organising community activity. Weddings and festivals are the most frequent occasions for community action, and participation in these events is largely limited to the caste and kinship group. Caste endogamy restricts marital arrangements across these boundaries, and rural caste traditions often dictate the form of expression of festivals and ceremonies, effectively precluding the participation of neighbours of differing religions, castes or regions in these important events. It is relevant to mention here that the four most frequently mentioned items in response to a question on self-images were family, gender, caste and occupation.²⁸ These identities accurately reflect the major social activities, linkages and interactions of women in *bastis*. Caste and kinship give needed social support to the individual, but in the process also function to insulate them from wider associations and interactions in the urban setting.

²⁷O.P. Sharma, 'Operational Structure of Urban Working Women', *The Economic Times*, New Delhi and Bombay, 15 June 1975. Sharma found that 66 per cent of the total employed females in 1971 were illiterate.

²⁸This question was based on a model of analysis developed by Viktor Gecas in his work with migrant Mexican-Americans. I would like to express my thanks to him for sending me some useful advice on the use of this technique and the code lists which he had developed in his study. For further explanation of this technique, see Viktor Gecas, 'Self-Conceptions of Migrant and Settled Mexican-Americans', *Social Science Quarterly*, 54, December 1973, pp. 579-95.

To sum up, this paper has attempted to present a broad view of the consequences of urban poverty for women and the family, and to delineate some of the processes through which they adapt to the urban environment and cope with their conditions of poverty. Each of the four *bastis* included in the study was found to have its own unique internal social and political organisation which was influenced by the major caste, religious and regional identities of their populations. While *basti* dwellers can manipulate their physical environment to a certain degree in order to accommodate their differing values, customs and group identities, the harsh physical environment of the *bastis* was found to create special problems for the work and well-being of the family, especially for women who carry out most of the domestic work of the family, and children whose vulnerability was demonstrated by their high rates of mortality.

Nonetheless, arriving in Delhi from a background of crushing rural poverty, these migrants find themselves in some ways better off than they were in the villages. A large majority of those included in this study lived in nuclear families, but they maintained extensive kinship and caste networks within the city and in the *basti*. [Within the home, women and their daughters carried out the majority of household tasks, but there was considerable sharing between husband and wife in decision-making, with the husband maintaining an upper hand mainly in matters pertaining to the financial affairs of the family.] It was found that most *basti* women went to work out of sheer economic necessity (as they had in the village before they migrated), but that they earned less than half as much as men per unit of time worked. Discrimination against women in hiring and promotional practices was seen as one reason for their limited employment opportunities, but caste-specific values regarding the type of work considered appropriate for women to pursue, and their lack of skills and education also limited their options. Nonetheless, women were found to make an important economic contribution to the family, spending nearly all of their income on food, clothing and the most basic needs of the family. Still, most families could barely make ends meet. At least 40 per cent of the children under five suffered from malnutrition, and there was an exceptionally high rate of child mortality. It was also found that preventable diseases such as

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malaria and water-borne diseases were common, largely due to environmental factors. Women viewed their own most critical needs for the future as economic, while they wanted to see their sons get a good job and education and their daughters married well. The limited participation of *basti* women in the major social, economic and political structures of the city and the community was seen to result in a low degree of visibility and a poor understanding of their needs and priorities by the wider society.

CONCLUSIONS

This brief portrait of family life in Delhi squatter settlements makes it possible to make a few generalisations about the problem of urban poverty. For one thing, it is clear that the problem of urban poverty must be viewed within the context of the larger environment of the city and the wider rural society. The transplantation of the urban poor from rural poverty to urban poverty derives from a combination of factors, including the agrarian crisis of the countryside, the burgeoning need for workers in the low-paid jobs of the unorganised sector, and an accumulating shortage of housing in the fast growing cities of India. The cost of 'authorised' housing is beyond the means of these workers and yet the city at India's present stage of development apparently cannot continue to grow and develop without them. Thus, the growth of slums and squatter settlements must be considered but a natural consequence of the process of urbanisation in India. For the city, these migrants provide perhaps the strongest social and cultural links to the countryside as they bring many of their traditional customs to the city and maintain regular communication and contact with their kin in the village. In fact, it is these caste and kinship networks which shape the direction and size of migration streams to the city, and this is one reason for ethnic concentrations in squatter settlements as well as in occupations. Squatters in Delhi comprise more than 20 per cent of the city's population while slum dwellers comprise at least a third of the populations of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. There is every indication that the proportion of urban poor will continue to grow, regardless of rural development efforts. It is within this

larger functional context that the problem of urban poverty must be viewed and tackled.

It is clear that women play a major role in the family's efforts to cope with conditions of absolute poverty in the city. Few women in this study felt that they could afford the luxury of sitting at home, and it was clear that the women themselves had accepted the responsibility for finding a job and providing for the family. They also expected that their daughters would work after marriage to help to meet the basic needs of the family. Although our sample apparently included a somewhat higher percentage of female workers than is found generally among squatters in Delhi or in other cities, there is plenty of evidence to show that a significantly higher proportion of women in the lower income groups are employed than in the urban population as a whole.²⁹ Although their options are highly limited, it is the problem of under-employment, especially when defined in terms of low pay, that is far more severe than the problem of unemployment. This points to the rather inelastic market in which they compete for work. Raising their income would appear to be the most critical short-term need, while raising their levels of education and training them in new skills might be considered as long-term goals. Even if the females' average earnings were to equal that of the males', the standard of living of the family could be expected to rise dramatically since, as was shown here, a woman's earnings go almost entirely towards the basic necessities of the family. It is also generally accepted that as household income increases and the basic needs of food and fuel are met, the family can be expected to divert more of their resources into housing. Thus, by increasing the earning power of women, the poor would be able to invest

²⁹The survey of Delhi squatter settlements by the Town and Country Planning Organisation *op. cit.*, p. 105 estimates that 38.4 per cent of the adult women are employed, but this figure apparently does not include part-time workers who, as our study has shown, may work as much as forty hours a week. According to rough calculations based on census data, this means that percentage-wise about ten times as many women in squatter settlements are employed as women in the rest of the population of Delhi. Figures given for the slums of Madras indicate that nearly 30 per cent of the adult female population is employed. See Rama Aranganal, *op. cit.*, p. 24., and Wiebe (this volume). Unfortunately, comparable data for other cities of India are not available.

considerably more in their own housing than is possible at present.

I would also like to stress the important influence of ethnicity on the position of women in the family and the community. Differing values and customs derived from the rural society tend to persist in the urban environment so that it is inappropriate to generalise about women in lower income groups beyond a certain level. Women from U.P., for example, whether Hindu or Muslim, are often left behind in the village to assume the major social, and often economic, responsibility for their families when their menfolk migrate to the city. When they come to Delhi, they are reluctant to move beyond their homes or the *basti*, and tend to have a low work force participation rate. Among other regional and caste groups, however, families nearly always migrate as a unit, and in some groups women participate in the work force as actively as men. Work at least draws these women out into contact with the wider society, even if these contacts are limited in scope and content. Caste and regional values thus function to create a mosaic pattern in the urban female work force, limiting a woman's options even while they provide a ready source of employment because of the well-established social networks through which workers are generally recruited in the unorganised sectors. These kinds of patterns and processes are not unique to Delhi, to the lower class, nor indeed to Indian society. It remains for us to explore in greater depth, however, their precise configurations and consequences for women in India. Development programmes could be more meaningful and effective if such differences were taken into consideration.

Finally, it is necessary to consider the consequences of the prevailing custom of sex-segregation in Indian society for women among the urban poor. This custom expresses itself in different ways and degrees in different ethnic groups, but nonetheless exercises an influence on nearly every dimension of familial or social activity. Of course, this is true of the middle and upper levels of society, too, but there appear to be important qualitative differences in the consequences of sex-segregation for women in the lower socio-economic strata of society. Unlike women in the middle and upper classes, the women in *bastis* have little chance of attaining literacy, much less of getting an education or

vocational training which would allow them to compete in the modern sector of urban society. They do not even value education highly since they see little chance of benefiting from it. Their experience tells them that the jobs which are open to them have no such requirements; it is the men, they reason, who need education since all jobs are potentially open to them. In the unorganised sector, even where men and women are engaged in similar occupations such as in construction work, males and females are separated into sex-segregated teams and the women have no opportunity for further training or advancement. Jobs which are considered appropriate for women of the middle and upper classes to pursue such as teaching, nursing, and clerical work obviously require a far higher level of education and training than is within the reach of women in *bastis*. Less obvious, but at least as important, are the consequences of excluding women from the political structures and processes of society, and their failure to have developed alternative structures of their own. This also stands in sharp contrast to the multitude of women's associations in the middle and upper classes and their active participation in politics. As a result, women in *bastis* not only lack the machinery or power to press for their demands, but they also lack a medium through which their most urgent problems can become publicly known and comprehended by those in power.

Only when there is a fuller understanding of the social and cultural factors involved in urban poverty can we expect to make a genuine breakthrough in programmes and plans for urban development in India. This paper has focused on the contribution of women in coping with conditions of absolute poverty, and has attempted to suggest some of the most basic needs and priorities. Although they lack visibility or the political power to press for their demands, the needs of women and the family in such areas as education, training, employment, health, public facilities, and services are critical and urgently in need of attention. Policies which do not take these needs into consideration cannot possibly succeed in achieving the full potential for human growth and development in the cities of India.