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There Has Been No Silent Revolution: A decade of empowerment for women in rural Tamil Nadu[#]

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Abstract

In 2003, the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu in southern India, Jayaram Jayalalithaa, gave a speech about the "silent revolution" of the emancipation of Indian women. But 15 years on, regrettably, the promises of that revolution do not seem to have been fulfilled. Thanks to the various programmes set up to champion women's empowerment (involving local NGOs, public programmes and international support), women are now more prominent in certain public spaces and are able to play a genuine advocacy role as regards the public authorities. Girls education has also significantly improved. But it has not brought about improved employment opportunities. Women are in fact losing out on paid employment (as is the case in India as a whole). They are also heavily indebted (not only from microcredit, but also informal lending and lending from private financial companies). Their indebtedness is disproportionate to their income, and compared to men. Moreover, women almost exclusively put debt towards the social reproduction of families. Reduced opportunities for paid employment and massive debt have hit Dalit women particularly hard. Our analyses use data collected over more than a decade in a rural area of Tamil Nadu, drawing together ethnography and quantitative data, including panel data (2010-2016). They shed light on the complexity of social change, intertwining forms of domination (here, caste and gender), and the ambiguous qualities of so-called empowerment programmes, whose impacts have been various and unexpected.

Keywords: empowerment, gender, labour, debt, microcredit, India.

JEL code: O12, J16, J22, G51.

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Introduction

In 2003, Jayaram Jayalithaa, then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu in southern India, gave a speech about a "silent revolution" taking place in the Indian countryside thanks to microfinance. Women, she said, had acquired "top status" in society. The era of their dependency on men had been swept away forever (Guérin and Palier 2007). Sixteen years on, regrettably, the revolution does not seem to have delivered on its promises. Various programmes to support women's empowerment (bringing together local NGOs, public programmes and international support) have helped women to become more prominent across certain public spaces and to advocate for themselves to the public authorities (Kalpana 2016). Girls' education has also significantly improved. But this has not brought about improved employment opportunities. Women are indeed losing out on paid work (as throughout India). They are also heavily indebted (due to microcredit, but also informal lending and private financial lending), disproportionately so in terms of their income and compared to men. Moreover, women's debt is almost exclusively put towards the social reproduction of families. Reduced opportunities for paid employment and massive debt have hit Dalit women particularly hard.

Our analyses draw on data gathered for over a decade from a rural area of Tamil Nadu, combining ethnography and quantitative surveys, including panel data collection (2010-2016/17). They highlight the complexity of social change, the intertwining of forms of domination (here, caste and gender), and the ambiguous qualities of so-called empowerment programmes, whose impacts have been various and unexpected. We draw on feminist research in the field of development (Kabeer 1999; Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead 2007), including postcolonial approaches (Mohanty 1984; Batliwala 2015), to take a broad and open conception of women's empowerment that is alert to its multiple facets. These include materiality and power, but also lived experience, aspirations and social norms.

The first and second sections of this paper set out methodology and context. The subsequent sections turn to our findings: the decline of employment opportunities for women (Section 3), the burden of women's debt (Section 4) and our discussion and commentary (Section 5). The conclusion addresses the broader implications of these findings.

1. Method

Our analysis draws on mixed methods. Panel data collected in 2010 (*Rural Microfinance and Employment*, [RUME](#)) and 2016-2017 (*Networks, Employment, dEbt, Mobilities and Skills in India Survey*, [NEEMSIS](#)) from around 500 households have allowed us to quantify changes over time with respect to employment, education and debt through the perspective of gender¹. Beyond panel data collection, some of our authors have been carrying out fieldwork in this region since the early 2000s as part of the long-term 'Labour, Finance and Social Dynamics' research programme, which seeks to

¹ Of the 405 households surveyed in 2010, 388 were re-interviewed in 2016-2017, limiting the attrition rate to only 4%. 104 households were added, raising the second sample to 492 households. See Nordman et al. (2017) on NEEMSIS panel data collection methods and household and individual questionnaires.

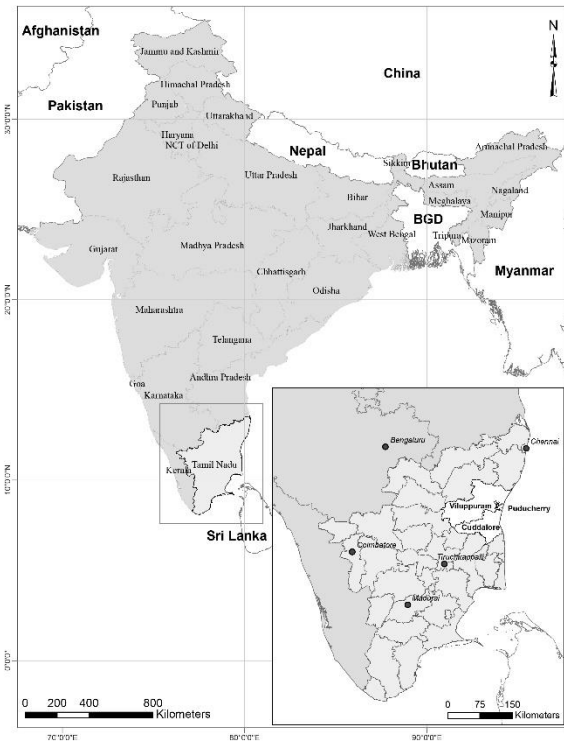
understand the local political economy, lived experiences and the complexity of change. It has mostly used descriptive statistics and qualitative methods such as ethnography, immersion in local life, life stories, informal interviews, participant observation and group discussions. Life stories have been used to reconstruct individual and family life trajectories, and to understand how various facets of these trajectories intertwine. Informal interviews with a wide variety of participants such as local leaders, politicians, officials, NGO and social workers allowed us to triangulate and cross-check information. Participant observation allowed us to better grasp the nature of social and power relations, to look behind the speeches and to grasp not only what people say, but what they do. Group discussions allowed us to gain a sense of social norms, beyond personal life trajectories.

A broad approach to ‘empowerment’ accompanies these mixed methods. We consider its structural and subjective qualities and multiple components – ‘empowerment’ is at once an economic, social, cultural and political process – and its multiple meanings, particularly as regards caste and class.

The choice of the study area – rural Tamil Nadu – is particularly meaningful since Tamil Nadu is one of the most economically and socially developed Indian states (Joshi and McGrath 2015). The region lies on the border of Cuddalore and Villipuram districts. It was selected because it exhibits several key tendencies in the State: strong diversification of rural activities, the rise of rural trade centers and some degree of industrialization, and various forms of agrarian transition, spanning peri-urbanized villages and villages that remain largely agricultural.

We will not focus on any one particular programme, on an ‘all things being equal’ basis (as impact studies aim to do), but on the region’s overall progression from the perspective of gender. Impact studies are of course highly useful and necessary. Yet in real life, programmes never operate on an ‘all things being equal’ basis, but within a particular context, most often alongside other forms of outside involvement. It is useful to examine how such varied factors and outside involvement interact, and how a given region changes over time. This region, as we shall discuss in the following section, has seen strong economic growth, a wide range of social policies, and active ‘financial inclusion’ programmes, with increasing support from private stakeholders.

Figure 1. The case study: a rural region in Tamil Nadu (South India)



Source: authors, with A. Ricout (IFP)

2. Context

Tamil Nadu has experienced strong and steady economic growth, and a long tradition of public interventionism, both to promote industry and support the development of rural areas, which still comprise almost two-thirds of the population. The following overview of the key stages of its development policies will help better understand its current specificities.

As elsewhere, the agricultural modernization of the ‘green revolution’ of the 1960s and 1970s massively boosted the country’s productive capacities. But it completely excluded women, the landless, small family farms, and arid regions (Harriss-White and Janakarajan 2004; Mencher 1974). Under the ‘green revolution’, women also came to predominate in daily agricultural employment. Small landowners, namely the majority of farmers, had been facing increasingly low profits, and so turned to a cheaper female workforce (Garikipati and Pfaffenzeller 2012). With inequalities exploding, the ‘fight against poverty’ was made a priority in the mid-1970s. Various development programmes sought to help households, but chiefly men, to diversify their income. The main concern for women was to curb fertility rates at all costs. It was not until the mid-1980s that women started to be approached as individuals (rather than mothers) and considered as potentially productive agents (other than in purely reproductive terms).

Various programmes to support women's employment were set up. The Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP) was introduced in 1986 and aimed to offer women employability skills on the labour market, as employees or small business owners. Quota policies were also implemented, such as Operation Blackboard in 1986, which (among other measures) sought for women to make up half of the elementary school teacher workforce.

But in theory, microcredit was the key tool to champion women’s employment, and it targeted entrepreneurship rather than wage employment. Civil society organisations were the first to take up microcredit in India in the 1970s and 1980s. It took off fully in the early 2000s, particularly in India’s southern states (including Tamil Nadu). ‘Empowerment’ – very much in vogue internationally – became the watchword. India’s main microcredit model started out as Self-Help Groups (SHG). These consisted of fifteen to twenty women who would circulate money amongst themselves, becoming eligible for external loans from NGOs, banks or non-banking financial companies. SHG groups in Tamil Nadu have received strong public policy and multilateral agency support, with uneven growth performance over the last two decades. By 2010, an estimated half of Tamil households (44%) and almost one fifth (18%) of the adult female population belonged to at least one SHG². By 2017, almost one million SHGs had been set up in the state (Sa-Dhan, 2017).

Although SHGs had an economic function (empowering women to save, issuing credit, promoting ‘entrepreneurship’), they were also drafted into managing the local commons (managing subsidized food shops; maintaining latrines, pumps, public lighting, water reservoirs), facilitating local democratic life (joining village committees, training candidates for local elections, supervising elections), and helping deliver government schemes by locating eligible beneficiaries.

Today, however, the financial supply is mostly driven by private and for-profit stakeholders. For various reasons that lie beyond the scope of this chapter, most microcredit NGOs have either left, been repurposed for other sectors or been turned into for-profit non-banking companies. This is the

² <http://ifmrlead.org/map-of-microfinance> Last accessed August, 27 2019.

only way to attract what is now fully private capital and to ensure their survival. New players have also been attracted by women borrowers as an emerging market segment. Extremely longstanding financial companies which traditionally targeted the urban middle class have now turned their attention to rural areas and women. For instance, the private company Muthoot, which has been around for over a century, has been investing in the countryside since 2010, focusing exclusively on women. It has had an average annual growth of 87%, and by late 2015 it was targeting over a million female clients (while women only made up 1.15% of workers).³ Muthoot has gained ground in even the remotest parts of the Tamil countryside, with its extremely dense network of branches and advertising for loan approvals within '3 minutes'. Other organisations, including SMILE and Equitas, were set up more recently. The annual interest rates (from 24% to 30%) are rather high by Western standards, but are slightly lower than averages worldwide. Their published default rates are low (below 5%). This is due to strong enforcement mechanisms (social pressure, public denunciations, refusals to renew loans). Besides microcredit, domestic credit distribution rose sharply in the 2000s. Housing and consumer loans tripled between 2001 and 2009 across all of India. Over the same period in Tamil Nadu, these loans increased almost six-fold. Consumer credit expansion continues, with a 2.5-fold growth in six years (2012-2018), much faster than production.⁴ Private commercial banks also started to show interest in this market segment. The private commercial banks had largely neglected rural areas after the banking sector was liberalized in 1991, but such areas drew growing interest from the end of the 2010s. The country's leading commercial bank, ICICI, which was founded in 1994 with a focus on the new middle class, now also invests in the countryside. From 2010 to 2014, its rural branches quadrupled across India.

As a villager we met in August 2015 put it, "before we fought to get money, now you just have to hold out your hand." Just a few hours in a village suffice to witness how dynamic, or even frenzied, private lenders can be, and they now approach clients in their own homes. As it was with microcredit, women are the main targets. As we will see later, our quantitative data confirm the size and growth of household debt.

Last but not least, all kinds of social programmes have sprung up, with women their main targets. These programmes are part of a long tradition of public interventionism. This intensified when the Congress Party was returned to power in 2004, and when the Hindu nationalist party (the Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP) took power in 2014. Its re-election in 2019 has done nothing to change the situation. A key example is the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) of 2006, which gave every rural family living below the poverty line the right to 100 days of paid work at the minimum wage per year. The subsidized food and school meal support schemes of the 1960s were also reinforced. Beyond centralised schemes, Tamil Nadu's successive governments over the past two decades have continued to compete with their state-run social schemes. The housing subsidy programme (100,000 to 180,000 Indian rupees per family in 2015; 1300 to 2000 Euros) has probably been the most ambitious example. Households (most commonly women) are also eligible to a wide range of fully or partially subsidized goods, including livestock, gas connections, household appliances (TVs, blenders, fans, bicycles, uniforms and stationery for students), subsidies for funerals and girls' weddings, and health insurance. The central and state governments also promote an active 'financial inclusion', which is meant to allow all adults to open a bank account. Two issues are at stake here: encouraging saving and facilitating social transfers.

³ <https://www.themix.org/mixmarket/profiles/muthoot-fincorp> Last accessed August, 27 2019.

⁴ Data are from the Reserve Bank of India <https://rbi.org.in> Last accessed April, 5 2019

The past two decades have thus seen a wide range of policies, programmes and various kinds of projects: microcredit and support for entrepreneurship, social transfers, and support for employment (NREGA, for instance). What insights can our longitudinal data offer as to how women's employment has evolved in the region?

3. The fall in women's employment⁵

Our first observation is a decline in employment for Dalit women. Despite various policies and programmes to help encourage women to take on paid work, the proportion of employed or self-employed women has only fallen significantly among Dalits; non-Dalit female employment rates were already low (cf. Table 1).

Almost 39% of the female labour force⁶ was unemployed in 2010, rising to almost half in 2016/17 (48.8%). While middle and upper castes maintained relatively stable rates of inactivity, this almost doubled from just over a quarter (26.3%) to almost half (46.7%) of Dalits. We shall return to the explanations behind this, but changes in employment structure are a key point. Over the same period, daily agricultural employment fell sharply, particularly among Dalit women. Agricultural coolie work (daily labouring) as a main occupation made up over 40% of paid employment in 2010, in contrast to under 10% in 2016/17. While this drop in agricultural employment also affected non-Dalit women, they seem to have more successfully converted to more sustainable jobs. Indeed, a drop in precarious employment was accompanied by greater regular employment levels among the middle and upper castes. By contrast, Dalit women continued to have limited access to (generally unskilled) permanent jobs, which only 20% of this group are engaged in. Last but not least, entrepreneurship is more and more the preserve of upper castes. The proportion of women entrepreneurs has slightly increased, but has remained low (4.2% to 7.2%). And crucially, this increase has mainly been driven by high-caste women. A significant proportion of these women have now turned to entrepreneurship (20.6% in 2016/17 as opposed to 9.2% in 2010). It has slightly risen among middle-caste women (from 3.1 to 7.6%), and fallen among Dalit women (from 3.6% to 2.4%).

⁵ This section draws on Michiels (2019).

⁶ 'Labour force' is used here in its broader definition: people of working age (over 15 years old) and available for work (out of school).

Table 1. Changes in female employment structure between 2010 and 2016/17

	Caste group			Total
	Dalit	Middle Caste	Upper Caste	
Main occupation in 2010	n=277	n=224	n=76	n=577
No occupation	25,3	43,8	52,6	36,1
Agri casual workers	43,7	29,9	21,1	35,4
Non-agri casual worke	17,3	4,9	0	10,2
NREGA	7,6	13,8	15,8	11,1
<i>Sub-total precarious employment</i>	<i>68,6</i>	<i>48,7</i>	<i>36,8</i>	<i>56,7</i>
Cultivator	0,4	1,8	0	0,9
Non-qualified permanent employment	0,7	0,4	1,3	0,7
Qualified permanent employment	1,4	1,8	0,0	1,4
Non-farm entrepreneur	3,6	3,1	9,2	4,2
<i>Sub-total regular employment</i>	<i>6,1</i>	<i>7,1</i>	<i>10,5</i>	<i>7,1</i>
Total	100	100	100	100
Main occupation in 2016	n=205	n=171	n=68	n=444
No occupation	45,4	43,9	60,3	47,1
Agri casual workers	15,6	6,4	0,0	9,7
Non-agri casual worke	8,3	5,8	0,0	6,1
NREGA	11,2	14,0	5,3	11,5
<i>Sub-total precarious employment</i>	<i>35,1</i>	<i>26,3</i>	<i>5,3</i>	<i>27,3</i>
Cultivator	3,4	11,7	4,4	6,8
Non-qualified permanent employment	10,7	9,4	5,9	9,5
Qualified permanent employment	2,9	1,2	2,6	2,3
Non-farm entrepreneur	2,4	7,6	20,6	7,2
<i>Sub-total regular employment</i>	<i>19,5</i>	<i>29,8</i>	<i>33,5</i>	<i>25,7</i>
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: Authors from RUME (2010) and NEEMSIS (2016-17), <https://neemsis.hypotheses.org>

Rural Tamil Nadu is no exception in India. It reflects agricultural decline, from which women and especially Dalit women are the first to suffer, as well as the dynamics of industrialization, urbanization and the (relative) tertiarisation of the economy, which mostly excludes rural women. Across India, female participation is not only low, but has been declining for several decades despite solid economic growth. According to World Bank data, it fell from 35.1% in 1990 to 27.2% in 2017, ranking India 210 out of 233 countries referenced worldwide. By comparison, women's labour force participation rate is 61% in China, 53% in Brazil and 57% in Russia⁷.

While Tamil is no exception in India, the country stands out from other emerging economies. But its rates remain close to what has been described as a "belt of classic patriarchy" in countries running from North Africa to India and Bangladesh via the Middle East (Kabeer 1988).

⁷ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS> Last accessed 27 August 2019.

4. The burden of female debt⁸

Women's employment rates, and by extension their incomes, are falling. But women are standing out financially for their ability to negotiate credit and manage debt despite their meager earnings.

Given their low and volatile incomes (women are much more likely to face irregular employment, although men are also affected), borrowing is used as a major strategy to smooth over the cost of consumption and manage budgets. In 2016/17, 99% of households in our sample had unsettled debts at the time of the survey, with an average of 4 loans to repay. Widespread household debt is also worsening. In the period between our two surveys, average outstanding amount increased by 50% (from an average of 97,000 rupees in 2010 to 189,000 rupees in 2016/17), a sharper rise than in incomes. The mean debt to household income ratio increased from 1.57 to 2.5. Our survey protocol did not provide for quantifying the progression of female debt from 2010 to 2016/17, but the second wave data reveal the significance of women's contribution to household financing, and particularly highlight a clear disparity between their income and debt levels.

Resorting to borrowing among women is far from a marginal occurrence; it affects three quarters of studied households (77%). But the descriptive statistics suggest that caste and poverty have an impact on the scale of women's debt. Dalit households rely more heavily on women's credits, along with lower income households. In the lowest decile of per capita household income, the proportion of female debt is, on average, two times greater than in the highest decile.

As a whole, women's involvement in the financial sphere stands in contrast to their contribution to household income. Women's share in total household debt is 37% in volume, for an income share of 22%. The borrowed amounts reflect the gender discrepancy in earnings. While men and women have a similar propensity take on debt, male borrowers have 2.2 higher debts than their female counterparts, on average. But they actually borrow far less in relative terms. Female borrowers get into debt to the tune of 9 times their annual income on average, as opposed to 3 times greater for males (3 and 1 at the median, respectively).

Differences in loan sizes also stem from differences in borrowing purposes and loan uses. Half (52%) of female borrowers had taken out at least one loan to meet daily expenses (notably food), as opposed to one third (35%) of males. On average, 40% of women's total debt was taken out for this purpose, namely double the men's level. By contrast, men are mainly the ones to invest in productive assets, accounting for 83% of loans (by frequency) for productive purposes. 27% spent some of their credit money on investments, while only 17% of women did. As Garikipari et al. (2017) highlight, these differences in borrowing purposes do not have solely economic consequences. While 'begging' for small amounts to ensure a livelihood is seen as degrading (particularly for men), borrowing large sums, especially from banks, is considered honorable and sign of social prestige.

According to our data, 29% of female borrowers have resorted to microcredit (3% of men). This includes both private microfinance loans and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) loans. These women tend to come from poorer households than other female debtors. There is a 20% lower mean per capita household income. They mostly consist of casual workers (78%), and less frequently the regularly employed (2%). They are however more frequently self-employed in the non-agricultural sector (12%). It is worth noting that three quarters of microcredit users top up their microcredit loan with

⁸This section draws on Guérin, Nordman, and Reboul (2019).

at least one other informal loan (73%). Although microcredit users' mean individual incomes do not significantly vary from those of non-users, there is a clear disparity between their rates of indebtedness. Microcredit users' have a mean debt to income ratio of 13 (4.6 at the median), in contrast to 7.6 among other female debtors (2.7). Microcredit debt accounts on average for half of users' outstanding debt (46%), and is triple their annual income (3.4). Crucially, this financial burden does not have an impact on borrowing motives and credit uses in terms of gender. Women who resorted to microcredit did not use such credit significantly more often to finance investments, but they did put it even more towards daily expenses.

Women's far greater indebtedness, which stems from their responsibilities for household reproduction, raises the critical question of financial assistance from men. Although it is limited, our data on a subsample of the loans (on 'main loans', namely those identified by the households as the most critical to repay)⁹ suggest that full pooling and sharing of debt within the household is far from the norm. For the vast majority of these main loans, the borrower is declared not to receive any help repaying (be it from a spouse, children or others). And while women's main loans certainly tend to draw more repayment assistance, female borrowers still are on their own for 64% of their main loans.

Finally, some insights into how debt repayment burdens are distributed, and into intra-household differentiated financial struggle, can be gleaned in terms of the use to which individuals put credit. Contracting debts to repay other debts can indeed be taken as an indicator of financial hardship. It turns out that 22% of female borrowers have used at least some of their loans to repay other loans, as opposed to only 9% of men. Moreover, women who have resorted to microcredit have significantly more often used at least some of that credit to repay other loans: 29% in contrast to 19% for the other borrowers¹⁰.

In brief, while women are equally likely to resort to credit as men, they become far more heavily indebted in relative terms. Their credits are mostly put towards non-productive uses, smoothing over consumption spending, and household reproduction. Not only does this hold true for microcredit loans, but those women who have resorted to microcredit become more deeply indebted than other borrowers. The descriptive statistics moreover suggest that women tend to have a higher share of debt in poorer, and Dalit, households. As has been shown elsewhere (Guérin, Nordman, and Reboul 2019), multivariate statistics confirm that both poverty levels and caste can explain female debt. This reflects both economic factors (poor households have a greater need for female debt for survival purposes) and social norms (Dalit women have historically had greater financial responsibilities).

⁹ Help with repayment was recorded only for the three 'main' loans of the household, i.e. those identified by members as the most critical to repay. While as such being a non-representative subsample of the loans, it seems plausible that there could be a potential bias towards over-estimating intra-household cooperation.

¹⁰ This result could still be driven by the fact that they contracted more loans and larger amounts, which would automatically increase the likelihood of a positive outcome in our non-exclusive categories of loan use.

5. Comments and Discussion: Women's ongoing role in social reproduction

While various programmes and policies were intended to promote women's employment, on the contrary, observation shows that activity rates among the upper and middle caste have stagnated, or declined among Dalits. Women are however massively indebted, disproportionately both to their incomes and to men. This is particularly the case among Dalit and poor households, where debt is primarily put towards the expenses of household social reproduction.

Each of these findings call for specific analyses, some of which have already been carried out (Michiels 2019; Guérin, Nordman, and Reboul 2019). But it is also instructive to undertake their joint analysis in order to pinpoint overall trends.

By and large, policies to promote women's employment, be this through paid work or self-employment, have clearly missed their mark, although the NREGA did slightly compensate for the fall in employment among Dalit women and serves as a safety net (see Table 1). As discussed above, self-employment remains very low or has even dropped among Dalits, while doubling among upper castes. Our method does not allow us to measure microcredit's contribution to these changes in isolation. But it is reasonable to say that microcredit's massive presence has comprehensively failed to foster self-employment among Dalits.

Two major explanations lie behind this. First there are various barriers to setting up businesses (Guérin, D'Espallier, and Venkatasubramanian 2015), some of which affect the whole population. These include the hierarchical and oligopolistic regulation of local markets, and intense competition from mass produced products for handicraft-based small businesses (tailoring, toy-making, cosmetics-making, processed food production, etc.). Other barriers particularly affect Dalits (continued discrimination from clients, particularly in food and service sectors, and sometimes from suppliers and officials). Other barriers more particularly affect women (lack of control over assets, strong restrictions on their physical mobility) while others even more particularly affect Dalit women (lack of networks to locate customers, suppliers and to navigate administration) (Guérin, D'Espallier, and Venkatasubramanian 2015; Guérin et al. 2017).

The second explanation concerns the use of microcredits. As we have seen, they tend to be put to non-productive purposes. Families need credit first and foremost to make ends meet. Even if incomes tend to increase, the increase in real incomes is less clear given the increase in needs. Self-consumption from agricultural production has almost died out, the privatisation or disappearance of a number of common goods such as water, wood, grazing imply new expenses. At the same time, expenditure on social and religious rituals is constantly increasing, while certain durable consumer goods are now essential for finding a job, such as mobile phones and motor vehicles. This increase in needs also stems from the privatisation of various goods and services, including education. Public schools exist but are increasingly underfunded. According to our data, 2016/17 education costs accounted for 15% to 20% of total household spending.

Quite clearly, microcredit's promises to help with starting up small businesses are not being kept. It is mainly a means of supporting consumer spending, ultimately reinforcing the role many Indian women already held in managing family budgets.

Our ethnographic and life story cases have shown that the consequences for women are not necessarily negative, and vary between women. They also highlight how the nature of cooperation

between spouses and the rest of the family (children, in-laws, own kin) is key to understanding the outcome of women's debt on their empowerment and well-being. For some, accessing new debt sources allows them to better manage their income and expenditure over time, to have more power in certain financial decision-making, and to get some sort of recognition within the household. Other women, by contrast, become trapped in a spiral of over-indebtedness, causing stress and anxiety, sometimes depression, and chronic family conflict that may turn violent.

Even at its best, however, the 'silent revolution' Jayalalithaa promised did not transpire, regrettably. Overall, the main effect of microcredit programmes has been to reinforce women's prominent role in social reproduction, ultimately broadening the spectrum of social reproduction to include financial management tasks, which are becoming increasingly sophisticated as a result of changes in the financial landscape.

But self-employment only accounts for very small proportion of women's employment. How do we explain why wage employment is also decreasing among Dalits? The first explanation, as mentioned above, is the decline of agriculture. Rural economies are diversifying; agriculture is losing importance or intensifying. The decline in the labour force is affecting women the most. Not only is the non-agricultural economy taking a jobless direction of growth, but the jobs that are created are much less accessible to rural women as they involve moving beyond their village. This is a freedom few rural women enjoy, particularly once they are married.

Improved education is another explanatory factor, which is often mentioned on a countrywide level. This is reflected in our longitudinal data, including justifications for caste differences. 46% of females under twenty-five completed secondary school in 2016/2017, as opposed to under 20% in 2010. While this improvement spans all castes, it is more noticeable among middle and upper castes. The disparities from Dalits actually tend to widen over time, which explains why middle and upper caste women are more likely to find non-agricultural jobs (Michiels 2019).

But we should also consider the consequences of the drop in female Dalit employment. Decision-makers have often made women's employment a target, assuming it to be a vehicle for women's empowerment. But it is in fact an ambivalent reality (Benería, Berik, and Floro 2015). If it comes to physical, poorly paid and socially undervalued tasks, the decline in female employment may be good news, as Judith Heyer argues about another region in Tamil Nadu (Heyer 2015). The social meaning of female employment also deserves our attention. In a context where spatial mobility and women's bodies remain tightly controlled, being a housewife may be socially valued and contribute to family prestige. This largely explains the differential in female activity rates between castes. While the employment of Dalit women is declining, it is now similar to that of middle castes, and remains higher than that of high castes, which is at a historic low level. While this social norm used to be confined to upper classes and castes, it is now spreading across other social groups, including certain Dalit groups: for women, not working can be positively valued, both individually and socially.

Qualitative analysis indicates that several factors explain Dalit women's withdrawal from paid employment, and that vary across generation. Young women say that they want to take care of their children, including when they go to school. This type of discourse is very new: historically, taking care of children was a family task, dedicated to mothers-in-law, older sister, even neighbours.

Managing household finances is another factor, which is more common among older women. As already mentioned, families juggle many loans and women take on a large share of them, especially among the poorest and the Dalits. Loan management is time-consuming and resembles a new form of unpaid work (Harriss-White and Janakarajan 2004; Kar 2018; Reboul et al. 2019). Incomes are erratic, declining (on average) for women, while men are far from all cooperative when it comes to

repayment. In addition to this, most loans are informal and based on interpersonal relations. For all these reasons, managing household finances requires a constant effort to maintain relationships in order to build and maintain trust (Hilger and Nordman 2020), and this with lenders, actual or potential, as well as with the family and entourage, who are also regularly solicited as lenders (and vice versa). Some women have stopped working, or work less regularly, in order to devote themselves to this financial management. This is obviously not a full-time job, but the mere fact of having to spend half a day at a borrower's meeting or going door-to-door in the village to find a lender prevents women from being available for a local employer or contractor, who prefer regular labour.

Finally, another factor also comes into play: many Dalit women now refuse to comply with working arrangements with local landowners, who are systematically high-caste. Going in front of their homes, waiting, showing deference and gratitude to get a job, accepting fluctuating wages: many women say they no longer want to accept "this kind of job".

We are thus clearly witnessing a "housewifization" process (Mies 1989), in which women are constructed as mothers and wives, increasingly dependent on male breadwinners, agents of consumption and called upon to demonstrate scientific home management in order to best manage household resources.

"Housewifization" does not mean however a seclusion and withdrawal into the private space. Rural women's presence in the public space has been one significant shift in their position over the past two decades. Dalit women had never really been excluded from this space, but their field of mobility rarely extended beyond their own neighbourhood. Non-Dalit women continue to keep a relatively low profile in their neighbourhoods, which remain predominantly male spaces. But due to their involvement in NGOs and social programmes, both Dalit and non-Dalit women now have greater mobility. Such improvement may remain modest and restricted to certain activities, particularly to the exclusion of paid employment. Many women are now allowed to travel to neighbouring towns to access and repay their microcredits. They attend collection offices to negotiate the terms of social programmes, or may take part in street demonstrations against the state's failure to provide certain basic services or to keep their welfare programme pledges.

The contradictions and ambiguities of these emancipation processes, and their subjective dimension, should be stressed here. As post-colonial (Mohanty 1984; Spivak 2003) and postmodern feminism (Marchand and Parpart 2003) have strongly emphasised, 'emancipation' does not necessarily mean the same thing everywhere and for all women.

In the narratives on women's empowerment by state government, several key terms are used over and over again: "women's negotiating ability to acquire money" and "not to depend on men", or their "decision-making to educate children". At political meetings, at local, regional or state level, political decision-makers, pursuing Jayalalithaa's legacy, regularly welcome the fact that all this has now been achieved. Women's political involvement is also highlighted, whether by political leaders or some NGOs.

The discourse of the women themselves and their own lived experience highlight different realities and perceptions. Our purpose here is not to sink into relativism or justify deep discrimination in the name of local tradition and culture. But any policy or programme intended to promote emancipation can ill afford to ignore local aspirations and subjectivities. Life stories, based on our fifteen-year follow-up of a dozen women, can highlight the intertwining of the various aspects of empowerment. By this we mean the enhanced ability to make choices, but also and above all, to resist domination. These life stories also highlight the chaotic and conflictual qualities of these life trajectories.

Empowerment is often a zero-sum game, and the empowerment of some often leads to the (relative) disempowerment of others, be they spouses or other women in the family or neighbourhood. Similarly, on the individual level, the various facets of empowerment are often contradictory (Guérin, Kumar, and Agier 2013). A win in one area can mean a loss in another. Typically, an active woman who has successfully acquired responsibilities, whether through employment, small business management or local leadership, can often face harsh criticism because her behaviour contradicts social norms (see also Still 2015). Visibility in the public space can sometimes come at a high price, not only at the individual level (ostracism from a part of one's family) but also on the collective level. Given the current crisis of masculinity and increased competition between social groups (especially between caste groups), increases in women's freedom, however meagre, are only tolerated if they can give access to resources such as credit or social transfers. But they can also be a source of constant tension and conflict in families (Anandhi, Jeyaranjan, and Krishnan 2002). Finally, given that identity and agency are first and foremost *relational* in this context, female independence is hard to conceive of and rarely sought after (Cornwall 2007). Women primarily seek to improve their position within their couple and extended family, with their in-laws and their family of origin, whose economic and moral support can be crucial.

Beyond the variety of life trajectories, however, we observed a common point. The role of women continues to be materially, socially and symbolically restricted to the social reproduction of the family, through the preservation of the group's honour. Economically, their incomes are low and their activity rates are declining, especially among Dalits. But women's role in accessing credit and in managing credit management is crucial, allowing families to make ends meet. Their modest increases in freedom are only possible or accepted if they are put towards such social reproduction.

Conclusion

What can be learned from this decade of transformation in a rural region of South India? Economic growth, alongside social and development policies, has not been enough to structurally improve women's position and access to material resources, including employment. The weight of patriarchal social and cultural norms continues to severely restrict their agency and freedom. When women do manage to gain some agency and freedom, they remain subject to the social reproduction constraints of their family and group of belonging.

Unsurprisingly, economic growth does not automatically help emancipate women, as many feminists have already shown (Kabeer 2016). But the unexpected, mixed effects of social and development policies are more disappointing and current social and development policies need to be put in question.

While this range of social transfer measures has undoubtedly contributed to the social reproduction of the family, helping women fulfil their prescribed role, various observers have concluded that they mainly serve as safety net. True social security, genuine infrastructure and basic public goods are still lacking. Public spending on social transfers has increased significantly since the 1990s, but it has run alongside the commodification of basic services such as education, public health (although this varies across states, and Tamil Nadu is certainly one of the most advanced at improving public health services), water and sanitation (Jayal 2013; Kapur and Nangia 2015). The public employment programme, as we have seen, has partially compensated for the decline in Dalit female employment. But it has done nothing to further sustain access to quality jobs. Most employment for both women

and men remains informal, unprotected, and outside any social protection system. India's very high levels of informal employment are only continuing to rise throughout India (Kannan 2019).

As far as development policies are concerned, microcredit and particularly its current forms under for-profit organisations appear to represent a new stage in the history of gender policies. Women were initially forgotten under development, before being considered as workers, which furthered the industrialisation of several emerging economies, and then as self-employed. Our observations on the failure of this entrepreneurial dream largely confirm other findings, both from India (Garikipati 2008; Kalpana 2016; Pattenden 2010) and elsewhere (Cull and Morduch 2017). Not only is most microcredit put toward expenses that do not generate direct income, but the collective action dimension championed by SHGs has completely disappeared. This, too, highlights the increasing commodification of the microfinance sector. Echoing a historical process, specific to capitalism (Mies 1989), women are no longer considered as workers or self-entrepreneurs, but simply as borrowers, consumers and managers of household finances. This reflects a very narrow vision of empowerment.

Patriarchal norms meanwhile weigh as much on men as on women. Public debate and deliberation are certainly an essential force for change, which is one of Amartya Sen's main conclusions in his work on gender inequalities and his reflections on how to reconcile respect for individual freedoms with changing norms (Sen 2000). Historically informed feminist research has consistently stressed the crucial role of collective action in women's empowerment, both to win rights and to transform patriarchal norms. These ultimately remain one of the most complex barriers to be eradicated (Agarwal 1994; Scott and Tilly 1975). The SHG movement could have helped achieve this, but it never involved men, without whom it is difficult to transform social norms. It also never fulfilled its promises of true participation. Real participation requires an open and indeterminate horizon, which depends on what its members collectively decide. The scaling up of the SHG movement and its massive spread has, regrettably, resulted in a standardization of practices (Nair 2016). This is ill-suited to a real process of empowerment (Sudarshan 2015). Here again, the case of India seems to be no exception, as witnessed by the ambiguous outcomes of scaling up local women's groups elsewhere, such as in Peru (Anderson 2015) and in Kenya (Johnson 2015). Embedding empowerment policies and programmes within local realities and adapting them to local constraints and norms look to be the only way to promote sustainable change, attentive to both universal ideals of freedom and empowerment, and to local, necessarily diverse aspirations and identities (Kabeer, Sudarshan, and Milward 2013; Guérin and Nobre 2014).

Regrettably, the Sustainable Development Goals have forged and nurtured current policies in India and well beyond, leaving little room for these recommendations (Cornwall and Rivas 2015). Not only does women's market inclusion remain a key priority, but privatising initiatives through so-called public/private partnerships, is being strongly encouraged. In the microfinance sector, as we have seen, this completely ignores the potential for collective empowerment that some initiatives have been able to demonstrate (Kabeer 2011; de França Filho et al. 2018). It seems there is still a long road to equality.

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