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Women's work: Invisible but vital

Session at a glance

Recap

Warm up/ Drawing

Draw a farmer

Poster

Some facts about women's work – Agriculture

Story/ Discussion/ Poster

Some facts about women's work – Industry

Worksheet 8

My mother does not work

Preparing for the session

The session begins with a warm up that requires all students to have a piece of paper to draw on, so do ask them to get that and a pencil beforehand.

The rest of the session involves discussing some facts about women's work in society with the help of posters; please have a look at the information given in the manual in advance. Do encourage all students to participate; do probe, as this issue is not normally talked about with any depth or clarity.

The final activity encourages children to question their opinions of their mothers', sisters', grandmothers' roles in running the home; they may feel shy or hesitant to talk about these issues, particularly about attitudes and practices within their homes, but hopefully it will also make them show their appreciation by helping in household tasks. Do convey this message to the children – not as a rule that must be followed, but as a way of supporting the women in their lives.

The worksheet at the end of the session will be referred to again in the last session. Encourage the children to fill it and remind them to look after it and bring it to class for Session 12.

Main ideas

- Women work for much the same reason as men do – they need money. Yet their work is not given the importance and recognition that it deserves.
- Women are given fewer opportunities to educate and train for the work they do.
- They are also paid much less than men and generally do much more unpaid work. Women constitute half of the world's population but receive just one-tenth of the total income.
- Their work is more labour intensive, time consuming and tedious. Often there is no social security offered to them if they are unable to continue working.
- Across the world, the main responsibility for housework and care-giving tasks lies with women. Unfortunately, even women themselves do not recognize this as work.
- While gender discrimination continues, it is also true that society's understanding of women's role is – slowly but surely – changing.

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Reflection

My home, my job

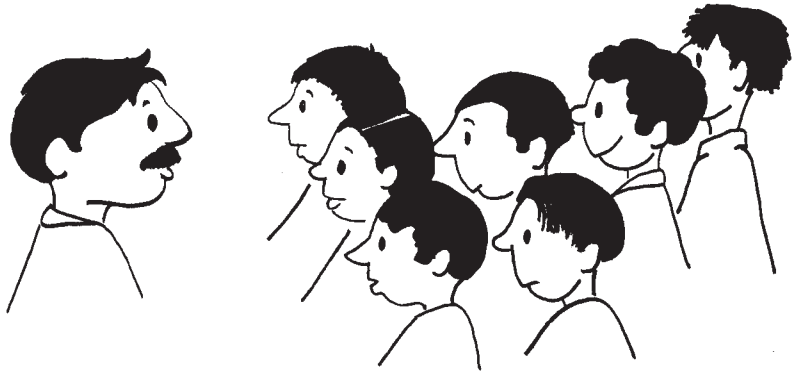
Home Activity

Worksheet 9
Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

Worksheet 10
Florie's story

Materials

- Poster: *Some facts about women's work – Agriculture*
- Poster: *Some facts about women's work – Industry*
- Worksheet 8: *My mother does not work* (one copy per student)
- Worksheet 9: *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (one copy per student)
- Worksheet 10: *Florie's story* (one copy per student)



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Conducting the session

Recap

In the last few sessions we saw how we acquire our notions of gender from different sources like the family, peer group and media. We saw that women have less power and prestige in society – why? One reason is that women's work is not given due importance. Let us see how that affects their position in society.

Activity 1
Warm up/Drawing

Draw a farmer

Tell the students to take a sheet of paper and a pencil; ask them to think of any farm they know, and to imagine a farmer working on a field there. Tell them to draw that farmer with the background scenery as they like; they should be as realistic as possible, illustrating clothing, farming implements, activities etc. After they finish they should write down the farmer's name too. When all drawings are completed, invite them to tape their drawings on the walls/board and ask them to view the drawings of others. Try to keep the drawings up until the end of the session and even after, so that they can look at the pictures again and reflect on them.

Count the number of drawings that show female farmers; they are likely to be much fewer than those that have male farmers. Draw the attention of the class to this fact and conclude by saying that the drawings represent everyone's subconscious views about farm work and farmers. We tend to think of farmers as males, though a large part of agricultural work is done by women.
Then move on to the next activity.

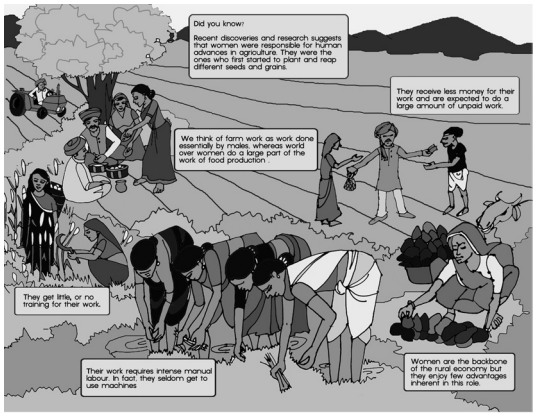
Activity 2
Poster

Some facts about women's work – Agriculture

Display the poster that makes some pertinent points about women's work in rural areas. **Please note that the poster has points in brief; you will need to give more detailed information about each point – the matter given below can help you to do that.**

Poster: *Some facts about women's work – Agriculture*

- We think of farm work as work done essentially by males, whereas world over women do a large part of the work of food production – in most Asian countries, women are responsible for the family and the farm; in Africa they are the biggest contributors to agriculture. In India almost 70% of farm work is done by women.



- Their work – planting, weeding, reaping, winnowing, cleaning, etc. – requires intense manual labour.
- In fact, they seldom get to use machines; when machines like threshers are used women who did that kind of work earlier lose their jobs and income.
- As it is, they receive less money for their work and are expected to do a large amount of unpaid work, such as looking after animals, collecting manure for use in the farm, cleaning and storing produce, etc.
- They get little, or no training for their work. Agricultural colleges in the country have very few female students.
- Women are the backbone of the rural economy but they enjoy few advantages inherent in this role.

Did you know?

Recent discoveries and research suggests that women were responsible for human advances in agriculture. They were the ones who first started to plant and reap different seeds and grains. Early division of labour meant that while men hunted, women used to gather vegetables, roots and fruits to supplement the diet of the community. They developed an understanding of which plants were edible and which poisonous, which season provided the most produce, how to store seeds and use them to get new plants. Thus their knowledge of plants must have been put to good use when they began to grow their food.

After putting away the poster, tell the class that this unfairness towards women's work can be seen elsewhere too, as the next activity will show.

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Activity 3
Story/Discussion/ Poster

Some facts about women's work – Industry

Narrate the following incident to the class:

Arun, a senior personnel manager with the ABCD Bank was discussing a work problem with his wife Zoya at dinner. A female employee, who worked in the call centre of the Bank, had filed a case in Court saying that the Bank had discriminated against her on the basis of gender. Arun explained that the situation had arisen because the Bank's systems were being upgraded and the work continued until 3 o'clock in the morning for two weeks. All male employees were allowed to work the night shift; they got extra money for the shift too. The women, including the complainant, were disallowed to do any kind of night work.

On hearing this, Zoya exclaimed "Well that does sound unfair. Why shouldn't the women get a chance to earn extra money too?" Arun protested, "Arre bhai, it's for their safety only that the Bank has made this rule, na. That late at night, how will they get home safely?"

"It's not safe for men too these days! The Bank should provide transport for employees in such situations; many call centres do that now", suggested Zoya. "Yeah sure, so that we have to face more cases – haven't you heard of employees being raped and killed by their transport drivers? Then the Bank is dragged to Court and hounded by the media. Who wants to get into such lafdas?" said Arun. "No, no, it is best for all parties concerned, that only male employees should handle such tasks. In fact, the Bank would lose more money paying transports costs plus overtime to these women" Arun opined.

Zoya was surprised to hear that Bank policy stated that women working in their call centres must stop work at 10 pm while male employees had no such restrictions. She was dismayed when she learnt that in future the Bank planned to hire fewer women because

of such restrictions and the fact that they could get pregnant and go on maternity leave, thus affecting work momentum.

Zoya looked at their daughter busy on her laptop and wondered if she'll achieve her career dreams!

After they have absorbed the story, initiate a discussion with the help of questions like the following.

- Do you think ABCD Bank discriminated against female employees? Give reasons for your opinions.
- Are women discriminated against in other ways also? Give examples if possible.
- Do you think that their taking a break to have and care for children affects women's work?
- What can ABCD Bank do to make it easier for women to work in their organization?
- If more employers stop hiring women because of such reasons, what sort of future will Zoya's daughter have?

Display the second poster; this one makes some pertinent points about women's work in urban areas and industries. **Please note that the poster has points in brief; you will need to give more detailed information about each point – the matter given below can help you to do that.**

Poster: *Some facts about women's work – Industry*

- Women constitute half the world's population but receive just one-tenth of the total income.
- Women find it hard to compete in the job market as they receive less training and technical education.
- Between 85 – 90% of the workers in the world's export manufacturing zones are

unskilled or semi-skilled – most of them are women. They are the ones who make the computers we use, the gadgets that make our lives convenient and fun, the shoes we run in, the clothes we wear – the Apples and Nikes and Levis and Samsungs!

- In our country women and children work in huge numbers in bidi rolling, agarbatti making, bangle making, weaving, brassware, leather, crafts and other such small scale industries. They are forced to work for pitiable wages and are denied all social security benefits.
- Women find it difficult to get loans and credit, as they don't have property to offer as guarantee. This reduces their options for creating employment and expanding small businesses.
- The corporate sector in all parts of the world employs fewer women than men. Even where they are employed in large numbers, they seldom work in managerial positions. There are many fewer women in top positions of power and in boardrooms.
- Women's salaries add to the family income; in many homes they are the main income earners, yet their condition hasn't improved in society.
- Unfortunately, the demand for female labour has significantly declined in most parts of the world.

Did you know?

According to a recent study by the International Labour Organization, in almost all countries, whether rich or poor, women earn comparatively less than men.

In Bollywood the highest paid female actor gets only 25 to 40% of the salary of the highest paid male actor. The case is much the same in Hollywood.

Until recently, Air India had a different retirement age for female Cabin Crew – they retired at 50 whereas males retired at 58 – now all retire at 58. They fought for many years to get this changed because the work they did was the same. They were opposed at every step of the way by their male colleagues!

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After putting the poster away sum up the preceding activities by making the following points.

Women work for much the same reason as men do – they need money. They too have to feed themselves and their families and pay their bills. They too enjoy certain tasks and look for ways to become better at them. They can be doctors and chartered accounts and tailors and beauticians. They work in factories, banks, hotels, in brick making units and cotton mills. In spite of all the odds, today more and more women work, as education and rising prices make it possible and necessary to earn money.

This new economic independence has made a difference to their social status but the general attitude towards the work women do seems to be one of grudging acceptance at best and indifference at worst. Nowhere does it show as much as in our homes; the next activity will show exactly how little value we attach as a society to women's work.

Activity 4

Writing/Discussion

My mother does not work

Introduce Worksheet 8 by reading the paragraph given below.

A teacher was discussing families in class and asked students to describe their own. She asked them what their parents did. Hands shot up all over the class as children eagerly waited their turn to answer. "My father works at a movie theatre, he operates the projector there and my mother works in a shop", said one boy. Another said that his parents both were lawyers and worked in the same office. A girl shyly said that her mother was a hairstylist while her father worked

as a cameraman in TV serials. When it was Sameer's turn he got up and proudly announced that his father owned a small Udipi restaurant; when asked about his mother, he said that she did not work.

Now distribute a copy of Worksheet 8 to each student. Tell then that the worksheet shows a set of pictures showing a day in the life of Sameer's mother. Ask them to take a close look at the pictures and decide if they agree with Sameer – that his mother did not work.

Give them 10 minutes for this and then ask them what they thought about the work that Sameer's mother does. Encourage them to discuss their opinions; the following questions may help you in conducting an effective discussion.

- So, do you feel that Sameer's mother does not work?
- Do you think that the work of the mother and father is given equal value? In this family do they have the same status?
- Housework is invisible, time consuming and physically demanding. Do you agree?
- Do you find the situation described above familiar? Have you seen families like this?
- Did you find anything wrong with this situation? What?
- Why does Sameer's mother not expect more help from her husband? Why does he not offer to do more in the house?
- What will Sameer and his sister learn from what they see their parents do? How do you imagine they will behave when they grow up?
- Does this tell you anything about how we learn our gender roles?

Then sum up the activity by making the following points.

In the above activity, we saw that the work Sameer's mother does within the house is non-stop and physically tiring, but it is not seen as work. This is not unique to this family – across the world, the main responsibility for housework and care-giving tasks, like looking after the family, especially children, elderly and sick members, lie with women. As we have seen, the work that women do within the home is not recognized as work. It is also assumed that it is something that comes naturally to women hence it is easy for them. This attitude is so common in society that like Sameer,

many of us can unhesitatingly make the statement "My mother/wife does not work". The irony is that if one asked Sameer's mother she too would say – "I'm just a housewife; I don't work!"

Another aspect of housework that is seldom recognized is that it is very time consuming. In fact, if we add up the hours they spend doing housework, we find that women spend much more time working than men and have far less time for leisure. They are also 'permanently on call', which means that they can be asked to interrupt their work or rest for any reason – answering the doorbell, attending to children, heating food, making tea, entertaining guests. If a woman works outside the home as well, then her condition is even more challenging. In most cases she has to do double duty – that is, she has to manage household tasks along with her professional responsibilities. In some families, husbands and children do share the workload at home but by and large, the woman has to bear the double burden alone. A woman's workday is longer than that of men – 15 to 19 hours on an average.

Attitudes about how girls and boys/women and men behave are learnt in the family by watching the adults around us. Sameer and his sister will absorb what they see in their family, unless they are made aware of the unfairness of the situation and learn to share the household chores. If their father too helps in household tasks, they will learn from him and he will be able to enjoy his interaction with them. The fact that housework is devalued affects what women feel about themselves. If men help with housework it changes the mood in the family and helps children become conscious of the dignity of labour as well as learning to be gender fair. For it is only when there is true equality at home, can there be equality in society.

Activity 5
Reflection

My home, my job

This is meant to be a quick wind up for the session, so ask the questions soon after the sum up of the previous activity and conclude quickly. The idea is to help them examine if, and how much, they share in household tasks. It is also hoped that hearing their classmates say that they do help at home will convince those who don't to begin. Most important is to realize that none of these tasks need only a male or only a female to do them; they can give a sense of purpose to both. Make sure that both boys and girls answer these questions – see to it that boys talk about cooking and girls about driving, so that gender stereotypes are not re-inforced.

- How many of you help at home? What work do you do?
- How many of you know how to cook? To iron clothes? To pay bills?
- How many of you know how to change a light bulb? To repair an electric plug?
- How many of you know how to shop for vegetables? Where do you go to buy your groceries?
- How many of you spend time looking after grandparents or elderly relatives/friends?
- How many of you have looked after younger children?
- How many of you want to learn how to drive? How many want to learn how to operate a bank account?

After they have discussed this, sum up the session by making the following points.

In recent years, as more and more women work outside the home, people have realized that, except for tasks that require extreme physical exertion, women can excel in all the fields men can. Similarly, except for childbearing and breastfeeding, there are no tasks that men cannot perform as well as women. The fact that there have been female scientists, mechanics, taxi drivers, pilots, doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs and managers and male designers, chefs, hairdressers, nurses, kindergarten teachers in great numbers shows that limiting what people can do because of their sex is illogical and entirely invented by societies. Therefore societies can also demolish this artificial separation and create more equality between the sexes.

Women are made to feel that their duties concerning home and care-giving are most important, and that no one can do this work better than them. This makes it difficult for them to imagine any other options for themselves On the other hand men are made to feel that they will not be as good at such tasks and thus it is better for them not to work at home. This is not a natural division of labour but is deliberately created by our patriarchal society – it is necessary and possible to change this unfair and artificial division. Since many women now work outside the home, they are forced to stretch their energies to manage all sorts of jobs both inside and outside the house.

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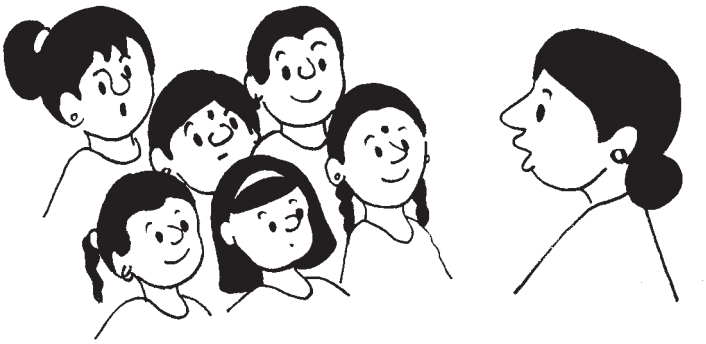
But in spite of the added burden, education and economic independence have made a huge difference to a woman's life today. It will not be wrong to say that her reality today is substantially different from her mother's and vastly different from that of her grandmother. The worksheet that you will fill at home will reveal to you just how much change has occurred.

Home Activity

Worksheet 9
Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

Worksheet 10
Florie's story

Distribute Worksheets 9 and 10 to the class and ask the students to fill them at home and file them in their folders. They will need Worksheet 9: *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* for Session 12, so do ask them to look after it.