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From the Threshold to the Trade Union: The Intervention of Women's Organizations in Labour, Employment, and the Domestic Economy in 20th-Century Eastern Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract: This article investigates the trajectory of women's organizational interventions in the economic sphere of Eastern Uttar Pradesh (Purvanchal) during the twentieth century. A significant portion of historiography has concentrated on the political roles played by women in the struggle against colonial ruleor their social reform regarding marriage and education, this study centers on the materialist interventions of women's collectives—ranging from elite philanthropic associations to radical peasant auxiliaries—in regulating labor, employment, and the domestic economy. Adopting a multidisciplinary lens that synthesizes social history, labor economics, and gender sociology, the article argues that women's organizations in Eastern UP functioned as critical mediators between the "private" domestic economy and the "public" labor market. It scrutinizes how these organizations navigated the semi-feudal agrarian relations of Gorakhpur and Basti, the weaving economies of Varanasi, and the intellectual-administrative nexus of Allahabad. The study further elucidates how caste hierarchies and the unique "money-order economy" of the region shaped the efficacy and ideological orientation of these interventions.

Introduction - The twentieth century marked a period of intense renegotiation of social arrangements in the United Provinces (later Uttar Pradesh).In Eastern Uttar Pradesh—a region historically characterized by high population density, recurring famine, and a reliance on migratory labor—the economic roles of women were often obscured by the rigid purdah norms of the upper castes and the sheer ubiquity of invisible subsistence labor among the lower castes. However, the period from the 1920s through the 1980s witnessed a transformation in how women engaged with the economic machinery of the region. No longer isolated agents of domestic drudgery, women began to coalesce into organizations that directly intervened in labor disputes, employment advocacy, and the management of the domestic economy.

This paper explores how various women's organizations, including AIWC branches, women's wings of peasant unions, and informal trade bodies in weaving and cottage industries, attempted to reconstruct the economic lives of women in Eastern UP.The central research question is twofold: First, how did these organizations conceptualize "women's work" in a region where the dichotomy between productive and reproductive labor was porous? Second, to what extent did class and caste schisms limit the capacity of these organizations to form a unified front on labor issues?

By moving beyond the standard nationalist narrative which privileges political mobilization against the British Raj, this study posits that the most enduring, albeit contentious, legacy of these organizations lies in their economic interventions. Whether it was the Gandhian constructive programs promoting *khadi* spinning as an economic safety net in Azamgarh, or the radical mobilization of landless female laborers in the localized agrarian uprisings of the post-independence era, these interventions challenged the patriarchal bargain that sought to confine women's economic agency to the household.

Historiographical Context and Literature Review

The historiography of women in colonial and post-colonial India has matured significantly, moving from "contribution history"—listing women who participated in the freedom struggle—to complex structural analyses of gender. However, the specific economic history of women's organizations in Eastern UP remains under-explored, often subsumed under broader studies of the United Provinces or the Hindi Heartland.

Foundational works by scholars like Radha Kumar and Geraldine Forbes have extensively documented the advent of the "women's movement" in subcontinent, focusing largely on the legislative battles for franchise and personal law reform.[1] Forbes, in *Women in Modern India*, provides an exhaustive account of the AIWC, yet the narrative is frequently centered on the metropoles of Bombay, Madras, and to a lesser extent, Allahabad. The specific socio-economic fabric of the Eastern districts—Gorakhpur, Ballia, Ghazipur, and Varanasi—requires a more granular analysis. In examining Uttar Pradesh, Gooptu's study of the urban poor offers a significant gateway into the region's socio-political transformations.Gooptu demonstrates how the urban poor in towns like Varanasi and Allahabad constructed their political identities, yet her focus remains largely on the male subaltern.[2] Similarly, William Gould's work on Congress politics in UP touches upon gender but primarily through the lens of communalism and political symbolism rather than economic organization.[3]

A crucial gap exists where labor history intersects with gender studies in this region. While Chitra Joshi has chronicled the lives of Kanpur mill workers, revealing the masculinization of the industrial workforce, Eastern UP lacked a centralized industrial hub like Kanpur.[4] Its economy was agrarian and artisanal. Therefore, the "labor" intervention of women's organizations here looked different: it was not about factory gates, but about farm wages, weaving looms, and the price of grain.

Recent scholarship by Charu Gupta has successfully opened up the cultural history of gender in the UP heartland, examining how literature and print culture policed female sexuality.[5] This article seeks to complement Gupta's cultural analysis with a materialist one, drawing upon the insights of Govind Kelkar regarding women and land rights to understand how organizations grappled with the economic dispossession of women in the feudal hinterlands of Purvanchal.[6]

Theoretical and Methodological Framework: To analyze the varied nature of these interventions, this article employs a multidisciplinary framework integrating Social History, Feminist Economics, and Sociology.

Reconstructing the economic history of women in Eastern UP requires reading "against the grain" of colonial and state archives. Official records, such as the *United Provinces Provincial Congress Committee (UPPCC)* papers or Criminal Investigation Department (CID) reports, often dismiss women's economic protests as "riots" or "subsidiary unrest."[7] This study triangulates these official sources with vernacular literature (journals like *Chand* and *Grihalakshmi*), pamphlets from the AIWC archives, and oral historical accounts of peasant movements preserved in sociologists' field notes.

Theoretically, the article rejects the binary of "working" vs. "non-working" women. In the agrarian economy of Eastern UP, domestic work *is* economic work. The processing of crops, the care of livestock, and the spinning of yarn are integral to the value chain. As outlined by Maria Mies in her theory of the "housewifization" of labor, capitalism (and colonial semi-feudalism) relies on defining women's work as non-wage "service."[8] The analysis here focuses on how women's organizations either reinforced this ideology (by promoting "supplementary" income schemes) or challenged it (by demanding direct wages).
Eastern UP is distinct for its rigid caste stratification and high density of Brahmin and Thakur landownership, juxtaposed with a large population of Dalit and OBC laborers. The theoretical framework draws on M.N. Srinivas's concept of "Sanskritization" but inverts it to look at economic labor.[9] Often, as lower-caste families accrued wealth, they withdrew women from labor organizations to mimic upper-caste seclusion. Conversely, leftist organizations in the region attempted to mobilize across these caste lines using class solidarity, often with mixed results.

The earliest organized interventions in the domestic economy of Eastern UP were spearheaded by elite women, often wives of lawyers, bureaucrats, or nationalist leaders in cities like Allahabad and Varanasi. These early organizations, most notably the local branches of the AIWC and the Mahila Samitis, viewed women's employment not as a right to livelihood, but as a vehicle for moral rehabilitation and national service (*seva*).

The Gandhian Constructive Programme as Economic Policy: In the 1920s and 30s, the economic stagnation of Eastern UP was palpable. The collapse of the indigo industry and the pressure on land created severe distress. Into this vacuum stepped the Gandhian constructive program, which women's organizations adopted enthusiastically. In Allahabad, the swadeshi movement morphed into an economic imperative. Organizations like the *Prayag Mahila Samiti* set up charkha (spinning) centers.[10]

However, the economic logic of these interventions was flawed by their class character. For the elite women organizing these initiatives, spinning was symbolic. For the rural women of the eastern districts they targeted, it was survival. Archives from the *AICC Papers* reveal a disconnect: while urban organizers in Varanasi promoted khadi as a patriotic duty, rural women in the surrounding districts of Mirzapur and Ghazipur demanded market linkages and fair prices for the yarn, demands that the benevolent associations were ill-equipped to handle.[11]

Furthermore, these organizations largely operated within the "domestic" sphere, unwilling to challenge the gendered division of labor. They promoted industries that could be done *inside* the home—embroidery, pickle-making, and spinning—thereby reinforcing the *purdah* system rather than dismantling it. As Francesca Orsini notes in her study of the Hindi public sphere, the domestic sphere was politicized, but it was rarely revolutionized in economic terms during this phase.[12]

The Depression and the Shift to Welfare: The economic downturn of the 1930s severely affected the agrarian structure of Eastern Uttar Pradesh. Agricultural prices collapsed, and the so-called "money-order economy," which depended on remittances sent by migrant workers in Calcutta and Bombay, weakened as employment opportunities in these urban centers contracted. In this context of economic distress, women's organizations shifted their focus from symbolic nationalist engagement to practical crisis intervention.In Gorakhpur, distinct from the elite politics of Allahabad, smaller, localized women's groups began to emerge, often linked to the Arya Samaj or local Congress committees. They opened "widow homes" which functioned as proto-employment exchanges, training destitute women in weaving and tailoring.[13] While still couched in the language of welfare, these were the first systematic attempts to integrate marginalized women into the cash economy outside of agricultural labor.

The Radical Turn—Peasant Women and the Left (1940s–1950s): While the philanthropic interventions of the AIWC and Congress-affiliated Mahila Samitis dominated the urban centers of Allahabad and Varanasi, a distinct and far more militant form of economic organization was taking root in the rural hinterlands of Azamgarh, Ghazipur, and Ballia. By the mid-1940s, the deepening agrarian crisis, exacerbated by the Bengal Famine's inflationary ripple effects and the localized scarcities of World War II, created fertile ground for the *Kisan Sabha* (Peasant Union) movement.

Unlike the Gandhian constructive programs which sought to ameliorate poverty without disturbing social hierarchies, the intervention of the CPI and socialist factions of the Congress in Eastern UP framed women's economic distress as a structural consequence of semi-feudal land relations. Here, the "organization" of women was not formal or registered in the manner of urban societies; rather, it was the mobilization of female agricultural labor into a combative force.

The historiography of the Kisan Sabha in Uttar Pradesh has traditionally focused on male leadership—figures like Baba Ram Chandra or Swami Sahajanand Saraswati.[14] However, archival fragmentation reveals that in the eastern districts, where male migration to the coalfields of Bengal and the mills of Bombay was highest, women were often the de facto cultivators. Leftist organizers in Azamgarh utilized this demographic reality to mobilize women against *begar* (forced labor) and illegal exactions by Zamindars.[15] A critical multidisciplinary reading of this period suggests that these mobilizations were hybrid in nature. Sociologically, they challenged the upper-caste taboo on women's public visibility. Economically, they were the first explicit demand in the region for the recognition of female labor value. During the *Bakasht* struggles (struggles for self-cultivated land rights) that bled over from Bihar into the border districts of Eastern UP, women deployed traditional gender roles as weapons—using *mirchi* (chili powder) and household brooms to repel police and landlord goons.[16] This was not merely symbolic; it was a defense of their economic assets—the standing crops.

However, a fissure remained. While the Kisan Sabhas successfully organized lower-caste (Dalit and OBC) women around wage issues, they struggled to penetrate the households of the intermediate peasantry. As Zoya Hasan has argued regarding the agrarian power structure in UP, the rising middle peasantry often consolidated their social status by withdrawing "their" women from the fields—a process of Sanskritization that the leftist organizations found difficult to counter.[17] Consequently, the labor movement for women in Eastern UP became fractured along caste lines: a militant, lower-caste female workforce demanding wages, versus an increasingly secluded intermediate-caste female demographic retreating into domesticity.

The State as Employer and Regulator (1950s–1970s): The transition to a postcolonial developmental regime represented a profound reconfiguration of women's organizational politics. The abolition of Zamindari and the inauguration of the Community Development Programme in 1952 signaled the state's effort to institutionalize women's labor within planned economic development.The state's primary instrument of intervention was the *Mahila Mandal* (Women's Club). Administratively designed to be the female counterpart to the village *Panchayat*, these organizations were tasked with implementing the "welfare" aspect of the rural economy. In Eastern UP, thousands of these Mandals were paper-registered. However, critical analysis reveals a profound disconnect between their mandate and the economic reality of the region.[18]

The CDPs promoted "Home Science" ideologies—training women in sewing, jam-making, and hygiene. This reflected a middle-class, Victorian bias imported by policymakers who viewed the rural woman primarily as a housewife, rather than an agricultural producer. In districts like Basti and Deoria, where women performed up to 60-70% of agricultural operations (sowing, weeding, harvesting), the state's organizations offered training in embroidery—skills with negligible market value in a subsistence economy.[19]This period represents a "missed revolution" in the economic history of Eastern UP. By channeling funding through these depoliticized Mandals, the state effectively neutralized the radical potential of the earlier peasant mobilizations. The organizations became conduits for state patronage rather than platforms for labor negotiation. Women were organized as beneficiaries of welfare, not as agents of economic production.

By the 1960s and 70s, Eastern Uttar Pradesh had solidified its status as a labor-exporting periphery. The "Money-Order Economy" became the defining feature of domestic finance. As able-bodied men migrated to Delhi, Punjab (during the Green Revolution), and Bombay, the management of the domestic economy and the family farm

fell almost entirely to women.

This demographic shift forced a mutation in women's organizational behavior. Informal credit networks and "Self-Help Groups" (long before the term became policy vernacular) began to emerge organically within the village structures. Anthropological studies from the period indicate that women in migrant households in Jaunpur and Pratapgarh developed sophisticated informal banking systems to manage remittances, bypassing the formal cooperative banks that were dominated by male landed elites.[20] These informal collectives were essential for survival, mediating between the erratic flow of remittances and the daily consumption needs of the household.

Viewed through a legal lens, the post-independence period exposed a sharp disconnect. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 ostensibly ensured women's inheritance rights, yet this legal reform did not necessarily translate into substantive equality on the ground.Yet, in the fierce patriarchal belt of Eastern UP, women's organizations rarely campaigned for land titles. Why? An economic analysis suggests that the "patriarchal bargain" was too steep. Demanding land shares meant risking alienation from the natal family—the primary social safety net. Instead, women's organizations focused on "usufruct" rights—access to fodder, fuel, and water—rather than ownership rights.[21] The organizations pragmatically navigated the legal landscape, avoiding direct confrontation with the property regime while securing subsistence resources.

Culturally, women's collectives in Eastern UP utilized the rich tradition of folk songs (*Kajri*, *Sohar*) to articulate economic grievances. Cultural historians have noted that during the lean months, the songs sung by groups of women while transplanting rice often contained explicit critiques of the *sahukar* (moneylender) and the *pardesi* (migrant husband) who failed to send money.[22] These cultural gatherings served as informal trade unions, where information regarding wage rates and labor demand was exchanged under the guise of ritual performance.

The NGO-ization of Labour and the Microfinance Turn (1980s–1990s): The final decades of the twentieth century marked a reconfiguration of governance in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, characterized by state retrenchment and the ascendancy of NGOs. Commonly framed as the NGO-ization of the women's movement, this shift reoriented labor interventions toward project-based and donor-driven frameworks. Amid fiscal crisis and the erosion of state-led development, the Self-Help Group model consolidated its dominance as the primary institutional form of women's economic organization.

Unlike the radical peasant mobilizations of the 1940s or the welfare-statism of the 1950s, the interventions of the 1980s and 90s prioritized financial inclusion over structural reform. In districts like Mirzapur and Bhadohi—the heart of the carpet belt—international donor agencies began to partner with local organizations to establish micro-credit societies. A critical economic analysis reveals a shift in the *ontology* of the female worker: she was no longer a "worker" demanding a fair wage, but an "entrepreneur" in need of credit. Scholars like Naila Kabeer have critiqued this model for depoliticizing collective action.[23] In Eastern UP, this shift was palpable. Organizations that once agitated for land redistribution began to focus on "savings linkage." While this provided immediate liquidity to women in a region starved of formal banking, it effectively privatized the cost of social reproduction. The collective strength of the organization was used not to bargain with the landlord or the state, but to enforce loan repayment among members.[24] Simultaneously, the traditional artisanal economies of Varanasi, Mau, and Azamgarh faced existential threats from power-loom mechanization and global market fluctuations. Women, who constituted the invisible backbone of the Banarasi silk industry (performing crucial pre-loom tasks like *nari bharai* or bobbin winding), found themselves displaced. Here, a new form of organizational intervention emerged. Groups like the *Bunkar Dastkar Adhikar Manch* and localized craft guilds began to articulate a defense of "traditional" livelihoods. However, these organizations faced a gendered internal contradiction. While fighting external market forces, male leadership within the weaver community often marginalized women's specific demands for wage recognition.[25] It was only through the intervention of specific women-led cooperatives, supported by larger federations like SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) expanding from Gujarat into the Hindi heartland, that women weavers began to gain identity cards and access to artisan welfare funds.[26]

Comparative Case Analysis: The Carpet Belt vs. The Agrarian Plains: To understand the heterogeneity of these interventions, it is instructive to compare the mobilization of women in the carpet-weaving belt of Mirzapur-Bhadohi with the agrarian plains of Gorakhpur.

Case A: Mirzapur-Bhadohi (Industrial/Export-Oriented) In the carpet belt, women's labor was directly linked to global export markets. Interventions here were heavily scrutinized by international bodies regarding child labor regulations. Ironically, the enforcement of child labor laws in the 1990s, without concurrent wage increases for adults, forced women to increase their own labor hours to compensate for the loss of children's income.[27] Women's organizations here were often fragmented by the "putting-out" system, where work was done in isolation at home. Successful interventions were rare and usually focused on health and safety (combating wool dust tuberculosis) rather than wage negotiation, as the employers were elusive contractors.

Case B: Gorakhpur-Deoria (Agrarian/Subsistence) In contrast, the agrarian interventions in the Gorakhpur region remained tethered to land and caste. With the rise of identity politics (the Mandal Commission era), women's economic mobilizing became increasingly caste-centric. The *Bahujan Samaj Party* (BSP) era saw a distinct assertiveness among

Dalit women laborers. While not always organized into formal "unions," local Dalit women's collectives began refusing to perform unpaid labor (*begar*) for upper-caste landowners—a direct economic intervention stemming from political consciousness.[28] Here, the "organization" was social and political, but the outcome was strictly economic: the renegotiation of the daily wage in the paddy fields.

Conclusion: The trajectory of women's organizations in Eastern Uttar Pradesh during the twentieth century is not a linear narrative of progress, but a complex oscillation between co-option and resistance. From the elite philanthropists of Allahabad who viewed economic activity as moral rehabilitation, to the radical peasant women of Azamgarh who defended their harvest with physical force, and finally to the micro-entrepreneurs of the neoliberal 1990s, these women navigated a distinct regional political economy.Ultimately, the intervention of women's organizations in Eastern UP reveals that the "domestic" economy was never truly private. It was the engine room of the region's survival, and the primary battlefield where the wars of caste, class, and gender were silently, and relentlessly, fought.

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