
Towards a Framework of Analysis

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Introduction¹

This paper seeks to examine two important questions concerning the income earning activities of women. Firstly, why is it that in many Third World countries women are concentrated in areas of the economy commonly referred to as the 'informal sector', and secondly, why is it that women, particularly married women, even within the informal sector are found in specific types of employment?

In many Third World countries a substantial proportion of the workforce is concentrated in economic activities that are insecure, do not provide full-time employment and which generate low incomes. The identification of the large proportion of the active labour force involved in this type of activity in the early 1970s resulted in the emergence of the 'informal sector' as a useful concept with which to analyse the specificities of the sector [ILO 1972; Hart 1973; Mazumdar 1975].

The concept has been subjected to much criticism [Moser 1978; Bromley and Gerry 1979]; nevertheless it is not my intention in this article to address that debate, rather I shall continue to use the term in a descriptive way [following ILO 1972; Singer et al 1976; Sethuraman 1976; Souza and Tokman 1976] to refer to economic activities which have the following characteristics: i) non-permanence and casualness ii) lack of company and/or government regulations iii) taking place in small-scale and less capitalised establishments, relying on household labour.

Studies of the sexual composition of the workforce in the informal sector found that more women than men are involved in this sphere of economic activity [of the ILO's Regional Employment Programme studies of 1968-1974].² A Brazilian study in 1973 [Merrick and Schmink 1978] found that at least 80 per cent of working women were concentrated in 'the lowest income strata of the population' and that 86 per cent of married and widowed heads of poor households were employed in casual work. None of these studies explained why such a high proportion of women are

found in the informal sector. They do, however, provide scarce data on women in casual employment, and point to the importance of more detailed analysis of the concentration of women in the low-income sector of the economy.

This article is intended to go some way towards filling this gap through its examination of the interaction of economic processes and dominant ideologies in the structuring and allocation of very specific economic spaces to women. The concentration of women in the informal sector and the form their work within it takes are largely determined by four factors: firstly, the changing structure of employment, ie the restructuring in certain sectors of production and its effects on the economic activities of women; secondly, the selective labour utilisation in different branches of production at specific historical periods; thirdly, the ideological assumptions which determine the nature of tasks allocated to women and the value placed on female labour; and lastly, the close inter-relationship between the domestic role of women within the household (ie their *actual* functioning within the household as opposed to the ideological assumptions discussed above) and women's position as specific kinds of income-generating workers. It is important to discuss in detail each of these factors.

The Changing Structure of Employment and Women's Work

The nature of labour demand in the rural areas of Third World countries has undergone rapid and fundamental changes due to technological innovation, which has caused shifts in types of crops grown or of commodities produced, and to a change in the methods of production. The intervention of international capital with its technically advanced systems of production often accelerates this transformation process through increased commercialisation and cash crop farming. Changes in the structures of employment are accompanied by changes in skill requirements which do not necessarily absorb all those previously employed. Frequently, various forms of unemployment occur with pressures set up for the displaced population to use those existing skills they have by migrating in search of alternative employment.

What are the particular effects of such skill restructuring on the economic participation of women? While much of the evidence is still tentative two patterns can be

¹This is a much abbreviated version of a *Discussion Paper* written during an appointment as Research Officer at IDS. An earlier draft of the *Discussion Paper* was discussed at the Workshop on Women and the Working Poor, held at IDS from 23-25 April 1980.

²These were Brazil (cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, 1972); Chile (all cities, 1968); Dominican Republic (Santo Domingo 1973); Ecuador (Guayaquil, Quito 1970); El Salvador (San Salvador 1974); Mexico (Federal District and State of Mexico 1970); Paraguay (Asuncion 1973); Peru (all cities 1970); Venezuela (all cities 1974).

observed from case studies from Latin America and Southeast Asia. Firstly, women are squeezed out of independent productive activities directed at the market, and forced into casual labour and into domestic service. Secondly, where women are no longer able to make an important contribution to household economy they are often forced to migrate out of rural areas.

The first pattern is indicated by a number of studies published in the latter half of the 1970s. While the industrialisation process in the late 19th century in Mexico and early 20th century in Argentina [Towner 1977; Hollander 1977] absorbed into those manufacturing industries considered 'female' women who had been displaced from traditional productive roles in the home, this did not occur in later stages. A study of Guatemala's industrial expansion, for instance, found that international capital had weakened artisan industries, traditionally areas of women's work, displacing female artisans rather than absorbing them [Chinchilla 1977]. Similar tendencies have been observed in Brazil; while women in 1900 comprised 45.3 per cent of the labour force, by 1970, despite industrial expansion, this figure had dropped to 21 per cent. In Mexico, the introduction of new technology both in agriculture and in industries, displaced women while restricting their access to new industrial jobs [Arizpe 1977]. Although more women are working than ever before in the cities of Third World countries, their work is increasingly concentrated in the commercial, service and casual sectors and particularly in domestic service where the majority of young migrant women work [Scott 1978; Saffioti nd; Arizpe 1977].³

The second discernable pattern shows that women migrate to cities more than men. Elizaga's report on migration rates by sex for the urban areas of seven Latin American countries and for seven major cities shows that female migration rates were higher than men's except for one case where there was no difference between sexes [Jelin 1977]. While the bulk of the rural migrants have historically been adult males or adult males and their families throughout Asia, this traditional pattern in Southeast Asia is changing, with young women now forming a major proportion of the rural-urban drift.⁴

Various reasons have been suggested for this sex-specific migration: the fact that the domestic manufacturing activities of rural women are 'undermined by more efficient industrially produced goods or made more productive' [Young 1981]; the increasing tendency to

find large-scale female migration in areas where women's labour has become marginal to agricultural production [Boserup 1970]. In addition, the growth of global assembly lines requiring an age-specific workforce frequently acts as a 'pull' factor for the outmigration of young women from the rural areas [Grossman 1979; Heyzer 1979; Jamiliah 1980]. The way these women are redistributed in the urban employment sectors is dependent on the nature of selective labour absorption in the urban economy. This is examined in the next section.

Differential Labour Absorption and Women's Work

In the economies of Third World countries there is frequently insufficient stable wage-employment to absorb the high growth in population, such that certain groups are incorporated at the 'margins' of the urban economy. In such a situation, hierarchical differences of various kinds are utilised by capital to organise the conditions of production and accumulation. In this section I look at some of these hierarchical differences and how they may contribute to the concentration of women in the 'unstable' sectors of the economy.

The creation of a 'labour aristocracy'

In many Third World countries a 'labour aristocracy' has been created, which allows for small numbers of workers in the face of considerable excess labour supply to work for relatively high wages and various social benefits. The consequence of this phenomenon is a highly segmented labour market in which the labour force is separated into sub-markets with different employment conditions and wages. Access to high-wage jobs is not only dependent on being competent in certain skills but also related to the protection and bargaining power of organised labour. The fact that trade unions are often male-dominated means that certain jobs have been defined as 'skilled' or as 'men's jobs' and therefore the range of jobs available to women has been reduced.

Schooling takes on a new significance with the growth of a 'protected' labour market, particularly for employment in international manufacturing and clerical jobs in newly created bureaucracies. In these labour markets the credentials schooling provides are used as a selection mechanism and as a measure of labour's trainability and discipline. This has particular consequences. Access to schooling in low-income families is often sex-specific. It is frequently the male child who continues with his education while the female child drops out to substitute work for schooling, or to reduce the financial cost of schooling within the household unit. The use of education as a screening mechanism, in this case, effectively excludes a substantial portion of women from stable employment.

³Eviota and Smith [1979] found that 7 out of 10 females in the category of domestic servants were migrants, and more than half of them were young, single, recently migrated women.

⁴See Eviota and Smith [1979] for data on the Philippines; Jamiliah [1980] and Heyzer [1979] for data on Malaysia.

The creation of an age-specific female workforce

In several Third World countries, the international fragmentation of the labour process has led to differential employment of women at the different stages of their life cycle. In the present phase of this process certain industries have relocated certain aspects of production to the Third World—those parts which offer the most advantage in terms of the exploitation of cheap labour [Elson and Pearson 1980]. The giant electronic industry is the main one to have undergone this international relocation, where between 80 per cent and 90 per cent of the workforce are young, unmarried girls under 25 years of age [Lim 1978; Heyzer 1980]. This high age-specific concentration of women in an industry where new workers can easily be trained means that women are absorbed and then rejected at different stages of their life cycle.

To summarise very briefly, the process of development has produced an 'uprooting' of rural groups and their redistribution to areas which provide some industrial and service sector employment. The groups that are selectively absorbed in stable wage employment are those with some educational qualifications and those who possess the characteristics demanded by 'modern sector employment'. These are usually male and young female workers. The group most discriminated against are older married women with few educational qualifications or formal documents. These women are then forced into 'the urban subsistence economy' or the informal sector. In order to explain the specific forms the work of these women take in the informal sector, it is necessary to focus on ideological as well as economic factors.

Ideological Assumptions Determining the Value Placed on Female Labour Power

The ideological assumption about women's position in the family, that women as housewives must be dependent on their husbands' wages, is used to define women's social position even in cases where women do not have husbands or are the sole earners. Housewives are used as disguised wage workers as household units become integrated into the production system, with the most common form of this type of wage employment being domestic outwork. Here women perform the finishing and assembling processes in their own homes, for particular industries, eg in the clothing and footwear industries. Although many of these workers are the family breadwinners, the enterprises employing them frequently regard them as 'housewives' and therefore 'inactive labour' [Mies 1979] and defines them as 'dependents', 'secondary workers' or even 'non-workers' [Schmitz 1979].⁵

⁵In his study of hammock production, Schmitz [1979] found that enterprises employing 15 enumerated workers in the factory (all males) had an estimate of about 700 homeworkers, who were women, children and elderly people.

In addition, the ideology of sex roles which defines women solely in terms of their being 'housewives' and hence assumes that their husbands' wages are responsible for the cost of the reproduction of life, is frequently used to lower the wages paid to women on the basis that they are 'secondary' income earners. The ideology of sex roles in some instances is utilised to structure economic spaces differently for male and female members of the domestic units. Sanctions are used against women when they try to press against the boundaries constructed by the ideology governing the sexual division of labour. Women are subjected to malicious gossip and classification when their economic behaviour breaks the 'norm' set by male dominance [Rubbo 1975; Moser in this *Bulletin*].

Production and Reproduction

Within the household there is a set of task requirements performed *largely* by women and the focus of which is mainly reproduction. This labour which goes into the production of life, into household and child-care work, is seen as natural for women, ie a part of their biology, and hence their responsibility. Whether women participate in income-generating activities depends on their ability to manage multiple roles. In fact, women's informal sector employment differs from that of men's in a variety of ways: firstly, they are concentrated in areas that are compatible with their reproductive role, particularly child-rearing, and often extensions of their domestic responsibilities within the household; secondly, they are, with few exceptions, concentrated in areas with lesser growth potential.

In various income-generating activities in the urban centres of Africa and Southeast Asia, particularly the three most important forms—petty trading, selling of cooked food, brewing of ale and beer—these trends in the sexual division of labour have been widely noted [Lawson 1976; Lim 1980; Bujera 1976; Nelson 1979]. These activities not only require very little outlay but are simply extensions of the women's domestic duties: in many African rural systems, women who have their own plot of land on which they grow vegetables and fruits for family consumption struggle to produce a surplus to trade in the market; similarly beer brewing and the selling of cooked food, particularly at fixed locations, allow women to combine reproductive with economic roles when both these activities are carried out from the family premises. In cases where beer brewing is illegal and the beer-brewers are subjected to harassment, arrest, fines and imprisonment, these activities tend to be carried out by elderly women while younger women rely on prostitution which, while also illegal, is thought to be better paid [Bujera 1976].

Comparisons of the marketing activities of women in relation to those of men, show a tendency for women

to concentrate in areas which provide lower returns: thus in a Singapore market it was found that women were concentrated in the vegetable section while the men were concentrated in the meat and fish section which brought higher rates of return [Lim 1980; see also Moser 1975 who provides similar data for Bogotá, Colombia].

In Ghana it was found that women were concentrated in small-scale trading while men were involved with large-scale trading. The main reason for this was not only the lack of access to markets, trading contacts and transportation but also the fact that large-scale trading required a level of flexibility and mobility that women did not have unless they were freed from their domestic chores [Church 1977 cited in Beneria 1978].

Another form of work that is an extension of tasks performed by women within the household is domestic service. Although this provides relatively stable wage employment, and cannot be strictly described as informal sector employment, it has some similar features, ie it is frequently undertaken without a written contract with the employee vulnerable to instant dismissal; it is work that is seldom protected by any government regulations. Although in countries like India males are employed as domestic servants, elsewhere domestic service is predominantly a female occupation, given women's special skills as a result of tasks performed as unpaid work within the family—cleaning, washing, ironing, and taking care of children [Jelin 1977; Rubbo and Taussig 1977].

Conclusion

In this article I have looked at recent contributions to the understanding of the concentration of women in the low-income sectors of the economy and the forms their economic participation take. I have also tried to indicate the direction in which a framework of analysis might be developed further. I argue that any analysis of the economic participation of low-income women in Third World economies must take account of at least four factors: firstly, the changing structure of employment in certain sectors of production and how this affects women's work; secondly, the selective nature of labour utilisation in different branches of employment; thirdly, the ideological assumptions about women and work; and fourthly, the intimate relationship between women's work in the household and their position as specific kinds of wage and income-generating workers. In any concrete situation, it is seldom one or the other of the above factors but their combination (and interaction) that explains the realities of women's low-income employment. These combinations can only be discovered by examining each particular economy. They cannot be deduced from abstract constructs which are useful only as guidelines.

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