JOHANNA LESSINGER

Caught Between Work And Modesty

The Dilemma Of Women Traders In Madras

THE question of women's economic marginality is important because female poverty and dependence are at the root of so many of women's other social disabilities. Women in many countries find themselves unable to compete equally for jobs, either in the formal labour market or in the far more extensive informal labour market of low paid and frequently temporary jobs.

In India, the general level of household poverty seems increasingly compounded by a decline in female employment. Women,.overwhelmingly concentrated in the informal sector, made up 34 percent of the workforce in 1911 and 31 percent in 1961. By 1971, however, women made up only 17.3 percent of the workforce, according to the 1975 report on the status of women. Although there is debate about the accuracy of these figures, it seems probable that they do represent some kind of trend.

In this study, I examine women's participation in petty produce trading, which is an integral part of the informal sector in the highly segmented labour market of Madras city. Although the area has a long tradition of female wage labour in agriculture, women working in urban petty trade are consistently marginalised. My material adds to the growing number of studies which show that development does not automatically benefit women, who are frequently denied the chance to support themselves, to amass small amounts of capital or to experience modest social mobility which such urban enterpreneurial activity can offer men.

Madras, at the time of this study, had a population of about three million. The city's informal sector of industries has been unable to generate enough employment to give work to all the poor, unskilled rural migrants driven off the land in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. As a result, Madras' informal sector employs a large proportion of the city's poor. For poor women the informal sector is even more crucial than for poor men. Virtually the only employment available to them is as domestic servants, workers in small backyard manufacturing concerns, coolies, construction workers and as petty traders.

Petty retail trade in fresh vegetables, flowers and fruit is an especially important and desirable occupation,

Flower Sellers

open to both the sexes. Since retail markets are so vital in supplying Madras with fresh food, this kind of selling work is more readily available to both men and women than other kinds of casual work, which are usually scarce and hard to obtain. Retail selling has the additional advantage of requiring few formal skills and little initial capital investment. Because traders are self employed, the question of employer prejudice against women does not arise. In India, trading at this small scale retail level is not traditionally thought of as women's work, as it is in West Africa, South-east Asia or Latin America, but neither is it an exclusively male preserve, as is wholesale trading. The result is, however, that men and women compete with each other in petty trade, although they themselves do not think of it in that way.

Women Prosper Less

What is immediately noticeable in the Madras retail markets scattered through residential neighbourhoods is how women are the losers in that competition. Although women are nominally as free to enter retail trading as are men, they are, in fact, consistently more marginal. Although women make up from a quarter to a half of the traders present in any one location, they are concentrated most heavily in the less prosperous marketplaces, and tend to sell the high risk, low profit kind of goods. Thus, women are most often found selling fresh greens, limes, betel, flowers or damaged vegetables—items which are cheap, highly perishable and yield a somewhat lower profit rate. Many women sell from baskets or mats spread on the ground, rather than from regular stalls because they cannot afford stall rents or the payment needed to obtain a stall. Some women do carry out a middle level trade in ordinary vegetables, and own permanent stalls in the market, but there are no women at all amongst those who sell high profit items such as fruit., plantain leaves or meat, nor do women engage in the profitable supplying of commercial kitchens.

Female seclusion—the physical and social separation of women from all men who are not their kin—cuts across religious lines and the custom is found among both Hindu and Muslims in some form or other all over India. Its particular manifestations differ from one region to another, ranging at one extreme from women who never leave the household and, in some communities, are veiled, to women at the other extreme who take employment outside the home but do their utmost to avoid.unchaperoned contact with strange men. These customs are justified by the perceived need to protect women's chastity and thus family honour. These customs need to be reexamined in terms of their impact on women's ability to work outside the home.

There is also a class aspect to all female seclusion. The family which succeeds in keeping "its" women within the household is asserting not only its superior morality but also its ability to hire men or lower caste women whose labour replaces that of the household's female members. Coercive seduction and outright rape of poor women are an assertion of class privilege on the part of high status men. They are also a more general threat to all women. For instance, in one village in Karnataka, youths raped a high caste woman because they thought her trips outside the village by herself were too independent. The constant awareness of possible rape and harassment thus makes many women welcome the custom of seclusion which strengthens male control of women's movements and activities.

For those families which need women's earnings and depend on them regularly, the ideology of female seclusion is in conflict with daily reality. Within such groups, employed women are seen as foregoing the privacy and comfort of seclusion within their homes to ensure the financial survival of their families. The honoured stereotype of the self sacrificing wife and mother is adapted to justify the behaviour of a group of women who may aspire to, but cannot afford, seclusion at home? Their departure from the norm of female modesty is seen as caused by their domestic responsibility.

Public Chaperonage

But these women must still face the realities of extensive sexual harassment and possible rape. Even unfounded rumours about an employed woman's possible sexual indiscretions may be enough to provoke violence from husband or in-laws. South Indian women who must work outside their homes without the chaperonage of a servant or relative have developed an ingenious strategy to cope with a situation full of contradictions. A technique which might be called "public chaperonage" honours the spirit if not the letter of the rules of female modesty. Interaction between men and women is rendered more or less harmless if it is carried out in public view, in front of an audience which knows both parties and can attest to the innocence of all that is said and done. Successful use of this technique allows poor women to take work at some distance from their homes, provided they can work alongside other women or men from their villages. Female agricultural labourers and construction workers apparently resort to this technique when travelling outside their villages, sometimes without their husbands, in search of employment.

Men and women seem to enter small trading on much the same footing, but gender inequality soon reasserts itself within the occupation. Virtually all of women's difficulties in entering the larger and more profitable kinds of trade can be traced in the first place to their difficulties in operating beyond the range of the retail market in which "public chaperonage" is available to protect them. The second level of difficulty is the negative interpretation placed on any prolonged inertaction between unrelated men and women.

The disabilities women experience are not enough to exclude them wholly from trading as an occupation. Yet the problems are severe enough to keep most women at the margins of the produce distribution system. Women can only become truly successful traders as

members of households in which at least some male members are also involved to handle the needed travelling and contact with strangers. As the partners of husbands or sons, women become quite successful, although such a woman is usually perceived as the man's helper or junior partner. In a few such households, earnings are high enough to provide a small measure of social mobility, in that case, the woman trader eventually retires to the seclusion which marks high status, her labour replaced by that of hired men.

Within the confines of a familiar retail marketplace, women in Madras are able to operate confidently, since they are surrounded by people they know. Indeed, they manage to treat the marketplace as if it were an extension of the home or neighbourhood. Such markets typically develop great internal cohesion over time because many people are already kin, neighbours or fellow villagers. Those traders who are unrelated diffuse the sexual implications of their interaction by using reciprocal kinship terms such as "younger brother, older sister" or "mother, son" with those of the other sex. Once established in a selling spot, therefore, a woman trader is given courteous if patronising protection by the male traders around her, much as she would in her immediate residential neighbourhood. Furthermore, the public nature of all her interactions with customers and fellow traders deflects criticism which might damage her reputation.

Restricted Mobility

Women's difficulties arise, however, from the demands of trading which take them outside the protective marketplace. The first hurdle they face is the procurement of supplies from the central wholesale market. That market, Kottuwal Chavadi, is the single point of supply for the city's retail markets. Its wholesale houses are located in a crowded section of the city with a reputation for rowdiness and vice. Women traders who venture there have to run a gauntlet of verbal harassment from the market porters, risk being accosted as prostitutes, and must bargain aggressively with high status male wholesale dealers. The whole process is something of an ordeal for the boldest woman. The more determined visit the market only in daylight, and in groups, travelling to and from there with one or two female friends or with a group of men and women. Many women refuse to go anywhere near Kottuwal Chavadi. Instead, they buy their supplies at a slightly higher price from another larger male retailer selling near them. Others convince a male friend or relative to make their purchases for them. In either case, a woman must usually pay a premium for such services, which cuts into her already small profit margin which retailers place at about 10 percent of the total sales volume.

Spice Vendor

The same restrictions which make it difficult for women to travel beyond the retail location or to form permanent trading ties with strange men make it impossible for women to take on the kind of lucrative sideline developed by some large scale male traders—the supplying of hospital, school or factory canteens. A retailer willing to buy fruit or vegetables in bulk and deliver them regularly to such commercial kitchens can make a sizeable profit simply because the turnover is far greater than in retail sales alone. Since few retailers can hope to become wholesale dealers, this is one of the few available routes by which retail traders can accumulate capital for investment in other things. This lucrative aspect of retail trading, with its potential for social mobility, is not open to women, since they cannot travel around the city freely or argue with institutional paymasters, who are notoriously slow to settle their bills.

Cannot Expand Trade

Women also find it hard to mobilise extra labour power to expand their businesses. In a system in which profits expand with the amount of labour power invested, men who lack the necessary helpers within their own households, hire young men or boys to assist them. For younger men, such a period of employment, lasting a few weeks to several years, is a valuable chance to accumulate experience, a little capital, some useful contacts and an informal credit rating before going into business on their own. Women, however, cannot either hire young men or be hired themselves, since the resulting intimacy is considered scandalous. One highly independent woman trader, encountered in the course of research did hire a young man as her assistant.

She was forced to get rid of him within days by the storm of scandal and gossip that shook the market.

If adult women cannot hire young men, or be hired by men, girls and young women cannot be hired even by other women because the marketplace,

although an acceptable worksite for adult women, is apparently thought too dangerous to the reputations of young women, who are rendered particularly vulnerable by the approach of puberty and marriage. Young married women described in interviews how they had been obliged to argue with husbands and mothers-in-law before being allowed to take up trading. The consequence of these attitudes is that girls and young women are deprived of a valuable period of apprenticeship during which their male counterparts are acquiring the skills of a trader and amassing a small amount of starting capital. When young women emerge from the period of seclusion imposed on them in their teens to enter trading as wives and mothers, they are at something of a disadvantage compared to the men around them.

Limited Contacts

Women's lack of physical mobility, plus their more limited social networks, also make it more difficult for women to relocate if their own marketplace should decline. Although most retail markets in Madras are booming, population shifts have sent the retail trade in a few areas into collapse. Male traders, alert to the danger signs, usually begin to look for somewhere else to sell. On forays to other areas, they start building the social ties which will eventually allow them to request admittance to some other market. Women, unless they have relatives in prosperous markets who can help them, tend to stay on in familiar locations as trade dies around them.

Finally, women traders encounter overt prejudice from wholesale dealers who are the major source of credit to the entire marketing system. Women say the dealers will not allow them as much produce on credit as male traders can get, and that therefore they cannot expand their businesses as much as they would like. Wholesalers, who carry out careful credit checks of those who buy from them, insist that women, with their generally smaller businesses, could not sell large quantities of goods even if allowed to have them.and therefore could not repay larger loans. Women, in the wholesalers' view, are simply poor credit risks, although wholesalers show no discrimination in giving women the initial credit which permits them first to enter trade. Although women's complaints of discrimination are justified, it is not clear, given the other disabilities they face, whether more generous credit allowances, advocated by some development specialists, would actually increase the scope of women's operations.

Vegetable Vendor

Secret of Success

Amidst this somewhat doleful account of the problems women face in carrying on small trading operations, it is important to remember that there are a certain number of women who are successful as marketers. The secret of their success lies not in superior ability or greater boldness but in the fact that they have the help of adult males in carrying out those aspects of trade that women find most difficult or distasteful. As members of household teams, generally, made up of husbands and wives, but sometimes of mothers and sons or mothers-in-law and sons-in-law, women flourish in the market. Typically, in such an arrangement, the woman opens the stall early in the morning, while the man handles purchasing and credit arrangements at Kottuwal Chavadi. Later in the day, he may return to the stall while she goes home to cook and do housework, returning to help during the evening rush. Some husbands and wives operate separate stalls in the same marketplace to maximise household sales outlets. Some women lend out the household profits for interest, to both male and female borrowers. Such female moneylenders are especially skilled at creating the humiliating public rows which are the chief sanction the informal moneylender can invoke against defaulting borrowers. In some situations, the husband has a separate job but still contrives to help his wife before and after work.

Men Take Over

A certain number of such men interviewed said they had abandoned or were thinking of abandoning their own irregular or poorly paid jobs to devote their time to their wives' trading enterprises. What this suggests is that a number of successful small trading businesses run by husbands and wives started out as businesses run by women, only to fall under male control as they proved more lucrative than male wage work.

These successful husband and wife teams may continue to sell into old age until the enterprise is handed over, as a valuable piece of family property, to the care of a son, daughter, daughter-in-law or nephew. At the pinnacle of success is the small family trading business which earns enough profit so that the wife can retire again to the seclusion of her home.

Her labour can be replaced by that of hired men, which allows a validation of family social mobility and newly achieved status, as well as a reaffirmation of the woman's own "true" domestic role.

Interviewing would not normally have revealed the fact that such women once participated in trade except that the inadvertent remarks of their husbands revealed the fact. The prosperous man who insists that "My wife is too decent to come here' may let slip in another context that his wife once worked with

him in their younger days.

Efforts Crippled

The implication of the pattern elaborated above is that urban petty trade does not necessarily offer a new and promising form of employment for poor, unskilled urban women. The idea of launching women into such small scale trade has appealed both to planners and to poor women themselves. Certainly, the expansion of this kind of informal sector employment among women does seem to offer a short term solution to low household incomes held down by abysmally low male wages. However, while petty trade may in the short run give a certain number of women and their children an escape from total destitution, it nevertheless often places women in a painful dilemma. They are obliged to abandon or restrict certain trading activities for fear of offending against the conventions of female modesty and gender segregation for which the sanctions are often severe. Furthermore, some kinds of petty trade may offer women substantial earnings only when they take part in them as members of households committed to trade. This means that the most helpless women—widows, divorcees or the elderly, with the least access to the help of male relatives—have the least hope of gaining an independent livelihood from trade. In general, the social barriers which allow women little physical mobility and constrain the kinds of social networks they can develop will also cripple their individual efforts to earn, to accumulate capital or to achieve individual social mobility. Only as members of household enterprises can women share the benefits created by their labour.

Dependence Remains

In the Madras marketing system, the relations of production intersect with the local ideology of female seclusion in such a way that female dependence on men and the patriarchal household's traditional control over female labour are perpetuated, even though the jobs created by urbanisation and the expansion of the marketing system are relatively new. The highly competitive situation of urban job scarcity encourages men to perpetuate their gender domination in the face of women's new opportunities to earn. Thus, male traders, in contradictory fashion, believe that women in general should stay home "in their place." Yet, at a certain stage in their own domestic cycle, these same men may promote the earning capabilities of their own female relatives through trade.

Poor women try to cope with these

contradictory demands that they support their children while remaining "modest" by turning to conventions of public chaperonage which have served them before. By extending some of the symbolic social relations of the household and neighbourhood into the marketplace, women do manage to protect their reputations. This technique, as I have shown, is only partially successful. Women can enter trade and carry it on in a small way, but they are effectively blocked in any attempt to enter more profitable areas, except as the partners of the men in their families. The effect is to keep these poor urban women the household's most mobile economic resource, sent into the labour market when economic pressures demand, withdrawn from it and kept secluded again to validate family honour when economic pressures ease. Until this pattern changes, it is clear that the widespread employment of women in trade and in a variety of other informal sector jobs will do little to challenge traditional sex roles or to alter a division of labour which keeps women generally marginal within any occupation they fill.

Combat Marginalisation

The situation examined here has implications which stretch beyond the relatively limited world of female small traders in Madras. In a more general way, those of us concerned about female employment and female poverty need to look carefully at the way the ideology of sexual separation and female seclusion affects the type of work women can do, the kinds of locations in which they can work, and their ability to succeed in various kinds of employment. It is not enough simply to contrast women workers within the household with those outside it. We must now begin to make finer distinctions about the kinds of levels women reach within the labour market. It is probable that further detailed examination of other groups of women workers would show a similar process of female marginalisation in jobs open to both men and women. This marginalisation becomes more pronounced in urban situations where the competition for work is most severe.

This material also implies that it is possible for men and women to work side by side under certain circumstances. Until now, those working to develop jobs for Indian women have generally acceded to women's own strong preferences for sheltered, all female work environments. Such settings may not always be practical to establish and maintain, however. Urban employment opportunities increasingly attract both men and women. The creation of female employment ghettos has, in one country after another, produced woeful exploitation of women workers. Women, physically isolated by parda like settings or economically isolated within "women's jobs" in a gender segmented labour market, are likely to be victimised, and to find it hard to alter their situation.

It is important to remember that working women themselves have developed mechanisms for mediating male and female work relations. The cultural model of public chaperonage which they have developed depends on the work process being carried on publicly amidst a sense of community and mutual responsibility among workers. These factors, which make it possible for mixed sex groups of workers to function, can be fostered and encouraged as a way of facilitating women's employment and of making sure that women remain in certain sectors of the labour market.

On a larger scale, planners will eventually have to challenge directly the pervasive sexist ideology which makes a woman's chastity, very narrowly defined, the criterion of family honour and of her ability to find employment.

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Women Teachers For Change

HAVE been a subscriber to Manushi for the last few years. X teach history in a government women's college in Dindigul, Tamil Nadu.

I was the convenor of a conven-tion of women college teachers, recently organised at Madurai by the Joint Action Council of College Teachers of Tamil Nadu, which is a loose federation of the three college teachers' associations of Tamil Nadu. The convention focused on the erosion of democratic rights in women's colleges and the atmosphere of repression and harassment that prevails in them.

Many malpractices prevail in women's colleges. For instance, teachers are deprived of the right to security of service, promotion, increments, maternity benefits, provident fund and leave, are given an excessively heavy workload, and are suspended or even terminated on flimsy grounds.

In a large number of women's colleges in the state, teachers are not allowed to form associations. Wherever associations do come into existence, every attempt is made to break them. The authorities victimise the activists by denying them promotion, cutting their increments, transferring them or closing down courses taught by them.

The most significant area, however, where the repressive character of the administration in women's colleges is seen is the intangible one of psychological pressure. The person in authority replicates with-in the college the mother-in-law syndrome. Numberless weapons are used against teachers. A teacher who displays the slightest semblance of independence is bombarded with memos. Whispering campaigns are unleashed. Serious charges are framed against teachers who try to organise themselves.

The convention was attended by about 600 women teachers from 50 women's colleges all over Tamil Nadu. The convention recalled and acknowledged the heroic struggles that have broken out in women's colleges against heavy odds. The most noteworthy examples are the ones in SIET college, Madras, DKM college, Vellore, Avinashilingam home science college, Coimbatore, Sarada college, Salem, and SA college, Pallatbur.

At the convention

The convention raised the ques-tion as to what we, as highly educa-ted women, are doing to improve the condition of women. Hundreds of young women pass through our hands every year, but we have fail-ed to impart to them values of women's equality and solidarity to face the onslaughts of a sexist society.

The education minister, Tamil Nadu, and the former supreme court judge V.R. Krishna Iyer, addressed the convention. We presented a charter of demands which asked for democratisation in women's colleges, creches, hostels for women teachers, toilets and rest rooms, special consideration for middle aged women to enter or rejoin the profession, a programme to create awareness of women's issues in men's and women's colleges, opening of professional courses and polytechnics for women with the same courses as for men, creation of committees to make policy with regard to these and other proposals.

The association hopes that the convention will be the beginning of long term campaigns. Committees are being formed to follow up the work on campuses. In the college where I work we have been work-ing in this direction. We have organised rallies against dowry and commercialisation of women. We have put up an exhibition on different dimensions of the women's question. We have formed a women's organisation which tries to assist women in distress and provide free legal aid.

—V. Vasanthi Devi