

WOMEN AND WORK

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Summary

The article underlines that in the last thirty years official statements and national and international declarations have recognized that most women work longer hours than men, but at lower remuneration and often in worse conditions. At the same time, a gender analysis on work is still needed. Areas as those of gender segregation in work, limited access to independent income, worsening insecurity as well as many other disadvantages in every level of occupation are indeed in need of more analysis.

The other point which the article stresses is that Northern development practitioners often portray women in the South as uniformly exploited and submissive. In so doing they also ignore the many differences among women in developing countries, whether in terms of cultures, level of access to education, health and work, age, and socio-economic situations.

The article also underlines the importance of understanding how the processes of industrialization and globalization are affecting women in different ways according to the stage in their reproductive and productive lives.

In the section on agricultural work, the article warns that a great number of women working in this sector are not counted, thus statistics need to be taken with caution. Part

of the problem is in the fact that agricultural activities are often difficult to distinguish from reproductive work for which women are responsible. More generally, the author calls for a dynamic approach which brings close the reproductive and productive area of women's work, including the role they have in managing natural resources.

1. Introduction

In the last thirty years it has been gradually recognized that women in general, and poor women in particular, work extremely long hours, at many different occupations and tasks, and often with poor remuneration and under difficult conditions. This realization has been built through gender-based analyses and debates, and empirical evidence, which have challenged a previously held view that the lives of most women unfolded outside the world of work. Through this process the understanding of the notion of work, especially in the context of development, has also been revised.

This paper reiterates the importance of a gender analysis of work, but focuses mainly on women and their paid and unpaid occupations in developing countries. It summarizes the main aspects of women's work, which have been the key to its re-interpretation.

The nature of women's work varies considerably according to the characteristics of individual women and to moments in their lifecycle. Beyond this individual level, the extent and manner in which women as a social group are engaged in production can be better understood when related to the concrete and ideological place women occupy within the household. In other words, dominant cultural influences and gender norms and relations are mediated through the household. The detailed analysis of such links has led to the acknowledgement of women's multiple roles and heavy work burden.

These roles and burden are now fully recognized, though sometimes attributed to "natural" causes. Another important aspect of the re-interpretation of women's work is more dynamic. It has explained the changes in their work opportunities and constraints through broader processes, and linked them to shifts in economic trends and policies. To illustrate this, the paper concentrates on the changing nature of women's work in industry, and touches briefly on agricultural employment. Women are involved in large numbers in the service sector. In the paper, however, this is not considered in detail in the assumption that the features of women's work in other sectors apply here.

Many of the studies of women's work have been at pains to show that women themselves are not inert victims of uncontrollable forces. On the contrary, they try to overcome constraints and exploit opportunities in the pursuit of livelihoods, of financial and social recognition, of new skills and experiences. To show this, the paper highlights some of the thinking on women's participation in decision-making as well as in labor struggles. This is to restate that both within the home and within the place of work they try to shape their own lives, as much as the structural and contingent situations affect their ability of doing so.

2. Women's Disadvantage

The point of departure of this paper is the consensus, which has been reached so far:

that women suffer from undisputed inequalities, when compared to men, in their ability to make a living through work, and that they experience a “disadvantaged position in the labor market” (Anker 1997). The acknowledgment of women’s disadvantaged position in work has not led to its elimination. Despite improvements, official information still shows disadvantages of different kinds:

Insecurity and women’s work: In some contexts, worsening insecurity makes women’s work—both in production and reproduction—particularly difficult. The patterns of conflict across the world have changed towards claiming many more civilian casualties than ever before; the displacement, material damages, and social disintegration typical of societies at war, all contribute to exacerbate both the need and the difficulties women experience to support themselves, and their families. Economic crises, for example in East Asia, are having similar detrimental effects, as we will show later.

Women’s working hours: Women work longer hours than men in most countries of the world, though averages vary between countries and between urban and rural areas. ‘Of the total burden of work, women carry on average 53% in developing countries and 51% in industrial countries’ (UNDP 1995:88). Little information is available for subsistence and household work. All the same, official sources calculate that women do the largest share of the former, and perform more than 20–30-hour than men in the tasks associated with the latter (United Nations 1995).

Limited access to independent incomes: Despite the sheer burden of work, women still suffer from obstacles in their access to independent incomes from employment. Though there have been increases in female labor force participation rates, globally they still remain at 38.5%, well below the 58% of men (UNDP 1995). Women’s participation rates differ by region, the highest being in Eastern Europe and Eastern and Central Asia, with Northern Africa among the lowest (United Nations 1995).

Earnings: For the countries and sectors for which the information is available, women’s wages are still lower than men (especially in agricultural work), though with considerable geographical variations (UNDP 1995). In many countries the gap between male and female wages has narrowed but, despite the widespread adoption of equal pay legislation, deep disparities persist. Poverty of earnings for women is aggravated by their concentration in badly remunerated sectors, and by the limited access they have to credit (United Nations 1995).

Occupational segregation: Women remain segregated in a narrow range of sectors and occupations. All are characterized by low-skills and low productivity, poor work conditions and job security, limited career prospects and protection (UNDP 1995: 39). Agriculture is the most frequent form of livelihood for women across the developing world (United Nations 1995). Informal work, especially in the service sector, also provides much employment for women. The kinds of activities in which they are concentrated (as well as the reproductive tasks for which they are responsible) make them especially vulnerable to the negative environmental effects of productive methods.

Disadvantage: Affects women in every level of occupations, including those who have

managed to reach positions of authority. Though some women have slowly achieved such positions, these are still few, and the majority is barred from breaking through the so-called “glass ceiling”: “According to national surveys, women’s overall share in management jobs rarely exceeds 20%. In the largest and most powerful organizations the proportion of top positions going to women is generally 2 or 3 %”. (ILO 1998).

3. Differences and Similarities

This information shows that gender-based disadvantages affect women throughout the world; and in all sectors and occupations. While the figures reflect a widespread reality, they tend to hide aspects of women’s work that those engaged in the re-interpretation of women’s work have been at pains to explore and clarify. Two such aspects have been mentioned above; and are the differences among women, and the links between production and reproduction. Together they illustrate some of the differences and commonalities in women’s work, as well as some of the problems they experience.

3.1 Differences Among Women

A debate exists which charges academics and development practitioners of Northern countries with treating women in developing countries as an undifferentiated mass, unified by being exploited, downtrodden and submissive. While it is undeniable that this tendency exists, many of the studies of women’s work are distinguished by their interest on the very characteristics which differentiate women among themselves. This has led to an emphasis on the differences among women and the consequences they have on their access to all forms of work and in their conditions, and benefits. The conclusion has been that:

“Although all women may experience disadvantage relative to men of the same class, not all women are absolutely deprived in terms of access to a basic minimum livelihood. The significance of gender in the production of deprivation is thus not necessarily the same for all women at all times, nor are all women affected in the same way by social and economic change”. (Standing 1992).

Later, we will look at the question of social and economic change. For now, the stress is on the importance given to the differences among women, in their personal (in age, race, education, and marital status) and social (class, urban or rural extraction, and location) characteristics.

An important element of differentiation derives from women’s life cycle, each stage of which affects differently their ability to join the labor market, and the manner of doing so. Gryns et al. (1994) conclude from a study in the manufacturing sector of rural and peri-urban Java (Indonesia):

“Individual women can change work status at different stages in their life cycle. Young women start their working life either as family laborers in the enterprises of relatives, or as waged workers. After marriage and the birth of their first child/ren they often work as unpaid workers in family enterprises or as domestic out-workers. When the children are somewhat older or after a divorce they switch back to wage work or they become

entrepreneurs”.

A consideration to life-cycle events and changes helps underline the complex interaction between the characteristics of the individual woman (or man), and the socially determined rights and obligations, which accompany biological processes.

Taking a neat North–South separation as an element of differentiation may be as dangerous as assuming commonalities of interests and perceptions among women worldwide. However, the conditions of poverty and lack of social provisioning characteristics of so many developing countries, and of countries in transitions represent a key axis of distinction between women living in such regions, and those living in industrialized nations.

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Biographical Sketch

Dr Ines Smyth has a PhD in social anthropology from University College London. She has been had academic posts at the Institute of Social Studies (The Hague, The Netherlands), at the Department of Applied Social Research at the University of Oxford, and at the London School of Economics. In these institutions she has thoughts courses on development theory, research methodologies, gender and development, and social policy in developing countries, as well as carrying out research on related fields. Since 1996 she has been working for Oxfam, the largest development NGO is in the UK, originally as a Policy Advisor. She supported field activities through research, capacity building and training initiatives. More recently she has assumed the post of Manger for the East Timor Human Resources Development Program. Responsibilities involve running a program of support to local organizations and to the primary school system. They also involve research on the impact of the conflict, on gender disparities in education and on reconstruction and reconciliation issues.

Her recent publications include:

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