

AMRC Occasional Paper

Making Working-Poor Women Visible in Economic Reality

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Foreword

Ideology of private and public spheres, dominating the conventional discourse, constitutes gender hierarchy that puts women in a vulnerable position. In this study, “gender” is understood as a social construct institutionalized in every aspects of the daily life. The objective of deploying “gender” analysis is to see what factors causing the gendered informalization. In particular, gender privileges (valorizes) that which characterized as masculine—not all men or only men—at the expense of that which is stigmatized (devalorised) as feminine; lacking agency, control, reason, ‘skills’, culture and so on (Pettersen, 2005). Gender as a social construct has been naturalized as norms within the society. As a norm, it pervades culture and languages commonly used in the daily life. A succinct explanation is provided by Pettersen (2003):

Understood analytically, gender is a *governing* code that pervades language and hence systemically shapes how we think, what we presume to “know”, and how such knowledge claims are legitimized.

In emphasizing the salience of gender in political economy, we need to review the normalization of informal employment and unfettered power of market over every aspect of life. The special attention is given to poor women economy activities, due to gender stereotype, are considered as private sphere activities. The characters of feminized labour force in which women constitute the majority have become impediments for collective resistance against capital power proliferated in every aspects of society.

Addressing gender issues in the social movement requires a special approach enabling working-poor women to remove the barrier of well preserved social construct. Indeed, in identifying power relation underpinning the subordination of women in feminized labour force, we include the analysis on how capital accumulation advantages from the endurance of ideology of private and public sphere. Pushing for the visibility of working-poor women in the economic reality then becomes an inevitable task for organizers. By visibility, working-poor women are capable to assert their role as activists and agent of change.

Using this account as a background, this paper tries to capture the organizing strategy applied by actors of social movement in three countries in South East Asia region in organizing working-poor women. Those three countries are Indonesia, Cambodia and Philippines. The information is elicited through Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC) project of new ways of organizing. In implementing the project, AMRC works with local organizations in three aforementioned countries. The project itself is intended to encourage the constitution of workers’ bargaining power amidst massive informalization

Informalization and feminized labour



Informal women workers in Asia

Women are predominant in the vulnerable work, own account and contributing family work or unpaid family work. There also has been increasing number of women employed in the service sector in the last two decades. In Southeastern Asia, own-account workers make up 22 per cent (United Nation, 2010) of female employment. Meanwhile, contributing family workers make up 23 per cent (United Nation, 2010) of female employment. The recent economic downturn slashed million jobs in formal sector have pushed women to engage with the informal sector.

In Indonesia, the overall job market is dominated by informal economy workers accounting for 81 million people or 71 percent of the total workforce. By estimation, 92% of the total employment in Indonesia falls into category of informal work including informalised work in formal economy. Own account workers make up 19 per cent of the total employment. Unpaid family workers and employers assisted by unpaid temporary workers respectively make up 20 and 18 per cent of the total employment. Women make up 34.4% of own account workers and 33.6 per cent of unpaid family workers.(ILO,KLIM 2010)

Philippine government, in 2010, claimed that there was a dramatic increase of employment reaching to 39.55 jobs (Ibon, 2011). Nevertheless, nearly 6 out of 10 of the 1.73 million-increase in jobs were in among the country's poor quality and lowest-earning work (Ibon, 2011). Out of the one million net new jobs created, some 515,000 were in among the economy's lowest earning sectors: agriculture (201,000 jobs), wholesale and retail trade (251,000) and private households (62,000) (Ibon, 2011). Women workers are predominant in those three lowest earning sectors. While in Cambodia, own account workers and contributing family work respectively make up 41 % and 45.7% of the total employment. (ILO,KLIM 2010). There is also increasing number of women employed in service sector due to the rapid growth of tourist industry. Women employed in the service sector make up 25% of the total workforce. They work on the short term contract basis.

Informalization becomes central in understanding the feminized labour force. The flexibilisation of labour market introduced in countries like Indonesia, South Korea and Philippines as a remedy to 1997 economic crisis has not only dismantled the union power but also exacerbated the living condition of workers. The flexibilisation has pushed more people to engage with informal sector using whatever means of subsistence to survive. A misleading thought of informal sector has resulted from the recent economic downturn slashing million jobs in Southeast Asia countries. The mainstream media, Wall Street Journal argued that informal sector is the last safe havens in a darkening financial climate and 'a critical safety net as the economic crisis spreads'. (WSJ, 14 March 2009 cited in Breman (2009)). This argument quickly invited supports from IMF and World Bank emphasizing the self-reliance aspect of informal sector.

What takes place on the real practice is not the potential of self-reliance but the massive proletarianization where the poor have to compete against each other to earn living. The situation then enables capital to tap reserve of cheap labour supply in the society. This is the socialized labour where

all daily life activities are subsumed to the circuit of capital. Chang (2007), provides explanation on socialized labour in current movement of capital:

The current movement of capital is making the whole of society into a factory and capitalist labour is transforming from labour in factories to more socialised labour. More than ever before, capitalist labour becomes the common in the livelihood of the Asian (and elsewhere) population. However, this means not only quantitative expansion of capitalist labour as labour is given a particular nature as well. *It becomes commonly informal.*

Reproductive economy, basically economy activities in the private sphere, becomes indispensable in understanding informalization and the feminization of the labour force. Working-poor women, engaged with the informal sector, provides socially necessary labour which used to be non waged work. In urban area, working-poor women work as domestic workers performing work traditionally assigned to mother or wives. In service sector, women are employed to perform work like serving the customer or cleaning jobs. The outsourcing of industrial process also depends on working poor women employed in home based industries. Meanwhile in rural area, many women are forced to become unpaid family workers whose work is helping their husbands employed in the plantation to meet the working target.

Feminine identity attached to women and their work is manipulated by capital to support its smooth functioning in the society. Indeed, referring to ‘feminine’ as not the privileged one, male workers are also feminized by flexibilization of labour market. Nevertheless, for women, the issue is more complicated as ‘feminine’ identity is politically attributed to them. The feminine identity of working poor women then creates political and economic impacts. The work is considered unskilled and therefore it is low paid or even in the case of unpaid family work, it is wageless. Politically, the working poor women are made invisible in the economic reality.

Organizing working-poor women



Working poor women in Philippine, Indonesia and Cambodia

When it comes to organizing working poor women, we need to recognize how capitalism benefits from hierarchical and gendered division of labour. In rural area in North Sumatra Province, Indonesia, the major issue for working-poor women is family labour. Women, whose husbands work as casual workers in palm oil plantation are assigned to “help” their husbands pick up fresh fruit bunch of palm oil during harvesting season. The word “help” signifies women under-privileged position within the hierarchical division of labour, the work they perform is non waged labour thereof. Besides accepting their role in the production, workers are required as well to acquire the idea of hierarchical division of labour. The man, posed as a head of the household, depends on the feminized identity of his wife. The point here is that the smooth functioning of capitalism as an economic system requires identities and assignments of value that conform to the hierarchical principles of the game.(Pettersen, 2003)

The gendered division of labour also devalues kinds of work which is traditionally assigned to wives or mother. This applies to domestic work and service sector where women provide their socially necessary labour yet the work is undervalued. In Cambodia, around 4000 young women work as beer promotion workers. In 2009, AMRC and CSFWF (Cambodia Service and Food Workers Federation) organized a survey involving 101 beer promotion workers. The survey was intended to encourage BPWs to organize and fight for their rights. The survey findings reveal that BPWs are vulnerable to sexual abuse from the customers. They are also required to perform non-waged additional job such as cleaning up the restaurant after working hours.

Serving the beer, accompanying the customers and “helping” the husbands to meet the harvesting target are obviously considered as work with feminized qualities. Women’s work and feminized qualities—in whatever sphere—are devalued: deemed ‘economically’ irrelevant, characterized as subjective, ‘natural’ and ‘unskilled’, and typically unpaid. (Pettersson, 2005) Therefore, in addressing the issue to working-poor women in rural and urban area, there is a need to introduce how gender identity is being socialized through culture and even religion. The first thing needs to be prioritized in the organizing work, before stepping into a higher level such as policy changes, is how to overcome the barriers of women in improving their capacity to organize and represents themselves due to gender identity attributed to them.

Women, activists and agent for changes

The prominent challenge lies in making women visible in economic reality. By making women visible, women are not merely considered as victims but also agents of change. It is indispensable to encourage women to become activists capable of removing feminized identities attributed to them. Pettersson (2005) provides a succinct explanation:

Making women empirically visible is thus an indispensable project. It inserts actual (embodied) women in our picture of economic reality, exposes how women and men are differently engaged with and affected by political economy, and reveals women as agents and activists, as well as victims of violence and the poorest of the poor.

In making women visible in economic reality, we can start by a process called as “power mapping” specifically intended to identify the oppressive actors and institution and strategy for change. In a small group discussion, organized by AMRC and KPS and attended by plantation workers and peasants, male-casual workers are determined to organize other workers. One of the issues they were planning to take up was to demand plantation to provide additional workers during harvesting season. Women, in the group, then criticized the approach by asserting their identities as (non-waged) workers. New element then was inserted into the discussion. The non-waged and casual women workers who have been invisible were inserted in picturing the economic reality in plantation area. As workers, the women would actively involve in organizing other casual workers and struggle for their long-neglected rights as workers.

At a one workshop organized by AMRC and Ecumenical Labour Institute for Labor Education and Research (EILER) in Philippine to discuss strategy of organizing informal workers, one of issues discussed most in organizing informal workers in slum area is how to ensure that the community activities do not diminish one’s activity to earn living. Few people whose time absorbed to do 2-3 informal work would spend their spare time to join an organization. Moreover, working poor women in the slum area bear dual burden of child rearing and scrapping for living.

Therefore, strategy of organizing working poor women should encompass process where

women are able to discuss their private issues and connect them to societal issues. The instrument of power mapping can also be used to identify other groups of people that can support women struggle. In Philippine, besides rising the awareness of women to fight for their rights, Samakana, an organization of urban poor women, also organizes the male spouses. It is also important to disseminate the salience of women struggle to their male spouses as deconstructing of gender as a social construct must be started from family which is part of social institution.

In the case of beer promotion workers in Cambodia, the questionnaire covered barriers encountered by women in private sphere and preserved by held-traditional value. Working on short-term contract basis, the BPWs earn US\$55 per month which is insufficient for living. Most of them, coming from poor villages where industrialization expropriates land of small-holding farmers, think beer promotion as an easy job require low education level and skill. Most of BPWs, involved in the survey, are single parents or responsible for family earning.

BPWs face social stigma as a result of working at bars. Because of insufficient income, some of them are dragged into prostitution making them vulnerable to rape and sexually transmitted diseases. During the workshop, organized by AMRC and CLC to discuss the survey output for organizing strategy, the organizers emphasized the importance of applying multi-layered strategy. The first layer was to build the confident of BPWs. The first layer was to deconstruct the feminized identities of BPWs. The next layer was to introduce them with the union. Included in the workshop discussion was general political economy explanation, conveyed in the simple language, to identify the bargaining target of the collective resistance. Therefore, by being visible in the economic reality, women become the actors for changes.

Way forward

Challenging the ideology of public and private sphere dominating the conventional discourse has been a constant issue in the social movement. Informalization indeed has perpetuated the idea of reproductive economy not considered as economic activities. The feminization of labour enables capital to tap labour reserves from society. The control over labours by capital no longer takes form in regulatory framework. The control is derived from labours' own desire to survive. Creating labour supplies *from within* has been the process of informalization, the unmaking of once formalized relations, a process unleashed mostly during the capitalist world-economy's cyclical downturns, when attempt to reduce labour cost take precedence over other cost-cutting measures. (Tabak 2000a,5 cited in Petterson, 2003).

The initiative developed to organize working-poor women in rural and urban area then must seek for the visibility of women, whose work is not considered as economy activities, in economic reality. AMRC has introduced power mapping method to be applied in the local workshop on organizing strategy. The power mapping, for working-poor women, is to elaborate what social institution, culture and any forms of power relation that preserve the feminized identities attributed to women. By applying the power mapping, women then become the (actual) subjects capable of recognizing her economic activities and their connection to society. Once the working-poor women become activists and agents of change then they are (surely) fully entitled to decide the most effective form of organization or strategies to constitute their bargaining power.

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