

WOMEN AND THE LABOUR MARKET: CHALLENGES POSED FOR JOB-CREATION POLICY¹

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United Nations Statistics have shown that, despite the fact that women make up just over half the world's population, they perform two-thirds of the work done worldwide. However, women's earnings only amount to 10 percent of the world's earnings, and they own only 1 percent of the world's property (Bazilli, 1991:17). These statistics speak volumes about women's position in the labour market. South Africa is no exception to this pattern.

Women in the Formal Economy

The legacy of Apartheid means that women of different race groups are situated differently in the occupational division of labour. White women have better jobs than Indian and 'Coloured' women, who in turn have better jobs than African women. However, compared with the men in their respective race groups, women are in general employed in more low-wage, low-skill occupations. This goes some way towards explaining why the earnings of women are generally proportionately lower than their rate of participation in economic activity. In predominantly 'female' industries such as the food, textile and garment industries, men occupy most of the more skilled and better-paid positions. Except for the mining industry, most of the traditionally male industries have become highly capital-intensive and high-wage sectors which unashamedly advertise for, and employ, male labour only (such as in the motor and petro-chemical industries).

A recent study of the KwaZulu-Natal region (Posel et al, 1993) shows a strong feminisation of the labour force between 1983 and 1991. However, this is :

not a panacea for women (who) are crowded into certain parts of the labour market, and predominate in low-wage, less secure jobs and in the informal sector. In consequence, women's incomes are substantially lower than those of men, and women-headed households form a disproportionately large part of the poverty groupings (Posel, 1993:74).

Women outside of the Formal Economy

Women who are not working in the formal economy are by no means all housewives who have elected to stay at home and be full-time mothers and/or wives, supported by the income of a responsible male head of the family. Very many of them are women who need to earn an income, but who are insufficiently skilled or educated to be considered for jobs in the formal sector of the economy. Many of them are the sole supporters of their families, and many others have to earn incomes to supplement the low wages earned by their husbands, sons or daughters. However, this is a fact which is not usually recognised in South Africa's economic statistics.

Apparently the rate of male unemployment is worked out on the basis of 95 percent of the adult male population, but the rate of female unemployment is worked out on the basis of 55 percent of the adult female population in South Africa.² Therefore the unemployment statistics for women in South Africa are clearly unreliable. A further problem is that unemployment is generally understood to refer to those who do not have work in the formal sector of the economy. However, a great many 'unemployed' people, particularly women, are working very hard to try to earn an income. Quite apart from the unpaid labour which is performed by almost all women in the home, a great many women have to try to eke out a subsistence through their labour in the informal sector of the economy.

Even in the informal sector, which is not homogeneous, women occupy the low-income, low-skill occupations. Often when activities undertaken by women in the informal sector start to become more profitable, they are gradually taken over by men. The women remain in the more subsistence-level activities, while the men are often able to move beyond subsistence to accumulate capital for more ambitious projects. There are a number of reasons for this, including the easier access of men to credit facilities, the inferior legal status of women, and the fact that women generally take greater direct responsibility for raising their children, which impedes their ability to progress.

There is a popular view that all informal sector operators are independent entrepreneurs who choose to work in this way in preference to working in the formal sector of the economy, because they make much more money. This is a fallacy in the case of the majority of women in the sector. Most are engaged in unrewarding, unremunerative, hard work for many hours each day, merely because there is absolutely no choice or alternative. Or they 'use informal sector activities to supplement inadequate income in formal jobs such as domestic work' (Budlender, 1991:21). Many women in this sector are never sure of making a nett profit. All they know is that there is some turnover of cash which is generated by being involved in trading.

Although statistics on the informal economy are hard to find, '..... it is clear that many people are involved, and that the majority of them are probably women' (Budlender, 1991). Nevertheless, it shares the same characteristic with the formal sector in that women's earnings are proportionately lower than their level of participation in economic activity, and therefore women are more concentrated in the low-income activities in the sector (Budlender, 1991:22-23).

Invisible Work Sectors

The factors which relegate women to the most poorly-paid low-skill jobs in the formal and informal sectors of the economy, also result in women (and children) being employed in different types of work which are not recognised in economic statistics or in a census. These types of work include casual work, piece-work, seasonal work, home-based work, and of course, what is euphemistically known as 'family labour'. The second-class status of women in a patriarchal society facilitates their marginalisation into these types of work.

The fact that so many women who cannot get jobs in the formal economy are so desperate for an income, makes them easy prey for employers who are wanting labour on cheaper terms than may be found in the formal sector. These invisible sectors of work are usually subject to super-exploitation. Normally these workers are isolated and unorganised, and therefore are not in a strong bargaining position. Very often the weak position of these workers is further reinforced by patriarchal power relations, such as in the case of 'family labour'.

Even in countries where there is legislation to protect such workers, there is often difficulty in implementing such legislation due to the invisibility of the sector of work, and the workers remain vulnerable to high levels of exploitation as long as they are not organised. Particularly vulnerable are immigrants who are worried about their rights to stay in a country, and people who are involved in illegal forms of work.

Statistical disappearance of women into 'the household'

In most countries in the world (and South Africa is no exception) economic policy is constructed on an idealised conception of the household unit, which assumes that it is a unit with common economic interests, headed by an identifiable male who makes decisions for the whole household which result in the use of the household's resources for the greatest benefit of all members. However:

there is now research from many countries to confirm that within households, women and men do not share resources equally, nor apply their resources to the same ends. Men tend to keep a disproportionate share of their earnings for spending upon their individual wants; women apply virtually all their resources to the

needs of their families, very often putting their children's needs before their own (Ginwala et al, 1990:17).

The large numbers of female-headed households in South Africa, particularly in rural areas³, mean that economic policy in South Africa, which is underpinned by this type of assumption, is way out of line with socio-economic reality.

The consequence of the above is that women, particularly black women in South Africa, are the poorest people in the society, and the most marginal in the distribution of the society's wealth. The effect of women's key role in supporting families and communities is that whole communities remain poor. One of the results of Apartheid has been uneven development whereby the cities have developed at the expense of the rural areas. seventy-one percent of African women in South Africa are based in the rural areas (Ginwala et al, 1990:20) where there are the highest proportion of female-headed households. Apartheid's underdevelopment of the rural areas has resulted in women remaining over-represented among the poor in South Africa.

What this means for Job Creation Strategies

Job-creation strategies, which provide jobs mainly for unemployed men, have limited potential for uplifting the standard of living of the community as a whole if the socio-economic position of women remains unaddressed. However, job-creation which merely creates more low-income, low-skill job opportunities for women may end up not changing their socio-economic position or that of the communities in which they live.

Restructuring of the economy therefore needs to occur in a way which is sensitive to the connection between individuals and household survival, and the kinds of employment which will be made available. In this regard, it will not be possible to address fundamental issues of inequality or equity without seriously considering the growing feminisation of poverty and the vast numbers of people and households who are dependent on women's earnings (Posel et al, 1993:76-77).

For job-creation to lead to development, redistribution and sustained economic growth, it is important to transform the occupational division of labour between men and women so that women occupy a more central place in the economy, and more of the higher-wage and higher-skill occupations. One of the problems is that the types of work which are seen as 'women's work' mostly earn very low incomes. Thus a change in the occupational division of labour means that there must be both a revaluation of the jobs done by women, and also that women must be employed more in non-traditional areas of work (seen as 'men's' work) which earn higher incomes.

One of the factors which keeps women in low-income jobs is the lack of skills to do anything else. Therefore training in new skills must be a part of any job-creation programme. For the reasons mentioned above, training must actively seek to encourage women to learn skills in the occupations which are not traditionally followed by women. Very often women do not present themselves for such training because they do not believe that they will get employment in these occupations. So job-creation programmes should actively promote women taking up jobs in these non-traditional sectors of work, and ensure their placement in such jobs, and advertise for women to present themselves for these jobs and skills training.

Job-Creation in the SMME Sector

At present, the small, medium and micro-enterprise (SMME) sector is popularly seen as a sector with great potential for creating jobs for people who have not been able to access the mainstream economy, such as black people and women. In fact, the promotion of job opportunities in this sector is often euphemistically called 'black advancement', 'women's empowerment' or 'economic affirmative action'. However, a number of problems arise when relying on this sector as a panacea to provide jobs in the South African economy. Firstly, the SMME sector in actual fact has fairly limited job-creating capacity. Secondly, some job-creation strategies in this sector (such as sub-contracting) may sometimes cause jobs to be lost in the formal sector, and often more jobs are lost than those new ones thereby created in the SMME sector. Further, the jobs in the SMME sector are invariably lower-wage jobs. So it may be that the strategy merely replaces well-paid workers in the formal sector with other more poorly-paid workers in the SMME sector, which is hardly a sound strategy for overall economic growth. Further, if job-creation in the SMME sector is accompanied by job-loss in the formal sector, then those retrenched formal sector workers now start to crowd into the informal sector. Because they are usually more skilled than the people who are already in the informal sector, they dominate the higher-wage occupations, while those (mainly women) who operated in the informal sector all along, continue to occupy the low-wage occupations in an ever-more-crowded informal sector. Job-creation strategies in the SMME sector need therefore to be designed with the macro-economic objective of achieving an overall increase in the number of jobs created as well as in the amount of income earned, and not merely achieving a shift of jobs from a higher-wage to the low-wage SMME sector.

Another problem in seeing the SMME sector as the answer for job-creation for disadvantaged groups of people, is that such strategies tend to ghetto-ise black people and women into the SMME sector, with as little possibility as ever of penetrating the mainstream economy. It is therefore important that job-creation

strategies in this sector are implemented in such a way as to allow the people in the sector as much mobility as possible from the SMME into other sectors of the economy, and that these strategies do not merely concentrate on developing the SMME sector as an end in itself.

Strategies for encouraging the development of a more production-oriented informal sector (as opposed to the present one which is substantially oriented towards commerce and services) might produce an expanded and more dynamic informal sector. However, it might also result in the marginalisation within such a new informal sector of those people (the majority of whom are women) who are already engaged in trade and service-centred economic activities in that sector. This would leave the position of women in the informal sector, particularly the most poverty-stricken, virtually unchanged.

Thus job-creation strategies in the SMME sector must also aim to achieve the transformation of the position of women in the occupational division of labour in the economy as a whole, if the objective is to achieve development, redistribution and economic growth.

Strategies for putting women at the centre of the economy

At the basis both of the marginal and secondary position of women in the economy, and of the process of driving women out of the formal economy in times of increasing unemployment, is the patriarchal nature of South African society. A patriarchal society is described as:

a system of male authority which oppresses women through its social, political and economic institutions. In any of the historical forms that patriarchal society takes, whether it is feudal, capitalist or socialist, a sex-gender system and a system of economic discrimination operate simultaneously. Patriarchy has power from men's greater access to, and mediation of, the resources and rewards of authority structures inside and outside the home (Humm, 1989).

Thus there is a good reason why income-generation and job-creation strategies rarely change these trends in practice, despite all the modern-day awareness about the feminisation of poverty world-wide, about the need for development strategies to focus on women if they are to be effective and about the marginal position of women in the economy. This is because most strategies fail to challenge the patriarchal relationships which give rise to this situation. Strategies for mainstreaming women in the economy have to be revolutionary. They have to challenge patriarchal institutions, practices and traditions, at least to the extent of transforming the occupational gender division of labour in the society.

Importance of Organisation

For such a revolutionary transformation to take place, working women have to be well organised, not only as workers, but specifically as women focussing on the root causes of their oppression as women. Women workers in the informal sector must be part of such organisation, in alliance with organised working women in the formal economy. One form of such organisation is women-only trade unions. Another form is strong women's committees (within established trade unions), with enough teeth to be able to challenge patriarchal power relations. These should be linked through an overall co-ordinating mechanism, in a broader working-class women's alliance.

Organised working women would need to challenge the patriarchal practices and power-dynamics of the trade union movement itself, in order to push the trade unions into leading a struggle to transform women's position within the occupational division of labour. Once women workers are better organised as women, what strategies may they undertake (and persuade the trade union movement to undertake) in pursuance of this objective? Here are some possibilities:

1. Make visible the work that all women are doing. Organise women in the invisible work sectors to campaign around their recognition and legal accommodation as workers (such as the international network of women's organisations campaigning for the adoption of an ILO Convention on Home-based Work in June 1995).
2. Develop leadership, negotiating and lobbying skills among women in the low-skill, low-pay occupations in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy.
3. Advocate and negotiate changes to legislation so as to broaden the definition of workers to include the peripheral categories of work in which women are often employed.
4. Advocate and negotiate policies and practices which, based on developing the ability to make choices, facilitate mobility of women into more mainstream positions in the economy, including mobility into more skilled work, and mobility from informal to formal sector work.
5. Undertake negotiations to revalue and restructure 'women's work', and the entire structure of jobs in all sectors of the economy.

6. Break down the stereotypical division of labour through extensive affirmative action programmes, training and education, occupational and industrial restructuring, etc.
7. Campaign against unpaid 'family labour' (and child labour) in enterprises.
8. Campaign and negotiate for the implementation of a Code of Minimum Labour Standards for SMMEs.
9. Break down popular and disempowering misconceptions about the position of women in the informal sector, by building organisations of women workers in this sector who speak for themselves, instead of always being spoken for by the better-off entrepreneurs in the sector.

Conclusion

It is unlikely that a transformation of the position of women in the economy will take place without strong organisation spearheaded by women. Women's position in the economy, and the tendency for women to be squeezed out of the labour market, originates in their lack of power in a patriarchal society. Any substantial change to this situation is likely to be accompanied by a change in power relations in the society, economically or politically. In all likelihood such changes will be resisted, particularly by individuals or interest groups who hold any power in the current situation and who feel threatened by the possibility of such change. In order to overcome such resistance it is important that the process of change be driven by organised working women themselves. Organisations of working women must be sure that their representatives not only are part of, but also play a leading role in, policy-making and decision-making for job-creation programmes and strategies intended to transform the marginalised position of women in the labour market. To avoid the familiar problem of women delegates sitting in male-dominated committees and losing their way or failing to make any impression, regular report-backs and collection of new mandates from their organisations, as well as regular collective reassessments of ways of being more effective, are essential. This will make it easier for such representatives to be widely supported by working women in pressing for strategies and policy changes necessary for a move away from merely reinforcing old patterns, to ensuring the implementation of some of the strategies listed above.

NOTES

- 1 Based on a paper presented at a conference on The Labour Market in Transition - Experiences, Possibilities, Strategies in South Africa and Germany, 10/12 October 1994 (Bad Boll, Germany)
- 2 A workshop on Unpaid Labour organised by the ANC Commission for the Emancipation of Women in 1993 heard this from one of the delegates from the Development Bank of S.A. who had tried to find out from the CSS how these statistics were arrived at. She was not able to establish any rationale for choosing these percentages.
- 3 59 percent in Bantustan rural areas, 47 percent in Bantustan urban areas, 25 percent on white-owned farms, 20 percent in small towns outside Bantustans, 30 percent in metropolitan areas. (Ginwala et al, 1990:17)

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