

WOMEN AND MEN HOME-BASED WORKERS IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR IN THE WEST BANK TEXTILE INDUSTRY¹

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This article is a shortened version of a research project conducted in 1995 on "Women and Men in the Informal Sector in the West Bank: Home-Based Workers in the Textile Industry". The central thesis examined was "that both men and women could probably meet their livelihood needs in case of temporary unemployment through subcontracting". In this work I established that the gender division of labour in the West Bank confines women to rigid reproductive and productive roles; thus, hindering their mobility, and increasing their vulnerability at the level of the household, the market and society. The principal objectives of the study were; (i) to acquire an understanding of the mechanisms of subcontracting in controlling home-based workers (both men and women) and (ii) to explore the role of gender in employment patterns in the textile industry. A fundamental finding was that while women's home-based work is a basic survival strategy that enables them to carry on with their reproductive role, for men, it is just a short term strategy which is resorted to in case of unemployment conditions. However, men's comparatively less limited access to the market motivated them to recognize the opportunities and capitalize on them. The data also suggest 'job-gendering' at different levels in the textile home-based work. Job-gendering was evident in the skills men and women acquire through the work they do and as a result of contractual arrangements with contractors/subcontractors who are exclusively men. Another interesting finding was the feminization of home-based work at both levels as home-based workers and wage labour earners.

Introduction

Until recently, the Palestinian labour force in the West Bank has been identified with the integration of the Palestinian economy through the absorption of almost half the active labour force in the Israeli labour market (Siniora, 1986:1). This absorption took different forms, of which subcontracting was a major form. Subcontracting in the Palestinian context emerged as a result of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. With its developed export economy, Israel has been able to assimilate the Palestinian economy not only through subcontracting arrangements but by manipulating the Palestinian economy as a whole. Hence, a major manifestation of the "integrationist" policy was the process of proletarianization of large numbers of men and women largely

from the countryside. Thus, the concentration on the process of economic "integration" was a priority for understanding mechanisms of control over the West Bank natural and human resources.

Significantly, the literature on women, men and work in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip has on the whole been part of the literature on economic "integration" in the Israeli economy. The theoretical perspectives used were within the colonial settler thesis, dependency theory and general Marxist theory and the "integrationist" policy implemented by Israel affecting all aspects of living conditions in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Sara Roy elaborates on this:

Palestinians tend to use the language of dependency theory and use neo-Marxist analyses to define the relationship between Israel and the West Bank as economic and structurally asymmetric. It is a centre-periphery relationship between two separate economies, with Israel the dominant "centre" economy and the West Bank its subordinated, peripheralized counterpart (Roy, Sara. 1995:119).

The entry of women and men in the formal and/or informal sectors as wage labourers in subcontracted workshops and in home-based production at a later stage - although it existed before 1967 on a very small scale in the crafts industry and in agriculture on an even smaller scale - was not a result of economic growth and development, rather it was the consequence of the annexation of the Palestinian economy into the Israeli developed economy. In addition, other policies implemented by the occupation authorities (mainly land confiscation and water usage restrictions) have accelerated the entrance of both men and women into the Israeli labour market. Thus farmers, casual labourers, and so on have become cheap labour power for Israel. A major consequence of pooling out of cheap labour power has been growing employment in the textile manufacturing industries and a blurring of the boundaries of the formal and informal sectors.

Subcontracting developed into a major method used by Israeli firms for employing cheap labour power in textile products and other light industries such as food processing and paper manufacturing. In the textile industry, subcontracting arrangements resulted in the growth of large numbers of Palestinian workshops to the advantage of the Israeli local and export markets. Palestinian subcontractors owning workshops receive the cut material from Israeli firms for assembly in their workshops, and the unskilled labour employed is mainly

constituted of women, with a few men. In the occupied territories the textile industry employs one-quarter of those employed in the industrial sector (Samed 1988). The majority of these workshops are tied up to Israeli factories. The textile industry does not require high technology and employs Palestinian local labour in relatively large numbers. This sector mainly involves small factories/workshops small in size, employing less than ten workers. It is also characterized by seasonal work and limited invested capital (Abu Abla, Abla, 1986).

Home-Based Work and its Gender Implications in the West Bank

Home-based workers are dispersed geographically in the West Bank. They are in cities, towns, villages and refugee camps. However, all home-workers come from low income families whose spouses, other male members in the family and/or women members of the family work in low paid jobs in Israel or in the West Bank. A few of the male spouses and other male members in the family work in different occupations, of which the salaries are barely enough to support a family of 6 to 7 members. Almost all home-workers interviewed, whether men or women, have worked at one time in textile workshops run by Palestinian businessmen carrying subcontracted assembly work for Israeli firms. The two major reasons why women and men work as home-workers are their difficult economic situation due to unemployment and the fact that there is no direct supervision by employers. However, women interviewed stated that they do home-based work because of social restrictions on their mobility and because they can care for their children and perform domestic tasks at the same time. For men home-work has another dimension; one man asserted, 'I do not want to be under the control of a Palestinian factory owner unless there are laws that regulate the relationship between us'. He also reported that the closure of the West Bank to Israel had caused many workers to lose their jobs; given the high rates of unemployment, home-based work was welcome and the flexible working hours gave a feeling of self-employment for both men and women. Additionally, for men in particular it is considered a step towards opening their own textile workshop. Some men have been able to open textile workshops in their homes and/or become distributors between Israeli firms and Palestinian home-based workers, while being themselves home-based workers, i.e. combining different activities, which they found to be more profitable. Other men and women gave up work in textile workshops when the West Bank closures to Israel left Palestinian textile workshops without regular work. Some women reported an interest in opening their own workshops, but the unavailability of capital combined with their reproductive role which hinders mobility, means that they have not been able to do so.

The above explicitly reflects an income-earning strategy of the household and the gender implications of home-based work. For women it is a basic survival need, especially for female-headed households (among cases interviewed four women were the head of the family and the sole earner, while another two were the only earner in the family where family members were

unemployed). The gender implication for women is that home-based work will enable them to combine their reproductive role with their productive income-earning work. On the other hand, for men it is a short-term household strategy brought about by unemployment, and because there are no socio-cultural constraints, they were able to perform other activities related to home-based work i.e. subcontracting arrangements at the market level. Men's unlimited accessibility to the market motivated them to recognize the opportunities and capitalize on them (Friedman and Hambridge 1991:171) in conditions of unemployment. Women's accessibility to the market is of course, limited by their domestic responsibilities. At the household level it was found that women working in home-based production do not necessarily retain and save from their earnings, since it is spent as part of family expenditures.

Gender Determinants and Home-Based Work

Discussing the role of gender in home-based work is intricate. There is no sharp demarcation in employing either men and/or women. However, quite a large number of women are working in home-based work though men are also found in significant numbers. One can go as far as saying that all members of the family might be involved to different degrees according to whether the worker is a woman or a man. Nevertheless, the above classification can help in delineating gender differences in relation to women's and men's access and control over resources and decision making processes - thus, describing their access to subcontractors, relationships between subcontractors and home-based workers and the types of work done by both women and men.

Women Home-Based Workers

All women home-based workers without exception, worked in textile workshops and/or firms before starting home-based work. They are the sole earners and/or the second major supporters in the household. They all have direct contact with subcontractors and/or owners of firms whether Palestinians or Israelis. They are also in control of the assembly work and make the financial arrangements with the subcontractors to a lesser degree. Additionally, they all employ wage workers (an average of seven) and get very little help from family members in assembly work. Access to work resources through subcontracting depends mainly on supply and demand in the market. However, some of these home-based workers work for one contractor or a subcontractor who has not been changed for sometime. One of them reported that when the subcontractor she used to work with stopped providing her with assembly work, she began looking for another and now works with him. Although the others did not change subcontractors, the information gathered suggests that it is not difficult to find subcontractors. This is because of the increasing work in textile industries - both for the local Palestinian market and the Israeli market (which is partly for export). However, the cases of women home-based workers revealed differences according to marital status, whether she works with an Israeli firm or a Palestinian subcontractor, and the presence of male partners in the household. Marital status was found to be a significant

factor in determining women's control over income, factors of production and decision making.

Single Women Home-Based Workers

All of them are the primary home-based workers, and they get very little help in assembly work from family members (mainly in the finishing stage). However, they employ wage labour and are in full control of their work and the arrangements they have with subcontractors. The home-based workers working with Palestinian subcontractors receive the cut material at home. All single home-based workers are in control of the financial transactions and are paid once a month by a contractor who comes to the house for delivery and collection, and pays them by the piece.

Widowed Home-Based Workers:

Widows were found to have full control over their income, factors of production, and decision making to varying degrees. However, for those working with Israeli contractors, a male member in the family brings and delivers the work back. All of them employ women wage labour.

Married Home-Based Workers: Husbands are usually in full control mainly if the work is done through an Israeli subcontractor. However, working with Palestinian subcontractors few women are in control of the financial arrangements.

Men Home-Based Workers

Male home-based workers have direct access to owners of firms and subcontractors and are in full control of their work. This is "expected" because of their socially acknowledged role in production and as family supporters. However, there is a difference in their access to subcontracting and control of market resources which is reflected in the combination of the work they do with other factors, mainly the number of workers they employ and the number of sewing machines they own.

Gender Roles in Home-Based Work

Gender roles operate at two levels in relation to access to contractors and subcontractors. All subcontractors and firm owners are men. Concerning assembly work as home-based workers, there exists a gender division of labour (who does the major work in assembly and who makes the financial arrangements with the subcontractor). There is also a gender division of labour at the household level in relation to earning allocation and decision making.

Access to Contractors/Subcontractors

Having worked originally in textile workshops and small factories women have access to Palestinian subcontractors and/or distributors in the Palestinian market. Besides, Palestinian workshop owners approach them in their homes. These workshop owners are either self-employed and/or work through subcontracting with Israeli firms. The data collected suggest that male home-based workers find access to subcontractors and firms much easier due to their unrestricted mobility and ability to expand their work. Not only do they

have access to subcontractors but also can develop their work by combining different kinds of subcontracting arrangements. Almost all women home-based workers reported a keen interest in developing their work into workshops, working on their own and for the Palestinian market. However, they stated that their domestic responsibilities, restrictions on their mobility and the fact that they have no savings means that they are unable to work on their own. Traditional norms of behaviour restrict women's ability to take initiatives. One home-based worker reported that being a widow restricts her mobility even more because "people seeing me out of the house too often might gossip about me". Another single home-based worker said that "as a woman in our society it is better to work at home and not go daily to work in a factory". Hence, tradition is a factor hindering the mobility of women and making them even more vulnerable.

The majority of women home-based workers reported that they do not know of credit organizations to which they could apply. Also, they are scared to take the risk of obtaining credit due to high interest rates and remain skeptical about their ability to pay back on time especially that conditions in the market are unstable because of the political situation.

The productive work of women in clothing assembly at home conforms with their 'natural' domestic role. The majority of women interviewed started working as home-based workers because it does not conflict with their roles as wives, mothers, sisters and daughters, and enables them to bring an income to the family. Subcontractors' reasons for preferring women or men home-based workers were not clear. They gave contradictory responses but they revealed their preference for women because they accept lower payment and possess dexterity in the assembly work. However, subcontractors reported that men are more productive than women and engage in heavier and more demanding work.

Home-Based Work

Women home-based workers with the help of female wage labour perform the assembly work. Women wage workers have specific hours of work, while the home-based workers have longer working hours as they work at night. This is dictated by the domestic responsibilities a woman has to undertake during the day. She leaves assembly work to do housework, prepares meals for the children and husband and performs other household chores. Men home-based workers, irrespective of the number of wage labourers they employ, only work in assembly of cut material. They do not have responsibility at the household level. Men workers know exactly the number of hours they work a day while women are unable to give a precise figure. Besides, men home-based workers are usually helped by women members of the family in the finishing part of assembly work, while women home-based workers are not similarly assisted by male members. This clearly indicates that women's productive labour at the household level is considered "flexible". Women are considered the carers in a family, ensuring that it is close and united. Men are identified as breadwinners and supporters of the family, going out daily to the market, and are not expected to have household

responsibilities. Women however, juggle housework and child care with their home-based work so that the two become invisible.

Another significant variable that distinguishes men's and women's home-based work is the type of material assembled. Men are given jeans material to assemble while women are given dress material. This involves a difference in the amount of money paid to the worker, suggesting that men produce goods of higher marketable value. Subcontractors and men home-based workers reported that women cannot assemble jeans material because they find it too rough to handle.

A primary factor in home-based work is the settlement of finances with subcontractors. Male members of the family, whether home-based workers or not, are responsible for this. In the category family labour it was very clear that men are in charge, although women are the primary assembly workers and in some cases have trained male members in the family in the assembly work. However, in the case of single and divorced women they are in control of their financial arrangements.

Gender Roles at the Household Level

The question of women's access to and control of household resources as earners and decision makers is a complex subject. When asked how they allocate their earnings, women's natural response was that 'it is spent in support of the family'. Information collected suggests that women do not retain money. However, one woman home-based worker reported that she is saving from her income and she is planning to purchase a piece of land. Her brothers who work with her in home-based work save money for investment. The brothers are the decision makers although she is the one who introduced them to the subcontractor, having worked for a while in his workshop. In another case of family labour, the husband controls the household resources and is investing in building a house which will be registered in his name, even though it is built from the earnings of both the husband and the wife.

When asked if she is able to save money, the wife responded 'I have not thought of the idea', and added that since her husband is paid by the subcontractor he is in charge of household expenditures. This and other cases reflect the notion that everything belongs to the family and nothing belongs to women individually, while men refer to their machines and work as their own, reflecting women's subordinate position in the family. In the category of women home-based workers, in particular single and widowed, they control household resources though several cases reveal that they support male members of the family. In one case the married brothers wanted to share profits with their sister although they are not living in the same house and earn an income from their own work. The sister helped them for a while but now she has started investing in machines and has opened a bank account. For the married woman it was clear that her income goes into family support.

Conclusion

In discussing gender determinants of home-based work in the informal sector in the West Bank, the article has revealed similar characteristics of home-based work in the informal

sector as in other Third World countries. These characteristics are summarized in the lack of job security, and stereotypical traits associated with women such as patience, and dexterity. At the same time, women are low paid, and their turn over is very high. They combine long hours of home-based work and domestic responsibilities. Meis asserts:

"By defining women as housewives and breeders, it is possible to obfuscate the fact that they are subsidizing, as unpaid family workers and low paid production workers, the modernization process (1986: 188)."

Women's employment in home-based work is a basic survival strategy that enables them to carry on with their reproductive role in maintaining the household domestic responsibilities. For men, it is a short term household strategy due to unemployment. However, men's unlimited accessibility to the market motivate them to recognize the opportunities and capitalize on them. This was evident from different cases illustrated where men have combined home-based work and subcontracting. Although subcontracting and home-based work emerged in the West Bank under conditions of occupation, the logic of capital is the same everywhere. Israeli capital has benefited from Palestinian men's and women's cheap labour in maximizing its profits. However, women's cheaper labour has been manipulated through patriarchal relations in the Palestinian society and has been viewed because of women's subordinate position in the family, as invisible labour at the level of home-based work. Palestinian subcontractors also benefited from the cheaper labour of women in expanding their workshops and factories although to a lesser degree than the Israeli contractor.

ENDNOTE

1. Adapted from **Women and Men Home-Based workers in the Informal Sector in the West Bank Textile Industry** (1996) Suha Hindiyeh-Mani published in English by World University Service (UK) and in Arabic by the Women's Studies Center/ East Jerusalem 1996.

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