

When work just traps people in poverty

By Noeleen Heyzer

International Herald Tribune
FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 2005

NEW YORK In a world of work that increasingly crosses borders, we're discovering that globalization does not necessarily lead to better, more secure jobs.

Self-employment, casual and home-based work, and part-time and temporary jobs account for 50 percent to 80 percent of non-agricultural employment in developing countries (the percentage is higher still if agriculture is included). In the developed world, such informal employment makes up about 20 percent to 30 percent of total employment.

And rather than informal work becoming formalized as economies grow, work is moving from regulated to unregulated, with workers losing job security along with medical and other benefits, and toiling in unsafe conditions for paychecks that are meager as well as unreliable.

The trend is particularly pronounced for women, who tend to be overrepresented in informal employment in both developing and developed countries. Women make up the majority of part-time and temporary workers in developed countries, while in developing countries (with the exception of North Africa), 60 percent or more of female workers are in informal employment outside agriculture.

Rural women spend backbreaking hours on family plots, often for no payment at all. Those in urban areas work in unregulated factories, earning pennies for products shipped to markets far away.

Furthermore, the totality of women's work remains poorly understood and measured. In virtually all countries, women still bear the primary responsibility for taking care of children, the ill and the elderly, limiting their ability to obtain the education and experience required for better-paying jobs. In countries where health care systems are being ravaged by AIDS, women are bearing an ever larger burden of care.

We know that the consequences of working informally go beyond paltry earnings to include lack of human rights and social inclusion. Compared with those who work in the formal economy, those in the informal economy have less access to clean water, electricity and social services; are more vulnerable to property loss and disability; and have less access to financial, physical and other productive assets.

It is hard to imagine a greater physical and psychological distance, or a greater imbalance - in terms of power, profit and lifestyle - than that between the woman who stitches garments or soccer balls in her home in Pakistan for a retail company in Europe or North America, and the chief executive of that company.

In advance of the 2005 World Summit at the United Nations this month, when leaders come together to assess progress toward the Millennium Development Goals, my organization is arguing for a closer look at women, work and poverty. The basic premise is that decent work is a human right, and fundamental to economic security. Unless efforts are made to create decent work for the informal work force, we will not be able to eliminate poverty or achieve gender equality, nor achieve any of the other millennium goals. Similarly, unless women's economic security is strengthened, any real progress on these goals will be limited.

For progress to occur, four areas should be priorities:

First, organizing informal workers, especially women, to obtain legal and social protection. Unless women are empowered to demand their rights, society will not make the changes that will improve their lives.

Second, making a greater effort to help the self-employed, to improve their access to credit and financial markets and to mobilize demand for their products and services.

Third, creating appropriate policies in support of informal workers, which require that they are visible and that the totality of their work - especially in the case of women - is valued. The starting point is to collect and analyze gender-sensitive statistics on national labor forces.

Finally, strengthening strategies to end gender inequality. Closing gender-income gaps and ensuring safe and healthy working conditions for all should be central to policy-making.

Eradicating poverty and achieving gender equality requires a major reorientation of economic and development policy. It is critical that all those committed to achieving the millennium goals, including the United Nations system, governments and the international trade and finance institutions, make decent employment a priority, and that corporations in the global marketplace improve the condition of all their employees, both formal and informal.

(Noeleen Heyzer is the executive director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women.)

IHT

Copyright © 2005 The International Herald Tribune | www.iht.com