Space and Workplace Issues for Nepalese Female Entrepreneurs, Street Vendors and Employees

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ABSTRACT

Most of the literature focusing on the work and aspirations of women has been produced by and about a western environment and context. Comparatively little literature has been produced within the sphere of management studies about the particular issues facing women in the developing world in terms of their aspirations, work-life balance and general operational issues of their work lives. Among the problems facing Nepalese women wishing to work outside the house are the issues of being seen in public and interacting with strangers in public places, while retaining the perception of being decent and respectable. Some public spaces are considered suitable for women to occupy and the nature of these can vary because of the powerful caste, class and ethnicity issues that colonise Nepalese society. This includes the work of street vendors and other entrepreneurs. Data is provided by personal interviews as well as ethnographic observation. This provides recommendations for both the women involved and also public policy.

Keywords: entrepreneurs, female entrepreneurs, Nepal, public space

1. Introduction

In Nepal, women face structural and systematically-organized barriers to equality in terms of rights and the provision of both domestic and outside work. They are also subject to longstanding and entrenched cultural practices that punish any woman who tries to escape social bonds - being branded a witch, for example - while the dowry system means that giving birth to a girl can represent the potential financial disaster for any family that is not rich (Pathak, 2005: 296-303). The struggle of the Maoist People's movement in Nepal received large popular support because of its attempt to undo

deeply entrenched feudal relationships and have given rise to new forms of identity politics. The war was supported by large numbers of women, particularly from the rural areas, who took a wide range of roles (Sharma & Prasain, 2004). Nevertheless, as Nightingale (2011) observes, "... a variety of everyday practices maintain the boundaries that keep distinctions between ethnic groups and castes clear." The general poverty of the country and the years of warfare are reflected by the lack of infrastructure, especially outside the urban areas. Proximity to a viable road represents a significant contributory factor towards determining economic survival or failure (Brown, 2003). Of course, changing economic

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activities can have unintended consequences and lead to increased inequalities between genders and ethnic groups (Thomas-Slayter & Bhatt, 1994). However, at least one women's development project in Janakpur has connected a group of women with an international market with some degree of success (Davis, 2007). Nevertheless, the discussion of women working has often focused more on whether they are permitted to work at all and less on the issues of where they can work, what activities and functions are they able to perform and in what ways can they improve their income generating activities and quality of life through standard entrepreneurial strategies. This paper investigates the working conditions and issues facing a sample of women in the eastern Nepalese city of Janakpur. In doing so, it focuses on issues of space and mobility for those women in a specific urban environment. Space in this context includes a physical element and, also, a social space element which incorporates "... an (artificial) edifice of hierarchically ordered institutions, of laws and conventions upheld by 'values' that are communicated through the national language (Lefebvre, 2003). In Nepal, the state includes the ideological and repressive states apparatuses (Althusser, 2001) that have imposed through history a legacy of ethnic, religious and caste discourses that have highly gender-determined outcomes. These outcomes are evident at the street level where the women work and they represent significant structural barriers that have to be overcome if those women are to be able to improve their working lives.

A society such as Nepal's tends to be static and to prevent social mobility. However, Nepal as a country is being drawn more closely into the system of international capitalism and this is bringing about many changes through the process of Schumpeterian creative destruction. New products are being introduced into the country, as well as new processes and numerous new

possibilities for the business models that might be operated by entrepreneurs. Since these innovations are not integrated with the caste system, there are some opportunities for the women workers described above to adopt new types of occupation which would enable them to improve their economic circumstances and their aspirations. In addition, the widespread phenomenon of work migration, particularly among men, intensifies the responsibilities women left behind in maintaining the household and managing income (Lokshin & Glinskaya, 2009). While the types of work that women do have been quite well-established, their experience in doing that work has not been very well explored, especially from the perspective of business and management studies. Exactly how do they do their work, what options are available to them and what can management studies best practice suggest for possible income generation improvements? It is these questions that the current research paper intends to try to answer. In particular, it contrasts the roles of women who have some agency over their work - e.g. entrepreneurs and managers - with those who have little or no such agency - e.g. street vendors and employees. Literature on female entrepreneurs (e.g. Birley, 1989) suggests that the principal differences from male entrepreneurs are determined by environmental or antecedent factors that are manifested in market entry choices. Subsequent business development may be influenced by work-family balance issues (Shelton, 2006). What impact does the environment of Janakpur have on this model? This paper uses personal interviews to explore the interaction between the issues of women, work, street work and public space in the research site of Janakpur. The paper continues with a literature review of relevant issues, followed by a description of the method used to obtain data and then a presentation of the data found, discussion and conclusion.

2. Literature Review

Since the 1970s, the role of women in Nepal society has undergone considerable change. Today, women are becoming more aware of their personal needs and identities and are demanding greater equality and status both within the home and outside. In the last decade, the increase in the number of women in the paid labour force has been such that it now exceeds 40%. Yet the discrimination continues. There are formidable barriers to entry for women wishing to take up professional careers. Those who do gain access are often segregated in female occupations, relegated to lower ranks in the organization and barred from moving up the organizational hierarchy because the promotion criteria are such conditions that the average Nepali women cannot meet them through their own resources (Acker, 1989). As a consequence, most employment for women in Nepal takes place in the informal sector, mostly in the areas of street vending and retailing. Previous research among women street vendors and small scale entrepreneurs has indicated the importance of very location-specific factors that have an impact on supply and demand factors that can make the difference between success and failure (Maneepong & Walsh, 2012; Walsh & Maneepong, 2012; Southiseng et al., 2008; Walsh, 2010; Thakur & Walsh, 2013a; Lovichakorntikul, Ngamsang & Walsh, 2013). In South Asia, this situation has the additional dimensions of caste and ethnicity, which are closely correlated in many cases, which do so much to determine what kind of economic activity women are permitted to undertake and where they are permitted to pursue that activity. In general, women who work within a formal workplace system tend to be controlled, their work divided and gradated so as to reduce wages and socially isolated to prevent solidarity and the possibility of collective bargaining (Custers, 2012).

Moser (1978) described members of the informal sector as being part of a continuum of activities that linked petty commodity production with the capitalist (formal) sector in a subordinate position. In some cases, the relationship between the two may be positive, if the capitalist sector finds the informal sector to be a necessary functional part of the overall system. However, this is not always the case. In the work of Custers (2012), the textile industry of the south Asian research sites contained such subordinate activities organized in a hierarchical manner. The situation is more complex at the urban level because more than one industry is concerned and the lives of people in such environments require various goods and services for labour power and social relations to be sustained and recreated. The government of Nepal has taken steps to try to strengthen women's positions in the formal sector by approving an amendment in the Factories Act to permit women employees to participate in night shifts. Meanwhile, various non-government organizations (NGOs) have been encouraging women to enter self-employment on a systematic basis. As such, entrepreneurial women should be able to take advantage of Schumpeterian creative destruction to improve their income-generating options, bearing in mind what is known about differences between male and female entrepreneurs and the means of encouraging more of them (Verheul, Van Stel & Thurik, 2006). However, caste and ethnicity issues prevent the free movement of women into new opportunities. In general, specific castes and tribal identities (the two are closely related) are connected with the types of activity that is permitted for women to do. Although there is more fluidity and complexity in caste relationships than may initially appear to outsiders (e.g. Levine, 1987; Stash & Hannum, 2001), the rigidity of gender distinctions is evident. As a result, relationships exist between the type of economic activity that takes place in the city, the place within the city that those

activities take place and, therefore, the people who undertake them.

Harvey (2008) observed that cities have always arisen as the result of the geographical accumulation of surplus product, accumulated from somewhere and someone and then disbursed by a small number of hands in the city. Within the city, therefore, there is a constant need to discover new and profitable forms of capital accumulation and absorption because this is the purpose and logic of the city. The ability of capital-owners to do this is constrained by certain social relations, such as caste rules, which prevent the redeployment of some forms of capital in their most productive ways. In this sense, capitalism requires a type of (limited) egalitarianism which is the exact ideological opposite of a caste system (Dumont, 1980:4). There are pressures on those who wish to be part of capital accumulation or who are constrained to do so and this can result in familial problems and social dysfunction (Castells, 1978). Even at the level of petty commodification, as Moser (1978) wrote, these pressures are still likely to be evident and they may be manifested in terms of the use of space. The public space in the city where women work may be seen, therefore, as a site of one form of contestation (Goheen, 1998). In this case, the contestation is between the willingness of women to use public spaces as a means of generating income and the social forces that constrain them from doing so. There are practical constraints also. In the developed world, women entering the urban labour force in large numbers are supported - albeit at an often high cost - by government services and private sector childcare provision, while new policies have helped to make at least some workplaces friendlier to women (McDowell et al., 2006). The women of Janakpur lack these services and resources and must improvise to deal with children and other family dependent issues. In other societies where women work in the informal sector, social solidarity means that

people will help each other in terms of childcare and tending businesses when one woman or another has to be away for a short period (e.g. Walsh, 2014). Levels of education and income are nevertheless generally below those of Kathmandu and it has been found that the former is the principal determinant when considering whether everyday corruption, gift-giving and favouritism activities are tolerated in the country (Truex, 2011). This takes place in an economy which is still subject to destabilizing political uncertainty, low expenditure absorption capacity, volatile levels of remittances and an agricultural sector relying on a monsoon that cannot always be predicted and other natural disasters (ADB, 2015).

However, the caste system also places limits on cooperation and development in Nepalese society and economy. Caste segmentation, it has been found, leads to inefficient allocation of labour and capital and, hence, contributes to lower levels of economic efficiency and activity (Villanger, 2012). Nevertheless, religion remains pervasive in Nepalese society, even in the face of evident social and economic injustices as a result. In India, it has been argued, the majority Hindu religion infuses society to a considerable extent (Pio, 2010) and both shapes the nature and identity of people able to participate in mercantile or entrepreneurial activities and also influences the nature of personal relationships and interactions between individuals, organizations and institutions. Although Nepal was declared a secular state in 2006 (Riaz, 2010) and elected governments have sought to link the local economy with international markets, it is evident that religion retains an important role in daily life, notwithstanding changes brought about by conflict and contestation. State-designated religion was used for many years to stratify Nepalese society and to provide legitimacy to the monarchy and to its role at the apex of the social hierarchy (ibid.).

As previously observed, models of entrepreneurial behaviour by women are quite well-established (Birley, 1989; Shelton, 2006; Minniti & Naudé, 2010). It is apparent that external factors have a significant impact on the types of activities that women can do and how they can adapt and develop their work practices. However, the Nepalese environment suggests that there will be more than usual external factors having an impact on those activities. This research aims to test the degree to which this is true by comparing the limitations placed on women who have agency over their working lives and those who do not, within the particular context of an urban setting.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Research Site

Janakpur (or Janakpurdhan) is a city of some 80,000 people located in eastern Nepal, 123 km south-east of the national capital Kathmandu and 20 km north of the open Indian border. The city is a remnant of the ancient kingdom of Mithila, which was bounded by the Himalayas to the north and three rivers in the other directions, the Ganges, the Kosi and the Gandaki. Kings of Mithilla held the title of Janak and so their capital was known as Janakpur (Burghart, 1978). It is now the administrative headquarters of Dhanusa District of the Janakpur Zone.

The city now has Nepal's only working railway and has developed some religion-based tourism. The most commonly spoken language is Maithili, although Nepali and Hindi are also widely-understood. Other ethnic groups have their own languages. Janakpur residents have reported instances of discrimination in Kathmandu and other areas where Maithili is not spoken.

3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected for this study through a series of face-to-face interviews with respondents

in the places where they worked. A semi-structured questionnaire was constructed to act as a guideline for interviews but the personal interaction was not intended to be constrained by the instrument. Instead, it was intended to be a stimulus for discussions that would in each case take a unique turn depending on the circumstances and opinions of individual respondents.

Respondents were selected on convenience and snowball methods, which began from the premise that those eligible for interview would be women working in the streets or in shops in Janakpur. Within this framework, efforts were made to enhance the heterogeneity of the sample by seeking out respondents with different demographic characteristics than those who had already been interviewed. A total of 30 women were interviewed in depth over the course of several days in late 2013.

Languages used in the course of the interviewing included Maithili, Nepali and Hindi. Ethnic minority women who could not speak any of these languages and had no one to interpret for them had to be excluded. A further limitation of the research was the preconceived idea that some respondents had that the researcher was not conducting academic research at all but in reality was a representative of the public sector who was capable of deploying considerable resources if the respondents provided the 'right answers.' The author has attempted to minimize any distortion or noise in the research findings in the light of these limitations through conducting content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), since it had been determined beforehand that issues relating to physical and social space (Lefebvre, 2003) formed the area of interest. The research was restricted to decent work, as defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) (ILO, 2013) and so sex work was not included in this study.

4. Findings

The research indicated that there are three broad clusters of occupations (Thakur & Walsh, 2013b). The first is for women who have some capital, either because of the accident of birth or because they have husbands or other relatives who are able to remit money from the Middle East or elsewhere. These women may be from higher castes such as Thakur, Jha, Mandal, Mahato, Karn and Yadab and they are able to work in beauty parlours or in bangle shops. These jobs allow the women to work indoors and perhaps in air conditioned surroundings. Their customers are mostly women and so the workplace conditions are considered to be decent and respectable. With success, new ventures can be begun. Although it is considered to be an acceptable form of employment, this is a comparatively recent development and it is only in the last 30 years that such work has become available. Society is still socially conservative in nature and women could still be criticized for doing this kind of work, even though it has become generally accepted. Some normal business activities, such as travelling for meetings or to obtain supplies, also attract criticism if women perform them, especially if they were to travel alone or to interact with a man who is not her husband.

The second category of work involves those who sell farm produce on the streets or some form of prepared food or beverages from a temporary or a permanent booth or stall. Some vendors sell street food snacks that are cheaper alternatives to restaurant meals. Again, the women's caste largely determines the type of food or produce that might be offered. Profit margins are slender for these women who are obliged to purchase supplies from wholesalers, although those who have relatives who own the farmland that produces the raw materials are able to retain more money as profits and thus have the potential to improve their situations in the future. This work is outside but still decent, according to the

definitions provided by the ILO.

The third group of women street vendors is those who must sell sweets or eggs outside the principal temple in Janakpur. These are very poor women from castes such as Sudi, Teli and Kalwar. In some cases, these are women who must work because they have been abandoned or their husbands are unable or unwilling to support them. This work is very unpleasant as it requires them to sit in the sun all day and the profit that can be made from selling these items is very limited. It would be considered socially unacceptable for these women to change their location or the items that they sell and so they are locked into a situation which they greatly dislike but have very little ability to change. Discrimination also affects those members of ethnic minority groups who travel somewhere outside their ancestral home to different parts of the city.

In general, more women are entering the urban labour force because of improved mobility, because of deprivation caused by global economic crisis and 15 years of turmoil in Nepal, as well as the increased number of men who are now able to travel overseas for work, notably in the Middle East. When men are international labour migrants, it can make for some short-term hardship for the women while they wait for the man to get in a position from which he can remit money (and some are never able to do so) but once remittances do start to arrive, they can be used as capital that enables the woman to have a better occupation, perhaps by opening a shop. In addition, some women in this category have more personal freedom and fewer domestic responsibilities and so might choose to work outside the house to keep themselves busy and for self-affirmation. For example, one respondent noted:

"I am running a beauty parlour because my husband went to an Arab country and he sends money from there. But still I have to take care of my family and also

I was feeling bored at home and so that is why I opened this shop."

However, caste and social traditions still persist and women cannot undertake activities outside the scope of their caste and some activities and locations are forbidden. For example, women are not allowed to butcher or sell meat in the evening market, which is a common occupation for women in the Mekong region, for example. There are also some offices which are restricted to men-only. The reasons why gender restrictions exist in some offices and not others may appear arbitrary and even random to outsiders but they are based on tacit societal knowledge that is evident to those involved.

Within the context of caste restrictions, however, women do rotate their options from day to day when they are able to do so. Those women who are able to sell agricultural products, for example, will do their best to respond to changing market demand as well as the seasonality of production by switching what they sell. Janakpur is not a large enough or rich enough city to provide consistent year-round demand for a wide range of products and so it is necessary for women vendors to be entrepreneurial insofar as they are able in order to maintain revenues. On the other hand, some women, such as the sweet sellers, are prevented from moving in to any other sector for caste reasons even though they know that their efforts are unlikely ever to provide sufficient income and this can be a source of bitterness. These issues are evident from comments made by some of the respondents. For example, one sweet-seller observed:

"I don't want to sell sweets in front of the temple under the sun for the whole day but I have no option because I have to take care of my family."

The problem, perceived or real, of inadequate family members and the burden this places on the women concerned was also evident. One respondent claimed that:

"I would also like to stay at home and take care of it but my husband doesn't like to work and he is at home right now taking a rest. So here I am here selling fruit because if I also stay at home my family will suffer because we have to live hand to mouth anyway."

There is a great deal of unemployment in Janakpur and, indeed, throughout Nepal as a whole. Within nuclear families, it is common for one person to be the breadwinner and other adults to remain at home. Consequently, if the husband is unemployed, the wife will go out to try to earn some money and, if she is successful in doing so, the husband may prefer to maintain that situation and remain without an occupation on a long-term basis. This might bring friction in the home but it is not feasible for most women to consider separation or divorce. By contrast, a number of respondents talked about how they or other women had been abandoned by their husbands. As mentioned above, the border with India is only 20 km away and is effectively open. Consequently, it is not difficult for men to travel across the border in search of better work options and, in many cases, stay there and abandon their families.

It is not only husbands who come in for criticism, although they were the most frequent source of such complaints. Sons too can also behave in disappointing ways:

"Even though I am now an old lady, I am still selling vegetables in the market because my son doesn't take any responsibility and the government does not do anything to take care of us."

The government came in for criticism quite often. In general, Nepalese people have lost a lot of faith in the ability of the government - any government - to be able to do anything very positive while in office. As one respondent put it:

"The government is not doing anything for us. They do not give us any capital to support our business. I have to get money from the money lenders and pay a very high rate of interest and it is very difficult to repay the amount required."

In fact, some forms of micro-finance provision are beginning to become evident in the country, although knowledge about them and their use remains limited. Respondents called upon the government to provide low-cost capital and to take measures to develop market institutions so that a wider range of opportunities for women could exist. They also wanted the government to improve the educational system, which is very limited, especially for girls. Only 25% of women and girls aged 6 and over are literate, compared to 54% of men and even in urban areas the female literacy rate is less than 50%. Nearly one third of literate women have never been to school and 40% have only primary level education. Female participation declines with age, indicating that many girls are required to drop out of school early. It was also argued that girls see little point in continuing with their education because the curriculum is so far out of kilter with contemporary society that following it feels pointless. Respondents would like the government - or any institution, including aid donors and non-governmental organizations - to improve the education system generally but, more specifically, provide basic training in business subjects to enable women to be able to open their own ventures with more confidence and expectation of success. Since the ability of the government to provide any kind of service is limited, because of poverty, the destruction of infrastructure by warfare and alleged incompetence and corruption, respondents made a number of claims about the kinds of things that the government should be providing which were often impractical. There is certainly scope for the private sector to become more active and to work with the public sector towards developmental as well as commercial goals.

Nepalese people, in common with people in many Asian countries, tend to look to the government first when it comes to future economic development and expect the government to intervene directly in local economies. This leads to disappointment when the government is not able to act effectively in this way.

5. Discussion

It is evident that the Janakpur women interviewed for this project are motivated to work outside the house for reasons familiar from around the world: the need for additional income during a time of adverse circumstantial change or to meet a long-term need. This accords with existing literature as described previously. However, what is different is the social immobility that appears to be inherent in the city. Although new activities and opportunities appear to be available as a result of the linking of the city to international markets, many of the women are prevented from taking up these opportunities because of social constraints. Women who are entrepreneurs or managers are able in some cases to take advantage of these opportunities but that is because their social situation allows them to do so. In other words, new opportunities in a socially immobile society are leading to greater levels of inequality. Whether this will lead to a resurgence of progressive politics in the future remains to be seen.

Street vendors are especially likely to be adversely affected by the spatial divisions the city and their connections with specific activities. One of the more obvious insights provided by business practice is that sales are likely to be better in an area of relative scarcity. Yet the restrictions on movement prevent the obvious conclusion being reached. Solving this conundrum is not likely to be possible internally. This is because the everyday politics of mundane life, which involves regular interactions between people and between people and organizations

on a quotidian basis which are structured by status and class (Kerkvliet, 2009), does not provide women within this community the ability to break free from the existing situation. These women lack access even to the weapons of the weak (Scott, 1987). It is not impossible that managerial technology could break through the barriers and reinvigorate their commercial activities but this will almost certainly need to be introduced from outside.

The principal means by which the women involved may alter this situation through their own means would be by migration. This is physically possible, since many men are able to travel across the open border to India where large urban centres offer possibilities for employment, while local or regional migration to rural areas offers another option. The problem of this, of course, is that the women must abandon at least some aspects of their identity by doing so. Long-distance trading is, again, only available to those women who as entrepreneurs with capital who are already able to take advantage of emergent opportunities.

6. Conclusion

Castells (1978) argued that the specialized land-uses and concomitant atomization of activities in an urban location can only be made to work if joined together through women's unpaid labour. The ability of people to travel here and there to conduct necessary personal business and still maintain a decent standard of living, that is, relies upon free domestic labour to make it practical. When this situation is mixed with a nascent market economy that is crippled by socially-constructed limitations, it leads to dysfunctional lives and families and this is borne out by the current research. Many of Janakpur's women workers are like caged birds, able to see the sky and the freedom it offers but barred from reaching it. Eventually, it might be expected that the spread of capitalism across Nepal, which is only now beginning in many regions, will

dissolve all of these social relations and replace them with a cash nexus that would provide the women with the desired freedom, although they will have to face other problems as a result. However, that is a long way away and many lives will be damaged by current restrictions in the meantime. Interventions by all sectors can alleviate these problems to some extent, although this ability is limited by resources available. What seems more likely to stimulate change is to introduce new goods and services into the local economy which are not associated with any particular caste or other social marker and which might, therefore, represent a neutral space which any woman might occupy. Of course, for profitable new activities it can be expected that capital-owners will attempt to create monopolies but nevertheless this approach represents potential for change.

The strategies that women use to try to deal with the constraints on their life and work are very limited in nature. The calcification of entrepreneurialism created by the caste system on the one hand and low income levels on the other hand significantly prevent these women from introducing innovations or taking advantages of changes created by others. The low level of education further contributes to this problem. While there is some hope that more micro-finance and NGO support will enable some women to open new ventures, this will remain limited in scope for the foreseeable future.

Future research in Janakpur will monitor change and persistency in the local marketplaces among women workers in particular. Society does change, although not always quickly and not always for the better. Nevertheless, change represents opportunity. The research will in due course move towards being action research, which will be used to help women to recognize and then take advantage of opportunities provided by such changes. It will take place in the context of the research framework outlined here.

7. References

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