



Paid Work, Women's Empowerment and Gender Justice: Critical Pathways of Social Change

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Women's presence in labour markets has increased in many parts of the world with the integration of the global economy and the spread of flexible labour markets. Paid work has become a primary route through which large numbers of women in developing countries enter the public domain. MDG 3 on gender equality and women's empowerment cites women's share of non-agricultural employment as a key indicator of progress. Yet there is little agreement about whether, and what kind of paid work, contributes to women's empowerment.

Conflicting interpretations are partly related to contextual factors. Context profoundly influences the cultural meanings and experiences of paid work for women. In particular, gender relations and ideologies prevailing in different regions directly influence the acceptability and availability of different types of work. In addition, the nature of market opportunities, including the availability of non-agricultural employment, varies with



degree of integration into the global economy. The state also plays an important role in shaping the terms and conditions of paid work – for women as well as men.

Conflicting interpretations are also related to the priorities attached to the individual and collective dimensions of empowerment.



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The collective dimensions of empowerment include:

- the possibilities for women to come together to challenge the injustices they face as women
- the possibilities for them to participate on equal terms with men in the larger struggle for a more just and democratic social order

Evidence suggests there is wide variation in types and circumstances of women's work, with different consequences for these aspects of empowerment. Large numbers of women are currently employed in informal sector work which may be insecure, dispersed, homebased and/or attract low returns and low social recognition. In general, work that takes women outside their homes into the public domain beyond kin networks appears to offer more possibilities for change in terms of voice

and relationships in the domestic domain, and for developing new kinds of identity and a greater sense of agency. This is because it offers:

- greater recognition by women themselves and by others that this constitutes 'work';
- better and/or more regular returns, and often more accommodating responses from family and the wider community;

More critically, such work also offers greater opportunities for developing new kinds of relationships and associational affiliations and hence greater possibilities for transformative change. While changes in individual consciousness and capacity are essential in social change processes, collective struggles for representation, redistribution and recognition have proven more effective in challenging structures of oppression

than individual acts. It is therefore the opportunities that paid work offers for women to develop a collective consciousness of their shared exclusion or exploitation, and the extent to which this translates into collective



mobilisation around their needs and interests that is likely to be a critical feature of the relationship between paid work and longer term structural change.

The dispersed and casual nature of much of women's work makes such collective mobilisation a





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major challenge. However, innovative strategies have been used with considerable success by a variety of different organisations to overcome the constraints faced by women workers in the informal economy.

the politics of redistribution, demanding fairer terms and conditions for women workers, as well as the politics of recognition, bringing to bear the implications of gender difference for women's experiences of paid work

public struggle for gender justice? And are women who engage in collective struggle at the work place able to challenge resilient patterns of inequality within the domestic domain? What leads men to support, or to resist, these challenge to traditional male privilege at home and work?



These organisations tend to have a broader agenda than that associated with the traditional trade union movement. Their activities straddle home, community and workplace, reflecting women's location at the intersections of production and reproduction. Their agendas straddle

and for their interpretation of what it means to be a citizen.

From a research perspective, we need to understand these processes of change in the lives of working women better. What motivates a woman who is empowered in her private life to take up the

From a policy perspective, it is evident that it is not merely where women are located in the world of work that will contribute to progress on MDG 3, but the possibilities for social mobilisation offered by different kinds of work. We therefore need to ask how policies can be formulated to promote women's associational life at work in ways that contribute to their capacity for collective reflection and action.

Photos:

Francis Quarcoopome, cover
Fernanda Capibaribe, inside





About us

Pathways of Women's Empowerment is an international research consortium funded by the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID). Co-ordinated by the Institute of Development Studies in Brighton, UK, the consortium is collectively run by six partners: BRAC University, Bangladesh; the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy (CEGENSA), Ghana; Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK; the Nucleus for Interdisciplinary Women's Studies (NEIM) at the Federal University of Bahia, Brazil; the Social Research Centre (SRC) at the American University in Cairo; and UNIFEM, who in turn work with partners within their regions. Our research seeks to ground emerging understandings of empowerment in women's everyday lives, trace the trajectories of policies affecting women's empowerment and explore promising stories of change to find out what works and why to advance gender justice and equality for all.

For further reading see: Naila Kabeer, **Paid Work, Women's Empowerment and Gender Justice, Critical Pathways of Social Change**

Pathways Working Paper 3. This can be viewed at:

www.pathways-of-empowerment.org/resources_pathways.html

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