

Informal trade as an instrument to fight urban poverty and promote new orders of social stratification: studying the involvement of women in informal economic activities in Maputo - Mozambique.

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1. In a world of poverty and in the cities in particular, women have nowadays become increasingly involved in the economy, acting as agents in the working world beyond the domestic scope making a sound contribution to the family survival.

This is a fairly recent phenomenon and in some countries it was a direct result of the decolonization models whereas in others, it was boosted by the application of the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs).

The group of women I've studied in Maputo, the capital city of Mozambique, are no exception as far as this process is concerned.

Most women – especially the eldest – transferred themselves to Maputo in the years after the independence and gradually learned to adapt to life and to the city structures. They are therefore countryside women, which is reflected in some of their options and attitudes even if, in some cases, a clear adaptation to the urban world can be noticed.

Today, most of them are sellers. The poorest sell their products in the streets on the floor and the more experienced ones, as well as those with an enterprising spirit, sell in the informal markets.

They know how to explain that the most striking women's involvement in the informal business happened in two distinctive moments of the country's recent history. The first happened towards the end of 1970 and the second in the end of 1980.

By the end of the 70s, there was a rupture in the management of the productive structures as well as a break in the agriculture production. It affected all the country. The failure in the delivery of provisions affected mainly the cities, especially the capital city situated in the south of the country, faraway from the most important agriculture cooperative societies.

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Around this period, the city begun to feel the effects of the lack of food and food scarcity was becoming a real threat especially to the poorest families.

In 1987, the never ending war and the worsening of the difficulties the government was facing as far as the political and economic management of the country is concerned, a SAP is implemented. If ten years before what Maputo's population lacked was food, now they lacked money. As a consequence of the adjustment measures enforcement there were, throughout Africa, privatizations, unemployment, (especially in urban areas), and several other reductions in the field of structures and social support programmes for those in dire need (see: Eade 1999; Galli 200; et alli).

In any of these moments, women once confronted with the uncertainty of hunger, came up with unexpected solutions in an effort to guarantee the survival and quality of their families lives and especially the lives of their children. Therefore they needed to find a quick and efficient solution. In between a small yard crop and a network of politically well-placed connections, some women managed to sometimes gain access to some products which they cooked and later sold, in a discreet manner, in the neighbourhood. However, due to the scarcity of those products, this was clearly a short run strategy. Women soon realized they needed to look for alternatives.

Many women had a network of peasant kin living in villages near Maputo, and despite the war and all sorts of increasing hardships (that we will later discuss), some women were soon willing to move away from the city and look for help within their families. They brought them city products – querozene, blankets, phosphorus - which they exchanged for products from the *machamba* (kitchen garden).

In this way, the informal trade started to take shape. Later, many women started to enlarge their network of providers beyond their kinship. By having a better understanding of the way business was done, they started to get supplies in more distant country villages where they found a bigger variety of products and better prices.

In this way, they didn't depend so much on their families support, reducing the responsibility of the reinforced family bonds.

Later, some of these sales women started to specialize in the trade of other products which they now bought in neighbouring countries mainly South Africa and Swaziland.

Still being developed, the trade of foodstuffs still goes on today as a female business. The men from Maputo who nowadays started to adhere to the informal business, choose to work with other products because of the gender segregation.

For a long time, women's activities took place in a concealed manner. They knew that it was very important to keep the entrepreneurship spirit very discreet, unknown to their husbands, to their extended family and to their neighbours if possible.

So as to avoid family confrontation on the one hand, and hide the disregard which their activities made them feel because of the traditional order of male and female roles on the other hand, they made their homes, especially their kitchens, the perfect cover for their first businesses, which was crucial to maintain their activities silent and invisible.

Starting off with some domestic qualifications and knowledge about buying and processing food – which is both traditionally assumed as women's attributes – and using their homes usually understood as restrictive, holding back creativity and intervention, a place where there is no space for reflection and knowledge. The saleswomen we met, ended up to reveal themselves extremely creative and competent in times of war.

2. In the course of time, the business development and the going in and out of the city as well as the increasingly prolonged absences – at first the women tried hard to go and come back from the countryside in the same day, but as time went by, the confidence, the training and ambition acquired in the course of doing business – increased the number of merchants who, in search for better business opportunities, travelled to increasingly distant areas of the city, which made it difficult to go backwards and forwards in the same day.

Away from their homes for more than one day, the excuses they used to justify these absences to their husbands and close family were limited and these women's actions became inevitably visible.

Most men could not bear the thought that their women devoted themselves to trade and earned their own income.

In truth, when the first suspicions arose because of the continuous absences and the dissimulated way women organized themselves, almost all husbands (and society itself) assumed that women dedicated themselves to rendering sexual favours to other men so as to obtain the products and the money they didn't have at home.

The women's prolonged absences as well as the success they have obtained soon guided people's thoughts towards adventure and transgression rather than labour and effort.

Unemployment, by rendering many of these men to a condition of occupational void, ended up creating a huge number of problems. If we think that nowadays work is also a powerful tool of social integration and inclusion, an unemployed person, especially if

that person remains unemployed for a long time (as it is the case of the above mentioned men), not only does he experience economic constraints but can also consider himself both personally and socially excluded or even marginalized because he doesn't meet the necessary requirements to be considered as a worthy individual who fully participates in the world – the working world – and who has learned to consider working a fundamental tool in a men's achievement process.

It is therefore understandable that in Maputo, just like in any other European city, long term unemployment can nowadays be regarded beyond a mere economical disintegration factor but rather as a psychological, social and cultural disintegration factor.

3. In only a few years time, because of their skills and commitment, this group of women ended up by getting a high level of success in their enterprise. A loss in the delivery of foods into the city made trafficking of agriculture products particularly prosperous.

This phenomenon is of such relevance that nowadays, in Maputo, as it will surely happen in other major African cities, women's intervention in the economy (even though it is a parallel economy) can already be considered as an advantage as far as change is concerned.

Actually, in a growing number of cases, a substantial part of family income in Maputo, is nowadays provided by women, owing to the fact that male unemployment and very low wages do not allow man to continue, in fact, to be the head of the family in terms of social or economic decisions, although men are statistically considered the largest group of individuals with real jobs.

Because of their enterprises a large number of these women managed to get some economic autonomy in relation to men, especially from their husbands or parents, which has real consequences in terms of the challenge opposing the immaculate perpetuation of traditional order and customary practices, namely, as above mentioned, the roles and social responsibilities of men and women.

Although the policy of the domestic units can be relatively calm in rural communities, it becomes more agitated with urbanization, because the traditional community control over the behaviour of women becomes less rigid and also because women start to be considered as a work force.

The changes which have already been felt, reveal a tendency to change the perspective on gender relations, namely the traditional ones based upon women's dependence in relation to men, as well as the perspective about the value of affinity ties and obligations amongst men and women, but especially between families and the social structure itself according to the cases we have seen in Maputo.

4. In this text we are not trying to explore the economic phenomenon upon which the informal economy is based in itself, but rather explore new social phenomena that have been noticed because of its meaningful development.

Amongst those phenomena, the issues concerning the statutes and powers of men and women in society, namely in developing societies, are some of the most interesting ones, especially those concerning the composition of the traditional puzzles relative to the differences between sexes.

In the environment these people now lived, the city and the family and social organization demand new logics in the attitudes and actions, and women, before the crisis and the difficulties associated with it, felt they had to act beyond their traditional roles, which, in practice, involved defying the tradition action model, considered limiting and inadequate in that particular moment in time.

Our reflections lead us to the idea that if the informal economy was a source of change as far as the issues related to the social place of women are concerned, the urban environment was far more than that, it was the proper place for its blossoming and development.

Today, our group of women keep facing several hardships related to the family survival. They are still attached to a very clear set of values regarding the role and responsibilities of each member within the family, but they argue that they are no longer available to deal with harsh kinship rules and with the constant intervention of their husband's family members² when it comes to the management of their nuclear family.

They are fully aware that their lives have changed. The city does have an implacable role in the assumption of this fact. The need to work and a new awareness of society and of the world makes it increasingly difficult for them to maintain a traditional life pattern, that still resists especially in the countryside, for which the urban rhythm and the urban organization does not take pity.

² In the south of Mozambique prevails the patriarchal family organization.

5. The incompatibility of the responsibilities of women and men as well as their activities, has had serious consequences regarding couples relations and family disruption.

As soon as fieldwork was started we realised, for example, that a high number of saleswomen who worked in the markets, had no husband, and usually lived with their children who are under their care.

This fact has been increasing the number of single-parent families and has undoubtedly contributed to a phenomenon which has become visible, that of *Families Lead by Women* (FLWs). This is a phenomenon that has been worrying the government and requires efforts regarding a reflection about support policies for these families.

The FLWs, are families which are identified (as it happens throughout the world) as one of the most vulnerable social groups because we are talking about families whose survival and continuation depends upon a woman, usually the mother, who is also the main source of economic support.

The number of FLWs in many countries of sub-Saharan Africa, seems to experience a continuous growth (Handa et al. 1999), and according to data provided by several institutions, the biggest number of women heads of family are single women, followed by the widows and married women, especially those whose husbands emigrated because of work. The studies mentioning separated or divorced women are rare.

It is true that a major part of the existing studies about this issue are related, in most countries, with the exodus of men and therefore with its impact in rural areas.

In Mozambique, the reasons given by most authors for the increasing number of FLWs are still related to war and immigration of men who leave home in search for work in south Africa's mines, and it seems that proper attention isn't yet given to the migration of the population into the cities, namely the capital city.

The war has left a substantial number of widows, but the emigration of Mozambicans going to work in the mines of the neighbouring country³, has been over the last decades, strongly refrained by south African authorities in the aftermath of the implementation of immigration restrictive policies.

³ The emigration of male labour to the mines of South Africa, was a fact during several decades. It became such an important phenomenon that, apart from the economical impacts implied, it also had a particularly interesting socio-cultural outline and was therefore considered not as a ritual but certainly a young men mark of passage, who leave when they are still boys and return as adults.

This fact has led to a significant reduction of male emigration⁴ to South Africa and, in a way, has redirected at least some of this migration flow to Maputo, and therefore, a high percentage of women heading their families in rural areas persists. In urban areas, this situation is somewhat different.

The number of single women, married women and widows, seems to be, in proportion, less than in the countryside, and the number of separated and divorced women seems, on the contrary, to be a lot bigger.

Let's look at some of the factors that may be influencing this situation:

- lack of jobs or social subsidies, which limits both economically and socially many men and affects their self esteem, because without having the possibility of, by means of a salary, accomplish some of their head of family functions, they feel despised and negatively affected in their manhood, becoming incapable of reacting in any other way, searching for comfort in inertia, alcohol consumption or domestic violence;
- the increasing participation of women in the world of informal sector and the consequences of this participation regarding their awareness about the increase of their economic capacity, their autonomy and increased self confidence.

In this way, and extrapolating from the situation of saleswomen with whom we worked, we believe that, at least in the last years, and contrary to what seems to happen in the rural milieu, many of the FLWs in the city started off by being lead by a growing number of separated or divorced women. If the intervention of women in the business area has been, according to their own words, more and more instigated by economic constraints, it is a fact that this intervention is starting to transform the structure of a social model (beyond the economic one) of a city and a society still very much ruralized but irrefutably on the move to transition.

One of the costs of this transition is noticed by a raise in the number of separations and divorces, by the number of families lead by women and fragmented families and single mothers, because the value and importance that, mainly younger women, attribute to the fact of having a husband, is decreasing.

⁴ Mozambican emigrants to the mines were mainly from Maputo and Gaza provinces, the country's south provinces.

Children are still considered something precious and irreplaceable, but their ability to maintain a marital bond according to the patterns most men insist in assuming, seems to be decreasing.

6. Because of the change that happened in the lives of the women we are studying – economic and personal authority, new knowledge and new powers – it would be expected that the ambitions towards their sons and daughters in relation to tradition would change as well.

Following the changes that happened in their lives since they started to dedicate themselves to business, and the notion that the development of these businesses offered them knowledge about the importance of having reading, writing and counting skills to be able to succeed in life and, moreover, the value of schooling in relation to the access to a formal job, theoretically well paid and socially accepted, it would be logical to assume that at least the majority of these women would show great diligence in their children's education.

In practice however, it occurs that the majority of mothers in question is aware of how important it is to send their children to school, but we could also gather that the rates of school abandonment are extremely high, both among boys and girls. Nevertheless, because this fact is most common in poverty contexts and particularly amongst girls, mothers do not put pressure on their children to carry on their studies.

The reasons for the high female school abandonment are related, in the majority of cases, with pregnancy at a very young age.

The influence of the urban milieu doesn't seem to have, in this case, specific effects in relation to the traditional understanding and the way of living one's sexuality, which continues to be, just like in the countryside, free and pacifically tolerated.

Even mothers seem to accept the fact that it is almost inevitable that a young teenage girl of twelve or fourteen years old, ends up by establishing a relationship with a boy of her own age or even young adults and, naturally, get pregnant.

Although there are girls who leave school only because they don't want to continue studying, it is a fact that a huge number of them leave school when they realise they're pregnant.

Even those who abandon school for reasons other than pregnancy, have strong possibilities of getting pregnant prematurely.

Once at home, these girls devote themselves to taking care of the household chores and look after the younger brothers should they exist.

The ones who accept to work with their mothers in the markets are very few. Actually, the majority of women confided in us, saying that their sons and daughters are usually ashamed of the fact that their mothers are saleswomen, which is an activity they consider socially depreciated and highly stigmatized.

In truth, the saleswomen, even when there's a lot of work and plenty of need, seldom count on their children's help. They don't even ask for it. It is usually easier to hire a girl from a very poor family to help them out.

According to these mothers, both sons and daughters are victims of the state of affairs: the lack of motherly companionship, the father's attitude and indifference, the family disintegration (due to the fact that they are separated, divorced or widowed), social violence, lack of job opportunities.

The hasty way they speak about the types of activities that keep their children busy during the day, somehow betrays their discomfort (and maybe a feeling of guilt or even inability to act) when they are aware that the majority of the children spend far too much time on their own without being watched and therefore, mainly the boys, spend many hours wandering from place to place (*ginger*), which eventually makes them easy preys for crime.

The majority of the interviewed women fear that their sons get involved in small criminal gangs and become *ninjas*, which is the name given to young offenders (boys), that is, to those who would rather steal than work, and apart from robberies and other type of violence they may practice, they are also individuals without any values, who have total disregard for the established rules, and for the people, no matter if they are women, children or elders.

Any mother is ashamed of having a *ninja* son; however, if any of their children becomes an offender, she will sadly blame the *History of the Present*.

7. The research points out that the efforts made by the majority of those who have committed themselves to these activities, were at first part of a food safety strategy, but recently has ended up by clearly becoming a generation strategy and a way to increase one's own resources. That is, a true instrument of personal and social empowerment.

Apart from all this success, we realized that they still have to face a set of very specific personal difficulties related with loneliness, with intimate feelings of guilt because the

traditional order is being defied, social disrespect and lack of recognition for their efforts from family members (especially husbands and children).

The difficulties they have been through gave them however, a new understanding of the world's dimension and even some pride because their worth is recognised in terms of the social impact their activities nowadays have.

There are surely other implications and effects to be considered in the long run. In terms of work they will compete with men, and in this way, maybe a set of opportunities can be accelerated which will be enjoyed not only by the families but also by society itself, and an increasing number of fully trained members for other projects of changed will be gained.

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