

PERSONAL VIEW

Recognising women's role in informal economies

The unstoppable process of economic globalisation gives developing nations no choice but to innovate ways to absorb their unemployed into their informal economies.

Estimates suggest that between 40 percent and 80 percent of the urban workforces of developing nations are in the informal sectors.

Street vendors constitute a significant share of this workforce. In Africa especially, women represent the majority of these vendors because they often lack the necessary technical skills to do anything else in the informal sector.

Women generally have great difficulty getting training, credit, market information and other forms of support to help them reach beyond such survivalist activities as street vending, shoe polishing and street cleaning.

In South Africa, for example,

White women make up another 5 percent of informal sector workers;

12 percent of them are in survivalist positions.

These figures reflect a gross disproportion of informal sector working women in elementary occupations, primarily in street vending.

With women from rural areas joining the urban poor in search of survival occupations, this disproportion is worsening.

Street vendors are the most visible aspect of the informal economy. They are often regarded as a nuisance, obstructing the flow of commerce, and as unwellcome proof of the country's underdevelopment.



ZARINA MAHARAJ

But they are stigmatised and harassed by the police and members of the business community, largely because of the failure of municipal corporations and urban planners to acknowledge the informal sector's increasingly valuable role in a struggling economy.

In addition to credit, training, markets and other enterprise services, street vendors need a regulatory environment and strong representative institutions to support their legal status.

They need vending licences and vending zones earmarked in city plans, as recognition of their role as an integral part of an urban distribution system.

They need literacy, education and social security programmes. They need commissions run by themselves in conjunction with the police, to monitor compliance with municipal vending laws and to prosecute vendors who break those laws.

By accurate information. To this end, Sewu is co-ordinating research on women street vendors on behalf of a new initiative called Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising (Wiego), of which it is a member.

The data Sewu is collecting on women street vendors includes their exact numbers, their working conditions, the nature and impact of current government interventions, vendors' organising strategies and their contribution to both the commercial sector and the economy.

This research initiative was co-founded in early 1997 by the Harvard Institute for International Development, the United Nations Development Fund for Women and the Self-Employed Women's Association of India.

In collaboration with the IASV, Wiego proposes to address biases in policy and other areas against street vendors, initially