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CONNECTING PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

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1 Introduction

This article takes up the theme of 'gender and poverty', but looks at it from the vantage point of women living in an increasingly opulent setting. The case study comes from a small rural community in south-eastern Iran. The selected region has some distinct features which make it interesting for exploring this particular conjunction of social forces: relative opulence generated through agricultural export earnings, on the one hand, and powerful gender discriminatory relations sanctioned by local custom and reinforced through state policy, on the other. The article will explore the contradictory implications that the rising levels of household income have had for women. It does so by using two different, but related, ways of capturing how women have fared in the context of these socio-economic changes.

First, defining poverty/well-being as a 'state of being or doing' (as in Sen's 'functionings'), we look at gender differentials in well-being indicators. In this context we focus on some of the most extreme forms of deprivation – infant and child mortality – to see if they reflect gender bias in parental care, as one might expect from the geographical distribution of masculine sex ratios. Although it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about changes in discriminatory practices on the basis of time-series trends in mortality sex ratios, we offer some tentative explanations for the observed patterns.

We then explore issues of vulnerability which are highlighted in women's own accounts of well-being. Vulnerability here refers to the complex bundles of risk that are hemming women in, making them more dependent on male incomes: the weakening of women's independent economic sphere; the withdrawal of female labour from farm work; and their forced reliance on a labour market that is highly segmented and discriminatory. In many ways these changes seem to add up to a deterioration in women's 'fall back position'. However, in response we also find a series of coping strategies through which women seek to make their lives more secure – demanding a share of the family legacy (land); demanding remuneration for their labour obligations within marriage; and a tendency to invest their wages in assets that are less vulnerable to male predation.

From Rags to Riches

*Looking at Poverty
from a Gender
Perspective*

Shahra Razavi

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Although it is difficult to generalise from the experience documented in this case study, some of our findings may have wider relevance. Strategies for increasing rural incomes may entail a number of unforeseen negative consequences for women. The specific ways in which these macro-policies affect women depend on a variety of factors, amongst them the growth trajectory, the various institutions which mediate the benefits of growth (markets, the state), and the pre-existing gender relations. In the case study documented in this paper, for example, 'underemployment' rather than 'overemployment' seems to be the critical gender issue that is emerging.¹

The article also draws attention to the relative strengths and weaknesses of 'objective' measures of well-being. While well-being indicators (measured directly on the individual) are more conducive to obtaining a gender-differentiated picture of deprivation than are household-based measures (as in the poverty line approach), they are nevertheless limited in the extent to which they can capture different aspects of gender discrimination. Some of these limitations are highlighted in this paper by drawing on women's own accounts of well-being which focus on issues of vulnerability and security within marriage. As we see below, the way in which the concept of vulnerability is used here differs in several respects from its usage in the mainstream literature and highlights some of the ways in which the concept has to be reformulated if gender is to be brought in as a core concern.

2 Opulence and Well-Being: The National Context

The study region is set within a country which, by standard opulence criteria, is considered to be 'middle-income'. Some of this wealth at least seems to be contributing to the achievement of basic needs. With an average life expectancy of almost 68 years, an infant mortality rate of 25 per 1,000, and an adult literacy rate of 65 per cent, Iran ranks amongst the 'medium human development'

achievers (UNDP 1995). A critical factor in this process seems to have been Iranian state policy which in the post-1979 period has identified the improvement of basic needs as one of its main priorities.² Over a period of almost 15 years infant mortality has dropped from 104 per 1,000 to 25 per 1,000; life expectancy has risen from 55 to 68 years. Literacy rates over the same period have gone from under half to around two-thirds, and are still rising; the gap between urban and rural literacy is closing; and rural infrastructure – safe drinking water, electricity and roads – has been significantly improved (*The Economist*, 18 January 1997). Even though the rationing system which was put in place during the Iran-Iraq war has now virtually ceased to exist, universal state subsidies on bread, fuel, medicine and other basic necessities continue to shield the population from the vagaries of market forces unleashed by Iran's liberalisation and restructuring programs (albeit without IMF loans).

Cross-cutting, and potentially off-setting some of the benefits of these economic and social policies, are a set of powerful gender relations which are institutionalised within the household and the market, and reinforced through state policies. Falling within the so-called classic belt of 'patriarchy-patriliny-patrilocality', the typical Iranian household is a corporate entity with women's economic independence and personal autonomy highly circumscribed. Hand in hand with the more benign social and economic policies noted above, state presence of a more ambiguous kind has tended to reinforce these gender-based restrictions. The schools, the mosques, the mass media and various revolutionary organs convey messages about 'propriety' and 'decency', backed by powerful sanctions (including force where necessary), which serve to preserve and reinforce men's privileged position within conjugal and gender relations. Symbolising the entry of the urban Islamic culture into the rural milieu – which has been historically more lax about women's physical mobility and attire – is the black veil (*chador*) that increasingly adorns school girls and young women.

¹ In the context of export promotion in many African rural economies, in contrast, an important gender issue appears to be women's increasing work loads (e.g. Uganda Women's Network 1995; Palmer 1991).

² The state commitment to improving basic needs was no

doubt an outcome of the revolutionary process that brought the Islamic regime to power. As many have argued, the Islamic Republic itself is a highly eclectic entity which combines traditionalist elements of shi'i Islam with aspects of Third World populism and state socialism (Abrahamian 1993).

Looking more closely at the Rafsanjan district, the first point to note is that as the main producer of Iran's leading export crop (pistachio), it ranks amongst the most affluent regions in the country. While commercial relations have had a long history in this region, since the mid-1960s a number of factors (state policies, water shortages) have hastened the transition from semi-subsistence agriculture into full-scale cash cropping so that by the early 1980s most of the villages in the Rafsanjan basin produced nothing but pistachio. At the same time the persistence of a hierarchical class structure – where the descendants of the absentee landlords still own a significant proportion of the region's land and water resources – has meant that the export earnings are very unequally divided. Yet a number of social changes – some of them sanctioned by the state – have served to reduce class inequality.

Irrigation technology – which prior to 1979 was the preserve of the rural elite – has become more widely accessible; this has led to the emergence of a small strata of rich peasants (some of whom are politically connected to the state), and a labour force that is marginally landed ('garden owners'). More importantly though as far as the landless and the land-poor are concerned, the landlord-peasant relations have undergone a qualitative sea-change; a more enlightened style of capitalism has replaced the archaic 'feudal' relations of domination. A progressive Labour Code backed by state sanction has obliged the absentee owners of large-scale pistachio farms to provide their attached male labourers with a wage that is above the national minimum wage, health insurance, paid holidays, and compensation in case of unfair dismissal.³ The labour market nevertheless remains rigidly segmented, and the labour relations within the female segments bear no resemblance to the favourable conditions that prevail in some male segments of the market (more on this later).

The general point raised above about state presence certainly applies to the study villages. On the one hand, this has been reflected in the development of rural infrastructure; most villages in the district now have piped water and electricity, paved roads, primary schools and access to state-funded mobile

immunisation units. At the same time, the very structures that have brought 'development' to these remote villages – schools, roads, electricity (television) – also serve as a conduit for state propaganda and control. The dominant household model, and the symbols and social norms that accompany it, legitimise male advantage within the conjugal contract, redefine the concepts of gendered space, and tighten the female segments within the labour market. Moreover, the failure to recognise women as independent persons means that state efforts to distribute assets (land, water) more fairly and to protect the rights of agricultural workers completely by-pass women.

3 The Strengths and Limitations of Well-Being Indicators

There has been much debate on the gender biases that imbue measurements of poverty. As many have argued, using human development indicators (as opposed to opulence criteria such as income), is preferable not only for drawing attention to the actual realisation of basic needs (as opposed to the potential value of income in achieving those needs), but also because it is less prone to gender bias as it is measured directly on the individual (Kabeer 1996). Moreover, 'objective' indicators of well-being are not subject to the same cultural biases that are likely to affect people's self-perceptions of well-being – a bias that is particularly acute in the case of women (Sen 1987). For all these reasons gender differentials in infant and child death rates can capture an important dimension of relative female deprivation. Do the Iranian mortality figures conform to the pattern emerging from other parts of the patriarchal belt (Pakistan, North India, Bangladesh) where significant social factors outweigh and reverse the pattern that is expected on the basis of biological sex differentials in life chances?

Unfortunately, the Iranian vital statistics obtained through large-scale sample surveys are quite old (SCI 1978). As one might expect, however, they indicate a significant degree of female disadvantage in early age survivorship, which is particularly acute during infancy (m/f ratio of 0.91) and early childhood (m/f ratio of 0.8). To put the picture of

³ To escape the requirements of the Labour Code, the capitalist owners increasingly resort to hiring Afghani

labourers who, as refugees, are not entitled to the same rights as Iranian workers.

Table 1: Infant and Child Mortality Rates for the Interval between 1 month and 5 years in Rafsanjan, Iran (number of live births)

Women's Age Group	Infant and Child Mortality Rates (a)			M/F
15-34	Male	40	(267)	1.08
	Female	37	(246)	
	Both	39	(518)	
35-39	Male	100	(100)	0.89
	Female	112	(98)	
	Both	106	(198)	
40-44	Male	98	(92)	0.64
	Female	153	(85)	
	Both	124	(177)	
45-49	Male	110*	(109)	0.41
	Female	267*	(120)	
	Both	192	(229)	
50-54	Male	145	(117)	0.65
	Female	224	(76)	
	Both	176	(193)	
55-59	Male	243	(74)	1.25
	Female	194	(67)	
	Both	220	(141)	
15-59	Male	101*	(690)	0.74
	Female	137*	(625)	
	Both	118	(1315)	

(a) Per 1,000 live births

* The mortality ratios for males and females are significantly different from each other at 95 per cent confidence.

relative female deprivation in perspective, it would be useful to compare the Iranian figures with their Indian equivalents. While the Indian mortality ratios during the same period (1976–1978) were feminine too – for both infants and young children – the extent of female disadvantage was marginally less pronounced in India than in Iran. This is quite a significant point, given that the Indian ratios are themselves highly ‘perverse’ by international standards. While recent national figures for infant mortality in Iran indicate a significant improvement in

infant survivorship, we have little information on the relative life chances of girls and boys. Our village level data⁴ provides some clues on the possible trends.

A somewhat similar picture of relative female deprivation emerges from our village-level data, which was based on the fertility histories of all ever-married women (see Table 1).⁵ The cumulative results for infant and child mortality (based on deaths between one month and 5 years) show female

⁴ The field research was carried out between September 1988 and August 1989 as part of the author's DPhil thesis (Razavi 1992).

⁵ The mortality rates were based on the fertility histories of women aged 15–59 years; women in older age groups (59 years plus) were excluded due to possible memory lapses.

mortality to be 26 per cent higher than male mortality (m/f ratio of 0.74). The extent of female disadvantage reflected in the data set thus seems to be even more pronounced than in the national survey data noted above.

The South Asian literature on excess female mortality has identified both proximate determinants (sex bias in food intake and in access to health care) and underlying causes ('economic' and 'cultural' under-valuation of women) in order to explain these mortality differentials.⁶ As far as the proximate mechanisms are concerned, in the study region we have found a number of health beliefs and customs which are suggestive of gender bias in parental care. Although it is difficult to establish direct causality between these health beliefs and the observed sex differentials in mortality, it would not be unreasonable to assume that they have an impact on the observed mortality patterns.⁷ However it should also be noted that our village-level evidence does not indicate any demographic manipulation of the kind documented by Monica Das Gupta (1987) in the case of Punjab, where specific categories of daughters are consciously neglected.⁸ The excess mortality of female infants and children in Rafsanjan is thus likely to be the outcome of generalised neglect rather than selective discrimination.⁹ In other words parents seem to have internalised certain norms that lead them to give better care to their sons than to their daughters, so that excess female mortality is an unintended consequence.

How can we explain the under-valuation of females which is ultimately responsible for truncating the survival chances of young females? Many of the

factors that have been implicated in the Indian debate – women's low rates of labour participation, their tenuous inheritance rights, their low social status and limited autonomy within marriage – can also explain son preference in the Iranian context (although dowry is not an issue in Iran). However, while it seems reasonable to explain excess female mortality in terms of patriarchal gender relations, it is dangerous to rely on mortality differentials as an indicator of women's subordination. Below I elaborate on this point.

Looking more closely at the data set one of the points that clearly emerges is the falling proportion of infant and child deaths with the age of the mother – the proportion falls from nearly 22 per cent for the 55–59 age group to 3.9 per cent for women aged 15–34 years. While the reasons for this trend are complex, we can at least speculate that some of the reduction in mortality reflects an improvement in infant and child survivorship **over time**, which has also been noted for the country as a whole.¹⁰ Given the significant investments that have been made by the public sector in the provision of primary health care, electricity, safe drinking water and basic education, such trends are to be expected.

More controversially though, the data indicate a gradual convergence of male and female life chances **over time** so that the infant and child mortality rates for mothers in the youngest age group (15–34 years) are in fact masculine (m/f ratio of 1.08). Although we need to be cautious in interpreting these rates – given the small number of cases on which they are based – it is not

⁶ There is a vast literature on this subject; some of it has been summarised in Harriss (1987).

⁷ That sex bias does not always work in a consistent manner is shown by a study of eye disease where 'health care' caused iatrogenic loss of vision amongst male infants since they were more exposed than female infants to harmful therapy such as steroid eye cream (Cohen, cited in Harriss 1987). Similarly, gender bias in food intake does not always translate into female disadvantage as far as anthropometric and mortality outcomes are concerned because females need absolutely less of most nutrients than do males (Harriss 1990).

⁸ In the Punjab study girls born to mothers who already had one or more surviving daughters experienced 53 per cent higher chance of mortality than the average rate which is recorded for their male and female siblings.

⁹ It would be interesting to see whether this point still holds in the context of the dramatic reductions in fertility rates that have been documented since the late 1980s (government sources claim that there has been a 50 per cent reduction in the population growth rate – from 3.9 per cent down to nearly 2 per cent).

¹⁰ The major problem in interpreting these rates stems from the difficulty of differentiating between 'historical time' and 'personal time'. In other words, some of the reduction in mortality could reflect an improvement in infant and child survivorship over time (as we assume). But a woman's life cycle position, quite independently of 'historical' factors, is also likely to affect the welfare of her children. Unfortunately our data set does not allow us to differentiate between these two factors.

unreasonable to assume that a convergence (or even reversal) of male and female mortality rates for infants and children may be happening under conditions of general mortality decline. If this is indeed the case, over the next decade or so the phenomenon of excess female mortality during infancy and childhood may be disappearing from the Iranian life tables due to the general improvements in infant and child survivorship. It is quite likely that the discriminatory forces (such as differential health care) which led to excess female mortality in the past are still in place, but because of the general improvements in the nutrition and health status of infants and children they no longer translate into mortality differentials. In other words, if we assume that excess female mortality was due to discriminatory behaviour, it would not necessarily follow that the disappearance of the excess has been due to a modification of that behaviour; it might have been mainly a function of the mortality decline itself. But it is worth bearing in mind that the convergence of male and female life chances during infancy and early childhood is not an inevitable (or automatic) outcome of mortality decline.

Looking at the broader picture, it becomes clear that although over time, with mortality decline, the female disadvantage in life expectation is likely to disappear, sex differences in early age mortality have tended to persist in some regions more than others. Punjab is a particularly instructive case since it shows that a pronounced sex differential in early age mortality can remain even in an economic environment conducive to improved survivorship. Improvements in living standards and health care in the Ludhiana District (Punjab), for example, have led to significant rises in early age survivorship and overall life expectancy; the infant mortality rate fell from 129 per 1,000 live births to 66 per 1,000 between 1972 and 1984. Yet the sex differentials in infant and child mortality appear to be fairly resilient to change (Das Gupta 1987). Similar findings have been reported in a number of other village-level studies from North India (e.g. Kynch 1994 cited in Jackson 1996).

What, if anything, can we conclude from the Iranian scenario? While it would be reasonable to interpret the observed sex bias in early age mortality as an outcome of the anti-female ideologies expressed in health care practices, it is unlikely for

the apparent convergence of male and female early age mortality to be due to a modification of the discriminatory norms and behaviour. In fact as the following section will show, over time gender divisions and hierarchies have become even more accentuated in the Rafsanjan district, and women have become more of an economic 'liability' (Miller 1981). It may then very well be that discriminatory ideologies and practices no longer translate into mortality outcomes. The fact that gender bias may no longer be reflected in mortality data also points to other aspects of gender discrimination that are not so easy to capture through quantitative indicators of poverty. It is to these issues that we now turn.

4 Why Vulnerability (Rather than Poverty or Exclusion)?

Vulnerability, as the literature suggests, is not the same as poverty. Those who are vulnerable in any society are exposed to particular risks, shocks and stress, but they are not necessarily poor (Chambers 1989). Vulnerability is often contrasted with security and linked with net assets – 'a wide range of tangible and intangible stores of value or claims to assistance which can be mobilised in a crisis' (Swift 1989: 11). The inclusion of **intangible** assets, which should include kinship-based entitlements or claims, goes a long way in making definitions of vulnerability more sensitive to the particular circumstances that women find themselves in (even though in Swift's own formulation there is no mention of claims on **other household members**). As Kabeer (1989) points out, these intrahousehold kinship-based entitlements are particularly significant for women's well-being and security in contexts where they are classified as dependent minors within marriage. However, as we will see below, even where marriage offers a considerable degree of security and well-being, it does not seem to stop women from striving to make their independent entitlements – entitlements that are not mediated through marriage, such as direct sale of labour power or ownership of assets – more secure.

One of the recurring concerns that emerged in conversations with women from different social classes in Rafsanjan was that of 'security' – the fear of 'being abandoned' by their husbands, or of 'being left to starve on the streets'. Curiously though, the institution of marriage seemed to be quite stable:

there were only two cases of divorce (where men had walked away from marriage) in the two villages. In many ways the amelioration of poverty at the household level has meant that men, who are the ones who control the new sources of income, are in a better position to meet their basic normative obligations towards women (feeding the family), and are thus less likely to 'walk off'. However, despite the statistical insignificance of complete male abdication of responsibility, and the predominance of cultural representations of marriage as a 'God-ordained and harmonious institution wherein the husband is the breadwinner', women continue to strategise for 'security' outside marriage. This concern for security seems to reflect an acute awareness of the bleak prospects that they face in case of a breakdown in marriage given their deteriorating and tenuous 'independent entitlements'. As we will see below, the forces that have created opulence in this region, have also served to make women more dependent within marriage, and thus more vulnerable.

Women, like men, are also exposed to risks that are generated from relying on the market, especially for the sale of their labour power. However, the way in which men and women experience these market-generated risks are qualitatively different. As Kabeer points out in the context of Bangladesh, even when women have such independent entitlements 'they may prefer to exercise them in ways that do not disrupt kinship-based entitlements, their primary source of survival and security' (1989: 9). As we will see below, both women's entry into the wage labour market and their access to land in Rafsanjan are very much shaped by their willingness to preserve these kinship-based entitlements. Moreover, even within the market the issue of gender discrimination is not confined to the quantitative differential between male and female wages (even when 'pure' wage discrimination exists and is captured). The different 'exchange rates' that male and female labour obtain on the market constitute an important component of gender differentials in poverty, as well as being an excellent indicator of the social embeddedness of markets (markets as 'bearers of gender'). But equally important are the qualitative terms on which female and male labour get contracted. These differences in labour relations amount to different structures of vulnerability for men and women within the labour market.

Finally, since vulnerability points to specific areas of risk it does not preclude the possibility that those who are threatened by certain conditions may also be able to count upon strengths and advantages in other areas in order to avoid harm. It thus leads to less fatalistic analysis than reliance upon concepts like poverty and exclusion which are descriptions of end states in which people have lost out (Hewitt de Alcantara 1996). In Rafsanjan, for example, we find that through a number of 'feminine' investment strategies women seek to strengthen their independent entitlements: holding on to their wages and investing them in assets that are relatively resilient to male predation – gold, for example, that can be hidden away, and housing improvements which men cannot appropriate for themselves. An understanding of vulnerability that draws attention to instances of purposive action (or agency) is particularly useful when we look at the situation of women in the so-called 'patriarchal belt', given the overwhelming tendency to see these women as helpless and subordinated victims.

5 From Sharecroppers to Landed Labourers

One of the most spectacular developments of the past two decades in the Rafsanjan basin has been the gradual erosion of large-scale landlordism and the emergence of a more mixed rural economy that includes both extensive plantation-type operations using wage labour as well as smallholdings. The change has been facilitated through both state policy (1962 Land Reform Programme 1979 'revolutionary pumps') and local-level initiatives by the landless sharecroppers – including encroachment on common property lands. By the late 1980s when the field research was carried out more than 70 per cent of the households in the two villages owned some land and irrigation water. As might be expected, it is predominantly men who own these titles. The bulk of the male household heads are in fact landed wage labourers in a highly segmented labour market where the attached labourers occupy the apex, and the casual labourers the lower rungs. Thus in most cases the livelihood strategies of Rafsanjani households include both own-account farming of cash crops as well as sale of labour power. Only a small minority of households can be truly classified as 'middle peasants' who own relatively sizeable pistachio plots and do not hire out any labour (male or female).

It is widely recognised that the rural poor tend to rely more heavily than the rich on common property resources for meeting their basic needs. As might be expected, the rummage for land and water and the encroachment of private pistachio gardens onto common property lands in Rafsanjan has had some adverse implications in class terms – the poorer households, for example, now have to rely on the market for their fuel requirements and for some important food items. While this may mean a reduction in the amount of time women spend on household reproduction (e.g. procuring firewood), at the same time, it has undermined their independent pastoral activities which relied heavily on the village common lands for grazing. With their pastoral activities (processing a variety of dairy products) women provided an important component of the household's diet; they were also able to sell, or exchange, some of the products they processed on the market. Today only a small minority of village women engage in pastoral activities, and they tend to come from the more affluent households which have access to the capital needed for purchasing animal feed and other inputs. Moreover, the fact that animal feed now has to be purchased from merchants, rather than procured (through grazing or cutting of weeds), has led to greater male involvement in what was a predominantly female sphere.

At the same time, the fact that pistachio monoculture has replaced a more diverse agricultural economy which included both food and cash crops (wheat, barley, cotton, pistachio), combined with the rising levels of household income as a result of changes in land ownership and in labour relations, have served to narrow down women's labour participation. Up until the early 1970s women, along with men, participated in both grain harvests as well as cotton and pistachio picking. Needless to say women's in-kind wages for harvesting wheat

and barley were a fraction of men's, as were the money wages that they received for pistachio picking. In the case of cotton, harvest workers were paid on a piece-rate basis. With the cotton that women procured during the harvest season they wove coarse cotton fabrics that were used for both household consumption and sold, or exchanged, on the market.¹¹ As is argued below (Section 6), the changes in crop portfolio and the increasing levels of household opulence have reduced women's participation in field work and their opportunities for earning an income.

More importantly, the gains from land ownership have tended to be contradictory for women. The income from pistachio is in most cases completely controlled by men; most of the women interviewed did not even know how much their husbands had earned on the sale of pistachio in the previous year. In many ways pistachio has the characteristics of what Longhurst (1988) calls a 'wicked' crop: it is a non-food crop; it takes several seasons to mature and the revenues from it are lumpy (as opposed to crops like tea), which make it easier for men to monopolise. This does not necessarily mean that some of the income does not 'trickle down' to women through male-dominated decision-making processes – in the form of more food, for example, or increased leisure time. In fact with the extra income most men are now able to meet their households' basic food requirements and women's income-earning activities have become less essential for household survival. However, the way in which the gender relations have adjusted to these changes in livelihood strategies has had some contradictory implications for women. Most crucially, the increased 'leisure time', has to be set against the loss of economic independence and autonomy and the sense of vulnerability that it has entailed – a trade-off which women are only too aware of.¹²

¹¹ The disappearance of these cottage industries throughout most of Iran has to be explained in terms of the government's cheap import policies in the post-1960s oil boom.

¹² In response to direct questions about how they assess the changes in their working lives over time women express satisfaction about not having to perform fieldwork any more. This is not surprising. For a start, women's responses have to be seen in their historical context: the nature of the work they did was very arduous; moreover, it was performed within a social

setting where as wives/daughters/sisters of sharecroppers in a 'feudal' system they occupied very unfavourable positions, being at the 'beck and call' of the landlord and open to all sorts of abuse. However, in conversations about other issues it becomes clear that women are very concerned about the loss of economic independence. In other words, it would be very easy on the basis of a quick questionnaire for the observer to conclude that women are satisfied with the changes in their economic status. However, from comprehensive conversations and a more contextual approach it becomes clear that women's assessments of the situation are more nuanced.

6 Women's Control of their Own Labour Power: Translating Labour into Wages

The rights that men and women have to their own labour and to the labour of each other tend to be unequal, especially where the norms of female propriety are more strictly enforced. Poverty very often undermines the norms of seclusion and wifely dependence, which tend to constrain women's ability to dispose of their own labour power, while opulence upholds them. This can be seen in both historical and cross-class comparisons. Today working in the village orchards during the harvest season is seen as a sign of destitution – only a small group of older widows can afford to violate the norms of propriety and seclusion set by the more affluent classes. But many female respondents can recall working in the grain-rich regions in the vicinity during several harvest seasons (wheat, cotton, pistachio) each year as recently as in the 1970s. This redefinition of gendered space has meant that the labour market has become even more segmented than it was in the past, pushing the bulk of the female work force into post-harvest processing, which is carried out indoors and is confined to a couple of months a year. Even in this case some of the younger married women find that their access to the labour market is blocked by their husbands who claim that working in the processing centres can have an adverse impact on the health of their children (who are taken along with their mothers). While most women express satisfaction about not having to do arduous work 'under the sun', a number of women were clearly concerned about their limited employment options. Some of the younger unmarried women from the casual labouring households defy the village norms on propriety – which they say are set by the rich and do not apply to them. They walk to the nearby villages to work in the processing operations when the processing work in their own village ends, despite the accusations of misconduct that it entails.

Within the labour market a number of factors – social norms and structural vulnerabilities – constrain women's ability to translate their labour into

wages. For a start the repetitive tasks that are allocated to women (like pistachio peeling and sorting) are the ones that get substituted by machines. This is already happening in the Rafsanjan basin, but so far the labour displacing effect of post-harvest mechanisation has been offset by the rise in pistachio production (due to expanding acreage under cultivation).¹³ Given the lack of alternative employment opportunities for women that are equally remunerative and dignified, mechanisation has grave implications for the bulk of the village women who rely on post-harvest processing for an independent source of income.¹⁴

While it is difficult to talk about pure wage discrimination in this context, given the highly segmented nature of the labour market, some rough estimates can be given by comparing wage rates for male and female harvest workers (even though there are not that many female harvest workers). This gives an estimated 60 per cent wage differential, which seems to have been fairly constant over a number of years. Although employers tend to explain the differential in wages in terms of men's higher productivity, women workers dispute their reasoning (after all, pistachio picking requires the famous 'nimble fingers'). A more critical manifestation of discrimination though are the social norms and power relations which serve to construct female workers as different from (and inferior to) male workers within the labour market. One of the most serious disadvantages facing the female labourers is the timing of payment and the way in which their wage rates are settled. Employers do not very often announce the wages they are offering in advance. Moreover, most women are paid two to three months after the processing operations have ended. In contrast, the wages of male casual labourers are settled before they commence work and payment is prompt. The notion of women's wages as *jahiz* money – money used for making a trousseau – like that of 'pin money' or 'money for lipstick' supports the view that women's earnings from wage work are minor and that they are neither essential to her subsistence, nor to her family's maintenance. It ensures that women are constructed as less than full labourers.

¹³ The proportion of female labour (to total labour) falls from around 38 per cent to 25 per cent and finally 16 per cent with increasing mechanisation.

¹⁴ Some forms of home-based work that are available to women have very low financial returns (e.g. quilt making); domestic work which entails loss of dignity and autonomy, is one of the least desirable occupations in these villages.

Indicative of women's vulnerability within the labour market has been the way in which international pressures have worked themselves out at the local level. Over the past two years in response to protectionist threats from importing countries on grounds of health and hygiene, the Rafsanjan Pistachio Producers Cooperative (a 'private' institution with strong government links, responsible for the marketing of pistachio exports) has encouraged employers to forbid their female wage labourers from bringing their young children along to the processing centres (on the grounds that young children contaminate the pistachio). Ironically, there seems to have been much less concern about the health hazards of millions of tons of toxic pesticides that are sprayed over the basin's orchards each year. This seems to have induced a response in a number of villages, where female workers have organised 'creche' facilities on the premises. While women's response is indicative of their willingness to do something about the discriminatory forces that are working against them, it is difficult to be jubilant about the situation. Indicative of women workers' weak power base is the fact that neither the employers nor any of the relevant public authorities have made any financial contributions to these spontaneous efforts (while lavish subsidies are available on many other inputs/services).

A more forceful indication of women's agency can be found when we look at women's labour obligations within marriage. The picture emerging from smallholder agriculture is in many ways typical of 'male farming': men own most of the land, they make all the production decisions, they purchase the inputs, make the marketing decisions and control the revenues. But it is not uncommon to find wives – especially in the more affluent households where women do not work in the wage labour market – demanding a wage for processing their husbands' harvest, and fairly customary for husbands to acquiesce to this demand (where they don't, the wife very often secretly takes her share from his pistachio harvest). Women's demand for a wage effectively undermines the notion that a wife's labour obligations within marriage is part of her wifely duties.

In some situations a system of reward in kind for a wife's labour already exists and is extended to include a new crop (e.g. Guyer 1980). In Rafsanjan,

however, such a system does not appear to have existed – neither in practice nor as a cultural paradigm. Although there may have been some precedence for this claim in the Islamic notion that a wife can demand a 'wage' from her husband in return for breastfeeding, it is nevertheless critical to ask why women in this particular region are claiming a wage for their family labour obligations (since it is not a widespread practice throughout Iran) and why they are doing so now. It seems to us that women's demand for a wage is in response to their restricted access to an independent source of income (for reasons noted above) in an increasingly monetised setting, and to their inability to tap into their husbands' cash earnings. In other words, it is in response to the pressures generated through the changing socio-economic context and the changing conjugal rights and obligations that women are invoking this new claim, thereby forcing a re-negotiation of the conjugal contract.

7 Translating Wages into Assets

While it is not the intention of this section to directly assess whether or not women's wage employment is having an impact on power relations within the household, issues of power are nevertheless implicit when we look at ways in which women try to retain control over their wages and translate them into assets that provide a degree of security and well-being. To add some clarity to the discussion it would be useful to say a few words about the scope and the context of women's employment.

First, leaving aside for the moment the familial ideologies and social processes that intervene to differentiate men's and women's wages, any empowering affect that women's wages may have is likely to be reduced where that employment is seasonal (rather than constant throughout the year). This is likely to be the case partly because it does not provide an adequate 'fall back' position for women, and also because in monetary terms it makes a smaller contribution to household survival than would full-time work (perceived contributions), thereby weakening their claims on household resources and reducing the threat of its withdrawal. In addition, the forms of social solidarity that may emerge from working in a collective enterprise are likely to be more tenuous when the work is carried out on a seasonal or *ad hoc* basis than when it is full-time.

The fact that women workers in these villages have not so far responded to the unfair manner in which their wage rates are settled, for example, may have to be explained in these terms.

The second point worth noting is the fact that women's processing work is carried out outside the household premises and under social relationships that are not familial; this should make it easier for women to control the proceeds. In Rafsanjan women deal directly with their employers (or bailiffs and managers representing the employer) and without the mediation of their husbands/fathers. This arrangement is quite different from the situation of home-based carpet weavers of central Iran described by Afshar (1985), where village women supply practically all the labour input while their husbands make the critical production and marketing decisions and control the proceeds from the sale of carpets.¹⁵

The seasonal nature of women's work and the fact that their wages are obtained in bulk, tends to have a number of other implications as well. Even though in some households, usually the poorer casual labouring households, women spent a portion of their wage on food requirements, this was not a prevalent pattern. The general trend seems to be for men to allocate a portion of their wage to housekeeping (given its regular nature), while women earmark their wages for bulkier, non-food items. These include articles for the house (doors, glass for windows, bricks and tiles, roof repair); gold; consumer durables for their daughters' trousseau; and smaller non-food items like clothes and household durables. Under pressure from their husbands and fathers, women also reluctantly contribute to agricultural investments – purchase of land and water.

A number of factors – divisibility, ease of sale or mortgage, and maintaining value in bad times – have been identified as characteristics of tangible assets that appear important to vulnerable households (Chambers 1989). Women's investment strategies in Rafsanjan reveal a couple of additional characteristics that tangible assets need to have: the ease with which they can be concealed or hidden away ('hidden assets'), and the indivisibility of their

benefits (communal consumption); the two characteristics seem to be mutually exclusive. Gold and jewelery are the perfect female assets since in addition to the factors highlighted by Chambers (above), they are also easy to conceal. Women's investments in housing seem to conform to the second characteristic noted above: although they cannot be concealed (as in the case of gold), the benefits flowing from improved housing have to be used communally – they cannot be diverted away for individual use.

Very often when a young couple move into their new 'home' the building is still incomplete, and a significant proportion of the wife's wages tend to be spent on the needed repairs and constructions. While women's preferences for investing their wages in their homes may be interpreted as yet another manifestation of their attachment to the collective or family aspects of consumption, in this case their motives seem to be more complex. In most households, the house and the land on which it is built constitute the wife's *mehr* – the contractual wealth that will have to be transferred to her upon divorce. Although in practice these contractual obligations are very rarely upheld, women were aware of their legal rights and explained their housing investments in these terms. More important though, unlike assets such as agricultural land, the benefits from housing cannot be alienated by the more powerful members of the household for their own personal use. The land that women inherit from their fathers, for example, tends to be managed by their husbands, along with any other land that he owns; and he controls the proceeds in much the same way that he controls the income from his own land. It is not therefore surprising that married women refrain from investing their wages in land/water (they nevertheless pressurise their husbands to specify a share of his land for them in a will, given the uncertainties that surround the enforcement of legal prescriptions). The only women who worked and saved in order to buy a plot of land and a share of water were some of the village widows. Married women's preferences for investing their savings in the home can be better understood if they are seen in the context of these gender-based constraints.

¹⁵ In many ways (gender division of labour, marriage patterns) the region where Afshar did her research was

similar to Rafsanjan – both fall within the central Iranian plateau.

Somewhat similar motivations underpin women's preferences for investing their wages in the trousseau. For a start it has to be noted that unlike the Hindu dowry which is a flow of gifts from the bride's family to the groom's, the Iranian *jahiz* belongs to the bride (and her household). In fact, it is very often the only share a daughter has from her parents' wealth (Afshar 1985). And yet at the same time, the transition from a semi-subsistence to a cash economy combined with the increasing opulence of the village elite is increasing the financial burden of the trousseau, which now includes a variety of bulky consumer durables like television sets and refrigerators. Women from the less affluent households are thus under increasing pressure to ensure a minimum respectability for themselves and their daughters by procuring a 'descent' trousseau – a burden to which men refuse to contribute.

It is quite common to find men complaining about their wife's reluctance to contribute to their agricultural investments, while they 'waste' large sums of money on the trousseau. This does not, however, mean that women exercise complete control over their wages. In nearly all casual labouring households when land and water was being purchased, women's wages constituted a significant proportion of the funds with which their fathers and husbands purchased land (and thereby became landed for the first time, or increased their holdings). In this case though, women relinquish their wages under pressure – both subtle and direct – from their husbands. The following two illustrations are taken from two case studies where there had been open conflicts between husband and wife on this issue.

Mehdi is a casual labourer in his early 30s. In 1987 he purchased 100 *ghassab* of land with his savings from his wages, his wife's wages from pistachio processing and the sale of her gold ring and bracelets (which she had purchased with her wages prior to her marriage). Roughly one-third of the money was hers. As she explained:

I told him 'since I am also paying for the land, then at least register some of it in my name' ... he said we don't have any *joda-savayi* (Fati)

The expression *joda-savayi* translated literally means 'separate-otherness'. To be individuated,

autonomous, and covetous of one's own sphere is a culturally negative concept. Here Mehdi was implying that they constitute a single unit, thereby disapproving of her selfish demand.

Asghar, another casual labourer and his wife, Maryam, both in their early 30s, purchased their first plot of land (50 *ghassab*) in 1985. In this case Maryam provided half the funds by selling her gold (which she had purchased in previous years), while Asghar paid for the rest with his savings from wage labouring. Maryam, however, insisted that 25 *ghassab* of the land should be registered in her name and he agreed. As she put it:

I told him that I would sell my gold only if what I paid for was made in my own name because ... what if he leaves me and enjoys the land with another woman? (Maryam)

While the consumerism and class differentiation which are the direct outcomes of Rafsanjan's growth trajectory seem to underpin the inflation of the trousseau, it is a mistake to see the conflict between husband and wife over the trousseau as a conflict between 'essential' and 'non-essential' categories of expenditure (as the village men seem to do). After all, the expenses for wedding festivities to which men contribute substantial sums of money are even more superfluous (and even more so is their expenditure on narcotics – opium). More importantly, women's preferences for investing in the house and in household durables has to be seen in the context of male control over productive assets like land and dairy animals. In a neighbouring region (Bardsir) where the rural economy has remained semi-subsistence and where women continue to play a dominant role in the pastoral economy, not only does the trousseau include dairy animals (rather than bulky consumer durables), but women are also active pastoral entrepreneurs in their own right, reinvesting their savings from the sale of milk and wool in dairy animals (Razavi 1992).

8 Conclusion

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this account. First, while female disadvantage in early age mortality is indicative of discriminatory forces operating against female infants and children, the convergence of male and female life chances does

not necessarily mean that those discriminatory norms and behaviour have been modified. The disappearance of excess female mortality may just be an outcome of the mortality decline itself. In the case study reviewed in this paper we have found that the overall improvements in infant and child survival, due in large part to public sector investments in sanitation and health care, have also led to the disappearance of excess female mortality (but it is important to emphasise that this is not an inevitable or irreversible outcome). Ironically, the disappearance of excess female mortality has happened at the same time that gender hierarchies have become more accentuated and women have become more of an economic 'liability' in this region. It thus seems to us that well-being indicators, such as mortality, may be too blunt; they cannot capture some of the qualitative changes in gender relations that have left women 'worse off'.

These qualitative issues were discussed under the rubric of vulnerability – the bundles of risk stemming from the deterioration in women's independent entitlements and from the changes in conjugal relations, which are hemming women in and making them more dependent on male incomes. On the one hand, the rising levels of household income appear to have strengthened the norms of propriety which tend to constrain women's ability to dispose of their own labour power. This can be seen in the withdrawal of female labour from farm work and its limitation to operations that are spatially (indoor and village-based) and temporally (seasonal) confined. On the other hand, the weakening of women's own-account economic activities and the rising levels of cash income that are directed into men's hands have made women more dependent on male incomes. It was nevertheless argued that even where marriage offers some degree of security and well-being to women – because men control the main sources of income and are able to meet their

basic normative obligations towards women – it does not seem to stop women from striving to make their independent entitlements more secure. Women's strategies include: engaging in wage labour (albeit within a segmented labour market) and retaining control over their earnings; demanding a wage for their family labour obligations; demanding a share of the family legacy; and converting their wages into assets that are less vulnerable to male predation.

In making sense of these qualitative changes we found the notion of 'vulnerability' to be quite useful because it highlighted issues of risk and security which seem to be central to the narrative. At the same time it also drew attention to women's strategies for avoiding harm – issues of agency. The latter are sometimes absent from analyses that rely upon concepts like poverty and exclusion which are descriptions of end states in which people have lost out.

Finally, as far as policy is concerned, increasing levels of household opulence seem to have had contradictory implications for women in this particular region – improving their survival chances, reducing their work burden, but also making them more dependent on male incomes and thus more insecure within marriage. The obvious lesson seems to be that the amelioration of poverty at the household level does not necessarily leave the female members 'better off'. As was noted at the beginning of this paper, the specific ways in which macro-policies affect women depend on a variety of mediating factors, amongst them the growth trajectory, the various institutions that mediate the benefits of growth and the pre-existing gender relations. If poverty reduction is to be combined with gender equity, then alternative ways will have to be found – through changes in some or all of these institutions – in making 'development' truly gender-equitable.

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