

STREET FOODS : OPPORTUNITIES FOR
FEMALE EMPLOYMENT IN THE FOOD SYSTEM

Monique COHEN
Irène TINKER

The Street Foods project was funded by the Women in Development Office of AID to investigate the street food trade, and women's role within it, in four developing countries. It was supervised by EPOC. The objectives of the project are :

- to design interventions which will enhance the income or improve the product of the women and men working in this sector ;
- to identify policy issues which have inhibited the development of this sector ;
- to show how the findings of the project can and should be utilized by a wide range of sector planners and programmers.

CONCEPT AND DESIGN

The Street Food project is unique in two ways : it focusses on income activities of urban women and it considers women's activities in terms of the total street food sector. Most previous studies of women's "invisible" contributions to the economy of their countries have focussed on rural activities including farming, food processing, and handicrafts. The project not only collected data on urban earnings but identified street food sellers as a market for goods produced and processed by rural women and men.

The decision to study the production, marketing, and consumption of street foods arose from two considerations. First, it is necessary to understand the dynamics of the ready-to-eat street foods sector in order to understand and support the role of women within it. Secondly, because

this sector has been neglected, there is no adequate data base upon which to build. Prepared foods was selected because it reflects women's dual roles as provider for her family of both income and food.

Given the lack of data on street foods, the project design called first for a complete census of all sellers of ready-to-eat foods throughout all parts of the provincial towns selected for study. Street foods, by our definition, include any food that could be eaten on the spot, which is immediately available to eat, and is sold on the street, from carts, or from shops with fewer than four permanent walls. While vendors are most visible in commercial and market areas, we wished to find out the extent to which street foods were important outside the downtown areas. Indeed, in several cities the ratio of neighborhood to downtown vendors was as high as 1:4.

A sample of street food vendors, selected by type of food and selling location, were interviewed by local staff and revisited several times over a year to check for seasonal variations. Vendor families, selected according to the importance of women's economic contributions to the trade, were visited and observed to document the activities of different family members in the preparation and selling of street foods. Data sought was related to economic issues such as individual income, use of paid or unpaid help, sales and profits and to product issues as seasonality, variety, and supply. Questions were also asked about the history of the enterprise, use of money earned, problems of enterprise survival, and attitude toward the trade.

To document the demand for street foods, customer surveys were carried out. In two countries, general household food consumption studies were also completed. Foods were also tested for nutritional value and for safety. Nutritional interventions were actually tried in Bogor. Seminars were held in each provincial town and in the capital city to present the findings and discuss possible interventions to help the vendors either enhance their incomes or improve their products. Special concern was given to measures for supporting women vendors or processors. In Bangladesh, a credit program for vendors was initiated.

FINDINGS

EPOC's four country study was undertaken in Ziguinchor in Senegal, Manikganj in Bangladesh, Iloilo in the Philippines and Bogor in Indonesia. City size and the total number of vendors in each city are given in Table I along with percentages of enterprises operated by women alone, by men alone and by couples working together. The dominance of women vendors in Senegal and Philippines as well as the absence of women vendors in Bangladesh was to be expected. However the number of women operators in Bogor was lower than anticipated when compared to earlier studies of market vendors in Jojakarta ; differences clearly reflect the cultural variation between these two towns on Java.

In both Bangladesh and Indonesia about one-quarter of the male vendors had daily help from their wives at home in the preparation of the foods for sale. In addition, some 12 % of the vendors in Manikganj employed women helpers in their enterprises. Thus women are involved in 40 % of all street foods establishments in Bogor and 37 % in Manikganj. Of course, they did this work in addition to maintaining their households. It is important to note that in Ziguinchor the women vendors were largely relieved of their household duties by other family members, only 20 % of the women vendors said that they daily cooked meals at home for their family.

In Ziguinchor, women and men vendors sold distinct products, in the other countries there was little distinction by gender although no women sell ice cream in Iloilo and no women sell chicken noodle soup in Bogor. The mode of selling does tend to vary between sexes ; no women were observed pushing mobile carts and no men were seen balancing baskets on their heads. Foods sold on commission, ice cream in both Iloilo and Ziguinchor, as well as bread in Bogor, seemed to be reserved for men only.

ECONOMICS OF THE STREET FOOD TRADE

The invisibility of the street foods trade is not confined to its importance as a basis for income generation for women but extends to other aspects of the trade, including its contribution to the urban economy and the food system. In the four countries studies the annual volume of sales generated by this prepared foods sector ranged from as high as US\$67 million in Bogor, a city of quarter of a million in Indo-

nesia, to US\$2 million in Manikganj, a rural service center of 38,000 in Bangladesh (Tables II and III).

As a sector composed of a myriad of micro-enterprises, the significance of the street food trade at the level of the city applies as much to its contribution to output as to its role as a source of employment for the urban poor. All street food vendors consider themselves self-employed, even though many have contractual arrangements with their suppliers which are suggestive of dependence rather than independence. At least a quarter of these enterprises in all countries employ either paid or unpaid labor. As a result, close to 6 % of the labor force in Ziguinchor and Manikganj and between 15 % and 26 % in Iloilo and Bogor, respectively, derive an income from this economic activity.

Daily income to the street food operator indicates an economic activity that provides a competitive source of earnings.

- In Iloilo, the average gross earnings of vendors was 54 pesos daily which exceeds the daily minimum formal sector unskilled wage of 33 pesos.
- Daily net incomes among street vendors in Bogor ranged from 790 to 8,910 rupiah, with 50 % of the vendors concentrated in the 1,660-3,110 range. Average earnings are nearly twice the daily wages of construction workers.
- Gross profits per street food firm in Ziguinchor averaged 370 cfa francs per day, a figure which is slightly in excess of the gross income of a craftsman, estimated at 355 cfa francs daily.
- In Manikganj the daily net income of a street food vendors is Tk. 72, a level of earnings more than three times that of the daily agricultural wage.

In many households, street foods are the primary source of income: this applies to as many as 86 % and 56 % of the street food vendors in the Philippines and Bangladesh respectively ; among women vendors in Ziguinchor the comparable figure was 59 %. In view of the scale of the enterprise and this high household dependence on this income source, it is not surprising to find that household and enterprise finance are frequently inseparable. Dipping into operating and investment capital when family emergencies arise is not uncommon and, in turn, limits the ability of street food establishments to accumulate capital regardless of net profit levels.

Among vendors able to build up a reserve, the tendency is not to expand the existing enterprise. An examination of formal sector food catering establishments in Iloilo indicated that none had "crossed the gap" from a micro-enterprise to a small scale firm. Rather the trend is for the street food entrepreneur to invest the surplus either by diversifying into other activities, particularly the sale of non-perishables, or in the next generation, i.e., social investment in their children's education.

Indeed, for an enterprise of this size it would seem that the levels of supply of foods and the demand for them are in a delicate balance. Thus, expansion is not necessarily a business objective. Actually, expansion may mean increased prices or greater spoilage, and so lead to business failure. At this level of enterprise, access to credit, while possibly not sought for growth reasons, is still needed - as working capital and as a buffer against bankruptcy that can strike when household emergencies inevitably force the drawing down of operating capital.

The tendency has been to classify street food establishments as distributive and service enterprises. Yet, the street food firm is no less important as a productive enterprise, involved in food processing as well as sales. These establishments undertake an integrated process extending from the purchase of the raw ingredients and their processing through to their marketing and distribution. For example, *monie* sellers are involved on a daily basis in milling as well as the manufacture and sale of their millet-based porridge. In Bangladesh women puff rice as a snack. The production process is not unlike that which takes place, albeit on a different scale, in the large-scale manufacture of breakfast cereals such as oatmeal or Rice Krispies.

This level of food processing was found to be largely the domain of women. Most prepare the food in their homes and later sell it on the streets. In Muslim countries the rules of seclusion result in the women either delegating the retailing to other family members or selling their output to other food catering enterprises. As processors of some or all of the food they sell - a definition that is applicable to at least 75 % of the vendors in the Philippines, Indonesia and Senegal and 42 % in Bangladesh - the activities of many of street food establishments may have implications for the rural as well as the urban food processing sector. Evidence of such possibilities are suggested by the presence of

small pickling enterprises in Bangladesh or steamed rice sweets in Indonesia. Frequently located in rural areas, these micro-level businesses sell their output to vendors who specialize in retailing in urban areas.

DEMAND FOR STREET FOODS

Household survey data from Indonesia and the Philippines identified a strong level of effective demand for street foods. Urban households in these two countries spend an average of 25 % of their food budgets on street foods, a percentage which is consistent across income levels. Estimates for Senegal suggest a proportion of the household food budget allocated to streets foods closer to 20 %.

Although street foods have long been thought to be marginal to diet, the data reject this assumption and show these foodstuffs to be integral to diet.

- In Iloilo street foods appear to provide the fats and oils that are lacking in a diet defined exclusively in terms of household prepared foodstuffs.
- In Bogor it is possible to obtain more than half of the recommended daily allowance of protein, iron, vitamin A and vitamin C from a 30 cent street food meal.

Only in Bangladesh does the term "supplement" best describe the role of street foods in diet. In a country where few eat more than one full meal daily, any street food, the majority of which are snacks, is nonetheless an important dietary supplement.

The primary street food clientele are the vendors' peers, other members of the informal sector, and the urban poor. Even though their per capita levels of expenditure are lower than their middle and upper income counterparts, by their numbers they comprise the major group of consumers. Their purchases reflect rational choices. Many urban women, as well as men, living alone find it more economic to spend their time in income generating activities and to purchase street foods, than to shop for and cook many traditional foods which are both time consuming to prepare and perishable. Furthermore, the rising costs of fuel and ingredients, particularly in times of food scarcity, have meant that for many poor households, daily cooking has become expensive. As a result many may, in fact, find it cheaper to purchase street food meals where economies of scale bring the price of a serving below the cost of home preparation (Table IV).

Next in importance as consumers are students, both those who live away from home and elementary level pupils. The latter, the target group in school feeding programs, often purchase more than simply the odd snack or breakfast on the way to the school. For example : In urban Nigeria the data show that as many as 76 % of school children in Ile-Ife eat two street food meals and 96 % eat breakfast daily.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The street foods sector emerges as a pervasive and essential feature of third world cities. Yet, most vendors operate in urban environments that are intrinsically hostile. In many countries the sector has no legal status and has a history of harassment and forcible removal from the streets. A primary finding of the project is the need to legitimize this sector, and so reduce the constant fear of the vendors for their livelihood. This calls for the establishment of institutional mechanisms, both by the vendors and the government, so that the two groups can work together to legitimize the presence of the sector.

Legitimation should bring with it the collection of a regular, if not a daily, tax. Contrary to conventional wisdom many vendors do pay some form of tax, if not to government then to other entities including vendors' associations. Thus, implementing such a regulation would not necessarily increase the vendors' costs of operation. Legitimation also requires the formulation of regulations that are feasible for both the vendors and government, particularly in the area of health and food safety. The provision of basic services or the encouragement of self regulation by the vendors are among actions that should also be part of this process.

EPOC's findings on the street food trade have implications for food policy that extend from production through processing and marketing to consumption.

- a) Through backward linkages urban demand has implications for increasing certain types of domestic food production and rural incomes. Since most of the ingredients processed by vendors utilize domestic grains, the encouragement of this trade would seem not only to increase domestic demand but would also decrease imports.
- b) The invisibility of vendors due to their lack of legitimacy is compounded by the lack of data on their role within the national, regio-

nal and urban food systems. Much of the unprocessed or semi-processed food used by street food sellers comes through micro-marketing channels which occur outside these larger scale marketing institutions. While the data do not permit a quantification of the sector's weight within the total urban food system, the data suggest that this amount is far from negligible and is important to the provision of low cost urban food.

- c) At the level of the consumer, the integral role of these foods in diet suggests a potential role for the street food vendors in the introduction of new foods and in providing school children with nutritious meals.
- d) Lastly, this study of the street food trade has suggested possibilities of linking street foods with food aid for development purposes. Food aid might be made available to vendors on a monetized basis. The capital generated from sales could be used to build a capital fund which in turn can be recycled to provide credit and other services to vendors.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

Recommendations can conveniently be divided into those relating to support to the vendors on the one hand, and to the integration of the street food sector into large scale programming on the other.

Economic support for the vendors includes credit, training in the basics of record keeping, and provision of health insurance. All of these services are best provided through a vendor-based organization ; the existence of such a group would encourage the dialogue suggested above, which should lead to legitimation of the sector. Since women in mixed groups seldom take active leadership roles, it is recommended that separate women's groups be formed. Further, since women have a better pay-back rate than men, women should be allowed to borrow without requiring that the funds be used for business expansion. As long as the loans are repaid, it would appear unnecessary to limit the use for which loans are granted. The possibility of insurance for critical illness should be explored to see if such a provision could prevent business failures since in family, and especially in one-person, operations the illness of the owner not only stops income but uses up working capital.

Product support is also best delivered through small groups of vendors. These groups could facilitate bulk purchasing or establish direct links to producers, thus assuring regularity of supplies, reducing costs, and so increasing profits. The provision of water supply in areas where vendors congregate would not only reduce contamination of food but benefit the neighborhoods in which vendors trade.

Recognition of the importance of the street food sector both to the urban food system and to employment has implications for large scale programming for several sectors including rainfed agriculture, and for promotion of private enterprise and good nutrition. Rainfed agriculture in Asia is associated with small scale plots ; vegetables and fruits grown there have a natural market in street foods. Micro-processing of the food by rural or urban women and men provides a new source of income for the poor. Re-emphasis on traditional grains, such as millet and sorghum can be strengthened by recognizing street foods as a traditional market for the foods based on these grains. On the other hand, the ubiquitous nature of street foods makes them a possible method of introducing new foods utilizing secondary crops including millet, sorghum and cassava, and high protein beans such as soy and winged beans.

Street food vendors supply the major source of purchased food for school children and for many industrial and clerical workers. Instead of trying to supplant vendors with semi-western cafeterias, donors might follow the example of Singapore which allows vendors to contract for the use of institutionally-provided facilities. The right to sell on school grounds should be tied to vendors' upgrading the level of both sanitation and nutrition of the food they sell.

Street foods are obviously so important a source of income and food for the urban poor in developing countries that both governments and donors should support and upgrade the sector.

Table I : STREET FOOD VENDORS, BY SEX, IN FOUR COUNTRIES

	Population	Number of Vendors	Operators (by Sex)			Women's Involvement*
			Women (%)	Men (%)	Couples (%)	
Manikganj Bangladesh	38.000	550	1	99	-	37
Ziguinchor Senegal	86.000	1.534	53	47	-	53
Iloilo Philippines	245.000	5.100	63	10	27	90
Bogor Indonesia	248.000	17.760	16	60	24	40

* in selling or in preparation or processing at home.

Source : Barth - 1983 , Posner - 1983 ; Owens and Hussain - 1984 ; Chapman - 1984.

Table II : ECONOMICS OF THE URBAN STREET FOOD TRADE

	: Bogor Indonesia	: Iloilo Philippines	: Ziguinchor Senegal	: Manikganj Bangladesh
Population	: 248,000 : (1980)	: 244,827 : (1980)	: 86,295 : (1980)	: 37,996 : (1981)
Number of Street Food Enterprises	: 17,760	: 5,000	: 1,534	: 550
Establishments Per Population	: 1:14	: 1:49	: 1:56	: 1:69
Percentage of Labor Force Active in Street Food Trade	: 26	: 15	: 6	: 6
Aggregate Yearly Sales: (million US\$)	: 67	: 28	: 4	: 2

Source : Barth - 1983 ; Posner - 1983 ; Owens and Hussain - 1984 ;
Chapman - 1984.

Table III : STREET FOOD ESTABLISHMENT DAILY EARNINGS

A				
	Iloilo (pesos)	Bogor (rupiah)	Manikganj (thaka) ^a	
Expenses	182.38	11649.93	227	
Sales	236.22	16027.31	299	
Gross Profits	53.84	4377.38	72	
Net Profit per firm	0	n.a.	52	
Minimum Wage	33	n.a.	20 ^b	

a. Based on weekly figures divided by 7.

b. Average wage.

B
Ziguinchor
(CFA francs)

	Millet Porridge	Whole Milk: Yogurt	Cow Pea Fritters	Peanuts	Seafood Snacks
Expenses	372	1,744	741	420	294
Sales	720	2,726	1,094	682	582
Gross Profits	384	952	353	262	288
Net Profits per firm	98	702	103	12	38
Minimum Wage ^a	250	250	250	250	250

a. In Senegal, the minimum legal daily rate of 250 CFA for a maid was used.

n.a. not available

Sources : Barth - 1983 ; Posner - 1983 ; Owens and Hussain - 1984 ; Chapman - 1984.

Table IV : THE STREET FOOD CUSTOMER, BY OCCUPATION

	Iloilo	Bogor	Manikganj	Ziguinchor
	(Percentage Distribution)			
Children	16a/	33a/	8	21
Students b/	n.a.	n.a.	4	14
White-Collar Workers	21	14	19	24
Informal Sector	47	37	43	10
Housewives	16c/	16c/	1	17
Unemployed	n.a.	n.a.	1	7
Other	0	0	24d/	7
Total	100	100	100	100
(Number)	(246)	(464)	(436)	(240)

a. Includes students.

b. High school and college students.

c. Includes the unemployed.

d. Includes 22 % farmers.

n.a. not available

Sources : Barth - 1983 ; Posner - 1983 ; Chapman - 1984 ; Owens and Hussain - 1984.

ABSTRACT

This paper is based on Epoc's four country studies on street-foods and women vendors in Senegal, Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines. It demonstrates that the invisibility of the street foods trade is not confined to its importance as a basis for income generation for women but extends to other aspects of the trade, including its contribution to the urban economy and the food system.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet exposé est fondé sur les quatre études de pays de Epoc concernant la restauration de rue et les vendeuses du Sénégal, du Bangladesh, d'Indonésie et des Philippines. Il montre que l'invisibilité de cette activité n'est pas seulement restreinte à son importance en tant que source de revenus pour les femmes, mais aussi à d'autres aspects de la restauration de rue, notamment à sa contribution à l'économie urbaine et au système alimentaire.