

New Scholars

**“I AM TOO OLD! WHO IS GOING TO GIVE ME
A JOB?” WOMEN HAWKERS IN TELUK BAHANG,
PENANG, MALAYSIA**

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ABSTRACT

The informal economy is of massive importance to women workers in the Southeast Asian region. This article explores women’s informal work as hawkers in the village of Teluk Bahang in the State of Penang in northern Malaysia. Focusing on women’s right to work *and* their rights at work, the article engages in an analysis of women’s labor market experiences and decisions during different periods in their lives as well as an analysis of the gendered outcome of contemporary hawker policies. Spatial aspects are central to this analysis, and it is argued that hawking represents not only an important informal economic activity for women but also a way for them to gain extended access to public places of work.

INTRODUCTION

Contrary to early accounts of the informal economy—in which informal work was expected to be formalized in the phase of modernization and development (Benería & Floro, 2005)—informal work remains a permanent and growing feature of the global economy (Chen, 2007; International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2002a). In fact, it is argued that a majority of the world’s workers are found in various forms of informal employment relationships (Chant & Pedwell, 2008; Chen, 2001; Kaufmann, 2007; Lloyd-Evans, 2008). In the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) it is estimated that own-account and

contributing family work alone account for nearly 60% of employment in the region (ILO, 2007). However, despite its massive importance to workers in ASEAN, knowledge and data around informal employment remain insufficient, and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) argues that without further knowledge it will be “difficult to formulate appropriate policies or to monitor and evaluate the impact of policies promoting decent and productive employment” (ILO, 2007: 20).

Women are disproportionately represented in informal employment (ILO, 2002b, 2007; Lloyd-Evans, 2008), and this article explores women’s informal work as hawkers in the village of Teluk Bahang, in the State of Penang on the northwestern coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Current debates around informal work have revealed the inadequacy of approaching the formal and informal economy as dichotomous or as two separate spheres (Barrientos, 2007; Beneria & Floro, 2005; Chen, Jhabvala, & Lund, 2002; Kaufmann, 2007). This article aims to contribute to these debates by exploring the patterns of formal and informal work engaged in by the women in Teluk Bahang during different periods of their lives (Hapke & Ayyankeri, 2004). This follows the line of thought that women’s work in the formal and informal economy should be described as a “continuum” (Chen, 2007)—where women, for example, move from formal to informal employment, such as hawking and home-work, with age (Loh-Ludher, 2007). In Malaysia, women’s access to formal employment is largely determined by age. While younger women are predominantly employees in manufacturing and services, with age the importance of own-account and contributing family work increases, and for the oldest age groups own-account work even represents the most important category of employment (Malaysia Department of Statistics, 2009). Women’s move from the formal to the informal sphere will here be examined in the context of *women’s right to work*—understood as the structural and ideological constructs that frame women’s access to jobs and the possibility of keeping them (Ellingsaeter, 1999). Importantly, however, informal work is not approached as something necessarily entered into for lack of a better option. Instead, there is a growing body of literature suggesting that informal work and entrepreneurship can be motivated by a multitude of voluntary and opportunity-driven factors (Gurtoo & Williams, 2009; Jütting, Parlevliet, & Xenogiani, 2008; Maloney, 2004). Exploring these factors—trying to understand what made the female hawkers leave the formal labor force and opt for informal work—is therefore a central question in this article. Lloyd-Evans (2008) argues that while various academic disciplines have shown a growing interest in studying the informal economy, there is still a lack of geographical engagement with this body of work. This article attempts to contribute to geographical knowledge building through its explicit focus upon the spatial aspects of women’s right to work and labor market choices.

Another set of questions explored in this article relates to women’s *rights at work*—here mainly approached through looking at job security, access to

pensions, and the right to organize and bargain collectively. While the challenges faced by informal workers with regard to social security and exercising rights at work are increasingly recognized (Chen et al., 2002; ILO, 2002a), Barrientos (2007) argues the need to acknowledge the multiple challenges and discrimination faced by women informal workers based on both their employment status and their gender ideologies. Feminist scholarship has leveled much criticism at contemporary measures to protect workers' rights for having a male bias, leaving women largely unprotected (Franck, 2008; Singh & Zammit, 2004). In exploring informal women workers' possibilities of exercising the right to collective bargaining we must, therefore, not fail to consider the marginal position of women in trade unions and in the institutions dealing with labor policies—a position that has, critics argue, resulted in a systematic failure to adequately address the needs of women workers (Kabeer, 2004; Pearson, 2007; Razavi, 1999). As in most parts of the world, Malaysian trade-union leadership is heavily male dominated, and gender issues have traditionally had a low priority (Ng, Mohamad, & beng hui, 2006), and when trade unions fail to address gender issues, women tend to regard the unions skeptically (Barrientos, 2007). This article will therefore explore not only questions around current working conditions but also questions of how the women hawkers perceive their possibilities of organizing and their relationships to trade unions and hawker associations.

HAWKING AND HAWKER POLICIES IN MALAYSIA

While hawking is sometimes referred to as “street vending/trading” or “peddling,” the term “hawking” is the most commonly used in Malaysia—it is also in used policymaking there (Municipal Council of Penang Island [MPPP], 2008)—to refer to petty trade performed from a fixed or nonfixed public location (International Development Research Center [IDRC], 1975). The focus upon hawking in this study is largely motivated by its importance to the informal economy in Malaysia (Agus, 1987; Hassan, 2003; Socio-Economic and Environmental Research Institute [SERI], 2003). In the State of Penang, studies indicate that the vending of street food alone has generated around 20,000 jobs—or the equivalent of 12% of employment in Penang Island (Bhat & Waghay, 2000). Hawking in Malaysia has been the focus of numerous studies (Agus, 1987; Hassan, 2003; McGee & Yeung, 1977; Pang & Toh, 2008; Toh & Birchenough, 2000). However, despite its recognized importance, particularly for women (Chen, 2001; Cohen, 2000; Nirathron, 2006; Tinker, 2003; Yasmeen, 2006), there is no comprehensive study in the Malaysian context that focuses upon women's hawking in particular (Loh-Ludher, undated). As hawkers make up such a substantial share of informal workers in Malaysia, this lack of knowledge is a concern, not only for an understanding of women's conditions and rights in the informal labor market but also for an analysis of contemporary hawker

policies. Malaysia is one of only a few countries that have given formal recognition to hawkers (Bhowmik, 2005), but in many Asian countries legislation around hawkers had already been enacted during the colonial period. McGee and Yeung (1977) list the three main elements of policies around street vending during the colonial era: (1) attempts to establish hygienic standards for street vendors, (2) the desire to confine their activities to certain parts of the city, and (3) attempts to gain some revenue from street vendors through licensing their activities. These are still the core elements of hawker policy in Penang (Municipal Council of Penang Island [MPPP], 2008). According to the Public Health and Licensing Department of the municipal council (the MPPP), the aim of Penang's hawker policy has been (apart from license requirements) to move hawkers from temporary sites into controlled areas where they are less scattered, where they cause less obstruction to traffic, and where hygiene can be controlled. These so-called designated sites can be day markets, night markets, food complexes, temporary hawker sites, or sites for mobile hawkers. Important to the focus of this study is that many of these sites are placed in residential areas throughout the island. The sanitary and health issues are a central feature of policy, academic studies, and public debate on food hawking in Malaysia (Bavani, 2009; Menon, 2009; Pang & Toh, 2008; "Putting to waste hawkers' pollutants," 2009; Toh & Birchenough 2000; Yeoh, 2009). However, the policy of moving hawkers to designated sites has not been implemented without difficulty (Pang & Toh, 2008). The MPPP reports that hawkers in Penang have been reluctant to move to the sites as they fear losing customers. Additionally, the fees for vending at a fixed site are significantly higher than for vending in the street, and the Socio-Economic and Environmental Research Institute in Penang (SERI; 2003) reports that the price of doing informal business in Penang has increased significantly over the last few years. Currently no more hawker licenses are being issued by the MPPP, because many hawkers were not complying with the requirements. It will be argued here that the impacts of these policies are not gender neutral; neither can the policies be expected to have a homogenous impact on different groups of women hawkers.

METHODOLOGY

Empirically this article builds upon fieldwork conducted in the State of Penang during 2009. The aim of the fieldwork was to interview women currently working in the informal economy in order to learn more about the factors contributing to women's decision to enter informal employment, and about their current working conditions and rights. Interviewing women hawkers in local markets provided the opportunity to approach an important group of female informal workers in an accessible and public place. This article draws upon the findings in the predominantly Malay (fishing) village of Teluk Bahang on the northwestern tip of Penang Island (Ghazali, 2009). A total of 36 women were interviewed, of

whom 33 worked in and around the designated morning market, and an additional three women were home-based workers producing food products for the market. The women interviewed belong to several different groups of hawkers, as sixteen women held a license for a fixed stall inside the market, and an additional 11 women worked at stalls inside the market where the license was held by someone else (a husband, relative, or friend). Some shared a stall with a friend, some worked as employees, and the remaining women were contributing family workers. Some women also worked outside the market, three women worked at licensed mobile stalls (push-carts), and an additional three worked at stalls with no license—that is, they were so-called illegal hawkers. Inside the market and in the surrounding streets, I chose the respondents by randomly going between the different stalls. While many respondents spoke English, all of the interviews were conducted together with a Malay interpreter. Several of the hawkers get goods delivered from home-workers in the area, and it was through their contacts that I was able to find the home-workers. All of the respondents were approached during working hours in their place of work (thus, for the home-workers, in their home). A majority of the women were interviewed once, but a limited number were interviewed twice. The interviews were structured around a questionnaire. Apart from basic data, such as the respondents' age and education level, and so forth, the open-ended questions evolved around their work-life history and how they handled the work-family relationship, their current employment status, and their conditions of work. The depth of the information retrieved from the interviews varied significantly, depending on the respondent's willingness to talk. Some interviews were brief and almost survey-like, while others lasted for a longer time, with questions being added as the conversation proceeded. Malaysia is a multiethnic society, and there are three main ethnic groups—Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Of the respondents in Teluk Bahang, 32 were ethnic Malay, two were ethnic Indians, one was ethnic Chinese, and one was a migrant. This partially reflects the ethnic composition of the women working in the Teluk Bahang market—but it also reflects the fact that some of the Chinese women who were approached declined to take part. One reason for this may have been the presence of my Malay interpreter; the tension between the different ethnic groups was sometimes, though rarely, brought up during the interviews. On some occasions I was also asked to show my research pass, as some respondents wanted to make sure I did not come from the authorities. This likely reflects hawker policies in Penang—according to which the municipal council makes regular checks in hawker sites and markets to make sure that all the stalls are licensed. Some employees at stalls also declined to take part in the interviewing because of the presence of their boss. Sometimes it was possible to return to the stall at a later stage—but in the cases where it would have meant compromising the women's situation, I chose not to speak to them. The fact that a majority of the respondents are Malay is significant for the analysis, as the three main ethnic groups display significant differences with regard to employment and entrepreneurship (Amin

& Alam, 2008; Ariff & Abubakar, 2002). Here, the focus is therefore placed particularly (although not exclusively) on the Malay women hawkers.

The empirical findings below are structured into two main parts. The first deals with women's right to work, and the second is devoted to women's rights at work. First, however, the Teluk Bahang market will be more thoroughly introduced.

GENDER, ETHNIC, AND SPATIAL DIVISIONS OF LABOR IN THE TELUK BAHANG WET MARKET

The Teluk Bahang market is located along the main road in Teluk Bahang village and is a designated hawker site. Within the market premises, hawkers rent a fixed stall from the municipal council (the MPPP), which provides electricity, water, cleaning of the common eating areas, and a public toilet. At the time of the fieldwork, 52 fixed stalls were in operation in the market. The two main halls of the market are the "food court" and the "fresh food hall." The food court has fixed stalls along the walls that serve cooked food, with a shared eating area in the middle. This area is dominated by Malay women, who run 10 out of the 14 fixed stalls. In the other main section of the market, the fresh food hall, 21 stalls sell fresh fruit, vegetables, fresh coconut milk, beef, and fish. Fixed stalls along the walls sell dry goods, such as rice, noodles, spices, and tinned food. Here, the majority of the vendors are male, and this section is more ethnically mixed. There are, however, clear ethnic and gender divisions of labor—particularly with regard to the handling of meat products. The Malay population is Muslim and the Syariah Laws (which apply to the Malay part of the population) have requirements with regard to hygiene, sanitation, and the safety of foods. According to Islam, Muslims are only allowed to consume food that is halal (lawful) and they do not eat pork. Large portions of the Indian population are Hindu, and in accordance with Hindu beliefs they do not eat beef. Beef and chicken are sold by Malay vendors (all but one male) while the pork section (which is secluded from the rest of the market) is exclusively run by Chinese men. The stalls outside the main halls sell non-food products and on some days nonfixed stalls appear on portable tables or on cloths on the ground selling dried fish, herbs, vegetables, or toys. These nonfixed stalls generally operate without a license and on a nonregular basis. In the streets surrounding the market (outside the market premises), there are also varying numbers of stalls operating from push-carts. These stalls are run exclusively by Malay women. The labor market experience of the female hawkers interviewed in Teluk Bahang is the primary focus of the following sections.

"I GOT MARRIED—NO MORE WORKING!": PREVIOUS LABOR MARKET EXPERIENCES OF THE HAWKERS

As in the rest of Penang Island, the major sources of employment in Teluk Bahang are found in manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade, and hotels and

restaurants (Ghazali, 2009; Malaysia Department of Statistics, 2009). The vast majority (86%) of the respondents in Teluk Bahang had previously held formal jobs. Around 52% had previously worked in factories, and the remaining 48% had worked in the service sector—most commonly in the tourism industry. In comparison with their husbands, many of whom still worked in the tourism industry, the women had left the formal labor market at a relatively early age. The women were asked what made them leave their former jobs, and the majority (53%) gave “marriage and children” as their main reason for leaving. Fernandez (forthcoming: 6) argues that “Malaysia’s failure to develop a good child care system restricts female labor participation,” and for many of the women in Teluk Bahang the lack of affordable childcare facilities was an explicit factor in their decision to leave their former jobs. One respondent explained: “To have someone to look after the children takes a lot of money and my husband is a fisherman! . . . I went for a job interview [in a hotel] and I got the job, but there was nobody to look after my baby so I could not go.” Another woman, who before marriage used to work in a factory, stated: “Before there was no childcare and your salary is not big enough even if there are people who can look after your children—you are going to have to give [all] your pay to them.” This respondent ran a small business from home, cooking *nasi-lemak* (breakfast rice), which was sold to vendors in the market. Her adult daughter also worked in the home business: “Her children are still small. So, if she goes to work outside she says that ‘then all my work will just go to the childcare, and I would rather work and stay at home to help my mother plus have my children with me.’” Some other respondents also expressed skepticism about using childcare: “It is different if we look after our own babies. It is different in what they get to eat, what we cook for them, and what we are going to teach them. . . . Plus it costs more money. You have to pay money.” Another respondent, a former hotel worker, said that she would not use childcare even if she could afford it: “No. Because before, my mother, when she was still alive, she stayed with me in the mornings. But after she passed away I was not interested in giving the children to other people. I don’t like it.”

Several women also stated that they had left their jobs because their husbands asked them to do so after marriage. One woman, who before marriage worked in an electronics factory, stated: “I got married—No more working! My husband didn’t like me to work. . . . Before, my mother-in-law and father-in-law, they also didn’t want me to work.” This former factory worker also said: “My husband asked me to quit. He didn’t want me to work. He wanted a wife that stayed at home. . . . He said it is easier for us to look after our kids. Plus there is a distance to get from here to the Bayan Lepas [the industrial zone]. In the past it was not really easy to get a bus.” Their geographical distance from their former jobs, such as jobs in the industrial zones, was a factor mentioned by several other women as well: “After marriage I had a baby so I resigned, because the factory is far away on the other side of the island.” Hence, the lack of childcare facilities, the distance from formal jobs, and the cultural norms around the role of married

women were important factors in these women's decisions to resign from their jobs. As their children were now old enough to attend school—or even grown up—the question is, what made them enter hawking rather than return to the formal labor market?

“I AM TOO OLD!”: REASONS NOT TO REENTER THE LABOR MARKET

The largest group of hawkers interviewed in Teluk Bahang had entered hawking in their 30s, when their children were old enough to attend school. Many women explained that they were simply uninterested in going back to work in factories or hotels, as they found running a small hawker business more satisfying. However, some women expressed a desire to have a formal job, but for various reasons they were not able to reenter formal work. While their reasons varied, the most common response can be summarized as the feeling that they were “too old for formal jobs.” Many women expressed with certainty that they were not going to get a job because of their age: “It’s hard to get a job. I am too old! Who is going to give a job to me?” One 49-year-old Chinese respondent, a former cashier in a supermarket, was quite clear in her response to the question as to whether she would like to have a formal job again: “Yes! I would like it. But I am too old! Too old for the job.” Similarly, this woman stated: “No, I am 44! That is like over age!” This is consistent with previous knowledge around women’s entry to export-employment in Malaysia, and export-manufacturers have demonstrated a well-documented interest in hiring predominantly young (and unmarried) women (Chattopadhyay, 1998; Kaur, 2000; Ng et al., 2006; Ong, 1987; Sivalingam, 1994). The lack of employment opportunities for “older” women should also be seen in light of the conditions of work in the jobs offered to women without higher education. In Teluk Bahang, some women spoke of the fact that they were too old to handle the actual conditions of work in their previous jobs. A 48-year-old former factory worker explained: “No, it’s hard! I don’t want to work in a factory anymore. Plus I am over age—they won’t take me anymore.” Factory work, as well as work in hotels, involves shift work. Without access to childcare, this presents a challenge to many women. A former hotel worker stated: “Sometimes you work in shifts. And there is nobody to look after the children. . . . My husband only works at night, so when I have got to do night shifts then it’s not possible.” The lack of upward mobility in low-skilled jobs, where women, despite years on the job, are stuck at the bottom of the employment hierarchy was another issue raised. One woman who had previously worked as a cleaner stated that she did not feel comfortable taking orders and being “sculled” [shouted at] by younger managers. For her, the possibility of being her own boss as a self-employed person was an important reason not to go back to formal work. A 54-year-old woman who had never attended school gave “lack of education” as a reason. She had no formal

schooling, and the opportunities of obtaining jobs, even low-skilled jobs, were very limited: “If the business doesn’t work, then I will look for work. I want to work as a security guard . . . but I can’t even read. I can’t even read A!”

Amin (2004) argues that women’s employment (as well as fertility) in Malaysia also depend (apart from women’s tastes and preferences) on social values and culture. Although it will be touched upon here only briefly, the changing role of women and the view of the family at the intersection of “Islamization projects” and state and economic interests in Malaysia have been the topic of lively discussions (Kooi-Chin Tong & Turner, 2008; Ong, 1990). Stivens (2006), for example, argues that the highly politicized discourse from the state, religious leaders, and the media around family values in Islam has had a significant impact on Malay women. In their study of the role of Malay women Abdullah, Noor, and Wok (2008: 443) conclude that despite women’s entry into both higher education and formal labor markets over the last few decades, women still perceive their role as strongly connected to the home and to their responsibility for children, meaning that “employment is an extra, an added-on role, not their primary role.” They also found that the extent of support from the husband, as well as from in-laws, was crucial for married Malay women’s employment decisions. Several women in Teluk Bahang stated that their husbands did not find it appropriate that they should look for employment. One Malay woman, who worked from home, expressed a strong desire to work outside the house, while at the same time accepting the role of her husband as the decision maker based on her religious beliefs. When asked if her husband would allow her to work outside the home now that their children were older, she responded:

No, he won’t allow it. . . . He just won’t let me. Last time I asked, he also wouldn’t let me. . . . Sometimes I feel empty. But now, no more. Now I have aged. . . . We know that we are Muslim. We cannot object unless we have a reason. He just wants me to stay at home and I can work from home. And that is okay—I can also make money from home.

Similarly, one illegal hawker, selling dried fish from a portable table, said: “My husband won’t let me! If it was up to me, then I really want it! I have had lots of job offers but he never let me [accept them]. I went to work for a day, and he came to ask me to come back.” The question of how the women perceived and handled the role of the husband in decision making regarding their employment produced a mixture of responses. Some of the women, like the respondent above but also non-Muslims, approved of their husbands making the decisions, referring to a mutual “trust” between the husband and his spouse. One Indian respondent answered that it was the husband alone who made the decisions regarding her employment. When asked why, she responded: “Because I trust him and he trusts me.” One migrant woman stated that her husband would not approve of her looking for work outside the village. When asked whether she had to accept that decision and if so why, she explained:

“Because I am obedient. . . . I just follow what he says. . . . If he wouldn’t let you go and you still go, that is when the thoughts of jealousy might come—that false thought might come. So if he says no, then it’s just no.” Some women were more critical with regard to the role of the man as the decision maker in the family. One woman, who was now a widow and whose husband had not allowed her to work after they married, stated: “In the past we were stupid! When the husband didn’t like it then we didn’t argue or fight back.” Some of the elderly widowed women also spoke of resistance from their sons toward their working. Asked if she would like a formal job, one woman, 60 years old, selling finger-food outside the market, stated: “No, ’cause I am growing old. My son would be mad at me because he can support me. Even doing this, they [the children] are angry with me. Because they can give enough—even if they are married and have children, they still support me.” This woman represents the group of elderly hawkers in Teluk Bahang. This group was the second biggest and consisted largely of women who had entered hawking in their 50s. In a much-cited review of street vendors in Asia, Bhowmik (2005: 2264) states: “Women vendors form the lowest rung amongst street traders. In most cases they take to this trade because of poverty and because the male members in the family do not have jobs.” While this may be the case in some Asian countries, the following sections will show that in the Malaysian context there is a need for a more complex view of the reasons why women enter hawking.

“IT’S NOT HEALTHY TO STAY AT HOME”: REASONS FOR ENTERING HAWKING

In Teluk Bahang, the women had entered hawking for a wide variety of reasons. The respondents were asked both why they chose hawking as a job and why they chose to run a stall at the Teluk Bahang market. The answers to these questions are interlinked, and for many women the opportunity to rent or open a stall in close proximity to their house was certainly an important aspect of the reason why they entered hawking. The most common response to the question of what made them choose to be hawkers was “income.” A majority of the women reported that they earned less than RM40 per day (less than US\$13). However, the income is irregular and can vary significantly between days and seasons. While this may be a disadvantage in terms of predicting monthly income, several women saw the fact that they earned an income on a daily basis as an advantage: “I have no interest in working and having a steady payment job. I like it like this. Even if it is [only] a little, I have it every day.” Employees and contributing family workers generally reported a lower and more fixed income per day (commonly RM15–25; around US\$5–8) than women who ran their own fixed stalls inside the market premises. However, the women who ran their own stalls found it more difficult to estimate an average income, due to the varying cost of the stock required. The most interesting responses with regard to the women’s

income are perhaps those given in answer to the question of whether they perceived their income to be enough for them to survive. A majority of the women stated that their income was enough; however, this included a number of women who stated that their income was only “just enough” or “okay.” A 49-year-old woman selling noodle soup outside the market explained: “It’s just enough. It’s no luxury, but you can get what you want and you don’t need to be in debt.” Clearly, marital status and the number of children to support (or, in the case of elderly women, to be supported by) also played a part in how the women perceived their income. Around 80% of the women were married with children, while the remaining 20% were divorced, widowed, or had never married. Among the women who had no other family members to support, several commented that their income was sufficient because it was just for them. The income of a husband was also a significant factor. One 39-year-old noodle seller, earning around RM40–45 per day, stated: “It’s okay because my husband is working in a hotel.” Some women pointed out that the income earned from hawking was just an add-on to the family income earned by the husband. For example, a 49-year-old woman selling chicken porridge said: “I don’t depend on this because my husband is working. This is my pocket money.” For others, the income earned from hawking was a necessary, and in some cases the only, source of income for the family. One woman, 50 years old and earning around RM30–35 per day, explained that her husband had fallen sick and she had to support the family. When asked if the money she earned from selling *roti channai* in the market was enough, she exclaimed: “Not enough, la! Our children are all in school and my husband is not working!” For some women, whose husbands were working, their low income was a concern: “It’s enough but it’s on a daily basis. You scratch here one day and then you have to scratch here another day. It’s just like a chicken—you scratch here and there. . . . Water bills, electric bills, and my husband’s pay is only 800.” Besides income as a reason for choosing hawking, other commonly cited reasons included an “interest in business” and reason perhaps best summarized as “bored at home.” While women are expected to stay at home and look after their children (or grandchildren), many of the women who were interviewed stated that this was not a satisfying way of life for them. For this group, the market represented not just a space of economic importance but also a space of social importance. One respondent, 64 years old and the mother of 17 children, stated:

It’s not healthy to stay at home. My sons don’t want me to do all this. They say, “Just stay at home and relax”—but it is not healthy to stay at home and eat and sleep and eat and sleep and do nothing. But if you come over here you can do business, you can walk a little bit, and you meet people and you stay happy. So it’s more healthy.

Apart from the factors discussed above, other less common responses to the question of why they chose to work as hawkers included the following: “to help a family member,” to “be independent,” and “easy operation.”

**“HE DOESN’T WANT SOMEONE TO TAKE HIS WIFE AWAY!”:
GEOGRAPHIC PROXIMITY AND CONSTRUCTION OF SPACE**

An overwhelming majority stated that they chose to do business at this particular market because of its location close to their homes. This gave the women the opportunity to combine their role as caregivers to children and other relatives with earning an income through hawking. One woman answered the question of whether proximity was important by saying: “Yes, it’s important to me . . . like now my mother-in-law is sick and if there is any emergency it’s very good for me. It’s very near.” She was also asked if she could imagine traveling a distance to work: “I don’t think so. Who is going to take care of my kids? In the past when I was working it was okay, because my mother was still alive and she could take care of them. But now, no more.” Another interesting observation is that for the women who stated that their husbands disapproved of their having a formal job outside the home, it seems that hawking provided the possibility of entering work in the public sphere—*with the approval of their husbands*. Unlike performing work in the home, the market is a public place—but it seems to be an acceptable place and space for women. One Malay woman, 33 years of age, stated that she would like to have a formal job but her husband would not let her. When asked why, she explained: “He is jealous! He doesn’t want somebody else to take his wife away!” Another woman said that her husband would not let her work outside the village: “My husband would question if I would be okay there. He doesn’t want me to get tired. I asked before if I could work in Batu Ferringhi [a neighboring village] but my husband said, ‘No, you are going to get tired.’” Women who were not allowed to “work” by their husbands or family were still able to be hawkers—as the market was perceived as an acceptable public place in which to work. It was a place where, in the case of the respondent above, the husband did not have to worry that “somebody else” would “take his wife away.”

The following sections are devoted to an analysis of women’s rights at work, starting with an analysis of current hawker policies.

**“I WAS SO SCARED. . . . I THOUGHT THEY WERE GOING
TO CONFISCATE [THE STOCK]”: THE POLICY WITH
REGARD TO LICENSES AND DESIGNATED SITES**

The Teluk Bahang market is, as mentioned, a designated hawker site. The stalls are rented from the municipal council and all the hawkers are expected to have a license. There are several important gendered aspects of the current hawker policy that need to be factored into an analysis of the policy’s implications. However, it is also important to note that women hawkers are not a homogenous group. For the women in Teluk Bahang who had not been able to obtain a license, the restrictive policies of the MPPP with regard to the issuing of licenses as well as

the regular checks and confiscation of stock from illegal hawkers constituted an issue of serious concern. One woman working outside the market complained about the council's confiscation of the stock of illegal hawkers. Some of these hawkers had applied for a license but had not been given one:

Sometimes they [the illegal hawkers] lose their things. They [the MPPP] just come from town and just grab it all. . . . So if they approve their license, it really helps them. I just want to ask them to approve a lot of licenses. Let the people, the ones who are poor . . . have more income and survive. . . . You know my mother has a shop inside. She is asking for a license for the shop. It has been six months we have been waiting for the license and the shop to be approved. . . . Two days ago, a man came from the license department and he knows that we don't have a license, and suddenly he said: "You better pack up all your things—if not, we are going to confiscate them." . . . We are surviving on the money we are getting, the earnings from the business, and suddenly they are asking us to close!? Then how?

Just a few hours prior to the interview, the licensing department had paid another visit: "I was so scared. . . . I thought they [the licensing department] were going to confiscate. I just ran in, you know. And all of them say, the people inside [the market], they say don't be scared. They will not do anything. And then suddenly they [the licensing department] just went off."

On the other hand, for the licensed hawkers, the policy of designated sites had more positive implications. One important aspect of taking up business at the designated market sites is the *fixed opening hours*. For women this has a special significance, given their role as responsible for the children and the home. While the limited opening hours were also experienced as a problem with regard to earnings, at the same time, the limited opening hours worked as an incentive to open a stall at the market. Teluk Bahang is a morning market, and the women interviewed generally work in the market from around six o'clock in the morning until around twelve thirty or one o'clock when the market closes. The limited hours mean that they spend a set amount of time in the market—although many also spend several additional hours doing the preparatory work in the home. The market's opening hours coincide with school opening hours—and this makes it possible for mothers with children in school to work in the market in the morning and stay at home with their children in the afternoon. As explained by one respondent: "I can take care of my children. I have a lot of time at home. You see, I come here in the morning and about twelve o'clock I have finished. So I can be at home with my kids."

Yet another important aspect of having a fixed stall at a designated market is the ability to keep stock in one place—without having to move it every day from a temporary site. One respondent, 64 years of age, and one of the few hawkers who did not live in the village, stated that she chose this particular market because at "the market where I live they don't have facilities. They don't have a built up [structure]. Then you have to come and open every day and

unpack. I am old and my sons are all working, and I don't want to bother them.” She also pointed out that the advantages of the fixed structure included the services it provides, such as access to a public toilet. Similarly, a 68-year-old woman stated that she chose this particular market because it provided a space indoors and she did not have to carry supplies between places: “If I am going to do business outside in the rain, then maybe I am not going to be able to do it. . . . Plus it's easy to get your supplies here. If you are going to be somewhere else, it's hard to get your supplies.” For women, the ability to keep stock in one place and to buy their supplies in the same location has specific implications relating to gendered access to transportation. Among the women interviewed, only 18% traveled by car to and from the market. Another 36% walked, 21% traveled by motorcycle, 12% had someone who drove them to the market, and 9% traveled by bicycle. Moving stock to and from temporary sites every day is not an easy operation if you do not have access to a car. One respondent, whose husband and daughter also worked in the market, stated that she chose to rent a stall at this particular market “because we are from here. . . . We would like to go and do business in other places, but we don't have transport.” The policy of providing fixed stalls at designated markets in residential areas has thus had a positive impact on women's ability to be hawkers. On the other hand, the restrictive policies related to the issuing of licenses has had a negative impact—in the sense that it has deprived some female hawkers of the possibility of earning a regular income.

“IT'S MORE SECURE THAN IF YOU WORK IN A HOTEL!”: JOB SECURITY AND PENSIONS

Masud, Haron, and Gikonyo (2008) raise the concern that the low participation rates of women in the formal labor market in Malaysia have meant that women also have less access to forms of social assistance and protection such as pensions. Informal workers, by definition, lack formal recognition and job security, and the women in Teluk Bahang are no exception. While none of the women responded that they had any job security in legal terms, several women had a different interpretation of job security. For example, one respondent stated: “For now it is secure. The children are still in school, and after their studies maybe we don't have to do business anymore.” Another woman said: “It's more secure than if you work in a hotel! There have been a lot of retrenchments, so if you work for yourself it is more secure.”

As previously mentioned, a large group of hawkers in Teluk Bahang were elderly. The fact that elderly women take up own-account work or home-work needs to be seen in light of the gendered access to pensions in Malaysia (Masud et al., 2008; Ofstedal, Reidy, & Knodel, 2004). The Malaysian pension system is managed by the Employees Provident Fund (EPF), in which retirement savings are deposited by employees or their employers. According to the EPF's annual report (2008), there are currently around 5.7 million active members; however,

men form the majority of the registered members and they also hold a significantly higher amount in savings than do women. It is now also possible for self-employed persons to deposit savings in the EPF (“EPF rolls out 1 Malaysia retirement scheme for self-employed,” 2009), but during the time of the fieldwork for this study, none of the women interviewed were currently depositing any payments in the EPF. The women who had previously held formal jobs had some savings from that time; however, considering the short time spent in these formal jobs, their savings were, at best, limited.

**“NONE OF THE UNIONS HAVE COME TO ASK US TO JOIN”:
IMPROVING THE WORK SITUATION AND
COLLECTIVE BARGAINING**

The women in Teluk Bahang were asked: “If you could improve something about your working situation, what would that be?” The majority expressed contentment with their current work situation, but many also suggested that they wanted to improve the conditions of work. The most common answer to the above question was “a better/cleaner/healthier working environment.” Notably, twice as many fixed hawkers inside the market (i.e., the designated site) than the roadside hawkers gave this answer. In a manner similar to the findings of Pang and Toh (2008) in their study of hawkers in Kuala Lumpur and Taiping, quite a number of hawkers in Teluk Bahang noted “lack of business” as an issue of concern in various forms; for example, they wanted “more business at the market,” the “possibility of expanding the business,” “higher income,” “a bigger space/stall in the market,” and “longer opening hours in the market.” The possibility of changing the working situation for hawkers is, however, not only determined by the hawker policy of the municipal council but also by the hawkers’ informal employment status. In Penang, there are several petty traders’ and hawkers’ associations, and while a very limited number of the respondents were members of a petty traders’ association, none of them were members of a trade union. When asked why they were not members, several women expressed their distrust of trade union organizations. “No! The unions over here are useless!” Some women also shared the view that the unions were somehow “too formal”: “I don’t know. . . . I can’t really write, so I don’t want to get involved with these union things. You need paperwork or a letter of recommendation and all these things.” There were some women who expressed an interest in joining a union but perceived the unions as not interested in them:

I want to say that none of the unions have come to ask us to join. So we don’t join. We are not in a group, so everything is separate, individual. I have been doing business for 20 years, but none of the unions have approached me to invite me. We just have our own capital. We start up and we do whatever we can.

However, for most of the respondents, trade union organizations were simply absent, and many said they had never thought about joining: “No. I never thought about that”; or “No, I am just an old woman.” An important consideration with regard to women’s organizing is that women, in both formal and informal employment, retain their reproductive responsibilities, and time constraints are therefore an important factor in their ability to organize (Barrientos, 2007). Several respondents in Teluk Bahang commented on this: “No, it’s tiring [to be a member]. They are going to call you to go to a meeting here and there and a course here and there. It’s hard for me because I have to baby-sit my grandchildren. I have to take care of them when they come home from school because their parents are working.” While labor legislation assumes a worker separated from reproductive work, this assumption does not apply to the vast majority of women workers (Barrientos, 2007; Elias, 2007). The women in Teluk Bahang work on average six hours per day preparing food at home and selling it in the market. Many of them start early and all of them finish only as the market closes: “At 3:45 I come to the market to cook the coconut rice for one hour. Then I go home and I come back at 6:40 to start cooking the rice noodles.” The women were also asked how many hours a day they spent on housework; however, most of them found it very difficult to give an answer. Many found the question strange or even outright funny: “Housework?! Until night you can’t finish! Ha ha!” Many thus regarded housework as a 24-hours-a-day commitment—but for the women who did specify the time spent on housework, four hours was the average time per day that they gave. While some of the women stated that their husbands helped with the housework, it was clear that the housework was the responsibility of the wife. One 34-year-old curry puff seller said her husband did “A little bit [of housework]. He mops the floor and sweeps it. Light, light stuff. But he works more at his work. He provides more income.” Ng and colleagues (2006: 113) argue that in Malaysia, apart from not being able to leave their children to attend meetings, women may also face resistance from their husbands, “who demand that they prioritize their duties and responsibilities at home.” One woman in Teluk Bahang explicitly stated that she would not join a union because “It’s my husband’s stuff.” Cultural constraints may thus also effectively limit women’s participation and influence in trade unions and other interest groups.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article has largely aimed to contribute to an increased knowledge of women’s informal work in Malaysia. It has explored women’s work as hawkers through looking at both women’s right to work and women’s rights at work. The empirical findings illustrate the importance of approaching women’s formal and informal work as a “continuum” (Chen, 2007) rather than a dichotomy (Barrientos, 2007; Benería & Floro, 2005; Kaufmann, 2007). The vast majority of the women interviewed had moved along the continuum from formal

employment (in export industries) to informal work (own-account work or home-work) with age. Applying an approach that examined this in the context of women's *right to work* also revealed that access to jobs and the possibility of keeping them was determined by age, marital status, motherhood and locality. While the export-oriented development model adopted in Malaysia has been celebrated for its potential to create jobs particularly for women, the experiences of the women in Teluk Bahang reveal a more questionable track record when it comes to women's ability to retain the jobs created in export industries. Increasing female labor force participation is an explicit objective of the Malaysian government. The Tenth Malaysia Plan (Malaysia Economic Planning Unit, 2011) suggests addressing this through important improvements in access to childcare and training opportunities. However, the government also needs to actively address the discriminatory practices of employers against "older" women. The empirical data show that while the perceived "unemployability" of older women was certainly relevant, so were the lack of affordable childcare, the attitudes of their husbands and other family members, the restricted mobility of married women, and gendered access to transportation—revealing the importance of looking at how both structural and ideological constructs frame women's work (Ellingsaeter, 1999). Far from all of the women in Teluk Bahang, however, expressed a desire to reenter the formal labor market. Instead, many experienced informal work as a better option. This supports the claim that informal work is entered into for a variety of reasons—not only out of necessity or poverty (Gurtoo & Williams, 2009; Maloney, 2004). On the contrary, for some of the women in Teluk Bahang, it was entered into out of pure interest, and for many it was a choice based on the notion that own-account work or home-work allowed them to earn an income while fulfilling their roles as mothers and wives.

This article also contributes to the geographical scholarship around women's informal work, through its emphasis on spatial aspects. This is not purely a matter of academic importance; it is also, I argue, relevant for policymaking around hawking. The current hawker policy in Penang and its emphasis on confining hawkers to certain restricted areas could be characterized as restrictive (Chen et al., 2002). Valid criticism has been leveled at this policy, as it has deprived mobile hawkers of business when they are forcefully removed from profitable locations. However, as argued in the introduction, the impact of this policy is not gender neutral. The policy of "confinement" has also involved setting up a large number of markets in residential areas—and considering the importance, as expressed by the women, of working in close geographic proximity to their home, this has no doubt been a *promotive* policy (Chen et al., 2002) for many women. Spatial aspects are, importantly, not limited to issues of geographic proximity and access to transportation, but they also apply to spatial boundaries through the constructed meaning of the market *space*. To several women, where work outside the household had been inaccessible or even unacceptable, the market area (including the streets surrounding the market) represented an *accessible* and

acceptable public place of work. The market thus seems to be constructed as a place *in-between* the public and the private—supporting Yasmeeen’s (2006) claim (in a study from neighboring Thailand) that hawking appears to dissolve the traditional Western construction of public/private, home/workplace. Hawking could therefore be regarded as not only an important economic activity for women but also a renegotiation of the places and spaces accessible to them. As such, the possibility of engaging in hawking can also be empowering for women—not only in terms of financial independence but also in terms of the extended access to public places of work. Based on surveys carried out throughout Penang, the municipal council decides where to establish markets. In making these decisions, the council should consider not only the number of mobile or illegal hawkers in the area but also the potentially positive impact on women in the various residential areas. It needs to be pointed out, however, that women hawkers are not a homogenous group. Instead, among women hawkers there may be conflicting interests (based upon, for example, locality and/or ethnicity). But, while hawker interest groups are largely male dominated, there is an urgent need to directly involve different groups of women hawkers in the drafting as well as implementation of policies, in order to ensure that women’s voices are heard and that their interests are represented. While acknowledging the positive impact of the policy of “confinement” for many of the women hawkers interviewed, when we consider women’s rights at work, other aspects of Penang’s hawker policy are by no means as beneficial. One such aspect is the increased price of doing informal business—for example, through increased rental fees. The authorities in Penang need to make sure that the fees for hawking at a designated market (as well as the license fee) are kept at an affordable level. The most notable negative impact is perhaps the currently restrictive policy with regard to the issuing of hawker licenses. In order to avoid the loss of livelihood and stress caused by this policy, the local authorities need to grant more licenses. Women’s rights at work have been further examined throughout this article through focusing on job security, pensions, and the right to organize and bargain collectively. As argued by Barrientos (2007), the women in Teluk Bahang face obstacles relating to these rights based on their status as informal workers—but also on their status as women. A lack of social protection is a defining feature of informal work (ILO, 2002b). And while the vulnerability of informal workers is an issue of serious concern, the view expressed by some of the women that informal work is in fact more secure than the formal work available is interesting. Factories regularly close down—and the women who have been retrenched have received very little compensation. Some women thus perceived that the flexibility and autonomy offered by hawking presented greater security than formal work (Jütting et al, 2008). Developing a social security system that provides better protection for both formal and informal workers is therefore crucial. In order to do this, the ILO suggests the broader concept of “social protection,” which includes a broader set of schemes that would extend greater protection, including protection for

informal workers (ILO, 2002b). For women this has a particular significance, given that they generally have less in savings and limited access to capital—as illustrated here by their disproportionately low pension fund savings. The possibility for self-employed persons to deposit pension savings in the EPF is one step in the right direction—however, the EPF needs to work with explicitly gender-sensitive strategies to ensure that women can take equal advantage of this scheme. Organizing informal workers presents a real challenge to the trade union movement (Barrientos, 2007), and the empirical findings of this study further support the feminist critique of the trade union movement for failing to adequately represent women workers (Kabeer, 2004; Pearson, 2007; Razavi, 1999). Very few women in Teluk Bahang were members of a petty traders' associations, and none was a registered member of a trade union. Instead, several women expressed skepticism with regard to unions, or even outright distrust of them. The organizations, NGOs and trade unions alike, that aim to represent hawkers clearly need to draft specific strategies to reach and address the needs of different groups of female hawkers. When developing such strategies, it needs to be recognized that women workers are not detached from their reproductive role. Instead, women's close attachment to the home preconditions their ability to organize. Time constraints and restrictions in mobility call for specific and targeted measures to ensure that different groups of women are able to take part in activities such as attending meetings.

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