

Enterprising Women



ften, we hear some so called revolutionaries put down people who are interested in making money. Only capitalists and the bourgeoisie pursue wealth. Revolutionaries should be dedicating their lives only and solely to the changing of society while living like spartans all the time. The criticism is never more sharp and bitter when they're directed towards fellow activists that one can not quite help wondering if the object of the revolution is not so much to redistribute wealth as to democratize poverty.

So when we met women who are activists and entrepreneurs at the same time, we secretly applauded their courage to engage in an enterprise that is both controversial and pioneering. These women are exporters, for now into fair trade of alternative markets but already eyeing the mainstream. They are serious and set on making their business a success because so many people depend on it. Yet, they are beset by dilemmas, as our story on "Fair Trade" will show. Long informal talks with them suggest they are carefully picking their way through a minefield of brickbats, and they are sometimes defensive about their decision to go into export. Cautious about being called reformists, they made sure we understood that the central problem in a semi-feudal economy such as theirs is still land ownership and they wanted us to know, in no uncertain terms, that they went into business only to raise the money needed to finance the fight for land.

The problem is while they wish to remain focused on the crux of the struggle and do not want to become business sharks, they need to become more aggressive, more competitive in

their business conduct in order to provide their workers—most of whom are urban poor mothers regular jobs, critical lifelines that can keep families from falling off the brink into absolute destitution. But jobs can only be regularized if the activists/entrepreneurs decide to jump into and become competitive in the mainstream.

But the women are confident they can make it and the statistics are there to back them up. Women-owned firms have been found to outlast businesses led by males, thanks to the flexibility and creativity that women naturally learn as they juggle work and home and thanks to the sensitivity to women's needs that they develop as they raise a family.

But just as women's businesses are surviving and passing the tests that any new enterprise go through, governments, in their characteristic fashion, decide to make it more difficult for women. In the Asia-Pacific, trade liberalization and globalization, as embodied and implemented by the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), will seriously undermine the viability of small and medium businesses, endeavors that many women engaged in. As noted in another story here, when the trumpeters of globalization pronounce its benefits, they are speaking to businesses that are already competitive and positioned to have access to credit and other support that investments need. They are not addressing business women that we have come to know. These women, for their businesses to survive, have to be not just a lot more enterprising; they will have to invest a lot more in the people's struggle as well.

Tom McCarthy cartoon