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Women in the Invisible Economy in Tunis

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This chapter turns to the theoretical and empirical aspects of the women’s presence, or absence, in the economy of the greater metropolitan area of Tunis. It takes off from an earlier work\(^1\) that focused on the informal economy in Tunis in general. However, this study is guided by the assumption that there is an integrated and unitary economy overall.

While the overt public economic presence of women is not great in Tunis, this study of the invisible economy requires a model that articulates the role for both men and women. As described in the introduction, this research recognizes the fundamental, dependent, and necessary connections of the invisible economy to the wider economic system. Although this invisible sector is peripheral to the sources of finance capital, it is essential for the grassroots provision and distribution of goods and services in the wider economy.\(^2\) Moreover, the logic of all capital-based systems, which seeks to maximize earnings and minimize costs, is followed by both the “visible” (formal) and “invisible” (informal) sectors.

The street-level methodology of this chapter shows what can be done on this level. But as a male, I am aware of how much is missed if household surveys and observations made by female researchers are not also incorporated. Fortunately this book provides field data generated almost exclusively by female researchers, who have investigated the issue at the neighborhood and household level.

Definitions and Dimensions of the Tunisian Invisible Economy

As noted elsewhere in this book, the invisible economy has gone by many other names, such as the nonstructured sector, the traditional economy, the informal economy, and the spontaneous economy, but each term has vari-
ous drawbacks as well as advantages. It is often difficult for differing disciplines to apply such concepts consistently.

The possibilities for confusion expand given the related aspects of the invisible economy, including squatter housing and popular transport, not to mention the gray and black (illegal) economies. They operate quietly or clandestinely outside conventional administrative structures and with very little record keeping. Social and economic transactions in these spheres are deliberately ephemeral and obscure.

Decades ago, a study in Cairo noted the ruralization of its population, notably based in the informal sector. In fact, the rural origins of urbanites keep the intimate connections between city and countryside. Even formal-sector employment can be at such low levels that the term *underemployment* is more apt, and many formal-sector workers may have important income supplements in the informal sector. With these points in mind, it is clear that even the empirical investigation of the informal sector is filled with contradictions and difficulties in measurement.

Literature on the informal sector in Tunisia includes the work of Charmes, which has created a solid quantitative base by which to measure the scale of the informal ("non-structured") economy in Tunisia. Other Tunisian research on the informal sector has investigated "spontaneous" housing (*bidonvilles, gourbivilles*); the history; income and employment; urban demography; construction and manufacturing; and transport and commerce.

According to current multidisciplinary inquiry, the "constitutional coup" of Ben Ali in 1987 has brought notable economic reform, but the government has also inherited grave economic problems. Not least of these is the very high level of Tunisian youthful unemployment. According to official figures, the rates of unemployment grew from 1984 to 1989, and in 1989, 48.4 percent of the unemployed were between the ages of 18 and 24 years. Of the Tunisian population of 7 million in 1986, 53 percent was urban, and of the 1.6 million people in the Governorate of Tunis, 49 percent were younger than 24. Of the working residents of Tunis, almost 55 percent were in the service or manufacturing area, and a great many of them were employed in the informal sector.

Data from research by Charmes on the scale of the nonagricultural informal sector in Tunis are presented in table 12. Clearly great numbers of people do such work. Note that the categories include a wide range of small-scale enterprises that, in many cases, operate from permanent locations, unlike the subjects of my own research, who performed work only in public space.
Table 12. Approximate Size of Tunisian Informal Sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Activity</th>
<th>Informal Workforce</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foods</td>
<td>8,900</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction materials</td>
<td>13,500</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metals and electricity</td>
<td>8,500</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textiles-clothing</td>
<td>106,500</td>
<td></td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood, printing</td>
<td>22,300</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>42,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>8,600</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotels</td>
<td>12,900</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repairs</td>
<td>24,200</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other services</td>
<td>36,200</td>
<td></td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Institut National de la Statistique, 1980, Table ACT 58.

Concurrent with other economic problems in Tunis, Tunisian workers’ option of traveling to Europe to search for work was recently made substantially more difficult. As a consequence, there has been a rise in such conditions as marginalization, individualization, social segregation, frustration, and even violence. 14 Such is the case particularly among poorer male youths in urban Tunisia. Many commentators consider that these conditions have contributed to the rise of Islamic extremism and subsequent state controls on human rights and democratic expression.

Because of those struggling to survive the burden of urban poverty, there appears to be an absolute and relative increase in the scale of the invisible urban economy. Either explicitly or implicitly, a large portion of the studies cited above attribute the growth of this part of the economy to some or all of the following factors: (1) gender differentiation and sexism, (2) urban poverty and unemployment, (3) expansion of the cash economy and capital accumulation, (4) growth of wage labor and cash crops in rural agriculture, (5) rural-to-urban migration, (6) restricted access to jobs in Europe and the Arab world, and (7) overall postcolonial class formation in Tunisia.

My research in Tunisia discovered a vast array of activities such as street vending, squatter markets, begging, labor pools, seasonal work, car washing, and informal transport. Although women are found in such activities, they are especially concentrated in the hidden, or invisible, economy of household production and domestic services, as well other categories out-
side formally registered and structured urban life. The illegal area of the invisible economy includes the drug trade, smuggling, theft, tax evasion, and prostitution outside the legally permitted form.

Within the informal street economy, the breakdown of participants in commercial activities, who in Tunis are overwhelmingly male, is estimated as follows: sellers of merchandise, 35 percent; food sellers, 30 percent; shoe shiners, 15 percent; sellers of journals and books, 10 percent; beggars, 5 percent; unemployed journeymen and porters, 5 percent.

There are also substantial numbers of unseen wholesalers, transporters, artisans, seamstresses, agricultural workers, and food preparers. The items supplied by such vendors include tobacco and cigarettes; fruits and vegetables; chicken, meat, and eggs; and friperie, used clothing that is imported in bulk.

The scale of commercial activity varies in terms of costs and profit. Some merchants have little inventory—only fifteen to twenty bananas or six potatoes and one bunch of carrots. Others might have as few as twenty pieces of homemade chewing gum. The very few butchers selling meat on the street are probably among the least poor and are virtually all men. They usually sell either sheep and beef, or chickens, not usually together. In weekly peripheral markets, women sell live chickens and rabbits.

Informal-sector inventories vary considerably in terms of capital investment. Often the total value of goods would be 50 Tunisian dinars, sometimes 100 DT, rarely 1,000 DT. Often the total inventories are small. For example, 8 kites at 1 DT each; 3–4 kilos of potatoes at 200–400 millemes, depending upon quality; 20 pairs of socks at 600 mms each; 5 liter-bottles of rose water at 2 DT; 15 balls of gum at 100 mms each. Street selling of flowers is rare except in the affluent communities like Carthage, or in Place de l'Indépendence.

Refinement and clarity in studies of the informal sector require definitions that aim toward cross-cultural comparison; work on structural issues such as the dualistic or unitary nature of the urban economy; and empirical field studies that give a concrete expression of taxonomic, structural, and functional dimensions of the informal sector.

The urban informal commercial sector exists within both capitalist and state-planned economies. It functions as a survival mechanism that serves the economic interests of poor and low-income merchants and consumers. These functions are maintained by generally small-scale investment and inventory and low and negotiable prices. Service functions of the informal sector are especially difficult to observe and describe, but they form a large part of informal economic activities, especially for women.
Ethnography of the Informal Economy in Tunis

Areas of Low-Level Activity

In areas of light manufacture and production such as carpentry, baking, leather work, shoes, marble work, glass and mirrors, informal-sector activities of males and females on the street are virtually nonexistent. Informal street commerce activities are very few in areas of low pedestrian traffic; they are seldom found in the “formal” zones of food markets and the Old Medina of Tunis, where confined streets and established formal space will not permit them.

Even in a poor area, Mellasine, where substantial numbers of street sellers might be expected, it was decidedly quiet. I saw only five sellers after walking on all sides and down the middle service road, thus viewing every public roadway, but a number of old, yet serviceable, vending carts were noted. I assumed that they were parked at the homes of sellers, but the carts were not in use.

On the Sebkhet Sejoumi side of Mellasine are large dumping grounds for garbage and trash of all sorts. Artisanal firing of pottery in Mellasine causes a disagreeable thick black smoke. Stored on the roofs are large collections of broken objects and salvaged spare parts. There are surprising numbers of livestock for an urban area: about twenty cows, hundreds of chickens, scores of sheep and goats, all within walking distance of downtown Tunis. This is thus an impoverished area where survival skills are at a premium, but there is little pedestrian traffic, and consequently there is little informal commerce in the area.

The rue Kasbah in the medina has a greater level of street merchant activity, in clothes, shoes, and light merchandise. Informal-sector merchants at the rue Kasbah were on the street, not associated with stores. They were almost entirely young men, but they were not serving the tourist market, as would be the case at the rue Zeitoun, also in the medina.

Areas of High-Level Activity

The highest concentration of informal commercial activities in Tunis takes place in open spaces and on the peripheries of larger markets. There is a greater diversity of goods and services and much greater numbers of potential customers. The area around the medina supports the highest daily level of informal-sector activities. At the peripheries of the urban area of Tunis, such as in Kram West or Hammam Lif, informal markets can only be achieved on a weekly basis, but in these places the greatest numbers of women are present.
Within the medina is also the lively, quite poor, but extremely crowded Marché aux Puces (flea market). For the 195 vendors my study enumerated in this location, there were thousands of customers, including scores of women. The distribution of goods sold at this informal market was about 50 percent clothes (70 percent old; 30 percent new); 40 percent electrical, metal, and hardware parts, all used; and about 10 percent foods, mostly fruits. The adjacent rue Marr, a main axis road, has many small-scale activities in shops discussed in more detail by Berry in this volume. 18

In the area of the medina around the Place Halfaouine mosque, the buildings indicate poorer economic conditions, but there is very high pedestrian traffic and very little vehicular traffic. Thus there is for sale a very wide array of fruits, vegetables, and new manufactured items. The 119 informal street vendors enumerated there included 5 women selling old clothes (especially in front of the mosque at Place Halfaouine), 7 fish vendors, and 3 vendors of meat cutlets. Meat is rarely sold on the street outside a fixed-location butcher shop. In short, informal street commerce was confirmed as regularly high in areas at the peripheries of the medina and aswaq (markets), especially in zones of much pedestrian traffic.

At the popular location for street commerce at rue Zarkoun, the merchants offer mainly small-scale services and small items with a high rate of turnover that require little warehousing or capital investment. The rue Zarkoun merchants handle more high-tech items than at any other place; it is rumored that some of the merchandise is stolen.

Tunisian Women in the Invisible Economy

For purposes of studying women in the informal sector, I had to go beyond unlicensed street merchants occupying public space and having impermanent facilities for storage of their merchandise or provision of their services. Typically the numbers of women were low in these circumstances, which account for only one part of the much bigger informal sector. As other chapters in this book show, women at home often produce goods that men sell on the streets, and the women in domestic service, illegal activities, and prostitution are extremely difficult to enumerate, although there appears to be an unprecedented growth in the role of women in the informal sector in recent decades.

In order to study the invisible role of women in the Tunisian economy, the work in this chapter relied on informants, unobtrusive measures, and data derived from a general survey of the informal sector, in which men were overwhelmingly dominant in the public arena. Nonetheless the taxonomy in table 13 provides a focus for public positions of women. What
may be most useful in this case is to contrast my observations with studies of men or with the numerous studies of women by the women authors of other chapters in this book. In either case, the neglect or minimization of the role of women as a subject of research will lead to false conclusions. Even in the public activities listed in the following section, it requires effort to discover female activities.

Overwhelmingly, public informal street commerce in Tunis is built upon young men, although fruit sellers and shoe repairers may be a bit older. Even in the case of highly concentrated informal activity at Place Barcelone, there were only four women among the hundreds of informal-sector merchants, and these four occupied a peripheral location on the west side. The women, who occupied this spot on a regular basis, sold only eggs and wafer bread with peppers. Similarly, in the highly concentrated informal commerce at the Marche Aux Puces, where 195 men were selling, only two women were vendors; one sold old clothes, and the other sold spices.

At the weekly markets such as Kram West and Hammam Lif, the numbers of women vendors were greater but still very small, located at peripheral areas and selling either foods or old clothes. One informant said that used clothes are brought into the port city of Monastir in bulk from Europe and America, then sold around Tunisia. Some are reexported widely within Africa after being sorted. The bulk bags of clothes are to be seen widely, but they have no mark as to origin. One *fripp* vendor confirmed that the used clothes come from all over the world; he buys them in bulk by kilo, then sorts and markets the clothing throughout the country.

The main street of legal female prostitution in the medina, the rue Sidi Abdallah Gueche, just off the rue Zarkoun, is an impasse with a T-shaped branch. The twenty-six prostitutes enumerated there were soliciting about 150 customers waiting in lines around doors. There were a total of some 100 closed doors, as well as street doors opening onto five or six private rooms inside, the basis for an estimate of the prostitute population at 150. Within this area, there was a solitary male street merchant with his cart located strategically at the T-juncture, selling peanuts and paper handkerchiefs to his customers.

**Beggars in the Informal Sector**

The mass media often project that many people in the informal sector are beggars. In fact the presence of beggars in the areas of informal commercial activities is almost negligible. For example, within the broadest scope of the Central Business District (CBD) there were fewer than one hundred during an extensive walking survey of about six hours. Most of them were
men, but there are more women in this subsector than in any other single public informal activity involving women.

Interspersed within a group of twenty-seven street sellers in the rue Kasbah in the medina were five women beggars, not far from the Zeitoun mosque. These women were poor or elderly, or both, but had no visible handicaps.

Areas around important mosques such as the Zeitoun were often locations for women beggars, typically very poor and often accompanied by children. I have also observed informal, nonstate harassment of women beggars with children; some pedestrians try to shame them. Women beggars are the worst off, for sure. Beggars at the TGM Metro station range from one to four, established next to the ticket office to beg for small change from Metro riders.

A smaller proportion of the beggars were very poor and likely homeless. Some also appeared emotionally distressed or mentally ill. Most of the men had a variety of physical handicaps such as amputations, crippled limbs, or blindness, yet many of them were well shaven, had wheelchairs, and wore decent clothes and shoes. The locations for begging activity were remarkably constant over a period of many months.

**Transport in the Informal Sector**

Informal-sector transport within the CBD (medina and adjoining neighborhoods) involves an estimated three hundred small handcarts that can reach areas otherwise inaccessible by cars or trucks. Rental fees for motorized or man-powered carts are determined by the distance and difficulty of the job. There are two main places near the medina for three-wheeled vehicles; in the north at Bab al Khadra and in the east in front of the CERES building on rue d’Espagne next to the medina. The handcarts, either small-sized or large, reached inner areas of the medina. Of the hundreds of these handcarts, some are owner-used, and others are for hire. The three-wheeled vehicles probably number fifty at the very least. No pushcart operators were women. Taxi drivers either have their own cars or work for a company as drivers. Only once in six months was a woman taxi driver observed; they are a great rarity although there are no legal constraints against them.

**Women and Low-Density Informal Commerce**

The Case of Hai Et Taddaman

Hai Et Taddaman is a new and expanding area plunging into the countryside to the west of Tunis, up to old olive orchards. In its informal economy
the majority are small cart merchants and merchants displaying their wares on fences, walls, and cardboard sheets. Lots of fruits and vegetables are for sale, especially in the smallish vegetable suq (market). There were a few butchers, but none were women.

Many small shops in this area sell manufactured items or furnishings. Among the street merchants three were cobblers. There were no beggars. Only one woman was seen on the street in a mercantile role. She was trying to sell four old coats; she was very poor, and there was little interest in her old clothing. Unlike middle-class areas, the National Guard office in Hai Et Taddaman has officers alert and armed with standard automatic rifles. Aside from roadside stalls to serve a passing clientele, there was little informal street commerce in general.

The Kabaria Market

The Kabaria market stop on the Ben Arous tram, halfway between Place Barcelone and Ben Arous, was the site of market activity not to be seen at any of the other intermediate stops. While there were six small butcher shops, no livestock was visible in this decent working-class residential area. The Kabaria area was said to supply many workers to France. The street sellers worked from carts, tables, and canvases. They lined the road giving access to the small central market.

Of the 102 street vendors enumerated at Kabaria, 5 were women, who were selling food and old clothes. In the established municipal market there were 7 women, who sold beans and other vegetables. All women wore traditional (rural) costumes and jewelry. There were more women counted in Kabaria than in most other places visited, except for large weekly markets. In the cases of Ben Arous and Ariana there were few pedestrians and virtually no informal street merchants of either gender in such areas.

High-Density Weekly Markets in the Tunis Urban Area

The weekly markets have a very high level of informal-sector activities. There are at least four and perhaps six of these weekly markets in the urban agglomeration of Carthage-Tunis. In the Tunis urban area, my research surveyed the Sunday markets at Kram West and Hammam. According to Michalak, in Hai Et Taddaman and Ariana there are also untaxed Friday markets and municipal markets at Galaat Andaleuss on Wednesdays and at Sidi Thabet on Saturdays.19

The vendors sell the usual array of merchandise, but hundreds of merchants are concentrated in a single location, many more than in a more
central urban area of the typical informal-sector activities. Assuming that there are only four weekly markets in the wider urban agglomeration of Tunis, and 500 vendors at each, the total number is 2,000 active members of the invisible economy. Whether they sold at other locations during the week I could not easily determine, but I presume that they were primarily focused on the weekly, rather than daily, market as I noticed no major decline elsewhere in other markets on Sundays, only on Fridays.

The Kram West Weekly Market

The Kram Sunday market, in a vast open space in westernmost Kram on a football field, was the second-largest single site of informal commercial activity in this study. The total of enumerated merchants was 683, including 26 women, mainly in vegetable and food sales but a few in other areas as well. Thus women accounted for 3.8 percent of the vendors. As with the Kabaria market, the women were often in traditional (rural) dress. There were vast arrays of goods—fruits, vegetables, ten flocks of sheep totaling two hundred or so animals, a variety of foods, new clothes, new and used hardware, furniture, used appliances, pots and pans, cassette tapes, fish and octopuses, snails, and eggs. No meat was sold. Three beggars were observed; all were women. In the used clothing trade, about three-fourths of the customers were women, but men were the sellers. Used clothes represented about one-third of the total area.

The Hammam Lif Weekly Market

Hammam Lif, a huge Sunday market, was even bigger than Kram West. The informal-sector merchants enumerated there totaled 708, of which 25 were women, or 3.5 percent of the total. Most women were selling food and clothing. Three women were selling small manufactured items such as toys, and two were selling rabbits and chickens. There were four women beggars, one with two children and one with one child. Two other women beggars seemed simply to be very poor. There were no male and no handicapped beggars.

The Hammam Lif Sunday market is at the easternmost extension of the suburbs of Tunis, lining the rue Mendes France all the way to the beach. The street gives the market a long narrow axis; cars are parked everywhere at the periphery, and only pedestrian traffic is allowed in the market area. In a remote corner of the market near the beach was the fripperie, where I counted 95 vendors of used clothing, all men. Among their customers, women were highly represented.

The census data here, primary documentation from the research, may
Table 14. Informal Economy by Location and Gender in Tunis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Area</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Outside the Medina</td>
<td>878</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Inside the Medina</td>
<td>1,081</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>1,143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Urban Periphery</td>
<td>1,899</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>1,985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>3,858</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>4,012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The relatively high number of women inside the medina is accounted for by the number of prostitutes on one street.

help to create a baseline for future study of the gender composition of the informal economy in Tunis.

**Observations and Discussion**

If judgments about the economic role of Tunisian women were based solely on observations in the public sphere such as I have reported, a very false conclusion could be reached. In general, informal-sector activities for men or women on the street were virtually zero in the areas of light manufacture and production such as carpentry, baking, and leather work. On the other hand, informal economic activity rose at the gateways and peripheries of the medina and aswaq; it was low in the formal zones of food markets and in the medina, where there are confined streets and established commercial space.

The marginal public position of women was very apparent, and the proportion of women beggars (often with children) pointed to a serious deficiency in social services. No instance was found of women selling higher-value items such as flowers, dates, fruits, meat, or coffee. Since police harassment of male sellers may be intense in certain areas, one might anticipate equally severe measures against women. The few women in the street economy are often associated with food sales, but not a single woman operator was observed among the hundreds of sellers from pushcarts, who may occupy the same locations over long periods of time. At the weekly markets, however, where carts are less common, women were more commonly observed selling food and clothing. In another case, four women frequently sold eggs and wafer bread with peppers from the same spot, on the periphery of the high-traffic railroad-metro nexus at Place Barcelone.

Women might be expected to play a significant role in the huge fripperie and junk market at Mellasine, just west of a major highway intersection. While women were heavily represented among the customers, the 55 sellers
were all men. In an adjacent complex there were an additional 115 male vendors of various building materials, furniture, appliances, and other new and used materials of all sorts. It was only at the entrance area that five food sellers were present, and only one was a woman, selling eggs.

An exception to the limited economic role of Tunisian women was the Kabaria market, where they sold beans, other vegetables, and old clothes. Kabaria is a residential location for recent rural-to-urban migrants and thus may be considered under relatively traditional social control. The Kabaria area has also produced a high number of migrant laborers, who may have left their wives with limited income.

In Kram and Hammam Lif, both centers of redevelopment and rapid urbanization, the weekly markets offer considerable informal economic opportunities for women, and the greatest number of women vendors is found there. Even though they make up only 3–4 percent of the total vendors, some sixty to eighty women gain additional income at such sites. In the relatively poor areas of Tunis, the numbers of women sellers are very few. However, women are quite numerous among the customers, especially for used clothing.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the sales and services available to the public in public areas in the urban agglomeration of Tunis. While the data and details describe this portion of the informal economy, this research does not adequately inventory informal manufacture or production, domestic or household services, construction labor, and illegal activities. If these were included, the numbers of people directly involved would be considerably increased.

That the informal sector is a response or survival mechanism for the urban poor is without question. With a few important exceptions, the largest number of merchants and clients are the poor. Operating at relatively low cost in merchandise and overhead, informal-sector merchants make additional income and serve others. In data from the National Institute of Statistics not presented here, I ranked nineteen neighborhoods of Tunis by the proportion that owned the following items: television, refrigerator, car, telephone, and five or more rooms. For the wealthiest there was almost no informal street merchandising except for tourist items. The next wealthiest had some limited informal-sector activity and participated in weekly markets. The poorer areas had the highest levels of informal-sector activity. The very poorest neighborhoods had very slight informal street sales. This
circumstantial evidence supports the conclusion that the street sellers in the informal sector were of the struggling poor and were selling to people of their own social stratum or only somewhat above.

The idea that the informal sector is small-scale is refuted by the fact that central wholesalers use the informal sector for the break-in-bulk of manufactured products and agricultural goods. The international network and very large volume of used clothing is anything but small-scale or simple.

To describe the informal economy as unstructured or spontaneous is also far from the mark. To the contrary, the participants in the informal economy have regular locations or regular days for selling an established range of goods and services. The judgments they make about high or low density and frequency of markets and clients also demonstrate sophisticated economic choices to maximize profit.

The gender relations in Tunisian society are preserved in the informal sector in Tunis. The widespread exclusion of women from public areas continues to be the main practice in the informal economy. The exceptions to this are women sellers or buyers of food and clothing, considered to be gender-specific. The few cases of women beggars are highly stigmatized.

The informal sector serves as an economic survival mechanism for the urban poor of Tunis. It is well organized and structured by internal and external forces. It is connected to the global economy and it follows, on a small scale, a wider economic logic. The irony is that “invisible” working men and women among the urban poor of Tunis cannot live well on the proceeds of their informal economy, but they would probably live even worse without it. As a matter of development policy and of the empowerment of women, one might propose marketing cooperatives through which women could participate more directly in selling foods and clothing, rather than being primarily customers.

This study of women in the economy must thereby be considered incomplete, since the involvement of women in agricultural production, clothing manufacture, and animal husbandry is substantial, as the research of Dammak and Ferchiou has illustrated. As Dammak noted, the seasonal, rural, and household locus of women’s work adds to its “invisibility.” Ferchiou notes that as much as half of rural agricultural production is based on women’s labor, yet it is often not remunerated. The relatively high level of illiteracy for women compounds their relative marginality to the formal economy, yet the goods contributed by women appear in both formal and informal markets. Accounting for women’s labor is not only an empirical problem. As Ferchiou has noted, it is also an ideological issue: recognition of women’s rights to the fruits of their labor. This study also shows the
necessity of having female researchers centrally involved in investigations of this sort. Even when highly motivated male researchers attack this problem, the data are not easily accessible, and many male researchers could say that women workers and producers were not visible when their presence was, in fact, everywhere, but just out of view.

Notes


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15. The Tunisian dinar (DT) was worth $0.85 U.S. in 1990. One thousand millimes equal 1 DT.

16. Lobban, “Responding to Middle East Urban Poverty.”


