

Summary of the research at Jharcraft by Nienke Hekket

Introduction

The following conclusions and quotes were drawn and gathered based on research carried out at Jharcraft in Ranchi, India, in the period from April 1 to April 22, 2012.

Please bear in mind that these results cannot be generalized. Of the 35 women interviewed, no one story and/or summary was the same and opinions varied per case. The conclusions drawn from this apply only to the women that I spoke to personally. Given the limited number, this is not representative of all women working for Jharcraft, in Jharkhand or across all of India.

Research Question

To what extent do female employees perceive a relationship between being employed by Jharcraft and female empowerment within the household?

Conclusions (per subject)

1. Reason for working
2. Economic position of the woman in the family
3. Relationship with husband
4. Children
5. Mobility

1. Reason for working

Conclusion

All women indicated that they initially began working for financial reasons. The regions where the female employees of Jharcraft work are very isolated and job opportunities close to home are virtually nonexistent with the exception of agriculture. In general, women do not work; their responsibility is to care for the children and the home. But they also don't work because they are not permitted to leave the house alone. The fact that women can work close to home, or even from home, helps women overcome this and many have indicated that they otherwise would not have done so. It is also the sort of work (handiwork) that enables them to do this. Many women have little to no formal education and can therefore scarcely read or write. This means that many jobs fall outside their capabilities. They find work with Jharcraft by initially being approached by field officers or via word of mouth promotion from other women. None of the women actively looked for work themselves; it was simply not an option for them to do it themselves. But given that they heard about work from others or were convinced by the fact that they as a woman could also earn money, meaning they could lift their family out of a difficult economic position through their own financial contribution, old traditions have been broken. The majority of the women indicated that if their husbands earned enough to take care of the family they would have preferred not to work. This highlights the financial need for women to work. And the unemployment of men also plays a significant role. They are primarily responsible for the family income and when the men cannot meet this the women are driven to act. Many women who work for Jharcraft also work there as a result of the illness or death of their husbands. Some women who are not yet married (far and away the minority of the employees) work to contribute to their parent's income. In that case they give their salary to their father. A final factor is having the time to work. Many women are instructed by their husbands that they may only work if it is not at the cost of household duties, such as caring for the children, cooking, washing and cleaning. Only when these tasks are completed and the woman has free time may she work outside of the home. Notably, the women have no issue with this restriction and see it as perfectly normal.

Important Points

- Women work for economic reasons: fighting poverty
- When the husband is unable to provide enough income due to unemployment, illness or death the woman is the only breadwinner. Given that she is responsible for the care of her children she has to work to ensure that care.
- The fact that the work is low impact (close to home and handiwork) means that there are no factors to hold the women back.
- Women do not actively seek work, they are told about the opportunity to work by others.
- Women work but only when they have time for this alongside their household tasks.

Quotes

“She wanted to work here to support her husband. He did not make enough money.”

“If the man had been earning well she explained there would have been no need to leave the home and she would have chosen to stay in the home and take care of her family. If her husband were to be earning enough according to her society there would be no need for her to leave home and she could just stay at home and take care of the children and everyone else.”

2. Economic position of women in the family

Conclusion

Most women indicated that their work dramatically improved the financial situation of the family. They say that they have more money available to spend on the household, meaning that they no longer have to live in the depths of poverty. Because work is the last hope for many of them, this comes as no surprise. In general, their income is spent on the family and their basic needs. These include food, drink, education, clothing, maintenance of the house, as well as pots and pans. In cases in which the economic position of the family is a little better, where for example the man also works, women are able to save for the future or for a dowry if they have a daughter. In general, women have no control over their own income as this is a responsibility given to the husband. Women give their salary to their husband or require his permission to spend the money. In some cases this can cause problems, for example when the husband does not permit the woman to spend her own money. While on the other hand, women sometimes see this as a form of freedom, as the husband will give them money when they need something for themselves. Decisions about how these things are done vary per family.

Important points

- For women, work creates an incredible improvement in the economic position of their family.
- The woman's income is spent on the family's basic needs, such as food, drink, education and clothing.
- In some cases, women are able to save a little extra money for things like their daughter's dowry.
- Women have little control over the money they earn and are forced to give it to their husband or need his permission to spend money. This varies per case.

Quotes

“She started to work because of financial reasons. Her husband decides about money. Before, she had to ask for money all the time, when he did not agree they used to fight. Abuse. Now it is better because she works. She felt fully dependent on him. She feels her husband has more

power. It made her feel useless. Now she can decide on her own money but is still dependent on her husband because he decides whether she can go out.

“That the ladies work is a very good thing, because of that they earn the money for their families, for their child, which they can send to schools, and a number of husbands do not work. So she comes here to fulfill their family’s needs. And their husband’s needs. A number of husband’s here just come to drink wine.” (Male respondent)

“She started working because of the death of her husband. Before working, her father paid for everything, now she can pay herself. She wants to save for a dowry for her daughters but is not able to because she is not earning enough.”

“She works here because of poverty. Her husband is mentally ill (he used to abuse her physically). She lives alone. She looked for other jobs, but this was the only thing she could do. She cannot read. Because of working she can now have three meals a day, in the past she has been hungry. To prevent this for her daughters, she wants them to be educated, so they can stand on their own feet. The job is for money only.

3. Relationship with husband

Conclusion

As stated in the previous section, there is a great deal of variation per woman in how decisions are made about money within the family. In general, women state that they have little control over their money as they constantly have to explain or get permission. This shows that the traditional family structures are difficult to break through. Traditionally, women have nothing to do with financial matters within the family and if she earns her own income. While the literature shows that working women within such cultures are more frequently victims of domestic abuse, I did not experience this. The women appear to be completely comfortable with the division of roles within the family. They have been brought up with it. There is no hint among these women of the Dutch assertiveness or a sense of injustice. I have heard (from field officers and employees at Jharcraft headquarters) of high levels of alcoholism and domestic violence. However, these are such sensitive issues that of the 35 women only one woman was prepared to talk about it. These sorts of issues are, just as in Dutch society, taboo. Just as no two women are the same, so no two men are the same. A number of women indicated that their husbands encouraged them to earn their own money to be independent from them; while some women initially had to convince their husbands to let them work. In many cases men are initially dubious about the idea of their wife working as it is not her role, rather his. Yet the majority of women stated that the relationship with their husband has not significantly changed as a result of them working. They see no direct relationship between having an income and an improvement/deterioration in the relationship. An often heard response is “he has always been a good husband”.

Important points

- It is difficult to break through the traditional role divisions within the household: many men are initially dubious about their wife working.
- Many women find what we might see as a subordinate position in respect to their husband being perfectly normal. Having a job does not make them more assertive in this area.
- It is said that other issues (including domestic violence and high levels of violence) play a role in this region, but little was said about this (to me).
- The relationship between husband and wife does not seem to change significantly as a result of her having a job.

Quotes

“If the man would have been earning well, she said that she would not have needed to leave the home; she would have chosen to stay in the home and take care of the family. If her husband was earning sufficient then according to her society there is no need to leave the home, just stay at home and take care of the children and everyone. It is a thought which comes from earlier times, you can't change it. You might say, the moral from the childhood saying that basically that girls should not leave the home, this is the teaching they get from childhood.”

“Her husband is an alcoholic. They used to fight in the evenings when he was drunk. That is less right now. To her it is not necessary to be independent. She has accepted the situation. In the beginning her husband did not accept the fact that she was working, but now he thinks it is good, because he likes the place here.”

4. Children

Conclusion

Every woman that I spoke to understood the importance of education for children. Mainly because many of the women themselves cannot read or write and they understand how important it is for children to be able to do this, even the girls. Moreover, girls have a better chance of marrying a decent boy if they are better educated. Given that every marriage is an arranged marriage, the girls stand a better chance if they are better educated. It seems that education is an investment not only in knowledge but also in finding a good man. Almost every woman has children and the age at which this begins is somewhat younger than we are used to in the Netherlands. It is not exceptional for a woman of 23 to have 4 children, the oldest of which is 6. All children go to school. This is mainly because schools have been built by the government in many villages. These are called *Serkari Schools* and they are free. They are accessible to everyone, to both boys and girls. Nevertheless many women say that they use their income for their children's education. What they mean by this is that they have money to provide their children with extra lessons or for their children to be able to change schools, as the quality of *Serkari schools* often leaves much to be desired. Many children have extra tutoring, but this is paid at an hourly rate. This tutoring is not given because a child is behind, as is often the case with us, but is completely normal. The more money the parents have, the more tutoring a child will receive. And this will be a personal one-on-one lesson from a professional tutor. Many parents also change their children's school. One woman explained that she has three children and that in the past year she had been able to send the oldest two to a private school and that she was now saving money to send her youngest child there as well. One notable point is that young girls aged 15-16 work for *Jharcraft*. These girls no longer go to school, which clearly points to the fact that children stop attending school at an earlier age than they do, for example, in the Netherlands. On the other hand, children (primarily girls), cost a great deal of money and can be a burden for women. A single woman whose husband had died explained that the reason why she worked was that she only had daughters and therefore needed lots of money for them to be able to marry. If she had had sons this would have been a different issue as she would not have had to worry about dowries and could have worked for her own care in old age. In *Jharkhand*, there is no provision for elderly care, at least not for these women. A decent and loving upbringing for your children is also an investment in decent and loving care in old age. However, women live with the husband's family so if a mother has no husband and only daughters, then when her in-laws die she will be entirely alone.

Important points

- The importance of good education for children is understood by every mother.
- All children went to school even before the woman was working. Her job or extra income does not influence this.
- Women invest their new income in extra tutoring for the children, or removing them from a public to a private school as the quality of education is better there.
- Children are also a social safety net for parents when they are older, so good care for them is an automatic investment in old age.
- Due to the cost of dowries, daughters can be an extra hindrance particularly when there are no sons to contribute financially to the family.

Quotes

“Education is very important. If I were educated, I would be able to talk to you directly and she (translator, e.g.), would not be necessary. I would understand what you say.”

5 Mobility

Conclusion

Women indicated, to my surprise, that as well as an improved financial situation, a new sense of freedom of movement was a huge change from the time before they had a job. Many women hardly leave their husband's side. Their living space is limited to the house and if they go outside this is never without a man (father-in-law/husband/son) at their side. When they work they are only in a space working with other women and often go there as a group. Women describe this as a great sense of freedom created by them having a job as this had never been possible before. Freedom is not determined by these women as being free to make decisions, but to have the freedom to be outside of the home. Many women have said that through making new contacts and talking to other non family-related women, they have learnt a great deal. They talk amongst themselves while working about their home situation or hear other opinions than those they are used to. Additionally, many women say that “doing something for themselves” gives them confidence. They feel self-assured as they walk to work without their husband, while this was unthinkable in the past. Moreover, many women feel that having knowledge of a certain skill contributes to their self-confidence. They can do something, something tangible. And that cannot be taken from them because it's in their heads and in their fingers.

Important points

Mobility is viewed by many women as a very important change: their job has given them freedom of movement. Freedom of movement is important in their eyes as they get to know other women with whom they can talk about personal issues as well as learning from each other. Having a skill also contributes to increase self confidence in the women.

Quotes

“Every women had a right to freedom and to go out of the house and do work and show their skills and capability to others, because men are not here, they can work. Women also are able, capable of the work. Freedom means that women can leave the home to go outside and to show their skills and also they can also manage the household work.”

April 2012, Nienke Hekket