

Eija Stark & Anna-Catrin Östman: Peddling women and Forest Industry men – Rural working class families and manifold sources of income at the turn of the 20th century

”Kun piikast tule emänt, o niinku katist tuls karh” (When a maidservant becomes a farm mistress, it’s like a cat becoming a bear). This proverb, quoted above, reflected quite common attitudes toward the lower working class women in 19th and early 20th century Finland. Among other things, women were regarded naturally in lower social position with their own God-given functions. As in upper classes, rural working class families were patriarchal and women were subordinate to their husbands and in-laws. Most households were self-sufficient and produced their own goods, hence a farm household was the basic unit of social organization and economic production.

Focusing on ethnicity, gender and class, our paper explores the meanings of women and petty trade and of marketed commodities, as well as practices, representations and experiences of women engaged in trading activities. In the gendered division of rural working-class, men generally worked in the fields and forest, in ploughing, sowing and digging ditches; scythe harvesting, hunting, trapping and fishing. The women were responsible for food preparation and childcare, and they worked in the cottage dairy industry and performed the textile and household chores including milking, weaving, sewing, laundering, and making butter and cheese (e.g. Stark 2016; Östman 2000; Talve 1997).

Long winters, the cold weather and a short growing season of Finland were the basic constraints in agricultural production, hence, many of the hinterland smallholding farmers were in need of the logging industry to supplement their income during the winter time. The land reforms of 1918 and 1922 secured land for tenant farmers and farm workers and, as a result, hundreds of thousands of small farms were established, which could only support families if they had the extra income from forest work. Although husband and wife formed a production team in the rural peasant family, the two genders acted and worked as separate collectives (Stark 2014).

Women from poor background or impoverished widows were forced out of necessity to cross the boundaries of the gendered division of labor. Besides typical male-dominated industrial jobs and agricultural work, women were engaged in selling as an economic activity, such as

sewing, weaving and food peddling and retailing, and unlike Karl Marx claimed, the wives of male workers often did work outside home. In the subsistence-economy, social contacts were close-knit and visits to neighbors for milk, eggs, and butter were frequent, and this offered women to improve their livelihood. Women workers were not the only ones viewed with disdain, for example, the attitudes toward different ethnicities such as the Roma or the Russian peddlars were also met with prejudices.

In traditions of working class history, manifold sources of income in rural peasant community have not received sufficient attention. Although previous research suggests that multifaceted trading activities were economically important and that marginalised groups received income from small-scale selling throughout history, there are surprisingly few historical studies of petty, ambulatory trade, and of cultural encounters. Generally, these studies suggest that petty trade engaged various groups, having of great importance for the lower strata in society. A major study on labour and work practices in early modern Sweden, demonstrates that also women were engaged in trading activities to a large degree (Pennington 2015; Ågren 2016). Our presentation takes as its point of departure a topic of gender-work in the Finnish labour history and asks: in which selling activities were women engaged, how were these activities interpreted by women themselves and by outsiders?

Our focus is on how women engaged in itinerant trade and trading activities on fairs and urban markets. We base our analysis on the old newspaper articles, folklore, ethnographic questionnaires and oral history materials. The language of the source materials were either in Swedish or Finnish and they are housed in the archives of the National Board of Antiquities, the Finnish Literature Society, the Society of Swedish Literature in Finland and the Ethnological archive of Åbo Akademi University. In our presentation, we also comment on the speed of modernization in Finland: the rural populace was able to adopt and absorb new social and cultural forms as well as new economic activities relatively quickly.

References:

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