

Beyond shopping, saving the world

Now is the time to focus on women as agents of change, not creatures of consumption



By HONG XINYI

I BEGAN covering the fashion beat for this paper's Urban magazine a few months ago and found that a very interesting thing happens when one meets newsmakers from the fashion industry.

I like to call it the Fashion Flicker: a pronounced sweep of the eyes from top to bottom, taking in everything from the reporter's hairstyle to the fitness - or not - of her bag.

Not everyone does it. But many do, at least in my experience and judging from conversations with colleagues and reporters from other fashion publications.

Let's be clear: I'm not slamming the Fashion Flicker. In an industry that trades on the value of labels, logos and luxe, it is inevitable and not unreasonable that appearances and possessions are subject to more scrutiny.

And let's face it: You don't need to be part of the fashion business to know that women (Fashion Flickers are typically girl-on-girl crimes) can be very judgmental about the way other women spend their money.

And now that the global recession is on everyone's minds, the consumption habits of women are being dissected more minutely than ever.

In the developed world, particularly, newsprint has been lavished on the newly acquired thrift chic of self-proclaimed recessionistas and what US First Lady Michelle Obama's shopping choices say about her politics.

In developing countries, however, the picture is much grimmer.

In a news release issued at the World Economic Forum last month, the World

Bank stated: "Girls are the most likely to be withdrawn from school and be put to work to help their families during economic crises."

"Adult women face the risk of suffering disproportionately from the jobs lost since they constitute between 60 and 80 per cent of export-manufacturing workers in developing countries, a sector expected to shrink due to falling demand."

This prospect, if it comes to pass, will be another blow for women in developing countries, who already lag significantly behind their male counterparts in employment opportunities and earning power.

Ms Amanda Ellis, the lead gender specialist for The World Bank Group's Gender Action Plan - which aims to promote gender equality by improving women's access to things such as credit and land - tells The Straits Times: "In low-income countries today, women consistently trail men in formal labour-force participation, access to credit, entrepreneurship rates, income levels, and inheritance and ownership rights."

"Women in low-income countries have less access to formal jobs now than they had 25 years ago: The female labour force shrank from 53 per cent in 1980 to

49 per cent in 2005, while men continue to be employed at roughly the same level, around 86 per cent. In all developing countries, women earn an average of about 22 per cent less than men do, after taking into account differences in observed skills."

These disparities have larger implications if you consider the argument that an educated and gainfully employed woman creates a multiplier effect for the economy she works in.

Says Ms Ellis, who will speak today at the Economic Opportunities For Women In Asia-Pacific conference organised by

the Singapore Management University, the Stern School of Business at New York University and The World Bank Group: "Research has demonstrated that when women are given access to resources and opportunities, the benefits also accrue to their employers, their families and communities, their national economies, and most importantly, to the next generation."

An educated woman, for example, is more likely to raise educated children, who will then contribute more productively to their economy. Schooling and hiring women, in other words, has a direct and significant impact on the economic growth and poverty reduction of a country.

A 2006 article in The Economist, in fact, describes the productivity of working women as a force that trumps even the largest emerging economies: "The increase in female employment in the rich world has been the main driving force of growth in the past couple of decades. Those women have contributed more to global GDP growth than have either new technology or the new giants, China and India."

In places such as Singapore, where most women of my generation are fortunate enough to take our access to education and employment for granted, it is ironic that a significant portion of the coverage of this ongoing financial crisis has reiterated the theme that crops up again and again in literary classics such as The House Of Mirth and chick-lit novels such as Confessions Of A Shopaholic - namely, that women are creatures of consumption rather than agents of production.

Again and again, these female characters fritter money away on things that might elicit an approving Fashion Flicker, only to be overwhelmed by the consequences of their financial ineptitude.

Perhaps it's time to shift our focus from what we no longer buy (either by choice or by necessity) to what we want to create: goods, services, skills, businesses, a better future for those who come after us.

In these uncertain times, appreciating just how much impact our earning power can have might just make the difference between an active life or a passive existence, so we help to shape the world - rather than merely shopping in its malls.

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