

Chapter 22

Agency, Gender Identities, and Clothing Consumption: The Discourse on Garment Workers

Fatema Rouson Jahan
University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

The chapter critically analyses the discourses on global factory workers that rest on three assumptions. First, the discussions of production are centred on stories of victimhood and produce a homogeneous image of third world workers as cheap and docile, who are affected by global labour market dynamics similarly and equally. Second, the third world is always theorised as a site of production and women factory workers are always positioned as sweatshop workers and never as consumers. Third, women's role as consumers appears only in relation to white women from the global north, who are assumed to have more purchasing power. Third world workers' consumption practices have been largely overlooked. The chapter problematises some of these assumptions. It proposes to look at the gender dynamics in the lives of women workers in global garment factories with a focus on their clothing consumption in order to further an approach that acknowledges the heterogeneity and agency of garment workers.

INTRODUCTION

The academic focus on global labour market offers multiple ways to explore the lives of the workers who work in the global factories (Elson, 1995; Marchand & Runyan, 2000; Nash & Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Perrons, 2010). These studies on global factory workers largely rest on three assumptions. First, the discussion of production centres on stories of victimhood and produces a homogeneous image of third world workers as cheap and docile workers, who are affected by global labour market dynamics 'similarly and equally' (Wolf, 1990, p. 27). Second, the third world is always theorised as a site of production and never as a site of consumption. Consequently, women factory workers are always positioned as sweatshop workers and never as consumers. They are never theorised as both (Raghuram, 2004). Third, women's role as consumers appears only in relation to white women from the global north, who

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are assumed to have more purchasing power. Third world workers' consumption practices have been largely overlooked (Raghuram, 2004).

This chapter will problematise some of these above assumptions by looking at the gendered dynamics in the global garment industry with a focus on the clothing consumptions of women workers. The primary aim of the chapter is to analyse, compare and contrast the discourse on garment workers and their consumption of clothes to further an approach that acknowledges the agency and heterogeneity of garment factory workers. It has three broad objectives. First, to look at the workers' agency and diversity by challenging the homogeneous image of third world workers as cheap, victim and docile; second, to analyse the discourse on garment work from the perspective of gender identities; and third, to identify garment workers also as consumers of clothes.

WOMEN WORKERS IN THE GLOBAL FACTORIES

Women's incorporation into global industrialisation has been facilitated by two processes. First, the rising cost of labour in the developed countries led to a restructuring and relocation of the industrial production process from developed to developing countries where low wages were paid (Kabeer, 2000). Second, in the newly-relocated production sites, women were preferred as the workforce because they were assumed to have naturally 'nimble fingers'; they are cheap to employ, docile and are less likely to join the trade unions than men (Elson & Pearson, 1981).

Women's employment opportunities in the global factories have been regarded positively in a number of studies (Lim, 1985; Tinker, 1976). The decision to work outside home itself speaks of a certain level of power and agency within the household, particularly in contexts where the decision is negotiated and/or made in the face of disagreement from other family members. The decision to work also brings further opportunities for women, because 'once the decision to work ha[ve] been negotiated in women's favour, all the potentials associated with earning wages bec[o]me part of the expanded possibilities open to women, *an expansion which they themselves ha[ve] initiated*, whether or not they then actualised their full potential' (Kabeer, 2000, p. 189).

Other studies, however, focus on the contradictory implications of factory work for women, focusing on the harsh working conditions and gender inequalities on the factory floor (Elson & Pearson, 1981; Marchand & Runyan, 2000; Nash & Fernandez-Kelly, 1983). These studies argue that factory employment may provide opportunities for women in the short run, but increase women's vulnerability in the long run. Research on Cambodian female garment workers shows how factory work even makes them vulnerable to AIDS (Webber et al., 2010). Although women migrate from rural to urban areas in search of factory work to overcome poverty, their wages are so meagre that they look for ways to supplement their income. Some engage in sex work, which puts them at risk of contracting HIV. Hence, factory work not only entrenches existing gender subordination but also creates new forms of gender subordination (Elson & Pearson, 1981; Pearson, 1998). Women's access to the global factory cannot be equated with women's empowerment, because they are employed by factory owners mostly to exploit the 'comparative advantage of women's disadvantage' (Arizpe & Aranda, 1981; Collins, 2002; Kabeer, 2000). In other words, low-skilled women are preferred to highly skilled workers because they are cheap to employ and because of their assumed docility.

While critics of the feminisation of garment industries rightly bring out the gender perspective, they fail to address the question of why women still choose to work in the garment industry. In other words,

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