A Literature Review on Gender and Manufacturing: with Special Reference to Employees in Global Garment Factories in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: *Understanding the positioning of women within the global garment industry with the use of relevant theoretical underpinnings is the purpose of this paper. It pays special attention to women and men working in the garment industry in Sri Lanka a country in the global south. Garment industry is one of the leading employers in the country and more than seventy percent of the workforce is women and majority of them work in the factory floor. Although women contribute to a greater extent for the economic development of the country, less attention is paid to their positioning within the industry. This papers aims at addressing this gap in literature with the use of seminal work of Elson and Pearson (1981) in which they explained the complex dependence of capitalist strategies on the patriarchal subordination of women as a gender, Salzinger's (2003) study which argues that gendered subjectivities are created not just locally but on the shop floor, Carswell and De Neve's (2013) work on how employees agency is rooted in every day decision making around employment affects the functioning of capitalists firms and ethical trading initiatives in the global garment industry (Hale and Shaw, 2001).*

Keywords: Global Garment Factories, Women's Positioning, Patriarchy, Global Value Chains, Workers' Subjectivities

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to put forward my understanding of the available literature on gender and manufacturing. It attempts to compose literature that can be used to understand the positioning of women and men within the industry who are employed in global garment factories, especially in Sri Lanka a country in the global south. Being an Asian country, in Sri Lanka gender prejudices and patriarchal norms stemming from colonialism, race, caste, ethnicity, religion and cultural practices are incorporated into the structure of the labour regime (Kurian and Jayewardene, 2013). There are approximately 300 garment factories in Sri Lanka; women account for between 70% - 80% of the workforce in an industry which provides employment for around 300, 000 employees (Export Development Board, 2014). Although the industry is one of the leading employers in the island the employees do not enjoy the freedom of unionisation. This is because the Board of Investment (BOI), the government agency encouraging investment in the country limits the voice and power of workers in garment factories to negotiate labour conditions by advocating 'Employee Councils' instead of unions. Even with curtailed voices the employees in the garment industry contributes significantly to the economy of the country, for instance, export earnings from garment products account for 44% of the total export earnings of Sri Lanka.

It is evident that women contribute to the country's development to a greater extent, particularly as employees in garment factories. In contrast, less attention is paid to their positioning within the industry. To address this gap, understanding how gender affects their lives due to being employed in the garment industry with the use of relevant theoretical underpinnings, is timely and relevant. Thus, studies' relating to gender in global manufacturing is the focus of my writing. I look at the different perspectives people have used to study gender in global manufacturing, especially in the global garment industry, to show the different ways that key changes and developments have been understood. I focus in particular on developments in research which highlight, for instance, the feminisation of the manufacturing workforce, the increasing focus on workers' subjectivities and the spread of global value chains within which garment production now takes place.

1.1 Gender and Manufacturing

In the globalized world economy women play a key role in the manufacturing sector (Ma, 2014). In the export-oriented industries of certain Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand and China, women account for nearly half of all manufacturing sector employees (Barrientos, Kabeer and Hossain, 2004; Bair, 2010; Williams et al, 2013) – although a bit less in Sri Lanka (Ranaraja, 2013).

Due to the attention paid by feminist and other social movements to sex/gender inequality in public life (Acker, 2004), considering gender as a significant aspect of the production and distribution of manufactured goods was an initiative that arose in the 1960s and 1970s in the countries of the global South (Kabeer, 2004). In theorising gender some scholars were already critiquing a 'naturalistic' approach which bases gender on the biological characteristics of human beings. Increasingly studies 'de-naturalize' gender to consider it as a social institution, an attribute not so much of individuals but of a system of gender relations (Calás, Smircich, and Holvino, 2014) – and this is the ontological stance I take in this article. Gender inequality is arguably more complex today than in the 1960s and 70s, which is linked to changes in economic, cultural and political spheres due to globalisation and the expansion of neo-liberalism.

The large number of women entering global production in recent decades has led to scholars forming different conclusions about the implications for women. According to Hussain and Dutta (2014), the debate mainly consists of two camps. On one hand are those who argue that entry into manufacturing increases the exploitation of women (Frobel *et al.* 1979; Elson and Pearson, 1981), who work long hours for lower wages. On the other hand, others argue that women joining the manufacturing labour force gain certain advantages, such as more financial independence and increased decision-making power in their households (Oppong 1981; Bahr, 1974 cited in Dwyer and Bruce, 1988). A central question concerning global production is whether the globalisation of manufacturing benefits poorer countries, or whether it intensifies divisions and inequalities among and within countries (Chant and McIlwaine, 2009). It is also significant that scholars now observe the actions of multinational companies at the top of the global manufacturing process, and also the roles and choices of workers and managers in specific places and contexts and their scope for making decisions which affect their work lives as employers or workers (Williams *et al.*, 2013).

1.2 Capitalism and Patriarchy

Against this backdrop, feminist theorists in the 1970s and 1980s argued that the inter-dependent relation between capitalism and patriarchy is at the heart of women's positions in global production. The majority of employees in the global factories that emerged at that time were women, including Sri Lanka. A very influential account by Elson and Pearson (1981) evaluated new possibilities and problems for women caused by the employment of women in global factories, and explained these through the complex dependence of capitalist strategies on the patriarchal subordination of women as a gender. Many women worked in the Free Trade Zones (FTZs) that governments created, including Sri Lanka, where national laws on workers' rights were suspended, allowing employers to increase productivity without effective resistance. Elson and Pearson (1981) argued that global factories employed women, counter to the expectations of traditional gender norms in many countries, but that this neither made women equal nor necessarily led to their emancipation from family norms. Firms used the expectation that women were economically reliant on male breadwinners, and small family farms, to treat them as a secondary labour force that did not require a wage to support their families. Women were paid 20%-50% of men's wages in the same role, and seen as 'naturally' docile, 'nimble-fingered' and less inclined to join trade unions. The discriminatory treatment of women was justified by employers through the idea that women are naturally inferior workers because they are unable to continue in employment once they have children.

Elson and Pearson (1981) rejected the idea that the subordination of women is 'natural', but argued that gender subordination was intrinsic to gender construction processes in the world at the time. Thus, it was not patriarchal practices alone that produced gender subordination, as some feminists argued, nor capitalism, as some Marxists argued, but rather the intricate material processes which take place in daily practices, and which are rooted in both capitalism

and patriarchy as structures governing the decision-making of companies and households. Capitalist labour processes use women's domestic obligations to allocate them to a secondary status in the labour market, and thereby cheapen the cost of labour. Indeed, the patterns found by Elson and Pearson (1981) are found world-wide, for instance in Fussell's (2010) study of maquiladoras in Mexico. Fussell considers women as suppliers of low-wage labour in developing countries due to the social construction of women as secondary wage earners. Employers are uninterested in attracting qualified workers with higher wages, but prefer employing the cheapest labour to enable them to compete globally. Global competition affecting multinational assembly plants has influenced the local labour market by reducing the earnings of women. Mies's (1982) research on export production in India, according to Bair (2011), showed that this occurs not only in multinational assembly plants. Capital can exploit women's labour not only in factories but also in the home, where home-based production is incorporated into the production of goods destined for the world market.

I will argue that studying the intersection of capitalist processes and patriarchal norms and practices will enable a researcher to look at the experience of Sri Lankan employees and employers. This approach will allow to understand how capitalism piggybacks on patriarchy for profits within global production.

However, it will be necessary to give more attention to women's agency than Elson and Pearson's (1981) original article. Pearson (Jackson and Pearson, 1998) later challenged the overly general view that she and Elson had put forward regarding global trends in the employment of women in factories or the overarching patriarchal control of women by men, and came to recognise that the character of gender relations also depends on the specificities of gender relations in different places and the practices of local labour markets. Critiquing Pearson's earlier work with Elson (1981), Jackson and Pearson also comment that Elson and Pearson ignored the reformulation of specific gender identities within which women are active agents. They critiqued Elson and Pearson's earlier view on women's roles, which seemed to see them as passive recipients of the effects of capitalism and patriarchy rather than as actors capable of active resistance or collusion. They might also have given too much emphasis to wage costs. Caraway (2005) argues that the level of wages is only one influence on women's increasing participation in the labour force, since increasing participation is also due to managers looking at productivity and labour control through a gender lens. Sri Lankan factories operating within transnational production might depend on women's low wages for profit (Elson and Pearson, 1981), but women may also have been employed due to other factors, such as productivity and labour control (Caraway, 2005).

Elson and Pearson's (1981) original article identified three possible tendencies in the relation between the emergence of factory work and the subordination of women as a gender (which we might find still exists today). These were, first and second, 'intensifying' or 'decomposing' forms of gender relations and, third, 'recomposing' new forms. These three

concepts have been found useful as a way of talking about changes in gender relations.

Evidence of all three trends can be found in the global workplace. Feldman's (2009) study in Bangladesh points to the increasing pressures of achieving targets as an example of the 'intensification' of gender subordination due to patriarchal relations on the factory floor within the feminized labour market, particularly for export workers. In contrast, 'decomposing' women's subordination has occurred in Java, where women workers' autonomy increased along with their economic contribution to the household (Wolf, 1991, cited in Charles, 1993). Sri Lankan literature highlights a similar increase in employed women's influence on family decision-making (Hancock *et al.*, 2011), which can be seen as a partial 'decomposing' of gender subordination. 'Recomposing' gender subordination has been seen in Taiwan, where young women going out to work were still expected to remain under the authority of their parents and, once working in factories, to repay their parents for having brought them up (Wolf, 1990 cited in Charles, 1993).

Cockburn (1983) also works with the idea of the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy, and links capitalism to a system of sex/gender relations and the recomposition of gender subordination. Her study of male compositors in the UK newspaper printing industry highlighted male workers' patriarchal craft culture, which enabled skilled men and their male-identified trade unions to marginalize women within the industry. Print unions feared that they would lose control of the labour process and male dominance of skilled jobs if women entered the industry. However, ultimately technological change challenged the power relations between unionised male, skilled compositors, employers and female labour. What eventually happened was a reorganisation of the gendered division of labour. Keeping women out of craft jobs was a struggle by men to maintain patriarchal control and advantage. According to Cockburn (1983) men had some control over the labour process only because employers agreed to it. This might not be as relevant elsewhere (outside of the UK), where employers might be less amenable to supporting men's superiority in the labour force, or where trade unions do not play such an important role in mediating the impact of technological change. Cockburn's (1983) work might become useful in understanding the struggles of women in a non-unionised setting where women are placed mostly in the lower rungs of factories.

1.3 Creating Subjectivities

Although studies on gender in manufacturing was initially focused on how globalisation at the macro level affects women, later scholars became more interested in understanding how gendered activities and interests affect globalisation (Ngai, 2005). Bair (2010) argues that with the shift away from grand narratives and the emergence of postmodernism in feminist theory, studying subjectivities and identities rather than macro structures like capitalism and patriarchy became central to the study of gender inequality. Thus more attention began to be paid to active agency and the creation of subjectivities as an essential aspect of the reproduction of gender subordination and the possibilities for resistance. This continues a longer tradition of attending to women's agency, for instance Jackson and Pearson's (1998) recognition of the significance of the reformulation of specific women's gender identities and the ways in which women are active agents in the interaction between capital accumulation and traditional forms of gender identities. Cockburn's (1983) emphasis on creating gender identities and resistance, and Acker's (2006a, 2012) attention to gender identities as products of organisational processes all emphasise the role of subjects' own agency in defining femininity and masculinity. Ong (1987, cited in Bair, 2010) and Wolf (1992, cited in Bair, 2010) were also attentive to subjectivity and agency in their studies on Malay and Javanese factories. They described capitalism as a system of social relations and a cultural configuration that intersects with local Malay and Javanese practices and understandings to produce specific manifestations of gendered work (cited in Bair, 2010).

An even stronger interest in creating subjectivities can be found in poststructuralist studies on gender in global factories. For instance, her aim was to explain the ubiquity of what she calls 'the trope of productive femininity', that is the 'icon' of the docile and dextrous women worker (Salzinger, 2003 cited in Bair, 2010: 217), which Salzinger locates in discourse rather than family structures.

Salzinger argues that gendered subjectivities are created not just locally but on the shop floor, and that they occur differently in different factories. New subjects are created through discourse, and are more productive as they take on the expectations of management. However, Salzinger may be criticised for failing to identify linkages between what happens in particular factories and in connection with wider socio-economic structures and practices. Thus, Bair (2010) argues that the construction of productive femininity, as highlighted by Salzinger, not only reflects the vision of transnational managers but also their placement within the larger structure of global capitalism. This link between local and larger global structures is essential to provide a satisfactory explanation about gendering in transnational production.

Studying the construction of new subjectivities and their relation to women's agency in Sri Lankan garment factories, Lynch (1999a) identifies a 'newly traditional identity' through which rural women workers attempt to differentiate themselves from their urban counterparts, and to also prove themselves as morally 'good girls' despite being modern working women. In particular, women workers have to negotiate new identities in the face of what is perceived to be a clash between factory work and the maintenance of traditional female sexual morality. The celebration of 'good girls' symbolizes a conjuncture of nationalist and capitalist gender ideals. Thus the process of identity formation illustrates the profound impact of the local context and not just a global context in terms of worker subjectivities. According to Lynch ideals of respectability and feminine purity are particularly important in shaping gender subordination in Sri Lanka. Similarly, 'sense of place' and 'self-identities' among migrant women factory workers are explored in a study of workers in the Katunayake FTZ by

Attanapola (2006). These women have developed positive self-identities within the factories by participating in social and political activities. Their contributions to family income are recognised by their families, where they gain respect, an example of the decomposition of gender subordination, although not conceptualised as such by the author.

Taking a similar approach to Salzinger's (2003) emphasis on the construction of subjectivities, but giving more weight to the structures of capitalism and patriarchy, Ngai's (2005) study of an electronics factory in China found that a newly embodied social identity emerged in these factories to meet the changing socio-economic relations of the country and the needs of capital. Post-structuralist researchers, like Salzinger and Ngai, focus on discourse, agency and subjectivity to highlight the significance of women's active participation in creating subjectivities which sometimes intensifies and sometimes modifies gender subordination within factories, and this is important to fully understand gender relations in factories. But it needs to be combined with attention to wider structures, which some of these authors neglect.

Gunawardana (2014) found in Sri Lanka that while enjoying the BOI restrictions on unionisation in line with global trends, managers permit internal, individualized voice mechanisms for voicing concerns of employees. Gunwardana discusses how some voice mechanisms are used by managers to address conflicts, absenteeism, etc. Women discuss their issues and grievances initially with their immediate supervisors and if not resolved, these proceed to other levels. She also notes how social relations such as respect embedded in gender hierarchies curtail women's voice in formal settings as a result of socialization within a patriarchal social structure.

Some studies have considered not just women's agency, but also how it might refract back onto developments in capitalist strategies of production. In particular, Carswell and De Neve (2013) have studied the practices and forms of agency rooted in people's everyday decision-making around employment, livelihood and social reproduction in garment factories in South India. Employees' everyday practices, though restricted by lack of material, social and human capital, try to turn things to their advantage and utilise the best option available to them. As a result of their decisions they enter or leave the labour market and sometimes move between work organisations. These practices have effects on daily factory functioning and may improve aspects such as their livelihood. Capital must in turn deal with labour agency through strategies to maintain the required workforce. Thus labour agency and capital's response can be understood as an iterative interaction (Carswell and De Neve, 2013). Use of Carswell and De Neve, 's (2013) work will enable to understand how capitalists firms in the garment industry in Sri Lanka are affected by the forms of agency rooted in peoples every decision making around employment.

1.4 Global Value Chains

Another approach to gender and manufacturing which has developed since Elson and Pearson's (1981) original article entails much greater attention to the global value chains

which connect producers and consumers across the globe. This is because the scale and complexity of links across the globalised world has increased phenomenally, and scholars attempt to keep up with it through different studies looking at the variety of ways that women are integrated into global manufacturing and why forms of integration develop in different ways. They are also concerned with where power lies in these chains, and how power constrains or empowers actors in different locations of the chain. For instance the term 'buyer driven' commodity chains (Gereffi, 1994) for the global garment industry suggests that retail chains that obtain the goods they sell from factories in the South monopolise power. Within the global apparel industry retailers and merchandisers play the leading role in setting up production networks, and the buyers or, in other words, the highly capitalised corporate giants hold the greatest power (Collins, 2003). But there is also research on factory owners and retailers in the global South, on gender issues. Hodges *et al.* (2017) have looked at entrepreneurship in the small apparel-related business in four countries through a gender lens, and studied gender differences in the experience of owning and operating a global apparel business. They found that it is not gender, but the entrepreneur's location which is a significant factor in their capacity to start a business, due to the constraints in financing a business. However, women faced particular difficulties in difficulty of hiring capable people. However no significant gender differences were found among successful business that had survived earlier stages.

Carswell and De Neve (2013) suggest that analysts have given less attention to labour in commodity chains than to retailers or factory owners. Looking at labour at the tail end of the commodity chain means looking at the millions of women workers in the industry, whose fate is linked to the dynamics of the commodity chain (Collins, 2003). Similarly, garment producers in the global South, although geared to towards high profits are also squeezed by competing powers, such as the compliance requirements of buyers, severe competition among producers and the resistance of workers towards aspects including management decisions and relations at work. An example of such research is Crinis and Vickers (2016), who use global commodity chains, global production networks and global value chains as their analytical framework to study the forms taken by the internationalised organisation of the clothing industry. They describe the strategies of global garment firms as the 'informalization and dis-organisation'[1] of labour, and use case studies from different countries to highlight the different policies, processes and actions that keep labour divided and therefore controlled.

One of the countervailing powers on the organisation of the clothing industry is pressure from consumers. According to

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[1] Informalisation and dis-organisation refer to ways of removing employment practices and labour processes from scrutiny by governments and trade unions, and removing them from regulation, for instance by externalising production to other companies or countries. This may result in disempowering those organisations, especially trade unions that have historically supported the collective interests of workers (Crinis and Vickers, 2016).

Hale and Shaw (2001), ethical trading initiatives in the global garment industry are an outcome of public concern that questions major capitalist firms selling goods produced using exploitative labour. In response, many companies have developed codes of conduct to ascertain and, if necessary, establish labour standards in manufacturing firms based in the global South as compliance requirements. To understand ethical trading initiatives, Ruwanpura (2016) has studied how ethical codes of conduct shape labour practices in Sri Lankan garment factories, given that there are state controls on unionisation.

2. Conclusion

Sri Lanka is an Asian country with a patriarchal social structure and ethnic, religious and cultural practices are incorporated into the structure of the labour regime. Within this context global garment factories in the country provide employment for around 300, 000 employees and women account for between 70% - 80% of the workforce. The garment industry contributes significantly to the economy of the country, and women contribute to the country's development to a greater extent. In theorising gender at present the tendency is to consider it as a social institution, an attribute not so much of individuals but of a system of gender relations and this is the ontological stance I take in this article. While paying attention to the actions of multinational companies that are at the top of the global manufacturing process researchers also study the roles and choices of workers and managers in specific places and contexts. These studies intend to understand how their scope for making decisions affects their work lives as employers or workers. Seminal work by Elson and Pearson (1981) evaluated new possibilities and problems for women caused by the employment of women in global factories, and explained these through the complex dependence of capitalist strategies on the patriarchal subordination of women as a gender. The three possible tendencies (intensifying' or 'decomposing' forms of gender relations and, third, 'recomposing' new forms) they outlined in the relation between the emergence of factory work and the subordination of women as a gender have been found useful as a way of talking about changes in gender relations. Cockburn's (1983) work on newspaper printing industry highlighted male workers' patriarchal craft culture, which enabled skilled men and their male-identified trade unions to marginalize women within the industry and this framework will become useful to understand the struggles of Sri Lanka women in a non - unionised setting in the garment industry. Once combined with attention to wider structures this is important to fully understand gender relations in factories. The employees agency rooted in every day decision making around employment affects the functioning of capitalists firms and Carswell and De Neve's (2013) work is significant in understanding this relationship. Recent development in research on global value chains (such as Collins, 2003) is also a significant theoretical lens because scholars attempt to look at the variety of ways that women are integrated into global manufacturing, where power lies in these chains, and how power constrains or empowers actors in different locations of the chain. Compliance requirements of buyers are another recent development which has resulted in the ethical trading initiatives in the global garment industry (Hale and Shaw, 2001). Thus these theoretical underpinnings are significant in understanding how women employees in the Sri Lankan garment industry are positioned in the global value chain and the presence or absence of ethical initiatives. In conclusion it is important to note that the literature presented in the paper are useful theoretical lenses to understand the positioning of women employed in global garment factories in Sri Lanka to address the gap in existing literature.

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