
Women in the Global Factory

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During the 1980s and 1990s, American business interests continually expanded overseas. The reasons for this expansion are clearly economic: Multinational firms face lower wages and less restrictive labor and environmental regulations. In this article, published in 1983, Annette Fuentes and Barbara Ehrenreich address the role of women in developing nations. While their study was done at the beginning of the global expansion, little has changed for women working in various manufacturing enterprises.

In Penang, Malaysia, Julie K. is up before the three other young women with whom she shares a room and starts heating the leftover rice from last night's supper. She looks good in the company's green-trimmed uniform and she's proud to work in a modern, U.S.-owned factory. Not quite so proud as when she started working three years ago, she thinks, as she squints out the door at a passing group of women. All day at work, she peers through a microscope, bonding hair-thin gold wires to silicon chips that will end up inside pocket calculators. At 21 years of age, she is afraid she can no longer see very clearly.

In the 1890s, farm girls in England and the northeastern United States filled the textile mills of the first Industrial Revolution.

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Today, from Penang to Ciudad Juarez, young Third World women have become the new “factory girls,” providing a vast pool of cheap labor for globetrotting corporations. Behind the labels “Made in Taiwan” and “assembled in Haiti” may be one of the most strategic blocs of womanpower of the 1980s. In the last 15 years, multinational corporations, such as Sears Roebuck and General Electric, have come to rely on women around the world to keep labor costs down and profits up. Women are the unseen assemblers of consumer goods such as toys and designer jeans, as well as the hardware of today’s “Microprocessor Revolution.”

Low wages are the main reason companies move to the Third World. A female assembly line worker in the U.S. is likely to earn between \$3.10 and \$5 an hour.* In many Third World countries a woman doing the same work will earn \$3 to \$5 a *day*. Corporate executives with their eyes glued to the bottom line, wonder why they should pay someone in Massachusetts on an hourly basis what someone in the Philippines will earn in a day. And, for that matter, why pay a male worker anywhere to do what a female worker can be hired to do for 40 to 60% less?

...

We need female workers; older than 17, younger than 30; single and without children; minimum education primary school, maximum education one year of preparatory school [high school]; available for all shifts.

Advertisement from a Mexican newspaper

A nimble veteran seamstress, Miss Altagracia eventually began to earn as much as \$5.75 a day . . . “I was exceeding my piecework quota by a lot.” . . . But then, Altagracia said, her plant supervisor, a Cuban emigre, called her into his office. “He said I was doing a fine job, but that I and some

*Eds. Note—The wages are from 1983.

FIGURE 1 *Cheap Labor Wages Per Hour in U.S. Dollars*

	Wage	Wage & Fringe Benefits
Hong Kong	\$1.15	\$1.20
Singapore	.79	1.25
South Korea	.63	2.00
Taiwan	.53	.80
Malaysia	.48	.60
Philippines	.48	.50
Indonesia	.19	.35

Source: *Semiconductor International*, February 1982.

other of the women were making too much money, and he was being forced to lower what we earned for each piece we sewed.” On the best days, she now can clear barely \$3, she said. “I was earning less, so I started working six and seven days a week. But I was tired and I could not work as fast as before.” Within a few months she was too ill to work at all.

Story of 23-year-old Basilia Altagracia, a seamstress in the Dominican Republic’s La Romana free trade zone, in the *AFL-CIO American Federalist*.¹

There are over one million people employed in industrial free trade zones in the Third World. Millions more work outside the zones in multinational-controlled plants and domestically-owned subtracting factories. Eighty to 90% of the light-assembly workers are women. This is a remarkable switch from earlier patterns of foreign-controlled industrialization. Until recently, economic development involved heavy industries such as mining and construction and usually meant more jobs for men and—compared to traditional agricultural society—a diminished economic status for women. But multinationals consider light-assembly work, whether the product is Barbie dolls or computer components, to be women’s work.

Women everywhere are paid lower wages than men. Since multinationals go overseas to reduce labor costs, women are the natural choice for assembly jobs. Wage-earning opportunities for women are limited and women are considered only supplementary income earners for their families. Management uses this secondary status to pay women less than men and justify layoffs during slow periods, claiming that women don't need to work and will probably quit to get married.

Women are the preferred workforce for other reasons. Multinationals want a workforce that is docile, easily manipulated and willing to do boring, repetitive assembly work. Women, they claim, are the perfect employees, with their "natural patience" and "manual dexterity." As the personnel manager of an assembly plant in Taiwan says, "Young male workers are too restless and impatient to be doing monotonous work with no career value. If displeased they sabotage the machine and even threaten the foreman. But girls, at most they cry a little."²

Multinationals prefer single women with no children and no plans to have any. Pregnancy tests are routinely given to potential employees to avoid the issue of maternity benefits. In India, a woman textile worker reports that "they do take unmarried women but they prefer women who have had an operation," referring to her government's sterilization program.³ In the Philippines' Bataan Export Processing Zone the Mattel toy company offers prizes to workers who undergo sterilization.⁴

Third World women haven't always been a ready workforce. Until two decades ago, young women were vital to the rural economy in many countries. They worked in the home, in agriculture, or in local cottage industries. But many Third World governments adopted development plans favoring large-scale industry and agribusiness as advocated by such agencies as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Traditional farming systems and communities are now crumbling as many families lose their land and local enterprises collapse. As a result of the breakdown of the rural

economy, many families now send their daughters to the cities or the free trade zones in an attempt to assure some income.

The majority of the new female workforce is young, between 16 and 25 years old. As one management consultant explains, “when seniority rises, wages rise”; so the companies prefer to train a fresh group of teenagers rather than give experienced women higher pay. Different industries have different age and skill standards. The youngest workers, usually under 23 years old, are found in electronics and textile factories where keen eyesight and dexterity are essential. A second, older group of women work in industries like food processing where nimble fingers and perfect vision aren’t required. Conditions in these factories are partially bad. Multinationals can get away with more because the women generally can’t find jobs elsewhere.

Not all companies want young women, although this is the exception rather than the rule. In Singapore, some companies had problems with young women workers who went “shopping for jobs from factory to factory.” Management consultants suggested “housewives-only” assembly lines. Older and too responsible for “transient glamour jobs,” housewives would make better candidates, they reasoned. One consultant recommended that “a brigade of housewives could run the factory from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. and leave. Then a second brigade could come in [and] take over till 6 p.m. This way housewives need only work half a day. They will be able to earn and spend time with their families. The factories will get a full and longer day’s work. Deadlines will be met.”⁵

Corporate apologists are quick to insist that Third World women are absolutely thrilled with their newfound employment opportunities. “You should watch these kids going to work,” said Bill Mitchell, an American who solicits U.S. business for the Burmudez Industrial Park in Ciudad Juarez. “You don’t have any sullenness here. They smile.” A top-level management consultant who advises U.S. companies on where to relocate their factories said, “The girls genuinely enjoy themselves. They’re away from their families. They have spending money. They can buy motor bikes, whatever. Of course, it is a reg-

ulated experience, too—with dormitories to live in—so it’s a healthful experience.” Richard Meier, a professor of environment design believes that “earning power should do more for the women of these countries than any amount of organization, demonstration and protest. . . . The benefits and freedom to be gained by these women from their employment in these new industries are almost always preferred to the near slavery associated with the production of classical goods, such as batik.”⁶

Liberation or virtual slavery? What is the real experience of Third World women? A study of Brazilian women working in a textile factory drew positive conclusions: work “represents the widening of horizons, a means of confronting life, a source of individualization. The majority of women . . . drew a significant part of their identity from being wage-workers.”⁷ By earning money and working outside the home, factory women may find a certain independence from their families. Meeting and working with other women lays the foundation for a collective spirit and, perhaps, collective action.

But at the same time, the factory system relies upon and reinforces the power of men in the traditional patriarchal family to control women. Cynthia Enloe, a sociologist who organized an international conference of women textile workers in 1982, says that in the Third World, “the emphasis on family is absolutely crucial to management strategy. Both old-time firms and multinationals use the family to reproduce and control workers. Even recruitment is a family process. Women don’t just go out independently to find jobs: it’s a matter of fathers, brothers and husbands making women available after getting reassurances from the companies. Discipline becomes a family matter since, in most cases, women turn their paychecks over to their parents. Factory life is, in general, constrained and defined by the family life cycle.”

One thing is certain: when multinational corporate-style development meets traditional patriarchal culture, women’s lives are bound to change.

Endnotes

- ¹Flannery, M. (1978, May). America's sweatshops in the sun. *AFL-CIO American Federationist*, 16.
- ²Cantwell, B., Luce, D., & Weinglass, L. (1978). *Made in Taiwan*. New York: Asia Center, 14.
- ³Chhachhi, A. (1981). The experiences of retrenchment: Women textile workers in India. Paper presented at textile worker conference of the Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, October 1981, p. 7.
- ⁴From a slide show on women in the Philippines by the Philippine Solidarity Network, San Francisco, California.
- ⁵Our fussy factory workers. (1978, June 18). *New Straits Times* (Singapore).
- ⁶Meier, R. L. (1977, November). Multinationals as agents of social development. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 32.
- ⁷Saffioti, H. I. B. (1981). The impact of industrialization on the structure of female employment. Paper presented at textile workers conference of the Transnational Institute, Amsterdam.



Questions

1. Why do multinational manufacturing firms prefer to employ women? Are the reasons simply economic? If not, what else affects this trend?
2. To what degree does age also play a role in the work conditions described in the article?
3. Do you agree with the “corporate apologists” that employment for women in the Third World is liberating?
4. In 1982, the minimum wage in the United States was \$3.10 per hour. What is the minimum wage now? If you look up today's standard wages for the countries listed in Table 1, how do they compare to the standard wages in 1982? Has the gap (i.e., profit) between U.S. labor rates and labor rates in various Asian nations

increased or decreased? What does this change imply for multinational companies?