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Author(s): Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson

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Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson

Introduction

Since the late 1960s a new type of wage employment has become available to women in many Third World countries: work in 'world market factories' producing manufactures exclusively for export to the rich countries. In these factories the vast majority of employees are usually young women between the age of fourteen and twenty-four or -five. While these women are only a small proportion of all Third World women, theirs is an important case to study, because the provision of jobs for women is often seen as an important way of 'integrating women into the development process', a demand which emerged from the United Nations Conference of International Women's Year which took place in 1975 under the tutelage of various international development agencies.

The idea that women's subordinate position stems from a lack of job opportunities, and can be ended by the provision of sufficient job opportunities, is deeply rooted and held by a wide spectrum of opinion, from international development agencies, government bureaux and mainstream Marxists to many women's organizations. Our work in the Workshop on the Subordination of Women in the process of development at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex University, has led us to reject this perspective as a starting point. We do not accept that the problem is one of women being left out of the development process. Rather, it is precisely the relations through which women are 'integrated' into the development process that need to be problematized and investigated. For such relations may well be part of the *problem*, rather than part of the *solution*. Our starting point, therefore, is the need to evaluate world market factories from the point of view of the new possibilities *and* the new problems which they raise for Third World women who work in them.

Why Have World Market Factories Emerged in the Third World?

World market factories represent a relocation of production of certain kinds of manufactured product from the developed countries, where they continue to be consumed, to the Third World. These products are often classified into two groups, those using old established (or 'traditional') technologies, such as garments, textiles, sporting equipment, toys, soft goods, furniture, etc; and those using modern technologies, such as electrical goods and components for the electronics industry.

The stress on the modernity (or otherwise) of the technological base can, however, be misleading. For the sophisticated, highly knowledge-intensive processes which produce the technological base for something like the electronics industry remain located in a few developed countries, in particular Japan and the USA. The parts of such an industry which are relocated to the Third World share many characteristics with world market factories based on old-established technologies: *their production processes are standardized, repetitious, call for very little modern knowledge, and are highly labour-intensive*. In many cases the reason for the high labour-intensity is that the production processes are assembly-type operations which have proved difficult and/or costly to mechanize further.

Subcontracting from large corporations

World market factories typically produce on subcontract to the order of a particular overseas customer, and the customer arranges the marketing of the product. The world market factory may be owned by indigenous capitalists, or may be a wholly-owned subsidiary of its overseas customer, or may be a joint venture of some kind between Third World businessmen and the overseas customer. World market factories producing components for the electronics industry are typically wholly or partially owned subsidiaries of Japanese, North American or European multinationals. Large multinational trading and retailing firms based in developed countries have been very important in the development of trade in final consumer goods from world market factories. Large US and European retailing firms, like Sears Roebuck, Marks and Spencers and C & A Modes, now place very large contracts with world market factories. In South East Asia the huge Japanese trading firms (such as Mitsubishi, Mitsui, Sumitomo, and so on) are very important customers of world market factories. For instance, it has been estimated that about 40% of South Korea's foreign trade is in the hands of the four major Japanese trading firms, and in the case of Thailand the percentage is said to be even higher.

Some world market factories producing final consumer goods do no more than assemble together parts supplied by their customers. Typical cases are the sewing together of products like garments, gloves and leather luggage, the design and cutting of the parts having been carried out in the developed country by the customer. For instance, trousers are cut out in Germany, then flown in air-containers to Tunisia, where they are sewn together, packed and flown back for sale in Germany. In such cases, the world market factory is fully integrated into the production process of the customer firm, even though in formal terms it may be independent.

Through the provision of material inputs, or design capacity, or working capital, the customer may control the production process to the extent that, though the supplier has formal autonomy, in practice the customer is operating a new and more sophisticated version of the 'putting-out' system. The transfer of the goods across national boundaries, though ostensibly organized through market sales and purchases, may in substance be a transfer between two departments of an integrated production process. A good test is the ease with which, if the specific contracts under which it is operating were broken, the world market factory would be able to find alternative buyers for its product, or alternative sources of supply of the same inputs.

In some cases there is some scope for local initiative, a certain relative autonomy. Hong Kong is a good example of the form that such relative autonomy might take: faced with import controls, Hong Kong businessmen in the garment industry have successfully switched to new product lines which cater for the higher quality, rather than the cheaper end of the market. And while the vast bulk of Hong Kong's garment industry output is contracted for by large western buying groups, and is made to their specifications, the number of manufacturers developing and marketing their own products has begun to increase.

But in general the degree of autonomy enjoyed by world market factories is very limited because they lack the means to develop new technologies. For example, the locally owned and developed consumer electronics industry in Hong Kong (producing radios, watches, TV games etc.) has been in difficulties with quality control on some items because of the lack of local technical know-how. All the evidence suggests that world market factories *cannot* create a new technical basis for capital accumulation: the lack of technology transfer is one of the main criticisms made of world market factories by Third World governments.

Why is production relocated to the Third World?

The fundamental reason is to try to overcome the limits to profitability posed by labour in developed countries. While the exploitation of labour is a necessary condition for the profitability of capital, it also confronts capital with potential opposition.[1] The relation between capital and labour can never be completely determined by what would suit capital. Individual capitals may try to get round this problem by manipulating the market for their product, but the existence of other capitals limits their ability to do this. In the case we are considering, the competition between capitals producing labour-intensive manufactures in the USA and Western Europe on the one hand, and Japan on the other, was particularly important. In the 1960s the problem posed by labour in Japan was much smaller than the problem posed in the USA and Western Europe. Japanese wage rates were lower and productivity higher, so that Japanese firms could undercut the prices which American and European firms had to charge if they were to cover their costs. To some extent the effects of this on American and European firms could be offset by state intervention, such as import controls. But this kind of intervention tends to be limited by the competition that goes on between capitals in different industries in a national economy. Though import controls tend to increase the profitability of firms in protected branches of industry, by enabling them to charge higher prices, they tend to decrease the profitability of firms in other branches, by for instance, raising wage costs because of a rise in the cost of wage goods, such as textiles and garments.

The limitations that competition places on strategies in the market means that eventually some action has to be taken in the process of production. This may take the form of investment at *existing* locations in new technology that will reduce the need for labour and/or reduce labour costs by permitting greater control over the labour force in the factory or the substitution of cheaper labour, and so on. (For the classic recent discussion of this possibility, see Braverman, 1974.) Or it may take the form of investment at *new* locations, with or without new technology, to take advantage of a labour force which is cheaper and easier to control.

In the case of labour-intensive manufacturing in the late 1960s, capital was faced

with a technological barrier in that automation was either too difficult or too costly for many of the assembly processes. At the same time, advances in the technology of transport and communication reduced the costs of locating production at a distance from the market it served; and governments in an increasing number of Third World countries were actively supplying the infrastructure necessary for labour-intensive manufacturing. Governments in the USA and Western Europe also took action to facilitate relocation of production, modifying their tariff provisions to provide for duty-free re-entry of goods assembled abroad from parts and components exported from the developed country. Governments of Third World countries set up Free Trade Zones, and provided a wide range of incentives for firms to locate in them.[2]

All this has provided a powerful incentive to relocate production to areas of the Third World where a suitable labour force is available. It must be a labour force which offers a ratio of output to money costs of employment superior to that which prevails at existing centres of capital accumulation in the developed countries. And this superior ratio must be achieved *without* superior technology. It is by now well documented that this has been achieved in world market factories by a combination of much lower costs of employment, and matching or even higher productivity than that achieved in developed countries. Wages in world market factories are often ten times lower than in comparable factories in developed countries, while working hours per year are up to 50% higher. Additional costs, such as social security payments, fringe benefits and work clothing are also much lower. The US Tariff Commission found that productivity of workers in foreign establishments assembling or processing products of US origin generally approximates that of workers with the same job classification in the US. Several other studies have reported instances of productivity substantially higher than in the US. This is not being achieved through superior technology; it is the result of greater intensity of work, of greater continuity of production; in short greater control over the performance of the labour force.

This greater degree of control is facilitated by the measures which have been taken by Third World governments to suspend workers' rights in world market factories. Many Third World countries which in the past had enacted progressive labour legislation, often as a result of the contribution of trade union struggles to the fight against imperialism, have by now incorporated the official trade union organization into the state apparatus, and either suspended, or failed to enforce, major provisions of that legislation. Workers in world market factories have been left exposed by the abrogation of their rights on such matters as minimum wage payments, contributions to insurance funds, limitations on the length of the working day and week, security of employment, redundancy conditions and payments, and the right to strike. Free Trade Zones have particularly stringent controls on the activity of workers' organizations, but in some countries, particularly in South East Asia, the whole country is covered by such controls; and the power of the state is vigorously used to enforce them. It is ironic that in the name of improving the lives of the poorer groups in the Third World by creating more employment opportunities for them, many governments have actively reduced the ability of the poor to protect themselves against the most blatant forms of exploitation.

The situation of workers in world market factories cannot, however, be analysed

Paul Harrison

Women assembling aerials in Delhi Factory.

International Labour Office

Textiles in Zaire.

simply in terms of class struggle and national struggle. It has also to be analysed in terms of gender struggle.

The Employment of Women in World Market Factories

Why is it young women who overwhelmingly constitute the labour force of world market factories? This question is conspicuous by its absence from most of the studies done by economists (Lim, 1978, is a notable exception). One reason may be that the type of jobs done by women in world market factories in the Third World are also done by women in the First World. It might seem to follow that the labour force of world market factories is predominantly female because the jobs to be done are regarded as 'women's work'. But to note that jobs are sex-stereotyped is not to explain why this is so. After all, capitalist firms are compelled by competitive forces to select their labour force and constitute their division of labour on the basis of profitability, not ideology. If it were more profitable to employ men in world market factories to do jobs done by women in the developed world, then this is what capitalist firms would do, particularly as they do not face the situation of more or less full employment of the male labour force which prevailed in the fifties and sixties in the developed world. We might expect the pressures of unemployment and poverty to induce men to accept jobs that in developed countries have been stereotyped as 'women's work'. In fact, this is what we find in a large number of 'white collar' jobs, such as typing and clerical work (Boserup, 1970). But this does not seem to have happened in world market factories.

The reproduction in world market factories of the sexual division of labour typical in labour-intensive assembly operations in developed countries must therefore rest upon some differentiation of the labour force which makes it more profitable to employ female labour than male labour in these jobs. *Female labour must either be cheaper to employ than comparable male labour, or have higher productivity, or some combination of both; the net result being that unit costs of production are lower with female labour.* In general the money costs of employing female labour in world market factories do seem to be lower than the money costs of employing men would be. Kreye found that women's wages in world market factories are in general 20%-50% lower than wages paid for men in comparable jobs (Frobel *et al.*, 1979). Direct productivity comparisons between male and female workers are hard to make, since so few men are employed in comparable labour-intensive assembly operations. In the few documented cases where men have been employed (in Malaysian electronics factories and Malawi textile factories), their productivity was in fact lower than that of women employed in the same plants. Firms running world market factories seem firmly convinced that this would generally be the case.

What produces this differentiation? The answers that companies give when asked why they employ women, as well as the statements made by governments trying to attract world market factories, show that there is a widespread belief that it is a 'natural' differentiation, produced by innate capacities and personality traits of women and men, and by an objective differentiation of their income needs in that men need an income to support a family, while women do not. A good example is the following passage in a Malaysian investment brochure, designed to attract foreign firms:

> The manual dexterity of the oriental female is famous the world over. Her hands are small and she works fast with extreme care. Who, therefore, could be better qualified *by nature and inheritance* to contribute to the efficiency of a bench-assembly production line than the oriental girl (emphasis added).

Women are considered not only to have naturally nimble fingers, but also to be naturally more docile and willing to accept tough work discipline, and naturally less inclined to join trade unions, than men; and to be naturally more suited to tedious, repetitious, monotonous work. Their lower wages are attributed to their secondary status in the labour market which is seen as a natural consequence of their capacity to bear children. The fact that only young women work in world market factories is also rationalized as an effect of their capacity to bear children – this naturally means they will be either unwilling or unable to continue in employment much beyond their early twenties. Indeed the phenomenon of women leaving employment in the factory when they get married or pregnant is known as 'natural wastage', and can be highly advantageous to firms which periodically need to vary the size of their labour force so as to adjust to fluctuating demand for their output in the world market.

While we agree that there is a real differentiation between the characteristics of women and men as potential workers in world market factories, in our view it is far from being natural.

Where do women get their skills?

The famous 'nimble fingers' of young women are not an inheritance from their mothers in the same way that they may inherit the colour of her skin or eyes. They are the result of the *training* they have received from their mothers and other female kin since early infancy in the tasks socially appropriate to woman's role. For instance, since industrial sewing of clothing closely resembles sewing with a domestic sewing machine, girls who have learnt such sewing at home already have the manual dexterity and capacity for spatial assessment required. Training in needlework and sewing also produces skills transferable to other assembly operations:

> . . . manual dexterity of a high order may be required in typical subcontracted operations, but nevertheless the operation is usually one that can be learned quickly on the basis of traditional skills. Thus in Morocco, in six weeks, girls (who may not be literate) are taught the assembly under magnification of memory planes for computers – this is virtually darning with copper wire, and sewing is a traditional Moroccan skill. In the electrical field the equivalent of sewing is putting together wiring harnesses; and in metal-working, one finds parallels in some forms of soldering and welding (Sharpston, 1976:334).

It is partly because this training, like so many other female activities which come under the heading of domestic labour, is socially invisible and privatized, that the skills it produces are attributable to nature, and the jobs that make use of it are classified as 'unskilled' or 'semi-skilled'. Given that 'manual dexterity of a high order' is an admitted requirement for many of the assembly jobs done by women in world market factories, and that women working in the electronics industry have to pass aptitude tests with high scores, it is clear that the cate-

gorization of these jobs as 'unskilled' does not derive from the purely *technical* characteristics of the job. The fact that the training period required within the factory is short, and that workers do not take long to become highly proficient once this period is over, does not detract from this conclusion. Little training and 'on the job' learning is required because the women are already trained:

> It takes six weeks to teach industrial garment making *to girls who already know how to sew* (Sharpston, 1975: 105, emphasis added).

In objective terms, it is more accurate to speak of the jobs making a demand for easily trained labour, than for unskilled labour. But of course skill categories are not determined in a purely objective way (Braverman, 1974). In particular, jobs which are identified as 'women's work' tend to be classified as 'unskilled' or 'semi-skilled', whereas technically similar jobs identified as 'men's work' tend to be classified as 'skilled' (Phillips and Taylor, 1980). To a large extent, women do not do 'unskilled' jobs because they are the bearers of inferior labour; rather the jobs they do are 'unskilled' because women enter them already determined as inferior bearers of labour.

Women's subordination as a gender

The social invisibility of the training that produces these skills of manual dexterity and the lack of social recognition for these skills is not accidental. It is intrinsic to the process of gender construction in the world today. For this is not simply a process of gender differentiation, producing two 'separate but equal' gender roles for women and men, any more than *apartheid* produces two 'separate but equal' roles for blacks and whites in South Africa. Rather it is a process of *subordination* of women as a gender (Whitehead, 1979). This is not only an ideological process, taking place in the realm of attitudes and values. It is not must a matter of people ascribing lesser value to women's gender roles; of simply failing to see the contribution that women make; or of believing that it is only right and proper for women to accept a second place to men. Although ideology plays a role, we would argue that the subordination of women as a gender cannot be understood simply as a matter of 'patriarchal attitudes'. Rather it is a material process which goes on not just in our heads, but in our practices. In claiming that it is a material process we do not intend to reduce it to an economic process, to be analysed only in terms of labour; but rather to emphasize that it cannot be changed simply through propaganda for more 'enlightened' views, and that it requires practical changes in daily living. We would suggest that this process of subordination of women as a gender can be understood in terms of the exclusion of women as a gender from certain activities, and their confinement to others; where the activities from which women as a gender are excluded are some of those which are constituted as public, overtly social activities, and the activities to which women as a gender are confined are some of those which are constituted as private, seemingly purely individual activities.

The constitution of activities as public or private, social or individual, of course differs over time, and between different kinds of society, and is itself a matter of struggle, not a pre-determined 'given'. The importance of activities in which the social aspect is dominant, which are overtly represented as social, is that these confer social power. This is not to say that *no* power is conferred by activities in which the private aspect is dominant: but in our view it is a mistake to see

private power as co-equal with social power. Social power is collective power, reproducible through social processes, relatively autonomous from the characteristics of particular individuals. But private power is purely individual power, contingent on the specific characteristics of particular individuals, reproducible only by chance.

A distinction can usefully be made between relations which are *gender ascriptive*, that is, relations which are constructed intrinsically in terms of the gender of the persons concerned; and relations which are not gender ascriptive, but which can nevertheless be *bearers of gender* (Whitehead, 1979: 11). An example of the first is the conjugal relation: marriage is a relation necessarily involving the union of persons of definite and opposite genders. A union between persons of the same gender is not marriage. An example of the second is the sexual division of labour in the capitalist labour process. Though the capital-labour relation is not gender ascriptive, it is nevertheless a bearer of gender (Phillips and Taylor, 1980). Gender ascriptive relations are clearly the fundamental sites of the subordination of women as a gender, and in them women's subordination may take a literally patriarchal form, with women directly subject to the authority of the father, their own or their children's. But male hegemony in gender ascriptive relations does not always assume a patriarchal form. Rather it is a matter of the extent to which women's social being can only be satisfactorily established through the mediation of a gender ascriptive relation, whereas the same is not true for men. This kind of gender subordination is not something which an individual woman can escape by virtue of choosing to avoid certain kinds of personal relation which men. For instance, it means that the *absence* of a husband is as significant as his presence for the establishment of a woman's identity. As Elizabeth Phillips of the Jamaica Women's Bureau has pointed out:

> The apparent independence of women from men can be misleading: while women may not be directly subordinate to a particular member of their male kin, they are nonetheless subject to an overall culture of male dominance.

For women, unlike men, the question of gender is never absent.

Behind the mirage of docility

It is in the context of the subordination of women as a gender that we must analyse the supposed docility, subservience and consequent suitability for tedious, monotonous work of young women in the Third World. In the conditions of their subordination as a gender, this is the appearance that women often present to men, particularly men in some definite relation of authority to them, such as father, husband, boss. A similar appearance, presented by colonized peoples to their colonizers, was brilliantly dissected by Franz Fanon, who showed how the public passivity and fatalism which the colonized peoples displayed towards the colonizers for long periods concealed an inner, private, rebellion and subversion. But this passivity is not a natural and original state: to achieve it requires enormous efforts of self-repression. The 'native' is in a state of permanent tension, so that when he does resist, it tends to be with a spontaneity and intensity all the stronger for having been so long pent-up and hidden: action not negotiation is the characteristic response (Fanon, 1969: 48).

That self-repression is required for women to achieve an adequate level of docility and subservience can be demonstrated on an everyday level by

differences in their behaviour when authority figures are present and absent. An example is the behaviour observed by Noeleen Heyzer (1978) in a world market factory producing textiles in Singapore. Here the women workers were always on guard when the supervisors were around, and displayed a characteristic subservience; but in the absence of supervisors behaviour changed. Far from displaying respectful subservience, workers mocked the supervisors and ridiculed them. Another indication that the 'private' behaviour of women workers in their peer group differs from their behaviour when outsiders are present comes from the fact that some electronics factories on the Mexican border have introduced a few men on to production lines formerly the exclusive province of women in the belief that this will improve the discipline and productivity of the women. The stress that such self-repression can impose and the 'non-rational' forms its relief may take is exemplified in the well-documented occurrence of outbreaks of mass hysteria among young women factory workers in South East Asia.

It is interesting that governments and companies are unwilling to trust completely the personal docility of women workers and feel a need to reinforce it with that suspension of a wide variety of workers' rights which is such a selling point of Free Trade Zones. Nevertheless, in spite of being faced with extensive use of state power to control labour unions and prevent strikes, women workers in world market factories have at times publicly thrown off their docility and subservience and taken direct action, though their level of participation in trade unions is reported to be very low. There are indications that these struggles tend to erupt outside the official trade union framework, taking for instance the form of 'wild cat' sitdowns or walk-outs, rather than being organized around official negotiations.

Secondary status in the labour market

A major aspect of the gender differentiation of the labour force available for employment in world market factories is what is generally referred to in the literature as women's 'secondary status' in the labour market (Lim, 1978: 11). The main characteristics of this secondary status are that women's rates of pay tend to be lower than those of men doing similar or comparable jobs: and that women tend to form a 'reserve army' of labour, easily fired when firms want to cut back on their labour force, and easily re-hired when firms want to expand again. This tends to be explained in terms of 'women's role in the family' or 'women's reproductive role'. In a sense this explanation may be true, but it is ambiguous in that for many people 'women's role in the family', 'women's reproductive role', is an ahistorical fact, given by biology. What has to be stressed is that woman's role in the family is socially constructed as a subordinated role – even if she is a 'female head of household'. For it is the female role to nurture children and men, work which appears to be purely private and personal; while it is the male role to represent women and children in the wider society. And it is the representative role which confers social power.

This kind of gender subordination means that when a labour market develops, women, unlike men, are unable to take on fully the classic attributes of free wage labour. A man can become a free wage labourer

> . . . in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose his labour-power as his own commodity and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale . . . he is free of all the objects needed for the realiza-

tion of his labour-power (Marx, 1976: 237).

A woman is never 'free' in this way: she has obligations of domestic labour, difficulties in establishing control over her own body, an inability to be fully a member of society in her own right; but also the possibility of obtaining her subsistence from men in exchange for personal services of a sexual or nurturing kind, of realizing her labour power outside the capitalist labour process. It is this gender difference which gives women a 'secondary status' in the labour market. Our purpose is not to deny the social reality of this secondary status. But it is to take up a critical stance towards it, rather than view it as 'natural': nature does not compel the tasks of bringing up children to be the privatized responsibility of their mother while depriving her of the social power to secure, in her own right, access to the resources required for this, thus forcing her into a dependent position.

This secondary status arising from women's subordination as a gender means that women workers are peculiarly vulnerable to super-exploitation, in the sense that their wages will not need to cover the full money costs of the reproduction of their labour power, either on a daily or a generational basis. It also means that women tend to get lower wages than men, even when those wages contribute to the support of several other people, as do the wages of many of the young women who work in world market factories (or indeed of many women workers in developed countries). Sending a daughter to work in such a factory is in some cases the only remaining strategy for acquiring an income for the rest of the family.

The Interplay of Capital and Gender: the limits to Liberation through Factory Work

Ever since large numbers of women were drawn into factory work in the industrial revolution in nineteenth century England there has been a strong belief that wage work can liberate women from gender subordination. The classical Marxists tended to see the entry of women into wage work as a substitution of one form of domination, 'the rule of the husband over the wife', by another, the domination of capitalists over worker (Engels, 1976: 171-8), so that the struggle of working women became part of the general class struggle. Liberals have always tended to see jobs for women as leading to female emancipation by providing women with financial independence; and have viewed the lack of equal pay, equal working conditions and equal opportunities for women in the capitalist economy as the result of out-moded prejudice and discrimination. Such attitudes are expected to be gradually undermined as women demonstrate their capacities in the very visible sphere of wage work – which is overtly social, unlike domestic production. The fact that the social relations of factory work are not intrinsically gender ascriptive, but are rooted in an impersonal cash nexus, gives some plausibility to such views.

For instance, it seems plausible that competition between women and men for jobs would tend to undermine any material basis for gender differentiation of the labour force in world market factories. If initially capitalists prefer to employ women because they can be paid low wages, can be trained quickly and appear to accept easily the discipline of factory life, then surely high male unemployment will tend to undermine this preference as men are induced to accept the same wages and working conditions and to acquire the same

attributes that make women employable, in order to get a job. The end result of such a process would be a labour force undifferentiated by gender, with women and men doing the same jobs, in the same conditions, for the same wages, modified only by personal preferences or prejudices for this or that kind of employment or employee. There would be no objective basis for gender differentiation.

But this argument fails to consider *how it is* that women have acquired the characteristics that make them initially the preferred labour force. If men are to compete successfully, they also need to acquire the 'nimble fingers' and 'docile dispositions' for which women workers are prized. But for this, they would require to undergo the same social experience as women. In order to compete successfully, men would need to experience gender subordination. But since men and women cannot *both* simultaneously experience gender subordination, this could only happen if women were to be freed from gender subordination; that is, a reversal, rather than an elimination of gender differentiation. Competition between women and men in the labour market can tend to produce, in certain circumstances, signs of such a reversal (Engels, 1976: 173-4), signs which provoke the traditionalist critique of women's participation in wage work as an overturning of the natural order of things. But these signs of the reversal of gender roles are themselves a demonstration of the fundamental interdependence of the labour force characteristics of women and men. Although, as competitors in the labour market, women and men may at first appear as atomized individuals, they are never completely separated. *They are always linked through gender ascriptive relations, and their labour market relations become bearers of gender.*

The important point about the development of capitalism is that it does offer a form of interdependence – the cash nexus – which is not gender ascriptive. But although capitalist production is dominated by the cash nexus, in the sense that it must be organized to make a profit, it cannot be organized solely through cash relations (through wages and prices) but requires a specific hierarchical managerial organization: the capitalist labour process. It has to be organized through the giving of orders, as well as the making of payments. It is because of this that capitalist production may be a bearer of gender, though it is not intrinsically gender ascriptive (Phillips and Taylor, 1980; Whitehead, 1979). Typically, the giving of orders in the capitalist labour process is defined as a male prerogative; while the role of women is defined as the carrying out of orders.

Another intrinsic limit is that the socialization of the reproduction of labour power cannot be accomplished completely through the cash nexus. A great deal of the labour required to provide the goods and services needed for the reproduction of labour power quite clearly can be socialized through the cash nexus: the monetization of labour processes formerly carried out domestically, and socialized though the gender ascriptive relations of marriage, is one of the hallmarks of capital accumulation (Braverman, 1974, ch. 13). But the establishment of the social identity of children, their social integration, cannot be accomplished solely through the cash nexus. One implication of this is that the *de facto* position of women workers as major contributors to the family income does not automatically mean that they will become socially recognized as 'breadwinners', and that their secondary status in the labour market will be ended. For the position of breadwinner is not constituted purely at the economic level: it is also constituted in the process of establishing the connexion of the family with

the wider society. The breadwinner must be also the public representative of the family. Ann Whitehead (1978) suggests that the wage itself, though clearly not a gender ascriptive form, tends to become a bearer of gender, in the sense that wages of male and female family members are not treated as interchangeable, but are earmarked for different things.

The recognition of this limitation does not mean that we must therefore deny capitalism *any* liberating potential: the alternative, cash-based forms of socialization it entails do tend to undermine and disrupt other forms of socialization, including the gender ascriptive relations which are fundamental to the subordination of women as a gender. In this way they provide a material basis for struggle against the subordination of women as a gender. But there is no way that capitalist exploitation of women as wage workers can simply *replace* gender subordination of women. Indeed, the capitalist exploitation of women as wage workers is parasitic upon their subordination as a gender.

The dialectic of capital and gender

We would like to distinguish three tendencies in the relation between the emergence of factory work and the subordination of women as a gender: a tendency to *intensify* the existing forms of gender subordination; a tendency to *decompose* existing forms of gender subordination; and a tendency to *recompose* new forms of gender subordination. We are not suggesting that these are mutually exclusive tendencies – any specific situation might well show signs of all three. They are, moreover, not categories which can be aggregated to produce a uni-dimensional conclusion that the position of women is getting worse or better. Rather, they are suggested as ways of analysing particular conjunctions of forces shaping women's lives, in the hope that this will help clarify the strategic possibilities facing women in those situations.

There is evidence of all three tendencies at work in the case of women employed in world market factories. One example of the way existing forms of gender subordination may be intensified is the case of a multi national corporation operating in Malaysia which believes in deliberately trying to preserve and utilize traditional forms of patriarchal power. Instead of undermining the father's authority over the daughter by encouraging 'modern', 'western' behaviour, it pursues a policy of reinforcement:

> The company has installed prayer rooms in the factory itself, does not have modern uniforms but lets the girls wear their traditional attire, and enforces a strict and rigid discipline in the work place (Lim, 1978: 37).

The enhanced economic value of daughters certainly provides a motive for fathers to exert more control, including sending them to work in the factories whether they wish to or not. On the other hand, the ability to earn a wage may be an important factor in undermining certain forms of control of fathers and brothers over young women, an advantage which has been mentioned frequently by Malaysian women working in world market factories. However, this does not mean that there is a reversal of the authority structure of the family. There is considerable empirical evidence that their wages do not confer greater status or decision-making power on the women, even though they may be the chief source of family income.

As an example of the way existing forms of gender subordination may be *de-*

composed, we can cite Myrna Blake's observation (1979) of the importance of factory work as a way of escaping an early arranged marriage in some Asian countries. But the ability to resist arranged marriage and opt for 'free-choice' marriage is two-edged. In the conditions of a society dominated by the capitalist mode of production, 'free-choice' marriage tends to take on the characteristics of the dominant form of choice in such societies, a *market* choice from among competing commodities. And it is women themselves who take on many of the attributes of the competing commodities, while it is men who exercise the choice. This tendency towards the recomposition of a specifically capitalist, 'commoditized' form of making marriages is actively encouraged by the management styles of some of the large American multinational electronics companies which provide lessons in fashion and 'beauty care' and organize beauty contests and western-style dances and social functions for their employees. This is rationalized as the provision of fringe benefits which naturally appeal to the 'feminine interests' of the young women workers. Such interests are indeed 'feminine' in a situation where many young women are competing in a marriage market hoping to attract a husband. But they stem not from the eternal structure of the feminine psyche, but from concrete material conditions in which a young woman's face may be quite literally her fortune.

Although one form of gender subordination, the subordination of daughters to their fathers, may visibly crumble, another form of gender subordination, that of women employees to male factory bosses, just as visibly is built up. Work in world market factories is organized through a formal hierarchy with ordinary operators at the bottom controlled by varying levels of supervisors and managers. In study after study the same pattern is revealed: the young female employees are almost exclusively at the bottom of this hierarchy; the upper levels of the hierarchy are almost invariably male. Only among the lowest level of supervisors is it at all common to find women. The relationship of female employees to male bosses is qualitatively different from the relationship of male employees to male bosses. One important feature is that the sexual element in the relation between female employee and male boss is not contained and shaped by kin relations. This is one of the reasons why factory girls are often regarded as not quite 'respectable'. In some cases sexual exploitation is quite widespread – in the Masan Free Export Zone in South Korea, for example, numerous instances have occurred of sexual abuse of women employees by Japanese supervisors.

This *recomposition* of a new form of gender subordination in which young women are subject to the authority of men who are not in any family relation to them can also have the effect of intensifying more traditional forms of gender subordination of wives to husbands. The fact that if his wife works in a factory she will be subject to the authority of other men may be a powerful reason for a husband wishing to confine his wife to the home. Husbands' dislike of their wives working in factories is mentioned by Linda Lim (1978) as one of the reasons why so few married women are employed in world market factories in Malaysia.

Instability of employment

But the problem is not simply that young women may, through factory work, escape the domination of fathers and brothers only to become subordinate to male managers and supervisors – and escape the domination of managers and

supervisors only to become subordinate to husbands or lovers. There is also the problem that the domination of managers and supervisors may be withdrawn – the woman may be sacked from her job – while the woman is without the 'protection' of subordination to father, brother, husband.[3] She may be left dependent on the cash nexus for survival, but unable to realize her labour power in cash terms through working in the factory.

This problem is particularly acute for women who work in world market factories. Some change in some distant, unknown part of the world may at any moment undercut their position, leaving their product and their labour power without a market. The recession in world demand in 1974 provoked massive cut-backs in employment in many world market factories: for instance about one-third of all electronics workers in Singapore lost their jobs (Grossman, 1979: 10). Moreover, there is still a possibility of a resurgence of competition from firms located in developed countries. The very success of world market factories has made them vulnerable to retaliation. So far this has mainly taken the form of the growth of restrictions on imports of manufactures, particularly of consumer goods like textiles, garments and shoes. More recently there have been signs of fresh attempts to revolutionize the production process in developed countries, to eliminate the advantage which cheap labour gives to world market factories in the production of labour-intensive goods. At the request of the European Clothing Manufacturers' Federation, the Commission of the EEC is to fund a research programme on ways of automating garment making. The fact that the mass of capital continues to be accumulated in developed countries means that market demand, technical know-how and finance continue to be concentrated there, so that world market factories, representing relatively small dispersions of capital accumulation, are inherently vulnerable to changes in the conditions of accumulation in developed countries.

The hiring and firing practices of particular firms do, however, add to the inherent precariousness and instability of employment in world market factories. The preference of firms for young workers means that workers in their early twenties who have not yet left voluntarily are the first to be dismissed if it is necessary to retrench the labour force. Pregnancy is often grounds for dismissal. Or women are dismissed on the grounds that they can no longer meet productivity or time-keeping norms. A deterioriation in performance is, in fact, often the result of some disability caused by the work itself. Women employed in the garment industry on the Mexican border tend to suffer from kidney complaints and varicose veins. Women using microscopes every day in the electronics industry suffer eye-strain and their eyesight deteriorates. Shift work, which is common in electronics and textile factories, can produce continual fatigue, headaches and a general deterioration of health. The net result is that it is often those workers who have already acquired new consumption patterns, responsibilities, and in many cases, debts, who lose their jobs, rather than those who have just entered factory life.

If a woman loses her job in a world market factory after she has re-shaped her life on the basis of a wage income, the only way she may have of surviving is by selling her body. There are reports from South Korea, for instance, that many former electronics workers have no alternative but to become prostitutes (Grossman, 1979: 16). A growing market for such services is provided by the

way in which the tourist industry has been developed, especially in South East Asia.

Conclusions

Our conclusion may be summarized as follows: there are inherent limits to the extent to which the provision of wage work for women through capitalist accumulation can dissolve the subordination of women as a gender. Rather than ending such subordination, entry into wage work tends to transform it. While there is a tendency for the decomposition of some existing forms of gender subordination, such as the control of fathers and brothers over the life-styles of young women, there is also a tendency to the recomposition of new forms of gender subordination, both through the recomposition of gender ascriptive relations in new forms, and through relations which are not intrinsically gendered becoming bearers of gender. Indeed, the decomposition tendency itself helps to strengthen the recomposition tendency. For the former, while bringing independence of a sort, also brings vulnerability. This is particularly true when, as is the case with world market factory employees, this tendency affects only a small proportion of the relevant age cohort, and an even smaller proportion of the total female population of the society concerned. As an insurance against this vulnerability, individual women may often have little choice but to actively accept, indeed seek, the 'protection' of new forms of gender subordination.

What Can Women Do?

Official reports about the problems of women in the Third World usually end with a list of policy recommendations which various official bodies, acting 'in the interests of women', should implement. But we orient our discussion of action around the concept of 'struggle' rather than around the concept of 'policy'. It is not that we see no role for official state agencies, whether national or international, in the process of action, but rather that our orientation towards them is to ask, not what *solutions* should they offer women, but how can women use them for purposes women have determined. For we take the most fundamental objective of action to be the development of women's capacity for self-determination.

In our view the development of world market factories does, in itself, provide a material basis for a process of struggle for self-determination. The most fundamental way in which it does this is by bringing together large numbers of women and confronting them with a common, cash-based authority: the authority of capital. This is not the effect of most alternative forms of work for young Third World women, such as unremunerated labour in the family, or work in the 'informal sector' in petty services or 'out-work', or work as domestic servants (Blake, 1979: 11). In these other cases women tend to be more physically isolated from one another; or they are confronted with a different, more personalized form of authority; or they relate to one another not as members of the same gender or class, but as members of particular households, kin groups etc.

Struggle as workers

The most obvious possibility for struggle which this suggests is struggle as *workers* around such issues as wages and conditions of work. It is therefore, at first sight, disappointing to find a low level of formal participation in trade

union activities by women employed in world market factories; and evidence that in many cases they do not identify themselves as workers, or develop 'trade union consciousness' (Cardosa-Khoo & Khoo Kay Jin, 1978). But we need to bear in mind the *limitations*, as well as the possibilities, of factory-based struggle about work-related issues; and the *shortcomings* of official trade union organizations in many parts of the world.

The basic limitation in the ability of workers, no matter how well-organized, to secure improvements in pay and conditions of work is set by the fact that control over the means of production lies ultimately with management, and not with the workforce. The limits within which workers in world market factories are confined are particularly narrow because of the ease with which the operations carried out in them might be relocated, and because the management so often enjoys the backing of particularly coercive forms of state power. The ability to secure improvements tends to be very much conditioned by particular rates of accumulation at particular localities. It is noticeable that it is in countries like Hong Kong and Singapore where the rate of investment has been high that wage rates in world market factories have tended to rise. A higher proportion of married, and older, women tends to be found in world market factories in these countries, symptomatic of a tighter labour market.

Besides the rate of accumulation, another important consideration is the extent to which other social groups will support workers in particular factories in campaigns for better pay and conditions of work. In the case of women working in world markets factories, such support within their own countries is likely to come mainly from either professional and technical elite groups, or from religious organizations. There is a material basis for the support of the first group in the fact that the pay and conditions of employment in world market factories so often offend the sense of justice and fairness encouraged by other aspects of the development of capitalism, rooted in the equalizing and liberalizing aspect of the market economy. Unfortunately such support tends to be limited: while many members of professional and technical elite groups are willing to support the workers' right to a fair day's pay for a fair day's work, they are not so willing to face all the implications of genuine self-determination for workers, including the workers' right to control the means of production. The support offered by religious groups can often be in many ways more radical, because it tends to draw on a different set of values, rooted in a more organic vision of society. Such groups, in some countries, have become very involved in the struggle of workers in world market factories. However, from the point of view of women, such support may be particularly double-edged, because religious values tend so often to encourage the subordination of women as a gender.

However, no matter how effective and far-reaching the support given by religious or other groups to the workforce, the struggle for better pay and conditions of work remains contradictory. To a considerable extent, the success of the workforce in this struggle is predicated upon the success of management in making profits.

Management's ability to displace labour with machinery means that the existence of a trade-off between the number of jobs available, and the pay and conditions of work associated with them, is not simply an ideological invention of

orthodox economics. But the story does not end there. The actions which individual capitalists take (and must take, owing to competitive pressures) to relocate and re-shape production on an international scale have repercussions which tend to undermine the viability of their continued control over the means of production. To put it schematically, the international relocating and re-shaping of production has repercussions which tend to undermine the national and international systems of money and property rights which underpin, and are necessary for, capitalist control over the means of production. Current manifestations of this are the world-wide problems of inflation, the lack of a stable international currency, and the massive increase in international indebtedness of precisely those Third World countries which have been most 'successful' in export-oriented industrialization.

The main lesson we would draw from this is that struggle at the level of the factory cannot be judged solely in terms of its effects on pay and conditions of work. It has to be judged not simply as an instrument for making economic gains, but as a way of developing the capacities of those involved in it, particularly the capacity for self-organization. In this context, participation in collective action in the factory itself, even of a sporadic and spontaneous character, is more important than purely formal membersip of a trade union: it also helps factory workers to understand the world-wide structure of the forces which shape their lives, and helps prepare them for struggle, not just in the factory where they work, but against the economic system of which it is a part.

Struggle as women

Struggles arising from the development of world market factories will, however, remain seriously deficient from the point of view of *women* workers if they deal only with economic questions of pay and working conditions, and fail to take up other problems which stem from the recomposition of new forms of the subordination of women as a gender. Many of these problems present themselves as a series of 'personal' 'individual' difficulties: how to attract a husband or lover; how to deal with the contradictions of female sexuality – to express one's sexuality without becoming a sex-object; how to cope with pregnancy and child care (Blake, 1979: 12). The concern of women workers with these problems is not a sign that they are 'backward' in consciousness as compared with male workers, but that for women, it is gender subordination which is primary, while capitalist exploitation is secondary and derivative. This is not to say that women spontaneously recognize that their 'personal' problems are reflections of their subordination as a gender. If social relations were so transparent there would be little need to write essays like this – or to consciously analyze women's position and to plan and organize struggle.

The forms that workers' organizations have traditionally taken have been inadequate from women's point of view because they have failed to recognize and build into their structure the specificity of gender. Trade unions, for instance, have been organized to represent 'the worker', political parties to represent 'the working class'. The failure to take account of gender means that in practice they have tended to represent *male* workers. Working women have tended to be represented only through their dependence on male workers. In addition, the specific problems that concern women as a subordinated gender are often problems which it is not easy for conventional forms of trade union or working class political activity to tackle. New forms of organization are

required that will specifically take up these problems, offering both practical, immediate action on them, and also revealing the social roots of what at first sight appear to be a series of individual, personal problems whose only common denominator lies in the supposed 'natural' propensities and capacities of women as a sex.

The employment of women in world market factories does provide a material basis for 'politicizing the personal' because of the way it masses together women not simply as workers but as a gender. Women are brought together in the factory, not by virtue of being the daughter of this man, the mother of that; the sister of this, the wife of that; but simply by virtue of being women, of having the characteristics of a subordinated gender. In factory employment, women are abstracted out of particularized gender ascriptive relations.

So, a practical reality is given to the concept of women as a gender, in the same way that a practical reality is given to the concept of labour in general (Marx, 1973: 103-105). This creates a basis for the struggle of women factory workers as members of a *gender*, as well as members of a *class*. This is not to say that such struggle will automatically take place—it will only happen if new forms of organization are consciously built. To some extent this is already happening. Women workers in various parts of the Third World have formed sector-based organizations which link women in different factories operating in the same industry; and "off-site' organizations to tackle issues like housing, education and sanitation, which remain the responsibility of women.

Of course, limitations and contradictions similar to those discussed in the case of activity to improve pay and working conditions in the factory beset the struggle to ameliorate other aspects of women workers' lives, especially those in the so-called 'personal' domain. *Just as a limit is set to the former by capitalists' class monopoly of the means of production, so a limit is set to the latter by men's gender monopoly of the means of establishing social being, social presence.* Accordingly women's struggle as a gender should not be judged in purely instrumental terms, as achieving this or that improvement in the position of women; but should be judged in terms of the way that the struggle itself develops capacities for self-determination. The development of conscious co-operation and solidarity between women on the basis of recognition of their common experience of gender subordination is even more important a goal than any particular improvement in the provision of jobs or welfare services to women, more important than any particular reform of legal status, and than any particular weakening of 'machismo' or 'patriarchal attitudes'. Improvements which come about through capital accumulation or state policy or changing male attitudes can be reversed. Lasting gains depend upon the relationships built up between women themselves.

This is the point that needs impressing upon all those policy advisers, policy makers and policy implementers at national and international levels who wish to 'include women in development', 'enhance the status of women' and so on. The single most important requirement, the single most important way of helping, is to make resources and information available to organizations and activities which are based on an explicit recognition of gender subordination, and are trying to develop new forms of association through which women can begin to establish elements of a social identity in their own right, and not through the

mediation of men. Such organizations do not require policy advisers to tell them what to do, supervise them and monitor them; they require access to resources, and protection from the almost inevitable onslaughts of those who have a vested interest in maintaining both the exploitation of women as workers, and the subordination of women as a gender. The most important task of sympathetic personnel in national and international state agencies is to work out how they can facilitate access to such resources and afford such protection – now how they can deliver a package of ready-made 'improvements' wrapped up as a 'women's programme'.

Notes

Diane Elson is an economist who has taught at the universities of York and Sussex and carried out research in South East Asia. She is now living in Manchester where she is a member of various local feminist groups. She is also active in the Conference of Socialist Economists and the Socialist Economic Review.

Ruth Pearson is an economist who has worked in Argentina and Mexico. She is at present living in Norwich, where she teaches economics and women's studies, and is active in various local feminist campaigns.

Both authors were members of the Workshop on the Subordination of Women at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

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1 Exploitation of labour: in this essay used in a technical sense, derived from Marx, to mean the process of compelling workers to work longer than the time necessary to produce the goods they themselves consume.
2 Free Trade Zones: special areas which are exempt from normal import and export regulations, and also from many other kinds of regulation, such as protective labour legislation, and taxation law.
3 It may seem paradoxical to talk of the protection afforded by subordination, but the paradox lies in the social relations themselves. When the social identity of women has to be established through their relations with men, the absence of father, brother or husband, is often disadvantageous.

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