

Chapter 7

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

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ABSTRACT

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

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INTRODUCTION

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

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

WOMEN WORKERS IN THE GLOBAL FACTORIES

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

Women’s employment opportunities in the global factories have been regarded positively in a number of studies (Lim, 1985; Tinker, 1976). The decision to work outside home itself speaks of a certain level of power and agency within the household, particularly in contexts where the decision is negotiated and/or made in the

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