

Women and the World of Work in Asia: Perspectives and Practices

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Introduction

It is important to appreciate that there are two basic perspectives on patriarchy and gender. A significant feature of patriarchy demonstrates an arrangement in society and its institutions in which men's interests are prioritized. Gender entails relational dimensions of behavior attached to biological sex as a product of socialization and in the process, could allow for change over time and reflect different political systems and cultures. It means that becoming a woman is an active and an ongoing process of searching for the inherent female essence (de Beauvoir, 1989). Feminism sees the relationship between the sexes as one of inequality, subordination and oppression. Its political orientation is on how one can challenge and reclaim power and privilege that seem to favor men at the expense of women. Political thought has consistently ignored women (Bryson, 2003). To date, even though they constitute half of the human race they are still excluded essentially from much of public affairs.

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There are two dominant perspectives that are at the core of feminist analysis.

One view holds that women as individuals can overcome inequality by removing barriers and prejudice through appropriate policies and reforms; throw light on the cultural factors that presuppose sex stereotypes; and set up instruments to resolve constraints in resolving inequality.

Radical feminism, on the other hand, believes that women's oppression is due to the systematic continuum of domination in social relations and that the problems which confront them are neither individual nor psychological narratives. Because reality is never quite simple, deeply entrenched domination of men over women in both society and the workplace necessitates the transformation of unequal and hierarchical institutions and workplaces. From this perspective, there is potential to redress the balance of male-oriented characterization of organizational life and facilitate the conditions for the creative self realization of women and the framing of their true identity.

Real equality for women should be in terms of cooperation and collectivism rather than competition and individualism. While women's participation in the labor market has continued to increase, many of them are heavily concentrated in part-time low pay occupations and bear the double burden of unpaid work. The various developments in the labor market indicate the extent to which the global economy's need for a reserve army of cheap, docile and unskilled labor has been met by women.

With the female constituency bringing to the fore new structures of women's relationship with both paid and unpaid labor, the values of collective life could contest conventional locales of power and bring about an anti-hegemonic sensibility. This finds expression in the negotiation and struggle over the use and distribution of resources relative to women's interest in the context of mainstream gender ideologies being accepted not just by women themselves but by both employers and male workers. With the gender struggle not always being clear cut, feminist critiques of all forms of power should begin with innovative social initiatives from below and build thereon new forms of grassroots movement which women, as well as men, could support.

The Politics of Trade Relations

Since the founding of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1946, a new impetus towards a more liberalized trading regime through negotiations and regional agreements came into play. An important driving force was brought about by the financial markets through the removal of restrictions on the international movements of capital. The nature and content of growth was founded on telecommunication technologies, both local and mobile. In a similar fashion, international air passenger transport expanded market competitiveness in a highly integrated economy.

In 1995, the World Trade Organization (WTO) was established to administer GATT agreements and to ensure that members would comply. The WTO's new measures included a clearer timetable and process for resolving and adjudicating disputes and claims, as well as the expansion of rules beyond merchandise trade to cover trade in services and intellectual property. The line of argument offers the view that WTO strengthens the international trade system under conditions of greater participation as sought with considerable zest by less developed states. Currently, the WTO has 149 member countries. This represents well over 90% of world trade.

Under WTO, it is assumed that liberalization will level the playing field for all participating countries or that there will be equal status for both small countries and big trading powers alike. However, two summits—one in Cancun, Mexico in 2003 and another in Hong.Kong in 2005—failed to deliver the promise of widespread reforms in international trade of farm goods, manufactured products and services. WTO's most powerful members from their end have muted pressures to address issues of farm support and manufacturing tariffs.

In general, to compete in the global market means to understand the guiding set of rules and to agree on a range of measures on opening market access and promoting competition. But for the business sector in the Philippines, there is fear of social consequences in the absence of uniform rules because the probable increase in the price of goods would naturally be passed on to the consumers owing to the transaction costs that have to be shouldered by businessmen. However, there is also the perception that WTO can offer a decisive decision on this particular problem. China has gained considerable socio-economic momentum at the turn of the century and, along with India, continues to play a key

role in furthering global growth. Similarly, the economies in developing Asia are expected to expand 7.7% by the end of 2006. With China as the single biggest economic bloc, the European Union (EU) and the ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Nations, a 10-member regional partnership consisting of the Philippines, Thailand, Burma, Indonesia, Laos, Cambodia, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam and Vietnam) have given importance to widening the scope of inter-regional trade and the creation of additional forums for regional and subregional economic cooperation. In 2004, ASEAN posted global exports totaling US\$ 551.7 billion.

The question of change and transformation in world trade takes place within and between three regional areas: North America, Europe and East Asia (Pearson & Payaslian, 1999). The magnitude and significance of the changes taking place are drawn upon the regional free markets in the establishment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the European Union (EU). Moreover, a free trade agreement between EU and ASEAN is already being envisioned. Obviously, any economic strategy for ASEAN cannot ignore China's pattern of growth strategy. In the meantime, the rising number of elderly in the EU equates to a corresponding decline in its working age population. This is the biggest challenge to Europe's capacity to make globalization a vehicle for employment and growth.

The defining characteristic of globalization conjures up an image of an ever closer integration of spatially separate locations around the world into a single international market, and the functional integration of internationally dispersed business activities (Etemad & Wright, 2003). The unprecedented changes in transnational trade and financial activities are overarching in geographical and structural terms. To achieve both economic and social goals, domestic economies must play an important role in shaping their environment as international market competition intensifies.

With an international economy dominated by powerful organizations and the enormity of unemployment, there is an urgent need for institution building and democratic governance. Feminist critics have pointed out that in the process of global economic change there is widening inequality gap between women and men, and concomitant social disintegration and environmental degradation. The question as to who wins or loses from international trade and trade under various conditions remains. The persisting disparities in income levels between the developed and the developing

countries indicate that trade alone cannot offer the transcendence towards several conceivable systems of a more equitable distribution of income and resources.

As the international economy becomes more a polity in which joint decision making or governance takes place, center-periphery relations within regions, as well as those between the North and the South, are expected to expand to encompass new trade partners, labor markets and resource suppliers. The role of the state in regulating domestic and international markets and in encouraging strategic industries or economic actors will continue to be the subject of controversy. A praxis that challenges the structural causes of the exploitation of women is the first step along the road to a balanced approach to international political economy.

Global Employment Trends for Women

Elder and Schmidt (2004) reported that out of 2.8 billion people that had work in 2003, 1.1 billion were women. Out of an estimated 550 million working poor, around 60% or 330 million were women. In other words, women's chances to make better use of their potential have improved to the extent that the labor force participation gap between men and women has been decreasing in East Asia. Currently, the proportion is 83 economically active women per 100 men. They also pointed out that women's share in work in total employment increased to 40%. In contrast, in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia, there are only around 40 economically active women for every 100 men in the labor force.

Furthermore, Elder and Schmidt presented a general picture of the gross inequalities being experienced by women in the labor market. The struggle to join the labor market and hold on to their jobs in periods of economic downturn is described to be very difficult for young females (aged 15 to 24 years). This is in part because women often hold low level, low paying positions in female dominated occupations. Likewise, there is hardly a shift occurring among wage and salaried women workers. Whereas men are hired in core, regular and better paid jobs; women are in peripheral, insecure, home-based and temporary work with little social protection. The surging labor force participation rate has hardly improved the working conditions of women either.

The realms of family and work are still considered to be women's domain in the established order. When they have to combine child raising activities, they have to assume two roles. Women work more in the agriculture sector and this trend is expected to continue in most parts of the developing world. So while men are rooted in wage and salaried work, women toil in the informal economy as unpaid family workers. The informal sector represents the crossroads between the economy and the labor market, provides the nexus, and adds value to the interaction between employment creation, production and income generation. It is in agriculture and the informal economy that women break their backs and minds in waged and unwaged labor.

Thinking Big: The Rise of Global Sourcing Companies

Over the past twenty years, trade liberalization and communication innovation have opened up new huge markets for retailers and brands to buy their products from producers worldwide. Between 1980 and 1998, average tariffs on manufactured products fell from 10% to 5% in industrial countries, and from around 25% to 13% in developing countries, cutting the cost of trade in goods (Raworth, 2004). Export processing zones proliferated in the 1990s in developing countries offering tax exemptions and investment allowances in order to attract local and foreign investors to produce goods for export. The spread of Internet based software systems made real time information exchange possible, and enabled just-in-time production and delivery coordination between producers and retailers on an international scale. Sea freight costs have also fallen to almost 70% between the early 1980s and the mid 1990s. Moreover, with significant growth in airfreight services, the delivery costs for distant producers have also fallen dramatically.

The recasting of the world into a large multi-centered thinking geographical space has resulted in a new business model for major retailers such as hypermarkets, supermarkets, and department stores; and brand owners such as the leading clothing companies (Raworth, 2004). These retailers and brands have become global sourcing companies involving multi-scaled strategies and networks of suppliers producing in a global supply chain. The cumulative impact of improvements in process and product innovation is the reason behind the successful integration of planning and volume production across a range of industries.

Restructuring personnel in turn, implies changing work arrangements that are very much dependent on outsourcing. On one hand, there is the privileged highly trained and competent workforce capable of utilizing high level of skills to yield productivity increase. On the other hand, there is the labor strategy characterized by low wages, low productivity and unskilled work. The complex aspects of work types, available jobs, levels of income, extent of training and skills development, and the degree of job security, can only be fully understood within the massive interventions of the economic, social and political environment within which productive strategies are developed. The creation of new firms tilted shifts in employment from primary and secondary sectors to the tertiary and service sector. In the service sector, women are generally still concentrated in a narrow range of occupations bound by gender hierarchies, unable to secure higher wages and more regular or senior positions. With the decline in employment from manufacturing to services, what followed is a similar reduction from a unionized male to a largely non-union female employment.

Women in Agriculture and Micro Small Medium Enterprises (MSMEs)

Women's contribution to agriculture and other sectors of the economy reflect an ongoing structural change in the economy and should provide a greater understanding of the relationship between empowerment and socio-economic development. Over time, as women's empowerment evolved and broadened, there came an obvious need for it to be accounted for. Unfortunately, it remains invisible in plans and programs (Prakash, 2003). Among the poor, for instance, rural women are the poorest and the most vulnerable. Rural poverty is generally characterized by food insecurity and work that is highly labor intensive. In Africa, three quarters of agriculture work is done by women. Meanwhile in Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, women comprise half of agricultural labor.

At the same time, it is impossible to analyze women's empowerment without incorporating the phenomenon of micro small medium enterprises (MSMEs). It has been reported that MSMEs generally account for over 85% of the total number of manufacturing establishments in Asia (AWCF, 2006). In China, Chinese Taipei, Japan and Thailand, MSMEs contribute over 70% to employment (AWCF, 2004). In the Philippines, 92% of the country's more than

1.4 million enterprises are micro, most of which belong to the informal economy. Only 7.8% belong to the small and medium enterprise category. Also, the total number of large enterprises in the country remains at .03%.

Illegal Migration Increasing in Southeast Asia

Nearly half of the world's international migrants, or about 94 million, are women. Young women, the most helpless segments of the population in the face of massive unemployment and poverty, are forced increasingly to migrate to rich neighboring Asian countries illegally. Many are from the Philippines and Indonesia but end up in Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong. More than half of Asian migrant workers, especially Filipinas, wind up as domestic workers in Hong Kong and Singapore and as entertainers in Japan ("Illegal migration increasing," 2006). Because of the often inadequate and inconsistent laws in many origin, transit and destination countries, there is also a growing incidence of abuse and irregular labor migration such as trafficking. This has become a major issue in Southeast Asia during the past decade. Although much has yet to be done to combat trafficking, important lessons can be drawn through dialogue and information sharing.

In 2004, some US\$3 billion or 42% of the world's US\$127 billion worth of remittances channeled through banks came from Asia. India, Philippines, China and Pakistan comprised four of the top five remittance-receiving countries worldwide. The Philippines is at number three. Government data shows that over 65% of those deployed overseas are women. A third of the country's US\$10 billion remittances from Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) came from women migrants.

Models of Collectivist Practices

It has been observed that the gendered nature of the labor market has prevented access by women to economic opportunities. This restricts their participation to address existing gender hierarchy in the home and society effectively. But if the past is to be an indicator, the centrality of collectivist practices has proven that women's greater options and control over their lives are more feasible and could facilitate shared responsibilities towards productive experience in the development of social enterprises. An example is found in the formation of a cooperative. A cooperative

is an autonomous association of persons united to meet their common, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise. Cooperatives are people-centered business enterprises which operate in all areas of economic activity and in almost all countries in the world. Another example of aggrupation is found in a non-government organization (NGO), which is defined as an independent voluntary association of people acting together on a continuous basis for the common good.

Best Practice in China

In May 2006, China hosted an expert group meeting on cooperatives and employment (UN, 2006). The outcome of the meeting provided inputs into the report of the secretary general to the 62nd session of the General Assembly. The objectives of the meeting included: identifying and evaluating strategies to promote and reinforce the contribution of cooperatives to job creation and social inclusion; recommending policies to scale up sustainable employment initiatives; and providing equal employment opportunities to women, youth and indigenous people. It was agreed that the focus would be more on the agriculture sector towards poverty reduction, with the cooperatives mobilizing social capital and mainstreaming the sector in the generation of new employment. China is one of the few countries in the developing world to make substantial progress in reducing its total number of poor in the past two decades by posting an average annual growth of over 11% a year in the 1990s.

In the meantime, the all China Women's Federation and the International Committee for the Promotion of Chinese Industrial Cooperatives have linked to participate in the mainstream economy as an organized group (Chen, 1999). The Chinese women in the rural areas have increasingly adapted cooperative practices in accessing resources, land, credit, training and information. They were also asking the government to define the legal framework more clearly as they actively promote women's participation in cooperatives.

Best Practice in Japan

The Japanese government has recently revised the Agricultural Cooperative Act to allow the Central Union of Agriculture

Cooperatives to have tighter control over its members (Miyakoshi, 2002). For the Japanese, a proper balance of domestic stockpiles through agriculture cooperatives should be maintained to ensure food security. With Japan as the world's largest source of official development assistance (ODA), the government will continue to support agriculture cooperatives in the developing economies for sustainable rural development and food security, and women's training in agriculture.

Women worker cooperatives are mostly concentrated in the Kanto and Kansai areas but are present from Sapporo to Nagasaki. The Women's Worker Cooperative has 12,000 members; the Japan Worker's Cooperative Union has 9,000; while the recently formed Senior Cooperatives for those aged 55 and older have 15,000 members (Marshall, 2006). Women in Japan take care of their elderly through their workers' cooperatives. The cooperatives also offer housewives—for whom employment prospects have always been and remain bleak—opportunity to work part time and control the conditions of their own labor. The challenge is for them to attain economic independence, making better use of their leisure time, set a purpose in life, and help out in the family budget. They look forward to managing their own labor and schedules, not only as housewives but as consumer cooperative members and social activists.

Best Practice in Thailand

In Thailand, there is a Cooperative Promotion Department that oversees the promotion of cooperative methods such as information campaign on principles and practices concerning cooperatives, study and research into cooperatives, and assistance in the establishment of business operations. The Department has also introduced a cooperative program that is conscious of women development. With government support, members' products such as insecticide-free bananas are not only distributed locally but exported to such channels as the Toto Consumer Cooperative in Japan.

The Credit Union League of Thailand (CULT) is a national organization with a network of over 800 credit cooperatives and more than 380,000 individual members from all over Thailand (AWCF, 2004). In 1988, CULT facilitated a baseline survey of the needs of women members. At present, it has a Women Cooperative

Product Development Center that promotes opportunities, the sharing of ideas and teamwork, and the building of women's entrepreneurial and leadership skills.

In 1986, the Thakarn Women's Group (TWG) set up by wives of agricultural workers' was organized in Thayang District, Phetchburi Province. At present it has 83 members. In 1990, CULT joined other national cooperative organizations from Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia in founding the Asian Women in Cooperative Development Forum. As a regional body, the AWCF helps to address women empowerment and gender issues within the members' structures.

In 1997, the TWG started its enterprise to help solve the problem encountered by the community due to the declining price of lemon. With the assistance of the local agriculture office, the group's members developed their skill in producing products made from lemon. They produced lemon power juice, lemon power for cooking, lemon jelly and similar products. While they also had to contend with the problem of marketing, through CULT the women network was able to reach other groups. Since then, the women have been getting regular orders and welcoming visitors to the cooperative's production site.

Best Practice in Singapore

The National Trade Union Congress (NTUC) Income is headed by a woman manager. The NTUC established nine cooperatives which provide a wide range of products and services to the community. One of these cooperatives is NTUC income with 1.8 million members providing social security to workers and their families through low premium insurance policies (NTUC Income, 2006). It also offers general insurance, educational and hospitalization policies, and is the highest rated domestic insurer in Asia. Its annual charges are among the lowest in the market. As of 2004, the investment linked funds of NTUC Income have a combined total asset of \$US 4.5 billion.

Best Practice in Sri Lanka

The Sri Lanka Women's Development Services Cooperative was incorporated in 1991 as a district society, and upgraded to the national level as a Women's Bank in 1998 (Gamage &

Keppetiyagama, 2004). The Bank has around 25,000 low income members. It is engaged in a mission to put resources and ideas, and support its women members through the cooperative principles of self help and mutual aid. It is presently clustered into 55 branches and is federated into an assembly of elected national leaders. Besides being a savings and credit cooperative, added services include children savings fund, welfare fund, human resource development programs, as well as education and health services. In Sri Lanka, around 2.9 million families out of its 19 million people are into multi-purpose, and another one million are into savings and credit. The cooperative does not depend on subsidies or dole outs.

Best Practice in the Philippines

The 8th National Summit of Cooperatives was held in Puerto Princesa, Palawan on October 4-6, 2006, attended by 4,000 participants. As a pro-bono contribution to the Summit, the Social Weather Stations did a survey and found that one in ten adult Filipinos is a cooperative member, a projected 5.6 million people who belong to either multi-purpose or credit cooperative. Of the total number of cooperative members, 36% belongs to the latter.

The First National Summit of Women in Cooperatives took place in Banaue, Ifugao in 2003. The Summit has resulted in eight congresses for the national capital region, and for regions 1, 3, 5, 6, 11 and 12. The regional congress held in Lake Cebu, South Cotabato drew attention to the unequal distribution of wealth largely because of the exploitative practices of traders and middlemen. The women leaders felt they can only advance their interests if they have political education and training to increase their individual and collective capacity for community enterprises. An approach that has been taken is to involve a network of women educators known for their creative and technical expertise in the grassroots to share their skills. Similarly, the Southern Tagalog Council of Women in Cooperatives has undertaken a number of trainings, seminars and workshops. Calling themselves *Buklod Filipina*, the group will participate in the May 2007 election as a party list group.

Best Practice in India

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has a membership of nearly 700,000 members, all of whom are women in the informal segment of urban and rural employment (SEWA, 2006). It was registered in 1972 and is also into cooperative banking. The main features of the SEWA bank include: a membership exclusive to poor women only; efforts to help women become financially independent and start their own economic activity; and procedures that cut red tape so as to allow illiterate women to avail of small loans without difficulty.

SEWA works on four key strategies: organizing women into membership bases such as trade unions, cooperatives and associations; capacity building, including technical as well as managerial assistance; obtaining capital information, either as individuals or as groups; and facilitating access to social security such as health care, child care, insurance, housing and old age benefits.

In Gujarat, SEWA has a membership of over 200,000 mostly home based workers. The group was involved in the framing of the ILO Home Work Convention (No. 177) in 1996.

Best Practice in Bangladesh

On October 14, 2006, it was reported that Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh won the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize for their grassroots efforts to lift millions out of poverty. Yunus set up a new kind of bank in 1976 to lend to the poorest, particularly women, enabling them to start up small businesses without collateral. The Nobel Committee said in its citation, "Lasting peace cannot be achieved unless large population groups find ways in which to break out of poverty. Microcredit is one such means. Development from below also serves to advance democracy and human rights." The Grameen Bank lends money to 6.6 million people, 96% of whom are women.

Best Practice in Vietnam

In Vietnam, the term civil society is defined as the broad range of organized groupings which occupy the public space between the state and the individual citizen. There appears to be a shift from

a total state domination of development activity to an acceptance of the contribution of other players in development activity. The Socio-Economic Development Plan (2006-2010) covers three areas of action (Sabharwal & Houg, 2005): strengthening the decentralization process through the grassroots democracy decree and enhancing the accountability of governments at the provincial, district and commune level; enhancing the participation of the poor in development, planning, implementation and monitoring; and supporting service delivery for poverty elimination with particular focus on HIV/AIDS and social safety nets.

As a result of the building of trust between the state and NGOs, the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU) has been carrying out various practical activities that help promote women entrepreneurship. Currently, it has a membership of 11 million women and a network at four levels: central, provincial, district and commune. For the period 2003-2007, it aims to focus on the following: to help create an equal and conducive legal and policy environment for women entrepreneurship; to improve knowledge and skills in starting a business; to enhance women entrepreneurs' access to credit in a more favorable and equal manner; to help get better access to markets; and to support both social and network developments.

Conclusion

Radical feminism has called for collectivist solutions against powerful economic interests. Women's shared experience of subordination and marginality has prompted them to challenge elitism and sexism in the gendered global labor market. Through cooperatives, women's full and equal participation in the economy now include securing equal access to and control of credit, as well as education and property rights, among others. The illustrations in various countries indicate how national alliances can shape the true socio-economic empowerment of women. It is imperative to look for the leading edges of change based on an oppositional consciousness that would bring about the increasing involvement of women. Broad cultural transformation should promote the full realization of women's rights.

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