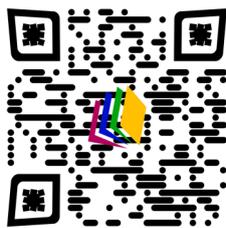


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## **Women Empowerment: Jobs in Global Manufacturing and Services**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The 'feminization' of global manufacturing and services industries in Global South has gained interest from numerous scholars who put forth disparate observations on women empowerment in periphery countries such as Bangladesh, and South Africa. The paper uses three frameworks of gender studies, *Women in Development*, *Women and Development and Gender and Development* to study the cases of Bangladesh, Mexico, India, and Zimbabwe to argue that employment in global manufacturing units and services has empowered women to an extent. While women employed in global manufacturing units in Bangladesh enjoy greater agency ('the power to') and decision-making power ('the power within'), Mexican women working in maquiladoras are unlikely to observe a similar level of empowerment. Furthermore, women employed in the global caregiving sector tend to migrate to core countries such as the Filipino women to United States or more developed countries in their own regions such as Zimbabwean women to Johannesburg. There is limited scope for the migrated women to experience empowerment such as joining trade unions ('to power with'), and increased agency due to several cases of illegal migration or language barriers. In contrast, there is a higher chance for economic empowerment and increased decision-making power in the nursing industry as argued by Indian nurses serving in UAE.

**KEY WORDS:** Women Empowerment; WID; WAD; GAD; Agency; Trade Unions

### **Introduction**

Since the 1990s, there has been an immense proliferation of discussions and studies over the state of women workers within globalisation, their struggle against exploitation, tussle for rights and tactics to implement these rights. The 'feminization' of global manufacturing and services industries in Global South has gained attention from several scholars who put forth diverse observations on women empowerment in countries such as Bangladesh and Mexico. It

is critical to understand that 'Global South' comprises of seventy-seven countries with different contexts, cultural norms on gender and a varied timeline of independence and industrialization. Therefore, the impact of jobs in global manufacturing and services for women empowerment may also vary. This essay will argue that employment in Global manufacturing and services has empowered women in Global South to an extent. The first section explores several definitions of empowerment and highlights different theories of gender and development in relation to empowerment. The subsequent section argues that while women working in garment export industries in Bangladesh have experienced economic empowerment and increased agency, there is little evidence of collective action or union to put forth demands and fight against the working conditions in factories. Moreover, the case study of Bangladesh is pitted against the maquiladoras workers of Mexico who have seen minimal economic empowerment and experience domestic violence and workplace sexual harassment often thereby, reducing their agency, mobility, and self-value. In both the case studies, scholars such as Kabeer and Domínguez et al. highlight that intersectionality with different protected characteristics like age and marital status tends to have an impact on employment and empowerment.

The third section explores the impact of jobs in global service sectors such as domestic care on empowerment. Through the case study of Latin American migrant workers in the United States of America and Zimbabwean migrant workers in Johannesburg, the essay argues that the domestic caregivers especially illegal migrant workers, are likely to receive economic empowerment at the cost of mobility, legal support and agency. Yeates argues that considering the illegal migrants lead

atomised lives, they are less likely to be a part of collective organisations. The comparison between U.S.A. and Johannesburg highlights that the issues surrounding empowerment of migrant caregivers is not only an issue for Global North. Furthermore, the section also argues that while government of countries such as Philippines and India benefit from the provision of domestic caregivers to 'core' nations, it recasts a global and domestic social hierarchy and forms the 'Global Care Chain'. The subsequent section highlights actions taken by states and independent organizations in the past to bolster women empowerment for workers of Global manufacturing and service industries and provides suggestions regarding what can be done to further improve the conditions. Finally, the concluding section summarizes the analysis of four case studies to put forth the argument that employment in Global manufacturing and services has empowered women in Global South to an extent. While many female workers have experienced economic empowerment, more effort needs to go into the forming of collective groups or trade unions, enhance agency of women in households and enforce legal barriers for the misconduct with migrant workers by host countries.

#### Section One: Conceptualizing Women's Empowerment

Efforts towards women's empowerment has its origins in grassroot mobilisations of several kinds however, feminist scholars such as Sen and Grown, Kabeer and Rowlands have pushed to shift these concerns onto the agenda of gender and development. Their endowments highlighted key concerns regarding uneven power relations preventing women's ability to participate in labour workforce and put forth changes that may serve to endorse this ability at individual as well as

collective level. There were several key features that formed the basis of analytical framework at a later stage. Firstly, light was shed on women's bias and perception ('the power within') as a vital component of the process of change. Secondly, the feminist scholars have accentuated the significance of valued resources like material, capital, human and social, to women's ability to employ more control over important parts of their lives and to contribute to the wider society ('the power to'). Thirdly, the scholars emphasize on the significance of the requirement for women to come together collectively, to develop a mutual knowledge of the institutionalized character of injustices faced and further challenge these injustices collectively ('the power with'). These growing concerns when brought forward gave way to the formation of policy frameworks such as 'Women in Development' (WID), 'Women and Development' (WAD), and 'Gender and Development' (GAD) which further informed of the social inequalities, structural challenges to gender equality and possible methods to reduce such inequalities. In addition, critical perspectives on gender and development questioned several propositions of the key theoretical perspectives and contributed to a global understanding of women's barriers and social inequality for example postcolonial view focuses on issues that women in Global South in contrast to Global North.

Until the early 1970's women were not considered key players in economic developments and were seen as the counterpart to the male breadwinner, dependents to the male wage earners. However, the women's movements and rise of feminism in the same decade caused a dramatic shift in the perceived and "ideal" roles of women and their inclusion in the policy discourse. Scholars and practitioners highlighted women's productive roles

and their contribution to the economy. The supporters of the liberal view of WID promoted women's inclusion in the economy on an even playing field, challenging the notion that women were unproductive. However, critiques argued that WID's argument was unable to capture the whole picture of social and gender inequality. The approach referred to as WAD is not only concerned with the economic benefits for women, but also the socio-economic exploitation that impact men and women in different ways. Beneria and Sen argued that reproductive labour largely delivered by women go beyond just childbearing and includes providing care to ensure intergenerational reproduction of household and labour force stability, emphasising on the link between reproduction and paid labour. Proponents of Gender and Development (GAD) highlight that women do not form a homogenous group. Gender inequalities are exacerbated through the intersection of other socio-economic inequalities including the nine protected characteristics, race, ethnicity, and caste. The recognised inequalities are not only a barrier within domestic markets but commonly identified as a global issue, further highlighting social hierarchies and inequalities. Furthermore, the broadly applied distinction between women's practical and strategic gender needs partially encapsulates some of the differences and similarities amongst women within a specific context. While practical gender needs reflect the obligations and roles affiliated women's positions in the socio-economic hierarchy, varying across context, class, race and more, strategic gender needs are based on empirical analysis of the structures of women's subservience and offers the promise of a transformative feminist politics based on collective experiences.

The three key approaches to gender and

development draw attention to several carriers to gender inequality, focussing on women. However, postcolonial theorists provide a critique of Western conceptualisation of gender inequality put forth by WID, WAD and GAD. They argue that Western-influenced women are likely to accept the modernist structure of society as the model for development however this approach fails to provide adequate solutions to issues of gender subservience in non-western society. Therefore, as argued by postmodernist and to an extent, GAD, it is essential to consider the diversity of women's experiences on the basis of intersection properties like class, race and sexuality. As this essay will show, it is critical to understand who has the ability and platform to voice the experiences and dictate policies for gender inequality in different states. Scholars such as Kabeer and Spielberg have although examined the same country and industry, garment export in Bangladesh, they have produced diverse conclusions on the condition of women in global manufacturing and services job.

As gender equality gained prominence in the mainstream of development policy, several international organizations and scholars contributed into defining women's empowerment. Some of the key aspects of the conceptualisation of women's empowerment included: feeling of self-value and social identity; women's ability and willingness to inquire their subordinate position; capability to employ strategic influence over their lives and negotiate their relation within society and their ability to participate on an equal playing field with men in reforming the society. Agencies like Inter-American Development Bank and UN pursued similar characteristics of empowerment highlighting agency, women's self-worth, access to resources and control over their lives. In addition, the economic dimension while incorporated in the

understanding of women's empowerment has been drastically visible within the global policy discourse recently. The Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals on gender equality and women's empowerment both promoted and continue to promote women's economic independence, the access to resources and economic opportunities. The definition of 'economic empowerment' for women encompasses of several traits recognised by World Bank, UNDP and OECD which include making markets operate for women, empowering them to participate in the markets and act on economic decisions. Similar to the previous key characteristics, the definition specific to economic empowerment also highlight agency, decision-making in the market and household and choice as critical components on women's empowerment. In the subsequent sections, the concerns of approaches to gender and development, and the key characteristics of women's empowerment would be examined to understand to what extent jobs in global manufacturing and service industries have empowered women in the Global South.

Section Two: Empowerment in Manufacturing jobs  
This section will focus on the cases of Bangladesh's garment export industry in contrast to Mexico's maquiladoras and argue that women workers in both the cases experience and gain empowerment to an extent. While in both cases women have access to jobs in global manufacturing, economic empowerment, increased agency and decision making are limited by societal constraints and intersectionality. In several instances, poverty acts as a key factor contributing to an increased women's labour participation force. The Pathways of Women's Empowerment research programme adopted certain indicators used to determine women's empowerment in different

sectors of employment including women's opinion of themselves and how they are perceived by others in her community and family; their capability for agency and decision-making within household and their ability to participate in community building. The studies conducted in Bangladesh, Egypt and Ghana showed women's paid labour resulted in not only economic pathway to change their lives but had a spill over effect on other aspects as well. Kabeer argues that when comparing jobs in garments industries and its alternatives, wages are generally higher in the global manufacturing industries and gender disparity lower. Furthermore, the women's ability to go out in the world and earn on a regular basis gives them a feeling of self-sufficiency. Scholars like Kibria highlight that in addition to economic freedom, women value their new-found access to social networks on factory floors, replacing their earlier isolation at home.

However, there are instances when wages are withheld or delayed by two or three months in order to retain workers from leaving, therefore, limiting their freedom and mobility in society. Overtime work is often contested and brings forth the notion of intersectionality and triple-burden faced by women. While workers may be forced to work overtime, married women are likely to bear the additional burden of their household duties. In contrast, unmarried women welcome overtime work and see it as an opportunity of supplementing their wages. Even though workers often build bonds and create a social network, it does not translate into collective organizations and unions to put forth demands for better working conditions or workers' rights ('power with'). Employers are often seen to use strong-arm tactics to coerce those found to be trying to unionise and therefore have been successful in keeping the garment industry predominantly non-unionised. A key issue

favouring the employers in keeping the garment industry non-unionised is that the workers in question are mostly young women who have migrated from rural areas where the concept of trade unions is not pronounced and is patriarchal in nature.

The economic benefits of women's labour force participation have spilled over onto other spheres of their personal lives. Paul-Majumdar and Begum argue that women have experienced greater voice and decision-making power in household due to the value of their economic benefaction, enhanced feeling of self-value and, in some cases larger personal autonomy ('power within'). The access to earning power has allowed several women to renegotiate their roles in marriages, while others have challenged the cultural norms and walked out of abusive marriages or reached out to take care of elderly parents. Furthermore, a national consultation exercise conducted by NGO Working Group of the World Bank reported that garment export industries and NGOs were the sole formal organizations unanimously deemed to have a positive influence on the urban poor and scholars have argued that the host country benefits from foreign direct investment (FDI) as it can act as an effective weapon for economic development. Several scholars like Spielberg rightfully project the negative aspects of the ground reality for garment workers in Bangladesh however, the women workers argue to be fully aware of the exploitation and comparatively lower wages (to the West). The women workers in global garment industry argue that regardless of the conditions, the job has certainly provided them with material and personal benefits, an opinion often overlooked in the literature. Furthermore, a 1997 survey showed five percent of women had encountered sexual harassment in the garment factory. It is argued that

a small percentage of women reported to have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace and were often more likely to experience a mishappen on their journey back. In addition, studies in Dhaka's (capital city of Bangladesh) urban slums show that several parents preferred their daughters to work at the garment export factories because they were considered safer options for their young daughters.

Domínguez et al. problematizes the argument that the current export-based jobs are dignified alternatives for all women in Global South. Although, globalisation and interconnected has formed common patterns across faraway localities, it is troublesome to assume that the experiences of women in Bangladesh or other Asian export sector would be parallel to those of Mexico or Central America. In contrast to the case study of Bangladesh, Domínguez et al. argues that several observations made in Mexico reveal that women's participation in labour force, working in maquiladoras did not reap economic benefits or increased agency in most cases. Several former maquiladora workers have initiated small businesses such as beauty parlours instead of working in export industries due to health and financial reasons. Case studies and interviews revealed that the wages of women workers in maquila factories did not even meet the Mexican minimum wage of US\$ 174 and were insufficient to meet the basic needs of the workers' and their families. In order to cover the basic basket needs, women workers were likely to work overtime which would result in twelve hours shifts or complement their job as a maquila worker with other informal roles such as domestic workers. In similar events to Bangladesh, the economic contribution does not change their traditional roles and may not satisfy strategic needs of women,

rather the women workers experience double burden with increased household responsibilities. The sense of autonomy and independence in many cases is dependent on the age and marital status of workers. Petros and Quintero and Dragustnovis argue that young girls who earn wages through working in export industries experience a sense of self-worth and increased independence however, as observed in Northern Mexican cities, married women may appreciate their role as a secondary breadwinner, they still experience large responsibility for their family. Instead of representing an opportunity for women to increase their agency, maquila workers incomes are only a means for survival and rarely translate into them questioning patriarchal norms.

In contrast to the Bangladeshi women workers, several studies from mid-1980s to early 2000s in Mexico and Central America reveal a noticeable pattern of sexual harassment by managers, supervisors and male co-workers including touching, lewd behaviour, and sexual comments. The women interviewed for the case studies also stated that they would not want their daughters to work as maquila workers as long as it could be avoided. In addition to sexual harassment, the case of killings in Ciudad Juárez highlight the increasing problem of extreme violence faced by women, in the method of systematic killings involving torture. These types of killings often include several maquiladora workers as victims and is seen as a growing problem . Blanco and Villa argue that the improved economic states or contributions by women challenge the existing patriarchal norms and traditional gender relations in a society, and under selective circumstances, may ignite rage and violence against women. As individuals' women are unlikely to bring forth demands or fight for human rights, however, in

Mexico, there is a strong trade union presence. Several NGOs and transnational solidarity networks such as Coalition of Justice in Maquiladoras (CJM) and Servicio, Desarrollo y Paz, AC (SEDEPAC) among others have developed since the late 1980s corresponding with arrangements for North American Free trade Agreement (NAFTA). These organisations are associated with transnational networks like Maquiladora Solidarity Network (Canada) and international partners in America. The collective organizations although have mixed outcomes when confronting global manufacturing units, the overall success in regard to women's capacity building is commended.

### Section Three: Empowerment in Global Service

This section will focus on two forms of Global services: domestic labour and nursing. In terms of migrant labour, the section will look at the cases of Latin American migrants in the United States of America, and Zimbabwean workers in Johannesburg. The aim is to highlight that globalisation of reproductive labour is not only a phenomenon in Global North but in developing nations of Global South as well. In both the cases, the essay will argue that economic empowerment for women is limited and comes with a cost of mobility, legal barriers, and exploitation. In contrast, the case study of Indian nurses in the Gulf countries reveal economic empowerment, training, and increased agency. However, the problem of legal contracts and limited mobility constraints the opportunity for women's empowerment.

The concept of 'new international division of reproductive labour' (NIDRL) portrays that reproductive labour formerly given by women in 'core' countries in progressively supplied by women from 'peripheral' states who have travelled to the 'core' states in order to undertake domestic

labour. Driven by an escalating demand for migrant domestic workers throughout richer countries across the globe and the supply of workers by less affluent countries, the global services industry is linked to the globalisation dynamics that continue to recast social hierarchy domestically and globally. On the demand side, feminisation of the labour force, the ageing population and masculinisation of women's work patterns makes it difficult to continue reproductive roles therefore, the purchase of reproductive services from migrant workers allows these women to continue their role in the work force. This phenomenon is severely structured by intersecting factors alongside gender, which as class, race, and ethnicity. Studies show that affluent families in California prefer Filipino or Mexican women as caretakers as they are stereotyped to be docile and possess remarkable nurturing skills. Similarly, In South Africa, Zimbabwean women migrants are preferred as they are considered 'loyal, clean and cheap' workers .

Several interviews and case studies of migrant caregivers by Zimmerman et al. reveal the tragic conditions borne by several women migrants. Claudia Gate, a 19-year-old immigrant from Chile testified before the Labour Commissioner in Sonoma County that her employers in California paid her only \$50 a month even though she worked 24/7 as a servant, cook and gardener. In addition, she was made to sleep on the floor, her passport was held onto by the employers and withheld her pay for more than a year. The Mujeres Unidas y Activas (MUA), a collective organization supporting Latina immigrant domestic workers report that workers often have to suffer circumstances approaching slavery ('power with'). This highlights the limited extent of economic empowerment accessed by illegal migrant workers in the 'core' countries as not only the wages are

below the minimum wage rate of U.S.A. (US\$ 7.5/hour) in most cases but the amount is often withheld in order to reduce physical mobility of the employee. In contrast, illegal migrant workers in Johannesburg, South Africa, reveal that while the job is exploitative and demeaning in nature, the limited remittances sent back to their families in their home countries allows them to build a better future. Many women especially Zimbabwean workers complained about the long working hours, exploitative work, poor pay and sexual abuse in several instances however, they also emphasised on the need for their current jobs to fulfil the needs of their family and the future. Judith Atanasio, an undocumented domestic caregiver in Johannesburg focused on the depersonalisation and disposable treatment received by workers as the employers “needed our labour but not us”. While the cases in South Africa reveal fulfilment of economic empowerment to an extent, from the perspective of the migrant workers, there is still a lack of agency (‘power within’) and decision-making.

The global nursing case chain (GNCC) in another strand of global service industry and is often supported by governmental organizations. The supplying nations, India in this case, promote labour export programmes as it provides several benefits including: relieving burden on the global labour market and securing significant foreign exchange through remittances. The state of Kerala set-up a state-owned company, Overseas Development and Employment Promotion Consultants Ltd. in 1995 that supplied over 600 nurses to Saudi Arabia in 2005 and continued to speak to other authorities like Kuwait and UAE. Key reasons for women, especially from the federal state of Kerala, has been economic growth, desire for more professional experience and autonomy (‘power to’). Percot argues that nurses in Gulf

countries and Western states challenge the traditional gender-based restrictions and roles and continue to increase female agency. The migration to another country provides women with a better opportunity to not only be the breadwinners in a relation but also provide care for the parents, which is unusual in the Indian context as a woman. This portrays the achievement of practical and strategic gender needs for Keralese nurses in Gulf states as well as economic empowerment, increased agency and opportunities for further experiences. However, there still are barriers to women’s empowerment as legal nurses as well.

When advertised to the job of nursing, women are the ‘obvious’ choice as they are stereotyped to contain natural attributes like submissive and self-suffice. The same argument is made for married women who are portrayed to benefit the role due to their ‘maternal instincts’ and nurturing nature. This highlights the discriminatory nature of recruitment as the male-counterparts may not fit into the stereotype to work as a nurse. Furthermore, training nurses for emigration – referred to as ‘business process outsourcing’ – has become a fast-growing industry for private companies to invest in due to large profits, however, this has resulted in several cases of exploitation. Jha puts forth a case of Indian nurses in Saudi Arabia, sponsored by Nakhuba House Medical Services Company, a Riyadh-based firm, who were forced to stay and work for the Saudi Ministry of Health even after completing the three-years contract in the country. While such cases of exploitation cannot be disregarded, the more regulated work of migrant nurses, paired with required skills in the framework of a global nursing shortage provides for greater global mobility and agency in comparison to other services like domestic work.

Section Four: Past and Future Actions

While platforms like the Beijing Platform for Action, the United Nations and Millennium Development Goals have promoted women's empowerment, there are additional ways to reduce exploitation in Global manufacturing and service industries and increase opportunities for empowerment.

In regard to the global manufacturing industries, Kabeer argues that formal or semi-formal paid jobs presents the most favourable pathway to women's empowerment however, such employment opportunities especially in the public sector is declining. Therefore, it is unlikely for men and women currently employed in the informal sector to access such opportunities offered by formal work in the near or distant future. Furthermore, Domínguez et al. and Kabeer present evidence showing a greater eagerness on the part of women in export industries to participate in collective bargaining with the administration ('power with'). As portrayed in Section One, it is a key component in women's empowerment and is lacking in the Global manufacturing industries. There is a question of effectiveness of collective organisations if attached to the government or privately run. The case study of El Salvador shows some unions have started to assist maquiladoras workers to form unions despite the anti-union attitudes from private companies. Similar cases have been found in Nicaragua and Honduras. A key aspect of their mission is to denounce bad working conditions and low wages, and further demand for improved conditions including capacity-building and training.

In regard to the global service industries, a key concern regarding the exploitation of undocumented migrant workers has been about the legal barriers associated with country policies or guidelines. Lindio-McGovern and Wallimann

disclose that in the case of South African domestic workers, the 'legal' migrants as well as domestic caregivers are recipients of one of the most notable and extensive efforts across the globe in regard to formally regulated paid work. However, a majority of the workers are excluded from labour rights due to the 'illegal' presence in the country. Similarly, several scholars argue that there is a systematic use of immigrants and coloured people as disposable workers in the United States. Through the observation of Mario Barrera and Kitty Calavita, Zimmerman et al. state that while immigration policies of U.S.A. allow for 'recruitment' or importation of migrant labour, the policies of the state deny the labour the rights of citizen workers therefore leaving them exposed to exploitation. This allows the state to maximise the service of the workers while minimising the cost linked with providing for the labourers. This highlights the potential failures of nation-states in incorporating the large illegal migrant group of labourers. While the solution is debatable, legal protection against exploitation of labour is key into increasing opportunities of empowerment.

## Conclusion

The different approaches to gender and development project a diverse range of understanding of empowerment. Some of the central themes of women's empowerment include, increased agency and decision making ('power within'), access to resources ('power to') and collective voice ('power with'). In addition, economic empowerment is not only access to income but only the agency to decide how it should be spent. The specified factors contributed in analysing the extent to which jobs in Global manufacturing and services provided women in Global South with the opportunity for empowerment.

The analysis of women's empowerment in Bangladesh's garment export industry reveals that while several Western scholars and media argue that the working conditions of women in these factories are 'wretched', for women employees it provides an opportunity for economic empowerment, increased agency and decision-making power at home, and self-value. In comparison to Bangladesh, studies in Mexico reveal a drastically different story for women working in Global manufacturing units. There is limited scope for economic empowerment and its spill over effect onto increased agency, decision-making or self-worth. However, the growing membership in trade unions ('power with') is visible. Therefore, women's empowerment in terms of economic empowerment, ability to make decisions, increased agency and collective action is dependent on the contexts and is not the same across Global South.

In the cases discussed, women's empowerment in Global manufacturing was only achieved to an extent and is limited by intersecting characteristics and societal norms. The analysis of women's empowerment in the case of migrant domestic workers in the United States of America and Johannesburg, South Africa reveal that workers are not only exploited by employers but limit physical mobility, legal mobility, and opportunities for agency. However, there are collective organizations that attempt at correcting or assisting the migrant workers as is the case in U.S.A. This shows that it is not global but regional inequalities exist in the Global Care Chains. In contrast, the nursing industries offer more of an opportunity for increased women's employment in regard to agency ('power within'), autonomy, decision-making ('power to') and economic empowerment.

While international agencies and governments recognise the growing potential of labour trade and profit from MNCs, there is still a need to assess the exploitation of labour. Certain corrections can be made by adding laws to protect illegal migrant workers and providing resources to women in manufacturing units with resources to build collective unions.

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