

FOURTEEN

‘FABRIC-ATING FASHION’

The Clothing Industries

APPLIED CASE STUDY

Since 2000, Lesotho, a small country in southern Africa, has been the leading African exporter of clothing to the USA. As such, it is influenced by both global and local discourses about gender, labour and centre–periphery relations in formal and informal negotiations between workers and employers.

Feminized Labour

Chapter 10 indicates that the labour force in the garment industry is largely female, and Lesotho is no exception. The reasons, from an employer point of view, are fairly clear: women form an acquiescent labour force, easier to control, with one stated reason for using fewer men being that they tend to be more physically violent and inclined to vandalize factory equipment during labour disputes. As such, the factories find it easier to pay women less, provide fewer opportunities for development and promotion, and employ them in fragmented labour situations.

This is supported, in the Lesotho context, by the fact that both society and politics, including labour politics, take highly patriarchal and paternalistic discourses, prioritizing male leadership and male labour, effacing women’s voices and allowing the exploitation of labour through patriarchal discourses which prevent women from perceiving themselves as deserving of the same rights as male workers. The unions are also largely male–run and participate in the same paternalistic discourses, with the General Secretary of the LECAWU (the main local union representing garment workers) being compared to Moses. Anti-union discourses take on obvious subtexts of gender and sexual control, with references to union leaders

as ‘boys’ who are ‘leading factory girls astray’. Women are thus the bulk of the workforce, but have little say even in their own representation.

However, this situation is complicated by the fact that, in the Lesotho context, the decline in the (male-dominated) mining industry means that many households are becoming dependent on women as the primary earner. On the one hand, this means that women will be more in need of jobs and less inclined to negotiate over terms and conditions (as can be seen in the fact that, in Lesotho, employment in the garment industries has risen over the past decade while average wages have declined). On the other hand, it also gives women greater power within the household, as the chief earner, which could lead to a long-term equalization of gender relations. Gender norms in the garment industry are thus complicated by local conditions and by political discourses.

Centre–Periphery Relations

The Lesotho garment industry, at first glance, seems like a typical example of the uneven centre–periphery relations discussed throughout *Global Shift*. In Sub-Saharan Africa, foreign buyers dominate the chain and dictate the direction for the local factories, meaning that, rather than setting their own terms, the Lesothan industry is subject to the US market. However, to complicate the picture, many of the garment manufacturers are neither indigenous nor American, but South East Asian; the largest ‘local’ company is Taiwanese owned. The situation is thus not just one of the centre exploiting the periphery, but different parts of the periphery exploiting each other while at the same time being both exploited by the centre, in a complex globe-spanning web of power relations.

Labour Relations

This complex situation also impacts upon labour relations. Locally, the trade unions are heavily involved with party politics on the national level, leading to internal fragmentation, and the government treading a thin line between keeping international trade viable and keeping the unions happy. However, this situation is complicated by the fact that many of the owners are South East Asian, where the standard for treatment of labour is different, and where there is a consensus-based system of negotiation in which strikes and industrial conflict are rare, leading to labour clashes being as much about clashes of culture as about industrial relations. Consequently, the US Embassy occasionally has to intervene to break up deadlocks which are technically outside its purview, to ensure continued supplies of clothing to US retailers. The unions themselves have also begun taking on a transnational world-view (see Chapter 8); as well as the International Labour Organization being involved in keeping standards up, LECAWU also made formal

connections with its US equivalent, UNITE, for cross-border organization, allowing UNITE to put pressure on domestic buyers on LECAWU's behalf.

Conclusion

The Lesotho case thus shows not only how labour, work and gender are affected by the global nature of garment industry, but also how all of these factors blend into each other, with gender issues affecting labour relations and all of these influencing, and being influenced by, development discourses. These factors must be considered together in order to understand the situation.

QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the reasons why women in particular make a good source of acquiescent labour in the garment industry.
2. Compare and contrast the labour situation in the Lesotho clothing factories with those of the workers for McDonald's in Europe (Chapter 8).
3. What could the potential problems be with a transnational union agreement such as the one between LECAWU and UNITE?
4. Other than alliances between unions, what other ways could there be for transnational labour organization?

FURTHER READING

- Bair, Jennifer (2008) Surveying the post-MFA landscape: what prospects for the global South post-quota? *Competition and Change*, 12 (1): 3–10.
- Gibbs, Tim (2005) 'Union Boys in Caps Leading Factory Girls Astray?' The politics of labour reform in Lesotho's 'Feminised' garment industry. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31 (1): 95–115.
- Kasvio, Antti (1985) The internationalization of production and the changing position of women workers in the textile, clothing, and electronics industries. *Acta Sociologica*, 28 (3): 275–281.
- McIntosh, Robert (1993) Sweated labour: female needleworkers in industrializing Canada. *Labour/Le Travail*, 32: 105–138.