

Global Economic Restructuring and Women's Experiences

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Shifts in the world capitalist system have had a profound effect on the forms and conditions of women's work, and thus on their experiences of oppression and their struggles for liberation as both women and workers. Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania — two places where I have had the opportunity to live and carry out research — are almost halfway around the world from each other. Recent changes in their economies — rapid industrialization in the one case and extensive deindustrialization in the other — may at first glance also appear to be worlds apart. In reality, though, these two apparently opposite developments are related aspects of a common process of global capitalist restructuring.

These different, though linked, forms of economic transformation and the crises they generate also have curiously similar impacts on women's lives and roles. Both building on and reinforcing existing forms of gender subordination, the effect of global economic integration in both Negeri Sembilan and Pittsburgh has been to promote the proletarianization of women while also profoundly increasing the insecurity and casualization of women's work. These two cases are thus instructive of the role gender plays in the current transformation of capitalism on a world scale and in the subsequent recomposition of the international working class.

Capitalist Development, Rapid Industrialization, and Malay Women

Beginning in the period of British colonial domination and accelerating in the postcolonial era initiated in 1957, Malaysia has been experiencing a process of intensive capitalist development. Since the early 1970s, the national government has been pursuing a specific model of development based on export-processing industrialization, with an aspiration in recent years of becoming one of the Newly Industrialized Countries as represented presently by the Four Tigers of Asia (Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan). After a serious economic crisis in the mid-1980s, resulting in the retrenchment of tens of thousands of workers, the local economy has shown a steady and rapid growth, including an increasing conversion from the production of primary resources (especially natural rubber, palm oil, and tropical timber) to the manufacture of industrial components and products.

The Malaysian developmental strategy is, however, characterized by dependence on one or two key industries, most notably electronics, and the continued domination of the local economy by foreign investors. A 1992 report in *Far Eastern Economic Review* claims: "The cutting edge for this shift in priorities, which has made Malaysia one of the fastest growing economies in the world, has been a

surge in foreign manufacturing investments which hit MS 16 billion (US\$6.2 billion) in 1991." This surge was facilitated by an "overhauling of the country's investment rules in 1987 to favour foreigners." A 1989 report in the same publication indicates the entry of Hong Kong and Taiwanese companies into a situation dominated by Japanese, American and British firms. All of this sets the stage for the changing experiences of Malay women.

During 1978–79, when I carried out field research in the Kuala Pilah area of Negeri Sembilan, young women for the first time in their community's history were being drawn in large numbers into the system of wage labor. Many of these women, along with their female counterparts from other regions of Malaysia, formed the backbone of the workforce in the Japanese- and American-owned electronics plants that had mushroomed since the early 1970s as part of the new strategy of export-processing or "offshore sourcing" by international capital. Other young women, also working in Free Trade Zones, were employed by the longer-standing but expanding textile industry. More recent reports indicate that 80 percent of the 85,000 jobs that have been created in electronics alone are held by women. And 70 percent of these women workers are Malay. (Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society, made up primarily of people of Malay, Chinese, and Indian descent; Malays are the majority group, but had been primarily rural.)

Some of these new jobs are located in the rural areas, but most require Malay women to relocate, at least on a temporary basis, from their rural villages to urban settings or industrial zones. Young, unmarried female factory workers were most prevalent in the 1970s and early 1980s. There are indications, however, that women are now staying longer in these jobs through the experience of marriage and childbearing. This is a significant new development that will affect female roles, family patterns, and the structure of both rural and urban Malay society.

The main attraction for multinational companies to locate their plants in Malaysia is the availability of a cheap, though well-educated, labor force. A 1989 report, for example, indicated that female production workers in electronics factories were paid around US\$4.20 a day. At the same time, many of these young women have at least a high school education. Such wage scales are in turn supplemented by other economic benefits for investing in a free-trade zone, such as tax holidays and exemptions from import-export duties. There are also the advantages for employers of a political climate that prevents labor militancy, including stringent control over union organizing and activity. The laxity of health and safety regulations provides another attraction for investors which, however, has very deleterious results for factory workers and local communities. This includes the recent occurrence of a number of deaths among women working in electronics plants that are thought to be linked to the exposure to toxic chemicals throughout the industry.

Capitalist development and the growth of export-processing industries has also meant the expansion and transformation of other aspects of Malaysia's economy. Negeri Sembilan women now regularly travel to nearby towns or to the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, seeking work in the clerical, sales, and service sectors. They take jobs as office clerks, typists, telephone operators, sales- persons in Chinese-owned stores, beauticians, or workers in the tourist industry, thus entering occupations that are heavily feminized in both developed and developing societies. Recent moves toward privatization of much of the public sector, including the postal, telecommunications, and transportation services, will affect several of these jobs. If trends in other countries are any indication, women clerical and service workers are likely to experience falling wages and greater job insecurity.

At the same time, the mothers of these young women, while remaining in their rural environment, are drawn further into the petty-commodity production of rubber. The tapping of rubber by Malay smallholders began in the colonial era but in areas such as Negeri Sembilan has undergone an expansion during the post-colonial period, resulting in the entry of more women into this economic activity. While they still remain outside of the wage-work system, the participation of these women

in small-scale rubber production ties their income more closely to international fluctuations in the demand for natural rubber and increases their vulnerability to downturns in the global capitalist economy. All of these women — whatever their form of employment — likewise find themselves increasingly dependent on mass-produced commodities supplied through a competitive market framework, to meet basic needs for food, clothing, and housing as well as to provide new necessities such as televisions, running water, school uniforms, and motorbikes.

There are disagreements among both researchers and activists concerning the effect of these developments on women's status and on gender relations. Some argue that women's increasing participation in wage work and greater access to a cash income increases their personal autonomy and their decision-making power within households and families. Others focus on the relegation of young women, compared to their male counterparts, to low-paid and insecure jobs in the wage labor sector, and the increasing responsibility of more mature women for subsistence production and household work, while the men in their families become the primary providers of cash. There is also the question of ideology and values. Thus some argue that participation in the capitalist sector introduces young women to liberal democratic values, while others point to the role of factory regimes in strengthening patriarchal tendencies while undermining more positive aspects of traditional cultures.

The situation in Negeri Sembilan — where the traditional matrilineal system ensured women's access to productive resources, promoted their active participation in economic production and community life, and encouraged a high valuation of women's roles — allows a clear picture of the undermining of women's status as a result of capitalist development. While both younger and older Negeri Sembilan women continue their active participation in the changing economy, women's traditional economic roles are being devalued, and there is emerging a situation of unequal male and female access to important new resources. Perhaps the most positive aspect of these women's growing participation in the capitalist sector is their increasing interaction with women from other ethnic groups and from other regions of the country. This may help to break down longstanding prejudices and create a stronger basis for worker and female solidarity.

Deindustrialization and Women's Experiences in the Pittsburgh Region

While Malaysia is undergoing a process of rapid industrialization, the Pittsburgh region is experiencing the effects of a precipitous industrial decline.

Disinvestment in the American steel industry, and its virtual collapse in the Pittsburgh region in the early 1980s, has reshaped the whole picture of employment throughout the metropolitan area and in the small towns located along the nearby rivers. A recent report indicates that "between 1975 and 1987 Pittsburgh's manufacturing industries (primarily metals, electrical machinery, and transportation equipment) lost 128,000 jobs, a 49 percent decline. Over the same period, nonmanufacturing industries gained 87,500 jobs, a 13.6 percent increase." (*Allegheny County Labor Market Analysis*, p.37.) The net loss of jobs from 1979 to 1986 was over 70,000 while the weight of the service sector in the local economy significantly increased.

The immediate impact of the shutdown of the steel mills in the early to mid-1980s was massive unemployment throughout the region, affecting not only steelworkers but those whose jobs depended on the revenues generated by the mills. A study of women in two former mill towns says:

When so many steel plants closed down, cut back, or relocated, most other sources of gainful employment faded away, too. Associated industries, bunks, shops, positions in towns and boroughs, and many other possible places to turn for work, disappeared. To find new options twenty or thirty

miles away was not possible; everyone in the area was in the same boat....

It was not just the skilled blue collar jobs, many of them held by male heads of households but some by women as well, for which the region was known, that were lost. The once skilled workers in the steel industry were out looking for jobs, any jobs, but work was not available. Many of the study women had once been clerical workers but such work also disappeared. It was an economic wasteland.

Even more indicative of the depth of the crisis was the continuing pattern of unemployment and underemployment throughout the 1980s:

Unemployment continues to haunt these households. At the time the interviews were conducted [i.e., 1987-88] about one-third of the adult household figures who were in the labor market were unemployed husbands, the women themselves, and adult children. Only among the husbands were a slight majority working full-time. Many employed members were working only part-time and some of them considered their work temporary. The majority of the unemployed are actively seeking work in spite of setbacks.

In the late 1980s there were reports of some economic recovery in the Pittsburgh region and even a decline in unemployment figures. However, the developments described above represent not just a temporary crisis of unemployment and job loss but rather a fundamental restructuring of the region's economy. Gone are the reasonably well-paying jobs in heavy industry and the other enterprises they helped to support. The majority of people who used to work in the mills and related industries — as well as their younger family members newly entering the labor force — now largely find themselves in lower-paid, insecure, often part-time or temporary jobs. Most of these jobs are in the service and clerical sectors, or in light industries. These changes have a particular effect on African American families:

Black households had the worst time with unemployment in a situation where all households suffered. Black household members were virtually wiped out of the skilled blue collar jobs that had been the life blood of the river communities for so long. In these households, also, women were far more likely to bear the major burden of household financial support since so many were single parents.

Beginning in the early 1990s, yet another cycle of unemployment and job loss is affecting the Pittsburgh region, especially involving layoffs among white-collar workers, i.e., those in typically feminized clerical and service areas. A front-page article in the July 18, 1993, Pittsburgh Post Gazette was headlined "Layoffs Pile Up Despite Recovery" and reported that at least 6,700 jobs had been lost in the region since the start of the year. Part of this new job loss results from "downsizing" in the health care industry, a significant area of local employment since the closing of the mills. The official unemployment rate for the Pittsburgh area currently fluctuating around 6.5—7.0 percent. Some analysts, however, argue that the real unemployment rate is probably double the official rate.

The jobless rate among African Americans in this region is more than three times that for cities, so unemployment in the Black community is at least 20 percent. While the local unemployment rate for women is reported to be lower than that for men, this is partly accounted for by the fact that women more readily accept part time and temporary work. At the same time, the wage gap between women and men remains. A report published by the Pennsylvania Commission for Women (1991) indicates that the "1985 median income of full-time working women was approximately 63 percent of that of her male counterpart." According to a local City Planning Department report, for poor women who head household; in Pittsburgh the gap is 45 cents to the dollar.

These developments have had particular, though complex, effects on women. The decline and dismantling of the steel industry in the early 1980s resulted in job loss for both women and men. For the modest numbers of women who had obtained jobs in the steel mills, they experienced the phenomenon of “last hired, first fired (or laid off).” These female steelworkers found it even harder than their male counterparts to obtain alternative employment using their acquired skills. A larger number of women suffered job loss because of the domino effect whereby the closing of the mills precipitated the shutdown or curtailment of other businesses and sources of employment.

At the same time, because of high rates of male unemployment, there was increased pressure on women to seek and take jobs — any sort of jobs—in order to support their families. The shift to a service economy likewise favored the hiring of women over men. There was a significant increase in the number of women engaged in paid employment in this region from 1975 through the early 1980s, although the absolute numbers had declined again by 1985. (This decline in absolute numbers of female workers is most likely due to the massive out-migration of families, estimated to be about 7.31 percent of the total population between 1980 and 1990. Women’s percentage of the overall labor force went from 28.5 percent of the total in 1975 to 32.9 percent in 1980 and then showed an even larger jump to 41.6 percent in 1985.

This change must be attributed in part to the growing social trend for women to work outside the home, but it is also related to the particular economic conditions in this region. These conditions simultaneously pushed women into the wage-labor force while offering them only low paid service or clerical sector work and continuing job insecurity as well. Many wage-earning women in the Pittsburgh region, like their counterparts in Malaysia, also find themselves distanced from family and community support systems either through the necessity of long daily commutes or because they have had to relocate in order to obtain a job, housing, or other basic necessities.

As in the case of Malay women, there are ongoing debates about the meaning of these changes for women’s role and status. Some argue that Pittsburgh women’s growing participation in the wage labor force and their increased contributions to household income represent a positive change in their roles and a probable rise in their autonomy and decision-making power within the household. Others, however, point to the undesirable and often involuntary conditions under which many women in the Pittsburgh region are taking on these responsibilities. There is some indication that the crisis conditions under which recent shifts in gender roles have occurred lead both women and men to view these changes in a negative light. This in turn generates resistance to the ideological acceptance of the new work and family roles in which women and men are actually engaged.

While women’s responsibility for income provision increases when their families face economic crisis, so, too, does their responsibility for emotional support of family members and for stretching scarce family resources the result is an increased work load within the home and the reinforcement rather than transformation of this traditional female role. Added to this is the dramatic physical deterioration and weakening of the social fabric of many of the communities in which these women live. In many cases, this deterioration has reached the point where street violence — including drive-by shootings, drug trafficking, and gang killings — has become a significant factor in everyday life. This crisis of local community life is a side effect of the rise in unemployment, out-migration of local residents, and the decline of basic infrastructure and services. It serves to further constrain and limit women’s autonomy and degree of social support.

These contradictory dynamics have continued and even been exacerbated during the recent recession. The situation for women in the wage-labor force has also deteriorated. For example, there is a growing tendency to hire workers on a temporary basis without health care or other social benefits, one aspect of the casualization of the workforce we are seeing throughout the U.S. Thus most of the major corporate employers in the Pittsburgh region now acquire their clerical staff

through temporary agencies. The kinds of jobs presently available and those projected for growth in this region over the next few years are generally in the low-paying category. This is particularly true for traditionally female occupations. The most promising area of work in the Pittsburgh region in recent years has been in the field of health care. However, there is a real concern that the restructuring of the medical industry noted above will eliminate many of the middle-level professional positions — e.g., nursing and technical roles — while leaving unchanged the low-paying jobs of aides, housekeepers, and kitchen help. In many cases, the income from available jobs is not enough to compensate for the loss of Aid to Families with Dependent Children benefits when a family moves from dependence on welfare to reliance on wage work.

Conclusion

The political implications that can be derived from these case studies of Negeri Sembilan and Pittsburgh are many. Only two will be mentioned here. First, there is the obvious need for recognition of the greatly expanded role of women in the capitalist workforce and thus in emerging struggles of the working class in both dependent and imperialist countries. This awareness of women's centrality in class struggle must be combined with an understanding of the particular conditions under which they both labor and resist — i.e., extreme insecurity of employment, continued responsibility for family survival and support, and confusion about changing gender roles given the confounding ways in which capitalist restructuring has exploited the work of both women and men.

It follows from this that there is a need to give increased attention to the way in which women's experiences and thus political demands frequently combine issues of gender, race or ethnicity, and class. Second, it should be obvious from these two case studies that any attempt to engage women in organized political struggles must be based on an internationally informed analysis of the situations they face as well as a consistent effort to develop international solidarity based on recognition of common problems while also respecting cultural differences and indigenous perspectives. Only through such an approach can the international recomposition of the working class driven by the needs of capital be transformed into a revival of international class solidarity and struggle to meet the needs and visions of workers themselves.

P.S.

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