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The Global Market and the Status of Women

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The Global Market and the Status of Women

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SOC 4090-03/WMS 4000-01: Gender and Sexuality: Global Issues
Spring 2013

Dr. Julianne Weinzimmer

Dr. Weinzimmer notes that Ms. Kirksey selected a very important topic and covered the issue from local cultural, economic, and transnational perspectives. She ties her case to global issues of exploitation within capitalism and the status of women in a succinct and persuasive manner. She tackles a very big issue remarkably well for a short paper and successfully incorporates sources and theoretical perspectives. Her writing style is engaging and she directly tackles the most important elements of the issue she is discussing.

Editor's note: This course was not designated Integrated Writing at the time this paper was written, but the course did meet the IW requirements and is in the process of being adopted as an IW course.

The global market has afforded many individuals opportunities for employment that would have otherwise not existed. Women, in particular, have been affected by globalization and the spread of the capitalist model as factory jobs have become increasingly available. Although a factory job is a form of employment, these women are exploited by the system and often do not have the resources to receive fair treatment and establish autonomy. Operating within the framework of feminism and human rights advocacy, this paper will analyze the status of Indian women who work in textile factories. It shall address the question of how lower-caste Indian women are oppressed by the current economic model and what options are available to eradicate this injustice.

In order to fully consider the topic of the exploitation of Indian women who work in the textile industry, the factors of gender and power within the Indian culture must be discussed. As in many countries where a patriarchal system is established, women in India are not perceived to be citizens by their own existence. In the current social and economic environment, a woman exists through her relationship to men. Similarly, a woman's value is dictated by how much money she can bring into a union with a man. This is efficiently illustrated in Linda Stone and Caroline James's article "Dowry, Bride-Burning and Female Power," which addresses how the dowry system (the exchange of commercial goods from the bride to the groom) is unlawfully still in practice and the bride-burnings that occur when women are perceived to be economic burdens to men and their families.

According to Stone and James, the dowry system was first established to "perpetuate [the] divisions [between status groups] over the generations to ensure that control over property remained within the...group[s]" (309). The authors argue the dowry system is inextricable from the class system and therefore the subordination of lower socioeconomic groups by higher ones (Stone and James 309). The dowry system is often used by men to facilitate "hypergamy," or marrying someone of equal or greater status to ascend the social ladder. The results are fatal for the bride if the groom does not feel sufficiently compensated:

A new bride is harassed and criticized for the pitiful dowry she has brought. She is encouraged to wrangle more and more from her family, yet her in-laws remain unsatisfied until, at some point, the situation explodes into an attempt on her life...The most common means of murder is soaking the bride in kerosene and setting her aflame [thus, bride-burning]. (Stone and James 311-2)

The phenomenon of the dowry system and bride-burning also exists because women are socially viewed as worthless, burdensome beings that must redeem themselves through monetary and/or economic gain. In this way, it becomes apparent that women in India have been commoditized, therefore exploited. Women are dehumanized through this process.

In a similar way, Indian women who work are not free of exploitation. A description of the economic progress of India will provide contextual information for understanding the status of women in India.

India is a blossoming economic power in today's global market. Beginning in the 1990s, India's economic liberation hurtled the country to the forefront of economic development by way of "industrial deregulation, privatization of state-owned enterprises, and reduced controls on foreign trade and investment" (Central Intelligence Agency). The Indian textile industry and how it operates in the global economy is a prime example of how the elements of the country's development have created a social environment that is harmful to the lower-caste women.

The majority of workers in India's textile industry are women. In a report by Corporate Catalyst India, it is stated that "the Indian textile industry contributes about 14 per cent to industrial production, 4 per cent to the country's gross domestic product (GDP), and 17 per cent to the country's export earnings" ("A Brief Report on Textile Industry in India"). The companies who request the materials these factories produce are typically transnational corporations – especially corporations that are headquartered in the United States of America, Canada, and Europe. Therefore, the textile

industry in India is the country's most lucrative source of earnings from international trade. Because the Indian textile business operates within the global capital model, it is spurred by the principles of supply-and-demand and fueled by the exploitation of a gender and socioeconomic minority group – lower-caste women.

The conditions that these women face are long work hours, no breaks, verbal and physical abuse, and sexual harassment. In the article “Neither ‘Woman’ or ‘Worker’? Narrative, Identity, and Subjectivity in the Life Story of an Indian Factory Worker,” University of Michigan’s Jayati Lal utilizes the narrative of a woman factory-worker, Rani, to demonstrate the complexities of the intersectionality of an Indian woman’s caste and gender within the social sphere. Rani describes to the author the contrasting environments of a textile factory and a factory that assembles televisions, the latter in which she works. Rani vehemently asserts that she would not choose to work in the textile factory because of the harassment that a woman may be subject to

[I]n export work [textiles] there are no obstructions to this sort of behavior [harassment]. Over there, there are so many tailors...who are like that and who speak like that...There is a big different in the two [industries. In garments] – the [tailors] are such that...they do things to girls, they seduce...them... they will trick many girls. (Lal 4)

Not only must the women who work in textile factories endure harassment, the women also find their personal schedules ignored when they are required, “often without advance notice” to report for “night-shift duty” (Lal 3). This is a cause for questioning the morality of the women who work in the factories because the managers (who act more as overseers) are typically men (Lal 4). This serves only to exacerbate the social injustices that lower-caste women who work in the textile factories endure. As women they are chastised because they exist, as workers they are criminalized when they must report at night, and as members of a lower caste they are compelled to work so that they and their families may survive. It should be noted that the

exploitation of women within the Indian garment-producing system is not accidental.

The inferior status and desperation of the women factory workers coincide with the women's acceptance of insufficient work conditions and pay: "women workers had lower reservation wages than their male counterparts, were more willing to accept longer hours and unpleasant and often unhealthy or hazardous factory conditions, typically did not unionize or engage in other forms of collective bargaining to improve conditions" (Ghosh 18). In consequence, it is evident that hiring women to work in textile factories is a conscious decision that is premeditated by the factory owners and/or managers. As previously stated, these factories operate within the global capitalist economy; therefore, as long as the demand for the supplies continues, these factories and the conditions under which these women work will continue.

There are two methods by which the conditions under which women textile factory workers can be ameliorated and their exploitation eradicated: the establishment of international laws/regulations, or an emphasis on consumer responsibility. It would be more beneficial if the two were enacted simultaneously; however, if only one came to pass that would still provide progress.

The issue of the exploitation of women workers exists on a transnational level; thus, it should be addressed with international policy.

Demanding that Indian women unify in the fight for the procurement of their rights is far-fetched and insensitive, for the social conditions in which these women live is precarious and the source(s) of the issue (primarily patriarchy) is rooted deep within the history of the country. Yes, it would be challenging to encourage the women to unionize their work environments, for many of them are in economic situations where they could not risk unemployment. This is illustrated by Rani's response to being asked about a union that is rumored to have begun formation at the company where she works, Telco:

No, I have nothing to do with unions, I don't go to unions. I don't like it. There was talk of a union forming at Telco, but I was not a part of it. My brother was also not a part of it. There was an advantage to getting a union, but the company was not going to let them bring in the union at any cost. They [the organizers] could never win against...the others...[I]hey dismissed a lot of people ...because of this very matter? So what's the benefit? Did they get anything from this? No... (Lal 7)

Rani's narrative efficiently portrays the sentiments of most women workers: they are aware of the injustices of the system, yet they are too afraid and have too much need to risk losing their employ. Therefore, international policy that outlines the responsibilities of the owners of the factories in "lesser-developed countries" to provide materials that have been produced in non-oppressive environments should be established (Batenkas 309). Similarly, the law should state that "multinational enterprises" should not have demands that may motivate the owners to exploit the workers so that they may receive a profit (Batenkas 309). This is hard to achieve due to the inherently exploitative nature of capitalism.

Thus, the answer to ameliorating the social and occupational environments of working Indian women may, in fact, lie in the hands of the consumer: The decisions of consumers immediately affect the producer. If there appears to be a profitable audience for an item, then production shall continue and/or increase; if there is no audience, there is no profit. Consequently, there is no production and, in turn, no women to exploit.

Indeed, consumer protest cannot be the solution for ending the mistreatment of women factory workers – no, it will only serve as the catalyst. Naturally, the ethical treatment of women who work in factories is not solely the responsibility of consumers, and international corporations are not the only ones to blame. That is why a multifaceted approach to embettering the work conditions of lower-caste, textile factory workers is needed. There is, however, one final thing to consider: As Dr. Julianne Weinzimmer of Wright State

University inquired, “If capitalism relies upon the cheap, exploitable factory workers, then what happens...if/when ... [it is] no longer a gender-based issue?” When it is no longer a specific issue of gender, it is still an issue of human rights. It is upon these rights that many social changes have occurred, and the change in the conditions of Indian women who work in textile factories is a fight that should not be excluded. Human rights are innumerable and transcend the boundaries of country, race, gender, class, and caste.

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