

World market factories, female workers and national economy: An analysis

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Abstract

Relocation of labour-intensive manufacturing industries by multinational corporations in the contemporary world economy has been one of the most dominant features since the 1960s. These corporations not only account for an important share of world production but also control a major part of all foreign direct investment in many developing countries. Abundant supply of unemployed labour force at a cheaper price and various types of facilities and incentives provided by developing country governments are the main attractions for their relocation. Evidence reveals that the implications of export oriented industrialisation on developing country economies are complex and contradictory. World market factories largely employ women and employment in waged jobs give them access to financial resources although they rarely control their wages and experience various types of exploitation on the factory floor in different ways. Governments in developing countries support the establishment of world market factories despite the fact that such industrialisation does not offer them the chance of overcoming their underdeveloped situation rather, marginalises a large part of the population without creating any precondition for alternative development.

1.0 Introduction

The growth of world market factories is one of the most revolutionary and controversial phenomena in the development of the world economy during the last century. World market factories and export processing zones became new but influential elements in the international division of labour of the post World War II period. These factories are often, though not always constitute

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production sites within export processing zones (EPZs) where industrial utilisation of labour forces of developing countries takes place to produce goods and services for world market. They conduct world market oriented production utilising the reserved army of labour of Third World countries (Frobel et. al. 1980:291). In the modern international economy these factories are institutions of increasing importance. These are actually the extended wings of large multinational corporations who relocated their production to developing countries to ensure continued profitability, new product lines, new markets, new investment outlets and above all new ways to reduce production costs (McEwan, 1978 cited in Tiano: 1994:11). Very few nations are now isolated from some involvement with world market factories (Parry, 1980:1). In practice, the largest multinational corporations (MNCs) orchestrate an ensemble of investments scattered across dozens of countries. Tied together by vast communications webs these firms match various corporate functions such as research and development, production, and marketing, with locales around the globe that feature the right mix of necessary ingredients, whether these be the skills and wage rates of local labour, the tax and regulatory policies of governments, the availability of needed infrastructure, or the supply of natural resources.

The sheer size of many MNCs, combined with their economic efficiency and international mobility, not only provide such firms with a key place in the world economy, but also endows them with considerable political power and influence. They are able to manipulate transfer prices and to move their productive facilities to another country. It limits government's ability to tax them (Radice, 1975:54). The significance of multinational corporations in the world economy is viewed in both quantitative and qualitative ways. Quantitative significance highlights the size of such corporations and their weight in such things as world production, foreign investment, technology creation, trade, etc. Qualitative significance looks at the growth of transnational corporations and highlights their key tendencies in the capitalist system. In terms of size the largest MNCs have sales which exceed the total gross

domestic product of most Third World countries. These corporations not only account for an important share of world production but these also control a major part of all foreign direct investment (Jenkins, 1987:8). These foreign investors never invest in the production of the most needed things, such as cheap food, clean water or simple housing. Foreign investment goes mostly into producing things to export to rich countries. Historically many of the major exports of the Third World countries have been produced by world market factories (Jenkins, 1987:11). Jenkins argues (p. 11) that these factories also dominate the marketing of those goods. As for example, the world coffee market is mostly controlled by four companies: Philip Morris, Nestle, Proctor & Gamble and Sara Lee. It is these large corporations that reap the majority of the benefits of coffee production.

A typical transnational corporation is Nike. Its headquarters are in the United States and its entire manufacturing process is carried out through independent subcontracting in the Third World countries. The Nike brand is globally renowned and products can be bought in Europe, Africa, and even South America. All financial decisions are carried out in the USA while much of the production for the company is often done in Third World countries like Bangladesh, Indonesia etc which welcome the penetration of these companies. Their movement in these countries is accelerated by an attractive investment climate made by government policies. Developing nations attract multinational subsidiary operations due to a number of factors such as cheap labour, low taxation and less vigilance concerning worker's rights and environmental protection. A number of governments in the Third World passed laws which restricted the formation of organisation and thus bargaining power of the employees. They are rarely made accountable to contributing to the social security net i.e. welfare, employment, insurance, etc. One of the specialities of most of the Third World countries are large supply of cheap and unorganised labour. Multinational corporations utilise this labour-power for world market oriented production. For their smooth operation many governments formed autonomous export processing or free trade

zones where they employ young women largely (Frobel et al. 1980; Cohen, 1991). Do women get any benefit from their employment in these factories? To what extent do the national economies gain? These are the questions I will explore in this article. This article explains the main advantages in the Third World countries that attract capital to develop world market factories. Facilities and incentives offered by the Export Processing Zone Authorities in Bangladesh for foreign investors will be explored in this regard.

2.0 Development of world market factories and attractions for them in Third World countries

The development of world market factories began in the 1950s and the 1960s. During that time the multinational corporations were relocating their manufacturing industries from developed to developing countries. This was in their response to the new international division of labour and the pattern of trade in manufacturing. Some other important factors also account for this rush. First, the large size of the multinational corporations gave them wider horizons and a global outlook. Secondly, the development of communications technology created a global challenge and threatened institutions by opening up new sources of competition. A third factor was the growth in international trade that intensified the inter-capitalist competition among the developed nations. In particular, Japan emerged as a major industrial power in the world economy in the 1960s and it entered into the western consumer markets very rapidly with great success. The ascendance of Japan as a major industrial power changed the global trade scenario. American and European manufacturers were falling behind in the competitive race and losing ground to Japanese firms. In such a situation these manufacturers began to relocate their industries in developing countries to reduce production costs to compete with the Japanese (Radice, (ed.) 1975; Lim, 1997).

In the 1960s and early 1970s western economies experienced tight domestic labour markets. High labour costs, low unemployment

rate and chronic labour shortages affected labour-intensive manufacturing industries. As such, these countries began to lose their competitive advantage in international trade in garments, shoes, toys and electronic assembly. This situation forced these labour-intensive industries to relocate their manufacturing plants to developing countries (Lim, 1997:217). The process of relocation of particularly, labour intensive production has been a part of contemporary world economy and was anticipated by Rockefeller in the 1960s and suggested by Mandel in the 1970s.

In essence what we people in the Western Hemisphere really need is more efficient division of labour among us. The division of labour is one of the tried and true economic principles that will be as valid in 1976 as it was in 1776 when it was first spelled by Adam Smith...The less developed countries would also gain with abundant supplies of labour and wage levels well below those of the US, they could export processed food, textiles, apparel, footwear and other light manufactures.

(The Rockefeller Report on the Americans, 1963, cited in Cohen, 1991.)

Capital today **has** two ways available to it of reconstructing the industrial army: on the one hand the intensification of capital exports and the systematic suffocation of investments at home, i.e. sending capital where there is still excess labour power, instead of bringing labour power to excess capital; on the other the intensification of automation, or in other words the concentration of investments to set free as much living labour is possible.

(Mandel, E Late Capitalism, 1978, cited in Cohen, 1991.)

Many companies in the west were facing labour crisis and high labour costs by the early 1970s. Both labour crisis and high labour costs increased their production costs and therefore, they were looking for available labour forces at a cheaper price. They moved to the developing countries that had abundant supplies of labour with high unemployment rates and low wages. With a view to generating employment for huge numbers of unemployed people,

governments of different countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America at that time created an investment oriented environment to encourage foreign investors. From the 1960s onward governments of Third World countries began to establish free production zones to attract multinational corporations. These production zones are also called free trade zones or export processing zones. These production zones extended various types of facilities and incentives for these factories apart from cheap labour.

Profitable industrial production requires an adequate provision of industrial inputs and a sophisticated infrastructure. It also needs the lifting of national restrictions on international transfer of profits (Frobel et al. 1980:295). Investors in free trade zones were allowed to bring machinery, equipment and materials free of import duties. They got tax exemptions, inexpensive electricity, and the provision of roads, buildings and other types on necessary infrastructures are also made available. Almost all free trade zones operating in developing countries **are providing these** facilities and incentives to attract capital. This is evident from the following extract taken from the official documents of Bangladesh Export Processing Zones (BEPZA Website, 2013).

Bangladesh Export Processing Zones were established in 1984 with the following objectives:

1. Promotion of foreign (FDI) & local investment
2. Promotion of export
3. Diversification of exports
4. Development of backward & forward linkages
5. Generation of employment
6. Transfer of technology
7. Upgradation of skill
8. Development of management
9. Promotion of international marketing skill / access

In achieving the above stated objectives it provides the following facilities and incentives to foreign investors to attract them to invest in the country.

A. Facilities

- a. Land and factory buildings are available on rental basis.
- b. Electricity, tele-communications, gas and water are provided by the zones.
- c. Import and export permits are issued by EPZ within 24 hours.
- d. Work permits are issued by BEPZA.
- e. EPZ is a secured and protected area.
- f. Recreational facilities are available.
- g. Availability of foodstuff and beverages on payment of nominal tax for foreigners working in EPZs.
- h. Potential investors are required to deal only with BEPZA for investment and all other operational purposes.
- i. Permanent residentship to a foreign citizen investing a minimum of US \$ 75,000 or equivalent amount (non-repatriable); similarly citizenship to any foreign citizen investing US \$ 5,00,000 or transferring US \$ 1,000,000 to any recognised Bangladeshi financing institution (non-repatriable).

B. Incentives: Fiscal

I. Tax Exemption

- a. Tax holiday for 10 years.
- b. Exemption of income tax on interest on borrowed capital.
- c. Relief from double taxation subject to bilateral agreement.
- d. Complete exemption from dividend tax for tax holiday period for foreign nationals.
- e. Exemption of income tax on salaries of foreign technicians for 3 years subject to certain conditions.

II. Duty Free Import and Export

- a. Duty free import of machineries, equipment and raw materials.
- b. Duty free import of three motor vehicles for use of the enterprises in EPZs under certain conditions.

- c. Duty free import of materials for construction of factory buildings in the zones.
- d. Duty free export of goods produced in the zones.
- e. GSP facilities available for export to USA, European and Japanese markets.
- f. Export from Bangladesh to USA enjoys Most Favoured Nation status (MFN).

C. Incentives': Non-Fiscal

I. Investment

- a. All foreign investments secured by law.
- b. No ceiling on extent of foreign investment.
- c. Full repatriation of profit and capital permissible.
- d. Repatriation of investment including capital gains, if any, permissible.
- e. Remittances allowed in following cases:
 - i. All post tax profit and dividend on foreign capital.
 - ii. **Savings** from **earnings**, retirement benefits, personal assets of individual on **retirement/termination** of services.
 - iii Approved royalties and technical fees.

II. Project Financing and Banking

- a. Off-shore banking facilities available.
- b. Local and international banking facilities also wide-open.

III. Import

- a. Freedom from national import policy restrictions.
- b. Import of raw materials also allowed on Documentary Acceptance (DA) basis.
- c. Advantage of opening back to back L/C for certain types of industries for import of raw materials.
- d. Import of goods from Domestic Tariff Area(DTA) permissible.
- e. Enterprises can sell their 10% of the product to the DTA on payment of duties and taxes under certain conditions.

IV. Project Implementation

- a. Re-location of existing industries from abroad allowed.
- b. Re-location of industries from one zone to another within the country permissible.

V. Operation

- a. Sub-contracting within EPZ allowed.
- b. Inter-zone and intra-zone export permitted.
- c. All customs formalities done at the gate site of the respective factory building within the zone.
- d. Permission for import/export given in the same day.
- e. Repairing and maintenance of machinery and capital equipment from domestic tariff area allowed.

VI. Employment

- a. Liberal employment of foreign technicians/experts allowed.
- b. Foreigners employed in the zones enjoy equal rights similar to those of Bangladesh nationals.

VII. Support Services

Customs office, post office, medical centre, fire station, police station etc. are within the zone.

It also provides production oriented labour laws that say that formation of any labour unions in EPZs is forbidden. Strike within zones is also prohibited. It sets minimum wages, working hours and other related issues. However these are the common facilities and incentives that all export processing zones around the globe provide to attract multinational corporations to invest. Governments in developing countries create an environment that encourages the establishment of world market factories to make optimal utilisation of their abundant labour forces at a cheaper price for world market. They largely employ young women in their factories. In Bangladesh, as the ILO reports, 62% of the total employed in 2013 in EPZs was women (ILO, 2013).

3.0 Women workers in world market factories

Export processing/free trade zones have many attractions for foreign investors. In most cases world market factories typically produce goods on a subcontract basis to the order of a particular overseas customer who arranges the marketing of that product. Cheap labour in the developing countries is one of the main attractions to shift production to free trade zones. Due to uneven capitalist development world-wide, workers in developing countries are forced to sell their labour-power at a price which is much lower than the price which prevails in the developed countries (Frobel, 1980:322). Elson and Pearson (1981:21) show that the wages in world market factories are often ten times lower than that of a factory in the developed country. Moreover, working hours per year are up to 50% higher than that in developed world. The Guardian, quoting from a recent Oxfam study, reveals that the foreign investors drive down wages and compromise the welfare of the workers. They set an hourly production targets that are, in the expression of Oxfam, 'almost impossible to reach'. The Oxfam study reports that in Chile 75% of women fruit-pickers work 60 hours a week with a very poor wage which is less than the minimum wage while the Burmese migrant workers in Thai garment factories have been paid less than a third of the minimum wage. Frobel (1980:341) argues the existence of a large unemployed labour and acute poverty in developing countries force the unemployed to work at any wage. In such a situation it's a debate whether the employment of women workers in world market factories is exploitation or emancipation.

The position of women in the labour market is more vulnerable since they are universally defined as 'housewives' not as 'workers'. Their work is treated as an 'income-generating activity' (Mies, 1986:116). Lim (1997:221) argues, in general, employers assume that women work only for pocket money for luxuries or to make a secondary income contribution to the family as male is the principal breadwinner. Moreover, Mies continues, the universal definition of women as housewives gives employers the opportunity to cheapen their labour. They also gain political and

ideological control over them. As a result the outstanding characteristics of the structure of employment in free trade zones and world market factories is its feminisation. The majority of this female workforce is between 16 and 25 years of age. They are unskilled or semiskilled and employed as production workers (Frobel, 1980:344).

World market factories have generated a huge employment opportunity for women in Third World countries. More than 70% of the total employed in the free trade zones are women since the jobs to be done in these factories are defined as 'women's work' (Elson & Pearson, 1981:22). Elson & Pearson argue that women are considered to have naturally 'nimble fingers'. They are naturally more docile and willing to accept tough work discipline. They are naturally suited to tedious, repetitious and monotonous work (p. 200). Lim (1997:221) argues that women's 'natural' role is considered to be a domestic one, they 'naturally' perform tasks such as cooking, childcare, etc., therefore they are unsuited to many kinds of wage employment. According to Mackintosh (1981:5) due to the sexual division of labour women perform the bulk of domestic tasks and those are socially unvalued. This sexual division of labour sharply restricts women's ability to participate in cash earning activities. The conventional 'wisdom' and prejudice regarding women's role has, over time rendered their status inferior or secondary in the capitalist wage-labour market. Employers take advantage of women's inferior position in the labour market. Hence the price of female labour force is lower than that of male labour force. Women's wages in world market factories are frequently half of the male wage (Frobel, 1980:347).

Women participate in wage employment to support their family. Elder daughters are usually forced to quit school and take jobs to support their parents or subsidise the educational expenses of their brothers. Above all they often have little control over their earnings since they are expected to hand over their wages to their parents (Salaff, 1981 cited in Tiano, 1994:45). In their work places they perform tedious and monotonous tasks for minimal wages with

little job security or advancement opportunity. The working conditions inside the factories are also very poor. Governments often formulate laws to favour employers that restrict employees from forming or even joining unions through which they may press for better opportunities or working conditions. In relation to Bangladesh Export Processing Zones the government of the country has also implemented such laws that are in implementation (BEPZ website, 2013).

The wages paid to workers in world market factories in the free trade zones are often insufficient to cover the reproduction costs of the workforce. The physical reproduction and psychic recovery of the workers exhausted by highly demanding work in their work places needs some other means such as obtaining more food (Frobel et al. 1980: 353). But these jobs pay so little that most women have barely enough to live on. Therefore, due to ill health because of their employment in world market factories, workers cannot continue their jobs for long. Furthermore, they gain no **marketable** skills from their job and as such once dismissed some women have nowhere to go (Arrigo, 1980 cited in Bandarage, 1984:503).

Nevertheless the availability of jobs for virtually any wage and regardless of the working conditions allows women to leave the confines of the home. They gain the opportunity to avoid early marriage and early child bearing. Employment increases their incomes and consumption levels as well. Their mobility is improved and individual choice is expanded. Moreover, they can exercise some sort of personal independence. Hence, working in world market factories is preferable to many women to the alternatives of staying at home, early marriage and child bearing, domestic service, prostitution or unemployment. Employment in world market oriented factories provides them with at least a partial liberation from the confines and dictates of traditional patriarchal social relations (Lim, 1997:225). This independence has a negative impact as well. Bandarage (1984:503) argues that when they are dismissed from their job, it is not unlikely that their

families refuse to accept them and men refuse to marry them because of their independence. For her, this situation forces at least some of the women into prostitution.

World market factories offer stable jobs and steady wages at or above government mandated minimum. Furthermore, the working conditions in these companies tend to be better than those in other jobs like farm or construction work available to women (Tiano, 1994:46). Bandarage (1984:503) argues that women perceive their jobs materially and personally rewarding. In her view women working in world market factories consider themselves privileged to hold such a job. They also enjoy some sort of social status due to their employment in the modern Westernised sector. Stoddard (1987, cited in Tiano, 1994) argues that the modern working environment in the world market factories transform the consciousness of women. They gain material resources and self-respect which to some extent enables them to challenge traditional patriarchal social relations.

In *Women's Role in Economic Development* Ester Boserup (1970) argued that the development efforts in the Third World countries marginalized women's position in the economy. She and other liberal feminists suggested that women needed to be integrated into development. It is obvious that the employment of women in world market factories is one of the ways to integrate them into the national economy. The gender-division of labour limits the employment opportunities for women although they are to earn for the survival of their family. World market factories created employment opportunities for women but they are working in these factories in poor conditions with poor wages. Their employment is based on the super-exploitation of the labour force (Frobel et al. 1980:350). Others argue that to some extent they benefit from their employment. Their earning capacity brings them the ability to challenge existing traditional social relations (Tiano, 1994:223).

4.0 World market factories and developing countries

The concept of export-oriented industrialisation became popular in

the late 1960s and early 1970s as the most appropriate development strategy for Third-World countries. One of the main motivations underlying the creation of export processing zones was to increase employment and provide jobs for the large number of new entrants in the labour force. World market factories create employment opportunities for what constitute large industrial reserve workforces in developing countries. Between 1970 and 1986 the number of jobs in the export processing zones of the developing countries increased at the average rate of 22.5 per cent per year (ILO, 1988:53, 55). Thus it is obvious that world market factories are generating employment opportunities in developing countries and helping these countries in relieving their unemployment and underemployment situation. This is also true that these factories can not solve the entire unemployment problem of the host countries (Frobel et al. 1980:367).

The employees get some training facility although it is very limited in scale. Frobel et al. (1980:369-370) argues that most workers are trained to perform a specific function of a chosen production process. Training is not designed to impart comprehensive knowledge. However, the creation of new employment opportunities is one of the major economic and social benefits to the host countries.

World market oriented industrialisation in developing countries means in the first instance the provision of land, resources, labour and capital. The basic investment items to establish a free trade zone are:

- a. the acquisition of land for the site;
- b. the preparation of the site which includes levelling, drainage, landscaping, etc.
- c. access roads and roads within the zone as well as parking and loading spaces;
- d. water supply and waste water disposal;
- e. public utilities such as electricity supplies, telephone and other telecommunication facilities.

The selection of the site is determined by the distance to the main outlet of the product and the availability or possibility of providing international transport facilities. Frobel (p. 376) argues that the site selection is often done without considering the existing economic structures or the ecological effects of industrial production. In most cases land acquisition involves the forced displacement of the rural population. Governments, for developing the site and other related infrastructures, obtain credits from international financial institutions like the World Bank and other Regional Development Banks. Besides, there is investment from the multinational corporations. Thus the host countries may attain access to foreign capital. However, governments cannot spend this money according to their own development plan. Another contribution to national government may be some transfer of technology. In some cases world market factories utilise advanced technology that would not normally be available to the host nation (Frobel et al. 1080:377).

The integration of world market production with domestic economy creates backward and forward linkages although it occurs on a very limited scale. Frobel et al. (1080:378) argue that supply of raw materials, local processing of parts and products manufactured in free trade zones and world market factories are precluded by the nature of the world market orientation of production. Frobel et al. argues that jobs in free trade zones by world market factories in developing countries are created for only a specific group of the economically active population. The cost of generating a new job in developing countries is very high and in most cases this is not cost-effective (ILO, 1988:137). In export processing zones the rental fee charged to foreign investors is a source of income for the host government. The rental fee for floor space in export processing zones must be determined on the basis of the effective investment costs in developing these zones. Since EPZs compete against one another on the world market, no country can afford to charge higher rental fees than those prevailing elsewhere do. The ILO research finding suggests that in most cases governments are to provide very large subsidies to bring the rental fees down to the international level.

World market factories export their production. Frobel et al (1980:380) argue that this is not export from respective countries rather this is inter-company transaction. In most cases the factories are adding value to their imported raw materials, inputs, etc. utilising local labour force. Therefore, export of a produced good from the host country just consists of labour-power of the local work force. Furthermore, the actual surpluses obtained from the exported goods and services are mostly transferred abroad. Thus it is evident that the economic yields of world market oriented industrialisation for the countries concerned are in most cases very slight and against the very low domestic and foreign trade income, corporate profit is very high (p. 380).

5.0 Conclusion

By the early 1970s the high labour costs in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries had led to the relocation of labour intensive industries to the Third World countries. Due to this relocation advanced industrial countries saw the beginning of a transition from manufacturing based economy to a service based economy dominated by knowledge-intensive industries. At the same time the condition of indebtedness of the Third World countries caused by the world-wide oil crisis created an increased demand for foreign investment. These factors together fed on each other, resulting in an increased performance of multinational companies in global trade.

Multinational firms, in quest of cheaper labour force, moved to developing countries and created world market factories with massive investment in export processing zones. The facilities and incentives in export processing zones offered by governments and the largely unemployed labour force of developing countries attracted them most. They employed women at large in their factories and employment opportunity gave women access to financial resources to confront private patriarchy to an extent.

Although world market oriented industrialisation in developing countries is a process of integrating a growing number of unemployed labour forces with global economy, this process of development enhances dependency and generates uneven development. It does not offer developing countries the chance of overcoming their underdeveloped situation rather, marginalises a large part of the population without creating any precondition for alternative development. However, governments in these countries support the establishment of world market factories. They try to attract more and more companies to invest in their respective export processing zones. It is not unlikely that this very process will develop an industrial structure in the country which may have the potential for autonomous development. Another important aspect of this new international division of labour may be the emergence of a working class for industrial work. Organisation of these workers inside the labour process may develop political and social self-organisation with which they can struggle for their own development (Frobel et al. 1980:404-6).

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