GENDER AND INEQUALITY IN THE GLOBAL LABOR FORCE

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Abstract  This review examines the convergence of recent anthropological interests in gender, labor, and globalization. Attention to gender and gender inequality offers a productive strategy for the analysis of globalizing processes and their local variations and contestations. Contemporary ethnographic research explores multiple dimensions of labor and gender inequalities in the global economy: gendered patterns of labor recruitment and discipline, the transnational mobility and commodification of reproductive labor, and the gendered effects of international structural adjustment programs, among others. New and continuing research explores the diverse meanings and practices that produce a gendered global labor force, incorporating the perspectives of men and women, masculinities and femininities, and examines how these processes of gender and labor inequality articulate with other structures of subordination (such as ethnicity and nationality) to shape lived experiences of work and livelihood, exploitation and struggle, around the world.

INTRODUCTION

Studies of gender, labor, and globalization do not constitute a clearly bounded or easily definable field of research in anthropology. Nevertheless, the complex intersections of these topics have generated considerable attention and interest in recent years. Numerous edited collections address the overlapping and multifaceted effects of gender and labor inequalities worldwide (see, among others, Elson 1995, Marchand & Runyan 2000, Nash & Fernandez-Kelly 1983, Rothstein & Blim 1992, Ward 1990); whereas, a growing number of focused ethnographies explore the play of these dynamics in specific settings (for example, Finn 1998, Gill 1994, Ong 1987). Much of this work documents the heavily feminized labor forces in free trade zones and similar sites of new industrialization around the world (see Cravey 1998, Freeman 2000, Mills 1999b, Ong 1991, Safa 1995, Wolf 1992). Other work extends the analysis of gender and labor to global processes such as transnational labor migration and domestic service (see Anderson 2000; Constable 1997; Gamburd 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 2001; Parreñas 2001), as well as
micro-enterprise production and other forms of work in what is often called the informal sector (see Benería & Roldán 1987, Clark 1994, Gill 2000, Rahman 1999, Seligmann 2001). As a whole, the literature encompasses an astonishing range of geographic and occupational settings; yet this eclectic body of research attests to a common phenomenon: a profoundly gendered global economy.

Gender inequalities operate simultaneously, but not identically, as systems of dominant meanings and symbolism; as structured social relations, roles, and practices; and as lived experiences of personal identity. The literature discussed here is notable for engaging all of these divergent dimensions of gender. Of particular interest are the findings of many scholars, which state that gender meanings, relations, and identities do more than merely sustain existing structures of power in global labor relations; these complex dimensions of gender also constitute a dynamic cultural terrain wherein forms of domination may be contested, reworked, and even potentially transformed.

Of course, in any given place or time, gender is only one of “multiple, interlocking systems of domination” (Clark 1994, p. 422). Many ethnographers of globalization explore the ways that gender intersects with other sources of discrimination and exploitation in the lives of working men and women. Gender inequalities represent one dynamic within a global labor force that is also segmented by class, ethnicity and race, nationality and region, among other factors. By tracing these varied systems of domination as they combine in different settings, scholars have begun to illuminate the diverse processes through which gender and labor inequalities shape the global economy. Although this review focuses on gendered forms and experiences of inequality, its aim is not to discount other aspects of identity or ideology that underlie global patterns of labor exploitation and material extraction. Rather the point here is to follow the particular insights that gendered analyses contribute to a broad and dynamic field of study.

Around the globe, gender hierarchies are produced and maintained in relation to transnational circuits of labor mobilization and capital accumulation. In varied and often locally specific ways international capital relies on gendered ideologies and social relations to recruit and discipline workers, to reproduce and cheapen segmented labor forces within and across national borders (see, among others, Enloe 1989, Ong 1991, Safa 1995). These are not new phenomena. Historians of the industrial revolution document the early recruitment of women (particularly young unmarried women) as a highly flexible, inexpensive, and easily disciplined source of labor (Dublin 1979, Tilly & Scott 1978, Tsurumi 1990). Similarly, European colonial regimes relied in part upon the mobilization of colonized women (as well as men) to work, for example, as domestic servants and concubines to colonial officials or as family workers on plantation estates (Stoler 1985, 1991). Yet today, more than in any previous era, the gendered and ethnically segmented labor pool upon which capitalist accumulation depends encompasses every corner of the globe. The first part of this review examines recent contributions to teasing apart the gendered inequalities that produce and sustain these global labor practices in their many variations. The second part of this review explores
ongoing efforts by scholars to show how processes of gender and labor inequality articulate with actual women’s and men’s lived experiences to produce a wide range of struggles and contestations. This division is made for ease of discussion only; both directions of analysis offer critical insights and new questions for further research. Indeed, a central feature of this literature is its consistent attention to the intersections of structure and agency, ideology and practice in tracing out the complex and contested dynamics of gender and labor inequalities around the world.

PRODUCING A GENDERED GLOBAL LABOR FORCE

Feminization and the Disciplining of Global Labor

Around the world, hierarchical gender ideologies serve to cheapen the direct costs of labor to capital by defining key segments of the population (notably women and children) as supplementary or devalued workers (see, for example, Elson 1995, Enloe 1989, Marchand & Runyon 2000). At one level, the pictures appear remarkably consistent; in country after country, industrial employers identify the inherently desirable qualities of their preferred labor force: “nimble-fingered,” often youthful, and deferential female workers. Wherever they locate—from Indonesia (Wolf 1992) to Israel (Drori 2000), Mexico (Cravey 1998, Fernandez-Kelly 1983) to Malaysia (Ong 1987)—global factories reproduce similar models of organization wherein women dominate the lowest levels both of pay and authority, whereas men occupy most positions of supervisory and managerial rank (see also Ong 1991 for a comprehensive review of these patterns in Mexican and Asian industrialization through the 1980s). Indeed, it is the hegemonic capacity of patriarchal norms to define women’s labor as not only “cheap” but socially and economically worthless (and therefore less worthy of equitable pay and other treatment) that makes a gendered labor force so crucial to the accumulation strategies of global capital (Wright 1999, 2001).

And yet the appearance of sameness is also deceiving. A closer look at the ethno-graphic record reveals considerable diversity in the discursive forms and material practices that gender hierarchies take within the global labor force. In some cases it is women’s status as unmarried and subordinate “daughters” that makes them an attractively cheap and flexible pool of labor (Drori 2000, Kim 1997, Lynch 1999, Wolf 1992). In other contexts, it is women’s status as wives and mothers that justifies their lower wages and limited job security (Kondo 1990, Lamphere 1987, Lee 1998, Roberts 1994). Disciplinary strategies may also (and often at the same time) position female workers as sexualized bodies whose subordination is maintained through erotic banter and other forms of sexual harassment (Prieto 1997, Wright 2001, Yelvington 1995). A heightened emphasis on feminine beauty, fashion, and commodified leisure activities associated with wage work can similarly position workers as feminized consumers rather than as productive (and valuable) laborers (Freeman 2000, Lynch 1999, Mills 1999b).
In any given setting the variable interplay of multiple gender roles and meanings can produce a wide range of recruitment and disciplinary regimes. Lee (1998) found that the same company deployed sharply different gendered discourses to deal with its female workforces in Hong Kong (where older women were enlisted in a process of self regulation) and in the nearby free trade zones of South China (where young rural migrants were subject to a much harsher, authoritarian labor process). In the U.S.-Mexico border region, a single, dominant gender discourse constructs Mexican women as the ideal (i.e., docile) labor force for transnational industry; yet on the shop floor the monolithic image of a feminized labor force refracts into divergent forms of labor regulation: from factory regimes that highlight workers’ sexualized appearances as idealized objects of managerial consumption and control, to settings in which gendered identities are subordinated to workers’ closely monitored performance of piece-rate production quotas (Salzinger 1997). Such studies demonstrate that dominant discourses about gender affect but cannot determine the day-to-day dynamics of labor discipline. Hegemonic ideologies always intersect with local histories and demographies, production processes, and managerial styles to produce site- and even factory-specific regimes of control and contestation.

These patterns are also historically contingent. Longitudinal studies of feminized labor reveal the value of tracing disciplinary regimes over time. Changing demographics and immigration patterns over the twentieth century transformed the preferred labor force of Rhode Island textile and garment factories from unmarried daughters to married mothers (Lamphere 1987). Bao (2001) and Matthews (2003) respectively explore other gendered and ethnicized histories of labor in New York City and California’s Silicon Valley. Political transformations can shape these histories as well. The Chinese state’s promotion of capitalist production regimes has prompted new gendered labor practices that include the massive recruitment of young rural women for industrial work into urban areas and special economic zones (Lee 1998, L. Zhang 2001); nevertheless, these shifts have not affected all workers in the same ways. Rofel (1999) traces the impact of China’s economic reforms in the lives of female silk workers, once members of a revolutionary proletariat whose industrial labor is now no longer an important symbol of national goals. Rosenthal (2002) examines similar processes in a state-owned textile factory in Vietnam.

Labor recruitment into export-oriented agricultural production offers another telling example of the variable ways gender meanings can be used to devalue and control labor. Global agri-business relies on large pools of cheap and seasonally replaceable labor to perform tasks that are typically segregated by gender. Comparing fruit workers in Chile, Brazil, and Mexico, Collins (1995) notes that these gendered norms vary in ways that make clear their arbitrary quality: identical tasks are defined as “men’s” work in one place and “women’s” in another. Yet in each setting patriarchal norms are manipulated to ensure the low cost structure of the industry. Of particular interest here is the finding that these practices do not mean that women are always positioned at the bottom of the wage scale, if, for example,
a more vulnerable population (such as migrants) can be tapped as an even cheaper reserve pool (Collins 1995, pp. 190–92). In other studies of commodified agriculture in Latin America, India, and Africa, scholars explore similar modes of labor segmentation. Varied combinations of gender, class, and ethnic divisions structure agricultural labor inequalities in ways that limit employers’ costs and also undermine the possibilities for workers’ collective action (Chatterjee 2001, Dolan 2001, Freidberg 2001, Orton et al. 2001, Sachs 1996, Striffler 1999).

Globalizing Reproduction: Gender in the Transnational Service Economy

The feminization of global labor is not limited to third-world sites of export-oriented industry or agriculture; feminized and migrant labor forces are also crucial to reducing the high costs of private consumption and social reproduction at the centers of global privilege and power. Transnational migrants, both women and men, represent a pool of vulnerable, feminized labor in the lowest wage sectors of the world’s wealthiest economies (Foner 2000, Kwong 1998, Mahler 1995, Sassen 1998, Yeoh et al. 2000). As sweatshop garment sewers, restaurant workers, domestic servants, and day laborers they provide the undervalued services essential to maintaining both the structures and symbols of global economic power and privilege.

For example, Bonacich & Appelbaum (2000) show how the small subcontracting enterprises that make up the Los Angeles garment trade are essential to maintaining the rapid turnover of clothing styles and fashions in the women’s apparel industry. Small shops must produce new products on demand in short periods of time, a process made profitable by their ability to hire predominantly immigrant (often undocumented) and female labor at extremely low wages with minimal protections. Not coincidentally, the gender and ethnic marginalization of this sweated labor force sustains the demands of an industry that is itself crucial to the ideological production of hegemonic femininity as defined through the endless consumption of women’s fashion. Similarly, Ingraham (1999) notes the links between sweated labor in the global wedding-gown industry and the consumption and reproduction of hegemonic femininity and patriarchal heterosexuality in U.S. popular culture.

The complex effects of gendered hierarchies on the transnational mobility of global labor is also evident in the international market for domestic servants. Caribbean nannies in New York (Colen 1995); Filipina caregivers in Los Angeles and Rome (Parreñas 2001), in Hong Kong (Constable 1997), and in Malaysia (Chin 1998); Mexican and Latina housecleaners in California and other parts of the United States (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001, Romero 1992); Sri Lankan maids in Saudi Arabia (Gamburd 2000)—all provide a feminized and racialized support structure for more privileged households. In many cases, this commodification of reproductive labor frees female employers to enter or maintain professional occupations, thereby challenging some gender barriers in their own societies but
without a radical reworking of gender responsibilities in the domestic realm. Instead these duties are displaced onto ethnically and legally marginalized women in a complex entanglement of gender, class, racial, and ethnic hierarchies that stretch across the globe.

Ironically, many women and men who provide transnational service labor are themselves pursuing globally inflected desires for class mobility and consumption. The costs of plane fares, agency fees, and other expenses necessary to attain international employment (whether by legal or illegal means) are often very high. Consequently, many of those entering circuits of transnational migration are not the poorest members of their societies; many come from more intermediate strata that face reduced economic opportunities or declining income, perhaps as a result of economic retrenchment and structural adjustment policies in sending countries. Thus, in the Philippines, women with middle-class education credentials—nurses and teachers, for example—find they can earn much more working as domestic servants in Hong Kong, Italy, or Canada (Barber 2000, Constable 1997, Parreñas 2001). Despite the appearance of downward class mobility, these and other transnationally employed domestic workers can secure and even enhance the status of their families left behind. For example, many such migrants use part of their international wages to hire even cheaper domestic help at home. In this way, circuits of transnational labor not only are a product of gendered and ethnic hierarchies within a segmented global labor force, but also they reproduce these same relations of inequality (Parreñas 2001, pp. 72–78).

The Gender and Labor Inequalities of Structural Adjustment

As the preceding discussion suggests, the structuring of gender inequality in one type of employment or one segment of the global economy cannot be viewed in isolation from any other. Further complicating the picture, many scholars argue that the intersections of gender, labor, and globalization extend well beyond the confines of the formal wage economy and conventional arenas of capitalist production. Specifically, ethnographies from Bolivia (Gill 1994, 2000) to Zambia (Hansen 2000), Turkey (White 1994) to Nicaragua (Babb 2001) elucidate the gender and labor inequalities of international structural adjustment policies and related neo-liberal economic programs. These and other scholars highlight the ironies of a global economy in which transnational circuits of labor mobility stretch families and their functions across international boundaries at the same time that international policies of neo-liberal economic restructuring rely upon the resilience of those families to absorb social costs.

Structural adjustment policies require states to cut back or eliminate many social programs and subsidies; this process has had a devastating effect on many communities often with sharply gendered implications. Such programs of economic restructuring—usually implemented at the behest of international financial authorities, such as the International Monetary Fund or World Bank—depend upon the flexible capacities of private households to absorb the loss of state-funded

Moreover, women’s informal entrepreneurial and artisanal labor has itself been identified as a promising field for international economic development. The growth potential of women’s informal sector work is one of the underlying tenets of micro-enterprise investment, also known as the micro-credit movement (Dignard & Havet 1995). Most often modeled on Bangladesh’s Grameen Bank, micro-credit financing is viewed by many states and non-state groups alike as an ideal strategy for poverty alleviation and economic development. Most micro-credit programs are targeted primarily if not exclusively at women for investment in small, household-based livelihood projects. Loans typically are secured collectively by small groups of borrowers for whom new loans are dependent on successful repayment by the entire group. Micro-credit is hailed by international sponsors as a means to implement gender-sensitive development, “empowering” women by mobilizing the untapped creativity of their productive and reproductive labor (Mayoux 1999). Nevertheless, micro-enterprise programs rarely challenge the overall sexual division of labor within households and may even reinforce these gendered norms (Milgram 2001, Rozario 1997). Some ethnographic studies suggest that (in practice if not in their original intent) micro-credit programs are more effective at extracting profits from the economic activities of poor women and men than in transforming systems of gender hierarchy or empowering their clients socially and economically (Gill 2000, pp. 142–51; Rahman 1999).

**CHALLENGE AND CONTESTATION: GENDERED STRUGGLES IN THE GLOBAL LABOR FORCE**

Considering the wide range of settings and the diverse labor practices to which they contribute, it is clear that patriarchal ideologies and related gender inequalities are significant, even constitutive, features of the global economy. In complex and multifaceted ways, gendered hierarchies help to produce a segmented and flexible global labor force. However, the ways in which hegemonic gender meanings structure the lived experiences of actual women and men vary widely. In fact, the forms
of gendered inequality that people encounter in their own lives are often sources of conflict and contradiction as gendered ideologies and structures of authority clash with individuals’ own lived desires and identities. Slippages between ideological norms and everyday experiences can rupture the disciplinary effects of gender hierarchy whether on the shop floor or in other settings. The resulting disjunctures and inconsistencies can open the way to generate new meanings and practices. Gender inequalities are thus not only sources of exploitation within a global labor force but also, and importantly, critical points of contestation and struggle.

The forms these struggles take, however, are as varied and complex as the hegemonic structures they confront. Some involve explicit oppositional protest, such as strikes and labor organizing, although, as discussed below, the obstacles to such actions are often formidable. In many cases, however, new experiences of global labor give rise to contests that are less obviously confrontational. Nevertheless, these localized processes of what Ong has called “cultural struggle” (Ong 1991, p. 281) are critical to understanding the effects of globalizing labor practices. As individuals and communities confront new modes of exploitation, they also rework experiences of gender and labor inequality in diverse and often unpredictable ways.

Cultural Struggles and Contested Identities

New experiences of wage work and income earning often engage women and men alike in unprecedented forms of social interaction and personal autonomy. Ideological constructions of women as docile and dexterous workers has facilitated their massive recruitment as idealized workers for global industry; at the same time, the experiences and resources of wage labor provide workers, and especially women, with new means to contest their subordination in other arenas of daily life. Around the world, new forms of wage work offer women novel opportunities to challenge or renegotiate the authority of others, particularly parents or husbands, over both their earnings and their activities.

Extensive research challenges assumptions that women’s labor is necessarily subordinated to household economic strategies; instead, studies reveal the complex and contested processes through which women’s wage work can enhance their relative bargaining power vis-à-vis family and community. For many women, participation in global labor brings new claims to spatial mobility, consumption expenditures, and a wider range of behaviors in which they can engage as respected members of their communities, as “good” daughters, wives, or mothers (Benería & Roldan 1987, Feldman 2001, Freeman 2000, Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, Kabeer 2000, Lamphere 1987, Silvey 2000a, Tiano 1994, Yelvington 1995).

A theme widely reported in the literature is the pursuit by young women workers of greater autonomy and control over courtship and marriage decisions. Wage workers in rural Malaysia and Indonesia (Ong 1987, Wolf 1992), rural-urban migrants in Thailand (Mills 1999b), factory operatives in Sri Lanka (Lynch 1999), and economic migrants in Shenzen, China (Clark 2001) all use the enhanced autonomy that wage earning gives them to negotiate with parents over desired partners,
to postpone or evade arranged marriages, or to experiment with new styles of unsupervised romance and independent matchmaking. A few studies also suggest that new spaces opened up by globalized mobility and labor practices enable expressions of transgressive gender identities and alternative sexualities (Blackwood 1998; Theobald 2002, p. 146).

Transnational migration fosters similar assertions of new identities and shifts in gendered claims to autonomy. For example, both historical and contemporary research on immigration to the United States documents how new income-earning roles allow immigrant women to negotiate a wider scope of autonomy and authority within parental and marital households (Foner 2000, p. 108–41; Gabaccia 1994; Lamphere 1987). Given the potential (and not infrequently, actual) failures of husbands or consensual partners to make reliable contributions to household budgets, many women view their wage work as a source of increased personal independence and security despite the often exploitative conditions of that employment (Grasmuck & Pessar 1991, Hirsch 1999, Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). For example, studies of Mexican and Caribbean women in the United States often find that they are much more reluctant than their male compatriots to return to the home country, believing that it would likely entail a parallel return to more patriarchal household relations (Goldring 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, p. 100; Levitt 2001, pp. 104–6).

An important dimension of women’s expanding autonomy in many parts of the world is their ability as independent wage earners to participate in new patterns of consumption linked to desired and often globally oriented standards of “modernity.” This points to a complex source of tension surrounding women’s new visibility within global labor practices: State-based discourses promote goals of national development and progress in which women’s recruitment into export-oriented industrialization or other forms of global labor are often critical components. Thus entrants into new industrial jobs or migrants who remit wages from overseas may be hailed as key contributors to nationalist goals of economic growth and modernization (Lynch 1999; Parreñas 2001, p. 53). However, many new recruits to the global labor force seek to achieve standards of modernity in their own right, particularly as active and sophisticated commodity consumers (Freeman 2000, Gill 1994, Mills 1999b, Rofel 1999).

Wage work and new modes of commodity consumption open up newly imaginable possibilities of personal autonomy and self-expression that are often targeted most forcefully at women. Nevertheless, these images of modernity often carry a contested moral status; women in particular are vulnerable to accusations of immorality owing to “excessive” modernity and inappropriate commodity consumption. Access to new sources of income and consumption possibilities can provoke public fears that autonomous women will spend their wages on “selfish” purchases for personal pleasure or adornment. Furthermore, state-based discourses of development can promote such anxieties by displacing social and political tensions associated with rapid economic changes onto concerns about the inappropriate, immodest, or untraditional behavior of women working outside the home (Brenner

Consequently, for many individual subjects, new experiences of labor and gender autonomy are often marked by ambivalence and conflict, producing actions that simultaneously comply with and resist dominant gender ideals. Thus, young Bangladeshi and Egyptian women adopt the gendered restrictions and respectability of “Islamic dress” to enable easier access to public mobility and wage employment (Feldman 2001, MacLeod 1991). In a different context, women in Barbados off-shore informatics (data entry) industries tolerate patriarchal norms and deteriorating labor conditions within the work place while carving out broader spheres of autonomy elsewhere, particularly as informal entrepreneurs in the “suitcase” trade (i.e., goods acquired through international travel for resale at home; see Freeman 2000, 2001). Similar themes of accommodation and resistance are played out in myriad variations around the globe.

Women’s transnational labor offers yet another perspective on the complex ways in which global workers both reproduce and contest the gendered conditions of their subordination. Migrants working as international domestic servants assert pride in their achievements and sacrifices as workers, as contributors to their families and sometimes to their nations as well. Although migrants may assert that they are “better” mothers than their employers, claims that are backed up by substantial financial remittances, many women who leave families behind also negotiate a sharp sense of failure for not being “good” (i.e., physically present) mothers to their own children (Gamburd 2000, pp. 207–8; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001, pp. 22–27; Parreñas 2001, pp. 119–31). At the same time, for some women transnational migration can be a means to escape violent or abusive partners without abandoning their economic obligations to children or other kin (Arguelles & Rivero 1993; Gamburd 2000, pp. 146–47; Parreñas 2001, pp. 66–69).

**Gendered Struggles In/About the Workplace**

As the forms of accommodation and resistance discussed above reveal, workers around the world may tolerate tremendous exploitation and hardship in order to achieve other economic or social goals. Gendered encounters with capitalist labor relations do not necessarily direct workers’ struggles for greater autonomy toward the workplace. In the case of industrial labor, open resistance to harsh working conditions may be especially unlikely when alternative employment options (such as domestic service or sex work) are even less attractive (Harrison 1997). Nevertheless, new experiences of work and newfound autonomy in other aspects of daily life can also open up avenues for contestation on the job. These may be subtle as in footdragging, withdrawal, or other forms of nonconfrontational resistance to employer demands (Drori 2000, pp. 127–32; Freeman 2000, pp. 208–12; Yelvington 1995, pp. 200–2). Distress and anger may find expression in locally situated idioms
of protest such as episodes of mass spirit possession in Malay electronics factories (Ong 1987). Faced with different constraints than industrial workers, transnational domestic servants find indirect ways to resist their isolation and the paternalistic control of employers (Chin 1998). In Rome and Hong Kong, for example, Filipina housekeepers gather visibly in open urban sites on their days off, appropriating public spaces as their own (Constable 1997, pp. 166–70; Parreñas 2001, pp. 202–4).

Strikes, unions, and other organized conflict offer the most obvious evidence of contestation in global labor relations; however, ethnographic research concerning such activities remains rather limited. In part, this gap in the larger literature reflects the formidable obstacles to labor organizing in the global economy. The ease with which capital investment can shift production from one site to another limits the effective bargaining power of workers in any one place; at the same time, many contemporary state regimes seek to attract international investors by sharply restricting (or banning outright) unions and other forms of independent collective organizing for workers. The widespread practice of subcontracting in many industries around the world is also a barrier to worker solidarity: because components of the same end product may be manufactured in several different countries by workers employed by multiple subcontractors. This fragmentation of the global labor force, the distancing of production decisions and marketing from the people and places actually assembling global commodities, may well have curtailed opportunities for labor organizing. It has not, however, prevented labor militancy. Moreover, when strikes and other labor conflicts occur women are often key and sometimes primary figures as, for example, in South Korea (Kim 1997, Koo 2001, Ogle 1990), in Mexico (Cravey 1998, Peña 1995, Tirado 1994), and in Southeast Asia (Hutchison & Brown 2001, Margold 1999, Roha 1994, West 1997).

Strikes, walkouts, and other militant labor actions reveal the outrage and potential for confrontation that are obscured by images of “nimble-fingered” docility in a feminized global labor force. Assumptions about deferential and compliant women workers are challenged by patterns of organizing and activism around the globe (Chhachhi & Pittin 1996, Hutchison & Brown 2001, Louie 2001, Rowbotham & Mitter 1994). Although, to date, few extensive ethnographic studies focus on gendered processes of labor organizing and politicization, this is beginning to change. Kim’s (1997) study of women workers in Korea offers a particularly detailed ethnography of militant female labor. Related work includes recent studies of women’s labor activism in Asia (Brown 2001, Margold 1999, Mills 1999a, West 1997) and Latin America (Gill 1994, Stephen 1997).

The commodification of women’s productive and reproductive labor throughout the global economy has prompted new modes of confrontation and collective struggle. For example, ethnically marginalized domestic servants struggle to unionize in Bolivia (Gill 1994). Transnational Caribbean and Filipina migrants organize for better legal protections and citizenship in Canada (Stasiulis & Bakan 1997). Unions and activist groups represent sex workers in many countries (see Kempadoo & Doezema 1998). Similarly some industrial and artisanal homeworkers join
union-like bodies (Prugl 1999, Rose 1992, Rowbotham 1998). Other examples include marketing and production cooperatives through which women can seek greater control over their participation in local and global markets often as handicraft producers (Babb 2001, Milgram 2001, Tice 1995). Some of these organizations begin as local self-help groups, others as projects sponsored by development or charitable programs; many receive support from and maintain crucial ties to regional and transnational networks of women’s activist and nongovernmental organizations (cf. Rowbotham & Linkogle 2001, Rowbotham & Mitter 1994, Stephen 1997). As a whole, however, the global record of women’s economic organizing reveals the enormous obstacles that their efforts face.

In no small part, these difficulties reflect the fact that, around the world, the patriarchal assumptions of employers are often shared by labor organizers. Globally, labor union leadership remains predominantly male; when women do organize their efforts are often perceived as supplementary, subordinate, or constrained by prior domestic roles and responsibilities (Kim 1997, Stephen 1997, West 1997). In an Indian example, male-dominated unions in the Calcutta jute industry actively collaborated with employers to protect men’s privileges as full-time skilled workers rather than seeking to extend protections to women employed as temporary and unskilled laborers in the same production process (Fernandes 1997). The failure of labor institutions to overcome their own histories of gender inequality remains a critical source of weakness for labor solidarity and activism worldwide.

**Masculinities and Global Labor**

Women may be especially visible as subordinated labor in the global economy, and the contested quality of their experiences can place them in particularly vulnerable positions. However, gendered struggles in the global economy are not only contests about norms and practices of femininity; they are also about meanings and experiences of masculinity. Ethnographers are only beginning to ask how shifting material conditions of labor shape gender roles and relations from the perspective of men. Although overall the gendered dynamics of men’s participation in global labor has received far less attention than that of women, ethnographies of transnational labor mobility have addressed these questions more consistently than others. For example, high rates of overseas contract labor in South and Southeast Asian men have led some ethnographers to note the effects of this pattern of labor recruitment on local gender systems and identities (de Guzman 1993, Gardner 1995, Pinches 2001, Yamanaka 2000).

Filipino men working in the Middle East endured harsh working conditions as well as persistent marginalization as members of an alien ethnic and religious minority. Migrants experienced their legal inferiority and vulnerability as a denial not only of their masculinity but also of their own humanity; the effects of these inversions continued to trouble many migrants even after returning home (Margold 1995). A similar sense of vulnerability affects rural Thai men involved in overseas contract labor, expressed in part through fears of deadly attacks by female
spirits (Mills 1995). Nevertheless, many overseas workers seek a confirmation of masculine pride as intrepid and able workers in high-status sites of globalization. Consequently, rural men in Kerala, India view overseas employment, despite its risks, as increasingly necessary if they are to acquire the material and symbolic capital necessary to claim a fully adult masculine status at home (that is, to establish themselves as responsible and marriageable householders—see Osella & Osella 2000). Similarly, some working class Chinese Malay men have made overseas work experience critical to their assertions of successful masculine identities and authority over other men and women at home (Nonini 1997).

Crises of masculinity also figure into migration studies where transnational mobility involves both sexes or when men are the ones left behind. For many migrant and immigrant communities, the obstacles to achieving economic security in the new setting are often experienced as particularly painful failures for men. No longer able to fulfill traditional provider roles, men are often compelled to renegotiate their status and authority within the household (George 2000, Goldring 2001, Levitt 2001, Rouse 1995). This is the same process that results in the expansion of women’s claims to authority in immigrant communities and in men’s and women’s differing perspectives on the long-term settlement plans of many migrant households (see discussion above). An additional consequence, however, is the elaboration of misogynist discourses among some groups of working class men. These discourses can allow men to deflect their own experiences of subordination or distress in the workplace onto images of women, and sometimes violently onto the bodies of female companions (Ferguson 1999, p. 188; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Messner 1994).

Similar conflicts can arise when women move and men stay behind, as noted above. In Sri Lanka, women migrate to work as maids in Saudi Arabia, reversing the expected order of support between husband and wife; however, men do not assume the feminized status of caregivers in return. Struggling to retain a satisfactory identity as masculine heads of household some men claim their wives’ remitted earnings for personal use instead of managing these funds for the household. The persistent power of gender hierarchies in the home community makes it difficult for women to challenge husbands when this happens, in part because husbands’ transgressions are viewed as a response to the women’s own failures to be good (i.e., present) wives (Gamburd 2000).

Global transformations can also prompt crises of masculinity for long-term residents of the world’s wealthier societies as, for example, when nonmigrant men face the loss of relatively high-paying working class jobs to de-industrialization or lose managerial positions under corporate down-sizing (McDowell 2000, Newman 1988). In New York City, young Puerto Rican men reject service-sector jobs as both poorly paid and requiring acts of deference that are demeaning to their masculine self-respect. However, without the educational or social capital to achieve well-paying work in the formal economy some young men find both high earnings and a hyper-masculine (and violent) sense of dominance in the illicit drug trade (Bourgois 1995). The gendered effects of economic restructuring on impoverished
urban dwellers in Bolivia are reflected in heightened patterns of masculine violence both toward each other and women, owing in part to the brutalizing effects of military service, one of the few employment options still available to poor men (Gill 2000, pp. 117–28). Similarly the decline of Zambia’s Copperbelt compels former mineworkers to reexamine their claims to a “modern” masculine self-identity predicated on secure wage earning and a domestic division of labor that are both increasingly untenable (Ferguson 1999).

Recognizing the persistent privileging of masculine authority within gender hierarchies, a few scholars have begun to examine the production of hegemonic masculinities at the centers of global economic power and prestige. Representations and experiences of gender hierarchy in the global economy are not just concerned with cheapening feminized labor forces; they also reveal the shifting ideological grounds upon which entrepreneurial models of masculinity stand. For example, new demands for “caring” in corporate cultures exist in uneasy relationships with longstanding metaphors of “cowboy” competition and related models of aggression in global business practice (Hooper 2000). The different experiences of capitalists in Italian family firms (Yanagisako 2002), diasporic Chinese entrepreneurial elites (Ong 1999), U.S.-Mexico border factories (Salzinger 1997, Wright 2001), and informal sector entrepreneurs in Beijing (L. Zhang 2001) all promote business practices that assert and refigure hegemonic norms of masculinity but in highly specific and culturally contingent ways.

For example, E.Y. Zhang (2001) examines male-peer culture among new entrepreneurs and state officials in Beijing. This is characterized by ritualized outings to nightclubs where men negotiate globally inflected norms of masculinity through the consumption of imported alcohol and the commodified bodies of women. Such ties between expanding business circuits and the heightened demand for women’s labor as sex workers also suggest interesting parallels with the ways women’s sexual labor supports similar relations of masculinized power linked to global tourism or military expansion (Enloe 1989, Hyde 2001, Law 2000, Moon 1997, Sinclair 1997, Skrobanek et al. 1997, Truong 1990). In a different context, recent analyses of post-Soviet Russia and Eastern Europe note that the shift to neo-liberal capitalism has meant a reevaluation of economic practices in gendered terms. The entrepreneurial and higher-paying segments of the emerging private sector are often linked with a new sense of globalized masculinity, whereas lower-waged jobs and much of the public sector increasingly represent a domain of feminized and devalued labor (see Gal & Kligman 2000, p. 60; Humphrey 2002, p. 178; True 2000).

Whether hegemonic or subordinate, neither masculinities nor femininities in global economic relations are uniform; nor are they experienced in uniform ways. The gendered practices of women and men, both capitalists and laborers, are always and already culturally and historically situated. As such they constitute appropriate, indeed critical, subjects for ethnographic investigation (cf. Yanagisako 2002, p. 188). The challenge is to explicate globally inflected processes in their locally specific forms while at the same time seeking connections across economic and social contexts.
CONCLUSION

Engaging gender as both a subject and a tool of analysis, the ethnographic and scholarly research discussed above has generated new ways of understanding the intersections between international hegemonies and particular localities in a global labor force. A rich array of case studies and comparative analyses—many more in fact than can be cited in a short review—explore the multiple ways that gendered meanings, practices, and identities mediate these points of contact. The result is an innovative and wide-ranging body of scholarship that illuminates the heterogeneous character of globalizing labor practices and their gendered dynamics.

In a diverse global economy, gender ideologies can support flexible modes of labor control and discipline because of their ability to naturalize arbitrary and constructed claims about whose labor is worth more (or less) and what kinds of bodies are best suited to particular tasks. At the same time, global transformations in production, mobility, and livelihood have specific effects in the lives of gendered subjects, creating tensions and conflicts as well as newly imaginable possibilities. The resulting struggles involve men and women, workers and employers, communities and states in contests that can at times reproduce existing relations of power; however, they can also lead to new, potentially transformative forms of action and identity. Continuing research into the intersections of gender, labor, and globalization must engage all of these varied dimensions of discipline and contestation. Critical as well are studies that can link diverse patterns of gender and labor inequalities with other intertwining sources of power and domination: ethnic-racial divisions, rural-urban conflicts, state ideologies, mass media influences, and more. Whereas women’s entry into new forms of employment has focused considerable attention on transformations in experiences and images of femininity in the global economy, far less research has traced how discourses and experiences of masculinity are also implicated in the shifting dynamics of a globalized labor force. Although scholars have begun to ask these and related questions, new research must incorporate closer attention to the constructions of both masculinities and femininities, and the contested experiences of men as well as (and in relation to) women within a gendered labor force.

Comparative work across national boundaries is especially important to illuminate these complexities and contradictions in labor and gender inequalities. Finn (1998) offers an instructive model in her study of a transnational mining corporation and its effects on the men and women of two communities, one in the United States and the other in Chile. Though mining employment in both sites was a masculine preserve, women’s domestic work and image were essential to the systems of labor control and struggle in both communities, albeit in different ways. Tracing the interactions of management and workers, men and women, Finn’s cross-border and historical analysis unravels the tangled hierarchies of gender, class, ethnicity, and nationality. She highlights the struggles these forces engendered to show how and why they produced differential and shifting experiences of inequality in time and space.
This kind of attention to gender and gender inequalities, in both their material and ideological dimensions, will continue to offer productive strategies for scholarly research. Historically informed and ethnographically rich comparative work is essential to build a more complex understanding of gender and labor in globalizing processes. How do men and women sustain new understandings of themselves and their relations with others while seeking to survive amid often limited options? How and when can people channel new meanings and experiences into actions that may challenge underlying structures of inequality and domination? Under what conditions are such confrontations with inequality more likely to maintain or reproduce structures of power, including gender hierarchies? Ethnographic and anthropological research is and will continue to be particularly well positioned to trace these complexities across settings and times, amid intersecting ideological and symbolic systems, within and between particular industries, states, communities, workplaces, and lives. In so doing, ethnographers of gender, labor, and globalization can and will continue to make gender visible in new ways, to uncover the arbitrary and artificial ways through which gendered inequalities devalue labor and undermine the security and livelihoods of men and women around the world.

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