Beyond "Déjà Vu All Over Again?" Women's Work in the Global Economy

Gabaccia, Donna R., 1949-

Journal of Women's History, Volume 19, Number 3, Fall 2007, pp. 222-231 (Review)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/jowh.2007.0056

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jowh/summary/v019/19.3gabaccia.html
Beyond “Déjà Vu All Over Again?”
Women’s Work in the Global Economy


Donna R. Gabaccia

In our postcommunist, postsocialist, post-Maoist, postmodern, neoliberal era, the changes associated with globalization—which include rapid, long-distance movements of capital, labor, images and ideas—seem capable of radically transforming the lives, identities, options, and desires of laborers everywhere. It was an emerging sense of globality as a sharp rupture from the past that produced so much exciting theory (although also much “global babble” and “globaloney”) in the 1990s. In these five books, a new generation of scholars in women and gender studies begin to sort out the meaning and consequences of globalization for women’s labor. All focus on today’s world. If globalization has indeed sharply separated global present from national and local past, then a historian reader expects to be surprised with each page turned. Instead, this reviewer experienced an overpowering sense of “déjà vu all over again.” Why should the decidedly postmodern workers...
of contemporary Bulgaria, China, Nicaragua, or the United Arab Emirates seem so familiar to a scholar who has worked mainly on the Atlantic labor migrations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?

In part, this sense of déjà vu results from the fact that so many of the central questions and observations highlighted in these five books are the same ones featured in the research of historians studying industrialization and urbanization in earlier centuries and in other parts of the world, including Europe, North America, and parts of Latin America. While industry has certainly relocated recently (to what was once termed the “third world”), the majority of women workers in most of these new, and urbanizing, industrial sites are migrants from the countryside, just as were the women workers of the past. Domestic servants in our own times—as was the case a century ago, too—are migrant women who differ religiously, linguistically, and culturally from their urban employers. This is and was especially the case when women traveled in search of work across national boundaries. But in both the past (in France, for instance) and in the present (for example, in China), culture and language could just as decidedly mark as profound outsiders the peasant women who arrived “from the provinces.” The work and workplaces of both factory and service workers today are as highly gendered as in the past and they are also surprisingly similar in that gendered dynamics seem to have reproduced the low wages, long hours, alienating and minutely manipulated, abysmal working conditions deplored by reformers and advocates a century ago. Today’s employers, workers’ families, and local societies also continue to eye women’s migrations and the work they travel to take as potentially corrupting. Assuaging fears of migrants’ potential moral stigmatization supposedly motivates employers in China today—as it did also in Lowell, Massachusetts in the 1830s—to require their “girl workers” to live in dormitories. Finally, in all these works, scholars of today’s women workers wrestle with the familiar, if complex, issue of how the search for autonomy and the desire to contribute to familial economies motivate and constrain women’s work and the uses to which they put their wages.

The five books reviewed here are, of course, a widely ranging collection: three are more focused on female movement in the form of migration; two are equally or more concerned with female movement as a form of collective action. Female industrial workers are the main focus of Jacka’s, Mendez’s, and Ngai’s books, but more highly skilled work in the service (tourist) sector and extremely low-waged and indentured work in domestic work and in sex work also make appearances in Ghodsee’s and in Oishi’s and Jacka’s books, respectively. Not surprisingly, the five authors also work from quite diverse theoretical perspectives and respond to distinctive scholarly literatures shaped by both discipline and geographical area.
I suspect that fifty years ago, these books would never have been reviewed together; reviews would have appeared in the many separate journals of “area studies” (Latin America, Eastern Europe, East Asia, South Asia, or the Middle East). It is also quite possible that fifty years ago, few historians would have read these works.

The popularity of such new concepts as globalization and of global economy, thankfully, make a review like this one possible, for these concepts assume connections among workers in the far-flung parts of the world that earlier area-studies paradigms or historical work on national economies often rendered invisible. So, too, the development over the past forty years of interdisciplinary fields such as women and gender studies, labor studies, and migration studies has encouraged explorations of patriarchal forms and assumptions in economy, family, and politics across nations and cultures. (Three of the five authors reviewed here—Ngai, Ghodsee, and Jacka—work in interdisciplinary academic departments; Mendez and Oishi are sociologists.) The benefits of such interdisciplinary training and professional life are beautifully illustrated in these publications: readers will see in them the benefits of a dialogue that has developed between theorists of culture and identity on the one hand, and, on the other, sociologists and anthropologists who adopt qualitative methods (ranging from ethnographic field work to discourse analysis) to explore women’s work. Readers will also be reminded by Nana Oishi’s *Women in Motion* of the interdisciplinary roots of research on comparative (or “cross-national”) politics, political sociology, and policy. (Oishi once worked for the International Labour Organization and her book ends with careful attention to possible policy responses to the patterns she identifies in her study.)

More than the other authors, Oishi is concerned to offer a spatially wide-ranging portrait of women workers around that huge part of the world we call Asia, from its western fringe (also known as “the Middle East”) and south to Japan and the Philippines in the east. As a result, *Women in Motion* is also the best introduction to the ways that women workers today also differ from those of the past. A century ago, a sizeable majority of migrants seeking work in the global economy were men; the global labor market for women was far more limited than it is today, when women are more equally represented among migrants and even form majorities in movements into and out of some countries. Unlike the women workers of the past, furthermore, significant numbers of migrants and of the industrial, service, and clerical workers they become are older married women, not the single women who were more common in the earlier moments of industrialization in Europe and North America, and who seem most characteristic of China in today’s world. Oishi’s focus, furthermore, is firmly on important, but distinctive, subsets of migratory female workers—those that are both
temporary and legal. This distinction between authorized and unauthorized movements, too, is far more characteristic of today’s world of highly regulated and restricted human movements than it was of the nineteenth century—when liberals around the Atlantic argued for the free movement of people as well as for free trade. Most historians who have addressed the gendering of past migrations have assumed (perhaps too easily) that female migrations represented permanent migrations of settlement; today, by contrast, women are almost as likely to be recruited under short-term contracts as are men, even though they perform fundamentally different types of labor.

Oishi seeks to document and to explain cross-national differences in female migration and in women’s employment—between sending and nonsending countries and between sending and receiving countries—in Women in Motion. She points to state policies as key determinants of women’s recruitment and freedom to move. Thus, for example, Japan limits migrant female labor to the entertainment (including the sex) industry while the oil-rich western Asian countries vigorously recruit female migrants as domestic servant workers. Governing regimes in the Philippines hope to benefit (through remittances and investment) from their permissive “export” of female labor while Bangladesh has at times restricted and even banned female migration. However different these policies, Oishi reminds readers, they are all intended to undergird and not to challenge existing and highly gendered divisions of labor.

Women in Motion is more than simple description or analysis of state policy, however. It provides ample evidence of how migrant women come to “embody national pride and dignity” (102), with the result that women, their families, and their co-nationals often focus intently on the morality of and moral threat to women migrated abroad to work. Oishi shows how cultures of migration nevertheless develop in sending areas. She reveals how women also use cultural knowledge of migration to make choices about their own work and mobility, often independently of and even in opposition to the wishes of family members. Oishi sees the migration of young single women, and not that of older married women, as the largest single challenge to traditional social norms in sending countries. Despite this challenge, positive and supportive local cultures of migration provide social legitimacy for the decision of even young women to leave home to work for shorter or longer periods of time, perpetuating migration and work patterns that may have been initiated by state policies but cannot be sustained by them. It is in this context that Oishi notes the sense of empowerment that many migrant women express, even when the conditions of their exploitation—for example, in sex work—are also clear to them.

As this shows, Oishi does not completely ignore women’s perspectives or voices in her cross-national analysis. Still, it is the other authors reviewed
here who offer the richer “bottom-up” views of the global economy gained from studying smaller groups of women in very particular places. Perhaps because Mendez and Ghodsee focus on diverse types of female labor, they also draw somewhat different conclusions about the impact of globalization on women. The juxtaposed reading of their books about the maquiladoras of Nicaragua and the tourist resorts of Bulgaria’s Black Sea nevertheless provide parallel portraits of women’s lives as socialist economies give way to neoliberal political models, viewed in both books, furthermore, from the vantage point of the ethnographer working at the local level. Both authors also present fascinating portraits of the work of feminist Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and their relationship to the women workers of these two fundamentally different sites.

Ghodsee clearly frames her analysis of women’s work in Bulgaria’s “Red Riviera” tourism sector as a contribution to recent studies of the “transition” from socialism to capitalism. Based on interviews and the “small histories” (6) of women workers, collected during several years of fieldwork, Ghodsee stakes out a somewhat controversial position in the small but growing literature on the fate of “capitalism by design” in postcommunist countries. She acknowledges and documents the devastating decline in the standard of living most Bulgarians experienced during the 1990s. But she also points to a select group of women who, having worked in tourism under Bulgaria’s communist regime, also possessed the necessary cultural capital to succeed in the new capitalist economy. Endowed with university educations, Western contacts, and multiple language skills, all acquired as workers in a communist system, even those women who worked as waitresses and receptionists were often able to hold onto their positions or in some cases to transform them into opportunities for entrepreneurship and advancement in the new resort industry that emerged after communism’s collapse. By focusing on these relatively successful women, Ghodsee seeks to make a larger point—that capitalism by design is not merely an import, imposed from outside on the blank slate of a disintegrated society. Capitalism in Bulgaria has been shaped by the education, habits, and even skills of those trained and socialized under the old regime. By contrasting the successful women of the tourist industry to the fallen male heroes of communism (its industrial workers), Ghodsee introduces readers to the equally complex transition in gendered expectations, options, and aspirations that has accompanied rapid economic change.

On this foundation, Ghodsee offers a provocative critique of NGOs in her final chapter, “Feminism-by-Design.” Ghodsee focuses on the “disconnect” between Bulgarian women and the advocacy projects of feminist NGOs. Her retelling of how she used cigarettes—and the fact that she is a smoker—to establish rapport with a Bulgarian feminist NGO-worker who
noted, “very few of you Americans smoke,” is just a small symbol of this disconnect (153–55). Feminist NGOs in Bulgaria are almost completely dependent on funding from abroad, and their funders do not often see unemployment as a feminist issue, preferring to focus on violence against women, discriminatory employment practices, and negative gender stereotypes. For Bulgarian women, however, the largest problems they face are ones they share with men—limited employment opportunities, high rates of unemployment, and a declining standard of living. The result, according to Ghodsee, is both widespread cynicism about feminism among Bulgarian women and the co-optation of a small segment of middle-class Bulgarian feminists who work in the Western-funded and -directed NGOs rather than devoting themselves to the organization of a new oppositional movement that might draw a mass following.

Readers can consider some of these same issues from a different angle in the work of Jennifer Bickham Mendez. Nicaragua, too, has undergone a transition from socialism under the leadership of the Sandinistas toward a market-driven political economy. From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras is based on fieldwork that transformed Mendez into a cooperante (“cooperator” or international assistant) of a Nicaraguan working and unemployed women’s movement called “María Elena Cuadra” (MEC). Mendez traces the formation of the group to the history of oppositional politics in Nicaragua and to problems women experienced within the Sandinista movement and especially within the labor movement. She makes clear how women’s desire for employment (“but with dignity”) in the maquiladoras of Nicaragua’s Free Trade Zone has required the development of new, less confrontational strategies and new, although equally troubled, relationships to the still-male-dominated trade union movement of the country.

Mendez offers a rich portrait of MEC and its leadership but she ends her book (I assume quite consciously) with a section called “What does MEC teach us? Lessons for the North.” Mendez remains firmly committed to feminist transnational politics and to the ways in which feminist supporters from the North can help to make information—for example, about human rights—flow more effectively to their partners in the South. But she also insists with greater optimism than Ghodsee that outside supporters of groups such as MEC might avoid allowing “rigid funding priorities to become a straitjacket that prevents those working for social justice within local contexts in the South from developing and implementing alternative organizational forms, strategies, and practices” (218). For Mendez, the fact that MEC was organized “from below” holds the key to whatever democratic challenge Nicaragua’s women may be able to mount against a leftist union movement still understood as male, and neoliberal concepts of female workers as interchangeable factors of production in a global economy.
Both Ghodsee and Mendez treat the types of alliances they find in NGOs as unprecedented, and in some ways they are correct to do so. There were, of course, no NGOs in Bulgaria or Nicaragua to interact with the migrant women workers a century ago. Still, the fraught relationships of NGOs and local women workers, and the class dynamics between China’s women activists and working-class women, share at least some similarity with the tensions historians have revealed in studies of settlement house workers and their female immigrant clients and of wealthy “allies” and young factory workers in such U.S. and British organizations as the Women’s Trade Union League.

Tamara Jacka and Pun Ngai demonstrate in their works the near impossibility of conventional workplace mobilization among the women workers in China’s factories yet both also insist on highlighting small signs of resistance they see emerging among highly regimented and disempowered workers. (Both authors—and especially Ngai—have been influenced by the work of Michel Foucault and James Scott.) Both authors are also far more concerned than Ghodsee, Mendez, or Oishi with the identity and with the self-representations of the women they sought to study. Both distance their work explicitly from earlier feminist studies that—hoping to give voice to working-class women—represented female “experience” far too unproblematically.

Of the two, Jacka presents a more nuanced discussion of how studies of experience, discourse, agency, and subjection can be brought into dialogue, something she also attempts in her book. Rural Women in Urban China provides a clear introduction to the enormity of movements underway from countryside to city in China. Jacka considers the lives of women working in a variety of occupations but her richest material is about the dagongmei (“working [younger] sisters”) in China’s global factories; almost all have recently arrived in cities from the countryside and very few of them possess legitimate rights to permanent, urban residency. She is also particularly concerned to explore how an official discourse of factory work as means to raising the suzhi (“human quality”) of rural dwellers is subsequently learned, modified, manipulated, or rejected by women workers. Jacka’s analysis is sensitive to the ways in which locality, life course, and relationships within and outside the family interplay in the creation of identities and identifications among women workers, making her work particularly accessible to historian readers.

The dagongmei are also at the center of Pun Ngai’s Made in China. While Jacka pursued a surprising range of methodologies—participant/observation in a Migrant Women’s Club, interviews, surveys, fieldwork—Ngai’s book is based instead on an intensive year devoted to seeking work and then actually working in an electronics assembly plant. Ngai even gained
permission to live in the dormitories with young women recently relocated to the city in order to earn wages—no mean feat. Although I have no evidence that Ngai is aware of the earlier social investigators who—dressing themselves as hoboes, domestic servants, laundry workers, or factory girls—undertook similar studies a century ago, it is clear from Ngai’s work that those who employ this method in our own times face higher expectations and stricter scholarly conventions than did their counterparts in the past. Ngai did not attempt to disguise her identity; her co-workers knew she was a “student” who had chosen to work and live among them, a fact they apparently found odd but nevertheless accepted. Ngai also agonizes far more than her early-twentieth-century predecessors ever did over the limits of her ability to learn empathetically through shared experience, and over the possibility of translating or representing to readers the lives of the women among whom she lived. The powerlessness and constraints Ngai describes her co-workers as facing simply did not apply to Ngai. In the last of her ethnographic chapters, Ngai focuses on a woman who expresses her feelings about a sequence of serious reversals in love and work by awaking from her dreams screaming almost nightly. Ngai nevertheless concludes that this woman and her co-workers are “approaching a minor genre of resistance” (187). She argues that China’s workers must confront their enclosure in order to imagine what she calls new strategies of “multisided resistance” (chap. 7). This reader, at least, concluded that such resistance, shaped as it is by local, rural cultures, is unlikely to resemble either the strategies imagined by transnational NGO workers or by the workers of the past.

Quite directly, in the case of Ngai, and more indirectly in the work of Jacka and Mendez, this new scholarship on women workers responds to theorist Gayatri Spivak’s controversial question about whether or not the subaltern can speak. Jacka insists early in her book that “it needs to be stressed again that there is no subject outside of the history of its performances” (17). Yet somehow, as an author, Jacka manages to convey to readers some sense of the humanity and vivacity of the individual women she interviewed; in an appendix she also gives them names. To Jacka’s credit, she has also made available on the Web translations of the full stories written by Chinese women for a contest, “My Life as a Migrant Worker,” sponsored by a magazine for rural women. Fewer speaking individuals—and more subject positions—populate the pages of Ngai’s Made in China, although in the case of this book, too, photographs and even the account of “Yan’s displaced self” (Yan is the screaming woman of chapter 6) establish the humanity of her worker subjects.

By contrast, both Ghodsee and Mendez, the scholars who most self-consciously engage the problems of transition from socialism to capitalism, seem far more willing to represent the women among whom they lived as
individuals and as subjects who speak. Mendez acknowledges that she was transformed by her work as a cooperante, an experience she describes as having moved her “thinking away from postmodernist concerns toward more materialist ones, from questions of identity to ones of political economy” (24). Ghodsee’s concern with political economy is even more consistent and refreshing. It is quite striking, furthermore, that of the authors reviewed here, it was Mendez and Ghodsee who note they had married into the cultures they chose to study—placing them, as Mendez terms it, in an “insider/outside” position that seems to have differed from those of the other authors.

In choosing to review these five books, editors of the Journal of Women’s History assume—rightly, I think—that historians care about new work in the social sciences. If, as historians increasingly insist, the rupture of the “postmodern” from the modern is not as extreme as theorists of the 1990s posited, and, as historical research increasingly suggests, globalization is not a new phenomenon but one with a history of pulsing expansions and contractions, then one might well hope the social scientists of the future will consider that past in analyzing the present.

For now, however, they do not really do so; the interdisciplinary training of these authors seems not to have convinced them to problematize the current moment of globalization by acknowledging its past. The result? The rupture that separates present from past is assumed rather than questioned in these works, and history—as a discipline—appears to have little to offer. Tamara Jacka does acknowledge the influence of historian Joan Scott on her efforts to bring together analyses of experience, discourse, and agency. And Pun Ngai has read (although she does not really discuss) historian Tamara Hareven’s work on family and factory intersections. Time, if not the past, does matter in small ways in these accounts. Jacka, for example, explores time when analyzing individual biography and life narratives (chap. 7), while Ghodsee’s and Mendez’s concern with transitions from socialism to neoliberalism in Bolivia and Nicaragua forces them to examine change over time, at least in the arena of states and politics. But we are still a long way from interdisciplinary practices in which history, the past, and the temporal shape social scientific study of globalization and its impact in today’s world.

Notes
