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Sexual Politics

The Sweatshop Feminists

- Features - Feminism -

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Global elites have appropriated feminist language to justify brutal exploitation and neoliberal development.

I have often been asked since the publication of my book [1] what I mean by “feminism seduced.” Who is seducing feminism, and why? It’s a complicated question, with several meanings. I highlight two of them here: the use of cheap female labor by Export Processing Zones (EPZs); and the claim that women, rather than state-led development, are the key to eliminating poverty in the Third World.

Employers, governments, and international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have embraced one of the core tenets of contemporary feminism – “the right of women to paid work” – to justify the employment of women in EPZs in deplorable and often dangerous positions.

The globalization of manufacturing has led to the outsourcing of factory jobs in apparel, sneakers, electronics, and other industries to low-wage countries in the Global South. Much of this production takes place in EPZs – a type of free-trade zone that exempts businesses from most labor, taxes, health and safety regulations, and trade duties. These zones favor employers through anti-labor structures that assure foreign investors a docile and largely female workforce.

The legitimizing of women’s work in the rich Western countries has enabled factory owners in countries like China, Vietnam, and Malaysia to paint their use of primarily women’s labor as congruent with the dominant feminist belief that paid work liberates. Indeed, how often have we heard Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times* [defend these factories](#) as sites of opportunity for women? Aren’t they better off, he [asks his readers](#), than women scabbling through piles of garbage to find something to eat or sell?

The use of cheap female labor for export industries is not new – it was pioneered in South Korea during its so-called economic miracle, as women were drawn from farm to factory work. Political economist Alice Amsden [argued in 1989](#) that the male-female gender wage gap was one of the keys to the success of South Korea’s industrialization.

The gender-bifurcated wage structure that generated windfall profits for US companies like Fairchild and came to dominate the electronics industry in South Korea, was soon replicated elsewhere.

In the electronics industry, shortly after the invention of the silicon chip in 1958–59, Fairchild opened the first offshore semi-conductor plant in Hong Kong, moving into South Korea in 1966. General Instruments shifted its microelectronics production to Taiwan in 1964, and in 1965 many high tech firms relocated their production to the US-Mexico border, opening the first [maquiladoras](#). In the next decade, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines followed suit, and by the late 1970s they [were joined by](#) countries in the Caribbean and South America.

As multinationals – lured by government advertisements for the “nimble fingers” of their female workers – [shifted production overseas](#), the number and range of goods being produced by low-paid female workers expanded rapidly.

High profits went hand in hand with [deplorable working conditions](#) in the new EPZs. As information about the inhumane conditions experienced by women in these factories became known, there was widespread publicity and activism in the 1990s decrying the return of sweatshop conditions around the world. Naomi Klein [has even argued](#)

that the global justice movement owes its origins in part to indignation over the conditions imposed on workers by well-known brand name multinational corporations such as Nike.

There is [considerable debate](#) over the advantages and disadvantages of EPZs. Some feminist scholars, like Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, [have condemned](#) the extreme exploitation of female workers in export enclaves. But others, such as [Linda Lim](#) and [Naila Kabeer](#), defend EPZs as a path to escape familial patriarchy, or as a way for women to earn incomes that exceed what they could get in domestic industries.

Aihwa Ong, in her work on Japanese electronic companies in Malaysia, [points out](#) that while village girls might be exploited and fired as soon as their keen young eyesight wanes, they are also modernized by factory work – abandoning their peasant sarongs for blue jeans and winning the right to choose their own husbands.

Diane Wolf [notes](#) the paradox for women workers: “Globalization is a double-edged process as far as women are concerned. On the one hand, employment opportunities derived from transformations in the global economy produce new kinds of patriarchal and capitalist controls over women.” But on the other hand, the low-wage jobs, which are “often below subsistence standards,” nonetheless give women “tools with which they [resist] patriarchy . . . Women I interviewed [in Java, Indonesia] preferred work in ‘global sweatshops’ to the village rice fields.”

The extreme end of this spectrum of opinion is, perhaps, the view of Shelley Feldman, who has studied export-processing factories in Bangladesh, and is skeptical of simple-minded “economic determinis[t]” accounts. Feldman is critical of feminist scholars who fail to acknowledge the power of women to make their own choices.

She [argues](#) that the Bangladeshi women she studied were influenced, not by external factors such as structural adjustment programs, privatization, and the liberalization of the economy, but by their own choices, as “constituted through, and enabled by, the complex and contradictory histories of women’s lives.”

Yet Feldman’s argument seems to rely on a simplified dichotomy – either the Bangladeshi women were motivated by the particularities of their own lives and needs, or they were pulled into paid employment by the policies of their government and of the textile factories. Obviously there is an interaction at play, but it is an absurd leap to suggest that rural peasant women have conjured up EPZs, not to mention structural adjustment policies, on their own.

Perhaps these feminist scholars, looking through the lens of a twenty-first century feminism that sees work as the path to liberation, equate the newly proletarianized women workers of the Global South with the “[Lowell girls](#)” of nineteenth-century Massachusetts, drawn from their farms into the first American textile factories. Under fairly mild working conditions (compared to their counterparts in Manchester, England), the Lowell women developed both a worker and a feminist consciousness.

There is no doubt that working in EPZ factories, which provide young women with an independent income, can have a liberating effect. These women are following the path prescribed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: instead of doing unpaid and exhausting work on a farm, subject to feudal and patriarchal controls, seek employment in factories, which can bring economic autonomy and a consciousness of one’s capacities. But what may be true in theory is often less so in practice, especially given the harsh conditions under which most women in EPZs work.

Conditions in EPZs vary from country to country, but nearly all are exempt from national labor laws, and as a 2004 report by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions shows, employers are ruthless in crushing unionizing attempts and in going after labor organizers.

Even if they don't try to unionize, female EPZ workers face constant harassment. At CODEVI, a company located in Haiti's Ouanaminth free-trade zone, workers producing Levi's jeans for the clothing group Grupo M have experienced "abductions, beatings, arbitrary dismissals, verbal abuse, unpaid overtime, intimidation with firearms, and interrogations."

In Mexico, workers are usually on short-term contracts, with no job security. Women applying for jobs can be subjected to health tests, including pregnancy testing, which can involve being examined naked and "asked intrusive personal questions such as, "â€"Do you have a boyfriend?" â€"How often do you have sex?" and â€"Do you have children?""

Jeremy Seabrook, who has also observed factories in Bangladesh, [agrees with Kabeer](#) that the women workers of Dhaka, Bangladesh go through epic struggles to get factory jobs, having to overcome the obstacles placed in their path by patriarchal families and communities. But he argues that the women have no power to decide which industries settle in Bangladesh to take advantage of them.

They work fourteen-hour days, with wages often delayed, and endure brutal overseers and extremely dangerous working conditions; he witnessed a fire in Dhaka on August 27, 2000, that killed a dozen people and in recent years, more than two hundred factory workers have died in fires. More recently, the 2013 Rana Plaza [factory collapse](#) outside Dhaka killed more than one thousand workers. As Seabrook remarks, "This is scarcely a model of self-determination."

Moreover, Ellen Rosen [argues](#) that the nineteenth-century American pattern of industrialization, and the transformative potential it brought with it, is not being followed in the countries establishing EPZs:

Today's export-processing economy does not . . . transplant older forms of industrialization to the developing world. Unlike in Western nations, where capital-intensive manufacture was central to economic growth, in many developing countries these low-wage industries have become central to the economic growth that is expected to occur. And unlike in the West, where the higher-paid men's industrial jobs were central to the economic welfare of families, in export-processing economies the low-paid women workers make up about 80 percent â€" the vast majority â€" of the workforce.

Women receive a "woman's wage," but men do not receive a "man's wage" â€" leaving women working in EPZs few opportunities to lift themselves out of poverty.

The co-option of feminist ideals on the global stage goes beyond the use of a woman's right to paid employment to justify exploitative working conditions. The co-option is also evident in how women's "empowerment" has been used to justify neoliberal development models and the [structural adjustment](#) policies [imposed on](#) Third World countries in the 1980s, and more recently on northern countries like Ireland and Greece.

The international financial institutions â€" including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, and a raft of NGOs like [CARE](#) â€" along with corporate entities like Nike, have declared that the solution to the world's problems, especially poverty and inadequate health care, lies with the education and training of women and girls. Women's empowerment, through the use of microcredit and other interventions, will lift not only women but their children and families out of poverty and into the middle class.

Consider, for example, the cheerful words from Nike's "[girl effect](#)" website:

Girls are agents of change. They play a crucial role in solving the most persistent development problems facing the world today. By investing in their economic potential through education and by delaying child marriage and teen pregnancy issues such as HIV and AIDS can be resolved and the cycle of poverty can be broken.

In India, adolescent pregnancy results in nearly \$10 billion in lost potential income. In Uganda, 85 per cent of girls leave school early, resulting in \$10 billion in lost potential earnings. By delaying child marriage and early birth for one million girls, Bangladesh could potentially add \$69 billion to the national income over these girls' lifetimes.

This belief in the transformative power of individual women and girls is a cynical use of feminist, or rather pseudo-feminist, ideology. The creation of national wealth and a rising standard of living is, by and large, the result of state-led development, not the upshot of small loans or job training for women.

The case of South Korea is illustrative: the remarkable industrialization process of South Korea under a military dictatorship beginning in the 1960s was the product of strong state policies that rewarded corporate groups (chaebols) that were successful in meeting state goals, while punishing those that failed. The government used state-owned banks to modernize infrastructure, restrict direct foreign investment, and protect domestic producers against foreign competition by restricting imports.

In short, the government acted as designer, instigator, director, and impresario of the whole range of sectors, modernizing the economy to such an extent that by the 1980s the technologically advanced country was offering assistance to older industrialized nations.

Although contemporary mainstream commentators treat the concept of state-led development as heretical, the truth is that the great industrial powers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – Great Britain, Germany and the United States – owed much of their industrial strength to state-led development policies.

As Ha-Joon Chang [has pointed out](#), from the Civil War to World War II, “the United States had the most heavily protected economy in the world.” Abraham Lincoln was a disciple of Henry Clay, an advocate of the so-called [American System](#), “based on infrastructural development and protectionism.” Criticizing the British for preaching free trade to his country, Ulysses S. Grant, Civil War general and president from 1869 to 1877, retorted that “within two-hundred years, when America has gotten out of protection all that it can offer, it too, will adopt free trade.”

Disregarding this historical experience, the international financial institutions have, since the 1980s, imposed on Global South countries a neoliberal, “free-market” regime that has made state-led development impossible. Countries that have been subjected to structural adjustment policies, in the guise of encouraging their economic development, have instead found themselves unable to direct their own economies.

The net result is a distorted development process that does not replicate the successful path taken by the original industrial powers of Europe and the newly industrialized countries of the post–World War II period (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore). In today's global economy, it is illusory to think that poor countries can eliminate poverty and ill health without genuine industrial and agricultural development.

I do not wish to gloss over the costs of such a model. We should remember that South Korea was modernized under the heel of a brutal military dictatorship, and that part of the success of its economy is in no part due to the courageous and powerful trade union movement that grew up after the return to democracy.

I am not arguing that returning to a state-led development model would be in and of itself any kind of panacea,

without the full and democratic participation of workers. And it would take a different essay to talk about the current debates over “extractive” development, climate change, indigenous people’s land rights, and related issues.

But the fact remains that state-led development has a record of lifting large numbers of people out of poverty.

“Successful” feminist interventions, then, have ended up giving wealthy countries and international agencies like the United Nations a way to obscure this historical reality by pointing to women as the key to economic development. For example, UN chief Kofi Annan, in a speech marking the sixtieth anniversary of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, stated, “Study after study has taught us that no other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity, or to reduce infant and maternal mortality.”

It is gratifying for feminist activists that the former UN secretary-general recognizes the importance of supporting women and girls around the world. But his statement is deeply misleading.

The international financial institutions and the wealthy countries have created the myth that helping individual women, one by one, is going to eliminate poverty, disease, and malnutrition. Referring to women and girls as the key to development is a sleight of hand, a way to turn the gaze of policymakers, activists, and working people away from the vicious actions of groups like the [troika of “institutions”](#) (the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Central Bank) that are seeking to crucify Greece and the Syriza government in the name of the financial interests of banks, bondholders, and the rich lending countries.

Of course it is crucial that women and girls everywhere receive education, training, reproductive rights, affordable health care, control over their own decisions about work and marriage, and control over their own sexuality. But these fundamental tenets of feminism cannot be achieved by helping women one by one, in a context where the entire society is being ravaged by austerity and the market fundamentalism of neoliberal policies.

[Jacobin](#)

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[1] Feminism Seduced: How Global Elites Use Women’s Labor and Ideas to Exploit the World (2009)