

WOMEN FACTORY WORKERS IN FIJI: THE "HALF A LOAF" SYNDROME

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The condition of women in factory employment in Fiji captured national attention during the 1986 controversy over the garment industry, which then employed more than 2000 non-unionised women under unregulated conditions and at wages as low as 25 cents an hour.¹ Described by the last Alliance government Minister for Economic Development and Tourism, Peter Stinson, as "one of Fiji's greatest hopes for development in the medium term", garment manufacturing has become a major export industry in the last six years, thanks to the SPARTECA trade agreement between Australia and the Forum Island States in the Pacific. Under the terms of SPARTECA, Fiji is able to export a quota of finished garments to Australia.

A long-overdue Wages Council Order, prepared more than three years earlier but withheld because of successful lobbying by the Subcommittee of Fiji Garment Manufacturers,² was gazetted early in 1986. This followed a spate of articles and letters in the open columns of the two newspapers expressing concern over the industry's low wages and sweatshop conditions³. Under the Wages Order, garment manufacturers were obliged to pay a statutory wage of \$0.70 an hour for new entrants to the industry and \$0.90 a hour for other workers. Two weeks after it was announced, however, the order was re-cinded by the Alliance government. This action followed a three-day protest lock-out by manufacturers who threatened to close businesses. Women workers took to the streets in a spontaneous protest march but were urged by the General Secretary of the Fiji Trades Union Congress (and Secretary of the National Union of Factory and Commercial Workers) James Raman, not to try to form a union. The women returned to their jobs as a tribunal was set up by the government (with FTUC support) to look into their problems and decide a minimum wage for the industry (Parliamentary Paper [PP] No. 38 1986:4).

The debate surrounding the garment industry assumed a number of pro-worker positions, from moral outrage at the level of exploitation and the industry's attitude that "half a loaf was better than no bread at all";⁴ to compassion for garment workers as the poorest of the poor - women from impoverished, urban households or sole income earners with dependents; from speculation over government-industry political links, to critical appraisal of the

terms of trade between Fiji and Australia, the Spartecca Agreement and quota restrictions on Fiji garment imports in particular.⁵ In all the arguments raised against the industry's wage practices and the government's action, little attention was given to firstly, women's preferential employment in certain manufacturing industries in Fiji, and secondly, the general context of trends in the international division of labour. In particular the place of women's employment in both the phenomenon of 'runaway shops' or capital relocation in the third world and in the currently popular 'development' strategies of export-led growth was neglected. Thirdly, the wider implications of the Alliance government's sanctioning of low wages for women workers in the garment industry was also overlooked.

This article attempts to provide a class and gender analysis of women's employment in manufacturing in Fiji and to define the wider context of women's entry into manufacturing employment. It suggests the broader implications of the Alliance government's stance in the particular case of the garment industry.

The Growth of Women's Employment in Fiji

It is a commonly held view in Fiji that women do not work. The conservative, and largely Western, notion of women's proper place and role being in the home, carrying out the socially reproductive tasks of feeding, clothing and generally nurturing the family, neither recognises these tasks as work of some considerable value, nor takes account of the fact that this role also involves women in subsistence farming and fishing. Officially, their situation continues to be misrepresented. In the last census only 17 percent of women in Fiji were classified as 'economically active'.

Despite the prevailing notion that they do not work, growing numbers of women are in fact entering the country's paid workforce. Although official statistics on their employment may well be suspect, in the absence of any thorough research into employment practices in the unorganised sector, they must suffice.⁶ From these it is clear that the numbers of women in wage and salary employment has significantly increased over the last 12 years. In 1974, 9,804 women were recorded in employment (PP No 28 of 1977). In 1984, the figure had almost doubled to 17,117 (Annual Employment Survey 1984).

Women's increasing share of salaried and waged jobs in Fiji was noted by the Fiji Employment and Development Mission (FEDM). Not only was it found that women held 22 percent of the total number of jobs in 1981, but it was

also noted that between 1975 and 1980 they secured no less than 48 percent of the total new jobs created in that period. Indeed, between 1976 and 1982 the numbers of employed women increased by 40 percent compared with a 10 percent increase in the numbers of employed men in the same period.

These figures were a matter of some concern to the Employment Mission. In its final report the Mission proposed certain policy measures intended to either persuade women to stay in the home, performing non-remunerated work or force them to share the jobs they already held by making those jobs 'half-time' jobs⁷. These proposed measures were clearly aimed at reducing the numbers of women earning secondary incomes and were based on the rationale of distributing income more evenly among households or families in Fiji. Women in two-income families were projected as moving into paid employment not from economic necessity but from a frivolous desire 'to work outside the home':

Women's expressed desire for work outside the home generally reflects a relative preference and is, in many ways, more directly comparable to the desire of people with existing jobs for a better or a different job, than to the demand for a job by an unemployed person [read, man], who has no effective means of support. (FEDM 1984:156)

By taking a simplistic 'supply and demand' view of the problem of unemployment and arguing that "it is the numbers of people actively circulating in the market in search of work which is critical", the Mission held women's entry into the labour market responsible for exacerbating the (male) unemployment situation and lowering wages. Its specious argument against enforcing minimum wage legislation in the unregulated industries on the grounds that,

...(it) ... is likely to be less effective and more ambiguous in its effects since it is always exposed to the charge that it is pointless to refuse to allow the existence of jobs paying wages which currently unemployed people are anxious to accept. (FEDM 1984:157)

shows an unconcealed preference for the free market's continued exploitation of women who work out of necessity. According to the views expressed by the Mission, poorly-paid women workers, by flooding the labour market, are responsible for the poor wages they receive but are entitled to continue receiving them. By proposing measures that would contract women's

employment, the Mission not only absolves capital from any responsibility for the situation but also ignores at least two important points.

First, because of the structure of labour markets women and men do not generally compete for the same jobs. Female employment is concentrated in the three sectors of community, social and personal services; wholesale and retail trades, restaurants and hotels; and manufacturing. Within these sectors, women are segregated in 'female' occupations, specifically, nursing, teaching, secretarial, clerical, cleaning, retail sales, waitressing and housemaiding jobs. The roots of this occupational segregation lie as much in structures of gender subordination and sex-role stereotypes as in the conscious practices of capital to maintain this situation. Freeing up many of the jobs women presently hold would not create employment opportunities for unemployed men.

More importantly, the Mission ignored the fact that in those manufacturing industries where unskilled men and women could compete for jobs, industries are choosing women in preference to men. The rise in female employment in certain manufacturing industries has been quite dramatic over the last few years. It is evident that this has been due to a growing practice among certain industries of preferentially hiring women workers.

The Employment of Women in Manufacturing

Between 1974 and 1984 there was a 154 percent increase in the number of women employed in manufacturing. Actual numbers employed in this sector jumped from 898 in 1974 to 2,278 in 1984. Although men remain dominant in the sector, holding 83 percent of total manufacturing jobs in 1984, women's increasing share of these jobs is underlined by the fact that, in Suva alone, their share totalled 23 percent in 1984. The percentage has almost certainly grown since then. It is important to emphasise that the majority of women employed in manufacturing are working primarily as factory hands, not as administrative/clerical or managerial workers as Chandra (1984:293) suggested. Even in 1974, according to the Ministry of Labour Report for that year, 67 percent of women manufacturing workers (598 out of a total of 898) were in non-managerial, non-clerical/administrative jobs (PP No 28 of 1977).

Evidence of preferential hiring is difficult to obtain from statistics. It is known that women employed in manufacturing are concentrated in the two industries of textiles and clothing and food processing and packaging (Sivatibau et al. 1984). Other industries in which women are primarily, if not exclusively, employed are cigarette manufacturing and fish canning. Only the

garments industry and the cigarette manufacturing industry have, however, openly acknowledged that they preferentially employ women. Within the other industries in which women predominate (food processing and packaging and fish canning) preferential female hiring is an unstated but obvious practice. It is difficult to obtain precise figures on female employment in these industries over the last few years, when, it seems, the informal practice of preferentially hiring women began. Gender breakdown of industry employment figures is less commonly provided than the ubiquitous racial disaggregations. Moreover, figures for certain Fiji Standard Industrial Classification (FSIC) industry sub-groups are combined in Annual Employment Survey reports to protect the confidentiality of individual company returns. The numbers of women employed in manufacturing have, however, obviously increased even further in the two years since 1984. As the garment industry alone was estimated to be employing in excess of 2,000 women in 1985⁸ and the numbers of women employed in other industries combined are far in excess of 300, the total number of women in this sector in 1986 would probably, at a conservative guess, be in the region of 3,500.

Women's Concentration in Low-wage Manufacturing

Why are women being hired in manufacturing? The Employment Mission noted in its report the increasing participation by women in low-wage manufacturing industries. These are essentially those industries owned by local industrialists, which have not been unionised. They include confectionery, sweets and other food industries, non-alcoholic beverages, textiles, garments, footwear, agricultural machinery repair and jewellery. Local businessmen have strongly resisted the establishment of trade unions in their enterprises, and the trade union movement has up until recently balked at pushing the matter. Instead it has confined its energy to improving wages and conditions in organised industries.

The size of the unorganised sector has, however, grown quite considerably in recent years as local capital has developed and extended its activities to dominate, in particular, the manufacturing sector. It is estimated that slightly more than 50 percent of all wage and salary earners in Fiji are non-unionised. Although many of those who are non-unionised are in high-wage rather than low-wage jobs the vast majority are trapped in poorly-paid jobs. While it is true that most industries are regulated by Wages Orders, employers in some of these industries have been known to circumvent them by falsifying wage records. A few, like the garment industry, have managed to remain outside the ambit of Wages Councils.

Although in 1971, women comprised 31.7 percent of low-wage manufacturing labour by 1980 the figure had risen to 50.6 percent. The extent to which the figure has risen further in the last four years is probably significant. While the garment industry would mainly account for the more recent increases, other industries, particularly food processing, packaging, canning and other 'light' industries, have also contributed to the growing numbers of women in low-wage manufacturing.

The principal reason that women are being hired in low-wage manufacturing is that they are a cheaper labour force. In the absence of alternative, better-paid jobs, they are prepared to work for a pittance. Given the context of a segregated job market, sex-stereotyped job training and the underlying social ideology about the role and place of women, most young women in Fiji, especially from the growing number of poorer households, have the choice of taking low-wage jobs in the formal sector or accepting equally poorly paid (or unpaid) domestic work. The fact that many of the low-wage industries began as small family businesses which exploited the unpaid labour of female family members highlights the close link between the exploitation of women's labour in the private and public spheres.

The example set by companies, in 'favouring' women in recruiting labour and taking advantage of women's weaker bargaining position, should not necessarily be followed by government. The mutual interests of business and government are, however, obvious. Less overt are the wider interests that may be coming into play in what appears to be a policy of preserving a low-wage sector in Fiji's labour market. It is these wider interests and the implications for women factory workers in Fiji, that I will tentatively explore here, within the contexts of industrialisation in the third world generally and Fiji's own industrialisation goals.

Female Employment in Third World Manufacturing

The rise in female employment in Fiji typifies the situation that developed in other third world countries embarking on industrialisation via export-manufacturing. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that female labour has been critical to the strategy adopted by Newly Industrialising Countries (NIC's). Feminist scholars who have studied the boom in factory employment of third world women over the last decade, have explained it within the general context of the 'international division of labour' that has resulted from international capital's relocation of labour-intensive industries in the third world.

Relocation has essentially been international capital's response to rising labour costs in developed countries. This development was not unassociated with the equal pay gains made by women workers in developed nations. It is significant that many of the industries which have been relocated are those in which women workers predominated, such as the garments and textile industries. Other industries which have featured in this industrial explosion in the third world are the electrical and electronics industries.

The success of international capital's relocation of labour-intensive industries has been largely dependent on the cooperation or support of third world governments. Encouraged by multilateral lending agencies, such as the International Monetary Fund, which advocate 'development' strategies of export-led growth, many governments in the third world established 'free-trade' or 'export processing' zones in which 'world market factories' operate completely unfettered by any regulation of wages or profits.

The consequences for workers in both developed countries, who suffered job loss with factory closures and third world states have been severe. In the face of the constant risk that companies will relocate in a neighbouring country which offers even lower wages, governments are encouraged to introduce highly-repressive labour policies to keep workers and wages under control. The subjugation of workers' interests to the imperatives of international capital has often been unopposed by official trade union bodies which are most often incorporated into the state apparatus. The growing reality of repression and militarism within third world states is thus closely connected to maintaining favorable conditions for international capital.

Relocation by multinational companies in third world states is not the only face of the world market factory. The part that local companies play under subcontracting or licensing arrangements is equally significant. Perhaps it is more significant, as these arrangements manage to obscure the wider relations of exploitation that are at work. Local companies, moreover, are able to argue for both protection for their industries and for leniency from the trade unions as far as workers' wages are concerned, on the grounds that they are struggling indigenous or national enterprises and are contributing to the country's 'development'. Concessions to local firms also benefit client companies which are able to obtain finished products at a cheaper unit-cost.

Women have commonly comprised up to 90 percent of labour employed in relocated industry. This fact is usually explained by reference to physical or psychological characteristics women are said to possess which favour them for these jobs. These include manual dexterity (nimble fingers), loyalty, willingness to accept monotonous work and lower propensity to organise (Elson

and Pearson 1981). Such ideological rationalisations obscure the real motives for hiring women which are that female labour is cheap and women workers are less likely to organise.

The link between the low cost of female labour power and the subordination of women in society generally is plain. Gender ideologies confine women in the home, perpetuate their segregation within a narrow range of 'female' occupations' and justify low-wages on the grounds that women are supplementary earners in male-headed families. Despite evidence of the growing number of poorer, female-headed households (which tend to be the background of many women entering low-wage jobs), these ideologies persist. Women are thus condemned to the poorest-paid jobs and, being in a weak bargaining position, have little choice but to accept poor wages and working conditions. Trade unions tend to neglect women workers and indeed have often acted to protect 'male jobs' from women.

By favouring women in their employment practices, international capital is not simply exploiting the subordinate position of women and in particular the vulnerable position of poor women. It is also perpetuating the structures of gender subordination while profiting directly from low-wages and the wider effects such low wages have in holding wages down generally in developing countries.

The precarious nature and high risks of the development strategy of growth through world market manufacturing is illustrated by the ease with which corporations have pulled out of one country at a moment's notice in favour of another, or withdrawn subcontracts from one country and awarded them elsewhere. The effects on third world women who are recruited from cities and villages to work in high-technology or textile and garment manufacturing plants under shocking conditions have been extreme. Workers in micro-chip electronics industries have become permanently visually impaired while process and assembly workers, working under extreme pressure imposed by a piecework payment system and without breaks, are left semi-crippled from repetitive strain injuries. Workers whose factories suddenly close down become destitute overnight. These displaced workers usually remain in the cities where they swell the growing class of urban poor and frequently drift into prostitution for survival.

The Place of Women in Fiji's Industrialisation

What is the relevance to Fiji of the third world experience with

industrialisation? Under the last Alliance government, Fiji was set on a course of industrialisation which was aimed less at import-substitution than at export-promotion. Evidence of this was apparent in that government's Development Plan 9 which emphasised the manufacturing and industrial sector, promised special attention to export-oriented industries and restated an interest in establishing "some form of EPZ(s) [Economic Processing Zone(s)] appropriate to Fiji's economic conditions" (DP9 1986:100). The latter particularly raised a lot of questions about the development path Fiji was being steered along. First raised publicly in DP8, although apparently discussed earlier than this in the private confines of the Tripartite Forum where it was supported by the trade unions, the EPZ proposal was apparently abandoned following a number of feasibility studies during the last plan period. Its reiteration in DP9, however, suggested there might have been serious efforts made in the current plan period to establish such a zone if events in 1987 had not supervened. First, the electoral defeat of the Alliance by the Labour-National Federation Party Coalition in April brought to an end 17 years of Alliance leadership and heralded the advent of a new pro-labour direction in development policies. Secondly, there was a tragic turn of events brought about by the Alliance-backed military coup in May which plunged the nation into an unprecedented political and economic crisis. The likely implications for Fiji's development if repressive military rule remains a permanent feature of Fiji's political scene are too worrisome to contemplate and would be the subject of an entire paper in itself. This paper is simply concerned with critically reviewing women's entry into the manufacturing industry during the Alliance government's last term of office.

It was not surprising that under the Alliance leadership Fiji was being moving along the path followed by other third world states in its pursuit of economic growth, rather than real development. In recent years the country had been advised by the International Monetary Fund to boost manufacturing and to adopt the strategy of export-processing or manufacturing. Industrialisation through export-manufacturing is an attractive strategy for economic growth. It attracts international capital and satisfies local investors in search of quick profits. It also provides needed employment for increasing numbers of urban-dwellers.

It is clear that contrary to ideas expressed in the Employment Mission report about women's place being in the home and holding families together,⁹ women workers are going to be critical to the Alliance government's industrialisation strategy. If an EPZ were established, the principal bargaining chip would have had to be our 'competitive advantage' in terms of labour costs. It is well-known that compared to Asian countries, Fiji wage

levels are relatively high, particularly in the organised sectors. According to Chandra (1985:297) this was one of the main reasons why international consultants hired earlier to study the feasibility of establishing EPZ's in Fiji almost unanimously advised against them. The Alliance government's reiteration of the idea of an EPZ, which it knew would only be feasible if wages were kept competitively low, suggested an intention to preserve a low-wage segment within the labour market. Clearly this low-wage segment would consist primarily of women workers.

Even if the Alliance government had not established an EPZ, it was likely that the continued growth in export oriented industries (whether wholly-owned subsidiaries of foreign companies, joint venture schemes or locally-owned enterprises) would have seen more and more companies taking advantage of unorganised and low-wage workers, and particularly of women workers whose wages are lowest. The Employment Mission's finding that women comprised 50.6 percent of low-wage manufacturing jobs in 1980, confirmed an already heavy concentration of their numbers in the lowest-paid segments of the unorganised sector and indicated that women would increasingly be used as factory fodder in the industrialisation schemes of local entrepreneurs.

The garment industry wage case seems to have exposed rather clearly what appeared to be a hidden dimension of the Alliance government's industrialisation strategy. It would appear that the growth of a low-wage sector in Fiji was, in the eyes of that government, not a problem but rather an advantage and one it intended to preserve. This might explain the failure of the Employment Mission to recommend the introduction of minimum wages as the obvious solution to the problem of lowered wage levels, caused by women's participation in low-wage jobs. The political nature of the Mission's final report was noted by Narsey (1985).

The Alliance government's support for the garment manufacturers in 1986 clearly legitimated what I suggest has been a conscious practice among local companies of employing women, especially from poor households, at appallingly low wages. While implicit encouragement had long been given to them by the 'soft line' taken until then by the trade union movement on the matter of unionising workers in smaller, local firms, by 1986 official blessing had now been bestowed. In the name of national development, women workers from poor urban and rural households were to be sacrificed, it seemed, on the altar of industrialisation.

NOTES

1. The manufacturers actually claim that more than 3000 women are employed in the industry (PP No 38 1986).
2. This body is a self-proclaimed subcommittee of the Fiji Manufacturers' Association according to the latter's Secretary, Paul Sloan. It has, however, never publicly disassociated itself from the 'subcommittee'.
3. See for instance Narsey 'What's the plight of women garment workers?' Fiji Sun 10.11.85.
4. This phrase was used by a garment manufacturer interviewed in a survey carried out by the Central Planning Office in 1983 to determine the effects of a Wages Order on the Industry.
5. Narsey (1986), for instance, argued that "Fijian exporters who are squeezed by Australian tariff and quota protection must also be pressured to protect their profit margins by squeezing their workers in Fiji". He expressed serious doubts as to whether the benefits of any expansion of garment exports to Australia or elsewhere would, on its own account, be "shared in fair proportions with the workers in the ... industry" and entreated pressure groups in Australia concerned with improving Australia-Pacific relations, to lobby their government to use the preferential trade arrangements with the islands to influence working conditions there by making preferential access conditional upon production of the goods by unionised labour or by workers being paid regulated minimum wages.
6. It is, for instance, highly likely that under-reporting of numbers of workers may be quite substantial in the unorganised sector especially where the engagement of casual labour during peak production times is a practice.
7. The Report recommended, for example, joint taxation and the provision of a higher tax-free allowance where a secondary income-earner enters into 'half-time for half-pay' employment. It proposed half-time jobs particularly in primary school teaching, a profession overly dominated by women and poorly paid in comparison with other occupations of comparable worth. The Report also proposed a later starting age for schoolchildren, a policy recommendation which, if adopted, would have the effect of keeping mothers at home longer. For a detailed and critical analysis of the Mission's Report see Narsey, (1985b).

8. This was the figure cited by an Economic Development Board officer, Denis Miller, in an interview with me in 1985. If we accept the employment figure claimed by the garment industry itself, of more than 3000, the growth of female employment in manufacturing appears even more dramatic.
9. There is a somewhat contradictory argument in the FEDM report which although implicitly arguing in favour of women being kept in the home, is also both aware of women's entry into low-wage manufacturing and condones their continued employment there.

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