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Gender and Labor in Supply Chains Capitalism: a Review

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Abstract

Purpose of Review This article reviews some essays recently published that have focused on the social and material relations within production, combining an analytical approach on the spatiality of supply chain capitalism with empirical data on important aspects of life at work for women.

Recent Findings *Global value chains*, a term commonly used today in discussion of global production, represents a field of anthropological, sociological and political analysis of contemporary capitalism. This research area has become richer and more defined in recent years as the result of prominent multidisciplinary studies and innovative research projects that have investigated supply chains as tropes that on the one hand enable the exchange of people, things and ideas across distance and on the other form relations that make new social, economic and political orders possible.

Summary The studies reviewed provide detailed and original analysis of how gendered capital-labor relations underpin the expansion of supply networks. They also discuss and reconceptualize this expansion as a growth creating misery that based upon the exploitation and impoverishment of the female workforce.

Keywords Female workers · Gendered labor · Global supply chains · Labor conditions · Gender-based violence · Intersectionality

Introduction

The term *global value chains* (GVC)—along with that of *international production networks* [1], *global production networks* (GPNs) [2] and *French filière* [3]—is used to represent the organisational interactions linking workers, companies and States through supply chains, and the socio-spatial context in which every productive activity is embedded. Early attempts by Gary Gereffi et al. [4] based on the *global commodity chain* (GCC) paradigm aim to explain the transformations in the governance of spatially disconnected production activities. In particular, scholars have focused on the relationships between companies by considering the governance of the whole chain [5]. This concept is used to refer to the distribution of profits and risks in any specific sector, as well as the actors exercising this power, because within the production chain, power can be exercised by leading or supply companies [6].

From a social sciences perspective, the theory of GVC has certain limitations. First, it treats firms simply by distinguishing leading companies from supply firms and thus ends up downplaying their respective logistical roles in and influence on institutional, social and labor dynamics [7]. Secondly, it does not consider capital-labor relations as forming part of their study objectives. It focuses exclusively on international management, being unable to explain the distribution of value within the chain and thus the level of well-being or otherwise of workers, as well as their ability to deploy individual or collective forms of resistance [8]. In response to these criticisms, proponents of the GVC concept have argued that where it successful, there is an improvement in employment and wages [9].

However, as has been pointed out [10], placing the workforce in a global value chain does not always guarantee a real improvement in working conditions as the forms of employment being offered can be very precarious [11]. Attention must also be paid to the part of the workforce that is affected by the closure or downsizing of those factories that are replaced by production sites located elsewhere

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[12]. In brief, the paradigm of GVC effectively outlines the dynamic nature of the processes operated by production networks and the way in which the relationship between places, enterprises and labor are combined. However, it does not bring out the socio-cultural dynamics that influence their deployment because it tends to 'flatten' the distance between the sites where the production is managed and planned and those where it is carried out.

The debate that has developed about territory and scale in the social sciences [13, 14] has been an opportunity to provide an alternative reading of this geographical reorganisation of capitalism because it has focused precisely on the levels of hierarchy and control variously distributed in space [15]. As scholars have shown [16], the distribution of activity in different places is not based on pre-existing differences between one place and another (cheap labor, low levels of labor conflict, tax and customs incentives, the possible creation of Free Trade Zones) but on what can be extracted from a territory as an outcome of the conflict between many actors. To explain the combination of regions and sectors towards particular paths of economic integration, it is necessary to consider a broad social and institutional arena in which States, international organisations and the laborforce, with its demands, interact at various levels [17]. These interactions define the appeal of one territory as opposed to another and therefore explain the deployment of production networks on a world scale.

By following Anna Tsing's concept of *supply chains capitalism* [18], many studies have questioned the frictionless nature of the value chain, analysing the 'structural role of difference' in the spatial distribution of supply chains (p. 148). In contrast to the idea of growing capitalist convergence and homogeneity [19], this concept revealed how within supply chain models, social categories such as gender, ethnicity, religion and citizenship status are leveraged as sites of surplus value extraction. This approach draws more explicitly on the concept of intersectionality—that is, material and symbolic inequalities that are formed along multiple axes of difference [20–24, 25•]. In this light, prominent multidisciplinary studies [26••] and innovative research projects [27, 28] have considered supply chains as a potentially insightful entry point not only to analyse the exchange of people, commodities and ideas across distance, but also to explore the concrete ways in which people actually live and work in supply capitalism.

In this article, I review some recent essays employing this approach. This is a short, and far from exhaustive, selection of analyses focusing on the characteristics of women's jobs in supply chains production and their effects: precariousness, health problems and gender-based violence. Despite being from different disciplines and dealing with different sectors, they share a view on supply chains as a key site to draw attention to the political salience of gender in the mobilization of capital and labor. In this sense, they enrich the already existing analyses on the complex overlapping of processes of genderisation in a low paid workforce within projects of accumulation on a global scale [29].

Reading Supply Chains Through the Lens of Gender

Many different perspectives have provided a framework for examining the processes and outcomes of supply chains' deployment. Some critical perspectives adopt Marx's value theory [30, 31] to specify the centrality of labor within them and to identify and explain mechanisms by which socio-economic inequalities are reproduced in the capitalist system [32–36]. Working within the theoretical frame of Anglo Saxon Marxism, these studies have referred to Harvey's theory of accumulation by dispossession [37] to highlight the processes that create insecure and impoverished labor that are directly connected to the deployment of supply chains [38]. From this perspective, supply chains incorporate labor on a global scale creating differences between workers, especially along axes of race, ethnicity, gender, immigration status, skill and work regime. Other scholars have examined how the governance strategies of supply chains create highly exploited and impoverished laborforces, connecting the dynamics of employment within firms (the labor process), the labor regimes through which firms access cheap labor and workers' livelihood strategies. This perspective, focused on social reproduction, has attempted to connect workplace and extra-workplace relations analytically through a wide-ranging conception of capital-labor relations [39].

Starting with the fact that the International Labour Organisation (ILO) [40] and others estimate that women account for the majority of laborers employed within global supply chains [41••, 42], the strict sexual division through which work is organised has received special attention. Scholarship on female labor standards in the garment, footwear, electronics and agribusiness supply chains has analysed to varying degrees the way in which the segmentation of the laborforce within and between different countries is produced. The first aspect highlighted in the literature is the different forms of discrimination and exploitation affecting women employed in supply companies [43–45]. The differential treatment of female workers encompasses a number of dimensions: from their concentration in low status, low-wage roles [46, 47] and gendered industrial discipline practices [45, 48–51], to racism and sexual harassment [52]. These analyses across many sectors have provided a clearer picture of the different labor conditions experienced by men and women, as well as the specific ways in which gendered power relations intersect and reinforce each other. By addressing working organisation in supply chains, many ethnographies have documented

how in varied, locally specific ways, international capital recruits and disciplines workers playing on gendered ideologies and social relations [53, 54], that is the role that gendered power relations play in shaping the organisation of production and working conditions and, generally, the forms of gender extraction on which the labor organisation of supply chains is based.

These analytical efforts have chosen to study labor in global supply chains as a process inseparable from broader social relations. Feminist and post-colonial scholars across disciplines have shown how the circulation of capital and labor organisation is sustained by a host of relations, exchanges and practices traditionally deemed to be outside the bounds of the productive environment [55, 56]. These relational and material practices constitute the basis of social reproduction but at the same time represent the fundamental foundations of production. As Cindy Katz [57] has argued, social reproduction is seen not only as the 'messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life', but also as a 'set of structured practices that unfold in dialectical relation with production, with which it is mutually constitutive and in tension' (p. 711). The recent essays I review here share and develop this perspective by focusing on how patriarchal disciplinary patterns and feminised reproductive labor determine the division of labor in supply chains and hierarchical relations between men and women in the workplace [58].

Gendered Labor, Bonds, and Violence in Supply Chains

Anthropologist Sandya Hewamanne's essay [59] deals with the garment industry, a supply chain site par excellence. By focusing on the forms of labor contracting involving female workers in Sri Lanka's Katunayake Free Trade Zone (FTZ), she focuses on cultural and emotional bonds that restrict their mobility. Even when women are not formally forced to accept unfavourable wage and working conditions, they remain unfree because a coalition of patriarchal agents—including parents, labor contractors and factory managers—and accompanying village and kinship loyalties shape their accepting and continuing to work in the factories. For Hewamanne, at issue is not whether labor contractors 'really' secure freedom, but rather how they can take advantage of cultural forms of coercion. Using data from her long-term ethnography, she shows how labor management is influenced by the possibility that specific kinds of narratives and values will be recognised, legitimised and eventually become a source of profit. Hewamanne explores this influence in relation to the system of labor migration operating in the manufacturing sector, where female workers from rural zones are employed through labor contractors and housed in workers' dormitories.

Garment supply companies in Sri Lanka operate just-in-time production, and face fluctuating seasonal levels of production that demand a workforce correspondingly flexible in size. A system of temporary migrant labor, employed via temporary work agencies, which is entirely dispensable and housed in dormitories, is used by supply companies to 'solve' this labor supply problem.

Several studies in Asian and Central and Eastern European countries have shown [60, 61] that the dormitory is not only a means to reproduce a system of migrant labor based on disposability, but also to intercept the mobile working lives of female migrant workers whose labor is essential for reproducing themselves and their households. As Hewamanne points out, to respond to these needs, the recruitment system operates persuasively. Control of entry/exit and monitored leisure time activities in the dormitories are justified by labor contractors, families and management as a way to help young women adjust to city life, and to 'save them from the evils of urban living, i.e. romances, sex, popular culture and social independence' (p. 4). In other words, management provides housing overseen by older women to 'protect' female workers from the sense of shame traditionally associated with transgression of sexual and behavioural norms, and the fear of the consequential social ostracization.

Labor contractors exploit the moral panic associated with migration and women's waged work by promising parents that they will provide paternal care and protection to their daughters in the FTZ in order not to compromise their position within the marriage market. And the management, by providing factory-owned dormitories for new workers, ensures that factories have a ready supply of workers in a context of an acute labor shortage. Both labor contractors and management therefore exploit cultural anxieties about female morality to ensure a more compliant and easily manipulated female workforce. These intertwined social and cultural relations that underpin capitalist production make it difficult for women to understand how culture, family and village are used to bind them to unfavourable economic relations. This is why Hewamanne notes that it is not enough to point out the boundaries between free and unfree labor due to the different forms of 'unfreedom' that are interwoven into the supposedly free labor market. What demands explanation, rather, is the way production and reproduction intertwine and the role this plays in making constricting working conditions invisible.

Anthropologist Jelena Radovic-Fanta [62] also explores the dialectical relationship between gender and global production, examining the precarious working and life conditions of women employed in Chile's grape export industry. As well as in the garment industries [63], in the agri-food sector, 'feminine tasks' are channelled into low-paid jobs, especially those involving packaging where stereotypes about women's docility and dexterous ability for these tasks

abound. In Chile's fruit-export industry, female workers—called *temporeras*—make up more than 70% of the seasonal workforce and are represented as being particularly suitable at handling delicate grapes.

In the packing plants where Radovic-Fanta herself worked carrying out participant observation, female workers are hired on precarious contracts (not for the duration of the season but for the grape variety processed) and paid piece-rate. Employers lay off them when the harvest of a particular grape variety comes to an end; and when another variety is ready to be harvested, they are rehired under a different contract. As a result, temporeras can have more short contracts working for the same company without ever being able to accumulate sick days or other benefits.

The precariousness of this working regime as well as the economic and health vulnerability it causes are intrinsic to subcontracting relations. These are characterised by conflictual relations between the contractors, who tend to reduce costs, and the subcontractors, who seek to increase their profit margins, by regulating and controlling the laborforce. The subcontracting mechanism releases customers from the responsibility for production and workforce management, giving contractors a sense of independence that is completely fictitious because their activity cannot be detached from the tendency of contractors to lower costs along all links in the chain. The testimonies gathered by Radovic-Fanta reveal these frictions very well. The obligatory deductions from workers' pay checks, intended for social security, are not always paid but are pocketed by the subcontractors. They hire workers, sign labor contracts, arrange transportation and pay employees. They receive payments based on the number of employees they manage, but deduct the expenses from their salaries. The looming winter unemployment is reason enough for female workers not to complain openly about it.

In this scenario of tiring, intermittent and low-paid work, female workers are obliged to sacrifice 'their long-term health to meet short-term goals such as paying rent and buying groceries' (p. 10). They therefore tend to postpone medical appointments until the end of the harvest when; however, there is little or no income to pay for treatment. Temporeras are paid for each crate of fruit they pick or pack and for this they push their bodies to work long hours. They commonly suffer from tendonitis, lower back pain, varicose veins and injuries associated with the hazards present in packaging plants: hand injuries, exposure to pesticide and fertiliser poisoning and accidents caused by slipping and falling on loose grapes lying on the floor. Health issues are presented by those managing the work as an individual's problem and responsibility rather than a structural lack of adequate safety measures and decent wages. For employers, a 'good' and 'responsible' worker has to be as vigilant about her own safety, like a 'good' and 'responsible' care provider, that is, a 'buena madre' (good mother). Avoiding accidents is considered an act of care for the family whose survival depends on the work of the temporeras. Such moralising rhetoric silently echoes the moral blame directed at women factory workers, whose employment outside the home is associated with, among other things, irresponsible motherhood [54, 64].

Radovic-Fanta's work demonstrates well how discourses on femininity and motherhood are located directly to the intersection between marginalised labor relations and the disciplinary mechanism used by management to make female workers accept poor wages and precarious labor. Her essay, as well as Hewamanne's, rather than mapping the border between production and reproduction as binary categories, asserts the need to consider their close interconnection in the organisation of labor.

The essay by lawyer and human rights scholar Shikha Silliman Bhattacharjee [65] is part of a broader interdisciplinary analysis of the functioning of the garment industry that led to the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013 [66•]. It provides a useful—albeit dramatic—overview in order to understand the experiences of gender-based violence experienced by female workers in Asian garment supply chains based on analysis of in-depth factory profiles of 13 garment supply factories in Bangladesh, Cambodia and India. The violence reported by the female workers examined by Bhattacharjee takes many shapes and forms: sexual and physical violence, verbal abuse, coercion; physically extractive labor practices with severe health consequences; threats of firing. This violence is analysed at the factory level, and, more specifically, as a problem rooted in gender discrimination and workforce segmentation in garment supply chains. In other words, as she points out, the violence appear as a predictable outcome in an industry where women are employed in subordinate, low paid roles, driven to meet demanding production targets for pay below a living wage and subjected to the control and surveillance of male supervisors. For this reason, Bhattacharjee considers the violence at the intersection of supply chain employment practices and patriarchal norms in the light of stigma; gendered industrial discipline practices; the exploitation of women's productive capacity; and the production of vulnerability through job insecurity.

In her analysis, women's employment in fast-paced and low paid jobs is examined in the context of the structure of supply chains. As mentioned above, the relationships between leading and supply companies are highly hierarchical, characterised by pressure to reduce costs and the increase in subcontracting practices that cause contract labor to proliferate. The production timetable in the garment sector is largely determined by the lead firms, who contract supply companies in order to produce their branded products. Short product cycles and intense competition between suppliers bidding for contracts, drive down

production costs, creating a high level of fluctuation in production levels and therefore demand for labor, and also create a demand for speed throughout the supply chain. Supply companies operate just-in-time production, and face seasonal demands which often overlap with the hottest season in South-East Asian countries. In Cambodia, for example, from April to August, workers report being forced to work up to 14 h a day in sweltering heat, without an adequate supply of clean drinking water or any breaks. Exposure to high temperatures and high levels of chemical substances, exacerbated by poor ventilation and inadequate nutrition among workers, make episodes of mass fainting a regular occurrence. More than 90% of these cases concern female workers.

These characteristics represent risk factors for violence and, as Bhattacharjee appropriately points out, they are not the outcome of local practices but 'the by-product of the way multinational corporations do business' (p. 208). The daily race to meet production targets is sustained through gendered industrial discipline associated with blue-collar work. Physical and verbal abuse, coercion and threats are justified by supervisors by the need to achieve production targets. Physical violence reported by women workers includes slapping, pushing, kicking and throwing heavy bundles of papers and clothes, especially during high-stress production times. While men are not immune to such violence in the workplace, discipline and the resulting violence are disproportionately directed at women due to their concentration in jobs such as machine operator, checker and helper within production departments.

Incidents of violence are thus related to the hierarchy that operates in factory work and reflect power asymmetries between men and women [67]. Women workers reported sexual abuse from men in positions of authority within the factory such as supervisors, line managers and mechanics tasked with fixing their machines. In factories, the male monopoly of authority over a female workforce contributes to what Ong described as a constant 'sexual tension' [68]. It is therefore not accidental that sexual services are seen by some supervisors and managers as the quid pro quo for salary increases, promotions and better job positions. It is not, however, a real 'exchange' because a woman who does not meet the sexual desires of the supervisor may be given more overtime hours or denied legally required breaks or leave, or even fired.

The female workers' complaints refer to violence that extends beyond legal working hours and the factory floor because supervisors abuse control over working hours to make sexual advances after the night shifts. As one woman worker recounts, the supervisor's offer to drive a worker home after the night shift is often not an act of kindness but 'a trap' (p. 214). Deprived of the possibility of refusing, women workers face a double bind: either submit to sexual advances from supervisors; or risk harassment, robbery or worse during a late-night commute on their own.

For Bhattacharjee, this authority explains the widespread culture of impunity around sexual violence and harassment and the reluctance of women to report the violence they have suffered. This denial is motivated by social stigma that may manifest itself as a restriction of their mobility due to the reluctance of fathers and husbands to allow them to work in the factory, and victim blaming.

Conclusions

A growing number of social studies have argued the importance of gender relations in shaping the dynamics of global supply chains. They emphasise the need for gender to be integrated as a fundamental part of the methodological and analytical framework for inquiry into global supply chains, rather than seen as a conceptual 'add-on' [39, 48, 69, 70]. The social categories of gender difference, combined in the essays reviewed with immigration and class status, become a critical and emblematic site of exploitation because are literally given a value in supply chain structures. In this light, as Anna Tsing has pointed out [18], capitalism is not a fixed entity—if it ever was—but a process through which supply chains exploit the so-called non-economic features of identity, 'moulding' individuals so that they are 'suitable' for the needs of accumulation (p. 157).

Here, I have suggested a selection that include a range of interventions which, however diverse, all place gender at the core of a critical and up-to-date analysis of mechanisms of extraction in the production supply chains and their consequences for the living and working conditions of female workers.

The segmentation, insecurity and violence that characterise women's work in supply chains are analysed in these essays in a theoretical framework looking at labor processes incorporating social reproduction theory. The latter provides an essential entry point to explaining how surplus value is generated within the capitalist workplace, and how managers seek to control and increase the efficiency of labor through evolving divisions and techniques of disciplining labor [31, 71, 72].

The emotional and cultural bonds of female workers that capture Hewamanne's attention, the 'good' maternal feelings at work examined by Radovic-Fanta and, finally, the physical and sexual vulnerability that emerges from Bhattacharjee's essay testify to the structural role of gender—and of course of gender power relations—in the organisation of supply chains. These works show how the production supply chains shape the organisation of labor using gender as a productive force through naturalising and mixing imaginaries of reproduction, sexuality and relatedness [73, 74].

They also make another important contribution. Looking at the dynamics of marriage, gendered family-household relations and the moral blame associated with waged labor outside the home, these essays show how the gendered divisions of labor in the reproductive realm shape patterns within the labor market, as well as women's employment opportunities, contractual relations and conditions of work. In this way, show how intimate and personal relations—especially those linked to households, domestic units and reproductive labor—have become a source of profit [75, 76].

In conclusion, these essays help to fill the gap in the analysis of the link between working conditions in the productive and reproductive spheres within global supply chains.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declare that they have no competing interests.

Human and Animal Rights and Informed Consent This article does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by the authors.

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