Work Restructuring and Recolonizing Third World Women
An Example from the Garment Industry in Toronto

by Roxana Ng

Cet article examine la restructuration de l'industrie du vêtement à Toronto à la lumière des changements dans les relations de sexe, de race, de classe dans le climat actuel de la mondialisation

While globalization is heralded by transnational corporations and nation-states as the inevitable progress of our civilization, it has differential and differentiating effects on groups of people by virtue of their gender, race, and class locations in society.

et opine que cette restructuration représente une recolonisation à la manière des femmes du Tiers-monde mais dans notre monde actual.

The city of Toronto has been a major centre of garment production in Canada since industrialization. As an industry that makes use of what are assumed to be women's skills, the garment trade has always been an employer of female immigrant workers, firstly from Europe and later from Asia. According to Statistics Canada data in 1986, 94 per cent of sewing machine operators were born outside of Canada, as were 83 per cent of pattern-makers and cutters and 83 per cent of the employees in various textile industry occupations (*The Toronto Star*, 21 September 1992, A1, qtd. in Borowy, Gordon, *et al.*). Whereas women constituted just 29 per cent of the workforce in manufacturing, 80 per cent of them were in the garment industry (Borowy and Johnson). Thus, the garment and textile sector was and continues to be a major employer of immigrant labour.

Historically, homeworking and sweatshop operation were an integral part of the garment trade. With the formation of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), firstly in the U.S. and later in Canada, garment workers became the few unionized female workforce members that enjoyed decent wages and employee bebefits. Unlike some other sectors with heavy concentration of female immigrant workers, garment workers were protected by labour standard legislation and rights to collective bargaining. Since the 1980s, however, this has all changed. In the last 15 to 20 years, Toronto witnessed the closing of many garment factories, and massive worker layoffs. Employment dropped from 95,800 in 1988 to an estimated 62,800 in 1992, corresponding to the signing of the Free Trade Agreement between Canada and the U.S. Between 1985 and 1992, the ILGWU membership dropped by 60 per cent, bringing the unionization rate from a high of up to 80 per cent to below 20 per cent.[1] (Borowy, Gordon, *et al.*). What has happened?

In this article I will review briefly the restructuring of the garment industry leading to the massive displacement of workers and manufacturers. I will argue that the plight of garment workers is the conjuncture of changing relations of gender, race, and class in the current globalization climate. While globalization is heralded by transnational corporations and nation-states as the ultimate and inevitable progress of our civilization, I will show that it has differential and differentiating effects on groups of people by virtue of their gender, race, and class locations in society. I will argue further that the changing conditions of garment workers, resulting from the restructuring of the garment industry, represents a process of the recolonization of third world women in the first world.

The changing garment industry[2]

From the point of view of economists and policy-makers, the garment industry in Canada is a "sunset" industry because it has little chance of survival without heavy tariff and trade protection from global competition (Borowy, Gordon, *et al.*). For instance, the opening up of labour markets in the so-called "third world," especially the industrialization of the Asian Pacific Rim countries and the establishment of free trade zones there has enabled much cheaper garment production.

Concomitantly, control of the industry has shifted from manufacturers to large retail chains such as the Hudson's Bay (which owns Zellers, Simpson's, Robinson's, and Fields, and has recently acquired K Mart). Retailers' strategy, to keep up with global competition, is to deliver the most fashionable clothes to the market quickly. This is made possible, among other things, by technological innovations such as electronic data interchange to control the production process. This kind of computerized technology enables retailers to keep better records of their stock and to keep fewer stock. Sales of garments on the rack in retail stores can be communicated to production plants almost instantaneously anywhere in the world. This cuts down on mass production, storage, and other overhead costs. Retailers also demand quicker turn-around time for production, and that suppliers provide garments on consignment, and/or at last year's price. Improved distribution and transportation systems also allow garments to be delivered more quickly to stores, even from far-away places. Trade agreements, such as NAFTA (The North American Free Trade Agreement), make it possible

for retailers to order garments from Mexico, for example, that again undermines both manufacturers and workers in Toronto.

Manufacturers in Toronto responded to their slip of control and technological changes in the following ways:

•to retire and get out of the business altogether. Since garment production is a relatively old industry in Toronto, many manufacturers have been in the business since the postwar period and are close to retirement age anyway.

•to produce off-shore, either by setting up factories in cheaper locations such as Mexico and Asian countries as mentioned before, or by contracting production to factories established in these areas. (This is also a strategy used by retailers to keep production costs low, thereby undermining local manufacturers.)

With the re-organization of the industry due to the changing locus of control, although garment workers might have enjoyed a temporary improvement in their standard of living, their hard-earned security has become precarious with globalization.

•to become sub-contractors to retailers by becoming jobbers. This is done by reducing the production plant, for example by retaining a few cutters, laying off sewing machines operators, and by using homeworkers on a piece rate basis. This last strategy is especially pertinent to the situation of immigrant women workers in Canada, which I will return to later.

The effects of these changes are downsizing of industrial plants and factory closures in Toronto (and elsewhere in Canada). They in turn have led to massive layoffs and displacement of garment workers, many of whom are women from southern Europe (Italy, Greece) and from Asia such as Hong Kong, Vietnam, and India.

One important thing to note here is that the ethnicity and gender of garment workers have changed over the years. In the period immediately after the war, many garment workers were immigrant men from Europe. As they acquire skills and seniority and move up the production hierarchy (for example, by becoming cutters, who are seen to be more skilled than sewing machine operators), women replace them as sewing machine operators at the bottom of the garment production hierarchy. It is noteworthy, although not surprising, that in employing immigrant women as sewing machine operators, the skills they have acquired in domestic settings (such as mending and sewing) can be readily transferrable to the industrial context; thus these workers are seen by employers as unskilled or semi-skilled (vis-à-vis cutters who are seen to be skilled).

Furthermore, in the restructuring of the garment industry, it is the sewing machine operators (namely women) who were displaced. This does not mean that they have lost their jobs entirely.

It means that they are now sewing garments as homeworkers, earning their wages on piece rate. Under the Ontario labour legislation, homeworkers are seen to be self-employed, and are therefore not able to unionize. In fact, they work in isolation, with no labour standard protection or workers' benefits hitherto provided through unionization and through their employers. The paradox is that women sometimes see this as a viable alternative, and say that they "prefer" working at home. This is because women are still primarily responsible for family and child care responsibilities. Moreover, in this process children's labour is exploited as they participate in making garments with their mothers at home.

In summary, the restructuring of the garment industry in Toronto has deepened the isolation and exploitation of immigrant women. It is ironic that women and their families immigrate from the "third world" to the "first world" in search of better working conditions and higher standards of living. However, with the re-organization of the industry due to the changing locus of control and global competition, although they might have enjoyed a temporary improvement in their standard of living, their hard-earned security has become precarious with globalization. In other words, third world immigrant women are undergoing a process of being re-colonized in the first world.

Conceptualizing gender, race, and class as relations

What I described above is the convergence of gender, race, and class relations in (re)shaping the experience of immigrant women in Canada. In this section, I will explain my conconceptualization of gender, race, and class in order to see them as relations that intertwine in multiple and complicated ways in shaping people's everyday life. The purpose here is to provide an analysis that would enable us to describe people's experiences in an integrated way, rather than fragmenting them according to the analyst's theoretical categories.

Frequently, when the concepts of gender, race, and class are used, they are used as competing categories for determining social status. I want to move away from treating race, gender, and class as categories designating different and separate domains of social life to discovering how they are relations that organize our productive and reproductive activities, which are located in time and space. That is, gender, race, and class are not merely theoretical categories; they are concrete social relations that are discoverable in the everyday world of experience.

I use the term, "gender," in the same way that feminists developed the term in the 1970s to distinguish it from biological sex differences. Gender is not a term used to designate biological differences between men and women. Rather, it refers to the process(es) whereby sex differences are made real or objectified as differences between men

and women, and where these differences are valorized in differential ways. That is, men are seen to be superior, and therefore they are more valued; correspondingly women are seen to be inferior and are less valued. Thus, gender refers to the relation between men and women. Treating the skills women acquire in domestic settings as women's skills is an aspect of gender relation. In the process of differentiating men from women, these skills, which are social in origin, are seen to grow out of the natural differences between men and women, and less value is attributed to these skills in relation to those acquired by men in terms of the production process. Put in another way, more value is attributed to skills deployed in commodity production, and less value is attributed to skills acquired in and used for reproductive purposes.

For instance, sewing is seen to be a woman's skill; it is paid less than the work done by cutters in garment production. It is this process of valorization and differentiation that (a) produces social difference as gender difference; (b) de-values the skills women acquired (for instance the notion that women don't have to be trained for garment work because it is their "natural" skill); and (c) produces and reinforces women's inferiority socially and economically. This is sexism.

Similarly, people's physical and phenotypical differences are made into absolute differences in the construction of "races." This construction was deployed by Europeans in colonization and imperialist expansion (see Miles 1989, 1993; Ng). Racism (that is, the ideology of the superiority of one race over another) was used to justify the subordination of groups seen to be inferior. Thus, racism encompasses both the ideology and the practice of inferiorizing groups of people on the basis of their perceived racial differences. The historical process of racialization is expressed in contemporary reality by, among other phenomena, a labour market that is segregated by race and ethnicity. The garment industry with its gender, ethnic, and racial hierarchy is an example of this process of inferiorization.

Sima Elizabeth Shefrin, "Pieceworkers at Home II," fabric appliqué and quilting, 36" x 36", 1995. Photo: Brenda Hemsing.

Finally, my understanding of the term "class" is consistent with the way in which Marx uses the concept in *The German Ideology* and *Das Kapital* (Marx and Engels; Marx). That is, class is not used to indicate people's status in terms of occupation, salary, education, etc. (which is how stratification analysts use the concept). It is used to refer to a process whereby people's lives are transformed in terms of the relation and means of production (see Braverman). Although this transformation hinges on economic relations in capitalist society, it is not simply an economic relation. It is fundamentally a transformation of people's way of life or mode of livelihood. Thus, in the case of the restructuring of the garment industry in Toronto, we see how garment workers' livelihood is transformed from wage workers to homeworkers.

In this discussion, I want to preserve an understanding of capitalism, not only as an economic system, but as *a mode of production and reproduction.* That is, capitalism is a way in which people produce and reproduce their livelihood under specific material conditions that goes beyond the economy. It is a dynamic process whereby people's livelihood is being transformed and reorganized according to the requirement of capital accumulation. Gender, race, and class are essential ingredients in this continuous process of transformation. In the sketch I provided of the garment trade and the plight of garment workers above, it is clear that we cannot isolate gender, race, or class as the primary determinant of their experience. Rather, they are concrete relations that are interwoven; they work in complicated ways to give particular shapes and contours to people's everyday life.

Globalization and recolonization

Whereas industrial development has been largely confined to national boundaries by the national bourgeoisie until the 1970s, and the first world or so-called developed countries augmented capital accumulation in the third world by resource extraction (thereby underdeveloping them),[3] globalization signifies the stage in capitalism whereby capital has developed the capacity to move beyond national boundaries. This has led to the restructuring of practically all industrial sectors in developing countries, and the concomitant reorganization of everyday life in both developed and developing parts of the world. The sketch I gave of the reorganization of the garment industry in Toronto is part and parcel of globalization, which affects groups of people differently on the

basis of gender, race, and class, as I have pointed out. The result of globalization at the local level, as exemplified by the garment trade, is the renewed impoverishment of immigrant workers, some of whom were able to secure better livelihood before the restructuring process.[4] Thus, we see that globalization has created third world enclaves within the geographic boundaries of the first world.

I am not suggesting that garment workers were not exploited before. I am saying that globalization, with the resultant restructuring of the garment industry in Canada, has led to the deepening of the exploitation experienced by immigrant women. It is in this way that women from third world countries are being re-colonized, but this time not so much in their home country as in the developed part of the world to which they fled to escape from the effects of underdevelopment. There is a further difference between garment workers as members of an industrialized workforce, and their status as homeworkers. As homeworkers, immigrant women are seen to be self-employed, without the benefit of union and labour standard protection. They are thus self-regulating. This is the ultimate form of colonization!

By preserving the notion that capitalism is a dynamic system that continuously transforms the ground on which we stand, I don't want to reify it by suggesting that it is autonomous. Of course, the accumulation and augmentation of profit is accomplished by people. In the nineteenth century, the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat was a direct one. In contemporary times, as the division of labour becomes more fragmented and complex, class struggle is no longer played out directly between the two major classes.

In late capitalism, as capital mobility becomes a major requirement for profit augmentation, class rule is not even effected only within national boundaries anymore. I found the concept of the *regime of ruling*[5] useful in understanding the complex workings of capitalism and globalization. The global mobility of capital requires not only state rule, but a conglomerate or complex network of institutions and apparatuses (including the military, law, and trade organizations to name a few) to ensure its smooth movement within and across national boundaries. The ability of capital to extract surpluses from labour depends on the cooperation among nation-states in keeping a docile and flexible workforce. Both the establishment of free trade zones in third world countries and de-industrialization in developed countries are therefore simultaneous and compatible processes to facilitate profit augmentation and capital mobility. The kinds of negotiations we are witnessing right now among corporate and state leaders, such as the APEX summit in Vancouver and the MAI (Multilateral Agreement on Investment) negotiations in Paris, not to mention the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), are instances of the regime of ruling at work that transcend national boundaries that at the same time have differential effects on the livelihood of groups of people on the basis of their gender, race, and class.

Thus, in the age of globalization, we need to re-think categories we take for granted in describing the world. The most obvious of these in the context of this article is the division between "development" and "underdevelopment," between "first world" and "third world." As my analysis has shown, these are not binary opposites. Rather, they are mutually dependent and exist within the same geographical spaces. We need to interrogate the ways in which sexism, racism, and class exploitation take new forms in late capitalism. We need to re-think how we, with our multiple and at times contradictory identities, and in diverse locations (as workers, self-employed and otherwise, as women, people of colour) make alliances across geographical, racial, gender, and class divides to ameliorate some of the effects of globalization on the majority of working people. Indeed, developing innovative strategies to work across differences is working people's challenge to globalization.

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[1]Indeed, the union was so decimated that it is now merged with the other major union in the sector, the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Worker's Union (ACTWU), to form a new union called UNITE!

[2]Information in this section is based on my experience as an academic resource person to the ILGWU and as chairperson of a labour adjustment committee between 1991–1994, and on the invaluable work done by Jan Borowy, research coordinator of the ILGWU during this time period (Borowy, Gordon, *et al.*; Borowy and Johnson). I learned an enormous amount about the industry and worker's conditions from Jan and Alex Dagg, the Regional Manager of ILGWU (now UNITE!).

[3]I want to make two comments in this regard. First, according to this view, Canada's relation to the U.S. is that of a third world/first world one, as Canadian analysts in the 1970s concluded. Second, my characterization here is simplistic. The point I want to make is that globalization marks a change in how capitalism works.

[4]I don't mean to suggest that restructuring affects only immigrant workers. In Canada, no sector, private and public, has escaped restructuring and job loss. There has been a severe loss in full-time jobs and increase in part-time, non-unionized, and contract positions (see Armstrong; Vosko).

[5]The term, "regime of ruling," is borrowed from George Smith's analysis of the regulation of homosexuals and AIDS treatment and inspired by Patty Simpson's adaptation of this term in her work on development, which she calls "the development regime." I am using the term to refer to the complex conglomerate of relations and apparatuses developed among and across nation-states to coordinate capital mobility and regulate production and labour to facilitate capital augmentation—a key development in this period of globalization.

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JOAN BOND

Spinster Aunt Pleasance

Tidy straight and loyal she is there
in duo-tone sepia at the faded edge
of school field trips office socials
family picnics christenings anniversary dinners
She will show you the photograph album
but won't tell you
about the boating accident five days before the wedding
or why she dropped out of secretary school
nor about the scar by her right brow
Thirty-nine years she worked at Stacey's department store
in the lower level Imported Foods
Upon retirement she received
a silver locket engraved
"O taste and see that the Lord is good"
and wears it every Sunday to the Methodist meeting
Thirteen times now she's won
first prize at the annual fair for gooseberry jam
She'll let you taste it with her bourbon pound cake
on your next visit
A throaty chuckle is her signature tune
pewter hair in a topknot arc her trademark
Every other Christmas she gives
tatted white lace doilies to her married brothers
She has promised her nieces
and the Historical Society her china cabinet
A shrill voice will tell you the tales
of riding a camel in Egypt and
seeing the glow-worm grotto in New Zealand
She will show you the picture
of her mother and grandmother You'll notice
the ancestral cleft chin
When her hands neat and nimble close the album
you'll know the visit is over
She'll wave you good-bye from the porch
faded on the edge

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