



Economic Globalisation and Gender Issues

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In recent decades, the rapid growth of transnational corporations and the rise of transnational networks of production have been regarded as hallmarks of the process of economic globalisation. It is notable that the studies of globalisation that emphasise these trends, tend to neglect the role of women within these processes. Yet when we look at issues such as the increasingly mobile nature of capital, as production processes have spread in order to take advantage of low cost labour, or the increasing mobility of labour across state borders we cannot ignore the fact that these processes involve vast numbers of women. In this comment and analysis piece, I consider the need for a gender analysis in the way that we think about the economic aspects of globalisation.

Research into the gender impact of globalisation suggests that the process has had quite mixed consequences for women. On the one hand, we could point to the opening up of employment opportunities in the expanding service economy (for example in global information and global communications businesses, global retail and tourism). Women also account for a large number of the jobs in globalised manufacturing industries, often working on the export-processing zones that are an essential component of transnationally organised manufacturing production. The argument is made that such job opportunities have granted women access to a greater level of economic freedom, as they move out of the household and into the (global) market economy.

However, what needs to be taken into account is the way in which women entering these globalised industries are overwhelmingly stratified into the lower rungs of the occupational hierarchy. Indeed, a consistent feature of these opportunities for employment in the global economy is the low economic value accorded to work performed primarily by women. The jobs that women are moving into in the financial, information and communications industries, for example, have been characterised as work within “electronic sweatshops”; low paid and highly stressful. Whilst those highly paid jobs within these industries remain male dominated.

It is within the global manufacturing sector that some of the most in-depth research into the impact of globalisation on gender has taken place (see for example Joeke 1994). Women dominate employment in export manufacturing in industries such as electronics and garment manufacture. Women are recruited as a low wage labour force into these light manufacturing industries. They are seen, and hence favoured, as a passive, flexible workforce that will

accept low wages without demanding labour and human rights. Furthermore, an examination of the employment and recruitment practices of export-sector firms reveals that employers utilise ideas about the appropriate role of women (e.g. as secondary income earners or their innate suitability to monotonous work) in order to justify the low wages and lack of career advancement available to women employed in these sectors.

A reliance on low waged female labour is a key feature of the development of export-manufacturing (or export-oriented industrialisation – EOI). Indeed, it has been suggested that gender inequality is a fundamental component of EOI based development strategies (Seguino 2000). High levels of gender inequality in globalised production lines might also be linked to the deregulation of labour markets that has accompanied the global shift towards a more liberal market economy (Standing 1989, 1999). A flexibilization of employment, associated with little to no protection for the worker, is thus also linked to the feminization of employment.

Furthermore, on the issue of the flexibilisation of female employment, consideration also needs to be given to the role that home-workers play in globalised networks of production. In spite of the real difficulties in gathering statistics on home-workers, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has suggested that numbers of home-workers are increasing world-wide. Much of this rise is the result of the establishment of transnational systems of production operating within and across countries which utilise available low cost female labour. Homeworkers tend to fall outside the sphere of conventional social protection schemes, due, either to the informal nature of the work, or because they are required by an employer to register themselves as independent workers. Homeworkers are consequentially a highly marginalised groups of workers within the global economy.

A gender perspective on the globalisation of production, then, is useful because it exposes the contradictory processes that are at work within the shift to a more globalised economy. We can see that despite the fact that women are taking a major part in globalised networks of production, they have not necessarily benefited from this engagement. More generally, taking a gender perspective on globalisation is useful in the sense that it forces us to look at the way in which social hierarchies and inequalities are built into the process(es) of globalisation. In other words, globalisation has quite different impacts on different groups of people across the world.

references

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