

Nimble fingers. The predestined fate based on exploitation and sexualized division of labor in export-oriented sector in the balkans

Abstract: *In the following article I will discuss women's labor conditions in the export-oriented sector in terms of gender dynamics of labor and precarity. Firstly I will explain the motives of the expansion of the sector due to economic transformations. According to the latter, there is a change of paradigms and women are considered to be the important engine to economic development and the resolution to the poverty problem. I will develop my argument comparing the traditional Western feminist perspective with intersectionality feminism and how the former fails to explain the perpetual exploitation of poor women, insisting on liberation through self-empowerment. I will support my argument of feminization labor by explain the phenomenon of emotional work and the emotional tendency of women in the labor market. In this paper, I am going to focus on women's labor conditions in the export-oriented sector in Balkan countries and how the economic transformation during the transition led these industries to become on the most important factor of development supported even by the state.*

Keywords: *development, feminization labor, liberation, intersectionality, power relations, gender relations, productivity, structural adjustments, Balkan, exploitation, precarity.*

Introduction

“We start with the girl so she can change her world for herself and for everyone.” This is the catchy logo that cannot escape your eyes immediately after accessing the official site of *Girl Effect*¹, the campaign that supports self-expression, self-empowerment and self-valuation of girls in the Third World countries in order to educate them, to make them active in the labor market, to earn their own living, to help them grow independent. The highest the number of women in the labor market, the highest will be the economic growth, therefore the easiest will be the way to escape from poverty. Thinking in utilitarian terms creating new markets available to a wide range of people from all backgrounds, could help reducing the economic gap and give incentives to poor people, especially poor women to find a place for themselves in the neoliberal agenda. At least this is the picture I get in my mind the first I start to look up at their website which in theory could represent an efficient instrument in hitting two birds with one stone: empowering girls in order to fight poverty and gender inequality.

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ty. However, when turning to practical senses, the only labor markets that poor women can participate exploit and discriminate them, not only deepening the economic gap, but also the gender inequality. Due to economic changes, globalization, structural adjustments programs, export-oriented sector gained much power because they were regarded as a favorable strategy, helping countries in their economic performance and at the same resulting in massive employment. Many factories or small industries prefer female workers as being more docile and less likely to be engaging in political activities such as unions, by shaping the labor market and causing the what is called “feminization of employment” (Standing, 1989).

In the following article I will discuss women’s labor conditions in the export-oriented sector in terms of gender dynamics of labor and precarity. Firstly I will explain the motives of the expansion of the sector due to economic transformations. According to the latter, there is a change of paradigms and women are considered to be the important engine to economic development and the resolution to the poverty problem. I will develop my argument comparing the traditional Western feminist perspective² with intersectionality feminism and how the former fails to explain the perpetual exploitation of poor women, insisting on liberation through self-empowerment. I will support my argument of feminization labor by explain the phenomenon of emotional work and the emotional tendency of women in the labor market. In this paper, I am going to focus on women’s labor conditions in the export-oriented sector in Balkan countries and how the economic transformation during the transition led these industries to become on the most important factor of development supported even by the state.

1. Feminization Labor in the Global Market

To understand what covers export-oriented sector, Guy Standing in his article “Global Feminization through Flexible Labor” mentions several factors of development that shaped the existence of this sector. Firstly, countries with smaller percentage of Gross National Product (GNP) opened towards international market competition to become producers of export. Secondly, those countries adopted the Keynesian economic system. Thirdly, the welfare state and redistributive reforms were perceived as inefficient for possible development. Fourthly, technological revolution caused the substitution of product innovations to labor-saving innovation, leading to cheaper-labor forms of production. Consequently many labor units were considered useless and were closed which increased the rate of unemployment. Furthermore, the transformation of the economic system led to privatization that caused the fragmentation of the industry (Standing, 1989, p.1077-1078). After the 1990s, all Balkan countries were characterized by declining or stagnating exports, but the situation started to change during the 2000s when exports grew notably, however due to lack of sufficient competitive skills on foreign market and non-tariff barriers, the export sector remained limited in scope (Uvalic, 2012, 376). The need for stabilization and for establishing a place in the international market caused the transformation of state industries into small factories. In order to face the international market competition and also make profit, the small firms that survived during the transition grew the emphasis on cutting production costs. “Export-oriented firms produce goods for highly competitive global markets and wages constitute a large fraction of their production costs; this places them under exceptional pressure to seek out labor at the lowest costs” (Pepper, 2012, p.143). Considering the massive unemployment, lack of job certainty and semi-skilled work women were encouraged to accept lower wages and poorer conditions. This willingness of women for ac-

ceptance it is two folded: Firstly, women have been and persist to be socially and economically oppressed, as a result they are willing to accept low wages. Secondly, men are less inclined to compromise for sub-family wage rates and also it is assumed that they might reduce their 'effort bargain.' It is clear why it is not ambiguous that three-quarters of all workers to be women (Standing, 1989, p.1080).

This differentiation due what these factories sustain to be a natural differentiation emerges from the capacities and personality traits of women and men. Women are considered skilled since they have by nature smaller hands; "nimble fingers", work with more care and faster. Men, on the other hand need higher income to maintain a family as head of households, while women do no. Also, women are more docile and less inclined to organize into trade unions, suited to be tedious, repetitious and monotonous work (Elson & Pearson, 1981, p.93).

The increased number of women employed in the export-oriented sector takes another stand when it is associated with commodification and exploitation, both being materialized within global production circuit as experience of labor subordination. What I understand by exploitation is the definition that Allen Buchanan uses: "the harmful, merely instrumental utilization of an individual or her capacities for one's own advantage or ends" (Zwoliski, 2007, p.705). Their lower wages come as a result to their secondary status in the labor market, as in society and family. The belief that they naturally have to bear a child makes them unable to continue their employment after their twenties. The phenomenon of uncertainty transforms them into disposable women (Elson & Pearson, 1981, p.93). Melissa Wright discusses in her book *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*, about the concept of disposability and the how women live with the constant pressure of being discarded and replaced at any time. Eventually those women will consider themselves worthless, they will value themselves "no more than the cost of their dismissal and substitute." Nevertheless, it is odd that this worthless self-considered 'young woman' creates with her 'nimble fingers' precious goods; "*she generates prosperity through her own destruction*" (Wright, 2006, p.2).

The process of laboring is devalued every time when comes from a feminine body which is the first machine invented by capitalism (Mezzandri, 2016, p. 1881). Then, could be labor considered as liberatory or in fact it is just "capitalism's paradoxical ability to co-opt leftist language and imagery for its own ends?" Jason Hickel certainly, raises an important question, whether labor or the money they receive guarantees their liberations (Hickel, 2014, p.1363).

2. Freedom as Liberation

This perspective of freedom can be understood in two different ways; firstly in Western perspective that of individuality and secondly according to the intersectionality perspective of Martha Nussbaum and Chandra Mohanty, both of them developing an anti-capitalist feminist critique. What I mean by Western perspective it is a generalized assumption, based on Mohanty's argument that Western feminism try to homogenize and systematize the oppression of women in the Two/Third World. They intend to "appropriate and colonize the fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes" (Mohanty, 1984, p. 335). She constructs her critique based on three principles: the first principles regards 'women' as a category of analysis understood as a coherent group with identical interests and desires, despite their class, ethnicity or racial locations; the second principle attain proofs of universalism that women's oppression is a global phe-

nomenon; and the third principle explains the power relation in women's positions that draws the distinctive characteristics between Two/Third World women regarded as ignorant, poor, uneducated, domestic, victimized, etc. and self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, controlling their own bodies and sexualities, free to make their own decisions (p. 337).

On the other hand, Nussbaum develops her critique according to the principle of human capabilities (firstly popularized by Amartya Sen³), the principle of treating each person as an end and not a mere tool or instrument (Nussbaum, 2000, p.2). They shifted paradigms from economic measures of development such as GDP, wondering if people have the basic freedoms to realize their own conception of the good. According to this approach, the question would not revolve around a person's satisfaction or the number of resources she is able to command, but rather the question would be if the person is actually able to do and to be? Nussbaum puts the approach into two related ways: firstly, in qualitative terms of one's life comparing to others in certain core areas and secondly establishing a threshold of the basic level of capability for everyone situating below this threshold, must be considered an unfair situation (p. 71).

The former argument concludes two different assumptions; that women in the Two/Third World do not perceive labor as liberatory or even as self-empowerment because, their experiences are far from being similar with what campaigns such Girl Effect pretend to achieve, and secondly radical economic measures like Shock therapy, stabilization programme or Structural Adjustment Programmes fail to promote economic growth and reduce poverty. Such programmes are followed by the strategic agenda of imposing neoliberalism in these countries; consequently creating free markets requires free individuals and in order to have free individuals you have to teach them how to liberate and empower themselves (Hickel, 2014, p.1358). As a matter of fact, women's bodies became visible to be 'liberated' by the World Bank of IMF, just to be used as mere instruments, as 'potentialities' to be regulated in service of the market. Girl Effect campaign pretends to 'save' girls⁴ by detaching from Her local context and tradition, giving them education and teaching them that empowerment is a rational exchange in order to be accomplished. This political discourse is strongly related to neoliberalism, post-feminism and the education-as-development incentive altogether adhering principles of freedom, autonomy, choice, rationality and self-motivation (Switzer, 2013, p.350).

Clearly that supporters of these measures sustained that it is a win-win situation for women and economic development because according to them investing in women is crucial for poverty reduction. However what has resulted of these neoliberal policies is the increase (Stewart, 2002), of horizontal inequalities or inequality between culturally defined groups at high levels, making it impossible to overcome the labor stereotype; female wages have been pushed down in export-oriented sectors, increased social conflict and exclusion (Boyd, 2016, p. 149).

3. Gender relations as Power Relations

Let's picture dozens of women sitting in a chair in front of a sewing machine, in a gloomy hall, an airless space, with a male supervisor above their heads, surveilling every gesture and movement. An explanation that determines the gender differentiation inside the factory is the process of gender construction in the world. This process doesn't come simply as separating women and men in equal terms, rather it is a process of subordination of women as gender where ideological process and material process shape our practices not only in terms of labor (Elson & Pearson, 1981, 94). Through same process are created and perpetuated the power re-

lations in society, which it is elaborated, transformed, organized according to the situation. In our case, the gendered differentiation it is organized and manifested in in the hiring process, the administration, communication (Pepper, 2012, p. 147). Wright supports this theory in her analysis about disposable women where she discusses about practices that scrutinize and control the corporeal movements of disposable third world women at work. During her research, she noticed that men managers and engineers carefully monitor the wrists, fingers, backs, eyes and other body parts of women works to secure that they will produce secure skilled labor (Wright, 2006). It resembles quite a lot with the division of labor inside the family; the male supervisor is the personification of the male head of the family and vice versa. Women preserve their secondary status inside the household and this status is reproduced as a lower 'price tag' at the women's worker bodies. The factory takes her in and turns this price into labor surplus. Women are subjected, devalued and their cheapness altogether with their passivity to undermine the norm, justifies the tight forms of control (Mezzadri, 2016, p.1887). Also another research concluded by Salzinger in Mexico, found that while high-heeled, well coifed women are the passive objects of male supervisory voyeurism at one predominantly female factory ("Panoptimex"), assertive young women make each other responsible for their team's production ("Particimex"). In these factories, men managers can shape the way female workers see themselves because they focus on who workers are rather on the work they do (Salzinger, 2004, p.468). Men come to be controlled as well, by the same gendered mechanisms that are applied to women through dress code, social interactions, sexual harassment and sexualized rules of conduct, but with different specifics. To be a male supervisor, is to have the power of surveillance, however standing facing the line, He does not count as man; he is neither subject nor object. He has no place from which to act standing in between his relation to the women and his relation to factory managers (Peppers, 2012, p. 147). In the Balkan countries however, there is a lack of research and empirical data related to gender constructed relations inside the factories. Only a few women in mere voices accept to have faced sexual harassment and gender-related discrimination. At the end of day, these skilled women are condemned with the sad destiny of being the actual outcomes of cultural process that are immune to external interventions.

4. Emotional work and precarity

A method of explaining the submissive attitude of female workers in the export-oriented sector and their lack of political organization could be related with the emotional work under which women are used to perform. Earlier, I discussed how feminization of labor came to be realized due to Shock therapy, stabilization programme or Structural Adjustment Programmes. Capital started to become more plastic and Dionysian, meaning more affective and closer to the emotional aspect. At this point, the financialization of capital caused the exploitation not only of the body of the worker, but also her mind merging up to her emotional dimension (Vora, Boscagli, 2013, p. 11). The transformation of the capital's form generated work flexibility, as a consequence precarious and unprotected of labor. Precariousness tends to become a general form of labor relation, renouncing from its marginal and situational aspect, changing its technical and cultural conditions in the job market (Berardi, 2009, 32).

In this section I will discuss how feminization labor was developed until the stage that I'm analyzing through a personal dimension, that of the affective aspects, their social status and the implication of feelings. In his analysis, Standing was able to highlight some of the structural

motives for which feminization labor become a harsh reality and how the export-oriented sector applied gender preferential hiring. There is an explanation for the gendered choices that claim to favor women in order to help their actual social and economic position. Hochschild in her book *The Managed Heart* discusses about the gendered emotional performance of workers under a Marxist feminist perspective. Following her analysis, I will try to explain the inclusivity of female workers in the export-oriented sector and their vulnerability, in terms of exploitation of not only their bodies, but their emotional potential.

Firstly, let's recapitulate how the expansion of the export-oriented sector took place in the global context discussed in the first section. One of the methods that were adopted by the development strategies supported Structural Adjustment which relied upon export-led growth that indicated huge cuts in public expenditure. This method was expected to ensure states to earn foreign currency through exports to continue to service existing debts. The IMF offers to the transitional economies assistance for a short period to help them with payments problems, dividing loans by tranches and simultaneously requiring drastic cuts in civil spending, cut imports and attempting to increase exports (Standing, 1989). There lies the crucial role that export-oriented sectors play in the global context. On their way of supporting these measures, the using of cheap labor becomes a necessity for countries to agree on. Therefore, at this point the gender bias is introduced supporting at the same time labor exploitation and wage gap but also calling out for higher rates of female participation in the labor market. I have mentioned previously that female workers represent the majority of workers in the export-oriented sector. Culturally considered that women can be dependent, to them it is denied the title of breadwinner that traditionally belongs to male workers, women's work is devalued and overlooked. However, not by chance women appear to be particularly preferred for this kind of labor. Skillfulness, patience and submissiveness have all something in common when comes to the way women correspondently accept to perform a specific kind of job. As a matter of fact, Hochschild explains that women are capable of managing expression and feeling not only better but more often than men do. She underlines through a neo – Freudian theory that women socially tend to be closer to their emotions. Recounting Nancy Chodorow, Hochschild sustains that little boys must lose their primary identification with the mother by repressing feelings associated with her, by convincing themselves that they are 'not like mother', merging to their feelings being repressed generally. The girls though, identify themselves socially and sexually as their mothers do, saving therefore their emotional expressions. The reason behind the emotional management is precisely the closeness that women have with their feelings (Hochschild, 1985, p. 164). Even though in first appearance this closeness could be considered as a positive feature, actually it demands from them to do extra emotion work, "especially emotion work that affirms, enhances, and celebrates the well-being and status of others" (ibid, p. 165). Considered as low-status however, their feelings go unnoticed in two different ways: accepting them as ration but unimportant or by considering them irrational and therefore dismissible. The double standard behind these shadowy feelings appears when a man's anger is socially accepted as rational and understandable, because it doesn't indicate weakness, but a strong conviction and on the other hand, if women tend to act angrily is regarded with high suspicion and considered instable (ibid, p. 173). As a consequence relying on the fact that women traditionally are able to control their negative feelings such as anger, rage, discomfort, hate, but rather communicate compassion and understanding, make them prone to accept and submit exploitative jobs. According to the categorization of Hochschild for emotional labor⁵,

export-oriented labor is excluded from the list. However the third characteristic that describes the power relation between the supervisor and the employee, that the former can exercise control and power over the emotional activities of the work, explains the relationship described in the third section. The male supervisor can intimidate, threaten, harass the female worker, and she can still manage her feelings and not renounce her work even that could take the form of unfreedom. Being confronted with different structural reasons for them to consent the job and submit to the emotional work, risks their bodies and producing potential profit for others. Also, considering that anger is repressed as a feeling for not being representative for women, they tend to have less inclination to rebel or politically organize themselves into unions. With the rise of capitalism, the number of unions tends to minimize especially in the export-oriented sector, resulting into volatile conditions and precarity. The whole process of emotional work and being left in precarity can cause them emotional burn-out and alienation from themselves and from the work with which they tend to identify.

5. Balkan's docile bodies

Cheap Clothes Campaign realized several reports in 2014 across Balkan countries to denounce the exploitative conditions that women in these countries must confront each day. The research covered data from interviews with workers who were employed in brands such as: Zara, H&M, Hugo Boss, Adidas, Puma, Nike, Max Mara, Tom Tailor, Mango, Tesco, Versace, Dolce & Gabbana, Prada, Benneton, Otto, Arcadia, Esprit, and C & A. The reports found out that women are forced to work overtime during the day or even in weekends to reach their target and are not paid more than the minimal national wage; sometimes even less (considering that Albania's monthly legal minimum net wage is 140 euros, that being the lowest minimum monthly wage in the region). Workers interviewed stated that more than 50% of the workers don't get the statutory minimum wage; overtime payment regulations it is not respected, non-compliance with regulations on annual and sick-leave, they often are victims of yelling, intimidation and sexual violence by their male supervisors; often are confronted with situations that put their lives at risks and unhealthy working environment (Arqimandriti& Llubani & Ljarja, 2016). Women working in these factories tend to be nostalgic to the communist era and the loss of the social status. Those who suffered mostly from the transition were women, especially older women who faced the shock of post-socialist uncertainty with material difficulties and the feeling of precarity. Many workers are not even legally registered, losing social contributions and therefore not benefiting from annual leave and sick leave (Bonfiglioli, 2016).

The transition from the planned economy to the market economy left the Balkan region longing for the familiarity of their industrial past together with countless unemployed people. Lacking capital resources to strongly enter into the global market as a worthy competitive actor, Balkan region served as a foreign capital fertilization service by offering cheap and experienced labor force⁶. In countries such as North Macedonia and Bulgaria operates an inner-European trade scheme known as Lohn (Outward Processing Trade) which is responsible for the perpetual and delicate conditions of labor. Lohn-system is a form of manufacturing and trading apparel where the material is pre-cut, sewed and then exported to the place of origin. The trading is excluded from being taxed and as a consequence it isn't counted fully. The operation uses freely cheaper wages to make profitable arrangement for the buys/input-supplier

company in the country of origin causing dependence on any sourcing decision by buyers (Luginbuhl, Musiolek, 2014, p. 19).

One of the interviewed workers declared that she and her co-workers are situated in a state of poverty and constant devaluation because nobody praises them for their work and commitment comparing the factory she works in as equal to those in Bangladesh, even though she sustains they have safer labor conditions. Many workers are not even legally registered, losing social contributions and therefore not benefiting from annual leave and sick leave. Additionally, activists from Serbia⁷ declare that the problem is not limited to Bangladesh or Thailand, calling the attention to the Balkan region who is the main furnisher of semi-prepared garments from the Western Europe.

The governments, on their behalf seem to understand the value and importance of supporting export-oriented sector. In Albania for example, the government launched a special Incentives Package for the Industry of Inward Processing Regime also referred to as “Facon industry,” to help with a positive incentive the sector consulting with entrepreneurs and stakeholders in the industry, but not taking in consideration the working conditions and workers’ rights in the labor market. On the other hand, unions’ trades admit that many factories do not fulfill the Labor Code, but prefer to pretend that these issues are invisible to the public eye. They are incapable of assisting the needs of workers since they have been falling prey of corruption and bribery to not cause any troubles for the industry (Arqimandriti & Llubani & Ljarja, 2016). During 2017, in Serbia there were numerous strikes, however union trades functioned as an obstacle, worsening the situation. It is important to notice the historical context of trade unions in these countries. During the communist era, trade unions were integrated as systemic body of the State’s Party. Not only they weren’t supposed to represent any resistance (Bonfiglioli, 2016, p. 9), but their task was to mobilize the workers for the construction of socialism, the class warfare and the fulfillment of the plans (Arqimandriti & Llubani & Ljarja, 2016, p.26), thus social dialogue has continued to be a stranger form of realization at the work place or sectoral level even though today, the law invites workers to organize themselves politically.

Conclusions

The most reasonable solution for reducing inequality and consequently poverty for scholars to be propose, would be political engagement of and by this category of women. Horizontal inequality results from political inequality that leads to influence government policies and the distribution of resources and rights. Poor people, particularly poor women often are disadvantaged into being part of the exercised power due to structural problems that prevents them to obtain information and prioritize the needs. This political engagement would require being massive and strong to play a crucial role in order to gain power and be heard (Stewart, 2011). On the other hand, it is important to emphasize the importance of intersectionality in feminist political theory, going beyond the classic Western feminist philosophy which actually fails to explain the reasons behind the exploitation of poor women because they insist on liberation according to their terms of freedom, without considering the structural constraints such as race, gender and class. Before even thinking about existential freedom, these women are struggling with hunger, marginalization and unsecure life. Why would they care about self-improvement or empowerment when they are confronted with a starving stomach, children crying, domestic violence, debts and miserable conditions of labor? Another miscomprehension that libera-

tion theory tends to unfold is the generalization and oversimplification of the women's question, failing to understand subjectivity and personal experience as the base ground for oppression. From a poor woman perspective, coming from a poor country, the effects of imperialism (western global domination and hegemony) and national oppression (the national inferiority over an external power) must be considered important when studying marginalization and overburdening of women.

The very sexist concept of nimble fingers is paradoxical and yet again demonstrates how the new modern slavery it is perpetuated among women. Globalization, export-oriented sector, state failures associated with the omnipresence of the patriarchal order, constructs together the totality of exploitative labor. If institutions responsible for development such as IMF, the World Bank or different NGOs and unions are determined to highlight the importance of women's participation in labor, they must support constant research in different poor countries and initiate supporting programmes to encourage state governments in taking action against inequality for a far better representation of all categories of women in political life. Taking everything into account, probably even my position could be partially biased. I consider rather ambitious or even problematic to represent the voices of these women, or discuss on their behalf because the situation and the conditions on which they live day by day, can be understood and sensed only by those who have constantly experienced perpetual exploitation and oppression.

Notes

¹ <https://www.girleffect.org/> Last accessed at 8 June, 2019

² Chandra Mohanty in her article *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, introduced a critique toward Western Feminism (or White Feminism) as a strategy of "various textual strategies used by particular writes that codify Others as non-Western and hence themselves as (implicitly) Western." She tries to draw a line of distinction between Western (White) Feminism and Third World feminist practices (Mohanty, 1984, 333).

³ Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999

⁴ According to Mohanty saving poor women and girls is all included in the Western feminism political discourse. Before understanding their needs and capabilities, the discourse revolves around inspiring action and investing in them (Mohanty, 1984).

⁵ She identified three characteristics for jobs to have in common to be considered emotional labor. Firstly, the job would demand face-to-face or/and voice-to-voice contact with the public. Secondly, the job would require that the worker to produce an emotional state in another person, being that gratitude or fear (*see the case of the flight attendant and that of the bill collector). Thirdly, the job would allow the employer through training and supervision to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of the employees (Hochschild, 1985, p. 147).

⁶ Harald Köpping Athanasopoulos, "The secret life of Serbian sweatshops," *The Leipzig Glocal*, January 20, 2018 <https://leipglo.com/2018/01/20/secret-life-serbian-sweatshops/> (accessed December 14, 2019).

⁷ Ibid.

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