

RESEARCH ON MIGRANT WOMEN INDUSTRIAL WORKERS IN MALAYSIA - THEORETICAL, METHODOLOGICAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Jamilah Ariffin

Rural Development Division

Faculty of Economics and Administration

University of Malaya

Introduction

In the early 1970's, the local newspapers drew the attention of the Malaysian public to a new phenomenon in their midst, namely, the presence of the "MINAH KARAN".¹ This derogatory term refers to Malay women factory workers in the electronics industry who are assumed to be "hot stuff" and easily susceptible to city slickers since most of them are recent rural-urban migrants. Due to the wide-spread publicity, the study of women factory workers became a research area vigorously pursued by several academicians. This research interest reflects their concern for the "plight of the factory girls" and the social consequences ensuing from industrial development programmes of the State. While some studies were geared towards obtaining academic degrees, others like the "HAWA Project" at the University of Malaya and the "Young Workers Project" at Universiti Sains, Penang were aimed at advancing policy measures to ensure the welfare of women workers.² As has been documented by several writers,³ Malaysia in 1970, following the example set by its neighbours, embarked upon an export-oriented industrialization programme which was intended to be the major thrust of its development strategies.

The nature and pace of industrialization have a specific impact on Malaysian women, particularly young women with some educational qualifications. With the establishment of foreign-financed "off-shore sourcing" industries in newly-created "free trade zones" that concentrate on the assembly of electronics equipment and the production of textile

goods for export, a new era and form of industrialization were fostered in the Malaysian scene. This type of industries, with a factory work-system which requires manual dexterity and long sedentary work hours, favours the employment of women's labour rather than men's. Consequently, more women than men have been absorbed into these industries' workforce. Specific to Malaysia, the majority of the women workers in these urban-based factories are Malay women migrants from the rural areas.

The electronics and textile industries expanded rapidly in the 1970's.⁴ Together they subsequently became the major export-earners in the manufacturing sector. These two factors are the main reasons why attention was directed to these industries' workforce, which happened to be women workers who were predominantly young, unmarried and recent rural-urban migrants. This paper will, in the first section, discuss how the situation described above has important theoretical and policy implications for Women and Development studies and subsequently in the following section deal in greater detail on the contribution of the relevant research findings towards theoretical and policy formulations. In the concluding section I discuss the search for appropriate research methodologies to fulfil the needs of researchers studying women factory workers in Malaysia.

Theoretical and Policy Implications

One of the initial problems faced in researching on female migration to urban-industrial factories is the lack of base-line data and background material. Before 1980, there was a dearth of research material on the topic of female migration in Malaysia.⁵ This is also true in the case of the general literature on women in migration streams which reflects the lack of sensitivity on the part of demographers to gender issues. As pointed out by Ware (1981) at least nine out of ten studies on migration were restricted to male migration although their titles rarely gave any indication of this fact. Consequently, much of the available literature cannot provide the basis for theoretical formulations on female migration. Policy wise, there is a urgent need to ensure that government

agencies and implementing bodies must include gender variables in migration census-taking and reports before they are at liberty to make policy-statements on women migration-related issues. Due to the lack of relevant information as cited above, it can only be said that until the 1950's the proportion of women in the migration streams in Malaysia had been slight and of little economic significance. This can be attributed to historical and cultural reasons. Historically, Peninsular Malaysia had an unbalanced, heavily male population ratio.

Culturally, women had been more restricted in migratory movements than men. However, census data for the 1957-1970 period show that there was an increasing trend of female life-time migration in 1970 although subsequent analyses confirmed that this was non-autonomous migration and women migrated as family members. An analysis of the 1980 census data provides further evidence of the trend towards a rapidly growing number of women in migratory moves. Although the majority then were still limited to family migration, a significant proportion was due to autonomous migration in search of employment.⁶ Similar to the general rural-urban migration pattern, the female migration flows are mainly to the rapidly urbanising states of Selangor, Pahang, Penang and the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. Other than Pahang, all the three mentioned areas are centres of the newly-created export-oriented industries.⁷ The exodus of rural women to the urban-based factories in the 1970's was in fact the consequence of the interplay of several forces, policies and programmes which were operating many years beforehand. For instance, the massive entry of young women belonging to the age-group 15 to 25 years, into the labour market was a direct result of the initial entry of large numbers of girls into schools in the 1960 era. This era is associated with the granting of greater schooling opportunities for girls in Malaysia. Prior to that, women were inhibited, both by tradition and by the lack of schooling facilities, from participating equally with men in the pursuit of basic education. These women's job preferences were for the white-collar occupations generally associated with femininity, namely the nursing and teaching professions.⁸ However by the 1970's vacancies in such occupations were limited while, due to the export-oriented industrialization programme, factory jobs were in

abundance. Understandably therefore, the female job-seekers were channeled into the industrial workforce. As stated earlier, these factory-jobs were located in urban areas and offered an attractive alternative to job-opportunities in the unorganised sector and the rural-agrarian sector which are characterised by low pay, and working out-of-doors in the hot sun. Such jobs are considered menial by young women and bad for their complexion. Hence, in the event of not getting white-collar jobs, many of them accepted factory employment.⁹

The situation described above, by itself, has important theoretical and policy implications for Women Studies in Southeast Asia. Firstly, it is obvious that the situation faced by women in Malaysia in terms of unequal access to education is being experienced by women in other countries of Southeast Asia. Due to the late start in education, women have lagged behind men in terms of promotion up the career ladder. Education is a major vehicle for obtaining paid employment, thus the inhibitions against women going to school have delayed their process of liberation from domestic seclusion and economic dependence.¹⁰

Secondly, the forces encouraging the women to migrate from the rural areas are also worthy of analysis, particularly in terms of their relevance to Development issues. Studies on the impact of economic development in developing countries have confirmed that modernization does not bring equal benefits to men and women. Agrarian reforms and rural development-aid programmes are geared towards creating employment opportunities in the rural areas for men farmers without much regard for the farmers daughters.¹¹ Consequently, besides the ill-effects of dualistic development or "lop-sided development", where the rural areas lag behind the urban areas in terms of facilities and employment opportunities, rural women find that there are hardly any job opportunities befitting their educational qualifications when they leave school. Thirdly, and relatedly, due to the circumstances described above, these women are "pushed out" to migrate into the urban areas where jobs for women are more plentiful. In the event when jobs in the factory buildings are plentiful while those in the preferred femininised occupations are already saturated with other women, these women are

motivated to crowd into another sphere of the gender-oriented segmented labour force. The disdain shown by these young women for out-door-work or working in the fields, and the preference for factory work in an air-conditioned environment reflects women's preoccupation with physical beauty, usually construed as their most important asset in life.¹²

Fourthly, it is a common trend for these new migrants to try out fashions and cosmetics in order to be "like the city girls". Some venture further to be initiated into new consumer habits and entertainment forms. Despite these efforts, these factory women are easily identified by the urban communities as recent sojourners from the rural outback and given the title of "Minah Karan". In many urban areas in Peninsular Malaysia, the receiving communities view the factory girls critically. Should they be perceived to "step out of line" as determined by the community's values, they are chastised, and severely censured. One example is where the local authorities like the police and religious enforcement officers are called in to arrest factory girls believed to hold wild parties in the premise.¹³ The notion of being "spotted out" and regarded as "outsiders" by the receiving community has been documented extensively in studies on migrants, however, how these established theoretical constructs apply to the new situation in Malaysia or in other late industrialising countries premised on export-oriented manufacturing can be a subject of deliberation in "conflict studies". For example action taken by the receiving community against factory girls is a reflection of Malaysian society's traditional norms which inhibit unmarried women from migrating and staying on their own. More importantly, should the girls transgress the boundaries of the "proper" conduct expected of young women, the receiving communities regard it as their right to act as their strict guardians and remind them of the "woman's place". Gender subordination of young women is therefore not the sole "prerogative" of the family but permitted by society to be shared by other communities to which the migrant women do not belong. When and why such community-based actions do not seem to be so widespread in Malaysia nowadays are aspects worthy of investigation.¹⁴ Fifthly, and with reference to policy implications, the apparent lack of preparation by the Malaysian government to meet the consequences of export-oriented industrialization indicates the lack of proper planning and

understanding of the sophisticated management strategies of multinational companies monopolising the electronics and textile industries in Malaysia. For example government agencies have admitted that they had no inkling that these industries would create jobs more for women than men workers. As such, while the benefits expected from export-oriented industrialization were to be derived from its role in ameliorating the country's unemployment problem, (believed to be affecting males more than females) the economic consequences for labour was that it created new jobs for new female job seekers. Despite the growing realization that women for the past two decades have made up the bulk of workers in the premier industries, until 1990, planners in Malaysia today were insensitive towards the need to include gender considerations in their economic development plans.¹⁵

Contribution to Theoretical and Policy Formulations

Research on migrant women workers in Malaysia yielded several findings which have important implications in terms of theoretical, methodological and policy formulations. In the ensuing discussion, an attempt will be made to deliberate on the most important findings and the relevant issues for Women and Development studies. In this paper I will refer to my own research conducted over a period of seven years (1976 - 1982) on migration of factory women and their adaption process as well as the HAWA Project, which consisted of two large-scale surveys and several smaller micro-level studies on factory women. This project was started in 1980 and is still on-going.

The HAWA Project is divided into three phases. HAWA I, conducted in 1987, investigates the migration process, living and work conditions, health status and adaptation of migrant factory women, HAWA II, launched in 1982, provides a comparative analysis by studying factory women who are daily commuters to decentralised industries, HAWA III is an on-going follow up study of respondents of the two earlier surveys. The research findings of the studies cited above concurred with other studies on women workers in Malaysia in the following aspects:- Firstly, there is

considerable improvement in the rural migrants' standard of living in terms of better access to urban facilities and in having regular wages. Despite their cramped living conditions in the cities, usually located in squatter settlements or low-cost housing areas, the factory women reported that these constitute better living conditions when compared to the poor rural households they originate from. The main benefit obtained from factory employment is access to earning their own income since, for many of them, this was their first job. In this sense there is no previous working experience against which they can compare their present working situation. Many of them also come from very large families and migration to the cities frees them from the restrictive home setting of looking after younger siblings while their parents work in the farms. Earning money (albeit a small sum) also means that they achieve some degree of economic independence. This makes for changes in terms of their relationship with and status within their families and home communities. In this sense, women's migration to the factories liberates them from the shackles of domestic seclusion and allows them to be exposed to new ideas and facilities. Having their own income also allows them to remit some money back to the families and this gives them a sense of pride and satisfaction. Rather than having an unemployed daughter at home, parents with low income and inconsistent earnings appreciate the regular remittance from their daughters. The features described above can be found in other countries which are undergoing the first phase of industrialization. Similar findings on factory women's experiences have been documented by earlier studies in industrialising America in the 18th. century and by later studies in the developing countries of today. What is of direct relevance to theoretical formulations is the path and end product of the Southeast Asian factory women's liberation from traditional seclusion. Will these women be similar to their western sisters with their brand of "women's liberation" or will they end up as leaders of female-headed household as in the West Indies? Southeast Asian women factory workers may have their own idealistic goals and value orientations and new theoretical formulations are therefore needed to aid studies on the aspects cited above.

Secondly, despite the benefits mentioned earlier, women workers in the industries face new problems and new forms of subordination. Although employed in relatively stable wage-work compared to women in the unorganised sector, the nature of factory work and the form of integration into the world of work render them susceptible and vulnerable to domination and exploitation. First, they are assigned to the lowest strata of the company's social structure, and to the most monotonous, dulllest and least-paying jobs. Second, they are given no say in decision-making, not allowed to join trade unions which can represent their group interest, and have to accept domination in the production line.¹⁶ Third, most of their supervisors are men and in this sense they have escaped from male domination at home (in the form of their fathers) only to be replaced by this more subtle domination at the factory. Fourth, as young rural migrants at their first jobs in sophisticated surroundings, they are generally naive about personal management strategies and can be exploited more easily than town-based workers. As young rural women coming from sequestered backgrounds, unsure and inconfident about their new surroundings, they tend to find solace in their own peer groups. In Malaysia, this takes the form of factory-mates from the same ethnic group. Generally, they tend to gravitate towards living together and exchanging information on how to cope with their new life and its attendant problems. The structure of "mate-ship" among these women workers and the strength of peer group influence constitute an area worthy of detailed study and can contribute to theoretical formulations in women studies. With particular reference to the HAWA I Project, it was found that the factory girls had developed their own language forms and patterns.

Thirdly, although industrial women workers have now been acknowledged as a reliable and hardworking workforce and have contributed significantly to the country's industrial progress, steps to grant just rewards and protection have not been commensurate with this acknowledgement. As workers in the export-oriented industries, exposed to the vagaries of world demands, they are prone to be retrenched at any time and when this occurs, there is insufficient legislation to compensate them adequately for their services. They are seldom given opportunities for upward mobility in their career and many of them are aware that

theirs is a "dead-end job". Working mothers are seldom provided with child-care facilities by their employers. In short, it can be said that women factory workers receive inadequate remuneration (in the form of pay and facilities by their employers) especially when compared to the huge profits the companies derive from women's labour. When this issue is raised women workers at one country are pitted against women workers of other developing countries who, as claimed by the industrial companies, are prepared to receive lower pay hence attracting these off-shore sourcing factories to shift there, thus leaving Malaysian women workers in the lurch. Pitting women against other women is a version of the age-old policy of "divide and rule" and it reiterates male supremacy and gender domination. Women studies have shown that instead of cooperating with members of their own sex against their male oppressors, many women tend to compete against other women for men's favour. How this operates, whether within the factory walls or across national boundaries, is an area which deserves further theoretical formulations.

Fourthly, the research findings show that even when women are employed outside the home, they are not freed from their primary responsibilities as mothers and home-makers. The HAWA Phase III study shows that when these migrants become married working mothers, they are given the additional burden of running a home as well as catering to the demands of the work place. As migrants they do not have the extended family support system in the cities to lighten their domestic responsibilities. As low income-earners, they cannot afford to pay for reliable domestic helpers, which working women with higher salaries can. In addition, as factory workers, they have to work night shifts with lesser amenities normally enjoyed by women night-shift workers in the white-collar occupations such as nurses. All these disadvantages generate greater tension on their dual-role burden namely higher stress and chronic fatigue. Unless and until policy formulations and legislation are made to ensure that industrial employers will ease their women workers' dual-burden in the form of child-care centres and more flexible work hours, the situation of inadequate facilities for married factory women workers will continue even when the nation progresses to the higher-technology industrialization stage as planned by the government for the

future. In this regard it will be worthwhile to compare their situation with the better position which will be enjoyed by women government employees when the new legislation (that all government departments will provide child-care centres in their premises for their women employees) is implemented in Malaysia in the near future.

In Search of Appropriate Methodologies

One realization which was derived from conducting studies on migrant women factory workers is the need for designing appropriate methodologies so as to obtain answers to the research questions. For example, taking the case of the HAWA I study, one difficulty faced was in gauging the effect of factory work on the health status of factory women workers. This problem was acutely felt by the project coordinator, i.e. myself, who was assigned to prepare the report but was not involved in the data-gathering phase. Evidently, the methodology utilised was not appropriate for the task because the test items were administered by the survey method at a given point in time. The study therefore could not determine whether the poor health status of the respondents was due to the factory environment, or because their initial health status, prior to factory employment was already poor, or due to a combination of both factory work and their living conditions outside the factory.

A more appropriate methodology would be the longitudinal approach whereby the respondents would be interviewed prior to their entry into factory work and re-interviewed after being employed for a specific length of time keeping all other intervening variables constant. This however requires an ideal research situation not readily available to most researchers because it is not possible to follow the same sample over time either due to the lack of financial research resources or the inability to get the respondents' cooperation for repeat-interviews. Another reason for developing new methodologies is the emergence of new situations and issues which the existing methodologies cannot cope with. An example, is the case of researching on the effects of Structural Adjustment measures on women. Since the topic of Economic Structural Adjustment is a new one and the multifarious facets to the situation are also not clearly

discernible, an exploratory research has to be very sensitive to new methods of approaching the issue. In addition, when structural adjustment measures were taken very swiftly as in the case of Malaysia (by the government and the private sector) researchers did not have the opportunity to do a base-line measure of the position of these women before these actions were taken. Taking the case of women workers retrenched due to factory-closures, it would be ideal to study their position before the retrenchment and after. Since circumstances do not allow for this methodology to be utilised, new methodologies more appropriate to the new situation need to be devised. The third reason for seeking appropriate technologies lies in the fact that development are taking place among the research sample which are intricate, intimate, and cannot easily be detected by existing methodology. One example is when researching into the power relations between husbands and their factory wives in the newly emerging urban working class Malay families. Another would be the value conflict experienced by migrant women in the new industrial setting. Would the usual research methodologies which have been tried and tested in other industrialised countries and other cultural contexts apply and be appropriate? These are some of the issues which would have to be deliberated upon before venturing into the research field.

Conclusion

It is evident from the preceeding discussion that the multifarious aspects relating to the impact of industrialization on women in Malaysia require more comparative and cross-cultural studies. The salient implications arising from the present situation characterised by women's unequal integration in development vis-a-vis men, dualistic development and rural women's limited employment opportunities leading to their migration into gender-specific jobs, community's gender-biasness against women's social freedom, and government planners' gender-blind approach in development planning are aspects which deserve indepth research. It is also clear from the available research findings that rural women perceive their migration to towns and participation in factory employment as a

means to obtain better living standards and to be liberated from the shackles of domestic seclusion. However it is still not yet evident what the outcome of this "liberation" will be, either for the women in particular or society in general. A non-biased research orientation free from the theoretical confines of established models such as a western-based one is needed in investigating these issues. Since the pattern and form of industrialization and migration in Malaysia is changing rapidly, the search for new and appropriate research methodologies for studying these migrant factory women workers must be vigorously pursued so as to keep abreast of their changing work patterns and life-styles.¹⁶

iii Ackerman, S., Ph.D. thesis (1980), "Cultural Processes in Malaysia Industrialization: A case study of Malay Women Factory Workers", University of California, San Diego, U.S.A.

iii Anis, Ungku, Royal Professor (1977), "To establish HAWA for the welfare of New Malay Women Workers", paper presented at the Congress of Islamic Women Organization, Kuala Lumpur.

iv Jambiah Ariffin (1978), "Pembangunan Perindustrian dan Corak Pengkiran Wanita", Unpublished paper, National University of Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor.

v Blake, M.L. (1975), "Towards a Better Deal for the Young Workers", Federation of Family Planning Association Report, Malaya.

3. See for example:

i Linda Lim (1978), "Multinational Firms and Manufacturing For Export in Less Developed Countries - The case of the Electronics Industries in Malaysia and Singapore", Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan, U.S.A.

ii Anwar Ali (1986), "Industrial Restructuring Beyond the Industrial Master Plan", MIER 1986 NATIONAL OUTLOOK CONFERENCE, Kuala Lumpur.

iii Jambiah Ariffin (1979), "Migration of Women in Peninsular Malaysia", paper presented at the Working Group meeting on Women in the Cities, East West centre, Hawaii, and published in Foxwell, Elton and Smith (1984), *Women in the Cities of Asia*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, U.S.A.

4. See Kamal Salih and Mei Ling Young (1989), "Structural Adjustment and its Impact on Women in Malaysia", Consultancy report submitted to the Commonwealth Secretariat, London, available from the Malaysian Institute of Economic Research (MIER), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

NOTES

1. Some examples of the reports in the local newspapers are:-

Zainah Anwar (1978), "Roughing it out ...", 12th. March, 1978.
Christel Kraal (1979), "Small Pay, Crammed Quarters", 27th. February.

2. Some examples are;

i) Linda Lim (1978), "Multinational Firms and Manufacturing For Export in Less Developed Countries - The case of the Electronics Industries in Malaysia and Singapore", Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan, U.S.A.

ii) Ackerman, S., Ph.D. thesis (1980), "Cultural Processes in Malaysia Industrialization: A case study of Malay Women Factory Workers", University of California, San Diego, U.S.A.

iii) Aziz, Ungku, Royal Professor (1977), "To establish HAWA for the welfare of New Malay Women Workers", paper presented at the Congress of Islamic Women Organization, Kuala Lumpur.

iv) Jamilah Ariffin (1978), "Pembangunan Perindustrian dan Corak Penghijrahan Wanita", Unpublished paper, National University of Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor.

v) Blake, M.L. (1975), "Towards a Better Deal for the Young Workers", Federation of Family Planning Association Report, Malaya.

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ii) Annuar Ali (1988), "Industrial Restructuring: Beyond the Industrial Master Plan", MIER 1988 NATIONAL OUTLOOK CONFERENCE, Kuala Lumpur.

iii) Jamilah Ariffin (1979), "Migration Of Women in Peninsular Malaysia", paper presented at the Working Group meeting as *Women in the Cities*, East-West centre, Hawaii, and published in Fawcett, Khoo and Smith (1984), *Women in the Cities of Asia*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, U.S.A.

4. See Kamal Salih and Mei Ling Young (1989), "Structural Adjustments and its Impact on Women in Malaysia", Consultancy report submitted to the Commonwealth Secretariat, London, available from the Malaysian Institute of Economic Research (MIER), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

5. For details see Jamilah Ariffin (1987), "Female Rural- Urban Migration and Labour Force Participation trends in Peninsular Malaysia", paper presented at the Population Studies Unit Seminar on *Changing Malaysian Society*, Genting Highlands, Malaysia.

For details on the general literature see:

Ware, O. H. (1981), *Women Demography, and Development*, Australian National University Press, Australia.

6. See Jamilah Ariffin (1987).

7. Op cit (1987)

8. See HAWA I Report.

9. See HAWA I Report and Jamilah Ariffin Ph.D. thesis (1984).

10. See Jamilah Ariffin, chapter on "Women and Education in Malaysia", Pelanduk Press. (forthcoming)

11. Noeleen Heyzer (1987), *Women Farmers and Rural Change in Asia*, APDC, Kuala Lumpur, Chapter 3.

12. Beauty is often regarded by most women as their means to fame and fortune. Society, too generally assesses a woman by her beauty and a man by his wealth and intelligence. 13. These cases are discussed in detail in my Ph.D. thesis. See Jamilah Ariffin (1984), Chapter VI.

14. Nowadays the newspapers do not pursue stories on factory girls as vigorously as before. It also seems as through the stigmatisation of the factory girls is not as widespread and they do not have a low moral status.

15. This is derived from my interviews with top government officials in key ministries in Malaysia for the Commonwealth Secretariats' study on "The Impact of Structural Adjustments on Women" (1988 - 1989). However in December 1989, the Cabinet passed the National Policy on women in Malaysia. This has led to greater acknowledgement on the role of women in National Development. There is also a possibility that a chapter on "Women and Development" will be incorporated in the forthcoming Sixth Malaysia Plan (1990-1995).

16. Recently, the Malaysian government has allowed them to join "in-house" unions.

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