

Émancipation économique des femmes et précarité d'emploi dans les zones franches industrielles du Ghana

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Résumé

Dans de nombreux pays à revenu faible et intermédiaire, les zones franches industrielles (ZFI) ont été adoptées comme stratégie de croissance générée par les exportations, et saluées pour leur rôle d'absorption de la main-d'œuvre féminine de surplus. Les conditions de travail défavorables sont cependant prédominantes à l'échelle mondiale dans les ZFI en raison de la relaxation des normes de travail, ce qui affecte sérieusement la main-d'œuvre majoritairement féminine. Les recherches empiriques sur les expériences des travailleuses dans les ZFI du Ghana et de l'Afrique subsaharienne sont toutefois limitées. Dans cet article, nous levons le voile sur la précarisation de l'emploi en tant que nouvelle forme de travail dans les ZFI. Nous décrivons comment les travailleuses dans les ZFI du Ghana négocient cet espace et ses effets sur leur émancipation économique. Nous signalons que travailler en ZFI constitue une importante transition dans la trajectoire de travail des femmes puisqu'il s'agit d'une amélioration de leurs possibilités d'emploi. Cela leur permet de progresser vers de nouveaux rôles en tant qu'acteurs économiques, au foyer comme au sein de leur famille, rehaussant ainsi leur estime de soi. Par contre, les salaires moins élevés, la précarisation des emplois et les mises à pied, conditions courantes dans les usines des ZFI, peuvent affecter la durabilité de leur émancipation économique, ainsi que leurs rôles et leur identité économiques fraîchement acquis.

Women's Economic Empowerment and Precarious Employment in Ghana's Export Processing Zones

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Abstract

Many low- and middle-income countries have adopted export processing zones (EPZs) as a strategy of export-led growth and for their role in absorbing surplus labour, especially female labour. However, unfavourable working conditions are pronounced in EPZs globally due to a relaxation of labour standards, greatly affecting the predominantly female labour force. Yet empirical research on the experiences of women EPZ workers in Ghana and Sub-Saharan Africa is limited. In this paper, we unpack the precarization of employment as the form of work in EPZs. We describe how women workers in Ghana's EPZs navigate this space and the effects it has on their economic empowerment. The paper reports that EPZ employment is an important transition in the work trajectory of women and represents an improvement in their employment opportunities. It offers women a chance to transition into new roles as economic actors in their households and families and thereby enhance their sense of self-worth. However, lower salaries, labour casualization and dismissals, common in EPZ factories, can affect the sustainability of women's economic empowerment and their newly constructed economic roles and identity.

Introduction

Developing countries have increasingly adopted export-processing zones (EPZs) as industrial policies and export-led growth strategies (Boyenga, 2007). The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines EPZs as industrial zones with special incentives set up to attract foreign investors, in which imported materials undergo some degree of processing before being exported again (ILO, 2008). The rationale behind establishing EPZs include but are not limited to diversifying exports, promoting foreign exchange and foreign direct investment and generating employment in host countries (ILO,

2008). EPZs have become significant in absorbing many women employees in the developing world. They have provided them with opportunities to attain some level of financial autonomy, which may have trickle-down effects on other dimensions of empowerment (Madani, 1999; Hancock & Edirisinghe, 2012).

Notwithstanding these benefits, the capital investments of zone development, coupled with tax exemptions and free import and export duties granted to investors, have led to sceptics questioning the development potential of EPZs. More importantly, EPZs have been associated with unfavourable working conditions in many developing countries. Some of the commonly cited poor working conditions are lax enforcement of labour laws, restrictions on trade union creation and action, low wages, job insecurity and sexual violence; these issues require prompt attention from researchers and policymakers (see Mies, 1986; Wills & Hale, 2005; Cling et al., 2005; Carty, 2006; Engman et al., 2007).

While the evidence confirms that EPZs are associated with poor working conditions in many developing countries, there is limited scholarship on this topic, especially in Ghana and Sub-Saharan Africa. Little focus has been given to the nexus between EPZ employment and the empowerment of its predominantly female workforce. This is problematic as studies on the gender composition of EPZ jobs reveal that the female labour force is higher, and due to economic rationalization and gender stereotyping, women are more likely to experience poor working conditions compared to men (Khan, 2012; Pepper 2012). Unfavourable working conditions can have important gender-related implications, such as effects on the social, economic and political capital of women, thereby contributing to the vicious cycle of poverty, feminization of poverty and gender inequalities. However, little is known about the lived experiences of female workers in EPZs in the Ghanaian and Sub-Saharan African context, where poor working conditions are commonplace. This study fills a significant research gap by employing qualitative in-depth interviews to examine the experiences of female workers in Ghana's EPZs and how they translate EPZ employment into economic empowerment.

The puzzle underlying our study is this: the empowering potential of employment is a widely acknowledged one, but how sustainable is such empowerment if the employment is characterized by precarity? In the lives of many women in the

developing world, access to employment outside the home, which EPZ work represents, is seen as having positive direct effects on their economic empowerment. However, the precarities surrounding EPZ employment have the potential to transform this employment into a turning point event in the lives of its women employees. Our central argument therefore is that, while EPZ employment may be a positive transition for women and offers them the opportunity to make achievements in the economic dimension of empowerment, its precarity is a major hindrance to the sustenance of women's achieved economic empowerment.

The paper is organized as follows: after this introductory section, we give an overview of how data was collected and analyzed for this paper. We then present discussions on the feminization of EPZ employment and how labour casualization and flexibilization have become the new forms of employment in EPZs. We highlight how these labour casualization and flexibilization of EPZ employment have the potential to transform opportunities opened for women in EPZs into a pathway to precariousness. We then provide a summary of how we conceptualize economic empowerment in this paper. We commence our discussions with an overview of Ghana's EPZs, after which we present evidence of women's achieved economic empowerment and discuss its sustainability amid increasing precarity. Using a life-course lens, we reflect on the place of EPZ employment in the lives of the women and then present a conclusion.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data underlying this study was a follow-up on a study we conducted in 2013 on working conditions in Ghana's EPZ and their implications for women's empowerment (see Obeng et al., 2015). We selected two factories – a fruit processing factory and a garment factory – that were part of our 2013 study and conducted multiple in-depth interviews with 22 women in 2017. We studied how the women translated their EPZ employment into economic empowerment and especially how the precarity of their employment mediated the sustenance of their attained economic empowerment.

We adopted a life-course perspective to analyze the processes that link the micro world of women EPZ workers, strongly woven in the relationship between the personal, family and work domains, to the macro world of institutions within which EPZ employment and its characteristics are embedded (Giele & Elder, 1998). We

employed three of the five principles of the life-course perspective in our analysis. The principle of agency acknowledges that within the constraints and opportunities in the broader socio-economic, historical and cultural context, individuals make decisions about their life-course through both long-term planning and short-term survival considerations. The principle of time and place indicates the importance of how individual life-courses are strongly influenced by the larger historical context in the economic, social and cultural dimensions as well as specific locations of individuals. The principle of linked lives emphasizes that the life-course is interdependent with others especially within micro-level contexts (Elder, 1985; Hareven, 2000).

We studied the lives of the women both retrospectively and prospectively. We paid attention to their transition into EPZ employment in their work trajectories and how it related to other trajectories, specifically their economic empowerment trajectory. We analyzed this in the context of the interplay between the evolving constraints and opportunities of employment in world-market factories and the socio-economic position of women in global manufacturing, on one hand, and the interpersonal relations of women in the households and families at the micro level, on the other hand.

EPZ Employment and Its Feminization: A Pathway to Precariousness

Over the past few decades, researchers and practitioners have recognized that women's access to and control over employment, skills and knowledge are essential for their empowerment and, unlike accumulated wealth, land and associated landed assets, it is easier to redistribute these (Keller-Herzog, 1996; Thorin, 2001). Thus, when new manufacturing production locations are associated with new employment opportunities and demand for the paid labour of women, the positive directed effects for women are lauded (Keller-Herzog, 1996:11). Many countries of the Global North have shifted to a knowledge-based economy in recent years, resulting in the relocation of many labour-intensive industries to the Global South (Chant & McIlwaine, 2009; Neumayer & De Soysa, 2011). The remarkable spread of EPZs around the world is an epitome of this geographical rationalization, and women are seen as the greatest beneficiary of this spread.

The assembly-line, agro-processing, garment and electronic manufacturing sub-sectors have been prominent in absorbing women workers into EPZs. In these sub-sectors, the relocation of production into EPZs in the Global South has been characterized by the search for cheap and especially female labour. In the early 2000s, it was estimated that the female composition of the global EPZ workforce ranged between 60 and 80 per cent (ILO, 2004) and was even more pronounced in garment manufacturing. The link between EPZ employment and women is so strong that Standing (1999) speaks of feminization of employment in EPZs.

The preference for women in labour-intensive production units in EPZs is well known (see Elson & Pearson, 1981; Standing, 1999; Chant & McIlwaine, 2009). Economically, women offer cheaper labour than men because they are willing to accept extended working hours with poor payment (Chant & McIlwaine, 2009; Khan, 2012). Thus, it is economically prudent to employ women in such units to reduce production costs. It has also been argued that women have nimble fingers and gentle hands and hence, are best suited for these jobs, which are low-skilled, repetitive, monotonous and boring (Elson & Pearson, 1981; Khan, 2012). Additionally, women's supposed docile and malleable character means that they yield to instruction and supervision more easily than men (Peedoly, 2011) and are easier to hire and fire according to external-demand conditions (Khan, 2012).

The preference for women in EPZs is undoubtedly a combination of both economic rationalization and gender stereotyping. These twin factors have rendered women the preferred labour force in EPZs, where new forms of work/employment, usually poorly paid and non-standard, are also the norm. Foreign direct investment in EPZs choose to locate in host economies to take advantage of the lower cost of production (Beesley, 2010) and thus, lower levels of salaries, sometimes below the national minimum wage, are incentives for investors. Also, host governments are noted to use lax enforcement of labour laws and, in some cases, partial or full suspension of labour laws in EPZs as incentives to investors (see LaRRI, 2000). The competition among Third World economies to attract more investments has "fuelled 'a race to the bottom' in labour standards and because women are usually concentrated at the lower segments of global supply chains, they bear the greater cost of this race" (Dejardin, 2008:3).

Not only is the new form of work in EPZs poorly paid and non-standard, it is also insecure and unprotected. World-market factories located in EPZs generally are more mobile and sensitive to factor price changes, and the cost of labour is one factor that these factories are sensitive to. To stay competitive in the global economy, many factories have increased flexibility in the production process and labour casualization is one of the methods adopted (Obayelu, 2007). This process of casualization manifests itself in the replacement of permanent workers with casual workers who do not enjoy many benefits (Rama, 2001). EPZ employment has therefore become a new form of work in which flexibilization and casualization of labour is dominant. Employees fill permanent job needs, yet their work is insecure and unprotected. The overrepresentation of women among flexible, unsafe and insecure labour at the base of the global production line means that they are more vulnerable to job cuts when global competition heats up (Wichterich, 2009; Floro et al., 2010).

Standing (1999) argues that EPZ employment continues to be feminized because, increasingly, more work in global-market factories bears the features of traditional female household jobs, which are low-skilled, precarious and unpaid or poorly paid. In his view, the feminization of employment in EPZs also explains the flexibilization of labour for both females and males – the nature of jobs is changing such that irregular conditions are thought of as synonymous with women's secondary employment (Standing, 1999). As long as flexible labour strategies continue to be adopted by both host governments and world-market factories in EPZs, more and more women will drift into precarious employment in this sector.

Hu-Dehart (2007) indicates that the global production pyramid is sustained by massive numbers of Third World women, whose persistent position at the base of the production line gives them a comparative advantage in employment. In EPZs, low salaries, coupled with the worldwide growth of flexible labour arrangements, are twin processes that expose women to forces that compromise their opportunity for well-paying and quality employment (Sheen, 2017). EPZ employment, which provides women a chance to escape the precariousness of informal employment, has therefore become a pathway that ushers them into a sector in which precariousness is seemingly formalized. Thus, not only is EPZ employment feminized, there seems to be a feminization of precariousness in the EPZ sector as well.

Working or engaging in income-generating activities is an essential trajectory in the life-course of women. Whether within the informal or formal public and private sectors, women construct and maintain the sequence of roles and expectations of a work trajectory, and Ghanaian women are no exception (see Adomako Ampofo, 2007). For many women employed in Ghana's EPZs, their employment seems to be an important development in their life. However, the place of EPZ employment in ensuring long-term stability in the work trajectory of women is not certain as this change seems unstable due to precarities.

Conceptualizing Women's Economic Empowerment

Empowerment is the process by which those who have been denied power, gain access to power to make strategic choices concerning their lives (Moser 1993; Kabeer, 1999; Alsop & Heinsohn 2005). Scholars and practitioners have identified economic autonomy/economic empowerment as a crucial dimension in this process (see Sen, 1999; Oakley, 2001; Malhotra et al., 2002). Women's economic empowerment is about them participating in, contributing to and benefiting from a growth process (Eyben et al., 2008) that enables them to succeed and advance economically (Golla et al., 2011). The process of economic empowerment is measured by access to and control over resources that serve as important building blocks that women can draw on to succeed economically (Kabeer, 1999; Oakley, 2001; Golla et al., 2011).

Women's access to and control over income and their relative contribution to the household budget are important indicators of economic empowerment (Malhotra et al., 2002; Golla et al., 2011). However, economic empowerment goes beyond immediate survival needs (Eyben et al. 2008) and short-term goals of increasing women's access to income (UNIFEM, cited in Mosedale, 2005). Economic empowerment involves the entrance into the means of making a living on a sustainable and long-term basis (UNIFEM, cited in Mosedale, 2005). Thus, sustainable incomes and livelihoods secured through access to resources such as skills and knowledge, levels of women's income and individual wealth (Golla et al., 2011) are important indicators of economic advancement for women.

In a similar vein, Lutrell et al. (2009) highlight the importance of access to capabilities and appropriate skills for women's economic advancement, while Eyben et al. (2008)

acknowledge resources such as housing, homestead land and income savings as critical assets that can make an enormous difference for attaining sustainable economic empowerment. In this paper, while acknowledging access to income and contribution to household budget as aspects of women's economic empowerment, we measure the sustenance of women's achieved economic empowerment with indicators that ensure economic advancement and a sustained means of making a living.

Ghana's Export Processing Zone: An Overview

In Ghana, the Free Zones Program has existed since an Act of Parliament, the Free Zones Act (Act 504), was passed on 31 August 1995. The Act established the Ghana Free Zones Board (GFZB) and enabled it to develop free zones for the promotion of economic development. The program commenced in September 1996 with the objective of attracting foreign direct investment, creating employment opportunities, increasing foreign exchange earnings, providing opportunities for joint ventures between foreign investors and Ghanaians, enhancing technical and managerial skills for Ghanaians and promoting the transfer of technology (GFZB, 2013; 2016). The Free Zone Program operates two schemes: the export processing zone enclave and the single factory enterprise free zone. This allows investors to either locate in the designated free zone enclaves of Tema EPZ, Ashanti Technology Park, Shama Land Bank and Sekondi EPZ or any other location of their choice in the country (GFZB, 2013; 2016). This renders the entire country one big free zone.

In December 2013, 234 enterprises were operating under free zones licence in Ghana (GFZB, 2013). This rose to 352 in 2015 (GFZB 2015). The priority sectors that the Ghana Free Zones Board identifies for investment include agro-food processing, especially for fruit, vegetables and cocoa, information and communication technology, textiles and apparel manufacturing, seafood processing, jewellery, metal fabrication (GFZB, 2013; 2016) and oil and gas (GFZB, 2016). The Free Zone Program in Ghana is completely private driven. Developing the physical infrastructure of zones is one of the priority areas for investors. Thus, the government's role is limited to the facilitation, regulation and monitoring of zone developers/investors and enterprises.

Operating in Ghana's EPZ also comes with some monetary

and non-monetary incentives. These include 100 per cent exemption from payment of direct and indirect duties and levies on all imports for production in free zones and exemption from income tax on profits for 10 years, which will not exceed 8 per cent thereafter, and withholding tax on dividends arising from free zones investments. There is no import licensing requirements and minimal customs formalities (GFZB, 2013; 2015). Additionally, investors have 100 per cent ownership of shares in free zone enterprises, no restrictions on repatriation of dividends or net profit, permission to operate foreign currency accounts in banks in Ghana, agreement to sell up to 30 per cent of products in local markets, guaranteed protection against nationalization and expropriation, and relief from various bureaucratic restrictions and other statutory requirements (GFZB, 2016).

Ghana's EPZ is touted as a success story in terms of employment creation and surplus labour absorption (see Ackah et al., 2012). Angko (2014) reports that the labour force in Ghana's EPZ increased from just 579 in 2001 to 4485 in 2003 and to 8868 in 2008, which indicates an increase of about 93.47 per cent over the eight-year period. Although the female composition of the workforce in Ghana's EPZ remains lower than the male composition, the increasing number of light manufacturing activities in the zones is leading to a steady increase in the female employment there (Obeng et al. 2015). For example, in the period between 2010 and 2014, the percentage share of women employees increased. In 2011, the sector employed 29,216 people, an increase over the 2010 figure of 25,000 employees. This was made of up of 78.07 per cent males and 21.93 per cent females. In 2012 there was a further increase to 29,511, comprising 77.60 per cent males and 22.40 per cent females. There was a further increase in 2013 to 30,111 employees, comprising 77.37 per cent males and 22.63 per cent female. In 2014 when there was a 4 per cent decrease in employment numbers from the 2013 figure, to 28,908, there was still a percentage increase in female employment evidenced by a sex composition of 71.76 per cent males and 28.24 per cent females. (GFZB 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014).

While the percentage of women employed in Ghana's EPZ is increasing, reports indicate that a significant number of them are employed as contract or casual labour. Torvikey (2018) reports that in one fruit processing factory there were 4,000 workers in June 2018

and 60 per cent of them were women. She indicated that about 70 per cent of the workforce were casual labour and the majority of them were women. In their 2016 study of the same factory, Torvikey et al. indicated that while employing more women was the pride of the company, the over-concentration of these women at the production line, which was sensitive to seasonality in raw materials, meant that they were the same workforce that was recycled as casual labour. Obeng et al.'s (2015) study also reported that a greater proportion of women employed in EPZ factories were employed as casual or contract workers, engaged in low-skilled and low-ranked activities and their salary levels were generally low.

Like some other countries in the developing world, EPZ jobs in Ghana are characterized with precarities evident in the concentration of women in lower-rank activities which are highly casualized and attract lower salaries (Obeng et al., 2015; Torvikey et al., 2016; Torvikey, 2018). Unionization is generally absent in the EPZs although there are no explicit restrictions on union activities by the Government of Ghana or the EPZ factories. In cases where a workers' union exists, strikes and lock-outs are forbidden, rendering these unions less effective in seeking redress through such means (Obeng et al., 2015). With the inherent precarities of EPZ employment, there is little or no stability for workers, and by extension women, to unite in creating a workers' union or to make unions effective where they exist. The question then is, how do women translate this employment into economic empowerment, and how does its associated precariousness mediate the sustenance of women's achieved economic empowerment?

EPZ Employment and Women's Economic Empowerment in Ghana

Many of the women employed in Ghana's EPZs are earning regular income for the first time because of their employment in the factories. During the 2013 study, it was evident that 33.2 per cent of women were unemployed while another 32.1 per cent were engaged in petty trading before EPZ employment. For another 13.6 per cent, they had moved to EPZ employment right after completing junior high school or senior high school (see Obeng et al., 2015). Thus, for these women, their work enabled them to earn regular income, a crucial resource which hitherto did not exist. This offered the women access to and control over income, which is a fundamental resource

necessary for their economic empowerment.

In our 2017 analysis of how the women translate their employment into economic empowerment, we found out that the women we interviewed constructed economic empowerment in terms of financial accessibility and independence. The narratives of women were replete with statements such as “earning regular income”, “being able to afford what I want” and “not depending on anyone for money”. In this study, we found out that many of the women were either unemployed before EPZ employment or engaged in home-based trading that provided them with meagre incomes. EPZ employment therefore was an improvement on their prior employment opportunities.

For these women, if there was any outcome at all in their economic empowerment, it was evident in their ability to earn regular income, which helped them to cater for their households financially. Although the women constructed their economic empowerment to include the ability to afford what they wanted, this want was also built into the domain of what was needed in their households. For many of the women, their income had enabled them to meet more financial needs in their families as much of their income was spent on cooking for the household, children’s education, medical bills and taking care of other dependants as well as remitting to their extended families. Some women also paid rent and utility bills with their income. Although for many Ghanaian households, utility bills, children’s education and rent are significant expenses that are the primary responsibility of the head of the family, usually a male (Brown, 1994; Opong 2005; Wrigley-Asante, 2011), many of the women were taking up such financial roles in their households even in homes where there were male heads. Increasingly, Ghanaian women are assuming more economic responsibilities in their households as a result of their access to income (Brown, 1994; Opong 2005; Wrigley-Asante, 2011). The women who took part in this study were no exception, and as noted by Wrigley-Asante (2008), with their increased contribution to the household budget, they have become important economic actors even in male-headed households.

For some of the women, taking care of aged parents and other members of the extended family had been economically empowering and had had trickle-down effects on other dimensions of empowerment. They highlighted the respect they had gained in their hometowns due to their ability to provide for their parents

and extended families. One woman indicated, “because I can send money home to my parents every month and whenever there are funerals, everybody in our family house respects me” (32-year-old woman from garment factory). Another woman who worked in a fruit processing factory indicated how a young woman in her family is expected to get married so that her husband can take care of her aged parents. However, since her marriage did not work out, the only reason she had not been considered a failure was her ability to financially provide for her aged parents with her EPZ income. As noted by Dolphyne and Ofei Aboagye (2001), in Africa, apart from very educated women and religious leaders, another group of women who are accorded much respect are those who can provide for their families financially. Thus, the women in our study commonly believed that respect emanates from their ability to provide financially for their family.

While the above sources of empowerment are crucial for women and are evidence of resource control indicators of economic empowerment, there had not been a lot of achievement beyond supporting household budgets and sending remittances, as was also evident in Obeng et al. (2015). Income savings is recognized as an essential financial asset and crucial to the accumulation of capital to start up a business or purchase properties (Oppong, 2005; Oduro et al., 2011). However, the majority of the women in this study had not been able to save much of their income. The few women who had saved part of their income were engaged in other revenue-generating activities aside from EPZ employment. One woman asserted: “I have a provision stall in front of my house and my daughter takes care of it. Usually, income from that business is what I use to run the household, so I can afford to save my EPZ income” (47-year-old woman from fruit processing factory).

Not only was income savings low among the women, similarly and perhaps resultantly, their ownership of productive assets was also low. Although the importance of access to, ownership of and control over productive assets for women’s empowerment are well-known, assets ownership in general for the Ghanaian woman is low as compared to their male counterparts. The situation was no different for women in this study. Except for a few consumer durables, the women owned no productive assets before their employment in the factories, nor had they saved enough money from their work to accumulate such assets.

The women highlighted that their salaries were generally low and as such, even if they were saving, the actual amounts saved were too small to enable them to accumulate capital for significant expenses. Thus, for the few who had purchased some assets with their EPZ income, they were only able to buy household consumer durables instead of substantial assets such as land, houses or vehicles. One woman indicated: “I will say I have not bought any property with this income, except some household appliances, some shoes and clothes for myself and my children but these are not considered properties” (31-year-old woman from fruit processing factory).

For the few women who had purchase some landed assets, it was evident that such assets were not acquired primarily with income from EPZs because such women had other income-generating activities in addition to EPZ employment. The fact that the acquisition of properties was relatively higher among women with other businesses aside from EPZ employment suggests that the generally low salaries in the EPZs is prominent among the reasons why the women were not able to accumulate savings to acquire major assets.

Akin to the inability of women to save their EPZ income for acquiring assets, they had not been able to establish additional businesses from income savings. Although owning and running one’s own business is one physical asset that is important for women’s economic empowerment, data from the study indicated that many of the women were unable to achieve this through their employment in factories. While a few of them had started businesses with EPZ income, as evident in this assertion: “I have started selling fruits and vegetables on weekends with income from this employment and it helps me to earn extra revenue instead of relying on my monthly salary alone (24-year-old woman from garment factory), they were engaged in small-scale petty trading in fruits, vegetables, recharge cards and other food items arranged on top of tables in front of their dwellings. This phenomenon is a major characteristic of businesses owned by females in Ghana (Oppong, 2005).

EPZ employment and foreign direct investment, in general, is a process that does not only involve the transfer of capital from the developed to the developing world but one that encompasses the transfer of technology, skills and new knowledge generated from exposure of workers to modern production methods (Hancock & Edirisinghe, 2012). In spite of this, many of the women were not

gaining new employable skill in EPZ factories. Women who worked in the fruit-processing factory indicated that apart from learning safety measures, which helped them to adhere to occupational health and safety, they had not gained new employable skills that can earn them income outside the factory. One woman said:

The only activity most of us here do is to stand all day cutting fruits with an ordinary knife that we all use in our kitchens. There is no skill that one can gain from this except the fact that the rate at which you may cut your fingers with the knife reduces and you also cut more fruits in a day the longer you stay here. (26-year-old woman from fruit processing factory)

At the garment factory, the primary skill women had acquired was how to use the industrial machine for sewing. Strict division of labour along the production line meant that women only learned how to sew aspects of a full cloth. Thus, it was difficult for women who had no skills in sewing before their job to gain enough sewing skills, as evident in these assertions:

I did not know how to sew before I came into this factory and I thought by the time I leave here, I will know how to sew, but I was employed to only iron and fold the sewed clothes for packaging; how then will I learn how to sew? (28-year-old woman from garment factory)

Some of the women complain that they will not be able to learn how to sew because they are not engaged in the actual sewing in this factory. Well, I have been sewing in this factory for three years but all I do is to sew the back pockets of trousers and shorts, so I have also not learned anything apart from the fact that I can handle the industrial machine. This is no skill for me to be able to sew on my own when I leave here. (24-year-old woman from garment factory)

For those of us with no sewing experience before this employment, the only way we can learn how to sew a complete cloth is when we get to work in all the units

along the production line, a situation which never happens. (32-year-old woman from garment factory)

Although it is argued that EPZ employment provides women with new employable skills, this is very much dependent on the type of activities women are engaged in at the factory as well as the production processes adopted by the various factories. Many of the women were doing jobs that are synonymous with traditional female roles in the household or engaged in little aspects of the production processes, neither of which offer employable skills.

Women speak of economic empowerment in terms of access to, and control over, income that give them the ability to provide for their households and extended families. The associated sense of self-worth that comes with earning regular income and providing for the home are ways in which the economic empowerment of women has had trickle-down effects on their interpersonal empowerment. However, generally, women have not been able to translate their employment into economic advancement as evidenced by achievements in income savings, establishing businesses, acquiring assets or acquiring employable skills. How sustainable then are women's achieved economic empowerment when their attainments in terms of economic advancement indicators are low or absent?

Sustainable Empowerment?

Financial autonomy that comes with earning regular income at all levels of a woman's life is identified as a significant source of empowerment. The sustainability of women's economic empowerment means thinking beyond immediate survival needs (Eyben et al., 2008). For the women's achieved economic empowerment to go beyond immediate survival needs, access to and control of resources such as skills and knowledge, wealth, financial savings, physical capital and businesses are essential building blocks they need to draw on to succeed. However, the precariousness of EPZ employment that is evident in lower salaries has become a hindrance to women's ability to achieve economic advancement.

Also, because women's employment in the factories has not enabled them to make these advancements, their achieved economic empowerment is threatened because the insecurity of their work is a spectre that stares them in the face daily. These women narrated:

In this factory, the moment one gets pregnant, she should be prepared to go home. They [management] say that is it difficult for pregnant women to sit for long hours sewing. So, they ask them to go home without asking whether they can work or not. ...if you want your job, don't get pregnant. (28-year-old woman from garment factory)

Four months ago, they [management] said we were too many, and they had to let some of us go home. Can you believe everyone that was pregnant then and some loud ones were all asked to go home? Three weeks later they brought new people [employed new people]. Everyone just knew that they sacked the women because they were pregnant or because they caused trouble for them [management]. (33-year-old woman from garment factory)

I am a casual worker. I work for six months, and I go home [laid off] after that. During the six months that I work, I must be of good behaviour so that I can be called again. I know many people especially those who challenge their supervisors who are not called up again after their six months contract. Some do not even end their six months contract. If they are troublesome [challenge management usually on working conditions], their contract is terminated. By the grace of God, I am often called back after about a month or two in the house. I have been here for four years now. (47-years old woman from fruit processing factory)

Not only are the women's jobs in the factories insecure because they are employed as casual labour but even within the period of one's casual contract, pregnancy and standing up to management can be used as reasons to terminate their appointment. In the event of ultimate precarity evident in job loss, as suffered by some of the women's former colleagues, EPZ employment will be translated into turning points in the lives of women, which will not only lead to a collapse of their attained economic empowerment but also have dire consequences for their newly constructed sense of self-worth, ingrained in their abilities to provide financially

for their households and families. Undeniably, the effects of the precariousness of EPZ employment can lead to women questioning their socially constructed identity (Quinlan et al., 2001). What is the place of EPZ employment in the lives of its women workers then?

The Place of EPZ Employment in the Life-Course of Women

Mary Odoom is a 43-year-old single mother of five children and a grandmother to three-year-old twin boys. Before she joined the fruit processing factory as a casual worker some five years ago, she sold oranges in front of her house, which gave her a meagre income. She indicates: “The income I get from this factory is small but at least I know that at the end of every month I will get my salary.” Her face glowed when she was narrating the importance of this income to the survival of her eight-member household. She also asserted: “The period that I am home after the end of every six months contract is always a difficult time and I have to borrow money from others to feed the family and pay back when I am called back.” As such, she is always happy when she is called back and given another six months contract. When asked what will happen if she does not get called up again after her contract ends, she said: “What will we eat then? How will I pay the school fees of the children? How can I buy clothes for them? What kind of mother will I be if I cannot provide for my children? God forbid but that will never happen. I will always be called back.”

From Mary’s story and for many other women employed in the factories, within the limitations of their prior work trajectory, if any, agency was exercised in seeing and recognizing EPZ employment as an opportunity towards which they made active decisions to seek jobs in the sector. One woman said:

I had been in the house doing nothing for a very long time. So, when this factory opened, I rushed here and spoke to the manager and she asked me to apply. I am not educated, so my options are limited in getting employment. However, in this factory, they did not bother about the fact that I was not educated. Now I am also working and earning income. (34-year-old woman from fruit processing factory)

With expressions such as: “I am finally working”, “I can also boast that I am employed”, “I am no longer idle”, “this [EPZ employment] is better than when I was home doing nothing” common in the women’s narrations, EPZ employment represents an important transition in the work trajectory of the women and has become a pathway with positive effects for their life-course in general. For the women like Mary, who were engaged in household income-generating activities with meagre incomes, their access to employment in the factories is a significant transition in their work trajectory. For those who were unemployed before EPZ employment, it is the beginning of a trajectory with associated impacts on their personal and household experiences.

As noted in the experiences of the women with regards to their financial autonomy and ability to contribute towards household expenditure, the transition from unemployment or underemployment to EPZ employment represents a substantial change in their role and status and a distinct departure from prior roles and conditions. In consonance with the principle of shared lives within the life-course which manifests firmly in the household and family domains (Elder, 1985), the transition into EPZ employment for these women represents a change whose impact is felt in interpersonal contexts within more micro-level settings.

However, at this time in global manufacturing, flexible labour standards and precariousness, the socio-economic place of women at the bottom of the global labour force and the geographic location of these women in the Third World, where the race to the bottom in labour standards is practised and foreign direct investment is highly sensitive to factor price changes, are combined processes that render EPZ employment a precarious transition with associated effects on the economic empowerment of women. In the case of Mary Odoom and many others like her, she experiences a halt in her achieved economic empowerment in the few months she spends at home before being called up again for another contract. If she does not get called up, she is likely to have a heap of loans to pay in addition to looking for money to feed her household. As well, she will certainly question her role as a mother, as ingrained in her ability to feed her children and grandchildren.

With the precarities surrounding EPZ employment, the transition of women into this employment can easily be transformed into a life event involving a relatively abrupt change in the work

trajectories of the women, which can produce severe and long-lasting effects. As indicated by Hareven (2000), when a transition (in this case transition into EPZ employment) is followed by crises or unforeseen negative consequences (in this case precariousness) and requires exceptional social adjustments, then such a change becomes a turning point in the lives of the people involved. For women EPZ workers, there is the likelihood of direct negative implications on the sustainability of their achieved economic empowerment.

Conclusion

Providing more insights into the role of larger socio-economic contexts and the timing of events and role change in the lives of individuals, the life-course perspective has offered a useful lens in analyzing how EPZ employment and its precariousness mediate the empowerment of women employed in the sector. Often, individuals are affected by more substantial social changes through the impact that such changes have on their interpersonal contexts within more micro-level settings. In the lives of women workers in EPZs, the transition into employment in these zones is a critical aspect of their work trajectory and has significant effects on their empowerment at the personal and household levels. However, the precariousness of EPZ employment renders the employment one that easily translates into a life event which requires major adjustments by women, including questioning the sustainability of the empowering effects of their EPZ employment.

In analyzing the connection between EPZ employment and women's economic empowerment, there remain unanswered questions concerning the empowering potentials of paid work in EPZs when jobs are precarious. Conceptualized as having access to and control over the means to make a living on a sustainable and long-term basis, economic empowerment of women in the developing world, which is heralded as an achievement of the remarkable spread of EPZs, is not a given. Women working in the EPZs have achieved a level of income and been able to contribute to their household budget to the extent that we conclude that they have achieved a level of economic empowerment and enhanced their sense of self-worth. However, when we examine the degree to which these gains are sustainable, we note that for many women EPZ workers, the precarious nature of their employment, evident in low salaries, labour casualization and job insecurities, means that

empowerment is often short-lived.

Within the life-course of these women, EPZ employment and its associated achieved levels of income represent an important transition in the work trajectories, whose positive effects are felt at micro domains of the household. However, it is also one that easily becomes a turning point due to its precarity and whose direct negative effects are felt within the same micro domains. This renders EPZ employment one that has as many direct positive implications as direct negative implications on the life-course of the women employed in the sector.

Endnote

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