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30–35. Similar data is available for Cambodia, China and Bangladesh (e.g. War on Want 2011, 2012; Pun et al. 2015). In short, this indicates that garment factories are by no means a point of arrival for the working poor, contrary to what a large chunk of the industrial development literature suggests.

Given the relatively young age at which they leave garment factories, what do workers do afterwards; what does their 'industrial afterlife' look like? This is a crucial question to answer. Recently, studies have suggested that workers may be able to deploy the skills acquired to engage successfully in forms of self-employment still connected to the industry, but paid at higher rates. Evidence from China, for instance, suggests that (older) women factory workers may leave the factory to become part of cooperative teams; namely groups of self-employed garment workers who can command better wages due to their tailoring abilities (see Mezzadri & Fan 2018). Other studies have also illustrated the ways in which savings accumulated during garment employment may be deployed by workers once they leave the factory to set up small businesses. In this light, garment work may be considered as not necessarily good during the employment phase (due to bad working conditions faced in factories), but it can still be considered important to acquiring skills and assets for future livelihoods.

Sandya Hewamanne (2018) highlights that this is a route available to women former garment workers in Sri Lanka, who may deploy their savings to go back to their villages and set up small business, becoming self-entrepreneurs. Rebecca Prentice (2017), who explores the post-work dynamics of former garment workers in Trinidad, instead highlights that the move from factory to self-employment may be a result of the 'disarticulation' of the garment industry (see Bair & Werner 2011) and the rise of post-Fordist production landscapes in given regions. These studies suggest the need to assess the outcomes of working experiences across time and their longer-term implications for workers' livelihoods, rather than on the basis of static comparisons (of wages across sectors, for instance). While some suggest the potential presence of a virtuous cycle between past garment employment, savings and investment in petty entrepreneurship, others highlight the move from factory work to self-employment as due to industrial distress. Meanwhile, evidence from India seems to suggest instead that, ultimately, factory and non-factory work may simply be different forms of working poverty.

### **On the sample, and on factory time as reproductive time**

An analysis of what workers do when they leave garment factories, i.e. of the 'afterlife' available to former garment workers, provides key information on the options the garment industry grants its former labourers in the longerrun. This paper presents the analysis of twenty life histories of former garment workers collected in and around Bangalore. All respondents were women and offered their own narratives of post-work dynamics. Workers were chosen randomly, and on the basis of their willingness to share their stories with us (June-September 2015). A number of them were active in the Garment Labour Union (GLU), and were approached through Cividep networks. Others were identified through snowballing. The purpose of this research exercise was twofold. On the one hand, it aims at identifying a number of key initial trends and areas of enquiry, which hopefully may serve as a useful baseline for future, more systematic work on post-work livelihoods. On the other hand, it aims at illustrating the importance of collective workers' own stories of their industrial work experience, and how it fits into their broader life-cycles. In this sense, the sample does not aim at being representative – or comprehensive.

Unsurprisingly, it was immediately clear from the research exercise that that 'industrial afterlife options' are highly gendered. Our respondents were all women, and the majority placed particular emphasis, directly or indirectly, on the significance of the timing within their life cycles of industrial work. While effectively, for many, work in the factory is only very temporary, it does always coincide with their reproductive time in terms of childbearing and childrearing. Arguably, this is the first way in which production and social reproduction times overlap. However, conceivably, it is not the only way. In fact, the interplay between production and social reproduction explains many of the trends emerging from the women's own narratives. These trends include the accumulation of debt, as well as the return, post-industrial work, to informal economic activities. They are discussed below.

### **The 'afterlife' of Bangalore garment workers: debt & informal work**

The narratives collected were rich and detailed, and talked about lives of toil, sacrifice and, in many cases, abuse. It is impossible to do justice to such narratives here, particularly given the limited scope of this

paper. In terms of livelihoods post-industrial work, three main tropes from former workers' narratives emerged as particularly relevant. These are: 1) the lack of savings and the accumulation of debt during industrial work; 2) the 'new' types of work found once they left the garment factory; and 3) workers' own descriptions of the distinct income and time demands and constraints experienced in different occupations.

The average age of the group of women interviewed was 40. They had left the industry at different points in their lives; all roughly between the age of 30 to 40. The respondents came from Bangalore and other districts in Karnataka like Chamrajnagar, Mandya, Mysore and Yeddyur. One respondent's family originally came from the Tiruvannamalai district in Tamil Nadu. All respondents continued living in and around Bangalore after leaving factories. In terms of social profile, all the women except one were Hindu (one respondent was Christian) and belonged to either general or backward

castes. One may say they come from the many 'castes of poverty' hidden within the huge general/backwards caste bloc in India<sup>1</sup>.

Recalling their childhoods and early lives, the majority of the women indicated farming or related activities as the main source of income of their family of origin. In a few cases, instead they recalled their parents engaging in various informal sector work. As expected, given their age, all the women bar one were or had been married and the majority had children. In many cases, their children had already grown up and were either finishing school or already working in various occupations. The majority of the women had been raising their children during their time in factory work, either combining labour and care work, or decentralising care activities to their family members, at times leaving their offspring behind in the village. Arrangements around the care of young children, however they were organised, involved the



**Interviews with Ex-Garment Factory Workers at their families, Peenya Industrial Area, July 2016**

1. However, in the north of India there is a high percentage of Muslim workers among factory and workshop workers. Home-based embroidery communities located in villages are generally also Muslim, with labourers belonging to low castes such as Ansari. Women engaged in needle-based handwork are, instead, generally Hindu of various castes and classes. Only recently, evidence suggests that Dalit workers may be deployed in segments of embroidery originally dominated by Muslim communities in areas like Sikandrabad (Mezzadri 2016b).

unpaid work of the female section of the household or community.

All the women had stories of incredible hardship to share; of childhoods spent in poverty and years of struggle after moving to the big city. Some stories included references to terrible episodes of physical violence. In their narratives, much emphasis was placed on many negative experiences of marriage. Several respondents recall marriage as nothing more than a burden, as it often involved absent husbands abandoning caring, financial and moral responsibilities. The stories we collected depict some husbands spending all their money on drinking; others abandoning their families never to be seen again, or engaging in acts of physical violence and abuse. Most husbands are portrayed as enduring long spells of unemployment or underemployment. Only a few respondents were still in functional marriages, where husbands earned and contributed to the social and economic reproduction of the household. Unsurprisingly, the protagonists of these stories endured less hardship, past or present. A striking feature common to all narratives the women shared is the constant presence of financial debt in their life. Generally, issues of debt are addressed far less in analyses of factory work than in analyses of informal sector activities. Many studies on India's working poor illustrate patterns of indebtedness of informal workers across rural and urban areas and discuss their linkages with old and new forms of labour bondage or neobondage (e.g. Breman 1996; Guérin et al. 2013). In the garment industry in northern India, relations of neobondage based on advance payments and debt between labour contractors and workers are endemic to the functioning of the lowest rungs of the 'sweatshop regime' (Mezzadri 2016b). On the upper rungs (that is to say in factories and larger workshops) bondage or neobondage practices are, instead, generally discussed in relation to payment retention and the lack of physical freedom garment workers may endure in dormitories. Both these issues strongly articulate with gender and are also experienced by many women garment workers in the areas where we collected the life histories analysed here. For instance, the infamous Sumangali scheme, mostly widespread in Tamil Nadu, is a case in point. Within this scheme, young women from rural areas are recruited with the promise of a lump sum payment at the end of a given employment period, during which they will endure low salaries. The lump sum hardly ever materialises, while employers, through the work of rapacious contractors, are able to massively exploit these young women workers for



**Unstable Income of Post Work Self-Employment, Worker starts up local grocery store, Karnataka 2016**

years on end, before sending them home to be replaced with a new batch of victims (Mezzadri 2017).

However, debt also structures the lives of the female garment factory workers in ways that are far more systemic, and which are linked to the inner functioning of the temporalities of the shopfloor. First, as garment wages are not sufficient for the broader reproduction of the families of garment workers during times of hardship, the women continuously access their Provident Fund (PF) contributions, which are effectively used as a sort of bank deposit (Mezzadri 2017). This also explains why the 2013 government attempt to deny access to PF until retirement triggered an immediate wave of labour unrest (Yadav 2016).

Secondly, a number of novel managerial practices on the shopfloor seem to have further internalised debt as a key functioning mechanism of labour discipline. Jean Jenkins and Paul Blyton's (2017) study of the 'comp-off' system in Bangalore factories supports this observation. Similar to a system known as 'working dead horse' in Britain, this system effectively registers the hours of time workers owe the factory against payments. Within this system, time is turned into 'workplace currency', into a debt that, unlike advance payments, is 'managerially constructed' as owed to the factory, and which is turned into a 'time-bank' (Jenkins & Blyton, 2017: 91). In this case, exploitation is not only shaped by the time already spent on the assembly line; it is also further reinforced by the commitment of future time to the factory, as a 'time-bank'. Notably, the temporalities of production and reproduction that PF access strategies and 'comp-off' practices entail are competing and conflicting. While comp-off practices push workers to extend their time in the factory as

a proper form of neobondage, the need to access PF contributions pushes workers towards industrial circulation. Ultimately, the outcome depends on the reproductive needs of workers at given periods of time. In any case, via these measures, debt always remains a constant in the lives of garment workers.

Only three of the respondents did not report having left the industry with considerable levels of debt and one of them was the only unmarried woman in the group. The other two avoided debt thanks to the wages of other household members. All the others left with an average debt level ranging from 50,000–500,000 INR (1,100– 5,550 GBP circa). None of the respondents reported leaving the industry with any savings whatsoever. Given the relatively early age at which women garment workers exit the workshop (thereby engaging in the final act of labour circulation characterising the industry) these data disprove the representation of garment work as harsh industrial work that is, however, only a 'temporary evil'. It is only temporary in the lives of garment workers, and it may entail similar debt traps to those observed in the informal economy. Moreover, in India, it does not allow women workers to save, so that their early exit cannot be compensated by the possibility of starting off small businesses. This differs from the Sri Lankan case, where Hewamanne (2018) shows that women former garment workers are able to invest their savings and turn themselves into local micro-entrepreneurs.

The issue of exit leads us to the second important trope emerging from women's narratives; namely why women exit and what they do after they leave factories. Overall, half of the respondents reported being 'expelled' from the factories for various reasons, while the other half instead argued they left of their own volition due to the incompatibility of work with their current social reproductive needs. Specifically, the women interviewed report different reasons for leaving garment work. Some stopped working after factories closed down. Others stopped following spats with managers or supervisors. Labour discipline on the shopfloor was recalled by every respondent as asphyxiating and as causing high levels of stress due to the imposition of extremely high targets. Those connected with unions and/or engaged in organizing activities, mostly linked to GLU in our sample, were made to leave. Employers would first move them to separate departments; to 'union sections', where militant workers were marginalised from the core work on assembly lines so that they would not unionise the rest of the workforce. Then, employers

moved to dismiss these workers altogether from the industrial units, by either imposing unreasonable targets or by finding supposed flaws in their work. Several women reported quitting the factories due to a number of reproductive 'crises' and needs. One left to organise her sister's wedding; another quit to look after her elderly mother. Others reported developing chronic health issues, particularly related to the long sitting hours, specifically postural and mental stress. All of them recall garment work as greatly depleting for the body, and even more so for the mind. Many still feel they suffer the long-term effects of the harsh labour intensity.

Furthermore, the women's narratives also indicate the tight inter-linkages between their experience of industrial work and their constant reproductive duties. Arguably, all the women interviewed experienced multiple exits from the industry, until the very final one. Even those working for the same factories or companies for many years have experienced several breaks in service. These were either imposed by employers or decided by workers. In the latter case, it always corresponded to periods when the woman's labour was needed within the household for given collective reproductive purposes; namely, bearing children, raising them, looking after the elderly, or dealing with a number of other family reproductive duties. These exits always entailed access to PF contributions to pay off debt so that, in terms of contributions and entitlements, women always re-joined the industry as 'eternal newcomers' (see also Mezzadri 2017; Jenkins 2013). The clock time they spent in the sweatshop was always reset, again and again, with clear implication on social contributions.

After leaving Bangalore's garment factories quite a few of the women interviewed took up domestic work, in private households, apartment blocks or offices. Others started stitching at home, others again engaged in different forms of informal labour, in some cases strongly connected to what they or their family members were doing before starting their factory job. The women's narratives reveal that many women return to or land into the informal economy once they leave the factory. Moreover, they also indicate a great continuity between their industrial past and their informal present. While roughly half the women interviewed reported to be earning less than in the garment industry, a few reported earning more. Moreover, all reported as working less now than inside garment factories. When asked about time management during their period of industrial work,



**Group Discussions with Homeworkers in Karnataka, Peenya Industrial Area, August 2016**

the women discussed their never-ending working day, and the daily grind of reproductive chores in the early hours of the morning before leaving for the industrial area for their long stint on the shopfloor. Their working days effectively started at 5.00am and only ended by 11.00pm or midnight. Those housed by relatives in Bangalore had to do domestic work for the whole host household as a way of repaying them for their hospitality. Unsurprisingly, these women soon moved out, preferring more frugal arrangements to the highly exploitative terms of their familial lodging.

Overall, women seemed to recall their period working in garment factories as characterised by higher degrees of 'time poverty' and by exhausting overwork. For half of the respondents there seemed to be a trade-off between time-poverty and income-poverty (see Vickery 1977. On gendered poverty and time use, see also Warren 2003 and Johnston et al. 2018). For the other half, however, the two simply seemed to represent two sides of the same coin during their period of employment in the factory. For most, the main regret of leaving the factory had to do with lost friendships and the sense of comradeship that came with sharing a place in front of a stitching machine,

sitting side by side with so many other co-workers. In this process of loss, they all seemed to have regained some degree of control over their reproductive time; a process which, however, came at the cost of more regular income. In no way did factory work emerge from women's narratives as a point of arrival, as the best job they could aspire to, or as a long-term way out of working poverty. It was a moment in their lives when they were very young, a moment when coping with the greatly taxing rhythms of both factory and reproductive work combined could guarantee a few years of more-or-less predictable income.

### **Conclusions**

The story told in this paper, based on the narratives of women former garment workers in Bangalore, suggests that factory labour is a temporary moment in the lives of the labouring poor. Field findings also suggest that women perform this type of labour during the period where their reproductive duties – individual as well as collective – are very heavy. On the one hand, this stretches labour intensity to unbearable levels. This extended period of factory and reproductive overwork combined has implications for

exhausting women's bodies. They will exit the factories young, either retrenched by employers (particularly those engaged in union work) or simply consumed by the extenuating rhythms of the factory. Unfortunately, in this process of exit they often lose their friendships, their collective base, and also access to a more regular income. On the other hand, the combined productive and reproductive burden women experience during their time in the factory also devalues their paid work experience. Due to their multiple exits from the factory, mostly caused by reproductive duties, women remain eternal newcomers to the garment sector, which in any case already has a strong historical preference for young recruits. In short, women's engagement in reproductive activities has a direct impact on the way and degree to which they are exploited on the shopfloor. This is a key point, which informs broader debates on social reproduction (e.g. Mies 1986; Federici 2004; Bhattacharya 2017). Women do not leave the factory with savings, but rather with debt. In fact, the evidence suggests that there are a variety of ways in which factory workers accumulate and manage debt during their time in the factory. This is a serious issue for their future livelihoods, as hardly any of them will access a stable income once they have left the factory. The majority will slide back into informal jobs like domestic work, whose income is more irregular and precarious. In exiting the factory, women experience a trade-off between 'timebased' and 'income-based' poverty. Their post-factory work in informal jobs may be less taxing, and women may regain some degree of control over their reproductive and/or non-work time. By the time they leave they are also older and with lighter reproductive burdens. But they are also frailer, given the years of overwork spent in the factory. Overall, given its exhausting characteristics, its articulation with a heavy reproductive burden, and its dynamic links with informal work, it is difficult to represent factory work as anything other than one of the forms of working poverty women workers experience during their lifetimes. In its current forms, conditions and practices, the 'cheap labour model' cannot be beneficial for the labouring poor. While there is a pressing need to continue fighting for better wages and working conditions inside garment factories, given the experience of toil, overwork and exhaustion reported by women workers, there is also a need to consider the post-industrial work scenarios women will find themselves in once they leave the factory gates. This is a time when they will step into 'new old' forms of poverty and informal livelihoods without savings, or strong safety nets, and invariably bearing a burden of debt and physical exhaustion.





## Notes from the Field: On Productive and Reproductive Labour of Garment Workers

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The challenges for themes of social reproduction are exacerbated when it comes into contact with the feminised factory spaces, wherein the forces of production comprise wholly of women workers. In our narrative of female garment worker there is a collapse of the gendered division of labour, constructed through the valuable masculine production of the wage labour market and the invisible feminine reproduction within the confines of the domestic spaces. Here, women become the main protagonist of both productive and reproductive spheres, they continue the unwaged reproductive labour of giving birth, raising children while simultaneously entering the symbolic masculine spaces of factory work. In

India, women entering the formal labour market has not in any manner diminished the patriarchal insistence upon the gendered division of labour in the household. Entering the global labour market, does not ameliorate any of the domestic and reproductive demands thrust upon women by such patriarchal systems. Women give birth (obviously), they also feed and raise the children, attend to all household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, washing and taking care of the elderly parents and in-laws, alongside their daily eight-hours shift at the garment factories. During their prime childbearing years women in the industry undergo extreme duress both of the productive (factory work) and reproductive (domestic) kind and

as a result of these demands and exhaustions their lives are undeniably cut short.

Women workers in their 40's who have been expelled from the garment factories, are replaced by an ever-growing surplus of younger and cheaper workforces. As many postcolonial theorists have pointed out, in order to understand gender, labour and reproduction in India, it is fundamental to understand the context of work as very different from traditional Western societies. In majority of Indian society, women continue to undertake the social role of being exclusively wives and mothers. Therefore, working outside the house in the public spaces can bring about a significant disjunction of an firmly established status-quo. In many ways, global capitalism has been able to disrupt and break this set of engendered social relations. However, the rupture is not complete but rather an in-between-ness that borrows traits from both an aggressive labour-scouring neocolonial capitalism and an extremely conservative patriarchal order of the third world. The two narratives — one about the empowerment of women through waged work in factories and the other about the double burden of work in the household and the factories, co-exists and subsists.

The garment factories in Karnataka remain one of the few industrial sectors that recruit women in large numbers, yet most workers are often incorporated into the labour market through decisions made on their behalf by parents or husbands. In the interviews, majority of them explained that they were recruited into garment work through negotiations between male members of their family and agents, which completely exclude them. In alternate scenarios, they enter garment work because of economic difficulties in marriage, in the inability or unwillingness of their husbands to earn a living for the family, which forces them to work outside the house. Over the years of employment in the garments industry, the women, as workers achieve a certain political consciousness. Even if they do not explicitly join trade unions, a sense of community develops as a result of interacting with the workers community; especially through their encounters with unionised garment workers collectives and the dominating presence of women-led trade unions like Garment Labour Union (GLU) and Garment and Textile Workers Union (GATWU). The fostered sense of community outside the domestic spaces also impacts their voices within the household, which is made stronger because of their financial contribution to the family income.

The project of capitalism is deeply invested in depicting the female factory worker as an allegory for the emancipation of third world women from patriarchal oppression, it must be emphasised that the development of political consciousness among workers regarding their labour and reproductive rights does not occur as a consequence of factory work, but as collateral from extreme pressures and work-related stress induced by the employers, managements and the dehumanising forces of global supply chains. Capitalism continually appropriates the emancipatory aspects of collective factory work for women, while it actively hinders any emergence of collectives among workers. This is because any form of collectivity poses a threat of unionisation among workers, which time and again have impacted production targets, profits and resulted in reduction of workers performance outputs.

Another consequence of garment workers accumulating experience is that the older workers are more prone to complaining about poor working conditions, forms of malpractices, and are more likely to demand improvements. Hence, many years of experience is not an advantage for women in the garment industry, as they are made obsolete for being more aware of their rights. The professionally productive years in the garment industry for women are very short. The management prefers young and inexperienced workers who are more pliant and easier to coerce, in order to achieve unrealistic production targets. Older workers are often bullied, mistreated and forced to quit or relocate to factories located in the outskirts. Unless they are extremely resilient most of them end up resigning from factories before they reach the age of 40. Here, the workforce is replaced faster than the machinery and what accelerates this process is an ever-growing pool of younger migrant worker from rural India, desperate to enter the garment industry, and for far less than the minimum wages. Interviewing women who have retired from the garment industry but maintained ties with the unions helped us understand that factory employers are wary of workers who think for themselves or ask questions. Women who claim their rights as workers; those that join garment unions or talk about unionising; those that ask for facilities such as crèches, or paid maternity leaves, reductions in production targets, monitoring of sexual harassment and misconducts of the supervisor, are targeted as problematic workers. They are often forced to resign voluntarily or directly fired. Workers who are unionized and talk to other workers about unions and worker rights are perceived as particularly

dangerous. They are either strategically isolated from other workers, persecuted till they resign— at times they are even paid wages by factory owners and corporate brands to stay away from the factories.

Most workers enter and leave the factories during their reproductive years, it means that the politics of reproduction and reproductive rights of the workers, is a crucial issue for the garment industry. In India, women are expected to be reproductive at a certain age and take over domestic responsibilities within the household. This overlap of reproductive years and years of factory work implies that the female factory worker reaches high levels of attrition and exhaustion in this period of her life. The combined years of reproductive and productive labour leads to an accumulation of 'events' signifying a heavily exploited labour force, this is followed by a sudden slowdown and rejection from both professional and domestic spaces. While the advance in reproductive technologies such as birth control might have allowed women to join the workforce in large numbers, technology has not developed enough to completely replace women's reproductive capacity. However, it has advanced enough to utilise women in commercial reproduction— wombs-on-hire, surrogate wombs, and egg donations from the most precarious women workers in the developing world. Among the workers interviewed it was a common practice among certain groups of single/divorced workers to earn an additional income through egg-donations and surrogacy practices.

For workers, the years after leaving the factory are vastly different from their former lives. Workers who are used to stable monthly wages see their income become irregular and insufficient. They begin independent small-scale businesses as flower-sellers, local seamstresses or engage in paid domestic work. The sense of belonging to a community of workers erodes slowly. The remnants of a life after work in the garment factories is an enormous accumulation of fatigue and exploitation and a melancholic realisation of the involuntary emancipatory effects derived from the collectivities of feminised factory work.

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