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Untangling multiple inequalities: intersectionality, work and globalisation

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Abstract

This article begins by outlining the position of women and work in the Global South, highlighting the precarity of their labour market participation. It then argues that the experiences of these women are often examined within a single dimensional analytical framework and are therefore invisible in the intersectional literature, which tends to take a Western centric approach. The paper also contends that existing research fails to consider the particular domestic and cultural circumstances of the women so examined, and how their location in these spaces impacts on their experiences of work. The article argues for an examination of women and work in the Global South that takes an intersectional approach that recognises the complexity of their experiences as generated by multi-categorical and multilevel strands of inequality. It then goes on to introduce the contributions to this special issue, which explore inequality through an intersectional lens.

Introduction

It has been over ten years since Oxfam reported on the dire experiences of women working in the global garment and food production value chains in the global north and south, covering several countries in Africa, South-East Asia and Latin America, as well as the UK and the USA (Oxfam, 2004). In the main the report argued that big retail companies based in the West had benefited from the globalisation of production, facilitated by reduced costs of overseas production, at the direct expense of mainly women workers. Internet and other technologies that facilitate better communication across supply flows enhance much of this

production, enabling the use of just-in-time techniques and the insistence on short lead times at the expense of the producers. These production chains have also extended to consumer goods such as mobile phones and electronic devices.

The negative effects of the downward pressure on costs is borne by workers and reflected in precarious employment characterized by low wages, short-term or no contracts, long working hours, excessive overtime, no paid leave, no social security and health and safety risks, to name a few. Any threats of an increase in costs, such as attempts to increase wages, or regularize/regulate work in these sectors sees the multinational companies pack up their factories and move 'in search of new low-cost, competitive locations, knowing they will find workers wherever they go' (Oxfam, 2004: 49). The exploitation of women under these circumstances also extends to their domestic conditions, as many of them have to live away from home in non-hygienic poor accommodation and little access to good nutrition and safe transport.

However, there is no doubt that these global production chains have provided opportunities for low-income women and their families by enabling, at least, greater monetary security, which can lead to the increased status of women. Indeed, there has been a huge interest in the debate about the paradox of women's working experiences in newly industrializing countries. Some authors have focused on the advantages and argued, for example, that at the intersection of gender and education, some women enjoy higher status than others (Hancock 2008). Other studies, focusing on gender and power have highlighted the fact that such work simply reinforces and reasserts the patriarchal structures of power by ensuring that women (and not men) occupy spaces in these vulnerable sectors (Jayaweera, 2002, Piper, 2003). Much of the debate, however, fails to address the experiences of women in these kinds of work, either working for themselves, or for locally based companies *within* their own countries who produce both for the export and local market, i.e. women in the global value chain who do not work for multinational companies.

Clearly, the environment in which employment occurs is made up of a variety of stakeholder institutions at the macro, meso and micro levels including – political parties; government regulations and policies; legal frameworks and their enforcement; rules (formal and

informal) governing business and employment; markets, infrastructure, and services; social structures (including families); availability of education and training; and technological advances. Many of the countries who host these multinationals have benefitted from the global value chains and countries like Sri Lanka, and until recently, China, have economies that rely quite heavily on such production. Indeed many governments have actively sought and welcomed these neoliberal activities through the creation of Export Processing Zones (EPZs) and liberal tax regimes, while overlooking some of the more negative consequences.

The other dimension of the discussion is the experiences of the intersection between work and home for such women. In the Global South, a debate is being had about the relationship between an appreciation of women's household labour and economic justice. This is particularly true given that women's household labour in these parts of the world is inextricably linked with interdependent relationships with multilayered and multifaceted hierarchical family structures and patriarchal communities (Faiz, 2015). It is also deeply engrained in cultural and social dynamics of these communities. For example, care work in the home is linked to the well being of children and the elderly, and women, sometimes under circumstances of coercion and abuse, do most of this work, thereby reinforcing gendered hierarchies and limiting women's job opportunities. In cases where these women are privileged enough to delegate this unpaid work to others, it is usually to women from poorer communities, who do it for extremely low wages.

It is clear that the inequalities and precarious conditions faced by women at work in these sectors reflect an intersection of gender, class, race, marginalization, power and exploitation. The exploration of the drivers of inequality in the workplace now holds a prominent position within Western business and management literature. For decades, feminist researchers, activists and other social scientists have fought for workplace gender inequality to be acknowledged and recognised. There is a proliferation of arguments calling for the removal of the patriarchal societal and organisational structures, which promote and maintain male domination of organisational hierarchies. Studies abound which attempt to provide an understanding of inequality in the workplace, however, frequently these take a 'western' perspective. It is also important to recognise that the drivers of inequality are sometimes perceived from a static viewpoint, often not recognising that inequality is a

dynamic phenomenon. Indeed, gender is not the only basis of inequality in the lives of many women, especially those in the Global South. In this special issue we attempt to move away from the 'western-centric' approach and consider inequality through the eyes of women in less developed countries. In doing this, we draw upon an intersectional analytical approach which allows for an exploration of multiple inequalities which operate simultaneously.

Tatli and Özbilgin view 'the notion of intersectionality' as offering 'new and imaginative ways of researching diversity' as it 'denotes the interplay between strands of difference such as gender, ethnicity and class' (2012: 181). Feminists and activists have employed the paradigm of intersectionality to theorise the relationships of intersections and interactions between different *entangled* social relationships (class, gender, race, age, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.) of privilege and marginalisation (Acker, 2012). Intersectional analysis of gender has been popularised by feminist theorists in different fields of knowledge, providing a useful analytical framework that has a pluralistic and inclusive character (Garry, 2011).

This approach has grown out of post-modern feminist thought, postcolonial studies, Third World feminisms (Mohanty, 1986, 2003a, 2003b) and Black feminist studies (Hill, 1990, 2005; Crenshaw, 1991) and has played an important role in feminist theory in the last three decades. It has contributed to the explanation of the factors of women's oppression in social life by considering the intersection of different and multiple systems of inequality. This is particularly relevant when one considers exploited workers in developing countries. As Carasathis argues, 'oppression is not a singular process or a binary political relation, but is better understood as constituted by multiple converging, interwoven systems' (Carasathis, 2014: 304).

Certainly, intersectionality offers a methodological framework to explore multiple intersections and dimensions of diverse experiences of privilege and subordination. Derived from the seminal writings of the American feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991) where the focus was on race and gender, there has been a shift to now include other streams of intersectionality such as 'social marginalisation' with social class being 'embraced in the theoretical reflections and analysis' (Knudsen, 2005: 62).

Underlying the argument of intersectionality is that no one category explains the operation of social institutions or actors. As Hancock argues, 'the intersectionality approach... not only recognizes the political significance of one or another category...but it also sees more than one category's explanatory power in examining...institutions or...actors' (Hancock 2007: 67). It does not just consider gender as a basis of understanding women's inequalities because gender is not an isolated form of social marginalisation. As McCall (2005) suggests, one particular form of inequality cannot simply represent the others. Thus in her approach, and in this special issue, gender, social class and other relationships are understood as reciprocal processes. This is consistent with Pollert's (1998) proposal that class and gender are mutually constituting but representing two conceptually different types of irreducible social relationships. This means that there are no un-gendered class relations and no gender without class dimensions (Gottfried, 1998: 453). In this way, Gottfried (1998) agrees with Pollert (1996) that 'a theory of practice can open a space for analysis of both gender and class dynamics [...] We should document lived experience as means of identifying the complex mediations of gender and class' (Gottfried, 1998: 455). Both Pollert and Gottfried also argue that gender and class are historical relationships. Therefore intersectional analysis highlights that our life experiences take place in several and multifaceted spheres and, we argue in this issue, are historically and culturally contextualized in their intersections of time, place and context.

The notion of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005) therefore helps to conceptualise the structured systems of inequality (gender, social class, race, marginalization, power and precarity) in the complex dynamics of Global South women workers' experiences. Used as a heuristic device, an intersectional analysis enables a better understanding of the social structures and processes that generate and sustain unequal opportunities for individuals within the workplace.

The collection of papers in this volume highlights the importance of intersectional analysis to understanding the multiple strands of inequality faced by workers across the globe. In particular they provide insight into the multiple inequalities faced by working women in areas such as Brazil, China, Ghana and Haiti. They also demonstrate the complexity of intersectional analysis. Drawing mostly upon empirical data from less developed countries,

the papers help to readdress both the 'western-centric' approach and lack of empirical research on Global South workers within the intersectional debate. A strong theme running through the papers is the culture of patriarchal dominance faced by women both in society as a whole and in the workplace. In these papers we see how intersectional analysis needs to be viewed within a dynamic framework and how contextual setting is important for an understanding of social inequality and the precarity of work.

In the first paper, Jin Cao explores the impact of a move towards a more liberalised market economy where flexible working practices have emerged. The paper discusses how educated, skilled women in China have their jobs devalued within a highly feminised occupation (i.e. one dominated by female workers), which has become characterised by precarious working conditions. Cao's paper identifies how women are faced with patriarchal power relations within the home and the workplace, the hierarchy of the latter being male dominated. Due to the prevailing labour market conditions in which jobs are scarce, the women are trapped in situations of relatively low wages (compared to the males) but with their paid work encroaching on their family lives. They are 'expected' to work as home makers whilst their salaries are an important contribution to the family income. In this paper, we see the intersection of patriarchal structures and power relations with a 'feminised' occupation that has become 'proletarianised' by economic and market conditions.

Caroline Hossein takes a black feminist approach when she gives voice to Haiti's madan saras and considers the issues faced by them in their working and everyday lives. In her paper, Hossein explores the gender-based violence that these women experience in trying to create and maintain a living that will support them and their families and we again see precarious labour market conditions for marginalised workers. Working in the informal labour market is a risk which the madan saras are prepared to endure in order to earn an income which provides them with a little relief from economic dependence on their male partners. This paper demonstrates the dynamic intersection of the historical patriarchal context of economic and political male domination in Haiti, with gender and class inequality. For the madan saras social inequality, marginalisation and exclusion occurs as a result of

their low status within society as a whole; this despite the recognition of their importance to maintaining local trading economies.

Sonia Dias and Ana Carolina Ogando provide us with a very interesting insight into the lives of waste pickers in Brazil. Bringing the empirical data to the fore, Dias and Ogando draw upon a feminist participatory action research project in which they worked with groups of women in order to help the women to become aware of the gender issues they faced. The women recognised that they were subjected to multiple and intersecting inequalities based upon their class, gender and race; the authors point out that overarching these intersectional strands was a culture that undermines the value of the waste pickers work which is viewed as 'dirty' and 'menial'. In this paper, the authors highlight how the provision of a 'space' (i.e. workshops) allowed the women to come together and collectively voice their concerns. In this way they became less marginalised and understood that their inequalities were a shared phenomenon. As a result, the women have a certain sense of 'empowerment'. As women question their own views on sexuality, sexual behaviour and dress codes, we see evidence of women recognising their own negative stereotypical views towards other marginalised women, for example, lesbian women.

The following paper continues the theme of 'empowerment' whilst returning again to precariousness of work, this time in Export Processing Zones (EPZ) in Ghana. These zones are being created across the developing world and are sometimes viewed as areas that 'open up' opportunities for women workers. Faustina Adomaa Obeng, Charlotte Wrigley-Asante and Joseph Kofi Teye explore the intersectional aspects of gender, socio-economic positioning in the labour market and the precarious nature of work within this peripheral labour force. Obeng and colleagues highlight how, as in many of these EPZs, much of the work on offer is unskilled and poorly remunerated, however, they also suggest that at the intersection of gender and precarious work women in Ghana are relatively better off than counterparts in other countries as they have better working hours and terms and conditions. This provides them with a certain amount of autonomy. Nonetheless, as these authors identify, despite the work in general being empowering for the women in some ways, for example, giving them some social and financial autonomy within the home and society in general, the nature of the employment and the precariousness of their working

position ultimately prohibits them from either collective or individual resistance to exploitation. Again, a patriarchal society and culture dominated the working lives of the women and therefore within this environment it is not possible for them to achieve complete economic autonomy or personal empowerment.

The final paper takes us back to the neoliberalisation of employment and again looks at the precariousness of work, especially for women working in the 'feminised' occupation of care work. In her paper, Christiane Bomert provides a theoretical contribution to the discussion of intersectionality. She argues that although intersectionality is a relevant and important methodological aide to understanding inequalities in the workplace, linking this concept with other approaches to analysing inequality can strengthen our understanding. Bomert suggests that by combining intersectionality with other theoretical perspectives, for example the Foucauldian concept of Governmentality, researchers can explore social complexities, such as the role of governmental power and control and subjectification of (female) workers. Bomert calls particularly for this understanding of the wider political and social contexts when undertaking research that focuses upon the global division of labour.

In conclusion, it is clear that an intersectional analytical approach helps us to understand the complexities of women's waged work in the Global South. These complexities are generated and sustained by particular interactions between multi-level institutional factors (both work and domestic related), usually outside of the women's control. One-dimensional approaches provide a partial understanding of the realities of precarious work in these particular contexts. Clearly multiple strands of work, culture, community and societal structures combine to generate inequalities and therefore must be considered as interlocking and not mutually exclusive.

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