

Globalization and women's textile work: a comparative perspective

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In this paper, I will stage a rather wide-ranging historical overview of changes in women's work in the textile industry over a long period of time, in many parts of the world. Textile production has been highly labour-intensive throughout history. Even after machines were introduced since the late eighteenth century, textile producers have always been in need for cheap, flexible labour. In most places and times, it was women – and to a lesser extent children – who provided this labour. An important strategy in the search for cheap labour was the relocation of textile production. Although the latest shift, with mass cotton textile production moving from industrial sites in “the Global North” to “the Global South” is relatively well-known, earlier shifts have also occurred. In this paper, I aim to identify the most important drivers of these shifts, as well as their consequences for women workers. I will look at the process of globalization, but also at the availability, or the absence, of alternative work opportunities for women to explain these changes.

Prologue: Women and global textile production before globalization

The involvement of women in textile production is age-old. Although we do not know when spinning and weaving emerged exactly, archeological findings point out that around 4,000 BCE, already relatively advanced fabrics were produced, with the use of primitive tools such as the distaff and spindle for spinning, and the standing loom for weaving.

Most of the textile fabrics that were produced, from raw materials such as animal hairs, or plants such as flax or, in warmer climates, cotton, were for own use. Archeologists and historians agree that it was predominantly women who spun and wove, being part of their many domestic duties. In hunter and gatherer societies, people had mostly covered their bodies with animal hides, but with the emergence of sedentary arable agriculture, new ways of clothing emerged. In between their work in the fields, women spun thread while walking, and weaving could be done intermittently between the preparation of food or tending to small children.

From ancient Greece to precolonial Indonesia, women were symbolically depicted as spinners of the “thread of life”. In many historical contexts, especially in subsistence economies, the production of food, beverage and textiles for home use was part of women's daily duties. They produced clothing and textiles for their own household. This would start to change when population density increased, and opportunities for market exchange and labour specialization emerged.

Act 1: The rise of markets and 'the first age of globalization'

Textiles were one of the first products to be exchanged on markets. At the time of the Roman Empire, for instance, there was a lively long-distance textile trade with the Indian subcontinent and China. Because transport was expensive and risky, mostly luxury goods, such as high-quality cottons and silk were exchanged, which could still amount to considerable profits because of their high sale value.

With the emergence of cities and rise of local markets in the High Middle Ages, increasing specialization in more common textiles for daily use also occurred. Within the city walls, specialized weavers and dyers of cloth produced cloth for sale. Interestingly, in many regions of the world this specialization was followed by a gender-specific labour division with women spinning and men weaving. Male textile producers often organized themselves in guilds or other professional associations, from which women were usually excluded. Although the occurrence of textile guilds was most prominent in the highly urbanized regions in Europe, guildlike organizations also emerged in the Ottoman Empire, China and Japan.

The division of labour with men weaving and women spinning was not everywhere as strict, though. In large parts of China and in Indonesia, for example, both spinning and weaving remained predominantly women's work. In India, on the other hand, master weavers were generally men and women spun. These differences in the sexual division of work can be explained from the fact that in the rural areas of China and the Indonesian archipelago, weaving remained a mostly temporary and seasonal activity next to agricultural work. Women produced in principle for the household and only sold surpluses of cloth, whereas in India and in European cities, textile production was instead much more market-oriented.

Both in pre-industrial Europe and India, women did learn the craft of weaving, as daughters and wives, but this was always in an informal way. Women were usually not admitted to the formal training of the guilds, and they were hardly ever recognized as independent weavers in professional organizations. Exceptions were weavers' widows, who, in many European guilds were allowed to join as masters after their husbands had deceased.

Apart from the labour division according to gender, there was also an increasing global division of labour in textile production in the pre-industrial era. Asian producers mainly made cotton and silk, which in the 'first era of globalization' from about circa 1500, they increasingly sold on the world market. European trading companies imported more and more cotton from China and India, and the fabrics became increasingly popular all over Europe. In Europe itself, weavers produced mainly woolen and linen for export production. In the Americas cotton and woolen cloth was made, but generally not for the world market. In Africa people clothed themselves with hides, bark cloth or cotton fabrics, but cotton cloth was also only produced here for local markets, or imported from Asia via the Indian Ocean.

As mentioned, handmade textile production is highly labour intensive. Depending on the quality of the fabric, it takes four to eight hand spinners to provide one weaver with sufficient yarn. Already since the Middle Ages, independent weavers and textile merchants found inventive ways to keep labour costs down. Urban weavers employed spinners in the

countryside, where nominal wage rates were considerably lower. These rural workers, spun in the evenings and winters as a supplement to agricultural work, were usually women and children, and they could be found throughout the world.

In the seventeenth century Dutch Republic, Tilburg spinners spun wool for weavers in Leiden. Eighteenth-century women in the Chinese countryside of Shaanxi province spun cotton for the city of Xi'an. The same happened in early twentieth-century Egypt, where rural spinners spun for weavers in Cairo, but also for smaller provincial towns. Over time, the distances that yarn travelled, became larger. Thus, eighteenth-century Holland towns imported linen thread from Silesia. Women's wages were so much lower there that they could compensate for the higher transport costs. At the same time, cheap cotton yarn spun by women throughout the Ottoman Empire was transported to the most important industrial cities such as Istanbul and Cairo.

Act 2: Industrialization, relocation and gender in the long nineteenth century

World trade expanded, and Asian cotton cloth was increasingly wanted by consumers – not only in Europe, but also in Africa and North America. In the early eighteenth century, British woolen cloth producers called for protective measures to ban the import of cotton textiles from India, because according to them, it ruined the domestic woolen textile industry. However, the desire for cotton was insatiable. Therefore, other ways to be competitive with Asia on the world market were sought, and the solution was found in technology to cut down labour costs. New spinning and weaving machines were invented and introduced, leading to industrialization spreading all over the West, and eventually Japan, in the nineteenth century. Whereas China and India for centuries had been the global hubs of cotton textile production, this shifted to the West in the nineteenth century.

As a result of mechanization, thousands of female hand spinners lost their employment. Although some of them found work in the new factories, these were generally unmarried, young women. Despite the low wages they received, for these girls, a job in the factory was often more attractive than being an even worse-paid domestic servant in the household of others, which was the most common alternative to factory work. However, with the new machines, new gender-specific divisions of labour emerged in the factories, and more and more men moved into spinning. Because weaving mechanized several decades later, some married women now started working on the handlooms in their homes, but hand weaving was not enough to provide for all of the former spinners who were now unemployed. Consequently, an important source of additional income was lost for many rural and urban households in Western Europe.

With the rise of factories, both feminization and masculinization of the labour force took place. The early stages of industrialization are usually associated with women's and children's work. It was believed that with their nimble fingers, and their more docile attitude than men, they represented the perfect factory labour force. We can see this importance of cheap, supposedly submissive, labour not only in the UK, continental Europe and the United States, but also in the countries that industrialized later, such as Japan and China. India,

however, was markedly different. Here, mostly **men** migrated from rural areas to work in urban textile factories. There, jobs that had previously been done by women were more prone to mechanization than men's jobs.

Despite these early attempts at industrialization in the Asian colonies, world dominance in textile production decisively shifted to the West. The colonial markets in India and Indonesia were flooded by Western factory textiles. In turn, these regions more and more focused on the cultivation of tropical export commodities such as coffee, sugar, and tobacco for the European and American markets. Under the influence of globalization and the revolutions in long-distance transport, the divide between the rich industrialized countries and the poor countries focusing increasingly on agriculture, thus widened. Many economic historians have referred to this process as the "de-industrialization of the global periphery".

Nevertheless, recent research has shown that in many countries in the global south, despite the existing colonial policies and the advantages of focusing on tropical export products, there was also a great deal of resilience of local textile production, for much longer than previously thought. Although the factory imports indeed led to a loss of hand spinning in colonial Java, for instance, local hand weaving and the dyeing of white cloth was indeed *stimulated* by the imports of factory-made yarns and undyed cotton cloth from the West. Actually, Javanese women **took advantage** of the fact that the factory yarn was more even, and that they had to spend less time on labour-intensive and less profitable hand spinning. Instead, they took up hand weaving, as there was a growing internal market for the handwoven fabrics from Java. In China, historians have discovered similar patterns, with young women in the early 20th century losing work as hand spinners, but taking up hand weaving in the context of growing monetization and demand for cloth in the countryside. A similar expansion of hand weaving with the rise of imports of yarns from Western Europe we see in India, although hand weaving here was a much more urban, full-time and male-dominated phenomenon.

So, although in sum the global periphery saw its textile industries decline, the role of women in handloom weaving and cloth dyeing until the first decades of the twentieth century can hardly be underestimated. Indigenous fabrics were able to cater to niche markets at least until the First World War, when the Japanese factories quickly took over an important share of the world market for textiles.

Act 3: The final blow to handicraft production in the Global South

Following the philosophy of colonialism, most imperial powers were reluctant to industrialize their overseas territories, which they regarded in the first place as producers of the increasingly wanted tropical commodities, and as markets for their industrial goods, including textiles. Nevertheless, the British already made serious attempts at industrialization of the Indian subcontinent from the mid-1800s onwards. As mentioned before, the workers that were drawn to the first urban textile centers such as Bombay and Ahmedabad, were predominantly male migrants from the countryside. Women usually stayed behind to do rural work, and because their migration was heavily restricted within

the patriarchal society they lived in. As opposed to what happened in late-nineteenth century early industrializing China and Japan, the modern textile industry thus led to a *masculinization* of production in the case of British India.

In Japan, on the other hand, the main labour force initially consisted of low-paid unmarried girls, who were sent away from the countryside by their parents to work for a few years in the factories. They generally received low wages and slept in dormitories, which further drove down their payment, as it was seen as compensation in kind. The combination of capital investments in the factories and the very cheap female labour employed there, was key to the competitiveness of Japanese textiles in the world market. Particularly during the First World War, when the capacity of the industries in Europe and the US was seriously disturbed, Japan managed to take over. In the five year period between 1914 and 1919, the total value of Japanese exports almost tripled – from a little over 500 million Yens to 1.5 billion Yens. Jumping into the temporary vacuum the Great War left in the world market for textiles, Japan exported its cheap cotton cloth to markets all over Asia, as well as East Africa. Even the Belgians in the Congo were concerned about the impressive rise of imports of Japanese cotton fabrics in their colony. After the war, Japan managed to hold on to its share in the world market, and especially in the 1930s they became of great concern to the Western powers.

In colonial Indonesia, for instance, where the Dutch had always been very reluctant to invest in mechanized cotton production, the 1930s constituted a clear break. As the Japanese Yen was already devaluated in 1931, whereas the Dutch guilder remained linked to the Gold Standard until 1936, the relative price of Japanese textiles became even lower than before. At first, the Dutch tried to prevent the flooding of the Indonesian market with cotton cloth from Japan by import tariffs, but after a few years they decided to introduce textile factories in the colony itself, as a form of import substitution. Like in India, the emergence of mechanized industry also radically changed the gender division of labour in textile production in Indonesia. Whereas handloom weaving had traditionally almost entirely been the domain of women, the factories did draw male labourers on a large scale. Although as opposed to India, the Javanese factories did employ women as wage workers, they formed a minority, as around 75% of the labour force in textile factories were Indonesian men.

As had happened in Europe decades before, the massive imports by Japan as well as the set-up of indigenous textile factories also resulted in many married women in large parts of Asia losing their side employment in textile industries. As there were hardly any alternative opportunities for women outside subsistence agriculture, it is highly likely that this did not improve their position in society compared to men.

Act 4: Postwar recovery and decline of Western industries

As a result of the outcome of the Second World War, Japanese industrial competition was ruled out for a while. This meant that the Western textile industries were in principle able to regain their share in the world market. After overcoming the first problems of shortages in raw materials and lowered consumer demand, it appeared that the textile industries in

Western Europe recovered in the early 1950s. In the immediate postwar era, it was even difficult to find enough workers, because the textile factories in many countries were notorious for their relatively bad working conditions and low payment, so working-class people preferred jobs in other industries. On top of that, girls in the West increasingly followed more years of education, which meant that they were less available to work in the factories from a young age compared to before the second world war. All these problems with the supply of labour forced entrepreneurs to offer more attractive working conditions, leading to a steady rise of wages in the Western textile factories. Also, guest workers from the Mediterranean were attracted to work in textile production. Moreover, the economic growth in the late 1950s resulted in higher nominal wages, and additionally, the development of the welfare state also entailed all sorts of additional employment benefits.

These factors combined lead to a significant increase of the wage bill for employers. As a consequence, the newly industrializing countries in Eastern Europe and Asia, where wages were much lower and union demands usually repressed, started to outcompete textile firms in Western Europe and the US.

In the early 1960s, many textile factories in the West started to get into serious trouble. Their output lowered and employment opportunities drastically declined, leading to massive layoffs and, eventually, the closure of many companies. During the 1970s, one million jobs in the Western European textile industry disappeared.¹ Particularly the firms where basic production processes, such as spinning and weaving, had been performed, were relocated to low-wage countries.

SHARE IN WORLD WIDE PRODUCTION PER REGION, 1963-1980						
Region	Yarns		Woven cloth		Ready-made clothing	
	1970	1980	1963	1980	1963	1980
Western Europe	32%	21%	28%	21%	25%	18%
Eastern Europe	15%	17%	29%	38%	25%	41%
United States	26%	26%	22%	20%	43%	32%
Japan	17%	6%	7%	6%	2%	3%
Other regions	9%	29%	15%	15%	6%	7%

Source: NAE, *Competitive status of the U.S.*, 28, 33.

As this table shows, yarn production was the first to move, and many spinning mills had to close. Although this certainly led to distress in many regions where textile production was concentrated, and both male and female textile workers in the West protested against the shutdown of the firms, the textile industry had become a relatively unimportant sector in most Western European economies. Also, exactly because of the rise of education that I mentioned earlier, many women chose **alternative employment opportunities** that were

¹ Cynthia Enloe, "Women textile workers", 411.

higher skilled, or had more attractive labour conditions, for instance office work or work in retailing.

Meanwhile, circumstances elsewhere in Europe were quite different. Between 1950 and 1980, despite the communist regimes, loans from the USA and Western Europe allowed countries in Eastern Europe, such as Poland, to expand its textile industry. This region became an important player on the world market for textiles in the postwar period. The great majority of textile workers in Eastern Europe consisted of female labourers. They worked under such deplorable conditions, that the generally non-militant staff of the textile factories went on strikes multiple times in the postwar period. In 1981, when the cost of living in Poland had risen so dramatically that the poor wages of textile workers led to starvation, many women joined the “hunger marches” organized by the Trade Union Solidarność, which was soon after forbidden.

All in all, it is clear that in the decades after the second world war, the Western dominance in worldwide cotton textile production started to erode. Many basic processes, such as spinning and weaving, were eventually outsourced to countries where wages were much lower, in first instance in Eastern Europe. This was much to the detriment of, usually female, textile workers who could barely survive on their poor wages. However, even cheaper regions of production came to the fore, most notably Asia, which was soon to become the predominant exporter of cotton yarns and fabrics.

Act 5: The rise of the Asian textile tigers

From the early 1960s, East Asian economies quickly became a popular destination of international capital seeking more favourable conditions for its productive activities. Industries which catered to the demands of multinational companies and export markets, such as textiles, were speedily established in the countries formerly known as the Asian tigers—South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, followed by Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. Unlike in Latin America, in Asia there has been a highly visible rise in the employment of young female workers. Often, factories made use of pre-industrial family relations for the recruitment of industrial labourers. In Taiwan, for example, family members, relatives and others recruited through family and kinship networks formed the core labour force in small factories. This allowed for the continuation of patriarchal domestic relations on the work floor, which contributed to a lower payment for women. While this cheap labour situation may have been fortunate for the entrepreneurs, it was less profitable for the female workers involved.

In fact, the current-day female textile workers of the Third World probably encounter more insecurities than the already precarious position of their nineteenth-century Western counterparts. Whereas a century ago, the female textile workers in Lowell or Lancashire produced largely for national firms, nowadays, workers in the Global South work for multinational companies which are only interested in the lowest wage bill, and feel not much intrinsic pressure to provide better working conditions. Instead, if the cost of labour

rises too much, they might just as well relocate their production to a country with even lower wages.

Much of this has its roots in international agreements that were made at a time when the economic hegemony of the USA was at its peak. In the beginning of the 1960s, when the US saw textile production disappear to low-wage countries in Asia, it instigated a series of agreements that were intended to restrict imports of cotton textiles into the country from elsewhere. In 1974 these bilateral agreements culminated in the Multi Fibre Agreement, which was adopted not only by the US, but also by the European Community, in order to constrain the competition from low-wage countries on their domestic textile industries. However, some countries were notably excluded from the Multi Fibre Agreement, such as Bangladesh. Ironically, such exceptions induced more volatility and insecurity for women workers in low wage countries. Multinational enterprises would more readily move to regions that were exempt from the international agreements, leading to unemployment. Also, they often would refrain from investing in favourable working conditions. The collapse of textile factory buildings around Rana Plaza in Dekka, Bangladesh in April 2013, is a very extreme consequence of such economization on the work environment. Although unemployment and bad working conditions affect not only women in the textile industry, but male workers as well, women are often more vulnerable because they are usually working in the lowest skilled positions that are most prone to being discarded. Also, it is usually men who work in management positions, so women have also less say about which jobs are being retained and which are not. Finally, alternative job opportunities for laid-off textile workers in many low-wage countries are often much scarcer for women than for men.

In conclusion, throughout the centuries, the division of labour in the textile industry has been influenced by three important factors:

- 1) First, market exchange and globalization were vital game changers. Under the influence of forces of supply and demand and specialization, textile production was taken out of the home, and moved into the market. Regardless of whether this market was regional or global, we see men taking over the more profitable, higher value-added processes of textile production, and that they often organized it in professional organizations, such as guilds, which often excluded women, also from formal training.
- 2) Second, technological change often led to changes in the division of labour between men and women. For instance, when mechanization occurred during the Industrial Revolution, for the first time in history, men massively entered into spinning – a job that had traditionally mostly been performed by women. Different stages of the industrialization process led to different divisions of labour. The first spinning machine were often operated by women and men alike, and also often by children. In the course of industrialization, when the machinery became more productive, and fewer people were needed, women were often replaced by men to tend to the machines. In Asia, we see quite differentiated patterns of gender divisions with industrialization. In India and Indonesia, factory textile workers were predominantly

male. In Japan, on the other hand, the first stage of industrialization entailed an almost completely female workforce, with girls coming from the countryside to work and live in the factories for a particular time in their life cycle

- 3) Third, education and alternatives in the labour market mattered. In many pre-industrial societies, spinning and weaving was combined with agricultural activities, as a side employment or seasonal work. In these cases, such as in China and Indonesia, but also in rural Germany and France, it was often women who did the spinning and weaving. In combination with petty trade, these were often the only alternatives available to women, whereas men had a much larger range of professions to choose from. Also, with the increasing educational opportunities offered to Western women in the course of the twentieth century, the range of career options broadened considerably. Women rather chose factory or shop work than to perform the straining work in textile factories. Unfortunately, many uneducated women in present-day developing countries, where most of the basic processes of textile production have moved to, are not in such a position to choose other jobs. They are often lucky to be able to find a job as a spinner or weaver, and they can only accept the deplorable conditions they are laboring under.

Epilogue: Towards responsible global textile consumption?

Exploitation of labour has always existed, and may perhaps even always continue to exist. Regardless of mechanization and robotizations, we will always need the minds and hands of people to produce goods and services. Female workers have historically been more prone to exploitation than male workers, because of their generally more precarious position in society. Textile production is a key example of this, as the cheapness of female labour was often instrumental to establishing power relations between employers and employees, and between different regions of the world. However, to end on a positive note, there are ways to counter the worst forms of exploitation.

First of all, in countries in the Global South increasing initiatives have been taken to organize textile workers to appeal for better working conditions. These organizations, although sometimes clandestine, have tried to gain momentum when there was ample media attention for injustices such as child labour in textile factories, or the tragedy in Bangladesh.

A second form of action to put pressure on textile firms to improve working conditions is raising consumer awareness in countries importing clothing from low wage countries. Initiatives such as the “Clean Clothes Campaign” and protests against multinationals making use of cheap, exploited labour such as GAP or Benetton, may have some effect.

However, the extent to which people are willing to forego their cheap T-shirts and jeans, and pay more for more sustainable products, and/or the extent to which companies are willing to make less profit, is questionable. As long as serious efforts are not being made, especially the women and children textile workers of the world will continue to suffer from this “race to the bottom” in the quest for low labour costs.