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THE SOCIAL RELATIONS APPROACH, EMPOWERMENT AND WOMEN FACTORY WORKERS IN MALAYSIA

ABSTRACT

We discuss the empowerment of women factory workers in Malaysia through the lens of Kabeer's *Social Relations Approach* which offers an institutional analysis of how gender inequality is produced and calls for the overall terms of exchange and cooperation to be shifted in their favour. Its application shows that Malaysian women factory workers face significant challenges, due to the character of institutions, and womens' difficulties in adopting and internalising the notion of 'empowerment'.

INTRODUCTION

Women are steadily increasing their labour force participation world-wide. An overwhelming number, particularly in developing countries, work in low-skilled occupations and 'informal' jobs. Gender inequality and discrimination affect them in negative ways, from the extent to which they are able to participate in the economy, to how their economic contribution is perceived and valued.

Significant international effort has been directed toward enhancing the economic *empowerment* of women. It is argued that enhancing women's economic participation increases living standards, improves children's well-being and raises women's empowerment (OECD 2012; World Bank, 2012). This article contributes to this discussion by examining the economic empowerment of

Malaysian women factory workers, using the Social Relations Approach (*SRA*) as a framework. The Malaysian case is relevant because low-skilled female labour plays a significant role in the country's economic development. Women form a significant portion of workers in its manufacturing industry. Crucially, however, they also suffer from sustained inequality and discrimination. Utilising the *SRA*, this article explores:

a) How institutions function and interact with each other to produce, perpetuate and reinforce gender inequality, and how this affects women factory workers
b) How policies may be designed to improve the position of women factory workers
c) Women factory workers' ability to increase their collective capacity to challenge their subordination and the role of grassroots organisations in facilitating this

The article proceeds as follows. Section 1 introduces the Social Relations Approach (SRA). Section 2 describes women's entry into the manufacturing industry in Malaysia and its gender characteristics. Section 3 considers how the interactions between institutions perpetuate and reinforce gender inequality, and what policies may be formulated to reverse this. The ways in which women factory workers can gain the capacity to exercise strategic forms of agency in relation to their own lives and in relation to the wider structural constraints are explored in Section 4. Section 5 concludes and draws the themes of the article together.

SECTION 1: THE SOCIAL RELATIONS APPROACH
The Social Relations Approach (SRA) offers an Institutional Analysis to of gender inequality and perceives gender relations as part of social relations. It asserts that there are systemic and structural causes of gender inequality, and requires their root causes to be addressed. In tackling gender inequality, the emphasis

is not on women's integration into development, rather, that the social structures, processes and relations which give rise to women's disadvantaged position, be transformed. Ending women's subordination thus goes beyond reallocating economic resources, to involve a redistribution of power (Kabeer, 1994; March, Smyth & Mukhopadhyay, 1999; Razavi and Miller, 1995).

The SRA is based on certain central concepts. It asserts that the ultimate goal of development is human well-being (survival, security and autonomy), rather than simply economic growth or increased productivity. Secondly, social relations determine people's roles, rights, responsibilities and claims over others. Further, institutions are key to producing and maintaining social inequalities. Four key institutions are the state, the market, the community and the family. They are defined by their rules, resources, people, activities and power. Recognising their core values and assumptions enables us to see how gender inequality is produced and reproduced. Institutions are not ideologically neutral, nor are they independent of one another. Changes in one institutional sphere will impact others. Fourthly, the operation of institutions reflects different gender policies, which are determined by the extent they recognise and address gender issues. These may be gender-blind, gender–neutral, gender-aware, gender–specific or gender–redistributive. Finally, analysis for planning needs to examine what immediate, intermediate and long-term factors are responsible for the problems, and the effects on those involved (Kabeer, 1994; Kabeer and Subrahmanian, 1996).

EMPOWERMENT AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

In challenging gender inequality, Kabeer urges us to focus on the *process* through which equitable power-sharing is to be achieved.

She stresses the notion of *empowerment* on the part of the disempowered, through which existing power relations can be renegotiated. Empowerment is regarded as the processes through which women gain the capacity for exercising strategic forms of agency in relation to their own lives and in relation to the larger structures of constraint that position them as subordinate to men. It is explored through the dimensions of *agency* (the ability to define goals and work upon them), *resources* (the means which enhance the ability to exercise choice) and *achievements* (the outcomes of the exercise of agency) (Kabeer, 1999). Importantly, empowerment is not something which can be handed over. Rather, it must be *claimed* (Kabeer, 1994: 97). The process of transformation, of empowerment, begins from within (Kabeer, 2005: 14) and is rooted in how people see themselves (p15).

Collective action is integral to empowerment (e.g. Kabeer, 1994; 2005; 2008; 2013). Women's allies and grassroots organisations play a crucial role in spurring women's collective action. They can help women challenge the way institutions relate to each other, create sp ace for women to politicise their demands, push for policies which redistribute power (rather than simply resources) and exert pressure on public institutions to be more responsive to women's needs. They are likely to be much closer to realities on the ground than official development agencies and thus more able to tailor strategies to fit local needs. Kabeer notes that collective struggles for representation, redistribution and recognition have historically proved more effective in challenging the structures of oppression than individual action (Kabeer, 1994: 229; Kabeer, 2008: 27). We revisit these themes later in the article.

SECTION 2: WOMEN IN THE MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY IN MALAYSIA

The pursuit of an export-oriented industrialisation model in Malaysia in the 1970s brought rapid feminisation of its labour force. Women entered waged employment, especially in manufacturing (electronics, textiles and garment), in unprecedented numbers (Ahmad, 1998; Lim, 1993). Young and unmarried women, particularly those of ethnic Malay origin, were specifically targeted (Kaur, 2000; Sivalingam, 1994).

In the last ten years, the female labour force participation rate has stabilised at 49.5 per cent, compared to 80.5 per cent for males (Malaysia Labour Force Survey Report, 2012: 3). Manufacturing continues to be an important sector, projected to grow at 5.7% until 2015 (Tenth Malaysia Plan, 2010: 60, 75). Despite the global recession, employment in the sector increased marginally to 2.228 million in 2012 compared to 2.222 million in 2011 (Malaysia Labour Force Survey Report, 2012: 10). The electrical and electronics industry is the most successful and largest single contributor to the sector, accounting for 26.1% of manufacturing output (Tenth Malaysia Plan, 2010: 131). Manufacturing is the largest provider of employment for men in Malaysia (employing 1.4 million out of a total of 8 million male workers, or 17.6 per cent of male workers) and women (employing 801,000 of the 4.6 million women in the labour force, or 17.3 per cent of female workers). The female share of manufacturing employment stands, currently, at 36% (Malaysia Labour Force Survey Report, 2012: 21, 82). Aggressive pursuit of an export-orientation model has made Malaysia one of the most export-dependent economies globally, one which is heavily reliant on women workers. Yet women possess limited prospects for moving up the occupational ladder or improving their economic position (Ng, 2006; Wye and Ismail, 2012).

SECTION 3: INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS OF GENDER INEQUALITY

An analysis of the ways institutions operate and relate to each other sheds light on why women factory workers in Malaysia suffer discrimination and inequality. As noted above, the *state* moved toward an export-oriented industrialisation strategy in the 1970s. Rising exports of manufactured goods led it to embrace more technologically-intensive foreign direct investment, especially within the electronics and electrical goods sectors (Kumar, Lucio and Che Rose, 2013). Women were presented as a malleable, passive and obedient workforce, and their labour promoted as relatively flexible and cheap (Kaur, 2000; Ng, 2006). A range of repressive labour laws was enacted to control workers. The state also encouraged flexible labour policies, serving to further fragment the labour movement (Kumar, Lucio and Che Rose, 2013; Ng, 2006). Additionally, existing ethnic tensions resulted in women workers perceiving themselves as belonging to their respective ethnic communities, rather than to a unified social class. These strategies had negative repercussions for women's organising efforts (Ng, 2006).

Within the manufacturing sector, gender wage differentials are prevalent (Karubi and Khalique, 2012; Low and Goy, 2006; Wye and Ismail, 2012).[1] Women's lower wages are justified on the

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[1] Male workers in the manufacturing sector earned more than their female counterparts in every occupational category (managerial, professional executive; technical and supervisory; clerical and general), although the wage advantage enjoyed by male workers have been diminishing, with the male-to-female salary ratio diminishing from 1.43 in 2007 to 1.29 in 2010 (in relation to full time workers). However the improvement in female workers' salary is still outweighed by that of male workers in the high-salary and high prestige managerial, professional and executive positions. This has generated concerns that workers who were equally educated and skilled might be treated differently in the manufacturing sector due to the gender group to which they belong, especially when they

basis that they have lower qualifications, education and experience, that their waged work is 'secondary' to their 'main' duties in the home, and that they are less skilled, less flexible and possess lower leadership potential (e.g. Fernandez, 2009; Ismail and Mohd Noor, 2005; Ismail and Jajri, 2012). Yet the state has been reluctant to intervene, because women's continued employment in low-skilled and labour-intensive industries ensures national competitiveness (Ng, 2006; Xavier, 2008).

Courts are similarly insensitive to women's subordination in the workplace. The Federal Court in the high profile case of Beatrice a/p At Fernandez v Sistem Penerbangan Malaysian and Anor (2005), in which an air stewardess was dismissed on grounds of pregnancy, attracted controversy for its unwillingness to extend protection under Article 8 of the Constitution (prohibition against sex discrimination) to cover collective agreements on the grounds that the latter were private arrangements, even if discriminatory. Additionally, in deciding whether the appellant had been discriminated against, the Court did not compare her to a male flight steward, but to *women in other occupations.* The correctness of this decision has been challenged (Abdul Aziz, 2008; Chee Din, Rahmat and Mashudi, 2011). In another case, eight women lost their appeal in an action for gender discrimination. They were dismissed in 2001 by Guppy Plastic Industries under a rule in its 'factory book' which provided that women employees reaching the age of 50 could be legitimately dismissed because they would be prone to suffering medical problems. The Industrial Court ruled in favour of the workers in 2008, holding that the regulation was archaic. This was overturned by the High Court in 2010 and the Appeals Court in 2012. Shortly after these decisions, the Minimum Retirement Age Act 2012 came into effect, stipulating a

progress up the job ladder. It has been argued that such gender wage differentials are due to discrimination (Wye and Ismail, 2012, p.272).

retirement age of 60 for all employees, irrespective of gender. The company aligned its retirement practices with this new requirement. The Federal Court recently considered it unnecessary to decide whether there was a case for the company to answer, in light of its compliance with the new law. The women received no compensation (*Parti Socialis Malaysia, 2012*).

The *market* is a key mechanism for producing and reinforcing gender inequality. Labour flexibility, outsourcing and subcontracting are today common practice in firms. Women make up over half of the workers in rubber and palm oil plantations in Malaysia (Social Watch, 2005). They earn incomes which put them below the poverty line. Ironically, instead of directing plantation owners to pay them a fair wage, the government has permitted the import of foreign labour to work in plantations, weakening the bargaining power of local workers (*Malaysiakini*, 2005). Workers are not only exploited by the plantation owners, but by the several recruitment agencies which operate in the sector (*Jerit*, 2012). Bormann, Krishnan and Neuner (2010) detail the working conditions of migrant workers in *Jabil Circuit* in Penang and *Flextronics* in Penang and Selangor (two US owned factories in the electronics sector). They reveal the heavily feminised nature of the industry and how working and living conditions violate national and international labour laws (p. 11). A culture of male dominance, paternalistic management structures and religious beliefs that women are subordinate to men are identified as barriers to organising women (p. 14). Research on working conditions of Burmese migrant women in the Malaysian electronics and garment industries demonstrated similar concerns (*War on Want, 2012*). These women worked in export processing zones where wages are kept low. NGOs working with these women stressed the importance of educating them so they can take action to improve their situations. Yet the very groups which can

offer education were themselves male dominated and would need to adapt their work to focus on women (p. 24).

The *community* perpetuates myths that women are subservient to men. Many women leave formal employment after having children to look after the home. They believe that they should not compete with men. Cultural norms and extreme versions of Islam portray women as the weaker sex, influencing how women perceive their roles, responsibilities and prospects for progress. The media maintains conservative ideas about women's roles, continuing to perpetuate their marginalisation. Finally, dominant views of men are promoted at *family* level. Women are expected to care for the sick and elderly, and responsible for children and the home. Working women are expected to balance family responsibilities with those at work, with husbands taking little or no part in helping with household responsibilities – attitudes common in patriarchal societies (Abdullah, Noor and Wok, 2008; Othman, 2006; Sultana and Noor, 2011; Wang, 2007).

These social relations condition the struggles of women factory workers. The lack of political resolve to protect their interests, market policies on female labour and beliefs that women are subservient to men explain their lack of progress and continuing economic marginalisation. Institutions reinforce each others' beliefs and practices, which become entrenched and resistant to change. They create a vicious cycle in which these women live, and from which there is little prospect of exit. They also reinforce a situation in which women face limited prospects for upward mobility (Ng, 2006).

DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTIONS

The *SRA* advocates that strategies can be adopted at *state, market, community* and *family* levels to reverse gender inequality. For

women factory workers, these strategies might take the following forms. The *state* might improve returns to women's work and secure better working terms and conditions for them through enacting and enforcing legislation. It might reward firms which implement gender-sensitive policies and practices (e.g. tax benefits, lucrative contracts). It might also increase women's political participation regarding employment practices which impinge on their well-being. At *market* level, industries might appoint regulators to supervise the implementation of best practice codes on gender issues. Industry regulators might also encourage firms to provide training so that more women in low-skilled and low-waged industries can enhance their skills. At *community* and *family* levels, appropriate programmes in schools challenging norms and encouraging women to be more assertive, may be developed. NGOs can create space for discussion about empowerment and relationships, and provide counselling, advice and information to women. As institutions change, so will the ways they relate to each other, ultimately impacting gender inequality.

Yet, there are also likely to be powerful forces, some within the policy domain itself, who will militate against this happening. Institutions are protective of their own interests and so are resistant to change. How, then, can women renegotiate existing social relations? Kabeer asserts it is only through the mobilisation of women in ways which alter existing power structures that change can be brought about (e.g. Kabeer, 2005; 2010; 2011a; 2013). Women themselves must participate in the processes in which "development interventions" to benefit them are brought to fruition. In this respect, strategies which bring about their empowerment so that they can exercise greater bargaining power in their relations with others are crucial. We noted earlier Kabeer's argument that women's allies and grassroots organisations play an

important role in facilitating this. What roles have unions and NGOs in Malaysia played in achieving this?

SECTION 4: EMPOWERING WOMEN FACTORY WORKERS: ROLE OF UNIONS

The literature underscores the limited success of the Malaysian union movement in representing labour. Whilst the state has welcomed foreign investment, a corresponding strategy has been to limit unions' room for maneuver (Kumar, Lucio and Che Rose, 2013; Ramasamy and Rowley, 2008; Todd and Peetz, 2001). Restrictive labour legislation and increasing political pressure to conform to the state agenda have stunted their growth and development. Recent figures suggest that union membership is low, under 10 per cent (News Straits Times, 2012; Department of Trade Union Affairs, 2014). Unions also suffer from low visibility in the workplace, in part because they have failed to develop imaginative forms of communication with workers (Kumar, Lucio and Che Rose, 2013). Consequently, there is a loss of worker belief in their ability to improve working conditions which has in turn, created an internal crisis of confidence. Union leaders have become embroiled in confrontational and divisive politics. Additionally, allegations of misappropriation of funds by union leaders have been made (Ramasamy and Rowley, 2008).

Distinctive obstacles have limited what unions can achieve for women workers, and consequently, their potential for empowerment. The masculine culture of trade unions and beliefs that women are responsible for the family, have limited women's engagement with the union movement (Crinis, 2008). Union organising is typically geared toward core, regular and male workers with gender issues regarded as a low priority (Kumar, Lucio and Che Rose, 2013). Women struggle to balance commitment, workload and emotional labour in the workplace

with family commitments at home. Few have time to attend trade union meetings which are generally held after work hours when women have to care for their families (Crinis, 2008: 53). In certain sectors, such as the electronics sector which is heavily feminised, trade unionism has been actively discouraged. Ramasamy and Rowley (2008: 125, 126) point to a number of explanations (Jomo and Todd, 1994) for gender bias in union organising: male domination of unions, society's disapproval of female involvement in organisations outside the home and union neglect of issues confronting women, such as childcare, harassment and discrimination. In view of the fact that more and more women are entering the paid workforce, they urge unions to reflect on the need to extend more opportunities to participate in union activities to women. Crinis (2008) notes that as a result of the lack of union activity to protect women workers in Malaysia, women unionists have joined forces with NGOs to raise community awareness about women's labour rights, domestic violence and sexual harassment.

Research demonstrates the important role NGOs play in organising women in low-skilled and low-waged work and the important function of women-only autonomous organisations as an alternative to unions in defending the rights of women workers (Broadbent and Ford, 2008). We explore their roles in empowering women factory workers in Malaysia.

EMPOWERING WOMEN FACTORY WORKERS: ROLE OF NGOs
METHOD
We adopt a qualitative approach in exploring this issue. A rich body of feminist literature considers whether a qualitative approach allows women to be better understood on their own terms (see discussion in e.g. Westmarland, 2001). Quantitative research methods have been criticised for ignoring and excluding

women (e.g. Oakley, 1974, 1998), for universalising the experience of men (Stanley and Wise, 1993) and for employing 'male-stream' methods to understand women's experiences (Mies, 1983). A qualitative approach is more appropriate for feminist research because it gives emphasis to the meanings, values and experiences of the participants themselves (Duelli Klein, 1983; Graham, 1983), helping us to understand reality in natural settings. It places the researcher and the object of study on a more equal level (Oakley, 1974; Stanley and Wise, 1990) and is perceived as more open, compassionate and egalitarian (Risman, 1993). Finally, as women are argued to have a mode of thinking which is "contextual and narrative" they may be more responsive to a qualitative approach (Davis, 1986).

Several NGOs which worked with women in Malaysia were contacted to determine the extent of their involvement with women factory workers. Initially, a web search was conducted in order to identify these organisations. NGOs in Kuala Lumpur were targeted. Compared with other regions, NGOs in the capital are likely to be the most prominent, most well-connected and attract the most publicity. Despite several NGOs being contacted, only two dealt closely with the issues under investigation.[2] To preserve anonymity, they will be referred to as X and Y. X champions the cause of the marginalised and working class, and campaigns for laws and policies to redistribute wealth and reduce income disparity. It has a long history of organising political protests, marches and rallies to demand equal rights for the poor and vulnerable segments of the population, including factory and

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[2] Many NGOs I contacted reported that their work did not revolve around women factory workers. Rather, they concentrated on promoting the rights of women under the Islamic religion, championing women's health issues, furthering their personal and professional development, combating domestic violence, promoting the rights of migrant women workers and refugees and making home-based workers more visible.

plantation workers. We have noted that a significant portion of these are female. Y meets our criteria more closely. It is dedicated to the rights of women workers and enjoys a long tradition of working with plantation, factory and domestic workers. It focuses on organising women workers and on advocacy and training. Both NGOs are small, with less than ten permanent staff and heavily reliant on volunteers to assist with their work. They have been existence for a long time (in the case of X, 10 years; in the case of Y, 30 years) and are publicly well known. Individually, they reached out to a few hundred women workers a year. Both are also left-leaning and reject current political structures as neglectful of the poor and vulnerable. In the light of their work, sphere of activity, reputation and experience, they are noteworthy. Observing how they operate gives us insight into the experiences of NGOs elsewhere in Malaysia operating in this field.

Data about the work of both NGOs was derived from secondary sources (media reports, NGO documents, organisational websites, etc.). The work of both NGOs was observed over the course of a week in November 2012. I travelled to various places to meet and speak with women factory workers, to understand their lifestyles, and the challenges they faced. In addition, one individual from X (S1) and three from Y (S2, S3 and M1) were interviewed. S1 is the 'face' of X; she exercises a coordinating role in X, makes decisions on its behalf and represents it in its dealings with the public, workers and other organisations. S2 is a founding member of Y, S3 is a regular volunteer, whilst M1, a salaried employee, is responsible for Y's 'bread and butter' issues. One lengthy face to face interview was conducted with S1 in March 2012 (26th March). Two telephone interviews were conducted with S2 in March 2012 (25th and 28th March), and a face to face interview took place with S2, S3 and M1 in November 2012 (8th November).

M1 had contacts in several factories in Kajang, a town 21 kilometres from Kuala Lumpur. Kajang is a heavily industrialised region, as evidenced by a large variety of factories clustered together (food and beverage, electronics, garment, furniture, toiletries etc.). M1 had built relationships with women workers in one of these factories (an electronics factory). Women formed the bulk of its workers (200 out of 300 workers, primarily of Indian origin). The vast majority are over 30 years old. Much of their work involved assembling and packing. An in-house union exists, with a membership of 60. In following M1 in her work, I spoke with women workers in this factory. In following S1, I conversed with women workers whom she visited and the union leaders she met. I also observed how M1 and S1 organised activities to bring women workers together. Notes were taken during meetings, discussions and other activities. Interviews with those representing the NGOs and with women workers themselves are presented (in the Data Analysis Section) to help us evaluate the extent to which the NGOs were able to empower the women workers they attempted to help.

"TRANSFORMATORY" ASPECTS OF NGO STRATEGIES

We noted earlier that integral to reversing gender inequality is *empowerment*, a concept which Kabeer emphasises throughout her works. In discussing empowerment, Kabeer advocates strategies which seek to "open up, rather than foreclose on, the possibilities open to women" (Kabeer, 1994: 261). Whether their transformatory potential can be operationalised, depends on the extent to which they e.g. (1) allow women themselves to identify and prioritise their needs, (2) compensate for institutional failure to meet the needs of women, (3) regard women as "real" actors in the development process, rather than simply seeking to act on their behalf (this would entail transforming women's consciousness and perspectives), (4) emphasise new forms of collective awareness

and association, and (5) strengthen women's own ability to organise and mobilise around their self-defined interests (1994: 261 – 262). These "transformatory aspects of NGO strategies" are investigated across a range of Kabeer's works (e.g. 2008; 2010; 2011a; 2011b; 2013). In the rest of this article, we evaluate the work of the two NGOs against these strategies. We ask; to what extent do their strategies correspond with those regarded by Kabeer as "transformatory"?

DATA ANALYSIS

1) **Strategies Organised around Participatory Agendas and Needs Identification:** Kabeer asks: to what extent are NGO interventions organised around *participatory* modes of needs identification and prioritisation? In the Malaysian context, are women factory workers themselves able to articulate their needs and concerns? Do NGOs create space for their voice to be heard or do they impose their own priorities on the women? (Kabeer, 1994: 230, 235)

My findings suggest that both NGOs regarded the women they attempted to help as capable of making choices, expressing priorities and taking responsibility. They believed that these women should have the last word in determining and ascertaining their own needs. S1 stressed the utility of adopting open and interactive decision making processes so that women could articulate their needs (interview 26th March, 2012):

S1: It is they [women] themselves who need to be aware of their own problems...we cannot impose our views on them. It is their level of consciousness which is important; they decide what their issues are...some of the problems which women workers bring to our attention are: poor living accommodation, lack of water or

electricity and low wages. The issues which they want us to take forward are taken by themselves by way of voting in a group...

The same approach is reflected in the work of Y. S2 laboured the point that she and M1 were previously factory workers (*"We worked for many years, between us we have covered numerous factories in many industries, electronics, manufacturing, garment, food!"*), and was thus able to understand and empathise with women factory workers, and that their own suffering helped break down a 'them' and 'us' mentality between the NGO and the women. They thus shared many socio-demographic similarities with the women they attempted to help. S2 commented (interview 8th November, 2012):

Our previous experience gives us knowledge of the difficulties faced by women in the same position...we know what they are going through because we have been there ourselves... we know what goes on from first-hand experience...so we are able to stand in their shoes...

M1 argued that an important way of uncovering women's needs was to keep in close contact with them and that was why she was perpetually *"on my motorbike because I go from factory to factory to see these women..., every day..., and talk to them to find out what they need. I make friends with them, I tell them we are here for you"* (interview 8th November, 2012). She felt that when she was on their territory, the women felt more comfortable telling her what their needs and concerns were.

2) **Strategies Compensating for Institutional Failure:** Kabeer asks how successful NGO interventions are in compensating for institutional failure (women excluded from credit facilities by banks, trade unions organised around male interests, public institutions unresponsive to women's needs and priorities). What alternative forms of needs satisfaction do NGOs offer? She cautions against the gender biases which are often entrenched

within the routine rules and procedures through which mainstream development agencies distribute resources (1994: 236). NGOs must be able to provide women with *new* kinds of resources, thereby signalling new potentials and possibilities, rather than merely reinforcing old roles and constraints (p. 261). These resources may be tangible (e.g. organising women's trade unions) and intangible (e.g. building the organisational capacity of women to press claims on public institutions).

In the Malaysian context, both NGOs sought to build the organisational capacity of women factory workers to assert claims against their employers. They adopted strategies which enabled women to meet together, share their experiences and learn about their rights. They organised drop-in centres, social events, adult learning literacy and numeracy classes. These events gave women opportunities to challenge perceptions about themselves and their acceptance of their place in the social order. They also allowed women to build alliances with other workers to collectively to put pressure on employers. S2 revealed how free dinner parties acted as effective ice-breakers to enable women to talk about their lives and struggles at work. Some of their concerns are low and unpaid wages, poor working conditions, occupational diseases and harsh treatment by supervisors. In following these up, Y conducted workshops and training to educate women about their rights at work and to increase the capacity to help themselves:

S2: Our activities are wide ranging...we involve women in discussions, seminars, training programmes, we provide advice and counselling... we help women to take control.... If we don't, then nothing will change, because workers are afraid... (interview, 25th March, 2012)

S1 revealed that it was difficult to organise women workers; many are timid and prefer to *"run away because they think they have no*

power" but that X was keen to encourage collective action and mobilisation:

So we hold 'kesedaraan' (awareness) campaigns; we try to educate these workers of their rights, we train them to organise themselves, we provide support such as advocacy and we stand with them if they want to bring a legal action against their employers (interview 26th March, 2012)

Y has drawn on drama and acting as a means of communication. They were an effective way of helping workers, many of whom are illiterate, to understand their legal rights. M1 described how drama has been successful in this regard:

Many workers, they do not know that they have a legal relationship with their employers. So we try to project this relationship as a boxing match. We put together a 'boxing drama' for workers to teach them what the work relationship is about...it is about negotiating your rights as a worker, and sometimes, you have to put up a fight... (interview 8th November, 2012)

M1 reported how she and her colleagues taught a group of Burmese women migrant workers about their employers' health and safety obligations toward them, through visual aids:

We draw charts identifying how each body part – hand, wrist, lungs, eyes and nose – can be affected by fumes, gases and other toxic materials. Often the workers have no idea, they come to work with painful wrists, runny nose and watery eyes, but they don't know why and what can be done about it. So we tell them, it may be related to work, and for them to see a doctor, and most importantly, that we can help them claim against their employer... (interview 8th November, 2012).

Thus, both NGOs focused on expanding intangible resources among the women they worked with. They believed in the importance of empowering women through communication of information, formation of networks and offering education and training to develop their confidence.

3) **Strategies as Consciousness-Transforming:** Kabeer emphasises the need for strategies which build a *sense* of empowerment in women and which transform their *consciousness* so that women can reflect, analyse and assess what has hitherto been taken for granted, to uncover the socially constructed and socially shared basis of apparently individual problems (p. 245). Through building women's sense of control (p. 246), fostering new collective identities (p. 247) and increasing women's intangible resources (p. 248), for example, NGOs can encourage women to analyse and question their reality and construct alternative ones.

Despite sustained efforts by both NGOs to transform women's consciousness, there appeared to be great reticence on the part of the women themselves to believe that they can challenge the very system which they realise is responsible for boxing them in. M1 was especially sensitive to this:

We try hard to increase their confidence and knowledge, but women still live under a 'veil of ignorance' ...they are not educated, many are illiterate and small minded. They think...their family, their children are the only things which matter...as long as they get paid...it does not matter that they are exploited at work...so although life is difficult they do not make an issue of this...to them it is part of their lives to be exploited, they simply accept it...(interview, 9th November, 2012)

This reserve was also evident on the part of women which X targeted. S1 had organised 'drop-in sessions' for workers to seek help with problems at work. Through these centres, she hoped to encourage them to be more confident about challenging employers. The centres were organised after work. Despite X reminding workers who had previously attended that there were opportunities for follow-up, these workers did not attend. No new

workers visited the centre either, despite X's efforts at publicising the opportunity to do so.

There was optimism in M1's eyes, however, when she relayed a story about a woman worker who she helped a few years ago bring a claim against her employer. Although retired, this ex-worker (V) continued to regard Y as a contact point for women who wanted to change their lives. During our meeting with her, she asked M1 to help a young mother who had suffered abuse at the hands of her husband. V said:

This young mother, she has packed the bags and wants to go to a women's refuge. This is a very brave thing! She does not want to live with her abusive husband anymore. She wants to take control of her own life. She has a child who sees the abuse. I told her to wait here in my house for M1, because people like M1, they help women do that (interview, 9th November, 2012)

Although not strictly in the context of work, the stories of two other women (F and T), who had fled abusive relationships, and who had settled into temporary accommodation provided by Y, is further evidence of Y's efforts to change women's mindsets. F said:

Do I feel like my life has changed since coming into contact with Y? maybe...I have learnt about independence, confidence and bravery. My husband beat me for many years before me and my children left him. I want now to do better for myself and for the children...(interview, 8th November, 2012)

T remarked:

Our marriages are arranged when we are barely 10 years old. So we don't go to school, we are sent to live with our future in-laws. We have no friends, no support. I did not know that my life could be different until I met M1 who gave us a place to stay, food to eat. I now have a job, thanks to her. I can earn a living and support my children. I also know what I am entitled to. I can imagine a future. Before I had no hope, but M1 said there is hope and we will teach you how...(interview, 8th November, 2012).

Yet, instances like these are few and far between. The majority of the women in this case study remained fearful, as evidenced by my interviews with them, a mentality which is confirmed to me by those who attempted to help them. The NGOs were not able to change their mindsets; they had accepted their predicament as a fact of life. They neither appeared willing to question their subordinate status, nor did they contemplate the possibility that they can take control of their lives. This belief, perpetuated by institutional rules and practices and the way in which they embody male agency, needs, and interests, is firmly entrenched in the minds of the women in the case study as shown by my brief conversations with them.

4) **Strategies which emphasise new forms of Collective Awareness and Association:** Kabeer stresses that collective identity underpins most empowerment strategies. Given women's disenfranchisement from sources of institutional power, their collective strength is their most important transformatory resource. Thus building up and strengthening networks and alliances among women is important (1994: 253). The NGOs relayed some of the ways in which they attempted to expand new forms of collective action among the women. Through their strategies, they tried to foster feelings of courage and solidarity, and an awareness that strength lies in numbers.

Getting unions to help strengthen the collective power of unorganised workers was an important strategy in X's armoury. Yet the investigation also revealed that it was frustrating persuading unions to do so. S1 regularly contacted union leaders in local factories to help organise contract workers in these factories (many of whom are women). Since many activist NGOs were prohibited by employers from being on factory premises because *"they see us as trouble makers"* union leaders constituted

an important contact point for X. One union leader responded to her in the following way:

I don't want to get in trouble with the permanent workers. They will be angry with me if I try to help the contract workers. So I don't want to rock the boat. My responsibility is to receive orders from the union bosses above, and to carry these out. I may be able to give you a contact among the contract workers, but I cannot get directly involved... (interview, 7th November, 2012)

S1 remarked that these responses were not unusual, but it was clear that unions' unwillingness to help had reduced chances of women collectively rallying around their causes. Unions were the obvious route to help achieve this, but their cooperation could not always be counted upon.

M1 regularly organises meetings at a canteen near factories so that women could meet to discuss their difficulties. The workers are always informed before-hand of these meetings. Yet it was not uncommon for very few workers to turn up, reducing opportunities for collective action. Many workers simply waved to acknowledge our presence, but did not come near us. M1 remarked:

These women are not confident. Some of them are migrants and do not speak the language, so they keep themselves to themselves...they also face problems because their culture says they should not be bold...so they just accept their fate, rather than fight...(interview, 8th November, 2012)

Even those women who had previously received help were reluctant to *"come back to us to help other women"*. M1 continued:

Many of these women, they come once or twice...and then disappear. Other women come to us with problems (unpaid wages, health issues) and we help them claim against the employer, but then they also disappear. So, it is very difficult to generate a collective attitude among these women (interview, 8th November, 2012)

One woman worker (K) who attended meetings M1 organised was particularly vocal. She was willing to speak at length about her experience of being 'empowered' and subsequently, her belief that acting in solidarity was crucial in bringing about change. She described Y as *"my two eyes"*. K relayed how Y had helped her:

I faced a lot of difficulties with unpaid salary. Y taught me where I could complain and took me to the labour office. My union does not care that we work long hours, earn low salaries and have to do complicated and difficult work. It is very close to the managers. It even warned us that if we went to Y to ask for help, it will make sure we are dismissed!!! (interview, 9th November, 2012)

When questioned about the consciousness of her co-workers and their willingness to collectively challenge a system which legitimises their subordination, K underlined that this was an immensely difficult task:

I have tried so hard to tell my colleagues we need to fight together, then our employer will listen. But my colleagues they just give up. They don't want to meet, we are not in one mind and heart. They are too scared to create trouble. When our employer threatens us, everyone backs off.

During the conversation with K, many other women workers saw us but did not stop to talk to us. When I asked one of them, B, why she would not stop to talk to M1 (whom she knew), she said:

I scared of the boss. He will be very angry if I mix with people outside the factory. I just work and go home, and don't worry about anything else.

Both M1 and K then provided accounts of workers who Y had helped, but did not then stay in contact, diminishing chances of collective action:

There was a worker who was dismissed unfairly. We helped her initiate legal proceedings against her employer. Suddenly she

decided she did not want to continue...another worker whose salary was cut...we helped her get back the salary but we never heard from her again...Lack of solidarity among these women prevented us from trying to mobilise them. They are too scared. Management keeps threatening them, so they don't dare to fight back...

This fear and ambivalence, together with a wider perception that their interests are bound up with their own homes and children, play a large role in explaining why women workers have not rallied around a common agenda to the extent that Y would have liked to see.

5) Strategies which Mobilise for Change: Kabeer emphasises the importance of a commitment on the part of NGOs to strengthen women's own ability to mobilise around their self defined interests. Yet she cautions that NGOs tend to be accountable upwards to governments or donors, and consequently, operate around acceptable and predefined agendas (1994: 256, 262). Pressures to obtain donor funding can lead to an expansion of standardised and ill-thought out projects, detracting NGOs from prioritising the needs of their potential beneficiaries. More ominously, NGOs' ability to operate often depends on containing their activities within a non-political agenda which does not challenge the structures which subordinate women (p. 256). Thus it is important to ask, for example, to what extent NGOs defer to the aims, objectives and policies of their funders? Are they content to operate within the confines set by the state? How do NGOs deal with the "political" implications of their work?

In my investigations, S2 raised concerns that donors often limit how funds can be spent and that sometimes, donor specifications detract Y from the work it wanted to do:

Our funding runs out in 3 months and this is worrying. We are a small NGO. We don't get funding from the government...we live from hand to mouth. At times, we find we have no choice but to

comply with the conditions imposed by foreign funders although what they say we must do is not what we want to do...(interview, 28th March, 2012).

X however, had decided to secure funds only from independent donors. When probed as to the reasons why, S1 explained that this was because many international donors "*tend to tell us how we can spend the money*". She continued, "*...as a result, our funds are small, but this is a sacrifice we are willing to make because we believe that we, at local level, are the best people to determine how money ought to be be utilised to help the workers.*"
(interview, 26th March, 2012)

How do both NGOs deal with state pressure to manage their activities around acceptable and pre-defined agendas? Despite the ever present possibility of state suppression of action perceived to threaten its authority, neither NGO appeared troubled by this. On the contrary, both asserted that their work in helping women factory workers should continue despite state resistance.

Despite the government not having clear policies on women in low-skilled occupations, S3 expressed hope about the future:

There is low level discourse on workers' rights, the government is not sympathetic to these workers...they are more sympathetic to the concerns of employers... the whole political situation is very unhealthy, but we have hope... the last election has shown how people have been brave enough to challenge government...it almost lost, so the government is forced to concede to certain political demands...for us, we press on, there is still much work to do... (interview, 8th November, 2012)

S1 was frustrated with the ambivalence of the government on the implementation of minimum wages, something X had campaigned for over many years. The government had promised to announce the adoption of minimum wages many times but this was

perpetually delayed. She expressed disappointment with this, but said that it did not dampen her spirit to continue campaigning:

Everyone puts profit first, and ignores workers... The Minimum Wage Policy will now be implemented 1 January 2013...firms are resisting this policy. Yet Government is unwilling to take a strong position on this...if we don't fight for workers, who will?
(interview, 7th November, 2012).

SECTION 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has deployed the SRA as a framework to explain the inequality and discrimination suffered by women factory workers in Malaysia. The underlying causes of gender inequality are reproduced across a range of institutions, namely the *state*, the *market*, the *community* and *family*. It has also investigated the extent to which NGOs can contribute to these women's empowerment so that they can challenge the structures and processes which give rise to their disadvantaged position. The work of two NGOs have been presented, which charts their objectives and strategies in assisting the empowerment of women.

To what extent do their strategies correspond with those regarded by Kabeer as "transformatory"? Three observations are offered. First, in assisting the empowerment of women factory workers, the evidence suggests that both NGOs encouraged women to determine their own interests and needs. In compensating for institutional failure, they focused on increasing women's intangible resources. They did not treat women as clients or victims, but regarded them as potential vessels which can be transformed into something strong. They attempted to build women's collective power. Their efforts clearly aimed to encourage women to reappraise their status and to challenge the way they are perceived by the state, employers and culture. They

also attempted to preserve their autonomy, despite operating in an unsympathetic environment.

Despite their interventions, the extent to which women factory workers were able to draw on their new found power to achieve change is limited. Kabeer asserted that the process of empowerment begins from within, and that part of this process is the development of a critical consciousness, a realisation that the injustices that women experience in their daily lives do not have to be accepted in unquestioning silence but can be challenged (Kabeer, 1999; 2012). In my investigation, the evidence suggests a dismal lack of confidence and ample reticence among women factory workers to challenge existing values, policies and practices, either because they are resigned to their position in life (and at work) and do not think to question its injustice, or otherwise are fearful of the repercussions of doing so. How far this is specific to Malaysia is uncertain but it is also unlikely to be unique to that country. Thus, a point which invites reflection is that the SRA is useful as a tool for women's empowerment only if women first see themselves as capable of being so empowered.

Thirdly, whilst the empirical basis for this study has been modest, it clearly complements the literature on industrial relations in Malaysia. It is not possible to ignore the fact that the state has built a model of economic development which relies on the repression of labour rights. It is ambivalent in its approach to gender issues, thus restricting women's progress. We note Kabeer's assertion that the state is a contradictory force in the process of women's empowerment. It has the power to override constraints and provide the enabling conditions for women to mobilise around their own self defined priorities. But where such activity conflicts with its interests, it is unlikely to prove a reliable ally (Kabeer, 1994: 261). This study also confirms that dimensions beyond the state help explain the subordination of women factory workers. It

has captured the part played by the *market*, *community* and *family* in perpetuating and reinforcing their predicament. These institutions contribute, in varying degrees, to the discrimination and inequality they suffer. Solutions to gender inequality cannot simply focus on remedying defects in individual institutions. On the contrary, a holistic approach is needed, but is one unlikely to prove popular with those with vested interests.

What prospects exist for collective action to generate sustained pressures on the structures of power and bring about change? For women factory workers in Malaysia, this may currently be more an illusion than a reality. The findings suggest that their experience of the concept of empowerment is extremely limited. Much work remains to be done in transforming their individual consciousness so that they question their subordinate status and recognise their capacity to exercise control over their own lives, let alone recognising the power of collective action in renegotiating power relations. Until then, using Kabeer's analogy, they 'remain in a dark room with their eyes closed'.

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