

**Export Opportunities: Women workers organising  
in the Philippine garments industry**

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## Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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## **Abstract**

Transnational production arrangements have been widely argued to lessen the organising capacities of industrial workers, none more so than in the case of women workers in 'export' or 'world market' factories in developing countries. This thesis contests this assertion by showing that women workers' ability to form enterprise unions in the Philippine garments industry are enhanced by transnational production arrangements involving an overseas market. Specifically, the thesis demonstrates that, in order to meet the quality and delivery requirements of overseas buyers and contractors, local owners and/or production managers are forced to routinely keep more production in-house in order to exert more direct controls over the work processes of their women sewers. By thereby limiting the amount of local subcontracting which is done, women workers are agglomerated in larger numbers in the one place and, consequently, their capacities to engage in collective action – as indicated by the establishment of enterprise unions – is markedly increased.

Empirically, the argument of the thesis draws on a 'multiple-case' study of sixty-five garment-making establishments located in and around Manila. The study involved interviews with owners, production managers and/or trade union officials about the local subcontracting practices of their establishments. The conclusions drawn about the links between export production and enhanced labour organising capacities at the enterprise level are corroborated by the 'commodity chain' literature on industrial deepening in the international garments industry and the status of the Philippine industry in this regard. But

rather than think simply in terms of industrial deepening, this thesis is concerned with the impacts of exporting on class processes.

Theoretically, the thesis thus draws on the Marxist view that capitalist development entails changes in the social form of labour, through the real subsumption of labour. But, whereas Marx linked the real subsumption of labour to greater capitalist controls over the labour process, in this thesis the real subsumption of labour is also tied to concomitant changes in the spatial form of the labour process. From this standpoint, the thesis engages with labour process theory after Braverman (accusing it of often failing to link capitalist control to class processes) and with theories of class (which often ignore the social and spatial form of the labour process). In tying organising capacities of women workers at the enterprise level to changes in social and spatial form of the labour process, it is nevertheless argued that these capacities are also shaped at the national level by the legal framework for legitimate organising and by 'political space' in which the law in fact operates. In this regard, it is argued that, whilst the state often passes laws to protect labour standards, it does not grant workers the means to ensure such standards are actually enforced.

The thesis also challenges the view that the recruitment of women is a strategy which employers deliberately use in the Philippine garments industry to limit industrial conflict. Against this assertion of a rational economic basis to women's employment, the thesis argues that women are employed for sewing jobs as a result of the sex-typing of such jobs; but that this is also more an effect than a cause as the feminisation of sewing in the modern garments industry is embedded in class processes in the nineteenth century in Europe

and the United States. Gender is a dimension of labour control, but women workers in the garments industry are not employed to limit enterprise unionism.

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## Glossary

BOI	Bureau of Industry
CBA	Collective Bargaining Agreement
CIR	Court of Industrial Relations
CLO	Congress of Labor Organizations
CPP	Communist Party of the Philippines
CRC	Centre for Research and Communication
CTUHR	Commission on Trade Union and Human Rights
DOLE	Department of Labor and Employment
EILER	Ecumenical Institute for Labor Education and Research
EOI	export-oriented industrialisation
EPZ	export processing zone
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GBAP	Garment Business Association of the Philippines
GTEB	Garments and Textile Export Board
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ISI	import-substitution industrialisation
KMK	<i>Kilusan ng Manggagawang Kababaihan</i> (Women's Workers' Movement)
KMU	<i>Kilusang Mayo Uno</i> (May First Movement)
LACC	Labour Advisory Consultative Council
MFA	Multi-Fibre Arrangement
MOLE	Ministry of Labor and Employment
NAFLU	National Federation of Labor Unions
NCSO	National Census and Statistics Office

NEDA	National Economic and Development Authority
NFL	National Federation of Labor
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NIDL	new international division of labour
PKP	<i>Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas</i>
RA	Republic Act
SEC	Securities Exchange Commission
TFDP	Task Force Detainees of the Philippines
TUCP	Trade Union Congress of the Philippines
UN	United Nations
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organisation
WTO	World Trade Organisation



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