Global Labour Journal

Volume 1 | Issue 2 4

5-31-2010

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Kathryn Kopinak
King's University College, University of Western Ontario, London, Canada, kkopinak@mail.ucsd.edu

Recommended Citation
Kopinak, Kathryn (2010) "Review of Teri Caraway's 'Assembling Women: The Feminization of Global Manufacturing'," *Global Labour Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, p. 295-296.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/globallabour/vol1/iss2/4

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Review of Teri Caraway's 'Assembling Women: The Feminization of Global Manufacturing'

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Book Review

Teri Caraway (2007) *Assembling Women: The Feminization of Global Manufacturing*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. ISBN: 978-0-8014-7365-4.

REVIEWED BY *Kathryn Kopinak, King's University College*

The scholarly aim of this book is to explain how and when women are hired in formal manufacturing. Data come from an in-depth case study of feminization in Indonesia, comparing it with other countries which comprise three important regions: South East Asia, South Asia and Latin America. In analyzing the transition from Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) to Export Oriented Industrialization (EOI), Caraway finds that 'low wages are only a partial reason why labor intensive sectors hire women' (16). For a fuller understanding, she formulates a theory of the feminization of global manufacturing incorporating four key areas: labor/capital intensity, labor supply, mediating institutions and gendered discourses of work. The methodology is gendered in considering industries dominated by both men and women, and multilevel, with data from national, regional and shopfloor points. The analysis is both quantitative and qualitative.

This work is set in the larger context of studies on women workers in EOI, pioneered by Diane Elson, Ruth Pearson etc. Caraway believes that the conclusion of much of this literature, equating EOI with the hiring of cheap female labor, is incomplete. She points out that in Indonesia and other EOI regimes, only the first phase is characterized by feminization at low wages. In the second phase, investment tends to be more capital intensive and the labor force male. Unfortunately, she is not explicit about the fact that women hired during the first phase for low wages are locked into this segment and co-exist with the second better rewarded sector of the labor force. It is not a transition from one labor force to another, but a stratification of different sectors within one labor force. This would be important to include, since once the second male dominated phase appears, researchers tend to backslide into gender blindness in the framing of their studies.

A prerequisite for feminization is labor supply: the availability of women deemed suitable by capital. In Indonesia this meant legal reforms permitting women to work at night, promoting family planning and education, etc. Under EOI, such reforms permit employers to add women workers in new factories or expanded shops in existing factories. Existing male workers are not to be replaced by females since this would be too disruptive. She does not find that religious factors, such as restrictive Islamic policies for women, were a barrier to their employment in Indonesia.

Perhaps the mediating institutions which contributed most to the feminization of manufacturing in Indonesia were weak unions. Caraway points out that in other situations, male workers have been able to use unions to prevent feminization, fearing it will lower their wages and working conditions. Because unions were stronger in Latin America and often incorporated into the state, manufacturing in them is less feminized than in South East Asia, where more authoritarian states were averse to organized labor.

Caraway emphasizes the role of gendered discourses of work in the feminization of manufacturing. She argues that previous studies have subsumed this factor under low wages and not understood it as an independent variable. Managers in capital intensive firms could, for example, save a great deal by hiring women rather than men. However, in second phase sectors such as auto assembly, there are strong cultural barriers to hiring women, even when it is admitted that women's work in rice fields is as heavy as in auto manufacturing (113). In labor intensive firms, managers were found to hire women even when men were available at the same rate of pay, because they said that men were more likely to be 'naughty', absent and careless. Caraway found that managers held relatively consistent gendered ideas across factories, but that they often translated what they meant by these ideas into quite varied allocations of work environments (116). From a poststructuralist feminist approach, she argues that it is impossible to determine a priori which firms will adopt a particular gendered translation.

The recommended audience for this book is research experts specializing in the social scientific study of gendered work in globalizing economies. Readers who assume that the cover images of Indonesian women at sewing machines introduce a book presenting the point of the view of the worker will be disappointed. Caraway only quotes or paraphrases managers, supervisors, political leaders etc. She does not get beyond the Foucauldian idea that it is the discourse of management which produces patient, disciplined and diligent woman workers (30). The voices of women workers, and male workers for that matter, are unfortunately absent. This appeared curious in light of the fact that the book is dedicated to four women labor activists (xi).

Kathryn Kopinak is Professor in the Department of Sociology at King's University College, at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, Canada.