
THIRD WORLD WOMEN IN THE GLOBAL FACTORY: NEITHER “VICTIMS” NOR “SAVIORS”¹

— ANNE SISSON RUNYAN —

Timothy Luke has argued that in an increasingly “informationalized” world economy and world polity, we must be more attentive to the new horizontal “power of flows”—the flows of “ideas, goods, symbols, people, images and money”—than to the traditional vertical “flow of power” emanating from institutional actors in the global hierarchy.² We need to look in new and unusual places for clues as to how the “power of flows” is operating and with what effects on traditional power-wielders and the traditionally powerless in the international system. One such place to look was at Levi’s South Zarzamora plant in San Antonio, Texas. Prior to the closure of their plant in 1990, the 1,150 workers employed there earned nearly \$7 per hour.³ Eighty-six percent of these workers were non-unionized Latino women, most of whom remain unemployed or work part-time or for minimum wage.⁴ However, one month after they were laid off, these same disempowered workers organized *Fuerza Unida* to launch a national boycott of Levi’s products until it met their demands for “increased pension benefits, extended severance pay, and special compensation for disabled workers.”⁵

Initially this extra-workplace organizing was focused on gaining traditional concessions from a (former) employer, but the struggle widened considerably as women became conscious of the ripple effects of the layoffs, ranging from

1. This phrase comes from the Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) Group, a Third World women’s research organization that has set up working groups all over the economic South to analyze the effects of structural adjustment policies on women and women’s struggles against them.

2. Timothy W. Luke, “From the Flows of Power to the Power of Flows: Teaching World Politics in the Informationalizing World System,” in *Teaching World Politics: Contending Pedagogies for a New World Order*, ed. Lev S. Gonick and Edward Weisband, 39-60 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 43.

3. Elizabeth Martinez, “Levi’s, Button Your Fly—Your Greed is Showing!” *Z Magazine*, January 1993, 22.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 23.

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psychological depression to domestic violence. Adopting the slogan, "*La mujer luchando. El mundo transformando*" ("Women struggling, the world transforming"), *Fuerza Unida* has held protests, hunger strikes, and tribunals in cities all over the Southwest and Northeast United States as well as in Mexico and France.⁶ It has also networked with such organizations as *Mujer a Mujer* (Woman to Woman) in Texas and Mexico, the garment workers organization *La Mujer Obrera* (The Woman Worker) in El Paso, and the Seamstresses' Union in Mexico. As Elizabeth Martinez observes, "That networking with other organizations is not merely tactical; *Fuerza Unida* sees links between their experience and other plant closures, other women's struggles, government policy—all sorts of broader issues."⁷ These include the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which is now a major target of *Fuerza Unida* and its network of labor and grass-roots organizations.⁸

Grass-roots movements of unemployed and marginally employed women of color like *Fuerza Unida*, *La Mujer Obrera*, and hundreds of others that have formed around the world⁹ are central actors in a new kind of struggle that is responding to a decade of structural adjustment policies and corporate restructuring. June Nash argues that this is not a traditional class struggle, but rather an "assertion of the right to live in a world with a diminishing resource base." As Third World governments comply with IMF directives to produce and export more goods (while cutting social services and gutting health, safety and environmental regulations) and corporations seek cheaper labor pools in order to become more competitive, export processing zones are proliferating throughout the economic South in agricultural and rainforest areas. Moreover, they are heavily reliant on women's cheap and intensive labor. The combination of these factors is undercutting the ability of households to sustain themselves on a daily basis. Wages are insufficient to provide adequate food and shelter, the time and energy of women as reproductive workers is being stretched to the limit, and sources for subsistence food are becoming degraded. Under these circumstances sheer survival, not class consciousness in the traditional sense, is what is motivating these women-led local/global movements.

Throughout the 1980s, women in textile, clothing, and electronic industries were networking through international feminist conferences held at the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam, ISIS (the Women's International Information and Communication Service) in Geneva, and in London through War on Want and the Archway Development Education Center.¹⁰ What emerged from these meetings were analyses and strategies quite different from those of conventional, male-dominated unions. First, these women challenged the notion of Western economic development and the idea that TNCs, in particular, are

6. *Ibid.*, 23.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. See Rachel Kamel, *The Global Factory* (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1990).

10. See Swasti Mitter, *Common Fate, Common Bond: Women in the Global Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 145-7.

Under these conditions, June Nash argues that the locus of resistance movements is shifting outside of the workplace and working-class organizations.¹⁹ What Nash calls "subsistence movements"²⁰ are fast replacing workers' movements as primary actors in national and transnational liberation struggles, and the focus of their protest includes not only TNCs, but governments as well. Nash suggests that subsistence movements are nothing less than "the consolidation of people against the state" which has failed to provide basic needs and even colluded with international capital to undermine subsistence production.²¹

Some men who have been reduced to subsistence production by massive layoffs in industrial sectors are beginning to ally with women who have traditionally been the most active in subsistence movements, as in the case of the Bolivian hunger strike. This process may be "rewriting" gendered bodies and gendered societies by reducing gender differentiation in terms of gender roles, relations, and interests—at least at the lowest economic rungs of societies where both men and women are reduced to living on the edge in the degraded informal economy. Under such circumstances, masculine gender privilege and expectations of feminine passivity make little sense, for they can derail joint struggles for survival that would be less divisive (and, thus, more effective) when undertaken by equals.

However, the case of Russia suggests that gender identities, roles, and relations may be regressing in the context of survival struggle. Male "entrepreneurs," who are entering into the informal "Mafia" economy now operating in Russia as a result of the swiftness of capitalist penetration there since the demise of the Soviet Union, are cornering the market of the informal economy, leaving little room for women even for subsistence production.²² Not only have seventy percent of Russian women found themselves without employment in the formal sector, but they have also largely been cut out of the legal and illegal commodity trade rackets mushrooming in what one commentator calls an increasingly "'brothel society'" where everything is being commodified.²³ This includes health, education, and childcare services, which are becoming privatized, unaffordable, and inaccessible for most women whose choices have been reduced to clerical and modelling work or housewifery and prostitution.²⁴ Women have been placed in the position of competing with men for jobs, education, and even informal economy work, a competition they are losing because men are entering into these sectors with increased access to resources from the start.

As male-female competition rather than cooperation develops in the struggle for diminishing subsistence resources, autonomous, grass-roots women's organizations will increasingly be at the forefront of local/global liberation struggles against TNCs and states which fail to meet the basic needs of households

Hopkins, and Akbar Muhammad (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 30.

19. *Ibid.*, 31.

20. Nash, "Global Integration and Subsistence Insecurity" Presentation.

21. *Ibid.*

22. See Andrew Kopkind, "From Russia With Love and Squalor," *The Nation*, 18 January 1993.

23. *Ibid.*, 55, 48.

24. *Ibid.*, 55.

“welcome and universal levellers” of inequalities in tradition-bound societies by creating “modern and superior societies.”¹¹ Second, they questioned both state policies and left-wing elite strategies to mold a working-class for the purposes of making it either a compliant labor force or a revolutionary mass to be led by a vanguard party.¹² Third, they refused to place the blame on “foreign competition” for job exploitation and loss, which sets worker against worker, and instead placed it on the practices of Western-based TNCs.¹³ Fourth, they rejected what have become false separations between workers in different industries. For example, they found similarities in the working conditions for both “blue-collar” manufacturing workers and “white-collar” clerical workers which further automates and fragments production work of all kinds.¹⁴ Moreover, by comparing notes, women working for Control Data in Korea found they had much in common with women working for Levi’s in Tennessee.¹⁵

Finally, these women also made connections between industrial and household production. Homework, in terms of both reproductive labor (such as childcare, eldercare, housework, and the production, procurement, and processing of food) and industrial piecework farmed out to women for home production, is among the most invisible, isolated, and alienated labor, they argued. Lack of childcare and transportation keeps women from working outside the home, and their subsequent lack of a living wage or even a wage at all leaves them subject to extreme poverty. As in the conventional workplace, homeworkers of color are particularly burdened, especially if they are illegal immigrants. Such women often face racism, single parenthood, and no protection by state authorities from worker exploitation and domestic violence.¹⁶

In view of these patterns, many socialist feminists are arguing that “it will be futile to counteract the challenges of global corporations until and unless there are extended social provisions for the care of the young and the elderly, and men are willing to share domestic work.”¹⁷ However, as an individual engaged in a hunger strike by laid off mine workers and their wives 1986 to protest the government’s compliance with IMF structural adjustment policies observed,

The government has not established the minimal conditions for worthwhile survival. For this reason, for us the survival of the mining centers is more than a love for the mines. We are posing the question: How are we going to live? What will be the basis of our survival? The government leaves it up to us to seek forms of survival.¹⁸

11. *Ibid.*, 152.

12. *Ibid.*, 152-3.

13. *Ibid.*, 146. According to Kamel, only a few US unions are coming to this understanding. Kamel, 62.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Both experienced male “discipline” in their plants, not just by bosses, but by male co-workers and relatives. Often at such plants, “husbands, older brothers and fathers” were used “to oversee the women workers.” *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 152.

17. *Ibid.*, 162.

18. Quoted in June Nash, “Cultural Parameters of Sexism and Racism in the International Division of Labor,” in *Racism, Sexism, and the World-System*, ed. Joan Smith, Jane Collins, Terence K.

and local communities. Since the state in its present form is increasingly unwilling and even unable to do this, such struggles may lead to demands for different kinds of political communities that can deliver both “bread and roses.” This is the meaning of *Fuerza Unido*’s slogan, “*La mujer luchando, el mundo transformando*,” but it is questionable if the struggle itself can survive in the face of the growing threats to even subsistence living.

Women’s struggles inside and outside of the global factory are still rooted in the modern (workplace, nation, state), and especially the pre-modern (household, community) which is becoming the most degraded sphere, resource-wise, by capitalist penetration. Moreover, these grass-roots struggles, however effectively they reconstruct the consciousness of and connections among the women in them, are still no match for the “power of flows” orchestrated by TNCs. *Fuerza Unido*’s boycott messages are overwhelmed by Levi’s advertising appeal to the common man and hip youth. Similarly, Nike’s chorus of athletic, hard-bodied young women screaming, “Just Do It!,” shifts attention away from the impoverished and emaciated body of the woman “who ‘is’ doing it—making the actual shoes.”²⁵ Yet, both corporations have an interest in maintaining their liberal images, so they are vulnerable to public disclosures about the working conditions suffered by mostly Hispanic and Asian women in clothing industry sweatshops.²⁶ However, few concessions to reduce exploitative labor practices are being won as yet. Moreover, groups like *La Mujer Obrera* are running out of funds and having to develop income-generating projects to keep themselves afloat.²⁷

Finally, the disintegration of the state may be hastened more by forces from above than below, making its demise and replacement highly undesirable for progressive women’s movements. David Becker and Richard Sklar argue that we are entering into a period of “postimperialism” in which “transnational class formation” is facilitating a political rapprochement between First World and Third World elites based on increasingly shared interests in constructing liberal democracies in the context of a world capitalist system.²⁸ However, as Becker and Sklar observe, this “new world order” is not necessarily cause for celebration:

... “postimperialism is a theory of international oligarchy.” Should the nation-state be increasingly or decisively marginalized as an economic institution by “Cosmocorp,” and should the nationalistic vendettas with which we are all too familiar be overcome, it is not certain that the result would be the Utopia foreseen by the ideologists of corporate capitalism. A world dominated by an international

25. Ballinger, 32.

26. Martinez, 27.

27. Kamel, 64.

28. David G. Becker and Richard L. Sklar, “Why Postimperialism?,” in *Postimperialism: International Capitalism and Development in the Late Twentieth Century*, eds. David G. Becker, Jeff Frieden, Sayre P. Schatz, and Richard L. Sklar (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987), 13.

bourgeois oligarchy offers little that would appeal to progressives. Its institutions of political power and accountability might be even more remote from those affected by them than is the case today. What is more, the dominant oligarchy may resort to openly coercive forms of social control if it has to face a sullen or hostile proletariat without the legitimation afforded by nationalism.²⁹

It is undesirable for the increasingly feminized proletariat and sub-proletariat to trade gendered nationalism for gendered internationalism. This would amount to their exchanging a construction of national identity and solidarity based on masculinist notions of self-determination and autonomy (which occurs often at the expense of women's self-definitions and solidarity with each other), for a construct which would further distance women at the grass-roots from networks of power emanating from and across male-dominated, international financial and "security" regimes. Thus, it is not surprising that grass-roots women's movements, particularly in the economic South (whether that be in the geographical Third World or First World), still seek to some degree a reformation of the state through national solidarity and liberation campaigns. However, to the degree that the state is already captured in the postimperialist scenario, it is equally understandable why progressive women's movements may increasingly need to by-pass it to form alternative political solidarities, communities, and structures of societal coordination.

Whether struggling for reformation or transformation or both, it is clear that women in and out of the global factory are not helpless "victims" but neither are they "saviors" ushering in a new future all by themselves. Neither of these pre-modernist and modernist identities are useful to women engaging in the day-to-day struggle to negotiate local/global forces that are shaping and reshaping their lives and ours. Indeed, impoverished women (and men) in the economic South struggling to survive in the face of degrading political economies/ecologies could be likened only to the first wave of canaries sent into the mine shafts. Allowing their expendability undermines sustainability (social, economic, political, as well as ecological) for much of the rest of us in the global community. Thus, turning our attention to those struggles at the nexus of the pre-modern, modern, and post-modern—which challenge conventional dichotomies, boundaries, and institutional frameworks through local/transnational connections—may move more of us to renegotiate the contract that as select few have drawn up and are forcing the majority of us to sign.

29. *Ibid.*, 14.

