

*How do global supply chains  
exacerbate gender-based violence  
against women in the global south?*

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## ***How do global supply chains exacerbate gender-based violence against women in the global south?***

In 2018/2019 the CGPE launched an annual Gender & Global Political Economy Undergraduate Essay Prize competition, open to all undergraduate students within the School of Global Studies. The winner of the 2018/2019 competition is **Isabella Garcia** for the essay "How do global supply chains exacerbate gender-based violence against women in the Global South?" Isabella graduated with a BA in International Relations and Development in July and will join the MA cohort in our Global Political Economy programme for 2019/2020. Given the very strong field of submissions, the award committee further decided to award a second-place prize to Yume Tamiya for the essay "Does the rise of the middle class disguise existing inequalities in Brazil?". Yume graduated with a BA in International Development with International Education and Development. We are delighted to publish both of these excellent essays in the CGPE Working Paper series.

## **How do global supply chains exacerbate gender-based violence against women in the global south?**

The majority of commodities sold by large brands and retailers in the world today are not produced in one single location, rather their components parts are sourced or produced across different countries through complex transnational production networks known as 'supply chains'<sup>1</sup>. The development of global supply chains has been part of a wider transformation in global production and trading patterns and is linked to neoliberal trade 'liberalization' and the increased ease of capital flow, as well as lower transportation costs and better global communication networks. This has made it much easier for non-state actors to trade with international buyers through transnational supply networks and has enabled the re-location of production to independently owned suppliers across the global south, establishing "a new, international division of labour in which vast brand and retail companies coordinate production across a panoply of subcontracted suppliers located all over the Global South" (LeBaron, Howard, Thibos and Kyritsis, 2018, p.16). This new international division of labour has occurred simultaneously with the 'feminisation of labour': used to describe the integration of women across the global south into the formal economy, mostly through their employment in the labour-intensive stages of production for large brands and retailers.

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<sup>1</sup> The ILO define global supply chains as: "the cross-border organization of the activities required to produce goods or services and bring them to consumers through inputs and various phases of development, production and delivery. This definition includes foreign direct investment (FDI) by multinational enterprises (MNEs) in wholly owned subsidiaries or in joint ventures in which the MNE has direct responsibility for the employment relationship. It also includes the increasingly predominant model of international sourcing where the engagement of lead firms is defined by the terms and conditions of contractual or sometimes tacit arrangements with their suppliers and sub-contracted firms for specific goods, inputs and services" (ILO 2016, p.1).

In this essay, I will analyse how the feminisation of labour at the base of supply chains has transformed the processes of production in relation to the processes of social reproduction in the global south. Firstly, I argue that gender discourses concerning the social reproductive roles of women as wives and mothers have been appropriated and reproduced within exporting hubs in the global south to naturalise new discourses concerning the forms of employment that women are 'capable' of doing. Specifically, a new sexual division of labour has emerged beyond the traditional 'public'/ 'private' dichotomy, as women enter the public realm of work but are relegated to certain jobs that are constructed as feminine. These feminised jobs are devalued within capitalist economies through their designation as 'low-skilled' and 'flexible', which justifies forcing women into precarious, unregulated, and often violent employment. Secondly, I argue that a consequence of the neoliberal globalisation and feminisation of labour is the undermining of existing modes of social reproduction; this, in turn, impacts localised gender-relations by alienating men economically and subverting heteronormative cultural and social norms concerning the roles of men and women.

Feminist GPE research into the effects of the feminisation of labour at the bottom of supply chains highlights how it permits gender inequality in terms of wages and employment rights, placing women workers in a subordinate position in terms of material equity. However, this research has often overlooked how these material inequalities that are ingrained into the operations and organisation of global supply chains, actually manifest physically through violence against women in the global south.<sup>2</sup> I will examine how demand-

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<sup>2</sup> The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993) defines violence against women as: "Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."

driven industries, specifically garments and fresh-produce, opportunistically reinforce gender hierarchies by demanding cheap-flexible labour from suppliers, which in turn, forces female workers into exploitative employment and increases their risk of being subject to violence in the workplace by male managers and co-workers. I will then go onto explore how the feminisation of labour in supply chains has exacerbated gender-based violence in certain cultural and local contexts by examining the link between ‘femicides’ in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico and the introduction of Export-Processing Zones in the 1990s. Lastly, I will examine the link between raw material exploitation and sexual violence in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) by examining how domestic and international actors linked to extractive industries indirectly fund conflict and sexual violence in mining regions.

### **The rise of supply chains**

In today’s globalised economy multinational companies, such as Walmart and Nike, outsource the labour-intensive stages of commodity production to independent manufacturing hubs in the global south that have lower production costs. For example, food retail giant Nestle has nearly 165,000 direct suppliers and 695,000 individual farmers worldwide (Lebaron, Howard, Thibos and Kyritsis, 2018, p.16). Despite not owning their own factories and farms, leading firms wield power over their suppliers and over the coordination of their supply chains. This is because they can actively choose – and replace – suppliers, due to their immense purchasing power, which allows them to extract price concessions, as well as giving companies monopolies over global commodities and resources. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development has estimated that the “productive networks coordinated by firms like this encompass fully 80% of world trade,

with one in five jobs linked to their operations” (Lebaron, Howard, Thibos and Kyritsis, 2018, p.16). Outsourcing can therefore be understood as a strategic business decision that allows companies to demand cheaper production from suppliers by taking advantage of lower labour costs and regulations in the global south.

The processes of outsourcing also signify a wider transformation in the history of capitalism, in which a new international division of labour has emerged in conjunction with the global integration of the processes of production. This is reflected as a new ‘global assembly line’ within newly industrialising countries in the global south who have established a ‘comparative advantage’ in the export of cheap labour-intensive manufactured goods (Smith and Mahutga, 2009, p.63). One of the industrialisation strategies implemented by these countries was the creation of Export Processing Zones (EPZs) to attract foreign companies, by advertising tax reductions and other concessions in these zones, as well as having very weak labour rights and regulations, which has enabled exploitative labour practices in many of the factories and farms in these zones. Consequentially, the comparative advantage of these countries is not the cheap goods they produce, rather it is the availability of cheap exploitable labour that keeps production costs low (Elias and Ferguson, 2014).

However, the responsibility for exploitative labour practices is not solely with suppliers or the national governments of newly industrialised economies in the global south. The demand for cheap production and thus labour comes from the buyer-driven operations of many leading retailers and brands, who push the costs and risk associated with fluctuating economic markets, short-production cycles and changing consumer preferences down their supply chains onto their supplier factories and farms. More often than not these suppliers have inadequate technical tools and managerial training, which are both necessary for them

to cope with such pressure and results in them passing it onto their workforce leading to forced labour practices. For example, a study examining the supply chains of 50 companies discovered that only about 6 per cent of supply chain workforce was directly employed (LeBaron, Howard, Thibos and Kyritsis, 2018, p.31). This indicates that the “successes of retailers and brands in creating low-cost flexible supply chains appears to rely on the availability of a pool of workers who are socially and economically obliged to accept work on such terms” (Raworth and Kidder, 2009, p.165). Meanwhile, lead firms remain legally unaccountable for the exploitation they enable because they retain an ‘arms-length’ relationship with suppliers. For example, it says on the website of the European fashion retailer H&M: “We neither set nor pay factory workers’ wages and consequentially, we cannot decide what they are paid” (H&M, Cited in LeBaron, Howard, Thibos and Kyritsis, 2018, p.43). Such narratives ignore how lead firms actively shape the conditions for all those beneath them; by unevenly distributing value along their supply chains through sourcing practices that seek out the cheapest labour possible and whose value they then accrued up their supply chains (Ibid, p. 42).

### **‘The feminisation of labour’**

The demand for cheap and flexible labour that is unable to contest conditions of employment is inherently gendered because women occupy the majority of low-waged jobs in exporting sectors. For example, female workers make up around 70 percent of the workforce in EPZs and often these are young migrant women who move from rural areas to EPZs towns seeking employment opportunities. The expansion of women into the global labour market has been described as the feminisation of labour, referring to the high number of women who now work in the formal economy; but more significantly to the type



of employment that is prevalent within exporting sectors in the global south, which is low-paid, low-skilled, precarious and disposable (Young, 2018, p.461). This type of labour is feminised because it intersects with gender discourses surrounding social reproduction – “those activities that are usually performed within the private sphere of the household that are essential to the functioning of the productive economy” (Elias and Ferguson, 2014, p.189). These are domestic activities such as birthing, childcare, cleaning, emotional labour etc, that have traditionally been performed by women and are devalued within capitalist economies because they are viewed as unproductive and low-skilled. Such gendered ideologies constitutively shape what types of jobs are viewed as suitable for women in society in relation to their assumed productive and reproductive roles. Women are relegated to jobs that are viewed as similar to those performed in domestic sphere such as, fruit-picking or sewing due to gendered assumptions about women being ‘dexterous’ or having ‘nimble fingers. The process of feminising these type jobs actively constructs them as low-skilled, flexible and disposable, which devalues them and provides employers with impetus to pay less for such work. Furthermore, lower wages are justified on the basis that women are viewed as secondary earners to men. A study of female factory workers in China found that there was perception among male managers that female workers were only working until they married and thus were not deserving of better pay or promotions (Elias and Ferguson, 2014, p.189). This highlights how there is a perception among employers that female workers are flexible and disposable, which illustrates why the majority of these jobs are uncontracted and temporary. Consequently, this has led to a new sexual division of labour within the supply chains of certain exporting industries across the global south. A report by Oxfam (2004) found that women occupy around 60-90 percent of the jobs in the labour-intensive stages of clothing and fresh-produce production in supply

chains, whereas men occupy the majority of managerial roles in factories and farms. Thus, “gender as a category of social and economic differentiation influences the division of labour, and the distribution of work, income, productivity inputs and the economic behaviour of agents (Young, 2018 p.458).

### **Gender-Based Violence in Supply Chains: The Garment Industry**

The integration of women into the demanding supply chains of big brands and retailers “has been on unfavourable terms, with employment characterized by low pay and poor working conditions as well as low job insecurity and uncertain sustainability” (Young, 2018, p.461). This is because the competitive nature of markets for labour-intensive products, as well as raw material extraction, has in many instances exacerbated gender inequalities and aggravated local and cultural gender relations, by creating unregulated environments in which violence against women thrives. It is therefore, essential to examine how these socio-economic factors produce or exacerbate violence against women, as well as how “gender constructions of women as inferior or subordinate to men within and across societies have made violence against women both acceptable, in many places at many times, and invisible” (True, 2012, p.9).

The garment industry is a key example of this because the rise of ‘fast fashion’ in the clothing industry has led to retailers delivering eight to-ten styles per season rather than just four. Resulting in leading retailers demanding ever-faster low-cost production from their suppliers, which “undermine[s] other efforts to promote good labour standards and reinforce[s] bad practices of unscrupulous factory managers” (Raworth and Kidder, 2009, p.173). Furthermore, due to the prevalence of outsourcing practices within the garment industry, leading retailers remain legally unaccountable for the cost and risk that they push

down their supply chains, hindering them from investigating abuses occurring in their supplier factories.

A 2018 report published by the Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA) investigating gender-based violence in H&M, Walmart and Gap's supply chains found that female workers across their suppliers in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka were subject to sexual harassment and physical violence by male managers. For example, "forms of sexual harassment documented in H&M supply chain included inappropriate touching, pinching, pulling hair, and bodily contact initiated by both managers and male co-workers" (AFWA, 2018, p. 60). Those that resisted these advancements were threatened with being fired, highlighting the precarious nature of their employment. The report also documented how extreme pressure to reach production targets meant that female workers faced routine physical violence in response to not completing quotas fast enough. As well as deprivations of liberty such as forced over-time and not being allowed to take lunch and toilet breaks. A different report produced by the Fair Labour Association (2012) examining the system of 'Sumangali'<sup>3</sup> in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, found that female migrant workers were forced to work excessive hours, in dangerous conditions, and were often subject to sexual harassment and violence by male managers who controlled the dormitories they lived in along with factories they worked in. The report also listed the retailers who sourced from suppliers in Tamil Nadu, which includes major global brand who are part of the Ethical Trading Initiative such as, Marks & Spencer, Sainsburys, Walmart, H&M and Zara.

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'Sumangali' is used to refer to "a form of bonded labour where young women have a fixed-term contract and a significant portion of the legal minimum wage and/or other payments to which they are entitled are withheld until they have completed the contract. The term 'camp labour' refers to arrangements whereby workers live in company-controlled hostels with no freedom of movement so that they will be available to work on call, will not seek work in other factories or mills and will be deterred from joining a union. Both Sumangali and camp labour are forms of forced labour" (FLA, 2012).

### **'Femicides' in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico:**

Violence against women manifests in various forms with acts ranging from verbal and emotional abuse to physical and sexual assault. One of the most egregious forms is 'femicide', a sex-based hate crime, which according to the WHO (2012) "is generally understood to involve intentional murder of women because they are women". The town Ciudad Juarez is an Export Processing Zone located along the Mexican-American border that has been described as the 'femicide capital' of the world. Since 1993 thousands of women have been murdered and significantly many of the victims were employed in Maquiladora factories, which were built after the introduction of the North American Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1992. Research examining the causes of the femicides in Ciudad Juárez has suggested that extreme gender-based violence manifested, due to a complex socio-economic interaction between cultural gender norms, the economic disenfranchisement of men in favour of women, and an increased structural vulnerability of women workers in export supply chains. (True, 2012).

As discussed above, women workers make up the bulk of workers in export processing zones and around 50 percent of the maquila workers in Ciudad Juarez are women. Employers have traditionally favoured them over men because of "their nimble fingers, and aptitude for the work, but also because they are cheap and supposedly docile workers" (Carron, Thomson and Macdonald, 2007, p.26). Studies have suggested that rise in female employment in predominately patriarchal societies such as Mexico, have negatively impacted gender relations in towns like Ciudad Juárez. As the influx of 'cheap' female workers resulted in deflated wages for everyone in the area, as well as reduced employment opportunities for male labourers, which led to an overarching resentment

towards female workers (ibid). This resentment intersected with the cultural expressions of machismo and marianismo regarding male and female roles within Latin American society. These terms signify inherently patriarchal values as, “male power is symbolized by aggression, whereas the domestic and inferior nature of women is symbolized by marianismo” (Pantaleo, 2010, p.351). The consequence of these patriarchal values is that more often than not, women are defined solely in relation to their role as wives and mothers; as unpaid carers of the family who should not engage in paid labour (ibid). As a result, the expansion of women workers into exporting sectors has created a perception among economically alienated men that women are preventing them from performing their role as ‘providers’, which in some cases, has led to men attempting to reassert their power and social standing through violence against women (True, 2012).

### **Mineral Exploitation and Trade in the Eastern DRC**

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is widespread, and the most egregious forms of sexual violence are perpetrated by armed groups involved in the country's long-standing conflict (Meger, 2015, Devoe, 2011). The UN and multiple NGOs have frequently attempted to highlight a direct connection between sexual violence and competition between armed factions in the eastern part of the country over control of mines that extract the natural resources- tin, tungsten, tantalum and gold. These minerals are essential for the production of numerous electronic goods thus their exploitation is a source of lucrative revenue for armed militias and corporate elites who profit from their trade internationally (globalwitness.org, enoughproject.org). Academic research examining sexual violence as a weapon of war has shown that it is often employed by armed groups in order to achieve their objectives. In many conflicts it has been utilised

tactically to control communities by creating feelings of stigma and shame at an individual and community-based level (Meger, 2011). This in turn, perpetuates a break-down of community kinship ties through the “exploitation of social and cultural norms of honour and identity” (Meger, 2011, p.125). Accordingly, a large body of research on mineral exploitation and sexual violence has emphasised the connection between sexual violence in the Eastern DRC and the acquisition of mineral wealth by armed groups operating in the region (globalwitness.org, enoughproject.org). One of the main examples often cited, aiming to show a connection between sexual violence and conflict minerals is ‘Walikale’, which is a prominent mining region in the Eastern part of the country where in 2010 over 300 women, men, girls and boys were raped and sexually assaulted by soldiers from the FDLR and Maï Sheka rebel groups (Devoe, 2011, p.467). In response to this event, as well as international pressure, then president Joseph Kabila introduced a mining ban from September 2010 to March 2011. While, at the international level the United States Congress passed section 1502 of the Frank Dodd Act (2010), which aims to regulate corporate sourcing of minerals from central Africa through self-disclosure and public reporting (Buss, 2018, p.555). Similarly, the OECD and UN have both established regulatory standards that advise companies using or trading materials that come from conflict areas to carry out risk-based diligence; through examination of their supply chains in order to check for abuses that they may be funding (Globalwitness.org).

However, the effectiveness of these measures is dubious because it is extremely difficult to hold specific actors accountable due to the complex and arms-lengths nature of supply chains. The exploitation and trade of these minerals is part of a complex network of various local, national and international actors, which is comprised of market exchanges that “cross boundaries and blur the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate, which off-shore

finance acts as the node, connecting the two markets” (Merger, 2011, p.110). There are also many peaceful Congolese artisanal miners (including women) whose survival is equally as dependent upon the mines for a source of income as armed groups; whose livelihoods would be undermined if stricter regulations or bans were imposed domestically and internationally (Kirby, 2012). Furthermore, mainstream discourses tend to marginalise more common forms of SGBV that occur in mining sites in the eastern DRC specifically, ‘transactional sex’. Here, “women provide sex to gain access to employment, which further underscores the link between sexual and economic exploitation particularly common in mining sites” (Laudati and Mertens, 2019, p.15). This represents an alternative link between sexual violence and mining beyond the dominant rape-resource narrative because it occurs within the industry rather than outside. In this instance, the body and sex become a commodity that women must sell in order to gain employment into patriarchal ‘markets of violence’ such as mining (Ibid, p.15).

While there is a correlation between the mineral exploitation and sexual violence by armed groups to simply assume cause and effect undermines the complexity of sexual violence in the Eastern DRC. As such, “the relationship between sexual violence, conflict, and mineral extraction, while asserted as fact, is far from clear” (Buss, 2018, p.562). The link between SGBV, mineral exploitation and global trade transcends purely material explanations. Instead, academic analysis of these issues should be situated within the historically specific socio-politico context of the DRC, while also emphasising the violent processes of capital accumulation within extractive industries. For example, ethnographic research conducted by Baaz and Stern (2009) reveals the complex psycho-social and material motivations behind why a large proportion of soldiers in the eastern DRC commit rape. The narrative here highlights how economically disenfranchised Congolese soldiers

perpetuate “sexual violence as an available means for obtaining the ‘provider’ masculinity subverted by the feminization of poverty” (Meger, 2015, p.428). These affective feelings, however, are tied to a neoliberal transformation that has undermined previously established modes of social reproduction, which has explicitly gendered consequences at a micro and macro level (Federici, 2002). These changes are inherently violent as they require “the suppression of dissent and any form of economic activity that challenges the logic of accumulation” (Meger, 2015, p. 422). Post-colonial developing countries, such as the DRC, with valuable natural resources and weak institutional structures are especially vulnerable to out-breaks of conflict. This is because global demand creates internal and external competition for access to these resources, which has supported the rise of shadow economies and provided non-state actors with material incentives in a country with few formal economic opportunities (Ibid). As in clientelist states, only a select group of political and financial elites with formal access to institutional power have profited from neoliberal globalisation (Ibid). Consequentially, these processes have exacerbated existing internal tensions and fuelled conflict, while simultaneously financially benefiting certain domestic and international actors. It is in this environment that, “sexual and gender-based violence perpetuated in the context of the conflict in eastern DRC has facilitated the exploitation of natural resources and accumulation for those within the respective industries” (Meger, 2015, p.427). Therefore, the prevalence of SGBV and mineral exploitation may not be a deliberate and conscious strategy employed to serve the material goals of leading firms or even armed groups. Nevertheless, the violent exploitation of these minerals is directly in service to the neoliberalised processes of capital accumulation in extractive industries. This in turn, has fuelled conflict in eastern DRC and undermined existing modes of reproduction,



which has been detrimental to local gender-relations and has facilitated the rise of increasingly violent environments.

In conclusion, the integration of women workers across the global south into the supply chains of multinational companies is often constructed as a positive phenomenon by mainstream discourses. However, the reality of the situation is not one of female empowerment, rather the feminization of labour in exporting-sectors in newly industrializing countries has forced women into precarious, low-waged and exploitative employment at the bottom of the global supply chains of leading brands and retailers. This has occurred in conjunction with a neoliberal transformation in the processes of production, which has enabled firms to outsource production to manufacturing hubs across the global south. These processes have allowed companies to take advantage of the 'cheap' and 'flexible' female labour supply within these countries, which has transformed pre-existing gendered norms of social reproduction, while also alienating a large proportion of men in the global south who are no longer able to perform their 'provider' role. Throughout this essay, I have attempted to illustrate that the feminisation of labour is monopolised on by leading firms, who often exacerbate the gender hierarchies and inequalities on which it is based. This is because they directly shape the conditions for those at the bottom of their supply chains due to their disproportionate market power over suppliers. This immense power enables lead firms to constantly demand cheaper and faster production; ultimately at the expense of women workers employed in supplier factories across the global south. Crucially, the aim of this essay has been to deliver a nuanced examination of how such complex socio-economic processes impact and shape local gender relations and which, in

conjunction with unregulated labour and corporate environments has enabled gender-based violence to thrive.

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