

"women in the global factory" by annette fuentes and ehrenreich essay sample

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Do labor-intensive jobs really empower and liberate women? Is it just a ploy of multinational firms to take advantage of the status of women in third world countries? These are the questions raised by Annette Fuentes and Ehrenreich in their book, “ Women in the Global Factory.” The book discusses the emerging trend where women are employed in factories and tasked to work in manufacturing assembly lines. The book explores the lives of women from third world countries and how their lives are shaped and defined by the multinational firms who employ them. Fuentes and Ehrenreich presented arguments and evidence as to why women are favored for factory work. They presented real-life experiences of women who have been employed in such labor intensive work.

From the arguments presented, it is evident that factory work is not a form of liberation for women. Fuentes and Ehrenreich asked, “ Liberation or virtual slavery?”[1] Quite clearly, it is the latter. Women are made to believe that their work in factories empowers them. They are preferred not because they are ideal in terms of skills but because they fit the ideal low-wage labor-intensive worker. Reasons abound as to why women are chosen for such kind of work. Fuentes and Ehrenreich discussed some of these reasons. One reason is that women as seen as, “ Docile, easily manipulated, and willing to do boring repetitive work.”[2] Secondly, women are viewed to have “ natural patience.”[3] Men complain and protest while women only cry. Such

perceived characteristics of women make them more favorable than men for such forms of employment.

So is factory work a truly liberating experience for women? The answer is no. It all comes down to economics. Multinational corporations moved their production to third world countries in search for cheap labor. As Fuentes and Ehrenreich wrote, " If labor stops being so cheap, they can move on." [4] These companies are always on the look out for cost minimizing measures. Employing women is just that, a way by which to lower down costs. Women are paid lower wages than men. [5] This is the primary reason why they are preferred by multinational corporations. Aside from the other reasons mentioned, lower wages is what attracts firms to hire women, most especially in third world countries. Unfortunately, more recent studies have shown that women's wages are still lower than men even in the developed countries. In the United States in fact, a study conducted by US Department of Labor show that women's earnings were only 76% of their male counterparts. [6]

The plight of women in third world countries and in the more developed countries does not differ much. This is because women are still being discriminated. One would expect that American women would be freer from discrimination than others. In a study conducted by the World Economic Forum it was revealed that, " Women in Sri Lanka, South Africa, Cuba and Lesotho all fared better — relatively speaking — than women in industrialized nations such as Japan, Switzerland and the United States." [7] The study took into consideration the difference between men and women in

terms of salary, education, and the number of women who hold managerial and political positions. This reveals that the problems Fuentes and Ehrenreich discussed in their book are felt not just in developing countries but in first world countries as well.

It can be assumed that in third world countries, the difference in wages of men and women is presumably larger. In third world countries, this difference in wage can be attributed to the fact that women are seen to hold merely a "secondary status." (Fuentes and Ehrenreich, 1983) There are fewer opportunities for women to earn a living. More importantly, women are only considered as "supplementary earners for their families." (Fuentes and Ehrenreich, 1983) They can do without the work and remain at home doing what women traditionally ought to be doing.

Working in labor intensive jobs is not liberating or empowering for women. In fact, it only makes it more evident that women hold a lower status than men. It reinforces the patriarchal nature of society. More importantly, employing women as in such positions only reflects the economic nature of society. Firms will always find ways and means to lower the costs of production.

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[1] Annette Fuentes and Barbara Ehrenreich, *Women in the Global Factory* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1983).

[6] Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Highlights of Women's Earnings in 2001*, 2002, United States Department of Labor, <http://stats.bls.gov/cps/cpswom2001.pdf>.

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