

Independence to
dependency
globalization impact
on jamaican women



The impact of the globalization project on third world countries has been steadily escalating worldwide. Through this project, economies of nations across the globe have become more increasingly interconnected. While many countries, mostly those of the West, benefit significantly from this process, developing nations often do not enjoy the same benefits. Two years ago I took a cruise to the Caribbean and visited many of the islands. One of the countries that really stood out for me was Jamaica. Though the experience was unforgettable, I could not help but notice the extreme poverty in non-tourist areas. It is shocking to see what seems to be two completely different places on one small island. One side full of luxury and beauty, yet the other of hardships and struggle. Through Global Development Studies I learned more about the economic situation of the developing countries and gained a further understanding of the context of what I saw. As a result, my question for research is, while globalization has linked many countries, is its impact on women in developing countries, more specifically Jamaica, really beneficial? World organizations such as the IMF and World Bank, as well as that of transnational corporations (TNCs) in the area, have gained huge control over the economic operations of Jamaica over the last few decades. This shift of power has impacted the country as a whole, however, their impression has been felt most by Jamaican women. The creation of “ Free Zones” has changed the way women live and are involved in the work force. The impact of globalization has affected every sector of Jamaican women’s lives. Economically, their suffering is worsened, as well, their health becomes endangered and finally the cultural impacts of the emerging corporations cause further consequences. The discourse of

these inequalities and exploitations of these women has given rise for the reasoning to further research the subject in hopes to make a better future. Though globalization has been proven to provide an increase of beneficial interactions globally, it ultimately proves to be extremely detrimental to Jamaican women.

Although the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPS) was intended to bring economic prosperity to developing countries, the impact it had on Jamaican women proved otherwise. Bolles (1996) explains the effect that the national debt crisis had on the creation of Free Trade Zones (FTZs). After gaining independence, Jamaica's economy was extremely unstable. As a result, the Jamaican government had to resort to borrowing loans from Western countries and, consequentially, this led to them falling into major debt. This caused the IMF and World Bank to be placed in control of all loans, and thus have the ability to implement SAPs. While this method was used to ease the debt of this developing country, it merely exacerbated the problem (Bolles 1996). Because of the immense foreign involvement, these programs proved to do very little in terms of economic prosperity. For example the Independent Evaluation Group (2001) explains that in 1985 external debt was still 180 percent of the GDP. Moreover, due to the pro-foreign investment nature of these programs, they ultimately led to the creation of Free Zones in Jamaica, which were largely gender specific. Transnational corporations were attracted to these countries taking part in SAPs because of the "race to the bottom" effect (Standings 1989). Standings explains that TNCs are attracted to these countries due do the weak labor laws in terms of wages, regulation and benefits. These companies also receive tax breaks

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from the government to further promote investment. As a result of this combination, Jamaican women suffered. Moreover, these zones are seen as ideal for major corporations due to the fact that, while technically unionization is allowed, there are absolutely no unions in free zones in Jamaica (Willmore 1993). This also relates back to the idea of racing to the bottom: the government of Jamaica would never back up their people in creating a union because the TNC would simply relocate to a country which would appeal to their wishes, thus making these female workers helpless (Willmore 1993). The Structural Adjustment Programs put in place through the increasing globalizing world are proved to be unfavorable for Jamaican women.

While the SAPs provided the admittance for the transnational corporations to create the Free Zones in Jamaica, the actions of the companies themselves in terms of wages and taxation further highlight the struggles felt by Jamaican women due to globalization. The gender specifics of the zones resulted in the corporations relying heavily on female labor and the feminization of labor (Bolles 1996). With the focus on export industries, low income women providing basic consumer goods began to suffer. This resulted in a shift to jobs in the labor force as a source of income. After the FTZs were introduced, an intense acceleration of women entering the garment industry was seen, with 90 percent of zone workers being female (Bolles 1996). These women were seen as flexible labor, and the corporations benefitted from their willingness to accept lower wages. Moghadem (1999) argues that women in developing countries are more apt to work in labor-intensive industries at wages lower than men in worse

conditions due to the fact that there are so few opportunities for other employment. Moreover with extreme poverty many of these women are forced to find jobs to provide for their family, and as a result agree to accept the flexible wages of the FTZs. However, "individual" wages are paid rather than "family" wages. (Standings 1989) This means that the women are not being paid wages intended to support a family, rather they are given merely enough to get by for themselves. This raises a major issue, considering most of these women enter the labor force for the sole reason to support their family. Furthermore, the TNCs take advantage of the leniency in regulations given to them by the government. The film "Life and Debt" interviewed laborers in Jamaican free zones and complaints of unfair taxes were dominant. The issue of low wages and unwarranted taxes put forward by the transnational corporations negatively impact the women laborers in Jamaica.

Not only does the structural adjustment programs and transnational corporations have economic consequences, but, the health risks which coincide these free zones are also detrimental to women. The Structural Adjustment Programs were placed upon developing countries such as Jamaica with strict terms of how they are to be operated. Because these programs were firmly in place to produce economic progress, other public services such as healthcare and education were largely ignored during economic planning. Independent Evaluation Group (2001) stated that as a result of these SAPs, the standard of living worsened. Due to the lack of regulation by the local government, TNCs are able to cutback in regards to meeting preset standards. According to Bailey and Ricketts (2003) many of the factories do not live up to the International Labor Organization Decent

Work Agenda thus risking the workers health. Fuettes and Ehenreich (1998) explain how the health of employees is low on the priorities of the employers. With meeting quotas being the main priority of these companies, the women working as laborers are forced to endure long hours over tedious work with few breaks in order to obtain their pay. "Life and Debt" further corroborates this by displaying the workers working in cramped warehouses revealing the need to work meticulously in order to reach the days quotas. These women are forced to work up to 14 hours a day, often without over time in order to reach the weekly goals (Sparr 1994). As a result, the heavy impact on their bodies and minds, this often leads to early retirement among young workers. Unfortunately, the long hours are not the only method used to reach the quotas for the day. These Jamaican women have to endure verbal and often times physical abuse in the workplace (Bailey and Rickets 2003). Another major health issue is the lack of attention to following the standards set in place by the U. S. National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (Fuettes and Ehenreich 1998). This results in these women working in hazardous conditions. For example there have been cases in textile industries, with such cramped warehouses and poor investment in proper air flow, lung disease has become an issue among workers. Furthermore, there are often open containers of carcinogenic acids and solvents that emit toxic fumes (Fuettes and Ehenreich 1998). There is also a lack of training among these employees and often times they are required to operate dangerous machinery, further causing risks to health. The hazardous and health threatening conditions further demonstrates the harmful effect of globalization on Jamaican women laborers.

Though the conditions of the free zones play a large role in expressing the health risks, the lack of benefits and protection for the workers is also a major factor. Because the free zones are under different regulation by the government, they are able to evade the rules in place for employee benefits. Many of the women are single mothers and depend on the pay checks to support their families, however, often times they do not get the entirety of their pay if they take sick days (Bailey and Ricketts 2003). This pushes women to work despite illness. Moreover, maternity leave is often not offered, or very little benefits is given with it, and this results in pregnant women working in hazardous conditions because they have no other choice. Since the employers are exclusively concerned about their own profits, they do not provide much in terms of health insurance (Bailey and Ricketts 2003). With the low wages to begin with, lack of health benefits makes gaining proper medical treatment extremely difficult for these women laborers. The lack of benefits provided is another aspect of the damaging impact of globalization on female workers in Jamaica.

In addition to the economic and health issues which arise from the Structural Adjustment Programs, there are cultural problems which are put in place as a result of globalization as well. In Caribbean culture, men are seen as the breadwinner, while women are expected to be the homemaker. These stereotypes result in the idea of a "glass ceiling". This means that although women are pushed to work as much as possible, they can only move up so far, and in the case of Jamaican female workers, the ability to move

up is very limited. The creation of FTZs, while bringing women into the

workforce, has also stigmatized them. Occupations in these zones are sex-
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stereotyped, with women in the least protected and lowest paid sectors (Bailey and Ricketts 2003). The Women's Edge Coalition's case study outlines how free trade impacted Jamaican women. They bring to attention that the impact is not gender neutral, and argue that women have been disproportionately affected in a negative way. The gender based differences of free trade in Jamaica cause further problems for the women.

Another cultural aspect that is brought to attention by globalization is the patriarchal control in Jamaica. In the free zones, males hold superior positions over females. Sexual harassment has become problematic in these corporations due to the little protection rights of workers. Often times, women feel as if they have no choice but to be submissive to their superiors or else their job would be in danger (Fuettes and Ehenreich 1998). Women, however, are not only victims within the Free Zones, but due to the early start times of the workers, rape while commuting has become an issue and fear amongst the workers (Bailey and Ricketts). Moreover, women are often used as subcontracted workers in the informal sector. While these women are able to maintain their household duties, they are subject to much more government inspection than male entrepreneurs and are less likely to succeed (Women's Edge Coalition). The already male dominated society becomes even more unfavorable for women workers due to free trade.

Finally, familial obligations and issues arise from the effect of globalization on women working in Jamaica. As stated earlier, women in Jamaica are expected to head the household duties. As a result, they become reliant on their husbands. However, alcohol and cigarette addiction of these men can

lead to domestic violence, and this is an issue many of these women face
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from their spouses (Fuettes and Ehenreich). Willmore (1993) explores this idea further by explaining that a large portion of young women in Jamaica often become single parents, and due to the usual familial situations have the highest unemployment rates. The importance of these women remaining at home make them finding suitable employment much more difficult, thus, they choose to work in the Free Zones, where cheap female labour is exploited. Furthermore, Fuettes and Ehenreich (1998) explain that “westernization” brought by these industries are often rejected by the families of these women. This results in a difficulty to re-assimilate after retirement, which often occurs at a young age. These familial concerns further support the idea of globalization’s negative impression on women in Jamaica.

Globalization has brought many changes to the newly independent Jamaica, and though these programs and investments are initially seen as positive contributions to the country, the women working in Jamaica are the ones who suffer as a result. With the standard of living decreasing amongst women laborers, the creation of Free Zones while initially seen as beneficial for the country’s economy has proved to be less helpful than perceived. This paper has shown that, through globalization, the country of Jamaica has lost much of their control over their own operations to external global institutions which are largely backed by western countries, and the trickle down effect from the governmental level has resulted in increasing women’s anguish. In order to create a long lasting change, the Jamaican government must be able to protect and improve the lives of their people without having to worry about the threat of international investment leaving as a result. Along with

this, regulations in Free Zones must be kept up to standards and closely monitored. Not only should the developing country's government regulate the operations, but it is also up to the transnational corporations themselves to maintain a standard sense of human rights within their factories and warehouses. While these changes would be beneficial, there are several issues that may stand in the way. The deeply rooted patriarchal society in which Jamaica exists poses a road block in gaining equality, and will result in a long process to overcome the issue. Moreover, while the idea of the transnational corporations monitoring themselves is a noble one, their main priority remains to be that of profit. This being said, they are most likely to make green washing efforts to elude the outside world rather than making fundamental changes to better the lives of their female employees. Finally, from an economic stance, no real change will be able to be made until the structural adjustment programs are reevaluated. The current SAPs are created so that the developing country can never truly escape debt and are continually dependent on the developed nations, and until this is changed, little can be done. While globalization is increasingly being seen as a positive change to the global structure, it will be a long process for women laborers to feel that change.