

**BANANAS**  
**BEACHES**  
**& BASES**

MAKING FEMINIST SENSE  
OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

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## 6

# CARMEN MIRANDA ON MY MIND: INTERNATIONAL POLITICS OF THE BANANA

When she appeared on screen, the tempo quickened. Dressed in her outrageous costumes, topped by hats featuring bananas and other tropical fruits, Carmen Miranda sang and danced her way to Hollywood stardom. While she was best known for her feisty comic performances, she also played a part in a serious political drama: the realignment of American power in the Western hemisphere. Carmen Miranda's movies helped make Latin America safe for American banana companies at a time when US imperialism was coming under wider regional criticism.

Between 1880 and 1930 the United States colonized or invaded Hawaii, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba and Nicaragua. Each was strategically valuable for its plantation crops. The British, French and Dutch had their plantation colonies producing rubber, tea, coffee, palm oil, coconuts, tobacco, sisal, cotton, jute, rice and, of course, the monarch of plantation crops, sugar. Bananas, sugar, coffee, pineapples – each had become an international commodity that Americans, too, were willing to kill for. But by the time Franklin Roosevelt came into office, sending in the marines was beginning to lose its political value; it was alienating too many potential regional allies. New, less direct means had to be found to guarantee American control of Latin America.

Carmen Miranda was born in Lisbon in 1909, but emigrated as a child to Brazil, where her father established a wholesale fruit business. Despite

her parents' hopes that their convent-educated daughter would grow up to be a respectable young woman, she secretly auditioned for and won a regular spot on a Rio de Janeiro radio station. She became a hit and soon was an attraction on the local nightclub circuit. By 1939 Carmen Miranda had recorded over 300 singles, appeared in four Brazilian films and was being referred to by her compatriots as a national institution. It was at this point in her career that Broadway theatrical producer Lee Schubert saw Carmen Miranda perform and offered her a contract to move north. When she stepped off the boat in New York on May 4 1939, Schubert had the press corps already primed to greet his new 'Brazilian bombshell'. With her outrageous headgear and limited but flamboyant English (she spoke French and Spanish as well as Portuguese), she was on her way to being turned into the 1940s American stereotype of the Latin American woman. In response to reporters' questions, Miranda replied, 'Money, money, money . . . hot dog. I say yes, no, and I say money, money money and I say turkey sandwich and I say grape juice.'<sup>1</sup>

The world's fair was attracting throngs to the Sunken Meadow fairgrounds just outside New York City in the summer of 1939, but Carmen Miranda still managed to make Schubert's show, *Streets of Paris*, a commercial success. *Life* magazine's reviewer noted:

Partly because their unusual melody and heavy accented rhythms are unlike anything ever heard in a Manhattan revue before, partly because there is not a clue to their meaning except the gay rolling of Carmen Miranda's insinuating eyes, these songs, and Miranda herself, are the outstanding hit of the show.<sup>2</sup>

In 1940 Hollywood studio directors were boarding the Latin America bandwagon. Men like Darryl Zanuck, head of Twentieth Century Fox, had long cultivated friendships with politicians in Washington. It was one way of overcoming the barriers of anti-Semitism confronting many of the film industry's moguls. Thus when President Franklin Roosevelt launched his Latin American 'Good Neighbor' policy, the men who ran Hollywood were willing to help the government's campaign to replace a militaristic, imperial approach to US-Latin America diplomacy with a more 'cooperative' strategy. Roosevelt and his advisers were convinced that gunboat diplomacy was arousing too much opposition among precisely those Latin American governments which American businessmen would have to cultivate if the country was to pull itself out of the Depression. Tourism and investment were promoted in glossy brochures. Pan-American Airways flew holiday-makers to Havana and Managua; construction of the Pan-American Highway was started. Nicaragua's

Anastasio Somoza was invited to the world's fair to celebrate regional democracy and progress. Latin American movie stars replaced the marines as the guarantors of regional harmony.<sup>3</sup>

Darryl Zanuck enticed Carmen Miranda away from Broadway to be his studio's contribution to the 'Good Neighbor' policy. She appeared in the



14 Carmen Miranda. A Hollywood publicity shot, n.d.

1940 film *Down Argentine Way*, starring Betty Grable and Don Ameche, singing 'South American Way'. Her film career soared during World War II, when Washington officials believed that it was diplomatically vital to keep Latin American regimes friendly to the United States. Propaganda and censorship agencies urged the entertainment industry to promote Latin actors and popularize Latin music.

Carmen Miranda was confined to light roles, treated by the studios as a comic or character actor, never a romantic lead. Perhaps her most lavish film was Busby Berkeley's *The Gang's All Here* (1943), whose set was adorned with giant bananas and strawberries. She mastered English, but was careful to maintain in her performances a heavily accented pronunciation, which suggested feminine *naïveté*. For many Americans, during the 1940s Carmen Miranda became a guide to Latin culture. While Hollywood's Latin American male was stereotypically a loyal but none-too-bright sidekick, like Donald Duck's parrot pal José Carioca, Miranda personified a culture full of zest and charm, unclouded by intense emotion or political ambivalence. Like the bananas she wore on her head, Miranda was exotic yet mildly amusing.

'Carmen Miranda is the chief export of Brazil. Next comes coffee.' So recalls Uruguayan historian Eduardo Galeano.<sup>4</sup> Brazilians themselves were proud of Miranda's Hollywood success. When she died suddenly of a heart attack in 1955, her body and effects were shipped back to Rio to be memorialized in a Carmen Miranda museum. Brazilian President Kubitschek declared a national day of mourning.

#### 'I'M CHIQUITA BANANA AND I'VE COME TO SAY'

The banana has a history, a gendered history. The fruit has its origins in Southeast Asia and was carried westward by traders. By the fifteenth century it had become a basic food for Africans living on the Guinean coast. When Portuguese and Spanish slave-traders began raiding the coast for Africans to serve as forced labor on colonial estates, they chose bananas as the food to ship with them; it was local and cheap. These were red bananas, a variety still popular in the West Indies and Africa. The yellow banana so familiar today to consumers in Europe, Japan, the Persian Gulf and North America wasn't developed as a distinct variety until the nineteenth century. Then it was imagined to be food fit not for slaves, but for the palates of the wealthy. The first record of bunches of bananas being brought to New York from Havana was in 1804. But it was when the yellow banana was served as an exotic delicacy in the homes of affluent Bostonians in 1875 that it took off as an international commodity. In 1876 the banana was featured at the

United States Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. The yellow banana symbolized America's new global reach.<sup>5</sup>

Notions of masculinity and femininity have been used to shape the international political economy of the banana. Banana plantations were developed in Central America, Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and the Philippines as a result of alliances between men of different but complementary interests: businessmen and male officials of the importing countries on the one hand, and male landowners and government officials of the exporting countries on the other. To clear the land and harvest the bananas they decided they needed a male workforce, sustained at a distance by women as prostitutes, mothers and wives. However company executives' manly pride was invested not so much in their extensive plantations as in the sophisticated equipment and technology they developed to transport the fragile tropical fruit to far-away markets: railroads, wire services and fleets of refrigerator ships. Even today company officials take special satisfaction in describing their giant cold-storage ships circling the globe, directed by a sophisticated international communications network, all to ensure that bananas that leave Costa Rica or the Philippines by the green tonnage will arrive in New York or Liverpool undamaged and unspoiled, ready for the ripening factory.<sup>6</sup> The companies envisaged their customers to be women: mothers and housewives concerned about their families' nutrition and looking for a reliable product. The most successful way of bonding housewives' loyalty to a particular company was to create a fantasized market woman.

The United Fruit Company, the largest grower and marketer of bananas, made its contribution to America's 'Good Neighbor' culture. In 1943 the company opened a Middle American Information Bureau to encourage 'mutual knowledge and mutual understanding'. The bureau wrote and distributed materials which emphasized the value of Central American products such as hardwoods, coffee, spices and fruits to the US war effort. It targeted school children and housewives: those who ate bananas and those who bought them. *Nicaragua in Story and Pictures* was a company-designed school text celebrating the progress brought to Nicaragua by foreign-financed railroads and imported tractors. 'Fifty Questions on Middle America for North American Women' and 'Middle America and a Woman's World' explained to the North American housewife, United Fruit's chief customer, how the Japanese invasion of Malaysia made imported foods from Nicaragua and Costa Rica all the more important to her wartime security.<sup>7</sup>

United Fruit's biggest contribution to American culture, however, was 'Chiquita Banana'. In 1944, when Carmen Miranda was packing movie houses and American troops were landing on Europe's beaches, United

Fruit advertising executives created a half-banana, half-woman cartoon character destined to rival Donald Duck. Dressed as a Miranda-esque market woman, this feminized banana sang her calypso song from coast to coast. Chiquita Banana helped to establish a twentieth-century art form, the singing commercial. One could hear her singing the praises of the banana on the radio 376 times daily.

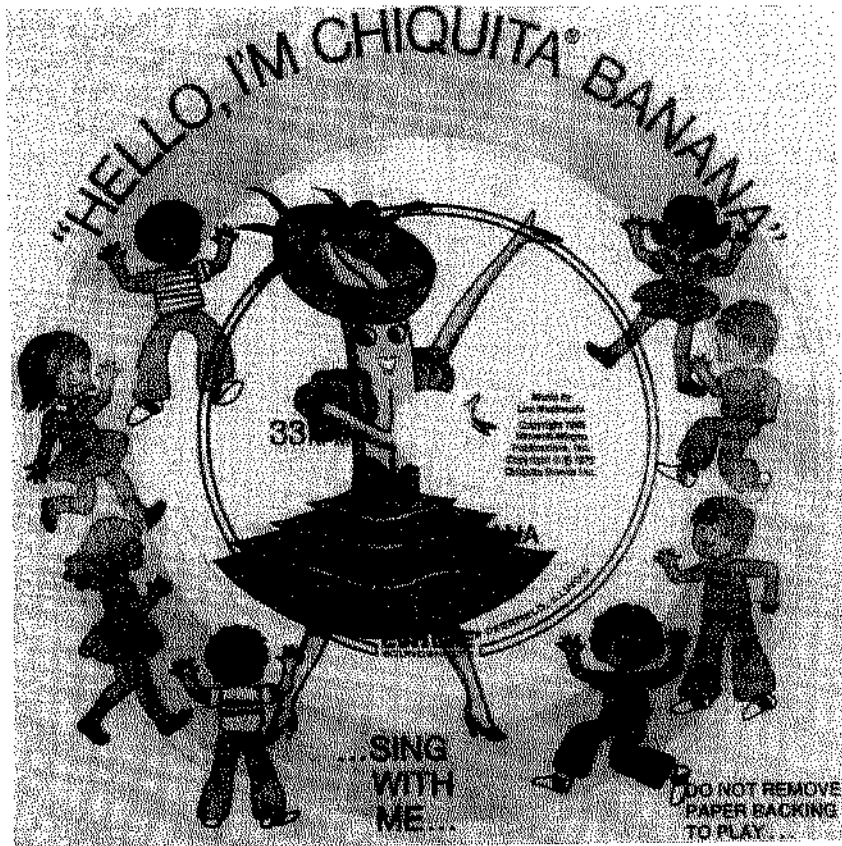
Americans who are now in their fifties still can give a rendition of her memorable song:

*I'm Chiquita Banana  
And I've come to say  
Bananas have to ripen  
In a certain way.  
When they are fleck'd with brown  
And have a golden hue  
Bananas taste the best  
And are the best for you.*

*You can put them in a salad  
You can put them in a pie-eye  
Any way you want to eat them  
It's impossible to beat them.  
But bananas like the climate  
Of the very, very tropical equator.  
So you should never put bananas  
In the refrigerator. No no no no!<sup>8</sup>*

United Fruit sales strategists set out to do the impossible – to create in housewives a brand-name loyalty for a generic fruit. They wanted women to think 'Chiquita' when they went to the grocery store to buy bananas. Roosevelt's 'Good Neighbor' policy and Carmen Miranda's Hollywood success had set the stage; animated cartoons and the commercial jingle did the rest. Between the woman consumer and the fruit there now was only a corporation with the friendly face of a bouncy Latin American market woman. Forty years later United Fruit Company has become United Brands; its principal subsidiary is Chiquita Brands, bringing us not only bananas, but melons, grapefruits and tropical juices.

Today virtually every affluent, industrialized country imports bananas from mainly poor, still agrarian countries. Each consumer society gets its bananas from two or three large agribusiness corporations which either have large plantations of their own or monopolize the marketing



15 United Brands Company's recording for children of the 'Chiquita Banana' song. (Original music by Len Mackensie, 1945; updated commercial lyrics, 1975, © Maxwell-Wirges, 1945)

system through which small growers sell their fruit. Since United Fruit's advertising coup in 1944, its competitors have followed suit, designing stickers for their own bananas. This allows a shopper to go into any grocery store in Europe, North America or Japan and check at a glance the state of international banana politics: just look for the sticker with its corporate logo and the country of origin. In London one might peel off a Geest sticker that says 'WINBAN' (the Windward Island nations of St Lucia, St Vincent or Dominica) or look for the Fyffes sticker (Fyffes is United Brands' European subsidiary) that gives the country of origin as Surinam. In Detroit or Toronto a shopper would be more likely to find a Chiquita, Del Monte or Dole sticker, with Costa Rica,

Ecuador or Colombia written below the logo in small print, while in Tokyo Sumitomo's Banambo sticker would identify bananas produced in the Philippines.

After a century of banana big business, Americans remain the largest consumers of bananas, eating some 2 million tons of the fruit each year. But with the opening of the Philippines to banana companies, especially under the debt-ridden Marcos regime, hungry for foreign investment, consumers in Japan and the Persian Gulf have become the latest targets for advertising campaigns.



16 Banana logo stickers from some of the largest international banana companies

## World Consumption of Bananas

Largest consuming countries	Major suppliers	Volume (tons)
United States	Ecuador, Costa Rica, Honduras	2,325,000
Canada	Ecuador, Columbia, Honduras	269,400
West Germany	Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras	503,000
France	Martinique, Guadeloupe	466,800
United Kingdom	Windward Islands, Colombia, Surinam	322,000
Italy	Colombia, Costa Rica, Somalia	330,000
Spain	Canary Islands	415,000
Japan	Philippines, China	757,900
Saudi Arabia	Philippines, Guatemala, Ecuador	120,000
Argentina	Ecuador, Brazil, Colombia	140,000

Source: *Green Gold: Bananas and Dependency in the Eastern Caribbean*, London, Latin American Bureau, 1987, pp. 14-15. Figures are from the Food and Agriculture Organization for 1982.

*Bananas for Bahrain*

A giant container ship steams out of the Philippines bound for the Middle East. On its cargo manifest . . . are bananas headed for markets in the region.

The shipment has been arranged by one of Japan's general trading companies, or *sogo shosha* . . .

In the world of the *sogo shosha*, bananas are just the beginning.<sup>9</sup>

Bananas have become big business, declares this advertisement placed by the Japan Foreign Trade Council. The history of Japan's banana industry, however, reaches back to the early 1900s. In 1903 small farmers in Taiwan were Japan's sole banana suppliers and remained its major source until the 1950s. Philippines bananas entered the Japanese market in 1969. In the next six years Philippines bananas grew from just under 3 per cent of the market to 85 per cent of the market. They had several advantages for Japanese fruit traders: they were grown near Japan; they were less vulnerable to typhoons; bananas could be introduced on large-scale plantations whose owners were looking for a new crop; they could be grown by cheap wage-labor readily available to plantation owners. Whereas once bananas were bought as 'hospital gifts' by Japanese consumers, by the 1970s they had become an everyday fruit seen by Japanese housewives as a good source of family nutrition at a reasonable price.<sup>10</sup>

## WOMEN IN BANANA REPUBLICS

It is always worth asking, 'Where are the women?' Answering the question reveals the dependence of most political and economic systems not just on women, but on certain kinds of relations between women and men. A great deal has been written about countries derisively labeled 'banana republics'. They are described as countries whose land and soul are in the clutches of a foreign company, supported by the might of its own government. A banana republic's sovereignty has been so thoroughly compromised that it is the butt of jokes, not respect. It has a government, but it is staffed by people who line their own pockets by doing the bidding of the overseas corporation and its political allies. Because it is impossible for such compromised rulers to win the support of their own citizens, many of whom are exploited on the corporation's plantations, the government depends on guns and jails, not ballots and national pride.

The quintessential banana republics were those Central American countries which came to be dominated by the United Fruit Company's monoculture, the US marines and their hand-picked dictators. Their regimes have been backed by American presidents, mocked by Woody Allen, and overthrown by nationalist guerrillas.

Yet these political systems, and the international relationships which underpin them, have been discussed as if women scarcely existed. The principal actors on all sides have been portrayed by conventional commentators as men, and as if their being male was insignificant. Thus the ways in which their shared masculinity allowed agribusiness entrepreneurs to form alliances with men in their own diplomatic corps and with men in Nicaraguan or Honduran society have been left unexamined. Enjoying Cuban cigars together after dinner while wives and mistresses powder their noses has been the stuff of smug cartoons but not of political curiosity. Similarly, a banana republic's militarized ethos has been taken for granted, without an investigation of how militarism feeds on masculinist values to sustain it. Marines, diplomats, corporate managers and military dictators may mostly be male, but they tend to need the feminine 'other' to maintain their self-assurance.

One of the conditions that has pushed women off the banana republic stage has been the masculinization of the banana plantation. Banana-company executives imagined that most of the jobs on their large plantations could be done only by men. Banana plantations were carved out of wooded acres. Clearing the brush required workers who could use a machete, live in rude barracks, and who, once the plantation's trees were bearing fruit, could chop down the heavy bunches and carry them to central loading areas and from there to the docks, to be loaded by the

ton on to refrigerator ships. This was men's work.

Not all plantation work has been masculinized. Generally, crops that call for the use of machetes – tools that can also be used as weapons – are produced with large inputs of male labor: bananas, sugar, palm oil. Producers of crops that require a lot of weeding, tapping and picking hire large numbers of women, sometimes comprising a majority of workers: tea, coffee, rubber.

Nor is the gendered labor formula on any plantation fixed. Plantation managers who once relied heavily on male workers may decide to bring in more women if the men become too costly; if their union becomes too threatening; if the international market for the crop declines necessitating cost-cutting measures such as hiring more part-time workers; if new technology allows some physically demanding tasks to be done by workers with less strength. Today both sugar and rubber are being produced by plantation companies using more women workers than they did a generation ago.<sup>11</sup> What has remained constant, however, is the presumption of international corporations that their position in the world market depends on manipulations of masculinity and femininity. Gender is injected into every Brooke Bond or Lipton tea leaf, every Unilever or Lonrho palm-oil nut, every bucket of Dunlop or Michelin latex, every stalk of Tate & Lyle sugar cane.

Like all plantation managers, banana company executives considered race as well as gender when employing what they thought would be the most skilled and compliant workforce. Thus although the majority of banana workers were men, race was used to divide them. On United Brands' plantations in Costa Rica and Panama, for instance, managers recruited Amerindian men from the Guaymi and Kuna communities, as well as West Indian Black men and hispanicized Ladino men. They placed them in different, unequally paid jobs, Ladino men at the top (below white male managers), Amerindian men at the bottom. Amerindian men were assigned to menial jobs such as chopping grass and overgrown bush, thus ensuring that Ladino men's negative stereotypes of Amerindians – *cholos*, unskilled, uncultured natives – would be perpetuated. The stereotypes were valuable to the company because they forestalled potential alliances between Ladino, Black and Amerindian men over common grievances.<sup>12</sup>

*Manager:* It's easier to work with *cholos*. They're not as smart and don't speak good Spanish. They can't argue back at you even when they're right . . . Hell, you can make a *cholo* do anything.

*Ladino foreman:* My workers are [not] *cholos* . . . It's different here. Sure I can grab them [Ladino and Black male workers] and make them work faster; but the consequences will catch up with me tomorrow. We're not *cholos* here . . . you understand?

*Guaymi worker:* They used to have up to 200 of us crammed into shacks eating boiled bananas out of empty kerosene cans.<sup>13</sup>

To say, therefore, that a banana plantation is masculinized is not to say that masculinity, even when combined with social class, is sufficient to forge political unity. On the other hand, the presumption that a banana plantation is a man's world does affect the politics of any movement attempting to improve workers' conditions, or to transform the power relationships that comprise a 'banana republic'.

A banana plantation's politics are deeply affected not just by the fact that the majority of its workers – and virtually all of its managers and owners – are men, but by the *meaning* that has been attached to that masculinization. Even male banana workers employed by a foreign company that, in alliance with local élites, had turned their country into a proverbial banana republic, could feel some pride. For they were unquestionably performing men's work. They knew how to wield a machete; they knew how to lift great weights; they worked outside in close coordination with trains and ships. Whether a smallholder or a plantation employee, a banana man was a *man*.

*Touris, white man, wipin his face,*

*Met me in Golden Grove market place.*

*He looked at m'ol' clothes brown wid stain,*

*An soaked tight through wid de Portlan rain,*

*He cas his eye, turned up his nose,*

*He says, 'You're a beggar man, I suppose?'*

*He says, 'Boy, get some occupation,*

*Be of some value to your nation.'*

*I said, 'By God and dis big right  
han  
You mus recognise a banana  
man . . .  
Don't judge a man by his patchy  
clothes,  
I'm a strong man, a proud man,  
an I'm free  
Free as dese mountains, free as  
dis sea,  
I know myself, an I know my  
ways,  
An will say wid pride to de end  
o my days.  
Praise God an m'big right  
han  
I will live an die a banana man.<sup>14</sup>*

In the 1920s when banana workers began to organize and to conduct strikes that even the US government and local élites had to pay attention to, their demands reached beyond working conditions to political structures. These workers' protests took on strong nationalist overtones: the local regime and foreign troops were as much the target of their protests as the plantation companies. But so long as banana plantation work was imagined to be men's work, and so long as the banana workers' unions were organized as if they were men's organizations, the nationalist cause would be masculinized. A banana republic might fall, but patriarchy remained in place.

### WOMEN WEED, WOMEN CLEAN

The banana plantation has never been as exclusively male as popular imagery suggests. It takes women's paid and unpaid labor to bring the golden fruit to the world's breakfast tables.

A banana plantation is closest to a male enclave at the beginning, when the principal task is bulldozing and clearing the land for planting. But even at this stage women are depended upon by the companies – and their male employees – to play their roles. As in the male-dominated mining industry from Chile to South Africa and Indonesia, companies can recruit men to live away from home only if someone back home takes care of their families and maintains their land. The 'feminization of agriculture' – that is, leaving small-scale farming to women, typically without giving

them training, equipment or extra finance – has always been part and parcel of the masculinization of mining and banana plantations.<sup>15</sup> The male labor force has to make private arrangements with wives, mothers or sisters to assure them of a place to return to when their contracts expire, when they get fed up with supervisors' contemptuous treatment or when they are laid off because world prices have plummeted. Behind every all-male banana plantation stand scores of women performing unpaid domestic and productive labor. Company executives, union spokesmen and export-driven government officials have all preferred not to take this into account when working out their bargaining positions. International agencies such as the International Monetary Fund scarcely give a thought to women as wives and subsistence farmers when they press indebted governments to open up more land to plantation companies in order to correct their trade imbalances and pay off foreign bankers.

Once the banana trees have been planted, women are likely to become residents and workers on the plantations. Plantation managers, like their diplomatic and military counterparts, have found marriage both a political asset and a liability. On the one hand, having young male workers without wives and children has advantages: the men are in their physical prime, they are likely to view life as an adventure and be willing to tolerate harsh working and living conditions. On the other hand, young unattached men are more volatile and are willing to take risks if angered precisely because they will not jeopardize anyone's security aside from their own. This makes the married male worker seem more stable to a calculating plantation manager. He may demand more from the company in the form of rudimentary amenities for his wife and children, but he is more likely to toe the company line for their sake.<sup>16</sup>

Women are most likely to be employed by the banana companies if the plantation cannot recruit men from a low-status ethnic group, like Amerindians in Central America, to do the least prestigious and lowest-paid jobs. In all sorts of agribusiness, women tend to be given the most tedious, least 'skilled' jobs, those that are most seasonal, the least likely to offer year-round employment and those company benefits awarded to full-time employees. Weeding and cleaning are the quintessential 'women's' jobs in agriculture, both in socialist and capitalist countries.<sup>17</sup>

Bananas today are washed, weighed and packed in factories on the plantations before being transported to the docks for shipment overseas. Inside these packing houses one finds the women on the modern banana plantation. They remove the bunches of fruit from the thick stems, an operation that has to be done carefully (one might say skillfully) so that the bananas are not damaged. They wash the bananas in a chemical



solution, a hazardous job. They select the rejects, which can amount to up to half the bananas picked in the fields. Companies often dump rejected bananas in nearby streams, causing pollution which kills local fish. Women weigh the fruit and finally attach the company's tell-tale sticker on each bunch. They are paid piece-rates and foremen expect them to work at high speed. In between harvests they may have little work to do and not receive any pay. At harvest time they are expected to be available for long stretches, sometimes around the clock, to meet the company's tight shipping schedule.<sup>18</sup>

Tess is a Filipino woman who works for TADECO, a subsidiary of United Brands, Philippines. She works on a plantation on the country's southern island, Mindanao. A decade-long war has been fought in the area between government troops and indigenous Muslim groups protesting against the leasing of large tracts of land either to multinational pineapple and banana companies or to wealthy Filipino landowners, who then work out lucrative contracts with those corporations. Tess herself is a Christian Filipina. She, like thousands of other women and men, migrated, with government encouragement, to Mindanao from other islands in search of work once the bottom fell out of the once-dominant sugar industry. She works with other young women in the plantation's packing plant, preparing bananas to be shipped to Japan by Japanese and American import companies. She is paid approximately \$1 a day. With an additional living allowance, Tess can make about \$45 a month; she sends a third of this home to her family in the Visayas.

Tess uses a chemical solution to wash the company's bananas. There is a large, reddish splotch on her leg where some of the chemical spilled accidentally. At the end of a day spent standing for hours at a time, Tess goes 'home' to a bunkhouse she shares with 100 other women, twenty-four to a room, sleeping in eight sets of three-tiered bunks.<sup>19</sup>

Many women working on banana plantations are young and single, and, in the Philippines, often have secondary-school or even college educations. They may be the daughters of male employees, or they may be recruited from outside. They are subjected to sexual harassment in the packing plants and can be fired if found to be pregnant. The life of a banana washer is dull and isolated: 'We have no choice than to stay here. First, the company is quite far from the highway and if we . . . spend our fare what else would be left for our food?'<sup>20</sup>

Large banana companies – Geest in Britain, United Brands, Del Monte and Dole in the United States and Japan's Sumitomo – also require workers at the other end of the food chain, in the countries where they market their bananas. The docks, the trucks and the ripening plants reveal



17 Women using chemicals to clean bananas in a Honduran packing plant. (photo: Jenny Matthews, 1983)

how company managers shape the sexual division of labor. Stevedors in every country are thought of as doing a classic 'man's' job, though again ethnic politics may determine which men will unload the bananas from the company's ships. Today in Japan, where immigrant labor is being increasingly relied upon to do the low-status, low-paid jobs, Filipino men do the heavy work of transferring bananas from ships to trucks. The job has become so closely associated with the fruit that to be a longshoreman in Japan is to be a 'banana'. Women are hired in all the consumer countries to weigh and sort at the ripening plant before the fruit heads for the supermarket. Food processing is as feminized – as dependent on ideas about femininity – as nursing, secretarial work and sewing.

Women are hired by the banana companies to do low-paid, often seasonal jobs that offer little chance of training and promotion; some involve the hazards of chemical pollution and sexual harassment. But many women still seek these jobs because they seem better than the alternatives: dependence on fathers or husbands (if they are employed), life on the dole (if work is not available), work in the entertainment industry around a military base, subsistence farming with few resources, emigration.

Many women are heads of households and take exploitative jobs in order to support their children; other women see their employment as

part of being dutiful daughters, sending part of their meager earnings back to parents, who may be losing farm land to agribusinesses. Neither women nor men working on any plantation – banana, tea, rubber, sugar, pineapple, palm oil, coffee – are simply ‘workers’. They are wives, husbands, daughters, sons, mothers, fathers, lovers; and each role has its own politics. The politics of being a daughter, a mother or a wife allows First World and Third World governments to rely on international plantation companies, which in turn are able to recruit and control women workers and win the consumer loyalty of women buyers. ‘Daughter’, ‘mother’, and ‘wife’ are ideas on which the international political system today depends.

### BROTHELS AND BANANAS

Bananas have long been the objects of sexual jokes and pranks. One food company recently complained when an AIDS education campaign used a banana to demonstrate how a man should put on a condom. But the banana industry – not the banana itself – is far more seriously sexualized. Sexual harassment helps to control women working in the plantation factories; prostitution has been permitted in order to control the still largely male plantation workforce.

They were no more than lost villages on the Colombian coast, a strip of dust between river and cemetery, a yawn between two siestas, when the yellow train of the United Fruit Company pulled in . . . The age of the banana had come.

The region awoke to find itself an immense plantation. Cienaga, Aracataca, and Fundacion got telegraph and post offices and new streets with poolrooms and brothels. Campesinos, who arrived by the thousands, left their mules at the hitching posts and went to work.<sup>21</sup>

Plantations are self-contained worlds. Workers, managers and the crops they cultivate live together side by side, but regulated by strict hierarchies, the more blatant because they are carved into the landscape. Male managers and their wives live in comfortable houses with gardens and kitchens maintained by local employees and have access to their own clubs with well-stocked bars and refreshing swimming pools. Foremen and their families have their own more modest housing compound and privileges. Workers live in spartan accommodation that often lacks minimal sanitary facilities. Some plantations are better equipped than others. Head offices like to talk about the clinics and schools they provide. They rarely talk

about the isolation, or the paralyzing debts accumulated by employees at the company store. Some companies have had to provide basic necessities for workers in order to obtain land rights and tax concessions from local governments. Caribbean critics of their countries’ past dependency on monoculture have coined the term ‘plantation economy’: foreign agribusiness giants have so dominated an entire society that it is reduced to a community permeated by dependency and paternalistic control.<sup>22</sup>

Plantations that depend on a predominately male workforce operate much like military bases. Women’s sexual availability just outside the gates (thus supposedly beyond the plantation manager’s control) has been offered as one of the rewards for enduring the isolated, harsh conditions of plantation life.

Few commentators on ‘plantation economies’ have thought to ask about the ways that sexuality has been used to control male workers. One who has is historian Ann Laura Stoler. When investigating life on Dutch-owned sisal, tea, rubber and palm-oil plantations in colonial Indonesia she asked about sexual politics.<sup>23</sup> Stoler found that prostitution was integral to the way managers recruited and controlled male workers from several different ethnic groups. There were many more men than women on these estates. Women were hired at half the rates paid to men, not enough to meet daily necessities. Most were single Javanese women, hired on contract and living far away from home. To make ends meet many of these women provided sexual services to Chinese male workers living in the plantation barracks. Some young women were pushed into prostitution by being sexually harassed by foremen in the packing plants. White plantation supervisors enjoyed the privilege of selecting their sexual partners from the most recent female arrivals.

Prostitution became the norm on many plantations by design, not simply by chance. There are records revealing that managers debated the advantages and disadvantages of prostitution for their company. The debates have a familiar ring; they echo debates about military prostitution. Some Dutch commentators were alarmed at the high incidence of venereal disease among plantation workers and blamed the prostitutes. Others noted that white supervisors were assaulted by male Javanese workers who believed their daughters were being lured into prostitution. But the prevailing view was that it would be too difficult to recruit male workers for plantation work if they were not provided with female sexual services. Furthermore, in the eyes of many plantation managers, prostitution was a lesser evil than homosexual relations between male workers deprived of female companionship. Finally, devoting a sizeable portion of their wages to prostitution left many male workers further in debt and thus made it

harder for them to abandon estate work when their current contracts expired.

Around some United Brands plantations in Central America brothels are commonplace. They are situated just outside the company gates. While the men on banana plantations are Amerindian, Black and Ladino, the women working in the brothels are overwhelmingly Ladino. Information is limited, but most women servicing banana workers seem to have done other sorts of work before becoming prostitutes, and many are the sole supporters of their children. Racism and sexism are woven together in Central America's banana plantation brothels, as is so often the case in prostitution politics. Ladino prostitutes told one researcher that they preferred Amerindian customers because, they said, these men were too shy to fully undress and got their intercourse over with quickly. This was not necessarily meant as a compliment to Amerindian masculinity and may have reinforced negative stereotypes among Ladino and Black male workers.<sup>24</sup>

### PATRIARCHAL LAND REFORM

Not all bananas are grown on plantations owned or leased by large corporations. Many people in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America eat bananas that are grown in their own yards or by small-scale independent farmers, a large proportion of them women, and sold by market women – Carmen Miranda's and Chiquita's inspiration – in provincial towns. Even some of the bananas reaching the supermarkets of industrialized countries – for instance, many Philippines bananas shipped to Japan – are cultivated by smallholders. Geest, one of Britain's largest food companies, buys its bananas from smallholders in the Windward Islands: St Lucia, Dominica, Grenada and St Vincent.<sup>25</sup>

In 1985 Britons consumed nearly 2 billion bananas; over half of them were Windward Island bananas imported and marketed by Geest. Charles Geest, one of two Dutch brothers who founded the company, was listed in 1989 as one of 200 Britons personally worth over £30 million.<sup>26</sup> But Geest operates quite differently to Dole, United Brands or other large-scale plantation companies. Its suppliers may have as much as twelve acres of land or as little as half an acre of land. These smallholders sell their bananas to the local Banana Growers Association, which in turn sells them to Geest. As the sole purchaser of Windward bananas and as the operator of the shipping company, the ripening plants and the wholesale network, Geest is able to impose quality standards, rules and a pricing formula that determine how its Caribbean suppliers must operate. Critics in the Caribbean and Britain charge that Geest makes

unfair profits and controls local farmers without having to assume direct responsibility.

It is all too easy to carry out an analysis of Geest without asking where the women are. The question seems unnecessary if one assumes that once the plantation system is removed and a crop is grown by smallholders on their own land, women and men within a household will work together as equals. The only political question then worth pursuing is whether the smallholders are dealt with fairly by the international marketing firm and the governments which link the farmers and the ultimate consumers.

But scratch the surface of small-scale farming and a more complex reality appears. In Dominica a survey of 120 banana farms ranging from one to five acres in size revealed that 82 per cent were owned by men; only 18 per cent were owned by women. This, despite the fact that on virtually every farm it took both women's and men's labor to nurture and harvest bananas that met Geest's high standards. In neighboring St Lucia 95 per cent of the small farms surveyed were owned by the men of the household, only 5 per cent by the women. In St Vincent the same pattern was repeated: men owned 70 per cent, women owned 30 per cent.<sup>27</sup>

The Banana Growers Association and Geest's managers are overwhelmingly male. They deal with small-scale owners who are mostly male. 'The smallholder and his wife' is the phrase commonly heard in international development circles. The phrase is not just sloppy semantics. It permits development agencies and local agricultural ministries to imagine that the person in the rural household to whom technical training, new seeds or agricultural credit should be given is the adult man. The unspoken corollary is that what is progress for a husband will turn into progress for his wife.

Women *grow* more food than men.

Women *buy* more food than men.

Women *cook* more food than men.

But women *own* less land on which food is grown.

And women *eat* less food than men.

'The farmer and his wife' disguises the reality of the world's food production. Most technical agencies agree that women produce at least half of the world's food. In Africa they produce between 60 per cent and 80 per cent. It is the politics of land *ownership* that obscures this reality. If one is talking about food production, not land ownership, it might be more accurate to refer to 'the farmer and her husband'.

More seriously, 'the farmer and his wife' not only obscures the gendered politics of land ownership; it also makes invisible the ways in which women organize their daily lives to sustain families and still

produce bananas on their smallholdings. The use of 'the household' as the unit for measuring the success or failure of any project or policy is radically flawed. It presumes – without testing that presumption against reality – that the relationships within any house are equal, that emotional, sexual and economic relationships between men and women and sons and daughters are naturally harmonious, without tension, without intimidation or coercion. This was the presumption used in Britain, France, Canada and the United States to deny women the right to vote: why would a woman need a vote of her own when her father, husband or brother would 'naturally' cast his ballot with her best interest in mind? What was a naïve assumption in the suffrage debate is an unfounded argument in the politics of the banana.<sup>28</sup>

Feminists in Third World countries who have made land reform a political cause have insisted that dismantling large plantations – whether locally or foreign-owned – must not be seen as sufficient to ensure that women gain the power and resources they need to shape rural development so that women as well as men benefit. If land reform is implemented without a critical examination of *which* small farmers will receive the precious land title, land reform can serve to perpetuate patriarchal inequities in the countryside.

In several countries where plantation agriculture has been dominant, women's groups are challenging relations between men and women that shape the way food is produced. In Kenya, where both high-ranking government officials and foreign agribusinesses have profited from the opening of more land to large-scale plantations, Kikuyu women working in a Del Monte pineapple packing plant went on strike in 1987 to protest at working conditions.<sup>29</sup> Honduran peasant organizations with strong women leaders have created autonomous women peasants' groups to permit women to develop political skills. Honduras depends on bananas for over 30 per cent of its export earnings, and the government is closely allied militarily to the United States; the organized peasant women take part in land seizures and call on the government to revise its modest land distribution law so that women other than widows can gain direct title to land.<sup>30</sup> A small group of Honduran women, who have to support their children on \$2 a day earned by picking melons and cantaloupes for a multinational, joined the Honduran Federation of Peasant Women (FEHMUC) and began thinking about ways to generate income for themselves. They learned carpentry skills and made the broomsticks and bookshelves. With the money she earned one woman bought the village's first sewing machine, while another woman saved enough to send her daughter to secondary school.<sup>31</sup>

On rubber plantations in Malaysia, the world's largest exporter of rubber, most workers are Indian Malaysians, descendants of workers brought from India at the turn of the century to supply cheap labor for Britain's colonial estates. Women started to work on rubber plantations decades ago, but with the decline in world rubber prices, plantation owners have been turning more and more to women to tap their trees. They are hired as casual labor and thus are less costly than full-time male employees. Britain's legacy of ethnic divide-and-rule and Malaysia's anti-union laws have made bridge-building between Malay, Chinese and Indian women difficult. In addition, the rubber workers' union has been run by Indian Malaysian men. Despite the formidable obstacles, one Malaysian working-women's organization has begun performing dramas on rubber plantations to highlight the dangers for women tappers of the widely used pesticide paraquat. Some plantation women have gone blind from accidental spraying of paraquat, but with rubber prices falling and tappers earning as little as \$35 per month, women workers have little time or energy to read, and newspapers cost money that must be spent on food and clothing. So the combination of dramatic performances and sending press clippings to be shared is the Malaysian women activists' strategy for making a small dent in the gender structure on which the rubber industry depends.<sup>32</sup> In using drama to give rural women a new sense of their worth and their political capabilities, the Malaysian women are paralleling Sistren, a Jamaican feminist theater group, whose members are tackling the complex problems flowing from the decline of Jamaica's one-time sugar-dependent economy.<sup>33</sup>

In Nicaragua coffee and banana plantations that have been collectivized have not radically altered the sexual division of labor – there is still 'men's work' and 'women's work' outside and especially inside the rural home. But more Nicaraguan women are beginning to do field jobs, not just packaging, on the banana estates. In coffee cultivation, where women in the past were expected to plant and transplant seedlings, women are starting to use flame throwers in the clearing of hillsides. Later in the coffee-growing cycle women are beginning to join men in what used to be a 'men's job', the pruning of coffee trees. These small steps toward redefining the division of labor have led to an unexpected change in sexual politics. When only men worked together, they forged friendships that spilled over into their after-work socializing. Nicaraguan women on one coffee estate describe how men used to go off together to town to drink and visit brothels. Working buddies became brothel buddies. But, according to these women, now that men are more likely to work alongside women when they clear the land or prune the trees, they form friendships with those women and are less

inclined to see drinking and going to prostitutes as the only after-work recreation.<sup>34</sup>

Developing a politics of land reform and agricultural labor that does not reproduce patriarchal relationships between rural women and men is not something that happens automatically. It does not derive necessarily from either a class-conscious or a nationalist politics of food. Where unequal and unfair relations between rural women and men have been seriously challenged, it has usually required women's own analysis and autonomous organizing. Both have been seen by some male land-reform activists either as a waste of time or as a threat to peasant unity. In 1985, as rural Filipinos were mobilizing to overthrow the Marcos regime, some activist peasant women decided that if land reform, a principal demand of the anti-Marcos movement, was to benefit women as well as men, women would have to organize autonomously. They created RICE (not an acronym). Eighteen months later, with Marcos replaced by Corazon Aquino, RICE had grown to 100 members and had affiliated with Gabriela, the umbrella women's group. RICE members also affiliated with the National Peasant Movement, popularly known as the KMP. Although the KMP is perhaps the most visible advocate of genuine land reform, the women in RICE saw it as a male-dominated organization. In villages where KMP was formed before RICE became active, KMP has remained dominated by male peasants. But where a branch of RICE brought together local women for discussions before KMP organized villagers, KMP's local councils have had more women participants and have accorded serious attention to matters of concern to women. One such issue is husbands' refusal to acknowledge the economic contributions made by their wives.

In my experience before, my husband didn't care about my financial contribution to the family. I worked in the fields like my husband. I did planting and weeding, etc., but he did not recognize this. If I was sick, my husband did not care, he just got mad at me. And I had no say over money matters.

Before, I used to take these things silently; I didn't answer back to my husband. But after being involved in RICE, I got up the courage to reason out why I was being treated like that and answer back to him.<sup>35</sup>

RICE was not the name these women peasants gave themselves. But they soon adopted this English name in the hope that it would sound less threatening to local military commanders. It has been difficult for RICE to criticize the KMP's male domination in part because the

army and military-supported vigilante groups have continued to torture and murder KMP activists.

Bananas, like anything else, can be militarized. In the Philippines, as in Honduras and Colombia, banana-plantation union activists have been assassinated by troops loyal to a government that sees multinational agribusiness as good for the economy. The current land system has been maintained in part by intimidation and force.<sup>36</sup> But militarization not only bolsters the plantation system and undermines land-reform movements in general; it also makes any woman's criticism of a progressive movement's male leaders and masculinized agenda appear illegitimate, even dangerous. How can a woman dare to criticize a fellow peasant activist when he is the target of military harassment? An army which uses coercion to maintain the rural status quo makes it hard to shake a nationalist land-reform movement free from its patriarchal base.

Women peasant activists in Honduras and the Philippines have themselves become the objects of an American counter-insurgency doctrine called 'Low-Intensity Conflict'. LIC employs a sprawling definition of 'insurgency' to justify harassment, intimidation and local disruption, and relies on vigilante groups as well as uniformed troops. Its implementation in the Philippines and Central America has made it politically hazardous for rural women to challenge rural men. It has also undermined rural women's independent efforts. To a national-security official who views 'development' through the prism of low-intensity conflict, day-care centers and food cooperatives – projects rural women believe are integral to real land reform – are subversive; they are thus legitimate targets for counter-insurgency operations. In 1987 RICE had twelve groups on Mindanao; a year later only five had survived.<sup>37</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Today's affluent consumers are increasingly conscious of the nutritional content of their daily food. Walk into any supermarket and you see the aisles crowded with customers reading the fine print on labels. As affluent consumers' tastes change, the international agribusinesses prick up their ears. So do the bankers, foreign advisors and politicians who work with them to shape international food policies. If the banana was the 'new food' of 1880s America and 1920s Japan, broccoli, radicchio and winter strawberries are the 'new foods' of the 1990s. This affects not only what women buy and cook in Saucilito and in Hampstead; it affects what women and men produce for plantation companies in Kenya, Malaysia, Guatemala and Jamaica.

It may be tempting to imagine plantations as part of an 'old-fashioned' way of life. They seem to symbolize the bad old days of slavery and colonialism. They conjure up the American ante-bellum South or the British empire according to Somerset Maugham. In reality plantations are as modern (or 'post-modern') as the home computer or toxic waste. Large plantation companies such as Castle and Cook (owner of Dole and Standard Fruit), Unilever (owner of both Liptons and Brooke Bond), Del Monte (recently purchased by R. J. Reynolds as part of its buyout of RJR Nabisco) and United Brands, are some of the largest multinational companies in the world today, wielding influence over their own as well as foreign governments.

Furthermore, plantation company executives don't stand still. When the political climate where they are operating becomes chilly – with the passage of land-reform laws or the successful unionization of agricultural workers – they try to persuade new governments to open up lands for plantation crops. When Honduran banana workers used strikes to compel their government to deny recognition to a company-controlled union, their employer, United Brands, began to look more favorably on the Philippines. Similarly, as 1992 looms in Europe, Del Monte has taken steps to persuade the government of Cameroon to open its lands to banana cultivation. Del Monte's Cameroon bananas will be marketed in Europe with the benefit of EEC trade concessions given to former European colonies. Other companies switch to new crops when the market begins to decline in once-profitable products. Thus nowadays the Chiquita label is turning up on melons. Britain's Brooke Bond, once synonymous with tea and still known by the woman tea-picker on its label, has moved into the flower business. Brooke Bond has convinced senior Kenyan government officials that it is in their interest to open extensive flower plantations. Carnations-for-export have become part of the international political economy.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, Coca Cola, world-famous for its soft drinks, has become one of the world's largest growers of citrus fruits. Its executives have persuaded the government of Belize, still hosting British troops but increasingly pressed to further American interests, to allow it to develop thousands of acres for exported oranges. Palm oil was seen in the 1970s and early 1980s by many export-sensitive governments and their foreign bankers as an attractive substitute for less stable plantation crops such as rubber; now oil-palm plantations are being threatened by Americans' aversion to cholesterol. Companies such as Unilever may rethink their investments in Zaïre, Malaysia and Ecuador if Europeans follow the Americans in insisting that food-processing companies eliminate saturated

fats from their cereals, cookie batter and other foods. In Guatemala and Chile, nervous governments and their military commanders are looking to grape and broccoli farming to pacify their rural populations and stabilize their currencies. General Pinochet has given governmental assistance to large-scale fruit estates owned by supporters of his regime so that they and fruit exports have become a principal prop for his government at a time when popular opposition has become alarmingly bold. Military counter-insurgency strategists in Guatemala are pinning their hopes on the opening of large broccoli, cauliflower and cabbage estates to pacify alienated highland Indians.<sup>39</sup>

These plantation companies and the importing and exporting governments that rely on them for tax revenues and political support each make gendered calculations. They appeal to women as food purchasers and as food preparers. If Carmen Miranda helped smooth the way for a more subtle form of American regional influence, 'Chiquita Banana' helped create consumer loyalty for a product that yielded huge profits for an American corporation; the real market women of Latin America were marginalized by a potent combination of 'Good Neighbor' diplomacy and agribusiness advertising.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, while women consumers often have a difficult time acquiring accurate nutritional information, acting together they have helped open up the files of food corporations. Women who today buy more fresh broccoli than canned peas are not merely passive creatures in an advertising agency's scenario.

As women consumers – in Third World as well as First World countries – try to reorganize the politics of food, women food-industry workers – in the First World as well as the Third World – try to reorganize the politics of land and labor. Plantation companies and the governments who need them have depended on the control of women in order to profitably produce every one of their agricultural products. This has been especially obvious in those sectors where plantation managers have defined most of the tasks as 'women's work': tea, coffee and to a lesser extent rubber. The dependence on women has been harder to recognize in sectors where work has been masculinized: bananas, palm oil, and to a lesser extent sugar. But in *both* masculinized and feminized plantation agriculture women have been crucial to the success of the company and its governmental allies. For even where women do not supply the bulk of the paid labor, they perform certain crucial jobs – as seasonal weeders, as processing-plant workers – and they supply cheap, part-time labor, to be called on when the world price drops for the company's product. Women also provide a plantation's male workers with unpaid food cultivation, child care and sexual satisfaction. Women plantation workers and women farmers share a politics of invisibility. A woman

agriculturalist is transformed by writers, policy-makers and economists into 'the farmer's wife'. This transformation is a political process that is being challenged by women farmers not only in Third World countries, but also in West Germany, France, Spain and the United States.<sup>41</sup>

All too often the international politics of bananas (and sugar, rubber and broccoli) are discussed as if they were formulated only in bankers' board rooms or union leaders' meetings. Because both of these settings have been so male-dominated, the dependence of food politics on women and on ideas about masculinity and femininity has been ignored. This in turn has meant that even genuine non-feminist attempts to reform agrarian politics – in the name of nationalism or development – have failed to change patriarchal relationships. The politics of bananas and broccoli cannot be fully transformed until both women and men are made visible, as consumers, producers, managers and policy-makers.

## 7

## BLUE JEANS AND BANKERS

Polyester. The very word conjures up an entire era. Shopping malls. Drip-dry. Consciousness-raising groups. Ho, ho, ho, we won't go. Hard hats for Nixon.

Polyester caused a major shift in American fashion in the late 1960s that lasted until the mid-1970s. Although it was invented during World War II, polyester, a plastics-based cloth, didn't become a household word until twenty-five years later, when chemical companies, textile manufacturers, machinery producers, fashion designers and garment manufacturers got together to create polyester double-knit clothing for women. At about the same time British consumers were switching from fish and chips to Indian take-aways and from Indian cotton to chemical-based brushed nylon.

Paris Knitting Mills is a clothing company in Ozone Park, across the river from Manhattan in Queens, an industrial neighborhood and home of generations of new American immigrants. Paris joined other garment companies in targeting a particular class of women for the new textile. Polyester double-knit suits were to be a godsend for 'the working mother'. Joseph Lombardo, formerly a presser for Paris and now a union organizer working for Queens' steadily shrinking membership, was clear about this targeted consumer.

Paris did not sell to the designer group . . . Paris made double-knit suits for your mother or my mother – three-piece suits, with a blouse, a Chanel-type jacket, and a skirt or a pair of pants. They sold for thirty-five or forty dollars . . .

For a forty-year-old woman who was going back to work after raising her kids it was ideal, because she could have three suits for a hundred dollar investment. She could mix and match.<sup>1</sup>

Polyester and the working mother. This was America in the early 1970s. Whereas in 1950 only 11.9 per cent of American married women with children under six had paid jobs, by 1970 the proportion had risen to 30.3 per cent. Two decades later it would reach 56 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

The polyester formula was inspired by anxiety over global competition. While the peace movement and Henry Kissinger had their eyes on Vietnam, Al Paris of Paris Knitting Mills fixed his attention on Hong Kong and Taiwan. In the US and Europe managers of textile and garment companies were beginning to worry about the rising tide of Asian-made goods that were attracting their customers. 'Buy American.' 'Buy British.' These were the calls made to post-empire women. When they shopped for clothes at Sears or Marks and Spencer women were to be patriotic. This was off-the-rack nationalism. Manufacturers hoped women in polyester and brushed-nylon suits would stave off foreign competition. They counted on the working-class working woman to be attracted to its wash-and-wear convenience, its low cost, its indestructibility. She could balance her family's check book and meet the demands of femininity by purchasing a locally produced, chemical-based wardrobe.

Polyester permitted Western manufacturers to play their strong cards: capital and technology. Their new Asian rivals had cheap female labor, but that wasn't the only asset in the international garments competition. The new fabric and new knitting machines required large investments and engineering know-how that Taiwan and Hong Kong companies couldn't yet afford. Looking back at the polyester era, Art Ortenberg, one of the founders of Liz Claiborne clothing, saw a 'natural marriage between the international knitting-machinery manufacturers and the large chemical companies in the United States – mainly DuPont'.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, European and North American working mothers' fashion sense was presumed to be unsophisticated. Thus the clothes marketed to them could be kept simple. Paris Knitting Mills could grow only if its women sewing-machinists didn't have to be paid a lot to acquire complicated new skills: 'The beauty of Paris was that the jackets were all so much alike that the girls could sew them with their eyes closed.'<sup>4</sup>

But polyester turned shiny after several washings. And the colors that worked best were bland—pastel blue, pink, yellow, aqua. Chemical engineers may have liked polyester, but the designers didn't. Moreover, Asian manufacturers began to learn how to produce their own double-knit suits. By the mid-1970s Asian-produced polyester clothes were turning up in the ladies-wear department of J. C. Penney's in Ozone Park. The final straw was blue jeans. Women began to wear jeans – 'designer jeans' – where before they would have felt they had to wear the more formal double-knit suits to be publicly presentable: the dress code was

shifting, if not crumbling. As feminine respectability was redefined, the international political economy lurched in a new direction.

Al Paris, who in his heyday had opened up plants in Montreal and Dublin, began to lay off workers. Pressers like Joseph Lombardo lost their jobs. But most of the laid-off workers were women, since they comprised the majority of the garment factories' workers. Unemployment soared in the working-class neighborhoods of Queens and in scattered rural towns where many American garment companies now had their plants. Between 1970 and 1986 the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, one of the two major unions in the US garment industry, lost more than 200,000 members. The cause was easy to spot: production of women's and children's clothes in the United States had dropped by more than 50 per cent. Still, the New York metropolitan area remained home for thousands of women and men working in garment factories. In 1986 the ILGWU, with its mainly male leadership and overwhelmingly female rank and file, had 75,400 New York members.<sup>5</sup> 'Deindustrialization' has become a political catchword since industrial decline meant the lay-off of male factory workers in steel and automobile towns. Garment workers' earlier economic hardships and the international transformations they reflected had been easier to overlook because the workers were women, many of them immigrant or poor rural women.

### THE BENETTON MODEL

Some Western manufacturers and design houses tried to beat the overseas competition by seeking out lower-paid workers in their own countries. British companies looked to Black and Asian British women, many of them recent arrivals and thus vulnerable to isolation in seasonal employment at low pay with minimum benefits and maximum health hazards. Large retailers such as Marks and Spencer, which sells one fifth of all garments bought in Britain, decided to become 'manufacturers without factories'. Their managers began farming out contracts to smaller producers, who hired workers or employed another layer of subcontractors. Today some 600 different suppliers feed Marks and Spencer alone. Each tries to cope with the constant adjustments as giant retailers refine their strategies to compete with Benetton, Next and other up-market entrepreneurs. Subcontractors prop up their profits yet satisfy their large clients by keeping costs low while offering garments with ever more fashionable stitching.<sup>6</sup>

This has meant finding a way to pass on the costs and the work pressures. British contractors and subcontractors have passed them on to women, especially Asian and Black British women. Some were hired to work in



factories. Others were hired by subcontractors to work in their own homes. These arrangements often appealed to women with small children. Despite lower wages and the lack of benefits and health protection, many women believed that at least they could look after their children while earning an income for their families, thus not having to choose between motherhood and paid work. Home work also appealed to many of the women's fathers or husbands. They believed that the women of their communities should be protected from the harsh realities – and perhaps immoral temptations – of white-dominated British society. The sexual and racial politics of post-imperial British immigration were woven into blouses destined for Marks and Spencer.

When you live in Newham [in the East End of London], you have little choice, sister. Burning down of an Asian home does not even make news any longer . . . How can I look for jobs outside my home in such a situation? I want to remain invisible, literally.

Also, sister, I am a widow and I really do not know what my legal status is . . . At the moment, my uncle brings machining work to my home. It works out to be 50 pence per hour, not great! But I earn and I feed my children somehow. Most of all, I do not have to deal with the fear of racist abuse in this white world.<sup>7</sup>

In the United States, manufacturers, encouraged by regional governors, moved their factories south in search of cheaper, non-unionized workers, who would enable them to compete with the Asian and Latin American imports. Black, Latina and rural white women became America's secret weapon against Mexican, Haitian and Korean goods. American companies also moved off the mainland to Puerto Rico, which fell under US customs protection and thus provided the best of all worlds: a Third World labor force inside the American trade sphere.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, smaller firms in the US and Canada adopted the home-work strategy. As in Britain, the majority of home workers were women of color, again recent immigrants, often fearful of deportation. In Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, New York, Miami and Los Angeles, it was Filipino, Vietnamese, Chinese, Greek, Dominican, Cuban, Salvadorean, Haitian and Jamaican women who became essential to garment companies' global strategies.<sup>9</sup>

Feminized patterns of racial and regional inequality – interwoven with ideas about motherhood and feminine respectability – helped those European and North American garment companies who felt threatened by the restructured world economy but who did not possess the resources

necessary to move their factories overseas. Garment-company executives in alliance with local officials came up with a formula that has suited electronics companies, toy manufacturers and food processors as well: if you can't move to the Third World, create a feminized Third World in your own back yard.<sup>10</sup>

The re-emergence of sweatshops and home working might seem to be a turning back of the modernist clock. But just as plantations are being fashioned to fit the 1990s, so sweatshops and home working are being given a contemporary look.

Benetton is the successful garment company based in northern Italy, a region of farms and small towns whose newly prosperous industrial companies have earned it the nickname of 'the Third Italy'. With its revolutionary knitting technology and its scores of computer-coordinated small shops, Benetton is being heralded by business-school professors and financial reporters as a model of the way to do business in the era of global competition.

[Luciano] Benetton, whose leonine curling gray-brown hair and horn-rimmed glasses are familiar to millions of Italians from endless photographs in the press, was dressed in his usual assortment of casual clothes: voluminous khaki pants, brown L. L. Bean-style oxfords, a tweed jacket, and a shirt with a button-down collar . . . [He was on his way to do something that] excited him more than anything else in life: the opening of a Benetton store in a 'remote, almost unbelievable' part of the world. We were going that morning to attend a Benetton opening in Prague . . .<sup>11</sup>

Benetton is admired for its stylish designs and its ability to change fashions as rapidly as consumers change their fickle tastes. This combination depends on *flexibility*. In practice, this means that Benetton has to be able to employ advanced computer technology to redesign patterns at a moment's notice. That is the high-tech side. Simultaneously, maximizing flexibility means Benetton's executives being able to call on small-scale local sewing workshops to change their products faster than most big companies can. However, prices must be low enough to enable Benetton to keep ahead of Marks and Spencer. The solution: Italian family-based subcontractors hiring women to work in their homes or in small non-unionized workshops. Although Benetton has eight plants of its own in northern Italy, these operations employ only 2,000 of its 8,000 garment workers. Most of the Italian women who depend on Benetton for their livelihood don't work directly for the company. This is one of the secrets of a corporate model that maximizes flexibility. When the

company gives tours to visiting reporters it doesn't include the small, non-unionized shops clustered around Benetton's impressive new plants, even though those subcontractors perform about 40 per cent of Benetton's knitting and 60 per cent of the garment assembly.<sup>12</sup>

Girls, now a prime consumer market, began to adopt the 'Benetton look' in the mid-1980s. With their 'colors of the world' advertising campaign, Benetton executives set out to create a style that could dissolve national borders. Benetton was preparing Europe's adolescents for 1992. Economic planners were taking notice. Benetton's flexibility formula, relying on subcontracting and using women workers in small workshops, has attracted foreign imitators as this advertisement by the government of the Republic of Cyprus makes clear.

*The Benetton Approach: A Turning Point for Cyprus*

We are thinking in terms of the Italian model rather than the Korean and the Taiwanese. That means flexible socialization where you create for a high quality market like Europe: the Benetton approach.<sup>13</sup>

The cult of flexibility has also taken hold in Cyprus's competitor, Ireland, as well as in countries past their industrial prime. Government policy-makers and company officials both see new methods of controlling women's work as ammunition in current international politics. But those methods require that women – in Italy, Cyprus, Ireland, Britain, Canada – find flexibility attractive for their own reasons, appeals which off-set the lack of promotion, training, benefits or bargaining power. 'Mother's hours' are being joined to communications satellites as international politics enter the twenty-first century.<sup>14</sup>

### THE BANKER AND THE SEAMSTRESS

Despite the 'Benetton model' and the attractions of employing low-paid women of color at home, during the 1980s American and European fashion designers and their clothing marketers increasingly contracted directly with garment firms abroad, especially in Asia, North Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. American industry analysts predict that by the mid-1990s over half of all clothes sold in the United States will be manufactured in foreign factories.<sup>15</sup> The US executives who are moving their orders overseas – either under contract with a foreign firm or investing in plants of their own – claim that the more American consumers demand styles with complicated stitching, the more they must search out the lowest-priced seamstresses: 'A polyester-wool blazer costs \$65 to make

domestically . . . We can produce the same garment with hand tailoring in the Orient for \$47.50.<sup>16</sup>

Overseas imports may have been hurting garment factory owners like Al Paris, but they were proving very profitable for other American and European clothing companies. Liz Claiborne, Jean Pierre and The Gap, for instance, all contract with the same Hong Kong company, Fang Brothers. Thanks to their business, the Fang Brothers themselves have built up a multinational operation. By the late 1980s these Hong Kong entrepreneurs had factories employing women in Panama, Ireland, Thailand and San Francisco. Such is the current international political system that Hong Kong Chinese businessmen fill orders for American clothing companies by hiring Panamanian women; Panama is the Caribbean's largest Export Processing Zone and thrives despite the US government's efforts to bring down the Panamanian government.<sup>17</sup>

A consumer in Boston, Rome or Osaka can trace the complexities of international garment-trade politics by reading the labels on her jeans, bras or sweaters. Just as Chiquita and Geest stickers are clues to the origins of bananas, so clothing labels tell where a garment was made. Two decades ago the labels were likely to read: USA, Britain, Canada, Ireland, Taiwan, Portugal, Hong Kong. Today, those labels are still on the racks, but they have been joined by labels that say: Panama, Indonesia, China, Bangladesh, Mexico, Jamaica, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, Sri Lanka or Lesotho.

Garment factories have become part of the local landscape in countries which otherwise are radically different. White South African government officials have encouraged foreign companies to set up shop in bantustans, a scheme intended to bolster apartheid and the fiction of self-sustaining Black 'homelands'. Companies from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Israel have been among those to accept Pretoria's invitation.<sup>18</sup> For their part, Vietnamese government officials have introduced policies to encourage garment factories to produce clothing for sale on the international market. In 1986 6,000 Vietnamese shirts were exported to Canada via Hungary. Under a joint-venture agreement with the Vietnamese government, a Hungarian firm sends cloth to Vietnam; Vietnamese workers sew the shirts; the shirts then are sent back to Hungary for sale or export to buyers in countries such as Canada.<sup>19</sup> In Fiji the government has been nervously courting foreign garment manufacturers. The government has been trying to compensate for a long-term slump in world sugar prices and a more recent sharp fall in tourism revenues following Fiji's military coup in 1988. Its Trade and Investments Board has tried to entice Australian and New Zealand companies to set up factories with a special offer intended to undercut Fiji's Asian neighbors. In so doing, it is hoped, Fijian women's

sewing will bandaid over the problems caused by a plantation economy, ethnic strife and militarization.<sup>20</sup>

The international politics of garments stretches from the women at their sewing machines stitching polyester sleeves to the men in board rooms and ministerial offices drafting memos on investments. It is impossible to make sense of the actions and beliefs of one without being curious about the actions and assumptions of the others. And, increasingly, the board rooms and ministerial offices have resonated with bankers' voices. Bankers need to make loans. Bankers need to assess risks. Bankers need to collect on their loans. In the last two decades American, European and Japanese bankers have made high-risk, high-interest loans to Third World governments. For risk-taking has been at the core of the masculinized conception of banking. Just as travel to exotic regions was once imagined to be a risky and therefore peculiarly masculine form of adventure, so today risk-taking is thought by many financiers to be integral to doing

#### ARE MY HANDS CLEAN? (3-03)

I wear garments touched by hands from all over the world

35% cotton, 65% polyester, the journey begins in Central America

In the cotton fields of El Salvador  
In a province soaked in blood, pesticide-sprayed  
workers toil in a broiling sun  
Pulling cotton for two dollars a day

Then we move on up to another rung—Cargill  
A top forty trading conglomerate, takes the cotton thru  
the Panama Canal  
Up the Eastern seaboard, coming to the U.S. of A.  
for  
the first time

In South Carolina  
At the Burlington mills  
Joins a shipment of polyester filament courtesy of the  
New Jersey petro-chemical mills of Dupont

Dupont strands of filament begin in the South  
American country of Venezuela  
Where oil riggers bring up oil from the earth for six  
dollars a day  
Then Exxon, largest oil company in the world  
Upgrades the product in the country of Trinidad and  
Tobago

Then back into the Caribbean and Atlantic Seas  
To the factories of Dupont  
On the way to the Burlington mills

In South Carolina

To meet the cotton from the blood-soaked fields of El  
Salvadore

In South Carolina  
Burlington factories hum with the business of weaving  
oil and cotton into miles of fabric for Sears  
Who takes this bounty back into the Caribbean Sea  
Headed for Haiti this time  
May she be one day soon free

Far from the Port-au-Prince palace  
Third world women toil doing piece work to Sears  
specifications  
For three dollars a day my sisters make my blouse  
It leaves the third world for the last time  
Coming back into the sea to be sealed in plastic for  
me

This third world sister  
And I go to the Sears department store where I buy  
my  
blouse  
On sale for 20% discount  
Are my hands clean?

*Composed for Winterfest, Institute of Policy Studies.  
The lyrics are based on an article by Institute fellow  
John Casanagh, "The Journey of the Blouse: A Global  
Assembly."*

*Lyrics and music by Bernice Johnson Reagon.  
Songtalk Publishing Co. ©1985*

18 'Are My Hands Clean?' sung by Sweet Honey in the Rock. Lyrics by Bernice Johnson Reagon ©Songtalk Publishing Company, 1985

competitive international business. The value assigned to risk-taking, furthermore, has become even greater since the 'Big Bang' in 1987 – governments' deregulation of banking. 'Big Bang' reforms made a distinctly American, masculinized style of banking more popular in Britain, France, West Germany and Japan. This masculinized style has helped sustain cooperative relations between otherwise fiercely competitive male bankers. It has also helped keep women on the margins of the financial world, providing crucial support services but only occasionally gaining promotions that give them the chance to make policy decisions. By 1982, after a decade of rapid expansion and computer revolution in the finance industry, women comprised 57 per cent of all banking employees in Britain. Yet at the managerial level, 90 per cent of all posts were filled by men. Only 5 per cent of the thousands of British women working for local and multinational banks hold policy-making posts.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, women are barely visible when the major banking countries, the Group of Ten, gather to resolve problems of trade imbalances and international debt.

This sort of masculinized international banking has been politically costly. It has destabilized more governmental regimes than all the world's terrorists combined. Most Third World countries scarcely have the currency to keep up with the astronomical interest payments due to their foreign creditors, much less to repay the principal. But Japanese, British, American and other large lenders and their governments fear that global default would topple the international political economy so carefully constructed in the years following World War II. So lenders and their allies, who include their own governments and the International Monetary Fund (in which the US and Japanese governments now wield the most votes), are trying to make the debtor countries make good their mammoth debts. The most popular formula pressed on debtor governments combines cuts in government expenditure on 'non-productive' public services with an expansion of exports.

The centerpiece of the bankers' export strategy has been the 'Export Processing Zone'. Indebted governments set aside territory specifically for factories producing goods for the international market. Governments lure overseas companies to move their plants to these EPZs by offering them sewers, electricity, ports, runways, tax holidays and police protection. Most attractive of all is the governments' offer of cheap labor. Women's labor has been the easiest to cheapen, so it shouldn't be surprising that in most Export Processing Zones at least 70 per cent of the workers are women, especially young women. The eighteen-year-old woman at the sewing machine – or electronics assembly line or food-processing plant – in Panama's Colon Export Processing Zone has become the essential though unequal partner of the banker in his glass and chrome office

in London or Chicago. The risk-taking banker needs the conscientious seamstress to hold his world together. The politician and his technocratic advisor need the seamstress to keep the banker and his home government pacified. If the seamstress rebels, if she rethinks what it means to be a woman who sews for a living, her country may turn up on the list of 'unstable regimes' now kept by politically sensitive bankers.

### MAKING WOMEN'S LABOR CHEAP

It has become commonplace to speak of 'cheap women's labor'. The phrase is used in public policy discussions as if cheapness were somehow inherent in women's work. In reality women's work is only as unrewarded or as low-paid as it is made to be.

The international political economy works the way it does, and has done for the last two centuries, in part because of the decisions which have cheapened the value of women's work. These decisions have first feminized certain home and workplace tasks – turning them into 'women's work' – and then rationalized the devaluation of that work. Without laws and cultural presumptions about sexuality, marriage and feminine respectability these transformations wouldn't have been possible.

Organizing factory jobs, designing machinery and factory rules to keep women productive and feminine – these were crucial strategies in Europe's industrial growth. Industrialized textile production and garment-making were central to Britain's global power. Both industries feminized labor in order to make it profitable and internationally competitive. Other countries learned the British lesson in order to compete in the emerging global political economy and to stave off foreign control. The making of the 'mill girl' proved crucial. American textile investors travelled from Boston to England to learn the formula in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Japanese entrepreneurs, backed by their government's Meiji reforms to resist Western colonization, also chose young rural women as their first industrial workers. In industrializing Tsarist Russia, owners of new textile factories steadily increased the proportion of women workers, with government approval. In the pre-World War I period gendered formulas for factory-fueled capitalism seemed to be traded as energetically as railroad stocks.<sup>22</sup> Neither war nor revolution has done much to transform the feminizing strategies used by both capitalist and socialist garment-factory managers. In the Soviet Union, which has undergone a radical reordering of its political system as well as Draconian industrialization, women in 1970 still comprised 93 per cent of all sewing-machine operators.<sup>23</sup>

Feminization, however, has never been as easy as later historians,

through their own lack of curiosity, make it seem. Textile and garment workers frequently shrugged off, even laughed derisively at their employers' efforts to lecture to them on Victorian propriety.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes women went on strike. It took threats, coercion and revised legal structures to bring them back into line. Occasionally the very technology factory owners installed to feminize labor threw feminine respectability into question.

In June 1853 an advertisement appeared in the *American Illustrated News* celebrating Singer's newly patented sewing machine:

The sewing machine has within the last two years acquired a wide celebrity and established its character as one of the most efficient labour-saving instruments ever introduced to public notice . . .

We must not forget to call attention to the fact that this instrument is peculiarly calculated for female operatives. They should never allow its use to be monopolized by men.<sup>25</sup>

The sewing machine was praised by feminists. It drew crowds when it was demonstrated at the 1851 Exposition in London and at the 1855 Exposition in Paris.<sup>26</sup> Thomas Cook's guided tourists were among the throngs who heard the sewing machine being heralded as woman's liberator. It symbolized progress: technology was a liberator of women and men. Countries whose women had access to sewing machines could congratulate themselves on their women's freedom from the sort of physical toil that characterized the benighted societies crowded at the bottom of the global ladder.

While women were encouraged to see the sewing machine as a home appliance, entrepreneurs were being urged to purchase the machines by the dozen for women who would work outside the home in factories. The sewing machine allowed company owners to break down the process of making a dress or a pair of pants into discrete operations and thus impose a rationalized factory system on the seamstresses: each woman would sew only a small part of the garment – a sleeve, a tuck, a back pocket. It also allowed owners to pay their employees by the piece, rather than by the hour or by an entire finished product. The piece-rates increased competitiveness between women workers as well as extending a factory manager's control over the entire production process.

None the less, the sewing machine had its detractors. In French towns large numbers of women were employed to work sewing machines by the 1860s, and many complained of fatigue and ill health. Eugène Guibout, a Parisian physician, reported to the *Société Médicale des Hospitaux* in 1866 that he believed that

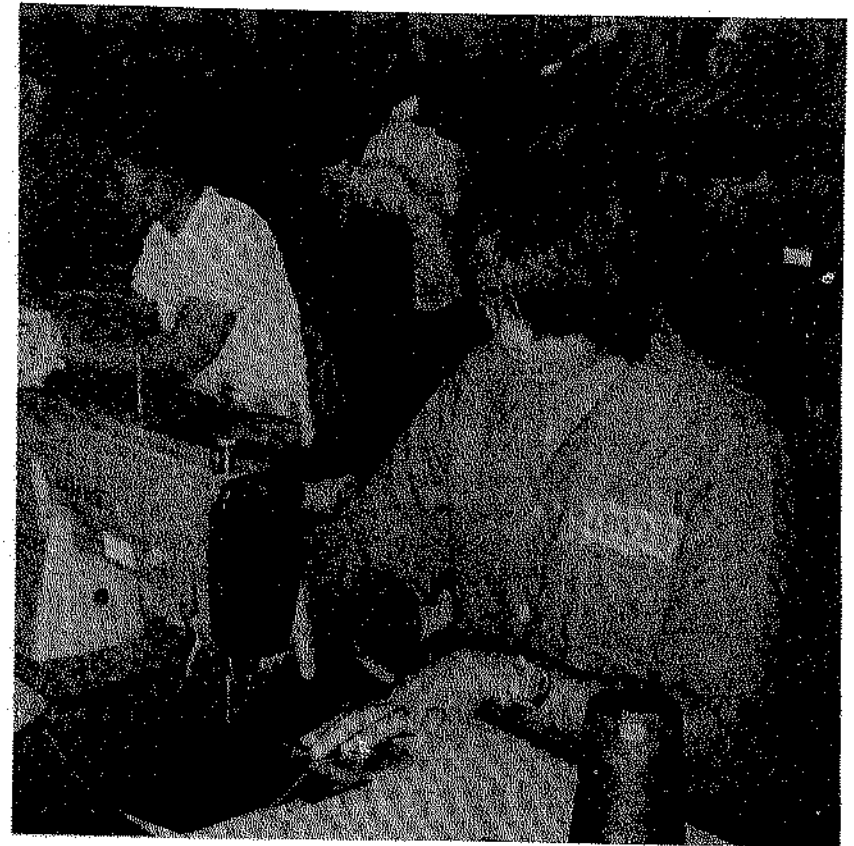
the extended use of the machine produced extensive vaginal discharges, sometimes haemorrhages, and extreme genital excitement, due to rubbing of the thighs during operation of the double pedal mechanism that then powered the machines used in industrial production.

The debate spilled over to Germany and Italy. Some male scientists were less alarmed than Dr Guibout, but they, too, raised their eyebrows at the potentially masturbatory effects of the bi-pedal sewing machine. There was palpable relief in international medical circles when a single-pedal machine was introduced. Still, it wasn't until the advent of the electrically powered sewing machine in the next century that the controversy over the sewing machine's sexual consequences was laid to rest.<sup>27</sup>

Garment-company managers have drawn on various patriarchal assumptions to help them keep wages and benefits low in their factories. First, they have defined sewing as something that girls and women do 'naturally' or 'traditionally'. An operation that a person does 'naturally' is not a 'skill', for a skill is something one has to be trained to do, for which one should then be rewarded. Such thinking may be convenient and save money, but is it accurate? Many a schoolgirl has struggled through a home economics class trying to make the required skirt or apron without much success. One garment-factory manager explained that he preferred to hire young Filipino women who *didn't* know how to sew, so that 'we don't have to undo the bad habits they've learned'.<sup>28</sup> But the myth of women as natural sewers persists and is used to deflate women garment workers' actual skills.

Second, a women's labor can be kept cheap if those jobs which even the factory managers acknowledge are 'skilled' can be reserved for men. Levis Jeans in Manila is remarkably like garment factories in New York, Manchester, Toronto, Moscow or Colombo: women are the sewing-machinists; men are the cutters and the pressers. Men also are selected to run specialized machines, like the zipper inserters. Cutting, pressing and zippering all are paid more than sewing. The managerial rationale for this sexual division of labor is that cutting, pressing and running specialized machinery require physical strength that only men have. This argument ignores the options available when technology is designed, the physical demands made on women by housework and farming, and the fact that some men are weaker than some women.

Third, managers justify paying women workers less by imagining that women are merely secondary wage earners in their families. They assume that men – as fathers and husbands – are the 'breadwinners'. This



19 A Levis factory in the Philippines: women sew the distinctive back pocket design. (photo: Cynthia Enloe, 1980)

presumption prevails not just in popular thinking but in the statistical reports of bodies such as the national census bureau, the World Bank, and development agencies.<sup>29</sup> Such reports are a boon to garment-factory managers. They make the practice of paying their women workers *as if* they were being supported at home by a man seem up-to-date and sophisticated. Thus the international garment industry, on which so many governments rely for foreign currency, is deeply dependent on ideas about the family and marriage.

Even those managers who prefer to hire single women – as many do – use the marriage factor to suppress wages. They can presume that the single woman is just earning 'pin money' for herself because she has a wage-earning father who supports her and her mother. Or they can claim



20 At the same factory, men are assigned the higher-paid cutting jobs.  
(photo: Cynthia Enloe, 1980)

that the single woman is not a 'serious' member of the laborforce because she intends to work only until she finds a husband and 'settles down', supported by him. Therefore, she does not need to be paid as if she were a career worker; when she is sewing sleeves for the Fang Brothers or a back pocket for Levis she is just going through 'a phase'.

If their own parents, teachers and religious leaders encourage them to think of their 'real' vocation – what will bring them community respect, personal gratification and moral reward – as being a wife and a mother, then it is not surprising that the young women themselves find it difficult to question their employers' contention that they don't deserve better pay because they are 'only working until they marry'. Local community expectations thus combine with World Bank statistical practices to

strengthen the garment-factory manager's cost-cutting hand. Take away or transform either and it might prove far more difficult for managers in garment manufacturing and other light industries to use 'cheap women's labor' to ensure international competitiveness.

At the turn of the century many Jewish and Italian women working in New York City's then thriving garment factories endured the low pay, lint dust, eye strain and six-day working week dreaming of marriage and of becoming housewives. It was a dream that made their parents and their employers comfortable. It was a dream that frustrated their coworkers who wanted them to organize, to protest, to strike. Even today, marriage is not just about heterosexual conformity. It is an escape. A husband, many women workers hope, will be a way out of patriarchal factory toil.

It's not easy to teach us union.

Garment girls shift like sand, start  
too young in the trade, wait for

Prince Charming to take em away . . .<sup>30</sup>

Feminist researchers in Sri Lanka interviewed women working for garment and electronics companies in the government-supported Export Processing Zone outside Colombo. Workers told them that they saw their jobs as lasting only a few years; they hoped they would be 'phase jobs', not careers. They also realized that their employers preferred single women. Because so many women in the Export Processing Zone didn't see themselves as 'workers', but as daughters, prospective wives and members of their community, feminists trying to build support around work issues had to radically rethink what a 'work issue' was. They discovered that women working in the factories felt intimidated by men who harassed them as they traveled to and from the Export Processing Zone. This wasn't the sort of issue that an orthodox union would take seriously, but it was significant for these young women workers. Working together, the activists outside the factories and the women employees built a coalition of village elders, religious groups and the women themselves to reduce the harassment. Had they confined their organizing to the factory floor, they would have been subject to dismissal, failed to engage many of the women workers and lost the chance to mobilize the groups with whom the women workers still chiefly identified.<sup>31</sup>

To make women's labor cheap garment-factory managers also find it useful to imagine marriage an inevitable and lasting state for adult women. If factory managers do have to hire married women, and if governments

have to acknowledge that balance of trade depends on women over twenty being part of the laborforce, then both are most comfortable assuming that, as a wife, a woman will be economically dependent on a man and put her wifely and motherly roles before any other.

This hardly matches contemporary reality. Today one third of the world's households are headed by women. The single mother – the woman responsible for supporting herself and at least one child – is not simply a phenomenon of affluent societies. In Kenya as well as in Denmark over 30 per cent of households are headed by women. The same is true in Barbados, Vietnam, Zimbabwe, Nicaragua, Jamaica and Lesotho.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, women's labor is made cheap by preventing women from organizing. This tactic rarely succeeds unless managers have assistance from government officials and women workers' male relatives. Fathers, brothers and husbands of women workers sometimes try to keep them from becoming politically involved because it might jeopardize the income they bring into the family. They also often object because political activity seems to violate codes of feminine respectability by involving women in public conflict, conflict with men of authority. Male workmates are not always supportive, seeing some of the women's demands (for protection against sexual harassment, for maternity leave) as irrelevant to 'serious' trade-union activity. Government officials have done their part to keep women's labor cheap by passing laws banning unions or authorizing only unions friendly to management. On occasion also they have called out their police to support managers. This can create a hostile confrontation that seriously jeopardizes a woman's reputation.

Thus keeping women's labor cheap requires vigilance and daily effort. That effort is an integral part of what is called 'international political economy'. Factory managers alone cannot keep women's labor cheap: it takes a combination of allies and ideas – about skills, marriage, feminine respectability, fashion. The politics of the international garment industry are sustained by relationships inside the home, in the community, in and between governments, as well as on the factory floor.

### 'THE LIGHT INDUSTRY GIRLS'

Those most eager to pay as little as possible for human labor are those who run firms that are most dependent on human labor to produce their product. The more a firm can design its production system to minimize that dependence, the less preoccupied its managers will be about cutting labor costs. Nowadays the kinds of industries that are most labor-intensive are 'light industries'. Light industries and heavy industries differ in the

mix of capital equipment – furnaces, turbines, computers, robots, looms, sewing machines – and human labor each needs to turn out a saleable product.

Because light industries are more labor-intensive and less reliant on large infusions of capital, they are also less likely to be concentrated in the hands of a few owners. There are many more players in any light-industry market. This makes light industries more decentralized and more competitive.

This sounds reassuringly democratic and efficient. But for the workers – sewing polyester suits for Al Paris or Liz Claiborne jeans for the Fang Brothers – light industry's decentralized competitiveness may not be benign. For the very intensity of the competition only heightens the determination of owners and managers to keep labor costs as low as possible. Cutting labor costs is seen as one of the chief strategies for beating one's rivals. And the industry's decentralization makes it hard for even a committed government to implement worker safety laws effectively. It is much easier to hide an illegal dress factory than to conceal an illegal automobile plant.

'Light industries' have been most feminized, while 'heavy industries' have been most masculinized. Thus how light and heavy industries relate to each other politically may depend in part on the relative influence possessed by women and men in a country. If women are seen mainly as mothers, part-time employees and unskilled workers, if they do not have control over the unions they are members of or have no unions at all, if they are not considered serious allies or opponents by men in government ministries or political parties, then it will be especially difficult for light industry to hold its own in politics in a way that benefits not only the managers but also the workers. Put another way, the power that men working in mining, aerospace, automobile, steel or petrochemical

#### LIGHT INDUSTRIES

Textiles  
Garments  
  
Food processing  
Cigarettes  
Toys  
Shoes  
Electronics  
Data entry (insurance data,  
airline reservations, etc.)

#### HEAVY INDUSTRIES

Steel  
Automobiles (including tanks  
and armored vehicles)  
Chemicals and petrochemicals  
Aircraft and aerospace  
Shipbuilding  
Machinery

industries can bring to bear on their country's political system not only privileges heavy industry, it serves to undercut women bunched together in light industry.

This sexual division of labor has had the effect of further masculinizing national and international politics. For government officials in most countries have come to think of 'heavy industries' as the very stuff of national power. Having its own steel industry is held as proof that a country has 'graduated', *arrived*.

While officials in South Korea, Brazil, and other countries that have developed masculinized heavy industries express pride in their elevated international status, their counterparts in 'mature' countries such as the United States, Britain and France feel as though they are losing their grip on world politics because of the decline of their steel and automobile companies. When political commentators accord the fortunes of their countries' steel, aircraft or automobile companies the seriousness reserved for issues of 'national security', they are further entrenching the masculinization of international politics.

First the Japanese and more recently the South Korean economies have 'graduated' from garments to steel.<sup>33</sup> That is, they have moved up from feminized industries to masculinized industries. Hosting the Olympics has become the world's graduation present.

As South Korean government officials were bidding to have their country chosen as the site of the 1988 Olympics, some commentators were talking about the 'two Koreas'. They didn't mean North and South. They were referring to the South Korea of large, capitalized heavy industries and the South Korea of the back-alley garment workshop. In 1988 women made up an estimated two thirds of workers in South Korea's world-famous export-oriented factories. They were working more hours per week than their male counterparts and being paid on average one third less, producing clothes, electronics, shoes and data services - industries that enabled South Korean businessmen to accumulate enough capital to launch their own companies. Those Korean women factory workers who went on strike in the 1980s to bring down the authoritarian military government were protesting against both the myth of the successful South Korea and the price that South Korean factory women were expected to pay to sustain that myth.

Past the rows of charred sewing machines, amid the smoke-blackened piles of timber and cinder, lie the keepsakes of the women who worked and died here. These were among the remains of the Green Hill Textile Company: a snapshot of a young girl smiling in a field of red flowers, a magazine clipping of a singer, a letter from a young man in the army.<sup>34</sup>

In March 1988 a fire tore through the Green Hill Textile Company's small factory, squeezed between a billiard parlor, a restaurant and a church in a dormitory community outside Seoul. Lee Pung Won, the 44-year-old owner, was considered a good employer, who treated his workers 'more like a family'. Most of his employees were young single women who had come from the countryside to the city in hope of finding a waged job. They were paid approximately \$1.75 per hour by Lee Pung Won, who expected them to work fifty-seven hours a week. In this, their lives were similar to those of other Korean women working in nearby factories producing shoes and televisions for export. When the factory received a big order, as often happened in the seasonal garment trade, their employer expected the women to work even longer hours:

The fire broke out in late March as twenty-eight young textile workers lay sleeping in the factory that doubled as their dormitory in this suburb of Seoul. With the stairways locked and heaped with sweaters the women had knit that day, only a few escaped. Twenty-two workers died.<sup>35</sup>

Making it as a 'world class' player has come with a gendered price tag.

### AN EARTHQUAKE IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

At 7:19 on the morning of September 19 1985, Mexico City experienced one of North America's worst earthquakes. It left thousands of people homeless, modern office buildings cracked and useless and Mexico's ruling Institutionalized Revolutionary Party (the PRI) badly shaken. For the seamstresses who worked in the factories clustered in the neighborhood of San Antonio Abad, the earthquake marked a political and personal turning point. An estimated 800 small garment factories in Mexico City were destroyed that morning, killing over 1,000 garment workers and leaving another 40,000 without jobs.<sup>36</sup>

Women who were just arriving at work as the quake shook Mexico City stood looking at the rubble that an hour before had been their source of livelihood. It was a Thursday, payday. Many of them were single mothers and their families depended on their wages. But their first thought was of those women, already at work at 7: a.m., who were trapped inside the flattened buildings. Managers usually kept windows closed and doors locked to stop women from taking work breaks or stealing materials, so few of their coworkers inside had had any chance of escaping. Some buildings held up to fifty different garment companies, several per floor. The floors and cement pillars on which they rested could hardly have been expected



to hold the weight of heavy industrial sewing machines and tons of fabric, though no government inspector had complained. Most companies were small subcontractors, usually backed by foreign money. Though not as well-known as the more visible 'maquiladoras' strung along the US - Mexican border, these firms were part of the Mexican government's policy of using tourism and light-industry exports to pay off its spiraling debt. By 1986 foreign-owned and joint-venture factories such as those in San Antonio Abad had displaced tourism as the country's second largest source of foreign exchange.<sup>37</sup>

Women outside the collapsed building tried to climb over the debris to rescue their coworkers trapped inside. Hastily mobilized government soldiers told them to get back and cordoned off the building. Within a day the company owners arrived, accompanied by the army. Equipped with cranes, soldiers began to pull away piles of fallen cement so that owners' could retrieve their machinery. Employees still standing in the sun on the other side of the ropes watched with mounting horror and indignation as their bosses and the soldiers chose to rescue sewing machines before women.

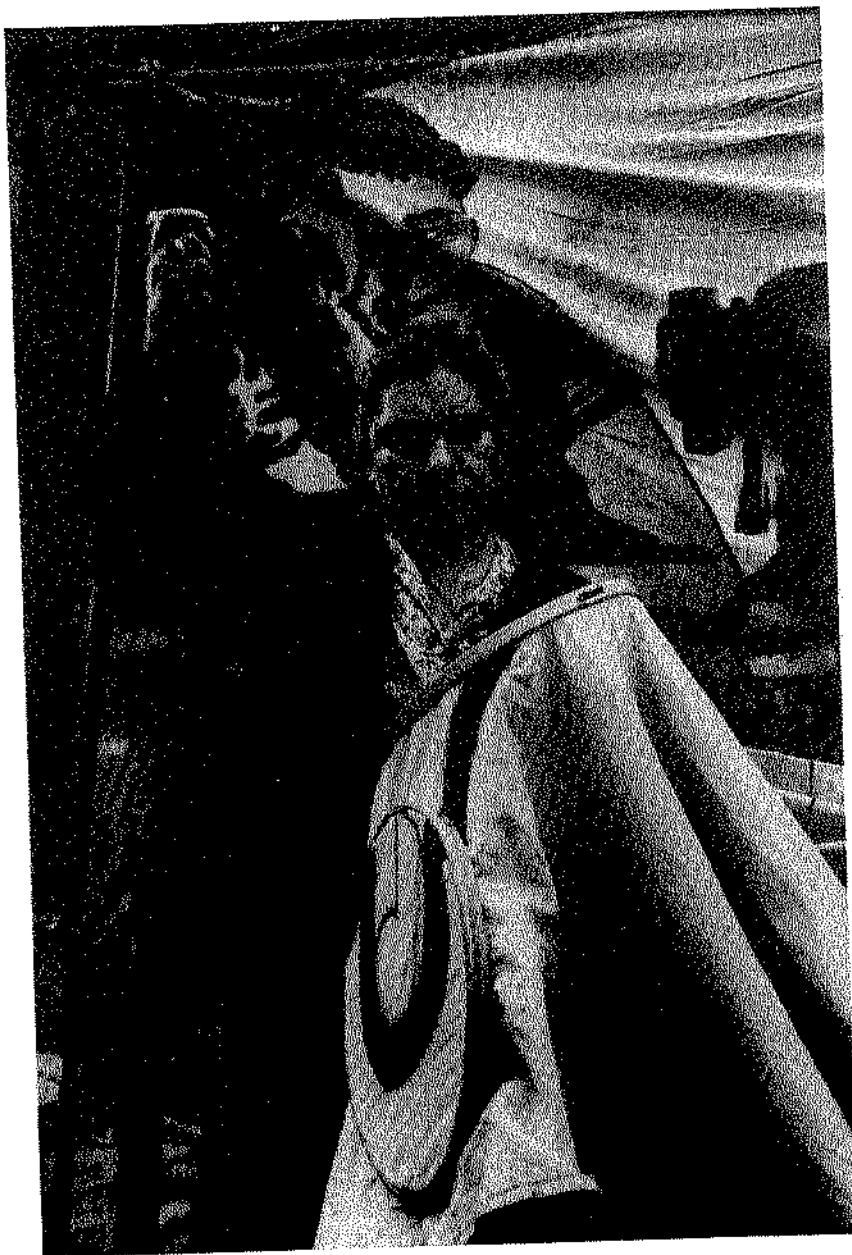
At this point something new began to happen. Mexican women who worked in garment factories had tried to organize and strike before. But each time they had been defeated. Employers fired the 'troublemakers', while adopting a fatherly attitude toward those women who accepted the terms of work. Many women needed their meager paychecks to support their children especially as the indebted Mexican government, which had counted on oil to solve the country's problems, was now cutting food subsidies and devaluing the peso to meet foreign bankers' demands. Even those women who were willing to risk being fired had to face male partners who resented their staying out after work to attend meetings. On top of these obstacles, left-wing opposition parties paid scant attention to women working in small sweatshops, preferring to court the more politically influential male oil workers. Small groups of Mexican feminists were active, but they were mostly middle-class and scarcely understood the needs of poor women with only primary-school education. Previously these obstacles had prevented independent women workers organizing. But the earthquake made blatantly clear what hesitant women workers had once been able to overlook: behind a façade of paternalism, employers and their government allied in valuing machines over the women who worked and voted for them.

Becoming more and more angry at what they saw, women at the scene of the disaster began to talk to each other about what this meant. Some women spontaneously moved to block the trucks that were about to carry off the owners' precious machines. Other women confronted the

owners. They wanted their paychecks. They wanted to be compensated for the days of lost work. When the owners shrugged their shoulders and claimed they had no money, women began to shout: 'Compensation! Compensation.' Several dozen women decided that they would have to stay at the site over night in order to prevent the army trucks from moving and thus the owners from leaving the scene of death and destruction without fulfilling their legal responsibilities. Staying over night meant having to stay away from male partners and children who expected them at home.

At about this time, middle-class women from feminist groups in Mexico City - some affiliated with political parties and some independent - began to hear of the garment workers' distress and came to several building sites to offer assistance. It wasn't immediately clear to the seamstresses, however, just what their priorities should be. Looking back afterward, some remembered that the feminists seemed to be urging the women workers to organize a union; political concerns were at the top of their agenda. But should this be the seamstresses' most pressing demand? If they did immediately form a union, especially one not affiliated to the PRI federation, maybe they would risk government reprisal and so alienate their bosses that they would never receive the cash they so desperately needed. Women workers also had to figure out how to respond to the offers of support from suddenly attentive left-wing parties. And what about their *compañeros*, their male partners: would they feel threatened if women began to take their working conditions so seriously? How could they be persuaded that a woman who stayed out in the evening was being political not unfaithful?

In the months that followed the earthquake garment workers gradually made a number of decisions that matched their own needs and resources. They kept up their road-block and vigil outside the factories until the government pushed the owners to pay compensation for lost wages. They did this in part by embarrassing the president and then leader of the PRI by publicizing the army's role in removing the sewing machines before rescuing trapped women workers. In their public-relations campaign, middle-class feminists proved valuable allies; they had more contacts with the press and helped to raise funds to buy typewriters. Feminists also knew lawyers who could help the seamstresses find their way through the bureaucratic labyrinths of the Ministry of Labor. But women workers remained skeptical of the middle-class women. Too often in the past well-meaning feminists had tried to speak on their behalf, to run meetings and rallies. So they took steps to ensure that whatever organization grew out of the earthquake's aftermath was run by seamstresses on terms that seamstresses themselves found most comfortable and practical.



21 Mexican garment worker sewing a banner that reads 'We Demand the Right to Unionize'. (photo: Marco A. Cruz/Imagenlatina, 1985)

The union that they created in the autumn of 1985 is the September 19th Garment Workers Union. By 1987 it had gained workers' support and official recognition in twelve factories. It has been difficult, however, to give assistance to women in factories as far away as Juarez or the Yucatan. Bus fares are expensive. The union has remained independent of all political parties and of the PRI federation. Debate over exactly what this independence meant during Mexico's first ever competitive presidential election campaign in 1988 strained bonds of unity inside the union. But such unity was essential given the continuing pressures from outside. The union had managed to gain Ministry of Labor certification in its early days largely because the PRI was running to catch up with the grassroots organizing that spread like wildfire through the neighborhoods in the wake of the earthquake. But once the foreign reporters went home and public attention flagged, the government joined with the garment companies to withdraw official certification. Teenage male thugs were sent to the factories to throw stones at women activists. Some *compañeros* prohibited their wives and companions from taking part in activities that carried such physical risks.

In reaction to this danger women active in the September 19th Union have worked with middle-class feminists to create links with garment workers, union activists and feminists in the United States. If they could mount letter writing campaigns to the Mexican government, officials might stop their efforts to discredit them to avoid international embarrassment. Making a film and organizing speaking tours to Los Angeles, New York, Chicago and Boston helped the Mexican women trade experiences and lessons with Latina and Chinese-American women garment workers. These trips also enabled September 19th union activists to track down those who were making the decisions in their factories. For instance, the Roberts company, a maker of men's suits, had taken the lead among factory owners in Mexico City in trying to persuade the Ministry of Labor that the union was not operating legally. But who owned Roberts? It is difficult to sit at a machine on the shop floor in San Antonio Abad and figure out who your boss reports to across the border. Women in the United States were able to help union organizers locate the Roberts Company's headquarters in Maine. American women were also able to put pressure on the company's US outlets.

The September 19th women spent hours at their newly acquired headquarters in a cement-covered vacant lot across from the ruined factories. They discussed ways to lessen their partners' and their families' resistance to their spending so much time away from home. The union became an all-women organization precisely so that garment workers could bring these questions to their meetings without anyone charging them with

being trivial or divisive. There are men in Mexico's garment factories – pressers and cutters – but from the start the seamstresses saw theirs as a women's organization addressing women's needs and remaining accessible to women. At first women felt as though they had to choose either to end their participation in the new union or to leave their male partners. A number of women now serving on the union's executive committee have left their *compañeros*. The need for such a choice had to be challenged, or it would have severely restricted the union's potential membership and made it hard to gain an audience in factories not yet organized. So members chose to try to make children and partners feel like participants in union activities. Setting up a child-care center at their headquarters was intended to relieve some of the tensions that were mounting between union work, factory work and family responsibilities. More recently, child care has fulfilled another purpose. Union women have invited women active in neighborhood organizations to use the child-care center too. Cooperation between Mexico City's unions and its neighborhood organizers – the majority of them women – is a new phenomenon in Mexican grassroots politics.

### CONCLUSION

A leaner, more competitive world is what leading politicians are prescribing for the 1990s. The prescription goes by several names: restructuring, *perestroika*, the four modernizations. It is providing a new common language for George Bush, Margaret Thatcher, Mikhail Gorbachev, Brian Mulroney, Deng Xiaoping and Sosuke Uno. They and their aides discuss these restructuring policies in terms of high-technology research, managerial flexibility, decentralized productivity. Their discourse has a futuristic ring: traditional national boundaries will mean less as data and capital goods are transferred electronically around the globe; teenagers in their Benetton sweaters will grow up with a global consciousness. But to turn this vision into reality government officials are relying on old-fashioned ideas about women.

This seductive 1990s formula needs women from Leningrad to Tokyo to continue to see themselves as mothers, wives and daughters. It is as mothers that Canadian or Italian women will be grateful for the introduction of more and more home-based jobs, jobs that allow managers and government planners to reduce costly overhead expenditures. It is as wives that American and Panamanian women will be willing to take the lower-paid assembly jobs in high- and low-tech light industry, permitting managers and government officials to compete with foreign rivals. It is as daughters that Soviet and Japanese women will accept the increasingly

common part-time jobs which enable officials to fine-tune the economy.

Yet this Brave New Old-Fashioned World is being planned without taking account of many women's mounting ambivalence about the meaning of marriage, motherhood and familial responsibility. It ignores the significance of single mothers and women as family breadwinners throughout the world. It dismisses many women's sophisticated organizational skills. Its proponents are remarkably uncurious about the changing dynamics within households.

To say this is not to suggest that all women everywhere are willing to see other women as allies rather than as competitors or strangers. Nor is it to imply that many women's relationships to male supervisors, husbands and fathers are not problematic. But as we enter the next decade, women as consumers and producers are not simply modern versions of Victorian domestic angels and obedient mill girls. And even those mythologized pioneers of the Industrial Revolution were not as passive as they are often made out to be.

The Mexican garment workers' experience suggests several things. First, despite their striking similarities, garment and other light-industry factories use the women who make up the majority of their workers in different ways. There is no Universal Garment Factory. Some factories are in capital cities, while others are far from the seats of power. Being in the capital does not guarantee influence for the women workers, since they may be employed by the smallest, most marginalized subcontracting factories, neglected by political activists, academics and reporters. But the location did help the Mexico City seamstresses to gain the resources to challenge the government directly when other conditions were on their side. Working for a company in an Export Processing Zone also has mixed implications. Local governments courting investment have designed the EPZs so that workers can be easily controlled. But those conditions can give women a sense of their shared interests. And, as women in the Philippines and Sri Lanka have shown, once they begin to organize, the very intensity of the EPZ experience can generate activism.<sup>38</sup> Then there are the thousands of women who don't do their industrial sewing in a factory at all. In the name of post-modern managerial flexibility, they are hired by subcontractors to work in their own homes. For home workers, recognizing unfair practices and organizing to challenge them may be especially difficult.

The September 19th Union's story also warns us not to collapse all women in Third World countries into a single homogeneous category. There is no such thing as 'the Third World woman'. Third World peasant women may feel they have little in common with women working in foreign-owned urban factories. Middle-class women, even if they are

feminists and want to support factory women in Third World societies, often speak a political language that is unfamiliar, even alienating to the very women they wish to help. And of course, as in industrialized countries, there are those Third World women, admittedly a minority, who are so comfortable with their class and racial privileges that they feel quite threatened when garment workers challenge established ideas about respectable feminine behavior *and* their government's scheme to pay off foreign bankers.

Feminization is being publicly rationalized in terms that appeal to a woman's desire to contribute to her nation, and that appear sympathetic to the double-burdened worker-mother. In the process, the politics of micro-chips and information are becoming as dependent on a particular politics of marriage and femininity as the politics of blouses and jeans were before them.<sup>39</sup> For women assembling micro-chips for state-of-the-art computers and lethal weaponry or entering data for publishers and hospitals, the technology has changed, but the ideology on which it rests has not. So, as the Mexican garment workers have demonstrated, any success in altering managerial and political policies will require taking up sensitive questions about home life, issues that male union leaders and nationalist intellectuals have dismissed as divisive or trivial.

What if . . . What if women continue to change their ideas about husbands as breadwinners? What if increasing numbers of women change their ideas about what a good mother does with her evenings? What if women in more and more countries change their ideas about what constitutes a 'skill'? If any of these ideas could be changed permanently, men in their board rooms, government ministries and union halls would have to revise their own ways of confronting the challenges of the next decade.

8

## 'JUST LIKE ONE OF THE FAMILY': DOMESTIC SERVANTS IN WORLD POLITICS

British/Irish/Scottish/Welsh nanny/governesses childcare trained/experienced with impeccable references. Worldwide Service. Regency Nannies International, 50 Hans Crescent, London SW1 (opposite Harrods). GB licenced.<sup>1</sup>

Every day the *International Herald Tribune*, *The Times*, the *Toronto Star* and other cosmopolitan newspapers run such advertisements. Agencies are eager to place nannies and domestic servants; families are eager to obtain household help. The women seeking work are British, Irish, American, Portuguese, Mexican, Colombian, Jamaican, Moroccan, Sri Lankan, Indian, Filipino and Ethiopian. Their potential employers are Canadian, American, British, French, German, Italian, Australian, Japanese, Hong Kong Chinese, Singaporean, Saudi and Kuwaiti. The governments of both domestic workers and their employers have a stake in those relationships. So does the International Monetary Fund. Domestic work has become an international business with political implications.

When middle-class women with families began returning to waged work in the 1970s, they needed more than polyester suits. The double burden, which factory and farming women had known for generations, was now becoming part of middle-class women's daily lives. Since the 1920s they had been told by conservatives and reformers alike that