



“Summary of article by Saskia Sassen-Koob: Notes of the Incorporation of Third World Women into Wage-Labor Through Immigration and Off-Shore Production” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 4: The Changing Nature of Work. Island Press: Washington DC, 1998. pp. 295-298

Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being

“Summary of article by Saskia Sassen-Koob: Notes of the Incorporation of Third World Women into Wage-Labor Through Immigration and Off-Shore Production”

Labor intensive production of agricultural and manufactured export goods in industrializing countries has expanded since the 1970s, as has emigration from developing countries to the United States. Both trends are drawing Third World women into the wage labor force on a massive scale, but the trends are theoretically puzzling since emigration normally accompanies a lack of employment growth and opportunity in the country of origin.

Employment of immigrants and off-shore production are functionally equivalent ways for firms in developed countries to secure a low-wage workforce and avoid organized labor. This paper indicates that, “The same set of processes that have promoted the location of plants and offices abroad also have contributed to a large supply of low wage jobs in the U.S. for which immigrant workers are a desirable labor supply.”[1145]

INDUSTRIALIZATION AND FEMALE MIGRATION

The redeployment of labor-intensive production to certain Third World locations created a significant demand for labor in those countries. Why then did these same countries also experience high rates of emigration? A chain of relationships can be traced from industrial growth through its employment impacts to its cultural-ideological effect on people.

Because internal consumption markets are limited, access to world markets, supported by foreign direct investment, accounts for most of the new industrial growth in developing countries. The export sector in developing countries involves agriculture and manufacturing, both of which induced internal migrations, but with different patterns, particularly for men and women. Differences in migration can also be discerned between Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and Africa, but in general, large-scale commercial agriculture displaced small farmers, creating both a rural labor supply and an increased demand for low-wage labor. However, much of this demand occurred on a seasonal basis only. Rural unemployment, migration from one rural area to another, and migration to the cities all increased. Men sought work in either in commercial agriculture or in industrializing urban areas. Women in some cases remained in the countryside and in others sought work in the cities.

Export manufacturing also increased the demand for labor, concentrated it near transportation and services, and promoted ancillary employment in industries such as packaging or construction. This growth in export manufacturing should have absorbed displaced rural labor;

instead it drew new segments of the population into the labor force, mostly young women who would not have entered the wage labor market so suddenly if industrialization were more gradual. Unlike earlier forms of modernization, which introduced capital intensive forms of production and favored male employment, export manufacturing is labor intensive and employs women in large numbers in industries as diverse as garments and electronics.

Although export-led growth increased employment, it did not do so in a stable way. The mental and physical fatigue produced by jobs in export industries led to high turnover. This suited employers' preferences for younger women. Many women who went to work in these industries eventually became unemployed. This constant turnover of employment sustained the migration of young women to the cities, a phenomenon which also proved disruptive of the local economies in communities from which they came. Households were left without a traditional source of labor. Young men were left without partners, or a role in the feminized export sector; and, as described above, were often displaced from traditional employment in agriculture.

Several factors have converged to transform internal migration into emigration, a phenomenon echoed by research evidence which indicates that recent migrants have a higher tendency to migrate again. Unstable employment means that high levels of employment coexist with unemployment. "Incipient westernization among [export] zone workers and the disruption of traditional work structures combine to minimize the possibility of returning to communities of origin." [1151] Contact with foreign workers in export zones provides information about potential destinations and a sense of familiarity with other countries. After this exposure to western culture, workers are even less likely to return home. Migrants are receptive to the image of the United States as a land of opportunity, an image enhanced by the productive activity of U.S. firms in foreign export zones producing for the U.S. market.

LABOR DEMAND AND THE ABSORPTION OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN

The supply of jobs in the developed world has been restructured in such a way as to increase the demand for low wage labor, in particular female labor. Several analysts have noted a trend, confirmed by census data for various occupations and industries, toward a polarization of income. A shift from manufacturing to services increased the proportion of jobs that are low paid, while the fastest growing service industries concentrate jobs at the high and low wage ends. Many high-tech production jobs are low-wage, while some older manufacturing industries (e.g., furs, garments, and footwear) suffered job downgrading when the work was moved to non-union sweatshop or homework settings. Computerization upgraded or downgraded many middle-income jobs.

These trends may be even more intense in the major cities which receive most immigrants since new-growth sectors, particularly producer services with almost half its jobs low-waged, concentrate in major cities. Globally-dispersed production requires centralized administration which is also concentrated in major cities. The sheer concentration of people (residents, workers, and tourists) in large cities induces a proliferation of small low-cost service producers that need a low-wage, non-unionized workforce to be competitive. Downgraded manufacturing jobs are concentrated in major cities near available workers and design centers so as to be responsive to consumer demand for specialty goods.

This demand for specialty goods reflects the other end of the polarization effect. The expansion of high income jobs itself increases the demand for low wage workers. “Behind the gourmet food stores and specialty boutiques that have replaced the self-service super-market and department store lies a very different organization of work.”[1155] Compared to the capital-intensive nature of middle-income suburbs that rely on transportation, appliances, self-service shopping for mass-produced goods, and household labor, high income households rely on hired staff and consumption of specialty products and services that are labor-intensive to produce and deliver.

This expansion of demand for low-wage workers coincides with the expansion in immigration, centered in the major cities of a few states. Just over half of legal immigrants are women. Their labor force participation rates are lower than those of immigrant men or native women, but their concentration in certain occupations (operatives and services) and industries (garments, textiles, food, and social services) is high. Immigrant women form both a labor supply on which the downgraded manufacturing sector relies heavily and a labor pool for many service jobs historically typed as women’s jobs.

CONCLUSION

Studies of women migrants usually focus on family roles and the effects on gender of migration to industrialized countries. This study suggest a new approach whereby a connection is made between female migration and the current capitalist world economy. Although many women migrate domestically or internationally with their husbands or families, fundamental processes are forming both a supply of women migrants and demand for their labor within export industries in Third World countries as well as within low-wage industries and occupations in the United States.