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Atıf/Citation: Yılmaz, M.-Whetstone, C. 2024. Understanding the Covid-19 Crisis Impact on Rural Migrant Women Factory Workers in China. *Avrasya Uluslararası Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 12/38, 148-175.
https://doi.org/10.33692/avrasyad.1368475

Makale Bilgisi / Article Information

Yayın Türü / Publication Type:	Araştırma Makalesi/Research Article
Geliş Tarihi /Received:	29.09.2023
Kabul Tarihi/Accepted:	31.12.2023
Yayın Tarihi/Published:	15.03.2024

UNDERSTANDING THE COVID-19 CRISIS IMPACT ON RURAL MIGRANT WOMEN FACTORY WORKERS IN CHINA

Abstract

How has Covid-19 impacted on gender and migrant women workers in China? Given the inequalities faced by rural migrant workers generally and the gender-specific issues women rural migrant workers face, this article brings human rights issues to the fore in considering Covid-19's implications. While rural migrant workers have suffered to a greater extent than urban and white-collar workers, women rural migrant workers appear to suffer the most given their position in more service sector jobs more typically eliminated or impossible to perform during lockdowns and due to women's unpaid caring burdens. The informal gig economy has provided women workers with a means of balancing their caring labor and earning income since the start of the pandemic, but gendered barriers disadvantage women in the gig economy. Through a comparative case study grounded in a feminist and interpretive methodology, we argue that an intersectional approach rooted in gender studies to studying crises sheds light on the most vulnerable and marginalized, which enables policymakers at the international level to consider ways to promote the well-being of those suffering from the ramifications of the pandemic. While

the informal and gig economies are helping some to manage, few can thrive in such economies. We conclude that the Covid-19 crisis highlights the pressing need to move away from informal and gig work.

Keywords: Covid-19, China, rural migrant workers, intersectionality, informal and gig economies.

COVID-19 KRİZİNİN ÇİN'DEKİ KÖYLÜ GÖÇMEN KADIN FABRİKA ÇALIŞANLARI ÜZERİNE ETKİSİNİ ANLAMAK

Öz

Covid-19 krizi Çin'deki göçmen kadın işçileri ve toplumsal cinsiyeti nasıl etkiledi? Bu makale, kırsal göçmen işçilerin genel olarak karşılaştığı eşitsizlikler ve kırsal göçmen kadınların karşılaştığı cinsiyete özgü sorunlar göz önüne alarak ve insan hakları sorunlarını ön plana çıkarıyor Kovid-19'un sonuçlarını değerlendirmektedir. Kırsal göçmen işçiler, kentsel ve beyaz yakalı işçilere göre daha fazla sıkıntı çekmişken, karantina sırasında gerçekleştirilmesi imkansız olan veya ortadan kaldırılan hizmet sektöründe yer alan işlerdeki konumları ve ayrıca çoğunlukla kadınlar tarafından gerçekleştirilen ücretsiz bakıcılık gibi konular göz önüne alındığında, kırsaldan göçen kadınların en çok sıkıntı çeken grup olduğu görünmektedir. Kayıt dışı esnek ekonomi, salgının başlangıcından bu yana kadın işçilere bakıcılık ile ilgili emeklerini ve gelir elde etmelerini dengelemenin bir yolunu sağlasa da cinsiyete dayalı engeller esnek ekonomide kadınlara dezavantajlı duruma düşürmektedir. Krizleri karşılaştırmalı vaka çalışmaları temelinde feminist ve yorumsamacı metodoloji ile incelemek ve toplumsal cinsiyet çalışmalarına dayanan kesişimsel bir yaklaşım, en savunmasız ve dışlanmış olanlara ışık tutacaktır. Bu da politika yapıcıların uluslararası düzeyde salgının sonuçlarından muzdarip olanların refahını artırmanın yollarını düşünmelerine olanak sağlamaktadır. Kayıt dışı ve esnek ekonomiler bazı insanların kıt kanaat geçinmesine yardımcı olabilirler, ancak çok az kişi bu tür ekonomilerde büyük atılımlar gerçekleştirebilir. Kovid-19 krizi, kayıt dışı ve geçici işlerden uzaklaşılmasına yönelik ihtiyacı ortaya çıkarmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Covid-19, Çin, köylü göçmen çalışanlar, kesişimsellik, kayıt dışı ve esnek ekonomi.

Introduction

Until 1978, China was closed off from globalized trade when the country underwent economic liberalization. China is now a major global economic force, even with the economic fallout of Covid-19. Early mass lockdowns at the start of the pandemic in January 2020 forced those in China to remain in their homes and limiting people from obtaining food and basic medicines. While lockdowns and curfews were instituted in the rest of the world by spring 2020, lockdowns became a hallmark of China's Covid-19 management. China's lockdowns are harsher than in other parts of the world as citizens typically cannot leave their homes for any reason, even a non-Covid-19 medical emergency (such as a heart attack) or other emergencies

(such as a fire in the house) (Woodward 2020; Pei2020; BBC News 12 September 2022). Lockdowns happened in China before anywhere else in the world (understandable given that the outbreak of the virus was in Wuhan, China), and there have been ongoing periodic lockdowns ever since, which were only recently lifted in December 2022 due to widespread anti-lockdown protests. From the start, citizens in China contested the government's pandemic measures (Wang and Hernandez 2020; Woodward 2020).

Globally, the negative impacts of Covid-19 have been widely felt. However, studies and reports have documented that the working classes (Blustein et al. 2020), non-citizens (migrants) (Guadagno 2020), informal economy workers (Ogando, Rogan, and Moussié 2022), and women (Al-Ali 2020; K. C. and Whetstone 2022; Kabeer, Razavi, and van der Meulen Rodgers 2021) are some of the vulnerable and marginalized populations who have borne the brunt of the pandemic's aftereffects. These classed and gendered patterns hold in China (Che, Du, and Chan 2020; Che et al. 2020; Yueping et al. 2021). Migrant workers in China compose the economy's backbone, part of the "super cheapened" workforce that made China a global economic powerhouse (Chan 2010:659), even as these workers endure tremendous social stigma and oppressive working conditions (Gaetano 2015). As of 2021, there are an estimated 292.5 million rural migrant workers in China (China Labour Bulletin n.d.). Given the outsized impact on the most marginalized, it is not surprising that Covid-19 led to "negative employment consequences for Chinese migrant workers" generally (Yueping et al. 2021:236). However, it is important to tease apart the particular gendered consequences of the pandemic on women migrant workers.

We are interested in the gender impact of Covid-19 on migrant women workers in China. In the early 1980s, the Chinese state began allowing multinational corporations (MNCs) to open factories in certain cities along the coasts (Gaetano 2015; Parr 2012). The first workers in these new MNC-owned factories were migrant men from the countryside. Rural women make up between 30 to 50 percent of migrant workers coming from the countryside to the cities seeking employment (Gaetano 2015). Rural migrant women often work in urban areas temporarily until they marry and move back to the countryside to focus on being wives and mothers, although many choose to remain working in the cities after marriage and children (Chang 2008; Gaetano 2015). In such cases, women leave their children with relatives in the villages (Chang 2008). While rural migrant workers face general discrimination in cities and poor working conditions, women typically endure further gender-specific problems as well (Chang 2008; Gaetano 2015).

In the paper, we follow an intersectional approach to understanding rural migrant women workers in China. Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term intersectionality over three decades ago, explains that "[i]ntersectionality is an analytic sensibility, a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power" and is ultimately "…a vision of social justice that

recognizes the ways racism, sexism, and other inequalities work together to undermine us all" (Crenshaw 2021). For rural Chinese migrant women factory workers, we narrow our intersectional focus to issues of gender, class, and rural status as these are the most salient to understanding the effects of Covid-19 on their lives. Our guiding research question asks: What is the impact of gender during the Covid-19 on migrant women workers in China? We follow the comparative case method, which is ideal for our project given that to illuminate the additional class and gender burdens (both impacted by rural migrant status) faced by rural migrant women factory workers in China in Covid-19, an in-depth assessment of their predicaments before the global health pandemic is necessary.

The article proceeds as follows. We begin with our rationale for the study followed by a brief discussion of our methodology and method. We then move into a review of intersectional analysis in crisis studies before delving into our first case study that explores the issues regularly faced by most women rural migrant workers in China before the pandemic. This is followed by a second case study examining women rural migrant workers' experiences in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis, which in China remains ongoing, likely through 2023 when some experts predict that upwards of 1 million more Chinese may die as a result of Covid-19 (Mallapaty 2022). We then explore the implications of the combined barriers faced by rural migrant women workers generally and in the new circumstances generated by the pandemic using intersectional analysis to highlight gender and class issues. We stress that while the gig economy is providing a means for some women in China to manage their increased caring burdens while still earning income, this is not an environment in which anyone can thrive. We conclude by encouraging international policymakers to move away from informal and gig work solutions to measures that promote the growth of societies built to thrive in the long term.

1- Rationale for the study

Our rationale for an examination of Chinese women workers during Covid-19 is twofold. First is the influential role of Chinese workers in terms of economic contributions globally. Although China is struggling with debt and has recently been downgraded by Moody's credit rating agency China is the number one trading partner of the US, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Russia, Ukraine, Kenya, South Africa, Brazil, Chile, and Saudia Arabia among others, more than 120 countries in total (Green 2023). Even as China faces increasing competition in terms of cheap labor (especially from other ASEAN countries) and Covid 19's disruption of the global supply chain that has greatly impacted China's exports abroad, China continues plays a critical role in terms of producing many consumer goods from textiles to (especially) electronics sent to markets around the world. This will continue, opening up both burdens on and opportunities for Chinese migrant workers. Second, is the impact of gender on Chinese workers. As scholars have noted, women workers face additional

burdens not just as part of the economically exploited but due to their gender (and many their race) (Bannerji 2015). This is due to their status as women who are typically charged with social reproduction, or the unpaid care work that takes place within the household that sustains productive labor, which has impinged upon women globally, adding significant time burdens as part of embedded structural violences that promote gender inequality (Elias and Rai 2019). The drain of social reproduction on women has been particularly difficult in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic for various reasons, both in the global North and global South (Akhter et al. 2022, K.C. & Whetstone 2022). Understanding what we expect to be the disproportionate burden on women migrant factory workers due to their economic exploitation and gender oppression is key to understanding the combination of the burdens of class and gender violences in a global crisis such as Covid-19. This holds both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, scholars continue to debate how best to understand women's position in global capitalism: by emphasizing class or gender (Bannerji 2015, Aguilar 2015). In practical terms, understanding women rural migrant factory workers' Covid-19 struggles can illuminate avenues to address these problems that impact (in different ways and to different degrees) working-class women globally.

2- Methodology and Methods

The article relies on the classic comparative case study method following a feminist and interpretive methodology. Interpretivism differs profoundly from the causal-seeking of positivism in that it pursues meaning-making (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Our methodology is further influenced by feminist approaches. Both interpretive and feminist methodologies engage in reflexive thinking on power relations and are interested in context and specificity, with feminists in particular taking an interest in a gender and intersectional lens (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, Ackerly & True, 2010). Given our interest in intersectionality around the key points of rural origin, class, and gender, a feminist interpretive methodology enables us to consider these power relations and the systems that undergird them. Further, interpretivism's pursuitt of the construction of meaning allows us to delve deeply into our cases (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). The comparative method is excellent for systematic comparisons of similarities and differences that in this paper allow for an analysis of meaning-making in terms of class and gender. To comprehend the impact of Covid-19 on women migrant factory workers, there is a need to understand their situation before the Covid-19 pandemic. By comparing the burdens women migrant factory workers faced before the global health pandemic, we can better assess the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. To flesh out the comparative case study, we draw on ethnographies, research reports, surveys, and interview data. We rely on secondary data for ethical reasons. As recently reported by Zheng Churan (one of China's famous "Feminist Five" activists), the recent research book *Her Factory Makes No Dreams: The Working Stories of Thirteen Shenzhen Female Workers* by Zhu Xiaobin saw her interview several women factory workers, many of whom, despite the author's efforts to

Avrasyad e-ISSN: 2147-2610

conceal their identities nevertheless, underwent police interrogations and other forms of state harassment following the book's release (Churan 2023). Given the highly repressive nature of the Chinese regime and its efforts to suppress labor unrest (widely documented through such sites as China Labor Bulletin), we seek to avoid causing any harm to workers by instead relying on secondary data. As feminist researchers, this is part of our ethical methodological orientation (Ackerly & True 2010).

The first case study outlines the challenges that rural migrant women factory workers in China face generally. The second case study explores the challenges that this social group has been subjected to in the context of Covid-19. Understanding the many challenges faced by Chinese women migrant workers before Covid-19 better illuminates the totality of the classed and gendered challenges that such women face in the contemporary period. We follow Mills' method of most similarity in our research design. Although we aren't making causal claims, Mills' method enables us to offer a systematic comparison. The environment (pre-Covid-19 versus post-Covid-19) is the only factor that changes in our comparison. Class and gender remain the same in both cases. However, there are different outcomes in terms of the challenges faced by rural migrant Chinese women workers. Given that the first case study covers a longer period of time (pre-Covid), it is richer in detail. The ongoing effects and aftereffects of Covid-19 are still unfolding and for this reason, the second case is briefer. Before turning to our case studies, we first flesh out the three sets of theoretical literature we draw upon: intersectionality, vulnerability and marginality, and gender and crises.

3- Literature Review: Intersectional analysis of crises

Here, we briefly review the growing literature on crises to situate our study. Crises are "episodic breakdowns of familiar symbolic frameworks that legitimate the pre-existing…order " (Boin, Mcconnell, and Hart 2008:3). A crisis may encompass a variety of problems, including emergencies and calamities such as economic crashes or chronic state debt, political matters such as revolutions, terrorism or armed conflicts, or environmental catastrophes from weather and other natural disasters. This includes global health epidemics and pandemics such as Covid-19 (Wenham and Davies 2022). Additionally, a crisis may develop due to leadership failures in the face of collective action problems. Crises result in varying outcomes, with some leading to progressive measures, while other crises garner negative results, such as new disasters (Farazmand 2014). In other instances, crises may result in a reinforcement of the status quo rather than change (Boin et al. 2008). The crisis management literature overlaps with the disaster and emergency management and preparedness literature, although the degrees of both urgency and threat constituted by crises make them more serious than "routine" emergencies (Peng 2008).

The scholarship on crisis management straddles public administration and international relations (IR). Major themes within crisis management in both subfields focus on

predictions and responses to crises, preventing and mitigating crises, as well as promoting recovery from crises, including by building resiliency among individuals and communities (Comfort 1992; Demiroz and Haase 2019; Pfefferbaum et al. 2013; Truesdale and Spearo 2014). There is also a rich area of scholarship regarding efforts to learn from past crises to promote better future prevention and mitigation preparation (Birkland 2009; Toft and Reynolds 2016; Wang 2019). In public administration, the focus is on national, state, and local levels of government and facilitating cooperation among government, businesses, civic groups, community groups, and locals from the community impacted by the crisis (Farazmand 2014; Waugh 1994). In IR, crisis management emphasizes facilitating cooperation among national governments and intergovernmental organizations—such as the United Nations (UN)—in the prevention of escalation to/of armed conflict, and the containment of international terrorism and other disasters, which also involves other levels of government, along with local communities and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) (Comfort 1992; Enia 2020; Neuhold 2013; Richardson 1988).

3.1. Vulnerability and marginality

Vulnerability and marginality highlight the particular needs of certain populations. Vulnerability has been theorized as "the characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of" a crisis, calamity or hazard (Wisner et al. 2003:11). This understanding is based on critical development, ecology, and related fields that point to "the global impact of urban-industrial methods" on the environment and suggest that the growth of economies at the expense of the environment have increased levels of vulnerability globally and harmed marginalized sectors of society more deeply than well-off sectors (Hewitt 1983:viii). This understanding is contrasted with those who focus on the vulnerability of businesses (especially supply chains) and the integrity of critical infrastructure within countries, whether publicly or privately owned, to infiltrations that would lead to shareholder losses or would benefit other governments in the security dilemma (Clarke and Chenoweth 2006; McEntire 205AD; Preble 1997). These latter framings of vulnerability are interested in assessing "risk, resistance and resilience paradigms" to make strategic decisions to ensure the smooth operations of a business or country, linked with corporate and national security perspectives (Clarke and Chenoweth 2006; McEntire 205AD:214). We focus on the former approach to conceptualize vulnerability since the concept of intersectionality is suited to understanding people. An emphasis on people's well-being in crises is part of human security, which looks at security at the individual or group level, including food security, housing security, healthcare security, and similar considerations (Tripp 2013).

Relatedly, in the context of crisis and general calamities, marginalization is linked with understanding the vulnerability of certain sectors of society. However, marginalization is

Avrasyad e-ISSN: 2147-2610

often glossed over in the crisis management literature, left "unpacked." According to Bradley Cullens and Michael Pretes (Cullen and Pretes 2000), there is a lack of consensus within the social sciences on what constitutes marginality. Generally, marginalization is understood to emerge from "unequal relationships between one or several groups with power, whether economic, political, social or all together, and a minority or non-members of the said group" (Walters and Gaillard 2014:212). The homeless, the socio-economically disadvantaged, the elderly, those living with disabilities, women and children, as well as ethnic and racial minorities and migrants of all types are typically depicted in crisis management literature as the marginalized and vulnerable. These individuals are generally understood as the least resilient in recovering from, or being prepared for a crisis (Farazmand 2014; Walters and Gaillard 2014).

While it is critical to recognize particular sectors of any community as vulnerable and marginalized, we emphasize the point made by Jamie Vickery (2018), who argues that, too often, there is a homogenization of the categories of those defined as vulnerable and marginalized in crisis and disaster studies. This matters in terms of accurate risk assessment and addressing people's needs as homogenization fails to recognize how different gender identities and ethnic and racial identities within the same marginalized category – such as migrant workers – can impact their experiences in a crisis. Only an intersectional analysis can speak to the differences in risk, vulnerability, and marginalization among various individuals and social groups to best assist crisis management scholars and practitioners with crisis prevention and mitigation fine-tuned to context.

3.2. Gender and crises

A growing literature documents that emergencies, disasters, and crises have gendered impacts, which are tied to the structural violences against women that exist in all societies (Author and Fatih Demiröz, Forthcoming). One major area of the crisis and disaster management literatures known as gender and disaster considers gender in "disaster planning, management and research" through gender mainstreaming (Cupples 2007:155). Since its founding in 1997, the Gender & Disaster Network (GDN) has brought together scholars working in disaster studies who share a primary goal to "document and analyze women's and men's experiences before, during, and after disasters, situating gender relations in broad political, economic, historical, and cultural context," a clear example of gender mainstreaming (Gender and Disaster Network n.d.). Gender and disaster studies have grown since the founding of GDN and have impacted a range of social science disciplines. Eric Neumayer and Thomas Plümper in their well-known longitudinal study on 141 countries examine natural disasters that occurred from 1981 to 2002 (Neumayer and Plümper 2007). They conclude that there is a "gendered nature of natural disasters" that leads to more women dying compared to men in natural disasters and their aftermaths (Neumayer and Plümper 2007:551). Notably,

that women suffer greater harm in natural disasters is not due to any biological differences from men, but rather due to women's pre-disaster vulnerabilities that are linked to the various gender hierarchies embedded in societies. Neumayer and Plümper's comparative analysis indicates that in societies where women hold higher status, they are less disadvantaged in disasters compared to women living in societies in which women have lower social status.

As with women's experiences in disasters and post-disaster reconstruction, scholars of gender and armed conflict have observed that armed conflict and its aftermath is a gendered experience that impacts women and men differently. Most notably, armed conflict disproportionately hurts women compared to men, even as women are less likely than men to be combatants (Clark and Moser 2001; Plümper and Neumayer 2006). Wartime conditions are complex, and the particular environment of a given armed conflict varies based on the type of war, the actors involved, and the preexisting characteristics of a society before armed conflict broke out. Such preexisting factors include the society's macro-level political, economic, and social structures, as well as its system of gender relations, which includes women's ties to cultural, social, and actual reproduction. These varying factors impact how women experience an armed conflict. Even in times of peace, but particularly in war, women are linked through their reproductive roles to (ethno)nationalist understandings that define their bodies through national, racial, ethnic, religious, tribal, and/or clan identity. It is in this representative capacity of a particular community that women are often targeted for rape in war (Cohn 2012; Enloe 2014).

Globally, women faced particular burdens in the context of Covid-19 linked to women's caring burdens and "double day" and has most impacted women with economically disadvantaged backgrounds, who often must provide economically for the household while being burned by caring duties (Al-Ali 2020; K. C. and Whetstone 2022; Kabeer et al. 2021; UN Women 2020; Warren and Lyonette 2020). This follows similar gendered patterns in other health endemics and pandemics, such as Ebola in West Africa and Zika in Brazil (Fawole et al. 2016; Wenham 2021).

4. Case study 1: Pre-Covid-19: Rural migrant women workers in China

Following the Chinese government's decision in 1984 to lessen restrictions on the mobility of rural farmers to migrate to cities, over the mid-1980s and picking up in the mid-1990s, was a growing movement from rural areas to cities for employment opportunities. Until 2003, migrants had to hide from the police as it was illegal to stay in the city without residency permits and most could not obtain such permits. Since 2003, it has been illegal to discriminate against rural migrants in job hiring and the government promotes migration to the cities since the national economy relies on migrant labor to sustain the country's export-led economy (Chang 2008).

At the macro level, the labor market system and the *hukou* system of household registration interact with class and gender hierarchies to make Chinese rural migrant women's labor cheap and exploitable. At the meso level, the division of labor by sex is influenced by a cultural system that renders girls and women temporary members of their natal family due both to a patrilocal and patrilineal family system in which women leave their natal families to become members of their husband's families and a widespread preference for sons over daughters. Yet this family system means that women are available to migrate for work since they are seen as "expendable" to the natal family. Because of the sexual division of labor, women wind up in jobs that replicate gendered household labor patterns, which in turn reinforce stereotypes about women and perpetuate women's inequality through factory work, domestic work (such as housekeeping and nannying), and in service sector jobs in the retail and food industries, which are all low status, poorly paid and entail exploitation (Gaetano 2015). Despite the exploitation of their labor and enduring hardships, working in the cities has increased migrant rural women's opportunities. For example, women have been able to see the world outside their rural villages and gained independence even within the confines of patriarchal family and workplace systems. The next three sections will examine some of the gendered and classed spaces that rural migrant women habit: the countryside, the factory, and the city (Chang 2008; Gaetano 2015).

4.1. Rural life and migration

Many young women in China's countryside feel powerless over their lives. Migration for employment is seen by women as one of the only routes they have to pursue greater autonomy, even if it is sometimes a temporary autonomy that they give up when they marry (Gaetano 2015). Farming, the predominant occupation in rural areas, which was once appreciated under Mao Zedong, is today socially stigmatized by the global capitalist system. To compensate for their low standing, rural women migrate to cities to try to "make something of themselves." There is a widespread belief among rural Chinese women that if they work hard enough, they will be successful in the city, which offers more opportunities than the countryside for them to earn wages and make more decisions for themselves, out of the direct influence of their relatives (Gaetano 2015).

During the 1980s and most of the 1990s, a migrant woman was looked down on for being a single woman living in the city by herself. There was significant stigma surrounding women who chose to migrate and work. During these decades, women worked to earn money as quickly as possible in order to return to the countryside to settle down and marry (Chang 2008). In part, this was because a woman who migrated to work was assumed to have a father who was unable to support her. This was shameful, part of the gendered roles of a male breadwinner and head of household that once again took root in China following liberalization in 1978, due both to outside influences and a return to pre-Mao cultural value systems

(Gaetano 2015). However, contemporary China is different. Rural Chinese women are now less likely to feel that they must return to rural life and many opt to stay in the city for most of their life. They may marry in the village but choose to return to the city to work while grandmothers care for their children. Unlike the 1980s and 1990s, when it was deemed shameful for a single woman to work in the city, it is now seen as shameful for women to stay in the village rather than work in the city for at least a few years. A woman who does not go to the city to work is deemed lazy (Chang 2008). Because of the sexism embedded in Chinese social life, which values sons over daughters, rural women actually have more freedom than rural men to work in the cities. Women typically work farther away from their home villages and work in the city for longer than their male counterparts, largely because rural parents expect sons to stay near to the home that they will one day inherit and because they are expected to help their parents more than daughters (Chang 2008; Gaetano 2015). Not only has the city become the place to be in today's China, unlike in the era of Mao when the countryside was valued, Chinese society now looks down on rural life as backward. Rural migrant women are seen as "country bumpkins" in the city because of their status as rural and working-class (Gaetano 2015). Despite the stigma, the city still presents opportunities for women with a promise of a better future through work such as in a factory.

4.2. Factory work

Women from the countryside arrive in the cities with high expectations (Gaetano 2015). But what is life like in the typical factory in China? In 2010, international media widely covered the story of three suicides of workers at the Chinese electronics factory Foxconn, which produces Apple products. China Labor Watch (CLW), a nongovernmental organization located in the US and dedicated to workers' rights in China, launched an investigation of all Chinese electronics factories as a result of these suicides (China Labor Watch 2012). In their report "Tragedies of Globalization" the organization details their discovery that most electronics factories' conditions differ little from conditions at Foxconn, finding empirical evidence that the working conditions in Chinese electronics factories are fundamentally inhumane and exploitive, including the ever-intensifying labor demands placed upon workers with no resultant increase in compensation in addition to forced overtime, denial of paid time off and finally, not only the lack of a living wage but even a minimum wage. Workers were routinely denied bathroom breaks, water and rest breaks, served food with worms and maggots, and charged outrageous prices for food and housing, which were taken directly out of their paychecks. Further, they were required to sign contracts that they did not understand, so that they were not aware of their rights, which often entitled them to paid sick leave. Yet because they were not aware, supervisors informed workers that if they missed work, they would be fired. Fire exits were frequently blocked off or locked in factories and dormitories, creating dangerous conditions that could be potentially devastating to thousands of lives and there was widespread discrimination against men, those over the age of 40, and pregnant

women. The preference for young women is tied to a gendered and age-ist perception that young women are easier to control than men and older women. The harsh living conditions of workers' dorms have created an environment where theft is rampant and occupants lack such basics as hot water. The required hours of work that most laborers perform far exceed the 49-hour limit for the work week that the government has set up to protect workers (Chang 2008).

All of the above applies to women workers but there are also female-specific problems in factories, where work is performed along a strict division of sexual labor. Women hold most of the assembly line jobs because they are seen as harder working and easier to manage than men. They also perform most clerical positions in the factory (Chang 2008). Women suffer many health issues in the factory environment. Since most factories hire young women, these are women in their peak reproductive years. Yet because of the *hukou* system, which prevents them from accessing healthcare, including reproductive care, they must travel back to their natal villages to receive affordable medical treatment. This can have devastating and long-term health consequences for women since most factories deny workers paid time off, sometimes even unpaid time off, by telling them that if they do not show up for work that they will be fired (Chang 2008; China Labor Watch 2012; Gaetano 2015). Sexual harassment is rampant. Since most men working in factories are relegated to menial tasks with no way to advance their pay or their careers, male workers have developed a hypermasculine identity to compensate for their low status in the workplace and their lowly position in the globalized economy. Part of this hypermasculine identity is performed through sexually harassing female factory workers. When women try to tell harassers to back off, men condemn them for being "loud" and, therefore, "unfeminine." Factory management does little to combat the issue, leaving women to fend for themselves (Kim 2015). However, women are not powerless. Migrant women often lie to employers and try to manipulate them to improve their working conditions, usually by claiming more work experience than is, in facet, true (Chang 2008). Job hopping is another strategy of the workers who are hopeful that conditions at another factory would be better. However, this is rarely the case as the findings of CLW indicate (China Labor Watch 2012).

4.3. Life in the city

Rural migrant women workers access new opportunities and freedoms through globalized trade processes that bring them to cities in search of work (Barker and Feiner 2009). Yet women's freedom in the cities is often compromised before they even arrive. While networking finds them a job, it also reduces their freedom to live as they choose in the city since the people women seek help in finding jobs from are the same individuals who keep tabs on them and report back to their families in the village on how the young women behave while living in the city. There remains a strong societal norm for women to remain sexually abstinent

until marriage and to take up appropriately feminine jobs (Gaetano 2015). Further, migrant women face barriers with housing and healthcare. The class divide between the cities and the countryside in China is acute. Migrants experience more job instability, are less able to find adequate housing, and lack access to affordable healthcare in comparison to their city-born counterparts, mainly due to the structural effects of the *hukou* system, which provide more benefits for city dwellers than to those born in the countrywide (Gaetano 2015). Healthcare is a major issue for migrant rural women factory workers, who are at their peak reproductive years but unable to access reproductive healthcare and are often forced to go the entire workday without using the restroom, which is arduous for menstruating women (Chang 2008; China Labor Watch 2012). To access healthcare without paying unreasonable or impossible fees, rural women must return to their natal villages, a direct result of the *hukou* registration system (Gaetano 2015). Not only is this inconvenient and logistically difficult but most workers are denied sick leave by illegal but common practices of factory owners (China Labor Watch 2012). Additionally, most housing is abysmal for factory workers. Dorms connected to factories are overcrowded and unsafe (Chang 2008; China Labor Watch 2012).

Once in the city, rural migrant women become increasingly aware of their "unsophisticated" speech, mannerisms, and dress. Throughout their stay in the city, rural migrant women typically undergo both conscious and unconscious changes, developing new consumer preferences and styles of speech and habits. In Beijing, rural migrants experience extreme discrimination in the cities where they are often called "dirty" or "outsiders" by native-born city people. Migrant women are viewed as unfeminine or "coarse" due to their rural background, leading migrant women to take up new personal hygiene habits, fashions, speech patterns, and mannerisms in an effort to "improve" themselves, much of which coalesces around being "modern." Rural migrant women achieve modernity through consumer patterns of touring and shopping, especially for middle-class knock-off brands (Chang 2008; Gaetano 2015). Most migrant women arrive in the city with their hair worn long and straight, a sign of feminine modesty in the countryside, while in contrast, urbanites sport short cuts or flowing, styled locks that are often highlighted and colored. In the recent past, men and women wore more gender-neutral clothing called Mao suits and both men and women kept their hair short. Following the reopening of China, more gender-essentialized fashions have become popular, influenced both by China's past and by the outside world. In China's urban spaces, the ideal woman is defined by her ultra-feminine appearance, which is achieved by wearing heels, skirts, makeup, and push-up bras. In Chinese villages, women typically do not sport this ware, so when rural women arrive in the city, they are deemed unfeminine and tomboyish. Once employed, migrant women spend a significant amount of their earnings on clothing and accessories, facial moisturizers, and hair maintenance, purchases made to be deemed attractive by mainstream society. However, women's appearance also influences employers' hiring decisions with employers preferring to hire

Avrasyad e-ISSN: 2147-2610

thinner, taller, and lighter-skinned women in contrast to the stereotype of the woman "peasant," who is described as shorter, stockier, and darker-skinned. Migrant women derive pleasure by manipulating their physical images through consumption (Gaetano 2015). Over time, rural migrant women living in the cities typically come to adopt the same disdain for the countryside and "rustic" practices and habits. In general, migrant rural women often try to move up in the world through education and self-improvement (Chang 2008; Gaetano 2015).

Migrant women's consumption of clothing and makeup is depicted by society as "frivolous." However, their choice to spend their meager income on these items is rooted in identity struggles over a need for belonging and it increases their social status. Women find that their youthful femininity is best projected through new consumption patterns and they understand this can enhance their lives in the cities. However, their new looks often bring them into conflict with their families in the countryside where life is more conservative. Families may have strong ideas about what is appropriate for women and what is not (Gaetano 2015). Overall, life in the cities makes migrant rural women feel that they are somehow inferior. This relates to their status as gendered, classed individuals from the countryside. The ideal Chinese woman is urban and "modern." This modernity is defined through consumption patterns of clothing, accessories, hairstyles, and makeup, which are expensive. Factory workers are paid little but feel intense pressure to purchase these goods.

5. Case study 2: Chinese workers in the immediate aftermath of Covid 19's impact: Focus on rural migrant women workers

The economic fallout of the Covid 19 pandemic has been brutal globally and has had far greater negative repercussions on working-class sectors (Che et al. 2020). Those employed in the informal economy are typically composed of the most vulnerable groups in society and the world (Blustein et al. 2020; Guadagno 2020; K. C. and Whetstone 2022; Ogando et al. 2022; UN Women 2020; Warren and Lyonette 2020). There are also clear gendered ramifications from the pandemic's impact that have disproportionately burdened women globally (K. C. and Whetstone 2022). China conforms to these global patterns. This section seeks to clarify the interaction between class, rural status, and gender in the Covid-19 crisis by examining the issues faced by women rural migrant factory workers.

The first quarter of 2020 saw China's GDP drop by an astounding 6.8 percent (Yueping et al. 2021:237). This indicates the profound economic crisis that many migrant workers face given that workers were not working during the intense lockdowns. In many ways, Covid-19 has rendered similar losses for rural migrant workers as faced during the fallout of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Worldwide demand for Chinese goods dried up in the difficult economic climate of the financial crisis, which translated into job loss and job insecurity for rural migrant workers in China (Cai and Chan 2009; Chan 2010). Likewise, demand for Chinese-made goods dropped in the difficult economic climate generated by the massive

lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic, which disrupted global supply chains. Many types of jobs cannot be performed from home, meaning around the world, many couldn't earn wages during lockdowns. Many others lost jobs as a result of the pandemic. Globally, consumer demand was down. This inevitably gave rise to letting go of rural migrant workers in China, given the lack of demand for Chinese-made products (Che et al. 2020).

Further, even if rural migrant workers had jobs awaiting them, they faced two major problems in the early months of the Covid-19 outbreak. First, workers' jobs couldn't be performed from home during the extensive lockdowns that gripped the country, meaning that they had no choice but to return to their job sites. Second, most workers had returned to their rural villages when the initial lockdowns were implemented as part of the massive annual return of rural migrant workers from cities to their villages to celebrate the Spring Festival or Lunar New Year. In seeking to return to their jobs, rural migrant workers faced what became known as the "three gates," which constituted a series of barriers that stood between them and a forthcoming paycheck. The first barrier was leaving their village for the city, where local officials often sought to prevent travel for fear of spreading the virus. The second was enduring the long journey back to their city of work (which is always an undertaking), and finally, migrant workers had to go through a quarantine period once they arrived back in the city (Che et al. 2020:450). The three gates are an apt term for what amounted to obstacles that considerably slowed progress towards earning a paycheck. How these classed obstacles differently impacted men versus women is next addressed.

In early 2020, researchers carried out a survey of 1,563 male migrant workers through a questionnaire sent to school children in a broad area that included Shaanxi, "Shanxi, Henan, Anhui, Inner Mongolia, Shandong, Sichuan, Zhejiang, Fujian, Gansu, Beijing, and Hebei" (Che et al. 2020:454). The most significant finding is that as of 28 February 2020, only twenty-three percent of survey male migrant workers, whether they were rural or urban based, had returned to their jobs. Of particular interest in this paper, only 8 percent of rural migrant workers had returned to their previous jobs, meaning that those lucky enough to return to their jobs were located in urban areas, where they had a shorter travel distance to reach their employers (Che et al. 2020:455). Another insight came from the two-thirds of rural survey respondents who indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic had negatively impacted their livelihoods while in contrast, only one-third of urban survey respondents said the same (Che et al. 2020:456). For the migrant workers who had been able to resume their work, in comparison to their urban counterparts, rural workers faced a longer temporal return to their work (Che et al. 2020:456). Rural families indicated greater difficulties with meeting household needs compared to urban families (Che et al. 2020:456). Finally, speaking to the three gates that kept rural migrant workers from their jobs, analysis of the survey responses indicated that a rural migrant worker who lived in a lockdown village "faced 1.49 times greater risk of

unemployment" compared to those rural migrant workers in villages not facing lockdowns (Che et al. 2020:457).

While this survey is informative in shedding light on the greater struggles of migrant workers compared to middle-class workers (who were more likely to be able to work their jobs from home) and also indicates the greater difficulties and economic risks faced by rural migrant workers compared to urban migrant workers, it tells us nothing of the role of gender. For this reason, we highlight another survey that examines rural women migrant workers in China. Building off "a follow-up survey of the 2018 China Migrants Dynamic Survey (CMDS) organized by the China Population and Development Research Center at the end of March 2020," researchers phone interviewed "1,775 migrants, of which 936 are women and 839 are men"' who had returned home for holidays and were in their home villages in early 2020 (Yueping et al. 2021:239). A key finding from the survey uncovered that women migrants are more concentrated than men in service jobs, which entail face-to-face interactions. For this reason, more women had issues returning to their jobs than did men who do not predominate in service sector industries (Yueping et al. 2021:240). This finding is supported globally, with women everywhere concentrated in service sector work (UN Women 2020).

While migrants who retained their employment were less likely to remain at home after the holidays, women constituted a disproportionate number of migrant workers who elected to remain in their villages regardless of whether their jobs remained or not. Comparing the disaggregated gender of migrants who returned to cities for work indicates that "the employment rate of women migrants was 10.3 percentage points lower than that of men migrants (65.8 percent vs. 76.1 percent, respectively) (Yueping et al. 2021:241). Further, women migrants were 8.8 percent less likely than their male counterparts to plan to return to the city (Yueping et al. 2021:243). A significant finding from the probit analysis of the phone interviews indicated that in households with a child age six or younger, women migrants were more likely to remove themselves from the workforce in the context of Covid-19. Conversely, the presence of a child aged 6 or younger had no deterring effect on men's decisions to return to the city for work (Yueping et al. 2021:243).

For rural migrant women workers, the pandemic's impact on their employment appears driven by two factors: what sectors of work they had been employed in and women's caregiving burdens. In terms of the former, 67.6 percent of women in the phone survey were concentrated in "manufacturing, wholesale and retail, hotels and catering, and residential services industries" compared to only 50.5 percent of men migrant workers (Yueping et al. 2021:246). Women's overrepresentation in these industries – and their concentration in more face-to-face positions – combined with the perceived need for women's caregiving work within the home has doubly impacted their employment opportunities in the fallout from Covid-19 (Yueping et al. 2021).

As periodic outbreaks of Covid-19 continue to plague China, particularly its factories where workers operate in close quarters and live together in factory dormitories, challenges continue confront migrant women factory workers, even if they have been able to retain factory work positions. We highlight the voice of one migrant woman factory worker (kept anonymous for her protection) who was employed (on contract) at the infamous Foxconn factory that provides work for some 200,000 people at the behest of such major companies as Apple. Although outbreaks have led to and continue to lead to periodic lockdowns in villages and cities in the last few years, factories typically remain open. Factory workers are tightly regulated, permitted only to work and return to the dorms and are subjected to regular Covid-19 testing. As the woman rural migrant factory worker explained, as grateful as she was regarding the opportunity to earn income from Foxconn, she no longer seeks to work there:

> In recent years, during every year to the peak season, I…(have chosen) to go to Foxconn. Foxconn's monthly base salary is 2,000 yuan (USD$274), which calculated according to the 8-hour shift every day. In order to earn more money, we all work overtime desperately, and we can receive a salary of 3,500-4,000 yuan a month. Although the base salary is not high, I am still very satisfied with the job because I can receive a high bonus when I are finished with my job. So I'm grateful to Foxconn for bringing stable incomes to rural families like us.

Foxconn seeks to keep workers from leaving the factory compound during Covid-19 outbreaks so that workers avoid infection and can continue to meet production quotas. The woman worker – a mother of two – was forced to (literally) escape from the factory in order to return to her family before her home village went into lockdown and she wouldn't be permitted to return:

> After the Covid-19 outbreak…in October…(2022), as the virus spread, the whole Foxconn factory was in a state of panic. People who were tested positive were pulled away from every workshop every day… The Foxconn factory compound is too large, all around with iron welded. Without permission, people outside can not enter, and the people inside cannot get out. (To return home) I climbed on the railing and jumped over, and looked for more than an hour in vain for an exit that other workers mentioned. Finally, a kind-hearted man led me to the place where the wires had a big hole. He used his motorcycle light to illuminate for me and said: run, run… I couldn't use navigation and didn't know the direction of home, so I had to ask if there were people going to my hometown. At 7:00 p.m., I followed four or five people and set off in the direction of home. Along the way, I met many people who had escaped, and everyone's goal was to return home. Because of the fear of bringing trouble to the people in the villages along the way from the infected area, we all walked along the highway, sometimes through the crop fields, and tried our best to choose the sparsely populated places to go…. I became really tired from the walk, and sat on the ground to rest. I did not

> dare to sleep, hoping to return home earlier and worrying about what may happen on the road… Because I took rest, several times I couldn't catch up with other workers (she had left with). Every time, I had to look for workers also going to my hometown. So all night long, I kept asking and kept running.

Eventually the woman made it to her home village where she was taken by government workers to be tested and put into isolation before rejoining her family. This is where the interview was conducted:

> I don't know how many more days I will stay in the isolation site (near her home), but I am happy that I managed to escape. In a few days, I will be able to see my children and family. As for Foxconn, I won't go again because I'm afraid (to be trapped again). (Asian Labour Review 2022).

This woman's story exemplifies the challenges faced by migrant women factory workers in the Covid-19 era. For this reason, more women are seeking to find new ways of supporting themselves economically that allows them to both manage their social reproductive labor and to avoid such violences as being forced to stay away from their families for an unknown period of time. Given women's caring roles, it is particularly difficult for mothers to be kept from their children for unknown durations. One way women are managing the classed and gendered impacts of Covid-19 is by taking up gig economy work.

5.1. A woman's place in the gig economy

To manage their caring and domestic burdens and the shriveling of their former jobs due to the pandemic, many Chinese women who formerly migrated for work have now entered the gig economy as a way to balance their "second shift" demands and still earn some income (China Labor Watch 2022:3). The precarious nature of most women migrant workers' jobs left no doubt that they – along with those working in temporary, informal and casual labor situations – would be hardest hit as a result of the pandemic (China Labor Watch 2022:9).

The gig economy is flexible, meaning that workers who lost jobs due to Covid-19 have a place to turn, given that migrant and similarly disadvantaged workers do not have access to government employment compensation when they lose their jobs. What is notable about gig work is that the platforms that hopeful gig workers use to access work do not ask about gender. For this reason, an estimated 52.22 percent of Chinese gig workers are women (China Labor Watch 2022:10). Given the widespread gender discrimination that women face in most other jobs – including in jobs filled by women migrant workers – the lack of gig employment apps ascertaining people's gender is quite notable. However, this holds gender-specific drawbacks for women. The algorithms that set the parameters on gig apps calculate on averages, which include men who perform these same jobs. The typically greater physical capacity of most men compared to most women means that women understand themselves to be forced to work under unfair conditions. Further, given that most men do not have to deal

with menstruation while many women do, this also impedes women's abilities to carry out similar tasks at the same rate as men (China Labor Watch 2022:10). Although the gig economy may allow women workers to balance earning a wage with reproductive labor, we suggest it is not a just solution for the long-term. Survival is not enough (and it certainly will not allow women to meet modern femininity expectations that push consumerism as highlighted in the above case study). It is to this concern of survival as not enough that we turn to in our discussion.

6. Discussion: Informal and Gig Economies Not a Just Long-term Solution

An intersectional analysis of women rural migrant workers in China indicates the need for greater regulation of the global economy and greater protections from national governments. By addressing those worse off in the Covid-19 crisis, everyone would be better off everywhere. We take China as an example of these issues but connect to similar issues from the crisis in the context of conflict-affected countries and the global North, especially racialized women disadvantaged by their gender, class, caste, and other markers, and particularly for those working in the informal economy (Al-Ali 2020; K. C. and Whetstone 2022; Kabeer et al. 2021). The World Bank and much of the international development industry have been promoting entrepreneurial solutions to roll back poverty and promote a higher quality of life for people by making countries "business friendly" (Rangan et al. 2007:452). However, even with numerous other criticisms already put forward about the lack of worker protections in the informal and gig economies - particularly among domestic workers, who are overwhelmingly women - the ongoing crisis brought about by Covid-19 makes clear that new alternatives must be considered. By considering rural migrant women workers in China as a starting point, issues of rural-status, class, and gender can be addressed holistically. We cannot simply consider women's issues when we think of gender but must understand those women most constrained by systems of exploitation and oppression.

Solutions such as Universal Basic Income or Universal Basic Services offer two compelling solutions forward that attend issues of class. However, these would be reliant upon national governments for implementation, and frankly, due to the cultivation of underdevelopment (Gunder Frank 1969) many countries in the global South would not find this viable. In the case of China, the authoritarian government appears to care little for its migrant workers. Despite having some rights, Chinese workers rarely organize even when there are laws to protect individual workers' rights. This is because these laws are often ignored by factory owners and local government officials and because workers may not even be aware that they have such rights (Chen 2007; China Labor Watch 2012). Feasibility is a problem.

Another avenue is the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), a government-run organization. However, the ACFTU is anything but a labor union to help workers engage

in collective-bargaining. Rather it is meant to promote the Chinese state's export-led economic growth (Han n.d.). The Chinese government fails to ensure that current labor laws are enforced and actively works to end strikes or actions by workers due to the fear of losing money or an economically competitive edge over other developing states that might jeopardize China's continued economic growth (Chan 2011). Structural constraints, such as the Chinese government's development strategy of efficiency over equality and the lack of a social safety net, only partially account for the disadvantaged position in labor relations that Chinese workers are in. The government's choice to privilege individual over collective rights in the law has removed Chinese workers' ability to meaningfully organize, strike, and bargain collectively, which in effect denies their ability to protect their individual rights since they cannot effectively bargain or negotiate with employers. The Chinese state is likely unwilling to relinquish control to workers based on the role in democratization that the independent unionist movement the Polish Solidarity Union played in Poland's transition from communist control to democracy. The state wishes to prevent a similar occurrence in China (Chen 2007).

The bargain the CCP has made with its citizens - economic growth in exchange for loyalty to a nondemocratic regime - is increasingly a bargain the state can no longer make good upon (He 2022; Zhou 2012). Protests engulfed cities and locales across the country in November 2022 to protest the lockdown conditions after ten people in Xinjiang died due to a house fire when they were locked inside during a lockdown. For three years, those living in China have endured harsh lockdowns (France 24 2022). After some World Cup matches aired on television in which attendees stood crowded together and unmasked in the stands, many Chinese became infuriated that their lives were still on hold while the rest of the world was back to usual living (Holmes). The protests mainly contested the lockdowns, but some protestors called upon Xi Jinping to step down. After a week of intense protesting, the state's crackdown brought such public displays to an end. The CCP - to the surprise of most - lifted the lockdown restrictions. Given the extremely low rate of vaccines for the elderly, this came as a surprise. Scientific models suggest that up to 1 million may perish in the coming year in China due to the lifting of lockdowns before vaccines have been widely available (Mallapaty 2022). With the number of cases rising in China, the Covid-19 crisis is not yet over.

Despite the lifting of lockdown restrictions, Chinese youth by and large have a gloomy outlook on the future (Teh 2022). This indicates that the CCP's longtime bargain with its people is in dire straits. In very real ways, the government has an incentive to allow the ACFTU to allow for collective bargaining to improve workers' lives. However, as wages in factories increased in response to earlier strikes that took place about 10 years ago, there has been a very real concern that MNCs will simply relocate their factories to countries such as Vietnam, where wages were lower (Wang, Xia, and Xu 2020). This is the inherent issue with neoliberalism and its race to the bottom (Mosley and Uno 2007). The Chinese government could revise its position to better regulate the industry and provide greater social services to its workers.

From 2010 to 2013, there was hope among many that Chinese workers were finding ways of improving their circumstances. Many saw a 2010 strike at a Hondo auto parts factory in Guangdong as a hoped-for turning point in Chinese workers' rights. Hundreds of workers went on strike but were confronted by their own union representatives, who pushed them to go back to work. The day after the strike, a photo of these union reps pushing workers wound up on the internet and received widespread attention across China. The workers did not back down and eventually earned a 35 percent pay increase, widely seen as a move that let workers transform from victims to agents. Later, in a 2013 strike by hospital workers in Guangdong, there was no victory but the solidarity of university students, labor groups, and local residents who joined the workers in their effort against management inspired further hope for change in China's workers' movement, especially when the local government did not attempt to intervene. Through Weibo, China's version of Twitter, and the increasing class consciousness of workers, workers were seen increasingly to be making gains for themselves. The Chinese media has been better able to cover strikes on television, newspapers, and magazines, which in addition to social media has helped to extend class consciousness and has generated worker sympathy throughout the country (Han n.d.; Xue and Chan 2013).

Neoliberalism's incentives push the Chinese government to restrict workers' rights since their concern is only about growing China's export-led economy (Chang 2008; Han n.d.). At the local level, people from the villages in which factories are located rent their land to foreign-owned businesses and make a great deal of money, and they are not the people who work in the factories. Instead, factory jobs are filled by migrants who come to the villages to work from even more remote rural places. Often, the villagers who rent out to MNCs are appointed heads of local labor unions, a clear conflict of interest. Local villagers do not suffer from the bad working conditions in these factories but do make money from the companies that they rent out to. Therefore, villagers seek to prevent collective action against factory owners for fear that it would make owners relocate. Local governments have no incentive to help migrant workers. Rather, their only real interest is to increase tax revenue by keeping factory owners happy, which is accomplished by letting the owners do as they please (Chan 2011; Chang 2008). These structural conditions, especially present in EPZs, prevent solidarity movements between locals and migrant workers (Chan 2011). The state has a role to play in working conditions by shaping the macropolitical, economic, social, and cultural environments. If the government chooses to play a strong role in protecting workers' rights, there is a potential for positive change to work against the effects of neoliberalism. Despite the many problems of enforcing current labor laws, it is beneficial that Chinese workers have some recourse through labor laws on the books; even if they are inadequate, such laws can provide at least a way going forward in the effort for workers' rights. Likewise, working in the factory together rather than in home-based work means that workers are coming together, at least allowing for the possibility of workers' consciousness to form and grow. However, real

Avrasyad e-ISSN: 2147-2610

improvements are likely only possible when Chinese workers are able to demand a greater regulatory role from the state (Xue and Chan 2013).

Like proposed international solutions, the above suggestions are marked by concerns of feasibility. Further we suggest that these national approaches mainly address class concerns, which leaves out gender discrimination. China's state-led capitalism has rendered (unpaid) social reproductive labor – overwhelming performed by women – unvalued. Until global capitalism recognizes the value of social reproductive labor – on which the productive economy is entirely dependent (Elias and Roberts 2018; Prügl 2021), women will continue to face gender oppression. It is unlikely that women's work will be "counted" (to borrow from the feminist economist Marylin Waring 1988) but a first step would the elevation of unpaid caring and domestic work and men's desire to engage in such reproductive work. With that said, as Marxist-feminist scholars argue, working class women's exploitation will not end without addressing class exploitation (Bannerji 2015, Aguilar 2015). Finding the resources to address classed and gendered issues starts by considering the lived experiences of working women whether in China or elsewhere. Given China's predominance on the global economy, we suggest that Chinese women factory workers offer an excellent starting place to conceive of solutions.

Conclusion

This article has sought to add to the growing literature on women in crises to highlight that while most women are burdened by new caring demands in the context of crises, working class women, such as rural migrant workers or gig economy workers, are disadvantaged further by class. Although the gig economy can provide some relief for women workers who formerly held positions as migrant workers, the gig economy cannot provide for high quality lives. We conclude by encouraging international policymakers to move away from informal and gig work solutions to measures that promote the growth of societies built to thrive in the long term. By centering the most vulnerable in a given society - such as women rural migrant workers - in Covid-19 and post Covid-19 development plans and by bringing in those most harmed by the crisis to help identify solutions, alternative solutions can hopefully be found.

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