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Gender And Sexuality as a Labor Control Regime in the Garment Industry

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Abstract

This study examines how women workers experience despotic market conditions and local patriarchal structures within the context of garment production. It specifically discusses the dynamics that render women's labor temporary, obedient, and disciplined in the workplace. The study focuses on women garment workers in the Free Trade Zone in Mersin, Turkey, and is based on qualitative data derived from in-depth interviews with 19 women garment workers, three employers, one union delegate, and one employer representative. The findings reveal how patriarchal patterns are reproduced in daily workshop practices and how gender roles, sexualized meanings, and harassment serve as tools of power, control, and discipline in the workplace, reinforcing patriarchal hegemony. The study identifies that women are considered "ideal workers" in the garment industry due to being perceived as "loyal," "disciplined," and "docile." Furthermore, patriarchal discourses surrounding femininity and heterosexual relationships (whether marital or sexual) are used to control and discipline women workers throughout the production process as a labor control regime. The competition among female workers is shaped by patriarchal femininity roles rather than by the qualifications required for the job. These mechanisms contribute to the creation of a gendered workplace, reinforcing production politics that undermine solidarity among women workers and foster distinctions based on gender and sexuality.

Keywords: Gender, hegemonic-despotism, labor, patriarchy, labor control regimes, women's subjectivity

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Konfeksiyon Sektöründe Emek Kontrol Rejimi Olarak Toplumsal Cinsiyet ve Cinsellik

Öz

Bu çalışma, kadın işçilerin despotik piyasa koşullarını ve yerel patriyarkal yapıları konfeksiyon üretimi bağlamında nasıl deneyimlediklerini incelemektedir. Özellikle, atölye içerisinde kadın emeğini geçici, itaatkâr ve disiplinli hale getiren dinamikleri ele almaktadır. Çalışma, Türkiye'nin Mersin Serbest Bölgesi'nde çalışan kadın konfeksiyon işçilerine odaklanmakta olup, 19 kadın konfeksiyon işçisi, üç işveren, bir sendika temsilcisi ve bir işveren temsilcisi ile gerçekleştirilen derinlemesine görüşmelere dayanmaktadır. Bulgular, patriyarkal kalıpların günlük atölye pratiklerinde nasıl yeniden üretildiğini ve toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri, cinselleştirilmiş anlamlar ve tacizin işyerinde güç, kontrol ve disiplin araçları olarak nasıl kullanılarak patriyarkal hegemonyayı pekiştirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, kadınların konfeksiyon sektöründe "ideal işçiler" olarak kabul edilmelerinin, onların "sadık", "disiplinli" ve "uysal" olarak algılanmalarına dayandığını göstermektedir. Ayrıca, kadınlık ve heteroseksüel ilişkiler (evlilik ya da cinsellik) etrafında şekillenen patriyarkal söylemler, üretim sürecinde kadın işçileri kontrol etme ve disipline etme aracı olarak kullanılmaktadır. Kadın işçiler arasındaki rekabet, işin gerektirdiği niteliklerden ziyade patriyarkal kadınlık rolleri tarafından belirlenmektedir. Bu mekanizmalar, toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı bir işyeri yapısının oluşmasına katkıda bulunarak, kadın işçiler arasındaki dayanışmayı zayıflatmakta ve toplumsal cinsiyet ve cinselliğe dayalı ayrımları pekiştiren bir üretim politikası yaratmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Toplumsal cinsiyet, hegemonik despotizm, emek, ataerki, emek kontrol rejimleri, kadın öznelliği

Introduction

Export-based garment production is crucial for developing economies that rely heavily on women's labor. Studies highlight global supply chains, precarious work conditions, and subcontracting systems, women workers are often depicted as "cheap," "submissive," and "essential" for capitalist accumulation (Bair, 2010; Dedeoğlu, 2007; D'Ambrogio, 2014; Freeman, 2001; Korinek, 2005; Mills, 2003; Unni & Bali, 2002).

Since the 1970s, developing countries with low labor costs and low levels of unionization have become "preferred geographies" for transnational companies aiming to reduce production costs. This period saw a revival of liberal economic policies and shifting capital flows, leading to a new proletariat of young and female workers in free trade zones (Radice, 2015, p. 46). Labor market theories attribute women's disadvantage to the sexual division of labor or structural market conditions. Primary sectors serve producers, while secondary sectors employ low-paid, precarious workers, mainly women (Eraydn & Erendil, 1999, pp. 259-260). The economic restructuring process collaborates with local patriarchal systems, integrating patriarchal norms into daily work practices.

Earlier studies suggest women are preferred in the garment industry due to their "docility" and "discipline," but how these qualities are produced remains unexplored. Patriarchal femininity discourses shape female workers' subjectivity. This study examines women's experiences in Mersin (Turkey) FTZ's garment industry, analyzing patriarchal stereotypes in labor relations. This study's data was collected through in-depth interviews with 24 participants, including women workers, three employers, one union member, and one employer representative, with snowball sampling.

The sample of this study possesses specific characteristics worth noting. For example, due to the limited job opportunities in the local labor market, the number of working women and men in the Free Trade Zone (FTZ) garment industry, where data was collected, is roughly equal. However, women are consistently viewed as the "ideal garment workers" by the employers interviewed.

The concept of the "ideal worker" is largely constructed within masculine norms, defined in ways that reflect male bodies and lifestyles, thereby excluding female workers from its scope (Williams, 2001, p. 64). According to Williams et al. (2012, p. 550), employers tend to favor workers who prioritize the workplace more than anything else and demonstrate unwavering loyalty to their job. This preference systematically marginalizes women, who are often assumed to bear primary responsibility for home and family life. However, in export-oriented sectors, young female workers are often considered a preferred labor force due to their so-called natural skills, such as manual dexterity. In developing countries like Mexico and Indonesia, factories integrated into global markets typically employ female-intensive, low-wage labor forces. At the same time, male workers predominantly occupy supervisory and managerial positions within similar organizational models. The hegemony of patriarchal norms, which not only define women's labor as cheap but also socially and economically devalue it, produces a gendered workforce that is vital for the global capitalist accumulation regime (Mills, 2003, p. 43).

It was observed that various "compensatory masculinity mechanisms," such as sexual jokes or harassment, are prevalent in the workplace, stemming from the perception of women as an ideal labor force for garment manufacturing. These mechanisms are rooted in local patriarchal patterns and contribute to the creation of sexualized workplaces.

These practices serve not only as tools of oppression but also as patriarchal practices in which women. Despite the garment industry being female-dominated and women being seen as "ideal garment workers" due to characteristics attributed to their "nature," this study found that women's status in factories by engaging in patriarchal relationships—such as romantic, sexual, or marital ties—with male managers, employers, or foremen. These mechanisms create sexualized workplaces where women sometimes participate in patriarchal practices via patriarchal bargaining. In this sense, women's presence in the workplace is defined by gender roles rather than by identity as workers. This situation fosters patriarchal divisions among women in the workplace and undermines organized class consciousness. Therefore, analyzing how unequal structural organization of gender reveals and is reproduced in daily workplace practices provides valuable insights for increasing women's awareness of their class and gender identities.

This study discusses market and hegemonic despotisms as labor control regimes, analyzing how patriarchal structures shape these mechanisms and begins with theoretical discussions, followed by research methodology and findings.

Market and Hegemonic Despotisms as a Labor Control Regime

Production relationships include conflicts of interest between employer and workers and control of workers in the workplace. Labor control is a complex phenomenon therefore labor power is constantly embodied in people who have their own needs and interests and the ability to refuse to be treated as commodities unlike the other commodities used in production. In this sense, control means the capacity of capitalists to obtain desired work behavior from workers (Edwards 1979, pp. 12-18).

Research on labor control builds upon Karl Marx's historical materialism and Antonio Gramsci's theory of ideological hegemony. Marx recognized that the willingness to sell labor power was historically contingent, even though he argued that wage labor under capitalism was more of a social necessity than a natural condition. This raises the question of how capitalists successfully integrate workers into the manufacturing process, given their inherent tendency to resist as a class (Jonas, 2009, p. 60).

Labor control regimes emerge from employers' need to integrate labor into the capitalist production system. This necessity stems from the conditions specific to capitalism, where workers are legally free to sell their labor power to any employer but lack ownership of the means of production. Control is exercised through the detailed organization of workplace practices, which regulate the quality and quantity of labor available in the market and utilized in production (Jonas, 2009, p. 59)

Labor control regimes include various disciplinary methods used to maintain work continuity. Edwards (1979) identified three mechanisms: simple, technical, and bureaucratic. In the 19th century, simple control involved direct employer intervention, with workers facing arbitrary treatment and limited means of resistance due to small workforce sizes. As production more complex and large-scale, simple control became inadequate, requiring more structured oversight. The growing workforce led to the rise of supervisors and formalized management, while labor movements and strikes gained strength with socialist ideas. In response, firms adopted technical and bureaucratic control methods to regulate labor more systematically.

The labor-management systems of the industrial era relied on formal and bureaucratic regulations reinforced by various pressures. In recent years, labor management practices have shifted as businesses adopt less hierarchical organizational structures. Firms have effectively implemented modern labor control methods that emphasize voluntary organizational commitment and directly influence worker behavior (Degiuli & Kollmeyer, 2007, p. 498). Historical periodization has primarily focused on labor control within the production process, often overlooking the role of social and political institutions beyond the workplace. In this context, Burawoy developed the concepts of despotic and hegemonic labor control regimes, drawing inspiration from Gramsci's writings on hegemony.

In Americanism and Fordism, Gramsci argued that securing workers' consent to production regimes cannot rely solely on coercion; various ideological mechanisms must be integrated into the production process. This represents a new form of coercion exercised by the elite classes, incorporating self-coercion and self-discipline. External coercion mechanisms, implemented through industrial methods, fostered discipline and order in production while aligning workers' customs with labor requirements. Through this process, an "ideological hegemony" was established to shape a new type of worker suited to the Fordist industry (Hoare, 1999).

Burawoy (1985) conceptualizes the despotic labor regime as a system in which workers' dependence on wages is reinforced through "the economic whip of the market." The balance between wages and profits is sustained by optimizing labor efficiency and upheld through mechanisms of oppression and market despotism. Over time, this form of control has evolved into "hegemonic despotism," wherein domination is maintained not solely through coercion but also through ideological consent (Burawoy, 1985, pp. 126–150). Within the capitalist pursuit of profit, the labor process must be examined through the dialectical relationship between coercion and consent (Burawoy, 1979, pp. 27–30).

The organization of work, labor, and the production process encompasses political and ideological mechanisms that regulate production relations. The production process has both objective and subjective dimensions. In this context, the capitalist production process is not merely an external force exerted on workers; it also involves a process of naturalization and subjectification in which workers actively participate. Workers may develop strategies to negotiate their allegiance or become

complicit in their own exploitation. Thus, while workers continue to produce commodities, capitalism not only generates cooperation and domination but also cultivates “consent” for these relations (Burawoy, 1985).

The extraction of surplus value in capitalist production necessitates various workplace strategies, including the mystification of unpaid labor and decentralization of control. Workers negotiate with lower-level managers instead of employers, and a hierarchical division of qualifications fosters individualization over collective consciousness (Burawoy, 1985, pp. 32–33). This process creates atomized workers suited to the production system and establishes an “internal labor market” based on “competitive individualism.” As a managerial construct, the internal labor market regulates labor allocation and planning, masking surplus value extraction. Consequently, external and internal labor markets share key characteristics (Burawoy, 1979). Hegemonic labor regimes vary by country due to differences in state regulations, skills, technology, inter-firm competition, and worker resistance (Burawoy, 1983, p. 590).

The capitalist mode of production is based on an abstract subjective potential, expressed as “anyone can perform any type of work.” Capitalism develops this potential through discipline and cooperation while simultaneously regulating it through various disciplinary and subjectivity techniques. Thus, subjectivity functions as both a cause and an effect within capitalism (Read, 2003, p. 10). Burawoy (1985, p. 9) places class at the core of his analysis, considering it a fundamental element in the organization of modern society. However, his labor theory fails to incorporate a gender perspective or address the specific labor experiences of women.

Alongside class, gender plays a crucial role in labor market dynamics and production politics. Women's workforce control operates through local patriarchal systems and micropolitical strategies, reinforced both externally and through daily practices. Workplaces, as microcosms of society, play a significant role in this reproduction process.

Patriarchal Hegemony and Production of Sexual Subjects

Burawoy (1979, 1983, 1985) conceptualizes production politics within a despotic-hegemonic regime but overlooks the role of gender in securing consent to these policies. Women's labor market disadvantages, patriarchal management discourses, and gendered subjectivity in the workplace are also critical components of labor regulation.

Men and women undergo distinct socialization processes, leading to differentiated expectations and positions within the labor market. Factors such as domestic responsibilities, cultural norms surrounding employment, and family obligations shape their orientations toward work. Even when labor contributions are quantitatively similar, qualitative differences persist, influencing labor power delivery, workplace dynamics, time management, task performance, and the impact of parenthood on job

involvement. Consequently, due to gendered socialization and their relationship to the domestic sphere, men and women experience paid employment in fundamentally different ways (Davies, 1990, p. 395).

Burawoy's conceptualization of shopfloor culture predominantly reflects male experiences. However, shopfloor cultures vary and are shaped by mixed-gender dynamics. Due to occupational segregation, distinct work environments, and domestic responsibilities, women often develop their own workplace cultures, fostering unique forms of relative satisfaction. Furthermore, the labor process itself is frequently structured along gendered lines (Davies, 1990).

Gender, body, and sexuality function as mechanisms of control within the labor process. Despite increasing female labor market participation, women remain structurally disadvantaged across all levels of the employment hierarchy (Williams et al., 2012, pp. 550–551). Mills (2003, p. 43) argues that this hierarchy manifests in different ways, with married women with children often perceived as cheap labor, while single women assume a similar role as dependent “daughters.” Additionally, disciplinary strategies can construct women workers as sexualized bodies, reinforcing subordination through erotic teasing or sexual harassment. As the workplace has traditionally been a male-dominated public sphere, masculine culture and hegemony persist in various forms.

Hegemonic masculinity places men in dominant roles across various spheres, including the labor market, state, public sphere, streets, civil society, and family, thus ensuring that men hold primary positions while women occupy secondary ones (Connell, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity differs from other masculinities, particularly subordinate masculinities. It should not be assumed that hegemonic masculinity is normal in a statistical sense; it may only be enacted by a minority of men. However, it is certainly normative. It represents the most honored way of being a man in contemporary society, demanding that all other men align with it. Moreover, it serves as the ideological legitimization of the global subordination of women to men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). In this sense, hegemonic masculinity is a culturally idealized form that functions both as a personal and a collective project, embodying the common-sense notions of breadwinning and manhood. It is exclusive, anxiety-inducing, internally differentiated, hierarchical, brutal, and violent. It is pseudonatural, rigid, contradictory, crisis-prone, affluent, and socially sustained. Although not practiced by all men, most men benefit from it, and it is centrally connected to the institutions of male dominance. While it transcends class boundaries, it often excludes working-class and Black men. Hegemonic masculinity is a lived experience, an economic and cultural force, and is dependent on specific social arrangements (Donaldson, 1993, p. 645).

Gender is not merely a byproduct of organizational life but an essential component that shapes and constructs it (Forbes, 2009, p. 271). Within the workplace, patriarchal hegemony results in the devaluation of women's labor, treating their wages as a mere “contribution to the family budget,” while utilizing paternalistic control methods to subjugate workers. This system perpetuates women's precarious, informal, and low-wage labor, reinforcing a gendered power structure. Such dynamics

ultimately foster workers' consent for the despotic regulation of the production process, ensuring the continued dominance of patriarchal values within the labor market.

Salzinger (1997) asserts that gender patterns are reproduced and reinforced through various practices in export-based sectors that rely heavily on female labor. The process of shaping the "ideal export worker" involves both the application of local patriarchal ideologies as a form of control over workers in the factory and the creation of subjectivities grounded in traditional roles of femininity and masculinity. The discourses that construct the image of the "ideal worker" in free trade zones predominantly feature portrayals of "disciplined women workers who are less prone to boredom than men." In this context, sexist discourses rooted in local gender stereotypes and subjectivities are redefined and perpetuated through managerial practices and within the workplace itself.

Salzinger (2003) argues that labor market theorists often fail to question the "docility" attributed to women by society, ignoring both structural elements of labor control practices and the creation of gendered identities. Viewing sex as a stable structure is an essentialist mistake, as the "submissive and skilled female worker" is a discourse shaped by production relations. Gendered subjectivities influence all levels, from managerial decisions to workers' compliance and resistance. Submissive labor is constructed daily in workshops through practices and rhetoric. Thus, analyzing the gender dynamics in local contexts requires addressing "where," "when," and "how," in addition to daily activities. In this sense, "the personal is political" also implies "the personal is economic."

Patriarchy controls the workforce, with both women and men maintaining its hegemony. The creation of sexual subjectivities within labor control prevents workers from organizing against exploitation, limiting women workers from viewing themselves as "free workers." It forces them into heteronormative relationships with men and fosters hierarchies among them.

Research Method

The data collection process in this study focused on participants' experiences and perspectives on the circumstances (Creswell, 2014, pp. 185-186), using face-to-face in-depth interviews. To capture and understand gender roles, their impact on women's lives, and how social realities are constructed, women's unique experiences were assessed through their viewpoints (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p. 2). In the field study, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted: 3 with employers in the Mersin FTZ garment sector, 19 with women garment workers, and 1 each with a union delegate and an employer representative. As the interviews were conducted in Turkish, no translator was needed. Each interview lasted between fifteen minutes and one hour, taking place near the factories during break times, in employers' offices, the interviewees' homes, and a union office. All employer participants were men, thus unintentionally dividing the study sample into two groups: capitalist men and worker women. Ethics committee approval was obtained from Mersin University (01-10-2018-014).

Garment production is the leading sector in export-based production in Turkey, offering significant employment opportunities. As a result of export-oriented growth policies, the garment and textile industries have grown in importance due to their contribution to Turkey's Gross National Product and integration into international markets since the 1980s. According to 2018 World Trade Organization statistics, Turkey ranked 7th in global garment exports (WTO, 2019, p. 120). Additionally, Turkey placed 4th in global garment exports, following China, India, and Vietnam, among Asia, Pacific, and Arab countries, and 8th in global garment retailing from 1995 to 2014 (ILO, 2016; RTMT, 2019).

Mersin, the field research site, hosts a free trade zone, an international port, a low-cost local workforce, and a large Syrian refugee population. The Mersin Free Trade Zone (FTZ), established in 1987, is one of Turkey's first free zones. As of 2018, the zone's foreign trade volume reached 2,962,000,000 dollars, with 75 out of 426 companies operating in the garment sector (Mesbaş, 2019a, 2019b). According to data from the Mersin Chamber of Commerce and Industry, there are 206 textile and garment manufacturers in total, three of which are located in the organized industrial zone (MTSO, 2019). Furthermore, the Mersin Chamber of Clothing Manufacturers and Sellers reports 73 workshops in the city, which predominantly rely on informal and Syrian migrant labor.

In the field of garment production, products for international companies are manufactured in the Free Trade Zone (FTZ), while small-sized workshops primarily rely on Syrian refugees for local consumption. Informal labor is widespread in the local economy, except in the FTZ and international port. Although garment production is typically associated with female labor, the gender distribution in Mersin FTZ, where data were collected, is relatively balanced due to the limited availability of secure jobs in the local market. According to interviews, female workers are employed across all manufacturing departments, including machinery, packaging, labeling, yarn cleaning, and quality control, depending on order demand. In contrast, men are mostly assigned to simpler production lines or roles as personnel chiefs and foremen.

The employer participants in the field research operate international production in the FTZ. Their ages range from 47 to 64. It was observed that all the employers are sons of Turkish workers who had previously worked as immigrant garment workers in European countries such as Germany and Denmark. They have transferred their experiences to businesses in Mersin FTZ. Employers in the FTZ employ between 170 and 1,000 people, with the number of employees varying depending on seasonal demand. The reasons cited by employers for producing in Mersin FTZ include the ability to operate year-round, due to the region's hot climate, the availability of cheap labor, and the demands of the global firms they collaborate with.

This study's field research was conducted from September 2018 to January 2019, using snowball sampling as the data collection method. The first female interviewee was contacted through a local union, and subsequently, the researcher visited the factory where she worked to reach other female workers. Additional interviewees were identified through another union related to the garment industry.

Interviewees were also approached by visiting factories within the FTZ. Employer participants were reached through a local garment shop owner.

Except for three employer interviews, where permission was not granted, all interviews were recorded using a tape recorder. These recordings were then transcribed into written texts, ranging from 6 to 15 pages. The analyses and interviews were conducted directly by the author of this study. The themes used for analysis were derived from common themes, repeated topics, and ideas that emerged during the field study. The socio-demographic profiles of the interviewed women workers are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Socio-demographic profiles of women workers

Female Workers	Number
Ages	
20-24	5
25-29	3
30-39	7
40+	4
Marital Status	
Married	8
Separated/Divorced	5
Unmarried	6
Education	
None/Illiterate	1
Elementary School	6
Secondary School	4
High School	3
University	3
Missing Data	2
Position of female workers	
Helper	4
Machine operator	12
Quality inspector	3
Total:	19

The female worker interviewees are employed in eight different factories within the FTZ. All but one of the interviewees have worked exclusively in the FTZ throughout their careers. Most of the interviewees began their working lives in the garment sector. The ages at which the women started working range from 12 to 30.

The interviewees primarily explained their choice to work in the FTZ garment sector as a result of the inability to find alternative employment. They stated that other jobs available in the local market offer wages that are half of the minimum wage and lack social security benefits. Therefore, the FTZ's guarantee of a minimum wage and health insurance were cited as the main reasons for choosing employment in the FTZ. Additionally, divorced interviewees mentioned that the need to support their households on their own, coupled with low wages in other sectors, influenced their decision to work in the FTZ. Working hours in the FTZ exceed 12 hours a day, and during periods of high demand, a "mandatory shifts" system is implemented. Participants reported working at night, in addition to regular

working days, and sometimes even sleeping in the workshops because they are required to return the next day. Long working hours were perceived as the "norm" for FTZ employment by the women interviewees. No salary differences were observed between men and women in the FTZ garment industry during the field study.

Women workers reported difficulties in exercising their legal rights, such as maternity and breastfeeding leave, or accessing childcare benefits. In Turkey, maternity leave is granted for a total of 16 weeks, both before and after childbirth. Despite the fact that thousands of women work in the FTZ, there is no nursery available, and women who give birth are expected to return to work much earlier than the law stipulates. As a result, many women workers leave their jobs upon marriage or childbirth. Among the women interviewed in the field study, only three were union members. Some interviewees were unaware of what a union is, while others stated that they could not join a union due to their employers' anti-union stance.

In the field study, the spatial characteristics of the garment workshops revealed that different departments, such as ironing, sewing, and packaging, were separated by small barriers and walls. Management offices were located above the production lines. Foremen and workers shared the same spaces, which were illuminated with fluorescent lamps, and music played continuously throughout the working hours. Break times were signaled by a bell. Workers were prohibited from using mobile phones or talking to one another during work periods. Additionally, machine operators were not allowed to stand, and helpers were prohibited from sitting, according to management. The workplaces were monitored by cameras, and fingerprint recognition systems were used for factory entry and exit. The research findings will be discussed in the following section.

Findings

Fragile” and “Loyal”: Women as Ideal Garment Workers

The "nimble fingers" metaphor links women's labor to their bodies, with the idea that women's dexterity is central to their role in the workforce. In the field study, employers transferred this metaphor into the concepts of "fragile" and "loyal." The traditional belief that women are “fragile” and “sensitive” leads to the division of factory tasks into masculine and feminine roles. The research revealed that women are seen as a more flexible and functional workforce compared to men, which makes them preferred in the garment sector. Employers cited women's “innate ability” for sewing as the reason for this preference. Even without qualifications, all women who apply for the job are hired, while men are only considered if they have experience in garment production. Employer participants emphasized that women are more desirable than men, and that garment production is considered one of the best jobs for women. However, while employers prefer working with female workers, they also stated that there is no difference in craftsmanship between men and women. Thus, women are favored not for their technical skill, but because they are perceived as loyal, disciplined, and docile.

If I had the opportunity, I would like 100 percent of the employees to be women, but I do not have such an opportunity. (Employer, Age: 47, Educational Background: High School).

Clothing is one of the most favourable jobs for women. Instead of going and cleaning somewhere, they prefer the garment business. (Employer, Age: 64, Educational Background: Primary School).

However, men are preferred over women for "heavy work," such as ironing. One employer shared their view on women's "natural" ability in garment production, stating:

Because the ladies are generally a bit more gentle... **This is something from their chemistry and cells!** But for example, there are such departments in the business that the ironing department or the packaging department, we prefer more men here... Here is a hot region, and ironing naturally produces steam, and iron is somewhat heavy... Think of a lady's wrist, we do not find it very conscientious that she constantly does the ironing for 8 hours in a day. (Employer, Age: 47, Educational Background: University).

The distinction between "women's" and "men's" jobs reflects gendered power and status in production. Men are typically assigned physically demanding, skilled roles with authority, while women are often relegated to light, unskilled, and routine tasks, such as machine operation or observation (Johnson, 1990, pp. 14-15). Additionally, women workers themselves often support the belief that women are naturally suited to garment and sewing work.

Another reason women are frequently preferred during recruitment is the belief that women are more docile and disciplined than men. Employers commonly emphasize that women work more calmly and consistently, exhibiting greater "loyalty" to their jobs, whereas men are perceived as careless and prone to swearing. Furthermore, employers reported increased difficulty in finding female workers compared to the past, leading them to hire male workers instead.

The idea of natural differences underpins a gendered social structure, where bodies are socially constructed and function as both agents and objects in social practices (Connell, 2009). Skill naturalism shapes the moral economies of work by providing frameworks and vocabularies that support gendered narratives. This paradigm devalues skill and enables the exploitation of vulnerable labor in global manufacturing (Collins, 2002).

Thus, the naturalization of discrimination through biology is an ideological practice, with the "nimble fingers" metaphor reinforcing ideas of docile, cheap, and flexible female labor.

Workshop Hierarchy and Discourses on Femininity

Sexual behavior in the workplace is not a new phenomenon; it has been a part of business life since women began entering the workforce in significant numbers (Berebitsky, 2012). Sexual relations, despite including biological and physical characteristics, do not exist in isolation within social life. Furthermore, they create a microcosm shaped by the behaviors and values that constitute the culture. Millett (2000, p. 26) argues that "sexual politics obtains consent through the 'socialization' of both sexes to basic patriarchal policies with regard to temperament, role, and status. As to status, a pervasive assent to the prejudice of male superiority guarantees superior status in the male, inferior in the female".

The belief that men are "sexually weak" in the face of women can lead particularly disadvantaged women to act within the framework of femininity images defined for them in order to

attain certain positions in social life. According to Kandiyoti, patriarchal ideology, and its social practices cause women who occupy particularly disadvantaged positions to lean on masculine power and to establish partnerships with it so that they can take a place in society. These partnerships are sometimes possible through the assurance of the "loyalty" of women to kinship and family relationships in the direction of family ideology. This includes a set of strategies women developed in and bargained with the patriarchal society. Patriarchal bargains' in any given society can vary according to class, caste, and ethnicity. These patriarchal bargains exert a powerful influence on shaping women's gendered subjectivities and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts. (Kandiyoti, 1988).

In the field study, it was observed that the workshop hierarchy of organizations emerged in two ways: horizontally and vertically. Vertical supervision is carried out by the foremen, while horizontal supervision is conducted through various interpersonal surveillance and inspection practices. The horizontal control mechanism involves senior workers overseeing beginner workers. Additionally, it was observed that different surveillance practices form relationships with male staff in higher hierarchical positions. These relationships reveal a structure of interaction that includes kinship, marriage, and even sexuality.

It was observed that informal relationships with senior staff, such as employers or personnel chiefs, give workers a more privileged position in the eyes of their peers. Many women reported that although the foreman's or chief's wives were employed as workers in the workshop, they had supervisory roles over others, sometimes even using violence. One divorced woman interviewee shared that she was beaten by the foreman's wife for a manufacturing defect.

There was a mistake in the stitching of two products, I sent it incorrectly, it slipped my attention, then, he insulted badly (the foreman), his wife (foreman's wife) hit me. His wife was working with us too, his wife hit me, and then she insulted me for I was divorced, she said "get out of here, if you'd been a good wife your husband would still be with you." As she's the wife of the chief, she acts like a chief, always patronising, even more than the chief himself. For example, once she gets annoyed with you, you're finished there, so you can't work anymore. (Age:48, Marital Status: Divorced, Quality Inspector).

In the field study, it was observed that women gained privileges within the workshop through positions such as "foreman's wife" and "boss's lover." The female interviewees shared that some women entered intimate relationships with male supervisors to "feel more comfortable in the workplace." One woman stated that;

If you don't have a relationship with the boss, and if he has a relationship with a woman, you have to praise that woman, there is always unrest when you don't... sometimes these things happen. (Age: 27, Marital Status: Single, Machine Operator).

Women's responses to male domination vary significantly depending on objective circumstances, with patriarchal bargaining being reinforced by cultural values. Patriarchal bargaining represents a complex compromise: while it allows for the possibility of agency, this agency is simultaneously constrained by the established rules and norms governing gender relations. This occurs because the framework of patriarchal bargaining is not necessarily designed to challenge or dismantle patriarchy but rather to navigate within it. Instead of portraying women solely as passive victims, this

concept highlights their active participation in utilizing existing structures to gain recognition and advantages. Thus, patriarchal bargaining is not only concerned with women's resources and constraints but also encompasses the potential benefits they may obtain within the prevailing system (Ruslin, 2022, p. 144).

Ideology encompasses dominant beliefs about what is considered normal, natural, and desirable, and is closely linked to the interests of those who hold power. Ideologies are intertwined both with the organization of production systems and with the functioning of male-dominated sex/gender relations (Ramazanoglu, 1989, p. 147). Women may utilize the status they acquire within a group through their relationships with dominant men (marriage, kinship, sexuality, etc.) as a means of exerting oppression, enacting violence, or even facilitating dismissals. This dynamic serves as a patriarchal bargaining mechanism through which the disadvantaged position of femininity is compensated by reliance on masculine power.

The Discriminatory Discourses of Patriarchal Hegemony and the Construction of Female Subjectivity in the Workplaces

In the factories where the field study was conducted, the number of male and female employees was nearly equal. This characteristic of the research setting allowed for an analysis of the attitudes and discourses of male employees and employers within a feminized sector.

It has been observed that women are subjected to mistreatment and harassment through the humiliation of their gender in the workplace. For instance, one of the female interviewees reported that an employer reprimanded female employees by saying, "Is this place a brothel?" in response to the noise they were making. The free zone garment sector constitutes a labor sphere where women are insulted, perceived as sexual objects, and sometimes physically abused by male foremen or supervisors. The devaluation of working-class women's labor operates in conjunction with workplace sexual-political discourses and disciplinary mechanisms, ultimately contributing to the formation of a cheap and obedient workforce. Moreover, the prevalence of lower-paid and precarious jobs in the local labor market significantly influences men's decisions to work in the free zone. This situation recalls the organized group of male workers in Hartmann's (1979) work, *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, which highlights the exclusion of women from secure jobs.

According to Federici (2004, pp. 15, 96, 100), the body is central to understanding the roots of male dominance and the construction of female social identity. The historical association of women with a degraded conception of corporeal reality has played a crucial role in consolidating patriarchal power and enabling the exploitation of female labor by men. In this context, the exclusion of women from waged employment, the creation of the housewife role, and the establishment of the family as the center for the reproduction of labor power have contributed to the devaluation of women's labor. All these processes reflect a broader strategy aimed at women's exclusion from the labor market. As a result,

women who challenge these norms by working in public spaces outside the home are often portrayed as sexually aggressive shrews, “whores,” or “witches.” One woman stated that;

“Hey, look over here you fucking cunt,” they say, and when I tell them I find their language foul, they tell me to “shut up” and say “as if these are words you’ve never heard!” The foremen spoke in this language, and now the workers do as well. (Age: 36, Marital Status: Married, Machine Operator).

In the field study, it was observed that the behaviors and forms of address used by male workers toward female workers varied significantly depending on women's marital status (married, divorced, or widowed) and their position within the patriarchal social structure. Female participants reported that divorced women were treated differently in the factory, experiencing a range of interactions that spanned from flirting to humiliation.

We, those who are separated from their spouses, are viewed differently. We are humiliated; we are unavoidably inferior in the eyes of society. In our society, there is usually such an idea. Just because I am a divorced woman, because I support a house, because I need this job, and because they know that they think they can patronize me comfortably. (Age: 31, Marital Status: Divorced, Helper).

Because I am a divorced woman, they treat me badly, that is, as if a divorced woman is all dressed up with nowhere to go, like she needs an owner, as if, without that owner, she is available to anyone anytime. Even women behave that way. Now, if I say I’m divorced, it doesn't work, if I say my husband is dead, it’s the same. They are gossiping. (Age: 48, Marital Status: Divorced, Quality Control).

The negative perception about divorced women in the workplace is also shared by other female interviewees. This perspective is sometimes internalized even by divorced women themselves. Regardless of their marital status, women's behaviors in the workplace are continuously monitored and controlled by both their peers and superiors. The statements of women on this matter are as follows:

They want attention, they are divorced women, unfortunately, there are divorcees like us, they tarnish our name. We have our employees who wear décolleté blouse. Your mind would stop, they are provoking the men there. Nobody thinks well about them. Look, sister F., look at her clothes, for instance, men cannot do their job while looking at her. (Age: 56, Marital Status: Divorced, Machine Operator).

Our female friend is a divorced woman, they want to take advantage of her, and when you are married and you are decent, it is a problem for them anyway, because the ladies working there are always thought to be a toy for bosses, no matter how well you work, no matter what, they think you are disposable, you go and someone else comes, maybe a playful one will come in your place. (Age: 36, Marital Status: Married, Machine Operator).

Power relations between genders are discursively constructed in the workplace, with cultural meanings playing a significant role in the formation of workplace subjectivities. In a gendered workplace, family and sexual relations constitute a key element of the labor process, and power dynamics operate through a series of discourses rooted in family and sexual imagery. These factors profoundly influence the formation of gender-based subjectivities in the workplace (Adkins & Lury, 1996, p. 210).

Socially, marriage ensures that a man gains sexual rights over a woman, and a woman who is not visibly under a man’s protection is perceived by others as an “available” sexual object. The fear of sexual violence and harassment can serve as a tool for women to police themselves and other women through a series of disciplinary practices. In this way, macro power structures intersect with micro-level practices. Gender ideology, which defines sex in phallogocentric terms, positions the male as the sexual

subject and the female as the sexual object through various forms of representation and discourse (Jackson, 1996, p. 25). Moreover, as Mernissi (2000, p. 31) points out, divorced women are subjected to more patriarchal oppression than single women due to the belief that women who have experienced sexual intercourse represent the most potentially dangerous type of woman in Muslim societies. In this sense, uncontrollable female sexuality is viewed as a threat to society. As observed in the field study, female sexuality is reconstructed as a playground for men in the workplace.

Sexual Harassment in the Workplace as a Sexual Politics

The women were asked whether they had been subjected to or witnessed sexual harassment in the workplace in the field study. It was observed that the women's perceptions of sexual harassment were rather ambiguous. Sexual harassment was often conflated with extramarital affairs among the women and male staff. This confusion stems from the patriarchal, cultural belief that a man will not touch or molest a woman without her consent. Except a few women, most of the female interviewees agreed with this stereotype. Some interviewees noted that sexual harassment was sometimes used as a tool for intimidation. A crucial point to highlight is that, in cases where sexual harassment was reported in the workplace, the interviewees stated that both the women and men involved were dismissed, regardless of who the victim was. When asked about witnessing sexual harassment, the women shared the following:

He picked me up and assigned me to the ironing department at that time. What the man did, just to frustrate me and deter me, he was locking up the toilets, the key I wanted to go to the toilet was on the chief's pocket and he spoke to me in a slightly unkind way. I was about 21 years old then and he punished me that way. He said things like "I see you in my dreams" or something, he was a married person, he assigned me to the ironing that night, at work. (Age: 56, Marital Status: Divorced, Machine Operator).

Verbal abuse. For example, here it goes... when you pass by... your breasts... Look, just because you are like this, you hear ugly things. You have to live through such things. (Age: 27, Marital Status: Single, Machine Operator).

The opinions of women, who say that a man cannot do such a thing without the woman's permission, are generally as follows:

I did not hear. If another man touched her body, then it means that the woman permitted him. I saw such things with my own eyes. (Age: 33, Marital Status: Divorced, Helper).

Culturally, women are often seen as the primary instigators of male sexuality, and it is considered a woman's crime to arouse of a man sexually. This belief directly impacts women's freedom, including the restriction of their self-presentation in the public sphere. Women who do not conform to these limitations are viewed as undeserving of protection (Cornell, 1993, p. 170). Furthermore, sexual harassment in the workplace reflects a worldview in which the public sphere is considered to belong to men, while the private sphere is reserved for women. According to Schultz (1999, p. 81), sexual harassment is one of how working life is reinforced as a male domain. By keeping women away from work and labeling them as "inferior," sexual harassment serves to perpetuate gender-based discrimination in the labor market

The occurrence of sexual harassment is part of an attitude that reinforces gender differences on a broader scale and views work as a male-dominated field. Salzinger (2000) argues that sexual harassment in the workplace is seen as a violation of bilateral relations in working life but is often ignored as a crucial aspect of workplace sexual politics. The disregard for sexual harassment prevents a focus on other forms of sexual exploitation in the workplace. As observed in the field study, the evaluation of female workers based on their gender rather than their labor, and the production of sexuality and sexual subjects within the workplace, constitute an essential element of the mode of production and labor control.

As a result, patriarchal gender ideology creates artificial distinctions among female workers by perceiving women as the culprits of sexual harassment, associating their dignity with passivity, and causing women to identify more with their patriarchal position in society than with their role in the labor force.

CONCLUSION

The integration of developing countries into global markets is facilitated by global supply chains, with garment production being one of the primary sectors enabling this connection. The spatial, temporal, and functional flexibility policies of the flexible production system have shaped the working and production relations in the garment industry. Furthermore, globalized manufacturing is not a gender-neutral concept. On the contrary, it reinforces gender formations and gender ideologies within local economies. As a result, this system operates in conjunction with patriarchal cultural structures in local markets.

In the local market, hegemonic and despotic labor regimes provide the necessary workforce for the flexible production system. In this context, gender relations are a crucial component of the hegemonic-despotic control system. Gender and gender-based subjectivities are integral to both the production system and the labor control regime. Hegemonic despotism collaborates with local sexist ideologies to secure workers' consent and maintain organization, thereby creating a patriarchal hegemonic control mechanism over the female workforce. These control mechanisms are reproduced in the daily relationships within the workshop.

The definition of women as "ideal garment workers" is attributed to their so-called innate talents and their portrayal as a more "loyal" and "disciplined" group of workers compared to men. The naturalization paradigm functions as an ideological apparatus in the global garment industry by reducing women's labor to the level of "talent," thereby fulfilling the system's need for docile workers who can perform temporary, routine jobs. The perception that women are a "loyal," "disciplined," and non-unionized workforce are the key factors that make them considered "ideal workers" for garment production.

It is observed that the despotic structure of the local market accelerates men's participation as workers in international garment production. This situation necessitates the activation of a series of "compensatory mechanisms for masculinity" in the relationships within workshops. These mechanisms manifest in everyday practices, including sexual discourse on the production line, curses, macho behaviors, and sexual jokes that insult female sexuality. These behaviors reflect a patriarchal labor structure in which women are pitted against one another based on gender roles. Patriarchal cultural codes, which assert that women are powerless unless under the surveillance of a man, function as an ideological practice within the workshop.

Although women are often defined as "ideal garment workers," most managerial positions in the workshops are occupied by men. This situation, in addition to being related to local stereotypes regarding the passivity of women, also serves to create distinctions among female workers based on patriarchal forms of subjectivity. Consequently, women's competition in the internal labor market of organizations is not based on the qualifications required for the job but on gendered discourses and roles. The positions of women in the workshop are not determined by their labor value but by their relationships, such as being someone's wife, lover, or daughter. The competition among women over patriarchal norms of femininity serves to reinforce masculine hegemony in the gendered workshop. In this sense, women exist not as "free laborers" who sell their labor power, but as sexual subjects on the production line.

The positive effect of this situation for the capital side is that it undermines women's potential to organize better working conditions. The fragmentation of labor in the workplace and the competition in the internal labor market are shaped by patriarchal norms in society. Additionally, the ill-treatment and harassment of women by male workers and employers, as a sexual-political mechanism in the workshop, guarantees the submissiveness and discipline of women while creating an illusion of masculine power for male workers in a feminized sector. This is one of how men's docility in the production process is ensured. In this way, the male worker feels a sense of power, if not over working conditions, at least over women.

The process of creating obedient, cheap, and disciplined workers is facilitated both by the despotic features of the market, which prevent working under better conditions, and by the patriarchal-hegemonic despotic labor regime within the workshop. The sexualization of the sphere of production is the result of a discursive policy that cheapens the value placed on labor, accompanied by a patriarchal discourse in which women do not view their wages as their primary source of income. Sexuality and gender in the workplace are integral elements of labor control and play a significant role in securing consent to the conditions of exploitation within the workshop. While "moderate sexuality" is glorified on a discursive level, the production process is structured in such a way that women can gain prestige only through their patriarchal sexual identifications within the workshop. The existence of women in

the workforce as sexualized bodies, rather than as part of an organized working class, is a product of the process of submission.

Gender distinctions are influential in production politics, and gender is one of the key elements of labor markets. In addition to the domestic roles attributed to women within the social structure, and the characteristics that extend from these roles (such as loyalty and discipline), women are also seen as responsible for managing male sexuality. Therefore, women are subject to patriarchal forms of bargaining that are based on gaining status through their sexuality, thereby creating distinctions between themselves and other women. While women play the roles and assume the statuses assigned to them in both social life and the workplace, they are also agents in the social structure, reproducing the norms and values that are imposed upon them. The important point here is that women not only have the potential to reproduce the patriarchal structure but also have the capacity to oppose the artificial distinctions between themselves and exploitative working condition

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All researchers contributed equally to the study. / alıřmaya tm arařtırmacılar eřit oranda katkı saėlamıřtır.

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Appendix-1

EK 2. ETİK KURUL KARARI



MERSİN ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL VE BEŞERİ BİLİMLER ETİK KURULU
ONAY BELGESİ

Mersin Üniversitesi, Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi, Sosyoloji Bölümü doktora öğrencilerinden Sibel ERDOĞAN'ın başvuru yaptığı "Esnek Üretim Sistemi ve Emegin Feminizasyonu: Mersin Konfeksiyon İşçileri Örneği" adlı çalışma kurumunuz tarafından incelenmiş ve,

Etik yönden uygun bulunmuştur.

Etik yönden geliştirilmesi gerekmektedir.

Etik yönden uygun bulunmamıştır.



Mersin Üniversitesi Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler Etik Kurulu Kararı	
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