

From formal employment to street vending

Women's room to maneuver and labor market decisions under
conditions of export-orientation
- the case Penang, Malaysia

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To my Mother and Father

ABSTRACT

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This study is a compilation thesis consisting of an introduction and four separate papers. It is an inquiry into women's working lives in Penang, Malaysia.

The export-oriented development model adopted in Malaysia stimulated women's large-scale entry to the formal labor force. However, export-orientation has not been able to sustain women's long terms participation in the formal labor market and female labor force participation rates in Malaysia have never exceeded 50 percent. This means that despite the expansion of the Malaysian economy, declining fertility rates and increased female educational attainment, over half of working aged women in Malaysia remain 'outside the labor force'.

This thesis aims to investigate women's room to maneuver in the labor market by scrutinizing women's move from the formal to the informal economy over the life course. It also aims to contribute further knowledge relating to women's work in the informal economy – in particular its spatial aspects.

The empirical study is based on field work conducted in Penang between 2009 and 2011. The 80 women interviewed in Penang share the common feature that they make their living in the informal economy – mostly as street vendors (hawkers). The majority used to work in the formal economy as machine operators or assembly workers in factories or in low-skilled jobs the tourism industry.

An important reason for the low female labor force participation rates in Malaysia is that women's engagement in the formal labor market has a strong one-peaked pattern with many permanently leaving the labor force at a relatively young age. However, although women who leave the formal labor market tend to go missing statistically – they continue to work in the informal economy. This study suggests that while women's formal labor force participation has one peak, their full work participation over the life course can be more accurately described as *two-peaked*. This study has found that women's decisions to leave formal employment were often made under the simultaneous influence of marriage, child-birth and unsustainable labor conditions. In a similar fashion their decisions to not (re)engage in formal employment but rather to opt for informal work were influenced by the lack of institutional support for working mothers, norms around gender, work and place and an unwillingness to (re)engage in exploitative work in the formal economy. Issues of *distance* (to formal employment opportunities) and *proximity* (to informal work) were key features in their room to maneuver and labor market decisions.

Keywords: gender and trade, feminization of labor, female labor force participation, women's work, gender at work, informal economy, hawking, street vending, Penang, Malaysia

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முதற்கண் ஆர்வத்துடன் தங்களின் கதைகளை என்னுடன் பகிர்ந்து கொண்ட பிணாங்கு வாழ் அன்பர்கள் அனைவருக்கும் என்னுடைய நன்றியறிதலைச் சமர்ப்பித்துக் கொள்கிறேன். மேலும், அகமகிழ்வுடன் என்னைத் தங்களின் வீட்டிலும் பணியிடத்தும் பொறுமையுடன் வரவேற்று என்னுடைய பல கேள்விகளுக்கும் பதிலளித்து ஒத்துழைப்பு நல்கிய தாங்களனைவரும் என்றென்றும் என் நினைவில் இருப்பீர்கள். இறுதியாக, தங்களின் அறிமுகம் எனக்கு மகிழ்வையும் பெருமையும் அளித்தது, மிக்க நன்றி.

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1. INTRODUCTION

You know, women in Malaysia are not lazy! You see it everywhere. Women are working! Selling things or this or that ... I don't think I have any title ... We work and we make money... I think I'll call myself casual worker. Casual worker. It's a nice word!

Female hawkler, Tanjung Bungah, Penang 2009

1.1 Creating a 'research mystery'¹

Since gaining its independence from the United Kingdom in 1957, Malaysia has undergone rapid economic development. For Malaysian women this development has also signified their large-scale entry to the formal labor force. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s women in Malaysia entered waged employment, particularly within the manufacturing sector, in unprecedented numbers (Lim, 1993) and during these decades female labor force participation rates increased dramatically (Malaysia, 2003; Noor, 1999). However, despite the expansion of the economy, declining fertility rates (Razak, 2011) and increased educational attainment of women (UN and Malaysia, 2011) – female labor force participation rates in Malaysia have never reached above 50 percent (Fernandez, 2011). In fact, International Labour Organization (ILO) data (2008) suggest that Malaysian women have amongst the lowest participation rates in the entire Southeast Asian region. In the creation of this research project, it was precisely this that spurred my interest: In the face of Malaysia's development - how come these rates remained so extraordinarily low?

A closer examination of Malaysian labor force data reveals a strong 'one peaked pattern' (Horton, 1996) of female labor force participation. In other words, while women are active in the formal labor market when they are younger, around the average age of marriage and child-birth their participation rates decline quite rapidly. What is significant about this is not that women leave the labor market during this period in their lives – it is the fact that they tend to *permanently* leave (Ahmad, 1998). In the state of Penang, which has the highest female labor force participation rate in the

¹ I borrow the terminology of 'research mystery' from Alvesson and Kärreman (2007: 1265) who argue that a research methodology is developed around the two elements of active discovery and/or creation of mysteries, and around the succeeding solving of these mysteries.

entire country, this pattern is particularly striking (Malaysia, 2009:208). The question this provokes is: Why?

One feasible explanation is that the increased labor force participation rates recorded in the past were closely associated with the promotion of Malaysia as a center for labor-intensive export-manufacturing (Kaur, 2000). Export-oriented manufacturers located in Malaysia have had a well-documented history of hiring young and unmarried women (Ng, Mohamad and beng hui, 2006) particularly of Malay ethnic origin (Kaur, 2000). While there has been some decline in women's share of manufacturing labor – manufacturing remains, by far, the largest industry of employment for women in Malaysia. In Penang, manufacturing accounts for 40 percent of women's total employment (Malaysia, 2009:262). Additionally, low-skilled work in other export industries, such as the tourism industry – which characteristically display a similar demand for young and temporary female labor (ILO, 2001) – is increasing in importance. It thus seems that interest in women's labor – from some of the major employers – is closely associated with their age. However, this alone cannot explain women's transitory participation pattern. There are a number of additional context-bound factors that can tell us something about why and how women choose to enter waged work (Pearson, 1992 cited in Kabeer, 2000:8). In the Penang case, apart from labor market opportunities, these include the ethnic composition of the labor force,² gendered place-based social relations, welfare systems as well as available alternative means of income earning.

The Labor Force Survey Report states that over half of the women of working age in Malaysia (4.7 out of 8.6 million women) are found in the category 'outside the labor force' – with over three million stating 'housework' as their reasons to not enter waged work (Malaysia, 2009: 200). It must, however, be regarded as highly unlikely that such a large share of women in Malaysia would be 'housewives' – with no other income earning activities. Particularly when considering the fact that women, and especially in developing and newly industrialized countries, are rarely – if ever –

² The ethnic composition of the Penang population differs to the rest of the country in that the Malay and Chinese populations are almost equal in size – accounting for around 40 percent each. The high labor force participation rates for younger women in Penang can therefore likely also be explained by the high share of Chinese women in the labor force – who display higher participation rates (in the younger age groups) relative to the Malay and Indian.

unemployed but rather continuously engaged in various forms of paid activities even if they are not recognized as ‘working’ (Ghosh, 2002). This was further supported by my personal observations in Malaysia (and Penang) where you could walk down any street or neighborhood and see women performing all sorts of work, in all sorts of locations. This provoked more questions: How do the millions of women ‘outside the labor force’ in Malaysia make their living?

Loh-Ludher (2007; n.d) suggests that the low participation rates of Malaysian women in the labor force do not represent their lack of engagement in remunerative activities – but rather a lack of recognition for their work in the informal economy. However, there is no official data on the informal economy in Malaysia (Kamaruddin and Ali, 2006) and knowledge around women’s informal work remains scarce (Xavier, 2008). The Ninth Malaysia Plan (Malaysia, 2006:290), nonetheless, suggests that women are increasingly working informally:

As household and caring work remains predominantly with women, many of whom subordinate formal employment to family responsibilities, an increasing number of women are involved in the informal sector with flexible working arrangements.

So: if women are in fact working – why is their labor not recorded in the labor force data?

Data on women’s informal work is notoriously inaccurate (Ghosh, 1999), but the labor force survey data can, nonetheless, provide some insight into the informal work that has been reported in the survey – most notably through the status of employment categories own account and unpaid family work.³ In Malaysia this data shows that, while women in the younger age groups to a large degree work as employees, own account work increases its importance with their age.

In light of the above, I made the decision to develop a research and empirical focus which could contribute knowledge around the factors that influence women’s labor market decisions in moving from the formal to the informal economy. By studying this *continuum of formal and informal work* (see

³ Employed persons are in the Labor Force Survey (Malaysia, 2009:47-48) differentiated into four different categories according to their status of employment. Status of employment refers to their position or status within the establishment or organization for which she/he works. These four categories are: employer, employee, own account and unpaid family workers.

Chen, 2007, below) we can, I argue, gain important insight into the conditions under which women are able to access and sustain work in the formal economy (in this case under conditions of export-orientation) *and* the way that women make a living in the informal economy. Also, by focusing upon the factors that influence their labor market decisions we can learn about how they experience their actual *room to maneuver* in the local labor market.

1.2 Introduction to main research problem

1.2.1 Situating women's working lives

Empirically this study mainly builds upon interviews conducted with a group of 80 women in the state of Penang on the northwestern coast of Peninsular Malaysia. These women are a heterogeneous group. They are mothers, grandmothers, daughters, wives, single, divorced and widows. Many are Malay but some are also Chinese, Indian or migrant. But they generally share some common features: today all of them make their living in the informal economy but a majority used to work as machine operators in factories or in low-skill jobs in the tourism industry. Their room to maneuver in the labor market is situated at the intersection of the global and the local – between the interests and practices of employers, the presence of a large local informal economy and the gendered power relations of their society. The research problem at hand is, therefore, in turn situated within and between two main fields of inquiry: First, the way that women have been integrated into low-skill export-oriented employment in the Global South⁴ (feminization of export-labor) and second, women's work in the informal economy.

1.2.2 Feminization of labor in export-industries

In economic geography scholarship much attention has been devoted towards 'economic globalization' and, in particular, towards how increasing international trade and investments have reshaped the geographical patterns of global production (see Wood and Roberts, 2011) and the way in which

⁴ Throughout this thesis I use the term '*Global South*' with reference to countries often referred to as 'developing'/'poor' or 'Southern'. 'Global South' captures the way that "this is not a strict geographical categorization of the world but one based on economic inequalities which happens to have some cartographic continuity" and that "both North and South are, together, drawn into global processes" (Rigg, 2007:3f).

Transnational Corporations (TNCs), and their many affiliates, have become, what Dicken (2011) calls, the ‘primary movers and shapers’ of the global economy. During the 1960s and 1970s TNCs increasingly outsourced labor-intensive production to low wage locations in the Global South (Caraway, 2007). In the Asian region, countries like South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, followed by Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia, became preferential destinations (Saptari, 2000:148). The export-oriented development model pursued in many of these countries rested, particularly during primary stages, upon the access to ‘cheap’ labor – and notably upon the access to ‘cheap’ *female* labor (Caraway, 2007; Lim, 1993; Pearson, 1998; Saptari, 2000).⁵ To recall Joekes (1987:81) much cited line: “...industrialization in the post-war period has been as much female led as export led.”

While mainstream geography has largely ignored the gendered aspects,⁶ there is growing recognition within both academic scholarship (Barrientos, 2007; Benería 2003; 2007; Cagatay, 2001; Cagatay and Ozler 1995; Joekes 1995; Pearson, 2007b; van Staveren et al, 2007) and policy making (Korinek, 2005; Oxfam, 2004; UNCTAD, 2004) that the outcome of ‘globalization’ is not gender neutral. Instead, women and men are unevenly affected because of the way that prevailing gender inequalities determine access to and power over productive resources, work and income as well as physical and social infrastructure (UNCTAD, 2004). While *women* in the Global South have sometimes been named the ‘job winners’ in the face of export-orientation (Bussmann, 2009), the jobs created by export-industries have not been made available to all segments of the female labor force (Chattopadhyay, 1998). Instead, these industries have been selectively interested in hiring certain groups of women workers (Caraway, 2007) – with the majority of female jobs created in low-wage and low-skill industries (Basvalent and Onaran 2004; Bussmann, 2009) typically associated with temporary,

⁵ During the 1970s female shares of manufacturing employment in East and Southeast Asia were amongst the highest in the world (Lim, 1993), as millions of young women entered work in labor-intensive export-production both within and beyond the growing number of Export-Processing Zones (EPZs) as well as through outsourced piece-work in smaller production units and in households (Sen, G, 1999). And, in the decade which followed, employment creation within the manufacturing sector in countries like Malaysia and Singapore consisted almost exclusively of employment opportunities for women (Lim, 1993:189).

⁶ Although for notable contributions on gender and the globalized economy within (Western) geography see: Domosh and Seager, 2001; Gibson-Graham, 2000; 2006a; 2006b; Lie and Lund, 1994; 1999; 2005; McDowell, 1999; 2000; Oberhauser, 2000).

insecure and casual types of employment relationships (Standing 1989; 1999).

Whether women's access to such employment has been beneficial for women's agency, bargaining power and for gender equality struggles is much debated. And, while some studies have pointed to the positive aspects of gaining access to such work (Kabeer, 2000; Lim, 1990), others have remained skeptical (Benería, 2003; Dominguez et al, 2010), or found the impacts contradictory (Ong, 2010;⁷ Wolf, 1992). Pearson (2007a), however, argues that few studies have empirically tested assumptions around the outcome of such work for women's bargaining power and status within households and communities (for a notable exception see Ong, 2010; Wolf, 1992).

This study attempts at filling part of that research gap through a focus upon a) the factors that make women leave formal employment and b) how previous engagement in low-skill export-industry employment influences women's ability to bargain for a re-entry to work outside the household at a later stage in life. With regard to bargaining power the thesis thus focuses exclusively upon *the ability to engage in the labor market*. It does not, in other words, engage in analysis of the extent to which women's employment in export-industries affects their general well-being or ability to make decisions in other domains. The focus adopted here does, however, provide the opportunity to approach a central aspect of debates around the relationship between waged work and 'empowerment' – namely women's ability to access and sustain jobs *over the life course*. Also, whereas focus here is largely placed upon women *who have left formal work* and opted for informal work⁸ (and thus a selected segment of the female labor force), approaching *the* factors that make women leave the formal labor market also offers the possibility to bring new knowledge around how this group of women (who lack higher education and have held the main share of female jobs in export-oriented industries) experience their room to maneuver in the labor market and how they strategize (overtly and covertly (Agarwal, 1997)) to secure access to income earning (activities and workplaces) during different periods in their lives.

⁷ The original version of Ong's much cited book '*Spirits of resistance*' was first published in 1987.

⁸ A limited number of respondents are, however, still engaged also in formal employment.

1.2.3 The informal economy

Contrary to early accounts of the informal economy, in which it was expected to diminish and be formalized in the phase of modernization and development (Benería and Floro, 2005), informal work remains a permanent and growing feature of the global economy (Chen, 2007; ILO, 2002a). Although statistical accounts from different parts of the world vary, it remains more or less indisputable that, especially in developing and emerging economies, the informal economy plays a key role in employment creation, production and income generation (Asian Development Bank [ADB]/ILO, 2011; ILO, 2002b; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2002).⁹ In fact, it is argued that a majority of the world's workers are found in various forms of informal employment relationships (Chant and Pedwell, 2008; Chen, 2001; Carr and Chen, 2004; Kaufmann, 2007; Lloyd-Evans, 2008). And, in the Southeast Asian region, the ILO (2007) estimates that own account and unpaid family work alone accounts for over 60 percent of total employment in the region.

Informal workers are engaged in a wide range of occupations, in both informal *and* formal enterprises within and outside the agricultural sector (Chen, 2007). They can be casual and temporary workers, employees, own account, unpaid family and home-based workers. But, despite the diversity of activities, what informal workers generally have in common is that the work they perform *lacks legal recognition, regulation and protection* (Lloyd-Evans, 2008:1885).

Recent scholarship has exhibited a renewed interest in studying the informal economy (Benería and Floro, 2005; Carr and Chen, 2004; Chant and Pedwell, 2008; Chen, 2001; 2007). This scholarship has suggested the inadequacy of approaching the formal and informal economy as dichotomous or as two separate spheres (Barrientos, 2007; Benería and Floro, 2005; Chen, Jhabvala and Lund, 2002; Kaufmann, 2007). One reason for this is that unregulated or semi-regulated labor plays an important role in the *formal* economy (Pearson, 2007a) – as casual, temporary, contractual and insecure forms of employment are increasing (Kaufmann, 2007; Pearson, 2007a; 2007b; Standing, 1989; 1999). Also, many workers move between the formal and informal economy – during the same period in time or during different periods in their lives. Chen (2007) therefore proposes

⁹ For attempts to measure the informal economy contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in different countries see the efforts of 'the Delhi Group on Informal Sector Statistics'.

that we approach the relationship between the two as *a continuum of economic relations*. Unfortunately, as Lloyd-Evans (2008:1886) points out, engagement in these debates from geography scholars remains limited. A feminist geographical perspective, however, provides a strong foundation for pursuing inquiry into the formal and informal continuum, particularly considering its recurrent application of multiple scales of analysis (see Lie and Lund, 1994; 1999) and potential to reveal how overlapping spheres (of production and reproduction, formal and informal, and household and workplace) relate to contemporary international economic processes (Oberhauser, 2000:69, see also Domosh and Seager, 2001; Gibson-Graham, 2006a;; McDowell, 1999).

The work undertaken in this thesis, therefore, wishes to contribute to geographical knowledge building around informal work through its focus upon a) the factors that make women opt for informal types of work and entrepreneurship and b) how their decisions to do so influence the spatial boundaries women face in the work sphere. The majority of the women who feature in this study are hawkers and street vendors.¹⁰ This means that they represent a specific segment of the informal economy. However, given the importance of hawking to the informal economy in Malaysia (Hassan, 2003) – and the limited knowledge around women’s work in the informal economy (Loh-Ludher, 2007) it also provides the opportunity to learn about a group of workers who are often marginalized and/or ‘victimized’ in debates around the economy, labor market and informality.¹¹ Approaching these women as ‘active agents of change’ this thesis also hopes to contribute to a less homogenous view of women’s informal work as merely a product of exclusion and as something only entered into out of poverty or as a last resort (Williams and Gurtoo, 2011).

1.3 Aim and research questions

In light of the above, the aim of this thesis is twofold. First, it aims to investigate women’s room to maneuver in the labor market through scrutinizing the continuum of women’s formal and informal work. Second, it aims to contribute to knowledge building around women’s informal work in general and its spatial aspects in particular.

¹⁰ Hawking is sometimes also referred to as street vending/trading or peddling.

¹¹ See Papers 2 and 3.

In order to fulfill these aims the thesis employs four specific (although interrelated) research questions:

1a) Which are the key factors that make women leave formal employment?

b) How does previous engagement in export-industry employment influence women's ability to bargain for a re-entry to work outside the home?

2a) Which factors influence women's decisions to opt for informal work?

b) How does the entry to and construction of informal work influence women's ability to (re)negotiate gendered spatial boundaries and access to public places of work?

1.4 Delimitations

The women who were interviewed for this study all share the common characteristic that they *have engaged in informal work*. It excludes women who do not work for profit or monetary income. In terms of analyzing the underreporting of women's informal work in labor force data – and the overstatement of the number of women who are actually 'outside' the labor force – the results are, thus, by nature biased as they do not include women who lack remunerative activities. However, on the basis of previous scholarship within this field (see above and Chapter 2) it is safe to assume that the number of women in Malaysia, amongst those who lack higher education and belong to the lower income groups, who are not engaged in *any* form of remunerative activities is likely to be limited. For the most part the women who feature in this study lack higher education. They work in and around morning markets. However, although found in these sites, they represent various groups of informal workers in terms of their status of employment (employers, employees, own account and contributing family workers). Another important delimitation with regards to the empirical focus is the emphasis upon women's experiences and choices *in the labor market*. As such, focus is only placed on selected aspects of these women's lives and experiences. The empirical section is exclusively based upon qualitative research interviews conducted in Penang (mostly Penang Island) between 2009 and 2011.

1.5 Outline of the thesis

This is a compilation thesis which contains a general introduction (kappa) of five chapters (plus a summary of the papers) and four separate papers followed by my main conclusions. In the first of the introductory chapters (Chapter 2: **Gender, feminisms and women's work**) I explain my understanding of some of the key concepts and approaches used throughout this thesis. This includes examination of concepts such as gender, feminisms, feminist geographies and how these, in turn, inform my understanding of 'work' and 'labor markets'. In Chapter 3 (**Gender at work in the (global) labor market**) I present the research approach and examines previous literature around 'feminization of labor' and 'the informal economy'. Chapter 4 (**Malaysia and Penang**) contains a brief introduction to the Penang and Malaysian context. In Chapter 5 (**Methodology**) issues relating to method and methodology and my own situatedness and positionality within this research project and during field work will be raised. Chapter 6 provides a brief **summary** of the four individual papers that constitute the empirical sections of this thesis and in Chapter 7 I present my main **conclusions**. The four individual papers are:

Paper 1: 'Women's waged work and bargaining power under conditions of export-orientation. The case of Penang, Malaysia' (for submission to: *Gender, Place and Culture*).

Paper 2: "I am too old! Who is going to give me a job?" Women Hawkers in 'Teluk Bahang, Penang, Malaysia' (Published in: *Journal of Workplace Rights* (2011) Vol. 15, No. 1: 111-132).

Paper 3: 'Factors motivating women's informal micro-entrepreneurship: Experiences from Penang, Malaysia' (To be published in: the *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship* (2012) Vol. 4, No. 1).

Paper 4: 'Missing women? The underrecording and underreporting of women's work in Malaysia' (co-authored with Jerry Olsson, submitted to: *International Labour Review*).¹²

¹² I have been the main author of this paper. It is based on the field work I have conducted in Penang. Olsson's main contribution was through writing the summary of the reviewed literature and through helping me structure and analyze the data collected.

2. GENDER, FEMINISMS and WOMEN'S WORK

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter the key concepts and approaches that have informed this research will be discussed. The purpose is to make visible the contributions of previous scholarship and to present my understanding of fundamental concepts such as gender, work and place.

2.2 Gender as discursive and spatial practices

2.2.1 Approaching gender relations

Gender relations are part of our everyday lives and the 'arrangement' of gender is so common that we often perceive it as 'natural' or 'given'. However, as suggested by Connell (2002:4): "Being a man or a woman ... is not a fixed state. It is a becoming, a condition actively under construction." This line of thinking is influenced by one of Western feminism's most prominent figures, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), and her, by now, classic notion that we are not born as women; we *become* women (de Beauvoir, 2006:325). In our lives we thus *acquire* femininity and masculinity, through a process in which both social norms and authority play a significant role. But as people we also construct ourselves through claiming or responding to the place we have been given in the gendered order (Connell, 2002:4).

'Gender relations' is in this thesis used to describe an active social process, through which power relations are established, maintained and negotiated in particular places (Bosseldal, 1998; Connell, 2002; Little, 2002). They embody both the *material* and the *ideological* and are, as such, revealed through divisions of labor and resources, and through the representations and ideas of what is male or female (Agarwal, 1997). Gender relations also intersect with other structures of social hierarchy such as class, ethnicity, age, locality, nation etcetera. Thus, 'acting like a woman' or 'acting like a man' will have a variety of meanings to different groups of women and men in different places, and it will mean a different thing to the same group at a different point in time (Peterson and Runyan, 1993). Gender is, therefore, neither timeless nor possible to separate from its particular context (McDowell, 1999). Instead, it can be approached as: "the different ways in which women and men, and the accepted attributes of femininity and

masculinity, are defined across space and time” (Morre, 1988 in McDowell, 1999:7).¹³

2.2.2 Gender as spatial practices

The notion that the characteristics associated with femininity and masculinity vary between places and cultures should not solely be regarded as an empirical observation (Massey, 1994:178). Instead, it is my understanding that place is constitutive to identity and not incidental to it (Valentine, 2007:19).

Place is not understood here as a set of coordinates on a map, but rather as: “made through power relations which construct the rules which define boundaries” (McDowell, 1999:4). While different societies produce different conceptions of space, we are all expected to conform to a spatial order. As proposed by Harvey (1990:419), the assignment of place within a socio-spatial structure indicates:

... distinctive roles, capacities for action, and access to power within the social order. The when and where of different kinds of social activity and of different manners of relating convey clear social messages ... We all know, furthermore, what it means to be ‘put in one’s place’ and that to challenge what that place might be, physically as well as socially, is to challenge something fundamental in the social order.

Gendered spatial boundaries (between for example public and private or inside and outside), therefore, tell us who belongs in a certain place and who should be excluded. The idea that women and men occupy particular places is central to the social organization of homes, workplaces, labor markets and political institutions (McDowell, 1999:12).

Within feminist geographical inquiry¹⁴ an important objective is to investigate, make visible and challenge the relationship between gendered

¹³ Devasahayam (2005) proposes that we make use of the term ‘gendered’ rather than ‘gender’ identities because this term better captures the “plurality and difference without abandoning the notion that gender does play a part in constituting the subject” (Marshall, 1994 cited in Devasahayam, 2005:2).

¹⁴ A study of gender, in any socio-spatial environment, does not necessarily require a feminist perspective (Little, 2002). This research, however, aims to situate itself within feminist geographical scholarship. The most basic reason for doing so is, perhaps, that I am a feminist. As such, I subscribe to the idea that gender, at the intersection of class, ethnicity, age, ability, locality, nation etcetera, is a key organizer of social life. And, I view the call for progressive social change as a key commitment in my work (Sprague, 2005: 3).

and spatial divisions in order to “uncover their mutual constitution and problematize their apparent naturalness” (McDowell, 1999:12). Through this we are able to understand the way that women and men experience spaces and places differently and how such differences are part of gendered as well as spatial constructions (ibid). While there are a multitude of feminist positions (Sprague, 2005), the assumption that gender is a historical and social product – rather than as something natural given and/or ‘universal’ “constitutes a necessary condition for occupying the feminist philosophical position” (Gunnarsson, 2011:29). Throughout this thesis gendered (spatial) constructions are approached as historical and social products, and as such, as enactments of *power* (Gibson-Graham, 2000; Sharp, 2008). Places and spaces are thus not only gendered but also *awarded different meaning according to prevailing power relations* and the awarded meaning of these places fulfill an important role in upholding gendered power relations.

2.2.3 Approaching the categories ‘woman’ and ‘women’

Western-based feminist scholarship has been much preoccupied by power relations in the construction of knowledge, but it should be noted that such scholarship has, in itself, received a great deal of criticism for its ‘ethnocentric universalism’ in knowledge creation (Mohanty, 2006:19). Whereas Western feminists have engaged in questions regarding ‘how knowledge is created’ and ‘who holds the power to create such knowledge’ (Coleman, 2002:19), for example, postcolonial scholarship has added to these debates by asking: “for whom knowledge is created and from where” (Sharp, 2008:60). Critics have, in brief, argued that Western-based feminisms have used the experiences and positions of white middle-class Western women as a norm applicable to *all* women – including black and ethnic minority women living in Western societies (see for example Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and women in the ‘Third World’ (see Mohanty, 2006).¹⁵ An important contribution of such critical scholarship has been to make visible the importance of power relations *amongst women* - raising questions around the relationship between the categories ‘woman’ and ‘women’. Mohanty (2006:21) suggests that assumptions around *women* as an already constituted and coherent group that can be expected to share common interests and desires (regardless of

¹⁵ For an overview of these debates in the move from ‘feminized’ to ‘gendered’ development see: McIlwaine and Datta (2003).

class, ethnicity, locality etcetera) rests upon “a notion of gender or sexual differences or even patriarchy that can be applied universally or cross-culturally.” But, as argued above, gendered identities and relations (including those in the labor market and family) are context-bound and must therefore be approached with “specification in local cultural and historical contexts” (ibid:34f). The failure to do so, Mohanty proposes, has resulted in homogenous notions of ‘Third world women’ (as victimized, poor and uneducated) as well as that of the oppression they may face (ibid).¹⁶ As Butler (1999:6) suggests, this failure to distinguish between different contexts has also resulted in the colonization and appropriation of non-Western cultures to support Western notions of oppression. Apart from this being problematic in itself, it has also worked to promote the idea that women in the Global South need to be spoken *for* (Kabeer, 2004:10) – feeding into the perception that: “white men and women are needed to save brown women from brown men” (Sharp, 2009:116).¹⁷

Intersectionality

A growing number of feminist scholars have responded to the above criticism by trying to embrace the idea of *intersectionality* (McCall, 2005). This approach can be described as a move from the traditional approach of identities as structured along the axis of gender/race/class, towards an understanding of identities as ‘a doing’, where: “positions, identities and difference are made and unmade, claimed and rejected” (Valentine, 2007:14). Mulinari and de los Reyes (2005) argue that it is not enough to acknowledge different identities – we must also be able to explain why these different identities exist and how they are interconnected. The intersectional perspective which they propose is therefore not a way to describe how two *separate* and *autonomous* power structures, such as gender and race/ethnicity, mutually enforce each other. Rather, it is a theoretical perspective which makes visible how different historic and situation specific power relations are created *through and in the simultaneous effect* of gender, class and race/ethnicity (ibid:24).

¹⁶ While recognizing the importance also of other structures of social hierarchy, Gunnarsson (2011) nonetheless withholds that the category ‘women’ is indispensable to the feminist project and that a focus upon women does not necessarily imply essentialism or homogenization.

¹⁷ ‘Victimization’ and homogenous notions of oppression and have been much debated in relation to the conditions of women factory workers in the Global South (see for example: Elson and Pearson, 1981; Kabeer, 2004; Lim, 1990; Lim and Miller, 2003; Pearson, 1998).

Theorizing identities as complex, diverse and “as historically variable and spatially contingent” appeals to geographers (McDowell, 2008:491), however, Valentine (2007) argues that geographical studies have rarely included the full implications of intersectionality. Instead, geographical research has had a tendency to limit its intersectional analysis to the relationship between certain types of identities – such as the relationship between gender and class. Such analysis misses the full implications of intersectional theorization, which recognizes the fluid and unstable nature of intersections of multiple-identity categories. Valentine suggests that the narrowing of empirical work along more traditional lines occurs both for the sake of comprehension, as well as because of limitations in time and resources. The complexities of the intersectional perspective make it difficult to capture its full implications in a single article. This has led many studies to collapse “back to a focus on the experiences of nonprivileged groups rather than on how privileged or powerful identities are ‘done’ and ‘undone’” (ibid:14).

This thesis is, unfortunately perhaps, no exception to such a ‘collapse’. For just like McDowell (2008), I need to admit that as much as I am attracted by the anti-categorical approach of intersectionality (McCall, 2005:1777),¹⁸ and its critique of ‘master categories’ – I find it too complex to operationalize when approaching labor market inequalities. Also, as suggested by Valentine (2007), even though the intersectional perspective offers important insight through the focus on fluid and complex identities there is also a risk of: “losing sight of the fact that in particular spaces there are dominant spatial orderings that produce moments of exclusion for particular social groups”(ibid:19).

If we overlook the importance of space, in the rush to theorize intersectionality within social sciences, we risk overlooking the continuously

¹⁸ McCall (2005) describes three main methodological approaches towards intersectionality. First, ‘anticategorical complexity’, in which categories, such as gender, race or class, are deconstructed, because social life is seen as too complex and fluid to be captured by fixed categories. In this approach “deconstruction of master categories is understood as part and parcel of the deconstruction of inequality itself” (p.1777). Second, the ‘intracategorical complexity’, in which scholars focus upon one particular (previously neglected) group and work to “reveal the complexity of lived experience within such groups” (p.1774). The third approach, and least known, is ‘intercategorical complexity’. This approach uses the pre-existing categories, gender, race, class etc, although recognizing their complexity, and uses them provisionally and strategically. Emphasis is then placed upon the “nature of the relationships among social groups, rather than with the definition or representation of such groups, *per se*” (p.1785).

important issues of power and social exclusion (ibid). I will therefore limit myself to concluding that I am inspired by intersectional and postcolonial feminist scholars “who insist upon analyzing how gender intersects with other systems of power to produce multi-faceted, complex, and potentially contradictory identities” (Sundberg, 2004:46). I, therefore, acknowledge that my focus will not consider all elements of identity formation; rather I have chosen to focus upon “the categories that are either consciously expressed or strategically mobilized in the encounters analyzed” (ibid). In my case, this involves approaching gender at the intersection of class, ethnicity, age, marital status, locality and nation. I do, however, recognize the importance of approaching these intersections as fluid, unstable and changeable over time.

2.3 Gendered work and labor markets

2.3.1 Approaching ‘work’

The importance of studying gender in the world of work can largely be motivated by the notion that the way we think about who people are is often “inextricable from what we expect them to do” (Peterson and Runyan, 1993:18). While it is commonly understood that men do, need to, should and always have ‘worked’, the relationship between women and work is considerably more complex (Domosh and Seager, 2001). Women’s work is, for example, often depicted and described in terms of ‘love’ or ‘caring’ rather than ‘work’ (Forsberg, 2003; McDowell, 2000). It is therefore appropriate to start this section with a reminder that while women’s work is surrounded by a number of normative and ideological constructs that ‘minimize’ or ‘domesticate’ their labor, most women (like most men) work most of the time (Domosh and Seager, 2001:40f).

‘Work’ is largely perceived and depicted as gendered – i.e. as ‘men’s work’ or ‘women’s work’, and assumptions about the ‘natural’ affinities of men and women shape these definitions (ibid). A notable example of this is the association of women with various forms of care work. However, gendered constructions of work also intersect with other social hierarchies such as class, age, marital status and ethnicity. Work may, as such, also be constructed as particularly suitable for *certain groups of women* – contemplate, for example, the view of young and unmarried Asian/Central American/migrant women for assembly type work in factories, migrant women for domestic work, etcetera. Importantly, as McDowell (1999:134)

has suggested, women and men do not enter work: “with their unchanging gender identity fixed firmly in place.” Instead, gendered identities are *created* and *recreated* at work. This is important as it indicates that we should understand women’s work as not only reflecting gendered identities but also as constitutive of them. In a similar fashion, women’s labor market decisions are not approached here as mere reflections of gendered (spatial) boundaries but rather as having the potential to (re)negotiate these boundaries.¹⁹

In approaching women’s work there are both methodological and theoretical challenges. These challenges are partially due to the way that ‘work’ is defined, conceptualized and operationalized for data collection (Benería, 1999; Ghosh, 1999; McDowell, 1999). In the mainstream definitions, ‘work’ is commonly defined and conceptualized along the lines of: “waged labour in a formally structured employment relationship” (McDowell, 1999:125). However, such a narrow definition fails to capture the broad number of activities women perform on a daily basis for various forms of compensation (Gibson-Graham, 2006a:63f). It also has a wide range of implications for the way that women’s work is actually reported and recorded in labor force data (see for example: Bardasi et al, 2010; Langsten and Salen, 2008).²⁰ Throughout this thesis I have, therefore, approached ‘work’ as the various forms of activities that women are engaged in both within and beyond the household (registered and unregistered/formal and informal/regular and irregular) for different forms of compensation. This compensation can be in the form of monetary income (pay or profit) but it can also be in the form of ‘alternative pay’ (for example: unpaid work in a family business or different forms of in-kind payments) (Gibson-Graham, 2006a:63). The latter is important to include because non-monetary compensation also plays a significant role in the economy (*ibid*).

2.3.2 Gender, work and place

Gendered norms are closely related to the spatial organization of work in different places. *Workplaces* are, for example, often depicted as either suitable or unsuitable for certain groups of women (Domosh and Seager,

¹⁹ Momsen (2010:148f) for example illustrates how farm land located outside the vicinity of the home has been (re)defined as part of the private sphere and, as such, become an accessible workspace for women.

²⁰ For discussion around this, see Paper 4.

2001). Of particular importance to the invisibility of women's work, in data and as well as economic (geography) scholarship, is the spatial separation of work, expressed through the public/private, workplace/home dichotomies (Domosh and Seager, 2001; McDowell, 1999; Oberhauser, 2000).²¹ Where work occurs is, therefore, not only important to its gendering but also for its definition as 'work' or 'non-work' (compare for example cooking at home with cooking in public places). As the household/home/private realm has traditionally not been regarded as a site of production (or even as part of 'the economy') the economic contributions of women's work taking place here have become overlooked (Domosh and Seager, 2001; Elias, 2008).²²

A key element within feminist economic theorizing has been to link productive and reproductive economy. Instead of approaching the two as separate – or even dichotomous – we, therefore, need to approach them as *interrelated* and *interdependent* (Grown et al, 2000). The interdependency between production (the workplace) and reproduction (the home) (Hanson and Pratt, 1988) can be illustrated by the fact that women often “strategize in response to the time and space constraints by making their employment, child-care and housing decisions in a concert” (Gilbert, 1997:35). In a similar vein, Elson (1999:611f) suggests that we should approach *labor markets* as operating at the intersection of the productive and reproductive economies. Therefore, contrary to the belief that labor markets are neutral arenas where buyers and sellers of work interact – labor markets are inherently gendered institutions. They are, as Elson suggests, the “bearers of gender”.

Gendered spatial boundaries are important to the purpose of this thesis because of their influence on notions of mobility (Laws, 1997) – and, as such, women's ability to obtain and sustain work outside the vicinity of the home or to travel to work. When approaching geographical constraints to

²¹ This separation of public/private, workplace/home is a relatively new phenomena dating back to the emergence of the industrial revolution (McDowell, 1999) when: “the Industrial Revolution ... codified ‘work’ (and ‘nonwork’) in distinctive and enduring ways that were then replicated around the world with the spread of industrial capitalism” (Domosh and Seager, 2001:37).

²² Studies of home-based workers (see for example Carr et al, 2000) have, however, revealed the inadequacy of approaching the home and workplace as dichotomous. Home-based workers perform their work at home, but their goods (or services) are produced for the ‘market.’ In spite of this, home-based work is often overlooked in official data – partially because it is taking place in the private – and thus in the *perceived* ‘unproductive’ sphere, and because the boundaries between this work and reproductive (domestic) work can be difficult to trace (Benería, 1999:290; Loh-Ludher, 2007:3).

women's participation in the labor market we need to, yet again, note that women are not a homogenous group. Instead, as convincingly argued by Gilbert (1997:35), women's *survival strategies* and "the spatial boundedness of their everyday lives" are "mutually constituted". And, as pointed out by Laws (1997), these boundaries may change considerably over the life-course. For while unmarried women (of a certain ethnic origin) may be able to travel distances to work the same may not apply to married women – or vice versa. In other words, gendered spatial boundaries also intersect with social structures such as class, ethnicity, nation and religion.



3. GENDER AT WORK IN THE (GLOBAL) LABOR MARKET

No, it's hard! I don't want to work in a factory anymore. Plus I am over age – they won't take me anymore.

If you work in a factory you will spend less time with your children. When you are here [in the market] you have time with the children. If you are here you can come and you are close by.

Female hawkers, Teluk Bahang, 2009

3.1 Introduction

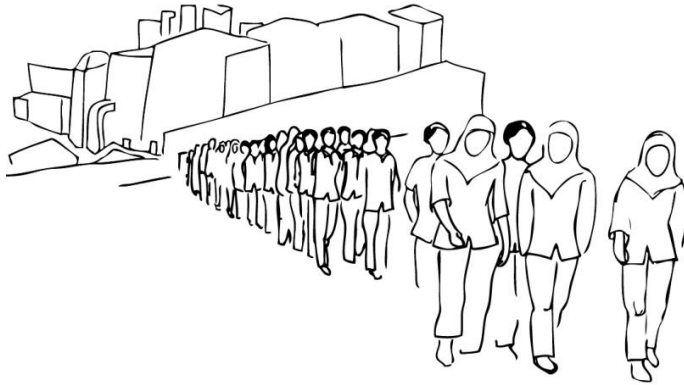
The research approach adopted in this thesis has been developed in conversation with two main bodies of work: scholarship around a) the feminization of labor-intensive export-industry employment and b) women's work in the informal economy. The main purpose of this chapter is to introduce previous findings within these two fields in order to make explicit its contribution to the research approach presented at the end of this chapter.

3.2 Feminization of labor-intensive export industries

3.2.1 The concept of 'feminization'

The link between outsourcing of production to low-wage countries and a 'feminization of the labor force' has been extensively studied within feminist scholarship (Caraway, 2007; Chant and McIlwaine, 1995; Elson and Pearson, 1981; Kabeer, 2000; Lim, 1990; Ong, 2010; Standing, 1989; 1999; Wolf, 1996; Wright, 2006). Such scholarship has drawn attention towards *why* and *how* women in different places have become incorporated into waged labor in export manufacturing. In feminization literature the concept 'feminization of labor' has typically been used to refer to three main events: first, an increase in women's participation in the labor-force; second, the relative decline in male employment and; third, deteriorating working-conditions in predominantly female jobs previously held by male workers (Benería, 2003:92). As such, it not only highlights the relative increase of female employment owing to shifts in the geographical patterns of

production, but also the fact that “women have replaced men under conditions of ‘flexible’ or deregulated employment” (Pearson, 1998:176). Whether this process signifies that women have actually replaced men or whether it reflects a decline in the number of jobs previously held by men is, however, debatable (Elson, 1996 in Pearson, 1998:181). It has, for example, been argued that the increased share of women in export-manufacturing rather represents a shift in export strategy towards labor-intensive industries (such as textiles, clothing, footwear and electronics) that typically employ a large share of women (Howes and Singh, 1995:1905). And, as indicated by several studies, when labor intensity decreases in favor of more capital intensive production and industries during secondary stages of export orientation, the share of women workers tends to decline (Caraway, 2007; Horton, 1999; Pearson, 1998).²³



3.2.2 Feminized labor recruitment

Importantly, processes of feminization within export industries have been highly selective and, for the most part (in Malaysia and elsewhere in much of Asia), have involved the inflow of young and unmarried women to low-skill and low-wage jobs in a selected number of labor-intensive industries (Bussmann, 2009; Caraway, 2007, Pearson, 1998).²⁴ Kabeer (2000:5)

²³ Malaysia proves no exception to this. Instead, women’s share of manufacturing labor increased the most dramatically during the early stages of export-orientation (Malaysia, 1990) with the highest shares of female workers recorded in labor-intensive industries such as electronics and textiles (Ahmad, 1998). During later stages of export-orientation women’s share of manufacturing employment has declined (Malaysia, 2001; 2011).

²⁴ It should, however, be noted that whereas young and unmarried women have been the preferred labor force in labor-intensive export-manufacturing in Asia – in other contexts

describes how young and unmarried women in Asia became the ideal labor force in labor-intensive export industries “on grounds which reflected an intersection of the ‘economics of demand’ and the ‘culture of supply’.” This is important as it indicates that we can understand women’s integration into these industries as reflecting a dialectic relationship between the interests and workings of capital and gender place-based power relations. As phrased by Domosh and Seager (2001:47f):

[I]ndustrial production brings toe to toe the competing demands of patriarchy (“Women ‘should’ stay at home to provide the support system for their working husbands”) and capitalism (“We need workers who can do tedious work without complaint and to whom we can pay the lowest wages”). These competing impulses are reconciled by defining some factory work as “naturally” feminized.

A whole array of studies have illustrated how the feminization of factory work has been facilitated by discourses around young (Asian/oriental/South) women as ‘particularly suitable’ for assembly type work because of their ‘nimble fingers’ (Elson and Pearson, 1981), docility, discipline, non-militancy and patience with monotonous work (Blomqvist, 2004; Chant and McIlwaine, 1995; Elson and Pearson, 1981; Ong, 2010; Safa, 1981; Standing, 1989). The poor labor conditions for women workers in global factories, where full-time and secure forms of employment have increasingly been replaced with insecure, casual and informal types of work (Standing, 1989; 1999), have been justified by ideas around women’s waged work as ‘secondary’ to their ‘main’ (read: reproductive) duties (Blomqvist, 2004). As such, women workers in export-industries have become constructed as a ‘disposable’ labor force (Wright, 2006).²⁵ A group of workers that can easily be dismissed because the jobs they acquire are not ‘supposed to’ last a lifetime (Domosh and Seager, 2001:50).

The finding that feminized labor recruitment to export industries has been closely related to the way both capital and gender operate in society is important to the purpose of this thesis. Most importantly, because of its link

feminized labor recruitment has targeted also older and married women (Pearson, 1998; Lim, 1990).

²⁵ Wright (2006) examines what she calls ‘the myth of the disposable third world woman.’ She argues that this myth proliferates both within and beyond the factory - its tale is told by factory managers, corporate executives and consumers who buy the products produced by these women and: “it is widely believed to be a factual account of a woman worker whose disposability is naturally and culturally scripted” (p. 1).

to the way that the demand for female labor tends to fluctuate and, more specifically, how different groups of women (i.e. educated, uneducated, married, unmarried, older, younger, of a certain ethnic origin, locality or nation etcetera) are encouraged or discouraged to engage in waged labor during different periods in time (Basvalent and Onaran 2004; Domosh and Seager 2001; Fernandez 2011).

3.2.3 Moving beyond the factory

The extensive focus in feminization studies upon women workers in export manufacturing has attracted a certain level of criticism. Lim (1990:101) for example argues that, relative to the number of women in the global labor force, the “handful of women” who work in export processing have received disproportionate attention. In the Malaysian context, however, the feminization of export manufacturing labor is not a peripheral development. Instead, it has played a central role in (particularly Malay) women’s entry to the waged labor force (Ng, Mohamad and beng hui, 2006; Ong, 2010; Kaur, 2000). Still today, manufacturing remains the largest industry of employment for women in Malaysia (Malaysia, 2009:138) – with the highest shares of female workers historically recorded in production within the EPZs (Sivalingam, 1994). That said, it is argued throughout this thesis that analysis of the outcome of export-orientation for women also needs to include women workers in other export industries. Throughout this thesis reference to export-industry workers, therefore, also includes workers in low-skill jobs in trade-related services – more precisely in the tourism industry. Such a focus is prompted partially by the growing importance of the tourism industry in the Asia-Pacific region (UNESCAP, 2007) and the current (aggressive) promotion of tourism as a source of growth and employment in Malaysia (Teo, 2003). While Caraway (2007) makes an important point when suggesting that it is in fact the labor intensity of industry that determine the share of women in the labor force – rather than the actual market orientation, it is suggested here that an export-oriented focus is, nonetheless, important *in terms of the outcome it produces for women workers*. Thus, while the outcome of women’s work in non-export labor-intensive industries displays many similarities with what happens in export-oriented industries, there are also factors that are particular to the latter. As will be suggested later in this thesis,²⁶ this includes the outcome of

²⁶ For discussion around, this see Paper 1.

the concentration of activities into special geographical areas/zones (to facilitate smooth operations for producers enabling them to respond to the needs and wants of their consumers), vulnerability of jobs to external economic processes and downturns (with regards to relocation decisions of corporations and economic fluctuations in other countries and regions),²⁷ insecure and casual labor conditions and a particular interest in hiring young women workers for a limited period of time.²⁸

3.2.4 Moving towards the outcome for women workers

Much attention in feminization literature has been devoted towards explaining the preference of export-industry employers for employing certain groups of women workers (Caraway, 2007). So much so that critics have alleged that global capital has actually been awarded much more animation and personality than the women whose labor has been exploited (Ong, 1988 cited in Kabeer, 2000:7). Kabeer (2000) argues that while feminization studies have produced intriguing results in terms of the strategies and needs of employers, they told us much less about (particularly the early scholarship) who the women workers were, what had motivated their entry to factory work and what such work signified to them. Women workers were, instead, largely depicted as ‘faceless’ and ‘voiceless’ victims – rather than social actors who have struggled against or acted upon their own conditions (Benería and Roldan, 1987 cited in Kabeer, 2000:7, for notable exceptions see Chant and McIlwaine, 1995; Ong, 2010; Wolf, 1992).

The (overt and covert) strategies adopted by women workers to secure access to work and income (Agarwal, 1997) are important to this thesis. However, given the importance of low-skill export-industry jobs to

²⁷ Seguino (2003), for example, argues that because women are often found in more ‘mobile’ industries that are easier to relocate, their bargaining power relative to capital is limited. This makes their labor more vulnerable at times of crises or economic fluctuations.

²⁸ A UNWTO report in November 2009 (‘The Tourism Labour Market in the Asia-Pacific Region’), for example, highlights as key characteristics of tourism employment: high labour mobility and employee turnover; an emphasis on casual or seasonal work; a labour intensive sector with a broad range of skills; domination by small businesses; a high proportion of young and unskilled workers; low wages or inadequate pay compared to other economic sectors; long and/or unsociable working hours; and a lack of career development with a low emphasis on training. In terms of the gender dimension, studies have indicated strong gender segregation (both vertically and horizontally) with regards to employment and conditions of work (Kinnaird and Hall, 1996; Williams, 2002), a preference for young female workers (Cohen, 1984; ILO, 2001), and the “manipulation of the image of women and their appropriate work roles” (Jordan, 1997:525).

women's employment in Penang and the fact that demand for female labor in such industries tends to be limited to the years prior to marriage and child-birth (see above), employer strategies are, nonetheless, interesting because they can tell us something about how women are able to access and sustain formal employment during different periods of their lives. That said, Kabeer (2000:8) reminds us that while employers, no doubt, exercise a great deal of power in the labor market, "women workers do not only exist as artifacts of employers' strategies nor is the quality of their lives fully determined by their experiences in the work place". Therefore, inquiry into the outcome of waged work for women must also include other factors – including *the outcome for intra-household power-relations* as well as a *contextualized examination of women's choices to enter waged employment* (Pearson, 1992 cited in Kabeer, 2000:8). This study aims to contribute knowledge to both of these through its focus upon the factors that influence women's labor market decisions and how former engagement in export-industry employment influences their ability to bargain for work outside the household at a later stage in life.

3.2.5 The 'Engelian myth'

Pearson (1998:178) suggests that feminization of export labor in the Global South has "reinforced the focus upon waged work as the key to women's emancipation." This assumed relationship, the 'Engelian myth' as she (2007a:15) calls it, has featured prominently in both development studies and practice (Kabeer, 2000). In brief, such reasoning suggests that women's entry into waged labor is a way to increase their bargaining power both *directly*, through for example access to own income, and *indirectly*, through an increasing perceived legitimacy of women's claims in household bargaining (for a notable example see the work of A. Sen, 1985; 1990; 1999).²⁹ However, while there is no doubt that the long and continued exclusion from the waged labor force has played a vital role in limiting women's freedom (Koggel, 2003) there are several aspects of the assumed relationship between waged work in export industries and women's increased bargaining power that call for further scrutiny (Elson, 1999). Such

²⁹ In his book *Development as Freedom*, Sen writes (1999:191-192): "... working outside the home and earning an independent income tend to have a clear impact on enhancing the social standing of a woman in the household and society. Her contribution to the prosperity of the family is then more visible, and she also has more voice, because of being less dependent on others."

cautions are not intended to deny the potentially positive aspects of income earning outside the household for individual women or certain groups of women.³⁰ However, women are, as suggested in previous chapters, rarely – if ever – unemployed in their lives but rather continuously involved in various forms of income earning activities (Ghosh, 2002) and questions about *waged work versus no work* are, therefore, more or less obsolete (Pearson, 2007a). In other words, if women do not hold low-skill employment in export industries we can expect that they will engage in other forms of income earning activities both within and beyond the household. Rather than just assuming a positive correlation between waged work and increased bargaining power, we thus need to critically evaluate the way in which, and under which conditions, women are entering waged employment in different places (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Pearson, 2007a; Koggel, 2003).

Koggel (2003:175) proposes that, in order to understand the outcome of employment for women’s empowerment, we need to trace the “interconnections between global forces of power and local systems of oppression”. Export-industry employment has, as suggested in the above sections, brought women into the waged labor force under specific conditions. In Malaysia (as elsewhere in Asia) these conditions have, importantly, been characterized by a transitory participation pattern (Fernandez, 2011) – where women have only been expected to work in these industries ‘temporarily’.³¹ Relative to work perceived as something that can/should be sustained during different periods in life, this is likely to limit women’s ability to bargain for work outside the household also *after* child-birth and marriage. In evaluating the impact of women’s previous engagement in export-industry work on their ability to exercise labor market choices we thus need to take into account both the nature of demand for

³⁰ Elson (1999) does, however, point out that with regards to gaining access to own income this does not necessarily transfer into *control* over that income (Elson, 1999). Empirical evidence on this issue point in different directions and while some studies have found that women have gained greater authority over the allocation of income in the household as a result of earning their own wages from factory work (Chant and McIlwaine, 1995; Kabeer, 2000) there is also evidence which point to the practice of handing over such income to the husband (Elson, 1999) or to other family members – where the income thus becomes part of the overall household budget rather than being used for women’s own spending (Wolf, 1992).

³¹ In their study of women workers in Malaysia, Lie and Lund (1994) found that also the women themselves regarded their work in factories as temporary.

women's labor from employers in major industries as well as gendered relations in the household, community and society.

In this thesis it is further argued that the lack of institutional support (especially the lack of affordable and reliable child-care facilities) plays a significant role in limiting the bargaining gains of employment for women. This is linked to the fact there is very little evidence of that women's increased participation in waged employment outside the home has been accompanied by an equivalent decrease in women's domestic (unpaid) work (Pearson, 2007a). As pointed out by Ghosh (2002:19), unless social policies and institutions emerge to deal with the work traditionally assigned to women, employment outside the household "may lead to an onerous double burden of work". When women are not able to rely on the supply of child-care facilities they are also not able to make the argument that they can leave the home in favor of employment outside – regardless of their previous engagement in the formal labor market.

In essence, the above suggests that while we should not underestimate the potentially positive impacts of waged work for the bargaining power of women in the household and beyond – we must also be cautious not to overestimate the same. Instead the effects of employment must be approached with due contextualization. Such contextualization, I argue, must also include available alternative means of income earning. In Malaysia (as elsewhere in many developing and emerging economies) the most common alternative is various forms of informal economic activity.



3.3 The informal economy

3.3.1 ... what is it?

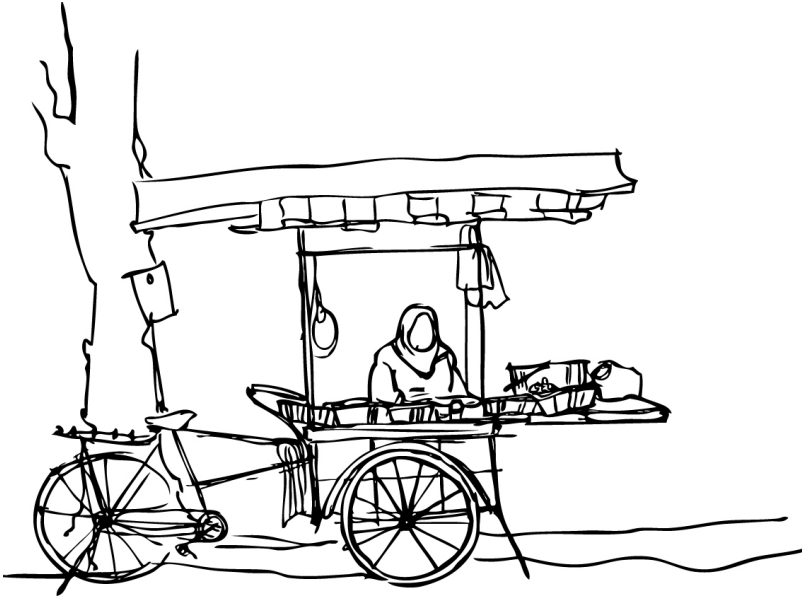
Since the ‘informal sector’ was first coined as a concept in the early 1970s (Hart, 1973) it has attracted growing attention amongst academic scholars and international organizations such as the ILO (Lloyd-Evans, 2008; Chen, 2001; 2007; Carr and Chen, 2004). Rather than using the term informal sector, this thesis, however, makes use of the term *informal economy*. This follows the line of thinking that this concept is better able to capture “how informal work cross-cuts a range of sectors and areas of work, and frequently overlaps with work in the formal economy” (Chant and Pedwell, 2008:2). The *informal economy* can be understood as including all forms of informal work, in both formal and informal enterprises, within and outside the agricultural sector (Chen, 2007).³² In approaching the informal economy focus is placed upon *workers* and *employment relationships* that are not legally regulated – rather than the traditional approach which focuses on the not legally regulated *enterprises* (Chen, 2007; Lloyd-Evans, 2008). Informal work is, as mentioned in the introduction, defined here as employment relationships that share the common characteristic that they lack legal recognition, regulation and protection (Lloyd-Evans, 2008:1885).³³

Informal workers are found in a wide range of occupations and, as stated above, they can be found both within the formal and informal economy – ranging from the more traditional forms of casual day laborers, temporary workers and self-employed to part-time, temporary and home-based workers in high tech industries (Chen, 2007). And, while own account and contributing family work is often used as a proxy for informal employment, the ILO (2007) suggests that this represents a significant

³² Since 1997 the International Expert Group on Informal Sector Statistics (also known as the Delhi Group) together with the global policy research network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) have worked together with the Bureau of Statistics of the ILO to develop an *employment-based* definition of the informal economy.

³³ Even though informal enterprises and workers are unregistered, untaxed and unregulated it is important to distinguish between informal economic activities and *criminal* economic activities – such as smuggling or trafficking. This is not always so easily made, much economic activity in the informal economy is semi-legal. Chen (2007) therefore presents the useful distinction between illegal *processes or arrangements* and illegal *goods and services*. Meaning that while informal employment arrangements or production units can be legal, semi-legal and in some cases illegal in character, most of them produce and distribute legal goods and services.

underestimation of informal work – because it excludes the large category of workers who are informal wage-workers. There are, additionally, several categories of workers that are not so easily captured by the categories own account and contributing family workers. A notable example is home-based workers who, although they are often treated as a distinct category (Prügl and Tinker, 1997), are *de facto* commonly working as “independent own account producers” (Carr, Chen and Tate, 2000: 127).



3.3.2 Gendering the informal economy

The vast majority of women in developing countries are estimated to be informally employed (ADB/ILO, 2011; ILO, 2002b; 2007; Lloyd-Evans, 2008). For the Asian region, ILO (2002b:19) suggests that, as a percentage of women’s total non-agricultural employment, women’s informal employment accounts for 65 percent. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, women’s work in the informal economy – in all employment categories – are notoriously underestimated, underrecorded and underreported.³⁴ Chen, et al (1999:604) therefore point out that if the magnitude of women’s informal work was fully covered in the data – this would not only increase women’s share of the informal work but also the share of informal workers in the total workforce.

³⁴ For further analysis around this issue, see Paper 4.

As with formal work, informal work is both heterogeneous and gendered. It is characterized by vertical and horizontal segregation³⁵ and considerable gender wage gaps in earnings - with an over-representation of women in the lower segments (Chen, 2007). A useful way to capture the gender segmentation can be seen in Figure 1 below.

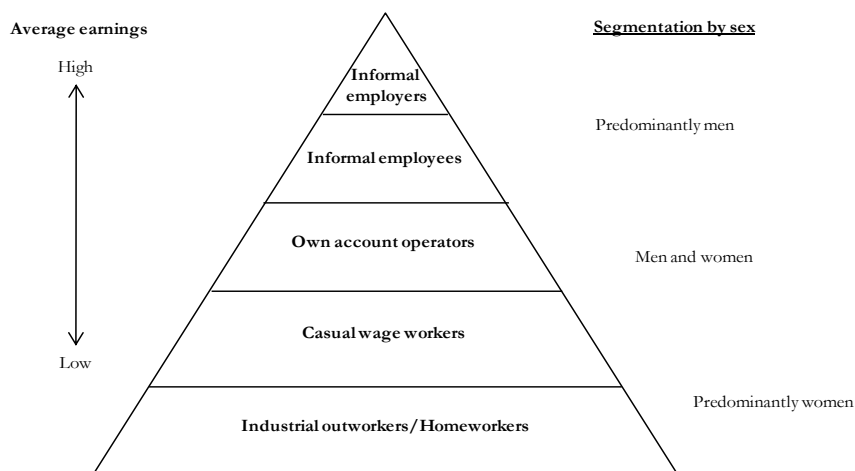


Figure 1. Segmentation of the informal economy. Based on Chen (2007:3)

The women who feature in this study are found in all of these segments. The majority are own account operators but some are also employers, employees (on both a regular and casual basis) and home-based workers.³⁶

While informal work is generally associated with lower wages than work in the formal economy (Jütting et al, 2008; Perry and Maloney, 2007) – it needs to be noted that informal enterprises not only include ‘survival activities’ but also stable enterprises and growing businesses (Chen, 2007:5). As will be argued below, the heterogeneous nature of informal work demands that we move beyond not only the dichotomy of formal/informal, but also the view that informal work always represents a last resort for those who cannot find work in the formal economy.

³⁵ Horizontal segregation refers to the concentration of women and men in certain sectors and occupations and vertical segregation that they tend to occupy different places in the occupational hierarchy – with women concentrated at the bottom with consistently low wages (McDowell, 1999; Grown, Elson and Cagatay, 2000).

³⁶ However, as is argued in Paper 4 – making the distinction and categorization of these workers is not so easily made. Many could, in fact, be placed in several categories.

3.3.3 The continuum of economic relations

Chen (2007) proposes that we approach the relationship between formal and informal work as *a continuum*. This calls into question the portrayal and analysis of the formal and informal economy as two as *separate* spheres dichotomously placed in relation to one another (for more on this see Barrientos, 2007; Benería and Floro, 2005; Kaufmann, 2007, Pearson, 2007a). The inadequacy of approaching the two as separate is revealed partially by the fact that the formal economy, to an increasing degree, features various forms of informal employment relationships (flexible, casual, temporary, contractual and insecure forms of employment) (Kaufmann, 2007; Pearson, 2007a; 2007b; Standing, 1989; 1999). According to Kaufmann (2007:5), the way in which the formal and informal economies interact has evolved to the point that the informal economy can no more be defined as everything outside the formal economy, because such a narrow definition fails to consider the increasing mobility of workers between the formal and informal. In a similar fashion Perry and Maloney (2007:3) illustrate the way that informality is a multidimensional phenomenon in which “agents interact with the state along some dimensions and not others, creating a large gray area between the extremes of full compliance and noncompliance”. People may, in other words, work as formal employees (with contracts and full protection) for a certain period – or part of their time – while working informally at the same time or during a different period. In capturing the relationship between all of these (formal and informal, paid and unpaid) activities, the continuum approach is thus useful as it allows us to analyze how workers and units move (with varying ease) along the continuum (Chen, 2007). For the analysis employed in this thesis the continuum is particularly relevant for capturing the way in which women move along the continuum of formal and informal work over the life course.

3.3.4 Is it always a last resort?

Informal work is often depicted as: “a residue of disadvantaged workers pushed out of decent work in the formal economy” (Lloyd-Evans, 2008:1893). Jütting et al. (2008:21) state:

In the conventional model of labour markets, informal employment is due to labour market segmentation which implies that those working informally do so against their will. They would have preferred to be in formal employment, given the chance.

In debates around women's informal work, I argue, it is important to distinguish between *what motivates women to enter informal work* and *the outcome* of such work. Regarding the former, recent scholarship has illustrated that it is questionable whether we can approach women's informal work simply as a result of poverty, oppression or as "the product of involuntary exclusion" from the labor market (Williams and Gurtoo, 2011:5). Instead, women's choices to enter informal work and entrepreneurship may be the result of a multitude of factors (Gurtoo and Williams, 2009; Jütting et al, 2008)³⁷ including increased autonomy, flexible working hours, the possibility to balance home and work responsibilities, proximity to economic activities, dissatisfaction with conditions and wages in formal jobs (Jütting et al, 2008; Perry and Maloney, 2007). This means that women may, in fact, quite consciously opt for informal work over formal work – as the conditions of work in formal jobs are not satisfactory and/or because it does not allow them to fulfill their double role as breadwinners and mothers. Acknowledging this is not to deny that the work women perform – in both the formal and informal economy – is framed and often restricted by norms and practices around women's work and mobility, access to resources and disproportionate responsibility for reproductive work (Brush et al, 2009; Gupta et al, 2009; Huang and Yeoh, 1996; Marlow, 2002; Mayoux, 1995; Prügl and Tinker, 1997; Roomi and Harrison, 2010). Nor does it diminish the fact that women face multiple challenges as informal workers – based on both their employment status and gender ideologies (Barrientos, 2007). On the contrary, structural inequalities are necessary components to understand the conditions under which women are able to enter and sustain both formal and informal work. However, understanding what motivates women to opt for informal work over formal work can, I argue, tell us something important not only about informal work – but also about the conditions that women face in the formal economy. Similarly, in evaluating the consequences of participating in such work there is reason to be beware of overstating the positive or negative outcomes – without due empirical and context-bound investigation. Pearson (2007a), for example, points out that debates around the way micro-entrepreneurship can work as empowering for women have been notoriously one-sided – which is not the least visible in the celebration of micro-credit for women. However, the relationship between women's informal economic activities and

³⁷ For further discussion around this, see Paper 2.

empowerment are just “as complicated and context specific as it is in the case of waged work in manufacturing and services” (ibid:208).



3.4 Analytical framework

3.4.1 Approaching the continuum of economic relations

Studies of industrialization in Asia have generally implied a focus upon external forces (Lie and Lund, 1999) and feminization scholarship have brought important insights into how the exploitation of female labor in labor-intensive industries has intersected with local systems of oppression (see above). However, as has been compellingly argued by previous feminist geographical scholarship (see Lie and Lund, 1994; 1999; McDowell and Massey, 1994), industrialization in various places produces *a unique set of gender relations*. We must therefore approach these processes as being specific to social and historic contexts (Mohanty, 2006). In this thesis focus is placed upon one specific aspect of such gendered relations in Penang, Malaysia – namely those in the local labor market. It proposes that by studying the *continuum of economic relations* – in which women move from formal to informal work with age – we can gain insight into women’s formal work (in this case under conditions of export-orientation) and the way that women make a living in the informal economy. In approaching the factors that make women leave and not re-enter formal work but rather opt for informal work, this thesis places emphasis upon, what I have termed, ‘room to maneuver’. Room to maneuver is here understood as both a materially

and discursively constructed space. As such, it involves both societal institutions (such as labor markets and welfare systems) as well as the normative frameworks which both frame and structure women's access to employment, mobility and bargaining power within and beyond the household.

Importantly, 'room to maneuver' is not approached as a fixed space – but rather as a space continuously under negotiation. This follows the line of thought (presented in Chapter 2) that gendered identities are *both created and recreated at work* (McDowell, 1999) and that transformation processes will lead to a re-negotiation of gendered relations and new identities become articulated (Lie and Lund, 2005:9). Therefore, gendered outcomes in the labor market can be understood as reflecting not only discrimination and disadvantage but also the 'behavioral reactions' of employers and workers (Standing, 1999:583). The 'behavioral reactions' of women – in this case the strategies they adopt through the decisions they make with regards to income earning – are part of shaping their maneuvering space. Important to this maneuvering space are gendered spatial boundaries which tell us which (work)places are suitable or not suitable for women (or certain groups of women) (Domosh and Seager, 2001; McDowell, 1999). It is argued here that re-negotiation of the maneuvering space therefore effects not only *whether* women are able to secure access to income earning but also *where* they are able to work.

3.4.2 Approaching women as active agents of change

There are several advantages of approaching women as active agents in the 'construction' of their room to maneuver. Most importantly because it awards women the role *as active agents of change* (Lie and Lund, 1999; Pearson, 1998; Sen, A, 1999) as opposed to 'patients' or recipients in development processes (Sen, A, 1999:190).³⁸ This, in turn, offers the potential to move beyond the "myth" of the "average Third World woman" – a woman depicted as sexually constrained, ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition bound, domestic, family-oriented and victimized (Mohanty, 2006:22). For while exploitation and suffering of women workers need not be ignored in studies of women's work, the point made by Gills (2002:109) is important:

³⁸ In approaching women's *agency* I have employed Kabeer's (1999) notion of agency as: "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them" (p. 438). This includes not only the 'observable actions' that people take but also the meaning, motivation and purpose which we bring to these activities. As such it also includes our *sense of agency*.

There are two axes of analysis involved in women's labor and globalization: one is of women as victims of the economic process; the other is the potential for women as subjects of this process. When women are perceived as an agency in the globalization process, they become a social force capable of acting in their own interest.

Mohanty (2006) also argues that while representations of the exploited woman (of a certain age, ethnic/national background or class) correspond with real people, the same woman has many contradictory and complex roles. In other words, women are simultaneously workers, mothers and consumers (an much more) in the global economy. Singular or monolithic categorizations of women, she argues, "circumscribe ideas about experience, agency and struggle" (ibid:248). Therefore, while women face significant oppression and disadvantage – we should not automatically assume that this makes women victims. Instead, we need to closely examine the way that women strategically respond to their given place through the decisions they take.

The decisions women make are clearly influenced by the norms and values of society. However, they also reflect individual histories and subjectivities (Kabeer, 2000: 328). Kabeer suggests that we conceptualize the decisions individuals face as a "value-defined continuum" (ibid). At the one end of the continuum we find purely subjective preferences and at the other the more value-laden. The latter, although not immutable, tend to change more slowly because "they often express the collective beliefs and values of society" (ibid). This approach is appealing because it recognizes that while preferences expressed are unlikely to be neutral – women (when they face disadvantage, poverty and inequality) also have individual subjective preferences. As such, this approach allows us to focus upon the 'ought to' but also the 'want to' in women's labor market decisions. And, as will be shown further on, the way that women maneuver in the labor market reflects both.

Sen (1990) proposes that bargaining processes within the household can take many shapes and forms – and may involve both conscious and unconscious choices. A woman may, he argues, unconsciously adjust her behavior (what he calls *'perceived interest response'*) – if she perceives that the

value of her own well-being is not as strong as that of others.³⁹ However, it is very difficult to determine *why* women are seemingly complying with an unjust order and *compliance* need not, as Agarwal (1997) points out, imply *complicity*. Therefore, if we are aiming to understand women's perceptions of and responses to inequality, we need to examine both their *overt* and *covert* responses (ibid). For obvious reasons the overt responses are more easily discovered. But the covert responses may be equally important. They may, as is suggested in the coming papers, involve labeling their activities as 'housework' rather than 'work.' Through this women are able to secure access to work (often outside the home), while appearing to comply with the norm of the male breadwinner and the notion that women's 'actual place' is in the home. The same applies to discussions around why women do not report their work to authorities. Previous studies within this field have largely emphasized how cultural norms impact the view of women's work as less important (or less appropriate) to report (Anker, 1983; Bardasi et al, 2010; Mata Greenwood, 1999), but it is here suggested that it may also reflect covert acts to secure self-interest - in this case, their desire to work outside the home.

³⁹ Sen (1990:126), for example, argues that: "... the lack of perception of personal interest combined with a great concern for family welfare is, of course, just the kind of attitude that helps to sustain the traditional inequalities. There is much evidence in history that acute inequalities often survive precisely by making allies out of the deprived. The underdog comes to accept the legitimacy of the unequal order and becomes an implicit accomplice."

4. MALAYSIA AND PENANG

4.1 Geography

Located in Southeast Asia, Malaysia consists of two main geographical entities: *Peninsular Malaysia*, located along the Strait of Malacca (bordering Thailand in the north and Singapore and Indonesia in the south), and *the northern part of the Island of Borneo* (bordering Indonesia in the South and surrounding the small Sultanate Brunei Darussalam). The Peninsular part of Malaysia is the most populated and hosts around 22.6 out of 28.3 million inhabitants.⁴⁰



Figure 2. Map of Southeast Asia with Malaysia.

The Federation of Malaya gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1957 and formed, together with the former crown colony Singapore and the British colonies Sabah and Sarawak, the state of Malaysia

⁴⁰ Information retrieved from www.statistics.gov.my, visited Dec 12, 2011.

in 1963. Singapore seceded from Malaysia in 1965 and became an independent republic. The State of *Penang* (sometimes also Pinang), located on the northwestern coast of Peninsular Malaysia, initially also had a separate status as a British crown colony and joined, not without controversy, the Federation of Malaya in 1948, subsequently becoming a member state of Malaysia in 1963. In the economic history of Malaysia, Penang holds a special position. While the state represents a relatively small share of the Malaysian population (around 1.6 million; 5.7 percent) its contribution to GDP is around 8.3 percent (2010).⁴¹

Post-colonial economic and social relations in Malaysia can be summarized as evolving around two key themes: (1) the reduction of poverty through promotion of economic growth; and (2) reducing the economic disparities between the country's main ethnic groups (Watson Andaya and Andaya, 2001). In promoting economic growth through export-oriented development Malaysia shares many features with other countries in the East and Southeast Asian regions. However, the way that Malaysian society is structured along ethnic lines is quite unique.

4.2 Population

Since the 1970s, the Malaysian population has been classified/defined into two main groups: the *Bumiputerus* (often translated into 'sons of the soil' – making reference to the indigenous population) and the *non-Bumiputerus*. According to the 2010 population census, the Bumiputera share of the population was 67.4 percent.⁴² Amongst the non-Bumiputerus the Chinese are the largest group (accounting for around 24.6 percent of the total population), followed by Indians (around 7.3 percent).⁴³ The presence of these two large minority groups in Malaysia is the result of migration waves from China and India in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Boo Teik, 2005). Due to its geographical location and significance in the colonial and economic history of Malaysia, the State of Penang has a unique ethnic composition. Here, the Malay and Chinese populations are almost equal in size (roughly 43 and 41 percent respectively). Around ten percent of the population is ethnic Indian and the remaining part largely consists of non-

⁴¹ Information retrieved from www.statistics.gov.my, visited Dec 12, 2011.

⁴² In Peninsular Malaysia the Bumiputera population is largely made of the *Malay* and some *Orang Asli* (aboriginal) groups. In Sabah and Sarawak, however, the Bumiputerus belong to a variety of ethnic aboriginal groups.

⁴³ Information retrieved from www.statistics.gov.my, visited Sept 14, 2011.

Malaysian citizens (SERI, 2010). Each of the ethnic groups have unique cultural traditions, languages and religious beliefs. The Malays are Muslims, the Chinese are a mixture of Confucians, Taoists, Buddhists and Christians and the Indians are largely Hindus, Muslims or Christians.

4.3 Historical labor market regimes and divisions of labor

4.3.1 The colonial legacy

The colonial economy in Malaysia was essentially built upon the work of immigrant labor. The main migrant groups worked in mines (mainly tin), plantations (mainly rubber) and in urban areas. Colonial labor relations were characterized by distinct production regimes as well as ethnic and gendered divisions of labor (Kaur, 1999). Described in broad and generalizing terms, the colonial era produced an ethnic division of labor in which the Malays were largely associated with rural agriculture, the Chinese with tin mining and commerce, and the Indian population with plantation work and selected public service professions. And, around the time of independence there was, thus, a stark ethnic division of labor (Boo Teik, 2005). Kaur (1999:214) argues that the colonial era also worked to produce an order in which paid employment became largely associated with men and the gender division of tasks became institutionalized. Through this divide women became confined to lower-paid types of employment, farm-work or the informal economy. The colonial policies strengthened patriarchal control over households, through land regulation and through establishing an unequal wage structure based upon the assumption of women as ‘secondary income earners’. Kaur states: “This labour policy, which shaped economic and social structures in the country, conditioned women’s role in the economy and left them out of the mainstream of capitalist development” (ibid:215). At the time of independence female labor force participation rates were just above 30 percent, but with the developments which followed in the 1970s and 1980s, as will be discussed in the coming sections, these rates increased quite dramatically.

4.3.2 The post-independence years

Whereas the post-independence years were marked by a relatively strong economic expansion, it failed to come to terms with the economic inequalities between the ethnic groups and particularly, what former Prime Minister Mahathir called, “the inferior economic position” of the Malays

(Mahathir, 2011:48).⁴⁴ Although politically dominant, the Malays remained overrepresented in the low-income groups and were generally underrepresented when it came to ownership of capital and productive resources. In contrast, the Chinese population, who originally migrated to work in tin mines, was (in general terms) significantly better off when it came to income and ownership. They were (and are) also the most urbanized of the three ethnic groups. The Indian population, on the other hand, was more differentiated. A large group of Indians belonged to the rural poor. Another group, consisting of urban Indians, had been 'brought to' Malaysia to work in the British administration. This group was heavily involved in the modern sectors of the economy (Boo Teik, 2005; Mason Oppenheim and Palan, 1981; Watson Andaya and Andaya, 2001).⁴⁵

4.3.3 The post 1969 industrial development

At the end of the 1960s the inequalities between the ethnic groups – and in particular the disadvantaged economic position of the Malays – spurred tensions. These tensions peaked through the outbreak of major ethnic riots in the capital city, Kuala Lumpur, in May 1969. A reported 196 people were killed and several hundreds were wounded (Watson Andaya and Andaya, 2001:298). The 1969 events are a landmark in the modern history of Malaysia and many studies of the 'new era' of social, political and economic relations start their inquiries from this point in time. The post-1969 economic policies were, as mentioned above, largely focused upon the key objectives of reducing poverty and the association of ethnicity with 'economic function' (Watson Andaya and Andaya, 2001). The New Economic Policy (NEP), adopted in 1971, contained these explicit objectives through facilitating access to land, physical capital, training and public services for economically underprivileged groups. Implemented through five-year plans, the NEP aimed at reducing the extent to which Malays (and other indigenous groups) were confined to subsistence agriculture and increasing their portion of the country's wealth through facilitating them to own more assets within the corporate sector (ibid: 302f).

⁴⁴ The original version of Mahathir's book '*The Malay dilemma*' was first published in 1970.

⁴⁵ Clearly, the type of generalizations featured above overlook the diversity *amongst* the ethnic groups. The intention here is not to do that – but rather to provide a brief introduction to the ethnic divisions which prevail in the way that contemporary gendered divisions of labor are structured.

The NEP brought about many changes. Of particular importance to this research is its association with an export-oriented strategy that shifted focus from production of primary commodities towards export-oriented manufacturing. In 1970 the five primary commodities, rubber, tin, timber, palm oil and petroleum, accounted for nearly 80 percent of Malaysia's total exports. Ten years later, the same commodities had dropped to around 33 percent. Meanwhile, manufacturing accounted for around 12 percent of export earnings in 1970, but by 1990 it had reached almost 60 percent (ibid:316). With regards to employment creation and growth there was a similar pattern. In the 1970s and 1980s the manufacturing sector recorded the highest employment growth. This was, according to the Fourth Malaysia Plan (1981-1985), essentially due to output growth and the large-scale expansion of labor-intensive and largely export-oriented industries that had taken place in the seventies (Malaysia, 1981:83). This aggressive export-orientation pursued in the 1970s and 1980s has made Malaysia one of the most export-dependent economies globally (Ng, 2010). In 2010 the share of exports to GDP amounted to 97 percent.⁴⁶

4.3.4 Women's entry into the manufacturing sector

Between 1970 and 1991, female labor force participation rates in Malaysia rose from 37.2 to 47.8 percent (Malaysia, 2003). As mentioned in previous sections, employment growth in labor-intensive manufacturing – particularly in electronics, textiles and clothing – was key to this development. In the 1970s the electronics industry was the largest exporter of manufactured goods – and the female share of the workforce was 75 percent. An even higher share of women was recorded in the clothing and textile industries (Ahmad, 1998). In the manufacturing industry as a whole, female shares of employment increased steadily – from 28.1 percent in 1970 to 46.4 percent in 1990 (Malaysia, 1990:415). In the growing number of EPZs the female shares of the labor force was even higher, and in 1990 almost 54 percent of workers in the zones were women – with the highest proportion found amongst low-skilled and semi-skilled workers (around 59 percent) (Sivalingam, 1994).

According to Kaur (2000:221ff) there are three main developments that can account for the increase in women's participation in the labor market in Malaysia after independence. First, Malaysia became a labor-deficit country

⁴⁶ IMF, International Financial Statistics, Nov 2011.

and there was therefore a consequent increase in rural-urban migration (Elias 2008). In 1997, Kaur states, three out of eight million in the Malaysian labor force were migrant workers.⁴⁷ The opportunities for work in the manufacturing sector in urban areas changed the migration patterns and women started migrating independently from their families. Second, there were significant declines in fertility rates, and particularly amongst the Malay population. This transition was, Kaur suggests, closely associated with the changing economic role of women, where women themselves, as a result of the economic opportunities offered to them, delayed the age of marriage and child-birth (Ahmad, 1998; Kaur, 2000; Kusago, 2000). Third, the NEP increased both the educational attainment and labor force participation of *Malay* women. By 1980s, in urban areas, there was little difference between Malay and Chinese female participation rates.

Whereas the previously important import substitution production was male dominated, labor-intensive export-oriented production targeted female labor in particular. Women, not only, represented the lowest labor cost alternative but were also perceived as willing to perform repetitive work with high accuracy, as having manual dexterity and “light touch” – and therefore as being suitable for assembly type work (Kaur, 2000). The much cited 1970 investment brochure from the Federal Industrial Development Authority of Malaysia is an illustrative example of how women were marketed to TNCs as an ideal labor force (cited in Ng, Mohamad and beng hui, 2006: 106):

The manual dexterity of the oriental female is famous the world over. Her hands are small and she works fast with extreme care. Who, therefore, could be better qualified by nature and inheritance to contribute to the efficiency of a bench-assembly production line than the oriental girl? No need for a Zero defects program here! By nature, they ‘quality control’ themselves.

Importantly, the jobs created for women in labor-intensive export-manufacturing have not been made available to all segments of the female labor force (Chattopadhyay, 1998). Instead, young and unmarried women (Ng, Mohamad and beng hui, 2006; Ong, 2010; Schafgans, 2000) particularly of ethnic Malay origin (Kaur, 2000; Sivalingam, 1994) have been the primary targets.

⁴⁷ This is mainly a reference to internal migrants. The terminology is sometimes confusing as reference to ‘migrant workers’ in contemporary debates on the labor market in Malaysia is most commonly a reference to the large number of foreign migrant workers.

While manufacturing remains the largest source of employment for women in Malaysia (around 721,000 of the four million women in the labor force), there have been significant changes over the last decades. In 2000 the female share of manufacturing employment had dropped to 41.1 percent (Malaysia, 2001:559) and in 2010 it amounted to 38.4 percent (Malaysia, 2011). The share of foreign migrant workers has, on the other hand, increased (Ng, 2010) and, according to the 2008 Malaysian labor force survey, almost 18 percent of employed persons in manufacturing were non-Malaysian citizens (Malaysia, 2009:134). That said, Ng, Mohamad and beng hui (2006:106) note, “[t]he policy of export-oriented industrialization fuelled by foreign direct investments continues to be the order of the day, leading to the influx of women workers to the manufacturing sector”. And, although the government has made efforts to move towards a more knowledge-based economy, the majority of women are still found in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs with limited prospects for moving up the occupational ladder (ibid:108).

4.4 Current labor market trends

4.4.1 A note on labor force data

In the following sections some of the current employment trends in Penang and Malaysia will be analyzed partially by the results of the 2008 labor force survey. It should be noted again that labor force data, particularly when it comes to women’s work, need to be approached with great caution.⁴⁸ Bearing these shortcomings in mind it can, nonetheless, be used to indicate certain trends in the labor market.⁴⁹ For my purpose there are two trends of specific interest: first, the one-peaked labor force participation pattern of women in the formal labor market, and, second, women’s move from formal to informal work during their life course.

4.4.2 The one-peaked labor force participation pattern

Women’s formal labor force participation in Malaysia is characterized by a one-peaked pattern (Horton, 1996). Chart 1 shows female and male labor force participation by age in Malaysia. It indicates that while male

⁴⁸ For further discussion see Chapter 2, 3 and Paper 4.

⁴⁹ Although Standing (1999:588) argues that labor force data can, at best, be used to paint an ‘impressionistic picture’.

participation remains relatively stable over the life course, a large group of women tend to permanently leave the labor force at a relatively young age.

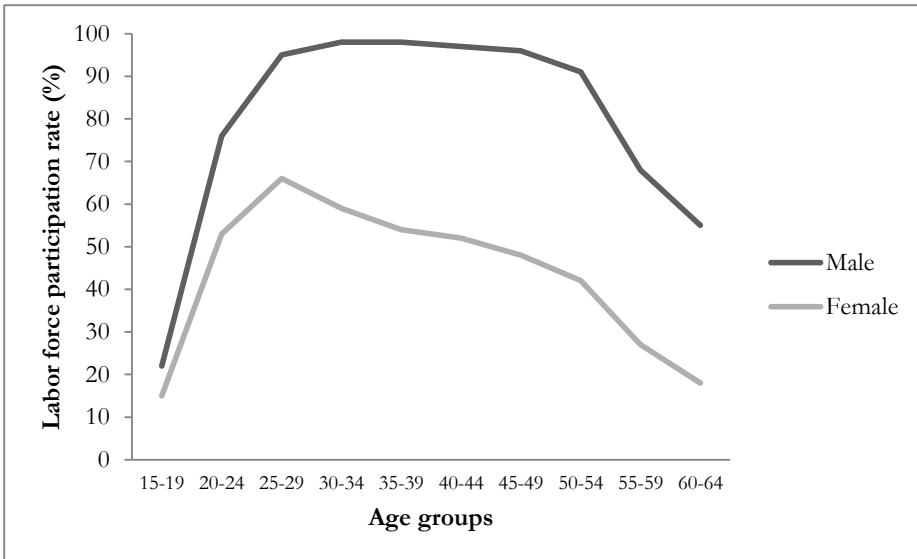


Chart 1. Female and male labor force participation rates by age groups in Malaysia, 2008. Based on data from Labour Force Survey Report, Malaysia (2009:77).

There are several reasons for why the State of Penang serves an interesting case to study women’s labor force participation. First, because Penang has the highest female labor force participation rate in Malaysia - 53.4 percent compared to the 45.7 percent national average (Malaysia, 2009: 208). Second, Penang has an equally strong, if not stronger, one-peaked pattern of participation and, as shown in Chart 2, while women in Penang under the age of 30 exhibit substantially higher rates of participation in the labor force compared to the national average, these rates decline quite dramatically with their age. For the oldest age group (60-64 years old) the rates in Penang are actually slightly below the national average.

In order to examine the one-peaked pattern of labor force participation for women in Penang, several different factors need to be examined. In the following sections emphasis will be placed upon major sources of employment, gendered place-based social relations (including the ethnic composition of the population and the lack of fit between the role of women as economic agents and mothers) and, finally, the available alternative means of income earning (i.e. the informal economy).

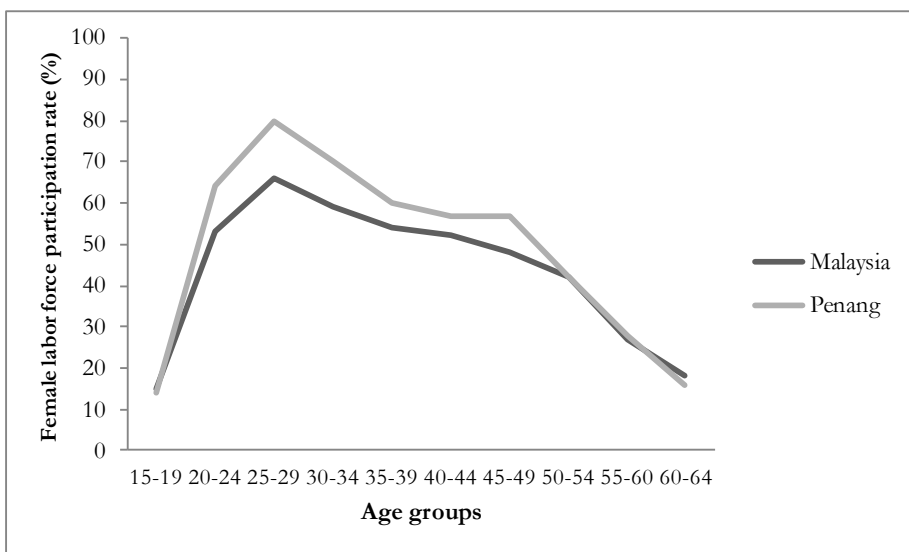


Chart 2. Female labor force participation rates by age groups, Malaysia and Penang, 2008. Based on data from Labour Force Survey Report, Malaysia (2009:208).

Major sources of employment

The federal industrial strategy of Penang has, from its outset in the early 1970s, emphasized the development of the state as a center for labor-intensive export-oriented manufacturing – particularly within electronics but also in textiles (Eriksson, 2004; Ghazali, 2003; Fold and Wangel, 1997). Malaysia’s first Export Processing Zone (EPZ), the Bayan Lepas, was established in Penang in 1972 and during the decades which followed, a number of EPZs and industrial estates were set up both in the island of Penang and in the mainland area around Butterworth (Ghazali, 2002; Kofoed and Fønnesbech, 2000). This development has had a significant impact upon the Malay Penang population in particular. In the 1970s the Malays in Penang were mainly rural dwellers, but through the establishment of the industrial zones and new towns, their share of the urban population gradually increased. This also forced the Malays to diversify their livelihood activities and many sought new income earning through manufacturing employment (Ghazali, 2002).

Electronics production has been the flagship of Penang and although the industry has witnessed some decline over the past decade (in the face of strong competition from China and India (SERI, 2011)), manufacturing has kept its central role in employment creation, and for women it remains the

biggest source of employment (Malaysia, 2009:262). Tourism employment is also relatively important and hotels and restaurants account for 10 percent of women’s employment in Penang. It should, however, be noted that work in restaurants is only partially tourism-related.

Data on the age composition of the workforce in different industries is not available on state level. However, using data for the whole of Malaysia reveals that there are differences between industries. Chart 3 shows the share of female workers in different age groups in four selected industries. It illustrates that manufacturing employment peaks in the age group 25-29 and then steadily decreases. The same peak can be seen for employment in education – but here the decline seems to slow down around the age of 30 and then declines sharply again after the age of 44. Agricultural employment shows a reversed pattern, with the highest shares of workers in the older age groups. Relative to manufacturing, hotel and restaurant workers have a more two-peaked pattern. However, we know from previous studies that the tourism industry has a reliance upon young and unskilled labor and has, in general, been found to prefer young female workers (ILO, 2001). It is therefore quite possible that a different pattern would occur if hotel and restaurant employment would be differentiated into two different categories.

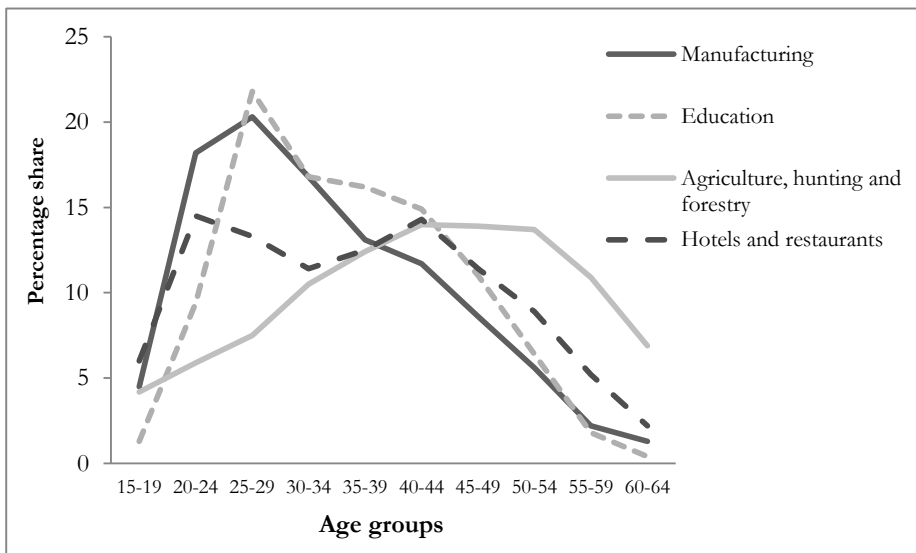


Chart 3. Age composition of the female workforce in selected industries in Malaysia, 2008. Based on data from Labour Force Survey Report, Malaysia (2009:148f).

Data on different industries can only paint a partial picture as it does not differentiate between workers according to occupational category or educational attainment. However, the labor force survey does provide data on the labor force participation by educational attainment which shows that, in Penang (and Malaysia), women who hold tertiary education display significantly higher participation rates relative to women who lack higher education (Malaysia, 2009:218). Likely explanations are that qualified jobs are more sustainable over time and that women in the higher income groups are better able to negotiate the work-family relationship because they have better access to and can afford public and private child-care facilities. Fernandez (2011) also suggests that as male real wages have increased families are better able to survive on one salary. I would, however, suggest that this is a more likely scenario in high income groups.

Lack of institutional support

Most commentators on female labor force participation in Malaysia take note of the limited institutional support for working women – notably through the lack of available – and affordable – child-care facilities (see for example: Ariffin, Horton and Sedlacek, 1996; Ng, Mohamad and beng hui 2006). According to Pillai (2011:30), only one percent of children aged 0-4 years old in Malaysia are enrolled in registered child-care centers. The actual number of children in different forms of child-care is likely to be higher – particularly given the rise in the number of foreign maids (Fernandez, 2011). However, private child-care and maids are not only unaffordable to lower-income families (ibid.), but the quality of child-care also perceived as less trustworthy (Pillai, 2011). Malaysian women are therefore experiencing, what Abdullah, Noor and Wok (2008: 453) call a “lack of fit between the support offered by institutions (workplace, community) and demands of the family”. While the need to facilitate the re-entry of women into waged labor after child-birth (through for example provision of child-care) is emphasized in the latest Malaysia Plans (2006-2010; 2011-2015), the slow rate of progress supporting this places significant constraints on women’s room to maneuver and ability to exercise choice in the labor market. This, in effect, restricts female labor force participation (Fernandez, 2011). Unsurprisingly, therefore, the labor force data shows that marriage has a negative impact upon female labor force participation: married women have

significantly lower participation rates than single or divorced women (Malaysia, 2009:222f).⁵⁰



The ethnic composition of the labor force

The particular ethnic composition of the Penang population and, more specifically, the large share of Chinese women in the labor force, is significant for explaining the high labor force participation rates amongst young Penang women. Ethnicity is, generally, a central feature of gendered identities in Malaysia (Devasahayam, 2005) and it is significant for female labor force participation and employment patterns (Malaysia, 2009: 138). Amongst the ethnic groups, Chinese women generally have the highest labor force participation rates - (for Malay women the average rate is 44.1 percent, for Chinese 47.1 and for Indian 43.6). Chinese women tend to marry later (Jones, 2007) and, as found by Amin and Alam (2008), among single women, Buddhists (in Malaysia predominantly the Chinese) are the most likely to work.

Several studies from Malaysia have also indicated that the labor force participation of married women is affected by norms and values in society

⁵⁰ Rural women exhibit more of a two-peaked pattern (and thus a returned entry to the labor market after the years of child-birth) (Ariffin, Horton and Sedlacek, 1996). One reason for this, Oppenheim Mason and Palan (1981) argue, is that in the rural context work is easier to combine with family obligations through work being performed in closer proximity to the household (i.e. farm work), the ability to leave children with parental surrogates or to bring them to work. In the urban context (such as much of Penang) women rely much more on the development of 'external' child-care facilities.

(Amin, 2004) and directly by the attitudes and support (or lack thereof) of other family members (husbands, parents and in-laws) (Abdullah, Noor and Wok, 2008). In a study of the roles of Malay women, Abdullah, Noor and Wok, found that despite women's increased entry into both education and formal labor markets over the last few decades, Malay women still perceive their role as strongly connected to the home and to their responsibility for the children, meaning that "employment is an extra, an added-on role, not their primary role" (ibid:443). The role of Malay women as economic agents is influenced both by Islam and Malay culture – and according to Lie and Lund (1994:32), this can explain a Malay woman's somewhat "paradoxical" role with regards to income earning.⁵¹

... in many ways she is the manager of the house as well as the decision maker; but still obedient to her husband as the head of the family. She is working for money; but still the husband is recognized as the family provider and responsible for her upkeep.

Yusof (2010) finds that Islam provides both an incentive and a restriction with regards to women's income earning. On the one hand, women are actively encouraged to partake in remunerative activities and to contribute their labor to the community. On the other, there are a number of restrictions regarding their mobility as well as specific demands upon the nature of places where they can work.

Malay women, when compared to Chinese women, have a lower average labor force participation rate and are often portrayed as the least likely to work (see for example Chattopadhyay, 1998). However, with regards to being a working mother (particularly in lower-income groups) all three ethnic groups face significant constraints. As revealed in Chart 4 below, Malay, Chinese and Indian women all have a strikingly similar one-peaked pattern of labor force participation.

In conclusion, young women in Penang are engaged in formal employment to a larger degree than women in other states. Their labor force participation is, however, transitory and women (of all ethnic groups) tend to permanently leave the labor market at a relatively early age. And, Ahmad (1998:36) argues, there are "no significant additional incentives for

⁵¹ There is also an ongoing debate around how the roles of Malay women have been influenced by the Islamization projects in Malaysia (see Frisk, 2009; Tong and Turner, 2008; Ong, 1990; Stivens, 2006).

women to re-enter the labor force at a later age.” Instead, they end up in the category ‘outside the labor force.’

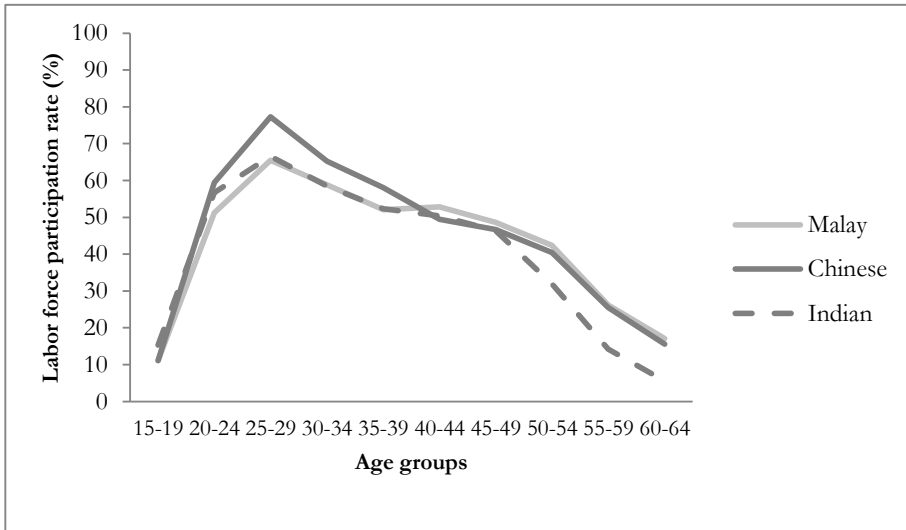


Chart 4. Female labor force participation rates by age and ethnicity, Malaysia 2008. Based on data from Labour Force Survey Report, Malaysia (2009:80).

4.4.3. Informal work

There is no official data on women’s informal economic activities in Malaysia (Kamaruddin and Ali, 2006) and academic studies of this issue remain scarce (Xavier, 2008). That said, there is some data on informal work included in the labor force survey – most notably through the employment categories ‘own account’ and ‘unpaid family work’. Although this data is inadequate for capturing the full extent of women’s informal work it can, as mentioned above, be used to indicate certain trends in women’s informal work.

In the labor force survey, employed persons are differentiated into four categories according to their status of employment (employer, employee, own account and unpaid family workers). Own account workers are persons who operate their own farms, businesses or trade without employing any additional paid workers. Unpaid family workers are those who work without pay or wages on farm, business or trade (Malaysia, 2009:47f).⁵² In Malaysia

⁵² As was discussed in Chapter 3, these two categories are often used as proxy for informal work but it needs to be borne in mind that these two alone represent a significant

these two categories are reported as accounting for 20 percent of female labor force participation (ibid:164). Chart 5 shows these employment categories by age. It indicates that while the category employee is, by far, the most important to younger age groups, there is a reversed trend in the older age groups - and for women above 60 own account work is the most common category.

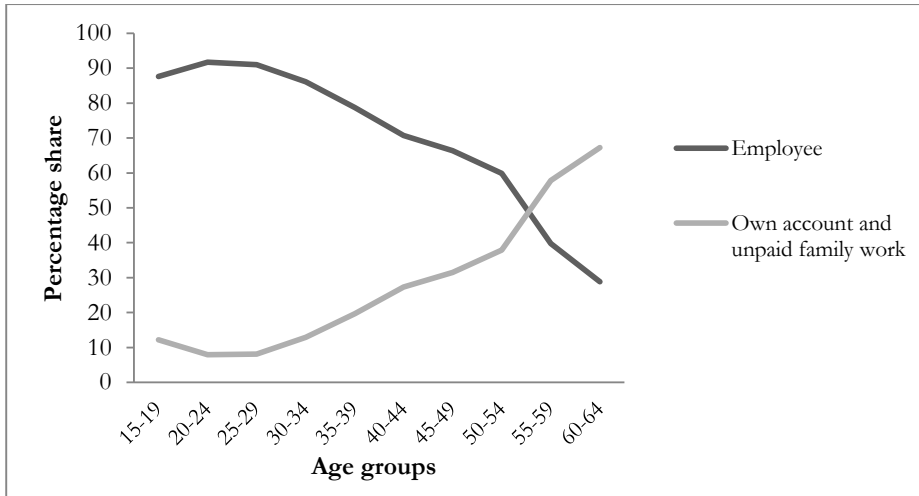


Chart 5. Percentage distribution of employed women by status of employment and age group, Malaysia 2008. Based on data from Labour Force Survey Report, Malaysia (2009:164).

This trend can be even better illustrated for the group of women in focus in this study if we use data on the number of employed women in manufacturing and the number of women in own account and contributing family work by age – as seen in Chart 6. However, it should be noted that this provides a comparison between two different types of data – and it is, for example, possible that a number of manufacturing workers are also simultaneously own account workers. The Chart, nonetheless, indicate a move from formal to informal employment over the life-course – and that women’s full work participation can be better characterized as ‘two-peaked’. In one of few empirical studies of women’s informal in Malaysia, Loh-Ludher (2007; undated) states a similar point. She suggests that rather than re-entering formal work after marriage and child-birth women (especially in

underestimation of informal work as a large number of informal workers are informal employees (ILO, 2007).

urban Malaysia) typically enter informal work. The labor force survey report states a similar expectation and proposes that women who are currently housewives “have the potential to enter the labour market especially through informal jobs such as sewing dresses, selling delicacies, providing child-care and others [sic.]” (Malaysia, 2009:22).

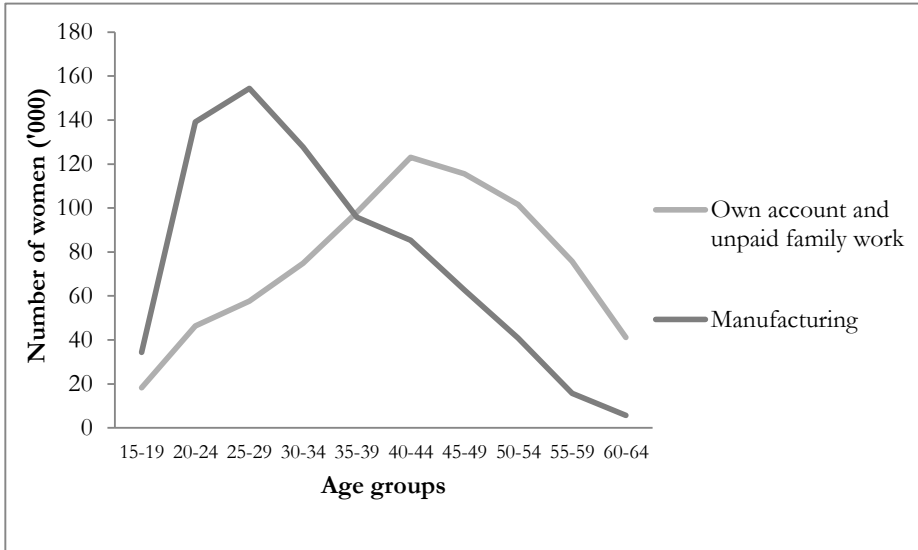


Chart 6. Number of women employed in manufacturing and own account and unpaid family work by age in Malaysia 2008. Data from the Malaysian Labor Force Survey Report, Malaysia (2009:148; 164).

Hawkers and street vendors

Informal workers in Malaysia perform a multitude of activities – and they are found in both formal and informal enterprises. The women who feature in this study are largely hawkers, street vendors and home-based workers. Hawking represents an important segment of the informal labor market in Malaysia (Agus, 1987; Hassan, 2003; SERI, 2003) and in the State of Penang, studies indicate that the vending of street food alone has generated around 20,000 jobs – or the equivalent of 12 percent of employment in Penang Island (Bhat and Waghray, 2000). The importance of food-hawking in Malaysia can partly be attributed to the local food system, where public eating is part of everyday life. Malaysian families spend an increasing amount of their household expenditure on food-away-from-home (Lee Siew Heng and Tan Khee Guan, 2007) While the provision of cheap street food is essential to families with lower incomes (Winarmo and Allain, 1991),

as found in studies from neighboring Thailand, consumption of hawker food is not limited to the urban poor – but extends to the middle and upper classes as well as tourists (Nirathron, 2006).

While food hawking has been the focus of numerous studies (Agus, 1987; Hassan, 2003; Pang and Toh, 2008; Toh and Birchenough, 2000) there is no comprehensive study in the Malaysian context that focuses upon women's hawking. However, given the acknowledged importance of different forms of hawking to women's livelihoods in the Southeast Asian region (Chen, 2001; Cohen, 2000; Nirathron, 2006; Tinker, 2003; Yasmeen, 2006), this lack of knowledge is a concern, if one is aiming to understand women's conditions and rights in the informal labor market (ILO, 2007).

Hawking is not a gender-neutral activity. On the contrary, different groups of women and men perform different kinds of hawking in different places. These divisions, I argue, are not incidental. Instead, they reflect gendered (spatial) norms and practices in the Malaysian society which need to be considered in any analysis of food hawking and policies related to food hawking. The particular emphasis placed here upon spatial practices is inspired by previous studies which have shown how food-hawking seems to dissolve the traditional (Western) constructions of public/private, home/workplace as dichotomous (Drummond, 2000; Huang and Yeoh, 1996; Yasmeen, 2006). As such, a focus upon these types of activities also has the potential to reveal something about the way that women are negotiating the meaning of public/private and workplace/home constructions.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Feminist research

5.1.1 Method, methodology and epistemology

Over the years feminist scholarship has acquired much empirical knowledge around women – their lives, experiences and desires. However, applying a method in which we ‘add women and stir’ to existing bodies of knowledge is not a sufficient method to understand the way in which gender operates in various levels of society (Harding and Hintikka, 2003). Therefore, feminist scholars have called for a “revolution in epistemology” (Harding, 2003:311). In understanding this call we need to apprehend the different elements involved in how we do research: method, methodology and epistemology. *Method* refers to the techniques we use to gather and analyze information, *methodology*, in turn, to how we chose to employ these different methods. Methodologies are based upon what we believe that knowledge is and how we can achieve such knowing. Together these constitute *epistemology* (Harding 1987 in Sprague, 2005:4). According to Sprague, the ‘narrowly technical’ accounts which are commonly associated with method – are not only ‘tedious,’ but also illustrative of the positivist dominance in science. Due examination of epistemologies is therefore needed in order to establish *how researchers actually know what they know* (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002).

5.1.2 Questioning the dichotomous way of producing meaning

Feminists have argued that categories such as knowing, subject, objectivity and rationality are not gender-neutral but rest upon gendered meaning and practice (ibid:24f). This is effectively illustrated by Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002:12):

The common sense of western thought largely takes for granted that knowledge of reality rests on factual evidence that can be observed, and that these facts (if properly interpreted) can indicate what is real, independently of researcher’s values. The inferiority of women was scientifically established in the nineteenth century in this way (by examining brain size and bodily differences, observing behaviour, and so on). Feminists have challenged these ‘facts’ by arguing that patriarchal and racial prejudices and power relations were present in the initial ideas and in the research method, producing ‘bad’ theory, and that the evidence of inferiority does not ‘fit’ reality or accord with experience.

A key claim is therefore that knowledge is part of the social structures within which the research is undertaken and knowledge is therefore constructed rather than a collection of 'objective facts' (Raghuram, Madge and Skelton, 1998:39). Peterson and Runyan (1993) suggest that the singularity of Western thought has privileged 'binarism' partially because of the importance of *science* in Western culture. Western science has two given dichotomies: the separation of 'fact' from 'value' and 'knower' (subject) from 'known' (object). These terms are awarded particular status because of their connection to science and the claims of 'objective knowledge' (Peterson and Runyan, 1993).

In common with feminisms in other disciplines, an important feminist project in geography has been to question the Western Enlightenment idea that the world can be studied through binary divisions (Forsberg, 2003; McDowell, 1999; Rose, 1993). In other words, it has questioned the construction of knowledge based on *dualisms* of masculinity and femininity, defined and depicted in *relational* terms as dichotomies (see for example Massey, 1994). Such dichotomous couples tend to construct 'woman' as 'not man,' and masculinity is therefore what femininity is not, and vice versa. The structure is hierarchical, where the dominant, positively rewarded term, is the first term in the binary structure. For example: man/woman, self/other, economy/society, production/reproduction, formal/informal public/private, workplace/home and so forth (Gibson-Graham, 2000; McDowell, 2004; Peterson and Runyan, 1993). The Western way of producing meaning through such binary structures: "establishes a relation of opposition and exclusion rather than similarity and mixture between the two terms" (Gibson-Graham, 2000:98). Thus, if a 'factory' is a site of production, then a 'not factory', for example the household is, either not a site of production, or (as a production unit) inferior to that of the factory (ibid). Important to this thesis is to move beyond the way that (economic) geography scholarship has approached the labor market through the dichotomies: formal/informal, productive/reproductive, public/private, workplace/home. Whereas mainstream economic geography has largely placed emphasis upon the first term in the binary structure, it is argued here that we need to approach these as a continuum – as interdependent and interconnected.

5.1.3 Feminist methodologies?

There is no unified feminist methodology. Instead, feminist researchers employ a number of different research techniques and hold different ontological and epistemological positions (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). However, feminist methodologies are distinctive in the sense that “they are shaped by feminist theory, politics and ethics and grounded in women’s experiences” (ibid:16). Feminist methodologies are, therefore, just as with other methodologies, not possible to separate from the ideas, subjectivity, politics, ethics and social location of the researcher (ibid). In approaching our research problem, methodology and method we thus also need to devote due attention to the location and ‘positionality’ of the researcher her/himself – because, as researchers we are, what Haraway (1988) call, ‘situated’. We carry with us a number of preconditions related to who we are and where we are from into the research project – in choosing the problem, writing, conducting field work and in analysis.

I have, therefore, approached all the different aspects of this research project with the underlying assumption that I am situated. The knowledge I have acquired is, as such, embedded in my location (historical, national and generational) and in my positionality (gender, class and ethnicity) (Miraftab, 2004).



5.2 Methodology

5.2.1 Field work

Empirically this study is based on field work conducted in Penang between 2009 and 2011. Field work has many advantages. For me, it offered the possibility to retrieve information around women's work which could not be obtained through official labor force data or through secondary sources (Dunn, 2010). It also provided the opportunity to apply a methodology which could start from the lived experiences of women (Mohanty, 2006). That said, *field work* can mean a number of different things in different disciplines (Wolf, 1996), and within geography it was long associated with "imperial interests and military conquests" – on field practices focusing on surveying, charting and assessment of resources rather than with social practices (Katz, 1996:177). The type of field work pursued here is, however, more closely related to field work practices that developed in the 1970s and which focused on: "the sociospatial practices of people's everyday lives, or with peoples productions of space, place and nature as constitutive of social life" (ibid:178). Such fieldwork offers the potential to retrieve important information around the lives and experiences of women – but it is also associated with several difficulties and challenges. In the coming sections I will therefore present my research design, explain my choices and address some of the challenges faced during this process.⁵³

5.2.2 Informant interviews

Although field work has been the primary method through which empirical knowledge has been acquired in this thesis I have also, prior to the field work, performed a number of informant interviews. These were mainly with officials working in international organizations, and whose competence was related to gender, trade and labor rights – mostly in the Southeast Asian region (the full list of informants is found in Appendix 1). The purpose of these interviews was to gather background information around women's labor force participation in the region (including how labor force data is collected and can be interpreted) as well as women's general position in the labor market and their related labor rights. Although these interviews are

⁵³ Esping (1999:87) proposes that we through including personal reflections in the texts we make the reader feel more connected to the field and we are also able to demonstrate the many difficulties associated with the research process. This, she argues, "increases the validity of the material".

not explicitly referred to in the papers – they were nonetheless important to shaping my pre-understanding of the region and for the formulation of the research problem.

In Penang I also conducted an interview with the Health and Licensing Department and the Penang Municipal Council (MPPP). The purpose of this interview was to gain better insight into Penang hawker policies.

5.2.3 Focus of the field work

The main purpose of the field work was to conduct qualitative research interviews with women informal workers – to learn more about women’s experiences in the labor market and the factors that influence their labor market decisions. In order to get a connection to a research environment in Malaysia knowledgeable on gender issues I had the valuable opportunity to be affiliated with the Women’s Development Research Centre (KANITA) at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Penang. The first field visit lasted around two and a half month, January to April 2009, and the four follow-up visits in 2010 and 2011 around two weeks respectively. Given the limited data available around women’s informal work in Malaysia, a first obstacle encountered when aiming to interview this group was how to identify an appropriate group of female workers. Together with my colleagues at USM I therefore developed the idea of approaching women *hawkers* in and around Penang’s many *wet markets*.⁵⁴ The majority of the women interviewed in these sites had personal experiences from working export-oriented employment. However, this was not part of my criteria for selection of respondents. Instead, the only criteria used was that they would form part of the informal labor force (for more on selection see below).

Hawking and its relating policies

An obvious advantage of focusing on women hawkers in markets was that it provided the opportunity to approach an important group of informal workers (see previous chapter) in a public and accessible location. While hawking in the street is still a common practice in Penang, the spatial organization of hawking has been profoundly affected by contemporary hawker policies. All hawkers are, for example, requested to obtain a license in order to conduct their business and, as in many other Malaysian states,

⁵⁴ A wet market refers to a market in which fresh vegetables, fruits, meat and fish is sold. In the fish section the floor is kept wet – hence the name.

authorities in Penang are seeking to move hawkers from the streets into designated market sites (MPPP, 2008). Based on surveys conducted throughout Penang, a large number of designated hawker sites have been put in place – mainly in residential areas.⁵⁵ These markets are built structures where the local authorities provide electricity and water and opening hours are restricted, usually from early morning (around six o'clock) and until around noon.

To mainly focus upon women workers in and around these morning markets in residential areas reflects the choice to focus upon sites where I would be able to find a large number of women.⁵⁶ This focus has the advantage that it makes it possible to record empirical material from a group of women who are often overlooked in both data and analysis of hawking or its related policy. It does, however, have the disadvantage that only one specific segment of the informal workforce features in the analysis. That said, the female workforce interviewed in these sites is far from homogenous. As will be revealed further below, they are differentiated by, for example, ethnicity and age as well as by the location of their workplace and their status of employment.

The wet-markets

All the market sites visited in Penang have a similar spatial organization. As a general rule, there is one 'food-court' section of the market. Here cooked food can be consumed on location or as take-away. In these sections, as seen in Figures 3 and 5, the vendors have their own separate space for cooking and there is a joint eating area in the middle. In the visited markets the food-court sections were largely female dominated. The ethnic composition of the workforce, however, varies with the ethnic composition of the community where it is located. In some cases there are also several food courts catering to different ethnic groups.⁵⁷

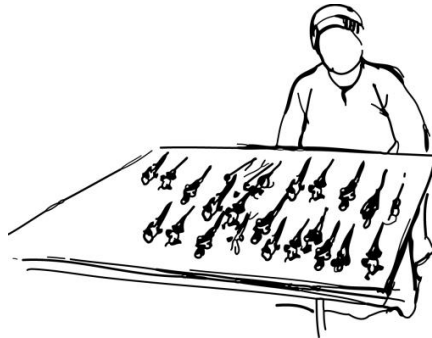
⁵⁵ For more discussion around the gendered aspects of this policy, see Paper 2.

⁵⁶ With the notable exceptions Batu Ferringhi and Chow Rasta (see below).

⁵⁷ The reason is that the ethnic groups have their own food cultures and preferences (Lam, 1982:52). The Malay population is Muslim and the Syariah Laws (which apply to the Muslim part of the population) contain requirements with regard to hygiene, sanitation and safety of foods which have implications for the way that food is both produced and consumed. The vending of pork, for example, takes place in a separate section of the market. The Indian Hindus, on the other hand, do not have beef, although beef still sold in the open section of the market.

The second part of the market is an ‘open hall’, where fresh produce, such as fruit, vegetables, fish, dry goods and tinned food, is sold. As seen in Figures 6-8, the stalls here are usually spread out in a large open hall. The stalls in this section are, usually, bigger than the stalls in the food court section with one or several additional employees. In the surveyed markets they also tended to be male dominated. There is also a section which cater for non-food items such as clothing, stationary, traditional medicines etcetera (see Figure 4). Here there are also services provided such as sewing and printing.

All stalls located inside the market buildings are licensed. However, it should be noted that *the work performed* is informal. The workforce does, however, belong to all employment categories used in official labor statistics: employers, employees, own account and unpaid family workers.



Streets and homes

In the streets (often surrounding the markets), see Figures 8-9, there are also vendors performing their business from push-cars or portable tables. These vendors are both licensed and unlicensed (illegal) but the size of the actual stall may vary significantly. They also sell a wide variety of produce such as cooked or raw food, clothing or toys.

Some of the stalls inside and around the markets get goods delivered from home-workers in the area (see Figure 11). This includes products such as cooked or packaged food, snacks, cookies, candy, dried fish or the like. Many of these workers run small-scale businesses – but some also have employees working for them. The homeworkers were important to include because of their general lack of visibility in analysis of the labor market – and because of the special interest of this thesis in deconstructing dichotomies such as workplace/home.



Figure 3. Food court stall, Teluk Bahang, 2009.



Figure 4. Clothing stall, Balik Pulau, 2009.



Figure 5. Food court section, Teluk Bahang, 2009.



Figure 6. Vegetable stall in open hall, Teluk Bahang, 2009.



Figure 7. Fish vending, Teluk Bahang, 2010.



Figure 8. Coconutmilk stall, Teluk Bahang, 2009.



Figure 9. Street vendors, Teluk Bahang, 2009.



Figure 10. Street vendor food, Batu Ferringhi, 2011.



Figure 11. Business from home, Teluk Bahang, 2011.

5.3 Selection of field work sites and respondents

5.3.1 The locations

The different interview locations, marked on the map below (see Figure 8), were chosen by taking into account the socio-economic setting of the community in which they are located as well as their distance to major industries of employment (i.e. the Export Processing Zone, the main tourism areas and Penang's main urban center George Town). The purpose here was, however, not to cover all types of locations throughout Penang – but rather to achieve variety in the locational characteristics.

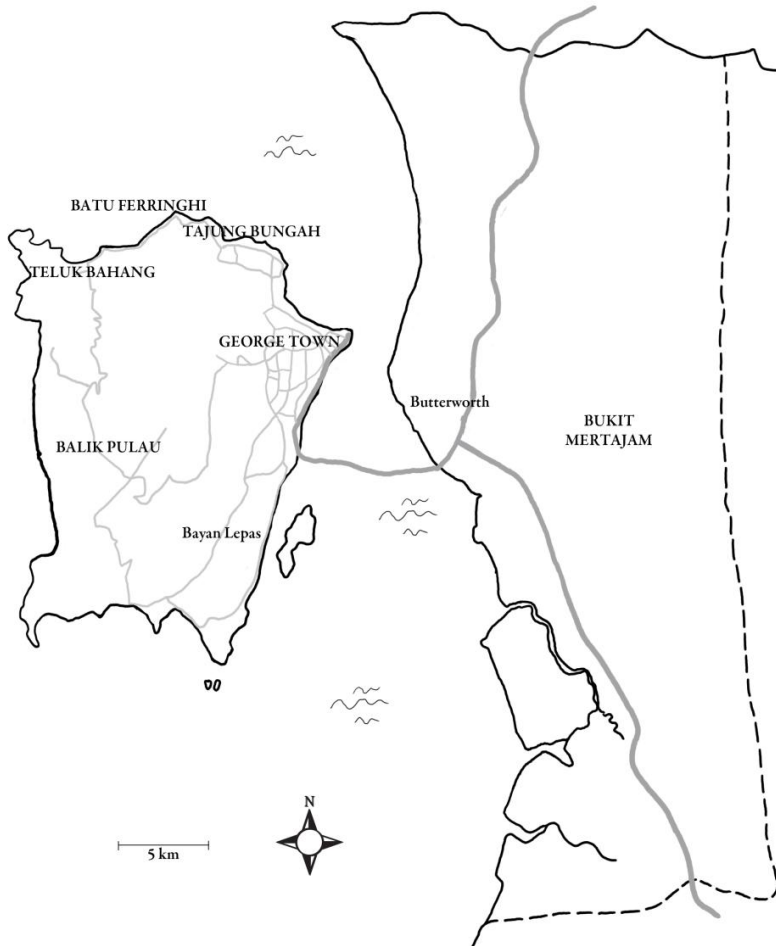


Figure 12. Map of the State of Penang with marked field locations and major roads.

Tanjung Bungah

The Tanjung Bungah community is a fast-growing middle-class suburban area of George Town, where condominium apartment blocks and resorts are mushrooming along the beach front (see Figure 9). The wet market, where all the interviews were conducted, is located in the older part of the community. The workforce here is predominantly ethnic Chinese, although interviews were also conducted with Malay and Indian workers in the market. In Tanjung Bungah I conducted a total of 20 interviews. The

majority of the women worked as food hawkers but a limited number also sold clothes or traditional medicine.⁵⁸



Figure 13. The Tanjung Bungah floating Mosque, 2010.

Batu Ferringhi

Further west along the coast line from Tanjung Bungah we find *Batu Ferringhi*. This is Penang's main beach tourism center and the former fishing village and its surrounding environment has had to give way to heavy tourism development, particularly along the beach front. Batu Ferringhi deviates from the other sites in that the women did not work in and around a morning market. Instead the eleven women interviewed here work in a hawker center, in streets or at home. The main reason for including this group was that I wanted to record the experiences of women who work in such close proximity to the big tourism establishments.

⁵⁸ The main reason to start in Tanjung Bungah was that it was a familiar environment to me. The family with whom I stayed during all the field visits did their shopping here and I had accompanied them to the market on many occasions.

Teluk Bahang

Continuing further west from Batu Ferringhi along the winding coastal road to the north western tip of the island we find the old Malay fishing village *Teluk Bahang*. Whereas Tanjung Bungah is suburban and Chinese dominated, *Teluk Bahang* is semi-rural and predominantly Malay. While fishing used to dominate the economy in *Teluk Bahang*, over the last few decades the village population has found it increasingly difficult to make a living from fishing and many have instead found employment in manufacturing or tourism (Ghazali, 2009; 2010). Here the largest number of interviews was performed, in total 38 (36 women and 2 men). The wet market is located along the main road of the village and the majority of the interviewed women work inside or in the streets around the market, although three women are home-workers.

Balik Pulau

All three of the above locations are found along the northern coastal road. By contrast, *Balik Pulau* is located inland and is the closest study location to the Bayan Lepas EPZ. This was the key reason for choosing this location. The new *Balik Pulau* market is one of Penang's biggest and most modern market venues, and is located on the outskirts of the small town. The workforce is ethnically mixed but the women interviewed are mostly Malay and run their own small fixed stalls in the section of the market where non-food goods are sold (see Figure 4).

Bukit Mertanjam

Apart from the interviews in the Island of Penang I also conducted one group interview (with 38 women) and two individual interviews in the small town *Bukit Mertanjam* on mainland Penang. This group of women belonged to one of Malaysia's many micro-credit schemes, *the Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia* (AIM). I was able to get in touch with this group through the wife of my interpreter who was part of the scheme. The interview took place during one of their weekly gatherings. The original purpose of going to *Bukit Mertanjam* was to include interviews with women hawkers in the mainland part of Penang State. However, upon arrival at the AIM meeting it became clear that the women had not anticipated that I conduct individual interviews. Instead, they expected me to speak to the women as a group. As an improvised way to conduct a group interview I, therefore, rephrased the questions somewhat from the interview guide and the women answered by

the raising of hands and by some women giving further explanation of their responses. Due to the nature of this interview and my personal relation to the group (which meant that I was treated as a personal guest of one of its members) I have used the group interview as background information and only included the two individual interviews that I was able to perform outside the meeting as part of my main empirical analysis.

The total number of female respondents interviewed by geographic location is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Total number of female respondents by location.

Location	Number of respondents
Balik Pulau	11
Batu Ferringhi	11
Bukit Mertanjam	2
Tanjung Bungah	20
Teluk Bahang	36
Total	80

Source: Field work conducted 2009-2011; own compilation.

5.3.2 The respondents on site

As stated above, selection of respondents was based on the criteria that they would form part of the informal labor force. In the selected locations I aimed to approach as many women as possible. This was done through starting in one section and randomly walking between the different stalls to ask if they would be prepared to participate in an interview. We (the interpreter and I) introduced me as a researcher from Sweden, now staying at USM, who was performing research around Malaysian women's work. We tried to make it clear that the purpose of the interview was solely to collect information for a university report. This was done for two main reasons. First, I wanted to emphasize that I had no affiliation with the authorities, and second, I did not want to give them the impression that I would have the possibility to improve their working conditions (in case they would want such a change).⁵⁹

⁵⁹ While the importance of making clear to the respondents what the study is about is often proclaimed in text books and lectures on field work methods, Amberntsson (2011:73) poses skepticism: "My own experience [from field work in Zambia] tells me that it is rather

Because all the women were approached in their place of work there were a number who were too busy at the time to sit down to talk. A few were also reluctant to take part because of the presence of their boss. The latter problem was most common when trying to approach migrant workers who were employees in stalls and on two occasions I was chased away by the employer, who aggressively shouted that I should “not interrogate his workers”. It was, on some occasions, possible to return at a later stage – but in cases where it would have meant disturbing their possibility to work or placing them in a compromising situation I chose not to speak to them. The limitation of this is, clearly, that their stories will not be recorded as part of my material – but has the advantage that I did not put them in danger of losing their jobs – which, for me, had priority.⁶⁰ Also, the number of women recorded in each market was not *per se* interesting for the purpose of my study.

Approaching the home-workers was primarily done via personal contacts with women in the markets who get their goods delivered from these workers. We approached them either by first calling them (in the cases where there was a phone number available) or by going to their house. All home-workers approached were willing to take part.

5.3.3 Interviews with male workers

While all of the interviews described above were conducted with female respondents I also conducted interviews with two male hawkers in the main locations and 12 individual interviews with a group of male meat and fish vendors in the Chow Rasta market in central George Town. These interviews were made to get a better understanding of the gendered spatial division of informal and market work in Penang. The Chow Rasta market is located in the center of George Town and, having been built in 1890, it is one of Penang’s oldest markets. All 12 of the men interviewed in Chow Rasta are fish and beef vendors on the ground floor of the market building. In contrast with the residential area markets I had visited, it (the meat and

naïve to assume that this type of openness and honesty solves the problem of expectations or biased answers from the respondents. Neither does it solve any other ethical problem involved in development research.”

⁶⁰ On some occasions I had to show my research pass to verify that I did not represent the local authorities. This likely reflects the hawker policies pursued by the Penang authorities – who make regular visits to the market to make sure all vendors are licensed. In the case of illegal hawkers the regular controls are perceived as a real hassle as authorities have the right to issue fines and confiscate their stock.

fish section) is a strikingly male dominated place. During these interviews I did not use any interview guide even though most questions posed to the men revolved, apart from background data, around their work-life history and gendered divisions of labor and spaces in food vending – such as why there were no women in the market, what they perceived as suitable jobs and places for women.⁶¹

5.4 Who are the respondents?

5.4.1 Ethnicity and age

A total of 94 informal workers were interviewed. Out of these 80 are women. As seen in Table 2, the majority are Malay (65 percent) and above 40 years of age.

Table 2: Female respondents by ethnicity and age groups

Age Ethnicity	<20	20-39	40-59	>60	Total
Malay	2	16	29	5	52
Chinese	0	3	8	4	15
Indian	0	1	4	2	7
Migrant	0	4	2	0	6
Total	2	24	43	11	80

Source: Field work conducted 2009-2011; own compilation

The ethnic composition partially reflects the ethnic composition of the sections of the markets that I visited.⁶² In a similar vein, the Malaysian labor force data does suggest that own account work accounts for a larger portion of Malay women’s employment – relative to Chinese and Indian women (Malaysia, 2009:159).⁶³ However, here the limited number of Chinese also

⁶¹ These interviews featured here as background information, however, the main findings from these interviews will be published in a forthcoming anthology on street vending (see Franck, forthcoming).

⁶² Teluk Bahang market, where the most interviews were performed, was Malay dominated. Also, the Balik Pulau market sections that cater for non-food items was largely Malay. The number of Indian women vendors in each of the markets was generally limited.

⁶³ Own account work accounts for 12.3 percent of employed Malay women’s employment. For Chinese and Indian women the equivalent figures are 9.6 and 5.8 percent respectively (Malaysia, 2009:159).

reflects some difficulty associated with getting Chinese vendors to take part (see below for further discussion around this issue). The Malay bias in my material, therefore, needs to be noted.

The age composition of the respondents largely reflects the age composition of the women vendors in the sites. The fact that so many of the vendors are over 40 is also consistent with the labor force data on own account and contributing family workers.⁶⁴

5.4.2 Educational attainment

The vast majority of the women interviewed in Penang lack higher education. In fact, only one out of 80 women had any form of university education. As indicated in Table 3 below, the majority (63 percent) of the respondents had some form of secondary education, although not all had finished their final year (Form 5).

Table 3. Female respondents by educational attainment

Educational attainment	No. of respondents
No education	5
Primary education*	19
Secondary education**	50
Post-secondary education***	4
Higher education	1
Not specified	1
Total	80

*Up to Standard 6 (6 years of education), ** Up to Form 5 (11years), ***1 to 2 years of post-secondary education (13 years).

Source: Field work conducted 2009-2011; own compilation.

5.4.3 Current employment status

The women interviewed belong to several different groups of hawkers. They work in markets, food-courts, streets or homes. Although they all belong to the informal labor force – they occupy different employment categories. These are, however, not so easily determined and, when looking at their status of employment as shown in Table 4, it should be borne in

⁶⁴ See Paper 2 for further discussion around this issue.

mind that women may belong to several categories.⁶⁵ The majority (around 69 percent) of the women can be categorized as *own account workers*. As such, they run their own stalls and work for profit – rather than wages. Amongst these, most work in licensed stalls inside the market – but some were also illegal street hawkers. The second most common employment status was *employee*, followed by *employer* and *unpaid family worker*. The category employer is interesting in this context given that women hawkers and street vendors are usually portrayed as poor and lacking in resources.⁶⁶

Table 4. Status of employment by ethnicity.

	Employer	Employee	Own account	Unpaid family worker	Total
Malay	5	8	35	4	52
Chinese	0	3	12	0	15
Indian	0	2	5	0	7
Migrant	0	3	3	0	6
Total	5	16	55	4	80

Source: Field work conducted 2009-2011; own compilation.

5.4.4 Previous labor market experiences

The women had varying labor market experiences. As seen in Table 5, the majority (75 percent) had previously held formal jobs. Amongst these, only 2 women had previously worked in the agricultural sector⁶⁷ while the vast majority had held employment in manufacturing or services. Previous engagement in manufacturing was especially frequent among Malay women. All those who reported having worked in manufacturing had worked in factories (mostly in the Bayan Lepas EPZ but some also in the industrial estates on the mainland) and, amongst those who reported having worked in the service sector, 48 percent had worked in hotels and an additional 7 percent in restaurants.⁶⁸ Amongst the group of women who had held formal

⁶⁵ For more elaborate discussions around how the respondents could be categorized in accordance with status of employment see Paper 4.

⁶⁶ For further discussion, see Paper 3.

⁶⁷ One agricultural worker had previously worked in a plantation and the other in chicken breeding.

⁶⁸ Other categories of service employment included, for example, clerical work, supermarket, construction – some of which was also related to the tourism industry.

employment before, these two groups amounted to 78 percent.⁶⁹ Those who replied that they had no former labor market experience included women who had previously worked informally – and only four women in total stated that they had previously been housewives.

Given the interest of this thesis in adding knowledge to debates around the outcome of export-orientation for women workers, one option could have been to focus exclusively upon those previously employed by factories, hotels and other tourism-related jobs. An advantage of this would, perhaps, have been a more precise focus. However, the focus upon both the groups (those with previous experience from export-industry employment and those without) provided the opportunity to compare the two groups. Also, export-industry jobs are central for women’s employment in Penang (particularly for women who lack higher education) and the interviews revealed that the conditions of export-orientation had significant impact upon the way that women in all groups were able to access formal employment.

Table 5. Previous labor market experience by ethnicity.

	Agriculture	Manufacturing	Services*	No formal experience	Total
Malay	0	23	20	9	52
Chinese	1	2	6	6	15
Indian	1	3	1	2	7
Migrant	0	1	2	3	6
Total	2	29	29	20	80

* Using the UN based ISIC system, services include: construction, trade, transport, professional business services and public services.

Source: Field work conducted 2009-2011; own compilation.

5.5 The interviews

5.5.1 Developing the interview guide

During February 2009 I conducted a pilot-study in Tanjung Bungah where 6 interviews were performed. Using the experiences from the pilot I developed the first interview guide. It included 36 questions (see Appendix

⁶⁹ Also amongst the whole group of women (including both those with and without former labor market experience), former factory and tourism-related workers constitute a majority – representing 45 out of 80 women.

2) and, apart from recording basic data (such as age, ethnicity, marital status, educational level, living conditions) the open-ended questions revolved around a few main themes: a) their current work and working conditions (status of employment, income, working hours, entitlements and access to welfare schemes, union membership etcetera), b) their previous labor market experiences from formal jobs and c) work-family relationships. A total of 51 women were interviewed using this first guide in Tanjung Bungah followed by Teluk Bahang and Batu Ferringhi.

In September 2009 I returned to Penang to perform more interviews. During this and later visits I used a slightly amended interview guide which now included 49 questions (see Appendix 3). The reason for these changes was that I wanted to further capture and clarify certain aspects of the issues included in the previous guide – particularly aspects relating to intra-household relations, gendered spatial boundaries and mobility, and entrepreneurship. Using this second interview guide 29 more women were interviewed during revisits to Batu Ferringhi, Tanjung Bungah and Teluk Bahang and in the new location: Balik Pulau.⁷⁰

5.5.2 Performing the interviews

The interviews were semi-structured (Dunn, 2010) and while trying to get all the women to respond to all the questions in the interview guide I also encouraged them to speak freely. The interviews, therefore, sometimes deviated from the questions in the interview guide. The advantage was that it allowed me and/or the respondent to improvise. It also made it possible for the respondent to raise issues that they perceived as relevant for my problem (Silverman, 1993: 95). However, it should be noted that open-ended questions do not avoid the “social control which shapes what people say” (ibid) and research interviews always involve power relations (Kvale, 1997). It is also important to remember that we do not necessarily acquire ‘unique’ information just because we let people speak freely. The respondents and I have different cultural backgrounds – and my experience of when they were at their most ‘authentic’ might be, as stated by Silverman,

⁷⁰ I also conducted follow-up interviews with five women. The selection of whom to interview on more than one occasion was based partially on their availability at the time, their responses in the previous surveys around issues where I wanted to further the analysis. They also represented different groups of informal workers – i.e. they had varying status of employment, ran/worked in smaller or larger business and belonged to different ethnic groups.

“when they are, in effect, reproducing a cultural script” (Silverman, 1993:96).

The way that the interviews played out varied significantly and the depth of the information retrieved depended both upon the respondent’s willingness to talk and the nature of the interview situation. Where the interview is taking place is significant (Aitken, 2001) and approaching the women in their workplaces had the advantage that I was able to observe their work situation up close. It was, for example, through spending a lot of time in their workplaces that I knew that they performed a wide variety of income generating activities which they, as discussed in Paper 4, would not always mention in response to my questions. That said, these workplaces also produced quite a ‘messy’ interview situation. In the food-court sections of the markets we would mostly sit down at one of the tables in the shared eating area and on numerous occasions these interviews were interrupted by customers and curious friends and relatives wanting to join in to the conversation. On a limited number of occasions husbands would also show up and start answering questions on behalf of the wife. This was a difficult situation to handle and in the cases where it was possible I tried to restate the question to the wife once more to record her own answer. If that was not possible I treated the husband’s answer as a background information and only recorded the information retrieved directly from the wife as part of my empirical material. The interviews with the home-workers were, which took place in their houses, were therefore the easiest to perform. Although neighbors would sometimes show up, the women were not working while the interviews were made.

5.5.3 Working with interpretation

While many respondents spoke English, all interviews were performed in the company of an interpreter. For the most part this was a Malay interpreter whom I knew from my previous visits to Penang. He had no formal training in interpreting but had spent several years in the United States and had acquired excellent English. However, Bahasa Melayu was his mother tongue, Swedish is my mother tongue – and consequently none of us are native English speakers. Coming from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds there are always questions regarding how the questions are understood by the parties involved. Interpretation issues are not limited to those arising purely from language and, as noted by Espling (1999), we need to be aware that the interview situation involves a number of different

interpretations of each interview question – mine, the interpreter’s and the respondents’. During such circumstances misunderstandings easily occur. One way to avoid validity problems is, therefore, to triangulate through control questions, comparison with other interviews and/or observations (Amberntsson, 2011:72; Silverman, 1993:156f). The interpreter and I also tried to address this problem through careful preparation of the interviews where we would discuss the purpose of each question in the guide and through evaluation of the interviews, and new questions which had arisen during interviews, afterwards. All interviews were recorded using an audio recorder (for which permission had been asked in advance, Dunn (2010:114)) and we therefore had the opportunity to return to the interviews to make clarifications when needed. Clearly, interviewing as well as interpreting requires skills that go beyond language and, as the months passed, the interpreter and I developed these skills together, which, hopefully, made the interviews better as well as helping us to reduce misunderstandings and mistranslations.

Situating the interpreter: gender, class and ethnicity

As revealed above, working with interpretation can be associated with a number of difficulties. In the Malaysian context these are aggravated by the ethnic relations present in all aspects of every-day life. The main interpreter was ethnic Malay and male. Many of the Malay women seemed to share with him a certain level of understanding regarding the rules that women felt they were expected to conform to (sometimes willingly and sometimes less willingly). Some respondents also turned to him to find confirmation of their answers – which could have influenced the information given. It should, therefore, be acknowledged that his male gender may have influenced the way that these and other women responded to the questions. The obvious option would have been to work with a female interpreter. However, amongst my Malaysian acquaintances there was no such person, with the right language skills, available and the option would thus have been to find an ‘official’ interpreter through the university. This would, I believe, have been connected with other difficulties - such as that a university student or university educated interpreter would, most likely, have a different class background. The fact that the interpreter I worked with had himself worked as a hawker, was, most likely, not perceived as ‘coming from above’ and had a very good and ‘informal’ way of approaching the respondents, for me, therefore, outweighed the fact that he was male.

The ethnicity of the interpreter sometimes surfaced as a problem. For one, as mentioned above, his first language is Bahasa Melayu and although the other ethnic groups mostly understand and speak Bahasa, their mother tongue was commonly Hokkien (for the Chinese) or Tamil (for the Indians). One example of when ethnicity was explicitly raised was during an interview with an Indian woman. In this situation the respondent talked about the problem of increasing competition in the market and the fact that Malay customers would not buy her rice because she was ethnic Indian. As the interpreter got up to wash his hands the respondent commented:

You know the Malays here are very nasty. Don't tell, please, please, please!
... Because you come with Malay. ... Are you a Muslim? We cannot talk
about it today. ... I don't want to be trouble.

Given my difficulties in approaching some Chinese vendors in Tanjung Bungah, during later field visits I also worked with Chinese interpretation in this location. However, developing a good and productive method to work with interpretation (for both the researcher and interpreter) takes time. And, although the Chinese interpreter did enable me to approach additional Chinese respondents, I am not entirely sure that this improved the information I was able to retrieve. These interviews were, for example, generally shorter and required more explanation on my behalf compared to those conducted with 'my regular' interpreter. One way to solve the above difficulties could have been to work with three different interpreters. However, given the limited time frame for field work I did not regard this as desirable or even feasible option.

5.5.4 Situating myself in the field

While it is sometimes argued that through qualitative research methods we are able to acquire more 'insider' knowledge (Limb and Dwyer, 2001:4; Gilbert, 1994) my experience from field work in Malaysia is quite different. While I shared with the women a certain level of understanding regarding the responsibilities of raising children and the double-burden of being a working woman still responsible for much of the house work – I am not an 'insider' – neither as a woman nor as a researcher employing qualitative methods. Although the wonderful feeling of 'belonging' has been present during many interviews, I have instead looked upon myself, in my encounters with my respondents, as a privileged visitor. As a *minab salleh*

(roughly translated into ‘white chick’ by my translator), taking an interest in how their working lives relate to global processes. The nature of our relationship involves issues of power, class, race, colonialism, mobility, control and choice. However, just as described by Wright (2006), I find it an impossible task to pinpoint exactly how my person and presence was viewed by the respondents – and how this, in turn, has influenced the information I was able to retrieve. There were, however, certain categories important to my positioning in the field which, on several occasions, surfaced during interviews as part of defining who I was and what I was doing there: my gender, ethnicity, nationality, age, religion, professional background, marital status and family.

An issue, with which I struggled during the field work, was a feeling of uncertainty on how to behave. My strong desire to behave appropriately, as a woman, a *minab salleh* and a researcher, in a place and space foreign to me, caused a lot of insecurity on my part in the actual interview situation. I struggled with questions ranging from what to wear to whether I was expected to order something from their stall. Interviewing women in their work place at the market I wanted to make sure that their business was not interrupted because of the interview. How was I supposed to behave when we were interrupted by customers? Should I stop the interview when relatives, friends or the husband turned up at the table? Did they want me to introduce myself? When reading Wolf (1996) describing how feminist scholars have experienced their role in the field – as women and foreigners, I feel some sense of relief. She describes how women researchers often experience stronger pressure to adhere to gender role behavior than male colleagues and have experienced precisely these types of insecurities and had to make decisions on what to wear and how to behave. Perhaps this can also be used as an illustration of that the relationship (perhaps even the power relation) between the researcher and the researched is not static – in the sense that it changes, sometimes during the course of the interview, and always from one interview situation to the other, depending on many factors – amongst them the perception of ‘situatedness’ discussed above (see Miraftab, 2004).

Inside, outside or in-between?

Miraftab (2004) offers an interesting way out of the discussion around the insider/outsider relationship between the researcher and the researched by suggesting the usefulness of the metaphor ‘betweenness’. She argues that

despite the opposite intention, the constant self-appraisal and self-reflexivity of feminist researchers risk presenting women being researched as merely passive; objectified, mute and lacking any forms of power (p.597). In her thought-provoking article ‘Can You Belly Dance?..’ (2004) she describes how she, as a Western educated Iranian young women entered field work in Guadalajara, Mexico. The respondents in her research handled the interview situation in various ways – influenced by their perception of *her* social situatedness. This, she suggests, “points to how the relationship between the researcher and the researched can emerge beyond the researcher’s predictable notions about the sources of power and privilege” (ibid:601).

Anyone conducting field work in a foreign environment has probably experienced being interviewed by the respondents. The questions are driven by many things, curiosity, caution and suspicion – as the respondent is trying to situate the researcher before giving out, sometimes sensitive, information about their lives. During my field work in Malaysia this was also very common, highlighting the point that the respondents were not passively answering my questions but actively taking part in forming the interview. Some respondents would interrupt the interview to ask “Why are you asking this?” Sometimes because they found the questions odd (sometimes plain stupid, I think) and sometimes because they wanted to make sure that this information would not be handed over to the authorities. Some of the women gave me directions on what I should include in my study by underlining certain statements and saying “Please write that in your report!” I also received a certain level of criticism from some of the respondents regarding the choice of questions, like one respondent stating: “(...) all these questions you ask are really only on the surface, you know.”

5.6 Analysis

5.6.1 A note on representation

Clearly, the interpretation of empirical ‘facts’ is not an isolated part of the research project (taking part only in, for example, an interpretative section), but rather it is an ongoing process throughout all research projects (Holme and Solvang, 1997). As suggested by Alvesson and Kärreman (2007:1265), data are “inextricably fused with theory” and prior to the ‘data’ being collected the analysis has thus already begun. In analyzing the retrieved empirical material I have aimed to make the respondents subjects, not

objects, of my research.⁷¹ I have to the largest degree possible tried to avoid representing the respondents in the analysis – emotionally, politically, academically or culturally. While trying to avoid ‘representation’– it needs to be acknowledged that in the analysis I hold the power to use the ‘data’ in the way that I interpret it.

5.6.2 Operationalizing the data in the articles

All of the interviews were recorded using an audio recorder. Upon transcript, the empirical material has been coded in accordance with different themes.⁷² These themes were related to the main research questions. I started by identifying their previous labor market experiences and attempted to identify the factors that made them leave their former jobs. I then proceeded to search for the factors that had made them opt for informal work rather than (re)enter the formal work. In the analysis of the results I have to the largest degree possible tried to use direct citations – rather than describing, in my words, what the respondents have stated. That said, the identification and categorization of different ‘factors’ – based on answers given to open-ended questions – is clearly subject to my situated understanding and interpretation of what the women have stated. In the following papers I have operationalized the findings using the whole or part of the sample to address one or several of the research questions (see Figure 14).

Paper 1 (Women’s waged work and bargaining power under conditions of export-orientation: The case of Penang, Malaysia) makes use of the whole of the empirical material collected in Penang – although emphasis in the empirical sections is placed upon those who have previously held employment in factories or in the tourism industry. This paper is structured around the factors that made the women leave formal employment – and focuses upon how former employment in export-industries influences

⁷¹ I do, however, recognize some of the valid criticism leveled at this approach by, amongst others Gilbert (1994), that a certain level of objectification may even be ‘desirable’ as engagement and attachment also places research subjects at risk of “manipulation and betrayal” and they therefore run the risk of exploitation (Stacey, 1991:113, quoted in Gilbert, 1994:93). Critics have argued that this risk may be even greater with feminist methodologies than with more positivist, abstract, and objectivist research (ibid).

⁷² This categorization was not done using any specific software or computer programs – but rather in the ‘old fashioned’ way through going through the printed transcripts over and over again. The downside of this is that it is a very time-consuming process – where there is a risk of things becoming overlooked. The positive side, for me, was that I became very familiar with the material.

women's ability to bargain for a (re)entry to the labor market after childbirth and marriage. **Paper 2** ('I am too old! Who is going to give me a job?' Women hawkers in Teluk Bahang, Malaysia) focuses on one specific location, Teluk Bahang. It focuses on women's move from the formal to the informal economy through investigating their rights *to* and *at* work. This paper makes use of most aspects covered in the interview guide – their labor market experiences and choices as well as current working situation. By contrast, **Paper 3** (Factors motivating women's informal micro-entrepreneurship: Experiences from Penang, Malaysia) focuses selectively upon the women who can be categorized as own account workers/self-employed/micro-entrepreneurs – and the factors that motivated their entry to such work. While the whole sample of own account workers feature in the article it highlights two individual stories. These two stories, notwithstanding their many common features, illustrate the diversity of the hawker workforce in Penang. **Paper 4** (Missing women? The underrecording and underreporting of women's work in Malaysia) is a methodology article – where emphasis is placed upon the difficulties associated with recording women's work. The empirical material used covers all 80 women interviewed in Penang.



6. SUMMARY OF THE INDIVIDUAL PAPERS

As illustrated in Figure 14, the four individual papers that make up the empirical part of this thesis all relate to one or several of the main research questions (RQ).

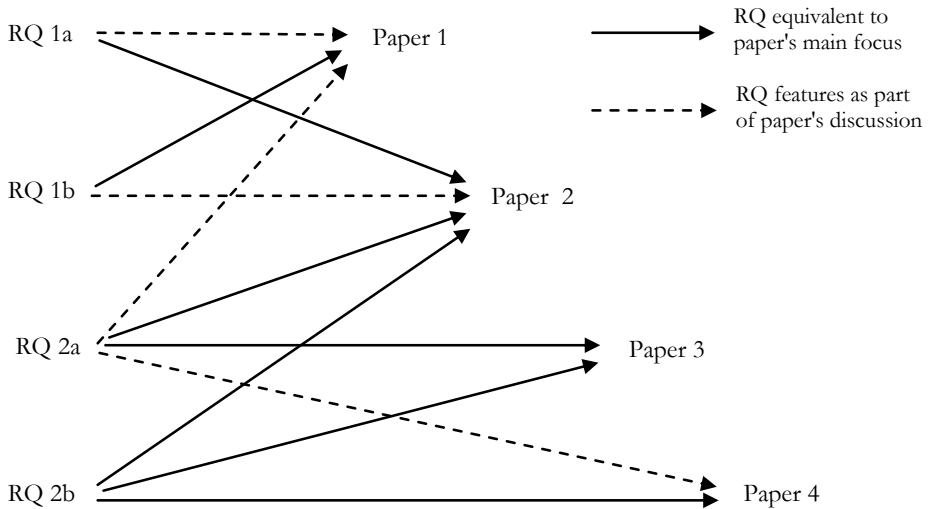


Figure 14. The relationship between research questions (RQ) and individual Papers⁷³

Paper 1 (*Women's waged work and bargaining power under conditions of export-orientation. The case of Penang, Malaysia*) deals with how previous engagement in export-industry employment influences women's ability to bargain for a re-entry to work outside the household at a later stage in life (RQ1b). The analysis is structured around the factors that made women leave their former jobs (RQ1a) and opt for informal work (RQ2b). The paper shows how bargaining gains from engagement in low-skill export-industry employment for the women interviewed in Penang were, much like the job themselves, highly temporary. Once marriage had been entered into,

⁷³ These four questions are: 1a) Which are the key factors that make women leave formal employment? 1b) How does previous engagement in export-industry employment influence women's ability to bargain for a re-entry to work outside the home? 2a) Which factors influence women's decisions to opt for informal work? 2b) How does the entry to and construction of informal work influence women's ability to (re)negotiate gendered spatial boundaries and access to public places of work?

regardless of their previous labor market experiences, they were largely expected to conform to traditional gendered roles in society and households. The paper argues that women's ability to bargain for a re-entry to formal work – after child-birth and marriage – is restricted by the lack of institutional support offered to working mothers and gendered norms, but also by the conditions of work (insecure labor contracts, shift work and low wages) and spatial organization of export production (such as the concentration of activities to special zones/areas).

Paper 2 (*“I am too old! Who is going to give me a job?” Women bankers in Penang, Malaysia*) is based upon the findings in one of the field locations, the Teluk Bahang village. This paper is related to all of the research questions – but has as a key objective to investigate women's move from the formal to informal economy (RQ1a and RQ2a) through a focus upon women's rights to work (the structural and normative constructs frame women's access to jobs and the possibility of keeping them (RQ1b)) and women's rights at work in the informal economy. The spatial aspects of women's labor market decisions and strategies are an important part of the discussion and the paper argues that hawking represents not only an important informal economic activity for women but also a way for them to gain extended access to public places of work (RQ2b).

Paper 3 (*Factors motivating women's informal micro-entrepreneurship: Experiences from Penang, Malaysia*) focuses primarily upon the factors that make women opt for informal work – and specifically micro-entrepreneurship (RQ2a). It also involves discussion of how normative constructs around informal work and gendered spatial boundaries influence women's decisions to opt for such activities (RQ2b). In contrast to the view that women's informal micro-entrepreneurship is motivated only by ‘involuntary exclusion from the labor market’ or ‘poverty’, the paper argues that women's micro-entrepreneurship can be motivated by a wide range of factors – including: to earn an income, interest in doing business, increased flexibility and autonomy, possibility to combine with family obligations and re-negotiating spatial practices. It also argues that necessity and choice may be ‘co-present’ in the motives to enter this type of work.

Paper 4 (*Missing women? The underrecording and underreporting of women's work in Malaysia*, co-authored with Jerry Olsson) focuses upon the methodological

difficulties associated with recording women's work. It aims to contribute both experiences from trying to record women's remunerative activities in Penang as well as to theoretical debates around why women do not report their labor in official surveys. Regarding the latter, the paper suggests a more agency based view and looks at how women use both covert and overt strategies to secure their access to informal income-earning activities (RQ2a) in the face of intra-household gendered power-relations and gendered constructions and perceptions of work and workplaces (RQ2b).

7. CONCLUSIONS

7.1 So where did the research mystery lead?

Official data tells us that female labor force participation in Malaysia remains below 50 percent. This means that a majority of working aged women in Malaysia are ‘missing’ from the labor force. However, already in the introduction to this thesis, questions were raised regarding what official data can actually tell us about women’s work. And, as the work is now coming towards the end, I conclude that, although the work of the women I have encountered in Penang remains largely unaccounted for in the official data, they work *a lot*. From early mornings until late at night they are busy cooking, cleaning, washing, taking care of their own children and grandchildren as well as nieces, nephews and neighbors, caring for their parents and in-laws, buying food and groceries, vending in markets and streets, sewing, repairing, recycling, cleaning apartments and houses for rent, drying fish, taking their children to and from schools, religious classes and doctors, doing volunteer work in community and religious centers and much, much more. Many of them laughed when asked to specify how many hours of housework they did per day: “It’s never ending!” they exclaimed. Some of their work is formal but most of it informal. Some provides monetary income but most of it does not. Prior to marriage a majority of these women had been employed in export-industries – as machine operators and assembly workers in factories or as low skill workers in hotels and restaurants. It is on the backs of women like these, that the wealth of the Malaysian economy has been built.

There is no doubt that the export-oriented development model pursued in Malaysia has been successful in terms of creating economic growth. But, while export-orientation has been celebrated for creating employment, this study has illustrated that it has not been able to sustain women’s long term engagement in the labor force. Instead, as so clearly illustrated by the official data, women’s formal labor force participation is transitory with many leaving the formal labor market at a relatively young age.

As women leave formal employment they tend to go statistically ‘missing’ from the official labor force data. But, as has been demonstrated, they continue to work. I therefore conclude that while women’s formal labor force participation has one peak (Horton, 1996) – women’s full work participation over the life course can be more accurately described as ‘two-

peaked?. To illustrate this point we can return to Chart 6 (see Chapter 4 above). It showed that women’s manufacturing work peaks around the age of 25-29 but that own account and contributing family work has a later peak, around the age of 40-44. Put together, these two lines produce a two-peaked figure. However, as argued throughout this thesis, data on own account and unpaid family work does not capture the full extent of women’s informal work – so it is safe to assume that the second peak is, in reality, significantly higher. Figure 15 (which also features on the cover of this thesis), therefore, illustrates my conclusion that women’s work participation in Malaysia (formal and informal, in homes and work-places) is two-peaked over the life course.

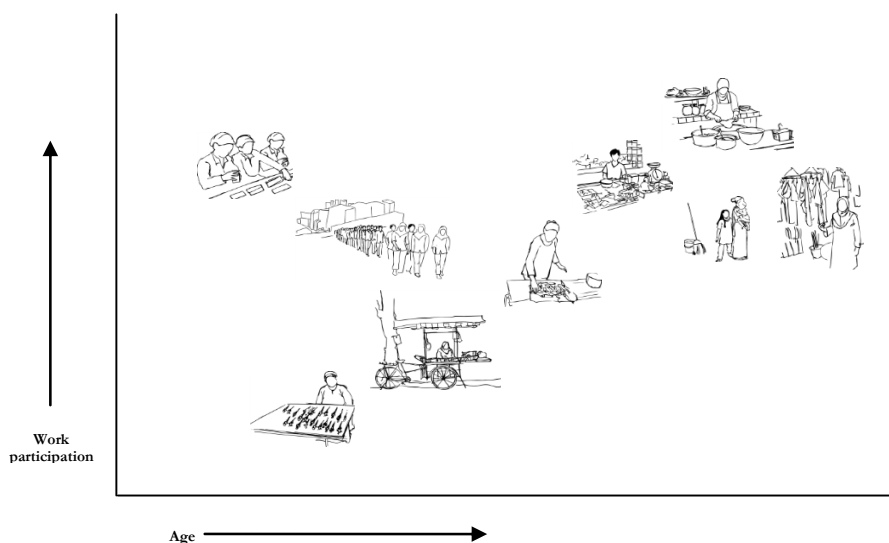


Figure 15. Illustration of women’s formal and informal work participation (in Malaysia) over the life course.

Illustrations by Sara Gullman.

Approaching women’s work as a continuum of formal and informal work is not foreign to contemporary scholarship (see Chen, 2007). The main contributions of this thesis therefore lie in its input of knowledge around *why* this pattern occurs. This contribution is facilitated by the empirical focus on the labor market decisions of women who have left the formal labor market and opted for informal work. The following sections offer a

summary of the conclusions according to the main questions that have guided the research.

7.1.1 Factors for leaving formal employment (RQ 1a)

Amongst the whole group of respondents in Penang, four principal factors leading to women leaving formal employment have been identified: ‘marriage and children’, retrenchments, the conditions of work in former industries of employment, and the desire to venture into (small-scale) business activities (the latter will be dealt with further on). The first factor, ‘marriage and children’ was the most common amongst all women – regardless of previous industry of employment. This thesis, therefore, provides no exception to the general agreement that the lack of institutional support offered to working mothers in Malaysia restricts female labor force participation (see for example Fernandez, 2011; Ng, Mohamad and Beng Hui, 2006). The lack of institutional support was most notable in the lack of affordable child-care but also in the lack of institutional care for the elderly. Women’s room to maneuver in the labor market is, however, not only framed and restricted by the lack of welfare systems but also by gendered norms which render employment secondary to women’s reproductive responsibilities. And, the decision to leave formal employment was often influenced by the wishes of husbands or other family members (for a similar conclusion see Abdullah, Noor and Wok, 2008; Amin, 2004; Lie and Lund, 1994).

The next two factors for leaving formal jobs, ‘retrenchments’ and ‘the conditions of work in former industries of employment’, were mentioned by many women, but the latter in particular was more commonly raised by former export-industry workers. Retrenchments, for the most part, made women leave involuntarily (although many had accepted a so-called *voluntary* retrenchment), but the long working hours, shift work, hierarchies in workplaces and the low wages also made some women take their own decision to leave (see also the findings of Ong, 2010). The decision to leave was often made under the simultaneous influence of: marriage, child-birth *and* unsustainable labor conditions. In other words, once the women got married and/or had children, the conditions were experienced as incompatible with their roles as wives and/or mothers.

It is further argued here that in order to properly understand the outcome of export-oriented employment for women’s labor market decisions we need to devote attention towards how these major industries

are spatially organized: in particular to the way that export-industry employment tends to be concentrated to special zones or areas. In the case of Penang, manufacturing is mostly concentrated in the EPZ or industrial estates. With regards to tourism, activities are mostly located in beach areas and the urban center, George Town. Economic geography scholarship has devoted much attention towards how this spatial organization has influenced locational patterns and decisions of producers and buyers (see for example Dicken, 2011; Wood and Roberts, 2011), while much less attention has been devoted to understanding its outcome for the workforce. I claim, however, that while the geographic concentration of activities may suit the needs of employers and consumers, it restricts women's ability to sustain jobs over the life course. As such, it influences women's decisions to leave *and* not re-enter formal waged employment after marriage and child-birth (see below).

In order to understand the significance of this for women's labor force participation we need to recall the importance of export-industry jobs for women's labor force participation in Penang – and especially for those who lack higher education. The respondents in this study seemed to largely perceive employment in export-industries as the available option to them in the formal economy. Their maneuvering space in the labor market was therefore mainly restricted to a choice between low-skill export-industry employment (factories or hotels) and informal work. This constitutes a serious obstacle if one is aiming to encourage women's re-entry to the labor market after child-birth (see Ninth and Tenth Malaysia Plans, 2006-2010, 2011-2015). The findings of this study therefore support the critical notions that reliance upon export-industry employment risks marginalizing women in low wage and low skilled jobs and industries *and* emphasizes that this also risks perpetuating women's transitory (one-peaked) formal labor force participation pattern (see also Basvalent and Onaran, 2004). It also needs to be pointed out that the one-peaked pattern in formal work limits women's entitlements to social security schemes. An urgent example is their limited access to pensions. Data from the Malaysian pension savings system (the EPF), where savings are partially deposited by employers, show that women hold significantly lower savings than men. One important reason is the temporary nature of employment resulting in women having limited time to acquire pension savings.

7.1.2 Bargaining for work outside the household (RQ1b)

As shown in the previous section, women's ability to sustain formal work was framed and restricted by gender place-based power relations in households and society, by the lack of institutional support and by the conditions of work experienced in their previous jobs. All of these factors were also visible in women's unwillingness or inability to (re)engage in waged formal labor also after marriage and child-birth. The large majority of the women interviewed in Penang were over 40 years old and many of them reported their formal working days were over. Some explicitly stated that this was because they perceived that they were 'far too old' to be hired. While some stated the explicit desire to return to the formal labor market – most of them were not able to because of their reproductive responsibilities. For some, the most important reason for not looking for formal work was that their husband 'would not let them work'.

Work-family conflicts are, most likely, experienced by women in all sectors of employment – and particularly amongst lower-income families who cannot afford to pay for domestic services (such as through hiring a nanny or maid) (Fernandez, 2011). However, I argue that there are also certain aspects particular to heavy dependency upon export-industry employment that influences (particularly low educated) women's ability to bargain for re-entry to work after marriage and child-birth. Some interviews revealed that the unwillingness and/or inability to (re)engage in formal work after marriage and child-birth was linked to the insecure conditions of employment (including the fear of retrenchments as companies may relocate their activities elsewhere) and the low wages. But what kept resurfacing as a central feature in the respondents' potential to (re)engage in formal work was the issue of 'proximity' and 'distance'. For many of the women, employment which would require travelling was perceived (by the women themselves as well as by their husbands) as inconvenient and/or inappropriate. Many women seemed to equate the questions around whether they would like to have a 'formal job' with factory and hotel jobs – and, as such, with 'distance'. This can be illustrated by the fact that some responded to the question of whether they would like to have a formal job by simply stating something along the lines of: 'no, I don't want to travel that far'. Engaging in work in the zones/areas where export-industry employment is largely located requires some form of transport. In certain areas shuttle busses to the EPZ or industrial estates are provided – but many women interviewed in Penang nevertheless reported that the need for

transport was an obstacle for getting to and from work. Many did not have access to their own vehicle and some also expressed reluctance to use public transport on their own. Apart from these 'practical' obstacles, gendered spatial norms and boundaries were certainly important to their decision not to (re)engage in such work. Because, while it may be considered acceptable for young women to travel long distances to work in these zones/areas – the same does not necessarily apply to married women. Some explicitly stated that their husbands would not allow them to travel and amongst the respondents it was clear that the spatial boundedness of their gendered roles (Gilbert, 1997) was a key factor in their labor market decisions. The above further underlines the argument posed by Kabeer (2000) that women's entry to low skill export-industry employment can be described as reflecting an intersection of the 'economics of demand' and the 'culture of supply'.

It is also crucially linked to women's ability to bargain for a (re)entry to formal work after marriage. In other words: the fact that there was no child-care available, they were perceived as 'too old' to be hired and formal jobs are located 'far away' – clearly restricted their ability to bargain for a (re)entry to such work. This thesis therefore calls into question assumptions around waged work as inherently 'empowering' (see Koggel, 2003; Pearson, 2007a). Because, once married, regardless of previous labor market experiences, the women were largely expected to conform to traditional gendered roles within the household and society. For many women these roles involved them being awarded the roles as primary care-givers – but also the role of the husband as the main decision-maker in the family. In the decision-making around the wives' employment, previous engagement in export-industries seemed to have little impact. Therefore, while gains in bargaining power may have been experienced during the time that export-industry employment was held, this study finds that these bargaining gains were, much like the jobs in themselves, highly temporary. And, as such, previous engagement in export-industry employment seemed to have limited impact upon women's ability to exercise labor market choice at a later stage in life.

The findings of this study also lend further support to the argument that debates around the potentially empowering effects of export-employment need to move beyond the dichotomy of 'working'/'not working' (see Pearson, 2007a) implicit when it is argued that 'it is better that they do this than that they do nothing at all'. This is because, for the vast majority of women, the alternative of doing 'nothing at all' does not really

exist. Instead, the respondents in this study have, like women in many other places, resolved the problem of not being able to retain formal work through engaging in the informal economy.

7.1.3 Opting for informal work (RQ2a)

The nature of labor relations in the formal economy is, no doubt, important to women's move from formal to informal work. However, this study has also argued that informal work does not necessarily represent 'a last resort'. Although women's informal work (especially small-scale activities such as hawking and street vending) seems to be stuck in discourses of 'victimization' – informal workers are not a homogenous group. Instead, the women encountered in Penang belong to all categories of employment, and the income levels amongst the women varied significantly. A few of them run flourishing businesses with several employees, while many others struggle to make ends meet. But, their move from formal to informal work was in many cases a deliberate choice. One which reflected, on the one hand, women's unwillingness to (re)engage in exploitative work in the formal economy and, on the other, their need for more freedom and flexibility in order to meet their double role as breadwinners and mothers. Informal work (as will be discussed below) also enabled them to secure access to income and public places of work in spite of norms that suggest that they are not 'supposed to' work outside the home.

This study therefore offers some support to claims that necessity and choice are *co-present* (Williams, 2009) in women's decisions to enter informal types of work. However, it needs to be noted that while informality provides working mothers with a certain flexibility, it also leaves them unprotected by labor legislation and therefore largely outside the scope of welfare systems (see Barrientos, 2007; Pearson, 2007a). I have, therefore, argued the need to differentiate between *what motivates women to enter informal work* and *the outcome* of such work. In our attempts to move beyond 'victimization' we must be cautious not to overlook the profound impacts that the informal employment status has for job security, access to pensions, maternity and sick leave, as well as for the right to bargain collectively.⁷⁴

Reliable data and empirical studies of women's informal work in Malaysia are difficult to come by (Xavier, 2008) and this study therefore

⁷⁴ This is perhaps particularly important to bear in mind when approaching the outcome of the much celebrated micro-credit schemes (see also Pearson, 2007a). For while micro-credits enable women to gain income – micro-entrepreneurship remains largely *informal*.

makes an empirical contribution to (geographic) scholarship around women's engagement in the informal economy. It also contributes to debates around how we can theorize the underreporting of such work in official labor force surveys. Previous scholarship has largely argued that the inadequate records of women's informal work are due to survey methods and that women do not report their labor as a result of gendered norms that render their work inadequate to report. While this study has found much support for the former, with regards to the latter, I have argued the need to further scrutinize assumptions about why women are not reporting their labor. On the one hand it is clear that gendered power relations and divisions of labor within the household and society have a wide range of implications for the interpretation of women's work as 'work' or not. On the other, women are active agents making up both overt and covert strategies (Agarwal, 1997) in response to the structural inequalities that they face. This study claims that women may, in fact, choose not to report their labor as a way to secure their own self-interest. This may be done through, for example, stating that they are 'housewives' as this avoids putting into question their awarded gendered role which, in turn, could jeopardize their possibility to access informal work. But they may also state in official surveys that they are not working for pragmatic reasons – such as to avoid losing benefits or raising the costs of living through increased fees or taxes.

7.1.4 (Re)negotiating gendered spatial boundaries (RQ2b)

While many of the respondents in Penang faced resistance from husbands and families with regards to formal work in EPZs or in tourism-areas – work in their residential area markets (and its surrounding streets) was largely perceived as acceptable by their families. The findings of this study therefore support the argument made by Loh-Ludher (2007, n.d) that the work women do in the informal economy is constructed – by the women themselves as well as by their families – as something of an extension of their domestic work. However, the study contributes two further points to this argument. The first is a description of how women actively participate in such constructions as a way to secure self-interest. Describing their informal work as 'non-work' may be interpreted as a way to minimize and domesticate the work women perform (Domosh and Seager, 2001). But labeling their activities as 'just helping out' or 'for pocket money only' can also be a way for women to secure access to remunerative activities – through appearing to comply with norms. In other words, if the

construction of their work does not put into question traditional gendered roles (i.e. the ‘male breadwinner norm’), they are better able to bargain for access to such work. This is related to the second point – namely that if market or street-vending sites become constructed as ‘female’ (devalued some might say) sites – they also become considered safe places for women. To several women, where work outside the household was inaccessible or even unacceptable – the market area (including the streets surrounding it) represented an *accessible* and *acceptable* public place of work – a place ‘*in-between*’ the public and the private. As such, it dissolves the Western construction of public/private, home/workplace (Yasmeen, 2006). This thesis therefore concludes that the informal work of women represents an important economic activity – but it is also a means by which they can renegotiate their access to places and spaces.

7.2 Suggestions for future research

An issue which has emerged with urgency during the work with this thesis is the lack of reliable data around women’s work. Labor force data are based upon the answers given in labor force surveys – and critical evaluation of surveying methods, as well as the interpretation of the results they bring, is an important task for the future research. Such work needs to be both quantitative and qualitative in order to create a picture of the actual extent of women’s informal work – as well as *why* women’s work in different places remains unaccounted for in labor force data.

Although gender and trade is an increasingly researched topic, there is a need for much more empirical analysis and focus upon the outcome of economic ‘globalization’ for different groups of women workers. Particularly in relation to women’s *rights to work* and *rights at work*. Such studies can reveal how women are able to access and sustain ‘globalized’ employment – but also the coverage of such work under labor legislation and social security schemes. The latter is particularly relevant considering that ‘informalized’ and ‘flexibilized’ types of employment relationships are increasing their importance to the global work force. However, the informal economy is generally understudied and in particular the informal work of women – in both the formal and informal enterprises. This lack of knowledge is a serious concern for the development of appropriate policies to protect the rights of informal workers. Further empirical studies, in various geographical contexts, are therefore urgently needed.

This study has largely focused upon women who have left formal employment in favor of informal work after marriage and child-birth. Further studies of women who have made the decision or had the possibility to stay in export-industries could reveal important knowledge around this how group has resolved the work-family conflicts, how they experience their bargaining power and work situation.

This study has called into question dichotomous understandings of concepts such as formal/informal, productive/reproductive and workplace/home. However, the relationship between these categories needs further scrutiny. An occupational group which can help reveal the inadequacies of these dichotomies is *home-based workers*. This study only included a limited number of home-based workers – but I propose that focus upon, in particular, industrial (outsourced) home-workers, in different geographical contexts, offers the opportunity to analyze women's work under conditions of globalization beyond these dichotomies. It can also tell us something important about the way that gender operates in the labor market at the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy.

8. REFERENCES

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APPENDIX 1.

Informant interviews

Table of informants by affiliation, main competence and location

Affiliation	Date	Main competence	Location
ASEAN Secretariat	March 2008	Economic Integration and Finance	Jakarta
ASEAN Secretariat	March 2008	Sustainable Development	Jakarta
International Labour Organization	March 2008	Labour Economist	Jakarta
International Labour Organization	March 2008	Gender issues	Jakarta
International Labour Organization	Oct 2008	Labour Statistics	Bangkok
International Labour Organization	Oct 2008	Labour Statistics	Bangkok
International Labour Organization	Oct 2008	Gender issues	Bangkok
International Gender and Trade Network	Jan 2008	Gender and Trade	Geneva
International Trade Union Confederation (Women's committee)	March 2008	Women's labor rights	Jakarta
International Trade Union Confederation	Feb 2008	Women's labor rights	Brussels
International Trade Union Confederation	Dec 2007	Trade and labor rights	Geneva
Women In Development Europe	Oct 2007	Gender and Trade	Brussels

APPENDIX 2

Interview guide I

- 1) Age
- 2) Gender
- 3) Ethnicity
- 4) Background (Are you from Penang or from another state or country?)
- 5) How many people live in your household?
- 6) Marital status and family (married, not married, divorced, widowed, children to support, grown up children, other family members to support)
7. If you have children – where are they when you work?
8. Household income
9. Living conditions
10. How many years of education have you got?
11. Do you live close to your workplace?
12. Mode of transportation to get your workplace?
13. What made you chose this job?
14. Status of employment?
15. Do you have a license to do this? (Which kind?)
16. If yes, do you hold the license in your name?
17. How many people work here?
18. How long have you worked here?
19. Why did you open a stall at this particular market?
20. How many hours a day do you work here?
21. How many hours do you spend preparing at home?
22. How many hours do you spend on housework at home?
23. Does your husband do any housework?
24. Which is the job title you would use about yourself?
25. Is your work informal (unregistered)?
26. Is this your only job or do you have several jobs?
27. Do you pay income tax?
28. Do you have any job security?
29. Are you registered with the EPF or SOCSO?
30. Have you ever had a formal job?
 - which job?
 - why did you stop working there?
31. Would you like to have a formal job?
 - Why
 - Why not?
32. Are you a member of a union?
33. How much do you earn per day?
34. Is that enough to survive?
35. Are you happy with the job?
36. If you could improve something about you current work situation – what would that be?

APPENDIX 3

Interview guide II

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Ethnicity
4. Background: Are you from Penang or from another state?
5. How many people live in your household?
6. Marital status and family (married, not married, divorced, widowed, children to support, grown up children, other family members to support)
7. If you have children – where are they while you work?
8. Household income
9. How many years of education have you got?
10. Do you live close to your workplace?
11. Mode of transport to get to the market?
12. How much do you earn per day?
13. Is that enough to survive?
14. Do you have more than one job?
15. Do you like your job?
16. What is good about it?
17. What is bad about it?
18. Would you like your children to do this? Why? / Why not?
19. What did you do before you started this job?
20. Was that a formal job?
21. Why did you quit?
22. When you got married – did you continue to work?
23. If no: why did you quit because of marriage?
24. Do you think it is ok for a married woman to work in a job outside the household?
25. Do you think it is ok for a married women to work outside the village?
26. Does your husband think it is ok for you to work here?
27. Who makes the decision about you working? You, your husband or together?
28. Is it important that this job is close to home?
29. Could you imagine travelling a distance to work?
30. Would it be ok for your husband if you worked somewhere else – outside the village?
31. If no, is it important to him that you work close to home?
32. When you had children did you continue to work?
33. If no: why not?
34. If yes: where were the children when you worked?
35. If there was child-care available would you have continued to work? Why?/Why not?
36. If there was child-care available would you take a formal job now?
37. Do you think it ok for mothers to work?
38. Which is the job title you use about yourself?
39. When you fill out an official form (for school or in surveys) which is the title do you use?
40. Why do you use that title?
41. Would you call what you do 'work'?
42. How would define/describe 'work' or a 'job'?
43. How is your job different to a formal job?
44. Did you need any money to start this business?
45. If yes, how did you get the money?
46. Is it the same for a woman and a man to start a business in Malaysia?
47. Do you think it is easier for a man to find money to start a business?
48. If yes, why?
49. Why do you think more men than women start a business?

