Garment Factories in America

A Research Project
The Leadership Scholars Certificate Program is a two-year selective, interdisciplinary certificate program that prepares Rutgers undergraduate women to be informed, innovative, and socially responsible leaders.

Leadership Scholars design and implement social action projects to expand their understanding of issues and problems and to develop leadership skills.

This project gives Scholars the opportunity to apply the theoretical knowledge they have gained about leadership, advocacy, and social change with the practical and experiential knowledge they have developed about a particular policy issue or problem through the field site placement. It also further develops leadership skills by giving undergraduates the opportunity to *practice* leadership through action.

To find out more please visit the Institute for Women’s Leadership’s website at [http://iwl.rutgers.edu](http://iwl.rutgers.edu).
Sweatshops & the Corporatization of the University

• Rachel Silvey & Feminist Research
• “students [must] think about ways that positioning themselves as the saviors of the ‘poor, exploited, brown women’ served both to ‘other’ the factory workers and to obscure the ways that students are complicit in perpetuating parallel oppressions in their own local economies” (Silvey, 2002: 204)
Importance of Feminist Research

• Reflexivity
  – Being self-reflective/looking inward of own biases & preconceptions

• Positionality
  – Understanding one’s social standing relative to others’ in our community & abroad

• Understanding my privileged subjectivity that may potentially affect objective lens of researcher

• Organizing across difference
Background

• Where are they located?
  – Export processing zones
  – Ethnic enclaves in America
  – Developing countries

• Who works in them?
  – Mostly women; some men, too
  – Immigrants (American garment factories)

• Globalization
  – Economic Neoliberalism/Free-Market Capitalism
Naomi Klein’s *No Logo*

- Multi-National Corporations
  - Subcontracting
  - Export Processing Zones
  - Race to the Bottom
- Brands
  - “What these companies produced primarily were not things…but *images* of their brands. Their real work lay not in manufacturing but in marketing. This formula…has proved enormously profitable, and its success has companies competing in a race toward weightlessness” (Klein, 2010: 4)
Why Garment Factory?

• Friend’s mother works in garment factory in Philadelphia earning $5/hour for 12 hour days without any paid breaks & is required to stand for long periods of time
• Feels a sense of self-worth and purpose
• Surprised to learn of garment factories in the United States
• Hoping to understand the under-representation of their presence
Representation

- Popular imagination
- Media
- Caricatured Imagery
- Discourse
  - Student Activists
  - Workers themselves
- “Sweatshop” vs. “Garment factory”
“Representing the Sweatshop” from The Ideal Sweatshop?

• “…images of the women garment workers…continue to circulate in the antisweatshop movements as victims of globalization and superexploitation and as models of successful resistance against corporate domination. As models for the anti-sweatshop movement, however women garment workers have not been granted the status of protesters…Garment workers and sweatshops have become a part of a circulation of signs and symbols, of virtual factories and perpetual victimhood” (Brooks, 2002: 282)

• “Because sweatshop…is both the excess of and integral to capitalist manufacturing, it is only representable as an other space, and its workers as victims of excessive abuses or static models of resistance who can only be saved through the agency of those on the outside” (Brooks, 2002: 283)
Media Portrayal

- *Life*, August 1, 1938
- Showing 2 “garment workers at play”
- As an obituary for sweatshops at height of New Deal’s focus on factory inspection & regulation through coalition of unions, reformers & gov’t officials
Popular Image of Garment Worker

- Docile female worker with nimble fingers appropriate for intricacies of garment production & downcast eyes
- Helpless, voiceless, agentless
- Disembodied worker – merging with the machine
- Distancing lens
Docile Worker
Mechanized/Disembodied Worker
Projected Project

- Analyze representation of garment factories, garment workers, and popular conceptualization of garment work for honors thesis
- Conducting ethnographic research in garment factory in ethnic enclaves (Chinatown) by working alongside factory workers in Philadelphia and New York
Social Activism

• Knowledge as power
• Producing work of knowledge potentially deconstructing normalized and hegemonized perspectives embedded in Western narratives of garment workers’ to account for the particular individualized lived experiences of workers
• Highlight issue of representation and normalized conceptions
• Providing voice for those navigating the within informal economy
• Not so much uncovering or revealing garment work as a form of liberation or empowerment, but more so understanding their perspectives
Methodology

• Engage in interviews with Chinese workers in English and Cantonese
• Conduct interviews with student activists combating labor abuse
• Juxtapose representations and multiple perspectives to demonstrate nuanced experiences and problem of representation
Research Findings

- Fewer people know of garment factories existing without our national borders despite hyper-representation of garment factories abroad.
- Google Alerts providing very few internet sources relating to garment factories in US
  - Mostly about fires or strikes abroad.
- Production of gender-specific clothing dependent on the season.
Development of Project

• Local and global as intimately connected
• Cannot study one without acknowledging other
• Cannot solely focus on garment factories in America given transnational processes contributing to their presence
  – Questioning solely American-based factories reproducing this distancing lens
  – Immigration
  – Free market policies
Future Research

• Gain better understanding of how they organize and produce their space through speech and practice

• Analyzing processes of working across difference
  – Different ethnic groups in same space
  – Immigration experiences
  – Migration patterns
Intersectional Solidarity

• History of racial- & gender-based exclusion
  – American privileging of White identity
  – Mostly male-led unions

• Organizing unions across national, ethnic, age, class, etc. differences
  – As well as experiences of sexual harassment
  – the “unionization opened up a space, albeit circumscribed, for women to resist sexual harassment collectively and to share strategies of resistance across boundaries of ethnicity and religion” (Bender, 2004: 101)
Social Justice Based Women’s Leadership

• Resilience and persistence
• Flexibility
• Social justice and leadership materialize in many forms
  – Research and knowledge production as form of social justice
  – Leadership necessitates feminist critique of self-reflexivity and positionality
• Problem not the garment factory, but larger free market capitalism policies propelling low wages and conditions
• Factories, as during the Fordist era, are not that bad
• Must change policies at a transnational institutional level
  – Requiring transparency, governance, and regulation of MNC
• Solution?
  – Buying secondhand clothing
  – Support independent businesses
  – Student activism