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Book Review: Girls of the Factory: A Year with the Garment Workers of Morocco

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Girls of the Factory: A Year with the Garment Workers of Morocco.
2011. Cairoli Laetitia. Gainesville, USA: University Press of Florida. 256pp
(Hardcover) ISBN 9780813035611. \$60.14.

Reviewed by Catherine Ogunmefun¹

Cairoli Laetitia's book, *Girls of the factory: a year with the garment workers of Morocco*, chronicles the experiences of girls working in the garment factories of the city of Fes, Morocco. Laetitia begins by stating the goals of the book- describing the industrial experience of Moroccan girls who are Arab and Muslim. She talks about the narrative style of her book and the reason for the style, that is, it makes the realities of ethnographic research apparent. The book is based on the research she conducted over a period of two years. Her research subjects are girls between 13 and 25 years of age, who are unmarried and living at home with their parents and siblings. Her research method was based on intensive ethnography. The book is divided into three parts- in the streets, inside the factory and inside the home.

In her introduction, the author talks about feminization of the labour force as not being a new phenomenon and how women have been engaging in work outside their homes since the time of the first industrial revolution. However the trend intensified in recent times due to structural adjustment policies imposed on many countries. Women started bearing the brunt of these policies in households; hence women's paid labour is a way to counter the impact of structural adjustment policies on households. The entry of women into the factories has not only led to the consumption of modern items (e.g. lipstick, face cream, sunglasses, etc) but also the adoption of personal autonomy. These developments resulted in conflict with local traditions.

Laetitia describes how garment factories work on a Taylorist system, whereby workers are expected to perform with minimal decision-making input and maximum efficiency. She elucidates on how working conditions are difficult as workers work for long hours, are not permitted to speak during work hours, are prohibited from leaving the building and are at risk of being fired. In addition to these, female factory workers are often demeaned by Fes inhabitants for their participation in factory labour. Despite all the challenges facing the girls, they continue to labour in Fes garment factories as a result of the need for economic survival.

In chapter one, the author talks about how she arrives in Morocco and her first impression of the city of Fes and Sidi Brahmin, the industrial district of Fes. Some of the factories of Sidi Brahmin are partly unfinished warehouses. The buildings of the factories are unnamed and do not have windows, only horizontal openings on the second floor. They also show no indication that they actually house workers. Laetitia's description of the factories at Fes shows that the girls work in an environment that is not conducive for working.

Laetitia also describes her first encounter with the girls that work at the factories, in the streets of Fes, and their willingness to participate in the research as they got to know her. She depicts the altruism of the girls as they are willing to put their lives on hold in order to support their families. The author also depicts how the girls shared their tales of intrigue and woes as well as offered immediate friendship and familiarity.

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Chapter two of the book presents a picture of how the girls work inside the factory, the management (of the factory) and the atmosphere of their workplace. The girls work under male line managers, who are put in charge to "make the girls afraid". In other words, the male managers are in the factory to keep the girls in line. This depicts the patriarchal system of the Moroccan society, where males have dominance over females. She also highlights how there can be a language barrier between a line manager and the girls, as the latter only communicate in Arabic and not in French, that the former speaks. The language barrier can therefore complicate the working relationship between the girls and their line manager.

Laetitia also shows how working in the factory helps the girls to obtain some freedom as they are not under the watchful eyes of the parents and brothers. This also allows them to discuss the issues of sexuality freely among themselves, which would not have been permitted at home. The freedom to discuss freely helps to remind them of their dreams and aspirations – to become wives before they reach age 30. In addition, the author also mentions how the girls apply makeup at lunch time in order to express their sense of freedom. The factory therefore provides a free space and safe place where the girls are able to experiment their sense of freedom.

In chapter three, Laetitia focuses on the girls that are regarded as unskilled workers as they work in the packing department of the factory (the other girls who sew are regarded as skilled due to their ability to operate a machine). The girls who pack are also among the least educated in the factory. However, the girls in the packing department have more freedom as there is more opportunity for movement. Regardless of the department in which they work, factory work allows girls the choice of not donning the Muslim veil as the girls are mostly teenagers who would want to display their beauty or fashionable clothing. The author also demonstrates that the need for freedom sometimes make girls to drop out of school in order to dress like factory workers.

Chapter four of the book shows the tough working conditions of the girls of the factories – no maternity leave, no sick leave, long working hours and lack of power to negotiate for better working conditions. It also shows how girls get involved in criminal activities in order to make extra money, e.g. running contraband goods, e.g. hashish. Though men who run contraband goods are likely to get caught, girls are never suspected of getting involved in criminal activities (or caught) probably due to the belief that females are not capable of such activities. The few girls who engage in such criminal activities use the factory jobs as a cover up, in order not to arouse people's suspicions about the wealth they are able to accumulate from their crime.

In the final chapters (chapters 5-7), the author explores the family life of the girls of the factory. She focuses on the family of one of the girls of the factory, Nadia. Through her interaction with Nadia, she finds out more about the Moroccan family life and culture. In Morocco, family members are often connected in multiple ways and people keep close to their siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, and where possible, they try to live near one another. Laetitia also reveals how the practise of polygamy can have a negative effect on a family (e.g. financial constraint, abuse, etc), especially if the first wife is neglected by her husband. For instance, Nadia's father left home and married another woman when Nadia was 14 years old. Even though Nadia's father never divorced her mother, he refused to provide the necessary financial support for Nadia and her siblings as well as her mother. As a result, Nadia had to start working in a factory in order

to support her mother and siblings. The story of Nadia shows how polygamy can sometimes provide a reason for a girl to leave home to seek for employment as a result of the need for economic survival. When a girl leaves home and starts working in a factory, she is no longer under the protection of her parents and brothers and therefore she becomes exposed to some 'dangers' outside her home e.g. riding around in a car with strange men, courting strange men in secret, wandering in the streets, etc.

Laetitia also shows that even though some girls join the workforce in order to obtain some freedom, factory work is considered as a phase to be endured until they find men who are ready to marry them. The author also mentions how factory work is incompatible with the role of wife and mother due to long working hours. This means once a girl gets married, she has to leave the job in order to focus on her home.

In closing, there was first a notion that the girls of the factory only work because of the need to support their families, however the narrative from some of the girls show that factory work gives them the freedom to get away from the boredom of staying at home under the watchful eyes of parents and brothers. This book thereby shows that out of the need for economic survival in families, girls (or women) can obtain some freedom. Freedom can, however, expose girls to some 'dangers' outside their homes such as wandering in the streets, courting strange men in secret, involvement in criminal activities, etc. Teenage pregnancy is another consequence of exposure to 'dangers' outside homes as shown in the increase in the number of teenagers falling pregnant in both the developed and developing countries of the world. There is however no mention of this problem in Morocco in the book. There may be a need for future research to investigate the issue of teenage pregnancy in Morocco, especially among working girls. This book is a good reading material for people interested in the impact of industrialisation on women in the developing regions of the world. It is also suitable for gender/feminist scholars. Those who are interested in the effect of modernisation on culture, especially Moroccan culture, would benefit from the book.