CHINESE WOMEN IN INDUSTRIAL HOME-BASED SUBCONTRACTING IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY IN KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA: NEITHER VALUED NOR COSTED

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ABSTRACT

CHINESE WOMEN IN INDUSTRIAL HOME-BASED SUBCONTRACTING IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY IN KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA: NEITHER VALUED NOR COSTED

The Chinese home-based subcontractors entered the formal labour force, mainly as workers in the garment industry when they were young and single but withdrew into home-based subcontracting after marriage and childbirth.

The industrialization of Malaysia in 1970s offered increasing employment opportunities for young women. These women were 'greened' as 'unskilled' and therefore 'cheap' secondary workers with the manual dexterity suitable for labour intensive work such as sewing. This attracted garment manufacturers in search of low cost labour to relocate from newly industrialized countries to Malaysia as part of the International Division of Labour. It led to the double-digit growth of the garment industry in the 1980s and 1990s. Faced with a disabling work environment lacking in gender-sensitive policies and intervention programs in conspiracy with Chinese patriarchal and patrilineal practices, the women were forced to withdraw from the formal labour force after marriage and childbirth.

Socialized to accept the Confucian ethical code of san cong si de
or ‘three obediences and four virtues’, these Chinese woman and their husbands believed that the women’s most important duty was to perpetuate the patriarchal lineage and xian fu jiao zi (相夫教子) or to care for her husband and teach her son. Their husbands were regarded as ‘yi jia zi zhu’ (家之主) (a family’ lord) even in absentia. Bounded by this Chinese patriarchal ideology of ‘good wife and good mother first’, the home-based subcontractors bore the physical and psychological responsibility for domestic work as well as to be gainfully employed to provide their families with primary or supplementary income to raise the family wellbeing. They experienced the feminine dilemma and suffered conflicting demands of productive work and domestic responsibility. They creatively adapted and ‘chose’ to work from home to integrate productive work with reproductive work.

Home-based subcontracting offers the garment industry adaptability to ensure its competitiveness and flexibility to respond to the seasonality of fashion. The home-based subcontractor processes, at home or in the vicinity of the home, raw materials or work-in-progress from a garment maker. The work may include designing, cutting of the fabric, stitching, finishing and packing. Garment makers who subcontract benefit from capacity flexibility, access to specialized skills and reduced equipment outlay, externalization of costs and casualization of labour.

By carrying out their productive work at home interspersed with their domestic work, they are often not regarded as ‘workers’. They are
given little or no training, low compensation without the benefits and protection which legislation normally provide for workers. They remain isolated and unorganized without knowledge of the value or cost of their work. Being in the informal sector, their contributions though vital to the industry are neither recognized, valued nor costed.

Husbands perceive their work as unnecessary, fail to realistically assess the quantum and worth of their wives’ income. They regard their wives’ earnings as ‘kuih’ money, just icing on the cake and fail to value or cost these women’s contributions to family well being.

This study shows that home-based subcontractors exist, are vital to the industry and to society and have to become visible, valued and costed.
ABSTRAK

WANITA CINA DALAM SUBKONTRAK INDUSTRI YANG BERPU SATKAN RUMAH DALAM INDUSTRI PAKAIA N DI KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA: TIDAK DINILAI ATAU DIHARGAI

Subkontraktor wanita Cina memasuki tenaga buruh formal, terutamanya sebagai pekerja-pekerja dalam industri pakaian semasa mereka muda dan bujang tetapi berhenti selepas perkahwinan dan kelahiran anak untuk melakukan subkontrak berpusatkan di rumah.


Wanita Cina bersama suami mereka telah disosialisasikan untuk menerima set kod etika Confucius san cong si de atau 'tiga kepatuhan dan

Subkontrak berpusatkan rumah memberikan industri pakaian kebolehkesuaian untuk memastikan saingan dan kelenturan untuk menyahut perubahan gaya dan fesyen yang bermusim. Subkontraktor berpusatkan rumah memproses pakaian di rumah atau di sekitar rumah bahan-bahan mentah ataupun bekerja dalam process buatan bagi pembuat pakaian seperti mereka bentuk, menggunting kain, menjahit, menyiaapkan dan membungkus. Pembuatan pakaian dalam subkontrak menikmati pelbagai manfaat yang ada hubung kait dengan fleksibiliti keupayaan, mudah mendapat kemahiran khusus dan peralatan dengan belanja yang besar: yakni kelahiran kos dan penyebab tenaga buruh.
Dengan menjalankan kerja produktif mereka di rumah diselangi dengan kerja rumah tangga mereka, selalunya tidak dianggap sebagai 'pekerja'. Mereka disediakan sedikit latihan, atau tidak ada latihan, pampasan rendah tanpa faedah-faedah dan perlindungan yang biasa dikurniakan kepada pekerja-pekerja oleh undang-undang. Mereka kekal terpencil dan tak bergabung tanpa penyedari nilai atau kos kerja mereka. Oleh sebab berada dalam sektor yang tak formal, maka sumbangan mereka, meskipun penting terhadap industri, tidak diakui, dinilai atau dihargai.

Para suami mengagap kerja isteri mereka sebagai remeh, lalu gagal untuk menilai secara realistik kuantum dan nilai pendapatan isteri mereka. Meraka menganggap pendapatan isteri mereka sebagai duit 'kuih', bagaikan aising pada kek lalu gagal untuk menilai atau menghargai sumbangan wanita ini terhadap kesejahteraan keluarga.

Kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa subkontraktor yang berkerja dari rumah memang wujud, justeru haruslah menjadi nyata, diberi nilai dan dihargai.
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Lee Lee Loh-Ludher @ Loh Lee Lee

1st September, 2001
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