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

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**INSTITUTE OF POSTGRADUATE STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA  
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Perpustakaan Universiti Malaya



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
	No.
Abstract	xii
Abstrak	xv
Acknowledgements	xviii
List of Tables	xx
List of Figures	xxi
List of Plates	xxii
	xvii

<b>1</b>	<b>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1	Introduction	1
1.2	Women Home-based Subcontractors in the Garment Industry: An Introduction	1
1.3	Purpose of the Study and Research Question	2
1.4	Significance of the Study	4
1.5	Methodology	7
	<i>1.5.1 Area and Periods of Fieldwork</i>	7
	<i>1.5.2 The Sample</i>	11
	<i>1.5.3 Methods</i>	16
	<i>(i) Interviewing Garment Makers</i>	18
	<i>(ii) Informal Interviews of the Home-based Subcontractors</i>	20
	<i>(iii) Participant Observation</i>	23
	<i>(iv) Case Study</i>	24
1.6	Analysis	27
1.7	Limitations of the Study	31
1.8	Overview of the Chapters	34

<b>2</b>	<b>CHAPTER 2 WOMEN AND WORK: A REVIEW</b>	<b>39</b>
2.1	Introduction	39
2.2	Women's Work	40
2.3	Entry of Married Women into the Labour Force	46
	2.3.1 <i>Factors Facilitating Entry of Married Women into the Labour Force</i>	47
	(i) <i>Social Conditions</i>	47
	(ii) <i>Economic Conditions</i>	50
	2.3.2 <i>Factors Limiting Participation of Women in the Labour Force</i>	52
	(i) <i>Ideology</i>	52
	(ii) <i>Patriarchy</i>	53
	(iii) <i>The Role of the State</i>	55
2.4	Feminine Dilemma	58
2.5	The Informal Sector	62
2.6	Home-based Production	66
2.7	Sub-contracting	70
2.8	Conclusion	74

<b>3</b>	<b>CHAPTER 3 WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE LABOUR FORCE IN MALAYSIA</b>	<b>77</b>
3.1	Introduction	77
3.2	Industrialization in Malaysia and Feminization of Labour	77
3.3	Pattern of Women's Labour Force Participation	81
	3.3.1 <i>Occupational Differentiation in Major Employment Sector</i>	87
	3.3.2 <i>Earning and Wage Differentiation</i>	92
	3.3.3 <i>Representation in Trade Unions</i>	95
3.4	Disabling Women's Participation in the Labour Force	97
	3.4.1 <i>Legislation and Public Policies</i>	104
	3.4.2 <i>Lack of Training Opportunities</i>	106
	3.4.3 <i>Inadequate Education Facility</i>	107
	3.4.4 <i>Inadequate Facilities for Child Care</i>	109
3.5	Labour Force Participation of Chinese Women	115
	3.5.1 <i>Historical Background</i>	115
	3.5.2 <i>The Influence of Chinese Culture on Women's Participation in the Labour Force</i>	117
	3.5.3 <i>Importance Placed on Upbringing of Children by Chinese Family</i>	122
	3.5.4 <i>The Importance of Prosperity and Need to Work</i>	125
3.6	Conclusion	126

<b>4</b>	<b>CHAPTER 4 THE GARMENT INDUSTRY IN MALAYSIA: THE ROLE OF SUBCONTRACTING</b>	<b>129</b>
4.1	Introduction	129
4.2	Malaysian Textile Manufacturers Association (MTMA)	129
4.3	The Garment Makers: Profile	130
4.4	Growth and Development of the Textile and Garment Industry	133
4.5	Characteristics of the Textile and Garment Industry	137
4.6	Workers in the Textile and Garment Industry	140
4.7	Issues Affecting Garment Industry	142
	<i>4.7.1 Shortage of Skilled Labour</i>	142
	<i>4.7.2 Wages and Earnings</i>	147
	<i>4.7.3 Rising Cost of Labour</i>	150
	<i>4.7.4 Retraining and Upgrading of Garment Workers</i>	151
	<i>4.7.5 The Need for Automation</i>	155
4.8	Possible Short-term Solutions	157
	<i>4.8.1 Relocate</i>	158
	<i>4.8.2 Foreign Workers</i>	160
	<i>4.8.3 Sub-contracting</i>	162
4.9	Conclusion	182

<b>5</b>	<b>CHAPTER 5 HOME-BASED SUB-CONTRACTORS IN GARMENT INDUSTRY</b>	<b>186</b>
5.1	Introduction	186
5.2	Profile of the Chinese Women Home-Based Garment Subcontractors	186
5.3	Introduction to the Thirty Cases of Home-based Subcontractors	189
5.4	Reasons for Home-based Sub-contracting	191
	<i>5.4.1 Case 1 : Lai Meng</i>	191
	<i>5.4.2 Case 2 : Siew Lian</i>	193
	<b>5.4.3 Case 3 : Siew Gaik</b>	194
	<i>5.4.4 Case 4: Ah Kiew Soh</i>	195
	<b>5.4.5 Case 5 : Choy Wan</b>	196
	<i>5.4.6 Case 6 : Pik Ching</i>	197
	<i>5.4.7 Case 7 : Leong Aun</i>	198
	<i>5.4.8 Case 8 : Xiao Lan</i>	199
	<i>5.4.9 Case 9 : Yi Ting</i>	200
	<i>5.4.10 Case 10 : Ah Kiew</i>	202
	<i>5.4.11 Case 11 : Yoke Yin</i>	204
	<i>5.4.12 Case 12 : Ah Fun</i>	205
	<i>5.4.13 Case 13 : Yoke Lan</i>	208
	<i>5.4.14 Case 14 : Ah Poh</i>	210
	<i>5.4.15 Case 15 : Phang Ying Mooi</i>	211
	<i>5.4.16 Case 16 : Bee Li</i>	211
	<i>5.4.17 Case 17 : Wong Ah Si</i>	212
	<i>5.4.18 Case 18 : Suan Heoh</i>	213



<b>6</b>	<b>CHAPTER 6 : PRODUCTIVE AND REPRODUCTIVE WORK ORGANIZATION OF HOME-BASED SUBCONTRACTORS IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY</b>	<b>254</b>
6.1	Introduction	254
6.2	Organization of Production in Garment Subcontracting	254
	6.2.1 <i>Equipment</i>	255
	6.2.2 <i>Work Space and Work Environment</i>	258
	6.2.3 <i>Work Arrangement</i>	261
	6.2.4 <i>Contract</i>	263
6.3	Earnings of Home-based Subcontractors	265
	6.3.1 <i>Piece Rate</i>	266
	6.3.2 <i>Other Benefits</i>	273
6.4	Relationship Between Garment Makers and Home-based Subcontractors	281
6.5	Bargaining Power of Home-based Subcontractors	282
6.6	Time Use for Sub-contracting	286
	6.6.1 <i>Subcontracting and Domestic Work</i>	286
	6.6.2 <i>Sharing of Domestic Work Between Husband and Wife</i>	291
	6.6.3 <i>Assistance of Children in Home-based Work</i>	296
6.7	Supplementing Household Income	299
6.8	The Value of Home-based Subcontracting	310
	6.8.1 <i>Views of Home-based Subcontractors</i>	311
	6.8.2 <i>Views of Husbands</i>	318
6.9	Conclusion	321

<b>7</b>	<b>CHAPTER 7: WOMEN IN INDUSTRIAL HOME-BASED SUBCONTRACTING : NEITHER VALUED NOR COSTED</b>	<b>325</b>
7.1	Introduction	325
7.2	The Garment Industry and Feminization of the Labour Force in Malaysia	325
	<i>7.2.1 Rapid Growth of the Garment Industry</i>	326
	<i>7.2.2 The Greening of Women Workers into Cheap Labour</i>	328
	<i>7.2.3 Home-based Subcontracting: A Viable Alternative</i>	331
7.3	Neither Valued Nor Costed	333
	<i>7.3.1 Home-based Subcontractors in the Garment Industry: Not Valued, Not Costed</i>	334
	<i>7.3.2 Home-based Subcontractors in the Family: Not Valued, Not Costed</i>	336
7.4	Future Women Workers in the Garment Industry	338

<b>8</b>	<b>CHAPTER 8 :POSTSCRIPT: SUBCONTRACTORS REVISITED</b>	<b>343</b>
8.1	Introduction	343
8.2	The Currency Crisis and its Impact on the Malaysian Economy	343
8.3	Impact on Garment Industry	350
8.4	Impact on Garment Makers	351
8.5	Impact on Home-based Subcontractors	358
	8.5.1 <i>Changes in Home-based Subcontractors' Households</i>	359
	8.5.2 <i>Changes in Subcontracting Arrangements</i>	360
	8.5.3 <i>Changes in Home-based Subcontractors' Income</i>	363
	(i) <i>More Work But Less Income</i>	364
	(ii) <i>More Work and More Income</i>	366
	8.5.4 <i>Becoming Primary Earners</i>	368
8.6	Reasons for Continued home-based Subcontracting	369
8.7	Conclusion	370
	<i>Appendix A</i>	<b>373</b>
	<i>Appendix B</i>	<b>375</b>
	<i>Appendix C</i>	<b>376</b>
	<i>References</i>	<b>381</b>

## 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*

(三从四德) or 'three obediences and four virtues', these Chinese women 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 zhu' (一家之主) (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.

**WANITA CINA DALAM SUBKONTRAK INDUSTRI  
YANG BERPUSATKAN RUMAH DALAM INDUSTRI  
PAKAIAN 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.

Perindustrialisasi di Malaysia pada tahun 1970an menambahkan peluang pekerjaan untuk wanita muda. Wanita-wanita ini 'dimentahkan' sebagai pekerja kedua 'tidak mahir' lagi 'murah' yang mempunyai deksteriti manual sesuai untuk kerja buruh intensif seperti jahitan. Ini menarik pembuat-pembuat pakaian dari negara perindustrian baru yang sedang mencari buruh kos rendah ke Malaysia sebagai sebahagian dari Pembahagian Tenagakerja Antarabangsa. Ini menyebabkan pertumbuhan dua digit industri pakaian dalam tahun 1980an dan 1990an. Wanita-wanita ini yang menghadapi suasana kerja yang mengilatkan kerana tidak ada dasar gender-sensitif dan program intervension yang bergabung dengan amalan patriarkal dan patrilineal Cina, telah dipaksa menarik diri dari tenaga buruh formal selepas perkahwinan dan kelahiran anak.

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

empat sifat baik'. Mereka percaya bahawa tugas amat penting mereka adalah untuk mengekalkan keturunan kebapaan dan *xian fu jiao zi* atau menjaga suami dan mengajar anak lelakinya. Suaminya dianggap sebagai *yi jia zi zhu*, ( - 家之主 ) (dewa sebuah keluarga) walaupun *in absentia*. Dibataskan oleh ideologi patriakal Cina tentang pertama sebagai isteri dan ibu yang baik ini, maka subkontraktor yang berpusatkan rumah memikul tanggungjawab fizikal dan psikologikal untuk tugas-tugas rumah tangga sambil bertungkus lumus mencari nafkah untuk memberikan keluarga pendapatan utama atau sokongan supaya meninggikan taraf hidup keluarga. Mereka mengalami dilemma wanita dan menderitai akibat tuntutan kerja produktif dan reproduktif yang bercanggah. Mereka menyesuaikan diri secara kreatif dan 'memilih' kerja daripada rumah untuk mengintegrasikan kerja produktif dengan kerja-kerja reproduktif.

Subkontrak berpusatkan rumah memberikan industri pakaian kebolehsesuaian 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, menyiapkan dan membungkus. Pembuat 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 diselangai 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 mengaggap kerja isteri mereka sebagai remeh, lalu gagal untuk menilai secara realistik kuantum dan nilai pendapatan isteri mereka. Mereka 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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## LIST OF TABLES

	Page No.
3.1 Percentage Distribution of Economically Active Population (EAP) by Employment, Malaysia, 1980-1995	84
3.2 Distribution of Employed Persons by Age Group and Sex, Malaysia, 1995	85
3.3 Distribution of Women in the Government Service, by Salary Group, Malaysia, 1986 and 1991	89
3.4 Percentage Distribution of Male and Female Students in Form Four Science, Arts, Vocational or Technical Streams, Malaysia, 1985 and 1992	90
3.5 Distribution of Vocational Students by Type of Courses and Gender, 1992	91
3.6 Selected Occupations Average Rate Paid, Starting Salary, Monthly Salary and Monthly Earnings (RM) for Male and Female Workers in the Textile Industry and Hotel Industry, Malaysia, 1992	94
3.7 Number of Employees' Trade Unions and Membership by Sex, 1992-96, Malaysia	96
3.8 Percentage Distribution of Persons Outside Labour Force by Sex and Reasons For Not Seeking Work, Malaysia, 1995	97
3.9 Rate of Literacy of the Chinese by Sex, Selected Years, Malaysia	123
4.1 Malaysia's Exports of Textiles and Garments 1980 - 95 (RM Million)	137
4.2 Added Value per Textile and Apparel Worker ( US\$ )	153
5.1 Age of Chinese Women Home Based Garment Subcontractors in and around Kuala Lumpur, 1994	187
5.2 Age of First Entry of Respondents into Home-based Subcontracting	237
5.3 The Number of Years of Continuous / Intermittent Involvement in Home-based Sub-contracting	238

6.1	Earnings of the 30 Cases of Home-based Subcontractors for the Month of July 1995	273
6.2	Projected Income and Expenditure of Pik Ching's Family	311

## LIST OF FIGURES

3.1	Percentage Distribution of Employed by Gender and Occupation Category, Malaysia, 1993-1998	81
3.2	Percentage Distribution of Persons Outside Labor Force by Age Group and Gender, Malaysia, 1995	86
3.3	Labour Force Participation Rate by Age Group and Sex, Peninsular Malaysia, 1995	87
3.4	Percentage Distribution of Employee in the Manufacturing Industry by Occupational Category, Year and Sex, Malaysia	88
3.5	Percentage Distribution of Persons Outside Labor Force by Gender and Reasons for Not Seeking Work, 1995	98
3.6	Labour Force Participation of Women by Age and Race, Malaysia, 1985	113
3.7	Labour Force Participation of Women by Age and Race, Malaysia, 1990	113
3.8	Labour Force Participation of Women by Age and Race, Malaysia, 1995	114
3.9	Labour Force Participation of Chinese Men by Age	114
4.1	Labour Force Distribution of a Typical Garment Company	156
4.2	Flow Charts Of Production Process Including Farm Out Operations	164
6.1	Sample of a Record Card for Home-based Subcontractor Kept by a Garment Factory	265

## LIST OF PLATES

4.1	Bangladeshi Men Stitching Brassieres at the Factory	160
5.1	My Home, My Workplace : Chinese Women Home-based Subcontractors	185
5.2	Sewing to Uplift the Well-Being of Her Family	206
5.3	Cutting Fabrics for Boutique Clothes	218
5.4	Caring for the Elderly While Working at Home	227
5.5	To be Gainfully Employed When Spatially Restricted	235
6.1	Sewing Machine and Embroidery Machine at Home Supplied Rent-free by Home-based Subcontractors	256
6.2	Dining Table Doubles as Work Table	260
6.3	Husband Cooking while Wife Sews	295